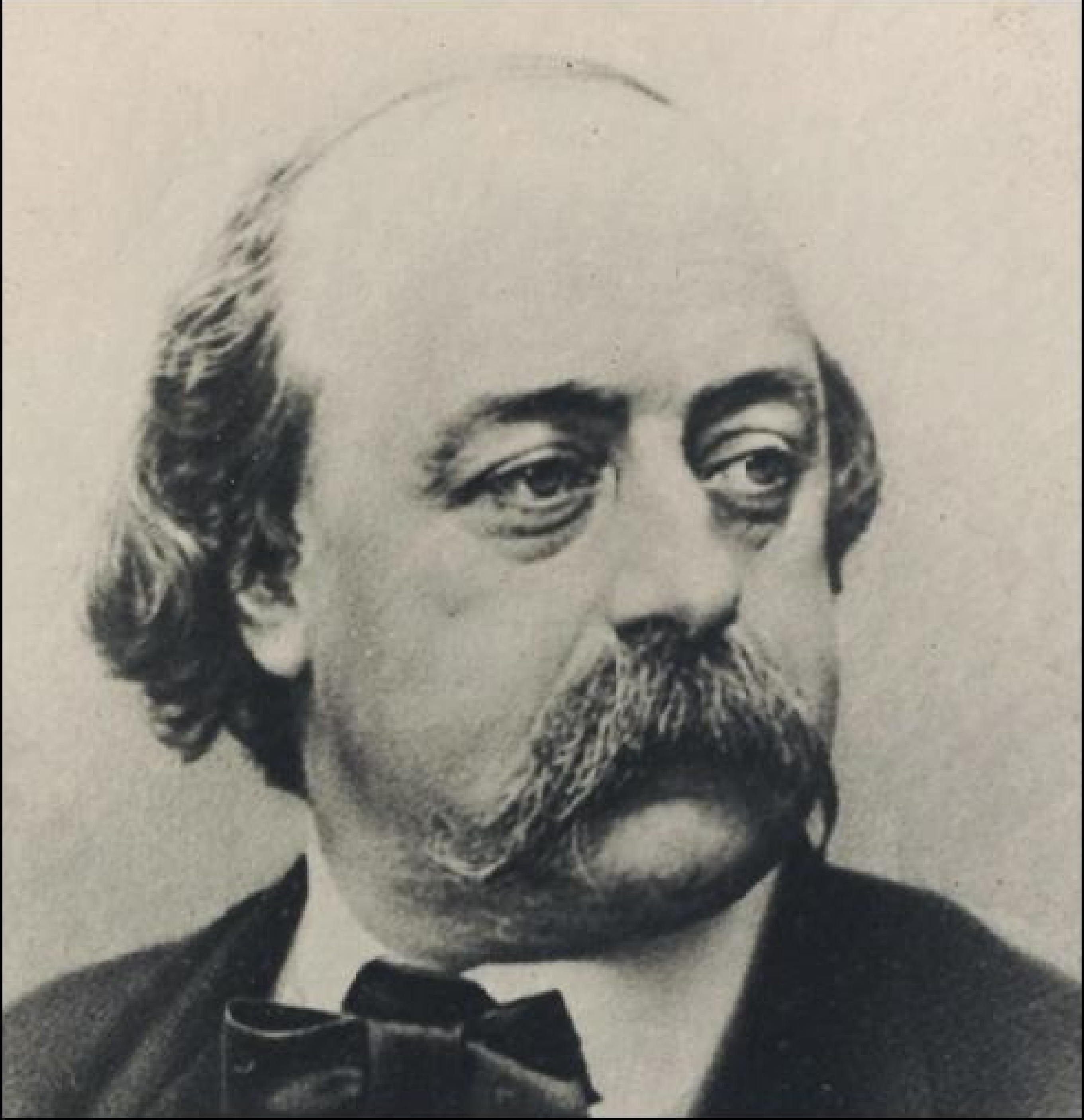
FLAUBERT

COMPLETE WORKS



DELPHI CLASSICS

THE COMPLETE WORKS OF

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

(1821-1880)

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Gve Flaubert

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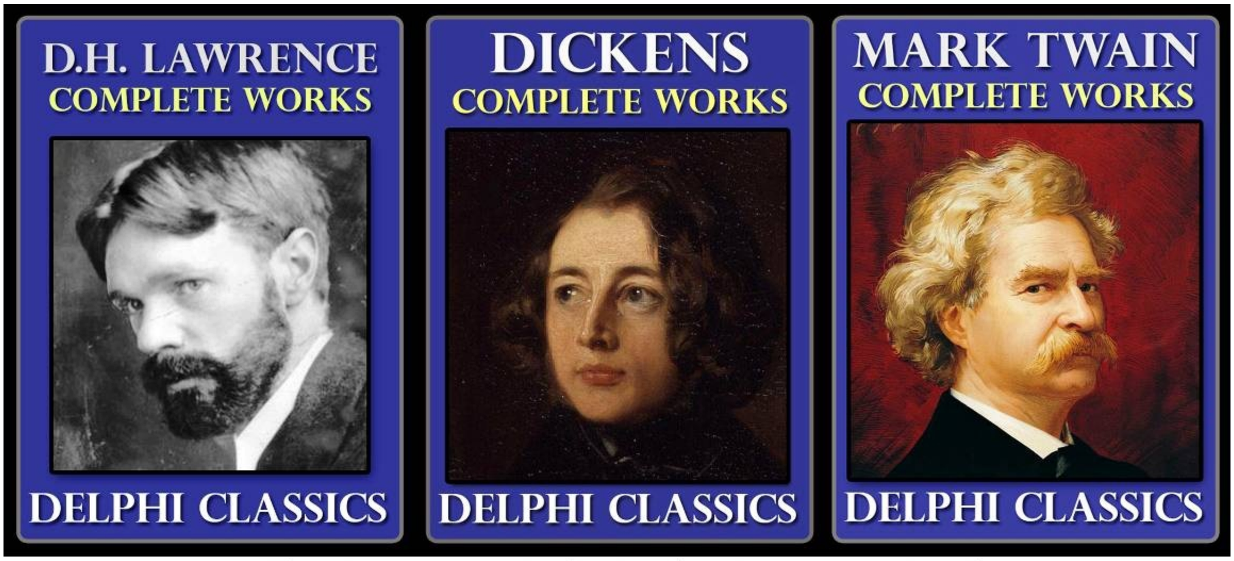
Version 1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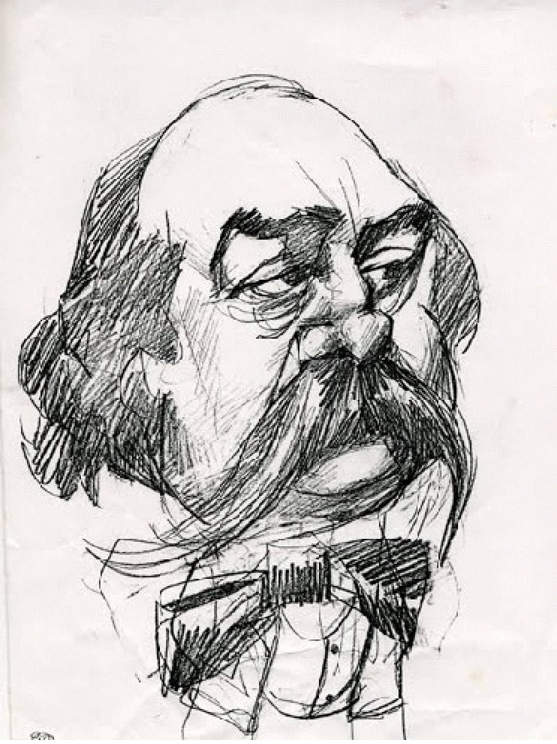
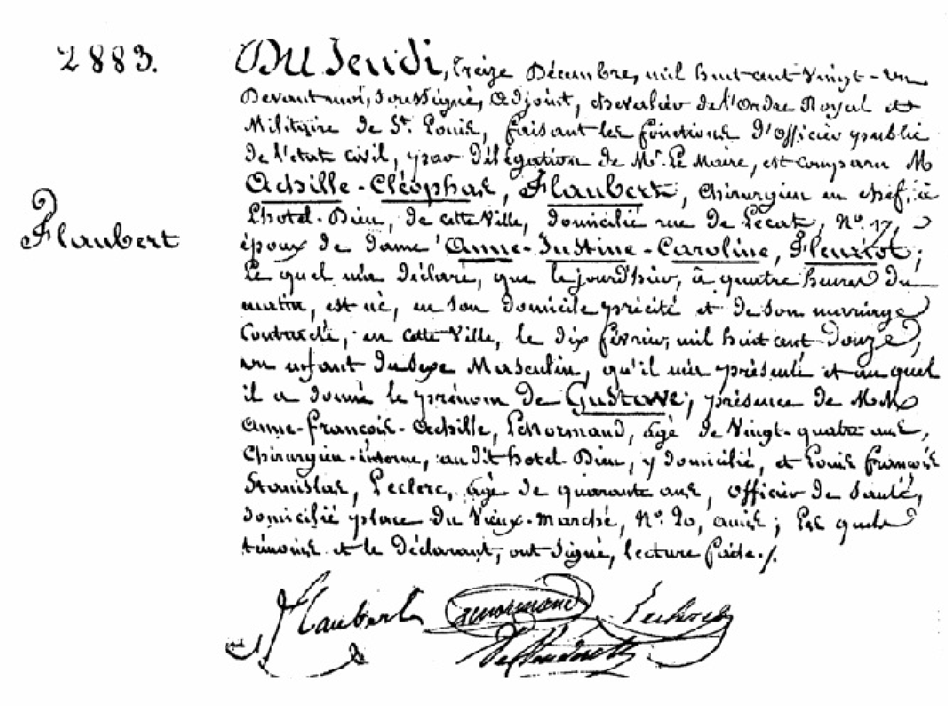


The Novels

The birthplace of Gustave Flaubert, Rouen

ICI NAQUIT
GUSTAVE FLAUBERT
LE 12 DECEMBRE 1821



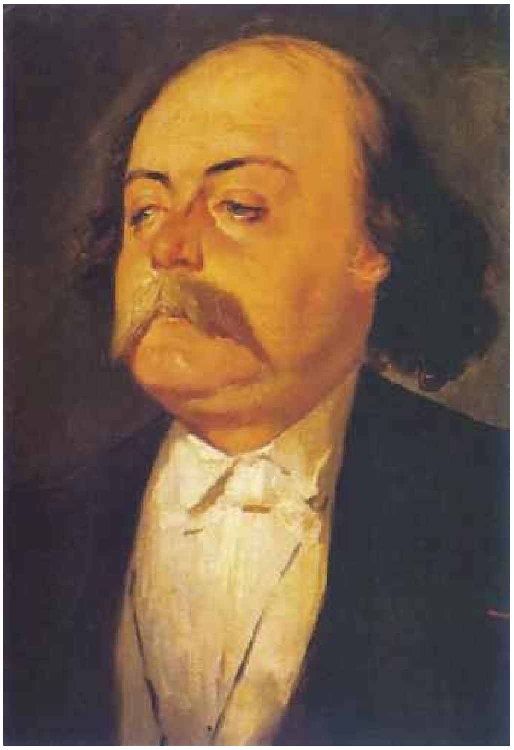
2883.

G
Flaubert

Du Jeudi, treize Décembre, mil huit cent vingt-un
Devant moi, soussigné, adjoint, chevalier de l'Ordre Royal et
Militaire de St. Louis, faisant les fonctions d'officier public
de l'état civil, par délégation de Mr. le Maire, est comparu Mr
Achille-Cléophas, Flaubert, chirurgien en chef à
l'hôtel-Dieu, de cette Ville, domicilié rue de Lecat, No. 17,
époux de Dame Anne-Justine-Caroline, Fleuriot;
Lequel nous a déclaré, que le jour d'hier, à quatre heures du
matin, est né, en son domicile précité et de son mariage
contracté, en cette Ville, le dix février, mil huit cent douze,
un enfant du sexe masculin, qu'il nous a présenté et auquel
il a donné le prénom de Gustave; présence de MM
Anne-François-Achille, Lenormand, âgé de vingt-quatre ans,
Chirurgien-interne, au dit hôtel-Dieu, y domicilié, et Louis-François-
Stanislas, Leclerc, âgé de quarante ans, officier de santé,
domicilié place du Vieux-marché, No. 20, amis; lesquels
témoins et le déclarant, ont signé, lecture faite./

Flaubert Leclerc

Flaubert's birth certificate

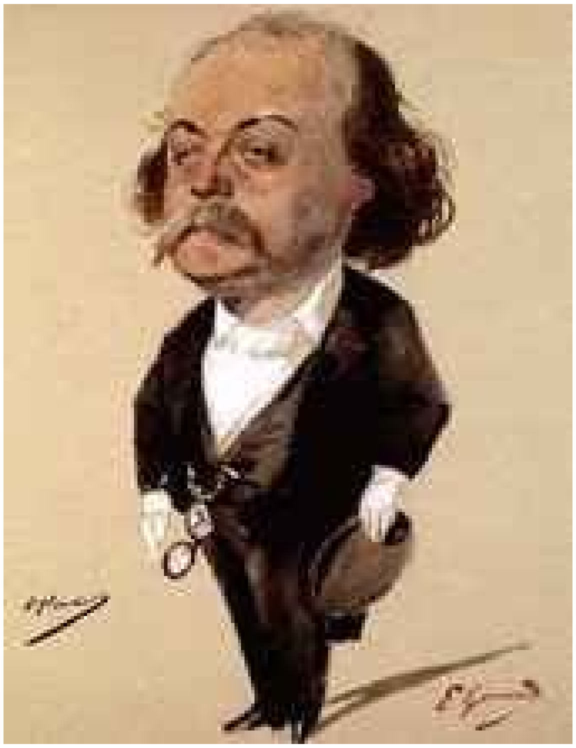


Flaubert by Eugène Giraud, 1880

MEMOIRS OF A MADMAN

This autobiographical short novel was written in 1838, but only first published in *La Revue Blanche* from December 1900 to February 1901, over twenty years after Flaubert's death. The novel alternates between the narrator's musings on the present and his memories of the past. In the sections that deal with the present, the narrator takes a bleak outlook on life, discussing writing, sanity, and death.

Unfortunately this novel has only been translated in recent years and so cannot appear in the collection. However, a free non-profit making translation is available to read via this weblink. The original French text follows this introduction.



A contemporary caricature of the great writer

MÉMOIRES D’UN FOU

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À toi mon cher Alfred

ces pages sont dédiées et données.

Elles renferment une âme tout entière. Est-ce la mienne ? est-ce celle d’un autre ? J’avais d’abord voulu faire un roman intime, où le scepticisme serait poussé jusqu’aux dernières bornes du désespoir ; mais peu à peu, en écrivant, l’impression personnelle perça à travers la fable, l’âme remua la plume et l’écrasa.

J’aime donc mieux laisser cela dans le mystère des conjectures ; pour toi, tu n’en feras pas.

Seulement tu croiras peut-être, en bien des endroits, que l’expression est forcée et le tableau assombri à plaisir ; rappelle-toi que c’est un fou qui a écrit ces pages, et, si le mot paraît souvent surpasser le sentiment qu’il exprime, c’est que, ailleurs, il a fléchi sous le poids du cœur.

Adieu, pense à moi et pour moi.

I

Pourquoi écrire ces pages ? — À quoi sont-elles bonnes ? Qu'en sçais-je moi-même ? Cela est assez sot, à mon gré, d'aller demander aux hommes le motif de leurs actions et de leurs écrits. — Sçavez-vous vous-même pourquoi vous avez ouvert les misérables feuilles que la main d'un fou va tracer ?

Un fou ! cela fait horreur. Qu'êtes-vous, vous lecteur ? Dans quelle catégorie te ranges-tu, dans celle des sots ou celle des fous ? — Si l'on te donnait à choisir, ta vanité préférerait encore la dernière condition. Oui, encore une fois, à quoi est-il bon, je le demande en vérité, un livre qui n'est ni instructif, ni amusant ni chimique ni philosophique ni agricultural ni élégiaque, un livre qui ne donne aucune recette ni pour les moutons ni pour les puces, qui ne parle ni des chemins de fer, ni de la Bourse, ni des replis intimes du cœur humain, ni des habits moyen âge, ni de Dieu, ni du diable, mais qui parle d'un fou, c'est-à-dire, le monde, ce grand idiot, qui tourne depuis tant de siècles dans l'espace sans faire un pas, et qui hurle, et qui bave et qui se déchire lui-même ?

Je ne sais pas plus que vous ce que vous allez lire, car ce n'est point un roman ni un drame avec un plan fixe, ou une seule idée préméditée, avec des jalons pour faire serpenter la pensée dans des allées tirées au cordeau.

Seulement je vais mettre sur le papier tout ce qui me viendra à la tête, mes idées avec mes souvenirs, mes impressions, mes rêves, mes caprices, tout ce qui passe dans la pensée et dans l'âme ; du rire et des pleurs, du blanc et du noir, des sanglots partis d'abord du cœur et étalés comme de la pâte dans des périodes sonores, et des larmes délayées dans des métaphores romantiques. Il me pèse cependant à penser que je vais écraser le bec à un paquet de plumes, que je vais user une bouteille d'encre, que je vais ennuyer le lecteur et m'ennuyer moi-même ; j'ai tellement pris l'habitude du rire et du scepticisme, qu'on y trouvera, depuis le commencement jusqu'à la fin une plaisanterie perpétuelle, et les gens qui aiment à rire pourront à la fin rire de l'auteur et d'eux-mêmes.

On y verra comment il faut croire au plan de l'univers, aux devoirs moraux de l'homme, à la vertu et à la philanthropie, mot que j'ai envie de faire inscrire sur mes bottes, quand j'en aurai, afin que tout le monde puisse le lire et l'apprendre par cœur, les corps les plus petits, les plus rampants, les plus près du ruisseau.

On aurait tort de voir dans ceci autre chose que les récréations d'un pauvre fou ! Un fou !

Et vous, lecteur, vous venez peut-être de vous marier ou de payer vos dettes ?

II

Je vais donc écrire l'histoire de ma vie. — Quelle vie ! Mais ai-je vécu ? je suis jeune, j'ai le visage sans ride et le cœur sans passion. — Oh ! comme elle fut calme, comme elle paraît douce et heureuse, tranquille et pure. Oh ! oui, paisible et silencieuse comme un tombeau dont l'âme serait le cadavre.

À peine ai-je vécu : je n'ai point connu le monde, c'est-à-dire je n'ai point de maîtresses, de flatteurs, de domestiques, d'équipages ; je ne suis pas entré, comme on dit, dans la société, car elle m'a paru toujours fausse et sonore et couverte de clinquant, ennuyeuse et guindée.

Or, ma vie, ce ne sont pas des faits ; ma vie, c'est une pensée.

Quelle est donc cette pensée qui m'amène maintenant, à l'âge où tout le monde sourit, se trouve heureux, où l'on se marie, où l'on aime ; à l'âge où tant d'autres s'enivrent de toutes les amours et de toutes les gloires, alors que tant de lumières brillent et que les verres sont remplis au festin, à me trouver seul et nu, froid à toute inspiration, à toute poésie, me sentant mourir et riant cruellement de ma lente agonie, comme cet épicurien qui se fit ouvrir les veines, se baigna dans un bain parfumé et mourut en riant, comme un homme qui sort ivre d'une orgie qui l'a fatigué ?

Oh ! comme elle fut longue cette pensée ! Comme une hydre, elle me dévora sous toutes ses faces. Pensée de deuil et d'amertume, pensée de bouffon qui pleure, pensée de philosophe qui médite…

Oh ! oui ! combien d'heures se sont écoulées dans ma vie, longues et monotones, à penser, à douter ! combien de journées d'hiver la tête baissée devant mes tisons blanchis aux pâles reflets du soleil couchant, combien de soirées d'été par les champs au crépuscule à regarder les nuages s'enfuir et se déployer, les blés se plier sous la brise, entendre les bois frémir et écouter la nature qui soupire dans les nuits !

Oh ! comme mon enfance fut rêveuse, comme j'étais un pauvre fou sans idées fixes, sans opinions positives ! Je regardais l'eau couler entre les massifs d'arbres qui penchent leur chevelure de feuilles et laissent tomber des fleurs, je contemplais de dedans mon berceau la lune sur son fond d'azur qui éclairait ma chambre et dessinait des formes étranges sur les murailles ; j'avais des extases devant un beau soleil ou une matinée de printemps avec son brouillard blanc, ses arbres fleuris, ses marguerites en fleurs.

J'aimais aussi, — et c'est un de mes plus tendres et délicieux souvenirs, — à regarder la mer, les vagues mousser l'une sur l'autre, la lame se briser en écume, s'étendre sur la plage et crier en se retirant sur les cailloux et les coquilles.

Je courais sur les rochers, je prenais le sable de l’Océan que je laissais s’écouler au vent entre mes doigts, je mouillais des varechs et j’aspirais à pleine poitrine cet air salé et frais de l’océan qui vous pénètre l’âme de tant d’énergie, de poétiques et larges pensées ; je regardais l’immensité, l’espace, l’infini, et mon âme s’abîmait devant cet horizon sans bornes.

Oh ! mais ce n’est pas [là] qu’est l’horizon sans bornes ! Le gouffre immense, oh ! non, un plus large et plus profond abîme s’ouvrit devant moi. Ce gouffre-là n’a point de tempête ; s’il y avait une tempête, il serait plein… et il est vide !

J’étais gai et riant, aimant la vie et ma mère. Pauvre mère !

Je me rappelle encore mes petites joies à voir les chevaux courir sur la route, à voir la fumée de leur haleine et la sueur inonder leurs harnois, j’aimais le trot monotone et cadencé qui fait osciller les soupentes ; et puis quand on s’arrêtait, tout se taisait dans les champs. On voyait la fumée sortir de leurs naseaux, la voiture ébranlée se raffermissait sur ses ressorts, le vent sifflait sur les vitres ; et c’était tout…

Oh ! comme j’ouvrais aussi de grands yeux sur la foule en habit de fête, joyeuse, tumultueuse, avec des cris, mer d’hommes orageuse, plus colère encore que la tempête et plus sotte que sa furie.

J’aimais les chars, les chevaux, les armées, les costumes de guerre, les tambours battants, le bruit la poudre et les canons roulant sur le pavé des villes.

Enfant, j’aimais ce qui [se] voit ; adolescent, ce qui se sent ; homme, je n’aime plus rien.

Et cependant, combien de choses j’ai dans l’âme, combien de forces intimes et combien d’océans de colère et d’amours se heurtent, se brisent dans ce cœur si faible, si débile si lassé si épuisé !

On me dit de reprendre à la vie, de me mêler à la foule !… Et comment la branche cassée peut-elle porter des fruits ? comment la feuille arrachée par les vents et traînée dans la poussière peut-elle reverdir ? Et pourquoi, si jeune, tant d’amertume ? Que sais-je ? il était peut-être dans ma destinée de vivre ainsi, lassé avant d’avoir porté le fardeau, haletant avant d’avoir couru.

J’ai lu, j’ai travaillé dans l’ardeur de l’enthousiasme, j’ai écrit. Oh ! comme j’étais heureux alors, comme ma pensée dans son délire s’envolait haut dans ces régions inconnues aux hommes, où il n’y a ni monde ni planètes ni soleils ! J’avais un infini plus immense s’il est possible que l’infini de Dieu, où la poésie se berçait et déployait ses ailes dans une atmosphère d’amour et d’extase ; et puis il fallait redescendre de ces régions sublimes vers les mots, et comment rendre par la parole cette harmonie qui s’élève dans le cœur du poète, et les pensées de géant qui font ployer les phrases comme une main forte et gonflée fait crever le gant qui la couvre ?

Là encore, la déception ; car nous touchons à la terre, à cette terre de glace, où tout feu meurt, où toute énergie faiblit ! Par quels échelons descendre de l'infini au positif ? Par quelle gradation la pensée s'abaisse-t-elle sans se briser ? Comment rapetisser ce géant qui embrasse l'infini ?

Alors j'avais des moments de tristesse et de désespoir, je sentais ma force qui me brisait et cette faiblesse dont j'avais honte, car la parole n'est qu'un écho lointain et affaibli de la pensée ; Je maudissais mes rêves les plus chers et mes heures silencieuses passées sur la limite de la création ; Je sentais quelque chose de vide et d'insatiable qui me dévorait.

Lassé de la poésie, je me lançai dans le champ de la méditation.

Je fus épris d'abord de cette étude imposante qui se propose l'homme pour but, et qui veut se l'expliquer, qui va jusqu'à disséquer des hypothèses et à discuter sur les suppositions les plus abstraites et à peser géométriquement les mots les plus vides.

L'homme, grain de sable jeté dans l'infini par une main inconnue, pauvre insecte aux faibles pattes qui veut se retenir sur le bord du gouffre à toutes les branches, qui se rattache à la vertu, à l'amour, à l'égoïsme, à l'ambition, et qui fait des vertus de tout cela pour mieux s'y tenir, qui se cramponne à Dieu, et qui faiblit toujours, lâche les mains et tombe…

Homme qui veut comprendre ce qui n'est pas et faire une science du néant ; homme, âme faite à l'image de Dieu et dont le génie sublime s'arrête à un brin d'herbe et ne peut franchir le problème d'un grain de poussière !

Et la lassitude me prit ; je vins à douter de tout. Jeune, j'étais vieux ; mon cœur avait des rides et en voyant des vieillards encore vifs, pleins d'enthousiasme et de croyances, je riais amèrement sur moi-même, si jeune, si désabusé de la vie, de l'amour, de la gloire, de Dieu, de tout ce qui est, de tout ce qui peut être.

J'eus cependant une horreur naturelle avant d'embrasser cette foi au néant ; au bord du gouffre, je fermai les yeux, j'y tombai.

Je fus content, je n'avais plus de chute à faire, j'étais froid et calme comme la pierre d'un tombeau. Je croyais trouver le bonheur dans le doute, insensé que j'étais ! On y roule dans un vide incommensurable. Ce vide-là est immense et fait dresser les cheveux d'horreur quand on s'approche du bord.

Du doute de Dieu j'en vins au doute de la vertu, fragile idée que chaque siècle a dressée comme il a pu sur l'échafaudage des lois, plus vacillant encore.

Je vous conterai plus tard toutes les phases de cette vie morne et méditative passée au coin du feu les bras croisés, avec un éternel bâillement d'ennui, seul pendant tout un jour, et tournant de temps [en temps] mes regards sur la neige des toits voisins, sur le soleil couchant avec ses jets de pâle lumière sur le pavé de ma chambre, ou sur une tête de mort jaune, édenteée et grimaçant sans cesse sur ma cheminée, symbole de la vie et comme elle froide et railleuse.

Plus tard, vous lirez peut-être toutes les angoisses de ce cœur si battu, si navré d’amertume. Vous sçaurez les aventures de cette vie si paisible et si banale, si remplie de sentiments, si vide de faits.

Et vous me direz ensuite si tout n’est pas une dérision et une moquerie, si tout ce qu’on chante dans les écoles, tout ce qu’on délaie dans les livres, tout ce qui se voit, se sent, se parle, si tout ce qui existe…

Je n’achève pas tant j’ai d’amertume à le dire. Eh ! bien, si tout cela enfin n’est pas de la pitié, de la fumée, du néant !

III

Je fus au collège dès l’âge de dix ans et j’y contractai de bonne heure une profonde aversion pour les hommes. Cette société d’enfants est aussi cruelle pour ses victimes que l’autre petite société, celle des hommes.

Même injustice de la foule, même tyrannie des préjugés et de la force, même égoïsme quoi qu’on ait dit sur le désintéressement et la fidélité de la jeunesse. Jeunesse ! âge de folie et de rêves, de poésie et de bêtise, synonymes dans la bouche des gens qui jugent le monde sainement. J’y fus froissé dans tous mes goûts : dans la classe pour mes idées, aux récréations pour mes penchants de sauvagerie solitaire. Dès lors, j’étais un fou.

J’y vécus donc seul et ennuyé, tracassé par mes maîtres et raillé par mes camarades. J’avais l’humeur railleuse et indépendante, et ma mordante et cynique ironie n’épargnait pas plus le caprice d’un seul que le despotisme de tous.

Je me vois encore, assis sur les bancs de la classe, absorbé dans mes rêves d’avenir, pensant à ce que l’imagination d’un enfant peut rêver de plus sublime, tandis que le pédagogue se moquait de mes vers latins, que mes camarades me regardaient en ricanant. Les imbéciles ! eux, rire de moi ! eux, si faibles, si communs, au cerveau si étroit ; moi, dont l’esprit se noyait sur les limites de la création, qui étais perdu dans tous les mondes de la poésie, qui me sentais plus grand qu’eux tous, qui recevais des jouissances infinies et qui avais des extases célestes devant toutes les révélations intimes de mon âme !

Moi qui me sentais grand comme le monde et qu’une seule de mes pensées si elle eût été de feu comme la foudre, eût pu réduire en poussière ; Pauvre fou !

Je me voyais jeune, à vingt ans, entouré de gloire, je rêvais de lointains voyages dans les contrées du Sud ; je voyais l’Orient et ses sables immenses, ses palais que foulent les chameaux et leurs clochettes d’airain ; je voyais les cavales bondir vers l’horizon rougi par le soleil ; je voyais des vagues bleues, un ciel pur, un sable d’argent ; je sentais le parfum de ces Océans tièdes du Midi ; et puis près de moi, sous une tente à l’ombre d’un aloès aux larges feuilles, quelque femme à la peau brune, au regard ardent, qui m’entourait de ses deux bras et me parlait la langue des houris.

Le soleil s’abaissait dans le sable, les chamelles et les juments dormaient, l’insecte bourdonnait à leurs mamelles, le vent du soir passait près de nous.

Et la nuit venue, quand cette lune d’argent jetait ses regards pâles sur le désert, que les étoiles brillaient sur le ciel d’azur, alors, dans le silence de cette nuit chaude et embaumée, je rêvais des joies infinies, des voluptés qui sont du ciel.

Et c'était encore la gloire, avec ses bruits de mains, ses fanfares vers le ciel, ses lauriers, sa poussière d'or jetée aux vents ; c'était un brillant théâtre avec des femmes parées, des diamants aux lumières, un air lourd, des poitrines haletantes ; puis un recueillement religieux, des paroles dévorantes comme l'incendie, des pleurs, du rire, des sanglots, l'enivrement de la gloire, des cris d'enthousiasme, le trépignement de la foule. Quoi ! de la vanité, du bruit, du néant.

Enfant, j'ai rêvé l'amour ; jeune homme la gloire ; homme, la tombe, ce dernier amour de ceux qui n'en ont plus.

Je percevais aussi l'antique époque des siècles qui ne sont plus et des races couchées sous l'herbe ; je voyais la bande de pèlerins et de guerriers marcher vers le Calvaire, s'arrêter dans le désert, mourant de faim, implorant ce Dieu qu'ils allaient chercher, et lassée de ses blasphèmes, marcher toujours vers cet horizon sans bornes ; puis, lasse, haletante, arriver enfin au but de son voyage, désespérée et vieille, pour embrasser quelques pierres arides, hommage du monde entier.

Je voyais les chevaliers courir sur les chevaux.

La nuit encore, dans la sombre cathédrale, toute la nef ornée d'une guirlande de peuples qui montent vers la voûte, dans les galeries, avec des chants ; des lumières qui resplendissent sur les vitraux, et dans la nuit de Noël toute la vieille ville avec ses toits aigus couverts de neige, s'illuminer et chanter.

Mais c'était Rome que j'aimais, la Rome impériale, cette belle reine se roulant dans l'orgie, salissant ses nobles vêtements du vin de la débauche, plus fière de ses vices qu'elle ne l'était de ses vertus. Néron ! Néron, avec ses chars de diamant volant dans l'arène, ses mille voitures, ses amours de tigre et ses festins de géant.

Loin des classiques leçons, je me reportais vers tes immenses voluptés, tes illuminations sanglantes, tes divertissements qui brûlent Rome.

Et bercé dans ces vagues rêveries, ces songes sur l'avenir, emporté par cette pensée aventureuse échappée comme une cavale sans frein qui franchit les torrents, escalade les monts et vole dans l'espace, je restais des heures entières la tête dans mes mains à regarder le plancher de mon étude ou une araignée jeter sa toile sur la chaire de notre maître ; et quand je me réveillais avec un grand œil béant, on riait de moi, le plus paresseux de tous, qui jamais n'aurait une idée positive, qui ne montrait aucun penchant pour aucune profession, qui serait inutile dans ce monde où il faut que chacun aille prendre sa part du gâteau, et qui enfin ne serait jamais bon à rien, tout au plus à faire un bouffon, un montreur d'animaux ou un faiseur de livres.

(Quoique d’une excellente santé, mon genre d’esprit perpétuellement froissé par l’existence que je menais et par le contact des autres avait occasionné en moi une irritation nerveuse qui me rendait véhément et emporté comme le taureau malade de la piqûre des insectes. J’avais des rêves, des cauchemars affreux.)

Oh !… la triste et maussade époque ! Je me vois encore errant, seul, dans les longs corridors blanchis de mon collège, à regarder les hiboux et les corneilles s’envoler des combles de la chapelle, ou bien, couché dans ces mornes dortoirs éclairés par la lampe dont l’huile se gelait. Dans les nuits, j’écoutais longtemps le vent qui soufflait lugubrement dans les longs appartements vides, et qui sifflait dans les serrures en faisant trembler les vitres dans leurs châssis ; j’entendais les pas de l’homme de ronde qui marchait lentement avec sa lanterne, et, quand il venait près de moi, je faisais semblant d’être endormi et je m’endormais en effet, moitié dans les rêves, moitié dans les pleurs.

IV

C’étaient d’effroyables visions à rendre fou de terreur.

J’étais couché dans la maison de mon père ; tous les meubles étaient conservés, mais tout ce qui m’entourait cependant avait une teinte noire. C’était une nuit d’hiver, et la neige jetait une clarté blanche dans ma chambre. Tout à coup la neige se fondit et les herbes et les arbres prirent une teinte rousse et brûlée, comme si un incendie eût éclairé mes fenêtres ; j’entendis des bruits de pas, on montait l’escalier ; un air chaud, une vapeur fétide monta jusqu’à moi. Ma porte s’ouvrit d’elle-même, on entra. Ils étaient beaucoup, peut-être [sept à huit], je n’eus pas le temps de les compter. Ils étaient petits ou grands, couverts de barbes noires et rudes, sans armes, mais tous avaient une lame d’acier entre les dents, et comme ils s’approchèrent en cercle autour de mon berceau leurs dents vinrent à claquer et ce fut horrible.

Ils écartèrent mes rideaux blancs et chaque doigt laissait une trace de sang ; ils me regardèrent avec de grands yeux fixes et sans paupières ; je les regardai aussi, je ne pouvais faire aucun mouvement, je voulais crier.

Il me sembla alors que la maison se levait de ses fondements, comme si un levier l’eût soulevée.

Ils me regardèrent ainsi longtemps, puis ils s’écartèrent, et je vis que tous avaient un côté du visage sans peau et qui saignait lentement. Ils soulevèrent tous mes vêtements et tous avaient du sang ; ils se mirent à manger, et le pain qu’ils rompirent laissait échapper du sang qui tombait goutte à goutte ; et ils se mirent à rire, comme le râle d’un mourant.

Puis, quand ils n’y furent plus, tout ce qu’ils avaient touché, les lambris, l’escalier, le plancher, tout cela était rougi par eux.

J’avais un goût d’amertume dans le cœur, il me sembla que j’avais mangé de la chair, et j’entendis un cri prolongé, rauque, aigu et les fenêtres et les portes s’ouvrirent lentement, et le vent les faisait battre et crier, comme une chanson bizarre dont chaque sifflement me déchirait la poitrine avec un stylet.

Ailleurs, – c’était dans une campagne verte et émaillée de fleurs, le long d’un fleuve ; – j’étais avec ma mère qui marchait du côté de la rive, elle tomba. Je vis l’eau écumer, des cercles s’agrandir et disparaître tout à coup ; l’eau reprit son cours, et puis je n’entendis plus que le bruit de l’eau qui passait entre les joncs et faisait ployer les roseaux.

Tout à coup, ma mère m’appela : Au secours !… au secours ! ô mon pauvre enfant, au secours ! à moi !

Je me penchai à plat ventre sur l’herbe pour regarder : je ne vis rien ; les cris continuèrent.

Une force invincible m’attachait sur la terre, et j’entendais les cris : je me noye ! je me noye ! à mon secours !

L’eau coulait, coulait limpide, et cette voix que j’entendais du fond du fleuve m’abîmait de désespoir et de rage...

V

Voilà donc comme j’étais, rêveur, insouciant avec l’humeur indépendante et railleuse, me bâtissant une destinée et rêvant à toute la poésie d’une existence pleine d’amour, vivant aussi sur mes souvenirs, autant qu’à seize ans on peut en avoir.

Le collège m’était antipathique. Ce serait une curieuse étude que ce profond dégoût des âmes nobles et élevées manifesté de suite par le contact et le froissement des hommes. Je n’ai jamais aimé une vie réglée, des heures fixes, une existence d’horloge où il faut que la pensée s’arrête avec la cloche, où tout est remonté d’avance, pour des siècles et des générations. Cette régularité sans doute peut convenir au plus grand nombre, mais pour le pauvre enfant qui se nourrit de poésie, de rêves et de chimères, qui pense à l’amour et à toutes les balivernes, c’est l’éveiller sans cesse de ce songe sublime, c’est ne pas lui laisser ni moment de repos, c’est l’étouffer en le ramenant dans notre atmosphère de matérialisme et de bon sens, dont il a horreur et dégoût.

J’allais à l’écart avec un livre de vers, un roman, de la poésie, quelque chose qui fasse tressaillir ce cœur de jeune homme, vierge de sensations et si désireux d’en avoir.

Je me rappelle avec quelle volupté je dévorais alors les pages de Byron et de Werther ; avec quels transports je lus Hamlet, Roméo, et les ouvrages les plus brûlants de notre époque, toutes ces œuvres enfin qui fondent l’âme en délices, ou la brûlent d’enthousiasme.

Je me nourris donc de cette poésie âpre du Nord, qui retentit si bien comme les vagues de la mer, dans les œuvres de Byron. Souvent j’en retenais, à la première lecture, des fragments entiers, et je me les répétais à moi-même, comme une chanson qui vous a charmé et dont la mélodie vous poursuit toujours.

Combien de fois n’ai-je pas dit le commencement du “Giaour” : Pas un souffle d’air, ou bien dans “Childe Harold” : Jadis dans l’antique Albion, et : Ô mer ! je t’ai toujours aimée. La platitude de la traduction française disparaissait devant les pensées seules, comme si elles eussent eu un style à elles sans les mots eux-mêmes.

Ce caractère de passion brûlante, joint à une si profonde ironie, devait agir fortement sur une nature ardente et vierge. Tous ces échos inconnus à la somptueuse dignité des littératures classiques avaient pour moi un parfum de nouveauté, un attrait qui m’attirait sans cesse vers cette poésie géante, qui vous donne le vertige et nous fait tomber dans le gouffre sans fond de l’infini.

Je m’étais donc faussé le goût et le cœur, comme disaient mes professeurs, et parmi tant d’êtres aux penchants si ignobles, mon indépendance d’esprit m’avait fait estimer le plus dépravé de tous ; j’étais ravalé au plus bas rang par la supériorité même. À peine si on me cédait l’imagination, c’est-à-dire, selon eux, une exaltation de cerveau voisine de la folie.

Voilà quelle fut mon entrée dans la société, et l’estime que je m’y attirai.

VI

Si l’on calomniait mon esprit et mes principes on n’attaquait pas mon cœur, car j’étais bon alors, et les misères d’autrui m’arrachaient des larmes.

Je me souviens que, tout enfant j’aimais à vider mes poches dans celles du pauvre. De quel sourire ils accueillaient mon passage et quel plaisir aussi j’avais à leur faire du bien !

C’est une volupté qui m’est depuis longtemps inconnue, car maintenant j’ai le cœur sec, les larmes se sont séchées. Mais malheur aux hommes qui m’ont rendu corrompu et méchant de bon et de pur que j’étais ! Malheur à cette aridité de la civilisation qui dessèche et étiole tout ce qui s’élève au soleil de la poésie et du cœur ! Cette vieille société corrompue qui a tant séduit et tant usé, ce vieux juif cupide mourra de marasme et d’épuisement sur ces tas de fumier qu’il appelle ses trésors, sans poète pour chanter sa mort, sans prêtre pour lui fermer les yeux, sans or pour son mausolée, car il aura tout usé pour ses vices.

VII

Quand donc finira cette société abâtardie par toutes les débauches, débauches d’esprit, de corps et d’âme ?

Alors, il y aura sans doute une joie sur la terre, quand ce vampire menteur et hypocrite qu’on appelle civilisation viendra à mourir ; on quittera le manteau royal, le sceptre, les diamants, le palais qui s’écroule, la ville qui tombe, pour aller rejoindre la cavale et la louve.

Après avoir passé sa vie dans les palais et usé ses pieds sur les dalles des grandes villes, l’homme ira mourir dans les bois.

La terre sera séchée par les incendies qui l’ont brûlée et toute pleine de la poussière des combats, le souffle de désolation, qui a passé sur les hommes aura passé sur elle, et elle ne donnera plus que des fruits amers et des roses d’épines, et les races s’éteindront au berceau comme les plantes battues par les vents qui meurent avant d’avoir fleuri.

Car il faudra bien que tout finisse et que la terre s’use à force d’être foulée ; Car l’immensité doit être lasse enfin de ce grain de poussière qui fait tant de bruit et trouble la majesté du néant. Il faudra que l’or s’épuise à force de passer dans les mains et de corrompre ; il faudra bien que cette vapeur de sang s’apaise, que le palais s’écroule sous le poids des richesses qu’il recèle, que l’orgie finisse et qu’on se réveille.

Alors il y aura un rire immense de désespoir, quand les hommes verront ce vide, quand il faudra quitter la vie pour la mort, pour la mort qui mange, qui a faim toujours. Et tout craquera pour s’écrouler dans le néant, et l’homme vertueux maudira sa vertu et le vice battra des mains.

Quelques hommes encore errants dans une terre aride s’appelleront mutuellement ; ils iront les uns vers les autres, et ils reculeront d’horreur, effrayés d’eux-mêmes, et ils mourront. Que sera l’homme alors, lui qui est déjà plus féroce que les bêtes fauves et plus vil que les reptiles ? Adieu pour jamais, chars éclatants, fanfares et renommées ; adieu au monde, à ses palais, à ses mausolées, aux voluptés du crime et aux joies de la corruption ! La pierre tombera tout à coup, écrasée par elle-même, et l’herbe poussera dessus. Et les palais, les temples, les pyramides, les colonnes, mausolées du roy, cercueil du pauvre, charogne du chien, tout cela sera à la même hauteur sous le gazon de la terre.

Alors, la mer sans digues battra en repos les rivages et ira baigner ses flots sur la cendre encore fumante des cités ; les arbres pousseront, verdiront, sans une main pour les casser et les briser ; les fleuves couleront dans des prairies émaillées, la nature sera libre, sans homme pour la contraindre, et cette race sera éteinte, car elle était maudite dès son enfance.

Triste et bizarre époque que la nôtre ! Vers quel océan ce torrent d'iniquités coule-t-il ? Où allons-nous dans une nuit si profonde ? Ceux qui veulent palper ce monde malade se retirent vite, effrayés de la corruption qui s'agite dans ses entrailles.

Quand Rome se sentit à son agonie, elle avait au moins un espoir, elle entrevoyait derrière le linceul la croix radieuse, brillant sur l'éternité. Cette religion a duré deux mille ans et voilà qu'elle s'épuise, qu'elle ne suffit plus, et qu'on s'en moque ; voilà ses églises qui tombent, ses cimetières tassés de morts et qui regorgent.

Et nous, quelle religion aurons-nous ? Être si vieux que nous le sommes et marcher encore dans le désert comme les Hébreux qui fuyaient d'Égypte !

Où sera la Terre Promise ?

Nous avons essayé de tout et nous renions tout sans espoir ; et puis une étrange cupidité nous a pris dans l'âme et l'humanité, il y a une inquiétude immense qui nous ronge, il y a un vide dans notre foule ; nous sentons autour de nous un froid de sépulcre.

L'humanité s'est prise à tourner des machines, et voyant l'or qui en ruisselait, elle s'est écriée : C'est Dieu ! et ce Dieu-là, elle le mange. Il y a : C'est que tout est fini, adieu ! adieu ! du vin avant de mourir ! Chacun se rue ou le pousse son instinct, le monde fourmille comme les insectes sur un cadavre, les poètes passent sans avoir le temps de sculpter leurs pensées, à peine s'ils les jettent sur des feuilles et les feuilles volent ; tout brille et tout retentit dans cette mascarade, sous ses royautés d'un jour et ses sceptres de carton, l'or roule, le vin ruisselle, la débauche froide lève sa robe et remue… horreur ! horreur !

Et puis il y a sur tout cela un voile dont chacun prend sa part et se cache le plus qu'il peut.

Dérision ! horreur ! horreur !

VIII

Et il y a des jours où j’ai une lassitude immense, et un sombre ennui m’enveloppe comme un linceul partout où je vais ; ses plis m’embarrassent et me gênent, la vie me pèse comme un remords. Si jeune et si lassé de tout, quand il y en a qui sont vieux et encore pleins d’enthousiasme ! et moi, je suis si tombé, si désenchanté ! que faire ? La nuit, regarder la lune qui jette sur mes lambris ses clartés tremblantes comme un large feuillage, et, le jour, le soleil dorant les toits voisins ? Est-ce là vivre ? Non, c’est la mort moins le repos du sépulcre.

Et j’ai des petites joies à moi seul, des réminiscences enfantines qui viennent encore me réchauffer dans mon isolement, comme des reflets de soleil couchant par les barreaux d’une prison. Un rien, la moindre circonstance, un jour pluvieux, un grand soleil, une fleur, un vieux meuble, me rappellent une série de souvenirs qui passent tous, confus, effacés comme des ombres. Jeux d’enfants sur l’herbe au milieu des marguerites dans les prés, derrière la haie fleurie, le long de la vigne aux grappes dorées, sur la mousse brune et verte, sous les larges feuilles, les frais ombrages ; souvenirs calmes et riants comme un souvenir du premier âge, vous passez près de moi comme des roses flétries.

La jeunesse, ses bouillants transports, ses instincts confus du monde et du cœur, ses palpitations d’amour, ses larmes, ses cris ! Amour du jeune homme, ironies de l’âge mûr. Vous revenez souvent avec vos couleurs sombres ou ternes, fuyant poussées les unes par les autres, comme les ombres des morts qui passent en courant sur les murs dans les nuits d’hiver. Et je tombe souvent en extases devant le souvenir de quelque bonne journée passée depuis bien longtemps, journée folle et joyeuse avec des éclats et des rires qui vibrent encore à mes oreilles, et qui palpite encore de gaieté et qui me fait sourire d’amertume. C’était quelque course sur un cheval, bondissant et couvert d’écume, quelque promenade bien rêveuse sous une large allée couverte d’ombre, à regarder l’eau couler sur les cailloux ; ou une contemplation d’un beau soleil resplendissant avec ses gerbes de feu et ses auréoles rouges. Et j’entends encore le galop du cheval, ses naseaux qui fument ; j’entends l’eau qui glisse, la feuille qui tremble, le vent qui courbe les blés comme une mer.

D’autres sont mornes et froids comme des journées pluvieuses, des souvenirs amers et cruels qui reviennent aussi ; des heures de calvaire passées à pleurer sans espoir, et puis à rire forcément pour chasser ces larmes qui cachent les yeux, les sanglots qui couvrent la voix.

J’ai resté bien des jours, bien des ans, assis à ne penser à rien, ou à tout, abîmé dans l’infini que je voulais embrasser, et qui me dévorait !

J’entendais la pluie tomber dans les gouttières, les cloches sonner en pleurant ; je voyais le soleil se coucher et la nuit venir ; la nuit dormeuse qui vous apaise ; et puis le jour reparaissait, toujours le même avec ses ennuis, son même nombre d’heures à vivre et que je voyais mourir avec joie.

Je rêvais la mer, les lointains voyages, les amours, les triomphes, toutes choses avortées dans mon existence, cadavres avant d’avoir vécu.

Hélas ! tout cela n’était donc pas fait pour moi ? Je n’envie pas les autres, car chacun se plaint du fardeau dont la fatalité l’accable ; les uns le jettent avant l’existence finie, d’autres le portent jusqu’au bout. Et moi, le porterai-je ?

À peine ai-je vu la vie, qu’il y a eu un immense dégoût dans mon âme ; j’ai porté à ma bouche tous les fruits, ils m’ont semblé amers, je les ai repoussés, et voilà que je meurs de faim. Mourir si jeune, sans espoir dans la tombe, sans être sûr d’y dormir, sans savoir si sa paix est inviolable ! Se jeter dans les bras du néant et douter s’il vous recevra !

Oui, je meurs, car est-ce vivre de voir son passé comme l’eau écoulée dans la mer, le présent comme une cage, l’avenir comme un linceul ?

IX

Il y a des choses insignifiantes qui m’ont frappé fortement et que je garderai toujours comme l’empreinte d’un fer rouge, quoiqu’elles soient banales et niaises.

Je me rappellerai toujours une espèce de château non loin de ma ville, et que nous allions voir souvent. C’était une de ces vieilles femmes du siècle dernier qui l’habitait. Tout chez elle avait conservé le souvenir pastoral, je vois encore les portraits poudrés, les habits bleu ciel des hommes et les roses et les œillets jetés sur les lambris avec des bergères et des troupeaux. Tout avait un aspect vieux et sombre, les meubles, presque tous de soie brodée, étaient spacieux et doux ; la maison était vieille ; d’anciens fossés, alors plantés de pommiers, l’entouraient, et les pierres qui se détachaient de temps en temps des créneaux allaient rouler jusqu’au fond.

Non loin était le parc, planté de grands arbres, avec des allées sombres, des bancs de pierre couverts de mousse, à demi brisés, entre les branchages et les ronces. Une chèvre paissait et, quand on ouvrait la grille de fer, elle se sauvait dans le feuillage.

Dans les beaux jours, il y avait des rayons de soleil qui passaient entre les branches et doraient la mousse çà et là.

C’était triste, le vent s’engouffrait dans ces larges cheminées de briques et me faisait peur, quand, le soir surtout, les hiboux poussaient leurs cris dans les vastes greniers.

Nous prolongions souvent nos visites assez tard le soir, réunis autour de la vieille maîtresse dans une grande salle couverte de dalles blanches, devant une vaste cheminée en marbre. Je vois encore sa tabatière d’or pleine du meilleur tabac d’Espagne, son carlin aux longs poils blancs, et son petit pied mignon enveloppé dans un joli soulier à haut talon orné d’une rose noire.

Qu’il y a longtemps de tout cela ! La maîtresse est morte, ses carlins aussi, sa tabatière est dans la poche du notaire ; le château sert de fabrique, et le pauvre soulier a été jeté à la rivière.

APRÈS TROIS SEMAINES D’ARRÊT :

…Je suis si lassé que j’ai un profond dégoût à continuer, ayant relu ce qui précède.

Les œuvres d’un homme ennuyé peuvent-elles amuser le public ?

Je vais cependant m’efforcer de divertir davantage l’un et l’autre.

Ici commencent vraiment les Mémoires.....

X

Ici sont mes souvenirs les plus tendres et les plus pénibles à la fois, et je les aborde avec une émotion toute religieuse. Ils sont vivants à ma mémoire et presque chauds encore pour mon âme, tant cette passion l'a fait saigner. C'est une large cicatrice au cœur qui durera toujours, mais, au moment de retracer cette page de ma vie, mon cœur bat comme si j'allais remuer des ruines chéries.

Elles sont déjà vieilles ces ruines ; en marchant dans la vie, l'horizon s'est écarté par derrière, et que de choses depuis lors ! car les jours semblent longs, un à un depuis le matin jusqu'au soir ! mais le passé paraît rapide, tant l'oubli rétrécit le cadre qui l'a contenu.

Pour moi tout semble vivre encore. J'entends et je vois le frémissement des feuilles, je vois jusqu'au moindre pli de sa robe ; j'entends le timbre de sa voix, comme si un ange chantait près de moi, voix douce et pure, qui vous enivre et qui vous fait mourir d'amour. Voix qui a un corps, tant elle est belle et qui séduit, comme s'il y avait un charme à tes mots…

Vous dire l'année précise me serait impossible ; mais alors j'étais fort jeune, j'avais, je crois, quinze ans ; nous allâmes cette année aux bains de mer de…, village de Picardie, charmant avec ses maisons entassées les unes sur les autres, noires, grises, rouges, blanches, tournées de tous côtés, sans alignement et sans symétrie, comme un tas de coquilles et de cailloux que la vague a poussés sur la côte.

Il y a quelques années personne n'y venait, malgré sa plage d'une demi-lieue de grandeur et sa charmante position ; mais, depuis peu la vogue s'y est tournée. La dernière fois que j'y fus, je vis quantité de gants jaunes et de livrées, on proposait même d'y construire une salle de spectacle.

Alors, tout était simple et sauvage, il n'y avait guère que des artistes et des gens du pays. Le rivage était désert, et à marée basse on voyait une plage immense avec un sable gris et argenté qui scintillait au soleil, tout humide encore de la vague. À gauche, des rochers où la mer battait paresseusement, dans ses jours de sommeil les parois noircies de varech, puis au loin l'océan bleu sous un soleil ardent et mugissant sourdement comme un géant qui pleure.

Et, quand on rentrait dans le village, c'était le plus pittoresque et le plus chaud spectacle. Des filets noirs et rongés par l'eau étendus aux portes, partout les enfants à moitié nus marchant sur un galet gris, seul pavage du lieu, des marins avec leurs vêtements rouges et bleus ; et tout cela simple dans sa grâce, naïf et robuste, tout cela empreint d’un caractère de vigueur et d’énergie.

J’allais souvent seul me promener sur la grève. Un jour, le hasard me fit aller vers l’endroit où l’on baignait. C’était une place, non loin des dernières maisons du village, fréquentée plus spécialement pour cet usage ; hommes et femmes nageaient ensemble, on se déshabillait sur le rivage ou dans sa maison et on laissait son manteau sur le sable.

Ce jour-là, une charmante pelisse rousse avec des raies noires était restée sur le rivage. La marée montait, le rivage était festonné d’écume ; déjà un flot plus fort avait mouillé les franges de soie de ce manteau. Je l’ôtai pour le placer au loin ; l’étoffe en était moelleuse et légère. C’était un manteau de femme.

Apparemment on m’avait vu, car le jour même, au repas de midi et comme tout le monde mangeait dans une salle commune à l’auberge où nous étions logés, j’entendis quelqu’un qui me disait :

— Monsieur, je vous remercie bien de votre galanterie.

Je me retournai ; c’était une jeune femme assise avec son mari à la table voisine.

— Quoi donc ? lui demandai-je, préoccupé.

— D’avoir ramassé mon manteau ; n’est-ce pas vous ?

Elle me regarda.

Je baissai les yeux et rougis.

Quel regard, en effet ! comme elle était belle, cette femme ! je vois encore cette prunelle ardente sous un sourcil noir se fixer sur moi comme un soleil.

Elle était grande, brune, avec de magnifiques cheveux noirs qui lui tombaient en tresses sur les épaules ; son nez était grec, ses yeux brûlants, ses sourcils hauts et admirablement arqués, sa peau était ardente et comme veloutée avec de l’or ; elle était mince et fine, on voyait des veines d’azur serpenter sur cette gorge brune et pourprée. Joignez à cela un duvet fin qui brunissait sa lèvre supérieure et donnait à sa figure une expression mâle et énergique à faire pâlir les beautés blondes. On aurait pu lui reprocher trop d'embonpoint ou plutôt un négligé artistique. Aussi les femmes en général la trouvaient-elles de mauvais ton. Elle parlait lentement, c’était une voix modulée, musicale et douce…

Elle avait une robe fine, de mousseline blanche qui laissait voir les contours moelleux de son bras.

Quand elle se leva pour partir, elle mit une capote blanche avec un seul nœud rose ; Elle le noua d’une main fine et potelée, une de ces mains qu’on rêve longtemps et qu’on brûlerait de baisers.

Chaque matin, j’allais la voir baigner ; je la contemplais de loin sous l’eau, j’enviais la vague molle et paisible qui battait sur ses flancs et couvrait d’écume cette poitrine haletante, je voyais le contour de ses membres sous les vêtements mouillés qui la couvraient, je voyais son cœur battre, sa poitrine se gonfler ; je contemplais machinalement son pied se poser sur le sable, et mon regard restait fixé sur la trace de ses pas, et j'aurais pleuré presque en voyant le flot les effacer lentement.

Et puis, quand elle revenait et qu'elle passait près de moi, que j'entendais l'eau tomber de ses habits et le frôlement de sa marche, mon cœur battait avec violence ; je baissais les yeux, le sang me montait à la tête, j'étouffais. Je sentais ce corps de femme à moitié nu passer près de moi avec le parfum de la vague. Sourd et aveugle, j'aurais deviné sa présence, car il y avait en moi quelque chose d'intime et de doux qui se noyait en extase et en gracieuses pensées quand elle passait ainsi.

Je crois voir encore la place où j'étais fixé sur le rivage, je vois les vagues accourir de toutes parts, se briser, s'étendre, je vois la plage festonnée d'écume, j'entends le bruit des voix confuses des baigneurs parlant entre eux, j'entends le bruit de ses pas, j'entends son haleine quand elle passait près de moi.

J'étais immobile de stupeur comme si la Vénus fût descendue de son piédestal et s'était mise à marcher. C'est que, pour la première fois alors, je sentais mon cœur, je sentais quelque chose de mystique, d'étrange comme un sens nouveau. J'étais baigné de sentiments infinis, tendres, j'étais bercé d'images vaporeuses, vagues ; j'étais plus grand et plus fier à la fois.

J'aimais.

Aimer, se sentir jeune et plein d'amour, sentir la nature et ses harmonies palpiter en vous, avoir besoin de cette rêverie, de cette action du cœur et s'en sentir heureux ! Oh ! les premiers battements du cœur de l'homme, ses premières palpitations d'amour ! qu'elles sont douces et étranges ! et plus tard, comme elles paraissent niaises et sottement ridicules ! Chose bizarre ! il y a tout ensemble du tourment et de la joie dans cette insomnie. Est-ce par vanité encore ? Ah ! l'amour ne serait-il que de l'orgueil ? Faut-il nier ce que les impies respectent ? Faudrait-il rire du cœur ? Hélas ! hélas ! La vague a effacé les pas de Maria.

Ce fut d'abord un singulier état de surprise et d'admiration, une sensation toute mystique en quelque sorte, toute idée de volupté à part. Ce ne fut que plus tard que je ressentis cette ardeur frénétique et sombre de la chair et de l'âme et qui dévore l'une et l'autre.

J'étais dans l'étonnement du cœur qui sent sa première pulsation. J'étais comme le premier homme quand il eût connu toutes ses facultés. À quoi je rêvais, serait fort impossible à dire ; je me sentais nouveau et tout étranger à moi-même ; une voix m'était venue dans l'âme.

Un rien, un pli de sa robe, un sourire, son pied, le moindre mot insignifiant m’impressionnaient comme des choses surnaturelles et j’avais pour tout un jour à en rêver. Je suivais sa trace à l’angle d’un long mur et le frôlement de ses vêtements me faisait palpiter d’aise. Quand j’entendais ses pas, les nuits qu’elle marchait ou qu’elle avançait vers moi… non, je ne saurais vous dire combien il y a de douces sensations d’enivrement du cœur, de béatitude et de folie dans l’amour.

Et maintenant si rieur sur tout, si amèrement persuadé du grotesque de l’existence, je sens encore que l’amour, cet amour comme je l’ai rêvé au collège sans l’avoir, et que j’ai ressenti plus tard, qui m’a tant fait pleurer et dont j’ai tant ri, combien je crois encore que ce serait tout à la fois la plus sublime des choses, ou la plus bouffonne des bêtises ! Deux êtres jetés sur la terre par un hasard, quelque chose, et qui se rencontrent, s’aiment, parce que l’un est femme et l’autre homme ! Les voilà haletants l’un pour l’autre, se promenant ensemble la nuit et se mouillant à la rosée, regardant le clair de lune et le trouvant diaphane, admirant les étoiles et disant sur tous les tons : je t’aime, tu m’aimes, il m’aime, nous nous aimons, et répétant cela avec des soupirs, des baisers ; et puis ils rentrent, poussés tous les deux par une ardeur sans pareille car ces deux âmes ont leurs organes violemment échauffés, et les voilà bientôt grotesquement accouplés, avec des rugissements et des soupirs, soucieux l’un et l’autre pour reproduire un imbécile de plus sur la terre, un malheureux qui les imitera ! Contemplez-les, plus bêtes en ce moment que les chiens et les mouches, s’évanouissant, et cachant soigneusement aux yeux des hommes leur jouissance solitaire, pensant peut-être que le bonheur est un crime et la volupté une honte.

On me pardonnera, je pense, de ne pas parler de l’amour platonique, cet amour exalté comme celui d’une statue ou d’une cathédrale, qui repousse toute idée de jalousie et de possession, et qui devrait se trouver entre les hommes mutuellement, mais que j’ai rarement eu l’occasion d’apercevoir ; amour sublime s’il existait, mais qui n’est qu’un rêve comme tout ce qu’il y a de beau en ce monde.

Je m’arrête ici, car la moquerie du vieillard ne doit pas ternir la virginité des sentiments du jeune homme ; je me serais indigné autant que vous, lecteur, si on m’eût alors tenu un langage aussi cruel. Je croyais qu’une femme était un ange… Oh ! que Molière a eu raison de la comparer à un potage !

XI

Maria avait un enfant, c’était une petite fille ; on l’aimait, on l’embrassait, on l’ennuyait de caresses et de baisers. Comme j’aurais recueilli un seul de ces baisers jetés, comme des perles, avec profusion sur la tête de cette enfant au maillot !

Maria l’allaitait elle-même, et un jour je la vis découvrir sa gorge et lui présenter son sein.

C’était une gorge grasse et ronde, avec une peau brune et des veines d’azur qu’on voyait sous cette chair ardente. Jamais je n’avais vu de femme nue alors. Oh ! la singulière extase où me plongea la vue de ce sein ; comme je le dévorai des yeux, comme j’aurais voulu seulement toucher cette poitrine ! Il me semblait que si j’eusse posé mes lèvres, mes dents l’auraient mordue de rage, et mon cœur se fondait en délices en pensant aux voluptés que donnerait ce baiser.

Oh ! comme je l’ai revue longtemps, cette gorge palpitante, ce long cou gracieux et cette tête penchée avec ses cheveux noirs en papillotes vers cette enfant qui tétait, et qu’elle berçait lentement sur ses genoux en fredonnant un air italien !

XII

Nous fîmes bientôt une connaissance plus intime : je dis nous, car pour moi personnellement, je me serais bien hasardé de lui adresser une parole en l’état où sa vue m’avait plongé.

Son mari tenait le milieu entre l’artiste et le commis voyageur ; il était orné de moustaches, de vêtements à guise ; il fumait intrépidement, était vif, bon garçon, amical ; il ne méprisait point la table, et je le vis une fois faire trois lieues à pied pour aller chercher un melon à la ville la plus voisine ; il était venu dans sa chaise de poste avec son chien, sa femme, son enfant et vingt-cinq bouteilles de vin du Rhin.

Aux bains de mer, à la campagne ou en voyage, on se parle plus facilement, on désire se connaître ; un rien suffit pour la conversation, la pluie et le beau temps bien plus qu’ailleurs y tiennent place. On se récrie sur l’incommodité des logements, sur le détestable de la cuisine d’auberge. Ce dernier trait surtout est du meilleur ton possible : Oh ! le linge, est-il sale ? C’est trop poivré ; c’est trop épicé ! Ah ! l’horreur ! ma chère.

Va-t-on ensemble à la promenade, c’est à qui s’extasiera davantage sur la beauté du paysage. Que c’est beau ! que la mer est belle ! Joignez à cela quelques mots poétiques et boursouflés, deux ou trois réflexions philosophiques entrelardées de soupirs et d’aspirations du nez plus ou moins fortes. Si vous savez dessiner, tirez votre album en maroquin, ou, ce qui est mieux, enfoncez votre casquette sur les yeux, croisez-vous les bras et dormez pour faire semblant de penser.

Il y a des femmes que j’ai flairées belle esprit à un quart de lieue loin, seulement à la manière dont elles regardaient la vague. Il faudra vous plaindre des hommes, manger peu et vous passionner pour un rocher, admirer un pré et vous mourir d’amour pour la mer. Ah ! vous serez délicieux alors, on dira : le charmant jeune homme ! quelle jolie blouse il a ! comme ses bottes sont fines ! quelle grâce ! la belle âme ! C’est ce besoin de parler, cet instinct d’aller en troupeau où les plus hardis marchent en tête qui a fait, dans l’origine, les sociétés et qui de nos jours forme les réunions.

Ce fut sans doute un pareil motif qui nous fit causer pour la première fois. C’était l’après-midi, il faisait chaud et le soleil dardait dans la salle malgré les auvents. Nous étions restés, quelques peintres, Maria et son mari et moi, étendus sur des chaises à fumer, en buvant du grog.

Maria fumait, ou du moins, si un reste de sottise féminine l’en empêchait, elle aimait l’odeur du tabac (monstruosité, elle me donna même des cigarettes !) On causa littérature, sujet inépuisable avec les femmes ; j’y pris ma part, je parlai longuement et avec feu ; Maria et moi étions parfaitement du même sentiment en fait d’art. Je n’ai jamais entendu personne le sentir avec plus de naïveté et avec moins de prétention ; elle avait des mots simples et expressifs qui partaient en relief et surtout avec tant de négligé et de grâce, tant d’abandon, de nonchalance, vous auriez dit qu’elle chantait.

Un soir, son mari nous proposa une partie de barque. Il faisait le plus beau temps du monde. Nous acceptâmes.

XIII

Comment rendre par des mots ces choses pour lesquelles il n’y a pas de langage, ces impressions du cœur, ces mystères de l’âme inconnus à elle-même ? Comment vous dirai-je tout ce que j’ai ressenti, tout ce que j’ai pensé, toutes les choses dont j’ai joui cette soirée-là ? C’était une belle nuit d’été ; vers neuf heures, nous montâmes sur la chaloupe, on rangea les avirons, nous partîmes. Le temps était calme, la lune se reflétait sur la surface unie de l’eau et le sillon de la barque faisait vaciller son image sur les flots. La marée se mit à remonter et nous sentîmes les premières vagues bercer lentement la chaloupe. On se taisait, Maria se mit à parler. Je ne sais ce qu’elle dit, je me laissais enchanter par le son de ses paroles comme je me laissais bercer par la mer. Elle était près de moi, je sentais le contour de son épaule et le contact de sa robe ; elle levait son regard vers le ciel, pur, étoilé, resplendissant de diamants et se mirant dans les vagues bleues. C’était un ange, à la voir ainsi la tête levée avec ce regard céleste.

J’étais enivré d’amour, j’écoutais les deux rames se lever en cadence, les flots battre les flancs de la barque, je me laissais toucher par tout cela [et] j’écoutais la voix de Maria douce et vibrante.

Est-ce que je pourrai jamais vous dire toutes les mélodies de sa voix, toutes les grâces de son sourire, toutes les beautés de son regard ? Vous dirai-je jamais comme c’était quelque chose à faire mourir d’amour que cette nuit pleine du parfum de la mer, avec ses vagues transparentes, son sable argenté par la lune, cette onde belle et calme, ce ciel resplendissant, et puis, près de moi, cette femme ? toutes les joies de la terre, toutes les voluptés, ce qu’il y a de plus doux, de plus enivrant ? C’était tout le charme d’un rêve avec toutes les jouissances du vrai. Je me laissais entraîner par toutes ces émotions, je m’y avançais plus avant avec une joie insatiable, je m’enivrais à plaisir de ce calme plein de voluptés, de ce regard de femme, de cette voix ; je me plongeais dans mon cœur et j’y trouvais des voluptés infinies. Comme j’étais heureux ! bonheur du crépuscule qui tombe dans la nuit, bonheur qui passe comme la vague expirée, comme le rivage…

On revint, on descendit, je conduisis Maria jusque chez elle, je ne lui dis pas un mot, j’étais timide ; je la suivais, je rêvais d’elle, du bruit de sa marche et, quand elle fut entrée, je regardai longtemps le mur de sa maison éclairé par les rayons de la lune, je vis sa lumière briller à travers les vitres, et je la regardais de temps en temps, en retournant par la grève ; puis, quand cette lumière eut disparu : elle dort, me dis-je. Et puis tout à coup une pensée vint m’assaillir, pensée de rage et de jalousie. Oh ! non, elle ne dort pas ; et j’eus dans l’âme toutes les tortures d’un damné.

Je pensai à son mari, à cet homme vulgaire et jovial, et les images les plus hideuses vinrent s’offrir devant moi. J’étais comme ces gens qu’on fait mourir de faim dans des cages et entourés des mets les plus exquis.

J’étais seul sur la grève, seul ; Elle ne pensait pas à moi. En regardant cette solitude immense devant moi, et cette autre solitude plus terrible encore, je me mis à pleurer comme un enfant, car près de moi, à quelques pas, elle était là, derrière ces murs que je dévorais du regard ; elle était là, belle et nue, avec toutes les voluptés de la nuit, toutes les grâces de l’amour, toutes les chastetés de l’hymen ; cet homme n’avait qu’à ouvrir les bras et elle venait sans efforts, sans attendre, elle venait à lui, et ils s’aimaient, ils s’embrassaient. À lui toutes ses joies, tous ses délices ; à lui mon amour sous ses pieds ; à lui cette femme tout entière, sa tête, sa gorge, ses seins, son corps, son âme, ses sourires, ses deux bras qui l’entourent, ses paroles d’amour ; à lui tout, à moi rien.

Je me mis à rire, car la jalousie m’inspira des pensées obscènes et grotesques, alors je les souillai tous les deux, j’amassai sur eux les ridicules les plus amers, et ces images qui m’avaient fait pleurer d’envie je m’efforçai d’en rire de pitié. La marée commençait à redescendre, et de place en place, on voyait de grands trous pleins d’eau argentés par la lune, des places de sable encore mouillé couvertes de varech, ça et là quelques rochers à fleur d’eau ou, se dressant plus haut, noirs ou blancs, des filets dressés et déchirés par la mer, qui se retirait en grondant.

Il faisait chaud, j’étouffais. Je rentrai dans la chambre de mon auberge, je voulus dormir. J’entendais toujours les flots aux côtés du canot, j’entendais la rame tomber, j’entendais la voix de Maria qui parlait ; j’avais du feu dans les veines, tout cela repassait devant moi, et la promenade du soir, et celle de la nuit sur le rivage, je voyais Maria couchée, et je m’arrêtais là, car le reste me faisait frémir. J’avais de la lave dans l’âme, j’étais harassé de tout cela et, couché sur le dos, je regardais ma chandelle brûler et son disque trembler au plafond ; c’était avec un hébétement stupide que je voyais le suif couler autour du flambeau de cuivre et la flammèche noire s’allonger dans la flamme.

Enfin le jour vint à paraître, je m’endormis.

XIV

Il fallut partir ; nous nous séparâmes sans pouvoir lui dire adieu. Elle quitta les bains le même jour que nous. C'était un dimanche.

Elle partit le matin, nous le soir ; elle partit et je ne la revis plus. Adieu pour toujours ! Elle partit comme la poussière de la route qui s'envola derrière ses pas. Comme j'y ai pensé depuis ! combien d'heures, confondu devant le souvenir de son regard, ou l'intonation de ses paroles !

Enfoncé dans la voiture, je reportais mon cœur plus avant dans la route que nous avions parcourue, je me replaçais dans le passé qui ne reviendrait plus ; je pensais à la mer, à ses vagues, à son rivage, à tout ce que je venais de voir, tout ce que j'avais senti ; les paroles dites, les gestes, les actions, la moindre chose, tout cela palpitait et vivait ; c'était dans mon cœur un chaos, un bourdonnement immense, une folie ; tout était passé comme un rêve. Adieu pour toujours à ces belles fleurs de la jeunesse si vite fanées et vers lesquelles plus tard on se reporte de temps en temps avec amertume et plaisir à la fois ! Enfin, je vis les maisons de ma ville, je rentrai chez moi ; tout m'y parut désert et lugubre, vide et creux. Je me mis à vivre, à boire, à manger, à dormir.

L'hiver vint, et je rentrai au collège.

XV

Si je vous disais que j’ai aimé d’autres femmes, je mentirais comme un infâme. Je l’ai cru cependant, je me suis efforcé d’attacher mon cœur à d’autres passions, il [y] a glissé comme sur la glace.

Quand on est enfant, on a lu tant de choses sur l’amour, on trouve ce mot-là si mélodieux, on le rêve tant, on souhaite si fort d’avoir ce sentiment qui vous fait palpiter à la lecture des romans et des drames, qu’à chaque femme qu’on voit on se dit : n’est-ce pas là l’amour ? On s’efforce d’aimer pour se faire homme.

Je n’ai pas été exempt plus qu’aucun autre de cette faiblesse d’enfant, j’ai soupiré comme un poète élégiaque, et, après bien des efforts, j’étais tout étonné de me trouver quelquefois quinze jours sans avoir pensé à celle que j’avais choisie pour rêver. Toute cette vanité d’enfant s’effaça devant Maria. Mais je dois remonter plus haut ; c’est un serment que j’ai fait de tout dire ; le fragment qu’on va lire avait été composé en partie en décembre dernier, avant que j’eusse l’idée de faire les Mémoires d’un fou. Comme il devait être isolé, je l’avais mis dans le cadre qui suit.

Le voici tel qu’il était :

Parmi tous les rêves du passé, les souvenirs d’autrefois et mes réminiscences de jeunesse, j’en ai conservé un bien petit nombre, avec lesquels je m’amuse aux heures d’ennui. À l’évocation d’un nom, tous les personnages reviennent avec leurs costumes et leur langage, jouer leur rôle comme ils le jouèrent dans ma vie, et je les vois agir devant moi comme un Dieu qui s’amuserait à regarder ses mondes créés. Un surtout, le premier amour, qui ne fut jamais violent ni passionné, effacé depuis par d’autres désirs, mais qui reste encore au fond de mon cœur comme une antique voie romaine qu’on aurait traversée par l’ignoble wagon d’un chemin de fer, c’est le récit de ces premiers battements du cœur, de ces commencements des voluptés indéfinies et vagues, de toutes les vaporeuses choses qui se passent dans l’âme d’un enfant à la vue des seins d’une femme, de ses yeux, à l’audition de ses chants et de ses paroles ; c’est ce salmigondis de sentiment et de rêverie que je devais étaler comme un cadavre devant un cercle d’amis qui vinrent un jour dans l’hiver, en décembre, pour se chauffer et me faire causer paisiblement au coin du feu, tout en fumant une pipe dont on arrose l’âcreté par un liquide quelconque.

Après que tous furent venus, que chacun se fut assis, qu’on eut bourré sa pipe et empli son verre, après que nous fûmes en cercle autour du feu, l’un avec les pincettes en main, l’autre soufflant, un troisième remuant les cendres avec sa canne, et que chacun eut une occupation, je commençai :

— Mes chers amis, leur dis-je, vous passerez bien quelque chose, quelque mot de vanité qui se glissera dans le récit.

Une adhésion de toutes les têtes m'engagea à commencer.

— Je me rappelle que c'était un jeudi, – j'étais, je crois en cinquième – vers le mois de novembre, il y a deux ans. La première fois que je la vis, elle déjeunait chez ma mère quand j'entrai d'un pas précipité, comme un écolier qui a flairé toute la semaine le repas du jeudi. Elle se détourna, à peine si je la saluai, car j'étais alors si niais et si enfant que je ne pouvais voir une femme, de celles du moins qui ne m'appelaient pas un enfant comme les dames, ou un ami, comme les petites filles, sans rougir ou plutôt sans rien faire et sans rien dire.

Mais, grâce à Dieu, j'ai gagné depuis en vanité et en effronterie tout ce que j'ai perdu en innocence et en candeur.

Elles étaient deux jeunes filles, des sœurs, des camarades de la mienne, de pauvres Anglaises qu'on avait fait sortir de leur pension pour les mener au grand air dans la campagne, pour les promener en voiture, les faire courir dans le jardin et les amuser enfin, sans l'œil d'une surveillante qui jette de la tiédeur et de la retenue dans les ébats de l'enfance. La plus âgée avait quinze ans, la seconde douze à peine ; celle-ci était petite et mince, ses yeux étaient plus vifs, plus grands et plus beaux que ceux de sa sœur aînée, mais celle-ci avait une tête si ronde et si gracieuse, sa peau était si fraîche, si rosée, ses dents courtes si blanches sous ses lèvres rosées, et tout cela était si bien encadré par des bandeaux de jolis cheveux châtains qu'on ne pouvait s'empêcher de lui donner la préférence. Elle était petite et peut-être un peu grosse, c'était son défaut le plus visible, mais ce qui me charmait le plus en elle, c'était une grâce enfantine sans prétention, un parfum de jeunesse qui embaumait autour d'elle.

Il y avait tant de naïveté et de candeur que les plus impies même ne pouvaient s'empêcher d'admirer. Il me semble la voir encore, à travers les vitres de ma chambre, qui courait dans le jardin avec d'autres camarades ; je vois encore leur robe de soie onduler brusquement sur leurs talons en bruissant, et leurs pieds se relever pour courir sur les allées sablées du jardin, puis s'arrêter haletantes, se prendre réciproquement par la taille et se promener gravement en causant, sans doute, de fêtes, de danses, de plaisirs et d'amours ; les pauvres filles !

L'intimité exista bientôt entre nous tous ; au bout de quatre mois je l'embrassais comme ma sœur, nous nous tutoyions tous. J'aimais tant à causer avec elle ! son accent étranger avait quelque chose de fin et de délicat qui rendait sa voix fraîche comme ses joues.

D'ailleurs, il y a dans les mœurs anglaises un négligé naturel et un abandon de toutes nos convenances qu'on pourrait prendre pour une coquetterie raffinée, mais qui n'est qu'un charme qui attire, comme ces feux follets qui fuient sans cesse. Souvent nous faisions des promenades en famille, et je me souviens qu'un jour dans l'hiver nous allâmes voir une vieille dame qui demeurait sur une côte qui domine la ville.

Pour arriver chez elle, il fallait traverser des masures plantés de pommiers où l'herbe était haute et mouillée ; un brouillard ensevelissait la ville et, du haut de notre colline, nous voyions les toits entassés et rapprochés couverts de neige, et puis le silence de la campagne, et au loin le bruit éloigné des pas d'une vache ou d'un cheval dont le pied s'enfonce dans les ornières.

En passant par une barrière peinte en blanc, son manteau s'accrocha aux épines de la haie, j'allai le détacher ; elle me dit : merci, avec tant de grâce et de laisser-aller que j'en rêvai tout le jour.

Puis elles se mirent à courir et leurs manteaux, que le vent levait derrière elles, flottaient en ondulant comme un flot qui descend ; elles s'arrêtèrent essoufflées. Je me rappelle encore leurs haleines qui bruissaient à mes oreilles et qui partaient d'entre leurs dents blanches en vaporeuse fumée.

Pauvre fille ! Elle était si bonne et m'embrassait avec tant de naïveté !

Les vacances de Pâques arrivèrent. Nous allâmes les passer à la campagne. Je me rappelle un jour, il faisait chaud sa ceinture était égarée, sa robe était sans taille ; nous nous promenâmes ensemble, foulant la rosée des herbes et des fleurs d'avril. Elle avait un livre à la main, c'étaient des vers, je crois ; elle le laissa tomber. Notre promenade continua.

Elle avait couru, je l'embrassai sur le cou, mes lèvres y restèrent collées sur cette peau satinée et mouillée d'une sueur embaumante.

Je ne sais de quoi nous parlâmes, des premières choses venues.

— Voilà que tu vas devenir bête, dit un des auditeurs en m'interrompant.

— D'accord, mon cher, le cœur est stupide.

L'après-midi, j'avais le cœur rempli d'une joie douce et vague ; je rêvais délicieusement en pensant à ses cheveux papillotés qui encadraient ses yeux vifs, et à sa gorge déjà formée que j'embrassais toujours aussi bas qu'un fichu rigoriste me le permettait. Je montai dans les champs ; j'allai dans les bois, je m'assis dans un fossé et je pensai à elle.

J'étais couché à plat ventre, j'arrachais les brins d'herbes, les marguerites d'avril, et, quand je levais la tête, le ciel blanc et mat formait sur moi un dôme d'azur qui s'enfonçait à l'horizon derrière les près verdoyants. Par hasard, j'avais du papier et un crayon, je fis des vers.

Tout le monde se mit à rire.

Les seuls que j'aie jamais faits de ma vie. Il y en avait peut-être trente ; à peine pris-je une demi-heure, car j'eus toujours une admirable facilité d’improvisation pour les bêtises de toute sorte. Mais ces vers pour la plupart étaient faux comme des protestations d’amour. Boiteux comme le bien.

Je me rappelle qu’il y avait :

quand le soir
Fatiguée du jeu et de la balançoire.

Je me battais les flancs pour peindre une chaleur que je n’avais vue que dans les livres ; puis, à propos de rien, je passais à une mélancolie sombre et digne d’Antony, quoique réellement j’eusse l’âme imbibée de candeur et d’un tendre sentiment mêlé de niaiserie, de réminiscences suaves et de parfums du cœur, et je disais à propos de rien :

Ma douleur est amère, ma tristesse profonde,
Et j’y suis enseveli, comme un homme en la tombe.

Les vers n’étaient même pas des vers, mais j’eus le sens de les brûler, manie qui devrait tenailler la plupart des poètes.

Je rentrai à la maison et la retrouvai qui jouait sur le rond de gazon. La chambre où elles couchaient était voisine de la mienne, je les entendis rire et causer longtemps, tandis que moi… je m’endormis bientôt comme elles, malgré tous les efforts que je fis pour veiller le plus possible. Car vous avez fait sans doute comme moi à quinze ans, vous avez cru une fois aimer de cet amour brûlant et frénétique, comme vous en avez vu dans les livres, tandis que vous n’aviez sur l’épiderme du cœur qu’une légère égratignure de cette griffe de fer qu’on nomme la passion, et vous souffliez de toutes les forces de votre imagination sur ce modeste feu qui brûlait à peine.

Il y a tant d’amours dans la vie pour l’homme ! À quatre ans, amour des chevaux, du soleil, des fleurs, des armes qui brillent, des livrées de soldat ; à dix, amour de la petite fille qui joue avec vous ; à treize, amour d’une grande femme à la gorge replète, car je me rappelle que ce que les adolescents adorent à la folie, c’est une poitrine de femme, blanche et mate, et, comme dit Marot :

Tetin refaict plus blanc qu’un œuf
Tetin de satin blanc tout neuf

Je faillis me trouver mal la première fois que je vis tout nus les deux seins d’une femme. Enfin, à quatorze ou quinze ans, amour d’une jeune fille qui vient chez vous, un peu plus qu’une sœur, moins qu’une amante ; puis à seize, amour d’une autre femme jusqu’à vingt-cinq ; puis on aime peut-être la femme avec qui on se mariera.

Cinq ans plus tard, on aime la danseuse qui fait sauter sa robe de gaze sur ses cuisses charnues ; enfin, à trente-six, amour de la députation, de la spéculation, des honneurs ; à cinquante, amour du dîner du ministre ou de celui du maire ; à soixante, amour de la fille de joie qui vous appelle à travers les vitres et vers laquelle on jette un regard d'impuissance, un regret vers le passé. Tout cela n'est-il pas vrai ? Car moi j'ai subi tous ces amours ; pas tous cependant, car je n'ai pas vécu toutes mes années, et chaque année dans la vie de bien des hommes est marquée par une passion nouvelle, celle des femmes, celle du jeu, des chevaux, des bottes fines, des cannes, des lunettes, des voitures, des places. Que de folies dans un homme ! Oh ! sans contredit l'habit d'un arlequin n'est pas plus varié dans ses nuances que l'esprit humain ne l'est dans ses folies, et tous deux arrivent au même but, celui de se râper l'un et l'autre et de faire rire quelque temps le public pour son argent, le philosophe pour sa science.

— Au récit ! demanda un des auditeurs impassible jusque-là et qui ne quitta sa pipe que pour jeter sur ma digression, qui montait en fumée, la salive de son reproche.

— Je ne sais guère que dire ensuite, car il y a une lacune dans l'histoire, un vers de moins dans l'élégie. Plusieurs temps passèrent donc de la sorte. Au mois de mai, la mère de ces jeunes filles vint en France conduire leur frère. C'était un charmant garçon, blond comme elle et pétillant de gaminerie et d'orgueil britannique.

Leur mère était une femme pâle, maigre et nonchalante. Elle était vêtue de noir ; ses manières et ses paroles, sa tenue avaient un air nonchalant, un peu mollasse, il est vrai, mais qui ressemblait au farniente italien. Tout cela cependant était parfumé de bon goût, reluisant d'un vernis aristocratique. Elle resta un mois en France.

Puis elle repartit et nous vécûmes ainsi comme si tous étaient de la famille, allant toujours ensemble dans nos promenades, nos vacances, nos congés. Nous étions tous frères et sœurs.

Il y avait dans nos rapports de chaque jour tant de grâce et d'effusion, d'intimité et de laisser aller, que cela peut-être dégénéra en amour, de sa part du moins, et j'en eus des preuves évidentes.

Pour moi, je peux me donner le rôle d'un homme moral, car je n'avais point de passion. Je l'aurais bien voulu.

Souvent, elle venait vers moi, me prenait autour de la taille, elle me regardait, elle causait. La charmante petite fille ! Elle me demandait des livres, des pièces de théâtre dont elle ne m'a rendu qu'un fort petit nombre ; elle montait dans ma chambre. J'étais assez embarrassé. Pouvais-je supposer tant d'audace dans une femme ou tant de naïveté ? Un jour, elle se coucha sur mon canapé dans une position très équivoque ; j'étais assis près d'elle sans rien dire.

Certes, le moment était critique : je n'en profitai pas, je la laissai partir.

D’autres fois, elle m’embrassait en pleurant. Je ne pouvais croire qu’elle m’aimait réellement. Ernest en était persuadé, il me le faisait remarquer, me traitait d’imbécile, tandis que vraiment j’étais tout à la fois timide et nonchalant.

C’était quelque chose de doux, d’enfantin, qu’aucune idée de possession ne ternissait, mais qui, par cela même manquait d’énergie ; c’était trop niais cependant pour être du platonisme.

Au bout d’un an, leur mère vint habiter la France ; puis au bout d’un mois elle repartit pour l’Angleterre. Ses filles avaient été tirées de pension et logeaient avec leur mère dans une rue déserte au second étage.

Pendant son voyage je les voyais souvent aux fenêtres, un jour que je passais, Caroline m’appela, je montai. Elle était seule, elle se jeta dans mes bras et m’embrassa avec effusion. Ce fut la dernière fois, car depuis elle se maria.

Son maître de dessin lui avait fait des visites fréquentes. On projeta un mariage, il fut noué et dénoué cent fois. Sa mère revint d’Angleterre sans son mari dont on n’a jamais entendu parler ; Caroline se maria au mois de janvier. Un jour je la rencontrai avec son mari, à peine si elle me salua.

Sa mère a changé de logement et de manière, elle reçoit maintenant chez elle des garçons tailleurs et des étudiants, elle va aux bals masqués et y mène sa jeune fille.

Il y a dix-huit mois que nous ne les avons vus.

Voilà comment finit cette liaison qui promettait peut-être une passion avec l’âge, mais qui se dénoua d’elle-même.

Est-il besoin de dire que cela avait été à l’amour ce que le crépuscule est au grand jour, et que le regard de Maria fit évanouir le souvenir de cette pâle enfant ?

C’est un petit feu qui n’est plus que de la cendre froide.

XVI

Cette page est courte, je voudrais qu’elle le fût davantage. Voici le fait.

La vanité me poussa à l’amour, non, à la volupté ; pas même à cela, à la chair.

On me raillait de ma chastet, j’en rougissais, elle me faisait honte, elle me pesait comme si elle eût été de la corruption.

Une femme se présenta à moi, je la pris ; et je sortis de ses bras plein de dégoût et d’amertume. Mais, alors, je pouvais faire le Lovelace d’estaminet, dire autant d’obscénités qu’un autre autour d’un bol de punch ; j’étais un homme alors, j’avais été comme un devoir faire du vice, et puis je m’en étais vanté. J’avais quinze ans, je parlais de femmes et de maîtresses.

Cette femme-là, je la pris en haine ; elle venait à moi, je la laissais ; elle faisait des frais de sourire qui me dégoûtaient comme une grimace hideuse.

J’eus des remords, comme si l’amour de Maria eût été une religion que j’eusse profanée.

XVII

Je me demandais si c’était bien là les délices que j’avais rêvés, ces transports de feu que je m’étais imaginés dans la virginité de ce cœur tendre et enfant.

Est-ce là tout ? est-ce qu’après cette froide jouissance, il ne doit pas y en avoir une autre, plus sublime, plus large, quelque chose de divin et qui fasse tomber en extase ? Oh ! non, tout était fini, j’avais été éteindre dans la boue ce feu sacré de mon âme. Oh ! Maria, j’avais été traîner dans la fange l’amour que ton regard avait créé, je l’avais gaspillé à plaisir, à la première femme venue, sans amour, sans désir, poussé par une vanité d’enfant, par un calcul d’orgueil, pour ne plus rougir à la licence, pour faire une bonne contenance dans une orgie. Pauvre Maria ! J’étais lassé, un dégoût profond me prit à l’âme, j’eus en pitié ces joies d’un moment, et ces convulsions de la chair. Il fallait que je fusse bien misérable, moi qui étais si fier de cet amour si haut, de cette passion sublime, et qui regardais mon cœur comme plus large et plus beau que ceux des autres hommes ; moi, aller comme eux !… Oh ! non, pas un d’eux peut-être ne l’a fait pour les mêmes motifs, presque tous y ont été poussés par les sens, ils ont obéi comme le chien à l’instinct de la nature ; mais il y avait bien plus de dégradation à en faire un calcul, à s’exciter à la corruption, à aller se jeter dans les bras d’une femme, à manier sa chair, à se vautrer dans le ruisseau, pour se relever et montrer ses souillures.

Et puis j’en eus honte comme d’une lâche profanation ; j’aurais voulu cacher à mes propres yeux l’ignominie dont je m’étais vanté.

Je me reportais vers ces temps où la chair pour moi n’avait rien d’ignoble et où la perspective du désir me montrait des formes vagues et des voluptés que mon cœur me créait. Non, jamais on ne pourra dire tous les mystères de l’âme vierge, toutes les choses qu’elle sent, tous les mondes qu’elle enfante. Comme ses rêves sont délicieux ! comme ses pensées sont vaporeuses et tendres ! comme sa déception est amère et cruelle !… Avoir aimé, avoir rêvé le ciel, avoir vu tout ce que l’être a de plus pur, de plus sublime, et s’enchaîner ensuite dans toutes les lourdeurs de la chair, toute la langueur du corps ! Avoir rêvé le ciel et tomber dans la boue !

Qui me rendra maintenant toutes les choses que j’ai perdues, ma virginité, mes rêves, mes illusions, toutes choses fanées, pauvres fleurs que la gelée a tuées avant d’être épanouies.

XVIII

Si j’ai éprouvé des moments d’enthousiasme, c’est à l’art que je les dois ; et cependant quelle vanité que l’art ! vouloir peindre l’homme dans un bloc de pierre, ou l’âme dans des mots, les sentiments par des sons et la nature sur une toile vernie !

Je ne sais quelle puissance magique possède la musique. J’ai rêvé des semaines entières au rythme cadencé d’un air ou aux larges contours d’un chœur majestueux ; il y a des sons qui m’entrent dans l’âme et des voix qui me fondent en délices. J’aimais l’orchestre grondant avec ses flots d’harmonie, ses vibrations sonores et cette vigueur immense qui semble avoir des muscles et qui meurt au bout de l’archet ; mon âme suivait la mélodie déployant ses ailes vers l’infini et montant en spirales, pure et lente, comme un parfum vers le ciel. J’aimais le bruit, les diamants qui brillent aux lumières, toutes ces mains de femmes gantées et applaudissant avec des fleurs ; je regardais le ballet sautillant, les robes roses ondoyantes ; j’écoutais les pas tomber en cadence, je regardais les genoux se détacher mollement avec les tailles penchées.

D’autrefois, recueilli devant les œuvres du génie, saisi par les chaînes avec lesquelles il vous attache, alors, au murmure de ces voix, au glapissement flatteur, à ce bourdonnement plein de charmes, j’ambitionnais la destinée de ces hommes forts qui manient la foule comme du plomb, qui la font pleurer, gémir, trépigner d’enthousiasme. Comme leur cœur doit être large à ceux-là qui y font entrer le monde, et comme tout est avorté dans ma nature ! Convaincu de mon impuissance et de ma stérilité, je me suis pris d’une haine jalouse ; je me disais que cela n’était rien, que le hasard seul avait dicté ces mots, je jetais de la boue sur les choses les plus hautes que j’enviais.

Je m’étais moqué de Dieu ; je pouvais bien rire des hommes.

Cependant cette sombre humeur n’était que passagère, et j’éprouvais un vrai plaisir à contempler le génie resplendissant au foyer de l’art, comme une large fleur qui ouvre une rosace de parfum à un soleil d’été.

L’art ! l’art ! quelle belle chose que cette vanité !

S’il y a sur la terre et parmi tous les néants une croyance qu’on adore, s’il est quelque chose de saint, de pur, de sublime, quelque chose qui aille à ce désir immodéré de l’infini et du vague que nous appelons âme, c’est l’art. Et quelle petitesse ! une pierre, un mot, un son, la disposition de tout cela que nous appelons le sublime. Je voudrais quelque chose qui n’eût pas besoin d’expression ni de forme, quelque chose de pur comme un parfum, de fort comme la pierre, d’insaisissable comme un chant, que ce fût à la fois tout cela et rien d’aucune de ces choses. Tout me semble borné, rétréci, avorté dans la nature.

L’homme avec son génie et son art n’est qu’un misérable singe de quelque chose de plus élevé.

Je voudrais le beau dans l’infini et je n’y trouve que le doute.

XIX

Oh ! l’infini, l’infini, gouffre immense, spirale qui monte du fond des abîmes aux plus hautes régions de l’inconnu, vieille idée dans laquelle nous tournons tous, pris par le vertige, abîme que chacun a dans le cœur, abîme incommensurable, abîme sans fond ! Nous aurons beau, pendant bien des jours, bien des nuits, nous demander dans notre angoisse : qu’est-ce que ces mots : Dieu, Éternité, Infini ? nous tournons là-dedans emportés par un vent de la mort, comme la feuille roulée par l’ouragan. On dirait que l’infini prend alors plaisir à nous bercer nous-mêmes dans cette immensité du doute.

Nous nous disons toujours cependant : après bien des siècles, des milliers d’ans, quand tout sera usé, il faudra bien qu’une borne soit là. Hélas, l’éternité se dresse devant nous et nous en avons peur, peur de cette chose qui doit durer si longtemps, nous qui durons si peu.

Si longtemps !

Sans doute quand le monde ne sera plus – que je voudrais vivre alors, vivre sans nature, sans hommes, quelle grandeur que ce vide-là ! – sans doute alors il y aura des ténèbres, un peu de cendres brûlées qui aura été la terre, et peut-être quelques gouttes d’eau, la mer. Ciel ! plus rien, du vide,..... que le néant étalé dans l’immensité comme un linceul.

Éternité ! Éternité ! cela durera-t-il toujours ? toujours, sans fin ? Mais cependant ce qui restera, la moindre parcelle des débris du monde, le dernier souffle d’une création mourante, le vide lui-même devra être las d’exister, tout appellera une destruction totale.

Cette idée de quelque chose sans fin nous fait pâlir hélas ! et nous serons là-dedans, nous autres qui vivons maintenant, et cette immensité nous roulera tous. Que serons-nous ? Un rien, pas même un souffle.

J’ai longtemps pensé aux morts dans les cercueils, aux longs siècles qu’ils passent ainsi sous la terre, pleine de bruits, de rumeurs et de cris, eux si calmes, dans leurs planches pourries et dont le morne silence est interrompu, parfois, soit par un cheveu qui tombe ou par un ver qui glisse sur un peu de chair. Comme ils dorment là, couchés sans bruit, sous la terre, sous le gazon fleuri !

Cependant, l’hiver ils doivent avoir froid sous la neige.

Oh ! s’ils se réveillaient alors, s’ils venaient à revivre et qu’ils vissent toutes les larmes dont on a paré leur drap de mort taries, tous ces sanglots étouffés, toutes les grimaces finies, ils auraient horreur de cette vie qu’ils ont pleurée en la quittant, et ils retourneraient vite dans le néant si calme et si vrai.

Certes, on peut vivre, et mourir même, sans s’être demandé une seule fois ce que c’est que la vie et que la mort ; mais pour celui qui regarde les feuilles trembler au souffle du vent, les rivières serpenter dans les prés, la vie se tourmenter et tourbillonner dans les choses, les hommes vivre, faire le bien et le mal, la mer rouler ses flots et le ciel dérouler ses lumières, et qui se demande : pourquoi ces feuilles ? pourquoi l’eau coule-t-elle ? pourquoi la vie elle-même est-elle un torrent si terrible et qui va se perdre dans l’océan sans bornes de la mort ? pourquoi les hommes marchent-ils, travaillent-ils comme des fourmis ? pourquoi la tempête ? pourquoi le ciel si pur et la terre si infâme ? Ces questions mènent à des ténèbres d’où l’on ne sort pas.

Et le doute vient après ; c’est quelque chose qui ne se dit pas, mais qui se sent. L’homme alors est comme ce voyageur perdu dans les sables, qui cherche partout une route pour le conduire à l’oasis, et qui ne voit que le désert. Le doute, c’est la vie. L’action, la parole, la nature, la mort, doute dans tout cela.

Le doute, c’est la mort pour les âmes ; c’est une lèpre qui prend les races usées ; c’est une maladie qui vient de la science et qui conduit à la folie. La folie est le doute de la raison, c’est peut-être la raison elle-même qui le prouve.

XX

Il est des poètes qui ont l’âme toute pleine de parfums et de fleurs, qui regardent la vie comme l’aurore du ciel ; d’autres qui n’ont rien que de sombre, rien que de l’amertume et de la colère ; il y a des peintres qui voient tout en bleu, d’autres tout en jaune ou tout en noir. Chacun de nous a un prisme à travers lequel il aperçoit le monde ; heureux celui qui y distingue des couleurs riantes et des choses gaies. Il y a des hommes qui ne voient dans le monde qu’un titre, que des femmes, que la banque, qu’un nom, qu’une destinée ; folies ! J’en connais qui n’y voient que chemins de fer, marchés ou bestiaux ; les uns y découvrent un plan sublime, les autres une farce obscène.

Et ceux-là vous demanderaient bien ce que c’est que l’obscène ? Question embarrassante à résoudre, comme les questions.

J’aimerais autant donner la définition géométrique d’une belle paire de bottes ou d’une belle femme, deux choses importantes. Les gens qui voient notre globe, comme un gros ou un petit tas de boue sont de singulières gens ou difficiles à peindre.

Vous venez de parler avec un de ces gens infâmes, gens qui ne s’intitulent philanthropes et qui ne votent pas pour la démolition des cathédrales sans craindre qu'on les appelle carlistes ; Mais bientôt vous vous arrêtez tout court ou vous vous avouez vaincu, car ceux-là sont des gens sans principes qui regardent la vertu comme un mot, le monde comme une bouffonnerie. De là, ils partent pour tout considérer sous un point de vue ignoble ; ils sourient aux plus belles choses et, quand vous leur parlez de philanthropie, ils haussent les épaules et vous disent que la philanthropie s’exerce par une souscription pour les pauvres. La belle chose qu’une liste de noms dans un journal !

Chose étrange que cette diversité d’opinions, de systèmes, de croyances et de folies ! Quand vous parlez à certaines gens, ils s’arrêtent tout à coup effrayés, et vous demandent : Comment, vous nieriez cela ? vous douteriez de cela ? peut-on révoquer le plan de l’univers et les devoirs de l’homme ? Et si, malheureusement, votre regard a laissé deviner un rêve de l’âme, ils s’arrêtent tout à coup et finissent là leur victoire logique, comme ces enfants effrayés d’un fantôme imaginaire, et qui se ferment les yeux sans oser regarder. Ouvre-les, homme faible et plein d’orgueil, pauvre fourmi qui rampes avec peine sur ton grain de poussière ; tu te dis libre et grand, tu te respectes toi-même, si vil pendant ta vie, et par dérision sans doute, tu salues ton corps pourri qui passe. Et puis tu penses qu’une si belle vie, agitée ainsi entre un peu d’orgueil que tu appelles grandeur et cet intérêt bas qui est l'essence de ta société, sera couronnée par une immortalité. De l'immortalité pour toi, plus lascif qu'un singe, et plus méchant qu'un tigre, et plus rampant qu'un serpent ? Allons donc ! faites-moi un paradis pour le singe, le tigre et le serpent, pour la luxure, la cruauté, la bassesse, un paradis pour l'égoïsme, une éternité pour cette poussière, de l'immortalité pour ce néant. Tu te vantes d'être libre, de pouvoir faire ce que tu appelles le bien et le mal ? Sans doute pour qu'on te condamne plus vite, car que saurais-tu faire de bon ? y a-t-il un seul de tes gestes qui ne soit stimulé par l'orgueil ou calculé par l'intérêt ? Toi, libre ! Dès ta naissance, tu es soumis à toutes les infirmités paternelles ; tu reçois, avec le jour, la semence de tous tes vices, de ta stupidité même, de tout ce qui te fera juger le monde, toi-même, tout ce qui t'entoure, d'après ce terme de comparaison, cette mesure que tu as en toi. Tu es né avec un esprit étroit, avec des idées faites ou qu'on te fera sur le bien ou sur le mal. On te dira qu'on doit aimer son père et le soigner dans sa vieillesse : tu feras l'un et l'autre et tu n'avais pas besoin qu'on te l'apprît, n'est-ce pas ? cela est une vertu innée comme le besoin de manger ; tandis que, derrière la montagne où tu es né, on enseignera à ton frère à tuer son père devenu vieux, et il le tuera, car cela, pense-t-il, est naturel, et il n'était pas nécessaire qu'on le lui apprît. On t'élèvera en te disant qu'il faut te garder d'aimer d'un amour charnel ta sœur ou ta mère ; tandis que tu descends comme tous les hommes d'un inceste, car le premier homme et la première femme, eux et leurs enfants, étaient frères et sœurs ; tandis que le soleil se couche sur d'autres peuples qui regardent l'inceste comme une vertu et le fratricide comme un devoir. Es-tu déjà libre des principes d'après lesquels tu gouverneras ta conduite ? Est-ce toi qui présides à ton éducation ? Est-ce toi qui as voulu naître avec un caractère heureux ou triste, phtisique ou robuste, doux ou méchant, moral ou vicieux ?

Mais d'abord pourquoi es-tu né ? est-ce toi qui l'as voulu ? t'a-t-on conseillé là-dessus ? tu es donc né fatalement parce que ton père un jour sera revenu d'une orgie, échauffé par le vin et des propos de débauche, et que ta mère en aura profité, qu'elle aura mis en jeu toutes les ruses de femme poussée par ses instincts de chair et de bestialité que lui a donnés la nature en lui faisant une âme, et qu'elle sera parvenue à animer cet homme que les filles publiques ont fatigué dès l'adolescence. Quelque grand que tu sois, tu as d'abord été quelque chose d'aussi sale que de la salive et de plus fétide que de l'urine, puis tu as subi des métamorphoses comme un ver, et enfin tu es venu au monde, presque sans vie, pleurant, criant et fermant les yeux, comme par haine pour ce soleil que tu as appelé tant de fois. On te donne à manger, u grandis, tu pousses comme la feuille ; c'est bien hasard si le vent ne t'emporte [pas] de bonne heure, car à combien de choses es-tu soumis ? À l'air, au feu, à la lumière, au jour, à la nuit, au froid, au chaud, à tout ce qui t'entoure, tout ce qui est. Tout cela te maîtrise, te passionne ; tu aimes la verdure, les fleurs, et tu es triste quand elles se fanent ; tu aimes ton chien, tu pleures quand il meurt ; une araignée arrive à toi, tu recules de frayeur ; tu frissonnes quelquefois en regardant ton ombre, et lorsque ta pensée s'enfonce dans les mystères du néant, tu es effrayé et tu as peur du doute.

Tu te dis libre, et chaque jour tu agis poussé par mille choses, tu vois une femme et tu l'aimes, tu en meurs d'amour, es-tu libre d'apaiser ce sang qui bat, de calmer cette tête brûlante, de comprimer ce cœur, d'apaiser ces ardeurs qui te dévorent ? Es-tu libre de ta pensée ? mille chaînes te retiennent, mille aiguillons te poussent, mille entraves t'arrêtent. Tu vois un homme pour la première fois, un de ses traits te choque, et durant ta vie tu as de l'aversion pour cet homme que tu aurais peut-être chéri s'il avait eu le nez moins gros. Tu as un mauvais estomac, et tu es brutal envers celui que tu aurais accueilli avec bienveillance. Et de tous ces faits découlent ou s'enchaînent aussi fatalement d'autres séries de faits, d'où d'autres dérivent à leur tour. Es-tu le créateur de ta constitution physique et morale ? Non, tu ne pourrais la diriger entièrement que si tu l'avais faite et modelée à ta guise. Tu te dis libre parce que tu as une âme ? D'abord c'est toi qui as fait cette découverte que tu ne saurais définir, une voix intime te dit que oui ; d'abord tu mens : une voix te dit que tu es faible et tu sens en toi un immense vide que tu voudrais combler par toutes les choses que tu y jettes. Quand même tu croirais que oui, en es-tu sûr ? qui te l'a dit ? Quand, longtemps combattu par deux sentiments opposés, après avoir bien hésité, bien douté, tu penches vers un sentiment, tu crois avoir été le maître de l'avoir fait ; mais, pour être maître, il faudrait n'avoir aucun penchant. Es-tu maître de faire le bien, si tu as le goût du mal enraciné dans le cœur, si tu es né avec de mauvais penchants développés par ton éducation ? et si tu es vertueux, si tu as horreur du crime, pourras-tu le faire ? Es-tu libre de faire le bien ou le mal ? puisque c'est le sentiment du bien qui te dirige toujours, tu ne peux faire le mal.

Ce combat est la lutte de ces deux penchants et si tu fais le mal, c'est que tu es plus vicieux que vertueux et que la fièvre la plus forte a eu le dessus. Quand deux hommes se battent, il est certain que le plus faible, le moins adroit, le moins souple, sera vaincu par le plus fort, le plus adroit, le plus souple ; quelque longtemps que puisse durer la lutte, il y en aura toujours un de vaincu. Il en est de même de ta nature intérieure : quand même ce que tu sens être bon l'emporte, la victoire est-elle toujours la justice ? ce que tu juges le bien est-il le bien absolu, immuable, éternel ?

Tout n'est donc que ténèbres autour de l'homme, tout est vide, et il voudrait quelque chose de fixe ; il roule lui-même dans cette immensité du vague où il voudrait s'arrêter, il se cramponne à tout et tout lui manque ; patrie, liberté, croyance, Dieu, vertu, il a pris tout cela et tout cela lui est tombé des mains, comme un fou qui laisse tomber un verre de cristal et qui rit de tous les morceaux qu'il a faits.

Mais l'homme a une âme immortelle et faite à l'image de Dieu, deux idées pour lesquelles il a versé son sang, deux idées qu'il ne comprend pas : une âme, un Dieu, mais dont il est convaincu.

Cette âme est une essence autour de laquelle notre être physique tourne comme la terre autour du soleil ; Cette âme est noble, car étant un principe spirituel, n'étant point terrestre, elle ne saurait rien avoir de bas, de vil. Cependant, n'est-ce pas la pensée qui dirige notre corps ? N'est-ce pas elle qui fait lever notre bras quand nous voulons tuer ? N'est-ce pas elle qui anime notre chair ? L'esprit serait-il le principe du mal et le corps l'agent ?

Voyons comme cette âme, comme cette conscience est élastique, flexible, comme elle est molle et maniable, comme elle se ploie facilement sous le corps qui pèse sur elle, comme cette âme est vénale et basse, comme elle rampe, comme elle flatte, comme elle ment, comme elle trompe ! C'est elle qui vend le corps, la main, la tête et la langue ; c'est elle qui veut du sang et qui demande de l'or, toujours insatiable et cupide de tout dans son infini ; elle est au milieu de nous comme une soif, une ardeur quelconque, un feu qui nous dévore, un pivot qui nous fait tourner sur lui.

Tu es grand, homme, non par le corps sans doute, mais par cet esprit qui t'a fait, dis-tu, le roi de la nature ; tu es grand, maître et fort.

Chaque jour, en effet, tu bouleverses la terre, tu creuses des canaux, tu bâtis des palais, tu enfermes les fleuves entre des pierres, tu cueilles l'herbe, tu la pétris et tu la manges ; tu remues l'océan avec la quille de tes vaisseaux, et tu crois tout cela beau ; tu te crois meilleur que la bête fauve que tu manges, plus libre que la feuille emportée par les vents, plus grand que l'aigle qui plane sur les tours, plus fort que la terre dont tu tires ton pain et tes diamants et que l'océan sur lequel tu cours. Mais, hélas ! la terre que tu remues renaît d'elle-même, les canaux se détruisent, les fleurs envahissent tes champs et tes villes, les pierres de tes palais se disjoignent et tombent d'elles-mêmes, les fourmis courent sur tes couronnes et sur tes trônes, toutes tes flottes ne sauraient marquer plus de traces de leur passage sur la surface de l'océan qu'une goutte de pluie et que le battement d'aile de l'oiseau. Et toi-même, tu passes sur cet océan des âges sans laisser plus de traces de toi-même que ton navire n'en laisse sur les flots. Tu te crois grand parce que tu travailles sans relâche, mais ce travail est une preuve de ta faiblesse. Tu étais donc condamné à apprendre toutes ces choses inutiles au prix de tes sueurs ; tu étais esclave avant d'être né, et malheureux avant de vivre ! Tu regardes les astres avec un sourire d'orgueil parce que tu leur as donné des noms, que tu as calculé leur distance, comme si tu voulais mesurer l’infini et enfermer l’espace dans les bornes de ton esprit, mais tu te trompes ! Qui te dit que, derrière ces mondes de lumières, il n’y en a pas d’autres, infinis encore et toujours ainsi, que tes calculs s'arrêtent peut-être à quelques pieds de hauteur, et que là commence une échelle nouvelle des faits ? Comprends-tu toi-même la valeur des mots dont tu te sers… étendue, espace ? Ils sont plus vastes que toi et ton globe.

Tu es grand et tu meurs, comme le chien et la fourmi, avec plus de regret qu’eux ; et puis tu pourris, et je te le demande, quand les vers t’ont mangé, quand ton corps s’est dissous dans l’humidité de la tombe et que ta poussière n’est plus, où es-tu, homme ? où est même ton âme ? cette âme qui était le moteur de tes actions, qui livrait ton cœur à la haine, à l’envie, à toutes les passions, cette âme qui te vendait et qui te faisait fuite tant de bassesses, où est-elle ? Est-il un lieu assez saint pour la recevoir ? Tu te respectes et tu t’honores comme un Dieu, tu as inventé l’idée de dignité de l’homme, idée que rien dans la nature ne pourrait avoir en te voyant ; tu veux qu’on t’honore et tu t’honores toi-même, tu veux même que ce corps, si vil pendant sa vie, soit honoré quand il n’est plus. Tu veux qu’on se découvre devant ta charogne humaine, qui se pourrit de corruption, quoique plus pure encore que toi quand tu vivais. C’est là ta grandeur, grandeur de poussière, majesté de néant !

XXI

J’y revins deux ans plus tard ; vous pensez où : elle n’y était pas.

Son mari était seul, venu avec une autre femme, et il en était parti deux jours avant mon arrivée.

Je retournai sur le rivage ; comme il était vide ! De là, je pouvais voir le mur gris de la maison de Maria ; quel isolement !

Je revins donc dans cette même salle dont je vous ai parlé ; elle était pleine, mais aucun des visages n’y était plus, les tables étaient prises par des gens que je n’avais jamais vus ; celle de Maria était occupée par une vieille femme qui s’appuyait à cette même place où si souvent son coude s’était posé.

Je restai ainsi quinze jours ; il fit quelques jours de mauvais temps et de pluie que je passai dans ma chambre où j’entendais la pluie tomber sur les ardoises, le bruit lointain de la mer, et, de temps en temps, quelque cri de marins sur le quai ; je repensai à toutes ces vieilles choses que le spectacle des mêmes lieux faisait revivre.

Je revoyais le même océan avec ses mêmes vagues, toujours immense, triste et mugissant sur ses rochers ; ce même village avec ses tas de boue, ses coquilles qu’on foule, et ses maisons en étage. Mais tout ce que j’avais aimé, tout ce qui entourait Maria, ce beau soleil qui passait à travers les auvents et qui dorait sa peau, l’air qui l’entourait, le monde qui passait près d’elle, tout cela était parti sans retour. Oh ! que je voudrais seulement un seul de ces jours sans pareils ! entrer sans y rien changer !

Quoi ! rien de tout cela ne reviendra ? Je sens comme mon cœur est vide, car tous ces hommes qui m’entourent me font un désert où je meurs. Je me rappelai ces longues et chaudes après-midi d’été où je lui parlais sans qu’elle se doutât que je l’aimais, et où son regard indifférent entrait comme un rayon d’amour jusqu’au fond de mon cœur. Comment aurait-elle pu en effet voir que je l’aimais, car je ne l’aimais pas alors, et en tout ce que je vous ai dit, j’ai menti ; c’était maintenant que je l’aimais, que je la désirais ; que, seul sur le rivage, dans les bois ou dans les champs, je me la créais là, marchant à côté de moi, me parlant, me regardant. Quand je me couchais sur l’herbe, et que je regardais les herbes ployer sous le vent et la vague battre le sable, je pensais à elle, et je reconstruisais dans mon cœur toutes les scènes où elle avait agi, parlé. Ces souvenirs étaient une passion.

Si je me rappelais l’avoir vue marcher en un endroit, j’y marchais ; j’ai voulu retrouver le timbre de sa voix pour m’enchanter moi-même ; cela était impossible. Que de fois j’ai passé devant sa maison et j’ai regardé à sa fenêtre !

Je passai donc ces quinze jours dans une contemplation amoureuse, rêvant à elle. Je me rappelle des choses navrantes ; un jour, je revenais, vers le crépuscule, je marchais à travers les pâturages couverts de bœufs, je marchais vite, je n’entendais que le bruit de ma marche qui froissait l’herbe, j’avais la tête baissée et je regardais la terre. Ce mouvement régulier m’ endormit pour ainsi dire, je crus entendre Maria marcher près de moi ; elle me tenait le bras et tournait la tête pour me voir, c’était elle qui marchait dans les herbes. Je savais bien que c’était une hallucination que j’animais moi-même, mais je ne pouvais me défendre d’en sourire et je me sentais heureux. Je levai la tête, le temps était sombre ; devant moi, à l’horizon, un magnifique soleil se couchait sous les vagues, on voyait une gerbe de feu s’élever en réseaux, disparaître sous de gros nuages noirs qui roulaient péniblement sur eux, et puis un reflet de ce soleil couchant reparaître plus loin derrière moi dans un coin du ciel limpide et bleu.

Quand je découvris la mer, il avait presque disparu ; son disque était à moitié enfoncé sous l’eau et une légère teinte de rose allait s’élargissant et s’affaiblissant vers le ciel.

Une autre fois, je revenais à cheval en longeant la grève. Je regardais machinalement les vagues dont la mousse mouillait les pieds de ma jument, je regardais les cailloux qu’elle faisait jaillir en marchant et ses pieds s’enfoncer dans le sable ; le soleil venait de disparaître tout à coup et il y avait sur les vagues une couleur sombre comme si quelque chose de noir eût plané sur elles. À ma droite, étaient des rochers entre lesquels la mousse s’agitait au souffle du vent comme une mer de neige, les mouettes passaient sur ma tête et je voyais leurs ailes blanches s’approcher tout près de cette eau sombre et terne. Rien ne pourra dire tout ce que cela avait de beau, cette mer, ce rivage avec son sable parsemé de coquilles, avec ses rochers couverts de varechs humides d'eau, et la mousse blanche qui se balançait sur eux au souffle de la brise.

Je vous dirais bien d’autres choses, bien plus belles et plus douces, si je pouvais dire tout ce que je ressentis d’amour, d’extase, de regrets. Pouvez-vous dire par des mots le battement du cœur ? pouvez-vous dire une larme et peindre son cristal humide qui baigne l’œil d’une amoureuse langueur ? Pouvez-vous dire tout ce que vous ressentez en un jour ?

Pauvre faiblesse humaine ! avec tes mots, tes langues, tes sons, tu parles et tu balbuties ; tu définis Dieu, le ciel et la terre, la chimie et la philosophie, et tu ne peux exprimer, avec ta langue, toute la joie que te cause une femme nue… ou un plum-pudding.

XXII

Ô Maria ! Maria, cher ange de ma jeunesse, toi que j'ai vue dans la fraîcheur de mes sentiments, toi que j'ai aimée d'un autour si doux, si plein de parfum, de tendres rêveries, adieu !

Adieu ! d'autres passions reviendront, je t'oublierai peut-être, mais tu resteras toujours au fond de mon cœur, car le cœur est une terre sur laquelle chaque passion bouleverse, remue et laboure sur les ruines des autres. Adieu !

Adieu ! et cependant comme je t'aurais aimée, comme je t'aurais embrassée, serrée dans mes bras ! Ah ! mon âme se fond en délices à toutes les folies que mon amour invente. Adieu !

Adieu, et cependant je penserai toujours à toi ; je vais être jeté dans le tourbillon du monde, j'y mourrai peut-être écrasé sous les pieds de la foule, déchiré en lambeaux. Où vais-je ? que serai-je ? Je voudrais être vieux, avoir les cheveux blancs ; non, je voudrais être beau comme les anges, avoir de la gloire, du génie, et tout déposer à tes pieds pour que tu marches sur tout cela ; et je n'ai rien de tout cela et tu m'as regardé aussi froidement qu'un laquais ou qu'un mendiant.

Et moi, sais-tu que je n'ai pas passé une nuit, pas un jour, pas une heure, sans penser à toi, sans te revoir sortant de dessous la vague, avec tes cheveux noirs sur tes épaules, ta peau brune avec ses perles d'eau salée, tes vêtements ruisselants et ton pied blanc aux ongles roses qui s'enfonçait dans le sable, et que cette vision est toujours présente, et que cela murmure toujours à mon cœur ? Oh ! non, tout est vide.

Adieu, et pourtant, quand je te vis, si j'avais été plus âgé de quatre à cinq ans, plus hardi… peut-être… Oh ! non, je rougissais à chacun de tes regards. Adieu !

XXIII

Quand j'entends les cloches sonner et le glas frapper en gémissant, j'ai dans l'âme une vague tristesse, quelque chose d'indéfinissable et de rêveur, comme des vibrations mourantes. Une série de pensées s'ouvre au tintement lugubre de la cloche des morts. Il me semble voir le monde dans ses plus beaux jours de fête, avec des cris de triomphe, des chars et des couronnes, et, par-dessus tout cela, un éternel silence et une éternelle majesté.

Mon âme s'envole vers l'éternité et l'infini et plane dans l'océan du doute, au son de cette voix qui annonce la mort. Voix régulière et froide comme les tombeaux et qui cependant sonne à toutes les fêtes, pleure à tous les deuils, j'aime à me laisser étourdir par ton harmonie, qui étouffe le bruit des villes ; j'aime, dans les champs, sur les collines dorées de blés mûrs, à entendre les sons frêles de la cloche du village qui chante au milieu de la campagne, tandis que l'insecte siffle sous l'herbe et que l'oiseau murmure sous le feuillage.

J'ai longtemps resté, dans l'hiver, dans ces jours sans soleil, éclairés d'une lumière morne et blafarde, à écouter toutes les cloches sonner les offices. De toutes parts sortaient les voix qui montaient vers le ciel en réseau d'harmonie, et je condensais ma pensée sur ce gigantesque instrument. Elle était grande, infinie ; je ressentais en moi des sons, des mélodies, des échos d'un autre monde, des choses immenses qui mouraient aussi. Ô cloches ! vous sonnerez donc aussi sur ma mort, et une minute après pour un baptême ; vous êtes donc une dérision comme le reste et un mensonge comme la vie, dont vous annoncez toutes les phases : le baptême, le mariage, la mort. Pauvre airain, perdu et penché au milieu des airs, et qui servirait si bien en lave ardente sur un champ de bataille ou à ferrer les chevaux !

FIN

MADAME BOVARY

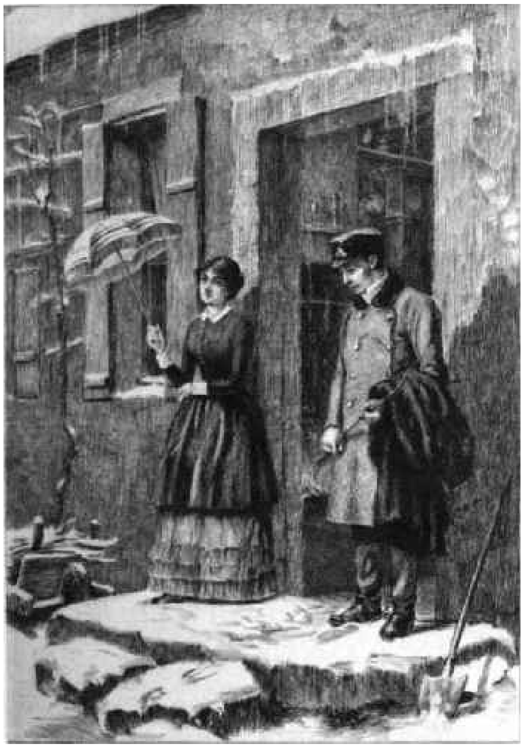
Translated by Eleanor Marx-Aveling

Widely considered to be his masterpiece, Flaubert began writing *Madame Bovary* in 1851, completing the novel in 1856 for serial publication in *La Revue de Paris.* It tells the story of doctor's wife Emma Bovary, who has adulterous affairs and lives beyond her means in order to escape the monotony and emptiness of her provincial life. At the time, the novel was attacked for obscenity by public prosecutors, resulting in a famous trial in January 1857. After acquittal on 7 February 1857, *Madame Bovary* became an instant bestseller when published in book format in April 1857.

The novel takes place in provincial northern France, near the town of Rouen in Normandy. The story begins and ends with Charles Bovary, a stolid, kindhearted man without much ability or ambition. As the novel opens, Charles is a shy, oddly-dressed teenager arriving at a new school amidst the ridicule of his new classmates. Later, Charles struggles his way to a second-rate medical degree and becomes an officier de santé in the Public Health Service. His mother chooses a wife for him, an unpleasant but supposedly rich widow, and Charles sets out to build a practice in the village of Tostes.

The character Emma played on screen by actress Jennifer Jones

Emma played on screen by Isabelle Huppert



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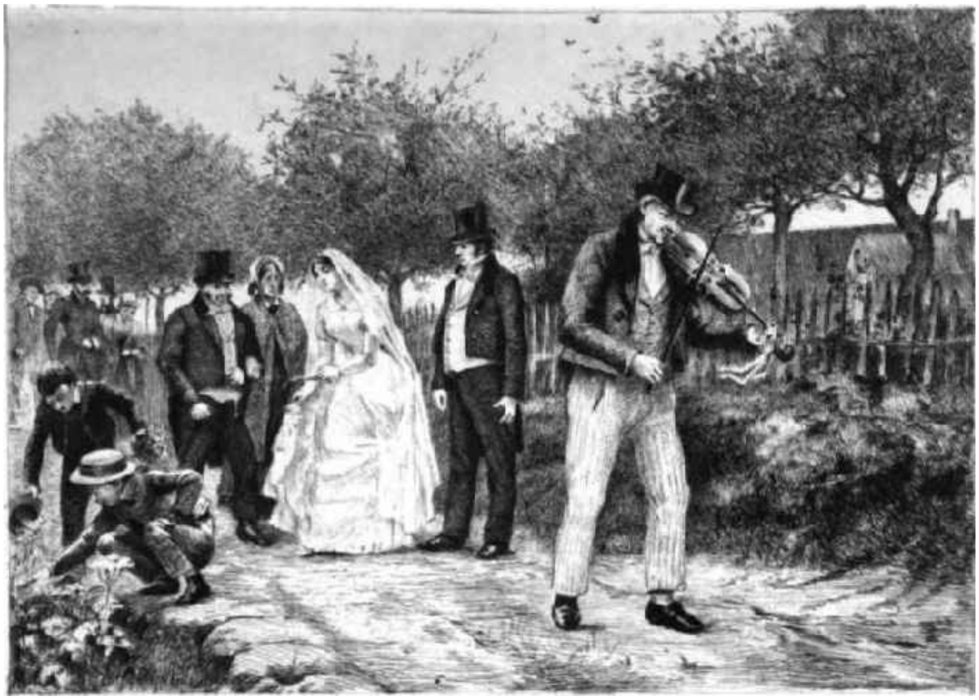

Another original illustration

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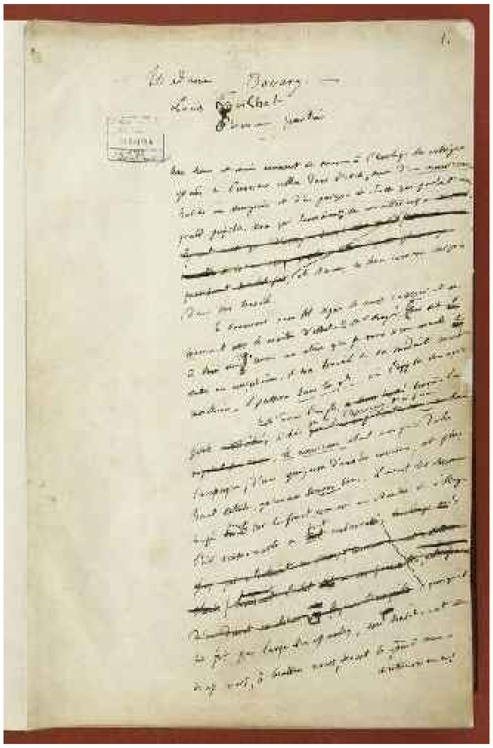

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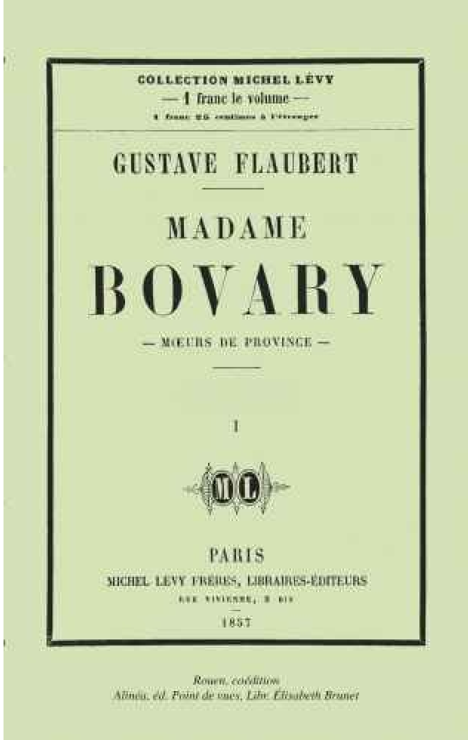

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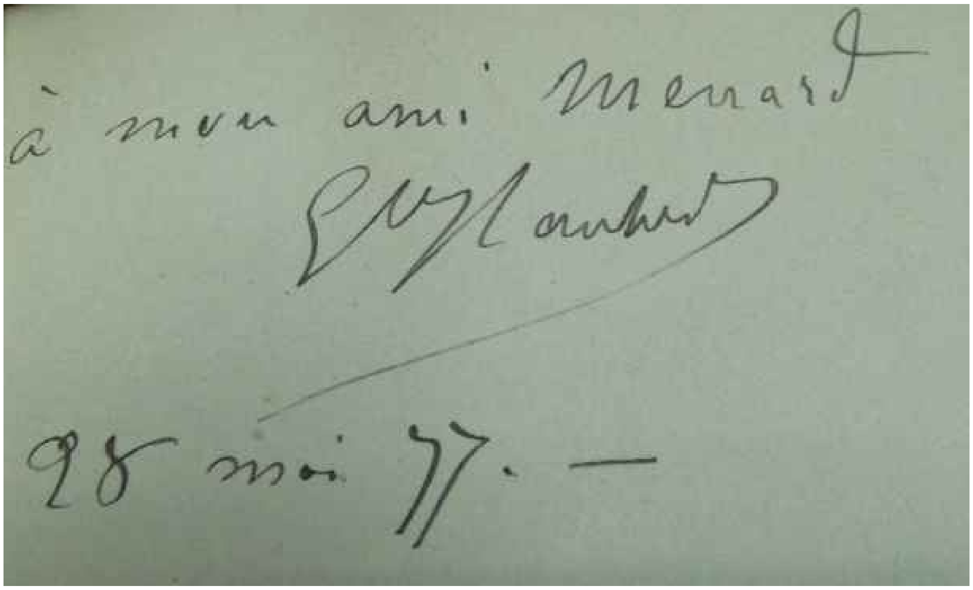
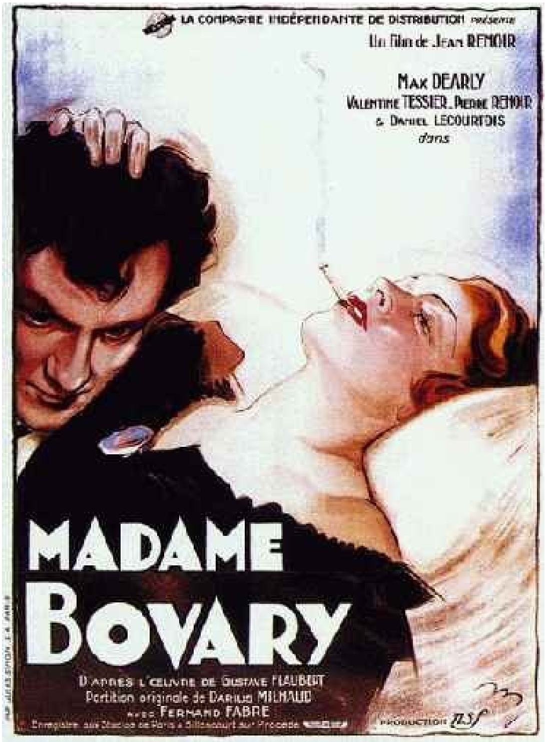


à mon ami Menard

Gve Flaubert

28 mai 77. —

A dedication written by Flaubert on a copy of the novel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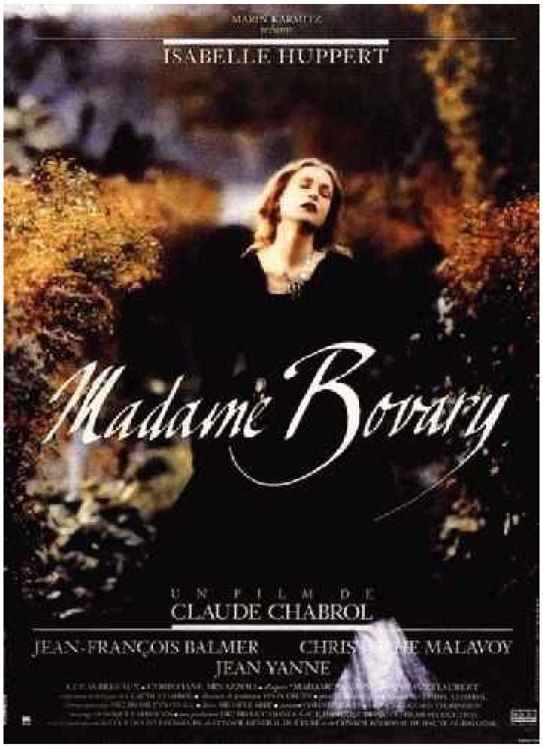
Madame Bovary
With
Christopher Kent
Gene Lockhart
Frank Allenby
Gladys Cooper
And
JAMES MASON
Directed by Vincente Minnelli
Produced by Pandro S. Berman

The 1949 film adaptation


MARIN KARMITZ
présente
ISABELLE HUPPERT
Madame Bovary
UN FILM DE
CLAUDE CHABROL
JEAN-FRANÇOIS BALMER
CHRIS E MALAVOY
JEAN YANNE

The 1991 film adaptation

Part I

Chapter One

We were in class when the head-master came in, followed by a "new fellow," not wearing the school uniform, and a school servant carrying a large desk. Those who had been asleep woke up, and every one rose as if just surprised at his work.

The head-master made a sign to us to sit down. Then, turning to the class-master, he said to him in a low voice —

"Monsieur Roger, here is a pupil whom I recommend to your care; he'll be in the second. If his work and conduct are satisfactory, he will go into one of the upper classes, as becomes his age."

The "new fellow," standing in the corner behind the door so that he could hardly be seen, was a country lad of about fifteen, and taller than any of us. His hair was cut square on his forehead like a village chorister's; he looked reliable, but very ill at ease. Although he was not broad-shouldered, his short school jacket of green cloth with black buttons must have been tight about the arm-holes, and showed at the opening of the cuffs red wrists accustomed to being bare. His legs, in blue stockings, looked out from beneath yellow trousers, drawn tight by braces, He wore stout, ill-cleaned, hob-nailed boots.

We began repeating the lesson. He listened with all his ears, as attentive as if at a sermon, not daring even to cross his legs or lean on his elbow; and when at two o'clock the bell rang, the master was obliged to tell him to fall into line with the rest of us.

When we came back to work, we were in the habit of throwing our caps on the ground so as to have our hands more free; we used from the door to toss them under the form, so that they hit against the wall and made a lot of dust: it was "the thing."

But, whether he had not noticed the trick, or did not dare to attempt it, the "new fellow," was still holding his cap on his knees even after prayers were over. It was one of those head-gears of composite order, in which we can find traces of the bearskin, shako, billycock hat, sealskin cap, and cotton night-cap; one of those poor things, in fine, whose dumb ugliness has depths of expression, like an imbecile's face. Oval, stiffened with whalebone, it began with three round knobs; then came in succession lozenges of velvet and rabbit-skin separated by a red band; after that a sort of bag that ended in a cardboard polygon covered with complicated braiding, from which hung, at the end of a long thin cord, small twisted gold threads in the manner of a tassel. The cap was new; its peak shone.

"Rise," said the master.

He stood up; his cap fell. The whole class began to laugh. He stooped to pick it up. A neighbor knocked it down again with his elbow; he picked it up once more.

"Get rid of your helmet," said the master, who was a bit of a wag.

There was a burst of laughter from the boys, which so thoroughly put the poor lad out of countenance that he did not know whether to keep his cap in his hand, leave it on the ground, or put it on his head. He sat down again and placed it on his knee.

"Rise," repeated the master, "and tell me your name."

The new boy articulated in a stammering voice an unintelligible name.

"Again!"

The same sputtering of syllables was heard, drowned by the tittering of the class.

"Louder!" cried the master; "louder!"

The "new fellow" then took a supreme resolution, opened an inordinately large mouth, and shouted at the top of his voice as if calling someone in the word "Charbovari."

A hubbub broke out, rose in crescendo with bursts of shrill voices (they yelled, barked, stamped, repeated "Charbovari! Charbovari"), then died away into single notes, growing quieter only with great difficulty, and now and again suddenly recommencing along the line of a form whence rose here and there, like a damp cracker going off, a stifled laugh.

However, amid a rain of impositions, order was gradually re-established in the class; and the master having succeeded in catching the name of "Charles Bovary," having had it dictated to him, spelt out, and re-read, at once ordered the poor devil to go and sit down on the punishment form at the foot of the master's desk. He got up, but before going hesitated.

"What are you looking for?" asked the master.

"My c-a-p," timidly said the "new fellow," casting troubled looks round him.

"Five hundred lines for all the class!" shouted in a furious voice stopped, like the Quos ego*, a fresh outburst. "Silence!" continued the master indignantly, wiping his brow with his handkerchief, which he had just taken from his cap. "As to you, 'new boy,' you will conjugate 'ridiculus sum'** twenty times."

Then, in a gentler tone, "Come, you'll find your cap again; it hasn't been stolen."

*A quotation from the Aeneid signifying a threat.

**I am ridiculous.

Quiet was restored. Heads bent over desks, and the "new fellow" remained for two hours in an exemplary attitude, although from time to time some paper pellet flipped from the tip of a pen came bang in his face. But he wiped his face with one hand and continued motionless, his eyes lowered.

In the evening, at preparation, he pulled out his pens from his desk, arranged his small belongings, and carefully ruled his paper. We saw him working conscientiously, looking up every word in the dictionary, and taking the greatest pains. Thanks, no doubt, to the willingness he showed, he had not to go down to the class below. But though he knew his rules passably, he had little finish in composition. It was the cure of his village who had taught him his first Latin; his parents, from motives of economy, having sent him to school as late as possible.

His father, Monsieur Charles Denis Bartolome Bovary, retired assistant-surgeon-major, compromised about 1812 in certain conscription scandals, and forced at this time to leave the service, had taken advantage of his fine figure to get hold of a dowry of sixty thousand francs that offered in the person of a hosier's daughter who had fallen in love with his good looks. A fine man, a great talker, making his spurs ring as he walked, wearing whiskers that ran into his moustache, his fingers always garnished with rings and dressed in loud colours, he had the dash of a military man with the easy go of a commercial traveller.

Once married, he lived for three or four years on his wife's fortune, dining well, rising late, smoking long porcelain pipes, not coming in at night till after the theatre, and haunting cafes. The father-in-law died, leaving little; he was indignant at this, "went in for the business," lost some money in it, then retired to the country, where he thought he would make money.

But, as he knew no more about farming than calico, as he rode his horses instead of sending them to plough, drank his cider in bottle instead of selling it in cask, ate the finest poultry in his farmyard, and greased his hunting-boots with the fat of his pigs, he was not long in finding out that he would do better to give up all speculation.

For two hundred francs a year he managed to live on the border of the provinces of Caux and Picardy, in a kind of place half farm, half private house; and here, soured, eaten up with regrets, cursing his luck, jealous of everyone, he shut himself up at the age of forty-five, sick of men, he said, and determined to live at peace.

His wife had adored him once on a time; she had bored him with a thousand servilities that had only estranged him the more. Lively once, expansive and affectionate, in growing older she had become (after the fashion of wine that, exposed to air, turns to vinegar) ill-tempered, grumbling, irritable. She had suffered so much without complaint at first, until she had seem him going after all the village drabs, and until a score of bad houses sent him back to her at night, weary, stinking drunk. Then her pride revolted. After that she was silent, burying her anger in a dumb stoicism that she maintained till her death. She was constantly going about looking after business matters. She called on the lawyers, the president, remembered when bills fell due, got them renewed, and at home ironed, sewed, washed, looked after the workmen, paid the accounts, while he, troubling himself about nothing, eternally besotted in sleepy sulkiness, whence he only roused himself to say disagreeable things to her, sat smoking by the fire and spitting into the cinders.

When she had a child, it had to be sent out to nurse. When he came home, the lad was spoilt as if he were a prince. His mother stuffed him with jam; his father let him run about barefoot, and, playing the philosopher, even said he might as well go about quite naked like the young of animals. As opposed to the maternal ideas, he had a certain virile idea of childhood on which he sought to mould his son, wishing him to be brought up hardily, like a Spartan, to give him a strong constitution. He sent him to bed without any fire, taught him to drink off large draughts of rum and to jeer at religious processions. But, peaceable by nature, the lad answered only poorly to his notions. His mother always kept him near her; she cut out cardboard for him, told him tales, entertained him with endless monologues full of melancholy gaiety and charming nonsense. In her life's isolation she centered on the child's head all her shattered, broken little vanities. She dreamed of high station; she already saw him, tall, handsome, clever, settled as an engineer or in the law. She taught him to read, and even, on an old piano, she had taught him two or three little songs. But to all this Monsieur Bovary, caring little for letters, said, "It was not worth while. Would they ever have the means to send him to a public school, to buy him a practice, or start him in business? Besides, with cheek a man always gets on in the world." Madame Bovary bit her lips, and the child knocked about the village.

He went after the labourers, drove away with clods of earth the ravens that were flying about. He ate blackberries along the hedges, minded the geese with a long switch, went haymaking during harvest, ran about in the woods, played hop-scotch under the church porch on rainy days, and at great fetes begged the beadle to let him toll the bells, that he might hang all his weight on the long rope and feel himself borne upward by it in its swing. Meanwhile he grew like an oak; he was strong on hand, fresh of colour.

When he was twelve years old his mother had her own way; he began lessons. The cure took him in hand; but the lessons were so short and irregular that they could not be of much use. They were given at spare moments in the sacristy, standing up, hurriedly, between a baptism and a burial; or else the cure, if he had not to go out, sent for his pupil after the Angelus*. They went up to his room and settled down; the flies and moths fluttered round the candle. It was close, the child fell asleep, and the good man, beginning to doze with his hands on his stomach, was soon snoring with his mouth wide open. On other occasions, when Monsieur le Cure, on his way back after administering the viaticum to some sick person in the neighbourhood, caught sight of Charles playing about the fields, he called him, lectured him for a quarter of an hour and took advantage of the occasion to make him conjugate his verb at the foot of a tree. The rain interrupted them or an acquaintance passed. All the same he was always pleased with him, and even said the "young man" had a very good memory.

*A devotion said at morning, noon, and evening, at the sound of a bell. Here, the evening prayer.

Charles could not go on like this. Madame Bovary took strong steps. Ashamed, or rather tired out, Monsieur Bovary gave in without a struggle, and they waited one year longer, so that the lad should take his first communion.

Six months more passed, and the year after Charles was finally sent to school at Rouen, where his father took him towards the end of October, at the time of the St. Romain fair.

It would now be impossible for any of us to remember anything about him. He was a youth of even temperament, who played in playtime, worked in school-hours, was attentive in class, slept well in the dormitory, and ate well in the refectory. He had in loco parentis* a wholesale ironmonger in the Rue Ganterie, who took him out once a month on Sundays after his shop was shut, sent him for a walk on the quay to look at the boats, and then brought him back to college at seven o'clock before supper. Every Thursday evening he wrote a long letter to his mother with red ink and three wafers; then he went over his history note-books, or read an old volume of "Anarchasis" that was knocking about the study. When he went for walks he talked to the servant, who, like himself, came from the country.

*In place of a parent.

By dint of hard work he kept always about the middle of the class; once even he got a certificate in natural history. But at the end of his third year his parents withdrew him from the school to make him study medicine, convinced that he could even take his degree by himself.

His mother chose a room for him on the fourth floor of a dyer's she knew, overlooking the Eau-de-Robec. She made arrangements for his board, got him furniture, table and two chairs, sent home for an old cherry-tree bedstead, and bought besides a small cast-iron stove with the supply of wood that was to warm the poor child.

Then at the end of a week she departed, after a thousand injunctions to be good now that he was going to be left to himself good now that he was going to be left to himself.

The syllabus that he read on the notice-board stunned him; lectures on anatomy, lectures on pathology, lectures on physiology, lectures on pharmacy, lectures on botany and clinical medicine, and therapeutics, without counting hygiene and materia medica — all names of whose etymologies he was ignorant, and that were to him as so many doors to sanctuaries filled with magnificent darkness.

He understood nothing of it all; it was all very well to listen — he did not follow. Still he worked; he had bound note-books, he attended all the courses, never missed a single lecture. He did his little daily task like a mill-horse, who goes round and round with his eyes bandaged, not knowing what work he is doing.

To spare him expense his mother sent him every week by the carrier a piece of veal baked in the oven, with which he lunched when he came back from the hospital, while he sat kicking his feet against the wall. After this he had to run off to lectures, to the operation-room, to the hospital, and return to his home at the other end of the town. In the evening, after the poor dinner of his landlord, he went back to his room and set to work again in his wet clothes, which smoked as he sat in front of the hot stove.

On the fine summer evenings, at the time when the close streets are empty, when the servants are playing shuttle-cock at the doors, he opened his window and leaned out. The river, that makes of this quarter of Rouen a wretched little Venice, flowed beneath him, between the bridges and the railings, yellow, violet, or blue. Working men, kneeling on the banks, washed their bare arms in the water. On poles projecting from the attics, skeins of cotton were drying in the air. Opposite, beyond the roots spread the pure heaven with the red sun setting. How pleasant it must be at home! How fresh under the beech-tree! And he expanded his nostrils to breathe in the sweet odours of the country which did not reach him.

He grew thin, his figure became taller, his face took a saddened look that made it nearly interesting. Naturally, through indifference, he abandoned all the resolutions he had made. Once he missed a lecture; the next day all the lectures; and, enjoying his idleness, little by little, he gave up work altogether. He got into the habit of going to the public-house, and had a passion for dominoes. To shut himself up every evening in the dirty public room, to push about on marble tables the small sheep bones with black dots, seemed to him a fine proof of his freedom, which raised him in his own esteem. It was beginning to see life, the sweetness of stolen pleasures; and when he entered, he put his hand on the door-handle with a joy almost sensual. Then many things hidden within him came out; he learnt couplets by heart and sang them to his boon companions, became he learnt couplets by heart and sang them to his boon companions, became enthusiastic about Beranger, learnt how to make punch, and, finally, how to make love.

Thanks to these preparatory labours, he failed completely in his examination for an ordinary degree. He was expected home the same night to celebrate his success. He started on foot, stopped at the beginning of the village, sent for his mother, and told her all. She excused him, threw the blame of his failure on the injustice of the examiners, encouraged him a little, and took upon herself to set matters straight. It was only five years later that Monsieur Bovary knew the truth; it was old then, and he accepted it. Moreover, he could not believe that a man born of him could be a fool.

So Charles set to work again and crammed for his examination, ceaselessly learning all the old questions by heart. He passed pretty well. What a happy day for his mother! They gave a grand dinner.

Where should he go to practice? To Tostes, where there was only one old doctor. For a long time Madame Bovary had been on the look-out for his death, and the old fellow had barely been packed off when Charles was installed, opposite his place, as his successor.

But it was not everything to have brought up a son, to have had him taught medicine, and discovered Tostes, where he could practice it; he must have a wife. She found him one — the widow of a bailiff at Dieppe — who was forty-five and had an income of twelve hundred francs. Though she was ugly, as dry as a bone, her face with as many pimples as the spring has buds, Madame Dubuc had no lack of suitors. To attain her ends Madame Bovary had to oust them all, and she even succeeded in very cleverly baffling the intrigues of a port-butcher backed up by the priests.

Charles had seen in marriage the advent of an easier life, thinking he would be more free to do as he liked with himself and his money. But his wife was master; he had to say this and not say that in company, to fast every Friday, dress as she liked, harass at her bidding those patients who did not pay. She opened his letter, watched his comings and goings, and listened at the partition-wall when women came to consult him in his surgery.

She must have her chocolate every morning, attentions without end. She constantly complained of her nerves, her chest, her liver. The noise of footsteps made her ill; when people left her, solitude became odious to her; if they came back, it was doubtless to see her die. When Charles returned in the evening, she stretched forth two long thin arms from beneath the sheets, put them round his neck, and having made him sit down on the edge of the bed, began to talk to him of her troubles: he was neglecting her, he loved another. She had been warned she would be unhappy; and she ended by asking him for a dose of medicine and she would be unhappy, and she ended by asking him for a dose of medicine and a little more love.

Chapter Two

One night towards eleven o'clock they were awakened by the noise of a horse pulling up outside their door. The servant opened the garret-window and parleyed for some time with a man in the street below. He came for the doctor, had a letter for him. Natasie came downstairs shivering and undid the bars and bolts one after the other. The man left his horse, and, following the servant, suddenly came in behind her. He pulled out from his wool cap with grey top-knots a letter wrapped up in a rag and presented it gingerly to Charles, who rested on his elbow on the pillow to read it. Natasie, standing near the bed, held the light. Madame in modesty had turned to the wall and showed only her back.

This letter, sealed with a small seal in blue wax, begged Monsieur Bovary to come immediately to the farm of the Bertaux to set a broken leg. Now from Tostes to the Bertaux was a good eighteen miles across country by way of Longueville and Saint-Victor. It was a dark night; Madame Bovary junior was afraid of accidents for her husband. So it was decided the stable-boy should go on first; Charles would start three hours later when the moon rose. A boy was to be sent to meet him, and show him the way to the farm, and open the gates for him.

Towards four o'clock in the morning, Charles, well wrapped up in his cloak, set out for the Bertaux. Still sleepy from the warmth of his bed, he let himself be lulled by the quiet trot of his horse. When it stopped of its own accord in front of those holes surrounded with thorns that are dug on the margin of furrows, Charles awoke with a start, suddenly remembered the broken leg, and tried to call to mind all the fractures he knew. The rain had stopped, day was breaking, and on the branches of the leafless trees birds roosted motionless, their little feathers bristling in the cold morning wind. The flat country stretched as far as eye could see, and the tufts of trees round the farms at long intervals seemed like dark violet stains on the cast grey surface, that on the horizon faded into the gloom of the sky.

Charles from time to time opened his eyes, his mind grew weary, and, sleep coming upon him, he soon fell into a doze wherein, his recent sensations blending with memories, he became conscious of a double self, at once student and married man, lying in his bed as but now, and crossing the operation theatre as of old. The warm smell of poultices mingled in his brain with the fresh odour of dew; he heard the iron rings rattling along the curtain-rods of the bed and saw his wife sleeping. As he passed Vassonville he came upon a boy sitting on the grass at the edge of a ditch.

"Are you the doctor?" asked the child.

And on Charles's answer he took his wooden shoes in his hands and ran on in front of him.

The general practitioner, riding along, gathered from his guide's talk that Monsieur Rouault must be one of the well-to-do farmers.

He had broken his leg the evening before on his way home from a Twelfth-night feast at a neighbour's. His wife had been dead for two years. There was with him only his daughter, who helped him to keep house.

The ruts were becoming deeper; they were approaching the Bertaux.

The little lad, slipping through a hole in the hedge, disappeared; then he came back to the end of a courtyard to open the gate. The horse slipped on the wet grass; Charles had to stoop to pass under the branches. The watchdogs in their kennels barked, dragging at their chains. As he entered the Bertaux, the horse took fright and stumbled.

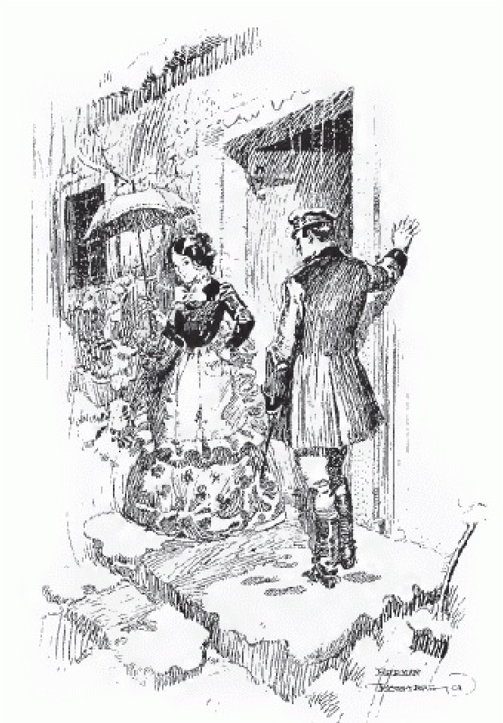
It was a substantial-looking farm. In the stables, over the top of the open doors, one could see great cart-horses quietly feeding from new racks. Right along the outbuildings extended a large dunghill, from which manure liquid oozed, while amidst fowls and turkeys, five or six peacocks, a luxury in Chauchois farmyards, were foraging on the top of it. The sheepfold was long, the barn high, with walls smooth as your hand. Under the cart-shed were two large carts and four ploughs, with their whips, shafts and harnesses complete, whose fleeces of blue wool were getting soiled by the fine dust that fell from the granaries. The courtyard sloped upwards, planted with trees set out symmetrically, and the chattering noise of a flock of geese was heard near the pond.

A young woman in a blue merino dress with three flounces came to the threshold of the door to receive Monsieur Bovary, whom she led to the kitchen, where a large fire was blazing. The servant's breakfast was boiling beside it in small pots of all sizes. Some damp clothes were drying inside the chimney-corner. The shovel, tongs, and the nozzle of the bellows, all of colossal size, shone like polished steel, while along the walls hung many pots and pans in which the clear flame of the hearth, mingling with the first rays of the sun coming in through the window, was mirrored fitfully.

Charles went up the first floor to see the patient. He found him in his bed, sweating under his bed-clothes, having thrown his cotton nightcap right away from him. He was a fat little man of fifty, with white skin and blue eyes, the forepart of his head bald, and he wore earrings. By his side on a chair stood a large decanter of brandy, whence he poured himself a little from time to time to keep up his spirits; but as soon as he caught sight of the doctor his elation subsided, and instead of swearing, as he had been doing for the last twelve hours, began to groan freely.

The fracture was a simple one, without any kind of complication.

Charles could not have hoped for an easier case. Then calling to mind the devices of his masters at the bedsides of patients, he comforted the sufferer with all sorts of kindly remarks, those Caresses of the surgeon that are like the oil they put on bistouries. In order to make some splints a bundle of laths was brought up from the cart-house. Charles selected one, cut it into two pieces and planed it with a fragment of windowpane, while the servant tore up sheets to make bandages, and Mademoiselle Emma tried to sew some pads. As she was a long time before she found her work-case, her father grew impatient; she did not answer, but as she sewed she pricked her fingers, which she then put to her mouth to suck them. Charles was surprised at the whiteness of her nails. They were shiny, delicate at the tips, more polished than the ivory of Dieppe, and almond-shaped. Yet her hand was not beautiful, perhaps not white enough, and a little hard at the knuckles; besides, it was too long, with no soft inflections in the outlines. Her real beauty was in her eyes. Although brown, they seemed black because of the lashes, and her look came at you frankly, with a candid boldness.



The bandaging over, the doctor was invited by Monsieur Rouault himself to "pick a bit" before he left.

Charles went down into the room on the ground floor. Knives and forks and silver goblets were laid for two on a little table at the foot of a huge bed that had a canopy of printed cotton with figures representing Turks. There was an odour a canopy of printed cotton with figures representing Turks. There was an odour of iris-root and damp sheets that escaped from a large oak chest opposite the window. On the floor in corners were sacks of flour stuck upright in rows. These were the overflow from the neighbouring granary, to which three stone steps led. By way of decoration for the apartment, hanging to a nail in the middle of the wall, whose green paint scaled off from the effects of the saltpetre, was a crayon head of Minerva in gold frame, underneath which was written in Gothic letters "To dear Papa."

First they spoke of the patient, then of the weather, of the great cold, of the wolves that infested the fields at night.

Mademoiselle Rouault did not at all like the country, especially now that she had to look after the farm almost alone. As the room was chilly, she shivered as she ate. This showed something of her full lips, that she had a habit of biting when silent.

Her neck stood out from a white turned-down collar. Her hair, whose two black folds seemed each of a single piece, so smooth were they, was parted in the middle by a delicate line that curved slightly with the curve of the head; and, just showing the tip of the ear, it was joined behind in a thick chignon, with a wavy movement at the temples that the country doctor saw now for the first time in his life. The upper part of her cheek was rose-coloured. She had, like a man, thrust in between two buttons of her bodice a tortoise-shell eyeglass.

When Charles, after bidding farewell to old Rouault, returned to the room before leaving, he found her standing, her forehead against the window, looking into the garden, where the bean props had been knocked down by the wind. She turned round. "Are you looking for anything?" she asked.

"My whip, if you please," he answered.

He began rummaging on the bed, behind the doors, under the chairs. It had fallen to the floor, between the sacks and the wall. Mademoiselle Emma saw it, and bent over the flour sacks.

Charles out of politeness made a dash also, and as he stretched out his arm, at the same moment felt his breast brush against the back of the young girl bending beneath him. She drew herself up, scarlet, and looked at him over her shoulder as she handed him his whip.

Instead of returning to the Bertaux in three days as he had promised, he went back the very next day, then regularly twice a week, without counting the visits he paid now and then as if by accident.

Everything, moreover, went well; the patient progressed favourably; and when, at the end of forty-six days, old Rouault was seen trying to walk alone in his "den," Monsieur Bovary began to be looked upon as a man of great capacity. Old Rouault said that he could not have been cured better by the first doctor of

Old Rouault said that he could not have been cured better by the first doctor of Yvetot, or even of Rouen.

As to Charles, he did not stop to ask himself why it was a pleasure to him to go to the Bertaux. Had he done so, he would, no doubt, have attributed his zeal to the importance of the case, or perhaps to the money he hoped to make by it. Was it for this, however, that his visits to the farm formed a delightful exception to the meagre occupations of his life? On these days he rose early, set off at a gallop, urging on his horse, then got down to wipe his boots in the grass and put on black gloves before entering. He liked going into the courtyard, and noticing the gate turn against his shoulder, the cock crow on the wall, the lads run to meet him. He liked the granary and the stables; he liked old Rouault, who pressed his hand and called him his saviour; he like the small wooden shoes of Mademoiselle Emma on the scoured flags of the kitchen — her high heels made her a little taller; and when she walked in front of him, the wooden soles springing up quickly struck with a sharp sound against the leather of her boots.

She always accompanied him to the first step of the stairs. When his horse had not yet been brought round she stayed there. They had said "Good-bye"; there was no more talking. The open air wrapped her round, playing with the soft down on the back of her neck, or blew to and fro on her hips the apron-strings, that fluttered like streamers. Once, during a thaw the bark of the trees in the yard was oozing, the snow on the roofs of the outbuildings was melting; she stood on the threshold, and went to fetch her sunshade and opened it. The sunshade of silk of the colour of pigeons' breasts, through which the sun shone, lighted up with shifting hues the white skin of her face. She smiled under the tender warmth, and drops of water could be heard falling one by one on the stretched silk.

During the first period of Charles's visits to the Bertaux, Madame Bovary junior never failed to inquire after the invalid, and she had even chosen in the book that she kept on a system of double entry a clean blank page for Monsieur Rouault. But when she heard he had a daughter, she began to make inquiries, and she learnt the Mademoiselle Rouault, brought up at the Ursuline Convent, had received what is called "a good education"; and so knew dancing, geography, drawing, how to embroider and play the piano. That was the last straw.

"So it is for this," she said to herself, "that his face beams when he goes to see her, and that he puts on his new waistcoat at the risk of spoiling it with the rain. Ah! that woman! That woman!"

And she detested her instinctively. At first she solaced herself by allusions that Charles did not understand, then by casual observations that he let pass for fear of a storm, finally by open apostrophes to which he knew not what to answer. "Why did he go back to the Bertaux now that Monsieur Rouault was answer. "Why did he go back to the Bertaux now that Monsieur Rouault was cured and that these folks hadn't paid yet? Ah! it was because a young lady was there, some one who know how to talk, to embroider, to be witty. That was what he cared about; he wanted town misses." And she went on —

"The daughter of old Rouault a town miss! Get out! Their grandfather was a shepherd, and they have a cousin who was almost had up at the assizes for a nasty blow in a quarrel. It is not worth while making such a fuss, or showing herself at church on Sundays in a silk gown like a countess. Besides, the poor old chap, if it hadn't been for the colza last year, would have had much ado to pay up his arrears."

For very weariness Charles left off going to the Bertaux. Heloise made him swear, his hand on the prayer-book, that he would go there no more after much sobbing and many kisses, in a great outburst of love. He obeyed then, but the strength of his desire protested against the servility of his conduct; and he thought, with a kind of naive hypocrisy, that his interdict to see her gave him a sort of right to love her. And then the widow was thin; she had long teeth; wore in all weathers a little black shawl, the edge of which hung down between her shoulder-blades; her bony figure was sheathed in her clothes as if they were a scabbard; they were too short, and displayed her ankles with the laces of her large boots crossed over grey stockings.

Charles's mother came to see them from time to time, but after a few days the daughter-in-law seemed to put her own edge on her, and then, like two knives, they scarified him with their reflections and observations. It was wrong of him to eat so much.

Why did he always offer a glass of something to everyone who came? What obstinacy not to wear flannels! In the spring it came about that a notary at Ingouville, the holder of the widow Dubuc's property, one fine day went off, taking with him all the money in his office. Heloise, it is true, still possessed, besides a share in a boat valued at six thousand francs, her house in the Rue St. Francois; and yet, with all this fortune that had been so trumpeted abroad, nothing, excepting perhaps a little furniture and a few clothes, had appeared in the household. The matter had to be gone into. The house at Dieppe was found to be eaten up with mortgages to its foundations; what she had placed with the notary God only knew, and her share in the boat did not exceed one thousand crowns. She had lied, the good lady! In his exasperation, Monsieur Bovary the elder, smashing a chair on the flags, accused his wife of having caused misfortune to the son by harnessing him to such a harridan, whose harness wasn't worth her hide. They came to Tostes. Explanations followed. There were scenes. Heloise in tears, throwing her arms about her husband, implored him to defend her from his parents.

Charles tried to speak up for her. They grew angry and left the house.

But "the blow had struck home." A week after, as she was hanging up some washing in her yard, she was seized with a spitting of blood, and the next day, while Charles had his back turned to her drawing the window-curtain, she said, "O God!" gave a sigh and fainted. She was dead! What a surprise! When all was over at the cemetery Charles went home. He found no one downstairs; he went up to the first floor to their room; say her dress still hanging at the foot of the alcove; then, leaning against the writing-table, he stayed until the evening, buried in a sorrowful reverie. She had loved him after all!

Chapter Three

One morning old Rouault brought Charles the money for setting his leg — seventy-five francs in forty-sou pieces, and a turkey. He had heard of his loss, and consoled him as well as he could.

"I know what it is," said he, clapping him on the shoulder; "I've been through it. When I lost my dear departed, I went into the fields to be quite alone. I fell at the foot of a tree; I cried; I called on God; I talked nonsense to Him. I wanted to be like the moles that I saw on the branches, their insides swarming with worms, dead, and an end of it. And when I thought that there were others at that very moment with their nice little wives holding them in their embrace, I struck great blows on the earth with my stick. I was pretty well mad with not eating; the very idea of going to a cafe disgusted me — you wouldn't believe it. Well, quite softly, one day following another, a spring on a winter, and an autumn after a summer, this wore away, piece by piece, crumb by crumb; it passed away, it is gone, I should say it has sunk; for something always remains at the bottom as one would say — a weight here, at one's heart. But since it is the lot of all of us, one must not give way altogether, and, because others have died, want to die too. You must pull yourself together, Monsieur Bovary. It will pass away. Come to see us; my daughter thinks of you now and again, d'ye know, and she says you are forgetting her. Spring will soon be here. We'll have some rabbit-shooting in the warrens to amuse you a bit."

Charles followed his advice. He went back to the Bertaux. He found all as he had left it, that is to say, as it was five months ago. The pear trees were already in blossom, and Farmer Rouault, on his legs again, came and went, making the farm more full of life.

Thinking it his duty to heap the greatest attention upon the doctor because of his sad position, he begged him not to take his hat off, spoke to him in an undertone as if he had been ill, and even pretended to be angry because nothing rather lighter had been prepared for him than for the others, such as a little clotted cream or stewed pears. He told stories. Charles found himself laughing, but the remembrance of his wife suddenly coming back to him depressed him. Coffee was brought in; he thought no more about her.

He thought less of her as he grew accustomed to living alone. The new delight of independence soon made his loneliness bearable. He could now change his meal-times, go in or out without explanation, and when he was very tired stretch himself at full length on his bed. So he nursed and coddled himself and accepted the consolations that were offered him. On the other hand, the death of his wife had not served him ill in his business, since for a month people had been saying, "The poor young man! what a loss!" His name had been talked about, his practice had increased; and moreover, he could go to the Bertaux just as he liked. He had an aimless hope, and was vaguely happy; he thought himself better looking as he brushed his whiskers before the looking-glass.

One day he got there about three o'clock. Everybody was in the fields. He went into the kitchen, but did not at once catch sight of Emma; the outside shutters were closed. Through the chinks of the wood the sun sent across the flooring long fine rays that were broken at the corners of the furniture and trembled along the ceiling. Some flies on the table were crawling up the glasses that had been used, and buzzing as they drowned themselves in the dregs of the cider. The daylight that came in by the chimney made velvet of the soot at the back of the fireplace, and touched with blue the cold cinders. Between the window and the hearth Emma was sewing; she wore no fichu; he could see small drops of perspiration on her bare shoulders.

After the fashion of country folks she asked him to have something to drink. He said no; she insisted, and at last laughingly offered to have a glass of liqueur with him. So she went to fetch a bottle of curacao from the cupboard, reached down two small glasses, filled one to the brim, poured scarcely anything into the other, and, after having clinked glasses, carried hers to her mouth. As it was almost empty she bent back to drink, her head thrown back, her lips pouting, her neck on the strain. She laughed at getting none of it, while with the tip of her tongue passing between her small teeth she licked drop by drop the bottom of her glass.

She sat down again and took up her work, a white cotton stocking she was darning. She worked with her head bent down; she did not speak, nor did Charles. The air coming in under the door blew a little dust over the flags; he watched it drift along, and heard nothing but the throbbing in his head and the faint clucking of a hen that had laid an egg in the yard. Emma from time to time cooled her cheeks with the palms of her hands, and cooled these again on the knobs of the huge fire-dogs.

She complained of suffering since the beginning of the season from giddiness; she asked if sea-baths would do her any good; she began talking of her convent, Charles of his school; words came to them. They went up into her bedroom. She showed him her old music-books, the little prizes she had won, and the oak-leaf crowns, left at the bottom of a cupboard. She spoke to him, too, of her mother, of the country, and even showed him the bed in the garden where, on the first Friday of every month, she gathered flowers to put on her mother's tomb. But the gardener they had never knew anything about it; servants are so stupid! She would have dearly liked, if only for the winter, to live in town, although the length of the fine days made the country perhaps even more wearisome in the summer. And, according to what she was saying, her voice was clear, sharp, or, on a sudden all languor, drawn out in modulations that ended almost in murmurs as she spoke to herself, now joyous, opening big naive eyes, then with her eyelids half closed, her look full of boredom, her thoughts wandering.

Going home at night, Charles went over her words one by one, trying to recall them, to fill out their sense, that he might piece out the life she had lived before he knew her. But he never saw her in his thoughts other than he had seen her the first time, or as he had just left her. Then he asked himself what would become of her — if she would be married, and to whom! Alas! Old Rouault was rich, and she! — so beautiful! But Emma's face always rose before his eyes, and a monotone, like the humming of a top, sounded in his ears, "If you should marry after all! If you should marry!" At night he could not sleep; his throat was parched; he was athirst. He got up to drink from the water-bottle and opened the window. The night was covered with stars, a warm wind blowing in the distance; the dogs were barking. He turned his head towards the Bertaux.

Thinking that, after all, he should lose nothing, Charles promised himself to ask her in marriage as soon as occasion offered, but each time such occasion did offer the fear of not finding the right words sealed his lips.

Old Rouault would not have been sorry to be rid of his daughter, who was of no use to him in the house. In his heart he excused her, thinking her too clever for farming, a calling under the ban of Heaven, since one never saw a millionaire in it. Far from having made a fortune by it, the good man was losing every year; for if he was good in bargaining, in which he enjoyed the dodges of the trade, on the other hand, agriculture properly so called, and the internal management of the farm, suited him less than most people. He did not willingly take his hands out of his pockets, and did not spare expense in all that concerned himself, liking to eat well, to have good fires, and to sleep well. He liked old cider, underdone legs of mutton, glorias* well beaten up. He took his meals in the kitchen alone, opposite the fire, on a little table brought to him all ready laid as on the stage.

*A mixture of coffee and spirits.

When, therefore, he perceived that Charles's cheeks grew red if near his daughter, which meant that he would propose for her one of these days, he chewed the cud of the matter beforehand. He certainly thought him a little meagre, and not quite the son-in-law he would have liked, but he was said to be well brought-up, economical, very learned, and no doubt would not make too many difficulties about the dowry. Now, as old Rouault would soon be forced to sell twenty-two acres of "his property," as he owed a good deal to the mason, to the harness-maker, and as the shaft of the cider-press wanted renewing, "If he asks for her," he said to himself, "I'll give her to him."

At Michaelmas Charles went to spend three days at the Bertaux.

The last had passed like the others in procrastinating from hour to hour. Old Rouault was seeing him off; they were walking along the road full of ruts; they were about to part. This was the time. Charles gave himself as far as to the corner of the hedge, and at last, when past it —

"Monsieur Rouault," he murmured, "I should like to say something to you."

They stopped. Charles was silent.

"Well, tell me your story. Don't I know all about it?" said old Rouault, laughing softly.

"Monsieur Rouault — Monsieur Rouault," stammered Charles.

"I ask nothing better", the farmer went on. "Although, no doubt, the little one is of my mind, still we must ask her opinion. So you get off — I'll go back home. If it is 'yes', you needn't return because of all the people about, and besides it would upset her too much. But so that you mayn't be eating your heart, I'll open wide the outer shutter of the window against the wall; you can see it from the back by leaning over the hedge."

And he went off.

Charles fastened his horse to a tree; he ran into the road and waited. Half an hour passed, then he counted nineteen minutes by his watch. Suddenly a noise was heard against the wall; the shutter had been thrown back; the hook was still swinging.

The next day by nine o'clock he was at the farm. Emma blushed as he entered, and she gave a little forced laugh to keep herself in countenance. Old Rouault embraced his future son-in-law. The discussion of money matters was put off; moreover, there was plenty of time before them, as the marriage could not decently take place till Charles was out of mourning, that is to say, about the spring of the next year.

The winter passed waiting for this. Mademoiselle Rouault was busy with her trousseau. Part of it was ordered at Rouen, and she made herself chemises and nightcaps after fashion-plates that she borrowed. When Charles visited the farmer, the preparations for the wedding were talked over; they wondered in what room they should have dinner; they dreamed of the number of dishes that would be wanted, and what should be entrees.

Emma would, on the contrary, have preferred to have a midnight wedding with torches, but old Rouault could not understand such an idea. So there was a wedding at which forty-three persons were present, at which they remained sixteen hours at table, began again the next day, and to some extent on the days following.

Chapter Four

The guests arrived early in carriages, in one-horse chaises, two-wheeled cars, old open gigs, waggonettes with leather hoods, and the young people from the nearer villages in carts, in which they stood up in rows, holding on to the sides so as not to fall, going at a trot and well shaken up. Some came from a distance of thirty miles, from Goderville, from Normanville, and from Cany.

All the relatives of both families had been invited, quarrels between friends arranged, acquaintances long since lost sight of written to.

From time to time one heard the crack of a whip behind the hedge; then the gates opened, a chaise entered. Galloping up to the foot of the steps, it stopped short and emptied its load. They got down from all sides, rubbing knees and stretching arms. The ladies, wearing bonnets, had on dresses in the town fashion, gold watch chains, pelerines with the ends tucked into belts, or little coloured fichus fastened down behind with a pin, and that left the back of the neck bare. The lads, dressed like their papas, seemed uncomfortable in their new clothes (many that day hand-sewed their first pair of boots), and by their sides, speaking never a work, wearing the white dress of their first communion lengthened for the occasion were some big girls of fourteen or sixteen, cousins or elder sisters no doubt, rubicund, bewildered, their hair greasy with rose pomade, and very much afraid of dirtying their gloves. As there were not enough stable-boys to unharness all the carriages, the gentlemen turned up their sleeves and set about it themselves. According to their different social positions they wore tail-coats, overcoats, shooting jackets, cutaway-coats; fine tail-coats, redolent of family respectability, that only came out of the wardrobe on state occasions; overcoats with long tails flapping in the wind and round capes and pockets like sacks; shooting jackets of coarse cloth, generally worn with a cap with a brass-bound peak; very short cutaway-coats with two small buttons in the back, close together like a pair of eyes, and the tails of which seemed cut out of one piece by a carpenter's hatchet. Some, too (but these, you may be sure, would sit at the bottom of the table), wore their best blouses — that is to say, with collars turned down to the shoulders, the back gathered into small plaits and the waist fastened very low down with a worked belt.

And the shirts stood out from the chests like cuirasses! Everyone had just had his hair cut; ears stood out from the heads; they had been close-shaved; a few, even, who had had to get up before daybreak, and not been able to see to shave, had diagonal gashes under their noses or cuts the size of a three-franc piece along the jaws, which the fresh air en route had enflamed, so that the great white beaming faces were mottled here and there with red dabs.

The mairie was a mile and a half from the farm, and they went thither on foot, returning in the same way after the ceremony in the church. The procession, first united like one long coloured scarf that undulated across the fields, along the narrow path winding amid the green corn, soon lengthened out, and broke up into different groups that loitered to talk. The fiddler walked in front with his violin, gay with ribbons at its pegs. Then came the married pair, the relations, the friends, all following pell-mell; the children stayed behind amusing themselves plucking the bell-flowers from oat-ears, or playing amongst themselves unseen. Emma's dress, too long, trailed a little on the ground; from time to time she stopped to pull it up, and then delicately, with her gloved hands, she picked off the coarse grass and the thistledowns, while Charles, empty handed, waited till she had finished. Old Rouault, with a new silk hat and the cuffs of his black coat covering his hands up to the nails, gave his arm to Madame Bovary senior. As to Monsieur Bovary senior, who, heartily despising all these folk, had come simply in a frock-coat of military cut with one row of buttons — he was passing compliments of the bar to a fair young peasant. She bowed, blushed, and did not know what to say. The other wedding guests talked of their business or played tricks behind each other's backs, egging one another on in advance to be jolly. Those who listened could always catch the squeaking of the fiddler, who went on playing across the fields. When he saw that the rest were far behind he stopped to take breath, slowly rosined his bow, so that the strings should sound more shrilly, then set off again, by turns lowering and raising his neck, the better to mark time for himself. The noise of the instrument drove away the little birds from afar.

The table was laid under the cart-shed. On it were four sirloins, six chicken fricassees, stewed veal, three legs of mutton, and in the middle a fine roast suckling pig, flanked by four chitterlings with sorrel. At the corners were decanters of brandy. Sweet bottled-cider frothed round the corks, and all the glasses had been filled to the brim with wine beforehand. Large dishes of yellow cream, that trembled with the least shake of the table, had designed on their smooth surface the initials of the newly wedded pair in nonpareil arabesques. A confectioner of Yvetot had been intrusted with the tarts and sweets. As he had only just set up on the place, he had taken a lot of trouble, and at dessert he himself brought in a set dish that evoked loud cries of wonderment. To begin with, at its base there was a square of blue cardboard, representing a temple with porticoes, colonnades, and stucco statuettes all round, and in the niches constellations of gilt paper stars; then on the second stage was a dungeon of Savoy cake, surrounded by many fortifications in candied angelica, almonds, raisins, and quarters of oranges; and finally, on the upper platform a green field with rocks set in lakes of jam, nutshell boats, and a small Cupid balancing himself in a chocolate swing whose two uprights ended in real roses for balls at the top.

Until night they ate. When any of them were too tired of sitting, they went out for a stroll in the yard, or for a game with corks in the granary, and then returned to table. Some towards the finish went to sleep and snored. But with the coffee everyone woke up. Then they began songs, showed off tricks, raised heavy weights, performed feats with their fingers, then tried lifting carts on their shoulders, made broad jokes, kissed the women. At night when they left, the horses, stuffed up to the nostrils with oats, could hardly be got into the shafts; they kicked, reared, the harness broke, their masters laughed or swore; and all night in the light of the moon along country roads there were runaway carts at full gallop plunging into the ditches, jumping over yard after yard of stones, clambering up the hills, with women leaning out from the tilt to catch hold of the reins.

Those who stayed at the Bertaux spent the night drinking in the kitchen. The children had fallen asleep under the seats.

The bride had begged her father to be spared the usual marriage pleasantries. However, a fishmonger, one of their cousins (who had even brought a pair of soles for his wedding present), began to squirt water from his mouth through the keyhole, when old Rouault came up just in time to stop him, and explain to him that the distinguished position of his son-in-law would not allow of such liberties. The cousin all the same did not give in to these reasons readily. In his heart he accused old Rouault of being proud, and he joined four or five other guests in a corner, who having, through mere chance, been several times running served with the worst helps of meat, also were of opinion they had been badly used, and were whispering about their host, and with covered hints hoping he would ruin himself.

Madame Bovary, senior, had not opened her mouth all day. She had been consulted neither as to the dress of her daughter-in-law nor as to the arrangement of the feast; she went to bed early. Her husband, instead of following her, sent to Saint-Victor for some cigars, and smoked till daybreak, drinking kirsch-punch, a mixture unknown to the company. This added greatly to the consideration in which he was held.

Charles, who was not of a facetious turn, did not shine at the wedding. He answered feebly to the puns, doubles entendres*, compliments, and chaff that it was felt a duty to let off at him as soon as the soup appeared.

*Double meanings.

The next day, on the other hand, he seemed another man. It was he who might rather have been taken for the virgin of the evening before, whilst the bride gave no sign that revealed anything. The shrewdest did not know what to make of it, and they looked at her when she passed near them with an unbounded concentration of mind. But Charles concealed nothing. He called her "my wife", tutoyed* her, asked for her of everyone, looked for her everywhere, and often he dragged her into the yards, where he could be seen from far between the trees, putting his arm around her waist, and walking half-bending over her, ruffling the chemisette of her bodice with his head.

*Used the familiar form of address.

Two days after the wedding the married pair left. Charles, on account of his patients, could not be away longer. Old Rouault had them driven back in his cart, and himself accompanied them as far as Vassonville. Here he embraced his daughter for the last time, got down, and went his way. When he had gone about a hundred paces he stopped, and as he saw the cart disappearing, its wheels turning in the dust, he gave a deep sigh. Then he remembered his wedding, the old times, the first pregnancy of his wife; he, too, had been very happy the day when he had taken her from her father to his home, and had carried her off on a pillion, trotting through the snow, for it was near Christmas-time, and the country was all white. She held him by one arm, her basket hanging from the other; the wind blew the long lace of her Cauchois headdress so that it sometimes flapped across his mouth, and when he turned his head he saw near him, on his shoulder, her little rosy face, smiling silently under the gold bands of her cap. To warm her hands she put them from time to time in his breast. How long ago it all was! Their son would have been thirty by now. Then he looked back and saw nothing on the road. He felt dreary as an empty house; and tender memories mingling with the sad thoughts in his brain, addled by the fumes of the feast, he felt inclined for a moment to take a turn towards the church. As he was afraid, however, that this sight would make him yet more sad, he went right away home.

Monsieur and Madame Charles arrived at Tostes about six o'clock.

The neighbors came to the windows to see their doctor's new wife.

The old servant presented herself, curtsied to her, apologised for not having dinner ready, and suggested that madame, in the meantime, should look over her house.

Chapter Five

The brick front was just in a line with the street, or rather the road. Behind the door hung a cloak with a small collar, a bridle, and a black leather cap, and on the floor, in a corner, were a pair of leggings, still covered with dry mud. On the right was the one apartment, that was both dining and sitting room. A canary yellow paper, relieved at the top by a garland of pale flowers, was puckered everywhere over the badly stretched canvas; white calico curtains with a red border hung crossways at the length of the window; and on the narrow mantelpiece a clock with a head of Hippocrates shone resplendent between two plate candlesticks under oval shades. On the other side of the passage was Charles's consulting room, a little room about six paces wide, with a table, three chairs, and an office chair. Volumes of the "Dictionary of Medical Science," uncut, but the binding rather the worse for the successive sales through which they had gone, occupied almost along the six shelves of a deal bookcase.

The smell of melted butter penetrated through the walls when he saw patients, just as in the kitchen one could hear the people coughing in the consulting room and recounting their histories.

Then, opening on the yard, where the stable was, came a large dilapidated room with a stove, now used as a wood-house, cellar, and pantry, full of old rubbish, of empty casks, agricultural implements past service, and a mass of dusty things whose use it was impossible to guess.

The garden, longer than wide, ran between two mud walls with espaliered apricots, to a hawthorn hedge that separated it from the field. In the middle was a slate sundial on a brick pedestal; four flower beds with eglantines surrounded symmetrically the more useful kitchen garden bed. Right at the bottom, under the spruce bushes, was a cure in plaster reading his breviary.

Emma went upstairs. The first room was not furnished, but in the second, which was their bedroom, was a mahogany bedstead in an alcove with red drapery. A shell box adorned the chest of drawers, and on the secretary near the window a bouquet of orange blossoms tied with white satin ribbons stood in a bottle. It was a bride's bouquet; it was the other one's. She looked at it. Charles noticed it; he took it and carried it up to the attic, while Emma seated in an arm-chair (they were putting her things down around her) thought of her bridal flowers packed up in a bandbox, and wondered, dreaming, what would be done with them if she were to die.

During the first days she occupied herself in thinking about changes in the house. She took the shades off the candlesticks, had new wallpaper put up, the staircase repainted, and seats made in the garden round the sundial; she even inquired how she could get a basin with a jet fountain and fishes. Finally her husband, knowing that she liked to drive out, picked up a second-hand dogcart, which, with new lamps and splashboard in striped leather, looked almost like a tilbury.

He was happy then, and without a care in the world. A meal together, a walk in the evening on the highroad, a gesture of her hands over her hair, the sight of her straw hat hanging from the window-fastener, and many another thing in which Charles had never dreamed of pleasure, now made up the endless round of his happiness. In bed, in the morning, by her side, on the pillow, he watched the sunlight sinking into the down on her fair cheek, half hidden by the lappets of her night-cap. Seen thus closely, her eyes looked to him enlarged, especially when, on waking up, she opened and shut them rapidly many times. Black in the shade, dark blue in broad daylight, they had, as it were, depths of different colours, that, darker in the centre, grew paler towards the surface of the eye. His own eyes lost themselves in these depths; he saw himself in miniature down to the shoulders, with his handkerchief round his head and the top of his shirt open. He rose. She came to the window to see him off, and stayed leaning on the sill between two pots of geranium, clad in her dressing gown hanging loosely about her. Charles, in the street buckled his spurs, his foot on the mounting stone, while she talked to him from above, picking with her mouth some scrap of flower or leaf that she blew out at him. Then this, eddying, floating, described semicircles in the air like a bird, and was caught before it reached the ground in the ill-groomed mane of the old white mare standing motionless at the door. Charles from horseback threw her a kiss; she answered with a nod; she shut the window, and he set off. And then along the highroad, spreading out its long ribbon of dust, along the deep lanes that the trees bent over as in arbours, along paths where the corn reached to the knees, with the sun on his back and the morning air in his nostrils, his heart full of the joys of the past night, his mind at rest, his flesh at ease, he went on, re-chewing his happiness, like those who after dinner taste again the truffles which they are digesting.

Until now what good had he had of his life? His time at school, when he remained shut up within the high walls, alone, in the midst of companions richer than he or cleverer at their work, who laughed at his accent, who jeered at his clothes, and whose mothers came to the school with cakes in their muffs? Later on, when he studied medicine, and never had his purse full enough to treat some little work-girl who would have become his mistress? Afterwards, he had lived fourteen months with the widow, whose feet in bed were cold as icicles. But now he had for life this beautiful woman whom he adored. For him the universe did not extend beyond the circumference of her petticoat, and he reproached himself with not loving her. He wanted to see her again; he turned back quickly, ran up the stairs with a beating heart. Emma, in her room, was dressing; he came up on tiptoe, kissed her back; she gave a cry.

He could not keep from constantly touching her comb, her ring, her fichu; sometimes he gave her great sounding kisses with all his mouth on her cheeks, or else little kisses in a row all along her bare arm from the tip of her fingers up to her shoulder, and she put him away half-smiling, half-vexed, as you do a child who hangs about you.

Before marriage she thought herself in love; but the happiness that should have followed this love not having come, she must, she thought, have been mistaken. And Emma tried to find out what one meant exactly in life by the words felicity, passion, rapture, that had seemed to her so beautiful in books.

Chapter Six

She had read "Paul and Virginia," and she had dreamed of the little bamboo-house, the nigger Domingo, the dog Fidele, but above all of the sweet friendship of some dear little brother, who seeks red fruit for you on trees taller than steeples, or who runs barefoot over the sand, bringing you a bird's nest.

When she was thirteen, her father himself took her to town to place her in the convent. They stopped at an inn in the St. Gervais quarter, where, at their supper, they used painted plates that set forth the story of Mademoiselle de la Valliere. The explanatory legends, chipped here and there by the scratching of knives, all glorified religion, the tendernesses of the heart, and the pomps of court.

Far from being bored at first at the convent, she took pleasure in the society of the good sisters, who, to amuse her, took her to the chapel, which one entered from the refectory by a long corridor. She played very little during recreation hours, knew her catechism well, and it was she who always answered Monsieur le Vicaire's difficult questions. Living thus, without every leaving the warm atmosphere of the classrooms, and amid these pale-faced women wearing rosaries with brass crosses, she was softly lulled by the mystic languor exhaled in the perfumes of the altar, the freshness of the holy water, and the lights of the tapers. Instead of attending to mass, she looked at the pious vignettes with their azure borders in her book, and she loved the sick lamb, the sacred heart pierced with sharp arrows, or the poor Jesus sinking beneath the cross he carries. She tried, by way of mortification, to eat nothing a whole day. She puzzled her head to find some vow to fulfil.

When she went to confession, she invented little sins in order that she might stay there longer, kneeling in the shadow, her hands joined, her face against the grating beneath the whispering of the priest. The comparisons of betrothed, husband, celestial lover, and eternal marriage, that recur in sermons, stirred within her soul depths of unexpected sweetness.

In the evening, before prayers, there was some religious reading in the study. On week-nights it was some abstract of sacred history or the Lectures of the Abbe Frayssinous, and on Sundays passages from the "Genie du Christianisme," as a recreation. How she listened at first to the sonorous lamentations of its romantic melancholies reechoing through the world and eternity! If her childhood had been spent in the shop-parlour of some business quarter, she might perhaps have opened her heart to those lyrical invasions of Nature, which usually come to us only through translation in books. But she knew the country too well; she knew the lowing of cattle, the milking, the ploughs.

Accustomed to calm aspects of life, she turned, on the contrary, to those of excitement. She loved the sea only for the sake of its storms, and the green fields only when broken up by ruins.

She wanted to get some personal profit out of things, and she rejected as useless all that did not contribute to the immediate desires of her heart, being of a temperament more sentimental than artistic, looking for emotions, not landscapes.

At the convent there was an old maid who came for a week each month to mend the linen. Patronized by the clergy, because she belonged to an ancient family of noblemen ruined by the Revolution, she dined in the refectory at the table of the good sisters, and after the meal had a bit of chat with them before going back to her work. The girls often slipped out from the study to go and see her. She knew by heart the love songs of the last century, and sang them in a low voice as she stitched away.

She told stories, gave them news, went errands in the town, and on the sly lent the big girls some novel, that she always carried in the pockets of her apron, and of which the good lady herself swallowed long chapters in the intervals of her work. They were all love, lovers, sweethearts, persecuted ladies fainting in lonely pavilions, postilions killed at every stage, horses ridden to death on every page, sombre forests, heartaches, vows, sobs, tears and kisses, little skiffs by moonlight, nightingales in shady groves, "gentlemen" brave as lions, gentle as lambs, virtuous as no one ever was, always well dressed, and weeping like fountains. For six months, then, Emma, at fifteen years of age, made her hands dirty with books from old lending libraries.

Through Walter Scott, later on, she fell in love with historical events, dreamed of old chests, guard-rooms and minstrels. She would have liked to live in some old manor-house, like those long-waisted chatelaines who, in the shade of pointed arches, spent their days leaning on the stone, chin in hand, watching a cavalier with white plume galloping on his black horse from the distant fields. At this time she had a cult for Mary Stuart and enthusiastic veneration for illustrious or unhappy women. Joan of Arc, Heloise, Agnes Sorel, the beautiful Ferroniere, and Clemence Isaure stood out to her like comets in the dark immensity of heaven, where also were seen, lost in shadow, and all unconnected, St. Louis with his oak, the dying Bayard, some cruelties of Louis XI, a little of St. Bartholomew's Day, the plume of the Bearnais, and always the remembrance of the plates painted in honour of Louis XIV.

In the music class, in the ballads she sang, there was nothing but little angels with golden wings, madonnas, lagunes, gondoliers;-mild compositions that allowed her to catch a glimpse athwart the obscurity of style and the weakness of the music of the attractive phantasmagoria of sentimental realities. Some of her companions brought "keepsakes" given them as new year's gifts to the convent. These had to be hidden; it was quite an undertaking; they were read in the dormitory. Delicately handling the beautiful satin bindings, Emma looked with dazzled eyes at the names of the unknown authors, who had signed their verses for the most part as counts or viscounts.

She trembled as she blew back the tissue paper over the engraving and saw it folded in two and fall gently against the page. Here behind the balustrade of a balcony was a young man in a short cloak, holding in his arms a young girl in a white dress wearing an alms-bag at her belt; or there were nameless portraits of English ladies with fair curls, who looked at you from under their round straw hats with their large clear eyes. Some there were lounging in their carriages, gliding through parks, a greyhound bounding along in front of the equipage driven at a trot by two midget postilions in white breeches. Others, dreaming on sofas with an open letter, gazed at the moon through a slightly open window half draped by a black curtain. The naive ones, a tear on their cheeks, were kissing doves through the bars of a Gothic cage, or, smiling, their heads on one side, were plucking the leaves of a marguerite with their taper fingers, that curved at the tips like peaked shoes. And you, too, were there, Sultans with long pipes reclining beneath arbours in the arms of Bayaderes; Djiaours, Turkish sabres, Greek caps; and you especially, pale landscapes of dithyrambic lands, that often show us at once palm trees and firs, tigers on the right, a lion to the left, Tartar minarets on the horizon; the whole framed by a very neat virgin forest, and with a great perpendicular sunbeam trembling in the water, where, standing out in relief like white excoriations on a steel-grey ground, swans are swimming about.

And the shade of the argand lamp fastened to the wall above Emma's head lighted up all these pictures of the world, that passed before her one by one in the silence of the dormitory, and to the distant noise of some belated carriage rolling over the Boulevards.

When her mother died she cried much the first few days. She had a funeral picture made with the hair of the deceased, and, in a letter sent to the Bertaux full of sad reflections on life, she asked to be buried later on in the same grave. The goodman thought she must be ill, and came to see her. Emma was secretly pleased that she had reached at a first attempt the rare ideal of pale lives, never attained by mediocre hearts. She let herself glide along with Lamartine meanderings, listened to harps on lakes, to all the songs of dying swans, to the falling of the leaves, the pure virgins ascending to heaven, and the voice of the Eternal discoursing down the valleys. She wearied of it, would not confess it, continued from habit, and at last was surprised to feel herself soothed, and with no more sadness at heart than wrinkles on her brow.

The good nuns, who had been so sure of her vocation, perceived with great astonishment that Mademoiselle Rouault seemed to be slipping from them. They had indeed been so lavish to her of prayers, retreats, novenas, and sermons, they had so often preached the respect due to saints and martyrs, and given so much good advice as to the modesty of the body and the salvation of her soul, that she did as tightly reined horses; she pulled up short and the bit slipped from her teeth. This nature, positive in the midst of its enthusiasms, that had loved the church for the sake of the flowers, and music for the words of the songs, and literature for its passional stimulus, rebelled against the mysteries of faith as it grew irritated by discipline, a thing antipathetic to her constitution. When her father took her from school, no one was sorry to see her go. The Lady Superior even thought that she had latterly been somewhat irreverent to the community.

Emma, at home once more, first took pleasure in looking after the servants, then grew disgusted with the country and missed her convent. When Charles came to the Bertaux for the first time, she thought herself quite disillusioned, with nothing more to learn, and nothing more to feel.

But the uneasiness of her new position, or perhaps the disturbance caused by the presence of this man, had sufficed to make her believe that she at last felt that wondrous passion which, till then, like a great bird with rose-coloured wings, hung in the splendour of the skies of poesy; and now she could not think that the calm in which she lived was the happiness she had dreamed.

Chapter Seven

She thought, sometimes, that, after all, this was the happiest time of her life — the honeymoon, as people called it. To taste the full sweetness of it, it would have been necessary doubtless to fly to those lands with sonorous names where the days after marriage are full of laziness most suave. In post chaises behind blue silken curtains to ride slowly up steep road, listening to the song of the postilion re-echoed by the mountains, along with the bells of goats and the muffled sound of a waterfall; at sunset on the shores of gulfs to breathe in the perfume of lemon trees; then in the evening on the villa-terraces above, hand in hand to look at the stars, making plans for the future. It seemed to her that certain places on earth must bring happiness, as a plant peculiar to the soil, and that cannot thrive elsewhere. Why could not she lean over balconies in Swiss chalets, or enshrine her melancholy in a Scotch cottage, with a husband dressed in a black velvet coat with long tails, and thin shoes, a pointed hat and frills? Perhaps she would have liked to confide all these things to someone. But how tell an undefinable uneasiness, variable as the clouds, unstable as the winds? Words failed her — the opportunity, the courage.

If Charles had but wished it, if he had guessed it, if his look had but once met her thought, it seemed to her that a sudden plenty would have gone out from her heart, as the fruit falls from a tree when shaken by a hand. But as the intimacy of their life became deeper, the greater became the gulf that separated her from him.

Charles's conversation was commonplace as a street pavement, and everyone's ideas trooped through it in their everyday garb, without exciting emotion, laughter, or thought. He had never had the curiosity, he said, while he lived at Rouen, to go to the theatre to see the actors from Paris. He could neither swim, nor fence, nor shoot, and one day he could not explain some term of horsemanship to her that she had come across in a novel.

A man, on the contrary, should he not know everything, excel in manifold activities, initiate you into the energies of passion, the refinements of life, all mysteries? But this one taught nothing, knew nothing, wished nothing. He thought her happy; and she resented this easy calm, this serene heaviness, the very happiness she gave him.

Sometimes she would draw; and it was great amusement to Charles to stand there bolt upright and watch her bend over her cardboard, with eyes half-closed the better to see her work, or rolling, between her fingers, little bread-pellets. As to the piano, the more quickly her fingers glided over it the more he wondered.

She struck the notes with aplomb, and ran from top to bottom of the keyboard without a break. Thus shaken up, the old instrument, whose strings buzzed, could be heard at the other end of the village when the window was open, and often the bailiff's clerk, passing along the highroad bare-headed and in list slippers, stopped to listen, his sheet of paper in his hand.

Emma, on the other hand, knew how to look after her house. She sent the patients' accounts in well-phrased letters that had no suggestion of a bill. When they had a neighbour to dinner on Sundays, she managed to have some tasty dish — piled up pyramids of greengages on vine leaves, served up preserves turned out into plates — and even spoke of buying finger-glasses for dessert. From all this much consideration was extended to Bovary.

Charles finished by rising in his own esteem for possessing such a wife. He showed with pride in the sitting room two small pencil sketched by her that he had had framed in very large frames, and hung up against the wallpaper by long green cords. People returning from mass saw him at his door in his wool-work slippers.

He came home late — at ten o'clock, at midnight sometimes. Then he asked for something to eat, and as the servant had gone to bed, Emma waited on him. He took off his coat to dine more at his ease. He told her, one after the other, the people he had met, the villages where he had been, the prescriptions he had written, and, well pleased with himself, he finished the remainder of the boiled beef and onions, picked pieces off the cheese, munched an apple, emptied his water-bottle, and then went to bed, and lay on his back and snored.

As he had been for a time accustomed to wear nightcaps, his handkerchief would not keep down over his ears, so that his hair in the morning was all tumbled pell-mell about his face and whitened with the feathers of the pillow, whose strings came untied during the night. He always wore thick boots that had two long creases over the instep running obliquely towards the ankle, while the rest of the upper continued in a straight line as if stretched on a wooden foot. He said that "was quite good enough for the country."

His mother approved of his economy, for she came to see him as formerly when there had been some violent row at her place; and yet Madame Bovary senior seemed prejudiced against her daughter-in-law. She thought "her ways too fine for their position"; the wood, the sugar, and the candles disappeared as "at a grand establishment," and the amount of firing in the kitchen would have been enough for twenty-five courses. She put her linen in order for her in the presses, and taught her to keep an eye on the butcher when he brought the meat. Emma put up with these lessons. Madame Bovary was lavish of them; and the words "daughter" and "mother" were exchanged all day long, accompanied by little quiverings of the lips, each one uttering gentle words in a voice trembling with anger.

In Madame Dubuc's time the old woman felt that she was still the favorite; but now the love of Charles for Emma seemed to her a desertion from her tenderness, an encroachment upon what was hers, and she watched her son's happiness in sad silence, as a ruined man looks through the windows at people dining in his old house. She recalled to him as remembrances her troubles and her sacrifices, and, comparing these with Emma's negligence, came to the conclusion that it was not reasonable to adore her so exclusively.

Charles knew not what to answer: he respected his mother, and he loved his wife infinitely; he considered the judgment of the one infallible, and yet he thought the conduct of the other irreproachable. When Madam Bovary had gone, he tried timidly and in the same terms to hazard one or two of the more anodyne observations he had heard from his mamma. Emma proved to him with a word that he was mistaken, and sent him off to his patients.

And yet, in accord with theories she believed right, she wanted to make herself in love with him. By moonlight in the garden she recited all the passionate rhymes she knew by heart, and, sighing, sang to him many melancholy adagios; but she found herself as calm after as before, and Charles seemed no more amorous and no more moved.

When she had thus for a while struck the flint on her heart without getting a spark, incapable, moreover, of understanding what she did not experience as of believing anything that did not present itself in conventional forms, she persuaded herself without difficulty that Charles's passion was nothing very exorbitant. His outbursts became regular; he embraced her at certain fixed times. It was one habit among other habits, and, like a dessert, looked forward to after the monotony of dinner.

A gamekeeper, cured by the doctor of inflammation of the lungs, had given madame a little Italian greyhound; she took her out walking, for she went out sometimes in order to be alone for a moment, and not to see before her eyes the eternal garden and the dusty road. She went as far as the beeches of Banneville, near the deserted pavilion which forms an angle of the wall on the side of the country. Amidst the vegetation of the ditch there are long reeds with leaves that cut you.

She began by looking round her to see if nothing had changed since last she had been there. She found again in the same places the foxgloves and wallflowers, the beds of nettles growing round the big stones, and the patches of lichen along the three windows, whose shutters, always closed, were rotting away on their rusty iron bars. Her thoughts, aimless at first, wandered at random, like her greyhound, who ran round and round in the fields, yelping after the yellow butterflies, chasing the shrew-mice, or nibbling the poppies on the edge of a cornfield.

Then gradually her ideas took definite shape, and, sitting on the grass that she dug up with little prods of her sunshade, Emma repeated to herself, "Good heavens! Why did I marry?"

She asked herself if by some other chance combination it would have not been possible to meet another man; and she tried to imagine what would have been these unrealised events, this different life, this unknown husband. All, surely, could not be like this one. He might have been handsome, witty, distinguished, attractive, such as, no doubt, her old companions of the convent had married. What were they doing now? In town, with the noise of the streets, the buzz of the theatres and the lights of the ballroom, they were living lives where the heart expands, the senses bourgeon out. But she — her life was cold as a garret whose dormer window looks on the north, and ennui, the silent spider, was weaving its web in the darkness in every corner of her heart.

She recalled the prize days, when she mounted the platform to receive her little crowns, with her hair in long plaits. In her white frock and open prunella shoes she had a pretty way, and when she went back to her seat, the gentlemen bent over her to congratulate her; the courtyard was full of carriages; farewells were called to her through their windows; the music master with his violin case bowed in passing by. How far all of this! How far away! She called Djali, took her between her knees, and smoothed the long delicate head, saying, "Come, kiss mistress; you have no troubles."

Then noting the melancholy face of the graceful animal, who yawned slowly, she softened, and comparing her to herself, spoke to her aloud as to somebody in trouble whom one is consoling.

Occasionally there came gusts of winds, breezes from the sea rolling in one sweep over the whole plateau of the Caux country, which brought even to these fields a salt freshness. The rushes, close to the ground, whistled; the branches trembled in a swift rustling, while their summits, ceaselessly swaying, kept up a deep murmur. Emma drew her shawl round her shoulders and rose.

In the avenue a green light dimmed by the leaves lit up the short moss that crackled softly beneath her feet. The sun was setting; the sky showed red between the branches, and the trunks of the trees, uniform, and planted in a straight line, seemed a brown colonnade standing out against a background of gold. A fear took hold of her; she called Djali, and hurriedly returned to Tostes by the high road, threw herself into an armchair, and for the rest of the evening did not speak.

But towards the end of September something extraordinary fell upon her life; she was invited by the Marquis d'Andervilliers to Vaubyessard.

Secretary of State under the Restoration, the Marquis, anxious to re-enter political life, set about preparing for his candidature to the Chamber of Deputies long beforehand. In the winter he distributed a great deal of wood, and in the Conseil General always enthusiastically demanded new roads for his arrondissement. During the dog-days he had suffered from an abscess, which Charles had cured as if by miracle by giving a timely little touch with the lancet. The steward sent to Tostes to pay for the operation reported in the evening that he had seen some superb cherries in the doctor's little garden. Now cherry trees did not thrive at Vaubyessard; the Marquis asked Bovary for some slips; made it his business to thank his personally; saw Emma; thought she had a pretty figure, and that she did not bow like a peasant; so that he did not think he was going beyond the bounds of condescension, nor, on the other hand, making a mistake, in inviting the young couple.

On Wednesday at three o'clock, Monsieur and Madame Bovary, seated in their dog-cart, set out for Vaubyessard, with a great trunk strapped on behind and a bonnet-box in front of the apron. Besides these Charles held a bandbox between his knees.

They arrived at nightfall, just as the lamps in the park were being lit to show the way for the carriages.

Chapter Eight

The chateau, a modern building in Italian style, with two projecting wings and three flights of steps, lay at the foot of an immense green-sward, on which some cows were grazing among groups of large trees set out at regular intervals, while large beds of arbutus, rhododendron, syringas, and guelder roses bulged out their irregular clusters of green along the curve of the gravel path. A river flowed under a bridge; through the mist one could distinguish buildings with thatched roofs scattered over the field bordered by two gently sloping, well timbered hillocks, and in the background amid the trees rose in two parallel lines the coach houses and stables, all that was left of the ruined old chateau.

Charles's dog-cart pulled up before the middle flight of steps; servants appeared; the Marquis came forward, and, offering his arm to the doctor's wife, conducted her to the vestibule.

It was paved with marble slabs, was very lofty, and the sound of footsteps and that of voices re-echoed through it as in a church.

Opposite rose a straight staircase, and on the left a gallery overlooking the garden led to the billiard room, through whose door one could hear the click of the ivory balls. As she crossed it to go to the drawing room, Emma saw standing round the table men with grave faces, their chins resting on high cravats. They all wore orders, and smiled silently as they made their strokes.

On the dark wainscoting of the walls large gold frames bore at the bottom names written in black letters. She read: "Jean-Antoine d'Andervilliers d'Yvervonbille, Count de la Vaubyessard and Baron de la Fresnay, killed at the battle of Coutras on the 20th of October, 1587." And on another: "Jean-Antoine-Henry-Guy d'Andervilliers de la Vaubyessard, Admiral of France and Chevalier of the Order of St. Michael, wounded at the battle of the Hougue-Saint-Vaast on the 29th of May, 1692; died at Vaubyessard on the 23rd of January 1693." One could hardly make out those that followed, for the light of the lamps lowered over the green cloth threw a dim shadow round the room. Burnishing the horizontal pictures, it broke up against these in delicate lines where there were cracks in the varnish, and from all these great black squares framed in with gold stood out here and there some lighter portion of the painting — a pale brow, two eyes that looked at you, perukes flowing over and powdering red-coated shoulders, or the buckle of a garter above a well-rounded calf.

The Marquis opened the drawing room door; one of the ladies (the Marchioness herself) came to meet Emma. She made her sit down by her on an ottoman, and began talking to her as amicably as if she had known her a long time. She was a woman of about forty, with fine shoulders, a hook nose, a drawling voice, and on this evening she wore over her brown hair a simple guipure fichu that fell in a point at the back. A fair young woman sat in a high-backed chair in a corner; and gentlemen with flowers in their buttonholes were talking to ladies round the fire.

At seven dinner was served. The men, who were in the majority, sat down at the first table in the vestibule; the ladies at the second in the dining room with the Marquis and Marchioness.

Emma, on entering, felt herself wrapped round by the warm air, a blending of the perfume of flowers and of the fine linen, of the fumes of the viands, and the odour of the truffles. The silver dish covers reflected the lighted wax candles in the candelabra, the cut crystal covered with light steam reflected from one to the other pale rays; bouquets were placed in a row the whole length of the table; and in the large-bordered plates each napkin, arranged after the fashion of a bishop's mitre, held between its two gaping folds a small oval shaped roll. The red claws of lobsters hung over the dishes; rich fruit in open baskets was piled up on moss; there were quails in their plumage; smoke was rising; and in silk stockings, knee-breeches, white cravat, and frilled shirt, the steward, grave as a judge, offering ready carved dishes between the shoulders of the guests, with a touch of the spoon gave you the piece chosen. On the large stove of porcelain inlaid with copper baguettes the statue of a woman, draped to the chin, gazed motionless on the room full of life.

Madame Bovary noticed that many ladies had not put their gloves in their glasses.

But at the upper end of the table, alone amongst all these women, bent over his full plate, and his napkin tied round his neck like a child, an old man sat eating, letting drops of gravy drip from his mouth. His eyes were bloodshot, and he wore a little queue tied with black ribbon. He was the Marquis's father-in-law, the old Duke de Laverdiere, once on a time favourite of the Count d'Artois, in the days of the Vaudreuil hunting-parties at the Marquis de Conflans', and had been, it was said, the lover of Queen Marie Antoinette, between Monsieur de Coigny and Monsieur de Lauzun. He had lived a life of noisy debauch, full of duels, bets, elopements; he had squandered his fortune and frightened all his family. A servant behind his chair named aloud to him in his ear the dishes that he pointed to stammering, and constantly Emma's eyes turned involuntarily to this old man with hanging lips, as to something extraordinary. He had lived at court and slept in the bed of queens! Iced champagne was poured out. Emma shivered all over as she felt it cold in her mouth. She had never seen pomegranates nor tasted pineapples. The powdered sugar even seemed to her whiter and finer than elsewhere.

The ladies afterwards went to their rooms to prepare for the ball.

Emma made her toilet with the fastidious care of an actress on her debut. She did her hair according to the directions of the hairdresser, and put on the barege dress spread out upon the bed.

Charles's trousers were tight across the belly.

"My trouser-straps will be rather awkward for dancing," he said.

"Dancing?" repeated Emma.

"Yes!"

"Why, you must be mad! They would make fun of you; keep your place. Besides, it is more becoming for a doctor," she added.

Charles was silent. He walked up and down waiting for Emma to finish dressing.

He saw her from behind in the glass between two lights. Her black eyes seemed blacker than ever. Her hair, undulating towards the ears, shone with a blue lustre; a rose in her chignon trembled on its mobile stalk, with artificial dewdrops on the tip of the leaves. She wore a gown of pale saffron trimmed with three bouquets of pompon roses mixed with green.

Charles came and kissed her on her shoulder.

"Let me alone!" she said; "you are tumbling me."

One could hear the flourish of the violin and the notes of a horn. She went downstairs restraining herself from running.

Dancing had begun. Guests were arriving. There was some crushing.

She sat down on a form near the door.

The quadrille over, the floor was occupied by groups of men standing up and talking and servants in livery bearing large trays. Along the line of seated women painted fans were fluttering, bouquets half hid smiling faces, and gold stoppered scent-bottles were turned in partly-closed hands, whose white gloves outlined the nails and tightened on the flesh at the wrists. Lace trimmings, diamond brooches, medallion bracelets trembled on bodices, gleamed on breasts, clinked on bare arms.

The hair, well-smoothed over the temples and knotted at the nape, bore crowns, or bunches, or sprays of mytosotis, jasmine, pomegranate blossoms, ears of corn, and corn-flowers. Calmly seated in their places, mothers with forbidding countenances were wearing red turbans.

Emma's heart beat rather faster when, her partner holding her by the tips of the fingers, she took her place in a line with the dancers, and waited for the first note to start. But her emotion soon vanished, and, swaying to the rhythm of the orchestra, she glided forward with slight movements of the neck. A smile rose to her lips at certain delicate phrases of the violin, that sometimes played alone while the other instruments were silent; one could hear the clear clink of the louis d'or that were being thrown down upon the card tables in the next room; then all struck again, the cornet-a-piston uttered its sonorous note, feet marked time, skirts swelled and rustled, hands touched and parted; the same eyes falling before you met yours again.

A few men (some fifteen or so), of twenty-five to forty, scattered here and there among the dancers or talking at the doorways, distinguished themselves from the crowd by a certain air of breeding, whatever their differences in age, dress, or face.

Their clothes, better made, seemed of finer cloth, and their hair, brought forward in curls towards the temples, glossy with more delicate pomades. They had the complexion of wealth — that clear complexion that is heightened by the pallor of porcelain, the shimmer of satin, the veneer of old furniture, and that an ordered regimen of exquisite nurture maintains at its best. Their necks moved easily in their low cravats, their long whiskers fell over their turned-down collars, they wiped their lips upon handkerchiefs with embroidered initials that gave forth a subtle perfume. Those who were beginning to grow old had an air of youth, while there was something mature in the faces of the young. In their unconcerned looks was the calm of passions daily satiated, and through all their gentleness of manner pierced that peculiar brutality, the result of a command of half-easy things, in which force is exercised and vanity amused — the management of thoroughbred horses and the society of loose women.

A few steps from Emma a gentleman in a blue coat was talking of Italy with a pale young woman wearing a parure of pearls.

They were praising the breadth of the columns of St. Peter's, Tivoly, Vesuvius, Castellamare, and Cassines, the roses of Genoa, the Coliseum by moonlight. With her other ear Emma was listening to a conversation full of words she did not understand. A circle gathered round a very young man who the week before had beaten "Miss Arabella" and "Romolus," and won two thousand louis jumping a ditch in England. One complained that his racehorses were growing fat; another of the printers' errors that had disfigured the name of his horse.

The atmosphere of the ball was heavy; the lamps were growing dim.

Guests were flocking to the billiard room. A servant got upon a chair and broke the window-panes. At the crash of the glass Madame Bovary turned her head and saw in the garden the faces of peasants pressed against the window looking in at them. Then the memory of the Bertaux came back to her. She saw the farm again, the muddy pond, her father in a blouse under the apple trees, and she saw herself again as formerly, skimming with her finger the cream off the milk-pans in the dairy. But in the refulgence of the present hour her past life, so distinct until then, faded away completely, and she almost doubted having lived it. She was there; beyond the ball was only shadow overspreading all the rest. She was just eating a maraschino ice that she held with her left hand in a silver-gilt cup, her eyes half-closed, and the spoon between her teeth.

A lady near her dropped her fan. A gentlemen was passing.

"Would you be so good," said the lady, "as to pick up my fan that has fallen behind the sofa?"

The gentleman bowed, and as he moved to stretch out his arm, Emma saw the hand of a young woman throw something white, folded in a triangle, into his hat. The gentleman, picking up the fan, offered it to the lady respectfully; she thanked him with an inclination of the head, and began smelling her bouquet.

After supper, where were plenty of Spanish and Rhine wines, soups a la bisque and au lait d'amandes*, puddings a la Trafalgar, and all sorts of cold meats with jellies that trembled in the dishes, the carriages one after the other began to drive off. Raising the corners of the muslin curtain, one could see the light of their lanterns glimmering through the darkness. The seats began to empty, some card-players were still left; the musicians were cooling the tips of their fingers on their tongues. Charles was half asleep, his back propped against a door.

*With almond milk

At three o'clock the cotillion began. Emma did not know how to waltz. Everyone was waltzing, Mademoiselle d'Andervilliers herself and the Marquis; only the guests staying at the castle were still there, about a dozen persons.

One of the waltzers, however, who was familiarly called Viscount, and whose low cut waistcoat seemed moulded to his chest, came a second time to ask Madame Bovary to dance, assuring her that he would guide her, and that she would get through it very well.

They began slowly, then went more rapidly. They turned; all around them was turning — the lamps, the furniture, the wainscoting, the floor, like a disc on a pivot. On passing near the doors the bottom of Emma's dress caught against his trousers.

Their legs commingled; he looked down at her; she raised her eyes to his. A torpor seized her; she stopped. They started again, and with a more rapid movement; the Viscount, dragging her along disappeared with her to the end of the gallery, where panting, she almost fell, and for a moment rested her head upon his breast. And then, still turning, but more slowly, he guided her back to her seat. She leaned back against the wall and covered her eyes with her hands.

When she opened them again, in the middle of the drawing room three

When she opened them again, in the middle of the drawing room three waltzers were kneeling before a lady sitting on a stool.

She chose the Viscount, and the violin struck up once more.

Everyone looked at them. They passed and re-passed, she with rigid body, her chin bent down, and he always in the same pose, his figure curved, his elbow rounded, his chin thrown forward. That woman knew how to waltz! They kept up a long time, and tired out all the others.

Then they talked a few moments longer, and after the goodnights, or rather good mornings, the guests of the chateau retired to bed.

Charles dragged himself up by the balusters. His "knees were going up into his body." He had spent five consecutive hours standing bolt upright at the card tables, watching them play whist, without understanding anything about it, and it was with a deep sigh of relief that he pulled off his boots.

Emma threw a shawl over her shoulders, opened the window, and leant out.

The night was dark; some drops of rain were falling. She breathed in the damp wind that refreshed her eyelids. The music of the ball was still murmuring in her ears. And she tried to keep herself awake in order to prolong the illusion of this luxurious life that she would soon have to give up.

Day began to break. She looked long at the windows of the chateau, trying to guess which were the rooms of all those she had noticed the evening before. She would fain have known their lives, have penetrated, blended with them. But she was shivering with cold. She undressed, and cowered down between the sheets against Charles, who was asleep.

There were a great many people to luncheon. The repast lasted ten minutes; no liqueurs were served, which astonished the doctor.

Next, Mademoiselle d'Andervilliers collected some pieces of roll in a small basket to take them to the swans on the ornamental waters, and they went to walk in the hot-houses, where strange plants, bristling with hairs, rose in pyramids under hanging vases, whence, as from over-filled nests of serpents, fell long green cords interlacing. The orangery, which was at the other end, led by a covered way to the outhouses of the chateau. The Marquis, to amuse the young woman, took her to see the stables.

Above the basket-shaped racks porcelain slabs bore the names of the horses in black letters. Each animal in its stall whisked its tail when anyone went near and said "Tchk! tchk!" The boards of the harness room shone like the flooring of a drawing room. The carriage harness was piled up in the middle against two twisted columns, and the bits, the whips, the spurs, the curbs, were ranged in a line all along the wall.

Charles, meanwhile, went to ask a groom to put his horse to. The dog-cart was brought to the foot of the steps, and, all the parcels being crammed in, the was brought to the foot of the steps, and, all the parcels being crammed in, the Bovarys paid their respects to the Marquis and Marchioness and set out again for Tostes.

Emma watched the turning wheels in silence. Charles, on the extreme edge of the seat, held the reins with his two arms wide apart, and the little horse ambled along in the shafts that were too big for him. The loose reins hanging over his crupper were wet with foam, and the box fastened on behind the chaise gave great regular bumps against it.

They were on the heights of Thibourville when suddenly some horsemen with cigars between their lips passed laughing. Emma thought she recognized the Viscount, turned back, and caught on the horizon only the movement of the heads rising or falling with the unequal cadence of the trot or gallop.

A mile farther on they had to stop to mend with some string the traces that had broken.

But Charles, giving a last look to the harness, saw something on the ground between his horse's legs, and he picked up a cigar-case with a green silk border and beblazoned in the centre like the door of a carriage.

"There are even two cigars in it," said he; "they'll do for this evening after dinner."

"Why, do you smoke?" she asked.

"Sometimes, when I get a chance."

He put his find in his pocket and whipped up the nag.

When they reached home the dinner was not ready. Madame lost her temper. Nastasie answered rudely.

"Leave the room!" said Emma. "You are forgetting yourself. I give you warning."

For dinner there was onion soup and a piece of veal with sorrel.

Charles, seated opposite Emma, rubbed his hands gleefully.

"How good it is to be at home again!"

Nastasie could be heard crying. He was rather fond of the poor girl. She had formerly, during the wearisome time of his widowhood, kept him company many an evening. She had been his first patient, his oldest acquaintance in the place.

"Have you given her warning for good?" he asked at last.

"Yes. Who is to prevent me?" she replied.

Then they warmed themselves in the kitchen while their room was being made ready. Charles began to smoke. He smoked with lips protruding, spitting every moment, recoiling at every puff.

"You'll make yourself ill," she said scornfully.

He put down his cigar and ran to swallow a glass of cold water at the pump.

He put down his cigar and ran to swallow a glass of cold water at the pump. Emma seizing hold of the cigar case threw it quickly to the back of the cupboard.

The next day was a long one. She walked about her little garden, up and down the same walks, stopping before the beds, before the espalier, before the plaster curate, looking with amazement at all these things of once-on-a-time that she knew so well. How far off the ball seemed already! What was it that thus set so far asunder the morning of the day before yesterday and the evening of to-day? Her journey to Vaubyessard had made a hole in her life, like one of those great crevices that a storm will sometimes make in one night in mountains. Still she was resigned. She devoutly put away in her drawers her beautiful dress, down to the satin shoes whose soles were yellowed with the slippery wax of the dancing floor. Her heart was like these. In its friction against wealth something had come over it that could not be effaced.

The memory of this ball, then, became an occupation for Emma.

Whenever the Wednesday came round she said to herself as she awoke, "Ah! I was there a week — a fortnight — three weeks ago."

And little by little the faces grew confused in her remembrance.

She forgot the tune of the quadrilles; she no longer saw the liveries and appointments so distinctly; some details escaped her, but the regret remained with her.

Chapter Nine

Often when Charles was out she took from the cupboard, between the folds of the linen where she had left it, the green silk cigar case. She looked at it, opened it, and even smelt the odour of the lining — a mixture of verbena and tobacco. Whose was it? The Viscount's? Perhaps it was a present from his mistress. It had been embroidered on some rosewood frame, a pretty little thing, hidden from all eyes, that had occupied many hours, and over which had fallen the soft curls of the pensive worker. A breath of love had passed over the stitches on the canvas; each prick of the needle had fixed there a hope or a memory, and all those interwoven threads of silk were but the continuity of the same silent passion. And then one morning the Viscount had taken it away with him. Of what had they spoken when it lay upon the wide-mantelled chimneys between flower-vases and Pompadour clocks? She was at Tostes; he was at Paris now, far away! What was this Paris like? What a vague name! She repeated it in a low voice, for the mere pleasure of it; it rang in her ears like a great cathedral bell; it shone before her eyes, even on the labels of her pomade-pots.

At night, when the carriers passed under her windows in their carts singing the "Marjolaine," she awoke, and listened to the noise of the iron-bound wheels, which, as they gained the country road, was soon deadened by the soil. "They will be there to-morrow!" she said to herself.

And she followed them in thought up and down the hills, traversing villages, gliding along the highroads by the light of the stars. At the end of some indefinite distance there was always a confused spot, into which her dream died.

She bought a plan of Paris, and with the tip of her finger on the map she walked about the capital. She went up the boulevards, stopping at every turning, between the lines of the streets, in front of the white squares that represented the houses. At last she would close the lids of her weary eyes, and see in the darkness the gas jets flaring in the wind and the steps of carriages lowered with much noise before the peristyles of theatres.

She took in "La Corbeille," a lady's journal, and the "Sylphe des Salons." She devoured, without skipping a word, all the accounts of first nights, races, and soirees, took interest in the debut of a singer, in the opening of a new shop. She knew the latest fashions, the addresses of the best tailors, the days of the Bois and the Opera. In Eugene Sue she studied descriptions of furniture; she read Balzac and George Sand, seeking in them imaginary satisfaction for her own desires. Even at table she had her book by her, and turned over the pages while Charles ate and talked to her. The memory of the Viscount always returned as she read. Between him and the imaginary personages she made comparisons. But the circle of which he was the centre gradually widened round him, and the aureole that he bore, fading from his form, broadened out beyond, lighting up her other dreams.

Paris, more vague than the ocean, glimmered before Emma's eyes in an atmosphere of vermilion. The many lives that stirred amid this tumult were, however, divided into parts, classed as distinct pictures. Emma perceived only two or three that hid from her all the rest, and in themselves represented all humanity. The world of ambassadors moved over polished floors in drawing rooms lined with mirrors, round oval tables covered with velvet and gold-fringed cloths. There were dresses with trains, deep mysteries, anguish hidden beneath smiles. Then came the society of the duchesses; all were pale; all got up at four o'clock; the women, poor angels, wore English point on their petticoats; and the men, unappreciated geniuses under a frivolous outward seeming, rode horses to death at pleasure parties, spent the summer season at Baden, and towards the forties married heiresses. In the private rooms of restaurants, where one sups after midnight by the light of wax candles, laughed the motley crowd of men of letters and actresses. They were prodigal as kings, full of ideal, ambitious, fantastic frenzy. This was an existence outside that of all others, between heaven and earth, in the midst of storms, having something of the sublime. For the rest of the world it was lost, with no particular place and as if non-existent. The nearer things were, moreover, the more her thoughts turned away from them. All her immediate surroundings, the wearisome country, the middle-class imbeciles, the mediocrity of existence, seemed to her exceptional, a peculiar chance that had caught hold of her, while beyond stretched, as far as eye could see, an immense land of joys and passions. She confused in her desire the sensualities of luxury with the delights of the heart, elegance of manners with delicacy of sentiment. Did not love, like Indian plants, need a special soil, a particular temperature? Signs by moonlight, long embraces, tears flowing over yielded hands, all the fevers of the flesh and the languors of tenderness could not be separated from the balconies of great castles full of indolence, from boudoirs with silken curtains and thick carpets, well-filled flower-stands, a bed on a raised dias, nor from the flashing of precious stones and the shoulder-knots of liveries.

The lad from the posting house who came to groom the mare every morning passed through the passage with his heavy wooden shoes; there were holes in his blouse; his feet were bare in list slippers. And this was the groom in knee-britches with whom she had to be content! His work done, he did not come back again all day, for Charles on his return put up his horse himself, unsaddled him and put on the halter, while the servant-girl brought a bundle of straw and threw it as best she could into the manger.

To replace Nastasie (who left Tostes shedding torrents of tears) Emma took into her service a young girl of fourteen, an orphan with a sweet face. She forbade her wearing cotton caps, taught her to address her in the third person, to bring a glass of water on a plate, to knock before coming into a room, to iron, starch, and to dress her — wanted to make a lady's-maid of her. The new servant obeyed without a murmur, so as not to be sent away; and as madame usually left the key in the sideboard, Felicite every evening took a small supply of sugar that she ate alone in her bed after she had said her prayers.

Sometimes in the afternoon she went to chat with the postilions.

Madame was in her room upstairs. She wore an open dressing gown that showed between the shawl facings of her bodice a pleated chamisette with three gold buttons. Her belt was a corded girdle with great tassels, and her small garnet coloured slippers had a large knot of ribbon that fell over her instep. She had bought herself a blotting book, writing case, pen-holder, and envelopes, although she had no one to write to; she dusted her what-not, looked at herself in the glass, picked up a book, and then, dreaming between the lines, let it drop on her knees. She longed to travel or to go back to her convent. She wished at the same time to die and to live in Paris.

Charles in snow and rain trotted across country. He ate omelettes on farmhouse tables, poked his arm into damp beds, received the tepid spurt of blood-lettings in his face, listened to death-rattles, examined basins, turned over a good deal of dirty linen; but every evening he found a blazing fire, his dinner ready, easy-chairs, and a well-dressed woman, charming with an odour of freshness, though no one could say whence the perfume came, or if it were not her skin that made odorous her chemise.

She charmed him by numerous attentions; now it was some new way of arranging paper sconces for the candles, a flounce that she altered on her gown, or an extraordinary name for some very simple dish that the servant had spoilt, but that Charles swallowed with pleasure to the last mouthful. At Rouen she saw some ladies who wore a bunch of charms on the watch-chains; she bought some charms. She wanted for her mantelpiece two large blue glass vases, and some time after an ivory necessaire with a silver-gilt thimble. The less Charles understood these refinements the more they seduced him. They added something to the pleasure of the senses and to the comfort of his fireside. It was like a golden dust sanding all along the narrow path of his life.

He was well, looked well; his reputation was firmly established.

The country-folk loved him because he was not proud. He petted the children, never went to the public house, and, moreover, his morals inspired confidence.

He was specially successful with catarrhs and chest complaints. Being much afraid of killing his patients, Charles, in fact only prescribed sedatives, from time to time and emetic, a footbath, or leeches. It was not that he was afraid of surgery; he bled people copiously like horses, and for the taking out of teeth he had the "devil's own wrist."

Finally, to keep up with the times, he took in "La Ruche Medicale," a new journal whose prospectus had been sent him. He read it a little after dinner, but in about five minutes the warmth of the room added to the effect of his dinner sent him to sleep; and he sat there, his chin on his two hands and his hair spreading like a mane to the foot of the lamp. Emma looked at him and shrugged her shoulders. Why, at least, was not her husband one of those men of taciturn passions who work at their books all night, and at last, when about sixty, the age of rheumatism sets in, wear a string of orders on their ill-fitting black coat? She could have wished this name of Bovary, which was hers, had been illustrious, to see it displayed at the booksellers', repeated in the newspapers, known to all France. But Charles had no ambition.

An Yvetot doctor whom he had lately met in consultation had somewhat humiliated him at the very bedside of the patient, before the assembled relatives. When, in the evening, Charles told her this anecdote, Emma inveighed loudly against his colleague. Charles was much touched. He kissed her forehead with a tear in his eyes. But she was angered with shame; she felt a wild desire to strike him; she went to open the window in the passage and breathed in the fresh air to calm herself.

"What a man! What a man!" she said in a low voice, biting her lips.

Besides, she was becoming more irritated with him. As he grew older his manner grew heavier; at dessert he cut the corks of the empty bottles; after eating he cleaned his teeth with his tongue; in taking soup he made a gurgling noise with every spoonful; and, as he was getting fatter, the puffed-out cheeks seemed to push the eyes, always small, up to the temples.

Sometimes Emma tucked the red borders of his under-vest unto his waistcoat, rearranged his cravat, and threw away the dirty gloves he was going to put on; and this was not, as he fancied, for himself; it was for herself, by a diffusion of egotism, of nervous irritation. Sometimes, too, she told him of what she had read, such as a passage in a novel, of a new play, or an anecdote of the "upper ten" that she had seen in a feuilleton; for, after all, Charles was something, an ever-open ear, and ever-ready approbation. She confided many a thing to her greyhound. She would have done so to the logs in the fireplace or to the pendulum of the clock.

At the bottom of her heart, however, she was waiting for something to happen. Like shipwrecked sailors, she turned despairing eyes upon the solitude of her life, seeking afar off some white sail in the mists of the horizon. She did not know what this chance would be, what wind would bring it her, towards what shore it would drive her, if it would be a shallop or a three-decker, laden with anguish or full of bliss to the portholes. But each morning, as she awoke, she hoped it would come that day; she listened to every sound, sprang up with a start, wondered that it did not come; then at sunset, always more saddened, she longed for the morrow.

Spring came round. With the first warm weather, when the pear trees began to blossom, she suffered from dyspnoea.

From the beginning of July she counted how many weeks there were to October, thinking that perhaps the Marquis d'Andervilliers would give another ball at Vaubyessard. But all September passed without letters or visits.

After the ennui of this disappointment her heart once more remained empty, and then the same series of days recommenced. So now they would thus follow one another, always the same, immovable, and bringing nothing. Other lives, however flat, had at least the chance of some event. One adventure sometimes brought with it infinite consequences and the scene changed. But nothing happened to her; God had willed it so! The future was a dark corridor, with its door at the end shut fast.

She gave up music. What was the good of playing? Who would hear her? Since she could never, in a velvet gown with short sleeves, striking with her light fingers the ivory keys of an Erard at a concert, feel the murmur of ecstasy envelop her like a breeze, it was not worth while boring herself with practicing. Her drawing cardboard and her embroidery she left in the cupboard. What was the good? What was the good? Sewing irritated her. "I have read everything," she said to herself. And she sat there making the tongs red-hot, or looked at the rain falling.

How sad she was on Sundays when vespers sounded! She listened with dull attention to each stroke of the cracked bell. A cat slowly walking over some roof put up his back in the pale rays of the sun. The wind on the highroad blew up clouds of dust. Afar off a dog sometimes howled; and the bell, keeping time, continued its monotonous ringing that died away over the fields.

But the people came out from church. The women in waxed clogs, the peasants in new blouses, the little bare-headed children skipping along in front of them, all were going home. And till nightfall, five or six men, always the same, stayed playing at corks in front of the large door of the inn.

The winter was severe. The windows every morning were covered with rime, and the light shining through them, dim as through ground-glass, sometimes did not change the whole day long. At four o'clock the lamp had to be lighted.

not change the whole day long. At four o'clock the lamp had to be lighted.

On fine days she went down into the garden. The dew had left on the cabbages a silver lace with long transparent threads spreading from one to the other. No birds were to be heard; everything seemed asleep, the espalier covered with straw, and the vine, like a great sick serpent under the coping of the wall, along which, on drawing hear, one saw the many-footed woodlice crawling. Under the spruce by the hedgerow, the curie in the three-cornered hat reading his breviary had lost his right foot, and the very plaster, scaling off with the frost, had left white scabs on his face.

Then she went up again, shut her door, put on coals, and fainting with the heat of the hearth, felt her boredom weigh more heavily than ever. She would have liked to go down and talk to the servant, but a sense of shame restrained her.

Every day at the same time the schoolmaster in a black skullcap opened the shutters of his house, and the rural policeman, wearing his sabre over his blouse, passed by. Night and morning the post-horses, three by three, crossed the street to water at the pond. From time to time the bell of a public house door rang, and when it was windy one could hear the little brass basins that served as signs for the hairdresser's shop creaking on their two rods. This shop had as decoration an old engraving of a fashion-plate stuck against a windowpane and the wax bust of a woman with yellow hair. He, too, the hairdresser, lamented his wasted calling, his hopeless future, and dreaming of some shop in a big town — at Rouen, for example, overlooking the harbour, near the theatre — he walked up and down all day from the mairie to the church, sombre and waiting for customers. When Madame Bovary looked up, she always saw him there, like a sentinel on duty, with his skullcap over his ears and his vest of lasting.

Sometimes in the afternoon outside the window of her room, the head of a man appeared, a swarthy head with black whiskers, smiling slowly, with a broad, gentle smile that showed his white teeth. A waltz immediately began and on the organ, in a little drawing room, dancers the size of a finger, women in pink turbans, Tyrolians in jackets, monkeys in frock coats, gentlemen in knee-breeches, turned and turned between the sofas, the consoles, multiplied in the bits of looking glass held together at their corners by a piece of gold paper. The man turned his handle, looking to the right and left, and up at the windows. Now and again, while he shot out a long squirt of brown saliva against the milestone, with his knee raised his instrument, whose hard straps tired his shoulder; and now, doleful and drawling, or gay and hurried, the music escaped from the box, droning through a curtain of pink taffeta under a brass claw in arabesque. They were airs played in other places at the theatres, sung in drawing rooms, danced to at night under lighted lustres, echoes of the world that reached even to Emma.

at night under lighted lustres, echoes of the world that reached even to Emma. Endless sarabands ran through her head, and, like an Indian dancing girl on the flowers of a carpet, her thoughts leapt with the notes, swung from dream to dream, from sadness to sadness. When the man had caught some coppers in his cap, he drew down an old cover of blue cloth, hitched his organ on to his back, and went off with a heavy tread. She watched him going.

But it was above all the meal-times that were unbearable to her, in this small room on the ground floor, with its smoking stove, its creaking door, the walls that sweated, the damp flags; all the bitterness in life seemed served up on her plate, and with smoke of the boiled beef there rose from her secret soul whiffs of sickliness. Charles was a slow eater; she played with a few nuts, or, leaning on her elbow, amused herself with drawing lines along the oilcloth table cover with the point of her knife.

She now let everything in her household take care of itself, and Madame Bovary senior, when she came to spend part of Lent at Tostes, was much surprised at the change. She who was formerly so careful, so dainty, now passed whole days without dressing, wore grey cotton stockings, and burnt tallow candles. She kept saying they must be economical since they were not rich, adding that she was very contented, very happy, that Tostes pleased her very much, with other speeches that closed the mouth of her mother-in-law. Besides, Emma no longer seemed inclined to follow her advice; once even, Madame Bovary having thought fit to maintain that mistresses ought to keep an eye on the religion of their servants, she had answered with so angry a look and so cold a smile that the good woman did not interfere again.

Emma was growing difficult, capricious. She ordered dishes for herself, then she did not touch them; one day drank only pure milk, the next cups of tea by the dozen. Often she persisted in not going out, then, stifling, threw open the windows and put on light dresses. After she had well scolded her servant she gave her presents or sent her out to see neighbours, just as she sometimes threw beggars all the silver in her purse, although she was by no means tender-hearted or easily accessible to the feelings of others, like most country-bred people, who always retain in their souls something of the horny hardness of the paternal hands.

Towards the end of February old Rouault, in memory of his cure, himself brought his son-in-law a superb turkey, and stayed three days at Tostes. Charles being with his patients, Emma kept him company. He smoked in the room, spat on the firedogs, talked farming, calves, cows, poultry, and municipal council, so that when he left she closed the door on him with a feeling of satisfaction that surprised even herself. Moreover she no longer concealed her contempt for anything or anybody, and at times she set herself to express singular opinions, anything or anybody, and at times she set herself to express singular opinions, finding fault with that which others approved, and approving things perverse and immoral, all of which made her husband open his eyes widely.

Would this misery last for ever? Would she never issue from it? Yet she was as good as all the women who were living happily. She had seen duchesses at Vaubyessard with clumsier waists and commoner ways, and she execrated the injustice of God. She leant her head against the walls to weep; she envied lives of stir; longed for masked balls, for violent pleasures, with all the wildness that she did not know, but that these must surely yield.

She grew pale and suffered from palpitations of the heart.

Charles prescribed valerian and camphor baths. Everything that was tried only seemed to irritate her the more.

On certain days she chatted with feverish rapidity, and this over-excitement was suddenly followed by a state of torpor, in which she remained without speaking, without moving. What then revived her was pouring a bottle of eau-de-cologne over her arms.

As she was constantly complaining about Tostes, Charles fancied that her illness was no doubt due to some local cause, and fixing on this idea, began to think seriously of setting up elsewhere.

From that moment she drank vinegar, contracted a sharp little cough, and completely lost her appetite.

It cost Charles much to give up Tostes after living there four years and "when he was beginning to get on there." Yet if it must be! He took her to Rouen to see his old master. It was a nervous complaint: change of air was needed.

After looking about him on this side and on that, Charles learnt that in the Neufchatel arrondissement there was a considerable market town called Yonville-l'Abbaye, whose doctor, a Polish refugee, had decamped a week before. Then he wrote to the chemist of the place to ask the number of the population, the distance from the nearest doctor, what his predecessor had made a year, and so forth; and the answer being satisfactory, he made up his mind to move towards the spring, if Emma's health did not improve.

One day when, in view of her departure, she was tidying a drawer, something pricked her finger. It was a wire of her wedding bouquet. The orange blossoms were yellow with dust and the silver bordered satin ribbons frayed at the edges. She threw it into the fire. It flared up more quickly than dry straw. Then it was, like a red bush in the cinders, slowly devoured. She watched it burn.

The little pasteboard berries burst, the wire twisted, the gold lace melted; and the shriveled paper corollas, fluttering like black butterflies at the back of the stove, at least flew up the chimney.

When they left Tostes at the month of March, Madame Bovary was pregnant.

Part II

Chapter One

Yonville-l'Abbaye (so called from an old Capuchin abbey of which not even the ruins remain) is a market-town twenty-four miles from Rouen, between the Abbeville and Beauvais roads, at the foot of a valley watered by the Rieule, a little river that runs into the Andelle after turning three water-mills near its mouth, where there are a few trout that the lads amuse themselves by fishing for on Sundays.

We leave the highroad at La Boissiere and keep straight on to the top of the Leux hill, whence the valley is seen. The river that runs through it makes of it, as it were, two regions with distinct physiognomies — all on the left is pasture land, all of the right arable. The meadow stretches under a bulge of low hills to join at the back with the pasture land of the Bray country, while on the eastern side, the plain, gently rising, broadens out, showing as far as eye can follow its blond cornfields. The water, flowing by the grass, divides with a white line the colour of the roads and of the plains, and the country is like a great unfolded mantle with a green velvet cape bordered with a fringe of silver.

Before us, on the verge of the horizon, lie the oaks of the forest of Argueil, with the steeps of the Saint-Jean hills scarred from top to bottom with red irregular lines; they are rain tracks, and these brick-tones standing out in narrow streaks against the grey colour of the mountain are due to the quantity of iron springs that flow beyond in the neighboring country.

Here we are on the confines of Normandy, Picardy, and the Ile-de-France, a bastard land whose language is without accent and its landscape is without character. It is there that they make the worst Neufchatel cheeses of all the arrondissement; and, on the other hand, farming is costly because so much manure is needed to enrich this friable soil full of sand and flints.

Up to 1835 there was no practicable road for getting to Yonville, but about this time a cross-road was made which joins that of Abbeville to that of Amiens, and is occasionally used by the Rouen wagoners on their way to Flanders. Yonville-l'Abbaye has remained stationary in spite of its "new outlet." Instead of improving the soil, they persist in keeping up the pasture lands, however depreciated they may be in value, and the lazy borough, growing away from the plain, has naturally spread riverwards. It is seem from afar sprawling along the banks like a cowherd taking a siesta by the water-side.

At the foot of the hill beyond the bridge begins a roadway, planted with young aspens, that leads in a straight line to the first houses in the place. These, fenced in by hedges, are in the middle of courtyards full of straggling buildings, wine-presses, cart-sheds and distilleries scattered under thick trees, with ladders, poles, or scythes hung on to the branches. The thatched roofs, like fur caps drawn over eyes, reach down over about a third of the low windows, whose coarse convex glasses have knots in the middle like the bottoms of bottles. Against the plaster wall diagonally crossed by black joists, a meagre pear-tree sometimes leans and the ground-floors have at their door a small swing-gate to keep out the chicks that come pilfering crumbs of bread steeped in cider on the threshold. But the courtyards grow narrower, the houses closer together, and the fences disappear; a bundle of ferns swings under a window from the end of a broomstick; there is a blacksmith's forge and then a wheelwright's, with two or three new carts outside that partly block the way. Then across an open space appears a white house beyond a grass mound ornamented by a Cupid, his finger on his lips; two brass vases are at each end of a flight of steps; scutcheons* blaze upon the door. It is the notary's house, and the finest in the place.

*The panonceaux that have to be hung over the doors of notaries.

The Church is on the other side of the street, twenty paces farther down, at the entrance of the square. The little cemetery that surrounds it, closed in by a wall breast high, is so full of graves that the old stones, level with the ground, form a continuous pavement, on which the grass of itself has marked out regular green squares. The church was rebuilt during the last years of the reign of Charles X. The wooden roof is beginning to rot from the top, and here and there has black hollows in its blue colour. Over the door, where the organ should be, is a loft for the men, with a spiral staircase that reverberates under their wooden shoes.

The daylight coming through the plain glass windows falls obliquely upon the pews ranged along the walls, which are adorned here and there with a straw mat bearing beneath it the words in large letters, "Mr. So-and-so's pew." Farther on, at a spot where the building narrows, the confessional forms a pendant to a statuette of the Virgin, clothed in a satin robe, coifed with a tulle veil sprinkled with silver stars, and with red cheeks, like an idol of the Sandwich Islands; and, finally, a copy of the "Holy Family, presented by the Minister of the Interior," overlooking the high altar, between four candlesticks, closes in the perspective. The choir stalls, of deal wood, have been left unpainted.

The market, that is to say, a tiled roof supported by some twenty posts, occupies of itself about half the public square of Yonville. The town hall, constructed "from the designs of a Paris architect," is a sort of Greek temple that forms the corner next to the chemist's shop. On the ground-floor are three Ionic columns and on the first floor a semicircular gallery, while the dome that crowns it is occupied by a Gallic cock, resting one foot upon the "Charte" and holding in the other the scales of Justice.

But that which most attracts the eye is opposite the Lion d'Or inn, the chemist's shop of Monsieur Homais. In the evening especially its argand lamp is lit up and the red and green jars that embellish his shop-front throw far across the street their two streams of colour; then across them as if in Bengal lights is seen the shadow of the chemist leaning over his desk. His house from top to bottom is placarded with inscriptions written in large hand, round hand, printed hand: "Vichy, Seltzer, Barege waters, blood purifiers, Raspail patent medicine, Arabian racahout, Darcet lozenges, Regnault paste, trusses, baths, hygienic chocolate," *etc.* And the signboard, which takes up all the breadth of the shop, bears in gold letters, "Homais, Chemist." Then at the back of the shop, behind the great scales fixed to the counter, the word "Laboratory" appears on a scroll above a glass door, which about half-way up once more repeats "Homais" in gold letters on a black ground.

Beyond this there is nothing to see at Yonville. The street (the only one) a gunshot in length and flanked by a few shops on either side stops short at the turn of the highroad. If it is left on the right hand and the foot of the Saint-Jean hills followed the cemetery is soon reached.

At the time of the cholera, in order to enlarge this, a piece of wall was pulled down, and three acres of land by its side purchased; but all the new portion is almost tenantless; the tombs, as heretofore, continue to crowd together towards the gate. The keeper, who is at once gravedigger and church beadle (thus making a double profit out of the parish corpses), has taken advantage of the unused plot of ground to plant potatoes there. From year to year, however, his small field grows smaller, and when there is an epidemic, he does not know whether to rejoice at the deaths or regret the burials.

"You live on the dead, Lestiboudois!" the curie at last said to him one day. This grim remark made him reflect; it checked him for some time; but to this day he carries on the cultivation of his little tubers, and even maintains stoutly that they grow naturally.

Since the events about to be narrated, nothing in fact has changed at Yonville. The tin tricolour flag still swings at the top of the church-steeple; the two chintz streamers still flutter in the wind from the linen-draper's; the chemist's fetuses, like lumps of white amadou, rot more and more in their turbid alcohol, and above the big door of the inn the old golden lion, faded by rain, still shows passers-by its poodle mane.

On the evening when the Bovarys were to arrive at Yonville, Widow Lefrancois, the landlady of this inn, was so very busy that she sweated great drops as she moved her saucepans. To-morrow was market-day. The meat had to be cut beforehand, the fowls drawn, the soup and coffee made. Moreover, she had the boarders' meal to see to, and that of the doctor, his wife, and their servant; the billiard-room was echoing with bursts of laughter; three millers in a small parlour were calling for brandy; the wood was blazing, the brazen pan was hissing, and on the long kitchen table, amid the quarters of raw mutton, rose piles of plates that rattled with the shaking of the block on which spinach was being chopped.

From the poultry-yard was heard the screaming of the fowls whom the servant was chasing in order to wring their necks.

A man slightly marked with small-pox, in green leather slippers, and wearing a velvet cap with a gold tassel, was warming his back at the chimney. His face expressed nothing but self-satisfaction, and he appeared to take life as calmly as the goldfinch suspended over his head in its wicker cage: this was the chemist.

"Artemise!" shouted the landlady, "chop some wood, fill the water bottles, bring some brandy, look sharp! If only I knew what dessert to offer the guests you are expecting! Good heavens! Those furniture-movers are beginning their racket in the billiard-room again; and their van has been left before the front door! The 'Hirondelle' might run into it when it draws up. Call Polyte and tell him to put it up. Only think, Monsieur Homais, that since morning they have had about fifteen games, and drunk eight jars of cider! Why, they'll tear my cloth for me," she went on, looking at them from a distance, her strainer in her hand.

"That wouldn't be much of a loss," replied Monsieur Homais. "You would buy another."

"Another billiard-table!" exclaimed the widow.

"Since that one is coming to pieces, Madame Lefrancois. I tell you again you are doing yourself harm, much harm! And besides, players now want narrow pockets and heavy cues. Hazards aren't played now; everything is changed! One must keep pace with the times! Just look at Tellier!"

The hostess reddened with vexation. The chemist went on —

"You may say what you like; his table is better than yours; and if one were to think, for example, of getting up a patriotic pool for Poland or the sufferers from the Lyons floods — "

"It isn't beggars like him that'll frighten us," interrupted the landlady, shrugging her fat shoulders. "Come, come, Monsieur Homais; as long as the 'Lion d'Or' exists people will come to it. We've feathered our nest; while one of these days you'll find the 'Cafe Francais' closed with a big placard on the shutters. Change my billiard-table!" she went on, speaking to herself, "the table that comes in so handy for folding the washing, and on which, in the hunting season, I have slept six visitors! But that dawdler, Hivert, doesn't come!"

"Are you waiting for him for your gentlemen's dinner?"

"Wait for him! And what about Monsieur Binet? As the clock strikes six you'll see him come in, for he hasn't his equal under the sun for punctuality. He must always have his seat in the small parlour. He'd rather die than dine anywhere else. And so squeamish as he is, and so particular about the cider! Not like Monsieur Leon; he sometimes comes at seven, or even half-past, and he doesn't so much as look at what he eats. Such a nice young man! Never speaks a rough word!"

"Well, you see, there's a great difference between an educated man and an old carabineer who is now a tax-collector."

Six o'clock struck. Binet came in.

He wore a blue frock-coat falling in a straight line round his thin body, and his leather cap, with its lappets knotted over the top of his head with string, showed under the turned-up peak a bald forehead, flattened by the constant wearing of a helmet. He wore a black cloth waistcoat, a hair collar, grey trousers, and, all the year round, well-blacked boots, that had two parallel swellings due to the sticking out of his big-toes. Not a hair stood out from the regular line of fair whiskers, which, encircling his jaws, framed, after the fashion of a garden border, his long, wan face, whose eyes were small and the nose hooked. Clever at all games of cards, a good hunter, and writing a fine hand, he had at home a lathe, and amused himself by turning napkin rings, with which he filled up his house, with the jealousy of an artist and the egotism of a bourgeois.

He went to the small parlour, but the three millers had to be got out first, and during the whole time necessary for laying the cloth, Binet remained silent in his place near the stove. Then he shut the door and took off his cap in his usual way.

"It isn't with saying civil things that he'll wear out his tongue," said the chemist, as soon as he was along with the landlady.

"He never talks more," she replied. "Last week two travelers in the cloth line were here — such clever chaps who told such jokes in the evening, that I fairly cried with laughing; and he stood there like a dab fish and never said a word."

"Yes," observed the chemist; "no imagination, no sallies, nothing that makes the society-man."

"Yet they say he has parts," objected the landlady.

"Parts!" replied Monsieur Homais; "he, parts! In his own line it is possible," he added in a calmer tone. And he went on —

"Ah! That a merchant, who has large connections, a jurisconsult, a doctor, a chemist, should be thus absent-minded, that they should become whimsical or even peevish, I can understand; such cases are cited in history. But at least it is because they are thinking of something. Myself, for example, how often has it happened to me to look on the bureau for my pen to write a label, and to find happened to me to look on the bureau for my pen to write a label, and to find, after all, that I had put it behind my ear!"

Madame Lefrancois just then went to the door to see if the "Hirondelle" were not coming. She started. A man dressed in black suddenly came into the kitchen. By the last gleam of the twilight one could see that his face was rubicund and his form athletic.

"What can I do for you, Monsieur le Curie?" asked the landlady, as she reached down from the chimney one of the copper candlesticks placed with their candles in a row. "Will you take something? A thimbleful of Cassis*? A glass of wine?"

*Black currant liqueur.

The priest declined very politely. He had come for his umbrella, that he had forgotten the other day at the Ernemont convent, and after asking Madame Lefrancois to have it sent to him at the presbytery in the evening, he left for the church, from which the Angelus was ringing.

When the chemist no longer heard the noise of his boots along the square, he thought the priest's behaviour just now very unbecoming. This refusal to take any refreshment seemed to him the most odious hypocrisy; all priests tippled on the sly, and were trying to bring back the days of the tithe.

The landlady took up the defence of her curie.

"Besides, he could double up four men like you over his knee. Last year he helped our people to bring in the straw; he carried as many as six trusses at once, he is so strong."

"Bravo!" said the chemist. "Now just send your daughters to confess to fellows which such a temperament! I, if I were the Government, I'd have the priests bled once a month. Yes, Madame Lefrancois, every month — a good phlebotomy, in the interests of the police and morals."

"Be quiet, Monsieur Homais. You are an infidel; you've no religion."

The chemist answered: "I have a religion, my religion, and I even have more than all these others with their mummeries and their juggling. I adore God, on the contrary. I believe in the Supreme Being, in a Creator, whatever he may be. I care little who has placed us here below to fulfil our duties as citizens and fathers of families; but I don't need to go to church to kiss silver plates, and fatten, out of my pocket, a lot of good-for-nothings who live better than we do. For one can know Him as well in a wood, in a field, or even contemplating the eternal vault like the ancients. My God! Mine is the God of Socrates, of Franklin, of Voltaire, and of Beranger! I am for the profession of faith of the 'Savoyard Vicar,' and the immortal principles of '89! And I can't admit of an old boy of a God who takes walks in his garden with a cane in his hand, who lodges his friends in the belly of whales, dies uttering a cry, and rises again at the end of his friends in the belly of whales, dies uttering a cry, and rises again at the end of three days; things absurd in themselves, and completely opposed, moreover, to all physical laws, which prove to us, by the way, that priests have always wallowed in turpid ignorance, in which they would fain engulf the people with them."

He ceased, looking round for an audience, for in his bubbling over the chemist had for a moment fancied himself in the midst of the town council. But the landlady no longer heeded him; she was listening to a distant rolling. One could distinguish the noise of a carriage mingled with the clattering of loose horseshoes that beat against the ground, and at last the "Hirondelle" stopped at the door.

It was a yellow box on two large wheels, that, reaching to the tilt, prevented travelers from seeing the road and dirtied their shoulders. The small panes of the narrow windows rattled in their sashes when the coach was closed, and retained here and there patches of mud amid the old layers of dust, that not even storms of rain had altogether washed away. It was drawn by three horses, the first a leader, and when it came down-hill its bottom jolted against the ground.

Some of the inhabitants of Yonville came out into the square; they all spoke at once, asking for news, for explanations, for hampers. Hivert did not know whom to answer. It was he who did the errands of the place in town. He went to the shops and brought back rolls of leather for the shoemaker, old iron for the farrier, a barrel of herrings for his mistress, caps from the milliner's, locks from the hair-dresser's and all along the road on his return journey he distributed his parcels, which he threw, standing upright on his seat and shouting at the top of his voice, over the enclosures of the yards.

An accident had delayed him. Madame Bovary's greyhound had run across the field. They had whistled for him a quarter of an hour; Hivert had even gone back a mile and a half expecting every moment to catch sight of her; but it had been necessary to go on.

Emma had wept, grown angry; she had accused Charles of this misfortune. Monsieur Lheureux, a draper, who happened to be in the coach with her, had tried to console her by a number of examples of lost dogs recognizing their masters at the end of long years. One, he said had been told of, who had come back to Paris from Constantinople. Another had gone one hundred and fifty miles in a straight line, and swum four rivers; and his own father had possessed a poodle, which, after twelve years of absence, had all of a sudden jumped on his back in the street as he was going to dine in town.

Chapter Two

Emma got out first, then Felicite, Monsieur Lheureux, and a nurse, and they had to wake up Charles in his corner, where he had slept soundly since night set in.

Homais introduced himself; he offered his homages to madame and his respects to monsieur; said he was charmed to have been able to render them some slight service, and added with a cordial air that he had ventured to invite himself, his wife being away.

When Madame Bovary was in the kitchen she went up to the chimney.

With the tips of her fingers she caught her dress at the knee, and having thus pulled it up to her ankle, held out her foot in its black boot to the fire above the revolving leg of mutton. The flame lit up the whole of her, penetrating with a crude light the woof of her gowns, the fine pores of her fair skin, and even her eyelids, which she blinked now and again. A great red glow passed over her with the blowing of the wind through the half-open door.

On the other side of the chimney a young man with fair hair watched her silently.

As he was a good deal bored at Yonville, where he was a clerk at the notary's, Monsieur Guillaumin, Monsieur Leon Dupuis (it was he who was the second habitue of the "Lion d'Or") frequently put back his dinner-hour in hope that some traveler might come to the inn, with whom he could chat in the evening. On the days when his work was done early, he had, for want of something else to do, to come punctually, and endure from soup to cheese a tete-a-tete with Binet. It was therefore with delight that he accepted the landlady's suggestion that he should dine in company with the newcomers, and they passed into the large parlour where Madame Lefrancois, for the purpose of showing off, had had the table laid for four.

Homais asked to be allowed to keep on his skull-cap, for fear of coryza; then, turning to his neighbour —

"Madame is no doubt a little fatigued; one gets jolted so abominably in our 'Hirondelle.'"

"That is true," replied Emma; "but moving about always amuses me. I like change of place."

"It is so tedious," sighed the clerk, "to be always riveted to the same places."

"If you were like me," said Charles, "constantly obliged to be in the saddle" —

"But," Leon went on, addressing himself to Madame Bovary, "nothing, it seems to me, is more pleasant — when one can," he added.

"Moreover," said the druggist, "the practice of medicine is not very hard work in our part of the world, for the state of our roads allows us the use of gigs, and generally, as the farmers are prosperous, they pay pretty well. We have, medically speaking, besides the ordinary cases of enteritis, bronchitis, bilious affections, etc., now and then a few intermittent fevers at harvest-time; but on the whole, little of a serious nature, nothing special to note, unless it be a great deal of scrofula, due, no doubt, to the deplorable hygienic conditions of our peasant dwellings. Ah! you will find many prejudices to combat, Monsieur Bovary, much obstinacy of routine, with which all the efforts of your science will daily come into collision; for people still have recourse to novenas, to relics, to the priest, rather than come straight to the doctor or the chemist. The climate, however, is not, truth to tell, bad, and we even have a few nonagenarians in our parish. The thermometer (I have made some observations) falls in winter to 4 degrees Centigrade at the outside, which gives us 24 degrees Reaumur as the maximum, or otherwise 54 degrees Fahrenheit (English scale), not more. And, as a matter of fact, we are sheltered from the north winds by the forest of Argueil on the one side, from the west winds by the St. Jean range on the other; and this heat, moreover, which, on account of the aqueous vapours given off by the river and the considerable number of cattle in the fields, which, as you know, exhale much ammonia, that is to say, nitrogen, hydrogen and oxygen (no, nitrogen and hydrogen alone), and which sucking up into itself the humus from the ground, mixing together all those different emanations, unites them into a stack, so to say, and combining with the electricity diffused through the atmosphere, when there is any, might in the long run, as in tropical countries, engender insalubrious miasmata — this heat, I say, finds itself perfectly tempered on the side whence it comes, or rather whence it should come — that is to say, the southern side — by the south-eastern winds, which, having cooled themselves passing over the Seine, reach us sometimes all at once like breezes from Russia."

"At any rate, you have some walks in the neighbourhood?" continued Madame Bovary, speaking to the young man.

"Oh, very few," he answered. "There is a place they call La Pature, on the top of the hill, on the edge of the forest. Sometimes, on Sundays, I go and stay there with a book, watching the sunset."

"I think there is nothing so admirable as sunsets," she resumed; "but especially by the side of the sea."

"Oh, I adore the sea!" said Monsieur Leon.

"And then, does it not seem to you," continued Madame Bovary, "that the mind travels more freely on this limitless expanse, the contemplation of which elevates the soul, gives ideas of the infinite, the ideal?"

"It is the same with mountainous landscapes," continued Leon. "A cousin of mine who travelled in Switzerland last year told me that one could not picture to oneself the poetry of the lakes, the charm of the waterfalls, the gigantic effect of the glaciers. One sees pines of incredible size across torrents, cottages suspended over precipices, and, a thousand feet below one, whole valleys when the clouds open. Such spectacles must stir to enthusiasm, incline to prayer, to ecstasy; and I no longer marvel at that celebrated musician who, the better to inspire his imagination, was in the habit of playing the piano before some imposing site."

"You play?" she asked.

"No, but I am very fond of music," he replied.

"Ah! don't you listen to him, Madame Bovary," interrupted Homais, bending over his plate. "That's sheer modesty. Why, my dear fellow, the other day in your room you were singing 'L'Ange Gardien' ravishingly. I heard you from the laboratory. You gave it like an actor."

Leon, in fact, lodged at the chemist's where he had a small room on the second floor, overlooking the Place. He blushed at the compliment of his landlord, who had already turned to the doctor, and was enumerating to him, one after the other, all the principal inhabitants of Yonville. He was telling anecdotes, giving information; the fortune of the notary was not known exactly, and "there was the Tuvache household," who made a good deal of show.

Emma continued, "And what music do you prefer?"

"Oh, German music; that which makes you dream."

"Have you been to the opera?"

"Not yet; but I shall go next year, when I am living at Paris to finish reading for the bar."

"As I had the honour of putting it to your husband," said the chemist, "with regard to this poor Yanoda who has run away, you will find yourself, thanks to his extravagance, in the possession of one of the most comfortable houses of Yonville. Its greatest convenience for a doctor is a door giving on the Walk, where one can go in and out unseen. Moreover, it contains everything that is agreeable in a household — a laundry, kitchen with offices, sitting-room, fruit-room, and so on. He was a gay dog, who didn't care what he spent. At the end of the garden, by the side of the water, he had an arbour built just for the purpose of drinking beer in summer; and if madame is fond of gardening she will be able —"

"My wife doesn't care about it," said Charles; "although she has been advised to take exercise, she prefers always sitting in her room reading."

"Like me," replied Leon. "And indeed, what is better than to sit by one's fireside in the evening with a book, while the wind beats against the window and the lamp is burning?"

"What, indeed?" she said, fixing her large black eyes wide open upon him.

"One thinks of nothing," he continued; "the hours slip by. Motionless we traverse countries we fancy we see, and your thought, blending with the fiction, playing with the details, follows the outline of the adventures. It mingles with the characters, and it seems as if it were yourself palpitating beneath their costumes."

"That is true! That is true?" she said.

"Has it ever happened to you," Leon went on, "to come across some vague idea of one's own in a book, some dim image that comes back to you from afar, and as the completest expression of your own slightest sentiment?"

"I have experienced it," she replied.

"That is why," he said, "I especially love the poets. I think verse more tender than prose, and that it moves far more easily to tears."

"Still in the long run it is tiring," continued Emma. "Now I, on the contrary, adore stories that rush breathlessly along, that frighten one. I detest commonplace heroes and moderate sentiments, such as there are in nature."

"In fact," observed the clerk, "these works, not touching the heart, miss, it seems to me, the true end of art. It is so sweet, amid all the disenchantments of life, to be able to dwell in thought upon noble characters, pure affections, and pictures of happiness. For myself, living here far from the world, this is my one distraction; but Yonville affords so few resources."

"Like Tostes, no doubt," replied Emma; "and so I always subscribed to a lending library."

"If madame will do me the honour of making use of it", said the chemist, who had just caught the last words, "I have at her disposal a library composed of the best authors, Voltaire, Rousseau, Delille, Walter Scott, the 'Echo des Feuilletons'; and in addition I receive various periodicals, among them the 'Fanal de Rouen' daily, having the advantage to be its correspondent for the districts of Buchy, Forges, Neufchatel, Yonville, and vicinity."

For two hours and a half they had been at table; for the servant Artemis, carelessly dragging her old list slippers over the flags, brought one plate after the other, forgot everything, and constantly left the door of the billiard-room half open, so that it beat against the wall with its hooks.

Unconsciously, Leon, while talking, had placed his foot on one of the bars of the chair on which Madame Bovary was sitting. She wore a small blue silk necktie, that kept up like a ruff a gauffered cambric collar, and with the movements of her head the lower part of her face gently sunk into the linen or came out from it. Thus side by side, while Charles and the chemist chatted, they entered into one of those vague conversations where the hazard of all that is said brings you back to the fixed centre of a common sympathy. The Paris theatres, titles of novels, new quadrilles, and the world they did not know; Tostes, where she had lived, and Yonville, where they were; they examined all, talked of everything till to the end of dinner.

When coffee was served Felicite went away to get ready the room in the new house, and the guests soon raised the siege. Madame Lefrancois was asleep near the cinders, while the stable-boy, lantern in hand, was waiting to show Monsieur and Madame Bovary the way home. Bits of straw stuck in his red hair, and he limped with his left leg. When he had taken in his other hand the cure's umbrella, they started.

The town was asleep; the pillars of the market threw great shadows; the earth was all grey as on a summer's night. But as the doctor's house was only some fifty paces from the inn, they had to say good-night almost immediately, and the company dispersed.

As soon as she entered the passage, Emma felt the cold of the plaster fall about her shoulders like damp linen. The walls were new and the wooden stairs creaked. In their bedroom, on the first floor, a whitish light passed through the curtainless windows.

She could catch glimpses of tree tops, and beyond, the fields, half-drowned in the fog that lay reeking in the moonlight along the course of the river. In the middle of the room, pell-mell, were scattered drawers, bottles, curtain-rods, gilt poles, with mattresses on the chairs and basins on the ground — the two men who had brought the furniture had left everything about carelessly.

This was the fourth time that she had slept in a strange place.

The first was the day of her going to the convent; the second, of her arrival at Tostes; the third, at Vaubyessard; and this was the fourth. And each one had marked, as it were, the inauguration of a new phase in her life. She did not believe that things could present themselves in the same way in different places, and since the portion of her life lived had been bad, no doubt that which remained to be lived would be better.

Chapter Three

The next day, as she was getting up, she saw the clerk on the Place. She had on a dressing-gown. He looked up and bowed. She nodded quickly and reclosed the window.

Leon waited all day for six o'clock in the evening to come, but on going to the inn, he found no one but Monsieur Binet, already at table. The dinner of the evening before had been a considerable event for him; he had never till then talked for two hours consecutively to a "lady." How then had he been able to explain, and in such language, the number of things that he could not have said so well before? He was usually shy, and maintained that reserve which partakes at once of modesty and dissimulation.

At Yonville he was considered "well-bred." He listened to the arguments of the older people, and did not seem hot about politics — a remarkable thing for a young man. Then he had some accomplishments; he painted in water-colours, could read the key of G, and readily talked literature after dinner when he did not play cards. Monsieur Homais respected him for his education; Madame Homais liked him for his good-nature, for he often took the little Homais into the garden — little brats who were always dirty, very much spoilt, and somewhat lymphatic, like their mother. Besides the servant to look after them, they had Justin, the chemist's apprentice, a second cousin of Monsieur Homais, who had been taken into the house from charity, and who was useful at the same time as a servant.

The druggist proved the best of neighbours. He gave Madame Bovary information as to the trades-people, sent expressly for his own cider merchant, tasted the drink himself, and saw that the casks were properly placed in the cellar; he explained how to set about getting in a supply of butter cheap, and made an arrangement with Lestiboudois, the sacristan, who, besides his sacerdotal and funeral functions, looked after the principal gardens at Yonville by the hour or the year, according to the taste of the customers.

The need of looking after others was not the only thing that urged the chemist to such obsequious cordiality; there was a plan underneath it all.

He had infringed the law of the 19th Ventose, year xi., article I, which forbade all persons not having a diploma to practise medicine; so that, after certain anonymous denunciations, Homais had been summoned to Rouen to see the procurer of the king in his own private room; the magistrate receiving him standing up, ermine on shoulder and cap on head. It was in the morning, before the court opened. In the corridors one heard the heavy boots of the gendarmes walking past, and like a far-off noise great locks that were shut. The druggist's ears tingled as if he were about to have an apoplectic stroke; he saw the depths of dungeons, his family in tears, his shop sold, all the jars dispersed; and he was obliged to enter a cafe and take a glass of rum and seltzer to recover his spirits.

Little by little the memory of this reprimand grew fainter, and he continued, as heretofore, to give anodyne consultations in his back-parlour. But the mayor resented it, his colleagues were jealous, everything was to be feared; gaining over Monsieur Bovary by his attentions was to earn his gratitude, and prevent his speaking out later on, should he notice anything. So every morning Homais brought him "the paper," and often in the afternoon left his shop for a few moments to have a chat with the Doctor.

Charles was dull: patients did not come. He remained seated for hours without speaking, went into his consulting room to sleep, or watched his wife sewing. Then for diversion he employed himself at home as a workman; he even tried to do up the attic with some paint which had been left behind by the painters. But money matters worried him. He had spent so much for repairs at Tostes, for madame's toilette, and for the moving, that the whole dowry, over three thousand crowns, had slipped away in two years.

Then how many things had been spoilt or lost during their carriage from Tostes to Yonville, without counting the plaster cure, who falling out of the coach at an over-severe jolt, had been dashed into a thousand fragments on the pavements of Quincampoix! A pleasanter trouble came to distract him, namely, the pregnancy of his wife. As the time of her confinement approached he cherished her the more. It was another bond of the flesh establishing itself, and, as it were, a continued sentiment of a more complex union. When from afar he saw her languid walk, and her figure without stays turning softly on her hips; when opposite one another he looked at her at his ease, while she took tired poses in her armchair, then his happiness knew no bounds; he got up, embraced her, passed his hands over her face, called her little mamma, wanted to make her dance, and half-laughing, half-crying, uttered all kinds of caressing pleasantries that came into his head. The idea of having begotten a child delighted him. Now he wanted nothing. He knew human life from end to end, and he sat down to it with serenity.

Emma at first felt a great astonishment; then was anxious to be delivered that she might know what it was to be a mother. But not being able to spend as much as she would have liked, to have a swing-bassinette with rose silk curtains, and embroidered caps, in a fit of bitterness she gave up looking after the trousseau, and ordered the whole of it from a village needlewoman, without choosing or discussing anything. Thus she did not amuse herself with those preparations that stimulate the tenderness of mothers, and so her affection was from the very outset, perhaps, to some extent attenuated.

As Charles, however, spoke of the boy at every meal, she soon began to think of him more consecutively.

She hoped for a son; he would be strong and dark; she would call him George; and this idea of having a male child was like an expected revenge for all her impotence in the past. A man, at least, is free; he may travel over passions and over countries, overcome obstacles, taste of the most far-away pleasures. But a woman is always hampered. At once inert and flexible, she has against her the weakness of the flesh and legal dependence. Her will, like the veil of her bonnet, held by a string, flutters in every wind; there is always some desire that draws her, some conventionality that restrains.

She was confined on a Sunday at about six o'clock, as the sun was rising.

"It is a girl!" said Charles.

She turned her head away and fainted.

Madame Homais, as well as Madame Lefrancois of the Lion d'Or, almost immediately came running in to embrace her. The chemist, as man of discretion, only offered a few provincial felicitations through the half-opened door. He wished to see the child and thought it well made.

Whilst she was getting well she occupied herself much in seeking a name for her daughter. First she went over all those that have Italian endings, such as Clara, Louisa, Amanda, Atala; she liked Galsuinde pretty well, and Yseult or Leocadie still better.

Charles wanted the child to be called after her mother; Emma opposed this. They ran over the calendar from end to end, and then consulted outsiders.

"Monsieur Leon," said the chemist, "with whom I was talking about it the other day, wonders you do not chose Madeleine. It is very much in fashion just now."

But Madame Bovary, senior, cried out loudly against this name of a sinner. As to Monsieur Homais, he had a preference for all those that recalled some great man, an illustrious fact, or a generous idea, and it was on this system that he had baptized his four children. Thus Napoleon represented glory and Franklin liberty; Irma was perhaps a concession to romanticism, but Athalie was a homage to the greatest masterpiece of the French stage. For his philosophical convictions did not interfere with his artistic tastes; in him the thinker did not stifle the man of sentiment; he could make distinctions, make allowances for imagination and fanaticism. In this tragedy, for example, he found fault with the ideas, but admired the style; he detested the conception, but applauded all the details, and loathed the characters while he grew enthusiastic over their dialogue.

When he read the fine passages he was transported, but when he thought that mummers would get something out of them for their show, he was disconsolate; and in this confusion of sentiments in which he was involved he would have liked at once to crown Racine with both his hands and discuss with him for a good quarter of an hour.

At last Emma remembered that at the chateau of Vaubyessard she had heard the Marchioness call a young lady Berthe; from that moment this name was chosen; and as old Rouault could not come, Monsieur Homais was requested to stand godfather. His gifts were all products from his establishment, to wit: six boxes of jujubes, a whole jar of racahout, three cakes of marshmallow paste, and six sticks of sugar-candy into the bargain that he had come across in a cupboard. On the evening of the ceremony there was a grand dinner; the cure was present; there was much excitement. Monsieur Homais towards liqueur-time began singing "Le Dieu des bonnes gens." Monsieur Leon sang a barcarolle, and Madame Bovary, senior, who was godmother, a romance of the time of the Empire; finally, M. Bovary, senior, insisted on having the child brought down, and began baptizing it with a glass of champagne that he poured over its head. This mockery of the first of the sacraments made the Abbe Bournisien angry; old Bovary replied by a quotation from "La Guerre des Dieux"; the cure wanted to leave; the ladies implored, Homais interfered; and they succeeded in making the priest sit down again, and he quietly went on with the half-finished coffee in his saucer.

Monsieur Bovary, senior, stayed at Yonville a month, dazzling the natives by a superb policeman's cap with silver tassels that he wore in the morning when he smoked his pipe in the square. Being also in the habit of drinking a good deal of brandy, he often sent the servant to the Lion d'Or to buy him a bottle, which was put down to his son's account, and to perfume his handkerchiefs he used up his daughter-in-law's whole supply of eau-de-cologne.

The latter did not at all dislike his company. He had knocked about the world, he talked about Berlin, Vienna, and Strasbourg, of his soldier times, of the mistresses he had had, the grand luncheons of which he had partaken; then he was amiable, and sometimes even, either on the stairs, or in the garden, would seize hold of her waist, crying, "Charles, look out for yourself."

Then Madame Bovary, senior, became alarmed for her son's happiness, and fearing that her husband might in the long-run have an immoral influence upon the ideas of the young woman, took care to hurry their departure. Perhaps she had more serious reasons for uneasiness. Monsieur Bovary was not the man to respect anything.

One day Emma was suddenly seized with the desire to see her little girl, who had been put to nurse with the carpenter's wife, and, without looking at the calendar to see whether the six weeks of the Virgin were yet passed, she set out for the Rollets' house, situated at the extreme end of the village, between the highroad and the fields.

It was mid-day, the shutters of the houses were closed and the slate roofs that glittered beneath the fierce light of the blue sky seemed to strike sparks from the crest of the gables. A heavy wind was blowing; Emma felt weak as she walked; the stones of the pavement hurt her; she was doubtful whether she would not go home again, or go in somewhere to rest.

At this moment Monsieur Leon came out from a neighbouring door with a bundle of papers under his arm. He came to greet her, and stood in the shade in front of the Lheureux's shop under the projecting grey awning.

Madame Bovary said she was going to see her baby, but that she was beginning to grow tired.

"If — " said Leon, not daring to go on.

"Have you any business to attend to?" she asked.

And on the clerk's answer, she begged him to accompany her. That same evening this was known in Yonville, and Madame Tuvache, the mayor's wife, declared in the presence of her servant that "Madame Bovary was compromising herself."

To get to the nurse's it was necessary to turn to the left on leaving the street, as if making for the cemetery, and to follow between little houses and yards a small path bordered with privet hedges. They were in bloom, and so were the speedwells, eglantines, thistles, and the sweetbriar that sprang up from the thickets. Through openings in the hedges one could see into the huts, some pigs on a dung-heap, or tethered cows rubbing their horns against the trunk of trees. The two, side by side walked slowly, she leaning upon him, and he restraining his pace, which he regulated by hers; in front of them a swarm of midges fluttered, buzzing in the warm air.

They recognized the house by an old walnut-tree which shaded it.

Low and covered with brown tiles, there hung outside it, beneath the dormer-window of the garret, a string of onions. Faggots upright against a thorn fence surrounded a bed of lettuce, a few square feet of lavender, and sweet peas strung on sticks. Dirty water was running here and there on the grass, and all round were several indefinite rags, knitted stockings, a red calico jacket, and a large sheet of coarse linen spread over the hedge. At the noise of the gate the nurse appeared with a baby she was suckling on one arm. With her other hand she was pulling along a poor puny little fellow, his face covered with scrofula, the son of a Rouen hosier, whom his parents, too taken up with their business, left in the country.

country.

"Go in," she said; "your little one is there asleep."

The room on the ground-floor, the only one in the dwelling, had at its farther end, against the wall, a large bed without curtains, while a kneading-trough took up the side by the window, one pane of which was mended with a piece of blue paper. In the corner behind the door, shining hob-nailed shoes stood in a row under the slab of the washstand, near a bottle of oil with a feather stuck in its mouth; a Matthieu Laensberg lay on the dusty mantelpiece amid gunflints, candle-ends, and bits of amadou.

Finally, the last luxury in the apartment was a "Fame" blowing her trumpets, a picture cut out, no doubt, from some perfumer's prospectus and nailed to the wall with six wooden shoe-pegs.

Emma's child was asleep in a wicker-cradle. She took it up in the wrapping that enveloped it and began singing softly as she rocked herself to and fro.

Leon walked up and down the room; it seemed strange to him to see this beautiful woman in her nankeen dress in the midst of all this poverty. Madam Bovary reddened; he turned away, thinking perhaps there had been an impertinent look in his eyes. Then she put back the little girl, who had just been sick over her collar.

The nurse at once came to dry her, protesting that it wouldn't show.

"She gives me other doses," she said: "I am always a-washing of her. If you would have the goodness to order Camus, the grocer, to let me have a little soap, it would really be more convenient for you, as I needn't trouble you then."

"Very well! very well!" said Emma. "Good morning, Madame Rollet," and she went out, wiping her shoes at the door.

The good woman accompanied her to the end of the garden, talking all the time of the trouble she had getting up of nights.

"I'm that worn out sometimes as I drop asleep on my chair. I'm sure you might at least give me just a pound of ground coffee; that'd last me a month, and I'd take it of a morning with some milk."

After having submitted to her thanks, Madam Bovary left. She had gone a little way down the path when, at the sound of wooden shoes, she turned round. It was the nurse.

"What is it?"

Then the peasant woman, taking her aside behind an elm tree, began talking to her of her husband, who with his trade and six francs a year that the captain —

"Oh, be quick!" said Emma.

"Well," the nurse went on, heaving sighs between each word, "I'm afraid he'll be put out seeing me have coffee alone, you know men — "

"But you are to have some," Emma repeated; "I will give you some. You

"But you are to have some," Emma repeated, "I will give you some. You bother me!"

"Oh, dear! my poor, dear lady! you see in consequence of his wounds he has terrible cramps in the chest. He even says that cider weakens him."

"Do make haste, Mere Rollet!"

"Well," the latter continued, making a curtsey, "if it weren't asking too much," and she curtsied once more, "if you would" — and her eyes begged — "a jar of brandy," she said at last, "and I'd rub your little one's feet with it; they're as tender as one's tongue."

Once rid of the nurse, Emma again took Monsieur Leon's arm. She walked fast for some time, then more slowly, and looking straight in front of her, her eyes rested on the shoulder of the young man, whose frock-coat had a black-velvety collar. His brown hair fell over it, straight and carefully arranged. She noticed his nails which were longer than one wore them at Yonville. It was one of the clerk's chief occupations to trim them, and for this purpose he kept a special knife in his writing desk.

They returned to Yonville by the water-side. In the warm season the bank, wider than at other times, showed to their foot the garden walls whence a few steps led to the river. It flowed noiselessly, swift, and cold to the eye; long, thin grasses huddled together in it as the current drove them, and spread themselves upon the limpid water like streaming hair; sometimes at the tip of the reeds or on the leaf of a water-lily an insect with fine legs crawled or rested. The sun pierced with a ray the small blue bubbles of the waves that, breaking, followed each other; branchless old willows mirrored their grey backs in the water; beyond, all around, the meadows seemed empty. It was the dinner-hour at the farms, and the young woman and her companion heard nothing as they walked but the fall of their steps on the earth of the path, the words they spoke, and the sound of Emma's dress rustling round her.

The walls of the gardens with pieces of bottle on their coping were hot as the glass windows of a conservatory. Wallflowers had sprung up between the bricks, and with the tip of her open sunshade Madame Bovary, as she passed, made some of their faded flowers crumble into a yellow dust, or a spray of overhanging honeysuckle and clematis caught in its fringe and dangled for a moment over the silk.

They were talking of a troupe of Spanish dancers who were expected shortly at the Rouen theatre.

"Are you going?" she asked.

"If I can," he answered.

Had they nothing else to say to one another? Yet their eyes were full of more serious speech, and while they forced themselves to find trivial phrases, they felt serious speech, and while they forced themselves to find trivial phrases, they felt the same languor stealing over them both. It was the whisper of the soul, deep, continuous, dominating that of their voices. Surprised with wonder at this strange sweetness, they did not think of speaking of the sensation or of seeking its cause. Coming joys, like tropical shores, throw over the immensity before them their inborn softness, an odorous wind, and we are lulled by this intoxication without a thought of the horizon that we do not even know.

In one place the ground had been trodden down by the cattle; they had to step on large green stones put here and there in the mud.

She often stopped a moment to look where to place her foot, and tottering on a stone that shook, her arms outspread, her form bent forward with a look of indecision, she would laugh, afraid of falling into the puddles of water.

When they arrived in front of her garden, Madame Bovary opened the little gate, ran up the steps and disappeared.

Leon returned to his office. His chief was away; he just glanced at the briefs, then cut himself a pen, and at last took up his hat and went out.

He went to La Pature at the top of the Argueil hills at the beginning of the forest; he threw himself upon the ground under the pines and watched the sky through his fingers.

"How bored I am!" he said to himself, "how bored I am!"

He thought he was to be pitied for living in this village, with Homais for a friend and Monsieru Guillaumin for master. The latter, entirely absorbed by his business, wearing gold-rimmed spectacles and red whiskers over a white cravat, understood nothing of mental refinements, although he affected a stiff English manner, which in the beginning had impressed the clerk.

As to the chemist's spouse, she was the best wife in Normandy, gentle as a sheep, loving her children, her father, her mother, her cousins, weeping for other's woes, letting everything go in her household, and detesting corsets; but so slow of movement, such a bore to listen to, so common in appearance, and of such restricted conversation, that although she was thirty, he only twenty, although they slept in rooms next each other and he spoke to her daily, he never thought that she might be a woman for another, or that she possessed anything else of her sex than the gown.

And what else was there? Binet, a few shopkeepers, two or three publicans, the cure, and finally, Monsieur Tuvache, the mayor, with his two sons, rich, crabbed, obtuse persons, who farmed their own lands and had feasts among themselves, bigoted to boot, and quite unbearable companions.

But from the general background of all these human faces Emma's stood out isolated and yet farthest off; for between her and him he seemed to see a vague abyss.

In the beginning he had called on her several times along with the druggist. Charles had not appeared particularly anxious to see him again, and Leon did not know what to do between his fear of being indiscreet and the desire for an intimacy that seemed almost impossible.

Chapter Four

When the first cold days set in Emma left her bedroom for the sitting-room, a long apartment with a low ceiling, in which there was on the mantelpiece a large bunch of coral spread out against the looking-glass. Seated in her arm chair near the window, she could see the villagers pass along the pavement.

Twice a day Leon went from his office to the Lion d'Or. Emma could hear him coming from afar; she leant forward listening, and the young man glided past the curtain, always dressed in the same way, and without turning his head. But in the twilight, when, her chin resting on her left hand, she let the embroidery she had begun fall on her knees, she often shuddered at the apparition of this shadow suddenly gliding past. She would get up and order the table to be laid.

Monsieur Homais called at dinner-time. Skull-cap in hand, he came in on tiptoe, in order to disturb no one, always repeating the same phrase, "Good evening, everybody." Then, when he had taken his seat at the table between the pair, he asked the doctor about his patients, and the latter consulted his as to the probability of their payment. Next they talked of "what was in the paper."

Homais by this hour knew it almost by heart, and he repeated it from end to end, with the reflections of the penny-a-liners, and all the stories of individual catastrophes that had occurred in France or abroad. But the subject becoming exhausted, he was not slow in throwing out some remarks on the dishes before him.

Sometimes even, half-rising, he delicately pointed out to madame the tenderest morsel, or turning to the servant, gave her some advice on the manipulation of stews and the hygiene of seasoning.

He talked aroma, osmazome, juices, and gelatine in a bewildering manner. Moreover, Homais, with his head fuller of recipes than his shop of jars, excelled in making all kinds of preserves, vinegars, and sweet liqueurs; he knew also all the latest inventions in economic stoves, together with the art of preserving cheese and of curing sick wines.

At eight o'clock Justin came to fetch him to shut up the shop.

Then Monsieur Homais gave him a sly look, especially if Felicite was there, for he half noticed that his apprentice was fond of the doctor's house.

"The young dog," he said, "is beginning to have ideas, and the devil take me if I don't believe he's in love with your servant!"

But a more serious fault with which he reproached Justin was his constantly listening to conversation. On Sunday, for example, one could not get him out of the drawing-room, whither Madame Homais had called him to fetch the children, who were falling asleep in the arm-chairs, and dragging down with their backs calico chair-covers that were too large.

Not many people came to these soirees at the chemist's, his scandal-mongering and political opinions having successfully alienated various respectable persons from him. The clerk never failed to be there. As soon as he heard the bell he ran to meet Madame Bovary, took her shawl, and put away under the shop-counter the thick list shoes that she wore over her boots when there was snow.

First they played some hands at trente-et-un; next Monsieur Homais played ecarte with Emma; Leon behind her gave her advice.

Standing up with his hands on the back of her chair he saw the teeth of her comb that bit into her chignon. With every movement that she made to throw her cards the right side of her dress was drawn up. From her turned-up hair a dark colour fell over her back, and growing gradually paler, lost itself little by little in the shade. Then her dress fell on both sides of her chair, puffing out full of folds, and reached the ground. When Leon occasionally felt the sole of his boot resting on it, he drew back as if he had trodden upon some one.

When the game of cards was over, the druggist and the Doctor played dominoes, and Emma, changing her place, leant her elbow on the table, turning over the leaves of "L'Illustration". She had brought her ladies' journal with her. Leon sat down near her; they looked at the engravings together, and waited for one another at the bottom of the pages. She often begged him to read her the verses; Leon declaimed them in a languid voice, to which he carefully gave a dying fall in the love passages. But the noise of the dominoes annoyed him. Monsieur Homais was strong at the game; he could beat Charles and give him a double-six. Then the three hundred finished, they both stretched themselves out in front of the fire, and were soon asleep. The fire was dying out in the cinders; the teapot was empty, Leon was still reading.

Emma listened to him, mechanically turning around the lampshade, on the gauze of which were painted clowns in carriages, and tight-rope dances with their balancing-poles. Leon stopped, pointing with a gesture to his sleeping audience; then they talked in low tones, and their conversation seemed the more sweet to them because it was unheard.

Thus a kind of bond was established between them, a constant commerce of books and of romances. Monsieur Bovary, little given to jealousy, did not trouble himself about it.

On his birthday he received a beautiful phrenological head, all marked with figures to the thorax and painted blue. This was an attention of the clerk's. He showed him many others, even to doing errands for him at Rouen; and the book of a novelist having made the mania for cactuses fashionable, Leon bought some for Madame Bovary, bringing them back on his knees in the "Hirondelle," pricking his fingers on their hard hairs.

She had a board with a balustrade fixed against her window to hold the pots. The clerk, too, had his small hanging garden; they saw each other tending their flowers at their windows.

Of the windows of the village there was one yet more often occupied; for on Sundays from morning to night, and every morning when the weather was bright, one could see at the dormer-window of the garret the profile of Monsieur Binet bending over his lathe, whose monotonous humming could be heard at the Lion d'Or.

One evening on coming home Leon found in his room a rug in velvet and wool with leaves on a pale ground. He called Madame Homais, Monsieur Homais, Justin, the children, the cook; he spoke of it to his chief; every one wanted to see this rug. Why did the doctor's wife give the clerk presents? It looked queer. They decided that she must be his lover.

He made this seem likely, so ceaselessly did he talk of her charms and of her wit; so much so, that Binet once roughly answered him —

"What does it matter to me since I'm not in her set?"

He tortured himself to find out how he could make his declaration to her, and always halting between the fear of displeasing her and the shame of being such a coward, he wept with discouragement and desire. Then he took energetic resolutions, wrote letters that he tore up, put it off to times that he again deferred.

Often he set out with the determination to dare all; but this resolution soon deserted him in Emma's presence, and when Charles, dropping in, invited him to jump into his chaise to go with him to see some patient in the neighbourhood, he at once accepted, bowed to madame, and went out. Her husband, was he not something belonging to her? As to Emma, she did not ask herself whether she loved. Love, she thought, must come suddenly, with great outbursts and lightnings — a hurricane of the skies, which falls upon life, revolutionises it, roots up the will like a leaf, and sweeps the whole heart into the abyss. She did not know that on the terrace of houses it makes lakes when the pipes are choked, and she would thus have remained in her security when she suddenly discovered a rent in the wall of it.

Chapter Five

It was a Sunday in February, an afternoon when the snow was falling.

They had all, Monsieur and Madame Bovary, Homais, and Monsieur Leon, gone to see a yarn-mill that was being built in the valley a mile and a half from Yonville. The druggist had taken Napoleon and Athalie to give them some exercise, and Justin accompanied them, carrying the umbrellas on his shoulder.

Nothing, however, could be less curious than this curiosity. A great piece of waste ground, on which pell-mell, amid a mass of sand and stones, were a few break-wheels, already rusty, surrounded by a quadrangular building pierced by a number of little windows. The building was unfinished; the sky could be seen through the joists of the roofing. Attached to the stop-plank of the gable a bunch of straw mixed with corn-ears fluttered its tricoloured ribbons in the wind.

Homais was talking. He explained to the company the future importance of this establishment, computed the strength of the floorings, the thickness of the walls, and regretted extremely not having a yard-stick such as Monsieur Binet possessed for his own special use.

Emma, who had taken his arm, bent lightly against his shoulder, and she looked at the sun's disc shedding afar through the mist his pale splendour. She turned. Charles was there. His cap was drawn down over his eyebrows, and his two thick lips were trembling, which added a look of stupidity to his face; his very back, his calm back, was irritating to behold, and she saw written upon his coat all the platitude of the bearer.

While she was considering him thus, tasting in her irritation a sort of depraved pleasure, Leon made a step forward. The cold that made him pale seemed to add a more gentle languor to his face; between his cravat and his neck the somewhat loose collar of his shirt showed the skin; the lobe of his ear looked out from beneath a lock of hair, and his large blue eyes, raised to the clouds, seemed to Emma more limpid and more beautiful than those mountain-lakes where the heavens are mirrored.

"Wretched boy!" suddenly cried the chemist.

And he ran to his son, who had just precipitated himself into a heap of lime in order to whiten his boots. At the reproaches with which he was being overwhelmed Napoleon began to roar, while Justin dried his shoes with a wisp of straw. But a knife was wanted; Charles offered his.

"Ah!" she said to herself, "he carried a knife in his pocket like a peasant."

The hoar-frost was falling, and they turned back to Yonville.

In the evening Madame Bovary did not go to her neighbour's, and when

Charles had left and she felt herself alone, the comparison re-began with the clearness of a sensation almost actual, and with that lengthening of perspective which memory gives to things. Looking from her bed at the clean fire that was burning, she still saw, as she had down there, Leon standing up with one hand behind his cane, and with the other holding Athalie, who was quietly sucking a piece of ice. She thought him charming; she could not tear herself away from him; she recalled his other attitudes on other days, the words he had spoken, the sound of his voice, his whole person; and she repeated, pouting out her lips as if for a kiss —

"Yes, charming! charming! Is he not in love?" she asked herself; "but with whom? With me?"

All the proofs arose before her at once; her heart leapt. The flame of the fire threw a joyous light upon the ceiling; she turned on her back, stretching out her arms.

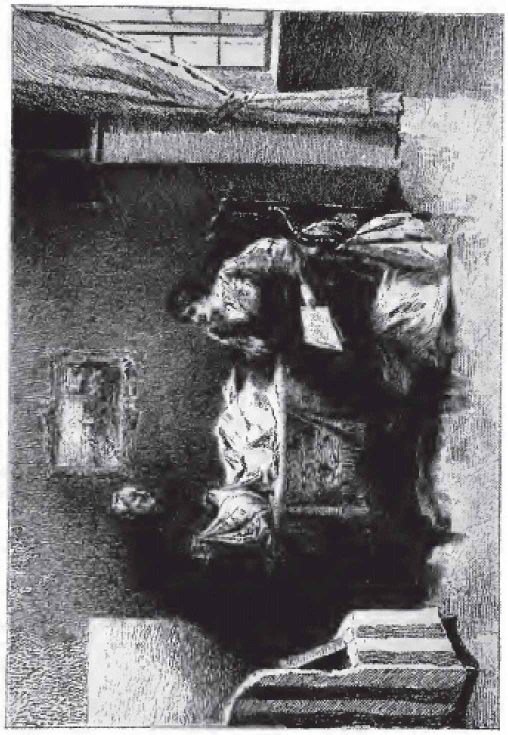
Then began the eternal lamentation: "Oh, if Heaven had out willed it! And why not? What prevented it?"

When Charles came home at midnight, she seemed to have just awakened, and as he made a noise undressing, she complained of a headache, then asked carelessly what had happened that evening.

"Monsieur Leon," he said, "went to his room early."

She could not help smiling, and she fell asleep, her soul filled with a new delight.

The next day, at dusk, she received a visit from Monsieur Lherueux, the draper. He was a man of ability, was this shopkeeper. Born a Gascon but bred a Norman, he grafted upon his southern volubility the cunning of the Cauchois. His fat, flabby, beardless face seemed dyed by a decoction of liquorice, and his white hair made even more vivid the keen brilliance of his small black eyes. No one knew what he had been formerly; a pedlar said some, a banker at Routot according to others. What was certain was that he made complex calculations in his head that would have frightened Binet himself. Polite to obsequiousness, he always held himself with his back bent in the position of one who bows or who invites.



After leaving at the door his hat surrounded with crape, he put down a green bandbox on the table, and began by complaining to madame, with many civilities, that he should have remained till that day without gaining her confidence. A poor shop like his was not made to attract a "fashionable lady"; he emphasized the words; yet she had only to command, and he would undertake to provide her with anything she might wish, either in haberdashery or linen, millinery or fancy goods, for he went to town regularly four times a month. He was connected with the best houses. You could speak of him at the "Trois Freres," at the "Barbe d'Or," or at the "Grand Sauvage"; all these gentlemen knew him as well as the insides of their pockets. To-day, then he had come to show madame, in passing, various articles he happened to have, thanks to the most rare opportunity. And he pulled out half-a-dozen embroidered collars from the box.

Madame Bovary examined them. "I do not require anything," she said.

Then Monsieur Lheureux delicately exhibited three Algerian scarves, several packets of English needles, a pair of straw slippers, and finally, four eggcups in cocoanut wood, carved in open work by convicts. Then, with both hands on the table, his neck stretched out, his figure bent forward, open-mouthed, he watched Emma's look, who was walking up and down undecided amid these goods. From time to time, as if to remove some dust, he filliped with his nail the silk of the scarves spread out at full length, and they rustled with a little noise, making in the green twilight the gold spangles of their tissue scintillate like little stars.

"How much are they?"

"How much are they?"

"A mere nothing," he replied, "a mere nothing. But there's no hurry; whenever it's convenient. We are not Jews."

She reflected for a few moments, and ended by again declining Monsieur Lheureux's offer. He replied quite unconcernedly —

"Very well. We shall understand one another by and by. I have always got on with ladies — if I didn't with my own!"

Emma smiled.

"I wanted to tell you," he went on good-naturedly, after his joke, "that it isn't the money I should trouble about. Why, I could give you some, if need be."

She made a gesture of surprise.

"Ah!" said he quickly and in a low voice, "I shouldn't have to go far to find you some, rely on that."

And he began asking after Pere Tellier, the proprietor of the "Cafe Francais," whom Monsieur Bovary was then attending.

"What's the matter with Pere Tellier? He coughs so that he shakes his whole house, and I'm afraid he'll soon want a deal covering rather than a flannel vest. He was such a rake as a young man! Those sort of people, madame, have not the least regularity; he's burnt up with brandy. Still it's sad, all the same, to see an acquaintance go off."

And while he fastened up his box he discoursed about the doctor's patients.

"It's the weather, no doubt," he said, looking frowningly at the floor, "that causes these illnesses. I, too, don't feel the thing. One of these days I shall even have to consult the doctor for a pain I have in my back. Well, good-bye, Madame Bovary. At your service; your very humble servant." And he closed the door gently.

Emma had her dinner served in her bedroom on a tray by the fireside; she was a long time over it; everything was well with her.

"How good I was!" she said to herself, thinking of the scarves.

She heard some steps on the stairs. It was Leon. She got up and took from the chest of drawers the first pile of dusters to be hemmed. When he came in she seemed very busy.

The conversation languished; Madame Bovary gave it up every few minutes, whilst he himself seemed quite embarrassed. Seated on a low chair near the fire, he turned round in his fingers the ivory thimble-case. She stitched on, or from time to time turned down the hem of the cloth with her nail. She did not speak; he was silent, captivated by her silence, as he would have been by her speech.

"Poor fellow!" she thought.

"How have I displeased her?" he asked himself.

At last, however, Leon said that he should have, one of these days, to go to

At last, however, Leon said that he should have, one of these days, to go to Rouen on some office business.

"Your music subscription is out; am I to renew it?"

"No," she replied.

"Why?"

"Because — "

And pursing her lips she slowly drew a long stitch of grey thread.

This work irritated Leon. It seemed to roughen the ends of her fingers. A gallant phrase came into his head, but he did not risk it.

"Then you are giving it up?" he went on.

"What?" she asked hurriedly. "Music? Ah! yes! Have I not my house to look after, my husband to attend to, a thousand things, in fact, many duties that must be considered first?"

She looked at the clock. Charles was late. Then, she affected anxiety. Two or three times she even repeated, "He is so good!"

The clerk was fond of Monsieur Bovary. But this tenderness on his behalf astonished him unpleasantly; nevertheless he took up on his praises, which he said everyone was singing, especially the chemist.

"Ah! he is a good fellow," continued Emma.

"Certainly," replied the clerk.

And he began talking of Madame Homais, whose very untidy appearance generally made them laugh.

"What does it matter?" interrupted Emma. "A good housewife does not trouble about her appearance."

Then she relapsed into silence.

It was the same on the following days; her talks, her manners, everything changed. She took interest in the housework, went to church regularly, and looked after her servant with more severity.

She took Berthe from nurse. When visitors called, Felicite brought her in, and Madame Bovary undressed her to show off her limbs. She declared she adored children; this was her consolation, her joy, her passion, and she accompanied her caresses with lyrical outburst which would have reminded anyone but the Yonville people of Sachette in "Notre Dame de Paris."

When Charles came home he found his slippers put to warm near the fire. His waistcoat now never wanted lining, nor his shirt buttons, and it was quite a pleasure to see in the cupboard the night-caps arranged in piles of the same height. She no longer grumbled as formerly at taking a turn in the garden; what he proposed was always done, although she did not understand the wishes to which she submitted without a murmur; and when Leon saw him by his fireside after dinner, his two hands on his stomach, his two feet on the fender, his two after dinner, his two hands on his stomach, his two feet on the fender, his two cheeks red with feeding, his eyes moist with happiness, the child crawling along the carpet, and this woman with the slender waist who came behind his arm-chair to kiss his forehead: "What madness!" he said to himself. "And how to reach her!"

And thus she seemed so virtuous and inaccessible to him that he lost all hope, even the faintest. But by this renunciation he placed her on an extraordinary pinnacle. To him she stood outside those fleshly attributes from which he had nothing to obtain, and in his heart she rose ever, and became farther removed from him after the magnificent manner of an apotheosis that is taking wing. It was one of those pure feelings that do not interfere with life, that are cultivated because they are rare, and whose loss would afflict more than their passion rejoices.

Emma grew thinner, her cheeks paler, her face longer. With her black hair, her large eyes, her aquiline nose, her birdlike walk, and always silent now, did she not seem to be passing through life scarcely touching it, and to bear on her brow the vague impress of some divine destiny? She was so sad and so calm, at once so gentle and so reserved, that near her one felt oneself seized by an icy charm, as we shudder in churches at the perfume of the flowers mingling with the cold of the marble. The others even did not escape from this seduction. The chemist said —

"She is a woman of great parts, who wouldn't be misplaced in a sub-prefecture."

The housewives admired her economy, the patients her politeness, the poor her charity.

But she was eaten up with desires, with rage, with hate. That dress with the narrow folds hid a distracted fear, of whose torment those chaste lips said nothing. She was in love with Leon, and sought solitude that she might with the more ease delight in his image. The sight of his form troubled the voluptuousness of this mediation. Emma thrilled at the sound of his step; then in his presence the emotion subsided, and afterwards there remained to her only an immense astonishment that ended in sorrow.

Leon did not know that when he left her in despair she rose after he had gone to see him in the street. She concerned herself about his comings and goings; she watched his face; she invented quite a history to find an excuse for going to his room. The chemist's wife seemed happy to her to sleep under the same roof, and her thoughts constantly centered upon this house, like the "Lion d'Or" pigeons, who came there to dip their red feet and white wings in its gutters. But the more Emma recognised her love, the more she crushed it down, that it might not be evident, that she might make it less. She would have liked Leon to guess it, and she imagined chances, catastrophes that should facilitate this.

What restrained her was, no doubt, idleness and fear, and a sense of shame also. She thought she had repulsed him too much, that the time was past, that all was lost. Then, pride, and joy of being able to say to herself, "I am virtuous," and to look at herself in the glass taking resigned poses, consoled her a little for the sacrifice she believed she was making.

Then the lusts of the flesh, the longing for money, and the melancholy of passion all blended themselves into one suffering, and instead of turning her thoughts from it, she clave to it the more, urging herself to pain, and seeking everywhere occasion for it. She was irritated by an ill-served dish or by a half-open door; bewailed the velvets she had not, the happiness she had missed, her too exalted dreams, her narrow home.

What exasperated her was that Charles did not seem to notice her anguish. His conviction that he was making her happy seemed to her an imbecile insult, and his sureness on this point ingratitude. For whose sake, then was she virtuous? Was it not for him, the obstacle to all felicity, the cause of all misery, and, as it were, the sharp clasp of that complex strap that bucked her in on all sides.

On him alone, then, she concentrated all the various hatreds that resulted from her boredom, and every effort to diminish only augmented it; for this useless trouble was added to the other reasons for despair, and contributed still more to the separation between them. Her own gentleness to herself made her rebel against him. Domestic mediocrity drove her to lewd fancies, marriage tenderness to adulterous desires. She would have liked Charles to beat her, that she might have a better right to hate him, to revenge herself upon him. She was surprised sometimes at the atrocious conjectures that came into her thoughts, and she had to go on smiling, to hear repeated to her at all hours that she was happy, to pretend to be happy, to let it be believed.

Yet she had loathing of this hypocrisy. She was seized with the temptation to flee somewhere with Leon to try a new life; but at once a vague chasm full of darkness opened within her soul.

"Besides, he no longer loves me," she thought. "What is to become of me? What help is to be hoped for, what consolation, what solace?"

She was left broken, breathless, inert, sobbing in a low voice, with flowing tears.

"Why don't you tell master?" the servant asked her when she came in during these crises.

"It is the nerves," said Emma. "Do not speak to him of it; it would worry him."

"Ah! yes," Felicite went on, "you are just like La Guerine, Pere Guerin's daughter, the fisherman at Pollet, that I used to know at Dieppe before I came to you. She was so sad, so sad, to see her standing upright on the threshold of her house, she seemed to you like a winding-sheet spread out before the door. Her illness, it appears, was a kind of fog that she had in her head, and the doctors could not do anything, nor the priest either. When she was taken too bad she went off quite alone to the sea-shore, so that the customs officer, going his rounds, often found her lying flat on her face, crying on the shingle. Then, after her marriage, it went off, they say."

"But with me," replied Emma, "it was after marriage that it began."

Chapter Six

One evening when the window was open, and she, sitting by it, had been watching Lestiboudois, the beadle, trimming the box, she suddenly heard the Angelus ringing.

It was the beginning of April, when the primroses are in bloom, and a warm wind blows over the flower-beds newly turned, and the gardens, like women, seem to be getting ready for the summer fetes. Through the bars of the arbour and away beyond, the river seen in the fields, meandering through the grass in wandering curves. The evening vapours rose between the leafless poplars, touching their outlines with a violet tint, paler and more transparent than a subtle gauze caught athwart their branches. In the distance cattle moved about; neither their steps nor their lowing could be heard; and the bell, still ringing through the air, kept up its peaceful lamentation.

With this repeated tinkling the thoughts of the young woman lost themselves in old memories of her youth and school-days. She remembered the great candlesticks that rose above the vases full of flowers on the altar, and the tabernacle with its small columns. She would have liked to be once more lost in the long line of white veils, marked off here and there by the stuff black hoods of the good sisters bending over their prie-Dieu. At mass on Sundays, when she looked up, she saw the gentle face of the Virgin amid the blue smoke of the rising incense. Then she was moved; she felt herself weak and quite deserted, like the down of a bird whirled by the tempest, and it was unconsciously that she went towards the church, included to no matter what devotions, so that her soul was absorbed and all existence lost in it.

On the Place she met Lestivoudois on his way back, for, in order not to shorten his day's labour, he preferred interrupting his work, then beginning it again, so that he rang the Angelus to suit his own convenience. Besides, the ringing over a little earlier warned the lads of catechism hour.

Already a few who had arrived were playing marbles on the stones of the cemetery. Others, astride the wall, swung their legs, kicking with their clogs the large nettles growing between the little enclosure and the newest graves. This was the only green spot. All the rest was but stones, always covered with a fine powder, despite the vestry-broom.

The children in list shoes ran about there as if it were an enclosure made for them. The shouts of their voices could be heard through the humming of the bell. This grew less and less with the swinging of the great rope that, hanging from the top of the belfry, dragged its end on the ground. Swallows flitted to and fro uttering little cries, cut the air with the edge of their wings, and swiftly returned to their yellow nests under the tiles of the coping. At the end of the church a lamp was burning, the wick of a night-light in a glass hung up. Its light from a distance looked like a white stain trembling in the oil. A long ray of the sun fell across the nave and seemed to darken the lower sides and the corners.

"Where is the cure?" asked Madame Bovary of one of the lads, who was amusing himself by shaking a swivel in a hole too large for it.

"He is just coming," he answered.

And in fact the door of the presbytery grated; Abbe Bournisien appeared; the children, pell-mell, fled into the church.

"These young scamps!" murmured the priest, "always the same!"

Then, picking up a catechism all in rags that he had struck with is foot, "They respect nothing!" But as soon as he caught sight of Madame Bovary, "Excuse me," he said; "I did not recognise you."

He thrust the catechism into his pocket, and stopped short, balancing the heavy vestry key between his two fingers.

The light of the setting sun that fell full upon his face paled the lasting of his cassock, shiny at the elbows, unravelled at the hem. Grease and tobacco stains followed along his broad chest the lines of the buttons, and grew more numerous the farther they were from his neckcloth, in which the massive folds of his red chin rested; this was dotted with yellow spots, that disappeared beneath the coarse hair of his greyish beard. He had just dined and was breathing noisily.

"How are you?" he added.

"Not well," replied Emma; "I am ill."

"Well, and so am I," answered the priest. "These first warm days weaken one most remarkably, don't they? But, after all, we are born to suffer, as St. Paul says. But what does Monsieur Bovary think of it?"

"He!" she said with a gesture of contempt.

"What!" replied the good fellow, quite astonished, "doesn't he prescribe something for you?"

"Ah!" said Emma, "it is no earthly remedy I need."

But the cure from time to time looked into the church, where the kneeling boys were shouldering one another, and tumbling over like packs of cards.

"I should like to know — " she went on.

"You look out, Riboudet," cried the priest in an angry voice; "I'll warm your ears, you imp!" Then turning to Emma, "He's Boudet the carpenter's son; his parents are well off, and let him do just as he pleases. Yet he could learn quickly if he would, for he is very sharp. And so sometimes for a joke I call him Riboudet (like the road one takes to go to Maromme) and I even say 'Mon

Riboudet.' Ha! Ha! 'Mont Riboudet.' The other day I repeated that just to Monsignor, and he laughed at it; he condescended to laugh at it. And how is Monsieur Bovary?"

She seemed not to hear him. And he went on —

"Always very busy, no doubt; for he and I are certainly the busiest people in the parish. But he is doctor of the body," he added with a thick laugh, "and I of the soul."

She fixed her pleading eyes upon the priest. "Yes," she said, "you solace all sorrows."

"Ah! don't talk to me of it, Madame Bovary. This morning I had to go to Bas-Diauville for a cow that was ill; they thought it was under a spell. All their cows, I don't know how it is — But pardon me! Longuemarre and Boudet! Bless me! Will you leave off?"

And with a bound he ran into the church.

The boys were just then clustering round the large desk, climbing over the precentor's footstool, opening the missal; and others on tiptoe were just about to venture into the confessional. But the priest suddenly distributed a shower of cuffs among them. Seizing them by the collars of their coats, he lifted them from the ground, and deposited them on their knees on the stones of the choir, firmly, as if he meant planting them there.

"Yes," said he, when he returned to Emma, unfolding his large cotton handkerchief, one corner of which he put between his teeth, "farmers are much to be pitied."

"Others, too," she replied.

"Assuredly. Town-labourers, for example."

"It is not they — "

"Pardon! I've there known poor mothers of families, virtuous women, I assure you, real saints, who wanted even bread."

"But those," replied Emma, and the corners of her mouth twitched as she spoke, "those, Monsieur le Cure, who have bread and have no — "

"Fire in the winter," said the priest.

"Oh, what does that matter?"

"What! What does it matter? It seems to me that when one has firing and food — for, after all — "

"My God! my God!" she sighed.

"It is indigestion, no doubt? You must get home, Madame Bovary; drink a little tea, that will strengthen you, or else a glass of fresh water with a little moist sugar."

"Why?" And she looked like one awaking from a dream.

"Well, you see, you were putting your hand to your forehead. I thought you felt faint." Then, bethinking himself, "But you were asking me something? What was it? I really don't remember."

"I? Nothing! nothing!" repeated Emma.

And the glance she cast round her slowly fell upon the old man in the cassock. They looked at one another face to face without speaking.

"Then, Madame Bovary," he said at last, "excuse me, but duty first, you know; I must look after my good-for-nothings. The first communion will soon be upon us, and I fear we shall be behind after all. So after Ascension Day I keep them recta* an extra hour every Wednesday. Poor children! One cannot lead them too soon into the path of the Lord, as, moreover, he has himself recommended us to do by the mouth of his Divine Son. Good health to you, madame; my respects to your husband."

*On the straight and narrow path.

And he went into the church making a genuflexion as soon as he reached the door.

Emma saw him disappear between the double row of forms, walking with a heavy tread, his head a little bent over his shoulder, and with his two hands half-open behind him.

Then she turned on her heel all of one piece, like a statue on a pivot, and went homewards. But the loud voice of the priest, the clear voices of the boys still reached her ears, and went on behind her.

"Are you a Christian?"

"Yes, I am a Christian."

"What is a Christian?"

"He who, being baptized-baptized-baptized — "

She went up the steps of the staircase holding on to the banisters, and when she was in her room threw herself into an arm-chair.

The whitish light of the window-panes fell with soft undulations.

The furniture in its place seemed to have become more immobile, and to lose itself in the shadow as in an ocean of darkness. The fire was out, the clock went on ticking, and Emma vaguely marvelled at this calm of all things while within herself was such tumult. But little Berthe was there, between the window and the work-table, tottering on her knitted shoes, and trying to come to her mother to catch hold of the ends of her apron-strings.

"Leave me alone," said the latter, putting her from her with her hand.

The little girl soon came up closer against her knees, and leaning on them with her arms, she looked up with her large blue eyes, while a small thread of pure saliva dribbled from her lips on to the silk apron.

"Leave me alone," repeated the young woman quite irritably.

Her face frightened the child, who began to scream.

"Will you leave me alone?" she said, pushing her with her elbow.

Berthe fell at the foot of the drawers against the brass handle, cutting her cheek, which began to bleed, against it. Madame Bovary sprang to lift her up, broke the bell-rope, called for the servant with all her might, and she was just going to curse herself when Charles appeared. It was the dinner-hour; he had come home.

"Look, dear!" said Emma, in a calm voice, "the little one fell down while she was playing, and has hurt herself."

Charles reassured her; the case was not a serious one, and he went for some sticking plaster.

Madame Bovary did not go downstairs to the dining-room; she wished to remain alone to look after the child. Then watching her sleep, the little anxiety she felt gradually wore off, and she seemed very stupid to herself, and very good to have been so worried just now at so little. Berthe, in fact, no longer sobbed.

Her breathing now imperceptibly raised the cotton covering. Big tears lay in the corner of the half-closed eyelids, through whose lashes one could see two pale sunken pupils; the plaster stuck on her cheek drew the skin obliquely.

"It is very strange," thought Emma, "how ugly this child is!"

When at eleven o'clock Charles came back from the chemist's shop, whither he had gone after dinner to return the remainder of the sticking-plaster, he found his wife standing by the cradle.

"I assure you it's nothing." he said, kissing her on the forehead. "Don't worry, my poor darling; you will make yourself ill."

He had stayed a long time at the chemist's. Although he had not seemed much moved, Homais, nevertheless, had exerted himself to buoy him up, to "keep up his spirits." Then they had talked of the various dangers that threaten childhood, of the carelessness of servants. Madame Homais knew something of it, having still upon her chest the marks left by a basin full of soup that a cook had formerly dropped on her pinafore, and her good parents took no end of trouble for her. The knives were not sharpened, nor the floors waxed; there were iron gratings to the windows and strong bars across the fireplace; the little Homais, in spite of their spirit, could not stir without someone watching them; at the slightest cold their father stuffed them with pectorals; and until they were turned four they all, without pity, had to wear wadded head-protectors. This, it is true, was a fancy of Madame Homais'; her husband was inwardly afflicted at it. Fearing the possible consequences of such compression to the intellectual organs. He even went so far as to say to her, "Do you want to make Caribs or Botocudos of them?"

Botocudos of them?

Charles, however, had several times tried to interrupt the conversation. "I should like to speak to you," he had whispered in the clerk's ear, who went upstairs in front of him.

"Can he suspect anything?" Leon asked himself. His heart beat, and he racked his brain with surmises.

At last, Charles, having shut the door, asked him to see himself what would be the price at Rouen of a fine daguerreotypes. It was a sentimental surprise he intended for his wife, a delicate attention — his portrait in a frock-coat. But he wanted first to know "how much it would be." The inquiries would not put Monsieur Leon out, since he went to town almost every week.

Why? Monsieur Homais suspected some "young man's affair" at the bottom of it, an intrigue. But he was mistaken. Leon was after no love-making. He was sadder than ever, as Madame Lefrancois saw from the amount of food he left on his plate. To find out more about it she questioned the tax-collector. Binet answered roughly that he "wasn't paid by the police."

All the same, his companion seemed very strange to him, for Leon often threw himself back in his chair, and stretching out his arms. Complained vaguely of life.

"It's because you don't take enough recreation," said the collector.

"What recreation?"

"If I were you I'd have a lathe."

"But I don't know how to turn," answered the clerk.

"Ah! that's true," said the other, rubbing his chin with an air of mingled contempt and satisfaction.

Leon was weary of loving without any result; moreover he was beginning to feel that depression caused by the repetition of the same kind of life, when no interest inspires and no hope sustains it. He was so bored with Yonville and its inhabitants, that the sight of certain persons, of certain houses, irritated him beyond endurance; and the chemist, good fellow though he was, was becoming absolutely unbearable to him. Yet the prospect of a new condition of life frightened as much as it seduced him.

This apprehension soon changed into impatience, and then Paris from afar sounded its fanfare of masked balls with the laugh of grisettes. As he was to finish reading there, why not set out at once? What prevented him? And he began making home-preparations; he arranged his occupations beforehand. He furnished in his head an apartment. He would lead an artist's life there! He would take lessons on the guitar! He would have a dressing-gown, a Basque cap, blue velvet slippers! He even already was admiring two crossed foils over his chimney-piece, with a death's head on the guitar above them.

chimney-piece, with a death's head on the guitar above them.

The difficulty was the consent of his mother; nothing, however, seemed more reasonable. Even his employer advised him to go to some other chambers where he could advance more rapidly. Taking a middle course, then, Leon looked for some place as second clerk at Rouen; found none, and at last wrote his mother a long letter full of details, in which he set forth the reasons for going to live at Paris immediately. She consented.

He did not hurry. Every day for a month Hivert carried boxes, valises, parcels for him from Yonville to Rouen and from Rouen to Yonville; and when Leon had packed up his wardrobe, had his three arm-chairs restuffed, bought a stock of neckties, in a word, had made more preparations than for a voyage around the world, he put it off from week to week, until he received a second letter from his mother urging him to leave, since he wanted to pass his examination before the vacation.

When the moment for the farewells had come, Madame Homais wept, Justin sobbed; Homais, as a man of nerve, concealed his emotion; he wished to carry his friend's overcoat himself as far as the gate of the notary, who was taking Leon to Rouen in his carriage.

The latter had just time to bid farewell to Monsieur Bovary.

When he reached the head of the stairs, he stopped, he was so out of breath. As he came in, Madame Bovary arose hurriedly.

"It is I again!" said Leon.

"I was sure of it!"

She bit her lips, and a rush of blood flowing under her skin made her red from the roots of her hair to the top of her collar. She remained standing, leaning with her shoulder against the wainscot.

"The doctor is not here?" he went on.

"He is out." She repeated, "He is out."

Then there was silence. They looked at one another and their thoughts, confounded in the same agony, clung close together like two throbbing breasts.

"I should like to kiss Berthe," said Leon.

Emma went down a few steps and called Felicite.

He threw one long look around him that took in the walls, the decorations, the fireplace, as if to penetrate everything, carry away everything. But she returned, and the servant brought Berthe, who was swinging a windmill roof downwards at the end of a string. Leon kissed her several times on the neck.

"Good-bye, poor child! good-bye, dear little one! good-bye!" And he gave her back to her mother.

"Take her away," she said.

They remained alone — Madame Bovary, her back turned, her face pressed

They remained alone — Madame Bovary, her back turned, her face pressed against a window-pane; Leon held his cap in his hand, knocking it softly against his thigh.

"It is going to rain," said Emma.

"I have a cloak," he answered.

"Ah!"

She turned around, her chin lowered, her forehead bent forward.

The light fell on it as on a piece of marble, to the curve of the eyebrows, without one's being able to guess what Emma was seeing on the horizon or what she was thinking within herself.

"Well, good-bye," he sighed.

She raised her head with a quick movement.

"Yes, good-bye — go!"

They advanced towards each other; he held out his hand; she hesitated.

"In the English fashion, then," she said, giving her own hand wholly to him, and forcing a laugh.

Leon felt it between his fingers, and the very essence of all his being seemed to pass down into that moist palm. Then he opened his hand; their eyes met again, and he disappeared.

When he reached the market-place, he stopped and hid behind a pillar to look for the last time at this white house with the four green blinds. He thought he saw a shadow behind the window in the room; but the curtain, sliding along the pole as though no one were touching it, slowly opened its long oblique folds that spread out with a single movement, and thus hung straight and motionless as a plaster wall. Leon set off running.

From afar he saw his employer's gig in the road, and by it a man in a coarse apron holding the horse. Homais and Monsieur Guillaumin were talking. They were waiting for him.

"Embrace me," said the druggist with tears in his eyes. "Here is your coat, my good friend. Mind the cold; take care of yourself; look after yourself."

"Come, Leon, jump in," said the notary.

Homais bend over the splash-board, and in a voice broken by sobs uttered these three sad words —

"A pleasant journey!"

"Good-night," said Monsieur Guillaumin. "Give him his head." They set out, and Homais went back.

Madame Bovary had opened her window overlooking the garden and watched the clouds. They gathered around the sunset on the side of Rouen and then swiftly rolled back their black columns, behind which the great rays of the sun looked out like the golden arrows of a suspended trophy, while the rest of the empty heavens was white as porcelain. But a gust of wind bowed the poplars, and suddenly the rain fell; it pattered against the green leaves.

Then the sun reappeared, the hens clucked, sparrows shook their wings in the damp thickets, and the pools of water on the gravel as they flowed away carried off the pink flowers of an acacia.

"Ah! how far off he must be already!" she thought.

Monsieur Homais, as usual, came at half-past six during dinner.

"Well," said he, "so we've sent off our young friend!"

"So it seems," replied the doctor. Then turning on his chair; "Any news at home?"

"Nothing much. Only my wife was a little moved this afternoon. You know women — a nothing upsets them, especially my wife. And we should be wrong to object to that, since their nervous organization is much more malleable than ours."

"Poor Leon!" said Charles. "How will he live at Paris? Will he get used to it?"

Madame Bovary sighed.

"Get along!" said the chemist, smacking his lips. "The outings at restaurants, the masked balls, the champagne — all that'll be jolly enough, I assure you."

"I don't think he'll go wrong," objected Bovary.

"Nor do I," said Monsieur Homais quickly; "although he'll have to do like the rest for fear of passing for a Jesuit. And you don't know what a life those dogs lead in the Latin quarter with actresses. Besides, students are thought a great deal of in Paris. Provided they have a few accomplishments, they are received in the best society; there are even ladies of the Faubourg Saint-Germain who fall in love with them, which subsequently furnishes them opportunities for making very good matches."

"But," said the doctor, "I fear for him that down there — "

"You are right," interrupted the chemist; "that is the reverse of the medal. And one is constantly obliged to keep one's hand in one's pocket there. Thus, we will suppose you are in a public garden. An individual presents himself, well dressed, even wearing an order, and whom one would take for a diplomatist. He approaches you, he insinuates himself; offers you a pinch of snuff, or picks up your hat. Then you become more intimate; he takes you to a cafe, invites you to his country-house, introduces you, between two drinks, to all sorts of people; and three-fourths of the time it's only to plunder your watch or lead you into some pernicious step.

"That is true," said Charles; "but I was thinking especially of illnesses — of typhoid fever, for example, that attacks students from the provinces."

Emma shuddered.

"Because of the change of regimen," continued the chemist, "and of the perturbation that results therefrom in the whole system. And then the water at Paris, don't you know! The dishes at restaurants, all the spiced food, end by heating the blood, and are not worth, whatever people may say of them, a good soup. For my own part, I have always preferred plain living; it is more healthy. So when I was studying pharmacy at Rouen, I boarded in a boarding house; I dined with the professors."

And thus he went on, expounding his opinions generally and his personal likings, until Justin came to fetch him for a mulled egg that was wanted.

"Not a moment's peace!" he cried; "always at it! I can't go out for a minute! Like a plough-horse, I have always to be moiling and toiling. What drudgery!" Then, when he was at the door, "By the way, do you know the news?"

"What news?"

"That it is very likely," Homais went on, raising his eyebrows and assuming one of his most serious expression, "that the agricultural meeting of the Seine-Inferieure will be held this year at Yonville-l'Abbaye. The rumour, at all events, is going the round. This morning the paper alluded to it. It would be of the utmost importance for our district. But we'll talk it over later on. I can see, thank you; Justin has the lantern."

Chapter Seven

The next day was a dreary one for Emma. Everything seemed to her enveloped in a black atmosphere floating confusedly over the exterior of things, and sorrow was engulfed within her soul with soft shrieks such as the winter wind makes in ruined castles. It was that reverie which we give to things that will not return, the lassitude that seizes you after everything was done; that pain, in fine, that the interruption of every wonted movement, the sudden cessation of any prolonged vibration, brings on.

As on the return from Vaubyessard, when the quadrilles were running in her head, she was full of a gloomy melancholy, of a numb despair. Leon reappeared, taller, handsomer, more charming, more vague. Though separated from her, he had not left her; he was there, and the walls of the house seemed to hold his shadow.

She could not detach her eyes from the carpet where he had walked, from those empty chairs where he had sat. The river still flowed on, and slowly drove its ripples along the slippery banks.

They had often walked there to the murmur of the waves over the moss-covered pebbles. How bright the sun had been! What happy afternoons they had seen alone in the shade at the end of the garden! He read aloud, bareheaded, sitting on a footstool of dry sticks; the fresh wind of the meadow set trembling the leaves of the book and the nasturtiums of the arbour. Ah! he was gone, the only charm of her life, the only possible hope of joy. Why had she not seized this happiness when it came to her? Why not have kept hold of it with both hands, with both knees, when it was about to flee from her? And she cursed herself for not having loved Leon. She thirsted for his lips. The wish took possession of her to run after and rejoin him, throw herself into his arms and say to him, "It is I; I am yours." But Emma recoiled beforehand at the difficulties of the enterprise, and her desires, increased by regret, became only the more acute.

Henceforth the memory of Leon was the centre of her boredom; it burnt there more brightly than the fire travellers have left on the snow of a Russian steppe. She sprang towards him, she pressed against him, she stirred carefully the dying embers, sought all around her anything that could revive it; and the most distant reminiscences, like the most immediate occasions, what she experienced as well as what she imagined, her voluptuous desires that were unsatisfied, her projects of happiness that crackled in the wind like dead boughs, her sterile virtue, her lost hopes, the domestic tete-a-tete — she gathered it all up, took everything, and made it all serve as fuel for her melancholy.

The flames, however, subsided, either because the supply had exhausted itself, or because it had been piled up too much. Love, little by little, was quelled by absence; regret stifled beneath habit; and this incendiary light that had empurpled her pale sky was overspread and faded by degrees. In the supineness of her conscience she even took her repugnance towards her husband for aspirations towards her lover, the burning of hate for the warmth of tenderness; but as the tempest still raged, and as passion burnt itself down to the very cinders, and no help came, no sun rose, there was night on all sides, and she was lost in the terrible cold that pierced her.

Then the evil days of Tostes began again. She thought herself now far more unhappy; for she had the experience of grief, with the certainty that it would not end.

A woman who had laid on herself such sacrifices could well allow herself certain whims. She bought a Gothic prie-dieu, and in a month spent fourteen francs on lemons for polishing her nails; she wrote to Rouen for a blue cashmere gown; she chose one of Lheureux's finest scarves, and wore it knotted around her waist over her dressing-gown; and, with closed blinds and a book in her hand, she lay stretched out on a couch in this garb.

She often changed her coiffure; she did her hair a la Chinoise, in flowing curls, in plaited coils; she parted in on one side and rolled it under like a man's.

She wanted to learn Italian; she bought dictionaries, a grammar, and a supply of white paper. She tried serious reading, history, and philosophy. Sometimes in the night Charles woke up with a start, thinking he was being called to a patient. "I'm coming," he stammered; and it was the noise of a match Emma had struck to relight the lamp. But her reading fared like her piece of embroidery, all of which, only just begun, filled her cupboard; she took it up, left it, passed on to other books.

She had attacks in which she could easily have been driven to commit any folly. She maintained one day, in opposition to her husband, that she could drink off a large glass of brandy, and, as Charles was stupid enough to dare her to, she swallowed the brandy to the last drop.

In spite of her vapourish airs (as the housewives of Yonville called them), Emma, all the same, never seemed gay, and usually she had at the corners of her mouth that immobile contraction that puckers the faces of old maids, and those of men whose ambition has failed. She was pale all over, white as a sheet; the skin of her nose was drawn at the nostrils, her eyes looked at you vaguely. After discovering three grey hairs on her temples, she talked much of her old age.

She often fainted. One day she even spat blood, and, as Charles fussed around her showing his anxiety —

"Bah!" she answered, "what does it matter?"

Charles fled to his study and wept there, both his elbows on the table, sitting in an arm-chair at his bureau under the phrenological head.

Then he wrote to his mother begging her to come, and they had many long consultations together on the subject of Emma.

What should they decide? What was to be done since she rejected all medical treatment? "Do you know what your wife wants?" replied Madame Bovary senior.

"She wants to be forced to occupy herself with some manual work. If she were obliged, like so many others, to earn her living, she wouldn't have these vapours, that come to her from a lot of ideas she stuffs into her head, and from the idleness in which she lives."

"Yet she is always busy," said Charles.

"Ah! always busy at what? Reading novels, bad books, works against religion, and in which they mock at priests in speeches taken from Voltaire. But all that leads you far astray, my poor child. Anyone who has no religion always ends by turning out badly."

So it was decided to stop Emma reading novels. The enterprise did not seem easy. The good lady undertook it. She was, when she passed through Rouen, to go herself to the lending-library and represent that Emma had discontinued her subscription. Would they not have a right to apply to the police if the librarian persisted all the same in his poisonous trade? The farewells of mother and daughter-in-law were cold. During the three weeks that they had been together they had not exchanged half-a-dozen words apart from the inquiries and phrases when they met at table and in the evening before going to bed.

Madame Bovary left on a Wednesday, the market-day at Yonville.

The Place since morning had been blocked by a row of carts, which, on end and their shafts in the air, spread all along the line of houses from the church to the inn. On the other side there were canvas booths, where cotton checks, blankets, and woollen stockings were sold, together with harness for horses, and packets of blue ribbon, whose ends fluttered in the wind. The coarse hardware was spread out on the ground between pyramids of eggs and hampers of cheeses, from which sticky straw stuck out.

Near the corn-machines clucking hens passed their necks through the bars of flat cages. The people, crowding in the same place and unwilling to move thence, sometimes threatened to smash the shop front of the chemist. On Wednesdays his shop was never empty, and the people pushed in less to buy drugs than for consultations. So great was Homais' reputation in the neighbouring villages. His robust aplomb had fascinated the rustics. They considered him a greater doctor than all the doctors.

Emma was leaning out at the window; she was often there. The window in the provinces replaces the theatre and the promenade, she was amusing herself with watching the crowd of boors when she saw a gentleman in a green velvet coat. He had on yellow gloves, although he wore heavy gaiters; he was coming towards the doctor's house, followed by a peasant walking with a bent head and quite a thoughtful air.

"Can I see the doctor?" he asked Justin, who was talking on the doorsteps with Felicite, and, taking him for a servant of the house — "Tell him that Monsieur Rodolphe Boulanger of La Huchette is here."

It was not from territorial vanity that the new arrival added "of La Huchette" to his name, but to make himself the better known.

La Huchette, in fact, was an estate near Yonville, where he had just bought the chateau and two farms that he cultivated himself, without, however, troubling very much about them. He lived as a bachelor, and was supposed to have "at least fifteen thousand francs a year."

Charles came into the room. Monsieur Boulanger introduced his man, who wanted to be bled because he felt "a tingling all over."

"That'll purge me," he urged as an objection to all reasoning.

So Bovary ordered a bandage and a basin, and asked Justin to hold it. Then addressing the peasant, who was already pale —

"Don't be afraid, my lad."

"No, no, sir," said the other; "get on."

And with an air of bravado he held out his great arm. At the prick of the lancet the blood spurted out, splashing against the looking-glass.

"Hold the basin nearer," exclaimed Charles.

"Lor!" said the peasant, "one would swear it was a little fountain flowing. How red my blood is! That's a good sign, isn't it?"

"Sometimes," answered the doctor, "one feels nothing at first, and then syncope sets in, and more especially with people of strong constitution like this man."

At these words the rustic let go the lancet-case he was twisting between his fingers. A shudder of his shoulders made the chair-back creak. His hat fell off.

"I thought as much," said Bovary, pressing his finger on the vein.

The basin was beginning to tremble in Justin's hands; his knees shook, he turned pale.

"Emma! Emma!" called Charles.

With one bound she came down the staircase.

"Some vinegar," he cried. "O dear! two at once!"

And in his emotion he could hardly put on the compress.

"It is nothing," said Monsieur Boulanger quietly, taking Justin in his arms. He seated him on the table with his back resting against the wall.

Madame Bovary began taking off his cravat. The strings of his shirt had got into a knot, and she was for some minutes moving her light fingers about the young fellow's neck. Then she poured some vinegar on her cambric handkerchief; she moistened his temples with little dabs, and then blew upon them softly. The ploughman revived, but Justin's syncope still lasted, and his eyeballs disappeared in the pale sclerotics like blue flowers in milk.

"We must hide this from him," said Charles.

Madame Bovary took the basin to put it under the table. With the movement she made in bending down, her dress (it was a summer dress with four flounces, yellow, long in the waist and wide in the skirt) spread out around her on the flags of the room; and as Emma stooping, staggered a little as she stretched out her arms.

The stuff here and there gave with the inflections of her bust.

Then she went to fetch a bottle of water, and she was melting some pieces of sugar when the chemist arrived. The servant had been to fetch him in the tumult. Seeing his pupil's eyes staring he drew a long breath; then going around him he looked at him from head to foot.

"Fool!" he said, "really a little fool! A fool in four letters! A phlebotomy's a big affair, isn't it! And a fellow who isn't afraid of anything; a kind of squirrel, just as he is who climbs to vertiginous heights to shake down nuts. Oh, yes! you just talk to me, boast about yourself! Here's a fine fitness for practising pharmacy later on; for under serious circumstances you may be called before the tribunals in order to enlighten the minds of the magistrates, and you would have to keep your head then, to reason, show yourself a man, or else pass for an imbecile."

Justin did not answer. The chemist went on —

"Who asked you to come? You are always pestering the doctor and madame. On Wednesday, moreover, your presence is indispensable to me. There are now twenty people in the shop. I left everything because of the interest I take in you. Come, get along! Sharp! Wait for me, and keep an eye on the jars."

When Justin, who was rearranging his dress, had gone, they talked for a little while about fainting-fits. Madame Bovary had never fainted.

"That is extraordinary for a lady," said Monsieur Boulanger; "but some people are very susceptible. Thus in a duel, I have seen a second lose consciousness at the mere sound of the loading of pistols."

"For my part," said the chemist, "the sight of other people's blood doesn't affect me at all, but the mere thought of my own flowing would make me faint if affect me at all, but the mere thought of my own flowing would make me faint if I reflected upon it too much."

Monsieur Boulanger, however, dismissed his servant, advising him to calm himself, since his fancy was over.

"It procured me the advantage of making your acquaintance," he added, and he looked at Emma as he said this. Then he put three francs on the corner of the table, bowed negligently, and went out.

He was soon on the other side of the river (this was his way back to La Huchette), and Emma saw him in the meadow, walking under the poplars, slackening his pace now and then as one who reflects.

"She is very pretty," he said to himself; "she is very pretty, this doctor's wife. Fine teeth, black eyes, a dainty foot, a figure like a Parisienne's. Where the devil does she come from? Wherever did that fat fellow pick her up?"

Monsieur Rodolphe Boulanger was thirty-four; he was of brutal temperament and intelligent perspicacity, having, moreover, had much to do with women, and knowing them well. This one had seemed pretty to him; so he was thinking about her and her husband.

"I think he is very stupid. She is tired of him, no doubt. He has dirty nails, and hasn't shaved for three days. While he is trotting after his patients, she sits there botching socks. And she gets bored! She would like to live in town and dance polkas every evening. Poor little woman! She is gaping after love like a carp after water on a kitchen-table. With three words of gallantry she'd adore one, I'm sure of it. She'd be tender, charming. Yes; but how to get rid of her afterwards?"

Then the difficulties of love-making seen in the distance made him by contrast think of his mistress. She was an actress at Rouen, whom he kept; and when he had pondered over this image, with which, even in remembrance, he was satiated —

"Ah! Madame Bovary," he thought, "is much prettier, especially fresher. Virginie is decidedly beginning to grow fat. She is so finiky about her pleasures; and, besides, she has a mania for prawns."

The fields were empty, and around him Rodolphe only heard the regular beating of the grass striking against his boots, with a cry of the grasshopper hidden at a distance among the oats. He again saw Emma in her room, dressed as he had seen her, and he undressed her.

"Oh, I will have her," he cried, striking a blow with his stick at a clod in front of him. And he at once began to consider the political part of the enterprise. He asked himself —

"Where shall we meet? By what means? We shall always be having the brat on our hands, and the servant, the neighbours, and husband, all sorts of worries. Pshaw! one would lose too much time over it."

Pshaw! one would lose too much time over it.

Then he resumed, "She really has eyes that pierce one's heart like a gimlet. And that pale complexion! I adore pale women!"

When he reached the top of the Arguiel hills he had made up his mind. "It's only finding the opportunities. Well, I will call in now and then. I'll send them venison, poultry; I'll have myself bled, if need be. We shall become friends; I'll invite them to my place. By Jove!" added he, "there's the agricultural show coming on. She'll be there. I shall see her. We'll begin boldly, for that's the surest way."

Chapter Eight

At last it came, the famous agricultural show. On the morning of the solemnity all the inhabitants at their doors were chatting over the preparations. The pediment of the town hall had been hung with garlands of ivy; a tent had been erected in a meadow for the banquet; and in the middle of the Place, in front of the church, a kind of bombarde was to announce the arrival of the prefect and the names of the successful farmers who had obtained prizes. The National Guard of Buchy (there was none at Yonville) had come to join the corps of firemen, of whom Binet was captain. On that day he wore a collar even higher than usual; and, tightly buttoned in his tunic, his figure was so stiff and motionless that the whole vital portion of his person seemed to have descended into his legs, which rose in a cadence of set steps with a single movement. As there was some rivalry between the tax-collector and the colonel, both, to show off their talents, drilled their men separately. One saw the red epaulettes and the black breastplates pass and re-pass alternately; there was no end to it, and it constantly began again. There had never been such a display of pomp. Several citizens had scoured their houses the evening before; tri-coloured flags hung from half-open windows; all the public-houses were full; and in the lovely weather the starched caps, the golden crosses, and the coloured neckerchiefs seemed whiter than snow, shone in the sun, and relieved with the motley colours the sombre monotony of the frock-coats and blue smocks. The neighbouring farmers' wives, when they got off their horses, pulled out the long pins that fastened around them their dresses, turned up for fear of mud; and the husbands, for their part, in order to save their hats, kept their handkerchiefs around them, holding one corner between their teeth.

The crowd came into the main street from both ends of the village. People poured in from the lanes, the alleys, the houses; and from time to time one heard knockers banging against doors closing behind women with their gloves, who were going out to see the fete. What was most admired were two long lamp-stands covered with lanterns, that flanked a platform on which the authorities were to sit. Besides this there were against the four columns of the town hall four kinds of poles, each bearing a small standard of greenish cloth, embellished with inscriptions in gold letters.

On one was written, "To Commerce"; on the other, "To Agriculture"; on the third, "To Industry"; and on the fourth, "To the Fine Arts."

But the jubilation that brightened all faces seemed to darken that of Madame Lefrancois, the innkeeper. Standing on her kitchen-steps she muttered to herself, "What rubbish! what rubbish! With their canvas booth! Do they think the prefect will be glad to dine down there under a tent like a gipsy? They call all this fussing doing good to the place! Then it wasn't worth while sending to Neufchatel for the keeper of a cookshop! And for whom? For cowherds! tatterdemalions!"

The druggist was passing. He had on a frock-coat, nankeen trousers, beaver shoes, and, for a wonder, a hat with a low crown.

"Your servant! Excuse me, I am in a hurry." And as the fat widow asked where he was going —

"It seems odd to you, doesn't it, I who am always more cooped up in my laboratory than the man's rat in his cheese."

"What cheese?" asked the landlady.

"Oh, nothing! nothing!" Homais continued. "I merely wished to convey to you, Madame Lefrancois, that I usually live at home like a recluse. To-day, however, considering the circumstances, it is necessary — "

"Oh, you're going down there!" she said contemptuously.

"Yes, I am going," replied the druggist, astonished. "Am I not a member of the consulting commission?"

Mere Lefrancois looked at him for a few moments, and ended by saying with a smile —

"That's another pair of shoes! But what does agriculture matter to you? Do you understand anything about it?"

"Certainly I understand it, since I am a druggist — that is to say, a chemist. And the object of chemistry, Madame Lefrancois, being the knowledge of the reciprocal and molecular action of all natural bodies, it follows that agriculture is comprised within its domain. And, in fact, the composition of the manure, the fermentation of liquids, the analyses of gases, and the influence of miasmata, what, I ask you, is all this, if it isn't chemistry, pure and simple?"

The landlady did not answer. Homais went on —

"Do you think that to be an agriculturist it is necessary to have tilled the earth or fattened fowls oneself? It is necessary rather to know the composition of the substances in question — the geological strata, the atmospheric actions, the quality of the soil, the minerals, the waters, the density of the different bodies, their capillarity, and what not. And one must be master of all the principles of hygiene in order to direct, criticize the construction of buildings, the feeding of animals, the diet of domestics. And, moreover, Madame Lefrancois, one must know botany, be able to distinguish between plants, you understand, which are the wholesome and those that are deleterious, which are unproductive and which nutritive, if it is well to pull them up here and re-sow them there, to propagate some, destroy others; in brief, one must keep pace with science by means of pamphlets and public papers, be always on the alert to find out improvements."

The landlady never took her eyes off the "Cafe Francois" and the chemist went on —

"Would to God our agriculturists were chemists, or that at least they would pay more attention to the counsels of science. Thus lately I myself wrote a considerable tract, a memoir of over seventy-two pages, entitled, 'Cider, its Manufacture and its Effects, together with some New Reflections on the Subject,' that I sent to the Agricultural Society of Rouen, and which even procured me the honour of being received among its members — Section, Agriculture; Class, Pomological. Well, if my work had been given to the public — " But the druggist stopped, Madame Lefrancois seemed so preoccupied.

"Just look at them!" she said. "It's past comprehension! Such a cookshop as that!" And with a shrug of the shoulders that stretched out over her breast the stitches of her knitted bodice, she pointed with both hands at her rival's inn, whence songs were heard issuing. "Well, it won't last long," she added. "It'll be over before a week."

Homais drew back with stupefaction. She came down three steps and whispered in his ear —

"What! you didn't know it? There is to be an execution in next week. It's Lheureux who is selling him out; he has killed him with bills."

"What a terrible catastrophe!" cried the druggist, who always found expressions in harmony with all imaginable circumstances.

Then the landlady began telling him the story that she had heard from Theodore, Monsieur Guillaumin's servant, and although she detested Tellier, she blamed Lheureux. He was "a wheedler, a sneak."

"There!" she said. "Look at him! he is in the market; he is bowing to Madame Bovary, who's got on a green bonnet. Why, she's taking Monsieur Boulanger's arm."

"Madame Bovary!" exclaimed Homais. "I must go at once and pay her my respects. Perhaps she'll be very glad to have a seat in the enclosure under the peristyle." And, without heeding Madame Lefrancois, who was calling him back to tell him more about it, the druggist walked off rapidly with a smile on his lips, with straight knees, bowing copiously to right and left, and taking up much room with the large tails of his frock-coat that fluttered behind him in the wind.

Rodolphe, having caught sight of him from afar, hurried on, but Madame Bovary lost her breath; so he walked more slowly, and, smiling at her, said in a rough tone —

"It's only to get away from that fat fellow, you know, the druggist." She pressed his elbow.

"What's the meaning of that?" he asked himself. And he looked at her out of the corner of his eyes.

Her profile was so calm that one could guess nothing from it. It stood out in the light from the oval of her bonnet, with pale ribbons on it like the leaves of weeds. Her eyes with their long curved lashes looked straight before her, and though wide open, they seemed slightly puckered by the cheek-bones, because of the blood pulsing gently under the delicate skin. A pink line ran along the partition between her nostrils. Her head was bent upon her shoulder, and the pearl tips of her white teeth were seen between her lips.

"Is she making fun of me?" thought Rodolphe.

Emma's gesture, however, had only been meant for a warning; for Monsieur Lheureux was accompanying them, and spoke now and again as if to enter into the conversation.

"What a superb day! Everybody is out! The wind is east!"

And neither Madame Bovary nor Rodolphe answered him, whilst at the slightest movement made by them he drew near, saying, "I beg your pardon!" and raised his hat.

When they reached the farrier's house, instead of following the road up to the fence, Rodolphe suddenly turned down a path, drawing with him Madame Bovary. He called out —

"Good evening, Monsieur Lheureux! See you again presently."

"How you got rid of him!" she said, laughing.

"Why," he went on, "allow oneself to be intruded upon by others? And as to-day I have the happiness of being with you — "

Emma blushed. He did not finish his sentence. Then he talked of the fine weather and of the pleasure of walking on the grass. A few daisies had sprung up again.

"Here are some pretty Easter daisies," he said, "and enough of them to furnish oracles to all the amorous maids in the place."

He added, "Shall I pick some? What do you think?"

"Are you in love?" she asked, coughing a little.

"H'm, h'm! who knows?" answered Rodolphe.

The meadow began to fill, and the housewives hustled you with their great umbrellas, their baskets, and their babies. One had often to get out of the way of a long file of country folk, servant-maids with blue stockings, flat shoes, silver rings, and who smelt of milk, when one passed close to them. They walked along holding one another by the hand, and thus they spread over the whole field from the row of open trees to the banquet tent.

But this was the examination time, and the farmers one after the other entered a kind of enclosure formed by a long cord supported on sticks.

The beasts were there, their noses towards the cord, and making a confused line with their unequal rumps. Drowsy pigs were burrowing in the earth with their snouts, calves were bleating, lambs baaing; the cows, on knees folded in, were stretching their bellies on the grass, slowly chewing the cud, and blinking their heavy eyelids at the gnats that buzzed round them. Plough-men with bare arms were holding by the halter prancing stallions that neighed with dilated nostrils looking towards the mares. These stood quietly, stretching out their heads and flowing manes, while their foals rested in their shadow, or now and then came and sucked them. And above the long undulation of these crowded animals one saw some white mane rising in the wind like a wave, or some sharp horns sticking out, and the heads of men running about. Apart, outside the enclosure, a hundred paces off, was a large black bull, muzzled, with an iron ring in its nostrils, and who moved no more than if he had been in bronze. A child in rags was holding him by a rope.

Between the two lines the committee-men were walking with heavy steps, examining each animal, then consulting one another in a low voice. One who seemed of more importance now and then took notes in a book as he walked along. This was the president of the jury, Monsieur Derozerays de la Panville. As soon as he recognised Rodolphe he came forward quickly, and smiling amiably, said —

"What! Monsieur Boulanger, you are deserting us?"

Rodolphe protested that he was just coming. But when the president had disappeared —

"Ma foi!*" said he, "I shall not go. Your company is better than his."

*Upon my word!

And while poking fun at the show, Rodolphe, to move about more easily, showed the gendarme his blue card, and even stopped now and then in front of some fine beast, which Madame Bovary did not at all admire. He noticed this, and began jeering at the Yonville ladies and their dresses; then he apologised for the negligence of his own. He had that incongruity of common and elegant in which the habitually vulgar think they see the revelation of an eccentric existence, of the perturbations of sentiment, the tyrannies of art, and always a certain contempt for social conventions, that seduces or exasperates them. Thus his cambric shirt with plaited cuffs was blown out by the wind in the opening of his waistcoat of grey ticking, and his broad-striped trousers disclosed at the ankle nankeen boots with patent leather gaiters.

These were so polished that they reflected the grass. He trampled on horses's dung with them, one hand in the pocket of his jacket and his straw hat on one ding with them, one hand in the pocket of his jacket and his straw hat on one side.

"Besides," added he, "when one lives in the country — "

"It's waste of time," said Emma.

"That is true," replied Rodolphe. "To think that not one of these people is capable of understanding even the cut of a coat!"

Then they talked about provincial mediocrity, of the lives it crushed, the illusions lost there.

"And I too," said Rodolphe, "am drifting into depression."

"You!" she said in astonishment; "I thought you very light-hearted."

"Ah! yes. I seem so, because in the midst of the world I know how to wear the mask of a scoffer upon my face; and yet, how many a time at the sight of a cemetery by moonlight have I not asked myself whether it were not better to join those sleeping there!"

"Oh! and your friends?" she said. "You do not think of them."

"My friends! What friends? Have I any? Who cares for me?" And he accompanied the last words with a kind of whistling of the lips.

But they were obliged to separate from each other because of a great pile of chairs that a man was carrying behind them. He was so overladen with them that one could only see the tips of his wooden shoes and the ends of his two outstretched arms. It was Lestiboudois, the gravedigger, who was carrying the church chairs about amongst the people. Alive to all that concerned his interests, he had hit upon this means of turning the show to account; and his idea was succeeding, for he no longer knew which way to turn. In fact, the villagers, who were hot, quarreled for these seats, whose straw smelt of incense, and they leant against the thick backs, stained with the wax of candles, with a certain veneration.

Madame Bovary again took Rodolphe's arm; he went on as if speaking to himself —

"Yes, I have missed so many things. Always alone! Ah! if I had some aim in life, if I had met some love, if I had found someone! Oh, how I would have spent all the energy of which I am capable, surmounted everything, overcome everything!"

"Yet it seems to me," said Emma, "that you are not to be pitied."

"Ah! you think so?" said Rodolphe.

"For, after all," she went on, "you are free — " she hesitated, "rich — "

"Do not mock me," he replied.

And she protested that she was not mocking him, when the report of a cannon resounded. Immediately all began hustling one another pell-mell towards the village

village.

It was a false alarm. The prefect seemed not to be coming, and the members of the jury felt much embarrassed, not knowing if they ought to begin the meeting or still wait.

At last at the end of the Place a large hired landau appeared, drawn by two thin horses, which a coachman in a white hat was whipping lustily. Binet had only just time to shout, "Present arms!" and the colonel to imitate him. All ran towards the enclosure; everyone pushed forward. A few even forgot their collars; but the equipage of the prefect seemed to anticipate the crowd, and the two yoked jades, trapesing in their harness, came up at a little trot in front of the peristyle of the town hall at the very moment when the National Guard and firemen deployed, beating drums and marking time.

"Present!" shouted Binet.

"Halt!" shouted the colonel. "Left about, march."

And after presenting arms, during which the clang of the band, letting loose, rang out like a brass kettle rolling downstairs, all the guns were lowered. Then was seen stepping down from the carriage a gentleman in a short coat with silver braiding, with bald brow, and wearing a tuft of hair at the back of his head, of a sallow complexion and the most benign appearance. His eyes, very large and covered by heavy lids, were half-closed to look at the crowd, while at the same time he raised his sharp nose, and forced a smile upon his sunken mouth. He recognised the mayor by his scarf, and explained to him that the prefect was not able to come. He himself was a councillor at the prefecture; then he added a few apologies. Monsieur Tuvache answered them with compliments; the other confessed himself nervous; and they remained thus, face to face, their foreheads almost touching, with the members of the jury all round, the municipal council, the notable personages, the National Guard and the crowd. The councillor pressing his little cocked hat to his breast repeated his bows, while Tuvache, bent like a bow, also smiled, stammered, tried to say something, protested his devotion to the monarchy and the honour that was being done to Yonville.

Hippolyte, the groom from the inn, took the head of the horses from the coachman, and, limping along with his club-foot, led them to the door of the "Lion d'Or", where a number of peasants collected to look at the carriage. The drum beat, the howitzer thundered, and the gentlemen one by one mounted the platform, where they sat down in red utrecht velvet armchairs that had been lent by Madame Tuvache.

All these people looked alike. Their fair flabby faces, somewhat tanned by the sun, were the colour of sweet cider, and their puffy whiskers emerged from stiff collars, kept up by white cravats with broad bows. All the waistcoats were of velvet, double-breasted; all the watches had, at the end of a long ribbon, an oval cornelian seal; everyone rested his two hands on his thighs, carefully stretching the stride of their trousers, whose unsponged glossy cloth shone more brilliantly than the leather of their heavy boots.

The ladies of the company stood at the back under the vestibule between the pillars while the common herd was opposite, standing up or sitting on chairs. As a matter of fact, Lestiboudois had brought thither all those that he had moved from the field, and he even kept running back every minute to fetch others from the church. He caused such confusion with this piece of business that one had great difficulty in getting to the small steps of the platform.

"I think," said Monsieur Lheureux to the chemist, who was passing to his place, "that they ought to have put up two Venetian masts with something rather severe and rich for ornaments; it would have been a very pretty effect."

"To be sure," replied Homais; "but what can you expect? The mayor took everything on his own shoulders. He hasn't much taste. Poor Tuvache! and he is even completely destitute of what is called the genius of art."

Rodolphe, meanwhile, with Madame Bovary, had gone up to the first floor of the town hall, to the "council-room," and, as it was empty, he declared that they could enjoy the sight there more comfortably. He fetched three stools from the round table under the bust of the monarch, and having carried them to one of the windows, they sat down by each other.

There was commotion on the platform, long whisperings, much parleying. At last the councillor got up. They knew now that his name was Lieuvain, and in the crowd the name was passed from one to the other. After he had collated a few pages, and bent over them to see better, he began —

"Gentlemen! May I be permitted first of all (before addressing you on the object of our meeting to-day, and this sentiment will, I am sure, be shared by you all), may I be permitted, I say, to pay a tribute to the higher administration, to the government to the monarch, gentle men, our sovereign, to that beloved king, to whom no branch of public or private prosperity is a matter of indifference, and who directs with a hand at once so firm and wise the chariot of the state amid the incessant perils of a stormy sea, knowing, moreover, how to make peace respected as well as war, industry, commerce, agriculture, and the fine arts?"

"I ought," said Rodolphe, "to get back a little further."

"Why?" said Emma.

But at this moment the voice of the councillor rose to an extraordinary pitch. He declaimed —

"This is no longer the time, gentlemen, when civil discord ensanguined our public places, when the landlord, the business-man, the working-man himself, falling asleep at night, lying down to peaceful sleep, trembled lest he should be awakened suddenly by the noise of incendiary tocsins, when the most subversive doctrines audaciously sapped foundations."

"Well, someone down there might see me," Rodolphe resumed, "then I should have to invent excuses for a fortnight; and with my bad reputation — "

"Oh, you are slandering yourself," said Emma.

"No! It is dreadful, I assure you."

"But, gentlemen," continued the councillor, "if, banishing from my memory the remembrance of these sad pictures, I carry my eyes back to the actual situation of our dear country, what do I see there? Everywhere commerce and the arts are flourishing; everywhere new means of communication, like so many new arteries in the body of the state, establish within it new relations. Our great industrial centres have recovered all their activity; religion, more consolidated, smiles in all hearts; our ports are full, confidence is born again, and France breathes once more!"

"Besides," added Rodolphe, "perhaps from the world's point of view they are right."

"How so?" she asked.

"What!" said he. "Do you not know that there are souls constantly tormented? They need by turns to dream and to act, the purest passions and the most turbulent joys, and thus they fling themselves into all sorts of fantasies, of follies."

Then she looked at him as one looks at a traveller who has voyaged over strange lands, and went on —

"We have not even this distraction, we poor women!"

"A sad distraction, for happiness isn't found in it."

"But is it ever found?" she asked.

"Yes; one day it comes," he answered.

"And this is what you have understood," said the councillor.

"You, farmers, agricultural labourers! you pacific pioneers of a work that belongs wholly to civilization! you, men of progress and morality, you have understood, I say, that political storms are even more redoubtable than atmospheric disturbances!"

"It comes one day," repeated Rodolphe, "one day suddenly, and when one is despairing of it. Then the horizon expands; it is as if a voice cried, 'It is here!' You feel the need of confiding the whole of your life, of giving everything, sacrificing everything to this being. There is no need for explanations; they understand one another. They have seen each other in dreams!"

(And he looked at her.) "In fine, here it is, this treasure so sought after, here before you. It glitters, it flashes; yet one still doubts, one does not believe it; one remains dazzled, as if one went out iron darkness into light."

And as he ended Rodolphe suited the action to the word. He passed his hand over his face, like a man seized with giddiness. Then he let it fall on Emma's. She took hers away.

"And who would be surprised at it, gentlemen? He only who is so blind, so plunged (I do not fear to say it), so plunged in the prejudices of another age as still to misunderstand the spirit of agricultural populations. Where, indeed, is to be found more patriotism than in the country, greater devotion to the public welfare, more intelligence, in a word? And, gentlemen, I do not mean that superficial intelligence, vain ornament of idle minds, but rather that profound and balanced intelligence that applies itself above all else to useful objects, thus contributing to the good of all, to the common amelioration and to the support of the state, born of respect for law and the practice of duty — "

"Ah! again!" said Rodolphe. "Always 'duty.' I am sick of the word. They are a lot of old blockheads in flannel vests and of old women with foot-warmers and rosaries who constantly drone into our ears 'Duty, duty!' Ah! by Jove! one's duty is to feel what is great, cherish the beautiful, and not accept all the conventions of society with the ignominy that it imposes upon us."

"Yet — yet — " objected Madame Bovary.

"No, no! Why cry out against the passions? Are they not the one beautiful thing on the earth, the source of heroism, of enthusiasm, of poetry, music, the arts, of everything, in a word?"

"But one must," said Emma, "to some extent bow to the opinion of the world and accept its moral code."

"Ah! but there are two," he replied. "The small, the conventional, that of men, that which constantly changes, that brays out so loudly, that makes such a commotion here below, of the earth earthly, like the mass of imbeciles you see down there. But the other, the eternal, that is about us and above, like the landscape that surrounds us, and the blue heavens that give us light."

Monsieur Lieuvain had just wiped his mouth with a pocket-handkerchief. He continued —

"And what should I do here gentlemen, pointing out to you the uses of agriculture? Who supplies our wants? Who provides our means of subsistence? Is it not the agriculturist? The agriculturist, gentlemen, who, sowing with laborious hand the fertile furrows of the country, brings forth the corn, which, being ground, is made into a powder by means of ingenious machinery, comes out thence under the name of flour, and from there, transported to our cities, is soon delivered at the baker's, who makes it into food for poor and rich alike. Again, is it not the agriculturist who fattens, for our clothes, his abundant flocks in the pastures? For how should we clothe ourselves, how nourish ourselves, without the agriculturist? And, gentlemen, is it even necessary to go so far for examples? Who has not frequently reflected on all the momentous things that we get out of that modest animal, the ornament of poultry-yards, that provides us at once with a soft pillow for our bed, with succulent flesh for our tables, and eggs? But I should never end if I were to enumerate one after the other all the different products which the earth, well cultivated, like a generous mother, lavishes upon her children. Here it is the vine, elsewhere the apple tree for cider, there colza, farther on cheeses and flax. Gentlemen, let us not forget flax, which has made such great strides of late years, and to which I will more particularly call your attention."

He had no need to call it, for all the mouths of the multitude were wide open, as if to drink in his words. Tuvache by his side listened to him with staring eyes. Monsieur Derozerays from time to time softly closed his eyelids, and farther on the chemist, with his son Napoleon between his knees, put his hand behind his ear in order not to lose a syllable. The chins of the other members of the jury went slowly up and down in their waistcoats in sign of approval. The firemen at the foot of the platform rested on their bayonets; and Binet, motionless, stood with out-turned elbows, the point of his sabre in the air. Perhaps he could hear, but certainly he could see nothing, because of the visor of his helmet, that fell down on his nose. His lieutenant, the youngest son of Monsieur Tuvache, had a bigger one, for his was enormous, and shook on his head, and from it an end of his cotton scarf peeped out. He smiled beneath it with a perfectly infantine sweetness, and his pale little face, whence drops were running, wore an expression of enjoyment and sleepiness.

The square as far as the houses was crowded with people. One saw folk leaning on their elbows at all the windows, others standing at doors, and Justin, in front of the chemist's shop, seemed quite transfixed by the sight of what he was looking at. In spite of the silence Monsieur Lieuvain's voice was lost in the air. It reached you in fragments of phrases, and interrupted here and there by the creaking of chairs in the crowd; then you suddenly heard the long bellowing of an ox, or else the bleating of the lambs, who answered one another at street corners. In fact, the cowherds and shepherds had driven their beasts thus far, and these lowed from time to time, while with their tongues they tore down some scrap of foliage that hung above their mouths.

Rodolphe had drawn nearer to Emma, and said to her in a low voice, speaking rapidly —

"Does not this conspiracy of the world revolt you? Is there a single sentiment it does not condemn? The noblest instincts, the purest sympathies are persecuted, slandered; and if at length two poor souls do meet, all is so organised that they cannot blend together. Yet they will make the attempt; they will flutter their wings; they will call upon each other. Oh! no matter. Sooner or later, in six months, ten years, they will come together, will love; for fate has decreed it, and they are born one for the other."

His arms were folded across his knees, and thus lifting his face towards Emma, close by her, he looked fixedly at her. She noticed in his eyes small golden lines radiating from black pupils; she even smelt the perfume of the pomade that made his hair glossy.

Then a faintness came over her; she recalled the Viscount who had waltzed with her at Vaubyessard, and his beard exhaled like this air an odour of vanilla and citron, and mechanically she half-closed her eyes the better to breathe it in. But in making this movement, as she leant back in her chair, she saw in the distance, right on the line of the horizon, the old diligence, the "Hirondelle," that was slowly descending the hill of Leux, dragging after it a long trail of dust. It was in this yellow carriage that Leon had so often come back to her, and by this route down there that he had gone for ever. She fancied she saw him opposite at his windows; then all grew confused; clouds gathered; it seemed to her that she was again turning in the waltz under the light of the lustres on the arm of the Viscount, and that Leon was not far away, that he was coming; and yet all the time she was conscious of the scent of Rodolphe's head by her side. This sweetness of sensation pierced through her old desires, and these, like grains of sand under a gust of wind, eddied to and fro in the subtle breath of the perfume which suffused her soul. She opened wide her nostrils several times to drink in the freshness of the ivy round the capitals. She took off her gloves, she wiped her hands, then fanned her face with her handkerchief, while athwart the throbbing of her temples she heard the murmur of the crowd and the voice of the councillor intoning his phrases. He said — "Continue, persevere; listen neither to the suggestions of routine, nor to the over-hasty councils of a rash empiricism.

"Apply yourselves, above all, to the amelioration of the soil, to good manures, to the development of the equine, bovine, ovine, and porcine races. Let these shows be to you pacific arenas, where the victor in leaving it will hold forth a hand to the vanquished, and will fraternise with him in the hope of better success. And you, aged servants, humble domestics, whose hard labour no Government up to this day has taken into consideration, come hither to receive the reward of your silent virtues, and be assured that the state henceforward has its eye upon you; that it encourages you, protects you; that it will accede to your just demands, and alleviate as much as in it lies the burden of your painful sacrifices."

Monsieur Lieuvain then sat down; Monsieur Derozerays got up, beginning

Monsieur Lieuvain then sat down; Monsieur Derozerays got up, beginning another speech. His was not perhaps so florid as that of the councillor, but it recommended itself by a more direct style, that is to say, by more special knowledge and more elevated considerations. Thus the praise of the Government took up less space in it; religion and agriculture more. He showed in it the relations of these two, and how they had always contributed to civilisation. Rodolphe with Madame Bovary was talking dreams, presentiments, magnetism. Going back to the cradle of society, the orator painted those fierce times when men lived on acorns in the heart of woods. Then they had left off the skins of beasts, had put on cloth, tilled the soil, planted the vine. Was this a good, and in this discovery was there not more of injury than of gain? Monsieur Derozerays set himself this problem. From magnetism little by little Rodolphe had come to affinities, and while the president was citing Cincinnatus and his plough, Diocletian, planting his cabbages, and the Emperors of China inaugurating the year by the sowing of seed, the young man was explaining to the young woman that these irresistible attractions find their cause in some previous state of existence.

"Thus we," he said, "why did we come to know one another? What chance willed it? It was because across the infinite, like two streams that flow but to unite; our special bents of mind had driven us towards each other."

And he seized her hand; she did not withdraw it.

"For good farming generally!" cried the president.

"Just now, for example, when I went to your house."

"To Monsieur Bizat of Quincampoix."

"Did I know I should accompany you?"

"Seventy francs."

"A hundred times I wished to go; and I followed you — I remained."

"Manures!"

"And I shall remain to-night, to-morrow, all other days, all my life!"

"To Monsieur Caron of Argueil, a gold medal!"

"For I have never in the society of any other person found so complete a charm."

"To Monsieur Bain of Givry-Saint-Martin."

"And I shall carry away with me the remembrance of you."

"For a merino ram!"

"But you will forget me; I shall pass away like a shadow."

"To Monsieur Belot of Notre-Dame."

"Oh, no! I shall be something in your thought, in your life, shall I not?"

"Porcine race; prizes — equal, to Messrs. Leherisse and Cullembourg, sixty francs!"

francs!"

Rodolphe was pressing her hand, and he felt it all warm and quivering like a captive dove that wants to fly away; but, whether she was trying to take it away or whether she was answering his pressure; she made a movement with her fingers. He exclaimed —

"Oh, I thank you! You do not repulse me! You are good! You understand that I am yours! Let me look at you; let me contemplate you!"

A gust of wind that blew in at the window ruffled the cloth on the table, and in the square below all the great caps of the peasant women were uplifted by it like the wings of white butterflies fluttering.

"Use of oil-cakes," continued the president. He was hurrying on: "Flemish manure-flax-growing-drainage-long leases-domestic service."

Rodolphe was no longer speaking. They looked at one another. A supreme desire made their dry lips tremble, and wearily, without an effort, their fingers intertwined.

"Catherine Nicaise Elizabeth Leroux, of Sassetot-la-Guerriere, for fifty-four years of service at the same farm, a silver medal — value, twenty-five francs!"

"Where is Catherine Leroux?" repeated the councillor.

She did not present herself, and one could hear voices whispering —

"Go up!"

"Don't be afraid!"

"Oh, how stupid she is!"

"Well, is she there?" cried Tuvache.

"Yes; here she is."

"Then let her come up!"

Then there came forward on the platform a little old woman with timid bearing, who seemed to shrink within her poor clothes. On her feet she wore heavy wooden clogs, and from her hips hung a large blue apron. Her pale face framed in a borderless cap was more wrinkled than a withered russet apple. And from the sleeves of her red jacket looked out two large hands with knotty joints, the dust of barns, the potash of washing the grease of wools had so encrusted, roughened, hardened these that they seemed dirty, although they had been rinsed in clear water; and by dint of long service they remained half open, as if to bear humble witness for themselves of so much suffering endured. Something of monastic rigidity dignified her face. Nothing of sadness or of emotion weakened that pale look. In her constant living with animals she had caught their dumbness and their calm. It was the first time that she found herself in the midst of so large a company, and inwardly scared by the flags, the drums, the gentlemen in frock-coats, and the order of the councillor, she stood motionless, not knowing whether to advance or run away, nor why the crowd was pushing her and the whether to advance or run away, nor why the crowd was pushing her and the jury were smiling at her.

Thus stood before these radiant bourgeois this half-century of servitude.

"Approach, venerable Catherine Nicaise Elizabeth Leroux!" said the councillor, who had taken the list of prize-winners from the president; and, looking at the piece of paper and the old woman by turns, he repeated in a fatherly tone — "Approach! approach!"

"Are you deaf?" said Tuvache, fidgeting in his armchair; and he began shouting in her ear, "Fifty-four years of service. A silver medal! Twenty-five francs! For you!"

Then, when she had her medal, she looked at it, and a smile of beatitude spread over her face; and as she walked away they could hear her muttering "I'll give it to our cure up home, to say some masses for me!"

"What fanaticism!" exclaimed the chemist, leaning across to the notary.

The meeting was over, the crowd dispersed, and now that the speeches had been read, each one fell back into his place again, and everything into the old grooves; the masters bullied the servants, and these struck the animals, indolent victors, going back to the stalls, a green-crown on their horns.

The National Guards, however, had gone up to the first floor of the town hall with buns spitted on their bayonets, and the drummer of the battalion carried a basket with bottles. Madame Bovary took Rodolphe's arm; he saw her home; they separated at her door; then he walked about alone in the meadow while he waited for the time of the banquet.

The feast was long, noisy, ill served; the guests were so crowded that they could hardly move their elbows; and the narrow planks used for forms almost broke down under their weight. They ate hugely. Each one stuffed himself on his own account. Sweat stood on every brow, and a whitish steam, like the vapour of a stream on an autumn morning, floated above the table between the hanging lamps. Rodolphe, leaning against the calico of the tent was thinking so earnestly of Emma that he heard nothing. Behind him on the grass the servants were piling up the dirty plates, his neighbours were talking; he did not answer them; they filled his glass, and there was silence in his thoughts in spite of the growing noise. He was dreaming of what she had said, of the line of her lips; her face, as in a magic mirror, shone on the plates of the shakos, the folds of her gown fell along the walls, and days of love unrolled to all infinity before him in the vistas of the future.

He saw her again in the evening during the fireworks, but she was with her husband, Madame Homais, and the druggist, who was worrying about the danger of stray rockets, and every moment he left the company to go and give some advice to Binet.

The pyrotechnic pieces sent to Monsieur Tuvache had, through an excess of caution, been shut up in his cellar, and so the damp powder would not light, and the principal set piece, that was to represent a dragon biting his tail, failed completely. Now and then a meagre Roman-candle went off; then the gaping crowd sent up a shout that mingled with the cry of the women, whose waists were being squeezed in the darkness. Emma silently nestled against Charles's shoulder; then, raising her chin, she watched the luminous rays of the rockets against the dark sky. Rodolphe gazed at her in the light of the burning lanterns.

They went out one by one. The stars shone out. A few crops of rain began to fall. She knotted her fichu round her bare head.

At this moment the councillor's carriage came out from the inn.

His coachman, who was drunk, suddenly dozed off, and one could see from the distance, above the hood, between the two lanterns, the mass of his body, that swayed from right to left with the giving of the traces.

"Truly," said the druggist, "one ought to proceed most rigorously against drunkenness! I should like to see written up weekly at the door of the town hall on a board ad hoc* the names of all those who during the week got intoxicated on alcohol. Besides, with regard to statistics, one would thus have, as it were, public records that one could refer to in case of need. But excuse me!"

*Specifically for that.

And he once more ran off to the captain. The latter was going back to see his lathe again.

"Perhaps you would not do ill," Homais said to him, "to send one of your men, or to go yourself — "

"Leave me alone!" answered the tax-collector. "It's all right!"

"Do not be uneasy," said the druggist, when he returned to his friends. "Monsieur Binet has assured me that all precautions have been taken. No sparks have fallen; the pumps are full. Let us go to rest."

"Ma foi! I want it," said Madame Homais, yawning at large. "But never mind; we've had a beautiful day for our fete."

Rodolphe repeated in a low voice, and with a tender look, "Oh, yes! very beautiful!"

And having bowed to one another, they separated.

Two days later, in the "Final de Rouen," there was a long article on the show. Homais had composed it with verve the very next morning.

"Why these festoons, these flowers, these garlands? Whither hurries this crowd like the waves of a furious sea under the torrents of a tropical sun pouring its heat upon our heads?"

Then he spoke of the condition of the peasants. Certainly the Government was doing much, but not enough. "Courage!" he cried to it; "a thousand reforms are indispensable; let us accomplish them!" Then touching on the entry of the councillor, he did not forget "the martial air of our militia;" nor "our most merry village maidens;" nor the "bald-headed old men like patriarchs who were there, and of whom some, the remnants of our phalanxes, still felt their hearts beat at the manly sound of the drums." He cited himself among the first of the members of the jury, and he even called attention in a note to the fact that Monsieur Homais, chemist, had sent a memoir on cider to the agricultural society.

When he came to the distribution of the prizes, he painted the joy of the prize-winners in dithyrambic strophes. "The father embraced the son, the brother the brother, the husband his consort. More than one showed his humble medal with pride; and no doubt when he got home to his good housewife, he hung it up weeping on the modest walls of his cot.

"About six o'clock a banquet prepared in the meadow of Monsieur Leigeard brought together the principal personages of the fete. The greatest cordiality reigned here. Divers toasts were proposed: Monsieur Lieuvain, the King; Monsieur Tuvache, the Prefect; Monsieur Derozerays, Agriculture; Monsieur Homais, Industry and the Fine Arts, those twin sisters; Monsieur Leplichey, Progress. In the evening some brilliant fireworks on a sudden illumined the air. One would have called it a veritable kaleidoscope, a real operatic scene; and for a moment our little locality might have thought itself transported into the midst of a dream of the 'Thousand and One Nights.' Let us state that no untoward event disturbed this family meeting." And he added "Only the absence of the clergy was remarked. No doubt the priests understand progress in another fashion. Just as you please, messieurs the followers of Loyola!"

Chapter Nine

Six weeks passed. Rodolphe did not come again. At last one evening he appeared.

The day after the show he had said to himself — "We mustn't go back too soon; that would be a mistake."

And at the end of a week he had gone off hunting. After the hunting he had thought it was too late, and then he reasoned thus —

"If from the first day she loved me, she must from impatience to see me again love me more. Let's go on with it!"

And he knew that his calculation had been right when, on entering the room, he saw Emma turn pale.

She was alone. The day was drawing in. The small muslin curtain along the windows deepened the twilight, and the gilding of the barometer, on which the rays of the sun fell, shone in the looking-glass between the meshes of the coral.

Rodolphe remained standing, and Emma hardly answered his first conventional phrases.

"I," he said, "have been busy. I have been ill."

"Seriously?" she cried.

"Well," said Rodolphe, sitting down at her side on a footstool, "no; it was because I did not want to come back."

"Why?"

"Can you not guess?"

He looked at her again, but so hard that she lowered her head, blushing. He went on —

"Emma!"

"Sir," she said, drawing back a little.

"Ah! you see," replied he in a melancholy voice, "that I was right not to come back; for this name, this name that fills my whole soul, and that escaped me, you forbid me to use! Madame Bovary! why all the world calls you thus! Besides, it is not your name; it is the name of another!"

He repeated, "of another!" And he hid his face in his hands.

"Yes, I think of you constantly. The memory of you drives me to despair. Ah! forgive me! I will leave you! Farewell! I will go far away, so far that you will never hear of me again; and yet — to-day — I know not what force impelled me towards you. For one does not struggle against Heaven; one cannot resist the smile of angels; one is carried away by that which is beautiful, charming, adorable."

It was the first time that Emma had heard such words spoken to herself, and her pride, like one who reposes bathed in warmth, expanded softly and fully at this glowing language.

"But if I did not come," he continued, "if I could not see you, at least I have gazed long on all that surrounds you. At night-every night-I arose; I came hither; I watched your house, its glimmering in the moon, the trees in the garden swaying before your window, and the little lamp, a gleam shining through the windowpanes in the darkness. Ah! you never knew that there, so near you, so far from you, was a poor wretch!"

She turned towards him with a sob.

"Oh, you are good!" she said.

"No, I love you, that is all! You do not doubt that! Tell me — one word — only one word!"

And Rodolphe imperceptibly glided from the footstool to the ground; but a sound of wooden shoes was heard in the kitchen, and he noticed the door of the room was not closed.

"How kind it would be of you," he went on, rising, "if you would humour a whim of mine." It was to go over her house; he wanted to know it; and Madame Bovary seeing no objection to this, they both rose, when Charles came in.

"Good morning, doctor," Rodolphe said to him.

The doctor, flattered at this unexpected title, launched out into obsequious phrases. Of this the other took advantage to pull himself together a little.

"Madame was speaking to me," he then said, "about her health."

Charles interrupted him; he had indeed a thousand anxieties; his wife's palpitations of the heart were beginning again. Then Rodolphe asked if riding would not be good.

"Certainly! excellent! just the thing! There's an idea! You ought to follow it up."

And as she objected that she had no horse, Monsieur Rodolphe offered one. She refused his offer; he did not insist. Then to explain his visit he said that his ploughman, the man of the blood-letting, still suffered from giddiness.

"I'll call around," said Bovary.

"No, no! I'll send him to you; we'll come; that will be more convenient for you."

"Ah! very good! I thank you."

And as soon as they were alone, "Why don't you accept Monsieur Boulanger's kind offer?"

She assumed a sulky air, invented a thousand excuses, and finally declared that perhaps it would look odd.

"Well, what the deuce do I care for that?" said Charles, making a pirouette. "Health before everything! You are wrong."

"And how do you think I can ride when I haven't got a habit?"

"You must order one," he answered.

The riding-habit decided her.

When the habit was ready, Charles wrote to Monsieur Boulanger that his wife was at his command, and that they counted on his good-nature.

The next day at noon Rodolphe appeared at Charles's door with two saddle-horses. One had pink rosettes at his ears and a deerskin side-saddle.

Rodolphe had put on high soft boots, saying to himself that no doubt she had never seen anything like them. In fact, Emma was charmed with his appearance as he stood on the landing in his great velvet coat and white corduroy breeches. She was ready; she was waiting for him.

Justin escaped from the chemist's to see her start, and the chemist also came out. He was giving Monsieur Boulanger a little good advice.

"An accident happens so easily. Be careful! Your horses perhaps are mettlesome."

She heard a noise above her; it was Felicite drumming on the windowpanes to amuse little Berthe. The child blew her a kiss; her mother answered with a wave of her whip.

"A pleasant ride!" cried Monsieur Homais. "Prudence! above all, prudence!" And he flourished his newspaper as he saw them disappear.

As soon as he felt the ground, Emma's horse set off at a gallop.

Rodolphe galloped by her side. Now and then they exchanged a word. Her figure slightly bent, her hand well up, and her right arm stretched out, she gave herself up to the cadence of the movement that rocked her in her saddle. At the bottom of the hill Rodolphe gave his horse its head; they started together at a bound, then at the top suddenly the horses stopped, and her large blue veil fell about her.

It was early in October. There was fog over the land. Hazy clouds hovered on the horizon between the outlines of the hills; others, rent asunder, floated up and disappeared. Sometimes through a rift in the clouds, beneath a ray of sunshine, gleamed from afar the roots of Yonville, with the gardens at the water's edge, the yards, the walls and the church steeple. Emma half closed her eyes to pick out her house, and never had this poor village where she lived appeared so small. From the height on which they were the whole valley seemed an immense pale lake sending off its vapour into the air. Clumps of trees here and there stood out like black rocks, and the tall lines of the poplars that rose above the mist were like a beach stirred by the wind.

By the side, on the turf between the pines, a brown light shimmered in the warm atmosphere. The earth, ruddy like the powder of tobacco, deadened the noise of their steps, and with the edge of their shoes the horses as they walked kicked the fallen fir cones in front of them.

Rodolphe and Emma thus went along the skirt of the wood. She turned away from time to time to avoid his look, and then she saw only the pine trunks in lines, whose monotonous succession made her a little giddy. The horses were panting; the leather of the saddles creaked.

Just as they were entering the forest the sun shone out.

"God protects us!" said Rodolphe.

"Do you think so?" she said.

"Forward! forward!" he continued.

He "tchk'd" with his tongue. The two beasts set off at a trot.

Long ferns by the roadside caught in Emma's stirrup.

Rodolphe leant forward and removed them as they rode along. At other times, to turn aside the branches, he passed close to her, and Emma felt his knee brushing against her leg. The sky was now blue, the leaves no longer stirred. There were spaces full of heather in flower, and plots of violets alternated with the confused patches of the trees that were grey, fawn, or golden coloured, according to the nature of their leaves. Often in the thicket was heard the fluttering of wings, or else the hoarse, soft cry of the ravens flying off amidst the oaks.

They dismounted. Rodolphe fastened up the horses. She walked on in front on the moss between the paths. But her long habit got in her way, although she held it up by the skirt; and Rodolphe, walking behind her, saw between the black cloth and the black shoe the fineness of her white stocking, that seemed to him as if it were a part of her nakedness.

She stopped. "I am tired," she said.

"Come, try again," he went on. "Courage!"

Then some hundred paces farther on she again stopped, and through her veil, that fell sideways from her man's hat over her hips, her face appeared in a bluish transparency as if she were floating under azure waves.

"But where are we going?"

He did not answer. She was breathing irregularly. Rodolphe looked round him biting his moustache. They came to a larger space where the coppice had been cut. They sat down on the trunk of a fallen tree, and Rodolphe began speaking to her of his love. He did not begin by frightening her with compliments. He was calm, serious, melancholy.

Emma listened to him with bowed head, and stirred the bits of wood on the ground with the tip of her foot. But at the words, "Are not our destinies now one?"

"Oh, no!" she replied. "You know that well. It is impossible!" She rose to go. He seized her by the wrist. She stopped. Then, having gazed at him for a few moments with an amorous and humid look, she said hurriedly —

"Ah! do not speak of it again! Where are the horses? Let us go back."

He made a gesture of anger and annoyance. She repeated:

"Where are the horses? Where are the horses?"

Then smiling a strange smile, his pupil fixed, his teeth set, he advanced with outstretched arms. She recoiled trembling. She stammered:

"Oh, you frighten me! You hurt me! Let me go!"

"If it must be," he went on, his face changing; and he again became respectful, caressing, timid. She gave him her arm. They went back. He said —

"What was the matter with you? Why? I do not understand. You were mistaken, no doubt. In my soul you are as a Madonna on a pedestal, in a place lofty, secure, immaculate. But I need you to live! I must have your eyes, your voice, your thought! Be my friend, my sister, my angel!"

And he put out his arm round her waist. She feebly tried to disengage herself. He supported her thus as they walked along.

But they heard the two horses browsing on the leaves.

"Oh! one moment!" said Rodolphe. "Do not let us go! Stay!"

He drew her farther on to a small pool where duckweeds made a greenness on the water. Faded water lilies lay motionless between the reeds. At the noise of their steps in the grass, frogs jumped away to hide themselves.

"I am wrong! I am wrong!" she said. "I am mad to listen to you!"

"Why? Emma! Emma!"

"Oh, Rodolphe!" said the young woman slowly, leaning on his shoulder.

The cloth of her habit caught against the velvet of his coat. She threw back her white neck, swelling with a sigh, and faltering, in tears, with a long shudder and hiding her face, she gave herself up to him —

The shades of night were falling; the horizontal sun passing between the branches dazzled the eyes. Here and there around her, in the leaves or on the ground, trembled luminous patches, as it hummingbirds flying about had scattered their feathers. Silence was everywhere; something sweet seemed to come forth from the trees; she felt her heart, whose beating had begun again, and the blood coursing through her flesh like a stream of milk. Then far away, beyond the wood, on the other hills, she heard a vague prolonged cry, a voice which lingered, and in silence she heard it mingling like music with the last pulsations of her throbbing nerves. Rodolphe, a cigar between his lips, was mending with his penknife one of the two broken bridles mending with his penknife one of the two broken bridles.

They returned to Yonville by the same road. On the mud they saw again the traces of their horses side by side, the same thickets, the same stones to the grass; nothing around them seemed changed; and yet for her something had happened more stupendous than if the mountains had moved in their places. Rodolphe now and again bent forward and took her hand to kiss it.

She was charming on horseback — upright, with her slender waist, her knee bent on the mane of her horse, her face somewhat flushed by the fresh air in the red of the evening.

On entering Yonville she made her horse prance in the road. People looked at her from the windows.

At dinner her husband thought she looked well, but she pretended not to hear him when he inquired about her ride, and she remained sitting there with her elbow at the side of her plate between the two lighted candles.

"Emma!" he said.

"What?"

"Well, I spent the afternoon at Monsieur Alexandre's. He has an old cob, still very fine, only a little broken-kneed, and that could be bought; I am sure, for a hundred crowns." He added, "And thinking it might please you, I have bespoken it — bought it. Have I done right? Do tell me?"

She nodded her head in assent; then a quarter of an hour later —

"Are you going out to-night?" she asked.

"Yes. Why?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing, my dear!"

And as soon as she had got rid of Charles she went and shut herself up in her room.

At first she felt stunned; she saw the trees, the paths, the ditches, Rodolphe, and she again felt the pressure of his arm, while the leaves rustled and the reeds whistled.

But when she saw herself in the glass she wondered at her face. Never had her eyes been so large, so black, of so profound a depth. Something subtle about her being transfigured her. She repeated, "I have a lover! a lover!" delighting at the idea as if a second puberty had come to her. So at last she was to know those joys of love, that fever of happiness of which she had despaired! She was entering upon marvels where all would be passion, ecstasy, delirium. An azure infinity encompassed her, the heights of sentiment sparkled under her thought, and ordinary existence appeared only afar off, down below in the shade, through the interspaces of these heights.

Then she recalled the heroines of the books that she had read, and the lyric legion of these adulterous women began to sing in her memory with the voice of legion of these adulterous women began to sing in her memory with the voice of sisters that charmed her. She became herself, as it were, an actual part of these imaginings, and realised the love-dream of her youth as she saw herself in this type of amorous women whom she had so envied. Besides, Emma felt a satisfaction of revenge. Had she not suffered enough? But now she triumphed, and the love so long pent up burst forth in full joyous bubblings. She tasted it without remorse, without anxiety, without trouble.

The day following passed with a new sweetness. They made vows to one another She told him of her sorrows. Rodolphe interrupted her with kisses; and she looking at him through half-closed eyes, asked him to call her again by her name — to say that he loved her They were in the forest, as yesterday, in the shed of some woodenshoe maker. The walls were of straw, and the roof so low they had to stoop. They were seated side by side on a bed of dry leaves.

From that day forth they wrote to one another regularly every evening. Emma placed her letter at the end of the garden, by the river, in a fissure of the wall. Rodolphe came to fetch it, and put another there, that she always found fault with as too short.

One morning, when Charles had gone out before day break, she was seized with the fancy to see Rodolphe at once. She would go quickly to La Huchette, stay there an hour, and be back again at Yonville while everyone was still asleep. This idea made her pant with desire, and she soon found herself in the middle of the field, walking with rapid steps, without looking behind her.

Day was just breaking. Emma from afar recognised her lover's house. Its two dove-tailed weathercocks stood out black against the pale dawn.

Beyond the farmyard there was a detached building that she thought must be the chateau She entered — it was if the doors at her approach had opened wide of their own accord. A large straight staircase led up to the corridor. Emma raised the latch of a door, and suddenly at the end of the room she saw a man sleeping. It was Rodolphe. She uttered a cry.

"You here? You here?" he repeated. "How did you manage to come? Ah! your dress is damp."

"I love you," she answered, throwing her arms about his neck.

This first piece of daring successful, now every time Charles went out early Emma dressed quickly and slipped on tiptoe down the steps that led to the waterside.

But when the plank for the cows was taken up, she had to go by the walls alongside of the river; the bank was slippery; in order not to fall she caught hold of the tufts of faded wallflowers. Then she went across ploughed fields, in which she sank, stumbling; and clogging her thin shoes. Her scarf, knotted round her head, fluttered to the wind in the meadows. She was afraid of the oxen; she head, fluttered to the wind in the meadows. She was afraid of the oxen; she began to run; she arrived out of breath, with rosy cheeks, and breathing out from her whole person a fresh perfume of sap, of verdure, of the open air. At this hour Rodolphe still slept. It was like a spring morning coming into his room.

The yellow curtains along the windows let a heavy, whitish light enter softly. Emma felt about, opening and closing her eyes, while the drops of dew hanging from her hair formed, as it were, a topaz aureole around her face. Rodolphe, laughing, drew her to him, and pressed her to his breast.

Then she examined the apartment, opened the drawers of the tables, combed her hair with his comb, and looked at herself in his shaving-glass. Often she even put between her teeth the big pipe that lay on the table by the bed, amongst lemons and pieces of sugar near a bottle of water.

It took them a good quarter of an hour to say goodbye. Then Emma cried. She would have wished never to leave Rodolphe. Something stronger than herself forced her to him; so much so, that one day, seeing her come unexpectedly, he frowned as one put out.

"What is the matter with you?" she said. "Are you ill? Tell me!"

At last he declared with a serious air that her visits were becoming imprudent — that she was compromising herself.

Chapter Ten

Gradually Rodolphe's fears took possession of her. At first, love had intoxicated her; and she had thought of nothing beyond. But now that he was indispensable to her life, she feared to lose anything of this, or even that it should be disturbed. When she came back from his house she looked all about her, anxiously watching every form that passed in the horizon, and every village window from which she could be seen. She listened for steps, cries, the noise of the ploughs, and she stopped short, white, and trembling more than the aspen leaves swaying overhead.

One morning as she was thus returning, she suddenly thought she saw the long barrel of a carbine that seemed to be aimed at her. It stuck out sideways from the end of a small tub half-buried in the grass on the edge of a ditch. Emma, half-fainting with terror, nevertheless walked on, and a man stepped out of the tub like a Jack-in-the-box. He had gaiters buckled up to the knees, his cap pulled down over his eyes, trembling lips, and a red nose. It was Captain Binet lying in ambush for wild ducks.

"You ought to have called out long ago!" he exclaimed; "When one sees a gun, one should always give warning."

The taxcollector was thus trying to hide the fright he had had, for a prefectorial order having prohibited duckhunting except in boats, Monsieur Binet, despite his respect for the laws, was infringing them, and so he every moment expected to see the rural guard turn up. But this anxiety whetted his pleasure, and, all alone in his tub, he congratulated himself on his luck and on his cuteness. At sight of Emma he seemed relieved from a great weight, and at once entered upon a conversation.

"It isn't warm; it's nipping."

Emma answered nothing. He went on —

"And you're out so early?"

"Yes," she said stammering; "I am just coming from the nurse where my child is."

"Ah! very good! very good! For myself, I am here, just as you see me, since break of day; but the weather is so muggy, that unless one had the bird at the mouth of the gun — "

"Good evening, Monsieur Binet," she interrupted him, turning on her heel.

"Your servant, madame," he replied drily; and he went back into his tub.

Emma regretted having left the taxcollector so abruptly. No doubt he would form unfavourable conjectures. The story about the nurse was the worst possible excuse, everyone at Yonville knowing that the little Bovary had been at home with her parents for a year. Besides, no one was living in this direction; this path led only to La Huchette. Binet, then, would guess whence she came, and he would not keep silence; he would talk, that was certain. She remained until evening racking her brain with every conceivable lying project, and had constantly before her eyes that imbecile with the game-bag.

Charles after dinner, seeing her gloomy, proposed, by way of distraction, to take her to the chemist's, and the first person she caught sight of in the shop was the taxcollector again. He was standing in front of the counter, lit up by the gleams of the red bottle, and was saying —

"Please give me half an ounce of vitriol."

"Justin," cried the druggist, "bring us the sulphuric acid." Then to Emma, who was going up to Madame Homais' room, "No, stay here; it isn't worth while going up; she is just coming down. Warm yourself at the stove in the meantime. Excuse me. Good-day, doctor," (for the chemist much enjoyed pronouncing the word "doctor," as if addressing another by it reflected on himself some of the grandeur that he found in it). "Now, take care not to upset the mortars! You'd better fetch some chairs from the little room; you know very well that the arm-chairs are not to be taken out of the drawing-room."

And to put his arm-chair back in its place he was darting away from the counter, when Binet asked him for half an ounce of sugar acid.

"Sugar acid!" said the chemist contemptuously, "don't know it; I'm ignorant of it! But perhaps you want oxalic acid. It is oxalic acid, isn't it?"

Binet explained that he wanted a corrosive to make himself some copperwater with which to remove rust from his hunting things.

Emma shuddered. The chemist began saying —

"Indeed the weather is not propitious on account of the damp."

"Nevertheless," replied the taxcollector, with a sly look, "there are people who like it."

She was stifling.

"And give me — "

"Will he never go?" thought she.

"Half an ounce of resin and turpentine, four ounces of yellow wax, and three half ounces of animal charcoal, if you please, to clean the varnished leather of my togs."

The druggist was beginning to cut the wax when Madame Homais appeared, Irma in her arms, Napoleon by her side, and Athalie following. She sat down on the velvet seat by the window, and the lad squatted down on a footstool, while his eldest sister hovered round the jujube box near her papa. The latter was filling funnels and corking phials, sticking on labels, making up parcels. Around him all were silent; only from time to time, were heard the weights jingling in the balance, and a few low words from the chemist giving directions to his pupil.

"And how's the little woman?" suddenly asked Madame Homais.

"Silence!" exclaimed her husband, who was writing down some figures in his waste-book.

"Why didn't you bring her?" she went on in a low voice.

"Hush! hush!" said Emma, pointing with her finger to the druggist.

But Binet, quite absorbed in looking over his bill, had probably heard

But Binet, quite absorbed in looking over his bill, had probably heard nothing. At last he went out. Then Emma, relieved, uttered a deep sigh.

"How hard you are breathing!" said Madame Homais.

"Well, you see, it's rather warm," she replied.

So the next day they talked over how to arrange their rendezvous. Emma wanted to bribe her servant with a present, but it would be better to find some safe house at Yonville. Rodolphe promised to look for one.

All through the winter, three or four times a week, in the dead of night he came to the garden. Emma had on purpose taken away the key of the gate, which Charles thought lost.

To call her, Rodolphe threw a sprinkle of sand at the shutters. She jumped up with a start; but sometimes he had to wait, for Charles had a mania for chatting by the fireside, and he would not stop. She was wild with impatience; if her eyes could have done it, she would have hurled him out at the window. At last she would begin to undress, then take up a book, and go on reading very quietly as if the book amused her. But Charles, who was in bed, called to her to come too.

"Come, now, Emma," he said, "it is time."

"Yes, I am coming," she answered.

Then, as the candles dazzled him; he turned to the wall and fell asleep. She escaped, smiling, palpitating, undressed. Rodolphe had a large cloak; he wrapped her in it, and putting his arm round her waist, he drew her without a word to the end of the garden.

It was in the arbour, on the same seat of old sticks where formerly Leon had looked at her so amorously on the summer evenings. She never thought of him now.

The stars shone through the leafless jasmine branches. Behind them they heard the river flowing, and now and again on the bank the rustling of the dry reeds. Masses of shadow here and there loomed out in the darkness, and sometimes, vibrating with one movement, they rose up and swayed like immense black waves pressing forward to engulf them. The cold of the nights made them clasp closer; the sighs of their lips seemed to them deeper; their eyes that they could hardly see, larger; and in the midst of the silence low words were spoken that fell on their souls sonorous, crystalline, and that reverberated in multiplied vibrations.

When the night was rainy, they took refuge in the consulting-room between the cart-shed and the stable. She lighted one of the kitchen candles that she had hidden behind the books. Rodolphe settled down there as if at home. The sight of the library, of the bureau, of the whole apartment, in fine, excited his merriment, and he could not refrain from making jokes about Charles, which rather embarrassed Emma. She would have liked to see him more serious, and even on embarrassed Emma. She would have liked to see him more serious, and even on occasions more dramatic; as, for example, when she thought she heard a noise of approaching steps in the alley.

"Someone is coming!" she said.

He blew out the light.

"Have you your pistols?"

"Why?"

"Why, to defend yourself," replied Emma.

"From your husband? Oh, poor devil!" And Rodolphe finished his sentence with a gesture that said, "I could crush him with a flip of my finger."

She was wonder-stricken at his bravery, although she felt in it a sort of indecency and a naive coarseness that scandalised her.

Rodolphe reflected a good deal on the affair of the pistols. If she had spoken seriously, it was very ridiculous, he thought, even odious; for he had no reason to hate the good Charles, not being what is called devoured by jealousy; and on this subject Emma had taken a great vow that he did not think in the best of taste.

Besides, she was growing very sentimental. She had insisted on exchanging miniatures; they had cut off handfuls of hair, and now she was asking for a ring — a real wedding-ring, in sign of an eternal union. She often spoke to him of the evening chimes, of the voices of nature. Then she talked to him of her mother — hers! and of his mother — his! Rodolphe had lost his twenty years ago. Emma none the less consoled him with caressing words as one would have done a lost child, and she sometimes even said to him, gazing at the moon —

"I am sure that above there together they approve of our love."

But she was so pretty. He had possessed so few women of such ingenuousness. This love without debauchery was a new experience for him, and, drawing him out of his lazy habits, caressed at once his pride and his sensuality. Emma's enthusiasm, which his bourgeois good sense disdained, seemed to him in his heart of hearts charming, since it was lavished on him. Then, sure of being loved, he no longer kept up appearances, and insensibly his ways changed.

He had no longer, as formerly, words so gentle that they made her cry, nor passionate caresses that made her mad, so that their great love, which engrossed her life, seemed to lessen beneath her like the water of a stream absorbed into its channel, and she could see the bed of it. She would not believe it; she redoubled in tenderness, and Rodolphe concealed his indifference less and less.

She did not know if she regretted having yielded to him, or whether she did not wish, on the contrary, to enjoy him the more. The humiliation of feeling herself weak was turning to rancour, tempered by their voluptuous pleasures. It was not affection; it was like a continual seduction. He subjugated her; she was not affection, it was like a continual seduction. He subjugated her; she almost feared him.

Appearances, nevertheless, were calmer than ever, Rodolphe having succeeded in carrying out the adultery after his own fancy; and at the end of six months, when the spring-time came, they were to one another like a married couple, tranquilly keeping up a domestic flame.

It was the time of year when old Rouault sent his turkey in remembrance of the setting of his leg. The present always arrived with a letter. Emma cut the string that tied it to the basket, and read the following lines: —

"My Dear Children — I hope this will find you well, and that this one will be as good as the others. For it seems to me a little more tender, if I may venture to say so, and heavier. But next time, for a change, I'll give you a turkeycock, unless you have a preference for some dabs; and send me back the hamper, if you please, with the two old ones. I have had an accident with my cart-sheds, whose covering flew off one windy night among the trees. The harvest has not been overgood either. Finally, I don't know when I shall come to see you. It is so difficult now to leave the house since I am alone, my poor Emma."

Here there was a break in the lines, as if the old fellow had dropped his pen to dream a little while.

"For myself, I am very well, except for a cold I caught the other day at the fair at Yvetot, where I had gone to hire a shepherd, having turned away mine because he was too dainty. How we are to be pitied with such a lot of thieves! Besides, he was also rude. I heard from a pedlar, who, travelling through your part of the country this winter, had a tooth drawn, that Bovary was as usual working hard. That doesn't surprise me; and he showed me his tooth; we had some coffee together. I asked him if he had seen you, and he said not, but that he had seen two horses in the stables, from which I conclude that business is looking up. So much the better, my dear children, and may God send you every imaginable happiness! It grieves me not yet to have seen my dear little grand-daughter, Berthe Bovary. I have planted an Orleans plum-tree for her in the garden under your room, and I won't have it touched unless it is to have jam made for her by and bye, that I will keep in the cupboard for her when she comes.

"Good-bye, my dear children. I kiss you, my girl, you too, my son-in-law, and the little one on both cheeks. I am, with best compliments, your loving father.

"Theodore Rouault."

She held the coarse paper in her fingers for some minutes. The spelling mistakes were interwoven one with the other, and Emma followed the kindly thought that cackled right through it like a hen half hidden in the hedge of thorns. The writing had been dried with ashes from the hearth, for a little grey powder slipped from the letter on to her dress, and she almost thought she saw her father bending over the hearth to take up the tongs. How long since she had been with him, sitting on the footstool in the chimney-corner, where she used to burn the end of a bit of wood in the great flame of the sea-sedges! She remembered the summer evenings all full of sunshine. The colts neighed when anyone passed by, and galloped, galloped. Under her window there was a beehive, and sometimes the bees wheeling round in the light struck against her window like rebounding balls of gold. What happiness there had been at that time, what freedom, what hope! What an abundance of illusions! Nothing was left of them now. She had got rid of them all in her soul's life, in all her successive conditions of life, maidenhood, her marriage, and her love — thus constantly losing them all her life through, like a traveller who leaves something of his wealth at every inn along his road.

But what then, made her so unhappy? What was the extraordinary catastrophe that had transformed her? And she raised her head, looking round as if to seek the cause of that which made her suffer.

An April ray was dancing on the china of the whatnot; the fire burned; beneath her slippers she felt the softness of the carpet; the day was bright, the air warm, and she heard her child shouting with laughter.

In fact, the little girl was just then rolling on the lawn in the midst of the grass that was being turned. She was lying flat on her stomach at the top of a rick. The servant was holding her by her skirt. Lestiboudois was raking by her side, and every time he came near she lent forward, beating the air with both her arms.

"Bring her to me," said her mother, rushing to embrace her. "How I love you, my poor child! How I love you!"

Then noticing that the tips of her ears were rather dirty, she rang at once for warm water, and washed her, changed her linen, her stockings, her shoes, asked a thousand questions about her health, as if on the return from a long journey, and finally, kissing her again and crying a little, she gave her back to the servant, who stood quite thunderstricken at this excess of tenderness.

That evening Rodolphe found her more serious than usual.

"That will pass over," he concluded; "it's a whim:"

And he missed three rendezvous running. When he did come, she showed herself cold and almost contemptuous.

"Ah! you're losing your time, my lady!"

And he pretended not to notice her melancholy sighs, nor the handkerchief she took out.

Then Emma repented. She even asked herself why she detested Charles; if it had not been better to have been able to love him? But he gave her no opportunities for such a revival of sentiment, so that she was much embarrassed by her desire for sacrifice, when the druggist came just in time to provide her with an opportunity.

Chapter Eleven

He had recently read a eulogy on a new method for curing clubfoot, and as he was a partisan of progress, he conceived the patriotic idea that Yonville, in order to keep to the fore, ought to have some operations for strephopody or clubfoot.

"For," said he to Emma, "what risk is there? See — " (and he enumerated on his fingers the advantages of the attempt), "success, almost certain relief and beautifying of the patient, celebrity acquired by the operator. Why, for example, should not your husband relieve poor Hippolyte of the 'Lion d'Or'? Note that he would not fail to tell about his cure to all the travellers, and then" (Homais lowered his voice and looked round him) "who is to prevent me from sending a short paragraph on the subject to the paper? Eh! goodness me! an article gets about; it is talked of; it ends by making a snowball! And who knows? who knows?"

In fact, Bovary might succeed. Nothing proved to Emma that he was not clever; and what a satisfaction for her to have urged him to a step by which his reputation and fortune would be increased! She only wished to lean on something more solid than love.

Charles, urged by the druggist and by her, allowed himself to be persuaded. He sent to Rouen for Dr. Duval's volume, and every evening, holding his head between both hands, plunged into the reading of it.

While he was studying equinus, varus, and valgus, that is to say, katastrephopody, endostrephopody, and exostrephopody (or better, the various turnings of the foot downwards, inwards, and outwards, with the hypostrephopody and anastrephopody), otherwise torsion downwards and upwards, Monsier Homais, with all sorts of arguments, was exhorting the lad at the inn to submit to the operation.

"You will scarcely feel, probably, a slight pain; it is a simple prick, like a little blood-letting, less than the extraction of certain corns."

Hippolyte, reflecting, rolled his stupid eyes.

"However," continued the chemist, "it doesn't concern me. It's for your sake, for pure humanity! I should like to see you, my friend, rid of your hideous caudication, together with that waddling of the lumbar regions which, whatever you say, must considerably interfere with you in the exercise of your calling."

Then Homais represented to him how much jollier and brisker he would feel afterwards, and even gave him to understand that he would be more likely to please the women; and the stable-boy began to smile heavily. Then he attacked him through his vanity:

"Aren't you a man? Hang it! what would you have done if you had had to go into the army, to go and fight beneath the standard? Ah! Hippolyte!"

And Homais retired, declaring that he could not understand this obstinacy, this blindness in refusing the benefactions of science.

The poor fellow gave way, for it was like a conspiracy. Binet, who never interfered with other people's business, Madame Lefrancois, Artemise, the neighbours, even the mayor, Monsieur Tuvache — everyone persuaded him, lectured him, shamed him; but what finally decided him was that it would cost him nothing. Bovary even undertook to provide the machine for the operation. This generosity was an idea of Emma's, and Charles consented to it, thinking in his heart of hearts that his wife was an angel.

So by the advice of the chemist, and after three fresh starts, he had a kind of box made by the carpenter, with the aid of the locksmith, that weighed about eight pounds, and in which iron, wood, sheer-iron, leather, screws, and nuts had not been spared.

But to know which of Hippolyte's tendons to cut, it was necessary first of all to find out what kind of clubfoot he had.

He had a foot forming almost a straight line with the leg, which, however, did not prevent it from being turned in, so that it was an equinus together with something of a varus, or else a slight varus with a strong tendency to equinus. But with this equinus, wide in foot like a horse's hoof, with rugose skin, dry tendons, and large toes, on which the black nails looked as if made of iron, the clubfoot ran about like a deer from morn till night. He was constantly to be seen on the Place, jumping round the carts, thrusting his limping foot forwards. He seemed even stronger on that leg than the other. By dint of hard service it had acquired, as it were, moral qualities of patience and energy; and when he was given some heavy work, he stood on it in preference to its fellow.

Now, as it was an equinus, it was necessary to cut the tendon of Achilles, and, if need were, the anterior tibial muscle could be seen to afterwards for getting rid of the varus; for the doctor did not dare to risk both operations at once; he was even trembling already for fear of injuring some important region that he did not know.

Neither Ambrose Pare, applying for the first time since Celsus, after an interval of fifteen centuries, a ligature to an artery, nor Dupuytren, about to open an abscess in the brain, nor Gensoul when he first took away the superior maxilla, had hearts that trembled, hands that shook, minds so strained as Monsieur Bovary when he approached Hippolyte, his tenotome between his fingers. And as at hospitals, near by on a table lay a heap of lint, with waxed thread, many bandages — a pyramid of bandages — every bandage to be found at the druggist's. It was Monsieur Homais who since morning had been organising all these preparations, as much to dazzle the multitude as to keep up his illusions. Charles pierced the skin; a dry crackling was heard. The tendon was cut, the operation over. Hippolyte could not get over his surprise, but bent over Bovary's hands to cover them with kisses.

"Come, be calm," said the druggist; "later on you will show your gratitude to your benefactor."

And he went down to tell the result to five or six inquirers who were waiting in the yard, and who fancied that Hippolyte would reappear walking properly. Then Charles, having buckled his patient into the machine, went home, where Emma, all anxiety, awaited him at the door. She threw herself on his neck; they sat down to table; he ate much, and at dessert he even wanted to take a cup of coffee, a luxury he only permitted himself on Sundays when there was company.

The evening was charming, full of prattle, of dreams together. They talked about their future fortune, of the improvements to be made in their house; he saw people's estimation of him growing, his comforts increasing, his wife always loving him; and she was happy to refresh herself with a new sentiment, healthier, better, to feel at last some tenderness for this poor fellow who adored her. The thought of Rodolphe for one moment passed through her mind, but her eyes turned again to Charles; she even noticed with surprise that he had not bad teeth.

They were in bed when Monsieur Homais, in spite of the servant, suddenly entered the room, holding in his hand a sheet of paper just written. It was the paragraph he intended for the "Fanal de Rouen." He brought it for them to read.

"Read it yourself," said Bovary.

He read —

"'Despite the prejudices that still invest a part of the face of Europe like a net, the light nevertheless begins to penetrate our country places. Thus on Tuesday our little town of Yonville found itself the scene of a surgical operation which is at the same time an act of loftiest philanthropy. Monsieur Bovary, one of our most distinguished practitioners — '"

"Oh, that is too much! too much!" said Charles, choking with emotion.

"No, no! not at all! What next!"

"' — Performed an operation on a clubfooted man.' I have not used the scientific term, because you know in a newspaper everyone would not perhaps understand. The masses must — '"

"No doubt," said Bovary; "go on!"

"I proceed," said the chemist. "'Monsieur Bovary, one of our most distinguished practitioners, performed an operation on a clubfooted man called Hippolyte Tautain, stableman for the last twenty-five years at the hotel of the

"Lion d'Or," kept by Widow Lefrancois, at the Place d'Armes. The novelty of the attempt, and the interest incident to the subject, had attracted such a concourse of persons that there was a veritable obstruction on the threshold of the establishment. The operation, moreover, was performed as if by magic, and barely a few drops of blood appeared on the skin, as though to say that the rebellious tendon had at last given way beneath the efforts of art. The patient, strangely enough — we affirm it as an eye-witness — complained of no pain. His condition up to the present time leaves nothing to be desired. Everything tends to show that his convelescence will be brief; and who knows even if at our next village festivity we shall not see our good Hippolyte figuring in the bacchic dance in the midst of a chorus of joyous boon-companions, and thus proving to all eyes by his verve and his capers his complete cure? Honour, then, to the generous savants! Honour to those indefatigable spirits who consecrate their vigils to the amelioration or to the alleviation of their kind! Honour, thrice honour! Is it not time to cry that the blind shall see, the deaf hear, the lame walk? But that which fanaticism formerly promised to its elect, science now accomplishes for all men. We shall keep our readers informed as to the successive phases of this remarkable cure.'"

This did not prevent Mere Lefrancois, from coming five days after, scared, and crying out —

"Help! he is dying! I am going crazy!"

Charles rushed to the "Lion d'Or," and the chemist, who caught sight of him passing along the Place hatless, abandoned his shop. He appeared himself breathless, red, anxious, and asking everyone who was going up the stairs —

"Why, what's the matter with our interesting strephopode?"

The strephopode was writhing in hideous convulsions, so that the machine in which his leg was enclosed was knocked against the wall enough to break it.

With many precautions, in order not to disturb the position of the limb, the box was removed, and an awful sight presented itself. The outlines of the foot disappeared in such a swelling that the entire skin seemed about to burst, and it was covered with ecchymosis, caused by the famous machine. Hippolyte had already complained of suffering from it. No attention had been paid to him; they had to acknowledge that he had not been altogether wrong, and he was freed for a few hours. But, hardly had the oedema gone down to some extent, than the two savants thought fit to put back the limb in the apparatus, strapping it tighter to hasten matters. At last, three days after, Hippolyte being unable to endure it any longer, they once more removed the machine, and were much surprised at the result they saw. The livid tumefaction spread over the leg, with blisters here and there, whence there oozed a black liquid. Matters were taking a serious turn.

Hippolyte began to worry himself, and Mere Lefrancois, had him installed in the little room near the kitchen, so that he might at least have some distraction.

But the tax-collector, who dined there every day, complained bitterly of such companionship. Then Hippolyte was removed to the billiard-room. He lay there moaning under his heavy coverings, pale with long beard, sunken eyes, and from time to time turning his perspiring head on the dirty pillow, where the flies alighted. Madame Bovary went to see him. She brought him linen for his poultices; she comforted, and encouraged him. Besides, he did not want for company, especially on market-days, when the peasants were knocking about the billiard-balls round him, fenced with the cues, smoked, drank, sang, and brawled.

"How are you?" they said, clapping him on the shoulder. "Ah! you're not up to much, it seems, but it's your own fault. You should do this! do that!" And then they told him stories of people who had all been cured by other remedies than his. Then by way of consolation they added —

"You give way too much! Get up! You coddle yourself like a king! All the same, old chap, you don't smell nice!"

Gangrene, in fact, was spreading more and more. Bovary himself turned sick at it. He came every hour, every moment. Hippolyte looked at him with eyes full of terror, sobbing —

"When shall I get well? Oh, save me! How unfortunate I am! How unfortunate I am!"

And the doctor left, always recommending him to diet himself.

"Don't listen to him, my lad," said Mere Lefrancois, "Haven't they tortured you enough already? You'll grow still weaker. Here! swallow this."

And she gave him some good beef-tea, a slice of mutton, a piece of bacon, and sometimes small glasses of brandy, that he had not the strength to put to his lips.

Abbe Bournisien, hearing that he was growing worse, asked to see him. He began by pitying his sufferings, declaring at the same time that he ought to rejoice at them since it was the will of the Lord, and take advantage of the occasion to reconcile himself to Heaven.

"For," said the ecclesiastic in a paternal tone, "you rather neglected your duties; you were rarely seen at divine worship. How many years is it since you approached the holy table? I understand that your work, that the whirl of the world may have kept you from care for your salvation. But now is the time to reflect. Yet don't despair. I have known great sinners, who, about to appear before God (you are not yet at this point I know), had implored His mercy, and who certainly died in the best frame of mind. Let us hope that, like them, you will set us a good example. Thus, as a precaution, what is to prevent you from will set us a good example. Thus, as a precaution, what is to prevent you from saying morning and evening a 'Hail Mary, full of grace,' and 'Our Father which art in heaven'? Yes, do that, for my sake, to oblige me. That won't cost you anything. Will you promise me?"

The poor devil promised. The cure came back day after day. He chatted with the landlady; and even told anecdotes interspersed with jokes and puns that Hippolyte did not understand. Then, as soon as he could, he fell back upon matters of religion, putting on an appropriate expression of face.

His zeal seemed successful, for the clubfoot soon manifested a desire to go on a pilgrimage to Bon-Secours if he were cured; to which Monsieur Bournisien replied that he saw no objection; two precautions were better than one; it was no risk anyhow.

The druggist was indignant at what he called the manoeuvres of the priest; they were prejudicial, he said, to Hippolyte's convalescence, and he kept repeating to Madame Lefrancois, "Leave him alone! leave him alone! You perturb his morals with your mysticism." But the good woman would no longer listen to him; he was the cause of it all. From a spirit of contradiction she hung up near the bedside of the patient a basin filled with holy-water and a branch of box.

Religion, however, seemed no more able to succour him than surgery, and the invincible gangrene still spread from the extremities towards the stomach. It was all very well to vary the potions and change the poultices; the muscles each day rotted more and more; and at last Charles replied by an affirmative nod of the head when Mere Lefrancois, asked him if she could not, as a forlorn hope, send for Monsieur Canivet of Neufchatel, who was a celebrity.

A doctor of medicine, fifty years of age, enjoying a good position and self-possessed, Charles's colleague did not refrain from laughing disdainfully when he had uncovered the leg, mortified to the knee. Then having flatly declared that it must be amputated, he went off to the chemist's to rail at the asses who could have reduced a poor man to such a state. Shaking Monsieur Homais by the button of his coat, he shouted out in the shop —

"These are the inventions of Paris! These are the ideas of those gentry of the capital! It is like strabismus, chloroform, lithotrity, a heap of monstrosities that the Government ought to prohibit. But they want to do the clever, and they cram you with remedies without, troubling about the consequences. We are not so clever, not we! We are not savants, coxcombs, fops! We are practitioners; we cure people, and we should not dream of operating on anyone who is in perfect health. Straighten club-feet! As if one could straighten club-feet! It is as if one wished, for example, to make a hunchback straight!"

Homais suffered as he listened to this discourse, and he concealed his

Homais suffered as he listened to this discourse, and he concealed his discomfort beneath a courtier's smile; for he needed to humour Monsier Canivet, whose prescriptions sometimes came as far as Yonville. So he did not take up the defence of Bovary; he did not even make a single remark, and, renouncing his principles, he sacrificed his dignity to the more serious interests of his business.

This amputation of the thigh by Doctor Canivet was a great event in the village. On that day all the inhabitants got up earlier, and the Grande Rue, although full of people, had something lugubrious about it, as if an execution had been expected. At the grocer's they discussed Hippolyte's illness; the shops did no business, and Madame Tuvache, the mayor's wife, did not stir from her window, such was her impatience to see the operator arrive.

He came in his gig, which he drove himself. But the springs of the right side having at length given way beneath the weight of his corpulence, it happened that the carriage as it rolled along leaned over a little, and on the other cushion near him could be seen a large box covered in red sheep-leather, whose three brass clasps shone grandly.

After he had entered like a whirlwind the porch of the "Lion d'Or," the doctor, shouting very loud, ordered them to unharness his horse. Then he went into the stable to see that he was eating his oats all right; for on arriving at a patient's he first of all looked after his mare and his gig. People even said about this —

"Ah! Monsieur Canivet's a character!"

And he was the more esteemed for this imperturbable coolness. The universe to the last man might have died, and he would not have missed the smallest of his habits.

Homais presented himself.

"I count on you," said the doctor. "Are we ready? Come along!"

But the druggist, turning red, confessed that he was too sensitive to assist at such an operation.

"When one is a simple spectator," he said, "the imagination, you know, is impressed. And then I have such a nervous system!"

"Pshaw!" interrupted Canivet; "on the contrary, you seem to me inclined to apoplexy. Besides, that doesn't astonish me, for you chemist fellows are always poking about your kitchens, which must end by spoiling your constitutions. Now just look at me. I get up every day at four o'clock; I shave with cold water (and am never cold). I don't wear flannels, and I never catch cold; my carcass is good enough! I live now in one way, now in another, like a philosopher, taking pot-luck; that is why I am not squeamish like you, and it is as indifferent to me to carve a Christian as the first fowl that turns up. Then, perhaps, you will say, habit! habit!"

Then, without any consideration for Hippolyte, who was sweating with agony between his sheets, these gentlemen entered into a conversation, in which the druggist compared the coolness of a surgeon to that of a general; and this comparison was pleasing to Canivet, who launched out on the exigencies of his art. He looked upon, it as a sacred office, although the ordinary practitioners dishonoured it. At last, coming back to the patient, he examined the bandages brought by Homais, the same that had appeared for the clubfoot, and asked for someone to hold the limb for him. Lestiboudois was sent for, and Monsieur Canivet having turned up his sleeves, passed into the billiard-room, while the druggist stayed with Artemise and the landlady, both whiter than their aprons, and with ears strained towards the door.

Bovary during this time did not dare to stir from his house.

He kept downstairs in the sitting-room by the side of the fireless chimney, his chin on his breast, his hands clasped, his eyes staring. "What a mishap!" he thought, "what a mishap!" Perhaps, after all, he had made some slip. He thought it over, but could hit upon nothing. But the most famous surgeons also made mistakes; and that is what no one would ever believe! People, on the contrary, would laugh, jeer! It would spread as far as Forges, as Neufchatel, as Rouen, everywhere! Who could say if his colleagues would not write against him. Polemics would ensue; he would have to answer in the papers. Hippolyte might even prosecute him. He saw himself dishonoured, ruined, lost; and his imagination, assailed by a world of hypotheses, tossed amongst them like an empty cask borne by the sea and floating upon the waves.

Emma, opposite, watched him; she did not share his humiliation; she felt another — that of having supposed such a man was worth anything. As if twenty times already she had not sufficiently perceived his mediocrity.

Charles was walking up and down the room; his boots creaked on the floor.

"Sit down," she said; "you fidget me."

He sat down again.

How was it that she — she, who was so intelligent — could have allowed herself to be deceived again? and through what deplorable madness had she thus ruined her life by continual sacrifices? She recalled all her instincts of luxury, all the privations of her soul, the sordidness of marriage, of the household, her dream sinking into the mire like wounded swallows; all that she had longed for, all that she had denied herself, all that she might have had! And for what? for what?

In the midst of the silence that hung over the village a heart-rending cry rose on the air. Bovary turned white to fainting. She knit her brows with a nervous gesture, then went on. And it was for him, for this creature, for this man, who understood nothing, who felt nothing! For he was there quite quiet, not even suspecting that the ridicule of his name would henceforth sully hers as well as his. She had made efforts to love him, and she had repented with tears for having yielded to another!

"But it was perhaps a valgus!" suddenly exclaimed Bovary, who was meditating.

At the unexpected shock of this phrase falling on her thought like a leaden bullet on a silver plate, Emma, shuddering, raised her head in order to find out what he meant to say; and they looked at the other in silence, almost amazed to see each other, so far sundered were they by their inner thoughts. Charles gazed at her with the dull look of a drunken man, while he listened motionless to the last cries of the sufferer, that followed each other in long-drawn modulations, broken by sharp spasms like the far-off howling of some beast being slaughtered. Emma bit her wan lips, and rolling between her fingers a piece of coral that she had broken, fixed on Charles the burning glance of her eyes like two arrows of fire about to dart forth. Everything in him irritated her now; his face, his dress, what he did not say, his whole person, his existence, in fine. She repented of her past virtue as of a crime, and what still remained of it rumbled away beneath the furious blows of her pride. She revelled in all the evil ironies of triumphant adultery. The memory of her lover came back to her with dazzling attractions; she threw her whole soul into it, borne away towards this image with a fresh enthusiasm; and Charles seemed to her as much removed from her life, as absent forever, as impossible and annihilated, as if he had been about to die and were passing under her eyes.

There was a sound of steps on the pavement. Charles looked up, and through the lowered blinds he saw at the corner of the market in the broad sunshine Dr. Canivet, who was wiping his brow with his handkerchief. Homais, behind him, was carrying a large red box in his hand, and both were going towards the chemist's.

Then with a feeling of sudden tenderness and discouragement Charles turned to his wife saying to her —

"Oh, kiss me, my own!"

"Leave me!" she said, red with anger.

"What is the matter?" he asked, stupefied. "Be calm; compose yourself. You know well enough that I love you. Come!"

"Enough!" she cried with a terrible look.

And escaping from the room, Emma closed the door so violently that the barometer fell from the wall and smashed on the floor.

Charles sank back into his arm-chair overwhelmed, trying to discover what could be wrong with her, fancying some nervous illness, weeping, and vaguely feeling something fatal and incomprehensible whirling round him.

When Rodolphe came to the garden that evening, he found his mistress waiting for him at the foot of the steps on the lowest stair. They threw their arms round one another, and all their rancour melted like snow beneath the warmth of that kiss.

Chapter Twelve

They began to love one another again. Often, even in the middle of the day, Emma suddenly wrote to him, then from the window made a sign to Justin, who, taking his apron off, quickly ran to La Huchette. Rodolphe would come; she had sent for him to tell him that she was bored, that her husband was odious, her life frightful.

"But what can I do?" he cried one day impatiently.

"Ah! if you would — "

She was sitting on the floor between his knees, her hair loose, her look lost.

"Why, what?" said Rodolphe.

She sighed.

"We would go and live elsewhere — somewhere!"

"You are really mad!" he said laughing. "How could that be possible?"

She returned to the subject; he pretended not to understand, and turned the conversation.

What he did not understand was all this worry about so simple an affair as love. She had a motive, a reason, and, as it were, a pendant to her affection.

Her tenderness, in fact, grew each day with her repulsion to her husband. The more she gave up herself to the one, the more she loathed the other. Never had Charles seemed to her so disagreeable, to have such stodgy fingers, such vulgar ways, to be so dull as when they found themselves together after her meeting with Rodolphe. Then, while playing the spouse and virtue, she was burning at the thought of that head whose black hair fell in a curl over the sunburnt brow, of that form at once so strong and elegant, of that man, in a word, who had such experience in his reasoning, such passion in his desires. It was for him that she filed her nails with the care of a chaser, and that there was never enough cold-cream for her skin, nor of patchouli for her handkerchiefs. She loaded herself with bracelets, rings, and necklaces. When he was coming she filled the two large blue glass vases with roses, and prepared her room and her person like a courtesan expecting a prince. The servant had to be constantly washing linen, and all day Felicite did not stir from the kitchen, where little Justin, who often kept her company, watched her at work.

With his elbows on the long board on which she was ironing, he greedily watched all these women's clothes spread about him, the dimity petticoats, the fichus, the collars, and the drawers with running strings, wide at the hips and growing narrower below.

"What is that for?" asked the young fellow, passing his hand over the crinoline or the hooks and eyes.

"Why, haven't you ever seen anything?" Felicite answered laughing. "As if your mistress, Madame Homais, didn't wear the same."

"Oh, I daresay! Madame Homais!" And he added with a meditative air, "As if she were a lady like madame!"

But Felicite grew impatient of seeing him hanging round her. She was six years older than he, and Theodore, Monsieur Guillaumin's servant, was beginning to pay court to her.

"Let me alone," she said, moving her pot of starch. "You'd better be off and pound almonds; you are always dangling about women. Before you meddle with such things, bad boy, wait till you've got a beard to your chin."

"Oh, don't be cross! I'll go and clean her boots."

And he at once took down from the shelf Emma's boots, all coated with mud, the mud of the rendezvous, that crumbled into powder beneath his fingers, and that he watched as it gently rose in a ray of sunlight.

"How afraid you are of spoiling them!" said the servant, who wasn't so particular when she cleaned them herself, because as soon as the stuff of the boots was no longer fresh madame handed them over to her.

Emma had a number in her cupboard that she squandered one after the other, without Charles allowing himself the slightest observation. So also he disbursed three hundred francs for a wooden leg that she thought proper to make a present of to Hippolyte. Its top was covered with cork, and it had spring joints, a complicated mechanism, covered over by black trousers ending in a patent-leather boot. But Hippolyte, not daring to use such a handsome leg every day, begged Madame Bovary to get him another more convenient one. The doctor, of course, had again to defray the expense of this purchase.

So little by little the stable-man took up his work again. One saw him running about the village as before, and when Charles heard from afar the sharp noise of the wooden leg, he at once went in another direction.

It was Monsieur Lheureux, the shopkeeper, who had undertaken the order; this provided him with an excuse for visiting Emma. He chatted with her about the new goods from Paris, about a thousand feminine trifles, made himself very obliging, and never asked for his money. Emma yielded to this lazy mode of satisfying all her caprices. Thus she wanted to have a very handsome ridding-whip that was at an umbrella-maker's at Rouen to give to Rodolphe. The week after Monsieur Lheureux placed it on her table.

But the next day he called on her with a bill for two hundred and seventy francs, not counting the centimes. Emma was much embarrassed; all the drawers of the writing-table were empty; they owed over a fortnight's wages to

Lestiboudois, two quarters to the servant, for any quantity of other things, and Bovary was impatiently expecting Monsieur Derozeray's account, which he was in the habit of paying every year about Midsummer.

She succeeded at first in putting off Lheureux. At last he lost patience; he was being sued; his capital was out, and unless he got some in he should be forced to take back all the goods she had received.

"Oh, very well, take them!" said Emma.

"I was only joking," he replied; "the only thing I regret is the whip. My word! I'll ask monsieur to return it to me."

"No, no!" she said.

"Ah! I've got you!" thought Lheureux.

And, certain of his discovery, he went out repeating to himself in an undertone, and with his usual low whistle —

"Good! we shall see! we shall see!"

She was thinking how to get out of this when the servant coming in put on the mantelpiece a small roll of blue paper "from Monsieur Derozeray's." Emma pounced upon and opened it. It contained fifteen napoleons; it was the account. She heard Charles on the stairs; threw the gold to the back of her drawer, and took out the key.

Three days after Lheureux reappeared.

"I have an arrangement to suggest to you," he said. "If, instead of the sum agreed on, you would take — "

"Here it is," she said placing fourteen napoleons in his hand.

The tradesman was dumfounded. Then, to conceal his disappointment, he was profuse in apologies and proffers of service, all of which Emma declined; then she remained a few moments fingering in the pocket of her apron the two five-franc pieces that he had given her in change. She promised herself she would economise in order to pay back later on. "Pshaw!" she thought, "he won't think about it again."

Besides the riding-whip with its silver-gilt handle, Rodolphe had received a seal with the motto Amor nel cor* furthermore, a scarf for a muffler, and, finally, a cigar-case exactly like the Viscount's, that Charles had formerly picked up in the road, and that Emma had kept. These presents, however, humiliated him; he refused several; she insisted, and he ended by obeying, thinking her tyrannical and overexacting.

*A loving heart.

Then she had strange ideas.

"When midnight strikes," she said, "you must think of me."

And if he confessed that he had not thought of her, there were floods of reproaches that always ended with the eternal question —

"Do you love me?"

"Why, of course I love you," he answered.

"A great deal?"

"Certainly!"

"You haven't loved any others?"

"Did you think you'd got a virgin?" he exclaimed laughing.

Emma cried, and he tried to console her, adorning his protestations with puns.

"Oh," she went on, "I love you! I love you so that I could not live without you, do you see? There are times when I long to see you again, when I am torn by all the anger of love. I ask myself, Where is he? Perhaps he is talking to other women. They smile upon him; he approaches. Oh no; no one else pleases you. There are some more beautiful, but I love you best. I know how to love best. I am your servant, your concubine! You are my king, my idol! You are good, you are beautiful, you are clever, you are strong!"

He had so often heard these things said that they did not strike him as original. Emma was like all his mistresses; and the charm of novelty, gradually falling away like a garment, laid bare the eternal monotony of passion, that has always the same forms and the same language. He did not distinguish, this man of so much experience, the difference of sentiment beneath the sameness of expression. Because lips libertine and venal had murmured such words to him, he believed but little in the candour of hers; exaggerated speeches hiding mediocre affections must be discounted; as if the fullness of the soul did not sometimes overflow in the emptiest metaphors, since no one can ever give the exact measure of his needs, nor of his conceptions, nor of his sorrows; and since human speech is like a cracked tin kettle, on which we hammer out tunes to make bears dance when we long to move the stars.

But with that superior critical judgment that belongs to him who, in no matter what circumstance, holds back, Rodolphe saw other delights to be got out of this love. He thought all modesty in the way. He treated her quite sans facon.* He made of her something supple and corrupt. Hers was an idiotic sort of attachment, full of admiration for him, of voluptuousness for her, a beatitude that benumbed her; her soul sank into this drunkenness, shrivelled up, drowned in it, like Clarence in his butt of Malmsey.

*Off-handedly.

By the mere effect of her love Madame Bovary's manners changed. Her looks grew bolder, her speech more free; she even committed the impropriety of walking out with Monsieur Rodolphe, a cigarette in her mouth, "as if to defy the people." At last, those who still doubted doubted no longer when one day they saw her getting out of the "Hirondelle," her waist squeezed into a waistcoat like a man; and Madame Bovary senior, who, after a fearful scene with her husband, had taken refuge at her son's, was not the least scandalised of the women-folk. Many other things displeased her. First, Charles had not attended to her advice about the forbidding of novels; then the "ways of the house" annoyed her; she allowed herself to make some remarks, and there were quarrels, especially one on account of Felicite.

Madame Bovary senior, the evening before, passing along the passage, had surprised her in company of a man — a man with a brown collar, about forty years old, who, at the sound of her step, had quickly escaped through the kitchen. Then Emma began to laugh, but the good lady grew angry, declaring that unless morals were to be laughed at one ought to look after those of one's servants.

"Where were you brought up?" asked the daughter-in-law, with so impertinent a look that Madame Bovary asked her if she were not perhaps defending her own case.

"Leave the room!" said the young woman, springing up with a bound.

"Emma! Mamma!" cried Charles, trying to reconcile them.

But both had fled in their exasperation. Emma was stamping her feet as she repeated —

"Oh! what manners! What a peasant!"

He ran to his mother; she was beside herself. She stammered

"She is an insolent, giddy-headed thing, or perhaps worse!"

And she was for leaving at once if the other did not apologise. So Charles went back again to his wife and implored her to give way; he knelt to her; she ended by saying —

"Very well! I'll go to her."

And in fact she held out her hand to her mother-in-law with the dignity of a marchioness as she said —

"Excuse me, madame."

Then, having gone up again to her room, she threw herself flat on her bed and cried there like a child, her face buried in the pillow.

She and Rodolphe had agreed that in the event of anything extraordinary occurring, she should fasten a small piece of white paper to the blind, so that if by chance he happened to be in Yonville, he could hurry to the lane behind the house. Emma made the signal; she had been waiting three-quarters of an hour when she suddenly caught sight of Rodolphe at the corner of the market. She felt tempted to open the window and call him, but he had already disappeared. She fell back in despair.

Soon, however, it seemed to her that someone was walking on the pavement

Soon, however, it seemed to her that someone was walking on the pavement. It was he, no doubt. She went downstairs, crossed the yard. He was there outside. She threw herself into his arms.

"Do take care!" he said.

"Ah! if you knew!" she replied.

And she began telling him everything, hurriedly, disjointedly, exaggerating the facts, inventing many, and so prodigal of parentheses that he understood nothing of it.

"Come, my poor angel, courage! Be comforted! be patient!"

"But I have been patient; I have suffered for four years. A love like ours ought to show itself in the face of heaven. They torture me! I can bear it no longer! Save me!"

She clung to Rodolphe. Her eyes, full of tears, flashed like flames beneath a wave; her breast heaved; he had never loved her so much, so that he lost his head and said "What is, it? What do you wish?"

"Take me away," she cried, "carry me off! Oh, I pray you!"

And she threw herself upon his mouth, as if to seize there the unexpected consent if breathed forth in a kiss.

"But — " Rodolphe resumed.

"What?"

"Your little girl!"

She reflected a few moments, then replied —

"We will take her! It can't be helped!"

"What a woman!" he said to himself, watching her as she went. For she had run into the garden. Someone was calling her.

On the following days Madame Bovary senior was much surprised at the change in her daughter-in-law. Emma, in fact, was showing herself more docile, and even carried her deference so far as to ask for a recipe for pickling gherkins.

Was it the better to deceive them both? Or did she wish by a sort of voluptuous stoicism to feel the more profoundly the bitterness of the things she was about to leave?

But she paid no heed to them; on the contrary, she lived as lost in the anticipated delight of her coming happiness.

It was an eternal subject for conversation with Rodolphe. She leant on his shoulder murmuring —

"Ah! when we are in the mail-coach! Do you think about it? Can it be? It seems to me that the moment I feel the carriage start, it will be as if we were rising in a balloon, as if we were setting out for the clouds. Do you know that I count the hours? And you?"

Never had Madame Bovary been so beautiful as at this period; she had that

Never had Madame Bovary been so beautiful as at this period; she had that indefinable beauty that results from joy, from enthusiasm, from success, and that is only the harmony of temperament with circumstances. Her desires, her sorrows, the experience of pleasure, and her ever-young illusions, that had, as soil and rain and winds and the sun make flowers grow, gradually developed her, and she at length blossomed forth in all the plenitude of her nature. Her eyelids seemed chiselled expressly for her long amorous looks in which the pupil disappeared, while a strong inspiration expanded her delicate nostrils and raised the fleshy corner of her lips, shaded in the light by a little black down. One would have thought that an artist apt in conception had arranged the curls of hair upon her neck; they fell in a thick mass, negligently, and with the changing chances of their adultery, that unbound them every day. Her voice now took more mellow infections, her figure also; something subtle and penetrating escaped even from the folds of her gown and from the line of her foot. Charles, as when they were first married, thought her delicious and quite irresistible.

When he came home in the middle of the night, he did not dare to wake her. The porcelain night-light threw a round trembling gleam upon the ceiling, and the drawn curtains of the little cot formed as it were a white hut standing out in the shade, and by the bedside Charles looked at them. He seemed to hear the light breathing of his child. She would grow big now; every season would bring rapid progress. He already saw her coming from school as the day drew in, laughing, with ink-stains on her jacket, and carrying her basket on her arm. Then she would have to be sent to the boarding-school; that would cost much; how was it to be done? Then he reflected. He thought of hiring a small farm in the neighbourhood, that he would superintend every morning on his way to his patients. He would save up what he brought in; he would put it in the savings-bank. Then he would buy shares somewhere, no matter where; besides, his practice would increase; he counted upon that, for he wanted Berthe to be well-educated, to be accomplished, to learn to play the piano. Ah! how pretty she would be later on when she was fifteen, when, resembling her mother, she would, like her, wear large straw hats in the summer-time; from a distance they would be taken for two sisters. He pictured her to himself working in the evening by their side beneath the light of the lamp; she would embroider him slippers; she would look after the house; she would fill all the home with her charm and her gaiety. At last, they would think of her marriage; they would find her some good young fellow with a steady business; he would make her happy; this would last for ever.

Emma was not asleep; she pretended to be; and while he dozed off by her side she awakened to other dreams.

To the gallop of four horses she was carried away for a week towards a new

To the gallop of four horses she was carried away for a week towards a new land, whence they would return no more. They went on and on, their arms entwined, without a word. Often from the top of a mountain there suddenly glimpsed some splendid city with domes, and bridges, and ships, forests of citron trees, and cathedrals of white marble, on whose pointed steeples were storks' nests. They went at a walking-pace because of the great flag-stones, and on the ground there were bouquets of flowers, offered you by women dressed in red bodices. They heard the chiming of bells, the neighing of mules, together with the murmur of guitars and the noise of fountains, whose rising spray refreshed heaps of fruit arranged like a pyramid at the foot of pale statues that smiled beneath playing waters. And then, one night they came to a fishing village, where brown nets were drying in the wind along the cliffs and in front of the huts. It was there that they would stay; they would live in a low, flat-roofed house, shaded by a palm-tree, in the heart of a gulf, by the sea. They would row in gondolas, swing in hammocks, and their existence would be easy and large as their silk gowns, warm and star-spangled as the nights they would contemplate. However, in the immensity of this future that she conjured up, nothing special stood forth; the days, all magnificent, resembled each other like waves; and it swayed in the horizon, infinite, harmonised, azure, and bathed in sunshine. But the child began to cough in her cot or Bovary snored more loudly, and Emma did not fall asleep till morning, when the dawn whitened the windows, and when little Justin was already in the square taking down the shutters of the chemist's shop.

She had sent for Monsieur Lheureux, and had said to him —

"I want a cloak — a large lined cloak with a deep collar."

"You are going on a journey?" he asked.

"No; but — never mind. I may count on you, may I not, and quickly?"

He bowed.

"Besides, I shall want," she went on, "a trunk — not too heavy — handy."

"Yes, yes, I understand. About three feet by a foot and a half, as they are being made just now."

"And a travelling bag."

"Decidedly," thought Lheureux, "there's a row on here."

"And," said Madame Bovary, taking her watch from her belt, "take this; you can pay yourself out of it."

But the tradesman cried out that she was wrong; they knew one another; did he doubt her? What childishness!

She insisted, however, on his taking at least the chain, and Lheureux had already put it in his pocket and was going, when she called him back.

"You will leave everything at your place. As to the cloak" — she seemed to be reflecting — "do not bring it either; you can give me the maker's address, and tell him to have it ready for me."

It was the next month that they were to run away. She was to leave Yonville as if she was going on some business to Rouen. Rodolphe would have booked the seats, procured the passports, and even have written to Paris in order to have the whole mail-coach reserved for them as far as Marseilles, where they would buy a carriage, and go on thence without stopping to Genoa. She would take care to send her luggage to Lheureux whence it would be taken direct to the "Hirondelle," so that no one would have any suspicion. And in all this there never was any allusion to the child. Rodolphe avoided speaking of her; perhaps he no longer thought about it.

He wished to have two more weeks before him to arrange some affairs; then at the end of a week he wanted two more; then he said he was ill; next he went on a journey. The month of August passed, and, after all these delays, they decided that it was to be irrevocably fixed for the 4th September — a Monday.

At length the Saturday before arrived.

Rodolphe came in the evening earlier than usual.

"Everything is ready?" she asked him.

"Yes."

Then they walked round a garden-bed, and went to sit down near the terrace on the kerb-stone of the wall.

"You are sad," said Emma.

"No; why?"

And yet he looked at her strangely in a tender fashion.

"It is because you are going away?" she went on; "because you are leaving what is dear to you — your life? Ah! I understand. I have nothing in the world! you are all to me; so shall I be to you. I will be your people, your country; I will tend, I will love you!"

"How sweet you are!" he said, seizing her in his arms.

"Really!" she said with a voluptuous laugh. "Do you love me? Swear it then!"

"Do I love you — love you? I adore you, my love."

The moon, full and purple-coloured, was rising right out of the earth at the end of the meadow. She rose quickly between the branches of the poplars, that hid her here and there like a black curtain pierced with holes. Then she appeared dazzling with whiteness in the empty heavens that she lit up, and now sailing more slowly along, let fall upon the river a great stain that broke up into an infinity of stars; and the silver sheen seemed to writhe through the very depths like a heedless serpent covered with luminous scales; it also resembled some monster candelabra all along which sparkled drops of diamonds running together. The soft night was about them; masses of shadow filled the branches. Emma, her eyes half closed, breathed in with deep sighs the fresh wind that was blowing. They did not speak, lost as they were in the rush of their reverie. The tenderness of the old days came back to their hearts, full and silent as the flowing river, with the softness of the perfume of the syringas, and threw across their memories shadows more immense and more sombre than those of the still willows that lengthened out over the grass. Often some night-animal, hedgehog or weasel, setting out on the hunt, disturbed the lovers, or sometimes they heard a ripe peach falling all alone from the espalier.

"Ah! what a lovely night!" said Rodolphe.

"We shall have others," replied Emma; and, as if speaking to herself: "Yet, it will be good to travel. And yet, why should my heart be so heavy? Is it dread of the unknown? The effect of habits left? Or rather — ? No; it is the excess of happiness. How weak I am, am I not? Forgive me!"

"There is still time!" he cried. "Reflect! perhaps you may repent!"

"Never!" she cried impetuously. And coming closer to him: "What ill could come to me? There is no desert, no precipice, no ocean I would not traverse with you. The longer we live together the more it will be like an embrace, every day closer, more heart to heart. There will be nothing to trouble us, no cares, no obstacle. We shall be alone, all to ourselves eternally. Oh, speak! Answer me!"

At regular intervals he answered, "Yes — Yes — " She had passed her hands through his hair, and she repeated in a childlike voice, despite the big tears which were falling, "Rodolphe! Rodolphe! Ah! Rodolphe! dear little Rodolphe!"

Midnight struck.

"Midnight!" said she. "Come, it is to-morrow. One day more!"

He rose to go; and as if the movement he made had been the signal for their flight, Emma said, suddenly assuming a gay air —

"You have the passports?"

"Yes."

"You are forgetting nothing?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Certainly."

"It is at the Hotel de Provence, is it not, that you will wait for me at midday?"

He nodded.

"Till to-morrow then!" said Emma in a last caress; and she watched him go.

He did not turn round. She ran after him, and, leaning over the water's edge between the bulrushes —

"To-morrow!" she cried.

He was already on the other side of the river and walking fast across the meadow.

After a few moments Rodolphe stopped; and when he saw her with her white gown gradually fade away in the shade like a ghost, he was seized with such a beating of the heart that he leant against a tree lest he should fall.

"What an imbecile I am!" he said with a fearful oath. "No matter! She was a pretty mistress!"

And immediately Emma's beauty, with all the pleasures of their love, came back to him. For a moment he softened; then he rebelled against her.

"For, after all," he exclaimed, gesticulating, "I can't exile myself — have a child on my hands."

He was saying these things to give himself firmness.

"And besides, the worry, the expense! Ah! no, no, no, no! a thousand times no! That would be too stupid."

Chapter Thirteen

No sooner was Rodolphe at home than he sat down quickly at his bureau under the stag's head that hung as a trophy on the wall. But when he had the pen between his fingers, he could think of nothing, so that, resting on his elbows, he began to reflect. Emma seemed to him to have receded into a far-off past, as if the resolution he had taken had suddenly placed a distance between them.

To get back something of her, he fetched from the cupboard at the bedside an old Rheims biscuit-box, in which he usually kept his letters from women, and from it came an odour of dry dust and withered roses. First he saw a handkerchief with pale little spots. It was a handkerchief of hers. Once when they were walking her nose had bled; he had forgotten it. Near it, chipped at all the corners, was a miniature given him by Emma: her toilette seemed to him pretentious, and her languishing look in the worst possible taste. Then, from looking at this image and recalling the memory of its original, Emma's features little by little grew confused in his remembrance, as if the living and the painted face, rubbing one against the other, had effaced each other. Finally, he read some of her letters; they were full of explanations relating to their journey, short, technical, and urgent, like business notes. He wanted to see the long ones again, those of old times. In order to find them at the bottom of the box, Rodolphe disturbed all the others, and mechanically began rummaging amidst this mass of papers and things, finding pell-mell bouquets, garters, a black mask, pins, and hair — hair! dark and fair, some even, catching in the hinges of the box, broke when it was opened.

Thus dallying with his souvenirs, he examined the writing and the style of the letters, as varied as their orthography. They were tender or jovial, facetious, melancholy; there were some that asked for love, others that asked for money. A word recalled faces to him, certain gestures, the sound of a voice; sometimes, however, he remembered nothing at all.

In fact, these women, rushing at once into his thoughts, cramped each other and lessened, as reduced to a uniform level of love that equalised them all. So taking handfuls of the mixed-up letters, he amused himself for some moments with letting them fall in cascades from his right into his left hand. At last, bored and weary, Rodolphe took back the box to the cupboard, saying to himself, "What a lot of rubbish!" Which summed up his opinion; for pleasures, like schoolboys in a school courtyard, had so trampled upon his heart that no green thing grew there, and that which passed through it, more heedless than children, did not even, like them, leave a name carved upon the wall.

"Come," said he, "let's begin."

He wrote —

"Courage, Emma! courage! I would not bring misery into your life."

"After all, that's true," thought Rodolphe. "I am acting in her interest; I am honest."

"Have you carefully weighed your resolution? Do you know to what an abyss I was dragging you, poor angel? No, you do not, do you? You were coming confident and fearless, believing in happiness in the future. Ah! unhappy that we are — insensate!"

Rodolphe stopped here to think of some good excuse.

"If I told her all my fortune is lost? No! Besides, that would stop nothing. It would all have to be begun over again later on. As if one could make women like that listen to reason!" He reflected, then went on —

"I shall not forget you, oh believe it; and I shall ever have a profound devotion for you; but some day, sooner or later, this ardour (such is the fate of human things) would have grown less, no doubt. Lassitude would have come to us, and who knows if I should not even have had the atrocious pain of witnessing your remorse, of sharing it myself, since I should have been its cause? The mere idea of the grief that would come to you tortures me, Emma. Forget me! Why did I ever know you? Why were you so beautiful? Is it my fault? O my God! No, no! Accuse only fate."

"That's a word that always tells," he said to himself.

"Ah, if you had been one of those frivolous women that one sees, certainly I might, through egotism, have tried an experiment, in that case without danger for you. But that delicious exaltation, at once your charm and your torment, has prevented you from understanding, adorable woman that you are, the falseness of our future position. Nor had I reflected upon this at first, and I rested in the shade of that ideal happiness as beneath that of the manchineel tree, without foreseeing the consequences."

"Perhaps she'll think I'm giving it up from avarice. Ah, well! so much the worse; it must be stopped!"

"The world is cruel, Emma. Wherever we might have gone, it would have persecuted us. You would have had to put up with indiscreet questions, calumny, contempt, insult perhaps. Insult to you! Oh! And I, who would place you on a throne! I who bear with me your memory as a talisman! For I am going to punish myself by exile for all the ill I have done you. I am going away. Whither I know not. I am mad. Adieu! Be good always. Preserve the memory of the unfortunate who has lost you. Teach my name to your child; let her repeat it in her prayers."

The wicks of the candles flickered. Rodolphe got up to, shut the window, and when he had sat down again —

"I think it's all right. Ah! and this for fear she should come and hunt me up."

"I shall be far away when you read these sad lines, for I have wished to flee as quickly as possible to shun the temptation of seeing you again. No weakness! I shall return, and perhaps later on we shall talk together very coldly of our old love. Adieu!"

And there was a last "adieu" divided into two words! "A Dieu!" which he thought in very excellent taste.

"Now how am I to sign?" he said to himself. "'Yours devotedly?' No! 'Your friend?' Yes, that's it."

"Your friend."

He re-read his letter. He considered it very good.

"Poor little woman!" he thought with emotion. "She'll think me harder than a rock. There ought to have been some tears on this; but I can't cry; it isn't my fault." Then, having emptied some water into a glass, Rodolphe dipped his finger into it, and let a big drop fall on the paper, that made a pale stain on the ink. Then looking for a seal, he came upon the one "Amor nel cor."

"That doesn't at all fit in with the circumstances. Pshaw! never mind!"

After which he smoked three pipes and went to bed.

The next day when he was up (at about two o'clock — he had slept late), Rodolphe had a basket of apricots picked. He put his letter at the bottom under some vine leaves, and at once ordered Girard, his ploughman, to take it with care to Madame Bovary. He made use of this means for corresponding with her, sending according to the season fruits or game.

"If she asks after me," he said, "you will tell her that I have gone on a journey. You must give the basket to her herself, into her own hands. Get along and take care!"

Girard put on his new blouse, knotted his handkerchief round the apricots, and walking with great heavy steps in his thick iron-bound galoshes, made his way to Yonville.

Madame Bovary, when he got to her house, was arranging a bundle of linen on the kitchen-table with Felicite.

"Here," said the ploughboy, "is something for you — from the master."

She was seized with apprehension, and as she sought in her pocket for some coppers, she looked at the peasant with haggard eyes, while he himself looked at her with amazement, not understanding how such a present could so move anyone. At last he went out. Felicite remained. She could bear it no longer; she ran into the sitting room as if to take the apricots there, overturned the basket, tore away the leaves, found the letter, opened it, and, as if some fearful fire were behind her, Emma flew to her room terrified.

Charles was there; she saw him; he spoke to her; she heard nothing, and she went on quickly up the stairs, breathless, distraught, dumb, and ever holding this horrible piece of paper, that crackled between her fingers like a plate of sheet-iron. On the second floor she stopped before the attic door, which was closed.

Then she tried to calm herself; she recalled the letter; she must finish it; she did not dare to. And where? How? She would be seen! "Ah, no! here," she thought, "I shall be all right."

Emma pushed open the door and went in.

The slates threw straight down a heavy heat that gripped her temples, stifled her; she dragged herself to the closed garret-window. She drew back the bolt, and the dazzling light burst in with a leap.

Opposite, beyond the roofs, stretched the open country till it was lost to sight. Down below, underneath her, the village square was empty; the stones of the pavement glittered, the weathercocks on the houses were motionless. At the corner of the street, from a lower storey, rose a kind of humming with strident modulations. It was Binet turning.

She leant against the embrasure of the window, and reread the letter with angry sneers. But the more she fixed her attention upon it, the more confused were her ideas. She saw him again, heard him, encircled him with her arms, and throbs of her heart, that beat against her breast like blows of a sledge-hammer, grew faster and faster, with uneven intervals. She looked about her with the wish that the earth might crumble into pieces. Why not end it all? What restrained her? She was free. She advanced, looking at the paving-stones, saying to herself, "Come! come!"

The luminous ray that came straight up from below drew the weight of her body towards the abyss. It seemed to her that the ground of the oscillating square went up the walls and that the floor dipped on end like a tossing boat. She was right at the edge, almost hanging, surrounded by vast space. The blue of the heavens suffused her, the air was whirling in her hollow head; she had but to yield, to let herself be taken; and the humming of the lathe never ceased, like an angry voice calling her.

"Emma! Emma!" cried Charles.

She stopped.

"Wherever are you? Come!"

The thought that she had just escaped from death almost made her faint with terror. She closed her eyes; then she shivered at the touch of a hand on her sleeve; it was Felicite.

"Master is waiting for you, madame; the soup is on the table."

And she had to go down to sit at table.

And she had to go down to sit at table.

She tried to eat. The food choked her. Then she unfolded her napkin as if to examine the darns, and she really thought of applying herself to this work, counting the threads in the linen. Suddenly the remembrance of the letter returned to her. How had she lost it? Where could she find it? But she felt such weariness of spirit that she could not even invent a pretext for leaving the table. Then she became a coward; she was afraid of Charles; he knew all, that was certain! Indeed he pronounced these words in a strange manner:

"We are not likely to see Monsieur Rodolphe soon again, it seems."

"Who told you?" she said, shuddering.

"Who told me!" he replied, rather astonished at her abrupt tone. "Why, Girard, whom I met just now at the door of the Cafe Francais. He has gone on a journey, or is to go."

She gave a sob.

"What surprises you in that? He absents himself like that from time to time for a change, and, ma foi, I think he's right, when one has a fortune and is a bachelor. Besides, he has jolly times, has our friend. He's a bit of a rake. Monsieur Langlois told me — "

He stopped for propriety's sake because the servant came in. She put back into the basket the apricots scattered on the sideboard. Charles, without noticing his wife's colour, had them brought to him, took one, and bit into it.

"Ah! perfect!" said he; "just taste!"

And he handed her the basket, which she put away from her gently.

"Do just smell! What an odour!" he remarked, passing it under her nose several times.

"I am choking," she cried, leaping up. But by an effort of will the spasm passed; then —

"It is nothing," she said, "it is nothing! It is nervousness. Sit down and go on eating." For she dreaded lest he should begin questioning her, attending to her, that she should not be left alone.

Charles, to obey her, sat down again, and he spat the stones of the apricots into his hands, afterwards putting them on his plate.

Suddenly a blue tilbury passed across the square at a rapid trot. Emma uttered a cry and fell back rigid to the ground.

In fact, Rodolphe, after many reflections, had decided to set out for Rouen. Now, as from La Huchette to Buchy there is no other way than by Yonville, he had to go through the village, and Emma had recognised him by the rays of the lanterns, which like lightning flashed through the twilight.

The chemist, at the tumult which broke out in the house ran thither. The table with all the plates was upset; sauce, meat, knives, the salt, and cruet-stand were with all the plates was upset, sauce, meat, knives, the salt, and cruet-stand were strewn over the room; Charles was calling for help; Berthe, scared, was crying; and Felicite, whose hands trembled, was unlacing her mistress, whose whole body shivered convulsively.

"I'll run to my laboratory for some aromatic vinegar," said the druggist.

Then as she opened her eyes on smelling the bottle —

"I was sure of it," he remarked; "that would wake any dead person for you!"

"Speak to us," said Charles; "collect yourself; it is your Charles, who loves you. Do you know me? See! here is your little girl! Oh, kiss her!"

The child stretched out her arms to her mother to cling to her neck. But turning away her head, Emma said in a broken voice "No, no! no one!"

She fainted again. They carried her to her bed. She lay there stretched at full length, her lips apart, her eyelids closed, her hands open, motionless, and white as a waxen image. Two streams of tears flowed from her eyes and fell slowly upon the pillow.

Charles, standing up, was at the back of the alcove, and the chemist, near him, maintained that meditative silence that is becoming on the serious occasions of life.

"Do not be uneasy," he said, touching his elbow; "I think the paroxysm is past."

"Yes, she is resting a little now," answered Charles, watching her sleep. "Poor girl! poor girl! She had gone off now!"

Then Homais asked how the accident had come about. Charles answered that she had been taken ill suddenly while she was eating some apricots.

"Extraordinary!" continued the chemist. "But it might be that the apricots had brought on the syncope. Some natures are so sensitive to certain smells; and it would even be a very fine question to study both in its pathological and physiological relation. The priests know the importance of it, they who have introduced aromatics into all their ceremonies. It is to stupefy the senses and to bring on ecstasies — a thing, moreover, very easy in persons of the weaker sex, who are more delicate than the other. Some are cited who faint at the smell of burnt hartshorn, of new bread — "

"Take care; you'll wake her!" said Bovary in a low voice.

"And not only," the druggist went on, "are human beings subject to such anomalies, but animals also. Thus you are not ignorant of the singularly aphrodisiac effect produced by the Nepeta cataria, vulgarly called catmint, on the feline race; and, on the other hand, to quote an example whose authenticity I can answer for. Bridaux (one of my old comrades, at present established in the Rue Malpalu) possesses a dog that falls into convulsions as soon as you hold out a snuff-box to him. He often even makes the experiment before his friends at his a snuff-box to him. He often even makes the experiment before his friends at his summer-house at Guillaume Wood. Would anyone believe that a simple sternutation could produce such ravages on a quadrupedal organism? It is extremely curious, is it not?"

"Yes," said Charles, who was not listening to him.

"This shows us," went on the other, smiling with benign self-sufficiency, "the innumerable irregularities of the nervous system. With regard to madame, she has always seemed to me, I confess, very susceptible. And so I should by no means recommend to you, my dear friend, any of those so-called remedies that, under the pretence of attacking the symptoms, attack the constitution. No; no useless physicking! Diet, that is all; sedatives, emollients, dulcification. Then, don't you think that perhaps her imagination should be worked upon?"

"In what way? How?" said Bovary.

"Ah! that is it. Such is indeed the question. 'That is the question,' as I lately read in a newspaper."

But Emma, awaking, cried out —

"The letter! the letter!"

They thought she was delirious; and she was by midnight. Brain-fever had set in.

For forty-three days Charles did not leave her. He gave up all his patients; he no longer went to bed; he was constantly feeling her pulse, putting on sinapisms and cold-water compresses. He sent Justin as far as Neufchatel for ice; the ice melted on the way; he sent him back again. He called Monsieur Canivet into consultation; he sent for Dr. Lariviere, his old master, from Rouen; he was in despair. What alarmed him most was Emma's prostration, for she did not speak, did not listen, did not even seem to suffer, as if her body and soul were both resting together after all their troubles.

About the middle of October she could sit up in bed supported by pillows. Charles wept when he saw her eat her first bread-and-jelly. Her strength returned to her; she got up for a few hours of an afternoon, and one day, when she felt better, he tried to take her, leaning on his arm, for a walk round the garden. The sand of the paths was disappearing beneath the dead leaves; she walked slowly, dragging along her slippers, and leaning against Charles's shoulder. She smiled all the time.

They went thus to the bottom of the garden near the terrace. She drew herself up slowly, shading her eyes with her hand to look. She looked far off, as far as she could, but on the horizon were only great bonfires of grass smoking on the hills.

"You will tire yourself, my darling!" said Bovary. And, pushing her gently to make her go into the arbour, "Sit down on this seat; you'll be comfortable."

"Oh! no; not there!" she said in a faltering voice.

She was seized with giddiness, and from that evening her illness recommenced, with a more uncertain character, it is true, and more complex symptoms. Now she suffered in her heart, then in the chest, the head, the limbs; she had vomitings, in which Charles thought he saw the first signs of cancer.

And besides this, the poor fellow was worried about money matters.

Chapter Fourteen

To begin with, he did not know how he could pay Monsieur Homais for all the physic supplied by him, and though, as a medical man, he was not obliged to pay for it, he nevertheless blushed a little at such an obligation. Then the expenses of the household, now that the servant was mistress, became terrible. Bills rained in upon the house; the tradesmen grumbled; Monsieur Lheureux especially harassed him. In fact, at the height of Emma's illness, the latter, taking advantage of the circumstances to make his bill larger, had hurriedly brought the cloak, the travelling-bag, two trunks instead of one, and a number of other things. It was very well for Charles to say he did not want them. The tradesman answered arrogantly that these articles had been ordered, and that he would not take them back; besides, it would vex madame in her convalescence; the doctor had better think it over; in short, he was resolved to sue him rather than give up his rights and take back his goods. Charles subsequently ordered them to be sent back to the shop. Felicite forgot; he had other things to attend to; then thought no more about them. Monsieur Lheureux returned to the charge, and, by turns threatening and whining, so managed that Bovary ended by signing a bill at six months. But hardly had he signed this bill than a bold idea occurred to him: it was to borrow a thousand francs from Lheureux. So, with an embarrassed air, he asked if it were possible to get them, adding that it would be for a year, at any interest he wished. Lheureux ran off to his shop, brought back the money, and dictated another bill, by which Bovary undertook to pay to his order on the 1st of September next the sum of one thousand and seventy francs, which, with the hundred and eighty already agreed to, made just twelve hundred and fifty, thus lending at six per cent in addition to one-fourth for commission: and the things bringing him in a good third at the least, this ought in twelve months to give him a profit of a hundred and thirty francs. He hoped that the business would not stop there; that the bills would not be paid; that they would be renewed; and that his poor little money, having thriven at the doctor's as at a hospital, would come back to him one day considerably more plump, and fat enough to burst his bag.

Everything, moreover, succeeded with him. He was adjudicator for a supply of cider to the hospital at Neufchatel; Monsieur Guillaumin promised him some shares in the turf-pits of Gaumesnil, and he dreamt of establishing a new diligence service between Arcueil and Rouen, which no doubt would not be long in ruining the ramshackle van of the "Lion d'Or," and that, travelling faster, at a cheaper rate, and carrying more luggage, would thus put into his hands the whole commerce of Yonville.

Charles several times asked himself by what means he should next year be able to pay back so much money. He reflected, imagined expedients, such as applying to his father or selling something. But his father would be deaf, and he — he had nothing to sell. Then he foresaw such worries that he quickly dismissed so disagreeable a subject of meditation from his mind. He reproached himself with forgetting Emma, as if, all his thoughts belonging to this woman, it was robbing her of something not to be constantly thinking of her.

The winter was severe, Madame Bovary's convalescence slow. When it was fine they wheeled her arm-chair to the window that overlooked the square, for she now had an antipathy to the garden, and the blinds on that side were always down. She wished the horse to be sold; what she formerly liked now displeased her. All her ideas seemed to be limited to the care of herself. She stayed in bed taking little meals, rang for the servant to inquire about her gruel or to chat with her. The snow on the market-roof threw a white, still light into the room; then the rain began to fall; and Emma waited daily with a mind full of eagerness for the inevitable return of some trifling events which nevertheless had no relation to her. The most important was the arrival of the "Hirondelle" in the evening. Then the landlady shouted out, and other voices answered, while Hippolyte's lantern, as he fetched the boxes from the boot, was like a star in the darkness. At mid-day Charles came in; then he went out again; next she took some beef-tea, and towards five o'clock, as the day drew in, the children coming back from school, dragging their wooden shoes along the pavement, knocked the clapper of the shutters with their rulers one after the other.

It was at this hour that Monsieur Bournisien came to see her. He inquired after her health, gave her news, exhorted her to religion, in a coaxing little prattle that was not without its charm. The mere thought of his cassock comforted her.

One day, when at the height of her illness, she had thought herself dying, and had asked for the communion; and, while they were making the preparations in her room for the sacrament, while they were turning the night table covered with syrups into an altar, and while Felicite was strewing dahlia flowers on the floor, Emma felt some power passing over her that freed her from her pains, from all perception, from all feeling. Her body, relieved, no longer thought; another life was beginning; it seemed to her that her being, mounting toward God, would be annihilated in that love like a burning incense that melts into vapour. The bed-clothes were sprinkled with holy water, the priest drew from the holy pyx the white wafer; and it was fainting with a celestial joy that she put out her lips to accept the body of the Saviour presented to her. The curtains of the alcove floated gently round her like clouds, and the rays of the two tapers burning on the night-table seemed to shine like dazzling halos. Then she let her head fall back, fancying she heard in space the music of seraphic harps, and perceived in an azure sky, on a golden throne in the midst of saints holding green palms, God the Father, resplendent with majesty, who with a sign sent to earth angels with wings of fire to carry her away in their arms.

This splendid vision dwelt in her memory as the most beautiful thing that it was possible to dream, so that now she strove to recall her sensation. That still lasted, however, but in a less exclusive fashion and with a deeper sweetness. Her soul, tortured by pride, at length found rest in Christian humility, and, tasting the joy of weakness, she saw within herself the destruction of her will, that must have left a wide entrance for the inroads of heavenly grace. There existed, then, in the place of happiness, still greater joys — another love beyond all loves, without pause and without end, one that would grow eternally! She saw amid the illusions of her hope a state of purity floating above the earth mingling with heaven, to which she aspired. She wanted to become a saint. She bought chaplets and wore amulets; she wished to have in her room, by the side of her bed, a reliquary set in emeralds that she might kiss it every evening.

The cure marvelled at this humour, although Emma's religion, he thought, might, from its fervour, end by touching on heresy, extravagance. But not being much versed in these matters, as soon as they went beyond a certain limit he wrote to Monsieur Boulard, bookseller to Monsignor, to send him "something good for a lady who was very clever." The bookseller, with as much indifference as if he had been sending off hardware to niggers, packed up, pellmell, everything that was then the fashion in the pious book trade. There were little manuals in questions and answers, pamphlets of aggressive tone after the manner of Monsieur de Maistre, and certain novels in rose-coloured bindings and with a honied style, manufactured by troubadour seminarists or penitent blue-stockings. There were the "Think of it; the Man of the World at Mary's Feet, by Monsieur de ***, decorated with many Orders"; "The Errors of Voltaire, for the Use of the Young," *etc.*

Madame Bovary's mind was not yet sufficiently clear to apply herself seriously to anything; moreover, she began this reading in too much hurry. She grew provoked at the doctrines of religion; the arrogance of the polemic writings displeased her by their inveteracy in attacking people she did not know; and the secular stories, relieved with religion, seemed to her written in such ignorance of the world, that they insensibly estranged her from the truths for whose proof she was looking. Nevertheless, she persevered; and when the volume slipped from her hands, she fancied herself seized with the finest Catholic melancholy that an ethereal soul could conceive.

As for the memory of Rodolphe, she had thrust it back to the bottom of her heart, and it remained there more solemn and more motionless than a king's mummy in a catacomb. An exhalation escaped from this embalmed love, that, penetrating through everything, perfumed with tenderness the immaculate atmosphere in which she longed to live. When she knelt on her Gothic prie-Dieu, she addressed to the Lord the same suave words that she had murmured formerly to her lover in the outpourings of adultery. It was to make faith come; but no delights descended from the heavens, and she arose with tired limbs and with a vague feeling of a gigantic dupery.

This searching after faith, she thought, was only one merit the more, and in the pride of her devoutness Emma compared herself to those grand ladies of long ago whose glory she, had dreamed of over a portrait of La Valliere, and who, trailing with so much majesty the lace-trimmed trains of their long gowns, retired into solitudes to shed at the feet of Christ all the tears of hearts that life had wounded.

Then she gave herself up to excessive charity. She sewed clothes for the poor, she sent wood to women in childbed; and Charles one day, on coming home, found three good-for-nothings in the kitchen seated at the table eating soup. She had her little girl, whom during her illness her husband had sent back to the nurse, brought home. She wanted to teach her to read; even when Berthe cried, she was not vexed. She had made up her mind to resignation, to universal indulgence. Her language about everything was full of ideal expressions. She said to her child, "Is your stomach-ache better, my angel?"

Madame Bovary senior found nothing to censure except perhaps this mania of knitting jackets for orphans instead of mending her own house-linen; but, harassed with domestic quarrels, the good woman took pleasure in this quiet house, and she even stayed there till after Easter, to escape the sarcasms of old Bovary, who never failed on Good Friday to order chitterlings.

Besides the companionship of her mother-in-law, who strengthened her a little by the rectitude of her judgment and her grave ways, Emma almost every day had other visitors. These were Madame Langlois, Madame Caron, Madame Dubreuil, Madame Tuvache, and regularly from two to five o'clock the excellent Madame Homais, who, for her part, had never believed any of the tittle-tattle about her neighbour. The little Homais also came to see her; Justin accompanied them. He went up with them to her bedroom, and remained standing near the door, motionless and mute. Often even Madame Bovary; taking no heed of him, began her toilette. She began by taking out her comb, shaking her head with a quick movement, and when he for the first time saw all this mass of hair that fell to her knees unrolling in black ringlets, it was to him, poor child! like a sudden entrance into something new and strange, whose splendour terrified him.

Emma, no doubt, did not notice his silent attentions or his timidity. She had no suspicion that the love vanished from her life was there, palpitating by her side, beneath that coarse holland shirt, in that youthful heart open to the emanations of her beauty. Besides, she now enveloped all things with such indifference, she had words so affectionate with looks so haughty, such contradictory ways, that one could no longer distinguish egotism from charity, or corruption from virtue. One evening, for example, she was angry with the servant, who had asked to go out, and stammered as she tried to find some pretext. Then suddenly —

"So you love him?" she said.

And without waiting for any answer from Felicite, who was blushing, she added, "There! run along; enjoy yourself!"

In the beginning of spring she had the garden turned up from end to end, despite Bovary's remonstrances. However, he was glad to see her at last manifest a wish of any kind. As she grew stronger she displayed more wilfulness. First, she found occasion to expel Mere Rollet, the nurse, who during her convalescence had contracted the habit of coming too often to the kitchen with her two nurslings and her boarder, better off for teeth than a cannibal. Then she got rid of the Homais family, successively dismissed all the other visitors, and even frequented church less assiduously, to the great approval of the druggist, who said to her in a friendly way —

"You were going in a bit for the cassock!"

As formerly, Monsieur Bournisien dropped in every day when he came out after catechism class. He preferred staying out of doors to taking the air "in the grove," as he called the arbour. This was the time when Charles came home. They were hot; some sweet cider was brought out, and they drank together to madame's complete restoration.

Binet was there; that is to say, a little lower down against the terrace wall, fishing for crayfish. Bovary invited him to have a drink, and he thoroughly understood the uncorking of the stone bottles.

"You must," he said, throwing a satisfied glance all round him, even to the very extremity of the landscape, "hold the bottle perpendicularly on the table, and after the strings are cut, press up the cork with little thrusts, gently, gently, as indeed they do seltzer-water at restaurants."

But during his demonstration the cider often spurted right into their faces, and then the ecclesiastic, with a thick laugh, never missed this joke —

"Its goodness strikes the eye!"

He was, in fact, a good fellow and one day he was not even scandalised at the chemist, who advised Charles to give madame some distraction by taking her to the theatre at Rouen to hear the illustrious tenor, Lagardy. Homais, surprised at the theatre at Rouen to hear the illustrious tenor, Lagardy. Homais, surprised at this silence, wanted to know his opinion, and the priest declared that he considered music less dangerous for morals than literature.

But the chemist took up the defence of letters. The theatre, he contended, served for railing at prejudices, and, beneath a mask of pleasure, taught virtue.

"'Castigat ridendo mores,'* Monsieur Bournisien! Thus consider the greater part of Voltaire's tragedies; they are cleverly strewn with philosophical reflections, that made them a vast school of morals and diplomacy for the people."

*It corrects customs through laughter.

"I," said Binet, "once saw a piece called the 'Gamin de Paris,' in which there was the character of an old general that is really hit off to a T. He sets down a young swell who had seduced a working girl, who at the ending — "

"Certainly," continued Homais, "there is bad literature as there is bad pharmacy, but to condemn in a lump the most important of the fine arts seems to me a stupidity, a Gothic idea, worthy of the abominable times that imprisoned Galileo."

"I know very well," objected the cure, "that there are good works, good authors. However, if it were only those persons of different sexes united in a bewitching apartment, decorated rouge, those lights, those effeminate voices, all this must, in the long-run, engender a certain mental libertinage, give rise to immodest thoughts and impure temptations. Such, at any rate, is the opinion of all the Fathers. Finally," he added, suddenly assuming a mystic tone of voice while he rolled a pinch of snuff between his fingers, "if the Church has condemned the theatre, she must be right; we must submit to her decrees."

"Why," asked the druggist, "should she excommunicate actors? For formerly they openly took part in religious ceremonies. Yes, in the middle of the chancel they acted; they performed a kind of farce called 'Mysteries,' which often offended against the laws of decency."

The ecclesiastic contented himself with uttering a groan, and the chemist went on —

"It's like it is in the Bible; there there are, you know, more than one piquant detail, matters really libidinous!"

And on a gesture of irritation from Monsieur Bournisien —

"Ah! you'll admit that it is not a book to place in the hands of a young girl, and I should be sorry if Athalie — "

"But it is the Protestants, and not we," cried the other impatiently, "who recommend the Bible."

"No matter," said Homais. "I am surprised that in our days, in this century of enlightenment, anyone should still persist in proscribing an intellectual enlightenment, anyone should still persist in proscribing an intellectual relaxation that is inoffensive, moralising, and sometimes even hygienic; is it not, doctor?"

"No doubt," replied the doctor carelessly, either because, sharing the same ideas, he wished to offend no one, or else because he had not any ideas.

The conversation seemed at an end when the chemist thought fit to shoot a Parthian arrow.

"I've known priests who put on ordinary clothes to go and see dancers kicking about."

"Come, come!" said the cure.

"Ah! I've known some!" And separating the words of his sentence, Homais repeated, "I — have — known — some!"

"Well, they were wrong," said Bournisien, resigned to anything.

"By Jove! they go in for more than that," exclaimed the druggist.

"Sir!" replied the ecclesiastic, with such angry eyes that the druggist was intimidated by them.

"I only mean to say," he replied in less brutal a tone, "that toleration is the surest way to draw people to religion."

"That is true! that is true!" agreed the good fellow, sitting down again on his chair. But he stayed only a few moments.

Then, as soon as he had gone, Monsieur Homais said to the doctor —

"That's what I call a cock-fight. I beat him, did you see, in a way! — Now take my advice. Take madame to the theatre, if it were only for once in your life, to enrage one of these ravens, hang it! If anyone could take my place, I would accompany you myself. Be quick about it. Lagardy is only going to give one performance; he's engaged to go to England at a high salary. From what I hear, he's a regular dog; he's rolling in money; he's taking three mistresses and a cook along with him. All these great artists burn the candle at both ends; they require a dissolute life, that suits the imagination to some extent. But they die at the hospital, because they haven't the sense when young to lay by. Well, a pleasant dinner! Goodbye till to-morrow."

The idea of the theatre quickly germinated in Bovary's head, for he at once communicated it to his wife, who at first refused, alleging the fatigue, the worry, the expense; but, for a wonder, Charles did not give in, so sure was he that this recreation would be good for her. He saw nothing to prevent it: his mother had sent them three hundred francs which he had no longer expected; the current debts were not very large, and the falling in of Lheureux's bills was still so far off that there was no need to think about them. Besides, imagining that she was refusing from delicacy, he insisted the more; so that by dint of worrying her she at last made up her mind, and the next day at eight o'clock they set out in the at last made up her mind, and the next day at eight o'clock they set out in the "Hirondelle."

The druggist, whom nothing whatever kept at Yonville, but who thought himself bound not to budge from it, sighed as he saw them go.

"Well, a pleasant journey!" he said to them; "happy mortals that you are!"

Then addressing himself to Emma, who was wearing a blue silk gown with four flounces —

"You are as lovely as a Venus. You'll cut a figure at Rouen."

The diligence stopped at the "Croix-Rouge" in the Place Beauvoisine. It was the inn that is in every provincial faubourg, with large stables and small bedrooms, where one sees in the middle of the court chickens pilfering the oats under the muddy gigs of the commercial travellers — a good old house, with worm-eaten balconies that creak in the wind on winter nights, always full of people, noise, and feeding, whose black tables are sticky with coffee and brandy, the thick windows made yellow by the flies, the damp napkins stained with cheap wine, and that always smells of the village, like ploughboys dressed in Sundayclothes, has a cafe on the street, and towards the countryside a kitchen-garden. Charles at once set out. He muddled up the stage-boxes with the gallery, the pit with the boxes; asked for explanations, did not understand them; was sent from the box-office to the acting-manager; came back to the inn, returned to the theatre, and thus several times traversed the whole length of the town from the theatre to the boulevard.

Madame Bovary bought a bonnet, gloves, and a bouquet. The doctor was much afraid of missing the beginning, and, without having had time to swallow a plate of soup, they presented themselves at the doors of the theatre, which were still closed.

Chapter Fifteen

The crowd was waiting against the wall, symmetrically enclosed between the balustrades. At the corner of the neighbouring streets huge bills repeated in quaint letters "Lucie de Lammermoor-Lagardy-Opera-etc." The weather was fine, the people were hot, perspiration trickled amid the curls, and handkerchiefs taken from pockets were mopping red foreheads; and now and then a warm wind that blew from the river gently stirred the border of the tick awnings hanging from the doors of the public-houses. A little lower down, however, one was refreshed by a current of icy air that smelt of tallow, leather, and oil. This was an exhalation from the Rue des Charrettes, full of large black warehouses where they made casks.

For fear of seeming ridiculous, Emma before going in wished to have a little stroll in the harbour, and Bovary prudently kept his tickets in his hand, in the pocket of his trousers, which he pressed against his stomach.

Her heart began to beat as soon as she reached the vestibule. She involuntarily smiled with vanity on seeing the crowd rushing to the right by the other corridor while she went up the staircase to the reserved seats. She was as pleased as a child to push with her finger the large tapestried door. She breathed in with all her might the dusty smell of the lobbies, and when she was seated in her box she bent forward with the air of a duchess.

The theatre was beginning to fill; opera-glasses were taken from their cases, and the subscribers, catching sight of one another, were bowing. They came to seek relaxation in the fine arts after the anxieties of business; but "business" was not forgotten; they still talked cottons, spirits of wine, or indigo. The heads of old men were to be seen, inexpressive and peaceful, with their hair and complexions looking like silver medals tarnished by steam of lead. The young beaux were strutting about in the pit, showing in the opening of their waistcoats their pink or applegreen cravats, and Madame Bovary from above admired them leaning on their canes with golden knobs in the open palm of their yellow gloves.

Now the lights of the orchestra were lit, the lustre, let down from the ceiling, throwing by the glimmering of its facets a sudden gaiety over the theatre; then the musicians came in one after the other; and first there was the protracted hubbub of the basses grumbling, violins squeaking, cornets trumpeting, flutes and flageolets fifing. But three knocks were heard on the stage, a rolling of drums began, the brass instruments played some chords, and the curtain rising, discovered a country-scene.

It was the cross-roads of a wood, with a fountain shaded by an oak to the left. Peasants and lords with plaids on their shoulders were singing a hunting-song together; then a captain suddenly came on, who evoked the spirit of evil by lifting both his arms to heaven. Another appeared; they went away, and the hunters started afresh. She felt herself transported to the reading of her youth, into the midst of Walter Scott. She seemed to hear through the mist the sound of the Scotch bagpipes re-echoing over the heather. Then her remembrance of the novel helping her to understand the libretto, she followed the story phrase by phrase, while vague thoughts that came back to her dispersed at once again with the bursts of music. She gave herself up to the lullaby of the melodies, and felt all her being vibrate as if the violin bows were drawn over her nerves. She had not eyes enough to look at the costumes, the scenery, the actors, the painted trees that shook when anyone walked, and the velvet caps, cloaks, swords — all those imaginary things that floated amid the harmony as in the atmosphere of another world. But a young woman stepped forward, throwing a purse to a squire in green. She was left alone, and the flute was heard like the murmur of a fountain or the warbling of birds. Lucie attacked her cavatina in G major bravely. She plained of love; she longed for wings. Emma, too, fleeing from life, would have liked to fly away in an embrace. Suddenly Edgar-Lagardy appeared.

He had that splendid pallor that gives something of the majesty of marble to the ardent races of the South. His vigorous form was tightly clad in a brown-coloured doublet; a small chiselled poniard hung against his left thigh, and he cast round laughing looks showing his white teeth. They said that a Polish princess having heard him sing one night on the beach at Biarritz, where he mended boats, had fallen in love with him. She had ruined herself for him. He had deserted her for other women, and this sentimental celebrity did not fail to enhance his artistic reputation. The diplomatic mummer took care always to slip into his advertisements some poetic phrase on the fascination of his person and the susceptibility of his soul. A fine organ, imperturbable coolness, more temperament than intelligence, more power of emphasis than of real singing, made up the charm of this admirable charlatan nature, in which there was something of the hairdresser and the toreador.

From the first scene he evoked enthusiasm. He pressed Lucy in his arms, he left her, he came back, he seemed desperate; he had outbursts of rage, then elegiac gurglings of infinite sweetness, and the notes escaped from his bare neck full of sobs and kisses. Emma leant forward to see him, clutching the velvet of the box with her nails. She was filling her heart with these melodious lamentations that were drawn out to the accompaniment of the double-basses, like the cries of the drowning in the tumult of a tempest. She recognised all the intoxication and the anguish that had almost killed her. The voice of a prima donna seemed to her to be but echoes of her conscience, and this illusion that charmed her as some very thing of her own life. But no one on earth had loved her with such love. He had not wept like Edgar that last moonlit night when they said, "To-morrow! to-morrow!" The theatre rang with cheers; they recommenced the entire movement; the lovers spoke of the flowers on their tomb, of vows, exile, fate, hopes; and when they uttered the final adieu, Emma gave a sharp cry that mingled with the vibrations of the last chords.

"But why," asked Bovary, "does that gentleman persecute her?"

"No, no!" she answered; "he is her lover!"

"Yet he vows vengeance on her family, while the other one who came on before said, 'I love Lucie and she loves me!' Besides, he went off with her father arm in arm. For he certainly is her father, isn't he — the ugly little man with a cock's feather in his hat?"

Despite Emma's explanations, as soon as the recitative duet began in which Gilbert lays bare his abominable machinations to his master Ashton, Charles, seeing the false troth-ring that is to deceive Lucie, thought it was a love-gift sent by Edgar. He confessed, moreover, that he did not understand the story because of the music, which interfered very much with the words.

"What does it matter?" said Emma. "Do be quiet!"

"Yes, but you know," he went on, leaning against her shoulder, "I like to understand things."

"Be quiet! be quiet!" she cried impatiently.

Lucie advanced, half supported by her women, a wreath of orange blossoms in her hair, and paler than the white satin of her gown. Emma dreamed of her marriage day; she saw herself at home again amid the corn in the little path as they walked to the church. Oh, why had not she, like this woman, resisted, implored? She, on the contrary, had been joyous, without seeing the abyss into which she was throwing herself. Ah! if in the freshness of her beauty, before the soiling of marriage and the disillusions of adultery, she could have anchored her life upon some great, strong heart, then virtue, tenderness, voluptuousness, and duty blending, she would never have fallen from so high a happiness. But that happiness, no doubt, was a lie invented for the despair of all desire. She now knew the smallness of the passions that art exaggerated. So, striving to divert her thoughts, Emma determined now to see in this reproduction of her sorrows only a plastic fantasy, well enough to please the eye, and she even smiled internally with disdainful pity when at the back of the stage under the velvet hangings a man appeared in a black cloak.

His large Spanish hat fell at a gesture he made, and immediately the instruments and the singers began the sextet. Edgar, flashing with fury, dominated all the others with his clearer voice; Ashton hurled homicidal provocations at him in deep notes; Lucie uttered her shrill plaint, Arthur at one side, his modulated tones in the middle register, and the bass of the minister pealed forth like an organ, while the voices of the women repeating his words took them up in chorus delightfully. They were all in a row gesticulating, and anger, vengeance, jealousy, terror, and stupefaction breathed forth at once from their half-opened mouths. The outraged lover brandished his naked sword; his guipure ruffle rose with jerks to the movements of his chest, and he walked from right to left with long strides, clanking against the boards the silver-gilt spurs of his soft boots, widening out at the ankles. He, she thought must have an inexhaustible love to lavish it upon the crowd with such effusion. All her small fault-findings faded before the poetry of the part that absorbed her; and, drawn towards this man by the illusion of the character, she tried to imagine to herself his life — that life resonant, extraordinary, splendid, and that might have been hers if fate had willed it. They would have known one another, loved one another. With him, through all the kingdoms of Europe she would have travelled from capital to capital, sharing his fatigues and his pride, picking up the flowers thrown to him, herself embroidering his costumes. Then each evening, at the back of a box, behind the golden trellis-work she would have drunk in eagerly the expansions of this soul that would have sung for her alone; from the stage, even as he acted, he would have looked at her. But the mad idea seized her that he was looking at her; it was certain. She longed to run to his arms, to take refuge in his strength, as in the incarnation of love itself, and to say to him, to cry out, "Take me away! carry me with you! let us go! Thine, thine! all my ardour and all my dreams!"

The curtain fell.

The smell of the gas mingled with that of the breaths, the waving of the fans, made the air more suffocating. Emma wanted to go out; the crowd filled the corridors, and she fell back in her arm-chair with palpitations that choked her. Charles, fearing that she would faint, ran to the refreshment-room to get a glass of barley-water.

He had great difficulty in getting back to his seat, for his elbows were jerked at every step because of the glass he held in his hands, and he even spilt three-fourths on the shoulders of a Rouen lady in short sleeves, who feeling the cold liquid running down to her loins, uttered cries like a peacock, as if she were being assassinated. Her husband, who was a millowner, railed at the clumsy fellow, and while she was with her handkerchief wiping up the stains from her handsome cherry-coloured taffeta gown, he angrily muttered about indemnity, costs, reimbursement. At last Charles reached his wife, saying to her, quite out of breath —

"Ma foi! I thought I should have had to stay there. There is such a crowd — SUCH a crowd!"

He added —

"Just guess whom I met up there! Monsieur Leon!"

"Leon?"

"Himself! He's coming along to pay his respects." And as he finished these words the ex-clerk of Yonville entered the box.

He held out his hand with the ease of a gentleman; and Madame Bovary extended hers, without doubt obeying the attraction of a stronger will. She had not felt it since that spring evening when the rain fell upon the green leaves, and they had said good-bye standing at the window. But soon recalling herself to the necessities of the situation, with an effort she shook off the torpor of her memories, and began stammering a few hurried words.

"Ah, good-day! What! you here?"

"Silence!" cried a voice from the pit, for the third act was beginning.

"So you are at Rouen?"

"Yes."

"And since when?"

"Turn them out! turn them out!" People were looking at them. They were silent.

But from that moment she listened no more; and the chorus of the guests, the scene between Ashton and his servant, the grand duet in D major, all were for her as far off as if the instruments had grown less sonorous and the characters more remote. She remembered the games at cards at the druggist's, and the walk to the nurse's, the reading in the arbour, the tete-a-tete by the fireside — all that poor love, so calm and so protracted, so discreet, so tender, and that she had nevertheless forgotten. And why had he come back? What combination of circumstances had brought him back into her life? He was standing behind her, leaning with his shoulder against the wall of the box; now and again she felt herself shuddering beneath the hot breath from his nostrils falling upon her hair.

"Does this amuse you?" said he, bending over her so closely that the end of his moustache brushed her cheek. She replied carelessly —

"Oh, dear me, no, not much."

Then he proposed that they should leave the theatre and go and take an ice somewhere.

"Oh, not yet; let us stay," said Bovary. "Her hair's undone; this is going to be tragic."

But the mad scene did not at all interest Emma, and the acting of the singer

But the mad scene did not at all interest Emma, and the acting of the singer seemed to her exaggerated.

"She screams too loud," said she, turning to Charles, who was listening.

"Yes — a little," he replied, undecided between the frankness of his pleasure and his respect for his wife's opinion.

Then with a sigh Leon said —

"The heat is — "

"Unbearable! Yes!"

"Do you feel unwell?" asked Bovary.

"Yes, I am stifling; let us go."

Monsieur Leon put her long lace shawl carefully about her shoulders, and all three went off to sit down in the harbour, in the open air, outside the windows of a cafe.

First they spoke of her illness, although Emma interrupted Charles from time to time, for fear, she said, of boring Monsieur Leon; and the latter told them that he had come to spend two years at Rouen in a large office, in order to get practice in his profession, which was different in Normandy and Paris. Then he inquired after Berthe, the Homais, Mere Lefrancois, and as they had, in the husband's presence, nothing more to say to one another, the conversation soon came to an end.

People coming out of the theatre passed along the pavement, humming or shouting at the top of their voices, "O bel ange, ma Lucie!*" Then Leon, playing the dilettante, began to talk music. He had seen Tambourini, Rubini, Persiani, Grisi, and, compared with them, Lagardy, despite his grand outbursts, was nowhere.

"Yet," interrupted Charles, who was slowly sipping his rum-sherbet, "they say that he is quite admirable in the last act. I regret leaving before the end, because it was beginning to amuse me."

"Why," said the clerk, "he will soon give another performance."

But Charles replied that they were going back next day. "Unless," he added, turning to his wife, "you would like to stay alone, kitten?"

And changing his tactics at this unexpected opportunity that presented itself to his hopes, the young man sang the praises of Lagardy in the last number. It was really superb, sublime. Then Charles insisted —

"You would get back on Sunday. Come, make up your mind. You are wrong if you feel that this is doing you the least good."

The tables round them, however, were emptying; a waiter came and stood discreetly near them. Charles, who understood, took out his purse; the clerk held back his arm, and did not forget to leave two more pieces of silver that he made back his arm, and did not forget to leave two more pieces of silver that he made chink on the marble.

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*Oh beautiful angel, my Lucie.

"I am really sorry," said Bovary, "about the money which you are — "

The other made a careless gesture full of cordiality, and taking his hat said —

"It is settled, isn't it? To-morrow at six o'clock?"

Charles explained once more that he could not absent himself longer, but that nothing prevented Emma —

"But," she stammered, with a strange smile, "I am not sure — "

"Well, you must think it over. We'll see. Night brings counsel." Then to Leon, who was walking along with them, "Now that you are in our part of the world, I hope you'll come and ask us for some dinner now and then."

The clerk declared he would not fail to do so, being obliged, moreover, to go to Yonville on some business for his office. And they parted before the Saint-Herbland Passage just as the clock in the cathedral struck half-past eleven.

Part III

Chapter One

Monsieur Leon, while studying law, had gone pretty often to the dancing-rooms, where he was even a great success amongst the grisettes, who thought he had a distinguished air. He was the best-mannered of the students; he wore his hair neither too long nor too short, didn't spend all his quarter's money on the first day of the month, and kept on good terms with his professors. As for excesses, he had always abstained from them, as much from cowardice as from refinement.

Often when he stayed in his room to read, or else when sitting of an evening under the lime-trees of the Luxembourg, he let his Code fall to the ground, and the memory of Emma came back to him. But gradually this feeling grew weaker, and other desires gathered over it, although it still persisted through them all. For Leon did not lose all hope; there was for him, as it were, a vague promise floating in the future, like a golden fruit suspended from some fantastic tree.

Then, seeing her again after three years of absence his passion reawakened. He must, he thought, at last make up his mind to possess her. Moreover, his timidity had worn off by contact with his gay companions, and he returned to the provinces despising everyone who had not with varnished shoes trodden the asphalt of the boulevards. By the side of a Parisienne in her laces, in the drawing-room of some illustrious physician, a person driving his carriage and wearing many orders, the poor clerk would no doubt have trembled like a child; but here, at Rouen, on the harbour, with the wife of this small doctor he felt at his ease, sure beforehand he would shine. Self-possession depends on its environment. We don't speak on the first floor as on the fourth; and the wealthy woman seems to have, about her, to guard her virtue, all her banknotes, like a cuirass in the lining of her corset.

On leaving the Bovarys the night before, Leon had followed them through the streets at a distance; then having seen them stop at the "Croix-Rouge," he turned on his heel, and spent the night meditating a plan.

So the next day about five o'clock he walked into the kitchen of the inn, with a choking sensation in his throat, pale cheeks, and that resolution of cowards that stops at nothing.

"The gentleman isn't in," answered a servant.

This seemed to him a good omen. He went upstairs.

She was not disturbed at his approach; on the contrary, she apologised for having neglected to tell him where they were staying.

"Oh, I divined it!" said Leon.

He pretended he had been guided towards her by chance, by, instinct. She began to smile; and at once, to repair his folly, Leon told her that he had spent his morning in looking for her in all the hotels in the town one after the other.

"So you have made up your mind to stay?" he added.

"Yes," she said, "and I am wrong. One ought not to accustom oneself to impossible pleasures when there are a thousand demands upon one."

"Oh, I can imagine!"

"Ah! no; for you, you are a man!"

But men too had had their trials, and the conversation went off into certain philosophical reflections. Emma expatiated much on the misery of earthly affections, and the eternal isolation in which the heart remains entombed.

To show off, or from a naive imitation of this melancholy which called forth his, the young man declared that he had been awfully bored during the whole course of his studies. The law irritated him, other vocations attracted him, and his mother never ceased worrying him in every one of her letters. As they talked they explained more and more fully the motives of their sadness, working themselves up in their progressive confidence. But they sometimes stopped short of the complete exposition of their thought, and then sought to invent a phrase that might express it all the same. She did not confess her passion for another; he did not say that he had forgotten her.

Perhaps he no longer remembered his suppers with girls after masked balls; and no doubt she did not recollect the rendezvous of old when she ran across the fields in the morning to her lover's house. The noises of the town hardly reached them, and the room seemed small, as if on purpose to hem in their solitude more closely. Emma, in a dimity dressing-gown, leant her head against the back of the old arm-chair; the yellow wall-paper formed, as it were, a golden background behind her, and her bare head was mirrored in the glass with the white parting in the middle, and the tip of her ears peeping out from the folds of her hair.

"But pardon me!" she said. "It is wrong of me. I weary you with my eternal complaints."

"No, never, never!"

"If you knew," she went on, raising to the ceiling her beautiful eyes, in which a tear was trembling, "all that I had dreamed!"

"And I! Oh, I too have suffered! Often I went out; I went away. I dragged myself along the quays, seeking distraction amid the din of the crowd without being able to banish the heaviness that weighed upon me. In an engraver's shop on the boulevard there is an Italian print of one of the Muses. She is draped in a tunic, and she is looking at the moon, with forget-me-nots in her flowing hair. Something drove me there continually; I stayed there hours together." Then in a trembling voice, "She resembled you a little."

Madame Bovary turned away her head that he might not see the irrepressible smile she felt rising to her lips.

"Often," he went on, "I wrote you letters that I tore up."

She did not answer. He continued —

"I sometimes fancied that some chance would bring you. I thought I recognised you at street-corners, and I ran after all the carriages through whose windows I saw a shawl fluttering, a veil like yours."

She seemed resolved to let him go on speaking without interruption. Crossing her arms and bending down her face, she looked at the rosettes on her slippers, and at intervals made little movements inside the satin of them with her toes.

At last she sighed.

"But the most wretched thing, is it not — is to drag out, as I do, a useless existence. If our pains were only of some use to someone, we should find consolation in the thought of the sacrifice."

He started off in praise of virtue, duty, and silent immolation, having himself an incredible longing for self-sacrifice that he could not satisfy.

"I should much like," she said, "to be a nurse at a hospital."

"Alas! men have none of these holy missions, and I see nowhere any calling — unless perhaps that of a doctor."

With a slight shrug of her shoulders, Emma interrupted him to speak of her illness, which had almost killed her. What a pity! She should not be suffering now! Leon at once envied the calm of the tomb, and one evening he had even made his will, asking to be buried in that beautiful rug with velvet stripes he had received from her. For this was how they would have wished to be, each setting up an ideal to which they were now adapting their past life. Besides, speech is a rolling-mill that always thins out the sentiment.

But at this invention of the rug she asked, "But why?"

"Why?" He hesitated. "Because I loved you so!" And congratulating himself at having surmounted the difficulty, Leon watched her face out of the corner of his eyes.

It was like the sky when a gust of wind drives the clouds across. The mass of sad thoughts that darkened them seemed to be lifted from her blue eyes; her whole face shone. He waited. At last she replied —

"I always suspected it."

Then they went over all the trifling events of that far-off existence, whose joys and sorrows they had just summed up in one word. They recalled the arbour with clematis, the dresses she had worn, the furniture of her room, the whole of her house.

"And our poor cactuses, where are they?"

"The cold killed them this winter."

"Ah! how I have thought of them, do you know? I often saw them again as of yore, when on the summer mornings the sun beat down upon your blinds, and I saw your two bare arms passing out amongst the flowers."

"Poor friend!" she said, holding out her hand to him.

Leon swiftly pressed his lips to it. Then, when he had taken a deep breath —

"At that time you were to me I know not what incomprehensible force that took captive my life. Once, for instance, I went to see you; but you, no doubt, do not remember it."

"I do," she said; "go on."

"You were downstairs in the ante-room, ready to go out, standing on the last stair; you were wearing a bonnet with small blue flowers; and without any invitation from you, in spite of myself, I went with you. Every moment, however, I grew more and more conscious of my folly, and I went on walking by you, not daring to follow you completely, and unwilling to leave you. When you went into a shop, I waited in the street, and I watched you through the window taking off your gloves and counting the change on the counter. Then you rang at Madame Tuvache's; you were let in, and I stood like an idiot in front of the great heavy door that had closed after you."

Madame Bovary, as she listened to him, wondered that she was so old. All these things reappearing before her seemed to widen out her life; it was like some sentimental immensity to which she returned; and from time to time she said in a low voice, her eyes half closed —

"Yes, it is true — true — true!"

They heard eight strike on the different clocks of the Beauvoisine quarter, which is full of schools, churches, and large empty hotels. They no longer spoke, but they felt as they looked upon each other a buzzing in their heads, as if something sonorous had escaped from the fixed eyes of each of them. They were hand in hand now, and the past, the future, reminiscences and dreams, all were confounded in the sweetness of this ecstasy. Night was darkening over the walls, on which still shone, half hidden in the shade, the coarse colours of four bills representing four scenes from the "Tour de Nesle," with a motto in Spanish and French at the bottom. Through the sash-window a patch of dark sky was seen between the pointed roofs.

She rose to light two wax-candles on the drawers, then she sat down again.

"Well!" said Leon.

"Well!" she replied.

He was thinking how to resume the interrupted conversation, when she said to him —

"How is it that no one until now has ever expressed such sentiments to me?"

The clerk said that ideal natures were difficult to understand. He from the first moment had loved her, and he despaired when he thought of the happiness that would have been theirs, if thanks to fortune, meeting her earlier, they had been indissolubly bound to one another.

"I have sometimes thought of it," she went on.

"What a dream!" murmured Leon. And fingering gently the blue binding of her long white sash, he added, "And who prevents us from beginning now?"

"No, my friend," she replied; "I am too old; you are too young. Forget me! Others will love you; you will love them."

"Not as you!" he cried.

"What a child you are! Come, let us be sensible. I wish it."

She showed him the impossibility of their love, and that they must remain, as formerly, on the simple terms of a fraternal friendship.

Was she speaking thus seriously? No doubt Emma did not herself know, quite absorbed as she was by the charm of the seduction, and the necessity of defending herself from it; and contemplating the young man with a moved look, she gently repulsed the timid caresses that his trembling hands attempted.

"Ah! forgive me!" he cried, drawing back.

Emma was seized with a vague fear at this shyness, more dangerous to her than the boldness of Rodolphe when he advanced to her open-armed. No man had ever seemed to her so beautiful. An exquisite candour emanated from his being. He lowered his long fine eyelashes, that curled upwards. His cheek, with the soft skin reddened, she thought, with desire of her person, and Emma felt an invincible longing to press her lips to it. Then, leaning towards the clock as if to see the time —

"Ah! how late it is!" she said; "how we do chatter!"

He understood the hint and took up his hat.

"It has even made me forget the theatre. And poor Bovary has left me here especially for that. Monsieur Lormeaux, of the Rue Grand-Pont, was to take me and his wife."

And the opportunity was lost, as she was to leave the next day.

"Really!" said Leon.

"Yes."

"But I must see you again," he went on. "I wanted to tell you — "

"What?"

"Something — important — serious. Oh, no! Besides, you will not go; it is impossible. If you should — listen to me. Then you have not understood me; you have not guessed — "

have not guessed —

"Yet you speak plainly," said Emma.

"Ah! you can jest. Enough! enough! Oh, for pity's sake, let me see you once — only once!"

"Well — " She stopped; then, as if thinking better of it, "Oh, not here!"

"Where you will."

"Will you — " She seemed to reflect; then abruptly, "Tomorrow at eleven o'clock in the cathedral."

"I shall be there," he cried, seizing her hands, which she disengaged.

And as they were both standing up, he behind her, and Emma with her head bent, he stooped over her and pressed long kisses on her neck.

"You are mad! Ah! you are mad!" she said, with sounding little laughs, while the kisses multiplied.

Then bending his head over her shoulder, he seemed to beg the consent of her eyes. They fell upon him full of an icy dignity.

Leon stepped back to go out. He stopped on the threshold; then he whispered with a trembling voice, "Tomorrow!"

She answered with a nod, and disappeared like a bird into the next room.

In the evening Emma wrote the clerk an interminable letter, in which she cancelled the rendezvous; all was over; they must not, for the sake of their happiness, meet again. But when the letter was finished, as she did not know Leon's address, she was puzzled.

"I'll give it to him myself," she said; "he will come."

The next morning, at the open window, and humming on his balcony, Leon himself varnished his pumps with several coatings. He put on white trousers, fine socks, a green coat, emptied all the scent he had into his handkerchief, then having had his hair curled, he uncurled it again, in order to give it a more natural elegance.

"It is still too early," he thought, looking at the hairdresser's cuckoo-clock, that pointed to the hour of nine. He read an old fashion journal, went out, smoked a cigar, walked up three streets, thought it was time, and went slowly towards the porch of Notre Dame.

It was a beautiful summer morning. Silver plate sparkled in the jeweller's windows, and the light falling obliquely on the cathedral made mirrors of the corners of the grey stones; a flock of birds fluttered in the grey sky round the trefoil bell-turrets; the square, resounding with cries, was fragrant with the flowers that bordered its pavement, roses, jasmines, pinks, narcissi, and tube-roses, unevenly spaced out between moist grasses, catmint, and chickweed for the birds; the fountains gurgled in the centre, and under large umbrellas, amidst melons, piled up in heaps, flower-women, bare-headed, were twisting paper melons, piled up in heaps, flower-women, bare-headed, were twisting paper round bunches of violets.

The young man took one. It was the first time that he had bought flowers for a woman, and his breast, as he smelt them, swelled with pride, as if this homage that he meant for another had recoiled upon himself.

But he was afraid of being seen; he resolutely entered the church. The beadle, who was just then standing on the threshold in the middle of the left doorway, under the "Dancing Marianne," with feather cap, and rapier dangling against his calves, came in, more majestic than a cardinal, and as shining as a saint on a holy pyx.

He came towards Leon, and, with that smile of wheedling benignity assumed by ecclesiastics when they question children —

"The gentleman, no doubt, does not belong to these parts? The gentleman would like to see the curiosities of the church?"

"No!" said the other.

And he first went round the lower aisles. Then he went out to look at the Place. Emma was not coming yet. He went up again to the choir.

The nave was reflected in the full fonts with the beginning of the arches and some portions of the glass windows. But the reflections of the paintings, broken by the marble rim, were continued farther on upon the flag-stones, like a many-coloured carpet. The broad daylight from without streamed into the church in three enormous rays from the three opened portals. From time to time at the upper end a sacristan passed, making the oblique genuflexion of devout persons in a hurry. The crystal lustres hung motionless. In the choir a silver lamp was burning, and from the side chapels and dark places of the church sometimes rose sounds like sighs, with the clang of a closing grating, its echo reverberating under the lofty vault.

Leon with solemn steps walked along by the walls. Life had never seemed so good to him. She would come directly, charming, agitated, looking back at the glances that followed her, and with her flounced dress, her gold eyeglass, her thin shoes, with all sorts of elegant trifles that he had never enjoyed, and with the ineffable seduction of yielding virtue. The church like a huge boudoir spread around her; the arches bent down to gather in the shade the confession of her love; the windows shone resplendent to illumine her face, and the censers would burn that she might appear like an angel amid the fumes of the sweet-smelling odours.

But she did not come. He sat down on a chair, and his eyes fell upon a blue stained window representing boatmen carrying baskets. He looked at it long, attentively, and he counted the scales of the fishes and the button-holes of the doublets, while his thoughts wandered off towards Emma.

doublets, while his thoughts wandered off towards Emma.

The beadle, standing aloof, was inwardly angry at this individual who took the liberty of admiring the cathedral by himself. He seemed to him to be conducting himself in a monstrous fashion, to be robbing him in a sort, and almost committing sacrilege.

But a rustle of silk on the flags, the tip of a bonnet, a lined cloak — it was she! Leon rose and ran to meet her.

Emma was pale. She walked fast.

"Read!" she said, holding out a paper to him. "Oh, no!"

And she abruptly withdrew her hand to enter the chapel of the Virgin, where, kneeling on a chair, she began to pray.

The young man was irritated at this bigot fancy; then he nevertheless experienced a certain charm in seeing her, in the middle of a rendezvous, thus lost in her devotions, like an Andalusian marchioness; then he grew bored, for she seemed never coming to an end.

Emma prayed, or rather strove to pray, hoping that some sudden resolution might descend to her from heaven; and to draw down divine aid she filled full her eyes with the splendours of the tabernacle. She breathed in the perfumes of the full-blown flowers in the large vases, and listened to the stillness of the church, that only heightened the tumult of her heart.

She rose, and they were about to leave, when the beadle came forward, hurriedly saying —

"Madame, no doubt, does not belong to these parts? Madame would like to see the curiosities of the church?"

"Oh, no!" cried the clerk.

"Why not?" said she. For she clung with her expiring virtue to the Virgin, the sculptures, the tombs — anything.

Then, in order to proceed "by rule," the beadle conducted them right to the entrance near the square, where, pointing out with his cane a large circle of block-stones without inscription or carving —

"This," he said majestically, "is the circumference of the beautiful bell of Ambroise. It weighed forty thousand pounds. There was not its equal in all Europe. The workman who cast it died of the joy — "

"Let us go on," said Leon.

The old fellow started off again; then, having got back to the chapel of the Virgin, he stretched forth his arm with an all-embracing gesture of demonstration, and, prouder than a country squire showing you his espaliers, went on —

"This simple stone covers Pierre de Breze, lord of Varenne and of Brissac, grand marshal of Poitou, and governor of Normandy, who died at the battle of

Montlhery on the 16th of July, 1465."

Leon bit his lips, fuming.

"And on the right, this gentleman all encased in iron, on the prancing horse, is his grandson, Louis de Breze, lord of Breval and of Montchauvet, Count de Maulevrier, Baron de Mauny, chamberlain to the king, Knight of the Order, and also governor of Normandy; died on the 23rd of July, 1531 — a Sunday, as the inscription specifies; and below, this figure, about to descend into the tomb, portrays the same person. It is not possible, is it, to see a more perfect representation of annihilation?"

Madame Bovary put up her eyeglasses. Leon, motionless, looked at her, no longer even attempting to speak a single word, to make a gesture, so discouraged was he at this two-fold obstinacy of gossip and indifference.

The everlasting guide went on —

"Near him, this kneeling woman who weeps is his spouse, Diane de Poitiers, Countess de Breze, Duchess de Valentinois, born in 1499, died in 1566, and to the left, the one with the child is the Holy Virgin. Now turn to this side; here are the tombs of the Ambroise. They were both cardinals and archbishops of Rouen. That one was minister under Louis XII. He did a great deal for the cathedral. In his will he left thirty thousand gold crowns for the poor."

And without stopping, still talking, he pushed them into a chapel full of balustrades, some put away, and disclosed a kind of block that certainly might once have been an ill-made statue.

"Truly," he said with a groan, "it adorned the tomb of Richard Coeur de Lion, King of England and Duke of Normandy. It was the Calvinists, sir, who reduced it to this condition. They had buried it for spite in the earth, under the episcopal seat of Monsignor. See! this is the door by which Monsignor passes to his house. Let us pass on quickly to see the gargoyle windows."

But Leon hastily took some silver from his pocket and seized Emma's arm. The beadle stood dumfounded, not able to understand this untimely munificence when there were still so many things for the stranger to see. So calling him back, he cried —

"Sir! sir! The steeple! the steeple!"

"No, thank you!" said Leon.

"You are wrong, sir! It is four hundred and forty feet high, nine less than the great pyramid of Egypt. It is all cast; it — "

Leon was fleeing, for it seemed to him that his love, that for nearly two hours now had become petrified in the church like the stones, would vanish like a vapour through that sort of truncated funnel, of oblong cage, of open chimney that rises so grotesquely from the cathedral like the extravagant attempt of some fantastic brazier.

"But where are we going?" she said.

Making no answer, he walked on with a rapid step; and Madame Bovary was already, dipping her finger in the holy water when behind them they heard a panting breath interrupted by the regular sound of a cane. Leon turned back.

"Sir!"

"What is it?"

And he recognised the beadle, holding under his arms and balancing against his stomach some twenty large sewn volumes. They were works "which treated of the cathedral."

"Idiot!" growled Leon, rushing out of the church.

A lad was playing about the close.

"Go and get me a cab!"

The child bounded off like a ball by the Rue Quatre-Vents; then they were alone a few minutes, face to face, and a little embarrassed.

"Ah! Leon! Really — I don't know — if I ought," she whispered. Then with a more serious air, "Do you know, it is very improper — "

"How so?" replied the clerk. "It is done at Paris."

And that, as an irresistible argument, decided her.

Still the cab did not come. Leon was afraid she might go back into the church. At last the cab appeared.

"At all events, go out by the north porch," cried the beadle, who was left alone on the threshold, "so as to see the Resurrection, the Last Judgment, Paradise, King David, and the Condemned in Hell-flames."

"Where to, sir?" asked the coachman.

"Where you like," said Leon, forcing Emma into the cab.

And the lumbering machine set out. It went down the Rue Grand-Pont, crossed the Place des Arts, the Quai Napoleon, the Pont Neuf, and stopped short before the statue of Pierre Corneille.

"Go on," cried a voice that came from within.

The cab went on again, and as soon as it reached the Carrefour Lafayette, set off down-hill, and entered the station at a gallop.

"No, straight on!" cried the same voice.

The cab came out by the gate, and soon having reached the Cours, trotted quietly beneath the elm-trees. The coachman wiped his brow, put his leather hat between his knees, and drove his carriage beyond the side alley by the meadow to the margin of the waters.

It went along by the river, along the towing-path paved with sharp pebbles, and for a long while in the direction of Oyssel, beyond the isles.

But suddenly it turned with a dash across Quatremares, Sotteville, La Grande-Chaussee, the Rue d'Elbeuf, and made its third halt in front of the Jardin des Plantes.

"Get on, will you?" cried the voice more furiously.

And at once resuming its course, it passed by Saint-Sever, by the Quai'des Curandiers, the Quai aux Meules, once more over the bridge, by the Place du Champ de Mars, and behind the hospital gardens, where old men in black coats were walking in the sun along the terrace all green with ivy. It went up the Boulevard Bouvreuil, along the Boulevard Cauchoise, then the whole of Mont-Riboudet to the Deville hills.

It came back; and then, without any fixed plan or direction, wandered about at hazard. The cab was seen at Saint-Pol, at Lescure, at Mont Gargan, at La Rougue-Marc and Place du Gaillardbois; in the Rue Maladrerie, Rue Dinanderie, before Saint-Romain, Saint-Vivien, Saint-Maclou, Saint-Nicaise — in front of the Customs, at the "Vieille Tour," the "Trois Pipes," and the Monumental Cemetery. From time to time the coachman, on his box cast despairing eyes at the public-houses. He could not understand what furious desire for locomotion urged these individuals never to wish to stop. He tried to now and then, and at once exclamations of anger burst forth behind him. Then he lashed his perspiring jades afresh, but indifferent to their jolting, running up against things here and there, not caring if he did, demoralised, and almost weeping with thirst, fatigue, and depression.

And on the harbour, in the midst of the drays and casks, and in the streets, at the corners, the good folk opened large wonder-stricken eyes at this sight, so extraordinary in the provinces, a cab with blinds drawn, and which appeared thus constantly shut more closely than a tomb, and tossing about like a vessel.

Once in the middle of the day, in the open country, just as the sun beat most fiercely against the old plated lanterns, a bared hand passed beneath the small blinds of yellow canvas, and threw out some scraps of paper that scattered in the wind, and farther off lighted like white butterflies on a field of red clover all in bloom.

At about six o'clock the carriage stopped in a back street of the Beauvoisine Quarter, and a woman got out, who walked with her veil down, and without turning her head.

Chapter Two

On reaching the inn, Madame Bovary was surprised not to see the diligence. Hivert, who had waited for her fifty-three minutes, had at last started.

Yet nothing forced her to go; but she had given her word that she would return that same evening. Moreover, Charles expected her, and in her heart she felt already that cowardly docility that is for some women at once the chastisement and atonement of adultery.

She packed her box quickly, paid her bill, took a cab in the yard, hurrying on the driver, urging him on, every moment inquiring about the time and the miles traversed. He succeeded in catching up the "Hirondelle" as it neared the first houses of Quincampoix.

Hardly was she seated in her corner than she closed her eyes, and opened them at the foot of the hill, when from afar she recognised Felicite, who was on the lookout in front of the farrier's shop. Hivert pulled in his horses and, the servant, climbing up to the window, said mysteriously —

"Madame, you must go at once to Monsieur Homais. It's for something important."

The village was silent as usual. At the corner of the streets were small pink heaps that smoked in the air, for this was the time for jam-making, and everyone at Yonville prepared his supply on the same day. But in front of the chemist's shop one might admire a far larger heap, and that surpassed the others with the superiority that a laboratory must have over ordinary stores, a general need over individual fancy.

She went in. The large arm-chair was upset, and even the "Fanal de Rouen" lay on the ground, outspread between two pestles. She pushed open the lobby door, and in the middle of the kitchen, amid brown jars full of picked currants, of powdered sugar and lump sugar, of the scales on the table, and of the pans on the fire, she saw all the Homais, small and large, with aprons reaching to their chins, and with forks in their hands. Justin was standing up with bowed head, and the chemist was screaming —

"Who told you to go and fetch it in the Capharnaum."

"What is it? What is the matter?"

"What is it?" replied the druggist. "We are making preserves; they are simmering; but they were about to boil over, because there is too much juice, and I ordered another pan. Then he, from indolence, from laziness, went and took, hanging on its nail in my laboratory, the key of the Capharnaum."

It was thus the druggist called a small room under the leads, full of the utensils and the goods of his trade. He often spent long hours there alone, labelling, decanting, and doing up again; and he looked upon it not as a simple store, but as a veritable sanctuary, whence there afterwards issued, elaborated by his hands, all sorts of pills, boluses, infusions, lotions, and potions, that would bear far and wide his celebrity. No one in the world set foot there, and he respected it so, that he swept it himself. Finally, if the pharmacy, open to all comers, was the spot where he displayed his pride, the Capharnaum was the refuge where, egoistically concentrating himself, Homais delighted in the exercise of his predilections, so that Justin's thoughtlessness seemed to him a monstrous piece of irreverence, and, redder than the currants, he repeated —

"Yes, from the Capharnaum! The key that locks up the acids and caustic alkalies! To go and get a spare pan! a pan with a lid! and that I shall perhaps never use! Everything is of importance in the delicate operations of our art! But, devil take it! one must make distinctions, and not employ for almost domestic purposes that which is meant for pharmaceutical! It is as if one were to carve a fowl with a scalpel; as if a magistrate — "

"Now be calm," said Madame Homais.

And Athalie, pulling at his coat, cried "Papa! papa!"

"No, let me alone," went on the druggist "let me alone, hang it! My word! One might as well set up for a grocer. That's it! go it! respect nothing! break, smash, let loose the leeches, burn the mallow-paste, pickle the gherkins in the window jars, tear up the bandages!"

"I thought you had — " said Emma.

"Presently! Do you know to what you exposed yourself? Didn't you see anything in the corner, on the left, on the third shelf? Speak, answer, articulate something."

"I — don't — know," stammered the young fellow.

"Ah! you don't know! Well, then, I do know! You saw a bottle of blue glass, sealed with yellow wax, that contains a white powder, on which I have even written 'Dangerous!' And do you know what is in it? Arsenic! And you go and touch it! You take a pan that was next to it!"

"Next to it!" cried Madame Homais, clasping her hands. "Arsenic! You might have poisoned us all."

And the children began howling as if they already had frightful pains in their entrails.

"Or poison a patient!" continued the druggist. "Do you want to see me in the prisoner's dock with criminals, in a court of justice? To see me dragged to the scaffold? Don't you know what care I take in managing things, although I am so thoroughly used to it? Often I am horrified myself when I think of my responsibility; for the Government persecutes us, and the absurd legislation that rules us is a veritable Damocles' sword over our heads."

Emma no longer dreamed of asking what they wanted her for, and the druggist went on in breathless phrases —

"That is your return for all the kindness we have shown you! That is how you recompense me for the really paternal care that I lavish on you! For without me where would you be? What would you be doing? Who provides you with food, education, clothes, and all the means of figuring one day with honour in the ranks of society? But you must pull hard at the oar if you're to do that, and get, as, people say, callosities upon your hands. Fabricando fit faber, age quod agis.*"

* The worker lives by working, do what he will.

He was so exasperated he quoted Latin. He would have quoted Chinese or Greenlandish had he known those two languages, for he was in one of those crises in which the whole soul shows indistinctly what it contains, like the ocean, which, in the storm, opens itself from the seaweeds on its shores down to the sands of its abysses.

And he went on —

"I am beginning to repent terribly of having taken you up! I should certainly have done better to have left you to rot in your poverty and the dirt in which you were born. Oh, you'll never be fit for anything but to herd animals with horns! You have no aptitude for science! You hardly know how to stick on a label! And there you are, dwelling with me snug as a parson, living in clover, taking your ease!"

But Emma, turning to Madame Homais, "I was told to come here — "

"Oh, dear me!" interrupted the good woman, with a sad air, "how am I to tell you? It is a misfortune!"

She could not finish, the druggist was thundering — "Empty it! Clean it! Take it back! Be quick!"

And seizing Justin by the collar of his blouse, he shook a book out of his pocket. The lad stooped, but Homais was the quicker, and, having picked up the volume, contemplated it with staring eyes and open mouth.

"CONJUGAL — LOVE!" he said, slowly separating the two words. "Ah! very good! very good! very pretty! And illustrations! Oh, this is too much!"

Madame Homais came forward.

"No, do not touch it!"

The children wanted to look at the pictures.

"Leave the room," he said imperiously; and they went out.

First he walked up and down with the open volume in his hand, rolling his eyes, choking, tumid, apoplectic. Then he came straight to his pupil, and, planting himself in front of him with crossed arms —

"Have you every vice, then, little wretch? Take care! you are on a downward path. Did not you reflect that this infamous book might fall in the hands of my children, kindle a spark in their minds, tarnish the purity of Athalie, corrupt Napoleon. He is already formed like a man. Are you quite sure, anyhow, that they have not read it? Can you certify to me — "

"But really, sir," said Emma, "you wished to tell me — "

"Ah, yes! madame. Your father-in-law is dead."

In fact, Monsieur Bovary senior had expired the evening before suddenly from an attack of apoplexy as he got up from table, and by way of greater precaution, on account of Emma's sensibility, Charles had begged Homais to break the horrible news to her gradually. Homais had thought over his speech; he had rounded, polished it, made it rhythmical; it was a masterpiece of prudence and transitions, of subtle turns and delicacy; but anger had got the better of rhetoric.

Emma, giving up all chance of hearing any details, left the pharmacy; for Monsieur Homais had taken up the thread of his vituperations. However, he was growing calmer, and was now grumbling in a paternal tone whilst he fanned himself with his skull-cap.

"It is not that I entirely disapprove of the work. Its author was a doctor! There are certain scientific points in it that it is not ill a man should know, and I would even venture to say that a man must know. But later — later! At any rate, not till you are man yourself and your temperament is formed."

When Emma knocked at the door. Charles, who was waiting for her, came forward with open arms and said to her with tears in his voice —

"Ah! my dear!"

And he bent over her gently to kiss her. But at the contact of his lips the memory of the other seized her, and she passed her hand over her face shuddering.

But she made answer, "Yes, I know, I know!"

He showed her the letter in which his mother told the event without any sentimental hypocrisy. She only regretted her husband had not received the consolations of religion, as he had died at Daudeville, in the street, at the door of a cafe after a patriotic dinner with some ex-officers.

Emma gave him back the letter; then at dinner, for appearance's sake, she affected a certain repugnance. But as he urged her to try, she resolutely began eating, while Charles opposite her sat motionless in a dejected attitude.

Now and then he raised his head and gave her a long look full of distress. Once he sighed, "I should have liked to see him again!"

Once he sighed, "I should have liked to see him again!"

She was silent. At last, understanding that she must say something, "How old was your father?" she asked.

"Fifty-eight."

"Ah!"

And that was all.

A quarter of an hour after he added, "My poor mother! what will become of her now?"

She made a gesture that signified she did not know. Seeing her so taciturn, Charles imagined her much affected, and forced himself to say nothing, not to reawaken this sorrow which moved him. And, shaking off his own —

"Did you enjoy yourself yesterday?" he asked.

"Yes."

When the cloth was removed, Bovary did not rise, nor did Emma; and as she looked at him, the monotony of the spectacle drove little by little all pity from her heart. He seemed to her paltry, weak, a cipher — in a word, a poor thing in every way. How to get rid of him? What an interminable evening! Something stupefying like the fumes of opium seized her.

They heard in the passage the sharp noise of a wooden leg on the boards. It was Hippolyte bringing back Emma's luggage. In order to put it down he described painfully a quarter of a circle with his stump.

"He doesn't even remember any more about it," she thought, looking at the poor devil, whose coarse red hair was wet with perspiration.

Bovary was searching at the bottom of his purse for a centime, and without appearing to understand all there was of humiliation for him in the mere presence of this man, who stood there like a personified reproach to his incurable incapacity.

"Hallo! you've a pretty bouquet," he said, noticing Leon's violets on the chimney.

"Yes," she replied indifferently; "it's a bouquet I bought just now from a beggar."

Charles picked up the flowers, and freshening his eyes, red with tears, against them, smelt them delicately.

She took them quickly from his hand and put them in a glass of water.

The next day Madame Bovary senior arrived. She and her son wept much. Emma, on the pretext of giving orders, disappeared. The following day they had a talk over the mourning. They went and sat down with their workboxes by the waterside under the arbour.

Charles was thinking of his father, and was surprised to feel so much affection for this man, whom till then he had thought he cared little about.

affection for this man, whom till then he had thought he cared little about. Madame Bovary senior was thinking of her husband. The worst days of the past seemed enviable to her. All was forgotten beneath the instinctive regret of such a long habit, and from time to time whilst she sewed, a big tear rolled along her nose and hung suspended there a moment. Emma was thinking that it was scarcely forty-eight hours since they had been together, far from the world, all in a frenzy of joy, and not having eyes enough to gaze upon each other. She tried to recall the slightest details of that past day. But the presence of her husband and mother-in-law worried her. She would have liked to hear nothing, to see nothing, so as not to disturb the meditation on her love, that, do what she would, became lost in external sensations.

She was unpicking the lining of a dress, and the strips were scattered around her. Madame Bovary senior was plying her scissor without looking up, and Charles, in his list slippers and his old brown surtout that he used as a dressing-gown, sat with both hands in his pockets, and did not speak either; near them Berthe, in a little white pinafore, was raking sand in the walks with her spade. Suddenly she saw Monsieur Lheureux, the linendraper, come in through the gate.

He came to offer his services "under the sad circumstances." Emma answered that she thought she could do without. The shopkeeper was not to be beaten.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "but I should like to have a private talk with you." Then in a low voice, "It's about that affair — you know."

Charles crimsoned to his ears. "Oh, yes! certainly." And in his confusion, turning to his wife, "Couldn't you, my darling?"

She seemed to understand him, for she rose; and Charles said to his mother, "It is nothing particular. No doubt, some household trifle." He did not want her to know the story of the bill, fearing her reproaches.

As soon as they were alone, Monsieur Lheureux in sufficiently clear terms began to congratulate Emma on the inheritance, then to talk of indifferent matters, of the espaliers, of the harvest, and of his own health, which was always so-so, always having ups and downs. In fact, he had to work devilish hard, although he didn't make enough, in spite of all people said, to find butter for his bread.

Emma let him talk on. She had bored herself so prodigiously the last two days.

"And so you're quite well again?" he went on. "Ma foi! I saw your husband in a sad state. He's a good fellow, though we did have a little misunderstanding."

She asked what misunderstanding, for Charles had said nothing of the dispute about the goods supplied to her.

"Why, you know well enough," cried Lheureux. "It was about your little

"Why, you know well enough," cried Lheureux. "It was about your little fancies — the travelling trunks."

He had drawn his hat over his eyes, and, with his hands behind his back, smiling and whistling, he looked straight at her in an unbearable manner. Did he suspect anything?

She was lost in all kinds of apprehensions. At last, however, he went on —

"We made it up, all the same, and I've come again to propose another arrangement."

This was to renew the bill Bovary had signed. The doctor, of course, would do as he pleased; he was not to trouble himself, especially just now, when he would have a lot of worry. "And he would do better to give it over to someone else — to you, for example. With a power of attorney it could be easily managed, and then we (you and I) would have our little business transactions together."

She did not understand. He was silent. Then, passing to his trade, Lheureux declared that madame must require something. He would send her a black barege, twelve yards, just enough to make a gown.

"The one you've on is good enough for the house, but you want another for calls. I saw that the very moment that I came in. I've the eye of an American!"

He did not send the stuff; he brought it. Then he came again to measure it; he came again on other pretexts, always trying to make himself agreeable, useful, "enfeoffing himself," as Homais would have said, and always dropping some hint to Emma about the power of attorney. He never mentioned the bill; she did not think of it. Charles, at the beginning of her convalescence, had certainly said something about it to her, but so many emotions had passed through her head that she no longer remembered it. Besides, she took care not to talk of any money questions. Madame Bovary seemed surprised at this, and attributed the change in her ways to the religious sentiments she had contracted during her illness.

But as soon as she was gone, Emma greatly astounded Bovary by her practical good sense. It would be necessary to make inquiries, to look into mortgages, and see if there were any occasion for a sale by auction or a liquidation. She quoted technical terms casually, pronounced the grand words of order, the future, foresight, and constantly exaggerated the difficulties of settling his father's affairs so much, that at last one day she showed him the rough draft of a power of attorney to manage and administer his business, arrange all loans, sign and endorse all bills, pay all sums, *etc.* She had profited by Lheureux's lessons. Charles naively asked her where this paper came from.

"Monsieur Guillaumin"; and with the utmost coolness she added, "I don't trust him overmuch. Notaries have such a bad reputation. Perhaps we ought to consult him overmuch. Notaries have such a bad reputation. Perhaps we ought to consult — we only know — no one."

"Unless Leon — " replied Charles, who was reflecting. But it was difficult to explain matters by letter. Then she offered to make the journey, but he thanked her. She insisted. It was quite a contest of mutual consideration. At last she cried with affected waywardness —

"No, I will go!"

"How good you are!" he said, kissing her forehead.

The next morning she set out in the "Hirondelle" to go to Rouen to consult Monsieur Leon, and she stayed there three days.

Chapter Three

They were three full, exquisite days — a true honeymoon. They were at the Hotel-de-Boulogne, on the harbour; and they lived there, with drawn blinds and closed doors, with flowers on the floor, and iced syrups were brought them early in the morning.

Towards evening they took a covered boat and went to dine on one of the islands. It was the time when one hears by the side of the dockyard the caulking-mallets sounding against the hull of vessels. The smoke of the tar rose up between the trees; there were large fatty drops on the water, undulating in the purple colour of the sun, like floating plaques of Florentine bronze.

They rowed down in the midst of moored boats, whose long oblique cables grazed lightly against the bottom of the boat. The din of the town gradually grew distant; the rolling of carriages, the tumult of voices, the yelping of dogs on the decks of vessels. She took off her bonnet, and they landed on their island.

They sat down in the low-ceilinged room of a tavern, at whose door hung black nets. They ate fried smelts, cream and cherries. They lay down upon the grass; they kissed behind the poplars; and they would fain, like two Robinsons, have lived for ever in this little place, which seemed to them in their beatitude the most magnificent on earth. It was not the first time that they had seen trees, a blue sky, meadows; that they had heard the water flowing and the wind blowing in the leaves; but, no doubt, they had never admired all this, as if Nature had not existed before, or had only begun to be beautiful since the gratification of their desires.

At night they returned. The boat glided along the shores of the islands. They sat at the bottom, both hidden by the shade, in silence. The square oars rang in the iron thwarts, and, in the stillness, seemed to mark time, like the beating of a metronome, while at the stern the rudder that trailed behind never ceased its gentle splash against the water.

Once the moon rose; they did not fail to make fine phrases, finding the orb melancholy and full of poetry. She even began to sing —

"One night, do you remember, we were sailing," *etc.*

Her musical but weak voice died away along the waves, and the winds carried off the trills that Leon heard pass like the flapping of wings about him.

She was opposite him, leaning against the partition of the shallop, through one of whose raised blinds the moon streamed in. Her black dress, whose drapery spread out like a fan, made her seem more slender, taller. Her head was raised, her hands clasped, her eyes turned towards heaven. At times the shadow of the willows hid her completely; then she reappeared suddenly, like a vision in the moonlight.

Leon, on the floor by her side, found under his hand a ribbon of scarlet silk. The boatman looked at it, and at last said —

"Perhaps it belongs to the party I took out the other day. A lot of jolly folk, gentlemen and ladies, with cakes, champagne, cornets — everything in style! There was one especially, a tall handsome man with small moustaches, who was that funny! And they all kept saying, 'Now tell us something, Adolphe — Dolpe,' I think."

She shivered.

"You are in pain?" asked Leon, coming closer to her.

"Oh, it's nothing! No doubt, it is only the night air."

"And who doesn't want for women, either," softly added the sailor, thinking he was paying the stranger a compliment.

Then, spitting on his hands, he took the oars again.

Yet they had to part. The adieux were sad. He was to send his letters to Mere Rollet, and she gave him such precise instructions about a double envelope that he admired greatly her amorous astuteness.

"So you can assure me it is all right?" she said with her last kiss.

"Yes, certainly."

"But why," he thought afterwards as he came back through the streets alone, "is she so very anxious to get this power of attorney?"

Chapter Four

Leon soon put on an air of superiority before his comrades, avoided their company, and completely neglected his work.

He waited for her letters; he re-read them; he wrote to her. He called her to mind with all the strength of his desires and of his memories. Instead of lessening with absence, this longing to see her again grew, so that at last on Saturday morning he escaped from his office.

When, from the summit of the hill, he saw in the valley below the church-spire with its tin flag swinging in the wind, he felt that delight mingled with triumphant vanity and egoistic tenderness that millionaires must experience when they come back to their native village.

He went rambling round her house. A light was burning in the kitchen. He watched for her shadow behind the curtains, but nothing appeared.

Mere Lefrancois, when she saw him, uttered many exclamations. She thought he "had grown and was thinner," while Artemise, on the contrary, thought him stouter and darker.

He dined in the little room as of yore, but alone, without the tax-gatherer; for Binet, tired of waiting for the "Hirondelle," had definitely put forward his meal one hour, and now he dined punctually at five, and yet he declared usually the rickety old concern "was late."

Leon, however, made up his mind, and knocked at the doctor's door. Madame was in her room, and did not come down for a quarter of an hour. The doctor seemed delighted to see him, but he never stirred out that evening, nor all the next day.

He saw her alone in the evening, very late, behind the garden in the lane; in the lane, as she had the other one! It was a stormy night, and they talked under an umbrella by lightning flashes.

Their separation was becoming intolerable. "I would rather die!" said Emma. She was writhing in his arms, weeping. "Adieu! adieu! When shall I see you again?"

They came back again to embrace once more, and it was then that she promised him to find soon, by no matter what means, a regular opportunity for seeing one another in freedom at least once a week. Emma never doubted she should be able to do this. Besides, she was full of hope. Some money was coming to her.

On the strength of it she bought a pair of yellow curtains with large stripes for her room, whose cheapness Monsieur Lheureux had commended; she dreamed of getting a carpet, and Lheureux, declaring that it wasn't "drinking the sea," politely undertook to supply her with one. She could no longer do without his services. Twenty times a day she sent for him, and he at once put by his business without a murmur. People could not understand either why Mere Rollet breakfasted with her every day, and even paid her private visits.

It was about this time, that is to say, the beginning of winter, that she seemed seized with great musical fervour.

One evening when Charles was listening to her, she began the same piece four times over, each time with much vexation, while he, not noticing any difference, cried —

"Bravo! very goodl You are wrong to stop. Go on!"

"Oh, no; it is execrable! My fingers are quite rusty."

The next day he begged her to play him something again.

"Very well; to please you!"

And Charles confessed she had gone off a little. She played wrong notes and blundered; then, stopping short —

"Ah! it is no use. I ought to take some lessons; but — " She bit her lips and added, "Twenty francs a lesson, that's too dear!"

"Yes, so it is — rather," said Charles, giggling stupidly. "But it seems to me that one might be able to do it for less; for there are artists of no reputation, and who are often better than the celebrities."

"Find them!" said Emma.

The next day when he came home he looked at her shyly, and at last could no longer keep back the words.

"How obstinate you are sometimes! I went to Barfucheres to-day. Well, Madame Liegard assured me that her three young ladies who are at La Misericorde have lessons at fifty sous apiece, and that from an excellent mistress!"

She shrugged her shoulders and did not open her piano again. But when she passed by it (if Bovary were there), she sighed —

"Ah! my poor piano!"

And when anyone came to see her, she did not fail to inform them she had given up music, and could not begin again now for important reasons. Then people commiserated her —

"What a pity! she had so much talent!"

They even spoke to Bovary about it. They put him to shame, and especially the chemist.

"You are wrong. One should never let any of the faculties of nature lie fallow. Besides, just think, my good friend, that by inducing madame to study; you are economising on the subsequent musical education of your child. For my own part, I think that mothers ought themselves to instruct their children. That is an idea of Rousseau's, still rather new perhaps, but that will end by triumphing, I am certain of it, like mothers nursing their own children and vaccination."

So Charles returned once more to this question of the piano. Emma replied bitterly that it would be better to sell it. This poor piano, that had given her vanity so much satisfaction — to see it go was to Bovary like the indefinable suicide of a part of herself.

"If you liked," he said, "a lesson from time to time, that wouldn't after all be very ruinous."

"But lessons," she replied, "are only of use when followed up."

And thus it was she set about obtaining her husband's permission to go to town once a week to see her lover. At the end of a month she was even considered to have made considerable progress.

Chapter Five

She went on Thursdays. She got up and dressed silently, in order not to awaken Charles, who would have made remarks about her getting ready too early. Next she walked up and down, went to the windows, and looked out at the Place. The early dawn was broadening between the pillars of the market, and the chemist's shop, with the shutters still up, showed in the pale light of the dawn the large letters of his signboard.

When the clock pointed to a quarter past seven, she went off to the "Lion d'Or," whose door Artemise opened yawning. The girl then made up the coals covered by the cinders, and Emma remained alone in the kitchen. Now and again she went out. Hivert was leisurely harnessing his horses, listening, moreover, to Mere Lefrancois, who, passing her head and nightcap through a grating, was charging him with commissions and giving him explanations that would have confused anyone else. Emma kept beating the soles of her boots against the pavement of the yard.

At last, when he had eaten his soup, put on his cloak, lighted his pipe, and grasped his whip, he calmly installed himself on his seat.

The "Hirondelle" started at a slow trot, and for about a mile stopped here and there to pick up passengers who waited for it, standing at the border of the road, in front of their yard gates.

Those who had secured seats the evening before kept it waiting; some even were still in bed in their houses. Hivert called, shouted, swore; then he got down from his seat and went and knocked loudly at the doors. The wind blew through the cracked windows.

The four seats, however, filled up. The carriage rolled off; rows of apple-trees followed one upon another, and the road between its two long ditches, full of yellow water, rose, constantly narrowing towards the horizon.

Emma knew it from end to end; she knew that after a meadow there was a sign-post, next an elm, a barn, or the hut of a lime-kiln tender. Sometimes even, in the hope of getting some surprise, she shut her eyes, but she never lost the clear perception of the distance to be traversed.

At last the brick houses began to follow one another more closely, the earth resounded beneath the wheels, the "Hirondelle" glided between the gardens, where through an opening one saw statues, a periwinkle plant, clipped yews, and a swing. Then on a sudden the town appeared. Sloping down like an amphitheatre, and drowned in the fog, it widened out beyond the bridges confusedly. Then the open country spread away with a monotonous movement till it touched in the distance the vague line of the pale sky. Seen thus from above, the whole landscape looked immovable as a picture; the anchored ships were massed in one corner, the river curved round the foot of the green hills, and the isles, oblique in shape, lay on the water, like large, motionless, black fishes. The factory chimneys belched forth immense brown fumes that were blown away at the top. One heard the rumbling of the foundries, together with the clear chimes of the churches that stood out in the mist. The leafless trees on the boulevards made violet thickets in the midst of the houses, and the roofs, all shining with the rain, threw back unequal reflections, according to the height of the quarters in which they were. Sometimes a gust of wind drove the clouds towards the Saint Catherine hills, like aerial waves that broke silently against a cliff.

A giddiness seemed to her to detach itself from this mass of existence, and her heart swelled as if the hundred and twenty thousand souls that palpitated there had all at once sent into it the vapour of the passions she fancied theirs. Her love grew in the presence of this vastness, and expanded with tumult to the vague murmurings that rose towards her. She poured it out upon the square, on the walks, on the streets, and the old Norman city outspread before her eyes as an enormous capital, as a Babylon into which she was entering. She leant with both hands against the window, drinking in the breeze; the three horses galloped, the stones grated in the mud, the diligence rocked, and Hivert, from afar, hailed the carts on the road, while the bourgeois who had spent the night at the Guillaume woods came quietly down the hill in their little family carriages.

They stopped at the barrier; Emma undid her overshoes, put on other gloves, rearranged her shawl, and some twenty paces farther she got down from the "Hirondelle."

The town was then awakening. Shop-boys in caps were cleaning up the shop-fronts, and women with baskets against their hips, at intervals uttered sonorous cries at the corners of streets. She walked with downcast eyes, close to the walls, and smiling with pleasure under her lowered black veil.

For fear of being seen, she did not usually take the most direct road. She plunged into dark alleys, and, all perspiring, reached the bottom of the Rue Nationale, near the fountain that stands there. It, is the quarter for theatres, public-houses, and whores. Often a cart would pass near her, bearing some shaking scenery. Waiters in aprons were sprinkling sand on the flagstones between green shrubs. It all smelt of absinthe, cigars, and oysters.

She turned down a street; she recognised him by his curling hair that escaped from beneath his hat.

Leon walked along the pavement. She followed him to the hotel. He went up, opened the door, entered — What an embrace!

Then, after the kisses, the words gushed forth. They told each other the sorrows of the week, the presentiments, the anxiety for the letters; but now everything was forgotten; they gazed into each other's faces with voluptuous laughs, and tender names.

The bed was large, of mahogany, in the shape of a boat. The curtains were in red levantine, that hung from the ceiling and bulged out too much towards the bell-shaped bedside; and nothing in the world was so lovely as her brown head and white skin standing out against this purple colour, when, with a movement of shame, she crossed her bare arms, hiding her face in her hands.

The warm room, with its discreet carpet, its gay ornaments, and its calm light, seemed made for the intimacies of passion. The curtain-rods, ending in arrows, their brass pegs, and the great balls of the fire-dogs shone suddenly when the sun came in. On the chimney between the candelabra there were two of those pink shells in which one hears the murmur of the sea if one holds them to the ear.

How they loved that dear room, so full of gaiety, despite its rather faded splendour! They always found the furniture in the same place, and sometimes hairpins, that she had forgotten the Thursday before, under the pedestal of the clock. They lunched by the fireside on a little round table, inlaid with rosewood. Emma carved, put bits on his plate with all sorts of coquettish ways, and she laughed with a sonorous and libertine laugh when the froth of the champagne ran over from the glass to the rings on her fingers. They were so completely lost in the possession of each other that they thought themselves in their own house, and that they would live there till death, like two spouses eternally young. They said "our room," "our carpet," she even said "my slippers," a gift of Leon's, a whim she had had. They were pink satin, bordered with swansdown. When she sat on his knees, her leg, then too short, hung in the air, and the dainty shoe, that had no back to it, was held only by the toes to her bare foot.

He for the first time enjoyed the inexpressible delicacy of feminine refinements. He had never met this grace of language, this reserve of clothing, these poses of the weary dove. He admired the exaltation of her soul and the lace on her petticoat. Besides, was she not "a lady" and a married woman — a real mistress, in fine?

By the diversity of her humour, in turn mystical or mirthful, talkative, taciturn, passionate, careless, she awakened in him a thousand desires, called up instincts or memories. She was the mistress of all the novels, the heroine of all the dramas, the vague "she" of all the volumes of verse. He found again on her shoulder the amber colouring of the "Odalisque Bathing"; she had the long waist of feudal chatelaines, and she resembled the "Pale Woman of Barcelona." But above all she was the Angel!

Often looking at her, it seemed to him that his soul, escaping towards her, spread like a wave about the outline of her head, and descended drawn down into the whiteness of her breast. He knelt on the ground before her, and with both elbows on her knees looked at her with a smile, his face upturned.

She bent over him, and murmured, as if choking with intoxication —

"Oh, do not move! do not speak! look at me! Something so sweet comes from your eyes that helps me so much!"

She called him "child." "Child, do you love me?"

And she did not listen for his answer in the haste of her lips that fastened to his mouth.

On the clock there was a bronze cupid, who smirked as he bent his arm beneath a golden garland. They had laughed at it many a time, but when they had to part everything seemed serious to them.

Motionless in front of each other, they kept repeating, "Till Thursday, till Thursday."

Suddenly she seized his head between her hands, kissed him hurriedly on the forehead, crying, "Adieu!" and rushed down the stairs.

She went to a hairdresser's in the Rue de la Comedie to have her hair arranged. Night fell; the gas was lighted in the shop. She heard the bell at the theatre calling the mummers to the performance, and she saw, passing opposite, men with white faces and women in faded gowns going in at the stage-door.

It was hot in the room, small, and too low where the stove was hissing in the midst of wigs and pomades. The smell of the tongs, together with the greasy hands that handled her head, soon stunned her, and she dozed a little in her wrapper. Often, as he did her hair, the man offered her tickets for a masked ball.

Then she went away. She went up the streets; reached the Croix-Rouge, put on her overshoes, that she had hidden in the morning under the seat, and sank into her place among the impatient passengers. Some got out at the foot of the hill. She remained alone in the carriage. At every turning all the lights of the town were seen more and more completely, making a great luminous vapour about the dim houses. Emma knelt on the cushions and her eyes wandered over the dazzling light. She sobbed; called on Leon, sent him tender words and kisses lost in the wind.

On the hillside a poor devil wandered about with his stick in the midst of the diligences. A mass of rags covered his shoulders, and an old staved-in beaver, turned out like a basin, hid his face; but when he took it off he discovered in the place of eyelids empty and bloody orbits. The flesh hung in red shreds, and there flowed from it liquids that congealed into green scale down to the nose, whose black nostrils sniffed convulsively. To speak to you he threw back his head with an idiotic laugh; then his bluish eyeballs, rolling constantly, at the temples beat against the edge of the open wound. He sang a little song as he followed the carriages —

"Maids an the warmth of a summer day Dream of love, and of love always"

And all the rest was about birds and sunshine and green leaves.

Sometimes he appeared suddenly behind Emma, bareheaded, and she drew back with a cry. Hivert made fun of him. He would advise him to get a booth at the Saint Romain fair, or else ask him, laughing, how his young woman was.

Often they had started when, with a sudden movement, his hat entered the diligence through the small window, while he clung with his other arm to the footboard, between the wheels splashing mud. His voice, feeble at first and quavering, grew sharp; it resounded in the night like the indistinct moan of a vague distress; and through the ringing of the bells, the murmur of the trees, and the rumbling of the empty vehicle, it had a far-off sound that disturbed Emma. It went to the bottom of her soul, like a whirlwind in an abyss, and carried her away into the distances of a boundless melancholy. But Hivert, noticing a weight behind, gave the blind man sharp cuts with his whip. The thong lashed his wounds, and he fell back into the mud with a yell. Then the passengers in the "Hirondelle" ended by falling asleep, some with open mouths, others with lowered chins, leaning against their neighbour's shoulder, or with their arm passed through the strap, oscillating regularly with the jolting of the carriage; and the reflection of the lantern swinging without, on the crupper of the wheeler; penetrating into the interior through the chocolate calico curtains, threw sanguineous shadows over all these motionless people. Emma, drunk with grief, shivered in her clothes, feeling her feet grow colder and colder, and death in her soul.

Charles at home was waiting for her; the "Hirondelle" was always late on Thursdays. Madame arrived at last, and scarcely kissed the child. The dinner was not ready. No matter! She excused the servant. This girl now seemed allowed to do just as she liked.

Often her husband, noting her pallor, asked if she were unwell.

"No," said Emma.

"But," he replied, "you seem so strange this evening."

"Oh, it's nothing! nothing!"

There were even days when she had no sooner come in than she went up to her room; and Justin, happening to be there, moved about noiselessly, quicker at helping her than the best of maids. He put the matches ready, the candlestick, a book, arranged her nightgown, turned back the bedclothes.

"Come!" said she, "that will do. Now you can go."

"Come!" said she, "that will do. Now you can go."

For he stood there, his hands hanging down and his eyes wide open, as if enmeshed in the innumerable threads of a sudden reverie.

The following day was frightful, and those that came after still more unbearable, because of her impatience to once again seize her happiness; an ardent lust, inflamed by the images of past experience, and that burst forth freely on the seventh day beneath Leon's caresses. His ardours were hidden beneath outbursts of wonder and gratitude. Emma tasted this love in a discreet, absorbed fashion, maintained it by all the artifices of her tenderness, and trembled a little lest it should be lost later on.

She often said to him, with her sweet, melancholy voice —

"Ah! you too, you will leave me! You will marry! You will be like all the others."

He asked, "What others?"

"Why, like all men," she replied. Then added, repulsing him with a languid movement —

"You are all evil!"

One day, as they were talking philosophically of earthly disillusions, to experiment on his jealousy, or yielding, perhaps, to an over-strong need to pour out her heart, she told him that formerly, before him, she had loved someone.

"Not like you," she went on quickly, protesting by the head of her child that "nothing had passed between them."

The young man believed her, but none the less questioned her to find out what he was.

"He was a ship's captain, my dear."

Was this not preventing any inquiry, and, at the same time, assuming a higher ground through this pretended fascination exercised over a man who must have been of warlike nature and accustomed to receive homage?

The clerk then felt the lowliness of his position; he longed for epaulettes, crosses, titles. All that would please her — he gathered that from her spendthrift habits.

Emma nevertheless concealed many of these extravagant fancies, such as her wish to have a blue tilbury to drive into Rouen, drawn by an English horse and driven by a groom in top-boots. It was Justin who had inspired her with this whim, by begging her to take him into her service as valet-de-chambre*, and if the privation of it did not lessen the pleasure of her arrival at each rendezvous, it certainly augmented the bitterness of the return.

* Manservant.

Often, when they talked together of Paris, she ended by murmuring, "Ah! how happy we should be there!"

how happy we should be there!"

"Are we not happy?" gently answered the young man passing his hands over her hair.

"Yes, that is true," she said. "I am mad. Kiss me!"

To her husband she was more charming than ever. She made him pistachio-creams, and played him waltzes after dinner. So he thought himself the most fortunate of men and Emma was without uneasiness, when, one evening suddenly he said —

"It is Mademoiselle Lempereur, isn't it, who gives you lessons?"

"Yes."

"Well, I saw her just now," Charles went on, "at Madame Liegeard's. I spoke to her about you, and she doesn't know you."

This was like a thunderclap. However, she replied quite naturally —

"Ah! no doubt she forgot my name."

"But perhaps," said the doctor, "there are several Demoiselles Lempereur at Rouen who are music-mistresses."

"Possibly!" Then quickly — "But I have my receipts here. See!"

And she went to the writing-table, ransacked all the drawers, rummaged the papers, and at last lost her head so completely that Charles earnestly begged her not to take so much trouble about those wretched receipts.

"Oh, I will find them," she said.

And, in fact, on the following Friday, as Charles was putting on one of his boots in the dark cabinet where his clothes were kept, he felt a piece of paper between the leather and his sock. He took it out and read —

"Received, for three months' lessons and several pieces of music, the sum of sixty-three francs. — Felicie Lempereur, professor of music."

"How the devil did it get into my boots?"

"It must," she replied, "have fallen from the old box of bills that is on the edge of the shelf."

From that moment her existence was but one long tissue of lies, in which she enveloped her love as in veils to hide it. It was a want, a mania, a pleasure carried to such an extent that if she said she had the day before walked on the right side of a road, one might know she had taken the left.

One morning, when she had gone, as usual, rather lightly clothed, it suddenly began to snow, and as Charles was watching the weather from the window, he caught sight of Monsieur Bournisien in the chaise of Monsieur Tuvache, who was driving him to Rouen. Then he went down to give the priest a thick shawl that he was to hand over to Emma as soon as he reached the "Croix-Rouge." When he got to the inn, Monsieur Bournisien asked for the wife of the Yonville doctor. The landlady replied that she very rarely came to her establishment. So that evening, when he recognised Madame Bovary in the "Hirondelle," the cure told her his dilemma, without, however, appearing to attach much importance to it, for he began praising a preacher who was doing wonders at the Cathedral, and whom all the ladies were rushing to hear.

Still, if he did not ask for any explanation, others, later on, might prove less discreet. So she thought well to get down each time at the "Croix-Rouge," so that the good folk of her village who saw her on the stairs should suspect nothing.

One day, however, Monsieur Lheureux met her coming out of the Hotel de Boulogne on Leon's arm; and she was frightened, thinking he would gossip. He was not such a fool. But three days after he came to her room, shut the door, and said, "I must have some money."

She declared she could not give him any. Lheureux burst into lamentations and reminded her of all the kindnesses he had shown her.

In fact, of the two bills signed by Charles, Emma up to the present had paid only one. As to the second, the shopkeeper, at her request, had consented to replace it by another, which again had been renewed for a long date. Then he drew from his pocket a list of goods not paid for; to wit, the curtains, the carpet, the material for the armchairs, several dresses, and divers articles of dress, the bills for which amounted to about two thousand francs.

She bowed her head. He went on —

"But if you haven't any ready money, you have an estate." And he reminded her of a miserable little hovel situated at Barneville, near Aumale, that brought in almost nothing. It had formerly been part of a small farm sold by Monsieur Bovary senior; for Lheureux knew everything, even to the number of acres and the names of the neighbours.

"If I were in your place," he said, "I should clear myself of my debts, and have money left over."

She pointed out the difficulty of getting a purchaser. He held out the hope of finding one; but she asked him how she should manage to sell it.

"Haven't you your power of attorney?" he replied.

The phrase came to her like a breath of fresh air. "Leave me the bill," said Emma.

"Oh, it isn't worth while," answered Lheureux.

He came back the following week and boasted of having, after much trouble, at last discovered a certain Langlois, who, for a long time, had had an eye on the property, but without mentioning his price.

"Never mind the price!" she cried.

But they would, on the contrary, have to wait, to sound the fellow. The thing was worth a journey, and, as she could not undertake it, he offered to go to the place to have an interview with Langlois. On his return he announced that the purchaser proposed four thousand francs.

Emma was radiant at this news.

"Frankly," he added, "that's a good price."

She drew half the sum at once, and when she was about to pay her account the shopkeeper said —

"It really grieves me, on my word! to see you depriving yourself all at once of such a big sum as that."

Then she looked at the bank-notes, and dreaming of the unlimited number of rendezvous represented by those two thousand francs, she stammered —

"What! what!"

"Oh!" he went on, laughing good-naturedly, "one puts anything one likes on receipts. Don't you think I know what household affairs are?" And he looked at her fixedly, while in his hand he held two long papers that he slid between his nails. At last, opening his pocket-book, he spread out on the table four bills to order, each for a thousand francs.

"Sign these," he said, "and keep it all!"

She cried out, scandalised.

"But if I give you the surplus," replied Monsieur Lheureux impudently, "is that not helping you?"

And taking a pen he wrote at the bottom of the account, "Received of Madame Bovary four thousand francs."

"Now who can trouble you, since in six months you'll draw the arrears for your cottage, and I don't make the last bill due till after you've been paid?"

Emma grew rather confused in her calculations, and her ears tingled as if gold pieces, bursting from their bags, rang all round her on the floor. At last Lheureux explained that he had a very good friend, Vincart, a broker at Rouen, who would discount these four bills. Then he himself would hand over to madame the remainder after the actual debt was paid.

But instead of two thousand francs he brought only eighteen hundred, for the friend Vincart (which was only fair) had deducted two hundred francs for commission and discount. Then he carelessly asked for a receipt.

"You understand — in business — sometimes. And with the date, if you please, with the date."

A horizon of realisable whims opened out before Emma. She was prudent enough to lay by a thousand crowns, with which the first three bills were paid when they fell due; but the fourth, by chance, came to the house on a Thursday, and Charles, quite upset, patiently awaited his wife's return for an explanation.

If she had not told him about this bill, it was only to spare him such domestic worries; she sat on his knees, caressed him, cooed to him, gave him a long enumeration of all the indispensable things that had been got on credit.

"Really, you must confess, considering the quantity, it isn't too dear."

Charles, at his wit's end, soon had recourse to the eternal Lheureux, who swore he would arrange matters if the doctor would sign him two bills, one of which was for seven hundred francs, payable in three months. In order to arrange for this he wrote his mother a pathetic letter. Instead of sending a reply she came herself; and when Emma wanted to know whether he had got anything out of her, "Yes," he replied; "but she wants to see the account." The next morning at daybreak Emma ran to Lheureux to beg him to make out another account for not more than a thousand francs, for to show the one for four thousand it would be necessary to say that she had paid two-thirds, and confess, consequently, the sale of the estate — a negotiation admirably carried out by the shopkeeper, and which, in fact, was only actually known later on.

Despite the low price of each article, Madame Bovary senior, of course, thought the expenditure extravagant.

"Couldn't you do without a carpet? Why have recovered the armchairs? In my time there was a single armchair in a house, for elderly persons — at any rate it was so at my mother's, who was a good woman, I can tell you. Everybody can't be rich! No fortune can hold out against waste! I should be ashamed to coddle myself as you do! And yet I am old. I need looking after. And there! there! fitting up gowns! fallals! What! silk for lining at two francs, when you can get jaconet for ten sous, or even for eight, that would do well enough!"

Emma, lying on a lounge, replied as quietly as possible — "Ah! Madame, enough! enough!"

The other went on lecturing her, predicting they would end in the workhouse. But it was Bovary's fault. Luckily he had promised to destroy that power of attorney.

"What?"

"Ah! he swore he would," went on the good woman.

Emma opened the window, called Charles, and the poor fellow was obliged to confess the promise torn from him by his mother.

Emma disappeared, then came back quickly, and majestically handed her a thick piece of paper.

"Thank you," said the old woman. And she threw the power of attorney into the fire.

Emma began to laugh, a strident, piercing, continuous laugh; she had an attack of hysterics.

"Oh, my God!" cried Charles. "Ah! you really are wrong! You come here and make scenes with her!"

His mother, shrugging her shoulders, declared it was "all put on."

But Charles, rebelling for the first time, took his wife's part, so that Madame Bovary, senior, said she would leave. She went the very next day, and on the threshold, as he was trying to detain her, she replied —

"No, no! You love her better than me, and you are right. It is natural. For the rest, so much the worse! You will see. Good day — for I am not likely to come soon again, as you say, to make scenes."

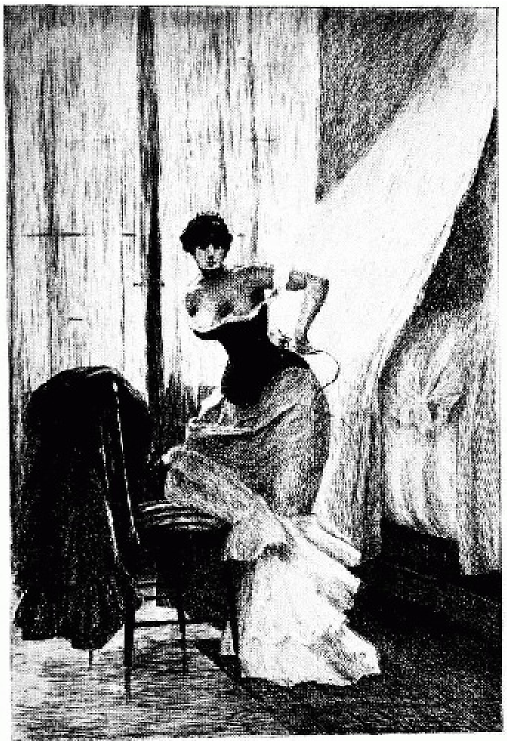
Charles nevertheless was very crestfallen before Emma, who did not hide the resentment she still felt at his want of confidence, and it needed many prayers before she would consent to have another power of attorney. He even accompanied her to Monsieur Guillaumin to have a second one, just like the other, drawn up.

"I understand," said the notary; "a man of science can't be worried with the practical details of life."

And Charles felt relieved by this comfortable reflection, which gave his weakness the flattering appearance of higher pre-occupation.

And what an outburst the next Thursday at the hotel in their room with Leon! She laughed, cried, sang, sent for sherbets, wanted to smoke cigarettes, seemed to him wild and extravagant, but adorable, superb.

He did not know what recreation of her whole being drove her more and more to plunge into the pleasures of life. She was becoming irritable, greedy, voluptuous; and she walked about the streets with him carrying her head high, without fear, so she said, of compromising herself. At times, however, Emma shuddered at the sudden thought of meeting Rodolphe, for it seemed to her that, although they were separated forever, she was not completely free from her subjugation to him.



One night she did not return to Yonville at all. Charles lost his head with anxiety, and little Berthe would not go to bed without her mamma, and sobbed enough to break her heart. Justin had gone out searching the road at random. Monsieur Homais even had left his pharmacy.

At last, at eleven o'clock, able to bear it no longer, Charles harnessed his chaise, jumped in, whipped up his horse, and reached the "Croix-Rouge" about two o'clock in the morning. No one there! He thought that the clerk had perhaps seen her; but where did he live? Happily, Charles remembered his employer's address, and rushed off there.

Day was breaking, and he could distinguish the escutcheons over the door, and knocked. Someone, without opening the door, shouted out the required information, adding a few insults to those who disturb people in the middle of the night.

The house inhabited by the clerk had neither bell, knocker, nor porter. Charles knocked loudly at the shutters with his hands. A policeman happened to pass by. Then he was frightened, and went away.

"I am mad," he said; "no doubt they kept her to dinner at Monsieur Lormeaux'." But the Lormeaux no longer lived at Rouen.

"She probably stayed to look after Madame Dubreuil. Why, Madame Dubreuil has been dead these ten months! Where can she be?"

An idea occurred to him. At a cafe he asked for a Directory, and hurriedly looked for the name of Mademoiselle Lempereur, who lived at No. 74 Rue de la Renelle-des-Maroquiniers.

Renelle-des-Maroquiniers.

As he was turning into the street, Emma herself appeared at the other end of it. He threw himself upon her rather than embraced her, crying —

"What kept you yesterday?"

"I was not well."

"What was it? Where? How?"

She passed her hand over her forehead and answered, "At Mademoiselle Lempereur's."

"I was sure of it! I was going there."

"Oh, it isn't worth while," said Emma. "She went out just now; but for the future don't worry. I do not feel free, you see, if I know that the least delay upsets you like this."

This was a sort of permission that she gave herself, so as to get perfect freedom in her escapades. And she profited by it freely, fully. When she was seized with the desire to see Leon, she set out upon any pretext; and as he was not expecting her on that day, she went to fetch him at his office.

It was a great delight at first, but soon he no longer concealed the truth, which was, that his master complained very much about these interruptions.

"Pshaw! come along," she said.

And he slipped out.

She wanted him to dress all in black, and grow a pointed beard, to look like the portraits of Louis XIII. She wanted to see his lodgings; thought them poor. He blushed at them, but she did not notice this, then advised him to buy some curtains like hers, and as he objected to the expense —

"Ah! ah! you care for your money," she said laughing.

Each time Leon had to tell her everything that he had done since their last meeting. She asked him for some verses — some verses "for herself," a "love poem" in honour of her. But he never succeeded in getting a rhyme for the second verse; and at last ended by copying a sonnet in a "Keepsake." This was less from vanity than from the one desire of pleasing her. He did not question her ideas; he accepted all her tastes; he was rather becoming her mistress than she his. She had tender words and kisses that thrilled his soul. Where could she have learnt this corruption almost incorporeal in the strength of its profanity and dissimulation?

Chapter Six

During the journeys he made to see her, Leon had often dined at the chemist's, and he felt obliged from politeness to invite him in turn.

"With pleasure!" Monsieur Homais replied; "besides, I must invigorate my mind, for I am getting rusty here. We'll go to the theatre, to the restaurant; we'll make a night of it."

"Oh, my dear!" tenderly murmured Madame Homais, alarmed at the vague perils he was preparing to brave.

"Well, what? Do you think I'm not sufficiently ruining my health living here amid the continual emanations of the pharmacy? But there! that is the way with women! They are jealous of science, and then are opposed to our taking the most legitimate distractions. No matter! Count upon me. One of these days I shall turn up at Rouen, and we'll go the pace together."

The druggist would formerly have taken good care not to use such an expression, but he was cultivating a gay Parisian style, which he thought in the best taste; and, like his neighbour, Madame Bovary, he questioned the clerk curiously about the customs of the capital; he even talked slang to dazzle the bourgeois, saying bender, crummy, dandy, macaroni, the cheese, cut my stick and "I'll hook it," for "I am going."

So one Thursday Emma was surprised to meet Monsieur Homais in the kitchen of the "Lion d'Or," wearing a traveller's costume, that is to say, wrapped in an old cloak which no one knew he had, while he carried a valise in one hand and the foot-warmer of his establishment in the other. He had confided his intentions to no one, for fear of causing the public anxiety by his absence.

The idea of seeing again the place where his youth had been spent no doubt excited him, for during the whole journey he never ceased talking, and as soon as he had arrived, he jumped quickly out of the diligence to go in search of Leon. In vain the clerk tried to get rid of him. Monsieur Homais dragged him off to the large Cafe de la Normandie, which he entered majestically, not raising his hat, thinking it very provincial to uncover in any public place.

Emma waited for Leon three quarters of an hour. At last she ran to his office; and, lost in all sorts of conjectures, accusing him of indifference, and reproaching herself for her weakness, she spent the afternoon, her face pressed against the window-panes.

At two o'clock they were still at a table opposite each other. The large room was emptying; the stove-pipe, in the shape of a palm-tree, spread its gilt leaves over the white ceiling, and near them, outside the window, in the bright sunshine, a little fountain gurgled in a white basin, where; in the midst of watercress and asparagus, three torpid lobsters stretched across to some quails that lay heaped up in a pile on their sides.

Homais was enjoying himself. Although he was even more intoxicated with the luxury than the rich fare, the Pommard wine all the same rather excited his faculties; and when the omelette au rhum* appeared, he began propounding immoral theories about women. What seduced him above all else was chic. He admired an elegant toilette in a well-furnished apartment, and as to bodily qualities, he didn't dislike a young girl.

* In rum.

Leon watched the clock in despair. The druggist went on drinking, eating, and talking.

"You must be very lonely," he said suddenly, "here at Rouen. To be sure your lady-love doesn't live far away."

And the other blushed —

"Come now, be frank. Can you deny that at Yonville — "

The young man stammered something.

"At Madame Bovary's, you're not making love to — "

"To whom?"

"The servant!"

He was not joking; but vanity getting the better of all prudence, Leon, in spite of himself protested. Besides, he only liked dark women.

"I approve of that," said the chemist; "they have more passion."

And whispering into his friend's ear, he pointed out the symptoms by which one could find out if a woman had passion. He even launched into an ethnographic digression: the German was vapourish, the French woman licentious, the Italian passionate.

"And negresses?" asked the clerk.

"They are an artistic taste!" said Homais. "Waiter! two cups of coffee!"

"Are we going?" at last asked Leon impatiently.

"Ja!"

But before leaving he wanted to see the proprietor of the establishment and made him a few compliments. Then the young man, to be alone, alleged he had some business engagement.

"Ah! I will escort you," said Homais.

And all the while he was walking through the streets with him he talked of his wife, his children; of their future, and of his business; told him in what a decayed condition it had formerly been, and to what a degree of perfection he had raised it.

Arrived in front of the Hotel de Boulogne, Leon left him abruptly, ran up the stairs, and found his mistress in great excitement. At mention of the chemist she flew into a passion. He, however, piled up good reasons; it wasn't his fault; didn't she know Homais — did she believe that he would prefer his company? But she turned away; he drew her back, and, sinking on his knees, clasped her waist with his arms in a languorous pose, full of concupiscence and supplication.

She was standing up, her large flashing eyes looked at him seriously, almost terribly. Then tears obscured them, her red eyelids were lowered, she gave him her hands, and Leon was pressing them to his lips when a servant appeared to tell the gentleman that he was wanted.

"You will come back?" she said.

"Yes."

"But when?"

"Immediately."

"It's a trick," said the chemist, when he saw Leon. "I wanted to interrupt this visit, that seemed to me to annoy you. Let's go and have a glass of garus at Bridoux'."

Leon vowed that he must get back to his office. Then the druggist joked him about quill-drivers and the law.

"Leave Cujas and Barthole alone a bit. Who the devil prevents you? Be a man! Let's go to Bridoux'. You'll see his dog. It's very interesting."

And as the clerk still insisted —

"I'll go with you. I'll read a paper while I wait for you, or turn over the leaves of a 'Code.'"

Leon, bewildered by Emma's anger, Monsieur Homais' chatter, and, perhaps, by the heaviness of the luncheon, was undecided, and, as it were, fascinated by the chemist, who kept repeating —

"Let's go to Bridoux'. It's just by here, in the Rue Malpalu."

Then, through cowardice, through stupidity, through that indefinable feeling that drags us into the most distasteful acts, he allowed himself to be led off to Bridoux', whom they found in his small yard, superintending three workmen, who panted as they turned the large wheel of a machine for making seltzer-water. Homais gave them some good advice. He embraced Bridoux; they took some garus. Twenty times Leon tried to escape, but the other seized him by the arm saying —

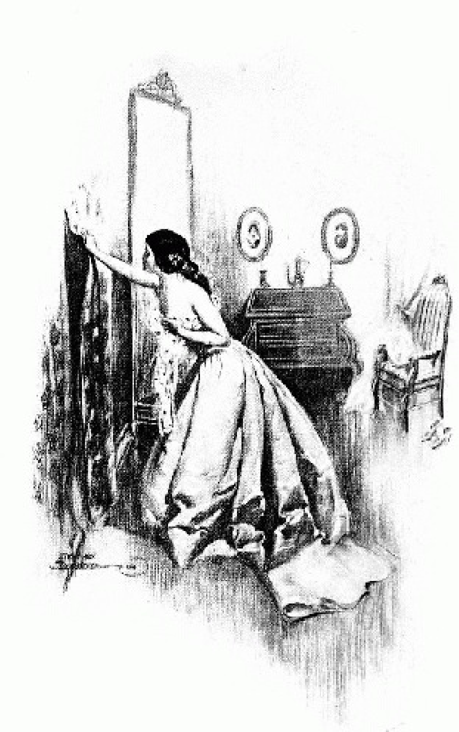
"Presently! I'm coming! We'll go to the 'Fanal de Rouen' to see the fellows there. I'll introduce you to Thornassin."

At last he managed to get rid of him, and rushed straight to the hotel. Emma was no longer there. She had just gone in a fit of anger. She detested him now.

This failing to keep their rendezvous seemed to her an insult, and she tried to rake up other reasons to separate herself from him. He was incapable of heroism, weak, banal, more spiritless than a woman, avaricious too, and cowardly.

Then, growing calmer, she at length discovered that she had, no doubt, calumniated him. But the disparaging of those we love always alienates us from them to some extent. We must not touch our idols; the gilt sticks to our fingers.

They gradually came to talking more frequently of matters outside their love, and in the letters that Emma wrote him she spoke of flowers, verses, the moon and the stars, naive resources of a waning passion striving to keep itself alive by all external aids. She was constantly promising herself a profound felicity on her next journey. Then she confessed to herself that she felt nothing extraordinary. This disappointment quickly gave way to a new hope, and Emma returned to him more inflamed, more eager than ever. She undressed brutally, tearing off the thin laces of her corset that nestled around her hips like a gliding snake. She went on tiptoe, barefooted, to see once more that the door was closed, then, pale, serious, and, without speaking, with one movement, she threw herself upon his breast with a long shudder.



Yet there was upon that brow covered with cold drops, on those quivering lips, in those wild eyes, in the strain of those arms, something vague and dreary that seemed to Leon to glide between them subtly as if to separate them.

He did not dare to question her; but, seeing her so skilled, she must have passed, he thought, through every experience of suffering and of pleasure. What had once charmed now frightened him a little. Besides, he rebelled against his had once charmed now frightened him a little. Besides, he rebelled against his absorption, daily more marked, by her personality. He begrudged Emma this constant victory. He even strove not to love her; then, when he heard the creaking of her boots, he turned coward, like drunkards at the sight of strong drinks.

She did not fail, in truth, to lavish all sorts of attentions upon him, from the delicacies of food to the coquettries of dress and languishing looks. She brought roses to her breast from Yonville, which she threw into his face; was anxious about his health, gave him advice as to his conduct; and, in order the more surely to keep her hold on him, hoping perhaps that heaven would take her part, she tied a medal of the Virgin round his neck. She inquired like a virtuous mother about his companions. She said to him —

"Don't see them; don't go out; think only of ourselves; love me!"

She would have liked to be able to watch over his life; and the idea occurred to her of having him followed in the streets. Near the hotel there was always a kind of loafer who accosted travellers, and who would not refuse. But her pride revolted at this.

"Bah! so much the worse. Let him deceive me! What does it matter to me? As If I cared for him!"

One day, when they had parted early and she was returning alone along the boulevard, she saw the walls of her convent; then she sat down on a form in the shade of the elm-trees. How calm that time had been! How she longed for the ineffable sentiments of love that she had tried to figure to herself out of books! The first month of her marriage, her rides in the wood, the viscount that waltzed, and Lagardy singing, all repassed before her eyes. And Leon suddenly appeared to her as far off as the others.

"Yet I love him," she said to herself.

No matter! She was not happy — she never had been. Whence came this insufficiency in life — this instantaneous turning to decay of everything on which she leant? But if there were somewhere a being strong and beautiful, a valiant nature, full at once of exaltation and refinement, a poet's heart in an angel's form, a lyre with sounding chords ringing out elegiac epithalamia to heaven, why, perchance, should she not find him? Ah! how impossible! Besides, nothing was worth the trouble of seeking it; everything was a lie. Every smile hid a yawn of boredom, every joy a curse, all pleasure satiety, and the sweetest kisses left upon your lips only the unattainable desire for a greater delight.

A metallic clang droned through the air, and four strokes were heard from the convent-clock. Four o'clock! And it seemed to her that she had been there on that form an eternity. But an infinity of passions may be contained in a minute, like a crowd in a small space.

crowd in a small space.

Emma lived all absorbed in hers, and troubled no more about money matters than an archduchess.

Once, however, a wretched-looking man, rubicund and bald, came to her house, saying he had been sent by Monsieur Vincart of Rouen. He took out the pins that held together the side-pockets of his long green overcoat, stuck them into his sleeve, and politely handed her a paper.

It was a bill for seven hundred francs, signed by her, and which Lheureux, in spite of all his professions, had paid away to Vincart. She sent her servant for him. He could not come. Then the stranger, who had remained standing, casting right and left curious glances, that his thick, fair eyebrows hid, asked with a naive air —

"What answer am I to take Monsieur Vincart?"

"Oh," said Emma, "tell him that I haven't it. I will send next week; he must wait; yes, till next week."

And the fellow went without another word.

But the next day at twelve o'clock she received a summons, and the sight of the stamped paper, on which appeared several times in large letters, "Maitre Hareng, bailiff at Buchy," so frightened her that she rushed in hot haste to the linendraper's. She found him in his shop, doing up a parcel.

"Your obedient!" he said; "I am at your service."

But Lheureux, all the same, went on with his work, helped by a young girl of about thirteen, somewhat hunch-backed, who was at once his clerk and his servant.

Then, his clogs clattering on the shop-boards, he went up in front of Madame Bovary to the first door, and introduced her into a narrow closet, where, in a large bureau in sapon-wood, lay some ledgers, protected by a horizontal padlocked iron bar. Against the wall, under some remnants of calico, one glimpsed a safe, but of such dimensions that it must contain something besides bills and money. Monsieur Lheureux, in fact, went in for pawnbroking, and it was there that he had put Madame Bovary's gold chain, together with the earrings of poor old Tellier, who, at last forced to sell out, had bought a meagre store of grocery at Quincampoix, where he was dying of catarrh amongst his candles, that were less yellow than his face.

Lheureux sat down in a large cane arm-chair, saying: "What news?"

"See!"

And she showed him the paper.

"Well how can I help it?"

Then she grew angry, reminding him of the promise he had given not to pay away her bills. He acknowledged it.

"But I was pressed myself; the knife was at my own throat."

"And what will happen now?" she went on.

"Oh, it's very simple; a judgment and then a distraint — that's about it!"

Emma kept down a desire to strike him, and asked gently if there was no way of quieting Monsieur Vincart.

"I dare say! Quiet Vincart! You don't know him; he's more ferocious than an Arab!"

Still Monsieur Lheureux must interfere.

"Well, listen. It seems to me so far I've been very good to you." And opening one of his ledgers, "See," he said. Then running up the page with his finger, "Let's see! let's see! August 3d, two hundred francs; June 17th, a hundred and fifty; March 23d, forty-six. In April — "

He stopped, as if afraid of making some mistake.

"Not to speak of the bills signed by Monsieur Bovary, one for seven hundred francs, and another for three hundred. As to your little installments, with the interest, why, there's no end to 'em; one gets quite muddled over 'em. I'll have nothing more to do with it."

She wept; she even called him "her good Monsieur Lheureux." But he always fell back upon "that rascal Vincart." Besides, he hadn't a brass farthing; no one was paying him now-a-days; they were eating his coat off his back; a poor shopkeeper like him couldn't advance money.

Emma was silent, and Monsieur Lheureux, who was biting the feathers of a quill, no doubt became uneasy at her silence, for he went on —

"Unless one of these days I have something coming in, I might — "

"Besides," said she, "as soon as the balance of Barneville — "

"What!"

And on hearing that Langlois had not yet paid he seemed much surprised. Then in a honied voice —

"And we agree, you say?"

"Oh! to anything you like."

On this he closed his eyes to reflect, wrote down a few figures, and declaring it would be very difficult for him, that the affair was shady, and that he was being bled, he wrote out four bills for two hundred and fifty francs each, to fall due month by month.

"Provided that Vincart will listen to me! However, it's settled. I don't play the fool; I'm straight enough."

Next he carelessly showed her several new goods, not one of which, however, was in his opinion worthy of madame.

"When I think that there's a dress at threepence-halfpenny a yard, and warranted fast colours! And yet they actually swallow it! Of course you understand one doesn't tell them what it really is!" He hoped by this confession of dishonesty to others to quite convince her of his probity to her.

Then he called her back to show her three yards of guipure that he had lately picked up "at a sale."

"Isn't it lovely?" said Lheureux. "It is very much used now for the backs of arm-chairs. It's quite the rage."

And, more ready than a juggler, he wrapped up the guipure in some blue paper and put it in Emma's hands.

"But at least let me know — "

"Yes, another time," he replied, turning on his heel.

That same evening she urged Bovary to write to his mother, to ask her to send as quickly as possible the whole of the balance due from the father's estate. The mother-in-law replied that she had nothing more, the winding up was over, and there was due to them besides Barneville an income of six hundred francs, that she would pay them punctually.

Then Madame Bovary sent in accounts to two or three patients, and she made large use of this method, which was very successful. She was always careful to add a postscript: "Do not mention this to my husband; you know how proud he is. Excuse me. Yours obediently." There were some complaints; she intercepted them.

To get money she began selling her old gloves, her old hats, the old odds and ends, and she bargained rapaciously, her peasant blood standing her in good stead. Then on her journey to town she picked up nick-nacks secondhand, that, in default of anyone else, Monsieur Lheureux would certainly take off her hands. She bought ostrich feathers, Chinese porcelain, and trunks; she borrowed from Felicite, from Madame Lefrancois, from the landlady at the Croix-Rouge, from everybody, no matter where.

With the money she at last received from Barneville she paid two bills; the other fifteen hundred francs fell due. She renewed the bills, and thus it was continually.

Sometimes, it is true, she tried to make a calculation, but she discovered things so exorbitant that she could not believe them possible. Then she recommenced, soon got confused, gave it all up, and thought no more about it.

The house was very dreary now. Tradesmen were seen leaving it with angry faces. Handkerchiefs were lying about on the stoves, and little Berthe, to the great scandal of Madame Homais, wore stockings with holes in them. If Charles timidly ventured a remark, she answered roughly that it wasn't her fault.

What was the meaning of all these fits of temper? He explained everything through her old nervous illness, and reproaching himself with having taken her infirmities for faults, accused himself of egotism, and longed to go and take her in his arms.

"Ah, no!" he said to himself; "I should worry her."

And he did not stir.

After dinner he walked about alone in the garden; he took little Berthe on his knees, and unfolding his medical journal, tried to teach her to read. But the child, who never had any lessons, soon looked up with large, sad eyes and began to cry. Then he comforted her; went to fetch water in her can to make rivers on the sand path, or broke off branches from the privet hedges to plant trees in the beds. This did not spoil the garden much, all choked now with long weeds. They owed Lestiboudois for so many days. Then the child grew cold and asked for her mother.

"Call the servant," said Charles. "You know, dearie, that mamma does not like to be disturbed."

Autumn was setting in, and the leaves were already falling, as they did two years ago when she was ill. Where would it all end? And he walked up and down, his hands behind his back.

Madame was in her room, which no one entered. She stayed there all day long, torpid, half dressed, and from time to time burning Turkish pastilles which she had bought at Rouen in an Algerian's shop. In order not to have at night this sleeping man stretched at her side, by dint of manoeuvring, she at last succeeded in banishing him to the second floor, while she read till morning extravagant books, full of pictures of orgies and thrilling situations. Often, seized with fear, she cried out, and Charles hurried to her.

"Oh, go away!" she would say.

Or at other times, consumed more ardently than ever by that inner flame to which adultery added fuel, panting, tremulous, all desire, she threw open her window, breathed in the cold air, shook loose in the wind her masses of hair, too heavy, and, gazing upon the stars, longed for some princely love. She thought of him, of Leon. She would then have given anything for a single one of those meetings that surfeited her.

These were her gala days. She wanted them to be sumptuous, and when he alone could not pay the expenses, she made up the deficit liberally, which happened pretty well every time. He tried to make her understand that they would be quite as comfortable somewhere else, in a smaller hotel, but she always found some objection.

One day she drew six small silver-gilt spoons from her bag (they were old Roualt's wedding present), begging him to pawn them at once for her, and Leon obeyed, though the proceeding annoyed him. He was afraid of compromising himself.

Then, on, reflection, he began to think his mistress's ways were growing odd, and that they were perhaps not wrong in wishing to separate him from her.

In fact someone had sent his mother a long anonymous letter to warn her that he was "ruining himself with a married woman," and the good lady at once conjuring up the eternal bugbear of families, the vague pernicious creature, the siren, the monster, who dwells fantastically in depths of love, wrote to Lawyer Dubocage, his employer, who behaved perfectly in the affair. He kept him for three quarters of an hour trying to open his eyes, to warn him of the abyss into which he was falling. Such an intrigue would damage him later on, when he set up for himself. He implored him to break with her, and, if he would not make this sacrifice in his own interest, to do it at least for his, Dubocage's sake.

At last Leon swore he would not see Emma again, and he reproached himself with not having kept his word, considering all the worry and lectures this woman might still draw down upon him, without reckoning the jokes made by his companions as they sat round the stove in the morning. Besides, he was soon to be head clerk; it was time to settle down. So he gave up his flute, exalted sentiments, and poetry; for every bourgeois in the flush of his youth, were it but for a day, a moment, has believed himself capable of immense passions, of lofty enterprises. The most mediocre libertine has dreamed of sultanas; every notary bears within him the debris of a poet.

He was bored now when Emma suddenly began to sob on his breast, and his heart, like the people who can only stand a certain amount of music, dozed to the sound of a love whose delicacies he no longer noted.

They knew one another too well for any of those surprises of possession that increase its joys a hundred-fold. She was as sick of him as he was weary of her. Emma found again in adultery all the platitudes of marriage.

But how to get rid of him? Then, though she might feel humiliated at the baseness of such enjoyment, she clung to it from habit or from corruption, and each day she hungered after them the more, exhausting all felicity in wishing for too much of it. She accused Leon of her baffled hopes, as if he had betrayed her; and she even longed for some catastrophe that would bring about their separation, since she had not the courage to make up her mind to it herself.

She none the less went on writing him love letters, in virtue of the notion that a woman must write to her lover.

But whilst she wrote it was another man she saw, a phantom fashioned out of her most ardent memories, of her finest reading, her strongest lusts, and at last he became so real, so tangible, that she palpitated wondering, without, however, the power to imagine him clearly, so lost was he, like a god, beneath the abundance power to imagine him clearly, so lost was he, like a god, beneath the abundance of his attributes. He dwelt in that azure land where silk ladders hang from balconies under the breath of flowers, in the light of the moon. She felt him near her; he was coming, and would carry her right away in a kiss.

Then she fell back exhausted, for these transports of vague love wearied her more than great debauchery.

She now felt constant ache all over her. Often she even received summonses, stamped paper that she barely looked at. She would have liked not to be alive, or to be always asleep.

On MidLent she did not return to Yonville, but in the evening went to a masked ball. She wore velvet breeches, red stockings, a club wig, and three-cornered hat cocked on one side. She danced all night to the wild tones of the trombones; people gathered round her, and in the morning she found herself on the steps of the theatre together with five or six masks, debardeuses* and sailors, Leon's comrades, who were talking about having supper.

* People dressed as longshoremen.

The neighbouring cafes were full. They caught sight of one on the harbour, a very indifferent restaurant, whose proprietor showed them to a little room on the fourth floor.

The men were whispering in a corner, no doubt consorting about expenses. There were a clerk, two medical students, and a shopman — what company for her! As to the women, Emma soon perceived from the tone of their voices that they must almost belong to the lowest class. Then she was frightened, pushed back her chair, and cast down her eyes.

The others began to eat; she ate nothing. Her head was on fire, her eyes smarted, and her skin was ice-cold. In her head she seemed to feel the floor of the ball-room rebounding again beneath the rhythmical pulsation of the thousands of dancing feet. And now the smell of the punch, the smoke of the cigars, made her giddy. She fainted, and they carried her to the window.

Day was breaking, and a great stain of purple colour broadened out in the pale horizon over the St. Catherine hills. The livid river was shivering in the wind; there was no one on the bridges; the street lamps were going out.

She revived, and began thinking of Berthe asleep yonder in the servant's room. Then a cart filled with long strips of iron passed by, and made a deafening metallic vibration against the walls of the houses.

She slipped away suddenly, threw off her costume, told Leon she must get back, and at last was alone at the Hotel de Boulogne. Everything, even herself, was now unbearable to her. She wished that, taking wing like a bird, she could fly somewhere, far away to regions of purity, and there grow young again.

She went out, crossed the Boulevard, the Place Cauchoise, and the Faubourg

She went out, crossed the Boulevard, the Place Cauchoise, and the Faubourg, as far as an open street that overlooked some gardens. She walked rapidly; the fresh air calming her; and, little by little, the faces of the crowd, the masks, the quadrilles, the lights, the supper, those women, all disappeared like mists fading away. Then, reaching the "Croix-Rouge," she threw herself on the bed in her little room on the second floor, where there were pictures of the "Tour de Nesle." At four o'clock Hivert awoke her.

When she got home, Felicite showed her behind the clock a grey paper. She read —

"In virtue of the seizure in execution of a judgment."

What judgment? As a matter of fact, the evening before another paper had been brought that she had not yet seen, and she was stunned by these words —

"By order of the king, law, and justice, to Madame Bovary." Then, skipping several lines, she read, "Within twenty-four hours, without fail — " But what? "To pay the sum of eight thousand francs." And there was even at the bottom, "She will be constrained thereto by every form of law, and notably by a writ of distraint on her furniture and effects."

What was to be done? In twenty-four hours — tomorrow. Lheureux, she thought, wanted to frighten her again; for she saw through all his devices, the object of his kindnesses. What reassured her was the very magnitude of the sum.

However, by dint of buying and not paying, of borrowing, signing bills, and renewing these bills that grew at each new falling-in, she had ended by preparing a capital for Monsieur Lheureux which he was impatiently awaiting for his speculations.

She presented herself at his place with an offhand air.

"You know what has happened to me? No doubt it's a joke!"

"How so?"

He turned away slowly, and, folding his arms, said to her —

"My good lady, did you think I should go on to all eternity being your purveyor and banker, for the love of God? Now be just. I must get back what I've laid out. Now be just."

She cried out against the debt.

"Ah! so much the worse. The court has admitted it. There's a judgment. It's been notified to you. Besides, it isn't my fault. It's Vincart's."

"Could you not — ?"

"Oh, nothing whatever."

"But still, now talk it over."

And she began beating about the bush; she had known nothing about it; it was a surprise.

"Whose fault is that?" said Lheureux, bowing ironically. "While I'm slaving

"Whose fault is that?" said Lheureux, bowing ironically. "While I'm slaving like a nigger, you go gallivanting about."

"Ah! no lecturing."

"It never does any harm," he replied.

She turned coward; she implored him; she even pressed her pretty white and slender hand against the shopkeeper's knee.

"There, that'll do! Anyone'd think you wanted to seduce me!"

"You are a wretch!" she cried.

"Oh, oh! go it! go it!"

"I will show you up. I shall tell my husband."

"All right! I too. I'll show your husband something."

And Lheureux drew from his strong box the receipt for eighteen hundred francs that she had given him when Vincart had discounted the bills.

"Do you think," he added, "that he'll not understand your little theft, the poor dear man?"

She collapsed, more overcome than if felled by the blow of a pole-axe. He was walking up and down from the window to the bureau, repeating all the while —

"Ah! I'll show him! I'll show him!" Then he approached her, and in a soft voice said —

"It isn't pleasant, I know; but, after all, no bones are broken, and, since that is the only way that is left for you paying back my money — "

"But where am I to get any?" said Emma, wringing her hands.

"Bah! when one has friends like you!"

And he looked at her in so keen, so terrible a fashion, that she shuddered to her very heart.

"I promise you," she said, "to sign — "

"I've enough of your signatures."

"I will sell something."

"Get along!" he said, shrugging his shoulders; "you've not got anything."

And he called through the peep-hole that looked down into the shop —

"Annette, don't forget the three coupons of No. 14."

The servant appeared. Emma understood, and asked how much money would be wanted to put a stop to the proceedings.

"It is too late."

"But if I brought you several thousand francs — a quarter of the sum — a third — perhaps the whole?"

"No; it's no use!"

And he pushed her gently towards the staircase.

"I implore you, Monsieur Lheureux, just a few days more!" She was sobbing.

"There! tears now!"

"You are driving me to despair!"

"What do I care?" said he, shutting the door.

Chapter Seven

She was stoical the next day when Maitre Hareng, the bailiff, with two assistants, presented himself at her house to draw up the inventory for the distraint.

They began with Bovary's consulting-room, and did not write down the phrenological head, which was considered an "instrument of his profession"; but in the kitchen they counted the plates; the saucepans, the chairs, the candlesticks, and in the bedroom all the nick-nacks on the whatnot. They examined her dresses, the linen, the dressing-room; and her whole existence to its most intimate details, was, like a corpse on whom a post-mortem is made, outspread before the eyes of these three men.

Maitre Hareng, buttoned up in his thin black coat, wearing a white choker and very tight foot-straps, repeated from time to time — "Allow me, madame. You allow me?" Often he uttered exclamations. "Charming! very pretty." Then he began writing again, dipping his pen into the horn inkstand in his left hand.

When they had done with the rooms they went up to the attic. She kept a desk there in which Rodolphe's letters were locked. It had to be opened.

"Ah! a correspondence," said Maitre Hareng, with a discreet smile. "But allow me, for I must make sure the box contains nothing else." And he tipped up the papers lightly, as if to shake out napoleons. Then she grew angered to see this coarse hand, with fingers red and pulpy like slugs, touching these pages against which her heart had beaten.

They went at last. Felicite came back. Emma had sent her out to watch for Bovary in order to keep him off, and they hurriedly installed the man in possession under the roof, where he swore he would remain.

During the evening Charles seemed to her careworn. Emma watched him with a look of anguish, fancying she saw an accusation in every line of his face. Then, when her eyes wandered over the chimney-piece ornamented with Chinese screens, over the large curtains, the armchairs, all those things, in a word, that had, softened the bitterness of her life, remorse seized her or rather an immense regret, that, far from crushing, irritated her passion. Charles placidly poked the fire, both his feet on the fire-dogs.

Once the man, no doubt bored in his hiding-place, made a slight noise.

"Is anyone walking upstairs?" said Charles.

"No," she replied; "it is a window that has been left open, and is rattling in the wind."

The next day, Sunday, she went to Rouen to call on all the brokers whose names she knew. They were at their country-places or on journeys. She was not discouraged; and those whom she did manage to see she asked for money, declaring she must have some, and that she would pay it back. Some laughed in her face; all refused.

At two o'clock she hurried to Leon, and knocked at the door. No one answered. At length he appeared.

"What brings you here?"

"Do I disturb you?"

"No; but — " And he admitted that his landlord didn't like his having "women" there.

"I must speak to you," she went on.

Then he took down the key, but she stopped him.

"No, no! Down there, in our home!"

And they went to their room at the Hotel de Boulogne.

On arriving she drank off a large glass of water. She was very pale. She said to him —

"Leon, you will do me a service?"

And, shaking him by both hands that she grasped tightly, she added —

"Listen, I want eight thousand francs."

"But you are mad!"

"Not yet."

And thereupon, telling him the story of the distraint, she explained her distress to him; for Charles knew nothing of it; her mother-in-law detested her; old Rouault could do nothing; but he, Leon, he would set about finding this indispensable sum.

"How on earth can I?"

"What a coward you are!" she cried.

Then he said stupidly, "You are exaggerating the difficulty. Perhaps, with a thousand crowns or so the fellow could be stopped."

All the greater reason to try and do something; it was impossible that they could not find three thousand francs. Besides, Leon, could be security instead of her.

"Go, try, try! I will love you so!"

He went out, and came back at the end of an hour, saying, with solemn face —

"I have been to three people with no success."

Then they remained sitting face to face at the two chimney corners, motionless, in silence. Emma shrugged her shoulders as she stamped her feet. He heard her murmuring —

"If I were in your place *I* should soon get some."

"But where?"

"At your office." And she looked at him.

An infernal boldness looked out from her burning eyes, and their lids drew close together with a lascivious and encouraging look, so that the young man felt himself growing weak beneath the mute will of this woman who was urging him to a crime. Then he was afraid, and to avoid any explanation he smote his forehead, crying —

"Morel is to come back to-night; he will not refuse me, I hope" (this was one of his friends, the son of a very rich merchant); "and I will bring it you to-morrow," he added.

Emma did not seem to welcome this hope with all the joy he had expected. Did she suspect the lie? He went on, blushing —

"However, if you don't see me by three o'clock do not wait for me, my darling. I must be off now; forgive me! Goodbye!"

He pressed her hand, but it felt quite lifeless. Emma had no strength left for any sentiment.

Four o'clock struck, and she rose to return to Yonville, mechanically obeying the force of old habits.

The weather was fine. It was one of those March days, clear and sharp, when the sun shines in a perfectly white sky. The Rouen folk, in Sunday-clothes, were walking about with happy looks. She reached the Place du Parvis. People were coming out after vespers; the crowd flowed out through the three doors like a stream through the three arches of a bridge, and in the middle one, more motionless than a rock, stood the beadle.

Then she remembered the day when, all anxious and full of hope, she had entered beneath this large nave, that had opened out before her, less profound than her love; and she walked on weeping beneath her veil, giddy, staggering, almost fainting.

"Take care!" cried a voice issuing from the gate of a courtyard that was thrown open.

She stopped to let pass a black horse, pawing the ground between the shafts of a tilbury, driven by a gentleman in sable furs. Who was it? She knew him. The carriage darted by and disappeared.

Why, it was he — the Viscount. She turned away; the street was empty. She was so overwhelmed, so sad, that she had to lean against a wall to keep herself from falling.

Then she thought she had been mistaken. Anyhow, she did not know. All within her and around her was abandoning her. She felt lost, sinking at random into indefinable abysses, and it was almost with joy that, on reaching the "Croix-Rouge," she saw the good Homais, who was watching a large box full of pharmaceutical stores being hoisted on to the "Hirondelle." In his hand he held tied in a silk handkerchief six cheminots for his wife.

Madame Homais was very fond of these small, heavy turban-shaped loaves, that are eaten in Lent with salt butter; a last vestige of Gothic food that goes back, perhaps, to the time of the Crusades, and with which the robust Normans gorged themselves of yore, fancying they saw on the table, in the light of the yellow torches, between tankards of hippocras and huge boars' heads, the heads of Saracens to be devoured. The druggist's wife crunched them up as they had done — heroically, despite her wretched teeth. And so whenever Homais journeyed to town, he never failed to bring her home some that he bought at the great baker's in the Rue Massacre.

"Charmed to see you," he said, offering Emma a hand to help her into the "Hirondelle." Then he hung up his cheminots to the cords of the netting, and remained bare-headed in an attitude pensive and Napoleonic.

But when the blind man appeared as usual at the foot of the hill he exclaimed —

"I can't understand why the authorities tolerate such culpable industries. Such unfortunates should be locked up and forced to work. Progress, my word! creeps at a snail's pace. We are floundering about in mere barbarism."

The blind man held out his hat, that flapped about at the door, as if it were a bag in the lining that had come unnailed.

"This," said the chemist, "is a scrofulous affection."

And though he knew the poor devil, he pretended to see him for the first time, murmured something about "cornea," "opaque cornea," "sclerotic," "facies," then asked him in a paternal tone —

"My friend, have you long had this terrible infirmity? Instead of getting drunk at the public, you'd do better to die yourself."

He advised him to take good wine, good beer, and good joints. The blind man went on with his song; he seemed, moreover, almost idiotic. At last Monsieur Homais opened his purse —

"Now there's a sou; give me back two lairds, and don't forget my advice: you'll be the better for it."

Hivert openly cast some doubt on the efficacy of it. But the druggist said that he would cure himself with an antiphlogistic pomade of his own composition, and he gave his address — "Monsieur Homais, near the market, pretty well known."

"Now," said Hivert, "for all this trouble you'll give us your performance."

The blind man sank down on his haunches, with his head thrown back, whilst he rolled his greenish eyes, lolled out his tongue, and rubbed his stomach with both hands as he uttered a kind of hollow yell like a famished dog. Emma, filled with disgust, threw him over her shoulder a five-franc piece. It was all her fortune. It seemed to her very fine thus to throw it away.

The coach had gone on again when suddenly Monsieur Homais leant out through the window, crying —

"No farinaceous or milk food, wear wool next the skin, and expose the diseased parts to the smoke of juniper berries."

The sight of the well-known objects that defiled before her eyes gradually diverted Emma from her present trouble. An intolerable fatigue overwhelmed her, and she reached her home stupefied, discouraged, almost asleep.

"Come what may come!" she said to herself. "And then, who knows? Why, at any moment could not some extraordinary event occur? Lheureux even might die!"

At nine o'clock in the morning she was awakened by the sound of voices in the Place. There was a crowd round the market reading a large bill fixed to one of the posts, and she saw Justin, who was climbing on to a stone and tearing down the bill. But at this moment the rural guard seized him by the collar. Monsieur Homais came out of his shop, and Mere Lefrangois, in the midst of the crowd, seemed to be perorating.

"Madame! madame!" cried Felicite, running in, "it's abominable!"

And the poor girl, deeply moved, handed her a yellow paper that she had just torn off the door. Emma read with a glance that all her furniture was for sale.

Then they looked at one another silently. The servant and mistress had no secret one from the other. At last Felicite sighed —

"If I were you, madame, I should go to Monsieur Guillaumin."

"Do you think — "

And this question meant to say —

"You who know the house through the servant, has the master spoken sometimes of me?"

"Yes, you'd do well to go there."

She dressed, put on her black gown, and her hood with jet beads, and that she might not be seen (there was still a crowd on the Place), she took the path by the river, outside the village.

She reached the notary's gate quite breathless. The sky was sombre, and a little snow was falling. At the sound of the bell, Theodore in a red waistcoat appeared on the steps; he came to open the door almost familiarly, as to an acquaintance, and showed her into the dining-room.

A large porcelain stove crackled beneath a cactus that filled up the niche in the wall, and in black wood frames against the oak-stained paper hung Steuben's "Esmeralda" and Schopin's "Potiphar." The ready-laid table, the two silver chafing-dishes, the crystal door-knobs, the parquet and the furniture, all shone with a scrupulous, English cleanliness; the windows were ornamented at each corner with stained glass.

"Now this," thought Emma, "is the dining-room I ought to have."

The notary came in pressing his palm-leaf dressing-gown to his breast with his left arm, while with the other hand he raised and quickly put on again his brown velvet cap, pretentiously cocked on the right side, whence looked out the ends of three fair curls drawn from the back of the head, following the line of his bald skull.

After he had offered her a seat he sat down to breakfast, apologising profusely for his rudeness.

"I have come," she said, "to beg you, sir — "

"What, madame? I am listening."

And she began explaining her position to him. Monsieur Guillaumin knew it, being secretly associated with the linendraper, from whom he always got capital for the loans on mortgages that he was asked to make.

So he knew (and better than she herself) the long story of the bills, small at first, bearing different names as endorsers, made out at long dates, and constantly renewed up to the day, when, gathering together all the protested bills, the shopkeeper had bidden his friend Vincart take in his own name all the necessary proceedings, not wishing to pass for a tiger with his fellow-citizens.

She mingled her story with recriminations against Lheureux, to which the notary replied from time to time with some insignificant word. Eating his cutlet and drinking his tea, he buried his chin in his sky-blue cravat, into which were thrust two diamond pins, held together by a small gold chain; and he smiled a singular smile, in a sugary, ambiguous fashion. But noticing that her feet were damp, he said —

"Do get closer to the stove; put your feet up against the porcelain."

She was afraid of dirtying it. The notary replied in a gallant tone —

"Beautiful things spoil nothing."

Then she tried to move him, and, growing moved herself, she began telling him about the poorness of her home, her worries, her wants. He could understand that; an elegant woman! and, without leaving off eating, he had turned completely round towards her, so that his knee brushed against her boot, whose sole curled round as it smoked against the stove.

But when she asked for a thousand sous, he closed his lips, and declared he was very sorry he had not had the management of her fortune before, for there was very sorry he had not had the management of her fortune before, for there were hundreds of ways very convenient, even for a lady, of turning her money to account. They might, either in the turf-peats of Grumesnil or building-ground at Havre, almost without risk, have ventured on some excellent speculations; and he let her consume herself with rage at the thought of the fabulous sums that she would certainly have made.

"How was it," he went on, "that you didn't come to me?"

"I hardly know," she said.

"Why, hey? Did I frighten you so much? It is I, on the contrary, who ought to complain. We hardly know one another; yet I am very devoted to you. You do not doubt that, I hope?"

He held out his hand, took hers, covered it with a greedy kiss, then held it on his knee; and he played delicately with her fingers whilst he murmured a thousand blandishments. His insipid voice murmured like a running brook; a light shone in his eyes through the glimmering of his spectacles, and his hand was advancing up Emma's sleeve to press her arm. She felt against her cheek his panting breath. This man oppressed her horribly.

She sprang up and said to him —

"Sir, I am waiting."

"For what?" said the notary, who suddenly became very pale.

"This money."

"But — " Then, yielding to the outburst of too powerful a desire, "Well, yes!"

He dragged himself towards her on his knees, regardless of his dressing-gown.

"For pity's sake, stay. I love you!"

He seized her by her waist. Madame Bovary's face flushed purple. She recoiled with a terrible look, crying —

"You are taking a shameless advantage of my distress, sir! I am to be pitied — not to be sold."

And she went out.

The notary remained quite stupefied, his eyes fixed on his fine embroidered slippers. They were a love gift, and the sight of them at last consoled him. Besides, he reflected that such an adventure might have carried him too far.

"What a wretch! what a scoundrel! what an infamy!" she said to herself, as she fled with nervous steps beneath the aspens of the path. The disappointment of her failure increased the indignation of her outraged modesty; it seemed to her that Providence pursued her implacably, and, strengthening herself in her pride, she had never felt so much esteem for herself nor so much contempt for others. A spirit of warfare transformed her. She would have liked to strike all men, to spit in their faces, to crush them, and she walked rapidly straight on, pale spit in their faces, to crush them, and she walked rapidly straight on, pale, quivering, maddened, searching the empty horizon with tear-dimmed eyes, and as it were rejoicing in the hate that was choking her.

When she saw her house a numbness came over her. She could not go on; and yet she must. Besides, whither could she flee?

Felicite was waiting for her at the door. "Well?"

"No!" said Emma.

And for a quarter of an hour the two of them went over the various persons in Yonville who might perhaps be inclined to help her. But each time that Felicite named someone Emma replied —

"Impossible! they will not!"

"And the master'll soon be in."

"I know that well enough. Leave me alone."

She had tried everything; there was nothing more to be done now; and when Charles came in she would have to say to him —

"Go away! This carpet on which you are walking is no longer ours. In your own house you do not possess a chair, a pin, a straw, and it is I, poor man, who have ruined you."

Then there would be a great sob; next he would weep abundantly, and at last, the surprise past, he would forgive her.

"Yes," she murmured, grinding her teeth, "he will forgive me, he who would give a million if I would forgive him for having known me! Never! never!"

This thought of Bovary's superiority to her exasperated her. Then, whether she confessed or did not confess, presently, immediately, to-morrow, he would know the catastrophe all the same; so she must wait for this horrible scene, and bear the weight of his magnanimity. The desire to return to Lheureux's seized her — what would be the use? To write to her father — it was too late; and perhaps, she began to repent now that she had not yielded to that other, when she heard the trot of a horse in the alley. It was he; he was opening the gate; he was whiter than the plaster wall. Rushing to the stairs, she ran out quickly to the square; and the wife of the mayor, who was talking to Lestiboudois in front of the church, saw her go in to the tax-collector's.

She hurried off to tell Madame Caron, and the two ladies went up to the attic, and, hidden by some linen spread across props, stationed themselves comfortably for overlooking the whole of Binet's room.

He was alone in his garret, busy imitating in wood one of those indescribable bits of ivory, composed of crescents, of spheres hollowed out one within the other, the whole as straight as an obelisk, and of no use whatever; and he was beginning on the last piece — he was nearing his goal. In the twilight of the workshop the white dust was flying from his tools like a shower of sparks under workshop the white dust was flying from his tools like a shower of sparks under the hoofs of a galloping horse; the two wheels were turning, droning; Binet smiled, his chin lowered, his nostrils distended, and, in a word, seemed lost in one of those complete happinesses that, no doubt, belong only to commonplace occupations, which amuse the mind with facile difficulties, and satisfy by a realisation of that beyond which such minds have not a dream.

"Ah! there she is!" exclaimed Madame Tuvache.

But it was impossible because of the lathe to hear what she was saying.

At last these ladies thought they made out the word "francs," and Madame Tuvache whispered in a low voice —

"She is begging him to give her time for paying her taxes."

"Apparently!" replied the other.

They saw her walking up and down, examining the napkin-rings, the candlesticks, the banister rails against the walls, while Binet stroked his beard with satisfaction.

"Do you think she wants to order something of him?" said Madame Tuvache.

"Why, he doesn't sell anything," objected her neighbour.

The tax-collector seemed to be listening with wide-open eyes, as if he did not understand. She went on in a tender, suppliant manner. She came nearer to him, her breast heaving; they no longer spoke.

"Is she making him advances?" said Madame Tuvache. Binet was scarlet to his very ears. She took hold of his hands.

"Oh, it's too much!"

And no doubt she was suggesting something abominable to him; for the tax-collector — yet he was brave, had fought at Bautzen and at Lutzen, had been through the French campaign, and had even been recommended for the cross — suddenly, as at the sight of a serpent, recoiled as far as he could from her, crying —

"Madame! what do you mean?"

"Women like that ought to be whipped," said Madame Tuvache.

"But where is she?" continued Madame Caron, for she had disappeared whilst they spoke; then catching sight of her going up the Grande Rue, and turning to the right as if making for the cemetery, they were lost in conjectures.

"Nurse Rollet," she said on reaching the nurse's, "I am choking; unlace me!" She fell on the bed sobbing. Nurse Rollet covered her with a petticoat and remained standing by her side. Then, as she did not answer, the good woman withdrew, took her wheel and began spinning flax.

"Oh, leave off!" she murmured, fancying she heard Binet's lathe.

"What's bothering her?" said the nurse to herself. "Why has she come here?"

She had rushed thither; impelled by a kind of horror that drove her from her home.

Lying on her back, motionless, and with staring eyes, she saw things but vaguely, although she tried to with idiotic persistence. She looked at the scales on the walls, two brands smoking end to end, and a long spider crawling over her head in a rent in the beam. At last she began to collect her thoughts. She remembered — one day — Leon — Oh! how long ago that was — the sun was shining on the river, and the clematis were perfuming the air. Then, carried away as by a rushing torrent, she soon began to recall the day before.

"What time is it?" she asked.

Mere Rollet went out, raised the fingers of her right hand to that side of the sky that was brightest, and came back slowly, saying —

"Nearly three."

"Ahl thanks, thanks!"

For he would come; he would have found some money. But he would, perhaps, go down yonder, not guessing she was here, and she told the nurse to run to her house to fetch him.

"Be quick!"

"But, my dear lady, I'm going, I'm going!"

She wondered now that she had not thought of him from the first. Yesterday he had given his word; he would not break it. And she already saw herself at Lheureux's spreading out her three bank-notes on his bureau. Then she would have to invent some story to explain matters to Bovary. What should it be?

The nurse, however, was a long while gone. But, as there was no clock in the cot, Emma feared she was perhaps exaggerating the length of time. She began walking round the garden, step by step; she went into the path by the hedge, and returned quickly, hoping that the woman would have come back by another road. At last, weary of waiting, assailed by fears that she thrust from her, no longer conscious whether she had been here a century or a moment, she sat down in a corner, closed her eyes, and stopped her ears. The gate grated; she sprang up. Before she had spoken Mere Rollet said to her —

"There is no one at your house!"

"What?"

"Oh, no one! And the doctor is crying. He is calling for you; they're looking for you."

Emma answered nothing. She gasped as she turned her eyes about her, while the peasant woman, frightened at her face, drew back instinctively, thinking her mad. Suddenly she struck her brow and uttered a cry; for the thought of Rodolphe, like a flash of lightning in a dark night, had passed into her soul. He was so good, so delicate, so generous! And besides, should he hesitate to do her this service, she would know well enough how to constrain him to it by re-waking, in a single moment, their lost love. So she set out towards La Huchette, not seeing that she was hastening to offer herself to that which but a while ago had so angered her, not in the least conscious of her prostitution.

Chapter Eight

She asked herself as she walked along, "What am I going to say? How shall I begin?" And as she went on she recognised the thickets, the trees, the sea-rushes on the hill, the chateau yonder. All the sensations of her first tenderness came back to her, and her poor aching heart opened out amorously. A warm wind blew in her face; the melting snow fell drop by drop from the buds to the grass.

She entered, as she used to, through the small park-gate. She reached the avenue bordered by a double row of dense lime-trees. They were swaying their long whispering branches to and fro. The dogs in their kennels all barked, and the noise of their voices resounded, but brought out no one.

She went up the large straight staircase with wooden balusters that led to the corridor paved with dusty flags, into which several doors in a row opened, as in a monastery or an inn. His was at the top, right at the end, on the left. When she placed her fingers on the lock her strength suddenly deserted her. She was afraid, almost wished he would not be there, though this was her only hope, her last chance of salvation. She collected her thoughts for one moment, and, strengthening herself by the feeling of present necessity, went in.

He was in front of the fire, both his feet on the mantelpiece, smoking a pipe.

"What! it is you!" he said, getting up hurriedly.

"Yes, it is I, Rodolphe. I should like to ask your advice."

And, despite all her efforts, it was impossible for her to open her lips.

"You have not changed; you are charming as ever!"

"Oh," she replied bitterly, "they are poor charms since you disdained them."

Then he began a long explanation of his conduct, excusing himself in vague terms, in default of being able to invent better.

She yielded to his words, still more to his voice and the sight of him, so that, she pretended to believe, or perhaps believed; in the pretext he gave for their rupture; this was a secret on which depended the honour, the very life of a third person.

"No matter!" she said, looking at him sadly. "I have suffered much."

He replied philosophically —

"Such is life!"

"Has life," Emma went on, "been good to you at least, since our separation?"

"Oh, neither good nor bad."

"Perhaps it would have been better never to have parted."

"Yes, perhaps."

"You think so?" she said, drawing nearer, and she sighed. "Oh, Rodolphe! if you but knew! I loved you so!"

It was then that she took his hand, and they remained some time, their fingers intertwined, like that first day at the Show. With a gesture of pride he struggled against this emotion. But sinking upon his breast she said to him —

"How did you think I could live without you? One cannot lose the habit of happiness. I was desolate. I thought I should die. I will tell you about all that and you will see. And you — you fled from me!"

For, all the three years, he had carefully avoided her in consequence of that natural cowardice that characterises the stronger sex. Emma went on, with dainty little nods, more coaxing than an amorous kitten —

"You love others, confess it! Oh, I understand them, dear! I excuse them. You probably seduced them as you seduced me. You are indeed a man; you have everything to make one love you. But we'll begin again, won't we? We will love one another. See! I am laughing; I am happy! Oh, speak!"

And she was charming to see, with her eyes, in which trembled a tear, like the rain of a storm in a blue corolla.

He had drawn her upon his knees, and with the back of his hand was caressing her smooth hair, where in the twilight was mirrored like a golden arrow one last ray of the sun. She bent down her brow; at last he kissed her on the eyelids quite gently with the tips of his lips.

"Why, you have been crying! What for?"

She burst into tears. Rodolphe thought this was an outburst of her love. As she did not speak, he took this silence for a last remnant of resistance, and then he cried out —

"Oh, forgive me! You are the only one who pleases me. I was imbecile and cruel. I love you. I will love you always. What is it. Tell me!" He was kneeling by her.

"Well, I am ruined, Rodolphe! You must lend me three thousand francs."

"But — but — " said he, getting up slowly, while his face assumed a grave expression.

"You know," she went on quickly, "that my husband had placed his whole fortune at a notary's. He ran away. So we borrowed; the patients don't pay us. Moreover, the settling of the estate is not yet done; we shall have the money later on. But to-day, for want of three thousand francs, we are to be sold up. It is to be at once, this very moment, and, counting upon your friendship, I have come to you."

"Ah!" thought Rodolphe, turning very pale, "that was what she came for." At last he said with a calm air —

"Dear madame, I have not got them."

He did not lie. If he had had them, he would, no doubt, have given them, although it is generally disagreeable to do such fine things: a demand for money being, of all the winds that blow upon love, the coldest and most destructive.

First she looked at him for some moments.

"You have not got them!" she repeated several times. "You have not got them! I ought to have spared myself this last shame. You never loved me. You are no better than the others."

She was betraying, ruining herself.

Rodolphe interrupted her, declaring he was "hard up" himself.

"Ah! I pity you," said Emma. "Yes — very much."

And fixing her eyes upon an embossed carabine, that shone against its panoply, "But when one is so poor one doesn't have silver on the butt of one's gun. One doesn't buy a clock inlaid with tortoise shell," she went on, pointing to a buhl timepiece, "nor silver-gilt whistles for one's whips," and she touched them, "nor charms for one's watch. Oh, he wants for nothing! even to a liqueur-stand in his room! For you love yourself; you live well. You have a chateau, farms, woods; you go hunting; you travel to Paris. Why, if it were but that," she cried, taking up two studs from the mantelpiece, "but the least of these trifles, one can get money for them. Oh, I do not want them, keep them!"

And she threw the two links away from her, their gold chain breaking as it struck against the wall.

"But I! I would have given you everything. I would have sold all, worked for you with my hands, I would have begged on the highroads for a smile, for a look, to hear you say 'Thanks!' And you sit there quietly in your arm-chair, as if you had not made me suffer enough already! But for you, and you know it, I might have lived happily. What made you do it? Was it a bet? Yet you loved me — you said so. And but a moment since — Ah! it would have been better to have driven me away. My hands are hot with your kisses, and there is the spot on the carpet where at my knees you swore an eternity of love! You made me believe you; for two years you held me in the most magnificent, the sweetest dream! Eh! Our plans for the journey, do you remember? Oh, your letter! your letter! it tore my heart! And then when I come back to him — to him, rich, happy, free — to implore the help the first stranger would give, a suppliant, and bringing back to him all my tenderness, he repulses me because it would cost him three thousand francs!"

"I haven't got them," replied Rodolphe, with that perfect calm with which resigned rage covers itself as with a shield.

She went out. The walls trembled, the ceiling was crushing her, and she passed back through the long alley, stumbling against the heaps of dead leaves scattered by the wind. At last she reached the ha-ha hedge in front of the gate; she broke her nails against the lock in her haste to open it. Then a hundred steps farther on, breathless, almost falling, she stopped. And now turning round, she once more saw the impassive chateau, with the park, the gardens, the three courts, and all the windows of the facade.

She remained lost in stupor, and having no more consciousness of herself than through the beating of her arteries, that she seemed to hear bursting forth like a deafening music filling all the fields. The earth beneath her feet was more yielding than the sea, and the furrows seemed to her immense brown waves breaking into foam. Everything in her head, of memories, ideas, went off at once like a thousand pieces of fireworks. She saw her father, Lheureux's closet, their room at home, another landscape. Madness was coming upon her; she grew afraid, and managed to recover herself, in a confused way, it is true, for she did not in the least remember the cause of the terrible condition she was in, that is to say, the question of money. She suffered only in her love, and felt her soul passing from her in this memory; as wounded men, dying, feel their life ebb from their bleeding wounds.

Night was falling, crows were flying about.

Suddenly it seemed to her that fiery spheres were exploding in the air like fulminating balls when they strike, and were whirling, whirling, to melt at last upon the snow between the branches of the trees. In the midst of each of them appeared the face of Rodolphe. They multiplied and drew near her, penetrating, her. It all disappeared; she recognised the lights of the houses that shone through the fog.

Now her situation, like an abyss, rose up before her. She was panting as if her heart would burst. Then in an ecstasy of heroism, that made her almost joyous, she ran down the hill, crossed the cow-plank, the foot-path, the alley, the market, and reached the chemist's shop. She was about to enter, but at the sound of the bell someone might come, and slipping in by the gate, holding her breath, feeling her way along the walls, she went as far as the door of the kitchen, where a candle stuck on the stove was burning. Justin in his shirt-sleeves was carrying out a dish.

"Ah! they are dining; I will wait."

He returned; she tapped at the window. He went out.

"The key! the one for upstairs where he keeps the — "

"What?"

And he looked at her, astonished at the pallor of her face, that stood out white against the black background of the night. She seemed to him extraordinarily beautiful and majestic as a phantom. Without understanding what she wanted, he had the presentiment of something terrible.

But she went on quickly in a love voice; in a sweet, melting voice, "I want it; give it to me."

As the partition wall was thin, they could hear the clatter of the forks on the plates in the dining-room.

She pretended that she wanted to kill the rats that kept her from sleeping.

"I must tell master."

"No, stay!" Then with an indifferent air, "Oh, it's not worth while; I'll tell him presently. Come, light me upstairs."

She entered the corridor into which the laboratory door opened. Against the wall was a key labelled Capharnaum.

"Justin!" called the druggist impatiently.

"Let us go up."

And he followed her. The key turned in the lock, and she went straight to the third shelf, so well did her memory guide her, seized the blue jar, tore out the cork, plunged in her hand, and withdrawing it full of a white powder, she began eating it.

"Stop!" he cried, rushing at her.

"Hush! someone will come."

He was in despair, was calling out.

"Say nothing, or all the blame will fall on your master."

Then she went home, suddenly calmed, and with something of the serenity of one that had performed a duty.

When Charles, distracted by the news of the distraint, returned home, Emma had just gone out. He cried aloud, wept, fainted, but she did not return. Where could she be? He sent Felicite to Homais, to Monsieur Tuvache, to Lheureux, to the "Lion d'Or," everywhere, and in the intervals of his agony he saw his reputation destroyed, their fortune lost, Berthe's future ruined. By what? — Not a word! He waited till six in the evening. At last, unable to bear it any longer, and fancying she had gone to Rouen, he set out along the highroad, walked a mile, met no one, again waited, and returned home. She had come back.

"What was the matter? Why? Explain to me."

She sat down at her writing-table and wrote a letter, which she sealed slowly, adding the date and the hour. Then she said in a solemn tone:

"You are to read it to-morrow; till then, I pray you, do not ask me a single question. No, not one!"

"But — "

"Oh, leave me!"

She lay down full length on her bed. A bitter taste that she felt in her mouth awakened her. She saw Charles, and again closed her eyes.

awakened her. She saw Charles, and again closed her eyes.

She was studying herself curiously, to see if she were not suffering. But no! nothing as yet. She heard the ticking of the clock, the crackling of the fire, and Charles breathing as he stood upright by her bed.

"Ah! it is but a little thing, death!" she thought. "I shall fall asleep and all will be over."

She drank a mouthful of water and turned to the wall. The frightful taste of ink continued.

"I am thirsty; oh! so thirsty," she sighed.

"What is it?" said Charles, who was handing her a glass.

"It is nothing! Open the window; I am choking."

She was seized with a sickness so sudden that she had hardly time to draw out her handkerchief from under the pillow.

"Take it away," she said quickly; "throw it away."

He spoke to her; she did not answer. She lay motionless, afraid that the slightest movement might make her vomit. But she felt an icy cold creeping from her feet to her heart.

"Ah! it is beginning," she murmured.

"What did you say?"

She turned her head from side to side with a gentle movement full of agony, while constantly opening her mouth as if something very heavy were weighing upon her tongue. At eight o'clock the vomiting began again.

Charles noticed that at the bottom of the basin there was a sort of white sediment sticking to the sides of the porcelain.

"This is extraordinary — very singular," he repeated.

But she said in a firm voice, "No, you are mistaken."

Then gently, and almost as caressing her, he passed his hand over her stomach. She uttered a sharp cry. He fell back terror-stricken.

Then she began to groan, faintly at first. Her shoulders were shaken by a strong shuddering, and she was growing paler than the sheets in which her clenched fingers buried themselves. Her unequal pulse was now almost imperceptible.

Drops of sweat oozed from her bluish face, that seemed as if rigid in the exhalations of a metallic vapour. Her teeth chattered, her dilated eyes looked vaguely about her, and to all questions she replied only with a shake of the head; she even smiled once or twice. Gradually, her moaning grew louder; a hollow shriek burst from her; she pretended she was better and that she would get up presently. But she was seized with convulsions and cried out —

"Ah! my God! It is horrible!"

He threw himself on his knees by her bed.

He threw himself on his knees by her bed.

"Tell me! what have you eaten? Answer, for heaven's sake!"

And he looked at her with a tenderness in his eyes such as she had never seen.

"Well, there — there!" she said in a faint voice. He flew to the writing-table, tore open the seal, and read aloud: "Accuse no one." He stopped, passed his hands across his eyes, and read it over again.

"What! help — help!"

He could only keep repeating the word: "Poisoned! poisoned!" Felicite ran to Homais, who proclaimed it in the market-place; Madame Lefrancois heard it at the "Lion d'Or"; some got up to go and tell their neighbours, and all night the village was on the alert.

Distraught, faltering, reeling, Charles wandered about the room. He knocked against the furniture, tore his hair, and the chemist had never believed that there could be so terrible a sight.

He went home to write to Monsieur Canivet and to Doctor Lariviere. He lost his head, and made more than fifteen rough copies. Hippolyte went to Neufchatel, and Justin so spurred Bovary's horse that he left it foundered and three parts dead by the hill at Bois-Guillaume.

Charles tried to look up his medical dictionary, but could not read it; the lines were dancing.

"Be calm," said the druggist; "we have only to administer a powerful antidote. What is the poison?"

Charles showed him the letter. It was arsenic.

"Very well," said Homais, "we must make an analysis."

For he knew that in cases of poisoning an analysis must be made; and the other, who did not understand, answered —

"Oh, do anything! save her!"

Then going back to her, he sank upon the carpet, and lay there with his head leaning against the edge of her bed, sobbing.

"Don't cry," she said to him. "Soon I shall not trouble you any more."

"Why was it? Who drove you to it?"

She replied. "It had to be, my dear!"

"Weren't you happy? Is it my fault? I did all I could!"

"Yes, that is true — you are good — you."

And she passed her hand slowly over his hair. The sweetness of this sensation deepened his sadness; he felt his whole being dissolving in despair at the thought that he must lose her, just when she was confessing more love for him than ever. And he could think of nothing; he did not know, he did not dare; the urgent need for some immediate resolution gave the finishing stroke to the turmoil of his mind.

So she had done, she thought, with all the treachery; and meanness, and numberless desires that had tortured her. She hated no one now; a twilight dimness was settling upon her thoughts, and, of all earthly noises, Emma heard none but the intermittent lamentations of this poor heart, sweet and indistinct like the echo of a symphony dying away.

"Bring me the child," she said, raising herself on her elbow.

"You are not worse, are you?" asked Charles.

"No, no!"

The child, serious, and still half-asleep, was carried in on the servant's arm in her long white nightgown, from which her bare feet peeped out. She looked wonderingly at the disordered room, and half-closed her eyes, dazzled by the candles burning on the table. They reminded her, no doubt, of the morning of New Year's day and Mid-Lent, when thus awakened early by candle-light she came to her mother's bed to fetch her presents, for she began saying —

"But where is it, mamma?" And as everybody was silent, "But I can't see my little stocking."

Felicite held her over the bed while she still kept looking towards the mantelpiece.

"Has nurse taken it?" she asked.

And at this name, that carried her back to the memory of her adulteries and her calamities, Madame Bovary turned away her head, as at the loathing of another bitterer poison that rose to her mouth. But Berthe remained perched on the bed.

"Oh, how big your eyes are, mamma! How pale you are! how hot you are!"

Her mother looked at her. "I am frightened!" cried the child, recoiling.

Emma took her hand to kiss it; the child struggled.

"That will do. Take her away," cried Charles, who was sobbing in the alcove.

Then the symptoms ceased for a moment; she seemed less agitated; and at every insignificant word, at every respiration a little more easy, he regained hope. At last, when Canivet came in, he threw himself into his arms.

"Ah! it is you. Thanks! You are good! But she is better. See! look at her."

His colleague was by no means of this opinion, and, as he said of himself, "never beating about the bush," he prescribed, an emetic in order to empty the stomach completely.

She soon began vomiting blood. Her lips became drawn. Her limbs were convulsed, her whole body covered with brown spots, and her pulse slipped beneath the fingers like a stretched thread, like a harp-string nearly breaking.

After this she began to scream horribly. She cursed the poison, railed at it, and implored it to be quick, and thrust away with her stiffened arms everything that Charles, in more agony than herself, tried to make her drink. He stood up, his handkerchief to his lips, with a rattling sound in his throat, weeping, and choked by sobs that shook his whole body. Felicite was running hither and thither in the room. Homais, motionless, uttered great sighs; and Monsieur Canivet, always retaining his self-command, nevertheless began to feel uneasy.

"The devil! yet she has been purged, and from the moment that the cause ceases — "

"The effect must cease," said Homais, "that is evident."

"Oh, save her!" cried Bovary.

And, without listening to the chemist, who was still venturing the hypothesis, "It is perhaps a salutary paroxysm," Canivet was about to administer some theriac, when they heard the cracking of a whip; all the windows rattled, and a post-chaise drawn by three horses abreast, up to their ears in mud, drove at a gallop round the corner of the market. It was Doctor Lariviere.

The apparition of a god would not have caused more commotion. Bovary raised his hands; Canivet stopped short; and Homais pulled off his skull-cap long before the doctor had come in.

He belonged to that great school of surgery begotten of Bichat, to that generation, now extinct, of philosophical practitioners, who, loving their art with a fanatical love, exercised it with enthusiasm and wisdom. Everyone in his hospital trembled when he was angry; and his students so revered him that they tried, as soon as they were themselves in practice, to imitate him as much as possible. So that in all the towns about they were found wearing his long wadded merino overcoat and black frock-coat, whose buttoned cuffs slightly covered his brawny hands — very beautiful hands, and that never knew gloves, as though to be more ready to plunge into suffering. Disdainful of honours, of titles, and of academies, like one of the old Knight-Hospitallers, generous, fatherly to the poor, and practising virtue without believing in it, he would almost have passed for a saint if the keenness of his intellect had not caused him to be feared as a demon. His glance, more penetrating than his bistouries, looked straight into your soul, and dissected every lie athwart all assertions and all reticences. And thus he went along, full of that debonair majesty that is given by the consciousness of great talent, of fortune, and of forty years of a labourious and irreproachable life.

He frowned as soon as he had passed the door when he saw the cadaverous face of Emma stretched out on her back with her mouth open. Then, while apparently listening to Canivet, he rubbed his fingers up and down beneath his nostrils, and repeated —

"Good! good!"

But he made a slow gesture with his shoulders. Bovary watched him; they looked at one another; and this man, accustomed as he was to the sight of pain, could not keep back a tear that fell on his shirt-frill.

He tried to take Canivet into the next room. Charles followed him.

"She is very ill, isn't she? If we put on sinapisms? Anything! Oh, think of something, you who have saved so many!"

Charles caught him in both his arms, and gazed at him wildly, imploringly, half-fainting against his breast.

"Come, my poor fellow, courage! There is nothing more to be done."

And Doctor Lariviere turned away.

"You are going?"

"I will come back."

He went out only to give an order to the coachman, with Monsieur Canivet, who did not care either to have Emma die under his hands.

The chemist rejoined them on the Place. He could not by temperament keep away from celebrities, so he begged Monsieur Lariviere to do him the signal honour of accepting some breakfast.

He sent quickly to the "Lion d'Or" for some pigeons; to the butcher's for all the cutlets that were to be had; to Tuvache for cream; and to Lestiboudois for eggs; and the druggist himself aided in the preparations, while Madame Homais was saying as she pulled together the strings of her jacket —

"You must excuse us, sir, for in this poor place, when one hasn't been told the night before — "

"Wine glasses!" whispered Homais.

"If only we were in town, we could fall back upon stuffed trotters."

"Be quiet! Sit down, doctor!"

He thought fit, after the first few mouthfuls, to give some details as to the catastrophe.

"We first had a feeling of siccity in the pharynx, then intolerable pains at the epigastrium, super purgation, coma."

"But how did she poison herself?"

"I don't know, doctor, and I don't even know where she can have procured the arsenious acid."

Justin, who was just bringing in a pile of plates, began to tremble.

"What's the matter?" said the chemist.

At this question the young man dropped the whole lot on the ground with a crash.

"Imbecile!" cried Homais, "awkward lout! block-head! confounded ass!"

But suddenly controlling himself —

"I wished, doctor, to make an analysis, and primo I delicately introduced a tube — "

"You would have done better," said the physician, "to introduce your fingers into her throat."

His colleague was silent, having just before privately received a severe lecture about his emetic, so that this good Canivet, so arrogant and so verbose at the time of the clubfoot, was to-day very modest. He smiled without ceasing in an approving manner.

Homais dilated in Amphytrionic pride, and the affecting thought of Bovary vaguely contributed to his pleasure by a kind of egotistic reflex upon himself. Then the presence of the doctor transported him. He displayed his erudition, cited pell-mell cantharides, upas, the manchineel, vipers.

"I have even read that various persons have found themselves under toxicological symptoms, and, as it were, thunderstricken by black-pudding that had been subjected to a too vehement fumigation. At least, this was stated in a very fine report drawn up by one of our pharmaceutical chiefs, one of our masters, the illustrious Cadet de Gassicourt!"

Madame Homais reappeared, carrying one of those shaky machines that are heated with spirits of wine; for Homais liked to make his coffee at table, having, moreover, torrefied it, pulverised it, and mixed it himself.

"Saccharum, doctor?" said he, offering the sugar.

Then he had all his children brought down, anxious to have the physician's opinion on their constitutions.

At last Monsieur Lariviere was about to leave, when Madame Homais asked for a consultation about her husband. He was making his blood too thick by going to sleep every evening after dinner.

"Oh, it isn't his blood that's too thick," said the physician.

And, smiling a little at his unnoticed joke, the doctor opened the door. But the chemist's shop was full of people; he had the greatest difficulty in getting rid of Monsieur Tuvache, who feared his spouse would get inflammation of the lungs, because she was in the habit of spitting on the ashes; then of Monsieur Binet, who sometimes experienced sudden attacks of great hunger; and of Madame Caron, who suffered from tinglings; of Lheureux, who had vertigo; of Lestiboudois, who had rheumatism; and of Madame Lefrancois, who had heartburn. At last the three horses started; and it was the general opinion that he had not shown himself at all obliging.

Public attention was distracted by the appearance of Monsieur Bournisien, who was going across the market with the holy oil.

Homais, as was due to his principles, compared priests to ravens attracted by the odour of death. The sight of an ecclesiastic was personally disagreeable to him, for the cassock made him think of the shroud, and he detested the one from some fear of the other.

Nevertheless, not shrinking from what he called his mission, he returned to Bovary's in company with Canivet whom Monsieur Lariviere, before leaving, had strongly urged to make this visit; and he would, but for his wife's objections, have taken his two sons with him, in order to accustom them to great occasions; that this might be a lesson, an example, a solemn picture, that should remain in their heads later on.

The room when they went in was full of mournful solemnity. On the work-table, covered over with a white cloth, there were five or six small balls of cotton in a silver dish, near a large crucifix between two lighted candles.

Emma, her chin sunken upon her breast, had her eyes inordinately wide open, and her poor hands wandered over the sheets with that hideous and soft movement of the dying, that seems as if they wanted already to cover themselves with the shroud. Pale as a statue and with eyes red as fire, Charles, not weeping, stood opposite her at the foot of the bed, while the priest, bending one knee, was muttering words in a low voice.

She turned her face slowly, and seemed filled with joy on seeing suddenly the violet stole, no doubt finding again, in the midst of a temporary lull in her pain, the lost voluptuousness of her first mystical transports, with the visions of eternal beatitude that were beginning.

The priest rose to take the crucifix; then she stretched forward her neck as one who is athirst, and glueing her lips to the body of the Man-God, she pressed upon it with all her expiring strength the fullest kiss of love that she had ever given. Then he recited the Misereatur and the Indulgentiam, dipped his right thumb in the oil, and began to give extreme unction. First upon the eyes, that had so coveted all worldly pomp; then upon the nostrils, that had been greedy of the warm breeze and amorous odours; then upon the mouth, that had uttered lies, that had curled with pride and cried out in lewdness; then upon the hands that had delighted in sensual touches; and finally upon the soles of the feet, so swift of yore, when she was running to satisfy her desires, and that would now walk no more.

The cure wiped his fingers, threw the bit of cotton dipped in oil into the fire, and came and sat down by the dying woman, to tell her that she must now blend her sufferings with those of Jesus Christ and abandon herself to the divine mercy.

Finishing his exhortations, he tried to place in her hand a blessed candle, symbol of the celestial glory with which she was soon to be surrounded. Emma, too weak, could not close her fingers, and the taper, but for Monsieur Bournisien too weak, could not close her fingers, and the taper, but for Monsieur Bournisien would have fallen to the ground.

However, she was not quite so pale, and her face had an expression of serenity as if the sacrament had cured her.

The priest did not fail to point this out; he even explained to Bovary that the Lord sometimes prolonged the life of persons when he thought it meet for their salvation; and Charles remembered the day when, so near death, she had received the communion. Perhaps there was no need to despair, he thought.

In fact, she looked around her slowly, as one awakening from a dream; then in a distinct voice she asked for her looking-glass, and remained some time bending over it, until the big tears fell from her eyes. Then she turned away her head with a sigh and fell back upon the pillows.

Her chest soon began panting rapidly; the whole of her tongue protruded from her mouth; her eyes, as they rolled, grew paler, like the two globes of a lamp that is going out, so that one might have thought her already dead but for the fearful labouring of her ribs, shaken by violent breathing, as if the soul were struggling to free itself. Felicite knelt down before the crucifix, and the druggist himself slightly bent his knees, while Monsieur Canivet looked out vaguely at the Place. Bournisien had again begun to pray, his face bowed against the edge of the bed, his long black cassock trailing behind him in the room. Charles was on the other side, on his knees, his arms outstretched towards Emma. He had taken her hands and pressed them, shuddering at every beat of her heart, as at the shaking of a falling ruin. As the death-rattle became stronger the priest prayed faster; his prayers mingled with the stifled sobs of Bovary, and sometimes all seemed lost in the muffled murmur of the Latin syllables that tolled like a passing bell.

Suddenly on the pavement was heard a loud noise of clogs and the clattering of a stick; and a voice rose — a raucous voice — that sang —

"Maids in the warmth of a summer day Dream of love and of love always"

Emma raised herself like a galvanised corpse, her hair undone, her eyes fixed, staring.

"Where the sickle blades have been, Nannette, gathering ears of corn, Passes bending down, my queen, To the earth where they were born."

"The blind man!" she cried. And Emma began to laugh, an atrocious, frantic, despairing laugh, thinking she saw the hideous face of the poor wretch that stood out against the eternal night like a menace.

"The wind is strong this summer day, Her petticoat has flown away."

She fell back upon the mattress in a convulsion. They all drew near. She was dead.

Chapter Nine

There is always after the death of anyone a kind of stupefaction; so difficult is it to grasp this advent of nothingness and to resign ourselves to believe in it. But still, when he saw that she did not move, Charles threw himself upon her, crying —

"Farewell! farewell!"

Homais and Canivet dragged him from the room.

"Restrain yourself!"

"Yes." said he, struggling, "I'll be quiet. I'll not do anything. But leave me alone. I want to see her. She is my wife!"

And he wept.

"Cry," said the chemist; "let nature take her course; that will solace you."

Weaker than a child, Charles let himself be led downstairs into the sitting-room, and Monsieur Homais soon went home. On the Place he was accosted by the blind man, who, having dragged himself as far as Yonville, in the hope of getting the antiphlogistic pomade, was asking every passer-by where the druggist lived.

"There now! as if I hadn't got other fish to fry. Well, so much the worse; you must come later on."

And he entered the shop hurriedly.

He had to write two letters, to prepare a soothing potion for Bovary, to invent some lie that would conceal the poisoning, and work it up into an article for the "Fanal," without counting the people who were waiting to get the news from him; and when the Yonvillers had all heard his story of the arsenic that she had mistaken for sugar in making a vanilla cream. Homais once more returned to Bovary's.

He found him alone (Monsieur Canivet had left), sitting in an arm-chair near the window, staring with an idiotic look at the flags of the floor.

"Now," said the chemist, "you ought yourself to fix the hour for the ceremony."

"Why? What ceremony?" Then, in a stammering, frightened voice, "Oh, no! not that. No! I want to see her here."

Homais, to keep himself in countenance, took up a water-bottle on the whatnot to water the geraniums.

"Ah! thanks," said Charles; "you are good."

But he did not finish, choking beneath the crowd of memories that this action of the druggist recalled to him.

Then to distract him, Homais thought fit to talk a little horticulture: plants wanted humidity. Charles bowed his head in sign of approbation.

"Besides, the fine days will soon be here again."

"Ah!" said Bovary.

The druggist, at his wit's end, began softly to draw aside the small window-curtain.

"Hallo! there's Monsieur Tuvache passing."

Charles repeated like a machine — -

"Monsieur Tuvache passing!"

Homais did not dare to speak to him again about the funeral arrangements; it was the priest who succeeded in reconciling him to them.

He shut himself up in his consulting-room, took a pen, and after sobbing for some time, wrote —

"I wish her to be buried in her wedding-dress, with white shoes, and a wreath. Her hair is to be spread out over her shoulders. Three coffins, one of oak, one of mahogany, one of lead. Let no one say anything to me. I shall have strength. Over all there is to be placed a large piece of green velvet. This is my wish; see that it is done."

The two men were much surprised at Bovary's romantic ideas. The chemist at once went to him and said —

"This velvet seems to me a superfetation. Besides, the expense — "

"What's that to you?" cried Charles. "Leave me! You did not love her. Go!"

The priest took him by the arm for a turn in the garden. He discoursed on the vanity of earthly things. God was very great, was very good: one must submit to his decrees without a murmur; nay, must even thank him.

Charles burst out into blasphemies: "I hate your God!"

"The spirit of rebellion is still upon you," sighed the ecclesiastic.

Bovary was far away. He was walking with great strides along by the wall, near the espalier, and he ground his teeth; he raised to heaven looks of malediction, but not so much as a leaf stirred.

A fine rain was falling: Charles, whose chest was bare, at last began to shiver; he went in and sat down in the kitchen.

At six o'clock a noise like a clatter of old iron was heard on the Place; it was the "Hirondelle" coming in, and he remained with his forehead against the windowpane, watching all the passengers get out, one after the other. Felicite put down a mattress for him in the drawing-room. He threw himself upon it and fell asleep.

Although a philosopher, Monsieur Homais respected the dead. So bearing no grudge to poor Charles, he came back again in the evening to sit up with the body; bringing with him three volumes and a pocket-book for taking notes.

Monsieur Bournisien was there, and two large candles were burning at the head of the bed, that had been taken out of the alcove. The druggist, on whom the silence weighed, was not long before he began formulating some regrets about this "unfortunate young woman." and the priest replied that there was nothing to do now but pray for her.

"Yet," Homais went on, "one of two things; either she died in a state of grace (as the Church has it), and then she has no need of our prayers; or else she departed impertinent (that is, I believe, the ecclesiastical expression), and then — "

Bournisien interrupted him, replying testily that it was none the less necessary to pray.

"But," objected the chemist, "since God knows all our needs, what can be the good of prayer?"

"What!" cried the ecclesiastic, "prayer! Why, aren't you a Christian?"

"Excuse me," said Homais; "I admire Christianity. To begin with, it enfranchised the slaves, introduced into the world a morality — "

"That isn't the question. All the texts-"

"Oh! oh! As to texts, look at history; it, is known that all the texts have been falsified by the Jesuits."

Charles came in, and advancing towards the bed, slowly drew the curtains.

Emma's head was turned towards her right shoulder, the corner of her mouth, which was open, seemed like a black hole at the lower part of her face; her two thumbs were bent into the palms of her hands; a kind of white dust besprinkled her lashes, and her eyes were beginning to disappear in that viscous pallor that looks like a thin web, as if spiders had spun it over. The sheet sunk in from her breast to her knees, and then rose at the tips of her toes, and it seemed to Charles that infinite masses, an enormous load, were weighing upon her.

The church clock struck two. They could hear the loud murmur of the river flowing in the darkness at the foot of the terrace. Monsieur Bournisien from time to time blew his nose noisily, and Homais' pen was scratching over the paper.

"Come, my good friend," he said, "withdraw; this spectacle is tearing you to pieces."

Charles once gone, the chemist and the cure recommenced their discussions.

"Read Voltaire," said the one, "read D'Holbach, read the 'Encyclopaedia'!"

"Read the 'Letters of some Portuguese Jews,'" said the other; "read 'The Meaning of Christianity,' by Nicolas, formerly a magistrate."

They grew warm, they grew red, they both talked at once without listening to each other. Bournisien was scandalized at such audacity; Homais marvelled at such stupidity; and they were on the point of insulting one another when Charles suddenly reappeared. A fascination drew him. He was continually coming upstairs.

He stood opposite her, the better to see her, and he lost himself in a contemplation so deep that it was no longer painful.

He recalled stories of catalepsy, the marvels of magnetism, and he said to himself that by willing it with all his force he might perhaps succeed in reviving her. Once he even bent towards he, and cried in a low voice, "Emma! Emma!" His strong breathing made the flames of the candles tremble against the wall.

At daybreak Madame Bovary senior arrived. Charles as he embraced her burst into another flood of tears. She tried, as the chemist had done, to make some remarks to him on the expenses of the funeral. He became so angry that she was silent, and he even commissioned her to go to town at once and buy what was necessary.

Charles remained alone the whole afternoon; they had taken Berthe to Madame Homais'; Felicite was in the room upstairs with Madame Lefrancois.

In the evening he had some visitors. He rose, pressed their hands, unable to speak. Then they sat down near one another, and formed a large semicircle in front of the fire. With lowered faces, and swinging one leg crossed over the other knee, they uttered deep sighs at intervals; each one was inordinately bored, and yet none would be the first to go.

Homais, when he returned at nine o'clock (for the last two days only Homais seemed to have been on the Place), was laden with a stock of camphor, of benzine, and aromatic herbs. He also carried a large jar full of chlorine water, to keep off all miasmata. Just then the servant, Madame Lefrancois, and Madame Bovary senior were busy about Emma, finishing dressing her, and they were drawing down the long stiff veil that covered her to her satin shoes.

Felicite was sobbing — "Ah! my poor mistress! my poor mistress!"

"Look at her," said the landlady, sighing; "how pretty she still is! Now, couldn't you swear she was going to get up in a minute?"

Then they bent over her to put on her wreath. They had to raise the head a little, and a rush of black liquid issued, as if she were vomiting, from her mouth.

"Oh, goodness! The dress; take care!" cried Madame Lefrancois. "Now, just come and help," she said to the chemist. "Perhaps you're afraid?"

"I afraid?" replied he, shrugging his shoulders. "I dare say! I've seen all sorts of things at the hospital when I was studying pharmacy. We used to make punch in the dissecting room! Nothingness does not terrify a philosopher; and, as I often say, I even intend to leave my body to the hospitals, in order, later on, to serve science."

The cure on his arrival inquired how Monsieur Bovary was, and, on the reply of the druggist, went on — "The blow, you see, is still too recent."

Then Homais congratulated him on not being exposed, like other people, to the loss of a beloved companion; whence there followed a discussion on the celibacy of priests.

"For," said the chemist, "it is unnatural that a man should do without women! There have been crimes — "

"But, good heaven!" cried the ecclesiastic, "how do you expect an individual who is married to keep the secrets of the confessional, for example?"

Homais fell foul of the confessional. Bournisien defended it; he enlarged on the acts of restitution that it brought about. He cited various anecdotes about thieves who had suddenly become honest. Military men on approaching the tribunal of penitence had felt the scales fall from their eyes. At Fribourg there was a minister —

His companion was asleep. Then he felt somewhat stifled by the over-heavy atmosphere of the room; he opened the window; this awoke the chemist.

"Come, take a pinch of snuff," he said to him. "Take it; it'll relieve you."

A continual barking was heard in the distance. "Do you hear that dog howling?" said the chemist.

"They smell the dead," replied the priest. "It's like bees; they leave their hives on the decease of any person."

Homais made no remark upon these prejudices, for he had again dropped asleep. Monsieur Bournisien, stronger than he, went on moving his lips gently for some time, then insensibly his chin sank down, he let fall his big black boot, and began to snore.

They sat opposite one another, with protruding stomachs, puffed-up faces, and frowning looks, after so much disagreement uniting at last in the same human weakness, and they moved no more than the corpse by their side, that seemed to be sleeping.

Charles coming in did not wake them. It was the last time; he came to bid her farewell.

The aromatic herbs were still smoking, and spirals of bluish vapour blended at the window-sash with the fog that was coming in. There were few stars, and the night was warm. The wax of the candles fell in great drops upon the sheets of the bed. Charles watched them burn, tiring his eyes against the glare of their yellow flame.

The watering on the satin gown shimmered white as moonlight. Emma was lost beneath it; and it seemed to him that, spreading beyond her own self, she blended confusedly with everything around her — the silence, the night, the passing wind, the damp odours rising from the ground.

passing wind, the damp odours rising from the ground.

Then suddenly he saw her in the garden at Tostes, on a bench against the thorn hedge, or else at Rouen in the streets, on the threshold of their house, in the yard at Bertaux. He again heard the laughter of the happy boys beneath the apple-trees: the room was filled with the perfume of her hair; and her dress rustled in his arms with a noise like electricity. The dress was still the same.

For a long while he thus recalled all his lost joys, her attitudes, her movements, the sound of her voice. Upon one fit of despair followed another, and even others, inexhaustible as the waves of an overflowing sea.

A terrible curiosity seized him. Slowly, with the tips of his fingers, palpitating, he lifted her veil. But he uttered a cry of horror that awoke the other two.

They dragged him down into the sitting-room. Then Felicite came up to say that he wanted some of her hair.

"Cut some off," replied the druggist.

And as she did not dare to, he himself stepped forward, scissors in hand. He trembled so that he pierced the skin of the temple in several places. At last, stiffening himself against emotion, Homais gave two or three great cuts at random that left white patches amongst that beautiful black hair.

The chemist and the cure plunged anew into their occupations, not without sleeping from time to time, of which they accused each other reciprocally at each fresh awakening. Then Monsieur Bournisien sprinkled the room with holy water and Homais threw a little chlorine water on the floor.

Felicite had taken care to put on the chest of drawers, for each of them, a bottle of brandy, some cheese, and a large roll. And the druggist, who could not hold out any longer, about four in the morning sighed —

"My word! I should like to take some sustenance."

The priest did not need any persuading; he went out to go and say mass, came back, and then they ate and hobnobbed, giggling a little without knowing why, stimulated by that vague gaiety that comes upon us after times of sadness, and at the last glass the priest said to the druggist, as he clapped him on the shoulder —

"We shall end by understanding one another."

In the passage downstairs they met the undertaker's men, who were coming in. Then Charles for two hours had to suffer the torture of hearing the hammer resound against the wood. Next day they lowered her into her oak coffin, that was fitted into the other two; but as the bier was too large, they had to fill up the gaps with the wool of a mattress. At last, when the three lids had been planed down, nailed, soldered, it was placed outside in front of the door; the house was thrown open, and the people of Yonville began to flock round.

Old Rouault arrived, and fainted on the Place when he saw the black cloth!

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Chapter Ten

He had only received the chemist's letter thirty-six hours after the event; and, from consideration for his feelings, Homais had so worded it that it was impossible to make out what it was all about.

First, the old fellow had fallen as if struck by apoplexy. Next, he understood that she was not dead, but she might be. At last, he had put on his blouse, taken his hat, fastened his spurs to his boots, and set out at full speed; and the whole of the way old Rouault, panting, was torn by anguish. Once even he was obliged to dismount. He was dizzy; he heard voices round about him; he felt himself going mad.

Day broke. He saw three black hens asleep in a tree. He shuddered, horrified at this omen. Then he promised the Holy Virgin three chasubles for the church, and that he would go barefooted from the cemetery at Bertaux to the chapel of Vassonville.

He entered Maromme shouting for the people of the inn, burst open the door with a thrust of his shoulder, made for a sack of oats, emptied a bottle of sweet cider into the manger, and again mounted his nag, whose feet struck fire as it dashed along.

He said to himself that no doubt they would save her; the doctors would discover some remedy surely. He remembered all the miraculous cures he had been told about. Then she appeared to him dead. She was there; before his eyes, lying on her back in the middle of the road. He reined up, and the hallucination disappeared.

At Quincampoix, to give himself heart, he drank three cups of coffee one after the other. He fancied they had made a mistake in the name in writing. He looked for the letter in his pocket, felt it there, but did not dare to open it.

At last he began to think it was all a joke; someone's spite, the jest of some wag; and besides, if she were dead, one would have known it. But no! There was nothing extraordinary about the country; the sky was blue, the trees swayed; a flock of sheep passed. He saw the village; he was seen coming bending forward upon his horse, belabouring it with great blows, the girths dripping with blood.

When he had recovered consciousness, he fell, weeping, into Bovary's arms: "My girl! Emma! my child! tell me — "

The other replied, sobbing, "I don't know! I don't know! It's a curse!"

The druggist separated them. "These horrible details are useless. I will tell this gentleman all about it. Here are the people coming. Dignity! Come now! Philosophy!"

The poor fellow tried to show himself brave, and repeated several times. "Yes! courage!"

"Oh," cried the old man, "so I will have, by God! I'll go along o' her to the end!"

The bell began tolling. All was ready; they had to start. And seated in a stall of the choir, side by side, they saw pass and repass in front of them continually the three chanting choristers.

The serpent-player was blowing with all his might. Monsieur Bournisien, in full vestments, was singing in a shrill voice. He bowed before the tabernacle, raising his hands, stretched out his arms. Lestiboudois went about the church with his whalebone stick. The bier stood near the lectern, between four rows of candles. Charles felt inclined to get up and put them out.

Yet he tried to stir himself to a feeling of devotion, to throw himself into the hope of a future life in which he should see her again. He imagined to himself she had gone on a long journey, far away, for a long time. But when he thought of her lying there, and that all was over, that they would lay her in the earth, he was seized with a fierce, gloomy, despairful rage. At times he thought he felt nothing more, and he enjoyed this lull in his pain, whilst at the same time he reproached himself for being a wretch.

The sharp noise of an iron-ferruled stick was heard on the stones, striking them at irregular intervals. It came from the end of the church, and stopped short at the lower aisles. A man in a coarse brown jacket knelt down painfully. It was Hippolyte, the stable-boy at the "Lion d'Or." He had put on his new leg.

One of the choristers went round the nave making a collection, and the coppers chinked one after the other on the silver plate.

"Oh, make haste! I am in pain!" cried Bovary, angrily throwing him a five-franc piece. The churchman thanked him with a deep bow.

They sang, they knelt, they stood up; it was endless! He remembered that once, in the early times, they had been to mass together, and they had sat down on the other side, on the right, by the wall. The bell began again. There was a great moving of chairs; the bearers slipped their three staves under the coffin, and everyone left the church.

Then Justin appeared at the door of the shop. He suddenly went in again, pale, staggering.

People were at the windows to see the procession pass. Charles at the head walked erect. He affected a brave air, and saluted with a nod those who, coming out from the lanes or from their doors, stood amidst the crowd.

The six men, three on either side, walked slowly, panting a little. The priests, the choristers, and the two choirboys recited the De profundis*, and their voices echoed over the fields, rising and falling with their undulations. Sometimes they disappeared in the windings of the path; but the great silver cross rose always before the trees.

*Psalm CXXX.

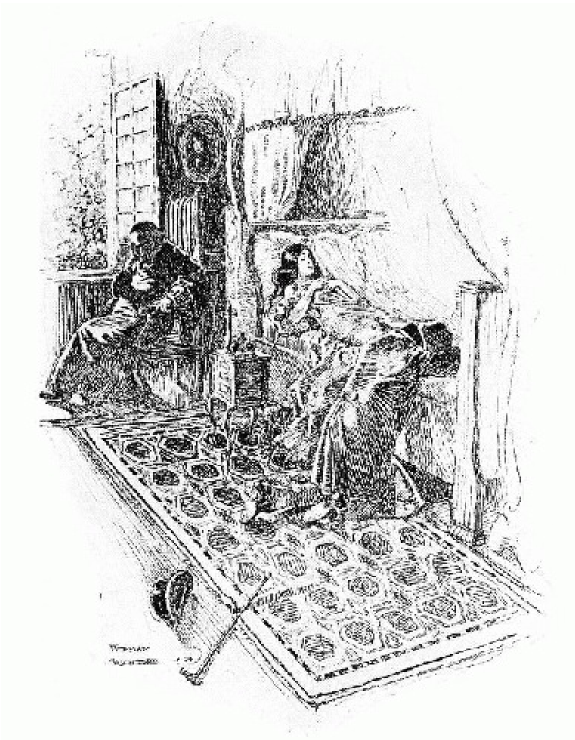
The women followed in black cloaks with turned-down hoods; each of them carried in her hands a large lighted candle, and Charles felt himself growing weaker at this continual repetition of prayers and torches, beneath this oppressive odour of wax and of cassocks. A fresh breeze was blowing; the rye and colza were sprouting, little dewdrops trembled at the roadsides and on the hawthorn hedges. All sorts of joyous sounds filled the air; the jolting of a cart rolling afar off in the ruts, the crowing of a cock, repeated again and again, or the gambling of a foal running away under the apple-trees: The pure sky was fretted with rosy clouds; a bluish haze rested upon the cots covered with iris. Charles as he passed recognised each courtyard. He remembered mornings like this, when, after visiting some patient, he came out from one and returned to her.

The black cloth bestrewn with white beads blew up from time to time, laying bare the coffin. The tired bearers walked more slowly, and it advanced with constant jerks, like a boat that pitches with every wave.

They reached the cemetery. The men went right down to a place in the grass where a grave was dug. They ranged themselves all round; and while the priest spoke, the red soil thrown up at the sides kept noiselessly slipping down at the corners.

Then when the four ropes were arranged the coffin was placed upon them. He watched it descend; it seemed descending for ever. At last a thud was heard; the ropes creaked as they were drawn up. Then Bournisien took the spade handed to him by Lestiboudois; with his left hand all the time sprinkling water, with the right he vigorously threw in a large spadeful; and the wood of the coffin, struck by the pebbles, gave forth that dread sound that seems to us the reverberation of eternity.

The ecclesiastic passed the holy water sprinkler to his neighbour. This was Homais. He swung it gravely, then handed it to Charles, who sank to his knees in the earth and threw in handfuls of it, crying, "Adieu!" He sent her kisses; he dragged himself towards the grave, to engulf himself with her. They led him away, and he soon grew calmer, feeling perhaps, like the others, a vague satisfaction that it was all over.



Old Rouault on his way back began quietly smoking a pipe, which Homais in his innermost conscience thought not quite the thing. He also noticed that Monsieur Binet had not been present, and that Tuvache had "made off" after mass, and that Theodore, the notary's servant wore a blue coat, "as if one could not have got a black coat, since that is the custom, by Jove!" And to share his observations with others he went from group to group. They were deploring Emma's death, especially Lheureux, who had not failed to come to the funeral.

"Poor little woman! What a trouble for her husband!"

The druggist continued, "Do you know that but for me he would have committed some fatal attempt upon himself?"

"Such a good woman! To think that I saw her only last Saturday in my shop."

"I haven't had leisure," said Homais, "to prepare a few words that I would have cast upon her tomb."

Charles on getting home undressed, and old Rouault put on his blue blouse. It was a new one, and as he had often during the journey wiped his eyes on the sleeves, the dye had stained his face, and the traces of tears made lines in the layer of dust that covered it.

Madame Bovary senior was with them. All three were silent. At last the old fellow sighed —

"Do you remember, my friend, that I went to Tostes once when you had just lost your first deceased? I consoled you at that time. I thought of something to say then, but now — " Then, with a loud groan that shook his whole chest, "Ah!

this is the end for me, do you see! I saw my wife go, then my son, and now today it's my daughter."

He wanted to go back at once to Bertaux, saying that he could not sleep in this house. He even refused to see his granddaughter.

"No, no! It would grieve me too much. Only you'll kiss her many times for me. Good-bye! you're a good fellow! And then I shall never forget that," he said, slapping his thigh. "Never fear, you shall always have your turkey."

But when he reached the top of the hill he turned back, as he had turned once before on the road of Saint-Victor when he had parted from her. The windows of the village were all on fire beneath the slanting rays of the sun sinking behind the field. He put his hand over his eyes, and saw in the horizon an enclosure of walls, where trees here and there formed black clusters between white stones; then he went on his way at a gentle trot, for his nag had gone lame.

Despite their fatigue, Charles and his mother stayed very long that evening talking together. They spoke of the days of the past and of the future. She would come to live at Yonville; she would keep house for him; they would never part again. She was ingenious and caressing, rejoicing in her heart at gaining once more an affection that had wandered from her for so many years. Midnight struck. The village as usual was silent, and Charles, awake, thought always of her.

Rodolphe, who, to distract himself, had been rambling about the wood all day, was sleeping quietly in his chateau, and Leon, down yonder, always slept.

There was another who at that hour was not asleep.

On the grave between the pine-trees a child was on his knees weeping, and his heart, rent by sobs, was beating in the shadow beneath the load of an immense regret, sweeter than the moon and fathomless as the night. The gate suddenly grated. It was Lestiboudois; he came to fetch his spade, that he had forgotten. He recognised Justin climbing over the wall, and at last knew who was the culprit who stole his potatoes.

Chapter Eleven

The next day Charles had the child brought back. She asked for her mamma. They told her she was away; that she would bring her back some playthings. Berthe spoke of her again several times, then at last thought no more of her. The child's gaiety broke Bovary's heart, and he had to bear besides the intolerable consolations of the chemist.

Money troubles soon began again, Monsieur Lheureux urging on anew his friend Vincart, and Charles pledged himself for exorbitant sums; for he would never consent to let the smallest of the things that had belonged to HER be sold. His mother was exasperated with him; he grew even more angry than she did. He had altogether changed. She left the house.

Then everyone began "taking advantage" of him. Mademoiselle Lempereur presented a bill for six months' teaching, although Emma had never taken a lesson (despite the receipted bill she had shown Bovary); it was an arrangement between the two women. The man at the circulating library demanded three years' subscriptions; Mere Rollet claimed the postage due for some twenty letters, and when Charles asked for an explanation, she had the delicacy to reply —

"Oh, I don't know. It was for her business affairs."

With every debt he paid Charles thought he had come to the end of them. But others followed ceaselessly. He sent in accounts for professional attendance. He was shown the letters his wife had written. Then he had to apologise.

Felicite now wore Madame Bovary's gowns; not all, for he had kept some of them, and he went to look at them in her dressing-room, locking himself up there; she was about her height, and often Charles, seeing her from behind, was seized with an illusion, and cried out —

"Oh, stay, stay!"

But at Whitsuntide she ran away from Yonville, carried off by Theodore, stealing all that was left of the wardrobe.

It was about this time that the widow Dupuis had the honour to inform him of the "marriage of Monsieur Leon Dupuis her son, notary at Yvetot, to Mademoiselle Leocadie Leboeuf of Bondeville." Charles, among the other congratulations he sent him, wrote this sentence —

"How glad my poor wife would have been!"

One day when, wandering aimlessly about the house, he had gone up to the attic, he felt a pellet of fine paper under his slipper. He opened it and read: "Courage, Emma, courage. I would not bring misery into your life." It was

Rodolphe's letter, fallen to the ground between the boxes, where it had remained, and that the wind from the dormer window had just blown towards the door. And Charles stood, motionless and staring, in the very same place where, long ago, Emma, in despair, and paler even than he, had thought of dying. At last he discovered a small R at the bottom of the second page. What did this mean? He remembered Rodolphe's attentions, his sudden, disappearance, his constrained air when they had met two or three times since. But the respectful tone of the letter deceived him.

"Perhaps they loved one another platonically," he said to himself.

Besides, Charles was not of those who go to the bottom of things; he shrank from the proofs, and his vague jealousy was lost in the immensity of his woe.

Everyone, he thought, must have adored her; all men assuredly must have coveted her. She seemed but the more beautiful to him for this; he was seized with a lasting, furious desire for her, that inflamed his despair, and that was boundless, because it was now unrealisable.

To please her, as if she were still living, he adopted her predilections, her ideas; he bought patent leather boots and took to wearing white cravats. He put cosmetics on his moustache, and, like her, signed notes of hand. She corrupted him from beyond the grave.

He was obliged to sell his silver piece by piece; next he sold the drawing-room furniture. All the rooms were stripped; but the bedroom, her own room, remained as before. After his dinner Charles went up there. He pushed the round table in front of the fire, and drew up her armchair. He sat down opposite it. A candle burnt in one of the gilt candlesticks. Berthe by his side was painting prints.

He suffered, poor man, at seeing her so badly dressed, with laceless boots, and the arm-holes of her pinafore torn down to the hips; for the charwoman took no care of her. But she was so sweet, so pretty, and her little head bent forward so gracefully, letting the dear fair hair fall over her rosy cheeks, that an infinite joy came upon him, a happiness mingled with bitterness, like those ill-made wines that taste of resin. He mended her toys, made her puppets from cardboard, or sewed up half-torn dolls. Then, if his eyes fell upon the workbox, a ribbon lying about, or even a pin left in a crack of the table, he began to dream, and looked so sad that she became as sad as he.

No one now came to see them, for Justin had run away to Rouen, where he was a grocer's assistant, and the druggist's children saw less and less of the child, Monsieur Homais not caring, seeing the difference of their social position, to continue the intimacy.

The blind man, whom he had not been able to cure with the pomade, had gone back to the hill of Bois-Guillaume, where he told the travellers of the vain attempt of the druggist, to such an extent, that Homais when he went to town hid himself behind the curtains of the "Hirondelle" to avoid meeting him. He detested him, and wishing, in the interests of his own reputation, to get rid of him at all costs, he directed against him a secret battery, that betrayed the depth of his intellect and the baseness of his vanity. Thus, for six consecutive months, one could read in the "Fanal de Rouen" editorials such as these —

"All who bend their steps towards the fertile plains of Picardy have, no doubt, remarked, by the Bois-Guillaume hill, a wretch suffering from a horrible facial wound. He importunes, persecutes one, and levies a regular tax on all travellers. Are we still living in the monstrous times of the Middle Ages, when vagabonds were permitted to display in our public places leprosy and scrofulas they had brought back from the Crusades?"

Or —

"In spite of the laws against vagabondage, the approaches to our great towns continue to be infected by bands of beggars. Some are seen going about alone, and these are not, perhaps, the least dangerous. What are our ediles about?"

Then Homais invented anecdotes —

"Yesterday, by the Bois-Guillaume hill, a skittish horse — " And then followed the story of an accident caused by the presence of the blind man.

He managed so well that the fellow was locked up. But he was released. He began again, and Homais began again. It was a struggle. Homais won it, for his foe was condemned to life-long confinement in an asylum.

This success emboldened him, and henceforth there was no longer a dog run over, a barn burnt down, a woman beaten in the parish, of which he did not immediately inform the public, guided always by the love of progress and the hate of priests. He instituted comparisons between the elementary and clerical schools to the detriment of the latter; called to mind the massacre of St. Bartholomew a propos of a grant of one hundred francs to the church, and denounced abuses, aired new views. That was his phrase. Homais was digging and delving; he was becoming dangerous.

However, he was stifling in the narrow limits of journalism, and soon a book, a work was necessary to him. Then he composed "General Statistics of the Canton of Yonville, followed by Climatological Remarks." The statistics drove him to philosophy. He busied himself with great questions: the social problem, moralisation of the poorer classes, pisciculture, caoutchouc, railways, *etc.* He even began to blush at being a bourgeois. He affected the artistic style, he smoked. He bought two chic Pompadour statuettes to adorn his drawing-room.

He by no means gave up his shop. On the contrary, he kept well abreast of new discoveries. He followed the great movement of chocolates; he was the first to introduce "cocoa" and "revalenta" into the Seine-Inferieure. He was enthusiastic about the hydro-electric Pulvermacher chains; he wore one himself, and when at night he took off his flannel vest, Madame Homais stood quite dazzled before the golden spiral beneath which he was hidden, and felt her ardour redouble for this man more bandaged than a Scythian, and splendid as one of the Magi.

He had fine ideas about Emma's tomb. First he proposed a broken column with some drapery, next a pyramid, then a Temple of Vesta, a sort of rotunda, or else a "mass of ruins." And in all his plans Homais always stuck to the weeping willow, which he looked upon as the indispensable symbol of sorrow.

Charles and he made a journey to Rouen together to look at some tombs at a funeral furnisher's, accompanied by an artist, one Vaufrylard, a friend of Bridoux's, who made puns all the time. At last, after having examined some hundred designs, having ordered an estimate and made another journey to Rouen, Charles decided in favour of a mausoleum, which on the two principal sides was to have a "spirit bearing an extinguished torch."

As to the inscription, Homais could think of nothing so fine as Sta viator*, and he got no further; he racked his brain, he constantly repeated Sta viator. At last he hit upon Amabilen conjugem calcas**, which was adopted.

* Rest traveler.

** Tread upon a loving wife.

A strange thing was that Bovary, while continually thinking of Emma, was forgetting her. He grew desperate as he felt this image fading from his memory in spite of all efforts to retain it. Yet every night he dreamt of her; it was always the same dream. He drew near her, but when he was about to clasp her she fell into decay in his arms.

For a week he was seen going to church in the evening. Monsieur Bournisien even paid him two or three visits, then gave him up. Moreover, the old fellow was growing intolerant, fanatic, said Homais. He thundered against the spirit of the age, and never failed, every other week, in his sermon, to recount the death agony of Voltaire, who died devouring his excrements, as everyone knows.

In spite of the economy with which Bovary lived, he was far from being able to pay off his old debts. Lheureux refused to renew any more bills. A distraint became imminent. Then he appealed to his mother, who consented to let him take a mortgage on her property, but with a great many recriminations against Emma; and in return for her sacrifice she asked for a shawl that had escaped the depredations of Felicite. Charles refused to give it her; they quarrelled.

She made the first overtures of reconciliation by offering to have the little girl, who could help her in the house, to live with her. Charles consented to this, but when the time for parting came, all his courage failed him. Then there was a final, complete rupture.

As his affections vanished, he clung more closely to the love of his child. She made him anxious, however, for she coughed sometimes, and had red spots on her cheeks.

Opposite his house, flourishing and merry, was the family of the chemist, with whom everything was prospering. Napoleon helped him in the laboratory, Athalie embroidered him a skullcap, Irma cut out rounds of paper to cover the preserves, and Franklin recited Pythagoras' table in a breath. He was the happiest of fathers, the most fortunate of men.

Not so! A secret ambition devoured him. Homais hankered after the cross of the Legion of Honour. He had plenty of claims to it.

"First, having at the time of the cholera distinguished myself by a boundless devotion; second, by having published, at my expense, various works of public utility, such as" (and he recalled his pamphlet entitled, "Cider, its manufacture and effects," besides observation on the lanigerous plant-louse, sent to the Academy; his volume of statistics, and down to his pharmaceutical thesis); "without counting that I am a member of several learned societies" (he was member of a single one).

"In short!" he cried, making a pirouette, "if it were only for distinguishing myself at fires!"

Then Homais inclined towards the Government. He secretly did the prefect great service during the elections. He sold himself — in a word, prostituted himself. He even addressed a petition to the sovereign in which he implored him to "do him justice"; he called him "our good king," and compared him to Henri IV.

And every morning the druggist rushed for the paper to see if his nomination were in it. It was never there. At last, unable to bear it any longer, he had a grass plot in his garden designed to represent the Star of the Cross of Honour with two little strips of grass running from the top to imitate the ribband. He walked round it with folded arms, meditating on the folly of the Government and the ingratitude of men.

From respect, or from a sort of sensuality that made him carry on his investigations slowly, Charles had not yet opened the secret drawer of a rosewood desk which Emma had generally used. One day, however, he sat down before it, turned the key, and pressed the spring. All Leon's letters were there. There could be no doubt this time. He devoured them to the very last, ransacked every corner, all the furniture, all the drawers, behind the walls, sobbing, crying every corner, all the furniture, all the drawers, behind the walls, sobbing, crying aloud, distraught, mad. He found a box and broke it open with a kick. Rodolphe's portrait flew full in his face in the midst of the overturned love-letters.

People wondered at his despondency. He never went out, saw no one, refused even to visit his patients. Then they said "he shut himself up to drink."

Sometimes, however, some curious person climbed on to the garden hedge, and saw with amazement this long-bearded, shabbily clothed, wild man, who wept aloud as he walked up and down.

In the evening in summer he took his little girl with him and led her to the cemetery. They came back at nightfall, when the only light left in the Place was that in Binet's window.

The voluptuousness of his grief was, however, incomplete, for he had no one near him to share it, and he paid visits to Madame Lefrancois to be able to speak of her.

But the landlady only listened with half an ear, having troubles like himself. For Lheureux had at last established the "Favorites du Commerce," and Hivert, who enjoyed a great reputation for doing errands, insisted on a rise of wages, and was threatening to go over "to the opposition shop."

One day when he had gone to the market at Argueil to sell his horse — his last resource — he met Rodolphe.

They both turned pale when they caught sight of one another. Rodolphe, who had only sent his card, first stammered some apologies, then grew bolder, and even pushed his assurance (it was in the month of August and very hot) to the length of inviting him to have a bottle of beer at the public-house.

Leaning on the table opposite him, he chewed his cigar as he talked, and Charles was lost in reverie at this face that she had loved. He seemed to see again something of her in it. It was a marvel to him. He would have liked to have been this man.

The other went on talking agriculture, cattle, pasturage, filling out with banal phrases all the gaps where an allusion might slip in. Charles was not listening to him; Rodolphe noticed it, and he followed the succession of memories that crossed his face. This gradually grew redder; the nostrils throbbed fast, the lips quivered. There was at last a moment when Charles, full of a sombre fury, fixed his eyes on Rodolphe, who, in something of fear, stopped talking. But soon the same look of weary lassitude came back to his face.

"I don't blame you," he said.

Rodolphe was dumb. And Charles, his head in his hands, went on in a broken voice, and with the resigned accent of infinite sorrow —

"No, I don't blame you now."

He even added a fine phrase, the only one he ever made —

He even added a fine phrase, the only one he ever made —

"It is the fault of fatality!"

Rodolphe, who had managed the fatality, thought the remark very offhand from a man in his position, comic even, and a little mean.

The next day Charles went to sit down on the seat in the arbour. Rays of light were straying through the trellis, the vine leaves threw their shadows on the sand, the jasmines perfumed the air, the heavens were blue, Spanish flies buzzed round the lilies in bloom, and Charles was suffocating like a youth beneath the vague love influences that filled his aching heart.

At seven o'clock little Berthe, who had not seen him all the afternoon, went to fetch him to dinner.

His head was thrown back against the wall, his eyes closed, his mouth open, and in his hand was a long tress of black hair.

"Come along, papa," she said.

And thinking he wanted to play; she pushed him gently. He fell to the ground. He was dead.

Thirty-six hours after, at the druggist's request, Monsieur Canivet came thither. He made a post-mortem and found nothing.

When everything had been sold, twelve francs seventy-five centimes remained, that served to pay for Mademoiselle Bovary's going to her grandmother. The good woman died the same year; old Rouault was paralysed, and it was an aunt who took charge of her. She is poor, and sends her to a cotton-factory to earn a living.

Since Bovary's death three doctors have followed one another at Yonville without any success, so severely did Homais attack them. He has an enormous practice; the authorities treat him with consideration, and public opinion protects him.

He has just received the cross of the Legion of Honour.

MADAME BOVARY

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PREMIÈRE PARTIE

I

Nous étions à l'Étude, quand le Proviseur entra, suivi d'un *nouveau* habillé en bourgeois et d'un garçon de classe qui portait un grand pupitre. Ceux qui dormaient se réveillèrent, et chacun se leva comme surpris dans son travail.

Le Proviseur nous fit signe de nous rasseoir ; puis, se tournant vers le maître d'études :

— Monsieur Roger, lui dit-il à demi-voix, voici un élève que je vous recommande, il entre en cinquième. Si son travail et sa conduite sont méritoires, il passera *dans les grands*, où l'appelle son âge.

Resté dans l'angle, derrière la porte, si bien qu'on l'apercevait à peine, le *nouveau* était un gars de la campagne, d'une quinzaine d'années environ, et plus haut de taille qu'aucun de nous tous. Il avait les cheveux coupés droit sur le front, comme un chantre de village, l'air raisonnable et fort embarrassé. Quoiqu'il ne fût pas large des épaules, son habit-veste de drap vert à boutons noirs devait le gêner aux entournures et laissait voir, par la fente des parements, des poignets rouges habitués à être nus. Ses jambes, en bas bleus, sortaient d'un pantalon jaunâtre très tiré par les bretelles. Il était chaussé de souliers forts, mal cirés, garnis de clous.

On commença la récitation des leçons. Il les écouta de toutes ses oreilles, attentif comme au sermon, n'osant même croiser les cuisses, ni s'appuyer sur le coude, et, à deux heures, quand la cloche sonna, le maître d'études fut obligé de l'avertir, pour qu'il se mît avec nous dans les rangs.

Nous avions l'habitude, en entrant en classe, de jeter nos casquettes par terre, afin d'avoir ensuite nos mains plus libres ; il fallait, dès le seuil de la porte, les lancer sous le banc, de façon à frapper contre la muraille en faisant beaucoup de poussière ; c'était là le *genre*.

Mais, soit qu'il n'eût pas remarqué cette manoeuvre ou qu'il n'eût osé s'y soumettre, la prière était finie que le *nouveau* tenait encore sa casquette sur ses deux genoux. C'était une de ces coiffures d'ordre composite, où l'on retrouve les éléments du bonnet à poil, du chapska, du chapeau rond, de la casquette de loutre et du bonnet de coton, une de ces pauvres choses, enfin, dont la laideur muette a des profondeurs d'expression comme le visage d'un imbécile. Ovoïde et renflée de baleines, elle commençait par trois boudins circulaires ; puis s'alternaient, séparés par une bande rouge, des losanges de velours et de poils de lapin ; venait ensuite une façon de sac qui se terminait par un polygone cartonné, couvert d'une broderie en soutache compliquée, et d'où pendait, au bout d'un long cordon trop mince, un petit croisillon de fils d'or, en manière de gland. Elle était neuve ; la visière brillait.

— Levez-vous, dit le professeur.

Il se leva ; sa casquette tomba. Toute la classe se mit à rire.

Il se baissa pour la reprendre. Un voisin la fit tomber d'un coup de coude, il la ramassa encore une fois.

— Débarrassez-vous donc de votre casque, dit le professeur, qui était un homme d'esprit.

Il y eut un rire éclatant des écoliers qui décontenança le pauvre garçon, si bien qu'il ne savait s'il fallait garder sa casquette à la main, la laisser par terre ou la mettre sur sa tête. Il se rassit et la posa sur ses genoux.

— Levez-vous, reprit le professeur, et dites-moi votre nom.

Le *nouveau* articula, d'une voix bredouillante, un nom inintelligible.

— Répétez !

Le même bredouillement de syllabes se fit entendre, couvert par les huées de la classe.

— Plus haut ! cria le maître, plus haut !

Le *nouveau*, prenant alors une résolution extrême, ouvrit une bouche démesurée et lança à pleins poumons, comme pour appeler quelqu'un, ce mot : *Charbovari*.

Ce fut un vacarme qui s'élança d'un bond, monta en crescendo, avec des éclats de voix aigus (on hurlait, on aboyait, on trépignait, on répétait : *Charbovari ! Charbovari !)*, puis qui roula en notes isolées, se calmant à grand-peine, et parfois qui reprenait tout à coup sur la ligne d'un banc où saillissait encore çà et là, comme un pétard mal éteint, quelque rire étouffé.

Cependant, sous la pluie des pensums, l'ordre peu à peu se rétablit dans la classe, et le professeur, parvenu à saisir le nom de Charles Bovary, se l'étant fait dicter, épeler et relire, commanda tout de suite au pauvre diable d'aller s'asseoir sur le banc de paresse, au pied de la chaire. Il se mit en mouvement, mais, avant de partir, hésita.

— Que cherchez-vous ? demanda le professeur.

— Ma cas…, fit timidement le *nouveau*, promenant autour de lui des regards inquiets.

— Cinq cents vers à toute la classe ! exclamé d'une voix furieuse, arrêta, comme le *Quos ego*, une bourrasque nouvelle.

— Restez donc tranquilles ! continuait le professeur indigné, et s'essuyant le front avec son mouchoir qu'il venait de prendre dans sa toque : Quant à vous, le *nouveau*, vous me copierez vingt fois le verbe *ridiculus sum*.

Puis, d'une voix plus douce :

— Eh ! vous la retrouverez, votre casquette ; on ne vous l'a pas volée !

Tout reprit son calme. Les têtes se courbèrent sur les cartons, et le *nouveau* resta pendant deux heures dans une tenue exemplaire, quoiqu'il y eût bien, de temps à autre, quelque boulette de papier lancée d'un bec de plume qui vînt s'éclabousser sur sa figure. Mais il s'essuyait avec la main, et demeurait immobile, les yeux baissés.

Le soir, à l'Étude, il tira ses bouts de manches de son pupitre, mit en ordre ses petites affaires, régla soigneusement son papier. Nous le vîmes qui travaillait en conscience, cherchant tous les mots dans le dictionnaire et se donnant beaucoup de mal. Grâce, sans doute, à cette bonne volonté dont il fit preuve, il dut de ne pas descendre dans la classe inférieure ; car, s'il savait passablement ses règles, il n'avait guère d'élégance dans les tournures. C'était le curé de son village qui lui avait commencé le latin, ses parents, par économie, ne l'ayant envoyé au collège que le plus tard possible.

Son père, M. Charles-Denis-Bartholomé Bovary, ancien aide-chirurgien-major, compromis, vers 1812, dans des affaires de conscription, et forcé, vers cette époque, de quitter le service, avait alors profité de ses avantages personnels pour saisir au passage une dot de soixante mille francs, qui s'offrait en la fille d'un marchand bonnetier, devenue amoureuse de sa tournure. Bel homme, hâbleur, faisant sonner haut ses éperons, portant des favoris rejoints aux moustaches, les doigts toujours garnis de bagues et habillé de couleurs voyantes, il avait l'aspect d'un brave, avec l'entrain facile d'un commis voyageur. Une fois marié, il vécut deux ou trois ans sur la fortune de sa femme, dînant bien, se levant tard, fumant dans de grandes pipes en porcelaine, ne rentrant le soir qu'après le spectacle et fréquentant les cafés. Le beau-père mourut et laissa peu de chose ; il en fut indigné, se lança *dans la fabrique*, y perdit quelque argent, puis se retira dans la campagne, où il voulut *faire valoir*. Mais, comme il ne s'entendait guère plus en culture qu'en indiennes, qu'il montait ses chevaux au lieu de les envoyer au labour, buvait son cidre en bouteilles au lieu de le vendre en barriques, mangeait les plus belles volailles de sa cour et graissait ses souliers de chasse avec le lard de ses cochons, il ne tarda point à s'apercevoir qu'il valait mieux planter là toute spéculation.

Moyennant deux cents francs par an, il trouva donc à louer dans un village, sur les confins du pays de Caux et de la Picardie, une sorte de logis moitié ferme, moitié maison de maître ; et, chagrin, rongé de regrets, accusant le ciel, jaloux contre tout le monde, il s'enferma dès l'âge de quarante-cinq ans, dégoûté des hommes, disait-il, et décidé à vivre en paix.

Sa femme avait été folle de lui autrefois ; elle l'avait aimé avec mille servilités qui l'avaient détaché d'elle encore davantage. Enjouée jadis, expansive et tout aimante, elle était, en vieillissant, devenue (à la façon du vin éventé qui se tourne en vinaigre) d'humeur difficile, piaillarde, nerveuse. Elle avait tant souffert, sans se plaindre, d'abord, quand elle le voyait courir après toutes les gotons de village et que vingt mauvais lieux le lui renvoyaient le soir, blasé et puant l'ivresse ! Puis l'orgueil s'était révolté. Alors elle s'était tue, avalant sa rage dans un stoïcisme muet, qu'elle garda jusqu'à sa mort. Elle était sans cesse en courses, en affaires. Elle allait chez les avoués, chez le président, se rappelait l'échéance des billets, obtenait des retards ; et, à la maison, repassait, cousait, blanchissait, surveillait les ouvriers, soldait les mémoires, tandis que, sans s'inquiéter de rien, Monsieur, continuellement engourdi dans une somnolence boudeuse dont il ne se réveillait que pour lui dire des choses désobligeantes, restait à fumer au coin du feu, en crachant dans les cendres.

Quand elle eut un enfant, il le fallut mettre en nourrice. Rentré chez eux, le marmot fut gâté comme un prince. Sa mère le nourrissait de confitures ; son père le laissait courir sans souliers, et, pour faire le philosophe, disait même qu'il pouvait bien aller tout nu, comme les enfants des bêtes. À l'encontre des tendances maternelles, il avait en tête un certain idéal viril de l'enfance, d'après lequel il tâchait de former son fils, voulant qu'on l'élevât durement, à la spartiate, pour lui faire une bonne constitution. Il l'envoyait se coucher sans feu, lui apprenait à boire de grands coups de rhum et à insulter les processions. Mais, naturellement paisible, le petit répondait mal à ses efforts. Sa mère le traînait toujours après elle ; elle lui découpait des cartons, lui racontait des histoires, s'entretenait avec lui dans des monologues sans fin, pleins de gaietés mélancoliques et de chatteries babillardes. Dans l'isolement de sa vie, elle reporta sur cette tête d'enfant toutes ses vanités éparses, brisées. Elle rêvait de hautes positions, elle le voyait déjà grand, beau, spirituel, établi, dans les ponts et chaussées ou dans la magistrature. Elle lui apprit à lire, et même lui enseigna, sur un vieux piano qu'elle avait, à chanter deux ou trois petites romances. Mais, à tout cela, M. Bovary, peu soucieux des lettres, disait que *ce n'était pas la peine !* Auraient-ils jamais de quoi l'entretenir dans les écoles du gouvernement, lui acheter une charge ou un fonds de commerce ? D'ailleurs, avec du toupet, *un homme réussit toujours dans le monde*. Madame Bovary se mordait les lèvres, et l'enfant vagabondait dans le village.

Il suivait les laboureurs, et chassait, à coups de motte de terre, les corbeaux qui s'envolaient. Il mangeait des mûres le long des fossés, gardait les dindons avec une gaule, fanait à la moisson, courait dans le bois, jouait à la marelle sous le porche de l'église les jours de pluie, et, aux grandes fêtes, suppliait le bedeau de lui laisser sonner les cloches, pour se pendre de tout son corps à la grande corde et se sentir emporter par elle dans sa volée.

Aussi poussa-t-il comme un chêne. Il acquit de fortes mains, de belles couleurs.

À douze ans, sa mère obtint que l'on commençât ses études. On en chargea le curé. Mais les leçons étaient si courtes et si mal suivies, qu'elles ne pouvaient servir à grand-chose. C'était aux moments perdus qu'elles se donnaient, dans la sacristie, debout, à la hâte, entre un baptême et un enterrement ; ou bien le curé envoyait chercher son élève après *l'Angelus*, quand il n'avait pas à sortir. On montait dans sa chambre, on s'installait : les moucherons et les papillons de nuit tournoyaient autour de la chandelle. Il faisait chaud, l'enfant s'endormait ; et le bonhomme, s'assoupissant les mains sur son ventre, ne tardait pas à ronfler, la bouche ouverte. D'autres fois, quand M. le curé, revenant de porter le viatique à quelque malade des environs, apercevait Charles qui polissonnait dans la campagne, il l'appelait, le sermonnait un quart d'heure et profitait de l'occasion pour lui faire conjuguer son verbe au pied d'un arbre. La pluie venait les interrompre, ou une connaissance qui passait. Du reste, il était toujours content de lui, disait même que le *jeune homme* avait beaucoup de mémoire.

Charles ne pouvait en rester là. Madame fut énergique. Honteux, ou fatigué plutôt, Monsieur céda sans résistance, et l'on attendit encore un an que le gamin eût fait sa première communion.

Six mois se passèrent encore ; et, l'année d'après, Charles fut définitivement envoyé au collège de Rouen, où son père l'amena lui-même, vers la fin d'octobre, à l'époque de la foire Saint-Romain.

Il serait maintenant impossible à aucun de nous de se rien rappeler de lui. C'était un garçon de tempérament modéré, qui jouait aux récréations, travaillait à l'étude, écoutant en classe, dormant bien au dortoir, mangeant bien au réfectoire. Il avait pour correspondant un quincaillier en gros de la rue Ganterie, qui le faisait sortir une fois par mois, le dimanche, après que sa boutique était fermée, l'envoyait se promener sur le port à regarder les bateaux, puis le ramenait au collège dès sept heures, avant le souper. Le soir de chaque jeudi, il écrivait une longue lettre à sa mère, avec de l'encre rouge et trois pains à cacheter ; puis il repassait ses cahiers d'histoire, ou bien lisait un vieux volume d'*Anacharsis* qui traînait dans l'étude. En promenade, il causait avec le domestique, qui était de la campagne comme lui.

À force de s'appliquer, il se maintint toujours vers le milieu de la classe ; une fois même, il gagna un premier accessit d'histoire naturelle. Mais à la fin de sa troisième, ses parents le retirèrent du collège pour lui faire étudier la médecine, persuadés qu'il pourrait se pousser seul jusqu'au baccalauréat.

Sa mère lui choisit une chambre, au quatrième, sur l'Eau-de-Robec, chez un teinturier de sa connaissance. Elle conclut les arrangements pour sa pension, se procura des meubles, une table et deux chaises, fit venir de chez elle un vieux lit en merisier, et acheta de plus un petit poêle en fonte, avec la provision de bois qui devait chauffer son pauvre enfant. Puis elle partit au bout de la semaine, après mille recommandations de se bien conduire, maintenant qu'il allait être abandonné à lui-même.

Le programme des cours, qu'il lut sur l'affiche, lui fit un effet d'étourdissement : cours d'anatomie, cours de pathologie, cours de physiologie, cours de pharmacie, cours de chimie, et de botanique, et de clinique, et de thérapeutique, sans compter l'hygiène ni la matière médicale, tous noms dont il ignorait les étymologies et qui étaient comme autant de portes de sanctuaires pleins d'augustes ténèbres.

Il n'y comprit rien ; il avait beau écouter, il ne saisissait pas. Il travaillait pourtant, il avait des cahiers reliés, il suivait tous les cours, il ne perdait pas une seule visite. Il accomplissait sa petite tâche quotidienne à la manière du cheval de manège, qui tourne en place les yeux bandés, ignorant de la besogne qu'il broie.

Pour lui épargner de la dépense, sa mère lui envoyait chaque semaine, par le messager, un morceau de veau cuit au four, avec quoi il déjeunait le matin, quand il était rentré de l'hôpital, tout en battant la semelle contre le mur. Ensuite il fallait courir aux leçons, à l'amphithéâtre, à l'hospice, et revenir chez lui, à travers toutes les rues. Le soir, après le maigre dîner de son propriétaire, il remontait à sa chambre et se remettait au travail, dans ses habits mouillés qui fumaient sur son corps, devant le poêle rougi.

Dans les beaux soirs d'été, à l'heure où les rues tièdes sont vides, quand les servantes, jouent au volant sur le seuil des portes, il ouvrait sa fenêtre et s'accoudait. La rivière, qui fait de ce quartier de Rouen comme une ignoble petite Venise, coulait en bas, sous lui, jaune, violette ou bleue, entre ses ponts et ses grilles. Des ouvriers, accroupis au bord, lavaient leurs bras dans l'eau. Sur des perches partant du haut des greniers, des écheveaux de coton séchaient à l'air. En face, au-delà des toits, le grand ciel pur s'étendait, avec le soleil rouge se couchant. Qu'il devait faire bon là-bas ! Quelle fraîcheur sous la hêtrée ! Et il ouvrait les narines pour aspirer les bonnes odeurs de la campagne, qui ne venaient pas jusqu'à lui.

Il maigrit, sa taille s'allongea, et sa figure prit une sorte d'expression dolente qui la rendit presque intéressante.

Naturellement, par nonchalance, il en vint à se délier de toutes les résolutions qu'il s'était faites. Une fois, il manqua la visite, le lendemain son cours, et, savourant la paresse, peu à peu, n'y retourna plus.

Il prit l'habitude du cabaret, avec la passion des dominos. S'enfermer chaque soir dans un sale appartement public, pour y taper sur des tables de marbre de petits os de mouton marqués de points noirs, lui semblait un acte précieux de sa liberté, qui le rehaussait d'estime vis-à-vis de lui-même. C'était comme l'initiation au monde, l'accès des plaisirs défendus ; et, en entrant, il posait la main sur le bouton de la porte avec une joie presque sensuelle. Alors, beaucoup de choses comprimées en lui, se dilatèrent ; il apprit par coeur des couplets qu'il chantait aux bienvenues, s'enthousiasma pour Béranger, sut faire du punch et connut enfin l'amour.

Grâce à ces travaux préparatoires, il échoua complètement à son examen d'officier de santé. On l'attendait le soir même à la maison pour fêter son succès !

Il partit à pied et s'arrêta vers l'entrée du village, où il fit demander sa mère, lui conta tout. Elle l'excusa, rejetant l'échec sur l'injustice des examinateurs, et le raffermit un peu, se chargeant d'arranger les choses. Cinq ans plus tard seulement, M. Bovary connut la vérité ; elle était vieille, il l'accepta, ne pouvant d'ailleurs supposer qu'un homme issu de lui fût un sot.

Charles se remit donc au travail et prépara sans discontinuer les matières de son examen, dont il apprit d'avance toutes les questions par coeur. Il fut reçu avec une assez bonne note. Quel beau jour pour sa mère ! On donna un grand dîner.

Où irait-il exercer son art ? À Tostes. Il n'y avait là qu'un vieux médecin. Depuis longtemps madame Bovary guettait sa mort, et le bonhomme n'avait point encore plié bagage, que Charles était installé en face, comme son successeur.

Mais ce n'était pas tout que d'avoir élevé son fils, de lui avoir fait apprendre la médecine et découvert Tostes pour l'exercer : il lui fallait une femme. Elle lui en trouva une : la veuve d'un huissier de Dieppe, qui avait quarante-cinq ans et douze cents livres de rente.

Quoiqu'elle fût laide, sèche comme un cotret, et bourgeonnée comme un printemps, certes madame Dubuc ne manquait pas de partis à choisir. Pour arriver à ses fins, la mère Bovary fut obligée de les évincer tous, et elle déjoua même fort habilement les intrigues d'un charcutier qui était soutenu par les prêtres.

Charles avait entrevu dans le mariage l'avènement d'une condition meilleure, imaginant qu'il serait plus libre et pourrait disposer de sa personne et de son argent. Mais sa femme fut le maître ; il devait devant le monde dire ceci, ne pas dire cela, faire maigre tous les vendredis, s'habiller comme elle l'entendait, harceler par son ordre les clients qui ne payaient pas. Elle décachetait ses lettres, épiait ses démarches, et l'écoutait, à travers la cloison, donner ses consultations dans son cabinet, quand il y avait des femmes.

Il lui fallait son chocolat tous les matins, des égards à n'en plus finir. Elle se plaignait sans cesse de ses nerfs, de sa poitrine, de ses humeurs. Le bruit des pas lui faisait mal ; on s'en allait, la solitude lui devenait odieuse ; revenait-on près d'elle, c'était pour la voir mourir, sans doute. Le soir, quand Charles rentrait, elle sortait de dessous ses draps ses longs bras maigres, les lui passait autour du cou, et, l'ayant fait asseoir au bord du lit, se mettait à lui parler de ses chagrins : il l'oubliait, il en aimait une autre ! On lui avait bien dit qu'elle serait malheureuse ; et elle finissait en lui demandant quelque sirop pour sa santé et un peu plus d'amour.

II

Une nuit, vers onze heures, ils furent réveillés par le bruit d'un cheval qui s'arrêta juste à la porte. La bonne ouvrit la lucarne du grenier et parlementa quelque temps avec un homme resté en bas, dans la rue. Il venait chercher le médecin ; il avait une lettre. *Nastasie* descendit les marches en grelottant, et alla ouvrir la serrure et les verrous, l'un après l'autre. L'homme laissa son cheval, et, suivant la bonne, entra tout à coup derrière elle. Il tira de dedans son bonnet de laine à houppes grises, une lettre enveloppée dans un chiffon, et la présenta délicatement à Charles, qui s'accouda sur l'oreiller pour la lire. Nastasie, près du lit, tenait la lumière. Madame, par pudeur, restait tournée vers la ruelle et montrait le dos.

Cette lettre, cachetée d'un petit cachet de cire bleue, suppliait M. Bovary de se rendre immédiatement à la ferme des Bertaux, pour remettre une jambe cassée. Or il y a, de Tostes aux Bertaux, six bonnes lieues de traverse, en passant par Longueville et Saint-Victor. La nuit était noire. Madame Bovary jeune redoutait les accidents pour son mari. Donc il fut décidé que le valet d'écurie prendrait les devants. Charles partirait trois heures plus tard, au lever de la lune. On enverrait un gamin à sa rencontre, afin de lui montrer le chemin de la ferme et d'ouvrir les clôtures devant lui.

Vers quatre heures du matin, Charles, bien enveloppé dans son manteau, se mit en route pour les Bertaux. Encore endormi par la chaleur du sommeil, il se laissait bercer au trot pacifique de sa bête. Quand elle s'arrêtait d'elle-même devant ces trous entourés d'épines que l'on creuse au bord des sillons, Charles se réveillant en sursaut, se rappelait vite la jambe cassée, et il tâchait de se remettre en mémoire toutes les fractures qu'il savait. La pluie ne tombait plus ; le jour commençait à venir, et, sur les branches des pommiers sans feuilles, des oiseaux se tenaient immobiles, hérissant leurs petites plumes au vent froid du matin. La plate campagne s'étalait à perte de vue, et les bouquets d'arbres autour des fermes faisaient, à intervalles éloignés, des taches d'un violet noir sur cette grande surface grise, qui se perdait à l'horizon dans le ton morne du ciel. Charles, de temps à autre, ouvrait les yeux ; puis, son esprit se fatiguant et le sommeil revenant de soi-même, bientôt il entrait dans une sorte d'assoupissement où, ses sensations récentes se confondant avec des souvenirs, lui-même se percevait double, à la fois étudiant et marié, couché dans son lit comme tout à l'heure, traversant une salle d'opérés comme autrefois. L'odeur chaude des cataplasmes se mêlait dans sa tête à la verte odeur de la rosée ; il entendait rouler sur leur tringle les anneaux de fer des lits et sa femme dormir... Comme il passait par Vassonville, il aperçut, au bord d'un fossé, un jeune garçon assis sur l'herbe.

— Êtes-vous le médecin ? demanda l'enfant.

Et, sur la réponse de Charles, il prit ses sabots à ses mains et se mit à courir devant lui.

L'officier de santé, chemin faisant, comprit aux discours de son guide que M. Rouault devait être un cultivateur des plus aisés. Il s'était cassé la jambe, la veille au soir, en revenant de *faire les Rois*, chez un voisin. Sa femme était morte depuis deux ans. Il n'avait avec lui que sa *demoiselle*, qui l'aidait à tenir la maison.

Les ornières devinrent plus profondes. On approchait des Bertaux. Le petit gars, se coulant alors par un trou de haie, disparut, puis il revint au bout d'une cour en ouvrir la barrière. Le cheval glissait sur l'herbe mouillée ; Charles se baissait pour passer sous les branches. Les chiens de garde à la niche aboyaient en tirant sur leur chaîne. Quand il entra dans les Bertaux, son cheval eut peur et fit un grand écart.

C'était une ferme de bonne apparence. On voyait dans les écuries, par le dessus des portes ouvertes, de gros chevaux de labour qui mangeaient tranquillement dans des râteliers neufs. Le long des bâtiments s'étendait un large fumier, de la buée s'en élevait, et, parmi les poules et les dindons, picoraient dessus cinq ou six paons, luxe des basses-cours cauchoises. La bergerie était longue, la grange était haute, à murs lisses comme la main. Il y avait sous le hangar deux grandes charrettes et quatre charrues, avec leurs fouets, leurs colliers, leurs équipages complets, dont les toisons de laine bleue se salissaient à la poussière fine qui tombait des greniers. La cour allait en montant, plantée d'arbres symétriquement espacés, et le bruit gai d'un troupeau d'oies retentissait près de la mare.

Une jeune femme, en robe de mérinos bleu garnie de trois volants, vint sur le seuil de la maison pour recevoir M. Bovary, qu'elle fit entrer dans la cuisine, où flambait un grand feu. Le déjeuner des gens bouillonnait alentour, dans des petits pots de taille inégale. Des vêtements humides séchaient dans l'intérieur de la cheminée. La pelle, les pincettes et le bec du soufflet, tous de proportion colossale, brillaient comme de l'acier poli, tandis que le long des murs s'étendait une abondante batterie de cuisine, où miroitait inégalement la flamme claire du foyer, jointe aux premières lueurs du soleil arrivant par les carreaux.

Charles monta, au premier, voir le malade. Il le trouva dans son lit, suant sous ses couvertures et ayant rejeté bien loin son bonnet de coton. C'était un gros petit homme de cinquante ans, à la peau blanche, à l'oeil bleu, chauve sur le devant de la tête, et qui portait des boucles d'oreilles. Il avait à ses côtés, sur une chaise, une grande carafe d'eau-de-vie, dont il se versait de temps à autre pour se donner du coeur au ventre ; mais, dès qu'il vit le médecin, son exaltation tomba, et, au lieu de sacrer comme il faisait depuis douze heures, il se prit à geindre faiblement.

La fracture était simple, sans complication d'aucune espèce. Charles n'eût osé en souhaiter de plus facile. Alors, se rappelant les allures de ses maîtres auprès du lit des blessés, il réconforta le patient avec toutes sortes de bons mots, caresses chirurgicales qui sont comme l'huile dont on graisse les bistouris. Afin d'avoir des attelles, on alla chercher, sous la charretterie, un paquet de lattes. Charles en choisit une, la coupa en morceaux et la polit avec un éclat de vitre, tandis que la servante déchirait des draps pour faire des bandes, et que mademoiselle Emma tâchait à coudre des coussinets. Comme elle fut longtemps avant de trouver son étui, son père s'impatienta ; elle ne répondit rien ; mais, tout en cousant, elle se piquait les doigts, qu'elle portait ensuite à sa bouche pour les sucer.

Charles fut surpris de la blancheur de ses ongles. Ils étaient brillants, fins du bout, plus nettoyés que les ivoires de Dieppe, et taillés en amande. Sa main pourtant n'était pas belle, point assez pâle peut-être, et un peu sèche aux phalanges ; elle était trop longue aussi, et sans molles inflexions de lignes sur les contours. Ce qu'elle avait de beau, c'étaient les yeux ; quoiqu'ils fussent bruns, ils semblaient noirs à cause des cils, et son regard arrivait franchement à vous avec une hardiesse candide.

Une fois le pansement fait, le médecin fut invité, par M. Rouault lui-même, à *prendre un morceau* avant de partir.

Charles descendit dans la salle, au rez-de-chaussée. Deux couverts, avec des timbales d'argent, y étaient mis sur une petite table, au pied d'un grand lit à baldaquin revêtu d'une indienne à personnages représentant des Turcs. On sentait une odeur d'iris et de draps humides, qui s'échappait de la haute armoire en bois de chêne, faisant face à la fenêtre. Par terre, dans les angles, étaient rangés, debout, des sacs de blé. C'était le trop-plein du grenier proche, où l'on montait par trois marches de pierre. Il y avait, pour décorer l'appartement, accrochée à un clou, au milieu du mur dont la peinture verte s'écaillait sous le salpêtre, une tête de Minerve au crayon noir, encadrée de dorure, et qui portait au bas, écrit en lettres gothiques : « À mon cher papa. »

On parla d'abord du malade, puis du temps qu'il faisait, des grands froids, des loups qui couraient les champs, la nuit. Mademoiselle Rouault ne s'amusait guère à la campagne, maintenant surtout qu'elle était chargée presque à elle seule des soins de la ferme. Comme la salle était fraîche, elle grelottait tout en mangeant, ce qui découvrait un peu ses lèvres charnues, qu'elle avait coutume de mordillonner à ses moments de silence.

Son cou sortait d'un col blanc, rabattu. Ses cheveux, dont les deux bandeaux noirs semblaient chacun d'un seul morceau, tant ils étaient lisses, étaient séparés sur le milieu de la tête par une raie fine, qui s'enfonçait légèrement selon la courbe du crâne ; et, laissant voir à peine le bout de l'oreille, ils allaient se confondre par derrière en un chignon abondant, avec un mouvement ondé vers les tempes, que le médecin de campagne remarqua là pour la première fois de sa vie. Ses pommettes étaient roses. Elle portait, comme un homme, passé entre deux boutons de son corsage, un lorgnon d'écaille.

Quand Charles, après être monté dire adieu au père Rouault, rentra dans la salle avant de partir, il la trouva debout, le front contre la fenêtre, et qui regardait dans le jardin, où les échalas des haricots avaient été renversés par le vent. Elle se retourna.

— Cherchez-vous quelque chose ? demanda-t-elle.

— Ma cravache, s'il vous plaît, répondit-il.

Et il se mit à fureter sur le lit, derrière les portes, sous les chaises ; elle était tombée à terre, entre les sacs et la muraille. Mademoiselle Emma l'aperçut ; elle se pencha sur les sacs de blé. Charles, par galanterie, se précipita et, comme il allongeait aussi son bras dans le même mouvement, il sentit sa poitrine effleurer le dos de la jeune fille, courbée sous lui. Elle se redressa toute rouge et le regarda par-dessus l'épaule, en lui tendant son nerf de boeuf.

Au lieu de revenir aux Bertaux trois jours après, comme il l'avait promis, c'est le lendemain même qu'il y retourna, puis deux fois la semaine régulièrement, sans compter les visites inattendues qu'il faisait de temps à autre, comme par mégarde.

Tout, du reste, alla bien ; la guérison s'établit selon les règles, et quand, au bout de quarante-six jours, on vit le père Rouault qui s'essayait à marcher seul dans sa masure, on commença à considérer M. Bovary comme un homme de grande capacité. Le père Rouault disait qu'il n'aurait pas été mieux guéri par les premiers médecins d'Yvetot ou même de Rouen.

Quant à Charles, il ne chercha point à se demander pourquoi il venait aux Bertaux avec plaisir. Y eût-il songé, qu'il aurait sans doute attribué son zèle à la gravité du cas, ou peut-être au profit qu'il en espérait. Était-ce pour cela, cependant, que ses visites à la ferme faisaient, parmi les pauvres occupations de sa vie, une exception charmante ? Ces jours-là il se levait de bonne heure, partait au galop, poussait sa bête, puis il descendait pour s'essuyer les pieds sur l'herbe, et passait ses gants noirs avant d'entrer. Il aimait à se voir arriver dans la cour, à sentir contre son épaule la barrière qui tournait, et le coq qui chantait sur le mur, les garçons qui venaient à sa rencontre. Il aimait la grange et les écuries ; il aimait le père Rouault, qui lui tapait dans la main en l'appelant son sauveur ; il aimait les petits sabots de mademoiselle Emma sur les dalles lavées de la cuisine ; ses talons hauts la grandissaient un peu, et, quand elle marchait devant lui, les semelles de bois, se relevant vite, claquaient avec un bruit sec contre le cuir de la bottine.

Elle le reconduisait toujours jusqu'à la première marche du perron. Lorsqu'on n'avait pas encore amené son cheval, elle restait là. On s'était dit adieu, on ne parlait plus ; le grand air l'entourait, levant pêle-mêle les petits cheveux follets de sa nuque, ou secouant sur sa hanche les cordons de son tablier, qui se tortillaient comme des banderoles. Une fois, par un temps de dégel, l'écorce des arbres suintait dans la cour, la neige sur les couvertures des bâtiments se fondait. Elle était sur le seuil ; elle alla chercher son ombrelle, elle l'ouvrit. L'ombrelle, de soie gorge de pigeon, que traversait le soleil, éclairait de reflets mobiles la peau blanche de sa figure. Elle souriait là-dessous à la chaleur tiède ; et on entendait les gouttes d'eau, une à une, tomber sur la moire tendue.

Dans les premiers temps que Charles fréquentait les Bertaux, madame Bovary jeune ne manquait pas de s'informer du malade, et même sur le livre qu'elle tenait en partie double, elle avait choisi pour M. Rouault une belle page blanche. Mais quand elle sut qu'il avait une fille, elle alla aux informations ; et elle apprit que mademoiselle Rouault, élevée au couvent, chez les Ursulines, avait reçu, comme on dit, *une belle éducation*, qu'elle savait, en conséquence, la danse, la géographie, le dessin, faire de la tapisserie et toucher du piano. Ce fut le comble !

— C'est donc pour cela, se disait-elle, qu'il a la figure si épanouie quand il va la voir, et qu'il met son gilet neuf, au risque de l'abîmer à la pluie ? Ah ! cette femme ! cette femme !...

Et elle la détesta, d'instinct. D'abord, elle se soulagea par des allusions, Charles ne les comprit pas ; ensuite, par des réflexions incidentes qu'il laissait passer de peur de l'orage ; enfin, par des apostrophes à brûle-pourpoint auxquelles il ne savait que répondre.

— D'où vient qu'il retournait aux Bertaux, puisque M. Rouault était guéri et que ces gens-là n'avaient pas encore payé ? Ah ! c'est qu'il y avait là-bas *une personne*, quelqu'un qui savait causer, une brodeuse, un bel esprit. C'était là ce qu'il aimait : il lui fallait des demoiselles de ville ! – Et elle reprenait :

— La fille au père Rouault, une demoiselle de ville ! Allons donc ! leur grand-père était berger, et ils ont un cousin qui a failli passer par les assises pour un mauvais coup, dans une dispute. Ce n'est pas la peine de faire tant de fla-fla, ni de se montrer le dimanche à l'église avec une robe de soie, comme une comtesse. Pauvre bonhomme, d'ailleurs, qui sans les colzas de l'an passé, eût été bien embarrassé de payer ses arrérages !

Par lassitude, Charles cessa de retourner aux Bertaux. Héloïse lui avait fait jurer qu'il n'irait plus, la main sur son livre de messe, après beaucoup de sanglots et de baisers, dans une grande explosion d'amour. Il obéit donc ; mais la hardiesse de son désir protesta contre la servilité de sa conduite, et, par une sorte d'hypocrisie naïve, il estima que cette défense de la voir était pour lui comme un droit de l'aimer. Et puis la veuve était maigre ; elle avait les dents longues ; elle portait en toute saison un petit châle noir dont la pointe lui descendait entre les omoplates ; sa taille dure était engainée dans des robes en façon de fourreau, trop courtes, qui découvraient ses chevilles, avec les rubans de ses souliers larges s'entrecroisant sur des bas gris.

La mère de Charles venait les voir de temps à autre ; mais, au bout de quelques jours, la bru semblait l'aiguiser à son fil ; et alors, comme deux couteaux, elles étaient à le scarifier par leurs réflexions et leurs observations. Il avait tort de tant manger ! Pourquoi toujours offrir la goutte au premier venu ? Quel entêtement que de ne pas vouloir porter de flanelle !

Il arriva qu'au commencement du printemps, un notaire d'Ingouville, détenteur de fonds à la veuve Dubuc, s'embarqua, par une belle marée, emportant avec lui tout l'argent de son étude. Héloïse, il est vrai, possédait encore, outre une part de bateau évaluée six mille francs, sa maison de la rue Saint-François ; et cependant, de toute cette fortune que l'on avait fait sonner si haut, rien, si ce n'est un peu de mobilier et quelques nippes, n'avait paru dans le ménage. Il fallut tirer la chose au clair. La maison de Dieppe se trouva vermoulue d'hypothèques jusque dans ses pilotis ; ce qu'elle avait mis chez le notaire, Dieu seul le savait, et la part de barque n'excéda point mille écus. Elle avait donc menti, la bonne dame ! Dans son exaspération, M. Bovary père, brisant une chaise contre les pavés, accusa sa femme d'avoir fait le malheur de leur fils en l'attelant à une haridelle semblable, dont les harnais ne valaient pas la peau. Ils vinrent à Tostes. On s'expliqua. Il y eut des scènes. Héloïse, en pleurs, se jetant dans les bras de son mari, le conjura de la défendre de ses parents. Charles voulut parler pour elle. Ceux-ci se fâchèrent, et ils partirent.

Mais *le coup était porté*. Huit jours après, comme elle étendait du linge dans sa cour, elle fut prise d'un crachement de sang, et le lendemain, tandis que Charles avait le dos tourné pour fermer le rideau de la fenêtre, elle dit : « Ah ! mon Dieu ! » poussa un soupir et s'évanouit. Elle était morte ! Quel étonnement !

Quand tout fut fini au cimetière, Charles rentra chez lui. Il ne trouva personne en bas ; il monta au premier, dans la chambre, vit sa robe encore accrochée au pied de l'alcôve ; alors, s'appuyant contre le secrétaire, il resta jusqu'au soir perdu dans une rêverie douloureuse. Elle l'avait aimé, après tout.

III

Un matin, le père Rouault vint apporter à Charles le payement de sa jambe remise : soixante et quinze francs en pièces de quarante sous, et une dinde. Il avait appris son malheur, et l'en consola tant qu'il put.

— Je sais ce que c'est ! disait-il en lui frappant sur l'épaule ; j'ai été comme vous, moi aussi ! Quand j'ai eu perdu ma pauvre défunte, j'allais dans les champs pour être tout seul ; je tombais au pied d'un arbre, je pleurais, j'appelais le bon Dieu, je lui disais des sottises ; j'aurais voulu être comme les taupes, que je voyais aux branches, qui avaient des vers leur grouillant dans le ventre, crevé, enfin. Et quand je pensais que d'autres, à ce moment-là, étaient avec leurs bonnes petites femmes à les tenir embrassées contre eux, je tapais de grands coups par terre avec mon bâton ; j'étais quasiment fou, que je ne mangeais plus ; l'idée d'aller seulement au café me dégoûtait, vous ne croiriez pas. Eh bien, tout doucement, un jour chassant l'autre, un printemps sur un hiver et un automne par-dessus un été, ça a coulé brin à brin, miette à miette ; ça s'en est allé, c'est parti, c'est descendu, je veux dire, car il vous reste toujours quelque chose au fond, comme qui dirait... un poids, là, sur la poitrine ! Mais, puisque c'est notre sort à tous, on ne doit pas non plus se laisser dépérir, et, parce que d'autres sont morts, vouloir mourir... Il faut vous secouer, monsieur Bovary ; ça se passera ! Venez nous voir ; ma fille pense à vous de temps à autre, savez-vous bien, et elle dit comme ça que vous l'oubliez. Voilà le printemps bientôt ; nous vous ferons tirer un lapin dans la garenne, pour vous dissiper un peu.

Charles suivit son conseil. Il retourna aux Bertaux ; il retrouva tout comme la veille, comme il y avait cinq mois, c'est-à-dire. Les poiriers déjà étaient en fleur, et le bonhomme Rouault, debout maintenant, allait et venait, ce qui rendait la ferme plus animée.

Croyant qu'il était de son devoir de prodiguer au médecin le plus de politesses possible, à cause de sa position douloureuse, il le pria de ne point se découvrir la tête, lui parla à voix basse, comme s'il eût été malade, et même fit semblant de se mettre en colère de ce que l'on n'avait pas apprêté à son intention quelque chose d'un peu plus léger que tout le reste, tels que des petits pots de crème ou des poires cuites. Il conta des histoires. Charles se surprit à rire ; mais le souvenir de sa femme, lui revenant tout à coup, l'assombrit.

On apporta le café ; il n'y pensa plus.

Il y pensa moins, à mesure qu'il s'habituait à vivre seul. L'agrément nouveau de l'indépendance lui rendit bientôt la solitude plus supportable. Il pouvait changer maintenant les heures de ses repas, rentrer ou sortir sans donner de raisons, et, lorsqu'il était bien fatigué, s'étendre de ses quatre membres, tout en large, dans son lit. Donc, il se choya, se dorlota et accepta les consolations qu'on lui donnait. D'autre part, la mort de sa femme ne l'avait pas mal servi dans son métier, car on avait répété durant un mois : « Ce pauvre jeune homme ! quel malheur ! » Son nom s'était répandu, sa clientèle s'était accrue ; et puis il allait aux Bertaux tout à son aise. Il avait un espoir sans but, un bonheur vague ; il se trouvait la figure plus agréable en brossant ses favoris devant son miroir.

Il arriva un jour vers trois heures ; tout le monde était aux champs ; il entra dans la cuisine, mais n'aperçut point d'abord Emma ; les auvents étaient fermés. Par les fentes du bois, le soleil allongeait sur les pavés de grandes raies minces, qui se brisaient à l'angle des meubles et tremblaient au plafond. Des mouches, sur la table, montaient le long des verres qui avaient servi, et bourdonnaient en se noyant au fond, dans le cidre resté. Le jour qui descendait par la cheminée, veloutant la suie de la plaque, bleuissait un peu les cendres froides. Entre la fenêtre et le foyer, Emma cousait ; elle n'avait point de fichu, on voyait sur ses épaules nues de petites gouttes de sueur.

Selon la mode de la campagne, elle lui proposa de boire quelque chose. Il refusa, elle insista, et enfin lui offrit, en riant, de prendre un verre de liqueur avec elle. Elle alla donc chercher dans l'armoire une bouteille de curaçao, atteignit deux petits verres, emplit l'un jusqu'au bord, versa à peine dans l'autre, et, après avoir trinqué, le porta à sa bouche. Comme il était presque vide, elle se renversait pour boire ; et, la tête en arrière, les lèvres avancées, le cou tendu, elle riait de ne rien sentir, tandis que le bout de sa langue, passant entre ses dents fines, léchait à petits coups le fond du verre.

Elle se rassit et elle reprit son ouvrage, qui était un bas de coton blanc où elle faisait des reprises ; elle travaillait le front baissé ; elle ne parlait pas, Charles non plus. L'air, passant par le dessous de la porte, poussait un peu de poussière sur les dalles ; il la regardait se traîner, et il entendait seulement le battement intérieur de sa tête, avec le cri d'une poule, au loin, qui pondait dans les cours. Emma, de temps à autre, se rafraîchissait les joues en y appliquant la paume de ses mains, qu'elle refroidissait après cela sur la pomme de fer des grands chenets.

Elle se plaignit d'éprouver, depuis le commencement de la saison, des étourdissements ; elle demanda si les bains de mer lui seraient utiles ; elle se mit à causer du couvent, Charles de son collège, les phrases leur vinrent. Ils montèrent dans sa chambre. Elle lui fit voir ses anciens cahiers de musique, les petits livres qu'on lui avait donnés en prix et les couronnes en feuilles de chêne, abandonnées dans un bas d'armoire. Elle lui parla encore de sa mère, du cimetière, et même lui montra dans le jardin la plate-bande dont elle cueillait les fleurs, tous les premiers vendredis de chaque mois, pour les aller mettre sur sa tombe. Mais le jardinier qu'ils avaient n'y entendait rien ; on était si mal servi ! Elle eût bien voulu, ne fût-ce au moins que pendant l'hiver, habiter la ville, quoique la longueur des beaux jours rendît peut-être la campagne plus ennuyeuse encore durant l'été ; – et, selon ce qu'elle disait, sa voix était claire, aiguë, ou se couvrant de langueur tout à coup, traînait des modulations qui finissaient presque en murmures, quand elle se parlait à elle-même, – tantôt joyeuse, ouvrant des yeux naïfs, puis les paupières à demi closes, le regard noyé d'ennui, la pensée vagabondant.

Le soir, en s'en retournant, Charles reprit une à une les phrases qu'elle avait dites, tâchant de se les rappeler, d'en compléter le sens, afin de se faire la portion d'existence qu'elle avait vécue dans le temps qu'il ne la connaissait pas encore. Mais jamais il ne put la voir en sa pensée, différemment qu'il ne l'avait vue la première fois, ou telle qu'il venait de la quitter tout à l'heure. Puis il se demanda ce qu'elle deviendrait, si elle se marierait, et à qui ? hélas ! le père Rouault était bien riche, et elle !... si belle ! Mais la figure d'Emma revenait toujours se placer devant ses yeux, et quelque chose de monotone comme le ronflement d'une toupie bourdonnait à ses oreilles : « Si tu te mariais, pourtant ! si tu te mariais ! » La nuit, il ne dormit pas, sa gorge était serrée, il avait soif ; il se leva pour aller boire à son pot à l'eau et il ouvrit la fenêtre ; le ciel était couvert d'étoiles, un vent chaud passait, au loin des chiens aboyaient. Il tourna la tête du côté des Bertaux.

Pensant qu'après tout l'on ne risquait rien, Charles se promit de faire la demande quand l'occasion s'en offrirait ; mais, chaque fois qu'elle s'offrit, la peur de ne point trouver les mots convenables lui collait les lèvres.

Le père Rouault n'eût pas été fâché qu'on le débarrassât de sa fille, qui ne lui servait guère dans sa maison. Il l'excusait intérieurement, trouvant qu'elle avait trop d'esprit pour la culture, métier maudit du ciel, puisqu'on n'y voyait jamais de millionnaire. Loin d'y avoir fait fortune, le bonhomme y perdait tous les ans ; car, s'il excellait dans les marchés, où il se plaisait aux ruses du métier, en revanche la culture proprement dite, avec le gouvernement intérieur de la ferme, lui convenait moins qu'à personne. Il ne retirait pas volontiers ses mains de dedans ses poches, et n'épargnait point la dépense pour tout ce qui regardait sa vie, voulant être bien nourri, bien chauffé, bien couché. Il aimait le gros cidre, les gigots saignants, les *glorias* longuement battus. Il prenait ses repas dans la cuisine, seul, en face du feu, sur une petite table qu'on lui apportait toute servie, comme au théâtre.

Lorsqu'il s'aperçut donc que Charles avait les pommettes rouges près de sa fille, ce qui signifiait qu'un de ces jours on la lui demanderait en mariage, il rumina d'avance toute l'affaire. Il le trouvait bien un peu *gringalet*, et ce n'était pas là un gendre comme il l'eût souhaité ; mais on le disait de bonne conduite, économe, fort instruit, et sans doute qu'il ne chicanerait pas trop sur la dot. Or, comme le père Rouault allait être forcé de vendre vingt-deux acres de *son bien*, qu'il devait beaucoup au maçon, beaucoup au bourrelier, que l'arbre du pressoir était à remettre :

— S'il me la demande, se dit-il, je la lui donne.

À l'époque de la Saint-Michel, Charles était venu passer trois jours aux Bertaux. La dernière journée s'était écoulée comme les précédentes, à reculer de quart d'heure en quart d'heure. Le père Rouault lui fit la conduite ; ils marchaient dans un chemin creux, ils s'allaient quitter ; c'était le moment. Charles se donna jusqu'au coin de la haie, et enfin, quand on l'eut dépassée :

— Maître Rouault, murmura-t-il, je voudrais bien vous dire quelque chose.

Ils s'arrêtèrent. Charles se taisait.

— Mais contez-moi votre histoire ! est-ce que je ne sais pas tout ? dit le père Rouault, en riant doucement.

— Père Rouault..., père Rouault..., balbutia Charles.

— Moi, je ne demande pas mieux, continua le fermier. Quoique sans doute la petite soit de mon idée, il faut pourtant lui demander son avis. Allez-vous-en donc ; je m'en vais retourner chez nous. Si c'est oui, entendez-moi bien, vous n'aurez pas besoin de revenir, à cause du monde, et, d'ailleurs, ça la saisirait trop. Mais pour que vous ne vous mangiez pas le sang, je pousserai tout grand l'auvent de la fenêtre contre le mur : vous pourrez le voir par derrière, en vous penchant sur la haie.

Et il s'éloigna.

Charles attacha son cheval à un arbre. Il courut se mettre dans le sentier ; il attendit. Une demi-heure se passa, puis il compta dix-neuf minutes à sa montre. Tout à coup un bruit se fit contre le mur ; l'auvent s'était rabattu, la cliquette tremblait encore.

Le lendemain, dès neuf heures, il était à la ferme. Emma rougit quand il entra, tout en s'efforçant de rire un peu, par contenance. Le père Rouault embrassa son futur gendre. On remit à causer des arrangements d'intérêt ; on avait, d'ailleurs, du temps devant soi, puisque le mariage ne pouvait décemment avoir lieu avant la fin du deuil de Charles, c'est-à-dire vers le printemps de l'année prochaine.

L'hiver se passa dans cette attente. Mademoiselle Rouault s'occupa de son trousseau. Une partie en fut commandée à Rouen, et elle se confectionna des chemises et des bonnets de nuit, d'après des dessins de modes qu'elle emprunta. Dans les visites que Charles faisait à la ferme, on causait des préparatifs de la noce ; on se demandait dans quel appartement se donnerait le dîner ; on rêvait à la quantité de plats qu'il faudrait et qu'elles seraient les entrées.

Emma eût, au contraire, désiré se marier à minuit, aux flambeaux ; mais le père Rouault ne comprit rien à cette idée. Il y eut donc une noce, où vinrent quarante-trois personnes, où l'on resta seize heures à table, qui recommença le lendemain et quelque peu les jours suivants.

IV

Les conviés arrivèrent de bonne heure dans des voitures, carrioles à un cheval, chars à bancs à deux roues, vieux cabriolets sans capote, tapissières à rideaux de cuir, et les jeunes gens des villages les plus voisins dans des charrettes où ils se tenaient debout, en rang, les mains appuyées sur les ridelles pour ne pas tomber, allant au trot et secoués dur. Il en vint de dix lieues loin, de Goderville, de Normanville, et de Cany. On avait invité tous les parents des deux familles, on s'était raccommodé avec les amis brouillés, on avait écrit à des connaissances perdues de vue depuis longtemps.

De temps à autre, on entendait des coups de fouet derrière la haie ; bientôt la barrière s'ouvrait : c'était une carriole qui entrait. Galopant jusqu'à la première marche du perron, elle s'y arrêtait court, et vidait son monde, qui sortait par tous les côtés en se frottant les genoux et en s'étirant les bras. Les dames, en bonnet, avaient des robes à la façon de la ville, des chaînes de montre en or, des pèlerines à bouts croisés dans la ceinture, ou de petits fichus de couleur attachés dans le dos avec une épingle, et qui leur découvraient le cou par derrière. Les gamins, vêtus pareillement à leurs papas, semblaient incommodés par leurs habits neufs (beaucoup même étrennèrent ce jour-là la première paire de bottes de leur existence), et l'on voyait à côté d'eux, ne soufflant mot dans la robe blanche de sa première communion rallongée pour la circonstance, quelque grande fillette de quatorze ou seize ans, leur cousine ou leur soeur aînée sans doute, rougeaude, ahurie, les cheveux gras de pommade à la rose, et ayant bien peur de salir ses gants. Comme il n'y avait point assez de valets d'écurie pour dételer toutes les voitures, les messieurs retroussaient leurs manches et s'y mettaient eux-mêmes. Suivant leur position sociale différente, ils avaient des habits, des redingotes, des vestes, des habits-vestes : – bons habits, entourés de toute la considération d'une famille, et qui ne sortaient de l'armoire que pour les solennités ; redingotes à grandes basques flottant au vent, à collet cylindrique, à poches larges comme des sacs ; vestes de gros drap, qui accompagnaient ordinairement quelque casquette cerclée de cuivre à sa visière ; habits-vestes très courts, ayant dans le dos deux boutons rapprochés comme une paire d'yeux, et dont les pans semblaient avoir été coupés à même un seul bloc, par la hache du charpentier. Quelques-uns encore (mais ceux-là, bien sûr, devaient dîner au bas bout de la table) portaient des blouses de cérémonie, c'est-à-dire dont le col était rabattu sur les épaules, le dos froncé à petits plis et la taille attachée très bas par une ceinture cousue.

Et les chemises sur les poitrines bombaient comme des cuirasses ! Tout le monde était tondu à neuf, les oreilles s'écartaient des têtes, on était rasé de près ; quelques-uns même qui s'étaient levés dès avant l'aube, n'ayant pas vu clair à se faire la barbe, avaient des balafres en diagonale sous le nez, ou, le long des mâchoires, des pelures d'épiderme larges comme des écus de trois francs, et qu'avait enflammées le grand air pendant la route, ce qui marbrait un peu de plaques roses toutes ces grosses faces blanches épanouies.

La mairie se trouvant à une demi-lieue de la ferme, on s'y rendit à pied, et l'on revint de même, une fois la cérémonie faite à l'église. Le cortège, d'abord uni comme une seule écharpe de couleur, qui ondulait dans la campagne, le long de l'étroit sentier serpentant entre les blés verts, s'allongea bientôt et se coupa en groupes différents, qui s'attardaient à causer. Le ménétrier allait en tête, avec son violon empanaché de rubans à la coquille ; les mariés venaient ensuite, les parents, les amis tout au hasard, et les enfants restaient derrière, s'amusant à arracher les clochettes des brins d'avoine, ou à se jouer entre eux, sans qu'on les vît. La robe d'Emma, trop longue, traînait un peu par le bas ; de temps à autre, elle s'arrêtait pour la tirer, et alors délicatement, de ses doigts gantés, elle enlevait les herbes rudes avec les petits dards des chardons, pendant que Charles, les mains vides, attendait qu'elle eût fini. Le père Rouault, un chapeau de soie neuf sur la tête et les parements de son habit noir lui couvrant les mains jusqu'aux ongles, donnait le bras à madame Bovary mère. Quant à M. Bovary père, qui, méprisant au fond tout ce monde-là, était venu simplement avec une redingote à un rang de boutons d'une coupe militaire, il débitait des galanteries d'estaminet à une jeune paysanne blonde. Elle saluait, rougissait, ne savait que répondre. Les autres gens de la noce causaient de leurs affaires ou se faisaient des niches dans le dos, s'excitant d'avance à la gaieté ; et, en y prêtant l'oreille, on entendait toujours le crin-crin du ménétrier qui continuait à jouer dans la campagne. Quand il s'apercevait qu'on était loin derrière lui, il s'arrêtait à reprendre haleine, cirait longuement de colophane son archet, afin que les cordes grinçassent mieux, et puis il se remettait à marcher, abaissant et levant tour à tour le manche de son violon, pour se bien marquer la mesure à lui-même. Le bruit de l'instrument faisait partir de loin les petits oiseaux.

C'était sous le hangar de la charretterie que la table était dressée. Il y avait dessus quatre aloyaux, six fricassées de poulets, du veau à la casserole, trois gigots, et, au milieu, un joli cochon de lait rôti, flanqué de quatre andouilles à l'oseille. Aux angles, se dressait l'eau-de-vie dans des carafes. Le cidre doux en bouteilles poussait sa mousse épaisse autour des bouchons, et tous les verres, d'avance, avaient été remplis de vin jusqu'au bord. De grands plats de crème jaune, qui flottaient d'eux-mêmes au moindre choc de la table, présentaient, dessinés sur leur surface unie, les chiffres des nouveaux époux en arabesques de nonpareille. On avait été chercher un pâtissier à Yvetot, pour les tourtes et les nougats. Comme il débutait dans le pays, il avait soigné les choses ; et il apporta, lui-même, au dessert, une pièce montée qui fit pousser des cris. À la base, d'abord, c'était un carré de carton bleu figurant un temple avec portiques, colonnades et statuettes de stuc tout autour, dans des niches constellées d'étoiles en papier doré ; puis se tenait au second étage un donjon en gâteau de Savoie, entouré de menues fortifications en angélique, amandes, raisins secs, quartiers d'oranges ; et enfin, sur la plate-forme supérieure, qui était une prairie verte où il y avait des rochers avec des lacs de confitures et des bateaux en écales de noisettes, on voyait un petit Amour, se balançant à une escarpolette de chocolat, dont les deux poteaux étaient terminés par deux boutons de rose naturels, en guise de boules, au sommet.

Jusqu'au soir, on mangea. Quand on était trop fatigué d'être assis, on allait se promener dans les cours ou jouer une partie de bouchon dans la grange ; puis on revenait à table. Quelques-uns, vers la fin, s'y endormirent et ronflèrent. Mais, au café, tout se ranima ; alors on entama des chansons, on fit des tours de force, on portait des poids, on passait sous son pouce, on essayait à soulever les charrettes sur ses épaules, on disait des gaudrioles, on embrassait les dames. Le soir, pour partir, les chevaux gorgés d'avoine jusqu'aux naseaux, eurent du mal à entrer dans les brancards ; ils ruaient, se cabraient, les harnais se cassaient, leurs maîtres juraient ou riaient ; et toute la nuit, au clair de la lune, par les routes du pays, il y eut des carrioles emportées qui couraient au grand galop, bondissant dans les saignées, sautant par-dessus les mètres de cailloux, s'accrochant aux talus, avec des femmes qui se penchaient en dehors de la portière pour saisir les guides.

Ceux qui restèrent aux Bertaux passèrent la nuit à boire dans la cuisine. Les enfants s'étaient endormis sous les bancs.

La mariée avait supplié son père qu'on lui épargnât les plaisanteries d'usage. Cependant, un mareyeur de leurs cousins (qui même avait apporté, comme présent de noces, une paire de soles) commençait à souffler de l'eau avec sa bouche par le trou de la serrure, quand le père Rouault arriva juste à temps pour l'en empêcher, et lui expliqua que la position grave de son gendre ne permettait pas de telles inconvenances. Le cousin, toutefois, céda difficilement à ces raisons. En dedans de lui-même, il accusa le père Rouault d'être fier, et il alla se joindre dans un coin à quatre ou cinq autres des invités qui, ayant eu par hasard plusieurs fois de suite à table les bas morceaux des viandes, trouvaient aussi qu'on les avait mal reçus, chuchotaient sur le compte de leur hôte et souhaitaient sa ruine à mots couverts.

Madame Bovary mère n'avait pas desserré les dents de la journée. On ne l'avait consultée ni sur la toilette de la bru, ni sur l'ordonnance du festin ; elle se retira de bonne heure. Son époux, au lieu de la suivre, envoya chercher des cigares à Saint-Victor et fuma jusqu'au jour, tout en buvant des grogs au kirsch, mélange inconnu à la compagnie, et qui fut pour lui comme la source d'une considération plus grande encore.

Charles n'était point de complexion facétieuse, il n'avait pas brillé pendant la noce. Il répondit médiocrement aux pointes, calembours, mots à double entente, compliments et gaillardises que l'on se fit un devoir de lui décocher dès le potage.

Le lendemain, en revanche, il semblait un autre homme. C'est lui plutôt que l'on eût pris pour la vierge de la veille, tandis que la mariée ne laissait rien découvrir où l'on pût deviner quelque chose. Les plus malins ne savaient que répondre, et ils la considéraient, quand elle passait près d'eux, avec des tensions d'esprit démesurées. Mais Charles ne dissimulait rien. Il l'appelait ma femme, la tutoyait, s'informait d'elle à chacun, la cherchait partout, et souvent il l'entraînait dans les cours, où on l'apercevait de loin, entre les arbres, qui lui passait le bras sous la taille et continuait à marcher à demi penché sur elle, en lui chiffonnant avec sa tête la guimpe de son corsage.

Deux jours après la noce, les époux s'en allèrent : Charles, à cause de ses malades, ne pouvait s'absenter plus longtemps. Le père Rouault les fit reconduire dans sa carriole et les accompagna lui-même jusqu'à Vassonville. Là, il embrassa sa fille une dernière fois, mit pied à terre et reprit sa route. Lorsqu'il eut fait cent pas environ, il s'arrêta, et, comme il vit la carriole s'éloignant, dont les roues tournaient dans la poussière, il poussa un gros soupir. Puis il se rappela ses noces, son temps d'autrefois, la première grossesse de sa femme ; il était bien joyeux, lui aussi, le jour qu'il l'avait emmenée de chez son père dans sa maison, quand il la portait en croupe en trottant sur la neige ; car on était aux environs de Noël et la campagne était toute blanche ; elle le tenait par un bras, à l'autre était accroché son panier ; le vent agitait les longues dentelles de sa coiffure cauchoise, qui lui passaient quelquefois sur la bouche, et, lorsqu'il tournait la tête, il voyait près de lui, sur son épaule, sa petite mine rosée qui souriait silencieusement, sous la plaque d'or de son bonnet. Pour se réchauffer les doigts, elle les lui mettait, de temps en temps, dans la poitrine. Comme c'était vieux tout cela ! Leur fils, à présent, aurait trente ans ! Alors il regarda derrière lui, il n'aperçut rien sur la route. Il se sentit triste comme une maison démeublée ; et, les souvenirs tendres se mêlant aux pensées noires dans sa cervelle obscurcie par les vapeurs de la bombance, il eut bien envie un moment d'aller faire un tour du côté de l'église. Comme il eut peur, cependant, que cette vue ne le rendît plus triste encore, il s'en revint tout droit chez lui.

M. et madame Charles arrivèrent à Tostes, vers six heures. Les voisins se mirent aux fenêtres pour voir la nouvelle femme de leur médecin.

La vieille bonne se présenta, lui fit ses salutations, s'excusa de ce que le dîner n'était pas prêt, et engagea Madame, en attendant, à prendre connaissance de sa maison.

V

La façade de briques était juste à l'alignement de la rue, ou de la route plutôt. Derrière la porte se trouvaient accrochés un manteau à petit collet, une bride, une casquette de cuir noir, et, dans un coin, à terre, une paire de houseaux encore couverts de boue sèche. À droite était la salle, c'est-à-dire l'appartement où l'on mangeait et où l'on se tenait. Un papier jaune-serin, relevé dans le haut par une guirlande de fleurs pâles, tremblait tout entier sur sa toile mal tendue ; des rideaux de calicot blanc, bordés d'un galon rouge, s'entrecroisaient le long des fenêtres, et sur l'étroit chambranle de la cheminée resplendissait une pendule à tête d'Hippocrate, entre deux flambeaux d'argent plaqué, sous des globes de forme ovale. De l'autre côté du corridor était le cabinet de Charles, petite pièce de six pas de large environ, avec une table, trois chaises et un fauteuil de bureau. Les tomes du *Dictionnaire des sciences médicales,* non coupés, mais dont la brochure avait souffert dans toutes les ventes successives par où ils avaient passé, garnissaient presque à eux seuls, les six rayons d'une bibliothèque en bois de sapin. L'odeur des roux pénétrait à travers la muraille, pendant les consultations, de même que l'on entendait de la cuisine, les malades tousser dans le cabinet et débiter toute leur histoire. Venait ensuite, s'ouvrant immédiatement sur la cour, où se trouvait l'écurie, une grande pièce délabrée qui avait un four, et qui servait maintenant de bûcher, de cellier, de garde-magasin, pleine de vieilles ferrailles, de tonneaux vides, d'instruments de culture hors de service, avec quantité d'autres choses poussiéreuses dont il était impossible de deviner l'usage.

Le jardin, plus long que large, allait, entre deux murs de bauge couverts d'abricots en espalier, jusqu'à une haie d'épines qui le séparait des champs. Il y avait au milieu un cadran solaire en ardoise, sur un piédestal de maçonnerie ; quatre plates-bandes garnies d'églantiers maigres entouraient symétriquement le carré plus utile des végétations sérieuses. Tout au fond, sous les sapinettes, un curé de plâtre lisait son bréviaire.

Emma monta dans les chambres. La première n'était point meublée ; mais la seconde, qui était la chambre conjugale, avait un lit d'acajou dans une alcôve à draperie rouge. Une boîte en coquillages décorait la commode ; et, sur le secrétaire, près de la fenêtre, il y avait, dans une carafe, un bouquet de fleurs d'oranger, noué par des rubans de satin blanc. C'était un bouquet de mariée, le bouquet de l'autre ! Elle le regarda. Charles s'en aperçut, il le prit et l'alla porter au grenier, tandis qu'assise dans un fauteuil (on disposait ses affaires autour d'elle), Emma songeait à son bouquet de mariage, qui était emballé dans un carton, et se demandait, en rêvant, ce qu'on en ferait, si par hasard elle venait à mourir.

Elle s'occupa, les premiers jours, à méditer des changements dans sa maison. Elle retira les globes des flambeaux, fit coller des papiers neufs, repeindre l'escalier et faire des bancs dans le jardin, tout autour du cadran solaire ; elle demanda même comment s'y prendre pour avoir un bassin à jet d'eau avec des poissons. Enfin son mari, sachant qu'elle aimait à se promener en voiture, trouva un *boc* d'occasion, qui, ayant une fois des lanternes neuves et des garde-crotte en cuir piqué, ressembla presque à un tilbury.

Il était donc heureux et sans souci de rien au monde. Un repas en tête-à-tête, une promenade le soir sur la grande route, un geste de sa main sur ses bandeaux, la vue de son chapeau de paille accroché à l'espagnolette d'une fenêtre, et bien d'autres choses encore où Charles n'avait jamais soupçonné de plaisir, composaient maintenant la continuité de son bonheur. Au lit, le matin, et côte à côte sur l'oreiller, il regardait la lumière du soleil passer parmi le duvet de ses joues blondes, que couvraient à demi les pattes escalopées de son bonnet. Vus de si près, ses yeux lui paraissaient agrandis, surtout quand elle ouvrait plusieurs fois de suite ses paupières en s'éveillant ; noirs à l'ombre et bleu foncé au grand jour, ils avaient comme des couches de couleurs successives, et qui plus épaisses dans le fond, allaient en s'éclaircissant vers la surface de l'émail. Son oeil, à lui, se perdait dans ces profondeurs, et il s'y voyait en petit jusqu'aux épaules, avec le foulard qui le coiffait et le haut de sa chemise entrouvert. Il se levait. Elle se mettait à la fenêtre pour le voir partir ; et elle restait accoudée sur le bord, entre deux pots de géraniums, vêtue de son peignoir, qui était lâche autour d'elle. Charles, dans la rue, bouclait ses éperons sur la borne ; et elle continuait à lui parler d'en haut, tout en arrachant avec sa bouche quelque bribe de fleur ou de verdure qu'elle soufflait vers lui, et qui voltigeant, se soutenant, faisant dans l'air des demi-cercles comme un oiseau, allait, avant de tomber, s'accrocher aux crins mal peignés de la vieille jument blanche, immobile à la porte. Charles, à cheval, lui envoyait un baiser ; elle répondait par un signe, elle refermait la fenêtre, il partait. Et alors, sur la grande route qui étendait sans en finir son long ruban de poussière, par les chemins creux où les arbres se courbaient en berceaux, dans les sentiers dont les blés lui montaient jusqu'aux genoux, avec le soleil sur ses épaules et l'air du matin à ses narines, le coeur plein des félicités de la nuit, l'esprit tranquille, la chair contente, il s'en allait ruminant son bonheur, comme ceux qui mâchent encore, après dîner, le goût des truffes qu'ils digèrent.

Jusqu'à présent, qu'avait-il eu de bon dans l'existence ? Était-ce son temps de collège, où il restait enfermé entre ces hauts murs, seul au milieu de ses camarades plus riches ou plus forts que lui dans leurs classes, qu'il faisait rire par son accent, qui se moquaient de ses habits, et dont les mères venaient au parloir avec des pâtisseries dans leur manchon ? Était-ce plus tard, lorsqu'il étudiait la médecine et n'avait jamais la bourse assez ronde pour payer la contredanse à quelque petite ouvrière qui fût devenue sa maîtresse ? Ensuite il avait vécu pendant quatorze mois avec la veuve, dont les pieds, dans le lit, étaient froids comme des glaçons. Mais, à présent, il possédait pour la vie cette jolie femme qu'il adorait. L'univers, pour lui, n'excédait pas le tour soyeux de son jupon ; et il se reprochait de ne pas l'aimer, il avait envie de la revoir ; il s'en revenait vite, montait l'escalier, le coeur battant. Emma, dans sa chambre, était à faire sa toilette ; il arrivait à pas muets, il la baisait dans le dos, elle poussait un cri.

Il ne pouvait se retenir de toucher continuellement à son peigne, à ses bagues, à son fichu ; quelquefois, il lui donnait sur les joues de gros baisers à pleine bouche, ou c'étaient de petits baisers à la file tout le long de son bras nu, depuis le bout des doigts jusqu'à l'épaule ; et elle le repoussait, à demi souriante et ennuyée, comme on fait à un enfant qui se pend après vous.

Avant qu'elle se mariât, elle avait cru avoir de l'amour ; mais le bonheur qui aurait dû résulter de cet amour n'étant pas venu, il fallait qu'elle se fût trompée, songeait-elle. Et Emma cherchait à savoir ce que l'on entendait au juste dans la vie par les mots de *félicité*, de *passion* et d'*ivresse*, qui lui avaient paru si beaux dans les livres.

VI

Elle avait lu *Paul et Virginie* et elle avait rêvé la maisonnette de bambous, le nègre Domingo, le chien Fidèle, mais surtout l'amitié douce de quelque bon petit frère, qui va chercher pour vous des fruits rouges dans des grands arbres plus hauts que des clochers, ou qui court pieds nus sur le sable, vous apportant un nid d'oiseau.

Lorsqu'elle eut treize ans, son père l'amena lui-même à la ville, pour la mettre au couvent. Ils descendirent dans une auberge du quartier Saint-Gervais, où ils eurent à leur souper des assiettes peintes qui représentaient l'histoire de mademoiselle de la Vallière. Les explications légendaires, coupées çà et là par l'égratignure des couteaux, glorifiaient toutes la religion, les délicatesses du coeur et les pompes de la Cour.

Loin de s'ennuyer au couvent les premiers temps, elle se plut dans la société des bonnes soeurs, qui, pour l'amuser, la conduisaient dans la chapelle, où l'on pénétrait du réfectoire par un long corridor. Elle jouait fort peu durant les récréations, comprenait bien le catéchisme, et c'est elle qui répondait toujours à M. le vicaire dans les questions difficiles. Vivant donc sans jamais sortir de la tiède atmosphère des classes et parmi ces femmes au teint blanc portant des chapelets à croix de cuivre, elle s'assoupit doucement à la langueur mystique qui s'exhale des parfums de l'autel, de la fraîcheur des bénitiers et du rayonnement des cierges. Au lieu de suivre la messe, elle regardait dans son livre les vignettes pieuses bordées d'azur, et elle aimait la brebis malade, le Sacré-Coeur percé de flèches aiguës, ou le pauvre Jésus, qui tombe en marchant sur sa croix. Elle essaya, par mortification, de rester tout un jour sans manger. Elle cherchait dans sa tête quelque voeu à accomplir.

Quand elle allait à confesse, elle inventait de petits péchés afin de rester là plus longtemps, à genoux dans l'ombre, les mains jointes, le visage à la grille sous le chuchotement du prêtre. Les comparaisons de fiancé, d'époux, d'amant céleste et de mariage éternel qui reviennent dans les sermons lui soulevaient au fond de l'âme des douceurs inattendues.

Le soir, avant la prière, on faisait dans l'étude une lecture religieuse. C'était, pendant la semaine, quelque résumé d'Histoire sainte ou les *Conférences* de l'abbé Frayssinous, et, le dimanche, des passages du *Génie du christianisme*, par récréation. Comme elle écouta, les premières fois, la lamentation sonore des mélancolies romantiques se répétant à tous les échos de la terre et de l'éternité !

Si son enfance se fût écoulée dans l'arrière-boutique d'un quartier marchand, elle se serait peut-être ouverte alors aux envahissements lyriques de la nature, qui, d'ordinaire, ne nous arrivent que par la traduction des écrivains. Mais elle connaissait trop la campagne ; elle savait le bêlement des troupeaux, les laitages, les charrues. Habituée aux aspects calmes, elle se tournait, au contraire, vers les accidentés. Elle n'aimait la mer qu'à cause de ses tempêtes, et la verdure seulement lorsqu'elle était clairsemée parmi les ruines. Il fallait qu'elle pût retirer des choses une sorte de profit personnel ; et elle rejetait comme inutile tout ce qui ne contribuait pas à la consommation immédiate de son coeur, – étant de tempérament plus sentimentale qu'artiste, cherchant des émotions et non des paysages.

Il y avait au couvent une vieille fille qui venait tous les mois, pendant huit jours, travailler à la lingerie. Protégée par l'archevêché comme appartenant à une ancienne famille de gentilshommes ruinés sous la Révolution, elle mangeait au réfectoire à la table des bonnes soeurs, et faisait avec elles, après le repas, un petit bout de causette avant de remonter à son ouvrage. Souvent les pensionnaires s'échappaient de l'étude pour l'aller voir. Elle savait par coeur des chansons galantes du siècle passé, qu'elle chantait à demi-voix, tout en poussant son aiguille. Elle contait des histoires, vous apprenait des nouvelles, faisait en ville vos commissions, et prêtait aux grandes, en cachette, quelque roman qu'elle avait toujours dans les poches de son tablier, et dont la bonne demoiselle elle-même avalait de longs chapitres, dans les intervalles de sa besogne. Ce n'étaient qu'amours, amants, amantes, dames persécutées s'évanouissant dans des pavillons solitaires, postillons qu'on tue à tous les relais, chevaux qu'on crève à toutes les pages, forêts sombres, troubles du coeur, serments, sanglots, larmes et baisers, nacelles au clair de lune, rossignols dans les bosquets, *messieurs* braves comme des lions, doux comme des agneaux, vertueux comme on ne l'est pas, toujours bien mis, et qui pleurent comme des urnes. Pendant six mois, à quinze ans, Emma se graissa donc les mains à cette poussière des vieux cabinets de lecture. Avec Walter Scott, plus tard, elle s'éprit de choses historiques, rêva bahuts, salle des gardes et ménestrels. Elle aurait voulu vivre dans quelque vieux manoir, comme ces châtelaines au long corsage, qui, sous le trèfle des ogives, passaient leurs jours, le coude sur la pierre et le menton dans la main, à regarder venir du fond de la campagne un cavalier à plume blanche qui galope sur un cheval noir. Elle eut dans ce temps-là le culte de Marie Stuart, et des vénérations enthousiastes à l'endroit des femmes illustres ou infortunées. Jeanne d'Arc, Héloïse, Agnès Sorel, la belle Ferronnière et Clémence Isaure, pour elle, se détachaient comme des comètes sur l'immensité ténébreuse de l'histoire, où saillissaient encore çà et là, mais plus perdus dans l'ombre et sans aucun rapport entre eux, saint Louis avec son chêne, Bayard mourant, quelques férocités de Louis XI, un peu de Saint-Barthélemy, le panache du Béarnais, et toujours le souvenir des assiettes peintes où Louis XIV était vanté.

À la classe de musique, dans les romances qu'elle chantait, il n'était question que de petits anges aux ailes d'or, de madones, de lagunes, de gondoliers, pacifiques compositions qui lui laissaient entrevoir, à travers la niaiserie du style et les imprudences de la note, l'attirante fantasmagorie des réalités sentimentales. Quelques-unes de ses camarades apportaient au couvent les keepsakes qu'elles avaient reçus en étrennes. Il les fallait cacher, c'était une affaire ; on les lisait au dortoir. Maniant délicatement leurs belles reliures de satin, Emma fixait ses regards éblouis sur le nom des auteurs inconnus qui avaient signé, le plus souvent, comtes ou vicomtes, au bas de leurs pièces.

Elle frémissait, en soulevant de son haleine le papier de soie des gravures, qui se levait à demi plié et retombait doucement contre la page. C'était, derrière la balustrade d'un balcon, un jeune homme en court manteau qui serrait dans ses bras une jeune fille en robe blanche, portant une aumônière à sa ceinture ; ou bien les portraits anonymes des ladies anglaises à boucles blondes, qui, sous leur chapeau de paille rond, vous regardent avec leurs grands yeux clairs. On en voyait d'étalées dans des voitures, glissant au milieu des parcs, où un lévrier sautait devant l'attelage que conduisaient au trot deux petits postillons en culotte blanche. D'autres, rêvant sur des sofas près d'un billet décacheté, contemplaient la lune, par la fenêtre entrouverte, à demi drapée d'un rideau noir. Les naïves, une larme sur la joue, becquetaient une tourterelle à travers les barreaux d'une cage gothique, ou, souriant la tête sur l'épaule, effeuillaient une marguerite de leurs doigts pointus, retroussés comme des souliers à la poulaine. Et vous y étiez aussi, sultans à longues pipes, pâmés sous des tonnelles, aux bras des bayadères, djiaours, sabres turcs, bonnets grecs, et vous surtout, paysages blafards des contrées dithyrambiques, qui souvent nous montrez à la fois des palmiers, des sapins, des tigres à droite, un lion à gauche, des minarets tartares à l'horizon, au premier plan des ruines romaines, puis des chameaux accroupis ; – le tout encadré d'une forêt vierge bien nettoyée, et avec un grand rayon de soleil perpendiculaire tremblotant dans l'eau, où se détachent en écorchures blanches, sur un fond d'acier gris, de loin en loin, des cygnes qui nagent.

Et l'abat-jour du quinquet, accroché dans la muraille au-dessus de la tête d'Emma, éclairait tous ces tableaux du monde, qui passaient devant elle les uns après les autres, dans le silence du dortoir et au bruit lointain de quelque fiacre attardé qui roulait encore sur les boulevards.

Quand sa mère mourut, elle pleura beaucoup les premiers jours. Elle se fit faire un tableau funèbre avec les cheveux de la défunte, et, dans une lettre qu'elle envoyait aux Bertaux, toute pleine de réflexions tristes sur la vie, elle demandait qu'on l'ensevelît plus tard dans le même tombeau. Le bonhomme la crut malade et vint la voir. Emma fut intérieurement satisfaite de se sentir arrivée du premier coup à ce rare idéal des existences pâles, où ne parviennent jamais les coeurs médiocres. Elle se laissa donc glisser dans les méandres lamartiniens, écouta les harpes sur les lacs, tous les chants de cygnes mourants, toutes les chutes de feuilles, les vierges pures qui montent au ciel, et la voix de l'Éternel discourant dans les vallons. Elle s'en ennuya, n'en voulut point convenir, continua par habitude, ensuite par vanité, et fut enfin surprise de se sentir apaisée, et sans plus de tristesse au coeur que de rides sur son front.

Les bonnes religieuses, qui avaient si bien présumé de sa vocation, s'aperçurent avec de grands étonnements que mademoiselle Rouault semblait échapper à leur soin. Elles lui avaient, en effet, tant prodigué les offices, les retraites, les neuvaines et les sermons, si bien prêché le respect que l'on doit aux saints et aux martyrs, et donné tant de bons conseils pour la modestie du corps et le salut de son âme, qu'elle fit comme les chevaux que l'on tire par la bride : elle s'arrêta court et le mors lui sortit des dents. Cet esprit, positif au milieu de ses enthousiasmes, qui avait aimé l'église pour ses fleurs, la musique pour les paroles des romances, et la littérature pour ses excitations passionnelles, s'insurgeait devant les mystères de la foi, de même qu'elle s'irritait davantage contre la discipline, qui était quelque chose d'antipathique à sa constitution. Quand son père la retira de pension, on ne fut point fâché de la voir partir. La supérieure trouvait même qu'elle était devenue, dans les derniers temps, peu révérencieuse envers la communauté.

Emma, rentrée chez elle, se plut d'abord au commandement des domestiques, prit ensuite la campagne en dégoût et regretta son couvent. Quand Charles vint aux Bertaux pour la première fois, elle se considérait comme fort désillusionnée, n'ayant plus rien à apprendre, ne devant plus rien sentir.

Mais l'anxiété d'un état nouveau, ou peut-être l'irritation causée par la présence de cet homme, avait suffi à lui faire croire qu'elle possédait enfin cette passion merveilleuse qui jusqu'alors s'était tenue comme un grand oiseau au plumage rose planant dans la splendeur des ciels poétiques ; – et elle ne pouvait s'imaginer à présent que ce calme où elle vivait fût le bonheur qu'elle avait rêvé.

VII

Elle songeait quelquefois que c'étaient là pourtant les plus beaux jours de sa vie, la lune de miel, comme on disait. Pour en goûter la douceur, il eût fallu, sans doute, s'en aller vers ces pays à noms sonores où les lendemains de mariage ont de plus suaves paresses ! Dans des chaises de poste, sous des stores de soie bleue, on monte au pas des routes escarpées, écoutant la chanson du postillon, qui se répète dans la montagne avec les clochettes des chèvres et le bruit sourd de la cascade. Quand le soleil se couche, on respire au bord des golfes le parfum des citronniers ; puis, le soir, sur la terrasse des villas, seuls et les doigts confondus, on regarde les étoiles en faisant des projets. Il lui semblait que certains lieux sur la terre devaient produire du bonheur, comme une plante particulière au sol et qui pousse mal tout autre part. Que ne pouvait-elle s'accouder sur le balcon des chalets suisses ou enfermer sa tristesse dans un cottage écossais, avec un mari vêtu d'un habit de velours noir à longues basques, et qui porte des bottes molles, un chapeau pointu et des manchettes !

Peut-être aurait-elle souhaité faire à quelqu'un la confidence de toutes ces choses. Mais comment dire un insaisissable malaise, qui change d'aspect comme les nuées, qui tourbillonne comme le vent ? Les mots lui manquaient donc, l'occasion, la hardiesse.

Si Charles l'avait voulu cependant, s'il s'en fût douté, si son regard, une seule fois, fût venu à la rencontre de sa pensée, il lui semblait qu'une abondance subite se serait détachée de son coeur, comme tombe la récolte d'un espalier quand on y porte la main. Mais, à mesure que se serrait davantage l'intimité de leur vie, un détachement intérieur se faisait qui la déliait de lui.

La conversation de Charles était plate comme un trottoir de rue, et les idées de tout le monde y défilaient dans leur costume ordinaire, sans exciter d'émotion, de rire ou de rêverie. Il n'avait jamais été curieux, disait-il, pendant qu'il habitait Rouen, d'aller voir au théâtre les acteurs de Paris. Il ne savait ni nager, ni faire des armes, ni tirer le pistolet, et il ne put, un jour, lui expliquer un terme d'équitation qu'elle avait rencontré dans un roman.

Un homme, au contraire, ne devait-il pas, tout connaître, exceller en des activités multiples, vous initier aux énergies de la passion, aux raffinements de la vie, à tous les mystères ? Mais il n'enseignait rien, celui-là, ne savait rien, ne souhaitait rien. Il la croyait heureuse ; et elle lui en voulait de ce calme si bien assis, de cette pesanteur sereine, du bonheur même qu'elle lui donnait.

Elle dessinait quelquefois ; et c'était pour Charles un grand amusement que de rester là, tout debout, à la regarder penchée sur son carton, clignant des yeux afin de mieux voir son ouvrage, ou arrondissant, sur son pouce, des boulettes de mie de pain. Quant au piano, plus les doigts y couraient vite, plus il s'émerveillait. Elle frappait sur les touches avec aplomb, et parcourait du haut en bas tout le clavier sans s'interrompre. Ainsi secoué par elle, le vieil instrument, dont les cordes frisaient, s'entendait jusqu'au bout du village si la fenêtre était ouverte, et souvent le clerc de l'huissier qui passait sur la grande route, nu-tête et en chaussons, s'arrêtait à l'écouter, sa feuille de papier à la main.

Emma, d'autre part, savait conduire sa maison. Elle envoyait aux malades le compte des visites, dans des lettres bien tournées qui ne sentaient pas la facture. Quand ils avaient, le dimanche, quelque voisin à dîner, elle trouvait moyen d'offrir un plat coquet, s'entendait à poser sur des feuilles de vigne les pyramides de reines-claudes, servait renversés les pots de confitures dans une assiette, et même elle parlait d'acheter des rince-bouche pour le dessert. Il rejaillissait de tout cela beaucoup de considération sur Bovary.

Charles finissait par s'estimer davantage de ce qu'il possédait une pareille femme. Il montrait avec orgueil, dans la salle, deux petits croquis d'elle, à la mine de plomb, qu'il avait fait encadrer de cadres très larges et suspendus contre le papier de la muraille à de longs cordons verts. Au sortir de la messe, on le voyait sur sa porte avec de belles pantoufles en tapisserie.

Il rentrait tard, à dix heures, minuit quelquefois. Alors il demandait à manger, et, comme la bonne était couchée, c'était Emma qui le servait. Il retirait sa redingote pour dîner plus à son aise. Il disait les uns après les autres tous les gens qu'il avait rencontrés, les villages où il avait été, les ordonnances qu'il avait écrites, et satisfait de lui-même, il mangeait le reste du miroton, épluchait son fromage, croquait une pomme, vidait sa carafe, puis s'allait mettre au lit, se couchait sur le dos et ronflait.

Comme il avait eu longtemps l'habitude du bonnet de coton, son foulard ne lui tenait pas aux oreilles ; aussi ses cheveux, le matin, étaient rabattus pêle-mêle sur sa figure et blanchis par le duvet de son oreiller, dont les cordons se dénouaient pendant la nuit. Il portait toujours de fortes bottes, qui avaient au cou-de-pied deux plis épais obliquant vers les chevilles, tandis que le reste de l'empeigne se continuait en ligne droite, tendu comme par un pied de bois. Il disait que c'était *bien assez bon pour la campagne*.

Sa mère l'approuvait en cette économie ; car elle le venait voir comme autrefois, lorsqu'il y avait eu chez elle quelque bourrasque un peu violente ; et cependant madame Bovary mère semblait prévenue contre sa bru. Elle lui trouvait *un genre trop relevé pour leur position de fortune* ; le bois, le sucre et la chandelle *filaient comme dans une grande maison*, et la quantité de braise qui se brûlait à la cuisine aurait suffi pour vingt-cinq plats ! Elle rangeait son linge dans les armoires et lui apprenait à surveiller le boucher quand il apportait la viande. Emma recevait ces leçons ; madame Bovary les prodiguait ; et les mots de *ma fille* et de *ma mère* s'échangeaient tout le long du jour, accompagnés d'un petit frémissement des lèvres, chacune lançant des paroles douces d'une voix tremblante de colère.

Du temps de madame Dubuc, la vieille femme se sentait encore la préférée ; mais, à présent, l'amour de Charles pour Emma lui semblait une désertion de sa tendresse, un envahissement sur ce qui lui appartenait ; et elle observait le bonheur de son fils avec un silence triste, comme quelqu'un de ruiné qui regarde, à travers les carreaux, des gens attablés dans son ancienne maison. Elle lui rappelait, en manière de souvenirs, ses peines et ses sacrifices, et, les comparant aux négligences d'Emma, concluait qu'il n'était point raisonnable de l'adorer d'une façon si exclusive.

Charles ne savait que répondre ; il respectait sa mère, et il aimait infiniment sa femme ; il considérait le jugement de l'une comme infaillible, et cependant il trouvait l'autre irréprochable. Quand madame Bovary était partie, il essayait de hasarder timidement, et dans les mêmes termes, une ou deux des plus anodines observations qu'il avait entendu faire à sa maman ; Emma, lui prouvant d'un mot qu'il se trompait, le renvoyait à ses malades.

Cependant, d'après des théories qu'elle croyait bonnes, elle voulut se donner de l'amour. Au clair de lune, dans le jardin, elle récitait tout ce qu'elle savait par coeur de rimes passionnées et lui chantait en soupirant des adagios mélancoliques ; mais elle se trouvait ensuite aussi calme qu'auparavant, et Charles n'en paraissait ni plus amoureux ni plus remué.

Quand elle eut ainsi un peu battu le briquet sur son coeur sans en faire jaillir une étincelle, incapable, du reste, de comprendre ce qu'elle n'éprouvait pas, comme de croire à tout ce qui ne se manifestait point par des formes convenues, elle se persuada sans peine que la passion de Charles n'avait plus rien d'exorbitant. Ses expansions étaient devenues régulières ; il l'embrassait à de certaines heures. C'était une habitude parmi les autres, et comme un dessert prévu d'avance, après la monotonie du dîner.

Un garde-chasse, guéri par Monsieur, d'une fluxion de poitrine, avait donné à Madame une petite levrette d'Italie ; elle la prenait pour se promener, car elle sortait quelquefois, afin d'être seule un instant et de n'avoir plus sous les yeux l'éternel jardin avec la route poudreuse.

Elle allait jusqu'à la hêtrée de Banneville, près du pavillon abandonné qui fait l'angle du mur, du côté des champs. Il y a dans le saut-de-loup, parmi les herbes, de longs roseaux à feuilles coupantes.

Elle commençait par regarder tout alentour, pour voir si rien n'avait changé depuis la dernière fois qu'elle était venue. Elle retrouvait aux mêmes places les digitales et les ravenelles, les bouquets d'orties entourant les gros cailloux, et les plaques de lichen le long des trois fenêtres, dont les volets toujours clos s'égrenaient de pourriture, sur leurs barres de fer rouillées. Sa pensée, sans but d'abord, vagabondait au hasard, comme sa levrette, qui faisait des cercles dans la campagne, jappait après les papillons jaunes, donnait la chasse aux musaraignes, ou mordillait les coquelicots sur le bord d'une pièce de blé. Puis ses idées peu à peu se fixaient, et, assise sur le gazon, qu'elle fouillait à petits coups avec le bout de son ombrelle, Emma se répétait :

— Pourquoi, mon Dieu ! me suis-je mariée ?

Elle se demandait s'il n'y aurait pas eu moyen, par d'autres combinaisons du hasard, de rencontrer un autre homme ; et elle cherchait à imaginer quels eussent été ces événements non survenus, cette vie différente, ce mari qu'elle ne connaissait pas. Tous, en effet, ne ressemblaient pas à celui-là. Il aurait pu être beau, spirituel, distingué, attirant, tels qu'ils étaient sans doute, ceux qu'avaient épousés ses anciennes camarades du couvent. Que faisaient-elles maintenant ? À la ville, avec le bruit des rues, le bourdonnement des théâtres et les clartés du bal, elles avaient des existences où le coeur se dilate, où les sens s'épanouissent. Mais elle, sa vie était froide comme un grenier dont la lucarne est au nord, et l'ennui, araignée silencieuse, filait sa toile dans l'ombre à tous les coins de son coeur. Elle se rappelait les jours de distribution de prix, où elle montait sur l'estrade pour aller chercher ses petites couronnes. Avec ses cheveux en tresse, sa robe blanche et ses souliers de prunelle découverts, elle avait une façon gentille, et les messieurs, quand elle regagnait sa place, se penchaient pour lui faire des compliments ; la cour était pleine de calèches, on lui disait adieu par les portières, le maître de musique passait en saluant, avec sa boîte à violon. Comme c'était loin, tout cela ! comme c'était loin !

Elle appelait Djali, la prenait entre ses genoux, passait ses doigts sur sa longue tête fine et lui disait :

— Allons, baisez maîtresse, vous qui n'avez pas de chagrins.

Puis, considérant la mine mélancolique du svelte animal qui bâillait avec lenteur, elle s'attendrissait, et, le comparant à elle-même, lui parlait tout haut, comme à quelqu'un d'affligé que l'on console.

Il arrivait parfois des rafales de vent, brises de la mer qui, roulant d'un bond sur tout le plateau du pays de Caux, apportaient, jusqu'au loin dans les champs, une fraîcheur salée. Les joncs sifflaient à ras de terre, et les feuilles des hêtres bruissaient en un frisson rapide, tandis que les cimes, se balançant toujours, continuaient leur grand murmure. Emma serrait son châle contre ses épaules et se levait.

Dans l'avenue, un jour vert rabattu par le feuillage éclairait la mousse rase qui craquait doucement sous ses pieds. Le soleil se couchait ; le ciel était rouge entre les branches, et les troncs pareils des arbres plantés en ligne droite semblaient une colonnade brune se détachant sur un fond d'or ; une peur la prenait, elle appelait Djali, s'en retournait vite à Tostes par la grande route, s'affaissait dans un fauteuil, et de toute la soirée ne parlait pas.

Mais, vers la fin de septembre, quelque chose d'extraordinaire tomba dans sa vie : elle fut invitée à la Vaubyessard, chez le marquis d'Andervilliers.

Secrétaire d'État sous la Restauration, le Marquis, cherchant à rentrer dans la vie politique, préparait de longue main sa candidature à la Chambre des députés. Il faisait, l'hiver, de nombreuses distributions de fagots, et, au Conseil général, réclamait avec exaltation toujours des routes pour son arrondissement. Il avait eu, lors des grandes chaleurs, un abcès dans la bouche, dont Charles l'avait soulagé comme par miracle, en y donnant à point un coup de lancette. L'homme d'affaires, envoyé à Tostes pour payer l'opération, conta, le soir, qu'il avait vu dans le jardinet du médecin des cerises superbes. Or, les cerisiers poussaient mal à la Vaubyessard, M. le Marquis demanda quelques boutures à Bovary, se fit un devoir de l'en remercier lui-même, aperçut Emma, trouva qu'elle avait une jolie taille et qu'elle ne saluait point en paysanne ; si bien qu'on ne crut pas au château outrepasser les bornes de la condescendance, ni d'autre part commettre une maladresse, en invitant le jeune ménage.

Un mercredi, à trois heures, M. et madame Bovary, montés dans leur *boc*, partirent pour la Vaubyessard, avec une grande malle attachée par derrière et une boîte à chapeau qui était posée devant le tablier. Charles avait, de plus, un carton entre les jambes.

Ils arrivèrent à la nuit tombante, comme on commençait à allumer des lampions dans le parc, afin d'éclairer les voitures.

VIII

Le château, de construction moderne, à l'Italienne, avec deux ailes avançant et trois perrons, se déployait au bas d'une immense pelouse où paissaient quelques vaches, entre des bouquets de grands arbres espacés, tandis que des bannettes d'arbustes, rhododendrons, seringas et boules-de-neige bombaient leurs touffes de verdure inégales sur la ligne courbe du chemin sablé. Une rivière passait sous un pont ; à travers la brume, on distinguait des bâtiments à toit de chaume, éparpillés dans la prairie, que bordaient en pente douce deux coteaux couverts de bois, et par derrière, dans les massifs, se tenaient, sur deux lignes parallèles, les remises et les écuries, restes conservés de l'ancien château démoli.

Le *boc* de Charles s'arrêta devant le perron du milieu ; des domestiques parurent ; le Marquis s'avança, et, offrant son bras à la femme du médecin, l'introduisit dans le vestibule.

Il était pavé de dalles en marbre, très haut, et le bruit des pas, avec celui des voix, y retentissait comme dans une église. En face montait un escalier droit, et à gauche une galerie donnant sur le jardin conduisait à la salle de billard dont on entendait, dès la porte, caramboler les boules d'ivoire. Comme elle la traversait pour aller au salon, Emma vit autour du jeu des hommes à figure grave, le menton posé sur de hautes cravates, décorés tous, et qui souriaient silencieusement, en poussant leur queue. Sur la boiserie sombre du lambris, de grands cadres dorés portaient, au bas de leur bordure, des noms écrits en lettres noires. Elle lut : « Jean-Antoine d'Andervilliers d'Yverbonville, comte de la Vaubyessard et baron de la Fresnaye, tué à la bataille de Coutras, le 20 octobre 1587 » Et sur un autre : « Jean-Antoine-Henry-Guy d'Andervilliers de la Vaubyessard, amiral de France et chevalier de l'ordre de Saint-Michel, blessé au combat de la Hougue-Saint-Vaast, le 29 mai 1692, mort à la Vaubyessard le 23 janvier 1693 » Puis on distinguait à peine ceux qui suivaient, car la lumière des lampes, rabattue sur le tapis vert du billard, laissait flotter une ombre dans l'appartement. Brunissant les toiles horizontales, elle se brisait contre elles en arêtes fines, selon les craquelures du vernis ; et de tous ces grands carrés noirs bordés d'or sortaient, çà et là, quelque portion plus claire de la peinture, un front pâle, deux yeux qui vous regardaient, des perruques se déroulant sur l'épaule poudrée des habits rouges, ou bien la boucle d'une jarretière au haut d'un mollet rebondi.

Le Marquis ouvrit la porte du salon ; une des dames se leva (la Marquise elle-même), vint à la rencontre d'Emma et la fit asseoir près d'elle, sur une causeuse, où elle se mit à lui parler amicalement, comme si elle la connaissait depuis longtemps. C'était une femme de la quarantaine environ, à belles épaules, à nez busqué, à la voix traînante, et portant, ce soir-là, sur ses cheveux châtains, un simple fichu de guipure qui retombaitpar derrière, en triangle. Une jeune personne blonde se tenait à côté, dans une chaise à dossier long ; et des messieurs, qui avaient une petite fleur à la boutonnière de leur habit, causaient avec les dames, tout autour de la cheminée.

À sept heures, on servit le dîner. Les hommes, plus nombreux, s'assirent à la première table, dans le vestibule, et les dames à la seconde, dans la salle à manger, avec le Marquis et la Marquise.

Emma se sentit, en entrant, enveloppée par un air chaud, mélange du parfum des fleurs et du beau linge, du fumet des viandes et de l'odeur des truffes. Les bougies des candélabres allongeaient des flammes sur les cloches d'argent ; les cristaux à facettes, couverts d'une buée mate, se renvoyaient des rayons pâles ; des bouquets étaient en ligne sur toute la longueur de la table, et, dans les assiettes à large bordure, les serviettes, arrangées en manière de bonnet d'évêque, tenaient entre le bâillement de leurs deux plis chacune un petit pain de forme ovale. Les pattes rouges des homards dépassaient les plats ; de gros fruits dans des corbeilles à jour s'étageaient sur la mousse ; les cailles avaient leurs plumes, des fumées montaient ; et, en bas de soie, en culotte courte, en cravate blanche, en jabot, grave comme un juge, le maître d'hôtel, passant entre les épaules des convives les plats tout découpés, faisait d'un coup de sa cuiller sauter pour vous le morceau qu'on choisissait. Sur le grand poêle de porcelaine à baguette de cuivre, une statue de femme drapée jusqu'au menton regardait immobile la salle pleine de monde.

Madame Bovary remarqua que plusieurs dames n'avaient pas mis leurs gants dans leur verre.

Cependant, au haut bout de la table, seul parmi toutes ces femmes, courbé sur son assiette remplie, et la serviette nouée dans le dos comme un enfant, un vieillard mangeait, laissant tomber de sa bouche des gouttes de sauce. Il avait les yeux éraillés et portait une petite queue enroulée d'un ruban noir. C'était le beau-père du marquis, le vieux duc de Laverdière, l'ancien favori du comte d'Artois, dans le temps des parties de chasse au Vaudreuil, chez le marquis de Conflans, et qui avait été, disait-on, l'amant de la reine Marie-Antoinette entre MM. de Coigny et de Lauzun. Il avait mené une vie bruyante de débauches, pleine de duels, de paris, de femmes enlevées, avait dévoré sa fortune et effrayé toute sa famille. Un domestique, derrière sa chaise, lui nommait tout haut, dans l'oreille, les plats qu'il désignait du doigt en bégayant ; et sans cesse les yeux d'Emma revenaient d'eux-mêmes sur ce vieil homme à lèvres pendantes, comme sur quelque chose d'extraordinaire et d'auguste. Il avait vécu à la Cour et couché dans le lit des reines !

On versa du vin de Champagne à la glace. Emma frissonna de toute sa peau en sentant ce froid dans sa bouche. Elle n'avait jamais vu de grenades ni mangé d'ananas. Le sucre en poudre même lui parut plus blanc et plus fin qu'ailleurs.

Les dames, ensuite, montèrent dans leurs chambres s'apprêter pour le bal.

Emma fit sa toilette avec la conscience méticuleuse d'une actrice à son début. Elle disposa ses cheveux d'après les recommandations du coiffeur, et elle entra dans sa robe de barège, étalée sur le lit. Le pantalon de Charles le serrait au ventre.

— Les sous-pieds vont me gêner pour danser, dit-il.

— Danser ? reprit Emma.

— Oui !

— Mais tu as perdu la tête ! on se moquerait de toi, reste à ta place. D'ailleurs, c'est plus convenable pour un médecin, ajouta-t-elle.

Charles se tut. Il marchait de long en large, attendant qu'Emma fût habillée.

Il la voyait par derrière, dans la glace, entre deux flambeaux. Ses yeux noirs semblaient plus noirs. Ses bandeaux, doucement bombés vers les oreilles, luisaient d'un éclat bleu ; une rose à son chignon tremblait sur une tige mobile, avec des gouttes d'eau factices au bout de ses feuilles. Elle avait une robe de safran pâle, relevée par trois bouquets de roses pompon mêlées de verdure.

Charles vint l'embrasser sur l'épaule.

— Laisse-moi ! dit-elle, tu me chiffonnes.

On entendit une ritournelle de violon et les sons d'un cor. Elle descendit l'escalier, se retenant de courir.

Les quadrilles étaient commencés. Il arrivait du monde. On se poussait. Elle se plaça près de la porte, sur une banquette.

Quand la contredanse fut finie, le parquet resta libre pour les groupes d'hommes causant debout et les domestiques en livrée qui apportaient de grands plateaux. Sur la ligne des femmes assises, les éventails peints s'agitaient, les bouquets cachaient à demi le sourire des visages, et les flacons à bouchon d'or tournaient dans des mains entrouvertes dont les gants blancs marquaient la forme des ongles et serraient la chair au poignet. Les garnitures de dentelles, les broches de diamants, les bracelets à médaillon frissonnaient aux corsages, scintillaient aux poitrines, bruissaient sur les bras nus. Les chevelures, bien collées sur les fronts et tordues à la nuque, avaient, en couronnes, en grappes ou en rameaux, des myosotis, du jasmin, des fleurs de grenadier, des épis ou des bleuets. Pacifiques à leurs places, des mères à figure renfrognée portaient des turbans rouges.

Le coeur d'Emma lui battit un peu lorsque, son cavalier la tenant par le bout des doigts, elle vint se mettre en ligne et attendit le coup d'archet pour partir. Mais bientôt l'émotion disparut ; et, se balançant au rythme de l'orchestre, elle glissait en avant, avec des mouvements légers du cou. Un sourire lui montait aux lèvres à certaines délicatesses du violon, qui jouait seul, quelquefois, quand les autres instruments se taisaient ; on entendait le bruit clair des louis d'or qui se versaient à côté, sur le tapis des tables ; puis tout reprenait à la fois, le cornet à pistons lançait un éclat sonore, les pieds retombaient en mesure, les jupes se bouffaient et frôlaient, les mains se donnaient, se quittaient ; les mêmes yeux, s'abaissant devant vous, revenaient se fixer sur les vôtres.

Quelques hommes (une quinzaine) de vingt-cinq à quarante ans, disséminés parmi les danseurs ou causant à l'entrée des portes, se distinguaient de la foule par un air de famille, quelles que fussent leurs différences d'âge, de toilette ou de figure.

Leurs habits, mieux faits, semblaient d'un drap plus souple, et leurs cheveux, ramenés en boucles vers les tempes, lustrés par des pommades plus fines. Ils avaient le teint de la richesse, ce teint blanc que rehaussent la pâleur des porcelaines, les moires du satin, le vernis des beaux meubles, et qu'entretient dans sa santé un régime discret de nourritures exquises. Leur cou tournait à l'aise sur des cravates basses ; leurs favoris longs tombaient sur des cols rabattus ; ils s'essuyaient les lèvres à des mouchoirs brodés d'un large chiffre, d'où sortait une odeur suave. Ceux qui commençaient à vieillir avaient l'air jeune, tandis que quelque chose de mûr s'étendait sur le visage des jeunes. Dans leurs regards indifférents flottait la quiétude de passions journellement assouvies ; et, à travers leurs manières douces, perçait cette brutalité particulière que communique la domination de choses à demi faciles, dans lesquelles la force s'exerce et où la vanité s'amuse, le maniement des chevaux de race et la société des femmes perdues.

À trois pas d'Emma, un cavalier en habit bleu causait Italie avec une jeune femme pâle, portant une parure de perles. Ils vantaient la grosseur des piliers de Saint-Pierre, Tivoli, le Vésuve, Castellamare et les Cassines, les roses de Gênes, le Colisée au clair de lune. Emma écoutait de son autre oreille une conversation pleine de mots qu'elle ne comprenait pas. On entourait un tout jeune homme qui avait battu, la semaine d'avant, *Miss-Arabelle* et *Romulus,* et gagné deux mille louis à sauter un fossé, en Angleterre. L'un se plaignait de ses coureurs qui engraissaient ; un autre, des fautes d'impression qui avaient dénaturé le nom de son cheval.

L'air du bal était lourd ; les lampes pâlissaient. On refluait dans la salle de billard. Un domestique monta sur une chaise et cassa deux vitres ; au bruit des éclats de verre, madame Bovary tourna la tête et aperçut dans le jardin, contre les carreaux, des faces de paysans qui regardaient. Alors le souvenir des Bertaux lui arriva. Elle revit la ferme, la mare bourbeuse, son père en blouse sous les pommiers, et elle se revit elle-même, comme autrefois, écrémant avec son doigt les terrines de lait dans la laiterie. Mais, aux fulgurations de l'heure présente, sa vie passée, si nette jusqu'alors, s'évanouissait tout entière, et elle doutait presque de l'avoir vécue. Elle était là ; puis autour du bal, il n'y avait plus que de l'ombre, étalée sur tout le reste. Elle mangeait alors une glace au marasquin, qu'elle tenait de la main gauche dans une coquille de vermeil, et fermait à demi les yeux, la cuiller entre les dents.

Une dame, près d'elle, laissa tomber son éventail. Un danseur passait.

— Que vous seriez bon, monsieur, dit la dame, de vouloir bien ramasser mon éventail, qui est derrière ce canapé !

Le monsieur s'inclina, et, pendant qu'il faisait le mouvement d'étendre son bras, Emma vit la main de la jeune dame qui jetait dans son chapeau quelque chose de blanc, plié en triangle. Le monsieur, ramenant l'éventail, l'offrit à la dame, respectueusement ; elle le remercia d'un signe de tête et se mit à respirer son bouquet.

Après le souper, où il y eut beaucoup de vins d'Espagne et de vins du Rhin, des potages à la bisque et au lait d'amandes, des puddings à la Trafalgar et toutes sortes de viandes froides avec des gelées alentour qui tremblaient dans les plats, les voitures, les unes après les autres, commencèrent à s'en aller. En écartant du coin le rideau de mousseline, on voyait glisser dans l'ombre la lumière de leurs lanternes. Les banquettes s'éclaircirent ; quelques joueurs restaient encore ; les musiciens rafraîchissaient, sur leur langue, le bout de leurs doigts ; Charles dormait à demi, le dos appuyé contre une porte.

À trois heures du matin, le cotillon commença. Emma ne savait pas valser. Tout le monde valsait, mademoiselle d'Andervilliers elle-même et la marquise ; il n'y avait plus que les hôtes du château, une douzaine de personnes à peu près.

Cependant, un des valseurs, qu'on appelait familièrement *vicomte*, et dont le gilet très ouvert semblait moulé sur la poitrine, vint une seconde fois encore inviter madame Bovary, l'assurant qu'il la guiderait et qu'elle s'en tirerait bien.

Ils commencèrent lentement, puis allèrent plus vite. Ils tournaient : tout tournait autour d'eux, les lampes, les meubles, les lambris, et le parquet, comme un disque sur un pivot. En passant auprès des portes, la robe d'Emma, par le bas, s'ériflait au pantalon ; leurs jambes entraient l'une dans l'autre ; il baissait ses regards vers elle, elle levait les siens vers lui ; une torpeur la prenait, elle s'arrêta. Ils repartirent ; et, d'un mouvement plus rapide, le vicomte, l'entraînant, disparut avec elle jusqu'au bout de la galerie, où, haletante, elle faillit tomber, et, un instant, s'appuya la tête sur sa poitrine. Et puis, tournant toujours, mais plus doucement, il la reconduisit à sa place ; elle se renversa contre la muraille et mit la main devant ses yeux.

Quand elle les rouvrit, au milieu du salon, une dame assise sur un tabouret avait devant elle trois valseurs agenouillés. Elle choisit le Vicomte, et le violon recommença.

On les regardait. Ils passaient et revenaient, elle immobile du corps et le menton baissé, et lui toujours dans sa même pose, la taille cambrée, le coude arrondi, la bouche en avant. Elle savait valser, celle-là ! Ils continuèrent longtemps et fatiguèrent tous les autres.

On causa quelques minutes encore, et, après les adieux ou plutôt le bonjour, les hôtes du château s'allèrent coucher.

Charles se traînait à la rampe, les genoux *lui rentraient dans le corps*. Il avait passé cinq heures de suite, tout debout devant les tables, à regarder jouer au whist sans y rien comprendre. Aussi poussa-t-il un grand soupir de satisfaction lorsqu'il eut retiré ses bottes.

Emma mit un châle sur ses épaules, ouvrit la fenêtre et s'accouda.

La nuit était noire. Quelques gouttes de pluie tombaient. Elle aspira le vent humide qui lui rafraîchissait les paupières. La musique du bal bourdonnait encore à ses oreilles, et elle faisait des efforts pour se tenir éveillée, afin de prolonger l'illusion de cette vie luxueuse qu'il lui faudrait tout à l'heure abandonner.

Le petit jour parut. Elle regarda les fenêtres du château, longuement, tâchant de deviner quelles étaient les chambres de tous ceux qu'elle avait remarqués la veille. Elle aurait voulu savoir leurs existences, y pénétrer, s'y confondre.

Mais elle grelottait de froid. Elle se déshabilla et se blottit entre les draps, contre Charles qui dormait.

Il y eut beaucoup de monde au déjeuner. Le repas dura dix minutes ; on ne servit aucune liqueur, ce qui étonna le médecin. Ensuite mademoiselle d'Andervilliers ramassa des morceaux de brioche dans une bannette, pour les porter aux cygnes sur la pièce d'eau, et on s'alla promener dans la serre chaude, où des plantes bizarres, hérissées de poils, s'étageaient en pyramides sous des vases suspendus, qui, pareils à des nids de serpents trop pleins, laissaient retomber, de leurs bords, de longs cordons verts entrelacés. L'orangerie, que l'on trouvait au bout, menait à couvert jusqu'aux communs du château. Le Marquis, pour amuser la jeune femme, la mena voir les écuries. Au-dessus des râteliers en forme de corbeille, des plaques de porcelaine portaient en noir le nom des chevaux. Chaque bête s'agitait dans sa stalle, quand on passait près d'elle, en claquant de la langue. Le plancher de la sellerie luisait à l'oeil comme le parquet d'un salon. Les harnais de voiture étaient dressés dans le milieu sur deux colonnes tournantes, et les mors, les fouets, les étriers, les gourmettes rangés en ligne tout le long de la muraille.

Charles, cependant, alla prier un domestique d'atteler son *boc*. On l'amena devant le perron, et, tous les paquets y étant fourrés, les époux Bovary firent leurs politesses au Marquis et à la Marquise, et repartirent pour Tostes.

Emma, silencieuse, regardait tourner les roues. Charles, posé sur le bord extrême de la banquette, conduisait les deux bras écartés, et le petit cheval trottait l'amble dans les brancards, qui étaient trop larges pour lui. Les guides molles battaient sur sa croupe en s'y trempant d'écume, et la boîte ficelée derrière le *boc* donnait contre la caisse de grands coups réguliers.

Ils étaient sur les hauteurs de Thibourville, lorsque devant eux, tout à coup, des cavaliers passèrent en riant, avec des cigares à la bouche. Emma crut reconnaître le Vicomte : elle se détourna, et n'aperçut à l'horizon que le mouvement des têtes s'abaissant et montant, selon la cadence inégale du trot ou du galop.

Un quart de lieue plus loin, il fallut s'arrêter pour raccommoder, avec de la corde, le reculement qui était rompu.

Mais Charles, donnant au harnais un dernier coup d'oeil, vit quelque chose par terre, entre les jambes de son cheval ; et il ramassa un porte-cigares tout bordé de soie verte et blasonné à son milieu comme la portière d'un carrosse.

— Il y a même deux cigares dedans, dit-il ; ce sera pour ce soir, après dîner.

— Tu fumes donc ? demanda-t-elle.

— Quelquefois, quand l'occasion se présente.

Il mit sa trouvaille dans sa poche et fouetta le bidet.

Quand ils arrivèrent chez eux, le dîner n'était point prêt. Madame s'emporta. Nastasie répondit insolemment.

— Partez ! dit Emma. C'est se moquer, je vous chasse.

Il y avait pour dîner de la soupe à l'oignon, avec un morceau de veau à l'oseille. Charles, assis devant Emma, dit en se frottant les mains d'un air heureux :

— Cela fait plaisir de se retrouver chez soi !

On entendait Nastasie qui pleurait. Il aimait un peu cette pauvre fille. Elle lui avait, autrefois, tenu société pendant bien des soirs, dans les désoeuvrements de son veuvage. C'était sa première pratique, sa plus ancienne connaissance du pays.

— Est-ce que tu l'as renvoyée pour tout de bon ? dit-il enfin.

— Oui. Qui m'en empêche ? répondit-elle.

Puis ils se chauffèrent dans la cuisine, pendant qu'on apprêtait leur chambre. Charles se mit à fumer. Il fumait en avançant les lèvres, crachant à toute minute, se reculant à chaque bouffée.

— Tu vas te faire mal, dit-elle dédaigneusement.

Il déposa son cigare, et courut avaler, à la pompe, un verre d'eau froide. Emma, saisissant le porte-cigares, le jeta vivement au fond de l'armoire.

La journée fut longue, le lendemain ! Elle se promena dans son jardinet, passant et revenant par les mêmes allées, s'arrêtant devant les plates-bandes, devant l'espalier, devant le curé de plâtre, considérant avec ébahissement toutes ces choses d'autrefois qu'elle connaissait si bien. Comme le bal déjà lui semblait loin ! Qui donc écartait, à tant de distance, le matin d'avant-hier et le soir d'aujourd'hui ? Son voyage à la Vaubyessard avait fait un trou dans sa vie, à la manière de ces grandes crevasses qu'un orage, en une seule nuit, creuse quelquefois dans les montagnes. Elle se résigna pourtant ; elle serra pieusement dans la commode sa belle toilette et jusqu'à ses souliers de satin, dont la semelle s'était jaunie à la cire glissante du parquet. Son coeur était comme eux : au frottement de la richesse, il s'était placé dessus quelque chose qui ne s'effacerait pas.

Ce fut donc une occupation pour Emma que le souvenir de ce bal. Toutes les fois que revenait le mercredi, elle se disait en s'éveillant : « Ah ! il y a huit jours... il y a quinze jours..., il y a trois semaines, j'y étais ! » Et peu à peu, les physionomies se confondirent dans sa mémoire, elle oublia l'air des contredanses, elle ne vit plus si nettement les livrées et les appartements ; quelques détails s'en allèrent, mais le regret lui resta.

IX

Souvent, lorsque Charles était sorti, elle allait prendre dans l'armoire, entre les plis du linge où elle l'avait laissé, le porte-cigares en soie verte.

Elle le regardait, l'ouvrait, et même elle flairait l'odeur de sa doublure, mêlée de verveine et de tabac. À qui appartenait-il ?... Au Vicomte. C'était peut-être un cadeau de sa maîtresse. On avait brodé cela sur quelque métier de palissandre, meuble mignon que l'on cachait à tous les yeux, qui avait occupé bien des heures et où s'étaient penchées les boucles molles de la travailleuse pensive. Un souffle d'amour avait passé parmi les mailles du canevas ; chaque coup d'aiguille avait fixé là une espérance ou un souvenir, et tous ces fils de soie entrelacés n'étaient que la continuité de la même passion silencieuse. Et puis le Vicomte, un matin, l'avait emporté avec lui. De quoi avait-on parlé, lorsqu'il restait sur les cheminées à large chambranle, entre les vases de fleurs et les pendules Pompadour ? Elle était à Tostes. Lui, il était à Paris, maintenant ; là-bas ! Comment était ce Paris ? Quel nom démesuré ! Elle se le répétait à demi-voix, pour se faire plaisir ; il sonnait à ses oreilles comme un bourdon de cathédrale, il flamboyait à ses yeux jusque sur l'étiquette de ses pots de pommade.

La nuit, quand les mareyeurs, dans leurs charrettes, passaient sous ses fenêtres en chantant *la Marjolaine*, elle s'éveillait ; et écoutant le bruit des roues ferrées, qui, à la sortie du pays, s'amortissait vite sur la terre :

— Ils y seront demain ! se disait-elle.

Et elle les suivait dans sa pensée, montant et descendant les côtes, traversant les villages, filant sur la grande route à la clarté des étoiles. Au bout d'une distance indéterminée, il se trouvait toujours une place confuse où expirait son rêve.

Elle s'acheta un plan de Paris, et, du bout de son doigt, sur la carte, elle faisait des courses dans la capitale. Elle remontait les boulevards, s'arrêtant à chaque angle, entre les lignes des rues, devant les carrés blancs qui figurent les maisons. Les yeux fatigués à la fin, elle fermait ses paupières, et elle voyait dans les ténèbres se tordre au vent des becs de gaz, avec des marche-pieds de calèches, qui se déployaient à grand fracas devant le péristyle des théâtres.

Elle s'abonna à *la Corbeille*, journal des femmes, et au *Sylphe des salons*. Elle dévorait, sans en rien passer, tous les comptes rendus de premières représentations, de courses et de soirées, s'intéressait au début d'une chanteuse, à l'ouverture d'un magasin. Elle savait les modes nouvelles, l'adresse des bons tailleurs, les jours de Bois ou d'Opéra. Elle étudia, dans Eugène Sue, des descriptions d'ameublements ; elle lut Balzac et George Sand, y cherchant des assouvissements imaginaires pour ses convoitises personnelles. À table même, elle apportait son livre, et elle tournait les feuillets, pendant que Charles mangeait en lui parlant. Le souvenir du Vicomte revenait toujours dans ses lectures. Entre lui et les personnages inventés, elle établissait des rapprochements. Mais le cercle dont il était le centre peu à peu s'élargit autour de lui, et cette auréole qu'il avait, s'écartant de sa figure, s'étala plus au loin, pour illuminer d'autres rêves.

Paris, plus vague que l'Océan, miroitait donc aux yeux d'Emma dans une atmosphère vermeille. La vie nombreuse qui s'agitait en ce tumulte y était cependant divisée par parties, classée en tableaux distincts. Emma n'en apercevait que deux ou trois qui lui cachaient tous les autres, et représentaient à eux seuls l'humanité complète. Le monde des ambassadeurs marchait sur des parquets luisants, dans des salons lambrissés de miroirs, autour de tables ovales couvertes d'un tapis de velours à crépines d'or. Il y avait là des robes à queue, de grands mystères, des angoisses dissimulées sous des sourires. Venait ensuite la société des duchesses ; on y était pâle ; on se levait à quatre heures ; les femmes, pauvres anges ! portaient du point d'Angleterre au bas de leur jupon, et les hommes, capacités méconnues sous des dehors futiles, crevaient leurs chevaux par partie de plaisir, allaient passer à Bade la saison d'été, et, vers la quarantaine enfin, épousaient des héritières. Dans les cabinets de restaurant où l'on soupe après minuit riait, à la clarté des bougies, la foule bigarrée des gens de lettres et des actrices. Ils étaient, ceux-là, prodigues comme des rois, pleins d'ambitions idéales et de délires fantastiques. C'était une existence au-dessus des autres, entre ciel et terre, dans les orages, quelque chose de sublime. Quant au reste du monde, il était perdu, sans place précise, et comme n'existant pas. Plus les choses, d'ailleurs, étaient voisines, plus sa pensée s'en détournait. Tout ce qui l'entourait immédiatement, campagne ennuyeuse, petits bourgeois imbéciles, médiocrité de l'existence, lui semblait une exception dans le monde, un hasard particulier où elle se trouvait prise, tandis qu'au delà s'étendait à perte de vue l'immense pays des félicités et des passions. Elle confondait, dans son désir, les sensualités du luxe avec les joies du coeur, l'élégance des habitudes et les délicatesses du sentiment. Ne fallait-il pas à l'amour, comme aux plantes indiennes, des terrains préparés, une température particulière ? Les soupirs au clair de lune, les longues étreintes, les larmes qui coulent sur les mains qu'on abandonne, toutes les fièvres de la chair et les langueurs de la tendresse ne se séparaient donc pas du balcon des grands châteaux qui sont pleins de loisirs, d'un boudoir à stores de soie avec un tapis bien épais, des jardinières remplies, un lit monté sur une estrade, ni du scintillement des pierres précieuses et des aiguillettes de la livrée.

Le garçon de la poste, qui, chaque matin, venait panser la jument, traversait le corridor avec ses gros sabots ; sa blouse avait des trous, ses pieds étaient nus dans des chaussons. C'était là le groom en culotte courte dont il fallait se contenter ! Quand son ouvrage était fini, il ne revenait plus de la journée ; car Charles, en rentrant, mettait lui-même son cheval à l'écurie, retirait la selle et passait le licou, pendant que la bonne apportait une botte de paille et la jetait, comme elle le pouvait, dans la mangeoire.

Pour remplacer Nastasie (qui enfin partit de Tostes, en versant des ruisseaux de larmes), Emma prit à son service une jeune fille de quatorze ans, orpheline et de physionomie douce. Elle lui interdit les bonnets de coton, lui apprit qu'il fallait vous parler à la troisième personne, apporter un verre d'eau dans une assiette, frapper aux portes avant d'entrer, et à repasser, à empeser, à l'habiller, voulut en faire sa femme de chambre. La nouvelle bonne obéissait sans murmure pour n'être point renvoyée ; et, comme Madame, d'habitude, laissait la clef au buffet, Félicité, chaque soir prenait une petite provision de sucre qu'elle mangeait toute seule, dans son lit, après avoir fait sa prière.

L'après-midi, quelquefois, elle allait causer en face avec les postillons. Madame se tenait en haut, dans son appartement.

Elle portait une robe de chambre tout ouverte, qui laissait voir, entre les revers à châle du corsage, une chemisette plissée avec trois boutons d'or. Sa ceinture était une cordelière à gros glands, et ses petites pantoufles de couleur grenat avaient une touffe de rubans larges, qui s'étalait sur le cou-de-pied. Elle s'était acheté un buvard, une papeterie, un porte-plume et des enveloppes, quoiqu'elle n'eût personne à qui écrire ; elle époussetait son étagère, se regardait dans la glace, prenait un livre, puis, rêvant entre les lignes, le laissait tomber sur ses genoux. Elle avait envie de faire des voyages ou de retourner vivre à son couvent. Elle souhaitait à la fois mourir et habiter Paris.

Charles, à la neige à la pluie, chevauchait par les chemins de traverse. Il mangeait des omelettes sur la table des fermes, entrait son bras dans des lits humides, recevait au visage le jet tiède des saignées, écoutait des râles, examinait des cuvettes, retroussait bien du linge sale ; mais il trouvait, tous les soirs, un feu flambant, la table servie, des meubles souples, et une femme en toilette fine, charmante et sentant frais, à ne savoir même d'où venait cette odeur, ou si ce n'était pas sa peau qui parfumait sa chemise.

Elle le charmait par quantité de délicatesses : c'était tantôt une manière nouvelle de façonner pour les bougies des bobèches de papier, un volant qu'elle changeait à sa robe, ou le nom extraordinaire d'un mets bien simple, et que la bonne avait manqué, mais que Charles, jusqu'au bout, avalait avec plaisir. Elle vit à Rouen des dames qui portaient à leur montre un paquet de breloques ; elle acheta des breloques. Elle voulut sur sa cheminée deux grands vases de verre bleu, et, quelque temps après, un nécessaire d'ivoire, avec un dé de vermeil. Moins Charles comprenait ces élégances, plus il en subissait la séduction. Elles ajoutaient quelque chose au plaisir de ses sens et à la douceur de son foyer. C'était comme une poussière d'or qui sablait tout du long le petit sentier de sa vie.

Il se portait bien, il avait bonne mine ; sa réputation était établie tout à fait. Les campagnards le chérissaient parce qu'il n'était pas fier. Il caressait les enfants, n'entrait jamais au cabaret, et, d'ailleurs, inspirait de la confiance par sa moralité. Il réussissait particulièrement dans les catarrhes et maladies de poitrine. Craignant beaucoup de tuer son monde, Charles, en effet, n'ordonnait guère que des potions calmantes, de temps à autre de l'émétique, un bain de pieds ou des sangsues. Ce n'est pas que la chirurgie lui fît peur ; il vous saignait les gens largement, comme des chevaux, et il avait pour l'extraction des dents une *poigne d'enfer*.

Enfin, *pour se tenir au courant*, il prit un abonnement à la *Ruche médicale,* journal nouveau dont il avait reçu le prospectus. Il en lisait un peu après son dîner ; mais la chaleur de l'appartement, jointe à la digestion, faisait qu'au bout de cinq minutes il s'endormait ; et il restait là, le menton sur ses deux mains, et les cheveux étalés comme une crinière jusqu'au pied de la lampe. Emma le regardait en haussant les épaules. Que n'avait-elle, au moins, pour mari un de ces hommes d'ardeurs taciturnes qui travaillent la nuit dans les livres, et portent enfin, à soixante ans, quand vient l'âge des rhumatismes, une brochette de croix, sur leur habit noir, mal fait. Elle aurait voulu que ce nom de Bovary, qui était le sien, fût illustre, le voir étalé chez les libraires, répété dans les journaux, connu par toute la France. Mais Charles n'avait point d'ambition ! Un médecin d'Yvetot, avec qui dernièrement il s'était trouvé en consultation, l'avait humilié quelque peu, au lit même du malade, devant les parents assemblés. Quand Charles lui raconta, le soir, cette anecdote, Emma s'emporta bien haut contre le confrère. Charles en fut attendri. Il la baisa au front avec une larme. Mais elle était exaspérée de honte, elle avait envie de le battre, elle alla dans le corridor ouvrir la fenêtre et huma l'air frais pour se calmer.

— Quel pauvre homme ! quel pauvre homme ! disait-elle tout bas, en se mordant les lèvres.

Elle se sentait, d'ailleurs, plus irritée de lui. Il prenait, avec l'âge, des allures épaisses ; il coupait, au dessert, le bouchon des bouteilles vides ; il se passait, après manger, la langue sur les dents ; il faisait, en avalant sa soupe, un gloussement à chaque gorgée, et, comme il commençait d'engraisser, ses yeux, déjà petits, semblaient remontés vers les tempes par la bouffissure de ses pommettes.

Emma, quelquefois, lui rentrait dans son gilet la bordure rouge de ses tricots, rajustait sa cravate, ou jetait à l'écart les gants déteints qu'il se disposait à passer ; et ce n'était pas, comme il croyait, pour lui ; c'était pour elle-même, par expansion d'égoïsme, agacement nerveux. Quelquefois aussi, elle lui parlait des choses qu'elle avait lues, comme d'un passage de roman, d'une pièce nouvelle, ou de l'anecdote du *grand monde* que l'on racontait dans le feuilleton ; car, enfin, Charles était quelqu'un, une oreille toujours ouverte, une approbation toujours prête. Elle faisait bien des confidences à sa levrette ! Elle en eût fait aux bûches de la cheminée et au balancier de la pendule.

Au fond de son âme, cependant, elle attendait un événement. Comme les matelots en détresse, elle promenait sur la solitude de sa vie des yeux désespérés, cherchant au loin quelque voile blanche dans les brumes de l'horizon. Elle ne savait pas quel serait ce hasard, le vent qui le pousserait jusqu'à elle, vers quel rivage il la mènerait, s'il était chaloupe ou vaisseau à trois ponts, chargé d'angoisses ou plein de félicités jusqu'aux sabords. Mais, chaque matin, à son réveil, elle l'espérait pour la journée, et elle écoutait tous les bruits, se levait en sursaut, s'étonnait qu'il ne vînt pas ; puis, au coucher du soleil, toujours plus triste, désirait être au lendemain.

Le printemps reparut. Elle eut des étouffements aux premières chaleurs, quand les poiriers fleurirent.

Dès le commencement de juillet, elle compta sur ses doigts combien de semaines lui restaient pour arriver au mois d'octobre, pensant que le marquis d'Andervilliers, peut-être, donnerait encore un bal à la Vaubyessard. Mais tout septembre s'écoula sans lettres ni visites.

Après l'ennui de cette déception, son coeur de nouveau resta vide, et alors la série des mêmes journées recommença.

Elles allaient donc maintenant se suivre ainsi à la file, toujours pareilles, innombrables, et n'apportant rien ! Les autres existences, si plates qu'elles fussent, avaient du moins la chance d'un événement. Une aventure amenait parfois des péripéties à l'infini, et le décor changeait. Mais, pour elle, rien n'arrivait, Dieu l'avait voulu ! L'avenir était un corridor tout noir, et qui avait au fond sa porte bien fermée.

Elle abandonna la musique. Pourquoi jouer ? qui l'entendrait ? Puisqu'elle ne pourrait jamais, en robe de velours à manches courtes, sur un piano d'Érard, dans un concert, battant de ses doigts légers les touches d'ivoire, sentir, comme une brise, circuler autour d'elle un murmure d'extase, ce n'était pas la peine de s'ennuyer à étudier. Elle laissa dans l'armoire ses cartons à dessin et la tapisserie. À quoi bon ? à quoi bon ? La couture l'irritait.

— J'ai tout lu, se disait-elle.

Et elle restait à faire rougir les pincettes, ou regardant la pluie tomber.

Comme elle était triste le dimanche, quand on sonnait les vêpres ! Elle écoutait, dans un hébétement attentif, tinter un à un les coups fêlés de la cloche. Quelque chat sur les toits, marchant lentement, bombait son dos aux rayons pâles du soleil. Le vent, sur la grande route, soufflait des traînées de poussière. Au loin, parfois, un chien hurlait : et la cloche, à temps égaux, continuait sa sonnerie monotone qui se perdait dans la campagne.

Cependant on sortait de l'église. Les femmes en sabots cirés, les paysans en blouse neuve, les petits enfants qui sautillaient nu-tête devant eux, tout rentrait chez soi. Et, jusqu'à la nuit, cinq ou six hommes, toujours les mêmes, restaient à jouer au bouchon, devant la grande porte de l'auberge.

L'hiver fut froid. Les carreaux, chaque matin, étaient chargés de givre, et la lumière, blanchâtre à travers eux, comme par des verres dépolis, quelquefois ne variait pas de la journée. Dès quatre heures du soir, il fallait allumer la lampe.

Les jours qu'il faisait beau, elle descendait dans le jardin. La rosée avait laissé sur les choux des guipures d'argent avec de longs fils clairs qui s'étendaient de l'un à l'autre. On n'entendait pas d'oiseaux, tout semblait dormir, l'espalier couvert de paille et la vigne comme un grand serpent malade sous le chaperon du mur, où l'on voyait, en s'approchant, se traîner des cloportes à pattes nombreuses. Dans les sapinettes, près de la haie, le curé en tricorne qui lisait son bréviaire avait perdu le pied droit et même le plâtre, s'écaillant à la gelée, avait fait des gales blanches sur sa figure.

Puis elle remontait, fermait la porte, étalait les charbons, et, défaillant à la chaleur du foyer, sentait l'ennui plus lourd qui retombait sur elle. Elle serait bien descendue causer avec la bonne, mais une pudeur la retenait.

Tous les jours, à la même heure, le maître d'école, en bonnet de soie noire, ouvrait les auvents de sa maison, et le garde-champêtre passait, portant son sabre sur sa blouse. Soir et matin, les chevaux de la poste, trois par trois, traversaient la rue pour aller boire à la mare. De temps à autre, la porte d'un cabaret faisait tinter sa sonnette, et, quand il y avait du vent, l'on entendait grincer sur leurs deux tringles les petites cuvettes en cuivre du perruquier, qui servaient d'enseigne à sa boutique. Elle avait pour décoration une vieille gravure de modes collée contre un carreau et un buste de femme en cire, dont les cheveux étaient jaunes. Lui aussi, le perruquier, il se lamentait de sa vocation arrêtée, de son avenir perdu, et, rêvant quelque boutique dans une grande ville, comme à Rouen par exemple, sur le port, près du théâtre, il restait toute la journée à se promener en long, depuis la mairie jusqu'à l'église, sombre, et attendant la clientèle. Lorsque madame Bovary levait les yeux, elle le voyait toujours là, comme une sentinelle en faction, avec son bonnet grec sur l'oreille et sa veste de lasting.

Dans l'après-midi, quelquefois, une tête d'homme apparaissait derrière les vitres de la salle, tête hâlée, à favoris noirs, et qui souriait lentement d'un large sourire doux à dents blanches. Une valse aussitôt commençait, et, sur l'orgue, dans un petit salon, des danseurs hauts comme le doigt, femmes en turban rose, Tyroliens en jaquette, singes en habit noir, messieurs en culotte courte, tournaient, tournaient entre les fauteuils, les canapés, les consoles, se répétant dans les morceaux de miroir que raccordait à leurs angles un filet de papier doré. L'homme faisait aller sa manivelle, regardant à droite, à gauche et vers les fenêtres. De temps à autre, tout en lançant contre la borne un long jet de salive brune, il soulevait du genou son instrument, dont la bretelle dure lui fatiguait l'épaule ; et, tantôt dolente et traînarde, ou joyeuse et précipitée, la musique de la boîte s'échappait en bourdonnant à travers un rideau de taffetas rose, sous une grille de cuivre en arabesque. C'étaient des airs que l'on jouait ailleurs sur les théâtres, que l'on chantait dans les salons, que l'on dansait le soir sous des lustres éclairés, échos du monde qui arrivaient jusqu'à Emma. Des sarabandes à n'en plus finir se déroulaient dans sa tête, et, comme une bayadère sur les fleurs d'un tapis, sa pensée bondissait avec les notes, se balançait de rêve en rêve, de tristesse en tristesse. Quand l'homme avait reçu l'aumône dans sa casquette, il rabattait une vieille couverture de laine bleue, passait son orgue sur son dos et s'éloignait d'un pas lourd. Elle le regardait partir.

Mais c'était surtout aux heures des repas qu'elle n'en pouvait plus, dans cette petite salle au rez-de-chaussée, avec le poêle qui fumait, la porte qui criait, les murs qui suintaient, les pavés humides ; toute l'amertume de l'existence, lui semblait servie sur son assiette, et, à la fumée du bouilli, il montait du fond de son âme comme d'autres bouffées d'affadissement. Charles était long à manger ; elle grignotait quelques noisettes, ou bien, appuyée du coude, s'amusait, avec la pointe de son couteau, à faire des raies sur la toile cirée.

Elle laissait maintenant tout aller dans son ménage, et madame Bovary mère, lorsqu'elle vint passer à Tostes une partie du carême, s'étonna fort de ce changement. Elle, en effet, si soigneuse autrefois et délicate, elle restait à présent des journées entières sans s'habiller, portait des bas de coton gris, s'éclairait à la chandelle. Elle répétait qu'il fallait économiser, puisqu'ils n'étaient pas riches, ajoutant qu'elle était très contente, très heureuse, que Tostes lui plaisait beaucoup, et autres discours nouveaux qui fermaient la bouche à la belle-mère. Du reste, Emma ne semblait plus disposée à suivre ses conseils ; une fois même, madame Bovary s'étant avisée de prétendre que les maîtres devaient surveiller la religion de leurs domestiques, elle lui avait répondu d'un oeil si colère et avec un sourire tellement froid, que la bonne femme ne s'y frotta plus.

Emma devenait difficile, capricieuse. Elle se commandait des plats pour elle, n'y touchait point, un jour ne buvait que du lait pur, et, le lendemain, des tasses de thé à la douzaine. Souvent elle s'obstinait à ne pas sortir, puis elle suffoquait, ouvrait les fenêtres, s'habillait en robe légère. Lorsqu'elle avait bien rudoyé sa servante, elle lui faisait des cadeaux ou l'envoyait se promener chez les voisines, de même qu'elle jetait parfois aux pauvres toutes les pièces blanches de sa bourse, quoiqu'elle ne fût guère tendre cependant, ni facilement accessible à l'émotion d'autrui, comme la plupart des gens issus de campagnards, qui gardent toujours à l'âme quelque chose de la callosité des mains paternelles.

Vers la fin de février, le père Rouault, en souvenir de sa guérison, apporta lui-même à son gendre une dinde superbe, et il resta trois jours à Tostes. Charles étant à ses malades, Emma lui tint compagnie. Il fuma dans la chambre, cracha sur les chenets, causa culture, veaux, vaches, volailles et conseil municipal ; si bien qu'elle referma la porte, quand il fut parti, avec un sentiment de satisfaction qui la surprit elle-même. D'ailleurs, elle ne cachait plus son mépris pour rien, ni pour personne ; et elle se mettait quelquefois à exprimer des opinions singulières, blâmant ce que l'on approuvait, et approuvant des choses perverses ou immorales : ce qui faisait ouvrir de grands yeux à son mari.

Est-ce que cette misère durerait toujours ? est-ce qu'elle n'en sortirait pas ? Elle valait bien cependant toutes celles qui vivaient heureuses ! Elle avait vu des duchesses à la Vaubyessard qui avaient la taille plus lourde et les façons plus communes, et elle exécrait l'injustice de Dieu ; elle s'appuyait la tête aux murs pour pleurer ; elle enviait les existences tumultueuses, les nuits masquées, les insolents plaisirs avec tous les éperduments qu'elle ne connaissait pas et qu'ils devaient donner.

Elle pâlissait et avait des battements de coeur. Charles lui administra de la valériane et des bains de camphre. Tout ce que l'on essayait semblait l'irriter davantage.

En de certains jours, elle bavardait avec une abondance fébrile ; à ces exaltations succédaient tout à coup des torpeurs où elle restait sans parler, sans bouger. Ce qui la ranimait alors, c'était de se répandre sur les bras un flacon d'eau de Cologne.

Comme elle se plaignait de Tostes continuellement, Charles imagina que la cause de sa maladie était sans doute dans quelque influence locale, et, s'arrêtant à cette idée, il songea sérieusement à aller s'établir ailleurs.

Dès lors, elle but du vinaigre pour se faire maigrir, contracta une petite toux sèche et perdit complètement l'appétit.

Il en coûtait à Charles d'abandonner Tostes après quatre ans de séjour et au moment *où il commençait à s'y poser*. S'il le fallait, cependant ! Il la conduisit à Rouen voir son ancien maître. C'était une maladie nerveuse : on devait la changer d'air.

Après s'être tourné de côté et d'autre, Charles apprit qu'il y avait dans l'arrondissement de Neufchâtel, un fort bourg nommé Yonville-l'Abbaye, dont le médecin, qui était un réfugié polonais, venait de décamper la semaine précédente. Alors il écrivit au pharmacien de l'endroit pour savoir quel était le chiffre de la population, la distance où se trouvait le confrère le plus voisin, combien par année gagnait son prédécesseur, etc. ; et, les réponses ayant été satisfaisantes, il se résolut à déménager vers le printemps, si la santé d'Emma ne s'améliorait pas.

Un jour qu'en prévision de son départ elle faisait des rangements dans un tiroir, elle se piqua les doigts à quelque chose. C'était un fil de fer de son bouquet de mariage. Les boutons d'oranger étaient jaunes de poussière, et les rubans de satin, à liséré d'argent, s'effiloquaient par le bord. Elle le jeta dans le feu. Il s'enflamma plus vite qu'une paille sèche. Puis ce fut comme un buisson rouge sur les cendres, et qui se rongeait lentement. Elle le regarda brûler. Les petites baies de carton éclataient, les fils d'archal se tordaient, le galon se fondait ; et les corolles de papier, racornies, se balançant le long de la plaque comme des papillons noirs, enfin s'envolèrent par la cheminée.

Quand on partit de Tostes, au mois de mars, madame Bovary était enceinte.

DEUXIEME PARTIE

I

Yonville-l'Abbaye (ainsi nommé à cause d'une ancienne abbaye de Capucins dont les ruines n'existent même plus) est un bourg à huit lieues de Rouen, entre la route d'Abbeville et celle de Beauvais, au fond d'une vallée qu'arrose la Rieule, petite rivière qui se jette dans l'Andelle, après avoir fait tourner trois moulins vers son embouchure, et où il y a quelques truites, que les garçons, le dimanche, s'amusent à pêcher à la ligne.

On quitte la grande route à la Boissière et l'on continue à plat jusqu'au haut de la côte des Leux, d'où l'on découvre la vallée. La rivière qui la traverse en fait comme deux régions de physionomie distincte : tout ce qui est à gauche est en herbage, tout ce qui est à droite est en labour. La prairie s'allonge sous un bourrelet de collines basses pour se rattacher par derrière aux pâturages du pays de Bray, tandis que, du côté de l'est, la plaine, montant doucement, va s'élargissant et étale à perte de vue ses blondes pièces de blé. L'eau qui court au bord de l'herbe sépare d'une raie blanche la couleur des prés et celle des sillons, et la campagne ainsi ressemble à un grand manteau déplié qui a un collet de velours vert, bordé d'un galon d'argent.

Au bout de l'horizon, lorsqu'on arrive, on a devant soi les chênes de la forêt d'Argueil, avec les escarpements de la côte Saint-Jean, rayés du haut en bas par de longues traînées rouges, inégales ; ce sont les traces des pluies, et ces tons de brique, tranchant en filets minces sur la couleur grise de la montagne, viennent de la quantité de sources ferrugineuses qui coulent au delà, dans le pays d'alentour.

On est ici sur les confins de la Normandie, de la Picardie et de l'Île-de-France, contrée bâtarde où le langage est sans accentuation, comme le paysage sans caractère. C'est là que l'on fait les pires fromages de Neufchâtel de tout l'arrondissement, et, d'autre part, la culture y est coûteuse, parce qu'il faut beaucoup de fumier pour engraisser ces terres friables pleines de sable et de cailloux.

Jusqu'en 1835, il n'y avait point de route praticable pour arriver à Yonville ; mais on a établi vers cette époque un chemin *de grande vicinalité* qui relie la route d'Abbeville à celle d'Amiens, et sert quelquefois aux rouliers allant de Rouen dans les Flandres. Cependant, Yonville-l'Abbaye est demeuré stationnaire, malgré ses *débouchés nouveaux*. Au lieu d'améliorer les cultures, on s'y obstine encore aux herbages, quelque dépréciés qu'ils soient, et le bourg paresseux, s'écartant de la plaine, a continué naturellement à s'agrandir vers la rivière. On l'aperçoit de loin, tout couché en long sur la rive, comme un gardeur de vaches qui fait la sieste au bord de l'eau.

Au bas de la côte, après le pont, commence une chaussée plantée de jeunes trembles, qui vous mène en droite ligne jusqu'aux premières maisons du pays. Elles sont encloses de haies, au milieu de cours pleines de bâtiments épars, pressoirs, charretteries et bouilleries, disséminés sous les arbres touffus portant des échelles, des gaules ou des faux accrochées dans leur branchage. Les toits de chaume, comme des bonnets de fourrure rabattus sur des yeux, descendent jusqu'au tiers à peu près des fenêtres basses, dont les gros verres bombés sont garnis d'un noeud dans le milieu, à la façon des culs de bouteilles. Sur le mur de plâtre que traversent en diagonale des lambourdes noires, s'accroche parfois quelque maigre poirier, et les rez-de-chaussée ont à leur porte une petite barrière tournante pour les défendre des poussins, qui viennent picorer, sur le seuil, des miettes de pain bis trempé de cidre. Cependant les cours se font plus étroites, les habitations se rapprochent, les haies disparaissent ; un fagot de fougères se balance sous une fenêtre au bout d'un manche à balai ; il y a la forge d'un maréchal et ensuite un charron avec deux ou trois charrettes neuves, en dehors, qui empiètent sur la route. Puis, à travers une claire-voie, apparaît une maison blanche au delà d'un rond de gazon que décore un Amour, le doigt posé sur la bouche ; deux vases en fonte sont à chaque bout du perron ; des panonceaux brillent à la porte ; c'est la maison du notaire, et la plus belle du pays.

L'église est de l'autre côté de la rue, vingt pas plus loin, à l'entrée de la place. Le petit cimetière qui l'entoure, clos d'un mur à hauteur d'appui, est si bien rempli de tombeaux, que les vieilles pierres à ras du sol font un dallage continu, où l'herbe a dessiné de soi-même des carrés verts réguliers. L'église a été rebâtie à neuf dans les dernières années du règne de Charles X. La voûte en bois commence à se pourrir par le haut, et, de place en place, a des enfonçures noires dans sa couleur bleue. Au-dessus de la porte, où seraient les orgues, se tient un jubé pour les hommes, avec un escalier tournant qui retentit sous les sabots.

Le grand jour, arrivant par les vitraux tout unis, éclaire obliquement les bancs rangés en travers de la muraille, que tapisse çà et là quelque paillasson cloué, ayant au-dessous de lui ces mots en grosses lettres : « Banc de M. un tel. » Plus loin, à l'endroit où le vaisseau se rétrécit, le confessionnal fait pendant à une statuette de la Vierge, vêtue d'une robe de satin, coiffée d'un voile de tulle semé d'étoiles d'argent, et tout empourprée aux pommettes comme une idole des îles Sandwich ; enfin une copie de la *Sainte Famille, envoi du ministre de l'intérieur,* dominant le maître-autel entre quatre chandeliers, termine au fond la perspective. Les stalles du choeur, en bois de sapin, sont restées sans être peintes.

Les halles, c'est-à-dire un toit de tuiles supporté par une vingtaine de poteaux, occupent à elles seules la moitié environ de la grande place d'Yonville. La mairie, construite *sur les dessins d'un architecte de Paris,* est une manière de temple grec qui fait l'angle, à côté de la maison du pharmacien. Elle a, au rez-de-chaussée, trois colonnes ioniques et, au premier étage, une galerie à plein cintre, tandis que le tympan qui la termine est rempli par un coq gaulois, appuyé d'une patte sur la Charte et tenant de l'autre les balances de la justice.

Mais ce qui attire le plus les yeux, c'est, en face de l'auberge du *Lion d'or*, la pharmacie de M. Homais ! Le soir, principalement, quand son quinquet est allumé et que les bocaux rouges et verts qui embellissent sa devanture allongent au loin, sur le sol, leurs deux clartés de couleur ; alors, à travers elles, comme dans des feux du Bengale, s'entrevoit l'ombre du pharmacien, accoudé sur son pupitre. Sa maison, du haut en bas, est placardée d'inscriptions écrites en anglaise, en ronde, en moulée : « Eaux de Vichy, de Seltz et de Barèges, robs dépuratifs, médecine Raspail, racahout des Arabes, pastilles Darcet, pâte Regnault, bandages, bains, chocolats de santé, etc. » Et l'enseigne, qui tient toute la largeur de la boutique, porte en lettres d'or : *Homais, pharmacien*. Puis, au fond de la boutique, derrière les grandes balances scellées sur le comptoir, le mot *laboratoire* se déroule au-dessus d'une porte vitrée qui, à moitié de sa hauteur, répète encore une fois *Homais*, en lettres d'or, sur un fond noir.

Il n'y a plus ensuite rien à voir dans Yonville. La rue (la seule), longue d'une portée de fusil et bordée de quelques boutiques, s'arrête court au tournant de la route. Si on la laisse sur la droite et que l'on suive le bas de la côte Saint-Jean, bientôt on arrive au cimetière.

Lors du choléra, pour l'agrandir, on a abattu un pan de mur et acheté trois acres de terre à côté ; mais toute cette portion nouvelle est presque inhabitée, les tombes, comme autrefois, continuant à s'entasser vers la porte. Le gardien, qui est en même temps fossoyeur et bedeau à l'église (tirant ainsi des cadavres de la paroisse un double bénéfice), a profité du terrain vide pour y semer des pommes de terre. D'année en année, cependant, son petit champ se rétrécit, et, lorsqu'il survient une épidémie, il ne sait pas s'il doit se réjouir des décès ou s'affliger des sépultures.

— Vous vous nourrissez des morts, Lestiboudois ! lui dit enfin, un jour, M. le curé.

Cette parole sombre le fit réfléchir ; elle l'arrêta pour quelque temps ; mais, aujourd'hui encore, il continue la culture de ses tubercules, et même soutient avec aplomb qu'ils poussent naturellement.

Depuis les événements que l'on va raconter, rien, en effet, n'a changé à Yonville. Le drapeau tricolore de fer-blanc tourne toujours au haut du clocher de l'église ; la boutique du marchand de nouveautés agite encore au vent ses deux banderoles d'indienne ; les foetus du pharmacien, comme des paquets d'amadou blanc, se pourrissent de plus en plus dans leur alcool bourbeux, et, au-dessus de la grande porte de l'auberge, le vieux lion d'or, déteint par les pluies, montre toujours aux passants sa frisure de caniche.

Le soir que les époux Bovary devaient arriver à Yonville, madame veuve Lefrançois, la maîtresse de cette auberge, était si fort affairée, qu'elle suait à grosses gouttes en remuant ses casseroles. C'était le lendemain jour de marché dans le bourg. Il fallait d'avance tailler les viandes, vider les poulets, faire de la soupe et du café. Elle avait, de plus, le repas de ses pensionnaires, celui du médecin, de sa femme et de leur bonne ; le billard retentissait d'éclats de rire ; trois meuniers, dans la petite salle, appelaient pour qu'on leur apportât de l'eau-de-vie ; le bois flambait, la braise craquait, et, sur la longue table de la cuisine, parmi les quartiers de mouton cru, s'élevaient des piles d'assiettes qui tremblaient aux secousses du billot où l'on hachait des épinards. On entendait, dans la basse-cour, crier les volailles que la servante poursuivait pour leur couper le cou.

Un homme en pantoufles de peau verte, quelque peu marqué de petite vérole et coiffé d'un bonnet de velours à gland d'or, se chauffait le dos contre la cheminée. Sa figure n'exprimait rien que la satisfaction de soi-même, et il avait l'air aussi calme dans la vie que le chardonneret suspendu au-dessus de sa tête, dans une cage d'osier : c'était le pharmacien.

— Artémise ! criait la maîtresse d'auberge, casse de la bourrée, emplis les carafes, apporte de l'eau-de-vie, dépêche-toi ! Au moins, si je savais quel dessert offrir à la société que vous attendez ! Bonté divine ! les commis du déménagement recommencent leur tintamarre dans le billard ! Et leur charrette qui est restée sous la grande porte ! L'*Hirondelle* est capable de la défoncer en arrivant ! Appelle Polyte pour qu'il la remise !... Dire que, depuis le matin, monsieur Homais, ils ont peut-être fait quinze parties et bu huit pots de cidre !... Mais ils vont me déchirer le tapis, continuait-elle en les regardant de loin, son écumoire à la main.

— Le mal ne serait pas grand, répondit M. Homais, vous en achèteriez un autre.

— Un autre billard ! exclama la veuve.

— Puisque celui-là ne tient plus, madame Lefrançois ; je vous le répète, vous vous faites tort ! vous vous faites grand tort ! Et puis les amateurs, à présent, veulent des blouses étroites et des queues lourdes. On ne joue plus la bille ; tout est changé ! Il faut marcher avec son siècle ! Regardez Tellier, plutôt...

L'hôtesse devint rouge de dépit. Le pharmacien ajouta :

— Son billard, vous avez beau dire, est plus mignon que le vôtre ; et qu'on ait l'idée, par exemple de monter une poule patriotique pour la Pologne ou les inondés de Lyon...

— Ce ne sont pas des gueux comme lui qui nous font peur ! interrompit l'hôtesse, en haussant ses grosses épaules. Allez ! allez ! monsieur Homais, tant que le *Lion d’or* vivra, on y viendra. Nous avons du foin dans nos bottes, nous autres ! Au lieu qu'un de ces matins vous verrez le *Café français* fermé, et avec une belle affiche sur les auvents !... Changer mon billard, continuait-elle en se parlant à elle-même, lui qui m'est si commode pour ranger ma lessive, et sur lequel, dans le temps de la chasse, j'ai mis coucher jusqu'à six voyageurs !... Mais ce lambin d'Hivert qui n'arrive pas !

— L'attendez-vous pour le dîner de vos messieurs ? demanda le pharmacien.

— L'attendre ? Et M. Binet donc ! À six heures battant vous allez le voir entrer, car son pareil n'existe pas sur la terre pour l'exactitude. Il lui faut toujours sa place dans la petite salle ! On le tuerait plutôt que de le faire dîner ailleurs ! et dégoûté qu'il est ! et si difficile pour le cidre ! Ce n'est pas comme M. Léon ; lui, il arrive quelquefois à sept heures, sept heures et demie même ; il ne regarde seulement pas à ce qu'il mange. Quel bon jeune homme ! Jamais un mot plus haut que l'autre.

— C'est qu'il y a bien de la différence, voyez-vous, entre quelqu'un qui a reçu de l'éducation et un ancien carabinier qui est percepteur.

Six heures sonnèrent. Binet entra.

Il était vêtu d'une redingote bleue, tombant droit d'elle-même tout autour de son corps maigre, et sa casquette de cuir, à pattes nouées par des cordons sur le sommet de sa tête, laissait voir, sous la visière relevée, un front chauve, qu'avait déprimé l'habitude du casque. Il portait un gilet de drap noir, un col de crin, un pantalon gris, et, en toute saison, des bottes bien cirées qui avaient deux renflements parallèles, à cause de la saillie de ses orteils. Pas un poil ne dépassait la ligne de son collier blond, qui, contournant la mâchoire, encadrait comme la bordure d'une plate-bande sa longue figure terne, dont les yeux étaient petits et le nez busqué. Fort à tous les jeux de cartes, bon chasseur et possédant une belle écriture, il avait chez lui un tour, où il s'amusait à tourner des ronds de serviette dont il encombrait sa maison, avec la jalousie d'un artiste et l'égoïsme d'un bourgeois.

Il se dirigea vers la petite salle ; mais il fallut d'abord en faire sortir les trois meuniers ; et, pendant tout le temps que l'on fut à mettre son couvert, Binet resta silencieux à sa place, auprès du poêle ; puis il ferma la porte et retira sa casquette, comme d'usage.

— Ce ne sont pas les civilités qui lui useront la langue ! dit le pharmacien, dès qu'il fut seul avec l'hôtesse.

— Jamais il ne cause davantage, répondit-elle ; il est venu ici, la semaine dernière, deux voyageurs en draps, des garçons pleins d'esprit qui contaient, le soir, un tas de farces que j'en pleurais de rire ; eh bien, il restait là, comme une alose, sans dire un mot.

— Oui, fit le pharmacien, pas d'imagination, pas de saillies, rien de ce qui constitue l'homme de société !

— On dit pourtant qu'il a des moyens, objecta l'hôtesse.

— Des moyens ? répliqua M. Homais ; lui ! des moyens ? Dans sa partie, c'est possible, ajouta-t-il d'un ton plus calme.

Et il reprit :

— Ah ! qu'un négociant qui a des relations considérables, qu'un jurisconsulte, un médecin, un pharmacien soient tellement absorbés qu'ils en deviennent fantasques et bourrus même, je le comprends ; on en cite des traits dans les histoires ! Mais, au moins, c'est qu'ils pensent à quelque chose. Moi, par exemple, combien de fois m'est-il arrivé de chercher ma plume sur mon bureau pour écrire une étiquette, et de trouver, en définitive, que je l'avais placée à mon oreille !

Cependant, madame Lefrançois alla sur le seuil regarder si l'*Hirondelle* n'arrivait pas. Elle tressaillit. Un homme vêtu de noir entra tout à coup dans la cuisine. On distinguait, aux dernières lueurs du crépuscule, qu'il avait la figure rubiconde et le corps athlétique.

— Qu'y a-t-il pour votre service, monsieur le curé ? demanda la maîtresse d'auberge, tout en atteignant sur la cheminée un des flambeaux de cuivre qui s'y trouvaient rangés en colonnade avec leurs chandelles ; voulez-vous prendre quelque chose ? un doigt de cassis, un verre de vin ?

L'ecclésiastique refusa fort civilement. Il venait chercher son parapluie, qu'il avait oublié l'autre jour au couvent d'Ernemont, et, après avoir prié madame Lefrançois de le lui faire remettre au presbytère dans la soirée, il sortit pour se rendre à l'église, où l'on sonnait l'*Angelus*.

Quand le pharmacien n'entendit plus sur la place le bruit de ses souliers, il trouva fort inconvenante sa conduite de tout à l'heure. Ce refus d'accepter un rafraîchissement lui semblait une hypocrisie des plus odieuses ; les prêtres godaillaient tous sans qu'on les vît, et cherchaient à ramener le temps de la dîme.

L'hôtesse prit la défense de son curé :

— D'ailleurs, il en plierait quatre comme vous sur son genou. Il a, l'année dernière, aidé nos gens à rentrer la paille ; il en portait jusqu'à six bottes à la fois, tant il est fort !

— Bravo ! dit le pharmacien. Envoyez donc vos filles en confesse à des gaillards d'un tempérament pareil ! Moi, si j'étais le gouvernement, je voudrais qu'on saignât les prêtres une fois par mois. Oui, madame Lefrançois, tous les mois, une large phlébotomie, dans l'intérêt de la police et des moeurs !

— Taisez-vous donc, monsieur Homais ! vous êtes un impie ! vous n'avez pas de religion !

Le pharmacien répondit :

— J'ai une religion, ma religion, et même j'en ai plus qu'eux tous, avec leurs momeries et leurs jongleries ! J'adore Dieu, au contraire ! Je crois en l'Être suprême, à un Créateur, quel qu'il soit, peu m'importe, qui nous a placés ici-bas pour y remplir nos devoirs de citoyen et de père de famille ; mais je n'ai pas besoin d'aller, dans une église, baiser des plats d'argent, et engraisser de ma poche un tas de farceurs qui se nourrissent mieux que nous ! Car on peut l'honorer aussi bien dans un bois, dans un champ, ou même en contemplant la voûte éthérée, comme les anciens. Mon Dieu, à moi, c'est le Dieu de Socrate, de Franklin, de Voltaire et de Béranger ! Je suis pour la *Profession de foi du vicaire savoyard* et les immortels principes de 89 ! Aussi, je n'admets pas un bonhomme de bon Dieu qui se promène dans son parterre la canne à la main, loge ses amis dans le ventre des baleines, meurt en poussant un cri et ressuscite au bout de trois jours : choses absurdes en elles-mêmes et complètement opposées, d'ailleurs, à toutes les lois de la physique ; ce qui nous démontre, en passant, que les prêtres ont toujours croupi dans une ignorance turpide, où ils s'efforcent d'engloutir avec eux les populations.

Il se tut, cherchant des yeux un public autour de lui, car, dans son effervescence, le pharmacien un moment s'était cru en plein conseil municipal. Mais la maîtresse d'auberge ne l'écoutait plus ; elle tendait son oreille à un roulement éloigné. On distingua le bruit d'une voiture mêlé à un claquement de fers lâches qui battaient la terre, et l'*Hirondelle* enfin s'arrêta devant la porte.

C'était un coffre jaune porté par deux grandes roues qui, montant jusqu'à la hauteur de la bâche, empêchaient les voyageurs de voir la route et leur salissaient les épaules. Les petits carreaux de ses vasistas étroits tremblaient dans leurs châssis quand la voiture était fermée, et gardaient des taches de boue, çà et là, parmi leur vieille couche de poussière, que les pluies d'orage même ne lavaient pas tout à fait. Elle était attelée de trois chevaux, dont le premier en arbalète, et, lorsqu'on descendait les côtes, elle touchait du fond en cahotant.

Quelques bourgeois d'Yonville arrivèrent sur la place ; ils parlaient tous à la fois, demandant des nouvelles, des explications et des bourriches ; Hivert ne savait auquel répondre. C'était lui qui faisait à la ville les commissions du pays. Il allait dans les boutiques, rapportait des rouleaux de cuir au cordonnier, de la ferraille au maréchal, un baril de harengs pour sa maîtresse, des bonnets de chez la modiste, des toupets de chez le coiffeur ; et, le long de la route, en s'en revenant, il distribuait ses paquets, qu'il jetait par-dessus les clôtures des cours, debout sur son siège, et criant à pleine poitrine, pendant que ses chevaux allaient tout seuls.

Un accident l'avait retardé : la levrette de madame Bovary s'était enfuie à travers champs. On l'avait sifflée un grand quart d'heure. Hivert même était retourné d'une demi-lieue en arrière, croyant l'apercevoir à chaque minute ; mais il avait fallu continuer la route. Emma avait pleuré, s'était emportée ; elle avait accusé Charles de ce malheur. M. Lheureux, marchand d'étoffes, qui se trouvait avec elle dans la voiture, avait essayé de la consoler par quantité d'exemples de chiens perdus, reconnaissant leur maître au bout de longues années. On en citait un, disait-il, qui était revenu de Constantinople à Paris. Un autre avait fait cinquante lieues en ligne droite et passé quatre rivières à la nage ; et son père à lui-même avait possédé un caniche qui, après douze ans d'absence, lui avait tout à coup sauté sur le dos, un soir, dans la rue, comme il allait dîner en ville.

II

Emma descendit la première, puis Félicité, M. Lheureux, une nourrice, et l'on fut obligé de réveiller Charles dans son coin, où il s'était endormi complètement dès que la nuit était venue.

Homais se présenta ; il offrit ses hommages à Madame, ses civilités à Monsieur, dit qu'il était charmé d'avoir pu leur rendre quelque service, et ajouta d'un air cordial qu'il avait osé s'inviter lui-même, sa femme d'ailleurs étant absente.

Madame Bovary, quand elle fut dans la cuisine, s'approcha de la cheminée. Du bout de ses deux doigts, elle prit sa robe à la hauteur du genou, et, l'ayant ainsi remontée jusqu'aux chevilles, elle tendit à la flamme, par-dessus le gigot qui tournait, son pied chaussé d'une bottine noire. Le feu l'éclairait en entier, pénétrant d'une lumière crue la trame de sa robe, les pores égaux de sa peau blanche et même les paupières de ses yeux qu'elle clignait de temps à autre. Une grande couleur rouge passait sur elle, selon le souffle du vent qui venait par la porte entrouverte.

De l'autre côté de la cheminée, un jeune homme à chevelure blonde la regardait silencieusement.

Comme il s'ennuyait beaucoup à Yonville, où il était clerc chez maître Guillaumin, souvent M. Léon Dupuis (c'était lui, le second habitué du *Lion d’or*) reculait l'instant de son repas, espérant qu'il viendrait quelque voyageur à l'auberge avec qui causer dans la soirée. Les jours que sa besogne était finie il lui fallait bien, faute de savoir que faire, arriver à l'heure exacte, et subir depuis la soupe jusqu'au fromage le tête-à-tête de Binet. Ce fut donc avec joie qu'il accepta la proposition de l'hôtesse de dîner en la compagnie des nouveaux venus, et l'on passa dans la grande salle, où madame Lefrançois, par pompe, avait fait dresser les quatre couverts.

Homais demanda la permission de garder son bonnet grec, de peur des coryzas.

Puis, se tournant vers sa voisine :

— Madame, sans doute, est un peu lasse ? on est si épouvantablement cahoté dans notre *Hirondelle* !

— Il est vrai, répondit Emma ; mais le dérangement m'amuse toujours ; j'aime à changer de place.

— C'est une chose si maussade, soupira le clerc, que de vivre cloué aux mêmes endroits !

— Si vous étiez comme moi, dit Charles, sans cesse obligé d'être à cheval...

— Mais, reprit Léon s'adressant à madame Bovary, rien n'est plus agréable, il me semble ; quand on le peut, ajouta-t-il.

— Du reste, disait l'apothicaire, l'exercice de la médecine n'est pas fort pénible en nos contrées ; car l'état de nos routes permet l'usage du cabriolet, et, généralement, l'on paye assez bien, les cultivateurs étant aisés. Nous avons, sous le rapport médical, à part les cas ordinaires d'entérite, bronchite, affections bilieuses, etc., de temps à autre quelques fièvres intermittentes à la moisson, mais, en somme, peu de choses graves, rien de spécial à noter, si ce n'est beaucoup d'humeurs froides, et qui tiennent sans doute aux déplorables conditions hygiéniques de nos logements de paysan. Ah ! vous trouverez bien des préjugés à combattre, monsieur Bovary ; bien des entêtements de la routine, où se heurteront quotidiennement tous les efforts de votre science ; car on a recours encore aux neuvaines, aux reliques, au curé, plutôt que de venir naturellement chez le médecin ou chez le pharmacien. Le climat, pourtant, n'est point, à vrai dire, mauvais, et même nous comptons dans la commune quelques nonagénaires. Le thermomètre (j'en ai fait les observations) descend en hiver jusqu'à quatre degrés, et, dans la forte saison, touche vingt-cinq, trente centigrades tout au plus, ce qui nous donne vingt-quatre Réaumur au maximum, ou autrement cinquante-quatre Fahrenheit (mesure anglaise), pas davantage ! – et, en effet, nous sommes abrités des vents du nord par la forêt d'Argueil d'une part, des vents d'ouest par la côte Saint-Jean de l'autre ; et cette chaleur, cependant, qui à cause de la vapeur d'eau dégagée par la rivière et la présence considérable de bestiaux dans les prairies, lesquels exhalent, comme vous savez, beaucoup d'ammoniaque, c'est-à-dire azote, hydrogène et oxygène (non, azote et hydrogène seulement), et qui, pompant à elle l'humus de la terre, confondant toutes ces émanations différentes, les réunissant en un faisceau, pour ainsi dire, et se combinant de soi-même avec l'électricité répandue dans l'atmosphère, lorsqu'il y en a, pourrait à la longue, comme dans les pays tropicaux, engendrer des miasmes insalubres ; – cette chaleur, dis-je, se trouve justement tempérée du côté où elle vient, ou plutôt d'où elle viendrait, c'est-à-dire du côté sud, par les vents de sud-est, lesquels, s'étant rafraîchis d'eux-mêmes en passant sur la Seine, nous arrivent quelquefois tout d'un coup, comme des brises de Russie !

— Avez-vous du moins quelques promenades dans les environs ? continuait madame Bovary parlant au jeune homme.

— Oh ! fort peu, répondit-il. Il y a un endroit que l'on nomme la Pâture, sur le haut de la côte, à la lisière de la forêt. Quelquefois, le dimanche, je vais là, et j'y reste avec un livre, à regarder le soleil couchant.

— Je ne trouve rien d'admirable comme les soleils couchants, reprit-elle, mais au bord de la mer, surtout.

— Oh ! j'adore la mer, dit M. Léon.

— Et puis ne vous semble-t-il pas, répliqua madame Bovary, que l'esprit vogue plus librement sur cette étendue sans limites, dont la contemplation vous élève l'âme et donne des idées d'infini, d'idéal ?

— Il en est de même des paysages de montagnes, reprit Léon. J'ai un cousin qui a voyagé en Suisse l'année dernière, et qui me disait qu'on ne peut se figurer la poésie des lacs, le charme des cascades, l'effet gigantesque des glaciers. On voit des pins d'une grandeur incroyable, en travers des torrents, des cabanes suspendues sur des précipices, et, à mille pieds sous vous, des vallées entières, quand les nuages s'entrouvrent. Ces spectacles doivent enthousiasmer, disposer à la prière, à l'extase ! Aussi je ne m'étonne plus de ce musicien célèbre qui, pour exciter mieux son imagination, avait coutume d'aller jouer du piano devant quelque site imposant.

— Vous faites de la musique ? demanda-t-elle.

— Non, mais je l'aime beaucoup, répondit-il.

— Ah ! ne l'écoutez pas, madame Bovary, interrompit Homais en se penchant sur son assiette, c'est modestie pure. – Comment, mon cher ! Eh ! l'autre jour, dans votre chambre, vous chantiez *l'Ange gardien* à ravir. Je vous entendais du laboratoire ; vous détachiez cela comme un acteur.

Léon, en effet, logeait chez le pharmacien, où il avait une petite pièce au second étage, sur la place. Il rougit à ce compliment de son propriétaire, qui déjà s'était tourné vers le médecin et lui énumérait les uns après les autres les principaux habitants d'Yonville. Il racontait des anecdotes, donnait des renseignements ; on ne savait pas au juste la fortune du notaire, *et il y avait la maison Tuvache* qui faisait beaucoup d'embarras.

Emma reprit :

— Et quelle musique préférez-vous ?

— Oh ! la musique allemande, celle qui porte à rêver.

— Connaissez-vous les Italiens ?

— Pas encore ; mais je les verrai l'année prochaine, quand j'irai habiter Paris, pour finir mon droit.

— C'est comme j'avais l'honneur, dit le pharmacien, de l'exprimer à M. votre époux, à propos de ce pauvre Yanoda qui s'est enfui ; vous vous trouverez, grâce aux folies qu'il a faites, jouir d'une des maisons les plus confortables d'Yonville. Ce qu'elle a principalement de commode pour un médecin, c'est une porte sur l'*Allée*, qui permet d'entrer et de sortir sans être vu. D'ailleurs, elle est fournie de tout ce qui est agréable à un ménage : buanderie, cuisine avec office, salon de famille, fruitier, *etc.* C'était un gaillard qui n'y regardait pas ! Il s'était fait construire, au bout du jardin, à côté de l'eau, une tonnelle tout exprès pour boire de la bière en été, et si Madame aime le jardinage, elle pourra...

— Ma femme ne s'en occupe guère, dit Charles ; elle aime mieux, quoiqu'on lui recommande l'exercice, toujours rester dans sa chambre, à lire.

— C'est comme moi, répliqua Léon ; quelle meilleure chose, en effet, que d'être le soir au coin du feu avec un livre, pendant que le vent bat les carreaux, que la lampe brûle ?...

— N'est-ce pas ? dit-elle, en fixant sur lui ses grands yeux noirs tout ouverts.

— On ne songe à rien, continuait-il, les heures passent. On se promène immobile dans des pays que l'on croit voir, et votre pensée, s'enlaçant à la fiction, se joue dans les détails ou poursuit le contour des aventures. Elle se mêle aux personnages ; il semble que c'est vous qui palpitez sous leurs costumes.

— C'est vrai ! c'est vrai ! disait-elle.

— Vous est-il arrivé parfois, reprit Léon, de rencontrer dans un livre une idée vague que l'on a eue, quelque image obscurcie qui revient de loin, et comme l'exposition entière de votre sentiment le plus délié ?

— J'ai éprouvé cela, répondit-elle.

— C'est pourquoi, dit-il, j'aime surtout les poètes. Je trouve les vers plus tendres que la prose, et qu'ils font bien mieux pleurer.

— Cependant ils fatiguent à la longue, reprit Emma ; et maintenant, au contraire, j'adore les histoires qui se suivent tout d'une haleine, où l'on a peur. Je déteste les héros communs et les sentiments tempérés, comme il y en a dans la nature.

— En effet, observa le clerc, ces ouvrages ne touchant pas le coeur, s'écartent, il me semble, du vrai but de l'Art. Il est si doux, parmi les désenchantements de la vie, de pouvoir se reporter en idée sur de nobles caractères, des affections pures et des tableaux de bonheur. Quant à moi, vivant ici, loin du monde, c'est ma seule distraction ; mais Yonville offre si peu de ressources !

— Comme Tostes, sans doute, reprit Emma ; aussi j'étais toujours abonnée à un cabinet de lecture.

— Si Madame veut me faire l'honneur d'en user, dit le pharmacien, qui venait d'entendre ces derniers mots, j'ai moi-même à sa disposition une bibliothèque composée des meilleurs auteurs : Voltaire, Rousseau, Delille, Walter Scott, *l'Écho des feuilletons*, etc., et je reçois, de plus, différentes feuilles périodiques, parmi lesquelles *le Fanal de Rouen*, quotidiennement, ayant l'avantage d'en être le correspondant pour les circonscriptions de Buchy, Forges, Neufchâtel, Yonville et les alentours.

Depuis deux heures et demie, on était à table ; car la servante Artémise, traînant nonchalamment sur les carreaux ses savates de lisière, apportait les assiettes les unes après les autres, oubliait tout, n'entendait à rien et sans cesse laissait entrebâillée la porte du billard, qui battait contre le mur du bout de sa clenche.

Sans qu'il s'en aperçût, tout en causant, Léon avait posé son pied sur un des barreaux de la chaise où madame Bovary était assise. Elle portait une petite cravate de soie bleue, qui tenait droit comme une fraise un col de batiste tuyauté ; et, selon les mouvements de tête qu'elle faisait, le bas de son visage s'enfonçait dans le linge ou en sortait avec douceur. C'est ainsi, l'un près de l'autre, pendant que Charles et le pharmacien devisaient, qu'ils entrèrent dans une de ces vagues conversations où le hasard des phrases vous ramène toujours au centre fixe d'une sympathie commune. Spectacles de Paris, titres de romans, quadrilles nouveaux, et le monde qu'ils ne connaissaient pas, Tostes où elle avait vécu, Yonville où ils étaient, ils examinèrent tout, parlèrent de tout jusqu'à la fin du dîner.

Quand le café fut servi, Félicité s'en alla préparer la chambre dans la nouvelle maison, et les convives bientôt levèrent le siège. Madame Lefrançois dormait auprès des cendres, tandis que le garçon d'écurie, une lanterne à la main, attendait M. et madame Bovary pour les conduire chez eux. Sa chevelure rouge était entremêlée de brins de paille, et il boitait de la jambe gauche. Lorsqu'il eut pris de son autre main le parapluie de M. le curé, l'on se mit en marche.

Le bourg était endormi. Les piliers des halles allongeaient de grandes ombres. La terre était toute grise, comme par une nuit d'été.

Mais, la maison du médecin se trouvant à cinquante pas de l'auberge, il fallut presque aussitôt se souhaiter le bonsoir, et la compagnie se dispersa.

Emma, dès le vestibule, sentit tomber sur ses épaules, comme un linge humide, le froid du plâtre. Les murs étaient neufs, et les marches de bois craquèrent. Dans la chambre, au premier, un jour blanchâtre passait par les fenêtres sans rideaux. On entrevoyait des cimes d'arbres, et plus loin la prairie, à demi noyée dans le brouillard, qui fumait au clair de la lune, selon le cours de la rivière. Au milieu de l'appartement, pêle-mêle, il y avait des tiroirs de commode, des bouteilles, des tringles, des bâtons dorés avec des matelas sur des chaises et des cuvettes sur le parquet, – les deux hommes qui avaient apporté les meubles ayant tout laissé là, négligemment.

C'était la quatrième fois qu'elle couchait dans un endroit inconnu. La première avait été le jour de son entrée au couvent, la seconde celle de son arrivée à Tostes, la troisième à la Vaubyessard, la quatrième était celle-ci ; et chacune s'était trouvée faire dans sa vie comme l'inauguration d'une phase nouvelle. Elle ne croyait pas que les choses pussent se représenter les mêmes à des places différentes, et, puisque la portion vécue avait été mauvaise, sans doute ce qui restait à consommer serait meilleur.

III

Le lendemain, à son réveil, elle aperçut le clerc sur la place. Elle était en peignoir. Il leva la tête et la salua. Elle fit une inclination rapide et referma la fenêtre.

Léon attendit pendant tout le jour que six heures du soir fussent arrivées ; mais, en entrant à l'auberge, il ne trouva personne que M. Binet, attablé.

Ce dîner de la veille était pour lui un événement considérable ; jamais, jusqu'alors, il n'avait causé pendant deux heures de suite avec une *dame*. Comment donc avoir pu lui exposer, et en un tel langage, quantité de choses qu'il n'aurait pas si bien dites auparavant ? il était timide d'habitude et gardait cette réserve qui participe à la fois de la pudeur et de la dissimulation. On trouvait à Yonville qu'il avait des manières *comme il faut*. Il écoutait raisonner les gens mûrs, et ne paraissait point exalté en politique, chose remarquable pour un jeune homme. Puis il possédait des talents, il peignait à l'aquarelle, savait lire la clef de sol, et s'occupait volontiers de littérature après son dîner, quand il ne jouait pas aux cartes. M. Homais le considérait pour son instruction ; madame Homais l'affectionnait pour sa complaisance, car souvent il accompagnait au jardin les petits Homais, marmots toujours barbouillés, fort mal élevés et quelque peu lymphatiques, comme leur mère. Ils avaient pour les soigner, outre la bonne, Justin, l'élève en pharmacie, un arrière-cousin de M. Homais que l'on avait pris dans la maison par charité, et qui servait en même temps de domestique.

L'apothicaire se montra le meilleur des voisins. Il renseigna madame Bovary sur les fournisseurs, fit venir son marchand de cidre tout exprès, goûta la boisson lui-même, et veilla dans la cave à ce que la futaille fût bien placée ; il indiqua encore la façon de s'y prendre pour avoir une provision de beurre à bon marché, et conclut un arrangement avec Lestiboudois, le sacristain, qui, outre ses fonctions sacerdotales et mortuaires, soignait les principaux jardins d'Yonville à l'heure ou à l'année, selon le goût des personnes.

Le besoin de s'occuper d'autrui ne poussait pas seul le pharmacien à tant de cordialité obséquieuse, et il y avait là-dessous un plan.

Il avait enfreint la loi du 19 ventôse an XI, article 1er, qui défend à tout individu non porteur de diplôme l'exercice de la médecine ; si bien que, sur des dénonciations ténébreuses, Homais avait été mandé à Rouen, près M. le procureur du roi, en son cabinet particulier. Le magistrat l'avait reçu debout, dans sa robe, hermine à l'épaule et toque en tête. C'était le matin, avant l'audience. On entendait dans le corridor passer les fortes bottes des gendarmes, et comme un bruit lointain de grosses serrures qui se fermaient. Les oreilles du pharmacien lui tintèrent à croire qu'il allait tomber d'un coup de sang ; il entrevit des culs de basse-fosse, sa famille en pleurs, la pharmacie vendue, tous les bocaux disséminés ; et il fut obligé d'entrer dans un café prendre un verre de rhum avec de l'eau de Seltz, pour se remettre les esprits.

Peu à peu, le souvenir de cette admonition s'affaiblit, et il continuait, comme autrefois, à donner des consultations anodines dans son arrière-boutique. Mais le maire lui en voulait, des confrères étaient jaloux, il fallait tout craindre ; en s'attachant M. Bovary par des politesses, c'était gagner sa gratitude, et empêcher qu'il ne parlât plus tard, s'il s'apercevait de quelque chose. Aussi, tous les matins, Homais lui apportait *le journal*, et souvent, dans l'après-midi, quittait un instant la pharmacie pour aller chez l'officier de santé faire la conversation.

Charles était triste : la clientèle n'arrivait pas. Il demeurait assis pendant de longues heures, sans parler, allait dormir dans son cabinet ou regardait coudre sa femme. Pour se distraire, il s'employa chez lui comme homme de peine, et même il essaya de peindre le grenier avec un reste de couleur que les peintres avaient laissé. Mais les affaires d'argent le préoccupaient. Il en avait tant dépensé pour les réparations de Tostes, pour les toilettes de Madame et pour le déménagement, que toute la dot, plus de trois mille écus, s'était écoulée en deux ans. Puis, que de choses endommagées ou perdues dans le transport de Tostes à Yonville, sans compter le curé de plâtre, qui, tombant de la charrette à un cahot trop fort, s'était écrasé en mille morceaux sur le pavé de Quincampoix !

Un souci meilleur vint le distraire, à savoir la grossesse de sa femme. À mesure que le terme en approchait, il la chérissait davantage. C'était un autre lien de la chair s'établissant et comme le sentiment continu d'une union plus complexe. Quand il voyait de loin sa démarche paresseuse et sa taille tourner mollement sur ses hanches sans corset, quand vis-à-vis l'un de l'autre il la contemplait tout à l'aise et qu'elle prenait, assise, des poses fatiguées dans son fauteuil, alors son bonheur ne se tenait plus ; il se levait, il l'embrassait, passait ses mains sur sa figure, l'appelait petite maman, voulait la faire danser, et débitait, moitié riant, moitié pleurant, toutes sortes de plaisanteries caressantes qui lui venaient à l'esprit. L'idée d'avoir engendré le délectait. Rien ne lui manquait à présent. Il connaissait l'existence humaine tout du long, et il s'y attablait sur les deux coudes avec sérénité.

Emma d'abord sentit un grand étonnement, puis eut envie d'être délivrée, pour savoir quelle chose c'était que d'être mère. Mais, ne pouvant faire les dépenses qu'elle voulait, avoir un berceau en nacelle avec des rideaux de soie rose et des béguins brodés, elle renonça au trousseau dans un accès d'amertume, et le commanda d'un seul coup à une ouvrière du village, sans rien choisir ni discuter.

Elle ne s'amusa donc pas à ces préparatifs où la tendresse des mères se met en appétit, et son affection, dès l'origine, en fut peut-être atténuée de quelque chose.

Cependant, comme Charles, à tous les repas, parlait du marmot, bientôt elle y songea d'une façon plus continue.

Elle souhaitait un fils ; il serait fort et brun, elle l'appellerait Georges ; et cette idée d'avoir pour enfant un mâle était comme la revanche en espoir de toutes ses impuissances passées. Un homme, au moins, est libre ; il peut parcourir les passions et les pays, traverser les obstacles, mordre aux bonheurs les plus lointains. Mais une femme est empêchée continuellement. Inerte et flexible à la fois, elle a contre elle les mollesses de la chair avec les dépendances de la loi. Sa volonté, comme le voile de son chapeau retenu par un cordon, palpite à tous les vents ; il y a toujours quelque désir qui entraîne, quelque convenance qui retient.

Elle accoucha un dimanche, vers six heures, au soleil levant.

— C'est une fille ! dit Charles.

Elle tourna la tête et s'évanouit.

Presque aussitôt, madame Homais accourut et l'embrassa, ainsi que la mère Lefrançois, du *Lion d’or*. Le pharmacien, en homme discret, lui adressa seulement quelques félicitations provisoires, par la porte entrebâillée. Il voulut voir l'enfant, et le trouva bien conformé.

Pendant sa convalescence, elle s'occupa beaucoup à chercher un nom pour sa fille. D'abord, elle passa en revue tous ceux qui avaient des terminaisons italiennes, tels que Clara, Louisa, Amanda, Atala ; elle aimait assez Galsuinde, plus encore Yseult ou Léocadie. Charles désirait qu'on appelât l'enfant comme sa mère ; Emma s'y opposait. On parcourut le calendrier d'un bout à l'autre, et l'on consulta les étrangers.

— M. Léon, disait le pharmacien, avec qui j'en causais l'autre jour, s'étonne que vous ne choisissiez point Madeleine, qui est excessivement à la mode maintenant.

Mais la mère Bovary se récria bien fort sur ce nom de pécheresse. M. Homais, quant à lui, avait en prédilection tous ceux qui rappelaient un grand homme, un fait illustre ou une conception généreuse, et c'est dans ce système-là qu'il avait baptisé ses quatre enfants. Ainsi, Napoléon représentait la gloire et Franklin la liberté ; Irma, peut-être, était une concession au romantisme ; mais Athalie, un hommage au plus immortel chef-d'oeuvre de la scène française. Car ses convictions philosophiques n'empêchaient pas ses admirations artistiques, le penseur chez lui n'étouffait point l'homme sensible ; il savait établir des différences, faire la part de l'imagination et celle du fanatisme. De cette tragédie, par exemple, il blâmait les idées, mais il admirait le style ; il maudissait la conception, mais il applaudissait à tous les détails, et s'exaspérait contre les personnages, en s'enthousiasmant de leurs discours. Lorsqu'il lisait les grands morceaux, il était transporté ; mais, quand il songeait que les calotins en tiraient avantage pour leur boutique, il était désolé, et dans cette confusion de sentiments où il s'embarrassait, il aurait voulu tout à la fois pouvoir couronner Racine de ses deux mains et discuter avec lui pendant un bon quart d'heure.

Enfin, Emma se souvint qu'au château de la Vaubyessard elle avait entendu la marquise appeler Berthe une jeune femme ; dès lors ce nom-là fut choisi, et, comme le père Rouault ne pouvait venir, on pria M. Homais d'être parrain. Il donna pour cadeaux tous produits de son établissement, à savoir : six boîtes de jujubes, un bocal entier de racahout, trois coffins de pâte à la guimauve, et, de plus, six bâtons de sucre candi qu'il avait retrouvés dans un placard. Le soir de la cérémonie, il y eut un grand dîner ; le curé s'y trouvait ; on s'échauffa. M. Homais, vers les liqueurs, entonna le *Dieu des bonnes gens*. M. Léon chanta une barcarolle, et madame Bovary mère, qui était la marraine, une romance du temps de l'Empire ; enfin M. Bovary père exigea que l'on descendît l'enfant, et se mit à le baptiser avec un verre de champagne qu'il lui versait de haut sur la tête. Cette dérision du premier des sacrements indigna l'abbé Bournisien ; le père Bovary répondit par une citation de *la Guerre des dieux*, le curé voulut partir ; les dames suppliaient ; Homais s'interposa ; et l'on parvint à faire rasseoir l'ecclésiastique, qui reprit tranquillement, dans sa soucoupe, sa demi-tasse de café à moitié bue.

M. Bovary père resta encore un mois à Yonville, dont il éblouit les habitants par un superbe bonnet de police à galons d'argent, qu'il portait le matin, pour fumer sa pipe sur la place. Ayant aussi l'habitude de boire beaucoup d'eau-de-vie, souvent il envoyait la servante au *Lion d’or* lui en acheter une bouteille, que l'on inscrivait au compte de son fils ; et il usa, pour parfumer ses foulards, toute la provision d'eau de Cologne qu'avait sa bru.

Celle-ci ne se déplaisait point dans sa compagnie. Il avait couru le monde : il parlait de Berlin, de Vienne, de Strasbourg, de son temps d'officier, des maîtresses qu'il avait eues, des grands déjeuners qu'il avait faits ; puis il se montrait aimable, et parfois même, soit dans l'escalier ou au jardin, il lui saisissait la taille en s'écriant :

— Charles, prends garde à toi !

Alors la mère Bovary s'effraya pour le bonheur de son fils, et, craignant que son époux, à la longue, n'eût une influence immorale sur les idées de la jeune femme, elle se hâta de presser le départ. Peut-être avait-elle des inquiétudes plus sérieuses. M. Bovary était homme à ne rien respecter.

Un jour, Emma fut prise tout à coup du besoin de voir sa petite fille, qui avait été mise en nourrice chez la femme du menuisier ; et, sans regarder à l'almanach si les six semaines de la Vierge duraient encore, elle s'achemina vers la demeure de Rolet, qui se trouvait à l'extrémité du village, au bas de la côte, entre la grande route et les prairies.

Il était midi ; les maisons avaient leurs volets fermés, et les toits d'ardoises, qui reluisaient sous la lumière âpre du ciel bleu, semblaient à la crête de leurs pignons faire pétiller des étincelles. Un vent lourd soufflait. Emma se sentait faible en marchant ; les cailloux du trottoir la blessaient ; elle hésita si elle ne s'en retournerait pas chez elle, ou entrerait quelque part pour s'asseoir.

À ce moment, M. Léon sortit d'une porte voisine avec une liasse de papiers sous son bras. Il vint la saluer et se mit à l'ombre devant la boutique de Lheureux, sous la tente grise qui avançait.

Madame Bovary dit qu'elle allait voir son enfant, mais qu'elle commençait à être lasse.

— Si..., reprit Léon, n'osant poursuivre.

— Avez-vous affaire quelque part ? demanda-t-elle.

Et, sur la réponse du clerc, elle le pria de l'accompagner. Dès le soir, cela fut connu dans Yonville, et madame Tuvache, la femme du maire, déclara devant sa servante que *madame Bovary se compromettait*.

Pour arriver chez la nourrice il fallait, après la rue, tourner à gauche, comme pour gagner le cimetière, et suivre, entre des maisonnettes et des cours, un petit sentier que bordaient des troènes. Ils étaient en fleur et les véroniques aussi, les églantiers, les orties, et les ronces légères qui s'élançaient des buissons. Par le trou des haies, on apercevait, dans les *masures*, quelque pourceau sur un fumier, ou des vaches embricolées, frottant leurs cornes contre le tronc des arbres. Tous les deux, côte à côte, ils marchaient doucement, elle s'appuyant sur lui et lui retenant son pas qu'il mesurait sur les siens ; devant eux, un essaim de mouches voltigeait, en bourdonnant dans l'air chaud.

Ils reconnurent la maison à un vieux noyer qui l'ombrageait. Basse et couverte de tuiles brunes, elle avait en dehors, sous la lucarne de son grenier, un chapelet d'oignons suspendu. Des bourrées, debout contre la clôture d'épines, entouraient un carré de laitues, quelques pieds de lavande et des pois à fleurs montés sur des rames. De l'eau sale coulait en s'éparpillant sur l'herbe, et il y avait tout autour plusieurs guenilles indistinctes, des bas de tricot, une camisole d'indienne rouge, et un grand drap de toile épaisse étalé en long sur la haie. Au bruit de la barrière, la nourrice parut, tenant sur son bras un enfant qui tétait. Elle tirait de l'autre main un pauvre marmot chétif, couvert de scrofules au visage, le fils d'un bonnetier de Rouen, que ses parents trop occupés de leur négoce laissaient à la campagne.

— Entrez, dit-elle ; votre petite est là qui dort.

La chambre, au rez-de-chaussée, la seule du logis, avait au fond contre la muraille un large lit sans rideaux, tandis que le pétrin occupait le côté de la fenêtre, dont une vitre était raccommodée avec un soleil de papier bleu. Dans l'angle, derrière la porte, des brodequins à clous luisants étaient rangés sous la dalle du lavoir, près d'une bouteille pleine d'huile qui portait une plume à son goulot ; un *Mathieu Laensberg* traînait sur la cheminée poudreuse, parmi des pierres à fusil, des bouts de chandelle et des morceaux d'amadou. Enfin la dernière superfluité de cet appartement était une Renommée soufflant dans des trompettes, image découpée sans doute à même quelque prospectus de parfumerie, et que six pointes à sabot clouaient au mur.

L'enfant d'Emma dormait à terre, dans un berceau d'osier. Elle la prit avec la couverture qui l'enveloppait, et se mit à chanter doucement en se dandinant.

Léon se promenait dans la chambre ; il lui semblait étrange de voir cette belle dame en robe de nankin, tout au milieu de cette misère. Madame Bovary devint rouge ; il se détourna, croyant que ses yeux peut-être avaient eu quelque impertinence. Puis elle recoucha la petite, qui venait de vomir sur sa collerette. La nourrice aussitôt vint l'essuyer, protestant qu'il n'y paraîtrait pas.

— Elle m'en fait bien d'autres, disait-elle, et je ne suis occupée qu'à la rincer continuellement ! Si vous aviez donc la complaisance de commander à Camus l'épicier, qu'il me laisse prendre un peu de savon lorsqu'il m'en faut ? ce serait même plus commode pour vous, que je ne dérangerais pas.

— C'est bien, c'est bien ! dit Emma. Au revoir, mère Rolet !

Et elle sortit, en essuyant ses pieds sur le seuil.

La bonne femme l'accompagna jusqu'au bout de la cour, tout en parlant du mal qu'elle avait à se relever la nuit.

— J'en suis si rompue quelquefois, que je m'endors sur ma chaise ; aussi, vous devriez pour le moins me donner une petite livre de café moulu qui me ferait un mois et que je prendrais le matin avec du lait.

Après avoir subi ses remerciements, madame Bovary s'en alla ; et elle était quelque peu avancée dans le sentier, lorsqu'à un bruit de sabots elle tourna la tête : c'était la nourrice !

— Qu'y a-t-il ?

Alors la paysanne, la tirant à l'écart, derrière un orme, se mit à lui parler de son mari, qui, avec son métier et six francs par an que le capitaine...

— Achevez plus vite, dit Emma.

— Eh bien, reprit la nourrice poussant des soupirs entre chaque mot, j'ai peur qu'il ne se fasse une tristesse de me voir prendre du café toute seule ; vous savez, les hommes...

— Puisque vous en aurez, répétait Emma, je vous en donnerai !... Vous m'ennuyez !

— Hélas ! ma pauvre chère dame, c'est qu'il a, par suite de ses blessures, des crampes terribles à la poitrine. Il dit même que le cidre l'affaiblit.

— Mais dépêchez-vous, mère Rolet !

— Donc, reprit celle-ci faisant une révérence, si ce n'était pas trop vous demander..., – elle salua encore une fois, – quand vous voudrez, – et son regard suppliait, – un cruchon d'eau-de-vie, dit-elle enfin, et j'en frotterai les pieds de votre petite, qui les a tendres comme la langue.

Débarrassée de la nourrice, Emma reprit le bras de M. Léon. Elle marcha rapidement pendant quelque temps ; puis elle se ralentit, et son regard qu'elle promenait devant elle rencontra l'épaule du jeune homme, dont la redingote avait un collet de velours noir. Ses cheveux châtains tombaient dessus, plats et bien peignés. Elle remarqua ses ongles, qui étaient plus longs qu'on ne les portait à Yonville. C'était une des grandes occupations du clerc que de les entretenir ; et il gardait, à cet usage, un canif tout particulier dans son écritoire.

Ils s'en revinrent à Yonville en suivant le bord de l'eau. Dans la saison chaude, la berge plus élargie découvrait jusqu'à leur base les murs des jardins, qui avaient un escalier de quelques marches descendant à la rivière. Elle coulait sans bruit, rapide et froide à l'oeil ; de grandes herbes minces s'y courbaient ensemble, selon le courant qui les poussait, et comme des chevelures vertes abandonnées s'étalaient dans sa limpidité. Quelquefois, à la pointe des joncs ou sur la feuille des nénuphars, un insecte à pattes fines marchait ou se posait. Le soleil traversait d'un rayon les petits globules bleus des ondes qui se succédaient en se crevant ; les vieux saules ébranchés miraient dans l'eau leur écorce grise ; au delà, tout alentour, la prairie semblait vide. C'était l'heure du dîner dans les fermes, et la jeune femme et son compagnon n'entendaient en marchant que la cadence de leurs pas sur la terre du sentier, les paroles qu'ils se disaient, et le frôlement de la robe d'Emma qui bruissait tout autour d'elle.

Les murs des jardins, garnis à leur chaperon de morceaux de bouteilles, étaient chauds comme le vitrage d'une serre. Dans les briques, des ravenelles avaient poussé ; et, du bord de son ombrelle déployée, madame Bovary, tout en passant, faisait s'égrener en poussière jaune un peu de leurs fleurs flétries, ou bien quelque branche des chèvrefeuilles et des clématites qui pendaient en dehors traînait un moment sur la soie, en s'accrochant aux effilés.

Ils causaient d'une troupe de danseurs espagnols, que l'on attendait bientôt sur le théâtre de Rouen.

— Vous irez ? demanda-t-elle.

— Si je le peux, répondit-il.

N'avaient-ils rien autre chose à se dire ? Leurs yeux pourtant étaient pleins d'une causerie plus sérieuse ; et, tandis qu'ils s'efforçaient à trouver des phrases banales, ils sentaient une même langueur les envahir tous les deux ; c'était comme un murmure de l'âme, profond, continu, qui dominait celui des voix. Surpris d'étonnement à cette suavité nouvelle, ils ne songeaient pas à s'en raconter la sensation ou à en découvrir la cause. Les bonheurs futurs, comme les rivages des tropiques, projettent sur l'immensité qui les précède leurs mollesses natales, une brise parfumée, et l'on s'assoupit dans cet enivrement sans même s'inquiéter de l'horizon que l'on n'aperçoit pas.

La terre, à un endroit, se trouvait effondrée par le pas des bestiaux ; il fallut marcher sur de grosses pierres vertes, espacées dans la boue. Souvent elle s'arrêtait une minute à regarder où poser sa bottine, – et, chancelant sur le caillou qui tremblait, les coudes en l'air, la taille penchée, l'oeil indécis, elle riait alors, de peur de tomber dans les flaques d'eau.

Quand ils furent arrivés devant son jardin, madame Bovary poussa la petite barrière, monta les marches en courant et disparut.

Léon rentra à son étude. Le patron était absent ; il jeta un coup d'oeil sur les dossiers, puis se tailla une plume, prit enfin son chapeau et s'en alla.

Il alla sur la Pâture, au haut de la côte d'Argueil, à l'entrée de la forêt ; il se coucha par terre sous les sapins, et regarda le ciel à travers ses doigts.

— Comme je m'ennuie ! se disait-il, comme je m'ennuie !

Il se trouvait à plaindre de vivre dans ce village, avec Homais pour ami et M. Guillaumin pour maître.

Ce dernier, tout occupé d'affaires, portant des lunettes à branches d'or et favoris rouges sur cravate blanche, n'entendait rien aux délicatesses de l'esprit, quoiqu'il affectât un genre raide et anglais qui avait ébloui le clerc dans les premiers temps. Quant à la femme du pharmacien, c'était la meilleure épouse de Normandie, douce comme un mouton, chérissant ses enfants, son père, sa mère, ses cousins, pleurant aux maux d'autrui, laissant tout aller dans son ménage, et détestant les corsets ; – mais si lente à se mouvoir, si ennuyeuse à écouter, d'un aspect si commun et d'une conversation si restreinte, qu'il n'avait jamais songé, quoiqu'elle eût trente ans, qu'il en eût vingt, qu'ils couchassent porte à porte, et qu'il lui parlât chaque jour, qu'elle pût être une femme pour quelqu'un, ni qu'elle possédât de son sexe autre chose que la robe.

Et ensuite, qu'y avait-il ? Binet, quelques marchands, deux ou trois cabaretiers, le curé, et enfin M. Tuvache, le maire, avec ses deux fils, gens cossus, bourrus, obtus, cultivant leurs terres eux-mêmes, faisant des ripailles en famille, dévots d'ailleurs, et d'une société tout à fait insupportable.

Mais, sur le fond commun de tous ces visages humains, la figure d'Emma se détachait isolée et plus lointaine cependant ; car il sentait entre elle et lui comme de vagues abîmes.

Au commencement, il était venu chez elle plusieurs fois dans la compagnie du pharmacien. Charles n'avait point paru extrêmement curieux de le recevoir ; et Léon ne savait comment s'y prendre entre la peur d'être indiscret et le désir d'une intimité qu'il estimait presque impossible.

IV

Dès les premiers froids, Emma quitta sa chambre pour habiter la salle, longue pièce à plafond bas où il y avait, sur la cheminée, un polypier touffu s'étalant contre la glace. Assise dans son fauteuil, près de la fenêtre, elle voyait passer les gens du village sur le trottoir.

Léon, deux fois par jour, allait de son étude au *Lion d’or*. Emma, de loin, l'entendait venir ; elle se penchait en écoutant ; et le jeune homme glissait derrière le rideau, toujours vêtu de même façon et sans détourner la tête. Mais au crépuscule, lorsque, le menton dans sa main gauche, elle avait abandonné sur ses genoux sa tapisserie commencée, souvent elle tressaillait à l'apparition de cette ombre glissant tout à coup. Elle se levait et commandait qu'on mît le couvert.

M. Homais arrivait pendant le dîner. Bonnet grec à la main, il entrait à pas muets pour ne déranger personne et toujours en répétant la même phrase : « Bonsoir la compagnie ! » Puis, quand il s'était posé à sa place, contre la table, entre les deux époux, il demandait au médecin des nouvelles de ses malades, et celui-ci le consultait sur la probabilité des honoraires. Ensuite, on causait de ce qu'il y avait *dans le journal*. Homais, à cette heure-là, le savait presque par coeur ; et il le rapportait intégralement, avec les réflexions du journaliste et toutes les histoires des catastrophes individuelles arrivées en France ou à l'étranger. Mais, le sujet se tarissant, il ne tardait pas à lancer quelques observations sur les mets qu'il voyait. Parfois même, se levant à demi, il indiquait délicatement à Madame le morceau le plus tendre, ou, se tournant vers la bonne, lui adressait des conseils pour la manipulation des ragoûts et l'hygiène des assaisonnements ; il parlait arome, osmazôme, sucs et gélatine d'une façon à éblouir. La tête d'ailleurs plus remplie de recettes que sa pharmacie ne l'était de bocaux, Homais excellait à faire quantité de confitures, vinaigres et liqueurs douces, et il connaissait aussi toutes les inventions nouvelles de caléfacteurs économiques, avec l'art de conserver les fromages et de soigner les vins malades.

À huit heures, Justin venait le chercher pour fermer la pharmacie. Alors M. Homais le regardait d'un oeil narquois, surtout si Félicité se trouvait là, s'étant aperçu que son élève affectionnait la maison du médecin.

— Mon gaillard, disait-il, commence à avoir des idées, et je crois, diable m'emporte, qu'il est amoureux de votre bonne !

Mais un défaut plus grave, et qu'il lui reprochait, c'était d'écouter continuellement les conversations. Le dimanche, par exemple, on ne pouvait le faire sortir du salon, où madame Homais l'avait appelé pour prendre les enfants, qui s'endormaient dans les fauteuils, en tirant avec leurs dos les housses de calicot, trop larges.

Il ne venait pas grand monde à ces soirées du pharmacien, sa médisance et ses opinions politiques ayant écarté de lui successivement différentes personnes respectables. Le clerc ne manquait pas de s'y trouver. Dès qu'il entendait la sonnette, il courait au-devant de madame Bovary, prenait son châle, et posait à l'écart, sous le bureau de la pharmacie, les grosses pantoufles de lisière qu'elle portait sur sa chaussure, quand il y avait de la neige.

On faisait d'abord quelques parties de trente-et-un ; ensuite M. Homais jouait à l'écarté avec Emma ; Léon, derrière elle, lui donnait des avis. Debout et les mains sur le dossier de sa chaise, il regardait les dents de son peigne qui mordaient son chignon. À chaque mouvement qu'elle faisait pour jeter les cartes, sa robe du côté droit remontait. De ses cheveux retroussés, il descendait une couleur brune sur son dos, et qui, s'apâlissant graduellement, peu à peu se perdait dans l'ombre. Son vêtement, ensuite, retombait des deux côtés sur le siège, en bouffant, plein de plis, et s'étalait jusqu'à terre. Quand Léon parfois sentait la semelle de sa botte poser dessus, il s'écartait, comme s'il eût marché sur quelqu'un.

Lorsque la partie de cartes était finie, l'apothicaire et le médecin jouaient aux dominos, et Emma changeant de place, s'accoudait sur la table, à feuilleter *l'Illustration*. Elle avait apporté son journal de modes. Léon se mettait près d'elle ; ils regardaient ensemble les gravures et s'attendaient au bas des pages. Souvent elle le priait de lui lire des vers ; Léon les déclamait d'une voix traînante et qu'il faisait expirer soigneusement aux passages d'amour. Mais le bruit des dominos le contrariait ; M. Homais y était fort, il battait Charles à plein double-six. Puis, les trois centaines terminées, ils s'allongeaient tous deux devant le foyer et ne tardaient pas à s'endormir. Le feu se mourait dans les cendres ; la théière était vide ; Léon lisait encore. Emma l'écoutait, en faisant tourner machinalement l'abat-jour de la lampe, où étaient peints sur la gaze des pierrots dans des voitures et des danseuses de corde, avec leurs balanciers. Léon s'arrêtait, désignant d'un geste son auditoire endormi ; alors ils se parlaient à voix basse, et la conversation qu'ils avaient leur semblait plus douce, parce qu'elle n'était pas entendue.

Ainsi s'établit entre eux une sorte d'association, un commerce continuel de livres et de romances ; M. Bovary, peu jaloux, ne s'en étonnait pas.

Il reçut pour sa fête une belle tête phrénologique, toute marquetée de chiffres jusqu'au thorax et peinte en bleu. C'était une attention du clerc. Il en avait bien d'autres, jusqu'à lui faire, à Rouen, ses commissions ; et le livre d'un romancier ayant mis à la mode la manie des plantes grasses, Léon en achetait pour Madame, qu'il rapportait sur ses genoux, dans l'*Hirondelle*, tout en se piquant les doigts à leurs poils durs.

Elle fit ajuster, contre sa croisée, une planchette à balustrade pour tenir ses potiches. Le clerc eut aussi son jardinet suspendu ; ils s'apercevaient soignant leurs fleurs à leur fenêtre.

Parmi les fenêtres du village, il y en avait une encore plus souvent occupée ; car, le dimanche, depuis le matin jusqu'à la nuit, et chaque après-midi, si le temps était clair, on voyait à la lucarne d'un grenier le profil maigre de M. Binet penché sur son tour, dont le ronflement monotone s'entendait jusqu'au *Lion d'or*.

Un soir, en rentrant, Léon trouva dans sa chambre un tapis de velours et de laine avec des feuillages sur fond pâle, il appela madame Homais, M. Homais, Justin, les enfants, la cuisinière, il en parla à son patron ; tout le monde désira connaître ce tapis ; pourquoi la femme du médecin faisait-elle au clerc des *générosités* ? Cela parut drôle, et l'on pensa définitivement qu'elle devait être *sa bonne amie.*

Il le donnait à croire, tant il vous entretenait sans cesse de ses charmes et de son esprit, si bien que Binet lui répondit une fois fort brutalement :

— Que m'importe, à moi, puisque je ne suis pas de sa société !

Il se torturait à découvrir par quel moyen lui *faire sa déclaration* ; et, toujours hésitant entre la crainte de lui déplaire et la honte d'être si pusillanime, il en pleurait de découragement et de désirs. Puis il prenait des décisions énergiques ; il écrivait des lettres qu'il déchirait, s'ajournait à des époques qu'il reculait. Souvent il se mettait en marche, dans le projet de tout oser ; mais cette résolution l'abandonnait bien vite en la présence d'Emma, et, quand Charles, survenant, l'invitait à monter dans son *boc* pour aller voir ensemble quelque malade aux environs, il acceptait aussitôt, saluait Madame et s'en allait. Son mari, n'était-ce pas quelque chose d'elle ?

Quant à Emma, elle ne s'interrogea point pour savoir si elle l'aimait. L'amour, croyait-elle, devait arriver tout à coup, avec de grands éclats et des fulgurations, – ouragan des cieux qui tombe sur la vie, la bouleverse, arrache les volontés comme des feuilles et emporte à l'abîme le coeur entier. Elle ne savait pas que, sur la terrasse des maisons, la pluie fait des lacs quand les gouttières sont bouchées, et elle fût ainsi demeurée en sa sécurité, lorsqu'elle découvrit subitement une lézarde dans le mur.

V

Ce fut un dimanche de février, une après-midi qu'il neigeait.

Ils étaient tous, M. et madame Bovary, Homais et M. Léon, partis voir, à une demi-lieue d'Yonville, dans la vallée, une filature de lin que l'on établissait. L'apothicaire avait emmené avec lui Napoléon et Athalie, pour leur faire faire de l'exercice, et Justin les accompagnait, portant des parapluies sur son épaule.

Rien pourtant n'était moins curieux que cette curiosité. Un grand espace de terrain vide, où se trouvaient pêle-mêle, entre des tas de sable et de cailloux, quelques roues d'engrenage déjà rouillées, entourait un long bâtiment quadrangulaire que perçaient quantité de petites fenêtres. Il n'était pas achevé d'être bâti, et l'on voyait le ciel à travers les lambourdes de la toiture. Attaché à la poutrelle du pignon, un bouquet de paille entremêlé d'épis faisait claquer au vent ses rubans tricolores.

Homais parlait. Il expliquait *à la compagnie* l'importance future de cet établissement, supputait la force des planchers, l'épaisseur des murailles, et regrettait beaucoup de n'avoir pas de canne métrique, comme M. Binet en possédait une pour son usage particulier.

Emma, qui lui donnait le bras, s'appuyait un peu sur son épaule, et elle regardait le disque du soleil irradiant au loin, dans la brume, sa pâleur éblouissante ; mais elle tourna la tête : Charles était là. Il avait sa casquette enfoncée sur ses sourcils, et ses deux grosses lèvres tremblotaient, ce qui ajoutait à son visage quelque chose de stupide ; son dos même, son dos tranquille était irritant à voir, et elle y trouvait étalée sur la redingote toute la platitude du personnage.

Pendant qu'elle le considérait, goûtant ainsi dans son irritation une sorte de volupté dépravée, Léon s'avança d'un pas. Le froid qui le pâlissait semblait déposer sur sa figure une langueur plus douce ; entre sa cravate et son cou, le col de la chemise, un peu lâche, laissait voir la peau ; un bout d'oreille dépassait sous une mèche de cheveux, et son grand oeil bleu, levé vers les nuages, parut à Emma plus limpide et plus beau que ces lacs des montagnes où le ciel se mire.

— Malheureux ! s'écria tout à coup l'apothicaire.

Et il courut à son fils, qui venait de se précipiter dans un tas de chaux pour peindre ses souliers en blanc. Aux reproches dont on l'accablait, Napoléon se prit à pousser des hurlements, tandis que Justin lui essuyait ses chaussures avec un torchis de paille. Mais il eût fallu un couteau ; Charles offrit le sien.

— Ah ! se dit-elle, il porte un couteau dans sa poche, comme un paysan !

Le givre tombait, et l'on s'en retourna vers Yonville.

Madame Bovary, le soir, n'alla pas chez ses voisins, et, quand Charles fut parti, lorsqu'elle se sentit seule, le parallèle recommença dans la netteté d'une sensation presque immédiate et avec cet allongement de perspective que le souvenir donne aux objets. Regardant de son lit le feu clair qui brûlait, elle voyait encore, comme là-bas, Léon debout, faisant plier d'une main sa badine et tenant de l'autre Athalie, qui suçait tranquillement un morceau de glace. Elle le trouvait charmant ; elle ne pouvait s'en détacher ; elle se rappela ses autres attitudes en d'autres jours, des phrases qu'il avait dites, le son de sa voix, toute sa personne ; et elle répétait, en avançant ses lèvres comme pour un baiser :

— Oui, charmant ! charmant !... N'aime-t-il pas ? se demanda-t-elle. Qui donc ?... mais c'est moi !

Toutes les preuves à la fois s'en étalèrent, son coeur bondit. La flamme de la cheminée faisait trembler au plafond une clarté joyeuse ; elle se tourna sur le dos en s'étirant les bras.

Alors commença l'éternelle lamentation : « Oh ! si le ciel l'avait voulu ! Pourquoi n'est-ce pas ? Qui empêchait donc ?... »

Quand Charles, à minuit, rentra, elle eut l'air de s'éveiller, et, comme il fit du bruit en se déshabillant, elle se plaignit de la migraine ; puis demanda nonchalamment ce qui s'était passé dans la soirée.

— M. Léon, dit-il, est remonté de bonne heure.

Elle ne put s'empêcher de sourire, et elle s'endormit l'âme remplie d'un enchantement nouveau.

Le lendemain, à la nuit tombante, elle reçut la visite du sieur Lheureux, marchand de nouveautés. C'était un homme habile que ce boutiquier.

Né Gascon, mais devenu Normand, il doublait sa faconde méridionale de cautèle cauchoise. Sa figure grasse, molle et sans barbe, semblait teinte par une décoction de réglisse claire, et sa chevelure blanche rendait plus vif encore l'éclat rude de ses petits yeux noirs. On ignorait ce qu'il avait été jadis : porteballe, disaient les uns, banquier à Routot, selon les autres. Ce qu'il y a de sûr, c'est qu'il faisait, de tête, des calculs compliqués, à effrayer Binet lui-même. Poli jusqu'à l'obséquiosité, il se tenait toujours les reins à demi courbés, dans la position de quelqu'un qui salue ou qui invite.

Après avoir laissé à la porte son chapeau garni d'un crêpe, il posa sur la table un carton vert, et commença par se plaindre à Madame, avec force civilités, d'être resté jusqu'à ce jour sans obtenir sa confiance. Une pauvre boutique comme la sienne n'était pas faite pour attirer une *élégante* ; il appuya sur le mot. Elle n'avait pourtant qu'à commander, et il se chargerait de lui fournir ce qu'elle voudrait, tant en mercerie que lingerie, bonneterie ou nouveautés ; car il allait à la ville quatre fois par mois, régulièrement. Il était en relation avec les plus fortes maisons. On pouvait parler de lui aux *Trois Frères*, à la *Barbe d'or* ou au *Grand Sauvage ;* tous ces messieurs le connaissaient comme leur poche ! Aujourd'hui donc, il venait montrer à Madame, en passant, différents articles qu'il se trouvait avoir, grâce à une occasion des plus rares. Et il retira de la boîte une demi-douzaine de cols brodés.

Madame Bovary les examina.

— Je n'ai besoin de rien, dit-elle.

Alors M. Lheureux exhiba délicatement trois écharpes algériennes, plusieurs paquets d'aiguilles anglaises, une paire de pantoufles en paille, et, enfin, quatre coquetiers en coco, ciselés à jour par des forçats. Puis, les deux mains sur la table, le cou tendu, la taille penchée, il suivait, bouche béante, le regard d'Emma, qui se promenait indécis parmi ces marchandises. De temps à autre, comme pour en chasser la poussière, il donnait un coup d'ongle sur la soie des écharpes, dépliées dans toute leur longueur ; et elles frémissaient avec un bruit léger, en faisant, à la lumière verdâtre du crépuscule, scintiller, comme de petites étoiles, les paillettes d'or de leur tissu.

— Combien coûtent-elles ?

— Une misère, répondit-il, une misère ; mais rien ne presse ; quand vous voudrez ; nous ne sommes pas des juifs !

Elle réfléchit quelques instants, et finit encore par remercier M. Lheureux, qui répliqua sans s'émouvoir :

— Eh bien, nous nous entendrons plus tard ; avec les dames je me suis toujours arrangé, si ce n'est avec la mienne, cependant !

Emma sourit.

— C'était pour vous dire, reprit-il d'un air bonhomme après sa plaisanterie, que ce n'est pas l'argent qui m'inquiète... Je vous en donnerais, s'il le fallait.

Elle eut un geste de surprise.

— Ah ! fit-il vivement et à voix basse, je n'aurais pas besoin d'aller loin pour vous en trouver ; comptez-y !

Et il se mit à demander des nouvelles du père Tellier, le maître du *Café Français,* que M. Bovary soignait alors.

— Qu'est-ce qu'il a donc, le père Tellier ?... Il tousse qu'il en secoue toute sa maison, et j'ai bien peur que prochainement il ne lui faille plutôt un paletot de sapin qu'une camisole de flanelle ? Il a fait tant de bamboches quand il était jeune ! Ces gens-là, madame, n'avaient pas le moindre ordre ! il s'est calciné avec l'eau-de-vie ! Mais c'est fâcheux tout de même de voir une connaissance s'en aller.

Et, tandis qu'il rebouclait son carton, il discourait ainsi sur la clientèle du médecin.

— C'est le temps, sans doute, dit-il en regardant les carreaux avec une figure rechignée, qui est la cause de ces maladies-là ! Moi aussi, je ne me sens pas en mon assiette ; il faudra même un de ces jours que je vienne consulter Monsieur, pour une douleur que j'ai dans le dos. Enfin, au revoir, madame Bovary ; à votre disposition ; serviteur très humble !

Et il referma la porte doucement.

Emma se fit servir à dîner dans sa chambre, au coin du feu, sur un plateau ; elle fut longue à manger ; tout lui sembla bon.

— Comme j'ai été sage ! se disait-elle en songeant aux écharpes.

Elle entendit des pas dans l'escalier : c'était Léon. Elle se leva, et prit sur la commode, parmi des torchons à ourler, le premier de la pile. Elle semblait fort occupée quand il parut.

La conversation fut languissante, madame Bovary l'abandonnant à chaque minute, tandis qu'il demeurait lui-même comme tout embarrassé. Assis sur une chaise basse, près de la cheminée, il faisait tourner dans ses doigts l'étui d'ivoire ; elle poussait son aiguille, ou, de temps à autre, avec son ongle, fronçait les plis de la toile. Elle ne parlait pas ; il se taisait, captivé par son silence, comme il l'eût été par ses paroles.

— Pauvre garçon ! pensait-elle.

— En quoi lui déplais-je ? se demandait-il.

Léon, cependant, finit par dire qu'il devait, un de ces jours, aller à Rouen, pour une affaire de son étude.

— Votre abonnement de musique est terminé, dois-je le reprendre ?

— Non, répondit-elle.

— Pourquoi ?

— Parce que...

Et, pinçant ses lèvres, elle tira lentement une longue aiguillée de fil gris.

Cet ouvrage irritait Léon. Les doigts d'Emma semblaient s'y écorcher par le bout ; il lui vint en tête une phrase galante, mais qu'il ne risqua pas.

— Vous l'abandonnez donc ? reprit-il.

— Quoi ? dit-elle vivement ; la musique ? Ah ! mon Dieu, oui ! n'ai-je pas ma maison à tenir, mon mari à soigner, mille choses enfin, bien des devoirs qui passent auparavant !

Elle regarda la pendule. Charles était en retard. Alors elle fit la soucieuse. Deux ou trois fois même elle répéta :

— Il est si bon !

Le clerc affectionnait M. Bovary. Mais cette tendresse à son endroit l'étonna d'une façon désagréable ; néanmoins il continua son éloge, qu'il entendait faire à chacun, disait-il, et surtout au pharmacien.

— Ah ! c'est un brave homme, reprit Emma.

— Certes, reprit le clerc.

Et il se mit à parler de madame Homais, dont la tenue fort négligée leur apprêtait à rire ordinairement.

— Qu'est-ce que cela fait ? interrompit Emma. Une bonne mère de famille ne s'inquiète pas de sa toilette.

Puis elle retomba dans son silence.

Il en fut de même les jours suivants ; ses discours, ses manières, tout changea. On la vit prendre à coeur son ménage, retourner à l'église régulièrement et tenir sa servante avec plus de sévérité.

Elle retira Berthe de nourrice. Félicité l'amenait quand il venait des visites, et madame Bovary la déshabillait afin de faire voir ses membres. Elle déclarait adorer les enfants ; c'était sa consolation, sa joie, sa folie, et elle accompagnait ses caresses d'expansions lyriques, qui, à d'autres qu'à des Yonvillais, eussent rappelé la Sachette de *Notre-Dame de Paris*.

Quand Charles rentrait, il trouvait auprès des cendres ses pantoufles à chauffer. Ses gilets maintenant ne manquaient plus de doublure, ni ses chemises de boutons, et même il y avait plaisir à considérer dans l'armoire tous les bonnets de coton rangés par piles égales. Elle ne rechignait plus, comme autrefois, à faire des tours dans le jardin ; ce qu'il proposait était toujours consenti, bien qu'elle ne devinât pas les volontés auxquelles elle se soumettait sans un murmure ; – et lorsque Léon le voyait au coin du feu, après le dîner, les deux mains sur son ventre, les deux pieds sur les chenets, la joue rougie par la digestion, les yeux humides de bonheur, avec l'enfant qui se traînait sur le tapis, et cette femme à taille mince qui par-dessus le dossier du fauteuil venait le baiser au front :

— Quelle folie ! se disait-il, et comment arriver jusqu'à elle ?

Elle lui parut donc si vertueuse et inaccessible, que toute espérance, même la plus vague, l'abandonna.

Mais, par ce renoncement, il la plaçait en des conditions extraordinaires. Elle se dégagea, pour lui, des qualités charnelles dont il n'avait rien à obtenir ; et elle alla, dans son coeur, montant toujours et s'en détachant, à la manière magnifique d'une apothéose qui s'envole. C'était un de ces sentiments purs qui n'embarrassent pas l'exercice de la vie, que l'on cultive parce qu'ils sont rares, et dont la perte affligerait plus que la possession n'est réjouissante.

Emma maigrit, ses joues pâlirent, sa figure s'allongea. Avec ses bandeaux noirs, ses grands yeux, son nez droit, sa démarche d'oiseau, et toujours silencieuse maintenant, ne semblait-elle pas traverser l'existence en y touchant à peine, et porter au front la vague empreinte de quelque prédestination sublime ? Elle était si triste et si calme, si douce à la fois et si réservée, que l'on se sentait près d'elle pris par un charme glacial, comme l'on frissonne dans les églises sous le parfum des fleurs mêlé au froid des marbres. Les autres même n'échappaient point à cette séduction. Le pharmacien disait :

— C'est une femme de grands moyens et qui ne serait pas déplacée dans une sous-préfecture.

Les bourgeoises admiraient son économie, les clients sa politesse, les pauvres sa charité.

Mais elle était pleine de convoitises, de rage, de haine. Cette robe aux plis droits cachait un coeur bouleversé, et ces lèvres si pudiques n'en racontaient pas la tourmente. Elle était amoureuse de Léon, et elle recherchait la solitude, afin de pouvoir plus à l'aise se délecter en son image. La vue de sa personne troublait la volupté de cette méditation. Emma palpitait au bruit de ses pas ; puis, en sa présence, l'émotion tombait, et il ne lui restait ensuite qu'un immense étonnement qui se finissait en tristesse.

Léon ne savait pas, lorsqu'il sortait de chez elle désespéré, qu'elle se levait derrière lui afin de le voir dans la rue. Elle s'inquiétait de ses démarches ; elle épiait son visage ; elle inventa toute une histoire pour trouver prétexte à visiter sa chambre. La femme du pharmacien lui semblait bien heureuse de dormir sous le même toit ; et ses pensées continuellement s'abattaient sur cette maison, comme les pigeons du *Lion d'or* qui venaient tremper là, dans les gouttières, leurs pattes roses et leurs ailes blanches. Mais plus Emma s'apercevait de son amour, plus elle le refoulait, afin qu'il ne parût pas, et pour le diminuer. Elle aurait voulu que Léon s'en doutât ; et elle imaginait des hasards, des catastrophes qui l'eussent facilité. Ce qui la retenait, sans doute, c'était la paresse ou l'épouvante, et la pudeur aussi. Elle songeait qu'elle l'avait repoussé trop loin, qu'il n'était plus temps, que tout était perdu. Puis l'orgueil, la joie de se dire : « Je suis vertueuse », et de se regarder dans la glace en prenant des poses résignées, la consolait un peu du sacrifice qu'elle croyait faire.

Alors, les appétits de la chair, les convoitises d'argent et les mélancolies de la passion, tout se confondit dans une même souffrance ; – et, au lieu d'en détourner sa pensée, elle l'y attachait davantage, s'excitant à la douleur et en cherchant partout les occasions. Elle s'irritait d'un plat mal servi ou d'une porte entrebâillée, gémissait du velours qu'elle n'avait pas, du bonheur qui lui manquait, de ses rêves trop hauts, de sa maison trop étroite.

Ce qui l'exaspérait, c'est que Charles n'avait pas l'air de se douter de son supplice. La conviction où il était de la rendre heureuse lui semblait une insulte imbécile, et sa sécurité là-dessus de l'ingratitude. Pour qui donc était-elle sage ? N'était-il pas, lui, l'obstacle à toute félicité, la cause de toute misère, et comme l'ardillon pointu de cette courroie complexe qui la bouclait de tous côtés ?

Donc, elle reporta sur lui seul la haine nombreuse qui résultait de ses ennuis, et chaque effort pour l'amoindrir ne servait qu'à l'augmenter ; car cette peine inutile s'ajoutait aux autres motifs de désespoir et contribuait encore plus à l'écartement. Sa propre douceur à elle-même lui donnait des rébellions. La médiocrité domestique la poussait à des fantaisies luxueuses, la tendresse matrimoniale en des désirs adultères. Elle aurait voulu que Charles la battît, pour pouvoir plus justement le détester, s'en venger. Elle s'étonnait parfois des conjectures atroces qui lui arrivaient à la pensée ; et il fallait continuer à sourire, s'entendre répéter qu'elle était heureuse, faire semblant de l'être, le laisser croire !

Elle avait des dégoûts, cependant, de cette hypocrisie. Des tentations la prenaient de s'enfuir avec Léon, quelque part, bien loin, pour essayer une destinée nouvelle ; mais aussitôt il s'ouvrait dans son âme un gouffre vague, plein d'obscurité.

— D'ailleurs, il ne m'aime plus, pensait-elle ; que devenir ? quel secours attendre, quelle consolation, quel allégement ?

Elle restait brisée, haletante, inerte, sanglotant à voix basse et avec des larmes qui coulaient.

— Pourquoi ne point le dire à Monsieur ? lui demandait la domestique, lorsqu'elle entrait pendant ces crises.

— Ce sont les nerfs, répondait Emma ; ne lui en parle pas, tu l'affligerais.

— Ah ! oui, reprenait Félicité, vous êtes justement comme la Guérine, la fille au père Guérin, le pêcheur du Pollet, que j'ai connue à Dieppe, avant de venir chez vous. Elle était si triste, si triste, qu'à la voir debout sur le seuil de sa maison, elle vous faisait l'effet d'un drap d'enterrement tendu devant la porte. Son mal, à ce qu'il paraît, était une manière de brouillard qu'elle avait dans la tête, et les médecins n'y pouvaient rien, ni le curé non plus. Quand ça la prenait trop fort, elle s'en allait toute seule sur le bord de la mer, si bien que le lieutenant de la douane, en faisant sa tournée, souvent la trouvait étendue à plat ventre et pleurant sur les galets. Puis, après son mariage, ça lui a passé, dit-on.

— Mais, moi, reprenait Emma, c'est après le mariage que ça m'est venu.

VI

Un soir que la fenêtre était ouverte, et que, assise au bord, elle venait de regarder Lestiboudois, le bedeau, qui taillait le buis, elle entendit tout à coup sonner l'*Angelus*.

On était au commencement d'avril, quand les primevères sont écloses ; un vent tiède se roule sur les plates-bandes labourées, et les jardins, comme des femmes, semblent faire leur toilette pour les fêtes de l'été. Par les barreaux de la tonnelle et au delà tout alentour, on voyait la rivière dans la prairie, où elle dessinait sur l'herbe des sinuosités vagabondes. La vapeur du soir passait entre les peupliers sans feuilles, estompant leurs contours d'une teinte violette, plus pâle et plus transparente qu'une gaze subtile arrêtée sur leurs branchages. Au loin, des bestiaux marchaient ; on n'entendait ni leurs pas, ni leurs mugissements ; et la cloche, sonnant toujours, continuait dans les airs sa lamentation pacifique.

À ce tintement répété, la pensée de la jeune femme s'égarait dans ses vieux souvenirs de jeunesse et de pension. Elle se rappela les grands chandeliers, qui dépassaient sur l'autel les vases pleins de fleurs et le tabernacle à colonnettes. Elle aurait voulu, comme autrefois, être encore confondue dans la longue ligne des voiles blancs, que marquaient de noir çà et là les capuchons raides des bonnes soeurs inclinées sur leur prie-Dieu ; le dimanche, à la messe, quand elle relevait sa tête, elle apercevait le doux visage de la Vierge parmi les tourbillons bleuâtres de l'encens qui montait. Alors un attendrissement la saisit ; elle se sentit molle et tout abandonnée, comme un duvet d'oiseau qui tournoie dans la tempête ; et ce fut sans en avoir conscience qu'elle s'achemina vers l'église, disposée à n'importe qu'elle dévotion, pourvu qu'elle y absorbât son âme et que l'existence entière y disparût.

Elle rencontra, sur la place, Lestiboudois, qui s'en revenait ; car, pour ne pas rogner la journée, il préférait interrompre sa besogne puis la reprendre, si bien qu'il tintait l'*Angelus* selon sa commodité. D'ailleurs, la sonnerie, faite plus tôt, avertissait les gamins de l'heure du catéchisme.

Déjà quelques-uns, qui se trouvaient arrivés, jouaient aux billes sur les dalles du cimetière. D'autres, à califourchon sur le mur, agitaient leurs jambes, en fauchant avec leurs sabots les grandes orties poussées entre la petite enceinte et les dernières tombes. C'était la seule place qui fût verte ; tout le reste n'était que pierres, et couvert continuellement d'une poudre fine, malgré le balai de la sacristie.

Les enfants en chaussons couraient là comme sur un parquet fait pour eux, et on entendait les éclats de leurs voix à travers le bourdonnement de la cloche. Il diminuait avec les oscillations de la grosse corde qui, tombant des hauteurs du clocher, traînait à terre par le bout. Des hirondelles passaient en poussant de petits cris, coupaient l'air au tranchant de leur vol, et rentraient vite dans leurs nids jaunes, sous les tuiles du larmier. Au fond de l'église, une lampe brûlait, c'est-à-dire une mèche de veilleuse dans un verre suspendu. Sa lumière, de loin, semblait une tache blanchâtre qui tremblait sur l'huile. Un long rayon de soleil traversait toute la nef et rendait plus sombres encore les bas-côtés et les angles.

— Où est le curé ? demanda madame Bovary à un jeune garçon qui s'amusait à secouer le tourniquet dans son trou trop lâche.

— Il va venir, répondit-il.

En effet, la porte du presbytère grinça, l'abbé Bournisien parut ; les enfants, pêle-mêle, s'enfuirent dans l'église.

— Ces polissons-là ! murmura l'ecclésiastique, toujours les mêmes !

Et, ramassant un catéchisme en lambeaux qu'il venait de heurter avec son pied :

— Ça ne respecte rien !

Mais, dès qu'il aperçut madame Bovary :

— Excusez-moi, dit-il, je ne vous remettais pas.

Il fourra le catéchisme dans sa poche et s'arrêta, continuant à balancer entre deux doigts la lourde clef de la sacristie.

La lueur du soleil couchant qui frappait en plein son visage pâlissait le lasting de sa soutane, luisante sous les coudes, effiloquée par le bas. Des taches de graisse et de tabac suivaient sur sa poitrine large la ligne des petits boutons, et elles devenaient plus nombreuses en s'écartant de son rabat, où reposaient les plis abondants de sa peau rouge ; elle était semée de macules jaunes qui disparaissaient dans les poils rudes de sa barbe grisonnante. Il venait de dîner et respirait bruyamment.

— Comment vous portez-vous ? ajouta-t-il.

— Mal, répondit Emma ; je souffre.

— Eh bien, moi aussi, reprit l'ecclésiastique. Ces premières chaleurs, n'est-ce pas, vous amollissent étonnamment ? Enfin, que voulez-vous ! nous sommes nés pour souffrir, comme dit saint Paul. Mais, M. Bovary, qu'est-ce qu'il en pense ?

— Lui ! fit-elle avec un geste de dédain.

— Quoi ! répliqua le bonhomme tout étonné, il ne vous ordonne pas quelque chose ?

— Ah ! dit Emma, ce ne sont pas les remèdes de la terre qu'il me faudrait.

Mais le curé, de temps à autre, regardait dans l'église, où tous les gamins agenouillés se poussaient de l'épaule, et tombaient comme des capucins de cartes.

— Je voudrais savoir..., reprit-elle.

— Attends, attends, Riboudet, cria l'ecclésiastique d'une voix colère, je m'en vas aller te chauffer les oreilles, mauvais galopin !

Puis, se tournant vers Emma :

— C'est le fils de Boudet le charpentier ; ses parents sont à leur aise et lui laissent faire ses fantaisies. Pourtant il apprendrait vite, s'il le voulait, car il est plein d'esprit. Et moi quelquefois, par plaisanterie, je l'appelle donc Riboudet (comme la côte que l'on prend pour aller à Maromme), et je dis même : mon Riboudet. Ah ! ah ! Mont-Riboudet ! L'autre jour, j'ai rapporté ce mot-là à Monseigneur, qui en a ri... il a daigné en rire.

— Et M. Bovary, comment va-t-il ?

Elle semblait ne pas entendre. Il continua :

— Toujours fort occupé, sans doute ? car nous sommes certainement, lui et moi, les deux personnes de la paroisse qui avons le plus à faire. Mais lui, il est le médecin des corps, ajouta-t-il avec un rire épais, et moi, je le suis des âmes !

Elle fixa sur le prêtre des yeux suppliants.

— Oui..., dit-elle, vous soulagez toutes les misères.

— Ah ! ne m'en parlez pas, madame Bovary ! Ce matin même, il a fallu que j'aille dans le Bas-Diauville pour une vache qui avait l'*enfle* ; ils croyaient que c'était un sort. Toutes leurs vaches, je ne sais comment... Mais, pardon ! Longuemarre et Boudet ! sac à papier ! voulez-vous bien finir !

Et, d'un bond, il s'élança dans l'église.

Les gamins, alors, se pressaient autour du grand pupitre, grimpaient sur le tabouret du chantre, ouvraient le missel ; et d'autres, à pas de loup, allaient se hasarder bientôt jusque dans le confessionnal. Mais le curé, soudain, distribua sur tous une grêle de soufflets. Les prenant par le collet de la veste, il les enlevait de terre et les reposait à deux genoux sur les pavés du choeur, fortement, comme s'il eût voulu les y planter.

— Allez, dit-il quand il fut revenu près d'Emma, et en déployant son large mouchoir d'indienne, dont il mit un angle entre ses dents, les cultivateurs sont bien à plaindre !

— Il y en a d'autres, répondit-elle.

— Assurément ! les ouvriers des villes, par exemple.

— Ce ne sont pas eux...

— Pardonnez-moi ! j'ai connu là de pauvres mères de famille, des femmes vertueuses, je vous assure, de véritables saintes, qui manquaient même de pain.

— Mais celles, reprit Emma (et les coins de sa bouche se tordaient en parlant), celles, monsieur le curé, qui ont du pain, et qui n'ont pas...

— De feu l'hiver, dit le prêtre.

— Eh ! qu'importe ?

— Comment ! qu'importe ? Il me semble, à moi, que lorsqu'on est bien chauffé, bien nourri..., car enfin...

— Mon Dieu ! mon Dieu ! soupirait-elle.

— Vous vous trouvez gênée ? fit-il, en s'avançant d'un air inquiet ; c'est la digestion, sans doute ? Il faut rentrer chez vous, madame Bovary, boire un peu de thé ; ça vous fortifiera, ou bien un verre d'eau fraîche avec de la cassonade.

— Pourquoi ?

Et elle avait l'air de quelqu'un qui se réveille d'un songe.

— C'est que vous passiez la main sur votre front. J'ai cru qu'un étourdissement vous prenait.

Puis, se ravisant :

— Mais vous me demandiez quelque chose ? Qu'est-ce donc ? Je ne sais plus.

— Moi ? Rien..., rien..., répétait Emma.

Et son regard, qu'elle promenait autour d'elle, s'abaissa lentement sur le vieillard à soutane. Ils se considéraient tous les deux, face à face, sans parler.

— Alors, madame Bovary, dit-il enfin, faites excuse, mais le devoir avant tout, vous savez ; il faut que j'expédie mes garnements. Voilà les premières communions qui vont venir. Nous serons encore surpris, j'en ai peur ! Aussi, à partir de l'Ascension, je les tiens recta tous les mercredis une heure de plus. Ces pauvres enfants ! on ne saurait les diriger trop tôt dans la voie du Seigneur, comme, du reste, il nous l'a recommandé lui-même par la bouche de son divin Fils... Bonne santé, madame ; mes respects à monsieur votre mari !

Et il entra dans l'église, en faisant dès la porte une génuflexion.

Emma le vit qui disparaissait entre la double ligne des bancs, marchant à pas lourds, la tête un peu penchée sur l'épaule, et avec ses deux mains entrouvertes, qu'il portait en dehors.

Puis elle tourna sur ses talons, tout d'un bloc comme une statue sur un pivot, et prit le chemin de sa maison. Mais la grosse voix du curé, la voix claire des gamins arrivaient encore à son oreille et continuaient derrière elle :

— Êtes-vous chrétien ?

— Oui, je suis chrétien.

— Qu'est-ce qu'un chrétien ?

— C'est celui qui, étant baptisé..., baptisé..., baptisé.

Elle monta les marches de son escalier en se tenant à la rampe, et, quand elle fut dans sa chambre, se laissa tomber dans un fauteuil.

Le jour blanchâtre des carreaux s'abaissait doucement avec des ondulations. Les meubles à leur place semblaient devenus plus immobiles et se perdre dans l'ombre comme dans un océan ténébreux. La cheminée était éteinte, la pendule battait toujours, et Emma vaguement s'ébahissait à ce calme des choses, tandis qu'il y avait en elle-même tant de bouleversements. Mais, entre la fenêtre et la table à ouvrage, la petite Berthe était là, qui chancelait sur ses bottines de tricot, et essayait de se rapprocher de sa mère, pour lui saisir, par le bout, les rubans de son tablier.

— Laisse-moi ! dit celle-ci en l'écartant avec la main.

La petite fille bientôt revint plus près encore contre ses genoux ; et, s'y appuyant des bras, elle levait vers elle son gros oeil bleu, pendant qu'un filet de salive pure découlait de sa lèvre sur la soie du tablier.

— Laisse-moi ! répéta la jeune femme tout irritée.

Sa figure épouvanta l'enfant, qui se mit à crier.

— Eh ! laisse-moi donc ! fit-elle en la repoussant du coude.

Berthe alla tomber au pied de la commode, contre la patère de cuivre ; elle s'y coupa la joue, le sang sortit. Madame Bovary se précipita pour la relever, cassa le cordon de la sonnette, appela la servante de toutes ses forces, et elle allait commencer à se maudire, lorsque Charles parut. C'était l'heure du dîner, il rentrait.

— Regarde donc, cher ami, lui dit Emma d'une voix tranquille : voilà la petite qui, en jouant, vient de se blesser par terre.

Charles la rassura, le cas n'était point grave, et il alla chercher du diachylum.

Madame Bovary ne descendit pas dans la salle ; elle voulut demeurer seule à garder son enfant. Alors, en la contemplant dormir, ce qu'elle conservait d'inquiétude se dissipa par degrés, et elle se parut à elle-même bien sotte et bien bonne de s'être troublée tout à l'heure pour si peu de chose. Berthe, en effet, ne sanglotait plus. Sa respiration, maintenant, soulevait insensiblement la couverture de coton. De grosses larmes s'arrêtaient au coin de ses paupières à demi closes, qui laissaient voir entre les cils deux prunelles pâles, enfoncées ; le sparadrap, collé sur sa joue, en tirait obliquement la peau tendue.

— C'est une chose étrange, pensait Emma, comme cette enfant est laide !

Quand Charles, à onze heures du soir, revint de la pharmacie (où il avait été remettre, après le dîner, ce qui lui restait du diachylum), il trouva sa femme debout auprès du berceau.

— Puisque je t'assure que ce ne sera rien, dit-il en la baisant au front ; ne te tourmente pas, pauvre chérie, tu te rendras malade !

Il était resté longtemps chez l'apothicaire. Bien qu'il ne s'y fût pas montré fort ému, M. Homais, néanmoins, s'était efforcé de le raffermir, de lui *remonter le moral*. Alors on avait causé des dangers divers qui menaçaient l'enfance et de l'étourderie des domestiques. Madame Homais en savait quelque chose, ayant encore sur la poitrine les marques d'une écuellée de braise qu'une cuisinière, autrefois, avait laissé tomber dans son sarrau. Aussi ces bons parents prenaient-ils quantité de précautions. Les couteaux jamais n'étaient affilés, ni les appartements cirés. Il y avait aux fenêtres des grilles en fer et aux chambranles de fortes barres. Les petits Homais, malgré leur indépendance, ne pouvaient remuer sans un surveillant derrière eux ; au moindre rhume, leur père les bourrait de pectoraux, et jusqu'à plus de quatre ans ils portaient tous, impitoyablement, des bourrelets matelassés. C'était, il est vrai, une manie de madame Homais ; son époux en était intérieurement affligé, redoutant pour les organes de l'intellect les résultats possibles d'une pareille compression, et il s'échappait jusqu'à lui dire :

— Tu prétends donc en faire des Caraïbes ou des Botocudos ?

Charles, cependant, avait essayé plusieurs fois d'interrompre la conversation.

— J'aurais à vous entretenir, avait-il soufflé bas à l'oreille du clerc, qui se mit à marcher devant lui dans l'escalier.

— Se douterait-il de quelque chose ? se demandait Léon. Il avait des battements de coeur et se perdait en conjectures.

Enfin Charles, ayant fermé la porte, le pria de voir lui-même à Rouen quels pouvaient être les prix d'un beau daguerréotype ; c'était une surprise sentimentale qu'il réservait à sa femme, une attention fine, son portrait en habit noir. Mais il voulait auparavant *savoir à quoi s'en tenir* ; ces démarches ne devaient pas embarrasser M. Léon, puisqu'il allait à la ville toutes les semaines, à peu près.

Dans quel but ? Homais soupçonnait là-dessous quelque *histoire de jeune homme*, une intrigue. Mais il se trompait ; Léon ne poursuivait aucune amourette. Plus que jamais il était triste, et madame Lefrançois s'en apercevait bien à la quantité de nourriture qu'il laissait maintenant sur son assiette. Pour en savoir plus long, elle interrogea le percepteur ; Binet répliqua, d'un ton rogue, qu'il n'était *point payé par la police*.

Son camarade, toutefois, lui paraissait fort singulier ; car souvent Léon se renversait sur sa chaise en écartant les bras, et se plaignait vaguement de l'existence.

— C'est que vous ne prenez point assez de distractions, disait le percepteur.

— Lesquelles ?

— Moi, à votre place, j'aurais un tour !

— Mais je ne sais pas tourner, répondait le clerc.

— Oh ! c'est vrai ! faisait l'autre en caressant sa mâchoire, avec un air de dédain mêlé de satisfaction.

Léon était las d'aimer sans résultat ; puis il commençait à sentir cet accablement que vous cause la répétition de la même vie, lorsque aucun intérêt ne la dirige et qu'aucune espérance ne la soutient. Il était si ennuyé d'Yonville et des Yonvillais, que la vue de certaines gens, de certaines maisons l'irritait à n'y pouvoir tenir ; et le pharmacien, tout bonhomme qu'il était, lui devenait complètement insupportable. Cependant, la perspective d'une situation nouvelle l'effrayait autant qu'elle le séduisait.

Cette appréhension se tourna vite en impatience, et Paris alors agita pour lui, dans le lointain, la fanfare de ses bals masqués avec le rire de ses grisettes. Puisqu'il devait y terminer son droit, pourquoi ne partait-il pas ? qui l'empêchait ? Et il se mit à faire des préparatifs intérieurs ; il arrangea d'avance ses occupations. Il se meubla, dans sa tête, un appartement. Il y mènerait une vie d'artiste ! Il y prendrait des leçons de guitare ! Il aurait une robe de chambre, un béret basque, des pantoufles de velours bleu ! Et même il admirait déjà sur sa cheminée deux fleurets en sautoir, avec une tête de mort et la guitare au-dessus.

La chose difficile était le consentement de sa mère ; rien pourtant ne paraissait plus raisonnable. Son patron même l'engageait à visiter une autre étude, où il pût se développer davantage. Prenant donc un parti moyen, Léon chercha quelque place de second clerc à Rouen, n'en trouva pas, et écrivit enfin à sa mère une longue lettre détaillée, où il exposait les raisons d'aller habiter Paris immédiatement. Elle y consentit.

Il ne se hâta point. Chaque jour, durant tout un mois, Hivert transporta pour lui d'Yonville à Rouen, de Rouen à Yonville, des coffres, des valises, des paquets ; et, quand Léon eut remonté sa garde-robe, fait rembourrer ses trois fauteuils, acheté une provision de foulards, pris en un mot plus de dispositions que pour un voyage autour du monde, il s'ajourna de semaine en semaine, jusqu'à ce qu'il reçût une seconde lettre maternelle où on le pressait de partir, puisqu'il désirait, avant les vacances passer son examen.

Lorsque le moment fut venu des embrassades, madame Homais pleura ; Justin sanglotait ; Homais, en homme fort, dissimula son émotion ; il voulut lui-même porter le paletot de son ami jusqu'à la grille du notaire, qui emmenait Léon à Rouen dans sa voiture. Ce dernier avait juste le temps de faire ses adieux à M. Bovary.

Quand il fut au haut de l'escalier, il s'arrêta, tant il se sentait hors d'haleine. À son entrée, madame Bovary se leva vivement.

— C'est encore moi ! dit Léon.

— J'en étais sûre !

Elle se mordit les lèvres, et un flot de sang lui courut sous la peau, qui se colora tout en rose, depuis la racine des cheveux jusqu'au bord de sa collerette. Elle restait debout, s'appuyant de l'épaule contre la boiserie.

— Monsieur n'est donc pas là ? reprit-il.

— Il est absent.

Elle répéta :

— Il est absent.

Alors il y eut un silence. Ils se regardèrent ; et leurs pensées, confondues dans la même angoisse, s'étreignaient étroitement, comme deux poitrines palpitantes.

— Je voudrais bien embrasser Berthe, dit Léon.

Emma descendit quelques marches, et elle appela Félicité.

Il jeta vite autour de lui un large coup d'oeil qui s'étala sur les murs, les étagères, la cheminée, comme pour pénétrer tout, emporter tout.

Mais elle rentra, et la servante amena Berthe, qui secouait au bout d'une ficelle un moulin à vent la tête en bas.

Léon la baisa sur le cou à plusieurs reprises.

— Adieu, pauvre enfant ! adieu, chère petite, adieu ! Et il la remit à sa mère.

— Emmenez-la, dit celle-ci.

Ils restèrent seuls.

Madame Bovary, le dos tourné, avait la figure posée contre un carreau ; Léon tenait sa casquette à la main et la battait doucement le long de sa cuisse.

— Il va pleuvoir, dit Emma.

— J'ai un manteau, répondit-il.

— Ah !

Elle se détourna, le menton baissé et le front en avant. La lumière y glissait comme sur un marbre, jusqu'à la courbe des sourcils, sans que l'on pût savoir ce qu'Emma regardait à l'horizon ni ce qu'elle pensait au fond d'elle-même.

— Allons, adieu ! soupira-t-il.

Elle releva sa tête d'un mouvement brusque :

— Oui, adieu..., partez !

Ils s'avancèrent l'un vers l'autre ; il tendit la main, elle hésita.

— À l'anglaise donc, fit-elle abandonnant la sienne tout en s'efforçant de rire.

Léon la sentit entre ses doigts, et la substance même de tout son être lui semblait descendre dans cette paume humide.

Puis il ouvrit la main ; leurs yeux se rencontrèrent encore, et il disparut.

Quand il fut sous les halles, il s'arrêta, et il se cacha derrière un pilier, afin de contempler une dernière fois cette maison blanche avec ses quatre jalousies vertes. Il crut voir une ombre derrière la fenêtre, dans la chambre ; mais le rideau, se décrochant de la patère comme si personne n'y touchait, remua lentement ses longs plis obliques, qui d'un seul bond s'étalèrent tous, et il resta droit, plus immobile qu'un mur de plâtre. Léon se mit à courir.

Il aperçut de loin, sur la route, le cabriolet de son patron, et à côté un homme en serpillière qui tenait le cheval. Homais et M. Guillaumin causaient ensemble.

On l'attendait.

— Embrassez-moi, dit l'apothicaire les larmes aux yeux. Voilà votre paletot, mon bon ami ; prenez garde au froid ! Soignez-vous ! ménagez-vous !

— Allons, Léon, en voiture ! dit le notaire.

Homais se pencha sur le garde-crotte, et d'une voix entrecoupée par les sanglots, laissa tomber ces deux mots tristes :

— Bon voyage !

— Bonsoir, répondit M. Guillaumin. Lâchez tout ! Ils partirent, et Homais s'en retourna.

Madame Bovary avait ouvert sa fenêtre sur le jardin, et elle regardait les nuages.

Ils s'amoncelaient au couchant du côté de Rouen, et roulaient vite leurs volutes noires, d'où dépassaient par derrière les grandes lignes du soleil, comme les flèches d'or d'un trophée suspendu, tandis que le reste du ciel vide avait la blancheur d'une porcelaine. Mais une rafale de vent fit se courber les peupliers, et tout à coup la pluie tomba ; elle crépitait sur les feuilles vertes. Puis le soleil reparut, les poules chantèrent, des moineaux battaient des ailes dans les buissons humides, et les flaques d'eau sur le sable emportaient en s'écoulant les fleurs roses d'un acacia.

— Ah ! qu'il doit être loin déjà ! pensa-t-elle.

M. Homais, comme de coutume, vint à six heures et demie, pendant le dîner.

— Eh bien, dit-il en s'asseyant, nous avons donc tantôt embarqué notre jeune homme ?

— Il paraît ! répondit le médecin.

Puis, se tournant sur sa chaise :

— Et quoi de neuf chez vous ?

— Pas grand-chose. Ma femme, seulement, a été, cette après-midi, un peu émue. Vous savez, les femmes, un rien les trouble ! la mienne surtout ! Et l'on aurait tort de se révolter là contre, puisque leur organisation nerveuse est beaucoup plus malléable que la nôtre.

— Ce pauvre Léon ! disait Charles, comment va-t-il vivre à Paris ?... S'y accoutumera-t-il ?

Madame Bovary soupira.

— Allons donc ! dit le pharmacien en claquant de la langue, les parties fines chez le traiteur ! les bals masqués ! le champagne ! tout cela va rouler, je vous assure.

— Je ne crois pas qu'il se dérange, objecta Bovary.

— Ni moi ! reprit vivement M. Homais, quoiqu'il lui faudra pourtant suivre les autres, au risque de passer pour un jésuite. Et vous ne savez pas la vie que mènent ces farceurs-là, dans le quartier Latin, avec les actrices ! Du reste, les étudiants sont fort bien vus à Paris. Pour peu qu'ils aient quelque talent d'agrément, on les reçoit dans les meilleures sociétés, et il y a même des dames du faubourg Saint-Germain qui en deviennent amoureuses, ce qui leur fournit, par la suite, les occasions de faire de très beaux mariages.

— Mais, dit le médecin, j'ai peur pour lui que... là-bas...

— Vous avez raison, interrompit l'apothicaire, c'est le revers de la médaille ! et l'on y est obligé continuellement d'avoir la main posée sur son gousset. Ainsi, vous êtes dans un jardin public, je suppose ; un quidam se présente, bien mis, décoré même, et qu'on prendrait pour un diplomate ; il vous aborde ; vous causez ; il s'insinue, vous offre une prise ou vous ramasse votre chapeau. Puis on se lie davantage ; il vous mène au café, vous invite à venir dans sa maison de campagne, vous fait faire, entre deux vins, toutes sortes de connaissances, et, les trois quarts du temps ce n'est que pour flibuster votre bourse ou vous entraîner en des démarches pernicieuses.

— C'est vrai, répondit Charles ; mais je pensais surtout aux maladies, à la fièvre typhoïde, par exemple, qui attaque les étudiants de la province.

Emma tressaillit.

— À cause du changement de régime, continua le pharmacien, et de la perturbation qui en résulte dans l'économie générale. Et puis, l'eau de Paris, voyez-vous ! les mets de restaurateurs, toutes ces nourritures épicées finissent par vous échauffer le sang et ne valent pas, quoi qu'on en dise, un bon pot-au-feu. J'ai toujours, quant à moi, préféré la cuisine bourgeoise : c'est plus sain ! Aussi, lorsque j'étudiais à Rouen la pharmacie, je m'étais mis en pension dans une pension ; je mangeais avec les professeurs.

Et il continua donc à exposer ses opinions générales et ses sympathies personnelles, jusqu'au moment où Justin vint le chercher pour un lait de poule qu'il fallait faire.

— Pas un instant de répit ! s'écria-t-il, toujours à la chaîne ! Je ne peux sortir une minute ! Il faut, comme un cheval de labour, être à suer sang et eau ! Quel collier de misère !

Puis, quand il fut sur la porte :

— À propos, dit-il, savez-vous la nouvelle ?

— Quoi donc ?

— C'est qu'il est fort probable, reprit Homais en dressant ses sourcils et en prenant une figure des plus sérieuses, que les comices agricoles de la Seine-Inférieure se tiendront cette année à Yonville-l'Abbaye. Le bruit, du moins, en circule. Ce matin, le journal en touchait quelque chose. Ce serait pour notre arrondissement de la dernière importance ! Mais nous en causerons plus tard. J'y vois, je vous remercie ; Justin a la lanterne.

VII

Le lendemain fut, pour Emma, une journée funèbre. Tout lui parut enveloppé par une atmosphère noire qui flottait confusément sur l'extérieur des choses, et le chagrin s'engouffrait dans son âme avec des hurlements doux, comme fait le vent d'hiver dans les châteaux abandonnés. C'était cette rêverie que l'on a sur ce qui ne reviendra plus, la lassitude qui vous prend après chaque fait accompli, cette douleur enfin que vous apportent l'interruption de tout mouvement accoutumé, la cessation brusque d'une vibration prolongée.

Comme au retour de la Vaubyessard, quand les quadrilles tourbillonnaient dans sa tête, elle avait une mélancolie morne, un désespoir engourdi. Léon réapparaissait plus grand, plus beau, plus suave, plus vague ; quoiqu'il fût séparé d'elle, il ne l'avait pas quittée, il était là, et les murailles de la maison semblaient garder son ombre. Elle ne pouvait détacher sa vue de ce tapis où il avait marché, de ces meubles vides où il s'était assis. La rivière coulait toujours, et poussait lentement ses petits flots le long de la berge glissante. Ils s'y étaient promenés bien des fois, à ce même murmure des ondes, sur les cailloux couverts de mousse. Quels bons soleils ils avaient eus ! quelles bonnes après-midi, seuls, à l'ombre, dans le fond du jardin ! Il lisait tout haut, tête nue, posé sur un tabouret de bâtons secs ; le vent frais de la prairie faisait trembler les pages du livre et les capucines de la tonnelle... Ah ! il était parti, le seul charme de sa vie, le seul espoir possible d'une félicité ! Comment n'avait-elle pas saisi ce bonheur-là, quand il se présentait ! Pourquoi ne l'avoir pas retenu à deux mains, à deux genoux, quand il voulait s'enfuir ? Et elle se maudit de n'avoir pas aimé Léon ; elle eut soif de ses lèvres. L'envie la prit de courir le rejoindre, de se jeter dans ses bras, de lui dire : « C'est moi, je suis à toi ! » Mais Emma s'embarrassait d'avance aux difficultés de l'entreprise, et ses désirs, s'augmentant d'un regret, n'en devenaient que plus actifs.

Dès lors, ce souvenir de Léon fut comme le centre de son ennui ; il y pétillait plus fort que, dans un steppe de Russie, un feu de voyageurs abandonné sur la neige. Elle se précipitait vers lui, elle se blottissait contre, elle remuait délicatement ce foyer près de s'éteindre, elle allait cherchant tout autour d'elle ce qui pouvait l'aviver davantage ; et les réminiscences les plus lointaines comme les plus immédiates occasions, ce qu'elle éprouvait avec ce qu'elle imaginait, ses envies de volupté qui se dispersaient, ses projets de bonheur qui craquaient au vent comme des branchages morts, sa vertu stérile, ses espérances tombées, la litière domestique, elle ramassait tout, prenait tout, et faisait servir tout à réchauffer sa tristesse.

Cependant les flammes s'apaisèrent, soit que la provision d'elle-même s'épuisât, ou que l'entassement fût trop considérable. L'amour, peu à peu, s'éteignit par l'absence, le regret s'étouffa sous l'habitude ; et cette lueur d'incendie qui empourprait son ciel pâle se couvrit de plus d'ombre et s'effaça par degrés. Dans l'assoupissement de sa conscience, elle prit même les répugnances du mari pour des aspirations vers l'amant, les brûlures de la haine pour des réchauffements de la tendresse ; mais, comme l'ouragan soufflait toujours, et que la passion se consuma jusqu'aux cendres, et qu'aucun secours ne vint, qu'aucun soleil ne parut, il fut de tous côtés nuit complète, et elle demeura perdue dans un froid horrible qui la traversait.

Alors les mauvais jours de Tostes recommencèrent. Elle s'estimait à présent beaucoup plus malheureuse : car elle avait l'expérience du chagrin, avec la certitude qu'il ne finirait pas.

Une femme qui s'était imposé de si grands sacrifices pouvait bien se passer des fantaisies. Elle s'acheta un prie-Dieu gothique, et elle dépensa en un mois pour quatorze francs de citrons à se nettoyer les ongles ; elle écrivit à Rouen, afin d'avoir une robe en cachemire bleu ; elle choisit chez Lheureux la plus belle de ses écharpes ; elle se la nouait à la taille par-dessus sa robe de chambre ; et, les volets fermés, avec un livre à la main, elle restait étendue sur un canapé dans cet accoutrement.

Souvent, elle variait sa coiffure : elle se mettait à la chinoise, en boucles molles, en nattes tressées ; elle se fit une raie sur le côté de la tête et roula ses cheveux en dessous, comme un homme.

Elle voulut apprendre l'italien : elle acheta des dictionnaires, une grammaire, une provision de papier blanc. Elle essaya des lectures sérieuses, de l'histoire et de la philosophie. La nuit, quelquefois, Charles se réveillait en sursaut, croyant qu'on venait le chercher pour un malade :

— J'y vais, balbutiait-il.

Et c'était le bruit d'une allumette qu'Emma frottait afin de rallumer la lampe. Mais il en était de ses lectures comme de ses tapisseries, qui, toutes commencées encombraient son armoire ; elle les prenait, les quittait, passait à d'autres.

Elle avait des accès, où on l'eût poussée facilement à des extravagances. Elle soutint un jour, contre son mari, qu'elle boirait bien un grand demi-verre d'eau-de-vie, et, comme Charles eut la bêtise de l'en défier, elle avala l'eau-de-vie jusqu'au bout.

Malgré ses airs évaporés (c'était le mot des bourgeoises d'Yonville), Emma pourtant ne paraissait pas joyeuse, et, d'habitude, elle gardait aux coins de la bouche cette immobile contraction qui plisse la figure des vieilles filles et celle des ambitieux déchus. Elle était pâle partout, blanche comme du linge ; la peau du nez se tirait vers les narines, ses yeux vous regardaient d'une manière vague. Pour s'être découvert trois cheveux gris sur les tempes, elle parla beaucoup de sa vieillesse.

Souvent des défaillances la prenaient. Un jour même, elle eut un crachement de sang, et, comme Charles s'empressait, laissant apercevoir son inquiétude :

— Ah bah ! répondit-elle, qu'est-ce que cela fait ?

Charles s'alla réfugier dans son cabinet ; et il pleura, les deux coudes sur la table, assis dans son fauteuil de bureau, sous la tête phrénologique.

Alors il écrivit à sa mère pour la prier de venir, et ils eurent ensemble de longues conférences au sujet d'Emma.

À quoi se résoudre ? que faire, puisqu'elle se refusait à tout traitement ?

— Sais-tu ce qu'il faudrait à ta femme ? reprenait la mère Bovary. Ce seraient des occupations forcées, des ouvrages manuels ! Si elle était comme tant d'autres, contrainte à gagner son pain, elle n'aurait pas ces vapeurs-là, qui lui viennent d'un tas d'idées qu'elle se fourre dans la tête, et du désoeuvrement où elle vit.

— Pourtant elle s'occupe, disait Charles.

— Ah ! elle s'occupe ! À quoi donc ? À lire des romans, de mauvais livres, des ouvrages qui sont contre la religion et dans lesquels on se moque des prêtres par des discours tirés de Voltaire. Mais tout cela va loin, mon pauvre enfant, et quelqu'un qui n'a pas de religion finit toujours par tourner mal.

Donc, il fut résolu que l'on empêcherait Emma de lire des romans. L'entreprise ne semblait point facile. La bonne dame s'en chargea : elle devait quand elle passerait par Rouen, aller en personne chez le loueur de livres et lui représenter qu'Emma cessait ses abonnements. N'aurait-on pas le droit d'avertir la police, si le libraire persistait quand même dans son métier d'empoisonneur ?

Les adieux de la belle-mère et de la bru furent secs. Pendant les trois semaines qu'elles étaient restées ensemble, elles n'avaient pas échangé quatre paroles, à part les informations et compliments quand elles se rencontraient à table, et le soir avant de se mettre au lit.

Madame Bovary mère partit un mercredi, qui était jour de marché à Yonville.

La Place, dès le matin, était encombrée par une file de charrettes qui, toutes à cul et les brancards en l'air, s'étendaient le long des maisons depuis l'église jusqu'à l'auberge. De l'autre côté, il y avait des baraques de toile où l'on vendait des cotonnades, des couvertures et des bas de laine, avec des licous pour les chevaux et des paquets de rubans bleus, qui par le bout s'envolaient au vent. De la grosse quincaillerie s'étalait par terre, entre les pyramides d'oeufs et les bannettes de fromages, d'où sortaient des pailles gluantes ; près des machines à blé, des poules qui gloussaient dans des cages plates passaient leurs cous par les barreaux. La foule, s'encombrant au même endroit sans en vouloir bouger, menaçait quelquefois de rompre la devanture de la pharmacie. Les mercredis, elle ne désemplissait pas et l'on s'y poussait, moins pour acheter des médicaments que pour prendre des consultations, tant était fameuse la réputation du sieur Homais dans les villages circonvoisins. Son robuste aplomb avait fasciné les campagnards. Ils le regardaient comme un plus grand médecin que tous les médecins.

Emma était accoudée à sa fenêtre (elle s'y mettait souvent : la fenêtre, en province, remplace les théâtres et la promenade), et elle s'amusait à considérer la cohue des rustres, lorsqu'elle aperçut un monsieur vêtu d'une redingote de velours vert. Il était ganté de gants jaunes, quoiqu'il fût chaussé de fortes guêtres ; et il se dirigeait vers la maison du médecin, suivi d'un paysan marchant la tête basse d'un air tout réfléchi.

— Puis-je voir Monsieur ? demanda-t-il à Justin, qui causait sur le seuil avec Félicité.

Et, le prenant pour le domestique de la maison :

— Dites-lui que M. Rodolphe Boulanger de la Huchette est là.

Ce n'était point par vanité territoriale que le nouvel arrivant avait ajouté à son nom la particule, mais afin de se faire mieux connaître. La Huchette, en effet, était un domaine près d'Yonville, dont il venait d'acquérir le château, avec deux fermes qu'il cultivait lui-même, sans trop se gêner cependant. Il vivait en garçon, et passait pour avoir *au moins quinze mille livres de rentes !*

Charles entra dans la salle. M. Boulanger lui présenta son homme, qui voulait être saigné parce qu'il éprouvait *des fourmis le long du corps*.

— Ça me purgera, objectait-il à tous les raisonnements.

Bovary commanda donc d'apporter une bande et une cuvette, et pria Justin de la soutenir. Puis, s'adressant au villageois déjà blême :

— N'ayez point peur, mon brave.

— Non, non, répondit l'autre, marchez toujours !

Et, d'un air fanfaron, il tendit son gros bras. Sous la piqûre de la lancette, le sang jaillit et alla s'éclabousser contre la glace.

— Approche le vase ! exclama Charles.

— *Guête* ! disait le paysan, on jurerait une petite fontaine qui coule ! Comme j'ai le sang rouge ! ce doit être bon signe, n'est-ce pas ?

— Quelquefois, reprit l'officier de santé, l'on n'éprouve rien au commencement, puis la syncope se déclare, et plus particulièrement chez les gens bien constitués, comme celui-ci.

Le campagnard, à ces mots, lâcha l'étui qu'il tournait entre ses doigts. Une saccade de ses épaules fit craquer le dossier de la chaise. Son chapeau tomba.

— Je m'en doutais, dit Bovary en appliquant son doigt sur la veine.

La cuvette commençait à trembler aux mains de Justin ; ses genoux chancelèrent, il devint pâle.

— Ma femme ! ma femme ! appela Charles.

D'un bond, elle descendit l'escalier.

— Du vinaigre ! cria-t-il. Ah ! mon Dieu, deux à la fois !

Et, dans son émotion, il avait peine à poser la compresse.

— Ce n'est rien, disait tout tranquillement M. Boulanger, tandis qu'il prenait Justin entre ses bras.

Et il l'assit sur la table, lui appuyant le dos contre la muraille.

Madame Bovary se mit à lui retirer sa cravate. Il y avait un noeud aux cordons de la chemise ; elle resta quelques minutes à remuer ses doigts légers dans le cou du jeune garçon ; ensuite elle versa du vinaigre sur son mouchoir de batiste ; elle lui en mouillait les tempes à petits coups et elle soufflait dessus, délicatement.

Le charretier se réveilla ; mais la syncope de Justin durait encore, et ses prunelles disparaissaient dans leur sclérotique pâle, comme des fleurs bleues dans du lait.

— Il faudrait, dit Charles, lui cacher cela.

Madame Bovary prit la cuvette. Pour la mettre sous la table, dans le mouvement qu'elle fit en s'inclinant, sa robe (c'était une robe d'été à quatre volants, de couleur jaune, longue de taille, large de jupe), sa robe s'évasa autour d'elle sur les carreaux de la salle ; – et, comme Emma, baissée, chancelait un peu en écartant les bras, le gonflement de l'étoffe se crevait de place en place, selon les inflexions de son corsage. Ensuite elle alla prendre une carafe d'eau, et elle faisait fondre des morceaux de sucre lorsque le pharmacien arriva. La servante l'avait été chercher dans l'algarade ; en apercevant son élève les yeux ouverts, il reprit haleine. Puis, tournant autour de lui, il le regardait de haut en bas.

— Sot ! disait-il ; petit sot, vraiment ! sot en trois lettres ! Grand-chose, après tout, qu'une phlébotomie ! et un gaillard qui n'a peur de rien ! une espèce d'écureuil, tel que vous le voyez, qui monte locher des noix à des hauteurs vertigineuses. Ah ! oui, parle, vante-toi ! voilà de belles dispositions à exercer plus tard la pharmacie ; car tu peux te trouver appelé en des circonstances graves, par-devant les tribunaux, afin d'y éclairer la conscience des magistrats ; et il faudra pourtant garder son sang-froid, raisonner, se montrer homme, ou bien passer pour un imbécile !

Justin ne répondait pas. L'apothicaire continuait :

— Qui t'a prié de venir ? Tu importunes toujours monsieur et madame ! Les mercredis, d'ailleurs, ta présence m'est plus indispensable. Il y a maintenant vingt personnes à la maison. J'ai tout quitté à cause de l'intérêt que je te porte. Allons, va-t'en ! cours ! attends-moi, et surveille les bocaux !

Quand Justin, qui se rhabillait, fut parti, l'on causa quelque peu des évanouissements. Madame Bovary n'en avait jamais eu.

— C'est extraordinaire pour une dame ! dit M. Boulanger. Du reste, il y a des gens bien délicats. Ainsi j'ai vu, dans une rencontre, un témoin perdre connaissance rien qu'au bruit des pistolets que l'on chargeait.

— Moi, dit l'apothicaire, la vue du sang des autres ne me fait rien du tout ; mais l'idée seulement du mien qui coule suffirait à me causer des défaillances, si j'y réfléchissais trop.

Cependant M. Boulanger congédia son domestique, en l'engageant à se tranquilliser l'esprit, puisque sa fantaisie était passée.

— Elle m'a procuré l'avantage de votre connaissance, ajouta-t-il.

Et il regardait Emma durant cette phrase.

Puis il déposa trois francs sur le coin de la table, salua négligemment et s'en alla.

Il fut bientôt de l'autre côté de la rivière (c'était son chemin pour s'en retourner à la Huchette) ; et Emma l'aperçut dans la prairie, qui marchait sous les peupliers, se ralentissant de temps à autre, comme quelqu'un qui réfléchit.

— Elle est fort gentille ! se disait-il ; elle est fort gentille, cette femme du médecin ! De belles dents, les yeux noirs, le pied coquet, et de la tournure comme une Parisienne. D'où diable sort-elle ? Où donc l'a-t-il trouvée, ce gros garçon-là ?

M. Rodolphe Boulanger avait trente-quatre ans ; il était de tempérament brutal et d'intelligence perspicace, ayant d'ailleurs beaucoup fréquenté les femmes, et s'y connaissant bien. Celle-là lui avait paru jolie ; il y rêvait donc, et à son mari.

— Je le crois très bête. Elle en est fatiguée sans doute. Il porte des ongles sales et une barbe de trois jours. Tandis qu'il trottine à ses malades, elle reste à ravauder des chaussettes. Et on s'ennuie ! on voudrait habiter la ville, danser la polka tous les soirs ! Pauvre petite femme ! Ça bâille après l'amour, comme une carpe après l'eau sur une table de cuisine. Avec trois mots de galanterie, cela vous adorerait, j'en suis sûr ! ce serait tendre ! charmant !... Oui, mais comment s'en débarrasser ensuite ?

Alors les encombrements du plaisir, entrevus en perspective, le firent, par contraste, songer à sa maîtresse. C'était une comédienne de Rouen, qu'il entretenait ; et, quand il se fut arrêté sur cette image, dont il avait, en souvenir même, des rassasiements :

— Ah ! madame Bovary, pensa-t-il, est bien plus jolie qu'elle, plus fraîche surtout. Virginie, décidément, commence à devenir trop grosse. Elle est si fastidieuse avec ses joies. Et, d'ailleurs, quelle manie de salicoques !

La campagne était déserte, et Rodolphe n'entendait autour de lui que le battement régulier des herbes qui fouettaient sa chaussure, avec le cri des grillons tapis au loin sous les avoines ; il revoyait Emma dans la salle, habillée comme il l'avait vue, et il la déshabillait.

— Oh ! je l'aurai ! s'écria-t-il en écrasant, d'un coup de bâton, une motte de terre devant lui.

Et aussitôt il examina la partie politique de l'entreprise. Il se demandait :

— Où se rencontrer ? par quel moyen ? On aura continuellement le marmot sur les épaules, et la bonne, les voisins, le mari, toute sorte de tracasseries considérables. Ah bah ! dit-il, on y perd trop de temps !

Puis il recommença :

— C'est qu'elle a des yeux qui vous entrent au coeur comme des vrilles. Et ce teint pâle !... Moi, qui adore les femmes pâles !

Au haut de la côte d'Argueil, sa résolution était prise.

— Il n'y a plus qu'à chercher les occasions. Eh bien, j'y passerai quelquefois, je leur enverrai du gibier, de la volaille ; je me ferai saigner, s'il le faut ; nous deviendrons amis, je les inviterai chez moi... Ah ! parbleu ! ajouta-t-il, voilà les comices bientôt ; elle y sera, je la verrai. Nous commencerons, et hardiment, car c'est le plus sûr.

VIII

Ils arrivèrent, en effet, ces fameux Comices ! Dès le matin de la solennité, tous les habitants, sur leurs portes, s'entretenaient des préparatifs ; on avait enguirlandé de lierres le fronton de la mairie ; une tente dans un pré était dressée pour le festin, et, au milieu de la Place, devant l'église, une espèce de bombarde devait signaler l'arrivée de M. le préfet et le nom des cultivateurs lauréats. La garde nationale de Buchy (il n'y en avait point à Yonville) était venue s'adjoindre au corps des pompiers, dont Binet était le capitaine. Il portait ce jour-là un col encore plus haut que de coutume ; et, sanglé dans sa tunique, il avait le buste si roide et immobile, que toute la partie vitale de sa personne semblait être descendue dans ses deux jambes, qui se levaient en cadence, à pas marqués, d'un seul mouvement. Comme une rivalité subsistait entre le percepteur et le colonel, l'un et l'autre, pour montrer leurs talents, faisaient à part manoeuvrer leurs hommes. On voyait alternativement passer et repasser les épaulettes rouges et les plastrons noirs. Cela ne finissait pas et toujours recommençait ! Jamais il n'y avait eu pareil déploiement de pompe ! Plusieurs bourgeois, dès la veille, avaient lavé leurs maisons ; des drapeaux tricolores pendaient aux fenêtres entrouvertes ; tous les cabarets étaient pleins ; et, par le beau temps qu'il faisait, les bonnets empesés, les croix d'or et les fichus de couleur paraissaient plus blancs que neige, miroitaient au soleil clair, et relevaient de leur bigarrure éparpillée la sombre monotonie des redingotes et des bourgerons bleus. Les fermières des environs retiraient, en descendant de cheval, la grosse épingle qui leur serrait autour du corps leur robe retroussée de peur des taches ; et les maris, au contraire, afin de ménager leurs chapeaux, gardaient par-dessus des mouchoirs de poche, dont ils tenaient un angle entre les dents.

La foule arrivait dans la grande rue par les deux bouts du village. Il s'en dégorgeait des ruelles, des allées, des maisons, et l'on entendait de temps à autre retomber le marteau des portes, derrière les bourgeoises en gants de fil, qui sortaient pour aller voir la fête. Ce que l'on admirait surtout, c'étaient deux longs ifs couverts de lampions qui flanquaient une estrade où s'allaient tenir les autorités ; et il y avait de plus, contre les quatre colonnes de la mairie, quatre manières de gaules, portant chacune un petit étendard de toile verdâtre, enrichi d'inscriptions en lettres d'or. On lisait sur l'un : « Au Commerce » ; sur l'autre : « À l'Agriculture » ; sur le troisième : « À l'Industrie » ; et sur le quatrième : « Aux Beaux-Arts ».

Mais la jubilation qui épanouissait tous les visages paraissait assombrir madame Lefrançois, l'aubergiste. Debout sur les marches de sa cuisine, elle murmurait dans son menton :

— Quelle bêtise ! quelle bêtise avec leur baraque de toile ! Croient-ils que le préfet sera bien aise de dîner là-bas, sous une tente, comme un saltimbanque ? Ils appellent ces embarras-là, faire le bien du pays ! Ce n'était pas la peine, alors, d'aller chercher un gargotier à Neufchâtel ! Et pour qui ? pour des vachers ! des va-nu-pieds !...

L'apothicaire passa. Il portait un habit noir, un pantalon de nankin, des souliers de castor, et par extraordinaire un chapeau, – un chapeau bas de forme.

— Serviteur ! dit-il ; excusez-moi, je suis pressé.

Et comme la grosse veuve lui demanda où il allait :

— Cela vous semble drôle, n'est-ce pas ? moi qui reste toujours plus confiné dans mon laboratoire que le rat du bonhomme dans son fromage.

— Quel fromage ? fit l'aubergiste.

— Non, rien ! ce n'est rien ! reprit Homais. Je voulais vous exprimer seulement, madame Lefrançois, que je demeure d'habitude tout reclus chez moi. Aujourd'hui cependant, vu la circonstance, il faut bien que...

— Ah ! vous allez là-bas ? dit-elle avec un air de dédain.

— Oui, j'y vais, répliqua l'apothicaire étonné ; ne fais-je point partie de la commission consultative ?

La mère Lefrançois le considéra quelques minutes, et finit par répondre en souriant :

— C'est autre chose ! Mais qu'est-ce que la culture vous regarde ? vous vous y entendez donc ?

— Certainement, je m'y entends, puisque je suis pharmacien, c'est-à-dire chimiste ! et la chimie, madame Lefrançois, ayant pour objet la connaissance de l'action réciproque et moléculaire de tous les corps de la nature, il s'ensuit que l'agriculture se trouve comprise dans son domaine ! Et, en effet, composition des engrais, fermentation des liquides, analyse des gaz et influence des miasmes, qu'est-ce que tout cela, je vous le demande, si ce n'est de la chimie pure et simple ?

L'aubergiste ne répondit rien. Homais continua :

— Croyez-vous qu'il faille, pour être agronome, avoir soi-même labouré la terre ou engraissé des volailles ? Mais il faut connaître plutôt la constitution des substances dont il s'agit, les gisements géologiques, les actions atmosphériques, la qualité des terrains, des minéraux, des eaux, la densité des différents corps et leur capillarité ! que sais-je ? Et il faut posséder à fond tous ses principes d'hygiène, pour diriger, critiquer la construction des bâtiments, le régime des animaux, l'alimentation des domestiques ! il faut encore, madame Lefrançois, posséder la botanique ; pouvoir discerner les plantes, entendez-vous, quelles sont les salutaires d'avec les délétères, quelles les improductives et quelles les nutritives, s'il est bon de les arracher par-ci et de les ressemer par-là, de propager les unes, de détruire les autres ; bref, il faut se tenir au courant de la science par les brochures et papiers publics, être toujours en haleine, afin d'indiquer les améliorations...

L'aubergiste ne quittait point des yeux la porte du *café Français*, et le pharmacien poursuivit :

— Plût à Dieu que nos agriculteurs fussent des chimistes, ou que du moins ils écoutassent davantage les conseils de la science ! Ainsi, moi, j'ai dernièrement écrit un fort opuscule, un mémoire de plus de soixante et douze pages, intitulé : *Du cidre, de sa fabrication et de ses effets ; suivi de quelques réflexions nouvelles à ce sujet*, que j'ai envoyé à la Société agronomique de Rouen ; ce qui m'a même valu l'honneur d'être reçu parmi ses membres, section d'agriculture, classe de pomologie ; eh bien, si mon ouvrage avait été livré à la publicité...

Mais l'apothicaire s'arrêta, tant madame Lefrançois paraissait préoccupée.

— Voyez-les donc ! disait-elle, on n'y comprend rien ! une gargote semblable !

Et, avec des haussements d'épaules qui tiraient sur sa poitrine les mailles de son tricot, elle montrait des deux mains le cabaret de son rival, d'où sortaient alors des chansons.

— Du reste, il n'en a pas pour longtemps, ajouta-t-elle ; avant huit jours, tout est fini.

Homais se recula de stupéfaction. Elle descendit ses trois marches, et, lui parlant à l'oreille :

— Comment ! vous ne savez pas cela ? On va le saisir cette semaine. C'est Lheureux qui le fait vendre. Il l'a assassiné de billets.

— Quelle épouvantable catastrophe ! s'écria l'apothicaire, qui avait toujours des expressions congruantes à toutes les circonstances imaginables.

L'hôtesse donc se mit à lui raconter cette histoire, qu'elle savait par Théodore, le domestique de M. Guillaumin, et, bien qu'elle exécrât Tellier, elle blâmait Lheureux. C'était un enjôleur, un rampant.

— Ah ! tenez, dit-elle, le voilà sous les halles ; il salue madame Bovary, qui a un chapeau vert. Elle est même au bras de M. Boulanger.

— Madame Bovary ! fit Homais. Je m'empresse d'aller lui offrir mes hommages. Peut-être qu'elle sera bien aise d'avoir une place dans l'enceinte, sous le péristyle.

Et, sans écouter la mère Lefrançois, qui le rappelait pour lui en conter plus long, le pharmacien s'éloigna d'un pas rapide, sourire aux lèvres et jarret tendu, distribuant de droite et de gauche quantité de salutations et emplissant beaucoup d'espace avec les grandes basques de son habit noir, qui flottaient au vent derrière lui.

Rodolphe, l'ayant aperçu de loin, avait pris un train rapide ; mais madame Bovary s'essouffla ; il se ralentit donc et lui dit en souriant, d'un ton brutal :

— C'est pour éviter ce gros homme : vous savez, l'apothicaire.

Elle lui donna un coup de coude.

— Qu'est-ce que cela signifie ? se demanda-t-il.

Et il la considéra du coin de l'oeil, tout en continuant à marcher.

Son profil était si calme, que l'on n'y devinait rien. Il se détachait en pleine lumière, dans l'ovale de sa capote qui avait des rubans pâles ressemblant à des feuilles de roseau. Ses yeux aux longs cils courbes regardaient devant elle, et, quoique bien ouverts, ils semblaient un peu bridés par les pommettes, à cause du sang, qui battait doucement sous sa peau fine. Une couleur rose traversait la cloison de son nez. Elle inclinait la tête sur l'épaule, et l'on voyait entre ses lèvres le bout nacré de ses dents blanches.

— Se moque-t-elle de moi ? songeait Rodolphe.

Ce geste d'Emma pourtant n'avait été qu'un avertissement ; car M. Lheureux les accompagnait, et il leur parlait de temps à autre, comme pour entrer en conversation :

— Voici une journée superbe ! tout le monde est dehors ! les vents sont à l'est.

Et madame Bovary, non plus que Rodolphe, ne lui répondait guère, tandis qu'au moindre mouvement qu'ils faisaient, il se rapprochait en disant : « Plaît-il ? » et portait la main à son chapeau.

Quand ils furent devant la maison du maréchal, au lieu de suivre la route jusqu'à la barrière, Rodolphe, brusquement, prit un sentier, entraînant madame Bovary ; il cria :

— Bonsoir, M. Lheureux ! au plaisir !

— Comme vous l'avez congédié ! dit-elle en riant.

— Pourquoi, reprit-il, se laisser envahir par les autres ? et, puisque, aujourd'hui, j'ai le bonheur d'être avec vous...

Emma rougit. Il n'acheva point sa phrase. Alors il parla du beau temps et du plaisir de marcher sur l'herbe. Quelques marguerites étaient repoussées.

— Voici de gentilles pâquerettes, dit-il, et de quoi fournir bien des oracles à toutes les amoureuses du pays.

Il ajouta :

— Si j'en cueillais. Qu'en pensez-vous ?

— Est-ce que vous êtes amoureux ? fit-elle en toussant un peu.

— Eh ! eh ! qui sait ? répondit Rodolphe.

Le pré commençait à se remplir, et les ménagères vous heurtaient avec leurs grands parapluies, leurs paniers et leurs bambins. Souvent il fallait se déranger devant une longue file de campagnardes, servantes en bas bleus, à souliers plats, à bagues d'argent, et qui sentaient le lait, quand on passait près d'elles. Elles marchaient en se tenant par la main, et se répandaient ainsi sur toute la longueur de la prairie, depuis la ligne des trembles jusqu'à la tente du banquet. Mais c'était le moment de l'examen, et les cultivateurs, les uns après les autres, entraient dans une manière d'hippodrome que formait une longue corde portée sur des bâtons.

Les bêtes étaient là, le nez tourné vers la ficelle, et alignant confusément leurs croupes inégales. Des porcs assoupis enfonçaient en terre leur groin ; des veaux beuglaient ; des brebis bêlaient ; les vaches, un jarret replié, étalaient leur ventre sur le gazon, et, ruminant lentement, clignaient leurs paupières lourdes, sous les moucherons qui bourdonnaient autour d'elles. Des charretiers, les bras nus, retenaient par le licou des étalons cabrés, qui hennissaient à pleins naseaux du côté des juments. Elles restaient paisibles, allongeant la tête et la crinière pendante, tandis que leurs poulains se reposaient à leur ombre, ou venaient les téter quelquefois ; et, sur la longue ondulation de tous ces corps tassés, on voyait se lever au vent, comme un flot, quelque crinière blanche, ou bien saillir des cornes aiguës, et des têtes d'hommes qui couraient. À l'écart, en dehors des lices, cent pas plus loin, il y avait un grand taureau noir muselé, portant un cercle de fer à la narine, et qui ne bougeait pas plus qu'une bête de bronze. Un enfant en haillons le tenait par une corde.

Cependant, entre les deux rangées, des messieurs s'avançaient d'un pas lourd, examinant chaque animal, puis se consultaient à voix basse. L'un d'eux, qui semblait plus considérable, prenait, tout en marchant, quelques notes sur un album. C'était le président du jury : M. Derozerays de la Panville. Sitôt qu'il reconnut Rodolphe, il s'avança vivement, et lui dit en souriant d'un air aimable :

— Comment, monsieur Boulanger, vous nous abandonnez ?

Rodolphe protesta qu'il allait venir. Mais quand le président eut disparu :

— Ma foi, non, reprit-il, je n'irai pas ; votre compagnie vaut bien la sienne.

Et, tout en se moquant des comices, Rodolphe, pour circuler plus à l'aise, montrait au gendarme sa pancarte bleue, et même il s'arrêtait parfois devant quelque beau *sujet*, que madame Bovary n'admirait guère. Il s'en aperçut, et alors se mit à faire des plaisanteries sur les dames d'Yonville, à propos de leur toilette ; puis il s'excusa lui-même du négligé de la sienne. Elle avait cette incohérence de choses communes et recherchées, où le vulgaire, d'habitude, croit entrevoir la révélation d'une existence excentrique, les désordres du sentiment, les tyrannies de l'art, et toujours un certain mépris des conventions sociales, ce qui le séduit ou l'exaspère. Ainsi sa chemise de batiste à manchettes plissées bouffait au hasard du vent, dans l'ouverture de son gilet, qui était de coutil gris, et son pantalon à larges raies découvrait aux chevilles ses bottines de nankin, claquées de cuir verni. Elles étaient si vernies, que l'herbe s'y reflétait. Il foulait avec elles les crottins de cheval, une main dans la poche de sa veste et son chapeau de paille mis de côté.

— D'ailleurs, ajouta-t-il, quand on habite la campagne...

— Tout est peine perdue, dit Emma.

— C'est vrai ! répliqua Rodolphe. Songer que pas un seul de ces braves gens n'est capable de comprendre même la tournure d'un habit !

Alors ils parlèrent de la médiocrité provinciale, des existences qu'elle étouffait, des illusions qui s'y perdaient.

— Aussi, disait Rodolphe, je m'enfonce dans une tristesse...

— Vous ! fit-elle avec étonnement. Mais je vous croyais très gai ?

— Ah ! oui, d'apparence, parce qu'au milieu du monde je sais mettre sur mon visage un masque railleur ; et cependant que de fois, à la vue d'un cimetière, au clair de lune, je me suis demandé si je ne ferais pas mieux d'aller rejoindre ceux qui sont à dormir...

— Oh ! Et vos amis ? dit-elle. Vous n'y pensez pas.

— Mes amis ? lesquels donc ? en ai-je ? Qui s'inquiète de moi ?

Et il accompagna ces derniers mots d'une sorte de sifflement entre ses lèvres.

Mais ils furent obligés de s'écarter l'un de l'autre, à cause d'un grand échafaudage de chaises qu'un homme portait derrière eux. Il en était si surchargé, que l'on apercevait seulement la pointe de ses sabots, avec le bout de ses deux bras, écartés droit. C'était Lestiboudois, le fossoyeur, qui charriait dans la multitude les chaises de l'église. Plein d'imagination pour tout ce qui concernait ses intérêts, il avait découvert ce moyen de tirer parti des comices ; et son idée lui réussissait, car il ne savait plus auquel, entendre. En effet, les villageois, qui avaient chaud, se disputaient ces sièges dont la paille sentait l'encens, et s'appuyaient contre leurs gros dossiers salis par la cire des cierges, avec une certaine vénération.

Madame Bovary reprit le bras de Rodolphe ; il continua comme se parlant à lui-même :

— Oui ! tant de choses m'ont manqué ! toujours seul ! Ah ! si j'avais eu un but dans la vie, si j'eusse rencontré une affection, si j'avais trouvé quelqu'un... Oh ! comme j'aurais dépensé toute l'énergie dont je suis capable, j'aurais surmonté tout, brisé tout !

— Il me semble pourtant, dit Emma, que vous n'êtes guère à plaindre.

— Ah ! vous trouvez ? fit Rodolphe.

— Car enfin..., reprit-elle, vous êtes libre.

Elle hésita :

— Riche.

— Ne vous moquez pas de moi, répondit-il.

Et elle jurait qu'elle ne se moquait pas, quand un coup de canon retentit ; aussitôt, on se poussa, pêle-mêle, vers le village.

C'était une fausse alerte. M. le préfet n'arrivait pas ; et les membres du jury se trouvaient fort embarrassés, ne sachant s'il fallait commencer la séance ou bien attendre encore.

Enfin, au fond de la Place, parut un grand landau de louage, traîné par deux chevaux maigres, que fouettait à tour de bras un cocher en chapeau blanc. Binet n'eut que le temps de crier : « Aux armes ! » et le colonel de l'imiter. On courut vers les faisceaux. On se précipita. Quelques-uns même oublièrent leur col. Mais l'équipage préfectoral sembla deviner cet embarras, et les deux rosses accouplées, se dandinant sur leur chaînette, arrivèrent au petit trot devant le péristyle de la mairie, juste au moment où la garde nationale et les pompiers s'y déployaient, tambour battant, et marquant le pas.

— Balancez ! cria Binet.

— Halte ! cria le colonel. Par file à gauche !

Et, après un port d'armes où le cliquetis des capucines, se déroulant, sonna comme un chaudron de cuivre qui dégringole les escaliers, tous les fusils retombèrent.

Alors on vit descendre du carrosse un monsieur vêtu d'un habit court à broderie d'argent, chauve sur le front, portant toupet à l'occiput, ayant le teint blafard et l'apparence des plus bénignes. Ses deux yeux, fort gros et couverts de paupières épaisses, se fermaient à demi pour considérer la multitude, en même temps qu'il levait son nez pointu et faisait sourire sa bouche rentrée. Il reconnut le maire à son écharpe, et lui exposa que M. le préfet n'avait pu venir. Il était, lui, un conseiller de préfecture ; puis il ajouta quelques excuses. Tuvache y répondit par des civilités, l'autre s'avoua confus ; et ils restaient ainsi, face à face, et leurs fronts se touchant presque, avec les membres du jury tout alentour, le conseil municipal, les notables, la garde nationale et la foule. M. le conseiller, appuyant contre sa poitrine son petit tricorne noir, réitérait ses salutations, tandis que Tuvache, courbé comme un arc, souriait aussi, bégayait, cherchait ses phrases, protestait de son dévouement à la monarchie, et de l'honneur que l'on faisait à Yonville.

Hippolyte, le garçon de l'auberge, vint prendre par la bride les chevaux du cocher, et tout en boitant de son pied bot, il les conduisit sous le porche du *Lion* *d’or*, où beaucoup de paysans s'amassèrent à regarder la voiture. Le tambour battit, l'obusier tonna, et les messieurs à la file montèrent s'asseoir sur l'estrade, dans les fauteuils en utrecht rouge qu'avait prêtés madame Tuvache.

Tous ces gens-là se ressemblaient. Leurs molles figures blondes, un peu hâlées par le soleil, avaient la couleur du cidre doux, et leurs favoris bouffants s'échappaient de grands cols roides, que maintenaient des cravates blanches à rosette bien étalée. Tous les gilets étaient de velours, à châle ; toutes les montres portaient au bout d'un long ruban quelque cachet ovale en cornaline ; et l'on appuyait ses deux mains sur ses deux cuisses, en écartant avec soin la fourche du pantalon, dont le drap non décati reluisait plus brillamment que le cuir des fortes bottes.

Les dames de la société se tenaient derrière, sous le vestibule, entre les colonnes, tandis que le commun de la foule était en face, debout, ou bien assis sur des chaises. En effet, Lestiboudois avait apporté là toutes celles qu'il avait déménagées de la prairie, et même il courait à chaque minute en chercher d'autres dans l'église, et causait un tel encombrement par son commerce, que l'on avait grand-peine à parvenir jusqu'au petit escalier de l'estrade.

— Moi, je trouve, dit M. Lheureux (s'adressant au pharmacien, qui passait pour gagner sa place), que l'on aurait dû planter là deux mâts vénitiens : avec quelque chose d'un peu sévère et de riche comme nouveautés, c'eût été d'un fort joli coup d'oeil.

— Certes, répondit Homais. Mais, que voulez-vous ! c'est le maire qui a tout pris sous son bonnet. Il n'a pas grand goût, ce pauvre Tuvache, et il est même complètement dénué de ce qui s'appelle le génie des arts.

Cependant Rodolphe, avec madame Bovary, était monté au premier étage de la mairie, dans la *salle des délibérations*, et, comme elle était vide, il avait déclaré que l'on y serait bien pour jouir du spectacle plus à son aise. Il prit trois tabourets autour de la table ovale, sous le buste du monarque, et, les ayant approchés de l'une des fenêtres, ils s'assirent l'un près de l'autre.

Il y eut une agitation sur l'estrade, de longs chuchotements, des pourparlers. Enfin, M. le Conseiller se leva. On savait maintenant qu'il s'appelait Lieuvain, et l'on se répétait son nom de l'un à l'autre, dans la foule. Quand il eut donc collationné quelques feuilles et appliqué dessus son oeil pour y mieux voir, il commença :

« Messieurs,

« Qu'il me soit permis d'abord (avant de vous entretenir de l'objet de cette réunion d'aujourd'hui, et ce sentiment, j'en suis sûr, sera partagé par vous tous), qu'il me soit permis, dis-je, de rendre justice à l'administration supérieure, au gouvernement, au monarque, messieurs, à notre souverain, à ce roi bien-aimé à qui aucune branche de la prospérité publique ou particulière n'est indifférente, et qui dirige à la fois d'une main si ferme et si sage le char de l'État parmi les périls incessants d'une mer orageuse, sachant d'ailleurs faire respecter la paix comme la guerre, l'industrie, le commerce, l'agriculture et les beaux-arts. »

— Je devrais, dit Rodolphe, me reculer un peu.

— Pourquoi ? dit Emma.

Mais, à ce moment, la voix du Conseiller s'éleva d'un ton extraordinaire. Il déclamait :

« Le temps n'est plus, messieurs, où la discorde civile ensanglantait nos places publiques, où le propriétaire, le négociant, l'ouvrier lui-même, en s'endormant le soir d'un sommeil paisible, tremblaient de se voir réveillés tout à coup au bruit des tocsins incendiaires, où les maximes les plus subversives sapaient audacieusement les bases... »

— C'est qu'on pourrait, reprit Rodolphe, m'apercevoir d'en bas ; puis j'en aurais pour quinze jours à donner des excuses, et, avec ma mauvaise réputation...

— Oh ! vous vous calomniez, dit Emma.

— Non, non, elle est exécrable, je vous jure.

« Mais messieurs, poursuivait le Conseiller, que si, écartant de mon souvenir ces sombres tableaux, je reporte mes yeux sur la situation actuelle de notre belle patrie : qu'y vois-je ? Partout fleurissent le commerce et les arts ; partout des voies nouvelles de communication, comme autant d'artères nouvelles dans le corps de l'État, y établissent des rapports nouveaux ; nos grands centres manufacturiers ont repris leur activité ; la religion, plus affermie, sourit à tous les coeurs ; nos ports sont pleins, la confiance renaît, et enfin la France respire !... »

— Du reste, ajouta Rodolphe, peut-être, au point de vue du monde, a-t-on raison ?

— Comment cela ? fit-elle.

— Eh quoi ! dit-il, ne savez-vous pas qu'il y a des âmes sans cesse tourmentées ? Il leur faut tour à tour le rêve et l'action, les passions les plus pures, les jouissances les plus furieuses, et l'on se jette ainsi dans toutes sortes de fantaisies, de folies.

Alors elle le regarda comme on contemple un voyageur qui a passé par des pays extraordinaires, et elle reprit :

— Nous n'avons pas même cette distraction, nous autres pauvres femmes !

— Triste distraction, car on n'y trouve pas le bonheur.

— Mais le trouve-t-on jamais ? demanda-t-elle.

— Oui, il se rencontre un jour, répondit-il.

« Et c'est là ce que vous avez compris, disait le Conseiller. Vous, agriculteurs et ouvriers des campagnes ; vous, pionniers pacifiques d'une oeuvre toute de civilisation ! vous, hommes de progrès et de moralité ! vous avez compris, dis-je, que les orages politiques sont encore plus redoutables vraiment que les désordres de l'atmosphère... »

— Il se rencontre un jour, répéta Rodolphe, un jour, tout à coup, et quand on en désespérait. Alors des horizons s'entrouvrent, c'est comme une voix qui crie : « Le voilà ! » Vous sentez le besoin de faire à cette personne la confidence de votre vie, de lui donner tout, de lui sacrifier tout ! On ne s'explique pas, on se devine. On s'est entrevu dans ses rêves. (Et il la regardait.) Enfin, il est là, ce trésor que l'on a tant cherché, là, devant vous ; il brille, il étincelle. Cependant on en doute encore, on n'ose y croire ; on en reste ébloui, comme si l'on sortait des ténèbres à la lumière.

Et, en achevant ces mots, Rodolphe ajouta la pantomime à sa phrase. Il se passa la main sur le visage, tel qu'un homme pris d'étourdissement ; puis il la laissa retomber sur celle d'Emma. Elle retira la sienne. Mais le Conseiller lisait toujours :

« Et qui s'en étonnerait, messieurs ? Celui-là seul qui serait assez aveugle, assez plongé (je ne crains pas de le dire), assez plongé dans les préjugés d'un autre âge pour méconnaître encore l'esprit des populations agricoles. Où trouver, en effet, plus de patriotisme que dans les campagnes, plus de dévouement à la cause publique, plus d'intelligence en un mot ? Et je n'entends pas, messieurs, cette intelligence superficielle, vain ornement des esprits oisifs, mais plus de cette intelligence profonde et modérée, qui s'applique par-dessus toute chose à poursuivre des buts utiles, contribuant ainsi au bien de chacun, à l'amélioration commune et au soutien des États, fruit du respect des lois et de la pratique des devoirs... »

— Ah ! encore, dit Rodolphe. Toujours les devoirs, je suis assommé de ces mots-là. Ils sont un tas de vieilles ganaches en gilet de flanelle, et de bigotes à chaufferette et à chapelet, qui continuellement nous chantent aux oreilles : « Le devoir ! le devoir ! » Eh ! parbleu ! le devoir, c'est de sentir ce qui est grand, de chérir ce qui est beau, et non pas d'accepter toutes les conventions de la société, avec les ignominies qu'elle nous impose.

— Cependant..., cependant..., objectait madame Bovary.

— Eh non ! pourquoi déclamer contre les passions ? Ne sont-elles pas la seule belle chose qu'il y ait sur la terre, la source de l'héroïsme, de l'enthousiasme, de la poésie, de la musique, des arts, de tout enfin ?

— Mais il faut bien, dit Emma, suivre un peu l'opinion du monde et obéir à sa morale.

— Ah ! c'est qu'il y en a deux, répliqua-t-il. La petite, la convenue, celle des hommes, celle qui varie sans cesse et qui braille si fort, s'agite en bas, terre à terre, comme ce rassemblement d'imbéciles que vous voyez. Mais l'autre, l'éternelle, elle est tout autour et au-dessus, comme le paysage qui nous environne et le ciel bleu qui nous éclaire.

M. Lieuvain venait de s'essuyer la bouche avec son mouchoir de poche. Il reprit :

« Et qu'aurais-je à faire, messieurs, de vous démontrer ici l'utilité de l'agriculture ? Qui donc pourvoit à nos besoins ? qui donc fournit à notre subsistance ? N'est-ce pas l'agriculteur ? L'agriculteur, messieurs, qui, ensemençant d'une main laborieuse les sillons féconds des campagnes, fait naître le blé, lequel broyé est mis en poudre au moyen d'ingénieux appareils, en sort sous le nom de farine, et, de là, transporté dans les cités, est bientôt rendu chez le boulanger, qui en confectionne un aliment pour le pauvre comme pour le riche. N'est-ce pas l'agriculteur encore qui engraisse, pour nos vêtements, ses abondants troupeaux dans les pâturages ? Car comment nous vêtirions-nous, car comment nous nourririons-nous sans l'agriculteur ? Et même, messieurs, est-il besoin d'aller si loin chercher des exemples ? Qui n'a souvent réfléchi à toute l'importance que l'on retire de ce modeste animal, ornement de nos basses-cours, qui fournit à la fois un oreiller moelleux pour nos couches, sa chair succulente pour nos tables, et des oeufs ? Mais je n'en finirais pas, s'il fallait énumérer les uns après les autres les différents produits que la terre bien cultivée, telle qu'une mère généreuse, prodigue à ses enfants. Ici, c'est la vigne ; ailleurs, ce sont les pommiers à cidre ; là, le colza ; plus loin, les fromages ; et le lin ; messieurs, n'oublions pas le lin ! qui a pris dans ces dernières années un accroissement considérable et sur lequel j'appellerai plus particulièrement votre attention. »

Il n'avait pas besoin de l'appeler : car toutes les bouches de la multitude se tenaient ouvertes, comme pour boire ses paroles. Tuvache, à côté de lui, l'écoutait en écarquillant les yeux ; M. Derozerays, de temps à autre, fermait doucement les paupières ; et, plus loin, le pharmacien, avec son fils Napoléon entre ses jambes, bombait sa main contre son oreille pour ne pas perdre une seule syllabe. Les autres membres du jury balançaient lentement leur menton dans leur gilet, en signe d'approbation. Les pompiers, au bas de l'estrade, se reposaient sur leurs baïonnettes ; et Binet, immobile, restait le coude en dehors, avec la pointe du sabre en l'air. Il entendait peut-être, mais il ne devait rien apercevoir, à cause de la visière de son casque qui lui descendait sur le nez. Son lieutenant, le fils cadet du sieur Tuvache, avait encore exagéré le sien ; car il en portait un énorme et qui lui vacillait sur la tête, en laissant dépasser un bout de son foulard d'indienne. Il souriait là-dessous avec une douceur tout enfantine, et sa petite figure pâle, où des gouttes ruisselaient, avait une expression de jouissance, d'accablement et de sommeil.

La Place jusqu'aux maisons était comble de monde. On voyait des gens accoudés à toutes les fenêtres, d'autres debout sur toutes les portes, et Justin, devant la devanture de la pharmacie, paraissait tout fixé dans la contemplation de ce qu'il regardait. Malgré le silence, la voix de M. Lieuvain se perdait dans l'air. Elle vous arrivait par lambeaux de phrases, qu'interrompait çà et là le bruit des chaises dans la foule ; puis on entendait, tout à coup, partir derrière soi un long mugissement de boeuf, ou bien les bêlements des agneaux qui se répondaient au coin des rues. En effet, les vachers et les bergers avaient poussé leurs bêtes jusque-là, et elles beuglaient de temps à autre, tout en arrachant avec leur langue quelque bribe de feuillage qui leur pendait sur le museau.

Rodolphe s'était rapproché d'Emma, et il disait d'une voix basse, en parlant vite :

— Est-ce que cette conjuration du monde ne vous révolte pas ? Est-il un seul sentiment qu'il ne condamne ? Les instincts les plus nobles, les sympathies les plus pures sont persécutés, calomniés, et, s'il se rencontre enfin deux pauvres âmes, tout est organisé pour qu'elles ne puissent se joindre. Elles essayeront cependant, elles battront des ailes, elles s'appelleront. Oh ! n'importe, tôt ou tard, dans six mois, dix ans, elles se réuniront, s'aimeront, parce que la fatalité l'exige et qu'elles sont nées l'une pour l'autre.

Il se tenait les bras croisés sur ses genoux, et, ainsi levant la figure vers Emma, il la regardait de près, fixement. Elle distinguait dans ses yeux des petits rayons d'or s'irradiant tout autour de ses pupilles noires, et même elle sentait le parfum de la pommade qui lustrait sa chevelure. Alors une mollesse la saisit, elle se rappela ce vicomte qui l'avait fait valser à la Vaubyessard, et dont la barbe exhalait, comme ces cheveux-là, cette odeur de vanille et de citron ; et, machinalement, elle entre-ferma les paupières pour la mieux respirer. Mais, dans ce geste qu'elle fit en se cambrant sur sa chaise, elle aperçut au loin, tout au fond de l'horizon, la vieille diligence l'*Hirondelle*, qui descendait lentement la côte des Leux, en traînant après soi un long panache de poussière. C'était dans cette voiture jaune que Léon, si souvent, était revenu vers elle ; et par cette route là-bas qu'il était parti pour toujours ! Elle crut le voir en face, à sa fenêtre ; puis tout se confondit, des nuages passèrent ; il lui sembla qu'elle tournait encore dans la valse, sous le feu des lustres, au bras du vicomte, et que Léon n'était pas loin, qui allait venir... et cependant elle sentait toujours la tête de Rodolphe à côté d'elle. La douceur de cette sensation pénétrait ainsi ses désirs d'autrefois, et comme des grains de sable sous un coup de vent, ils tourbillonnaient dans la bouffée subtile du parfum qui se répandait sur son âme. Elle ouvrit les narines à plusieurs reprises, fortement, pour aspirer la fraîcheur des lierres autour des chapiteaux. Elle retira ses gants, elle s'essuya les mains ; puis, avec son mouchoir, elle s'éventait la figure, tandis qu'à travers le battement de ses tempes elle entendait la rumeur de la foule et la voix du Conseiller qui psalmodiait ses phrases.

Il disait :

« Continuez ! persévérez ! n'écoutez ni les suggestions de la routine, ni les conseils trop hâtifs d'un empirisme téméraire ! Appliquez-vous surtout à l'amélioration du sol, aux bons engrais, au développement des races chevalines, bovines, ovines et porcines ! Que ces comices soient pour vous comme des arènes pacifiques où le vainqueur, en en sortant, tendra la main au vaincu et fraternisera avec lui, dans l'espoir d'un succès meilleur ! Et vous, vénérables serviteurs ! humbles domestiques, dont aucun gouvernement jusqu'à ce jour n'avait pris en considération les pénibles labeurs, venez recevoir la récompense de vos vertus silencieuses, et soyez convaincus que l'État, désormais, a les yeux fixés sur vous, qu'il vous encourage, qu'il vous protège, qu'il fera droit à vos justes réclamations et allégera, autant qu'il est en lui, le fardeau de vos pénibles sacrifices ! »

M. Lieuvain se rassit alors ; M. Derozerays se leva, commençant un autre discours. Le sien peut-être, ne fut point aussi fleuri que celui du Conseiller ; mais il se recommandait par un caractère de style plus positif, c'est-à-dire par des connaissances plus spéciales et des considérations plus relevées. Ainsi, l'éloge du gouvernement y tenait moins de place ; la religion et l'agriculture en occupaient davantage. On y voyait le rapport de l'une et de l'autre, et comment elles avaient concouru toujours à la civilisation. Rodolphe, avec madame Bovary, causait rêves, pressentiments, magnétisme. Remontant au berceau des sociétés, l'orateur vous dépeignait ces temps farouches où les hommes vivaient de glands, au fond des bois. Puis ils avaient quitté la dépouille des bêtes, endossé le drap, creusé des sillons, planté la vigne. Était-ce un bien, et n'y avait-il pas dans cette découverte plus d'inconvénients que d'avantages ? M. Derozerays se posait ce problème. Du magnétisme, peu à peu, Rodolphe en était venu aux affinités, et, tandis que M. le président citait Cincinnatus à sa charrue, Dioclétien plantant ses choux, et les empereurs de la Chine inaugurant l'année par des semailles, le jeune homme expliquait à la jeune femme que ces attractions irrésistibles tiraient leur cause de quelque existence antérieure.

— Ainsi, nous, disait-il, pourquoi nous sommes-nous connus ? quel hasard l'a voulu ? C'est qu'à travers l'éloignement, sans doute, comme deux fleuves qui coulent pour se rejoindre, nos pentes particulières nous avaient poussés l'un vers l'autre.

Et il saisit sa main ; elle ne la retira pas.

« Ensemble de bonnes cultures ! » cria le président.

— Tantôt, par exemple, quand je suis venu chez vous...

« À M. Bizet, de Quincampoix. »

— Savais-je que je vous accompagnerais ?

« Soixante et dix francs ! »

— Cent fois même j'ai voulu partir, et je vous ai suivie, je suis resté.

« Fumiers. »

— Comme je resterais ce soir, demain, les autres jours, toute ma vie !

« À M. Caron, d'Argueil, une médaille d'or ! »

— Car jamais je n'ai trouvé dans la société de personne un charme aussi complet.

« À M. Bain, de Givry-Saint-Martin ! »

— Aussi, moi, j'emporterai votre souvenir.

« Pour un bélier mérinos... »

— Mais vous m'oublierez, j'aurai passé comme une ombre.

« À M. Belot, de Notre-Dame... »

— Oh ! non, n'est-ce pas, je serai quelque chose dans votre pensée, dans votre vie ?

« Race porcine, prix ex aequo : à MM. Lehérissé et Cullembourg ; soixante francs ! »

Rodolphe lui serrait la main, et il la sentait toute chaude et frémissante comme une tourterelle captive qui veut reprendre sa volée ; mais, soit qu'elle essayât de la dégager ou bien qu'elle répondît à cette pression, elle fit un mouvement des doigts ; il s'écria :

— Oh ! merci ! Vous ne me repoussez pas ! Vous êtes bonne ! vous comprenez que je suis à vous ! Laissez que je vous voie, que je vous contemple !

Un coup de vent qui arriva par les fenêtres fronça le tapis de la table, et, sur la Place, en bas, tous les grands bonnets des paysannes se soulevèrent, comme des ailes de papillons blancs qui s'agitent.

« Emploi de tourteaux de graines oléagineuses », continua le président.

Il se hâtait :

« Engrais flamand, – culture du lin, – drainage, – baux à longs termes, – services de domestiques. »

Rodolphe ne parlait plus. Ils se regardaient. Un désir suprême faisait frissonner leurs lèvres sèches ; et mollement, sans effort, leurs doigts se confondirent.

« Catherine-Nicaise-Élisabeth Leroux, de Sassetot-la-Guerrière, pour cinquante-quatre ans de service dans la même ferme, une médaille d'argent – du prix de vingt-cinq francs ! »

« Où est-elle, Catherine Leroux ? » répéta le Conseiller.

Elle ne se présentait pas, et l'on entendait des voix qui chuchotaient :

— Vas-y !

— Non.

— À gauche !

— N'aie pas peur !

— Ah ! qu'elle est bête !

— Enfin y est-elle ? s'écria Tuvache.

— Oui !... la voilà !

— Qu'elle approche donc !

Alors on vit s'avancer sur l'estrade une petite vieille femme de maintien craintif, et qui paraissait se ratatiner dans ses pauvres vêtements. Elle avait aux pieds de grosses galoches de bois, et, le long des hanches, un grand tablier bleu. Son visage maigre, entouré d'un béguin sans bordure, était plus plissé de rides qu'une pomme de reinette flétrie, et des manches de sa camisole rouge dépassaient deux longues mains, à articulations noueuses. La poussière des granges, la potasse des lessives et le suint des laines les avaient si bien encroûtées, éraillées, durcies, qu'elles semblaient sales quoiqu'elles fussent rincées d'eau claire ; et, à force d'avoir servi, elles restaient entrouvertes, comme pour présenter d'elles-mêmes l'humble témoignage de tant de souffrances subies. Quelque chose d'une rigidité monacale relevait l'expression de sa figure. Rien de triste ou d'attendri n'amollissait ce regard pâle. Dans la fréquentation des animaux, elle avait pris leur mutisme et leur placidité. C'était la première fois qu'elle se voyait au milieu d'une compagnie si nombreuse ; et, intérieurement effarouchée par les drapeaux, par les tambours, par les messieurs en habit noir et par la croix d'honneur du Conseiller, elle demeurait tout immobile, ne sachant s'il fallait s'avancer ou s'enfuir, ni pourquoi la foule la poussait et pourquoi les examinateurs lui souriaient. Ainsi se tenait, devant ces bourgeois épanouis, ce demi-siècle de servitude.

— Approchez, vénérable Catherine-Nicaise-Élisabeth Leroux ! dit M. le Conseiller, qui avait pris des mains du président la liste des lauréats.

Et tour à tour examinant la feuille de papier, puis la vieille femme, il répétait d'un ton paternel :

— Approchez, approchez !

— Êtes-vous sourde ? dit Tuvache, en bondissant sur son fauteuil.

Et il se mit à lui crier dans l'oreille :

— Cinquante-quatre ans de service ! Une médaille d'argent ! Vingt-cinq francs ! C'est pour vous.

Puis, quand elle eut sa médaille, elle la considéra. Alors un sourire de béatitude se répandit sur sa figure, et on l'entendit qui marmottait en s'en allant :

— Je la donnerai au curé de chez nous, pour qu'il me dise des messes.

— Quel fanatisme ! exclama le pharmacien, en se penchant vers le notaire.

La séance était finie ; la foule se dispersa ; et, maintenant que les discours étaient lus, chacun reprenait son rang et tout rentrait dans la coutume : les maîtres rudoyaient les domestiques, et ceux-ci frappaient les animaux, triomphateurs indolents qui s'en retournaient à l'étable, une couronne verte entre les cornes.

Cependant les gardes nationaux étaient montés au premier étage de la mairie, avec des brioches embrochées à leurs baïonnettes, et le tambour du bataillon qui portait un panier de bouteilles. Madame Bovary prit le bras de Rodolphe ; il la reconduisit chez elle ; ils se séparèrent devant sa porte ; puis il se promena seul dans la prairie, tout en attendant l'heure du banquet.

Le festin fut long, bruyant, mal servi ; l'on était si tassé, que l'on avait peine à remuer les coudes, et les planches étroites qui servaient de bancs faillirent se rompre sous le poids des convives. Ils mangeaient abondamment. Chacun s'en donnait pour sa quote-part. La sueur coulait sur tous les fronts ; et une vapeur blanchâtre, comme la buée d'un fleuve par un matin d'automne, flottait au-dessus de la table, entre les quinquets suspendus. Rodolphe, le dos appuyé contre le calicot de la tente, pensait si fort à Emma, qu'il n'entendait rien. Derrière lui, sur le gazon, des domestiques empilaient des assiettes sales ; ses voisins parlaient, il ne leur répondait pas ; on lui emplissait son verre, et un silence s'établissait dans sa pensée, malgré les accroissements de la rumeur. Il rêvait à ce qu'elle avait dit et à la forme de ses lèvres ; sa figure, comme en un miroir magique, brillait sur la plaque des shakos ; les plis de sa robe descendaient le long des murs, et des journées d'amour se déroulaient à l'infini dans les perspectives de l'avenir.

Il la revit le soir, pendant le feu d'artifice ; mais elle était avec son mari, madame Homais et le pharmacien, lequel se tourmentait beaucoup sur le danger des fusées perdues ; et, à chaque moment, il quittait la compagnie pour aller faire à Binet des recommandations.

Les pièces pyrotechniques envoyées à l'adresse du sieur Tuvache avaient, par excès de précaution, été enfermées dans sa cave ; aussi la poudre humide ne s'enflammait guère, et le morceau principal, qui devait figurer un dragon se mordant la queue, rata complètement. De temps à autre, il portait une pauvre chandelle romaine ; alors la foule béante poussait une clameur où se mêlait le cri des femmes à qui l'on chatouillait la taille pendant l'obscurité. Emma, silencieuse, se blottissait doucement contre l'épaule de Charles ; puis, le menton levé, elle suivait dans le ciel noir le jet lumineux des fusées. Rodolphe la contemplait à la lueur des lampions qui brûlaient.

Ils s'éteignirent peu à peu. Les étoiles s'allumèrent. Quelques gouttes de pluie vinrent à tomber. Elle noua son fichu sur sa tête nue.

À ce moment, le fiacre du Conseiller sortit de l'auberge. Son cocher, qui était ivre, s'assoupit tout à coup ; et l'on apercevait de loin, par-dessus la capote, entre les deux lanternes, la masse de son corps qui se balançait de droite et de gauche selon le tangage des soupentes.

— En vérité, dit l'apothicaire, on devrait bien sévir contre l'ivresse ! Je voudrais que l'on inscrivît, hebdomadairement, à la porte de la mairie, sur un tableau ad hoc, les noms de tous ceux qui, durant la semaine, se seraient intoxiqués avec des alcools. D'ailleurs, sous le rapport de la statistique, on aurait là comme des annales patentes qu'on irait au besoin... Mais excusez.

Et il courut encore vers le capitaine.

Celui-ci rentrait à sa maison. Il allait revoir son tour.

— Peut-être ne feriez-vous pas mal, lui dit Homais, d'envoyer un de vos hommes ou d'aller vous-même...

— Laissez-moi donc tranquille, répondit le percepteur, puisqu'il n'y a rien !

— Rassurez-vous, dit l'apothicaire, quand il fut revenu près de ses amis. M. Binet m'a certifié que les mesures étaient prises. Nulle flammèche ne sera tombée. Les pompes sont pleines. Allons dormir.

— Ma foi ! j'en ai besoin, fit madame Homais, qui bâillait considérablement ; mais, n'importe, nous avons eu pour notre fête une bien belle journée.

Rodolphe répéta d'une voix basse et avec un regard tendre :

— Oh ! oui, bien belle !

Et, s'étant salués, on se tourna le dos.

Deux jours après, dans *le Fanal de Rouen*, il y avait un grand article sur les comices. Homais l'avait composé, de verve, dès le lendemain :

« Pourquoi ces festons, ces fleurs, ces guirlandes ? Où courait cette foule, comme les flots d'une mer en furie, sous les torrents d'un soleil tropical qui répandait sa chaleur sur nos guérets ? »

Ensuite, il parlait de la condition des paysans. Certes, le gouvernement faisait beaucoup, mais pas assez ! « Du courage ! lui criait-il ; mille réformes sont indispensables, accomplissons-les. » Puis, abordant l'entrée du Conseiller, il n'oubliait point « l'air martial de notre milice », ni « nos plus sémillantes villageoises », ni « les vieillards à tête chauve, sorte de patriarches qui étaient là, et dont quelques-uns, débris de nos immortelles phalanges, sentaient encore battre leurs coeurs au son mâle des tambours. » Il se citait des premiers parmi les membres du jury, et même il rappelait, dans une note, que M. Homais, pharmacien, avait envoyé un mémoire sur le cidre à la Société d'agriculture. Quand il arrivait à la distribution des récompenses, il dépeignait la joie des lauréats en traits dithyrambiques. « Le père embrassait son fils, le frère le frère, l'époux l'épouse. Plus d'un montrait avec orgueil son humble médaille, et sans doute, revenu chez lui, près de sa bonne ménagère, il l'aura suspendue en pleurant aux murs discrets de sa chaumine.

« Vers six heures, un banquet, dressé dans l'herbage de M. Liégeard, a réuni les principaux assistants de la fête. La plus grande cordialité n'a cessé d'y régner. Divers toasts ont été portés : M. Lieuvain, au monarque ! M. Tuvache, au préfet ! M. Derozerays, à l'agriculture ! M. Homais, à l'industrie et aux beaux-arts, ces deux soeurs ! M. Leplichey, aux améliorations ! Le soir, un brillant feu d'artifice a tout à coup illuminé les airs. On eût dit un véritable kaléidoscope, un vrai décor d'Opéra, et un moment notre petite localité a pu se croire transportée au milieu d'un rêve des *Mille et une Nuits*.

« Constatons qu'aucun événement fâcheux n'est venu troubler cette réunion de famille. »

Et il ajoutait :

« On y a seulement remarqué l'absence du clergé. Sans doute les sacristies entendent le progrès d'une autre manière. Libre à vous, messieurs de Loyola ! »

IX

Six semaines s'écoulèrent. Rodolphe ne revint pas. Un soir, enfin, il parut.

Il s'était dit, le lendemain des comices :

— N'y retournons pas de sitôt, ce serait une faute.

Et, au bout de la semaine, il était parti pour la chasse. Après la chasse, il avait songé qu'il était trop tard, puis il fit ce raisonnement :

— Mais, si du premier jour elle m'a aimé, elle doit, par l'impatience de me revoir, m'aimer davantage. Continuons donc !

Et il comprit que son calcul avait été bon lorsque, en entrant dans la salle, il aperçut Emma pâlir.

Elle était seule. Le jour tombait. Les petits rideaux de mousseline, le long des vitres, épaississaient le crépuscule, et la dorure du baromètre, sur qui frappait un rayon de soleil, étalait des feux dans la glace, entre les découpures du polypier.

Rodolphe resta debout ; et à peine si Emma répondit à ses premières phrases de politesse.

— Moi, dit-il, j'ai eu des affaires. J'ai été malade.

— Gravement ? s'écria-t-elle.

— Eh bien, fit Rodolphe en s'asseyant à ses côtés sur un tabouret, non !... C'est que je n'ai pas voulu revenir.

— Pourquoi ?

— Vous ne devinez pas ?

Il la regarda encore une fois, mais d'une façon si violente qu'elle baissa la tête en rougissant. Il reprit :

— Emma...

— Monsieur ! fit-elle en s'écartant un peu.

— Ah ! vous voyez bien, répliqua-t-il d'une voix mélancolique, que j'avais raison de vouloir ne pas revenir ; car ce nom, ce nom qui remplit mon âme et qui m'est échappé, vous me l'interdisez ! Madame Bovary !... Eh ! tout le monde vous appelle comme cela !... Ce n'est pas votre nom, d'ailleurs ; c'est le nom d'un autre !

Il répéta :

— D'un autre !

Et il se cacha la figure entre les mains.

— Oui, je pense à vous continuellement !... Votre souvenir me désespère ! Ah ! pardon !... Je vous quitte... Adieu !... J'irai loin..., si loin, que vous n'entendrez plus parler de moi !... Et cependant..., aujourd'hui..., je ne sais quelle force encore m'a poussé vers vous ! Car on ne lutte pas contre le ciel, on ne résiste point au sourire des anges ! on se laisse entraîner par ce qui est beau, charmant, adorable !

C'était la première fois qu'Emma s'entendait dire ces choses ; et son orgueil, comme quelqu'un qui se délasse dans une étuve, s'étirait mollement et tout entier à la chaleur de ce langage.

— Mais, si je ne suis pas venu, continua-t-il, si je n'ai pu vous voir, ah ! du moins j'ai bien contemplé ce qui vous entoure. La nuit, toutes les nuits, je me relevais, j'arrivais jusqu'ici, je regardais votre maison, le toit qui brillait sous la lune, les arbres du jardin qui se balançaient à votre fenêtre, et une petite lampe, une lueur, qui brillait à travers les carreaux, dans l'ombre. Ah ! vous ne saviez guère qu'il y avait là, si près et si loin, un pauvre misérable...

Elle se tourna vers lui avec un sanglot.

— Oh ! vous êtes bon ! dit-elle.

— Non, je vous aime, voilà tout ! Vous n'en doutez pas ! Dites-le-moi ; un mot ! un seul mot !

Et Rodolphe, insensiblement, se laissa glisser du tabouret jusqu'à terre ; mais on entendit un bruit de sabots dans la cuisine, et la porte de la salle, il s'en aperçut, n'était pas fermée.

— Que vous seriez charitable, poursuivit-il en se relevant, de satisfaire une fantaisie !

C'était de visiter sa maison ; il désirait la connaître ; et, madame Bovary n'y voyant point d'inconvénient, ils se levaient tous les deux, quand Charles entra.

— Bonjour, docteur, lui dit Rodolphe.

Le médecin, flatté de ce titre inattendu, se répandit en obséquiosités, et l'autre en profita pour se remettre un peu.

— Madame m'entretenait, fit-il donc, de sa santé...

Charles l'interrompit : il avait mille inquiétudes, en effet ; les oppressions de sa femme recommençaient. Alors Rodolphe demanda si l'exercice du cheval ne serait pas bon.

— Certes ! excellent, parfait !... Voilà une idée ! Tu devrais la suivre.

Et, comme elle objectait qu'elle n'avait point de cheval, M. Rodolphe en offrit un ; elle refusa ses offres ; il n'insista pas ; puis, afin de motiver sa visite, il conta que son charretier, l'homme à la saignée, éprouvait toujours des étourdissements.

— J'y passerai, dit Bovary.

— Non, non, je vous l'enverrai ; nous viendrons, ce sera plus commode pour vous.

— Ah ! fort bien. Je vous remercie.

Et, dès qu'ils furent seuls :

— Pourquoi n'acceptes-tu pas les propositions de M. Boulanger, qui sont si gracieuses ?

Elle prit un air boudeur, chercha mille excuses, et déclara finalement *que cela peut-être semblerait drôle.*

— Ah ! je m'en moque pas mal ! dit Charles en faisant une pirouette. La santé avant tout ! Tu as tort !

— Eh ! comment veux-tu que je monte à cheval, puisque je n'ai pas d'amazone ?

— Il faut t'en commander une ! répondit-il.

L'amazone la décida.

Quand le costume fut prêt, Charles écrivit à M. Boulanger que sa femme était à sa disposition, et qu'ils comptaient sur sa complaisance.

Le lendemain, à midi, Rodolphe arriva devant la porte de Charles avec deux chevaux de maître. L'un portait des pompons roses aux oreilles et une selle de femme en peau de daim.

Rodolphe avait mis de longues bottes molles, se disant que sans doute elle n'en avait jamais vu de pareilles ; en effet, Emma fut charmée de sa tournure, lorsqu'il apparut sur le palier avec son grand habit de velours et sa culotte de tricot blanc. Elle était prête, elle l'attendait.

Justin s'échappa de la pharmacie pour la voir, et l'apothicaire aussi se dérangea. Il faisait à M. Boulanger des recommandations :

— Un malheur arrive si vite ! Prenez garde ! Vos chevaux peut-être sont fougueux !

Elle entendit du bruit au-dessus de sa tête : c'était Félicité qui tambourinait contre les carreaux pour divertir la petite Berthe. L'enfant envoya de loin un baiser ; sa mère lui répondit d'un signe avec le pommeau de sa cravache.

— Bonne promenade ! cria M. Homais. De la prudence, surtout ! de la prudence !

Et il agita son journal en les regardant s'éloigner.

Dès qu'il sentit la terre, le cheval d'Emma prit le galop. Rodolphe galopait à côté d'elle. Par moments ils échangeaient une parole. La figure un peu baissée, la main haute et le bras droit déployé, elle s'abandonnait à la cadence du mouvement qui la berçait sur la selle.

Au bas de la côte, Rodolphe lâcha les rênes ; ils partirent ensemble, d'un seul bond ; puis, en haut, tout à coup, les chevaux s'arrêtèrent, et son grand voile bleu retomba.

On était aux premiers jours d'octobre. Il y avait du brouillard sur la campagne. Des vapeurs s'allongeaient à l'horizon, entre le contour des collines ; et d'autres, se déchirant, montaient, se perdaient. Quelquefois, dans un écartement des nuées, sous un rayon de soleil, on apercevait au loin les toits d'Yonville, avec les jardins au bord de l'eau, les cours, les murs, et le clocher de l'église. Emma fermait à demi les paupières pour reconnaître sa maison, et jamais ce pauvre village où elle vivait ne lui avait semblé si petit. De la hauteur où ils étaient, toute la vallée paraissait un immense lac pâle, s'évaporant à l'air. Les massifs d'arbres, de place en place, saillissaient comme des rochers noirs ; et les hautes lignes des peupliers, qui dépassaient la brume, figuraient des grèves que le vent remuait.

À côté, sur la pelouse, entre les sapins, une lumière brune circulait dans l'atmosphère tiède. La terre, roussâtre comme de la poudre de tabac, amortissait le bruit des pas ; et, du bout de leurs fers, en marchant, les chevaux poussaient devant eux des pommes de pin tombées.

Rodolphe et Emma suivirent ainsi la lisière du bois. Elle se détournait de temps à autre afin d'éviter son regard, et alors elle ne voyait que les troncs des sapins alignés, dont la succession continue l'étourdissait un peu. Les chevaux soufflaient. Le cuir des selles craquait.

Au moment où ils entrèrent dans la forêt, le soleil parut.

— Dieu nous protège ! dit Rodolphe.

— Vous croyez ? fit-elle.

— Avançons ! avançons ! reprit-il.

Il claqua de la langue. Les deux bêtes couraient.

De longues fougères, au bord du chemin, se prenaient dans l'étrier d'Emma. Rodolphe, tout en allant, se penchait et il les retirait à mesure. D'autres fois, pour écarter les branches, il passait près d'elle, et Emma sentait son genou lui frôler la jambe. Le ciel était devenu bleu. Les feuilles ne remuaient pas. Il y avait de grands espaces pleins de bruyères tout en fleurs ; et des nappes de violettes s'alternaient avec le fouillis des arbres, qui étaient gris, fauves ou dorés, selon la diversité des feuillages. Souvent on entendait, sous les buissons, glisser un petit battement d'ailes, ou bien le cri rauque et doux des corbeaux, qui s'envolaient dans les chênes.

Ils descendirent. Rodolphe attacha les chevaux. Elle allait devant, sur la mousse, entre les ornières.

Mais sa robe trop longue l'embarrassait, bien qu'elle la portât relevée par la queue, et Rodolphe, marchant derrière elle, contemplait entre ce drap noir et la bottine noire, la délicatesse de son bas blanc, qui lui semblait quelque chose de sa nudité.

Elle s'arrêta.

— Je suis fatiguée, dit-elle.

— Allons, essayez encore ! reprit-il. Du courage !

Puis, cent pas plus loin, elle s'arrêta de nouveau ; et, à travers son voile, qui de son chapeau d'homme descendait obliquement sur ses hanches, on distinguait son visage dans une transparence bleuâtre, comme si elle eût nagé sous des flots d'azur.

— Où allons-nous donc ?

Il ne répondit rien. Elle respirait d'une façon saccadée. Rodolphe jetait les yeux autour de lui et il se mordait la moustache.

Ils arrivèrent à un endroit plus large, où l'on avait abattu des baliveaux. Ils s'assirent sur un tronc d'arbre renversé, et Rodolphe se mit à lui parler de son amour.

Il ne l'effraya point d'abord par des compliments. Il fut calme, sérieux, mélancolique.

Emma l'écoutait la tête basse, et tout en remuant, avec la pointe de son pied, des copeaux par terre.

Mais, à cette phrase :

— Est-ce que nos destinées maintenant ne sont pas communes.

— Eh non ! répondit-elle. Vous le savez bien. C'est impossible.

Elle se leva pour partir. Il la saisit au poignet. Elle s'arrêta. Puis, l'ayant considéré quelques minutes d'un oeil amoureux et tout humide, elle dit vivement :

— Ah ! tenez, n'en parlons plus... Où sont les chevaux ? Retournons.

Il eut un geste de colère et d'ennui. Elle répéta :

— Où sont les chevaux ? où sont les chevaux ?

Alors, souriant d'un sourire étrange et la prunelle fixe, les dents serrées, il s'avança en écartant les bras. Elle se recula tremblante. Elle balbutiait :

— Oh ! vous me faites peur ! vous me faites mal ! Partons.

— Puisqu'il le faut, reprit-il en changeant de visage.

Et il redevint aussitôt respectueux, caressant, timide. Elle lui donna son bras. Ils s'en retournèrent. Il disait :

— Qu'aviez-vous donc ? Pourquoi ? Je n'ai pas compris ! Vous vous méprenez, sans doute ? Vous êtes dans mon âme comme une madone sur un piédestal, à une place haute, solide et immaculée. Mais j'ai besoin de vous pour vivre ! J'ai besoin de vos yeux, de votre voix, de votre pensée. Soyez mon amie, ma soeur, mon ange !

Et il allongeait son bras et lui en entourait la taille. Elle tâchait de se dégager mollement. Il la soutenait ainsi, en marchant.

Mais ils entendirent les deux chevaux qui broutaient le feuillage.

— Oh ! encore, dit Rodolphe. Ne partons pas ! Restez !

Il l'entraîna plus loin, autour d'un petit étang, où des lentilles d'eau faisaient une verdure sur les ondes. Des nénuphars flétris se tenaient immobiles entre les joncs. Au bruit de leurs pas dans l'herbe, des grenouilles sautaient pour se cacher.

— J'ai tort, j'ai tort, disait-elle. Je suis folle de vous entendre.

— Pourquoi ?... Emma ! Emma !

— Oh ! Rodolphe !... fit lentement la jeune femme en se penchant sur son épaule.

Le drap de sa robe s'accrochait au velours de l'habit. Elle renversa son cou blanc, qui se gonflait d'un soupir ; et, défaillante, tout en pleurs, avec un long frémissement et se cachant la figure, elle s'abandonna.

Les ombres du soir descendaient ; le soleil horizontal, passant entre les branches, lui éblouissait les yeux. Çà et là, tout autour d'elle, dans les feuilles ou par terre, des taches lumineuses tremblaient, comme si des colibris, en volant, eussent éparpillé leurs plumes. Le silence était partout ; quelque chose de doux semblait sortir des arbres ; elle sentait son coeur, dont les battements recommençaient, et le sang circuler dans sa chair comme un fleuve de lait. Alors, elle entendit tout au loin, au delà du bois, sur les autres collines, un cri vague et prolongé, une voix qui se traînait, et elle l'écoutait silencieusement, se mêlant comme une musique aux dernières vibrations de ses nerfs émus. Rodolphe, le cigare aux dents, raccommodait avec son canif une des deux brides cassée.

Ils s'en revinrent à Yonville, par le même chemin. Ils revirent sur la boue les traces de leurs chevaux, côte à côte, et les mêmes buissons, les mêmes cailloux dans l'herbe. Rien autour d'eux n'avait changé ; et pour elle, cependant, quelque chose était survenu de plus considérable que si les montagnes se fussent déplacées. Rodolphe, de temps à autre, se penchait et lui prenait sa main pour la baiser.

Elle était charmante, à cheval ! Droite, avec sa taille mince, le genou plié sur la crinière de sa bête et un peu colorée par le grand air, dans la rougeur du soir.

En entrant dans Yonville, elle caracola sur les pavés. On la regardait des fenêtres.

Son mari, au dîner, lui trouva bonne mine ; mais elle eut l'air de ne pas l'entendre lorsqu'il s'informa de sa promenade ; et elle restait le coude au bord de son assiette, entre les deux bougies qui brûlaient.

— Emma ! dit-il.

— Quoi ?

— Eh bien, j'ai passé cette après-midi chez M. Alexandre ; il a une ancienne pouliche encore fort belle, un peu couronnée seulement, et qu'on aurait, je suis sûr, pour une centaine d'écus...

Il ajouta :

— Pensant même que cela te serait agréable, je l'ai retenue..., je l'ai achetée... Ai-je bien fait ? Dis-moi donc.

Elle remua la tête en signe d'assentiment ; puis, un quart d'heure après :

— Sors-tu ce soir ? demanda-t-elle.

— Oui. Pourquoi ?

— Oh ! rien, rien, mon ami.

Et, dès qu'elle fut débarrassée de Charles, elle monta s'enfermer dans sa chambre.

D'abord, ce fut comme un étourdissement ; elle voyait les arbres, les chemins, les fossés, Rodolphe, et elle sentait encore l'étreinte de ses bras, tandis que le feuillage frémissait et que les joncs sifflaient.

Mais, en s'apercevant dans la glace, elle s'étonna de son visage. Jamais elle n'avait eu les yeux si grands, si noirs, ni d'une telle profondeur. Quelque chose de subtil épandu sur sa personne la transfigurait.

Elle se répétait : « J'ai un amant ! un amant ! » se délectant à cette idée comme à celle d'une autre puberté qui lui serait survenue. Elle allait donc posséder enfin ces joies de l'amour, cette fièvre du bonheur dont elle avait désespéré. Elle entrait dans quelque chose de merveilleux où tout serait passion, extase, délire ; une immensité bleuâtre l'entourait, les sommets du sentiment étincelaient sous sa pensée, et l'existence ordinaire n'apparaissait qu'au loin, tout en bas, dans l'ombre, entre les intervalles de ces hauteurs.

Alors elle se rappela les héroïnes des livres qu'elle avait lus, et la légion lyrique de ces femmes adultères se mit à chanter dans sa mémoire avec des voix de soeurs qui la charmaient. Elle devenait elle-même comme une partie véritable de ces imaginations et réalisait la longue rêverie de sa jeunesse, en se considérant dans ce type d'amoureuse qu'elle avait tant envié. D'ailleurs, Emma éprouvait une satisfaction de vengeance. N'avait-elle pas assez souffert ! Mais elle triomphait maintenant, et l'amour, si longtemps contenu, jaillissait tout entier avec des bouillonnements joyeux. Elle le savourait sans remords, sans inquiétude, sans trouble.

La journée du lendemain se passa dans une douceur nouvelle. Ils se firent des serments. Elle lui raconta ses tristesses. Rodolphe l'interrompait par ses baisers ; et elle lui demandait, en le contemplant les paupières à demi closes, de l'appeler encore par son nom et de répéter qu'il l'aimait. C'était dans la forêt, comme la veille, sous une hutte de sabotiers. Les murs en étaient de paille et le toit descendait si bas, qu'il fallait se tenir courbé. Ils étaient assis l'un contre l'autre, sur un lit de feuilles sèches.

À partir de ce jour-là, ils s'écrivirent régulièrement tous les soirs. Emma portait sa lettre au bout du jardin, près de la rivière, dans une fissure de la terrasse. Rodolphe venait l'y chercher et en plaçait une autre, qu'elle accusait toujours d'être trop courte.

Un matin, que Charles était sorti dès avant l'aube, elle fut prise par la fantaisie de voir Rodolphe à l'instant. On pouvait arriver promptement à la Huchette, y rester une heure et être rentré dans Yonville que tout le monde encore serait endormi. Cette idée la fit haleter de convoitise, et elle se trouva bientôt au milieu de la prairie, où elle marchait à pas rapides, sans regarder derrière elle.

Le jour commençait à paraître. Emma, de loin, reconnut la maison de son amant, dont les deux girouettes à queue-d'aronde se découpaient en noir sur le crépuscule pâle.

Après la cour de la ferme, il y avait un corps de logis qui devait être le château. Elle y entra, comme si les murs, à son approche, se fussent écartés d'eux-mêmes. Un grand escalier droit montait vers un corridor. Emma tourna la clenche d'une porte, et tout à coup, au fond de la chambre, elle aperçut un homme qui dormait. C'était Rodolphe. Elle poussa un cri.

— Te voilà ! te voilà ! répétait-il. Comment as-tu fait pour venir ?... Ah ! ta robe est mouillée !

— Je t'aime ! répondit-elle en lui passant les bras autour du cou.

Cette première audace lui ayant réussi, chaque fois maintenant que Charles sortait de bonne heure, Emma s'habillait vite et descendait à pas de loup le perron qui conduisait au bord de l'eau.

Mais, quand la planche aux vaches était levée, il fallait suivre les murs qui longeaient la rivière ; la berge était glissante ; elle s'accrochait de la main, pour ne pas tomber, aux bouquets de ravenelles flétries. Puis elle prenait à travers des champs en labour, où elle enfonçait, trébuchait et empêtrait ses bottines minces. Son foulard, noué sur sa tête, s'agitait au vent dans les herbages ; elle avait peur des boeufs, elle se mettait à courir ; elle arrivait essoufflée, les joues roses, et exhalant de toute sa personne un frais parfum de sève, de verdure et de grand air. Rodolphe, à cette heure-là, dormait encore. C'était comme une matinée de printemps qui entrait dans sa chambre.

Les rideaux jaunes, le long des fenêtres laissaient passer doucement une lourde lumière blonde. Emma tâtonnait en clignant des yeux, tandis que les gouttes de rosée suspendues à ses bandeaux faisaient comme une auréole de topazes tout autour de sa figure. Rodolphe, en riant, l'attirait à lui et il la prenait sur son coeur.

Ensuite, elle examinait l'appartement, elle ouvrait les tiroirs des meubles, elle se peignait avec son peigne et se regardait dans le miroir à barbe. Souvent même, elle mettait entre ses dents le tuyau d'une grosse pipe qui était sur la table de nuit, parmi des citrons et des morceaux de sucre, près d'une carafe d'eau.

Il leur fallait un bon quart d'heure pour les adieux. Alors Emma pleurait ; elle aurait voulu ne jamais abandonner Rodolphe. Quelque chose de plus fort qu'elle la poussait vers lui, si bien qu'un jour, la voyant survenir à l'improviste, il fronça le visage comme quelqu'un de contrarié.

— Qu'as-tu donc ? dit-elle. Souffres-tu ? Parle-moi !

Enfin il déclara, d'un air sérieux, que ses visites devenaient imprudentes et qu'elle se compromettait.

X

Peu à peu, ces craintes de Rodolphe la gagnèrent. L'amour l'avait enivrée d'abord, et elle n'avait songé à rien au delà. Mais, à présent qu'il était indispensable à sa vie, elle craignait d'en perdre quelque chose, ou même qu'il ne fût troublé. Quand elle s'en revenait de chez lui, elle jetait tout alentour des regards inquiets, épiant chaque forme qui passait à l'horizon et chaque lucarne du village d'où l'on pouvait l'apercevoir. Elle écoutait les pas, les cris, le bruit des charrues ; et elle s'arrêtait plus blême et plus tremblante que les feuilles des peupliers qui se balançaient sur sa tête.

Un matin, qu'elle s'en retournait ainsi, elle crut distinguer tout à coup le long canon d'une carabine qui semblait la tenir en joue. Il dépassait obliquement le bord d'un petit tonneau, à demi enfoui entre les herbes, sur la marge d'un fossé. Emma, prête à défaillir de terreur, avança cependant, et un homme sortit du tonneau, comme ces diables à boudin qui se dressent du fond des boîtes. Il avait des guêtres bouclées jusqu'aux genoux, sa casquette enfoncée jusqu'aux yeux, les lèvres grelottantes et le nez rouge. C'était le capitaine Binet, à l'affût des canards sauvages.

— Vous auriez dû parler de loin ! s'écria-t-il. Quand on aperçoit un fusil, il faut toujours avertir.

Le percepteur, par là, tâchait de dissimuler la crainte qu'il venait d'avoir ; car, un arrêté préfectoral ayant interdit la chasse aux canards autrement qu'en bateau, M. Binet, malgré son respect pour les lois, se trouvait en contravention. Aussi croyait-il à chaque minute entendre arriver le garde champêtre. Mais cette inquiétude irritait son plaisir, et, tout seul dans son tonneau, il s'applaudissait de son bonheur et de sa malice.

À la vue d'Emma, il parut soulagé d'un grand poids, et aussitôt, entamant la conversation :

— Il ne fait pas chaud, *ça pique* !

Emma ne répondit rien. Il poursuivit :

— Et vous voilà sortie de bien bonne heure ?

— Oui, dit-elle en balbutiant ; je viens de chez la nourrice où est mon enfant.

— Ah ! fort bien ! fort bien ! Quant à moi, tel que vous me voyez, dès la pointe du jour je suis là ; mais le temps est si crassineux, qu'à moins d'avoir la plume juste au bout...

— Bonsoir, monsieur Binet, interrompit-elle en lui tournant les talons.

— Serviteur, madame, reprit-il d'un ton sec.

Et il rentra dans son tonneau.

Emma se repentit d'avoir quitté si brusquement le percepteur. Sans doute, il allait faire des conjectures défavorables. L'histoire de la nourrice était la pire excuse, tout le monde sachant bien à Yonville que la petite Bovary, depuis un an, était revenue chez ses parents. D'ailleurs, personne n'habitait aux environs ; ce chemin ne conduisait qu'à la Huchette ; Binet donc avait deviné d'où elle venait, et il ne se tairait pas, il bavarderait, c'était certain ! Elle resta jusqu'au soir à se torturer l'esprit dans tous les projets de mensonges imaginables, et ayant sans cesse devant les yeux cet imbécile à carnassière.

Charles, après le dîner, la voyant soucieuse, voulut, par distraction, la conduire chez le pharmacien ; et la première personne qu'elle aperçut dans la pharmacie, ce fut encore lui, le percepteur ! Il était debout devant le comptoir, éclairé par la lumière du bocal rouge, et il disait :

— Donnez-moi, je vous prie, une demi-once de vitriol.

— Justin, cria l'apothicaire, apporte-nous l'acide sulfurique.

Puis, à Emma, qui voulait monter dans l'appartement de madame Homais :

— Non, restez, ce n'est pas la peine, elle va descendre. Chauffez-vous au poêle en attendant... Excusez-moi... Bonjour, docteur (car le pharmacien se plaisait beaucoup à prononcer ce mot *docteur*, comme si en l'adressant à un autre, il eût fait rejaillir sur lui-même quelque chose de la pompe qu'il y trouvait)... Mais prends garde de renverser les mortiers ! va plutôt chercher les chaises de la petite salle ; tu sais bien qu'on ne dérange pas les fauteuils du salon.

Et, pour remettre en place son fauteuil, Homais se précipitait hors du comptoir, quand Binet lui demanda une demi-once d'acide de sucre.

— Acide de sucre ? fit le pharmacien dédaigneusement. Je ne connais pas, j'ignore ! Vous voulez peut-être de l'acide oxalique ? C'est oxalique, n'est-il pas vrai ?

Binet expliqua qu'il avait besoin d'un mordant pour composer lui-même une eau de cuivre avec quoi dérouiller diverses garnitures de chasse. Emma tressaillit. Le pharmacien se mit à dire :

— En effet, le temps n'est pas propice, à cause de l'humidité.

— Cependant, reprit le percepteur d'un air finaud, il y a des personnes qui s'en arrangent.

Elle étouffait.

— Donnez-moi encore...

— Il ne s'en ira donc jamais ! pensait-elle.

— Une demi-once d'arcanson et de térébenthine, quatre onces de cire jaune, et trois demi-onces de noir animal, s'il vous plaît, pour nettoyer les cuirs vernis de mon équipement.

L'apothicaire commençait à tailler de la cire, quand madame Homais parut avec Irma dans ses bras, Napoléon à ses côtés et Athalie qui la suivait. Elle alla s'asseoir sur le banc de velours contre la fenêtre, et le gamin s'accroupit sur un tabouret, tandis que sa soeur aînée rôdait autour de la boîte à jujube, près de son petit papa. Celui-ci emplissait des entonnoirs et bouchait des flacons, il collait des étiquettes, il confectionnait des paquets. On se taisait autour de lui ; et l'on entendait seulement de temps à autre tinter les poids dans les balances, avec quelques paroles basses du pharmacien donnant des conseils à son élève.

— Comment va votre jeune personne ? demanda tout à coup madame Homais.

— Silence ! exclama son mari, qui écrivait des chiffres sur le cahier de brouillons.

— Pourquoi ne l'avez-vous pas amenée ? reprit-elle à demi-voix.

— Chut ! chut ! fit Emma en désignant du doigt l'apothicaire.

Mais Binet, tout entier à la lecture de l'addition, n'avait rien entendu probablement. Enfin il sortit. Alors Emma, débarrassée, poussa un grand soupir.

— Comme vous respirez fort ! dit madame Homais.

— Ah ! c'est qu'il fait un peu chaud, répondit-elle.

Ils avisèrent donc, le lendemain, à organiser leurs rendez-vous ; Emma voulait corrompre sa servante par un cadeau ; mais il eût mieux valu découvrir à Yonville quelque maison discrète. Rodolphe promit d'en chercher une.

Pendant tout l'hiver, trois ou quatre fois la semaine, à la nuit noire, il arrivait dans le jardin. Emma, tout exprès, avait retiré la clef de la barrière, que Charles crut perdue.

Pour l'avertir, Rodolphe jetait contre les persiennes une poignée de sable. Elle se levait en sursaut ; mais quelquefois il lui fallait attendre, car Charles avait la manie de bavarder au coin du feu, et il n'en finissait pas. Elle se dévorait d'impatience ; si ses yeux l'avaient pu, ils l'eussent fait sauter par les fenêtres. Enfin, elle commençait sa toilette de nuit ; puis, elle prenait un livre et continuait à lire fort tranquillement, comme si la lecture l'eût amusée. Mais Charles, qui était au lit, l'appelait pour se coucher.

— Viens donc, Emma, disait-il, il est temps.

— Oui, j'y vais ! répondait-elle.

Cependant, comme les bougies l'éblouissaient, il se tournait vers le mur et s'endormait. Elle s'échappait en retenant son haleine, souriante, palpitante, déshabillée.

Rodolphe avait un grand manteau ; il l'en enveloppait tout entière, et, passant le bras autour de sa taille, il l'entraînait sans parler jusqu'au fond du jardin.

C'était sous la tonnelle, sur ce même banc de bâtons pourris où autrefois Léon la regardait si amoureusement, durant les soirs d'été. Elle ne pensait guère à lui maintenant.

Les étoiles brillaient à travers les branches du jasmin sans feuilles. Ils entendaient derrière eux la rivière qui coulait, et, de temps à autre, sur la berge, le claquement des roseaux secs. Des massifs d'ombre, çà et là, se bombaient dans l'obscurité, et parfois, frissonnant tous d'un seul mouvement, ils se dressaient et se penchaient comme d'immenses vagues noires qui se fussent avancées pour les recouvrir. Le froid de la nuit les faisait s'étreindre davantage ; les soupirs de leurs lèvres leur semblaient plus forts ; leurs yeux, qu'ils entrevoyaient à peine, leur paraissaient plus grands, et, au milieu du silence, il y avait des paroles dites tout bas qui tombaient sur leur âme avec une sonorité cristalline et qui s'y répercutaient en vibrations multipliées.

Lorsque la nuit était pluvieuse, ils s'allaient réfugier dans le cabinet aux consultations, entre le hangar et l'écurie. Elle allumait un des flambeaux de la cuisine, qu'elle avait caché derrière les livres. Rodolphe s'installait là comme chez lui. La vue de la bibliothèque et du bureau, de tout l'appartement enfin, excitait sa gaieté ; et il ne pouvait se retenir de faire sur Charles quantité de plaisanteries qui embarrassaient Emma. Elle eût désiré le voir plus sérieux, et même plus dramatique à l'occasion, comme cette fois où elle crut entendre dans l'allée un bruit de pas qui s'approchaient.

— On vient ! dit-elle.

Il souffla la lumière.

— As-tu tes pistolets ?

— Pourquoi ?

— Mais... pour te défendre, reprit Emma.

— Est-ce de ton mari ? Ah ! le pauvre garçon !

Et Rodolphe acheva sa phrase avec un geste qui signifiait : « Je l'écraserais d'une chiquenaude. »

Elle fut ébahie de sa bravoure, bien qu'elle y sentît une sorte d'indélicatesse et de grossièreté naïve qui la scandalisa.

Rodolphe réfléchit beaucoup à cette histoire de pistolets. Si elle avait parlé sérieusement, cela était fort ridicule, pensait-il, odieux même, car il n'avait, lui, aucune raison de haïr ce bon Charles, n'étant pas ce qui s'appelle dévoré de jalousie ; – et, à ce propos, Emma lui avait fait un grand serment qu'il ne trouvait pas non plus du meilleur goût.

D'ailleurs, elle devenait bien sentimentale. Il avait fallu échanger des miniatures, on s'était coupé des poignées de cheveux, et elle demandait à présent une bague, un véritable anneau de mariage, en signe d'alliance éternelle. Souvent elle lui parlait des cloches du soir ou des *voix de la nature* ; puis elle l'entretenait de sa mère, à elle, et de sa mère, à lui. Rodolphe l'avait perdue depuis vingt ans. Emma, néanmoins, l'en consolait avec des mièvreries de langage, comme on eût fait à un marmot abandonné, et même lui disait quelquefois, en regardant la lune :

— Je suis sûre que là-haut, ensemble, elles approuvent notre amour.

Mais elle était si jolie ! il en avait possédé si peu d'une candeur pareille ! Cet amour sans libertinage était pour lui quelque chose de nouveau, et qui, le sortant de ses habitudes faciles, caressait à la fois son orgueil et sa sensualité. L'exaltation d'Emma, que son bon sens bourgeois dédaignait, lui semblait au fond du coeur charmante, puisqu'elle s'adressait à sa personne. Alors, sûr d'être aimé, il ne se gêna pas, et insensiblement ses façons changèrent.

Il n'avait plus, comme autrefois, de ces mots si doux qui la faisaient pleurer, ni de ces véhémentes caresses qui la rendaient folle ; si bien que leur grand amour, où elle vivait plongée, parut se diminuer sous elle, comme l'eau d'un fleuve qui s'absorberait dans son lit, et elle aperçut la vase. Elle n'y voulut pas croire ; elle redoubla de tendresse ; et Rodolphe, de moins en moins, cacha son indifférence.

Elle ne savait pas si elle regrettait de lui avoir cédé, ou si elle ne souhaitait point, au contraire, le chérir davantage. L'humiliation de se sentir faible se tournait en une rancune que les voluptés tempéraient. Ce n'était pas de l'attachement, c'était comme une séduction permanente. Il la subjuguait. Elle en avait presque peur.

Les apparences, néanmoins, étaient plus calmes que jamais, Rodolphe ayant réussi à conduire l'adultère selon sa fantaisie ; et, au bout de six mois, quand le printemps arriva, ils se trouvaient, l'un vis-à-vis de l'autre, comme deux mariés qui entretiennent tranquillement une flamme domestique.

C'était l'époque où le père Rouault envoyait son dinde, en souvenir de sa jambe remise. Le cadeau arrivait toujours avec une lettre. Emma coupa la corde qui la retenait au panier, et lut les lignes suivantes :

« Mes chers enfants,

« J'espère que la présente vous trouvera en bonne santé et que celui-là vaudra bien les autres ; car il me semble un peu plus mollet, si j'ose dire, et plus massif. Mais, la prochaine fois, par changement, je vous donnerai un coq, à moins que vous ne teniez de préférence aux *picots* ; et renvoyez-moi la bourriche, s'il vous plaît, avec les deux anciennes. J'ai eu un malheur à ma charretterie, dont la couverture, une nuit qu'il ventait fort, s'est envolée dans les arbres. La récolte non plus n'a pas été trop fameuse. Enfin, je ne sais pas quand j'irai vous voir. Ça m'est tellement difficile de quitter maintenant la maison, depuis que je suis seul, ma pauvre Emma ! »

Et il y avait ici un intervalle entre les lignes, comme si le bonhomme eût laissé tomber sa plume pour rêver quelque temps.

« Quant à moi, je vais bien, sauf un rhume que j'ai attrapé l'autre jour à la foire d'Yvetot, où j'étais parti pour retenir un berger, ayant mis le mien dehors, par suite de sa trop grande délicatesse de bouche. Comme on est à plaindre avec tous ces brigands-là ! Du reste, c'était aussi un malhonnête.

« J'ai appris d'un colporteur qui, voyageant cet hiver par votre pays, s'est fait arracher une dent, que Bovary travaillait toujours dur. Ça ne m'étonne pas, et il m'a montré sa dent ; nous avons pris un café ensemble. Je lui ai demandé s'il t'avait vue, il m'a dit que non, mais qu'il avait vu dans l'écurie deux animaux, d'où je conclus que le métier roule. Tant mieux, mes chers enfants, et que le bon Dieu vous envoie tout le bonheur imaginable.

« Il me fait deuil de ne pas connaître encore ma bien-aimée petite-fille Berthe Bovary. J'ai planté pour elle, dans le jardin, sous ta chambre, un prunier de prunes d'avoine, et je ne veux pas qu'on y touche, si ce n'est pour lui faire plus tard des compotes, que je garderai dans l'armoire, à son intention, quand elle viendra.

« Adieu, mes chers enfants. Je t'embrasse, ma fille ; vous aussi, mon gendre, et la petite, sur les deux joues.

« Je suis, avec bien des compliments,

« Votre tendre père,

« Théodore ROUAULT. »

Elle resta quelques minutes à tenir entre ses doigts ce gros papier. Les fautes d'orthographe s'y enlaçaient les unes aux autres, et Emma poursuivait la pensée douce qui caquetait tout au travers comme une poule à demi cachée dans une haie d'épines. On avait séché l'écriture avec les cendres du foyer, car un peu de poussière grise glissa de la lettre sur sa robe, et elle crut presque apercevoir son père se courbant vers l'âtre pour saisir les pincettes. Comme il y avait longtemps qu'elle n'était plus auprès de lui, sur l'escabeau, dans la cheminée, quand elle faisait brûler le bout d'un bâton à la grande flamme des joncs marins qui pétillaient !... Elle se rappela des soirs d'été tout pleins de soleil. Les poulains hennissaient quand on passait, et galopaient, galopaient... Il y avait sous sa fenêtre une ruche à miel, et quelquefois les abeilles, tournoyant dans la lumière, frappaient contre les carreaux comme des balles d'or rebondissantes. Quel bonheur dans ce temps-là ! quelle liberté ! quel espoir ! quelle abondance d'illusions ! Il n'en restait plus maintenant ! Elle en avait dépensé à toutes les aventures de son âme, par toutes les conditions successives, dans la virginité, dans le mariage et dans l'amour ; – les perdant ainsi continuellement le long de sa vie, comme un voyageur qui laisse quelque chose de sa richesse à toutes les auberges de la route.

Mais qui donc la rendait si malheureuse ? où était la catastrophe extraordinaire qui l'avait bouleversée ? Et elle releva la tête, regardant autour d'elle, comme pour chercher la cause de ce qui la faisait souffrir.

Un rayon d'avril chatoyait sur les porcelaines de l'étagère ; le feu brûlait ; elle sentait sous ses pantoufles la douceur du tapis ; le jour était blanc, l'atmosphère tiède, et elle entendit son enfant qui poussait des éclats de rire.

En effet, la petite fille se roulait alors sur le gazon, au milieu de l'herbe qu'on fanait. Elle était couchée à plat ventre, au haut d'une meule. Sa bonne la retenait par la jupe. Lestiboudois ratissait à côté, et, chaque fois qu'il s'approchait, elle se penchait en battant l'air de ses deux bras.

— Amenez-la-moi ! dit sa mère se précipitant pour l'embrasser. Comme je t'aime, ma pauvre enfant ! comme je t'aime !

Puis, s'apercevant qu'elle avait le bout des oreilles un peu sale, elle sonna vite pour avoir de l'eau chaude, et la nettoya, la changea de linge, de bas, de souliers, fit mille questions sur sa santé, comme au retour d'un voyage, et enfin, la baisant encore et pleurant un peu, elle la remit aux mains de la domestique, qui restait fort ébahie devant cet excès de tendresse.

Rodolphe, le soir, la trouva plus sérieuse que d'habitude.

— Cela se passera, jugea-t-il, c'est un caprice.

Et il manqua consécutivement à trois rendez-vous. Quand il revint, elle se montra froide et presque dédaigneuse.

— Ah ! tu perds ton temps, ma mignonne...

Et il eut l'air de ne point remarquer ses soupirs mélancoliques, ni le mouchoir qu'elle tirait.

C'est alors qu'Emma se repentit !

Elle se demanda même pourquoi donc elle exécrait Charles, et s'il n'eût pas été meilleur de le pouvoir aimer. Mais il n'offrait pas grande prise à ces retours du sentiment, si bien qu'elle demeurait fort embarrassée dans sa velléité de sacrifice, lorsque l'apothicaire vint à propos lui fournir une occasion.

XI

Il avait lu dernièrement l'éloge d'une nouvelle méthode pour la cure des pieds bots ; et comme il était partisan du progrès, il conçut cette idée patriotique que Yonville, pour *se mettre au niveau*, devait avoir des opérations de stréphopodie.

— Car, disait-il à Emma, que risque-t-on ? Examinez (et il énumérait, sur ses doigts, les avantages de la tentative) ; succès presque certain, soulagement et embellissement du malade, célébrité vite acquise à l'opérateur. Pourquoi votre mari, par exemple, ne voudrait-il pas débarrasser ce pauvre Hippolyte, du *Lion d'or* ? Notez qu'il ne manquerait pas de raconter sa guérison à tous les voyageurs, et puis (Homais baissait la voix et regardait autour de lui) qui donc m'empêcherait d'envoyer au journal une petite note là-dessus ? Eh ! mon Dieu ! un article circule..., on en parle..., cela finit par faire la boule de neige ! Et qui sait ? qui sait ?

En effet, Bovary pouvait réussir ; rien n'affirmait à Emma qu'il ne fût pas habile, et quelle satisfaction pour elle que de l'avoir engagé à une démarche d'où sa réputation et sa fortune se trouveraient accrues ? Elle ne demandait qu'à s'appuyer sur quelque chose de plus solide que l'amour.

Charles, sollicité par l'apothicaire et par elle, se laissa convaincre. Il fit venir de Rouen le volume du docteur Duval, et, tous les soirs, se prenant la tête entre les mains, il s'enfonçait dans cette lecture.

Tandis qu'il étudiait les équins, les varus et les valgus, c'est-à-dire la stréphocatopodie, la stréphendopodie et la stréphexopodie (ou, pour parler mieux, les différentes déviations du pied, soit en bas, en dedans ou en dehors), avec la stréphypopodie et la stréphanopodie (autrement dit torsion en dessous et redressement en haut), M. Homais par toute sorte de raisonnements, exhortait le garçon d'auberge à se faire opérer.

— À peine sentiras-tu, peut-être, une légère douleur ; c'est une simple piqûre comme une petite saignée, moins que l'extirpation de certains cors.

Hippolyte, réfléchissant, roulait des yeux stupides.

— Du reste, reprenait le pharmacien, ça ne me regarde pas ! c'est pour toi ! par humanité pure ! Je voudrais te voir, mon ami, débarrassé de ta hideuse claudication, avec ce balancement de la région lombaire, qui, bien que tu prétendes, doit te nuire considérablement dans l'exercice de ton métier.

Alors Homais lui représentait combien il se sentirait ensuite plus gaillard et plus ingambe, et même lui donnait à entendre qu'il s'en trouverait mieux pour plaire aux femmes ; et le valet d'écurie se prenait à sourire lourdement. Puis il l'attaquait par la vanité :

— N'es-tu pas un homme, saprelotte ? Que serait-ce donc, s'il t'avait fallu servir, aller combattre sous les drapeaux ?... Ah ! Hippolyte !

Et Homais s'éloignait, déclarant qu'il ne comprenait pas cet entêtement, cet aveuglement à se refuser aux bienfaits de la science.

Le malheureux céda, car ce fut comme une conjuration. Binet, qui ne se mêlait jamais des affaires d'autrui, madame Lefrançois, Artémise, les voisins, et jusqu'au maire, M. Tuvache, tout le monde l'engagea, le sermonna, lui faisait honte ; mais ce qui acheva de le décider, *c'est que ça ne lui coûterait rien*. Bovary se chargeait même de fournir la machine pour l'opération. Emma avait eu l'idée de cette générosité ; et Charles y consentit, se disant au fond du coeur que sa femme était un ange.

Avec les conseils du pharmacien, et en recommençant trois fois, il fit donc construire par le menuisier, aidé du serrurier, une manière de boîte pesant huit livres environ, et où le fer, le bois, la tôle, le cuir, les vis et les écrous ne se trouvaient point épargnés.

Cependant, pour savoir quel tendon couper à Hippolyte, il fallait connaître d'abord quelle espèce de pied-bot il avait.

Il avait un pied faisant avec la jambe une ligne presque droite, ce qui ne l'empêchait pas d'être tourné en dedans, de sorte que c'était un équin mêlé d'un peu de varus, ou bien un léger varus fortement accusé d'équin. Mais, avec cet équin, large en effet comme un pied de cheval, à peau rugueuse, à tendons secs, à gros orteils, et où les ongles noirs figuraient les clous d'un fer, le stréphopode, depuis le matin jusqu'à la nuit, galopait comme un cerf. On le voyait continuellement sur la place, sautiller tout autour des charrettes, en jetant en avant son support inégal. Il semblait même plus vigoureux de cette jambe-là que de l'autre. À force d'avoir servi, elle avait contracté comme des qualités morales de patience et d'énergie, et quand on lui donnait quelque gros ouvrage, il s'écorait dessus, préférablement.

Or, puisque c'était un équin, il fallait couper le tendon d'Achille, quitte à s'en prendre plus tard au muscle tibial antérieur pour se débarrasser du varus ; car le médecin n'osait d'un seul coup risquer deux opérations, et même il tremblait déjà, dans la peur d'attaquer quelque région importante qu'il ne connaissait pas.

Ni Ambroise Paré, appliquant pour la première fois depuis Celse, après quinze siècles d'intervalle, la ligature immédiate d'une artère ; ni Dupuytren allant ouvrir un abcès à travers une couche épaisse d'encéphale ; ni Gensoul, quand il fit la première ablation de maxillaire supérieur, n'avaient certes le coeur si palpitant, la main si frémissante, l'intellect aussi tendu que M. Bovary quand il approcha d'Hippolyte, son *ténotome* entre les doigts. Et, comme dans les hôpitaux, on voyait à côté, sur une table, un tas de charpie, des fils cirés, beaucoup de bandes, une pyramide de bandes, tout ce qu'il y avait de bandes chez l'apothicaire. C'était M. Homais qui avait organisé dès le matin tous ces préparatifs, autant pour éblouir la multitude que pour s'illusionner lui-même. Charles piqua la peau ; on entendit un craquement sec. Le tendon était coupé, l'opération était finie. Hippolyte n'en revenait pas de surprise ; il se penchait sur les mains de Bovary pour les couvrir de baisers.

— Allons, calme-toi, disait l'apothicaire, tu témoigneras plus tard ta reconnaissance envers ton bienfaiteur !

Et il descendit conter le résultat à cinq ou six curieux qui stationnaient dans la cour, et qui s'imaginaient qu'Hippolyte allait reparaître marchant droit. Puis Charles, ayant bouclé son malade dans le moteur mécanique, s'en retourna chez lui, où Emma, tout anxieuse, l'attendait sur la porte. Elle lui sauta au cou ; ils se mirent à table ; il mangea beaucoup, et même il voulut, au dessert, prendre une tasse de café, débauche qu'il ne se permettait que le dimanche lorsqu'il y avait du monde.

La soirée fut charmante, pleine de causeries, de rêves en commun. Ils parlèrent de leur fortune future, d'améliorations à introduire dans leur ménage ; il voyait sa considération s'étendant, son bien-être s'augmentant, sa femme l'aimant toujours ; et elle se trouvait heureuse de se rafraîchir dans un sentiment nouveau, plus sain, meilleur, enfin d'éprouver quelque tendresse pour ce pauvre garçon qui la chérissait. L'idée de Rodolphe, un moment, lui passa par la tête ; mais ses yeux se reportèrent sur Charles : elle remarqua même avec surprise qu'il n'avait point les dents vilaines.

Ils étaient au lit lorsque M. Homais, malgré la cuisinière, entra tout à coup dans la chambre, en tenant à la main une feuille de papier fraîche écrite. C'était la réclame qu'il destinait au *Fanal de Rouen*. Il la leur apportait à lire.

— Lisez vous-même, dit Bovary.

Il lut :

— « Malgré les préjugés qui recouvrent encore une partie de la face de l'Europe comme un réseau, la lumière cependant commence à pénétrer dans nos campagnes. C'est ainsi que, mardi, notre petite cité d'Yonville s'est vue le théâtre d'une expérience chirurgicale qui est en même temps un acte de haute philanthropie. M. Bovary, un de nos praticiens les plus distingués... »

— Ah ! c'est trop ! c'est trop ! disait Charles, que l'émotion suffoquait.

— Mais non, pas du tout ! comment donc !... « A opéré d'un pied bot... » Je n'ai pas mis le terme scientifique, parce que, vous savez, dans un journal..., tout le monde peut-être ne comprendrait pas ; il faut que les masses...

— En effet, dit Bovary. Continuez.

— Je reprends, dit le pharmacien. « M. Bovary, un de nos praticiens les plus distingués, a opéré d'un pied-bot le nommé Hippolyte Tautain, garçon d'écurie depuis vingt-cinq ans à l'hôtel du *Lion d’or*, tenu par madame veuve Lefrançois, sur la place d'Armes. La nouveauté de la tentative et l'intérêt qui s'attachait au sujet avaient attiré un tel concours de population, qu'il y avait véritablement encombrement au seuil de l'établissement. L'opération, du reste, s'est pratiquée comme par enchantement, et à peine si quelques gouttes de sang sont venues sur la peau, comme pour dire que le tendon rebelle venait enfin de céder sous les efforts de l'art. Le malade, chose étrange (nous l'affirmons *de visu*) n'accusa point de douleur. Son état, jusqu'à présent, ne laisse rien à désirer. Tout porte à croire que la convalescence sera courte ; et qui sait même si, à la prochaine fête villageoise, nous ne verrons pas notre brave Hippolyte figurer dans des danses bachiques, au milieu d'un choeur de joyeux drilles, et ainsi prouver à tous les yeux, par sa verve et ses entrechats, sa complète guérison ? Honneur donc aux savants généreux ! honneur à ces esprits infatigables qui consacrent leurs veilles à l'amélioration ou bien au soulagement de leur espèce ! Honneur ! trois fois honneur ! N'est-ce pas le cas de s'écrier que les aveugles verront, les sourds entendront et les boiteux marcheront ! Mais ce que le fanatisme autrefois promettait à ses élus, la science maintenant l'accomplit pour tous les hommes ! Nous tiendrons nos lecteurs au courant des phases successives de cette cure si remarquable. »

Ce qui n'empêcha pas que, cinq jours après, la mère Lefrançois n'arrivât tout effarée en s'écriant :

— Au secours ! il se meurt !... J'en perds la tête !

Charles se précipita vers le *Lion d’or*, et le pharmacien qui l'aperçut passant sur la place, sans chapeau, abandonna la pharmacie. Il parut lui-même, haletant, rouge, inquiet, et demandant à tous ceux qui montaient l'escalier :

— Qu'a donc notre intéressant stréphopode ?

Il se tordait, le stréphopode, dans des convulsions atroces, si bien que le moteur mécanique où était enfermée sa jambe frappait contre la muraille à la défoncer.

Avec beaucoup de précautions, pour ne pas déranger la position du membre, on retira donc la boîte, et l'on vit un spectacle affreux. Les formes du pied disparaissaient dans une telle bouffissure, que la peau tout entière semblait près de se rompre, et elle était couverte d'ecchymoses occasionnées par la fameuse machine. Hippolyte déjà s'était plaint d'en souffrir ; on n'y avait pris garde ; il fallut reconnaître qu'il n'avait pas eu tort complètement ; et on le laissa libre quelques heures. Mais à peine l'oedème eut-il un peu disparu, que les deux savants jugèrent à propos de rétablir le membre dans l'appareil, et en l'y serrant davantage, pour accélérer les choses. Enfin, trois jours après, Hippolyte n'y pouvant plus tenir, ils retirèrent encore une fois la mécanique, tout en s'étonnant beaucoup du résultat qu'ils aperçurent. Une tuméfaction livide s'étendait sur la jambe, et avec des phlyctènes de place en place, par où suintait un liquide noir. Cela prenait une tournure sérieuse. Hippolyte commençait à s'ennuyer, et la mère Lefrançois l'installa dans la petite salle, près de la cuisine, pour qu'il eût au moins quelque distraction.

Mais le percepteur, qui tous les jours y dînait, se plaignit avec amertume d'un tel voisinage. Alors on transporta Hippolyte dans la salle de billard.

Il était là, geignant sous ses grosses couvertures, pâle, la barbe longue, les yeux caves, et, de temps à autre, tournant sa tête en sueur sur le sale oreiller où s'abattaient les mouches. Madame Bovary le venait voir. Elle lui apportait des linges pour ses cataplasmes, et le consolait, l'encourageait. Du reste, il ne manquait pas de compagnie, les jours de marché surtout, lorsque les paysans autour de lui poussaient les billes du billard, escrimaient avec les queues, fumaient, buvaient, chantaient, braillaient.

— Comment vas-tu ? disaient-ils en lui frappant sur l'épaule. Ah ! tu n'es pas fier, à ce qu'il paraît ! mais c'est ta faute. Il faudrait faire ceci, faire cela.

Et on lui racontait des histoires de gens qui avaient tous été guéris par d'autres remèdes que les siens ; puis, en manière de consolation, ils ajoutaient :

— C'est que tu t'écoutes trop ! lève-toi donc ! tu te dorlotes comme un roi ! Ah ! n'importe, vieux farceur ! tu ne sens pas bon !

La gangrène, en effet, montait de plus en plus. Bovary en était malade lui-même. Il venait à chaque heure, à tout moment. Hippolyte le regardait avec des yeux pleins d'épouvante et balbutiait en sanglotant :

— Quand est-ce que je serai guéri ?... Ah ! sauvez-moi !... Que je suis malheureux ! que je suis malheureux !

Et le médecin s'en allait, toujours en lui recommandant la diète.

— Ne l'écoute point, mon garçon, reprenait la mère Lefrançois ; ils t'ont déjà bien assez martyrisé ? tu vas t'affaiblir encore. Tiens, avale !

Et elle lui présentait quelque bon bouillon, quelque tranche de gigot, quelque morceau de lard, et parfois des petits verres d'eau-de-vie, qu'il n'avait pas le courage de porter à ses lèvres.

L'abbé Bournisien, apprenant qu'il empirait, fit demander à le voir. Il commença par le plaindre de son mal, tout en déclarant qu'il fallait s'en réjouir, puisque c'était la volonté du Seigneur, et profiter vite de l'occasion pour se réconcilier avec le ciel.

— Car, disait l'ecclésiastique d'un ton paterne, tu négligeais un peu tes devoirs ; on te voyait rarement à l'office divin ; combien y a-t-il d'années que tu ne t'es approché de la sainte table ? Je comprends que tes occupations, que le tourbillon du monde aient pu t'écarter du soin de ton salut. Mais à présent, c'est l'heure d'y réfléchir. Ne désespère pas cependant ; j'ai connu de grands coupables qui, près de comparaître devant Dieu (tu n'en es point encore là, je le sais bien), avaient implorés sa miséricorde, et qui certainement sont morts dans les meilleures dispositions. Espérons que, tout comme eux, tu nous donneras de bons exemples ! Ainsi, par précaution, qui donc t'empêcherait de réciter matin et soir un « Je vous salue, Marie, pleine de grâce », et un « Notre Père, qui êtes aux cieux » ? Oui fais cela ! pour moi, pour m'obliger. Qu'est-ce que ça coûte ?... Me le promets-tu ?

Le pauvre diable promit. Le curé revint les jours suivants. Il causait avec l'aubergiste et même racontait des anecdotes entremêlées de plaisanteries, de calembours qu'Hippolyte ne comprenait pas. Puis, dès que la circonstance le permettait, il retombait sur les matières de religion, en prenant une figure convenable.

Son zèle parut réussir ; car bientôt le stréphopode témoigna l'envie d'aller en pèlerinage à Bon-Secours, s'il se guérissait : à quoi M. Bournisien répondit qu'il ne voyait pas d'inconvénient ; deux précautions valaient mieux qu'une. *On ne risquait rien.*

L'apothicaire s'indigna contre ce qu'il appelait les *manoeuvres du prêtre* ; elles nuisaient, prétendait-il, à la convalescence d'Hippolyte, et il répétait à madame Lefrançois :

— Laissez-le ! laissez-le ! vous lui perturbez le moral avec votre mysticisme !

Mais la bonne femme ne voulait plus l'entendre. Il était *la cause de tout*. Par esprit de contradiction, elle accrocha même au chevet du malade un bénitier tout plein, avec une branche de buis.

Cependant la religion pas plus que la chirurgie ne paraissait le secourir, et l'invincible pourriture allait montant toujours des extrémités vers le ventre. On avait beau varier les potions et changer les cataplasmes, les muscles chaque jour se décollaient davantage, et enfin Charles répondit par un signe de tête affirmatif quand la mère Lefrançois lui demanda si elle ne pourrait point, en désespoir de cause, faire venir M. Canivet, de Neufchâtel, qui était une célébrité.

Docteur en médecine, âgé de cinquante ans, jouissant d'une bonne position et sûr de lui-même, le confrère ne se gêna pas pour rire dédaigneusement lorsqu'il découvrit cette jambe gangrenée jusqu'au genou. Puis, ayant déclaré net qu'il la fallait amputer, il s'en alla chez le pharmacien déblatérer contre les ânes qui avaient pu réduire un malheureux homme en un tel état. Secouant M. Homais par le bouton de sa redingote, il vociférait dans la pharmacie :

— Ce sont là des inventions de Paris ! Voilà les idées de ces messieurs de la Capitale ! c'est comme le strabisme, le chloroforme et la lithotritie, un tas de monstruosités que le gouvernement devrait défendre ! Mais on veut faire le malin, et l'on vous fourre des remèdes sans s'inquiéter des conséquences. Nous ne sommes pas si forts que cela, nous autres ; nous ne sommes pas des savants, des mirliflores, des jolis coeurs ; nous sommes des praticiens, des guérisseurs, et nous n'imaginerions pas d'opérer quelqu'un qui se porte à merveille ! Redresser des pieds-bots ! est-ce qu'on peut redresser les pieds-bots ? c'est comme si l'on voulait, par exemple, rendre droit un bossu !

Homais souffrait en écoutant ce discours, et il dissimulait son malaise sous un sourire de courtisan, ayant besoin de ménager M. Canivet, dont les ordonnances quelquefois arrivaient jusqu'à Yonville ; aussi ne prit-il pas la défense de Bovary, ne fit-il même aucune observation, et, abandonnant ses principes, il sacrifia sa dignité aux intérêts plus sérieux de son négoce.

Ce fut dans le village un événement considérable que cette amputation de cuisse par le docteur Canivet ! Tous les habitants, ce jour-là, s'étaient levés de meilleure heure, et la Grande-Rue, bien que pleine de monde, avait quelque chose de lugubre comme s'il se fût agi d'une exécution capitale. On discutait chez l'épicier sur la maladie d'Hippolyte ; les boutiques ne vendaient rien, et madame Tuvache, la femme du maire, ne bougeait pas de sa fenêtre, par l'impatience où elle était de voir venir l'opérateur.

Il arriva dans son cabriolet, qu'il conduisait lui-même. Mais, le ressort du côté droit s'étant à la longue affaissé sous le poids de sa corpulence, il se faisait que la voiture penchait un peu tout en allant, et l'on apercevait sur l'autre coussin près de lui une vaste boîte, recouverte de basane rouge, dont les trois fermoirs de cuivre brillaient magistralement.

Quand il fut entré comme un tourbillon sous le porche du *Lion d’or*, le docteur, criant très haut, ordonna de dételer son cheval, puis il alla dans l'écurie voir s'il mangeait bien l'avoine ; car, en arrivant chez ses malades, il s'occupait d'abord de sa jument et de son cabriolet. On disait même à ce propos : « Ah ! M. Canivet, c'est un original ! » Et on l'estimait davantage pour cet inébranlable aplomb. L'univers aurait pu crever jusqu'au dernier homme, qu'il n'eût pas failli à la moindre de ses habitudes.

Homais se présenta.

— Je compte sur vous, fit le docteur. Sommes-nous prêts ? En marche !

Mais l'apothicaire, en rougissant, avoua qu'il était trop sensible pour assister à une pareille opération.

— Quand on est simple spectateur, disait-il, l'imagination, vous savez, se frappe ! Et puis j'ai le système nerveux tellement...

— Ah bah ! interrompit Canivet, vous me paraissez, au contraire, porté à l'apoplexie. Et, d'ailleurs, cela ne m'étonne pas ; car, vous autres, messieurs les pharmaciens, vous êtes continuellement fourrés dans votre cuisine, ce qui doit finir par altérer votre tempérament. Regardez-moi, plutôt : tous les jours, je me lève à quatre heures, je fais ma barbe à l'eau froide (je n'ai jamais froid), et je ne porte pas de flanelle, je n'attrape aucun rhume, le coffre est bon ! Je vis tantôt d'une manière, tantôt d'une autre, en philosophe, au hasard de la fourchette. C'est pourquoi je ne suis point délicat comme vous, et il m'est aussi parfaitement égal de découper un chrétien que la première volaille venue. Après ça, direz-vous, l'habitude..., l'habitude !...

Alors, sans aucun égard pour Hippolyte, qui suait d'angoisse entre ses draps, ces messieurs engagèrent une conversation où l'apothicaire compara le sang-froid d'un chirurgien à celui d'un général ; et ce rapprochement fut agréable à Canivet, qui se répandit en paroles sur les exigences de son art. Il le considérait comme un sacerdoce, bien que les officiers de santé le déshonorassent. Enfin, revenant au malade, il examina les bandes apportées par Homais, les mêmes qui avaient comparu lors du pied-bot, et demanda quelqu'un pour lui tenir le membre. On envoya chercher Lestiboudois, et M. Canivet, ayant retroussé ses manches, passa dans la salle de billard, tandis que l'apothicaire restait avec Artémise et l'aubergiste, plus pâles toutes les deux que leur tablier, et l'oreille tendue contre la porte.

Bovary, pendant ce temps-là, n'osait bouger de sa maison. Il se tenait en bas, dans la salle, assis au coin de la cheminée sans feu, le menton sur sa poitrine, les mains jointes, les yeux fixes. Quelle mésaventure ! pensait-il, quel désappointement ! Il avait pris pourtant toutes les précautions imaginables. La fatalité s'en était mêlée. N'importe ! si Hippolyte plus tard venait à mourir, c'est lui qui l'aurait assassiné. Et puis, quelle raison donnerait-il dans les visites, quand on l'interrogerait ? Peut-être, cependant, s'était-il trompé en quelque chose ? Il cherchait, ne trouvait pas. Mais les plus fameux chirurgiens se trompaient bien. Voilà ce qu'on ne voudrait jamais croire ! on allait rire, au contraire, clabauder ! Cela se répandrait jusqu'à Forges ! jusqu'à Neufchâtel ! jusqu'à Rouen ! partout ! Qui sait si des confrères n'écriraient pas contre lui ? Une polémique s'ensuivrait, il faudrait répondre dans les journaux. Hippolyte même pouvait lui faire un procès. Il se voyait déshonoré, ruiné, perdu ! Et son imagination, assaillie par une multitude d'hypothèses, ballottait au milieu d'elles comme un tonneau vide emporté à la mer et qui roule sur les flots.

Emma, en face de lui, le regardait ; elle ne partageait pas son humiliation, elle en éprouvait une autre : c'était de s'être imaginé qu'un pareil homme pût valoir quelque chose, comme si vingt fois déjà elle n'avait pas suffisamment aperçu sa médiocrité.

Charles se promenait de long en large, dans la chambre. Ses bottes craquaient sur le parquet.

— Assieds-toi, dit-elle, tu m'agaces !

Il se rassit.

Comment donc avait-elle fait (elle qui était si intelligente !) pour se méprendre encore une fois ? Du reste, par quelle déplorable manie avoir ainsi abîmé son existence en sacrifices continuels ? Elle se rappela tous ses instincts de luxe, toutes les privations de son âme, les bassesses du mariage, du ménage, ses rêves tombant dans la boue comme des hirondelles blessées, tout ce qu'elle avait désiré, tout ce qu'elle s'était refusé, tout ce qu'elle aurait pu avoir ! et pourquoi ? pourquoi ?

Au milieu du silence qui emplissait le village, un cri déchirant traversa l'air. Bovary devint pâle à s'évanouir. Elle fronça les sourcils d'un geste nerveux, puis continua. C'était pour lui cependant, pour cet être, pour cet homme qui ne comprenait rien, qui ne sentait rien ! car il était là, tout tranquillement, et sans même se douter que le ridicule de son nom allait désormais la salir comme lui. Elle avait fait des efforts pour l'aimer, et elle s'était repentie en pleurant d'avoir cédé à un autre.

— Mais c'était peut-être un valgus ! exclama soudain Bovary, qui méditait.

Au choc imprévu de cette phrase tombant sur sa pensée comme une balle de plomb dans un plat d'argent, Emma tressaillant leva la tête pour deviner ce qu'il voulait dire ; et ils se regardèrent silencieusement, presque ébahis de se voir, tant ils étaient par leur conscience éloignés l'un de l'autre. Charles la considérait avec le regard trouble d'un homme ivre, tout en écoutant, immobile, les derniers cris de l'amputé qui se suivaient en modulations traînantes, coupées de saccades aiguës, comme le hurlement lointain de quelque bête qu'on égorge. Emma mordait ses lèvres blêmes, et, roulant entre ses doigts un des brins du polypier qu'elle avait cassé, elle fixait sur Charles la pointe ardente de ses prunelles, comme deux flèches de feu prêtes à partir. Tout en lui l'irritait maintenant, sa figure, son costume, ce qu'il ne disait pas, sa personne entière, son existence enfin. Elle se repentait, comme d'un crime, de sa vertu passée, et ce qui en restait encore s'écroulait sous les coups furieux de son orgueil. Elle se délectait dans toutes les ironies mauvaises de l'adultère triomphant. Le souvenir de son amant revenait à elle avec des attractions vertigineuses : elle y jetait son âme, emportée vers cette image par un enthousiasme nouveau ; et Charles lui semblait aussi détaché de sa vie, aussi absent pour toujours, aussi impossible et anéanti, que s'il allait mourir et qu'il eût agonisé sous ses yeux.

Il se fit un bruit de pas sur le trottoir. Charles regarda ; et, à travers la jalousie baissée, il aperçut au bord des halles, en plein soleil, le docteur Canivet qui s'essuyait le front avec son foulard. Homais, derrière lui, portait à la main une grande boîte rouge, et ils se dirigeaient tous les deux du côté de la pharmacie.

Alors, par tendresse subite et découragement, Charles se tourna vers sa femme en lui disant :

— Embrasse-moi donc, ma bonne !

— Laisse-moi ! fit-elle, toute rouge de colère.

— Qu'as-tu ? qu'as-tu ? répétait-il stupéfait. Calme-toi ! reprends-toi !... Tu sais bien que je t'aime !... viens !

— Assez ! s'écria-t-elle d'un air terrible.

Et s'échappant de la salle, Emma ferma la porte si fort, que le baromètre bondit de la muraille et s'écrasa par terre.

Charles s'affaissa dans son fauteuil, bouleversé, cherchant ce qu'elle pouvait avoir, imaginant une maladie nerveuse, pleurant, et sentant vaguement circuler autour de lui quelque chose de funeste et d'incompréhensible.

Quand Rodolphe, le soir, arriva dans le jardin, il trouva sa maîtresse qui l'attendait au bas du perron, sur la première marche. Ils s'étreignirent, et toute leur rancune se fondit comme une neige sous la chaleur de ce baiser.

XII

Ils recommencèrent à s'aimer. Souvent même, au milieu de la journée, Emma lui écrivait tout à coup ; puis, à travers les carreaux, faisait un signe à Justin, qui, dénouant vite sa serpillière, s'envolait à la Huchette. Rodolphe arrivait ; c'était pour lui dire qu'elle s'ennuyait, que son mari était odieux et son existence affreuse !

— Est-ce que j'y peux quelque chose ? s'écria-t-il un jour, impatienté.

— Ah ! si tu voulais !...

Elle était assise par terre, entre ses genoux, les bandeaux dénoués, le regard perdu.

— Quoi donc ? fit Rodolphe.

Elle soupira.

— Nous irions vivre ailleurs..., quelque part...

— Tu es folle, vraiment ! dit-il en riant. Est-ce possible ?

Elle revint là-dessus ; il eut l'air de ne pas comprendre et détourna la conversation.

Ce qu'il ne comprenait pas, c'était tout ce trouble dans une chose aussi simple que l'amour. Elle avait un motif, une raison, et comme un auxiliaire à son attachement.

Cette tendresse, en effet, chaque jour s'accroissait davantage sous la répulsion du mari. Plus elle se livrait à l'un, plus elle exécrait l'autre ; jamais Charles ne lui paraissait aussi désagréable, avoir les doigts aussi carrés, l'esprit aussi lourd, les façons si communes qu'après ses rendez-vous avec Rodolphe, quand ils se trouvaient ensemble. Alors, tout en faisant l'épouse et la vertueuse, elle s'enflammait à l'idée de cette tête dont les cheveux noirs se tournaient en une boucle vers le front hâlé, de cette taille à la fois si robuste et si élégante, de cet homme enfin qui possédait tant d'expérience dans la raison, tant d'emportement dans le désir ! C'était pour lui qu'elle se limait les ongles avec un soin de ciseleur, et qu'il n'y avait jamais assez de *cold-cream* sur sa peau, ni de patchouli dans ses mouchoirs. Elle se chargeait de bracelets, de bagues, de colliers. Quand il devait venir, elle emplissait de roses ses deux grands vases de verre bleu, et disposait son appartement et sa personne comme une courtisane qui attend un prince. Il fallait que la domestique fût sans cesse à blanchir du linge ; et, de toute la journée, Félicité ne bougeait de la cuisine, où le petit Justin, qui souvent lui tenait compagnie, la regardait travailler.

Le coude sur la longue planche où elle repassait, il considérait avidement toutes ces affaires de femmes étalées autour de lui : les jupons de basin, les fichus, les collerettes, et les pantalons à coulisse, vastes de hanches et qui se rétrécissaient par le bas.

— À quoi cela sert-il ? demandait le jeune garçon en passant sa main sur la crinoline ou les agrafes.

— Tu n'as donc jamais rien vu ? répondait en riant Félicité ; comme si ta patronne, madame Homais, n'en portait pas de pareils.

— Ah bien oui ! madame Homais !

Et il ajoutait d'un ton méditatif :

— Est-ce que c'est une dame comme Madame ?

Mais Félicité s'impatientait de le voir tourner ainsi tout autour d'elle. Elle avait six ans de plus, et Théodore, le domestique de M. Guillaumin, commençait à lui faire la cour.

— Laisse-moi tranquille ! disait-elle en déplaçant son pot d'empois. Va-t'en plutôt piler des amandes ; tu es toujours à fourrager du côté des femmes ; attends pour te mêler de ça, méchant mioche, que tu aies de la barbe au menton.

— Allons, ne vous fâchez pas, je m'en vais vous *faire ses bottines*.

Et aussitôt, il atteignait sur le chambranle les chaussures d'Emma, tout empâtées de crotte – la crotte des rendez-vous – qui se détachait en poudre sous ses doigts, et qu'il regardait monter doucement dans un rayon de soleil.

— Comme tu as peur de les abîmer ! disait la cuisinière, qui n'y mettait pas tant de façons quand elle les nettoyait elle-même, parce que Madame, dès que l'étoffe n'était plus fraîche, les lui abandonnait.

Emma en avait une quantité dans son armoire, et qu'elle gaspillait à mesure, sans que jamais Charles se permît la moindre observation.

C'est ainsi qu'il déboursa trois cents francs pour une jambe de bois dont elle jugea convenable de faire cadeau à Hippolyte. Le pilon en était garni de liège, et il y avait des articulations à ressort, une mécanique compliquée recouverte d'un pantalon noir, que terminait une botte vernie. Mais Hippolyte, n'osant à tous les jours se servir d'une si belle jambe, supplia madame Bovary de lui en procurer une autre plus commode. Le médecin, bien entendu, fit encore les frais de cette acquisition.

Donc, le garçon d'écurie peu à peu recommença son métier. On le voyait comme autrefois parcourir le village, et quand Charles entendait de loin, sur les pavés, le bruit sec de son bâton, il prenait bien vite une autre route.

C'était M. Lheureux, le marchand, qui s'était chargé de la commande ; cela lui fournit l'occasion de fréquenter Emma. Il causait avec elle des nouveaux déballages de Paris, de mille curiosités féminines, se montrait fort complaisant, et jamais ne réclamait d'argent. Emma s'abandonnait à cette facilité de satisfaire tous ses caprices. Ainsi, elle voulut avoir, pour la donner à Rodolphe, une fort belle cravache qui se trouvait à Rouen dans un magasin de parapluies. M. Lheureux, la semaine d'après, la lui posa sur sa table.

Mais le lendemain il se présenta chez elle avec une facture de deux cent soixante et dix francs, sans compter les centimes. Emma fut très embarrassée : tous les tiroirs du secrétaire étaient vides ; on devait plus de quinze jours à Lestiboudois, deux trimestres à la servante, quantité d'autres choses encore, et Bovary attendait impatiemment l'envoi de M. Derozerays, qui avait coutume, chaque année, de le payer vers la Saint-Pierre.

Elle réussit d'abord à éconduire Lheureux ; enfin il perdit patience : on le poursuivait, ses capitaux étaient absents, et, s'il ne rentrait dans quelques-uns, il serait forcé de lui reprendre toutes les marchandises qu'elle avait.

— Eh ! reprenez-les ! dit Emma.

— Oh ! c'est pour rire ! répliqua-t-il. Seulement, je ne regrette que la cravache. Ma foi ! je la redemanderai à Monsieur.

— Non ! non ! fit-elle.

— Ah ! je te tiens ! pensa Lheureux.

Et, sûr de sa découverte, il sortit en répétant à demi-voix et avec son petit sifflement habituel :

— Soit ! nous verrons ! nous verrons !

Elle rêvait comment se tirer de là, quand la cuisinière entrant, déposa sur la cheminée un petit rouleau de papier bleu, *de la part de M. Derozerays*. Emma sauta dessus, l'ouvrit. Il y avait quinze napoléons. C'était le compte. Elle entendit Charles dans l'escalier ; elle jeta l'or au fond de son tiroir et prit la clef.

Trois jours après, Lheureux reparut.

— J'ai un arrangement à vous proposer, dit-il ; si, au lieu de la somme convenue, vous vouliez prendre...

— La voilà, fit-elle en lui plaçant dans la main quatorze napoléons.

Le marchand fut stupéfait. Alors, pour dissimuler son désappointement, il se répandit en excuses et en offres de service qu'Emma refusa toutes ; puis elle resta quelques minutes palpant dans la poche de son tablier les deux pièces de cent sous qu'il lui avait rendues. Elle se promettait d'économiser, afin de rendre plus tard...

— Ah bah ! songea-t-elle, il n'y pensera plus.

Outre la cravache à pommeau de vermeil, Rodolphe avait reçu un cachet avec cette devise : *Amor nel cor* ; de plus, une écharpe pour se faire un cache-nez, et enfin un porte-cigares tout pareil à celui du Vicomte, que Charles avait autrefois ramassé sur la route et qu'Emma conservait. Cependant ces cadeaux l'humiliaient. Il en refusa plusieurs ; elle insista, et Rodolphe finit par obéir, la trouvant tyrannique et trop envahissante.

Puis elle avait d'étranges idées :

— Quand minuit sonnera, disait-elle, tu penseras à moi !

Et, s'il avouait n'y avoir point songé, c'étaient des reproches en abondance, et qui se terminaient toujours par l'éternel mot :

— M'aimes-tu ?

— Mais oui, je t'aime ! répondait-il.

— Beaucoup ?

— Certainement !

— Tu n'en as pas aimé d'autres, hein ?

— Crois-tu m'avoir pris vierge ? exclamait-il en riant.

Emma pleurait, et il s'efforçait de la consoler, enjolivant de calembours ses protestations.

— Oh ! c'est que je t'aime ! reprenait-elle, je t'aime à ne pouvoir me passer de toi, sais-tu bien ? J'ai quelquefois des envies de te revoir où toutes les colères de l'amour me déchirent. Je me demande : « Où est-il ? Peut-être il parle à d'autres femmes ? Elles lui sourient, il s'approche... » Oh ! non, n'est-ce pas, aucune ne te plaît ? Il y en a de plus belles ; mais, moi, je sais mieux aimer ! Je suis ta servante et ta concubine ! Tu es mon roi, mon idole ! tu es bon ! tu es beau ! tu es intelligent ! tu es fort !

Il s'était tant de fois entendu dire ces choses, qu'elles n'avaient pour lui rien d'original. Emma ressemblait à toutes les maîtresses ; et le charme de la nouveauté, peu à peu tombant comme un vêtement, laissait voir à nu l'éternelle monotonie de la passion, qui a toujours les mêmes formes et le même langage. Il ne distinguait pas, cet homme si plein de pratique, la dissemblance des sentiments sous la parité des expressions. Parce que des lèvres libertines ou vénales lui avaient murmuré des phrases pareilles, il ne croyait que faiblement à la candeur de celles-là ; on en devait rabattre, pensait-il, les discours exagérés cachant les affections médiocres ; comme si la plénitude de l'âme ne débordait pas quelquefois par les métaphores les plus vides, puisque personne, jamais, ne peut donner l'exacte mesure de ses besoins, ni de ses conceptions, ni de ses douleurs, et que la parole humaine est comme un chaudron fêlé où nous battons des mélodies à faire danser les ours, quand on voudrait attendrir les étoiles.

Mais, avec cette supériorité de critique appartenant à celui qui, dans n'importe quel engagement, se tient en arrière, Rodolphe aperçut en cet amour d'autres jouissances à exploiter. Il jugea toute pudeur incommode. Il la traita sans façon. Il en fit quelque chose de souple et de corrompu. C'était une sorte d'attachement idiot plein d'admiration pour lui, de voluptés pour elle, une béatitude qui l'engourdissait ; et son âme s'enfonçait en cette ivresse et s'y noyait, ratatinée, comme le duc de Clarence dans son tonneau de malvoisie.

Par l'effet seul de ses habitudes amoureuses, madame Bovary changea d'allures. Ses regards devinrent plus hardis, ses discours plus libres ; elle eut même l'inconvenance de se promener avec M. Rodolphe, une cigarette à la bouche, *comme pour narguer le monde* ; enfin, ceux qui doutaient encore ne doutèrent plus quand on la vit, un jour, descendre de l'*Hirondelle*, la taille serrée dans un gilet, à la façon d'un homme ; et madame Bovary mère, qui, après une épouvantable scène avec son mari, était venue se réfugier chez son fils, ne fut pas la bourgeoise la moins scandalisée. Bien d'autres choses lui déplurent : d'abord Charles n'avait point écouté ses conseils pour l'interdiction des romans ; puis, *le genre de la maison* lui déplaisait ; elle se permit des observations, et l'on se fâcha, une fois surtout, à propos de Félicité.

Madame Bovary mère, la veille au soir, en traversant le corridor, l'avait surprise dans la compagnie d'un homme, un homme à collier brun, d'environ quarante ans, et qui, au bruit de ses pas, s'était vite échappé de la cuisine. Alors Emma se prit à rire ; mais la bonne dame s'emporta, déclarant qu'à moins de se moquer des moeurs, on devait surveiller celles des domestiques.

— De quel monde êtes-vous ? dit la bru, avec un regard tellement impertinent que madame Bovary lui demanda si elle ne défendait point sa propre cause.

— Sortez ! fit la jeune femme se levant d'un bond.

— Emma !... maman !... s'écriait Charles pour les rapatrier.

Mais elles s'étaient enfuies toutes les deux dans leur exaspération. Emma trépignait en répétant :

— Ah ! quel savoir-vivre ! quelle paysanne !

Il courut à sa mère ; elle était hors des gonds, elle balbutiait :

— C'est une insolente ! une évaporée ! pire, peut-être !

Et elle voulait partir immédiatement, si l'autre ne venait lui faire des excuses. Charles retourna donc vers sa femme et la conjura de céder ; il se mit à genoux ; elle finit par répondre :

— Soit ! j'y vais.

En effet, elle tendit la main à sa belle-mère avec une dignité de marquise, en lui disant :

— Excusez-moi, madame.

Puis, remontée chez elle, Emma se jeta tout à plat ventre sur son lit, et elle y pleura comme un enfant, la tête enfoncée dans l'oreiller.

Ils étaient convenus, elle et Rodolphe, qu'en cas d'événement extraordinaire, elle attacherait à la persienne un petit chiffon de papier blanc, afin que, si par hasard il se trouvait à Yonville, il accourût dans la ruelle, derrière la maison.

Emma fit le signal ; elle attendait depuis trois quarts d'heure, quand tout à coup elle aperçut Rodolphe au coin des halles. Elle fut tentée d'ouvrir la fenêtre, de l'appeler ; mais déjà il avait disparu. Elle retomba désespérée.

Bientôt pourtant il lui sembla que l'on marchait sur le trottoir. C'était lui, sans doute ; elle descendit l'escalier, traversa la cour. Il était là, dehors. Elle se jeta dans ses bras.

— Prends donc garde, dit-il.

— Ah ! si tu savais ! reprit-elle.

Et elle se mit à lui raconter tout, à la hâte, sans suite, exagérant les faits, en inventant plusieurs, et prodiguant les parenthèses si abondamment qu'il n'y comprenait rien.

— Allons, mon pauvre ange, du courage, console-toi, patience !

— Mais voilà quatre ans que je patiente et que je souffre !... Un amour comme le nôtre devrait s'avouer à la face du ciel ! Ils sont à me torturer. Je n'y tiens plus ! Sauve-moi !

Elle se serrait contre Rodolphe. Ses yeux, pleins de larmes, étincelaient comme des flammes sous l'onde ; sa gorge haletait à coups rapides ; jamais il ne l'avait tant aimée ; si bien qu'il en perdit la tête et qu'il lui dit :

— Que faut-il faire ? que veux-tu ?

— Emmène-moi ! s'écria-t-elle. Enlève-moi !... Oh ! je t'en supplie !

Et elle se précipita sur sa bouche, comme pour y saisir le consentement inattendu qui s'en exhalait dans un baiser.

— Mais..., reprit Rodolphe.

— Quoi donc ?

— Et ta fille ?

Elle réfléchit quelques minutes, puis répondit :

— Nous la prendrons, tant pis !

— Quelle femme ! se dit-il en la regardant s'éloigner.

Car elle venait de s'échapper dans le jardin. On l'appelait.

La mère Bovary, les jours suivants, fut très étonnée de la métamorphose de sa bru. En effet, Emma se montra plus docile, et même poussa la déférence jusqu'à lui demander une recette pour faire mariner des cornichons.

Était-ce afin de les mieux duper l'un et l'autre ? ou bien voulait-elle, par une sorte de stoïcisme voluptueux, sentir plus profondément l'amertume des choses qu'elle allait abandonner ? Mais elle n'y prenait garde, au contraire ; elle vivait comme perdue dans la dégustation anticipée de son bonheur prochain. C'était avec Rodolphe un éternel sujet de causeries. Elle s'appuyait sur son épaule, elle murmurait :

— Hein ! quand nous serons dans la malle-poste !... Y songes-tu ? Est-ce possible ? Il me semble qu'au moment où je sentirai la voiture s'élancer, ce sera comme si nous montions en ballon, comme si nous partions vers les nuages. Sais-tu que je compte les jours ?... Et toi ?

Jamais madame Bovary ne fut aussi belle qu'à cette époque ; elle avait cette indéfinissable beauté qui résulte de la joie, de l'enthousiasme, du succès, et qui n'est que l'harmonie du tempérament avec les circonstances. Ses convoitises, ses chagrins, l'expérience du plaisir et ses illusions toujours jeunes, comme font aux fleurs le fumier, la pluie, les vents et le soleil, l'avaient par gradations développée, et elle s'épanouissait enfin dans la plénitude de sa nature. Ses paupières semblaient taillées tout exprès pour ses longs regards amoureux où la prunelle se perdait, tandis qu'un souffle fort écartait ses narines minces et relevait le coin charnu de ses lèvres, qu'ombrageait à la lumière un peu de duvet noir. On eût dit qu'un artiste habile en corruptions avait disposé sur sa nuque la torsade de ses cheveux : ils s'enroulaient en une masse lourde, négligemment, et selon les hasards de l'adultère, qui les dénouait tous les jours. Sa voix maintenant prenait des inflexions plus molles, sa taille aussi ; quelque chose de subtil qui vous pénétrait se dégageait même des draperies de sa robe et de la cambrure de son pied. Charles, comme aux premiers temps de son mariage, la trouvait délicieuse et tout irrésistible.

Quand il rentrait au milieu de la nuit, il n'osait pas la réveiller. La veilleuse de porcelaine arrondissait au plafond une clarté tremblante, et les rideaux fermés du petit berceau faisaient comme une hutte blanche qui se bombait dans l'ombre, au bord du lit. Charles les regardait. Il croyait entendre l'haleine légère de son enfant. Elle allait grandir maintenant ; chaque saison, vite, amènerait un progrès. Il la voyait déjà revenant de l'école à la tombée du jour, toute rieuse, avec sa brassière tachée d'encre, et portant au bras son panier ; puis il faudrait la mettre en pension, cela coûterait beaucoup ; comment faire ? Alors il réfléchissait. Il pensait à louer une petite ferme aux environs, et qu'il surveillerait lui-même, tous les matins, en allant voir ses malades. Il en économiserait le revenu, il le placerait à la caisse d'épargne ; ensuite il achèterait des actions, quelque part, n'importe où ; d'ailleurs, la clientèle augmenterait ; il y comptait, car il voulait que Berthe fût bien élevée, qu'elle eût des talents, qu'elle apprît le piano. Ah ! qu'elle serait jolie, plus tard, à quinze ans, quand, ressemblant à sa mère, elle porterait comme elle, dans l'été, de grands chapeaux de paille ! on les prendrait de loin pour les deux soeurs. Il se la figurait travaillant le soir auprès d'eux, sous la lumière de la lampe ; elle lui broderait des pantoufles ; elle s'occuperait du ménage ; elle emplirait toute la maison de sa gentillesse et de sa gaieté. Enfin, ils songeraient à son établissement : on lui trouverait quelque brave garçon ayant un état solide ; il la rendrait heureuse ; cela durerait toujours.

Emma ne dormait pas, elle faisait semblant d'être endormie ; et, tandis qu'il s'assoupissait à ses côtés, elle se réveillait en d'autres rêves.

Au galop de quatre chevaux, elle était emportée depuis huit jours vers un pays nouveau, d'où ils ne reviendraient plus. Ils allaient, ils allaient, les bras enlacés, sans parler. Souvent, du haut d'une montagne, ils apercevaient tout à coup quelque cité splendide avec des dômes, des ponts, des navires, des forêts de citronniers et des cathédrales de marbre blanc, dont les clochers aigus portaient des nids de cigogne. On marchait au pas, à cause des grandes dalles, et il y avait par terre des bouquets de fleurs que vous offraient des femmes habillées en corset rouge. On entendait sonner des cloches, hennir les mulets, avec le murmure des guitares et le bruit des fontaines, dont la vapeur s'envolant rafraîchissait des tas de fruits, disposés en pyramide au pied des statues pâles, qui souriaient sous les jets d'eau. Et puis ils arrivaient, un soir, dans un village de pêcheurs, où des filets bruns séchaient au vent, le long de la falaise et des cabanes. C'est là qu'ils s'arrêteraient pour vivre ; ils habiteraient une maison basse, à toit plat, ombragée d'un palmier, au fond d'un golfe, au bord de la mer. Ils se promèneraient en gondole, ils se balanceraient en hamac ; et leur existence serait facile et large comme leurs vêtements de soie, toute chaude et étoilée comme les nuits douces qu'ils contempleraient. Cependant, sur l'immensité de cet avenir qu'elle se faisait apparaître, rien de particulier ne surgissait ; les jours, tous magnifiques, se ressemblaient comme des flots ; et cela se balançait à l'horizon, infini, harmonieux, bleuâtre et couvert de soleil. Mais l'enfant se mettait à tousser dans son berceau, ou bien Bovary ronflait plus fort, et Emma ne s'endormait que le matin, quand l'aube blanchissait les carreaux et que déjà le petit Justin, sur la place, ouvrait les auvents de la pharmacie.

Elle avait fait venir M. Lheureux et lui avait dit :

— J'aurais besoin d'un manteau, un grand manteau, à long collet, doublé.

— Vous partez en voyage ? demanda-t-il.

— Non ! mais..., n'importe, je compte sur vous, n'est-ce pas ? et vivement !

Il s'inclina.

— Il me faudrait encore, reprit-elle, une caisse..., pas trop lourde..., commode.

— Oui, oui, j'entends, de quatre-vingt-douze centimètres environ sur cinquante, comme on les fait à présent.

— Avec un sac de nuit.

— Décidément, pensa Lheureux, il y a du grabuge là-dessous.

— Et tenez, dit madame Bovary en tirant sa montre de sa ceinture, prenez cela ; vous vous payerez dessus.

Mais le marchand s'écria qu'elle avait tort ; ils se connaissaient ; est-ce qu'il doutait d'elle ? Quel enfantillage ! Elle insista cependant pour qu'il prît au moins la chaîne, et déjà Lheureux l'avait mise dans sa poche et s'en allait, quand elle le rappela.

— Vous laisserez tout chez vous. Quant au manteau, – elle eut l'air de réfléchir, – ne l'apportez pas non plus ; seulement, vous me donnerez l'adresse de l'ouvrier et avertirez qu'on le tienne à ma disposition.

C'était le mois prochain qu'ils devaient s'enfuir. Elle partirait d'Yonville comme pour aller faire des commissions à Rouen. Rodolphe aurait retenu les places, pris des passeports, et même écrit à Paris, afin d'avoir la malle entière jusqu'à Marseille, où ils achèteraient une calèche et, de là, continueraient sans s'arrêter, par la route de Gênes. Elle aurait eu soin d'envoyer chez Lheureux son bagage, qui serait directement porté à l'*Hirondelle*, de manière que personne ainsi n'aurait de soupçons ; et, dans tout cela, jamais il n'était question de son enfant. Rodolphe évitait d'en parler ; peut-être qu'elle n'y pensait pas.

Il voulut avoir encore deux semaines devant lui, pour terminer quelques dispositions ; puis, au bout de huit jours, il en demanda quinze autres ; puis il se dit malade ; ensuite il fit un voyage ; le mois d'août se passa, et, après tous ces retards, ils arrêtèrent que ce serait irrévocablement pour le 4 septembre, un lundi.

Enfin le samedi, l'avant-veille, arriva.

Rodolphe vint le soir, plus tôt que de coutume.

— Tout est-il prêt ? lui demanda-t-elle.

— Oui.

Alors ils firent le tour d'une plate-bande, et allèrent s'asseoir près de la terrasse, sur la margelle du mur.

— Tu es triste, dit Emma.

— Non, pourquoi ?

Et cependant il la regardait singulièrement, d'une façon tendre.

— Est-ce de t'en aller ? reprit-elle, de quitter tes affections, ta vie ? Ah ! je comprends... Mais, moi, je n'ai rien au monde ! tu es tout pour moi. Aussi je serai tout pour toi, je te serai une famille, une patrie ; je te soignerai, je t'aimerai.

— Que tu es charmante ! dit-il en la saisissant dans ses bras.

— Vrai ? fit-elle avec un rire de volupté. M'aimes-tu ? Jure-le donc !

— Si je t'aime ! si je t'aime ! mais je t'adore, mon amour !

La lune, toute ronde et couleur de pourpre, se levait à ras de terre, au fond de la prairie. Elle montait vite entre les branches des peupliers, qui la cachaient de place en place, comme un rideau noir, troué. Puis elle parut, éclatante de blancheur, dans le ciel vide qu'elle éclairait ; et alors, se ralentissant, elle laissa tomber sur la rivière une grande tache, qui faisait une infinité d'étoiles ; et cette lueur d'argent semblait s'y tordre jusqu'au fond, à la manière d'un serpent sans tête couvert d'écailles lumineuses. Cela ressemblait aussi à quelque monstrueux candélabre, d'où ruisselaient, tout du long, des gouttes de diamant en fusion. La nuit douce s'étalait autour d'eux ; des nappes d'ombre emplissaient les feuillages. Emma, les yeux à demi clos, aspirait avec de grands soupirs le vent frais qui soufflait. Ils ne se parlaient pas, trop perdus qu'ils étaient dans l'envahissement de leur rêverie. La tendresse des anciens jours leur revenait au coeur, abondante et silencieuse comme la rivière qui coulait, avec autant de mollesse qu'en apportait le parfum des seringas, et projetait dans leur souvenir des ombres plus démesurées et plus mélancoliques que celles des saules immobiles qui s'allongeaient sur l'herbe. Souvent quelque bête nocturne, hérisson ou belette, se mettant en chasse, dérangeait les feuilles, ou bien on entendait par moments une pêche mûre qui tombait toute seule de l'espalier.

— Ah ! la belle nuit ! dit Rodolphe.

— Nous en aurons d'autres ! reprit Emma.

Et, comme se parlant à elle-même :

— Oui, il fera bon voyager... Pourquoi ai-je le coeur triste, cependant ? Est-ce l'appréhension de l'inconnu..., l'effet des habitudes quittées..., ou plutôt... ? Non, c'est l'excès du bonheur ! Que je suis faible, n'est-ce pas ? Pardonne-moi !

— Il est encore temps ! s'écria-t-il. Réfléchis, tu t'en repentiras peut-être.

— Jamais ! fit-elle impétueusement.

Et, en se rapprochant de lui :

— Quel malheur donc peut-il me survenir ? Il n'y a pas de désert, pas de précipice ni d'océan que je ne traverserais avec toi. À mesure que nous vivrons ensemble, ce sera comme une étreinte chaque jour plus serrée, plus complète ! Nous n'aurons rien qui nous trouble, pas de soucis, nul obstacle ! Nous serons seuls, tout à nous, éternellement... Parle donc, réponds-moi.

Il répondait à intervalles réguliers : « Oui... oui !... » Elle lui avait passé les mains dans ses cheveux, et elle répétait d'une voix enfantine, malgré de grosses larmes qui coulaient :

— Rodolphe ! Rodolphe !... Ah ! Rodolphe, cher petit Rodolphe !

Minuit sonna.

— Minuit ! dit-elle. Allons, c'est demain ! encore un jour !

Il se leva pour partir ; et, comme si ce geste qu'il faisait eût été le signal de leur fuite, Emma, tout à coup, prenant un air gai :

— Tu as les passeports ?

— Oui.

— Tu n'oublies rien ?

— Non.

— Tu en es sûr ?

— Certainement.

— C'est à l'hôtel *de Provence*, n'est-ce pas, que tu m'attendras ?... à midi ?

Il fit un signe de tête.

— À demain, donc ! dit Emma dans une dernière caresse.

Et elle le regarda s'éloigner.

Il ne se détournait pas. Elle courut après lui, et, se penchant au bord de l'eau entre des broussailles :

— À demain ! s'écria-t-elle.

Il était déjà de l'autre côté de la rivière et marchait vite dans la prairie.

Au bout de quelques minutes, Rodolphe s'arrêta ; et, quand il la vit avec son vêtement blanc peu à peu s'évanouir dans l'ombre comme un fantôme, il fut pris d'un tel battement de coeur, qu'il s'appuya contre un arbre pour ne pas tomber.

— Quel imbécile je suis ! fit-il en jurant épouvantablement. N'importe, c'était une jolie maîtresse !

Et, aussitôt, la beauté d'Emma, avec tous les plaisirs de cet amour, lui réapparurent. D'abord il s'attendrit, puis il se révolta contre elle.

— Car enfin, exclamait-il en gesticulant, je ne peux pas m'expatrier, avoir la charge d'une enfant.

Il se disait ces choses pour s'affermir davantage.

— Et, d'ailleurs, les embarras, la dépense... Ah ! non, non, mille fois non ! cela eût été trop bête !

XIII

À peine arrivé chez lui, Rodolphe s'assit brusquement à son bureau, sous la tête de cerf faisant trophée contre la muraille. Mais, quand il eut la plume entre les doigts, il ne sut rien trouver, si bien que, s'appuyant sur les deux coudes, il se mit à réfléchir. Emma lui semblait être reculée dans un passé lointain, comme si la résolution qu'il avait prise venait de placer entre eux, tout à coup, un immense intervalle.

Afin de ressaisir quelque chose d'elle, il alla chercher dans l'armoire, au chevet de son lit, une vieille boîte à biscuits de Reims où il enfermait d'habitude ses lettres de femmes, et il s'en échappa une odeur de poussière humide et de roses flétries. D'abord il aperçut un mouchoir de poche, couvert de gouttelettes pâles. C'était un mouchoir à elle, une fois qu'elle avait saigné du nez, en promenade ; il ne s'en souvenait plus. Il y avait auprès, se cognant à tous les angles, la miniature donnée par Emma ; sa toilette lui parut prétentieuse et son regard *en coulisse* du plus pitoyable effet ; puis, à force de considérer cette image et d'évoquer le souvenir du modèle, les traits d'Emma peu à peu se confondirent en sa mémoire, comme si la figure vivante et la figure peinte, se frottant l'une contre l'autre, se fussent réciproquement effacées. Enfin il lut de ses lettres ; elles étaient pleines d'explications relatives à leur voyage, courtes, techniques et pressantes comme des billets d'affaires. Il voulut revoir les longues, celles d'autrefois ; pour les trouver au fond de la boîte, Rodolphe dérangea toutes les autres ; et machinalement il se mit à fouiller dans ce tas de papiers et de choses, y retrouvant pêle-mêle des bouquets, une jarretière, un masque noir, des épingles et des cheveux – des cheveux ! de bruns, de blonds ; quelques-uns même, s'accrochant à la ferrure de la boîte, se cassaient quand on l'ouvrait.

Ainsi flânant parmi ses souvenirs, il examinait les écritures et le style des lettres, aussi variés que leurs orthographes. Elles étaient tendres ou joviales, facétieuses, mélancoliques ; il y en avait qui demandaient de l'amour et d'autres qui demandaient de l'argent. À propos d'un mot, il se rappelait des visages, de certains gestes, un son de voix ; quelquefois pourtant il ne se rappelait rien.

En effet, ces femmes, accourant à la fois dans sa pensée, s'y gênaient les unes les autres et s'y rapetissaient, comme sous un même niveau d'amour qui les égalisait. Prenant donc à poignée les lettres confondues, il s'amusa pendant quelques minutes à les faire tomber en cascades, de sa main droite dans sa main gauche. Enfin, ennuyé, assoupi, Rodolphe alla reporter la boîte dans l'armoire en se disant :

— Quel tas de blagues !...

Ce qui résumait son opinion ; car les plaisirs, comme des écoliers dans la cour d'un collège, avaient tellement piétiné sur son coeur, que rien de vert n'y poussait, et ce qui passait par là, plus étourdi que les enfants, n'y laissait pas même, comme eux, son nom gravé sur la muraille.

— Allons, se dit-il, commençons !

Il écrivit :

« Du courage, Emma ! du courage ! Je ne veux pas faire le malheur de votre existence... »

— Après tout, c'est vrai, pensa Rodolphe ; j'agis dans son intérêt ; je suis honnête.

« Avez-vous mûrement pesé votre détermination ? Savez-vous l'abîme où je vous entraînais, pauvre ange ? Non, n'est-ce pas ? Vous alliez confiante et folle, croyant au bonheur, à l'avenir... Ah ! malheureux que nous sommes ! insensés ! »

Rodolphe s'arrêta pour trouver ici quelque bonne excuse.

— Si je lui disais que toute ma fortune est perdue ?... Ah ! non, et d'ailleurs, cela n'empêcherait rien. Ce serait à recommencer plus tard. Est-ce qu'on peut faire entendre raison à des femmes pareilles !

Il réfléchit, puis ajouta :

« Je ne vous oublierai pas, croyez-le bien, et j'aurai continuellement pour vous un dévouement profond ; mais, un jour, tôt ou tard, cette ardeur (c'est là le sort des choses humaines) se fût diminuée, sans doute ! Il nous serait venu des lassitudes, et qui sait même si je n'aurais pas eu l'atroce douleur d'assister à vos remords et d'y participer moi-même, puisque je les aurais causés. L'idée seule des chagrins qui vous arrivent me torture, Emma ! Oubliez-moi ! Pourquoi faut-il que je vous aie connue ? Pourquoi étiez-vous si belle ? Est-ce ma faute ? Ô mon Dieu ! non, non, n'en accusez que la fatalité ! »

— Voilà un mot qui fait toujours de l'effet, se dit-il.

« Ah ! si vous eussiez été une de ces femmes au coeur frivole comme on en voit, certes, j'aurais pu, par égoïsme, tenter une expérience alors sans danger pour vous. Mais cette exaltation délicieuse, qui fait à la fois votre charme et votre tourment, vous a empêchée de comprendre, adorable femme que vous êtes, la fausseté de notre position future. Moi non plus, je n'y avais pas réfléchi d'abord, et je me reposais à l'ombre de ce bonheur idéal, comme à celle du mancenillier, sans prévoir les conséquences. »

— Elle va peut-être croire que c'est par avarice que j'y renonce... Ah ! n'importe ! tant pis, il faut en finir !

« Le monde est cruel, Emma. Partout où nous eussions été, il nous aurait poursuivis. Il vous aurait fallu subir les questions indiscrètes, la calomnie, le dédain, l'outrage peut-être. L'outrage à vous ! Oh !... Et moi qui voudrais vous faire asseoir sur un trône ! moi qui emporte votre pensée comme un talisman ! Car je me punis par l'exil de tout le mal que je vous ai fait. Je pars. Où ? Je n'en sais rien, je suis fou ! Adieu ! Soyez toujours bonne ! Conservez le souvenir du malheureux qui vous a perdue. Apprenez mon nom à votre enfant, qu'il le redise dans ses prières. »

La mèche des deux bougies tremblait. Rodolphe se leva pour aller fermer la fenêtre, et, quand il se fut rassis :

— Il me semble que c'est tout. Ah ! encore ceci, de peur qu'elle ne vienne *à me relancer* :

« Je serai loin quand vous lirez ces tristes lignes ; car j'ai voulu m'enfuir au plus vite afin d'éviter la tentation de vous revoir. Pas de faiblesse ! Je reviendrai ; et peut-être que, plus tard, nous causerons ensemble très froidement de nos anciennes amours. Adieu ! »

Et il y avait un dernier adieu, séparé en deux mots : *À Dieu !* ce qu'il jugeait d'un excellent goût.

— Comment vais-je signer, maintenant ? se dit-il. Votre tout dévoué ?... Non. Votre ami ?... Oui, c'est cela.

« Votre ami. »

Il relut sa lettre. Elle lui parut bonne.

— Pauvre petite femme ! pensa-t-il avec attendrissement. Elle va me croire plus insensible qu'un roc ; il eût fallu quelques larmes là-dessus ; mais, moi, je ne peux pas pleurer ; ce n'est pas ma faute. Alors, s'étant versé de l'eau dans un verre, Rodolphe y trempa son doigt et il laissa tomber de haut une grosse goutte, qui fit une tache pâle sur l'encre ; puis, cherchant à cacheter la lettre, le cachet *Amor nel cor* se rencontra.

— Cela ne va guère à la circonstance... Ah bah ! n'importe !

Après quoi, il fuma trois pipes et s'alla coucher.

Le lendemain, quand il fut debout (vers deux heures environ, il avait dormi tard), Rodolphe se fit cueillir une corbeille d'abricots. Il disposa la lettre dans le fond, sous des feuilles de vigne, et ordonna tout de suite à Girard, son valet de charrue, de porter cela délicatement chez madame Bovary. Il se servait de ce moyen pour correspondre avec elle, lui envoyant, selon la saison, des fruits ou du gibier.

— Si elle te demande de mes nouvelles, dit-il, tu répondras que je suis parti en voyage. Il faut remettre le panier à elle-même, en mains propres... Va, et prends garde !

Girard passa sa blouse neuve, noua son mouchoir autour des abricots, et marchant à grands pas lourds dans ses grosses galoches ferrées, prit tranquillement le chemin d'Yonville.

Madame Bovary, quand il arriva chez elle, arrangeait avec Félicité, sur la table de la cuisine, un paquet de linge.

— Voilà, dit le valet, ce que notre maître vous envoie.

Elle fut saisie d'une appréhension, et, tout en cherchant quelque monnaie dans sa poche, elle considérait le paysan d'un oeil hagard, tandis qu'il la regardait lui-même avec ébahissement, ne comprenant pas qu'un pareil cadeau pût tant émouvoir quelqu'un. Enfin il sortit. Félicité restait. Elle n'y tenait plus, elle courut dans la salle comme pour y porter les abricots, renversa le panier, arracha les feuilles, trouva la lettre, l'ouvrit, et, comme s'il y avait eu derrière elle un effroyable incendie, Emma se mit à fuir vers sa chambre, tout épouvantée.

Charles y était, elle l'aperçut ; il lui parla, elle n'entendit rien, et elle continua vivement à monter les marches, haletante, éperdue, ivre, et toujours tenant cette horrible feuille de papier, qui lui claquait dans les doigts comme une plaque de tôle. Au second étage, elle s'arrêta devant la porte du grenier, qui était fermée.

Alors elle voulut se calmer ; elle se rappela la lettre ; il fallait la finir, elle n'osait pas. D'ailleurs, où ? comment ? on la verrait.

— Ah ! non, ici, pensa-t-elle, je serai bien.

Emma poussa la porte et entra.

Les ardoises laissaient tomber d'aplomb une chaleur lourde, qui lui serrait les tempes et l'étouffait ; elle se traîna jusqu'à la mansarde close, dont elle tira le verrou, et la lumière éblouissante jaillit d'un bond.

En face, par-dessus les toits, la pleine campagne s'étalait à perte de vue. En bas, sous elle, la place du village était vide ; les cailloux du trottoir scintillaient, les girouettes des maisons se tenaient immobiles ; au coin de la rue, il partit d'un étage inférieur une sorte de ronflement à modulations stridentes. C'était Binet qui tournait.

Elle s'était appuyée contre l'embrasure de la mansarde, et elle relisait la lettre avec des ricanements de colère. Mais plus elle y fixait d'attention, plus ses idées se confondaient. Elle le revoyait, elle l'entendait, elle l'entourait de ses deux bras ; et des battements de coeur, qui la frappaient sous la poitrine comme à grands coups de bélier, s'accéléraient l'un après l'autre, à intermittences inégales. Elle jetait les yeux tout autour d'elle avec l'envie que la terre croulât. Pourquoi n'en pas finir ? Qui la retenait donc ? Elle était libre. Et elle s'avança, elle regarda les pavés en se disant :

— Allons ! allons !

Le rayon lumineux qui montait d'en bas directement tirait vers l'abîme le poids de son corps. Il lui semblait que le sol de la place oscillant s'élevait le long des murs, et que le plancher s'inclinait par le bout, à la manière d'un vaisseau qui tangue. Elle se tenait tout au bord, presque suspendue, entourée d'un grand espace. Le bleu du ciel l'envahissait, l'air circulait dans sa tête creuse, elle n'avait qu'à céder, qu'à se laisser prendre ; et le ronflement du tour ne discontinuait pas, comme une voix furieuse qui l'appelait.

— Ma femme ! ma femme ! cria Charles.

Elle s'arrêta.

— Où es-tu donc ? Arrive !

L'idée qu'elle venait d'échapper à la mort faillit la faire s'évanouir de terreur ; elle ferma les yeux ; puis elle tressaillit au contact d'une main sur sa manche : c'était Félicité.

— Monsieur vous attend, Madame ; la soupe est servie.

Et il fallut descendre ! il fallut se mettre à table !

Elle essaya de manger. Les morceaux l'étouffaient. Alors elle déplia sa serviette comme pour en examiner les reprises et voulut réellement s'appliquer à ce travail, compter les fils de la toile. Tout à coup, le souvenir de la lettre lui revint. L'avait-elle donc perdue ? Où la retrouver ? Mais elle éprouvait une telle lassitude dans l'esprit, que jamais elle ne put inventer un prétexte à sortir de table. Puis elle était devenue lâche ; elle avait peur de Charles ; il savait tout, c'était sûr ! En effet, il prononça ces mots, singulièrement :

— Nous ne sommes pas près, à ce qu'il paraît, de voir M. Rodolphe.

— Qui te l'a dit ? fit-elle en tressaillant.

— Qui me l'a dit ? répliqua-t-il un peu surpris de ce ton brusque ; c'est Girard, que j'ai rencontré tout à l'heure à la porte du *café Français*. Il est parti en voyage, ou il doit partir.

Elle eut un sanglot.

— Quoi donc t'étonne ? Il s'absente ainsi de temps à autre pour se distraire, et, ma foi ! je l'approuve. Quand on a de la fortune et que l'on est garçon !... Du reste, il s'amuse joliment, notre ami ! c'est un farceur. M. Langlois m'a conté...

Il se tut par convenance, à cause de la domestique qui entrait.

Celle-ci replaça dans la corbeille les abricots répandus sur l'étagère ; Charles, sans remarquer la rougeur de sa femme, se les fit apporter, en prit un et mordit à même.

— Oh ! parfait ! disait-il. Tiens, goûte.

Et il tendit la corbeille, qu'elle repoussa doucement.

— Sens donc : quelle odeur ! fit-il en la lui passant sous le nez à plusieurs reprises.

— J'étouffe ! s'écria-t-elle en se levant d'un bond.

Mais, par un effort de volonté, ce spasme disparut ; puis :

— Ce n'est rien ! dit-elle, ce n'est rien ! c'est nerveux ! Assieds-toi, mange !

Car elle redoutait qu'on ne fût à la questionner, à la soigner, qu'on ne la quittât plus.

Charles, pour lui obéir, s'était rassis, et il crachait dans sa main les noyaux des abricots, qu'il déposait ensuite dans son assiette.

Tout à coup, un tilbury bleu passa au grand trot sur la place. Emma poussa un cri et tomba roide par terre, à la renverse.

En effet, Rodolphe, après bien des réflexions, s'était décidé à partir pour Rouen. Or, comme il n'y a, de la Huchette à Buchy, pas d'autre chemin que celui d'Yonville, il lui avait fallu traverser le village, et Emma l'avait reconnu à la lueur des lanternes qui coupaient comme un éclair le crépuscule.

Le pharmacien, au tumulte qui se faisait dans la maison, s'y précipita. La table, avec toutes les assiettes, était renversée ; de la sauce, de la viande, les couteaux, la salière et l'huilier jonchaient l'appartement ; Charles appelait au secours ; Berthe, effarée, criait ; et Félicité, dont les mains tremblaient, délaçait Madame, qui avait le long du corps des mouvements convulsifs.

— Je cours, dit l'apothicaire, chercher dans mon laboratoire, un peu de vinaigre aromatique.

Puis, comme elle rouvrait les yeux en respirant le flacon :

— J'en étais sûr, fit-il ; cela vous réveillerait un mort.

— Parle-nous ! disait Charles, parle-nous ! Remets-toi ! C'est moi, ton Charles qui t'aime ! Me reconnais-tu ? Tiens, voilà ta petite fille : embrasse-la donc !

L'enfant avançait les bras vers sa mère pour se pendre à son cou. Mais, détournant la tête, Emma dit d'une voix saccadée :

— Non, non... personne !

Elle s'évanouit encore. On la porta sur son lit.

Elle restait étendue, la bouche ouverte, les paupières fermées, les mains à plat, immobile, et blanche comme une statue de cire. Il sortait de ses yeux deux ruisseaux de larmes qui coulaient lentement sur l'oreiller.

Charles, debout, se tenait au fond de l'alcôve, et le pharmacien, près de lui, gardait ce silence méditatif qu'il est convenable d'avoir dans les occasions sérieuses de la vie.

— Rassurez-vous, dit-il en lui poussant le coude, je crois que le paroxysme est passé.

— Oui, elle repose un peu maintenant ! répondit Charles, qui la regardait dormir. Pauvre femme !... pauvre femme !... la voilà retombée !

Alors Homais demanda comment cet accident était survenu. Charles répondit que cela l'avait saisie tout à coup, pendant qu'elle mangeait des abricots.

— Extraordinaire !... reprit le pharmacien. Mais il se pourrait que les abricots eussent occasionné la syncope ! Il y a des natures si impressionnables à l'encontre de certaines odeurs ! et ce serait même une belle question à étudier, tant sous le rapport pathologique que sous le rapport physiologique. Les prêtres en connaissaient l'importance, eux qui ont toujours mêlé des aromates à leurs cérémonies. C'est pour vous stupéfier l'entendement et provoquer des extases, chose d'ailleurs facile à obtenir chez les personnes du sexe, qui sont plus délicates que les autres. On en cite qui s'évanouissent à l'odeur de la corne brûlée, du pain tendre...

— Prenez garde de l'éveiller ! dit à voix basse Bovary.

— Et non seulement, continua l'apothicaire, les humains sont en butte à ces anomalies, mais encore les animaux. Ainsi, vous n'êtes pas sans savoir l'effet singulièrement aphrodisiaque que produit le *nepeta cataria*, vulgairement appelé herbe-au-chat, sur la gent féline ; et d'autre part, pour citer un exemple que je garantis authentique, Bridoux (un de mes anciens camarades, actuellement établi rue Malpalu) possède un chien qui tombe en convulsions dès qu'on lui présente une tabatière. Souvent même il en fait l'expérience devant ses amis, à son pavillon du bois Guillaume. Croirait-on qu'un simple sternutatoire pût exercer de tels ravages dans l'organisme d'un quadrupède ? C'est extrêmement curieux, n'est-il pas vrai ?

— Oui, dit Charles, qui n'écoutait pas.

— Cela nous prouve, reprit l'autre en souriant avec un air de suffisance bénigne, les irrégularités sans nombre du système nerveux. Pour ce qui est de Madame, elle m'a toujours paru, je l'avoue, une vraie sensitive. Aussi ne vous conseillerai-je point, mon bon ami, aucun de ces prétendus remèdes qui, sous prétexte d'attaquer les symptômes, attaquent le tempérament. Non, pas de médicamentation oiseuse ! du régime, voilà tout ! des sédatifs, des émollients, des dulcifiants. Puis, ne pensez-vous pas qu'il faudrait peut-être frapper l'imagination ?

— En quoi ? comment ? dit Bovary.

— Ah ! c'est là la question ! Telle est effectivement la question : *That is the question !* comme je lisais dernièrement dans le journal.

Mais Emma, se réveillant, s'écria :

— Et la lettre ? et la lettre ?

On crut qu'elle avait le délire ; elle l'eut à partir de minuit : une fièvre cérébrale s'était déclarée.

Pendant quarante-trois jours, Charles ne la quitta pas. Il abandonna tous ses malades ; il ne se couchait plus, il était continuellement à lui tâter le pouls, à lui poser des sinapismes, des compresses d'eau froide. Il envoyait Justin jusqu'à Neufchâtel chercher de la glace ; la glace se fondait en route ; il le renvoyait. Il appela M. Canivet en consultation ; il fit venir de Rouen le docteur Larivière, son ancien maître ; il était désespéré. Ce qui l'effrayait le plus, c'était l'abattement d'Emma ; car elle ne parlait pas, n'entendait rien et même semblait ne point souffrir, – comme si son corps et son âme se fussent ensemble reposés de toutes leurs agitations.

Vers le milieu d'octobre, elle put se tenir assise dans son lit, avec des oreillers derrière elle. Charles pleura quand il la vit manger sa première tartine de confitures. Les forces lui revinrent ; elle se levait quelques heures pendant l'après-midi, et, un jour qu'elle se sentait mieux, il essaya de lui faire faire, à son bras, un tour de promenade dans le jardin. Le sable des allées disparaissait sous les feuilles mortes ; elle marchait pas à pas, en traînant ses pantoufles, et, s'appuyant de l'épaule contre Charles, elle continuait à sourire.

Ils allèrent ainsi jusqu'au fond, près de la terrasse. Elle se redressa lentement, se mit la main devant ses yeux, pour regarder ; elle regarda au loin, tout au loin ; mais il n'y avait à l'horizon que de grands feux d'herbe, qui fumaient sur les collines.

— Tu vas te fatiguer, ma chérie, dit Bovary.

Et, la poussant doucement pour la faire entrer sous la tonnelle :

— Assieds-toi donc sur ce banc : tu seras bien.

— Oh ! non, pas là, pas là ! fit-elle d'une voix défaillante.

Elle eut un étourdissement, et dès le soir, sa maladie recommença, avec une allure plus incertaine, il est vrai, et des caractères plus complexes. Tantôt elle souffrait au coeur, puis dans la poitrine, dans le cerveau, dans les membres ; il lui survint des vomissements où Charles crut apercevoir les premiers symptômes d'un cancer.

Et le pauvre garçon, par là-dessus, avait des inquiétudes d'argent !

XIV

D'abord, il ne savait comment faire pour dédommager M. Homais de tous les médicaments pris chez lui ; et, quoiqu'il eût pu, comme médecin, ne pas les payer, néanmoins il rougissait un peu de cette obligation. Puis la dépense du ménage, à présent que la cuisinière était maîtresse, devenait effrayante ; les notes pleuvaient dans la maison ; les fournisseurs murmuraient ; M. Lheureux, surtout, le harcelait. En effet, au plus fort de la maladie d'Emma, celui-ci, profitant de la circonstance pour exagérer sa facture, avait vite apporté le manteau, le sac de nuit, deux caisses au lieu d'une, quantité d'autres choses encore. Charles eut beau dire qu'il n'en avait pas besoin, le marchand répondit arrogamment qu'on lui avait commandé tous ces articles et qu'il ne les reprendrait pas ; d'ailleurs, ce serait contrarier Madame dans sa convalescence ; Monsieur réfléchirait ; bref, il était résolu à le poursuivre en justice plutôt que d'abandonner ses droits et que d'emporter ses marchandises. Charles ordonna par la suite de les renvoyer à son magasin ; Félicité oublia ; il avait d'autres soucis ; on n'y pensa plus ; M. Lheureux revint à la charge, et, tour à tour menaçant et gémissant, manoeuvra de telle façon, que Bovary finit par souscrire un billet à six mois d'échéance. Mais à peine eut-il signé ce billet, qu'une idée audacieuse lui surgit : c'était d'emprunter mille francs à M. Lheureux. Donc, il demanda, d'un air embarrassé, s'il n'y avait pas moyen de les avoir, ajoutant que ce serait pour un an et au taux que l'on voudrait. Lheureux courut à sa boutique, en rapporta les écus et dicta un autre billet, par lequel Bovary déclarait devoir payer à son ordre, le ler septembre prochain, la somme de mille soixante et dix francs ; ce qui, avec les cent quatre-vingts déjà stipulés, faisait juste douze cent cinquante. Ainsi, prêtant à six pour cent, augmenté d'un quart de commission, et les fournitures lui rapportant un bon tiers pour le moins, cela devait, en douze mois, donner cent trente francs de bénéfice ; et il espérait que l'affaire ne s'arrêterait pas là, qu'on ne pourrait payer les billets, qu'on les renouvellerait, et que son pauvre argent, s'étant nourri chez le médecin comme dans une maison de santé, lui reviendrait, un jour, considérablement plus dodu, et gros à faire craquer le sac.

Tout, d'ailleurs, lui réussissait. Il était adjudicataire d'une fourniture de cidre pour l'hôpital de Neufchâtel ; M. Guillaumin lui promettait des actions dans les tourbières de Grumesnil, et il rêvait d'établir un nouveau service de diligences entre Argueil et Rouen, qui ne tarderait pas, sans doute, à ruiner la guimbarde du *Lion d’or*, et qui, marchant plus vite, étant à prix plus bas et portant plus de bagages, lui mettrait ainsi dans les mains tout le commerce d'Yonville.

Charles se demanda plusieurs fois par quel moyen, l'année prochaine, pouvoir rembourser tant d'argent ; et il cherchait, imaginait des expédients, comme de recourir à son père ou de vendre quelque chose. Mais son père serait sourd, et il n'avait, lui, rien à vendre. Alors il découvrait de tels embarras, qu'il écartait vite de sa conscience un sujet de méditation aussi désagréable. Il se reprochait d'en oublier Emma ; comme si, toutes ses pensées appartenant à cette femme, c'eût été lui dérober quelque chose que de n'y pas continuellement réfléchir.

L'hiver fut rude. La convalescence de Madame fut longue. Quand il faisait beau, on la poussait dans son fauteuil auprès de la fenêtre, celle qui regardait la Place ; car elle avait maintenant le jardin en antipathie, et la persienne de ce côté restait constamment fermée. Elle voulut que l'on vendît le cheval ; ce qu'elle aimait autrefois, à présent lui déplaisait. Toutes ses idées paraissaient se borner au soin d'elle-même. Elle restait dans son lit à faire de petites collations, sonnait sa domestique pour s'informer de ses tisanes ou pour causer avec elle. Cependant la neige sur le toit des halles jetait dans la chambre un reflet blanc, immobile ; ensuite ce fut la pluie qui tombait. Et Emma quotidiennement attendait, avec une sorte d'anxiété, l'infaillible retour d'événements minimes, qui pourtant ne lui importaient guère. Le plus considérable était, le soir, l'arrivée de l'*Hirondelle*. Alors l'aubergiste criait et d'autres voix répondaient, tandis que le falot d'Hippolyte, qui cherchait des coffres sur la bâche, faisait comme une étoile dans l'obscurité. À midi, Charles rentrait ; ensuite il sortait ; puis elle prenait un bouillon, et, vers cinq heures, à la tombée du jour, les enfants qui s'en revenaient de la classe, traînant leurs sabots sur le trottoir, frappaient tous avec leurs règles la cliquette des auvents, les uns après les autres.

C'était à cette heure-là que M. Bournisien venait la voir. Il s'enquérait de sa santé, lui apportait des nouvelles et l'exhortait à la religion dans un petit bavardage câlin qui ne manquait pas d'agrément. La vue seule de sa soutane la réconfortait.

Un jour qu'au plus fort de sa maladie elle s'était crue agonisante, elle avait demandé la communion ; et, à mesure que l'on faisait dans sa chambre les préparatifs pour le sacrement, que l'on disposait en autel la commode encombrée de sirops et que Félicité semait par terre des fleurs de dahlia, Emma sentait quelque chose de fort passant sur elle, qui la débarrassait de ses douleurs, de toute perception, de tout sentiment. Sa chair allégée ne pesait plus, une autre vie commençait ; il lui sembla que son être, montant vers Dieu, allait s'anéantir dans cet amour comme un encens allumé qui se dissipe en vapeur. On aspergea d'eau bénite les draps du lit ; le prêtre retira du saint ciboire la blanche hostie ; et ce fut en défaillant d'une joie céleste qu'elle avança les lèvres pour accepter le corps du

Sauveur qui se présentait. Les rideaux de son alcôve se gonflaient mollement, autour d'elle, en façon de nuées, et les rayons des deux cierges brûlant sur la commode lui parurent être des gloires éblouissantes. Alors elle laissa retomber sa tête, croyant entendre dans les espaces le chant des harpes séraphiques et apercevoir en un ciel d'azur, sur un trône d'or, au milieu des saints tenant des palmes vertes, Dieu le Père tout éclatant de majesté, et qui d'un signe faisait descendre vers la terre des anges aux ailes de flamme pour l'emporter dans leurs bras.

Cette vision splendide demeura dans sa mémoire comme la chose la plus belle qu'il fût possible de rêver ; si bien qu'à présent elle s'efforçait d'en ressaisir la sensation, qui continuait cependant, mais d'une manière moins exclusive et avec une douceur aussi profonde. Son âme, courbatue d'orgueil, se reposait enfin dans l'humilité chrétienne ; et, savourant le plaisir d'être faible, Emma contemplait en elle-même la destruction de sa volonté, qui devait faire aux envahissements de la grâce une large entrée. Il existait donc à la place du bonheur des félicités plus grandes, un autre amour au-dessus de tous les amours, sans intermittence ni fin, et qui s'accroîtrait éternellement ! Elle entrevit, parmi les illusions de son espoir, un état de pureté flottant au-dessus de la terre, se confondant avec le ciel, et où elle aspira d'être. Elle voulut devenir une sainte. Elle acheta des chapelets, elle porta des amulettes ; elle souhaitait avoir dans sa chambre, au chevet de sa couche, un reliquaire enchâssé d'émeraudes, pour le baiser tous les soirs.

Le Curé s'émerveillait de ces dispositions, bien que la religion d'Emma, trouvait-il, pût, à force de ferveur, finir par friser l'hérésie et même l'extravagance. Mais, n'étant pas très versé dans ces matières sitôt qu'elles dépassaient une certaine mesure, il écrivit à M. Boulard, libraire de Monseigneur, de lui envoyer *quelque chose de fameux pour une personne du sexe, qui était pleine d'esprit*. Le libraire, avec autant d'indifférence que s'il eût expédié de la quincaillerie à des nègres, vous emballa pêle-mêle tout ce qui avait cours pour lors dans le négoce des livres pieux. C'étaient de petits manuels par demandes et par réponses, des pamphlets d'un ton rogue dans la manière de M. de Maistre, et des espèces de romans à cartonnage rose et à style douceâtre, fabriqués par des séminaristes troubadours ou des bas bleus repenties. Il y avait le *Pensez-y bien ; l'Homme du monde aux pieds de Marie, par M. de ***, décoré de plusieurs ordres ; des Erreurs de Voltaire, à l'usage des jeunes gens, etc.*

Madame Bovary n'avait pas encore l'intelligence assez nette pour s'appliquer sérieusement à n'importe quoi ; d'ailleurs, elle entreprit ces lectures avec trop de précipitation. Elle s'irrita contre les prescriptions du culte ; l'arrogance des écrits polémiques lui déplut par leur acharnement à poursuivre des gens qu'elle ne connaissait pas ; et les contes profanes relevés de religion lui parurent écrits dans une telle ignorance du monde, qu'ils l'écartèrent insensiblement des vérités dont elle attendait la preuve. Elle persista pourtant, et, lorsque le volume lui tombait des mains, elle se croyait prise par la plus fine mélancolie catholique qu'une âme éthérée pût concevoir.

Quant au souvenir de Rodolphe, elle l'avait descendu tout au fond de son coeur ; et il restait là, plus solennel et plus immobile qu'une momie de roi dans un souterrain. Une exhalaison s'échappait de ce grand amour embaumé et qui, passant à travers tout, parfumait de tendresse l'atmosphère d'immaculation où elle voulait vivre. Quand elle se mettait à genoux sur son prie-Dieu gothique, elle adressait au Seigneur les mêmes paroles de suavité qu'elle murmurait jadis à son amant, dans les épanchements de l'adultère. C'était pour faire venir la croyance ; mais aucune délectation ne descendait des cieux, et elle se relevait, les membres fatigués, avec le sentiment vague d'une immense duperie. Cette recherche, pensait-elle, n'était qu'un mérite de plus ; et dans l'orgueil de sa dévotion, Emma se comparait à ces grandes dames d'autrefois, dont elle avait rêvé la gloire sur un portrait de la Vallière, et qui, traînant avec tant de majesté la queue chamarrée de leurs longues robes, se retiraient en des solitudes pour y répandre aux pieds du Christ toutes les larmes d'un coeur que l'existence blessait.

Alors, elle se livra à des charités excessives. Elle cousait des habits pour les pauvres ; elle envoyait du bois aux femmes en couches ; et Charles, un jour en rentrant, trouva dans la cuisine trois vauriens attablés qui mangeaient un potage. Elle fit revenir à la maison sa petite fille, que son mari, durant sa maladie, avait renvoyée chez la nourrice. Elle voulut lui apprendre à lire ; Berthe avait beau pleurer, elle ne s'irritait plus. C'était un parti pris de résignation, une indulgence universelle. Son langage, à propos de tout, était plein d'expressions idéales. Elle disait à son enfant :

— Ta colique est-elle passée, mon ange ?

Madame Bovary mère ne trouvait rien à blâmer, sauf peut-être cette manie de tricoter des camisoles pour les orphelins, au lieu de raccommoder ses torchons. Mais, harassée de querelles domestiques, la bonne femme se plaisait en cette maison tranquille, et même elle y demeura jusques après Pâques, afin d'éviter les sarcasmes du père Bovary, qui ne manquait pas, tous les vendredis saints, de se commander une andouille.

Outre la compagnie de sa belle-mère, qui la raffermissait un peu par sa rectitude de jugement et ses façons graves, Emma, presque tous les jours, avait encore d'autres sociétés. C'était madame Langlois, madame Caron, madame Dubreuil, madame Tuvache et, régulièrement, de deux à cinq heures, l'excellente madame Homais, qui n'avait jamais voulu croire, celle-là, à aucun des cancans que l'on débitait sur sa voisine. Les petits Homais aussi venaient la voir ; Justin les accompagnait. Il montait avec eux dans la chambre, et il restait debout près de la porte, immobile, sans parler. Souvent même, madame Bovary, n'y prenant garde, se mettait à sa toilette. Elle commençait par retirer son peigne, en secouant sa tête d'un mouvement brusque ; et, quand il aperçut la première fois cette chevelure entière qui descendait jusqu'aux jarrets en déroulant ses anneaux noirs, ce fut pour lui, le pauvre enfant, comme l'entrée subite dans quelque chose d'extraordinaire et de nouveau dont la splendeur l'effraya.

Emma, sans doute, ne remarquait pas ses empressements silencieux ni ses timidités. Elle ne se doutait point que l'amour, disparu de sa vie, palpitait là, près d'elle, sous cette chemise de grosse toile, dans ce coeur d'adolescent ouvert aux émanations de sa beauté. Du reste, elle enveloppait tout maintenant d'une telle indifférence, elle avait des paroles si affectueuses et des regards si hautains, des façons si diverses, que l'on ne distinguait plus l'égoïsme de la charité, ni la corruption de la vertu. Un soir, par exemple, elle s'emporta contre sa domestique, qui lui demandait à sortir et balbutiait en cherchant un prétexte ; puis tout à coup :

— Tu l'aimes donc ? dit-elle.

Et, sans attendre la réponse de Félicité, qui rougissait, elle ajouta d'un air triste :

— Allons, cours-y ! amuse-toi !

Elle fit, au commencement du printemps, bouleverser le jardin d'un bout à l'autre, malgré les observations de Bovary ; il fut heureux, cependant, de lui voir enfin manifester une volonté quelconque. Elle en témoigna davantage à mesure qu'elle se rétablissait. D'abord, elle trouva moyen d'expulser la mère Rolet, la nourrice, qui avait pris l'habitude, pendant sa convalescence, de venir trop souvent à la cuisine avec ses deux nourrissons et son pensionnaire, plus endenté qu'un cannibale. Puis elle se dégagea de la famille Homais, congédia successivement toutes les autres visites et même fréquenta l'église avec moins d'assiduité, à la grande approbation de l'apothicaire, qui lui dit alors amicalement :

— Vous donniez un peu dans la calotte !

M. Bournisien, comme autrefois, survenait tous les jours, en sortant du catéchisme. Il préférait rester dehors, à prendre l'air *au milieu du bocage,* il appelait ainsi la tonnelle. C'était l'heure où Charles rentrait. Ils avaient chaud ; on apportait du cidre doux, et ils buvaient ensemble au complet rétablissement de Madame.

Binet se trouvait là, c'est-à-dire un peu plus bas, contre le mur de la terrasse, à pêcher des écrevisses. Bovary l'invitait à se rafraîchir, et il s'entendait parfaitement à déboucher les cruchons.

— Il faut, disait-il en promenant autour de lui et jusqu'aux extrémités du paysage un regard satisfait, tenir ainsi la bouteille d'aplomb sur la table, et, après que les ficelles sont coupées, pousser le liège à petits coups, doucement, doucement, comme on fait, d'ailleurs, à l'eau de Seltz, dans les restaurants.

Mais le cidre, pendant sa démonstration, souvent leur jaillissait en plein visage, et alors l'ecclésiastique, avec un rire opaque, ne manquait jamais cette plaisanterie :

— Sa bonté saute aux yeux !

Il était brave homme, en effet, et même, un jour, ne fut point scandalisé du pharmacien, qui conseillait à Charles, pour distraire Madame, de la mener au théâtre de Rouen voir l'illustre ténor Lagardy. Homais s'étonnant de ce silence, voulut savoir son opinion, et le prêtre déclara qu'il regardait la musique comme moins dangereuse pour les moeurs que la littérature.

Mais le pharmacien prit la défense des lettres. Le théâtre, prétendait-il, servait à fronder les préjugés, et, sous le masque du plaisir, enseignait la vertu.

— *Castigat ridendo mores,* monsieur Bournisien ! Ainsi, regardez la plupart des tragédies de Voltaire ; elles sont semées habilement de réflexions philosophiques qui en font pour le peuple une véritable école de morale et de diplomatie.

— Moi, dit Binet, j'ai vu autrefois une pièce intitulée *le Gamin de Paris,* où l'on remarque le caractère d'un vieux général qui est vraiment tapé ! Il rembarre un fils de famille qui avait séduit une ouvrière, qui à la fin...

— Certainement ! continuait Homais, il y a la mauvaise littérature comme il y a la mauvaise pharmacie ; mais condamner en bloc le plus important des beaux-arts me paraît une balourdise, une idée gothique, digne de ces temps abominables où l'on enfermait Galilée.

— Je sais bien, objecta le Curé, qu'il existe de bons ouvrages, de bons auteurs ; cependant, ne serait-ce que ces personnes de sexe différent réunies dans un appartement enchanteur, orné de pompes mondaines, et puis ces déguisements païens, ce fard, ces flambeaux, ces voix efféminées, tout cela doit finir par engendrer un certain libertinage d'esprit et vous donner des pensées déshonnêtes, des tentations impures. Telle est du moins l'opinion de tous les Pères. Enfin, ajouta-t-il en prenant subitement un ton de voix mystique, tandis qu'il roulait sur son pouce une prise de tabac, si l'Église a condamné les spectacles, c'est qu'elle avait raison ; il faut nous soumettre à ses décrets.

— Pourquoi, demanda l'apothicaire, excommunie-t-elle les comédiens ? car, autrefois, ils concouraient ouvertement aux cérémonies du culte. Oui, on jouait, on représentait au milieu du choeur des espèces de farces appelées mystères, dans lesquelles les lois de la décence souvent se trouvaient offensées.

L'ecclésiastique se contenta de pousser un gémissement, et le pharmacien poursuivit :

— C'est comme dans la Bible ; il y a..., savez-vous..., plus d'un détail... piquant, des choses... vraiment... gaillardes !

Et, sur un geste d'irritation que faisait M. Bournisien :

— Ah ! vous conviendrez que ce n'est pas un livre à mettre entre les mains d'une jeune personne, et je serais fâché qu'Athalie...

— Mais ce sont les protestants, et non pas nous, s'écria l'autre impatienté, qui recommandent la Bible !

— N'importe ! dit Homais, je m'étonne que, de nos jours, en un siècle de lumières, on s'obstine encore à proscrire un délassement intellectuel qui est inoffensif, moralisant et même hygiénique quelquefois, n'est-ce pas, docteur ?

— Sans doute, répondit le médecin nonchalamment, soit que, ayant les mêmes idées, il voulût n'offenser personne, ou bien qu'il n'eût pas d'idées.

La conversation semblait finie, quand le pharmacien jugea convenable de pousser une dernière botte.

— J'en ai connu, des prêtres, qui s'habillaient en bourgeois pour aller voir gigoter des danseuses.

— Allons donc ! fit le curé.

— Ah ! j'en ai connu !

Et, séparant les syllabes de sa phrase, Homais répéta :

— J'en-ai-connu.

— Eh bien ! ils avaient tort, dit Bournisien résigné à tout entendre.

— Parbleu ! ils en font bien d'autres ! exclama l'apothicaire.

— Monsieur !... reprit l'ecclésiastique avec des yeux si farouches, que le pharmacien en fut intimidé.

— Je veux seulement dire, répliqua-t-il alors d'un ton moins brutal, que la tolérance est le plus sûr moyen d'attirer les âmes à la religion.

— C'est vrai ! c'est vrai ! concéda le bonhomme en se rasseyant sur sa chaise.

Mais il n'y resta que deux minutes. Puis, dès qu'il fut parti, M. Homais dit au médecin :

— Voilà ce qui s'appelle une prise de bec ! Je l'ai roulé, vous avez vu, d'une manière !... Enfin, croyez-moi, conduisez Madame au spectacle, ne serait-ce que pour faire une fois dans votre vie enrager un de ces corbeaux-là, saprelotte ! Si quelqu'un pouvait me remplacer, je vous accompagnerais moi-même. Dépêchez-vous ! Lagardy ne donnera qu'une seule représentation ; il est engagé en Angleterre à des appointements considérables. C'est, à ce qu'on assure, un fameux lapin ! il roule sur l'or ! il mène avec lui trois maîtresses et son cuisinier ! Tous ces grands artistes brûlent la chandelle par les deux bouts ; il leur faut une existence dévergondée qui excite un peu l'imagination. Mais ils meurent à l'hôpital, parce qu'ils n'ont pas eu l'esprit, étant jeunes, de faire des économies. Allons, bon appétit ; à demain !

Cette idée de spectacle germa vite dans la tête de Bovary ; car aussitôt il en fit part à sa femme, qui refusa tout d'abord, alléguant la fatigue, le dérangement, la dépense ; mais, par extraordinaire, Charles ne céda pas, tant il jugeait cette récréation lui devoir être profitable. Il n'y voyait aucun empêchement ; sa mère leur avait expédié trois cents francs sur lesquels il ne comptait plus, les dettes courantes n'avaient rien d'énorme, et l'échéance des billets à payer au sieur Lheureux était encore si longue, qu'il n'y fallait pas songer. D'ailleurs, imaginant qu'elle y mettait de la délicatesse, Charles insista davantage ; si bien qu'elle finit, à force d'obsessions, par se décider. Et, le lendemain, à huit heures, ils s'emballèrent dans *l'Hirondelle.*

L'apothicaire, que rien ne retenait à Yonville, mais qui se croyait contraint de n'en pas bouger, soupira en les voyant partir.

— Allons, bon voyage ! leur dit-il, heureux mortels que vous êtes !

Puis, s'adressant à Emma, qui portait une robe de soie bleue à quatre falbalas :

— Je vous trouve jolie comme un Amour ! Vous allez *faire florès* à Rouen.

La diligence descendait à l'hôtel de la *Croix rouge*, sur la place Beauvoisine. C'était une de ces auberges comme il y en a dans tous les faubourgs de province, avec de grandes écuries et de petites chambres à coucher, où l'on voit au milieu de la cour des poules picorant l'avoine sous les cabriolets crottés des commis voyageurs ; – bons vieux gîtes à balcon de bois vermoulu qui craquent au vent dans les nuits d'hiver, continuellement pleins de monde, de vacarme et de mangeaille, dont les tables noires sont poissées par les *glorias*, les vitres épaisses jaunies par les mouches, les serviettes humides tachées par le vin bleu ; et qui, sentant toujours le village, comme des valets de ferme habillés en bourgeois, ont un café sur la rue, et du côté de la campagne un jardin à légumes. Charles immédiatement se mit en courses. Il confondit l'avant-scène avec les galeries, le *parquet* avec les loges, demanda des explications, ne les comprit pas, fut renvoyé du contrôleur au directeur, revint à l'auberge, retourna au bureau, et, plusieurs fois ainsi, arpenta toute la longueur de la ville, depuis le théâtre jusqu'au boulevard.

Madame s'acheta un chapeau, des gants, un bouquet. Monsieur craignait beaucoup de manquer le commencement ; et, sans avoir eu le temps d'avaler un bouillon, ils se présentèrent devant les portes du théâtre, qui étaient encore fermées.

XV

La foule stationnait contre le mur, parquée symétriquement entre des balustrades. À l'angle des rues voisines, de gigantesques affiches répétaient en caractères baroques : « *Lucie de Lamermoor*... Lagardy... Opéra..., etc. » Il faisait beau ; on avait chaud ; la sueur coulait dans les frisures, tous les mouchoirs tirés épongeaient les fronts rouges ; et parfois un vent tiède, qui soufflait de la rivière, agitait mollement la bordure des tentes en coutil suspendues à la porte des estaminets. Un peu plus bas, cependant, on était rafraîchi par un courant d'air glacial qui sentait le suif, le cuir et l'huile. C'était l'exhalaison de la rue des Charrettes, pleine de grands magasins noirs où l'on roule des barriques.

De peur de paraître ridicule, Emma voulut, avant d'entrer, faire un tour de promenade sur le port, et Bovary, par prudence, garda les billets à sa main, dans la poche de son pantalon, qu'il appuyait contre son ventre.

Un battement de coeur la prit dès le vestibule. Elle sourit involontairement de vanité, en voyant la foule qui se précipitait à droite par l'autre corridor, tandis qu'elle montait l'escalier des *premières*. Elle eut plaisir, comme un enfant, à pousser de son doigt les larges portes tapissées ; elle aspira de toute sa poitrine l'odeur poussiéreuse des couloirs, et, quand elle fut assise dans sa loge, elle se cambra la taille avec une désinvolture de duchesse.

La salle commençait à se remplir, on tirait les lorgnettes de leurs étuis, et les abonnés, s'apercevant de loin, se faisaient des salutations. Ils venaient se délasser dans les beaux-arts des inquiétudes de la vente ; mais, n'oubliant point *les affaires*, ils causaient encore cotons, trois-six ou indigo. On voyait là des têtes de vieux, inexpressives et pacifiques, et qui, blanchâtres de chevelure et de teint, ressemblaient à des médailles d'argent ternies par une vapeur de plomb. Les jeunes beaux se pavanaient au *parquet*, étalant, dans l'ouverture de leur gilet, leur cravate rose ou vert pomme ; et madame Bovary les admirait d'en haut, appuyant sur des badines à pomme d'or la paume tendue de leurs gants jaunes.

Cependant, les bougies de l'orchestre s'allumèrent ; le lustre descendit du plafond, versant, avec le rayonnement de ses facettes, une gaieté subite dans la salle ; puis les musiciens entrèrent les uns après les autres, et ce fut d'abord un long charivari de basses ronflant, de violons grinçant, de pistons trompettant, de flûtes et de flageolets qui piaulaient. Mais on entendit trois coups sur la scène ; un roulement de timbales commença, les instruments de cuivre plaquèrent des accords, et le rideau, se levant, découvrit un paysage.

C'était le carrefour d'un bois, avec une fontaine, à gauche, ombragée par un chêne. Des paysans et des seigneurs, le plaid sur l'épaule, chantaient tous ensemble une chanson de chasse ; puis il survint un capitaine qui invoquait l'ange du mal en levant au ciel ses deux bras ; un autre parut ; ils s'en allèrent, et les chasseurs reprirent.

Elle se retrouvait dans les lectures de sa jeunesse, en plein Walter Scott. Il lui semblait entendre, à travers le brouillard, le son des cornemuses écossaises se répéter sur les bruyères. D'ailleurs, le souvenir du roman facilitant l'intelligence du libretto, elle suivait l'intrigue phrase à phrase, tandis que d'insaisissables pensées qui lui revenaient, se dispersaient, aussitôt, sous les rafales de la musique. Elle se laissait aller au bercement des mélodies et se sentait elle-même vibrer de tout son être comme si les archets des violons se fussent promenés sur ses nerfs. Elle n'avait pas assez d'yeux pour contempler les costumes, les décors, les personnages, les arbres peints qui tremblaient quand on marchait, et les toques de velours, les manteaux, les épées, toutes ces imaginations qui s'agitaient dans l'harmonie comme dans l'atmosphère d'un autre monde. Mais une jeune femme s'avança en jetant une bourse à un écuyer vert. Elle resta seule, et alors on entendit une flûte qui faisait comme un murmure de fontaine ou comme des gazouillements d'oiseau. Lucie entama d'un air brave sa cavatine en *sol* majeur ; elle se plaignait d'amour, elle demandait des ailes. Emma, de même, aurait voulu, fuyant la vie, s'envoler dans une étreinte. Tout à coup, Edgar-Lagardy parut.

Il avait une de ces pâleurs splendides qui donnent quelque chose de la majesté des marbres aux races ardentes du Midi. Sa taille vigoureuse était prise dans un pourpoint de couleur brune ; un petit poignard ciselé lui battait sur la cuisse gauche, et il roulait des regards langoureusement en découvrant ses dents blanches. On disait qu'une princesse polonaise, l'écoutant un soir chanter sur la plage de Biarritz, où il radoubait des chaloupes, en était devenue amoureuse. Elle s'était ruinée à cause de lui. Il l'avait plantée là pour d'autres femmes, et cette célébrité sentimentale ne laissait pas que de servir à sa réputation artistique. Le cabotin diplomate avait même soin de faire toujours glisser dans les réclames une phrase poétique sur la fascination de sa personne et la sensibilité de son âme. Un bel organe, un imperturbable aplomb, plus de tempérament que d'intelligence et plus d'emphase que de lyrisme, achevaient de rehausser cette admirable nature de charlatan, où il y avait du coiffeur et du toréador.

Dès la première scène, il enthousiasma. Il pressait Lucie dans ses bras, il la quittait, il revenait, il semblait désespéré : il avait des éclats de colère, puis des râles élégiaques d'une douceur infinie, et les notes s'échappaient de son cou nu, pleines de sanglots et de baisers. Emma se penchait pour le voir, égratignant avec ses ongles le velours de sa loge. Elle s'emplissait le coeur de ces lamentations mélodieuses qui se traînaient à l'accompagnement des contrebasses, comme des cris de naufragés dans le tumulte d'une tempête. Elle reconnaissait tous les enivrements et les angoisses dont elle avait manqué mourir. La voix de la chanteuse ne lui semblait être que le retentissement de sa conscience, et cette illusion qui la charmait quelque chose même de sa vie. Mais personne sur la terre ne l'avait aimée d'un pareil amour. Il ne pleurait pas comme Edgar, le dernier soir, au clair de lune, lorsqu'ils se disaient : « À demain ; à demain !... » La salle craquait sous les bravos ; on recommença la strette entière ; les amoureux parlaient des fleurs de leur tombe, de serments, d'exil, de fatalité, d'espérances, et quand ils poussèrent l'adieu final, Emma jeta un cri aigu, qui se confondit avec la vibration des derniers accords.

— Pourquoi donc, demanda Bovary, ce seigneur est-il à la persécuter ?

— Mais non, répondit-elle ; c'est son amant.

— Pourtant il jure de se venger sur sa famille, tandis que l'autre, celui qui est venu tout à l'heure, disait :

« J'aime Lucie et je m'en crois aimé. » D'ailleurs, il est parti avec son père, bras dessus, bras dessous. Car c'est bien son père, n'est-ce pas, le petit laid qui porte une plume de coq à son chapeau ?

Malgré les explications d'Emma, dès le duo récitatif où Gilbert expose à son maître Ashton ses abominables manoeuvres, Charles, en voyant le faux anneau de fiançailles qui doit abuser Lucie, crut que c'était un souvenir d'amour envoyé par Edgar. Il avouait, du reste, ne pas comprendre l'histoire, – à cause de la musique – qui nuisait beaucoup aux paroles.

— Qu'importe ? dit Emma ; tais-toi !

— C'est que j'aime, reprit-il en se penchant sur son épaule, à me rendre compte, tu sais bien.

— Tais-toi ! tais-toi ! fit-elle impatientée.

Lucie s'avançait, à demi soutenue par ses femmes, une couronne d'oranger dans les cheveux, et plus pâle que le satin blanc de sa robe. Emma rêvait au jour de son mariage ; et elle se revoyait là-bas, au milieu des blés, sur le petit sentier, quand on marchait vers l'église. Pourquoi donc n'avait-elle pas, comme celle-là, résisté, supplié ? Elle était joyeuse, au contraire, sans s'apercevoir de l'abîme où elle se précipitait... Ah ! si, dans la fraîcheur de sa beauté, avant les souillures du mariage et la désillusion de l'adultère, elle avait pu placer sa vie sur quelque grand coeur solide, alors la vertu, la tendresse, les voluptés et le devoir se confondant, jamais elle ne serait descendue d'une félicité si haute. Mais ce bonheur-là, sans doute, était un mensonge imaginé pour le désespoir de tout désir. Elle connaissait à présent la petitesse des passions que l'art exagérait. S'efforçant donc d'en détourner sa pensée, Emma voulait ne plus voir dans cette reproduction de ses douleurs qu'une fantaisie plastique bonne à amuser les yeux, et même elle souriait intérieurement d'une pitié dédaigneuse, quand au fond du théâtre, sous la portière de velours, un homme apparut en manteau noir.

Son grand chapeau à l'espagnole tomba dans un geste qu'il fit ; et aussitôt les instruments et les chanteurs entonnèrent le sextuor. Edgar, étincelant de furie, dominait tous les autres de sa voix plus claire. Ashton lui lançait en notes graves des provocations homicides, Lucie poussait sa plainte aiguë, Arthur modulait à l'écart des sons moyens, et la basse-taille du ministre ronflait comme un orgue, tandis que les voix de femmes, répétant ses paroles, reprenaient en choeur, délicieusement. Ils étaient tous sur la même ligne à gesticuler ; et la colère, la vengeance, la jalousie, la terreur, la miséricorde et la stupéfaction s'exhalaient à la fois de leurs bouches entrouvertes. L'amoureux outragé brandissait son épée nue ; sa collerette de guipure se levait par saccades, selon les mouvements de sa poitrine, et il allait de droite et de gauche, à grands pas, faisant sonner contre les planches les éperons vermeils de ses bottes molles, qui s'évasaient à la cheville. Il devait avoir, pensait-elle, un intarissable amour, pour en déverser sur la foule à si larges effluves. Toutes ses velléités de dénigrement s'évanouissaient sous la poésie du rôle qui l'envahissait, et, entraînée vers l'homme par l'illusion du personnage, elle tâcha de se figurer sa vie, cette vie retentissante, extraordinaire, splendide, et qu'elle aurait pu mener cependant, si le hasard l'avait voulu. Ils se seraient connus, ils se seraient aimés ! Avec lui, par tous les royaumes de l'Europe, elle aurait voyagé de capitale en capitale, partageant ses fatigues et son orgueil, ramassant les fleurs qu'on lui jetait, brodant elle-même ses costumes ; puis, chaque soir, au fond d'une loge, derrière la grille à treillis d'or, elle eût recueilli, béante, les expansions de cette âme qui n'aurait chanté que pour elle seule ; de la scène, tout en jouant, il l'aurait regardée. Mais une folie la saisit : il la regardait, c'est sûr ! Elle eut envie de courir dans ses bras pour se réfugier en sa force, comme dans l'incarnation de l'amour même, et de lui dire, de s'écrier : « Enlève-moi, emmène-moi, partons ! À toi, à toi ! toutes mes ardeurs et tous mes rêves ! »

Le rideau se baissa.

L'odeur du gaz se mêlait aux haleines ; le vent des éventails rendait l'atmosphère plus étouffante. Emma voulut sortir ; la foule encombrait les corridors, et elle retomba dans son fauteuil avec des palpitations qui la suffoquaient. Charles, ayant peur de la voir s'évanouir, courut à la buvette lui chercher un verre d'orgeat.

Il eut grand-peine à regagner sa place, car on lui heurtait les coudes à tous les pas, à cause du verre qu'il tenait entre ses mains, et même il en versa les trois quarts sur les épaules d'une Rouennaise en manches courtes, qui, sentant le liquide froid lui couler dans les reins, jeta des cris de paon, comme si on l'eût assassinée. Son mari, qui était un filateur, s'emporta contre le maladroit ; et, tandis qu'avec son mouchoir elle épongeait les taches sur sa belle robe de taffetas cerise, il murmurait d'un ton bourru les mots d'indemnité, de frais, de remboursement. Enfin, Charles arriva près de sa femme, en lui disant tout essoufflé :

— J'ai cru, ma foi, que j'y resterais ! Il y a un monde !... un monde !...

Il ajouta :

— Devine un peu qui j'ai rencontré là-haut ? M. Léon !

— Léon ?

— Lui-même ! Il va venir te présenter ses civilités.

Et, comme il achevait ces mots, l'ancien clerc d'Yonville entra dans la loge.

Il tendit sa main avec un sans-façon de gentilhomme : et madame Bovary machinalement avança la sienne, sans doute obéissant à l'attraction d'une volonté plus forte. Elle ne l'avait pas sentie depuis ce soir de printemps où il pleuvait sur les feuilles vertes, quand ils se dirent adieu, debout au bord de la fenêtre. Mais, vite, se rappelant à la convenance de la situation, elle secoua dans un effort cette torpeur de ses souvenirs et se mit à balbutier des phrases rapides.

— Ah ! bonjour... Comment ! vous voilà ?

— Silence ! cria une voix du parterre, car le troisième acte commençait.

— Vous êtes donc à Rouen ?

— Oui.

— Et depuis quand ?

— À la porte ! à la porte !

On se tournait vers eux ; ils se turent.

Mais, à partir de ce moment, elle n'écouta plus ; et le choeur des conviés, la scène d'Ashton et de son valet, le grand duo en ré majeur, tout passa pour elle dans l'éloignement, comme si les instruments fussent devenus moins sonores et les personnages plus reculés ; elle se rappelait les parties de cartes chez le pharmacien, et la promenade chez la nourrice, les lectures sous la tonnelle, les tête-à-tête au coin du feu, tout ce pauvre amour si calme et si long, si discret, si tendre, et qu'elle avait oublié cependant. Pourquoi donc revenait-il ? quelle combinaison d'aventures le replaçait dans sa vie ? Il se tenait derrière elle, s'appuyant de l'épaule contre la cloison ; et, de temps à autre, elle se sentait frissonner sous le souffle tiède de ses narines qui lui descendait dans la chevelure.

— Est-ce que cela vous amuse ? dit-il en se penchant sur elle de si près, que la pointe de sa moustache lui effleura la joue.

Elle répondit nonchalamment :

— Oh ! mon Dieu, non ! pas beaucoup.

Alors il fit la proposition de sortir du théâtre, pour aller prendre des glaces quelque part.

— Ah ! pas encore ! restons ! dit Bovary. Elle a les cheveux dénoués : cela promet d'être tragique.

Mais la scène de la folie n'intéressait point Emma, et le jeu de la chanteuse lui parut exagéré.

— Elle crie trop fort, dit-elle en se tournant vers Charles, qui écoutait.

— Oui... peut-être... un peu, répliqua-t-il, indécis entre la franchise de son plaisir et le respect qu'il portait aux opinions de sa femme.

Puis Léon dit en soupirant :

— Il fait une chaleur...

— Insupportable ! c'est vrai.

— Es-tu gênée ? demanda Bovary.

— Oui, j'étouffe ; partons.

M. Léon posa délicatement sur ses épaules son long châle de dentelle, et ils allèrent tous les trois s'asseoir sur le port, en plein air, devant le vitrage d'un café.

Il fut d'abord question de sa maladie, bien qu'Emma interrompît Charles de temps à autre, par crainte, disait-elle, d'ennuyer M. Léon ; et celui-ci leur raconta qu'il venait à Rouen passer deux ans dans une forte étude, afin de se rompre aux affaires, qui étaient différentes en Normandie de celles que l'on traitait à Paris. Puis il s'informa de Berthe, de la famille Homais, de la mère Lefrançois ; et, comme ils n'avaient, en présence du mari, rien de plus à se dire, bientôt la conversation s'arrêta.

Des gens qui sortaient du spectacle passèrent sur le trottoir, tout fredonnant ou braillant à plein gosier : *Ô bel ange, ma Lucie !* Alors Léon, pour faire le dilettante, se mit à parler musique. Il avait vu Tamburini, Rubini, Persiani, Grisi ; et à côté d'eux, Lagardy, malgré ses grands éclats, ne valait rien.

— Pourtant, interrompit Charles qui mordait à petits coups son sorbet au rhum, on prétend qu'au dernier acte il est admirable tout à fait ; je regrette d'être parti avant la fin, car ça commençait à m'amuser.

— Au reste, reprit le clerc, il donnera bientôt une autre représentation.

Mais Charles répondit qu'ils s'en allaient dès le lendemain.

— À moins, ajouta-t-il en se tournant vers sa femme, que tu ne veuilles rester seule, mon petit chat ?

Et, changeant de manoeuvre devant cette occasion inattendue qui s'offrait à son espoir, le jeune homme entama l'éloge de Lagardy dans le morceau final.

C'était quelque chose de superbe, de sublime ! Alors Charles insista :

— Tu reviendrais dimanche. Voyons, décide-toi ! tu as tort, si tu sens le moins du monde que cela te fait du bien.

Cependant les tables, alentour, se dégarnissaient ; un garçon vint discrètement se poster près d'eux ; Charles qui comprit, tira sa bourse ; le clerc le retint par le bras, et même n'oublia point de laisser, en plus, deux pièces blanches, qu'il fit sonner contre le marbre.

— Je suis fâché, vraiment, murmura Bovary, de l'argent que vous...

L'autre eut un geste dédaigneux plein de cordialité, et, prenant son chapeau :

— C'est convenu, n'est-ce pas, demain, à six heures ?

Charles se récria encore une fois qu'il ne pouvait s'absenter plus longtemps ; mais rien n'empêchait Emma...

— C'est que..., balbutia-t-elle avec un singulier sourire, je ne sais pas trop...

— Eh bien ! tu réfléchiras, nous verrons, la nuit porte conseil...

Puis à Léon, qui les accompagnait :

— Maintenant que vous voilà dans nos contrées, vous viendrez, j'espère de temps à autre, nous demander à dîner ?

Le clerc affirma qu'il n'y manquerait pas, ayant d'ailleurs besoin de se rendre à Yonville pour une affaire de son étude. Et l'on se sépara devant le passage Saint-Herbland, au moment où onze heures et demie sonnaient à la cathédrale.

TROISIEME PARTIE

I

M. Léon, tout en étudiant son droit, avait passablement fréquenté la *Chaumière*, où il obtint même de fort jolis succès près des grisettes, qui lui trouvaient *l'air distingué*. C'était le plus convenable des étudiants : il ne portait les cheveux ni trop longs ni trop courts, ne mangeait pas le 1er du mois l'argent de son trimestre, et se maintenait en de bons termes avec ses professeurs. Quant à faire des excès, il s'en était toujours abstenu, autant par pusillanimité que par délicatesse.

Souvent, lorsqu'il restait à lire dans sa chambre, ou bien assis le soir sous les tilleuls du Luxembourg, il laissait tomber son Code par terre, et le souvenir d'Emma lui revenait. Mais peu à peu ce sentiment s'affaiblit, et d'autres convoitises s'accumulèrent par-dessus, bien qu'il persistât cependant à travers elles ; car Léon ne perdait pas toute espérance, et il y avait pour lui comme une promesse incertaine qui se balançait dans l'avenir, tel qu'un fruit d'or suspendu à quelque feuillage fantastique.

Puis, en la revoyant après trois années d'absence, sa passion se réveilla. Il fallait, pensa-t-il, se résoudre enfin à la vouloir posséder. D'ailleurs, sa timidité s'était usée au contact des compagnies folâtres, et il revenait en province, méprisant tout ce qui ne foulait pas d'un pied verni l'asphalte du boulevard. Auprès d'une Parisienne en dentelles, dans le salon de quelque docteur illustre, personnage à décorations et à voiture, le pauvre clerc, sans doute, eût tremblé comme un enfant ; mais ici, à Rouen, sur le port, devant la femme de ce petit médecin, il se sentait à l'aise, sûr d'avance qu'il éblouirait. L'aplomb dépend des milieux où il se pose : on ne parle pas à l'entresol comme au quatrième étage, et la femme riche semble avoir autour d'elle, pour garder sa vertu, tous ses billets de banque, comme une cuirasse, dans la doublure de son corset.

En quittant la veille au soir M. et madame Bovary, Léon, de loin, les avait suivis dans la rue ; puis les ayant vus s'arrêter à la *Croix rouge,* il avait tourné les talons et passé toute la nuit à méditer un plan.

Le lendemain donc, vers cinq heures, il entra dans la cuisine de l'auberge, la gorge serrée, les joues pâles, et avec cette résolution des poltrons que rien n'arrête.

— Monsieur n'y est point, répondit un domestique.

Cela lui parut de bon augure. Il monta.

Elle ne fut pas troublée à son abord ; elle lui fit, au contraire, des excuses pour avoir oublié de lui dire où ils étaient descendus.

— Oh ! je l'ai deviné, reprit Léon.

— Comment ?

Il prétendit avoir été guidé vers elle au hasard, par un instinct. Elle se mit à sourire, et aussitôt, pour réparer sa sottise, Léon raconta qu'il avait passé sa matinée à la chercher successivement dans tous les hôtels de la ville.

— Vous vous êtes donc décidée à rester ? ajouta-t-il.

— Oui, dit-elle, et j'ai eu tort. Il ne faut pas s'accoutumer à des plaisirs impraticables, quand on a autour de soi mille exigences...

— Oh ! je m'imagine...

— Eh ! non, car vous n'êtes pas une femme, vous.

Mais les hommes avaient aussi leurs chagrins, et la conversation s'engagea par quelques réflexions philosophiques. Emma s'étendit beaucoup sur la misère des affections terrestres et l'éternel isolement où le coeur reste enseveli.

Pour se faire valoir, ou par une imitation naïve de cette mélancolie qui provoquait la sienne, le jeune homme déclara s'être ennuyé prodigieusement tout le temps de ses études. La procédure l'irritait, d'autres vocations l'attiraient, et sa mère ne cessait, dans chaque lettre, de le tourmenter. Car ils précisaient de plus en plus les motifs de leur douleur, chacun, à mesure qu'il parlait, s'exaltant un peu dans cette confidence progressive. Mais ils s'arrêtaient quelquefois devant l'exposition complète de leur idée, et cherchaient alors à imaginer une phrase qui pût la traduire cependant. Elle ne confessa point sa passion pour un autre ; il ne dit pas qu'il l'avait oubliée.

Peut-être ne se rappelait-il plus ses soupers après le bal, avec des débardeuses ; et elle ne se souvenait pas sans doute des rendez-vous d'autrefois, quand elle courait le matin dans les herbes vers le château de son amant. Les bruits de la ville arrivaient à peine jusqu'à eux ; et la chambre semblait petite, tout exprès pour resserrer davantage leur solitude. Emma, vêtue d'un peignoir en basin, appuyait son chignon contre le dossier du vieux fauteuil ; le papier jaune de la muraille faisait comme un fond d'or derrière elle ; et sa tête nue se répétait dans la glace avec la raie blanche au milieu, et le bout de ses oreilles dépassant sous ses bandeaux.

— Mais pardon, dit-elle, j'ai tort ! je vous ennuie avec mes éternelles plaintes !

— Non, jamais ! jamais !

— Si vous saviez, reprit-elle, en levant au plafond ses beaux yeux qui roulaient une larme, tout ce que j'avais rêvé !

— Et moi, donc ! Oh ! j'ai bien souffert ! Souvent je sortais, je m'en allais, je me traînais le long des quais, m'étourdissant au bruit de la foule sans pouvoir bannir l'obsession qui me poursuivait. Il y a sur le boulevard, chez un marchand d'estampes, une gravure italienne qui représente une Muse. Elle est drapée d'une tunique et elle regarde la lune, avec des myosotis sur sa chevelure dénouée. Quelque chose incessamment me poussait là ; j'y suis resté des heures entières.

Puis, d'une voix tremblante :

— Elle vous ressemblait un peu.

Madame Bovary détourna la tête, pour qu'il ne vît pas sur ses lèvres l'irrésistible sourire qu'elle y sentait monter.

— Souvent, reprit-il, je vous écrivais des lettres qu'ensuite je déchirais.

Elle ne répondait pas. Il continua :

— Je m'imaginais quelquefois qu'un hasard vous amènerait. J'ai cru vous reconnaître au coin des rues et je courais après tous les fiacres où flottait à la portière un châle, un voile pareil au vôtre...

Elle semblait déterminée à le laisser parler sans l'interrompre. Croisant les bras et baissant la figure, elle considérait la rosette de ses pantoufles, et elle faisait dans leur satin de petits mouvements, par intervalles, avec les doigts de son pied.

Cependant, elle soupira :

— Ce qu'il y a de plus lamentable, n'est-ce pas, c'est de traîner, comme moi, une existence inutile ? Si nos douleurs pouvaient servir à quelqu'un, on se consolerait dans la pensée du sacrifice !

Il se mit à vanter la vertu, le devoir et les immolations silencieuses, ayant lui-même un incroyable besoin de dévouement qu'il ne pouvait assouvir.

— J'aimerais beaucoup, dit-elle, à être une religieuse d'hôpital.

— Hélas ! répliqua-t-il, les hommes n'ont point de ces missions saintes, et je ne vois nulle part aucun métier..., à moins peut-être que celui de médecin...

Avec un haussement léger de ses épaules, Emma l'interrompit pour se plaindre de sa maladie où elle avait manqué mourir ; quel dommage ! elle ne souffrirait plus maintenant. Léon tout de suite envia *le calme du tombeau* et même, un soir, il avait écrit son testament en recommandant qu'on l'ensevelît dans ce beau couvre-pied, à bandes de velours, qu'il tenait d'elle ; car c'est ainsi qu'ils auraient voulu avoir été, l'un et l'autre se faisant un idéal sur lequel ils ajustaient à présent leur vie passée. D'ailleurs, la parole est un laminoir qui allonge toujours les sentiments.

Mais à cette invention du couvre-pied :

— Pourquoi donc ? demanda-t-elle.

— Pourquoi ?

Il hésitait.

— Parce que je vous ai bien aimée !

Et, s'applaudissant d'avoir franchi la difficulté, Léon, du coin de l'oeil, épia sa physionomie.

Ce fut comme le ciel, quand un coup de vent chasse les nuages. L'amas des pensées tristes qui les assombrissaient parut se retirer de ses yeux bleus ; tout son visage rayonna.

Il attendait. Enfin elle répondit :

— Je m'en étais toujours doutée...

Alors, ils se racontèrent les petits événements de cette existence lointaine, dont ils venaient de résumer, par un seul mot, les plaisirs et les mélancolies. Il se rappelait le berceau de clématite, les robes qu'elle avait portées, les meubles de sa chambre, toute sa maison.

— Et nos pauvres cactus, où sont-ils ?

— Le froid les a tués cet hiver.

— Ah ! que j'ai pensé à eux, savez-vous ? Souvent je les revoyais comme autrefois, quand, par les matins d'été, le soleil frappait sur les jalousies... et j'apercevais vos deux bras nus qui passaient entre les fleurs.

— Pauvre ami ! fit-elle en lui tendant la main.

Léon, bien vite, y colla ses lèvres. Puis, quand il eut largement respiré :

— Vous étiez, dans ce temps-là, pour moi, je ne sais quelle force incompréhensible qui captivait ma vie. Une fois, par exemple, je suis venu chez vous ; mais vous ne vous en souvenez pas, sans doute ?

— Si, dit-elle. Continuez.

— Vous étiez en bas, dans l'antichambre, prête à sortir, sur la dernière marche ; – vous aviez même un chapeau à petites fleurs bleues ; et, sans nulle invitation de votre part, malgré moi, je vous ai accompagnée. À chaque minute, cependant, j'avais de plus en plus conscience de ma sottise, et je continuais à marcher près de vous, n'osant vous suivre tout à fait, et ne voulant pas vous quitter. Quand vous entriez dans une boutique, je restais dans la rue, je vous regardais par le carreau défaire vos gants et compter la monnaie sur le comptoir. Ensuite vous avez sonné chez madame Tuvache, on vous a ouvert, et je suis resté comme un idiot devant la grande porte lourde, qui était retombée sur vous.

Madame Bovary, en l'écoutant, s'étonnait d'être si vieille ; toutes ces choses qui réapparaissaient lui semblaient élargir son existence ; cela faisait comme des immensités sentimentales où elle se reportait ; et elle disait de temps à autre, à voix basse et les paupières à demi fermées :

— Oui, c'est vrai !... c'est vrai !... c'est vrai...

Ils entendirent huit heures sonner aux différentes horloges du quartier Beauvoisine, qui est plein de pensionnats, d'églises et de grands hôtels abandonnés. Ils ne se parlaient plus ; mais ils sentaient, en se regardant, un bruissement dans leurs têtes, comme si quelque chose de sonore se fût réciproquement échappé, de leurs prunelles fixes. Ils venaient de se joindre les mains ; et le passé, l'avenir, les réminiscences et les rêves, tout se trouvait confondu dans la douceur de cette extase. La nuit s'épaississait sur les murs, où brillaient encore, à demi perdues dans l'ombre, les grosses couleurs de quatre estampes représentant quatre scènes de *la Tour de Nesle*, avec une légende au bas, en espagnol et en français. Par la fenêtre à guillotine, on voyait un coin de ciel noir entre des toits pointus.

Elle se leva pour allumer deux bougies sur la commode, puis elle vint se rasseoir.

— Eh bien... fit Léon.

— Eh bien ? répondit-elle.

Et il cherchait comment renouer le dialogue interrompu, quand elle lui dit :

— D'où vient que personne, jusqu'à présent, ne m'a jamais exprimé des sentiments pareils ?

Le clerc se récria que les natures idéales étaient difficiles à comprendre. Lui, du premier coup d'oeil, il l'avait aimée ; et il se désespérait en pensant au bonheur qu'ils auraient eu si, par une grâce du hasard, se rencontrant plus tôt, ils se fussent attachés l'un à l'autre d'une manière indissoluble.

— J'y ai songé quelquefois, reprit-elle.

— Quel rêve ! murmura Léon.

Et, maniant délicatement le liséré bleu de sa longue ceinture blanche, il ajouta :

— Qui nous empêche donc de recommencer ?

— Non, mon ami, répondit-elle. Je suis trop vieille... vous êtes trop jeune..., oubliez-moi ! D'autres vous aimeront..., vous les aimerez.

— Pas comme vous ! s'écria-t-il.

— Enfant que vous êtes ! Allons, soyons sage ! je le veux !

Elle lui représenta les impossibilités de leur amour, et qu'ils devaient se tenir, comme autrefois, dans les simples termes d'une amitié fraternelle.

Était-ce sérieusement qu'elle parlait ainsi ? Sans doute qu'Emma n'en savait rien elle-même, tout occupée par le charme de la séduction et la nécessité de s'en défendre ; et, contemplant le jeune homme d'un regard attendri, elle repoussait doucement les timides caresses que ses mains frémissantes essayaient.

— Ah ! pardon, dit-il en se reculant.

Et Emma fut prise d'un vague effroi, devant cette timidité, plus dangereuse pour elle que la hardiesse de Rodolphe quand il s'avançait les bras ouverts. Jamais aucun homme ne lui avait paru si beau. Une exquise candeur s'échappait de son maintien. Il baissait ses longs cils fins qui se recourbaient. Sa joue à l'épiderme suave rougissait – pensait-elle – du désir de sa personne, et Emma sentait une invincible envie d'y porter ses lèvres. Alors se penchant vers la pendule comme pour regarder l'heure :

— Qu'il est tard, mon Dieu ! dit-elle ; que nous bavardons !

Il comprit l'allusion et chercha son chapeau.

— J'en ai même oublié le spectacle ! Ce pauvre Bovary qui m'avait laissée tout exprès ! M. Lormeaux, de la rue Grand-Pont, devait m'y conduire avec sa femme.

Et l'occasion était perdue, car elle partait dès le lendemain.

— Vrai ? fit Léon.

— Oui.

— Il faut pourtant que je vous voie encore, reprit-il ; j'avais à vous dire...

— Quoi ?

— Une chose... grave, sérieuse. Eh ! non, d'ailleurs, vous ne partirez pas, c'est impossible ! Si vous saviez... Écoutez-moi… Vous ne m'avez donc pas compris ? vous n'avez pas deviné ?...

— Cependant vous parlez bien, dit Emma.

— Ah ! des plaisanteries ! Assez, assez ! Faites, par pitié, que je vous revoie..., une fois..., une seule.

— Eh bien...

Elle s'arrêta ; puis, comme se ravisant :

— Oh ! pas ici !

— Où vous voudrez.

— Voulez-vous...

Elle parut réfléchir, et, d'un ton bref :

— Demain, à onze heures, dans la cathédrale.

— J'y serai ! s'écria-t-il en saisissant ses mains, qu'elle dégagea.

Et, comme ils se trouvaient debout tous les deux, lui placé derrière elle et Emma baissant la tête, il se pencha vers son cou et la baisa longuement à la nuque.

— Mais vous êtes fou ! ah ! vous êtes fou ! disait-elle avec de petits rires sonores, tandis que les baisers se multipliaient.

Alors, avançant la tête par-dessus son épaule, il sembla chercher le consentement de ses yeux. Ils tombèrent sur lui, pleins d'une majesté glaciale.

Léon fit trois pas en arrière, pour sortir. Il resta sur le seuil. Puis il chuchota d'une voix tremblante :

— À demain.

Elle répondit par un signe de tête, et disparut comme un oiseau dans la pièce à côté.

Emma, le soir, écrivit au clerc une interminable lettre où elle se dégageait du rendez-vous : tout maintenant était fini, et ils ne devaient plus, pour leur bonheur, se rencontrer. Mais, quand la lettre fut close, comme elle ne savait pas l'adresse de Léon, elle se trouva fort embarrassée.

— Je la lui donnerai moi-même, se dit-elle ; il viendra.

Léon, le lendemain, fenêtre ouverte et chantonnant sur son balcon, vernit lui-même ses escarpins, et à plusieurs couches. Il passa un pantalon blanc, des chaussettes fines, un habit vert, répandit dans son mouchoir tout ce qu'il possédait de senteurs, puis, s'étant fait friser, se défrisa, pour donner à sa chevelure plus d'élégance naturelle.

— Il est encore trop tôt ! pensa-t-il en regardant le coucou du perruquier, qui marquait neuf heures.

Il lut un vieux journal de modes, sortit, fuma un cigare, remonta trois rues, songea qu'il était temps et se dirigea lestement vers le parvis Notre-Dame.

C'était par un beau matin d'été. Des argenteries reluisaient aux boutiques des orfèvres, et la lumière qui arrivait obliquement sur la cathédrale posait des miroitements à la cassure des pierres grises ; une compagnie d'oiseaux tourbillonnaient dans le ciel bleu, autour des clochetons à trèfles ; la place, retentissante de cris, sentait les fleurs qui bordaient son pavé, roses, jasmins, oeillets, narcisses et tubéreuses, espacés inégalement par des verdures humides, de l'herbe-au-chat et du mouron pour les oiseaux ; la fontaine, au milieu, gargouillait, et, sous de larges parapluies, parmi des cantaloups s'étageant en pyramides, des marchandes, nu-tête, tournaient dans du papier des bouquets de violettes.

Le jeune homme en prit un. C'était la première fois qu'il achetait des fleurs pour une femme ; et sa poitrine, en les respirant, se gonfla d'orgueil, comme si cet hommage qu'il destinait à une autre se fût retourné vers lui.

Cependant il avait peur d'être aperçu ; il entra résolument dans l'église.

Le Suisse, alors, se tenait sur le seuil, au milieu du portail à gauche, au-dessous de la Marianne dansant plumet en tête, rapière au mollet, canne au poing, plus majestueux qu'un cardinal et reluisant comme un saint ciboire.

Il s'avança vers Léon, et, avec ce sourire de bénignité pateline que prennent les ecclésiastiques lorsqu'ils interrogent les enfants :

— Monsieur, sans doute, n'est pas d'ici ? Monsieur désire voir les curiosités de l'église ?

— Non, dit l'autre.

Et il fit d'abord le tour des bas-côtés. Puis il vint regarder sur la place. Emma n'arrivait pas. Il remonta jusqu'au choeur.

La nef se mirait dans les bénitiers pleins, avec le commencement des ogives et quelques portions de vitrail. Mais le reflet des peintures, se brisant au bord du marbre, continuait plus loin, sur les dalles, comme un tapis bariolé. Le grand jour du dehors s'allongeait dans l'église en trois rayons énormes, par les trois portails ouverts. De temps à autre, au fond, un sacristain passait en faisant devant l'autel l'oblique génuflexion des dévots pressés. Les lustres de cristal pendaient immobiles. Dans le choeur, une lampe d'argent brûlait ; et, des chapelles latérales, des parties sombres de l'église, il s'échappait quelquefois comme des exhalaisons de soupirs, avec le son d'une grille qui retombait, en répercutant son écho sous les hautes voûtes.

Léon, à pas sérieux, marchait auprès des murs. Jamais la vie ne lui avait paru si bonne. Elle allait venir tout à l'heure, charmante, agitée, épiant derrière elle les regards qui la suivaient, – et avec sa robe à volants, son lorgnon d'or, ses bottines minces, dans toute sorte d'élégances dont il n'avait pas goûté, et dans l'ineffable séduction de la vertu qui succombe. L'église, comme un boudoir gigantesque, se disposait autour d'elle ; les voûtes s'inclinaient pour recueillir dans l'ombre la confession de son amour ; les vitraux resplendissaient pour illuminer son visage, et les encensoirs allaient brûler pour qu'elle apparût comme un ange, dans la fumée des parfums.

Cependant elle ne venait pas. Il se plaça sur une chaise et ses yeux rencontrèrent un vitrage bleu où l'on voit des bateliers qui portent des corbeilles. Il le regarda longtemps, attentivement, et il comptait les écailles des poissons et les boutonnières des pourpoints, tandis que sa pensée vagabondait à la recherche d'Emma.

Le Suisse, à l'écart, s'indignait intérieurement contre cet individu, qui se permettait d'admirer seul la cathédrale. Il lui semblait se conduire d'une façon monstrueuse, le voler en quelque sorte, et presque commettre un sacrilège.

Mais un froufrou de soie sur les dalles, la bordure d'un chapeau, un camail noir... C'était elle ! Léon se leva et courut à sa rencontre.

Emma était pâle. Elle marchait vite.

— Lisez ! dit-elle en lui tendant un papier... Oh non !

Et brusquement elle retira sa main, pour entrer dans la chapelle de la Vierge, où, s'agenouillant contre une chaise, elle se mit en prière.

Le jeune homme fut irrité de cette fantaisie bigote ; puis il éprouva pourtant un certain charme à la voir, au milieu du rendez-vous, ainsi perdue dans les oraisons comme une marquise andalouse ; puis il ne tarda pas à s'ennuyer, car elle n'en finissait.

Emma priait, ou plutôt s'efforçait de prier, espérant qu'il allait lui descendre du ciel quelque résolution subite ; et, pour attirer le secours divin, elle s'emplissait les yeux des splendeurs du tabernacle, elle aspirait le parfum des juliennes blanches épanouies dans les grands vases, et prêtait l'oreille au silence de l'église, qui ne faisait qu'accroître le tumulte de son coeur.

Elle se relevait, et ils allaient partir, quand le Suisse s'approcha vivement, en disant :

— Madame, sans doute, n'est pas d'ici ? Madame désire voir les curiosités de l'église ?

— Eh non ! s'écria le clerc.

— Pourquoi pas ? reprit-elle.

Car elle se raccrochait de sa vertu chancelante à la Vierge, aux sculptures, aux tombeaux, à toutes les occasions.

Alors, afin de procéder *dans l'ordre*, le Suisse les conduisit jusqu'à l'entrée près de la place, où, leur montrant avec sa canne un grand cercle de pavés noirs, sans inscriptions ni ciselures :

— Voilà, fit-il majestueusement, la circonférence de la belle cloche d'Amboise. Elle pesait quarante mille livres. Il n'y avait pas sa pareille dans toute l'Europe. L'ouvrier qui l'a fondue en est mort de joie...

— Partons, dit Léon.

Le bonhomme se remit en marche ; puis, revenu à la chapelle de la Vierge, il étendit les bras dans un geste synthétique de démonstration, et, plus orgueilleux qu'un propriétaire campagnard vous montrant ses espaliers :

— Cette simple dalle recouvre Pierre de Brézé, seigneur de la Varenne et de Brissac, grand maréchal de Poitou et gouverneur de Normandie, mort à la bataille de Montlhéry, le 16 juillet 1465.

Léon, se mordant les lèvres, trépignait.

— Et, à droite, ce gentilhomme tout bardé de fer, sur un cheval qui se cabre, est son petit-fils Louis de Brézé, seigneur de Breval et de Montchauvet, comte de Maulevrier, baron de Mauny, chambellan du roi, chevalier de l'Ordre et pareillement gouverneur de Normandie, mort le 23 juillet 1531, un dimanche, comme l'inscription porte ; et, au-dessous, cet homme prêt à descendre au tombeau vous figure exactement le même. Il n'est point possible, n'est-ce pas, de voir une plus parfaite représentation du néant ?

Madame Bovary prit son lorgnon. Léon, immobile, la regardait, n'essayant même plus de dire un seul mot, de faire un seul geste, tant il se sentait découragé devant ce double parti pris de bavardage et d'indifférence.

L'éternel guide continuait :

— Près de lui, cette femme à genoux qui pleure est son épouse Diane de Poitiers, comtesse de Brézé, duchesse de Valentinois, née en 1499, morte en 1566 ; et, à gauche, celle qui porte un enfant, la sainte Vierge. Maintenant, tournez-vous de ce côté : voici les tombeaux d'Amboise. Ils ont été tous les deux cardinaux et archevêques de Rouen. Celui-là était ministre du roi Louis XII. Il a fait beaucoup de bien à la Cathédrale. On a trouvé dans son testament trente mille écus d'or pour les pauvres.

Et, sans s'arrêter, tout en parlant, il les poussa dans une chapelle encombrée par des balustrades, en dérangea quelques-unes, et découvrit une sorte de bloc, qui pouvait bien avoir été une statue mal faite.

— Elle décorait autrefois, dit-il avec un long gémissement, la tombe de Richard Coeur de Lion, roi d'Angleterre et duc de Normandie. Ce sont les calvinistes, monsieur, qui vous l'ont réduite en cet état. Ils l'avaient, par méchanceté, ensevelie dans de la terre, sous le siège épiscopal de Monseigneur. Tenez, voici la porte par où il se rend à son habitation, Monseigneur. Passons voir les vitraux de la Gargouille.

Mais Léon tira vivement une pièce blanche de sa poche et saisit Emma par le bras. Le Suisse demeura tout stupéfait, ne comprenant point cette munificence intempestive, lorsqu'il restait encore à l'étranger tant de choses à voir. Aussi, le rappelant :

— Eh ! monsieur. La flèche ! la flèche !...

— Merci, fit Léon.

— Monsieur a tort ! Elle aura quatre cent quarante pieds, neuf de moins que la grande pyramide d'Égypte. Elle est toute en fonte, elle...

Léon fuyait ; car il lui semblait que son amour, qui, depuis deux heures bientôt, s'était immobilisé dans l'église comme les pierres, allait maintenant s'évaporer, telle qu'une fumée, par cette espèce de tuyau tronqué, de cage oblongue, de cheminée à jour, qui se hasarde si grotesquement sur la cathédrale comme la tentative extravagante de quelque chaudronnier fantaisiste.

— Où allons-nous donc ? disait-elle.

Sans répondre, il continuait à marcher d'un pas rapide, et déjà madame Bovary trempait son doigt dans l'eau bénite, quand ils entendirent derrière eux un grand souffle haletant, entrecoupé régulièrement par le rebondissement d'une canne. Léon se détourna.

— Monsieur !

— Quoi ?

Et il reconnut le Suisse, portant sous son bras et maintenant en équilibre contre son ventre une vingtaine environ de forts volumes brochés. C'étaient les ouvrages *qui traitaient de la cathédrale*.

— Imbécile ! grommela Léon s'élançant hors de l'église.

Un gamin polissonnait sur le parvis :

— Va me chercher un fiacre !

L'enfant partit comme une balle, par la rue des Quatre-Vents ; alors ils restèrent seuls quelques minutes, face à face et un peu embarrassés.

— Ah ! Léon !... Vraiment..., je ne sais... si je dois... !

Elle minaudait. Puis, d'un air sérieux :

— C'est très inconvenant, savez-vous ?

— En quoi ? répliqua le clerc. Cela se fait à Paris !

Et cette parole, comme un irrésistible argument, la détermina.

Cependant le fiacre n'arrivait pas. Léon avait peur qu'elle ne rentrât dans l'église. Enfin le fiacre parut.

— Sortez du moins par le portail du nord ! leur cria le Suisse, qui était resté sur le seuil, pour voir la *Résurrection*, le *Jugement dernier*, le *Paradis*, le *Roi David*, et les *Réprouvés* dans les flammes d'enfer.

— Où Monsieur va-t-il ? demanda le cocher.

— Où vous voudrez ! dit Léon poussant Emma dans la voiture.

Et la lourde machine se mit en route.

Elle descendit la rue Grand-Pont, traversa la place des Arts, le quai Napoléon, le pont Neuf et s'arrêta court devant la statue de Pierre Corneille.

— Continuez ! fit une voix qui sortait de l'intérieur.

La voiture repartit, et, se laissant, dès le carrefour La Fayette, emporter par la descente, elle entra au grand galop dans la gare du chemin de fer.

— Non, tout droit ! cria la même voix.

Le fiacre sortit des grilles, et bientôt, arrivé sur le Cours, trotta doucement, au milieu des grands ormes. Le cocher s'essuya le front, mit son chapeau de cuir entre ses jambes et poussa la voiture en dehors des contre-allées, au bord de l'eau, près du gazon.

Elle alla le long de la rivière, sur le chemin de halage pavé de cailloux secs, et, longtemps, du côté d'Oyssel, au delà des îles.

Mais tout à coup, elle s'élança d'un bond à travers Quatremares, Sotteville, la Grande-Chaussée, la rue d'Elbeuf, et fit sa troisième halte devant le Jardin des plantes.

— Marchez donc ! s'écria la voix plus furieusement.

Et aussitôt, reprenant sa course, elle passa par Saint-Sever, par le quai des Curandiers, par le quai aux Meules, encore une fois par le pont, par la place du Champ-de-Mars et derrière les jardins de l'hôpital, où des vieillards en veste noire se promènent au soleil, le long d'une terrasse toute verdie par des lierres. Elle remonta le boulevard Bouvreuil, parcourut le boulevard Cauchoise, puis tout le Mont-Riboudet jusqu'à la côte de Deville.

Elle revint ; et alors, sans parti pris ni direction, au hasard, elle vagabonda. On la vit à Saint-Pol, à Lescure, au mont Gargan, à la Rouge-Mare, et place du Gaillard-bois ; rue Maladrerie, rue Dinanderie, devant Saint-Romain, Saint-

Vivien, Saint-Maclou, Saint-Nicaise, – devant la Douane, – à la basse Vieille-Tour, aux Trois-Pipes et au Cimetière Monumental. De temps à autre, le cocher sur son siège jetait aux cabarets des regards désespérés. Il ne comprenait pas quelle fureur de la locomotion poussait ces individus à ne vouloir point s'arrêter. Il essayait quelquefois, et aussitôt il entendait derrière lui partir des exclamations de colère. Alors il cinglait de plus belle ses deux rosses tout en sueur, mais sans prendre garde aux cahots, accrochant par-ci par-là, ne s'en souciant, démoralisé, et presque pleurant de soif, de fatigue et de tristesse.

Et sur le port, au milieu des camions et des barriques, et dans les rues, au coin des bornes, les bourgeois ouvraient de grands yeux ébahis devant cette chose si extraordinaire en province, une voiture à stores tendus, et qui apparaissait ainsi continuellement, plus close qu'un tombeau et ballottée comme un navire.

Une fois, au milieu du jour, en pleine campagne, au moment où le soleil dardait le plus fort contre les vieilles lanternes argentées, une main nue passa sous les petits rideaux de toile jaune et jeta des déchirures de papier, qui se dispersèrent au vent et s'abattirent plus loin, comme des papillons blancs, sur un champ de trèfles rouges tout en fleur.

Puis, vers six heures, la voiture s'arrêta dans une ruelle du quartier Beauvoisine, et une femme en descendit qui marchait le voile baissé, sans détourner la tête.

II

En arrivant à l'auberge, madame Bovary fut étonnée de ne pas apercevoir la diligence. Hivert, qui l'avait attendue cinquante-trois minutes, avait fini par s'en aller.

Rien pourtant ne la forçait à partir ; mais elle avait donné sa parole qu'elle reviendrait le soir même. D'ailleurs, Charles l'attendait ; et déjà elle se sentait au coeur cette lâche docilité qui est, pour bien des femmes, comme le châtiment tout à la fois et la rançon de l'adultère.

Vivement elle fit sa malle, paya la note, prit dans la cour un cabriolet, et, pressant le palefrenier, l'encourageant, s'informant à toute minute de l'heure et des kilomètres parcourus, parvint à rattraper l'*Hirondelle* vers les premières maisons de Quincampoix.

À peine assise dans son coin, elle ferma les yeux et les rouvrit au bas de la côte, où elle reconnut de loin Félicité, qui se tenait en vedette devant la maison du maréchal. Hivert retint ses chevaux, et la cuisinière, se haussant jusqu'au vasistas, dit mystérieusement :

— Madame il faut que vous alliez tout de suite chez M. Homais. C'est pour quelque chose de pressé.

Le village était silencieux comme d'habitude. Au coin des rues, il y avait de petits tas roses qui fumaient à l'air, car c'était le moment des confitures, et tout le monde à Yonville, confectionnait sa provision le même jour. Mais on admirait devant la boutique du pharmacien, un tas beaucoup plus large, et qui dépassait les autres de la supériorité qu'une officine doit avoir sur les fourneaux bourgeois, un besoin général sur des fantaisies individuelles.

Elle entra. Le grand fauteuil était renversé, et même le *Fanal de Rouen* gisait par terre, étendu entre les deux pilons. Elle poussa la porte du couloir ; et, au milieu de la cuisine, parmi les jarres brunes pleines de groseilles égrenées, du sucre râpé, du sucre en morceaux, des balances sur la table, des bassines sur le feu, elle aperçut tous les Homais, grands et petits, avec des tabliers qui leur montaient jusqu'au menton et tenant des fourchettes à la main. Justin, debout, baissait la tête, et le pharmacien criait :

— Qui t'avait dit de l'aller chercher dans le capharnaüm ?

— Qu'est-ce donc ? qu'y a-t-il ?

— Ce qu'il y a ? répondit l'apothicaire. On fait des confitures : elles cuisent ; mais elles allaient déborder à cause du bouillon trop fort, et je commande une autre bassine. Alors, lui, par mollesse, par paresse, a été prendre, suspendue à son clou dans mon laboratoire, la clef du capharnaüm !

L'apothicaire appelait ainsi un cabinet, sous les toits, plein des ustensiles et des marchandises de sa profession. Souvent il y passait seul de longues heures à étiqueter, à transvaser, à reficeler ; et il le considérait non comme un simple magasin, mais comme un véritable sanctuaire, d'où s'échappaient ensuite, élaborées par ses mains, toutes sortes de pilules, bols, tisanes, lotions et potions, qui allaient répandre aux alentours sa célébrité. Personne au monde n'y mettait les pieds ; et il le respectait si fort, qu'il le balayait lui-même. Enfin, si la pharmacie, ouverte à tout venant, était l'endroit où il étalait son orgueil, le capharnaüm était le refuge où, se concentrant égoïstement, Homais se délectait dans l'exercice de ses prédilections ; aussi l'étourderie de Justin lui paraissait-elle monstrueuse d'irrévérence ; et, plus rubicond que les groseilles, il répétait :

— Oui, du capharnaüm ! La clef qui enferme les acides avec les alcalis caustiques ! Avoir été prendre une bassine de réserve ! une bassine à couvercle ! et dont jamais peut-être je ne me servirai ! Tout a son importance dans les opérations délicates de notre art ! Mais que diable ! il faut établir des distinctions et ne pas employer à des usages presque domestiques ce qui est destiné pour les pharmaceutiques ! C'est comme si on découpait une poularde avec un scalpel, comme si un magistrat...

— Mais calme-toi ! disait madame Homais.

Et Athalie, le tirant par sa redingote :

— Papa ! papa !

— Non, laissez-moi ! reprenait l'apothicaire, laissez-moi ! fichtre ! Autant s'établir épicier, ma parole d'honneur ! Allons, va ! ne respecte rien ! casse ! brise ! lâche les sangsues ! brûle la guimauve ! marine des cornichons dans les bocaux ! lacère les bandages !

— Vous aviez pourtant..., dit Emma.

— Tout à l'heure ! – Sais-tu à quoi tu t'exposais ?... N'as-tu rien vu, dans le coin, à gauche, sur la troisième tablette ? Parle, réponds, articule quelque chose !

— Je ne... sais pas, balbutia le jeune garçon.

— Ah ! tu ne sais pas ! Eh bien, je sais, moi ! Tu as vu une bouteille, en verre bleu, cachetée avec de la cire jaune, qui contient une poudre blanche, sur laquelle même j'avais écrit : *Dangereux !* et sais-tu ce qu'il y avait dedans ? De l'arsenic ! et tu vas toucher à cela ! prendre une bassine qui est à côté !

— À côté ! s'écria madame Homais en joignant les mains. De l'arsenic ? Tu pouvais nous empoisonner tous !

Et les enfants se mirent à pousser des cris, comme s'ils avaient déjà senti dans leurs entrailles d'atroces douleurs.

— Ou bien empoisonner un malade ! continuait l'apothicaire. Tu voulais donc que j'allasse sur le banc des criminels, en cour d'assises ? me voir traîner à l'échafaud ? Ignores-tu le soin que j'observe dans les manutentions, quoique j'en aie cependant une furieuse habitude. Souvent je m'épouvante moi-même, lorsque je pense à ma responsabilité ! car le gouvernement nous persécute, et l'absurde législation qui nous régit est comme une véritable épée de Damoclès suspendue sur notre tête !

Emma ne songeait plus à demander ce qu'on lui voulait, et le pharmacien poursuivait en phrases haletantes :

— Voilà comme tu reconnais les bontés qu'on a pour toi ! voilà comme tu me récompenses des soins tout paternels que je te prodigue ! Car, sans moi, où serais-tu ? que ferais-tu ? Qui te fournit la nourriture, l'éducation, l'habillement, et tous les moyens de figurer un jour, avec honneur dans les rangs de la société ! Mais il faut pour cela suer ferme sur l'aviron, et acquérir, comme on dit, du cal aux mains. *Fabricando fit faber, age quod agis*.

Il citait du latin, tant il était exaspéré. Il eût cité du chinois et du groenlandais, s'il eût connu ces deux langues ; car il se trouvait dans une de ces crises où l'âme entière montre indistinctement ce qu'elle enferme, comme l'Océan, qui, dans les tempêtes, s'entrouvre depuis les fucus de son rivage jusqu'au sable de ses abîmes.

Et il reprit :

— Je commence à terriblement me repentir de m'être chargé de ta personne ! J'aurais certes mieux fait de te laisser autrefois croupir dans ta misère et dans la crasse où tu es né ! Tu ne seras jamais bon qu'à être un gardeur de bêtes à cornes ! Tu n'as nulle aptitude pour les sciences ! à peine si tu sais coller une étiquette ! Et tu vis là, chez moi, comme un chanoine, comme un coq en pâte, à te goberger !

Mais Emma, se tournant vers madame Homais :

— On m'avait fait venir...

— Ah ! mon Dieu ! interrompit d'un air triste la bonne dame, comment vous dirai-je bien ?... C'est un malheur !

Elle n'acheva pas. L'apothicaire tonnait :

— Vide-la ! écure-la ! reporte-la ! dépêche-toi donc !

Et, secouant Justin par le collet de son bourgeron, il fit tomber un livre de sa poche.

L'enfant se baissa. Homais fut plus prompt, et, ayant ramassé le volume, il le contemplait, les yeux écarquillés, la mâchoire ouverte.

— *L'amour... conjugal !* dit-il en séparant lentement ces deux mots. Ah ! très bien ! très bien ! très joli ! Et des gravures !... Ah ! c'est trop fort !

Madame Homais s'avança.

— Non ! n'y touche pas !

Les enfants voulurent voir les images.

— Sortez ! fit-il impérieusement.

Et ils sortirent.

Il marcha d'abord de long en large, à grands pas, gardant le volume ouvert entre ses doigts, roulant les yeux, suffoqué, tuméfié, apoplectique. Puis il vint droit à son élève, et, se plantant devant lui les bras croisés :

— Mais tu as donc tous les vices, petit malheureux ?... Prends garde, tu es sur une pente !... Tu n'as donc pas réfléchi qu'il pouvait, ce livre infâme, tomber entre les mains de mes enfants, mettre l'étincelle dans leur cerveau, ternir la pureté d'Athalie, corrompre Napoléon ! Il est déjà formé comme un homme. Es-tu bien sûr, au moins, qu'ils ne l'aient pas lu ? peux-tu me certifier... ?

— Mais enfin, monsieur, fit Emma, vous aviez à me dire... ?

— C'est vrai, madame... Votre beau-père est mort !

En effet, le sieur Bovary père venait de décéder l'avant-veille, tout à coup, d'une attaque d'apoplexie, au sortir de table ; et, par excès de précaution pour la sensibilité d'Emma, Charles avait prié M. Homais de lui apprendre avec ménagement cette horrible nouvelle.

Il avait médité sa phrase, il l'avait arrondie, polie, rythmée ; c'était un chef-d'oeuvre de prudence et de transitions, de tournures fines et de délicatesse ; mais la colère avait emporté la rhétorique.

Emma, renonçant à avoir aucun détail, quitta donc la pharmacie ; car M. Homais avait repris le cours de ses vitupérations. Il se calmait cependant, et, à présent, il grommelait d'un ton paterne, tout en s'éventant avec son bonnet grec :

— Ce n'est pas que je désapprouve entièrement l'ouvrage ! L'auteur était médecin. Il y a là-dedans certains côtés scientifiques qu'il n'est pas mal à un homme de connaître et, j'oserais dire, qu'il faut qu'un homme connaisse. Mais plus tard, plus tard ! Attends du moins que tu sois homme toi-même et que ton tempérament soit fait.

Au coup de marteau d'Emma, Charles, qui l'attendait, s'avança les bras ouverts et lui dit avec des larmes dans la voix :

— Ah ! ma chère amie...

Et il s'inclina doucement pour l'embrasser. Mais, au contact de ses lèvres, le souvenir de l'autre la saisit, et elle se passa la main sur son visage en frissonnant.

Cependant elle répondit :

— Oui, je sais..., je sais...

Il lui montra la lettre où sa mère narrait l'événement, sans aucune hypocrisie sentimentale. Seulement, elle regrettait que son mari n'eût pas reçu les secours de la religion, étant mort à Doudeville, dans la rue, sur le seuil d'un café, après un repas patriotique avec d'anciens officiers.

Emma rendit la lettre ; puis, au dîner, par savoir-vivre, elle affecta quelque répugnance. Mais comme il la reforçait, elle se mit résolument à manger, tandis que Charles, en face d'elle, demeurait immobile, dans une posture accablée.

De temps à autre, relevant la tête, il lui envoyait un long regard tout plein de détresse. Une fois il soupira :

— J'aurais voulu le revoir encore !

Elle se taisait. Enfin, comprenant qu'il fallait parler :

— Quel âge avait-il, ton père ?

— Cinquante-huit ans !

— Ah !

Et ce fut tout.

Un quart d'heure après, il ajouta :

— Ma pauvre mère ?... que va-t-elle devenir, à présent ?

Elle fit un geste d'ignorance.

À la voir si taciturne, Charles la supposait affligée et il se contraignait à ne rien dire, pour ne pas aviver cette douleur qui l'attendrissait. Cependant, secouant la sienne :

— T'es-tu bien amusée hier ? demanda-t-il.

— Oui.

Quand la nappe fut ôtée, Bovary ne se leva pas, Emma non plus ; et, à mesure qu'elle l'envisageait, la monotonie de ce spectacle bannissait peu à peu tout apitoiement de son coeur. Il lui semblait chétif, faible, nul, enfin être un pauvre homme, de toutes les façons. Comment se débarrasser de lui ? Quelle interminable soirée ! Quelque chose de stupéfiant comme une vapeur d'opium l'engourdissait.

Ils entendirent dans le vestibule le bruit sec d'un bâton sur les planches. C'était Hippolyte qui apportait les bagages de Madame. Pour les déposer, il décrivit péniblement un quart de cercle avec son pilon.

— Il n'y pense même plus ! se disait-elle en regardant le pauvre diable, dont la grosse chevelure rouge dégouttait de sueur.

Bovary cherchait un patard au fond de sa bourse ; et, sans paraître comprendre tout ce qu'il y avait pour lui d'humiliation dans la seule présence de cet homme qui se tenait là, comme le reproche personnifié de son incurable ineptie :

— Tiens ! tu as un joli bouquet ! dit-il en remarquant sur la cheminée les violettes de Léon.

— Oui, fit-elle avec indifférence ; c'est un bouquet que j'ai acheté tantôt... à une mendiante.

Charles prit les violettes, et, rafraîchissant dessus ses yeux tout rouges de larmes, il les humait délicatement. Elle les retira vite de sa main, et alla les porter dans un verre d'eau.

Le lendemain, madame Bovary mère arriva. Elle et son fils pleurèrent beaucoup. Emma, sous prétexte d'ordres à donner, disparut.

Le jour d'après, il fallut aviser ensemble aux affaires de deuil. On alla s'asseoir, avec les boîtes à ouvrage, au bord de l'eau, sous la tonnelle.

Charles pensait à son père, et il s'étonnait de sentir tant d'affection pour cet homme qu'il avait cru jusqu'alors n'aimer que très médiocrement. Madame Bovary mère pensait à son mari. Les pires jours d'autrefois lui réapparaissaient enviables. Tout s'effaçait sous le regret instinctif d'une si longue habitude ; et, de temps à autre, tandis qu'elle poussait son aiguille, une grosse larme descendait le long de son nez et s'y tenait un moment suspendue. Emma pensait qu'il y avait quarante-huit heures à peine, ils étaient ensemble, loin du monde, tout en ivresse, et n'ayant pas assez d'yeux pour se contempler. Elle tâchait de ressaisir les plus imperceptibles détails de cette journée disparue. Mais la présence de la belle-mère et du mari la gênait. Elle aurait voulu ne rien entendre, ne rien voir, afin de ne pas déranger le recueillement de son amour qui allait se perdant, quoi qu'elle fît, sous les sensations extérieures.

Elle décousait la doublure d'une robe, dont les bribes s'éparpillaient autour d'elle ; la mère Bovary, sans lever les yeux, faisait crier ses ciseaux, et Charles, avec ses pantoufles de lisière et sa vieille redingote brune qui lui servait de robe de chambre, restait les deux mains dans ses poches et ne parlait pas non plus ; près d'eux, Berthe, en petit tablier blanc, raclait avec sa pelle le sable des allées.

Tout à coup, ils virent entrer par la barrière M. Lheureux, le marchand d'étoffes.

Il venait offrir ses services, *eu égard à la fatale circonstance*. Emma répondit qu'elle croyait pouvoir s'en passer. Le marchand ne se tint pas pour battu.

— Mille excuses, dit-il ; je désirerais avoir un entretien particulier.

Puis, d'une voix basse :

— C'est relativement à cette affaire..., vous savez ?

Charles devint cramoisi jusqu'aux oreilles.

— Ah ! oui..., effectivement.

Et, dans son trouble, se tournant vers sa femme :

— Ne pourrais-tu pas..., ma chérie... ?

Elle parut le comprendre, car elle se leva, et Charles dit à sa mère :

— Ce n'est rien ! Sans doute quelque bagatelle de ménage.

Il ne voulait point qu'elle connût l'histoire du billet, redoutant ses observations.

Dès qu'ils furent seuls, M. Lheureux se mit, en termes assez nets, à féliciter Emma sur la succession, puis à causer de choses indifférentes, des espaliers, de la récolte et de sa santé à lui, qui allait toujours *couci-couci, entre le zist et le zest*. En effet, il se donnait un mal de cinq cents diables, bien qu'il ne fît pas, malgré les propos du monde, de quoi avoir seulement du beurre sur son pain.

Emma le laissait parler. Elle s'ennuyait si prodigieusement depuis deux jours !

— Et vous voilà tout à fait rétablie ? continuait-il. Ma foi, j'ai vu votre pauvre mari dans de beaux états ! C'est un brave garçon, quoique nous ayons eu ensemble des difficultés.

Elle demanda lesquelles, car Charles lui avait caché la contestation des fournitures.

— Mais vous le savez bien ! fit Lheureux. C'était pour vos petites fantaisies, les boîtes de voyage.

Il avait baissé son chapeau sur ses yeux, et, les deux mains derrière le dos, souriant et sifflotant, il la regardait en face, d'une manière insupportable. Soupçonnait-il quelque chose ? Elle demeurait perdue dans toutes sortes d'appréhensions. À la fin pourtant, il reprit :

— Nous nous sommes rapatriés, et je venais encore lui proposer un arrangement.

C'était de renouveler le billet signé par Bovary. Monsieur, du reste, agirait à sa guise ; il ne devait point se tourmenter, maintenant surtout qu'il allait avoir une foule d'embarras.

— Et même il ferait mieux de s'en décharger sur quelqu'un, sur vous, par exemple ; avec une procuration, ce serait commode, et alors nous aurions ensemble de petites affaires…

Elle ne comprenait pas. Il se tut. Ensuite, passant à son négoce, Lheureux déclara que Madame ne pouvait se dispenser de lui prendre quelque chose. Il lui enverrait un barège noir, douze mètres, de quoi faire une robe.

— Celle que vous avez là est bonne pour la maison. Il vous en faut une autre pour les visites. J'ai vu ça, moi, du premier coup en entrant. J'ai l'oeil américain.

Il n'envoya point d'étoffe, il l'apporta. Puis il revint pour l'aunage ; il revint sous d'autres prétextes, tâchant chaque fois, de se rendre aimable, serviable, s'inféodant, comme eût dit Homais, et toujours glissant à Emma quelques conseils sur la procuration. Il ne parlait point du billet. Elle n'y songeait pas ; Charles, au début de sa convalescence, lui en avait bien conté quelque chose ; mais tant d'agitations avaient passé dans sa tête, qu'elle ne s'en souvenait plus. D'ailleurs, elle se garda d'ouvrir aucune discussion d'intérêt ; la mère Bovary en fut surprise, et attribua son changement d'humeur aux sentiments religieux qu'elle avait contractés étant malade.

Mais, dès qu'elle fut partie, Emma ne tarda pas à émerveiller Bovary par son bon sens pratique. Il allait falloir prendre des informations, vérifier les hypothèques, voir s'il y avait lieu à une licitation ou à une liquidation. Elle citait des termes techniques, au hasard, prononçait les grands mots d'ordre, d'avenir, de prévoyance, et continuellement exagérait les embarras de la succession ; si bien qu'un jour elle lui montra le modèle d'une autorisation générale pour « gérer et administrer ses affaires, faire tous emprunts, signer et endosser tous billets, payer toutes sommes, etc. » Elle avait profité des leçons de Lheureux.

Charles, naïvement, lui demanda d'où venait ce papier.

— De M. Guillaumin.

Et, avec le plus grand sang-froid du monde, elle ajouta :

— Je ne m'y fie pas trop. Les notaires ont si mauvaise réputation ! Il faudrait peut-être consulter... Nous ne connaissons que... Oh ! personne.

— À moins que Léon..., répliqua Charles, qui réfléchissait.

Mais il était difficile de s'entendre par correspondance. Alors elle s'offrit à faire ce voyage. Il la remercia. Elle insista. Ce fut un assaut de prévenances. Enfin, elle s'écria d'un ton de mutinerie factice :

— Non, je t'en prie, j'irai.

— Comme tu es bonne ! dit-il en la baisant au front.

Dès le lendemain, elle s'embarqua dans l'*Hirondelle* pour aller à Rouen consulter M. Léon ; et elle y resta trois jours.

III

Ce furent trois jours pleins, exquis, splendides, une vraie lune de miel.

Ils étaient à *l'hôtel de Boulogne*, sur le port. Et ils vivaient là, volets fermés, portes closes, avec des fleurs par terre et des sirops à la glace, qu'on leur apportait dès le matin.

Vers le soir, ils prenaient une barque couverte et allaient dîner dans une île.

C'était l'heure où l'on entend, au bord des chantiers, retentir le maillet des calfats contre la coque des vaisseaux. La fumée du goudron s'échappait d'entre les arbres, et l'on voyait sur la rivière de larges gouttes grasses, ondulant inégalement sous la couleur pourpre du soleil, comme des plaques de bronze florentin, qui flottaient.

Ils descendaient au milieu des barques amarrées, dont les longs câbles obliques frôlaient un peu le dessus de la barque.

Les bruits de la ville insensiblement s'éloignaient, le roulement des charrettes, le tumulte des voix, le jappement des chiens sur le pont des navires. Elle dénouait son chapeau et ils abordaient à leur île.

Ils se plaçaient dans la salle basse d'un cabaret, qui avait à sa porte des filets noirs suspendus. Ils mangeaient de la friture d'éperlans, de la crème et des cerises. Ils se couchaient sur l'herbe ; ils s'embrassaient à l'écart sous les peupliers ; et ils auraient voulu, comme deux Robinsons, vivre perpétuellement dans ce petit endroit, qui leur semblait, en leur béatitude, le plus magnifique de la terre. Ce n'était pas la première fois qu'ils apercevaient des arbres, du ciel bleu, du gazon, qu'ils entendaient l'eau couler et la brise soufflant dans le feuillage ; mais ils n'avaient sans doute jamais admiré tout cela, comme si la nature n'existait pas auparavant, ou qu'elle n'eût commencé à être belle que depuis l'assouvissance de leurs désirs.

À la nuit, ils repartaient. La barque suivait le bord des îles. Ils restaient au fond, tous les deux cachés par l'ombre, sans parler. Les avirons carrés sonnaient entre les tolets de fer ; et cela marquait dans le silence comme un battement de métronome, tandis qu'à l'arrière la bauce qui traînait ne discontinuait pas son petit clapotement doux dans l'eau.

Une fois, la lune parut ; alors ils ne manquèrent pas à faire des phrases, trouvant l'astre mélancolique et plein de poésie ; même elle se mit à chanter :

Un soir, t'en souvient-il ? nous voguions, etc.

Sa voix harmonieuse et faible se perdait sur les flots ; et le vent emportait les roulades que Léon écoutait passer, comme des battements d'ailes, autour de lui.

Elle se tenait en face, appuyée contre la cloison de la chaloupe, où la lune entrait par un des volets ouverts. Sa robe noire, dont les draperies s'élargissaient en éventail, l'amincissait, la rendait plus grande. Elle avait la tête levée, les mains jointes, et les deux yeux vers le ciel. Parfois l'ombre des saules la cachait en entier, puis elle réapparaissait tout à coup, comme une vision, dans la lumière de la lune.

Léon, par terre, à côté d'elle, rencontra sous sa main un ruban de soie ponceau.

Le batelier l'examina et finit par dire :

— Ah ! c'est peut-être à une compagnie que j'ai promenée l'autre jour. Ils sont venus un tas de farceurs, messieurs et dames, avec des gâteaux, du champagne, des cornets à pistons, tout le tremblement ! Il y en avait un surtout, un grand bel homme, à petites moustaches, qui était joliment amusant ! et ils disaient comme ça : « Allons, contenous quelque chose..., Adolphe..., Dodolphe..., je crois. »

Elle frissonna.

— Tu souffres ? fit Léon en se rapprochant d'elle.

— Oh ! ce n'est rien. Sans doute, la fraîcheur de la nuit.

— Et qui ne doit pas manquer de femmes, non plus, ajouta doucement le vieux matelot, croyant dire une politesse à l'étranger.

Puis, crachant dans ses mains, il reprit ses avirons.

Il fallut pourtant se séparer ! Les adieux furent tristes. C'était chez la mère Rolet qu'il devait envoyer ses lettres ; et elle lui fit des recommandations si précises à propos de la double enveloppe, qu'il admira grandement son astuce amoureuse.

— Ainsi, tu m'affirmes que tout est bien ? dit-elle dans le dernier baiser.

— Oui certes ! – Mais pourquoi donc, songea-t-il après, en s'en revenant seul par les rues, tient-elle si fort à cette procuration ?

IV

Léon, bientôt, prit devant ses camarades un air de supériorité, s'abstint de leur compagnie, et négligea complètement les dossiers.

Il attendait ses lettres ; il les relisait. Il lui écrivait. Il l'évoquait de toute la force de son désir et de ses souvenirs. Au lieu de diminuer par l'absence, cette envie de la revoir s'accrut, si bien qu'un samedi matin il s'échappa de son étude.

Lorsque, du haut de la côte, il aperçut dans la vallée le clocher de l'église avec son drapeau de fer-blanc qui tournait au vent, il sentit cette délectation mêlée de vanité triomphante et d'attendrissement égoïste que doivent avoir les millionnaires, quand ils reviennent visiter leur village.

Il alla rôder autour de sa maison. Une lumière brillait dans la cuisine. Il guetta son ombre derrière les rideaux. Rien ne parut.

La mère Lefrançois, en le voyant, fit de grandes exclamations, et elle le trouva « grandi et minci », tandis qu'Artémise, au contraire, le trouva « forci et bruni ».

Il dîna dans la petite salle, comme autrefois, mais seul, sans le percepteur ; car Binet, *fatigué* d'attendre l'*Hirondelle*, avait définitivement avancé son repas d'une heure, et, maintenant, il dînait à cinq heures juste, encore prétendait-il le plus souvent que *la vieille patraque retardait*.

Léon pourtant se décida ; il alla frapper à la porte du médecin. Madame était dans sa chambre, d'où elle ne descendit qu'un quart d'heure après. Monsieur parut enchanté de le revoir ; mais il ne bougea de la soirée, ni de tout le jour suivant.

Il la vit seule, le soir, très tard, derrière le jardin, dans la ruelle ; – dans la ruelle, comme avec l'autre ! Il faisait de l'orage, et ils causaient sous un parapluie à la lueur des éclairs.

Leur séparation devenait intolérable.

— Plutôt mourir ! disait Emma.

Elle se tordait sur son bras, tout en pleurant.

— Adieu !... adieu !... Quand te reverrai-je ?

Ils revinrent sur leurs pas pour s'embrasser encore ; et ce fut là qu'elle lui fit la promesse de trouver bientôt, par n'importe quel moyen, l'occasion permanente de se voir en liberté, au moins une fois la semaine. Emma n'en doutait pas. Elle était, d'ailleurs, pleine d'espoir. Il allait lui venir de l'argent.

Aussi, elle acheta pour sa chambre une paire de rideaux jaunes à larges raies, dont M. Lheureux lui avait vanté le bon marché ; elle rêva un tapis, et Lheureux, affirmant « que ce n'était pas la mer à boire », s'engagea poliment à lui en fournir un. Elle ne pouvait plus se passer de ses services. Vingt fois dans la journée elle l'envoyait chercher, et aussitôt il plantait là ses affaires, sans se permettre un murmure. On ne comprenait point davantage pourquoi la mère Rolet déjeunait chez elle tous les jours, et même lui faisait des visites en particulier.

Ce fut vers cette époque, c'est-à-dire vers le commencement de l'hiver, qu'elle parut prise d'une grande ardeur musicale.

Un soir que Charles l'écoutait, elle recommença quatre fois de suite le même morceau, et toujours en se dépitant, tandis que, sans y remarquer de différence, il s'écriait :

— Bravo !..., très bien !... Tu as tort ! va donc !

— Eh non ! c'est exécrable ! j'ai les doigts rouillés.

Le lendemain, il la pria *de lui jouer encore quelque chose*.

— Soit, pour te faire plaisir !

Et Charles avoua qu'elle avait un peu perdu. Elle se trompait de portée, barbouillait ; puis, s'arrêtant court :

— Ah ! c'est fini ! il faudrait que je prisse des leçons ; mais...

Elle se mordit les lèvres et ajouta :

— Vingt francs par cachet, c'est trop cher !

— Oui, en effet..., un peu..., dit Charles tout en ricanant niaisement. Pourtant, il me semble que l'on pourrait peut-être à moins ; car il y a des artistes sans réputation qui souvent valent mieux que les célébrités.

— Cherche-les, dit Emma.

Le lendemain, en rentrant, il la contempla d'un oeil finaud, et ne put à la fin retenir cette phrase :

— Quel entêtement tu as quelquefois ! J'ai été à Barfeuchères aujourd'hui. Eh bien, madame Liégeard m'a certifié que ses trois demoiselles, qui sont à la Miséricorde, prenaient des leçons moyennant cinquante sous la séance, et d'une fameuse maîtresse encore !

Elle haussa les épaules, et ne rouvrit plus son instrument.

Mais, lorsqu'elle passait auprès (si Bovary se trouvait là), elle soupirait :

— Ah ! mon pauvre piano !

Et quand on venait la voir, elle ne manquait pas de vous apprendre qu'elle avait abandonné la musique et ne pouvait maintenant s'y remettre, pour des raisons majeures. Alors on la plaignait. C'était dommage ! elle qui avait un si beau talent ! On en parla même à Bovary. On lui faisait honte, et surtout le pharmacien :

— Vous avez tort ! il ne faut jamais laisser en friche les facultés de la nature. D'ailleurs, songez, mon bon ami, qu'en engageant Madame à étudier, vous économisez pour plus tard sur l'éducation musicale de votre enfant ! Moi, je trouve que les mères doivent instruire elles-mêmes leurs enfants. C'est une idée de Rousseau, peut-être un peu neuve encore, mais qui finira par triompher, j'en suis sûr, comme l'allaitement maternel et la vaccination.

Charles revint donc encore une fois sur cette question du piano. Emma répondit avec aigreur qu'il valait mieux le vendre. Ce pauvre piano, qui lui avait causé tant de vaniteuses satisfactions, le voir s'en aller, c'était pour Bovary comme l'indéfinissable suicide d'une partie d'elle-même !

— Si tu voulais..., disait-il, de temps à autre, une leçon, cela ne serait pas, après tout, extrêmement ruineux.

— Mais les leçons, répliquait-elle, ne sont profitables que suivies.

Et voilà comme elle s'y prit pour obtenir de son époux la permission d'aller à la ville, une fois la semaine, voir son amant. On trouva même, au bout d'un mois, qu'elle avait fait des progrès considérables.

V

C'était le jeudi. Elle se levait, et elle s'habillait silencieusement pour ne point éveiller Charles, qui lui aurait fait des observations sur ce qu'elle s'apprêtait de trop bonne heure. Ensuite elle marchait de long en large ; elle se mettait devant les fenêtres, elle regardait la Place. Le petit jour circulait entre les piliers des halles, et la maison du pharmacien, dont les volets étaient fermés, laissait apercevoir dans la couleur pâle de l'aurore les majuscules de son enseigne.

Quand la pendule marquait sept heures et un quart, elle s'en allait au *Lion d'or*, dont Artémise, en bâillant, venait lui ouvrir la porte. Celle-ci déterrait pour Madame les charbons enfouis sous les cendres. Emma restait seule dans la cuisine. De temps à autre, elle sortait. Hivert attelait sans se dépêcher, et en écoutant d'ailleurs la mère Lefrançois, qui, passant par un guichet sa tête en bonnet de coton, le chargeait de commissions et lui donnait des explications à troubler un tout autre homme. Emma battait la semelle de ses bottines contre les pavés de la cour.

Enfin, lorsqu'il avait mangé sa soupe, endossé sa limousine, allumé sa pipe et empoigné son fouet, il s'installait tranquillement sur le siège.

L'*Hirondelle* partait au petit trot, et, durant trois quarts de lieue, s'arrêtait de place en place pour prendre des voyageurs, qui la guettaient debout, au bord du chemin, devant la barrière des cours. Ceux qui avaient prévenu la veille se faisaient attendre ; quelques-uns même étaient encore au lit dans leur maison ; Hivert appelait, criait, sacrait, puis il descendait de son siège et allait frapper de grands coups contre les portes. Le vent soufflait par les vasistas fêlés.

Cependant les quatre banquettes se garnissaient, la voiture roulait, les pommiers à la file se succédaient ; et la route, entre ses deux longs fossés pleins d'eau jaune, allait continuellement se rétrécissant vers l'horizon.

Emma la connaissait d'un bout à l'autre ; elle savait qu'après un herbage il y avait un poteau, ensuite un orme, une grange ou une cahute de cantonnier ; quelquefois même, afin de se faire des surprises, elle fermait les yeux. Mais elle ne perdait jamais le sentiment net de la distance à parcourir.

Enfin, les maisons de briques se rapprochaient, la terre résonnait sous les roues, l'*Hirondelle* glissait entre des jardins où l'on apercevait, par une claire-voie, des statues, un vignot, des ifs taillés et une escarpolette. Puis, d'un seul coup d'oeil, la ville apparaissait.

Descendant tout en amphithéâtre et noyée dans le brouillard, elle s'élargissait au delà des ponts, confusément. La pleine campagne remontait ensuite d'un mouvement monotone, jusqu'à toucher au loin la base indécise du ciel pâle. Ainsi vu d'en haut, le paysage tout entier avait l'air immobile comme une peinture ; les navires à l'ancre se tassaient dans un coin ; le fleuve arrondissait sa courbe au pied des collines vertes, et les îles, de forme oblongue, semblaient sur l'eau de grands poissons noirs arrêtés. Les cheminées des usines poussaient d'immenses panaches bruns qui s'envolaient par le bout. On entendait le ronflement des fonderies avec le carillon clair des églises qui se dressaient dans la brume. Les arbres des boulevards, sans feuilles, faisaient des broussailles violettes au milieu des maisons, et les toits, tout reluisants de pluie, miroitaient inégalement, selon la hauteur des quartiers. Parfois un coup de vent emportait les nuages vers la côte Sainte-Catherine, comme des flots aériens qui se brisaient en silence contre une falaise.

Quelque chose de vertigineux se dégageait pour elle de ces existences amassées, et son coeur s'en gonflait abondamment, comme si les cent vingt mille âmes qui palpitaient là lui eussent envoyé toutes à la fois la vapeur des passions qu'elle leur supposait. Son amour s'agrandissait devant l'espace, et s'emplissait de tumulte aux bourdonnements vagues qui montaient. Elle le reversait au dehors, sur les places, sur les promenades, sur les rues, et la vieille cité normande s'étalait à ses yeux comme une capitale démesurée, comme une Babylone où elle entrait. Elle se penchait des deux mains par le vasistas, en humant la brise ; les trois chevaux galopaient, les pierres grinçaient dans la boue, la diligence se balançait, et Hivert, de loin, hélait les carrioles sur la route, tandis que les bourgeois qui avaient passé la nuit au bois Guillaume descendaient la côte tranquillement, dans leur petite voiture de famille.

On s'arrêtait à la barrière ; Emma débouclait ses socques, mettait d'autres gants, rajustait son châle, et, vingt pas plus loin, elle sortait de *l'Hirondelle*.

La ville alors s'éveillait. Des commis, en bonnet grec, frottaient la devanture des boutiques, et des femmes qui tenaient des paniers sur la hanche poussaient par intervalles un cri sonore, au coin des rues. Elle marchait les yeux à terre, frôlant les murs, et souriant de plaisir sous son voile noir baissé.

Par peur d'être vue, elle ne prenait pas ordinairement le chemin le plus court. Elle s'engouffrait dans les ruelles sombres, et elle arrivait tout en sueur vers le bas de la rue Nationale, près de la fontaine qui est là. C'est le quartier du théâtre, des estaminets et des filles. Souvent une charrette passait près d'elle, portant quelque décor qui tremblait. Des garçons en tablier versaient du sable sur les dalles, entre des arbustes verts. On sentait l'absinthe, le cigare et les huîtres.

Elle tournait une rue ; elle le reconnaissait à sa chevelure frisée qui s'échappait de son chapeau.

Léon, sur le trottoir, continuait à marcher. Elle le suivait jusqu'à l'hôtel ; il montait, il ouvrait la porte, il entrait... Quelle étreinte !

Puis les paroles, après les baisers, se précipitaient. On se racontait les chagrins de la semaine, les pressentiments, les inquiétudes pour les lettres ; mais à présent tout s'oubliait, et ils se regardaient face à face, avec des rires de volupté et des appellations de tendresse.

Le lit était un grand lit d'acajou en forme de nacelle. Les rideaux de levantine rouge, qui descendaient du plafond, se cintraient trop bas vers le chevet évasé ; – et rien au monde n'était beau comme sa tête brune et sa peau blanche se détachant sur cette couleur pourpre, quand, par un geste de pudeur, elle fermait ses deux bras nus, en se cachant la figure dans les mains.

Le tiède appartement, avec son tapis discret, ses ornements folâtres et sa lumière tranquille, semblait tout commode pour les intimités de la passion. Les bâtons se terminant en flèche, les patères de cuivre et les grosses boules de chenets reluisaient tout à coup, si le soleil entrait. Il y avait sur la cheminée, entre les candélabres, deux de ces grandes coquilles roses où l'on entend le bruit de la mer quand on les applique à son oreille.

Comme ils aimaient cette bonne chambre pleine de gaieté, malgré sa splendeur un peu fanée ! Ils retrouvaient toujours les meubles à leur place, et parfois des épingles à cheveux qu'elle avait oubliées, l'autre jeudi, sous le socle de la pendule. Ils déjeunaient au coin du feu, sur un petit guéridon incrusté de palissandre. Emma découpait, lui mettait les morceaux dans son assiette en débitant toutes sortes de chatteries ; et elle riait d'un rire sonore et libertin quand la mousse du vin de Champagne débordait du verre léger sur les bagues de ses doigts. Ils étaient si complètement perdus en la possession d'eux-mêmes, qu'ils se croyaient là dans leur maison particulière, et devant y vivre jusqu'à la mort, comme deux éternels jeunes époux. Ils disaient : notre chambre, notre tapis, nos fauteuils, même elle disait : mes pantoufles, un cadeau de Léon, une fantaisie qu'elle avait eue. C'étaient des pantoufles en satin rose, bordées de cygne. Quand elle s'asseyait sur ses genoux, sa jambe, alors trop courte, pendait en l'air ; et la mignarde chaussure, qui n'avait pas de quartier, tenait seulement par les orteils à son pied nu.

Il savourait pour la première fois l'inexprimable délicatesse des élégances féminines. Jamais il n'avait rencontré cette grâce de langage, cette réserve du vêtement, ces poses de colombe assoupie. Il admirait l'exaltation de son âme et les dentelles de sa jupe. D'ailleurs, n'était-ce pas *une femme du monde,* et une femme mariée ! une vraie maîtresse enfin ?

Par la diversité de son humeur, tour à tour mystique ou joyeuse, babillarde, taciturne, emportée, nonchalante, elle allait rappelant en lui mille désirs, évoquant des instincts ou des réminiscences. Elle était l'amoureuse de tous les romans, l'héroïne de tous les drames, le vague *elle* de tous les volumes de vers. Il retrouvait sur ses épaules la couleur ambrée de *l'odalisque au bain* ; elle avait le corsage long des châtelaines féodales ; elle ressemblait aussi à la *femme pâle de Barcelone*, mais elle était par-dessus tout Ange !

Souvent, en la regardant, il lui semblait que son âme, s'échappant vers elle, se répandait comme une onde sur le contour de sa tête, et descendait entraînée dans la blancheur de sa poitrine.

Il se mettait par terre, devant elle ; et, les deux coudes sur ses genoux, il la considérait avec un sourire, et le front tendu.

Elle se penchait vers lui et murmurait, comme suffoquée d'enivrement :

— Oh ! ne bouge pas ! ne parle pas ! regarde-moi ! Il sort de tes yeux quelque chose de si doux, qui me fait tant de bien !

Elle l'appelait enfant :

— Enfant, m'aimes-tu ?

Et elle n'entendait guère sa réponse, dans la précipitation de ses lèvres qui lui montaient à la bouche.

Il y avait sur la pendule un petit Cupidon de bronze, qui minaudait en arrondissant les bras sous une guirlande dorée. Ils en rirent bien des fois ; mais, quand il fallait se séparer, tout leur semblait sérieux.

Immobiles l'un devant l'autre, ils se répétaient :

— À jeudi !... à jeudi !

Tout à coup elle lui prenait la tête dans les deux mains, le baisait vite au front en s'écriant : « Adieu ! » et s'élançait dans l'escalier.

Elle allait rue de la Comédie, chez un coiffeur, se faire arranger ses bandeaux. La nuit tombait ; on allumait le gaz dans la boutique.

Elle entendait la clochette du théâtre qui appelait les cabotins à la représentation ; et elle voyait, en face, passer des hommes à figure blanche et des femmes en toilette fanée, qui entraient par la porte des coulisses.

Il faisait chaud dans ce petit appartement trop bas, où le poêle bourdonnait au milieu des perruques et des pommades. L'odeur des fers, avec ces mains grasses qui lui maniaient la tête, ne tardait pas à l'étourdir, et elle s'endormait un peu sous son peignoir. Souvent le garçon, en la coiffant, lui proposait des billets pour le bal masqué.

Puis elle s'en allait ! Elle remontait les rues ; elle arrivait à la *Croix rouge* ; elle reprenait ses socques, qu'elle avait cachés le matin sous une banquette, et se tassait à sa place parmi les voyageurs impatientés. Quelques-uns descendaient au bas de la côte. Elle restait seule dans la voiture.

À chaque tournant, on apercevait de plus en plus tous les éclairages de la ville qui faisaient une large vapeur lumineuse au-dessus des maisons confondues. Emma se mettait à genoux sur les coussins, et elle égarait ses yeux dans cet éblouissement. Elle sanglotait, appelait Léon, et lui envoyait des paroles tendres et des baisers qui se perdaient au vent.

Il y avait dans la côte un pauvre diable vagabondant avec son bâton, tout au milieu des diligences. Un amas de guenilles lui recouvrait les épaules, et un vieux castor défoncé, s'arrondissant en cuvette, lui cachait la figure ; mais, quand il le retirait, il découvrait, à la place des paupières, deux orbites béantes tout ensanglantées. La chair s'effiloquait par lambeaux rouges ; et il en coulait des liquides qui se figeaient en gales vertes jusqu'au nez, dont les narines noires reniflaient convulsivement. Pour vous parler, il se renversait la tête avec un rire idiot ; – alors ses prunelles bleuâtres, roulant d'un mouvement continu, allaient se cogner, vers les tempes, sur le bord de la plaie vive.

Il chantait une petite chanson en suivant les voitures :

Souvent la chaleur d'un beau jour
Fait rêver fillette à l'amour.

Et il y avait dans tout le reste des oiseaux, du soleil et du feuillage.

Quelquefois, il apparaissait tout à coup derrière Emma, tête nue. Elle se retirait avec un cri. Hivert venait le plaisanter. Il l'engageait à prendre une baraque à la foire Saint-Romain, ou bien lui demandait, en riant, comment se portait sa bonne amie.

Souvent, on était en marche, lorsque son chapeau, d'un mouvement brusque entrait dans la diligence par le vasistas, tandis qu'il se cramponnait, de l'autre bras, sur le marchepied, entre l'éclaboussure des roues. Sa voix, faible d'abord et vagissante, devenait aiguë. Elle se traînait dans la nuit, comme l'indistincte lamentation d'une vague détresse ; et, à travers la sonnerie des grelots, le murmure des arbres et le ronflement de la boîte creuse, elle avait quelque chose de lointain qui bouleversait Emma. Cela lui descendait au fond de l'âme comme un tourbillon dans un abîme, et l'emportait parmi les espaces d'une mélancolie sans bornes. Mais Hivert, qui s'apercevait d'un contrepoids, allongeait à l'aveugle de grands coups avec son fouet. La mèche le cinglait sur ses plaies, et il tombait dans la boue en poussant un hurlement.

Puis les voyageurs de *l'Hirondelle* finissaient par s'endormir, les uns la bouche ouverte, les autres le menton baissé, s'appuyant sur l'épaule de leur voisin, ou bien le bras passé dans la courroie, tout en oscillant régulièrement au branle de la voiture ; et le reflet de la lanterne qui se balançait en dehors, sur la croupe des limoniers, pénétrant dans l'intérieur par les rideaux de calicot chocolat, posait des ombres sanguinolentes sur tous ces individus immobiles. Emma, ivre de tristesse, grelottait sous ses vêtements ; et se sentait de plus en plus froid aux pieds, avec la mort dans l'âme.

Charles, à la maison, l'attendait ; l'*Hirondelle* était toujours en retard le jeudi. Madame arrivait enfin ! à peine si elle embrassait la petite. Le dîner n'était pas prêt, n'importe ! elle excusait la cuisinière. Tout maintenant semblait permis à cette fille.

Souvent son mari, remarquant sa pâleur, lui demandait si elle ne se trouvait point malade.

— Non, disait Emma.

— Mais, répliquait-il, tu es toute drôle ce soir ?

— Eh ! ce n'est rien ! ce n'est rien !

Il y avait même des jours où, à peine rentrée, elle montait dans sa chambre ; et Justin, qui se trouvait là, circulait à pas muets, plus ingénieux à la servir qu'une excellente cameriste. Il plaçait les allumettes, le bougeoir, un livre, disposait sa camisole, ouvrait les draps.

— Allons, disait-elle, c'est bien, va-t'en !

Car il restait debout, les mains pendantes et les yeux ouverts, comme enlacé dans les fils innombrables d'une rêverie soudaine.

La journée du lendemain était affreuse, et les suivantes étaient plus intolérables encore par l'impatience qu'avait Emma de ressaisir son bonheur, – convoitise âpre, enflammée d'images connues, et qui, le septième jour, éclatait tout à l'aise dans les caresses de Léon. Ses ardeurs, à lui, se cachaient sous des expansions d'émerveillement et de reconnaissance. Emma goûtait cet amour d'une façon discrète et absorbée, l'entretenait par tous les artifices de sa tendresse, et tremblait un peu qu'il ne se perdît plus tard.

Souvent elle lui disait, avec des douceurs de voix mélancolique :

— Ah ! tu me quitteras, toi !… tu te marieras !... tu seras comme les autres.

Il demandait :

— Quels autres ?

— Mais les hommes, enfin, répondait-elle.

Puis, elle ajoutait en le repoussant d'un geste langoureux :

— Vous êtes tous des infâmes !

Un jour qu'ils causaient philosophiquement des désillusions terrestres, elle vint à dire (pour expérimenter sa jalousie ou cédant peut-être à un besoin d'épanchement trop fort) qu'autrefois, avant lui, elle avait aimé quelqu'un, « pas comme toi ! » reprit-elle vite, protestant sur la tête de sa fille *qu'il ne s'était rien passé.*

Le jeune homme la crut, et néanmoins la questionna pour savoir ce qu'il faisait.

— Il était capitaine de vaisseau, mon ami.

N'était-ce pas prévenir toute recherche, et en même temps se poser très haut, par cette prétendue fascination exercée sur un homme qui devait être de nature belliqueuse et accoutumé à des hommages ?

Le clerc sentit alors l'infimité de sa position ; il envia des épaulettes, des croix, des titres. Tout cela devait lui plaire : il s'en doutait à ses habitudes dispendieuses.

Cependant Emma taisait quantité de ses extravagances, telle que l'envie d'avoir, pour l'amener à Rouen, un tilbury bleu, attelé d'un cheval anglais, et conduit par un groom en bottes à revers. C'était Justin qui lui en avait inspiré le caprice, en la suppliant de le prendre chez elle comme valet de chambre ; et, si cette privation n'atténuait pas à chaque rendez-vous le plaisir de l'arrivée, elle augmentait certainement l'amertume du retour.

Souvent lorsqu'ils parlaient ensemble de Paris, elle finissait par murmurer :

— Ah ! que nous serions bien là pour vivre !

— Ne sommes-nous pas heureux ? reprenait doucement le jeune homme, en lui passant la main sur ses bandeaux.

— Oui, c'est vrai, disait-elle, je suis folle ; embrasse-moi !

Elle était pour son mari plus charmante que jamais, lui faisait des crèmes à la pistache et jouait des valses après dîner. Il se trouvait donc le plus fortuné des mortels, et Emma vivait sans inquiétude, lorsqu'un soir, tout à coup :

— C'est mademoiselle Lempereur, n'est-ce pas, qui te donne des leçons ?

— Oui.

— Eh bien, je l'ai vue tantôt, reprit Charles, chez madame Liégeard. Je lui ai parlé de toi ; elle ne te connaît pas.

Ce fut comme un coup de foudre. Cependant elle répliqua d'un air naturel :

— Ah ! sans doute, elle aura oublié mon nom ?

— Mais il y a peut-être à Rouen, dit le médecin, plusieurs demoiselles Lempereur qui sont maîtresses de piano ?

— C'est possible !

Puis, vivement :

— J'ai pourtant ses reçus, tiens ! regarde.

Et elle alla au secrétaire, fouilla tous les tiroirs, confondit les papiers et finit si bien par perdre la tête, que Charles l'engagea fort à ne point se donner tant de mal pour ces misérables quittances.

— Oh ! je les trouverai, dit-elle.

En effet, dès le vendredi suivant, Charles, en passant une de ses bottes dans le cabinet noir où l'on serrait ses habits, sentit une feuille de papier entre le cuir et sa chaussette, il la prit et lut :

« Reçu, pour trois mois de leçons, plus diverses fournitures, la somme de soixante-cinq francs. FÉLICIE LEMPEREUR, professeur de musique. »

— Comment diable est-ce dans mes bottes ?

— Ce sera, sans doute, répondit-elle, tombé du vieux carton aux factures, qui est sur le bord de la planche.

À partir de ce moment, son existence ne fut plus qu'un assemblage de mensonges, où elle enveloppait son amour comme dans des voiles, pour le cacher.

C'était un besoin, une manie, un plaisir, au point que, si elle disait avoir passé, hier par le côté droit d'une rue, il fallait croire qu'elle avait pris par le côté gauche.

Un matin qu'elle venait de partir, selon sa coutume, assez légèrement vêtue, il tomba de la neige tout à coup ; et comme Charles regardait le temps à la fenêtre, il aperçut M. Bournisien dans le *boc* du sieur Tuvache qui le conduisait à Rouen. Alors il descendit confier à l'ecclésiastique un gros châle pour qu'il le remît à Madame, sitôt qu'il arriverait à la *Croix rouge*. À peine fut-il à l'auberge que Bournisien demanda où était la femme du médecin d'Yonville. L'hôtelière répondit qu'elle fréquentait fort peu son établissement. Aussi, le soir, en reconnaissant madame Bovary dans l'*Hirondelle*, le curé lui conta son embarras, sans paraître, du reste y attacher de l'importance ; car il entama l'éloge d'un prédicateur qui pour lors faisait merveilles à la cathédrale, et que toutes les dames couraient entendre.

N'importe s'il n'avait point demandé d'explications, d'autres plus tard pourraient se montrer moins discrets. Aussi jugea-t-elle utile de descendre chaque fois à la *Croix rouge*, de sorte que les bonnes gens de son village qui la voyaient dans l'escalier ne se doutaient de rien.

Un jour pourtant, M. Lheureux la rencontra qui sortait de *l'hôtel de Boulogne* au bras de Léon ; et elle eut peur, s'imaginant qu'il bavarderait. Il n'était pas si bête.

Mais trois jours après, il entra dans sa chambre, ferma la porte et dit :

— J'aurais besoin d'argent.

Elle déclara ne pouvoir lui en donner. Lheureux se répandit en gémissements, et rappela toutes les complaisances qu'il avait eues.

En effet, des deux billets souscrits par Charles, Emma jusqu'à présent n'en avait payé qu'un seul. Quant au second, le marchand, sur sa prière, avait consenti à le remplacer par deux autres, qui même avaient été renouvelés à une fort longue échéance. Puis il tira de sa poche une liste de fournitures non soldées, à savoir : les rideaux, le tapis, l'étoffe pour les fauteuils, plusieurs robes et divers articles de toilette, dont la valeur se montait à la somme de deux mille francs environ.

Elle baissa la tête ; il reprit :

— Mais, si vous n'avez pas d'espèces, vous avez *du bien*.

Et il indiqua une méchante masure sise à Barneville, près d'Aumale, qui ne rapportait pas grand-chose. Cela dépendait autrefois d'une petite ferme vendue par M. Bovary père, car Lheureux savait tout, jusqu'à la contenance d'hectares, avec le nom des voisins.

— Moi, à votre place, disait-il, je me libérerais, et j'aurais encore le surplus de l'argent.

Elle objecta la difficulté d'un acquéreur ; il donna l'espoir d'en trouver ; mais elle demanda comment faire pour qu'elle pût vendre.

— N'avez-vous pas la procuration ? répondit-il.

Ce mot lui arriva comme une bouffée d'air frais.

— Laissez-moi la note, dit Emma.

— Oh ! ce n'est pas la peine ! reprit Lheureux.

Il revint la semaine suivante, et se vanta d'avoir, après force démarches, fini par découvrir un certain Langlois qui, depuis longtemps, guignait la propriété sans faire connaître son prix.

— N'importe le prix ! s'écria-t-elle.

Il fallait attendre, au contraire, tâter ce gaillard-là. La chose valait la peine d'un voyage, et, comme elle ne pouvait faire ce voyage, il offrit de se rendre sur les lieux, pour s'aboucher avec Langlois. Une fois revenu, il annonça que l'acquéreur proposait quatre mille francs.

Emma s'épanouit à cette nouvelle.

— Franchement, ajouta-t-il, c'est bien payé.

Elle toucha la moitié de la somme immédiatement, et, quand elle fut pour solder son mémoire, le marchand lui dit :

— Cela me fait de la peine, parole d'honneur, de vous voir vous dessaisir tout d'un coup d'une somme aussi *conséquente* que celle-là.

Alors, elle regarda les billets de banque ; et, rêvant au nombre illimité de rendez-vous que ces deux mille francs représentaient :

— Comment ! comment ! balbutia-t-elle.

— Oh ! reprit-il en riant d'un air bonhomme, on met tout ce que l'on veut sur les factures. Est-ce que je ne connais pas les ménages ?

Et il la considérait fixement, tout en tenant à sa main deux longs papiers qu'il faisait glisser entre ses ongles. Enfin, ouvrant son portefeuille, il étala sur la table quatre billets à ordre, de mille francs chacun.

— Signez-moi cela, dit-il, et gardez tout.

Elle se récria, scandalisée.

— Mais, si je vous donne le surplus, répondit effrontément M. Lheureux, n'est-ce pas vous rendre service, à vous ?

Et, prenant une plume, il écrivit au bas du mémoire : « Reçu de madame Bovary quatre mille francs. »

— Qui vous inquiète, puisque vous toucherez dans six mois l'arriéré de votre baraque, et que je vous place l'échéance du dernier billet pour après le payement ?

Emma s'embarrassait un peu dans ses calculs, et les oreilles lui tintaient comme si des pièces d'or, s'éventrant de leurs sacs, eussent sonné tout autour d'elle sur le parquet. Enfin Lheureux expliqua qu'il avait un sien ami Vinçart, banquier à Rouen, lequel allait escompter ces quatre billets, puis il remettrait lui-même à Madame le surplus de la dette réelle.

Mais au lieu de deux mille francs, il n'en apporta que dix-huit cents, car l'ami Vinçart (comme *de juste*) en avait prélevé deux cents, pour frais de commission et d'escompte.

Puis il réclama négligemment une quittance.

— Vous comprenez..., dans le commerce..., quelquefois... Et avec la date, s'il vous plaît, la date.

Un horizon de fantaisies réalisables s'ouvrit alors devant Emma. Elle eut assez de prudence pour mettre en réserve mille écus, avec quoi furent payés, lorsqu'ils échurent, les trois premiers billets ; mais le quatrième, par hasard, tomba dans la maison un jeudi, et Charles, bouleversé, attendit patiemment le retour de sa femme pour avoir des explications.

Si elle ne l'avait point instruit de ce billet, c'était afin de lui épargner des tracas domestiques ; elle s'assit sur ses genoux, le caressa, roucoula, fit une longue énumération de toutes les choses indispensables prises à crédit.

— Enfin, tu conviendras que, vu la quantité, ce n'est pas trop cher.

Charles, à bout d'idées, bientôt eut recours à l'éternel Lheureux, qui jura de calmer les choses, si Monsieur lui signait deux billets, dont l'un de sept cents francs, payable dans trois mois. Pour se mettre en mesure, il écrivit à sa mère une lettre pathétique. Au lieu d'envoyer la réponse, elle vint elle-même ; et, quand Emma voulut savoir s'il en avait tiré quelque chose :

— Oui, répondit-il. Mais elle demande à connaître la facture.

Le lendemain, au point du jour, Emma courut chez M. Lheureux le prier de refaire une autre note, qui ne dépassât point mille francs ; car pour montrer celle de quatre mille, il eût fallu dire qu'elle en avait payé les deux tiers, avouer conséquemment la vente de l'immeuble, négociation bien conduite par le marchand, et qui ne fut effectivement connue que plus tard.

Malgré le prix très bas de chaque article, madame Bovary mère ne manqua point de trouver la dépense exagérée.

— Ne pouvait-on se passer d'un tapis ? Pourquoi avoir renouvelé l'étoffe des fauteuils ? De mon temps, on avait dans une maison un seul fauteuil, pour les personnes âgées, – du moins, c'était comme cela chez ma mère, qui était une honnête femme, je vous assure.

— Tout le monde ne peut être riche ! Aucune fortune ne tient contre le coulage ! Je rougirais de me dorloter comme vous faites ! et pourtant, moi, je suis vieille, j'ai besoin de soins... En voilà ! en voilà, des ajustements ! des flaflas ! Comment ! de la soie pour doublure, à deux francs !... tandis qu'on trouve du jaconas à dix sous, et même à huit sous qui fait parfaitement l'affaire.

Emma, renversée sur la causeuse, répliquait le plus tranquillement possible :

— Eh ! madame, assez ! assez !....

L'autre continuait à la sermonner, prédisant qu'ils finiraient à l'hôpital. D'ailleurs, c'était la faute de Bovary. Heureusement qu'il avait promis d'anéantir cette procuration...

— Comment ?

— Ah ! il me l'a juré, reprit la bonne femme.

Emma ouvrit la fenêtre, appela Charles, et le pauvre garçon fut contraint d'avouer la parole arrachée par sa mère.

Emma disparut, puis rentra vite en lui tendant majestueusement une grosse feuille de papier.

— Je vous remercie, dit la vieille femme.

Et elle jeta dans le feu la procuration.

Emma se mit à rire d'un rire strident, éclatant, continu : elle avait une attaque de nerfs.

— Ah ! mon Dieu ! s'écria Charles. Eh ! tu as tort aussi toi ! tu viens lui faire des scènes !...

Sa mère, en haussant les épaules, prétendait que *tout cela c'étaient des gestes.*

Mais Charles, pour la première fois se révoltant, prit la défense de sa femme, si bien que madame Bovary mère voulut s'en aller. Elle partit dès le lendemain, et, sur le seuil, comme il essayait à la retenir, elle répliqua :

— Non, non ! Tu l'aimes mieux que moi, et tu as raison, c'est dans l'ordre. Au reste, tant pis ! tu verras !... Bonne santé !... car je ne suis pas près, comme tu dis, de venir lui faire des scènes.

Charles n'en resta pas moins fort penaud vis-à-vis d'Emma, celle-ci ne cachant point la rancune qu'elle lui gardait pour avoir manqué de confiance ; il fallut bien des prières avant qu'elle consentît à reprendre sa procuration, et même il l'accompagna chez M. Guillaumin pour lui en faire faire une seconde, toute pareille.

— Je comprends cela, dit le notaire ; un homme de science ne peut s'embarrasser aux détails pratiques de la vie.

Et Charles se sentit soulagé par cette réflexion pateline, qui donnait à sa faiblesse les apparences flatteuses d'une préoccupation supérieure.

Quel débordement, le jeudi d'après, à l'hôtel, dans leur chambre, avec Léon ! Elle rit, pleura, chanta, dansa, fit monter des sorbets, voulut fumer des cigarettes, lui parut extravagante, mais adorable, superbe.

Il ne savait pas quelle réaction de tout son être la poussait davantage à se précipiter sur les jouissances de la vie. Elle devenait irritable, gourmande, et voluptueuse ; et elle se promenait avec lui dans les rues, tête haute, sans peur, disait-elle, de se compromettre. Parfois, cependant, Emma tressaillait à l'idée soudaine de rencontrer Rodolphe ; car il lui semblait, bien qu'ils fussent séparés pour toujours, qu'elle n'était pas complètement affranchie de sa dépendance.

Un soir, elle ne rentra point à Yonville. Charles en perdait la tête, et la petite Berthe, ne voulant pas se coucher sans sa maman, sanglotait à se rompre la poitrine. Justin était parti au hasard sur la route. M. Homais en avait quitté sa pharmacie.

Enfin, à onze heures, n'y tenant plus, Charles attela son *boc*, sauta dedans, fouetta sa bête et arriva vers deux heures du matin à la *Croix rouge*. Personne. Il pensa que le clerc peut-être l'avait vue ; mais où demeurait-il ? Charles, heureusement, se rappela l'adresse de son patron. Il y courut.

Le jour commençait à paraître. Il distingua des panonceaux au-dessus d'une porte ; il frappa. Quelqu'un, sans ouvrir, lui cria le renseignement demandé, tout en ajoutant force injures contre ceux qui dérangeaient le monde pendant la nuit.

La maison que le clerc habitait n'avait ni sonnette, ni marteau, ni portier. Charles donna de grands coups de poing contre les auvents. Un agent de police vint à passer ; alors il eut peur et s'en alla.

— Je suis fou, se disait-il ; sans doute, on l'aura retenue à dîner chez M. Lormeaux.

La famille Lormeaux n'habitait plus Rouen.

— Elle sera restée à soigner madame Dubreuil. Eh ! madame Dubreuil est morte depuis dix mois !... Où est-elle donc ?

Une idée lui vint. Il demanda, dans un café, l'*Annuaire* ; et chercha vite le nom de mademoiselle Lempereur, qui demeurait rue de la Renelle-des-Maroquiniers, n° 74.

Comme il entrait dans cette rue, Emma parut elle-même à l'autre bout ; il se jeta sur elle plutôt qu'il ne l'embrassa, en s'écriant :

— Qui t'a retenue hier ?

— J'ai été malade.

— Et de quoi ?... Où ?... Comment ?...

Elle se passa la main sur le front, et répondit :

— Chez mademoiselle Lempereur.

— J'en étais sûr ! J'y allais.

— Oh ! ce n'est pas la peine, dit Emma. Elle vient de sortir tout à l'heure ; mais, à l'avenir, tranquillise-toi. Je ne suis pas libre, tu comprends, si je sais que le moindre retard te bouleverse ainsi.

C'était une manière de permission qu'elle se donnait de ne point se gêner dans ses escapades. Aussi en profita-t-elle tout à son aise, largement. Lorsque l'envie la prenait de voir Léon, elle partait sous n'importe quel prétexte, et, comme il ne l'attendait pas ce jour-là, elle allait le chercher à son étude.

Ce fut un grand bonheur les premières fois ; mais bientôt il ne cacha plus la vérité, à savoir : que son patron se plaignait fort de ces dérangements.

— Ah bah ! viens donc, disait-elle.

Et il s'esquivait.

Elle voulut qu'il se vêtît tout en noir et se laissât pousser une pointe au menton, pour ressembler aux portraits de Louis XIII. Elle désira connaître son logement, le trouva médiocre ; il en rougit, elle n'y prit garde, puis lui conseilla d'acheter des rideaux pareils aux siens, et comme il objectait la dépense :

— Ah ! ah ! tu tiens à tes petits écus ! dit-elle en riant.

Il fallait que Léon, chaque fois, lui racontât toute sa conduite, depuis le dernier rendez-vous. Elle demanda des vers, des vers pour elle, *une pièce d'amour* en son honneur ; jamais il ne put parvenir à trouver la rime du second vers, et il finit par copier un sonnet dans un keepsake.

Ce fut moins par vanité que dans le seul but de lui complaire. Il ne discutait pas ses idées ; il acceptait tous ses goûts ; il devenait sa maîtresse plutôt qu'elle n'était la sienne. Elle avait des paroles tendres avec des baisers qui lui emportaient l'âme. Où donc avait-elle appris cette corruption, presque immatérielle à force d'être profonde et dissimulée ?

VI

Dans les voyages qu'il faisait pour la voir, Léon souvent avait dîné chez le pharmacien, et s'était cru contraint, par politesse, de l'inviter à son tour.

— Volontiers ! avait répondu M. Homais ; il faut, d'ailleurs, que je me retrempe un peu, car je m'encroûte ici. Nous irons au spectacle, au restaurant, nous ferons des folies !

— Ah ! bon ami ! murmura tendrement madame Homais, effrayée des périls vagues qu'il se disposait à courir.

— Eh bien, quoi ? tu trouves que je ne ruine pas assez ma santé à vivre parmi les émanations continuelles de la pharmacie ! Voilà, du reste, le caractère des femmes : elles sont jalouses de la Science, puis s'opposent à ce que l'on prenne les plus légitimes distractions. N'importe, comptez sur moi ; un de ces jours, je tombe à Rouen et nous ferons sauter ensemble les monacos.

L'apothicaire, autrefois, se fût bien gardé d'une telle expression ; mais il donnait maintenant dans un genre folâtre et parisien qu'il trouvait du meilleur goût ; et, comme madame Bovary, sa voisine, il interrogeait le clerc curieusement sur les moeurs de la capitale, même il parlait argot afin d'éblouir... les bourgeois, disant *turne, bazar, chicard, chicandard, Breda-street,* et *Je me la casse,* pour : Je m'en vais.

Donc, un jeudi, Emma fut surprise de rencontrer, dans la cuisine du *Lion d’or,* M. Homais en costume de voyageur, c'est-à-dire couvert d'un vieux manteau qu'on ne lui connaissait pas, tandis qu'il portait d'une main une valise, et, de l'autre, la chancelière de son établissement. Il n'avait confié son projet à personne, dans la crainte d'inquiéter le public par son absence.

L'idée de revoir les lieux où s'était passée sa jeunesse l'exaltait sans doute, car tout le long du chemin il n'arrêta pas de discourir ; puis, à peine arrivé, il sauta vivement de la voiture pour se mettre en quête de Léon ; et le clerc eut beau se débattre, M. Homais l'entraîna vers le grand *café de Normandie,* où il entra majestueusement sans retirer son chapeau, estimant fort provincial de se découvrir dans un endroit public.

Emma attendit Léon trois quarts d'heure. Enfin elle courut à son étude, et, perdue dans toute sorte de conjectures, l'accusant d'indifférence et se reprochant à elle-même sa faiblesse, elle passa l'après-midi le front collé contre les carreaux.

Ils étaient encore à deux heures attablés l'un devant l'autre. La grande salle se vidait ; le tuyau du poêle, en forme de palmier, arrondissait au plafond blanc sa gerbe dorée ; et près d'eux, derrière le vitrage, en plein soleil, un petit jet d'eau gargouillait dans un bassin de marbre où, parmi du cresson et des asperges, trois homards engourdis s'allongeaient jusqu'à des cailles, toutes couchées en pile, sur le flanc.

Homais se délectait. Quoiqu'il se grisât de luxe encore plus que de bonne chère, le vin de Pomard, cependant, lui excitait un peu les facultés, et, lorsque apparut l'omelette au rhum, il exposa sur les femmes des théories immorales. Ce qui le séduisait par-dessus tout, c'était le chic. Il adorait une toilette élégante dans un appartement bien meublé, et, quant aux qualités corporelles, ne détestait pas le *morceau*.

Léon contemplait la pendule avec désespoir. L'apothicaire buvait, mangeait, parlait.

— Vous devez être, dit-il tout à coup, bien privé à Rouen. Du reste, vos amours ne logent pas loin.

Et, comme l'autre rougissait :

— Allons, soyez franc ! Nierez-vous qu'à Yonville... ?

Le jeune homme balbutia.

— Chez madame Bovary, vous ne courtisiez point... ?

— Et qui donc ?

— La bonne !

Il ne plaisantait pas ; mais, la vanité l'emportant sur toute prudence, Léon, malgré lui, se récria. D'ailleurs, il n'aimait que les femmes brunes.

— Je vous approuve, dit le pharmacien ; elles ont plus de tempérament.

Et se penchant à l'oreille de son ami, il indiqua les symptômes auxquels on reconnaissait qu'une femme avait du tempérament. Il se lança même dans une digression ethnographique : l'Allemande était vaporeuse, la Française libertine, l'Italienne passionnée.

— Et les négresses ? demanda le clerc.

— C'est un goût d'artiste, dit Homais. – Garçon ! deux demi-tasses !

— Partons-nous ? reprit à la fin Léon s'impatientant.

— *Yes.*

Mais il voulut, avant de s'en aller, voir le maître de l'établissement et lui adressa quelques félicitations.

Alors le jeune homme, pour être seul, allégua qu'il avait affaire.

— Ah ! je vous escorte ! dit Homais.

Et, tout en descendant les rues avec lui, il parlait de sa femme, de ses enfants, de leur avenir et de sa pharmacie, racontait en quelle décadence elle était autrefois, et le point de perfection où il l'avait montée.

Arrivé devant *l'hôtel de Boulogne*, Léon le quitta brusquement, escalada l'escalier, et trouva sa maîtresse en grand émoi.

Au nom du pharmacien, elle s'emporta. Cependant, il accumulait de bonnes raisons ; ce n'était pas sa faute, ne connaissait-elle pas M. Homais ? pouvait-elle croire qu'il préférât sa compagnie ? Mais elle se détournait ; il la retint ; et, s'affaissant sur les genoux, il lui entoura la taille de ses deux bras, dans une pose langoureuse toute pleine de concupiscence et de supplication.

Elle était debout ; ses grands yeux enflammés le regardaient sérieusement et presque d'une façon terrible. Puis des larmes les obscurcirent, ses paupières roses s'abaissèrent, elle abandonna ses mains, et Léon les portait à sa bouche lorsque parut un domestique, avertissant Monsieur qu'on le demandait.

— Tu vas revenir ? dit-elle.

— Oui.

— Mais quand ?

— Tout à l'heure.

— C'est un truc, dit le pharmacien en apercevant Léon. J'ai voulu interrompre cette visite qui me paraissait vous contrarier. Allons chez Bridoux prendre un verre de garus.

Léon jura qu'il lui fallait retourner à son étude. Alors l'apothicaire fit des plaisanteries sur les paperasses, la procédure.

— Laissez donc un peu Cujas et Bartole, que diable ! Qui vous empêche ? Soyez un brave ! Allons chez Bridoux ; vous verrez son chien. C'est très curieux !

Et comme le clerc s'obstinait toujours :

— J'y vais aussi. Je lirai un journal en vous attendant, ou je feuilleterai un Code.

Léon, étourdi par la colère d'Emma, le bavardage de M. Homais et peut-être les pesanteurs du déjeuner, restait indécis et comme sous la fascination du pharmacien qui répétait :

— Allons chez Bridoux ! c'est à deux pas, rue Malpalu.

Alors, par lâcheté, par bêtise, par cet inqualifiable sentiment qui nous entraîne aux actions les plus antipathiques, il se laissa conduire chez Bridoux ; et ils le trouvèrent dans sa petite cour, surveillant trois garçons qui haletaient à tourner la grande roue d'une machine pour faire de l'eau de Seltz. Homais leur donna des conseils ; il embrassa Bridoux ; on prit le garus. Vingt fois Léon voulut s'en aller ; mais l'autre l'arrêtait par le bras en lui disant :

— Tout à l'heure ! je sors. Nous irons au *Fanal de Rouen*, voir ces messieurs. Je vous présenterai à Thomassin.

Il s'en débarrassa pourtant et courut d'un bond jusqu'à l'hôtel. Emma n'y était plus.

Elle venait de partir, exaspérée. Elle le détestait maintenant. Ce manque de parole au rendez-vous lui semblait un outrage, et elle cherchait encore d'autres raisons pour s'en détacher : il était incapable d'héroïsme, faible, banal, plus mou qu'une femme, avare d'ailleurs et pusillanime.

Puis, se calmant, elle finit par découvrir qu'elle l'avait sans doute calomnié. Mais le dénigrement de ceux que nous aimons toujours nous en détache quelque peu. Il ne faut pas toucher aux idoles : la dorure en reste aux mains.

Ils en vinrent à parler plus souvent de choses indifférentes à leur amour ; et, dans les lettres qu'Emma lui envoyait, il était question de fleurs, de vers, de la lune et des étoiles, ressources naïves d'une passion affaiblie, qui essayait de s'aviver à tous les secours extérieurs. Elle se promettait continuellement, pour son prochain voyage, une félicité profonde ; puis elle s'avouait ne rien sentir d'extraordinaire. Cette déception s'effaçait vite sous un espoir nouveau, et Emma revenait à lui plus enflammée, plus avide. Elle se déshabillait brutalement, arrachant le lacet mince de son corset, qui sifflait autour de ses hanches comme une couleuvre qui glisse. Elle allait sur la pointe de ses pieds nus regarder encore une fois si la porte était fermée, puis elle faisait d'un seul geste tomber ensemble tous ses vêtements ; – et, pâle, sans parler, sérieuse, elle s'abattait contre sa poitrine, avec un long frisson.

Cependant, il y avait sur ce front couvert de gouttes froides, sur ces lèvres balbutiantes, dans ces prunelles égarées, dans l'étreinte de ces bras, quelque chose d'extrême, de vague et de lugubre, qui semblait à Léon se glisser entre eux, subtilement, comme pour les séparer.

Il n'osait lui faire des questions ; mais, la discernant si expérimentée, elle avait dû passer, se disait-il, par toutes les épreuves de la souffrance et du plaisir. Ce qui le charmait autrefois l'effrayait un peu maintenant. D'ailleurs, il se révoltait contre l'absorption, chaque jour plus grande, de sa personnalité. Il en voulait à Emma de cette victoire permanente. Il s'efforçait même à ne pas la chérir ; puis, au craquement de ses bottines, il se sentait lâche, comme les ivrognes à la vue des liqueurs fortes.

Elle ne manquait point, il est vrai, de lui prodiguer toute sorte d'attentions, depuis les recherches de table jusqu'aux coquetteries du costume et aux langueurs du regard. Elle apportait d'Yonville des roses dans son sein, qu'elle lui jetait à la figure, montrait des inquiétudes pour sa santé, lui donnait des conseils sur sa conduite ; et, afin de le retenir davantage, espérant que le ciel peut-être s'en mêlerait, elle lui passa autour du cou une médaille de la Vierge. Elle s'informait, comme une mère vertueuse, de ses camarades. Elle lui disait :

— Ne les vois pas, ne sors pas, ne pense qu'à nous ; aime-moi !

Elle aurait voulu pouvoir surveiller sa vie, et l'idée lui vint de le faire suivre dans les rues. Il y avait toujours, près de l'hôtel, une sorte de vagabond qui accostait les voyageurs et qui ne refuserait pas... Mais sa fierté se révolta.

— Eh ! tant pis ! qu'il me trompe, que m'importe ! est-ce que j'y tiens ?

Un jour qu'ils s'étaient quittés de bonne heure, et qu'elle s'en revenait seule par le boulevard, elle aperçut les murs de son couvent ; alors elle s'assit sur un banc, à l'ombre des ormes. Quel calme dans ce temps-là ! comme elle enviait les ineffables sentiments d'amour qu'elle tâchait, d'après des livres, de se figurer !

Les premiers mois de son mariage, ses promenades à cheval dans la forêt, le Vicomte qui valsait, et Lagardy chantant, tout repassa devant ses yeux... Et Léon lui parut soudain dans le même éloignement que les autres.

— Je l'aime pourtant ! se disait-elle.

N'importe ! elle n'était pas heureuse, ne l'avait jamais été. D'où venait donc cette insuffisance de la vie, cette pourriture instantanée des choses où elle s'appuyait ?... Mais, s'il y avait quelque part un être fort et beau, une nature valeureuse, pleine à la fois d'exaltation et de raffinements, un coeur de poète sous une forme d'ange, lyre aux cordes d'airain, sonnant vers le ciel des épithalames élégiaques, pourquoi, par hasard, ne le trouverait-elle pas ? Oh ! quelle impossibilité ! Rien, d'ailleurs, ne valait la peine d'une recherche ; tout mentait ! Chaque sourire cachait un bâillement d'ennui, chaque joie une malédiction, tout plaisir son dégoût, et les meilleurs baisers ne vous laissaient sur la lèvre qu'une irréalisable envie d'une volupté plus haute.

Un râle métallique se traîna dans les airs et quatre coups se firent entendre à la cloche du couvent. Quatre heures ! et il lui semblait qu'elle était là, sur ce banc, depuis l'éternité. Mais un infini de passions peut tenir dans une minute, comme une foule dans un petit espace.

Emma vivait tout occupée des siennes, et ne s'inquiétait pas plus de l'argent qu'une archiduchesse.

Une fois pourtant, un homme d'allure chétive, rubicond et chauve, entra chez elle, se déclarant envoyé par M. Vinçart, de Rouen. Il retira les épingles qui fermaient la poche latérale de sa longue redingote verte, les piqua sur sa manche et tendit poliment un papier.

C'était un billet de sept cents francs, souscrit par elle, et que Lheureux, malgré toutes ses protestations, avait passé à l'ordre de Vinçart.

Elle expédia chez lui sa domestique. Il ne pouvait venir.

Alors, l'inconnu, qui était resté debout, lançant de droite et de gauche des regards curieux que dissimulaient ses gros sourcils blonds, demanda d'un air naïf :

— Quelle réponse apporter à M. Vinçart ?

— Eh bien, répondit Emma, dites-lui... que je n'en ai pas... Ce sera la semaine prochaine... Qu'il attende..., oui, la semaine prochaine.

Et le bonhomme s'en alla sans souffler mot.

Mais, le lendemain, à midi, elle reçut un protêt ; et la vue du papier timbré, où s'étalait à plusieurs reprises et en gros caractères : « Maître Hareng, huissier à Buchy », l'effraya si fort, qu'elle courut en toute hâte chez le marchand d'étoffes.

Elle le trouva dans sa boutique, en train de ficeler un paquet.

— Serviteur ! dit-il, je suis à vous.

Lheureux n'en continua pas moins sa besogne, aidé par une jeune fille de treize ans environ, un peu bossue, et qui lui servait à la fois de commis et de cuisinière.

Puis, faisant claquer ses sabots sur les planches de la boutique, il monta devant Madame au premier étage, et l'introduisit dans un étroit cabinet, où un gros bureau en bois de sape supportait quelques registres, défendus transversalement par une barre de fer cadenassée. Contre le mur, sous des coupons d'indienne, on entrevoyait un coffre-fort, mais d'une telle dimension, qu'il devait contenir autre chose que des billets et de l'argent. M. Lheureux, en effet, prêtait sur gages, et c'est là qu'il avait mis la chaîne en or de madame Bovary, avec les boucles d'oreilles du pauvre père Tellier, qui, enfin contraint de vendre, avait acheté à Quincampoix un maigre fonds d'épicerie, où il se mourait de son catarrhe, au milieu de ses chandelles moins jaunes que sa figure.

Lheureux s'assit dans son large fauteuil de paille, en disant :

— Quoi de neuf ?

— Tenez.

Et elle lui montra le papier.

— Eh bien, qu'y puis-je ?

Alors, elle s'emporta, rappelant la parole qu'il avait donnée de ne pas faire circuler ses billets ; il en convenait.

— Mais j'ai été forcé moi-même, j'avais le couteau sur la gorge.

— Et que va-t-il arriver, maintenant ? reprit-elle.

— Oh ! c'est bien simple : un jugement du tribunal, et puis la saisie... ; *bernique !*

Emma se retenait pour ne pas le battre. Elle lui demanda doucement s'il n'y avait pas moyen de calmer M. Vinçart.

— Ah bien, oui ! calmer Vinçart ; vous ne le connaissez guère ; il est plus féroce qu'un Arabe.

Pourtant il fallait que M. Lheureux s'en mêlât.

— Écoutez donc ! il me semble que, jusqu'à présent, j'ai été assez bon pour vous.

Et, déployant un de ses registres :

— Tenez !

Puis, remontant la page avec son doigt :

— Voyons..., voyons... Le 3 août, deux cents francs... Au 17 juin, cent cinquante... 23 mars, quarante-six... En avril...

Il s'arrêta, comme craignant de faire quelque sottise.

— Et je ne dis rien des billets souscrits par Monsieur, un de sept cents francs, un autre de trois cents ! Quant à vos petits acomptes, aux intérêts, ça n'en finit pas, on s'y embrouille. Je ne m'en mêle plus !

Elle pleurait, elle l'appela même « son bon monsieur Lheureux ». Mais il se rejetait toujours sur ce « mâtin de Vinçart ». D'ailleurs, il n'avait pas un centime, personne à présent ne le payait, on lui mangeait la laine sur le dos, un pauvre boutiquier comme lui ne pouvait faire d'avances.

Emma se taisait ; et M. Lheureux, qui mordillonnait les barbes d'une plume, sans doute s'inquiéta de son silence, car il reprit :

— Au moins, si un de ces jours j'avais quelques rentrées... je pourrais...

— Du reste, dit-elle, dès que l'arriéré de Barneville...

— Comment ?...

Et, en apprenant que Langlois n'avait pas encore payé, il parut fort surpris. Puis, d'une voix mielleuse :

— Et nous convenons, dites-vous... ?

— Oh ! de ce que vous voudrez !

Alors, il ferma les yeux pour réfléchir, écrivit quelques chiffres, et, déclarant qu'il aurait grand mal, que la chose était scabreuse et qu'il se saignait, il dicta quatre billets de deux cent cinquante francs, chacun, espacés les uns des autres à un mois d'échéance.

— Pourvu que Vinçart veuille m'entendre ! Du reste c'est convenu, je ne lanterne pas, je suis rond comme une pomme.

Ensuite il lui montra négligemment plusieurs marchandises nouvelles, mais dont pas une, dans son opinion, n'était digne de Madame.

— Quand je pense que voilà une robe à sept sous le mètre, et certifiée bon teint ! Ils gobent cela pourtant ! on ne leur conte pas ce qui en est, vous pensez bien, voulant par cet aveu de coquinerie envers les autres la convaincre tout à fait de sa probité.

Puis il la rappela, pour lui montrer trois aunes de guipure qu'il avait trouvées dernièrement « dans une *vendue* ».

— Est-ce beau ! disait Lheureux ; on s'en sert beaucoup maintenant, comme têtes de fauteuils, c'est le genre.

Et, plus prompt qu'un escamoteur, il enveloppa la guipure de papier bleu et la mit dans les mains d'Emma.

— Au moins, que je sache... ?

— Ah ! plus tard, reprit-il en lui tournant les talons.

Dès le soir, elle pressa Bovary d'écrire à sa mère pour qu'elle leur envoyât bien vite tout l'arriéré de l'héritage. La belle-mère répondit n'avoir plus rien ; la liquidation était close, et il leur restait, outre Barneville, six cents livres de rente, qu'elle leur servirait exactement.

Alors Madame expédia des factures chez deux ou trois clients, et bientôt usa largement de ce moyen, qui lui réussissait. Elle avait toujours soin d'ajouter en post-scriptum : « N'en parlez pas à mon mari, vous savez comme il est fier... Excusez-moi... Votre servante... » Il y eut quelques réclamations ; elle les intercepta.

Pour se faire de l'argent, elle se mit à vendre ses vieux gants, ses vieux chapeaux, la vieille ferraille ; et elle marchandait avec rapacité, – son sang de paysanne la poussant au gain. Puis, dans ses voyages à la ville, elle brocanterait des babioles, que M. Lheureux, à défaut d'autres, lui prendrait certainement. Elle s'acheta des plumes d'autruche, de la porcelaine chinoise et des bahuts ; elle empruntait à Félicité, à madame Lefrançois, à l'hôtelière de la *Croix rouge*, à tout le monde, n'importe où. Avec l'argent qu'elle reçut enfin de Barneville, elle paya deux billets ; les quinze cents autres francs s'écoulèrent. Elle s'engagea de nouveau, et toujours ainsi !

Parfois, il est vrai, elle tâchait de faire des calculs ; mais elle découvrait des choses si exorbitantes, qu'elle n'y pouvait croire. Alors elle recommençait, s'embrouillait vite, plantait tout là et n'y pensait plus.

La maison était bien triste, maintenant ! On en voyait sortir les fournisseurs avec des figures furieuses. Il y avait des mouchoirs traînant sur les fourneaux ; et la petite Berthe, au grand scandale de madame Homais, portait des bas percés. Si Charles, timidement, hasardait une observation, elle répondait avec brutalité que ce n'était point sa faute !

Pourquoi ces emportements ? Il expliquait tout par son ancienne maladie nerveuse ; et, se reprochant d'avoir pris pour des défauts ses infirmités, il s'accusait d'égoïsme, avait envie de courir l'embrasser.

— Oh ! non, se disait-il, je l'ennuierais !

Et il restait.

Après le dîner, il se promenait seul dans le jardin ; il prenait la petite Berthe sur ses genoux, et, déployant son journal de médecine, essayait de lui apprendre à lire. L'enfant, qui n'étudiait jamais, ne tardait pas à ouvrir de grands yeux tristes et se mettait à pleurer. Alors il la consolait ; il allait lui chercher de l'eau dans l'arrosoir pour faire des rivières sur le sable, ou cassait les branches des troènes pour planter des arbres dans les plates-bandes, ce qui gâtait peu le jardin, tout encombré de longues herbes ; on devait tant de journées à Lestiboudois ! Puis l'enfant avait froid et demandait sa mère.

— Appelle ta bonne, disait Charles. Tu sais bien, ma petite, que ta maman ne veut pas qu'on la dérange.

L'automne commençait et déjà les feuilles tombaient, – comme il y a deux ans, lorsqu'elle était malade ! – Quand donc tout cela finira-t-il !... Et il continuait à marcher, les deux mains derrière le dos.

Madame était dans sa chambre. On n'y montait pas. Elle restait là tout le long du jour, engourdie, à peine vêtue, et, de temps à autre, faisant fumer des pastilles du sérail qu'elle avait achetées à Rouen, dans la boutique d'un Algérien. Pour ne pas avoir la nuit auprès d'elle, cet homme étendu qui dormait, elle finit, à force de grimaces, par le reléguer au second étage ; et elle lisait jusqu'au matin des livres extravagants où il y avait des tableaux orgiaques avec des situations sanglantes. Souvent une terreur la prenait, elle poussait un cri, Charles accourait.

— Ah ! va-t'en ! disait-elle.

Ou, d'autres fois, brûlée plus fort par cette flamme intime que l'adultère avivait, haletante, émue, tout en désir, elle ouvrait sa fenêtre, aspirait l'air froid, éparpillait au vent sa chevelure trop lourde, et, regardant les étoiles, souhaitait des amours de prince. Elle pensait à lui, à Léon. Elle eût alors tout donné pour un seul de ces rendez-vous, qui la rassasiaient.

C'était ses jours de gala. Elle les voulait splendides ! et, lorsqu'il ne pouvait payer seul la dépense, elle complétait le surplus libéralement, ce qui arrivait à peu près toutes les fois. Il essaya de lui faire comprendre qu'ils seraient aussi bien ailleurs, dans quelque hôtel plus modeste ; mais elle trouva des objections.

Un jour, elle tira de son sac six petites cuillers en vermeil (c'était le cadeau de noces du père Rouault), en le priant d'aller immédiatement porter cela, pour elle, au mont-de-piété ; et Léon obéit, bien que cette démarche lui déplût. Il avait peur de se compromettre.

Puis, en y réfléchissant, il trouva que sa maîtresse prenait des allures étranges, et qu'on n'avait peut-être pas tort de vouloir l'en détacher.

En effet, quelqu'un avait envoyé à sa mère une longue lettre anonyme, pour la prévenir qu'il *se perdait avec une femme mariée* ; et aussitôt la bonne dame, entrevoyant l'éternel épouvantail des familles, c'est-à-dire la vague créature pernicieuse, la sirène, le monstre, qui habite fantastiquement les profondeurs de l'amour, écrivit à maître Dubocage son patron, lequel fut parfait dans cette affaire. Il le tint durant trois quarts d'heure, voulant lui dessiller les yeux, l'avertir du gouffre. Une telle intrigue nuirait plus tard à son établissement. Il le supplia de rompre, et, s'il ne faisait ce sacrifice dans son propre intérêt, qu'il le fît au moins pour lui, Dubocage !

Léon enfin avait juré de ne plus revoir Emma ; et il se reprochait de n'avoir pas tenu sa parole, considérant tout ce que cette femme pourrait encore lui attirer d'embarras et de discours, sans compter les plaisanteries de ses camarades, qui se débitaient le matin, autour du poêle. D'ailleurs, il allait devenir premier clerc : c'était le moment d'être sérieux. Aussi renonçait-il à la flûte, aux sentiments exaltés, à l'imagination ; – car tout bourgeois, dans l'échauffement de sa jeunesse, ne fût-ce qu'un jour, une minute, s'est cru capable d'immenses passions, de hautes entreprises. Le plus médiocre libertin a rêvé des sultanes ; chaque notaire porte en soi les débris d'un poète.

Il s'ennuyait maintenant lorsque Emma, tout à coup, sanglotait sur sa poitrine ; et son coeur, comme les gens qui ne peuvent endurer qu'une certaine dose de musique, s'assoupissait d'indifférence au vacarme d'un amour dont il ne distinguait plus les délicatesses.

Ils se connaissaient trop pour avoir ces ébahissements de la possession qui en centuplent la joie. Elle était aussi dégoûtée de lui qu'il était fatigué d'elle. Emma retrouvait dans l'adultère toutes les platitudes du mariage.

Mais comment pouvoir s'en débarrasser ? Puis, elle avait beau se sentir humiliée de la bassesse d'un tel bonheur, elle y tenait par habitude ou par corruption ; et, chaque jour, elle s'y acharnait davantage, tarissant toute félicité à la vouloir trop grande. Elle accusait Léon de ses espoirs déçus, comme s'il l'avait trahie ; et même elle souhaitait une catastrophe qui amenât leur séparation, puisqu'elle n'avait pas le courage de s'y décider.

Elle n'en continuait pas moins à lui écrire des lettres amoureuses, en vertu de cette idée, qu'une femme doit toujours écrire à son amant.

Mais, en écrivant, elle percevait un autre homme, un fantôme fait de ses plus ardents souvenirs, de ses lectures les plus belles, de ses convoitises les plus fortes ; et il devenait à la fin si véritable, et accessible, qu'elle en palpitait émerveillée, sans pouvoir néanmoins le nettement imaginer, tant il se perdait, comme un dieu, sous l'abondance de ses attributs. Il habitait la contrée bleuâtre où les échelles de soie se balancent à des balcons, sous le souffle des fleurs, dans la clarté de la lune. Elle le sentait près d'elle, il allait venir et l'enlèverait tout entière dans un baiser. Ensuite elle retombait à plat, brisée ; car ces élans d'amour vague la fatiguaient plus que de grandes débauches.

Elle éprouvait maintenant une courbature incessante et universelle. Souvent même, Emma recevait des assignations, du papier timbré qu'elle regardait à peine. Elle aurait voulu ne plus vivre, ou continuellement dormir.

Le jour de la mi-carême, elle ne rentra pas à Yonville ; elle alla le soir au bal masqué. Elle mit un pantalon de velours et des bas rouges, avec une perruque à catogan et un lampion sur l'oreille. Elle sauta toute la nuit au son furieux des trombones ; on faisait cercle autour d'elle ; et elle se trouva le matin sur le péristyle du théâtre parmi cinq ou six masques, débardeuses et matelots, des camarades de Léon, qui parlaient d'aller souper.

Les cafés d'alentour étaient pleins. Ils avisèrent sur le port un restaurant des plus médiocres, dont le maître leur ouvrit, au quatrième étage, une petite chambre.

Les hommes chuchotèrent dans un coin, sans doute se consultant sur la dépense. Il y avait un clerc, deux carabins et un commis : quelle société pour elle ! Quant aux femmes Emma s'aperçut vite, au timbre de leurs voix, qu'elles devaient être, presque toutes, du dernier rang. Elle eut peur alors, recula sa chaise et baissa les yeux.

Les autres se mirent à manger. Elle ne mangea pas ; elle avait le front en feu, des picotements aux paupières et un froid de glace à la peau. Elle sentait dans sa tête le plancher du bal, rebondissant encore sous la pulsation rythmique des mille pieds qui dansaient. Puis, l'odeur du punch avec la fumée des cigares l'étourdit. Elle s'évanouissait ; on la porta devant la fenêtre.

Le jour commençait à se lever, et une grande tache de couleur pourpre s'élargissait dans le ciel pâle, du côté de Sainte-Catherine. La rivière livide frissonnait au vent ; il n'y avait personne sur les ponts ; les réverbères s'éteignaient.

Elle se ranima cependant, et vint à penser à Berthe, qui dormait là-bas, dans la chambre de sa bonne. Mais une charrette pleine de longs rubans de fer passa, en jetant contre le mur des maisons une vibration métallique assourdissante.

Elle s'esquiva brusquement, se débarrassa de son costume, dit à Léon qu'il lui fallait s'en retourner, et enfin resta seule à *l'hôtel de Boulogne*. Tout et elle-même lui étaient insupportables. Elle aurait voulu, s'échappant comme un oiseau, aller se rajeunir quelque part, bien loin, dans les espaces immaculés.

Elle sortit, elle traversa le boulevard, la place Cauchoise et le faubourg, jusqu'à une rue découverte qui dominait des jardins. Elle marchait vite, le grand air la calmait : et peu à peu les figures de la foule, les masques, les quadrilles, les lustres, le souper, ces femmes, tout disparaissait comme des brumes emportées. Puis, revenue à la *Croix rouge*, elle se jeta sur son lit, dans la petite chambre du second, où il y avait les images de la *Tour de Nesle*. À quatre heures du soir, Hivert la réveilla.

En rentrant chez elle, Félicité lui montra derrière la pendule un papier gris. Elle lut :

« En vertu de la grosse, en forme exécutoire d'un jugement... »

Quel jugement ? La veille, en effet, on avait apporté un autre papier qu'elle ne connaissait pas ; aussi fut-elle stupéfaite de ces mots :

« Commandement de par le roi, la loi et justice, à madame Bovary... »

Alors, sautant plusieurs lignes, elle aperçut :

« Dans vingt-quatre heures pour tout délai. » – Quoi donc ? « Payer la somme totale de huit mille francs. » Et même il y avait plus bas : « Elle y sera contrainte par toute voie de droit, et notamment par la saisie exécutoire de ses meubles et effets. »

Que faire ?... C'était dans vingt-quatre heures ; demain ! Lheureux, pensa-t-elle, voulait sans doute l'effrayer encore ; car elle devina du coup toutes ses manoeuvres, le but de ses complaisances. Ce qui la rassurait, c'était l'exagération même de la somme.

Cependant, à force d'acheter, de ne pas payer, d'emprunter, de souscrire des billets, puis de renouveler ces billets, qui s'enflaient à chaque échéance nouvelle, elle avait fini par préparer au sieur Lheureux un capital, qu'il attendait impatiemment pour ses spéculations.

Elle se présenta chez lui d'un air dégagé.

— Vous savez ce qui m'arrive ? C'est une plaisanterie, sans doute !

— Non.

— Comment cela ?

Il se détourna lentement, et lui dit en se croisant les bras :

— Pensiez-vous, ma petite dame, que j'allais, jusqu'à la consommation des siècles, être votre fournisseur et banquier pour l'amour de Dieu ? Il faut bien que je rentre dans mes déboursés, soyons justes !

Elle se récria sur la dette.

— Ah ! tant pis ! le tribunal l'a reconnue ! il y a jugement ! on vous l'a signifié ! D'ailleurs, ce n'est pas moi, c'est Vinçart.

— Est-ce que vous ne pourriez... ?

— Oh ! rien du tout.

— Mais..., cependant..., raisonnons.

Et elle battit la campagne ; elle n'avait rien su... c'était une surprise...

— À qui la faute ? dit Lheureux en la saluant ironiquement. Tandis que je suis, moi, à bûcher comme un nègre, vous vous repassez du bon temps.

— Ah ! pas de morale !

— Ça ne nuit jamais, répliqua-t-il.

Elle fut lâche, elle le supplia ; et même elle appuya sa jolie main blanche et longue, sur les genoux du marchand.

— Laissez-moi donc ! On dirait que vous voulez me séduire !

— Vous êtes un misérable ! s'écria-t-elle.

— Oh ! oh ! comme vous y allez ! reprit-il en riant.

— Je ferai savoir qui vous êtes. Je dirai à mon mari...

— Eh bien, moi, je lui montrerai quelque chose à votre mari !

Et Lheureux tira de son coffre-fort le reçu de dix-huit cents francs, qu'elle lui avait donné lors de l'escompte Vinçart.

— Croyez-vous, ajouta-t-il, qu'il ne comprenne pas votre petit vol, ce pauvre cher homme ?

Elle s'affaissa, plus assommée qu'elle n'eût été par un coup de massue. Il se promenait depuis la fenêtre jusqu'au bureau, tout en répétant :

— Ah ! je lui montrerai bien... je lui montrerai bien...

Ensuite il se rapprocha d'elle, et, d'une voix douce :

— Ce n'est pas amusant, je le sais ; personne, après tout n'en est mort, et, puisque c'est le seul moyen qui vous reste de me rendre mon argent...

— Mais où en trouverai-je ? dit Emma en se tordant les bras.

— Ah bah ! quand on a comme vous des amis !

Et il la regardait d'une façon si perspicace et si terrible, qu'elle en frissonna jusqu'aux entrailles.

— Je vous promets, dit-elle, je signerai...

— J'en ai assez, de vos signatures !

— Je vendrai encore...

— Allons donc ! fit-il en haussant les épaules, vous n'avez plus rien.

Et il cria dans le judas qui s'ouvrait sur la boutique :

— Annette ! n'oublie pas les trois coupons du n° 14.

La servante parut ; Emma comprit, et demanda « ce qu'il faudrait d'argent pour arrêter toutes les poursuites ».

— Il est trop tard !

— Mais, si je vous apportais plusieurs mille francs, le quart de la somme, le tiers, presque tout ?

— Eh ! non, c'est inutile !

Il la poussait doucement vers l'escalier.

— Je vous en conjure, monsieur Lheureux, quelques jours encore !

Elle sanglotait.

— Allons, bon ! des larmes !

— Vous me désespérez !

— Je m'en moque pas mal ! dit-il en refermant la porte.

VII

Elle fut stoïque, le lendemain, lorsque maître Hareng, l'huissier, avec deux témoins, se présenta chez elle pour faire le procès-verbal de la saisie.

Ils commencèrent par le cabinet de Bovary et n'inscrivirent point la tête phrénologique, qui fut considérée comme *instrument de sa profession* ; mais ils comptèrent dans la cuisine les plats, les marmites, les chaises, les flambeaux, et, dans sa chambre à coucher, toutes les babioles de l'étagère. Ils examinèrent ses robes, le linge, le cabinet de toilette ; et son existence, jusque dans ses recoins les plus intimes, fut, comme un cadavre que l'on autopsie, étalée tout du long aux regards de ces trois hommes.

Maître Hareng, boutonné dans un mince habit noir, en cravate blanche, et portant des sous-pieds fort tendus, répétait de temps à autre :

— Vous permettez, madame ? vous permettez ?

Souvent il faisait des exclamations :

— Charmant !... fort joli !

Puis il se remettait à écrire, trempant sa plume dans l'encrier de corne qu'il tenait de la main gauche.

Quand ils en eurent fini avec les appartements, ils montèrent au grenier.

Elle y gardait un pupitre où étaient enfermées les lettres de Rodolphe. Il fallut l'ouvrir.

— Ah ! une correspondance ! dit maître Hareng avec un sourire discret. Mais permettez ! car je dois m'assurer si la boîte ne contient pas autre chose.

Et il inclina les papiers, légèrement, comme pour en faire tomber des napoléons. Alors l'indignation la prit, à voir cette grosse main, aux doigts rouges et mous comme des limaces, qui se posait sur ces pages où son coeur avait battu.

Ils partirent enfin ! Félicité rentra. Elle l'avait envoyée aux aguets pour détourner Bovary ; et elles installèrent vivement sous les toits le gardien de la saisie, qui jura de s'y tenir.

Charles, pendant la soirée, lui parut soucieux. Emma l'épiait d'un regard plein d'angoisse, croyant apercevoir dans les rides de son visage des accusations. Puis, quand ses yeux se reportaient sur la cheminée garnie d'écrans chinois, sur les larges rideaux, sur les fauteuils, sur toutes ces choses enfin qui avaient adouci l'amertume de sa vie, un remords la prenait, ou plutôt un regret immense et qui irritait la passion, loin de l'anéantir. Charles tisonnait avec placidité, les deux pieds sur les chenets.

Il y eut un moment où le gardien, sans doute s'ennuyant dans sa cachette, fit un peu de bruit.

— On marche là-haut ? dit Charles.

— Non ! reprit-elle, c'est une lucarne restée ouverte que le vent remue.

Elle partit pour Rouen, le lendemain dimanche, afin d'aller chez tous les banquiers dont elle connaissait le nom. Ils étaient à la campagne ou en voyage. Elle ne se rebuta pas ; et ceux qu'elle put rencontrer, elle leur demandait de l'argent, protestant qu'il lui en fallait, qu'elle le rendrait. Quelques-uns lui rirent au nez ; tous la refusèrent.

À deux heures, elle courut chez Léon, frappa contre sa porte. On n'ouvrit pas. Enfin il parut.

— Qui t'amène ?

— Cela te dérange ?

— Non..., mais...

Et il avoua que le propriétaire n'aimait point que l'on reçût « des femmes ».

— J'ai à te parler, reprit-elle.

Alors il atteignit sa clef. Elle l'arrêta.

— Oh ! non, là-bas, chez nous.

Et ils allèrent dans leur chambre, à *l'hôtel de Boulogne*.

Elle but en arrivant un grand verre d'eau. Elle était très pâle. Elle lui dit :

— Léon, tu vas me rendre un service.

Et, le secouant par ses deux mains, qu'elle serrait étroitement, elle ajouta :

— Écoute, j'ai besoin de huit mille francs !

— Mais tu es folle !

— Pas encore !

Et, aussitôt, racontant l'histoire de la saisie, elle lui exposa sa détresse ; car Charles ignorait tout, sa belle-mère la détestait, le père Rouault ne pouvait rien ; mais lui, Léon, il allait se mettre en course pour trouver cette indispensable somme...

— Comment veux-tu... ?

— Quel lâche tu fais ! s'écria-t-elle.

Alors il dit bêtement :

— Tu t'exagères le mal. Peut-être qu'avec un millier d'écus ton bonhomme se calmerait.

Raison de plus pour tenter quelque démarche ; il n'était pas possible que l'on ne découvrît point trois mille francs. D'ailleurs, Léon pouvait s'engager à sa place.

— Va ! essaye ! il le faut ! cours !... Oh ! tâche ! tâche ! je t'aimerai bien !

Il sortit, revint au bout d'une heure, et dit avec une figure solennelle :

— J'ai été chez trois personnes... inutilement !

Puis ils restèrent assis l'un en face de l'autre, aux deux coins de la cheminée, immobiles, sans parler. Emma haussait les épaules, tout en trépignant. Il l'entendit qui murmurait :

— Si j'étais à ta place, moi, j'en trouverais bien !

— Où donc ?

— À ton étude !

Et elle le regarda.

Une hardiesse infernale s'échappait de ses prunelles enflammées, et les paupières se rapprochaient d'une façon lascive et encourageante ; – si bien que le jeune homme se sentit faiblir sous la muette volonté de cette femme qui lui conseillait un crime. Alors il eut peur, et pour éviter tout éclaircissement, il se frappa le front en s'écriant :

— Morel doit revenir cette nuit ! il ne me refusera pas, j'espère (c'était un de ses amis, le fils d'un négociant fort riche), et je t'apporterai cela demain, ajouta-t-il.

Emma n'eut point l'air d'accueillir cet espoir avec autant de joie qu'il l'avait imaginé. Soupçonnait-elle le mensonge ? Il reprit en rougissant :

— Pourtant, si tu ne me voyais pas à trois heures, ne m'attends plus, ma chérie. Il faut que je m'en aille, excuse-moi. Adieu !

Il serra sa main, mais il la sentit tout inerte. Emma n'avait plus la force d'aucun sentiment.

Quatre heures sonnèrent ; et elle se leva pour s'en retourner à Yonville, obéissant comme un automate à l'impulsion des habitudes.

Il faisait beau ; c'était un de ces jours du mois de mars clairs et âpres, où le soleil reluit dans un ciel tout blanc. Des Rouennais endimanchés se promenaient d'un air heureux. Elle arriva sur la place du Parvis. On sortait des vêpres ; la foule s'écoulait par les trois portails, comme un fleuve par les trois arches d'un pont, et, au milieu, plus immobile qu'un roc, se tenait le Suisse.

Alors elle se rappela ce jour où, tout anxieuse et pleine d'espérances, elle était entrée sous cette grande nef qui s'étendait devant elle moins profonde que son amour ; et elle continua de marcher, en pleurant sous son voile, étourdie, chancelante, près de défaillir.

— Gare ! cria une voix sortant d'une porte cochère qui s'ouvrait.

Elle s'arrêta pour laisser passer un cheval noir, piaffant dans les brancards d'un tilbury que conduisait un gentleman en fourrure de zibeline. Qui était-ce donc ? Elle le connaissait... La voiture s'élança et disparut.

Mais c'était lui, le Vicomte ! Elle se détourna : la rue était déserte. Et elle fut si accablée, si triste, qu'elle s'appuya contre un mur pour ne pas tomber.

Puis elle pensa qu'elle s'était trompée. Au reste, elle n'en savait rien. Tout, en elle-même et au dehors, l'abandonnait. Elle se sentait perdue, roulant au hasard dans des abîmes indéfinissables ; et ce fut presque avec joie qu'elle aperçut, en arrivant à la *Croix rouge*, ce bon Homais qui regardait charger sur l'*Hirondelle* une grande boîte pleine de provisions pharmaceutiques. Il tenait à sa main, dans un foulard, *six cheminots* pour son épouse.

Madame Homais aimait beaucoup ces petits pains lourds, en forme de turban, que l'on mange dans le carême avec du beurre salé : dernier échantillon des nourritures gothiques, qui remonte peut-être au siècle des croisades, et dont les robustes Normands s'emplissaient autrefois, croyant voir sur la table, à la lueur des torches jaunes, entre les brocs d'hypocras et les gigantesques charcuteries, des têtes de Sarrasins à dévorer. La femme de l'apothicaire les croquait comme eux, héroïquement, malgré sa détestable dentition ; aussi, toutes les fois que M. Homais faisait un voyage à la ville, il ne manquait pas de lui en rapporter, qu'il prenait toujours chez le grand faiseur, rue Massacre.

— Charmé de vous voir ! dit-il en offrant la main à Emma pour l'aider à monter dans l'*Hirondelle*.

Puis il suspendit les *cheminots* aux lanières du filet, et resta nu-tête et les bras croisés, dans une attitude pensive et napoléonienne.

Mais, quand l'Aveugle, comme d'habitude, apparut au bas de la côte, il s'écria :

— Je ne comprends pas que l'autorité tolère encore de si coupables industries ! On devrait enfermer ces malheureux, que l'on forcerait à quelque travail ! Le Progrès, ma parole d'honneur, marche à pas de tortue ! nous pataugeons en pleine barbarie !

L'Aveugle tendait son chapeau, qui ballottait au bord de la portière, comme une poche de la tapisserie déclouée.

— Voilà, dit le pharmacien, une affection scrofuleuse !

Et, bien qu'il connût ce pauvre diable, il feignit de le voir pour la première fois, murmura les mots de *cornée, cornée opaque, sclérotique, facies*, puis lui demanda d'un ton paterne :

— Y a-t-il longtemps, mon ami, que tu as cette épouvantable infirmité ? Au lieu de t'enivrer au cabaret, tu ferais mieux de suivre un régime.

Il l'engageait à prendre de bon vin, de bonne bière, de bons rôtis. L'Aveugle continuait sa chanson ; il paraissait, d'ailleurs, presque idiot. Enfin, M. Homais ouvrit sa bourse.

— Tiens, voilà un sou, rends-moi deux liards ; et n'oublie pas mes recommandations, tu t'en trouveras bien.

Hivert se permit tout haut quelque doute sur leur efficacité. Mais l'apothicaire certifia qu'il le guérirait lui-même, avec une pommade antiphlogistique de sa composition, et il donna son adresse :

— M. Homais, près des halles, suffisamment connu.

— Eh bien, pour la peine, dit Hivert, tu vas nous *montrer la comédie*.

L'Aveugle s'affaissa sur ses jarrets, et, la tête renversée, tout en roulant ses yeux verdâtres et tirant la langue, il se frottait l'estomac à deux mains, tandis qu'il poussait une sorte de hurlement sourd, comme un chien affamé.

Emma, prise de dégoût, lui envoya, par-dessus l'épaule, une pièce de cinq francs. C'était toute sa fortune. Il lui semblait beau de la jeter ainsi.

La voiture était repartie, quand soudain M. Homais se pencha en dehors du vasistas et cria :

— Pas de farineux ni de laitage ! Porter de la laine sur la peau et exposer les parties malades à la fumée de baies de genièvre !

Le spectacle des objets connus qui défilaient devant ses yeux peu à peu détournait Emma de sa douleur présente. Une intolérable fatigue l'accablait, et elle arriva chez elle hébétée, découragée, presque endormie.

— Advienne que pourra ! se disait-elle.

Et puis, qui sait ? pourquoi, d'un moment à l'autre, ne surgirait-il pas un événement extraordinaire ? Lheureux même pouvait mourir.

Elle fut, à neuf heures du matin, réveillée par un bruit de voix sur la place. Il y avait un attroupement autour des halles pour lire une grande affiche collée contre un des poteaux, et elle vit Justin qui montait sur une borne et qui déchirait l'affiche. Mais, à ce moment, le garde champêtre lui posa la main sur le collet. M. Homais sortit de la pharmacie, et la mère Lefrançois, au milieu de la foule, avait l'air de pérorer.

— Madame ! madame ! s'écria Félicité en entrant, c'est une abomination !

Et la pauvre fille, émue, lui tendit un papier jaune qu'elle venait d'arracher à la porte. Emma lut d'un clin d'oeil que tout son mobilier était à vendre.

Alors elles se considérèrent silencieusement. Elles n'avaient, la servante et la maîtresse, aucun secret l'une pour l'autre. Enfin Félicité soupira :

— Si j'étais de vous, madame, j'irais chez M. Guillaumin.

— Tu crois ?...

Et cette interrogation voulait dire :

— Toi qui connais la maison par le domestique, est-ce que le maître quelquefois aurait parlé de moi ?

— Oui, allez-y, vous ferez bien.

Elle s'habilla, mit sa robe noire avec sa capote à grains de jais ; et, pour qu'on ne la vît pas (il y avait toujours beaucoup de monde sur la place), elle prit en dehors du village, par le sentier au bord de l'eau.

Elle arriva tout essoufflée devant la grille du notaire ; le ciel était sombre et un peu de neige tombait.

Au bruit de la sonnette, Théodore, en gilet rouge, parut sur le perron ; il vint lui ouvrir presque familièrement, comme à une connaissance, et l'introduisit dans la salle à manger.

Un large poêle de porcelaine bourdonnait sous un cactus qui emplissait la niche, et, dans des cadres de bois noir, contre la tenture de papier chêne, il y avait la *Esméralda* de Steuben, avec la *Putiphar* de Schopin. La table servie, deux réchauds d'argent, le bouton des portes en cristal, le parquet et les meubles, tout reluisait d'une propreté méticuleuse, anglaise ; les carreaux étaient décorés, à chaque angle, par des verres de couleur.

— Voilà une salle à manger, pensait Emma, comme il m'en faudrait une.

Le notaire entra, serrant du bras gauche contre son corps sa robe de chambre à palmes, tandis qu'il ôtait et remettait vite de l'autre main sa toque de velours marron, prétentieusement posée sur le côté droit, où retombaient les bouts de trois mèches blondes qui, prises à l'occiput, contournaient son crâne chauve.

Après qu'il eut offert un siège, il s'assit pour déjeuner, tout en s'excusant beaucoup de l'impolitesse.

— Monsieur, dit-elle, je vous prierais...

— De quoi, madame ? J'écoute.

Elle se mit à lui exposer sa situation.

Maître Guillaumin la connaissait, étant lié secrètement avec le marchand d'étoffes, chez lequel il trouvait toujours des capitaux pour les prêts hypothécaires qu'on lui demandait à contracter.

Donc, il savait (et mieux qu'elle) la longue histoire de ces billets, minimes d'abord, portant comme endosseurs des noms divers, espacés à de longues échéances et renouvelés continuellement, jusqu'au jour où, ramassant tous les protêts, le marchand avait chargé son ami Vinçart de faire en son nom propre les poursuites qu'il fallait, ne voulant point passer pour un tigre parmi ses concitoyens.

Elle entremêla son récit de récriminations contre Lheureux, récriminations auxquelles le notaire répondait de temps à autre par une parole insignifiante. Mangeant sa côtelette et buvant son thé, il baissait le menton dans sa cravate bleu de ciel, piquée par deux épingles de diamants que rattachait une chaînette d'or ; et il souriait d'un singulier sourire, d'une façon douceâtre et ambiguë. Mais, s'apercevant qu'elle avait les pieds humides :

— Approchez-vous donc du poêle... plus haut..., contre la porcelaine.

Elle avait peur de la salir. Le notaire reprit d'un ton galant :

— Les belles choses ne gâtent rien.

Alors elle tâcha de l'émouvoir, et, s'émotionnant elle-même, elle vint à lui conter l'étroitesse de son ménage, ses tiraillements, ses besoins. Il comprenait cela : une femme élégante ! et, sans s'interrompre de manger, il s'était tourné vers elle complètement, si bien qu'il frôlait du genou sa bottine, dont la semelle se recourbait tout en fumant contre le poêle.

Mais, lorsqu'elle lui demanda mille écus, il serra les lèvres, puis se déclara très peiné de n'avoir pas eu autrefois la direction de sa fortune, car il y avait cent moyens fort commodes, même pour une dame, de faire valoir son argent. On aurait pu, soit dans les tourbières de Grumesnil ou les terrains du Havre, hasarder presque à coup sûr d'excellentes spéculations ; et il la laissa se dévorer de rage à l'idée des sommes fantastiques qu'elle aurait certainement gagnées.

— D'où vient, reprit-il, que vous n'êtes pas venue chez moi ?

— Je ne sais trop, dit-elle.

— Pourquoi, hein ?... Je vous faisais donc bien peur ? C'est moi, au contraire, qui devrais me plaindre ! À peine si nous nous connaissons ! Je vous suis pourtant très dévoué ; vous n'en doutez plus, j'espère ?

Il tendit sa main, prit la sienne, la couvrit d'un baiser vorace, puis la garda sur son genou ; et il jouait avec ses doigts délicatement, tout en lui contant mille douceurs.

Sa voix fade susurrait, comme un ruisseau qui coule ; une étincelle jaillissait de sa pupille à travers le miroitement de ses lunettes, et ses mains s'avançaient dans la manche d'Emma, pour lui palper le bras. Elle sentait contre sa joue le souffle d'une respiration haletante. Cet homme la gênait horriblement.

Elle se leva d'un bond et lui dit :

— Monsieur, j'attends !

— Quoi donc ? fit le notaire, qui devint tout à coup extrêmement pâle.

— Cet argent.

— Mais...

Puis, cédant à l'irruption d'un désir trop fort :

— Eh bien, oui !...

Il se traînait à genoux vers elle, sans égard pour sa robe de chambre.

— De grâce, restez ! je vous aime !

Il la saisit par la taille.

Un flot de pourpre monta vite au visage de madame Bovary. Elle se recula d'un air terrible, en s'écriant :

— Vous profitez impudemment de ma détresse, monsieur ! Je suis à plaindre, mais pas à vendre !

Et elle sortit.

Le notaire resta fort stupéfait, les yeux fixés sur ses belles pantoufles en tapisserie. C'était un présent de l'amour. Cette vue à la fin le consola. D'ailleurs, il songeait qu'une aventure pareille l'aurait entraîné trop loin.

— Quel misérable ! quel goujat !... quelle infamie ! se disait-elle, en fuyant d'un pied nerveux sous les trembles de la route. Le désappointement de l'insuccès renforçait l'indignation de sa pudeur outragée ; il lui semblait que la Providence s'acharnait à la poursuivre, et, s'en rehaussant d'orgueil, jamais elle n'avait eu tant d'estime pour elle-même ni tant de mépris pour les autres. Quelque chose de belliqueux la transportait. Elle aurait voulu battre les hommes, leur cracher au visage, les broyer tous ; et elle continuait à marcher rapidement devant elle, pâle, frémissante, enragée, furetant d'un oeil en pleurs l'horizon vide, et comme se délectant à la haine qui l'étouffait.

Quand elle aperçut sa maison, un engourdissement la saisit. Elle ne pouvait avancer ; il le fallait cependant ; d'ailleurs, où fuir ?

Félicité l'attendait sur la porte.

— Eh bien ?

— Non ! dit Emma.

Et, pendant un quart d'heure, toutes les deux, elles avisèrent les différentes personnes d'Yonville disposées peut-être à la secourir. Mais, chaque fois que Félicité nommait quelqu'un, Emma répliquait :

— Est-ce possible ! Ils ne voudront pas !

— Et monsieur qui va rentrer !

— Je le sais bien... Laisse-moi seule.

Elle avait tout tenté. Il n'y avait plus rien à faire maintenant ; et, quand Charles paraîtrait, elle allait donc lui dire :

— Retire-toi. Ce tapis où tu marches n'est plus à nous. De ta maison, tu n'as pas un meuble, une épingle, une paille, et c'est moi qui t'ai ruiné, pauvre homme !

Alors ce serait un grand sanglot, puis il pleurerait abondamment, et enfin, la surprise passée, il pardonnerait.

— Oui, murmurait-elle en grinçant des dents, il me pardonnera, lui qui n'aurait pas assez d'un million à m'offrir pour que je l'excuse de m'avoir connue... Jamais ! jamais !

Cette idée de la supériorité de Bovary sur elle l'exaspérait. Puis, qu'elle avouât ou n'avouât pas, tout à l'heure, tantôt, demain, il n'en saurait pas moins la catastrophe ; donc, il fallait attendre cette horrible scène et subir le poids de sa magnanimité. L'envie lui vint de retourner chez Lheureux : à quoi bon ? d'écrire à son père ; il était trop tard ; et peut-être qu'elle se repentait maintenant de n'avoir pas cédé à l'autre, lorsqu'elle entendit le trot d'un cheval dans l'allée.

C'était lui, il ouvrait la barrière, il était plus blême que le mur de plâtre. Bondissant dans l'escalier, elle s'échappa vivement par la place ; et la femme du maire, qui causait devant l'église avec Lestiboudois, la vit entrer chez le percepteur.

Elle courut le dire à madame Caron. Ces deux dames montèrent dans le grenier ; et cachées par du linge étendu sur des perches, se postèrent commodément pour apercevoir tout l'intérieur de Binet.

Il était seul, dans sa mansarde, en train d'imiter, avec du bois, une de ces ivoireries indescriptibles, composées de croissants, de sphères creusées les unes dans les autres, le tout droit comme un obélisque et ne servant à rien ; et il entamait la dernière pièce, il touchait au but ! Dans le clair-obscur de l'atelier, la poussière blonde s'envolait de son outil, comme une aigrette d'étincelles sous les fers d'un cheval au galop ; les deux roues tournaient, ronflaient ; Binet souriait, le menton baissé, les narines ouvertes, et semblait enfin perdu dans un de ces bonheurs complets, n'appartenant sans doute qu'aux occupations médiocres, qui amusent l'intelligence par des difficultés faciles, et l'assouvissent en une réalisation au delà de laquelle il n'y a pas à rêver.

— Ah ! la voici ! fit madame Tuvache.

Mais il n'était guère possible, à cause du tour, d'entendre ce qu'elle disait.

Enfin, ces dames crurent distinguer le mot *francs*, et la mère Tuvache souffla tout bas :

— Elle le prie, pour obtenir un retard à ses contributions.

— D'apparence ! reprit l'autre.

Elles la virent qui marchait de long en large, examinant contre les murs les ronds de serviette, les chandeliers, les pommes de rampe, tandis que Binet se caressait la barbe avec satisfaction.

— Viendrait-elle lui commander quelque chose ? dit madame Tuvache.

— Mais il ne vend rien ! objecta sa voisine.

Le percepteur avait l'air d'écouter, tout en écarquillant les yeux, comme s'il ne comprenait pas. Elle continuait d'une manière tendre, suppliante. Elle se rapprocha ; son sein haletait ; ils ne parlaient plus.

— Est-ce qu'elle lui fait des avances ? dit madame Tuvache.

Binet était rouge jusqu'aux oreilles. Elle lui prit les mains.

— Ah ! c'est trop fort !

Et sans doute qu'elle lui proposait une abomination ; car le percepteur, – il était brave pourtant, il avait combattu à Bautzen et à Lutzen, fait la campagne de France, et même été *porté pour la croix* ; – tout à coup, comme à la vue d'un serpent, se recula bien loin en s'écriant :

— Madame ! y pensez-vous ?...

— On devrait fouetter ces femmes-là ! dit madame Tuvache.

— Où est-elle donc ? reprit madame Caron.

Car elle avait disparu durant ces mots ; puis, l'apercevant qui enfilait la Grande-Rue et tournait à droite comme pour gagner le cimetière, elles se perdirent en conjectures.

— Mère Rolet, dit-elle en arrivant chez la nourrice, j'étouffe !... délacez-moi.

Elle tomba sur le lit ; elle sanglotait. La mère Rolet la couvrit d'un jupon et resta debout près d'elle. Puis, comme elle ne répondait pas, la bonne femme s'éloigna, prit son rouet et se mit à filer du lin.

— Oh ! finissez ! murmura-t-elle, croyant entendre le tour de Binet.

— Qui la gêne ? se demandait la nourrice. Pourquoi vient-elle ici ?

Elle y était accourue, poussée par une sorte d'épouvante qui la chassait de sa maison.

Couchée sur le dos, immobile et les yeux fixes, elle discernait vaguement les objets, bien qu'elle y appliquât son attention avec une persistance idiote. Elle contemplait les écaillures de la muraille, deux tisons fumant bout à bout, et une longue araignée qui marchait au-dessus de sa tête, dans la fente de la poutrelle. Enfin, elle rassembla ses idées. Elle se souvenait... Un jour, avec Léon... Oh ! comme c'était loin... Le soleil brillait sur la rivière et les clématites embaumaient... Alors, emportée dans ses souvenirs comme dans un torrent qui bouillonne, elle arriva bientôt à se rappeler la journée de la veille.

— Quelle heure est-il ? demanda-t-elle.

La mère Rolet sortit, leva les doigts de sa main droite du côté que le ciel était le plus clair, et rentra lentement en disant :

— Trois heures, bientôt.

— Ah ! merci ! merci !

Car il allait venir. C'était sûr ! Il aurait trouvé de l'argent. Mais il irait peut-être là-bas, sans se douter qu'elle fût là ; et elle commanda à la nourrice de courir chez elle pour l'amener.

— Dépêchez-vous !

— Mais, ma chère dame, j'y vais ! j'y vais !

Elle s'étonnait, à présent, de n'avoir pas songé à lui tout d'abord ; hier, il avait donné sa parole, il n'y manquerait pas ; et elle se voyait déjà chez Lheureux, étalant sur son bureau les trois billets de banque. Puis il faudrait inventer une histoire qui expliquât les choses à Bovary. Laquelle ?

Cependant la nourrice était bien longue à revenir. Mais, comme il n'y avait point d'horloge dans la chaumière, Emma craignait de s'exagérer peut-être la longueur du temps. Elle se mit à faire des tours de promenade dans le jardin, pas à pas ; elle alla dans le sentier le long de la haie, et s'en retourna vivement, espérant que la bonne femme serait rentrée par une autre route. Enfin, lasse d'attendre, assaillie de soupçons qu'elle repoussait, ne sachant plus si elle était là depuis un siècle ou une minute, elle s'assit dans un coin et ferma les yeux, se boucha les oreilles. La barrière grinça : elle fit un bond ; avant qu'elle eût parlé, la mère Rolet lui avait dit :

— Il n'y a personne chez vous !

— Comment ?

— Oh ! personne ! Et monsieur pleure. Il vous appelle. On vous cherche.

Emma ne répondit rien. Elle haletait, tout en roulant les yeux autour d'elle, tandis que la paysanne, effrayée de son visage, se reculait instinctivement, la croyant folle. Tout à coup elle se frappa le front, poussa un cri, car le souvenir de Rodolphe, comme un grand éclair dans une nuit sombre, lui avait passé dans l'âme. Il était si bon, si délicat, si généreux ! Et, d'ailleurs, s'il hésitait à lui rendre ce service, elle saurait bien l'y contraindre en rappelant d'un seul clin d'oeil leur amour perdu. Elle partit donc vers la Huchette, sans s'apercevoir qu'elle courait s'offrir à ce qui l'avait tantôt si fort exaspérée, ni se douter le moins du monde de cette prostitution.

VIII

Elle se demandait tout en marchant : « Que vais-je dire ? Par où commencerai-je ? » Et à mesure qu'elle avançait, elle reconnaissait les buissons, les arbres, les joncs marins sur la colline, le château là-bas. Elle se retrouvait dans les sensations de sa première tendresse, et son pauvre coeur comprimé s'y dilatait amoureusement. Un vent tiède lui soufflait au visage ; la neige, se fondant, tombait goutte à goutte des bourgeons sur l'herbe.

Elle entra, comme autrefois, par la petite porte du parc, puis arriva à la cour d'honneur, que bordait un double rang de tilleuls touffus. Ils balançaient, en sifflant, leurs longues branches. Les chiens au chenil aboyèrent tous, et l'éclat de leurs voix retentissait sans qu'il parût personne.

Elle monta le large escalier droit, à balustres de bois, qui conduisait au corridor pavé de dalles poudreuses où s'ouvraient plusieurs chambres à la file, comme dans les monastères ou les auberges. La sienne était au bout, tout au fond, à gauche. Quand elle vint à poser les doigts sur la serrure, ses forces subitement l'abandonnèrent. Elle avait peur qu'il ne fût pas là, le souhaitait presque, et c'était pourtant son seul espoir, la dernière chance de salut. Elle se recueillit une minute, et, retrempant son courage au sentiment de la nécessité présente, elle entra.

Il était devant le feu, les deux pieds sur le chambranle, en train de fumer une pipe.

— Tiens ! c'est vous ! dit-il en se levant brusquement.

— Oui, c'est moi !... je voudrais, Rodolphe, vous demander un conseil.

Et malgré tous ses efforts, il lui était impossible de desserrer la bouche.

— Vous n'avez pas changé, vous êtes toujours charmante !

— Oh ! reprit-elle amèrement, ce sont de tristes charmes, mon ami, puisque vous les avez dédaignés.

Alors il entama une explication de sa conduite, s'excusant en termes vagues, faute de pouvoir inventer mieux.

Elle se laissa prendre à ses paroles, plus encore à sa voix et par le spectacle de sa personne ; si bien qu'elle fit semblant de croire, ou crut-elle peut-être, au prétexte de leur rupture ; c'était un secret d'où dépendaient l'honneur et même la vie d'une troisième personne.

— N'importe ! fit-elle en le regardant tristement, j'ai bien souffert !

Il répondit d'un ton philosophique :

— L'existence est ainsi !

— A-t-elle du moins, reprit Emma, été bonne pour vous depuis notre séparation ?

— Oh ! ni bonne... ni mauvaise.

— Il aurait peut-être mieux valu ne jamais nous quitter.

— Oui..., peut-être !

— Tu crois ? dit-elle en se rapprochant.

Et elle soupira.

— Ô Rodolphe ! si tu savais... je t'ai bien aimé !

Ce fut alors qu'elle prit sa main, et ils restèrent quelque temps les doigts entrelacés, – comme le premier jour, aux Comices ! Par un geste d'orgueil, il se débattait sous l'attendrissement. Mais, s'affaissant contre sa poitrine, elle lui dit :
— Comment voulais-tu que je vécusse sans toi ? On ne peut pas se déshabituer du bonheur ! J'étais désespérée ! j'ai cru mourir ! Je te conterai tout cela, tu verras. Et toi... tu m'as fuie !...

Car, depuis trois ans, il l'avait soigneusement évitée par suite de cette lâcheté naturelle qui caractérise le sexe fort ; et Emma continuait avec des gestes mignons de tête, plus câline qu'une chatte amoureuse : — Tu en aimes d'autres, avoue-le. Oh ! je les comprends, va ! je les excuse ; tu les auras séduites, comme tu m'avais séduite. Tu es un homme, toi ! tu as tout ce qu'il faut pour te faire chérir. Mais nous recommencerons, n'est-ce pas ? nous nous aimerons ! Tiens, je ris, je suis heureuse !... parle donc !

Et elle était ravissante à voir, avec son regard où tremblait une larme, comme l'eau d'un orage dans un calice bleu.

Il l'attira sur ses genoux, et il caressait du revers de la main ses bandeaux lisses, où, dans la clarté du crépuscule, miroitait comme une flèche d'or un dernier rayon du soleil. Elle penchait le front ; il finit par la baiser sur les paupières, tout doucement, du bout de ses lèvres.

— Mais tu as pleuré ! dit-il. Pourquoi ?

Elle éclata en sanglots. Rodolphe crut que c'était l'explosion de son amour ; comme elle se taisait, il prit ce silence pour une dernière pudeur, et alors il s'écria : — Ah ! pardonne-moi ! tu es la seule qui me plaise. J'ai été imbécile et méchant ! Je t'aime, je t'aimerai toujours !... Qu'as-tu ? dis-le donc !

Il s'agenouillait.

— Eh bien !... je suis ruinée, Rodolphe ! Tu vas me prêter trois mille francs !

— Mais..., mais..., dit-il en se relevant peu à peu, tandis que sa physionomie prenait une expression grave.

— Tu sais, continuait-elle vite, que mon mari avait placé toute sa fortune chez un notaire ; il s'est enfui. Nous avons emprunté ; les clients ne payaient pas. Du reste la liquidation n'est pas finie ; nous en aurons plus tard. Mais, aujourd'hui, faute de trois mille francs, on va nous saisir ; c'est à présent, à l'instant même ; et, comptant sur ton amitié, je suis venue.

— Ah ! pensa Rodolphe, qui devint très pâle tout à coup, c'est pour cela qu'elle est venue !

Enfin il dit d'un air calme :

— Je ne les ai pas, chère madame.

Il ne mentait point. Il les eût eus qu'il les aurait donnés, sans doute, bien qu'il soit généralement désagréable de faire de si belles actions : une demande pécuniaire, de toutes les bourrasques qui tombent sur l'amour, étant la plus froide et la plus déracinante.

Elle resta d'abord quelques minutes à le regarder.

— Tu ne les as pas !

Elle répéta plusieurs fois :

— Tu ne les as pas !... J'aurais dû m'épargner cette dernière honte. Tu ne m'as jamais aimée ! tu ne vaux pas mieux que les autres !

Elle se trahissait, elle se perdait.

Rodolphe l'interrompit, affirmant qu'il se trouvait « gêné » lui-même.

— Ah ! je te plains ! dit Emma. Oui, considérablement !...

Et, arrêtant ses yeux sur une carabine damasquinée qui brillait dans la panoplie : — Mais, lorsqu'on est si pauvre, on ne met pas d'argent à la crosse de son fusil ! On n'achète pas une pendule avec des incrustations d'écaille ! continuait-elle en montrant l'horloge de Boulle ; ni des sifflets de vermeil pour ses fouets – elle les touchait ! – ni des breloques pour sa montre ! Oh ! rien ne lui manque ! jusqu'à un porte-liqueurs dans sa chambre ; car tu t'aimes, tu vis bien, tu as un château, des fermes, des bois ; tu chasses à courre, tu voyages à Paris... Eh ! quand ce ne serait que cela, s'écria-t-elle en prenant sur la cheminée ses boutons de manchettes, que la moindre de ces niaiseries ! on en peut faire de l'argent !... Oh ! je n'en veux pas ! garde-les !

Et elle lança bien loin les deux boutons, dont la chaîne d'or se rompit en cognant contre la muraille.

— Mais, moi, je t'aurais tout donné, j'aurais tout vendu, j'aurais travaillé de mes mains, j'aurais mendié sur les routes, pour un sourire, pour un regard, pour t'entendre dire : « Merci ! » Et tu restes là tranquillement dans ton fauteuil, comme si déjà tu ne m'avais pas fait assez souffrir ? Sans toi, sais-tu bien, j'aurais pu vivre heureuse ! Qui t'y forçait ? Était-ce une gageure ? Tu m'aimais cependant, tu le disais... Et tout à l'heure encore... Ah ! il eût mieux valu me chasser ! J'ai les mains chaudes de tes baisers, et voilà la place, sur le tapis, où tu jurais à mes genoux une éternité d'amour. Tu m'y as fait croire : tu m'as pendant deux ans, traînée dans le rêve le plus magnifique et le plus suave !... Hein ! nos projets de voyage, tu te rappelles ? Oh ! ta lettre, ta lettre ! elle m'a déchiré le coeur !... Et puis, quand je reviens vers lui, vers lui, qui est riche, heureux, libre ! pour implorer un secours que le premier venu rendrait, suppliante et lui rapportant toute ma tendresse, il me repousse, parce que ça lui coûterait trois mille francs !

— Je ne les ai pas ! répondit Rodolphe avec ce calme parfait dont se recouvrent comme d'un bouclier les colères résignées.

Elle sortit. Les murs tremblaient, le plafond l'écrasait ; et elle repassa par la longue allée, en trébuchant contre les tas de feuilles mortes que le vent dispersait. Enfin elle arriva au saut-de-loup devant la grille ; elle se cassa les ongles contre la serrure, tant elle se dépêchait pour l'ouvrir. Puis, cent pas plus loin, essoufflée, près de tomber, elle s'arrêta. Et alors, se détournant, elle aperçut encore une fois l'impassible château, avec le parc, les jardins, les trois cours, et toutes les fenêtres de la façade.

Elle resta perdue de stupeur, et n'ayant plus conscience d'elle-même que par le battement de ses artères, qu'elle croyait entendre s'échapper comme une assourdissante musique qui emplissait la campagne. Le sol sous ses pieds était plus mou qu'une onde, et les sillons lui parurent d'immenses vagues brunes, qui déferlaient. Tout ce qu'il y avait dans sa tête de réminiscences, d'idées, s'échappait à la fois, d'un seul bond, comme les mille pièces d'un feu d'artifice. Elle vit son père, le cabinet de Lheureux, leur chambre là-bas, un autre paysage. La folie la prenait, elle eut peur, et parvint à se ressaisir, d'une manière confuse, il est vrai ; car elle ne se rappelait point la cause de son horrible état, c'est-à-dire la question d'argent. Elle ne souffrait que de son amour, et sentait son âme l'abandonner par ce souvenir, comme les blessés, en agonisant, sentent l'existence qui s'en va par leur plaie qui saigne.

La nuit tombait, des corneilles volaient.

Il lui sembla tout à coup que des globules couleur de feu éclataient dans l'air comme des balles fulminantes en s'aplatissant, et tournaient, tournaient, pour aller se fondre sur la neige, entre les branches des arbres. Au milieu de chacun d'eux, la figure de Rodolphe apparaissait. Ils se multiplièrent, et ils se rapprochaient, la pénétraient ; tout disparut. Elle reconnut les lumières des maisons, qui rayonnaient de loin dans le brouillard.

Alors sa situation, telle qu'un abîme, se représenta. Elle haletait à se rompre la poitrine. Puis, dans un transport d'héroïsme qui la rendait presque joyeuse, elle descendit la côte en courant, traversa la planche aux vaches, le sentier, l'allée, les halles, et arriva devant la boutique du pharmacien.

Il n'y avait personne. Elle allait entrer ; mais, au bruit de la sonnette, on pouvait venir ; et, se glissant par la barrière, retenant son haleine, tâtant les murs, elle s'avança jusqu'au seuil de la cuisine, où brûlait une chandelle posée sur le fourneau. Justin, en manches de chemise, emportait un plat.

— Ah ! ils dînent. Attendons.

Il revint. Elle frappa contre la vitre. Il sortit.

— La clef ! celle d'en haut, où sont les...

— Comment ?

Et il la regardait, tout étonné par la pâleur de son visage, qui tranchait en blanc sur le fond noir de la nuit. Elle lui apparut extraordinairement belle, et majestueuse comme un fantôme ; sans comprendre ce qu'elle voulait, il pressentait quelque chose de terrible.

Mais elle reprit vivement, à voix basse, d'une voix douce, dissolvante :

— Je la veux ! donne-la-moi.

Comme la cloison était mince, on entendait le cliquetis des fourchettes sur les assiettes dans la salle à manger.

Elle prétendit avoir besoin de tuer les rats qui l'empêchaient de dormir.

— Il faudrait que j'avertisse monsieur.

— Non ! reste !

Puis, d'un air indifférent :

— Eh ! ce n'est pas la peine, je lui dirai tantôt. Allons, éclaire-moi !

Elle entra dans le corridor où s'ouvrait la porte du laboratoire. Il y avait contre la muraille une clef étiquetée *capharnaüm*.

— Justin ! cria l'apothicaire, qui s'impatientait.

— Montons !

Et il la suivit.

La clef tourna dans la serrure, et elle alla droit vers la troisième tablette, tant son souvenir la guidait bien, saisit le bocal bleu, en arracha le bouchon, y fourra sa main, et, la retirant pleine d'une poudre blanche, elle se mit à manger à même.

— Arrêtez ! s'écria-t-il en se jetant sur elle.

— Tais-toi ! on viendrait...

Il se désespérait, voulait appeler.

— N'en dis rien, tout retomberait sur ton maître !

Puis elle s'en retourna subitement apaisée, et presque dans la sérénité d'un devoir accompli.

Quand Charles, bouleversé par la nouvelle de la saisie, était rentré à la maison, Emma venait d'en sortir. Il cria, pleura, s'évanouit, mais elle ne revint pas. Où pouvait-elle être ? Il envoya Félicité chez Homais, chez M. Tuvache, chez Lheureux, au *Lion d'or*, partout ; et, dans les intermittences de son angoisse, il voyait sa considération anéantie, leur fortune perdue, l'avenir de Berthe brisé ! Par quelle cause ?... pas un mot ! Il attendit jusqu'à six heures du soir. Enfin, n'y pouvant plus tenir, et imaginant qu'elle était partie pour Rouen, il alla sur la grande route, fit une demi-lieue, ne rencontra personne, attendit encore et s'en revint.

Elle était rentrée.

— Qu'y avait-il ?... Pourquoi ?... Explique-moi !...

Elle s'assit à son secrétaire, et écrivit une lettre qu'elle cacheta lentement, ajoutant la date du jour et l'heure. Puis elle dit d'un ton solennel : — Tu la liras demain ; d'ici là, je t'en prie, ne m'adresse pas une seule question !... Non, pas une !

— Mais...

— Oh ! laisse-moi !

Et elle se coucha tout du long sur son lit.

Une saveur âcre qu'elle sentait dans sa bouche la réveilla. Elle entrevit Charles et referma les yeux.

Elle s'épiait curieusement, pour discerner si elle ne souffrait pas. Mais non ! rien encore. Elle entendait le battement de la pendule, le bruit du feu, et Charles, debout près de sa couche, qui respirait.

— Ah ! c'est bien peu de chose, la mort ! pensait-elle ; je vais m'endormir, et tout sera fini !

Elle but une gorgée d'eau et se tourna vers la muraille.

Cet affreux goût d'encre continuait.

— J'ai soif !... oh ! j'ai bien soif ! soupira-t-elle.

— Qu'as-tu donc ? dit Charles, qui lui tendait un verre.

— Ce n'est rien !... Ouvre la fenêtre..., j'étouffe !

Et elle fut prise d'une nausée si soudaine, qu'elle eut à peine le temps de saisir son mouchoir sous l'oreiller.

— Enlève-le ! dit-elle vivement ; jette-le !

Il la questionna ; elle ne répondit pas. Elle se tenait immobile, de peur que la moindre émotion ne la fît vomir. Cependant, elle sentait un froid de glace qui lui montait des pieds jusqu'au coeur.

— Ah ! voilà que ça commence ! murmura-t-elle.

— Que dis-tu ?

Elle roulait sa tête avec un geste doux plein d'angoisse, et tout en ouvrant continuellement les mâchoires, comme si elle eût porté sur sa langue quelque chose de très lourd. À huit heures, les vomissements reparurent.

Charles observa qu'il y avait au fond de la cuvette une sorte de gravier blanc, attaché aux parois de la porcelaine.

— C'est extraordinaire ! c'est singulier ! répéta-t-il.

Mais elle dit d'une voix forte :

— Non, tu te trompes !

Alors, délicatement et presque en la caressant, il lui passa la main sur l'estomac. Elle jeta un cri aigu. Il se recula tout effrayé.

Puis elle se mit à geindre, faiblement d'abord. Un grand frisson lui secouait les épaules, et elle devenait plus pâle que le drap où s'enfonçaient ses doigts crispés. Son pouls inégal était presque insensible maintenant.

Des gouttes suintaient sur sa figure bleuâtre, qui semblait comme figée dans l'exhalaison d'une vapeur métallique. Ses dents claquaient, ses yeux agrandis regardaient vaguement autour d'elle, et à toutes les questions elle ne répondait qu'en hochant la tête ; même elle sourit deux ou trois fois. Peu à peu, ses gémissements furent plus forts. Un hurlement sourd lui échappa ; elle prétendit qu'elle allait mieux et qu'elle se lèverait tout à l'heure. Mais les convulsions la saisirent ; elle s'écria : — Ah ! c'est atroce, mon Dieu !

Il se jeta à genoux contre son lit.

— Parle ! qu'as-tu mangé ? Réponds, au nom du ciel !

Et il la regardait avec des yeux d'une tendresse comme elle n'en avait jamais vu.

— Eh bien, là..., là !... dit-elle d'une voix défaillante.

Il bondit au secrétaire, brisa le cachet et lut tout haut : *Qu'on n'accuse personne*... Il s'arrêta, se passa la main sur les yeux, et relut encore.

— Comment !... Au secours ! à moi !

Et il ne pouvait que répéter ce mot : « Empoisonnée ! empoisonnée ! » Félicité courut chez Homais, qui l'exclama sur la place ; madame Lefrançois l'entendit au *Lion d'or* ; quelques-uns se levèrent pour l'apprendre à leurs voisins, et toute la nuit le village fut en éveil.

Éperdu, balbutiant, près de tomber, Charles tournait dans la chambre. Il se heurtait aux meubles, s'arrachait les cheveux, et jamais le pharmacien n'avait cru qu'il pût y avoir de si épouvantable spectacle.

Il revint chez lui pour écrire à M. Canivet et au docteur Larivière. Il perdait la tête ; il fit plus de quinze brouillons. Hippolyte partit à Neufchâtel, et Justin talonna si fort le cheval de Bovary, qu'il le laissa dans la côte du bois Guillaume, fourbu et aux trois quarts crevé.

Charles voulut feuilleter son dictionnaire de médecine ; il n'y voyait pas, les lignes dansaient.

— Du calme ! dit l'apothicaire. Il s'agit seulement d'administrer quelque puissant antidote. Quel est le poison ?

Charles montra la lettre. C'était de l'arsenic.

— Eh bien, reprit Homais, il faudrait en faire l'analyse.

Car il savait qu'il faut, dans tous les empoisonnements, faire une analyse ; et l'autre, qui ne comprenait pas, répondit : — Ah ! faites ! faites ! sauvez-la...

Puis, revenu près d'elle, il s'affaissa par terre sur le tapis, et il restait la tête appuyée contre le bord de sa couche, à sangloter.

— Ne pleure pas ! lui dit-elle. Bientôt je ne te tourmenterai plus !

— Pourquoi ? Qui t'a forcée ?

Elle répliqua :

— Il le fallait, mon ami.

— N'étais-tu pas heureuse ? Est-ce ma faute ? J'ai fait tout ce que j'ai pu, pourtant !

— Oui..., c'est vrai..., tu es bon, toi !

Et elle lui passait la main dans les cheveux, lentement. La douceur de cette sensation surchargeait sa tristesse ; il sentait tout son être s'écrouler de désespoir à l'idée qu'il fallait la perdre, quand, au contraire, elle avouait pour lui plus d'amour que jamais ; et il ne trouvait rien ; il ne savait pas, il n'osait, l'urgence d'une résolution immédiate achevant de le bouleverser.

Elle en avait fini, songeait-elle, avec toutes les trahisons, les bassesses et les innombrables convoitises qui la torturaient. Elle ne haïssait personne, maintenant ; une confusion de crépuscule s'abattait en sa pensée, et de tous les bruits de la terre Emma n'entendait plus que l'intermittente lamentation de ce pauvre coeur, douce et indistincte, comme le dernier écho d'une symphonie qui s'éloigne.

— Amenez-moi la petite, dit-elle en se soulevant du coude.

— Tu n'es pas plus mal, n'est-ce pas ? demanda Charles.

— Non ! non !

L'enfant arriva sur le bras de sa bonne, dans sa longue chemise de nuit, d'où sortaient ses pieds nus, sérieuse et presque rêvant encore. Elle considérait avec étonnement la chambre tout en désordre, et clignait des yeux, éblouie par les flambeaux qui brûlaient sur les meubles. Ils lui rappelaient sans doute les matins du jour de l'an ou de la mi-carême, quand, ainsi réveillée de bonne heure à la clarté des bougies, elle venait dans le lit de sa mère pour y recevoir ses étrennes, car elle se mit à dire : — Où est-ce donc, maman ?

Et comme tout le monde se taisait :

— Mais je ne vois pas mon petit soulier !

Félicité la penchait vers le lit, tandis qu'elle regardait toujours du côté de la cheminée.

— Est-ce nourrice qui l'aurait pris ? demanda-t-elle.

Et, à ce nom, qui la reportait dans le souvenir de ses adultères et de ses calamités, madame Bovary détourna sa tête, comme au dégoût d'un autre poison plus fort qui lui remontait à la bouche. Berthe, cependant, restait posée sur le lit.

— Oh ! comme tu as de grands yeux, maman ! comme tu es pâle ! comme tu sues !...

Sa mère la regardait.

— J'ai peur ! dit la petite en se reculant.

Emma prit sa main pour la baiser ; elle se débattait.

— Assez ! qu'on l'emmène ! s'écria Charles, qui sanglotait dans l'alcôve.

Puis les symptômes s'arrêtèrent un moment ; elle paraissait moins agitée ; et, à chaque parole insignifiante, à chaque souffle de sa poitrine un peu plus calme, il reprenait espoir. Enfin, lorsque Canivet entra, il se jeta dans ses bras en pleurant.

— Ah ! c'est vous ! merci ! vous êtes bon ! Mais tout va mieux. Tenez, regardez-la...

Le confrère ne fut nullement de cette opinion, et, n'y allant pas, comme il le disait lui-même, *par quatre chemins*, il prescrivit de l'émétique, afin de dégager complètement l'estomac.

Elle ne tarda pas à vomir du sang. Ses lèvres se serrèrent davantage. Elle avait les membres crispés, le corps couvert de taches brunes, et son pouls glissait sous les doigts comme un fil tendu, comme une corde de harpe près de se rompre.

Puis elle se mettait à crier, horriblement. Elle maudissait le poison, l'invectivait, le suppliait de se hâter, et repoussait de ses bras roidis tout ce que Charles, plus agonisant qu'elle, s'efforçait de lui faire boire. Il était debout, son mouchoir sur les lèvres, râlant, pleurant, et suffoqué par des sanglots qui le secouaient jusqu'aux talons ; Félicité courait çà et là dans la chambre ; Homais, immobile, poussait de gros soupirs, et M. Canivet, gardant toujours son aplomb, commençait néanmoins à se sentir troublé.

— Diable !... cependant... elle est purgée, et, du moment que la cause cesse...

— L'effet doit cesser, dit Homais ; c'est évident.

— Mais sauvez-la ! exclamait Bovary.

Aussi, sans écouter le pharmacien, qui hasardait encore cette hypothèse : « C'est peut-être un paroxysme salutaire », Canivet allait administrer de la thériaque, lorsqu'on entendit le claquement d'un fouet ; toutes les vitres frémirent, et, une berline de poste qu'enlevaient à plein poitrail trois chevaux crottés jusqu'aux oreilles, débusqua d'un bond au coin des halles. C'était le docteur Larivière.

L'apparition d'un dieu n'eût pas causé plus d'émoi. Bovary leva les mains, Canivet s'arrêta court, et Homais retira son bonnet grec bien avant que le docteur fût entré.

Il appartenait à la grande école chirurgicale sortie du tablier de Bichat, à cette génération, maintenant disparue, de praticiens philosophes qui, chérissant leur art d'un amour fanatique, l'exerçaient avec exaltation et sagacité ! Tout tremblait dans son hôpital quand il se mettait en colère, et ses élèves le vénéraient si bien, qu'ils s'efforçaient, à peine établis, de l'imiter le plus possible ; de sorte que l'on retrouvait sur eux, par les villes d'alentour, sa longue douillette de mérinos et son large habit noir, dont les parements déboutonnés couvraient un peu ses mains charnues, de fort belles mains, et qui n'avaient jamais de gants, comme pour être plus promptes à plonger dans les misères. Dédaigneux des croix, des titres et des académies, hospitalier, libéral, paternel avec les pauvres et pratiquant la vertu sans y croire, il eût presque passé pour un saint si la finesse de son esprit ne l'eût fait craindre comme un démon. Son regard, plus tranchant que ses bistouris, vous descendait droit dans l'âme et désarticulait tout mensonge à travers les allégations et les pudeurs. Et il allait ainsi, plein de cette majesté débonnaire que donnent la conscience d'un grand talent, de la fortune, et quarante ans d'une existence laborieuse et irréprochable.

Il fronça les sourcils dès la porte, en apercevant la face cadavéreuse d'Emma, étendue sur le dos, la bouche ouverte. Puis, tout en ayant l'air d'écouter Canivet, il se passait l'index sous les narines et répétait : — C'est bien, c'est bien.

Mais il fit un geste lent des épaules. Bovary l'observa : ils se regardèrent ; et cet homme, si habitué pourtant à l'aspect des douleurs, ne put retenir une larme qui tomba sur son jabot.

Il voulut emmener Canivet dans la pièce voisine. Charles le suivit.

— Elle est bien mal, n'est-ce pas ? Si l'on posait des sinapismes ? je ne sais quoi ! Trouvez donc quelque chose, vous qui en avez tant sauvé !

Charles lui entourait le corps de ses deux bras, et il le contemplait d'une manière effarée, suppliante, à demi pâmé contre sa poitrine.

— Allons, mon pauvre garçon, du courage ! Il n'y a plus rien à faire.

Et le docteur Larivière se détourna.

— Vous partez ?

— Je vais revenir.

Il sortit comme pour donner un ordre au postillon, avec le sieur Canivet, qui ne se souciait pas non plus de voir Emma mourir entre ses mains.

Le pharmacien les rejoignit sur la place. Il ne pouvait, par tempérament, se séparer des gens célèbres. Aussi conjura-t-il M. Larivière de lui faire cet insigne honneur d'accepter à déjeuner.

On envoya bien vite prendre des pigeons au *Lion d'or*, tout ce qu'il y avait de côtelettes à la boucherie, de la crème chez Tuvache, des oeufs chez Lestiboudois, et l'apothicaire aidait lui-même aux préparatifs, tandis que madame Homais disait, en tirant les cordons de sa camisole : — Vous ferez excuse, monsieur ; car dans notre malheureux pays, du moment qu'on n'est pas prévenu la veille...

— Les verres à patte ! ! ! souffla Homais.

— Au moins, si nous étions à la ville, nous aurions la ressource des pieds farcis.

— Tais-toi !... À table, docteur !

Il jugea bon, après les premiers morceaux, de fournir quelques détails sur la catastrophe : — Nous avons eu d'abord un sentiment de siccité au pharynx, puis des douleurs intolérables à l'épigastre, superpurgation, coma.

— Comment s'est-elle donc empoisonnée ?

— Je l'ignore, docteur, et même je ne sais pas trop où elle a pu se procurer cet acide arsénieux.

Justin, qui apportait alors une pile d'assiettes, fut saisi d'un tremblement.

— Qu'as-tu ? dit le pharmacien.

Le jeune homme, à cette question, laissa tout tomber par terre, avec un grand fracas.

— Imbécile ! s'écria Homais, maladroit ! lourdaud ! fichu âne !

Mais, soudain, se maîtrisant :

— J'ai voulu, docteur, tenter une analyse, et *primo*, j'ai délicatement introduit dans un tube...

— Il aurait mieux valu, dit le chirurgien, lui introduire vos doigts dans la gorge.

Son confrère se taisait, ayant tout à l'heure reçu confidentiellement une forte semonce à propos de son émétique, de sorte que ce bon Canivet, si arrogant et verbeux lors du pied-bot, était très modeste aujourd'hui ; il souriait sans discontinuer, d'une manière approbative.

Homais s'épanouissait dans son orgueil d'amphitryon, et l'affligeante idée de Bovary contribuait vaguement à son plaisir, par un retour égoïste qu'il faisait sur lui-même. Puis la présence du Docteur le transportait. Il étalait son érudition, il citait pêle-mêle les cantharides, l'upas, le mancenillier, la vipère.

— Et même j'ai lu que différentes personnes s'étaient trouvées intoxiquées, docteur, et comme foudroyées par des boudins qui avaient subi une trop véhémente fumigation ! Du moins, c'était dans un fort beau rapport, composé par une de nos sommités pharmaceutiques, un de nos maîtres, l'illustre Cadet de Gassicourt !

Madame Homais réapparut, portant une de ces vacillantes machines que l'on chauffe avec de l'esprit-de-vin ; car Homais tenait à faire son café sur la table, l'ayant d'ailleurs torréfié lui-même, porphyrisé lui-même, mixtionné lui-même.

— *Saccharum*, docteur, dit-il en offrant du sucre.

Puis il fit descendre tous ses enfants, curieux d'avoir l'avis du chirurgien sur leur constitution.

Enfin, M. Larivière allait partir, quand madame Homais lui demanda une consultation pour son mari. Il s'épaississait le sang à s'endormir chaque soir après le dîner.

— Oh ! ce n'est pas le sens qui le gêne.

Et, souriant un peu de ce calembour inaperçu, le docteur ouvrit la porte. Mais la pharmacie regorgeait de monde ; et il eut grand-peine à pouvoir se débarrasser du sieur Tuvache, qui redoutait pour son épouse une fluxion de poitrine, parce qu'elle avait coutume de cracher dans les cendres ; puis de M. Binet, qui éprouvait parfois des fringales, et de madame Caron, qui avait des picotements ; de Lheureux, qui avait des vertiges ; de Lestiboudois, qui avait un rhumatisme ; de madame Lefrançois, qui avait des aigreurs. Enfin les trois chevaux détalèrent, et l'on trouva généralement qu'il n'avait point montré de complaisance.

L'attention publique fut distraite par l'apparition de M. Bournisien, qui passait sous les halles avec les saintes huiles.

Homais, comme il le devait à ses principes, compara les prêtres à des corbeaux qu'attire l'odeur des morts ; la vue d'un ecclésiastique lui était personnellement désagréable, car la soutane le faisait rêver au linceul, et il exécrait l'une un peu par épouvante de l'autre.

Néanmoins, ne reculant pas devant ce qu'il appelait *sa mission*, il retourna chez Bovary en compagnie de Canivet, que M. Larivière, avant de partir, avait engagé fortement à cette démarche ; et même, sans les représentations de sa femme, il eût emmené avec lui ses deux fils, afin de les accoutumer aux fortes circonstances, pour que ce fût une leçon, un exemple, un tableau solennel qui leur restât plus tard dans la tête.

La chambre, quand ils entrèrent, était toute pleine d'une solennité lugubre. Il y avait sur la table à ouvrage, recouverte d'une serviette blanche, cinq ou six petites boules de coton dans un plat d'argent, près d'un gros crucifix, entre deux chandeliers qui brûlaient. Emma, le menton contre sa poitrine, ouvrait démesurément les paupières ; et ses pauvres mains se traînaient sur les draps, avec ce geste hideux et doux des agonisants qui semblent vouloir déjà se recouvrir du suaire. Pâle comme une statue, et les yeux rouges comme des charbons, Charles, sans pleurer, se tenait en face d'elle, au pied du lit, tandis que le prêtre, appuyé sur un genou, marmottait des paroles basses.

Elle tourna sa figure lentement, et parut saisie de joie à voir tout à coup l'étole violette, sans doute retrouvant au milieu d'un apaisement extraordinaire la volupté perdue de ses premiers élancements mystiques, avec des visions de béatitude éternelle qui commençaient.

Le prêtre se releva pour prendre le crucifix ; alors elle allongea le cou comme quelqu'un qui a soif, et, collant ses lèvres sur le corps de l'Homme-Dieu, elle y déposa de toute sa force expirante le plus grand baiser d'amour qu'elle eût jamais donné. Ensuite il récita le *Misereatur* et l'*Indulgentiam*, trempa son pouce droit dans l'huile et commença les onctions : d'abord sur les yeux, qui avaient tant convoité toutes les somptuosités terrestres ; puis sur les narines, friandes de brises tièdes et de senteurs amoureuses ; puis sur la bouche, qui s'était ouverte pour le mensonge, qui avait gémi d'orgueil et crié dans la luxure ; puis sur les mains, qui se délectaient aux contacts suaves, et enfin sur la plante des pieds, si rapides autrefois quand elle courait à l'assouvissance de ses désirs, et qui maintenant ne marcheraient plus.

Le curé s'essuya les doigts, jeta dans le feu les brins de coton trempés d'huile, et revint s'asseoir près de la moribonde pour lui dire qu'elle devait à présent joindre ses souffrances à celles de Jésus-Christ et s'abandonner à la miséricorde divine.

En finissant ses exhortations, il essaya de lui mettre dans la main un cierge bénit, symbole des gloires célestes dont elle allait tout à l'heure être environnée. Emma, trop faible, ne put fermer les doigts, et le cierge, sans M. Bournisien, serait tombé à terre.

Cependant elle n'était plus aussi pâle, et son visage avait une expression de sérénité, comme si le sacrement l'eût guérie.

Le prêtre ne manqua point d'en faire l'observation ; il expliqua même à Bovary que le Seigneur, quelquefois, prolongeait l'existence des personnes lorsqu'il le jugeait convenable pour leur salut ; et Charles se rappela un jour où, ainsi près de mourir, elle avait reçu la communion.

— Il ne fallait peut-être pas se désespérer, pensa-t-il.

En effet, elle regarda tout autour d'elle, lentement, comme quelqu'un qui se réveille d'un songe ; puis, d'une voix distincte, elle demanda son miroir, et elle resta penchée dessus quelque temps, jusqu'au moment où de grosses larmes lui découlèrent des yeux. Alors elle se renversa la tête en poussant un soupir et retomba sur l'oreiller.

Sa poitrine aussitôt se mit à haleter rapidement. La langue tout entière lui sortit hors de la bouche ; ses yeux, en roulant, pâlissaient comme deux globes de lampe qui s'éteignent, à la croire déjà morte, sans l'effrayante accélération de ses côtes, secouées par un souffle furieux, comme si l'âme eût fait des bonds pour se détacher. Félicité s'agenouilla devant le crucifix, et le pharmacien lui-même fléchit un peu les jarrets, tandis que M. Canivet regardait vaguement sur la place. Bournisien s'était remis en prière, la figure inclinée contre le bord de la couche, avec sa longue soutane noire qui traînait derrière lui dans l'appartement. Charles était de l'autre côté, à genoux, les bras étendus vers Emma. Il avait pris ses mains et il les serrait, tressaillant à chaque battement de son coeur, comme au contrecoup d'une ruine qui tombe. À mesure que le râle devenait plus fort, l'ecclésiastique précipitait ses oraisons ; elles se mêlaient aux sanglots étouffés de Bovary, et quelquefois tout semblait disparaître dans le sourd murmure des syllabes latines, qui tintaient comme un glas de cloche.

Tout à coup, on entendit sur le trottoir un bruit de gros sabots, avec le frôlement d'un bâton ; et une voix s'éleva, une voix rauque, qui chantait :

Souvent la chaleur d'un beau jour
Fait rêver fillette à l'amour.

Emma se releva comme un cadavre que l'on galvanise, les cheveux dénoués, la prunelle fixe, béante.

Pour amasser diligemment
Les épis que la faux moissonne,
Ma Nanette va s'inclinant
Vers le sillon qui nous les donne.

— L'Aveugle s'écria-t-elle.

Et Emma se mit à rire, d'un rire atroce, frénétique, désespéré, croyant voir la face hideuse du misérable, qui se dressait dans les ténèbres éternelles comme un épouvantement.

Il souffla bien fort ce jour-là,
Et le jupon court s'envola !

Une convulsion la rabattit sur le matelas. Tous s'approchèrent. Elle n'existait plus.

IX

Il y a toujours après la mort de quelqu'un comme une stupéfaction qui se dégage, tant il est difficile de comprendre cette survenue du néant et de se résigner à y croire. Mais, quand il s'aperçut pourtant de son immobilité, Charles se jeta sur elle en criant :

— Adieu ! adieu !

Homais et Canivet l'entraînèrent hors de la chambre.

— Modérez-vous !

— Oui, disait-il en se débattant, je serai raisonnable, je ne ferai pas de mal. Mais laissez-moi ! je veux la voir ! c'est ma femme !

Et il pleurait.

— Pleurez, reprit le pharmacien, donnez cours à la nature, cela vous soulagera !

Devenu plus faible qu'un enfant, Charles se laissa conduire en bas, dans la salle, et M. Homais bientôt s'en retourna chez lui.

Il fut sur la Place accosté par l'Aveugle, qui, s'étant traîné jusqu'à Yonville dans l'espoir de la pommade antiphlogistique, demandait à chaque passant où demeurait l'apothicaire.

— Allons, bon ! comme si je n'avais pas d'autres chiens à fouetter ! Ah ! tant pis, reviens plus tard !

Et il entra précipitamment dans la pharmacie.

Il avait à écrire deux lettres, à faire une potion calmante pour Bovary, à trouver un mensonge qui pût cacher l'empoisonnement et à le rédiger en article pour le *Fanal*, sans compter les personnes qui l'attendaient, afin d'avoir des informations ; et, quand les Yonvillais eurent tous entendu son histoire d'arsenic qu'elle avait pris pour du sucre, en faisant une crème à la vanille, Homais, encore une fois, retourna chez Bovary.

Il le trouva seul (M. Canivet venait de partir), assis dans le fauteuil, près de la fenêtre, et contemplant d'un regard idiot les pavés de la salle.

— Il faudrait à présent, dit le pharmacien, fixer vous-même l'heure de la cérémonie.

— Pourquoi ? quelle cérémonie ?

Puis d'une voix balbutiante et effrayée :

— Oh ! non, n'est-ce pas ? non, je veux la garder.

Homais, par contenance, prit une carafe sur l'étagère pour arroser les géraniums.

— Ah ! merci, dit Charles, vous êtes bon !

Et il n'acheva pas, suffoquant sous une abondance de souvenirs que ce geste du pharmacien lui rappelait.

Alors, pour le distraire, Homais jugea convenable de causer un peu horticulture ; les plantes avaient besoin d'humidité. Charles baissa la tête en signe d'approbation.

— Du reste, les beaux jours maintenant vont revenir.

— Ah ! fit Bovary.

L'apothicaire, à bout d'idées, se mit à écarter doucement les petits rideaux du vitrage.

— Tiens, voilà M. Tuvache qui passe.

Charles répéta comme une machine :

— M. Tuvache qui passe.

Homais n'osa lui reparler des dispositions funèbres ; ce fut l'ecclésiastique qui parvint à l'y résoudre.

Il s'enferma dans son cabinet, prit une plume, et, après avoir sangloté quelque temps, il écrivit :

« Je veux qu'on l'enterre dans sa robe de noces, avec des souliers blancs, une couronne. On lui étalera ses cheveux sur les épaules ; trois cercueils, un de chêne, un d'acajou, un de plomb. Qu'on ne me dise rien, j'aurai de la force. On lui mettra par-dessus tout une grande pièce de velours vert. Je le veux. Faites-le. »

Ces messieurs s'étonnèrent beaucoup des idées romanesques de Bovary, et aussitôt le pharmacien alla lui dire :

— Ce velours me paraît une superfétation. La dépense, d'ailleurs...

— Est-ce que cela vous regarde ? s'écria Charles. Laissez-moi ! vous ne l'aimiez pas ! Allez-vous-en !

L'ecclésiastique le prit par-dessous le bras pour lui faire faire un tour de promenade dans le jardin. Il discourait sur la vanité des choses terrestres. Dieu était bien grand, bien bon ; on devait sans murmure se soumettre à ses décrets, même le remercier.

Charles éclata en blasphèmes.

— Je l'exècre, votre Dieu !

— L'esprit de révolte est encore en vous, soupira l'ecclésiastique.

Bovary était loin. Il marchait à grands pas, le long du mur, près de l'espalier, et il grinçait des dents, il levait au ciel des regards de malédiction ; mais pas une feuille seulement n'en bougea.

Une petite pluie tombait. Charles, qui avait la poitrine nue, finit par grelotter ; il rentra s'asseoir dans la cuisine.

À six heures, on entendit un bruit de ferraille sur la Place : c'était l'*Hirondelle* qui arrivait ; et il resta le front contre les carreaux, à voir descendre les uns après les autres tous les voyageurs. Félicité lui étendit un matelas dans le salon ; il se jeta dessus et s'endormit.

Bien que philosophe, M. Homais respectait les morts. Aussi, sans garder rancune au pauvre Charles, il revint le soir pour faire la veillée du cadavre, apportant avec lui trois volumes, et un portefeuille, afin de prendre des notes.

M. Bournisien s'y trouvait, et deux grands cierges brûlaient au chevet du lit, que l'on avait tiré hors de l'alcôve.

L'apothicaire, à qui le silence pesait, ne tarda pas à formuler quelques plaintes sur cette « infortunée jeune femme » ; et le prêtre répondit qu'il ne restait plus maintenant qu'à prier pour elle.

— Cependant, reprit Homais, de deux choses l'une : ou elle est morte en état de grâce (comme s'exprime l'Église), et alors elle n'a nul besoin de nos prières ; ou bien elle est décédée impénitente (c'est, je crois, l'expression ecclésiastique), et alors...

Bournisien l'interrompit, répliquant d'un ton bourru qu'il n'en fallait pas moins prier.

— Mais, objecta le pharmacien, puisque Dieu connaît tous nos besoins, à quoi peut servir la prière ?

— Comment ! fit l'ecclésiastique, la prière ! Vous n'êtes donc pas chrétien ?

— Pardonnez ! dit Homais. J'admire le christianisme. Il a d'abord affranchi les esclaves, introduit dans le monde une morale...

— Il ne s'agit pas de cela ! Tous les textes...

— Oh ! oh ! quant aux textes, ouvrez l'histoire ; on sait qu'ils ont été falsifiés par les jésuites.

Charles entra, et, s'avançant vers le lit, il tira lentement les rideaux.

Emma avait la tête penchée sur l'épaule droite. Le coin de sa bouche, qui se tenait ouverte, faisait comme un trou noir au bas de son visage ; les deux pouces restaient infléchis dans la paume des mains ; une sorte de poussière blanche lui parsemait les cils, et ses yeux commençaient à disparaître dans une pâleur visqueuse qui ressemblait à une toile mince, comme si des araignées avaient filé dessus. Le drap se creusait depuis ses seins jusqu'à ses genoux, se relevant ensuite à la pointe des orteils ; et il semblait à Charles que des masses infinies, qu'un poids énorme pesait sur elle.

L'horloge de l'église sonna deux heures. On entendait le gros murmure de la rivière qui coulait dans les ténèbres, au pied de la terrasse. M. Bournisien, de temps à autre, se mouchait bruyamment, et Homais faisait grincer sa plume sur le papier.

— Allons, mon bon ami, dit-il, retirez-vous, ce spectacle vous déchire !

Charles une fois parti, le pharmacien et le curé recommencèrent leurs discussions.

— Lisez Voltaire ! disait l'un ; lisez d'Holbach, lisez *l'Encyclopédie* !

— Lisez les *Lettres de quelques juifs portugais !* disait l'autre ; lisez la *Raison du christianisme*, par Nicolas, ancien magistrat !

Ils s'échauffaient, ils étaient rouges, ils parlaient à la fois sans s'écouter ; Bournisien se scandalisait d'une telle audace ; Homais s'émerveillait d'une telle bêtise ; et ils n'étaient pas loin de s'adresser des injures, quand Charles, tout à coup, reparut. Une fascination l'attirait. Il remontait continuellement l'escalier.

Il se posait en face d'elle pour la mieux voir, et il se perdait en cette contemplation, qui n'était plus douloureuse à force d'être profonde.

Il se rappelait des histoires de catalepsie, les miracles du magnétisme ; et il se disait qu'en le voulant extrêmement, il parviendrait peut-être à la ressusciter. Une fois même il se pencha vers elle, et il cria tout bas : « Emma ! Emma ! » Son haleine, fortement poussée, fit trembler la flamme des cierges contre le mur.

Au petit jour, madame Bovary mère arriva ; Charles, en l'embrassant, eut un nouveau débordement de pleurs. Elle essaya, comme avait tenté le pharmacien, de lui faire quelques observations sur les dépenses de l'enterrement. Il s'emporta si fort qu'elle se tut, et même il la chargea de se rendre immédiatement à la ville pour acheter ce qu'il fallait.

Charles resta seul toute l'après-midi : on avait conduit Berthe chez madame Homais ; Félicité se tenait en haut, dans la chambre, avec la mère Lefrançois.

Le soir, il reçut des visites. Il se levait, vous serrait les mains sans pouvoir parler, puis l'on s'asseyait auprès des autres, qui faisaient devant la cheminée un grand demi-cercle. La figure basse et le jarret sur le genou, ils dandinaient leur jambe, tout en poussant par intervalles un gros soupir ; et chacun s'ennuyait d'une façon démesurée ; c'était pourtant à qui ne partirait pas.

Homais, quand il revint à neuf heures (on ne voyait que lui sur la Place depuis deux jours), était chargé d'une provision de camphre, de benjoin et d'herbes aromatiques. Il portait aussi un vase plein de chlore, pour bannir les miasmes. À ce moment, la domestique, madame Lefrançois et la mère Bovary tournaient autour d'Emma, en achevant de l'habiller ; et elles abaissèrent le long voile raide, qui la recouvrit jusqu'à ses souliers de satin.

Félicité sanglotait :

— Ah ! ma pauvre maîtresse ! ma pauvre maîtresse !

— Regardez-la, disait en soupirant l'aubergiste, comme elle est mignonne encore ! Si l'on ne jurerait pas qu'elle va se lever tout à l'heure.

Puis elles se penchèrent, pour lui mettre sa couronne.

Il fallut soulever un peu la tête, et alors un flot de liquides noirs sortit, comme un vomissement, de sa bouche.

— Ah ! mon Dieu ! la robe, prenez garde ! s'écria madame Lefrançois. Aidez-nous donc ! disait-elle au pharmacien. Est-ce que vous avez peur, par hasard ?

— Moi, peur ? répliqua-t-il en haussant les épaules. Ah bien, oui ! J'en ai vu d'autres à l'Hôtel-Dieu, quand j'étudiais la pharmacie ! Nous faisions du punch dans l'amphithéâtre aux dissections ! Le néant n'épouvante pas un philosophe ; et même, je le dis souvent, j'ai l'intention de léguer mon corps aux hôpitaux, afin de servir plus tard à la Science.

En arrivant, le Curé demanda comment se portait Monsieur ; et, sur la réponse de l'apothicaire, il reprit :

— Le coup, vous comprenez, est encore trop récent !

Alors Homais le félicita de n'être pas exposé, comme tout le monde, à perdre une compagne chérie ; d'où s'ensuivit une discussion sur le célibat des prêtres.

— Car, disait le pharmacien, il n'est pas naturel qu'un homme se passe de femmes ! On a vu des crimes...

— Mais, sabre de bois ! s'écria l'ecclésiastique, comment voulez-vous qu'un individu pris dans le mariage puisse garder, par exemple, le secret de la confession ?

Homais attaqua la confession. Bournisien la défendit ; il s'étendit sur les restitutions qu'elle faisait opérer. Il cita différentes anecdotes de voleurs devenus honnêtes tout à coup. Des militaires, s'étant approchés du tribunal de la pénitence, avaient senti les écailles leur tomber des yeux. Il y avait à Fribourg un ministre...

Son compagnon dormait. Puis, comme il étouffait un peu dans l'atmosphère trop lourde de la chambre, il ouvrit la fenêtre, ce qui réveilla le pharmacien.

— Allons, une prise ! lui dit-il. Acceptez, cela dissipe.

Des aboiements continus se traînaient au loin, quelque part.

— Entendez-vous un chien qui hurle ? dit le pharmacien.

— On prétend qu'ils sentent les morts, répondit l'ecclésiastique. C'est comme les abeilles : elles s'envolent de la ruche au décès des personnes. Homais ne releva pas ces préjugés, car il s'était rendormi.

M. Bournisien, plus robuste, continua quelque temps à remuer tout bas les lèvres ; puis, insensiblement, il baissa le menton, lâcha son gros livre noir et se mit à ronfler.

Ils étaient en face l'un de l'autre, le ventre en avant, la figure bouffie, l'air renfrogné, après tant de désaccord se rencontrant enfin dans la même faiblesse humaine ; et ils ne bougeaient pas plus que le cadavre à côté d'eux, qui avait l'air de dormir.

Charles, en entrant, ne les réveilla point. C'était la dernière fois. Il venait lui faire ses adieux.

Les herbes aromatiques fumaient encore, et des tourbillons de vapeur bleuâtre se confondaient au bord de la croisée avec le brouillard qui entrait. Il y avait quelques étoiles, et la nuit était douce.

La cire des cierges tombait par grosses larmes sur les draps du lit. Charles les regardait brûler, fatiguant ses yeux contre le rayonnement de leur flamme jaune.

Des moires frissonnaient sur la robe de satin, blanche comme un clair de lune. Emma disparaissait dessous ; et il lui semblait que, s'épandant au dehors d'elle-même, elle se perdait confusément dans l'entourage des choses, dans le silence, dans la nuit, dans le vent qui passait, dans les senteurs humides qui montaient.

Puis, tout à coup, il la voyait dans le jardin de Tostes, sur le banc, contre la haie d'épines, ou bien à Rouen dans les rues, sur le seuil de leur maison, dans la cour des Bertaux. Il entendait encore le rire des garçons en gaieté qui dansaient sous les pommiers ; la chambre était pleine du parfum de sa chevelure, et sa robe lui frissonnait dans les bras avec un bruit d'étincelles. C'était la même, celle-là !

Il fut longtemps à se rappeler ainsi toutes les félicités disparues, ses attitudes, ses gestes, le timbre de sa voix. Après un désespoir, il en venait un autre, et toujours, intarissablement, comme les flots d'une marée qui déborde.

Il eut une curiosité terrible : lentement, du bout des doigts, en palpitant, il releva son voile. Mais il poussa un cri d'horreur qui réveilla les deux autres. Ils l'entraînèrent en bas, dans la salle.

Puis Félicité vint dire qu'il demandait des cheveux.

— Coupez-en ! répliqua l'apothicaire.

Et, comme elle n'osait, il s'avança lui-même, les ciseaux à la main. Il tremblait si fort, qu'il piqua la peau des tempes en plusieurs places. Enfin, se raidissant contre l'émotion, Homais donna deux ou trois grands coups au hasard, ce qui fit des marques blanches dans cette belle chevelure noire.

Le pharmacien et le curé se replongèrent dans leurs occupations, non sans dormir de temps à autre, ce dont ils s'accusaient réciproquement à chaque réveil nouveau. Alors M. Bournisien aspergeait la chambre d'eau bénite et Homais jetait un peu de chlore par terre.

Félicité avait eu soin de mettre pour eux, sur la commode, une bouteille d'eau-de-vie, un fromage et une grosse brioche. Aussi l'apothicaire, qui n'en pouvait plus, soupira, vers quatre heures du matin :

— Ma foi, je me sustenterais avec plaisir !

L'ecclésiastique ne se fit point prier ; il sortit pour aller dire sa messe, revint ;

puis ils mangèrent et trinquèrent, tout en ricanant un peu, sans savoir pourquoi, excités par cette gaieté vague qui vous prend après des séances de tristesse ; et, au dernier petit verre, le prêtre dit au pharmacien, tout en lui frappant sur l'épaule :

— Nous finirons par nous entendre !

Ils rencontrèrent en bas, dans le vestibule, les ouvriers qui arrivaient. Alors Charles, pendant deux heures, eut à subir le supplice du marteau qui résonnait sur les planches. Puis on la descendit dans son cercueil de chêne, que l'on emboîta dans les deux autres ; mais, comme la bière était trop large, il fallut boucher les interstices avec la laine d'un matelas. Enfin, quand les trois couvercles furent rabotés, cloués, soudés, on l'exposa devant la porte ; on ouvrit toute grande la maison, et les gens d'Yonville commencèrent à affluer.

Le père Rouault arriva. Il s'évanouit sur la Place en apercevant le drap noir.

X

Il n'avait reçu la lettre du pharmacien que trente-six heures après l'événement ; et, par égard pour sa sensibilité, M. Homais l'avait rédigée de telle façon qu'il était impossible de savoir à quoi s'en tenir.

Le bonhomme tomba d'abord comme frappé d'apoplexie. Ensuite il comprit qu'elle n'était pas morte. Mais elle pouvait l'être... Enfin il avait passé sa blouse, pris son chapeau, accroché un éperon à son soulier et était parti ventre à terre ; et, tout le long de la route, le père Rouault, haletant, se dévora d'angoisses. Une fois même, il fut obligé de descendre. Il n'y voyait plus, il entendait des voix autour de lui, il se sentait devenir fou.

Le jour se leva. Il aperçut trois poules noires qui dormaient dans un arbre ; il tressaillit, épouvanté de ce présage. Alors il promit à la sainte Vierge trois chasubles pour l'église, et qu'il irait pieds nus depuis le cimetière des Bertaux jusqu'à la chapelle de Vassonville.

Il entra dans Maromme en hélant les gens de l'auberge, enfonça la porte d'un coup d'épaule, bondit au sac d'avoine, versa dans la mangeoire une bouteille de cidre doux, et renfourcha son bidet, qui faisait feu des quatre fers.

Il se disait qu'on la sauverait sans doute ; les médecins découvriraient un remède, c'était sûr. Il se rappela toutes les guérisons miraculeuses qu'on lui avait contées.

Puis elle lui apparaissait morte. Elle était là, devant lui, étendue sur le dos, au milieu de la route. Il tirait la bride et l'hallucination disparaissait.

À Quincampoix, pour se donner du coeur, il but trois cafés l'un sur l'autre.

Il songea qu'on s'était trompé de nom en écrivant. Il chercha la lettre dans sa poche, l'y sentit, mais il n'osa pas l'ouvrir.

Il en vint à supposer que c'était peut-être une farce, une vengeance de quelqu'un, une fantaisie d'homme en goguette ; et, d'ailleurs, si elle était morte, on le saurait ? Mais non ! la campagne n'avait rien d'extraordinaire : le ciel était bleu, les arbres se balançaient ; un troupeau de moutons passa. Il aperçut le village ; on le vit accourant tout penché sur son cheval, qu'il bâtonnait à grands coups, et dont les sangles dégouttelaient de sang.

Quand il eut repris connaissance, il tomba tout en pleurs dans les bras de Bovary :

— Ma fille ! Emma ! mon enfant ! expliquez-moi... ?

Et l'autre répondait avec des sanglots :

— Je ne sais pas, je ne sais pas ! c'est une malédiction !

L'apothicaire les sépara.

— Ces horribles détails sont inutiles. J'en instruirai monsieur. Voici le monde qui vient. De la dignité, fichtre ! de la philosophie !

Le pauvre garçon voulut paraître fort, et il répéta plusieurs fois :

— Oui..., du courage !

— Eh bien, s'écria le bonhomme, j'en aurai, nom d'un tonnerre de Dieu ! Je m'en vas la conduire jusqu'au bout.

La cloche tintait. Tout était prêt. Il fallut se mettre en marche.

Et, assis dans une stalle du choeur, l'un près de l'autre, ils virent passer devant eux et repasser continuellement les trois chantres qui psalmodiaient. Le serpent soufflait à pleine poitrine. M. Bournisien, en grand appareil, chantait d'une voix aiguë ; il saluait le tabernacle, élevait les mains, étendait les bras. Lestiboudois circulait dans l'église avec sa latte de baleine ; près du lutrin, la bière reposait entre quatre rangs de cierges. Charles avait envie de se lever pour les éteindre.

Il tâchait cependant de s'exciter à la dévotion, de s'élancer dans l'espoir d'une vie future où il la reverrait. Il imaginait qu'elle était partie en voyage, bien loin, depuis longtemps. Mais, quand il pensait qu'elle se trouvait là-dessous, et que tout était fini, qu'on l'emportait dans la terre, il se prenait d'une rage farouche, noire, désespérée. Parfois il croyait ne plus rien sentir ; et il savourait cet adoucissement de sa douleur, tout en se reprochant d'être un misérable.

On entendit sur les dalles comme le bruit sec d'un bâton ferré qui les frappait à temps égaux. Cela venait du fond, et s'arrêta court dans les bas-côtés de l'église. Un homme en grosse veste brune s'agenouilla péniblement. C'était Hippolyte, le garçon du *Lion d’or*. Il avait mis sa jambe neuve.

L'un des chantres vint faire le tour de la nef pour quêter, et les gros sous, les uns après les autres, sonnaient dans le plat d'argent.

— Dépêchez-vous donc ! Je souffre, moi ! s'écria Bovary tout en lui jetant avec colère une pièce de cinq francs.

L'homme d'église le remercia par une longue révérence.

On chantait, on s'agenouillait, on se relevait, cela n'en finissait pas ! Il se rappela qu'une fois, dans les premiers temps, ils avaient ensemble assisté à la messe, et ils s'étaient mis de l'autre côté, à droite, contre le mur. La cloche recommença. Il y eut un grand mouvement de chaises. Les porteurs glissèrent leurs trois bâtons sous la bière, et l'on sortit de l'église.

Justin alors parut sur le seuil de la pharmacie. Il y rentra tout à coup, pâle, chancelant.

On se tenait aux fenêtres pour voir passer le cortège. Charles, en avant, se cambrait la taille. Il affectait un air brave et saluait d'un signe ceux qui, débouchant des ruelles ou des portes, se rangeaient dans la foule.

Les six hommes, trois de chaque côté, marchaient au petit pas et en haletant un peu. Les prêtres, les chantres et les deux enfants de choeur récitaient le *De profundis* ; et leurs voix s'en allaient sur la campagne, montant et s'abaissant avec des ondulations. Parfois ils disparaissaient aux détours du sentier ; mais la grande croix d'argent se dressait toujours entre les arbres.

Les femmes suivaient, couvertes de mantes noires à capuchon rabattu ; elles portaient à la main un gros cierge qui brûlait, et Charles se sentait défaillir à cette continuelle répétition de prières et de flambeaux, sous ces odeurs affadissantes de cire et de soutane. Une brise fraîche soufflait, les seigles et les colzas verdoyaient, des gouttelettes de rosée tremblaient au bord du chemin, sur les haies d'épines. Toutes sortes de bruits joyeux emplissaient l'horizon : le claquement d'une charrette roulant au loin dans les ornières, le cri d'un coq qui se répétait ou la galopade d'un poulain que l'on voyait s'enfuir sous les pommiers. Le ciel pur était tacheté de nuages roses ; des fumignons bleuâtres se rabattaient sur les chaumières couvertes d'iris ; Charles, en passant, reconnaissait les cours. Il se souvenait de matins comme celui-ci, où, après avoir visité quelque malade, il en sortait, et retournait vers elle.

Le drap noir, semé de larmes blanches, se levait de temps à autre en découvrant la bière. Les porteurs fatigués se ralentissaient, et elle avançait par saccades continues, comme une chaloupe qui tangue à chaque flot.

On arriva.

Les hommes continuèrent jusqu'en bas, à une place dans le gazon où la fosse était creusée.

On se rangea tout autour ; et, tandis que le prêtre parlait, la terre rouge, rejetée sur les bords, coulait par les coins, sans bruit, continuellement.

Puis, quand les quatre cordes furent disposées, on poussa la bière dessus. Il la regarda descendre. Elle descendait toujours.

Enfin on entendit un choc ; les cordes en grinçant remontèrent. Alors Bournisien prit la bêche que lui tendait Lestiboudois ; de sa main gauche, tout en aspergeant de la droite, il poussa vigoureusement une large pelletée ; et le bois du cercueil, heurté par les cailloux, fit ce bruit formidable qui nous semble être le retentissement de l'éternité.

L'ecclésiastique passa le goupillon à son voisin. C'était M. Homais. Il le secoua gravement, puis le tendit à Charles, qui s'affaissa jusqu'aux genoux dans la terre, et il en jetait à pleines mains tout en criant : « Adieu ! » Il lui envoyait des baisers ; il se traînait vers la fosse pour s'y engloutir avec elle.

On l'emmena ; et il ne tarda pas à s'apaiser, éprouvant peut-être, comme tous les autres, la vague satisfaction d'en avoir fini.

Le père Rouault, en revenant, se mit tranquillement à fumer une pipe ; ce que Homais, dans son for intérieur, jugea peu convenable. Il remarqua de même que

M. Binet s'était abstenu de paraître, que Tuvache « avait filé » après la messe, et que Théodore, le domestique du notaire, portait un habit bleu, « comme si l'on ne pouvait pas trouver un habit noir, puisque c'est l'usage, que diable ! » Et pour communiquer ses observations, il allait d'un groupe à l'autre. On y déplorait la mort d'Emma, et surtout Lheureux, qui n'avait point manqué de venir à l'enterrement.

— Cette pauvre petite dame ! quelle douleur pour son mari !

L'apothicaire reprenait :

— Sans moi, savez-vous bien, il se serait porté sur lui-même à quelque attentat funeste !

— Une si bonne personne ! Dire pourtant que je l'ai encore vue samedi dernier dans ma boutique !

— Je n'ai pas eu le loisir, dit Homais, de préparer quelques paroles que j'aurais jetées sur sa tombe.

En rentrant, Charles se déshabilla, et le père Rouault repassa sa blouse bleue. Elle était neuve, et, comme il s'était, pendant la route, souvent essuyé les yeux avec les manches, elle avait déteint sur sa figure ; et la trace des pleurs y faisait des lignes dans la couche de poussière qui la salissait.

Madame Bovary mère était avec eux. Ils se taisaient tous les trois. Enfin le bonhomme soupira :

— Vous rappelez-vous, mon ami, que je suis venu à Tostes une fois, quand vous veniez de perdre votre première défunte. Je vous consolais dans ce temps-là ! Je trouvais quoi dire ; mais à présent...

Puis, avec un long gémissement qui souleva toute sa poitrine :

— Ah ! c'est la fin pour moi, voyez-vous ! J'ai vu partir ma femme..., mon fils après..., et voilà ma fille, aujourd'hui !

Il voulut s'en retourner tout de suite aux Bertaux, disant qu'il ne pourrait pas dormir dans cette maison-là. Il refusa même de voir sa petite-fille.

— Non ! non ! ça me ferait trop de deuil. Seulement, vous l'embrasserez bien ! Adieu !... vous êtes un bon garçon ! Et puis, jamais je n'oublierai ça, dit-il en se frappant la cuisse, n'ayez peur ! vous recevrez toujours votre dinde.

Mais, quand il fut au haut de la côte, il se détourna, comme autrefois il s'était détourné sur le chemin de Saint-Victor, en se séparant d'elle. Les fenêtres du village étaient tout en feu sous les rayons obliques du soleil, qui se couchait dans la prairie. Il mit sa main devant ses yeux ; et il aperçut à l'horizon un enclos de murs où des arbres, çà et là, faisaient des bouquets noirs entre des pierres blanches, puis il continua sa route, au petit trot, car son bidet boitait.

Charles et sa mère restèrent le soir, malgré leur fatigue, fort longtemps à causer ensemble. Ils parlèrent des jours d'autrefois et de l'avenir. Elle viendrait habiter Yonville, elle tiendrait son ménage, ils ne se quitteraient plus. Elle fut ingénieuse et caressante, se réjouissant intérieurement à ressaisir une affection qui depuis tant d'années lui échappait. Minuit sonna. Le village, comme d'habitude, était silencieux, et Charles, éveillé, pensait toujours à elle.

Rodolphe, qui, pour se distraire, avait battu le bois toute la journée, dormait tranquillement dans son château ; et Léon, là-bas, dormait aussi.

Il y en avait un autre qui, à cette heure-là, ne dormait pas.

Sur la fosse, entre les sapins, un enfant pleurait agenouillé, et sa poitrine, brisée par les sanglots, haletait dans l'ombre, sous la pression d'un regret immense plus doux que la lune et plus insondable que la nuit. La grille tout à coup craqua. C'était Lestiboudois ; il venait chercher sa bêche qu'il avait oubliée tantôt. Il reconnut Justin escaladant le mur, et sut alors à quoi s'en tenir sur le malfaiteur qui lui dérobait ses pommes de terre.

XI

Charles, le lendemain, fit revenir la petite. Elle demanda sa maman. On lui répondit qu'elle était absente, qu'elle lui rapporterait des joujoux. Berthe en reparla plusieurs fois ; puis, à la longue, elle n'y pensa plus. La gaieté de cette enfant navrait Bovary, et il avait à subir les intolérables consolations du pharmacien.

Les affaires d'argent bientôt recommencèrent, M. Lheureux excitant de nouveau son ami Vinçart, et Charles s'engagea pour des sommes exorbitantes ; car jamais il ne voulut consentir à laisser vendre le moindre des meubles qui *lui* avaient appartenu. Sa mère en fut exaspérée. Il s'indigna plus fort qu'elle. Il avait changé tout à fait. Elle abandonna la maison.

Alors chacun se mit *à profiter*. Mademoiselle Lempereur réclama six mois de leçons, bien qu'Emma n'en eût jamais pris une seule (malgré cette facture acquittée qu'elle avait fait voir à Bovary) : c'était une convention entre elles deux ; le loueur de livres réclama trois ans d'abonnement ; la mère Rolet réclama le port d'une vingtaine de lettres ; et, comme Charles demandait des explications, elle eut la délicatesse de répondre :

— Ah ! je ne sais rien ! c'était pour ses affaires.

À chaque dette qu'il payait, Charles croyait en avoir fini. Il en survenait d'autres, continuellement.

Il exigea l'arriéré d'anciennes visites. On lui montra les lettres que sa femme avait envoyées. Alors il fallut faire des excuses.

Félicité portait maintenant les robes de Madame ; non pas toutes, car il en avait gardé quelques-unes, et il les allait voir dans son cabinet de toilette, où il s'enfermait ; elle était à peu près de sa taille, souvent Charles, en l'apercevant par derrière, était saisi d'une illusion, et s'écriait :

— Oh ! reste ! reste !

Mais, à la Pentecôte, elle décampa d'Yonville, enlevée par Théodore, et en volant tout ce qui restait de la garde-robe.

Ce fut vers cette époque que madame veuve Dupuis eut l'honneur de lui faire part du « mariage de M. Léon Dupuis, son fils, notaire à Yvetot, avec mademoiselle Léocadie Leboeuf, de Bondeville ». Charles, parmi les félicitations qu'il lui adressa, écrivit cette phrase :

« Comme ma pauvre femme aurait été heureuse ! »

Un jour qu'errant sans but dans la maison, il était monté jusqu'au grenier, il sentit sous sa pantoufle une boulette de papier fin. Il l'ouvrit et il lut : « Du courage, Emma ! du courage ! Je ne veux pas faire le malheur de votre existence. » C'était la lettre de Rodolphe, tombée à terre entre des caisses, qui était restée là, et que le vent de la lucarne venait de pousser vers la porte. Et Charles demeura tout immobile et béant à cette même place où jadis, encore plus pâle que lui, Emma, désespérée, avait voulu mourir. Enfin, il découvrit un petit R au bas de la seconde page. Qu'était-ce ? il se rappela les assiduités de Rodolphe, sa disparition soudaine et l'air contraint qu'il avait eu en la rencontrant depuis, deux ou trois fois. Mais le ton respectueux de la lettre l'illusionna.

— Ils se sont peut-être aimés platoniquement, se dit-il.

D'ailleurs, Charles n'était pas de ceux qui descendent au fond des choses : il recula devant les preuves, et sa jalousie incertaine se perdit dans l'immensité de son chagrin.

On avait dû, pensait-il, l'adorer. Tous les hommes, à coup sûr, l'avaient convoitée. Elle lui en parut plus belle ; et il en conçut un désir permanent, furieux, qui enflammait son désespoir et qui n'avait pas de limites, parce qu'il était maintenant irréalisable.

Pour lui plaire, comme si elle vivait encore, il adopta ses prédilections, ses idées ; il s'acheta des bottes vernies, il prit l'usage des cravates blanches. Il mettait du cosmétique à ses moustaches, il souscrivit comme elle des billets à ordre. Elle le corrompait par delà le tombeau.

Il fut obligé de vendre l'argenterie pièce à pièce, ensuite il vendit les meubles du salon. Tous les appartements se dégarnirent ; mais la chambre, sa chambre à elle, était restée comme autrefois. Après son dîner, Charles montait là. Il poussait devant le feu la table ronde, et il approchait son fauteuil. Il s'asseyait en face. Une chandelle brûlait dans un des flambeaux dorés. Berthe, près de lui, enluminait des estampes.

Il souffrait, le pauvre homme, à la voir si mal vêtue, avec ses brodequins sans lacet et l'emmanchure de ses blouses déchirée jusqu'aux hanches, car la femme de ménage n'en prenait guère de souci. Mais elle était si douce, si gentille, et sa petite tête se penchait si gracieusement en laissant retomber sur ses joues roses sa bonne chevelure blonde, qu'une délectation infinie l'envahissait, plaisir tout mêlé d'amertume comme ces vins mal faits qui sentent la résine. Il raccommodait ses joujoux, lui fabriquait des pantins avec du carton, ou recousait le ventre déchiré de ses poupées. Puis, s'il rencontrait des yeux la boîte à ouvrage, un ruban qui traînait ou même une épingle restée dans une fente de la table, il se prenait à rêver, et il avait l'air si triste, qu'elle devenait triste comme lui.

Personne à présent ne venait les voir ; car Justin s'était enfui à Rouen, où il est devenu garçon épicier, et les enfants de l'apothicaire fréquentaient de moins en moins la petite, M. Homais ne se souciant pas, vu la différence de leurs conditions sociales, que l'intimité se prolongeât.

L'Aveugle, qu'il n'avait pu guérir avec sa pommade, était retourné dans la côte du Bois-Guillaume, où il narrait aux voyageurs la vaine tentative du pharmacien, à tel point que Homais, lorsqu'il allait à la ville, se dissimulait derrière les rideaux de l'*Hirondelle*, afin d'éviter sa rencontre. Il l'exécrait ; et, dans l'intérêt de sa propre réputation, voulant s'en débarrasser à toute force, il dressa contre lui une batterie cachée, qui décelait la profondeur de son intelligence et la scélératesse de sa vanité. Durant six mois consécutifs, on put donc lire dans le *Fanal de Rouen* des entrefilets ainsi conçus :

« Toutes les personnes qui se dirigent vers les fertiles contrées de la Picardie auront remarqué sans doute, dans la côte du Bois-Guillaume, un misérable atteint d'une horrible plaie faciale. Il vous importune, vous persécute et prélève un véritable impôt sur les voyageurs. Sommes-nous encore à ces temps monstrueux du Moyen Age, où il était permis aux vagabonds d'étaler par nos places publiques la lèpre et les scrofules qu'ils avaient rapportées de la croisade ? »

Ou bien :

« Malgré les lois contre le vagabondage, les abords de nos grandes villes continuent à être infestés par des bandes de pauvres. On en voit qui circulent isolément, et qui, peut-être, ne sont pas les moins dangereux. À quoi songent nos édiles ? »

Puis Homais inventait des anecdotes :

« Hier, dans la côte du Bois-Guillaume, un cheval ombrageux... » Et suivait le récit d'un accident occasionné par la présence de l'Aveugle.

Il fit si bien, qu'on l'incarcéra. Mais on le relâcha. Il recommença, et Homais aussi recommença. C'était une lutte. Il eut la victoire ; car son ennemi fut condamné à une reclusion perpétuelle dans un hospice.

Ce succès l'enhardit ; et dès lors il n'y eut plus dans l'arrondissement un chien écrasé, une grange incendiée, une femme battue, dont aussitôt il ne fît part au public, toujours guidé par l'amour du progrès et la haine des prêtres. Il établissait des comparaisons entre les écoles primaires et les frères ignorantins, au détriment de ces derniers, rappelait la Saint-Barthélemy à propos d'une allocation de cent francs faite à l'église, et dénonçait des abus, lançait des boutades. C'était son mot. Homais sapait ; il devenait dangereux.

Cependant il étouffait dans les limites étroites du journalisme, et bientôt il lui fallut le livre, l'ouvrage ! Alors il composa une *Statistique générale du canton* *d'Yonville,* suivie d'observations climatologiques, et la statistique le poussa vers la philosophie. Il se préoccupa des grandes questions : problème social, moralisation des classes pauvres, pisciculture, caoutchouc, chemins de fer, *etc*. Il en vint à rougir d'être un bourgeois. Il affectait *le genre artiste*, il fumait ! Il s'acheta deux statuettes chic Pompadour, pour décorer son salon.

Il n'abandonnait point la pharmacie ; au contraire ! il se tenait au courant des découvertes. Il suivait le grand mouvement des chocolats. C'est le premier qui ait fait venir dans la Seine-Inférieure du *cho-ca* et de la *revalentia*. Il s'éprit d'enthousiasme pour les chaînes hydro-électriques Pulvermacher ; il en portait une lui-même ; et, le soir, quand il retirait son gilet de flanelle, madame Homais restait tout éblouie devant la spirale d'or sous laquelle il disparaissait, et sentait redoubler ses ardeurs pour cet homme plus garrotté qu'un Scythe et splendide comme un mage.

Il eut de belles idées à propos du tombeau d'Emma. Il proposa d'abord un tronçon de colonne avec une draperie, ensuite une pyramide, puis un temple de Vesta, une manière de rotonde... ou bien « un amas de ruines ». Et, dans tous les plans, Homais ne démordait point du saule pleureur, qu'il considérait comme le symbole obligé de la tristesse.

Charles et lui firent ensemble un voyage à Rouen, pour voir des tombeaux, chez un entrepreneur de sépultures, – accompagnés d'un artiste peintre, un nommé Vaufrylard, ami de Bridoux, et qui, tout le temps, débita des calembours. Enfin, après avoir examiné une centaine de dessins, s'être commandé un devis et avoir fait un second voyage à Rouen, Charles se décida pour un mausolée qui devait porter sur ses deux faces principales « un génie tenant une torche éteinte ».

Quant à l'inscription, Homais ne trouvait rien de beau comme : *Sta viator*, et il en restait là ; il se creusait l'imagination ; il répétait continuell ement : *Sta viator*... Enfin, il découvrit : *amabilem conjugem calcas !* qui fut adopté.

Une chose étrange, c'est que Bovary, tout en pensant à Emma continuellement, l'oubliait ; et il se désespérait à sentir cette image lui échapper de la mémoire au milieu des efforts qu'il faisait pour la retenir. Chaque nuit pourtant, il la rêvait ; c'était toujours le même rêve : il s'approchait d'elle ; mais, quand il venait à l'étreindre, elle tombait en pourriture dans ses bras.

On le vit pendant une semaine entrer le soir à l'église. M. Bournisien lui fit même deux ou trois visites, puis l'abandonna. D'ailleurs, le bonhomme tournait à l'intolérance, au fanatisme, disait Homais ; il fulminait contre l'esprit du siècle, et ne manquait pas, tous les quinze jours, au sermon, de raconter l'agonie de Voltaire, lequel mourut en dévorant ses excréments, comme chacun sait.

Malgré l'épargne où vivait Bovary, il était loin de pouvoir amortir ses anciennes dettes. Lheureux refusa de renouveler aucun billet. La saisie devint imminente. Alors il eut recours à sa mère, qui consentit à lui laisser prendre une hypothèque sur ses biens, mais en lui envoyant force récriminations contre Emma ; et elle demandait, en retour de son sacrifice, un châle, échappé aux ravages de Félicité. Charles le lui refusa. Ils se brouillèrent.

Elle fit les premières ouvertures de raccommodement, en lui proposant de prendre chez elle la petite, qui la soulagerait dans sa maison. Charles y consentit. Mais, au moment du départ, tout courage l'abandonna. Alors, ce fut une rupture définitive, complète.

À mesure que ses affections disparaissaient, il se resserrait plus étroitement à l'amour de son enfant. Elle l'inquiétait cependant ; car elle toussait quelquefois, et avait des plaques rouges aux pommettes.

En face de lui s'étalait, florissante et hilare, la famille du pharmacien, que tout au monde contribuait à satisfaire. Napoléon l'aidait au laboratoire, Athalie lui brodait un bonnet grec, Irma découpait des rondelles de papier pour couvrir les confitures, et Franklin récitait tout d'une haleine la table de Pythagore. Il était le plus heureux des pères, le plus fortuné des hommes.

Erreur ! une ambition sourde le rongeait : Homais désirait la croix. Les titres ne lui manquaient point :

1° S'être, lors du choléra, signalé par un dévouement sans bornes ; 2° avoir publié, et à mes frais, différents ouvrages d'utilité publique, tels que... (et il rappelait son mémoire intitulé : *Du cidre, de sa fabrication et de ses effets* ; plus, des observations sur le puceron laniger, envoyées à l'Académie ; son volume de statistique, et jusqu'à sa thèse de pharmacien) ; sans compter que je suis membre de plusieurs sociétés savantes (il l'était d'une seule).

— Enfin, s'écriait-il, en faisant une pirouette, quand ce ne serait que de me signaler aux incendies !

Alors Homais inclina vers le Pouvoir. Il rendit secrètement à M. le préfet de grands services dans les élections. Il se vendit enfin, il se prostitua. Il adressa même au souverain une pétition où il le suppliait de *lui faire justice* ; il l'appelait *notre bon roi* et le comparait à Henri IV.

Et chaque matin, l'apothicaire se précipitait sur le journal pour y découvrir sa nomination ; elle ne venait pas. Enfin, n'y tenant plus, il fit dessiner dans son jardin un gazon figurant l'étoile de l'honneur, avec deux petits tordillons d'herbe qui partaient du sommet pour imiter le ruban. Il se promenait autour, les bras croisés, en méditant sur l'ineptie du gouvernement et l'ingratitude des hommes.

Par respect, ou par une sorte de sensualité qui lui faisait mettre de la lenteur dans ses investigations, Charles n'avait pas encore ouvert le compartiment secret d'un bureau de palissandre dont Emma se servait habituellement. Un jour, enfin, il s'assit devant, tourna la clef et poussa le ressort. Toutes les lettres de Léon s'y trouvaient. Plus de doute, cette fois ! Il dévora jusqu'à la dernière, fouilla dans tous les coins, tous les meubles, tous les tiroirs, derrière les murs, sanglotant, hurlant, éperdu, fou. Il découvrit une boîte, la défonça d'un coup de pied. Le portrait de Rodolphe lui sauta en plein visage, au milieu des billets doux bouleversés.

On s'étonna de son découragement. Il ne sortait plus, ne recevait personne, refusait même d'aller voir ses malades. Alors on prétendit qu'*il s'enfermait pour boire.*

Quelquefois pourtant, un curieux se haussait par-dessus la haie du jardin, et apercevait avec ébahissement cet homme à barbe longue, couvert d'habits sordides, farouche, et qui pleurait tout haut en marchant.

Le soir, dans l'été, il prenait avec lui sa petite fille et la conduisait au cimetière. Ils s'en revenaient à la nuit close, quand il n'y avait plus d'éclairé sur la Place que la lucarne de Binet.

Cependant la volupté de sa douleur était incomplète, car il n'avait autour de lui personne qui la partageât ; et il faisait des visites à la mère Lefrançois afin de pouvoir parler *d'elle*. Mais l'aubergiste ne l'écoutait que d'une oreille, ayant comme lui des chagrins, car M. Lheureux venait enfin d'établir les *Favorites du commerce*, et Hivert, qui jouissait d'une grande réputation pour les commissions, exigeait un surcroît d'appointements et menaçait de s'engager « à la Concurrence ».

Un jour qu'il était allé au marché d'Argueil pour y vendre son cheval, – dernière ressource, – il rencontra Rodolphe.

Ils pâlirent en s'apercevant. Rodolphe, qui avait seulement envoyé sa carte, balbutia d'abord quelques excuses, puis s'enhardit et même poussa l'aplomb (il faisait très chaud, on était au mois d'août), jusqu'à l'inviter à prendre une bouteille de bière au cabaret.

Accoudé en face de lui, il mâchait son cigare tout en causant, et Charles se perdait en rêveries devant cette figure qu'elle avait aimée. Il lui semblait revoir quelque chose d'elle. C'était un émerveillement. Il aurait voulu être cet homme.

L'autre continuait à parler culture, bestiaux, engrais, bouchant avec des phrases banales tous les interstices où pouvait se glisser une allusion. Charles ne l'écoutait pas ; Rodolphe s'en apercevait, et il suivait sur la mobilité de sa figure le passage des souvenirs. Elle s'empourprait peu à peu, les narines battaient vite, les lèvres frémissaient ; il y eut même un instant où Charles, plein d'une fureur sombre, fixa ses yeux contre Rodolphe qui, dans une sorte d'effroi, s'interrompit.

Mais bientôt la même lassitude funèbre réapparut sur son visage.

— Je ne vous en veux pas, dit-il.

Rodolphe était resté muet. Et Charles, la tête dans ses deux mains, reprit d'une voix éteinte et avec l'accent résigné des douleurs infinies :

— Non, je ne vous en veux plus !

Il ajouta même un grand mot, le seul qu'il ait jamais dit :

— C'est la faute de la fatalité !

Rodolphe, qui avait conduit cette fatalité, le trouva bien débonnaire pour un homme dans sa situation, comique même, et un peu vil.

Le lendemain, Charles alla s'asseoir sur le banc, dans la tonnelle. Des jours passaient par le treillis ; les feuilles de vigne dessinaient leurs ombres sur le sable, le jasmin embaumait, le ciel était bleu, des cantharides bourdonnaient autour des lis en fleur, et Charles suffoquait comme un adolescent sous les vagues effluves amoureux qui gonflaient son coeur chagrin.

À sept heures, la petite Berthe, qui ne l'avait pas vu de toute l'après-midi, vint le chercher pour dîner.

Il avait la tête renversée contre le mur, les yeux clos, la bouche ouverte, et tenait dans ses mains une longue mèche de cheveux noirs.

— Papa, viens donc ! dit-elle.

Et, croyant qu'il voulait jouer, elle le poussa doucement. Il tomba par terre. Il était mort.

Trente-six heures après, sur la demande de l'apothicaire, M. Canivet accourut. Il l'ouvrit et ne trouva rien.

Quand tout fut vendu, il resta douze francs soixante et quinze centimes qui servirent à payer le voyage de mademoiselle Bovary chez sa grand-mère. La bonne femme mourut dans l'année même ; le père Rouault étant paralysé, ce fut une tante qui s'en chargea. Elle est pauvre et l'envoie, pour gagner sa vie, dans une filature de coton.

Depuis la mort de Bovary, trois médecins se sont succédé à Yonville sans pouvoir y réussir, tant M. Homais les a tout de suite battus en brèche. Il fait une clientèle d'enfer ; l'autorité le ménage et l'opinion publique le protège.

Il vient de recevoir la croix d'honneur.

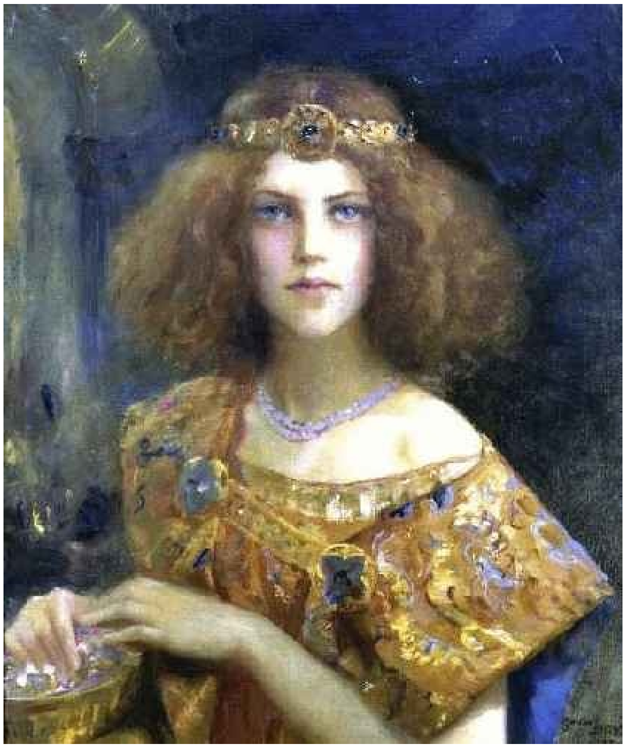
FIN

SALAMMBÔ

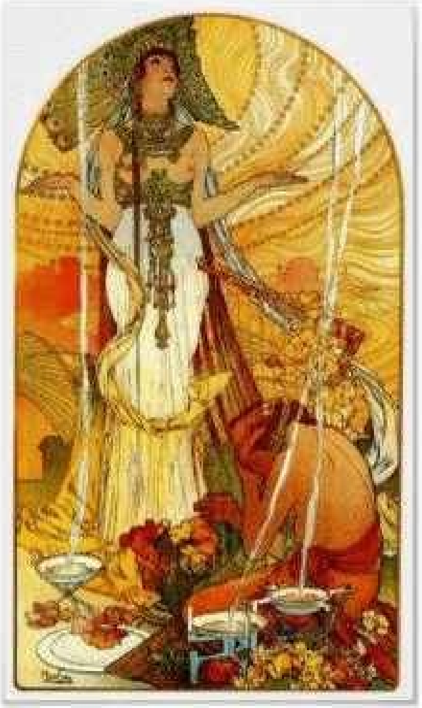
Translated by M. Walter Dunne

First published in 1862, this historical novel is set in Ancient Carthage during the third century BC, after the First Punic War. Flaubert's main source for the novel was the first book of Polybius' *Histories*. Flaubert researched the novel painstakingly, having chosen a historical period previously unexplored in a novel. Fortunately, the novel became another bestseller, sealing Flaubert's reputation.

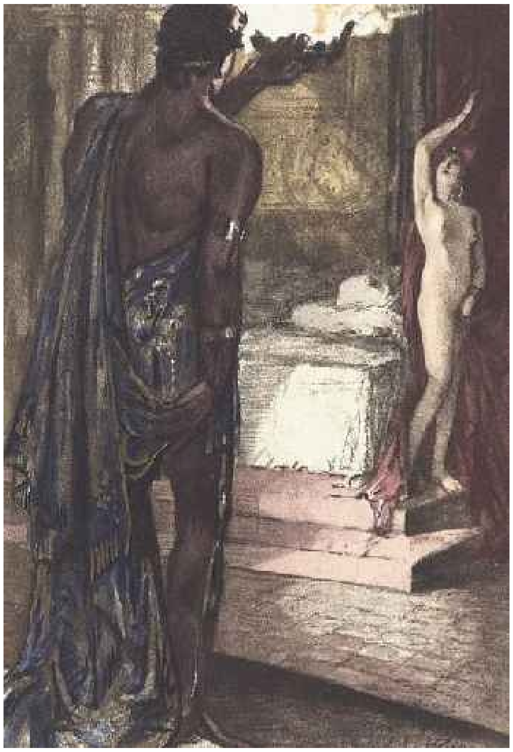
When the narrative begins, the Ancient city of Carthage is unable to fulfil promises made to its army of mercenaries and the city finds itself under attack. Salammbô, a priestess and the daughter of Hamilcar Barca, is the object of lust of Matho, a leader of the mercenaries. With the help of the scheming freed slave, Spendius, Matho steals the sacred veil of Carthage, the Zaïmph, prompting Salammbô to enter the mercenaries' camp in an attempt to steal it back.



‘Salammbô’ by Gaston Bussière, 1907



‘Salammbô’ by Alphonse Mucha



An illustration from the first edition

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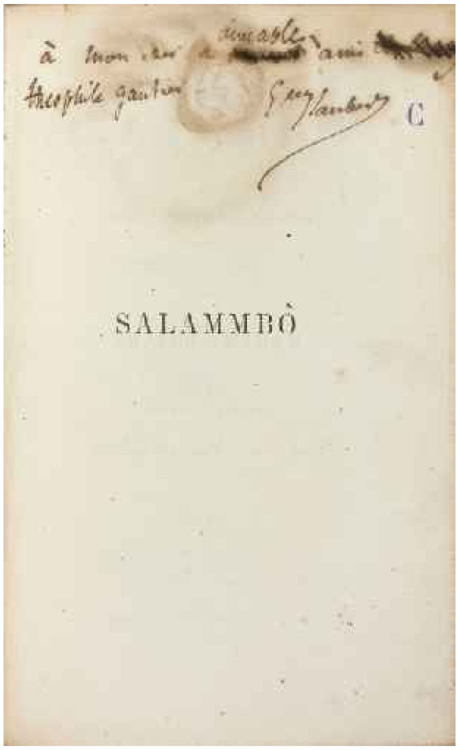
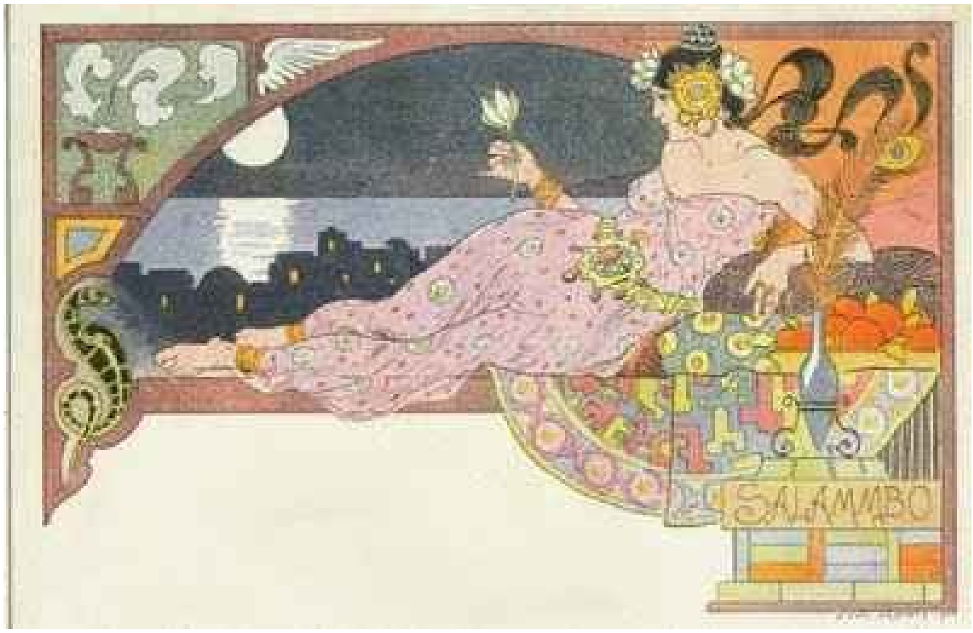


à mon cher & ~~[illegible]~~ aimable ami ~~[illegible]~~
théophile gautier Gve Flaubert

C

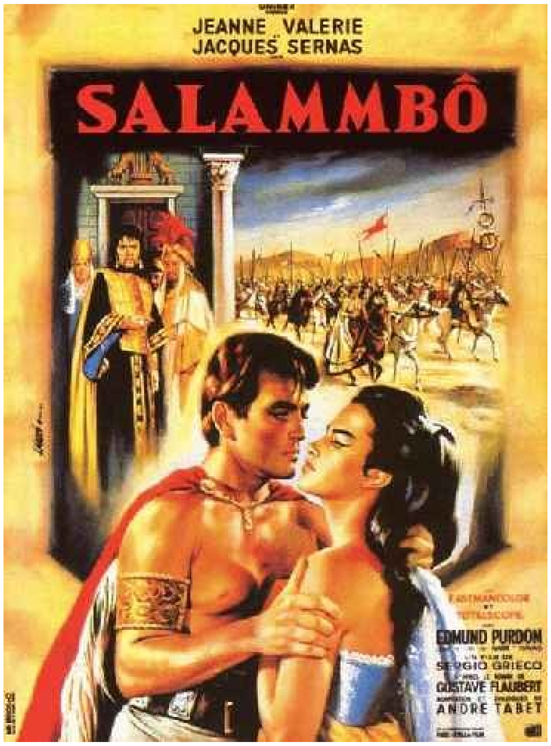
SALAMMBÔ

The titlepage of the first edition, signed by Flaubert



An Art Nouveau postcard advertising the 1890 operatic adaptation

Ernest Reyer, the composer of the opera


JEANNE VALERIE
JACQUES SERNAS
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EASTMANCOLOR
ET
TOTALSCOPE
EDMUND PURDOM
UN FILM DE
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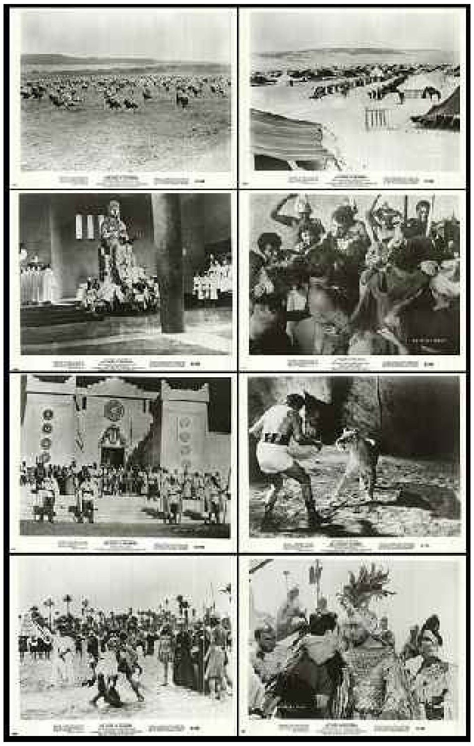
GUSTAVE FLAUBERT
ANDRE TABET

The 1960 film adaptation



Scenes from the 1960 film

The video game inspired by the novel

CHAPTER I

THE FEAST

It was at Megara, a suburb of Carthage, in the gardens of Hamilcar. The soldiers whom he had commanded in Sicily were having a great feast to celebrate the anniversary of the battle of Eryx, and as the master was away, and they were numerous, they ate and drank with perfect freedom.

The captains, who wore bronze cothurni, had placed themselves in the central path, beneath a gold-fringed purple awning, which reached from the wall of the stables to the first terrace of the palace; the common soldiers were scattered beneath the trees, where numerous flat-roofed buildings might be seen, wine-presses, cellars, storehouses, bakeries, and arsenals, with a court for elephants, dens for wild beasts, and a prison for slaves.

Fig-trees surrounded the kitchens; a wood of sycamores stretched away to meet masses of verdure, where the pomegranate shone amid the white tufts of the cotton-plant; vines, grape-laden, grew up into the branches of the pines; a field of roses bloomed beneath the plane-trees; here and there lilies rocked upon the turf; the paths were strewn with black sand mingled with powdered coral, and in the centre the avenue of cypress formed, as it were, a double colonnade of green obelisks from one extremity to the other.

Far in the background stood the palace, built of yellow mottled Numidian marble, broad courses supporting its four terraced stories. With its large, straight, ebony staircase, bearing the prow of a vanquished galley at the corners of every step, its red doors quartered with black crosses, its brass gratings protecting it from scorpions below, and its trellises of gilded rods closing the apertures above, it seemed to the soldiers in its haughty opulence as solemn and impenetrable as the face of Hamilcar.

The Council had appointed his house for the holding of this feast; the convalescents lying in the temple of Eschmoun had set out at daybreak and dragged themselves thither on their crutches. Every minute others were arriving. They poured in ceaselessly by every path like torrents rushing into a lake; through the trees the slaves of the kitchens might be seen running scared and half-naked; the gazelles fled bleating on the lawns; the sun was setting, and the perfume of citron trees rendered the exhalation from the perspiring crowd heavier still.

Men of all nations were there, Ligurians, Lusitanians, Balearians, Negroes, and fugitives from Rome. Beside the heavy Dorian dialect were audible the and fugitives from Rome. Beside the heavy Dorian dialect were audible the resonant Celtic syllables rattling like chariots of war, while Ionian terminations conflicted with consonants of the desert as harsh as the jackal's cry. The Greek might be recognised by his slender figure, the Egyptian by his elevated shoulders, the Cantabrian by his broad calves. There were Carians proudly nodding their helmet plumes, Cappadocian archers displaying large flowers painted on their bodies with the juice of herbs, and a few Lydians in women's robes, dining in slippers and earrings. Others were ostentatiously daubed with vermilion, and resembled coral statues.

They stretched themselves on the cushions, they ate squatting round large trays, or lying face downwards they drew out the pieces of meat and sated themselves, leaning on their elbows in the peaceful posture of lions tearing their prey. The last comers stood leaning against the trees watching the low tables half hidden beneath the scarlet coverings, and awaiting their turn.

Hamilcar's kitchens being insufficient, the Council had sent them slaves, ware, and beds, and in the middle of the garden, as on a battle-field when they burn the dead, large bright fires might be seen, at which oxen were roasting. Anise-sprinkled loaves alternated with great cheeses heavier than discuses, crateras filled with wine, and cantharuses filled with water, together with baskets of gold filigree-work containing flowers. Every eye was dilated with the joy of being able at last to gorge at pleasure, and songs were beginning here and there.

First they were served with birds and green sauce in plates of red clay relieved by drawings in black, then with every kind of shell-fish that is gathered on the Punic coasts, wheaten porridge, beans and barley, and snails dressed with cumin on dishes of yellow amber.

Afterwards the tables were covered with meats, antelopes with their horns, peacocks with their feathers, whole sheep cooked in sweet wine, haunches of she-camels and buffaloes, hedgehogs with garum, fried grasshoppers, and preserved dormice. Large pieces of fat floated in the midst of saffron in bowls of Tamrapanni wood. Everything was running over with wine, truffles, and asafoetida. Pyramids of fruit were crumbling upon honeycombs, and they had not forgotten a few of those plump little dogs with pink silky hair and fattened on olive lees, — a Carthaginian dish held in abhorrence among other nations. Surprise at the novel fare excited the greed of the stomach. The Gauls with their long hair drawn up on the crown of the head, snatched at the watermelons and lemons, and crunched them up with the rind. The Negroes, who had never seen a lobster, tore their faces with its red prickles. But the shaven Greeks, whiter than marble, threw the leavings of their plates behind them, while the herdsmen from Brutium, in their wolf-skin garments, devoured in silence with their faces in their portions.

Night fell. The velarium, spread over the cypress avenue, was drawn back, and torches were brought.

The apes, sacred to the moon, were terrified on the cedar tops by the wavering lights of the petroleum as it burned in the porphyry vases. They uttered screams which afforded mirth to the soldiers.

Oblong flames trembled in cuirasses of brass. Every kind of scintillation flashed from the gem-incrusted dishes. The crateras with their borders of convex mirrors multiplied and enlarged the images of things; the soldiers thronged around, looking at their reflections with amazement, and grimacing to make themselves laugh. They tossed the ivory stools and golden spatulas to one another across the tables. They gulped down all the Greek wines in their leathern bottles, the Campanian wine enclosed in amphoras, the Cantabrian wines brought in casks, with the wines of the jujube, cinnamomum and lotus. There were pools of these on the ground that made the foot slip. The smoke of the meats ascended into the foliage with the vapour of the breath. Simultaneously were heard the snapping of jaws, the noise of speech, songs, and cups, the crash of Campanian vases shivering into a thousand pieces, or the limpid sound of a large silver dish.

In proportion as their intoxication increased they more and more recalled the injustice of Carthage. The Republic, in fact, exhausted by the war, had allowed all the returning bands to accumulate in the town. Gisco, their general, had however been prudent enough to send them back severally in order to facilitate the liquidation of their pay, and the Council had believed that they would in the end consent to some reduction. But at present ill-will was caused by the inability to pay them. This debt was confused in the minds of the people with the 3200 Euboic talents exacted by Lutatius, and equally with Rome they were regarded as enemies to Carthage. The Mercenaries understood this, and their indignation found vent in threats and outbreaks. At last they demanded permission to assemble to celebrate one of their victories, and the peace party yielded, at the same time revenging themselves on Hamilcar who had so strongly upheld the war. It had been terminated notwithstanding all his efforts, so that, despairing of Carthage, he had entrusted the government of the Mercenaries to Gisco. To appoint his palace for their reception was to draw upon him something of the hatred which was borne to them. Moreover, the expense must be excessive, and he would incur nearly the whole.

Proud of having brought the Republic to submit, the Mercenaries thought that they were at last about to return to their homes with the payment for their blood in the hoods of their cloaks. But as seen through the mists of intoxication, their fatigues seemed to them prodigious and but ill-rewarded. They showed one another their wounds, they told of their combats, their travels and the hunting in their native lands. They imitated the cries and the leaps of wild beasts. Then came unclean wagers; they buried their heads in the amphoras and drank on without interruption, like thirsty dromedaries. A Lusitanian of gigantic stature ran over the tables, carrying a man in each hand at arm's length, and spitting out fire through his nostrils. Some Lacedaemonians, who had not taken off their cuirasses, were leaping with a heavy step. Some advanced like women, making obscene gestures; others stripped naked to fight amid the cups after the fashion of gladiators, and a company of Greeks danced around a vase whereon nymphs were to be seen, while a Negro tapped with an ox-bone on a brazen buckler.

Suddenly they heard a plaintive song, a song loud and soft, rising and falling in the air like the wing-beating of a wounded bird.

It was the voice of the slaves in the ergastulum. Some soldiers rose at a bound to release them and disappeared.

They returned, driving through the dust amid shouts, twenty men, distinguished by their greater paleness of face. Small black felt caps of conical shape covered their shaven heads; they all wore wooden shoes, and yet made a noise as of old iron like driving chariots.

They reached the avenue of cypress, where they were lost among the crowd of those questioning them. One of them remained apart, standing. Through the rents in his tunic his shoulders could be seen striped with long scars. Drooping his chin, he looked round him with distrust, closing his eyelids somewhat against the dazzling light of the torches, but when he saw that none of the armed men were unfriendly to him, a great sigh escaped from his breast; he stammered, he sneered through the bright tears that bathed his face. At last he seized a brimming cantharus by its rings, raised it straight up into the air with his outstretched arms, from which his chains hung down, and then looking to heaven, and still holding the cup he said:

"Hail first to thee, Baal-Eschmoun, the deliverer, whom the people of my country call Aesculapius! and to you, genii of the fountains, light, and woods! and to you, ye gods hidden beneath the mountains and in the caverns of the earth! and to you, strong men in shining armour who have set me free!"

Then he let fall the cup and related his history. He was called Spendius. The Carthaginians had taken him in the battle of Aeginusae, and he thanked the Mercenaries once more in Greek, Ligurian and Punic; he kissed their hands; finally, he congratulated them on the banquet, while expressing his surprise at not perceiving the cups of the Sacred Legion. These cups, which bore an emerald vine on each of their six golden faces, belonged to a corps composed exclusively of young patricians of the tallest stature. They were a privilege, almost a sacerdotal distinction, and accordingly nothing among the treasures of the Republic was more coveted by the Mercenaries. They detested the Legion on this account, and some of them had been known to risk their lives for the inconceivable pleasure of drinking out of these cups.

Accordingly they commanded that the cups should be brought. They were in the keeping of the Syssitia, companies of traders, who had a common table. The slaves returned. At that hour all the members of the Syssitia were asleep.

"Let them be awakened!" responded the Mercenaries.

After a second excursion it was explained to them that the cups were shut up in a temple.

"Let it be opened!" they replied.

And when the slaves confessed with trembling that they were in the possession of Gisco, the general, they cried out:

"Let him bring them!"

Gisco soon appeared at the far end of the garden with an escort of the Sacred Legion. His full, black cloak, which was fastened on his head to a golden mitre starred with precious stones, and which hung all about him down to his horse's hoofs, blended in the distance with the colour of the night. His white beard, the radiancy of his head-dress, and his triple necklace of broad blue plates beating against his breast, were alone visible.

When he entered, the soldiers greeted him with loud shouts, all crying:

"The cups! The cups!"

He began by declaring that if reference were had to their courage, they were worthy of them.

The crowd applauded and howled with joy.

HE knew it, he who had commanded them over yonder, and had returned with the last cohort in the last galley!

"True! True!" said they.

Nevertheless, Gisco continued, the Republic had respected their national divisions, their customs, and their modes of worship; in Carthage they were free! As to the cups of the Sacred Legion, they were private property. Suddenly a Gaul, who was close to Spendius, sprang over the tables and ran straight up to Gisco, gesticulating and threatening him with two naked swords.

Without interrupting his speech, the General struck him on the head with his heavy ivory staff, and the Barbarian fell. The Gauls howled, and their frenzy, which was spreading to the others, would soon have swept away the legionaries. Gisco shrugged his shoulders as he saw them growing pale. He thought that his courage would be useless against these exasperated brute beasts. It would be better to revenge himself upon them by some artifice later; accordingly, he signed to his soldiers and slowly withdrew. Then, turning in the gateway towards the Mercenaries, he cried to them that they would repent of it.

The feast recommenced. But Gisco might return, and by surrounding the suburb, which was beside the last ramparts, might crush them against the walls. Then they felt themselves alone in spite of their crowd, and the great town sleeping beneath them in the shade suddenly made them afraid, with its piles of staircases, its lofty black houses, and its vague gods fiercer even than its people. In the distance a few ships'-lanterns were gliding across the harbour, and there were lights in the temple of Khamon. They thought of Hamilcar. Where was he? Why had he forsaken them when peace was concluded? His differences with the Council were doubtless but a pretence in order to destroy them. Their unsatisfied hate recoiled upon him, and they cursed him, exasperating one another with their own anger. At this juncture they collected together beneath the plane-trees to see a slave who, with eyeballs fixed, neck contorted, and lips covered with foam, was rolling on the ground, and beating the soil with his limbs. Some one cried out that he was poisoned. All then believed themselves poisoned. They fell upon the slaves, a terrible clamour was raised, and a vertigo of destruction came like a whirlwind upon the drunken army. They struck about them at random, they smashed, they slew; some hurled torches into the foliage; others, leaning over the lions' balustrade, massacred the animals with arrows; the most daring ran to the elephants, desiring to cut down their trunks and eat ivory.

Some Balearic slingers, however, who had gone round the corner of the palace, in order to pillage more conveniently, were checked by a lofty barrier, made of Indian cane. They cut the lock-straps with their daggers, and then found themselves beneath the front that faced Carthage, in another garden full of trimmed vegetation. Lines of white flowers all following one another in regular succession formed long parabolas like star-rockets on the azure-coloured earth. The gloomy bushes exhaled warm and honied odours. There were trunks of trees smeared with cinnabar, which resembled columns covered with blood. In the centre were twelve pedestals, each supporting a great glass ball, and these hollow globes were indistinctly filled with reddish lights, like enormous and still palpitating eyeballs. The soldiers lighted themselves with torches as they stumbled on the slope of the deeply laboured soil.

But they perceived a little lake divided into several basins by walls of blue stones. So limpid was the wave that the flames of the torches quivered in it at the very bottom, on a bed of white pebbles and golden dust. It began to bubble, luminous spangles glided past, and great fish with gems about their mouths, appeared near the surface.

With much laughter the soldiers slipped their fingers into the gills and brought them to the tables. They were the fish of the Barca family, and were all descended from those primordial lotes which had hatched the mystic egg wherein the goddess was concealed. The idea of committing a sacrilege revived the greediness of the Mercenaries; they speedily placed fire beneath some brazen vases, and amused themselves by watching the beautiful fish struggling in the boiling water.

The surge of soldiers pressed on. They were no longer afraid. They commenced to drink again. Their ragged tunics were wet with the perfumes that flowed in large drops from their foreheads, and resting both fists on the tables, which seemed to them to be rocking like ships, they rolled their great drunken eyes around to devour by sight what they could not take. Others walked amid the dishes on the purple table covers, breaking ivory stools, and phials of Tyrian glass to pieces with their feet. Songs mingled with the death-rattle of the slaves expiring amid the broken cups. They demanded wine, meat, gold. They cried out for women. They raved in a hundred languages. Some thought that they were at the vapour baths on account of the steam which floated around them, or else, catching sight of the foliage, imagined that they were at the chase, and rushed upon their companions as upon wild beasts. The conflagration spread to all the trees, one after another, and the lofty mosses of verdure, emitting long white spirals, looked like volcanoes beginning to smoke. The clamour redoubled; the wounded lions roared in the shade.

In an instant the highest terrace of the palace was illuminated, the central door opened, and a woman, Hamilcar's daughter herself, clothed in black garments, appeared on the threshold. She descended the first staircase, which ran obliquely along the first story, then the second, and the third, and stopped on the last terrace at the head of the galley staircase. Motionless and with head bent, she gazed upon the soldiers.

Behind her, on each side, were two long shadows of pale men, clad in white, red-fringed robes, which fell straight to their feet. They had no beard, no hair, no eyebrows. In their hands, which sparkled with rings, they carried enormous lyres, and with shrill voice they sang a hymn to the divinity of Carthage. They were the eunuch priests of the temple of Tanith, who were often summoned by Salammbo to her house.

At last she descended the galley staircase. The priests followed her. She advanced into the avenue of cypress, and walked slowly through the tables of the captains, who drew back somewhat as they watched her pass.

Her hair, which was powdered with violet sand, and combined into the form of a tower, after the fashion of the Chanaanite maidens, added to her height. Tresses of pearls were fastened to her temples, and fell to the corners of her mouth, which was as rosy as a half-open pomegranate. On her breast was a mouth, which was as rosy as a half-open pomegranate. On her breast was a collection of luminous stones, their variegation imitating the scales of the murena. Her arms were adorned with diamonds, and issued naked from her sleeveless tunic, which was starred with red flowers on a perfectly black ground. Between her ankles she wore a golden chainlet to regulate her steps, and her large dark purple mantle, cut of an unknown material, trailed behind her, making, as it were, at each step, a broad wave which followed her.

The priests played nearly stifled chords on their lyres from time to time, and in the intervals of the music might be heard the tinkling of the little golden chain, and the regular patter of her papyrus sandals.

No one as yet was acquainted with her. It was only known that she led a retired life, engaged in pious practices. Some soldiers had seen her in the night on the summit of her palace kneeling before the stars amid the eddyings from kindled perfuming-pans. It was the moon that had made her so pale, and there was something from the gods that enveloped her like a subtle vapour. Her eyes seemed to gaze far beyond terrestrial space. She bent her head as she walked, and in her right hand she carried a little ebony lyre.

They heard her murmur:

"Dead! All dead! No more will you come obedient to my voice as when, seated on the edge of the lake, I used to through seeds of the watermelon into your mouths! The mystery of Tanith ranged in the depths of your eyes that were more limpid than the globules of rivers." And she called them by their names, which were those of the months — "Siv! Sivan! Tammouz, Eloul, Tischri, Schebar! Ah! have pity on me, goddess!"

The soldiers thronged about her without understanding what she said. They wondered at her attire, but she turned a long frightened look upon them all, then sinking her head beneath her shoulders, and waving her arms, she repeated several times:

"What have you done? what have you done?

"Yet you had bread, and meats and oil, and all the malobathrum of the granaries for your enjoyment! I had brought oxen from Hecatompylos; I had sent hunters into the desert!" Her voice swelled; her cheeks purpled. She added, "Where, pray, are you now? In a conquered town, or in the palace of a master? And what master? Hamilcar the Suffet, my father, the servant of the Baals! It was he who withheld from Lutatius those arms of yours, red now with the blood of his slaves! Know you of any in your own lands more skilled in the conduct of battles? Look! our palace steps are encumbered with our victories! Ah! desist not! burn it! I will carry away with me the genius of my house, my black serpent slumbering up yonder on lotus leaves! I will whistle and he will follow me, and if I embark in a galley he will speed in the wake of my ship over the foam of the

If I embark in a galley he will speed in the wake of my ship over the foam of the waves."

Her delicate nostrils were quivering. She crushed her nails against the gems on her bosom. Her eyes drooped, and she resumed:

"Ah! poor Carthage! lamentable city! No longer hast thou for thy protection the strong men of former days who went beyond the oceans to build temples on their shores. All the lands laboured about thee, and the sea-plains, ploughed by thine oars, rocked with thy harvests." Then she began to sing the adventures of Melkarth, the god of the Sidonians, and the father of her family.

She told of the ascent of the mountains of Ersiphonia, the journey to Tartessus, and the war against Masisabal to avenge the queen of the serpents:

"He pursued the female monster, whose tail undulated over the dead leaves like a silver brook, into the forest, and came to a plain where women with dragon-croups were round a great fire, standing erect on the points of their tails. The blood-coloured moon was shining within a pale circle, and their scarlet tongues, cloven like the harpoons of fishermen, reached curling forth to the very edge of the flame."

Then Salammbo, without pausing, related how Melkarth, after vanquishing Masisabal, placed her severed head on the prow of his ship. "At each throb of the waves it sank beneath the foam, but the sun embalmed it; it became harder than gold; nevertheless the eyes ceased not to weep, and the tears fell into the water continually."

She sang all this in an old Chanaanite idiom, which the Barbarians did not understand. They asked one another what she could be saying to them with those frightful gestures which accompanied her speech, and mounted round about her on the tables, beds, and sycamore boughs, they strove with open mouths and craned necks to grasp the vague stories hovering before their imaginations, through the dimness of the theogonies, like phantoms wrapped in cloud.

Only the beardless priests understood Salammbo; their wrinkled hands, which hung over the strings of their lyres, quivered, and from time to time they would draw forth a mournful chord; for, feebler than old women, they trembled at once with mystic emotion, and with the fear inspired by men. The Barbarians heeded them not, but listened continually to the maiden's song.

None gazed at her like a young Numidian chief, who was placed at the captains' tables among soldiers of his own nation. His girdle so bristled with darts that it formed a swelling in his ample cloak, which was fastened on his temples with a leather lace. The cloth parted asunder as it fell upon his shoulders, and enveloped his countenance in shadow, so that only the fires of his two fixed eyes could be seen. It was by chance that he was at the feast, his father having domiciled him with the Barca family, according to the custom by which having domiciled him with the Barca family, according to the custom by which kings used to send their children into the households of the great in order to pave the way for alliances; but Narr' Havas had lodged there fox six months without having hitherto seen Salammbo, and now, seated on his heels, with his head brushing the handles of his javelins, he was watching her with dilated nostrils, like a leopard crouching among the bamboos.

On the other side of the tables was a Libyan of colossal stature, and with short black curly hair. He had retained only his military jacket, the brass plates of which were tearing the purple of the couch. A necklace of silver moons was tangled in his hairy breast. His face was stained with splashes of blood; he was leaning on his left elbow with a smile on his large, open mouth.

Salammbo had abandoned the sacred rhythm. With a woman's subtlety she was simultaneously employing all the dialects of the Barbarians in order to appease their anger. To the Greeks she spoke Greek; then she turned to the Ligurians, the Campanians, the Negroes, and listening to her each one found again in her voice the sweetness of his native land. She now, carried away by the memories of Carthage, sang of the ancient battles against Rome; they applauded. She kindled at the gleaming of the naked swords, and cried aloud with outstretched arms. Her lyre fell, she was silent; and, pressing both hands upon her heart, she remained for some minutes with closed eyelids enjoying the agitation of all these men.

Matho, the Libyan, leaned over towards her. Involuntarily she approached him, and impelled by grateful pride, poured him a long stream of wine into a golden cup in order to conciliate the army.

"Drink!" she said.

He took the cup, and was carrying it to his lips when a Gaul, the same that had been hurt by Gisco, struck him on the shoulder, while in a jovial manner he gave utterance to pleasantries in his native tongue. Spendius was not far off, and he volunteered to interpret them.

"Speak!" said Matho.

"The gods protect you; you are going to become rich. When will the nuptials be?"

"What nuptials?"

"Yours! for with us," said the Gaul, "when a woman gives drink to a soldier, it means that she offers him her couch."

He had not finished when Narr' Havas, with a bound, drew a javelin from his girdle, and, leaning his right foot upon the edge of the table, hurled it against Matho.

The javelin whistled among the cups, and piercing the Lybian's arm, pinned it so firmly to the cloth, that the shaft quivered in the air.

Matho quickly plucked it out; but he was weaponless and naked; at last he lifted the over-laden table with both arms, and flung it against Narr' Havas into the very centre of the crowd that rushed between them. The soldiers and Numidians pressed together so closely that they were unable to draw their swords. Matho advanced dealing great blows with his head. When he raised it, Narr' Havas had disappeared. He sought for him with his eyes. Salammbo also was gone.

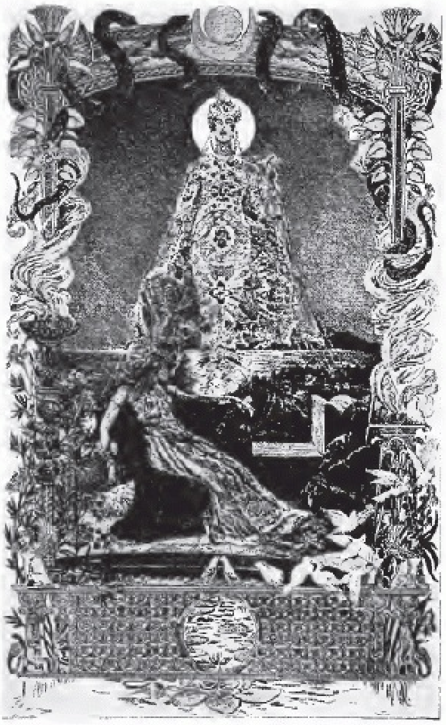
Then directing his looks to the palace he perceived the red door with the black cross closing far above, and he darted away.

They saw him run between the prows of the galleys, and then reappear along the three staircases until he reached the red door against which he dashed his whole body. Panting, he leaned against the wall to keep himself from falling.

But a man had followed him, and through the darkness, for the lights of the feast were hidden by the corner of the palace, he recognised Spendius.

"Begone!" said he.

The slave without replying began to tear his tunic with his teeth; then kneeling beside Matho he tenderly took his arm, and felt it in the shadow to discover the wound.



By a ray of the moon which was then gliding between the clouds, Spendius perceived a gaping wound in the middle of the arm. He rolled the piece of stuff about it, but the other said irritably, "Leave me! leave me!"

"Oh no!" replied the slave. "You released me from the ergastulum. I am yours! you are my master! command me!"

Matho walked round the terrace brushing against the walls. He strained his ears at every step, glancing down into the silent apartments through the spaces between the gilded reeds. At last he stopped with a look of despair.

"Listen!" said the slave to him. "Oh! do not despise me for my feebleness! I have lived in the palace. I can wind like a viper through the walls. Come! in the Ancestor's Chamber there is an ingot of gold beneath every flagstone; an underground path leads to their tombs."

"Well! what matters it?" said Matho.

Spendius was silent.

They were on the terrace. A huge mass of shadow stretched before them, appearing as if it contained vague accumulations, like the gigantic billows of a black and petrified ocean.

But a luminous bar rose towards the East; far below, on the left, the canals of Megara were beginning to stripe the verdure of the gardens with their windings of white. The conical roofs of the heptagonal temples, the staircases, terraces, and ramparts were being carved by degrees upon the paleness of the dawn; and a girdle of white foam rocked around the Carthaginian peninsula, while the emerald sea appeared as if it were curdled in the freshness of the morning. Then as the rosy sky grew larger, the lofty houses, bending over the sloping soil, reared and massed themselves like a herd of black goats coming down from the mountains. The deserted streets lengthened; the palm-trees that topped the walls here and there were motionless; the brimming cisterns seemed like silver bucklers lost in the courts; the beacon on the promontory of Hermaeum was beginning to grow pale. The horses of Eschmoun, on the very summit of the Acropolis in the cypress wood, feeling that the light was coming, placed their hoofs on the marble parapet, and neighed towards the sun.

It appeared, and Spendius raised his arms with a cry.

Everything stirred in a diffusion of red, for the god, as if he were rending himself, now poured full-rayed upon Carthage the golden rain of his veins. The beaks of the galleys sparkled, the roof of Khamon appeared to be all in flames, while far within the temples, whose doors were opening, glimmerings of light could be seen. Large chariots, arriving from the country, rolled their wheels over the flagstones in the streets. Dromedaries, baggage-laden, came down the ramps. Money-changers raised the pent-houses of their shops at the cross ways, storks took to flight, white sails fluttered. In the wood of Tanith might be heard the tabourines of the sacred courtesans, and the furnaces for baking the clay coffins were beginning to smoke on the Mappalian point.

Spendius leaned over the terrace; his teeth chattered and he repeated:

"Ah! yes — yes — master! I understand why you scorned the pillage of the house just now."

Matho was as if he had just been awaked by the hissing of his voice, and did not seem to understand. Spendius resumed:

"Ah! what riches! and the men who possess them have not even the steel to defend them!"

Then, pointing with his right arm outstretched to some of the populace who were crawling on the sand outside the mole to look for gold dust:

"See!" he said to him, "the Republic is like these wretches: bending on the brink of the ocean, she buries her greedy arms in every shore, and the noise of the billows so fills her ear that she cannot hear behind her the tread of a master's heel!"

He drew Matho to quite the other end of the terrace, and showed him the garden, wherein the soldiers' swords, hanging on the trees, were like mirrors in the sun.

"But here there are strong men whose hatred is roused! and nothing binds them to Carthage, neither families, oaths nor gods!"

Matho remained leaning against the wall; Spendius came close, and continued in a low voice:

"Do you understand me, soldier? We should walk purple-clad like satraps. We should bathe in perfumes; and I should in turn have slaves! Are you not weary of sleeping on hard ground, of drinking the vinegar of the camps, and of continually hearing the trumpet? But you will rest later, will you not? When they pull off your cuirass to cast your corpse to the vultures! or perhaps blind, lame, and weak you will go, leaning on a stick, from door to door to tell of your youth to pickle-sellers and little children. Remember all the injustice of your chiefs, the campings in the snow, the marchings in the sun, the tyrannies of discipline, and the everlasting menace of the cross! And after all this misery they have given you a necklace of honour, as they hang a girdle of bells round the breast of an ass to deafen it on its journey, and prevent it from feeling fatigue. A man like you, braver than Pyrrhus! If only you had wished it! Ah! how happy will you be in large cool halls, with the sound of lyres, lying on flowers, with women and buffoons! Do not tell me that the enterprise is impossible. Have not the Mercenaries already possessed Rhegium and other fortified places in Italy? Who is to prevent you? Hamilcar is away; the people execrate the rich; Gisco can do nothing with the cowards who surround him. Command them! Carthage is ours; let us fall upon it!"

"No!" said Matho, "the curse of Moloch weighs upon me. I felt it in her eyes, and just now I saw a black ram retreating in a temple." Looking around him he added: "But where is she?"

added. "But where is she?"

Then Spendius understood that a great disquiet possessed him, and did not venture to speak again.

The trees behind them were still smoking; half-burned carcases of apes dropped from their blackened boughs from time to time into the midst of the dishes. Drunken soldiers snored open-mouthed by the side of the corpses, and those who were not asleep lowered their heads dazzled by the light of day. The trampled soil was hidden beneath splashes of red. The elephants poised their bleeding trunks between the stakes of their pens. In the open granaries might be seen sacks of spilled wheat, below the gate was a thick line of chariots which had been heaped up by the Barbarians, and the peacocks perched in the cedars were spreading their tails and beginning to utter their cry.

Matho's immobility, however, astonished Spendius; he was even paler than he had recently been, and he was following something on the horizon with fixed eyeballs, and with both fists resting on the edge of the terrace. Spendius crouched down, and so at last discovered at what he was gazing. In the distance a golden speck was turning in the dust on the road to Utica; it was the nave of a chariot drawn by two mules; a slave was running at the end of the pole, and holding them by the bridle. Two women were seated in the chariot. The manes of the animals were puffed between the ears after the Persian fashion, beneath a network of blue pearls. Spendius recognised them, and restrained a cry.

A large veil floated behind in the wind.

CHAPTER II

AT SICCA

Two days afterwards the Mercenaries left Carthage.

They had each received a piece of gold on the condition that they should go into camp at Sicca, and they had been told with all sorts of caresses:

"You are the saviours of Carthage! But you would starve it if you remained there; it would become insolvent. Withdraw! The Republic will be grateful to you later for all this condescension. We are going to levy taxes immediately; your pay shall be in full, and galleys shall be equipped to take you back to your native lands."

They did not know how to reply to all this talk. These men, accustomed as they were to war, were wearied by residence in a town; there was difficulty in convincing them, and the people mounted the walls to see them go away.

They defiled through the street of Khamon, and the Cirta gate, pell-mell, archers with hoplites, captains with soldiers, Lusitanians with Greeks. They marched with a bold step, rattling their heavy cothurni on the paving stones. Their armour was dented by the catapult, and their faces blackened by the sunburn of battles. Hoarse cries issued from their thick bears, their tattered coats of mail flapped upon the pommels of their swords, and through the holes in the brass might be seen their naked limbs, as frightful as engines of war. Sarissae, axes, spears, felt caps and bronze helmets, all swung together with a single motion. They filled the street thickly enough to have made the walls crack, and the long mass of armed soldiers overflowed between the lofty bitumen-smeared houses six storys high. Behind their gratings of iron or reed the women, with veiled heads, silently watched the Barbarians pass.

The terraces, fortifications, and walls were hidden beneath the crowd of Carthaginians, who were dressed in garments of black. The sailors' tunics showed like drops of blood among the dark multitude, and nearly naked children, whose skin shone beneath their copper bracelets, gesticulated in the foliage of the columns, or amid the branches of a palm tree. Some of the Ancients were posted on the platform of the towers, and people did not know why a personage with a long beard stood thus in a dreamy attitude here and there. He appeared in the distance against the background of the sky, vague as a phantom and motionless as stone.

All, however, were oppressed with the same anxiety; it was feared that the Barbarians, seeing themselves so strong, might take a fancy to stay. But they

Barbarians, seeing themselves so strong, might take a fancy to stay. But they were leaving with so much good faith that the Carthaginians grew bold and mingled with the soldiers. They overwhelmed them with protestations and embraces. Some with exaggerated politeness and audacious hypocrisy even sought to induce them not to leave the city. They threw perfumes, flowers, and pieces of silver to them. They gave them amulets to avert sickness; but they had spit upon them three times to attract death, or had enclosed jackal's hair within them to put cowardice into their hearts. Aloud, they invoked Melkarth's favour, and in a whisper, his curse.

Then came the mob of baggage, beasts of burden, and stragglers. The sick groaned on the backs of dromedaries, while others limped along leaning on broken pikes. The drunkards carried leathern bottles, and the greedy quarters of meat, cakes, fruits, butter wrapped in fig leaves, and snow in linen bags. Some were to be seen with parasols in their hands, and parrots on their shoulders. They had mastiffs, gazelles, and panthers following behind them. Women of Libyan race, mounted on asses, inveighed against the Negresses who had forsaken the lupanaria of Malqua for the soldiers; many of them were suckling children suspended on their bosoms by leathern thongs. The mules were goaded out at the point of the sword, their backs bending beneath the load of tents, while there were numbers of serving-men and water-carriers, emaciated, jaundiced with fever, and filthy with vermin, the scum of the Carthaginian populace, who had attached themselves to the Barbarians.

When they had passed, the gates were shut behind them, but the people did not descend from the walls. The army soon spread over the breadth of the isthmus.

It parted into unequal masses. Then the lances appeared like tall blades of grass, and finally all was lost in a train of dust; those of the soldiers who looked back towards Carthage could now only see its long walls with their vacant battlements cut out against the edge of the sky.

Then the Barbarians heard a great shout. They thought that some from among them (for they did not know their own number) had remained in the town, and were amusing themselves by pillaging a temple. They laughed a great deal at the idea of this, and then continued their journey.

They were rejoiced to find themselves, as in former days, marching all together in the open country, and some of the Greeks sang the old song of the Mamertines:

"With my lance and sword I plough and reap; I am master of the house! The disarmed man falls at my feet and calls me Lord and Great King."

They shouted, they leaped, the merriest began to tell stories; the time of their miseries was past. As they arrived at Tunis, some of them remarked that a troop of Balearic slingers was missing. They were doubtless not far off; and no further heed was paid to them.

Some went to lodge in the houses, others camped at the foot of the walls, and the townspeople came out to chat with the soldiers.

During the whole night fires were seen burning on the horizon in the direction of Carthage; the light stretched like giant torches across the motionless lake. No one in the army could tell what festival was being celebrated.

On the following day the Barbarian's passed through a region that was covered with cultivation. The domains of the patricians succeeded one another along the border of the route; channels of water flowed through woods of palm; there were long, green lines of olive-trees; rose-coloured vapours floated in the gorges of the hills, while blue mountains reared themselves behind. A warm wind was blowing. Chameleons were crawling on the broad leaves of the cactus.

The Barbarians slackened their speed.

They marched on in isolated detachments, or lagged behind one another at long intervals. They ate grapes along the margin of the vines. They lay on the grass and gazed with stupefaction upon the large, artificially twisted horns of the oxen, the sheep clothed with skins to protect their wool, the furrows crossing one another so as to form lozenges, and the ploughshares like ships' anchors, with the pomegranate trees that were watered with silphium. Such wealth of the soil and such inventions of wisdom dazzled them.

In the evening they stretched themselves on the tents without unfolding them; and thought with regret of Hamilcar's feast, as they fell asleep with their faces towards the stars.

In the middle of the following day they halted on the bank of a river, amid clumps of rose-bays. Then they quickly threw aside lances, bucklers and belts. They bathed with shouts, and drew water in their helmets, while others drank lying flat on their stomachs, and all in the midst of the beasts of burden whose baggage was slipping from them.

Spendius, who was seated on a dromedary stolen in Hamilcar's parks, perceived Matho at a distance, with his arm hanging against his breast, his head bare, and his face bent down, giving his mule drink, and watching the water flow. Spendius immediately ran through the crowd calling him, "Master! master!"

Matho gave him but scant thanks for his blessings, but Spendius paid no heed to this, and began to march behind him, from time to time turning restless glances in the direction of Carthage.

He was the son of a Greek rhetor and a Campanian prostitute. He had at first grown rich by dealing in women; then, ruined by a shipwreck, he had made war against the Romans with the herdsmen of Samnium. He had been taken and had escaped; he had been retaken, and had worked in the quarries, panted in the vapour-baths, shrieked under torture, passed through the hands of many masters, and experienced every frenzy. At last, one day, in despair, he had flung himself into the sea from the top of a trireme where he was working at the oar. Some of Hamilcar's sailors had picked him up when at the point of death, and had brought him to the ergastulum of Megara, at Carthage. But, as fugitives were to be given back to the Romans, he had taken advantage of the confusion to fly with the soldiers.

During the whole of the march he remained near Matho; he brought him food, assisted him to dismount, and spread a carpet in the evening beneath his head. Matho at last was touched by these attentions, and by degrees unlocked his lips.

He had been born in the gulf of Syrtis. His father had taken him on a pilgrimage to the temple of Ammon. Then he had hunted elephants in the forests of the Garamantes. Afterwards he had entered the service of Carthage. He had been appointed tetrarch at the capture of Drepanum. The Republic owed him four horses, twenty-three medimni of wheat, and a winter's pay. He feared the gods, and wished to die in his native land.

Spendius spoke to him of his travels, and of the peoples and temples that he had visited. He knew many things: he could make sandals, boar-spears and nets; he could tame wild beasts and could cook fish.

Sometimes he would interrupt himself, and utter a hoarse cry from the depths of his throat; Matho's mule would quicken his pace, and others would hasten after them, and then Spendius would begin again though still torn with agony. This subsided at last on the evening of the fourth day.

They were marching side by side to the right of the army on the side of a hill; below them stretched the plain lost in the vapours of the night. The lines of soldiers also were defiling below, making undulations in the shade. From time to time these passed over eminences lit up by the moon; then stars would tremble on the points of the pikes, the helmets would glimmer for an instant, all would disappear, and others would come on continually. Startled flocks bleated in the distance, and a something of infinite sweetness seemed to sink upon the earth.

Spendius, with his head thrown back and his eyes half-closed, inhaled the freshness of the wind with great sighs; he spread out his arms, moving his fingers that he might the better feel the cares that streamed over his body. Hopes of vengeance came back to him and transported him. He pressed his hand upon his mouth to check his sobs, and half-swooning with intoxication, let go the halter of his dromedary, which was proceeding with long, regular steps. Matho had relapsed into his former melancholy; his legs hung down to the ground, and the grass made a continuous rustling as it beat against his cothurni.

The journey, however, spread itself out without ever coming to an end. At the extremity of a plain they would always reach a round-shaped plateau; then they would descend again into a valley, and the mountains which seemed to block up the horizon would, in proportion as they were approached, glide as it were from their positions. From time to time a river would appear amid the verdure of tamarisks to lose itself at the turning of the hills. Sometimes a huge rock would tower aloft like the prow of a vessel or the pedestal of some vanished colossus.

At regular intervals they met with little quadrangular temples, which served as stations for the pilgrims who repaired to Sicca. They were closed like tombs. The Libyans struck great blows upon the doors to have them opened. But no one inside responded.

Then the cultivation became more rare. They suddenly entered upon belts of sand bristling with thorny thickets. Flocks of sheep were browsing among the stones; a woman with a blue fleece about her waist was watching them. She fled screaming when she saw the soldiers' pikes among the rocks.

They were marching through a kind of large passage bordered by two chains of reddish coloured hillocks, when their nostrils were greeted with a nauseous odour, and they thought that they could see something extraordinary on the top of a carob tree: a lion's head reared itself above the leaves.

They ran thither. It was a lion with his four limbs fastened to a cross like a criminal. His huge muzzle fell upon his breast, and his two fore-paws, half-hidden beneath the abundance of his mane, were spread out wide like the wings of a bird. His ribs stood severally out beneath his distended skin; his hind legs, which were nailed against each other, were raised somewhat, and the black blood, flowing through his hair, had collected in stalactites at the end of his tail, which hung down perfectly straight along the cross. The soldiers made merry around; they called him consul, and Roman citizen, and threw pebbles into his eyes to drive away the gnats.

But a hundred paces further on they saw two more, and then there suddenly appeared a long file of crosses bearing lions. Some had been so long dead that nothing was left against the wood but the remains of their skeletons; others which were half eaten away had their jaws twisted into horrible grimaces; there were some enormous ones; the shafts of the crosses bent beneath them, and they swayed in the wind, while bands of crows wheeled ceaselessly in the air above their heads. It was thus that the Carthaginian peasants avenged themselves when they captured a wild beast; they hoped to terrify the others by such an example. The Barbarians ceased their laughter, and were long lost in amazement. "What people is this," they thought, "that amuses itself by crucifying lions!"

They were, besides, especially the men of the North, vaguely uneasy, troubled, and already sick. They tore their hands with the darts of the aloes; great mosquitoes buzzed in their ears, and dysentry was breaking out in the army. They were weary at not yet seeing Sicca. They were afraid of losing themselves and of reaching the desert, the country of sands and terrors. Many even were unwilling to advance further. Others started back to Carthage.

At last on the seventh day, after following the base of a mountain for a long time, they turned abruptly to the right, and there then appeared a line of walls resting on white rocks and blending with them. Suddenly the entire city rose; blue, yellow, and white veils moved on the walls in the redness of the evening. These were the priestesses of Tanith, who had hastened hither to receive the men. They stood ranged along the rampart, striking tabourines, playing lyres, and shaking crotala, while the rays of the sun, setting behind them in the mountains of Numidia, shot between the strings of their lyres over which their naked arms were stretched. At intervals their instruments would become suddenly still, and a cry would break forth strident, precipitate, frenzied, continuous, a sort of barking which they made by striking both corners of the mouth with the tongue. Others, more motionless than the Sphynx, rested on their elbows with their chins on their hands, and darted their great black eyes upon the army as it ascended.

Although Sicca was a sacred town it could not hold such a multitude; the temple alone, with its appurtenances, occupied half of it. Accordingly the Barbarians established themselves at their ease on the plain; those who were disciplined in regular troops, and the rest according to nationality or their own fancy.

The Greeks ranged their tents of skin in parallel lines; the Iberians placed their canvas pavilions in a circle; the Gauls made themselves huts of planks; the Libyans cabins of dry stones, while the Negroes with their nails hollowed out trenches in the sand to sleep in. Many, not knowing where to go, wandered about among the baggage, and at nightfall lay down in their ragged mantles on the ground.

The plain, which was wholly bounded by mountains, expanded around them. Here and there a palm tree leaned over a sand hill, and pines and oaks flecked the sides of the precipices: sometimes the rain of a storm would hang from the sky like a long scarf, while the country everywhere was still covered with azure and serenity; then a warm wind would drive before it tornadoes of dust, and a stream would descend in cascades from the heights of Sicca, where, with its roofing of gold on its columns of brass, rose the temple of the Carthaginian Venus, the mistress of the land. She seemed to fill it with her soul. In such convulsions of the soil, such alternations of temperature, and such plays of light would she manifest the extravagance of her might with the beauty of her eternal smile. The mountains at their summits were crescent-shaped; others were like women's bosoms presenting their swelling breasts, and the Barbarians felt a heaviness that was full of delight weighing down their fatigues.

Spendius had bought a slave with the money brought him by his dromedary. The whole day long he lay asleep stretched before Matho's tent. Often he would awake, thinking in his dreams that he heard the whistling of the thongs; with a smile he would pass his hands over the scars on his legs at the place where the fetters had long been worn, and then he would fall asleep again.

Matho accepted his companionship, and when he went out Spendius would escort him like a lictor with a long sword on his thigh; or perhaps Matho would rest his arm carelessly on the other's shoulder, for Spendius was small.

One evening when they were passing together through the streets in the camp they perceived some men covered with white cloaks; among them was Narr' Havas, the prince of the Numidians. Matho started.

"Your sword!" he cried; "I will kill him!"

"Not yet!" said Spendius, restraining him. Narr' Havas was already advancing towards him.

He kissed both thumbs in token of alliance, showing nothing of the anger which he had experienced at the drunkenness of the feast; then he spoke at length against Carthage, but did not say what brought him among the Barbarians.

"Was it to betray them, or else the Republic?" Spendius asked himself; and as he expected to profit by every disorder, he felt grateful to Narr' Havas for the future perfidies of which he suspected him.

The chief of the Numidians remained amongst the Mercenaries. He appeared desirous of attaching Matho to himself. He sent him fat goats, gold dust, and ostrich feathers. The Libyan, who was amazed at such caresses, was in doubt whether to respond to them or to become exasperated at them. But Spendius pacified him, and Matho allowed himself to be ruled by the slave, remaining ever irresolute and in an unconquerable torpor, like those who have once taken a draught of which they are to die.

One morning when all three went out lion-hunting, Narr' Havas concealed a dagger in his cloak. Spendius kept continually behind him, and when they returned the dagger had not been drawn.

Another time Narr' Havas took them a long way off, as far as the boundaries of his kingdom. They came to a narrow gorge, and Narr' Havas smiled as he declared that he had forgotten the way. Spendius found it again.

But most frequently Matho would go off at sunrise, as melancholy as an augur, to wander about the country. He would stretch himself on the sand, and augur, to wander about the country. He would stretch himself on the sand, and remain there motionless until the evening.

He consulted all the soothsayers in the army one after the other, — those who watch the trail of serpents, those who read the stars, and those who breathe upon the ashes of the dead. He swallowed galbanum, seseli, and viper's venom which freezes the heart; Negro women, singing barbarous words in the moonlight, pricked the skin of his forehead with golden stylets; he loaded himself with necklaces and charms; he invoked in turn Baal-Khamon, Moloch, the seven Kabiri, Tanith, and the Venus of the Greeks. He engraved a name upon a copper plate, and buried it in the sand at the threshold of his tent. Spendius used to hear him groaning and talking to himself.

One night he went in.

Matho, as naked as a corpse, was lying on a lion's skin flat on his stomach, with his face in both his hands; a hanging lamp lit up his armour, which was hooked on to the tent-pole above his head.

"You are suffering?" said the slave to him. "What is the matter with you? Answer me?" And he shook him by the shoulder calling him several times, "Master! master!"

At last Matho lifted large troubled eyes towards him.

"Listen!" he said in a low voice, and with a finger on his lips. "It is the wrath of the Gods! Hamilcar's daughter pursues me! I am afraid of her, Spendius!" He pressed himself close against his breast like a child terrified by a phantom. "Speak to me! I am sick! I want to get well! I have tried everything! But you, you perhaps know some stronger gods, or some resistless invocation?"

"For what purpose?" asked Spendius.

Striking his head with both his fists, he replied:

"To rid me of her!"

Then speaking to himself with long pauses he said:

"I am no doubt the victim of some holocaust which she has promised to the gods? — She holds me fast by a chain which people cannot see. If I walk, it is she that is advancing; when I stop, she is resting! Her eyes burn me, I hear her voice. She encompasses me, she penetrates me. It seems to me that she has become my soul!

"And yet between us there are, as it were, the invisible billows of a boundless ocean! She is far away and quite inaccessible! The splendour of her beauty forms a cloud of light around her, and at times I think that I have never seen her — that she does not exist — and that it is all a dream!"

Matho wept thus in the darkness; the Barbarians were sleeping. Spendius, as he looked at him, recalled the young men who once used to entreat him with golden cases in their hands, when he led his herd of courtesans through the golden cases in their hands, when he led his herd of courtesans through the towns; a feeling of pity moved him, and he said —

"Be strong, my master! Summon your will, and beseech the gods no more, for they turn not aside at the cries of men! Weeping like a coward! And you are not humiliated that a woman can cause you so much suffering?"

"Am I a child?" said Matho. "Do you think that I am moved by their faces and songs? We kept them at Drepanum to sweep out our stables. I have embraced them amid assaults, beneath falling ceilings, and while the catapult was still vibrating! — But she, Spendius, she! — "

The slave interrupted him:

"If she were not Hanno's daughter — "

"No!" cried Matho. "She has nothing in common with the daughters of other men! Have you seen her great eyes beneath her great eyebrows, like suns beneath triumphal arches? Think: when she appeared all the torches grew pale. Her naked breast shone here and there through the diamonds of her necklace; behind her you perceived as it were the odour of a temple, and her whole being emitted something that was sweeter than wine and more terrible than death. She walked, however, and then she stopped."

He remained gaping with his head cast down and his eyeballs fixed.

"But I want her! I need her! I am dying for her! I am transported with frenzied joy at the thought of clasping her in my arms, and yet I hate her, Spendius! I should like to beat her! What is to be done? I have a mind to sell myself and become her slave! YOU have been that! You were able to get sight of her; speak to me of her! Every night she ascends to the terrace of her palace, does she not? Ah! the stones must quiver beneath her sandals, and the stars bend down to see her!"

He fell back in a perfect frenzy, with a rattling in his throat like a wounded bull.

Then Matho sang: "He pursued into the forest the female monster, whose tail undulated over the dead leaves like a silver brook." And with lingering tones he imitated Salammbo's voice, while his outspread hands were held like two light hands on the strings of a lyre.

To all the consolations offered by Spendius, he repeated the same words; their nights were spent in these wailings and exhortations.

Matho sought to drown his thoughts in wine. After his fits of drunkenness he was more melancholy still. He tried to divert himself at huckle-bones, and lost the gold plates of his necklace one by one. He had himself taken to the servants of the Goddess; but he came down the hill sobbing, like one returning from a funeral.

Spendius, on the contrary, became more bold and gay. He was to be seen in

Spendius, on the contrary, became more bold and gay. He was to be seen in the leafy taverns discoursing in the midst of the soldiers. He mended old cuirasses. He juggled with daggers. He went and gathered herbs in the fields for the sick. He was facetious, dexterous, full of invention and talk; the Barbarians grew accustomed to his services, and he came to be loved by them.

However, they were awaiting an ambassador from Carthage to bring them mules laden with baskets of gold; and ever beginning the same calculation over again, they would trace figures with their fingers in the sand. Every one was arranging his life beforehand; they would have concubines, slaves, lands; others intended to bury their treasure, or risk it on a vessel. But their tempers were provoked by want of employment; there were constant disputes between horse-soldiers and foot-soldiers, Barbarians and Greeks, while there was a never-ending din of shrill female voices.

Every day men came flocking in nearly naked, and with grass on their heads to protect them from the sun; they were the debtors of the rich Carthaginians and had been forced to till the lands of the latter, but had escaped. Libyans came pouring in with peasants ruined by the taxes, outlaws, and malefactors. Then the horde of traders, all the dealers in wine and oil, who were furious at not being paid, laid the blame upon the Republic. Spendius declaimed against it. Soon the provisions ran low; and there was talk of advancing in a body upon Carthage, and calling in the Romans.

One evening, at supper-time, dull cracked sounds were heard approaching, and something red appeared in the distance among the undulations of the soil.

It was a large purple litter, adorned with ostrich feathers at the corners. Chains of crystal and garlands of pearls beat against the closed hangings. It was followed by camels sounding the great bells that hung at their breasts, and having around them horsemen clad from shoulder to heel in armour of golden scales.

They halted three hundred paces from the camp to take their round bucklers, broad swords, and Boeotian helmets out of the cases which they carried behind their saddles. Some remained with the camels, while the others resumed their march. At last the ensigns of the Republic appeared, that is to say, staves of blue wood terminated in horses' heads or fir cones. The Barbarians all rose with applause; the women rushed towards the guards of the Legion and kissed their feet.

The litter advanced on the shoulders of twelve Negroes who walked in step with short, rapid strides; they went at random to right or left, being embarrassed by the tent-ropes, the animals that were straying about, or the tripods where food was being cooked. Sometimes a fat hand, laden with rings, would partially open the litter, and a hoarse voice would utter loud reproaches; then the bearers would stop and take a different direction through the camp.

But the purple curtains were raised, and a human head, impassible and bloated, was seen resting on a large pillow; the eyebrows, which were like arches of ebony, met each other at the points; golden dust sparkled in the frizzled hair, and the face was so wan that it looked as if it had been powdered with marble raspings. The rest of the body was concealed beneath the fleeces which filled the litter.

In the man so reclining the soldiers recognised the Suffet Hanno, he whose slackness had assisted to lose the battle of the Aegatian islands; and as to his victory at Hecatompylos over the Libyans, even if he did behave with clemency, thought the Barbarians, it was owing to cupidity, for he had sold all the captives on his own account, although he had reported their deaths to the Republic.

After seeking for some time a convenient place from which to harangue the soldiers, he made a sign; the litter stopped, and Hanno, supported by two slaves, put his tottering feet to the ground.

He wore boots of black felt strewn with silver moons. His legs were swathed in bands like those wrapped about a mummy, and the flesh crept through the crossings of the linen; his stomach came out beyond the scarlet jacket which covered his thighs; the folds of his neck fell down to his breast like the dewlaps of an ox; his tunic, which was painted with flowers, was bursting at the arm-pits; he wore a scarf, a girdle, and an ample black cloak with laced double-sleeves. But the abundance of his garments, his great necklace of blue stones, his golden clasps, and heavy earrings only rendered his deformity still more hideous. He might have been taken for some big idol rough-hewn in a block of stone; for a pale leprosy, which was spread over his whole body, gave him the appearance of an inert thing. His nose, however, which was hooked like a vulture's beak, was violently dilated to breathe in the air, and his little eyes, with their gummed lashes, shone with a hard and metallic lustre. He held a spatula of aloe-wood in his hand wherewith to scratch his skin.

At last two heralds sounded their silver horns; the tumult subsided, and Hanno commenced to speak.

He began with an eulogy of the gods and the Republic; the Barbarians ought to congratulate themselves on having served it. But they must show themselves more reasonable; times were hard, "and if a master has only three olives, is it not right that he should keep two for himself?"

The old Suffet mingled his speech in this way with proverbs and apologues, nodding his head the while to solicit some approval.

He spoke in Punic, and those surrounding him (the most alert, who had hastened thither without their arms), were Campanians, Gauls, and Greeks, so that no one in the crowd understood him. Hanno, perceiving this, stopped and reflected, swaying himself heavily from one leg to the other.

It occurred to him to call the captains together; then his heralds shouted the order in Greek, the language which, from the time of Xanthippus, had been used for commands in the Carthaginian armies.

The guards dispersed the mob of soldiers with strokes of the whip; and the captains of the Spartan phalanxes and the chiefs of the Barbarian cohorts soon arrived with the insignia of their rank, and in the armour of their nation. Night had fallen, a great tumult was spreading throughout the plain; fires were burning here and there; and the soldiers kept going from one to another asking what the matter was, and why the Suffet did not distribute the money?

He was setting the infinite burdens of the Republic before the captains. Her treasury was empty. The tribute to Rome was crushing her. "We are quite at a loss what to do! She is much to be pitied!"

From time to time he would rub his limbs with his aloe-wood spatula, or perhaps he would break off to drink a ptisan made of the ashes of a weasel and asparagus boiled in vinegar from a silver cup handed to him by a slave; then he would wipe his lips with a scarlet napkin and resume:

"What used to be worth a shekel of silver is now worth three shekels of gold, while the cultivated lands which were abandoned during the war bring in nothing! Our purpura fisheries are nearly gone, and even pearls are becoming exhorbitant; we have scarcely unguents enough for the service of the gods! As for the things of the table, I shall say nothing about them; it is a calamity! For want of galleys we are without spices, and it is a matter of great difficulty to procure silphium on account of the rebellions on the Cyrenian frontier. Sicily, where so many slaves used to be had, is now closed to us! Only yesterday I gave more money for a bather and four scullions than I used at one time to give for a pair of elephants!"

He unrolled a long piece of papyrus; and, without omitting a single figure, read all the expenses that the government had incurred; so much for repairing the temples, for paving the streets, for the construction of vessels, for the coral-fisheries, for the enlargement of the Syssitia, and for engines in the mines in the country of the Cantabrians.

But the captains understood Punic as little as the soldiers, although the Mercenaries saluted one another in that language. It was usual to place a few Carthaginian officers in the Barbarian armies to act as interpreters; after the war they had concealed themselves through fear of vengeance, and Hanno had not thought of taking them with him; his hollow voice, too, was lost in the wind.

The Greeks, girthed in their iron waist-belts, strained their ears as they strove to guess at his words, while the mountaineers, covered with furs like bears, looked at him with distrust, or yawned as they leaned on their brass-nailed clubs. The heedless Gauls sneered as they shook their lofty heads of hair, and the men of the desert listened motionless, cowled in their garments of grey wool; others kept coming up behind; the guards, crushed by the mob, staggered on their horses; the Negroes held out burning fir branches at arm's length; and the big Carthaginian, mounted on a grassy hillock, continued his harangue.

The Barbarians, however, were growing impatient; murmuring arose, and every one apostrophized him. Hanno gesticulated with his spatula; and those who wished the others to be quiet shouted still more loudly, thereby adding to the din.

Suddenly a man of mean appearance bounded to Hanno's feet, snatched up a herald's trumpet, blew it, and Spendius (for it was he) announced that he was going to say something of importance. At this declaration, which was rapidly uttered in five different languages, Greek, Latin, Gallic, Libyan and Balearic, the captains, half laughing and half surprised, replied: "Speak! Speak!"

Spendius hesitated; he trembled; at last, addressing the Libyans who were the most numerous, he said to them:

"You have all heard this man's horrible threats!"

Hanno made no exclamation, therefore he did not understand Libyan; and, to carry on the experiment, Spendius repeated the same phrase in the other Barbarian dialects.

They looked at one another in astonishment; then, as by a tacit agreement, and believing perhaps that they had understood, they bent their heads in token of assent.

Then Spendius began in vehement tones:

"He said first that all the Gods of the other nations were but dreams besides the Gods of Carthage! He called you cowards, thieves, liars, dogs, and the sons of dogs! But for you (he said that!) the Republic would not be forced to pay excessive tribute to the Romans; and through your excesses you have drained it of perfumes, aromatics, slaves, and silphium, for you are in league with the nomads on the Cyrenian frontier! But the guilty shall be punished! He read the enumeration of their torments; they shall be made to work at the paving of the streets, at the equipment of the vessels, at the adornment of the Syssitia, while the rest shall be sent to scrape the earth in the mines in the country of the Cantabrians."

Spendius repeated the same statements to the Gauls, Greeks, Campanians and Balearians. The Mercenaries, recognising several of the proper names which had met their ears, were convinced that he was accurately reporting the Suffet's speech. A few cried out to him, "You lie!" but their voices were drowned in the tumult of the rest; Spendius added:

"Have you not seen that he has left a reserve of his horse-soldiers outside the camp? At a given signal they will hasten hither to slay you all."

The Barbarians turned in that direction, and as the crowd was then scattering, there appeared in the midst of them, and advancing with the slowness of a phantom, a human being, bent, lean, entirely naked, and covered down to his flanks with long hair bristling with dried leaves, dust and thorns. About his loins and his knees he had wisps of straw and linen rags; his soft and earthy skin hung on his emaciated limbs like tatters on dried boughs; his hands trembled with a continuous quivering, and as he walked he leaned on a staff of olive-wood.

He reached the Negroes who were bearing the torches. His pale gums were displayed in a sort of idiotic titter; his large, scared eyes gazed upon the crowd of Barbarians around him.

But uttering a cry of terror he threw himself behind them, shielding himself with their bodies. "There they are! There they are!" he stammered out, pointing to the Suffet's guards, who were motionless in their glittering armour. Their horses, dazzled by the light of the torches which crackled in the darkness, were pawing the ground; the human spectre struggled and howled:

"They have killed them!"

At these words, which were screamed in Balearic, some Balearians came up and recognised him; without answering them he repeated:

"Yes, all killed, all! crushed like grapes! The fine young men! the slingers! my companions and yours!"

They gave him wine to drink, and he wept; then he launched forth into speech.

Spendius could scarcely repress his joy, as he explained the horrors related by Zarxas to the Greeks and Libyans; he could not believe them, so appropriately did they come in. The Balearians grew pale as they learned how their companions had perished.

It was a troop of three hundred slingers who had disembarked the evening before, and had on that day slept too late. When they reached the square of Khamon the Barbarians were gone, and they found themselves defenceless, their clay bullets having been put on the camels with the rest of the baggage. They were allowed to advance into the street of Satheb as far as the brass sheathed oaken gate; then the people with a single impulse had sprung upon them.

Indeed, the soldiers remembered a great shout; Spendius, who was flying at the head of the columns, had not heard it.

Then the corpses were placed in the arms of the Pataec gods that fringed the temple of Khamon. They were upbraided with all the crimes of the Mercenaries; their gluttony, their thefts, their impiety, their disdain, and the murder of the fishes in Salammbo's garden. Their bodies were subjected to infamous mutilations; the priests burned their hair in order to torture their souls; they were hung up in pieces in the meat-shops; some even buried their teeth in them, and in the evening funeral-piles were kindled at the cross-ways to finish them.

These were the flames that had gleamed from a distance across the lake. But some houses having taken fire, any dead or dying that remained were speedily thrown over the walls; Zarxas had remained among the reeds on the edge of the lake until the following day; then he had wandered about through the country, seeking for the army by the footprints in the dust. In the morning he hid himself in caves; in the evening he resumed his march with his bleeding wounds, famished, sick, living on roots and carrion; at last one day he perceived lances on the horizon, and he had followed them, for his reason was disturbed through his terrors and miseries.

The indignation of the soldiers, restrained so long as he was speaking, broke forth like a tempest; they were going to massacre the guards together with the Suffet. A few interposed, saying that they ought to hear him and know at least whether they should be paid. Then they all cried: "Our money!" Hanno replied that he had brought it.

They ran to the outposts, and the Suffet's baggage arrived in the midst of the tents, pressed forward by the Barbarians. Without waiting for the slaves, they very quickly unfastened the baskets; in them they found hyacinth robes, sponges, scrapers, brushes, perfumes, and antimony pencils for painting the eyes — all belonging to the guards, who were rich men and accustomed to such refinements. Next they uncovered a large bronze tub on a camel: it belonged to the Suffet who had it for bathing in during his journey; for he had taken all manner of precautions, even going so far as to bring caged weasels from Hecatompylos, which were burnt alive to make his ptisan. But, as his malady gave him a great appetite, there were also many comestibles and many wines, pickle, meats and fishes preserved in honey, with little pots of Commagene, or melted goose-fat covered with snow and chopped straw. There was a considerable supply of it; the more they opened the baskets the more they found, and laughter arose like conflicting waves.

As to the pay of the Mercenaries it nearly filled two esparto-grass baskets; there were even visible in one of them some of the leathern discs which the Republic used to economise its specie; and as the Barbarians appeared greatly surprised, Hanno told them that, their accounts being very difficult, the Ancients had not had leisure to examine them. Meanwhile they had sent them this.

Then everything was in disorder and confusion; mules, serving men, litter

Then everything was in disorder and confusion: mules, serving men, litter, provisions, and baggage. The soldiers took the coin in the bags to stone Hanno. With great difficulty he was able to mount an ass; and he fled, clinging to its hair, howling, weeping, shaken, bruised, and calling down the curse of all the gods upon the army. His broad necklace of precious stones rebounded up to his ears. His cloak which was too long, and which trailed behind him, he kept on with his teeth, and from afar the Barbarians shouted at him, "Begone coward! pig! sink of Moloch! sweat your gold and your plague! quicker! quicker!" The routed escort galloped beside him.

But the fury of the Barbarians did not abate. They remembered that several of them who had set out for Carthage had not returned; no doubt they had been killed. So much injustice exasperated them, and they began to pull up the stakes of their tents, to roll up their cloaks, and to bridle their horses; every one took his helmet and sword, and instantly all was ready. Those who had no arms rushed into the woods to cut staves.

Day dawned; the people of Sicca were roused, and stirring in the streets. "They are going to Carthage," said they, and the rumour of this soon spread through the country.

From every path and every ravine men arose. Shepherds were seen running down from the mountains.

Then, when the Barbarians had set out, Spendius circled the plain, riding on a Punic stallion, and attended by his slave, who led a third horse.

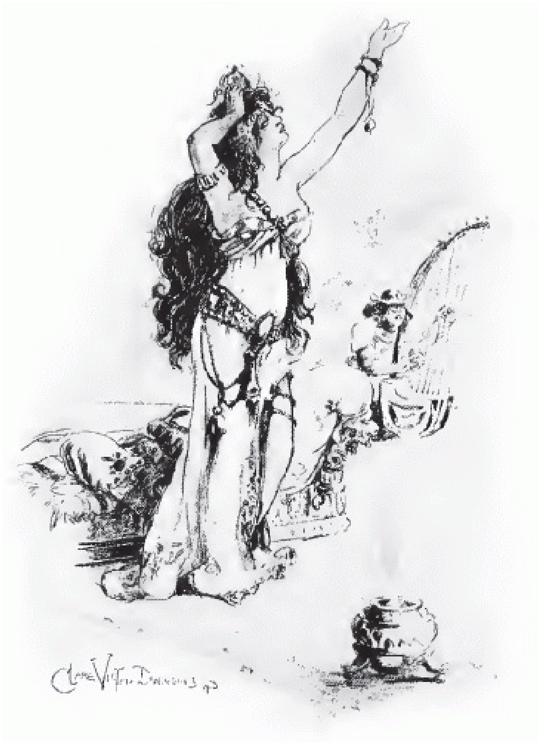
A single tent remained. Spendius entered it.

"Up, master! rise! we are departing!"

"And where are you going?" asked Matho.

"To Carthage!" cried Spendius.

Matho bounded upon the horse which the slave held at the door.



CHAPTER III

SALAMMBO

The moon was rising just above the waves, and on the town which was still wrapped in darkness there glittered white and luminous specks: — the pole of a chariot, a dangling rag of linen, the corner of a wall, or a golden necklace on the bosom of a god. The glass balls on the roofs of the temples beamed like great diamonds here and there. But ill-defined ruins, piles of black earth, and gardens formed deeper masses in the gloom, and below Malqua fishermen's nets stretched from one house to another like gigantic bats spreading their wings. The grinding of the hydraulic wheels which conveyed water to the highest storys of the palaces, was no longer heard; and the camels, lying ostrich fashion on their stomachs, rested peacefully in the middle of the terraces. The porters were asleep in the streets on the thresholds of the houses; the shadows of the colossuses stretched across the deserted squares; occasionally in the distance the smoke of a still burning sacrifice would escape through the bronze tiling, and the heavy breeze would waft the odours of aromatics blended with the scent of the sea and the exhalation from the sun-heated walls. The motionless waves shone around Carthage, for the moon was spreading her light at once upon the mountain-circled gulf and upon the lake of Tunis, where flamingoes formed long rose-coloured lines amid the banks of sand, while further on beneath the catacombs the great salt lagoon shimmered like a piece of silver. The blue vault of heaven sank on the horizon in one direction into the dustiness of the plains, and in the other into the mists of the sea, and on the summit of the Acropolis, the pyramidal cypress trees, fringing the temple of Eschmoun, swayed murmuring like the regular waves that beat slowly along the mole beneath the ramparts.

Salammbo ascended to the terrace of her palace, supported by a female slave who carried an iron dish filled with live coals.

In the middle of the terrace there was a small ivory bed covered with lynx skins, and cushions made with the feathers of the parrot, a fatidical animal consecrated to the gods; and at the four corners rose four long perfuming-pans filled with nard, incense, cinnamomum, and myrrh. The slave lit the perfumes. Salammbo looked at the polar star; she slowly saluted the four points of heaven, and knelt down on the ground in the azure dust which was strewn with golden stars in imitation of the firmament. Then with both elbows against her sides, her fore-arms straight and her hands open, she threw back her head beneath the rays of the moon, and said:

of the moon, and said:

"O Rabetna! — Baalet! — Tanith!" and her voice was lengthened in a plaintive fashion as if calling to some one. "Anaitis! Astarte! Derceto! Astoreth! Mylitta! Athara! Elissa! Tiratha! — By the hidden symbols, by the resounding sistra, — by the furrows of the earth, — by the eternal silence and by the eternal fruitfulness, — mistress of the gloomy sea and of the azure shores, O Queen of the watery world, all hail!"

She swayed her whole body twice or thrice, and then cast herself face downwards in the dust with both arms outstretched.

But the slave nimbly raised her, for according to the rites someone must catch the suppliant at the moment of his prostration; this told him that the gods accepted him, and Salammbo's nurse never failed in this pious duty.

Some merchants from Darytian Gaetulia had brought her to Carthage when quite young, and after her enfranchisement she would not forsake her old masters, as was shown by her right ear, which was pierced with a large hole. A petticoat of many-coloured stripes fitted closely on her hips, and fell to her ankles, where two tin rings clashed together. Her somewhat flat face was yellow like her tunic. Silver bodkins of great length formed a sun behind her head. She wore a coral button on the nostril, and she stood beside the bed more erect than a Hermes, and with her eyelids cast down.

Salammbo walked to the edge of the terrace; her eyes swept the horizon for an instant, and then were lowered upon the sleeping town, while the sigh that she heaved swelled her bosom, and gave an undulating movement to the whole length of the long white simar which hung without clasp or girdle about her. Her curved and painted sandals were hidden beneath a heap of emeralds, and a net of purple thread was filled with her disordered hair.

But she raised her head to gaze upon the moon, and murmured, mingling her speech with fragments of hymns:

"How lightly turnest thou, supported by the impalpable ether! It brightens about thee, and 'tis the stir of thine agitation that distributes the winds and fruitful dews. According as thou dost wax and wane the eyes of cats and spots of panthers lengthen or grow short. Wives shriek thy name in the pangs of childbirth! Thou makest the shells to swell, the wine to bubble, and the corpse to putrefy! Thou formest the pearls at the bottom of the sea!

"And every germ, O goddess! ferments in the dark depths of thy moisture.

"When thou appearest, quietness is spread abroad upon the earth; the flowers close, the waves are soothed, wearied man stretches his breast toward thee, and the world with its oceans and mountains looks at itself in thy face as in a mirror. Thou art white, gentle, luminous, immaculate, helping, purifying, serene!"

The crescent of the moon was then over the mountain of the Hot Springs, in the hollow formed by its two summits, on the other side of the gulf. Below it there was a little star, and all around it a pale circle. Salammbo went on:

"But thou art a terrible mistress! — Monsters, terrifying phantoms, and lying dreams come from thee; thine eyes devour the stones of buildings, and the apes are ever ill each time thou growest young again.

"Whither goest thou? Why dost thou change thy forms continually? Now, slender and curved thou glidest through space like a mastless galley; and then, amid the stars, thou art like a shepherd keeping his flock. Shining and round, thou dost graze the mountain-tops like the wheel of a chariot.

"O Tanith! thou dost love me? I have looked so much on thee! But no! thou sailest through thine azure, and I — I remain on the motionless earth.

"Taanach, take your nebal and play softly on the silver string, for my heart is sad!"

The slave lifted a sort of harp of ebony wood, taller than herself, and triangular in shape like a delta; she fixed the point in a crystal globe, and with both hands began to play.

The sounds followed one another hurried and deep, like the buzzing of bees, and with increasing sonorousness floated away into the night with the complaining of the waves, and the rustling of the great trees on the summit of the Acropolis.

"Hush!" cried Salammbo.

"What ails you, mistress? The blowing of the breeze, the passing of a cloud, everything disquiets you just now!"

"I do not know," she said.

"You are wearied with too long prayers!"

"Oh! Tanaach, I would fain be dissolved in them like a flower in wine!"

"Perhaps it is the smoke of your perfumes?"

"No!" said Salammbo; "the spirit of the gods dwells in fragrant odours."

Then the slave spoke to her of her father. It was thought that he had gone towards the amber country, behind the pillars of Melkarth. "But if he does not return," she said, "you must nevertheless, since it was his will, choose a husband among the sons of the Ancients, and then your grief will pass away in a man's arms."

"Why?" asked the young girl. All those that she had seen had horrified her with their fallow-deer laughter and their coarse limbs.

"Sometimes, Tanaach, from the depths of my being there exhale as it were hot fumes heavier than the vapours from a volcano. Voices call me, a globe of fire rolls and mounts within my bosom, it stifles me, I am at the point of death; and then, something sweet, flowing from my brow to my feet, passes through my flesh — it is a caress enfolding me, and I feel myself crushed as if some god were stretched upon me. Oh! would that I could lose myself in the mists of the night, the waters of the fountains, the sap of the trees, that I could issue from my body, and be but a breath, or a ray, and glide, mount up to thee, O Mother!"

She raised her arms to their full length, arching her form, which in its long garment was as pale and light as the moon. Then she fell back, panting, on the ivory couch; but Taanach passed an amber necklace with dolphin's teeth about her neck to banish terrors, and Salammbo said in an almost stifled voice: "Go and bring me Schahabarim."

Her father had not wished her to enter the college of priestesses, nor even to be made at all acquainted with the popular Tanith. He was reserving her for some alliance that might serve his political ends; so that Salammbo lived alone in the midst of the palace. Her mother was long since dead.

She had grown up with abstinences, fastings and purifications, always surrounded by grave and exquisite things, her body saturated with perfumes, and her soul filled with prayers. She had never tasted wine, nor eaten meat, nor touched an unclean animal, nor set her heels in the house of death.

She knew nothing of obscene images, for as each god was manifested in different forms, the same principle often received the witness of contradictory cults, and Salammbo worshipped the goddess in her sidereal presentation. An influence had descended upon the maiden from the moon; when the planet passed diminishing away, Salammbo grew weak. She languished the whole day long, and revived at evening. During an eclipse she nearly died.

But Rabetna, in jealousy, revenged herself for the virginity withdrawn from her sacrifices, and she tormented Salammbo with possessions, all the stronger for being vague, which were spread through this belief and excited by it.

Unceasingly was Hamilcar's daughter disquieted about Tanith. She had learned her adventures, her travels, and all her names, which she would repeat without their having any distinct signification for her. In order to penetrate into the depths of her dogma, she wished to become acquainted, in the most secret part of the temple, with the old idol in the magnificent mantle, whereon depended the destinies of Carthage, for the idea of a god did not stand out clearly from his representation, and to hold, or even see the image of one, was to take away part of his virtue, and in a measure to rule him.

But Salammbo turned around. She had recognised the sound of the golden bells which Schahabarim wore at the hem of his garment.

He ascended the staircases; then at the threshold of the terrace he stopped and folded his arms.

His sunken eyes shone like the lamps of a sepulchre; his long thin body floated in its linen robe which was weighted by the bells, the latter alternating with balls of emeralds at his heels. He had feeble limbs, an oblique skull and a pointed chin; his skin seemed cold to the touch, and his yellow face, which was deeply furrowed with wrinkles, was as if it contracted in a longing, in an everlasting grief.

He was the high priest of Tanith, and it was he who had educated Salammbo.

"Speak!" he said. "What will you?"

"I hoped — you had almost promised me — " She stammered and was confused; then suddenly: "Why do you despise me? what have I forgotten in the rites? You are my master, and you told me that no one was so accomplished in the things pertaining to the goddess as I; but there are some of which you will not speak. Is it so, O father?"

Schahabarim remembered Hamilcar's orders, and replied:

"No, I have nothing more to teach you!"

"A genius," she resumed, "impels me to this love. I have climbed the steps of Eschmoun, god of the planets and intelligences; I have slept beneath the golden olive of Melkarth, patron of the Tyrian colonies; I have pushed open the doors of Baal-Khamon, the enlightener and fertiliser; I have sacrificed to the subterranean Kabiri, to the gods of woods, winds, rivers and mountains; but, can you understand? they are all too far away, too high, too insensible, while she — I feel her mingled in my life; she fills my soul, and I quiver with inward startings, as though she were leaping in order to escape. Methinks I am about to hear her voice, and see her face, lightnings dazzle me and then I sink back again into the darkness."

Schahabarim was silent. She entreated him with suppliant looks. At last he made a sign for the dismissal of the slave, who was not of Chanaanitish race. Taanach disappeared, and Schahabarim, raising one arm in the air, began:

"Before the gods darkness alone was, and a breathing stirred dull and indistinct as the conscience of a man in a dream. It contracted, creating Desire and Cloud, and from Desire and Cloud there issued primitive Matter. This was a water, muddy, black, icy and deep. It contained senseless monsters, incoherent portions of the forms to be born, which are painted on the walls of the sanctuaries.

"Then Matter condensed. It became an egg. It burst. One half formed the earth and the other the firmament. Sun, moon, winds and clouds appeared, and at the crash of the thunder intelligent creatures awoke. Then Eschmoun spread himself in the starry sphere; Khamon beamed in the sun; Melkarth thrust him with his arms behind Gades; the Kabiri descended beneath the volcanoes, and Rabetna like a nurse bent over the world pouring out her light like milk, and her night like a mantle."

"And then?" she said.

He had related the secret of the origins to her, to divert her from sublimer prospects; but the maiden's desire kindled again at his last words, and Schahabarim, half yielding resumed:

"She inspires and governs the loves of men."

"The loves of men!" repeated Salammbo dreamily.

"She is the soul of Carthage," continued the priest; "and although she is everywhere diffused, it is here that she dwells, beneath the sacred veil."

"O father!" cried Salammbo, "I shall see her, shall I not? you will bring me to her! I had long been hesitating; I am devoured with curiosity to see her form. Pity! help me! let us go?"

He repulsed her with a vehement gesture that was full of pride.

"Never! Do you not know that it means death? The hermaphrodite Baals are unveiled to us alone who are men in understanding and women in weakness. Your desire is sacrilege; be satisfied with the knowledge that you possess!"

She fell upon her knees placing two fingers against her ears in token of repentance; and crushed by the priest's words, and filled at once with anger against him, with terror and humiliation, she burst into sobs. Schahabarim remained erect, and more insensible than the stones of the terrace. He looked down upon her quivering at his feet, and felt a kind of joy on seeing her suffer for his divinity whom he himself could not wholly embrace. The birds were already singing, a cold wind was blowing, and little clouds were drifting in the paling sky.

Suddenly he perceived on the horizon, behind Tunis, what looked like slight mists trailing along the ground; then these became a great curtain of dust extending perpendicularly, and, amid the whirlwinds of the thronging mass, dromedaries' heads, lances and shields appeared. It was the army of the Barbarians advancing upon Carthage.

CHAPTER IV

BENEATH THE WALLS OF CARTHAGE

Some country people, riding on asses or running on foot, arrived in the town, pale, breathless, and mad with fear. They were flying before the army. It had accomplished the journey from Sicca in three days, in order to reach Carthage and wholly exterminate it.

The gates were shut. The Barbarians appeared almost immediately; but they stopped in the middle of the isthmus, on the edge of the lake.

At first they made no hostile announcement. Several approached with palm branches in their hands. They were driven back with arrows, so great was the terror.

In the morning and at nightfall prowlers would sometimes wander along the walls. A little man carefully wrapped in a cloak, and with his face concealed beneath a very low visor, was especially noticed. He would remain whole hours gazing at the aqueduct, and so persistently that he doubtless wished to mislead the Carthaginians as to his real designs. Another man, a sort of giant who walked bareheaded, used to accompany him.

But Carthage was defended throughout the whole breadth of the isthmus: first by a trench, then by a grassy rampart, and lastly by a wall thirty cubits high, built of freestone, and in two storys. It contained stables for three hundred elephants with stores for their caparisons, shackles, and food; other stables again for four thousand horses with supplies of barley and harness, and barracks for twenty thousand soldiers with armour and all materials of war. Towers rose from the second story, all provided with battlements, and having bronze bucklers hung on cramps on the outside.

This first line of wall gave immediate shelter to Malqua, the sailors' and dyers' quarter. Masts might be seen whereon purple sails were drying, and on the highest terraces clay furnaces for heating the pickle were visible.

Behind, the lofty houses of the city rose in an ampitheatre of cubical form. They were built of stone, planks, shingle, reeds, shells, and beaten earth. The woods belonging to the temples were like lakes of verdure in this mountain of diversely-coloured blocks. It was levelled at unequal distances by the public squares, and was cut from top to bottom by countless intersecting lanes. The enclosures of the three old quarters which are now lost might be distinguished; they rose here and there like great reefs, or extended in enormous fronts, blackened, half-covered with flowers, and broadly striped by the casting of filth blackened, half-covered with flowers, and broadly striped by the casting of filth, while streets passed through their yawning apertures like rivers beneath bridges.

The hill of the Acropolis, in the centre of Byrsa, was hidden beneath a disordered array of monuments. There were temples with wreathed columns bearing bronze capitals and metal chains, cones of dry stones with bands of azure, copper cupolas, marble architraves, Babylonian buttresses, obelisks poised on their points like inverted torches. Peristyles reached to pediments; volutes were displayed through colonnades; granite walls supported tile partitions; the whole mounting, half-hidden, the one above the other in a marvellous and incomprehensible fashion. In it might be felt the succession of the ages, and, as it were, the memorials of forgotten fatherlands.

Behind the Acropolis the Mappalian road, which was lined with tombs, extended through red lands in a straight line from the shore to the catacombs; then spacious dwellings occurred at intervals in the gardens, and this third quarter, Megara, which was the new town, reached as far as the edge of the cliff, where rose a giant pharos that blazed forth every night.

In this fashion was Carthage displayed before the soldiers quartered in the plain.

They could recognise the markets and crossways in the distance, and disputed with one another as to the sites of the temples. Khamon's, fronting the Syssitia, had golden tiles; Melkarth, to the left of Eschmoun, had branches of coral on its roofing; beyond, Tanith's copper cupola swelled among the palm trees; the dark Moloch was below the cisterns, in the direction of the pharos. At the angles of the pediments, on the tops of the walls, at the corners of the squares, everywhere, divinities with hideous heads might be seen, colossal or squat, with enormous bellies, or immoderately flattened, opening their jaws, extending their arms, and holding forks, chains or javelins in their hands; while the blue of the sea stretched away behind the streets which were rendered still steeper by the perspective.

They were filled from morning till evening with a tumultuous people; young boys shaking little bells, shouted at the doors of the baths; the shops for hot drinks smoked, the air resounded with the noise of anvils, the white cocks, sacred to the Sun, crowed on the terraces, the oxen that were being slaughtered bellowed in the temples, slaves ran about with baskets on their heads; and in the depths of the porticoes a priest would sometimes appear, draped in a dark cloak, barefooted, and wearing a pointed cap.

The spectacle afforded by Carthage irritated the Barbarians; they admired it and execrated it, and would have liked both to annihilate it and to dwell in it. But what was there in the Military Harbour defended by a triple wall? Then behind the town, at the back of Megara, and higher than the Acropolis, appeared

Hamilcar's palace.

Matho's eyes were directed thither every moment. He would ascend the olive trees and lean over with his hand spread out above his eyebrows. The gardens were empty, and the red door with its black cross remained constantly shut.

More than twenty times he walked round the ramparts, seeking some breach by which he might enter. One night he threw himself into the gulf and swam for three hours at a stretch. He reached the foot of the Mappalian quarter and tried to climb up the face of the cliff. He covered his knees with blood, broke his nails, and then fell back into the waves and returned.

His impotence exasperated him. He was jealous of this Carthage which contained Salammbo, as if of some one who had possessed her. His nervelessness left him to be replaced by a mad and continual eagerness for action. With flaming cheek, angry eyes, and hoarse voice, he would walk with rapid strides through the camp; or seated on the shore he would scour his great sword with sand. He shot arrows at the passing vultures. His heart overflowed into frenzied speech.

"Give free course to your wrath like a runaway chariot," said Spendius. "Shout, blaspheme, ravage and slay. Grief is allayed with blood, and since you cannot sate your love, gorge your hate; it will sustain you!"

Matho resumed the command of his soldiers. He drilled them pitilessly. He was respected for his courage and especially for his strength. Moreover he inspired a sort of mystic dread, and it was believed that he conversed at night with phantoms. The other captains were animated by his example. The army soon grew disciplined. From their houses the Carthaginians could hear the bugle-flourishes that regulated their exercises. At last the Barbarians drew near.

To crush them in the isthmus it would have been necessary for two armies to take them simultaneously in the rear, one disembarking at the end of the gulf of Utica, and the second at the mountain of the Hot Springs. But what could be done with the single sacred Legion, mustering at most six thousand men? If the enemy bent towards the east they would join the nomads and intercept the commerce of the desert. If they fell back to the west, Numidia would rise. Finally, lack of provisions would sooner or later lead them to devastate the surrounding country like grasshoppers, and the rich trembled for their fine country-houses, their vineyards and their cultivated lands.

Hanno proposed atrocious and impracticable measures, such as promising a heavy sum for every Barbarian's head, or setting fire to their camp with ships and machines. His colleague Gisco, on the other hand, wished them to be paid. But the Ancients detested him owing to his popularity; for they dreaded the risk of a master, and through terror of monarchy strove to weaken whatever contributed to it or might re-establish it.

Outside the fortification there were people of another race and of unknown origin, all hunters of the porcupine, and eaters of shell-fish and serpents. They used to go into caves to catch hyenas alive, and amuse themselves by making them run in the evening on the sands of Megara between the stelae of the tombs. Their huts, which were made of mud and wrack, hung on the cliff like swallows' nests. There they lived, without government and without gods, pell-mell, completely naked, at once feeble and fierce, and execrated by the people of all time on account of their unclean food. One morning the sentries perceived that they were all gone.

At last some members of the Great Council arrived at a decision. They came to the camp without necklaces or girdles, and in open sandals like neighbours. They walked at a quiet pace, waving salutations to the captains, or stopped to speak to the soldiers, saying that all was finished and that justice was about to be done to their claims.

Many of them saw a camp of Mercenaries for the first time. Instead of the confusion which they had pictured to themselves, there prevailed everywhere terrible silence and order. A grassy rampart formed a lofty wall round the army immovable by the shock of catapults. The ground in the streets was sprinkled with fresh water; through the holes in the tents they could perceive tawny eyeballs gleaming in the shade. The piles of pikes and hanging panoplies dazzled them like mirrors. They conversed in low tones. They were afraid of upsetting something with their long robes.

The soldiers requested provisions, undertaking to pay for them out of the money that was due.

Oxen, sheep, guinea fowl, fruit and lupins were sent to them, with smoked scombri, that excellent scombri which Carthage dispatched to every port. But they walked scornfully around the magnificent cattle, and disparaging what they coveted, offered the worth of a pigeon for a ram, or the price of a pomegranate for three goats. The Eaters of Uncleanness came forward as arbitrators, and declared that they were being duped. Then they drew their swords with threats to slay.

Commissaries of the Great Council wrote down the number of years for which pay was due to each soldier. But it was no longer possible to know how many Mercenaries had been engaged, and the Ancients were dismayed at the enormous sum which they would have to pay. The reserve of silphium must be sold, and the trading towns taxed; the Mercenaries would grow impatient; Tunis was already with them; and the rich, stunned by Hanno's ragings and his colleague's reproaches, urged any citizens who might know a Barbarian to go to see him immediately in order to win back his friendship, and to speak him fair. Such a show of confidence would soothe them.

Traders, scribes, workers in the arsenal, and whole families visited the Barbarians.

The soldiers allowed all the Carthaginians to come in, but by a single passage so narrow that four men abreast jostled one another in it. Spendius, standing against the barrier, had them carefully searched; facing him Matho was examining the multitude, trying to recognise some one whom he might have seen at Salammbo's palace.

The camp was like a town, so full of people and of movement was it. The two distinct crowds mingled without blending, one dressed in linen or wool, with felt caps like fir-cones, and the other clad in iron and wearing helmets. Amid serving men and itinerant vendors there moved women of all nations, as brown as ripe dates, as greenish as olives, as yellow as oranges, sold by sailors, picked out of dens, stolen from caravans, taken in the sacking of towns, women that were jaded with love so long as they were young, and plied with blows when they were old, and that died in routs on the roadsides among the baggage and the abandoned beasts of burden. The wives of the nomads had square, tawny robes of dromedary's hair swinging at their heels; musicians from Cyrenaica, wrapped in violet gauze and with painted eyebrows, sang, squatting on mats; old Negresses with hanging breasts gathered the animals' dung that was drying in the sun to light their fires; the Syracusan women had golden plates in their hair; the Lusitanians had necklaces of shells; the Gauls wore wolf skins upon their white bosoms; and sturdy children, vermin-covered, naked and uncircumcised, butted with their heads against passers-by, or came behind them like young tigers to bite their hands.

The Carthaginians walked through the camp, surprised at the quantities of things with which it was running over. The most miserable were melancholy, and the rest dissembled their anxiety.

The soldiers struck them on the shoulder, and exhorted them to be gay. As soon as they saw any one, they invited him to their amusements. If they were playing at discus, they would manage to crush his feet, or if at boxing to fracture his jaw with the very first blow. The slingers terrified the Carthaginians with their slings, the Psylli with their vipers, and the horsemen with their horses, while their victims, addicted as they were to peaceful occupations, bent their heads and tried to smile at all these outrages. Some, in order to show themselves brave, made signs that they should like to become soldiers. They were set to split wood and to curry mules. They were buckled up in armour, and rolled like casks through the streets of the camp. Then, when they were about to leave, the

Mercenaries plucked out their hair with grotesque contortions.

But many, from foolishness or prejudice, innocently believed that all the Carthaginians were very rich, and they walked behind them entreating them to grant them something. They requested everything that they thought fine: a ring, a girdle, sandals, the fringe of a robe, and when the despoiled Carthaginian cried — "But I have nothing left. What do you want?" they would reply, "Your wife!" Others even said, "Your life!"

The military accounts were handed to the captains, read to the soldiers, and definitively approved. Then they claimed tents; they received them. Next the polemarchs of the Greeks demanded some of the handsome suits of armour that were manufactured at Carthage; the Great Council voted sums of money for their purchase. But it was only fair, so the horsemen pretended, that the Republic should indemnify them for their horses; one had lost three at such a siege, another, five during such a march, another, fourteen in the precipices. Stallions from Hecatompylos were offered to them, but they preferred money.

Next they demanded that they should be paid in money (in pieces of money, and not in leathern coins) for all the corn that was owing to them, and at the highest price that it had fetched during the war; so that they exacted four hundred times as much for a measure of meal as they had given for a sack of wheat. Such injustice was exasperating; but it was necessary, nevertheless, to submit.

Then the delegates from the soldiers and from the Great Council swore renewed friendship by the Genius of Carthage and the gods of the Barbarians. They exchanged excuses and caresses with oriental demonstrativeness and verbosity. Then the soldiers claimed, as a proof of friendship, the punishment of those who had estranged them from the Republic.

Their meaning, it was pretended, was not understood, and they explained themselves more clearly by saying that they must have Hanno's head.

Several times a day, they left their camp, and walked along the foot of the walls, shouting a demand that the Suffet's head should be thrown to them, and holding out their robes to receive it.

The Great Council would perhaps have given way but for a last exaction, more outrageous than the rest; they demanded maidens, chosen from illustrious families, in marriage for their chiefs. It was an idea which had emanated from Spendius, and which many thought most simple and practicable. But the assumption of their desire to mix with Punic blood made the people indignant; and they were bluntly told that they were to receive no more. Then they exclaimed that they had been deceived, and that if their pay did not arrive within three days, they would themselves go and take it in Carthage.

The bad faith of the Mercenaries was not so complete as their enemies thought. Hamilcar had made them extravagant promises, vague, it is true, but at the same time solemn and reiterated. They might have believed that when they disembarked at Carthage the town would be abandoned to them, and that they should have treasures divided among them; and when they saw that scarcely their wages would be paid, the disillusion touched their pride no less than their greed.

Had not Dionysius, Pyrrhus, Agathocles, and the generals of Alexander furnished examples of marvellous good fortune? Hercules, whom the Chanaanites confounded with the sun, was the ideal which shone on the horizon of armies. They knew that simple soldiers had worn diadems, and the echoes of crumbling empires would furnish dreams to the Gaul in his oak forest, to the Ethiopian amid his sands. But there was a nation always ready to turn courage to account; and the robber driven from his tribe, the patricide wandering on the roads, the perpetrator of sacrilege pursued by the gods, all who were starving or in despair strove to reach the port where the Carthaginian broker was recruiting soldiers. Usually the Republic kept its promises. This time, however, the eagerness of its avarice had brought it into perilous disgrace. Numidians, Libyans, the whole of Africa was about to fall upon Carthage. Only the sea was open to it, and there it met with the Romans; so that, like a man assailed by murderers, it felt death all around it.

It was quite necessary to have recourse to Gisco, and the Barbarians accepted his intervention. One morning they saw the chains of the harbour lowered, and three flat-bottomed boats passing through the canal of Taenia entered the lake.

Gisco was visible on the first at the prow. Behind him rose an enormous chest, higher than a catafalque, and furnished with rings like hanging crowns. Then appeared the legion of interpreters, with their hair dressed like sphinxes, and with parrots tattooed on their breasts. Friends and slaves followed, all without arms, and in such numbers that they shouldered one another. The three long, dangerously-loaded barges advanced amid the shouts of the onlooking army.

As soon as Gisco disembarked the soldiers ran to him. He had a sort of tribune erected with knapsacks, and declared that he should not depart before he had paid them all in full.

There was an outburst of applause, and it was a long time before he was able to speak.

Then he censured the wrongs done to the Republic, and to the Barbarians; the fault lay with a few mutineers who had alarmed Carthage by their violence. The best proof of good intention on the part of the latter was that it was he, the eternal adversary of the Suffet Hanno, who was sent to them. They must not eternal adversary of the Suffet Hanno, who was sent to them. They must not credit the people with the folly of desiring to provoke brave men, nor with ingratitude enough not to recognise their services; and Gisco began to pay the soldiers, commencing with the Libyans. As they had declared that the lists were untruthful, he made no use of them.

They defiled before him according to nationality, opening their fingers to show the number of their years of service; they were marked in succession with green paint on the left arm; the scribes dipped into the yawning coffer, while others made holes with a style on a sheet of lead.

A man passed walking heavily like an ox.

"Come up beside me," said the Suffet, suspecting some fraud; "how many years have you served?"

"Twelve," replied the Libyan.

Gisco slipped his fingers under his chin, for the chin-piece of the helmet used in course of time to occasion two callosities there; these were called carobs, and "to have the carobs" was an expression used to denote a veteran.

"Thief!" exclaimed the Suffet, "your shoulders ought to have what your face lacks!" and tearing off his tunic he laid bare is back which was covered with a bleeding scab; he was a labourer from Hippo-Zarytus. Hootings were raised, and he was decapitated.

As soon as night fell, Spendius went and roused the Libyans, and said to them:

"When the Ligurians, Greeks, Balearians, and men of Italy are paid, they will return. But as for you, you will remain in Africa, scattered through your tribes, and without any means of defence! It will be then that the Republic will take its revenge! Mistrust the journey! Are you going to believe everything that is said? Both the Suffets are agreed, and this one is imposing on you! Remember the Island of Bones, and Xanthippus, whom they sent back to Sparta in a rotten galley!"

"How are we to proceed?" they asked.

"Reflect!" said Spendius.

The two following days were spent in paying the men of Magdala, Leptis, and Hecatompylos; Spendius went about among the Gauls.

"They are paying off the Libyans, and then they will discharge the Greeks, the Balearians, the Asiatics and all the rest! But you, who are few in number, will receive nothing! You will see your native lands no more! You will have no ships, and they will kill you to save your food!"

The Gauls came to the Suffet. Autaritus, he whom he had wounded at Hamilcar's palace, put questions to him, but was repelled by the slaves, and disappeared swearing he would be revenged.

disappeared swearing he would be revenged.

The demands and complaints multiplied. The most obstinate penetrated at night into the Suffet's tent; they took his hands and sought to move him by making him feel their toothless mouths, their wasted arms, and the scars of their wounds. Those who had not yet been paid were growing angry, those who had received the money demanded more for their horses; and vagabonds and outlaws assumed soldiers' arms and declared that they were being forgotten. Every minute there arrived whirlwinds of men, as it were; the tents strained and fell; the multitude, thick pressed between the ramparts of the camp, swayed with loud shouts from the gates to the centre. When the tumult grew excessively violent Gisco would rest one elbow on his ivory sceptre and stand motionless looking at the sea with his fingers buried in his beard.

Matho frequently went off to speak with Spendius; then he would again place himself in front of the Suffet, and Gisco could feel his eyes continually like two flaming phalaricas darted against him. Several times they hurled reproaches at each other over the heads of the crowd, but without making themselves heard. The distribution, meanwhile, continued, and the Suffet found expedients to remove every obstacle.

The Greeks tried to quibble about differences in currency, but he furnished them with such explanations that they retired without a murmur. The Negroes demanded white shells such as are used for trading in the interior of Africa, but when he offered to send to Carthage for them they accepted money like the rest.

But the Balearians had been promised something better, namely, women. The Suffet replied that a whole caravan of maidens was expected for them, but the journey was long and would require six moons more. When they were fat and well rubbed with benjamin they should be sent in ships to the ports of the Balearians.

Suddenly Zarxas, now handsome and vigorous, leaped like a mountebank upon the shoulders of his friends and cried:

"Have you reserved any of them for the corpses?" at the same time pointing to the gate of Khamon in Carthage.

The brass plates with which it was furnished from top to bottom shone in the sun's latest fires, and the Barbarians believed that they could discern on it a trail of blood. Every time that Gisco wished to speak their shouts began again. At last he descended with measured steps, and shut himself up in his tent.

When he left it at sunrise his interpreters, who used to sleep outside, did not stir; they lay on their backs with their eyes fixed, their tongues between their teeth, and their faces of a bluish colour. White mucus flowed from their nostrils, and their limbs were stiff, as if they had all been frozen by the cold during the night. Each had a little noose of rushes round his neck.

night. Each had a little noose of rushes round his neck.

From that time onward the rebellion was unchecked. The murder of the Balearians which had been recalled by Zarxas strengthened the distrust inspired by Spendius. They imagined that the Republic was always trying to deceive them. An end must be put to it! The interpreters should be dispensed with! Zarxas sang war songs with a sling around his head; Autaritus brandished his great sword; Spendius whispered a word to one or gave a dagger to another. The boldest endeavoured to pay themselves, while those who were less frenzied wished to have the distribution continued. No one now relinquished his arms, and the anger of all combined into a tumultuous hatred of Gisco.

Some got up beside him. So long as they vociferated abuse they were listened to with patience; but if they tried to utter the least word in his behalf they were immediately stoned, or their heads were cut off by a sabre-stroke from behind. The heap of knapsacks was redder than an altar.

They became terrible after their meal and when they had drunk wine! This was an enjoyment forbidden in the Punic armies under pain of death, and they raised their cups in the direction of Carthage in derision of its discipline. Then they returned to the slaves of the exchequer and again began to kill. The word "strike," though different in each language, was understood by all.

Gisco was well aware that he was being abandoned by his country; but in spite of its ingratitude he would not dishonour it. When they reminded him that they had been promised ships, he swore by Moloch to provide them himself at his own expense, and pulling off his necklace of blue stones he threw it into the crowd as the pledge of his oath.

Then the Africans claimed the corn in accordance with the engagements made by the Great Council. Gisco spread out the accounts of the Syssitia traced in violet pigment on sheep skins; and read out all that had entered Carthage month by month and day by day.

Suddenly he stopped with gaping eyes, as if he had just discovered his sentence of death among the figures.

The Ancients had, in fact, fraudulently reduced them, and the corn sold during the most calamitous period of the war was set down at so low a rate that, blindness apart, it was impossible to believe it.

"Speak!" they shouted. "Louder! Ah! he is trying to lie, the coward! Don't trust him."

For some time he hesitated. At last he resumed his task.

The soldiers, without suspecting that they were being deceived, accepted the accounts of the Syssitia as true. But the abundance that had prevailed at Carthage made them furiously jealous. They broke open the sycamore chest; it was three parts empty. They had seen such sums coming out of it, that they thought it inexhaustible; Gisco must have buried some in his tent. They scaled the knapsacks. Matho led them, and as they shouted "The money! the money!" Gisco at last replied:

"Let your general give it to you!"

He looked them in the face without speaking, with his great yellow eyes, and his long face that was paler than his beard. An arrow, held by its feathers, hung from the large gold ring in his ear, and a stream of blood was trickling from his tiara upon his shoulder.

At a gesture from Matho all advanced. Gisco held out his arms; Spendius tied his wrists with a slip knot; another knocked him down, and he disappeared amid the disorder of the crowd which was stumbling over the knapsacks.

They sacked his tent. Nothing was found in it except things indispensable to life; and, on a closer search, three images of Tanith, and, wrapped up in an ape's skin, a black stone which had fallen from the moon. Many Carthaginians had chosen to accompany him; they were eminent men, and all belonged to the war party.

They were dragged outside the tents and thrown into the pit used for the reception of filth. They were tied with iron chains around the body to solid stakes, and were offered food at the point of the javelin.

Autaritus overwhelmed them with invectives as he inspected them, but being quite ignorant of his language they made no reply; and the Gaul from time to time threw pebbles at their faces to make them cry out.

The next day a sort of languor took possession of the army. Now that their anger was over they were seized with anxiety. Matho was suffering from vague melancholy. It seemed to him that Salammbo had indirectly been insulted. These rich men were a kind of appendage to her person. He sat down in the night on the edge of the pit, and recognised in their groanings something of the voice of which his heart was full.

All, however, upbraided the Libyans, who alone had been paid. But while national antipathies revived, together with personal hatreds, it was felt that it would be perilous to give way to them. Reprisals after such an outrage would be formidable. It was necessary, therefore, to anticipate the vengeance of Carthage. Conventions and harangues never ceased. Every one spoke, no one was listened to; Spendius, usually so loquacious, shook his head at every proposal.

One evening he asked Matho carelessly whether there were not springs in the interior of the town.

"Not one!" replied Matho.

The next day Spendius drew him aside to the bank of the lake.

"Master!" said the former slave, "If your heart is dauntless, I will bring you into Carthage."

"How?" repeated the other, panting.

"Swear to execute all my commands and to follow me like a shadow!"

Then Matho, raising his arm towards the planet of Chabar, exclaimed:

"By Tanith, I swear!"

Spendius resumed:

"To-morrow after sunset you will wait for me at the foot of the aqueduct between the ninth and tenth arcades. Bring with you an iron pick, a crestless helmet, and leathern sandals."

The aqueduct of which he spoke crossed the entire isthmus obliquely, — a considerable work, afterwards enlarged by the Romans. In spite of her disdain of other nations, Carthage had awkwardly borrowed this novel invention from them, just as Rome herself had built Punic galleys; and five rows of superposed arches, of a dumpy kind of architecture, with buttresses at their foot and lions' heads at the top, reached to the western part of the Acropolis, where they sank beneath the town to incline what was nearly a river into the cisterns of Megara.

Spendius met Matho here at the hour agreed upon. He fastened a sort of harpoon to the end of a cord and whirled it rapidly like a sling; the iron instrument caught fast, and they began to climb up the wall, the one after the other.

But when they had ascended to the first story the cramp fell back every time that they threw it, and in order to discover some fissure they had to walk along the edge of the cornice. At every row of arches they found that it became narrower. Then the cord relaxed. Several times it nearly broke.

At last they reached the upper platform. Spendius stooped down from time to time to feel the stones with his hand.

"Here it is," he said; "let us begin!" And leaning on the pick which Matho had brought they succeeded in dislodging one of the flagstones.

In the distance they perceived a troop of horsemen galloping on horses without bridles. Their golden bracelets leaped in the vague drapings of their cloaks. A man could be seen in front crowned with ostrich feathers, and galloping with a lance in each hand.

"Narr' Havas!" exclaimed Matho.

"What matter?" returned Spendius, and he leaped into the hole which they had just made by removing the flagstone.

Matho at his command tried to thrust out one of the blocks. But he could not move his elbows for want of room.

"We shall return," said Spendius; "go in front." Then they ventured into the channel of water.

It reached to their waists. Soon they staggered, and were obliged to swim. Their limbs knocked against the walls of the narrow duct. The water flowed almost immediately beneath the stones above, and their faces were torn by them. Then the current carried them away. Their breasts were crushed with air heavier than that of a sepulchre, and stretching themselves out as much as possible with their heads between their arms and their legs close together, they passed like arrows into the darkness, choking, gurgling, and almost dead. Suddenly all became black before them, and the speed of the waters redoubled. They fell.

When they came to the surface again, they remained for a few minutes extended on their backs, inhaling the air delightfully. Arcades, one behind another, opened up amid large walls separating the various basins. All were filled, and the water stretched in a single sheet throughout the length of the cisterns. Through the air-holes in the cupolas on the ceiling there fell a pale brightness which spread upon the waves discs, as it were, of light, while the darkness round about thickened towards the walls and threw them back to an indefinite distance. The slightest sound made a great echo.

Spendius and Matho commenced to swim again, and passing through the opening of the arches, traversed several chambers in succession. Two other rows of smaller basins extended in a parallel direction on each side. They lost themselves; they turned, and came back again. At last something offered a resistance to their heels. It was the pavement of the gallery that ran along the cisterns.

Then, advancing with great precautions, they felt along the wall to find an outlet. But their feet slipped, and they fell into the great centre-basins. They had to climb up again, and there they fell again. They experienced terrible fatigue, which made them feel as if all their limbs had been dissolved in the water while swimming. Their eyes closed; they were in the agonies of death.

Spendius struck his hand against the bars of a grating. They shook it, it gave way, and they found themselves on the steps of a staircase. A door of bronze closed it above. With the point of a dagger they moved the bar, which was opened from without, and suddenly the pure open air surrounded them.

The night was filled with silence, and the sky seemed at an extraordinary height. Clusters of trees projected over the long lines of walls. The whole town was asleep. The fires of the outposts shone like lost stars.

Spendius, who had spent three years in the ergastulum, was but imperfectly acquainted with the different quarters. Matho conjectured that to reach Hamilcar's palace they ought to strike to the left and cross the Mappalian district.

"No," said Spendius, "take me to the temple of Tanith."

Matho wished to speak.

"Remember!" said the former slave, and raising his arm he showed him the glittering planet of Chabar.

Then Matho turned in silence towards the Acropolis.

They crept along the nopal hedges which bordered the paths. The water trickled from their limbs upon the dust. Their damp sandals made no noise; Spendius, with eyes that flamed more than torches, searched the bushes at every step; — and he walked behind Matho with his hands resting on the two daggers which he carried on his arms, and which hung from below the armpit by a leathern band.

CHAPTER V

TANITH

After leaving the gardens Matho and Spendius found themselves checked by the rampart of Megara. But they discovered a breach in the great wall and passed through.

The ground sloped downwards, forming a kind of very broad valley. It was an exposed place.

"Listen," said Spendius, "and first of all fear nothing! I shall fulfil my promise — "

He stopped abruptly, and seemed to reflect as though searching for words, — "Do you remember that time at sunrise when I showed Carthage to you on Salammbo's terrace? We were strong that day, but you would listen to nothing!" Then in a grave voice: "Master, in the sanctuary of Tanith there is a mysterious veil, which fell from heaven and which covers the goddess."

"I know," said Matho.

Spendius resumed: "It is itself divine, for it forms part of her. The gods reside where their images are. It is because Carthage possesses it that Carthage is powerful." Then leaning over to his ear: "I have brought you with me to carry it off!"

Matho recoiled in horror. "Begone! look for some one else! I will not help you in this execrable crime!"

"But Tanith is your enemy," retorted Spendius; "she is persecuting you and you are dying through her wrath. You will be revenged upon her. She will obey you, and you will become almost immortal and invincible."

Matho bent his head. Spendius continued:

"We should succumb; the army would be annihilated of itself. We have neither flight, nor succour, nor pardon to hope for! What chastisement from the gods can you be afraid of since you will have their power in your own hands? Would you rather die on the evening of a defeat, in misery beneath the shelter of a bush, or amid the outrages of the populace and the flames of funeral piles? Master, one day you will enter Carthage among the colleges of the pontiffs, who will kiss your sandals; and if the veil of Tanith weighs upon you still, you will reinstate it in its temple. Follow me! come and take it."

Matho was consumed by a terrible longing. He would have liked to possess the veil while refraining from the sacrilege. He said to himself that perhaps it would not be necessary to take it in order to monopolise its virtue. He did not go would not be necessary to take it in order to monopolise its virtue. He did not go to the bottom of his thought but stopped at the boundary, where it terrified him.

"Come on!" he said; and they went off with rapid strides, side by side, and without speaking.

The ground rose again, and the dwellings were near. They turned again into the narrow streets amid the darkness. The strips of esparto-grass with which the doors were closed, beat against the walls. Some camels were ruminating in a square before heaps of cut grass. Then they passed beneath a gallery covered with foliage. A pack of dogs were barking. But suddenly the space grew wider and they recognised the western face of the Acropolis. At the foot of Byrsa there stretched a long black mass: it was the temple of Tanith, a whole made up of monuments and galleries, courts and fore-courts, and bounded by a low wall of dry stones. Spendius and Matho leaped over it.

This first barrier enclosed a wood of plane-trees as a precaution against plague and infection in the air. Tents were scattered here and there, in which, during the daytime, depilatory pastes, perfumes, garments, moon-shaped cakes, and images of the goddess with representations of the temple hollowed out in blocks of alabaster, were on sale.

They had nothing to fear, for on nights when the planet did not appear, all rites were suspended; nevertheless Matho slackened his speed, and stopped before the three ebony steps leading to the second enclosure.

"Forward!" said Spendius.

Pomegranate, almond trees, cypresses and myrtles alternated in regular succession; the path, which was paved with blue pebbles, creaked beneath their footsteps, and full-blown roses formed a hanging bower over the whole length of the avenue. They arrived before an oval hole protected by a grating. Then Matho, who was frightened by the silence, said to Spendius:

"It is here that they mix the fresh water and the bitter."

"I have seen all that," returned the former slave, "in Syria, in the town of Maphug"; and they ascended into the third enclosure by a staircase of six silver steps.

A huge cedar occupied the centre. Its lowest branches were hidden beneath scraps of material and necklaces hung upon them by the faithful. They walked a few steps further on, and the front of the temple was displayed before them.

Two long porticoes, with their architraves resting on dumpy pillars, flanked a quadrangular tower, the platform of which was adorned with the crescent of a moon. On the angles of the porticoes and at the four corners of the tower stood vases filled with kindled aromatics. The capitals were laden with pomegranates and coloquintidas. Twining knots, lozenges, and rows of pearls alternated on the walls, and a hedge of silver filigree formed a wide semicircle in front of the brass staircase which led down from the vestibule.

There was a cone of stone at the entrance between a stela of gold and one of emerald, and Matho kissed his right hand as he passed beside it.

The first room was very lofty; its vaulted roof was pierced by numberless apertures, and if the head were raised the stars might be seen. All round the wall rush baskets were heaped up with the first fruits of adolescence in the shape of beards and curls of hair; and in the centre of the circular apartment the body of a woman issued from a sheath which was covered with breasts. Fat, bearded, and with eyelids downcast, she looked as though she were smiling, while her hands were crossed upon the lower part of her big body, which was polished by the kisses of the crowd.

Then they found themselves again in the open air in a transverse corridor, wherein there was an altar of small dimensions leaning against an ivory door. There was no further passage; the priests alone could open it; for the temple was not a place of meeting for the multitude, but the private abode of a divinity.

"The enterprise is impossible," said Matho. "You had not thought of this! Let us go back!" Spendius was examining the walls.

He wanted the veil, not because he had confidence in its virtue (Spendius believed only in the Oracle), but because he was persuaded that the Carthaginians would be greatly dismayed on seeing themselves deprived of it. They walked all round behind in order to find some outlet.

Aedicules of different shapes were visible beneath clusters of turpentine trees. Here and there rose a stone phallus, and large stags roamed peacefully about, spurning the fallen fir-cones with their cloven hoofs.

But they retraced their steps between two long galleries which ran parallel to each other. There were small open cells along their sides, and tabourines and cymbals hung against their cedar columns from top to bottom. Women were sleeping stretched on mats outside the cells. Their bodies were greasy with unguents, and exhaled an odour of spices and extinguished perfuming-pans; while they were so covered with tattooings, necklaces, rings, vermilion, and antimony that, but for the motion of their breasts, they might have been taken for idols as they lay thus on the ground. There were lotus-trees encircling a fountain in which fish like Salammbo's were swimming; and then in the background, against the wall of the temple, spread a vine, the branches of which were of glass and the grape-bunches of emerald, the rays from the precious stones making a play of light through the painted columns upon the sleeping faces.

Matho felt suffocated in the warm atmosphere pressed down upon him by the cedar partitions. All these symbols of fecundation, these perfumes, radiations, and breathings overwhelmed him. Through all the mystic dazzling he kept thinking of Salammbo. She became confused with the goddess herself, and his loved unfolded itself all the more, like the great lotus-plants blooming upon the depths of the waters.

Spendius was calculating how much money he would have made in former days by the sale of these women; and with a rapid glance he estimated the weight of the golden necklaces as he passed by.

The temple was impenetrable on this side as on the other, and they returned behind the first chamber. While Spendius was searching and ferreting, Matho was prostrate before the door supplicating Tanith. He besought her not to permit the sacrilege, and strove to soften her with caressing words, such as are used to an angry person.

Spendius noticed a narrow aperture above the door.

"Rise!" he said to Matho, and he made him stand erect with his back against the wall. Placing one foot in his hands, and then the other upon his head, he reached up to the air-hole, made his way into it and disappeared. Then Matho felt a knotted cord — that one which Spendius had rolled around his body before entering the cisterns — fall upon his shoulders, and bearing upon it with both hands he soon found himself by the side of the other in a large hall filled with shadow.

Such an attempt was something extraordinary. The inadequacy of the means for preventing it was a sufficient proof that it was considered impossible. The sanctuaries were protected by terror more than by their walls. Matho expected to die at every step.

However a light was flickering far back in the darkness, and they went up to it. It was a lamp burning in a shell on the pedestal of a statue which wore the cap of the Kabiri. Its long blue robe was strewn with diamond discs, and its heels were fastened to the ground by chains which sank beneath the pavement. Matho suppressed a cry. "Ah! there she is! there she is!" he stammered out. Spendius took up the lamp in order to light himself.

"What an impious man you are!" murmured Matho, following him nevertheless.

The apartment which they entered had nothing in it but a black painting representing another woman. Her legs reached to the top of the wall, and her body filled the entire ceiling; a huge egg hung by a thread from her navel, and she fell head downwards upon the other wall, reaching as far as the level of the pavement, which was touched by her pointed fingers.

They drew a hanging aside, in order to go on further; but the wind blew and the light went out.

Then they wandered about, lost in the complications of the architecture.

Suddenly they felt something strangely soft beneath their feet. Sparks crackled and leaped; they were walking in fire. Spendius touched the ground and perceived that it was carefully carpeted with lynx skins; then it seemed to them that a big cord, wet, cold, and viscous, was gliding between their legs. Through some fissures cut in the wall there fell thin white rays, and they advanced by this uncertain light. At last they distinguished a large black serpent. It darted quickly away and disappeared.

"Let us fly!" exclaimed Matho. "It is she! I feel her; she is coming."

"No, no," replied Spendius, "the temple is empty."

Then a dazzling light made them lower their eyes. Next they perceived all around them an infinite number of beasts, lean, panting, with bristling claws, and mingled together one above another in a mysterious and terrifying confusion. There were serpents with feet, and bulls with wings, fishes with human heads were devouring fruit, flowers were blooming in the jaws of crocodiles, and elephants with uplifted trunks were sailing proudly through the azure like eagles. Their incomplete or multiplied limbs were distended with terrible exertion. As they thrust out their tongues they looked as though they would fain give forth their souls; and every shape was to be found among them as if the germ-receptacle had been suddenly hatched and had burst, emptying itself upon the walls of the hall.

Round the latter were twelve globes of blue crystal, supported by monsters resembling tigers. Their eyeballs were starting out of their heads like those of snails, with their dumpy loins bent they were turning round towards the background where the supreme Rabbet, the Omnifecund, the last invented, shone splendid in a chariot of ivory.

She was covered with scales, feathers, flowers, and birds as high as the waist. For earrings she had silver cymbals, which flapped against her cheeks. Her large fixed eyes gazed upon you, and a luminous stone, set in an obscene symbol on her brow, lighted the whole hall by its reflection in red copper mirrors above the door.

Matho stood a step forward; but a flag stone yielded beneath his heels and immediately the spheres began to revolve and the monsters to roar; music rose melodious and pealing, like the harmony of the planets; the tumultuous soul of Tanith was poured streaming forth. She was about to arise, as lofty as the hall and with open arms. Suddenly the monsters closed their jaws and the crystal globes revolved no more.

Then a mournful modulation lingered for a time through the air and at last died away.

"And the veil?" said Spendius.

Nowhere could it be seen. Where was it to be found? How could it be discovered? What if the priests had hidden it? Matho experienced anguish of heart and felt as though he had been deceived in his belief.

"This way!" whispered Spendius. An inspiration guided him. He drew Matho behind Tanith's chariot, where a cleft a cubit wide ran down the wall from top to bottom.

Then they penetrated into a small and completely circular room, so lofty that it was like the interior of a pillar. In the centre there was a big black stone, of semispherical shape like a tabourine; flames were burning upon it; an ebony cone, bearing a head and two arms, rose behind.

But beyond it seemed as though there were a cloud wherein were twinkling stars; faces appeared in the depths of its folds — Eschmoun with the Kabiri, some of the monsters that had already been seen, the sacred beasts of the Babylonians, and others with which they were not acquainted. It passed beneath the idol's face like a mantle, and spread fully out was drawn up on the wall to which it was fastened by the corners, appearing at once bluish as the night, yellow as the dawn, purple as the sun, multitudinous, diaphanous, sparkling light. It was the mantle of the goddess, the holy zaimph which might not be seen.

Both turned pale.

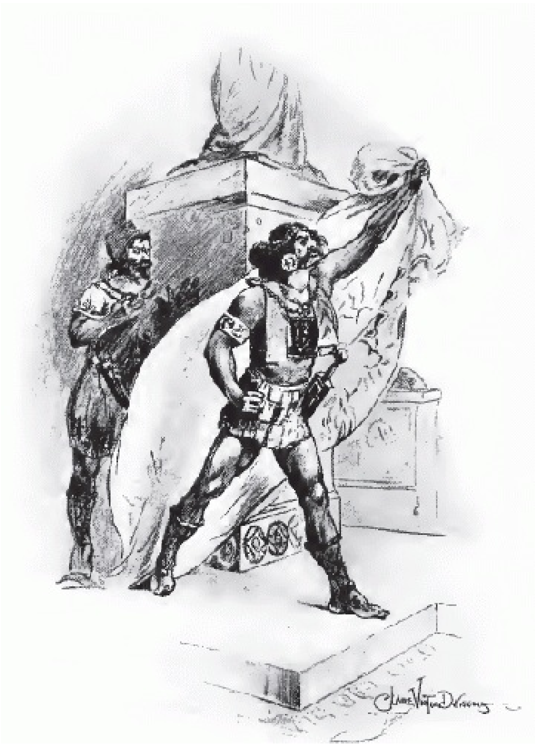
"Take it!" said Matho at last.

Spendius did not hesitate, and leaning upon the idol he unfastened the veil, which sank to the ground. Matho laid his hand upon it; then he put his head through the opening, then he wrapped it about his body, and he spread out his arms the better to view it.

"Let us go!" said Spendius.

Matho stood panting with his eyes fixed upon the pavement. Suddenly he exclaimed:

"But what if I went to her? I fear her beauty no longer! What could she do to me? I am now more than a man. I could pass through flames or walk upon the sea! I am transported! Salammbo! Salammbo! I am your master!"



His voice was like thunder. He seemed to Spendius to have grown taller and transformed.

A sound of footsteps drew near, a door opened, and a man appeared, a priest with lofty cap and staring eyes. Before he could make a gesture Spendius had rushed upon him, and clasping him in his arms had buried both his daggers in his sides. His head rang upon the pavement.

Then they stood for a while, as motionless as the corpse, listening. Nothing could be heard but the murmuring of the wind through the half-opened door.

The latter led into a narrow passage. Spendius advanced along it, Matho followed him, and they found themselves almost immediately in the third enclosure, between the lateral porticoes, in which were the dwellings of the priests.

Behind the cells there must be a shorter way out. They hastened along.

Spendius squatted down at the edge of the fountain and washed his bloodstained hands. The women slept. The emerald vine shone. They resumed their advance.

But something was running behind them under the trees; and Matho, who bore the veil, several times felt that it was being pulled very gently from below. It was a large cynocephalus, one of those which dwelt at liberty within the enclosure of the goddess. It clung to the mantle as though it had been conscious of the theft. They did not dare to strike it, however, fearing that it might redouble its cries; suddenly its anger subsided, and it trotted close beside them swinging its body with its long hanging arms. Then at the barrier it leaped at a bound into its body with its long hanging arms. Then at the barrier it leaped at a bound into a palm tree.

When they had left the last enclosure they directed their steps towards Hamilcar's palace, Spendius understanding that it would be useless to try to dissuade Matho.

They went by the street of the Tanners, the square of Muthumbal, the green market and the crossways of Cynasyn. At the angle of a wall a man drew back frightened by the sparkling thing which pierced the darkness.

"Hide the zaimph!" said Spendius.

Other people passed them, but without perceiving them.

At last they recognised the houses of Megara.

The pharos, which was built behind them on the summit of the cliff, lit up the heavens with a great red brightness, and the shadow of the palace, with its rising terraces, projected a monstrous pyramid, as it were, upon the gardens. They entered through the hedge of jujube-trees, beating down the branches with blows of the dagger.

The traces of the feast of the Mercenaries were everywhere still manifest. The parks were broken up, the trenches drained, the doors of the ergastulum open. No one was to be seen about the kitchens or cellars. They wondered at the silence, which was occasionally broken by the hoarse breathing of the elephants moving in their shackles, and the crepitation of the pharos, in which a pile of aloes was burning.

Matho, however, kept repeating:

"But where is she? I wish to see her! Lead me!"

"It is a piece of insanity!" Spendius kept saying. "She will call, her slaves will run up, and in spite of your strength you will die!"

They reached thus the galley staircase. Matho raised his head, and thought that he could perceive far above a vague brightness, radiant and soft. Spendius sought to restrain him, but he dashed up the steps.

As he found himself again in places where he had already seen her, the interval of the days that had passed was obliterated from his memory. But now had she been singing among the tables; she had disappeared, and he had since been continually ascending this staircase. The sky above his head was covered with fires; the sea filled the horizon; at each step he was surrounded by a still greater immensity, and he continued to climb upward with that strange facility which we experience in dreams.

The rustling of the veil as it brushed against the stones recalled his new power to him; but in the excess of his hope he could no longer tell what he was to do; this uncertainty alarmed him.

From time to time he would press his face against the quadrangular openings

From time to time he would press his face against the quadrangular openings in the closed apartments, and he thought that in several of the latter he could see persons asleep.

The last story, which was narrower, formed a sort of dado on the summit of the terraces. Matho walked round it slowly.

A milky light filled the sheets of talc which closed the little apertures in the wall, and in their symmetrical arrangement they looked in the darkness like rows of delicate pearls. He recognised the red door with the black cross. The throbbing of his heart increased. He would fain have fled. He pushed the door and it opened.

A galley-shaped lamp hung burning in the back part of the room, and three rays, emitted from its silver keel, trembled on the lofty wainscots, which were painted red with black bands. The ceiling was an assemblage of small beams, with amethysts and topazes amid their gilding in the knots of the wood. On both the great sides of the apartment there stretched a very low bed made with white leathern straps; while above, semicircles like shells, opened in the thickness of the wall, suffered a garment to come out and hang down to the ground.

There was an oval basin with a step of onyx round it; delicate slippers of serpent skin were standing on the edge, together with an alabaster flagon. The trace of a wet footstep might be seen beyond. Exquisite scents were evaporating.

Matho glided over the pavement, which was encrusted with gold, mother-of-pearl, and glass; and, in spite of the polished smoothness of the ground, it seemed to him that his feet sank as though he were walking on sand.

Behind the silver lamp he had perceived a large square of azure held in the air by four cords from above, and he advanced with loins bent and mouth open.

Flamingoes' wings, fitted on branches of black coral, lay about among purple cushions, tortoiseshell strigils, cedar boxes, and ivory spatulas. There were antelopes' horns with rings and bracelets strung upon them; and clay vases were cooling in the wind in the cleft of the wall with a lattice-work of reeds. Several times he struck his foot, for the ground had various levels of unequal height, which formed a succession of apartments, as it were, in the room. In the background there were silver balustrades surrounding a carpet strewn with painted flowers. At last he came to the hanging bed beside an ebony stool serving to get into it.

But the light ceased at the edge; — and the shadow, like a great curtain, revealed only a corner of the red mattress with the extremity of a little naked foot lying upon its ankle. Then Matho took up the lamp very gently.

She was sleeping with her cheek in one hand and with the other arm extended. Her ringlets were spread about her in such abundance that she appeared to be lying on black feathers, and her ample white tunic wound in soft appeared to be lying on black feathers, and her ample white tunic wound in soft draperies to her feet following the curves of her person. Her eyes were just visible beneath her half-closed eyelids. The curtains, which stretched perpendicularly, enveloped her in a bluish atmosphere, and the motion of her breathing, communicating itself to the cords, seemed to rock her in the air. A long mosquito was buzzing.

Matho stood motionless holding the silver lamp at arm's length; but on a sudden the mosquito-net caught fire and disappeared, and Salammbo awoke.

The fire had gone out of itself. She did not speak. The lamp caused great luminous moires to flicker on the wainscots.

"What is it?" she said.

He replied:

"'Tis the veil of the goddess!"

"The veil of the goddess!" cried Salammbo, and supporting herself on both clenched hands she leaned shuddering out. He resumed:

"I have been in the depths of the sanctuary to seek it for you! Look!" The Zaimph shone a mass of rays.

"Do you remember it?" said Matho. "You appeared at night in my dreams, but I did not guess the mute command of your eyes!" She put out one foot upon the ebony stool. "Had I understood I should have hastened hither, I should have forsaken the army, I should not have left Carthage. To obey you I would go down through the caverns of Hadrumetum into the kingdom of the shades! — Forgive me! it was as though mountains were weighing upon my days; and yet something drew me on! I tried to come to you! Should I ever have dared this without the Gods! — Let us go! You must follow me! or, if you do not wish to do so, I will remain. What matters it to me! — Drown my soul in your breath! Let my lips be crushed with kissing your hands!"

"Let me see it!" she said. "Nearer! nearer!"

Day was breaking, and the sheets of talc in the walls were filled with a vinous colour. Salammbo leaned fainting against the cushions of the bed.

"I love you!" cried Matho.

"Give it!" she stammered out, and they drew closer together.

She kept advancing, clothed in her white trailing simar, and with her large eyes fastened on the veil. Matho gazed at her, dazzled by the splendours of her head, and, holding out the zaimph towards her, was about to enfold her in an embrace. She was stretching out her arms. Suddenly she stopped, and they stood looking at each other, open-mouthed.

Then without understanding the meaning of his solicitation a horror seized upon her. Her delicate eyebrows rose, her lips opened; she trembled. At last she struck one of the brass pateras which hung at the corners of the red mattress.

crying:

"To the rescue! to the rescue! Back, sacrilegious man! infamous and accursed! Help, Taanach, Kroum, Ewa, Micipsa, Schaoul!"

And the scared face of Spendius, appearing in the wall between the clay flagons, cried out these words:

"Fly! they are hastening hither!"

A great tumult came upwards shaking the staircases, and a flood of people, women, serving-men, and slaves, rushed into the room with stakes, tomahawks, cutlasses, and daggers. They were nearly paralysed with indignation on perceiving a man; the female servants uttered funeral wailings, and the eunuchs grew pale beneath their black skins.

Matho was standing behind the balustrades. With the zaimph which was wrapped about him, he looked like a sidereal god surrounded by the firmament. The slaves were going to fall upon him, but she stopped them:

"Touch it not! It is the mantle of the goddess!"

She had drawn back into a corner; but she took a step towards him, and stretched forth her naked arm:

"A curse upon you, you who have plundered Tanith! Hatred, vengeance, massacre, and grief! May Gurzil, god of battles, rend you! may Mastiman, god of the dead, stifle you! and may the Other — he who may not be named — burn you!"

Matho uttered a cry as though he had received a sword-thrust. She repeated several times: "Begone! begone!"

The crowd of servants spread out, and Matho, with hanging head, passed slowly through the midst of them; but at the door he stopped, for the fringe of the zaimph had caught on one of the golden stars with which the flagstones were paved. He pulled it off abruptly with a movement of his shoulder and went down the staircases.

Spendius, bounding from terrace to terrace, and leaping over the hedges and trenches, had escaped from the gardens. He reached the foot of the pharos. The wall was discontinued at this spot, so inaccessible was the cliff. He advanced to the edge, lay down on his back, and let himself slide, feet foremost, down the whole length of it to the bottom; then by swimming he reached the Cape of the Tombs, made a wide circuit of the salt lagoon, and re-entered the camp of the Barbarians in the evening.

The sun had risen; and, like a retreating lion, Matho went down the paths, casting terrible glances about him.

A vague clamour reached his ears. It had started from the palace, and it was beginning afresh in the distance, towards the Acropolis. Some said that the treasure of the Republic had been seized in the temple of Moloch; others spoke of the assassination of a priest. It was thought, moreover, that the Barbarians had entered the city.

Matho, who did not know how to get out of the enclosures, walked straight before him. He was seen, and an outcry was raised. Every one understood; and there was consternation, then immense wrath.

From the bottom of the Mappalian quarter, from the heights of the Acropolis, from the catacombs, from the borders of the lake, the multitude came in haste. The patricians left their palaces, and the traders left their shops; the women forsook their children; swords, hatchets, and sticks were seized; but the obstacle which had stayed Salammbo stayed them. How could the veil be taken back? The mere sight of it was a crime; it was of the nature of the gods, and contact with it was death.

The despairing priests wrung their hands on the peristyles of the temples. The guards of the Legion galloped about at random; the people climbed upon the houses, the terraces, the shoulders of the colossuses, and the masts of the ships. He went on, nevertheless, and the rage, and the terror also, increased at each of his steps; the streets cleared at his approach, and the torrent of flying men streamed on both sides up to the tops of the walls. Everywhere he could perceive only eyes opened widely as if to devour him, chattering teeth and outstretched fists, and Salammbo's imprecations resounded many times renewed.

Suddenly a long arrow whizzed past, then another, and stones began to buzz about him; but the missiles, being badly aimed (for there was the dread of hitting the zaimph), passed over his head. Moreover, he made a shield of the veil, holding it to the right, to the left, before him and behind him; and they could devise no expedient. He quickened his steps more and more, advancing through the open streets. They were barred with cords, chariots, and snares; and all his windings brought him back again. At last he entered the square of Khamon where the Balearians had perished, and stopped, growing pale as one about to die. This time he was surely lost, and the multitude clapped their hands.

He ran up to the great gate, which was closed. It was very high, made throughout of heart of oak, with iron nails and sheathed with brass. Matho flung himself against it. The people stamped their feet with joy when they saw the impotence of his fury; then he took his sandal, spit upon it, and beat the immovable panels with it. The whole city howled. The veil was forgotten now, and they were about to crush him. Matho gazed with wide vacant eyes upon the crowd. His temples were throbbing with violence enough to stun him, and he felt a numbness as of intoxication creeping over him. Suddenly he caught sight of the long chain used in working the swinging of the gate. With a bound he grasped it, stiffening his arms, and making a buttress of his feet, and at last the huge leaves partly opened.

Then when he was outside he took the great zaimph from his neck, and raised it as high as possible above his head. The material, upborne by the sea breeze, shone in the sunlight with its colours, its gems, and the figures of its gods. Matho bore it thus across the whole plain as far as the soldiers' tents, and the people on the walls watched the fortune of Carthage depart.

CHAPTER VI

HANNO

"I ought to have carried her off!" Matho said in the evening to Spendius. "I should have seized her, and torn her from her house! No one would have dared to touch me!"

Spendius was not listening to him. Stretched on his back he was taking delicious rest beside a large jar filled with honey-coloured water, into which he would dip his head from time to time in order to drink more copiously.

Matho resumed:

"What is to be done? How can we re-enter Carthage?"

"I do not know," said Spendius.

Such impassibility exasperated Matho and he exclaimed:

"Why! the fault is yours! You carry me away, and then you forsake me, coward that you are! Why, pray, should I obey you? Do you think that you are my master? Ah! you prostituter, you slave, you son of a slave!" He ground his teeth and raised his broad hand above Spendius.

The Greek did not reply. An earthen lamp was burning gently against the tent-pole, where the zaimph shone amid the hanging panoply. Suddenly Matho put on his cothurni, buckled on his brazen jacket of mail, and took his helmet.

"Where are you going?" asked Spendius.

"I am returning! Let me alone! I will bring her back! And if they show themselves I will crush them like vipers! I will put her to death, Spendius! Yes," he repeated, "I will kill her! You shall see, I will kill her!"

But Spendius, who was listening eagerly, snatched up the zaimph abruptly and threw it into a corner, heaping up fleeces above it. A murmuring of voices was heard, torches gleamed, and Narr' Havas entered, followed by about twenty men.

They wore white woollen cloaks, long daggers, copper necklaces, wooden earrings, and boots of hyena skin; and standing on the threshold they leaned upon their lances like herdsmen resting themselves. Narr' Havas was the handsomest of all; his slender arms were bound with straps ornamented with pearls. The golden circlet which fastened his ample garment about his head held an ostrich feather which hung down behind his shoulder; his teeth were displayed in a continual smile; his eyes seemed sharpened like arrows, and there was something observant and airy about his whole demeanour.

He declared that he had come to join the Mercenaries, for the Republic had

He declared that he had come to join the Mercenaries, for the Republic had long been threatening his kingdom. Accordingly he was interested in assisting the Barbarians, and he might also be of service to them.

"I will provide you with elephants (my forests are full of them), wine, oil, barley, dates, pitch and sulphur for sieges, twenty thousand foot-soldiers and ten thousand horses. If I address myself to you, Matho, it is because the possession of the zaimph has made you chief man in the army. Moreover," he added, "we are old friends."

Matho, however, was looking at Spendius, who, seated on the sheep-skins, was listening, and giving little nods of assent the while. Narr' Havas continued speaking. He called the gods to witness he cursed Carthage. In his imprecations he broke a javelin. All his men uttered simultaneously a loud howl, and Matho, carried away by so much passion, exclaimed that he accepted the alliance.

A white bull and a black sheep, the symbols of day and night, were then brought, and their throats were cut on the edge of a ditch. When the latter was full of blood they dipped their arms into it. Then Narr' Havas spread out his hand upon Matho's breast, and Matho did the same to Narr' Havas. They repeated the stain upon the canvas of their tents. Afterwards they passed the night in eating, and the remaining portions of the meat were burnt together with the skin, bones, horns, and hoofs.

Matho had been greeted with great shouting when he had come back bearing the veil of the goddess; even those who were not of the Chanaanitish religion were made by their vague enthusiasm to feel the arrival of a genius. As to seizing the zaimph, no one thought of it, for the mysterious manner in which he had acquired it was sufficient in the minds of the Barbarians to justify its possession; such were the thoughts of the soldiers of the African race. The others, whose hatred was not of such long standing, did not know how to make up their minds. If they had had ships they would immediately have departed.

Spendius, Narr' Havas, and Matho despatched men to all the tribes on Punic soil.

Carthage was sapping the strength of these nations. She wrung exorbitant taxes from them, and arrears or even murmurings were punished with fetters, the axe, or the cross. It was necessary to cultivate whatever suited the Republic, and to furnish what she demanded; no one had the right of possessing a weapon; when villages rebelled the inhabitants were sold; governors were esteemed like wine-presses, according to the quantity which they succeeded in extracting. Then beyond the regions immediately subject to Carthage extended the allies roamed the Nomads, who might be let loose upon them. By this system the crops were always abundant, the studs skilfully managed, and the plantations superb.

The elder Cato, a master in the matters of tillage and slaves, was amazed at it ninety-two years later, and the death-cry which he repeated continually at Rome was but the exclamation of jealous greed.

During the last war the exactions had been increased, so that nearly all the towns of Libya had surrendered to Regulus. To punish them, a thousand talents, twenty thousand oxen, three hundred bags of gold dust, and considerable advances of grain had been exacted from them, and the chiefs of the tribes had been crucified or thrown to the lions.

Tunis especially execrated Carthage! Older than the metropolis, it could not forgive her her greatness, and it fronted her walls crouching in the mire on the water's edge like a venomous beast watching her. Transportation, massacres, and epidemics did not weaken it. It had assisted Archagathas, the son of Agathocles, and the Eaters of Uncleanness found arms there at once.

The couriers had not yet set out when universal rejoicing broke out in the provinces. Without waiting for anything they strangled the comptrollers of the houses and the functionaries of the Republic in the baths; they took the old weapons that had been concealed out of the caves; they forged swords with the iron of the ploughs; the children sharpened javelins at the doors, and the women gave their necklaces, rings, earrings, and everything that could be employed for the destruction of Carthage. Piles of lances were heaped up in the country towns like sheaves of maize. Cattle and money were sent off. Matho speedily paid the Mercenaries their arrears, and owing to this, which was Spendius's idea, he was appointed commander-in-chief — the schalishim of the Barbarians.

Reinforcements of men poured in at the same time. The aborigines appeared first, and were followed by the slaves from the country; caravans of Negroes were seized and armed, and merchants on their way to Carthage, despairing of any more certain profit, mingled with the Barbarians. Numerous bands were continually arriving. From the heights of the Acropolis the growing army might be seen.

But the guards of the Legion were posted as sentries on the platform of the aqueduct, and near them rose at intervals brazen vats, in which floods of asphalt were boiling. Below in the plain the great crowd stirred tumultuously. They were in a state of uncertainty, feeling the embarrassment with which Barbarians are always inspired when they meet with walls.

Utica and Hippo-Zarytus refused their alliance. Phoenician colonies like Carthage, they were self-governing, and always had clauses inserted in the treaties concluded by the Republic to distinguish them from the latter. Nevertheless they respected this strong sister of theirs who protected them, and they did not think that she could be vanquished by a mass of Barbarians; these would on the contrary be themselves exterminated. They desired to remain neutral and to live at peace.

But their position rendered them indispensable. Utica, at the foot of the gulf, was convenient for bringing assistance to Carthage from without. If Utica alone were taken, Hippo-Zarytus, six hours further distant along the coast, would take its place, and the metropolis, being revictualled in this way, would be impregnable.

Spendius wished the siege to be undertaken immediately. Narr' Havas was opposed to this: an advance should first be made upon the frontier. This was the opinion of the veterans, and of Matho himself, and it was decided that Spendius should go to attack Utica, and Matho Hippo-Zarytus, while in the third place the main body should rest on Tunis and occupy the plain of Carthage, Autaritus being in command. As to Narr' Havas, he was to return to his own kingdom to procure elephants and to scour the roads with his cavalry.

The women cried out loudly against this decision; they coveted the jewels of the Punic ladies. The Libyans also protested. They had been summoned against Carthage, and now they were going away from it! The soldiers departed almost alone. Matho commanded his own companions, together with the Iberians, Lusitanians, and the men of the West, and of the islands; all those who spoke Greek had asked for Spendius on account of his cleverness.

Great was the stupefaction when the army was seen suddenly in motion; it stretched along beneath the mountain of Ariana on the road to Utica beside the sea. A fragment remained before Tunis, the rest disappeared to re-appear on the other shore of the gulf on the outskirts of the woods in which they were lost.

They were perhaps eighty thousand men. The two Tyrian cities would offer no resistance, and they would return against Carthage. Already there was a considerable army attacking it from the base of the isthmus, and it would soon perish from famine, for it was impossible to live without the aid of the provinces, the citizens not paying contributions as they did at Rome. Carthage was wanting in political genius. Her eternal anxiety for gain prevented her from having the prudence which results from loftier ambitions. A galley anchored on the Libyan sands, it was with toil that she maintained her position. The nations roared like billows around her, and the slightest storm shook this formidable machine.

The treasury was exhausted by the Roman war and by all that had been squandered and lost in the bargaining with the Barbarians. Nevertheless soldiers must be had, and not a government would trust the Republic! Ptolemaeus had lately refused it two thousand talents. Moreover the rape of the veil disheartened them. Spendius had clearly foreseen this.

But the nation, feeling that it was hated, clasped its money and its gods to its heart, and its patriotism was sustained by the very constitution of its government.

First, the power rested with all, without any one being strong enough to engross it. Private debts were considered as public debts, men of Chanaanitish race had a monopoly of commerce, and by multiplying the profits of piracy with those of usury, by hard dealings in lands and slaves and with the poor, fortunes were sometimes made. These alone opened up all the magistracies, and although authority and money were perpetuated in the same families, people tolerated the oligarchy because they hoped ultimately to share in it.

The societies of merchants, in which the laws were elaborated, chose the inspectors of the exchequer, who on leaving office nominated the hundred members of the Council of the Ancients, themselves dependent on the Grand Assembly, or general gathering of all the rich. As to the two Suffets, the relics of the monarchy and the less than consuls, they were taken from distinct families on the same day. All kinds of enmities were contrived between them, so that they might mutually weaken each other. They could not deliberate concerning war, and when they were vanquished the Great Council crucified them.

The power of Carthage emanated, therefore, from the Syssitia, that is to say, from a large court in the centre of Malqua, at the place, it was said, where the first bark of Phoenician sailors had touched, the sea having retired a long way since then. It was a collection of little rooms of archaic architecture, built of palm trunks with corners of stone, and separated from one another so as to accommodate the various societies separately. The rich crowded there all day to discuss their own concerns and those of the government, from the procuring of pepper to the extermination of Rome. Thrice in a moon they would have their beds brought up to the lofty terrace running along the wall of the court, and they might be seen from below at table in the air, without cothurni or cloaks, with their diamond-covered fingers wandering over the dishes, and their large earrings hanging down among the flagons, — all fat and lusty, half-naked, smiling and eating beneath the blue sky, like great sharks sporting in the sea.

But just now they were unable to dissemble their anxiety; they were too pale for that. The crowd which waited for them at the gates escorted them to their palaces in order to obtain some news from them. As in times of pestilence, all the houses were shut; the streets would fill and suddenly clear again; people ascended the Acropolis or ran to the harbour, and the Great Council deliberated every night. At last the people were convened in the square of Khamon, and it was decided to leave the management of things to Hanno, the conqueror of Hecatompylos.

He was a true Carthaginian, devout, crafty, and pitiless towards the people of Africa. His revenues equalled those of the Barcas. No one had such experience in administrative affairs.

He decreed the enrolment of all healthy citizens, he placed catapults on the towers, he exacted exorbitant supplies of arms, he even ordered the construction of fourteen galleys which were not required, and he desired everything to be registered and carefully set down in writing. He had himself conveyed to the arsenal, the pharos, and the treasuries of the temples; his great litter was continually to be seen swinging from step to step as it ascended the staircases of the Acropolis. And then in his palace at night, being unable to sleep, he would yell out warlike manoeuvres in terrible tones so as to prepare himself for the fray.

In their extremity of terror all became brave. The rich ranged themselves in line along the Mappalian district at cockcrow, and tucking up their robes practised themselves in handling the pike. But for want of an instructor they had disputes about it. They would sit down breathless upon the tombs and then begin again. Several even dieted themselves. Some imagined that it was necessary to eat a great deal in order to acquire strength, while others who were inconvenienced by their corpulence weakened themselves with fasts in order to become thin.

Utica had already called several times upon Carthage for assistance; but Hanno would not set out until the engines of war had been supplied with the last screws. He lost three moons more in equipping the one hundred and twelve elephants that were lodged in the ramparts. They were the conquerors of Regulus; the people loved them; it was impossible to treat such old friends too well. Hanno had the brass plates which adorned their breasts recast, their tusks gilt, their towers enlarged, and caparisons, edged with very heavy fringes, cut out of the handsomest purple. Finally, as their drivers were called Indians (after the first ones, no doubt, who came from the Indies) he ordered them all to be costumed after the Indian fashion; that is to say, with white pads round their temples, and small drawers of byssus, which with their transverse folds looked like two valves of a shell applied to the hips.

The army under Autaritus still remained before Tunis. It was hidden behind a wall made with mud from the lake, and protected on the top by thorny brushwood. Some Negroes had planted tall sticks here and there bearing frightful faces, — human masks made with birds' feathers, and jackals' or serpents' heads, — which gaped towards the enemy for the purpose of terrifying him; and the Barbarians, reckoning themselves invincible through these means, danced, wrestled, and juggled, convinced that Carthage would perish before long. Any one but Hanno would easily have crushed such a multitude, hampered as it was with herds and women. Moreover, they knew nothing of drill, and Autaritus was so disheartened that he had ceased to require it.

They stepped aside when he passed by rolling his big blue eyes. Then on reaching the edge of the lake he would draw back his sealskin cloak, unfasten the cord which tied up his long red hair, and soak the latter in the water. He regretted that he had not deserted to the Romans along with the two thousand Gauls of the temple of Eryx.

Often the sun would suddenly lose his rays in the middle of the day. Then the gulf and the open sea would seem as motionless as molten lead. A cloud of brown dust stretching perpendicularly would speed whirling along; the palm trees would bend and the sky disappear, while stones would be heard rebounding on the animals' cruppers; and the Gaul, his lips glued against the holes in his tent, would gasp with exhaustion and melancholy. His thoughts would be of the scent of the pastures on autumn mornings, of snowflakes, or of the bellowing of the urus lost in the fog, and closing his eyelids he would in imagination behold the fires in long, straw-roofed cottages flickering on the marshes in the depths of the woods.

Others regretted their native lands as well as he, even though they might not be so far away. Indeed the Carthaginian captives could distinguish the velaria spread over the courtyards of their houses, beyond the gulf on the slopes of Byrsa. But sentries marched round them continually. They were all fastened to a common chain. Each one wore an iron carcanet, and the crowd was never weary of coming to gaze at them. The women would show their little children the handsome robes hanging in tatters on their wasted limbs.

Whenever Autaritus looked at Gisco he was seized with rage at the recollection of the insult that he had received, and he would have killed him but for the oath which he had taken to Narr' Havas. Then he would go back into his tent and drink a mixture of barley and cumin until he swooned away from intoxication, — to awake afterwards in broad daylight consumed with horrible thirst.

Matho, meanwhile, was besieging Hippo-Zarytus. But the town was protected by a lake, communicating with the sea. It had three lines of circumvallation, and upon the heights which surrounded it there extended a wall fortified with towers. He had never commanded in such an enterprise before. Moreover, he was beset with thoughts of Salammbo, and he raved in the delight of her beauty as in the sweetness of a vengeance that transported him with pride. He felt an acrid, frenzied, permanent want to see her again. He even thought of presenting himself as the bearer of a flag of truce, in the hope that once within Carthage he might make his way to her. Often he would cause the assault to be sounded and waiting for nothing rush upon the mole which it was sought to construct in the sea. He would snatch up the stones with his hands, overturn, strike, and deal sword-thrusts everywhere. The Barbarians would dash on pell-mell; the ladders sword-thrusts everywhere. The Barbarians would dash on pell-mell; the ladders would break with a loud crash, and masses of men would tumble into the water, causing it to fly up in red waves against the walls. Finally the tumult would subside, and the soldiers would retire to make a fresh beginning.

Matho would go and seat himself outside the tents, wipe his blood-splashed face with his arm, and gaze at the horizon in the direction of Carthage.

In front of him, among the olives, palms, myrtles and planes, stretched two broad ponds which met another lake, the outlines of which could not be seen. Behind one mountain other mountains reared themselves, and in the middle of the immense lake rose an island perfectly black and pyramidal in form. On the left, at the extremity of the gulf, were sand-heaps like arrested waves, large and pale, while the sea, flat as a pavement of lapis-lazuli, ascended by insensible degrees to the edge of the sky. The verdure of the country was lost in places beneath long sheets of yellow; carobs were shining like knobs of coral; vine branches drooped from the tops of the sycamores; the murmuring of the water could be heard; crested larks were hopping about, and the sun's latest fires gilded the carapaces of the tortoises as they came forth from the reeds to inhale the breeze.

Matho would heave deep sighs. He would lie flat on his face, with his nails buried in the soil, and weep; he felt wretched, paltry, forsaken. Never would he possess her, and he was unable even to take a town.

At night when alone in his tent he would gaze upon the zaimph. Of what use to him was this thing which belonged to the gods? — and doubt crept into the Barbarian's thoughts. Then, on the contrary, it would seem to him that the vesture of the goddess was depending from Salammbo, and that a portion of her soul hovered in it, subtler than a breath; and he would feel it, breathe it in, bury his face in it, and kiss it with sobs. He would cover his shoulders with it in order to delude himself that he was beside her.

Sometimes he would suddenly steal away, stride in the starlight over the sleeping soldiers as they lay wrapped in their cloaks, spring upon a horse on reaching the camp gates, and two hours later be at Utica in Spendius's tent.

At first he would speak of the siege, but his coming was only to ease his sorrow by talking about Salammbo. Spendius exhorted him to be prudent.

"Drive away these trifles from your soul, which is degraded by them! Formerly you were used to obey; now you command an army, and if Carthage is not conquered we shall at least be granted provinces. We shall become kings!"

But how was it that the possession of the zaimph did not give them the victory? According to Spendius they must wait.

Matho fancied that the veil affected people of Chanaanitish race exclusively, and, in his Barbarian-like subtlety, he said to himself: "The zaimph will and, in his Barbarian-like subtlety, he said to himself: "The Zaimph will accordingly do nothing for me, but since they have lost it, it will do nothing for them."

Afterwards a scruple troubled him. He was afraid of offending Moloch by worshipping Aptouknos, the god of the Libyans, and he timidly asked Spendius to which of the gods it would be advisable to sacrifice a man.

"Keep on sacrificing!" laughed Spendius.

Matho, who could not understand such indifference, suspected the Greek of having a genius of whom he did not speak.

All modes of worship, as well as all races, were to be met with in these armies of Barbarians, and consideration was had to the gods of others, for they too, inspired fear. Many mingled foreign practices with their native religion. It was to no purpose that they did not adore the stars; if a constellation were fatal or helpful, sacrifices were offered to it; an unknown amulet found by chance at a moment of peril became a divinity; or it might be a name and nothing more, which would be repeated without any attempt to understand its meaning. But after pillaging temples, and seeing numbers of nations and slaughters, many ultimately ceased to believe in anything but destiny and death; — and every evening these would fall asleep with the placidity of wild beasts. Spendius had spit upon the images of Jupiter Olympius; nevertheless he dreaded to speak aloud in the dark, nor did he fail every day to put on his right boot first.

He reared a long quadrangular terrace in front of Utica, but in proportion as it ascended the rampart was also heightened, and what was thrown down by the one side was almost immediately raised again by the other. Spendius took care of his men; he dreamed of plans and strove to recall the stratagems which he had heard described in his travels. But why did Narr' Havas not return? There was nothing but anxiety.

Hanno had at last concluded his preparations. One night when there was no moon he transported his elephants and soldiers on rafts across the Gulf of Carthage. Then they wheeled round the mountain of the Hot Springs so as to avoid Autaritus, and continued their march so slowly that instead of surprising the Barbarians in the morning, as the Suffet had calculated, they did not reach them until it was broad daylight on the third day.

Utica had on the east a plain which extended to the large lagoon of Carthage; behind it a valley ran at right angles between two low and abruptly terminated mountains; the Barbarians were encamped further to the left in such a way as to blockade the harbour; and they were sleeping in their tents (for on that day both sides were too weary to fight and were resting) when the Carthaginian army appeared at the turning of the hills.

Some camp followers furnished with slings were stationed at intervals on the

Some camp followers furnished with slings were stationed at intervals on the wings. The first line was formed of the guards of the Legion in golden scale-armour, mounted on their big horses, which were without mane, hair, or ears, and had silver horns in the middle of their foreheads to make them look like rhinoceroses. Between their squadrons were youths wearing small helmets and swinging an ashen javelin in each hand. The long files of the heavy infantry marched behind. All these traders had piled as many weapons upon their bodies as possible. Some might be seen carrying an axe, a lance, a club, and two swords all at once; others bristled with darts like porcupines, and their arms stood out from their cuirasses in sheets of horn or iron plates. At last the scaffoldings of the lofty engines appeared: carrobalistas, onagers, catapults and scorpions, rocking on chariots drawn by mules and quadrigas of oxen; and in proportion as the army drew out, the captains ran panting right and left to deliver commands, close up the files, and preserve the intervals. Such of the Ancients as held commands had come in purple cassocks, the magnificent fringes of which tangled in the white straps of their cothurni. Their faces, which were smeared all over with vermilion, shone beneath enormous helmets surmounted with images of the gods; and, as they had shields with ivory borders covered with precious stones, they might have been taken for suns passing over walls of brass.

But the Carthaginians manoeuvred so clumsily that the soldiers in derision urged them to sit down. They called out that they were just going to empty their big stomachs, to dust the gilding of their skin, and to give them iron to drink.

A strip of green cloth appeared at the top of the pole planted before Spendius's tent: it was the signal. The Carthaginian army replied to it with a great noise of trumpets, cymbals, flutes of asses' bones, and tympanums. The Barbarians had already leaped outside the palisades, and were facing their enemies within a javelin's throw of them.

A Balearic slinger took a step forward, put one of his clay bullets into his thong, and swung round his arm. An ivory shield was shivered, and the two armies mingled together.

The Greeks made the horses rear and fall back upon their masters by pricking their nostrils with the points of their lances. The slaves who were to hurl stones had picked such as were too big, and they accordingly fell close to them. The Punic foot-soldiers exposed the right side in cutting with their long swords. The Barbarians broke their lines; they slaughtered them freely; they stumbled over the dying and dead, quite blinded by the blood that spurted into their faces. The confused heap of pikes, helmets, cuirasses and swords turned round about, widening out and closing in with elastic contractions. The gaps increased more and more in the Carthaginian cohorts, the engines could not get out of the sand; and finally the Suffet's litter (his grand litter with crystal pendants), which from the beginning might have been seen tossing among the soldiers like a bark on the waves, suddenly foundered. He was no doubt dead. The Barbarians found themselves alone.

The dust around them fell and they were beginning to sing, when Hanno himself appeared on the top of an elephant. He sat bare-headed beneath a parasol of byssus which was carried by a Negro behind him. His necklace of blue plates flapped against the flowers on his black tunic; his huge arms were compressed within circles of diamonds, and with open mouth he brandished a pike of inordinate size, which spread out at the end like a lotus, and flashed more than a mirror. Immediately the earth shook, — and the Barbarians saw all the elephants of Carthage, with their gilt tusks and blue-painted ears, hastening up in single line, clothed with bronze and shaking the leathern towers which were placed above their scarlet caparisons, in each of which were three archers bending large bows.

The soldiers were barely in possession of their arms; they had taken up their positions at random. They were frozen with terror; they stood undecided.

Javelins, arrows, phalaricas, and masses of lead were already being showered down upon them from the towers. Some clung to the fringes of the caparisons in order to climb up, but their hands were struck off with cutlasses and they fell backwards upon the swords' points. The pikes were too weak and broke, and the elephants passed through the phalanxes like wild boars through tufts of grass; they plucked up the stakes of the camp with their trunks, and traversed it from one end to the other, overthrowing the tents with their breasts. All the Barbarians had fled. They were hiding themselves in the hills bordering the valley by which the Carthaginians had come.

The victorious Hanno presented himself before the gates of Utica. He had a trumpet sounded. The three Judges of the town appeared in the opening of the battlements on the summit of a tower.

But the people of Utica would not receive such well-armed guests. Hanno was furious. At last they consented to admit him with a feeble escort.

The streets were too narrow for the elephants. They had to be left outside.

As soon as the Suffet was in the town the principal men came to greet him. He had himself taken to the vapour baths, and called for his cooks.

Three hours afterwards he was still immersed in the oil of cinnamomum with which the basin had been filled; and while he bathed he ate flamingoes' tongues with honied poppy-seeds on a spread ox-hide. Beside him was his Greek physician, motionless, in a long yellow robe, directing the reheating of the bath from time to time, and two young boys leaned over the steps of the basin and rubbed his legs. But attention to his body did not check his love for the commonwealth, for he was dictating a letter to be sent to the Great Council, and as some prisoners had just been taken he was asking himself what terrible punishment could be devised.

"Stop!" said he to a slave who stood writing in the hollow of his hand. "Let some of them be brought to me! I wish to see them!"

And from the bottom of the hall, full of a whitish vapour on which the torches cast red spots, three Barbarians were thrust forward: a Samnite, a Spartan, and a Cappadocian.

"Proceed!" said Hanno.

"Rejoice, light of the Baals! your Suffet has exterminated the ravenous hounds! Blessings on the Republic! Give orders for prayers!" He perceived the captives and burst out laughing: "Ah! ha! my fine fellows of Sicca! You are not shouting so loudly to-day! It is I! Do you recognise me? And where are your swords? What really terrible fellows!" and he pretended to be desirous to hide himself as if he were afraid of them. "You demanded horses, women, estates, magistracies, no doubt, and priesthoods! Why not? Well, I will provide you with the estates, and such as you will never come out of! You shall be married to gibbets that are perfectly new! Your pay? it shall be melted in your mouths in leaden ingots! and I will put you into good and very exalted positions among the clouds, so as to bring you close to the eagles!"

The three long-haired and ragged Barbarians looked at him without understanding what he said. Wounded in the knees, they had been seized by having ropes thrown over them, and the ends of the great chains on their hands trailed upon the pavement. Hanno was indignant at their impassibility.

"On your knees! on your knees! jackals! dust! vermin! excrements! And they make no reply! Enough! be silent! Let them be flayed alive! No! presently!"

He was breathing like a hippopotamus and rolling his eyes. The perfumed oil overflowed beneath the mass of his body, and clinging to the scales on his skin, made it look pink in the light of the torches.

He resumed:

"For four days we suffered greatly from the sun. Some mules were lost in crossing the Macaras. In spite of their position, the extraordinary courage — Ah! Demonades! how I suffer! Have the bricks reheated, and let them be red-hot!"

A noise of rakes and furnaces was heard. The incense smoked more strongly in the large perfuming pans, and the shampooers, who were quite naked and were sweating like sponges, crushed a paste composed of wheat, sulphur, black wine, bitch's milk, myrrh, galbanum and storax upon his joints. He was consumed with incessant thirst, but the yellow-robed man did not yield to this inclination, and held out to him a golden cup in which viper broth was smoking.

"Drink!" said he, "that strength of sun-born serpents may penetrate into the marrow of your bones, and take courage, O reflection of the gods! You know, moreover, that a priest of Eschmoun watches those cruel stars round the Dog from which your malady is derived. They are growing pale like the spots on your skin, and you are not to die from them."

"Oh! yes, that is so, is it not?" repeated the Suffet, "I am not to die from them!" And his violaceous lips gave forth a breath more nauseous than the exhalation from a corpse. Two coals seemed to burn in the place of his eyes, which had lost their eyebrows; a mass of wrinkled skin hung over his forehead; both his ears stood out from his head and were beginning to increase in size; and the deep lines forming semicircles round his nostrils gave him a strange and terrifying appearance, the look of a wild beast. His unnatural voice was like a roar; he said:

"Perhaps you are right, Demonades. In fact there are many ulcers here which have closed. I feel robust. Here! look how I am eating!"

And less from greediness than from ostentation, and the desire to prove to himself that he was in good health, he cut into the forcemeats of cheese and marjoram, the boned fish, gourds, oysters with eggs, horse-radishes, truffles, and brochettes of small birds. As he looked at the prisoners he revelled in the imagination of their tortures. Nevertheless he remembered Sicca, and the rage caused by all his woes found vent in the abuse of these three men.

"Ah! traitors! ah! wretches! infamous, accursed creatures! And you outraged me! — me! the Suffet! Their services, the price of their blood, say they! Ah! yes! their blood! their blood!" Then speaking to himself: — "All shall perish! not one shall be sold! It would be better to bring them to Carthage! I should be seen — but doubtless, I have not brought chains enough? Write: Send me — How many of them are there? go and ask Muthumbal! Go! no pity! and let all their hands be cut off and brought to me in baskets!"

But strange cries at once hoarse and shrill penetrated into the hall above Hanno's voice and the rattling of the dishes that were being placed around him. They increased, and suddenly the furious trumpeting of the elephants burst forth as if the battle were beginning again. A great tumult was going on around the town.

The Carthaginians had not attempted to pursue the Barbarians. They had taken up their quarters at the foot of the walls with their baggage, mules, serving men, and all their train of satraps; and they made merry in their beautiful pearl-bordered tents, while the camp of the Mercenaries was now nothing but a heap of ruins in the plain. Spendius had recovered his courage. He dispatched Zarxas to Matho, scoured the woods, rallied his men (the losses had been inconsiderable), — and they were re-forming their lines enraged at having been conquered without a fight, when they discovered a vat of petroleum which had no doubt been abandoned by the Carthaginians. Then Spendius had some pigs carried off from the farms, smeared them with bitumen, set them on fire, and drove them towards Utica.

The elephants were terrified by the flames and fled. The ground sloped upwards, javelins were thrown at them, and they turned back; — and with great blows of ivory and trampling feet they ripped up the Carthaginians, stifled them, flattened them. The Barbarians descended the hill behind them; the Punic camp, which was without entrenchments was sacked at the first rush, and the Carthaginians were crushed against the gates, which were not opened through fear of the Mercenaries.

Day broke, and Matho's foot-soldiers were seen coming up from the west. At the same time horsemen appeared; they were Narr' Havas with his Numidians. Leaping ravines and bushes they ran down the fugitives like greyhounds pursuing hares. This change of fortune interrupted the Suffet. He called out to be assisted to leave the vapour bath.

The three captives were still before him. Then a Negro (the same who had carried his parasol in the battle) leaned over to his ear.

"Well?" replied the Suffet slowly. "Ah! kill them!" he added in an abrupt tone.

The Ethiopian drew a long dagger from his girdle and the three heads fell. One of them rebounded among the remains of the feast, and leaped into the basin, where it floated for some time with open mouth and staring eyes. The morning light entered through the chinks in the wall; the three bodies streamed with great bubbles like three fountains, and a sheet of blood flowed over the mosaics with their powdering of blue dust. The Suffet dipped his hand into this hot mire and rubbed his knees with it: it was a cure.

When evening had come he stole away from the town with his escort, and made his way into the mountain to rejoin his army.

He succeeded in finding the remains of it.

Four days afterward he was on the top of a defile at Gorza, when the troops under Spendius appeared below. Twenty stout lances might easily have checked them by attacking the head of their column, but the Carthaginians watched them pass by in a state of stupefaction. Hanno recognised the king of the Numidians in the rearguard; Narr' Havas bowed to him, at the same time making a sign which he did not understand.

The return to Carthage took place amid all kinds of terrors. They marched only at night, hiding in the olive woods during the day. There were deaths at every halting-place; several times they believed themselves lost. At last they reached Cape Hermaeum, where vessels came to receive them.

Hanno was so fatigued, so desperate — the loss of the elephants in particular overwhelmed him — that he demanded poison from Demonades in order to put an end to it all. Moreover he could already feel himself stretched upon the cross.

Carthage had not strength enough to be indignant with him. Its losses had amounted to one hundred thousand nine hundred and seventy-two shekels of silver, fifteen thousand six hundred and twenty-three shekels of gold, eighteen elephants, fourteen members of the Great Council, three hundred of the rich, eight thousand citizens, corn enough for three moons, a considerable quantity of baggage, and all the engines of war! The defection of Narr' Havas was certain, and both sieges were beginning again. The army under Autaritus now extended from Tunis to Rhades. From the top of the Acropolis long columns of smoke might be seen in the country ascending to the sky; they were the mansions of the rich, which were on fire.

One man alone could have saved the Republic. People repented that they had slighted him, and the peace party itself voted holocausts for Hamilcar's return.

The sight of the zaimph had upset Salammbo. At night she thought that she could hear the footsteps of the goddess, and she would awake terrified and shrieking. Every day she sent food to the temples. Taanach was worn out with executing her orders, and Schahabarim never left her.

CHAPTER VII

HAMILCAR BARCA

The Announcer of the Moons, who watched on the summit of the temple of Eschmoun every night in order to signal the disturbances of the planet with his trumpet, one morning perceived towards the west something like a bird skimming the surface of the sea with its long wings.

It was a ship with three tiers of oars and with a horse carved on the prow. The sun was rising; the Announcer of the Moons put up his hand before his eyes, and then grasping his clarion with outstretched arms sounded a loud brazen cry over Carthage.

People came out of every house; they would not believe what was said; they disputed with one another; the mole was covered with people. At last they recognised Hamilcar's trireme.

It advanced in fierce and haughty fashion, cleaving the foam around it, the lateen-yard quite square and the sail bulging down the whole length of the mast; its gigantic oars kept time as they beat the water; every now and then the extremity of the keel, which was shaped like a ploughshare, would appear, and the ivory-headed horse, rearing both its feet beneath the spur which terminated the prow, would seem to be speeding over the plains of the sea.

As it rounded the promontory the wind ceased, the sail fell, and a man was seen standing bareheaded beside the pilot. It was he, Hamilcar, the Suffet! About his sides he wore gleaming sheets of steel; a red cloak, fastened to his shoulders, left his arms visible; two pearls of great length hung from his ears, and his black, bushy beard rested on his breast.

The galley, however, tossing amid the rocks, was proceeding along the side of the mole, and the crowd followed it on the flag-stones, shouting:

"Greeting! blessing! Eye of Khamon! ah! deliver us! 'Tis the fault of the rich! they want to put you to death! Take care of yourself, Barca!"

He made no reply, as if the loud clamour of oceans and battles had completely deafened him. But when he was below the staircase leading down from the Acropolis, Hamilcar raised his head, and looked with folded arms upon the temple of Eschmoun. His gaze mounted higher still, to the great pure sky; he shouted an order in a harsh voice to his sailors; the trireme leaped forward; it grazed the idol set up at the corner of the mole to stay the storms; and in the merchant harbour, which was full of filth, fragments of wood, and rinds of fruit, it pushed aside and crushed against the other ships moored to stakes and it pushed aside and crushed against the other ships moored to stakes and terminating in crocodiles' jaws. The people hastened thither, and some threw themselves into the water to swim to it. It was already at the very end before the gate which bristled with nails. The gate rose, and the trireme disappeared beneath the deep arch.

The Military Harbour was completely separated from the town; when ambassadors arrived, they had to proceed between two walls through a passage which had its outlet on the left in front of the temple of Khamon. This great expanse of water was as round as a cup, and was bordered with quays on which sheds were built for sheltering the ships. Before each of these rose two pillars bearing the horns of Ammon on their capitals and forming continuous porticoes all round the basin. On an island in the centre stood a house for the marine Suffet.

The water was so limpid that the bottom was visible with its paving of white pebbles. The noise of the streets did not reach so far, and Hamilcar as he passed recognised the triremes which he had formerly commanded.

Not more than twenty perhaps remained, under shelter on the land, leaning over on their sides or standing upright on their keels, with lofty poops and swelling prows, and covered with gildings and mystic symbols. The chimaeras had lost their wings, the Pataec Gods their arms, the bulls their silver horns; — and half-painted, motionless, and rotten as they were, yet full of associations, and still emitting the scent of voyages, they all seemed to say to him, like mutilated soldiers on seeing their master again, "'Tis we! 'tis we! and YOU too are vanquished!"

No one excepting the marine Suffet might enter the admiral's house. So long as there was no proof of his death he was considered as still in existence. In this way the Ancients avoided a master the more, and they had not failed to comply with the custom in respect to Hamilcar.

The Suffet proceeded into the deserted apartments. At every step he recognised armour and furniture — familiar objects which nevertheless astonished him, and in a perfuming-pan in the vestibule there even remained the ashes of the perfumes that had been kindled at his departure for the conjuration of Melkarth. It was not thus that he had hoped to return. Everything that he had done, everything that he had seen, unfolded itself in his memory: assaults, conflagrations, legions, tempests, Drepanum, Syracuse, Lilybaeum, Mount Etna, the plateau of Eryx, five years of battles, — until the fatal day when arms had been laid down and Sicily had been lost. Then he once more saw the woods of citron-trees, and herdsmen with their goats on grey mountains; and his heart leaped at the thought of the establishment of another Carthage down yonder. His projects and his recollections buzzed through his head, which was still dizzy from the pitching of the vessel; he was overwhelmed with anguish, and, becoming suddenly weak, he felt the necessity of drawing near to the gods.

Then he went up to the highest story of his house, and taking a nail-studded staple from a golden shell, which hung on his arm, he opened a small oval chamber.

It was softly lighted by means of delicate black discs let into the wall and as transparent as glass. Between the rows of these equal discs, holes, like those for the urns in columbaria, were hollowed out. Each of them contained a round dark stone, which appeared to be very heavy. Only people of superior understanding honoured these abaddirs, which had fallen from the moon. By their fall they denoted the stars, the sky, and fire; by their colour dark night, and by their density the cohesion of terrestrial things. A stifling atmosphere filled this mystic place. The round stones lying in the niches were whitened somewhat with sea-sand which the wind had no doubt driven through the door. Hamilcar counted them one after another with the tip of his finger; then he hid his face in a saffron-coloured veil, and, falling on his knees, stretched himself on the ground with both arms extended.

The daylight outside was beginning to strike on the folding shutters of black lattice-work. Arborescences, hillocks, eddies, and ill-defined animals appeared in their diaphanous thickness; and the light came terrifying and yet peaceful as it must be behind the sun in the dull spaces of future creations. He strove to banish from his thoughts all forms, and all symbols and appellations of the gods, that he might the better apprehend the immutable spirit which outward appearances took away. Something of the planetary vitalities penetrated him, and he felt withal a wiser and more intimate scorn of death and of every accident. When he rose he was filled with serene fearlessness and was proof against pity or dread, and as his chest was choking he went to the top of the tower which overlooked Carthage.

The town sank downwards in a long hollow curve, with its cupolas, its temples, its golden roofs, its houses, its clusters of palm trees here and there, and its glass balls with streaming rays, while the ramparts formed, as it were, the gigantic border of this horn of plenty which poured itself out before him. Far below he could see the harbours, the squares, the interiors of the courts, the plan of the streets, and the people, who seemed very small and but little above the level of the pavement. Ah! if Hanno had not arrived too late on the morning of the Aegatian islands! He fastened his eyes on the extreme horizon and stretched forth his quivering arms in the direction of Rome.

The steps of the Acropolis were occupied by the multitude. In the square of Khamon the people were pressing forwards to see the Suffet come out, and the terraces were gradually being loaded with people; a few recognised him, and he was saluted; but he retired in order the better to excite the impatience of the people.

Hamilcar found the most important men of his party below in the hall: Istatten, Subeldia, Hictamon, Yeoubas and others. They related to him all that had taken place since the conclusion of the peace: the greed of the Ancients, the departure of the soldiers, their return, their demands, the capture of Gisco, the theft of the zaimph, the relief and subsequent abandonment of Utica; but no one ventured to tell him of the events which concerned himself. At last they separated, to meet again during the night at the assembly of the Ancients in the temple of Moloch.

They had just gone out when a tumult arose outside the door. Some one was trying to enter in spite of the servants; and as the disturbance was increasing Hamilcar ordered the stranger to be shown in.

An old Negress made her appearance, broken, wrinkled, trembling, stupid-looking, wrapped to the heels in ample blue veils. She advanced face to face with the Suffet, and they looked at each other for some time; suddenly Hamilcar started; at a wave of his hand the slaves withdrew. Then, signing to her to walk with precaution, he drew her by the arm into a remote apartment.

The Negress threw herself upon the floor to kiss his feet; he raised her brutally.

"Where have you left him, Iddibal?"

"Down there, Master;" and extricating herself from her veils, she rubbed her face with her sleeve; the black colour, the senile trembling, the bent figure disappeared, and there remained a strong old man whose skin seemed tanned by sand, wind, and sea. A tuft of white hair rose on his skull like the crest of a bird; and he indicated his disguise, as it lay on the ground, with an ironic glance.

"You have done well, Iddibal! 'Tis well!" Then piercing him, as it were, with his keen gaze: "No one yet suspects?"

The old man swore to him by the Kabiri that the mystery had been kept. They never left their cottage, which was three days' journey from Hadrumetum, on a shore peopled with turtles, and with palms on the dune. "And in accordance with your command, O Master! I teach him to hurl the javelin and to drive a team."

"He is strong, is he not?"

"Yes, Master, and intrepid as well! He has no fear of serpents, or thunder, or phantoms. He runs bare-footed like a herdsman along the brinks of precipices."

"Speak! speak!"

"He invents snares for wild beasts. Would you believe it, that last moon he surprised an eagle; he dragged it away, and the bird's blood and the child's were scattered in the air in large drops like driven roses. The animal in its fury enwrapped him in the beating of its wings; he strained it against his breast, and as it died his laughter increased, piercing and proud like the clashing of swords."

Hamilcar bent his head, dazzled by such presages of greatness.

"But he has been for some time restless and disturbed. He gazes at the sails passing far out at sea; he is melancholy, he rejects bread, he inquires about the gods, and he wishes to become acquainted with Carthage."

"No, no! not yet!" exclaimed the Suffet.

The old slave seemed to understand the peril which alarmed Hamilcar, and he resumed:

"How is he to be restrained? Already I am obliged to make him promises, and I have come to Carthage only to buy him a dagger with a silver handle and pearls all around it." Then he told how, having perceived the Suffet on the terrace, he had passed himself off on the warders of the harbour as one of Salammbo's women, so as to make his way in to him.

Hamilcar remained for a long time apparently lost in deliberation; at last he said:

"To-morrow you will present yourself at sunset behind the purple factories in Megara, and imitate a jackal's cry three times. If you do not see me, you will return to Carthage on the first day of every moon. Forget nothing! Love him! You may speak to him now about Hamilcar."

The slave resumed his costume, and they left the house and the harbour together.

Hamilcar went on his way alone on foot and without an escort, for the meetings of the Ancients were, under extraordinary circumstances, always secret, and were resorted to mysteriously.

At first he went along the western front of the Acropolis, and then passed through the Green Market, the galleries of Kinisdo, and the Perfumers' suburb. The scattered lights were being extinguished, the broader streets grew still, then shadows glided through the darkness. They followed him, others appeared, and like him they all directed their course towards the Mappalian district.

The temple of Moloch was built at the foot of a steep defile in a sinister spot. From below nothing could be seen but lofty walls rising indefinitely like those of a monstrous tomb. The night was gloomy, a greyish fog seemed to weigh upon the sea, which beat against the cliff with a noise as of death-rattles and sobs; and the shadows gradually vanished as if they had passed through the walls.

But as soon as the doorway was crossed one found oneself in a vast quadrangular court bordered by arcades. In the centre rose a mass of architecture with eight equal faces. It was surmounted by cupolas which thronged around a second story supporting a kind of rotunda, from which sprang a cone with a re-entrant curve and terminating in a ball on the summit.

Fires were burning in cylinders of filigree-work fitted upon poles, which men were carrying to and fro. These lights flickered in the gusts of wind and reddened the golden combs which fastened their plaited hair on the nape of the neck. They ran about calling to one another to receive the Ancients.

Here and there on the flag-stones huge lions were couched like sphinxes, living symbols of the devouring sun. They were slumbering with half-closed eyelids. But roused by the footsteps and voices they rose slowly, came towards the Ancients, whom they recognised by their dress, and rubbed themselves against their thighs, arching their backs with sonorous yawns; the vapour of their breath passed across the light of the torches. The stir increased, doors closed, all the priests fled, and the Ancients disappeared beneath the columns which formed a deep vestibule round the temple.

These columns were arranged in such a way that their circular ranks, which were contained one within another, showed the Saturnian period with its years, the years with their months, and the months with their days, and finally reached to the walls of the sanctuary.

Here it was that the Ancients laid aside their sticks of narwhal's-horn, — for a law which was always observed inflicted the punishment of death upon any one entering the meeting with any kind of weapon. Several wore a rent repaired with a strip of purple at the bottom of their garment, to show that they had not been economical in their dress when mourning for their relatives, and this testimony to their affliction prevented the slit from growing larger. Others had their beards inclosed in little bags of violet skin, and fastened to their ears by two cords. They all accosted one another by embracing breast to breast. They surrounded Hamilcar with congratulations; they might have been taken for brothers meeting their brother again.

These men were generally thick-set, with curved noses like those of the Assyrian colossi. In a few, however, the more prominent cheek-bone, the taller figure, and the narrower foot, betrayed an African origin and nomad ancestors. Those who lived continually shut up in their counting-houses had pale faces; others showed in theirs the severity of the desert, and strange jewels sparkled on all the fingers of their hands, which were burnt by unknown suns. The navigators might be distinguished by their rolling gait, while the men of agriculture smelt of the wine-press, dried herbs, and the sweat of mules. These old pirates had lands under tillage, these money-grubbers would fit out ships, these proprietors of cultivated lands supported slaves who followed trades. All were skilled in religious discipline, expert in strategy, pitiless and rich. They looked wearied of prolonged cares. Their flaming eyes expressed distrust, and their habits of travelling and lying, trafficking and commanding, gave an appearance of cunning and violence, a sort of discreet and convulsive brutality to their whole demeanour. Further, the influence of the god cast a gloom upon them.

They first passed through a vaulted hall which was shaped like an egg. Seven doors, corresponding to the seven planets, displayed seven squares of different colours against the wall. After traversing a long room they entered another similar hall.

A candelabrum completely covered with chiselled flowers was burning at the far end, and each of its eight golden branches bore a wick of byssus in a diamond chalice. It was placed upon the last of the long steps leading to a great altar, the corners of which terminated in horns of brass. Two lateral staircases led to its flattened summit; the stones of it could not be seen; it was like a mountain of heaped cinders, and something indistinct was slowly smoking at the top of it. Then further back, higher than the candelabrum, and much higher than the altar, rose the Moloch, all of iron, and with gaping apertures in his human breast. His outspread wings were stretched upon the wall, his tapering hands reached down to the ground; three black stones bordered by yellow circles represented three eyeballs on his brow, and his bull's head was raised with a terrible effort as if in order to bellow.

Ebony stools were ranged round the apartment. Behind each of them was a bronze shaft resting on three claws and supporting a torch. All these lights were reflected in the mother-of-pearl lozenges which formed the pavement of the hall. So lofty was the latter that the red colour of the walls grew black as it rose towards the vaulted roof, and the three eyes of the idol appeared far above like stars half lost in the night.

The Ancients sat down on the ebony stools after putting the trains of their robes over their heads. They remained motionless with their hands crossed inside their broad sleeves, and the mother-of-pearl pavement seemed like a luminous river streaming from the altar to the door and flowing beneath their naked feet.

The four pontiffs had their places in the centre, sitting back to back on four ivory seats which formed a cross, the high-priest of Eschmoun in a hyacinth robe, the high-priest of Tanith in a white linen robe, the high-priest of Khamon in a tawny woollen robe, and the high-priest of Moloch in a purple robe.

Hamilcar advanced towards the candelabrum. He walked all round it, looking at the burning wicks; then he threw a scented powder upon them, and violet flames appeared at the extremities of the branches.

Then a shrill voice rose; another replied to it, and the hundred Ancients, the four pontiffs, and Hamilcar, who remained standing, simultaneously intoned a hymn, and their voices ever repeating the same syllables and strengthening hymn, and their voices — ever repeating the same syllables and strengthening the sounds — rose, grew loud, became terrible, and then suddenly were still.

There was a pause for some time. At last Hamilcar drew from his breast a little three-headed statuette, as blue as sapphire, and placed it before him. It was the image of Truth, the very genius of his speech. Then he replaced it in his bosom, and all, as if seized with sudden wrath, cried out:

"They are good friends of yours, are the Barbarians! Infamous traitor! You come back to see us perish, do you not? Let him speak! — No! no!"

They were taking their revenge for the constraint to which political ceremonial had just obliged them; and even though they had wished for Hamilcar's return, they were now indignant that he had not anticipated their disasters, or rather that he had not endured them as well as they.

When the tumult had subsided, the pontiff of Moloch rose:

"We ask you why you did not return to Carthage?"

"What is that to you?" replied the Suffet disdainfully.

Their shouts were redoubled.

"Of what do you accuse me? I managed the war badly, perhaps! You have seen how I order my battles, you who conveniently allow Barbarians — "

"Enough! enough!"

He went on in a low voice so as to make himself the better listened to:

"Oh! that is true! I am wrong, lights of the Baals; there are intrepid men among you! Gisco, rise!" And surveying the step of the altar with half-closed eyelids, as if he sought for some one, he repeated:

"Rise, Gisco! You can accuse me; they will protect you! But where is he?" Then, as if he remembered himself: "Ah! in his house, no doubt! surrounded by his sons, commanding his slaves, happy, and counting on the wall the necklaces of honour which his country has given to him!"

They moved about raising their shoulders as if they were being scourged with thongs. "You do not even know whether he is living or dead!" And without giving any heed to their clamours he said that in deserting the Suffet they had deserted the Republic. So, too, the peace with Rome, however advantageous it might appear to them, was more fatal than twenty battles. A few — those who were the least rich of the Council and were suspected of perpetual leanings towards the people or towards tyranny — applauded. Their opponents, chiefs of the Syssitia and administrators, triumphed over them in point of numbers; and the more eminent of them had ranged themselves close to Hanno, who was sitting at the other end of the hall before the lofty door, which was closed by a hanging of hyacinth colour.

He had covered the ulcers on his face with paint. But the gold dust in his hair had fallen upon his shoulders, where it formed two brilliant sheets, so that his had fallen upon his shoulders, where it formed two brilliant sheets, so that his hair appeared whitish, fine, and frizzled like wool. His hands were enveloped in linen soaked in a greasy perfume, which dripped upon the pavement, and his disease had no doubt considerably increased, for his eyes were hidden beneath the folds of his eyelids. He had thrown back his head in order to see. His partisans urged him to speak. At last in a hoarse and hideous voice he said:

"Less arrogance, Barca! We have all been vanquished! Each one supports his own misfortune! Be resigned!"

"Tell us rather," said Hamilcar, smiling, "how it was that you steered your galleys into the Roman fleet?"

"I was driven by the wind," replied Hanno.

"You are like a rhinoceros trampling on his dung: you are displaying your own folly! be silent!" And they began to indulge in recriminations respecting the battle of the Aegatian islands.

Hanno accused him of not having come to meet him.

"But that would have left Eryx undefended. You ought to have stood out from the coast; what prevented you? Ah! I forgot! all elephants are afraid of the sea!"

Hamilcar's followers thought this jest so good that they burst out into loud laughter. The vault rang with it like the beating of tympanums.

Hanno denounced the unworthiness of such an insult; the disease had come upon him from a cold taken at the siege of Hecatompylos, and tears flowed down his face like winter rain on a ruined wall.

Hamilcar resumed:

"If you had loved me as much as him there would be great joy in Carthage now! How many times did I not call upon you! and you always refused me money!"

"We had need of it," said the chiefs of the Syssitia.

"And when things were desperate with me — we drank mules' urine and ate the straps of our sandals; when I would fain have had the blades of grass soldiers and made battalions with the rottenness of our dead, you recalled the vessels that I had left!"

"We could not risk everything," replied Baat-Baal, who possessed gold mines in Darytian Gaetulia.

"But what did you do here, at Carthage, in your houses, behind your walls? There are Gauls on the Eridanus, who ought to have been roused, Chanaanites at Cyrene who would have come, and while the Romans send ambassadors to Ptolemaeus — "

"Now he is extolling the Romans to us!" Some one shouted out to him: "How much have they paid you to defend them?"

"Ask that of the plains of Brutium, of the ruins of Locri, of Metapontum, and

"Ask that of the plains of Bruttium, of the ruins of Locri, of Metapontum, and of Heraclea! I have burnt all their trees, I have pillaged all their temples, and even to the death of their grandchildren's grandchildren — "

"Why, you disclaim like a rhetor!" said Kapouras, a very illustrious merchant. "What is it that you want?"

"I say that we must be more ingenious or more terrible! If the whole of Africa rejects your yoke the reason is, my feeble masters, that you do not know how to fasten it to her shoulders! Agathocles, Regulus, Coepio, any bold man has only to land and capture her; and when the Libyans in the east concert with the Numidians in the west, and the Nomads come from the south, and the Romans from the north" — a cry of horror rose — "Oh! you will beat your breasts, and roll in the dust, and tear your cloaks! No matter! you will have to go and turn the millstone in the Suburra, and gather grapes on the hills of Latium."

They smote their right thighs to mark their sense of the scandal, and the sleeves of their robes rose like large wings of startled birds. Hamilcar, carried away by a spirit, continued his speech, standing on the highest step of the altar, quivering and terrible; he raised his arms, and the rays from the candelabrum which burned behind him passed between his fingers like javelins of gold.

"You will lose your ships, your country seats, your chariots, your hanging beds, and the slaves who rub your feet! The jackal will crouch in your palaces, and the ploughshare will upturn your tombs. Nothing will be left but the eagles' scream and a heap of ruins. Carthage, thou wilt fall!"

The four pontiffs spread out their hands to avert the anathema. All had risen. But the marine Suffet, being a sacerdotal magistrate under the protection of the Sun, was inviolate so long as the assembly of the rich had not judged him. Terror was associated with the altar. They drew back.

Hamilcar had ceased speaking, and was panting with eye fixed, his face as pale as the pearls of his tiara, almost frightened at himself, and his spirit lost in funereal visions. From the height on which he stood, all the torches on the bronze shafts seemed to him like a vast crown of fire laid level with the pavement; black smoke issuing from them mounted up into the darkness of the vault; and for some minutes the silence was so profound that they could hear in the distance the sound of the sea.

Then the Ancients began to question one another. Their interests, their existence, were attacked by the Barbarians. But it was impossible to conquer them without the assistance of the Suffet, and in spite of their pride this consideration made them forget every other. His friends were taken aside. There were interested reconciliations, understandings, and promises. Hamilcar would not take any further part in any government. All conjured him. They besought him; and as the word treason occurred in their speech, he fell into a passion. The sole traitor was the Great Council, for as the enlistment of the soldiers expired with the war, they became free as soon as the war was finished; he even exalted their bravery and all the advantages which might be derived from interesting them in the Republic by donations and privileges.

Then Magdassin, a former provincial governor, said, as he rolled his yellow eyes:

"Truly Barca, with your travelling you have become a Greek, or a Latin, or something! Why speak you of rewards for these men? Rather let ten thousand Barbarians perish than a single one of us!"

The Ancients nodded approval, murmuring: — "Yes, is there need for so much trouble? They can always be had?"

"And they can be got rid of conveniently, can they not? They are deserted as they were by you in Sardinia. The enemy is apprised of the road which they are to take, as in the case of those Gauls in Sicily, or perhaps they are disembarked in the middle of the sea. As I was returning I saw the rock quite white with their bones!"

"What a misfortune!" said Kapouras impudently.

"Have they not gone over to the enemy a hundred times?" cried the others.

"Why, then," exclaimed Hamilcar, "did you recall them to Carthage, notwithstanding your laws? And when they are in your town, poor and numerous amid all your riches, it does not occur to you to weaken them by the slightest division! Afterwards you dismiss the whole of them with their women and children, without keeping a single hostage! Did you expect that they would murder themselves to spare you the pain of keeping your oaths? You hate them because they are strong! You hate me still more, who am their master! Oh! I felt it just now when you were kissing my hands and were all putting a constraint upon yourselves not to bite them!"

If the lions that were sleeping in the court had come howling in, the uproar could not have been more frightful. But the pontiff of Eschmoun rose, and, standing perfectly upright, with his knees close together, his elbows pressed to his body, and his hands half open, he said:

"Barca, Carthage has need that you should take the general command of the Punic forces against the Mercenaries!"

"I refuse," replied Hamilcar.

"We will give you full authority," cried the chiefs of the Syssitia.

"No!"

"With no control, no partition, all the money that you want, all the captives, all the booty, fifty zereths of land for every enemy's corpse."

"No! no! because it is impossible to conquer with you!"

"He is afraid!"

"Because you are cowardly, greedy, ungrateful, pusillanimous and mad!"

"He is careful of them!"

"In order to put himself at their head," said some one.

"And return against us," said another; and from the bottom of the hall Hanno howled:

"He wants to make himself king!"

Then they bounded up, overturning the seats and the torches: the crowd of them rushed towards the altar; they brandished daggers. But Hamilcar dived into his sleeves and drew from them two broad cutlasses; and half stooping, his left foot advanced, his eyes flaming and his teeth clenched, he defied them as he stood there beneath the golden candelabrum.

Thus they had brought weapons with them as a precaution; it was a crime; they looked with terror at one another. As all were guilty, every one became quickly reassured; and by degrees they turned their backs on the Suffet and came down again maddened with humiliation. For the second time they recoiled before him. They remained standing for some time. Several who had wounded their fingers put them to their mouths or rolled them gently in the hem of their mantles, and they were about to depart when Hamilcar heard these words:

"Why! it is a piece of delicacy to avoid distressing his daughter!"

A louder voice was raised:

"No doubt, since she takes her lovers from among the Mercenaries!"

At first he tottered, then his eye rapidly sought for Schahabarim. But the priest of Tanith had alone remained in his place; and Hamilcar could see only his lofty cap in the distance. All were sneering in his face. In proportion as his anguish increased their joy redoubled, and those who were behind shouted amid the hootings:

"He was seen coming out of her room!"

"One morning in the month of Tammouz!"

"It was the thief who stole the zaimph!"

"A very handsome man!"

"Taller than you!"

He snatched off the tiara, the ensign of his rank — his tiara with its eight mystic rows, and with an emerald shell in the centre — and with both hands and with all his strength dashed it to the ground; the golden circles rebounded as they broke, and the pearls rang upon the pavement. Then they saw a long scar upon the whiteness of his brow; it moved like a serpent between his eyebrows; all his limbs trembled. He ascended one of the lateral staircases which led on to the altar, and walked upon the latter! This was to devote himself to the god, to offer himself as a holocaust. The motion of his mantle agitated the lights of the candelabrum, which was lower than his sandals, and the fine dust raised by his footsteps surrounded him like a cloud as high as the waist. He stopped between the legs of the brass colossus. He took up two handfuls of the dust, the mere sight of which made every Carthaginian shudder with horror, and said:

"By the hundred torches of your Intelligences! by the eight fires of the Kabiri! by the stars, the meteors, and the volcanoes! by everything that burns! by the thirst of the desert and the saltness of the ocean! by the cave of Hadrumetum and the empire of Souls! by extermination! by the ashes of your sons and the ashes of the brothers of your ancestors with which I now mingle my own! — you, the Hundred of the Council of Carthage, have lied in your accusation of my daughter! And I, Hamilcar Barca, marine Suffet, chief of the rich and ruler of the people, in the presence of bull-headed Moloch, I swear" — they expected something frightful, but he resumed in a loftier and calmer tone — "that I will not even speak to her about it!"

The sacred servants entered wearing their golden combs, some with purple sponges and others with branches of palm. They raised the hyacinth curtain which was stretched before the door; and through the opening of this angle there was visible behind the other halls the great pink sky which seemed to be a continuation of the vault and to rest at the horizon upon the blue sea. The sun was issuing from the waves and mounting upwards. It suddenly struck upon the breast of the brazen colossus, which was divided into seven compartments closed by gratings. His red-toothed jaws opened in a horrible yawn; his enormous nostrils were dilated, the broad daylight animated him, and gave him a terrible and impatient aspect, as if he would fain have leaped without to mingle with the star, the god, and together traverse the immensities.

The torches, however, which were scattered on the ground, were still burning, while here and there on the mother-of-pearl pavement was stretched from them what looked like spots of blood. The Ancients were reeling from exhaustion; they filled their lungs inhaling the freshness of the air; the sweat flowed down their livid faces; they had shouted so much that they could now scarcely make their voices heard. But their wrath against the Suffet was not at all abated; they hurled menaces at him by way of farewells, and Hamilcar answered them again.

"Until the next night, Barca, in the temple of Eschmoun!"

"I shall be there!"

"We will have you condemned by the rich!"

"And I you by the people!"

"Take care that you do not end on the cross!"

"And you that you are not torn to pieces in the streets!"

As soon as they were on the threshold of the court they again assumed a calm demeanour.

Their runners and coachmen were waiting for them at the door. Most of them departed on white mules. The Suffet leaped into his chariot and took the reins; the two animals, curving their necks, and rhythmically beating the resounding pebbles, went up the whole of the Mappalian Way at full gallop, and the silver vulture at the extremity of the pole seemed to fly, so quickly did the chariot pass along.

The road crossed a field planted with slabs of stone, which were painted on the top like pyramids, and had open hands carved out in the centre as if all the dead men lying beneath had stretched them out towards heaven to demand something. Next there came scattered cabins built of earth, branches, and bulrush-hurdles, and all of a conical shape. These dwellings, which became constantly denser as the road ascended towards the Suffet's gardens, were irregularly separated from one another by little pebble walls, trenches of spring water, ropes of esparto-grass, and nopal hedges. But Hamilcar's eyes were fastened on a great tower, the three storys of which formed three monster cylinders — the first being built of stone, the second of brick, and the third all of cedar — supporting a copper cupola upon twenty-four pillars of juniper, from which slender interlacing chains of brass hung down after the manner of garlands. This lofty edifice overlooked the buildings — the emporiums and mercantile houses — which stretched to the right, while the women's palace rose at the end of the cypress trees, which were ranged in line like two walls of bronze.

When the echoing chariot had entered through the narrow gateway it stopped beneath a broad shed in which there were shackled horses eating from heaps of chopped grass.

All the servants hastened up. They formed quite a multitude, those who worked on the country estates having been brought to Carthage through fear of the soldiers. The labourers, who were clad in animals' skins, had chains riveted to their ankles and trailing after them; the workers in the purple factories had arms as red as those of executioners; the sailors wore green caps; the fishermen coral necklaces; the huntsmen carried nets on their shoulders; and the people belonging to Megara wore black or white tunics, leathern drawers, and caps of straw, felt or linen, according to their service or their different occupations.

Behind pressed a tattered populace. They lived without employment remote from the apartments, slept at night in the gardens, ate the refuse from the kitchens, — a human mouldiness vegetating in the shadow of the palace. Hamilcar tolerated them from foresight even more than from scorn. They had all put a flower in the ear in token of their joy, and many of them had never seen him.

But men with head-dresses like the Sphinx's, and furnished with great sticks, dashed into the crowd, striking right and left. This was to drive back the slaves, who were curious to see their master, so that he might not be assailed by their numbers or inconvenienced by their smell.

Then they all threw themselves flat on the ground, crying:

"Eye of Baal, may your house flourish!" And through these people as they lay thus on the ground in the avenue of cypress trees, Abdalonim, the Steward of the stewards, waving a white miter, advanced towards Hamilcar with a censer in his hand.

Salammbo was then coming down the galley staircases. All her slave women followed her; and, at each of her steps, they also descended. The heads of the Negresses formed big black spots on the line of the bands of the golden plates clasping the foreheads of the Roman women. Others had silver arrows, emerald butterflies, or long bodkins set like suns in their hair. Rings, clasps, necklaces, fringes, and bracelets shone amid the confusion of white, yellow, and blue garments; a rustling of light material became audible; the pattering of sandals might be heard together with the dull sound of naked feet as they were set down on the wood; — and here and there a tall eunuch, head and shoulders above them, smiled with his face in air. When the shouting of the men had subsided they hid their faces in their sleeves, and together uttered a strange cry like the howling of a she-wolf, and so frenzied and strident was it that it seemed to make the great ebony staircase, with its thronging women, vibrate from top to bottom like a lyre.

The wind lifted their veils, and the slender stems of the papyrus plant rocked gently. It was the month of Schebaz and the depth of winter. The flowering pomegranates swelled against the azure of the sky, and the sea disappeared through the branches with an island in the distance half lost in the mist.

Hamilcar stopped on perceiving Salammbo. She had come to him after the death of several male children. Moreover, the birth of daughters was considered a calamity in the religions of the Sun. The gods had afterwards sent him a son; but he still felt something of the betrayal of his hope, and the shock, as it were, of the curse which he had uttered against her. Salammbo, however, continued to advance.

Long bunches of various-coloured pearls fell from her ears to her shoulders, and as far as her elbows. Her hair was crisped so as to simulate a cloud. Round her neck she wore little quadrangular plates of gold, representing a woman between two rampant lions; and her costume was a complete reproduction of the equipment of the goddess. Her broad-sleeved hyacinth robe fitted close to her equipment of the goddess. Her broad-sleeved hyacinth robe fitted close to her figure, widening out below. The vermilion on her lips gave additional whiteness to her teeth, and the antimony on her eyelids greater length to her eyes. Her sandals, which were cut out in bird's plumage, had very high heels, and she was extraordinarily pale, doubtless on account of the cold.

At last she came close to Hamilcar, and without looking at him, without raising her head to him:

"Greeting, eye of Baalim, eternal glory! triumph! leisure! satisfaction! riches! Long has my heart been sad and the house drooping. But the returning master is like reviving Tammouz; and beneath your gaze, O father, joyfulness and a new existence will everywhere prevail!"

And taking from Taanach's hands a little oblong vase wherein smoked a mixture of meal, butter, cardamom, and wine: "Drink freely," said she, "of the returning cup, which your servant has prepared!"

He replied: "A blessing upon you!" and he mechanically grasped the golden vase which she held out to him.

He scanned her, however, with such harsh attention, that Salammbo was troubled and stammered out:

"They have told you, O Master!"

"Yes! I know!" said Hamilcar in a low voice.

Was this a confession, or was she speaking of the Barbarians? And he added a few vague words upon the public embarrassments which he hoped by his sole efforts to clear away.

"O father!" exclaimed Salammbo, "you will not obliterate what is irreparable!"

Then he drew back and Salammbo was astonished at his amazement; for she was not thinking of Carthage but of the sacrilege in which she found herself implicated. This man, who made legions tremble and whom she hardly knew, terrified her like a god; he had guessed, he knew all, something awful was about to happen. "Pardon!" she cried.

Hamilcar slowly bowed his head.

Although she wished to accuse herself she dared not open her lips; and yet she felt stifled with the need of complaining and being comforted. Hamilcar was struggling against a longing to break his oath. He kept it out of pride or from the dread of putting an end to his uncertainty; and he looked into her face with all his might so as to lay hold on what she kept concealed at the bottom of her heart.

By degrees the panting Salammbo, crushed by such heavy looks, let her head sink below her shoulders. He was now sure that she had erred in the embrace of a Barbarian; he shuddered and raised both his fists. She uttered a shriek and fell down among her women, who crowded around her.

down among her women, who crowded around her.

Hamilcar turned on his heel. All the stewards followed him.

The door of the emporiums was opened, and he entered a vast round hall form which long passages leading to other halls branched off like the spokes from the nave of a wheel. A stone disc stood in the centre with balustrades to support the cushions that were heaped up upon carpets.

The Suffet walked at first with rapid strides; he breathed noisily, he struck the ground with his heel, and drew his hand across his forehead like a man annoyed by flies. But he shook his head, and as he perceived the accumulation of his riches he became calm; his thoughts, which were attracted by the vistas in the passages, wandered to the other halls that were full of still rarer treasures. Bronze plates, silver ingots, and iron bars alternated with pigs of tin brought from the Cassiterides over the Dark Sea; gums from the country of the Blacks were running over their bags of palm bark; and gold dust heaped up in leathern bottles was insensibly creeping out through the worn-out seams. Delicate filaments drawn from marine plants hung amid flax from Egypt, Greece, Taprobane and Judaea; mandrepores bristled like large bushes at the foot of the walls; and an indefinable odour — the exhalation from perfumes, leather, spices, and ostrich feathers, the latter tied in great bunches at the very top of the vault — floated through the air. An arch was formed above the door before each passage with elephants' teeth placed upright and meeting together at the points.

At last he ascended the stone disc. All the stewards stood with arms folded and heads bent while Abdalonim reared his pointed mitre with a haughty air.

Hamilcar questioned the Chief of the Ships. He was an old pilot with eyelids chafed by the wind, and white locks fell to his hips as if dashing foam of the tempests had remained on his beard.

He replied that he had sent a fleet by Gades and Thymiamata to try to reach Eziongaber by doubling the Southern Horn and the promontory of Aromata.

Others had advanced continuously towards the west for four moons without meeting with any shore; but the ships prows became entangled in weeds, the horizon echoed continually with the noise of cataracts, blood-coloured mists darkened the sun, a perfume-laden breeze lulled the crews to sleep; and their memories were so disturbed that they were now unable to tell anything. However, expeditions had ascended the rivers of the Scythians, had made their way into Colchis, and into the countries of the Jugrians and of the Estians, had carried off fifteen hundred maidens in the Archipelago, and sunk all the strange vessels sailing beyond Cape Oestrymon, so that the secret of the routes should not be known. King Ptolemaeus was detaining the incense from Schesbar; Syracuse, Elathia, Corsica, and the islands had furnished nothing, and the old pilot lowered his voice to announce that a trireme was taken at Rusicada by the pilot lowered his voice to announce that a trireme was taken at Rusicada by the Numidians, — "for they are with them, Master."

Hamilcar knit his brows; then he signed to the Chief of the Journeys to speak. This functionary was enveloped in a brown, ungirdled robe, and had his head covered with a long scarf of white stuff which passed along the edge of his lips and fell upon his shoulder behind.

The caravans had set out regularly at the winter equinox. But of fifteen hundred men directing their course towards the extreme boundaries of Ethiopia with excellent camels, new leathern bottles, and supplies of painted cloth, but one had reappeared at Carthage — the rest having died of fatigue or become mad through the terror of the desert; — and he said that far beyond the Black Harousch, after passing the Atarantes and the country of the great apes, he had seen immense kingdoms, wherein the pettiest utensils were all of gold, a river of the colour of milk and as broad as the sea, forests of blue trees, hills of aromatics, monsters with human faces vegetating on the rocks with eyeballs which expanded like flowers to look at you; and then crystal mountains supporting the sun behind lakes all covered with dragons. Others had returned from India with peacocks, pepper, and new textures. As to those who go by way of the Syrtes and the temple of Ammon to purchase chalcedony, they had no doubt perished in the sands. The caravans from Gaetulia and Phazzana had furnished their usual supplies; but he, the Chief of the Journeys, did not venture to fit one out just now.

Hamilcar understood; the Mercenaries were in occupation of the country. He leaned upon his other elbow with a hollow groan; and the Chief of Farms was so afraid to speak that he trembled horribly in spite of his thick shoulders and his big red eyeballs. His face, which was as snub-nosed as a mastiff's, was surmounted by a net woven of threads of bark. He wore a waist-belt of hairy leopard's skin, wherein gleamed two formidable cutlasses.

As soon as Hamilcar turned away he began to cry aloud and invoke all the Baals. It was not his fault! he could not help it! He had watched the temperature, the soil, the stars, had planted at the winter solstice and pruned at the waning of the moon, had inspected the slaves and had been careful of their clothes.

But Hamilcar grew angry at this loquacity. He clacked his tongue, and the man with the cutlasses went on in rapid tones:

"Ah, Master! they have pillaged everything! sacked everything! destroyed everything! Three thousand trees have been cut down at Maschala, and at Ubada the granaries have been looted and the cisterns filled up! At Tedes they have carried off fifteen hundred gomors of meal; at Marrazana they have killed the shepherds, eaten the flocks, burnt your house — your beautiful house with its cedar beams, which you used to visit in the summer! The slaves at Tuburbo who were reaping barley fled to the mountains; and the asses, the mules both great and small, the oxen from Taormina, and the antelopes, — not a single one left! all carried away! It is a curse! I shall not survive it!" He went on again in tears: "Ah! if you knew how full the cellars were, and how the ploughshares shone! Ah! the fine rams! ah! the fine bulls! — "

Hamilcar's wrath was choking him. It burst forth:

"Be silent! Am I a pauper then? No lies! speak the truth! I wish to know all that I have lost to the last shekel, to the last cab! Abdalonim, bring me the accounts of the ships, of the caravans, of the farms, of the house! And if your consciences are not clear, woe be on your heads! Go out!"

All the stewards went out walking backwards, with their fists touching the ground.

Abdalonim went up to a set of pigeon-holes in the wall, and from the midst of them took out knotted cords, strips of linen or papyrus, and sheeps' shoulder-blades inscribed with delicate writing. He laid them at Hamilcar's feet, placed in his hands a wooden frame furnished on the inside with three threads on which balls of gold, silver, and horn were strung, and began:

"One hundred and ninety-two houses in the Mappalian district let to the New Carthaginians at the rate of one bekah a moon."

"No! it is too much! be lenient towards the poor people! and you will try to learn whether they are attached to the Republic, and write down the names of those who appear to you to be the most daring! What next?"

Abdalonim hesitated in surprise at such generosity.

Hamilcar snatched the strips of linen from his hands.

"What is this? three palaces around Khamon at twelve kesitahs a month! Make it twenty! I do not want to be eaten up by the rich."

The Steward of the stewards, after a long salutation, resumed:

"Lent to Tigillas until the end of the season two kikars at three per cent., maritime interest; to Bar-Malkarth fifteen hundred shekels on the security of thirty slaves. But twelve have died in the salt-marshes."

"That is because they were not hardy," said the Suffet, laughing. "No matter! if he is in want of money, satisfy him! We should always lend, and at different rates of interest, according to the wealth of the individual."

Then the servant hastened to read all that had been brought in by the iron-mines of Annaba, the coral fisheries, the purple factories, the farming of the tax on the resident Greeks, the export of silver to Arabia, where it had ten times the value of gold, and the captures of vessels, deduction of a tenth being made for the temple of the goddess. "Each time I declared a quarter less, Master!"

Hamilcar was reckoning with the balls; they rang beneath his fingers.

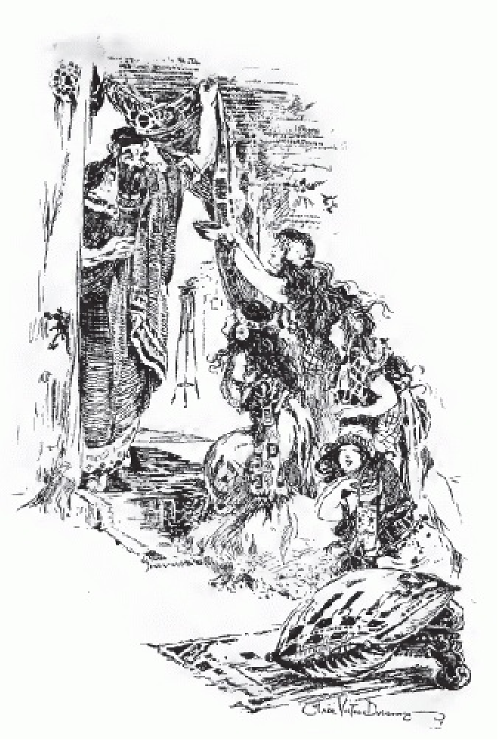
"Enough! What have you paid?"

"To Stratonicles of Corinth, and to three Alexandrian merchants, on these letters here (they have been realised), ten thousand Athenian drachmas, and twelve Syrian talents of gold. The food for the crews, amounting to twenty minae a month for each trireme — "

"I know! How many lost?"

"Here is the account on these sheets of lead," said the Steward. "As to the ships chartered in common, it has often been necessary to throw the cargo into the seas, and so the unequal losses have been divided among the partners. For the ropes which were borrowed from the arsenals, and which it was impossible to restore, the Syssitia exacted eight hundred kesitahs before the expedition to Utica."

"They again!" said Hamilcar, hanging his head; and he remained for a time as if quite crushed by the weight of all the hatreds that he could feel upon him. "But I do not see the Megara expenses?"



Abdalonim, turning pale, went to another set of pigeon-holes, and took from them some planchettes of sycamore wood strung in packets on leathern strings.

Hamilcar, curious about these domestic details, listened to him and grew calm with the monotony of the tones in which the figures were enumerated. Abdalonim became slower. Suddenly he let the wooden sheets fall to the ground and threw himself flat on his face with his arms stretched out in the position of a condemned criminal. Hamilcar picked up the tablets without any emotion; and his lips parted and his eyes grew larger when he perceived an exorbitant his lips parted and his eyes grew larger when he perceived an exorbitant consumption of meat, fish, birds, wines, and aromatics, with broken vases, dead slaves, and spoiled carpets set down as the expense of a single day.

Abdalonim, still prostrate, told him of the feast of the Barbarians. He had not been able to avoid the command of the Ancients. Moreover, Salammbo desired money to be lavished for the better reception of the soldiers.

At his daughter's name Hamilcar leaped to his feet. Then with compressed lips he crouched down upon the cushions, tearing the fringes with his nails, and panting with staring eyes.

"Rise!" said he; and he descended.

Abdalonim followed him; his knees trembled. But seizing an iron bar he began like one distraught to loosen the paving stones. A wooden disc sprang up and soon there appeared throughout the length of the passage several of the large covers employed for stopping up the trenches in which grain was kept.

"You see, Eye of Baal," said the servant, trembling, "they have not taken everything yet! and these are each fifty cubits deep and filled up to the brim! During your voyage I had them dug out in the arsenals, in the gardens, everywhere! your house is full of corn as your heart is full of wisdom."

A smile passed over Hamilcar's face. "It is well, Abdalonim!" Then bending over to his ear: "You will have it brought from Etruria, Brutium, whence you will, and no matter at what price! Heap it and keep it! I alone must possess all the corn in Carthage."

Then when they were alone at the extremity of the passage, Abdalonim, with one of the keys hanging at his girdle, opened a large quadrangular chamber divided in the centre by pillars of cedar. Gold, silver, and brass coins were arranged on tables or packed into niches, and rose as high as the joists of the roof along the four walls. In the corners there were huge baskets of hippopotamus skin supporting whole rows of smaller bags; there were hillocks formed of heaps of bullion on the pavement; and here and there a pile that was too high had given way and looked like a ruined column. The large Carthaginian pieces, representing Tanith with a horse beneath a palm-tree, mingled with those from the colonies, which were marked with a bull, star, globe, or crescent. Then there might be seen pieces of all values, dimensions, and ages arrayed in unequal amounts — from the ancient coins of Assyria, slender as the nail, to the ancient ones of Latium, thicker than the hand, with the buttons of Egina, the tablets of Bactriana, and the short bars of Lacedaemon; many were covered with rust, or had grown greasy, or, having been taken in nets or from among the ruins of captured cities, were green with the water or blackened by fire. The Suffet had speedily calculated whether the sums present corresponded with the gains and losses which had just been read to him; and he was going away when he losses which had just been read to him, and he was going away when he perceived three brass jars completely empty. Abdalonim turned away his head to mark his horror, and Hamilcar, resigning himself to it, said nothing.

They crossed other passages and other halls, and at last reached a door where, to ensure its better protection and in accordance with a Roman custom lately introduced into Carthage, a man was fastened by the waist to a long chain let into the wall. His beard and nails had grown to an immoderate length, and he swayed himself from right to left with that continual oscillation which is characteristic of captive animals. As soon as he recognised Hamilcar he darted towards him, crying:

"Pardon, Eye of Baal! pity! kill me! For ten years I have not seen the sun! In your father's name, pardon!"

Hamilcar, without answering him, clapped his hands and three men appeared; and all four simultaneously stiffening their arms, drew back from its rings the enormous bar which closed the door. Hamilcar took a torch and disappeared into the darkness.

This was believed to be the family burying-place; but nothing would have been found in it except a broad well. It was dug out merely to baffle robbers, and it concealed nothing. Hamilcar passed along beside it; then stooping down he made a very heavy millstone turn upon its rollers, and through this aperture entered an apartment which was built in the shape of a cone.

The walls were covered with scales of brass; and in the centre, on a granite pedestal, stood the statue of one of the Kabiri called Aletes, the discoverer of the mines in Celtiberia. On the ground, at its base, and arranged in the form of a cross, were large gold shields and monster close-necked silver vases, of extravagant shape and unfitted for use; it was customary to cast quantities of metal in this way, so that dilapidation and even removal should be almost impossible.

With his torch he lit a miner's lamp which was fastened to the idol's cap, and green, yellow, blue, violet, wine-coloured, and blood-coloured fires suddenly illuminated the hall. It was filled with gems which were either in gold calabashes fastened like sconces upon sheets of brass, or were ranged in native masses at the foot of the wall. There were callaides shot away from the mountains with slings, carbuncles formed by the urine of the lynx, glossopetrae which had fallen from the moon, tyanos, diamonds, sandastra, beryls, with the three kinds of rubies, the four kinds of sapphires, and the twelve kinds of emeralds. They gleamed like splashes of milk, blue icicles, and silver dust, and shed their light in sheets, rays, and stars. Ceraunia, engendered by the thunder, sparkled by the side of chalcedonies, which are a cure for poison. There were topazes from Mount Zabarca to avert terrors, opals from Bactriana to prevent abortions, and horns of

Zabarca to avert terrors, opals from Bactriana to prevent abortions, and horns of Ammon, which are placed under the bed to induce dreams.

The fires from the stones and the flames from the lamp were mirrored in the great golden shields. Hamilcar stood smiling with folded arms, and was less delighted by the sight of his riches than by the consciousness of their possession. They were inaccessible, exhaustless, infinite. His ancestors sleeping beneath his feet transmitted something of their eternity to his heart. He felt very near to the subterranean deities. It was as the joy of one of the Kabiri; and the great luminous rays striking upon his face looked like the extremity of an invisible net linking him across the abysses with the centre of the world.

A thought came which made him shudder, and placing himself behind the idol he walked straight up to the wall. Then among the tattooings on his arm he scrutinised a horizontal line with two other perpendicular ones which in Chanaanitish figures expressed the number thirteen. Then he counted as far as the thirteenth of the brass plates and again raised his ample sleeve; and with his right hand stretched out he read other more complicated lines on his arm, at the same time moving his fingers daintily about like one playing on a lyre. At last he struck seven blows with his thumb, and an entire section of the wall turned about in a single block.

It served to conceal a sort of cellar containing mysterious things which had no name and were of incalculable value. Hamilcar went down the three steps, took up a llama's skin which was floating on a black liquid in a silver vat, and then re-ascended.

Abdalonim again began to walk before him. He struck the pavement with his tall cane, the pommel of which was adorned with bells, and before every apartment cried aloud the name of Hamilcar amid eulogies and benedictions.

Along the walls of the circular gallery, from which the passages branched off, were piled little beams of algummim, bags of Lawsonia, cakes of Lemnos-earth, and tortoise carapaces filled with pearls. The Suffet brushed them with his robe as he passed without even looking at some gigantic pieces of amber, an almost divine material formed by the rays of the sun.

A cloud of odorous vapour burst forth.

"Push open the door!"

They went in.

Naked men were kneading pastes, crushing herbs, stirring coals, pouring oil into jars, and opening and shutting the little ovoid cells which were hollowed out all round in the wall, and were so numerous that the apartment was like the interior of a hive. They were brimful of myrobalan, bdellium, saffron, and violets. Gums, powders, roots, glass phials, branches of filipendula, and rose-petals were scattered about everywhere, and the scents were stifling in spite of the cloud-wreaths from the styrax shrivelling on a brazen tripod in the centre.

The Chief of the Sweet Odours, pale and long as a waxen torch, came up to Hamilcar to crush a roll of metopion in his hands, while two others rubbed his heels with leaves of baccharis. He repelled them; they were Cyreneans of infamous morals, but valued on account of the secrets which they possessed.

To show his vigilance the Chief of the Odours offered the Suffet a little malobathrum to taste in an electrum spoon; then he pierced three Indian bezoars with an awl. The master, who knew the artifices employed, took a horn full of balm, and after holding it near the coals inclined it over his robe. A brown spot appeared; it was a fraud. Then he gazed fixedly at the Chief of the Odours, and without saying anything flung the gazelle's horn full in his face.

However indignant he might be at adulterations made to his own prejudice, when he perceived some parcels of nard which were being packed up for countries beyond the sea, he ordered antimony to be mixed with it so as to make it heavier.

Then he asked where three boxes of psagdas designed for his own use were to be found.

The Chief of the Odours confessed that he did not know; some soldiers had come howling in with knives and he had opened the boxes for them.

"So you are more afraid of them then of me!" cried the Suffet; and his eyeballs flashed like torches through the smoke upon the tall, pale man who was beginning to understand. "Abdalonim! you will make him run the gauntlet before sunset: tear him!"

This loss, which was less than the others, had exasperated him; for in spite of his efforts to banish them from his thoughts he was continually coming again across the Barbarians. Their excesses were blended with his daughter's shame, and he was angry with the whole household for knowing of the latter and for not speaking of it to him. But something impelled him to bury himself in his misfortune; and in an inquisitorial fit he visited the sheds behind the mercantile house to see the supplies of bitumen, wood, anchors and cordage, honey and wax, the cloth warehouse, the stores of food, the marble yard and the silphium barn.

He went to the other side of the gardens to make an inspection in their cottages, of the domestic artisans whose productions were sold. There were tailors embroidering cloaks, others making nets, others painting cushions or cutting out sandals, and Egyptian workmen polished papyrus with a shell, while the weavers' shuttles rattled and the armourers' anvils rang.

Hamilcar said to them:

"Beat away at the swords! I shall want them." And he drew the antelope's skin that had been steeped in poisons from his bosom to have it cut into a cuirass more solid than one of brass and unassailable by steel or flame.

As soon as he approached the workmen, Abdalonim, to give his wrath another direction, tried to anger him against them by murmured disparagement of their work. "What a performance! It is a shame! The Master is indeed too good." Hamilcar moved away without listening to him.

He slackened his pace, for the paths were barred by great trees calcined from one end to the other, such as may be met with in woods where shepherds have encamped; and the palings were broken, the water in the trenches was disappearing, while fragments of glass and the bones of apes were to be seen amid the miry puddles. A scrap of cloth hung here and there from the bushes, and the rotten flowers formed a yellow muck-heap beneath the citron trees. In fact, the servants had neglected everything, thinking that the master would never return.

At every step he discovered some new disaster, some further proof of the thing which he had forbidden himself to learn. Here he was soiling his purple boots as he crushed the filth under-foot; and he had not all these men before him at the end of a catapult to make them fly into fragments! He felt humiliated at having defended them; it was a delusion and a piece of treachery; and as he could not revenge himself upon the soldiers, or the Ancients, or Salammbo, or anybody, and his wrath required some victim, he condemned all the slaves of the gardens to the mines at a single stroke.

Abdalonim shuddered each time that he saw him approaching the parks. But Hamilcar took the path towards the mill, from which there might be heard issuing a mournful melopoeia.

The heavy millstones were turning amid the dust. They consisted of two cones of porphyry laid the one upon the other — the upper one of the two, which carried a funnel, being made to revolve upon the second by means of strong bars. Some men were pushing these with their breasts and arms, while others were yoked to them and were pulling them. The friction of the straps had formed purulent scabs round about their armpits such as are seen on asses' withers, and the end of the limp black rag, which scarcely covered their loins, hung down and flapped against their hams like a long tail. Their eyes were red, the irons on their feet clanked, and all their breasts panted rhythmically. On their mouths they had muzzles fastened by two little bronze chains to render it impossible for them to eat the flour, and their hands were enclosed in gauntlets without fingers, so as to prevent them from taking any.

At the master's entrance the wooden bars creaked still more loudly. The grain grated as it was being crushed. Several fell upon their knees; the others, continuing their work, stepped across them.

He asked for Giddenem, the governor of the slaved, and that personage appeared, his rank being displayed in the richness of his dress. His tunic, which was slit up the sides, was of fine purple; his ears were weighted with heavy rings; and the strips of cloth enfolding his legs were joined together with a lacing of gold which extended from his ankles to his hips, like a serpent winding about a tree. In his fingers, which were laden with rings, he held a necklace of jet beads, so as to recognise the men who were subject to the sacred disease.

Hamilcar signed to him to unfasten the muzzles. Then with the cries of famished animals they all rushed upon the flour, burying their faces in the heaps of it and devouring it.

"You are weakening them!" said the Suffet.

Giddenem replied that such treatment was necessary in order to subdue them.

"It was scarcely worth while sending you to the slaves' school at Syracuse. Fetch the others!"

And the cooks, butlers, grooms, runners, and litter-carriers, the men belonging to the vapour-baths, and the women with their children, all ranged themselves in a single line in the garden from the mercantile house to the deer park. They held their breath. An immense silence prevailed in Megara. The sun was lengthening across the lagoon at the foot of the catacombs. The peacocks were screeching. Hamilcar walked along step by step.

"What am I to do with these old creatures?" he said. "Sell them! There are too many Gauls: they are drunkards! and too many Cretans: they are liars! Buy me some Cappadocians, Asiatics, and Negroes."

He was astonished that the children were so few. "The house ought to have births every year, Giddenem. You will leave the huts open every night to let them mingle freely."

He then had the thieves, the lazy, and the mutinous shown to him. He distributed punishments, with reproaches to Giddenem; and Giddenem, ox-like, bent his low forehead, with its two broad intersecting eyebrows.

"See, Eye of Baal," he said, pointing out a sturdy Libyan, "here is one who was caught with the rope round his neck."

"Ah! you wish to die?" said the Suffet scornfully.

"Yes!" replied the slave in an intrepid tone.

Then, without heeding the precedent or the pecuniary loss, Hamilcar said to the serving-men:

"Away with him!"

Perhaps in his thoughts he intended a sacrifice. It was a misfortune which he inflicted upon himself in order to avert more terrible ones.

Giddenem had hidden those who were mutilated behind the others. Hamilcar perceived them.

"Who cut off your arm?"

"The soldiers, Eye of Baal."

Then to a Samnite who was staggering like a wounded heron:

"And you, who did that to you?"

It was the governor, who had broken his leg with an iron bar.

This silly atrocity made the Suffet indignant; he snatched the jet necklace out of Giddenem's hands.

"Cursed be the dog that injures the flock! Gracious Tanith, to cripple slaves! Ah! you ruin your master! Let him be smothered in the dunghill. And those that are missing? Where are they? Have you helped the soldiers to murder them?"

His face was so terrible that all the women fled. The slaves drew back and formed a large circle around them; Giddenem was frantically kissing his sandals; Hamilcar stood upright with his arms raised above him.

But with his understanding as clear as in the sternest of his battles, he recalled a thousand odious things, ignominies from which he had turned aside; and in the gleaming of his wrath he could once more see all his disasters simultaneously as in the lightnings of a storm. The governors of the country estates had fled through terror of the soldiers, perhaps through collusion with them; they were all deceiving him; he had restrained himself too long.

"Bring them here!" he cried; "and brand them on the forehead with red-hot irons as cowards!"

Then they brought and spread out in the middle of the garden, fetters, carcanets, knives, chains for those condemned to the mines, cippi for fastening the legs, numellae for confining the shoulders, and scorpions or whips with triple thongs terminating in brass claws.

All were placed facing the sun, in the direction of Moloch the Devourer, and were stretched on the ground on their stomachs or on their backs, those, however, who were sentenced to be flogged standing upright against the trees with two men beside them, one counting the blows and the other striking.

In striking he used both his arms, and the whistling thongs made the bark of the plane-trees fly. The blood was scattered like rain upon the foliage, and red masses writhed with howls at the foot of the trees. Those who were under the iron tore their faces with their nails. The wooden screws could be heard creaking; dull knockings resounded; sometimes a sharp cry would suddenly pierce the air. In the direction of the kitchens, men were brisking up burning coals with fans amid tattered garments and scattered hair, and a smell of burning flesh was perceptible. Those who were under the scourge, swooning, but kept in their positions by the bonds on their arms, rolled their heads upon their shoulders and closed their eyes. The others who were watching them began to shriek with terror, and the lions, remembering the feast perhaps, stretched themselves out yawning against the edge of the dens.

Then Salammbo was seen on the platform of her terrace. She ran wildly about it from left to right. Hamilcar perceived her. It seemed to him that she was holding up her arms towards him to ask for pardon; with a gesture of horror he plunged into the elephants' park.

These animals were the pride of the great Punic houses. They had carried their ancestors, had triumphed in the wars, and they were reverenced as being the favourites of the Sun.

Those of Megara were the strongest in Carthage. Before he went away Hamilcar had required Abdalonim to swear that he would watch over them. But they had died from their mutilations; and only three remained, lying in the middle of the court in the dust before the ruins of their manger.

They recognised him and came up to him. One had its ears horribly slit, another had a large wound in its knee, while the trunk of the third was cut off.

They looked sadly at him, like reasonable creatures; and the one that had lost its trunk tried by stooping its huge head and bending its hams to stroke him softly with the hideous extremity of its stump.

At this caress from the animal two tears started into his eyes. He rushed at Abdalonim.

"Ah! wretch! the cross! the cross!"

Abdalonim fell back swooning upon the ground.

The bark of a jackal rang from behind the purple factories, the blue smoke of which was ascending slowly into the sky; Hamilcar paused.

The thought of his son had suddenly calmed him like the touch of a god. He caught a glimpse of a prolongation of his might, an indefinite continuation of his personality, and the slaves could not understand whence this appeasement had come upon him.

As he bent his steps towards the purple factories he passed before the ergastulum, which was a long house of black stone built in a square pit with a small pathway all round it and four staircases at the corners.

Iddibal was doubtless waiting until the night to finish his signal. "There is no hurry yet," thought Hamilcar; and he went down into the prison. Some cried out to him: "Return"; the boldest followed him.

The open door was flapping in the wind. The twilight entered through the narrow loopholes, and in the interior broken chains could be distinguished hanging from the walls.

This was all that remained of the captives of war!

This was all that remained of the captives of war!

Then Hamilcar grew extraordinarily pale, and those who were leaning over the pit outside saw him resting one hand against the wall to keep himself from falling.

But the jackal uttered its cry three times in succession. Hamilcar raised his head; he did not speak a word nor make a gesture. Then when the sun had completely set he disappeared behind the nopal hedge, and in the evening he said as he entered the assembly of the rich in the temple of Eschmoun:

"Luminaries of the Baalim, I accept the command of the Punic forces against the army of the Barbarians!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE BATTLE OF THE MACARAS

In the following day he drew two hundred and twenty-three thousand kikars of gold from the Syssitia, and decreed a tax of fourteen shekels upon the rich. Even the women contributed; payment was made in behalf of the children, and he compelled the colleges of priests to furnish money — a monstrous thing, according to Carthaginian customs.

He demanded all the horses, mules, and arms. A few tried to conceal their wealth, and their property was sold; and, to intimidate the avarice of the rest, he himself gave sixty suits of armour, and fifteen hundred gomers of meal, which was as much as was given by the Ivory Company.

He sent into Liguria to buy soldiers, three thousand mountaineers accustomed to fight with bears; they were paid for six moons in advance at the rate of four minae a day.

Nevertheless an army was wanted. But he did not, like Hanno, accept all the citizens. First he rejected those engaged in sedentary occupations, and then those who were big-bellied or had a pusillanimous look; and he admitted those of ill-repute, the scum of Malqua, sons of Barbarians, freed men. For reward he promised some of the New Carthaginians complete rights of citizenship.

His first care was to reform the Legion. These handsome young fellows, who regarded themselves as the military majesty of the Republic, governed themselves. He reduced their officers to the ranks; he treated them harshly, made them run, leap, ascend the declivity of Byrsa at a single burst, hurl javelins, wrestle together, and sleep in the squares at night. Their families used to come to see them and pity them.

He ordered shorter swords and stronger buskins. He fixed the number of serving-men, and reduced the amount of baggage; and as there were three hundred Roman pila kept in the temple of Moloch, he took them in spite of the pontiff's protests.

He organised a phalanx of seventy-two elephants with those which had returned from Utica, and others which were private property, and rendered them formidable. He armed their drivers with mallet and chisel to enable them to split their skulls in the fight if they ran away.

He would not allow his generals to be nominated by the Grand Council. The Ancients tried to urge the laws in objection, but he set them aside; no one ventured to murmur again, and everything yielded to the violence of his genius.

ventured to murmur again, and everything yielded to the violence of his genius.

He assumed sole charge of the war, the government, and the finances; and as a precaution against accusations he demanded the Suffet Hanno as examiner of his accounts.

He set to work upon the ramparts, and had the old and now useless inner walls demolished in order to furnish stones. But difference of fortune, replacing the hierarchy of race, still kept the sons of the vanquished and those of the conquerors apart; thus the patricians viewed the destruction of these ruins with an angry eye, while the plebeians, scarcely knowing why, rejoiced.

The troops defiled under arms through the streets from morning till night; every moment the sound of trumpets was heard; chariots passed bearing shields, tents, and pikes; the courts were full of women engaged in tearing up linen; the enthusiasm spread from one to another, and Hamilcar's soul filled the Republic.

He had divided his soldiers into even numbers, being careful to place a strong man and a weak one alternately throughout the length of his files, so that he who was less vigorous or more cowardly might be at once led and pushed forward by two others. But with his three thousand Ligurians, and the best in Carthage, he could form only a simple phalanx of four thousand and ninety-six hoplites, protected by bronze helmets, and handling ashen sarissae fourteen cubits long.

There were two thousand young men, each equipped with a sling, a dagger, and sandals. He reinforced them with eight hundred others armed with round shields and Roman swords.

The heavy cavalry was composed of the nineteen hundred remaining guardsmen of the Legion, covered with plates of vermilion bronze, like the Assyrian Clinabarians. He had further four hundred mounted archers, of those that were called Tarentines, with caps of weasel's skin, two-edged axes, and leathern tunics. Finally there were twelve hundred Negroes from the quarter of the caravans, who were mingled with the Clinabarians, and were to run beside the stallions with one hand resting on the manes. All was ready, and yet Hamilcar did not start.

Often at night he would go out of Carthage alone and make his way beyond the lagoon towards the mouths of the Macaras. Did he intend to join the Mercenaries? The Ligurians encamped in the Mappalian district surrounded his house.

The apprehensions of the rich appeared justified when, one day, three hundred Barbarians were seen approaching the walls. The Suffet opened the gates to them; they were deserters; drawn by fear or by fidelity, they were hastening to their master.

Hamilcar's return had not surprised the Mercenaries; according to their ideas the man could not die. He was returning to fulfil his promise: — a hope by no means absurd, so deep was the abyss between Country and Army. Moreover they did not believe themselves culpable; the feast was forgotten.

The spies whom they surprised undeceived them. It was a triumph for the bitter; even the lukewarm grew furious. Then the two sieges overwhelmed then with weariness; no progress was being made; a battle would be better! Thus many men had left the ranks and were scouring the country. But at news of the arming they returned; Matho leaped for joy. "At last! at last!" he cried.

Then the resentment which he cherished against Salammbo was turned against Hamilcar. His hate could now perceive a definite prey; and as his vengeance grew easier of conception he almost believed that he had realised it and he revelled in it already. At the same time he was seized with a loftier tenderness, and consumed by more acrid desire. He saw himself alternately in the midst of the soldiers brandishing the Suffet's head on a pike, and then in the room with the purple bed, clasping the maiden in his arms, covering her face with kisses, passing his hands over her long, black hair; and the imagination of this, which he knew could never be realised, tortured him. He swore to himself that, since his companions had appointed him schalishim, he would conduct the war; the certainty that he would not return from it urged him to render it a pitiless one.

He came to Spendius and said to him:

"You will go and get your men! I will bring mine! Warn Autaritus! We are lost if Hamilcar attacks us! Do you understand me? Rise!"

Spendius was stupefied before such an air of authority. Matho usually allowed himself to be led, and his previous transports had quickly passed away. But just now he appeared at once calmer and more terrible; a superb will gleamed in his eyes like the flame of sacrifice.

The Greek did not listen to his reasons. He was living in one of the Carthaginian pearl-bordered tents, drinking cool beverages from silver cups, playing at the cottabos, letting his hair grow, and conducting the siege with slackness. Moreover, he had entered into communications with some in the town and would not leave, being sure that it would open its gates before many days were over.

Narr' Havas, who wandered about among the three armies, was at that time with him. He supported his opinion, and even blamed the Libyan for wishing in his excess of courage to abandon their enterprise.

"Go, if you are afraid!" exclaimed Matho; "you promised us pitch, sulphur, elephants, foot-soldiers, horses! where are they?"

Narr' Havas reminded him that he had exterminated Hanno's last cohorts; — as to the elephants, they were being hunted in the woods, he was arming the foot-soldiers, the horses were on their way; and the Numidian rolled his eyes like a woman and smiled in an irritating manner as he stroked the ostrich feather which fell upon his shoulder. In his presence Matho was at a loss for a reply.

But a man who was a stranger entered, wet with perspiration, scared, and with bleeding feet and loosened girdle; his breathing shook his lean sides enough to have burst them, and speaking in an unintelligible dialect he opened his eyes wide as if he were telling of some battle. The king sprang outside and called his horsemen.

They ranged themselves in the plain before him in the form of a circle. Narr' Havas, who was mounted, bent his head and bit his lips. At last he separated his men into two equal divisions, and told the first to wait; then with an imperious gesture he carried off the others at a gallop and disappeared on the horizon in the direction of the mountains.

"Master!" murmured Spendius, "I do not like these extraordinary chances — the Suffet returning, Narr' Havas going away — "

"Why! what does it matter?" said Matho disdainfully.

It was a reason the more for anticipating Hamilcar by uniting with Autaritus. But if the siege of the towns were raised, the inhabitants would come out and attack them in the rear, while they would have the Carthaginians in front. After much talking the following measures were resolved upon and immediately executed.

Spendius proceeded with fifteen thousand men as far as the bridge built across the Macaras, three miles from Utica; the corners of it were fortified with four huge towers provided with catapults; all the paths and gorges in the mountains were stopped up with trunks of trees, pieces of rock, interlacings of thorn, and stone walls; on the summits heaps of grass were made which might be lighted as signals, and shepherds who were able to see at a distance were posted at intervals.

No doubt Hamilcar would not, like Hanno, advance by the mountain of the Hot Springs. He would think that Autaritus, being master of the interior, would close the route against him. Moreover, a check at the opening of the campaign would ruin him, while if he gained a victory he would soon have to make a fresh beginning, the Mercenaries being further off. Again, he could disembark at Cape Grapes and march thence upon one of the towns. But he would then find himself between the two armies, an indiscretion which he could not commit with his scanty forces. Accordingly he must proceed along the base of Mount Ariana, then turn to the left to avoid the mouths of the Macaras, and come straight to the bridge. It was there that Matho expected him.

At night he used to inspect the pioneers by torch-light. He would hasten to

Hippo-Zarytus or to the works on the mountains, would come back again, would never rest. Spendius envied his energy; but in the management of spies, the choice of sentries, the working of the engines and all means of defence, Matho listened docilely to his companion. They spoke no more of Salammbo, — one not thinking about her, and the other being prevented by a feeling of shame.

Often he would go towards Carthage, striving to catch sight of Hamilcar's troops. His eyes would dart along the horizon; he would lie flat on the ground, and believe that he could hear an army in the throbbing of his arteries.

He told Spendius that if Hamilcar did not arrive in three days he would go with all his men to meet him and offer him battle. Two further days elapsed. Spendius restrained him; but on the morning of the sixth day he departed.

The Carthaginians were no less impatient for war than the Barbarians. In tents and in houses there was the same longing and the same distress; all were asking one another what was delaying Hamilcar.

From time to time he would mount to the cupola of the temple of Eschmoun beside the Announcer of the Moons and take note of the wind.

One day — it was the third of the month of Tibby — they saw him descending from the Acropolis with hurried steps. A great clamour arose in the Mappalian district. Soon the streets were astir, and the soldiers were everywhere beginning to arm themselves upon their breasts; then they ran quickly to the square of Khamon to take their places in the ranks. No one was allowed to follow them or even to speak to them, or to approach the ramparts; for some minutes the whole town was silent as a great tomb. The soldiers as they leaned on their lances were thinking, and the others in the houses were sighing.

At sunset the army went out by the western gate; but instead of taking the road to Tunis or making for the mountains in the direction of Utica, they continued their march along the edge of the sea; and they soon reached the Lagoon, where round spaces quite whitened with salt glittered like gigantic silver dishes forgotten on the shore.

Then the pools of water multiplied. The ground gradually became softer, and the feet sank in it. Hamilcar did not turn back. He went on still at their head; and his horse, which was yellow-spotted like a dragon, advanced into the mire flinging froth around him, and with great straining of the loins. Night — a moonless light — fell. A few cried out that they were about to perish; he snatched their arms from them, and gave them to the serving-men. Nevertheless the mud became deeper and deeper. Some had to mount the beasts of burden; others clung to the horses' tails; the sturdy pulled the weak, and the Ligurian corps drove on the infantry with the points of their pikes. The darkness increased. They had lost their way. All stopped.

Then some of the Suffet's slaves went on ahead to look for the buoys which had been placed at intervals by his order. They shouted through the darkness, and the army followed them at a distance.

At last they felt the resistance of the ground. Then a whitish curve became dimly visible, and they found themselves on the bank of the Macaras. In spite of the cold no fires were lighted.

In the middle of the night squalls of wind arose. Hamilcar had the soldiers roused, but not a trumpet was sounded: their captain tapped them softly on the shoulder.

A man of lofty stature went down into the water. It did not come up to his girdle; it was possible to cross.

The Suffet ordered thirty-two of the elephants to be posted in the river a hundred paces further on, while the others, lower down, would check the lines of men that were carried away by the current; and holding their weapons above their heads they all crossed the Macaras as though between two walls. He had noticed that the western wind had driven the sand so as to obstruct the river and form a natural causeway across it.

He was now on the left bank in front of Utica, and in a vast plain, the latter being advantageous for his elephants, which formed the strength of his army.

This feat of genius filled the soldiers with enthusiasm. They recovered extraordinary confidence. They wished to hasten immediately against the Barbarians; but the Suffet bade them rest for two hours. As soon as the sun appeared they moved into the plain in three lines — first came the elephants, and then the light infantry with the cavalry behind it, the phalanx marching next.

The Barbarians encamped at Utica, and the fifteen thousand about the bridge were surprised to see the ground undulating in the distance. The wind, which was blowing very hard, was driving tornadoes of sand before it; they rose as though snatched from the soil, ascended in great light-coloured strips, then parted asunder and began again, hiding the Punic army the while from the Mercenaries. Owing to the horns, which stood up on the edge of the helmets, some thought that they could perceive a herd of oxen; others, deceived by the motion of the cloaks, pretended that they could distinguish wings, and those who had travelled a good deal shrugged their shoulders and explained everything by the illusions of the mirage. Nevertheless something of enormous size continued to advance. Little vapours, as subtle as the breath, ran across the surface of the desert; the sun, which was higher now, shone more strongly: a harsh light, which seemed to vibrate, threw back the depths of the sky, and permeating objects, rendered distance incalculable. The immense plain expanded in every direction beyond the limits of vision; and the almost insensible undulations of the soil extended to the extreme horizon, which was closed by a great blue line which they knew to be the sea. The two armies, having left their tents, stood gazing; the people of Utica were massing on the ramparts to have a better view.

At last they distinguished several transverse bars bristling with level points. They became thicker, larger; black hillocks swayed to and fro; square thickets suddenly appeared; they were elephants and lances. A single shout went up: "The Carthaginians!" and without signal or command the soldiers at Utica and those at the bridge ran pell-mell to fall in a body upon Hamilcar.

Spendius shuddered at the name. "Hamilcar! Hamilcar!" he repeated, panting, and Matho was not there! What was to be done? No means of flight! The suddenness of the event, his terror of the Suffet, and above all, the urgent need of forming an immediate resolution, distracted him; he could see himself pierced by a thousand swords, decapitated, dead. Meanwhile he was being called for; thirty thousand men would follow him; he was seized with fury against himself; he fell back upon the hope of victory; it was full of bliss, and he believed himself more intrepid than Epaminondas. He smeared his cheeks with vermilion in order to conceal his paleness, then he buckled on his knemids and his cuirass, swallowed a patera of pure wine, and ran after his troops, who were hastening towards those from Utica.

They united so rapidly that the Suffet had not time to draw up his men in battle array. By degrees he slackened his speed. The elephants stopped; they rocked their heavy heads with their chargings of ostrich feathers, striking their shoulders the while with their trunks.

Behind the intervals between them might be seen the cohorts of the velites, and further on the great helmets of the Clinabarians, with steel heads glancing in the sun, cuirasses, plumes, and waving standards. But the Carthaginian army, which amounted to eleven thousand three hundred and ninety-six men, seemed scarcely to contain them, for it formed an oblong, narrow at the sides and pressed back upon itself.

Seeing them so weak, the Barbarians, who were thrice as numerous, were seized with extravagant joy. Hamilcar was not to be seen. Perhaps he had remained down yonder? Moreover what did it matter? The disdain which they felt for these traders strengthened their courage; and before Spendius could command a manoeuvre they had all understood it, and already executed it.

They were deployed in a long, straight line, overlapping the wings of the Punic army in order to completely encompass it. But when there was an interval of only three hundred paces between the armies, the elephants turned round instead of advancing; then the Clinabarians were seen to face about and follow them; and the surprise of the Mercenaries increased when they saw the archers running to join them. So the Carthaginians were afraid, they were fleeing! A running to join them. So the Carthaginians were afraid, they were fleeing! A tremendous hooting broke out from among the Barbarian troops, and Spendius exclaimed from the top of his dromedary: "Ah! I knew it! Forward! forward!"

Then javelins, darts, and sling-bullets burst forth simultaneously. The elephants feeling their croups stung by the arrows began to gallop more quickly; a great dust enveloped them, and they vanished like shadows in a cloud.

But from the distance there came a loud noise of footsteps dominated by the shrill sound of the trumpets, which were being blown furiously. The space which the Barbarians had in front of them, which was full of eddies and tumult, attracted like a whirlpool; some dashed into it. Cohorts of infantry appeared; they closed up; and at the same time all the rest saw the foot-soldiers hastening up with the horseman at a gallop.

Hamilcar had, in fact, ordered the phalanx to break its sections, and the elephants, light troops, and cavalry to pass through the intervals so as to bring themselves speedily upon the wings, and so well had he calculated the distance from the Barbarians, that at the moment when they reached him, the entire Carthaginian army formed one long straight line.

In the centre bristled the phalanx, formed of syntagmata or full squares having sixteen men on each side. All the leaders of all the files appeared amid long, sharp lanceheads, which jutted out unevenly around them, for the first six ranks crossed their sarissae, holding them in the middle, and the ten lower ranks rested them upon the shoulders of their companions in succession before them. Their faces were all half hidden beneath the visors of their helmets; their right legs were all covered with bronze knemids; broad cylindrical shields reached down to their knees; and the horrible quadrangular mass moved in a single body, and seemed to live like an animal and work like a machine. Two cohorts of elephants flanked it in regular array; quivering, they shook off the splinters of the arrows that clung to their black skins. The Indians, squatting on their withers among the tufts of white feathers, restrained them with their spoon-headed harpoons, while the men in the towers, who were hidden up to their shoulders, moved about iron distaffs furnished with lighted tow on the edges of their large bended bows. Right and left of the elephants hovered the slingers, each with a sling around his loins, a second on his head, and a third in his right hand. Then came the Clinabarians, each flanked by a Negro, and pointing their lances between the ears of their horses, which, like themselves, were completely covered with gold. Afterwards, at intervals, came the light armed soldiers with shields of lynx skin, beyond which projected the points of the javelins which they held in their left hands; while the Tarentines, each having two coupled horses, relieved this wall of soldiers at its two extremities.

The army of the Barbarians, on the contrary, had not been able to preserve its

The army of the Barbarians, on the contrary, had not been able to preserve its line. Undulations and blanks were to be found through its extravagant length; all were panting and out of breath with their running.

The phalanx moved heavily along with thrusts from all its sarissae; and the too slender line of the Mercenaries soon yielded in the centre beneath the enormous weight.

Then the Carthaginian wings expanded in order to fall upon them, the elephants following. The phalanx, with obliquely pointed lances, cut through the Barbarians; there were two enormous, struggling bodies; and the wings with slings and arrows beat them back upon the phalangites. There was no cavalry to get rid of them, except two hundred Numidians operating against the right squadron of the Clinabarians. All the rest were hemmed in, and unable to extricate themselves from the lines. The peril was imminent, and the need of coming to some resolution urgent.

Spendius ordered attacks to be made simultaneously on both flanks of the phalanx so as to pass clean through it. But the narrower ranks glided below the longer ones and recovered their position, and the phalanx turned upon the Barbarians as terrible in flank as it had just been in front.

They struck at the staves of the sarissae, but the cavalry in the rear embarrassed their attack; and the phalanx, supported by the elephants, lengthened and contracted, presenting itself in the form of a square, a cone, a rhombus, a trapezium, a pyramid. A twofold internal movement went on continually from its head to its rear; for those who were at the lowest part of the files hastened up to the first ranks, while the latter, from fatigue, or on account of the wounded, fell further back. The Barbarians found themselves thronged upon the phalanx. It was impossible for it to advance; there was, as it were, an ocean wherein leaped red crests and scales of brass, while the bright shields rolled like silver foam. Sometimes broad currents would descend from one extremity to the other, and then go up again, while a heavy mass remained motionless in the centre. The lances dipped and rose alternately. Elsewhere there was so quick a play of naked swords that only the points were visible, while turmae of cavalry formed wide circles which closed again like whirlwinds behind them.

Above the voices of the captains, the ringing of clarions and the grating of tyres, bullets of lead and almonds of clay whistled through the air, dashing the sword from the hand or the brain out of the skull. The wounded, sheltering themselves with one arm beneath their shields, pointed their swords by resting the pommels on the ground, while others, lying in pools of blood, would turn and bite the heels of those above them. The multitude was so compact, the dust so thick, and the tumult so great that it was impossible to distinguish anything; the cowards who offered to surrender were not even heard. Those whose hands the cowards who offered to surrender were not even heard. Those whose hands were empty clasped one another close; breasts cracked against cuirasses, and corpses hung with head thrown back between a pair of contracted arms. There was a company of sixty Umbrians who, firm on their hams, their pikes before their eyes, immovable and grinding their teeth, forced two syntagmata to recoil simultaneously. Some Epirote shepherds ran upon the left squadron of the Clinabarians, and whirling their staves, seized the horses by the man; the animals threw their riders and fled across the plain. The Punic slingers scattered here and there stood gaping. The phalanx began to waver, the captains ran to and fro in distraction, the rearmost in the files were pressing upon the soldiers, and the Barbarians had reformed; they were recovering; the victory was theirs.

But a cry, a terrible cry broke forth, a roar of pain and wrath: it came from the seventy-two elephants which were rushing on in double line, Hamilcar having waited until the Mercenaries were massed together in one spot to let them loose against them; the Indians had goaded them so vigorously that blood was trickling down their broad ears. Their trunks, which were smeared with mimium, were stretched straight out in the air like red serpents; their breasts were furnished with spears and their backs with cuirasses; their tusks were lengthened with steel blades curved like sabres, — and to make them more ferocious they had been intoxicated with a mixture of pepper, wine, and incense. They shook their necklaces of bells, and shrieked; and the elephantarchs bent their heads beneath the stream of phalaricas which was beginning to fly from the tops of the towers.

In order to resist them the better the Barbarians rushed forward in a compact crowd; the elephants flung themselves impetuously upon the centre of it. The spurs on their breasts, like ships' prows, clove through the cohorts, which flowed surging back. They stifled the men with their trunks, or else snatching them up from the ground delivered them over their heads to the soldiers in the towers; with their tusks they disembowelled them, and hurled them into the air, and long entrails hung from their ivory fangs like bundles of rope from a mast. The Barbarians strove to blind them, to hamstring them; others would slip beneath their bodies, bury a sword in them up to the hilt, and perish crushed to death; the most intrepid clung to their straps; they would go on sawing the leather amid flames, bullets, and arrows, and the wicker tower would fall like a tower of stone. Fourteen of the animals on the extreme right, irritated by their wounds, turned upon the second rank; the Indians seized mallet and chisel, applied the latter to a joint in the head, and with all their might struck a great blow.

Down fell the huge beasts, falling one above another. It was like a mountain; and upon the heap of dead bodies and armour a monstrous elephant, called "The Fury of Baal," which had been caught by the leg in some chains, stood howling until the evening with an arrow in its eye.

The others, however, like conquerors, delighting in extermination, overthrew, crushed, stamped, and raged against the corpses and the debris. To repel the maniples in serried circles around them, they turned about on their hind feet as they advanced, with a continual rotatory motion. The Carthaginians felt their energy increase, and the battle begin again.

The Barbarians were growing weak; some Greek hoplites threw away all their arms, and terror seized upon the rest. Spendius was seen stooping upon his dromedary, and spurring it on the shoulders with two javelins. Then they all rushed away from the wings and ran towards Utica.

The Clinabarians, whose horses were exhausted, did not try to overtake them. The Ligurians, who were weakened by thirst, cried out for an advance towards the river. But the Carthaginians, who were posted in the centre of the syntagmata, and had suffered less, stamped their feet with longing for the vengeance which was flying from them; and they were already darting forward in pursuit of the Mercenaries when Hamilcar appeared.

He held in his spotted and sweat-covered horse with silver reins. The bands fastened to the horns on his helmet flapped in the wind behind him, and he had placed his oval shield beneath his left thigh. With a motion of his triple-pointed pike he checked the army.

The Tarentines leaped quickly upon their spare horses, and set off right and left towards the river and towards the town.

The phalanx exterminated all the remaining Barbarians at leisure. When the swords appeared they would stretch out their throats and close their eyelids. Others defended themselves to the last, and were knocked down from a distance with flints like mad dogs. Hamilcar had desired the taking of prisoners, but the Carthaginians obeyed him grudgingly, so much pleasure did they derive from plunging their swords into the bodies of the Barbarians. As they were too hot they set about their work with bare arms like mowers; and when they desisted to take breath they would follow with their eyes a horseman galloping across the country after a fleeing soldier. He would succeed in seizing him by the hair, hold him thus for a while, and then fell him with a blow of his axe.

Night fell. Carthaginians and Barbarians had disappeared. The elephants which had taken to flight roamed in the horizon with their fired towers. These burned here and there in the darkness like beacons nearly half lost in the mist; and no movement could be discerned in the plain save the undulation of the river, which was heaped with corpses, and was drifting them away to the sea.

Two hours afterwards Matho arrived. He caught sight in the starlight of long, uneven heaps lying upon the ground.

They were files of Barbarians. He stooped down; all were dead. He called into the distance, but no voice replied.

That very morning he had left Hippo-Zarytus with his soldiers to march upon Carthage. At Utica the army under Spendius had just set out, and the inhabitants were beginning to fire the engines. All had fought desperately. But, the tumult which was going on in the direction of the bridge increasing in an incomprehensible fashion, Matho had struck across the mountain by the shortest road, and as the Barbarians were fleeing over the plain he had encountered nobody.

Facing him were little pyramidal masses rearing themselves in the shade, and on this side of the river and closer to him were motionless lights on the surface of the ground. In fact the Carthaginians had fallen back behind the bridge, and to deceive the Barbarians the Suffet had stationed numerous posts upon the other bank.

Matho, still advancing, thought that he could distinguish Punic engines, for horses' heads which did not stir appeared in the air fixed upon the tops of piles of staves which could not be seen; and further off he could hear a great clamour, a noise of songs, and clashing of cups.

Then, not knowing where he was nor how to find Spendius, assailed with anguish, scared, and lost in the darkness, he returned more impetuously by the same road. The dawn as growing grey when from the top of the mountain he perceived the town with the carcases of the engines blackened by the flames and looking like giant skeletons leaning against the walls.

All was peaceful amid extraordinary silence and heaviness. Among his soldiers on the verge of the tents men were sleeping nearly naked, each upon his back, or with his forehead against his arm which was supported by his cuirass. Some were unwinding bloodstained bandages from their legs. Those who were doomed to die rolled their heads about gently; others dragged themselves along and brought them drink. The sentries walked up and down along the narrow paths in order to warm themselves, or stood in a fierce attitude with their faces turned towards the horizon, and their pikes on their shoulders. Matho found Spendius sheltered beneath a rag of canvas, supported by two sticks set in the ground, his knee in his hands and his head cast down.

They remained for a long time without speaking.

At last Matho murmured: "Conquered!"

Spendius rejoined in a gloomy voice: "Yes, conquered!"

And to all questions he replied by gestures of despair.

Meanwhile sighs and death-rattles reached them. Matho partially opened the canvas. Then the sight of the soldiers reminded him of another disaster on the same spot, and he ground his teeth: "Wretch! once already — "

Spendius interrupted him: "You were not there either."

"It is a curse!" exclaimed Matho. "Nevertheless, in the end I will get at him! I will conquer him! I will slay him! Ah! if I had been there! — " The thought of having missed the battle rendered him even more desperate than the defeat. He snatched up his sword and threw it upon the ground. "But how did the Carthaginians beat you?"

The former slave began to describe the manoeuvres. Matho seemed to see them, and he grew angry. The army from Utica ought to have taken Hamilcar in the rear instead of hastening to the bridge.

"Ah! I know!" said Spendius.

"You ought to have made your ranks twice as deep, avoided exposing the velites against the phalanx, and given free passage to the elephants. Everything might have been recovered at the last moment; there was no necessity to fly."

Spendius replied:

"I saw him pass along in his large red cloak, with uplifted arms and higher than the dust, like an eagle flying upon the flank of the cohorts; and at every nod they closed up or darted forward; the throng carried us towards each other; he looked at me, and I felt the cold steel as it were in my heart."

"He selected the day, perhaps?" whispered Matho to himself.

They questioned each other, trying to discover what it was that had brought the Suffet just when circumstances were most unfavourable. They went on to talk over the situation, and Spendius, to extenuate his fault, or to revive his courage, asserted that some hope still remained.

"And if there be none, it matters not!" said Matho; "alone, I will carry on the war!"

"And I too!" exclaimed the Greek, leaping up; he strode to and fro, his eyes sparkling, and a strange smile wrinkled his jackal face.

"We will make a fresh start; do not leave me again! I am not made for battles in the sunlight — the flashing of swords troubles my sight; it is a disease, I lived too long in the ergastulum. But give me walls to scale at night, and I will enter the citadels, and the corpses shall be cold before cock-crow! Show me any one, anything, an enemy, a treasure, a woman, — a woman," he repeated, "were she a king's daughter, and I will quickly bring your desire to your feet. You reproach me for having lost the battle against Hanno, nevertheless I won it back again. Confess it! my herd of swine did more for us than a phalanx of Spartans." And yielding to the need that he felt of exalting himself and taking his revenge, he enumerated all that he had done for the cause of the Mercenaries. "It was I who urged on the Gaul in the Suffet's gardens! And later, at Sicca, I maddened them all with fear of the Republic! Gisco was sending them back, but I prevented the interpreters speaking. Ah! how their tongues hung out of their mouths! do you remember? I brought you into Carthage; I stole the zaimph. I led you to her. I will do more yet: you shall see!" He burst out laughing like a madman.

Matho regarded him with gaping eyes. He felt in a measure uncomfortable in the presence of this man, who was at once so cowardly and so terrible.

The Greek resumed in jovial tones and cracking his fingers:

"Evoe! Sun after run! I have worked in the quarries, and I have drunk Massic wine beneath a golden awning in a vessel of my own like a Ptolemaeus. Calamity should help to make us cleverer. By dint of work we may make fortune bend. She loves politicians. She will yield!"

He returned to Matho and took him by the arm.

"Master, at present the Carthaginians are sure of their victory. You have quite an army which has not fought, and your men obey YOU. Place them in the front: mine will follow to avenge themselves. I have still three thousand Carians, twelve hundred slingers and archers, whole cohorts! A phalanx even might be formed; let us return!"

Matho, who had been stunned by the disaster, had hitherto thought of no means of repairing it. He listened with open mouth, and the bronze plates which circled his sides rose with the leapings of his heart. He picked up his sword, crying:

"Follow me; forward!"

But when the scouts returned, they announced that the Carthaginian dead had been carried off, that the bridge was in ruins, and that Hamilcar had disappeared.

CHAPTER IX

IN THE FIELD

Hamilcar had thought that the Mercenaries would await him at Utica, or that they would return against him; and finding his forces insufficient to make or to sustain an attack, he had struck southwards along the right bank of the river, thus protecting himself immediately from a surprise.

He intended first to wink at the revolt of the tribes and to detach them all from the cause of the Barbarians; then when they were quite isolated in the midst of the provinces he would fall upon them and exterminate them.

In fourteen days he pacified the region comprised between Thouccaber and Utica, with the towns of Tignicabah, Tessourah, Vacca, and others further to the west. Zounghar built in the mountains, Assoura celebrated for its temple, Djeraado fertile in junipers, Thapitis, and Hagour sent embassies to him. The country people came with their hands full of provisions, implored his protection, kissed his feet and those of the soldiers, and complained of the Barbarians. Some came to offer him bags containing heads of Mercenaries killed, so they said, by themselves, but which they had cut off corpses; for many had lost themselves in their flight, and were found dead here and there beneath the olive trees and among the vines.

On the morrow of his victory, Hamilcar, to dazzle the people, had sent to Carthage the two thousand captives taken on the battlefield. They arrived in long companies of one hundred men each, all with their arms fastened behind their backs with a bar of bronze which caught them at the nape of the neck, and the wounded, bleeding as they still were, running also along; horsemen followed them, driving them on with blows of the whip.

Then there was a delirium of joy! People repeated that there were six thousand Barbarians killed; the others would not hold out, and the war was finished; they embraced one another in the streets, and rubbed the faces of the Pataec Gods with butter and cinnamomum to thank them. These, with their big eyes, their big bodies, and their arms raised as high as the shoulder, seemed to live beneath their freshened paint, and to participate in the cheerfulness of the people. The rich left their doors open; the city resounded with the noise of the timbrels; the temples were illuminated every night, and the servants of the goddess went down to Malqua and set up stages of sycamore-wood at the corners of the cross-ways, and prostituted themselves there. Lands were voted to the conquerors holocausts to Melkarth three hundred gold crowns to the Suffet the conquerors, holocausts to Melkarth, three hundred gold crowns to the Suffet, and his partisans proposed to decree to him new prerogatives and honours.

He had begged the Ancients to make overtures to Autaritus for exchanging all the Barbarians, if necessary, for the aged Gisco, and the other Carthaginians detained like him. The Libyans and Nomads composing the army under Autaritus knew scarcely anything of these Mercenaries, who were men of Italiote or Greek race; and the offer by the Republic of so many Barbarians for so few Carthaginians, showed that the value of the former was nothing and that of the latter considerable. They dreaded a snare. Autaritus refused.

Then the Ancients decreed the execution of the captives, although the Suffet had written to them not to put them to death. He reckoned upon incorporating the best of them with his own troops and of thus instigating defections. But hatred swept away all circumspection.

The two thousand Barbarians were tied to the stelae of the tombs in the Mappalian quarter; and traders, scullions, embroiderers, and even women, — the widows of the dead with their children — all who would, came to kill them with arrows. They aimed slowly at them, the better to prolong their torture, lowering the weapon and then raising it in turn; and the multitude pressed forward howling. Paralytics had themselves brought thither in hand-barrows; many took the precaution of bringing their food, and remained on the spot until the evening; others passed the night there. Tents had been set up in which drinking went on. Many gained large sums by hiring out bows.

Then all these crucified corpses were left upright, looking like so many red statues on the tombs, and the excitement even spread to the people of Malqua, who were the descendants of the aboriginal families, and were usually indifferent to the affairs of their country. Out of gratitude for the pleasure it had been giving them they now interested themselves in its fortunes, and felt that they were Carthaginians, and the Ancients thought it a clever thing to have thus blended the entire people in a single act of vengeance.

The sanction of the gods was not wanting; for crows alighted from all quarters of the sky. They wheeled in the air as they flew with loud hoarse cries, and formed a huge cloud rolling continually upon itself. It was seen from Clypea, Rhades, and the promontory of Hermaeum. Sometimes it would suddenly burst asunder, its black spirals extending far away, as an eagle clove the centre of it, and then departed again; here and there on the terraces the domes, the peaks of the obelisks, and the pediments of the temples there were big birds holding human fragments in their reddened beaks.

Owing to the smell the Carthaginians resigned themselves to unbind the corpses. A few of them were burnt; the rest were thrown into the sea, and the waves, driven by the north wind, deposited them on the shore at the end of the gulf before the camp of Autaritus.

This punishment had no doubt terrified the Barbarians, for from the top of Eschmoun they could be seen striking their tents, collecting their flocks, and hoisting their baggage upon asses, and on the evening of the same day the entire army withdrew.

It was to march to and fro between the mountain of the Hot Springs and Hippo-Zarytus, and so debar the Suffet from approaching the Tyrian towns, and from the possibility of a return to Carthage.

Meanwhile the two other armies were to try to overtake him in the south, Spendius in the east, and Matho in the west, in such a way that all three should unite to surprise and entangle him. Then they received a reinforcement which they had not looked for: Narr' Havas appeared with three hundred camels laden with bitumen, twenty-five elephants, and six thousand horsemen.

To weaken the Mercenaries the Suffet had judged it prudent to occupy his attention at a distance in his own kingdom. From the heart of Carthage he had come to an understanding with Masgaba, a Gaetulian brigand who was seeking to found an empire. Strengthened by Punic money, the adventurer had raised the Numidian States with promises of freedom. But Narr' Havas, warned by his nurse's son, had dropped into Cirta, poisoned the conquerors with the water of the cisterns, struck off a few heads, set all right again, and had just arrived against the Suffet more furious than the Barbarians.

The chiefs of the four armies concerted the arrangements for the war. It would be a long one, and everything must be foreseen.

It was agreed first to entreat the assistance of the Romans, and this mission was offered to Spendius, but as a fugitive he dared not undertake it. Twelve men from the Greek colonies embarked at Annaba in a sloop belonging to the Numidians. Then the chiefs exacted an oath of complete obedience from all the Barbarians. Every day the captains inspected clothes and boots; the sentries were even forbidden to use a shield, for they would often lean it against their lance and fall asleep as they stood; those who had any baggage trailing after them were obliged to get rid of it; everything was to be carried, in Roman fashion, on the back. As a precaution against the elephants Matho instituted a corps of cataphract cavalry, men and horses being hidden beneath cuirasses of hippopotamus skin bristling with nails; and to protect the horses' hoofs boots of plaited esparto-grass were made for them.

It was forbidden to pillage the villages, or to tyrannise over the inhabitants who were not of Punic race. But as the country was becoming exhausted, Matho ordered the provisions to be served out to the soldiers individually, without troubling about the women. At first the men shared with them. Many grew weak for lack of food. It was the occasion of many quarrels and invectives, many drawing away the companions of the rest by the bait or even by the promise of their own portion. Matho commanded them all to be driven away pitilessly. They took refuge in the camp of Autaritus; but the Gaulish and Libyan women forced them by their outrageous treatment to depart.

At last they came beneath the walls of Carthage to implore the protection of Ceres and Proserpine, for in Byrsa there was a temple with priests consecrated to these goddesses in expiation of the horrors formerly committed at the siege of Syracuse. The Syssitia, alleging their right to waifs and strays, claimed the youngest in order to sell them; and some fair Lacedaemonian women were taken by New Carthaginians in marriage.

A few persisted in following the armies. They ran on the flank of the syntagmata by the side of the captains. They called to their husbands, pulled them by the cloak, cursed them as they beat their breasts, and held out their little naked and weeping children at arm's length. The sight of them was unmanning the Barbarians; they were an embarrassment and a peril. Several times they were repulsed, but they came back again; Matho made the horsemen belonging to Narr' Havas charge them with the point of the lance; and on some Balearians shouting out to him that they must have women, he replied: "I have none!"

Just now he was invaded by the genius of Moloch. In spite of the rebellion of his conscience, he performed terrible deeds, imagining that he was thus obeying the voice of a god. When he could not ravage the fields, Matho would cast stones into them to render them sterile.

He urged Autaritus and Spendius with repeated messages to make haste. But the Suffet's operations were incomprehensible. He encamped at Eidous, Monchar, and Tehent successively; some scouts believed that they saw him in the neighbourhood of Ischiil, near the frontiers of Narr' Havas, and it was reported that he had crossed the river above Tebourba as though to return to Carthage. Scarcely was he in one place when he removed to another. The routes that he followed always remained unknown. The Suffet preserved his advantages without offering battle, and while pursued by the Barbarians seemed to be leading them.

These marches and counter marches were still more fatiguing to the Carthaginians, and Hamilcar's forces, receiving no reinforcements, diminished from day to day. The country people were now more backward in bringing him provisions. In every direction he encountered taciturn hesitation and hatred; and in spite of his entreaties to the Great Council no succour came from Carthage.

It was said, perhaps it was believed, that he had need of none. It was a trick, or his complaints were unnecessary; and Hanno's partisans, in order to do him an ill turn, exaggerated the importance of his victory. The troops which he commanded he was welcome to; but they were not going to supply his demands continually in that way. The war was quite burdensome enough! it had cost too much, and from pride the patricians belonging to his faction supported him but slackly.

Then Hamilcar, despairing of the Republic, took by force from the tribes all that he wanted for the war — grain, oil, wood, cattle, and men. But the inhabitants were not long in taking flight. The villages passed through were empty, and the cabins were ransacked without anything being discerned in them. The Punic army was soon encompassed by a terrible solitude.

The Carthaginians, who were furious, began to sack the provinces; they filled up the cisterns and fired the houses. The sparks, being carried by the wind, were scattered far off, and whole forests were on fire on the mountains; they bordered the valleys with a crown of flames, and it was often necessary to wait in order to pass beyond them. Then the soldiers resumed their march over the warm ashes in the full glare of the sun.

Sometimes they would see what looked like the eyes of a tiger cat gleaming in a bush by the side of the road. This was a Barbarian crouching upon his heels, and smeared with dust, that he might not be distinguished from the colour of the foliage; or perhaps when passing along a ravine those on the wings would suddenly hear the rolling of stones, and raising their eyes would perceive a bare-footed man bounding along through the openings of the gorge.

Meanwhile Utica and Hippo-Zarytus were free since the Mercenaries were no longer besieging them. Hamilcar commanded them to come to his assistance. But not caring to compromise themselves, they answered him with vague words, with compliments and excuses.

He went up again abruptly into the North, determined to open up one of the Tyrian towns, though he were obliged to lay siege to it. He required a station on the coast, so as to be able to draw supplies and men from the islands or from Cyrene, and he coveted the harbour of Utica as being the nearest to Carthage.

The Suffet therefore left Zouitin and turned the lake of Hippo-Zarytus with circumspection. But he was soon obliged to lengthen out his regiments into column in order to climb the mountain which separates the two valleys. They were descending at sunset into its hollow, funnel-shaped summit, when they perceived on the level of the ground before them bronze she-wolves which seemed to be running across the grass.

Suddenly large plumes arose and a terrible song burst forth, accompanied by the rhythm of flutes. It was the army under Spendius; for some Campanians and Greeks, in their execration of Carthage, had assumed the ensigns of Rome. At the same time long pikes, shields of leopard's skin, linen cuirasses, and naked shoulders were seen on the left. These were the Iberians under Matho, the Lusitanians, Balearians, and Gaetulians; the horses of Narr' Havas were heard to neigh; they spread around the hill; then came the loose rabble commanded by Autaritus — Gauls, Libyans, and Nomads; while the Eaters of Uncleanness might be recognised among them by the fish bones which they wore in their hair.

Thus the Barbarians, having contrived their marches with exactness, had come together again. But themselves surprised, they remained motionless for some minutes in consultation.

The Suffet had collected his men into an orbicular mass, in such a way as to offer an equal resistance in every direction. The infantry were surrounded by their tall, pointed shields fixed close to one another in the turf. The Clinabarians were outside and the elephants at intervals further off. The Mercenaries were worn out with fatigue; it was better to wait till next day; and the Barbarians feeling sure of their victory occupied themselves the whole night in eating.

They lighted large bright fires, which, while dazzling themselves, left the Punic army below them in the shade. Hamilcar caused a trench fifteen feet broad and ten cubits deep to be dug in Roman fashion round his camp, and the earth thrown out to be raised on the inside into a parapet, on which sharp interlacing stakes were planted; and at sunrise the Mercenaries were amazed to perceive all the Carthaginians thus entrenched as if in a fortress.

They could recognise Hamilcar in the midst of the tents walking about and giving orders. His person was clad in a brown cuirass cut in little scales; he was followed by his horse, and stopped from time to time to point out something with his right arm outstretched.

Then more than one recalled similar mornings when, amid the din of clarions, he passed slowly before them, and his looks strengthened them like cups of wine. A kind of emotion overcame them. Those, on the contrary, who were not acquainted with Hamilcar, were mad with joy at having caught him.

Nevertheless if all attacked at once they would do one another mutual injury in the insufficiency of space. The Numidians might dash through; but the Clinabarians, who were protected by cuirasses, would crush them. And then how were the palisades to be crossed? As to the elephants, they were not sufficiently well trained.

"You are all cowards!" exclaimed Matho.

And with the best among them he rushed against the entrenchment. They were repulsed by a volley of stones; for the Suffet had taken their abandoned catapults on the bridge.

This want of success produced an abrupt change in the fickle minds of the

Barbarians. Their extreme bravery disappeared; they wished to conquer, but with the smallest possible risk. According to Spendius they ought to maintain carefully the position that they held, and starve out the Punic army. But the Carthaginians began to dig wells, and as there were mountains surrounding the hill, they discovered water.

From the summit of their palisade they launched arrows, earth, dung, and pebbles which they gathered from the ground, while the six catapults rolled incessantly throughout the length of the terrace.

But the springs would dry up of themselves; the provisions would be exhausted, and the catapults worn out; the Mercenaries, who were ten times as numerous, would triumph in the end. The Suffet devised negotiations so as to gain time, and one morning the Barbarians found a sheep's skin covered with writing within their lines. He justified himself for his victory: the Ancients had forced him into the war, and to show them that he was keeping his word, he offered them the pillaging of Utica or Hippo-Zarytus at their choice; in conclusion, Hamilcar declared that he did not fear them because he had won over some traitors, and thanks to them would easily manage the rest.

The Barbarians were disturbed: this proposal of immediate booty made them consider; they were apprehensive of treachery, not suspecting a snare in the Suffet's boasting, and they began to look upon one another with mistrust. Words and steps were watched; terrors awaked them in the night. Many forsook their companions and chose their army as fancy dictated, and the Gauls with Autaritus went and joined themselves with the men of Cisalpine Gaul, whose language they understood.

The four chiefs met together every evening in Matho's tent, and squatting round a shield, attentively moved backwards and forwards the little wooden figures invented by Pyrrhus for the representation of manoeuvres. Spendius would demonstrate Hamilcar's resources, and with oaths by all the gods entreat that the opportunity should not be wasted. Matho would walk about angry and gesticulating. The war against Carthage was his own personal affair; he was indignant that the others should interfere in it without being willing to obey him. Autaritus would divine his speech from his countenance and applaud. Narr' Havas would elevate his chin to mark his disdain; there was not a measure he did not consider fatal; and he had ceased to smile. Sighs would escape him as though he were thrusting back sorrow for an impossible dream, despair for an abortive enterprise.

While the Barbarians deliberated in uncertainty, the Suffet increased his defences: he had a second trench dug within the palisades, a second wall raised, and wooden towers constructed at the corners; and his slaves went as far as the middle of the outposts to drive caltrops into the ground. But the elephants middle of the outposts to drive caltrops into the ground. But the elephants, whose allowances were lessened, struggled in their shackles. To economise the grass he ordered the Clinabarians to kill the least strong among the stallions. A few refused to do so, and he had them decapitated. The horses were eaten. The recollection of this fresh meat was a source of great sadness to them in the days that followed.

From the bottom of the ampitheatre in which they were confined they could see the four bustling camps of the Barbarians all around them on the heights. Women moved about with leathern bottles on their heads, goats strayed bleating beneath the piles of pikes; sentries were being relieved, and eating was going on around tripods. In fact, the tribes furnished them abundantly with provisions, and they did not themselves suspect how much their inaction alarmed the Punic army.

On the second day the Carthaginians had remarked a troop of three hundred men apart from the rest in the camp of the nomads. These were the rich who had been kept prisoners since the beginning of the war. Some Libyans ranged them along the edge of the trench, took their station behind them, and hurled javelins, making themselves a rampart of their bodies. The wretched creatures could scarcely be recognised, so completely were their faces covered with vermin and filth. Their hair had been plucked out in places, leaving bare the ulcers on their heads, and they were so lean and hideous that they were like mummies in tattered shrouds. A few trembled and sobbed with a stupid look; the rest cried out to their friends to fire upon the Barbarians. There was one who remained quite motionless with face cast down, and without speaking; his long white beard fell to his chain-covered hands; and the Carthaginians, feeling as it were the downfall of the Republic in the bottom of their hearts, recognised Gisco. Although the place was a dangerous one they pressed forward to see him. On his head had been placed a grotesque tiara of hippopotamus leather incrusted with pebbles. It was Autaritus's idea; but it was displeasing to Matho.

Hamilcar in exasperation, and resolved to cut his way through in one way or another, had the palisades opened; and the Carthaginians went at a furious rate half way up the hill or three hundred paces. Such a flood of Barbarians descended upon them that they were driven back to their lines. One of the guards of the Legion who had remained outside was stumbling among the stones. Zarxas ran up to him, knocked him down, and plunged a dagger into his throat; he drew it out, threw himself upon the wound — and gluing his lips to it with mutterings of joy, and startings which shook him to the heels, pumped up the blood by breastfuls; then he quietly sat down upon the corpse, raised his face with his neck thrown back the better to breathe in the air, like a hind that has just drunk at a mountain stream, and in a shrill voice began to sing a Balearic song, a drunk at a mountain stream, and in a shrill voice began to sing a Balearic song, a vague melody full of prolonged modulations, with interruptions and alternations like echoes answering one another in the mountains; he called upon his dead brothers and invited them to a feast; — then he let his hands fall between his legs, slowly bent his head, and wept. This atrocious occurrence horrified the Barbarians, especially the Greeks.

From that time forth the Carthaginians did not attempt to make any sally; and they had no thought of surrender, certain as they were that they would perish in tortures.

Nevertheless the provisions, in spite of Hamilcar's carefulness, diminished frightfully. There was not left per man more than ten k'hommers of wheat, three hins of millet, and twelve betzas of dried fruit. No more meat, no more oil, no more salt food, and not a grain of barley for the horses, which might be seen stretching down their wasted necks seeking in the dust for blades of trampled straw. Often the sentries on vedette upon the terrace would see in the moonlight a dog belonging to the Barbarians coming to prowl beneath the entrenchment among the heaps of filth; it would be knocked down with a stone, and then, after a descent had been effected along the palisades by means of the straps of a shield, it would be eaten without a word. Sometimes horrible barkings would be heard and the man would not come up again. Three phalangites, in the fourth dilochia of the twelfth syntagmata, killed one another with knives in a dispute about a rat.

All regretted their families, and their houses; the poor their hive-shaped huts, with the shells on the threshold and the hanging net, and the patricians their large halls filled with bluish shadows, where at the most indolent hour of the day they used to rest listening to the vague noise of the streets mingled with the rustling of the leaves as they stirred in their gardens; — to go deeper into the thought of this, and to enjoy it more, they would half close their eyelids, only to be roused by the shock of a wound. Every minute there was some engagement, some fresh alarm; the towers were burning, the Eaters of Uncleanness were leaping across the palisades; their hands would be struck off with axes; others would hasten up; an iron hail would fall upon the tents. Galleries of rushen hurdles were raised as a protection against the projectiles. The Carthaginians shut themselves up within them and stirred out no more.

Every day the sun coming over the hill used, after the early hours, to forsake the bottom of the gorge and leave them in the shade. The grey slopes of the ground, covered with flints spotted with scanty lichen, ascended in front and in the rear, and above their summits stretched the sky in its perpetual purity, smoother and colder to the eye than a metal cupola. Hamilcar was so indignant with Carthage that he felt inclined to throw himself among the Barbarians and with Carthage that he felt inclined to throw himself among the Barbarians and lead them against her. Moreover, the porters, sutlers, and slaves were beginning to murmur, while neither people, nor Great Council, nor any one sent as much as a hope. The situation was intolerable, especially owing to the thought that it would become worse.

At the news of the disaster Carthage had leaped, as it were, with anger and hate; the Suffet would have been less execrated if he had allowed himself to be conquered from the first.

But time and money were lacking for the hire of other Mercenaries. As to a levy of soldiers in the town, how were they to be equipped? Hamilcar had taken all the arms! and then who was to command them? The best captains were down yonder with him! Meanwhile, some men despatched by the Suffet arrived in the streets with shouts. The Great Council were roused by them, and contrived to make them disappear.

It was an unnecessary precaution; every one accused Barca of having behaved with slackness. He ought to have annihilated the Mercenaries after his victory. Why had he ravaged the tribes? The sacrifices already imposed had been heavy enough! and the patricians deplored their contributions of fourteen shekels, and the Syssitia their two hundred and twenty-three thousand gold kikars; those who had given nothing lamented like the rest. The populace was jealous of the New Carthaginians, to whom he had promised full rights of citizenship; and even the Ligurians, who had fought with such intrepidity, were confounded with the Barbarians and cursed like them; their race became a crime, the proof of complicity. The traders on the threshold of their shops, the workmen passing plumb-line in hand, the vendors of pickle rinsing their baskets, the attendants in the vapour baths and the retailers of hot drinks all discussed the operations of the campaign. They would trace battle-plans with their fingers in the dust, and there was not a sorry rascal to be found who could not have corrected Hamilcar's mistakes.

It was a punishment, said the priests, for his long-continued impiety. He had offered no holocausts; he had not purified his troops; he had even refused to take augurs with him; and the scandal of sacrilege strengthened the violence of restrained hate, and the rage of betrayed hopes. People recalled the Sicilian disasters, and all the burden of his pride that they had borne for so long! The colleges of the pontiffs could not forgive him for having seized their treasure, and they demanded a pledge from the Great Council to crucify him should he ever return.

The heats of the month of Eloul, which were excessive in that year, were another calamity. Sickening smells rose from the borders of the Lake, and were wafted through the air together with the fumes of the aromatics that eddied at the corners of the streets. The sounds of hymns were constantly heard. Crowds of people occupied the staircases of the temples; all the walls were covered with black veils; tapers burnt on the brows of the Pataec Gods, and the blood of camels slain for sacrifice ran along the flights of stairs forming red cascades upon the steps. Carthage was agitated with funereal delirium. From the depths of the narrowest lanes, and the blackest dens, there issued pale faces, men with viper-like profiles and grinding their teeth. The houses were filled with the women's piercing shrieks, which, escaping through the gratings, caused those who stood talking in the squares to turn round. Sometimes it was thought that the Barbarians were arriving; they had been seen behind the mountain of the Hot Springs; they were encamped at Tunis; and the voices would multiply and swell, and be blended into one single clamour. Then universal silence would reign, some remaining where they had climbed upon the frontals of the buildings, screening their eyes with their open hand, while the rest lay flat on their faces at the foot of the ramparts straining their ears. When their terror had passed off their anger would begin again. But the conviction of their own impotence would soon sink them into the same sadness as before.

It increased every evening when all ascended the terraces, and bowing down nine times uttered a loud cry in salutation of the sun, as it sank slowly behind the lagoon, and then suddenly disappeared among the mountains in the direction of the Barbarians.

They were waiting for the thrice holy festival when, from the summit of a funeral pile, an eagle flew heavenwards as a symbol of the resurrection of the year, and a message from the people to their Baal; they regarded it as a sort of union, a method of connecting themselves with the might of the Sun. Moreover, filled as they now were with hatred, they turned frankly towards homicidal Moloch, and all forsook Tanith. In fact, Rabetna, having lost her veil, was as if she had been despoiled of part of her virtue. She denied the beneficence of her waters, she had abandoned Carthage; she was a deserter, an enemy. Some threw stones at her to insult her. But many pitied her while they inveighed against her; she was still beloved, and perhaps more deeply than she had been.

All their misfortunes came, therefore, from the loss of the zaimph. Salammbo had indirectly participated in it; she was included in the same ill will; she must be punished. A vague idea of immolation spread among the people. To appease the Baalim it was without doubt necessary to offer them something of incalculable worth, a being handsome, young, virgin, of old family, a descendant of the gods, a human star. Every day the gardens of Megara were invaded by strange men; the slaves, trembling on their own account, dared not resist them. Nevertheless, they did not pass beyond the galley staircase. They remained below with their eyes raised to the highest terrace; they were waiting for Salammbo, and they would cry out for hours against her like dogs baying at the moon.

CHAPTER X

THE SERPENT

These clamourings of the populace did not alarm Hamilcar's daughter. She was disturbed by loftier anxieties: her great serpent, the black python, was drooping; and in the eyes of the Carthaginians, the serpent was at once a national and a private fetish. It was believed to be the offspring of the dust of the earth, since it emerges from its depths and has no need of feet to traverse it; its mode of progression called to mind the undulations of rivers, its temperature the ancient, viscous, and fecund darkness, and the orbit which it describes when biting its tail the harmony of the planets, and the intelligence of Eschmoun.

Salammbo's serpent had several times already refused the four live sparrows which were offered to it at the full moon and at every new moon. Its handsome skin, covered like the firmament with golden spots upon a perfectly black ground, was now yellow, relaxed, wrinkled, and too large for its body. A cottony mouldiness extended round its head; and in the corners of its eyelids might be seen little red specks which appeared to move. Salammbo would approach its silver-wire basket from time to time, and would draw aside the purple curtains, the lotus leaves, and the bird's down; but it was continually rolled up upon itself, more motionless than a withered bind-weed; and from looking at it she at last came to feel a kind of spiral within her heart, another serpent, as it were, mounting up to her throat by degrees and strangling her.

She was in despair of having seen the zaimph, and yet she felt a sort of joy, an intimate pride at having done so. A mystery shrank within the splendour of its folds; it was the cloud that enveloped the gods, and the secret of the universal existence, and Salammbo, horror-stricken at herself, regretted that she had not raised it.

She was almost always crouching at the back of her apartment, holding her bended left leg in her hands, her mouth half open, her chin sunk, her eye fixed. She recollected her father's face with terror; she wished to go away into the mountains of Phoenicia, on a pilgrimage to the temple of Aphaka, where Tanith descended in the form of a star; all kinds of imaginings attracted her and terrified her; moreover, a solitude which every day became greater encompassed her. She did not even know what Hamilcar was about.

Wearied at last with her thoughts she would rise, and trailing along her little sandals whose soles clacked upon her heels at every step, she would walk at random through the large silent room. The amethysts and topazes of the ceiling random through the large silent room. The amethysts and topazes of the ceiling made luminous spots quiver here and there, and Salammbo as she walked would turn her head a little to see them. She would go and take the hanging amphoras by the neck; she would cool her bosom beneath the broad fans, or perhaps amuse herself by burning cinnamomum in hollow pearls. At sunset Taanach would draw back the black felt lozenges that closed the openings in the wall; then her doves, rubbed with musk like the doves of Tanith, suddenly entered, and their pink feet glided over the glass pavement, amid the grains of barley which she threw to them in handfuls like a sower in a field. But on a sudden she would burst into sobs and lie stretched on the large bed of ox-leather straps without moving, repeating a word that was ever the same, with open eyes, pale as one dead, insensible, cold; and yet she could hear the cries of the apes in the tufts of the palm trees, with the continuous grinding of the great wheel which brought a flow of pure water through the stories into the porphyry centre-basin.

Sometimes for several days she would refuse to eat. She could see in a dream troubled stars wandering beneath her feet. She would call Schahabarim, and when he came she had nothing to say to him.

She could not live without the relief of his presence. But she rebelled inwardly against this domination; her feeling towards the priest was one at once of terror, jealousy, hatred, and a species of love, in gratitude for the singular voluptuousness which she experienced by his side.

He had recognised the influence of Rabbet, being skilful to discern the gods who send diseases; and to cure Salammbo he had her apartment watered with lotions of vervain, and maidenhair; she ate mandrakes every morning; she slept with her head on a cushion filled with aromatics blended by the pontiffs; he had even employed baaras, a fiery-coloured root which drives back fatal geniuses into the North; lastly, turning towards the polar star, he murmured thrice the mysterious name of Tanith; but Salammbo still suffered and her anguish deepened.

No one in Carthage was so learned as he. In his youth he had studied at the College of the Mogbeds, at Borsippa, near Babylon; had then visited Samothrace, Pessinus, Ephesus, Thessaly, Judaea, and the temples of the Nabathae, which are lost in the sands; and had travelled on foot along the banks of the Nile from the cataracts to the sea. Shaking torches with veil-covered face, he had cast a black cock upon a fire of sandarach before the breast of the Sphinx, the Father of Terror. He had descended into the caverns of Proserpine; he had seen the five hundred pillars of the labyrinth of Lemnos revolve, and the candelabrum of Tarentum, which bore as many sconces on its shaft as there are days in the year, shine in its splendour; at times he received Greeks by night in order to question them. The constitution of the world disquieted him no less than the nature of the gods; he had observed the equinoxes with the armils placed in the portico of Alexandria, and accompanied the bematists of Evergetes, who measure the sky by calculating the number of their steps, as far as Cyrene; so that there was now growing in his thoughts a religion of his own, with no distinct formula, and on that very account full of infatuation and fervour. He no longer believed that the earth was formed like a fir-cone; he believed it to be round, and eternally falling through immensity with such prodigious speed that its fall was not perceived.

From the position of the sun above the moon he inferred the predominance of Baal, of whom the planet itself is but the reflection and figure; moreover, all that he saw in terrestrial things compelled him to recognise the male exterminating principle as supreme. And then he secretly charged Rabbet with the misfortune of his life. Was it not for her that the grand-pontiff had once advanced amid the tumult of cymbals, and with a patera of boiling water taken from him his future virility? And he followed with a melancholy gaze the men who were disappearing with the priestesses in the depths of the turpentine trees.

His days were spent in inspecting the censers, the gold vases, the tongs, the rakes for the ashes of the altar, and all the robes of the statues down to the bronze bodkin that served to curl the hair of an old Tanith in the third aedicule near the emerald vine. At the same hours he would raise the great hangings of the same swinging doors; would remain with his arms outspread in the same attitude; or prayed prostrate on the same flag-stones, while around him a people of priests moved barefooted through the passages filled with an eternal twilight.

But Salammbo was in the barrenness of his life like a flower in the cleft of a sepulchre. Nevertheless he was hard upon her, and spared her neither penances nor bitter words. His condition established, as it were, the equality of a common sex between them, and he was less angry with the girl for his inability to possess her than for finding her so beautiful, and above all so pure. Often he saw that she grew weary of following his thought. Then he would turn away sadder than before; he would feel himself more forsaken, more empty, more alone.

Strange words escaped him sometimes, which passed before Salammbo like broad lightnings illuminating the abysses. This would be at night on the terrace when, both alone, they gazed upon the stars, and Carthage spread below under their feet, with the gulf and the open sea dimly lost in the colour of the darkness.

He would set forth to her the theory of the souls that descend upon the earth, following the same route as the sun through the signs of the zodiac. With outstretched arm he showed the gate of human generation in the Ram, and that of the return to the gods in Capricorn; and Salammbo strove to see them, for she took these conceptions for realities; she accepted pure symbols and even manners of speech as being true in themselves, a distinction not always very clear even to the priest.

"The souls of the dead," said he, "resolve themselves into the moon, as their bodies do into the earth. Their tears compose its humidity; 'tis a dark abode full of mire, and wreck, and tempest."

She asked what would become of her then.

"At first you will languish as light as a vapour hovering upon the waves; and after more lengthened ordeals and agonies, you will pass into the forces of the sun, the very source of Intelligence!"

He did not speak, however, of Rabbet. Salammbo imagined that it was through some shame for his vanquished goddess, and calling her by a common name which designated the moon, she launched into blessings upon the soft and fertile planet. At last he exclaimed:

"No! no! she draws all her fecundity from the other! Do you not see her hovering about him like an amorous woman running after a man in a field?" And he exalted the virtue of light unceasingly.

Far from depressing her mystic desires, he sought, on the contrary, to excite them, and he even seemed to take joy in grieving her by the revelation of a pitiless doctrine. In spite of the pains of her love Salammbo threw herself upon it with transport.

But the more that Schahabarim felt himself in doubt about Tanith, the more he wished to believe in her. At the bottom of his soul he was arrested by remorse. He needed some proof, some manifestation from the gods, and in the hope of obtaining it the priest devised an enterprise which might save at once his country and his belief.

Thenceforward he set himself to deplore before Salammbo the sacrilege and the misfortunes which resulted from it even in the regions of the sky. Then he suddenly announced the peril of the Suffet, who was assailed by three armies under the command of Matho — for on account of the veil Matho was, in the eyes of the Carthaginians, the king, as it were, of the Barbarians, — and he added that the safety of the Republic and of her father depended upon her alone.

"Upon me!" she exclaimed. "How can I — ?"

But the priest, with a smile of disdain said:

"You will never consent!"

She entreated him. At last Schahabarim said to her:

"You must go to the Barbarians and recover the zaimph!"

She sank down upon the ebony stool, and remained with her arms stretched out between her knees and shivering in all her limbs, like a victim at the altar's foot awaiting the blow of the club. Her temples were ringing, she could see fiery circles revolving, and in her stupor she had lost the understanding of all things save one, that she was certainly going to die soon.

But if Rabbetna triumphed, if the zaimph were restored and Carthage delivered, what mattered a woman's life? thought Schahabarim. Moreover, she would perhaps obtain the veil and not perish.

He stayed away for three days; on the evening of the fourth she sent for him.

The better to inflame her heart he reported to her all the invectives howled against Hamilcar in open council; he told her that she had erred, that she owed reparation for her crime, and that Rabbetna commanded the sacrifice.

A great uproar came frequently across the Mappalian district to Megara. Schahabarim and Salammbo went out quickly, and gazed from the top of the galley staircase.

There were people in the square of Khamon shouting for arms. The Ancients would not provide them, esteeming such an effort useless; others who had set out without a general had been massacred. At last they were permitted to depart, and as a sort of homage to Moloch, or from a vague need of destruction, they tore up tall cypress trees in the woods of the temples, and having kindled them at the torches of the Kabiri, were carrying them through the streets singing. These monstrous flames advanced swaying gently; they transmitted fires to the glass balls on the crests of the temples, to the ornaments of the colossuses and the beaks of the ships, passed beyond the terraces and formed suns as it were, which rolled through the town. They descended the Acropolis. The gate of Malqua opened.

"Are you ready?" exclaimed Schahabarim, "or have you asked them to tell your father that you abandoned him?" She hid her face in her veils, and the great lights retired, sinking gradually the while to the edge of the waves.

An indeterminate dread restrained her; she was afraid of Moloch and of Matho. This man, with his giant stature, who was master of the zaimph, ruled Rabbetna as much as did Baal, and seemed to her to be surrounded by the same fulgurations; and then the souls of the gods sometimes visited the bodies of men. Did not Schahabarim in speaking of him say that she was to vanquish Moloch? They were mingled with each other; she confused them together; both of them were pursuing her.

She wished to learn the future, and approached the serpent, for auguries were drawn from the attitudes of serpents. But the basket was empty; Salammbo was disturbed.

She found him with his tail rolled round one of the silver balustrades beside the hanging bed, which he was rubbing in order to free himself from his old yellowish skin, while his body stretched forth gleaming and clear like a sword half out of the sheath.

Then on the days following, in proportion as she allowed herself to be convinced, and was more disposed to succour Tanith, the python recovered and grew; he seemed to be reviving.

The certainty that Salammbo was giving expression to the will of the gods then became established in her conscience. One morning she awoke resolved, and she asked what was necessary to make Matho restore the veil.

"To claim it," said Schahabarim.

"But if he refuses?" she rejoined.

The priest scanned her fixedly with a smile such as she had never seen.

"Yes, what is to be done?" repeated Salammbo.

He rolled between his fingers the extremities of the bands which fell from his tiara upon his shoulders, standing motionless with eyes cast down. At last seeing that she did not understand:

"You will be alone with him."

"Well?" she said.

"Alone in his tent."

"What then?"

Schahabarim bit his lips. He sought for some phrase, some circumlocution.

"If you are to die, that will be later," he said; "later! fear nothing! and whatever he may undertake to do, do not call out! do not be frightened! You will be humble, you understand, and submissive to his desire, which is ordained of heaven!"

"But the veil?"

"The gods will take thought for it," replied Schahabarim.

"Suppose you were to accompany me, O father?" she added.

"No!"

He made her kneel down, and keeping his left hand raised and his right extended, he swore in her behalf to bring back the mantle of Tanith into Carthage. With terrible imprecations she devoted herself to the gods, and each time that Schahabarim pronounced a word she falteringly repeated it.

He indicated to her all the purifications and fastings that she was to observe, and how she was to reach Matho. Moreover, a man acquainted with the routes would accompany her.

She felt as if she had been set free. She thought only of the happiness of seeing the zaimph again, and she now blessed Schahabarim for his exhortations.

It was the period at which the doves of Carthage migrated to Sicily to the mountain of Eryx and the temple of Venus. For several days before their departure they sought out and called to one another so as to collect together; at last one evening they flew away; the wind blew them along, and the big white cloud glided across the sky high above the sea.

The horizon was filled with the colour of blood. They seemed to descend gradually to the waves; then they disappeared as though swallowed up, and falling of themselves into the jaws of the sun. Salammbo, who watched them retiring, bent her head, and then Taanach, believing that she guessed her sorrow, said gently to her:

"But they will come back, Mistress."

"Yes! I know."

"And you will see them again."

"Perhaps!" she said, sighing.

She had not confided her resolve to any one; in order to carry it out with the greater discretion she sent Taanach to the suburb of Kinisdo to buy all the things that she required instead of requesting them from the stewards: vermilion, aromatics, a linen girdle, and new garments. The old slave was amazed at these preparations, without daring, however, to ask any questions; and the day, which had been fixed by Schahabarim, arrived when Salammbo was to set out.

About the twelfth hour she perceived, in the depths of the sycamore trees, a blind old man with one hand resting on the shoulder of a child who walked before him, while with the other he carried a kind of cithara of black wood against his hip. The eunuchs, slaves, and women had been scrupulously sent away; no one might know the mystery that was preparing.

Taanach kindled four tripods filled with strobus and cadamomum in the corners of the apartment; then she unfolded large Babylonian hangings, and stretched them on cords all around the room, for Salammbo did not wish to be seen even by the walls. The kinnor-player squatted behind the door and the young boy standing upright applied a reed flute to his lips. In the distance the roar of the streets was growing feebler, violet shadows were lengthening before the peristyles of the temples, and on the other side of the gulf the mountain bases, the fields of olive-trees, and the vague yellow lands undulated indefinitely, and were blended together in a bluish haze; not a sound was to be heard, and an unspeakable depression weighed in the air.

Salammbo crouched down upon the onyx step on the edge of the basin; she raised her ample sleeves, fastening them behind her shoulders, and began her ablutions in methodical fashion, according to the sacred rites.

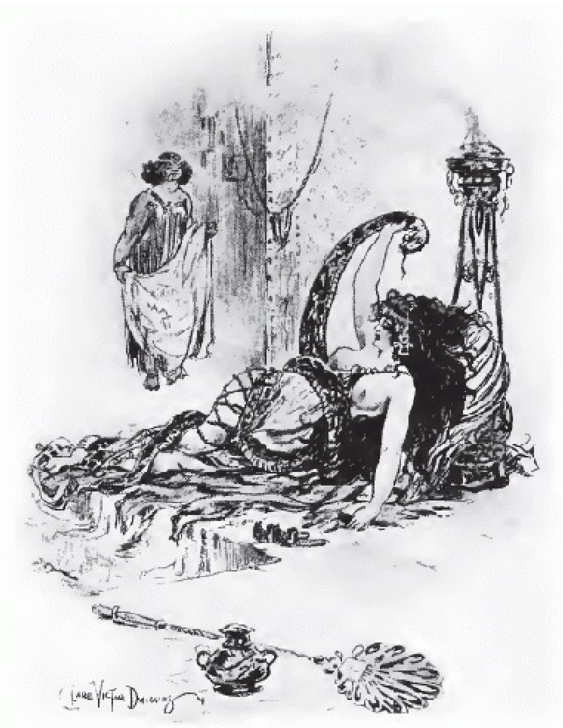
Next Taanach brought her something liquid and coagulated in an alabaster phial; it was the blood of a black dog slaughtered by barren women on a winter's night amid the rubbish of a sepulchre. She rubbed it upon her ears, her heels, and the thumb of her right hand, and even her nail remained somewhat red, as if she had crushed a fruit had crushed a fruit.

The moon rose; then the cithara and the flute began to play together.

Salammbo unfastened her earrings, her necklace, her bracelets, and her long white simar; she unknotted the band in her hair, shaking the latter for a few minutes softly over her shoulders to cool herself by thus scattering it. The music went on outside; it consisted of three notes ever the same, hurried and frenzied; the strings grated, the flute blew; Taanach kept time by striking her hands; Salammbo, with a swaying of her whole body, chanted prayers, and her garments fell one after another around her.

The heavy tapestry trembled, and the python's head appeared above the cord that supported it. The serpent descended slowly like a drop of water flowing along a wall, crawled among the scattered stuffs, and then, gluing its tail to the ground, rose perfectly erect; and his eyes, more brilliant than carbuncles, darted upon Salammbo.

A horror of cold, or perhaps a feeling of shame, at first made her hesitate. But she recalled Schahabarim's orders and advanced; the python turned downwards, and resting the centre of its body upon the nape of her neck, allowed its head and tail to hang like a broken necklace with both ends trailing to the ground. Salammbo rolled it around her sides, under her arms and between her knees; then taking it by the jaw she brought the little triangular mouth to the edge of her teeth, and half shutting her eyes, threw herself back beneath the rays of the moon. The white light seemed to envelop her in a silver mist, the prints of her humid steps shone upon the flag-stones, stars quivered in the depth of the water; it tightened upon her its black rings that were spotted with scales of gold. Salammbo panted beneath the excessive weight, her loins yielded, she felt herself dying, and with the tip of its tail the serpent gently beat her thigh; then the music becoming still it fell off again.



Taanach came back to her; and after arranging two candelabra, the lights of which burned in crystal balls filled with water, she tinged the inside of her hands with Lawsonia, spread vermilion upon her cheeks, and antimony along the edge of her eyelids, and lengthened her eyebrows with a mixture of gum, musk, ebony, and crushed legs of flies.

Salammbo seated on a chair with ivory uprights, gave herself up to the attentions of the slave. But the touchings, the odour of the aromatics, and the fasts that she had undergone, were enervating her. She became so pale that Taanach stopped.

"Go on!" said Salammbo, and bearing up against herself, she suddenly revived. Then she was seized with impatience; she urged Taanach to make haste, and the old slave grumbled:

"Well! well! Mistress! — Besides, you have no one waiting for you!"

"Yes!" said Salammbo, "some one is waiting for me."

Taanach drew back in surprise, and in order to learn more about it, said:

"What orders to you give me, Mistress? for if you are to remain away — "

But Salammbo was sobbing; the slave exclaimed:

"You are suffering! what is the matter? Do not go away! take me! When you were quite little and used to cry, I took you to my heart and made you laugh with the points of my breasts; you have drained them, Mistress!" She struck herself upon her dried-up bosom. "Now I am old! I can do nothing for you! you no longer love me! you hide your griefs from me, you despise the nurse!" And tears of tenderness and vexation flowed down her cheeks in the gashes of her of tenderness and vexation flowed down her cheeks in the gashes of her tattooing.

"No!" said Salammbo, "no, I love you! be comforted!"

With a smile like the grimace of an old ape, Taanach resumed her task. In accordance with Schahabarim's recommendations, Salammbo had ordered the slave to make her magnificent; and she was obeying her mistress with barbaric taste full at once of refinement and ingenuity.

Over a first delicate and vinous-coloured tunic she passed a second embroidered with birds' feathers. Golden scales clung to her hips, and from this broad girdle descended her blue flowing silver-starred trousers. Next Taanach put upon her a long robe made of the cloth of the country of Seres, white and streaked with green lines. On the edge of her shoulder she fastened a square of purple weighted at the hem with grains of sandastrum; and above all these garments she placed a black mantle with a flowing train; then she gazed at her, and proud of her work could not help saying:

"You will not be more beautiful on the day of your bridal!"

"My bridal!" repeated Salammbo; she was musing with her elbow resting upon the ivory chair.

But Taanach set up before her a copper mirror, which was so broad and high that she could see herself completely in it. Then she rose, and with a light touch of her finger raised a lock of her hair which was falling too low.

Her hair was covered with gold dust, was crisped in front, and hung down behind over her back in long twists ending in pearls. The brightness of the candelabra heightened the paint on her cheeks, the gold on her garments, and the whiteness of her skin; around her waist, and on her arms, hands and toes, she had such a wealth of gems that the mirror sent back rays upon her like a sun; — and Salammbo, standing by the side of Taanach, who leaned over to see her, smiled amid this dazzling display.

Then she walked to and fro embarrassed by the time that was still left.

Suddenly the crow of a cock resounded. She quickly pinned a long yellow veil upon her hair, passed a scarf around her neck, thrust her feet into blue leather boots, and said to Taanach:

"Go and see whether there is not a man with two horses beneath the myrtles."

Taanach had scarcely re-entered when she was descending the galley staircase.

"Mistress!" cried the nurse.

Salammbo turned round with one finger on her mouth as a sign for discretion and immobility.

Taanach stole softly along the prows to the foot of the terrace, and from a distance she could distinguish by the light of the moon a gigantic shadow distance she could distinguish by the light of the moon a gigantic shadow walking obliquely in the cypress avenue to the left of Salammbo, a sign which presaged death.

Taanach went up again into the chamber. She threw herself upon the ground tearing her face with her nails; she plucked out her hair, and uttered piercing shrieks with all her might.

It occurred to her that they might be heard; then she became silent, sobbing quite softly with her head in the hands and her face on the pavement.

CHAPTER XI

IN THE TENT

The man who guided Salammbo made her ascend again beyond the pharos in the direction of the Catacombs, and then go down the long suburb of Molouya, which was full of steep lanes. The sky was beginning to grow grey. Sometimes palm-wood beams jutting out from the walls obliged them to bend their heads. The two horses which were at the walk would often slip; and thus they reached the Teveste gate.

Its heavy leaves were half open; they passed through, and it closed behind them.

At first they followed the foot of the ramparts for a time, and at the height of the cisterns they took their way along the Taenia, a narrow strip of yellow earth separating the gulf from the lake and extending as far as Rhades.

No one was to be seen around Carthage, whether on the sea or in the country. The slate-coloured waves chopped softly, and the light wind blowing their foam hither and thither spotted them with white rents. In spite of all her veils, Salammbo shivered in the freshness of the morning; the motion and the open air dazed her. Then the sun rose; it preyed on the back of her head, and she involuntarily dozed a little. The two animals rambled along side by side, their feet sinking into the silent sand.

When they had passed the mountain of the Hot Springs, they went on at a more rapid rate, the ground being firmer.

But although it was the season for sowing and ploughing, the fields were as empty as the desert as far as the eye could reach. Here and there were scattered heaps of corn; at other places the barley was shedding its reddened ears. The villages showed black upon the clear horizon, with shapes incoherently carved.

From time to time a half-calcined piece of wall would be found standing on the edge of the road. The roofs of the cottages were falling in, and in the interiors might be distinguished fragments of pottery, rags of clothing, and all kinds of unrecognisable utensils and broken things. Often a creature clothed in tatters, with earthy face and flaming eyes would emerge from these ruins. But he would very quickly begin to run or would disappear into a hole. Salammbo and her guide did not stop.

Deserted plains succeeded one another. Charcoal dust which was raised by their feet behind them, stretched in unequal trails over large spaces of perfectly white soil. Sometimes they came upon little peaceful spots, where a brook white soil. Sometimes they came upon little peaceful spots, where a brook flowed amid the long grass; and as they ascended the other bank Salammbo would pluck damp leaves to cool her hands. At the corner of a wood of rose-bays her horse shied violently at the corpse of a man which lay extended on the ground.

The slave immediately settled her again on the cushions. He was one of the servants of the Temple, a man whom Schahabarim used to employ on perilous missions.

With extreme precaution he now went on foot beside her and between the horses; he would whip the animals with the end of a leathern lace wound round his arm, or would perhaps take balls made of wheat, dates, and yolks of eggs wrapped in lotus leaves from a scrip hanging against his breast, and offer them to Salammbo without speaking, and running all the time.

In the middle of the day three Barbarians clad in animals' skins crossed their path. By degrees others appeared wandering in troops of ten, twelve, or twenty-five men; many were driving goats or a limping cow. Their heavy sticks bristled with brass points; cutlasses gleamed in their clothes, which were savagely dirty, and they opened their eyes with a look of menace and amazement. As they passed some sent them a vulgar benediction; others obscene jests, and Schahabarim's man replied to each in his own idiom. He told them that this was a sick youth going to be cured at a distant temple.

However, the day was closing in. Barkings were heard, and they approached them.

Then in the twilight they perceived an enclosure of dry stones shutting in a rambling edifice. A dog was running along the top of the wall. The slave threw some pebbles at him and they entered a lofty vaulted hall.

A woman was crouching in the centre warming herself at a fire of brushwood, the smoke of which escaped through the holes in the ceiling. She was half hidden by her white hair which fell to her knees; and unwilling to answer, she muttered with idiotic look words of vengeance against the Barbarians and the Carthaginians.

The runner ferreted right and left. Then he returned to her and demanded something to eat. The old woman shook her head, and murmured with her eyes fixed upon the charcoal:

"I was the hand. The ten fingers are cut off. The mouth eats no more."

The slave showed her a handful of gold pieces. She rushed upon them, but soon resumed her immobility.

At last he placed a dagger which he had in his girdle beneath her throat. Then, trembling, she went and raised a large stone, and brought back an amphora of wine with fish from Hippo-Zarytus preserved in honey.

Salammbo turned away from this unclean food, and fell asleep on the horses' caparisons which were spread in a corner of the hall.

He awoke her before daylight.

The dog was howling. The slave went up to it quietly, and struck off its head with a single blow of his dagger. Then he rubbed the horses' nostrils with blood to revive them. The old woman cast a malediction at him from behind. Salammbo perceived this, and pressed the amulet which she wore above her heart.

They resumed their journey.

From time to time she asked whether they would not arrive soon. The road undulated over little hills. Nothing was to be heard but the grating of the grasshoppers. The sun heated the yellowed grass; the ground was all chinked with crevices which in dividing formed, as it were, monstrous paving-stones. Sometimes a viper passed, or eagles flew by; the slave still continued running. Salammbo mused beneath her veils, and in spite of the heat did not lay them aside through fear of soiling her beautiful garments.

At regular distances stood towers built by the Carthaginians for the purpose of keeping watch upon the tribes. They entered these for the sake of the shade, and then set out again.

For prudence sake they had made a wide detour the day before. But they met with no one just now; the region being a sterile one, the Barbarians had not passed that way.

Gradually the devastation began again. Sometimes a piece of mosaic would be displayed in the centre of a field, the sole remnant of a vanished mansion; and the leafless olive trees looked at a distance like large bushes of thorns. They passed through a town in which houses were burnt to the ground. Human skeletons might be seen along the walls. There were some, too, of dromedaries and mules. Half-gnawed carrion blocked the streets.

Night fell. The sky was lowering and cloudy.

They ascended again for two hours in a westerly direction, when suddenly they perceived a quantity of little flames before them.

These were shining at the bottom of an ampitheatre. Gold plates, as they displaced one another, glanced here and there. These were the cuirasses of the Clinabarians in the Punic camp; then in the neighbourhood they distinguished other and more numerous lights, for the armies of the Mercenaries, now blended together, extended over a great space.

Salammbo made a movement as though to advance. But Schahabarim's man took her further away, and they passed along by the terrace which enclosed the camp of the Barbarians. A breach became visible in it, and the slave disappeared.

A sentry was walking upon the top of the entrenchment with a bow in his hand and a pike on his shoulder.

Salammbo drew still nearer; the Barbarian knelt and a long arrow pierced the hem of her cloak. Then as she stood motionless and shrieking, he asked her what she wanted.

"To speak to Matho," she replied. "I am a fugitive from Carthage."

He gave a whistle, which was repeated at intervals further away.

Salammbo waited; her frightened horse moved round and round, sniffing.

When Matho arrived the moon was rising behind her. But she had a yellow veil with black flowers over her face, and so many draperies about her person, that it was impossible to make any guess about her. From the top of the terrace he gazed upon this vague form standing up like a phantom in the penumbrae of the evening.

At last she said to him:

"Lead me to your tent! I wish it!"

A recollection which he could not define passed through his memory. He felt his heart beating. The air of command intimidated him.

"Follow me!" he said.

The barrier was lowered, and immediately she was in the camp of the Barbarians.

It was filled with a great tumult and a great throng. Bright fires were burning beneath hanging pots; and their purpled reflections illuminating some places left others completely in the dark. There was shouting and calling; shackled horses formed long straight lines amid the tents; the latter were round and square, of leather or of canvas; there were huts of reeds, and holes in the sand such as are made by dogs. Soldiers were carting faggots, resting on their elbows on the ground, or wrapping themselves up in mats and preparing to sleep; and Salammbo's horse sometimes stretched out a leg and jumped in order to pass over them.

She remembered that she had seen them before; but their beards were longer now, their faces still blacker, and their voices hoarser. Matho, who walked before her, waved them off with a gesture of his arm which raised his red mantle. Some kissed his hands; others bending their spines approached him to ask for orders, for he was now veritable and sole chief of the Barbarians; Spendius, Autaritus, and Narr' Havas had become disheartened, and he had displayed so much audacity and obstinacy that all obeyed him.

Salammbo followed him through the entire camp. His tent was at the end, three hundred feet from Hamilcar's entrenchments.

She noticed a wide pit on the right, and it seemed to her that faces were resting against the edge of it on a level with the ground, as decapitated heads might have done. However, their eyes moved, and from these half-opened mouths groanings escaped in the Punic tongue.

Two Negroes holding resin lights stood on both sides of the door. Matho drew the canvas abruptly aside. She followed him. It was a deep tent with a pole standing up in the centre. It was lighted by a large lamp-holder shaped like a lotus and full of a yellow oil wherein floated handfuls of burning tow, and military things might be distinguished gleaming in the shade. A naked sword leaned against a stool by the side of a shield; whips of hippopotamus leather, cymbals, bells, and necklaces were displayed pell-mell on baskets of esparto-grass; a felt rug lay soiled with crumbs of black bread; some copper money was carelessly heaped upon a round stone in a corner, and through the rents in the canvas the wind brought the dust from without, together with the smell of the elephants, which might be heard eating and shaking their chains.

"Who are you?" said Matho.

She looked slowly around her without replying; then her eyes were arrested in the background, where something bluish and sparkling fell upon a bed of palm-branches.

She advanced quickly. A cry escaped her. Matho stamped his foot behind her.

"Who brings you here? why do you come?"

"To take it!" she replied, pointing to the zaimph, and with the other hand she tore the veils from her head. He drew back with his elbows behind him, gaping, almost terrified.

She felt as if she were leaning on the might of the gods; and looking at him face to face she asked him for the zaimph; she demanded it in words abundant and superb.

Matho did not hear; he was gazing at her, and in his eyes her garments were blended with her body. The clouding of the stuffs, like the splendour of her skin, was something special and belonging to her alone. Her eyes and her diamonds sparkled; the polish of her nails continued the delicacy of the stones which loaded her fingers; the two clasps of her tunic raised her breasts somewhat and brought them closer together, and he in thought lost himself in the narrow interval between them whence there fell a thread holding a plate of emeralds which could be seen lower down beneath the violet gauze. She had as earrings two little sapphire scales, each supporting a hollow pearl filled with liquid scent. A little drop would fall every moment through the holes in the pearl and moisten her naked shoulder. Matho watched it fall.

He was carried away by ungovernable curiosity; and, like a child laying his hand upon a strange fruit, he tremblingly and lightly touched the top of her chest with the tip of his finger: the flesh, which was somewhat cold, yielded with an elastic resistance.

This contact, though scarcely a sensible one, shook Matho to the very depths of his nature. An uprising of his whole being urged him towards her. He would fain have enveloped her, absorbed her, drunk her. His bosom was panting, his teeth were chattering.

Taking her by the wrists he drew her gently to him, and then sat down upon a cuirass beside the palm-tree bed which was covered with a lion's skin. She was standing. He looked up at her, holding her thus between his knees, and repeating:

"How beautiful you are! how beautiful you are!"

His eyes, which were continually fixed upon hers, pained her; and the uncomfortableness, the repugnance increased in so acute a fashion that Salammbo put a constraint upon herself not to cry out. The thought of Schahabarim came back to her, and she resigned herself.

Matho still kept her little hands in his own; and from time to time, in spite of the priest's command, she turned away her face and tried to thrust him off by jerking her arms. He opened his nostrils the better to breathe in the perfume which exhaled from her person. It was a fresh, indefinable emanation, which nevertheless made him dizzy, like the smoke from a perfuming-pan. She smelt of honey, pepper, incense, roses, with another odour still.

But how was she thus with him in his tent, and at his disposal? Some one no doubt had urged her. She had not come for the zaimph. His arms fell, and he bent his head whelmed in sudden reverie.

To soften him Salammbo said to him in a plaintive voice:

"What have I done to you that you should desire my death?"

"Your death!"

She resumed:

"I saw you one evening by the light of my burning gardens amid fuming cups and my slaughtered slaves, and your anger was so strong that you bounded towards me and I was obliged to fly! Then terror entered into Carthage. There were cries of the devastation of the towns, the burning of the country-seats, the massacre of the soldiery; it was you who had ruined them, it was you who had murdered them! I hate you! Your very name gnaws me like remorse! You are execrated more than the plague, and the Roman war! The provinces shudder at your fury, the furrows are full of corpses! I have followed the traces of your fires as though I were travelling behind Moloch!"

Matho leaped up; his heart was swelling with colossal pride; he was raised to the stature of a god.

With quivering nostrils and clenched teeth she went on:

"As if your sacrilege were not enough, you came to me in my sleep covered with the zaimph! Your words I did not understand; but I could see that you wished to drag me to some terrible thing at the bottom of an abyss."

Matho, writhing his arms, exclaimed:

"No! no! it was to give it to you! to restore it to you! It seemed to me that the goddess had left her garment for you, and that it belonged to you! In her temple or in your house, what does it matter? are you not all-powerful, immaculate, radiant and beautiful even as Tanith?" And with a look of boundless adoration he added:

"Unless perhaps you are Tanith?"

"I, Tanith!" said Salammbo to herself.

They left off speaking. The thunder rolled in the distance. Some sheep bleated, frightened by the storm.

"Oh! come near!" he went on, "come near! fear nothing!

"Formerly I was only a soldier mingled with the common herd of the Mercenaries, ay, and so meek that I used to carry wood on my back for the others. Do I trouble myself about Carthage! The crowd of its people move as though lost in the dust of your sandals, and all its treasures, with the provinces, fleets, and islands, do not raise my envy like the freshness of your lips and the turn of your shoulders. But I wanted to throw down its walls that I might reach you to possess you! Moreover, I was revenging myself in the meantime! At present I crush men like shells, and I throw myself upon phalanxes; I put aside the sarissae with my hands, I check the stallions by the nostrils; a catapult would not kill me! Oh! if you knew how I think of you in the midst of war! Sometimes the memory of a gesture or of a fold of your garment suddenly seizes me and entwines me like a net! I perceive your eyes in the flames of the phalaricas and on the gilding of the shields! I hear your voice in the sounding of the cymbals. I turn aside, but you are not there! and I plunge again into the battle!"

He raised his arms whereon his veins crossed one another like ivy on the branches of a tree. Sweat flowed down his breast between his square muscles; and his breathing shook his sides with his bronze girdle all garnished with thongs hanging down to his knees, which were firmer than marble. Salammbo, who was accustomed to eunuchs, yielded to amazement at the strength of this man. It was the chastisement of the goddess or the influence of Moloch in motion around her in the five armies. She was overwhelmed with lassitude; and she listened in a state of stupor to the intermittent shouts of the sentinels as they answered one another.

The flames of the lamp kindled in the squalls of hot air. There came at times broad lightning flashes; then the darkness increased; and she could only see Matho's eyeballs like two coals in the night. However, she felt that a fatality was

Matho's eyeballs like two coals in the night. However, she felt that a fatality was surrounding her, that she had reached a supreme and irrevocable moment, and making an effort she went up again towards the zaimph and raised her hands to seize it.

"What are you doing?" exclaimed Matho.

"I am going back to Carthage," she placidly replied.

He advanced folding his arms and with so terrible a look that her heels were immediately nailed, as it were, to the spot.

"Going back to Carthage!" He stammered, and, grinding his teeth, repeated:

"Going back to Carthage! Ah! you came to take the zaimph, to conquer me, and then disappear! No, no! you belong to me! and no one now shall tear you from here! Oh! I have not forgotten the insolence of your large tranquil eyes, and how you crushed me with the haughtiness of your beauty! 'Tis my turn now! You are my captive, my slave, my servant! Call, if you like, on your father and his army, the Ancients, the rich, and your whole accursed people! I am the master of three hundred thousand soldiers! I will go and seek them in Lusitania, in the Gauls, and in the depths of the desert, and I will overthrow your town and burn all its temples; the triremes shall float on the waves of blood! I will not have a house, a stone, or a palm tree remaining! And if men fail me I will draw the bears from the mountains and urge on the lions! Seek not to fly or I kill you!"

Pale and with clenched fists he quivered like a harp whose strings are about to burst. Suddenly sobs stifled him, and he sank down upon his hams.

"Ah! forgive me! I am a scoundrel, and viler than scorpions, than mire and dust! Just now while you were speaking your breath passed across my face, and I rejoiced like a dying man who drinks lying flat on the edge of a stream. Crush me, if only I feel your feet! curse me, if only I hear your voice! Do not go! have pity! I love you! I love you!"

He was on his knees on the ground before her; and he encircled her form with both his arms, his head thrown back, and his hands wandering; the gold discs hanging from his ears gleamed upon his bronzed neck; big tears rolled in his eyes like silver globes; he sighed caressingly, and murmured vague words lighter than a breeze and sweet as a kiss.

Salammbo was invaded by a weakness in which she lost all consciousness of herself. Something at once inward and lofty, a command from the gods, obliged her to yield herself; clouds uplifted her, and she fell back swooning upon the bed amid the lion's hair. The zaimph fell, and enveloped her; she could see Matho's face bending down above her breast.

"Moloch, thou burnest me!" and the soldier's kisses, more devouring than flames, covered her; she was as though swept away in a hurricane, taken in the might of the sun.

flight of the sun.

He kissed all her fingers, her arms, her feet, and the long tresses of her hair from one end to the other.

"Carry it off," he said, "what do I care? take me away with it! I abandon the army! I renounce everything! Beyond Gades, twenty days' journey into the sea, you come to an island covered with gold dust, verdure, and birds. On the mountains large flowers filled with smoking perfumes rock like eternal censers; in the citron trees, which are higher than cedars, milk-coloured serpents cause the fruit to fall upon the turf with the diamonds in their jaws; the air is so mild that it keeps you from dying. Oh! I shall find it, you will see. We shall live in crystal grottoes cut out at the foot of the hills. No one dwells in it yet, or I shall become the king of the country."

He brushed the dust off her cothurni; he wanted her to put a quarter of a pomegranate between her lips; he heaped up garments behind her head to make a cushion for her. He sought for means to serve her, and to humble himself, and he even spread the zaimph over her feet as if it were a mere rug.

"Have you still," he said, "those little gazelle's horns on which your necklaces hang? You will give them to me! I love them!" For he spoke as if the war were finished, and joyful laughs broke from him. The Mercenaries, Hamilcar, every obstacle had now disappeared. The moon was gliding between two clouds. They could see it through an opening in the tent. "Ah, what nights have I spent gazing at her! she seemed to me like a veil that hid your face; you would look at me through her; the memory of you was mingled with her beams; then I could no longer distinguish you!" And with his head between her breasts he wept copiously.

"And this," she thought, "is the formidable man who makes Carthage tremble!"

He fell asleep. Then disengaging herself from his arm she put one foot to the ground, and she perceived that her chainlet was broken.

The maidens of the great families were accustomed to respect these shackles as something that was almost religious, and Salammbo, blushing, rolled the two pieces of the golden chain around her ankles.

Carthage, Megara, her house, her room, and the country that she had passed through, whirled in tumultuous yet distinct images through her memory. But an abyss had yawned and thrown them far back to an infinite distance from her.

The storm was departing; drops of water splashing rarely, one by one, made the tent-roof shake.

Matho slept like a drunken man, stretched on his side, and with one arm over the edge of the couch. His band of pearls was raised somewhat, and uncovered his brow; his teeth were parted in a smile; they shone through his black beard his brow, his teeth were parted in a smile, they shone through his black beard, and there was a silent and almost outrageous gaiety in his half-closed eyelids.

Salammbo looked at him motionless, her head bent and her hands crossed.

A dagger was displayed on the table of cypress-wood at the head of the bed; the sight of the gleaming blade fired her with a sanguinary desire. Mournful voices lingered at a distance in the shade, and like a chorus of geniuses urged her on. She approached it; she seized the steel by the handle. At the rustling of her dress Matho half opened his eyes, putting forth his mouth upon her hands, and the dagger fell.

Shouts arose; a terrible light flashed behind the canvas. Matho raised the latter; they perceived the camp of the Libyans enveloped in great flames.

Their reed huts were burning, and the twisting stems burst in the smoke and flew off like arrows; black shadows ran about distractedly on the red horizon. They could hear the shrieks of those who were in the huts; the elephants, oxen, and horses plunged in the midst of the crowd crushing it together with the stores and baggage that were being rescued from the fire. Trumpets sounded. There were calls of "Matho! Matho!" Some people at the door tried to get in.

"Come along! Hamilcar is burning the camp of Autaritus!"

He made a spring. She found herself quite alone.

Then she examined the zaimph; and when she had viewed it well she was surprised that she had not the happiness which she had once imagined to herself. She stood with melancholy before her accomplished dream.

But the lower part of the tent was raised, and a monstrous form appeared. Salammbo could at first distinguish only the two eyes and a long white beard which hung down to the ground; for the rest of the body, which was cumbered with the rags of a tawny garment, trailed along the earth; and with every forward movement the hands passed into the beard and then fell again. Crawling in this way it reached her feet, and Salammbo recognised the aged Gisco.

In fact, the Mercenaries had broken the legs of the captive Ancients with a brass bar to prevent them from taking to flight; and they were all rotting pell-mell in a pit in the midst of filth. But the sturdiest of them raised themselves and shouted when they heard the noise of platters, and it was in this way that Gisco had seen Salammbo. He had guessed that she was a Carthaginian woman by the little balls of sandastrum flapping against her cothurni; and having a presentiment of an important mystery he had succeeded, with the assistance of his companions, in getting out of the pit; then with elbows and hands he had dragged himself twenty paces further on as far as Matho's tent. Two voices were speaking within it. He had listened outside and had heard everything.

"It is you!" she said at last, almost terrified.

"Yes, it is I!" he replied, raising himself on his wrists. "They think me dead, do they not?"

She bent her head. He resumed:

"Ah! why have the Baals not granted me this mercy!" He approached so close he was touching her. "They would have spared me the pain of cursing you!"

Salammbo sprang quickly back, so much afraid was she of this unclean being, who was as hideous as a larva and nearly as terrible as a phantom.

"I am nearly one hundred years old," he said. "I have seen Agathocles; I have seen Regulus and the eagles of the Romans passing over the harvests of the Punic fields! I have seen all the terrors of battles and the sea encumbered with the wrecks of our fleets! Barbarians whom I used to command have chained my four limbs like a slave that has committed murder. My companions are dying around me, one after the other; the odour of their corpses awakes me in the night; I drive away the birds that come to peck out their eyes; and yet not for a single day have I despaired of Carthage! Though I had seen all the armies of the earth against her, and the flames of the siege overtop the height of the temples, I should have still believed in her eternity! But now all is over! all is lost! The gods execrate her! A curse upon you who have quickened her ruin by your disgrace!"

She opened her lips.

"Ah! I was there!" he cried. "I heard you gurgling with love like a prostitute; then he told you of his desire, and you allowed him to kiss your hands! But if the frenzy of your unchastity urged you to it, you should at least have done as do the fallow deer, which hide themselves in their copulations, and not have displayed your shame beneath your father's very eyes!"

"What?" she said.

"Ah! you did not know that the two entrenchments are sixty cubits from each other and that your Matho, in the excess of his pride, has posted himself just in front of Hamilcar. Your father is there behind you; and could I climb the path which leads to the platform, I should cry to him: 'Come and see your daughter in the Barbarian's arms! She has put on the garment of the goddess to please him; and in yielding her body to him she surrenders with the glory of your name the majesty of the gods, the vengeance of her country, even the safety of Carthage!'" The motion of his toothless mouth moved his beard throughout its length; his eyes were riveted upon her and devoured her; panting in the dust he repeated:

"Ah! sacrilegious one! May you be accursed! accursed! accursed!"

Salammbo had drawn back the canvas; she held it raised at arm's length, and without answering him she looked in the direction of Hamilcar.

"It is this way, is it not?" she said.

"What matters it to you? Turn away! Begone! Rather crush your face against the earth! It is a holy spot which would be polluted by your gaze!"

She threw the zaimph about her waist, and quickly picked up her veils, mantle, and scarf. "I hasten thither!" she cried; and making her escape Salammbo disappeared.

At first she walked through the darkness without meeting any one, for all were betaking themselves to the fire; the uproar was increasing and great flames purpled the sky behind; a long terrace stopped her.

She turned round to right and left at random, seeking for a ladder, a rope, a stone, something in short to assist her. She was afraid of Gisco, and it seemed to her that shouts and footsteps were pursuing her. Day was beginning to break. She perceived a path in the thickness of the entrenchment. She took the hem of her robe, which impeded her, in her teeth, and in three bounds she was on the platform.

A sonorous shout burst forth beneath her in the shade, the same which she had heard at the foot of the galley staircase, and leaning over she recognised Schahabarim's man with his coupled horses.

He had wandered all night between the two entrenchments; then disquieted by the fire, he had gone back again trying to see what was passing in Matho's camp; and, knowing that this spot was nearest to his tent, he had not stirred from it, in obedience to the priest's command.

He stood up on one of the horses. Salammbo let herself slide down to him; and they fled at full gallop, circling the Punic camp in search of a gate.

Matho had re-entered his tent. The smoky lamp gave but little light, and he also believed that Salammbo was asleep. Then he delicately touched the lion's skin on the palm-tree bed. He called but she did not answer; he quickly tore away a strip of the canvas to let in some light; the zaimph was gone.

The earth trembled beneath thronging feet. Shouts, neighings, and clashing of armour rose in the air, and clarion flourishes sounded the charge. It was as though a hurricane were whirling around him. Immoderate frenzy made him leap upon his arms, and he dashed outside.

The long files of the Barbarians were descending the mountain at a run, and the Punic squares were advancing against them with a heavy and regular oscillation. The mist, rent by the rays of the sun, formed little rocking clouds which as they rose gradually discovered standards, helmets, and points of pikes. Beneath the rapid evolutions portions of the earth which were still in the shadow seemed to be displaced bodily; in other places it looked as if huge torrents were crossing one another, while thorny masses stood motionless between them. Matho could distinguish the captains, soldiers, heralds, and even the serving-men, who were mounted on asses in the rear. But instead of maintaining his position in order to cover the foot-soldiers, Narr' Havas turned abruptly to the right, as though he wished himself to be crushed by Hamilcar.

His horsemen outstripped the elephants, which were slackening their speed; and all the horses, stretching out their unbridled heads, galloped at so furious a rate that their bellies seemed to graze the earth. Then suddenly Narr' Havas went resolutely up to a sentry. He threw away his sword, lance, and javelins, and disappeared among the Carthaginians.

The king of the Numidians reached Hamilcar's tent, and pointing to his men, who were standing still at a distance, he said:

"Barca! I bring them to you. They are yours."

Then he prostrated himself in token of bondage, and to prove his fidelity recalled all his conduct from the beginning of the war.

First, he had prevented the siege of Carthage and the massacre of the captives; then he had taken no advantage of the victory over Hanno after the defeat at Utica. As to the Tyrian towns, they were on the frontiers of his kingdom. Finally he had not taken part in the battle of the Macaras; and he had even expressly absented himself in order to evade the obligation of fighting against the Suffet.

Narr' Havas had in fact wished to aggrandise himself by encroachments upon the Punic provinces, and had alternately assisted and forsaken the Mercenaries according to the chances of victory. But seeing that Hamilcar would ultimately prove the stronger, he had gone over to him; and in his desertion there was perhaps something of a grudge against Matho, whether on account of the command or of his former love.

The Suffet listened without interrupting him. The man who thus presented himself with an army where vengeance was his due was not an auxiliary to be despised; Hamilcar at once divined the utility of such an alliance in his great projects. With the Numidians he would get rid of the Libyans. Then he would draw off the West to the conquest of Iberia; and, without asking Narr' Havas why he had not come sooner, or noticing any of his lies, he kissed him, striking his breast thrice against his own.

It was to bring matters to an end and in despair that he had fired the camp of the Libyans. This army came to him like a relief from the gods; dissembling his joy he replied:

"May the Baals favour you! I do not know what the Republic will do for you, but Hamilcar is not ungrateful."

The tumult increased; some captains entered. He was arming himself as he spoke.

"Come, return! You will use your horsemen to beat down their infantry between your elephants and mine. Courage! exterminate them!"

And Narr' Havas was rushing away when Salammbo appeared.

She leaped down quickly from her horse. She opened her ample cloak and spreading out her arms displayed the zaimph.

The leathern tent, which was raised at the corners, left visible the entire circuit of the mountain with its thronging soldiers, and as it was in the centre Salammbo could be seen on all sides. An immense shouting burst forth, a long cry of triumph and hope. Those who were marching stopped; the dying leaned on their elbows and turned round to bless her. All the Barbarians knew now that she had recovered the zaimph; they saw her or believed that they saw her from a distance; and other cries, but those of rage and vengeance, resounded in spite of the plaudits of the Carthaginians. Thus did the five armies in tiers upon the mountain stamp and shriek around Salammbo.

Hamilcar, who was unable to speak, nodded her his thanks. His eyes were directed alternately upon the zaimph and upon her, and he noticed that her chainlet was broken. Then he shivered, being seized with a terrible suspicion. But soon recovering his impassibility he looked sideways at Narr' Havas without turning his face.

The king of the Numidians held himself apart in a discreet attitude; on his forehead he bore a little of the dust which he had touched when prostrating himself. At last the Suffet advanced towards him with a look full of gravity.

"As a reward for the services which you have rendered me, Narr' Havas, I give you my daughter. Be my son," he added, "and defend your father!"

Narr' Havas gave a great gesture of surprise; then he threw himself upon Hamilcar's hands and covered them with kisses.

Salammbo, calm as a statue, did not seem to understand. She blushed a little as she cast down her eyelids, and her long curved lashes made shadows upon her cheeks.

Hamilcar wished to unite them immediately in indissoluble betrothal. A lance was placed in Salammbo's hands and by her offered to Narr' Havas; their thumbs were tied together with a thong of ox-leather; then corn was poured upon their heads, and the grains that fell around them rang like rebounding hail.

CHAPTER XII

THE AQUEDUCT

Twelve hours afterwards all that remained of the Mercenaries was a heap of wounded, dead, and dying.

Hamilcar had suddenly emerged from the bottom of the gorge, and again descended the western slope that looked towards Hippo-Zarytus, and the space being broader at this spot he had taken care to draw the Barbarians into it. Narr' Havas had encompassed them with his horse; the Suffet meanwhile drove them back and crushed them. Then, too, they were conquered beforehand by the loss of the zaimph; even those who cared nothing about it had experienced anguish and something akin to enfeeblement. Hamilcar, not indulging his pride by holding the field of battle, had retired a little further off on the left to some heights, from which he commanded them.

The shape of the camps could be recognised by their sloping palisades. A long heap of black cinders was smoking on the side of the Libyans; the devastated soil showed undulations like the sea, and the tents with their tattered canvas looked like dim ships half lost in the breakers. Cuirasses, forks, clarions, pieces of wood, iron and brass, corn, straw, and garments were scattered about among the corpses; here and there a phalarica on the point of extinction burned against a heap of baggage; in some places the earth was hidden with shields; horses' carcasses succeeded one another like a series of hillocks; legs, sandals, arms, and coats of mail were to be seen, with heads held in their helmets by the chin-pieces and rolling about like balls; heads of hair were hanging on the thorns; elephants were lying with their towers in pools of blood, with entrails exposed, and gasping. The foot trod on slimy things, and there were swamps of mud although no rain had fallen.

This confusion of dead bodies covered the whole mountain from top to bottom.

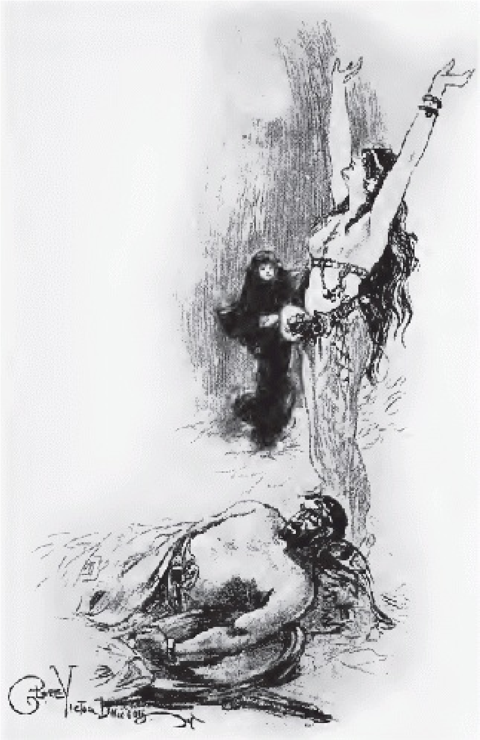
Those who survived stirred as little as the dead. Squatting in unequal groups they looked at one another scared and without speaking.

The lake of Hippo-Zarytus shone at the end of a long meadow beneath the setting sun. To the right an agglomeration of white houses extended beyond a girdle of walls; then the sea spread out indefinitely; and the Barbarians, with their chins in their hands, sighed as they thought of their native lands. A cloud of grey dust was falling.

The evening wind blew; then every breast dilated, and as the freshness

The evening wind blew, then every breast dilated, and as the freshness increased, the vermin might be seen to forsake the dead, who were colder now, and to run over the hot sand. Crows, looking towards the dying, rested motionless on the tops of the big stones.

When night had fallen yellow-haired dogs, those unclean beasts which followed the armies, came quite softly into the midst of the Barbarians. At first they licked the clots of blood on the still tepid stumps; and soon they began to devour the corpses, biting into the stomachs first of all.



The fugitives reappeared one by one like shadows; the women also ventured to return, for there were still some of them left, especially among the Libyans, in spite of the dreadful massacre of them by the Numidians.

Some took ropes' ends and lighted them to use as torches. Others held crossed pikes. The corpses were placed upon these and were conveyed apart.

They were found lying stretched in long lines, on their backs, with their mouths open, and their lances beside them; or else they were piled up pell-mell so that it was often necessary to dig out a whole heap in order to discover those they were wanting. Then the torch would be passed slowly over their faces. They had received complicated wounds from hideous weapons. Greenish strips hung from their foreheads; they were cut in pieces, crushed to the marrow, blue from strangulation, or broadly cleft by the elephants' ivory. Although they had died at almost the same time there existed differences between their various states of corruption. The men of the North were puffed up with livid swellings, while the more nervous Africans looked as though they had been smoked, and were already drying up. The Mercenaries might be recognised by the tattooing on their hands: the old soldiers of Antiochus displayed a sparrow-hawk; those who had served in Egypt, the head of the cynosephalus; those who had served with the princes of Asia, a hatchet, a pomegranate, or a hammer; those who had served in the Greek republics, the side-view of a citadel or the name of an archon; and some were to be seen whose arms were entirely covered with these multiplied symbols, which mingled with their scars and their recent wounds.

Four great funeral piles were erected for the men of Latin race, the Samnites, Etruscans, Campanians, and Bruttians.

The Greeks dug pits with the points of their swords. The Spartans removed their red cloaks and wrapped them round the dead; the Athenians laid them out with their faces towards the rising sun; the Cantabrians buried them beneath a heap of pebbles; the Nasamonians bent them double with ox-leather thongs, and the Garamantians went and interred them on the shore so that they might be perpetually washed by the waves. But the Latins were grieved that they could not collect the ashes in urns; the Nomads regretted the heat of the sands in which bodies were mummified, and the Celts, the three rude stones beneath a rainy sky at the end of an islet-covered gulf.

Vociferations arose, followed by the lengthened silence. This was to oblige the souls to return. Then the shouting was resumed persistently at regular intervals.

They made excuses to the dead for their inability to honour them as the rites prescribed: for, owing to this deprivation, they would pass for infinite periods through all kinds of chances and metamorphoses; they questioned them and asked them what they desired; others loaded them with abuse for having allowed themselves to be conquered.

The bloodless faces lying back here and there on wrecks of armour showed pale in the light of the great funeral-pile; tears provoked tears, the sobs became shriller, the recognitions and embracings more frantic. Women stretched themselves on the corpses, mouth to mouth and brow to brow; it was necessary to beat them in order to make them withdraw when the earth was being thrown in. They blackened their cheeks; they cut off their hair; they drew their own blood and poured it into the pits; they gashed themselves in imitation of the wounds that disfigured the dead. Roarings burst forth through the crashings of the cymbals. Some snatched off their amulets and spat upon them. The dying rolled in the bloody mire biting their mutilated fists in their rage; and forty-three Samnites, quite a "sacred spring," cut one another's throats like gladiators. Soon wood for the funeral-piles failed, the flames were extinguished, every spot was occupied; and weary from shouting, weakened, tottering, they fell asleep close to their dead brethren, those who still clung to life full of anxieties, and the others desiring never to wake again.

In the greyness of the dawn some soldiers appeared on the outskirts of the Barbarians, and filed past with their helmets raised on the points of their pikes; they saluted the Mercenaries and asked them whether they had no messages to send to their native lands.

Others approached, and the Barbarians recognised some of their former companions.

The Suffet had proposed to all the captives that they should serve in his troops. Several had fearlessly refused; and quite resolved neither to support them nor to abandon them to the Great Council, he had sent them away with injunctions to fight no more against Carthage. As to those who had been rendered docile by the fear of tortures, they had been furnished with the weapons taken from the enemy; and they were now presenting themselves to the vanquished, not so much in order to seduce them as out of an impulse of pride and curiosity.

At first they told of the good treatment which they had received from the Suffet; the Barbarians listened to them with jealousy although they despised them. Then at the first words of reproach the cowards fell into a passion; they showed them from a distance their own swords and cuirasses and invited them with abuse to come and take them. The Barbarians picked up flints; all took to flight; and nothing more could be seen on the summit of the mountain except the lance-points projecting above the edge of the palisades.

Then the Barbarians were overwhelmed with a grief that was heavier than the humiliation of the defeat. They thought of the emptiness of their courage, and they stood with their eyes fixed and grinding their teeth.

The same thought came to them all. They rushed tumultuously upon the Carthaginian prisoners. It chanced that the Suffet's soldiers had been unable to discover them, and as he had withdrawn from the field of battle they were still in the deep pit.

They were ranged on the ground on a flattened spot. Sentries formed a circle round them, and the women were allowed to enter thirty or forty at a time. Wishing to profit by the short time that was allowed to them, they ran from one to the other, uncertain and panting; then bending over the poor bodies they struck them with all their might like washerwomen beating linen; shrieking their husband's names they tore them with their nails and put out their eyes with the bodkins of their hair. The men came next and tortured them from their feet, which they cut off at the ankles, to their foreheads, from which they took crowns of skin to put upon their own heads. The Eaters of Uncleanness were atrocious in their devices. They envenomed the wounds by pouring into them dust, vinegar, and fragments of pottery; others waited behind; blood flowed, and they rejoiced like vintagers round fuming vats.

Matho, however, was seated on the ground, at the very place where he had happened to be when the battle ended, his elbows on his knees, and his temples in his hands; he saw nothing, heard nothing, and had ceased to think.

At the shrieks of joy uttered by the crowd he raised his head. Before him a strip of canvas caught on a flagpole, and trailing on the ground, sheltered in confused fashion blankets, carpets, and a lion's skin. He recognised his tent; and he riveted his eyes upon the ground as though Hamilcar's daughter, when she disappeared, had sunk into the earth.

The torn canvas flapped in the wind; the long rags of it sometimes passed across his mouth, and he perceived a red mark like the print of a hand. It was the hand of Narr' Havas, the token of their alliance. Then Matho rose. He took a firebrand which was still smoking, and threw it disdainfully upon the wrecks of his tent. Then with the toe of his cothurn he pushed the things which fell out back towards the flame so that nothing might be left.

Suddenly, without any one being able to guess from what point he had sprung up, Spendius reappeared.

The former slave had fastened two fragments of a lance against his thigh; he limped with a piteous look, breathing forth complaints the while.

"Remove that," said Matho to him. "I know that you are a brave fellow!" For he was so crushed by the injustice of the gods that he had not strength enough to be indignant with men.

Spendius beckoned to him and led him to a hollow of the mountain, where Zarxas and Autaritus were lying concealed.

They had fled like the slave, the one although he was cruel, and the other in spite of his bravery. But who, said they, could have expected the treachery of Narr' Havas, the burning of the camp of the Libyans, the loss of the zaimph, the sudden attack by Hamilcar, and, above all, his manoeuvres which forced them to return to the bottom of the mountain beneath the instant blows of the Carthaginians? Spendius made no acknowledgement of his terror, and persisted in maintaining that his leg was broken.

At last the three chiefs and the schalischim asked one another what decision should now be adopted.

Hamilcar closed the road to Carthage against them; they were caught between his soldiers and the provinces belonging to Narr' Havas; the Tyrian towns would join the conquerors; the Barbarians would find themselves driven to the edge of the sea, and all those united forces would crush them. This would infallibly happen.

Thus no means presented themselves of avoiding the war. Accordingly they must prosecute it to the bitter end. But how were they to make the necessity of an interminable battle understood by all these disheartened people, who were still bleeding from their wounds.

"I will undertake that!" said Spendius.

Two hours afterwards a man who came from the direction of Hippo-Zarytus climbed the mountain at a run. He waved some tablets at arm's length, and as he shouted very loudly the Barbarians surrounded him.

The tablets had been despatched by the Greek soldiers in Sardinia. They recommended their African comrades to watch over Gisco and the other captives. A Samian trader, one Hipponax, coming from Carthage, had informed them that a plot was being organised to promote their escape, and the Barbarians were urged to take every precaution; the Republic was powerful.

Spendius's stratagem did not succeed at first as he had hoped. This assurance of the new peril, so far from exciting frenzy, raised fears; and remembering Hamilcar's warning, lately thrown into their midst, they expected something unlooked for and terrible. The night was spent in great distress; several even got rid of their weapons, so as to soften the Suffet when he presented himself.

But on the following day, at the third watch, a second runner appeared, still more breathless, and blackened with dust. The Greek snatched from his hand a roll of papyrus covered with Phoenician writing. The Mercenaries were entreated not to be disheartened; the brave men of Tunis were coming with large reinforcements.

Spendius first read the letter three times in succession; and held up by two Cappadocians, who bore him seated on their shoulders, he had himself conveyed from place to place and re-read it. For seven hours he harangued.

He reminded the Mercenaries of the promises of the Great Council; the Africans of the cruelties of the stewards, and all the Barbarians of the injustice of Carthage. The Suffet's mildness was only a bait to capture them; those who surrendered would be sold as slaves, and the vanquished would perish under torture. As to flight, what routes could they follow? Not a nation would receive them. Whereas by continuing their efforts they would obtain at once freedom, vengeance, and money! And they would not have long to wait, since the people of Tunis, the whole of Libya, was rushing to relieve them. He showed the unrolled papyrus: "Look at it! read! see their promises! I do not lie."

Dogs were straying about with their black muzzles all plastered with red. The men's uncovered heads were growing hot in the burning sun. A nauseous smell exhaled from the badly buried corpses. Some even projected from the earth as far as the waist. Spendius called them to witness what he was saying; then he far as the waist. Spendius called them to witness what he was saying, then he raised his fists in the direction of Hamilcar.

Matho, moreover, was watching him, and to cover his cowardice he displayed an anger by which he gradually found himself carried away. Devoting himself to the gods he heaped curses upon the Carthaginians. The torture of the captives was child's play. Why spare them, and be ever dragging this useless cattle after one? "No! we must put an end to it! their designs are known! a single one might ruin us! no pity! Those who are worthy will be known by the speed of their legs and the force of their blows."

Then they turned again upon the captives. Several were still in the last throes; they were finished by the thrust of a heel in the mouth or a stab with the point of a javelin.

Then they thought of Gisco. Nowhere could he be seen; they were disturbed with anxiety. They wished at once to convince themselves of his death and to participate in it. At last three Samnite shepherds discovered him at a distance of fifteen paces from the spot where Matho's tent lately stood. They recognised him by his long beard and they called the rest.

Stretched on his back, his arms against his hips, and his knees close together, he looked like a dead man laid out for the tomb. Nevertheless his wasted sides rose and fell, and his eyes, wide-opened in his pallid face, gazed in a continuous and intolerable fashion.

The Barbarians looked at him at first with great astonishment. Since he had been living in the pit he had been almost forgotten; rendered uneasy by old memories they stood at a distance and did not venture to raise their hands against him.

But those who were behind were murmuring and pressed forward when a Garamantian passed through the crowd; he was brandishing a sickle; all understood his thought; their faces purpled, and smitten with shame they shrieked:

"Yes! yes!"

The man with the curved steel approached Gisco. He took his head, and, resting it upon his knee, sawed it off with rapid strokes; it fell; to great jets of blood made a hole in the dust. Zarxas leaped upon it, and lighter than a leopard ran towards the Carthaginians.

Then when he had covered two thirds of the mountain he drew Gisco's head from his breast by the beard, whirled his arm rapidly several times, — and the mass, when thrown at last, described a long parabola and disappeared behind the Punic entrenchments.

Soon at the edge of the palisades there rose two crossed standards, the customary sign for claiming a corpse customary sign for claiming a corpse.

Then four heralds, chosen for their width of chest, went out with great clarions, and speaking through the brass tubes declared that henceforth there would be between Carthaginians and Barbarians neither faith, pity, nor gods, that they refused all overtures beforehand, and that envoys would be sent back with their hands cut off.

Immediately afterwards, Spendius was sent to Hippo-Zarytus to procure provisions; the Tyrian city sent them some the same evening. They ate greedily. Then when they were strengthened they speedily collected the remains of their baggage and their broken arms; the women massed themselves in the centre, and heedless of the wounded left weeping behind them, they set out along the edge of the shore like a herd of wolves taking its departure.

They were marching upon Hippo-Zarytus, resolved to take it, for they had need of a town.

Hamilcar, as he perceived them at a distance, had a feeling of despair in spite of the pride which he experienced in seeing them fly before him. He ought to have attacked them immediately with fresh troops. Another similar day and the war was over! If matters were protracted they would return with greater strength; the Tyrian towns would join them; his clemency towards the vanquished had been of no avail. He resolved to be pitiless.

The same evening he sent the Great Council a dromedary laden with bracelets collected from the dead, and with horrible threats ordered another army to be despatched.

All had for a long time believed him lost; so that on learning his victory they felt a stupefaction which was almost terror. The vaguely announced return of the zaimph completed the wonder. Thus the gods and the might of Carthage seemed now to belong to him.

None of his enemies ventured upon complaint or recrimination. Owing to the enthusiasm of some and the pusillanimity of the rest, an army of five thousand men was ready before the interval prescribed had elapsed.

This army promptly made its way to Utica in order to support the Suffet's rear, while three thousand of the most notable citizens embarked in vessels which were to land them at Hippo-Zarytus, whence they were to drive back the Barbarians.

Hanno had accepted the command; but he intrusted the army to his lieutenant, Magdassin, so as to lead the troops which were to be disembarked himself, for he could no longer endure the shaking of the litter. His disease had eaten away his lips and nostrils, and had hollowed out a large hole in his face; the back of his throat could be seen at a distance of ten paces, and he knew himself to be so hideous that he wore a veil over his head like a woman.

Hippo-Zarytus paid no attention to his summonings nor yet to those of the Barbarians; but every morning the inhabitants lowered provisions to the latter in baskets, and shouting from the tops of the towers pleaded the exigencies of the Republic and conjured them to withdraw. By means of signs they addressed the same protestations to the Carthaginians, who were stationed on the sea.

Hanno contented himself with blockading the harbour without risking an attack. However, he permitted the judges of Hippo-Zarytus to admit three hundred soldiers. Then he departed to the Cape Grapes, and made a long circuit so as to hem in the Barbarians, an inopportune and even dangerous operation. His jealousy prevented him from relieving the Suffet; he arrested his spies, impeded him in all his plans, and compromised the success of the enterprise. At last Hamilcar wrote to the Great Council to rid himself of Hanno, and the latter returned to Carthage furious at the baseness of the Ancients and the madness of his colleague. Hence, after so many hopes, the situation was now still more deplorable; but there was an effort not to reflect upon it and even not to talk about it.

As if all this were not sufficient misfortune at one time, news came that the Sardinian Mercenaries had crucified their general, seized the strongholds, and everywhere slaughtered those of Chanaanitish race. The Roman people threatened the Republic with immediate hostilities unless she gave twelve hundred talents with the whole of the island of Sardinia. They had accepted the alliance of the Barbarians, and they despatched to them flat-bottomed boats laden with meal and dried meat. The Carthaginians pursued these, and captured five hundred men; but three days afterwards a fleet coming from Byzacena, and conveying provisions to Carthage, foundered in a storm. The gods were evidently declaring against her.

Upon this the citizens of Hippo-Zarytus, under pretence of an alarm, made Hanno's three hundred men ascend their walls; then coming behind them they took them by the legs, and suddenly threw them over the ramparts. Some who were not killed were pursued, and went and drowned themselves in the sea.

Utica was enduring the presence of soldiers, for Magdassin had acted like Hanno, and in accordance with his orders and deaf to Hamilcar's prayers, was surrounding the town. As for these, they were given wine mixed with mandrake, and were then slaughtered in their sleep. At the same time the Barbarians arrived; Magdassin fled; the gates were opened, and thenceforward the two Tyrian towns displayed an obstinate devotion to their new friends and an inconceivable hatred to their former allies.

This abandonment of the Punic cause was a counsel and a precedent. Hopes of deliverance revived. Populations hitherto uncertain hesitated no longer.

Everywhere there was a stir. The Suffet learnt this, and he had no assistance to look for! He was now irrevocably lost.

He immediately dismissed Narr' Havas, who was to guard the borders of his kingdom. As for himself, he resolved to re-enter Carthage in order to obtain soldiers and begin the war again.

The Barbarians posted at Hippo-Zarytus perceived his army as it descended the mountain.

Where could the Carthaginians be going? Hunger, no doubt, was urging them on; and, distracted by their sufferings, they were coming in spite of their weakness to give battle. But they turned to the right: they were fleeing. They might be overtaken and all be crushed. The Barbarians dashed in pursuit of them.

The Carthaginians were checked by the river. It was wide this time and the west wind had not been blowing. Some crossed by swimming, and the rest on their shields. They resumed their march. Night fell. They were out of sight.

The Barbarians did not stop; they went higher to find a narrower place. The people of Tunis hastened thither, bringing those of Utica along with them. Their numbers increased at every bush; and the Carthaginians, as they lay on the ground, could hear the tramping of their feet in the darkness. From time to time Barca had a volley of arrows discharged behind him to check them, and several were killed. When day broke they were in the Ariana Mountains, at the spot where the road makes a bend.

Then Matho, who was marching at the head, thought that he could distinguish something green on the horizon on the summit of an eminence. Then the ground sank, and obelisks, domes, and houses appeared! It was Carthage. He leaned against a tree to keep himself from falling, so rapidly did his heart beat.

He thought of all that had come to pass in his existence since the last time that he had passed that way! It was an infinite surprise, it stunned him. Then he was transported with joy at the thought of seeing Salammbo again. The reasons which he had for execrating her returned to his recollection, but he very quickly rejected them. Quivering and with straining eyeballs he gazed at the lofty terrace of a palace above the palm trees beyond Eschmoun; a smile of ecstasy lighted his face as if some great light had reached him; he opened his arms, and sent kisses on the breeze, and murmured: "Come! come!" A sigh swelled his breast, and two long tears like pearls fell upon his beard.

"What stays you?" cried Spendius. "Make haste! Forward! The Suffet is going to escape us! But your knees are tottering, and you are looking at me like a drunken man!"

He stamped with impatience and urged Matho, his eyes twinkling as at the approach of an object long aimed at.

"Ah! we have reached it! We are there! I have them!"

He had so convinced and triumphant an air that Matho was surprised from his torpor, and felt himself carried away by it. These words, coming when his distress was at its height, drove his despair to vengeance, and pointed to food for his wrath. He bounded upon one of the camels that were among the baggage, snatched up its halter, and with the long rope, struck the stragglers with all his might, running right and left alternately, in the rear of the army, like a dog driving a flock.

At this thundering voice the lines of men closed up; even the lame hurried their steps; the intervening space lessened in the middle of the isthmus. The foremost of the Barbarians were marching in the dust raised by the Carthaginians. The two armies were coming close, and were on the point of touching. But the Malqua gate, the Tagaste gate, and the great gate of Khamon threw wide their leaves. The Punic square divided; three columns were swallowed up, and eddied beneath the porches. Soon the mass, being too tightly packed, could advance no further; pikes clashed in the air, and the arrows of the Barbarians were shivering against the walls.

Hamilcar was to be seen on the threshold of Khamon. He turned round and shouted to his men to move aside. He dismounted from his horse; and pricking it on the croup with the sword which he held, sent it against the Barbarians.

It was a black stallion, which was fed on balls of meal, and would bend its knees to allow its master to mount. Why was he sending it away? Was this a sacrifice?

The noble horse galloped into the midst of the lances, knocked down men, and, entangling its feet in its entrails, fell down, then rose again with furious leaps; and while they were moving aside, trying to stop it, or looking at it in surprise, the Carthaginians had united again; they entered, and the enormous gate shut echoing behind them.

It would not yield. The Barbarians came crushing against it; — and for some minutes there was an oscillation throughout the army, which became weaker and weaker, and at last ceased.

The Carthaginians had placed soldiers on the aqueduct, they began to hurl stones, balls, and beams. Spendius represented that it would be best not to persist. The Barbarians went and posted themselves further off, all being quite resolved to lay siege to Carthage.

The rumour of the war, however, had passed beyond the confines of the Punic empire; and from the pillars of Hercules to beyond Cyrene shepherds mused on it as they kept their flocks, and caravans talked about it in the light of the stars.

This great Carthage, mistress of the seas, splendid as the sun, and terrible as a god, actually found men who were daring enough to attack her! Her fall even had been asserted several times; and all had believed it for all wished it: the subject populations, the tributary villages, the allied provinces, the independent hordes, those who execrated her for her tyranny or were jealous of her power, or coveted her wealth. The bravest had very speedily joined the Mercenaries. The defeat at the Macaras had checked all the rest. At last they had recovered confidence, had gradually advanced and approached; and now the men of the eastern regions were lying on the sandhills of Clypea on the other side of the gulf. As soon as they perceived the Barbarians they showed themselves.

They were not Libyans from the neighbourhood of Carthage, who had long composed the third army, but nomads from the tableland of Barca, bandits from Cape Phiscus and the promontory of Dernah, from Phazzana and Marmarica. They had crossed the desert, drinking at the brackish wells walled in with camels' bones; the Zuaeces, with their covering of ostrich feathers, had come on quadrigae; the Garamantians, masked with black veils, rode behind on their painted mares; others were mounted on asses, onagers, zebras, and buffaloes; while some dragged after them the roofs of their sloop-shaped huts together with their families and idols. There were Ammonians with limbs wrinkled by the hot water of the springs; Atarantians, who curse the sun; Troglodytes, who bury their dead with laughter beneath branches of trees; and the hideous Auseans, who eat grass-hoppers; the Achyrmachidae, who eat lice; and the vermilion-painted Gysantians, who eat apes.

All were ranged along the edge of the sea in a great straight line. Afterwards they advanced like tornadoes of sand raised by the wind. In the centre of the isthmus the throng stopped, the Mercenaries who were posted in front of them, close to the walls, being unwilling to move.

Then from the direction of Ariana appeared the men of the West, the people of the Numidians. In fact, Narr' Havas governed only the Massylians; and, moreover, as they were permitted by custom to abandon their king when reverses were sustained, they had assembled on the Zainus, and then had crossed it at Hamilcar's first movement. First were seen running up all the hunters from Malethut-Baal and Garaphos, clad in lions' skins, and with the staves of their pikes driving small lean horses with long manes; then marched the Gaetulians in cuirasses of serpents' skin; then the Pharusians, wearing lofty crowns made of wax and resin; and the Caunians, Macarians, and Tillabarians, each holding two javelins and a round shield of hippopotamus leather. They stopped at the foot of the Catacombs among the first pools of the Lagoon.

But when the Libyans had moved away, the multitude of the Negroes appeared like a cloud on a level with the ground, in the place which the others had occupied. They were there from the White Harousch, the Black Harousch, the desert of Augila, and even from the great country of Agazymba, which is four months' journey south of the Garamantians, and from regions further still! In spite of their red wooden jewels, the filth of their black skin made them look like mulberries that had been long rolling in the dust. They had bark-thread drawers, dried-grass tunics, fallow-deer muzzles on their heads; they shook rods furnished with rings, and brandished cows' tails at the end of sticks, after the fashion of standards, howling the while like wolves.

Then behind the Numidians, Marusians, and Gaetulians pressed the yellowish men, who are spread through the cedar forests beyond Taggir. They had cat-skin quivers flapping against their shoulders, and they led in leashes enormous dogs, which were as high as asses, and did not bark.

Finally, as though Africa had not been sufficiently emptied, and it had been necessary to seek further fury in the very dregs of the races, men might be seen behind the rest, with beast-like profiles and grinning with idiotic laughter — wretches ravaged by hideous diseases, deformed pigmies, mulattoes of doubtful sex, albinos whose red eyes blinked in the sun; stammering out unintelligible sounds, they put a finger into their mouths to show that they were hungry.

The confusion of weapons was as great as that of garments and peoples. There was not a deadly invention that was not present — from wooden daggers, stone hatchets and ivory tridents, to long sabres toothed like saws, slender, and formed of a yielding copper blade. They handled cutlasses which were forked into several branches like antelopes' horns, bills fastened to the ends of ropes, iron triangles, clubs and bodkins. The Ethiopians from the Bambotus had little poisoned darts hidden in their hair. Many had brought pebbles in bags. Others, empty handed, chattered with their teeth.

This multitude was stirred with a ceaseless swell. Dromedaries, smeared all over with tar-like streaks, knocked down the women, who carried their children on their hips. The provisions in the baskets were pouring out; in walking, pieces of salt, parcels of gum, rotten dates, and gourou nuts were crushed underfoot; and sometimes on vermin-covered bosoms there would hang a slender cord supporting a diamond that the Satraps had sought, an almost fabulous stone, sufficient to purchase an empire. Most of them did not even know what they desired. They were impelled by fascination or curiosity; and nomads who had never seen a town were frightened by the shadows of the walls.

The isthmus was now hidden by men; and this long surface, whereon the tents were like huts amid an inundation, stretched as far as the first lines of the other Barbarians, which were streaming with steel and were posted symmetrically upon both sides of the aqueduct.

upon both sides of the aqueduct.

The Carthaginians had not recovered from the terror caused by their arrival when they perceived the siege-engines sent by the Tyrian towns coming straight towards them like monsters and like buildings — with their masts, arms, ropes, articulations, capitals and carapaces, sixty carroballistas, eighty onagers, thirty scorpions, fifty tollenos, twelve rams, and three gigantic catapults which hurled pieces of rock of the weight of fifteen talents. Masses of men clinging to their bases pushed them on; at every step a quivering shook them, and in this way they arrived in front of the walls.

But several days were still needed to finish the preparations for the siege. The Mercenaries, taught by their defeats, would not risk themselves in useless engagements; and on both sides there was no haste, for it was well known that a terrible action was about to open, and that the result of it would be complete victory or complete extermination.

Carthage might hold out for a long time; her broad walls presented a series of re-entrant and projecting angles, an advantageous arrangement for repelling assaults.

Nevertheless a portion had fallen down in the direction of the Catacombs, and on dark nights lights could be seen in the dens of Malqua through the disjointed blocks. These in some places overlooked the top of the ramparts. It was here that the Mercenaries' wives, who had been driven away by Matho, were living with their new husbands. On seeing the men again their hearts could stand it no longer. They waved their scarfs at a distance; then they came and chatted in the darkness with the soldiers through the cleft in the wall, and one morning the Great Council learned that they had all fled. Some had passed through between the stones; others with greater intrepidity had let themselves down with ropes.

At last Spendius resolved to accomplish his design.

The war, by keeping him at a distance, had hitherto prevented him; and since the return to before Carthage, it seemed to him that the inhabitants suspected his enterprise. But soon they diminished the sentries on the aqueduct. There were not too many people for the defence of the walls.

The former slave practised himself for some days in shooting arrows at the flamingoes on the lake. Then one moonlight evening he begged Matho to light a great fire of straw in the middle of the night, while all his men were to shout at the same time; and taking Zarxas with him, he went away along the edge of the gulf in the direction of Tunis.

When on a level with the last arches they returned straight towards the aqueduct; the place was unprotected: they crawled to the base of the pillars.

The sentries on the platform were walking quietly up and down.

Towering flames appeared; clarions rang; and the soldiers on vedette

Towering flames appeared, clarions rang, and the soldiers on vedette, believing that there was an assault, rushed away in the direction of Carthage.

One man had remained. He showed black against the background of the sky. The moon was shining behind him, and his shadow, which was of extravagant size, looked in the distance like an obelisk proceeding across the plain.

They waited until he was in position just before them. Zarxas seized his sling, but whether from prudence or from ferocity Spendius stopped him. "No, the whiz of the bullet would make a noise! Let me!"

Then he bent his bow with all his strength, resting the lower end of it against the great toe of his left foot; he took aim, and the arrow went off.

The man did not fall. He disappeared.

"If he were wounded we should hear him!" said Spendius; and he mounted quickly from story to story as he had done the first time, with the assistance of a rope and a harpoon. Then when he had reached the top and was beside the corpse, he let it fall again. The Balearian fastened a pick and a mallet to it and turned back.

The trumpets sounded no longer. All was now quiet. Spendius had raised one of the flag-stones and, entering the water, had closed it behind him.

Calculating the distance by the number of his steps, he arrived at the exact spot where he had noticed an oblique fissure; and for three hours until morning he worked in continuous and furious fashion, breathing with difficulty through the interstices in the upper flag-tones, assailed with anguish, and twenty times believing that he was going to die. At last a crack was heard, and a huge stone ricocheting on the lower arches rolled to the ground, — and suddenly a cataract, an entire river, fell from the skies onto the plain. The aqueduct, being cut through in the centre, was emptying itself. It was death to Carthage and victory for the Barbarians.

In an instant the awakened Carthaginians appeared on the walls, the houses, and the temples. The Barbarians pressed forward with shouts. They danced in delirium around the great waterfall, and came up and wet their heads in it in the extravagance of their joy.

A man in a torn, brown tunic was perceived on the summit of the aqueduct. He stood leaning over the very edge with both hands on his hips, and was looking down below him as though astonished at his work.

Then he drew himself up. He surveyed the horizon with a haughty air which seemed to say: "All that is now mine!" The applause of the Barbarians burst forth, while the Carthaginians, comprehending their disaster at last, shrieked with despair. Then he began to run about the platform from one end to the other, — and like a chariot-driver triumphant at the Olympic Games, Spendius, distraught with pride, raised his arms aloft.

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CHAPTER XIII

MOLOCH

The Barbarians had no need of a circumvallation on the side of Africa, for it was theirs. But to facilitate the approach to the walls, the entrenchments bordering the ditch were thrown down. Matho next divided the army into great semicircles so as to encompass Carthage the better. The hoplites of the Mercenaries were placed in the first rank, and behind them the slingers and horsemen; quite at the back were the baggage, chariots, and horses; and the engines bristled in front of this throng at a distance of three hundred paces from the towers.

Amid the infinite variety of their nomenclature (which changed several times in the course of the centuries) these machines might be reduced to two systems: some acted like slings, and the rest like bows.

The first, which were the catapults, was composed of a square frame with two vertical uprights and a horizontal bar. In its anterior portion was a cylinder, furnished with cables, which held back a great beam bearing a spoon for the reception of projectiles; its base was caught in a skein of twisted thread, and when the ropes were let go it sprang up and struck against the bar, which, checking it with a shock, multiplied its power.

The second presented a more complicated mechanism. A cross-bar had its centre fixed on a little pillar, and from this point of junction there branched off at right angles a short of channel; two caps containing twists of horse-hair stood at the extremities of the cross-bar; two small beams were fastened to them to hold the extremities of a rope which was brought to the bottom of the channel upon a tablet of bronze. This metal plate was released by a spring, and sliding in grooves impelled the arrows.

The catapults were likewise called onagers, after the wild asses which fling up stones with their feet, and the ballistas scorpions, on account of a hook which stood upon the tablet, and being lowered by a blow of the fist, released the spring.

Their construction required learned calculations; the wood selected had to be of the hardest substance, and their gearing all of brass; they were stretched with levers, tackle-blocks, capstans or tympanums; the direction of the shooting was changed by means of strong pivots; they were moved forward on cylinders, and the most considerable of them, which were brought piece by piece, were set up in front of the enemy in front of the enemy.

Spendius arranged three great catapults opposite the three principle angles; he placed a ram before every gate, a ballista before every tower, while carroballistas were to move about in the rear. But it was necessary to protect them against the fire thrown by the besieged, and first of all to fill up the trench which separated them from the walls.

They pushed forward galleries formed of hurdles of green reeds, and oaken semicircles like enormous shields gliding on three wheels; the workers were sheltered in little huts covered with raw hides and stuffed with wrack; the catapults and ballistas were protected by rope curtains which had been steeped in vinegar to render them incombustible. The women and children went to procure stones on the strand, and gathered earth with their hands and brought it to the soldiers.

The Carthaginians also made preparations.

Hamilcar had speedily reassured them by declaring that there was enough water left in the cisterns for one hundred and twenty-three days. This assertion, together with his presence, and above all that of the zaimph among them, gave them good hopes. Carthage recovered from its dejection; those who were not of Chanaanitish origin were carried away by the passion of the rest.

The slaves were armed, the arsenals were emptied, and every citizen had his own post and his own employment. Twelve hundred of the fugitives had survived, and the Suffet made them all captains; and carpenters, armourers, blacksmiths, and goldsmiths were intrusted with the engines. The Carthaginians had kept a few in spite of the conditions of the peace with Rome. These were repaired. They understood such work.

The two northern and eastern sides, being protected by the sea and the gulf, remained inaccessible. On the wall fronting the Barbarians they collected tree-trunks, mill-stones, vases filled with sulphur, and vats filled with oil, and built furnaces. Stones were heaped up on the platforms of the towers, and the houses bordering immediately on the rampart were crammed with sand in order to strengthen it and increase its thickness.

The Barbarians grew angry at the sight of these preparations. They wished to fight at once. The weights which they put into the catapults were so extravagantly heavy that the beams broke, and the attack was delayed.

At last on the thirteenth day of the month of Schabar, — at sunrise, — a great blow was heard at the gate of Khamon.

Seventy-five soldiers were pulling at ropes arranged at the base of a gigantic beam which was suspended horizontally by chains hanging from a framework, and which terminated in a ram's head of pure brass. It had been swathed in ox-hides: it was bound at intervals with iron bracelets: it was thrice as thick as a man's body, one hundred and twenty cubits long, and under the crowd of naked arms pushing it forward and drawing it back, it moved to and fro with a regular oscillation.

The other rams before the other gates began to be in motion. Men might be seen mounting from step to step in the hollow wheels of the tympanums. The pulleys and caps grated, the rope curtains were lowered, and showers of stones and showers of arrows poured forth simultaneously; all the scattered slingers ran up. Some approached the rampart hiding pots of resin under their shields; then they would hurl these with all their might. This hail of bullets, darts, and flames passed above the first ranks in the form of a curve which fell behind the walls. But long cranes, used for masting vessels, were reared on the summit of the ramparts; and from them there descended some of those enormous pincers which terminated in two semicircles toothed on the inside. They bit the rams. The soldiers clung to the beam and drew it back. The Carthaginians hauled in order to pull it up; and the action was prolonged until the evening.

When the Mercenaries resumed their task on the following day, the tops of the walls were completely carpeted with bales of cotton, sails, and cushions; the battlements were stopped up with mats; and a line of forks and blades, fixed upon sticks, might be distinguished among the cranes on the rampart. A furious resistance immediately began.

Trunks of trees fastened to cables fell and rose alternately and battered the rams; cramps hurled by the ballistas tore away the roofs of the huts; and streams of flints and pebbles poured from the platforms of the towers.

At last the rams broke the gates of Khamon and Tagaste. But the Carthaginians had piled up such an abundance of materials on the inside that the leaves did not open. They remained standing.

Then they drove augers against the walls; these were applied to the joints of the blocks, so as to detach the latter. The engines were better managed, the men serving them were divided into squads, and they were worked from morning till evening without interruption and with the monotonous precision of a weaver's loom.

Spendius returned to them untiringly. It was he who stretched the skeins of the ballistas. In order that the twin tensions might completely correspond, the ropes as they were tightened were struck on the right and left alternately until both sides gave out an equal sound. Spendius would mount upon the timbers. He would strike the ropes softly with the extremity of his foot, and strain his ears like a musician tuning a lyre. Then when the beam of the catapult rose, when the pillar of the ballista trembled with the shock of the spring, when the stones were shooting in rays, and the darts pouring in streams, he would incline his whole body and fling his arms into the air as though to follow them.

The soldiers admired his skill and executed his commands. In the gaiety of their work they gave utterance to jests on the names of the machines. Thus the plyers for seizing the rams were called "wolves," and the galleries were covered with "vines"; they were lambs, or they were going to gather the grapes; and as they loaded their pieces they would say to the onagers: "Come, pick well!" and to the scorpions: "Pierce them to the heart!" These jokes, which were ever the same, kept up their courage.

Nevertheless the machines did not demolish the rampart. It was formed of two walls and was completely filled with earth. The upper portions were beaten down, but each time the besieged raised them again. Matho ordered the construction of wooden towers which should be as high as the towers of stone. They cast turf, stakes, pebbles and chariots with their wheels into the trench so as to fill it up the more quickly; but before this was accomplished the immense throng of the Barbarians undulated over the plain with a single movement and came beating against the foot of the walls like an overflowing sea.

They moved forward the rope ladders, straight ladders, and sambucas, the latter consisting of two poles from which a series of bamboos terminating in a moveable bridge were lowered by means of tackling. They formed numerous straight lines resting against the wall, and the Mercenaries mounted them in files, holding their weapons in their hands. Not a Carthaginian showed himself; already two thirds of the rampart had been covered. Then the battlements opened, vomiting flames and smoke like dragon jaws; the sand scattered and entered the joints of their armour; the petroleum fastened on their garments; the liquid lead hopped on their helmets and made holes in their flesh; a rain of sparks splashed against their faces, and eyeless orbits seemed to weep tears as big as almonds. There were men all yellow with oil, with their hair in flames. They began to run and set fire to the rest. They were extinguished in mantles steeped in blood, which were thrown from a distance over their faces. Some who had no wounds remained motionless, stiffer than stakes, their mouths open and their arms outspread.

The assault was renewed for several days in succession, the Mercenaries hoping to triumph by extraordinary energy and audacity.

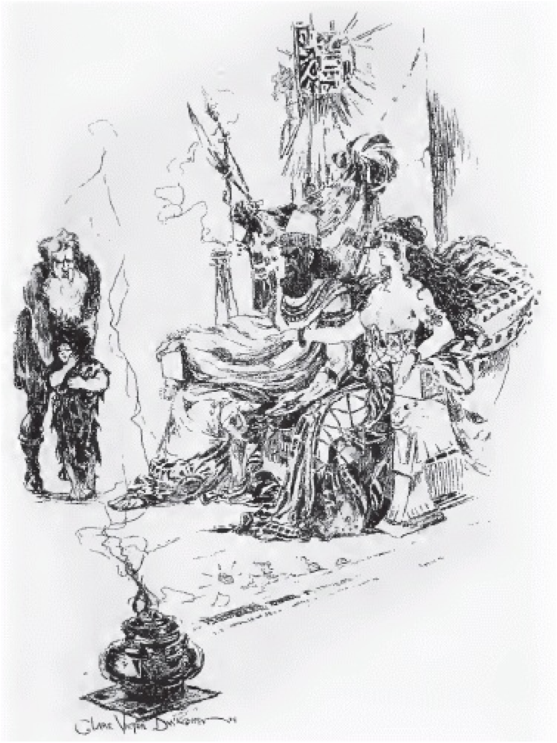
Sometimes a man raised on the shoulders of another would drive a pin between the stones, and then making use of it as a step to reach further, would place a second and a third; and, protected by the edge of the battlements, which stood out from the wall, they would gradually raise themselves in this way; but on reaching a certain height they always fell back again. The great trench was full to overflowing; the wounded were massed pell-mell with the dead and dying beneath the footsteps of the living. Calcined trunks formed black spots amid opened entrails, scattered brains, and pools of blood; and arms and legs projecting half way out of a heap, would stand straight up like props in a burning vineyard.

The ladders proving insufficient the tollenos were brought into requisition, —instruments consisting of a long beam set transversely upon another, and bearing at its extremity a quadrangular basket which would hold thirty foot-soldiers with their weapons.

Matho wished to ascend in the first that was ready. Spendius stopped him.

Some men bent over a capstan; the great beam rose, became horizontal, reared itself almost vertically, and being overweighted at the end, bent like a huge reed. The soldiers, who were crowded together, were hidden up to their chins; only their helmet-plumes could be seen. At last when it was twenty cubits high in the air it turned several times to the right and to the left, and then was depressed; and like a giant arm holding a cohort of pigmies in its hand, it laid the basketful of men upon the edge of the wall. They leaped into the crowd and never returned.

All the other tollenos were speedily made ready. But a hundred times as many would have been needed for the capture of the town. They were utilised in a murderous fashion: Ethiopian archers were placed in the baskets; then, the cables having been fastened, they remained suspended and shot poisoned arrows. The fifty tollenos commanding the battlements thus surrounded Carthage like monstrous vultures; and the Negroes laughed to see the guards on the rampart dying in grievous convulsions.



Hamilcar sent hoplites to these posts, and every morning made them drink the juice of certain herbs which protected them against the poison.

One evening when it was dark he embarked the best of his soldiers on lighters and planks, and turning to the right of the harbour, disembarked on the Taenia. Then he advanced to the first lines of the Barbarians, and taking them in flank, made a great slaughter. Men hanging to ropes would descend at night from the top of the wall with torches in their hands, burn the works of the Mercenaries, and then mount up again.

Matho was exasperated; every obstacle strengthened his wrath, which led him into terrible extravagances. He mentally summoned Salammbo to an interview; then he waited. She did not come; this seemed to him like a fresh piece of treachery, — and henceforth he execrated her. If he had seen her corpse he would perhaps have gone away. He doubled the outposts, he planted forks at the foot of the rampart, he drove caltrops into the ground, and he commanded the Libyans to bring him a whole forest that he might set it on fire and burn Carthage like a den of foxes.

Spendius went on obstinately with the siege. He sought to invent terrible machines such as had never before been constructed.

The other Barbarians, encamped at a distance on the isthmus, were amazed at these delays; they murmured, and they were let loose.

Then they rushed with their cutlasses and javelins, and beat against the gates with them. But the nakedness of their bodies facilitating the infliction of wounds, the Carthaginians massacred them freely; and the Mercenaries rejoiced at it, no doubt through jealousy about the plunder. Hence there resulted quarrels and combats between them. Then, the country having been ravaged, provisions were soon scarce. They grew disheartened. Numerous hordes went away, but the crowd was so great that the loss was not apparent.

The best of them tried to dig mines, but the earth, being badly supported, fell in. They began again in other places, but Hamilcar always guessed the direction that they were taking by holding his ear against a bronze shield. He bored counter-mines beneath the path along which the wooden towers were to move, and when they were pushed forward they sank into the holes.

At last all recognised that the town was impregnable, unless a long terrace was raised to the same height as the walls, so as to enable them to fight on the same level. The top of it should be paved so that the machines might be rolled along. Then Carthage would find it quite impossible to resist.

The town was beginning to suffer from thirst. The water which was worth two kesitahs the bath at the opening of the siege was now sold for a shekel of silver; the stores of meat and corn were also becoming exhausted; there was a dread of famine, and some even began to speak of useless mouths, which terrified every one.

From the square of Khamon to the temple of Melkarth the streets were cumbered with corpses; and, as it was the end of the summer, the combatants were annoyed by great black flies. Old men carried off the wounded, and the devout continued the fictitious funerals for their relatives and friends who had died far away during the war. Waxen statues with clothes and hair were displayed across the gates. They melted in the heat of the tapers burning beside them; the paint flowed down upon their shoulders, and tears streamed over the faces of the living, as they chanted mournful songs beside them. The crowd meanwhile ran to and fro; armed bands passed; captains shouted orders, while the shock of the rams beating against the rampart was constantly heard.

The temperature became so heavy that the bodies swelled and would no longer fit into the coffins. They were burned in the centre of the courts. But the fires, being too much confined, kindled the neighbouring walls, and long flames suddenly burst from the houses like blood spurting from an artery. Thus Moloch was in possession of Carthage; he clasped the ramparts, he rolled through the streets, he devoured the very corpses.

Men wearing cloaks made of collected rags in token of despair, stationed themselves at the corners of the crossways. They declaimed against the Ancients and against Hamilcar, predicted complete ruin to the people, and invited them to universal destruction and license. The most dangerous were the henbane-drinkers; in their crisis they believed themselves wild beasts, and leaped upon drinkers; in their crisis they believed themselves wild beasts, and leaped upon the passers-by to rend them. Mobs formed around them, and the defence of Carthage was forgotten. The Suffet devised the payment of others to support his policy.

In order to retain the genius of the gods within the town their images had been covered with chains. Black veils were placed upon the Pataec gods, and hair-cloths around the altars; and attempts were made to excite the pride and jealousy of the Baals by singing in their ears: "Thou art about to suffer thyself to be vanquished! Are the others perchance more strong? Show thyself! aid us! that the peoples may not say: 'Where are now their gods?'"

The colleges of the pontiffs were agitated by unceasing anxiety. Those of Rabbetna were especially afraid — the restoration of the zaimph having been of no avail. They kept themselves shut up in the third enclosure which was as impregnable as a fortress. Only one among them, the high priest Schahabarim, ventured to go out.

He used to visit Salammbo. But he would either remain perfectly silent, gazing at her with fixed eyeballs, or else would be lavish of words, and the reproaches that he uttered were harder than ever.

With inconceivable inconsistency he could not forgive the young girl for carrying out his commands; Schahabarim had guessed all, and this haunting thought revived the jealousies of his impotence. He accused her of being the cause of the war. Matho, according to him, was besieging Carthage to recover the zaimph; and he poured out imprecations and sarcasms upon this Barbarian who pretended to the possession of holy things. Yet it was not this that the priest wished to say.

But just now Salammbo felt no terror of him. The anguish which she used formerly to suffer had left her. A strange peacefulness possessed her. Her gaze was less wandering, and shone with limpid fire.

Meanwhile the python had become ill again; and as Salammbo, on the contrary, appeared to be recovering, old Taanach rejoiced in the conviction that by its decline it was taking away the languor of her mistress.

One morning she found it coiled up behind the bed of ox-hides, colder than marble, and with its head hidden by a heap of worms. Her cries brought Salammbo to the spot. She turned it over for a while with the tip of her sandal, and the slave was amazed at her insensibility.

Hamilcar's daughter no longer prolonged her fasts with so much fervour. She passed whole days on the top of her terrace, leaning her elbows against the balustrade, and amusing herself by looking out before her. The summits of the walls at the end of the town cut uneven zigzags upon the sky, and the lances of the sentries formed what was like a border of corn-ears throughout their length the sentries formed what was like a border of corn-ears throughout their length. Further away she could see the manoeuvres of the Barbarians between the towers; on days when the siege was interrupted she could even distinguish their occupations. They mended their weapons, greased their hair, and washed their bloodstained arms in the sea; the tents were closed; the beasts of burden were feeding; and in the distance the scythes of the chariots, which were all ranged in a semicircle, looked like a silver scimitar lying at the base of the mountains. Schahabarim's talk recurred to her memory. She was waiting for Narr' Havas, her betrothed. In spite of her hatred she would have liked to see Matho again. Of all the Carthaginians she was perhaps the only one who would have spoken to him without fear.

Her father often came into her room. He would sit down panting on the cushions, and gaze at her with an almost tender look, as if he found some rest from her fatigues in the sight of her. He sometimes questioned her about her journey to the camp of the Mercenaries. He even asked her whether any one had urged her to it; and with a shake of the head she answered, No, — so proud was Salammbo of having saved the zaimph.

But the Suffet always came back to Matho under pretence of making military inquiries. He could not understand how the hours which she had spent in the tent had been employed. Salammbo, in fact, said nothing about Gisco; for as words had an effective power in themselves, curses, if reported to any one, might be turned against him; and she was silent about her wish to assassinate, lest she should be blamed for not having yielded to it. She said that the schalischim appeared furious, that he had shouted a great deal, and that he had then fallen asleep. Salammbo told no more, through shame perhaps, or else because she was led by her extreme ingenuousness to attach but little importance to the soldier's kisses. Moreover, it all floated through her head in a melancholy and misty fashion, like the recollection of a depressing dream; and she would not have known in what way or in what words to express it.

One evening when they were thus face to face with each other, Taanach came in looking quite scared. An old man with a child was yonder in the courts, and wished to see the Suffet.

Hamilcar turned pale, and then quickly replied:

"Let him come up!"

Iddibal entered without prostrating himself. He held a young boy, covered with a goat's-hair cloak, by the hand, and at once raised the hood which screened his face.

"Here he is, Master! Take him!"

The Suffet and the slave went into a corner of the room.

The child remained in the centre standing upright, and with a gaze of attention rather than of astonishment he surveyed the ceiling, the furniture, the pearl necklaces trailing on the purple draperies, and the majestic maiden who was bending over towards him.

He was perhaps ten years old, and was not taller than a Roman sword. His curly hair shaded his swelling forehead. His eyeballs looked as if they were seeking for space. The nostrils of his delicate nose were broad and palpitating, and upon his whole person was displayed the indefinable splendour of those who are destined to great enterprises. When he had cast aside his extremely heavy cloak, he remained clad in a lynx skin, which was fastened about his waist, and he rested his little naked feet, which were all white with dust, resolutely upon the pavement. But he no doubt divined that important matters were under discussion, for he stood motionless, with one hand behind his back, his chin lowered, and a finger in his mouth.

At last Hamilcar attracted Salammbo with a sign and said to her in a low voice:

"You will keep him with you, you understand! No one, even though belonging to the house, must know of his existence!"

Then, behind the door, he again asked Iddibal whether he was quite sure that they had not been noticed.

"No!" said the slave, "the streets were empty."

As the war filled all the provinces he had feared for his master's son. Then, not knowing where to hide him, he had come along the coasts in a sloop, and for three days Iddibal had been tacking about in the gulf and watching the ramparts. At last, that evening, as the environs of Khamon seemed to be deserted, he had passed briskly through the channel and landed near the arsenal, the entrance to the harbour being free.

But soon the Barbarians posted an immense raft in front of it in order to prevent the Carthaginians from coming out. They were again rearing the wooden towers, and the terrace was rising at the same time.

Outside communications were cut off and an intolerable famine set in.

The besieged killed all the dogs, all the mules, all the asses, and then the fifteen elephants which the Suffet had brought back. The lions of the temple of Moloch had become ferocious, and the hierodules no longer durst approach them. They were fed at first with the wounded Barbarians; then they were thrown corpses that were still warm; they refused them, and they all died. People wandered in the twilight along the old enclosures, and gathered grass and flowers among the stones to boil them in wine, wine being cheaper than water. Others crept as far as the enemy's outposts, and entered the tents to steal food, and the stupefied Barbarians sometimes allowed them to return. At last a day arrived when the Ancients resolved to slaughter the horses of Eschmoun privately. They were holy animals whose manes were plaited by the pontiffs with gold ribbons, and whose existence denoted the motion of the sun — the idea of fire in its most exalted form. Their flesh was cut into equal portions and buried behind the altar. Then every evening the Ancients, alleging some act of devotion, would go up to the temple and regale themselves in secret, and each would take away a piece beneath his tunic for his children. In the deserted quarters remote from the walls, the inhabitants, whose misery was not so great, had barricaded themselves through fear of the rest.

The stones from the catapults, and the demolitions commanded for purposes of defence, had accumulated heaps of ruins in the middle of the streets. At the quietest times masses of people would suddenly rush along with shouts; and from the top of the Acropolis the conflagrations were like purple rags scattered upon the terraces and twisted by the wind.

The three great catapults did not stop in spite of all these works. Their ravages were extraordinary: thus a man's head rebounded from the pediment of the Syssitia; a woman who was being confined in the street of Kinisdo was crushed by a block of marble, and her child was carried with the bed as far as the crossways of Cinasyn, where the coverlet was found.

The most annoying were the bullets of the slingers. They fell upon the roofs, and in the gardens, and in the middle of the courts, while people were at table before a slender meal with their hearts big with sighs. These cruel projectiles bore engraved letters which stamped themselves upon the flesh; — and insults might be read on corpses such as "pig," "jackal," "vermin," and sometimes jests: "Catch it!" or "I have well deserved it!"

The portion of the rampart which extended from the corner of the harbours to the height of the cisterns was broken down. Then the people of Malqua found themselves caught between the old enclosure of Byrsa behind, and the Barbarians in front. But there was enough to be done in thickening the wall and making it as high as possible without troubling about them; they were abandoned; all perished; and although they were generally hated, Hamilcar came to be greatly abhorred.

On the morrow he opened the pits in which he kept stores of corn, and his stewards gave it to the people. For three days they gorged themselves.

Their thirst, however, only became the more intolerable, and they could constantly see before them the long cascade formed by the clear falling water of the aqueduct. A thin vapour, with a rainbow beside it, went up from its base, beneath the rays of the sun, and a little stream curving through the plain fell into the gulf.

Hamilcar did not give way. He was reckoning upon an event, upon something decisive and extraordinary.

His own slaves tore off the silver plates from the temple of Melkarth; four long boats were drawn out of the harbour, they were brought by means of capstans to the foot of the Mappalian quarter, the wall facing the shore was bored, and they set out for the Gauls to buy Mercenaries there at no matter what price. Nevertheless, Hamilcar was distressed at his inability to communicate with the king of the Numidians, for he knew that he was behind the Barbarians, and ready to fall upon them. But Narr' Havas, being too weak, was not going to make any venture alone; and the Suffet had the rampart raised twelve palms higher, all the material in the arsenals piled up in the Acropolis, and the machines repaired once more.

Sinews taken from bulls' necks, or else stags' hamstrings, were commonly employed for the twists of the catapults. However, neither stags nor bulls were in existence in Carthage. Hamilcar asked the Ancients for the hair of their wives; all sacrificed it, but the quantity was not sufficient. In the buildings of the Syssitia there were twelve hundred marriageable slaves destined for prostitution in Greece and Italy, and their hair, having been rendered elastic by the use of unguents, was wonderfully well adapted for engines of war. But the subsequent loss would be too great. Accordingly it was decided that a choice should be made of the finest heads of hair among the wives of the plebeians. Careless of their country's needs, they shrieked in despair when the servants of the Hundred came with scissors to lay hands upon them.

The Barbarians were animated with increased fury. They could be seen in the distance taking fat from the dead to grease their machines, while others pulled out the nails and stitched them end to end to make cuirasses. They devised a plan of putting into the catapults vessels filled with serpents which had been brought by the Negroes; the clay pots broke on the flagstones, the serpents ran about, seemed to multiply, and, so numerous were they, to issue naturally from the walls. Then the Barbarians, not satisfied with their invention, improved upon it; they hurled all kinds of filth, human excrements, pieces of carrion, corpses. The plague reappeared. The teeth of the Carthaginians fell out of their mouths, and their gums were discoloured like those of camels after too long a journey.

The machines were set up on the terrace, although the latter did not as yet reach everywhere to the height of the rampart. Before the twenty-three towers on the fortification stood twenty-three others of wood. All the tollenos were mounted again, and in the centre, a little further back, appeared the formidable helepolis of Demetrius Poliorcetes, which Spendius had at last reconstructed. Of pyramidical shape, like the pharos of Alexandria, it was one hundred and thirty cubits high and twenty-three wide, with nine stories, diminishing as they approached the summit, and protected by scales of brass; they were pierced with numerous doors and were filled with soldiers, and on the upper platform there stood a catapult flanked by two ballistas.

Then Hamilcar planted crosses for those who should speak of surrender, and even the women were brigaded. The people lay in the streets and waited full of distress.

Then one morning before sunrise (it was the seventh day of the month of Nyssan) they heard a great shout uttered by all the Barbarians simultaneously; the leaden-tubed trumpets pealed, and the great Paphlagonian horns bellowed like bulls. All rose and ran to the rampart.

A forest of lances, pikes, and swords bristled at its base. It leaped against the wall, the ladders grappled them; and Barbarians' heads appeared in the intervals of the battlements.

Beams supported by long files of men were battering at the gates; and, in order to demolish the wall at places where the terrace was wanting, the Mercenaries came up in serried cohorts, the first line crawling, the second bending their hams, and the others rising in succession to the last who stood upright; while elsewhere, in order to climb up, the tallest advanced in front and the lowest in the rear, and all rested their shields upon their helmets with their left arms, joining them together at the edges so tightly that they might have been taken for an assemblage of large tortoises. The projectiles slid over these oblique masses.

The Carthaginians threw down mill-stones, pestles, vats, casks, beds, everything that could serve as a weight and could knock down. Some watched at the embrasures with fisherman's nets, and when the Barbarian arrived he found himself caught in the meshes, and struggled like a fish. They demolished their own battlements; portions of wall fell down raising a great dust; and as the catapults on the terrace were shooting over against one another, the stones would strike together and shiver into a thousand pieces, making a copious shower upon the combatants.

Soon the two crowds formed but one great chain of human bodies; it overflowed into the intervals in the terrace, and, somewhat looser at the two extremities, swayed perpetually without advancing. They clasped one another, lying flat on the ground like wrestlers. They crushed one another. The women leaned over the battlements and shrieked. They were dragged away by their veils, and the whiteness of their suddenly uncovered sides shone in the arms of the Negroes as the latter buried their daggers in them. Some corpses did not fall, being too much pressed by the crowd, and, supported by the shoulders of their companions, advanced for some minutes quite upright and with staring eyes. Some who had both temples pierced by a javelin swayed their heads about like bears. Mouths, opened to shout, remained gaping; severed hands flew through the air. Mighty blows were dealt, which were long talked of by the survivors.

Meanwhile arrows darted from the towers of wood and stone. The tollenos moved their long yards rapidly; and as the Barbarians had sacked the old cemetery of the aborigines beneath the Catacombs, they hurled the tombstones against the Carthaginians. Sometimes the cables broke under the weight of too heavy baskets, and masses of men, all with uplifted arms, would fall from the sky.

Up to the middle of the day the veterans had attacked the Taenia fiercely in order to penetrate into the harbour and destroy the fleet. Hamilcar had a fire of damp straw lit upon the roofing of Khamon, and as the smoke blinded them they fell back to left, and came to swell the horrible rout which was pressing forward in Malqua. Some syntagmata composed of sturdy men, chosen expressly for the purpose, had broken in three gates. They were checked by lofty barriers made of planks studded with nails, but a fourth yielded easily; they dashed over it at a run and rolled into a pit in which there were hidden snares. At the south-west gate Autaritus and his men broke down the rampart, the fissure in which had been stopped up with bricks. The ground behind rose, and they climbed it nimbly. But on the top they found a second wall composed of stones and long beams lying quite flat and alternating like the squares on a chess-board. It was a Gaulish fashion, and had been adapted by the Suffet to the requirements of the situation; the Gauls imagined themselves before a town in their own country. Their attack was weak, and they were repulsed.

All the roundway, from the street of Khamon as far as the Green Market, now belonged to the Barbarians, and the Samnites were finishing off the dying with blows of stakes; or else with one foot on the wall were gazing down at the smoking ruins beneath them, and the battle which was beginning again in the distance.

The slingers, who were distributed through the rear, were still shooting. But the springs of the Acarnanian slings had broken from use, and many were throwing stones with the hand like shepherds; the rest hurled leaden bullets with the handle of a whip. Zarxas, his shoulders covered with his long black hair, went about everywhere, and led on the Barbarians. Two pouches hung at his hips; he thrust his left hand into them continually, while his right arm whirled round like a chariot-wheel.

Matho had at first refrained from fighting, the better to command the Barbarians all at once. He had been seen along the gulf with the Mercenaries, near the lagoon with the Numidians, and on the shores of the lake among the near the lagoon with the Numidians, and on the shores of the lake among the Negroes, and from the back part of the plain he urged forward masses of soldiers who came ceaselessly against the ramparts. By degrees he had drawn near; the smell of blood, the sight of carnage, and the tumult of clarions had at last made his heart leap. Then he had gone back into his tent, and throwing off his cuirass had taken his lion's skin as being more convenient for battle. The snout fitted upon his head, bordering his face with a circle of fangs; the two fore-paws were crossed upon his breast, and the claws of the hinder ones fell beneath his knees.

He had kept on his strong waist-belt, wherein gleamed a two-edged axe, and with his great sword in both hands he had dashed impetuously through the breach. Like a pruner cutting willow-branches and trying to strike off as much as possible so as to make the more money, he marched along mowing down the Carthaginians around him. Those who tried to seize him in flank he knocked down with blows of the pommel; when they attacked him in front he ran them through; if they fled he clove them. Two men leaped together upon his back; he bounded backwards against a gate and crushed them. His sword fell and rose. It shivered on the angle of a wall. Then he took his heavy axe, and front and rear he ripped up the Carthaginians like a flock of sheep. They scattered more and more, and he was quite alone when he reached the second enclosure at the foot of the Acropolis. The materials which had been flung from the summit cumbered the steps and were heaped up higher than the wall. Matho turned back amid the ruins to summons his companions.

He perceived their crests scattered over the multitude; they were sinking and their wearers were about to perish; he dashed towards them; then the vast wreath of red plumes closed in, and they soon rejoined him and surrounded him. But an enormous crowd was discharging from the side streets. He was caught by the hips, lifted up and carried away outside the ramparts to a spot where the terrace was high.

Matho shouted a command and all the shields sank upon the helmets; he leaped upon them in order to catch hold somewhere so as to re-enter Carthage; and, flourishing his terrible axe, ran over the shields, which resembled waves of bronze, like a marine god, with brandished trident, over his billows.

However, a man in a white robe was walking along the edge of the rampart, impassible, and indifferent to the death which surrounded him. Sometimes he would spread out his right hand above his eyes in order to find out some one. Matho happened to pass beneath him. Suddenly his eyeballs flamed, his livid face contracted; and raising both his lean arms he shouted out abuse at him.

Matho did not hear it; but he felt so furious and cruel a look entering his heart that he uttered a roar. He hurled his long axe at him; some people threw themselves upon Schahabarim; and Matho seeing him no more fell back themselves upon Schahabarim, and Matho seeing him no more fell back exhausted.

A terrible creaking drew near, mingled with the rhythm of hoarse voices singing together.

It was the great helepolis surrounded by a crowd of soldiers. They were dragging it with both hands, hauling it with ropes, and pushing it with their shoulders, — for the slope rising from the plain to the terrace, although extremely gentle, was found impracticable for machines of such prodigious weight. However, it had eight wheels banded with iron, and it had been advancing slowly in this way since the morning, like a mountain raised upon another. Then there appeared an immense ram issuing from its base. The doors along the three fronts which faced the town fell down, and cuirassed soldiers appeared in the interior like pillars of iron. Some might be seen climbing and descending the two staircases which crossed the stories. Some were waiting to dart out as soon as the cramps of the doors touched the walls; in the middle of the upper platform the skeins of the ballistas were turning, and the great beam of the catapult was being lowered.

Hamilcar was at that moment standing upright on the roof of Melkarth. He had calculated that it would come directly towards him, against what was the most invulnerable place in the wall, which was for that very reason denuded of sentries. His slaves had for a long time been bringing leathern bottles along the roundway, where they had raised with clay two transverse partitions forming a sort of basin. The water was flowing insensibly along the terrace, and strange to say, it seemed to cause Hamilcar no anxiety.

But when the helepolis was thirty paces off, he commanded planks to be placed over the streets between the houses from the cisterns to the rampart; and a file of people passed from hand to hand helmets and amphoras, which were emptied continually. The Carthaginians, however, grew indignant at this waste of water. The ram was demolishing the wall, when suddenly a fountain sprang forth from the disjointed stones. Then the lofty brazen mass, nine stories high, which contained and engaged more than three thousand soldiers, began to rock gently like a ship. In fact, the water, which had penetrated the terrace, had broken up the path before it; its wheels stuck in the mire; the head of Spendius, with distended cheeks blowing an ivory cornet, appeared between leathern curtains on the first story. The great machine, as though convulsively upheaved, advanced perhaps ten paces; but the ground softened more and more, the mire reached to the axles, and the helepolis stopped, leaning over frightfully to one side. The catapult rolled to the edge of the platform, and carried away by the weight of its beam, fell, shattering the lower stories beneath it. The soldiers who were standing on the doors slipped into the abyss, or else held on to the were standing on the doors slipped into the abyss, or else held on to the extremities of the long beams, and by their weight increased the inclination of the helepolis, which was going to pieces with creakings in all its joints.

The other Barbarians rushed up to help them, massing themselves into a compact crowd. The Carthaginians descended from the rampart, and, assailing them in the rear, killed them at leisure. But the chariots furnished with sickles hastened up, and galloped round the outskirts of the multitude. The latter ascended the wall again; night came on; and the Barbarians gradually retired.

Nothing could now be seen on the plain but a sort of perfectly black, swarming mass, which extended from the bluish gulf to the purely white lagoon; and the lake, which had received streams of blood, stretched further away like a great purple pool.

The terrace was now so laden with corpses that it looked as though it had been constructed of human bodies. In the centre stood the helepolis covered with armour; and from time to time huge fragments broke off from it, like stones from a crumbling pyramid. Broad tracks made by the streams of lead might be distinguished on the walls. A broken-down wooden tower burned here and there, and the houses showed dimly like the stages of a ruined ampitheatre. Heavy fumes of smoke were rising, and rolling with them sparks which were lost in the dark sky.

The Carthaginians, however, who were consumed by thirst, had rushed to the cisterns. They broke open the doors. A miry swamp stretched at the bottom.

What was to be done now? Moreover, the Barbarians were countless, and when their fatigue was over they would begin again.

The people deliberated all night in groups at the corners of the streets. Some said that they ought to send away the women, the sick, and the old men; others proposed to abandon the town, and found a colony far away. But vessels were lacking, and when the sun appeared no decision had been made.

There was no fighting that day, all being too much exhausted. The sleepers looked like corpses.

Then the Carthaginians, reflecting upon the cause of their disasters, remembered that they had not dispatched to Phoenicia the annual offering due to Tyrian Melkarth, and a great terror came upon them. The gods were indignant with the Republic, and were, no doubt, about to prosecute their vengeance.

They were considered as cruel masters, who were appeased with supplications and allowed themselves to be bribed with presents. All were feeble in comparison with Moloch the Devourer. The existence, the very flesh of men, belonged to him; and hence in order to preserve it, the Carthaginians used to offer up a portion of it to him, which calmed his fury. Children were burned on the forehead, or on the nape of the neck, with woollen wicks; and as this mode of satisfying Baal brought in much money to the priests, they failed not to recommend it as being easier and more pleasant.

This time, however, the Republic itself was at stake. But as every profit must be purchased by some loss, and as every transaction was regulated according to the needs of the weaker and the demands of the stronger, there was no pain great enough for the god, since he delighted in such as was of the most horrible description, and all were now at his mercy. He must accordingly be fully gratified. Precedents showed that in this way the scourge would be made to disappear. Moreover, it was believed that an immolation by fire would purify Carthage. The ferocity of the people was predisposed towards it. The choice, too, must fall exclusively upon the families of the great.

The Ancients assembled. The sitting was a long one. Hanno had come to it. As he was now unable to sit he remained lying down near the door, half hidden among the fringes of the lofty tapestry; and when the pontiff of Moloch asked them whether they would consent to surrender their children, his voice suddenly broke forth from the shadow like the roaring of a genius in the depths of a cavern. He regretted, he said, that he had none of his own blood to give; and he gazed at Hamilcar, who faced him at the other end of the hall. The Suffet was so much disconcerted by this look that it made him lower his eyes. All successively bent their heads in approval; and in accordance with the rites he had to reply to the high priest: "Yes; be it so." Then the Ancients decreed the sacrifice in traditional circumlocution, — because there are things more troublesome to say than to perform.

The decision was almost immediately known in Carthage, and lamentations resounded. The cries of women might everywhere be heard; their husbands consoled them, or railed at them with remonstrances.

But three hours afterwards extraordinary tidings were spread abroad: the Suffet had discovered springs at the foot of the cliff. There was a rush to the place. Water might be seen in holes dug in the sand, and some were already lying flat on the ground and drinking.

Hamilcar did not himself know whether it was by the determination of the gods or through the vague recollection of a revelation which his father had once made to him; but on leaving the Ancients he had gone down to the shore and had begun to dig the gravel with his slaves.

He gave clothing, boots, and wine. He gave all the rest of the corn that he was keeping by him. He even let the crowd enter his palace, and he opened kitchens, stores, and all the rooms, — Salammbo's alone excepted. He announced that six thousand Gaulish Mercenaries were coming, and that the king of Macedonia was sending soldiers.

But on the second day the springs diminished, and on the evening of the third they were completely dried up. Then the decree of the Ancients passed everywhere from lip to lip, and the priests of Moloch began their task.

Men in black robes presented themselves in the houses. In many instances the owners had deserted them under pretence of some business, or of some dainty that they were going to buy; and the servants of Moloch came and took the children away. Others themselves surrendered them stupidly. Then they were brought to the temple of Tanith, where the priestesses were charged with their amusement and support until the solemn day.

They visited Hamilcar suddenly and found him in his gardens.

"Barca! we come for that that you know of — your son!" They added that some people had met him one evening during the previous moon in the centre of the Mappalian district being led by an old man.

He was as though suffocated at first. But speedily understanding that any denial would be in vain, Hamilcar bowed; and he brought them into the commercial house. Some slaves who had run up at a sign kept watch all round about it.

He entered Salammbo's room in a state of distraction. He seized Hannibal with one hand, snatched up the cord of a trailing garment with the other, tied his feet and hands with it, thrust the end into his mouth to form a gag, and hid him under the bed of the ox-hides by letting an ample drapery fall to the ground.

Afterwards he walked about from right to left, raised his arms, wheeled round, bit his lips. Then he stood still with staring eyelids, and panted as though he were about to die.

But he clapped his hands three times. Giddenem appeared.

"Listen!" he said, "go and take from among the slaves a male child from eight to nine years of age, with black hair and swelling forehead! Bring him here! make haste!"

Giddenem soon entered again, bringing forward a young boy.

He was a miserable child, at once lean and bloated; his skin looked greyish, like the infected rag hanging to his sides; his head was sunk between his shoulders, and with the back of his hand he was rubbing his eyes, which were filled with flies.

How could he ever be confounded with Hannibal! and there was no time to choose another. Hamilcar looked at Giddenem; he felt inclined to strangle him.

"Begone!" he cried; and the master of the slaves fled.

The misfortune which he had so long dreaded was therefore come, and with extravagant efforts he strove to discover whether there was not some mode, some means to escape it.

Abdalonim suddenly spoke from behind the door. The Suffet was being asked for. The servants of Moloch were growing impatient.

Hamilcar repressed a cry as though a red hot iron had burnt him; and he began anew to pace the room like one distraught. Then he sank down beside the balustrade, and, with his elbows on his knees, pressed his forehead into his shut fists.

The porphyry basin still contained a little clear water for Salammbo's ablutions. In spite of his repugnance and all his pride, the Suffet dipped the child into it, and, like a slave merchant, began to wash him and rub him with strigils and red earth. Then he took two purple squares from the receptacles round the wall, placed one on his breast and the other on his back, and joined them together on the collar bones with two diamond clasps. He poured perfume upon his head, passed an electrum necklace around his neck, and put on him sandals with heels of pearl, — sandals belonging to his own daughter! But he stamped with shame and vexation; Salammbo, who busied herself in helping him, was as pale as he. The child, dazzled by such splendour, smiled and, growing bold even, was beginning to clap his hands and jump, when Hamilcar took him away.

He held him firmly by the arm as though he were afraid of losing him, and the child, who was hurt, wept a little as he ran beside him.

When on a level with the ergastulum, under a palm tree, a voice was raised, a mournful and supplicant voice. It murmured: "Master! oh! master!"

Hamilcar turned and beside him perceived a man of abject appearance, one of the wretches who led a haphazard existence in the household.

"What do you want?" said the Suffet.

The slave, who trembled horribly, stammered:

"I am his father!"

Hamilcar walked on; the other followed him with stooping loins, bent hams, and head thrust forward. His face was convulsed with unspeakable anguish, and he was choking with suppressed sobs, so eager was he at once to question him, and to cry: "Mercy!"

At last he ventured to touch him lightly with one finger on the elbow.

"Are you going to — ?" He had not the strength to finish, and Hamilcar stopped quite amazed at such grief.

He had never thought — so immense was the abyss separating them from each other — that there could be anything in common between them. It even appeared to him a sort of outrage, an encroachment upon his own privileges. He replied with a look colder and heavier than an executioner's axe; the slave swooned and fell in the dust at his feet. Hamilcar strode across him.

The three black-robed men were waiting in the great hall, and standing against the stone disc. Immediately he tore his garments, and rolled upon the pavement uttering piercing cries.

"Ah! poor little Hannibal! Oh! my son! my consolation! my hope! my life! Kill me also! take me away! Woe! Woe!" He ploughed his face with his nails, tore out his hair, and shrieked like the women who lament at funerals. "Take him away then! my suffering is too great! begone! kill me like him!" The servants of Moloch were astonished that the great Hamilcar was so weak-spirited. They were almost moved by it.

A noise of naked feet became audible, with a broken throat-rattling like the breathing of a wild beast speeding along, and a man, pale, terrible, and with outspread arms appeared on the threshold of the third gallery, between the ivory pots; he exclaimed:

"My child!"

Hamilcar threw himself with a bound upon the slave, and covering the man's mouth with his hand exclaimed still more loudly:

"It is the old man who reared him! he calls him 'my child!' it will make him mad! enough! enough!" And hustling away the three priests and their victim he went out with them and with a great kick shut the door behind him.

Hamilcar strained his ears for some minutes in constant fear of seeing them return. He then thought of getting rid of the slave in order to be quite sure that he would see nothing; but the peril had not wholly disappeared, and, if the gods were provoked at the man's death, it might be turned against his son. Then, changing his intention, he sent him by Taanach the best from his kitchens — a quarter of a goat, beans, and preserved pomegranates. The slave, who had eaten nothing for a long time, rushed upon them; his tears fell into the dishes.

Hamilcar at last returned to Salammbo, and unfastened Hannibal's cords. The child in exasperation bit his hand until the blood came. He repelled him with a caress.

To make him remain quiet Salammbo tried to frighten him with Lamia, a Cyrenian ogress.

"But where is she?" he asked.

He was told that brigands were coming to put him into prison. "Let them come," he rejoined, "and I will kill them!"

Then Hamilcar told him the frightful truth. But he fell into a passion with his father, contending that he was quite able to annihilate the whole people, since he was the master of Carthage.

At last, exhausted by his exertions and anger, he fell into a wild sleep. He spoke in his dreams, his back leaning against a scarlet cushion; his head was thrown back somewhat, and his little arm, outstretched from his body, lay quite straight in an attitude of command straight in an attitude of command.

When the night had grown dark Hamilcar lifted him up gently, and, without a torch, went down the galley staircase. As he passed through the mercantile house he took up a basket of grapes and a flagon of pure water; the child awoke before the statue of Aletes in the vault of gems, and he smiled — like the other — on his father's arm at the brilliant lights which surrounded him.

Hamilcar felt quite sure that his son could not be taken from him. It was an impenetrable spot communicating with the beach by a subterranean passage which he alone knew, and casting his eyes around he inhaled a great draught of air. Then he set him down upon a stool beside some golden shields. No one at present could see him; he had no further need for watching; and he relieved his feelings. Like a mother finding her first-born that was lost, he threw himself upon his son; he clasped him to his breast, he laughed and wept at the same time, he called him by the fondest names and covered him with kisses; little Hannibal was frightened by this terrible tenderness and was silent now.

Hamilcar returned with silent steps, feeling the walls around him, and came into the great hall where the moonlight entered through one of the apertures in the dome; in the centre the slave lay sleeping after his repast, stretched at full length upon the marble pavement. He looked at him and was moved with a sort of pity. With the tip of his cothurn he pushed forward a carpet beneath his head. Then he raised his eyes and gazed at Tanith, whose slender crescent was shining in the sky, and felt himself stronger than the Baals and full of contempt for them.

The arrangements for the sacrifice were already begun.

Part of a wall in the temple of Moloch was thrown down in order to draw out the brazen god without touching the ashes of the altar. Then as soon as the sun appeared the hierodules pushed it towards the square of Khamon.

It moved backwards sliding upon cylinders; its shoulders overlapped the walls. No sooner did the Carthaginians perceive it in the distance than they speedily took to flight, for the Baal could be looked upon with impunity only when exercising his wrath.

A smell of aromatics spread through the streets. All the temples had just been opened simultaneously, and from them there came forth tabernacles borne upon chariots, or upon litters carried by the pontiffs. Great plumes swayed at the corners of them, and rays were emitted from their slender pinnacles which terminated in balls of crystal, gold, silver or copper.

These were the Chanaanitish Baalim, offshoots of the supreme Baal, who were returning to their first cause to humble themselves before his might and annihilate themselves in his splendour.

Melkarth's pavilion, which was of fine purple, sheltered a petroleum flare; on Khamon's, which was of hyacinth colour, there rose an ivory phallus bordered

Khamon's, which was of hyacinth colour, there rose an ivory phallus bordered with a circle of gems; between Eschmoun's curtains, which were as blue as the ether, a sleeping python formed a circle with his tail, and the Pataec gods, held in the arms of their priests, looked like great infants in swaddling clothes with their heels touching the ground.

Then came all the inferior forms of the Divinity: Baal-Samin, god of celestial space; Baal-Peor, god of the sacred mountains; Baal-Zeboub, god of corruption, with those of the neighbouring countries and congenerous races: the Iarbal of Libya, the Adramelech of Chaldaea, the Kijun of the Syrians; Derceto, with her virgin's face, crept on her fins, and the corpse of Tammouz was drawn along in the midst of a catafalque among torches and heads of hair. In order to subdue the kings of the firmament to the Sun, and prevent their particular influences from disturbing his, diversely coloured metal stars were brandished at the end of long poles; and all were there, from the dark Neblo, the genius of Mercury, to the hideous Rahab, which is the constellation of the Crocodile. The Abbadirs, stones which had fallen from the moon, were whirling in slings of silver thread; little loaves, representing the female form, were born on baskets by the priests of Ceres; others brought their fetishes and amulets; forgotten idols reappeared, while the mystic symbols had been taken from the very ships as though Carthage wished to concentrate herself wholly upon a single thought of death and desolation.

Before each tabernacle a man balanced a large vase of smoking incense on his head. Clouds hovered here and there, and the hangings, pendants, and embroideries of the sacred pavilions might be distinguished amid the thick vapours. These advanced slowly owing to their enormous weight. Sometimes the axles became fast in the streets; then the pious took advantage of the opportunity to touch the Baalim with their garments, which they preserved afterwards as holy things.

The brazen statue continued to advance towards the square of Khamon. The rich, carrying sceptres with emerald balls, set out from the bottom of Megara; the Ancients, with diadems on their heads, had assembled in Kinisdo, and masters of the finances, governors of provinces, sailors, and the numerous horde employed at funerals, all with the insignia of their magistracies or the instruments of their calling, were making their way towards the tabernacles which were descending from the Acropolis between the colleges of the pontiffs.

Out of deference to Moloch they had adorned themselves with the most splendid jewels. Diamonds sparkled on their black garments; but their rings were too large and fell from their wasted hands, — nor could there have been anything so mournful as this silent crowd where earrings tapped against pale faces, and gold tiaras clasped brows contracted with stern despair.

faces, and gold tiaras clasped brows contracted with stern despair.

At last the Baal arrived exactly in the centre of the square. His pontiffs arranged an enclosure with trellis-work to keep off the multitude, and remained around him at his feet.

The priests of Khamon, in tawny woollen robes, formed a line before their temple beneath the columns of the portico; those of Eschmoun, in linen mantles with necklaces of koukouphas' heads and pointed tiaras, posted themselves on the steps of the Acropolis; the priests of Melkarth, in violet tunics, took the western side; the priests of the Abbadirs, clasped with bands of Phrygian stuffs, placed themselves on the east, while towards the south, with the necromancers all covered with tattooings, and the shriekers in patched cloaks, were ranged the curates of the Pataec gods, and the Yidonim, who put the bone of a dead man into their mouths to learn the future. The priests of Ceres, who were dressed in blue robes, had prudently stopped in the street of Satheb, and in low tones were chanting a thesmophorion in the Megarian dialect.

From time to time files of men arrived, completely naked, their arms outstretched, and all holding one another by the shoulders. From the depths of their breasts they drew forth a hoarse and cavernous intonation; their eyes, which were fastened upon the colossus, shone through the dust, and they swayed their bodies simultaneously, and at equal distances, as though they were all affected by a single movement. They were so frenzied that to restore order the hierodules compelled them, with blows of the stick, to lie flat upon the ground, with their faces resting against the brass trellis-work.

Then it was that a man in a white robe advanced from the back of the square. He penetrated the crowd slowly, and people recognised a priest of Tanith — the high-priest Schahabarim. Hootings were raised, for the tyranny of the male principle prevailed that day in all consciences, and the goddess was actually so completely forgotten that the absence of her pontiffs had not been noticed. But the amazement was increased when he was seen to open one of the doors of the trellis-work intended for those who intended to offer up victims. It was an outrage to their god, thought the priests of Moloch, that he had just committed, and they sought with eager gestures to repel him. Fed on the meat of the holocausts, clad in purple like kings, and wearing triple-storied crowns, they despised the pale eunuch, weakened with his macerations, and angry laughter shook their black beards, which were displayed on their breasts in the sun.

Schahabarim walked on, giving no reply, and, traversing the whole enclosure with deliberation, reached the legs of the colossus; then, spreading out both arms, he touched it on both sides, which was a solemn form of adoration. For a long time Rabbet had been torturing him, and in despair, or perhaps for lack of a god that completely satisfied his ideas, he had at last decided for this one.

god that completely satisfied his ideas, he had at last decided for this one.

The crowd, terrified by this act of apostasy, uttered a lengthened murmur. It was felt that the last tie which bound their souls to a merciful divinity was breaking.

But owing to his mutilation, Schahabarim could take no part in the cult of the Baal. The men in the red cloaks shut him out from the enclosure; then, when he was outside, he went round all the colleges in succession, and the priest, henceforth without a god, disappeared into the crowd. It scattered at his approach.

Meanwhile a fire of aloes, cedar, and laurel was burning between the legs of the colossus. The tips of its long wings dipped into the flame; the unguents with which it had been rubbed flowed like sweat over its brazen limbs. Around the circular flagstone on which its feet rested, the children, wrapped in black veils, formed a motionless circle; and its extravagantly long arms reached down their palms to them as though to seize the crown that they formed and carry it to the sky.

The rich, the Ancients, the women, the whole multitude, thronged behind the priests and on the terraces of the houses. The large painted stars revolved no longer; the tabernacles were set upon the ground; and the fumes from the censers ascended perpendicularly, spreading their bluish branches through the azure like gigantic trees.

Many fainted; others became inert and petrified in their ecstasy. Infinite anguish weighed upon the breasts of the beholders. The last shouts died out one by one, — and the people of Carthage stood breathless, and absorbed in the longing of their terror.

At last the high priest of Moloch passed his left hand beneath the children's veils, plucked a lock of hair from their foreheads, and threw it upon the flames. Then the men in the red cloaks chanted the sacred hymn:

"Homage to thee, Sun! king of the two zones, self-generating Creator, Father and Mother, Father and Son, God and Goddess, Goddess and God!" And their voices were lost in the outburst of instruments sounding simultaneously to drown the cries of the victims. The eight-stringed scheminiths, the kinnors which had ten strings, and the nebals which had twelve, grated, whistled, and thundered. Enormous leathern bags, bristling with pipes, made a shrill clashing noise; the tabourines, beaten with all the players' might, resounded with heavy, rapid blows; and, in spite of the fury of the clarions, the salsalim snapped like grasshoppers' wings.

The hierodules, with a long hook, opened the seven-storied compartments on the body of the Baal. They put meal into the highest, two turtle-doves into the second, an ape into the third, a ram into the fourth, a sheep into the fifth, and as no ox was to be had for the sixth, a tawny hide taken from the sanctuary was thrown into it. The seventh compartment yawned empty still.

Before undertaking anything it was well to make trial of the arms of the god. Slender chainlets stretched from his fingers up to his shoulders and fell behind, where men by pulling them made the two hands rise to a level with the elbows, and come close together against the belly; they were moved several times in succession with little abrupt jerks. Then the instruments were still. The fire roared.

The pontiffs of Moloch walked about on the great flagstone scanning the multitude.

An individual sacrifice was necessary, a perfectly voluntary oblation, which was considered as carrying the others along with it. But no one had appeared up to the present, and the seven passages leading from the barriers to the colossus were completely empty. Then the priests, to encourage the people, drew bodkins from their girdles and gashed their faces. The Devotees, who were stretched on the ground outside, were brought within the enclosure. A bundle of horrible irons was thrown to them, and each chose his own torture. They drove in spits between their breasts; they split their cheeks; they put crowns of thorns upon their heads; then they twined their arms together, and surrounded the children in another large circle which widened and contracted in turns. They reached to the balustrade, they threw themselves back again, and then began once more, attracting the crowd to them by the dizziness of their motion with its accompanying blood and shrieks.

By degrees people came into the end of the passages; they flung into the flames pearls, gold vases, cups, torches, all their wealth; the offerings became constantly more numerous and more splendid. At last a man who tottered, a man pale and hideous with terror, thrust forward a child; then a little black mass was seen between the hands of the colossus, and sank into the dark opening. The priests bent over the edge of the great flagstone, — and a new song burst forth celebrating the joys of death and of new birth into eternity.

The children ascended slowly, and as the smoke formed lofty eddies as it escaped, they seemed at a distance to disappear in a cloud. Not one stirred. Their wrists and ankles were tied, and the dark drapery prevented them from seeing anything and from being recognised.

Hamilcar, in a red cloak, like the priests of Moloch, was beside the Baal, standing upright in front of the great toe of its right foot. When the fourteenth child was brought every one could see him make a great gesture of horror. But he soon resumed his former attitude, folded his arms, and looked upon the ground. The high pontiff stood on the other side of the statue as motionless as he. His head, laden with an Assyrian mitre, was bent, and he was watching the gold plate on his breast; it was covered with fatidical stones, and the flame mirrored in it formed irisated lights. He grew pale and dismayed. Hamilcar bent his brow; and they were both so near the funeral-pile that the hems of their cloaks brushed it as they rose from time to time.

The brazen arms were working more quickly. They paused no longer. Every time that a child was placed in them the priests of Moloch spread out their hands upon him to burden him with the crimes of the people, vociferating: "They are not men but oxen!" and the multitude round about repeated: "Oxen! oxen!" The devout exclaimed: "Lord! eat!" and the priests of Proserpine, complying through terror with the needs of Carthage, muttered the Eleusinian formula: "Pour out rain! bring forth!"

The victims, when scarcely at the edge of the opening, disappeared like a drop of water on a red-hot plate, and white smoke rose amid the great scarlet colour.

Nevertheless, the appetite of the god was not appeased. He ever wished for more. In order to furnish him with a larger supply, the victims were piled up on his hands with a big chain above them which kept them in their place. Some devout persons had at the beginning wished to count them, to see whether their number corresponded with the days of the solar year; but others were brought, and it was impossible to distinguish them in the giddy motion of the horrible arms. This lasted for a long, indefinite time until the evening. Then the partitions inside assumed a darker glow, and burning flesh could be seen. Some even believed that they could descry hair, limbs, and whole bodies.

Night fell; clouds accumulated above the Baal. The funeral-pile, which was flameless now, formed a pyramid of coals up to his knees; completely red like a giant covered with blood, he looked, with his head thrown back, as though he were staggering beneath the weight of his intoxication.

In proportion as the priests made haste, the frenzy of the people increased; as the number of the victims was diminishing, some cried out to spare them, others that still more were needful. The walls, with their burden of people, seemed to be giving way beneath the howlings of terror and mystic voluptuousness. Then the faithful came into the passages, dragging their children, who clung to them; and they beat them in order to make them let go, and handed them over to the men in red. The instrument-players sometimes stopped through exhaustion; then the cries of the mothers might be heard, and the frizzling of the fat as it fell upon the coals. The henbane-drinkers crawled on all fours around the colossus, roaring like tigers; the Yidonim vaticinated, the Devotees sang with their cloven lips; the trellis-work had been broken through, all wished for a share in the sacrifice; — and fathers, whose children had died previously, cast their effigies, their playthings, their preserved bones into the fire. Some who had knives rushed upon the rest. They slaughtered one another. The hierodules took the fallen ashes at the edge of the flagstone in bronze fans, and cast them into the air that the sacrifice might be scattered over the town and even to the region of the stars.

The loud noise and great light had attracted the Barbarians to the foot of the walls; they clung to the wreck of the helepolis to have a better view, and gazed open-mouthed in horror.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PASS OF THE HATCHET

The Carthaginians had not re-entered their houses when the clouds accumulated more thickly; those who raised their heads towards the colossus could feel big drops on their foreheads, and the rain fell.

It fell the whole night plentifully, in floods; the thunder growled; it was the voice of Moloch; he had vanquished Tanith; and she, being now fecundated, opened up her vast bosom in heaven's heights. Sometimes she could be seen in a clear and luminous spot stretched upon cushions of cloud; and then the darkness would close in again as though she were still too weary and wished to sleep again; the Carthaginians, all believing that water is brought forth by the moon, shouted to make her travail easy.

The rain beat upon the terraces and overflowed them, forming lakes in the courts, cascades on the staircases, and eddies at the corners of the streets. It poured in warm heavy masses and urgent streams; big frothy jets leaped from the corners of all the buildings; and it seemed as though whitish cloths hung dimly upon the walls, and the washed temple-roofs shone black in the gleam of the lightning. Torrents descended from the Acropolis by a thousand paths; houses suddenly gave way, and small beams, plaster, rubbish, and furniture passed along in streams which ran impetuously over the pavement.

Amphoras, flagons, and canvases had been placed out of doors; but the torches were extinguished; brands were taken from the funeral-pile of the Baal, and the Carthaginians bent back their necks and opened their mouths to drink. Others by the side of the miry pools, plunged their arms into them up to the armpits, and filled themselves so abundantly with water that they vomited it forth like buffaloes. The freshness gradually spread; they breathed in the damp air with play of limb, and in the happiness of their intoxication boundless hope soon arose. All their miseries were forgotten. Their country was born anew.

They felt the need, as it were, of directing upon others the extravagant fury which they had been unable to employ against themselves. Such a sacrifice could not be in vain; although they felt no remorse they found themselves carried away by the frenzy which results from complicity in irreparable crimes.

The Barbarians had encountered the storm in their ill-closed tents; and they were still quite chilled on the morrow as they tramped through the mud in search of their stores and weapons, which were spoiled and lost.

Hamilcar went himself to see Hanno, and, in virtue of his plenary powers

Hamilcar went himself to see Hanno, and, in virtue of his plenary powers, intrusted the command to him. The old Suffet hesitated for a few minutes between his animosity and his appetite for authority, but he accepted nevertheless.

Hamilcar next took out a galley armed with a catapult at each end. He placed it in the gulf in front of the raft; then he embarked his stoutest troops on board such vessels as were available. He was apparently taking to flight; and running northward before the wind he disappeared into the mist.

But three days afterwards, when the attack was about to begin again, some people arrived tumultuously from the Libyan coast. Barca had come among them. He had carried off provisions everywhere, and he was spreading through the country.

Then the Barbarians were indignant as though he were betraying them. Those who were most weary of the siege, and especially the Gauls, did not hesitate to leave the walls in order to try and rejoin him. Spendius wanted to reconstruct the helepolis; Matho had traced an imaginary line from his tent to Megara, and inwardly swore to follow it, and none of their men stirred. But the rest, under the command of Autaritus, went off, abandoning the western part of the rampart, and so profound was the carelessness exhibited that no one even thought of replacing them.

Narr' Havas spied them from afar in the mountains. During the night he led all his men along the sea-shore on the outer side of the Lagoon, and entered Carthage.

He presented himself as a saviour with six thousand men all carrying meal under their cloaks, and forty elephants laden with forage and dried meat. The people flocked quickly around them; they gave them names. The sight of these strong animals, sacred to Baal, gave the Carthaginians even more joy than the arrival of such relief; it was a token of the tenderness of the god, a proof that he was at last about to interfere in the war to defend them.

Narr' Havas received the compliments of the Ancients. Then he ascended to Salammbo's palace.

He had not seen her again since the time when in Hamilcar's tent amid the five armies he had felt her little, cold, soft hand fastened to his own; she had left for Carthage after the betrothal. His love, which had been diverted by other ambitions, had come back to him; and now he expected to enjoy his rights, to marry her, and take her.

Salammbo did not understand how the young man could ever become her master! Although she asked Tanith every day for Matho's death, her horror of the Libyan was growing less. She vaguely felt that the hate with which he had persecuted her was something almost religious, — and she would fain have seen in Narr' Havas's person a reflection, as it were, of that malice which still dazzled her. She desired to know him better, and yet his presence would have embarrassed her. She sent him word that she could not receive him.

Moreover, Hamilcar had forbidden his people to admit the King of the Numidians to see her; by putting off his reward to the end of the war he hoped to retain his devotion; — and, through dread of the Suffet, Narr' Havas withdrew.

But he bore himself haughtily towards the Hundred. He changed their arrangements. He demanded privileges for his men, and placed them on important posts; thus the Barbarians stared when they perceived Numidians on the towers.

The surprise of the Carthaginians was greater still when three hundred of their own people, who had been made prisoners during the Sicilian war, arrived on board an old Punic trireme. Hamilcar, in fact, had secretly sent back to the Quirites the crews of the Latin vessels, taken before the defection of the Tyrian towns; and, to reciprocate the courtesy, Rome was now sending him back her captives. She scorned the overtures of the Mercenaries in Sardinian, and would not even recognise the inhabitants of Utica as subjects.

Hiero, who was ruling at Syracuse, was carried away by this example. For the preservation of his own States it was necessary that an equilibrium should exist between the two peoples; he was interested, therefore, in the safety of the Chanaanites, and he declared himself their friend, and sent them twelve hundred oxen, with fifty-three thousand nebels of pure wheat.

A deeper reason prompted aid to Carthage. It was felt that if the Mercenaries triumphed, every one, from soldier to plate-washer, would rise, and that no government and no house could resist them.

Meanwhile Hamilcar was scouring the eastern districts. He drove back the Gauls, and all the Barbarians found that they were themselves in something like a state of siege.

Then he set himself to harass them. He would arrive and then retire, and by constantly renewing this manoeuvre, he gradually detached them from their encampments. Spendius was obliged to follow them, and in the end Matho yielded in like manner.

He did not pass beyond Tunis. He shut himself up within its walls. This persistence was full of wisdom, for soon Narr' Havas was to be seen issuing from the gate of Khamon with his elephants and soldiers. Hamilcar was recalling him, but the other Barbarians were already wandering about in the provinces in pursuit of the Suffet.

The latter had received three thousand Gauls from Clypea. He had horses brought to him from Cyrenaica, and armour from Brutium, and began the war again.

Never had his genius been so impetuous and fertile. For five moons he dragged his enemies after him. He had an end to which he wished to guide them.

The Barbarians had at first tried to encompass him with small detachments, but he always escaped them. They ceased to separate then. Their army amounted to about forty thousand men, and several times they enjoyed the sight of seeing the Carthaginians fall back.

The horsemen of Narr' Havas were what they found most tormenting. Often, at times of the greatest weariness, when they were advancing over the plains, and dozing beneath the weight of their arms, a great line of dust would suddenly rise on the horizon; there would be a galloping up to them, and a rain of darts would pour from the bosom of a cloud filled with flaming eyes. The Numidians in their white cloaks would utter loud shouts, raise their arms, press their rearing stallions with their knees, and, wheeling them round abruptly, would then disappear. They had always supplies of javelins and dromedaries some distance off, and they would return more terrible than before, howl like wolves, and take to flight like vultures. The Barbarians posted at the extremities of the files fell one by one; and this would continue until evening, when an attempt would be made to enter the mountains.

Although they were perilous for elephants, Hamilcar made his way in among them. He followed the long chain which extends from the promontory of Hermaeum to the top of Zagouan. This, they believed, was a device for hiding the insufficiency of his troops. But the continual uncertainty in which he kept them exasperated them at last more than any defeat. They did not lose heart, and marched after him.

At last one evening they surprised a body of velites amid some big rocks at the entrance of a pass between the Silver Mountain and the Lead Mountain; the entire army was certainly in front of them, for a noise of footsteps and clarions could be heard; the Carthaginians immediately fled through the gorge. It descended into a plain, and was shaped like an iron hatchet with a surrounding of lofty cliffs. The Barbarians dashed into it in order to overtake the velites; quite at the bottom other Carthaginians were running tumultuously amid galloping oxen. A man in a red cloak was to be seen; it was the Suffet; they shouted this to one another; and they were carried away with increased fury and joy. Several, from laziness or prudence, had remained on the threshold of the pass. But some cavalry, debouching from a wood, beat them down upon the rest with blows of pike and sabre; and soon all the Barbarians were below in the plain.

Then this great human mass, after swaying to and fro for some time, stood still; they could discover no outlet.

Those who were nearest to the pass went back again, but the passage had entirely disappeared. They hailed those in front to make them go on; they were being crushed against the mountain, and from a distance they inveighed against their companions, who were unable to find the route again.

In fact the Barbarians had scarcely descended when men who had been crouching behind the rocks raised the latter with beams and overthrew them, and as the slope was steep the huge blocks had rolled down pell-mell and completely stopped up the narrow opening.

At the other extremity of the plain stretched a long passage, split in gaps here and there, and leading to a ravine which ascended to the upper plateau, where the Punic army was stationed. Ladders had been placed beforehand in this passage against the wall of cliff; and, protected by the windings of the gaps, the velites were able to seize and mount them before being overtaken. Several even made their way to the bottom of the ravine; they were drawn up with cables, for the ground at this spot was of moving sand, and so much inclined that it was impossible to climb it even on the knees. The Barbarians arrived almost immediately. But a portcullis, forty cubits high, and made to fit the intervening space exactly, suddenly sank before them like a rampart fallen from the skies.

The Suffet's combinations had therefore succeeded. None of the Mercenaries knew the mountain, and, marching as they did at the head of their columns, they had drawn on the rest. The rocks, which were somewhat narrow at the base, had been easily cast down; and, while all were running, his army had raised shouts, as of distress, on the horizon. Hamilcar, it is true, might have lost his velites, only half of whom remained, but he would have sacrificed twenty times as many for the success of such an enterprise.

The Barbarians pressed forward until morning, in compact files, from one end of the plain to the other. They felt the mountain with their hands, seeking to discover a passage.

At last day broke; and they perceived all about them a great white wall hewn with the pick. And no means of safety, no hope! The two natural outcomes from this blind alley were closed by the portcullis and the heaps of rocks.

Then they all looked at one another without speaking. They sank down in collapse, feeling an icy coldness in their loins, and an overwhelming weight upon their eyelids.

They rose, and bounded against the rocks. But the lowest were weighted by the pressure of the others, and were immovable. They tried to cling to them so as to reach the top, but the bellying shape of the great masses rendered all hold impossible. They sought to cleave the ground on both sides of the gorge, but their instruments broke. They made a large fire with the tent poles, but the fire could not burn the mountain.

They returned to the portcullis; it was garnished with long nails as thick as stakes, as sharp as the spines of a porcupine, and closer than the hairs of a brush. But they were animated by such rage that they dashed themselves against it. The first were pierced to the backbone, those coming next surged over them, and all fell back, leaving human fragments and bloodstained hair on those horrible branches.

When their discouragement was somewhat abated, they made an examination of the provisions. The Mercenaries, whose baggage was lost, possessed scarcely enough for two days; and all the rest found themselves destitute, — for they had been awaiting a convoy promised by the villages of the South.

However, some bulls were roaming about, those which the Carthaginians had loosed in the gorge to attract the Barbarians. They killed them with lance thrusts and ate them, and when their stomachs were filled their thoughts were less mournful.

The next day they slaughtered all the mules to the number of about forty; then they scraped the skins, boiled the entrails, pounded the bones, and did not yet despair; the army from Tunis had no doubt been warned, and was coming.

But on the evening of the fifth day their hunger increased; they gnawed their sword-belts, and the little sponges which bordered the bottom of their helmets.

These forty thousand men were massed into the species of hippodrome formed by the mountain about them. Some remained in front of the portcullis, or at the foot of the rocks; the rest covered the plain confusedly. The strong shunned one another, and the timid sought out the brave, who, nevertheless, were unable to save them.

To avoid infection, the corpses of the velites had been speedily buried; and the position of the graves was no longer visible.

All the Barbarians lay drooping on the ground. A veteran would pass between their lines here and there; and they would howl curses against the Carthaginians, against Hamilcar, and against Matho, although he was innocent of their disaster; but it seemed to them that their pains would have been less if he had shared them. Then they groaned, and some wept softly like little children.

They came to the captains and besought them to grant them something that would alleviate their sufferings. The others made no reply; or, seized with fury, would pick up a stone and fling it in their faces.

Several, in fact, carefully kept a reserve of food in a hole in the ground — a few handfuls of dates, or a little meal; and they ate this during the night, with their heads bent beneath their cloaks. Those who had swords kept them naked in their hands, and the most suspicious remained standing with their backs against the mountain.

They accused their chiefs and threatened them. Autaritus was not afraid of showing himself. With the Barbaric obstinacy which nothing could discourage, he would advance twenty times a day to the rocks at the bottom, hoping every time to find them perchance displaced; and swaying his heavy fur-covered shoulders, he reminded his companions of a bear coming forth from its cave in springtime to see whether the snows are melted.

Spendius, surrounded by the Greeks, hid himself in one of the gaps; as he was afraid, he caused a rumour of his death to be spread.

They were now hideously lean; their skin was overlaid with bluish marblings. On the evening of the ninth day three Iberians died.

Their frightened companions left the spot. They were stripped, and the white, naked bodies lay in the sunshine on the sand.

Then the Garamantians began to prowl slowly round about them. They were men accustomed to existence in solitude, and they reverenced no god. At last the oldest of the band made a sign, and bending over the corpses they cut strips from them with their knives, then squatted upon their heels and ate. The rest looked on from a distance; they uttered cries of horror; — many, nevertheless, being, at the bottom of their souls, jealous of such courage.

In the middle of the night some of these approached, and, dissembling their eagerness, asked for a small mouthful, merely to try, they said. Bolder ones came up; their number increased; there was soon a crowd. But almost all of them let their hands fall on feeling the cold flesh on the edge of their lips; others, on the contrary, devoured it with delight.

That they might be led away by example, they urged one another on mutually. Such as had at first refused went to see the Garamantians, and returned no more. They cooked the pieces on coals at the point of the sword; they salted them with dust, and contended for the best morsels. When nothing was left of the three corpses, their eyes ranged over the whole plain to find others.

But were they not in possession of Carthaginians — twenty captives taken in the last encounter, whom no one had noticed up to the present? These disappeared; moreover, it was an act of vengeance. Then, as they must live, as the taste for this food had become developed, and as they were dying, they cut the throats of the water-carriers, grooms, and all the serving-men belonging to the Mercenaries. They killed some of them every day. Some ate much, recovered strength, and were sad no more.

Soon this resource failed. Then the longing was directed to the wounded and sick. Since they could not recover, it was as well to release them from their tortures; and, as soon as a man began to stagger, all exclaimed that he was now tortures; and, as soon as a man began to stagger, all exclaimed that he was now lost, and ought to be made use of for the rest. Artifices were employed to accelerate their death; the last remnant of their foul portion was stolen from them; they were trodden on as though by inadvertence; those in the last throes wishing to make believe that they were strong, strove to stretch out their arms, to rise, to laugh. Men who had swooned came to themselves at the touch of a notched blade sawing off a limb; — and they still slew, ferociously and needlessly, to sate their fury.

A mist heavy and warm, such as comes in those regions at the end of winter, sank on the fourteenth day upon the army. This change of temperature brought numerous deaths with it, and corruption was developed with frightful rapidity in the warm dampness which was kept in by the sides of the mountain. The drizzle that fell upon the corpses softened them, and soon made the plain one broad tract of rottenness. Whitish vapours floated overhead; they pricked the nostrils, penetrated the skin, and troubled the sight; and the Barbarians thought that through the exhalations of the breath they could see the souls of their companions. They were overwhelmed with immense disgust. They wished for nothing more; they preferred to die.

Two days afterwards the weather became fine again, and hunger seized them once more. It seemed to them that their stomachs were being wrenched from them with tongs. Then they rolled about in convulsions, flung handfuls of dust into their mouths, bit their arms, and burst into frantic laughter.

They were still more tormented by thirst, for they had not a drop of water, the leathern bottles having been completely dried up since the ninth day. To cheat their need they applied their tongues to the metal plates on their waist-belts, their ivory pommels, and the steel of their swords. Some former caravan-leaders tightened their waists with ropes. Others sucked a pebble. They drank urine cooled in their brazen helmets.

And they still expected the army from Tunis! The length of time which it took in coming was, according to their conjectures, an assurance of its early arrival. Besides, Matho, who was a brave fellow, would not desert them. "'Twill be to-morrow!" they would say to one another; and then to-morrow would pass.

At the beginning they had offered up prayers and vows, and practised all kinds of incantations. Just now their only feeling to their divinities was one of hatred, and they strove to revenge themselves by believing in them no more.

Men of violent disposition perished first; the Africans held out better than the Gauls. Zarxas lay stretched at full length among the Balearians, his hair over his arm, inert. Spendius found a plant with broad leaves filled abundantly with juice, and after declaring that it was poisonous, so as to keep off the rest, he fed himself upon it.

himself upon it.

They were too weak to knock down the flying crows with stones. Sometimes when a gypaetus was perched on a corpse, and had been mangling it for a long time, a man would set himself to crawl towards it with a javelin between his teeth. He would support himself with one hand, and after taking a good aim, throw his weapon. The white-feathered creature, disturbed by the noise, would desist and look about in tranquil fashion like a cormorant on a rock, and would then again thrust in its hideous, yellow beak, while the man, in despair, would fall flat on his face in the dust. Some succeeded in discovering chameleons and serpents. But it was the love of life that kept them alive. They directed their souls to this idea exclusively, and clung to existence by an effort of the will that prolonged it.

The most stoical kept close to one another, seated in a circle here and there, among the dead in the middle of the plain; and wrapped in their cloaks they gave themselves up silently to their sadness.

Those who had been born in towns recalled the resounding streets, the taverns, theatres, baths, and the barbers' shops where there are tales to be heard. Others could once more see country districts at sunset, when the yellow corn waves, and the great oxen ascend the hills again with the ploughshares on their necks. Travellers dreamed of cisterns, hunters of their forests, veterans of battles; and in the somnolence that benumbed them their thoughts jostled one another with the precipitancy and clearness of dreams. Hallucinations came suddenly upon them; they sought for a door in the mountain in order to flee, and tried to pass through it. Others thought that they were sailing in a storm and gave orders for the handling of a ship, or else fell back in terror, perceiving Punic battalions in the clouds. There were some who imagined themselves at a feast, and sang.

Many through a strange mania would repeat the same word or continually make the same gesture. Then when they happened to raise their heads and look at one another they were choked with sobs on discovering the horrible ravages made in their faces. Some had ceased to suffer, and to while away the hours told of the perils which they had escaped.

Death was certain and imminent to all. How many times had they not tried to open up a passage! As to implore terms from the conqueror, by what means could they do so? They did not even know where Hamilcar was.

The wind was blowing from the direction of the ravine. It made the sand flow perpetually in cascades over the portcullis; and the cloaks and hair of the Barbarians were being covered with it as though the earth were rising upon them and desirous of burying them. Nothing stirred; the eternal mountain seemed still higher to them every morning.

Sometimes flights of birds darted past beneath the blue sky in the freedom of

Sometimes flights of birds darted past beneath the blue sky in the freedom of the air. The men closed their eyes that they might not see them.

At first they felt a buzzing in their ears, their nails grew black, the cold reached to their breasts; they lay upon their sides and expired without a cry.

On the nineteenth day two thousand Asiatics were dead, with fifteen hundred from the Archipelago, eight thousand from Libya, the youngest of the Mercenaries and whole tribes — in all twenty thousand soldiers, or half of the army.

Autaritus, who had only fifty Gauls left, was going to kill himself in order to put an end to this state of things, when he thought he saw a man on the top of the mountain in front of him.

Owing to his elevation this man did not appear taller than a dwarf. However, Autaritus recognised a shield shaped like a trefoil on his left arm. "A Carthaginian!" he exclaimed, and immediately throughout the plain, before the portcullis and beneath the rocks, all rose. The soldier was walking along the edge of the precipice; the Barbarians gazed at him from below.

Spendius picked up the head of an ox; then having formed a diadem with two belts, he fixed it on the horns at the end of a pole in token of pacific intentions. The Carthaginian disappeared. They waited.

At last in the evening a sword-belt suddenly fell from above like a stone loosened from the cliff. It was made of red leather covered with embroidery, with three diamond stars, and stamped in the centre, it bore the mark of the Great Council: a horse beneath a palm-tree. This was Hamilcar's reply, the safe-conduct that he sent them.

They had nothing to fear; any change of fortune brought with it the end of their woes. They were moved with extravagant joy, they embraced one another, they wept. Spendius, Autaritus, and Zarxas, four Italiotes, a Negro and two Spartans offered themselves as envoys. They were immediately accepted. They did not know, however, by what means they should get away.

But a cracking sounded in the direction of the rocks; and the most elevated of them, after rocking to and fro, rebounded to the bottom. In fact, if they were immovable on the side of the Barbarians — for it would have been necessary to urge them up an incline plane, and they were, moreover, heaped together owing to the narrowness of the gorge — on the others, on the contrary, it was sufficient to drive against them with violence to make them descend. The Carthaginians pushed them, and at daybreak they projected into the plain like the steps of an immense ruined staircase.

The Barbarians were still unable to climb them. Ladders were held out for their assistance; all rushed upon them. The discharge of a catapult drove the crowd back; only the Ten were taken away.

They walked amid the Clinabarians, leaning their hands on the horses' croups for support.

Now that their first joy was over they began to harbour anxieties. Hamilcar's demands would be cruel. But Spendius reassured them.

"I will speak!" And he boasted that he knew excellent things to say for the safety of the army.

Behind all the bushes they met with ambushed sentries, who prostrated themselves before the sword-belt which Spendius had placed over his shoulder.

When they reached the Punic camp the crowd flocked around them, and they thought that they could hear whisperings and laughter. The door of a tent opened.

Hamilcar was at the very back of it seated on a stool beside a table on which there shone a naked sword. He was surrounded by captains, who were standing.

He started back on perceiving these men, and then bent over to examine them.

Their pupils were strangely dilated, and there was a great black circle round their eyes, which extended to the lower parts of their ears; their bluish noses stood out between their hollow cheeks, which were chinked with deep wrinkles; the skin of their bodies was too large for their muscles, and was hidden beneath a slate-coloured dust; their lips were glued to their yellow teeth; they exhaled an infectious odour; they might have been taken for half-opened tombs, for living sepulchres.

In the centre of the tent, on a mat on which the captains were about to sit down, there was a dish of smoking gourds. The Barbarians fastened their eyes upon it with a shivering in all their limbs, and tears came to their eyelids; nevertheless they restrained themselves.

Hamilcar turned away to speak to some one. Then they all flung themselves upon it, flat on the ground. Their faces were soaked in the fat, and the noise of their deglutition was mingled with the sobs of joy which they uttered. Through astonishment, doubtless, rather than pity, they were allowed to finish the mess. Then when they had risen Hamilcar with a sign commanded the man who bore the sword-belt to speak. Spendius was afraid; he stammered.

Hamilcar, while listening to him, kept turning round on his finger a big gold ring, the same which had stamped the seal of Carthage upon the sword-belt. He let it fall to the ground; Spendius immediately picked it up; his servile habits came back to him in the presence of his master. The others quivered with indignation at such baseness.

But the Greek raised his voice and spoke for a long time in rapid, insidious, and even violent fashion, setting forth the crimes of Hanno, whom he knew to be Barca's enemy, and striving to move Hamilcar's pity by the details of their miseries and the recollection of their devotion; in the end he became forgetful of himself, being carried away by the warmth of his temper.

Hamilcar replied that he accepted their excuses. Peace, then, was about to be concluded, and now it would be a definitive one! But he required that ten Mercenaries, chosen by himself, should be delivered up to him without weapons or tunics.

They had not expected such clemency; Spendius exclaimed: "Ah! twenty if you wish, master!"

"No! ten will suffice," replied Hamilcar quietly.

They were sent out of the tent to deliberate. As soon as they were alone, Autaritus protested against the sacrifice of their companions, and Zarxas said to Spendius:

"Why did you not kill him? his sword was there beside you!"

"Him!" said Spendius. "Him! him!" he repeated several times, as though the thing had been impossible, and Hamilcar were an immortal.

They were so overwhelmed with weariness that they stretched themselves on their backs on the ground, not knowing at what resolution to arrive.

Spendius urged them to yield. At last they consented, and went in again.

Then the Suffet put his hand into the hands of the ten Barbarians in turn, and pressed their thumbs; then he rubbed it on his garment, for their viscous skin gave a rude, soft impression to the touch, a greasy tingling which induced horripilation. Afterwards he said to them:

"You are really all the chiefs of the Barbarians, and you have sworn for them?"

"Yes!" they replied.

"Without constraint, from the bottom of your souls, with the intention of fulfilling your promises?"

They assured him that they were returning to the rest in order to fulfil them.

"Well!" rejoined the Suffet, "in accordance with the convention concluded between myself, Barca, and the ambassadors of the Mercenaries, it is you whom I choose and shall keep!"

Spendius fell swooning upon the mat. The Barbarians, as though abandoning him, pressed close together; and there was not a word, not a complaint.

Their companions, who were waiting for them, not seeing them return, believed themselves betrayed. The envoys had no doubt given themselves up to the Suffet.

They waited for two days longer; then on the morning of the third, their resolution was taken. With ropes, picks, and arrows, arranged like rungs between strips of canvas, they succeeded in scaling the rocks; and leaving the weakest, about three thousand in number, behind them, they began their march to rejoin the army at Tunis.

Above the gorge there stretched a meadow thinly sown with shrubs; the Barbarians devoured the buds. Afterwards they found a field of beans; and everything disappeared as though a cloud of grasshoppers had passed that way. Three hours later they reached a second plateau bordered by a belt of green hills.

Among the undulations of these hillocks, silvery sheaves shone at intervals from one another; the Barbarians, who were dazzled by the sun, could perceive confusedly below great black masses supporting them; these rose, as though they were expanding. They were lances in towers on elephants terribly armed.

Besides the spears on their breasts, the bodkin tusks, the brass plates which covered their sides, and the daggers fastened to their knee-caps, they had at the extremity of their tusks a leathern bracelet, in which the handle of a broad cutlass was inserted; they had set out simultaneously from the back part of the plain, and were advancing on both sides in parallel lines.

The Barbarians were frozen with a nameless terror. They did not even try to flee. They already found themselves surrounded.

The elephants entered into this mass of men; and the spurs on their breasts divided it, the lances on their tusks upturned it like ploughshares; they cut, hewed, and hacked with the scythes on their trunks; the towers, which were full of phalaricas, looked like volcanoes on the march; nothing could be distinguished but a large heap, whereon human flesh, pieces of brass and blood made white spots, grey sheets and red fuses. The horrible animals dug out black furrows as they passed through the midst of it all.

The fiercest was driven by a Numidian who was crowned with a diadem of plumes. He hurled javelins with frightful quickness, giving at intervals a long shrill whistle. The great beasts, docile as dogs, kept an eye on him during the carnage.

The circle of them narrowed by degrees; the weakened Barbarians offered no resistance; the elephants were soon in the centre of the plain. They lacked space; they thronged half-rearing together, and their tusks clashed against one another. Suddenly Narr' Havas quieted them, and wheeling round they trotted back to the hills.

Two syntagmata, however, had taken refuge on the right in a bend of ground, had thrown away their arms, and were all kneeling with their faces towards the Punic tents imploring mercy with uplifted arms.

Their legs and hands were tied; then when they were stretched on the ground beside one another the elephants were brought back.

Their breasts cracked like boxes being forced; two were crushed at every step; the big feet sank into the bodies with a motion of the haunches which made the elephants appear lame. They went on to the very end.

The level surface of the plain again became motionless. Night fell. Hamilcar was delighting himself with the spectacle of his vengeance, but suddenly he started.

He saw, and all saw, some more Barbarians six hundred paces to the left on the summit of a peak! In fact four hundred of the stoutest Mercenaries, Etruscans, Libyans, and Spartans had gained the heights at the beginning, and had remained there in uncertainty until now. After the massacre of their companions they resolved to make their way through the Carthaginians; they were already descending in serried columns, in a marvellous and formidable fashion.

A herald was immediately despatched to them. The Suffet needed soldiers; he received them unconditionally, so greatly did he admire their bravery. They could even, said the man of Carthage, come a little nearer, to a place, which he pointed out to them, where they would find provisions.

The Barbarians ran thither and spent the night in eating. Then the Carthaginians broke into clamours against the Suffet's partiality for the Mercenaries.

Did he yield to these outbursts of insatiable hatred or was it a refinement of treachery? The next day he came himself, without a sword and bare-headed, with an escort of Clinabarians, and announced to them that having too many to feed he did not intend to keep them. Nevertheless, as he wanted men and he knew of no means of selecting the good ones, they were to fight together to the death; he would then admit the conquerors into his own body-guard. This death was quite as good as another; — and then moving his soldiers aside (for the Punic standards hid the horizon from the Mercenaries) he showed them the one hundred and ninety-two elephants under Narr' Havas, forming a single straight line, their trunks brandishing broad steel blades like giant arms holding axes above their heads.

The Barbarians looked at one another silently. It was not death that made them turn pale, but the horrible compulsion to which they found themselves reduced.

The community of their lives had brought about profound friendship among these men. The camp, with most, took the place of their country; living without a family they transferred the needful tenderness to a companion, and they would fall asleep in the starlight side by side under the same cloak. And then in their perpetual wanderings through all sorts of countries, murders, and adventures, they had contracted affections, one for the other, in which the stronger protected the younger in the midst of battles, helped him to cross precipices, sponged the sweat of fevers from his brow, and stole food for him, and the weaker, a child perhaps, who had been picked up on the roadside, and had then become a Mercenary, repaid this devotion by a thousand kindnesses.

They exchanged their necklaces and earrings, presents which they had made to one another in former days, after great peril, or in hours of intoxication. All asked to die, and none would strike. A young fellow might be seen here and there, saying to another whose beard was grey: "No! no! you are more robust! you will avenge us, kill me!" and the man would reply: "I have fewer years to live! Strike to the heart, and think no more about it!" Brothers gazed on one another with clasped hands, and friend bade friend eternal farewells, standing and weeping upon his shoulder.

They threw off their cuirasses that the sword-points might be thrust in the more quickly. Then there appeared the marks of the great blows which they had received for Carthage, and which looked like inscriptions on columns.

They placed themselves in four equal ranks, after the fashion of gladiators, and began with timid engagements. Some had even bandaged their eyes, and their swords waved gently through the air like blind men's sticks. The Carthaginians hooted, and shouted to them that they were cowards. The Barbarians became animated, and soon the combat as general, headlong, and terrible.

Sometimes two men all covered with blood would stop, fall into each other's arms, and die with mutual kisses. None drew back. They rushed upon the extended blades. Their delirium was so frenzied that the Carthaginians in the distance were afraid.

At last they stopped. Their breasts made a great hoarse noise, and their eyeballs could be seen through their long hair, which hung down as though it had come out of a purple bath. Several were turning round rapidly, like panthers wounded in the forehead. Others stood motionless looking at a corpse at their feet; then they would suddenly tear their faces with their nails, take their swords with both hands, and plunge them into their own bodies.

There were still sixty left. They asked for drink. They were told by shouts to throw away their swords, and when they had done so water was brought to them.

While they were drinking, with their faces buried in the vases, sixty Carthaginians leaped upon them and killed them with stiletos in the back.

Hamilcar had done this to gratify the instincts of his army, and, by means of this treachery, to attach it to his own person.

The war, then, was ended; at least he believed that it was; Matho would not resist; in his impatience the Suffet commanded an immediate departure.

His scouts came to tell him that a convoy had been descried, departing

His scouts came to tell him that a convoy had been descried, departing towards the Lead Mountain. Hamilcar did not trouble himself about it. The Mercenaries once annihilated, the Nomads would give him no further trouble. The important matter was to take Tunis. He advanced by forced marches upon it.

He had sent Narr' Havas to Carthage with the news of his victory; and the King of the Numidians, proud of his success, visited Salammbo.

She received him in her gardens under a large sycamore tree, amid pillows of yellow leather, and with Taanach beside her. Her face was covered with a white scarf, which, passing over her mouth and forehead, allowed only her eyes to be seen; but her lips shone in the transparency of the tissue like the gems on her fingers, for Salammbo had both her hands wrapped up, and did not make a gesture during the whole conversation.

Narr' Havas announced the defeat of the Barbarians to her. She thanked him with a blessing for the services which he had rendered to her father. Then he began to tell her about the whole campaign.

The doves on the palm trees around them cooed softly, and other birds fluttered amid the grass: ring-necked glareolas, Tartessus quails and Punic guinea-fowl. The garden, long uncultivated, had multiplied its verdure; coloquintidas mounted into the branches of cassias, the asclepias was scattered over fields of roses, all kinds of vegetation formed entwinings and bowers; and here and there, as in the woods, sun-rays, descending obliquely, marked the shadow of a leaf upon the ground. Domestic animals, grown wild again, fled at the slightest noise. Sometimes a gazelle might be seen trailing scattered peacocks' feathers after its little black hoofs. The clamours of the distant town were lost in the murmuring of the waves. The sky was quite blue, and not a sail was visible on the sea.

Narr' Havas had ceased speaking; Salammbo was looking at him without replying. He wore a linen robe with flowers painted on it, and with gold fringes at the hem; two silver arrows fastened his plaited hair at the tips of his ears; his right hand rested on a pike-staff adorned with circles of electrum and tufts of hair.

As she watched him a crowd of dim thoughts absorbed her. This young man, with his gentle voice and feminine figure, captivated her eyes by the grace of his person, and seemed to her like an elder sister sent by the Baals to protect her. The recollection of Matho came upon her, nor did she resist the desire to learn what had become of him.

Narr' Havas replied that the Carthaginians were advancing towards Tunis to take it. In proportion as he set forth their chances of success and Matho's weaknesses, she seemed to rejoice in extraordinary hope. Her lips trembled, her breast panted. When he finally promised to kill him himself, she exclaimed:

breast panted. When he finally promised to kill him himself, she exclaimed: "Yes! kill him! It must be so!"

The Numidian replied that he desired this death ardently, since he would be her husband when the war was over.

Salammbo started, and bent her head.

But Narr' Havas, pursuing the subject, compared his longings to flowers languishing for rain, or to lost travellers waiting for the day. He told her, further, that she was more beautiful than the moon, better than the wind of morning or than the face of a guest. He would bring for her from the country of the Blacks things such as there were none in Carthage, and the apartments in their house should be sanded with gold dust.

Evening fell, and odours of balsam were exhaled. For a long time they looked at each other in silence, and Salammbo's eyes, in the depths of her long draperies, resembled two stars in the rift of a cloud. Before the sun set he withdrew.

The Ancients felt themselves relieved of a great anxiety, when he left Carthage. The people had received him with even more enthusiastic acclamations than on the first occasion. If Hamilcar and the King of the Numidians triumphed alone over the Mercenaries it would be impossible to resist them. To weaken Barca they therefore resolved to make the aged Hanno, him whom they loved, a sharer in the deliverance of Carthage.

He proceeded immediately towards the western provinces, to take his vengeance in the very places which had witnessed his shame. But the inhabitants and the Barbarians were dead, hidden, or fled. Then his anger was vented upon the country. He burnt the ruins of the ruins, he did not leave a single tree nor a blade of grass; the children and the infirm, that were met with, were tortured; he gave the women to his soldiers to be violated before they were slaughtered.

Often, on the crests of the hills, black tents were struck as though overturned by the wind, and broad, brilliantly bordered discs, which were recognised as being chariot-wheels, revolved with a plaintive sound as they gradually disappeared in the valleys. The tribes, which had abandoned the siege of Carthage, were wandering in this way through the provinces, waiting for an opportunity, or for some victory to be gained by the Mercenaries, in order to return. But, whether from terror or famine, they all took the roads to their native lands, and disappeared.

Hamilcar was not jealous of Hanno's successes. Nevertheless he was in a hurry to end matters; he commanded him to fall back upon Tunis; and Hanno, who loved his country, was under the walls of the town on the appointed day.

For its protection it had its aboriginal population, twelve thousand Mercenaries, and, in addition, all the Eaters of Uncleanness, for like Matho they

Mercenaries, and, in addition, all the Eaters of Uncleanness; for like Matho they were riveted to the horizon of Carthage, and plebs and schalischim gazed at its lofty walls from afar, looking back in thought to boundless enjoyments. With this harmony of hatred, resistance was briskly organised. Leathern bottles were taken to make helmets; all the palm-trees in the gardens were cut down for lances; cisterns were dug; while for provisions they caught on the shores of the lake big white fish, fed on corpses and filth. Their ramparts, kept in ruins now by the jealousy of Carthage, were so weak that they could be thrown down with a push of the shoulder. Matho stopped up the holes in them with the stones of the houses. It was the last struggle; he hoped for nothing, and yet he told himself that fortune was fickle.

As the Carthaginians approached they noticed a man on the rampart who towered over the battlements from his belt upwards. The arrows that flew about him seemed to frighten him no more than a swarm of swallows. Extraordinary to say, none of them touched him.

Hamilcar pitched his camp on the south side; Narr' Havas, to his right, occupied the plain of Rhades, and Hanno the shore of the lake; and the three generals were to maintain their respective positions, so as all to attack the walls simultaneously.

But Hamilcar wished first to show the Mercenaries that he would punish them like slaves. He had the ten ambassadors crucified beside one another on a hillock in front of the town.

At the sight of this the besieged forsook the rampart.

Matho had said to himself that if he could pass between the walls and Narr' Havas's tents with such rapidity that the Numidians had not time to come out, he could fall upon the rear of the Carthaginian infantry, who would be caught between his division and those inside. He dashed out with his veterans.

Narr' Havas perceived him; he crossed the shore of the lake, and came to warn Hanno to dispatch men to Hamilcar's assistance. Did he believe Barca too weak to resist the Mercenaries? Was it a piece of treachery or folly? No one could ever learn.

Hanno, desiring to humiliate his rival, did not hesitate. He shouted orders to sound the trumpets, and his whole army rushed upon the Barbarians. The latter returned, and ran straight against the Carthaginians; they knocked them down, crushed them under their feet, and, driving them back in this way, reached the tent of Hanno, who was then surrounded by thirty Carthaginians, the most illustrious of the Ancients.

He appeared stupefied by their audacity; he called for his captains. Every one thrust his fist under his throat, vociferating abuse. The crowd pressed on; and those who had their hands on him could scarce retain their hold. However, he tried to whisper to them: "I will gave you whatever you want! I am rich! Save me!" They dragged him along; heavy as he was his feet did not touch the ground. The Ancients had been carried off. His terror increased. "You have beaten me! I am your captive! I will ransom myself! Listen to me, my friends!" and borne along by all those shoulders which were pressed against his sides, he repeated: "What are you going to do? What do you want? You can see that I am not obstanite! I have always been good-natured!"

A gigantic cross stood at the gate. The Barbarians howled: "Here! here!" But he raised his voice still higher; and in the names of their gods he called upon them to lead him to the schalischim, because he wished to confide to him something on which their safety depended.

They paused, some asserting that it was right to summon Matho. He was sent for.

Hanno fell upon the grass; and he saw around him other crosses also, as though the torture by which he was about to perish had been multiplied beforehand; he made efforts to convince himself that he was mistaken, that there was only one, and even to believe that there were none at all. At last he was lifted up.

"Speak!" said Matho.

He offered to give up Hamilcar; then they would enter Carthage and both be kings.

Matho withdrew, signing to the others to make haste. It was a stratagem, he thought, to gain time.

The Barbarian was mistaken; Hanno was in an extremity when consideration is had to nothing, and, moreover, he so execrated Hamilcar that he would have sacrificed him and all his soldiers on the slightest hope of safety.

The Ancients were languishing on the ground at the foot of the crosses; ropes had already been passed beneath their armpits. Then the old Suffet, understanding that he must die, wept.

They tore off the clothes that were still left on him — and the horror of his person appeared. Ulcers covered the nameless mass; the fat on his legs hid the nails on his feet; from his fingers there hung what looked like greenish strips; and the tears streaming through the tubercles on his cheeks gave to his face an expression of frightful sadness, for they seemed to take up more room than on another human face. His royal fillet, which was half unfastened, trailed with his white hair in the dust.

They thought that they had no ropes strong enough to haul him up to the top of the cross, and they nailed him upon it, after the Punic fashion, before it was erected. But his pride awoke in his pain. He began to overwhelm them with abuse. He foamed and twisted like a marine monster being slaughtered on the shore, and predicted that they would all end more horribly still, and that he would be avenged.

He was. On the other side of the town, whence there now escaped jets of flame with columns of smoke, the ambassadors from the Mercenaries were in their last throes.

Some who had swooned at first had just revived in the freshness of the wind; but their chins still rested upon their breasts, and their bodies had fallen somewhat, in spite of the nails in their arms, which were fastened higher than their heads; from their heels and hands blood fell in big, slow drops, as ripe fruit falls from the branches of a tree, — and Carthage, gulf, mountains, and plains all appeared to them to be revolving like an immense wheel; sometimes a cloud of dust, rising from the ground, enveloped them in its eddies; they burned with horrible thirst, their tongues curled in their mouths, and they felt an icy sweat flowing over them with their departing souls.

Nevertheless they had glimpses, at an infinite depth, of streets, marching soldiers, and the swinging of swords; and the tumult of battle reached them dimly like the noise of the sea to shipwrecked men dying on the masts of a ship. The Italiotes, who were sturdier than the rest, were still shrieking. The Lacedaemonians were silent, with eyelids closed; Zarxas, once so vigorous, was bending like a broken reed; the Ethiopian beside him had his head thrown back over the arms of the cross; Autaritus was motionless, rolling his eyes; his great head of hair, caught in a cleft in the wood, fell straight upon his forehead, and his death-rattle seemed rather to be a roar of anger. As to Spendius, a strange courage had come to him; he despised life now in the certainty which he possessed of an almost immediate and an eternal emancipation, and he awaited death with impassibility.

Amid their swooning, they sometimes started at the brushing of feathers passing across their lips. Large wings swung shadows around them, croakings sounded in the air; and as Spendius's cross was the highest, it was upon his that the first vulture alighted. Then he turned his face towards Autaritus, and said slowly to him with an unaccountable smile:

"Do you remember the lions on the road to Sicca?"

"They were our brothers!" replied the Gaul, as he expired.

The Suffet, meanwhile, had bored through the walls and reached the citadel. The smoke suddenly disappeared before a gust of wind, discovering the horizon as far as the walls of Carthage; he even thought that he could distinguish people watching on the platform of Eschmoun; then, bringing back his eyes, he perceived thirty crosses of extravagant size on the shore of the Lake, to the left.

In fact, to render them still more frightful, they had been constructed with tent-poles fastened end to end, and the thirty corpses of the Ancients appeared high up in the sky. They had what looked like white butterflies on their breasts; these were the feathers of the arrows which had been shot at them from below.

A broad gold ribbon shone on the summit of the highest; it hung down to the shoulder, there being no arm on that side, and Hamilcar had some difficulty in recognising Hanno. His spongy bones had given way under the iron pins, portions of his limbs had come off, and nothing was left on the cross but shapeless remains, like the fragments of animals that are hung up on huntsmen's doors.

The Suffet could not have known anything about it; the town in front of him masked everything that was beyond and behind; and the captains who had been successively sent to the two generals had not re-appeared. Then fugitives arrived with the tale of the rout, and the Punic army halted. This catastrophe, falling upon them as it did in the midst of their victory, stupefied them. Hamilcar's orders were no longer listened to.

Matho took advantage of this to continue his ravages among the Numidians.

Hanno's camp having been overthrown, he had returned against them. The elephants came out; but the Mercenaries advanced through the plain shaking about flaming firebrands, which they had plucked from the walls, and the great beasts, in fright, ran headlong into the gulf, where they killed one another in their struggles, or were drowned beneath the weight of their cuirasses. Narr' Havas had already launched his cavalry; all threw themselves face downwards upon the ground; then, when the horses were within three paces of them, they sprang beneath their bellies, ripped them open with dagger-strokes, and half the Numidians had perished when Barca came up.

The exhausted Mercenaries could not withstand his troops. They retired in good order to the mountain of the Hot Springs. The Suffet was prudent enough not to pursue them. He directed his course to the mouths of the Macaras.

Tunis was his; but it was now nothing but a heap of smoking rubbish. The ruins fell through the breaches in the walls to the centre of the plain; quite in the background, between the shores of the gulf, the corpses of the elephants drifting before the wind conflicted, like an archipelago of black rocks floating on the water.

Narr' Havas had drained his forests of these animals, taking young and old, male and female, to keep up the war, and the military force of his kingdom could not repair the loss. The people who had seen them perishing at a distance were grieved at it; men lamented in the streets, calling them by their names like deceased friends: "Ah! the Invincible! the Victory! the Thunderer! the

Swallow!" On the first day, too, there was no talk except of the dead citizens. But on the morrow the tents of the Mercenaries were seen on the mountain of the Hot Springs. Then so deep was the despair that many people, especially women, flung themselves headlong from the top of the Acropolis.

Hamilcar's designs were not known. He lived alone in his tent with none near him but a young boy, and no one ever ate with them, not even excepting Narr' Havas. Nevertheless he showed great deference to the latter after Hanno's defeat; but the king of the Numidians had too great an interest in becoming his son not to distrust him.

This inertness veiled skilful manoeuvres. Hamilcar seduced the heads of the villages by all sorts of artifices; and the Mercenaries were hunted, repulsed, and enclosed like wild beasts. As soon as they entered a wood, the trees caught fire around them; when they drank of a spring it was poisoned; the caves in which they hid in order to sleep were walled up. Their old accomplices, the populations who had hitherto defended them, now pursued them; and they continually recognised Carthaginian armour in these bands.

Many had their faces consumed with red tetters; this, they thought, had come to them through touching Hanno. Others imagined that it was because they had eaten Salammbo's fishes, and far from repenting of it, they dreamed of even more abominable sacrileges, so that the abasement of the Punic Gods might be still greater. They would fain have exterminated them.

In this way they lingered for three months along the eastern coast, and then behind the mountain of Selloum, and as far as the first sands of the desert. They sought for a place of refuge, no matter where. Utica and Hippo-Zarytus alone had not betrayed them; but Hamilcar was encompassing these two towns. Then they went northwards at haphazard without even knowing the various routes. Their many miseries had confused their understandings.

The only feeling left them was one of exasperation, which went on developing; and one day they found themselves again in the gorges of Cobus and once more before Carthage!

Then the actions multiplied. Fortune remained equal; but both sides were so wearied that they would willingly have exchanged these skirmishes for a great battle, provided that it were really the last.

Matho was inclined to carry this proposal himself to the Suffet. One of his Libyans devoted himself for the purpose. All were convinced as they saw him depart that he would not return.

He returned the same evening.

Hamilcar accepted the challenge. The encounter should take place the following day at sunrise, in the plain of Rhades.

The Mercenaries wished to know whether he had said anything more, and the Libyan added:

"As I remained in his presence, he asked me what I was waiting for. 'To be killed!' I replied. Then he rejoined: 'No! begone! that will be to-morrow with the rest.'"

This generosity astonished the Barbarians; some were terrified by it, and Matho regretted that the emissary had not been killed.

He had still remaining three thousand Africans, twelve hundred Greeks, fifteen hundred Campanians, two hundred Iberians, four hundred Etruscans, five hundred Samnites, forty Gauls, and a troop of Naffurs, nomad bandits met with in the date region — in all seven thousand two hundred and nineteen soldiers, but not one complete syntagmata. They had stopped up the holes in their cuirasses with the shoulder-blades of quadrupeds, and replaced their brass cothurni with worn sandals. Their garments were weighted with copper or steel plates; their coats of mail hung in tatters about them, and scars appeared like purple threads through the hair on their arms and faces.

The wraiths of their dead companions came back to their souls and increased their energy; they felt, in a confused way, that they were the ministers of a god diffused in the hearts of the oppressed, and were the pontiffs, so to speak, of universal vengeance! Then they were enraged with grief at what was extravagant injustice, and above all by the sight of Carthage on the horizon. They swore an oath to fight for one another until death.

The beasts of burden were killed, and as much as possible was eaten so as to gain strength; afterwards they slept. Some prayed, turning towards different constellations.

The Carthaginians arrived first in the plain. They rubbed the edges of their shields with oil to make the arrows glide off them easily; the foot-soldiers who wore long hair took the precaution of cutting it on the forehead; and Hamilcar ordered all bowls to be inverted from the fifth hour, knowing that it is disadvantageous to fight with the stomach too full. His army amounted to fourteen thousand men, or about double the number of the Barbarians. Nevertheless, he had never felt such anxiety; if he succumbed it would mean the annihilation of the Republic, and he would perish on the cross; if, on the contrary, he triumphed, he would reach Italy by way of the Pyrenees, the Gauls, and the Alps, and the empire of the Barcas would become eternal. Twenty times during the night he rose to inspect everything himself, down to the most trifling details. As to the Carthaginians, they were exasperated by their lengthened terror. Narr' Havas suspected the fidelity of his Numidians. Moreover, the Barbarians might vanquish them. A strange weakness had come upon him; every moment he drank large cups of water.

moment he drank large cups of water.

But a man whom he did not know opened his tent and laid on the ground a crown of rock-salt, adorned with hieratic designs formed with sulphur, and lozenges of mother-of-pearl; a marriage crown was sometimes sent to a betrothed husband; it was a proof of love, a sort of invitation.

Nevertheless Hamilcar's daughter had no tenderness for Narr' Havas.

The recollection of Matho disturbed her in an intolerable manner; it seemed to her that the death of this man would unburden her thoughts, just as people to cure themselves of the bite of a viper crush it upon the wound. The king of the Numidians was depending upon her; he awaited the wedding with impatience, and, as it was to follow the victory, Salammbo made him this present to stimulate his courage. Then his distress vanished, and he thought only of the happiness of possessing so beautiful a woman.

The same vision had assailed Matho; but he cast it from him immediately, and his love, that he thus thrust back, was poured out upon his companions in arms. He cherished them like portions of his own person, of his hatred, — and he felt his spirit higher, and his arms stronger; everything that he was to accomplish appeared clearly before him. If sighs sometimes escaped him, it was because he was thinking of Spendius.

He drew up the Barbarians in six equal ranks. He posted the Etruscans in the centre, all being fastened to a bronze chain; the archers were behind, and on the wings he distributed the Naffurs, who were mounted on short-haired camels, covered with ostrich feathers.

The Suffet arranged the Carthaginians in similar order. He placed the Clinabarians outside the infantry next to the velites, and the Numidians beyond; when day appeared, both sides were thus in line face to face. All gazed at each other from a distance, with round fierce eyes. There was at first some hesitation; at last both armies moved.

The Barbarians advanced slowly so as not to become out of breath, beating the ground with their feet; the centre of the Punic army formed a convex curve. Then came the burst of a terrible shock, like the crash of two fleets in collision. The first rank of the Barbarians had quickly opened up, and the marksmen, hidden behind the others, discharged their bullets, arrows, and javelins. The curve of the Carthaginians, however, flattened by degrees, became quite straight, and then bent inwards; upon this, the two sections of the velites drew together in parallel lines, like the legs of a compass that is being closed. The Barbarians, who were attacking the phalanx with fury, entered the gap; they were being lost; Matho checked them, — and while the Carthaginian wings continued to advance, he drew out the three inner ranks of his line; they soon covered his flanks, and his army appeared in triple array.

flanks, and his army appeared in triple array.

But the Barbarians placed at the extremities were the weakest, especially those on the left, who had exhausted their quivers, and the troop of velites, which had at last come up against them, was cutting them up greatly.

Matho made them fall back. His right comprised Campanians, who were armed with axes; he hurled them against the Carthaginian left; the centre attacked the enemy, and those at the other extremity, who were out of peril, kept the velites at a distance.

Then Hamilcar divided his horsemen into squadrons, placed hoplites between them, and sent them against the Mercenaries.

Those cone-shaped masses presented a front of horses, and their broader sides were filled and bristling with lances. The Barbarians found it impossible to resist; the Greek foot-soldiers alone had brazen armour, all the rest had cutlasses on the end of poles, scythes taken from the farms, or swords manufactured out of the fellies of wheels; the soft blades were twisted by a blow, and while they were engaged in straightening them under their heels, the Carthaginians massacred them right and left at their ease.

But the Etruscans, riveted to their chain, did not stir; those who were dead, being prevented from falling, formed an obstruction with their corpses; and the great bronze line widened and contracted in turn, as supple as a serpent, and as impregnable as a wall. The Barbarians would come to re-form behind it, pant for a minute, and then set off again with the fragments of their weapons in their hands.

Many already had none left, and they leaped upon the Carthaginians, biting their faces like dogs. The Gauls in their pride stripped themselves of the sagum; they showed their great white bodies from a distance, and they enlarged their wounds to terrify the enemy. The voice of the crier announcing the orders could no longer be heard in the midst of the Punic syntagmata; their signals were being repeated by the standards, which were raised above the dust, and every one was swept away in the swaying of the great mass that surrounded him.

Hamilcar commanded the Numidians to advance. But the Naffurs rushed to meet them.

Clad in vast black robes, with a tuft of hair on the top of the skull, and a shield of rhinoceros leather, they wielded a steel which had no handle, and which they held by a rope; and their camels, which bristled all over with feathers, uttered long, hoarse cluckings. Each blade fell on a precise spot, then rose again with a smart stroke carrying off a limb with it. The fierce beasts galloped through the syntagmata. Some, whose legs were broken, went hopping along like wounded ostriches.

The Punic infantry turned in a body upon the Barbarians, and cut them off.

Their maniples wheeled about at intervals from one another. The more brilliant Carthaginian weapons encircled them like golden crowns; there was a swarming movement in the centre, and the sun, striking down upon the points of the swords, made them glitter with white flickering gleams. However, files of Clinabarians lay stretched upon the plain; some Mercenaries snatched away their armour, clothed themselves in it, and then returned to the fray. The deluded Carthaginians were several times entangled in their midst. They would stand stupidly motionless, or else would back, surge again, and triumphant shouts rising in the distance seemed to drive them along like derelicts in a storm. Hamilcar was growing desperate; all was about to perish beneath the genius of Matho and the invincible courage of the Mercenaries.

But a great noise of tabourines burst forth on the horizon. It was a crowd of old men, sick persons, children of fifteen years of age, and even women, who, being unable to withstand their distress any longer, had set out from Carthage, and, for the purpose of placing themselves under the protection of something formidable, had taken from Hamilcar's palace the only elephant that the Republic now possessed, — that one, namely, whose trunk had been cut off.

Then it seemed to the Carthaginians that their country, forsaking its walls, was coming to command them to die for her. They were seized with increased fury, and the Numidians carried away all the rest.

The Barbarians had set themselves with their backs to a hillock in the centre of the plain. They had no chance of conquering, or even of surviving; but they were the best, the most intrepid, and the strongest.

The people from Carthage began to throw spits, larding-pins and hammers, over the heads of the Numidians; those whom consuls had feared died beneath sticks hurled by women; the Punic populace was exterminating the Mercenaries.

The latter had taken refuge on the top of the hill. Their circle closed up after every fresh breach; twice it descended to be immediately repulsed with a shock; and the Carthaginians stretched forth their arms pell-mell, thrusting their pikes between the legs of their companions, and raking at random before them. They slipped in the blood; the steep slope of the ground made the corpses roll to the bottom. The elephant, which was trying to climb the hillock, was up to its belly; it seemed to be crawling over them with delight; and its shortened trunk, which was broad at the extremity, rose from time to time like an enormous leech.

Then all paused. The Carthaginians ground their teeth as they gazed at the hill, where the Barbarians were standing.

At last they dashed at them abruptly, and the fight began again. The Mercenaries would often let them approach, shouting to them that they wished to surrender; then, with frightful sneers, they would kill themselves at a blow, and as the dead fell, the rest would mount upon them to defend themselves. It was a kind of pyramid, which grew larger by degrees.

Soon there were only fifty, then only twenty, only three, and lastly only two — a Samnite armed with an axe, and Matho who still had his sword.

The Samnite with bent hams swept his axe alternately to the right and left, at the same time warning Matho of the blows that were being aimed at him. "Master, this way! that way! stoop down!"

Matho had lost his shoulder-pieces, his helmet, his cuirass; he was completely naked, and more livid than the dead, with his hair quite erect, and two patches of foam at the corners of his lips, — and his sword whirled so rapidly that it formed an aureola around him. A stone broke it near the guard; the Samnite was killed and the flood of Carthaginians closed in, they touched Matho. Then he raised both his empty hands towards heaven, closed his eyes, and, opening out his arms like a man throwing himself from the summit of a promontory into the sea, hurled himself among the pikes.

They moved away before him. Several times he ran against the Carthaginians. But they always drew back and turned their weapons aside.

His foot struck against a sword. Matho tried to seize it. He felt himself tied by the wrists and knees, and fell.

Narr' Havas had been following him for some time, step by step, with one of the large nets used for capturing wild beasts, and, taking advantage of the moment when he stooped down, had involved him in it.

Then he was fastened on the elephants with his four limbs forming a cross; and all those who were not wounded escorted him, and rushed with great tumult towards Carthage.

The news of the victory had arrived in some inexplicable way at the third hour of the night; the clepsydra of Khamon had just completed the fifth as they reached Malqua; then Matho opened his eyes. There were so many lights in the houses that the town appeared to be all in flames.

An immense clamour reached him dimly; and lying on his back he looked at the stars.

Then a door closed and he was wrapped in darkness.

On the morrow, at the same hour, the last of the men left in the Pass of the Hatchet expired.

On the day that their companions had set out, some Zuaeces who were returning had tumbled the rocks down, and had fed them for some time.

The Barbarians constantly expected to see Matho appear, — and from discouragement, from languor, and from the obstinacy of sick men who object to change their situation, they would not leave the mountain; at last the provisions were exhausted and the Zuaeces went away. It was known that they numbered scarcely more than thirteen hundred men, and there was no need to employ soldiers to put an end to them.

Wild beasts, especially lions, had multiplied during the three years that the war had lasted. Narr' Havas had held a great battue, and — after tying goats at intervals — had run upon them and so driven them towards the Pass of the Hatchet; — and they were now all living in it when a man arrived who had been sent by the Ancients to find out what there was left of the Barbarians.

Lions and corpses were lying over the tract of the plain, and the dead were mingled with clothes and armour. Nearly all had the face or an arm wanting; some appeared to be still intact; others were completely dried up, and their helmets were filled with powdery skulls; feet which had lost their flesh stood out straight from the knemides; skeletons still wore their cloaks; and bones, cleaned by the sun, made gleaming spots in the midst of the sand.

The lions were resting with their breasts against the ground and both paws stretched out, winking their eyelids in the bright daylight, which was heightened by the reflection from the white rocks. Others were seated on their hind-quarters and staring before them, or else were sleeping, rolled into a ball and half hidden by their great manes; they all looked well fed, tired, and dull. They were as motionless as the mountain and the dead. Night was falling; the sky was striped with broad red bands in the west.

In one of the heaps, which in an irregular fashion embossed the plain, something rose up vaguer than a spectre. Then one of the lions set himself in motion, his monstrous form cutting a black shadow on the background of the purple sky, and when he was quite close to the man, he knocked him down with a single blow of his paw.

Then, stretching himself flat upon him, he slowly drew out the entrails with the edge of his teeth.

Afterwards he opened his huge jaws, and for some minutes uttered a lengthened roar which was repeated by the echoes in the mountain, and was finally lost in the solitude.

Suddenly some small gravel rolled down from above. The rustling of rapid steps was heard, and in the direction of the portcullis and of the gorge there appeared pointed muzzles and straight ears, with gleaming, tawny eyes. These were the jackals coming to eat what was left.

The Carthaginian, who was leaning over the top of the precipice to look, went back again.

CHAPTER XV

MATHO

There were rejoicings at Carthage, — rejoicings deep, universal, extravagant, frantic; the holes of the ruins had been stopped up, the statues of the gods had been repainted, the streets were strewn with myrtle branches, incense smoked at the corners of the crossways, and the throng on the terraces looked, in their variegated garments, like heaps of flowers blooming in the air.

The shouts of the water-carriers watering the pavement rose above the continual screaming of voices; slaves belonging to Hamilcar offered in his name roasted barley and pieces of raw meat; people accosted one another, and embraced one another with tears; the Tyrian towns were taken, the nomads dispersed, and all the Barbarians annihilated. The Acropolis was hidden beneath coloured velaria; the beaks of the triremes, drawn up in line outside the mole, shone like a dyke of diamonds; everywhere there was a sense of the restoration of order, the beginning of a new existence, and the diffusion of vast happiness: it was the day of Salammbo's marriage with the King of the Numidians.

On the terrace of the temple of Khamon there were three long tables laden with gigantic plate, at which the priests, Ancients, and the rich were to sit, and there was a fourth and higher one for Hamilcar, Narr' Havas, and Salammbo; for as she had saved her country by the restoration of the zaimph, the people turned her wedding day into a national rejoicing, and were waiting in the square below till she should appear.

But their impatience was excited by another and more acrid longing: Matho's death has been promised for the ceremony.

It had been proposed at first to flay him alive, to pour lead into his entrails, to kill him with hunger; he should be tied to a tree, and an ape behind him should strike him on the head with a stone; he had offended Tanith, and the cynocephaluses of Tanith should avenge her. Others were of opinion that he should be led about on a dromedary after linen wicks, dipped in oil, had been inserted in his body in several places; — and they took pleasure in the thought of the large animal wandering through the streets with this man writhing beneath the fires like a candelabrum blown about by the wind.

But what citizens should be charged with his torture, and why disappoint the rest? They would have liked a kind of death in which the whole town might take part, in which every hand, every weapon, everything Carthaginian, to the very paving-stones in the streets and the waves in the gulf, could rend him, and crush paving stones in the streets and the waves in the gulf, could rend him, and crush him, and annihilate him. Accordingly the Ancients decided that he should go from his prison to the square of Khamon without any escort, and with his arms fastened to his back; it was forbidden to strike him to the heart, in order that he might live the longer; to put out his eyes, so that he might see the torture through; to hurl anything against his person, or to lay more than three fingers upon him at a time.

Although he was not to appear until the end of the day, the people sometimes fancied that he could be seen, and the crowd would rush towards the Acropolis, and empty the streets, to return with lengthened murmurings. Some people had remained standing in the same place since the day before, and they would call on one another from a distance and show their nails which they had allowed to grow, the better to bury them into his flesh. Others walked restlessly up and down; some were as pale as though they were awaiting their own execution.

Suddenly lofty feather fans rose above the heads, behind the Mappalian district. It was Salammbo leaving her palace; a sigh of relief found vent.

But the procession was long in coming; it marched with deliberation.

First there filed past the priests of the Pataec Gods, then those of Eschmoun, of Melkarth, and all the other colleges in succession, with the same insignia, and in the same order as had been observed at the time of the sacrifice. The pontiffs of Moloch passed with heads bent, and the multitude stood aside from them in a kind of remorse. But the priests of Rabbetna advanced with a proud step, and with lyres in their hands; the priestesses followed them in transparent robes of yellow or black, uttering cries like birds and writhing like vipers, or else whirling round to the sound of flutes to imitate the dance of the stars, while their light garments wafted puffs of delicate scents through the streets.

The Kedeschim, with painted eyelids, who symbolised the hermaphrodism of the Divinity, received applause among these women, and, being perfumed and dressed like them, they resembled them in spite of their flat breasts and narrower hips. Moreover, on this day the female principle dominated and confused all things; a mystic voluptuousness moved in the heavy air; the torches were already lighted in the depths of the sacred woods; there was to be a great celebration there during the night; three vessels had brought courtesans from Sicily, and others had come from the desert.

As the colleges arrived they ranged themselves in the courts of the temples, on the outer galleries, and along double staircases which rose against the walls, and drew together at the top. Files of white robes appeared between the colonnades, and the architecture was peopled with human statues, motionless as statues of stone.

Then came the masters of the exchequer, the governors of the provinces, and all the rich. A great tumult prevailed below. Adjacent streets were discharging the crowd, hierodules were driving it back with blows of sticks; and then Salammbo appeared in a litter surmounted by a purple canopy, and surrounded by the Ancients crowned with their golden tiaras.

Thereupon an immense shout arose; the cymbals and crotala sounded more loudly, the tabourines thundered, and the great purple canopy sank between the two pylons.

It appeared again on the first landing. Salammbo was walking slowly beneath it; then she crossed the terrace to take her seat behind on a kind of throne cut out of the carapace of a tortoise. An ivory stool with three steps was pushed beneath her feet; two Negro children knelt on the edge of the first step, and sometimes she would rest both arms, which were laden with rings of excessive weight, upon their heads.

From ankle to hip she was covered with a network of narrow meshes which were in imitation of fish scales, and shone like mother-of-pearl; her waist was clasped by a blue zone, which allowed her breasts to be seen through two crescent-shaped slashings; the nipples were hidden by carbuncle pendants. She had a headdress made of peacock's feathers studded with gems; an ample cloak, as white as snow, fell behind her, — and with her elbows at her sides, her knees pressed together, and circles of diamonds on the upper part of her arms, she remained perfectly upright in a hieratic attitude.

Her father and her husband were on two lower seats, Narr' Havas dressed in a light simar and wearing his crown of rock-salt, from which there strayed two tresses of hair as twisted as the horns of Ammon; and Hamilcar in a violet tunic figured with gold vine branches, and with a battle-sword at his side.

The python of the temple of Eschmoun lay on the ground amid pools of pink oil in the space enclosed by the tables, and, biting its tail, described a large black circle. In the middle of the circle there was a copper pillar bearing a crystal egg; and, as the sun shone upon it, rays were emitted on every side.

Behind Salammbo stretched the priests of Tanith in linen robes; on her right the Ancients, in their tiaras, formed a great gold line, and on the other side the rich with their emerald sceptres a great green line, — while quite in the background, where the priests of Moloch were ranged, the cloaks looked like a wall of purple. The other colleges occupied the lower terraces. The multitude obstructed the streets. It reached to the house-tops, and extended in long files to the summit of the Acropolis. Having thus the people at her feet, the firmament above her head, and around her the immensity of the sea, the gulf, the mountains, and the distant provinces, Salammbo in her splendour was blended with Tanith, and seemed the very genius of Carthage, and its embodied soul.

The feast was to last all night, and lamps with several branches were planted like trees on the painted woollen cloths which covered the low tables. Large electrum flagons, blue glass amphoras, tortoise-shell spoons, and small round loaves were crowded between the double row of pearl-bordered plates; bunches of grapes with their leaves had been rolled round ivory vine-stocks after the fashion of the thyrsus; blocks of snow were melting on ebony trays, and lemons, pomegranates, gourds, and watermelons formed hillocks beneath the lofty silver plate; boars with open jaws were wallowing in the dust of spices; hares, covered with their fur, appeared to be bounding amid the flowers; there were shells filled with forcemeat; the pastry had symbolic shapes; when the covers of the dishes were removed doves flew out.

The slaves, meanwhile, with tunics tucked up, were going about on tiptoe; from time to time a hymn sounded on the lyres, or a choir of voices rose. The clamour of the people, continuous as the noise of the sea, floated vaguely around the feast, and seemed to lull it in a broader harmony; some recalled the banquet of the Mercenaries; they gave themselves up to dreams of happiness; the sun was beginning to go down, and the crescent of the moon was already rising in another part of the sky.

But Salammbo turned her head as though some one had called her; the people, who were watching her, followed the direction of her eyes.

The door of the dungeon, hewn in the rock at the foot of the temple, on the summit of the Acropolis, had just opened; and a man was standing on the threshold of this black hole.

He came forth bent double, with the scared look of fallow deer when suddenly enlarged.

The light dazzled him; he stood motionless awhile. All had recognised him, and they held their breath.

In their eyes the body of this victim was something peculiarly theirs, and was adorned with almost religious splendour. They bent forward to see him, especially the women. They burned to gaze upon him who had caused the deaths of their children and husbands; and from the bottom of their souls there sprang up in spite of themselves an infamous curiosity, a desire to know him completely, a wish mingled with remorse which turned to increased execration.

At last he advanced; then the stupefaction of surprise disappeared. Numbers of arms were raised, and he was lost to sight.

The staircase of the Acropolis had sixty steps. He descended them as though he were rolled down in a torrent from the top of a mountain; three times he was seen to leap, and then he alighted below on his feet.

His shoulders were bleeding, his breast was panting with great shocks; and he made such efforts to burst his bonds that his arms, which were crossed on his naked loins, swelled like pieces of a serpent.

Several streets began in front of him, leading from the spot at which he found himself. In each of them a triple row of bronze chains fastened to the navels of the Pataec gods extended in parallel lines from one end to the other; the crowd was massed against the houses, and servants, belonging to the Ancients, walked in the middle brandishing thongs.

One of them drove him forward with a great blow; Matho began to move.

They thrust their arms over the chains shouting out that the road had been left too wide for him; and he passed along, felt, pricked, and slashed by all those fingers; when he reached the end of one street another appeared; several times he flung himself to one side to bite them; they speedily dispersed, the chains held him back, and the crowd burst out laughing.

A child rent his ear; a young girl, hiding the point of a spindle in her sleeve, split his cheek; they tore handfuls of hair from him and strips of flesh; others smeared his face with sponges steeped in filth and fastened upon sticks. A stream of blood started from the right side of his neck, frenzy immediately set in. This last Barbarian was to them a representative of all the Barbarians, and all the army; they were taking vengeance on him for their disasters, their terrors, and their shame. The rage of the mob developed with its gratification; the curving chains were over-strained, and were on the point of breaking; the people did not feel the blows of the slaves who struck at them to drive them back; some clung to the projections of the houses; all the openings in the walls were stopped up with heads; and they howled at him the mischief that they could not inflict upon him.

It was atrocious, filthy abuse mingled with ironical encouragements and imprecations; and, his present tortures not being enough for them, they foretold to him others that should be still more terrible in eternity.

This vast baying filled Carthage with stupid continuity. Frequently a single syllable — a hoarse, deep, and frantic intonation — would be repeated for several minutes by the entire people. The walls would vibrate with it from top to bottom, and both sides of the street would seem to Matho to be coming against him, and carrying him off the ground, like two immense arms stifling him in the air.

Nevertheless he remembered that he had experienced something like it before. The same crowd was on the terraces, there were the same looks and the same wrath; but then he had walked free, all had then dispersed, for a god covered him; — and the recollection of this, gaining precision by degrees, brought a crushing sadness upon him. Shadows passed before his eyes; the town whirled round in his head, his blood streamed from a wound in his hip, he felt that he was dying; his hams bent, and he sank quite gently upon the pavement.

Some one went to the peristyle of the temple of Melkarth, took thence the bar of a tripod, heated red hot in the coals, and, slipping it beneath the first chain, pressed it against his wound. The flesh was seen to smoke; the hootings of the people drowned his voice; he was standing again.

Six paces further on, and he fell a third and again a fourth time; but some new torture always made him rise. They discharged little drops of boiling oil through tubes at him; they strewed pieces of broken glass beneath his feet; still he walked on. At the corner of the street of Satheb he leaned his back against the wall beneath the pent-house of a shop, and advanced no further.

The slaves of the Council struck him with their whips of hippopotamus leather, so furiously and long that the fringes of their tunics were drenched with sweat. Matho appeared insensible; suddenly he started off and began to run at random, making a noise with his lips like one shivering with severe cold. He threaded the street of Boudes, and the street of Soepo, crossed the Green Market, and reached the square of Khamon.

He now belonged to the priests; the slaves had just dispersed the crowd, and there was more room. Matho gazed round him and his eyes encountered Salammbo.

At the first step that he had taken she had risen; then, as he approached, she had involuntarily advanced by degrees to the edge of the terrace; and soon all external things were blotted out, and she saw only Matho. Silence fell in her soul, — one of those abysses wherein the whole world disappears beneath the pressure of a single thought, a memory, a look. This man who was walking towards her attracted her.

Excepting his eyes he had no appearance of humanity left; he was a long, perfectly red shape; his broken bonds hung down his thighs, but they could not be distinguished from the tendons of his wrists, which were laid quite bare; his mouth remained wide open; from his eye-sockets there darted flames which seemed to rise up to his hair; — and the wretch still walked on!

He reached the foot of the terrace. Salammbo was leaning over the balustrade; those frightful eyeballs were scanning her, and there rose within her a consciousness of all that he had suffered for her. Although he was in his death agony she could see him once more kneeling in his tent, encircling her waist with his arms, and stammering out gentle words; she thirsted to feel them and hear them again; she did not want him to die! At this moment Matho gave a great start; she was on the point of shrieking aloud. He fell backwards and did not stir again.

Salammbo was borne back, nearly swooning, to her throne by the priests who flocked about her. They congratulated her; it was her work. All clapped their hands and stamped their feet, howling her name.

A man darted upon the corpse. Although he had no beard he had the cloak of a priest of Moloch on his shoulder, and in his belt that species of knife which they employed for cutting up the sacred meat, and which terminated, at the end of the handle, in a golden spatula. He cleft Matho's breast with a single blow, then snatched out the heart and laid it upon the spoon; and Schahabarim, uplifting his arm, offered it to the sun.

The sun sank behind the waves; his rays fell like long arrows upon the red heart. As the beatings diminished the planet sank into the sea; and at the last palpitation it disappeared.

Then from the gulf to the lagoon, and from the isthmus to the pharos, in all the streets, on all the houses, and on all the temples, there was a single shout; sometimes it paused, to be again renewed; the buildings shook with it; Carthage was convulsed, as it were, in the spasm of Titanic joy and boundless hope.

Narr' Havas, drunk with pride, passed his left arm beneath Salammbo's waist in token of possession; and taking a gold patera in his right hand, he drank to the Genius of Carthage.

Salammbo rose like her husband, with a cup in her hand, to drink also. She fell down again with her head lying over the back of the throne, — pale, stiff, with parted lips, — and her loosened hair hung to the ground.

Thus died Hamilcar's daughter for having touched the mantle of Tanith.

SALAMMBÔ

TABLE DES MATIÈRES

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Chapitre 1 LE FESTIN

C'était à Mégara, faubourg de Carthage, dans les jardins d'Hamilcar.

Les soldats qu'il avait commandés en Sicile se donnaient un grand festin pour célébrer le jour anniversaire de la bataille d'Eryx, et comme le maître était absent et qu'ils se trouvaient nombreux, ils mangeaient et ils buvaient en pleine liberté.

Les capitaines, portant des cothurnes de bronze, s'étaient placés dans le chemin du milieu, sous un voile de pourpre à franges d'or, qui s'étendait depuis le mur des écuries jusqu'à la première terrasse du palais ; le commun des soldats était répandu sous les arbres, où l'on distinguait quantité de bâtiments à toit plat, pressoirs, celliers, magasins, boulangeries et arsenaux, avec une cour pour les éléphants, des fosses pour les bêtes féroces, une prison pour les esclaves.

Des figuiers entouraient les cuisines ; un bois de sycomores se prolongeait jusqu'à des masses de verdure, où des grenades resplendissaient parmi les touffes blanches des cotonniers ; des vignes, chargées de grappes, montaient dans le branchage des pins : un champ de roses s'épanouissait sous des platanes ; de place en place sur des gazons, se balançaient des lis ; un sable noir, mêlé à de la poudre de corail, parsemait les sentiers, et, au milieu, l'avenue des cyprès faisait d'un bout à l'autre comme une double colonnade d'obélisques verts.

Le palais, bâti en marbre numidique tacheté de jaune, superposait tout au fond, sur de larges assises, ses quatre étages en terrasses. Avec son grand escalier droit en bois d'ébène, portant aux angles de chaque marche la proue d'une galère vaincue, avec ses portes rouges écartelées d'une croix noire, ses grillages d'airain qui le défendaient en bas des scorpions, et ses treillis de baguettes dorées qui bouchaient en haut ses ouvertures, il semblait aux soldats, dans son opulence farouche, aussi solennel et impénétrable que le visage d'Hamilcar.

Le Conseil leur avait désigné sa maison pour y tenir ce festin ; les convalescents qui couchaient dans le temple d'Eschmoûn, se mettant en marche dès l'aurore, s'y étaient traînés sur leurs béquilles. A chaque minute, d'autres arrivaient. Par tous les sentiers, il en débouchait incessamment, comme des torrents qui se précipitent dans un lac. On voyait entre les arbres courir les esclaves des cuisines, effarés et à demi nus ; les gazelles sur les pelouses s'enfuyaient en bêlant ; le soleil se couchait, et le parfum des citronniers rendait encore plus lourde l'exhalaison de cette foule en sueur.

Il y avait là des hommes de toutes les nations, des Ligures, des Lusitaniens, des Baléares, des Nègres et des fugitifs de Rome. On entendait, à côté du lourd patois dorien, retentir les syllabes celtiques bruissantes comme des chars de bataille, et les terminaisons ioniennes se heurtaient aux consonnes du désert, âpres comme des cris de chacal. Le Grec se reconnaissait à sa taille mince, l'Egyptien à ses épaules remontées, le Cantabre à ses larges mollets. Des Cariens balançaient orgueilleusement les plumes de leur casque, des archers de Cappadoce s'étaient peint avec des jus d'herbes de larges fleurs sur le corps, et quelques Lydiens portant des robes de femmes dînaient en pantoufles et avec des boucles d'oreilles. D'autres, qui s'étaient par pompe barbouillés de vermillon, ressemblaient à des statues de corail.

Ils s'allongeaient sur les coussins, ils mangeaient accroupis autour de grands plateaux, ou bien, couchés sur le ventre, ils tiraient à eux les morceaux de viande, et se rassasiaient appuyés sur les coudes, dans la pose pacifique des lions lorsqu'ils dépècent leur proie. Les derniers venus, debout contre les arbres, regardaient les tables basses disparaissant à moitié sous des tapis d'écarlate, et attendaient leur tour.

Les cuisines d'Hamilcar n'étant pas suffisantes, le Conseil leur avait envoyé des esclaves, de la vaisselle, des lits ; et l'on voyait au milieu du jardin, comme sur un champ de bataille quand on brûle les morts, de grands feux clairs où rôtissaient des boeufs. Les pains saupoudrés d'anis alternaient avec les gros fromages plus lourds que des disques, et les cratères pleins de vin, et les canthares pleins d'eau auprès des corbeilles en filigrane d'or qui contenaient des fleurs. La joie de pouvoir enfin se gorger à l'aise dilatait tous les yeux çà et là, les chansons commençaient.

D'abord on leur servit des oiseaux à la sauce verte, dans des assiettes d'argile rouge rehaussée de dessins noirs, puis toutes les espèces de coquillages que l'on ramasse sur les côtes puniques, des bouillies de froment, de fève et d'orge, et des escargots au cumin, sur des plats d'ambre jaune.

Ensuite les tables furent couvertes de viandes antilopes : avec leurs cornes, paons avec leurs plumes, moutons entiers cuits au vin doux, gigots de chamelles et de buffles, hérissons au garum, cigales frites et loirs confits. Dans des gamelles en bois de Tamrapanni flottaient, au milieu du safran, de grands morceaux de graisse. Tout débordait de saumure, de truffes et d'assa foetida. Les pyramides de fruits s'éboulaient sur les gâteaux de miel, et l'on n'avait pas oublié quelques-uns de ces petits chiens à gros ventre et à soies roses que l'on engraissait avec du marc d'olives, mets carthaginois en abomination aux autres peuples. La surprise des nourritures nouvelles excitait la cupidité des estomacs. Les Gaulois aux longs cheveux retroussés sur le sommet de la tête, s'arrachaient les pastèques et les limons qu'ils croquaient avec l'écorce. Des Nègres n'ayant jamais vu de langoustes se déchiraient le visage à leurs piquants rouges. Mais les

Grecs rasés, plus blancs que des marbres, jetaient derrière eux les épluchures de leur assiette, tandis que des pâtres du Brutium, vêtus de peaux de loups, dévoraient silencieusement, le visage dans leur portion.

La nuit tombait. On retira le velarium étalé sur l'avenue de cyprès et l'on apporta des flambeaux.

Les lueurs vacillantes du pétrole qui brûlait dans des vases de porphyre effrayèrent, au haut des cèdres, les singes consacrés à la lune. Ils poussèrent des cris, ce qui mit les soldats en gaieté.

Des flammes oblongues tremblaient sur les cuirasses d'airain. Toutes sortes de scintillements jaillissaient des plats incrustés de pierres précieuses. Les cratères, à bordure de miroirs convexes, multipliaient l'image élargie des choses ; les soldats se pressant autour s'y regardaient avec ébahissement et grimaçaient pour se faire rire. Ils se lançaient, par-dessus les tables, les escabeaux d'ivoire et les spatules d'or. Ils avalaient à pleine gorge tous les vins grecs qui sont dans des outres, les vins de Campanie enfermés dans des amphores, les vins des Cantabres que l'on apporte dans des tonneaux, et les vins de jujubier, de cinnamome et de lotus. Il y en avait des flaques par terre où l'on glissait. La fumée des viandes montait dans les feuillages avec la vapeur des haleines. On entendait à la fois le claquement des mâchoires, le bruit des paroles, des chansons, des coupes, le fracas des vases campaniens qui s'écroulaient en mille morceaux, ou le son limpide d'un grand plat d'argent.

A mesure qu'augmentait leur ivresse, ils se rappelaient de plus en plus l'injustice de Carthage. En effet, la République, épuisée par la guerre, avait laissé s'accumuler dans la ville toutes les bandes qui revenaient. Giscon, leur général, avait eu cependant la prudence de les renvoyer les uns après les autres pour faciliter l'acquittement de leur solde, et le Conseil avait cru qu'ils finiraient par consentir à quelque diminution. Mais on leur en voulait aujourd'hui de ne pouvoir les payer. Cette dette se confondait dans l'esprit du peuple avec les trois mille deux cents talents euboïques exigés par Lutatius, et ils étaient, comme Rome, un ennemi pour Carthage. Les Mercenaires le comprenaient ; aussi leur indignation éclatait en menaces et en débordements. Enfin, ils demandèrent à se réunir pour célébrer une de leurs victoires, et le parti de la paix céda, en se vengeant d'Hamilcar qui avait tant soutenu la guerre. Elle s'était terminée contre tous ses efforts, si bien que, désespérant de Carthage, il avait remis à Giscon le gouvernement des Mercenaires. Désigner son palais pour les recevoir, c'était attirer sur lui quelque chose de la haine qu'on leur portait. D'ailleurs la dépense devait être excessive ; il la subirait presque toute.

Fiers d'avoir fait plier la République, les Mercenaires croyaient qu'ils allaient enfin s'en retourner chez eux, avec la solde de leur sang dans le capuchon de leur manteau. Mais leurs fatigues, revues à travers les vapeurs de l'ivresse, leur semblaient prodigieuses et trop peu récompensées. Ils se montraient leurs blessures, ils racontaient leurs combats, leurs voyages et les chasses de leurs pays. Ils imitaient le cri des bêtes féroces, leurs bonds. Puis vinrent les immondes gageures ; ils s'enfonçaient la tête dans les amphores, et restaient à boire, sans s'interrompre, comme des dromadaires altérés. Un Lusitanien, de taille gigantesque, portant un homme au bout de chaque bras, parcourait les tables tout en crachant du feu par les narines. Des Lacédémoniens qui n'avaient point ôté leurs cuirasses sautaient d'un pas lourd. Quelques-uns s'avançaient comme des femmes en faisant des gestes obscènes ; d'autres se mettaient nus pour combattre, au milieu des coupes, à la façon des gladiateurs, et une compagnie de Grecs dansait autour d'un vase où l'on voyait des nymphes, pendant qu'un nègre tapait avec un os de boeuf sur un bouclier d'airain.

Tout à coup, ils entendirent un chant plaintif, un chant fort et doux, qui s'abaissait et remontait dans les airs comme le battement d'ailes d'un oiseau blessé.

C'était la voix des esclaves dans l'ergastule. Des soldats, pour les délivrer, se levèrent d'un bond et disparurent.

Ils revinrent, chassant au milieu des cris, dans la poussière, une vingtaine d'hommes que l'on distinguait à leur visage plus pâle. Un petit bonnet de forme conique, en feutre noir, couvrait leur tête rasée ; ils portaient tous des sandales de bois et faisaient un bruit de ferrailles comme des chariots en marche.

Ils arrivèrent dans l'avenue des cyprès, où ils se perdirent parmi la foule, qui les interrogeait. L'un d'eux était resté à l'écart, debout. A travers les déchirures de sa tunique on apercevait ses épaules rayées par de longues balafres. Baissant le menton, il regardait autour de lui avec méfiance et fermait un peu ses paupières dans l'éblouissement des flambeaux ; mais quand il vit que personne de ces gens armés ne lui en voulait, un grand soupir s'échappa de sa poitrine : il balbutiait, il ricanait sous les larmes claires qui lavaient sa figure ; puis il saisit par les anneaux un canthare tout plein, le leva droit en l'air au bout de ses bras d'où pendaient des chaînes, et alors regardant le ciel et toujours tenant la coupe, il dit :

— " Salut d'abord à toi, Baal-Eschmoûn libérateur, que les gens de ma patrie appellent Esculape ! et à vous, Génies des fontaines, de la lumière et des bois ! et à vous, Dieux cachés sous les montagnes et dans les cavernes de la terre ! et à vous, hommes forts aux armures reluisantes, qui m'avez délivré ! "

Puis il laissa tomber la coupe et conta son histoire. On le nommait Spendius. Les Carthaginois l'avaient pris à la bataille des Egineuses, et parlant grec, ligure et punique, il remercia encore une fois les Mercenaires ; il leur baisait les mains ;

enfin, il les félicita du banquet, tout en s'étonnant de n'y pas apercevoir les coupes de la Légion sacrée. Ces coupes, portant une vigne en émeraude sur chacune de leurs six faces en or, appartenaient à une milice exclusivement composée des jeunes patriciens, les plus hauts de taille. C'était un privilège, presque un honneur sacerdotal ; aussi rien dans les trésors de la République n'était plus convoité des Mercenaires. Ils détestaient la Légion à cause de cela, et on en avait vu qui risquaient leur vie pour l'inconcevable plaisir d'y boire. Donc ils commandèrent d'aller chercher les coupes. Elles étaient en dépôt chez les Syssites, compagnies de commerçants qui mangeaient en commun. Les esclaves revinrent. A cette heure, tous les membres des Syssites dormaient.

— " Qu'on les réveille ! " répondirent les Mercenaires.

Après une seconde démarche, on leur expliqua qu'elles étaient enfermées dans un temple.

— " Qu'on l'ouvre ! " répliquèrent-ils.

Et quand les esclaves, en tremblant, eurent avoué qu'elles étaient entre les mains du général Giscon, ils s'écrièrent :

— " Qu'il les apporte ! "

Giscon, bientôt, apparut au fond du jardin dans une escorte de la Légion sacrée. Son ample manteau noir, retenu sur sa tête à une mitre d'or constellée de pierres précieuses, et qui pendait tout à l'entour jusqu'aux sabots de son cheval, se confondait, de loin, avec la couleur de la nuit. On n'apercevait que sa barbe blanche, les rayonnements de sa coiffure et son triple collier à larges plaques bleues qui lui battait sur la poitrine.

Les soldats, quand il entra, le saluèrent d'une grande acclamation, tous criant :

— " Les coupes ! Les coupes ! "

Il commença par déclarer que, si l'on considérait leur courage, ils en étaient dignes. La foule hurla de joie, en applaudissant.

Il le savait bien, lui qui les avait commandés là-bas et qui était revenu avec la dernière cohorte sur la dernière galère !

— " C'est vrai ! c'est vrai ! ", disaient-ils.

Cependant, continua Giscon, la République avait respecté leurs divisions par peuples, leurs coutumes, leurs cultes ; ils étaient libres dans Carthage ! Quant aux vases de la Légion sacrée, c'était une propriété particulière. Tout à coup, près de Spendius, un Gaulois s'élança par-dessus les tables et courut droit à Giscon, qu'il menaçait en gesticulant avec deux épées nues.

Le général, sans s'interrompre, le frappa sur la tête de son lourd bâton d'ivoire : le Barbare tomba. Les Gaulois hurlaient, et leur fureur, se communiquant aux autres, allait emporter les légionnaires. Giscon haussa les épaules en les voyant pâlir. Il songeait que son courage serait inutile contre ces bêtes brutes, exaspérées. Il valait mieux plus tard s'en venger dans quelque ruse ; donc il fit signe à ses soldats et s'éloigna lentement. Puis, sous la porte, se tournant vers les Mercenaires, il leur cria qu'ils s'en repentiraient.

Le festin recommença. Mais Giscon pouvait revenir et, cernant le faubourg qui touchait aux derniers remparts, les écraser contre les murs. Alors ils se sentirent seuls malgré leur foule ; et la grande ville qui dormait sous eux, dans l'ombre, leur fit peur, tout à coup, avec ses entassements d'escaliers, ses hautes maisons noires et ses vagues dieux encore plus féroces que son peuple. Au loin, quelques fanaux glissaient sur le port, et il y avait des lumières dans le temple de Khamon. Ils se souvinrent d'Hamilcar. Où était-il ? Pourquoi les avoir abandonnés, la paix conclue ? Ses dissensions avec le Conseil n'étaient sans doute qu'un jeu pour les perdre. Leur haine inassouvie retombait sur lui : et ils le maudissaient s'exaspérant les uns les autres par leur propre colère. A ce moment-là, il se fit un rassemblement sous les platanes. C'était pour voir un nègre qui se roulait en battant le sol avec ses membres, la prunelle fixe, le cou tordu, l'écume aux lèvres. Quelqu'un cria qu'il était empoisonné. Tous se crurent empoisonnés. Ils tombèrent sur les esclaves ; une clameur épouvantable s'éleva, et un vertige de destruction tourbillonna sur l'armée ivre. Ils frappaient au hasard, autour d'eux, ils brisaient, ils tuaient : quelques-uns lancèrent des flambeaux dans les feuillages ; d'autres, s'accoudant sur la balustrade des lions, les massacrèrent à coups de flèches ; les plus hardis coururent aux éléphants, ils voulaient leur abattre la trompe et manger de l'ivoire.

Cependant des frondeurs baléares qui, pour piller plus commodément, avaient tourné l'angle du palais, furent arrêtés par une haute barrière faite en jonc des Indes. Ils coupèrent avec leurs poignards les courroies de la serrure et se trouvèrent alors sous la façade qui regardait Carthage, dans un autre jardin rempli de végétations taillées. Des lignes de fleurs blanches, toutes se suivant une à une, décrivaient sur la terre couleur d'azur de longues paraboles, comme des fusées d'étoiles. Les buissons, pleins de ténèbres, exhalaient des odeurs chaudes, mielleuses. Il y avait des troncs d'arbre barbouillés de cinabre, qui ressemblaient à des colonnes sanglantes. Au milieu, douze piédestaux de cuivre portaient chacun une grosse boule de verre, et des lueurs rougeâtres emplissaient confusément ces globes creux, comme d'énormes prunelles qui palpiteraient encore. Les soldats s'éclairaient avec des torches, tout en trébuchant sur la pente du terrain, profondément labouré.

Mais ils aperçurent un petit lac, divisé en plusieurs bassins par des murailles de pierres bleues. L'onde était si limpide que les flammes des torches tremblaient jusqu'au fond, sur un lit de cailloux blancs et de poussière d'or. Elle se mit à bouillonner, des paillettes lumineuses glissèrent, et de gros poissons, qui portaient des pierreries à la gueule, apparurent vers la surface.

Les soldats, en riant beaucoup, leur passèrent les doigts dans les ouïes et les apportèrent sur les tables.

C'étaient les poissons de la famille Barca. Tous descendaient de ces lottes primordiales qui avaient fait éclore l'oeuf mystique où se cachait la Déesse. L'idée de commettre un sacrilège ranima la gourmandise des Mercenaires ; ils placèrent vite du feu sous des vases d'airain et s'amusèrent à regarder les beaux poissons se débattre dans l'eau bouillante.

La houle des soldats se poussait. Ils n'avaient plus peur. Ils recommençaient à boire. Les parfums qui leur coulaient du front mouillaient de gouttes larges leurs tuniques en lambeaux, et s'appuyant des deux poings sur les tables qui leur semblaient osciller comme des navires, ils promenaient à l'entour leurs gros yeux ivres, pour dévorer par la vue ce qu'ils ne pouvaient prendre. D'autres, marchant tout au milieu des plats sur les nappes de pourpre, cassaient à coups de pied les escabeaux d'ivoire et les fioles tyriennes en verre. Les chansons se mêlaient au râle des esclaves agonisant parmi les coupes brisées. Ils demandaient du vin, des viandes, de l'or. Ils criaient pour avoir des femmes. Ils déliraient en cent langages. Quelques-uns se croyaient aux étuves, à cause de la buée qui flottait autour d'eux, ou bien, apercevant des feuillages, ils s'imaginaient être à la chasse et couraient sur leurs compagnons comme sur des bêtes sauvages. L'incendie de l'un à l'autre gagnait tous les arbres, et les hautes masses de verdure, d'où s'échappaient de longues spirales blanches, semblaient des volcans qui commencent à fumer. La clameur redoublait ; les lions blessés rugissaient dans l'ombre.

Le palais s'éclaira d'un seul coup à sa plus haute terrasse, la porte du milieu s'ouvrit, et une femme, la fille d'Hamilcar elle-même, couverte de vêtements noirs, apparut sur le seuil. Elle descendit le premier escalier qui longeait obliquement le premier étage, puis le second, le troisième, et elle s'arrêta sur la dernière terrasse, au haut de l'escalier des galères. Immobile et la tête basse, elle regardait les soldats.

Derrière elle, de chaque côté, se tenaient deux longues théories d'hommes pâles, vêtus de robes blanches à franges rouges qui tombaient droit sur leurs pieds. Ils n'avaient pas de barbe, pas de cheveux, pas de sourcils. Dans leurs mains étincelantes d'anneaux ils portaient d'énormes lyres et chantaient tous, d'une voix aiguë, un hymne à la divinité de Carthage. C'étaient les prêtres eunuques du temple de Tanit, que Salammbô appelait souvent dans sa maison.

Enfin elle descendit l'escalier des galères. Les prêtres la suivirent. Elle s'avança dans l'avenue des cyprès, et elle marchait lentement entre les tables des capitaines, qui se reculaient un peu en la regardant passer.

Sa chevelure, poudrée d'un sable violet, et réunie en forme de tour selon la mode des vierges chananéennes, la faisait paraître plus grande. Des tresses de perles attachées à ses tempes descendaient jusqu'aux coins de sa bouche, rose comme une grenade entrouverte. Il y avait sur sa poitrine un assemblage de pierres lumineuses, imitant par leur bigarrure les écailles d'une murène. Ses bras, garnis de diamants, sortaient nus de sa tunique sans manches, étoilée de fleurs rouges sur un fond tout noir. Elle portait entre les chevilles une chaînette d'or pour régler sa marche, et son grand manteau de pourpre sombre, taillé dans une étoffe inconnue, traînait derrière elle, faisant à chacun de ses pas comme une large vague qui la suivait.

Les prêtres, de temps à autre, pinçaient sur leurs lyres des accords presque étouffés, et dans les intervalles de la musique, on entendait le petit bruit de la chaînette d'or avec le claquement régulier de ses sandales en papyrus.

Personne encore ne la connaissait. On savait seulement qu'elle vivait retirée dans des pratiques pieuses. Des soldats l'avaient aperçue la nuit, sur le haut de son palais, à genoux devant les étoiles, entre les tourbillons des cassolettes allumées. C'était la lune qui l'avait rendue si pâle, et quelque chose des Dieux l'enveloppait comme une vapeur subtile. Ses prunelles semblaient regarder tout au loin au-delà des espaces terrestres. Elle marchait en inclinant la tête, et tenait à sa main droite une petite lyre d'ébène.

Ils l'entendaient murmurer :

— " Morts ! Tous morts ! Vous ne viendrez plus obéissant à ma voix, quand, assise sur le bord du lac, je vous jetais dans la gueule des pépins de pastèques ! Le mystère de Tanit roulait au fond de vos yeux, plus limpides que les globules des fleuves. " Et elle les appelait par leurs noms, qui étaient les noms des mois.

— " Siv ! Sivan ! Tammouz, Eloul, Tischri, Schebar !

— Ah ! pitié pour moi, Déesse ! "

Les soldats, sans comprendre ce qu'elle disait, se tassaient autour d'elle. Ils s'ébahissaient de sa parure ; mais elle promena sur eux tous un long regard épouvanté, puis s'enfonçant la tête dans les épaules en écartant les bras, elle répéta plusieurs fois :

— " Qu'avez-vous fait ! qu'avez-vous fait !

— Vous aviez cependant, pour vous réjouir, du pain, des viandes, de l'huile, tout le malobathre des greniers ! J'avais fait venir des boeufs d'Hécatompyle, j'avais envoyé des chasseurs dans le désert ! " Sa voix s'enflait, ses joues s'empourpraient. Elle ajouta : " Où êtes-vous donc, ici ? Est-ce dans une ville conquise, ou dans le palais d'un maître ? Et quel maître ? le suffète Hamilcar mon père, serviteur des Baals ! Vos armes, rouges du sang de ses esclaves, c'est lui qui les a refusées à Lutatius ! En connaissez-vous un dans vos patries qui sache mieux conduire les batailles ? Regardez donc ! les marches de notre palais sont encombrées par nos victoires ! Continuez ! brûlez-le ! J'emporterai avec moi le Génie de ma maison, mon serpent noir qui dort là-haut sur des feuilles de lotus ! Je sifflerai, il me suivra ; et, si je monte en galère, il courra dans le sillage de mon navire sur l'écume des flots. "

Ses narines minces palpitaient. Elle écrasait ses ongles contre les pierreries de sa poitrine. Ses yeux s'alanguirent ; elle reprit :

— " Ah ! pauvre Carthage ! lamentable ville ! Tu n'as plus pour te défendre les hommes forts d'autrefois, qui allaient au-delà des océans bâtir des temples sur les rivages. Tous les pays travaillaient autour de toi, et les plaines de la mer, labourées par tes rames, balançaient tes moissons. "

Alors elle se mit à chanter les aventures de Melkarth, dieu des Sidoniens et père de sa famille.

Elle disait l'ascension des montagnes d'Ersiphonie, le voyage à Tartessus, et la guerre contre Masisabal pour venger la reine des serpents :

— " Il poursuivait dans la forêt le monstre femelle dont la queue ondulait sur les feuilles mortes comme un ruisseau d'argent ; et il arriva dans une prairie où des femmes, à croupe de dragon, se tenaient autour d'un grand feu, dressées sur la pointe de leur queue. La lune, couleur de sang, resplendissait dans un cercle pâle, et leurs langues écarlates, fendues comme des harpons de pêcheurs, s'allongeaient en se recourbant jusqu'au bord de la flamme. "

Puis Salammbô, sans s'arrêter, raconta comment Melkarth, après avoir vaincu Masisabal, mit à la proue du navire sa tête coupée. — " A chaque battement des flots, elle s'enfonçait sous l'écume ; mais le soleil l'embaumait, elle se fit plus dure que l'or ; cependant les yeux ne cessaient point de pleurer, et les larmes, continuellement, tombaient dans l'eau. "

Elle chantait tout cela dans un vieil idiome chananéen que n'entendaient pas les Barbares. Ils se demandaient ce qu'elle pouvait leur dire avec les gestes effrayants dont elle accompagnait son discours ; — et montés autour d'elle sur les tables, sur les lits, dans les rameaux des sycomores, la bouche ouverte et allongeant la tête, ils tâchaient de saisir ces vagues histoires qui se balançaient devant leur imagination, à travers l'obscurité des théogonies, comme des fantômes dans des nuages.

Seuls, les prêtres sans barbe comprenaient Salammbô. Leurs mains ridées, pendant sur les cordes des lyres, frémissaient, et de temps à autre en tiraient un accord lugubre : car plus faibles que des vieilles femmes ils tremblaient à la fois d'émotion mystique et de la peur que leur faisaient les hommes. Les Barbares ne s'en souciaient ; ils écoutaient toujours la vierge chanter.

Aucun ne la regardait comme un jeune chef numide placé aux tables des capitaines, parmi des soldats de sa nation. Sa ceinture était si hérissée de dards, qu'elle faisait une bosse dans son large manteau, noué à ses tempes par un lacet de cuir. L'étoffe, bâillant sur ses épaules, enveloppait d'ombre son visage, et l'on n'apercevait que les flammes de ses deux yeux fixes. C'était par hasard qu'il se trouvait au festin, — son père le faisant vivre chez les Barca, selon la coutume des rois qui envoyaient leurs enfants dans les grandes familles pour préparer des alliances ; mais depuis six mois que Narr'Havas y logeait, il n'avait point encore aperçu Salammbô ; et, assis sur les talons, la barbe baissée vers les hampes de ses javelots, il la considérait en écartant les narines comme un léopard qui est accroupi dans les bambous.

De l'autre côté des tables se tenait un Libyen de taille colossale et à courts cheveux noirs frisés. Il n'avait gardé que sa jaquette militaire, dont les lames d'airain déchiraient la pourpre du lit. Un collier à lune d'argent s'embarrassait dans les poils de sa poitrine. Des éclaboussures de sang lui tachetaient la face, il s'appuyait sur le coude gauche ; et la bouche grande ouverte il souriait.

Salammbô n'en était plus au rythme sacré. Elle employait simultanément tous les idiomes des Barbares, délicatesse de femme pour attendrir leur colère. Aux Grecs elle parlait grec, puis elle se tournait vers les Ligures, vers les Campaniens, vers les Nègres ; et chacun en l'écoutant retrouvait dans cette voix la douceur de sa patrie. Emportée par les souvenirs de Carthage, elle chantait maintenant les anciennes batailles contre Rome ; ils applaudissaient. Elle s'enflammait à la lueur des épées nues ; elle criait, les bras ouverts. Sa lyre tomba, elle se tut ; — et pressant son coeur à deux mains, elle resta quelques minutes les paupières closes à savourer l'agitation de tous ces hommes.

Mâtho le Libyen se penchait vers elle. Involontairement elle s'en approcha, et, poussée par la reconnaissance de son orgueil, elle lui versa dans une coupe d'or un long jet de vin pour se réconcilier avec l'armée.

— " Bois ! " dit-elle.

Il prit la coupe et il la portait à ses lèvres quand un Gaulois, le même que Giscon avait blessé, le frappa sur l'épaule, tout en débitant d'un air jovial des plaisanteries dans la langue de son pays. Spendius n'était pas loin ; il s'offrit à les expliquer.

— " Parle ! " dit Mâtho.

— " Les Dieux te protègent, tu vas devenir riche. A quand les noces ? "

— " Quelles noces ? "

— " Les tiennes ! car chez nous ", dit le Gaulois, lorsqu'une femme fait boire un soldat, c'est qu'elle lui offre sa couche. "

Il n'avait pas fini que Narr'Havas, en bondissant, tira un javelot de sa ceinture, et appuyé du pied droit sur le bord de la table, il le lança contre Mâtho.

Le javelot siffla entre les coupes, et, traversant le bras du Libyen, le cloua sur la nappe si fortement, que la poignée en tremblait dans l'air.

Mâtho l'arracha vite ; mais il n'avait pas d'armes, il était nu ; enfin, levant à deux bras la table surchargée, il la jeta contre Narr'Havas tout au milieu de la foule qui se précipitait entre eux. Les soldats et les Numides se serraient à ne pouvoir tirer leurs glaives. Mâtho avançait en donnant de grands coups avec sa tête. Quand il la releva, Narr'Havas avait disparu. Il le chercha des yeux. Salammbô aussi était partie.

Alors sa vue se tournant sur le palais, il aperçut tout en haut la porte rouge à croix noire qui se refermait. Il s'élança.

On le vit courir entre les proues des galères, puis réapparaître le long des trois escaliers jusqu'à la porte rouge qu'il heurta de tout son corps. En haletant, il s'appuya contre le mur pour ne pas tomber.

Un homme l'avait suivi, et, à travers les ténèbres, car les lueurs du festin étaient cachées par l'angle du palais, il reconnut Spendius.

— " Va-t'en ! " dit-il.

L'esclave, sans répondre, se mit avec ses dents à déchirer sa tunique ; puis s'agenouillant auprès de Mâtho il lui prit le bras délicatement, et il le palpait dans l'ombre pour découvrir la blessure.

Sous un rayon de la lune qui glissait entre les nuages, Spendius aperçut au milieu du bras une plaie béante. Il roula tout autour le morceau d'étoffe ; mais l'autre, s'irritant, disait : " Laisse-moi ! Laisse-moi ! "

— " Oh ! non ! " reprit l'esclave. " Tu m'as délivré de l'ergastule. Je suis à toi ! tu es mon maître ! ordonne ! "

Mâtho, en frôlant les murs, fit le tour de la terrasse. Il tendait l'oreille à chaque pas, et, par l'intervalle des roseaux dorés, plongeait ses regards dans les appartements silencieux. Enfin il s'arrêta d'un air désespéré.

— " Ecoute ! " lui dit l'esclave. " Oh ! ne me méprise pas pour ma faiblesse ! J'ai vécu dans le palais. Je peux, comme une vipère, me couler entre les murs. Viens ! Il y a dans la Chambre des Ancêtres un lingot d'or sous chaque dalle ; une voie souterraine conduit à leurs tombeaux. "

— " Eh ! qu'importe ! " dit Mâtho.

Spendius se tut.

Ils étaient sur la terrasse. Une masse d'ombre énorme s'étalait devant eux, et qui semblait contenir de vagues amoncellements, pareils aux flots gigantesques d'un océan noir pétrifié.

Mais une barre lumineuse s'éleva du côté de l'Orient. A gauche, tout en bas, les canaux de Mégara commençaient à rayer de leurs sinuosités blanches les verdures des jardins. Les toits coniques des temples heptagones, les escaliers, les terrasses, les remparts, peu à peu, se découpaient sur la pâleur de l'aube ; et tout autour de la péninsule carthaginoise une ceinture d'écume blanche oscillait tandis que la mer couleur d'émeraude semblait comme figée dans la fraîcheur du matin. Puis à mesure que le ciel rose allait s'élargissant, les hautes maisons inclinées sur les pentes du terrain se haussaient, se tassaient telles qu'un troupeau de chèvres noires qui descend des montagnes. Les rues désertes s'allongeaient ; les palmiers, çà et là sortant des murs, ne bougeaient pas ; les citernes remplies avaient l'air de boucliers d'argent perdus dans les cours, le phare du promontoire Hennormaeum commençait à pâlir. Tout en haut de l'Acropole, dans le bois de cyprès, les chevaux d'Eschmoûn, sentant venir la lumière, posaient leurs sabots sur le parapet de marbre et hennissaient du côté du soleil.

Il parut ; Spendius, levant les bras, poussa un cri.

Tout s'agitait dans une rougeur épandue, car le Dieu, comme se déchirant, versait à pleins rayons sur Carthage la pluie d'or de ses veines. Les éperons des galères étincelaient, le toit de Khamon paraissait tout en flammes, et l'on apercevait des lueurs au fond des temples dont les portes s'ouvraient. Les grands chariots arrivant de la campagne faisaient tourner leurs roues sur les dalles des rues. Des dromadaires chargés de bagages descendaient les rampes. Les changeurs dans les carrefours relevaient les auvents de leurs boutiques. Des cigognes s'envolèrent, des voiles blanches palpitaient. On entendait dans le bois de Tanit le tambourin des courtisanes sacrées, et à la pointe des Mappales, les fourneaux pour cuire les cercueils d'argile commençaient à fumer.

Spendius se penchait en dehors de la terrasse ; ses dents claquaient, il répétait :

— " Ah ! oui... oui ... maître ! je comprends pourquoi tu dédaignais tout à l'heure le pillage de la maison. "

Mâtho fut comme réveillé par le sifflement de sa voix, il semblait ne pas comprendre ; Spendius reprit :

— " Ah ! quelles richesses ! et les hommes qui les possèdent n'ont même pas de fer pour les défendre ! "

Alors, lui faisant voir de sa main droite étendue quelques-uns de la populace qui rampaient en dehors du môle, sur le sable, pour chercher des paillettes d'or :

— " Tiens ! " lui dit-il, " la République est comme ces misérables : courbée au bord des océans, elle enfonce dans tous les rivages ses bras avides, et le bruit des flots emplit tellement son oreille qu'elle n'entendrait pas venir par-derrière le talon d'un maître ! "

Il entraîna Mâtho tout à l'autre bout de la terrasse, et lui montrant le jardin où miroitaient au soleil les épées des soldats suspendues dans les arbres.

— " Mais ici il y a des hommes forts dont la haine est exaspérée ! et rien ne les attache à Carthage, ni leurs familles, ni leurs serments, ni leurs dieux ! "

Mâtho restait appuyé contre le mur ; Spendius, se rapprochant, poursuivit à voix basse :

— " Me comprends-tu, soldat ? Nous nous promènerions couverts de pourpre comme des satrapes. On nous laverait dans les parfums ; j'aurais des esclaves à mon tour ! N'es-tu pas las de dormir sur la terre dure, de boire le vinaigre des camps, et toujours d'entendre la trompette ? Tu te reposeras plus tard, n'est-ce pas ? quand on arrachera ta cuirasse pour jeter ton cadavre aux vautours ! ou peut-être, t'appuyant sur un bâton, aveugle, boiteux, débile, tu t'en iras de porte en porte raconter ta jeunesse aux petits enfants et aux vendeurs de saumure. Rappelle-toi toutes les injustices de tes chefs, les campements dans la neige, les courses au soleil, les tyrannies de la discipline et l'éternelle menace de la croix ! Après tant de misères on t'a donné un collier d'honneur, comme on suspend au poitrail des ânes une ceinture de grelots pour les étourdir dans la marche, et faire qu'ils ne sentent pas la fatigue. Un homme comme toi, plus brave que Pyrrhus ! Si tu l'avais voulu, pourtant ! Ah ! comme tu seras heureux dans les grandes salles fraîches, au son des lyres, couché sur des fleurs, avec des bouffons et avec des femmes ! Ne me dis pas que l'entreprise est impossible ! Est-ce que les Mercenaires, déjà, n'ont pas possédé Rheggium et d'autres places fortes en Italie ! Qui t'empêche ? ! Hamilcar est absent ; le peuple exècre les Riches ; Giscon ne peut rien sur les lâches qui l'entourent. Mais tu es brave, toi ! ils t'obéiront. Commande-les ! Carthage est à nous ; jetons-nous-y ! "

— " Non ! " dit Mâtho, " la malédiction de Moloch pèse sur moi. Je l'ai senti à ses yeux, et tout à l'heure j'ai vu dans un temple un bélier noir qui reculait. " Il ajouta, en regardant autour de lui : " Où est-elle ? "

Spendius comprit qu'une inquiétude immense l'occupait ; il n'osa plus parler.

Les arbres derrière eux fumaient encore ; de leurs branches noircies, des carcasses de singes à demi-brûlées tombaient de temps à autre au milieu des plats. Les soldats ivres ronflaient la bouche ouverte à côté des cadavres ; et ceux qui ne dormaient pas baissaient leur tête, éblouis par le jour. Le sol piétiné disparaissait sous des flaques rouges. Les éléphants balançaient entre les pieux de leurs parcs leurs trompes sanglantes. On apercevait dans les greniers ouverts des sacs de froment répandus, et sous la porte une ligne épaisse de chariots amoncelés par les Barbares ; les paons juchés dans les cèdres déployaient leur queue et se mettaient à crier.

Cependant l'immobilité de Mâtho étonnait Spendius, il était encore plus pâle que tout à l'heure, et, les prunelles fixes, il suivait quelque chose à l'horizon, appuyé des deux poings sur le bord de la terrasse. Spendius, en se courbant, finit par découvrir ce qu'il contemplait. Un point d'or tournait au loin dans la poussière sur la route d'Utique ; c'était le moyeu d'un char attelé de deux mulets ; un esclave courait à la tête du timon, en les tenant par la bride. Il y avait dans le char deux femmes assises. Les crinières des bêtes bouffaient entre leurs oreilles à la mode persique, sous un réseau de perles bleues. Spendius les reconnut ; il retint un cri.

Un grand voile, par-derrière, flottait au vent.

Chapitre 2 A SICCA

Deux jours après, les Mercenaires sortirent de Carthage.

On leur avait donné à chacun une pièce d'or, sous la condition qu'ils iraient camper à Sicca, et on leur avait dit avec toutes sortes de caresses :

— " Vous êtes les sauveurs de Carthage ! Mais vous l'affameriez en y restant ; elle deviendrait insolvable. Eloignez-vous ! La République, plus tard, vous saura gré de cette condescendance. Nous allons immédiatement lever des impôts ; votre solde sera complète, et l'on équipera des galères qui vous reconduiront dans vos patries. "

Ils ne savaient que répondre à tant de discours. Ces hommes, accoutumés à la guerre, s'ennuyaient dans le séjour d'une ville ; on n'eut pas de mal à les convaincre, et le peuple monta sur les murs pour les voir s'en aller.

Ils défilèrent par la rue de Khamon et la porte de Cirta, pêle-mêle, les archers avec les hoplites, les capitaines avec les soldats, les Lusitaniens avec les Grecs. Ils marchaient d'un pas hardi, faisant sonner sur les dalles leurs lourds cothurnes. Leurs armures étaient bosselées par les catapultes et leurs visages noircis par le hâle des batailles. Des cris rauques sortaient des barbes épaisses ; leurs cottes de mailles déchirées battaient sur les pommeaux des glaives, et l'on apercevait, aux trous de l'airain, leurs membres nus, effrayants comme des machines de guerre. Les sarisses, les haches, les épieux, les bonnets de feutre et les casques de bronze, tout oscillait à la fois d'un seul mouvement. Ils emplissaient la rue à faire craquer les murs, et cette longue masse de soldats en armes s'épanchait entre les hautes maisons à six étages, barbouillées de bitume. Derrière leurs grilles de fer ou de roseaux, les femmes, la tête couverte d'un voile, regardaient en silence les Barbares passer.

Les terrasses, les fortifications, les murs disparaissaient sous la foule des Carthaginois, habillée de vêtements noirs. Les tuniques des matelots faisaient comme des taches de sang parmi cette sombre multitude, et des enfants presque nus, dont la peau brillait sous leurs bracelets de cuivre, gesticulaient dans le feuillage des colonnes ou entre les branches d'un palmier. Quelques-uns des Anciens s'étaient postés sur la plate-forme des tours, et l'on ne savait pas pourquoi se tenait ainsi, de place en place, un personnage à barbe longue, dans une attitude rêveuse. Il apparaissait de loin sur le fond du ciel, vague comme un fantôme, et immobile comme les pierres.

Tous, cependant, étaient oppressés par la même inquiétude ; on avait peur que les Barbares, en se voyant si forts, n'eussent la fantaisie de vouloir rester. Mais ils partaient avec tant de confiance que les Carthaginois s'enhardirent et se mêlèrent aux soldats. On les accablait de serments, d'étreintes. Quelques-uns même les engageaient à ne pas quitter la ville, par exagération de politique et audace d'hypocrisie. On leur jetait des parfums, des fleurs et des pièces d'argent. On leur donnait des amulettes contre les maladies ; mais on avait craché dessus trois fois pour attirer la mort, ou enfermé dedans des poils de chacal qui rendent le coeur lâche. On invoquait tout haut la faveur de Melkarth et tout bas sa malédiction.

Puis vint la cohue des bagages, des bêtes de somme et des traînards. Des malades gémissaient sur des dromadaires ; d'autres s'appuyaient, en boitant, sur le tronçon d'une pique. Les ivrognes emportaient des outres, les voraces des quartiers de viande, des gâteaux, des fruits, du beurre dans des feuilles de figuier, de la neige dans des sacs de toile. On en voyait avec des parasols à la main, avec des perroquets sur l'épaule. Ils se faisaient suivre par des dogues, par des gazelles ou des panthères. Des femmes de race Libyque, montées sur des ânes, invectivaient les négresses qui avaient abandonné pour les soldats les lupanars de Malqua : plusieurs allaitaient des enfants suspendus à leur poitrine dans une lanière de cuir. Les mulets, que l'on aiguillonnait avec la pointe des glaives, pliaient l'échine sous le fardeau des tentes ; et il y avait une quantité de valets et de porteurs d'eau, hâves, jaunis par les fièvres et tout sales de vermine, écume de la plèbe carthaginoise, qui s'attachait aux Barbares.

Quand ils furent passés, on ferma les portes derrière eux, le peuple ne descendit pas des murs ; l'armée se répandit bientôt sur la largeur de l'isthme.

Elle se divisait par masses inégales. Puis les lances apparurent comme de hauts brins d'herbe, enfin tout se perdit dans une traînée de poussière ; ceux des soldats qui se retournaient vers Carthage, n'apercevaient plus que ses longues murailles, découpant au bord du ciel leurs créneaux vides.

Alors les Barbares entendirent un grand cri. Ils crurent que quelques-uns d'entre eux, restés dans la ville (car ils ne savaient pas leur nombre), s'amusaient à piller un temple. Ils rirent beaucoup à cette idée, puis continuèrent leur chemin.

Ils étaient joyeux de se retrouver, comme autrefois, marchant tous ensemble dans la pleine campagne ; et des Grecs chantaient la vieille chanson des Mamertins :

— " Avec ma lance et mon épée, je laboure et je moissonne ; c'est moi qui suis le maître de la maison ! L'homme désarmé tombe à mes genoux et m'appelle Seigneur et Grand-Roi. "

Ils criaient, sautaient, les plus gais commençaient des histoires ; le temps des misères était fini. En arrivant à Tunis, quelques-uns remarquèrent qu'il manquait une troupe de frondeurs baléares. Ils n'étaient pas loin, sans doute : on n'y pensa plus.

Les uns allèrent loger dans les maisons, les autres campèrent au pied des murs, et les gens de la ville vinrent causer avec les soldats. Pendant toute la nuit, on aperçut des feux qui brûlaient à l'horizon, du côté de Carthage ; ces lueurs, comme des torches géantes, s'allongeaient sur le lac immobile. Personne, dans l'armée, ne pouvait dire quelle fête on célébrait.

Les Barbares, le lendemain, traversèrent une campagne toute couverte de cultures. Les métairies des patriciens se succédaient sur le bord de la route ; des rigoles coulaient dans des bois de palmiers ; les oliviers faisaient de longues lignes vertes ; des vapeurs roses flottaient dans les gorges des collines ; des montagnes bleues se dressaient par-derrière. Un vent chaud soufflait. Des caméléons rampaient sur les feuilles larges des cactus.

Les Barbares se ralentirent.

Ils s'en allaient par détachements isolés, ou se traînaient les uns après les autres à de longs intervalles. Ils mangeaient des raisins au bord des vignes. Ils se couchaient dans les herbes, et ils regardaient avec stupéfaction les grandes cornes des boeufs artificiellement tordues, les brebis revêtues de peaux pour protéger leur laine, les sillons qui s'entrecroisaient de manière à former des losanges, et les socs de charrues pareils à des ancres de navires, avec les grenadiers que l'on arrosait de silphium. Cette opulence de la terre et ces inventions de la sagesse les éblouissaient.

Le soir, ils s'étendirent sur les tentes sans les déplier ; et, tout en s'endormant la figure aux étoiles, ils regrettaient le festin d'Hamilcar.

Au milieu du jour suivant, on fit halte sur le bord d'une rivière, dans des touffes de lauriers-roses. Alors ils jetèrent vite leurs lances, leurs boucliers, leurs ceintures. Ils se lavaient en criant, ils puisaient dans leur casque, et d'autres buvaient à plat ventre, tout au milieu des bêtes de somme, dont les bagages tombaient.

Spendius, assis sur un dromadaire volé dans les parcs d'Hamilcar, aperçut de loin Mâtho, qui, le bras suspendu contre la poitrine, nu-tête et la figure basse, laissait boire son mulet, tout en regardant l'eau couler. Aussitôt il courut à travers la foule, en l'appelant :

— " Maître ! maître ! "

A peine si Mâtho le remercia de ses bénédictions. Spendius n'y prenant garde se mit à marcher derrière lui, et, de temps à autre, il tournait des yeux inquiets du côté de Carthage.

C'était le fils d'un rhéteur grec et d'une prostituée campanienne. Il s'était d'abord enrichi à vendre des femmes ; puis, ruiné par un naufrage, il avait fait la guerre contre les Romains avec les pâtres du Samnium. On l'avait pris, il s'était échappé ; on l'avait repris, et il avait travaillé dans les carrières, haleté dans les étuves, crié dans les supplices, passé par bien des maîtres, connu toutes les fureurs. Un jour enfin, par désespoir il s'était lancé à la mer du haut de la trirème où il poussait l'aviron. Des matelots d'Hamilcar l'avaient recueilli mourant et amené à Carthage dans l'ergastule de Mégara. Mais comme on devait rendre aux Romains leurs transfuges, il avait profité du désordre pour s'enfuir avec les soldats.

Pendant toute la route, il resta près de Mâtho ; il lui apportait à manger, il le soutenait pour descendre, il étendait un tapis, le soir, sous sa tête. Mâtho finit par s'émouvoir de ces prévenances, et peu à peu il desserra les lèvres.

Il était né dans le golfe des Syrtes. Son père l'avait conduit en pèlerinage au temple d'Ammon. Puis il avait chassé les éléphants dans les forêts des Garamantes. Ensuite, il s'était engagé au service de Carthage. On l'avait nommé tétrarque à la prise de Drépanum. La République lui devait quatre chevaux, vingt-trois médines de froment et la solde d'un hiver. Il craignait les Dieux et souhaitait mourir dans sa patrie.

Spendius lui parla de ses voyages, des peuples et des temples qu'il avait visités, et il connaissait beaucoup de choses : il savait faire des sandales, des épieux, des filets, apprivoiser les bêtes farouches et cuire des poissons.

Parfois s'interrompant, il tirait du fond de sa gorge un cri rauque ; le mulet de Mâtho pressait son allure ; les autres se hâtaient pour les suivre, puis Spendius recommençait, toujours agité par son angoisse. Elle se calma, le soir du quatrième jour.

Ils marchaient côte à côte, à la droite de l'armée, sur le flanc d'une colline ; la plaine, en bas, se prolongeait, perdue dans les vapeurs de la nuit. Les lignes des soldats défilant au-dessous d'eux faisaient dans l'ombre des ondulations. De temps à autre elles passaient sur les éminences éclairées par la lune ; alors une étoile tremblait à la pointe des piques, les casques un instant miroitaient, tout disparaissait, et il en survenait d'autres, continuellement. Au loin, des troupeaux réveillés bêlaient, et quelque chose d'une douceur infinie semblait s'abattre sur la terre.

Spendius, la tête renversée et les yeux à demi clos, aspirait avec de grands soupirs la fraîcheur du vent ; il écartait les bras en remuant ses doigts pour mieux sentir cette caresse qui lui coulait sur le corps. Des espoirs de vengeance, revenus, le transportaient. Il colla sa main contre sa bouche afin d'arrêter ses sanglots, et, à demi pâmé d'ivresse, il abandonnait le licol de son dromadaire qui avançait à grands pas réguliers. Mâtho était retombé dans sa tristesse : ses jambes pendaient jusqu'à terre, et les herbes, en fouettant ses cothurnes, faisaient un sifflement continu.

Cependant, la route s'allongeait sans jamais en finir. A l'extrémité d'une plaine, toujours on arrivait sur un plateau de forme ronde ; puis on redescendait dans une vallée, et les montagnes qui semblaient boucher l'horizon, à mesure que l'on approchait d'elles, se déplaçaient comme en glissant. De temps à autre, une rivière apparaissait dans la verdure des tamarix, pour se perdre au tournant des collines. Parfois, se dressait un énorme rocher, pareil à la proue d'un vaisseau ou au piédestal de quelque colosse disparu.

On rencontrait, à des intervalles réguliers, de petits temples quadrangulaires, servant aux stations des pèlerins qui se rendaient à Sicca. Ils étaient fermés comme des tombeaux. Les Libyens, pour se faire ouvrir, frappaient de grands coups contre la porte. Personne de l'intérieur ne répondait.

Puis les cultures se firent plus rares. On entrait tout à coup sur des bandes de sable, hérissées de bouquets épineux. Des troupeaux de moutons broutaient parmi les pierres ; une femme, la taille ceinte d'une toison bleue, les gardait. Elle s'enfuyait en poussant des cris, dès qu'elle apercevait entre les rochers les piques des soldats.

Ils marchaient dans une sorte de grand couloir bordé par deux chaînes de monticules rougeâtres, quand une odeur nauséabonde vint les frapper aux narines, et ils crurent voir au haut d'un caroubier quelque chose d'extraordinaire : une tête de lion se dressait au-dessus des feuilles.

Ils y coururent. C'était un lion, attaché à une croix par les quatre membres comme un criminel. Son mufle énorme lui retombait sur la poitrine, et ses deux pattes antérieures, disparaissant à demi sous l'abondance de sa crinière, étaient largement écartées comme les deux ailes d'un oiseau. Ses côtes, une à une, saillissaient sous sa peau tendue ; ses jambes de derrière, clouées l'une contre l'autre, remontaient un peu ; et du sang noir, coulant parmi ses poils, avait amassé des stalactites au bas de sa queue qui pendait toute droite le long de la croix. Les soldats se divertirent autour ; ils l'appelaient consul et citoyen de Rome et lui jetèrent des cailloux dans les yeux, pour faire envoler les moucherons.

Cent pas plus loin ils en virent deux autres, puis tout à coup parut une longue file de croix supportant des lions. Les uns étaient morts depuis si longtemps qu'il ne restait plus contre le bois que les débris de leurs squelettes ; d'autres à moitié rongés tordaient la gueule en faisant une horrible grimace ; il y en avait d'énormes, l'arbre de la croix pliait sous eux et ils se balançaient au vent, tandis que sur leur tête des bandes de corbeaux tournoyaient dans l'air, sans jamais s'arrêter. Ainsi se vengeaient les paysans carthaginois quand ils avaient pris quelque bête féroce ; ils espéraient par cet exemple terrifier les autres. Les

Barbares, cessant de rire, tombèrent dans un long étonnement. " Quel est ce peuple, pensaient-ils, qui s'amuse à crucifier les lions ! "

Ils étaient, d'ailleurs, les hommes du Nord surtout, vaguement inquiets, troublés, malades déjà, ils se déchiraient les mains aux dards des aloès ; de grands moustiques bourdonnaient à leurs oreilles, et les dysenteries commençaient dans l'armée. Ils s'ennuyaient de ne pas voir Sicca. Ils avaient peur de se perdre et d'atteindre le désert, la contrée des sables et des épouvantements. Beaucoup même ne voulaient plus avancer. D'autres reprirent le chemin de Carthage.

Enfin le septième jour, après avoir suivi pendant longtemps la base d'une montagne, on tourna brusquement à droite ; alors apparut une ligne de murailles posée sur des roches blanches et se confondant avec elles. Soudain la ville entière se dressa ; des voiles bleus, jaunes et blancs s'agitaient sur les murs, dans la rougeur du soir. C'étaient les prêtresses de Tanit, accourues pour recevoir les hommes. Elles se tenaient rangées sur le long du rempart, en frappant des tambourins, en pinçant des lyres, en secouant des crotales, et les rayons du soleil, qui se couchait par-derrière, dans les montagnes de la Numidie, passaient entre les cordes des harpes où s'allongeaient leurs bras nus. Les instruments, par intervalles, se taisaient tout à coup, et un cri strident éclatait, précipité, furieux, continu, sorte d'aboiement qu'elles faisaient en se frappant avec la langue les deux coins de la bouche. D'autres restaient accoudées, le menton dans la main, et plus immobiles que des sphinx, elles dardaient leurs grands yeux noirs sur l'armée qui montait.

Bien que Sicca fût une ville sacrée, elle ne pouvait contenir une telle multitude ; le temple avec ses dépendances en occupait, seul, la moitié. Aussi les Barbares s'établirent dans la plaine tout à leur aise, ceux qui étaient disciplinés par troupes régulières, et les autres, par nations ou d'après leur fantaisie.

Les Grecs alignèrent sur des rangs parallèles leurs tentes de peaux ; les Ibériens disposèrent en cercle leurs pavillons de toile ; les Gaulois se firent des baraques de planches ; les Libyens des cabanes de pierres sèches, et les Nègres creusèrent dans le sable avec leurs ongles des fosses pour dormir. Beaucoup, ne sachant où se mettre, erraient au milieu des bagages, et la nuit couchaient par terre dans leurs manteaux troués.

La plaine se développait autour d'eux, toute bordée de montagnes. Çà et là un palmier se penchait sur une colline de sable, des sapins et des chênes tachetaient les flancs des précipices. Quelquefois la pluie d'un orage, telle qu'une longue écharpe, pendait du ciel, tandis que la campagne restait partout couverte d'azur et de sérénité ; puis un vent tiède chassait des tourbillons de poussière ; — et un ruisseau descendait en cascade des hauteurs de Sicca où se dressait, avec sa toiture d'or sur des colonnes d'airain, le temple de la Vénus carthaginoise, dominatrice de la contrée. Elle semblait l'emplir de son âme. Par ces convulsions des terrains, ces alternatives de la température et ces jeux de la lumière, elle manifestait l'extravagance de sa force avec la beauté de son éternel sourire. Les montagnes, à leur sommet, avaient la forme d'un croissant ; d'autres ressemblaient à des poitrines de femme tendant leurs seins gonflés, et les Barbares sentaient peser par-dessus leurs fatigues un accablement qui était plein de délices.

Spendius, avec l'argent de son dromadaire, s'était acheté un esclave. Tout le long du jour il dormait étendu devant la tente de Mâtho. Souvent il se réveillait croyant dans son rêve entendre siffler les lanières ; alors, en souriant, il se passait les mains sur les cicatrices de ses jambes, à la place où les fers avaient longtemps porté ; puis il se rendormait.

Mâtho acceptait sa compagnie, et quand il sortait, Spendius, avec un long glaive sur la cuisse, l'escortait comme un licteur ; ou bien Mâtho nonchalamment s'appuyait du bras sur son épaule, car Spendius était petit.

Un soir qu'ils traversaient ensemble les rues du camp, ils aperçurent des hommes couverts de manteaux blancs ; parmi eux se trouvait Narr'Havas, le prince des Numides. Mâtho tressaillit.

— " Ton épée ! " s'écria-t-il ; " je veux le tuer ! "

— " Pas encore ! " fit Spendius en l'arrêtant. Déjà Narr'Havas s'avançait vers lui.

Il baisa ses deux pouces en signe d'alliance, rejetant la colère qu'il avait eue sur l'ivresse du festin ; puis il parla longuement contre Carthage, mais il ne dit pas ce qui l'amenait chez les Barbares.

Etait-ce pour les trahir ou bien la République ? se demandait Spendius ; et comme il comptait faire son profit de tous les désordres, il savait gré à Narr'Havas des futures perfidies dont il le soupçonnait.

Le chef des Numides resta parmi les Mercenaires. Il paraissait vouloir s'attacher Mâtho. Il lui envoyait des chèvres grasses, de la poudre d'or et des plumes d'autruche. Le Libyen, ébahi de ces caresses, hésitait à y répondre ou à s'en exaspérer. Mais Spendius l'apaisait, et Mâtho se laissait gouverner par l'esclave, — toujours irrésolu et dans une invincible torpeur, comme ceux qui ont pris autrefois quelque breuvage dont ils doivent mourir.

Un matin qu'ils partaient tous les trois pour la chasse au lion, Narr'Havas cacha un poignard dans son manteau. Spendius marcha continuellement derrière lui ; et ils revinrent sans qu'on eût tiré le poignard.

Une autre fois, Narr'Havas les entraîna fort loin, jusqu'aux limites de son royaume. Ils arrivèrent dans une gorge étroite ; Narr'Havas sourit en leur déclarant qu'il ne connaissait plus la route ; Spendius la retrouva.

Mais le plus souvent Mâtho, mélancolique comme un augure, s'en allait dès le soleil levant pour vagabonder dans la campagne. Il s'étendait sur le sable, et jusqu'au soir y restait immobile.

Il consulta l'un après l'autre tous les devins de l'armée, ceux qui observent la marche des serpents, ceux qui lisent dans les étoiles, ceux qui soufflent sur la cendre des morts. Il avala du galbanum, du seseli et du venin de vipère qui glace le coeur ; des femmes nègres, en chantant au clair de lune des paroles barbares, lui piquèrent la peau du front avec des stylets d'or ; il se chargeait de colliers et d'amulettes : il invoqua tour à tour Baal-Kamon, Moloch, les sept Cabires, Tanit et la Vénus des Grecs. Il grava un nom sur une plaque de cuivre et il l'enfouit dans le sable au seuil de sa tente. Spendius l'entendait gémir et parler tout seul.

Une nuit il entra.

Mâtho, nu comme un cadavre, était couché à plat ventre sur une peau de lion, la face dans les deux mains, une lampe suspendue éclairait ses armes, accrochées sur sa tête contre le mât de la tente.

— " Tu souffres ? " lui dit l'esclave. " Que te faut-il ? réponds-moi ! - " et il le secoua par l'épaule en l'appelant plusieurs fois : " Maître ! maître ! ... "

Enfin Mâtho leva vers lui de grands yeux troubles.

— " Ecoute ! " fit-il à voix basse, avec un doigt sur les lèvres. " C'est une colère des Dieux ! la fille d'Hamilcar me poursuit ! J'en ai peur, Spendius ! " Il se serrait contre sa poitrine, comme un enfant épouvanté par un fantôme. — " Parle-moi ! je suis malade ! je veux guérir ! j'ai tout essayé ! Mais toi, tu sais peut-être des Dieux plus forts ou quelque invocation irrésistible ? "

— " Pour quoi faire ? " demanda Spendius.

Il répondit, en se frappant la tête avec ses deux poings :

— " Pour m'en débarrasser ! "

Puis il se disait, se parlant à lui-même, avec de longs intervalles :

— " Je suis sans doute la victime de quelque holocauste qu'elle aura promis aux Dieux ? .... Elle me tient attaché par une chaîne que l'on n'aperçoit pas. Si je marche, c'est qu'elle avance ; quand je m'arrête, elle se repose ! Ses yeux me brûlent, j'entends sa voix. Elle m'environne, elle me pénètre. Il me semble qu'elle est devenue mon âme !

" Et pourtant, il y a entre nous deux comme les flots invisibles d'un océan sans bornes ! Elle est lointaine et tout inaccessible ! La splendeur de sa beauté fait autour d'elle un nuage de lumière ; et je crois, par moments, ne l'avoir jamais vue... qu'elle n'existe pas... et que tout cela est un songe ! "

Mâtho pleurait ainsi dans les ténèbres ; les Barbares dormaient. Spendius, en le regardant, se rappelait les jeunes hommes qui, avec des vases d'or dans les mains, le suppliaient autrefois, quand il promenait par les villes son troupeau de courtisanes ; une pitié l'émut, et il dit :

— " Sois fort, mon maître ! Appelle ta volonté et n'implore plus les Dieux, car ils ne se détournent pas aux cris des hommes ! Te voilà pleurant comme un lâche ! Tu n'es donc pas humilié qu'une femme te fasse tant souffrir ! "

— " Suis-je un enfant ? " dit Mâtho. " Crois-tu que je m'attendrisse encore à leur visage et à leurs chansons ? Nous en avions à Drépanum pour balayer nos écuries. J'en ai possédé au milieu des assauts, sous les plafonds qui croulaient et quand la catapulte vibrait encore ! .... Mais celle-là, Spendius, celle-là ! ... "

L'esclave l'interrompit :

— " Si elle n'était pas la fille d'Hamilcar... "

— " Non ! " s'écria Mâtho. " Elle n'a rien d'une autre fille des hommes ! As-tu vu ses grands yeux sous ses grands sourcils, comme des soleils sous des arcs de triomphe ? Rappelle-toi : quand elle a paru, tous les flambeaux ont pâli. Entre les diamants de son collier, des places sur sa poitrine nue resplendissaient ; on sentait derrière elle comme l'odeur d'un temple, et quelque chose s'échappait de tout son être qui était plus suave que le vin et plus terrible que la mort. Elle marchait cependant, et puis elle s'est arrêtée.

Il resta béant, la tête basse, les prunelles fixes.

— " Mais je la veux ! il me la faut ! j'en meurs ! A l'idée de l'étreindre dans mes bras, une fureur de joie m'emporte, et cependant je la hais, Spendius ! je voudrais la battre ! Que faire ? J'ai envie de me vendre pour devenir son esclave. Tu l'as été, toi ! Tu pouvais l'apercevoir : parle-moi d'elle ! Toutes les nuits, n'est-ce pas, elle monte sur la terrasse de son palais ? Ah ! les pierres doivent frémir sous ses sandales et les étoiles se pencher pour la voir ! "

Il retomba tout en fureur, et râlant comme un taureau blessé.

Puis Mâtho chanta : " Il poursuivait dans la forêt le monstre femelle dont la queue ondulait sur les feuilles mortes, comme un ruisseau d'argent. " Et en traînant la voix, il imitait la voix de Salammbô, tandis que ses mains étendues faisaient comme deux mains légères sur les cordes d'une lyre.

A toutes les consolations de Spendius, il lui répétait les mêmes discours ; leurs nuits se passaient dans ces gémissements et ces exhortations.

Mâtho voulut s'étourdir avec du vin. Après ses ivresses il était plus triste encore. Il essaya de se distraire aux osselets, et il perdit une à une les plaques d'or de son collier. Il se laissa conduire chez les servantes de la Déesse ; mais il descendit la colline en sanglotant, comme ceux qui s'en reviennent des funérailles.

Spendius, au contraire, devenait plus hardi et plus gai. On le voyait, dans les cabarets de feuillages, discourant au milieu des soldats. Il raccommodait les vieilles cuirasses. Il jonglait avec des poignards, il allait pour les malades cueillir des herbes dans les champs. Il était facétieux, subtil, plein d'inventions et de paroles ; les Barbares s'accoutumaient à ses services ; il s'en faisait aimer.

Cependant ils attendaient un ambassadeur de Carthage qui leur apporterait, sur des mulets, des corbeilles chargées d'or ; et toujours recommençant le même calcul, ils dessinaient avec leurs doigts des chiffres sur le sable. Chacun, d'avance, arrangeait sa vie ; ils auraient des concubines, des esclaves, des terres ; d'autres voulaient enfouir leur trésor ou le risquer sur un vaisseau. Mais dans ce désoeuvrement les caractères s'irritaient ; il y avait de continuelles disputes entre les cavaliers et les fantassins, les Barbares et les Grecs, et l'on était sans cesse étourdi par la voix aigre des femmes.

Tous les jours, il survenait des troupeaux d'hommes presque nus, avec des herbes sur la tête pour se garantir du soleil ; c'étaient les débiteurs des riches Carthaginois, contraints de labourer leurs terres, et qui s'étaient échappés. Des Libyens affluaient, des paysans ruinés par les impôts, des bannis, des malfaiteurs. Puis la horde des marchands, tous les vendeurs de vin et d'huile, furieux de n'être pas payés, s'en prenaient à la République ; Spendius déclamait contre elle. Bientôt les vivres diminuèrent. On parlait de se porter en masse sur Carthage et d'appeler les Romains.

Un soir, à l'heure du souper, on entendit des sons lourds et fêlés qui se rapprochaient, et, au loin, quelque chose de rouge apparut dans les ondulations du terrain.

C'était une grande litière de pourpre, ornée aux angles par des bouquets de plumes d'autruche. Des chaînes de cristal, avec des guirlandes de perles, battaient sur sa tenture fermée. Des chameaux la suivaient en faisant sonner la grosse cloche suspendue à leur poitrail, et l'on apercevait autour d'eux des cavaliers ayant une armure en écailles d'or depuis les talons jusqu'aux épaules.

Ils s'arrêtèrent à trois cents pas du camp, pour retirer des étuis qu'ils portaient en croupe, leur bouclier rond, leur large glaive et leur casque à la béotienne. Quelques-uns restèrent avec les chameaux ; les autres se remirent en marche. Enfin les enseignes de la République parurent, c'est-à-dire des bâtons de bois bleu, terminés par des têtes de cheval ou des pommes de pins. Les Barbares se levèrent tous, en applaudissant ; les femmes se précipitaient vers les gardes de la Légion et leur baisaient les pieds.

La litière s'avançait sur les épaules de douze Nègres, qui marchaient d'accord à petits pas rapides. Ils allaient de droite et de gauche, au hasard, embarrassés par les cordes des tentes, par les bestiaux qui erraient et les trépieds où cuisaient les viandes. Quelquefois une main grasse, chargée de bagues, entrouvrait la litière ; une voix rauque criait des injures ; alors les porteurs s'arrêtaient, puis ils prenaient une autre route à travers le camp.

Mais les courtines de pourpre se relevèrent ; et l'on découvrit sur un large oreiller une tête humaine tout impassible et boursouflée ; les sourcils formaient comme deux arcs d'ébène se rejoignant par les pointes ; des paillettes d'or étincelaient dans les cheveux crépus, et la face était si blême qu'elle semblait saupoudrée avec de la râpure de marbre. Le reste du corps disparaissait sous les toisons qui emplissaient la litière.

Les soldats reconnurent dans cet homme ainsi couché le suffète Hannon, celui qui avait contribué par sa lenteur à faire perdre la bataille des îles Aegates ; et, quant à sa victoire d'Hécatompyle sur les Libyens, s'il s'était conduit avec clémence, c'était par cupidité, pensaient les Barbares, car il avait vendu à son compte tous les captifs, bien qu'il eût déclaré leur mort à la République.

Lorsqu'il eut, pendant quelque temps, cherché une place commode pour haranguer les soldats, il fit un signe : la litière s'arrêta, et Hannon, soutenu par deux esclaves, posa ses pieds par terre, en chancelant.

Il avait des bottines en feutre noir, semées de lunes d'argent. Des bandelettes, comme autour d'une momie, s'enroulaient à ses jambes, et la chair passait entre les linges croisés. Son ventre débordait sur la jaquette écarlate qui lui couvrait les cuisses ; les plis de son cou retombaient jusqu'à sa poitrine comme des fanons de boeuf, sa tunique, où des fleurs étaient peintes, craquait aux aisselles ; il portait une écharpe, une ceinture et un large manteau noir à doubles manches lacées. L'abondance de ses vêtements, son grand collier de pierres bleues, ses agrafes d'or et ses lourds pendants d'oreilles ne rendaient que plus hideuse sa difformité. On aurait dit quelque grosse idole ébauchée dans un bloc de pierre ; car une lèpre pâle, étendue sur tout son corps, lui donnait l'apparence d'une chose inerte. Cependant son nez, crochu comme un bec de vautour, se dilatait violemment, afin d'aspirer l'air, et ses petits yeux, aux cils collés, brillaient d'un éclat dur et métallique. Il tenait à la main une spatule d'aloès, pour se gratter la peau.

Enfin deux hérauts sonnèrent dans leurs cornes d'argent ; le tumulte s'apaisa, et Hannon se mit à parler.

Il commença par faire l'éloge des Dieux et de la République ; les Barbares devaient se féliciter de l'avoir servie. Mais il fallait se montrer plus raisonnables, les temps étaient durs, — " - et si un maître n'a que trois olives, n'est-il pas juste qu'il en garde deux pour lui ? "

Ainsi le vieux suffète entremêlait son discours de proverbes et d'apologues, tout en faisant des signes de tête pour solliciter quelque approbation.

Il parlait punique et ceux qui l'entouraient (les plus alertes accourus sans leurs armes) étaient des Campaniens, des Gaulois et des Grecs, si bien que personne dans cette foule ne le comprenait. Hannon s'en aperçut, il s'arrêta, et il se balançait lourdement, d'une jambe sur l'autre, en réfléchissant.

L'idée lui vint de convoquer les capitaines ; alors ses hérauts crièrent cet ordre en grec, — langage qui, depuis Xantippe, servait aux commandements dans les armées carthaginoises.

Les gardes, à coups de fouet, écartèrent la tourbe des soldats ; et bientôt les capitaines des phalanges à la spartiate et les chefs des cohortes barbares arrivèrent, avec les insignes de leur grade et l'armure de leur nation. La nuit était tombée, une grande rumeur circulait par la plaine ; çà et là des feux brûlaient ; on allait de l'un à l'autre, on se demandait : " Qu'y a-t-il ? " et pourquoi le suffète ne distribuait pas l'argent ?

Il exposait aux capitaines les charges infinies de la République. Son trésor était vide. Le tribut des Romains l'accablait. " Nous ne savons plus que faire ! ... Elle est bien à plaindre ! "

De temps à autre, il se frottait les membres avec sa spatule d'aloès, ou bien il s'interrompait pour boire dans une coupe d'argent, que lui tendait un esclave, une tisane faite avec de la cendre de belette et des asperges bouillies dans du vinaigre ; puis il s'essuyait les lèvres à une serviette d'écarlate, et reprenait :

— " Ce qui valait un sicle d'argent vaut aujourd'hui trois shekels d'or, et les cultures abandonnées pendant la guerre ne rapportent rien ! Nos pêcheries de pourpre sont à peu près perdues, les perles mêmes deviennent exorbitantes ; à peine si nous avons assez d'onguents pour le service des Dieux ! Quant aux choses de la table, je n'en parle pas, c'est une calamité ! Faute de galères, nous manquons d'épices, et l'on a bien du mal à se fournir de silphium, à cause des rébellions sur la frontière de Cyrène. La Sicile, où l'on trouvait tant d'esclaves, nous est maintenant fermée ! Hier encore, pour un baigneur et quatre valets de cuisine, j'ai donné plus d'argent qu'autrefois pour une paire d'éléphants ! "

Il déroula un long morceau de papyrus ; et il lut, sans passer un seul chiffre, toutes les dépenses que le Gouvernement avait faites ; tant pour les réparations des temples, pour le dallage des rues, pour la construction des vaisseaux, pour les pêcheries de corail, pour l'agrandissement des Syssites, et pour des engins dans les mines, au pays des Cantabres.

Mais les capitaines, pas plus que les soldats, n'entendaient le punique, bien que les Mercenaires se saluassent en cette langue. On plaçait ordinairement dans les armées des Barbares quelques officiers carthaginois pour servir d'interprètes ; après la guerre ils s'étaient cachés de peur des vengeances, et Hannon n'avait pas songé à les prendre avec lui ; d'ailleurs sa voix trop sourde se perdait au vent.

Les Grecs, sanglés dans leur ceinturon de fer, tendaient l'oreille, en s'efforçant à deviner ses paroles, tandis que des montagnards, couverts de fourrures comme des ours, le regardaient avec défiance ou bâillaient, appuyés sur leur massue à clous d'airain. Les Gaulois inattentifs secouaient en ricanant leur haute chevelure, et les hommes du désert écoutaient immobiles, tout encapuchonnés dans leurs vêtements de laine grise : d'autres arrivaient par-derrière ; les gardes, que la cohue poussait, chancelaient sur leurs chevaux, les Nègres tenaient au bout de leurs bras des branches de sapin enflammées et le gros Carthaginois continuait sa harangue, monté sur un tertre de gazon.

Cependant les Barbares s'impatientaient, des murmures s'élevèrent, chacun l'apostropha. Hannon gesticulait avec sa spatule ; ceux qui voulaient faire taire les autres, criant plus fort, ajoutaient au tapage. Tout à coup, un homme d'apparence chétive bondit aux pieds d'Hannon, arracha la trompette d'un héraut, souffla dedans, et Spendius (car c'était lui) annonça qu'il allait dire quelque chose d'important. A cette déclaration, rapidement débitée en cinq langues diverses, grec, latin, gaulois, Lybique et baléare, les capitaines, moitié riant, moitié surpris, répondirent :

— " Parle ! parle ! "

Spendius hésita ; il tremblait ; enfin s'adressant aux Libyens, qui étaient les plus nombreux, il leur dit :

— " Vous avez tous entendu les horribles menaces de cet homme ? "

Hannon ne se récria pas, donc il ne comprenait point le Lybique ; et, pour continuer l'expérience, Spendius répéta la même phrase dans les autres idiomes des Barbares.

Ils se regardèrent étonnés ; puis tous, comme d'un accord tacite, croyant peut-être avoir compris, ils baissèrent la tête en signe d'assentiment.

Alors Spendius commença d'une voix véhémente :

— " Il a d'abord dit que tous les Dieux des autres peuples n'étaient que des songes près des Dieux de Carthage ! il vous a appelés lâches, voleurs, menteurs, chiens et fils de chiennes ! La République sans vous (il a dit cela !), ne serait pas contrainte à payer le tribut des Romains ; et par vos débordements vous l'avez épuisée de parfums, d'aromates, d'esclaves et de silphium, car vous vous entendez avec les nomades sur la frontière de Cyrène ! Mais les coupables seront punis ! Il a lu l'énumération de leurs supplices ; on les fera travailler au dallage des rues, à l'armement des vaisseaux, à l'embellissement des Syssites, et l'on enverra les autres gratter la terre dans les mines, au pays des Cantabres. "

Spendius redit les mêmes choses aux Gaulois, aux Grecs, aux Campaniens, aux Baléares. En reconnaissant plusieurs des noms propres qui avaient frappé leurs oreilles, les Mercenaires furent convaincus qu'il rapportait exactement le discours du suffète. Quelques-uns lui crièrent : - - " Tu mens ! " Leurs voix se perdirent dans le tumulte des autres ; Spendius ajouta :

— " N'avez-vous pas vu qu'il a laissé en dehors du camp une réserve de ses cavaliers ? A un signal ils vont accourir pour vous égorger tous. "

Les Barbares se tournèrent de ce côté, et, comme la foule alors s'écartait, il apparut au milieu d'elle, s'avançant avec la lenteur d'un fantôme, un être humain tout courbé, maigre, entièrement nu et caché jusqu'aux flancs par de longs cheveux hérissés de feuilles sèches, de poussière et d'épines. Il avait autour des reins et autour des genoux des torchis de paille, des lambeaux de toile ; sa peau molle et terreuse pendait à ses membres décharnés, comme des haillons sur des branches sèches ; ses mains tremblaient d'un frémissement continu, et il marchait en s'appuyant sur un bâton d'olivier.

Il arriva auprès des Nègres qui portaient les flambeaux. Une sorte de ricanement idiot découvrait ses gencives pâles ; ses grands yeux effarés considéraient la foule des Barbares autour de lui.

Mais, poussant un cri d'effroi, il se jeta derrière eux et il s'abritait de leurs corps ; il bégayait :

" Les voilà ! les voilà ! " en montrant les gardes du Suffète, immobiles dans leurs armures luisantes. Leurs chevaux piaffaient, éblouis par la lueur des torches ; elles pétillaient dans les ténèbres ; le spectre humain se débattait et hurlait :

— " Ils les ont tués ! . "

A ces mots qu'il criait en baléare, des Baléares arrivèrent et le reconnurent ; sans leur répondre il répétait :

— " Oui, tués tous, tous ! écrasés comme des raisins ! Les beaux jeunes hommes ! les frondeurs ! mes compagnons, les vôtres ! "

On lui fit boire du vin, et il pleura ; puis il se répandit en paroles.

Spendius avait peine à contenir sa joie, — tout en expliquant aux Grecs et aux Libyens les choses horribles que racontait Zarxas ; il n'y pouvait croire, tant elles survenaient à propos. Les Baléares pâlissaient, en apprenant comment avaient péri leurs compagnons.

C'était une troupe de trois cents frondeurs débarqués de la veille, et qui, ce jour-là, avaient dormi trop tard. Quand ils arrivèrent sur la place de Khamon, les Barbares étaient partis et ils se trouvaient sans défense, leurs balles d'argile ayant été mises sur les chameaux avec le reste des bagages. On les laissa s'engager dans la rue de Satheb, jusqu'à la porte de chêne doublée de plaques d'airain ; alors le peuple, d'un seul mouvement, s'était poussé contre eux.

En effet, les soldats se rappelèrent un grand cri ; Spendius, qui fuyait en tête des colonnes, ne l'avait pas entendu.

Puis les cadavres furent placés dans les bras des Dieux-Patæques qui bordaient le temple de Khamon. On leur reprocha tous les crimes des Mercenaires : leur gourmandise, leurs vols, leurs impiétés, leurs dédains, et le meurtre des poissons dans le jardin de Salammbô. On fit à leurs corps d'infâmes mutilations ; les prêtres brûlèrent leurs cheveux pour tourmenter leur âme ; on les suspendit par morceaux chez les marchands de viandes ; quelques-uns même y enfoncèrent les dents, et le soir, pour en finir, on alluma des bûchers dans les carrefours.

C'étaient là ces flammes qui luisaient de loin sur le lac. Mais quelques maisons ayant pris feu, on avait jeté vite par-dessus les murs ce qui restait de cadavres et d'agonisants ; Zarxas jusqu'au lendemain s'était tenu dans les roseaux, au bord du lac ; puis il avait erré dans la campagne, cherchant l'armée d'après les traces des pas sur la poussière. Le matin, il se cachait dans les cavernes ; le soir, il se remettait en marche, avec ses plaies saignantes, affamé, malade, vivant de racines et de charognes ; un jour enfin, il aperçut des lances à l'horizon et il les avait suivies, car sa raison était troublée à force de terreurs et de misères.

L'indignation des soldats, contenue tant qu'il parlait, éclata comme un orage ; ils voulaient massacrer les gardes avec le Suffète. Quelques-uns s'interposèrent, disant qu'il fallait l'entendre et savoir au moins s'ils seraient payés. Alors tous crièrent : " Notre argent ! " Hannon leur répondit qu'il l'avait apporté.

On courut aux avant-postes, et les bagages du Suffète arrivèrent au milieu des tentes, poussés par les Barbares. Sans attendre les esclaves, bien vite ils dénouèrent les corbeilles ; ils y trouvèrent des robes d'hyacinthe, des éponges, des grattoirs, des brosses, des parfums, et des poinçons en antimoine, pour se peindre les yeux ; — le tout appartenant aux Gardes, hommes riches accoutumés à ces délicatesses. Ensuite on découvrit sur un chameau une grande cuve de bronze : c'était au Suffète pour se donner des bains pendant la route ; car il avait pris toutes sortes de précautions, jusqu'à emporter, dans des cages, des belettes d'Hécatompyle que l'on brûlait vivantes pour faire sa tisane. Mais, comme sa maladie lui donnait un grand appétit, il y avait, de plus, force comestibles et force vins, de la saumure, des viandes et des poissons au miel, avec des petits pots de Commagène, graisse d'oie fondue recouverte de neige et de paille hachée. La provision en était considérable ; à mesure que l'on ouvrait les corbeilles, il en apparaissait, et des rires s'élevaient comme des flots qui s'entrechoquent.

Quant à la solde des Mercenaires, elle emplissait, à peu près, deux couffes de sparterie ; on voyait même, dans l'une, de ces rondelles en cuir dont la République se servait pour ménager le numéraire ; et comme les Barbares paraissaient fort surpris, Hannon leur déclara que, leurs comptes étant trop difficiles, les Anciens n'avaient pas eu le loisir de les examiner. On leur envoyait cela, en attendant.

Alors tout fut renversé, bouleversé : les mulets, les valets, la litière, les provisions, les bagages. Les soldats prirent la monnaie dans les sacs pour lapider Hannon. A grand'peine il put monter sur un âne ; il s'enfuyait en se cramponnant aux poils, hurlant, pleurant, secoué, meurtri, et appelant sur l'armée la malédiction de tous les Dieux. Son large collier de pierreries rebondissait jusqu'à ses oreilles. Il retenait avec ses dents son manteau trop long qui traînait, et de loin les Barbares lui criaient : — " Va-t'en, lâche ! pourceau ! égout de Moloch ! sue ton or et ta peste ! plus vite ! plus vite ! " L'escorte en déroute galopait à ses côtés.

Mais la fureur des Barbares ne s'apaisa pas. Ils se rappelèrent que plusieurs d'entre eux, partis pour Carthage, n'en étaient pas revenus ; on les avait tués sans doute. Tant d'injustice les exaspéra, et ils se mirent à arracher les piquets des tentes, à rouler leurs manteaux, à brider leurs chevaux ; chacun prit son casque et son épée, en un instant tout fut prêt. Ceux qui n'avaient pas d'armes s'élancèrent dans les bois pour se couper des bâtons.

Le jour se levait ; les gens de Sicca réveillés s'agitaient dans les rues. " Ils vont à Carthage ", disait-on, et cette rumeur bientôt s'étendit par la contrée.

De chaque sentier, de chaque ravin, il surgissait des hommes. On apercevait les pasteurs qui descendaient les montagnes en courant.

Puis, quand les Barbares furent partis, Spendius fit le tour de la plaine, monté sur un étalon punique et avec son esclave qui menait un troisième cheval.

Une seule tente était restée. Spendius y entra.

— " Debout, maître ! lève-toi ! nous partons ! "

— " Où allez-vous donc ? ", demanda Mâtho.

— " A Carthage ! ", cria Spendius.

Mâtho bondit sur le cheval que l'esclave tenait à la Porte.

Chapitre 3 SALAMMBÔ.

La lune se levait au ras des flots, et, sur la ville encore couverte de ténèbres, des points lumineux, des blancheurs brillaient : le timon d'un char dans une cour, quelque haillon de toile suspendu, l'angle d'un mur, un collier d'or à la poitrine d'un dieu. Les boules de verre sur les toits des temples rayonnaient, çà et là comme de gros diamants. Mais de vagues ruines, des tas de terre noire, des jardins faisaient des masses plus sombres dans l'obscurité, et, au bas de Malqua, des filets de pêcheurs s'étendaient d'une maison à l'autre, comme de gigantesques chauves-souris déployant leurs ailes. On n'entendait plus le grincement des roues hydrauliques qui apportaient l'eau au dernier étage des palais ; : et au milieu des terrasses, les chameaux reposaient tranquillement, couchés sur le ventre, à la manière des autruches. Les portiers dormaient dans les rues contre le seuil des maisons ; l'ombre des colosses s'allongeait sur les places désertes ; au loin quelquefois la fumée d'un sacrifice brûlant encore s'échappait par les tuiles de bronze, et la brise lourde apportait avec des parfums d'aromates les senteurs de la marine et l'exhalaison des murailles chauffées par le soleil. Autour de Carthage les ondes immobiles resplendissaient, car la lune étalait sa lueur tout à la fois sur le golfe environné de montagnes et sur le lac de Tunis, où des phénicoptères parmi les bancs de sable formaient de longues lignes roses, tandis qu'au-delà, sous les catacombes, la grande lagune salée miroitait comme un morceau d'argent. La voûte du ciel bleu s'enfonçait à l'horizon, d'un côté dans le poudroiement des plaines, de l'autre dans les brumes de la mer, et sur le sommet de l'Acropole les cyprès pyramidaux bordant le temple d'Eschmoûn se balançaient, et faisaient un murmure, comme les flots réguliers qui battaient lentement le long du môle, au bas des remparts.

Salammbô monta sur la terrasse de son palais, soutenue par une esclave qui portait dans un plat de fer des charbons enflammés.

Il y avait au milieu de la terrasse un petit lit d'ivoire, couvert de peaux de lynx avec des coussins en plume de perroquet, animal fatidique consacré aux Dieux, et dans les quatre coins s'élevaient quatre longues cassolettes remplies de nard, d'encens, de cinnamome et de myrrhe. L'esclave alluma les parfums. Salammbô regarda l'étoile polaire ; elle salua lentement les quatre points du ciel et s'agenouilla sur le sol parmi la poudre d'azur qui était semée d'étoiles d'or, à l'imitation du firmament. Puis les deux coudes contre les flancs, les avant-bras tout droits et les mains ouvertes, en se renversant la tête sous les rayons de la lune, elle dit :

— " O Rabbetna ! ... Baalet ! ... Tanit " et sa voix se traînait d'une façon plaintive, comme pour appeler quelqu'un. — " Anaïtis ! Astarté ! Derceto ! Astoreth ! Mylitta ! Athara ! Elissa ! Tiratha ! ... Par les symboles cachés, — par les cistres résonnants, — par les sillons de la terre, — par l'éternel silence et par l'éternelle fécondité, — dominatrice de la mer ténébreuse et des plages azurées, ô Reine des choses humides, salut ! "

Elle se balança tout le corps deux ou trois fois, puis se jeta le front dans la poussière, les bras allongés.

Son esclave la releva lentement, car il fallait, d'après les rites, que quelqu'un vînt arracher le suppliant à sa prosternation ; c'était lui dire que les Dieux l'agréaient, et la nourrice de Salammbô ne manquait jamais à ce devoir de piété.

Des marchands de la Gétulie-Darytienne l'avaient toute petite apportée à Carthage, et, après son affranchissement, elle n'avait pas voulu abandonner ses maîtres, comme le prouvait son oreille droite, percée d'un large trou. Un jupon à raies multicolores, en lui serrant les hanches, descendait sur ses chevilles, où s'entrechoquaient deux cercles d'étain. Sa figure, un peu plate, était jaune comme sa tunique. Des aiguilles d'argent très longues faisaient un soleil derrière sa tête. Elle portait sur la narine un bouton de corail, et elle se tenait auprès du lit, plus droite qu'un hermès et les paupières baissées.

Salammbô s'avança jusqu'au bord de la terrasse. Ses yeux, un instant, parcoururent l'horizon, puis ils s'abaissèrent sur la ville endormie, et le soupir qu'elle poussa, en lui soulevant les seins, fit onduler d'un bout à l'autre la longue simarre blanche qui pendait autour d'elle, sans agrafe ni ceinture. Ses sandales à pointes recourbées disparaissaient sous un amas d'émeraudes, et ses cheveux à l'abandon emplissaient un réseau en fils de pourpre.

Mais elle releva la tête pour contempler la lune, et, mêlant à ses paroles des fragments d'hymne, elle murmura :

— " Que tu tournes légèrement, soutenue par l'éther impalpable ! Il se polit autour de toi, et c'est le mouvement de ton agitation qui distribue les vents et les rosées fécondes. Selon que tu croîs et décrois, s'allongent ou se rapetissent les yeux des chats et les taches des panthères. Les épouses hurlent ton nom dans la douleur des enfantements ! Tu gonfles le coquillage ! Tu fais bouillonner les vins ! Tu putréfies les cadavres ! Tu formes les perles au fond de la mer ! "

— " Et tous les germes, ô Déesse ! fermentent dans les obscures profondeurs de ton humidité. "

— " Quand tu parais, il s'épand une quiétude sur la terre ; les fleurs se forment, les flots s'apaisent, les hommes fatigués s'étendent la poitrine vers toi, et le monde avec ses océans et ses montagnes, comme en un miroir, se regarde dans ta figure. Tu es blanche, douce, lumineuse, immaculée, auxiliatrice, purifiante, sereine. "

Le croissant de la lune était alors sur la montagne des Eaux-Chaudes, dans l'échancrure de ses deux sommets, de l'autre côté du golfe. Il y avait en dessous une petite étoile et tout autour un cercle pâle. Salammbô reprit :

— " Mais tu es terrible, maîtresse ! ... C'est par toi que se produisent les monstres, les fantômes effrayants, les songes menteurs ; tes yeux dévorent les pierres des édifices, et les singes sont malades toutes les fois que tu rajeunis. "

— " Où donc vas-tu ? Pourquoi changer tes formes, perpétuellement ? Tantôt mince et recourbée, tu glisses dans les espaces comme une galère sans mâture, ou bien au milieu des étoiles tu ressembles à un pasteur qui garde son troupeau. Luisante et ronde, tu frôles la cime des monts comme la roue d'un char. "

— " O Tanit ! tu m'aimes, n'est-ce pas ? Je t'ai tant regardée ! Mais non ! tu cours dans ton azur, et moi je reste sur la terre immobile. "

— " Taanach, prends ton nebal et joue tout bas sur la corde d'argent, car mon coeur est triste ! "

L'esclave souleva une sorte de harpe en bois d'ébène plus haute qu'elle, et triangulaire comme un delta ; elle en fixa la pointe dans un globe de cristal, et des deux bras se mit à jouer.

Les sons se succédaient, sourds et précipités comme un bourdonnement d'abeilles, et de plus en plus sonores ils s'envolaient dans la nuit avec la plainte des flots et le frémissement des grands arbres au sommet de l'Acropole.

— " Tais-toi ! " s'écria Salammbô.

— " Qu'as-tu donc, maîtresse ? La brise qui souffle, un nuage qui passe, tout à présent t'inquiète et t'agite. "

— " Je ne sais ", dit-elle.

— " Tu te fatigues à des prières trop longues ! "

— " Oh ! Taanach, je voudrais m'y dissoudre comme une fleur dans du vin ! "

— " C'est peut-être la fumée de tes parfums ? "

— " Non ! " dit Salammbô : " L'esprit des Dieux habite dans les bonnes odeurs. "

Alors l'esclave lui parla de son père. On le croyait parti vers la contrée de l'ambre, derrière les colonnes de Melkarth. — " Mais s'il ne revient pas ", disait-elle, " il te faudra pourtant, puisque c'était sa volonté, choisir un époux parmi les fils des Anciens, et alors ton chagrin s'en ira dans les bras d'un homme. "

— " Pourquoi ? " demanda la jeune fille. Tous ceux qu'elle avait aperçus lui faisaient horreur avec leurs rires de bête fauve et leurs membres grossiers.

— " Quelquefois, Taanach, il s'exhale du fond de mon être comme de chaudes bouffées, plus lourdes que les vapeurs d'un volcan. Des voix m'appellent, un globe de feu roule et monte dans ma poitrine, il m'étouffe, je vais mourir ; et puis, quelque chose de suave, coulant de mon front jusqu'à mes pieds, passe dans ma chair... c'est une caresse qui m'enveloppe, et je me sens écrasée comme si un dieu s'étendait sur moi. Oh ! je voudrais me perdre dans la brume des nuits, dans le flot des fontaines, dans la sève des arbres, sortir de mon corps, n'être qu'un souffle, qu'un rayon, et glisser, monter jusqu'à toi, ô Mère ! "

Elle leva ses bras le plus haut possible, en se cambrant la taille, pâle et légère comme la lune avec son long vêtement. Puis elle retomba sur la couche d'ivoire, haletante ; mais Taanach lui passa autour du cou un collier d'ambre avec des dents de dauphin pour bannir les terreurs, et Salammbô dit d'une voix presque éteinte :

— " Va me chercher Schahabarim. "

Son père n'avait pas voulu qu'elle entrât dans le collège des prêtresses, ni même qu'on lui fit rien connaître de la Tanit populaire. Il la réservait pour quelque alliance pouvant servir sa politique, si bien que Salammbô vivait seule au milieu de ce palais ; sa mère, depuis longtemps, était morte.

Elle avait grandi dans les abstinences, les jeûnes et les purifications, toujours entourée de choses exquises et graves, le corps saturé de parfums, l'âme pleine de prières. Jamais elle n'avait goûté de vin, ni mangé de viandes, ni touché à une bête immonde, ni posé ses talons dans la maison d'un mort.

Elle ignorait les simulacres obscènes, car chaque dieu se manifestant par des formes différentes, des cultes souvent contradictoires témoignaient à la fois du même principe, et Salammbô adorait la Déesse en sa figuration sidérale. Une influence était descendue de la lune sur la vierge ; quand l'astre allait en diminuant, Salammbô s'affaiblissait. Languissante toute la journée, elle se ranimait le soir. Pendant une éclipse, elle avait manqué mourir.

Mais la Rabbet jalouse se vengeait de cette virginité soustraite à ses sacrifices, et elle tourmentait Salammbô d'obsessions d'autant plus fortes qu'elles étaient vagues, épandues dans cette croyance et avivées par elle.

Sans cesse la fille d'Hamilcar s'inquiétait de Tanit. Elle avait appris ses aventures, ses voyages et tous ses noms, qu'elle répétait sans qu'ils eussent pour elle de signification distincte. Afin de pénétrer dans les profondeurs de son dogme, elle voulait connaître au plus secret du temple la vieille idole avec le manteau magnifique d'où dépendaient les destinées de Carthage, — car l'idée d'un dieu ne se dégageait pas nettement de sa représentation, et tenir ou même voir son simulacre, c'était lui prendre une part de sa vertu, et, en quelque sorte, le dominer.

Salammbô se détourna. Elle avait reconnu le bruit des clochettes d'or que Schahabarim portait au bas de son vêtement.

Il monta les escaliers : puis, dès le seuil de la terrasse, il s'arrêta en croisant les bras.

Ses yeux enfoncés brillaient comme les lampes d'un sépulcre ; son long corps maigre flottait dans sa robe de lin, alourdie par les grelots qui s'alternaient sur ses talons avec des pommes d'émeraude. Il avait les membres débiles, le crâne oblique, le menton pointu ; sa peau semblait froide à toucher, et sa face jaune, que des rides profondes labouraient, comme contractée dans un désir, dans un chagrin éternel.

C'était le grand prêtre de Tanit, celui qui avait élevé Salammbô.

— " Parle ! " dit-il. " Que veux-tu ? "

— " J'espérais ... tu m'avais presque promis... " Elle balbutiait, elle se troubla ; puis, tout à coup :

— " Pourquoi me méprises-tu ? qu'ai-je donc oublié dans les rites ? Tu es mon maître, et tu m'as dit que personne comme moi ne s'entendait aux choses de la Déesse ; mais il y en a que tu ne veux pas dire. Est-ce vrai, ô père ? "

Schahabarim se rappela les ordres d'Hamilcar ; il répondit :

— " Non, je n'ai plus rien à t'apprendre ! "

— " Un Génie ", reprit-elle, " me pousse à cet amour. J'ai gravi les marches d'Eschmoûn, dieu des planètes et des intelligences ; j'ai dormi sous l'olivier d'or de Melkarth, patron des colonies tyriennes ; j'ai poussé les portes de Baal-Khamon, éclaireur et fertilisateur ; j'ai sacrifié aux Kabyres souterrains, aux dieux des bois, des vents, des fleuves et des montagnes : mais tous ils sont trop loin, trop haut, trop insensibles, comprends-tu ? tandis qu'elle, je la sens mêlée à ma vie ; elle emplit mon âme, et je tressaille à des élancements intérieurs comme si elle bondissait pour s'échapper. Il me semble que je vais entendre sa voix, apercevoir sa figure, des éclairs m'éblouissent, puis je retombe dans les ténèbres. "

Schahabarim se taisait. Elle le sollicitait de son regard suppliant.

Enfin, il fit signe d'écarter l'esclave, qui n'était pas de race chananéenne. Taanach disparut, et Schahabarim, levant un bras dans l'air, commença :

— " Avant les Dieux, les ténèbres étaient seules, et un souffle flottait, lourd et indistinct comme la conscience d'un homme dans un rêve. Il se contracta, créant le Désir et la Nue, et du Désir et de la Nue sortit la Matière primitive. C'était une eau bourbeuse, noire, glacée, profonde. Elle enfermait des monstres insensibles, parties incohérentes des formes à naître et qui sont peintes sur la paroi des sanctuaires. "

Puis la Matière se condensa. Elle devint un oeuf. Il se rompit. Une moitié forma la terre, l'autre le firmament. Le soleil, la lune, les vents, les nuages parurent ; et, au fracas de la foudre, les animaux intelligents s'éveillèrent. Alors

Eschmoûn se déroula dans la sphère étoilée ; Khamon rayonna dans le soleil ; Melkarth, avec ses bras, le poussa derrière Gadès ; les Kabyrim descendirent sous les volcans, et Rabbetna, telle qu'une nourrice, se pencha sur le monde, versant sa lumière comme un lait et sa nuit comme un manteau.

— " Et après ? " dit-elle.

Il lui avait conté le secret des origines pour la distraire par des perspectives plus hautes ; mais le désir de la vierge se ralluma sous ces dernières paroles, et Schahabarim, cédant à moitié, reprit :

— " Elle inspire et gouverne les amours des hommes. "

— " Les amours des hommes ! " répéta Salammbô rêvant.

— " Elle est l'âme de Carthage ", continua le prêtre ; et bien qu'elle soit partout épandue, c'est ici qu'elle demeure, sous le voile sacré.

— " O père ! " s'écria Salammbô, " je la verrai, n'est-ce pas ? tu m'y conduiras ! Depuis longtemps j'hésitais ; la curiosité de sa forme me dévore. Pitié ! secours-moi ! partons ! "

Il la repoussa d'un geste véhément et plein d'orgueil.

— " Jamais ! Ne sais-tu pas qu'on en meurt ? Les Baals hermaphrodites ne se dévoilent que pour nous seuls, hommes par l'esprit, femmes par la faiblesse. Ton désir est un sacrilège ; satisfais-toi avec la science que tu possèdes ! "

Elle tomba sur les genoux, mettant ses deux doigts contre ses oreilles en signe de repentir ; et elle sanglotait, écrasée par la parole du prêtre, pleine à la fois de colère contre lui, de terreur et d'humiliation. Schahabarim, debout, restait plus insensible que les pierres de la terrasse. Il la regardait de haut en bas frémissante à ses pieds, il éprouvait une sorte de joie en la voyant souffrir pour sa divinité, qu'il ne pouvait, lui non plus, étreindre tout entière. Déjà les oiseaux chantaient, un vent froid soufflait, de petits nuages couraient dans le ciel plus pâle.

Tout à coup il aperçut à l'horizon derrière Tunis, comme des brouillards légers, qui se traînaient contre le sol ; puis ce fut un grand rideau de poudre grise perpendiculairement étalé, et, dans les tourbillons de cette masse nombreuse, des têtes de dromadaires, des lances, des boucliers parurent. C'était l'armée des Barbares qui s'avançait sur Carthage.

Chapitre 4 SOUS LES MURS DE CARTHAGE

Des gens de la campagne, montés sur des ânes ou courant à pied, pâles, essoufflés, fous de peur, arrivèrent dans la ville. Ils fuyaient devant l'armée. En trois jours, elle avait fait le chemin de Sicca, pour venir à Carthage et tout exterminer.

On ferma les portes. Les Barbares, presque aussitôt, parurent ; mais ils s'arrêtèrent au milieu de l'isthme, sur le bord du lac.

D'abord ils n'annoncèrent rien d'hostile. Plusieurs s'approchèrent avec des palmes à la main. Ils furent repoussés à coups de flèches, tant la terreur était grande.

Le matin et à la tombée du jour, des rôdeurs quelquefois erraient le long des murs. On remarquait surtout un petit homme, enveloppé soigneusement d'un manteau et dont la figure disparaissait sous une visière très basse. Il restait pendant de grandes heures à regarder l'aqueduc, et avec une telle persistance, qu'il voulait sans doute égarer les Carthaginois sur ses véritables desseins. Un autre homme l'accompagnait, une sorte de géant qui marchait tête nue.

Mais Carthage était défendue dans toute la largeur de l'isthme : d'abord par un fossé, ensuite par un rempart de gazon, et enfin par un mur, haut de trente coudées, en pierres de taille, et à double étage. Il contenait des écuries pour trois cents éléphants avec des magasins pour leurs caparaçons, leurs entraves et leur nourriture, puis d'autres écuries pour quatre mille chevaux avec les provisions d'orge et les harnachements, et des casernes pour vingt mille soldats avec les armures et tout le matériel de guerre. Des tours s'élevaient sur le second étage, toutes garnies de créneaux et qui portaient en dehors des boucliers de bronze, suspendus à des crampons.

Cette première ligne de murailles abritait immédiatement Malqua, le quartier des gens de la marine et des teinturiers. On apercevait des mâts où séchaient des voiles de pourpre, et sur les dernières terrasses des fourneaux d'argile pour cuire la saumure.

Par-derrière, la ville étageait en amphithéâtre ses hautes maisons de forme cubique. Elles étaient en pierres, en planches, en galets, en roseaux, en coquillages, en terre battue. Les bois des temples faisaient comme des lacs de verdure dans cette montagne de blocs, diversement coloriés. Les places publiques la nivelaient à des distances inégales ; d'innombrables ruelles s'entrecroisant la coupaient du haut en bas. On distinguait les enceintes des trois vieux quartiers, maintenant confondues ; elles se levaient çà et là comme de grands écueils, ou allongeaient des pans énormes, — à demi couverts de fleurs, noircis, largement rayés par le jet des immondices, et des rues passaient dans leurs ouvertures béantes, comme des fleuves sous des ponts.

La colline de l'Acropole, au centre de Byrsa, disparaissait sous un désordre de monuments. C'étaient des temples à colonnes torses avec des chapiteaux de bronze et des chaînes de métal, des cônes en pierres sèches à bandes d'azur, des coupoles de cuivre, des architraves de marbre, des contreforts babyloniens, des obélisques posant sur leur pointe comme des flambeaux renversés. Les péristyles atteignaient aux frontons ; les volutes se déroulaient entre les colonnades ; des murailles de granit supportaient des cloisons de tuile ; tout cela montait l'un sur l'autre en se cachant à demi, d'une façon merveilleuse et incompréhensible. On y sentait la succession des âges et comme des souvenirs de patries oubliées.

Derrière l'Acropole, dans des terrains rouges, le chemin des Mappales, bordé de tombeaux, s'allongeait en ligne droite du rivage aux catacombes ; de larges habitations s'espaçaient ensuite dans des jardins, et ce troisième quartier, Mégara, la ville neuve, allait jusqu'au bord de la falaise, où se dressait un phare géant qui flambait toutes les nuits.

Carthage se déployait ainsi devant les soldats établis dans la plaine.

De loin ils reconnaissaient les marchés, les carrefours ; ils se disputaient sur l'emplacement des temples. Celui de Khamon, en face des Syssites, avait des tuiles d'or ; Melkarth, à la gauche d'Eschmoûn, portait sur sa toiture des branches de corail ; Tanit, au-delà, arrondissait dans les palmiers sa coupole de cuivre ; le noir Moloch était au bas des citernes, du côté du phare. L'on voyait à l'angle des frontons, sur le sommet des murs, au coin des places, partout, des divinités à tête hideuse, colossales ou trapues, avec des ventres énormes, ou démesurément aplaties, ouvrant la gueule, écartant les bras, tenant à la main des fourches, des chaînes ou des javelots ; et le bleu de la mer s'étalait au fond des rues, que la perspective rendait encore plus escarpées.

Un peuple tumultueux du matin au soir les emplissait ; de jeunes garçons, agitant des sonnettes, criaient à la porte des bains : les boutiques de boissons chaudes fumaient, l'air retentissait du tapage des enclumes, les coqs blancs consacrés au Soleil chantaient sur les terrasses, les boeufs que l'on égorgeait mugissaient dans les temples, des esclaves couraient avec des corbeilles sur leur tête ; et, dans l'enfoncement des portiques, quelque prêtre apparaissait drapé d'un manteau sombre, nu-pieds et en bonnet pointu.

Ce spectacle de Carthage irritait les Barbares. Ils l'admiraient, ils l'exécraient, ils auraient voulu tout à la fois l'anéantir et l'habiter. Mais qu'y avait-il dans le Port-Militaire, défendu par une triple muraille ? Puis, derrière la ville, au fond de

Mégara, plus haut que l'Acropole, apparaissait le palais d'Hamilcar.

Les yeux de Mâtho à chaque instant s'y portaient. Il montait dans les oliviers, et il se penchait, la main étendue au bord des sourcils. Les jardins étaient vides, et la porte rouge à croix noire restait constamment fermée.

Plus de vingt fois il fit le tour des remparts, cherchant quelque brèche pour entrer. Une nuit, il se jeta dans le golfe, et, pendant trois heures, il nagea tout d'une haleine. Il arriva au bas des Mappales, il voulut grimper contre la falaise. Il ensanglanta ses genoux, brisa ses ongles, puis retomba dans les flots et s'en revint.

Son impuissance l'exaspérait. Il était jaloux de cette Carthage enfermant Salammbô, comme de quelqu'un qui l'aurait possédée. Ses énervements l'abandonnèrent, et ce fut une ardeur d'action folle et continuelle. La joue en feu, les yeux irrités, la voix rauque, il se promenait d'un pas rapide à travers le camp ; ou bien, assis sur le rivage, il frottait avec du sable sa grande épée. Il lançait des flèches aux vautours qui passaient. Son coeur débordait en paroles furieuses.

— " Laisse aller ta colère comme un char qui s'emporte ", disait Spendius " Crie, blasphème, ravage et tue. La douleur s'apaise avec du sang, et puisque tu ne peux assouvir ton amour, gorge ta haine ; elle te soutiendra ! "

Mâtho reprit le commandement de ses soldats. Il les faisait impitoyablement manoeuvrer. On le respectait pour son courage, pour sa force surtout. D'ailleurs, il inspirait comme une crainte mystique ; on croyait qu'il parlait, la nuit, à des fantômes. Les autres capitaines s'animèrent de son exemple. L'armée, bientôt, se disciplina. Les Carthaginois entendaient de leurs maisons la fanfare des buccines qui réglait les exercices. Enfin, les Barbares se rapprochèrent.

Il aurait fallu pour les écraser dans l'isthme que deux armées pussent les prendre à la fois par-derrière, l'une débarquant au fond du golfe d'Utique, et la seconde à la montagne des Eaux-Chaudes. Mais que faire avec la seule Légion sacrée, grosse de six mille hommes tout au plus ? S'ils inclinaient vers l'Orient, ils allaient se joindre aux Nomades, intercepter la route de Cyrène et le commerce du désert. S'ils se repliaient sur l'Occident, la Numidie se soulèverait. Enfin le manque de vivres les ferait tôt ou tard dévaster, comme des sauterelles, les campagnes environnantes ; les Riches tremblaient pour leurs beaux châteaux, pour leurs vignobles, pour leurs cultures.

Hannon proposa des mesures atroces et impraticables, comme de promettre une forte somme pour chaque tête de Barbare, ou, qu'avec des vaisseaux et des machines, on incendiât leur camp. Son collègue Giscon voulait au contraire qu'ils fussent payés. Mais, à cause de sa popularité, les Anciens le détestaient ; car ils redoutaient le hasard d'un maître et, par terreur de la monarchie, s'efforçaient d'atténuer ce qui en subsistait ou la pouvait rétablir.

Il y avait en dehors des fortifications des gens d'une autre race et d'une origine inconnue, — tous chasseurs de porc-épic, mangeurs de mollusques et de serpents. Ils allaient dans les cavernes prendre des hyènes vivantes, qu'ils s'amusaient à faire courir le soir sur les sables de Mégara, entre les stèles des tombeaux. Leurs cabanes, de fange et de varech, s'accrochaient contre la falaise comme des nids d'hirondelles. Ils vivaient là, sans gouvernement et sans dieux, pêle-mêle, complètement nus, à la fois débiles et farouches, et depuis des siècles exécrés par le peuple, à cause de leurs nourritures immondes. Les sentinelles s'aperçurent un matin qu'ils étaient tous partis.

Enfin des membres du Grand-Conseil se décidèrent. Ils vinrent au camp, sans colliers ni ceintures, en sandales découvertes, comme des voisins. Ils s'avançaient d'un pas tranquille, jetant des saluts aux capitaines, ou bien ils s'arrêtaient pour parler aux soldats, disant que tout était fini et qu'on allait faire justice à leurs réclamations.

Beaucoup d'entre eux voyaient pour la première fois un camp de Mercenaires. Au lieu de la confusion qu'ils avaient imaginée, partout c'était un ordre et un silence effrayants. Un rempart de gazon enfermait l'armée dans une haute muraille, inébranlable au choc des catapultes. Le sol des rues était aspergé d'eau fraîche ; par les trous des tentes, ils apercevaient des prunelles fauves qui luisaient dans l'ombre. Les faisceaux de piques et les panoplies suspendues les éblouissaient comme des miroirs. Ils se parlaient à voix basse. Ils avaient peur avec leurs longues robes de renverser quelque chose.

Les soldats demandèrent des vivres, en s'engageant à les payer sur l'argent qu'on leur devait.

On leur envoya des boeufs, des moutons, des pintades, des fruits secs et des lupins, avec des scombres fumés, de ces scombres excellents que Carthage expédiait dans tous les ports. Mais ils tournaient dédaigneusement autour des bestiaux magnifiques ; et, dénigrant ce qu'ils convoitaient, offraient pour un bélier la valeur d'un pigeon, pour trois chèvres le prix d'une grenade. Les Mangeurs-de-choses-immondes, se portant pour arbitres, affirmaient qu'on les dupait. Alors ils tiraient leur glaive, menaçaient de tuer.

Des commissaires du Grand-Conseil écrivirent le nombre d'années que l'on devait à chaque soldat. Mais il était impossible maintenant de savoir combien on avait engagé de Mercenaires, et les Anciens furent effrayés de la somme exorbitante qu'ils auraient à payer. Il fallait vendre la réserve du silphium, imposer les villes marchandes ; les Mercenaires s'impatienteraient, déjà Tunis était avec eux : et les Riches, étourdis par les fureurs d'Hannon et les reproches de son collègue, recommandèrent aux citoyens qui pouvaient connaître quelque Barbare d'aller le voir immédiatement pour reconquérir son amitié, lui dire de bonnes paroles. Cette confiance les calmerait.

Des marchands, des scribes, des ouvriers de l'arsenal, des familles entières se rendirent chez les Barbares.

Les soldats laissaient entrer chez eux tous les Carthaginois, mais par un seul passage tellement étroit que quatre hommes de front s'y coudoyaient. Spendius, debout contre la barrière, les faisait attentivement fouiller ; Mâtho, en face de lui, examinait cette multitude, cherchant à retrouver quelqu'un qu'il pouvait avoir vu chez Salammbô.

Le camp ressemblait à une ville, tant il était rempli de monde et d'agitation. Les deux foules distinctes se mêlaient sans se confondre, l'une habillée de toile ou de laine avec des bonnets de feutre pareils à des pommes de pin, et l'autre vêtue de fer et portant des casques. Au milieu des valets et des vendeurs ambulants circulaient des femmes de toutes les nations, brunes comme des dattes mûres, verdâtres comme des olives, jaunes comme des oranges, vendues par des matelots, choisies dans les bouges, volées à des caravanes, prises dans le sac des villes, que l'on fatiguait d'amour tant qu'elles étaient jeunes, qu'on accablait de coups lorsqu'elles étaient vieilles, et qui mouraient dans les déroutes au bord des chemins, parmi les bagages, avec les bêtes de somme abandonnées. Les épouses des Nomades balançaient sur leurs talons des robes en poil de dromadaire, carrées et de couleur fauve ; des musiciennes de la Cyrénaïque, enveloppées de gazes violettes et les sourcils peints, chantaient accroupies sur des nattes : de vieilles négresses aux mamelles pendantes ramassaient, pour faire du feu, des fientes d'animal que l'on desséchait au soleil : les Syracusaines avaient des plaques d'or dans la chevelure, les femmes des Lusitaniens des colliers de coquillages, les Gauloises des peaux de loup sur leur poitrine blanche ; et des enfants robustes, couverts de vermine, nus, incirconcis, donnaient aux passants des coups dans le ventre avec leur tête, ou venaient par-derrière, comme de jeunes tigres, les mordre aux mains.

Les Carthaginois se promenaient à travers le camp, surpris par la quantité de choses dont il regorgeait. Les plus misérables étaient tristes, et les autres dissimulaient leur inquiétude.

Les soldats leur frappaient sur l'épaule, en les excitant à la gaieté. Dès qu'ils apercevaient quelque personnage, ils l'invitaient à leurs divertissements. Quand on jouait au disque, ils s'arrangeaient pour lui écraser les pieds, et au pugilat, dès la première passe, lui fracassaient la mâchoires. Les frondeurs effrayaient les Carthaginois avec leurs frondes, les psylles avec des vipères, les cavaliers avec leurs chevaux. Ces gens d'occupations paisibles, à tous les outrages, baissaient la tête et s'efforçaient de sourire. Quelques-uns, pour se montrer braves, faisaient signe qu'ils voulaient devenir des soldats. On leur donnait à fendre du bois et à étriller des mulets. On les bouclait dans une armure et on les roulait comme des tonneaux par les rues du camp. Puis, quand ils se disposaient à partir, les Mercenaires s'arrachaient les cheveux avec des contorsions grotesques.

Mais beaucoup, par sottise ou préjugé, croyaient naïvement tous les Carthaginois très riches, et ils marchaient derrière eux en les suppliant de leur accorder quelque chose. Ils demandaient tout ce qui leur semblait beau : une bague, une ceinture, des sandales, la frange d'une robe, et, quand le Carthaginois dépouillé s'écriait : — " Mais je n'ai plus rien. Que veux-tu ? " Ils répondaient " Ta femme ! "

D'autres disaient : — " Ta vie ! "

Les comptes militaires furent remis aux capitaines, lus aux soldats, définitivement approuvés. Alors ils réclamèrent des tentes : on leur donna des tentes. Puis les polémarques des Grecs demandèrent quelques-unes de ces belles armures que l'on fabriquait à Carthage ; le Grand-Conseil vota des sommes pour cette acquisition. Mais il était juste, prétendaient les cavaliers, que la République les indemnisât de leurs chevaux ; l'un affirmait en avoir perdu trois à tel siège, un autre cinq dans telle marche, un autre quatorze dans les précipices. On leur offrit des étalons d'Hécatompyle ; ils aimèrent mieux l'argent.

Puis ils demandèrent qu'on leur payât en argent (en pièces d'argent et non en monnaie de cuir) tout le blé qu'on leur devait, et au plus haut prix où il s'était vendu pendant la guerre, si bien qu'ils exigeaient pour une mesure de farine quatre cents fois plus qu'ils n'avaient donné pour un sac de froment. Cette injustice exaspéra ; il fallut céder, pourtant.

Alors les délégués des soldats et ceux du Grand-Conseil se réconcilièrent, en jurant par le Génie de Carthage et par les Dieux des Barbares. Avec les démonstrations et la verbosité orientales, ils se firent des excuses et des caresses. Puis les soldats réclamèrent, comme une preuve d'amitié, la punition des traîtres qui les avaient indisposés contre la République.

On feignit de ne pas les comprendre. Ils s'expliquèrent plus nettement, disant qu'il leur fallait la tête d'Hannon.

Plusieurs fois par jour ils sortaient de leur camp. Ils se promenaient au pied des murs. Ils criaient qu'on leur jetât la tête du Suffète, et ils tendaient leurs robes pour la recevoir.

Le Grand-Conseil aurait faibli, peut-être, sans une dernière exigence plus injurieuse que les autres : ils demandèrent en mariage, pour leurs chefs, des vierges choisies dans les grandes familles. C'était une idée de Spendius, que plusieurs trouvaient toute simple et fort exécutable. Mais cette prétention de vouloir se mêler au sang punique indigna le peuple ; on leur signifia brutalement qu'ils n'avaient plus rien à recevoir. Alors ils s'écrièrent qu'on les avait trompés ;

si avant trois jours leur solde n'arrivait pas, ils iraient eux-mêmes la prendre dans Carthage.

La mauvaise foi des Mercenaires n'était point aussi complète que le pensaient leurs ennemis. Hamilcar leur avait fait des promesses exorbitantes, vagues il est vrai, mais solennelles et réitérées. Ils avaient pu croire, en débarquant à Carthage, qu'on leur abandonnerait la ville, qu'ils se partageraient des trésors ; et quand ils virent que leur solde à peine serait payée, ce fut une désillusion pour leur orgueil comme pour leur cupidité.

Denys, Pyrrhus, Agathoclès et les généraux d'Alexandre n'avaient-ils pas fourni l'exemple de merveilleuses fortunes ? L'idéal d'Hercule, que les Chananéens confondaient avec le soleil, resplendissait à l'horizon des armées. On savait que de simples soldats avaient porté des diadèmes, et le retentissement des empires qui s'écroulaient faisait rêver le Gaulois dans sa forêt de chênes, l'Ethiopien dans ses sables. Mais il y avait un peuple toujours prêt à utiliser les courages ; et le voleur chassé de sa tribu, le parricide errant sur les chemins, le sacrilège poursuivi par les dieux, tous les affamés, tous les désespérés tâchaient d'atteindre au port où le courtier de Carthage recrutait des soldats. Ordinairement elle tenait ses promesses. Cette fois pourtant, l'ardeur de son avarice l'avait entraînée dans une infamie périlleuse. Les Numides, les Libyens, l'Afrique entière s'allaient jeter sur Carthage. La mer seule était libre. Elle y rencontrait les Romains ; et, comme un homme assailli par des meurtriers, elle sentait la mort tout autour d'elle.

Il fallut bien recourir à Giscon ; les Barbares acceptèrent son entremise. Un matin ils virent les chaînes du port s'abaisser, et trois bateaux plats, passant par le canal de la Taenia, entrèrent dans le lac.

Sur le premier, à la proue, on apercevait Giscon. Derrière lui, et plus haute qu'un catafalque, s'élevait une caisse énorme, garnie d'anneaux pareils à des couronnes qui pendaient. Apparaissait ensuite la légion des Interprètes, coiffés comme des sphinx, et portant un perroquet tatoué sur la poitrine. Des amis et des esclaves suivaient, tous sans armes, et si nombreux qu'ils se touchaient des épaules. Les trois longues barques, pleines à sombrer, s'avançaient aux acclamations de l'armée, qui les regardait.

Dès que Giscon débarqua, les soldats coururent à sa rencontre. Avec des sacs il fit dresser une sorte de tribune et déclara qu'il ne s'en irait pas avant de les avoir tous intégralement payés.

Des applaudissements éclatèrent ; il fut longtemps sans pouvoir parler.

Puis il blâma les torts de la République et ceux des Barbares ; la faute en était à quelques mutins, qui par leur violence avaient effrayé Carthage. La meilleure preuve de ses bonnes intentions, c'était qu'on l'envoyait vers eux, lui, l'éternel adversaire du suffète Hannon. Ils ne devaient point supposer au peuple l'ineptie de vouloir irriter des braves, ni assez d'ingratitude pour méconnaître leurs services ; et Giscon se mit à la paye des soldats en commençant par les Libyens. Comme ils avaient déclaré les listes mensongères, il ne s'en servit point.

Ils défilaient devant lui, par nations, en ouvrant leurs doigts pour dire le nombre des années ; on les marquait successivement au bras gauche avec de la peinture verte ; les scribes puisaient dans le coffre béant, et d'autres, avec un stylet, faisaient des trous sur une lame de plomb.

Un homme passa, qui marchait lourdement, à la manière des boeufs.

— " Monte près de moi ", dit le Suffète, suspectant quelque fraude ; " combien d'années as-tu servi ? "

— " Douze ans ", répondit le Libyen.

Giscon lui glissa les doigts sous la mâchoire, car la mentonnière du casque y produisait à la longue deux callosités ; on les appelait des carroubes, et avoir les carroubes était une locution pour dire un vétéran.

— " Voleur ! " s'écria le Suffète, " ce qui te manque au visage tu dois le porter sur les épaules ! ", et lui déchirant sa tunique, il découvrit son dos couvert de gales sanglantes ; c'était un laboureur d'Hippo-Zaryte. Des huées s'élevèrent ; on le décapita.

Dès qu'il fut nuit, Spendius alla réveiller les Libyens. Il leur dit :

— " Quand les Ligures, les Grecs, les Baléares et les hommes d'Italie seront payés, ils s'en retourneront.

Mais vous autres, vous resterez en Afrique, épars dans vos tribus et sans aucune défense ! C'est alors que la République se vengera ! Méfiez-vous du voyage ! Allez-vous croire à toutes les paroles ? Les deux suffètes sont d'accord ! Celui-là vous abuse ! Rappelez-vous l'Ile-des-Ossements et Xantippe qu'ils ont renvoyé à Sparte sur une galère pourrie ! "

— " Comment nous y prendre ? ", demandaient-ils.

— " Réfléchissez ! " disait Spendius.

Les deux jours suivants se passèrent à payer les gens de Magdala, de Leptis, d'Hécatompyle ; Spendius se répandait chez les Gaulois.

— " On solde les Libyens, ensuite on payera les Grecs, puis les Baléares, les Asiatiques, et tous les autres ! Mais vous qui n'êtes pas nombreux, on ne vous donnera rien ! Vous ne reverrez plus vos patries ! Vous n'aurez point de vaisseaux ! Ils vous tueront, pour épargner la nourriture. "

Les Gaulois vinrent trouver le Suffète. Autharite, celui qu'il avait blessé chez Hamilcar, l'interpella. Il disparut, repoussé par les esclaves, mais en jurant qu'il se vengerait.

Les réclamations, les plaintes se multiplièrent. Les plus obstinés pénétraient dans la tente du Suffète ; pour l'attendrir ils prenaient ses mains, lui faisaient palper leurs bouches sans dents, leurs bras tout maigres et les cicatrices de leurs blessures. Ceux qui n'étaient point encore payés s'irritaient, ceux qui avaient reçu leur solde en demandaient une autre pour leurs chevaux ; et les vagabonds, les bannis, prenant les armes des soldats, affirmaient qu'on les oubliait. A chaque minute, il arrivait comme des tourbillons d'hommes ; les tentes craquaient, s'abattaient ; la multitude serrée entre les remparts du camp oscillait à grands cris depuis les portes jusqu'au centre. Quand le tumulte se faisait trop fort, Giscon posait un coude sur son sceptre d'ivoire, et, regardant la mer, il restait immobile, les doigts enfoncés dans sa barbe.

Souvent Mâtho s'écartait pour aller s'entretenir avec Spendius ; puis il se replaçait en face du Suffète, et Giscon sentait perpétuellement ses prunelles comme deux phalariques en flammes dardées vers lui. Par-dessus la foule, plusieurs fois, ils se lancèrent des injures, mais qu'ils n'entendirent pas. Cependant la distribution continuait, et le Suffète à tous les obstacles trouvait des expédients.

Les Grecs voulurent élever des chicanes sur la différence des monnaies. Il leur fournit de telles explications qu'ils se retirèrent sans murmures. Les Nègres réclamèrent de ces coquilles blanches usitées pour le commerce dans l'intérieur de l'Afrique. Il leur offrit d'en envoyer prendre à Carthage ; alors, comme les autres, ils acceptèrent de l'argent.

Mais on avait promis aux Baléares quelque chose de meilleur, à savoir des femmes. Le Suffète répondit que l'on attendait pour eux toute une caravane de vierges : la route était longue, il fallait encore six lunes. Quand elles seraient grasses et bien frottées de benjoin, on les enverrait sur des vaisseaux, dans les ports des Baléares.

Tout à coup, Zarxas, beau maintenant et vigoureux, sauta comme un bateleur sur les épaules de ses amis et il cria :

— " En as-tu réservé pour les cadavres ? " tandis qu'il montrait dans Carthage la porte de Khamon.

Aux derniers feux du soleil, les plaques d'airain la garnissant de haut en bas resplendissaient ; les Barbares crurent apercevoir sur elle une traînée sanglante. Chaque fois que Giscon voulait parler, leurs cris recommençaient. Enfin, il descendit à pas graves et s'enferma dans sa tente.

Quand il en sortit au lever du soleil, ses interprètes, qui couchaient en dehors, ne bougèrent point ; ils se tenaient sur le dos, les yeux fixes, la langue au bord des dents et la face bleuâtre. Des mucosités blanches coulaient de leurs narines, et leurs membres étaient raides, comme si le froid pendant la nuit les eût tous gelés. Chacun portait autour du cou un petit lacet de joncs.

La rébellion dès lors ne s'arrêta plus. Ce meurtre des Baléares rappelé par Zarxas confirmait les défiances de Spendius. Ils s'imaginaient que la République cherchait toujours à les tromper. Il fallait en finir ! On se passerait des interprètes ! Zarxas, avec une fronde autour de la tête, chantait des chansons de guerre ; Autharite brandissait sa grande épée ; Spendius soufflait à l'un quelque parole, fournissait à l'autre un poignard. Les plus forts tâchaient de se payer eux-mêmes, les moins furieux demandaient que la distribution continuât. Personne maintenant ne quittait ses armes, et toutes les colères se réunissaient contre Giscon dans une haine tumultueuse.

Quelques-uns montaient à ses côtés. Tant qu'ils vociféraient des injures on les écoutait avec patience ; mais s'ils tentaient pour lui le moindre mot, ils étaient immédiatement lapidés, ou par-derrière d'un coup de sabre on leur abattait la tête. L'amoncellement des sacs était plus rouge qu'un autel.

Ils devenaient terribles après le repas, quand ils avaient bu du vin ! C'était une joie défendue sous peine de mort dans les armées puniques, et ils levaient leur coupe du côté de Carthage par dérision pour sa discipline. Puis ils revenaient vers les esclaves des finances et ils recommençaient à tuer. Le mot frappe, différent dans chaque langue, était compris de tous.

Giscon savait bien que la patrie l'abandonnait ; mais il ne voulait point malgré son ingratitude la déshonorer. Quand ils lui rappelèrent qu'on leur avait promis des vaisseaux, il jura par Moloch de leur en fournir lui-même, à ses frais, et, arrachant son collier de pierres bleues, il le jeta dans la foule en gage de serment.

Alors les Africains réclamèrent le blé, d'après les engagements du Grand-Conseil. Giscon étala les comptes des Syssites, tracés avec de la peinture violette sur des peaux de brebis ; il lisait tout ce qui était entré dans Carthage, mois par mois et jour par jour.

Soudain il s'arrêta, les yeux béants, comme s'il fût découvert entre les chiffres sa sentence de mort.

En effet, les Anciens les avaient frauduleusement réduits et le blé, vendu pendant l'époque la plus calamiteuse de la guerre, se trouvait à un taux si bas, qu'à moins d'aveuglement on n'y pouvait croire.

— " Parle ! " crièrent-ils, " plus haut ! Ah ! c'est qu'il cherche à mentir, le lâche ! méfions-nous. "

Pendant quelque temps, il hésita. Enfin il reprit sa besogne.

Les soldats, sans se douter qu'on les trompait, acceptèrent comme vrais les comptes des Syssites. Alors l'abondance où s'était trouvée Carthage les jeta dans une jalousie furieuse. Ils brisèrent la caisse de sycomore ; elle était vide aux trois quarts. Ils avaient vu de telles sommes en sortir qu'ils la jugeaient inépuisable ;

Giscon en avait enfoui dans sa tente. Ils escaladèrent les sacs. Mâtho les conduisait, et comme ils criaient : " L'argent ! l'argent ! " Giscon à la fin répondit :

— " Que votre général vous en donne ! "

Il les regardait en face, sans parler, avec ses grands yeux jaunes et sa longue figure plus pâle que sa barbe. Une flèche, arrêtée par les plumes, se tenait à son oreille dans son large anneau d'or, et un filet de sang coulait de sa tiare sur son épaule.

A un geste de Mâtho, tous s'avancèrent. Il écarta les bras ; Spendius, avec un noeud coulant, l'étreignit aux poignets ; un autre le renversa, et il disparut dans le désordre de la foule qui s'écroulait sur les sacs.

Ils saccagèrent sa tente. On n'y trouva que les choses indispensables à la vie ; puis, en cherchant mieux, trois images de Tanit, et dans une peau de singe, une pierre noire tombée de la lune. Beaucoup de Carthaginois avaient voulu l'accompagner ; c'étaient des hommes considérables et tous du parti de la guerre.

On les entraîna en dehors des tentes, et on les précipita dans la fosse aux immondices. Avec des chaînes de fer ils furent attachés par le ventre à des pieux solides, et on leur tendait la nourriture à la pointe d'un javelot.

Autharite, tout en les surveillant, les accablait d'invectives, mais comme ils ne comprenaient point sa langue, ils ne répondaient pas ; le Gaulois, de temps à autre, leur jetait des cailloux au visage pour les faire crier.

Dès le lendemain, une sorte de langueur envahit l'armée. A présent que leur colère était finie, des inquiétudes les prenaient. Mâtho souffrait d'une tristesse vague. Il lui semblait avoir indirectement outragé Salammbô. Ces Riches étaient comme une dépendance de sa personne. Il s'asseyait la nuit au bord de leur fosse, et il retrouvait dans leurs gémissements quelque chose de la voix dont son coeur était plein.

Cependant ils accusaient, tous, les Libyens, qui seuls étaient payés. Mais, en même temps que se ravivaient les antipathies nationales avec les haines particulières, on sentait le péril de s'y abandonner. Les représailles, après un attentat pareil, seraient formidables. Donc il fallait prévenir la vengeance de Carthage. Les conciliabules, les harangues n'en finissaient pas. Chacun parlait, on n'écoutait personne, et Spendius, ordinairement si loquace, à toutes les propositions secouait la tête.

Un soir il demanda négligemment à Mâtho s'il n'y avait pas des sources dans l'intérieur de la ville.

— " Pas une ! " répondit Mâtho.

Le lendemain, Spendius l'entraîna sur la berge du lac.

— " Maître ! " dit l'ancien esclave, " Si ton coeur est intrépide, je te conduirai dans Carthage. "

— " Comment ? " répétait l'autre en haletant.

— " Jure d'exécuter tous mes ordres, de me suivre comme une ombre ! "

Alors Mâtho, levant son bras vers la planète de Chabar, s'écria :

— " Par Tanit, je le jure ! "

Spendius reprit :

— " Demain après le coucher du soleil, tu m'attendras au pied de l'aqueduc, entre la neuvième et la dixième arcade. Emporte avec toi un pic de fer, un casque sans aigrette et des sandales de cuir. "

L'aqueduc dont il parlait traversait obliquement l'isthme entier, — ouvrage considérable — , agrandi plus tard par les Romains. Malgré son dédain des autres peuples, Carthage leur avait pris gauchement cette invention nouvelle, comme Rome elle-même avait fait de la galère punique ; et cinq rangs d'arcs superposés, d'une architecture trapue, avec des contreforts à la base et des têtes de lion au sommet, aboutissaient à la partie occidentale de l'Acropole, où ils s'enfonçaient sous la ville pour déverser presque une rivière dans les citernes de Mégara.

A l'heure convenue, Spendius y trouva Mâtho. Il attacha une sorte de harpon au bout d'une corde, le fit tourner rapidement comme une fronde, l'engin de fer s'accrocha ; et ils se mirent, l'un derrière l'autre, à grimper le long du mur.

Mais quand ils furent montés sur le premier étage, le crampon, chaque fois qu'ils le jetaient, retombait ; il leur fallait, pour découvrir quelque fissure, marcher sur le bord de la corniche ; à chaque rang des arcs, ils la trouvaient plus étroite. Puis la corde se relâcha. Plusieurs fois, elle faillit se rompre.

Enfin ils arrivèrent à la plate-forme supérieure. Spendius, de temps à autre, se penchait pour tâter les pierres avec sa main.

— " C'est là " dit-il, " commençons ! " Et pesant sur l'épieu qu'avait apporté Mâtho, ils parvinrent à disjoindre une des dalles.

Ils aperçurent, au loin, une troupe de cavaliers galopant sur des chevaux sans brides. Leurs bracelets d'or sautaient dans les vagues draperies de leurs manteaux. On distinguait en avant un homme couronné de plumes d'autruche et qui galopait avec une lance à chaque main.

— " Narr'Havas ! " s'écria Mâtho.

— " Qu'importe ! " reprit Spendius ; et il sauta dans le trou qu'ils venaient de faire en découvrant la dalle.

Mâtho, par son ordre, essaya de pousser un des blocs. Mais, faute de place, il ne pouvait remuer les coudes . — " Nous reviendrons ", dit Spendius ! " Mets-toi devant. " Alors ils s'aventurèrent dans le conduit des eaux.

Ils en avaient jusqu'au ventre. Bientôt ils chancelèrent et il leur fallut nager.

Leurs membres se heurtaient contre les parois du canal trop étroit. L'eau coulait presque immédiatement sous la dalle supérieure : ils se déchiraient le visage. Puis le courant les entraîna. Un air plus lourd qu'un sépulcre leur écrasait la poitrine, et la tête sous les bras, les genoux l'un contre l'autre, allongés tant qu'ils pouvaient, ils passaient comme des flèches dans l'obscurité, étouffant, râlant, presque morts. Soudain, tout fut noir devant eux et la vélocité des eaux redoublait. Ils tombèrent.

Quand ils furent remontés à la surface, ils se tinrent pendant quelques minutes étendus sur le dos, à humer l'air, délicieusement. Des arcades, les unes derrière les autres, s'ouvraient au milieu de larges murailles séparant des bassins. Tous étaient remplis, et l'eau se continuait en une seule nappe dans la longueur des citernes. Les coupoles du plafond laissaient descendre par leur soupirail une clarté pâle qui étalait sur les ondes comme des disques de lumière, et les ténèbres à l'entour, s'épaississant vers les murs, les reculaient indéfiniment. Le moindre bruit faisait un grand écho.

Spendius et Mâtho se remirent à nager, et, passant par l'ouverture des arcs, ils traversèrent plusieurs chambres à la file. Deux autres rangs de bassins plus petits s'étendaient parallèlement de chaque côté. Ils se perdirent, ils tournaient, ils revenaient. Enfin, quelque chose résista sous leurs talons. C'était le pavé de la galerie qui longeait les citernes.

Alors, s'avançant avec de grandes précautions, ils palpèrent la muraille pour trouver une issue. Mais leurs pieds glissaient ; ils tombaient dans les vasques profondes. Ils avaient à remonter, puis ils retombaient encore ; et ils sentaient une épouvantable fatigue, comme si leurs membres en nageant se fussent dissous dans l'eau. Leurs yeux se fermèrent : ils agonisaient.

Spendius se frappa la main contre les barreaux d'une grille. Ils la secouèrent, elle céda, et ils se trouvèrent sur les marches d'un escalier. Une porte de bronze le fermait en haut. Avec la pointe d'un poignard, ils écartèrent la barre que l'on ouvrait en dehors ; tout à coup le grand air pur les enveloppa.

La nuit était pleine de silence, et le ciel avait une hauteur démesurée. Des bouquets d'arbres débordaient, sur les longues lignes des murs. La ville entière dormait. Les feux des avant-postes brillaient comme des étoiles perdues.

Spendius qui avait passé trois ans dans l'ergastule, connaissait imparfaitement les quartiers. Mâtho conjectura que, pour se rendre au palais d'Hamilcar, ils devaient prendre sur la gauche, en traversant les Mappales.

— " Non ", dit Spendius, " conduis-moi au temple de Tanit. "

Mâtho voulut parler.

— " Rappelle-toi ! " fit l'ancien esclave ; et, levant son bras, il lui montra la planète de Chabar qui resplendissait.

Alors Mâtho se tourna silencieusement vers l'Acropole.

Ils rampaient le long des clôtures de nopals qui bordaient les sentiers. L'eau coulait de leurs membres sur la poussière. Leurs sandales humides ne faisaient aucun bruit ; Spendius, avec ses yeux plus flamboyants que des torches, à chaque pas fouillait les buissons ; : — et il marchait derrière Mâtho, les mains posées sur les deux poignards qu'il portait aux bras, tenus au-dessous de l'aisselle par un cercle de cuir.

Chapitre 5 TANIT

Quand ils furent sortis des jardins, ils se trouvèrent arrêtés par l'enceinte de Mégara. Mais ils découvrirent une brèche dans la grosse muraille, et passèrent.

Le terrain descendait, formant une sorte de vallon très large. C'était une place découverte.

— " Ecoute ", dit Spendius, " et d'abord ne crains rien, j'exécuterai ma promesse ... "

Il s'interrompit ; il avait l'air de réfléchir, comme pour chercher ses paroles. — " Te rappelles-tu cette fois, au soleil levant, où, sur la terrasse de Salammbô, je t'ai montré Carthage ? Nous étions forts ce jour-là, mais tu n'as voulu rien entendre ! " Puis d'une voix grave : — " Maître, il y a dans le sanctuaire de Tanit un voile mystérieux, tombé du ciel, et qui recouvre la Déesse. "

— " Je le sais ", dit Mâtho.

Spendius reprit :

— " Il est divin lui-même, car il fait partie d'elle. Les dieux résident où se trouvent leurs simulacres. C'est parce que Carthage le possède, que Carthage est puissante. " Alors se penchant à son oreille : " Je t'ai emmené avec moi pour le ravir ! "

Mâtho recula d'horreur.

— " Va-t'en ! cherche quelque autre ! Je ne veux pas t'aider dans cet exécrable forfait. "

— " Mais Tanit est ton ennemie ", répliqua Spendius : elle te persécute, et tu meurs de sa colère. Tu t'en vengeras. Elle t'obéira. Tu deviendras presque immortel et invincible.

Mâtho baissait la tête. Il continua :

— " Nous succomberions ; l'armée d'elle-même s'anéantirait. Nous n'avons ni fuite à espérer, ni secours, ni pardon ! Quel châtiment des Dieux peux-tu craindre, puisque tu vas avoir leur force dans les mains ? Aimes-tu mieux périr le soir d'une défaite, misérablement, à l'abri d'un buisson, ou parmi l'outrage de la populace, dans la flamme des bûchers ? Maître, un jour tu entreras à Carthage, entre les collèges des pontifes, qui baiseront tes sandales : et si le voile de Tanit te pèse encore, tu le rétabliras dans son temple. Suis-moi ! viens le prendre. "

Une envie terrible dévorait Mâtho. Il aurait voulu, en s'abstenant du sacrilège, posséder le voile. Il se disait que peut-être on n'aurait pas besoin de le prendre pour en accaparer la vertu. Il n'allait point jusqu'au fond de sa pensée, s'arrêtant sur la limite où elle l'épouvantait.

— " Marchons ! " dit-il ; et ils s'éloignèrent d'un pas rapide, côte à côte, sans parler.

Le terrain remonta, et les habitations se rapprochèrent. Ils tournaient dans les rues étroites, au milieu des ténèbres. Des lambeaux de sparterie fermant les portes battaient contre les murs. Sur une place, des chameaux ruminaient devant des tas d'herbes coupées. Puis ils passèrent sous une galerie que recouvraient des feuillages. Un troupeau de chiens aboya. Mais l'espace tout à coup s'élargit, et ils reconnurent la face occidentale de l'Acropole. Au bas de Byrsa s'étalait une longue masse noire : c'était le temple de Tanit, ensemble de monuments et de jardins, de cours et d'avant-cours, bordé par un petit mur de pierres sèches. Spendius et Mâtho le franchirent.

Cette première enceinte renfermait un bois de platanes, par précaution contre la peste et l'infection de l'air. Çà et là étaient disséminées des tentes où l'on vendait pendant le jour des pâtes épilatoires, des parfums, des vêtements, des gâteaux en forme de lune, et des images de la Déesse avec des représentations du temple, creusées dans un bloc d'albâtre.

Ils n'avaient rien à craindre, car les nuits où l'astre ne paraissait pas on suspendait tous les rites : cependant Mâtho se ralentissait ; il s'arrêta devant les trois marches d'ébène qui conduisaient à la seconde enceinte.

— " Avance ! " dit Spendius.

Des grenadiers, des amandiers, des cyprès et des myrtes, immobiles comme des feuillages de bronze, alternaient régulièrement ; le chemin, pavé de cailloux bleus, craquait sous les pas, et des roses épanouies pendaient en berceau sur toute la longueur de l'allée. Ils arrivèrent devant un trou ovale, abrité par une grille. Alors, Mâtho, que ce silence effrayait, dit à Spendius :

— " C'est ici qu'on mélange les Eaux douces avec les Eaux amères. "

— " J'ai vu tout cela ", reprit l'ancien esclave, " en Syrie, dans la ville de Maphug " ; et, par un escalier de six marches d'argent, ils montèrent dans la troisième enceinte.

Un cèdre énorme en occupait le milieu. Ses branches les plus basses disparaissaient sous des brides d'étoffes et des colliers qu'y avaient appendus les fidèles. Ils firent encore quelques pas, et la façade du temple se déploya.

Deux longs portiques, dont les architraves reposaient sur des piliers trapus, flanquaient une tour quadrangulaire, ornée à sa plate-forme par un croissant de lune. Sur les angles des portiques et aux quatre coins de la tour s'élevaient des vases pleins d'aromates allumés. Des grenades et des coloquintes chargeaient les chapiteaux. Des entrelacs, des losanges, des lignes de perles s'alternaient sur les murs, et une haie en filigrane d'argent formait un large demi-cercle devant l'escalier d'airain qui descendait du vestibule.

Il y avait à l'entrée, entre une stèle d'or et une stèle d'émeraude, un cône de pierre ; Mâtho, en passant à côté, se baisa la main droite.

La première chambre était très haute ; d'innombrables ouvertures perçaient sa voûte ; en levant la tête on pouvait voir les étoiles. Tout autour de la muraille, dans des corbeilles de roseau, s'amoncelaient des barbes et des chevelures, prémices des adolescences ; et, au milieu de l'appartement circulaire, le corps d'une femme sortait d'une gaine couverte de mamelles. Grasse, barbue, et les paupières baissées, elle avait l'air de sourire, en croisant ses mains sur le bord de son gros ventre, — poli par les baisers de la foule.

Puis ils se retrouvèrent à l'air libre, dans un corridor transversal, où un autel de proportions exiguës s'appuyait contre une porte d'ivoire. On n'allait point au-delà : les prêtres seuls pouvaient l'ouvrir ; car un temple n'était pas un lieu de réunion pour la multitude, mais la demeure particulière d'une divinité.

— " L'entreprise est impossible ", disait Mâtho. " Tu n'y avais pas songé ! Retournons ! " Spendius examinait les murs.

Il voulait le voile, non qu'il eût confiance en sa vertu (Spendius ne croyait qu'à l'Oracle), mais persuadé que les Carthaginois, s'en voyant privés, tomberaient dans un grand abattement. Pour trouver quelque issue, ils firent le tour par-derrière.

On apercevait, sous des bosquets de térébinthe, des édicules de forme différente. Çà et là un phallus de pierre se dressait, et de grands cerfs erraient tranquillement, poussant de leurs pieds fourchus des pommes de pin tombées.

Ils revinrent sur leurs pas entre deux longues galeries qui s'avançaient parallèlement. De petites cellules s'ouvraient au bord. Des tambourins et des cymbales étaient accrochés du haut en bas de leurs colonnes de cèdre. Des femmes dormaient en dehors des cellules, étendues sur des nattes. Leurs corps, tout gras d'onguents, exhalaient une odeur d'épices et de cassolettes éteintes ; elles étaient si couvertes de tatouages, de colliers, d'anneaux, de vermillon et d'antimoine, qu'on les eût prises, sans le mouvement de leur poitrine, pour des idoles ainsi couchées par terre. Des lotus entouraient une fontaine, où nageaient des poissons pareils à ceux de Salammbô ; puis au fond, contre la muraille du temple, s'étalait une vigne dont les sarments étaient de verre et les grappes d'émeraude : les rayons des pierres précieuses faisaient des jeux de lumière, entre les colonnes peintes, sur les visages endormis.

Mâtho suffoquait dans la chaude atmosphère que rabattaient sur lui les cloisons de cèdre. Tous ces symboles de la fécondation, ces parfums, ces rayonnements, ces haleines l'accablaient. A travers les éblouissements mystiques, il songeait à Salammbô. Elle se confondait avec la Déesse elle-même, et son amour s'en dégageait plus fort, comme les grands lotus qui s'épanouissaient sur la profondeur des eaux.

Spendius calculait quelle somme d'argent il aurait autrefois gagnée à vendre ces femmes ; et, d'un coup d'oeil rapide, il pesait en passant les colliers d'or.

Le temple était, de ce côté comme de l'autre, impénétrable. Ils revinrent derrière la première chambre. Pendant que Spendius cherchait, furetait, Mâtho, prosterné devant la porte, implorait Tanit. Il la suppliait de ne point permettre ce sacrilège. Il tâchait de l'adoucir avec des mots caressants, comme on fait à une personne irritée. Spendius remarqua au-dessus de la porte une ouverture étroite.

— " Lève-toi ! " dit-il à Mâtho, et il le fit s'adosser contre le mur, tout debout. Alors, posant un pied dans ses mains, puis un autre sur sa tête, il parvint jusqu'à la hauteur du soupirail, s'y engagea et disparut. Puis Mâtho sentit tomber sur son épaule une corde à noeuds, celle que Spendius avait enroulée autour de son corps avant de s'engager dans les citernes ; et s'y appuyant des deux mains, bientôt il se trouva près de lui dans une grande salle pleine d'ombre.

De pareils attentats étaient une chose extraordinaire. L'insuffisance des moyens pour les prévenir témoignait assez qu'on les jugeait impossibles. La terreur, plus que les murs, défendait les sanctuaires. Mâtho, à chaque pas, s'attendait à mourir.

Cependant, une lueur vacillait au fond des ténèbres ; ils s'en rapprochèrent. C'était une lampe qui brûlait dans une coquille sur le piédestal d'une statue, coiffée du bonnet des Cabires. Des disques en diamant parsemaient sa longue robe bleue, et des chaînes, qui s'enfonçaient sous les dalles, l'attachaient au sol par les talons. Mâtho retint un cri. Il balbutiait : " Ah ! la voilà ! la voilà ! ... " Spendius prit la lampe afin de s'éclairer.

— " Quel impie tu es ! " murmura Mâtho. Il le suivait pourtant.

L'appartement où ils entrèrent n'avait rien qu'une peinture noire représentant une autre femme. Ses jambes montaient jusqu'au haut de la muraille. Son corps occupait le plafond tout entier. De son nombril pendait à un fil un oeuf énorme, et elle retombait sur l'autre mur, la tête en bas, jusqu'au niveau des dalles où atteignaient ses doigts pointus.

Pour passer plus loin, ils écartèrent une tapisserie ; mais le vent souffla, et la lumière s'éteignit.

Alors ils errèrent, perdus dans les complications de l'architecture. Tout à coup, ils sentirent sous leurs pieds quelque chose d'une douceur étrange. Des étincelles pétillaient, jaillissaient ; ils marchaient dans du feu. Spendius tâta le sol et reconnut qu'il était soigneusement tapissé avec des peaux de lynx ; puis il leur sembla qu'une grosse corde mouillée, froide et visqueuse, glissait entre leurs jambes. Des fissures, taillées dans la muraille, laissaient tomber de minces rayons blancs. Ils s'avançaient à ces lueurs incertaines. Enfin ils distinguèrent un grand serpent noir. Il s'élança vite et disparut.

— " Fuyons ! " s'écria Mâtho. " C'est elle ! je la sens elle vient. "

— " Eh non ! " répondit Spendius, " le temple est vide. "

Alors une lumière éblouissante leur fit baisser les yeux. Puis ils aperçurent tout à l'entour une infinité de bêtes, efflanquées, haletantes, hérissant leurs griffes, et confondues les unes par-dessus les autres dans un désordre mystérieux qui épouvantait. Des serpents avaient des pieds, des taureaux avaient des ailes, des poissons à têtes d'homme dévoraient des fruits, des fleurs s'épanouissaient dans la mâchoire des crocodiles, et des éléphants, la trompe levée, passaient en plein azur, orgueilleusement, comme des aigles. Un effort terrible distendait leurs membres incomplets ou multipliés. Ils avaient l'air, en tirant la langue, de vouloir faire sortir leur âme ; et toutes les formes se trouvaient là, comme si le réceptacle des germes, crevant dans une éclosion soudaine, se fût vidé sur les murs de la salle.

Douze globes de cristal bleu la bordaient circulairement, supportés par des monstres qui ressemblaient à des tigres. Leurs prunelles saillissaient comme les yeux des escargots, et courbant leurs reins trapus, ils se tournaient vers le fond, où resplendissait, sur un char d'ivoire, la Rabbet suprême, l'Omniféconde, la dernière inventée.

Des écailles, des plumes, des fleurs et des oiseaux lui montaient jusqu'au ventre. Pour pendants d'oreilles elle avait des cymbales d'argent qui lui battaient sur les joues. Ses grands yeux fixes vous regardaient, et une pierre lumineuse, enchâssée à son front dans un symbole obscène, éclairait toute la salle, en se reflétant au-dessus de la porte, sur des miroirs de cuivre rouge.

Mâtho fit un pas ; une dalle fléchit sous ses talons, et voilà que les sphères se mirent à tourner, les monstres à rugir ; une musique s'éleva, mélodieuse et ronflante comme l'harmonie des planètes ; l'âme tumultueuse de Tanit ruisselait épandue. Elle allait se lever, grande comme la salle, avec les bras ouverts. Tout à coup les monstres fermèrent la gueule, et les globes de cristal ne tournaient plus.

Puis une modulation lugubre pendant quelque temps se traîna dans l'air, et s'éteignit enfin.

— " Et le voile ? " dit Spendius.

Nulle part on ne l'apercevait. Où donc se trouvait-il ? Comment le découvrir ? Et si les prêtres l'avaient caché ? Mâtho éprouvait un déchirement au coeur et comme une déception dans sa foi.

— " Par ici ! " chuchota Spendius. Une inspiration le guidait. Il entraîna Mâtho derrière le char de Tanit, où une fente, large d'une coudée, coupait la muraille du haut en bas.

Alors ils pénétrèrent dans une petite salle toute ronde, et si élevée qu'elle ressemblait à l'intérieur d'une colonne. Il y avait au milieu une grosse pierre noire à demi sphérique, comme un tambourin ; des flammes brûlaient dessus ; un cône d'ébène se dressait par-derrière, portant une tête et deux bras.

Mais au-delà on aurait dit un nuage où étincelaient des étoiles : des figures apparaissaient dans les profondeurs de ses plis : Eschmoûn avec les Kabires, quelques-uns des monstres déjà vus, les bêtes sacrées des Babyloniens, puis d'autres qu'ils ne connaissaient pas. Cela passait comme un manteau sous le visage de l'idole, et remontant étalé sur le mur, s'accrochait par les angles, tout à la fois bleuâtre comme la nuit, jaune comme l'aurore, pourpre comme le soleil, nombreux, diaphane, étincelant, léger. C'était là le manteau de la Déesse, le zaïmph saint que l'on ne pouvait voir.

Ils pâlirent l'un et l'autre.

— " Prends-le ! " dit enfin Mâtho.

Spendius n'hésita pas ; et, s'appuyant sur l'idole, il décrocha le voile, qui s'affaissa par terre. Mâtho posa la main dessus ; puis il entra sa tête par l'ouverture, puis il s'en enveloppa le corps, et il écartait les bras pour le mieux contempler.

— " Partons ! " dit Spendius.

Mâtho, en haletant, restait les yeux fixés sur les dalles.

Tout à coup il s'écria :

— " Mais si j'allais chez elle ? Je n'ai plus peur de sa beauté. Que pourrait-elle faire contre moi ? Me voilà plus qu'un homme, maintenant. Je traverserais les flammes, je marcherais dans la mer ! Un élan m'emporte ! Salammbô ! Salammbô ! Je suis ton maître ! "

Sa voix tonnait. Il semblait à Spendius de taille plus haute et transfiguré.

Un bruit de pas se rapprocha, une porte s'ouvrit et un homme apparut, un prêtre, avec son haut bonnet et les yeux écarquillés. Avant qu'il eût fait un geste, Spendius s'était précipité, et, l'étreignant à pleins bras, lui avait enfoncé dans les flancs ses deux poignards. La tête sonna sur les dalles.

Puis, immobiles comme le cadavre, ils restèrent pendant quelque temps à écouter. On n'entendait que le murmure du vent par la porte entrouverte.

Elle donnait sur un passage resserré. Spendius s'y engagea. Mâtho le suivit, et ils se trouvèrent presque immédiatement dans la troisième enceinte, entre les portiques latéraux, où étaient les habitations des prêtres.

Derrière les cellules il devait y avoir pour sortir un chemin plus court. Ils se hâtèrent.

Spendius, s'accroupissant au bord de la fontaine, lava ses mains sanglantes. Les femmes dormaient. La vigne d'émeraude brillait. Ils se remirent en marche.

Mais quelqu'un, sous les arbres, courait derrière eux ; et Mâtho, qui portait le voile, sentit plusieurs fois qu'on le tirait par en bas, tout doucement. C'était un grand cynocéphale, un de ceux qui vivaient libres dans l'enceinte de la Déesse. Comme s'il avait eu conscience du vol, il se cramponnait au manteau. Cependant ils n'osaient le battre, dans la peur de faire redoubler ses cris ; soudain sa colère s'apaisa et il trottait près d'eux, côte à côte, en balançant son corps, avec ses longs bras qui pendaient. Puis, à la barrière, d'un bond, il s'élança dans un palmier.

Quand ils furent sortis de la dernière enceinte, ils se dirigèrent vers le palais d'Hamilcar, Spendius comprenant qu'il était inutile de vouloir en détourner Mâtho.

Ils prirent par la rue des Tanneurs, la place de Muthumbal, le marché aux herbes et le carrefour de Cynasyn. A l'angle d'un mur, un homme se recula, effrayé par cette chose étincelante, qui traversait les ténèbres.

— " Cache le zaïmph ! " dit Spendius.

D'autres gens les croisèrent ; mais ils n'en furent pas aperçus.

Enfin ils reconnurent les maisons de Mégara.

Le phare, bâti par-derrière, au sommet de la falaise, illuminait le ciel d'une grande clarté rouge, et l'ombre du palais, avec ses terrasses superposées, se projetait sur les jardins comme une monstrueuse pyramide. Ils entrèrent par la haie de jujubiers, en abattant les branches à coups de poignard.

Tout gardait les traces du festin des Mercenaires. Les parcs étaient rompus, les rigoles taries, les portes de l'ergastule ouvertes. Personne n'apparaissait autour des cuisines ni des celliers. Ils s'étonnaient de ce silence, interrompu quelquefois par le souffle rauque des éléphants qui s'agitaient dans leurs entraves, et la crépitation du phare où flambait un bûcher d'aloès.

Mâtho, cependant, répétait :

— " Où est-elle ? je veux la voir ! Conduis-moi ! "

— " C'est une démence ! " disait Spendius. " Elle appellera, ses esclaves accourront, et, malgré ta force, tu mourras ! "

Ils atteignirent ainsi l'escalier des galères. Mâtho leva la tête, et il crut apercevoir, tout en haut, une vague clarté rayonnante et douce. Spendius voulut le retenir. Il s'élança sur les marches.

En se retrouvant aux places où il l'avait déjà vue, l'intervalle des jours écoulés s'effaça dans sa mémoire. Tout à l'heure elle chantait entre les tables ; elle avait disparu, et depuis lors il montait continuellement cet escalier. Le ciel, sur sa tête, était couvert de feux ; la mer emplissait l'horizon ; à chacun de ses pas une immensité plus large l'entourait, et il continuait à gravir avec l'étrange facilité que l'on éprouve dans les rêves.

Le bruissement du voile frôlant contre les pierres lui rappela son pouvoir nouveau ; mais, dans l'excès de son espérance, il ne savait plus maintenant ce qu'il devait faire ; cette incertitude l'intimida.

De temps à autre, il collait son visage contre les baies quadrangulaires des appartements fermés, et il crut voir dans plusieurs des personnes endormies.

Le dernier étage, plus étroit, formait comme un dé sur le sommet des terrasses. Mâtho en fit le tour, lentement.

Une lumière laiteuse emplissait les feuilles de talc qui bouchaient les petites ouvertures de la muraille ; et, symétriquement disposées, elles ressemblaient dans les ténèbres à des rangs de perles fines. Il reconnut la porte rouge à croix noire. Les battements de son cœur redoublèrent. Il aurait voulu s'enfuir. Il poussa la porte ; elle s'ouvrit.

Une lampe en forme de galère brûlait suspendue dans le lointain de la chambre ; et trois rayons, qui s'échappaient de sa carène d'argent, tremblaient sur les hauts lambris, couverts d'une peinture rouge à bandes noires. Le plafond était un assemblage de poutrelles, portant au milieu de leur dorure des améthystes et des topazes dans les noeuds du bois. Sur les deux grands côtés de l'appartement, s'allongeait un lit très bas fait de courroies blanches ; et des cintres, pareils à des coquilles, s'ouvraient au-dessus, dans l'épaisseur de la muraille, laissant déborder quelque vêtement qui pendait jusqu'à terre.

Une marche d'onyx entourait un bassin ovale ; de fines pantoufles en peau de serpent étaient restées sur le bord avec une buire d'albâtre. La trace d'un pas humide s'apercevait au-delà. Des senteurs exquises s'évaporaient.

Mâtho effleurait les dalles incrustées d'or, de nacre et de verre ; et malgré la polissure du sol, il lui semblait que ses pieds enfonçaient comme s'il eût marché dans des sables.

Il avait aperçu derrière la lampe d'argent un grand carré d'azur se tenant en l'air par quatre cordes qui remontaient, et il s'avançait, les reins courbés, la bouche ouverte.

Des ailes de phénicoptères, emmanchées à des branches de corail noir, traînaient parmi les coussins de pourpre et les étrilles d'écaille, les coffrets de cèdre, les spatules d'ivoire. A des cornes d'antilope étaient enfilés des bagues, des bracelets ; et des vases d'argile rafraîchissaient au vent, dans la fente du mur, sur un treillage de roseaux. Plusieurs fois il se heurta les pieds, car le sol avait des niveaux de hauteur inégale qui faisaient dans la chambre comme une succession d'appartements. Au fond, des balustres d'argent entouraient un tapis semé de fleurs peintes. Enfin il arriva contre le lit suspendu, près d'un escabeau d'ébène servant à y monter.

Mais la lumière s'arrêtait au bord ; — et l'ombre, telle qu'un grand rideau, ne découvrait qu'un angle du matelas rouge avec le bout d'un petit pied nu posant sur la cheville. Alors Mâtho tira la lampe, tout doucement.

Elle dormait la joue dans une main et l'autre bras déplié. Les anneaux de sa chevelure se répandaient autour d'elle si abondamment qu'elle paraissait couchée sur des plumes noires, et sa large tunique blanche se courbait en molles draperies, jusqu'à ses pieds, suivant les inflexions de sa taille. On apercevait un peu ses yeux, sous ses paupières entre-closes. Les courtines, perpendiculairement tendues, l'enveloppaient d'une atmosphère bleuâtre, et le mouvement de sa respiration, en se communiquant aux cordes, semblait la balancer dans l'air. Un long moustique bourdonnait.

Mâtho, immobile, tenait au bout de son bras la galère d'argent, mais la moustiquaire s'enflamma d'un seul coup, disparut, et Salammbô se réveilla.

Le feu s'était de soi-même éteint. Elle ne parlait pas. La lampe faisait osciller sur les lambris de grandes moires lumineuses.

— " Qu'est-ce donc ? " dit-elle.

Il répondit :

— " C'est le voile de la Déesse ! "

— " Le voile, de la Déesse ! " s'écria Salammbô. Et appuyée sur les deux poings, elle se penchait en dehors toute frémissante. Il reprit :

— " J'ai été le chercher pour toi dans les profondeurs du sanctuaire ! Regarde ! " Le zaïmph étincelait tout couvert de rayons.

— " T'en souviens-tu ? " disait Mâtho. " La nuit, tu apparaissais dans mes songes - ; mais je ne devinais pas l'ordre muet de tes yeux ! " Elle avançait un pied sur l'escabeau d'ébène. " Si j'avais compris, je serais accouru ; j'aurais abandonné l'armée ; je ne serais pas sorti de Carthage. Pour t'obéir, je descendrais par la caverne d'Hadrumète dans le royaume des Ombres... Pardonne ! c'étaient comme des montagnes qui pesaient sur mes jours ; et pourtant quelque chose m'entraînait ! Je tâchais de venir jusqu'à toi ! Sans les Dieux, est-ce que jamais j'aurais osé ! ... Partons ! il faut me suivre ! ou, si tu ne veux pas, je vais rester. Que m'importe... Noie mon âme ans le souffle de ton haleine ! Que mes lèvres s'écrasent à baiser tes mains ! "

— " Laisse-moi voir ! " disait-elle. " Plus près ! Plus près ! "

L'aube se levait, et une couleur vineuse emplissait les feuilles de talc dans les murs. Salammbô s'appuyait en défaillant contre les coussins du lit.

— " Je t'aime ! " criait Mâtho.

Elle balbutia : — " Donne-le ! " Et ils se rapprochaient.

Elle s'avançait toujours, vêtue de sa simarre blanche qui traînait, avec ses grands yeux attachés sur le voile. Mâtho la contemplait, ébloui par les splendeurs de sa tête, et tendant vers elle le zaïmph, il allait l'envelopper dans une étreinte. Elle écartait les bras. Tout à coup elle s'arrêta, et ils restèrent béants à se regarder.

Sans comprendre ce qu'il sollicitait, une horreur la saisit. Ses sourcils minces remontèrent, ses lèvres s'ouvraient ; elle tremblait. Enfin, elle frappa dans une des patères d'airain qui pendaient aux coins du matelas rouge, en criant :

— " Au secours ! au secours ! Arrière, sacrilège ! infâme ! maudit ! A moi, Taanach, Kroûm, Ewa, Micipsa, Schaoûl ! "

Et la figure de Spendius effarée, apparaissant dans la muraille entre les buires d'argile, jeta ces mots :

— " Fuis donc ! ils accourent ! "

Un grand tumulte monta en ébranlant les escaliers et un flot de monde, des femmes, des valets, des esclaves, s'élancèrent dans la chambre avec des épieux, des casse-tête, des coutelas, des poignards. Ils furent comme paralysés d'indignation en apercevant un homme ; les servantes poussaient le hurlement des funérailles, et les eunuques pâlissaient sous leur peau noire.

Mâtho se tenait derrière les balustres. Avec le zaïmph qui l'enveloppait, il semblait un dieu sidéral tout environné du firmament. Les esclaves s'allaient jeter sur lui. Elle les arrêta :

— " N'y touchez pas ! C'est le manteau de la Déesse ! "

Elle s'était reculée dans un angle ; mais elle fit un pas vers lui, et, allongeant son bras nu :

— " Malédiction sur toi qui as dérobé Tanit ! Haine, vengeance, massacre et douleur ! Que Gurzil, dieu des batailles, te déchire ! que Matisman, dieu des morts, t'étouffe ! et que l'Autre, — celui qu'il ne faut pas nommer — te brûle ! "

Mâtho poussa un cri comme à la blessure d'une épée. Elle répéta plusieurs fois : — " Va-t'en ! va-t'en ! "

La foule des serviteurs s'écarta, et Mâtho, baissant la tête, passa lentement au milieu d'eux ; mais à la porte il s'arrêta, car la frange du zaïmph s'était accrochée à une des étoiles d'or qui pavaient les dalles. Il le tira brusquement d'un coup d'épaule, et descendit les escaliers.

Spendius, bondissant de terrasse en terrasse et sautant par-dessus les haies, les rigoles, s'était échappé des jardins. Il arriva au pied du phare. Le mur en cet endroit se trouvait abandonné, tant la falaise était inaccessible. Il s'avança jusqu'au bord, se coucha sur le dos, et, les pieds en avant, se laissa glisser tout le long jusqu'en bas ; puis il atteignit à la nage le cap des Tombeaux, fit un grand détour par la lagune salée, et, le soir, rentra au camp des Barbares.

Le soleil s'était levé ; et, comme un lion qui s'éloigne, Mâtho descendait les chemins, en jetant autour de lui des yeux terribles.

Une rumeur indécise arrivait à ses oreilles. Elle était partie du palais et elle recommençait au loin, du côté de l'Acropole. Les uns disaient qu'on avait pris le trésor de la République dans le temple de Moloch ; d'autres parlaient d'un prêtre assassiné. On s'imaginait ailleurs que les Barbares étaient entrés dans la ville.

Mâtho, qui ne savait comment sortir des enceintes, marchait droit devant lui. On l'aperçut, alors une clameur s'éleva. Tous avaient compris ; ce fut une consternation, puis une immense colère.

Du fond des Mappales, des hauteurs de l'Acropole, des catacombes, des bords du lac, la multitude accourut. Les patriciens sortaient de leur palais, les vendeurs de leurs boutiques ; les femmes abandonnaient leurs enfants ; on saisit des épées, des haches, des bâtons ; mais l'obstacle qui avait empêché Salammbô les arrêta. Comment reprendre le voile ? Sa vue seule était un crime : il était de la nature des Dieux et son contact faisait mourir.

Sur le péristyle des temples, les prêtres désespérés se tordaient les bras. Les gardes de la Légion galopaient au hasard : on montait sur les maisons, sur les terrasses, sur l'épaule des colosses et dans la mâture des navires. Il s'avançait cependant, et à chacun de ses pas la rage augmentait, mais la terreur aussi. Les rues se vidaient à son approche, et ce torrent d'hommes qui fuyaient rejaillissait des deux côtés jusqu'au sommet des murailles. Il ne distinguait partout que des yeux grands ouverts comme pour le dévorer, des dents qui claquaient, des poings tendus, et les imprécations de Salammbô retentissaient en se multipliant.

Tout à coup, une longue flèche siffla, puis une autre, et des pierres ronflaient : mais les coups, mal dirigés (car on avait peur d'atteindre le zaïmph), passaient au-dessus de sa tête. D'ailleurs, se faisant du voile un bouclier, il le tendait à droite, à gauche, devant lui, par-derrière ; et ils n'imaginaient aucun expédient. Il marchait de plus en plus vite, s'engageant par les rues ouvertes. Elles étaient barrées avec des cordes, des chariots, des pièges ; à chaque détour il revenait en arrière. Enfin il entra sur la place de Khamon, où les Baléares avaient péri ; Mâtho s'arrêta, pâlissant comme quelqu'un qui va mourir. Il était bien perdu cette fois ; la multitude battait des mains.

Il courut jusqu'à la grande porte fermée. Elle était très haute, tout en coeur de chêne, avec des clous de fer et doublée d'airain. Mâtho se jeta contre. Le peuple trépignait de joie, voyant l'impuissance de sa fureur ; alors il prit sa sandale, cracha dessus et en souffleta les panneaux immobiles. La ville entière hurla. On oubliait le voile maintenant, et ils allaient l'écraser. Mâtho promena sur la foule de grands yeux vagues. Ses tempes battaient à l'étourdir ; il se sentait envahi par l'engourdissement des gens ivres. Tout à coup il aperçut la longue chaîne que l'on tirait pour manoeuvrer la bascule de la porte. D'un bond il s'y cramponna, en roidissant ses bras, en s'arc-boutant des pieds ; et, à la fin, les battants énormes s'entrouvrirent.

Quand il fut dehors, il retira de son cou le grand zaïmph et l'éleva sur sa tête le plus haut possible. L'étoffe, soutenue par le vent de la mer, resplendissait au soleil avec ses couleurs, ses pierreries et la figure de ses dieux. Mâtho, le portant ainsi, traversa toute la plaine jusqu'aux tentes des soldats, et le peuple, sur les murs, regardait s'en aller la fortune de Carthage.

Chapitre 6 HANNON

— " J'aurais dû l'enlever ! " disait-il le soir à Spendius.

— Il fallait la saisir, l'arracher de sa maison ! Personne n'eût osé rien contre moi ! "

Spendius ne l'écoutait pas. Etendu sur le dos, il se reposait avec délices, près d'une grande jarre pleine d'eau miellée, où de temps à autre il se plongeait la tête pour boire plus abondamment.

Mâtho reprit :

— " Que faire ? ... Comment rentrer dans Carthage ? "

— " Je ne sais ", lui dit Spendius.

Cette impassibilité l'exaspérait ; il s'écria :

— " Eh ! la faute vient de toi ! Tu m'entraînes, puis tu m'abandonnes, lâche que tu es ! Pourquoi donc t'obéirais-je ? Te crois-tu mon maître ? Ah ! prostitueur, esclave, fils d'esclave ! "

" Il grinçait des dents et levait sur Spendius sa large main.

Le Grec ne répondit pas. Un lampadaire d'argile brûlait doucement contre le mât de la tente, où le zaïmph rayonnait dans la panoplie suspendue. Tout à coup, Mâtho chaussa ses cothurnes, boucla sa jaquette à lames d'airain, prit son casque.

— " Où vas-tu ? " demanda Spendius.

— " J'y retourne ! Laisse-moi ! Je la ramènerai ! Et s'ils se présentent je les écrase comme des vipères ! Je la ferai mourir, Spendius ! " Il répéta : " Oui ! Je la tuerai ! tu verras, je la tuerai ! "

Mais Spendius, qui tendait l'oreille, arracha brusquement le zaïmph et le jeta dans un coin, en accumulant par-dessus des toisons. On entendit un murmure de voix, des torches brillèrent, et Narr'Havas entra, suivi d'une vingtaine d'hommes environ.

Ils portaient des manteaux de laine blanche, de longs poignards, des colliers de cuir, des pendants d'oreilles en bois, des chaussures en peau d'hyène ; et, restés sur le seuil, ils s'appuyaient contre leurs lances comme des pasteurs qui se reposent. Narr'Havas était le plus beau de tous ; des courroies garnies de perles serraient ses bras minces ; le cercle d'or attachant autour de sa tête son large vêtement retenait une plume d'autruche qui lui pendait par-derrière l'épaule : un continuel sourire découvrait ses dents ; ses yeux semblaient aiguisés comme des flèches, et il y avait dans toute sa personne quelque chose d'attentif et de léger.

Il déclara qu'il venait se joindre aux Mercenaires, car la République menaçait depuis longtemps son royaume. Donc il avait intérêt à secourir les Barbares, et il pouvait aussi leur être utile.

— " Je vous fournirai des éléphants (mes forêts en sont pleines), du vin, de l'huile, de l'orge, des dattes, de la poix et du soufre pour les sièges, vingt mille, fantassins et dix mille chevaux. Si je m'adresse à toi, Mâtho, c'est que la possession du zaïmph t'a rendu le premier de l'armée. " Il ajouta : " Nous sommes d'anciens amis d'ailleurs. "

Mâtho, cependant, considérait Spendius, qui écoutait assis sur les peaux de mouton, tout en faisant avec la tête de petits signes d'assentiment. Narr'Havas parlait. Il attestait les Dieux, il maudissait Carthage. Dans ses imprécations, il brisa un javelot. Tous ses hommes à la fois poussèrent un grand hurlement, et Mâtho, emporté par cette colère, s'écria qu'il acceptait l'alliance.

Alors on amena un taureau blanc avec une brebis noire, symbole du jour et symbole de la nuit. On les égorgea au bord d'une fosse. Quand elle fut pleine de sang ils y plongèrent leurs bras. Puis Narr'Havas étala sa main sur la poitrine de Mâtho, et Mâtho la sienne sur la poitrine de Narr'Havas. Ils répétèrent ce stigmate sur la toile de leurs tentes. Ensuite ils passèrent la nuit à manger, et on brûla le reste des viandes avec la peau, les ossements, les cornes et les ongles.

Une immense acclamation avait salué Mâtho lorsqu'il était revenu portant le voile de la Déesse ; ceux mêmes qui n'étaient pas de la religion chananéenne sentirent à leur vague enthousiasme qu'un Génie survenait. Quant à chercher à s'emparer du zaïmph, aucun n'y songea ; la manière mystérieuse dont il l'avait acquis suffisait, dans l'esprit des Barbares, à en légitimer la possession. Ainsi pensaient les soldats de race africaine. Les autres, dont la haine était moins vieille, ne savaient que résoudre. S'ils avaient eu des navires, ils se seraient immédiatement en allés.

Spendius, Narr'Havas et Mâtho expédièrent des hommes à toutes les tribus du territoire punique.

Carthage exténuait ces peuples. Elle en tirait des impôts exorbitants ; et les fers, la hache ou la croix punissaient les retards et jusqu'aux murmures. Il fallait cultiver ce qui convenait à la République, fournir ce qu'elle demandait ; personne n'avait le droit de posséder une arme ; quand les villages se révoltaient, on vendait les habitants ; les gouverneurs étaient estimés comme des pressoirs d'après la quantité qu'ils faisaient rendre. Puis, au-delà des régions directement soumises à Carthage, s'étendaient les alliés ne payant qu'un médiocre tribut ; derrière les alliés vagabondaient les Nomades, qu'on pouvait lâcher sur eux. Par ce système les récoltes étaient toujours abondantes, les haras savamment conduits, les plantations superbes. Le vieux Caton, un maître en fait de labours et d'esclaves, quatre-vingt-douze ans plus tard, en fut ébahi, et le cri de mort qu'il répétait dans Rome n'était que l'exclamation d'une jalousie cupide.

Durant la dernière guerre, les exactions avaient redoublé, si bien que les villes de Libye, presque toutes, s'étaient livrées à Régulus. Pour les punir, on avait exigé d'elles mille talents, vingt mille boeufs, trois cents sacs de poudre d'or, des avances de grains considérables, et les chefs des tribus avaient été mis en croix ou jetés aux lions.

Tunis surtout exécrait Carthage ! Plus vieille que la métropole, elle ne lui pardonnait point sa grandeur ; elle se tenait en face de ses murs, accroupie dans la fange, au bord de l'eau, comme une bête venimeuse qui la regardait. Les déportations, les massacres et les épidémies ne l'affaiblissaient pas. Elle avait soutenu Archagate, fils d'Agathoclès. Les Mangeurs-de-choses-immondes, tout de suite, y trouvèrent des armes.

Les courriers n'étaient pas encore partis que dans les provinces une joie universelle éclata. Sans rien attendre, on étrangla dans les bains les intendants des maisons et les fonctionnaires de la République ; on retira des cavernes les vieilles armes que l'on cachait ; avec le fer des charrues on forgea des épées ; les enfants sur les portes aiguisaient des javelots, et les femmes donnèrent leurs colliers, leurs bagues, leurs pendants d'oreilles, tout ce qui pouvait servir à la destruction de Carthage. Chacun y voulait contribuer. Les paquets de lances s'amoncelaient dans les bourgs, comme des gerbes de maïs. On expédia des bestiaux et de l'argent. Mâtho paya vite aux Mercenaires l'arrérage de leur solde, et cette idée de Spendius le fit nommer général en chef, schalischim des Barbares.

En même temps, les secours d'hommes affluaient. D'abord parurent les gens de race autochtone, puis les esclaves des campagnes. Des caravanes de Nègres furent saisies, on les arma, et des marchands qui venaient à Carthage, dans l'espoir d'un profit plus certain, se mêlèrent aux Barbares. Il arrivait incessamment des bandes nombreuses. Des hauteurs de l'Acropole on voyait l'armée qui grossissait.

Sur la plate-forme de l'aqueduc, les gardes de la Légion étaient postés en sentinelles ; et près d'eux, de distance en distance, s'élevaient des cuves en airain où bouillonnaient des flots d'asphalte. En bas, dans la plaine, la grande foule s'agitait tumultueusement. Ils étaient incertains, éprouvant cet embarras que la rencontre des murailles inspire toujours aux Barbares.

Utique et Hippo-Zaryte refusèrent leur alliance. Colonies phéniciennes comme Carthage, elles se gouvernaient elles-mêmes, et, dans les traités que concluait la République, faisaient chaque fois admettre des clauses pour les en distinguer. Cependant elles respectaient cette soeur plus forte qui les protégeait, et elles ne croyaient point qu'un amas de Barbares fût capable de la vaincre ; ils seraient au contraire exterminés. Elles désiraient rester neutres et vivre tranquilles.

Mais leur position les rendait indispensables. Utique, au fond d'un golfe, était commode pour amener dans Carthage les secours du dehors. Si Utique seule était prise, Hippo-Zaryte, à six heures plus loin sur la côte, la remplacerait, et la métropole, ainsi ravitaillée, se trouverait inexpugnable.

Spendius voulait qu'on entreprît le siège immédiatement, Narr'Havas s'y opposa ; il fallait d'abord se porter sur la frontière. C'était l'opinion des vétérans, celle de Mâtho lui-même, et il fut décidé que Spendius irait attaquer Utique, Mâtho Hippo-Zaryte ; le troisième corps d'armée, s'appuyant à Tunis, occuperait la plaine de Carthage ; Autharite s'en chargea. Quant à Narr'Havas, il devait retourner dans son royaume pour y prendre des éléphants, et avec sa cavalerie battre les routes.

Les femmes crièrent bien fort à cette décision ; elles convoitaient les bijoux des dames puniques. Les Libyens aussi réclamèrent. On les avait appelés contre Carthage, et voilà qu'on s'en allait ! Les soldats presque seuls partirent. Mâtho commandait ses compagnons avec les Ibériens, les Lusitaniens, les hommes de l'Occident et des îles, et tous ceux qui parlaient grec avaient demandé Spendius, à cause de son esprit.

La stupéfaction fut grande quand on vit l'armée se mouvoir tout à coup ; puis elle s'allongea sous la montagne de l'Ariane, par le chemin d'Utique, du côté de la mer. Un tronçon demeura devant Tunis, le reste disparut, et il reparut sur l'autre bord du golfe, à la lisière des bois, où il s'enfonça.

Ils étaient quatre-vingt mille hommes, peut-être. Les deux cités tyriennes ne résisteraient pas ; ils reviendraient sur Carthage. Déjà une armée considérable l'entamait, en occupant l'isthme par la base, et bientôt elle périrait affamée, car on ne pouvait vivre sans l'auxiliaire des provinces, les citoyens ne payant pas, comme à Rome, de contributions. Le génie politique manquait à Carthage. Son éternel souci du pain l'empêchait d'avoir cette prudence que donnent les ambitions plus hautes. Galère ancrée sur le sable Libyque, elle s'y maintenait à force de travail. Les nations, comme des flots, mugissaient autour d'elle, et la moindre tempête ébranlait cette formidable machine.

Le trésor se trouvait épuisé par la guerre romaine et par tout ce qu'on avait gaspillé, perdu, tandis qu'on marchandait les Barbares. Cependant il fallait des soldats et pas un gouvernement ne se fiait à la République. Ptolémée naguère lui avait refusé deux mille talents. D'ailleurs le rapt du voile les décourageait. Spendius l'avait bien prévu.

Mais ce peuple, qui se sentait haï, étreignait sur son coeur, son argent et ses dieux ; et son patriotisme était entretenu par la constitution même de son gouvernement.

D'abord, le pouvoir dépendait de tous sans qu'aucun fût assez fort pour l'accaparer. Les dettes particulières étaient considérées comme dettes publiques, les hommes de race chananéenne avaient le monopole du commerce ; en multipliant les bénéfices de la piraterie par ceux de l'usure, en exploitant rudement les terres, les esclaves et les pauvres, quelquefois on arrivait à la richesse. Elle ouvrait seule toutes les magistratures, et bien que la puissance et l'argent se perpétuassent dans les mêmes familles, on tolérait l'oligarchie, parce qu'on avait l'espoir d'y atteindre.

Les sociétés de commerçants, où l'on élaborait les lois, choisissaient les inspecteurs des finances, qui, au sortir de leur charge, nommaient les cent membres du Conseil des Anciens, dépendant eux-mêmes de la Grande Assemblée, réunion générale de tous les riches. Quant aux deux suffètes, à ces restes de rois, moindres que des consuls, ils étaient pris le même jour dans deux familles distinctes. On les divisait par toutes sortes de haines, pour qu'ils s'affaiblissent réciproquement. Ils ne pouvaient délibérer sur la guerre ; et, quand ils étaient vaincus, le Grand-Conseil les crucifiait.

Donc la force de Carthage émanait des Syssites, c'est-à-dire d'une grande cour au centre de Malqua, à l'endroit, disait-on, où avait abordé la première barque de matelots phéniciens, la mer depuis lors s'étant beaucoup retirée. C'était un assemblage de petites chambres d'une architecture archaïque en troncs de palmier, avec des encoignures de pierre, et séparées les unes des autres pour recevoir isolément les différentes compagnies. Les Riches se tassaient là tout le jour pour débattre leurs intérêts et ceux du gouvernement, depuis la recherche du poivre jusqu'à l'extermination de Rome. Trois fois par lune ils faisaient monter leurs lits sur la haute terrasse bordant le mur de la cour ; et d'en bas on les apercevait attablés dans les airs, sans cothurnes et sans manteaux, avec les diamants de leurs doigts qui se promenaient sur les viandes et leurs grandes boucles d'oreilles qui se penchaient entre les buires, — tous forts et gras, à moitié nus, heureux, riant et mangeant en plein azur, comme de gros requins qui s'ébattent dans la mer.

Mais à présent ils ne pouvaient dissimuler leurs inquiétudes, ils étaient trop pâles ; la foule qui les attendait aux portes, les escortait jusqu'à leurs palais pour en tirer quelque nouvelle. Comme par les temps de peste, toutes les maisons étaient fermées ; les rues s'emplissaient, se vidaient soudain ; on montait à l'Acropole : on courait vers le port ; chaque nuit le Grand-Conseil délibérait. Enfin le peuple fut convoqué sur la place de Kamon, et l'on décida de s'en remettre à Hannon, le vainqueur d'Hécatompyle.

C'était un homme dévot, rusé, impitoyable aux gens d'Afrique, un vrai Carthaginois. Ses revenus égalaient ceux des Barca. Personne n'avait une telle expérience dans les choses de l'administration.

Il décréta l'enrôlement de tous les citoyens valides, il plaça des catapultes sur les tours, il exigea des provisions d'armes exorbitantes, il ordonna même la construction de quatorze galères dont on n'avait pas besoin ; et il voulut que tout fût enregistré, soigneusement écrit. Il se faisait transporter à l'arsenal, au phare, dans le trésor des temples ; on apercevait toujours sa grande litière qui, en se balançant de gradin en gradin, montait les escaliers de l'Acropole. Dans son palais, la nuit, comme il ne pouvait dormir, pour se préparer à la bataille, il hurlait, d'une voix terrible, des manoeuvres de guerre.

Tout le monde, par excès de terreur, devenait brave. Les Riches, dès le chant des coqs, s'alignaient le long des Mappales ; et, retroussant leurs robes, ils s'exerçaient à manier la pique. Mais, faute d'instructeur, on se disputait. Ils s'asseyaient essoufflés sur les tombes, puis recommençaient. Plusieurs même s'imposèrent un régime. Les uns, s'imaginant qu'il fallait beaucoup manger pour acquérir des forces, se gorgeaient, et d'autres, incommodés par leur corpulence, s'exténuaient de jeûnes pour se faire maigrir.

Utique avait déjà réclamé plusieurs fois les secours de Carthage. Mais Hannon ne voulait point partir tant que le dernier écrou manquait aux machines de guerre. Il perdit encore trois lunes à équiper les cent douze éléphants qui logeaient dans les remparts ; c'étaient les vainqueurs de Régulus ; le peuple les chérissait ; on ne pouvait trop bien agir envers ces vieux amis. Hannon fit refondre les plaques d'airain dont on garnissait leur poitrail, dorer leurs défenses, élargir leurs tours, et tailler dans la pourpre la plus belle des caparaçons bordés de franges très lourdes. Enfin, comme on appelait leurs conducteurs des Indiens (d'après les premiers, sans doute, venus des Indes), il ordonna que tous fussent costumés à la mode indienne, c'est-à-dire avec un bourrelet blanc autour des tempes et un petit caleçon de byssus qui formait, par ses plis transversaux, comme les deux valves d'une coquille appliquée sur les hanches.

L'armée d'Autharite restait toujours devant Tunis. Elle se cachait derrière un mur fait avec la boue du lac et défendu au sommet par des broussailles épineuses. Des Nègres y avaient planté çà et là, sur de grands bâtons, d'effroyables figures, masques humains composés avec des plumes d'oiseaux, têtes de chacal ou de serpents, qui bâillaient vers l'ennemi pour l'épouvanter ; — et, par ce moyen, s'estimant invincibles, les Barbares dansaient, luttaient, jonglaient, convaincus que Carthage ne tarderait pas à périr. Un autre qu'Hannon eût écrasé facilement cette multitude qu'embarrassaient des troupeaux et des femmes. D'ailleurs, ils ne comprenaient aucune manoeuvre, et Autharite découragé n'en exigeait plus rien.

Ils s'écartaient, quand il passait en roulant ses gros yeux bleus. Puis, arrivé au bord du lac, il retirait son sayon en poil de phoque, dénouait la corde qui attachait ses longs cheveux rouges et les trempait dans l'eau. Il regrettait de n'avoir pas déserté chez les Romains avec les deux mille Gaulois du temple d'Eryx.

Souvent, au milieu du jour, le soleil perdait ses rayons tout à coup. Alors, le golfe et la pleine mer semblaient immobiles comme du plomb fondu. Un nuage de poussière brune, perpendiculairement étalé, accourait en tourbillonnant ; les palmiers se courbaient, le ciel disparaissait, on entendait rebondir des pierres sur la croupe des animaux ; et le Gaulois, les lèvres collées contre les trous de sa tente, râlait d'épuisement et de mélancolie. Il songeait à la senteur des pâturages par les matins d'automne, à des flocons de neige, aux beuglements des aurochs perdus dans le brouillard, et, fermant ses paupières, il croyait apercevoir les feux des longues cabanes, couvertes de paille, trembler sur les marais, au fond des bois.

D'autres que lui regrettaient la patrie, bien qu'elle ne fût pas aussi lointaine. En effet, les Carthaginois captifs pouvaient distinguer au-delà du golfe, sur les pentes de Byrsa, les velarium de leurs maisons, étendus dans les cours. Mais des sentinelles marchaient autour d'eux, perpétuellement. On les avait tous attachés à une chaîne commune. Chacun portait un carcan de fer, et la foule ne se fatiguait pas de venir les regarder. Les femmes montraient aux petits enfants leurs belles robes en lambeaux qui pendaient sur leurs membres amaigris.

Toutes les fois qu'Autharite considérait Giscon, une fureur le prenait au souvenir de son injure ; il l'eût tué sans le serment qu'il avait fait à Narr'Havas. Alors il rentrait dans sa tente, buvait un mélange d'orge et de cumin jusqu'à s'évanouir d'ivresse, — puis se réveillait au grand soleil, dévoré par une soif horrible.

Mâtho cependant assiégeait Hippo-Zaryte.

Mais la ville était protégée par un lac communiquant avec la mer. Elle avait trois enceintes, et sur les hauteurs qui la dominaient se développait un mur fortifié de tours. Jamais il n'avait commandé de pareilles entreprises. Puis la pensée de Salammbô l'obsédait, et il rêvait dans les plaisirs de sa beauté, comme les délices d'une vengeance qui le transportait d'orgueil. C'était un besoin de la revoir, âcre, furieux, permanent. Il songea même à s'offrir comme parlementaire, espérant qu'une fois dans Carthage il parviendrait jusqu'à elle. Souvent il faisait sonner l'assaut, et, sans rien attendre, s'élançait sur le môle qu'on tâchait d'établir dans la mer. Il arrachait les pierres avec ses mains, bouleversait, frappait, enfonçait partout son épée. Les Barbares se précipitaient pêle-mêle ; les échelles rompaient avec un grand fracas, et des masses d'hommes s'écroulaient dans l'eau qui rejaillissait en flots rouges contre les murs. Enfin, le tumulte s'affaiblissait, et les soldats s'éloignaient pour recommencer.

Mâtho allait s'asseoir en dehors des tentes ; il essuyait avec son bras sa figure éclaboussée de sang, et, tourné vers Carthage, il regardait l'horizon.

En face de lui, dans les oliviers, les palmiers, les myrtes et les platanes, s'étalaient deux larges étangs qui rejoignaient un autre lac dont on n'apercevait pas les contours. Derrière une montagne surgissaient d'autres montagnes, et au milieu du lac immense, se dressait une île toute noire et de forme pyramidale. Sur la gauche, à l'extrémité du golfe, des tas de sable semblaient de grandes vagues blondes arrêtées, tandis que la mer, plate comme un dallage de lapis-lazuli, montait insensiblement jusqu'au bord du ciel. La verdure de la campagne disparaissait par endroits sous de longues plaques jaunes ; des caroubes brillaient comme des boutons de corail ; des pampres retombaient du sommet des sycomores ; on entendait le murmure de l'eau ; des alouettes huppées sautaient, et les derniers feux du soleil doraient la carapace des tortues, sortant des joncs pour aspirer la brise.

Mâtho poussait de grands soupirs. Il se couchait à plat ventre ; il enfonçait ses ongles dans la terre et il pleurait ; il se sentait misérable, chétif, abandonné. Jamais il ne la posséderait, et il ne pouvait même s'emparer d'une ville.

La nuit, seul, dans sa tente, il contemplait le zaïmph. A quoi cette chose des Dieux lui servait-elle ? et des doutes survenaient dans la pensée du Barbare. Puis il lui semblait au contraire que le vêtement de la Déesse dépendait de Salammbô, et qu'une partie de son âme y flottait plus subtile qu'une haleine ; et il le palpait, le humait, s'y plongeait le visage, il le baisait en sanglotant. Il s'en recouvrait les épaules pour se faire illusion et se croire auprès d'elle.

Quelquefois il s'échappait tout à coup ; à la clarté des étoiles, il enjambait les soldats qui dormaient, roulés dans leurs manteaux ; puis, aux portes du camp, il s'élançait sur un cheval, et, deux heures après, il se trouvait à Utique dans la tente de Spendius.

D'abord, il parlait du siège ; mais il n'était venu que pour soulager sa douleur en causant de Salammbô :

Spendius l'exhortait à la sagesse.

— " Repousse de ton âme ces misères qui la dégradent ! Tu obéissais autrefois, à présent tu commandes une armée, et si Carthage n'est pas conquise, du moins on nous accordera des provinces, nous deviendrons des rois ! "

Mais, comment la possession du zaïmph ne leur donnait-elle pas la victoire ? D'après Spendius, il fallait attendre.

Mâtho s'imagina que le voile concernait exclusivement les hommes de race chananéenne, et, dans sa subtilité de Barbare, il se disait : — " Donc le zaïmph ne fera rien pour moi ; mais, puisqu'ils l'ont perdu, il ne fera rien pour eux. "

Ensuite, un scrupule le troubla, il avait peur, en adorant Aptouknos, le dieu des Libyens, d'offenser Moloch ; et il demanda timidement à Spendius auquel des deux il serait bon de sacrifier un homme.

— " Sacrifie toujours ! " dit Spendius, en riant.

Mâtho, qui ne comprenait point cette indifférence, soupçonna le Grec d'avoir un génie dont il ne voulait pas parler.

Tous les cultes, comme toutes les races, se rencontraient dans ces armées de Barbares, et l'on considérait les dieux des autres, car ils effrayaient aussi. Plusieurs mêlaient à leur religion natale des pratiques étrangères. On avait beau ne pas adorer les étoiles, telle constellation étant funeste ou secourable, on lui faisait des sacrifices ; une amulette inconnue, trouvée par hasard dans un péril, devenait une divinité ; ou bien c'était un nom, rien qu'un nom, et que l'on répétait sans même chercher à comprendre ce qu'il pouvait dire. Mais, à force d'avoir pillé des temples, vu quantité de nations et d'égorgements, beaucoup finissaient par ne plus croire qu'au destin et à la mort ; et chaque soir ils s'endormaient dans la placidité des bêtes féroces. Spendius aurait craché sur les images de Jupiter Olympien ; cependant il redoutait de parler haut dans les ténèbres, et il ne manquait pas, tous les jours, de se chausser d'abord du pied droit.

Il élevait, en face d'Utique, une longue terrasse quadrangulaire. Mais, à mesure qu'elle montait, le rempart grandissait aussi ; ce qui était abattu par les uns, presque immédiatement se trouvait relevé par les autres. Spendius ménageait ses hommes, rêvait des plans ; il tâchait de se rappeler les stratagèmes qu'il avait entendu raconter dans ses voyages. Pourquoi Narr'Havas ne revenait-il pas ? On était plein d'inquiétudes.

Hannon avait terminé ses apprêts. Par une nuit sans lune, il fit, sur des radeaux, traverser à ses éléphants et à ses soldats le golfe de Carthage. Puis ils tournèrent la montagne des Eaux-Chaudes pour éviter Autharite, — et continuèrent avec tant de lenteur qu'au lieu de surprendre les Barbares un matin, comme avait calculé le Suffète, on n'arriva qu'en plein soleil, dans la troisième journée.

Utique avait, du côté de l'orient, une plaine qui s'étendait jusqu'à la grande lagune de Carthage ; derrière elle, débouchait à angle droit une vallée comprise entre deux basses montagnes s'interrompant tout à coup ; les Barbares s'étaient campés plus loin sur la gauche, de manière à bloquer le port ; et ils dormaient dans leurs tentes (car ce jour-là les deux partis, trop las pour combattre, se reposaient), lorsque, au tournant des collines, l'armée carthaginoise parut.

Des goujats munis de frondes étaient espacés sur les ailes. Les gardes de la Légion, sous leurs armures en écailles d'or, formaient la première ligne, avec leurs gros chevaux sans crinière, sans poil, sans oreilles et qui avaient au milieu du front une corne d'argent pour les faire ressembler à des rhinocéros. Entre leurs escadrons, des jeunes gens, coiffés d'un petit casque, balançaient dans chaque main un javelot de frêne ; les longues piques de la lourde infanterie s'avançaient par-derrière. Tous ces marchands avaient accumulé sur leurs corps le plus d'armes possible : on en voyait qui portaient à la fois une lance, une hache, une massue, deux glaives ; d'autres, comme des porcs-épics, étaient hérissés de dards, et leurs bras s'écartaient de leurs cuirasses en lames de corne ou en plaques de fer. Enfin apparurent les échafaudages des hautes machines : carrobalistes, onagres, catapultes et scorpions, oscillant sur des chariots tirés par des mulets et des quadriges de boeufs — et à mesure que l'armée se développait, les capitaines, en haletant, couraient de droite et de gauche pour communiquer des ordres, faire joindre les files et maintenir les intervalles. Ceux des Anciens qui commandaient étaient venus avec des casques de pourpre dont les franges magnifiques s'embarrassaient dans les courroies de leurs cothurnes. Leurs visages, tout barbouillés de vermillon, reluisaient sous des casques énormes surmontés de dieux et, comme ils avaient des boucliers à bordure d'ivoire couverte de pierreries, on aurait dit des soleils qui passaient sur des murs d'airain.

Les Carthaginois manoeuvraient si lourdement que les soldats, par dérision, les engagèrent à s'asseoir. Ils criaient qu'ils allaient tout à l'heure vider leurs gros ventres, épousseter la dorure de leur peau et leur faire boire du fer.

Au haut du mât planté devant la tente de Spendius, un lambeau de toile verte apparut ; c'était le signal. L'armée carthaginoise y répondit par un grand tapage de trompettes, de cymbales, de flûtes en os d'âne et de tympanons. Déjà les Barbares avaient sauté en dehors des palissades. On était à portée de javelot, face à face.

Un frondeur baléare s'avança d'un pas, posa dans sa lanière une de ses balles d'argile, tourna son bras : un bouclier d'ivoire éclata, et les deux armées se mêlèrent.

Avec la pointe des lances, les Grecs, en piquant les chevaux aux naseaux, les firent se renverser sur leurs maîtres. Les esclaves qui devaient lancer des pierres les avaient prises trop grosses ; elles retombaient près d'eux. Les fantassins puniques, en frappant de taille avec leurs longues épées, se découvraient le flanc droit. Les Barbares enfoncèrent leurs lignes ; ils les égorgeaient à plein glaive ; ils trébuchaient sur les moribonds et les cadavres, tout aveuglés par le sang qui leur jaillissait au visage. Ce tas de piques, de casques, de cuirasses, d'épées et de membres confondus tournait sur soi-même, s'élargissant et se serrant avec des contractions élastiques. Les cohortes carthaginoises se trouèrent de plus en plus, leurs machines ne pouvaient sortir des sables ; enfin la litière du Suffète (sa grande litière à pendeloques de cristal), que l'on apercevait depuis le commencement, balancée dans les soldats comme une barque sur les flots, tout à coup sombra. Il était mort sans doute ? Les Barbares se trouvèrent seuls.

La poussière autour d'eux tombait et ils commençaient à chanter, lorsque Hannon lui-même parut au haut d'un éléphant. Il était nu-tête, sous un parasol de byssus, que portait un nègre derrière lui. Son collier, à plaques bleues battait sur les fleurs de sa tunique noire ; des cercles de diamants comprimaient ses bras énormes, et, la bouche ouverte, il brandissait une pique démesurée, épanouie par le bout comme un lotus et plus brillante qu'un miroir. Aussitôt la terre s'ébranla, — et les Barbares virent accourir, sur une seule ligne, tous les éléphants de Carthage avec leurs défenses dorées, les oreilles peintes en bleu, revêtus de bronze, et secouant par-dessus leurs caparaçons d'écarlate des tours de cuir, où dans chacune trois archers tenaient un grand arc ouvert.

A peine si les soldats avaient leurs armes ; ils s'étaient rangés au hasard. Une terreur les glaça ; ils restèrent indécis.

Déjà du haut des tours on leur jetait des javelots, des flèches, des phalariques, des masses de plomb ; quelques-uns, pour y monter, se cramponnaient aux franges des caparaçons. Avec des coutelas on leur abattait les mains, et ils tombaient à la renverse sur des glaives tendus. Les piques trop faibles se rompaient, les éléphants passaient dans les phalanges comme des sangliers dans des touffes d'herbes ; ils arrachèrent les pieux du camp avec leurs trompes, le traversèrent d'un bout à l'autre en renversant les tentes sous leurs poitrails ; tous les Barbares avaient fui. Ils se cachaient dans les collines qui bordent la vallée par où les Carthaginois étaient venus.

Hannon vainqueur se présenta devant les portes d'Utique. Il fit sonner de la trompette. Les trois Juges de la ville parurent, au sommet d'une tour, dans la baie des créneaux.

Les gens d'Utique ne voulaient point recevoir chez eux des hôtes aussi bien armés. Hannon s'emporta. Enfin ils consentirent à l'admettre avec une faible escorte.

Les rues se trouvèrent trop étroites pour les éléphants. Il fallut les laisser dehors.

Dès que le Suffète fut dans la ville, les principaux le vinrent saluer. Il se fit conduire aux étuves, et appela ses cuisiniers.

Trois heures après, il était encore enfoncé dans l'huile de cinnamome dont on avait rempli la vasque ; et, tout en se baignant, il mangeait, sur une peau de boeuf étendue, des langues de phénicoptères avec des graines de pavot assaisonnées au miel. Près de lui, son médecin qui, immobile dans une longue robe jaune, faisait de temps à autre réchauffer l'étuve, et deux jeunes garçons penchés sur les marches du bassin, lui frottaient les jambes. Mais les soins de son corps n'arrêtaient pas son amour de la chose publique, et il dictait une lettre pour le Grand-Conseil, et, comme on venait de faire des prisonniers, il se demandait quel châtiment terrible inventer.

— " Arrête ! " dit-il à un esclave qui écrivait, debout, dans le creux de sa main. " Qu'on m'en amène ! Je veux les voir. "

Et du fond de la salle emplie d'une vapeur blanchâtre où les torches jetaient des taches rouges, on poussa trois Barbares : un Samnite, un Spartiate et un Cappadocien.

— " Continue ! " dit Hannon.

— " Réjouissez-vous, lumière des Baals ! votre suffète a exterminé les chiens voraces ! Bénédictions sur la République ! Ordonnez des prières ! "

Il aperçut les captifs, et alors éclatant de rire :

— " Ah ! ah ! mes braves de Sicca ! Vous ne criez plus si fort aujourd'hui ! C'est moi ! Me reconnaissez-vous ? Où sont donc vos épées ? Quels hommes terribles, vraiment ! " Et il feignait de se vouloir cacher, comme s'il en avait peur. — " Vous demandiez des chevaux, des femmes, des terres, des magistratures, sans doute, et des sacerdoces ! Pourquoi pas ? Eh bien, je vous en fournirai, des terres, et dont jamais vous ne sortirez ! On vous mariera à des potences toutes neuves ! Votre solde ? on vous la fondra dans la bouche en lingots de plomb ! et je vous mettrai à de bonnes places, très hautes, au milieu des nuages, pour être rapprochés des aigles ! "

Les trois Barbares, chevelus et couverts de guenilles, le regardaient sans comprendre ce qu'il disait. Blessés aux genoux, on les avait saisis en leur jetant des cordes, et les grosses chaînes de leurs mains traînaient par le bout, sur les dalles. Hannon s'indigna de leur impassibilité.

— " A genoux ! à genoux ! chacals ! poussière ! vermine ! excréments ! Et ils ne répondent pas ! Assez ! taisez-vous ! Qu'on les écorche vifs ! Non ! Tout à l'heure ! "

Il soufflait comme un hippopotame, en roulant ses yeux. L'huile parfumée débordait sous la masse de son corps, et, se collant contre les écailles de sa peau, à la lueur des torches, la faisait paraître rose.

Il reprit :

— " Nous avons, pendant quatre jours, grandement souffert du soleil. Au passage du Macar, des mulets se sont perdus. Malgré leur position, le courage extraordinaire... Ah ! Demonades ! comme je souffre ! Qu'on réchauffe les briques, et qu'elles soient rouges ! "

On entendit un bruit de râteaux et de fourneaux. L'encens fuma plus fort dans les larges cassolettes, et les masseurs tout nus, qui suaient comme des éponges, lui écrasèrent sur les articulations une pâte composée avec du froment, du soufre, du vin noir, du lait de chienne, de la myrrhe, du galbanum et du styrax. Une soif incessante le dévorait ; l'homme vêtu de jaune ne céda pas à cette envie, et, lui tendant une coupe d'or où fumait un bouillon de vipère :

— " Bois ! " dit-il, " pour que la force des serpents, nés du soleil, pénètre dans la moelle de tes os, et prends courage, ô reflet des Dieux ! Tu sais d'ailleurs qu'un prêtre d'Eschmoûn observe autour du Chien les étoiles cruelles d'où dérive ta maladie. Elles pâlissent comme les macules de ta peau, et tu n'en dois pas mourir. "

— " Oh ! oui, n'est-ce pas ? " répéta le Suffète, " je n'en dois pas mourir ! " Et de ses lèvres violacées s'échappait une haleine plus nauséabonde que l'exhalaison d'un cadavre. Deux charbons semblaient brûler à la place de ses yeux, qui n'avaient plus de sourcils ; un amas de peau rugueuse lui pendait sur le front ; ses deux oreilles, en s'écartant de sa tête, commençaient à grandir, et les rides profondes qui formaient des demi-cercles autour de ses narines lui donnaient un aspect étrange et effrayant, l'air d'une bête farouche. Sa voix dénaturée ressemblait à un rugissement ; il dit :

— " Tu as peut-être raison, Demonades ? En effet, voilà bien des ulcères qui se sont fermés. Je me sens robuste. Tiens ! regarde comme je mange ! "

Et moins par gourmandise que par ostentation, et pour se prouver à lui-même qu'il se portait bien, il entamait les farces de fromage et d'origan, les poissons désossés, les courges, les huîtres, avec des oeufs, des raiforts, des truffes et des brochettes de petits oiseaux. Tout en regardant les prisonniers, il se délectait dans l'imagination de leur supplice. Cependant il se rappelait Sicca, et la rage de toutes ses douleurs s'exhalait en injures contre ces trois hommes.

— " Ah ! traîtres ! ah ! misérables ! infâmes ! maudits ! Et vous m'outragiez, moi ! moi ! le Suffète ! Leurs services, le prix de leur sang, comme ils disent ! Ah ! oui ! leur sang ! leur sang ! " Puis, se parlant à lui-même : — " Tous périront ! on n'en vendra pas un seul ! Il vaudrait mieux les conduire à Carthage ! on me verrait... mais je n'ai pas, sans doute, emporté assez de chaînes ? Ecris : envoyez-moi ... Combien sont-ils ? qu'on aille le demander à Muthumbal ! Va ! pas de pitié ! et qu'on m'apporte dans des corbeilles toutes leurs mains coupées ! "

Mais des cris bizarres, à la fois rauques et aigus, arrivaient dans la salle, par-dessus la voix d'Hannon et le retentissement des plats que l'on posait autour de lui. Ils redoublèrent, et tout à coup le barrissement furieux des éléphants éclata, comme si la bataille recommençait. Un grand tumulte entourait la ville.

Les Carthaginois n'avaient point cherché à poursuivre les Barbares. Ils s'étaient établis au pied des murs, avec leurs bagages, leurs valets, tout leur train de satrapes, et ils se réjouissaient sous leurs belles tentes à bordures de perles, tandis que le camp des Mercenaires ne faisait plus dans la plaine qu'un amas de ruines. Spendius avait repris son courage. Il expédia Zarxas vers Mâtho, parcourut les bois, rallia ses hommes (les pertes n'étaient pas considérables), — et enragés d'avoir été vaincus sans combattre, ils reformaient leurs lignes, quand on découvrit une cuve de pétrole, abandonnée sans doute par les Carthaginois. Alors Spendius fit enlever des porcs dans les métairies, les barbouilla de bitume, y mit le feu et les poussa vers Utique.

Les éléphants, effrayés par ces flammes, s'enfuirent. Le terrain montait, on leur jetait des javelots, ils revinrent en arrière ; — et à grands coups d'ivoire et sous leurs pieds, ils éventraient les Carthaginois, les étouffaient, les aplatissaient. Derrière eux, les Barbares descendaient la colline ; le camp punique, sans retranchements, dès la première charge fut saccagé, et les Carthaginois se trouvèrent écrasés contre les portes, car on ne voulut pas les ouvrir dans la peur des Mercenaires.

Le jour se levait ; on vit, du côté de l'Occident, arriver les fantassins de Mâtho. En même temps des cavaliers parurent ; c'était Narr'Havas avec ses Numides. Sautant par-dessus les ravins et les buissons, ils forçaient les fuyards comme des lévriers qui chassent des lièvres. Ce changement de fortune interrompit le Suffète. Il cria pour qu'on vînt l'aider à sortir de l'étuve.

Les trois captifs étaient toujours devant lui. Alors un nègre (le même qui, dans la bataille, portait son parasol) se pencha vers son oreille.

— " Eh bien ! . . ? ... " répondit le Suffète lentement.

— " Ah ! tue-les ! " ajouta-t-il d'un ton brusque.

L'Ethiopien tira de sa ceinture un long poignard et les trois têtes tombèrent. Une d'elles, en rebondissant parmi les épluchures du festin, alla sauter dans la vasque, et elle y flotta quelque temps, la bouche ouverte et les yeux fixes. Les lueurs du matin entraient par les fentes du mur ; les trois corps, couchés sur leur poitrine, ruisselaient à gros bouillons comme trois fontaines, et une nappe de sang coulait sur les mosaïques, sablées de poudre bleue. Le Suffète trempa sa main dans cette fange toute chaude, et il s'en frotta les genoux : c'était un remède.

Le soir venu, il s'échappa de la ville avec son escorte, puis s'engagea dans la montagne, pour rejoindre son armée.

Il parvint à en retrouver les débris.

Quatre jours après, il était à Gorza, sur le haut d'un défilé, quand les troupes de Spendius se présentèrent en bas. Vingt bonnes lances, en attaquant le front de leur colonne, les eussent facilement arrêtées ; les Carthaginois les regardèrent passer tout stupéfaits. Hannon reconnut à l'arrière-garde le roi des Numides ; Narr'Havas s'inclina pour le saluer, en faisant un signe qu'il ne comprit pas.

On s'en revint à Carthage avec toutes sortes de terreurs. On marchait la nuit seulement ; le jour on se cachait dans les bois d'oliviers. A chaque étape quelques-uns mouraient ; ils se crurent perdus plusieurs fois. Enfin ils atteignirent le cap Hermaeum, où des vaisseaux vinrent les prendre.

Hannon était si fatigué, si désespéré, — la perte des éléphants surtout l'accablait, — qu'il demanda, pour en finir, du poison à Demonades. D'ailleurs, il se sentait déjà tout étendu sur sa croix.

Carthage n'eut pas la force de s'indigner contre lui. On avait perdu quatre cent mille neuf cent soixante-douze sicles d'argent, quinze mille six cent vingt-trois shekels d'or, dix-huit éléphants, quatorze membres du Grand-Conseil, trois cents Riches, huit mille citoyens, du blé pour trois lunes, un bagage considérable et toutes les machines de guerre ! La défection de Narr'Havas était certaine, les deux sièges recommençaient. L'armée d'Autharite s'étendait maintenant de Tunis à Rhadès. Du haut de l'Acropole, on apercevait dans la campagne de longues fumées montant jusqu'au ciel ; c'étaient les châteaux des Riches qui brûlaient.

Un homme, seul, aurait pu sauver la République. On se repentit de l'avoir méconnu, et le parti de la paix, lui-même, vota les holocaustes pour le retour d'Hamilcar.

La vue du zaïmph avait bouleversé Salammbô. Elle croyait la nuit entendre les pas de la Déesse, et elle se réveillait épouvantée en jetant des cris. Elle envoyait tous les jours porter de la nourriture dans les temples. Taanach se fatiguait à exécuter ses ordres, et Schahabarim ne la quittait plus.

Chapitre 7 HAMILCAR BARCA

L'Annonciateur-des-Lunes qui veillait toutes les nuits au haut du temple d'Eschmoûn, pour signaler avec sa trompette les agitations de l'astre, aperçut un matin, du côté de l'Occident, quelque chose de semblable à un oiseau frôlant de ses longues ailes la surface de la mer.

C'était un navire à trois rangs de rames ; il y avait à la proue un cheval sculpté. Le soleil se levait ; l'Annonciateur-des-Lunes mit sa main devant les yeux ; puis saisissant à plein bras son clairon, il poussa sur Carthage un grand cri d'airain.

De toutes les maisons des gens sortirent ; on ne voulait pas en croire les paroles, on se disputait, le môle était couvert de peuple. Enfin on reconnut la trirème d'Hamilcar.

Elle s'avançait d'une façon orgueilleuse et farouche, l'antenne toute droite, la voile bombée dans la longueur du mât, en fendant l'écume autour d'elle ; ses gigantesques avirons battaient l'eau en cadence ; de temps à autre l'extrémité de sa quille, faite comme un soc de charrue, apparaissait, et sous l'éperon qui terminait sa proue, le cheval à tête d'ivoire, en dressant ses deux pieds, semblait courir sur les plaines de la mer.

Autour du promontoire, comme le vent avait cessé, la voile tomba, et l'on aperçut auprès du pilote un homme debout, tête nue ; c'était lui, le suffète Hamilcar ! Il portait autour des flancs des lames de fer qui reluisaient ; un manteau rouge s'attachant à ses épaules laissait voir ses bras ; deux perles très longues pendaient à ses oreilles, et il baissait sur sa poitrine sa barbe noire, touffue.

Cependant la galère ballottée au milieu des rochers côtoyait le môle, et la foule la suivait sur les dalles en criant :

— " Salut ! bénédiction ! Oeil de Khamon ! ah ! délivre-nous ! C'est la faute des Riches ! ils veulent te faire mourir ! Prends garde à toi, Barca ! "

Il ne répondait pas, comme si la clameur des océans et des batailles l'eût complètement assourdi. Mais quand il fut sous l'escalier qui descendait de l'Acropole, Hamilcar releva la tête et, les bras croisés, il regarda le temple d'Eschmoûn. Sa vue monta plus haut encore, dans le grand ciel pur ; d'une voix âpre, il cria un ordre à ses matelots ; la trirème bondit ; elle érafla l'idole établie à l'angle du môle pour arrêter les tempêtes ; et dans le port marchand plein d'immondices, d'éclats de bois et d'écorces de fruits, elle refoulait, éventrait les autres navires amarrés à des pieux et finissant par des mâchoires de crocodile. Le peuple accourait, quelques-uns se jetèrent à la nage.

Déjà elle se trouvait au fond, devant la porte hérissée de clous. La porte se leva, et la trirème disparut sous la voûte profonde.

Le Port-Militaire était complètement séparé de la ville ; quand des ambassadeurs arrivaient, il leur fallait passer entre deux murailles, dans un couloir qui débouchait à gauche, devant le temple de Khamoûn. Cette grande place d'eau, ronde comme une coupe, avait une bordure de quais où étaient bâties des loges abritant les navires. En avant de chacune d'elles montaient deux colonnes, portant à leur chapiteau des cornes d'Ammon, ce qui formait une continuité des portiques tout autour du bassin. Au milieu, dans une île, s'élevait une maison pour le Suffète-de-la-mer.

L'eau était si limpide que l'on apercevait le fond pavé de cailloux blancs. Le bruit des rues n'arrivait pas jusque-là, et Hamilcar, en passant, reconnaissait les trirèmes qu'il avait autrefois commandées.

Il n'en restait plus qu'une vingtaine peut-être, à l'abri, par terre, penchées sur le flanc ou droites sur la quille, avec des poupes très hautes et des proues bombées, couvertes de dorures et de symboles mystiques. Les chimères avaient perdu leurs ailes, les Dieux-Patæques leurs bras, les taureaux leurs cornes d'argent ; — et toutes à moitié dépeintes, inertes, pourries, mais pleines d'histoires et exhalant encore la senteur des voyages, comme des soldats mutilés qui revoient leur maître, elles semblaient lui dire : — " C'est nous ! c'est nous ! et toi aussi tu es vaincu ! "

Nul, hormis le Suffète-de-la-mer, ne pouvait entrer dans la maison-amiral. Tant qu'on n'avait pas la preuve de sa mort, on le considérait comme existant toujours. Les Anciens évitaient par là un maître de plus, et ils n'avaient pas manqué pour Hamilcar d'obéir à la coutume.

Le Suffète s'avança dans les appartements déserts. A chaque pas il retrouvait des armures, des meubles, des objets connus qui l'étonnaient cependant, et même sous le vestibule il y avait encore, dans une cassolette, la cendre des parfums allumés au départ pour conjurer Melkarth. Ce n'était pas ainsi qu'il espérait revenir. ! Tout ce qu'il avait fait, tout ce qu'il avait vu se déroula dans sa mémoire : les assauts, les incendies, les légions, les tempêtes Drépanum, Syracuse, Lilybée, le mont Etna, le plateau d'Eryx, cinq ans de batailles, — jusqu'au jour funeste où, déposant les armes, avait il perdu la Sicile. Puis il revoyait des bois de citronniers, des pasteurs avec des chèvres sur des montagnes grises ; et son coeur bondissait à l'imagination d'une autre Carthage établie là-bas. Ses projets, ses souvenirs bourdonnaient dans sa tête, encore étourdie par le tangage du vaisseau ; une angoisse l'accablait, et devenu faible, tout à coup, il sentit le besoin de se rapprocher des Dieux.

Alors il monta au dernier étage de sa maison ; puis ayant retiré d'une coquille d'or suspendue à son bras une spatule garnie de clous, il ouvrit une petite chambre ovale.

De minces rondelles noires, encastrées dans la muraille et transparentes comme du verre, l'éclairaient doucement. Entre les rangs de ces disques égaux, des trous étaient creusés, pareils à ceux des urnes dans les columbarium. Ils contenaient chacun une pierre ronde, obscure, et qui paraissait très lourde. Les gens d'un esprit supérieur, seuls, honoraient ces abaddirs tombés de la lune. Par leur chute, ils signifiaient les astres, le ciel, le feu ; par leur couleur, la nuit ténébreuse, et par leur densité, la cohésion des choses terrestres. Une atmosphère étouffante emplissait ce lieu mystique. Du sable marin, que le vent avait poussé sans doute à travers la porte, blanchissait un peu les pierres rondes posées dans les niches. Hamilcar, du bout de son doigt, les compta les unes après les autres ; puis il se cacha le visage sous un voile de couleur safran, et, tombant à genoux, il s'étendit par terre, les deux bras allongés.

Le jour extérieur frappait contre les feuilles de laitier noir. Des arborescences, des monticules, des tourbillons, de vagues animaux se dessinaient dans leur épaisseur diaphane ; et la lumière arrivait, effrayante et pacifique cependant, comme elle doit être par-derrière le soleil, dans les mornes espaces des créations futures. Il s'efforçait à bannir de sa pensée toutes les formes, tous les symboles et les appellations des Dieux, afin de mieux saisir l'esprit immuable que les apparences dérobaient. Quelque chose des vitalités planétaires le pénétrait, tandis qu'il sentait pour la mort et pour tous les hasards un dédain plus savant et plus intime. Quand il se releva, il était plein d'une intrépidité sereine, invulnérable à la miséricorde, à la crainte, et comme sa poitrine étouffait, il alla sur le sommet de la tour qui dominait Carthage.

La ville descendait en se creusant par une courbe longue, avec ses coupoles, ses temples, ses toits d'or, ses maisons, ses touffes de palmiers, çà et là, ses boules de verre d'où jaillissaient des feux, et les remparts faisaient comme la gigantesque bordure de cette corne d'abondance qui s'épanchait vers lui. Il apercevait en bas les ports, les places, l'intérieur des cours, le dessin des rues, les hommes tout petits presque à ras des dalles. Ah ! Si Hannon n'était pas arrivé trop tard le matin des îles Aegates ? Ses yeux plongèrent dans l'extrême horizon, et il tendit du côté de Rome ses deux bras frémissants.

La multitude occupait les degrés de l'Acropole. Sur la place de Khamon on se poussait pour voir le Suffète sortir, les terrasses peu à peu se chargeaient de monde ; quelques-uns le reconnurent, on le saluait, il se retira, afin d'irriter mieux l'impatience du peuple.

Hamilcar trouva en bas, dans la salle, les hommes les plus importants de son parti : Istatten, Subeldia, Hictamon, Yeoubas et d'autres. Ils lui racontèrent tout ce qui s'était passé depuis la conclusion de la paix : l'avarice des Anciens, le départ des soldats, leur retour, leurs exigences, la capture de Giscon, le vol du zaïmph, Utique secourue, puis abandonnée ; mais aucun n'osa lui dire les événements qui le concernaient. Enfin on se sépara, pour se revoir pendant la nuit à l'assemblée des Anciens, dans le temple de Moloch.

Ils venaient de sortir quand un tumulte s'éleva en dehors, à la porte. Malgré les serviteurs, quelqu'un voulait entrer ; et comme le tapage redoublait, Hamilcar commanda d'introduire l'inconnu.

On vit paraître une vieille négresse, cassée, ridée, tremblante, l'air stupide, et enveloppée jusqu'aux talons dans de larges voiles bleus. Elle s'avança en face du Suffète, ils se regardèrent l'un l'autre quelque temps ; tout à coup Hamilcar tressaillit ; sur un geste de sa main, les esclaves s'en allèrent. Alors, lui faisant signe de marcher avec précaution, il l'entraîna par le bras dans une chambre lointaine.

La négresse se jeta par terre, à ses pieds pour les baiser ; il la releva brutalement.

— " Où l'as-tu laissé, Iddibal ? "

— " Là-bas, Maître " ; et en se débarrassant de ses voiles, avec sa manche elle se frotta la figure ; la couleur noire, le tremblement sénile, la taille courbée, tout disparut. C'était un robuste vieillard, dont la peau semblait tannée par le sable, le vent et la mer. Une houppe de cheveux blancs se levait sur son crâne, comme l'aigrette d'un oiseau ; et, d'un coup d'oeil ironique, il montrait par terre le déguisement tombé.

— " Tu as bien fait, Iddibal ! C'est bien ! - " Puis, comme le perçant de son regard aigu : " Aucun encore ne se doute ? "

Le vieillard lui jura par les Kabyres que le mystère était gardé. Ils ne quittaient pas leur cabane à trois jours d'Hadrumète, rivage peuplé de tortues avec des palmiers sur la dune. — " Et selon ton ordre, ô Maître ! je lui apprends à lancer des javelots et à conduire des attelages ! "

— " Il est fort, n'est-ce pas ? "

— " Oui, Maître, et intrépide aussi ! Il n'a peur ni des serpents, ni du tonnerre, ni des fantômes. Il court pieds nus, comme un pâtre, sur le bord des précipices. "

— " Parle ! Parle ! "

— " Il invente des pièges pour les bêtes farouches. L'autre lune, croirais-tu, il a surpris un aigle ; il le traînait, et le sang de l'oiseau et le sang de l'enfant s'éparpillaient dans l'air en larges gouttes, telles que des roses emportées. La bête, furieuse, l'enveloppait du battement de ses ailes ; il l'étreignait contre sa poitrine, et à mesure qu'elle agonisait ses rires redoublaient, éclatants et superbes comme des chocs d'épées. "

Hamilcar baissait la tête, ébloui par ces présages de grandeur.

— " Mais, depuis quelque temps, une inquiétude l'agite. Il regarde au loin les voiles qui passent sur la mer ; il est triste, il repousse le pain, il s'informe des Dieux et il veut connaître Carthage ! "

— " Non ! non ! pas encore ! " s'écria le Suffète.

Le vieil esclave parut savoir le péril qui effrayait Hamilcar, et il reprit :

— " Comment le retenir ? Il me faut déjà lui faire des promesses, et je ne suis venu à Carthage que pour lui acheter un poignard à manche d'argent avec des perles tout autour. " Puis il conta qu'ayant aperçu le Suffète sur la terrasse, il s'était donné aux gardiens du port pour une des femmes de Salammbô, afin de pénétrer jusqu'à lui.

Hamilcar resta longtemps comme perdu dans ses délibérations ; enfin il dit :

— " Demain tu te présenteras à Mégara, au coucher du soleil, derrière les fabriques de pourpre, en imitant par trois fois le cri d'un chacal. Si tu ne me vois pas, le premier jour de chaque lune tu reviendras à Carthage. N'oublie rien ! Aime-le ! Maintenant, tu peux lui parler d'Hamilcar. "

L'esclave reprit son costume, et ils sortirent ensemble de la maison et du port.

Hamilcar continua seul à pied, sans escorte, car les réunions des Anciens étaient, dans les circonstances extraordinaires, toujours secrètes, et l'on s'y rendait mystérieusement.

D'abord il longea la face orientale de l'Acropole, passa ensuite par le Marché-aux-herbes, les galeries de Kinsido, le Faubourg-des- parfumeurs. Les rares lumières s'éteignaient, les rues plus larges se faisaient silencieuses, puis des ombres glissèrent dans les ténèbres. Elles le suivaient, d'autres survinrent, et toutes se dirigeaient comme lui du côté des Mappales.

Le temple de Moloch était bâti au pied d'une gorge escarpée, dans un endroit sinistre. On n'apercevait d'en bas que de hautes murailles montant indéfiniment, telles que les parois d'un monstrueux tombeau. La nuit était sombre, un brouillard grisâtre semblait peser sur la mer. Elle battait contre la falaise avec un bruit de râles et de sanglots ; et des ombres peu à peu s'évanouissaient comme si elles eussent passé à travers les murs.

Mais, sitôt qu'on avait franchi la porte, on se trouvait dans une vaste cour quadrangulaire, que bordaient des arcades. Au milieu, se levait une masse d'architecture à huit pans égaux. Des coupoles la surmontaient en se tassant autour d'un second étage qui supportait une manière de rotonde, d'où s'élançait un cône à courbe rentrante, terminé par une boule au sommet.

Des feux brûlaient dans des cylindres en filigrane emmanchés à des perches que portaient des hommes. Ces lueurs vacillaient sous les bourrasques du vent et rougissaient les peignes d'or fixant à la nuque leurs cheveux tressés. Ils couraient, s'appelaient pour recevoir les Anciens.

Sur les dalles, de place en place, étaient accroupis comme des sphinx des lions énormes, symboles vivants du Soleil dévorateur. Ils sommeillaient, les paupières entre-closes. Mais réveillés par les pas et par les voix, ils se levaient lentement, venaient vers les Anciens, qu'ils reconnaissaient à leur costume, se frottaient contre leurs cuisses en bombant le dos avec des bâillements sonores ; la vapeur de leur haleine passait sur la lumière des torches. L'agitation redoubla, des portes se fermèrent, tous les prêtres s'enfuirent, et les Anciens disparurent sous les colonnes qui faisaient autour du temple un vestibule profond.

Elles étaient disposées de façon à reproduire par leurs rangs circulaires, compris les uns dans les autres, la période saturnienne contenant les années, les années les mois, les mois les jours, et se touchaient à la fin contre la muraille du sanctuaire.

C'était là que les Anciens déposaient leurs bâtons en corne de narval, — car une loi toujours observée punissait de mort celui qui entrait à la séance avec une arme quelconque. Plusieurs portaient au bas de leur vêtement une déchirure arrêtée par un galon de pourpre, pour bien montrer qu'en pleurant la mort de leurs proches ils n'avaient point ménagé leurs habits, et ce témoignage d'affliction empêchait la fente de s'agrandir. D'autres gardaient leur barbe enfermée dans un petit sac de peau violette, que deux cordons attachaient aux oreilles. Tous s'abordèrent en s'embrassant poitrine contre poitrine. Ils entouraient Hamilcar, ils le félicitaient ; on aurait dit des frères qui revoient leur frère.

Ces hommes étaient généralement trapus, avec des nez recourbés comme ceux des colosses assyriens. Quelques-uns cependant, par leurs pommettes plus saillantes, leur taille plus haute et leurs pieds plus étroits, trahissaient une origine africaine, des ancêtres nomades. Ceux qui vivaient continuellement au fond de leurs comptoirs avaient le visage pâle ; d'autres gardaient sur eux comme la sévérité du désert, et d'étranges joyaux scintillaient à tous les doigts de leurs mains, hâlés par les soleils inconnus. On distinguait des navigateurs au balancement de leur démarche, tandis que les hommes d'agriculture sentaient le pressoir, les herbes sèches et la sueur de mulet. Ces vieux pirates faisaient labourer des campagnes, ces ramasseurs d'argent équipaient des navires, ces propriétaires de culture nourrissaient des esclaves exerçant des métiers. Tous étaient savants dans les disciplines religieuses, experts en stratagèmes, impitoyables et riches. Ils avaient l'air fatigués par de longs soucis. Leurs yeux pleins de flammes regardaient avec défiance, et l'habitude des voyages et du mensonge, du trafic et du commandement, donnait à toute leur personne un aspect de ruse et de violence, une sorte de brutalité discrète et convulsive. D'ailleurs, l'influence du Dieu les assombrissait.

Ils passèrent d'abord par une salle voûtée, qui avait la forme d'un oeuf. Sept portes, correspondant aux sept planètes, étalaient contre sa muraille sept carrés de couleur différente. Après une longue chambre, ils entrèrent dans une autre salle pareille.

Un candélabre tout couvert de fleurs ciselées brûlait au fond, et chacune de ses huit branches en or portait dans un calice de diamants une mèche de byssus. Il était posé sur la dernière des longues marches qui allaient vers un grand autel, terminé aux angles par des cornes d'airain. Deux escaliers latéraux conduisaient à son sommet aplati ; on n'en voyait pas les pierres ; c'était comme une montagne de cendres accumulées, et quelque chose d'indistinct fumait dessus, lentement. Puis au-delà, plus haut que le candélabre, et bien plus haut que l'autel, se dressait le Moloch, tout en fer, avec sa poitrine d'homme où bâillaient des ouvertures. Ses ailes ouvertes s'étendaient sur le mur, ses mains allongées descendaient jusqu'à terre ; trois pierres noires, que bordait un cercle jaune, figuraient trois prunelles à son front, et, comme pour beugler, il levait dans un effort terrible sa tête de taureau.

Autour de l'appartement étaient rangés des escabeaux d'ébène. Derrière chacun d'eux, une tige en bronze posant sur trois griffes supportait un flambeau. Toutes ces lumières se reflétaient dans les losanges de nacre qui pavaient la salle. Elle était si haute que la couleur rouge des murailles, en montant vers la voûte, se faisait noire, et les trois yeux de l'idole apparaissaient tout en haut, comme des étoiles à demi perdues dans la nuit.

Les Anciens s'assirent sur les escabeaux d'ébène, ayant mis par-dessus leur tête la queue de leur robe. Ils restaient immobiles, les mains croisées dans leurs larges manches, et le dallage de nacre semblait un fleuve lumineux qui, ruisselant de l'autel vers la porte, coulait sous leurs pieds nus.

Les quatre pontifes se tenaient au milieu, dos à dos, sur quatre sièges d'ivoire formant la croix, le grand-prêtre d'Eschmoûn en robe d'hyacinthe, le grand-prêtre de Tanit en robe de lin blanc, le grand-prêtre de Khamon en robe de laine fauve, et le grand-prêtre de Moloch en robe de pourpre.

Hamilcar s'avança vers le candélabre. Il tourna tout autour, en considérant les mèches qui brûlaient, puis jeta sur elles une poudre parfumée ; des flammes violettes parurent à l'extrémité des branches.

Alors une voix aiguë s'éleva, une autre y répondit ; et les cent Anciens, les quatre pontifes, et Hamilcar debout, tous à la fois, entonnèrent un hymne, et répétant toujours les mêmes syllabes et renforçant les sons, leurs voix montaient, éclatèrent, devinrent terribles, puis, d'un seul coup, se turent.

On attendit quelque temps. Enfin Hamilcar tira de sa poitrine une petite statuette à trois têtes, bleue comme du saphir, et il la posa devant lui. C'était l'image de la vérité, le génie même de sa parole. Puis il la replaça dans son sein, et tous, comme saisis d'une colère soudaine, crièrent :

— " Ce sont tes bons amis les Barbares ! Traître ! infâme ! Tu reviens pour nous voir périr, n'est-ce pas ? Laissez-le parler ! - " — " Non ! non ! "

Ils se vengeaient de la contrainte où le cérémonial politique les avait tout à l'heure obligés ; : et bien qu'ils eussent souhaité le retour d'Hamilcar, ils s'indignaient maintenant de ce qu'il n'avait point prévenu leurs désastres ou plutôt ne les avait pas subis comme eux.

Quand le tumulte fut calmé, le pontife de Moloch se leva.

— " Nous te demandons pourquoi tu n'es pas revenu à Carthage ? "

— " Que vous importe ! " répondit dédaigneusement le Suffète.

Leurs cris redoublèrent.

— " De quoi m'accusez-vous ! J'ai mal conduit la guerre, peut-être ? Vous avez vu l'ordonnance de mes batailles, vous autres qui laissez commodément à des Barbares... "

— " Assez, assez ! "

Il reprit, d'une voix basse, pour se faire mieux écouter :

— " Oh ! cela est vrai ! Je me trouve, lumières des Baals ; il en est parmi vous d'intrépides ! Giscon, lève-toi ! "

" Et parcourant la marche de l'autel, les paupières à demi fermées, comme pour chercher quelqu'un, il répéta : " Lève-toi, Giscon ! tu peux m'accuser, ils te défendront ! Mais où est-il ? " Puis, comme se ravisant : " Ah ! dans sa maison, sans doute ? entouré de ses fils, commandant à ses esclaves, heureux, et comptant sur le mur les colliers d'honneur que la patrie lui a donnés ? "

Ils s'agitaient avec des haussements d'épaules, comme flagellés par les lanières. — " Vous ne savez même pas s'il est vivant ou s'il est mort ! " Et sans se soucier de leurs clameurs, il disait qu'en abandonnant le Suffète, c'était la République qu'on avait abandonnée. De même la paix romaine, si avantageuse qu'elle leur parût, était plus funeste que vingt batailles. Quelques-uns applaudirent, les moins riches du Conseil, suspects d'incliner toujours vers le peuple ou vers la tyrannie. Leurs adversaires, chefs des Syssites et administrateurs, en triomphaient par le nombre ; les plus considérables s'étaient rangés près d'Hannon, qui siégeait à l'autre bout de la salle, devant la haute porte, fermée par une tapisserie d'hyacinthe.

Il avait peint avec du fard les ulcères de sa figure. Mais la poudre d'or de ses cheveux lui était tombée sur les épaules, où elle faisait deux plaques brillantes, et ils paraissaient blanchâtres, fins et crépus comme de la laine. Des linges imbibés d'un parfum gras qui dégouttelait sur les dalles, enveloppaient ses mains, et sa maladie sans doute avait considérablement augmenté, car ses yeux disparaissaient sous les plis de ses paupières. Pour voir, il lui fallait se renverser la tête. Ses partisans l'engageaient à parler. Enfin, d'une voix rauque et hideuse :

— " Moins d'arrogance, Barca ! Nous avons tous été vaincus ! Chacun supporte son malheur ! résigne-toi ! "

— " Apprends-nous plutôt ", dit en souriant Hamilcar, " comment tu as conduit tes galères dans la flotte romaine ? "

— " J'étais chassé par le vent ", répondit Hannon.

— " Tu fais comme le rhinocéros qui piétine dans sa fiente : tu étales ta sottise ! tais-toi ! " Et ils commencèrent à s'incriminer sur la bataille des Iles Aegates.

Hannon l'accusait de n'être pas venu à sa rencontre.

— " Mais c'eût été dégarnir Eryx. Il fallait prendre le large ; qui t'empêchait ? Ah ! j'oubliais ! tous les éléphants ont peur de la mer ! "

Les gens d'Hamilcar trouvèrent la plaisanterie si bonne qu'ils poussèrent de grands rires. La voûte en retentissait, comme si l'on eût frappé des tympanons.

Hannon dénonça l'indignité d'un tel outrage ; cette maladie lui étant survenue par un refroidissement au siège d'Hécatompyle, et des pleurs coulaient sur sa face comme une pluie d'hiver sur une muraille en ruine.

Hamilcar reprit :

— " Si vous m'aviez aimé autant que celui-là, il y aurait maintenant une grande joie dans Carthage ! Combien de fois n'ai-je pas crié vers vous ! et toujours vous me refusiez de l'argent ! "

— " Nous en avions besoin ", dirent les chefs des Syssites.

— " Et quand mes affaires étaient désespérées, nous avons bu l'urine des mulets et mangé les courroies de nos sandales, — quand j'aurais voulu que les brins d'herbe fussent des soldats, et faire des bataillons avec la pourriture de nos morts, vous rappeliez chez vous ce qui me restait de vaisseaux ! "

— " Nous ne pouvions pas tout risquer ", répondit Baat-Baal, possesseur de mines d'or dans la Gétulie-Darytienne.

— " Que faisiez-vous cependant, ici, à Carthage, dans vos maisons, derrière vos murs ? Il y a des Gaulois sur l'Eridan qu'il fallait pousser, des Chananéens à Cyrène qui seraient venus, et tandis que les Romains envoient à Ptolémée des ambassadeurs... "

— " Il nous vante les Romains, à présent ! " Quelqu'un lui cria : " Combien t'ont-ils payé pour les défendre ? "

— " Demande-le aux plaines du Brutium, aux ruines de Locres, de Métaponte et d'Héraclée ! J'ai brûlé tous leurs arbres, j'ai pillé tous leurs temples, et jusqu'à la mort des petits-fils de leurs petits-fils... "

— " Eh ! tu déclames comme un rhéteur ! " fit Kapouras, un marchand très illustre. " Que veux-tu donc ? "

— " Je dis qu'il faut être plus ingénieux ou plus terrible ! Si l'Afrique entière rejette votre joug, c'est que vous ne savez pas, maîtres débiles, l'attacher à ses épaules ! Agathoclès, Régulus, Coepio, tous les hommes hardis n'ont qu'à débarquer pour la prendre ; et quand les Libyens qui sont à l'Orient s'entendront avec les Numides qui sont à l'Occident, et que les Nomades viendront du sud et les Romains du nord ... "

Un cri d'horreur s'éleva. " Oh ! vous frapperez vos poitrines, vous vous roulerez dans la poussière et vous déchirerez vos manteaux ! N'importe ! il faudra s'en aller tourner la meule dans Suburre et faire la vendange sur les collines du Latium. "

Ils se battaient la cuisse droite pour marquer leur scandale, et les manches de leur robe se levaient comme de grandes ailes d'oiseaux effarouchés. Hamilcar, emporté par un esprit, continuait, debout sur la plus haute marche de l'autel, frémissant, terrible ; il levait les bras, et les rayons du candélabre qui brûlait derrière lui passaient entre ses doigts comme des javelots d'or.

— " Vous perdrez vos navires, vos campagnes, vos chariots, vos lits suspendus, et vos esclaves qui vous frottent les pieds ! Les chacals se coucheront dans vos palais, la charrue retournera vos tombeaux. Il n'y aura plus que le cri des aigles et l'amoncellement des ruines. Tu tomberas, Carthage ! "

Les quatre pontifes étendirent leurs mains pour écarter l'anathème. Tous s'étaient levés. Mais le Suffète-de-la-mer, magistrat sacerdotal sous la protection du Soleil, était inviolable tant que l'assemblée des Riches ne l'avait pas jugé. Une épouvante s'attachait à l'autel. Ils reculèrent.

Hamilcar ne parlait plus. L'oeil fixe et la face aussi pâle que les perles de sa tiare, il haletait, presque effrayé par lui-même et l'esprit perdu dans des visions funèbres. De la hauteur où il était, tous les flambeaux sur les tiges de bronze lui semblaient une vaste couronne de feux, posée à ras des dalles ; des fumées noires, s'en échappant, montaient dans les ténèbres de la voûte ; et le silence pendant quelques minutes fut tellement profond qu'on entendait au loin le bruit de la mer.

Puis les Anciens se mirent à s'interroger. Leurs intérêts, leur existence se trouvait attaquée par les Barbares. Mais on ne pouvait les vaincre sans le secours du Suffète et cette considération, malgré leur orgueil, leur fit oublier toutes les autres. On prit à part ses amis.

Il y eut des réconciliations intéressées, des sous-entendus et des promesses.

Hamilcar ne voulait plus se mêler d'aucun gouvernement. Tous le conjurèrent. Ils le suppliaient : et comme le mot de trahison revenait dans leurs discours, il s'emporta. Le seul traître, c'était le Grand-Conseil, car l'engagement des soldats expirant avec la guerre, ils devenaient libres dès que la guerre était finie ; : il exalta même leur bravoure et tous les avantages qu'on en pourrait tirer en les intéressant à la République par des donations, des privilèges.

Alors Magdassan un ancien Gouverneur de provinces, dit en roulant ses yeux jaunes :

— " Vraiment, Barca, à force de voyager, tu es devenu un Grec ou un Latin, je ne sais quoi ! Que parles-tu de récompenses pour ces hommes ? Périssent dix mille Barbares plutôt qu'un seul d'entre nous ! "

Les Anciens approuvaient de la tête en murmurant :

— " Oui, faut-il tant se gêner ? On en trouve toujours ! "

— " Et l'on s'en débarrasse commodément, n'est-ce pas ? On les abandonne, ainsi que vous avez fait en Sardaigne. On avertit l'ennemi du chemin qu'ils doivent prendre, comme pour ces Gaulois dans la Sicile, ou bien on les débarque au milieu de la mer. En revenant, j'ai vu le rocher tout blanc de leurs os ! "

— " Quel malheur ! " fit impudemment Kapouras.

— " Est-ce qu'ils n'ont pas cent fois tourné à l'ennemi ! " exclamaient les autres.

Hamilcar s'écria :

— " Pourquoi donc, malgré vos lois, les avez-vous rappelés à Carthage ? Et quand ils sont dans votre ville, pauvres et nombreux au milieu de toutes vos richesses, l'idée ne vous vient pas de les affaiblir par la moindre division ! Ensuite vous les congédiez avec leurs femmes et avec leurs enfants, tous, sans garder un seul otage ! Comptiez-vous qu'ils s'assassineraient pour vous épargner la douleur de tenir vos serments ? Vous les haïssez, parce qu'ils sont forts ! Vous me haïssez encore plus, moi, leur maître ! Oh ! je l'ai senti, tout à l'heure, quand vous me baisiez les mains, et que vous vous reteniez tous pour ne pas les mordre ! "

Si les lions qui dormaient dans la cour fussent entrés en hurlant, la clameur n'eût pas été plus épouvantable. Mais le pontife d'Eschmoûn se leva, et, les deux genoux l'un contre l'autre, les coudes au corps, tout droit et les mains à demi ouvertes, il dit :

— " Barca, Carthage a besoin que tu prennes contre les Mercenaires le commandement général des forces puniques ! "

— " Je refuse ", répondit Hamilcar.

— " Nous te donnerons pleine autorité ! - " crièrent les chefs des Syssites.

— " Non ! "

— " Sans aucun contrôle, sans partage, tout l'argent que tu voudras, tous les captifs, tout le butin, cinquante zerets de terre par cadavre d'ennemi. "

— " Non ! non ! parce qu'il est impossible de vaincre avec vous ! "

— " Il en a peur. "

— " Parce que vous êtes lâches, avares, ingrats, pusillanimes et fous ! "

— Il les ménage !

— " Pour se mettre à leur tête ", dit quelqu'un.

— " Et revenir sur nous ", dit un autre ; et du fond de la salle, Hannon hurla :

— " Il veut se faire roi ! "

Alors ils bondirent, en renversant les sièges et les flambeaux : leur foule s'élança vers l'autel ; ils brandissaient des poignards. Mais, fouillant sous ses manches, Hamilcar tira deux larges coutelas ; et à demi courbé, le pied gauche en avant, les yeux flamboyants, les dents serrées, il les défiait, immobile sous le candélabre d'or.

Ainsi, par précaution, ils avaient apporté des armes ; c'était un crime ; ils se regardèrent les uns les autres, effrayés. Comme tous étaient coupables, chacun bien vite se rassura, et peu à peu, tournant le dos au Suffète, ils redescendirent, enragés d'humiliation. Pour la seconde fois, ils reculaient devant lui. Pendant quelque temps, ils restèrent debout. Plusieurs qui s'étaient blessé les doigts les portaient à leur bouche ou les roulaient doucement dans le bas de leur manteau, et ils allaient s'en aller quand Hamilcar entendit ces paroles :

— " Eh ! c'est une délicatesse pour ne pas affliger sa fille ! "

Une voix plus haute s'éleva :

— " Sans doute, puisqu'elle prend ses amants parmi les Mercenaires ! "

D'abord il chancela, puis ses yeux cherchèrent rapidement Schahabarim. Mais, seul, le prêtre de Tanit était resté à sa place ; et Hamilcar n'aperçut de loin que son haut bonnet. Tous lui ricanaient à la face. A mesure qu'augmentait son angoisse, leur joie redoublait, et, au milieu des huées, ceux qui étaient par-derrière criaient :

— " On l'a vu sortir de sa chambre ! "

— " Un matin du mois de Tammouz ! "

— " C'est le voleur du zaïmph ! "

— " Un homme très beau ! "

— " Plus grand que toi ! "

Il arracha sa tiare, insigne de sa dignité, — sa tiare à huit rangs mystiques dont le milieu portait une coquille d'émeraude — et à deux mains, de toutes ses forces, il la lança par terre ; les cercles d'or en se brisant rebondirent, et les perles sonnèrent sur les dalles. Ils virent alors sur la blancheur de son front une longue cicatrice ; elle s'agitait comme un serpent entre ses sourcils ; tous ses membres tremblaient. Il monta un des escaliers latéraux qui conduisaient sur l'autel et il marchait dessus ! C'était se vouer au Dieu, s'offrir en holocauste. Le mouvement de son manteau agitait les lueurs du candélabre plus bas que ses sandales, et la poudre fine, soulevée par ses pas, l'entourait comme un nuage jusqu'au ventre. Il s'arrêta entre les jambes du colosse d'airain. Il prit dans ses mains deux poignées de cette poussière dont la vue seule faisait frissonner d'horreur tous les Carthaginois, et il dit :

— " Par les cent flambeaux de vos Intelligences ! par les huit feux des Kabyres ! par les étoiles, les météores et les volcans ! par tout ce qui brûle ! par la soif du Désert et la salure de l'Océan ! par la caverne d'Hadrumète et l'empire des Ames ! par l'extermination ! par la cendre de vos fils, et la cendre des frères de vos aïeux, avec qui maintenant je confonds la mienne ! vous, les Cent du Conseil de Carthage, vous avez menti en accusant ma fille ! Et moi, Hamilcar Barca, Suffète-de-la-mer, Chef des Riches et Dominateur du peuple, devant Moloch-à-tête-de- taureau, je jure... " On s'attendait à quelque chose d'épouvantable, mais il reprit d'une voix plus haute et plus calme : " Que même je ne lui en parlerai pas ! "

Les serviteurs sacrés, portant des peignes d'or, entrèrent, — les uns avec des éponges de pourpre et les autres avec des branches de palmier. Ils relevèrent le rideau d'hyacinthe étendu devant la porte : et par l'ouverture de cet angle, on aperçut au fond des autres salles le grand ciel rose qui semblait continuer la voûte, en s'appuyant à l'horizon sur la mer toute bleue. Le soleil, sortant des flots, montait. Il frappa tout à coup contre la poitrine du colosse d'airain, divisé en sept compartiments que fermaient des grilles. Sa gueule aux dents rouges s'ouvrait dans un horrible bâillement ; ses naseaux énormes se dilataient, le grand jour l'animait, lui donnait un air terrible et impatient, comme s'il avait voulu bondir au-dehors pour se mêler avec l'astre, le Dieu, et parcourir ensemble les immensités.

Cependant les flambeaux répandus par terre brûlaient encore, en allongeant çà et là sur les pavés de nacre comme des taches de sang. Les Anciens chancelaient, épuisés ; ils aspiraient à pleins poumons la fraîcheur de l'air ; la sueur coulait sur leurs faces livides ; à force d'avoir crié, ils ne s'entendaient plus. Mais leur colère contre le Suffète n'était point calmée ; en manière d'adieux ils lui jetaient des menaces, et Hamilcar leur répondait :

— " A la nuit prochaine, Barca, dans le temple d'Eschmoûn ! "

— " J'y serai ! "

— " Nous te ferons condamner par les Riches ! "

— " Et moi par le peuple ! "

— " Prends garde de finir sur la croix ! "

— " Et vous, déchirés dans les rues ! "

Dès qu'ils furent sur le seuil de la cour, ils reprirent un calme maintien.

Leurs coureurs et leurs cochers les attendaient à la porte. La plupart s'en allèrent sur des mules blanches. Le Suffète sauta dans son char, prit les rênes ; les deux bêtes, courbant leur encolure et frappant en cadence les cailloux qui rebondissaient, montèrent au grand galop toute la voie des Mappales, et le vautour d'argent, à la pointe du timon, semblait voler tant le char passait vite.

La route traversait un champ, planté de longues dalles, aiguës par le sommet, telles que des pyramides, et qui portaient, entaillée à leur milieu, une main ouverte comme si le mort couché dessous l'eût tendue vers le ciel pour réclamer quelque chose. Ensuite, étaient disséminées des cabanes en terre, en branchages, en claies de joncs, toutes de forme conique. De petits murs en cailloux, des rigoles d'eau vive, des cordes de sparterie, des haies de nopals séparaient irrégulièrement ces habitations, qui se tassaient de plus en plus, en s'élevant vers les jardins du Suffète. Mais Hamilcar tendait ses yeux sur une grande tour dont les trois étages faisaient trois monstrueux cylindres, le premier bâti en pierres, le second en briques, et le troisième, tout en cèdre, — supportant une coupole de cuivre sur vingt-quatre colonnes de genévrier, d'où retombaient, en manière de guirlandes, des chaînettes d'airain entrelacées. Ce haut édifice dominait les bâtiments qui s'étendaient à droite, les entrepôts, la maison-de-commerce, tandis que le palais des femmes se dressait au fond des cyprès, — alignés comme deux murailles de bronze.

Quand le char retentissant fut entré par la porte étroite, il s'arrêta sous un large hangar, où des chevaux, retenus à des entraves, mangeaient des tas d'herbes coupées.

Tous les serviteurs accoururent. Ils faisaient une multitude, ceux qui travaillaient dans les campagnes, par terreur des soldats, ayant été ramenés à Carthage. Les laboureurs, vêtus de peaux de bêtes, traînaient des chaînes rivées à leurs chevilles ; les ouvriers des manufactures de pourpre avaient les bras rouges comme des bourreaux ; les marins, des bonnets verts ; les pêcheurs, des colliers de corail ; les chasseurs, un filet sur l'épaule ; et les gens de Mégara, des tuniques blanches ou noires, des caleçons de cuir, des calottes de paille, de feutre ou de toile, selon leur service ou leurs industries différentes.

Par-derrière se pressait une populace en haillons. Ils vivaient, ceux-là, sans aucun emploi, loin des appartements, dormaient la nuit dans les jardins, dévoraient les restes des cuisines, — moisissure humaine qui végétait à l'ombre du palais. Hamilcar les tolérait, par prévoyance encore plus que par dédain. Tous, en témoignage de joie, s'étaient mis une fleur à l'oreille, et beaucoup d'entre eux ne l'avaient jamais vu.

Mais des hommes, coiffés comme des sphinx et munis de grands bâtons, s'élancèrent dans la foule, en frappant de droite et de gauche. C'était pour repousser les esclaves curieux de voir le maître, afin qu'il ne fût pas assailli sous leur nombre et incommodé par leur odeur.

Alors, tous se jetèrent à plat ventre en criant :

— " Oeil de Baal, que ta maison fleurisse ! "

" Et entre ces hommes, ainsi couchés par terre dans l'avenue des cyprès, l'Intendant-des-intendants, Abdalonim, coiffé d'une mitre blanche, s'avança vers Hamilcar, un encensoir à la main.

Salammbô descendait alors l'escalier des galères. Toutes ses femmes venaient derrière elle ; et, à chacun de ses pas, elles descendaient aussi. Les têtes des Négresses marquaient de gros points noirs la ligne des bandeaux à plaque d'or qui serraient le front des Romaines. D'autres avaient dans les cheveux des flèches d'argent, des papillons d'émeraude, ou de longues aiguilles étalées en soleil. Sur la confusion de ces vêtements blancs, jaunes et bleus, les anneaux, les agrafes, les colliers, les franges, les bracelets resplendissaient ; un murmure d'étoffes légères s'élevait ; on entendait le claquement des sandales avec le bruit sourd des pieds nus posant sur le bois : — et, çà et là, un grand eunuque, qui les dépassait des épaules, souriait la face en l'air. Quand l'acclamation des hommes se fut apaisée, en se cachant le visage avec leurs manches, elles poussèrent ensemble un cri bizarre, pareil au hurlement d'une louve, et il était si furieux et si strident qu'il semblait faire, du haut en bas, vibrer comme une lyre le grand escalier d'ébène tout couvert de femmes.

Le vent soulevait leurs voiles, et les minces tiges des papyrus se balançaient doucement. On était au mois de Schebaz, en plein hiver. Les grenadiers en fleur se bombaient sur l'azur du ciel, et, à travers les branches, la mer apparaissait avec une île au loin, à demi perdue dans la brume.

Hamilcar s'arrêta, en apercevant Salammbô. Elle lui était survenue après la mort de plusieurs enfants mâles. D'ailleurs, la naissance des filles passait pour une calamité dans les religions du Soleil. Les Dieux, plus tard, lui avaient envoyé un fils ; mais il gardait quelque chose de son espoir trahi et comme l'ébranlement de la malédiction qu'il avait prononcée contre elle. Salammbô, cependant, continuait à marcher.

Des perles de couleurs variées descendaient en longues grappes de ses oreilles sur ses épaules et jusqu'aux coudes. Sa chevelure était crêpée, de façon à simuler un nuage. Elle portait, autour du cou, de petites plaques d'or quadrangulaires représentant une femme entre deux lions cabrés ; et son costume reproduisait en entier l'accoutrement de la Déesse. Sa robe d'hyacinthe, à manches larges, lui serrait la taille en s'évasant par le bas. Le vermillon de ses lèvres faisait paraître ses dents plus blanches, et l'antimoine de ses paupières ses yeux plus longs. Ses sandales, coupées dans un plumage d'oiseau, avaient des talons très hauts et elle était pâle extraordinairement, à cause du froid sans doute.

Enfin elle arriva près d'Hamilcar, et, sans le regarder, sans lever la tête, elle lui dit :

— " Salut, Oeil de Baalim, gloire éternelle ! triomphe ! loisir ! satisfaction ! richesse ! Voilà longtemps que mon coeur était triste, et la maison languissait. Mais le maître qui revient est comme Tainmmouz ressuscité ; et sous ton regard, ô père, une joie, une existence nouvelle va partout s'épanouir ! "

Et prenant des mains de Taanach un petit vase oblong où fumait un mélange de farine, de beurre, de cardamome et de vin : — " Bois à pleine gorge " dit-elle, " la boisson du retour préparée par ta servante. "

Il répliqua — - " Bénédiction sur toi ! " et il saisit machinalement le vase d'or qu'elle lui tendait.

Cependant, il l'examinait avec une attention si âpre que Salammbô troublée balbutia :

— " On t'a dit, ô maître ! ... "

— " Oui ! je sais ! " fit Hamilcar à voix basse.

Etait-ce un aveu ? ou parlait-elle des Barbares ? Et il ajouta quelques mots vagues sur les embarras publics qu'il espérait à lui seul dissiper.

— " O père ! " exclama Salammbô, " tu n'effaceras pas ce qui est irréparable ! "

Alors il se recula, et Salammbô s'étonnait de son ébahissement ; car elle ne songeait point à Carthage mais au sacrilège dont elle se trouvait complice. Cet homme, qui faisait trembler les légions et qu'elle connaissait à peine, l'effrayait comme un dieu ; il avait deviné, il savait tout, quelque chose de terrible allait venir. Elle s'écria : " Grâce ! "

Hamilcar baissa la tête, lentement.

Bien qu'elle voulût s'accuser, elle n'osait ouvrir les lèvres ; et cependant elle étouffait du besoin de se plaindre et d'être consolée. Hamilcar combattait l'envie de rompre son serment. Il le tenait par orgueil, ou par crainte d'en finir avec son incertitude : et il la regardait en face, de toutes ses forces, pour saisir ce qu'elle cachait au fond de son coeur.

Peu à peu, en haletant, Salammbô s'enfonçait la tête dans les épaules, écrasée par ce regard trop lourd. Il était sûr maintenant qu'elle avait failli dans l'étreinte d'un Barbare ; il frémissait, il leva ses deux poings. Elle poussa un cri et tomba entre ses femmes, qui s'empressèrent autour d'elle.

Hamilcar tourna les talons. Tous les intendants le suivirent.

On ouvrit la porte des entrepôts, et il entra dans une vaste salle ronde où aboutissaient, comme les rayons d'une roue à son moyeu, de longs couloirs qui conduisaient vers d'autres salles. Un disque de pierre s'élevait au centre avec des balustres pour soutenir des coussins accumulés sur des tapis.

Le Suffète se promena d'abord à grands pas rapides ; : il respirait bruyamment, il frappait la terre du talon, il se passait la main sur le front comme un homme harcelé par les mouches. Mais il secoua la tête, et, en apercevant l'accumulation des richesses, il se calma ; : sa pensée, qu'attiraient les perspectives des couloirs, se répandait dans les autres salles pleines de trésors plus rares. Des plaques de bronze, des lingots d'argent et des barres de fer alternaient avec les saumons d'étain apportés des Cassitérides par la mer Ténébreuse : les gommes du pays des Noirs débordaient de leurs sacs en écorce de palmier ; poudre d'or, tassée dans des outres, fuyait insensiblement par les coutures trop vieilles. De minces filaments, tirés des plantes marines, pendaient entre les lins d'Egypte, de Grèce, de Taprobane et de Judée : des madrépores, tels que de larges buissons, se hérissaient au pied des murs : et une odeur indéfinissable flottait, exhalaison des parfums, des cuirs, des épices et des plumes d'autruche liées en gros bouquets tout au haut de la voûte. Devant chaque couloir, des dents d'éléphant posées debout, en se réunissant par les pointes, formaient un arc au-dessus de la porte.

Enfin, il monta sur le disque de pierre. Tous les intendants se tenaient les bras croisés, la tête basse, tandis qu'Abdalonim levait d'un air orgueilleux sa mitre pointue.

Hamilcar interrogea le Chef-des-navires. C'était un vieux pilote aux paupières éraillées par le vent, et des flocons blancs descendaient jusqu'à ses hanches, comme si l'écume des tempêtes lui était restée sur la barbe.

Il répondit qu'il avait envoyé une flotte par Gadès et Thymiamata, pour tâcher d'atteindre Eziongaber, en doublant la Corne-du-Sud et le promontoire des Aromates.

D'autres avaient continué dans l'Ouest, durant quatre lunes, sans rencontrer de rivages ; mais la proue des navires s'embarrassait dans les herbes, l'horizon retentissait continuellement du bruit des cataractes, des brouillards couleur de sang obscurcissaient le soleil, une brise toute chargée de parfums endormait les équipages ; et à présent ils ne pouvaient rien dire, tant leur mémoire était troublée. Cependant on avait remonté les fleuves des Scythes, pénétré en Colchide, chez les Ingriens, chez les Estiens, ravi dans l'archipel quinze cents vierges et coulé bas tous les vaisseaux étrangers naviguant au-delà du cap Oestrymon, pour que le secret des routes ne fût pas connu. Le roi Ptolémée retenait l'encens de Schesbar, Syracuse, Elathia, la Corse et les îles n'avaient rien fourni, et le vieux pilote baissa la voix pour annoncer qu'une trirème était prise à

Rusicada par les Numides, — " car ils sont avec eux, Maître " .

Hamilcar fronça les sourcils ; puis il fit signe de parler au Chef-des- voyages, enveloppé d'une robe brune sans ceinture, et la tête prise dans une longue écharpe d'étoffe blanche qui, passant au bord de sa bouche, lui retombait par-derrière sur l'épaule.

Les caravanes étaient parties régulièrement à l'équinoxe d'hiver. Mais, de quinze cents hommes se dirigeant sur l'extrême Ethiopie avec d'excellents chameaux, des outres neuves et des provisions de toiles peintes, un seul avait reparu à Carthage, — les autres étant morts de fatigue ou devenus fous par la terreur du désert ; — et il disait avoir vu, bien au-delà du Harousch-Noir, après les Atarantes et le pays des grands singes, d'immenses royaumes où les moindres ustensiles sont tous en or, un fleuve couleur de lait, large comme une mer ; des forêts d'arbres bleus, des collines d'aromates, des monstres à figure humaine végétant sur les rochers et dont les prunelles, pour vous regarder, s'épanouissent comme des fleurs ; puis, derrière des lacs tout couverts de dragons, des montagnes de cristal qui supportent le soleil. D'autres étaient revenus de l'Inde avec des paons, du poivre et des tissus nouveaux. Quant à ceux qui vont acheter des calcédoines par le chemin des Syrtes et le temple d'Ammon, sans doute ils avaient péri dans les sables. Les caravanes de la Gétulie et de Phazzana avaient fourni leurs provenances habituelles ; mais il n'osait à présent, lui, le Chef-des-voyages, en équiper aucune.

Hamilcar comprit ; les Mercenaires occupaient la campagne. Avec un sourd gémissement, il s'appuya sur l'autre coude ; et le Chef-des- métairies avait si peur de parler, qu'il tremblait horriblement malgré ses épaules trapues et ses grosses prunelles rouges. Sa face, camarde comme celle d'un dogue, était surmontée d'un réseau en fils d'écorces ; il portait un ceinturon en peau de léopard avec tous les poils et où reluisaient deux formidables coutelas.

Dès qu'Hamilcar se détourna, il se mit, en criant, à invoquer tous les Baals. Ce n'était pas sa faute ! il n'y pouvait rien ! Il avait observé les températures, les terrains, les étoiles, fait les plantations au solstice d'hiver, les élagages au décours de la lune, inspecté les esclaves, ménagé leurs habits.

Mais Hamilcar s'irritait de cette loquacité. Il claqua de la langue et l'homme au coutelas d'une voix rapide :

— " Ah ! Maître ! ils ont tout pillé ! tout saccagé ! tout détruit ! Trois mille pieds d'arbres sont coupés à Maschala, et à Ubada les greniers défoncés, les citernes comblées ! A Tedès, ils ont emporté quinze cents gomors de farine ; à Marazzana, tué les pasteurs, mangé les troupeaux, brûlé ta maison, ta belle maison à poutres de cèdre, où tu venais l'été ! Les esclaves de Tuburbo, qui sciaient de l'orge, se sont enfuis vers les montagnes ; et les ânes, les bardeaux, les mulets, les boeufs de Taormine, et les chevaux orynges, plus un seul ! tous emmenés ! C'est une malédiction ! je n'y survivrai pas ! " Il reprenait en pleurant : " Ah ! Si tu savais comme les celliers étaient pleins et les charrues reluisantes ! Ah ! les beaux béliers ! ah ! les beaux taureaux ! "

La colère d'Hamilcar l'étouffait. Elle éclata :

— " Tais-toi ! Suis-je donc un pauvre ? Pas de mensonges ! dites vrai ! Je veux savoir tout ce que j'ai perdu, jusqu'au dernier sicle, jusqu'au dernier cab ! Abdalonim, apporte-moi les comptes des vaisseaux, ceux des caravanes ; ceux des métairies, ceux de la maison ! Et si votre conscience est trouble, malheur sur vos têtes ! Sortez ! "

Tous les intendants, marchant à reculons et les poings jusqu'à terre, sortirent.

Abdalonim alla prendre au milieu d'un casier, dans la muraille, des cordes à noeuds, des bandes de toile ou de papyrus, des omoplates de mouton chargées d'écritures fines. Il les déposa aux pieds d'Hamilcar, lui mit entre les mains un cadre de bois garni de trois fils intérieurs où étaient passées des boules d'or, d'argent et de corne, et il commença :

— " Cent quatre-vingt-douze maisons dans les Mappales, louées aux Carthaginois-nouveaux à raison d'un béka par lune. "

— " Non ! c'est trop ! ménage les pauvres ! et tu écriras les noms de ceux qui te paraîtront les plus hardis, en tâchant de savoir s'ils sont attachés à la République ! Après ? "

Abdalonim hésitait, surpris de cette générosité.

Hamilcar lui arracha des mains les bandes de toile.

— " Qu'est-ce donc ? trois palais autour de Khamon à douze késitah par mois ! Mets-en vingt ! Je ne veux pas que les Riches me dévorent. "

L'Intendant-des-intendants, après un long salut, reprit :

— " Prêté à Tigillas, jusqu'à la fin de la saison, deux kikar au denier trois, intérêt maritime : à Bar-Malkarth, quinze cents sicles sur le gage de trente esclaves. Mais douze sont morts dans les marais salins. "

— " C'est qu'ils n'étaient pas robustes ", dit en riant le Suffète. " N'importe ! S'il a besoin d'argent, satisfais-le ! Il faut toujours prêter, et à des intérêts divers, selon la richesse des personnes. "

Alors le serviteur s'empressa de lire tout ce qu'avaient rapporté les mines de fer d'Annaba, les pêcheries de corail, les fabriques de pourpre, la ferme de l'impôt sur les Grecs domiciliés, l'exportation de l'argent en Arabie où il valait dix fois l'or, les prises des vaisseaux, déduction faite du dixième pour le temple de la Déesse.

— " Chaque fois j'ai déclaré un quart de moins, Maître ! "

" Hamilcar comptait avec les billes ; elles sonnaient sous ses doigts.

— " Assez ! Qu'as-tu payé ? "

— " A Stratoniclès de Corinthe et à trois marchands d'Alexandrie, sur les lettres que voilà (elles sont rentrées), dix mille drachmes athéniennes et douze talents d'or syriens. La nourriture des équipages s'élevant à vingt mines par mois pour une trirème... "

— " Je le sais ! combien de perdues ? "

— " En voici le compte sur ces lames de plomb. ", dit l'intendant. " Quant aux navires nolisés en commun, comme il a fallu souvent jeter les cargaisons à la mer, on a réparti les pertes inégales par têtes d'associés. Pour des cordages empruntés aux arsenaux et qu'il a été impossible de leur rendre, les Syssites ont exigé huit cents késitah, avant l'expédition d'Utique. "

— " Encore eux " fit Hamilcar en baissant la tête ; et il resta quelque temps comme écrasé par le poids de toutes les haines qu'il sentait sur lui.

— " Mais je ne vois pas les dépenses de Mégara ? "

Abdalonim, en pâlissant, alla prendre, dans un autre casier, des planchettes de sycomore enfilées par paquets à des cordes de cuir.

Hamilcar l'écoutait, curieux des détails domestiques, et s'apaisant à la monotonie de cette voix qui énumérait des chiffres ; Abdalonim se ralentissait. Tout à coup il laissa tomber par terre les feuilles de bois et il se jeta lui-même à plat ventre, les bras étendus, dans la position des condamnés. Hamilcar, sans s'émouvoir, ramassa les tablettes ; et ses lèvres s'écartèrent et ses yeux s'agrandirent, lorsqu'il aperçut, à la dépense d'un seul jour, une exorbitante consommation de viandes, de poissons, d'oiseaux, de vins et d'aromates, avec des vases brisés, des esclaves morts, des tapis perdus.

Abdalonim, toujours prosterné, lui apprit le festin des Barbares. Il n'avait pu se soustraire à l'ordre des Anciens, — Salammbô, d'ailleurs, voulant que l'on prodiguât l'argent pour mieux recevoir les soldats.

Au nom de sa fille, Hamilcar se leva d'un bond. Puis, en serrant les lèvres, il s'accroupit sur les coussins ; il en déchirait les franges avec ses ongles, haletant, les prunelles fixes.

— " Lève-toi !, " dit-il ; et il descendit.

Abdalonim le suivait ; ses genoux tremblaient. Mais, saisissant une barre de fer, il se mit comme un furieux à desceller les dalles. Un disque de bois sauta, et bientôt parurent sur la longueur du couloir plusieurs de ces larges couvercles qui bouchaient des fosses où l'on conservait le grain.

— " Tu le vois, Oeil de Baal, " dit le serviteur en tremblant, " ils n'ont pas encore tout pris ! et elles sont profondes, chacune, de cinquante coudées et combles jusqu'au bord ! Pendant ton voyage, j'en ai fait creuser dans les arsenaux, dans les jardins, partout ! ta maison est pleine de blé, comme ton coeur de sagesse. "

Un sourire passa sur le visage d'Hamilcar :

— " C'est bien, Abdalonim ! " Puis, se penchant à son oreille : " Tu en feras venir de l'Etrurie, du Brutium, d'où il te plaira, et n'importe à quel prix ! Entasse et garde ! Il faut que je possède, à moi seul, tout le blé de Carthage. "

Puis, quand ils furent à l'extrémité du couloir, Abdalonim, avec une des clefs qui pendaient à sa ceinture, ouvrit une grande chambre quadrangulaire, divisée au milieu par des piliers de cèdre. Des monnaies d'or, d'argent et d'airain, disposées sur des tables ou enfoncées dans des niches, montaient le long des quatre murs jusqu'aux lambourdes du toit. D'énormes couffes en peau d'hippopotame supportaient, dans les coins, des rangs entiers de sacs plus petits ; des tas de billion faisaient des monticules sur les dalles ; et, çà et là, quelque pile trop haute s'étant écroulée avait l'air d'une colonne en ruine. Les grandes pièces de Carthage, représentant Tanit avec un cheval sous un palmier, se mêlaient à celles des colonies, marquées d'un taureau, d'une étoile, d'un globe ou d'un croissant. Puis l'on voyait disposées, par sommes inégales, des pièces de toutes les valeurs, de toutes les dimensions, de tous les âges, — depuis les vieilles d'Assyrie, minces comme l'ongle, jusqu'aux vieilles du Latium, plus épaisses que la main, avec les boutons d'Egine, les tablettes de la Bactriane, les courtes tringles de l'ancienne Lacédémone ; plusieurs étaient couvertes de rouille, encrassées, verdies par l'eau ou noircies par le feu, ayant été prises dans des filets ou après les sièges parmi les décombres des villes. Le Suffète eut bien vite supputé si les sommes présentes correspondaient aux gains et aux dommages qu'on venait de lui lire ; et il s'en allait lorsqu'il aperçut trois jarres d'airain complètement vides. Abdalonim détourna la tête en signe d'horreur, et Hamilcar résigné ne parla point.

Ils traversèrent d'autres couloirs, d'autres salles et arrivèrent enfin devant une porte où, pour la garder mieux, un homme était attaché par le ventre à une longue chaîne scellée contre le mur, coutume des Romains nouvellement introduite à Carthage. Sa barbe et ses ongles avaient démesurément poussé, et il se balançait de droite et de gauche avec l'oscillation continuelle des bêtes captives. Sitôt qu'il reconnut Hamilcar, il s'élança vers lui en criant :

— " Grâce, Oeil de Baal ! pitié ! tue-moi ! Voilà dix ans que je n'ai vu le soleil ! Au nom de ton père, grâce ! "

Hamilcar, sans lui répondre, frappa dans ses mains, trois hommes parurent ; et, tous les quatre à la fois, en raidissant leurs bras, ils retirèrent de ses anneaux la barre énorme qui fermait la porte. Hamilcar prit un flambeau, et disparut dans les ténèbres.

C'était, croyait-on, l'endroit des sépultures de la famille ; mais on n'eût trouvé qu'un large puits. Il était creusé seulement pour dérouter les voleurs, et ne cachait rien. Hamilcar passa auprès ; puis, en se baissant, il fit tourner sur ses rouleaux une meule très lourde, et, par cette ouverture, il entra dans un appartement bâti en forme de cône.

Des écailles d'airain couvraient les murs ; au milieu, sur un piédestal de granit, s'élevait la statue d'un Kabyre avec le nom d'Alètes, inventeur des mines dans la Celtibérie. Contre sa base, par terre, étaient disposés en croix de larges boucliers d'or et des vases d'argent monstrueux, à goulot fermé, d'une forme extravagante et qui ne pouvaient servir ; car on avait coutume de fondre ainsi des quantités de métal pour que les dilapidations et même les déplacements fussent presque impossibles.

Avec son flambeau, il alluma une lampe de mineur fixée au bonnet de l'idole ; des feux verts, jaunes, bleus, violets, couleur de vin, couleur de sang, tout à coup, illuminèrent la salle. Elle était pleine de pierreries qui se trouvaient dans des calebasses d'or accrochées comme des lampadaires aux lames d'airain, ou dans leurs blocs natifs rangés au bas du mur. C'étaient des callaïs arrachées des montagnes à coups de fronde, des escarboucles formées par l'urine des lynx, des glossopètres tombés de la lune, des tyanos, des diamants, des sandastrum, des béryls, avec les trois espèces de rubis, les quatre espèces de saphir et les douze espèces d'émeraudes. Elles fulguraient, pareilles à des éclaboussures de lait, à des glaçons bleus, à de la poussière d'argent, et jetaient leurs lumières en nappes, en rayons, en étoiles. Les céraunies engendrées par le tonnerre étincelaient près des calcédoines qui guérissent les poisons. Il y avait des topazes du mont Zabarca pour prévenir les terreurs, des opales de la Bactriane qui empêchent les avortements, et des cornes d'Ammon que l'on place sous les lits afin d'avoir des songes.

Les feux des pierres et les flammes de la lampe se miraient dans les grands boucliers d'or. Hamilcar, debout, souriait, les bras croisés ; — et il se délectait moins dans le spectacle que dans la conscience de ses richesses. Elles étaient inaccessibles, inépuisables, infinies. Ses aïeux, dormant sous ses pas, envoyaient à son coeur quelque chose de leur éternité. Il se sentait tout près des génies souterrains. C'était comme la joie d'un Kabyre ; et les grands rayons lumineux frappant son visage lui semblaient l'extrémité d'un invisible réseau, qui, à travers des abîmes, l'attachaient au centre du monde.

Une idée le fit tressaillir, et, s'étant placé derrière l'idole, il marcha droit vers le mur. Puis il examina parmi les tatouages de son bras une ligne horizontale avec deux autres perpendiculaires, ce qui exprimait, en chiffres chananéens, le nombre treize. Alors il compta jusqu'à la treizième des plaques d'airain, releva encore une fois sa large manche ; et, la main droite étendue, il lisait à une autre place de son bras d'autres lignes plus compliquées, tandis qu'il promenait ses doigts délicatement, à la façon d'un joueur de lyre. Enfin, avec son pouce, il frappa sept coups ; et, d'un seul bloc, toute une partie de la muraille tourna.

Elle dissimulait une sorte de caveau, où étaient enfermées des choses mystérieuses, qui n'avaient pas de nom, et d'une incalculable valeur. Hamilcar descendit les trois marches ; il prit dans une cuve d'argent une peau de lama flottant sur un liquide noir, puis il remonta.

Abdalonim se remit alors à marcher devant lui. Il frappait les pavés avec sa haute canne garnie de sonnettes au pommeau, et, devant chaque appartement, criait le nom d'Hamilcar, entouré de louanges et de bénédictions.

Dans la galerie circulaire où aboutissaient tous les couloirs, on avait accumulé le long des murs des poutrelles d'algummin, des sacs de lausonia, des gâteaux en terre de Lemnos, et des carapaces de tortue toutes pleines de perles. Le Suffète, en passant, les effleurait avec sa robe, sans même regarder de gigantesques morceaux d'ambre, matière presque divine formée par les rayons du soleil.

Un nuage de vapeur odorante s'échappa.

— " Pousse la porte ! "

Ils entrèrent.

Des hommes nus pétrissaient des pâtes, broyaient des herbes, agitaient des charbons, versaient de l'huile dans des jarres, ouvraient et fermaient les petites cellules ovoïdes creusées tout autour de la muraille et si nombreuses que l'appartement ressemblait à l'intérieur d'une ruche. Du myrobalon, du bdellium, du safran et des violettes en débordaient. Partout étaient éparpillées des gommes, des poudres, des racines, des fioles de verre, des branches de filipendule, des pétales de roses ; et l'on étouffait dans les senteurs, malgré les tourbillons de styrax qui grésillait au milieu sur un trépied d'airain.

Le Chef-des-odeurs-suaves, pâle et long comme un flambeau de cire, s'avança vers Hamilcar pour écraser dans ses mains un rouleau de métopion, tandis que deux autres lui frottaient les talons avec des feuilles de baccaris. Il les repoussa ; c'étaient des Cyrénéens de moeurs infâmes, mais que l'on considérait à cause de leurs secrets.

Afin de montrer sa vigilance, le Chef-des-odeurs offrit au Suffète, sur une cuiller d'électrum, un peu de malobathre à goûter ; puis, avec une alène, il perça trois besoars indiens. Le maître, qui savait les artifices, prit une corne pleine de baume, et, l'ayant approchée des charbons, il la pencha sur sa robe ; une tache brune y parut, c'était une fraude. Alors, il considéra le Chef-des-odeurs fixement, et, sans rien dire, lui jeta la corne de gazelle en plein visage.

Si indigné qu'il fût des falsifications commises à son préjudice, en apercevant des paquets de nard qu'on emballait pour les pays d'outremer, il ordonna d'y mêler de l'antimoine, afin de le rendre plus lourd.

Puis il demanda où se trouvaient trois boîtes de psagas, destinées à son usage.

Le Chef-des-odeurs avoua qu'il n'en savait rien, des soldats étaient venus avec des couteaux, en hurlant ; il leur avait ouvert les cases.

— " Tu les crains donc plus que moi ! ", s'écria le Suffète ; et, à travers la fumée, ses prunelles, comme des torches, étincelaient sur le grand homme pâle qui commençait à comprendre. " Abdalonim ! avant le coucher du soleil, tu le feras passer par les verges. Déchire-le ! "

Ce dommage, moindre que les autres, l'avait exaspéré ; car, malgré ses efforts pour les bannir de sa pensée, il retrouvait continuellement les Barbares. Leurs débordements se confondaient avec la honte de sa fille, et il en voulait à toute la maison de la connaître et de ne pas la lui dire. Mais quelque chose le poussait à s'enfoncer dans son malheur ; et, pris d'une rage d'inquisition, il visita sous les hangars, derrière la maison-de- commerce, les provisions de bitume, de bois, d'ancres et de cordages, de miel et de cire, le magasin des étoffes, les réserves de nourritures, le chantier des marbres, le grenier du silphium.

Il alla de l'autre côté des jardins inspecter, dans leurs cabanes, les artisans domestiques dont on vendait les produits. Des tailleurs brodaient des manteaux, d'autres tressaient des filets, d'autres peignaient des coussins, découpaient des sandales, des ouvriers d'Egypte avec un coquillage polissaient des papyrus, la navette des tisserands claquait, les enclumes des armuriers retentissaient.

Hamilcar leur dit :

— " Battez des glaives ! battez toujours ! il m'en faudra. " Et il tira de sa poitrine la peau d'antilope macérée dans les poisons pour qu'on lui taillât une cuirasse plus solide que celles d'airain, et qui serait inattaquable au fer et à la flamme.

Dès qu'il abordait les ouvriers, Abdalonim, afin de détourner sa colère, tâchait de l'irriter contre eux en dénigrant leurs ouvrages par des murmures.

— " Quelle besogne ! c'est une honte ! Vraiment le Maître est trop bon. " Hamilcar, sans l'écouter, s'éloignait. Il se ralentit, car de grands arbres calcinés d'un bout à l'autre, comme on en trouve dans les bois où les pasteurs ont campé, barraient les chemins ; et les palissades étaient rompues, l'eau des rigoles se perdait, des éclats de verres, des ossements de singes apparaissaient au milieu des flaques bourbeuses. Quelque bribe d'étoffe çà et là pendait aux buissons ; sous les citronniers, les fleurs pourries faisaient un fumier jaune. En effet, les serviteurs avaient tout abandonné, croyant que le maître ne reviendrait plus.

A chaque pas, il découvrait quelque désastre nouveau, une preuve encore de cette chose qu'il s'était interdit d'apprendre. Voilà maintenant qu'il souillait ses brodequins de pourpre en écrasant des immondices ; et il ne tenait pas ces hommes, tous devant lui au bout d'une catapulte, pour les faire voler en éclats ! Il se sentait humilié de les avoir défendus ; c'était une duperie, une trahison ; et, comme il ne pouvait se venger ni des soldats, ni des Anciens, ni de Salammbô, ni de personne, et que sa colère cherchait quelqu'un, il condamna aux mines, d'un seul coup, tous les esclaves des jardins.

Abdalonim frissonnait chaque fois qu'il le voyait se rapprocher des parcs. Mais Hamilcar prit le sentier du moulin, d'où l'on entendait sortir une mélopée lugubre.

Au milieu de la poussière, les lourdes meules tournaient, c'est-à-dire deux cônes de porphyre superposés, et dont le plus haut, portant un entonnoir, virait sur le second à l'aide de fortes barres. Avec leur poitrine et leurs bras des hommes poussaient, tandis que d'autres, attelés, tiraient. Le frottement de la bricole avait formé autour de leurs aisselles des croûtes purulentes comme on en voit au garrot des ânes, et le haillon noir et flasque qui couvrait à peine leurs reins et pendait par le bout, battait sur leurs jarrets comme une longue queue. Leurs yeux étaient rouges, les fers de leurs pieds sonnaient, toutes leurs poitrines haletaient d'accord. Ils avaient sur la bouche, fixée par deux chaînettes, de bronze, une muselière, pour qu'il leur fût impossible de manger la farine, et des gantelets sans doigts enfermaient leurs mains pour les empêcher d'en prendre.

A l'entrée du maître, les barres de bois craquèrent plus fort. Le grain, en se broyant, grinçait. Plusieurs tombèrent sur les genoux ; les autres, continuant, passaient par-dessus.

Il demanda Giddenem, le gouverneur des esclaves ; et ce personnage parut, étalant sa dignité dans la richesse de son costume ; car sa tunique, fendue sur les côtés, était de pourpre fine, de lourds anneaux tiraient ses oreilles, et, pour joindre les bandes d'étoffes qui enveloppaient ses jambes, un lacet d'or, comme un serpent autour d'un arbre, montait de ses chevilles à ses hanches. Il tenait dans ses doigts, tout chargés de bagues, un collier en grains de gagates pour reconnaître les hommes sujets au mal sacré.

Hamilcar lui fit signe de détacher les muselières. Alors tous, avec des cris de bêtes affamées, se ruèrent sur la farine, qu'ils dévoraient en s'enfonçant le visage dans les tas.

— " Tu les exténues ! " dit le Suffète.

Giddenem répondit qu'il fallait cela pour les dompter.

— " Ce n'était guère la peine de t'envoyer à Syracuse dans l'école des esclaves. Fais venir les autres ! "

Et les cuisiniers, les sommeliers, les palefreniers, les coureurs, les porteurs de litière, les hommes des étuves et les femmes avec leurs enfants, tous se rangèrent dans le jardin sur une seule ligne, depuis la maison-de-commerce jusqu'au parc des bêtes fauves. Ils retenaient leur haleine. Un silence énorme emplissait Mégara. Le soleil s'allongeait sur la lagune, au bas des catacombes. Les paons piaulaient. Hamilcar, pas à pas, marchait.

— " Qu'ai-je à faire de ces vieux ? " dit-il ; " vends-les ! C'est trop de Gaulois, ils sont ivrognes ! et trop de Crétois, ils sont menteurs ! Achète-moi des Cappadociens, des Asiatiques et des Nègres. "

Il s'étonna du petit nombre des enfants. — " Chaque année, Giddenem, la maison doit avoir des naissances ! Tu laisseras toutes les nuits les cases ouvertes pour qu'ils se mêlent en liberté. "

Il se fit montrer ensuite les voleurs, les paresseux, les mutins. Il distribuait des châtiments avec des reproches à Giddenem ; et Giddenem, comme un taureau, baissait son front bas, où s'entrecroisaient deux larges sourcils.

— " Tiens, Oeil de Baal ", dit-il, en désignant un Libyen robuste, " en voilà un que l'on a surpris la corde au cou. "

— " Ah ! tu veux mourir ? " fit dédaigneusement le Suffète.

Et l'esclave, d'un ton intrépide :

— " Oui ! "

Alors, sans se soucier de l'exemple ni du dommage pécuniaire, Hamilcar dit aux valets :

— " Emportez-le ! "

Peut-être y avait-il dans sa pensée l'intention d'un sacrifice. C'était un malheur qu'il s'infligeait afin d'en prévenir de plus terribles.

Giddenem avait caché les mutilés derrière les autres. Hamilcar les aperçut :

— " Qui t'a coupé le bras, à toi ? "

— " Les soldats, Oeil de Baal. "

Puis, à un Samnite qui chancelait comme un héron blessé :

— " Et toi, qui t'a fait cela ? "

C'était le gouverneur, en lui cassant la jambe avec une barre de fer.

Cette atrocité imbécile indigna le Suffète ; et, arrachant des mains de Giddenem son collier de gagates :

— " Malédiction au chien qui blesse le troupeau. Estropier des esclaves, bonté de Tanit ! Ah ! tu ruines ton maître ! Qu'on l'étouffe dans le fumier. Et ceux qui manquent ? Où sont-ils ? Les as-tu assassinés avec les soldats ? "

Sa figure était si terrible que toutes les femmes s'enfuirent. Les esclaves, se reculant, faisaient un grand cercle autour d'eux ; Giddenem baisait frénétiquement ses sandales ; Hamilcar, debout, restait les bras levés sur lui.

Mais, l'intelligence lucide comme au plus fort des batailles, il se rappelait mille choses odieuses, des ignominies dont il s'était détourné ; et, à la lueur de sa colère, comme aux fulgurations d'un orage, il revoyait d'un seul coup tous ses désastres à la fois. Les gouverneurs des campagnes avaient fui par terreur des soldats, par connivence peut-être, tous le trompaient, depuis trop longtemps il se contenait.

— " Qu'on les amène ! " cria-t-il, " et marquez-les au front avec des fers rouges, comme des lâches ! "

Alors, on apporta et l'on répandit au milieu du jardin des entraves, des carcans, des couteaux, des chaînes pour les condamnés aux mines, des cippes qui serraient les jambes, des numella qui enfermaient les épaules, et des scorpions, fouets à triples lanières terminées par des griffes en airain.

Tous furent placés la face vers le soleil, du côté de Moloch-dévorateur, étendus par terre sur le ventre ou sur le dos, et les condamnés à la flagellation, debout contre les arbres, avec deux hommes auprès d'eux, un qui comptait les coups et un autre qui frappait.

Il frappait à deux bras ; les lanières en sifflant faisaient voler l'écorce des platanes. Le sang s'éparpillait en pluie dans les feuillages, et des masses rouges se tordaient au pied des arbres en hurlant. Ceux que l'on ferrait s'arrachaient le visage avec les ongles. On entendait les vis de bois craquer ; des heurts sourds retentissaient ; parfois un cri aigu, tout à coup, traversait l'air. Du côté des cuisines, entre des vêtements en lambeaux et des chevelures abattues, des hommes, avec des éventails, avivaient des charbons, et une odeur de chair qui brûle passait. Les flagellés défaillant, mais retenus par les liens de leurs bras, roulaient leur tête sur leurs épaules en fermant les yeux. Les autres, qui regardaient, se mirent à crier d'épouvante, et les lions, se rappelant peut-être le festin, s'allongeaient en bâillant contre le bord des fosses.

On vit alors Salammbô sur la plate-forme de sa terrasse. Elle la parcourait rapidement de droite et de gauche, tout effarée. Hamilcar l'aperçut. Il lui sembla qu'elle levait les bras de son côté pour demander grâce ; avec un geste d'horreur, il s'enfonça dans le parc des éléphants.

Ces animaux faisaient l'orgueil des grandes maisons puniques. Ils avaient porté les aïeux, triomphé dans les guerres, et on les vénérait comme favoris du Soleil.

Ceux de Mégara étaient les plus forts de Carthage. Hamilcar, avant de partir, avait exigé d'Abdalonim le serment qu'il les surveillerait. Mais ils étaient morts de leurs mutilations ; et trois seulement restaient, couchés au milieu de la cour, sur la poussière, devant les débris de leur mangeoire.

Ils le reconnurent et vinrent à lui.

L'un avait les oreilles horriblement fendues, l'autre au genou une large plaie, et le troisième la trompe coupée.

Cependant, ils le regardaient d'un air triste, comme des personnes raisonnables ; et celui qui n'avait plus de trompe, en baissant sa tête énorme et pliant les jarrets, tâchait de le flatter doucement avec l'extrémité hideuse de son moignon.

A cette caresse de l'animal, deux larmes lui jaillirent des yeux. Il bondit sur Abdalonim.

— " Ah ! misérable ! la croix ! la croix ! "

Abdalonim, s'évanouissant, tomba par terre à la renverse.

Derrière les fabriques de pourpre, dont les lentes fumées bleues montaient dans le ciel, un aboiement de chacal retentit ; Hamilcar s'arrêta.

La pensée de son fils, comme l'attouchement d'un dieu, l'avait tout à coup calmé. C'était un prolongement de sa force, une continuation indéfinie de sa personne qu'il entrevoyait, et les esclaves ne comprenaient pas d'où lui était venu cet apaisement.

En se dirigeant vers les fabriques de pourpre, il passa devant l'ergastule, longue maison de pierre noire bâtie dans une fosse carrée avec un petit chemin tout autour et quatre escaliers aux angles.

Pour achever son signal, Iddibal sans doute attendait la nuit. Rien ne presse encore, songeait Hamilcar ; et il descendit dans la prison. Quelques-uns lui crièrent : — " Retourne " ; les plus hardis le suivirent.

La porte ouverte battait au vent. Le crépuscule entrait par les meurtrières étroites, et l'on distinguait dans l'intérieur des chaînes brisées pendant aux murs.

Voilà tout ce qui restait des captifs de guerre.

Alors Hamilcar pâlit extraordinairement, et ceux qui étaient penchés en dehors sur la fosse le virent qui s'appuyait d'une main contre le mur pour ne pas tomber.

Mais le chacal, trois fois de suite, cria. Hamilcar releva la tête ; il ne proféra pas une parole, il ne fit pas un geste. Puis, quand le soleil fut complètement couché, il disparut derrière la haie de nopals, et le soir, à l'assemblée des Riches, dans le temple d'Eschmoûn, il dit en entrant :

— " Lumières des Baalim, j'accepte le commandement des forces puniques contre l'armée des Barbares ! "

Chapitre 8 LA BATAILLE DU MACAR

Dès le lendemain, il tira des Syssites deux cent vingt-trois mille kikar d'or, il décréta un impôt de quatorze shekel sur les Riches. Les femmes mêmes contribuèrent ; on payait pour les enfants, et, chose monstrueuse dans les habitudes carthaginoises, il força les collèges des prêtres à fournir de l'argent.

Il réclama tous les chevaux, tous les mulets, toutes les armes. Quelques-uns voulurent dissimuler leurs richesses, on vendit leurs biens ; et, pour intimider l'avarice des autres, il donna soixante armures et quinze cents gommor de farine, autant à lui seul que la Compagnie-de-l'ivoire.

Il envoya dans la Ligurie acheter des soldats, trois mille montagnards habitués à combattre des ours ; d'avance on leur paya six lunes, à quinze mines par jour. Cependant, il fallait une armée. Mais il n'accepta pas, comme Hannon, tous les citoyens. Il repoussa d'abord les gens d'occupations sédentaires, puis ceux qui avaient le ventre trop gros ou l'aspect pusillanime ; et il admit des hommes déshonorés, la crapule de Malqua, des fils de Barbares, des affranchis. Pour récompense, il promit à des Carthaginois-nouveaux le droit de cité complet.

Son premier soin fut de réformer la Légion. Ces beaux jeunes hommes qui se considéraient comme la majesté militaire de la République, se gouvernaient eux-mêmes. Il cassa leurs officiers ; il les traitait rudement, les faisait courir, sauter, monter tout d'une haleine la pente de Byrsa, lancer des javelots, lutter corps à corps, coucher la nuit sur les places. Leurs familles venaient les voir et les plaignaient.

Il commanda des glaives plus courts, des brodequins plus forts. Il fixa le nombre des valets et réduisit les bagages ; et comme on gardait dans le temple de Moloch trois cents pilums romains, malgré les réclamations du pontife, il les prit.

Avec ceux qui étaient revenus d'Utique et d'autres que les particuliers possédaient, il organisa une phalange de soixante-douze éléphants et les rendit formidables. Il arma leurs conducteurs d'un maillet et d'un ciseau, afin de pouvoir dans la mêlée leur fendre le crâne s'ils s'emportaient.

Il ne permit point que ses généraux fussent nommés par le Grand-Conseil. Les Anciens tâchaient de lui objecter les lois, il passait au travers ; on n'osait plus murmurer, tout pliait sous la violence de son génie.

A lui seul il se chargeait de la guerre, du gouvernement et des finances ; et, afin de prévenir les accusations, il demanda comme examinateur de ses comptes le suffète Hannon.

Il faisait travailler aux remparts, et, pour avoir des pierres, démolir les vieilles murailles intérieures, à présent inutiles. Mais la différence des fortunes, remplaçant la hiérarchie des races, continuait à maintenir séparés les fils des vaincus et ceux des conquérants ; aussi les patriciens virent d'un oeil irrité la destruction de ces ruines, tandis que la plèbe, sans trop savoir pourquoi, s'en réjouissait.

Les troupes en armes, du matin au soir, défilaient dans les rues ; à chaque moment on entendait sonner les trompettes ; sur des chariots passaient des boucliers, des tentes, des piques : les cours étaient pleines de femmes qui déchiraient de la toile ; l'ardeur de l'un à l'autre se communiquait : l'âme d'Hamilcar emplissait la République.

Il avait divisé ses soldats par nombres pairs, en ayant soin de placer dans la longueur des files, alternativement, un homme fort et un homme faible, pour que le moins vigoureux ou le plus lâche fût conduit à la fois et poussé par deux autres. Mais avec ses trois mille Ligures et les meilleurs de Carthage, il ne put former qu'une phalange simple de quatre mille quatre-vingt-seize hoplites, défendus par des casques de bronze, et qui maniaient des sarisses de frêne, longues de quatorze coudées.

Deux mille jeunes hommes portaient des frondes, un poignard et des sandales. Il les renforça de huit cents autres armés d'un bouclier rond et d'un glaive à la romaine.

La grosse cavalerie se composait des dix-neuf cents gardes qui restaient de la Légion, couverts par des lames de bronze vermeil, comme les Clinabares assyriens. Il avait de plus quatre cents archers à cheval, de ceux qu'on appelait des Tarentins, avec des bonnets en peau de belette, une hache à double tranchant et une tunique de cuir. Enfin douze cents Nègres du quartier des caravanes, mêlés aux Clinabares, devaient courir auprès des étalons, en s'appuyant d'une main sur la crinière. Tout était prêt, et cependant Hamilcar ne partait pas.

Souvent la nuit il sortait de Carthage, seul, et il s'enfonçait plus loin que la lagune, vers les embouchures du Macar. Voulait-il se joindre aux Mercenaires ? Les Ligures campant sur les Mappales entouraient sa maison.

Les appréhensions des Riches parurent justifiées quand on vit, un jour, trois cents Barbares s'approcher des murs. Le Suffète leur ouvrit les portes ; c'étaient des transfuges ; ils accouraient vers leur maître, entraînés par la crainte ou par la fidélité.

Le retour d'Hamilcar n'avait point surpris les Mercenaires ; cet homme, dans leurs idées, ne pouvait pas mourir. Il revenait pour accomplir ses promesses : espérance qui n'avait rien d'absurde tant l'abîme était profond entre la Patrie et l'Armée. D'ailleurs, ils ne se croyaient point coupables ; on avait oublié le festin.

Les espions qu'ils surprirent les détrompèrent. Ce fut un triomphe pour les acharnés ; les tièdes même devinrent furieux. Puis les deux sièges les accablaient d'ennui ; rien n'avançait ; mieux valait une bataille ! Aussi beaucoup d'hommes se débandaient, couraient la campagne. A la nouvelle des armements ils revinrent ; Mâtho en bondit de joie. " Enfin ! enfin ! " s'écria-t-il.

Alors le ressentiment qu'il gardait à Salammbô se tourna contre Hamilcar. Sa haine, maintenant, apercevait une proie déterminée ; et comme la vengeance devenait plus facile à concevoir, il croyait presque la tenir et déjà s'y délectait. En même temps il était pris d'une tendresse plus haute, dévoré par un désir plus âcre. Tour à tour il se voyait au milieu des soldats, brandissant sur une pique la tête du Suffète, puis dans la chambre au lit de pourpre, serrant la vierge entre ses bras, couvrant sa figure de baisers, passant ses mains sur ses grands cheveux noirs ; et cette imagination qu'il savait irréalisable le suppliciait. Il se jura, puisque ses compagnons l'avaient nommé schalischim, de conduire la guerre ; la certitude qu'il n'en reviendrait pas le poussait à la rendre impitoyable.

Il arriva chez Spendius, et lui dit :

— " Tu vas prendre tes hommes ! J'amènerai les miens. Avertis Autharite ! Nous sommes perdus si Hamilcar nous attaque ! M'entends-tu ? Lève-toi ! "

Spendius demeura stupéfait devant cet air d'autorité. Mâtho, d'habitude, se laissait conduire, et les emportements qu'il avait eus étaient vite retombés. Mais à présent il semblait tout à la fois plus calme et plus terrible ; une volonté superbe fulgurait dans ses yeux, pareille à la flamme d'un sacrifice.

Le Grec n'écouta pas ses raisons. Il habitait une des tentes carthaginoises à bordures de perles, buvait des boissons fraîches dans des coupes d'argent, jouait au cottabe, laissait croître sa chevelure et conduisait le siège avec lenteur. Du reste, il avait pratiqué des intelligences dans la ville et ne voulait point partir, sûr qu'avant peu de jours elle s'ouvrirait.

Narr'Havas, qui vagabondait entre les trois armées, se trouvait alors près de lui. Il appuya son opinion, et même il blâma le Libyen de vouloir, par un excès de courage, abandonner leur entreprise.

— " Va-t'en, si tu as peur ! " s'écria Mâtho ; " tu nous avais promis de la poix, du soufre, des éléphants, des fantassins, des chevaux ! où sont-ils ? "

Narr'Havas lui rappela qu'il avait exterminé les dernières cohortes d'Hannon ; — quant aux éléphants, on les chassait dans les bois, il armait les fantassins, les chevaux étaient en marche ; et le Numide, en caressant la plume d'autruche qui lui retombait sur l'épaule, roulait ses yeux comme une femme et souriait d'une manière irritante. Mâtho, devant lui, ne trouvait rien à répondre.

Mais un homme que l'on ne connaissait pas entra, mouillé de sueur, effaré, les pieds saignants, la ceinture dénouée ; sa respiration secouait ses flancs maigres à les faire éclater, et tout en parlant un dialecte inintelligible, il ouvrait de grands yeux, comme s'il eût raconté quelque bataille. Le roi bondit dehors et appela ses cavaliers.

Ils se rangèrent dans la plaine, en formant un cercle devant lui. Narr'Havas, à cheval, baissait la tête et se mordait les lèvres. Enfin il sépara ses hommes en deux moitiés, dit à la première de l'attendre ; puis d'un geste impérieux, enlevant les autres au galop, il disparut dans l'horizon, du côté des montagnes.

— " Maître ! " murmura Spendius, " je n'aime pas ces hasards extraordinaires, le Suffète qui revient, Narr'Havas qui s'en va... "

— " Eh ! qu'importe ? ", fit dédaigneusement Mâtho.

C'était une raison de plus pour prévenir Hamilcar en rejoignant Autharite. Mais si l'on abandonnait le siège des villes, leurs habitants sortiraient, les attaqueraient par-derrière, et l'on aurait en face des Carthaginois. Après beaucoup de paroles, les mesures suivantes furent résolues et immédiatement exécutées.

Spendius, avec quinze mille hommes, se porta jusqu'au pont bâti sur le Macar, à trois milles d'Utique ; on en fortifia les angles par quatre tours énormes garnies de catapultes. Avec des troncs d'arbres, des pans de roches, des entrelacs d'épines et des murs de pierres, on boucha, dans les montagnes, tous les sentiers, toutes les gorges ; sur leurs sommets on entassa des herbes qu'on allumerait pour servir de signaux, et des pasteurs habiles à voir de loin, de place en place, y furent postés.

Sans doute Hamilcar ne prendrait pas comme Hannon par la montagne des Eaux-Chaudes. Il devait penser qu'Autharite, maître de l'intérieur, lui fermerait la route. Puis un échec au début de la campagne le perdrait, tandis que la victoire serait à recommencer bientôt, les Mercenaires étant plus loin. Il pouvait encore débarquer au cap des Raisins, et de là marcher sur une des villes. Mais il se trouvait alors entre les deux armées, imprudence dont il n'était pas capable avec des forces peu nombreuses. Donc il devait longer la base de l'Ariana, puis tourner à gauche pour éviter les embouchures du Macar et venir droit au pont. C'est là que Mâtho l'attendait.

La nuit, à la lueur des torches, il surveillait les pionniers. Il courait à Hippo-Zaryte, aux ouvrages des montagnes, revenait, ne se reposait pas. Spendius enviait sa force ; mais pour la conduite des espions, le choix des sentinelles, l'art des machines et tous les moyens défensifs, Mâtho écoutait docilement son compagnon ; et ils ne parlaient plus de Salammbô, — l'un n'y songeant pas, et l'autre empêché par une pudeur.

Souvent il s'en allait du côté de Carthage pour tâcher d'apercevoir les troupes d'Hamilcar. Il dardait ses yeux sur l'horizon ; il se couchait à plat ventre, et dans le bourdonnement de ses artères croyait entendre une armée.

Il dit à Spendius que si, avant trois jours, Hamilcar n'arrivait pas, il irait avec tous ses hommes à sa rencontre lui offrir la bataille. Deux jours encore se passèrent. Spendius le retenait ; le matin du sixième, il partit.

Les Carthaginois n'étaient pas moins que les Barbares impatients de la guerre. Dans les tentes et dans les maisons, c'était le même désir, la même angoisse ; tous se demandaient ce qui retardait Hamilcar.

De temps à autre, il montait sur la coupole du temple d'Eschmoûn, près de l'Annonciateur-des-Lunes, et il regardait le vent.

Un jour, c'était le troisième du mois de Tibby, on le vit descendre de l'Acropole, à pas précipités. Dans les Mappales une grande clameur s'éleva. Bientôt les rues s'agitèrent, et partout les soldats commençaient à s'armer au milieu des femmes en pleurs qui se jetaient contre leur poitrine, puis ils couraient vite sur la place de Khamon prendre leurs rangs. On ne pouvait les suivre ni même leur parler, ni s'approcher des remparts ; pendant quelques minutes, la ville entière fut silencieuse comme un grand tombeau. Les soldats songeaient, appuyés sur leurs lances, et les autres, dans les maisons, soupiraient.

Au coucher du soleil, l'armée sortit par la porte occidentale ; mais au lieu de prendre le chemin de Tunis ou de gagner les montagnes dans la direction d'Utique, on continua par le bord de la mer ; et bientôt ils atteignirent la Lagune, où des places rondes, toutes blanches de sel, miroitaient comme de gigantesques plats d'argent, oubliés sur le rivage.

Puis les flaques d'eau se multiplièrent. Le sol, peu à peu, devenant plus mou, les pieds s'enfonçaient. Hamilcar ne se retourna pas. Il allait toujours en tête ; et son cheval, couvert de macules jaunes comme un dragon, en jetant de l'écume autour de lui, avançait dans la fange à grands coups de reins. La nuit tomba, une nuit sans lune. Quelques-uns crièrent qu'on allait périr ; il leur arracha leurs armes, qui furent données aux valets. La boue cependant était de plus en plus profonde. Il fallut monter sur les bêtes de sommes ; d'autres se cramponnaient à la queue des chevaux ; les robustes tiraient les faibles, et le corps des Ligures poussait l'infanterie avec la pointe des piques.

L'obscurité redoubla. On avait perdu la route. Tous s'arrêtèrent.

Alors les esclaves du Suffète partirent en avant pour chercher les balises plantées par son ordre de distance en distance. Ils criaient dans les ténèbres, et de loin l'armée les suivait.

Enfin on sentit la résistance du sol. Puis une courbe blanchâtre se dessina vaguement, et ils se trouvèrent sur le bord du Macar. Malgré le froid, on n'alluma pas de feu.

Au milieu de la nuit, des rafales de vent s'élevèrent, Hamilcar fit réveiller les soldats, mais pas une trompette ne sonna : leurs capitaines les frappaient doucement sur l'épaule.

Un homme d'une haute taille descendit dans l'eau. Elle ne venait pas à la ceinture ; on pouvait passer.

Le Suffète ordonna que trente-deux des éléphants se placeraient dans le fleuve cent pas plus loin, tandis que les autres, plus bas, arrêteraient les lignes d'hommes emportées par le courant ; et tous, en tenant leurs armes au-dessus de leur tête, traversèrent le Macar comme entre deux murailles. Il avait remarqué que le vent d'ouest, en poussant les sables, obstruait le fleuve et formait dans sa largeur une chaussée naturelle.

Maintenant il était sur la rive gauche en face d'Utique, et dans une vaste plaine, avantage pour ses éléphants qui faisaient la force de son armée.

Ce tour de génie enthousiasma les soldats. Une confiance extraordinaire leur revenait. Ils voulaient tout de suite courir aux Barbares ; le Suffète les fit se reposer pendant deux heures. Dès que le soleil parut, on s'ébranla dans la plaine sur trois lignes : les éléphants d'abord, l'infanterie légère avec la cavalerie derrière elle, la phalange marchait ensuite.

Les Barbares campés à Utique, et les quinze mille autour du pont, furent surpris de voir au loin la terre onduler. Le vent qui soufflait très fort chassait des tourbillons de sable ; ils se levaient comme arrachés du sol, montaient par grands lambeaux de couleur blonde, puis se déchiraient et recommençaient toujours, en cachant aux Mercenaires l'armée punique. A cause des cornes dressées au bord des casques, les uns croyaient apercevoir un troupeau de boeufs ; d'autres, trompés par l'agitation des manteaux, prétendaient distinguer des ailes, et ceux qui avaient beaucoup voyagé, haussant les épaules, expliquaient tout par les illusions du mirage. Cependant, quelque chose d'énorme continuait à s'avancer. De petites vapeurs, subtiles comme des haleines, couraient sur la surface du désert ; le soleil, plus haut maintenant, brillait plus fort : une lumière âpre, et qui semblait vibrer, reculait la profondeur du ciel, et, pénétrant les objets, rendait la distance incalculable. L'immense plaine se développait de tous les côtés à perte de vue ; et les ondulations des terrains, presque insensibles, se prolongeaient jusqu'à l'extrême horizon, fermé par une grande ligne bleue qu'on savait être la mer. Les deux armées, sorties des tentes, regardaient ; les gens d'Utique, pour mieux voir, se tassaient sur les remparts.

Enfin ils distinguèrent plusieurs barres transversales, hérissées de points égaux. Elles devinrent plus épaisses, grandirent ; des monticules noirs se balançaient ; tout à coup des buissons carrés parurent ; c'étaient des éléphants et des lances ; un seul cri s'éleva : — " Les Carthaginois ! " et, sans signal, sans commandement, les soldats d'Utique et ceux du pont coururent pêle-mêle, pour tomber ensemble sur Hamilcar.

A ce nom, Spendius tressaillit. Il répétait en haletant : " Hamilcar ! Hamilcar ! " et Mâtho n'était pas là ! Que faire ? Nul moyen de fuir ! La surprise de l'événement, sa terreur du Suffète et surtout l'urgence d'une résolution immédiate le bouleversaient ; il se voyait traversé de mille glaives, décapité, mort. Cependant on l'appelait ; trente mille hommes allaient le suivre ; une fureur contre lui-même le saisit ; il se rejeta sur l'espérance de la victoire ; elle était pleine de félicités, et il se crut plus intrépide qu'Epaminondas. Pour cacher sa pâleur, il barbouilla ses joues de vermillon, puis il boucla ses cnémides, sa cuirasse, avala une patère de vin pur et courut après sa troupe, qui se hâtait vers celle d'Utique.

Elles se rejoignirent toutes les deux si rapidement que le Suffète n'eut pas le temps de ranger ses hommes en bataille. Peu à peu, il se ralentissait. Les éléphants s'arrêtèrent ; ils balançaient leurs lourdes têtes, chargées de plumes d'autruche, tout en se frappant les épaules avec leur trompe.

Au fond de leurs intervalles, on distinguait les cohortes des vélites, plus loin les grands casques des Clinabares, avec des fers qui brillaient au soleil, des cuirasses, des panaches des étendards agités. Mais l'armée carthaginoise, grosse de onze mille trois cent-quatre-vingt-seize hommes, semblait à peine les contenir, car elle formait un carré long, étroit des flancs et resserré sur soi-même.

En les voyant si faibles, les Barbares, trois fois plus nombreux, furent pris d'une joie désordonnée ; on n'apercevait pas Hamilcar. Il était resté là-bas, peut-être ? Qu'importait d'ailleurs ! Le dédain qu'ils avaient de ces marchands renforçait leur courage ; et avant que Spendius eût commandé la manoeuvre, tous l'avaient comprise et déjà l'exécutaient.

Ils se développèrent sur une grande ligne droite, qui débordait les ailes de l'armée punique, afin de l'envelopper complètement. Mais, quand on fut à trois cents pas d'intervalle, les éléphants, au lieu d'avancer, se retournèrent ! puis voilà que les Clinabares, faisant volte-face, les suivirent ; et la surprise des Mercenaires redoubla en apercevant tous les hommes de trait qui couraient pour les rejoindre. Les Carthaginois avaient donc peur, ils fuyaient ! Une huée formidable éclata dans les troupes des Barbares, et, du haut de son dromadaire, Spendius s'écriait : — " Ah ! je le savais bien ! En avant ! en avant ! "

Alors les javelots, les dards, les balles des frondes jaillirent à la fois. Les éléphants, la croupe piquée par les flèches, se mirent à galoper plus vite ; une grosse poussière les enveloppait, et, comme des ombres dans un nuage, ils s'évanouirent.

Cependant, on entendait au fond un grand bruit de pas, dominé par le son aigu des trompettes qui soufflaient avec furie. Cet espace, que les Barbares avaient devant eux, plein de tourbillons et de tumulte, attirait comme un gouffre ; quelques-uns s'y lancèrent. Des cohortes d'infanterie apparurent ; elles se refermaient ; et, en même temps, tous les autres voyaient accourir les fantassins avec des cavaliers au galop.

En effet, Hamilcar avait ordonné à la phalange de rompre ses sections, aux éléphants, aux troupes légères et à la cavalerie de passer par ces intervalles pour se porter vivement sur les ailes, et calculé si bien la distance des Barbares, que, au moment où ils arrivaient contre lui, l'armée carthaginoise tout entière faisait une grande ligne droite.

Au milieu se hérissait la phalange, formée par des syntagmes ou carrés pleins, ayant seize hommes de chaque côté. Tous les chefs de toutes les files apparaissaient entre de longs fers aigus qui les débordaient inégalement, car les six premiers rangs croisaient leurs sarisses en les tenant par le milieu, et les dix rangs inférieurs les appuyaient sur l'épaule de leurs compagnons se succédant devant eux. Toutes les figures disparaissaient à moitié dans la visière des casques ; des cnémides en bronze couvraient toutes les jambes droites ; les larges boucliers cylindriques descendaient jusqu'aux genoux ; et cette horrible masse quadrangulaire remuait d'une seule pièce, semblait vivre comme une bête et fonctionner comme une machine. Deux cohortes d'éléphants la bordaient régulièrement ; tout en frissonnant, ils faisaient tomber les éclats des flèches attachés à leur peau noire. Les Indiens accroupis sur leur garrot, parmi les touffes de plumes blanches, les retenaient avec la cuiller du harpon, tandis que, dans les tours, des hommes cachés jusqu'aux épaules promenaient, au bord de grands arcs tendus, des quenouilles en fer garnies d'étoupes allumées. A la droite et à la gauche des éléphants, voltigeaient les frondeurs, une fronde autour des reins, une seconde sur la tête, une troisième à la main droite. Puis les Clinabares, chacun flanqué d'un nègre, tendaient leurs lances entre les oreilles de leurs chevaux tout couverts d'or comme eux. Ensuite s'espaçaient les soldats armés à la légère avec des boucliers en peau de lynx, d'où dépassaient les pointes des javelots qu'ils tenaient dans leur main gauche ; et les Tarentins, conduisant deux chevaux accouplés, relevaient aux deux bouts cette muraille de soldats.

L'armée des Barbares, au contraire, n'avait pu maintenir son alignement. Sur sa longueur exorbitante il s'était fait des ondulations, des vides ; tous haletaient, essoufflés d'avoir couru.

La phalange s'ébranla lourdement en poussant toutes ses sarisses ; sous ce poids énorme la ligne des Mercenaires, trop mince, bientôt plia par le milieu.

Alors les ailes carthaginoises se développèrent pour les saisir : les éléphants les suivaient. Avec ses lances obliquement tendues, la phalange coupa les

Barbares ; deux tronçons énormes s'agitèrent ; les ailes, à coup de fronde et de flèche, les rabattaient sur les phalangistes. Pour s'en débarrasser, la cavalerie manquait ; sauf deux cents Numides qui se portèrent contre l'escadron droit des Clinabares, tous les autres se trouvaient enfermés, ne pouvaient sortir de ces lignes. Le péril était imminent et une résolution urgente.

Spendius ordonna d'attaquer la phalange simultanément par les deux flancs, afin de passer tout au travers. Mais les rangs les plus étroits glissèrent sous les plus longs, revinrent à leur place, et elle se retourna contre les Barbares, aussi terrible de ses côtés qu'elle l'était de front tout à l'heure.

Ils frappaient sur la hampe des sarisses, mais la cavalerie, par-derrière, gênait leur attaque ; et la phalange, appuyée aux éléphants, se resserrait et s'allongeait, se présentait en carré, en cône, en rhombe, en trapèze, en pyramide. Un double mouvement intérieur se faisait continuellement de sa tête à sa queue ; car ceux qui étaient au bas des files accouraient vers les premiers rangs, et ceux-là, par lassitude ou à cause des blessés, se repliaient plus bas. Les Barbares se trouvèrent foulés sur la phalange. Il lui était impossible de s'avancer ; on aurait dit un océan où bondissaient des aigrettes rouges avec des écailles d'airain, tandis que les clairs boucliers se roulaient comme une écume d'argent. Quelquefois d'un bout à l'autre, de larges courants descendaient, puis ils remontaient, et au milieu une lourde masse se tenait immobile. Les lances s'inclinaient et se relevaient, alternativement. Ailleurs c'était une agitation de glaives nus si précipitée que les pointes seules apparaissaient, et des turmes de cavalerie élargissaient des cercles, qui se refermaient derrière elles en tourbillonnant.

Par-dessus la voix des capitaines, la sonnerie des clairons et le grincement des lyres, les boules de plomb et les amandes d'argile passant dans l'air, sifflaient, faisaient sauter les glaives des mains, la cervelle des crânes. Les blessés, s'abritant d'un bras sous leur bouclier, tendaient leur épée en appuyant le pommeau contre le sol, et d'autres, dans des mares de sang, se retournaient pour mordre les talons. La multitude était si compacte, la poussière si épaisse, le tumulte si fort, qu'il était impossible de rien distinguer ; les lâches qui offrirent de se rendre ne furent même pas entendus. Quand les mains étaient vides, on s'étreignait corps à corps ; les poitrines craquaient contre les cuirasses et des cadavres pendaient la tête en arrière, entre deux bras crispés. Il y eut une compagnie de soixante Ombriens qui, fermes sur leurs jarrets, la pique devant les yeux, inébranlables et grinçant des dents, forcèrent à reculer deux syntagmes à la fois. Des pasteurs épirotes coururent à l'escadron gauche des Clinabares, saisirent les chevaux à la crinière en faisant tournoyer leurs bâtons ; les bêtes, renversant leurs hommes, s'enfuirent par la plaine. Les frondeurs puniques, écartés çà et là, restaient béants. La phalange commençait à osciller, les capitaines couraient éperdus, les serre-files poussaient les soldats, et les Barbares s'étaient reformés ; ils revenaient ; la victoire était pour eux.

Mais un cri, un cri épouvantable éclata, un rugissement de douleur et de colère : c'étaient les soixante-douze éléphants qui se précipitaient sur une double ligne, Hamilcar ayant attendu que les Mercenaires fussent tassés en une seule place pour les lâcher contre eux ; les Indiens les avaient si vigoureusement piqués que du sang coulait sur leurs larges oreilles. Leurs trompes, barbouillées de minium, se tenaient droites en l'air, pareilles à des serpents rouges ; leurs poitrines étaient garnies d'un épieu, leur dos d'une cuirasse, leurs défenses allongées par des lames de fer courbes comme des sabres, — et pour les rendre plus féroces, on les avait enivrés avec un mélange de poivre, de vin pur et d'encens. Ils secouaient leurs colliers de grelots, criaient ; et les éléphantarques baissaient la tête sous le jet des phalariques qui commençaient à voler du haut des tours.

Afin de mieux leur résister les Barbares se ruèrent, en foule compacte ; les éléphants se jetèrent au milieu, impétueusement. Les éperons de leur poitrail, comme des proues de navire, fendaient les cohortes ; elles refluaient à gros bouillons. Avec leurs trompes, ils étouffaient les hommes, ou bien les arrachant du sol, par-dessus leur tête ils les livraient aux soldats dans les tours ; avec leurs défenses, ils les éventraient, les lançaient en l'air, et de longues entrailles pendaient à leurs crocs d'ivoire comme des paquets de cordages à des mâts. Les Barbares tâchaient de leur crever les yeux, de leur couper les jarrets ; d'autres, se glissant sous leur ventre, y enfonçaient un glaive jusqu'à la garde et périssaient écrasés ; les plus intrépides se cramponnaient à leurs courroies ; sous les flammes, sous les balles, sous les flèches, ils continuaient à scier les cuirs, et la tour d'osier s'écroulait comme une tour de pierre. Quatorze de ceux qui se trouvaient à l'extrémité droite, irrités de leurs blessures, se retournèrent sur le second rang ; les Indiens saisirent leur maillet et leur ciseau et l'appliquant au joint de la tête, à tour de bras, ils frappèrent un grand coup.

Les bêtes énormes s'affaissèrent, tombèrent les unes par-dessus les autres. Ce fut comme une montagne ; et sur ce tas de cadavres et d'armures, un éléphant monstrueux qu'on appelait Fureur de Baal pris par la jambe entre des chaînes, resta jusqu'au soir à hurler, avec une flèche dans l'oeil.

Cependant les autres, comme des conquérants qui se délectent dans leur extermination, renversaient, écrasaient, piétinaient, s'acharnaient aux cadavres, aux débris. Pour repousser les manipules serrés en couronnes autour d'eux, ils pivotaient sur leurs pieds de derrière, dans un mouvement de rotation continuelle, en avançant toujours. Les Carthaginois sentirent redoubler leur vigueur, et la bataille recommença.

Les Barbares faiblissaient ; des hoplites grecs jetèrent leurs armes, une épouvante prit les autres. On aperçut Spendius penché sur son dromadaire et qui l'éperonnait aux épaules avec deux javelots. Tous alors se précipitèrent par les ailes et coururent vers Utique.

Les Clinabares, dont les chevaux n'en pouvaient plus, n'essayèrent pas de les atteindre. Les Ligures, exténués de soif, criaient pour se porter sur le fleuve. Mais les Carthaginois, placés au milieu des syntagmes, et qui avaient moins souffert, trépignaient de désir devant leur vengeance qui fuyait ; déjà ils s'élançaient à la poursuite des Mercenaires ; Hamilcar parut.

Il retenait avec des rênes d'argent son cheval tigré tout couvert de sueur. Les bandelettes attachées aux cornes de son casque claquaient au vent derrière lui, et il avait mis sous sa cuisse gauche son bouclier ovale. D'un mouvement de sa pique à trois pointes, il arrêta l'armée.

Les Tarentins sautèrent vite de leur cheval sur le second, et partirent à droite et à gauche vers le fleuve et vers la ville.

La phalange extermina commodément tout ce qui restait de Barbares. Quand arrivaient les épées, ils tendaient la gorge en fermant les paupières. D'autres se défendirent à outrance ; on les assomma de loin, sous des cailloux, comme des chiens enragés, Hamilcar avait recommandé de faire des captifs. Mais les Carthaginois lui obéissaient avec rancune, tant ils sentaient de plaisir à enfoncer leurs glaives dans les corps des Barbares. Comme ils avaient trop chaud, ils se mirent à travailler nu-bras, à la manière des faucheurs ; et lorsqu'ils s'interrompaient pour reprendre haleine, ils suivaient des yeux, dans la campagne, un cavalier galopant après un soldat qui courait. Il parvenait à le saisir par les cheveux, le tenait ainsi quelque temps, puis l'abattait d'un coup de hache.

La nuit tomba. Les Carthaginois, les Barbares avaient disparu. Les éléphants, qui s'étaient enfuis, vagabondaient à l'horizon avec leurs tours incendiées. Elles brûlaient dans les ténèbres, çà et là, comme des phares à demi perdus dans la brume ; et l'on n'apercevait d'autre mouvement sur la plaine que l'ondulation du fleuve, exhaussé par les cadavres et qui les charriait à la mer.

Deux heures après, Mâtho arriva. Il entrevit à la clarté des étoiles de longs tas inégaux couchés par terre.

C'étaient des files de Barbares. Il se baissa ; tous étaient morts, il appela au loin ; aucune voix ne lui répondit.

Le matin même, il avait quitté Hippo-Zaryte avec ses soldats pour marcher sur Carthage. A Utique, l'armée de Spendius venait de partir, et les habitants commençaient à incendier les machines. Tous s'étaient battus avec acharnement.

Mais le tumulte qui se faisait vers le pont redoublant d'une façon incompréhensible, Mâtho s'était jeté, par le plus court chemin, à travers la montagne, et, comme les Barbares s'enfuyaient par la plaine, il n'avait rencontré personne.

En face de lui, de petites masses pyramidales se dressaient dans l'ombre, et en deçà du fleuve, plus près, il y avait à ras du sol des lumières immobiles. En effet, les Carthaginois s'étaient repliés derrière le pont, et, pour tromper les Barbares, le Suffète avait établi des postes nombreux sur l'autre rive.

Mâtho, s'avançant toujours, crut distinguer des enseignes puniques, car des têtes de cheval qui ne bougeaient pas apparaissaient dans l'air, fixées au sommet des hampes en faisceau que l'on ne pouvait voir ; et il entendit plus loin une grande rumeur, un bruit de chansons et de coupes heurtées.

Alors, ne sachant où il se trouvait, ni comment découvrir Spendius, tout assailli d'angoisses, effaré, perdu dans les ténèbres, il s'en retourna par le même chemin plus impétueusement. L'aube blanchissait, quand du haut de la montagne il aperçut la ville, avec les carcasses des machines noircies par les flammes, comme des squelettes de géant qui s'appuyaient aux murs.

Tout reposait dans un silence et dans un accablement extraordinaires. Parmi ses soldats, au bord des tentes, des hommes presque nus dormaient sur le dos, ou le front contre leur bras que soutenait leur cuirasse. Quelques-uns décollaient de leurs jambes des bandelettes ensanglantées. Ceux qui allaient mourir roulaient leur tête, tout doucement ; d'autres, en se traînant, leur apportaient à boire. Le long des chemins étroits les sentinelles marchaient pour se réchauffer, ou se tenaient la figure tournée vers l'horizon, avec leur pique sur l'épaule, dans une attitude farouche.

Mâtho trouva Spendius abrité sous un lambeau de toile que supportaient deux bâtons par terre, le genou dans les mains, la tête basse.

Ils restèrent longtemps sans parler.

Enfin Mâtho murmura : — " Vaincus !

Spendius reprit d'une voix sombre : — " Oui, vaincus ! "

Et à toutes les questions il répondait par des gestes désespérés.

Cependant des soupirs, des râles arrivaient jusqu'à eux. Mâtho entrouvrit la toile. Alors le spectacle des soldats lui rappela un autre désastre, au même endroit, et en grinçant des dents :

— " Misérable ! une fois déjà... "

Spendius l'interrompit :

— " Tu n'y étais pas non plus. "

— " C'est une malédiction ! " s'écria Mâtho. " A la fin pourtant, je l'atteindrai ! je le vaincrai ! je le tuerai ! Ah ! Si j'avais été là... " L'idée d'avoir manqué la bataille le désespérait plus encore que la défaite. Il arracha son glaive, le jeta par terre. " Mais comment les Carthaginois vous ont-ils battus ? "

L'ancien esclave se mit à raconter les manoeuvres. Mâtho croyait les voir et il s'irritait. L'armée d'Utique, au lieu de courir vers le pont, aurait dû prendre Hamilcar par-derrière.

— " Eh ! je le sais ! " dit Spendius.

— " Il fallait doubler tes profondeurs, ne pas compromettre les vélites contre la phalange, donner des issues aux éléphants. Au dernier moment on pouvait tout regagner : rien ne forçait à fuir. "

Spendius répondit :

— " Je l'ai vu passer dans son grand manteau rouge, les bras levés, plus haut que la poussière, comme un aigle qui volait au flanc des cohortes ; et, à tous les signes de sa tête, elles se resserraient, s'élançaient ; la foule nous a entraînés l'un vers l'autre : il me regardait ; j'ai senti dans mon coeur comme le froid d'une épée. "

— " Il aura peut-être choisi le jour ? " se disait tout bas Mâtho.

Ils s'interrogèrent, tâchant de découvrir ce qui avait amené le Suffète précisément dans la circonstance la plus défavorable. Ils en vinrent à causer de la situation, et, pour atténuer sa faute ou se redonner à lui-même du courage, Spendius avança qu'il restait encore de l'espoir.

— " Qu'il n'en reste plus, n'importe ! " dit Mâtho, " tout seul, je continuerai la guerre ! "

— " Et moi aussi ! " s'écria le Grec en bondissant ; il marchait à grands pas ; ses prunelles étincelaient et un sourire étrange plissait sa figure de chacal.

— " Nous recommencerons, ne me quitte plus ! je ne suis pas fait pour les batailles au grand soleil ; l'éclat des épées me trouble la vue ; c'est une maladie, j'ai trop longtemps vécu dans l'ergastule. Mais donne-moi des murailles à escalader la nuit, et j'entrerai dans les citadelles, et les cadavres seront froids avant que les coqs aient chanté ! Montre-moi quelqu'un, quelque chose, un ennemi, un trésor, une femme " ; il répéta : " Une femme, fut-elle la fille d'un roi, et j'apporterai vivement ton désir devant tes pieds. Tu me reproches d'avoir perdu la bataille contre Hannon, je l'ai regagnée pourtant. Avoue-le ! mon troupeau de porcs nous a plus servi qu'une phalange de Spartiates. " Et, cédant au besoin de se rehausser et de saisir sa revanche, il énuméra tout ce qu'il avait fait pour la cause des Mercenaires. " C'est moi dans les jardins du Suffète, qui ai poussé le Gaulois ! Plus tard, à Sicca, je les ai tous enragés avec la peur de la République ! Giscon les renvoyait, mais je n'ai pas voulu que les interprètes pussent parler. Ah ! comme la langue leur pendait de la bouche ! t'en souviens-tu ? Je t'ai conduit dans Carthage ; j'ai volé le zaïmph. Je t'ai mené chez elle. Je ferai plus encore : tu verras ! " Il éclata de rire comme un fou.

Mâtho le considérait les yeux béants. Il éprouvait une sorte de malaise devant cet homme, qui était à la fois si lâche et si terrible.

Le Grec reprit d'un ton jovial, en faisant claquer ses doigts :

— " Evohé ! Après la pluie, le soleil ! J'ai travaillé aux carrières et j'ai bu du massique dans un vaisseau qui m'appartint, sous un tendelet d'or, comme un Ptolémée. Le malheur doit servir à nous rendre plus habiles. A force de travail, on assouplit la fortune. Elle aime les politiques. Elle cédera ! "

Il revint sur Mâtho et, le prenant au bras :

— " Maître, à présent les Carthaginois sont sûrs de leur victoire. Tu as toute une armée qui n'a pas combattu, et tes hommes t'obéissent, à toi. Place-les en avant ; : les miens, pour se venger, marcheront. Il me reste trois mille Cariens, douze cents frondeurs et des archers, des cohortes entières ! . On peut même former une phalange, retournons ! "

Mâtho, abasourdi par le désastre, n'avait jusqu'à présent rien imaginé pour en sortir. Il écoutait, la bouche ouverte, et les lames de bronze qui cerclaient ses côtes se soulevaient aux bondissements de son coeur. Il ramassa son épée, en criant :

— " Suis-moi, marchons ! "

Mais les éclaireurs, quand ils furent revenus, annoncèrent que les morts des Carthaginois étaient enlevés, le pont tout en ruine et Hamilcar disparu.

Chapitre 9 EN CAMPAGNE

Il avait pensé que les Mercenaires l'attendraient à Utique ou qu'ils reviendraient contre lui ; et, ne trouvant pas ses forces suffisantes pour donner l'attaque ou pour la recevoir, il s'était enfoncé dans le sud, par la rive droite du fleuve, ce qui le mettait immédiatement à couvert d'une surprise.

Il voulait, fermant d'abord les yeux sur leur révolte, détacher toutes les tribus de la cause des Barbares ; puis, quand ils seraient bien isolés au milieu des provinces, il tomberait sur eux et les exterminerait.

En quatorze jours, il pacifia la région comprise entre Thouccaber et Utique, avec les villes de Tignicabah, Tessourah, Vacca et d'autres encore à l'occident ; Zounghar bâtie dans les montagnes ; Assouras célèbre par son temple, Djeraado fertile en genévriers ; Thapitis et Hagour lui envoyèrent des ambassades. Les gens de la campagne arrivaient les mains pleines de vivres, imploraient sa protection, baisaient ses pieds, ceux des soldats, et se plaignaient des Barbares. Quelques-uns venaient lui offrir, dans des sacs, des têtes de Mercenaires, tués par eux, disaient-ils, mais qu'ils avaient coupées à des cadavres ; car beaucoup s'étaient perdus en fuyant, et on les trouvait morts de place en place, sous les oliviers et dans les vignes.

Pour éblouir le peuple, Hamilcar, dès le lendemain de la victoire, avait envoyé à Carthage les deux mille captifs faits sur le champ de bataille. Ils arrivèrent par longues compagnies de cent hommes chacune, tous les bras attachés sur le dos avec une barre de bronze qui les prenait à la nuque, et les blessés, en saignant, couraient aussi ; des cavaliers, derrière eux, les chassaient à coups de fouet.

Ce fut un délire de joie ! On se répétait qu'il y avait eu six mille Barbares de tués ; les autres ne tiendraient pas, la guerre était finie ; on s'embrassait dans les rues, et l'on frotta de beurre et de cinnamome la figure des Dieux-Patæques pour les remercier. Avec leurs gros yeux, leur gros ventre et leurs deux bras levés jusqu'aux épaules, ils semblaient vivre sous leur peinture plus fraîche et participer à l'allégresse du peuple. Les Riches laissaient leurs portes ouvertes ; la ville retentissait du ronflement des tambourins ; les temples toutes les nuits étaient illuminés, et les servantes de la Déesse descendues dans Malqua établirent au coin des carrefours des tréteaux en sycomore, où elles se prostituaient. On vota des terres pour les vainqueurs, des holocaustes pour Melkarth, trois cents couronnes d'or pour le Suffète, et ses partisans proposaient de lui décerner des prérogatives et des honneurs nouveaux.

Il avait sollicité les Anciens de faire des ouvertures à Autharite pour échanger contre tous les Barbares, s'il le fallait, le vieux Giscon avec les autres Carthaginois détenus comme lui. Les Libyens et les Nomades qui composaient l'armée d'Autharite connaissaient à peine ces Mercenaires, hommes de race italiote ou grecque ; et puisque la République leur offrait tant de Barbares contre si peu de Carthaginois, c'est que les uns étaient de nulle valeur et que les autres en avaient une considérable. Ils craignaient un piège. Autharite refusa.

Alors les Anciens décrétèrent l'exécution des captifs, bien que le Suffète leur eût écrit de ne pas les mettre à mort. Il comptait incorporer les meilleurs dans ses troupes et exciter par là des défections. Mais la haine emporta toute réserve.

Les deux mille Barbares furent attachés dans les Mappales, contre les stèles des tombeaux ; et des marchands, des goujats de cuisine, des brodeurs et même des femmes, les veuves des morts avec leurs enfants, tous ceux qui voulaient, vinrent les tuer à coups de flèche. On les visait lentement, pour mieux prolonger leur supplice : on baissait son arme, puis on la relevait tour à tour ; et la multitude se poussait en hurlant. Des paralytiques se faisaient amener sur des civières ; beaucoup, par précaution, apportaient leur nourriture et restaient là jusqu'au soir ; d'autres y passaient la nuit. On avait planté des tentes où l'on buvait. Plusieurs gagnèrent de fortes sommes à louer des arcs.

Puis on laissa debout tous ces cadavres crucifiés, qui semblaient sur les tombeaux autant de statues rouges et l'exaltation gagnait jusqu'aux gens de Malqua, issus des familles autochtones et d'ordinaire indifférents aux choses de la patrie. Par reconnaissance des plaisirs qu'elle leur donnait, maintenant ils s'intéressaient à sa fortune, se sentaient Puniques, et les Anciens trouvèrent habile d'avoir ainsi fondu dans une même vengeance le peuple entier.

La sanction des Dieux n'y manqua pas ; car de tous les côtés du ciel des corbeaux s'abattirent. Ils volaient en tournant dans l'air avec de grands cris rauques, et faisaient un nuage énorme qui roulait sur soi-même continuellement. On l'apercevait de Clypéa, de Rhadès et du promontoire Hermaeum. Parfois il se crevait tout à coup, élargissant au loin ses spirales noires ; c'était un aigle qui fondait dans le milieu, puis repartait ; sur les terrasses, sur les dômes, à la pointe des obélisques et au fronton des temples, il y avait, çà et là, de gros oiseaux qui tenaient dans leur bec rougi des lambeaux humains.

A cause de l'odeur, les Carthaginois se résignèrent à délier les cadavres. On en brûla quelques-uns ; on jeta les autres à la mer, et les vagues poussées par le vent du nord, en déposèrent sur la plage, au fond du golfe, devant le camp d'Autharite.

Ce châtiment avait terrifié les Barbares, sans doute, car du haut d'Eschmoûn on les vit abattre leurs tentes, réunir leurs troupeaux, hisser leurs bagages sur des ânes, et le soir du même jour l'armée entière s'éloigna.

Elle devait, en se portant depuis la montagne des Eaux-Chaudes jusqu'à Hippo-Zaryte alternativement, interdire au Suffète l'approche des villes tyriennes avec la possibilité d'un retour sur Carthage.

Pendant ce temps-là, les deux autres armées tâcheraient de l'atteindre dans le sud, Spendius par l'Orient, Mâtho par l'Occident, de manière à se joindre toutes les trois pour le surprendre et l'enlacer. Puis un renfort qu'ils n'espéraient pas leur survint : Narr'Havas reparut, avec trois cents chameaux chargés de bitume, vingt-cinq éléphants et six mille cavaliers.

Le Suffète, pour affaiblir les Mercenaires, avait jugé prudent de l'occuper au loin dans son royaume. Du fond de Carthage, il s'était entendu avec Masgaba, un brigand gétule qui cherchait à se faire un empire. Fort de l'argent punique, le coureur d'aventures avait soulevé les Etats numides en leur promettant la liberté. Mais Narr'Havas, prévenu par le fils de sa nourrice, était tombé dans Cirta, avait empoisonné les vainqueurs avec l'eau des citernes, abattu quelques têtes, tout rétabli, et il arrivait contre le Suffète plus furieux que les Barbares.

Les chefs des quatre armées s'entendirent sur les dispositions de la guerre. Elle serait longue : il fallait tout prévoir.

On convint d'abord de réclamer l'assistance des Romains, et l'on offrit cette mission à Spendius ; comme transfuge, il n'osa s'en charger. Douze hommes des colonies grecques s'embarquèrent à Annaba sur une chaloupe des Numides. Puis les chefs exigèrent de tous les Barbares le serment d'une obéissance complète. Chaque jour les capitaines inspectaient les vêtements, les chaussures ; on défendit même aux sentinelles l'usage du bouclier, car souvent elles l'appuyaient contre leur lance et s'endormaient debout ; ceux qui traînaient quelque bagage furent contraints de s'en défaire ; tout, à la mode romaine, devait être porté sur le dos. Par précaution contre les éléphants, Mâtho institua un corps de cavaliers cataphractes, où l'homme et le cheval disparaissaient sous une cuirasse en peau d'hippopotame hérissée de clous ; et pour protéger la corne des chevaux, on leur fit des bottines en tresse de sparterie.

Il fut interdit de piller les bourgs, de tyranniser les habitants de race non punique. Mais comme la contrée s'épuisait, Mâtho ordonna de distribuer les vivres par tête de soldat, sans s'inquiéter des femmes. D'abord ils les partagèrent avec elles. Faute de nourriture, beaucoup s'affaiblissaient. C'était une occasion incessante de querelles, d'invectives, plusieurs attirant les compagnes des autres par l'appât ou même la promesse de leur portion. Mâtho commanda de les chasser toutes, impitoyablement. Elles se réfugièrent dans le camp d'Autharite ; mais les Gauloises et les Libyennes, à force d'outrages, les contraignirent à s'en aller.

Enfin elles vinrent sous les murs de Carthage implorer la protection de Cérès et de Proserpine, car il y avait dans Byrsa un temple et des prêtres consacrés à ces déesses, en expiation des horreurs commises autrefois au siège de Syracuse. Les Syssites, alléguant leur droit d'épaves, réclamèrent les plus jeunes pour les vendre ; et des Carthaginois-nouveaux prirent en mariage des Lacédémoniennes qui étaient blondes.

Quelques-unes s'obstinèrent à suivre les armées. Elles couraient sur le flanc des syntagmes, à côté des capitaines. Elles appelaient leurs hommes, les tiraient par le manteau, se frappaient la poitrine en les maudissant, et tendaient au bout de leurs bras leurs petits enfants nus qui pleuraient. Ce spectacle amollissait les Barbares ; elles étaient un embarras, un péril. Plusieurs fois on les repoussa, elles revenaient ; Mâtho les fit charger à coups de lance par les cavaliers de Narr'Havas ; : et comme des Baléares lui criaient qu'il leur fallait des femmes :

— " Moi je n'en ai pas ! " répondit-il.

A présent, le génie de Moloch l'envahissait. Malgré les rébellions de sa conscience, il exécutait des choses épouvantables, s'imaginant obéir à la voix d'un Dieu. Quand il ne pouvait les ravager, Mâtho jetait des pierres dans les champs pour les rendre stériles.

Par des messages réitérés, il pressait Autharite et Spendius de se hâter. Mais les opérations du Suffète étaient incompréhensibles. Il campa successivement à Eidous, à Monchar, à Tehent ; des éclaireurs crurent l'apercevoir aux environs d'Ischil, près des frontières de Narr'Havas, et l'on apprit qu'il avait traversé le fleuve au-dessus de Tebourba comme pour revenir à Carthage. A peine dans un endroit, il se transportait vers un autre. Les routes qu'il prenait restaient toujours inconnues. Sans livrer de bataille, le Suffète conservait ses avantages ; poursuivi par les Barbares, il semblait les conduire.

Ces marches et ces contre-marches fatiguaient encore plus les Carthaginois ; et les forces d'Hamilcar, n'étant pas renouvelées, de jour en jour diminuaient. Les gens de la campagne lui apportaient maintenant des vivres avec plus de lenteur. Il rencontrait partout une hésitation, une haine taciturne ; et malgré ses supplications près du Grand-Conseil, aucun secours n'arrivait de Carthage.

On disait (on croyait peut-être) qu'il n'en avait pas besoin. C'était une ruse ou des plaintes inutiles ; et les partisans d'Hannon, afin de le desservir, exagéraient l'importance de sa victoire. Les troupes qu'il commandait, on en faisait le sacrifice ; mais on n'allait pas ainsi continuellement fournir toutes ses demandes. La guerre était bien assez lourde ! elle avait trop coûté, et, par orgueil, les patriciens de sa faction l'appuyaient avec mollesse.

Alors, désespérant de la République, Hamilcar leva de force dans les tribus tout ce qu'il lui fallait pour la guerre : du grain, de l'huile, du bois, des bestiaux et des hommes. Mais les habitants ne tardèrent pas à s'enfuir. Les bourgs que l'on traversait étaient vides, on fouillait les cabanes sans y rien trouver ; bientôt une effroyable solitude enveloppa l'armée punique.

Les Carthaginois, furieux, se mirent à saccager les provinces ; ils comblaient les citernes, incendiaient les maisons. Les flammèches, emportées par le vent, s'éparpillaient au loin, et sur les montagnes des forêts entières brûlaient ; elles bordaient les vallées d'une couronne de feux ; pour passer au-delà, on était forcé d'attendre. Puis ils reprenaient leur marche, en plein soleil, sur des cendres chaudes.

Quelquefois ils voyaient, au bord de la route, luire dans un buisson comme des prunelles de chat-tigre. C'était un Barbare accroupi sur les talons, et qui s'était barbouillé de poussière pour se confondre avec la couleur du feuillage ; ou bien quand on longeait une ravine, ceux qui étaient sur les ailes entendaient tout à coup rouler des pierres ; et, en levant les yeux, ils apercevaient dans l'écartement de la gorge un homme pieds nus qui bondissait.

Cependant Utique et Hippo-Zaryte étaient libres, puisque les Mercenaires ne les assiégeaient plus. Hamilcar leur commanda de venir à son aide. Mais, n'osant se compromettre, elles lui répondirent par des mots vagues, des compliments, des excuses.

Il remonta dans le nord brusquement, décidé à s'ouvrir une des villes tyriennes, dût-il en faire le siège. Il lui fallait un point sur la côte, afin de tirer des îles ou de Cyrène des approvisionnements et des soldats, et il convoitait le port d'Utique comme étant le plus près de Carthage.

Le Suffète partit donc de Zouitin et tourna le lac d'Hippo-Zaryte avec prudence. Mais bientôt il fut contraint d'allonger ses régiments en colonne pour gravir la montagne qui sépare les deux vallées. Au coucher du soleil ils descendaient dans son sommet creusé en forme d'entonnoir, quand ils aperçurent devant eux, à ras du sol, des louves de bronze qui semblaient courir sur l'herbe.

Tout à coup de grands panaches se levèrent, et au grand rythme des flûtes un chant formidable éclata. C'était l'armée de Spendius ; car des Campaniens et des Grecs, par exécration de Carthage, avaient pris les enseignes de Rome. En même temps, sur la gauche, apparurent de longues piques, des boucliers en peau de léopard, des cuirasses de lin, des épaules nues.

C'étaient les Ibériens de Mâtho, les Lusitaniens, les Baléares, les Gétules ; on entendit le hennissement des chevaux de Narr'Havas ; ils se répandirent autour de la colline ; puis arriva la vague cohue que commandait Autharite ; les Gaulois, les Libyens, les Nomades ; et l'on reconnaissait au milieu d'eux les Mangeurs-de-choses-immondes aux arêtes de poisson qu'ils portaient dans la chevelure.

Ainsi les Barbares, combinant exactement leurs marches, s'étaient rejoints. Mais, surpris eux-mêmes, ils restèrent quelques minutes immobiles et se consultant.

Le Suffète avait tassé ses hommes en une masse orbiculaire, de façon à offrir partout une résistance égale. Les hauts boucliers pointus, fichés dans le gazon les uns près des autres, entouraient l'infanterie. Les Clinabares se tenaient en dehors, et plus loin, de place en place, les éléphants. Les Mercenaires étaient harassés de fatigue ; il valait mieux attendre jusqu'au jour ; et, certains de leur victoire, les Barbares, pendant toute la nuit, s'occupèrent à manger.

Ils avaient allumé de grands feux clairs qui, en les éblouissant, laissaient dans l'ombre l'armée punique au-dessous d'eux. Hamilcar fit creuser autour de son camp, comme les Romains, un fossé large de quinze pas, profond de six coudées ; avec la terre exhausser à l'intérieur un parapet sur lequel on planta des pieux aigus qui s'entrelaçaient, et, au soleil levant, les Mercenaires furent ébahis d'apercevoir tous les Carthaginois ainsi retranchés comme dans une forteresse.

Ils reconnaissaient au milieu des tentes Hamilcar qui se promenait en distribuant des ordres. Il avait le corps pris dans une cuirasse brune tailladée en petites écailles ; et, suivi de son cheval, de temps en temps il s'arrêtait pour désigner quelque chose de son bras droit étendu.

Alors plus d'un se rappela des matinées pareilles, quand, au fracas des clairons, il passait devant eux lentement, et que ses regards les fortifiaient comme des coupes de vin. Une sorte d'attendrissement les saisit. Ceux, au contraire, qui ne connaissaient pas Hamilcar, dans leur joie de le tenir, déliraient.

Cependant, si tous attaquaient à la fois, on se nuirait mutuellement dans l'espace trop étroit. Les Numides pouvaient se lancer au travers ; mais les Clinabares défendus par des cuirasses les écraseraient ; puis comment franchir les palissades ? Quant aux éléphants, ils n'étaient pas suffisamment instruits.

— " Vous êtes tous des lâches ! " s'écria Mâtho.

Et, avec les meilleurs, il se précipita contre le retranchement. Une volée de pierres les repoussa ; car le Suffète avait pris sur le pont leurs catapultes abandonnées.

Cet insuccès fit tourner brusquement l'esprit mobile des Barbares. L'excès de leur bravoure disparut ; ils voulaient vaincre, mais en se risquant le moins possible. D'après Spendius, il fallait garder soigneusement la position que l'on avait et affamer l'armée punique. Mais les Carthaginois se mirent à creuser des puits, et des montagnes entourant la colline, ils découvrirent de l'eau.

Du sommet de leur palissade ils lançaient des flèches, de la terre, du fumier, des cailloux qu'ils arrachaient du sol, pendant que les six catapultes roulaient incessamment sur la longueur de la terrasse.

Mais les sources d'elles-mêmes se tariraient ; on épuiserait les vivres, on userait les catapultes ; les Mercenaires, dix fois plus nombreux, finiraient par triompher. Le Suffète imagina des négociations afin de gagner du temps, et un matin les Barbares trouvèrent dans leurs lignes une peau de mouton couverte d'écritures. Il se justifiait de sa victoire : les Anciens l'avaient forcé à la guerre, et pour leur montrer qu'il gardait sa parole, il leur offrait le pillage d'Utique ou celui d'Hippo-Zaryte, à leur choix ; Hamilcar, en terminant, déclarait ne pas les craindre, parce qu'il avait gagné des traîtres et que, grâce à ceux-là, il viendrait à bout, facilement, de tous les autres.

Les Barbares furent troublés : cette proposition d'un butin immédiat les faisait rêver ; ils appréhendaient une trahison, ne soupçonnant point un piège dans la forfanterie du Suffète, et ils commencèrent à se regarder les uns les autres avec méfiance. On observait les paroles, les démarches ; des terreurs les réveillaient la nuit. Plusieurs abandonnaient leurs compagnons ; suivant sa fantaisie on choisissait son armée, et les Gaulois avec Autharite allèrent se joindre aux hommes de la Cisalpine dont ils comprenaient la langue.

Les quatre chefs se réunissaient tous les soirs dans la tente de Mâtho, et, accroupis autour d'un bouclier, ils avançaient et reculaient attentivement les petites figurines de bois, inventées par Pyrrhus pour reproduire les manoeuvres. Spendius démontrait les ressources d'Hamilcar ; il suppliait de ne point compromettre l'occasion et jurait par tous les Dieux. Mâtho, irrité, marchait en gesticulant. La guerre contre Carthage était sa chose personnelle ; il s'indignait que les autres s'en mêlassent sans vouloir lui obéir. Autharite, à sa figure, devinait ses paroles, applaudissait. Narr'Havas levait le menton en signe de dédain ; pas une mesure qu'il ne jugeât funeste ; et il ne souriait plus. Des soupirs lui échappaient comme s'il eût refoulé la douleur d'un rêve impossible, le désespoir d'une entreprise manquée.

Pendant que les Barbares, incertains, délibéraient, le Suffète augmentait ses défenses : il fit creuser en deçà des palissades un second fossé, élever une seconde muraille, construire aux angles des tours de bois ; et ses esclaves allaient jusqu'au milieu des avant-postes enfoncer les chausse-trapes dans la terre. Mais les éléphants, dont les rations étaient diminuées, se débattaient dans leurs entraves. Pour ménager les herbes, il ordonna aux Clinabares de tuer les moins robustes des étalons. Quelques-uns s'y refusèrent ; il les fit décapiter. On mangea les chevaux. Le souvenir de cette viande fraîche, les jours suivants, fut une grande tristesse.

Du fond de l'amphithéâtre où ils se trouvaient resserrés, ils voyaient tout autour d'eux, sur les hauteurs, les quatre camps des Barbares pleins d'agitation.

Des femmes circulaient avec des outres sur la tête, des chèvres en bêlant erraient sous les faisceaux des piques ; on relevait les sentinelles, on mangeait autour des trépieds. En effet, les tribus leur fournissaient des vivres abondamment, et ils ne se doutaient pas eux-mêmes combien leur inaction effrayait l'armée punique.

Dès le second jour, les Carthaginois avaient remarqué dans le camp des Nomades une troupe de trois cents hommes à l'écart des autres. C'étaient les Riches, retenus prisonniers depuis le commencement de la guerre. Des Libyens les rangèrent tous au bord du fossé, et, postés derrière eux, ils envoyaient des javelots en se faisant un rempart de leur corps. A peine pouvait-on reconnaître ces misérables, tant leur visage disparaissait sous la vermine et les ordures. Leurs cheveux arrachés par endroits laissaient à nu les ulcères de leur tête, et ils étaient si maigres et hideux qu'ils ressemblaient à des momies dans des linceuls troués. Quelques-uns, en tremblant, sanglotaient d'un air stupide ; les autres criaient à leurs amis de tirer sur les Barbares. Il y en avait un, tout immobile, le front baissé, qui ne parlait pas ; sa grande barbe blanche tombait jusqu'à ses mains couvertes de chaînes ; et les Carthaginois, en sentant au fond de leur coeur comme l'écroulement de la République, reconnaissaient Giscon. Bien que la place fût dangereuse, ils se poussaient pour le voir. On l'avait coiffé d'une tiare grotesque, en cuir d'hippopotame, incrustée de cailloux. C'était une imagination d'Autharite ; mais cela déplaisait à Mâtho.

Hamilcar, exaspéré, fit ouvrir les palissades, résolu à se faire jour n'importe comment ; et d'un train furieux les Carthaginois montèrent jusqu'à mi-côte, pendant trois cents pas. Un tel flot de Barbares descendit qu'ils furent refoulés sur leurs lignes. Un des gardes de la Légion, resté en dehors, trébuchait parmi les pierres. Zarxas accourut, et, le terrassant, il lui enfonça un poignard dans la gorge ; il l'en retira, se jeta sur la blessure, — et, la bouche collée contre elle, avec des grondements de joie et des soubresauts qui le secouaient jusqu'aux talons, il pompait le sang à pleine poitrine ; puis, tranquillement, il s'assit sur le cadavre, releva son visage en se renversant le cou pour mieux humer l'air, comme fait une biche qui vient de boire à un torrent, et, d'une voix aiguë, il entonna une chanson des Baléares, une vague mélodie pleine de modulations prolongées, s'interrompant, alternant, comme des échos qui se répondent dans les montagnes ; il appelait ses frères morts et les conviait à un festin ; — puis il laissa retomber ses mains entre ses jambes, baissa lentement la tête, et pleura. Cette chose atroce fit horreur aux Barbares, aux Grecs surtout.

Les Carthaginois, à partir de ce moment, ne tentèrent aucune sortie ; — et ils ne songeaient pas à se rendre, certains de périr dans les supplices.

Cependant, les vivres, malgré les soins d'Hamilcar, diminuaient effroyablement. Pour chaque homme, il ne restait plus que dix k'kommer de blé, trois hin de millet et douze betza de fruits secs. Plus de viande, plus d'huile, plus de salaisons, pas un grain d'orge pour les chevaux ; on les voyait, baissant leur encolure amaigrie, chercher dans la poussière des brins de paille piétinés. Souvent les sentinelles en vedette sur la terrasse apercevaient, au clair de la lune, un chien des Barbares qui venait rôder sous le retranchement, dans les tas d'immondices ; on l'assommait avec une pierre, et, s'aidant des courroies du bouclier, on descendait le long des palissades, puis, sans rien dire, on le mangeait. Parfois d'horribles aboiements s'élevaient, et l'homme ne remontait plus. Dans la quatrième dilochie de la douzième syntagme, trois phalangites, en se disputant un rat, se tuèrent à coups de couteau.

Tous regrettaient leurs familles, leurs maisons : les pauvres, leurs cabanes en forme de ruche, avec des coquilles au seuil des portes, un filet suspendu, et les patriciens, leurs grandes salles emplies de ténèbres bleuâtres, quand, à l'heure la plus molle du jour, ils se reposaient, écoutant le bruit vague des rues mêlé au frémissement des feuilles qui s'agitaient dans leurs jardins ; — et, pour mieux descendre dans cette pensée, afin d'en jouir davantage, ils entre-fermaient les paupières ; la secousse d'une blessure les réveillait. A chaque minute, c'était un engagement, une alerte nouvelle ; les tours brûlaient, les Mangeurs-de- choses-immondes sautaient aux palissades ; avec des haches, on leur abattait les mains ; d'autres accouraient ; une pluie de fer tombait sur les tentes. On éleva des galeries en claies de jonc pour se garantir des projectiles. Les Carthaginois s'y enfermèrent ; ils n'en bougeaient plus.

Tous les jours, le soleil qui tournait sur la colline, abandonnant, dès les premières heures, le fond de la gorge, les laissait dans l'ombre. En face et par-derrière, les pentes grises du terrain remontaient, couvertes de cailloux tachetés d'un rare lichen, et, sur leurs têtes, le ciel, continuellement pur, s'étalait, plus lisse et froid à l'oeil qu'une coupole de métal. Hamilcar était si indigné contre Carthage qu'il sentait l'envie de se jeter dans les Barbares pour les conduire sur elle. Puis voilà que les porteurs, les vivandiers, les esclaves commençaient à murmurer, et ni le peuple ni le Grand-Conseil, personne n'envoyait même une espérance. La situation était intolérable surtout par l'idée qu'elle deviendrait pire.

A la nouvelle du désastre, Carthage avait comme bondi de colère et de haine ; on aurait moins exécré le Suffète, si, dès le commencement, il se fût laissé vaincre.

Mais pour acheter d'autres Mercenaires, le temps manquait, l'argent manquait. Quant à lever des soldats dans la ville, comment les équiper ? Hamilcar avait pris toutes les armes ! et qui donc les commanderait ? Les meilleurs capitaines se trouvaient là-bas avec lui ! Cependant, des hommes expédiés par le Suffète arrivaient dans les rues, poussaient des cris. Le Grand-Conseil s'en émut, et il s'arrangea pour les faire disparaître.

C'était une prudence inutile ; tous accusaient Barca de s'être conduit avec mollesse. Il aurait dû, après sa victoire, anéantir les Mercenaires. Pourquoi avait-il ravagé les tribus ? On s'était cependant imposé d'assez lourds sacrifices ! et les patriciens déploraient leur contribution de quatorze shekel, les Syssites leurs deux cent vingt-trois mille kikar d'or ; ceux qui n'avaient rien donné se lamentaient comme les autres. La populace était jalouse des Carthaginois-nouveaux auxquels il avait promis le droit de cité complet ; et même les Ligures, qui s'étaient si intrépidement battus, on les confondait avec les Barbares, on les maudissait comme eux ; leur race devenait un crime, une complicité. Les marchands sur le seuil de leur boutique, les manoeuvres qui passaient, une règle de plomb à la main, les vendeurs de saumure rinçant leurs paniers, les baigneurs dans les étuves et les débitants de boissons chaudes, tous discutaient les opérations de la campagne. On traçait avec son doigt des plans de bataille sur la poussière ; et il n'était si mince goujat qui ne sût corriger les fautes d'Hamilcar.

C'était, disaient les prêtres, le châtiment de sa longue impiété. Il n'avait point offert d'holocaustes ; il n'avait pas pu purifier ses troupes ; il avait même refusé de prendre avec lui des augures ; — et le scandale du sacrilège renforçait la violence des haines contenues, la rage des espoirs trahis. On se rappelait les désastres de la Sicile, tout le fardeau de son orgueil qu'on avait si longtemps porté ! Les collèges des pontifes ne lui pardonnaient pas d'avoir saisi leur trésor, et ils exigèrent du Grand-Conseil l'engagement de le crucifier, si jamais il revenait.

Les chaleurs du mois d'Eloul, excessives cette année-là, étaient une autre calamité. Des bords du Lac, il s'élevait des odeurs nauséabondes ; elles passaient dans l'air avec les fumées des aromates tourbillonnant au coin des rues. On entendait continuellement retentir des hymnes. Des flots de peuple occupaient les escaliers des temples : toutes les murailles étaient couvertes de voiles noirs ; des cierges brûlaient au front des Dieux-Patæques, et le sang des chameaux égorgés en sacrifice, coulant le long des rampes, formait, sur les marches, des cascades rouges. Un délire funèbre agitait Carthage. Du fond des ruelles les plus étroites, des bouges les plus noirs, des figures pâles sortaient, des hommes à profil de vipère et qui grinçaient des dents. Les hurlements aigus des femmes emplissaient les maisons, et, s'échappant par les grillages, faisaient se retourner sur les places ceux qui causaient debout. On croyait quelquefois que les Barbares arrivaient ; on les avait aperçus derrière la montagne des Eaux-Chaudes ; ils étaient campés à Tunis ; et les voix se multipliaient, grossissaient, se confondaient en une seule clameur. Puis, un silence universel s'établissait, les uns restaient grimpés sur le fronton des édifices, avec leur main ouverte au bord des yeux, tandis que les autres, à plat ventre au pied des remparts, tendaient l'oreille. La terreur passée, les colères recommençaient. Mais la conviction de leur impuissance les replongeait bientôt dans la même tristesse.

Elle redoublait chaque soir, quand tous, montés sur les terrasses, poussaient, en s'inclinant, par neuf fois, un grand cri, pour saluer le Soleil. Il s'abaissait derrière la Lagune, lentement, puis, tout à coup, il disparaissait dans les montagnes, du côté des Barbares.

On attendait la fête trois fois sainte où, du haut d'un bûcher, un aigle s'envolait vers le ciel, symbole de la résurrection de l'année, message du peuple à son Baal suprême, et qu'il considérait comme une sorte d'union, une manière de se rattacher à la force du Soleil. D'ailleurs, empli de haine maintenant, il se tournait naïvement vers Moloch-Homicide, et tous abandonnaient Tanit. En effet, la Rabbetna, n'ayant plus son voile, était comme dépouillée d'une partie de sa vertu. Elle refusait la bienfaisance de ses eaux, elle avait déserté Carthage ; c'était une transfuge, une ennemie. Quelques-uns, pour l'outrager, lui jetaient des pierres. Mais en l'invectivant, beaucoup la plaignaient ; on la chérissait encore et plus profondément peut-être.

Tous les malheurs venaient donc de la perte du zaïmph. Salammbô y avait indirectement participé ; on la comprenait dans la même rancune ; elle devait être punie. La vague idée d'une immolation bientôt circula dans le peuple. Pour apaiser les Baalim, il fallait sans doute leur offrir quelque chose d'une incalculable valeur, un être beau, jeune, vierge, d'antique maison, issu des Dieux, un astre humain. Tous les jours des hommes que l'on ne connaissait pas envahissaient les jardins de Mégara ; les esclaves, tremblant pour eux-mêmes, n'osaient leur résister. Cependant, ils ne dépassaient point l'escalier des galères. Ils restaient en bas, les yeux levés sur la dernière terrasse ; ils attendaient Salammbô, et, durant des heures, ils criaient contre elle, comme des chiens qui hurlent après la lune.

Chapitre 10 LE SERPENT

Ces clameurs de la populace n'épouvantaient pas la fille d'Hamilcar.

Elle était troublée par des inquiétudes plus hautes : son grand serpent, le Python noir, languissait ; et le serpent était pour les Carthaginois un fétiche à la fois national et particulier. On le croyait fils du limon de la terre, puisqu'il émerge de ses profondeurs et n'a pas besoin de pieds pour la parcourir ; sa démarche rappelait les ondulations des fleuves, sa température les antiques ténèbres visqueuses pleines de fécondité, et l'orbe qu'il décrit en se mordant la queue l'ensemble des planètes, l'intelligence d'Eschmoûn.

Celui de Salammbô avait déjà refusé plusieurs fois les quatre moineaux vivants qu'on lui présentait à la pleine lune et à chaque nouvelle lune. Sa belle peau, couverte comme le firmament de taches d'or sur un fond tout noir, était jaune maintenant, flasque, ridée et trop large pour son corps ; une moisissure cotonneuse étendait autour de sa tête ; et dans l'angle de ses paupières, on apercevait de petits points rouges qui paraissaient remuer. De temps à autre, Salammbô s'approchait de sa corbeille en fils d'argent ; elle écartait la courtine de pourpre, les feuilles de lotus, le duvet d'oiseau ; il était continuellement enroulé sur lui-même, plus immobile qu'une liane flétrie ; et, à force de le regarder, elle finissait par sentir dans son coeur comme une spirale, comme un autre serpent qui, peu à peu, lui montait à la gorge et l'étranglait.

Elle était désespérée d'avoir vu le zaïmph, et cependant, elle en éprouvait une sorte de joie, un orgueil intime. Un mystère se dérobait dans la splendeur de ses plis ; c'était le nuage enveloppant les Dieux, le secret de l'existence universelle, et Salammbô, en se faisant horreur à elle-même, regrettait de ne l'avoir pas soulevé.

Presque toujours, elle était accroupie au fond de son appartement, tenant dans ses mains sa jambe gauche repliée, la bouche entrouverte, le menton baissé, l'oeil fixe. Elle se rappelait, avec épouvante, la figure de son père ; elle voulait s'en aller dans les montagnes de la Phénicie, en pèlerinage au temple d'Aphaka, où Tanit est descendue sous la forme d'une étoile ; toutes sortes d'imaginations l'attiraient, l'effrayaient ; d'ailleurs une solitude chaque jour plus large l'environnait. Elle ne savait même pas ce que devenait Hamilcar.

Enfin, lasse de ses pensées, elle se levait, et, en traînant ses petites sandales dont la semelle à chaque pas claquait sur ses talons, elle se promenait au hasard dans la grande chambre silencieuse. Les améthystes et les topazes du plafond faisaient çà et là trembler des taches lumineuses, et Salammbô, tout en marchant, tournait un peu la tête pour les voir. Elle allait prendre par le goulot les amphores suspendues ; elle se rafraîchissait la poitrine sous les larges éventails, ou bien elle s'amusait à brûler du cinnamome dans des perles creuses. Au coucher du soleil, Taanach retirait les losanges de feutre noir bouchant les ouvertures de la muraille ; alors ses colombes, frottées de musc comme les colombes de Tanit, tout à coup entraient, et leurs pattes roses glissaient sur les dalles de verre parmi les grains d'orge qu'elle leur jetait à pleines poignées, comme un semeur dans un champ. Mais soudain elle éclatait en sanglots, et elle restait étendue sur le grand lit fait de courroies de boeuf, sans remuer, en répétant un mot, toujours le même, les yeux ouverts, pâle comme une morte, insensible, froide ; — et cependant elle entendait le cri des singes dans les touffes des palmiers, avec le grincement continu de la grande roue qui, à travers les étages, amenait un flot d'eau pure dans la vasque de porphyre.

Quelquefois, durant plusieurs jours, elle refusait de manger. Elle voyait en rêve des astres troubles qui passaient sous ses pieds. Elle appelait Schahabarim, et, quand il était venu, n'avait plus rien à lui dire.

Elle ne pouvait vivre sans le soulagement de sa présence. Mais elle se révoltait intérieurement contre cette domination ; elle sentait pour le prêtre tout à la fois de la terreur, de la jalousie, de la haine et une espèce d'amour, en reconnaissance de la singulière volupté qu'elle trouvait près de lui.

Il avait reconnu l'influence de la Rabbet, habile à distinguer quels étaient les Dieux qui envoyaient les maladies ; et, pour guérir Salammbô, il faisait arroser son appartement avec des lotions de verveine et d'adiante ; elle mangeait tous les matins des mandragores ; elle dormait, la tête sur un sachet d'aromates mixtionnés par les pontifes ; il avait même employé le baaras, racine couleur de feu qui refoule dans le septentrion les génies funestes ; enfin, se tournant vers l'étoile polaire, il murmura par trois fois le nom mystérieux de Tanit ; mais Salammbô souffrant toujours, ses angoisses s'approfondirent.

Personne à Carthage n'était savant comme lui. Dans sa jeunesse, il avait étudié au collège des Mogbeds, à Borsippa, près de Babylone ; puis visité Samothrace, Pessinunte, Ephèse, la Thessalie, la Judée, les temples des Nabathéens, qui sont perdus dans les sables ; et, des cataractes jusqu'à la mer, parcouru à pied les bords du Nil. La face couverte d'un voile, et en secouant des flambeaux, il avait jeté un coq noir sur un feu de sandaraque, devant le poitrail du Sphinx, le Père-de-la-Terreur. Il était descendu dans les cavernes de Proserpine ; il avait vu tourner les cinq cents colonnes du labyrinthe de Lemnos et resplendir le candélabre de Tarente, portant sur sa tige autant de lampadaires qu'il y a de jours dans l'année ; la nuit, parfois, il recevait des Grecs pour les interroger. La constitution du monde ne l'inquiétait pas moins que la nature des Dieux ; avec les armilles placés dans le portique d'Alexandrie, il avait observé les équinoxes, et accompagné jusqu'à Cyrène les bématistes d'Evergète, qui mesurent le ciel en calculant le nombre de leurs pas ; — si bien que maintenant grandissait dans sa pensée une religion particulière, sans formule distincte, et, à cause de cela même, toute pleine de vertiges et d'ardeurs. Il ne croyait plus la terre faite comme une pomme de pin ; il la croyait ronde et tombant éternellement dans l'immensité, avec une vitesse si prodigieuse qu'on ne s'aperçoit pas de sa chute.

De la position du soleil au-dessus de la lune, il concluait à la prédominance de Baal, dont l'astre lui-même n'est que le reflet et la figure ; d'ailleurs, tout ce qu'il voyait des choses terrestres le forçait à reconnaître pour suprême le principe mâle exterminateur. Puis, il accusait secrètement la Rabbet de l'infortune de sa vie. N'était-ce pas pour elle qu'autrefois, le grand pontife, s'avançant dans le tumulte des cymbales, lui avait pris sous une patère d'eau bouillante sa virilité future ? Et il suivait d'un oeil mélancolique des hommes qui se perdaient avec les prêtresses au fond des térébinthes.

Ses jours se passaient à inspecter les encensoirs, les vases d'or, les pinces, les râteaux pour les cendres de l'autel, et toutes les robes des statues, jusqu'à l'aiguille de bronze servant à friser les cheveux d'une vieille Tanit, dans le troisième édicule, près de la vigne d'émeraude. Aux mêmes heures, il soulevait les grandes tapisseries des mêmes portes qui retombaient ; il restait les bras ouverts dans la même attitude, ; il priait prosterné sur les mêmes dalles, tandis qu'autour de lui un peuple de prêtres circulait pieds nus par les couloirs pleins d'un crépuscule éternel.

Mais sur l'aridité de sa vie, Salammbô faisait comme une fleur dans la fente d'un sépulcre. Cependant, il était dur pour elle, et ne lui épargnait point les pénitences ni les paroles amères. Sa condition établissait entre eux comme l'égalité d'un sexe commun, et il en voulait moins à la jeune fille de ne pouvoir la posséder que de la trouver si belle et surtout si pure. Souvent il voyait bien qu'elle se fatiguait à suivre sa pensée. Alors il s'en retournait plus triste ; il se sentait plus abandonné, plus seul, plus vide.

Des mots étranges quelquefois lui échappaient, et qui passaient devant Salammbô comme de larges éclairs illuminant des abîmes. C'était la nuit, sur la terrasse, quand, seuls tous les deux, ils regardaient les étoiles, et que Carthage s'étalait en bas, sous leurs pieds, avec le golfe et la pleine mer vaguement perdus dans la couleur des ténèbres.

Il lui exposait la théorie des âmes qui descendent sur la terre, en suivant la même route que le soleil par les signes du zodiaque. De son bras étendu, il montrait dans le Bélier la porte de la génération humaine, dans le Capricorne, celle du retour vers les Dieux ; et Salammbô s'efforçait de les apercevoir, car elle prenait ces conceptions pour des réalités ; elle acceptait comme vrais en eux-mêmes de purs symboles et jusqu'à des manières de langage, distinction qui n'était pas, non plus, toujours bien nette pour le prêtre.

— " Les âmes des morts ", disait-il, " se résolvent dans la lune comme les cadavres dans la terre. Leurs larmes composent son humidité ; c'est un séjour obscur plein de fange, de débris et de tempêtes. "

Elle demanda ce qu'elle y deviendrait.

D'abord, tu languiras, légère comme une vapeur qui se balance sur les flots ; et, après des épreuves et des angoisses plus longues, tu t'en iras dans le foyer du soleil, à la source même de l'Intelligence !

Cependant il ne parlait pas de la Rabbet. Salammbô s'imaginait que c'était par pudeur pour sa déesse vaincue, et, l'appelant d'un nom commun qui désignait la lune, elle se répandait en bénédictions sur l'astre fertile et doux. A la fin, il s'écria :

— " Non ! non ! elle tire de l'autre toute sa fécondité ! Ne la vois-tu pas vagabondant autour de lui comme une femme amoureuse qui court après un homme dans un champ ? " Et sans cesse, il exaltait la vertu de la lumière.

Loin d'abattre ses désirs mystiques, au contraire il les sollicitait, et même il semblait prendre de la joie à la désoler par les révélations d'une doctrine impitoyable. Salammbô, malgré les douleurs de son amour, se jetait dessus avec emportement.

Mais plus Schahabarim se sentait douter de Tanit, plus il voulait y croire. Au fond de son âme un remords l'arrêtait. Il lui aurait fallu quelque preuve, une manifestation des Dieux, et, dans l'espoir de l'obtenir, le prêtre imagina une entreprise qui pouvait à la fois sauver sa patrie et sa croyance.

Dès lors il se mit, devant Salammbô, à déplorer le sacrilège et les malheurs qui en résultaient jusque dans les régions du ciel. Puis, tout à coup, il lui annonça le péril du Suffète, assailli par trois armées que commandait Mâtho ; car Mâtho, pour les Carthaginois, était, à cause du voile, comme le roi des Barbares ; et il ajouta que le salut de la République et de son père dépendait d'elle seule.

— " De moi ! " s'écria-t-elle, " comment puis-je ... ? "

Mais le prêtre, avec un sourire de dédain :

— " Jamais tu ne consentiras ! "

Elle le suppliait. Enfin Schahabarim lui dit :

— " Il faut que tu ailles chez les Barbares reprendre le zaïmph ! "

Elle s'affaissa sur l'escabeau d'ébène ; et elle restait les bras allongés entre ses genoux, avec un frisson de tous ses membres, comme une victime au pied de l'autel quand elle attend le coup de massue. Ses tempes bourdonnaient, elle voyait tourner des cercles de feu, et, dans sa stupeur, ne comprenait plus qu'une chose, c'est que certainement elle allait bientôt mourir.

Mais si Rabbetna triomphait, si le zaïmph était rendu et Carthage délivrée, qu'importe la vie d'une femme ! pensait Schahabarim. D'ailleurs, elle obtiendrait peut-être le voile et ne périrait pas.

Il fut trois jours sans revenir, ; le soir du quatrième, elle l'envoya chercher.

Pour mieux enflammer son coeur, il lui apportait toutes les invectives que l'on hurlait contre Hamilcar en plein Conseil ; il lui disait qu'elle avait failli, qu'elle devait réparer son crime, et que la Rabbetna ordonnait ce sacrifice.

Souvent une large clameur traversant les Mappales arrivait dans Mégara. Schahabarim et Salammbô sortaient vivement ; et, du haut de l'escalier des galères, ils regardaient.

C'étaient des gens sur la place de Khamon qui criaient pour avoir des armes. Les Anciens ne voulaient pas leur en fournir, estimant cet effort inutile ; d'autres partis, sans général, avaient été massacrés. Enfin on leur permit de s'en aller, et, par une sorte d'hommage à Moloch ou un vague besoin de destruction, ils arrachèrent dans les bois des temples de grands cyprès et, les ayant allumés aux flambeaux des Kabyres, ils les portaient dans les rues en chantant. Ces flammes monstrueuses s'avançaient, balancées doucement ; elles envoyaient des feux sur des boules de verre à la crête des temples, sur les ornements des colosses, sur les éperons des navires, dépassaient les terrasses et faisaient comme des soleils qui se roulaient par la ville. Elles descendirent l'Acropole. La porte de Malqua s'ouvrit.

— " Es-tu prête ? " s'écria Schahabarim, " ou leur as-tu recommandé de dire à ton père que tu l'abandonnais. " Elle se cacha le visage dans ses voiles, et les grandes lueurs s'éloignèrent, en s'abaissant peu à peu au bord des flots.

Une épouvante indéterminée la retenait : elle avait peur de Moloch, peur de Mâtho. Cet homme à taille de géant, et qui était maître du zaïmph, dominait la Rabbetna autant que le Baal et lui apparaissait entouré des mêmes fulgurations ; puis l'âme des Dieux, quelquefois, visitait le corps des hommes. Schahabarim, en parlant de celui-là, ne disait-il pas qu'elle devait vaincre Moloch ? Ils étaient mêlés l'un à l'autre ; elle les confondait ; tous les deux la poursuivaient.

Elle voulut connaître l'avenir et elle s'approcha du serpent, car on tirait des augures d'après l'attitude des serpents. Mais la corbeille était vide ; Salammbô fut troublée.

Elle le trouva enroulé par la queue à un des balustres d'argent, près du lit suspendu, et il le frottait pour se dégager de sa vieille peau jaunâtre, tandis que son corps tout luisant et clair s'allongeait comme un glaive à moitié sorti du fourreau.

Puis les jours suivants, à mesure qu'elle se laissait convaincre, qu'elle était plus disposée à secourir Tanit, le python se guérissait, grossissait, il semblait revivre.

La certitude que Schahabarim exprimait la volonté des Dieux s'établit alors dans sa conscience. Un matin, elle se réveilla déterminée, et elle demanda ce qu'il fallait pour que Mâtho rendît le voile.

— " Le réclamer ", dit Schahabarim.

— " Mais s'il refuse ? " reprit-elle.

Le prêtre la considéra fixement, et avec un sourire qu'elle n'avait jamais vu.

— " Oui, comment faire ? " répéta Salammbô.

Il roulait entre ses doigts l'extrémité des bandelettes qui tombaient de sa tiare sur ses épaules, les yeux baissés, immobile. Enfin, voyant qu'elle ne comprenait pas :

— " Tu seras seule avec lui. "

— " Après ? " dit-elle.

— " Seule dans sa tente. "

— " Et alors ? "

Schahabarim se mordit les lèvres. Il cherchait quelque phrase, un détour.

— " Si tu dois mourir, ce sera plus tard ", dit-il, plus tard ! ne crains rien ! et quoi qu'il entreprenne, n'appelle pas ! ne t'effraye pas ! Tu seras humble, entends-tu, et soumise à son désir qui est l'ordre du ciel !

— " Mais le voile ? "

— " Les Dieux y aviseront ", répondit Schahabarim. Elle ajouta :

— " Si tu m'accompagnais, ô père ? "

— " Non ! "

Il la fit se mettre à genoux, et, gardant la main gauche levée et la droite étendue, il jura pour elle de rapporter dans Carthage le manteau de Tanit. Avec des imprécations terribles, elle se dévouait aux Dieux, et chaque fois que Schahabarim prononçait un mot, en défaillant, elle le répétait.

Il lui indiqua toutes les purifications, les jeûnes qu'elle devait faire et comment parvenir jusqu'à Mâtho. D'ailleurs, un homme connaissant les routes l'accompagnerait.

Elle se sentit comme délivrée. Elle ne songeait plus qu'au bonheur de revoir le zaïmph, et maintenant elle bénissait Schahabarim de ses exhortations.

C'était l'époque où les colombes de Carthage émigraient en Sicile, dans la montagne d'Eryx, autour du temple de Vénus. Avant leur départ, durant plusieurs jours, elles se cherchaient, s'appelaient pour se réunir ; enfin elles s'envolèrent un soir ; le vent les poussait, et cette grosse nuée blanche glissait dans le ciel, au-dessus de la mer, très haut.

Une couleur de sang occupait l'horizon. Elles semblaient descendre vers les flots, peu à peu ; puis elles disparurent comme englouties et tombant d'elles-mêmes dans la gueule du soleil. Salammbô, qui les regardait s'éloigner, baissa la tête, et Taanach, croyant deviner son chagrin, lui dit alors doucement :

— " Mais elles reviendront, Maîtresse. "

— " Oui ! Je le sais. "

— " Et tu les reverras. "

— " Peut-être ! " fit-elle en soupirant.

Elle n'avait confié à personne sa résolution ; pour l'accomplir plus discrètement, elle envoya Taanach acheter dans le faubourg de Kinisdo (au lieu de les demander aux intendants), toutes les choses qu'il lui fallait : du vermillon, des aromates, une ceinture de lin et des vêtements neufs. La vieille esclave s'ébahissait de ces préparatifs, sans oser pourtant lui faire de questions ; et le jour arriva, fixé par Schahabarim, où Salammbô devait partir.

Vers la douzième heure, elle aperçut au fond des sycomores un vieillard aveugle, la main appuyée sur l'épaule d'un enfant qui marchait devant lui, et de l'autre il portait contre sa hanche une espèce de cithare en bois noir. Les eunuques, les esclaves, les femmes avaient été scrupuleusement éloignés : aucun ne pouvait savoir le mystère qui se préparait.

Taanach alluma dans les angles de l'appartement quatre trépieds pleins de strobus et de cardamone ; puis elle déploya de grandes tapisseries babyloniennes et elle les tendit sur des cordes, tout autour de la chambre : car Salammbô ne voulait pas être vue, même par les murailles. Le joueur de kinnor se tenait accroupi derrière la porte, et le jeune garçon, debout, appliquait contre ses lèvres une flûte de roseau. Au loin la clameur des rues s'affaiblissait, des ombres violettes s'allongeaient devant le péristyle des temples, et, de l'autre côté du golfe, les bases des montagnes, les champs d'oliviers et les vagues terrains jaunes, ondulant indéfiniment, se confondaient dans une vapeur bleuâtre ; on n'entendait aucun bruit, un accablement indicible pesait dans l'air.

Salammbô s'accroupit sur la marche d'onyx, au bord du bassin ; elle releva ses larges manches qu'elle attacha derrière ses épaules, et elle commença ses ablutions, méthodiquement, d'après les rites sacrés.

Enfin Taanach lui apporta, dans une fiole d'albâtre, quelque chose de liquide et de coagulé ; c'était le sang d'un chien noir, égorgé par des femmes stériles, une nuit d'hiver, dans les décombres d'un sépulcre. Elle s'en frotta les oreilles, les talons, le pouce de la main droite, et même son ongle resta un peu rouge, comme si elle eût écrasé un fruit.

La lune se leva ; alors la cithare et la flûte, toutes les deux à la fois, se mirent à jouer.

Salammbô défit ses pendants d'oreilles, son collier, ses bracelets, sa longue simarre blanche ; elle dénoua le bandeau de ses cheveux, et pendant quelques minutes elle les secoua sur ses épaules, doucement, pour se rafraîchir en les éparpillant. La musique au-dehors continuait ; c'étaient trois notes, toujours les mêmes, précipitées, furieuses ; les cordes grinçaient, la flûte ronflait ; Taanach marquait la cadence en frappant dans ses mains ; Salammbô, avec un balancement de tout son corps, psalmodiait des prières, et ses vêtements, les uns après les autres, tombaient autour d'elle.

La lourde tapisserie trembla, et par-dessus la corde qui la supportait, la tête du python apparut. Il descendit lentement, comme une goutte d'eau qui coule le long d'un mur, rampa entre les étoffes épandues, puis, la queue collée contre le sol, il se leva tout droit ; et ses yeux, plus brillants que des escarboucles, se dardaient sur Salammbô.

L'horreur du froid ou une pudeur, peut-être, la fit d'abord hésiter. Mais elle se rappela les ordres de Schahabarim, elle s'avança ; le python se rabattit et lui posant sur la nuque le milieu de son corps, il laissait pendre sa tête et sa queue, comme un collier rompu dont les deux bouts traînent jusqu'à terre. Salammbô l'entoura autour de ses flancs, sous ses bras, entre ses genoux ; puis le prenant à la mâchoire, elle approcha cette petite gueule triangulaire jusqu'au bord de ses dents, et, en fermant à demi les yeux, elle se renversait sous les rayons de la lune. La blanche lumière semblait l'envelopper d'un brouillard d'argent, la forme de ses pas humides brillait sur les dalles, des étoiles palpitaient dans la profondeur de l'eau ; il serrait contre elle ses noirs anneaux tigrés de plaques d'or. Salammbô haletait sous ce poids trop lourd, ses reins pliaient, elle se sentait mourir ; et du bout de sa queue il lui battait la cuisse tout doucement ; puis la musique se taisant, il retomba.

Taanach revint près d'elle ; et quand elle eut disposé deux candélabres dont les lumières brûlaient dans les boules de cristal pleines d'eau, elle teignit de lausonia l'intérieur de ses mains, passa du vermillon sur ses joues, de l'antimoine au bord de ses paupières, et allongea ses sourcils avec un mélange de gomme, de musc, d'ébène et de pattes de mouches écrasées.

Salammbô, assise dans une chaise à montants d'ivoire, s'abandonnait aux soins de l'esclave. Mais ces attouchements, l'odeur des aromates et les jeûnes qu'elle avait subis, l'énervaient. Elle devint si pâle que Taanach s'arrêta.

— " Continue ! " dit Salammbô, et, se roidissant contre elle-même, elle se ranima tout à coup. Alors une impatience la saisit ; elle pressait Taanach de se hâter, et la vieille esclave en grommelant :

— " Bien ! bien ! Maîtresse ! ... Tu n'as d'ailleurs personne qui t'attende ! "

— " Oui ! " dit Salammbô, " quelqu'un m'attend. "

Taanach se recula de surprise, et, afin d'en savoir plus long :

— " Que m'ordonnes-tu, Maîtresse ? car si tu dois rester partie... "

Mais Salammbô sanglotait ; l'esclave s'écria :

— " Tu souffres ! qu'as-tu donc ? Ne t'en va pas ! emmène-moi ! Quand tu étais toute petite et que tu pleurais, je te prenais sur mon coeur et je te faisais rire avec la pointe de mes mamelles ; tu les as taries, Maîtresse ! " Elle se donnait des coups sur sa poitrine desséchée. " Maintenant, je suis vieille ! je ne peux rien pour toi ! tu ne m'aimes plus ! tu me caches tes douleurs, tu dédaignes ta nourrice ! " Et de tendresse et de dépit, des larmes coulaient le long de ses joues, dans les balafres de son tatouage.

— " Non ! " dit Salammbô, " non, je t'aime ! console-toi ! "

Taanach, avec un sourire pareil à la grimace d'un vieux singe, reprit sa besogne. D'après les recommandations de Schahabarim, Salammbô lui avait ordonné de la rendre magnifique ; et elle l'accommodait dans un goût barbare, plein à la fois de recherche et d'ingénuité.

Sur une première tunique, mince, et de couleur vineuse, elle en passa une seconde, brodée en plumes d'oiseaux. Des écailles d'or se collaient à ses hanches, et de cette large ceinture descendaient les flots de ses caleçons bleus, étoilés d'argent. Ensuite Taanach lui emmancha une grande robe, faite avec la toile du pays des Sères, blanche et bariolée de lignes vertes. Elle attacha au bord de son épaule un carré de pourpre, appesanti dans le bas par des grains de sandastrum ; et par-dessus tous ces vêtements, elle posa un manteau noir à queue traînante ; puis elle la contempla, et, fière de son oeuvre, ne put s'empêcher de dire :

— " Tu ne seras pas plus belle le jour de tes noces ! "

— " Mes noces ! " répéta Salammbô ; elle rêvait, le coude appuyé sur la chaise d'ivoire.

Mais Taanach dressa devant elle un miroir de cuivre si large et si haut qu'elle s'y aperçut tout entière. Alors elle se leva, et, d'un coup de doigt léger, remonta une boucle de ses cheveux, qui descendait trop bas.

Ils étaient couverts de poudre d'or, crépus sur le front et par-derrière ils pendaient dans le dos, en longues torsades que terminaient des perles. Les clartés des candélabres avivaient le fard de ses joues, l'or de ses vêtements, la blancheur de sa peau ; elle avait autour de la taille, sur les bras, sur les mains et aux doigts des pieds une telle abondance de pierreries que le miroir, comme un soleil, lui renvoyait des rayons ; — et Salammbô, debout à côté de Taanach, se penchant pour la voir, souriait dans cet éblouissement.

Puis elle se promena de long en large, embarrassée du temps qui lui restait.

Tout à coup, le chant d'un coq retentit. Elle piqua vivement sur ses cheveux un long voile jaunes, se passa une écharpe autour du cou, enfonça ses pieds dans des bottines de cuir bleu, et elle dit à Taanach :

— " Va voir sous les myrtes s'il n'y a pas un homme avec deux chevaux. "

Taanach était à peine rentrée qu'elle descendait l'escalier des galeries.

— " Maîtresse ! " cria la nourrice.

Salammbô se retourna, un doigt sur la bouche, en signe de discrétion et d'immobilité.

Taanach se coula doucement le long des proues jusqu'au bas de la terrasse ; et de loin, à la clarté de la lune, elle distingua, dans l'avenue des cyprès, une ombre gigantesque marchant à la gauche de Salammbô obliquement, ce qui était un présage de mort.

Taanach remonta dans la chambre. Elle se jeta par terre, en se déchirant le visage avec ses ongles ; elle s'arrachait les cheveux, et à pleine poitrine poussait des hurlements aigus.

L'idée lui vint que l'on pouvait les entendre ; alors elle se tut. Elle sanglotait tout bas, la tête dans ses mains et la figure sur les dalles.

Chapitre 11 SOUS LA TENTE

L'homme qui conduisait Salammbô la fit remonter au-delà du phare, vers les Catacombes, puis descendre le long faubourg Molouya, plein de ruelles escarpées. Le ciel commençait à blanchir. Quelquefois, des poutres de palmier, sortant des murs, les obligeaient à baisser la tête. Les deux chevaux, marchant au pas, glissaient ; et ils arrivèrent ainsi à la porte de Teveste.

Ses lourds battants étaient entrebâillés ; ils passèrent ; elle se referma derrière eux.

D'abord ils suivirent pendant quelque temps le pied des remparts, et, à la hauteur des Citernes, ils prirent par la Taenia, étroit ruban de terre jaune, qui, séparant le golfe du lac, se prolonge jusqu'au Rhadès.

Personne n'apparaissait autour de Carthage, ni sur la mer, ni dans la campagne. Les flots couleur d'ardoise clapotaient doucement, et le vent léger, poussant leur écume çà et là, les tachetait de déchirures blanches. Malgré tous ses voiles, Salammbô frissonnait sous la fraîcheur du matin ; le mouvement, le grand air l'étourdissaient. Puis le soleil se leva ; il la mordait sur le derrière de la tête, et, involontairement, elle s'assoupissait un peu. Les deux bêtes, côte à côte, trottaient l'amble en enfonçant leurs pieds dans le sable muet.

Quand ils eurent dépassé la montagne des Eaux-Chaudes, ils continuèrent d'un train plus rapide, le sol étant plus ferme.

Mais les champs, bien qu'on fût à l'époque des semailles et des labours, d'aussi loin qu'on les apercevait, étaient vides comme le désert. Il y avait, de place en place, des tas de blé répandus ; ailleurs des orges roussies s'égrenaient. Sur l'horizon clair, les villages apparaissaient en noir, avec des formes incohérentes et découpées.

De temps à autre, un pan de muraille à demi calciné se dressait au bord de la route. Les toits des cabanes s'effondraient, et, dans l'intérieur, on distinguait des éclats de poteries, des lambeaux de vêtements, toutes sortes d'ustensiles et de choses brisées méconnaissables. Souvent un être couvert de haillons, la face terreuse et les prunelles flamboyantes, sortait de ces ruines. Mais bien vite il se mettait à courir ou disparaissait dans un trou. Salammbô et son guide ne s'arrêtaient pas.

Les plaines abandonnées se succédaient. Sur de grands espaces de terre toute blonde s'étalait, par traînées inégales, une poudre de charbon que leurs pas soulevaient derrière eux. Quelquefois ils rencontraient de petits endroits paisibles, un ruisseau qui coulait parmi de longues herbes ; et, en remontant sur l'autre bord, Salammbô, pour se rafraîchir les mains, arrachait des feuilles mouillées. Au coin d'un bois de lauriers-roses, son cheval fit un grand écart devant le cadavre d'un homme, étendu par terre.

L'esclave, aussitôt, la rétablit sur les coussins. C'était un des serviteurs du Temple, un homme que Schahabarim employait dans les missions périlleuses.

Par excès de précaution, maintenant il allait à pied, près d'elle entre les chevaux ; et il les fouettait avec le bout d'un lacet de cuir enroulé à son bras, ou bien il tirait d'une panetière suspendue contre sa poitrine des boulettes de froment, de dattes et de jaunes d'œufs, enveloppées dans des feuilles de lotus, et il les offrait à Salammbô, sans parler, tout en courant.

Au milieu du jour, trois Barbares, vêtus de peaux de bêtes, les croisèrent sur le sentier. Peu à peu, il en parut d'autres, vagabondant par troupes de dix, douze, vingt-cinq hommes ; plusieurs poussaient des chèvres ou quelque vache qui boitait. Leurs lourds bâtons étaient hérissés de pointes en airain ; des coutelas luisaient sur leurs vêtements d'une saleté farouche, et ils ouvraient les yeux avec un air de menace et d'ébahissement. Tout en passant, quelques-uns envoyaient une bénédiction banale ; d'autres, des plaisanteries obscènes ; et l'homme de Schahabarim répondait à chacun dans son propre idiome. Il leur disait que c'était un jeune garçon malade allant pour se guérir vers un temple lointain.

Cependant le jour tombait. Des aboiements retentirent ; ils s'en rapprochèrent.

Puis, aux clartés du crépuscule, ils aperçurent un enclos de pierres sèches, enfermant une vague construction. Un chien courait sur le mur. L'esclave lui jeta des cailloux ; et ils entrèrent dans une haute salle voûtée.

Au milieu, une femme accroupie se chauffait à un feu de broussailles dont la fumée s'envolait par les trous du plafond. Ses cheveux blancs, qui lui tombaient jusqu'aux genoux, la cachaient à demi ; et sans vouloir répondre, d'un air idiot, elle marmottait des paroles de vengeance contre les Barbares et contre les Carthaginois.

Le coureur furetait de droite et de gauche. Puis il revint près d'elle, en réclamant à manger. La vieille branlait la tête, et, les yeux fixés sur les charbons, murmurait :

— " J'étais la main. Les dix doigts sont coupés. La bouche ne mange plus. "

L'esclave lui montra une poignée de pièces d'or. Elle se rua dessus, mais bientôt elle reprit son immobilité.

Enfin il lui posa sous la gorge un poignard qu'il avait dans sa ceinture. Alors, en tremblant, elle alla soulever une large pierre et rapporta une amphore de vin avec des poissons d'Hippo-Zaryte confits dans du miel.

Salammbô se détourna de cette nourriture immonde, et elle s'endormit sur les caparaçons des chevaux étendus dans un coin de la salle.

Avant le jour, il la réveilla.

Le chien hurlait. L'esclave s'en approcha tout doucement ; et d'un seul coup de poignard, lui abattit la tête. Puis il frotta de sang les naseaux des chevaux pour les ranimer. La vieille lui lança par-derrière une malédiction. Salammbô l'aperçut, et elle pressa l'amulette qu'elle portait sur son coeur.

Ils se remirent en marche.

De temps à autre, elle demandait si l'on ne serait pas bientôt arrivé. La route ondulait sur de petites collines. On n'entendait que le grincement des cigales. Le soleil chauffait l'herbe jaunie ; la terre était toute fendillée par des crevasses, qui faisaient, en la divisant, comme des dalles monstrueuses. Quelquefois une vipère passait, des aigles volaient ; l'esclave courait toujours ; Salammbô rêvait sous ses voiles, et malgré la chaleur ne les écartait pas, dans la crainte de salir ses beaux vêtements.

A des distances régulières, des tours s'élevaient, bâties par les Carthaginois, afin de surveiller les tribus. Ils entraînaient dedans pour se mettre à l'ombre, puis repartaient.

La veille, par prudence, ils avaient fait un grand détour. Mais, à présent, on ne rencontrait personne ; la région étant stérile, les Barbares n'y avaient point passé.

La dévastation peu à peu recommença. Parfois, au milieu d'un champ, une mosaïque s'étalait, seul débris d'un château disparu ; et les oliviers, qui n'avaient pas de feuilles, semblaient au loin de larges buissons d'épines. Ils traversèrent un bourg dont les maisons étaient brûlées à ras du sol. On voyait le long des murailles des squelettes humains. Il y en avait aussi de dromadaires et de mulets. Des charognes à demi rongées barraient les rues. La nuit descendait. Le ciel était bas et couvert de nuages.

Ils remontèrent encore pendant deux heures dans la direction de l'Occident, et, tout à coup, devant eux, ils aperçurent quantité de petites flammes.

Elles brillaient au fond d'un amphithéâtre. Çà et là des plaques d'or miroitaient, en se déplaçant. C'étaient les cuirasses des Clinabares, le camp punique ; puis ils distinguèrent aux alentours d'autres lueurs plus nombreuses, car les armées des Mercenaires, confondues maintenant, s'étendaient sur un grand espace.

Salammbô fit un mouvement pour s'avancer. Mais l'homme de Schahabarim l'entraîna plus loin, et ils longèrent la terrasse qui fermait le camp des Barbares. Une brèche s'y ouvrait, l'esclave disparut.

Au sommet du retranchement, une sentinelle se promenait avec un arc à la main et une pique sur l'épaule.

Salammbô se rapprochait toujours ; le Barbare s'agenouilla, et une longue flèche vint percer le bas de son manteau. Puis, comme elle restait immobile, en criant, il lui demanda ce qu'elle voulait.

— " Parler à Mâtho ", répondit-elle. " Je suis un transfuge de Carthage. "

Il poussa un sifflement, qui se répéta de loin en loin.

Salammbô attendit ; son cheval, effrayé, tournoyait en reniflant.

Quand Mâtho arriva, la lune se levait derrière elle. Mais elle avait sur le visage un voile jaune à fleurs noires et tant de draperies autour du corps qu'il était impossible d'en rien deviner. Du haut de la terrasse, il considérait cette forme vague se dressant comme un fantôme dans les pénombres du soir.

Enfin elle lui dit :

— " Mène-moi dans ta tente ! Je le veux ! "

Un souvenir qu'il ne pouvait préciser lui traversa la mémoire. Il sentait battre son coeur. Cet air de commandement l'intimidait.

— " Suis-moi ! " dit-il.

La barrière s'abaissa ; aussitôt elle fut dans le camp des Barbares.

Un grand tumulte et une grande foule l'emplissaient. Des feux clairs brûlaient sous des marmites suspendues ; et leurs reflets empourprés, illuminant certaines places, en laissaient d'autres dans les ténèbres, complètement. On criait, on appelait ; des chevaux attachés à des entraves formaient de longues lignes droites au milieu des tentes ; elles étaient rondes, carrées, de cuir ou de toile ; il y avait des huttes en roseaux et des trous dans le sable comme en font les chiens. Les soldats charriaient des fascines, s'accoudaient par terre, ou, s'enroulant dans une natte, se disposaient à dormir ; et le cheval de Salammbô, pour passer par-dessus, quelquefois allongeait une jambe et sautait.

Elle se rappelait les avoir déjà vus ; mais leurs barbes étaient plus longues, leurs figures encore plus noires, leurs voix plus rauques. Mâtho, en marchant devant elle, les écartait par un geste de son bras qui soulevait son manteau rouge. Quelques-uns baisaient ses mains ; d'autres, en pliant l'échine, l'abordaient pour lui demander des ordres ; car il était maintenant le véritable, le seul chef des Barbares ; Spendius, Autharite et Narr'Havas étaient découragés, et il avait montré tant d'audace et d'obstination que tous lui obéissaient.

Salammbô, en le suivant, traversa le camp entier. Sa tente était au bout, à trois cents pas du retranchement d'Hamilcar.

Elle remarqua sur la droite une large fosse, et il lui sembla que des visages posaient contre le bord, au niveau du sol, comme eussent fait des têtes coupées. Cependant leurs yeux remuaient, et de ces bouches entrouvertes il s'échappait des gémissements en langage punique.

Deux nègres, portant des fanaux de résine, se tenaient aux deux côtés de la porte. Mâtho écarta la toile brusquement. Elle le suivit.

C'était une tente profonde, avec un mât dressé au milieu. Un grand lampadaire en forme de lotus l'éclairait, tout plein d'une huile jaune où flottaient des poignées d'étoupes, et on distinguait dans l'ombre des choses militaires qui reluisaient. Un glaive nu s'appuyait contre un escabeau, près d'un bouclier ; des fouets en cuir d'hippopotame, des cymbales, des grelots, des colliers s'étalaient pêle-mêle sur des corbeilles en sparterie ; les miettes d'un pain noir salissaient une couverture de feutre ; dans un coin, sur une pierre ronde, de la monnaie de cuivre était négligemment amoncelée, et, par les déchirures de la toile, le vent apportait la poussière du dehors avec la senteur des éléphants, que l'on entendait manger, tout en secouant leurs chaînes.

— " Qui es-tu ? " dit Mâtho.

Sans répondre, elle regardait autour d'elle, lentement, puis ses yeux s'arrêtèrent au fond, où, sur un lit en branches de palmier, retombait quelque chose de bleuâtre et de scintillant.

Elle s'avança vivement. Un cri lui échappa. Mâtho, derrière elle, frappait du pied.

— " Qui t'amène ? pourquoi viens-tu ? "

Elle répondit en montrant le zaïmph :

— " Pour le prendre ! " et de l'autre main elle arracha les voiles de sa tête. Il se recula, les coudes en arrière, béant, presque terrifié.

Elle se tenait comme appuyée sur la force des Dieux ; et, le regardant face à face, elle lui demanda le zaïmph ; elle le réclamait en paroles abondantes et superbes.

Mâtho n'entendait pas ; il la contemplait, et les vêtements, pour lui, se confondaient avec le corps. La moire des étoffes était, comme la splendeur de sa peau, quelque chose de spécial et n'appartenant qu'à elle. Ses yeux, ses diamants étincelaient ; le poli de ses ongles continuait la finesse des pierres qui chargeaient ses doigts ; les deux agrafes de sa tunique, soulevant un peu de ses seins, les rapprochaient l'un de l'autre, et il se perdait par la pensée dans leur étroit intervalle, où descendait un fil tenant une plaque d'émeraudes, que l'on apercevait plus bas sous la gaze violette. Elle avait pour pendants d'oreilles deux petites balances de saphir supportant une perle creuse, pleine d'un parfum liquide. Par les trous de la perle, de moment en moment, une gouttelette qui tombait mouillait son épaule nue. Mâtho la regardait tomber.

Une curiosité indomptable l'entraîna ; et, comme un enfant qui porte la main sur un fruit inconnu, tout en tremblant, du bout de son doigt, il la toucha légèrement sur le haut de sa poitrine ; la chair un peu froide céda avec une résistance élastique.

Ce contact, à peine sensible pourtant, ébranla Mâtho jusqu'au fond de lui-même. Un soulèvement de tout son être le précipitait vers elle. Il aurait voulu l'envelopper, l'absorber, la boire. Sa poitrine haletait, il claquait des dents.

En la prenant par les deux poignets, il l'attira doucement, et il s'assit alors sur une cuirasse, près du lit de palmier que couvrait une peau de lion. Elle était debout. Il la regardait de bas en haut, en la tenant ainsi entre ses jambes, et il répétait :

— " Comme tu es belle ! comme tu es belle ! "

Ses yeux continuellement fixés sur les siens la faisaient souffrir ; et ce malaise, cette répugnance augmentaient d'une façon si aiguë que Salammbô se retenait pour ne pas crier. La pensée de Schahabarim lui revint ; elle se résigna.

Mâtho gardait toujours ses petites mains dans les siennes ; et, de temps à autre, malgré l'ordre du prêtre, en tournant le visage, elle tâchait de l'écarter avec des secousses de ses bras. Il ouvrait les narines pour mieux humer le parfum s'exhalant de sa personne. C'était une émanation indéfinissable, fraîche, et cependant qui étourdissait comme la fumée d'une cassolette. Elle sentait le miel, le poivre, l'encens, les roses, et une autre odeur encore.

Mais comment se trouvait-elle près de lui, dans sa tente, à sa discrétion ? Quelqu'un, sans doute, l'avait poussée ? Elle n'était pas venue pour le zaïmph ? Ses bras retombèrent, et il baissa la tête, accablé par une rêverie soudaine.

Salammbô, afin de l'attendrir, lui dit d'une voix plaintive :

— " Que t'ai-je donc fait pour que tu veuilles ma mort ? "

— " Ta mort ! "

Elle reprit :

— " Je t'ai aperçu un soir, à la lueur de mes jardins qui brûlaient, entre des coupes fumantes et mes esclaves égorgés, et ta colère était si forte que tu as bondi vers moi et qu'il a fallu m'enfuir ! Puis une terreur est entrée dans Carthage. On criait la dévastation des villes, l'incendie des campagnes, le massacre des soldats ; c'est toi qui les avais perdus, c'est toi qui les avais assassinés ! Je te hais ! Ton nom seul me ronge comme un remords. Tu es plus exécré que la peste et que la guerre romaine ! Les provinces tressaillent de ta fureur, les sillons sont pleins de cadavres ! J'ai suivi la trace de tes feux, comme si je marchais derrière Moloch ! "

Mâtho se leva d'un bond ; un orgueil colossal lui gonflait le coeur ; il se trouvait haussé à la taille d'un Dieu.

Les narines battantes, les dents serrées, elle continuait :

— " Comme si ce n'était pas assez de ton sacrilège, tu es venu chez moi, dans mon sommeil, tout couvert du zaïmph ! Tes paroles, je ne les ai pas comprises ; mais je voyais bien que tu voulais m'entraîner vers quelque chose d'épouvantable, au fond d'un abîme. "

Mâtho, en se tordant les bras, s'écria :

— " Non ! non ! c'était pour te le donner ! pour te le rendre ! Il me semblait que la Déesse avait laissé son vêtement pour toi, et qu'il t'appartenait ! Dans son temple ou dans ta maison, qu'importe ? n'es-tu pas toute-puissante, immaculée, radieuse et belle comme Tanit ! " Et avec un regard plein d'une adoration infinie :

— " A moins, peut-être que tu ne sois Tanit ? "

— " Moi, Tanit ! " se disait Salammbô.

Ils ne parlaient plus. Le tonnerre au loin roulait. Des moutons bêlaient, effrayés par l'orage.

— " Oh ! approche ! " reprit-il, " approche ! ne crains rien ! "

— Autrefois, je n'étais qu'un soldat confondu dans la plèbe des Mercenaires, et même si doux, que je portais pour les autres du bois sur mon dos. Est-ce que je m'inquiète de Carthage ! La foule de ses hommes s'agite comme perdue dans la poussière de tes sandales, et tous ses trésors avec les provinces, les flottes et les îles, ne me font pas envie comme la fraîcheur de tes lèvres et le tour de tes épaules. Mais je voulais abattre ses murailles afin de parvenir jusqu'à toi, pour te posséder ! D'ailleurs, en attendant, je me vengeais ! A présent, j'écrase les hommes comme des coquilles, et je me jette sur les phalanges, j'écarte les sarisses avec mes mains, j'arrête les étalons par les naseaux ; une catapulte ne me tuerait pas ! Oh ! Si tu savais, au milieu de la guerre, comme je pense à toi ! Quelquefois, le souvenir d'un geste, d'un pli de ton vêtement, tout à coup me saisit et m'enlace comme un filet ! j'aperçois tes yeux dans les flammes des phalariques et sur la dorure des boucliers ! j'entends ta voix dans le retentissement des cymbales. Je me détourne, tu n'es pas là ! et alors je me replonge dans la bataille ! "

Il levait ses bras où des veines s'entrecroisaient comme des lierres sur des branches d'arbre. De la sueur coulait sur sa poitrine, entre ses muscles carrés ; et son haleine secouait ses flancs avec sa ceinture de bronze toute garnie de lanières qui pendaient jusqu'à ses genoux, plus fermes que du marbre. Salammbô, accoutumée aux eunuques, se laissait ébahir par la force de cet homme. C'était le châtiment de la Déesse ou l'influence de Moloch circulant autour d'elle, dans les cinq armées. Une lassitude l'accablait ; elle écoutait avec stupeur le cri intermittent des sentinelles, qui se répondaient.

Les flammes de la lampe vacillaient sous des rafales d'air chaud. Il venait, par moment, de larges éclairs ; puis l'obscurité redoublait ; et elle ne voyait plus que les prunelles de Mâtho, comme deux charbons dans la nuit. Cependant, elle sentait bien qu'une fatalité l'entourait, qu'elle touchait à un moment suprême, irrévocable, et, dans un effort, elle remonta vers le zaïmph et leva les mains pour le saisir.

— " Que fais-tu ? " s'écria Mâtho.

Elle répondit avec placidité :

— " Je m'en retourne à Carthage. "

Il s'avança en croisant les bras, et d'un air si terrible qu'elle fut immédiatement comme clouée sur ses talons.

— " T'en retourner à Carthage ! " Il balbutiait, et il répétait, en grinçant des dents :

— " T'en retourner à Carthage ! Ah ! tu venais pour prendre le zaïmph, pour me vaincre, puis disparaître ! Non ! non, tu m'appartiens ! et personne à présent ne t'arrachera d'ici ! Oh ! je n'ai pas oublié l'insolence de tes grands yeux tranquilles et comme tu m'écrasais avec la hauteur de ta beauté ! A mon tour, maintenant ! Tu es ma captive, mon esclave, ma servante ! Appelle, si tu veux, ton père et son armée, les Anciens, les Riches et ton exécrable peuple, tout entier ! Je suis le maître de trois cent mille soldats ! j'irai en chercher dans la Lusitanie, dans les Gaules et au fond du désert, et je renverserai ta ville, je brûlerai tous ses temples ; les trirèmes vogueront sur des vagues de sang ! Je ne veux pas qu'il en reste une maison, une pierre ni un palmier ! Et si les hommes me manquent, j'attirerai les ours des montagnes et je pousserai les lions ! N'essaye pas de t'enfuir, je te tue ! "

Blême et les poings crispés, il frémissait comme une harpe dont les cordes vont éclater. Tout à coup des sanglots l'étouffèrent et, en s'affaissant sur les jarrets :

— " Ah ! pardonne-moi ! Je suis un infâme et plus vil que les scorpions, que la fange et la poussière ! Tout à l'heure, pendant que tu parlais, ton haleine a passé sur ma face, et je me délectais comme un moribond qui boit à plat ventre au bord d'un ruisseau. Ecrase-moi, pourvu que je sente tes pieds ! maudis-moi, pourvu que j'entende ta voix ! Ne t'en va pas ! pitié ! je t'aime ! je t'aime ! "

Il était à genoux, par terre, devant elle ; et il lui entourait la taille de ses deux bras, la tête en arrière, les mains errantes ; les disques d'or suspendus à ses oreilles luisaient sur son cou bronzé ; de grosses larmes roulaient dans ses yeux pareils à des globes d'argent ; il soupirait d'une façon caressante, et murmurait de vagues paroles, plus légères qu'une brise et suaves comme un baiser.

Salammbô était envahie par une mollesse où elle perdait toute conscience d'elle-même. Quelque chose à la fois d'intime et de supérieur, un ordre des Dieux la forçait à s'y abandonner ; des nuages la soulevaient, et, en défaillant, elle se renversa sur le lit dans les poils du lion. Mâtho lui saisit les talons, la chaînette d'or éclata, et les deux bouts, en s'envolant, frappèrent la toile comme deux vipères rebondissantes. Le zaïmph tomba, l'enveloppait ; elle aperçut la figure de

Mâtho se courbant sur sa poitrine.

— " Moloch, tu me brûles ! " et les baisers du soldat, plus dévorateurs que des flammes, la parcouraient ; elle était comme enlevée dans un ouragan, prise dans la force du soleil.

Il baisa tous les doigts de ses mains, ses bras, ses pieds, et d'un bout à l'autre les longues tresses de ses cheveux.

— " Emporte-le ", disait-il, est-ce que j'y tiens ! Emmène-moi avec lui ! j'abandonne l'armée ! je renonce à tout ! Au-delà de Gadès, à vingt jours dans la mer, on rencontre une île couverte de poudre d'or, de verdure et d'oiseaux. Sur les montagnes, de grandes fleurs pleines de parfums qui fument se balancent comme d'éternels encensoirs ; dans les citronniers plus hauts que des cèdres, des serpents couleur de lait font avec les diamants de leur gueule tomber les fruits sur le gazon ; l'air est si doux qu'il empêche de mourir. Oh ! je la trouverai, tu verras. Nous vivrons dans les grottes de cristal, taillées au bas des collines. Personne encore ne l'habite, ou je deviendrai le roi du pays. "

Il balaya la poussière de ses cothurnes ; il voulut qu'elle mît entre ses lèvres le quartier d'une grenade, il accumula derrière sa tête des vêtements pour lui faire un coussin. Il cherchait les moyens de la servir, de s'humilier, et même il étala sur ses jambes le zaïmph, comme un simple tapis.

— " As-tu toujours ", disait-il, " ces petites cornes de gazelle où sont suspendus tes colliers ? Tu me les donneras ; je les aime ! " Car il parlait comme si la guerre était finie, des rires de joie lui échappaient ; et les Mercenaires, Hamilcar, tous les obstacles avaient maintenant disparu. La lune glissait entre deux nuages. Ils la voyaient par une ouverture de la tente.

— " Ah ! que j'ai passé de nuits à la contempler ! elle me semblait un voile qui cachait ta figure ; tu me regardais à travers ; ton souvenir se mêlait à ses rayonnements ; je ne vous distinguais plus ! " Et la tête entre ses seins, il pleurait abondamment.

— " C'est donc là ! ", songeait-elle " cet homme formidable qui fait trembler Carthage ! "

Il s'endormit. Alors, en se dégageant de son bras, elle posa un pied par terre, et elle s'aperçut que sa chaînette était brisée.

On accoutumait les vierges dans les grandes familles à respecter ces entraves comme une chose presque religieuse, et Salammbô, en rougissant, roula autour de ses jambes les deux tronçons de la chaîne d'or.

Carthage, Mégara, sa maison, sa chambre et les campagnes qu'elle avait traversées, tourbillonnaient dans sa mémoire en images tumultueuses et nettes cependant. Mais un abîme survenu les reculait loin d'elle, à une distance infinie.

L'orage s'en allait ; de rares gouttes d'eau en claquant une à une faisaient osciller le toit de la tente.

Mâtho, tel qu'un homme ivre, dormait étendu sur le flanc, avec un bras qui dépassait le bord de la couche. Son bandeau de perles était un peu remonté et découvrait son front. Un sourire écartait ses dents. Elles brillaient entre sa barbe noire, et dans les paupières à demi closes il y avait une gaieté silencieuse et presque outrageante.

Salammbô le regardait immobile, la tête basse, les mains croisées.

Au chevet du lit, un poignard s'étalait sur une table de cyprès ; la vue de cette lame luisante l'enflamma d'une envie sanguinaire. Des voix lamentables se traînaient au loin, dans l'ombre, et, comme un choeur de Génies, la sollicitaient. Elle se rapprocha ; elle saisit le fer par le manche. Au frôlement de sa robe, Mâtho entrouvrit les yeux, en avançant la bouche sur ses mains, et le poignard tomba.

Des cris s'élevèrent ; une lueur effrayante fulgurait derrière la toile. Mâtho la souleva ; ils aperçurent de grandes flammes qui enveloppaient le camp des Libyens.

Leurs cabanes de roseaux brûlaient, et les tiges, en se tordant, éclataient dans la fumée et s'envolaient comme des flèches ; sur l'horizon tout rouge, des ombres noires couraient éperdues. On entendait les hurlements de ceux qui étaient dans les cabanes ; les éléphants, les boeufs et les chevaux bondissaient au milieu de la foule en l'écrasant, avec les munitions et les bagages que l'on tirait de l'incendie. Des trompettes sonnaient. On appelait : " Mâtho ! Mâtho ! " Des gens à la porte voulaient entrer.

— " Viens donc ! c'est Hamilcar qui brûle le camp d'Autharite ! "

Il fit un bond. Elle se trouva toute seule.

Alors elle examina le zaïmph ; et quand elle l'eut bien contemplé, elle fut surprise de ne pas avoir ce bonheur qu'elle s'imaginait autrefois. Elle restait mélancolique devant son rêve accompli.

Mais le bas de la tente se releva, et une forme monstrueuse apparut. Salammbô ne distingua d'abord que les deux yeux, avec une longue barbe blanche qui pendait jusqu'à terre ; car le reste du corps, embarrassé dans les guenilles d'un vêtement fauve, traînait contre le sol ; et, à chaque mouvement pour avancer, les deux mains entraient dans la barbe, puis retombaient. En rampant ainsi, elle arriva jusqu'à ses pieds, et Salammbô reconnut le vieux Giscon.

En effet, les Mercenaires, pour empêcher les anciens captifs de s'enfuir, à coups de barre d'airain leur avaient cassé les jambes ; et ils pourrissaient tous pêle-mêle, dans une fosse, au milieu des immondices. Les plus robustes, quand ils entendaient le bruit des gamelles, se haussaient en criant : c'est ainsi que

Giscon avait aperçu Salammbô. Il avait deviné une Carthaginoise, aux petites boules de sandastrum qui battaient contre ses cothurnes ; et, dans le pressentiment d'un mystère considérable, en se faisant aider par ses compagnons, il était parvenu à sortir de la fosse ; puis, avec les coudes et les mains, il s'était traîné vingt pas plus loin, jusqu'à la tente de Mâtho. Deux voix y parlaient. Il avait écouté du dehors et tout entendu.

— " C'est toi ! " dit-elle enfin, presque épouvantée.

En se haussant sur les poignets, il répliqua :

— " Oui, c'est moi ! On me croit mort, n'est-ce pas ? "

Elle baissa la tête. Il reprit :

— " Ah ! pourquoi les Baals ne m'ont-ils pas accordé cette miséricorde ! "

" Et se rapprochant de si près, qu'il la frôlait : " Ils m'auraient épargné la peine de te maudire . ! "

Salammbô se rejeta vivement en arrière, tant elle eut peur de cet être immonde, qui était hideux comme une larve et terrible comme un fantôme.

— " J'ai cent ans, bientôt ", dit-il. " J'ai vu Agathodès ; j'ai vu Régulus et les aigles des Romains passer sur les moissons des champs puniques ! J'ai vu toutes les épouvantes des batailles et la mer encombrée par les débris de nos flottes ! Des Barbares que je commandais m'ont enchaîné aux quatre membres, comme un esclave homicide. Mes compagnons, l'un après l'autre, sont à mourir autour de moi ; l'odeur de leurs cadavres me réveille la nuit ; j'écarte les oiseaux qui viennent becqueter leurs yeux ; et pourtant, pas un seul jour je n'ai désespéré de Carthage ! Quand même j'aurais vu contre elle toutes les armées de la terre, et les flammes du siège dépasser la hauteur des temples, j'aurais cru encore à son éternité ! Mais, à présent, tout est fini ! tout est perdu ! Les Dieux l'exècrent ! Malédiction sur toi qui as précipité sa ruine par ton ignominie ! "

Elle ouvrit ses lèvres.

— " Ah ! j'étais là ! " s'écria-t-il. " Je t'ai entendue râler d'amour comme une prostituée ; puis il te racontait son désir, et tu te laissais baiser les mains ! Mais, si la fureur de ton impudicité te poussait, tu devais faire au moins comme les bêtes fauves qui se cachent dans leurs accouplements, et ne pas étaler ta honte jusque sous les yeux de ton père ! "

— " Comment ? ", dit-elle.

— " Ah ! tu ne savais pas que les deux retranchements sont à soixante coudées l'un de l'autre, et que ton Mâtho, par excès d'orgueil, s'est établi tout en face d'Hamilcar. Il est là, ton père, derrière toi ; et si je pouvais gravir le sentier qui mène sur la plate-forme, je lui crierais : Viens donc voir ta fille dans les bras du Barbare ! Elle a mis pour lui plaire le vêtement de la Déesse ; et, en abandonnant son corps, elle livre, avec la gloire de ton nom, la majesté des

Dieux, la vengeance de la patrie, le salut même de Carthage ! " Le mouvement de sa bouche édentée remuait sa barbe tout du long ; ses yeux, tendus sur elle, la dévoraient ; et il répétait en haletant dans la poussière :

— " Ah ! sacrilège ! Maudite sois-tu ! maudite ! maudite ! "

Salammbô avait écarté la toile, elle la tenait soulevée au bout de son bras, et, sans lui répondre, elle regardait du côté d'Hamilcar.

— " C'est par ici, n'est-ce pas ? " dit-elle.

— " Que t'importe ! Détourne-toi ! Va-t'en ! Ecrase plutôt ta face contre la terre ! C'est un lieu saint que ta vue souillerait. "

Elle jeta le zaïmph autour de sa taille, ramassa vivement ses voiles, son manteau, son écharpe. — " J'y cours ! " s'écria-t-elle ; et, s'échappant, Salammbô disparut.

D'abord, elle marcha dans les ténèbres sans rencontrer personne, car tous se portaient vers l'incendie ; et la clameur redoublait, de grandes flammes empourpraient le ciel par-derrière ; une longue terrasse l'arrêta.

Elle tourna sur elle-même, de droite et de gauche au hasard, cherchant une échelle, une corde, une pierre, quelque chose enfin pour l'aider. Elle avait peur de Giscon, et il lui semblait que des cris et des pas la poursuivaient. Le jour commençait à blanchir. Elle aperçut un sentier dans l'épaisseur du retranchement. Elle prit avec ses dents le bas de sa robe qui la gênait, et, en trois bonds, elle se trouva sur la plate-forme.

Un cri sonore éclata sous elle, dans l'ombre, le même qu'elle avait entendu au bas de l'escalier des galères ; et, en se penchant, elle reconnut l'homme de Schahabarim avec ses chevaux accouplés.

Il avait erré toute la nuit entre les deux retranchements ; puis, inquiété par l'incendie, il était revenu en arrière, tâchant d'apercevoir ce qui se passait dans le camp de Mâtho ; et, comme il savait que cette place était la plus voisine de sa tente, pour obéir au prêtre, il n'en avait pas bougé.

Il monta debout sur un des chevaux. Salammbô se laissa glisser jusqu'à lui ; et ils s'enfuirent au grand galop en faisant le tour du camp punique, pour trouver une porte quelque part.

Mâtho était rentré dans sa tente. La lampe toute fumeuse éclairait à peine, et même il crut que Salammbô dormait. Alors, il palpa délicatement la peau du lion, sur le lit de palmier. Il appela, elle ne répondit pas ; il arracha vivement un lambeau de la toile pour faire venir du jour ; le zaïmph avait disparu.

La terre tremblait sous des pas multipliés. De grands cris, des hennissements, des chocs d'armures s'élevaient dans l'air, et les fanfares des clairons sonnaient la charge. C'était comme un ouragan tourbillonnant autour de lui. Une fureur désordonnée le fit bondir sur ses armes, il se lança dehors.

Les longues files des Barbares descendaient en courant la montagne, et les carrés puniques s'avançaient contre eux, avec une oscillation lourde et régulière. Le brouillard, déchiré par les rayons du soleil, formait de petits nuages qui se balançaient, et peu à peu, en s'élevant, ils découvraient les étendards, les casques et la pointe des piques. Sous les évolutions rapides, des portions de terrain encore dans l'ombre semblaient se déplacer d'un seul morceau ; ailleurs, on aurait dit des torrents qui s'entrecroisaient, et, entre eux, des masses épineuses restaient immobiles. Mâtho distinguait les capitaines, les soldats, les hérauts et jusqu'aux valets par-derrière, qui étaient montés sur des ânes. Mais au lieu de garder sa position pour couvrir les fantassins, Narr'Havas tourna brusquement à droite, comme s'il voulait se faire écraser par Hamilcar.

Ses cavaliers dépassèrent les éléphants qui se ralentissaient ; et tous les chevaux, allongeant leur tête sans bride, galopaient d'un train si furieux que leur ventre paraissait frôler la terre. Puis, tout à coup, Narr'Havas marcha résolument vers une sentinelle. Il jeta son épée, sa lance, ses javelots, et disparut au milieu des Carthaginois.

Le roi des Numides arriva dans la tente d'Hamilcar ; et il dit, en lui montrant ses hommes qui se tenaient au loin arrêtés :

— " Barca ! je te les amène. Ils sont à toi. "

Alors il se prosterna en signe d'esclavage, et, comme preuve de sa fidélité, il rappela toute sa conduite depuis le commencement de la guerre.

D'abord il avait empêché le siège de Carthage et le massacre des captifs ; puis, il n'avait point profité de la victoire contre Hannon après la défaite d'Utique. Quant aux villes tyriennes, c'est qu'elles se trouvaient sur les frontières de son royaume. Enfin, il n'avait pas participé à la bataille de Macar ; et même il s'était absenté tout exprès pour fuir l'obligation de combattre le Suffète.

Narr'Havas, en effet, avait voulu s'agrandir par des empiétements sur les provinces puniques, et, selon les chances de la victoire, tour à tour secouru et délaissé les Mercenaires. Mais voyant que le plus fort serait définitivement Hamilcar, il s'était tourné vers lui ; et peut-être y avait-il dans sa défection une rancune contre Mâtho, soit à cause du commandement ou de son ancien amour.

Le Suffète l'écouta sans l'interrompre. L'homme qui se présentait ainsi dans une armée où on lui devait des vengeances n'était pas un auxiliaire à dédaigner ; Hamilcar devina tout de suite l'utilité d'une telle alliance pour ses grands projets. Avec les Numides, il se débarrasserait des Libyens. Puis il entraînerait l'Occident à la conquête de l'Ibérie ; et, sans lui demander pourquoi il n'était pas venu plus tôt, ni relever aucun de ses mensonges, il baisa Narr'Havas, en heurtant trois fois sa poitrine contre la sienne.

C'était pour en finir, et par désespoir, qu'il avait incendié le camp des

Libyens. Cette armée lui arrivait comme un secours des Dieux ; en dissimulant sa joie, il répondit :

— " Que les Baals te favorisent ! J'ignore ce que fera pour toi la République, mais Hamilcar n'a pas d'ingratitude. "

Le tumulte redoublait ; des capitaines entraient. Il s'armait tout en parlant :

— " Allons, retourne ! Avec les cavaliers, tu rabattras leur infanterie entre tes éléphants et les miens ! Courage ! extermine ! "

Et Narr'Havas se précipitait, quand Salammbô parut.

Elle sauta vite à bas de son cheval. Elle ouvrit son large manteau, et, en écartant les bras, elle déploya le zaïmph.

La tente de cuir, relevée dans les coins, laissait voir le tour entier de la montagne couverte de soldats, et comme elle se trouvait au centre, de tous les côtés on apercevait Salammbô. Une clameur immense éclata, un long cri de triomphe et d'espoir. Ceux qui étaient en marche s'arrêtèrent ; les moribonds, s'appuyant sur le coude, se retournaient pour la bénir. Tous les Barbares savaient maintenant qu'elle avait repris le zaïmph ; de loin ils la voyaient, ils croyaient la voir ; et d'autres cris, mais de rage et de vengeance, retentissaient, malgré les applaudissements des Carthaginois ; les cinq armées, s'étageant sur la montagne, trépignaient et hurlaient ainsi tout autour de Salammbô.

Hamilcar, sans pouvoir parler, la remerciait par des signes de tête. Ses yeux se portaient alternativement sur le zaïmph et sur elle, et il remarqua que sa chaînette était rompue. Alors il frissonna, saisi par un soupçon terrible. Mais reprenant vite son impassibilité, il considéra Narr'Havas obliquement, sans tourner la figure.

Le roi des Numides se tenait à l'écart dans une attitude discrète ; il portait au front un peu de la poussière qu'il avait touchée en se prosternant. Enfin le Suffète s'avança vers lui et, avec un air plein de gravité :

— " En récompense des services que tu m'as rendus, Narr'Havas, je te donne ma fille. "

" Il ajouta :

" Sois mon fils et défends ton père ! "

Narr'Havas eut un grand geste de surprise, puis se jeta sur ses mains qu'il couvrit de baisers.

Salammbô, calme comme une statue, semblait ne pas comprendre. Elle rougissait un peu, tout en baissant les paupières ; ses longs cils recourbés faisaient des ombres sur ses joues.

Hamilcar voulut immédiatement les unir par des fiançailles indissolubles. On mit entre les mains de Salammbô une lance qu'elle offrit à Narr'Havas : on attacha leurs pouces l'un contre l'autre avec une lanière de boeuf, puis on leur versa du blé sur la tête, et les grains qui tombaient autour d'eux sonnèrent comme de la grêle en rebondissant.

Chapitre 12 L'AQUEDUC

Douze heures après, il ne restait plus des Mercenaires qu'un tas de blessés, de morts et d'agonisants.

Hamilcar, sorti brusquement du fond de la gorge, était redescendu sur la pente occidentale qui regarde Hippo-Zaryte, et, l'espace étant plus large en cet endroit, il avait eu soin d'y attirer les Barbares. Narr'Havas les avait enveloppés avec ses chevaux ; le Suffète, pendant ce temps-là, les refoulait, les écrasait ; puis ils étaient vaincus d'avance par la perte du zaïmph ; ceux mêmes qui ne s'en souciaient avaient senti une angoisse et comme un affaiblissement. Hamilcar, ne mettant pas son orgueil à garder pour lui le champ de bataille, s'était retiré un peu plus loin, à gauche sur des hauteurs d'où il les dominait.

On reconnaissait la forme des camps à leurs palissades inclinées. Un long amas de cendres noires fumait sur l'emplacement des Libyens ; le sol bouleversé avait des ondulations comme la mer, et les tentes, avec leurs toiles en lambeaux, semblaient de vagues navires à demi perdus dans les écueils. Des cuirasses, des fourches, des clairons, des morceaux de bois, de fer et d'airain, du blé, de la paille et des vêtements s'éparpillaient au milieu des cadavres ; çà et là quelque phalarique prête à s'éteindre brûlait contre un monceau de bagages ; la terre, en de certains endroits, disparaissait sous les boucliers ; des charognes de chevaux se suivaient comme une série de monticules ; on apercevait des jambes, des sandales, des bras, des cottes de mailles et des têtes dans leurs casques, maintenues par la mentonnière et qui roulaient comme des boules ; des chevelures pendaient aux épines ; dans des mares de sang, des éléphants, les entrailles ouvertes, râlaient couchés avec leurs tours ; on marchait sur des choses gluantes et il y avait des flaques de boue, bien que la pluie n'eût pas tombé.

Cette confusion de cadavres occupait, du haut en bas, la montagne tout entière.

Ceux qui survivaient ne bougeaient pas plus que les morts. Accroupis par groupes inégaux, ils se regardaient, effarés, et ne parlaient pas.

Au bout d'une longue prairie, le lac d'Hippo-Zaryte resplendissait sous le soleil couchant. A droite, de blanches maisons agglomérées dépassaient une ceinture de murailles ; puis la mer s'étalait, indéfiniment ; — et, le menton dans la main, les Barbares soupiraient en songeant à leurs patries. Un nuage de poudre grise retombait.

Le vent du soir souffla ; alors toutes les poitrines se dilatèrent ; et, à mesure que la fraîcheur augmentait, on pouvait voir la vermine abandonner les morts qui se refroidissaient, et courir sur le sable chaud. Au sommet des grosses pierres, des corbeaux immobiles restaient tournés vers les agonisants.

Quand la nuit fut descendue, des chiens à poil jaune, de ces bêtes immondes qui suivaient les armées, arrivèrent tout doucement au milieu des Barbares. D'abord ils léchèrent les caillots de sang sur les moignons encore tièdes ; et bientôt ils se mirent à dévorer les cadavres, en les entamant par le ventre.

Les fugitifs reparaissaient un à un, comme des ombres ; les femmes aussi se hasardèrent à revenir, car il en restait encore, chez les Libyens surtout, malgré le massacre effroyable que les Numides en avaient fait.

Quelques-uns prirent des bouts de corde qu'ils allumèrent pour servir de flambeaux. D'autres tenaient des piques entrecroisées. On plaçait dessus les cadavres et on les transportait à l'écart.

Ils se trouvaient étendus par longues lignes, sur le dos, la bouche ouverte, avec leurs lances auprès d'eux ; ou bien ils s'entassaient pêle-mêle, et souvent, pour découvrir ceux qui manquaient, il fallait creuser tout un monceau. Puis on promenait la torche sur leur visage, lentement. Des armes hideuses leur avaient fait des blessures compliquées. Des lambeaux verdâtres leur pendaient du front ; ils étaient tailladés en morceaux, écrasés jusqu'à la moelle, bleuis sous des strangulations, ou largement fendus par l'ivoire des éléphants. Bien qu'ils fussent morts presque en même temps, des différences existaient dans leur corruption. Les hommes du Nord étaient gonflés d'une bouffissure livide, tandis que les Africains, plus nerveux, avaient l'air enfumés, et déjà se desséchaient. On reconnaissait les Mercenaires aux tatouages de leurs mains : les vieux soldats d'Antiochus portaient un épervier ; ceux qui avaient servi en Egypte, la tête d'un cynocéphale ; chez les princes de l'Asie, une hache, une grenade, un marteau ; dans les Républiques grecques, le profil d'une citadelle ou le nom d'un archonte ; et on en voyait dont les bras étaient couverts entièrement par ces symboles multipliés, qui se mêlaient à leurs cicatrices et aux blessures nouvelles.

Pour les hommes de race latine, les Samnites, les Etrusques, les Campaniens et les Brutiens, on établit quatre grands bûchers.

Les Grecs, avec la pointe de leurs glaives, creusèrent des fosses. Les Spartiates, retirant leurs manteaux rouges, en enveloppèrent les morts ; les Athéniens les étendaient la face vers le soleil levant ; les Cantabres les enfouissaient sous un monceau de cailloux ; les Nasamons les pliaient en deux avec des courroies de boeufs, et les Garamantes allèrent les ensevelir sur la plage, afin qu'ils fussent perpétuellement arrosés par les flots. Mais les Latins se désolaient de ne pas recueillir leurs cendres dans les urnes ; les Nomades regrettaient la chaleur des sables où les corps se momifient, et les Celtes, trois pierres brutes, sous un ciel pluvieux, au fond d'un golfe plein d'îlots.

Des vociférations s'élevaient, suivies d'un long silence. C'était pour forcer les âmes à revenir. Puis la clameur reprenait, à intervalles réguliers, obstinément.

On s'excusait près des morts de ne pouvoir les honorer comme le prescrivaient les rites : car ils allaient, par cette privation, circuler, durant des périodes infinies, à travers toutes sortes de hasards et de métamorphoses : on les interpellait, on leur demandait ce qu'ils désiraient ; d'autres les accablaient d'injures pour s'être laissé vaincre.

La lueur des grands bûchers apparaissait les figures exsangues, renversées de place en place sur les débris d'armures : et les larmes excitaient les larmes, les sanglots devenaient plus aigus, ; les reconnaissances et les étreintes plus frénétiques. Des femmes s'étalaient sur les cadavres, bouche contre bouche, front contre front : il fallait les battre pour qu'elles se retirassent, quand on jetait la terre. Ils se noircissaient les joues ; ils se coupaient les cheveux ; ils se tiraient du sang et le versaient dans les fosses ; ils se faisaient des entailles à l'imitation des blessures qui défiguraient les morts. Des rugissements éclataient à travers le tapage des cymbales. Quelques-uns arrachaient leurs amulettes, crachaient dessus. Les moribonds se roulaient dans la boue sanglante en mordant de rage leurs poings mutilés ; et quarante-trois Samnites, tout un printemps sacré, s'entr'égorgèrent comme des gladiateurs. Bientôt le bois manqua pour les bûchers, les flammes s'éteignirent, toutes les places étaient prises ; — et, las d'avoir crié, affaiblis, chancelants, ils s'endormirent auprès de leurs frères morts, ceux qui tenaient à vivre pleins d'inquiétudes, et les autres désirant ne pas se réveiller.

Aux blancheurs de l'aube, il parut sur les limites des Barbares des soldats qui défilaient avec des casques levés au bout des piques ; en saluant les Mercenaires, ils leur demandaient s'ils n'avaient rien à faire dire dans leurs patries.

D'autres se rapprochèrent, et les Barbares reconnurent quelques-uns de leurs anciens compagnons.

Le Suffète avait proposé à tous les captifs de servir dans ses troupes. Plusieurs avaient intrépidement refusé ; et, bien résolu à ne point les nourrir ni à les abandonner au Grand-Conseil, il les avait renvoyés, en leur ordonnant de ne plus combattre Carthage. Quant à ceux que la peur des supplices rendait dociles, on leur avait distribué les armes de l'ennemi ; et maintenant ils se présentaient aux vaincus, moins pour les séduire que par un mouvement d'orgueil et de curiosité.

D'abord ils racontèrent les bons traitements du Suffète ; les Barbares les écoutaient tout en les jalousant, bien qu'ils les méprisassent. Puis, aux premières paroles de reproche, les lâches s'emportèrent ; de loin ils leur montraient leurs propres épées, leurs cuirasses, et les conviaient avec des injures à venir les prendre. Les Barbares ramassèrent des cailloux ; tous s'enfuirent ; et l'on ne vit plus au sommet de la montagne que les pointes des lances dépassant le bord des palissades.

Alors une douleur, plus lourde que l'humiliation de la défaite, accabla les Barbares. Ils songeaient à l'inanité de leur courage. Ils restaient les yeux fixes en grinçant des dents.

La même idée leur vint. Ils se précipitèrent en tumulte sur les prisonniers carthaginois. Les soldats du Suffète, par hasard, n'avaient pu les découvrir, et comme il s'était retiré du champ de bataille, ils se trouvaient encore dans la fosse profonde.

On les rangea par terre, dans un endroit aplati. Des sentinelles firent un cercle autour d'eux, et on laissa les femmes entrer, par trente ou quarante successivement. Voulant profiter du peu de temps qu'on leur donnait, elles couraient de l'un à l'autre, incertaines, palpitantes ; puis, inclinées sur ces pauvres corps, elles les frappaient à tour de bras comme des lavandières qui battent des linges ; en hurlant le nom de leurs époux, elles les déchiraient sous leurs ongles ; elles leur crevèrent les yeux avec les aiguilles de leurs chevelures. Les hommes y vinrent ensuite, et ils les suppliciaient depuis les pieds, qu'ils coupaient aux chevilles, jusqu'au front, dont ils levaient des couronnes de peau pour se mettre sur la tête. Les Mangeurs-de-choses-immondes furent atroces dans leurs imaginations. Ils envenimaient les blessures en y versant de la poussière, du vinaigre, des éclats de poterie : d'autres attendaient derrière eux ; le sang coulait et ils se réjouissaient comme font les vendangeurs autour des cuves fumantes.

Cependant Mâtho était assis par terre, à la place même où il se trouvait quand la bataille avait fini, les coudes sur les genoux, les tempes dans les mains ; il ne voyait rien, n'entendait rien, ne pensait plus.

Aux hurlements de joie que la foule poussait, il releva la tête. Devant lui, un lambeau de toile accroché à une perche, et qui traînait par le bas, abritait confusément des corbeilles, des tapis, une peau de lion. Il reconnut sa tente ; et ses yeux s'attachaient contre le sol comme si la fille d'Hamilcar, en disparaissant, se fût enfoncée sous la terre.

La toile déchirée battait au vent ; quelquefois ses longues bribes lui passaient devant la bouche, et il aperçut une marque rouge, pareille à l'empreinte d'une main. C'était la main de Narr'Havas, le signe de leur alliance. Alors Mâtho se leva. Il prit un tison qui fumait encore, et il le jeta sur les débris de sa tente, dédaigneusement. Puis, du bout de son cothurne, il repoussait vers la flamme des choses qui débordaient, pour que rien n'en subsistât.

Tout à coup, et sans qu'on pût deviner de quel point il surgissait, Spendius parut.

L'ancien esclave s'était attaché contre la cuisse deux éclats de lance ; il boitait d'un air piteux, tout en exhalant des plaintes.

— " Retire donc cela ", lui dit Mâtho, " je sais que tu es un brave ! " Car il était si écrasé par l'injustice des Dieux qu'il n'avait plus assez de force pour s'indigner contre les hommes.

Spendius lui fit un signe, et il le mena dans le creux d'un mamelon, où Zarxas et Autharite se tenaient cachés.

Ils avaient fui comme l'esclave, l'un bien qu'il fût cruel, et l'autre malgré sa bravoure. Mais qui aurait pu s'attendre, disaient-ils, à la trahison de Narr'Havas, à l'incendie des Libyens, à la perte du zaïmph, à l'attaque soudaine d'Hamilcar, et surtout à ses manoeuvres les forçant à revenir dans le fond de la montagne sous les coups immédiats des Carthaginois ? Spendius n'avouait point sa terreur et persistait à soutenir qu'il avait la jambe cassée.

Enfin, les trois chefs et le schalischim se demandèrent ce qu'il fallait maintenant décider.

Hamilcar leur fermait la route de Carthage ; on était pris entre ses soldats et les provinces de Narr'Havas ; les villes tyriennes se joindraient aux vainqueurs ; ils allaient se trouver acculés au bord de la mer, et toutes ces forces réunies les écraseraient. Voilà ce qui arriverait immanquablement.

Ainsi pas un moyen ne s'offrait d'éviter la guerre. Donc, ils devaient la poursuivre à outrance. Mais comment faire comprendre la nécessité d'une interminable bataille à tous ces gens découragés et saignant encore de leurs blessures ?

— " Je m'en charge ! " dit Spendius.

Deux heures après, un homme, qui arrivait du côté d'Hippo-Zaryte, gravit en courant la montagne. Il agitait des tablettes au bout de son bras, et, comme il criait très fort, les Barbares l'entourèrent.

Elles étaient expédiées par les soldats grecs de la Sardaigne. Ils recommandaient à leurs compagnons d'Afrique de surveiller Giscon avec les autres captifs. Un marchand de Samos, un certain Hipponax, venant de Carthage, leur avait appris qu'un complot s'organisait pour les faire évader, et on engageait les Barbares à tout prévoir ; la République était puissante.

Le stratagème de Spendius ne réussit point d'abord comme il l'avait espéré. Cette assurance d'un péril nouveau, loin d'exciter de la fureur, souleva des craintes ; et, se rappelant l'avertissement d'Hamilcar jeté naguère au milieu d'eux, ils s'attendaient à quelque chose d'imprévu et qui serait terrible. La nuit se passa dans une grande angoisse ; plusieurs même se débarrassèrent de leurs armes pour attendrir le Suffète quand il se présenterait.

Mais le lendemain, à la troisième veille du jour, un second coureur parut, encore plus haletant et noir de poussière. Le Grec lui arracha des mains un rouleau de papyrus chargé d'écritures phéniciennes. On y suppliait les Mercenaires de ne pas se décourager ; les braves de Tunis allaient venir avec de grands renforts.

Spendius lut d'abord la lettre trois fois de suite ; et, soutenu par deux Cappadociens qui le tenaient assis sur leurs épaules, il se faisait transporter de place en place, et il la relisait. Pendant sept heures, il harangua.

Il rappelait aux Mercenaires les promesses du Grand-Conseil ; aux Africains, les cruautés des intendants ; à tous les Barbares, l'injustice de Carthage. La douceur du Suffète était un appât pour les prendre. Ceux qui se livreraient, on les vendrait comme des esclaves ; les vaincus périraient suppliciés. Quant à s'enfuir, par quelles routes ? Pas un peuple ne voudrait les recevoir. Tandis qu'en continuant leurs efforts, ils obtiendraient à la fois la liberté, la vengeance, de l'argent ! Et ils n'attendraient pas longtemps, puisque les gens de Tunis, la Libye entière se précipitait à leur secours. Il montrait le papyrus déroulé : — " Regardez donc ! lisez ! voilà leurs promesses ! Je ne mens pas. "

Des chiens erraient, avec leur museau noir tout plaqué de rouge. Le grand soleil chauffait les têtes nues. Une odeur nauséabonde s'exhalait des cadavres mal enfouis. Quelques-uns même sortaient de terre jusqu'au ventre. Spendius les appelait à lui pour témoigner des choses qu'il disait ; puis il levait ses poings du côté d'Hamilcar.

Mâtho l'observait d'ailleurs et, afin de couvrir sa lâcheté, il étalait une colère où peu à peu il se trouvait pris lui-même. En se dévouant aux Dieux, il accumula des malédictions sur les Carthaginois. Le supplice des captifs était un jeu d'enfants. Pourquoi donc les épargner et traîner toujours derrière soi ce bétail inutile ! — " Non ! il faut en finir ! leurs projets sont connus ! un seul peut nous perdre ! pas de pitié ! On reconnaîtra les bons à la vitesse des jambes et à la force du coup. "

Alors ils se retournèrent sur les captifs. Plusieurs râlaient encore ; on les acheva en leur enfonçant le talon dans la bouche, ou bien on les poignardait avec la pointe d'un javelot.

Ensuite ils songèrent à Giscon. Nulle part on ne l'apercevait ; une inquiétude les troubla. Ils voulaient tout à la fois se convaincre de sa mort et y participer. Enfin, trois pasteurs samnites le découvrirent à quinze pas de l'endroit où s'élevait naguère la tente de Mâtho. Ils le reconnurent à sa longue barbe, et ils appelèrent les autres.

Etendu sur le dos, les bras contre les hanches et les genoux serrés, il avait l'air d'un mort disposé pour le sépulcre. Cependant, ses côtes maigres s'abaissaient et remontaient, et ses yeux, largement ouverts au milieu de sa figure toute pâle, regardaient d'une façon continue et intolérable.

Les Barbares le considérèrent, d'abord, avec un grand étonnement. Depuis le temps qu'il vivait dans la fosse, on l'avait presque oublié ; gênés par de vieux souvenirs, ils se tenaient à distance et n'osaient porter la main sur lui.

Mais ceux qui étaient par-derrière murmuraient et se poussaient, quand un Garamante traversa la foule ; il brandissait une faucille ; tous comprirent sa pensée ; leurs visages s'empourprèrent, et, saisis de honte, ils hurlaient : " Oui ! oui ! "

L'homme au fer recourbé s'approcha de Giscon. Il lui prit la tête, et, l'appuyant sur son genou, il la sciait à coups rapides ; elle tomba ; deux gros jets de sang firent un trou dans la poussière. Zarxas avait sauté dessus, et, plus léger qu'un léopard, il courait vers les Carthaginois.

Puis, quand il fut aux deux tiers de la montagne, il retira de sa poitrine la tête de Giscon en la tenant par la barbe, il tourna son bras rapidement plusieurs fois, — et la masse, enfin lancée, décrivit une longue parabole et disparut derrière le retranchement punique.

Bientôt se dressèrent au bord des palissades deux étendards entrecroisés, signe convenu pour réclamer les cadavres.

Alors quatre hérauts, choisis sur la largeur de leur poitrine, s'en allèrent avec de grands clairons, et, parlant dans les tubes d'airain, ils déclarèrent qu'il n'y avait plus désormais, entre les Carthaginois et les Barbares, ni foi, ni pitié, ni dieux, qu'ils se refusaient d'avance à toutes les ouvertures et que l'on renverrait les parlementaires avec les mains coupées.

Immédiatement après, on députa Spendius à Hippo-Zaryte afin d'avoir des vivres ; la cité tyrienne leur en envoya le soir même. Ils mangèrent avidement. Puis, quand ils se furent réconfortés, ils ramassèrent bien vite les restes de leurs bagages et leurs armes rompues ; les femmes se tassèrent au centre, et sans souci des blessés pleurant derrière eux, ils partirent par le bord du rivage à pas rapides, comme un troupeau de loups qui s'éloignent.

Ils marchaient sur Hippo-Zaryte, décidés à la prendre, car ils avaient besoin d'une ville.

Hamilcar, en les apercevant au loin, eut un désespoir, malgré l'orgueil qu'il sentait à les voir fuir devant lui. Il aurait fallu les attaquer tout de suite avec des troupes fraîches. Encore une journée pareille, et la guerre était finie ! Si les choses traînaient, ils reviendraient plus forts ; les villes tyriennes se joindraient à eux ; sa clémence envers les vaincus n'avait servi de rien. Il prit la résolution d'être impitoyable.

Le soir même, il envoya au Grand-Conseil un dromadaire chargé de bracelets recueillis sur les morts, et, avec des menaces horribles, il ordonnait qu'on lui expédiât une autre armée.

Tous, depuis longtemps, le croyaient perdu ; si bien qu'en apprenant sa victoire, ils éprouvèrent une stupéfaction qui était presque de la terreur. Le retour du zaïmph, annoncé vaguement, complétait la merveille. Ainsi, les Dieux et la force de Carthage semblaient maintenant lui appartenir.

Personne de ses ennemis ne hasarda une plainte ou une récrimination. Par l'enthousiasme des uns et la pusillanimité des autres, avant le délai prescrit, une armée de cinq mille hommes fut prête.

Elle gagna promptement Utique pour appuyer le Suffète sur ses derrières, tandis que trois mille des plus considérables montèrent sur des vaisseaux qui devaient les débarquer à Hippo-Zaryte, d'où ils repousseraient les Barbares.

Hannon en avait accepté le commandement ; mais il confia l'armée à son lieutenant Magdassan, afin de conduire les troupes de débarquement lui-même, car il ne pouvait plus endurer les secousses de la litière. Son mal, en rongeant ses lèvres et ses narines, avait creusé dans sa face un large trou ; à dix pas, on lui voyait le fond de sa gorge, et il se savait tellement hideux qu'il se mettait, comme une femme, un voile sur la tête.

Hippo-Zaryte n'écouta point ses sommations, ni celles des Barbares non plus ; mais chaque matin les habitants leur descendaient des vivres dans des corbeilles, et, en criant du haut des tours, ils s'excusaient sur les exigences de la République et les conjuraient de s'éloigner. Ils adressaient par signes les mêmes protestations aux Carthaginois qui stationnaient dans la mer.

Hannon se contentait de bloquer le port sans risquer une attaque. Cependant, il persuada aux juges d'Hippo-Zaryte de recevoir chez eux trois cents soldats. Puis il s'en alla vers le cap des Raisins et il fit un long détour afin de cerner les Barbares, opération inopportune et même dangereuse. Sa jalousie l'empêchait de secourir le Suffète ; il arrêtait ses espions, le gênait dans tous ses plans, compromettait l'entreprise. Enfin, Hamilcar écrivit au Grand-Conseil de l'en débarrasser, et Hannon rentra dans Carthage, furieux contre la bassesse des Anciens et la folie de son collègue. Donc, après tant d'espérances, on se retrouvait dans une situation encore plus déplorable ; mais on tâchait de n'y pas réfléchir et même de n'en point parler.

Comme si ce n'était pas assez d'infortunes à la fois, on apprit que les Mercenaires de la Sardaigne avaient crucifié leur général, saisi les places fortes et partout égorgé les hommes de la race chananéenne. Le peuple romain menaça la République d'hostilités immédiates, si elle ne donnait douze cents talents avec l'île de Sardaigne tout entière. Il avait accepté l'alliance des Barbares, et il leur expédia des bateaux plats chargés de farine et de viandes sèches. Les Carthaginois les poursuivirent, capturèrent cinq cents hommes : mais, trois jours après, une flotte qui venait de la Bysacène, apportant des vivres à Carthage, sombra dans une tempête. Les Dieux évidemment se déclaraient contre elle.

Alors, les citoyens d'Hippo-Zaryte, prétextant une alarme, firent monter sur leurs murailles les trois cents hommes d'Hannon ; puis, survenant derrière eux, ils les prirent aux jambes et les jetèrent par-dessus les remparts, tout à coup. Quelques-uns qui n'étaient pas morts furent poursuivis et allèrent se noyer dans la mer.

Utique endurait des soldats, car Magdassan avait fait comme Hannon, et, d'après ses ordres, il entourait la ville, sourd aux prières d'Hamilcar. Pour ceux-là, on leur donna du vin mêlé de mandragore, puis on les égorgea dans leur sommeil. En même temps, les Barbares arrivèrent : Magdassan s'enfuit, les portes s'ouvrirent, et dès lors les deux villes tyriennes montrèrent à leurs nouveaux amis un opiniâtre dévouement, et à leurs anciens alliés une haine inconcevable.

Cet abandon de la cause punique était un conseil, un exemple. Les espoirs de délivrance se ranimèrent. Des populations, incertaines encore, n'hésitèrent plus. Tout s'ébranla. Le Suffète l'apprit, et il n'attendait aucun secours ! Il était maintenant irrévocablement perdu.

Aussitôt il congédia Narr'Havas, qui devait garder les limites de son royaume. Quant à lui, il résolut de rentrer à Carthage pour y prendre des soldats et recommencer la guerre.

Les Barbares établis à Hippo-Zaryte aperçurent son armée comme elle descendait la montagne.

Où donc les Carthaginois allaient-ils ? La faim sans doute les poussait ; et, affolés par les souffrances, malgré leur faiblesse, ils venaient de livrer bataille. Mais ils tournèrent à droite : ils fuyaient. On pouvait les atteindre, les écraser tous. Les Barbares s'élancèrent à leur poursuite.

Les Carthaginois furent arrêtés par le fleuve. Il était large cette fois, et le vent d'ouest n'avait pas soufflé. Les uns le passèrent à la nage, les autres sur leurs boucliers. Ils se remirent en marche. La nuit tomba. On ne les vit plus.

Les Barbares ne s'arrêtèrent pas ; ils remontèrent plus loin, pour trouver une place plus étroite. Les gens de Tunis accoururent ; ils entraînèrent ceux d'Utique. A chaque buisson, leur nombre augmentait ; et les Carthaginois, en se couchant par terre, entendaient le battement de leurs pas dans les ténèbres. De temps à autre, pour les ralentir, Barca faisait lancer, derrière lui, des volées de flèches ; plusieurs en furent tués. Quand le jour se leva, on était dans les montagnes de l'Ariane, à cet endroit où le chemin fait un coude.

Alors Mâtho, qui marchait en tête, crut distinguer dans l'horizon quelque chose de vert, au sommet d'une éminence. Puis le terrain s'abaissa, et des obélisques, des dômes, des maisons parurent ; c'était Carthage ! Il s'appuya contre un arbre pour ne pas tomber, tant son coeur battait vite.

Il songeait à tout ce qui était survenu dans son existence depuis la dernière fois qu'il avait passé par là ! C'était une surprise infinie, un étourdissement. Puis une joie l'emporta, à l'idée de revoir Salammbô. Les raisons qu'il avait de l'exécrer lui revinrent à la mémoire ; il les rejeta bien vite. Frémissant et les prunelles tendues, il contemplait, au-delà d'Eschmoûn, la haute terrasse d'un palais, par-dessus des palmiers ; un ' sourire d'extase illuminait sa figure, comme s'il fût arrivé jusqu'à lui quelque grande lumière ; il ouvrait les bras, il envoyait des baisers dans la brise et murmurait :

— " Viens ! viens ! " un soupir lui gonfla la poitrine, et deux larmes, longues comme des perles, tombèrent sur sa barbe.

— " Qui te retient ? " s'écria Spendius. " Hâte-toi donc ! En marche ! Le Suffète va nous échapper ! Mais tes genoux chancellent et tu me regardes comme un homme ivre ! "

Il trépignait d'impatience ; il pressait Mâtho ; et, avec des clignements d'yeux, comme à l'approche d'un but longuement visé :

— " Ah ! nous y sommes ! Nous y voilà ! Je les tiens ! "

Il avait l'air si convaincu et triomphant que Mâtho, surpris dans sa torpeur, se sentit entraîné. Ces paroles survenaient au plus fort de sa détresse, poussaient son désespoir à la vengeance, montraient une pâture à sa colère. Il bondit sur un des chameaux qui étaient dans les bagages, lui arracha son licou ; avec la longue corde, il frappait à tour de bras les traînards ; et il courait de droite et de gauche, alternativement, sur le derrière de l'armée, comme un chien qui pousse un troupeau.

A sa voix tonnante, les lignes d'hommes se resserrèrent ; les boiteux même précipitèrent leurs pas ; au milieu de l'isthme, l'intervalle diminua. Les premiers des Barbares marchaient dans la poussière des Carthaginois. Les deux armées se rapprochaient, allaient se toucher. Mais la porte de Malqua, la porte de Tagaste et la grande porte de Khamon déployèrent leurs battants. Le carré punique se divisa ; trois colonnes s'y engloutirent, elles tourbillonnaient sous les porches. Bientôt, la masse, trop serrée sur elle-même, n'avança plus ; les piques en l'air se heurtaient, et les flèches des Barbares éclataient contre les murs.

Sur le seuil de Khamon, on aperçut Hamilcar. Il se retourna en criant à ses hommes de s'écarter. Il descendit de son cheval ; et, du glaive qu'il tenait, en le piquant à la croupe, il l'envoya sur les Barbares.

C'était un étalon orynge qu'on nourrissait avec des boulettes de farine, et qui pliait les genoux pour laisser monter son maître. Pourquoi donc le renvoyait-il ? Etait-ce un sacrifice ?

Le grand cheval galopait au milieu des lances, renversait les hommes, et, s'embarrassant les pieds dans ses entrailles, tombait, puis se relevait avec des bonds furieux ; et pendant qu'ils s'écartaient, tâchaient de l'arrêter ou regardaient tout surpris, les Carthaginois s'étaient rejoints ; ils entrèrent : la porte énorme se referma derrière eux, en retentissant.

Elle ne céda pas. Les Barbares vinrent s'écraser contre elle ; — et, durant quelques minutes, sur toute la longueur de l'armée, il y eut une oscillation de plus en plus molle et qui enfin s'arrêta.

Les Carthaginois avaient mis des soldats sur l'aqueduc ; ils commençaient à lancer des pierres, des balles, des poutres. Spendius représenta qu'il ne fallait point s'obstiner. Ils allèrent s'établir plus loin, tous bien résolus à faire le siège de Carthage.

Cependant, la rumeur de la guerre avait dépassé les confins de l'empire punique ; et, des colonnes d'Hercule jusqu'au-delà de Cyrène, les pasteurs en rêvaient en gardant leurs troupeaux, et les caravanes en causaient la nuit, à la lueur des étoiles. Cette grande Carthage, dominatrice des mers, splendide comme le soleil et effrayante comme un dieu, il se trouvait des hommes qui l'osaient attaquer ! On avait même plusieurs fois affirmé sa chute ; et tous y avaient cru, car tous la souhaitaient : les populations soumises, les villages tributaires, les provinces alliées, les hordes indépendantes, ceux qui l'exécraient pour sa tyrannie, ou qui jalousaient sa puissance, ou qui convoitaient sa richesse. Les plus braves s'étaient joints bien vite aux Mercenaires. La défaite du Macar avait arrêté tous les autres. Enfin, ils avaient repris confiance, peu à peu s'étaient avancés, rapprochés ; et maintenant, les hommes des régions orientales se tenaient dans les dunes de Clypea, de l'autre côté du golfe. Dès qu'ils aperçurent les Barbares, ils se montrèrent.

Ce n'étaient pas les Libyens des environs de Carthage ; depuis longtemps, ils composaient la troisième armée ; mais les nomades du plateau de Barca, les bandits du cap Phiscus et du promontoire de Derné, ceux du Phazzana et de la Marmarique. Ils avaient traversé le désert en buvant aux puits saumâtres maçonnés avec des ossements de chameau ; les Zuaèces, couverts de plumes d'autruche, étaient venus sur des quadriges ; les Garamantes, masqués d'un voile noir, assis en arrière sur leurs cavales peintes ; d'autres sur des ânes, sur des onagres, sur des zèbres, sur des buffles ; et quelques-uns traînaient avec leurs familles et leurs idoles le toit de leur cabane en forme de chaloupe. Il y avait des Ammoniens aux membres ridés par l'eau chaude des fontaines ; des Atarantes, qui maudissent le soleil ; des Troglodytes, qui enterrent en riant leurs morts sous des branches d'arbres ; et les hideux Auséens, qui mangent des sauterelles ; les Achyrmachides, qui mangent des poux, et les Gysantes, peints de vermillon, qui mangent des singes.

Tous s'étaient rangés sur le bord de la mer, en une grande ligne droite. Ils s'avancèrent ensuite comme des tourbillons de sable soulevés par le vent. Au milieu de l'isthme, leur foule s'arrêta, les Mercenaires établis devant eux, près des murailles, ne voulant point bouger.

Puis, du côté de l'Ariane, apparurent les hommes de l'Occident, le peuple des Numides. En effet. Narr'Havas ne gouvernait que les Massyliens ; et d'ailleurs, une coutume leur permettant après les revers d'abandonner le roi, ils s'étaient rassemblés sur le Zaine, puis l'avaient franchi au premier mouvement d'Hamilcar. On vit d'abord accourir tous les chasseurs de Malethut-Baal et du Garaphos, habillés de peaux de lion, et qui conduisaient avec la hampe de leurs piques de petits chevaux maigres à longue crinière ; puis marchaient les Gétules dans des cuirasses en peau de serpent ; puis les Pharusiens, portant de hautes couronnes faites de cire et de résine : et les Caunes, les Macares, les Tillabares, chacun tenant deux javelots et un bouclier rond en cuir d'hippopotame. Ils s'arrêtèrent au bas des Catacombes, dans les premières flaques de la Lagune.

Mais quand les Libyens se furent déplacés, on aperçut à l'endroit qu'ils occupaient, et comme un nuage à ras du sol, la multitude des Nègres. Il en était venu du Harousch-blanc, du Harousch-noir, du désert d'Augyles et même de la grande contrée d'Agazymba, qui est à quatre mois au sud des Garamantes, et de plus loin encore ! Malgré leurs joyaux de bois rouge, la crasse de leur peau noire les faisait ressembler à des mûres longtemps roulées dans la poussière. Ils avaient des caleçons en fils d'écorce, des tuniques d'herbes desséchées, des mufles de bêtes fauves sur la tête, et, hurlant comme des loups, ils secouaient des tringles garnies d'anneaux et brandissaient des queues de vache au bout d'un bâton, en manière d'étendards.

Puis derrière les Numides, les Maurusiens et les Gétules, se pressaient les hommes jaunâtres répandus au-delà de Taggir dans les forêts de cèdres. Des carquois en poils de chat leur battaient sur les épaules, et ils menaient en laisse des chiens énormes, aussi hauts que des ânes, et qui n'aboyaient pas.

Enfin, comme si l'Afrique ne s'était point suffisamment vidée, et que, pour recueillir plus de fureurs, il eût fallu prendre jusqu'au bas des races, on voyait, derrière tous les autres, des hommes à profil de bête et ricanant d'un rire idiot ; — misérables ravagés par de hideuses maladies, pygmées difformes, mulâtres d'un sexe ambigu, albinos dont les yeux rouges clignotaient au soleil ; tout en bégayant des sons inintelligibles, ils mettaient un doigt dans leur bouche pour faire voir qu'ils avaient faim.

La confusion des armes n'était pas moindre que celle des vêtements et des peuples. Pas une invention de mort qui n'y fût, depuis les poignards de bois, les haches de pierre et les tridents d'ivoire, jusqu'à de longs sabres dentelés comme des scies, minces, et faits d'une lame de cuivre qui pliait. Ils maniaient des coutelas, se bifurquant en plusieurs branches pareilles à des ramures d'antilopes, des serpes attachées au bout d'une corde, des triangles de fer, des massues, des poinçons. Les Ethiopiens du Bambotus cachaient dans leurs cheveux de petits dards empoisonnés. Plusieurs avaient apporté des cailloux dans des sacs. D'autres, les mains vides, faisaient claquer leurs dents.

Une houle continuelle agitait cette multitude. Des dromadaires, tout barbouillés de goudron comme des navires, renversaient les femmes qui portaient leurs enfants sur la hanche. Les provisions dans les couffes se répandaient ; on écrasait en marchant des morceaux de sel, des paquets de gomme, des dattes pourries, des noix de gourou ; — et parfois, sur des seins couverts de vermine, pendait à un mince cordon quelque diamant qu'avaient cherché les Satrapes, une pierre presque fabuleuse et suffisante pour acheter un empire. Ils ne savaient même pas, la plupart, ce qu'ils désiraient. Une fascination, une curiosité les poussaient ; des Nomades qui n'avaient jamais vu de ville étaient effrayés par l'ombre des murailles.

L'isthme disparaissait maintenant sous les hommes ; et cette longue surface, où les tentes faisaient comme des cabanes dans une inondation, s'étalait jusqu'aux premières lignes des autres Barbares, toutes ruisselantes de fer et symétriquement établies sur les deux flancs de l'aqueduc.

Les Carthaginois se trouvaient encore dans l'effroi de leur arrivée, quand ils aperçurent, venant droit vers eux, comme des monstres et comme des édifices, — avec leurs mâts, leurs bras, leurs cordages, leurs articulations, leurs chapiteaux et leurs carapaces, — les machines de siège qu'envoyaient les villes tyriennes : soixante carrobalistes, quatre-vingts onagres, trente scorpions, cinquante tollénones, douze béliers et trois gigantesques catapultes qui lançaient des morceaux de roche du poids de quinze talents. Des masses d'hommes les poussaient cramponnés à leur base ; à chaque pas un frémissement les secouait ; elles arrivèrent ainsi jusqu'en face des murs.

Mais il fallait plusieurs jours encore pour finir les préparatifs du siège. Les Mercenaires, instruits par leurs défaites, ne voulaient point se risquer dans des engagements inutiles ; — et, de part et d'autre, on n'avait aucune hâte, sachant bien qu'une action terrible allait s'ouvrir et qu'il en résulterait une victoire ou une extermination complète.

Carthage pouvait longtemps résister ; ses larges murailles offraient une série d'angles rentrants et sortants, disposition avantageuse pour repousser les assauts.

Cependant, du côté des Catacombes, une portion s'était écroulée, — et, par les nuits obscures, entre les blocs disjoints, on apercevait des lumières dans les bouges de Malqua. Ils dominaient en de certains endroits la hauteur des remparts. C'était là que vivaient, avec leurs nouveaux époux, les femmes des Mercenaires chassées par Mâtho. En les revoyant, leur coeur n'y tint plus. Elles agitèrent de loin leurs écharpes ; puis elles venaient, dans les ténèbres, causer avec les soldats par la fente du mur, et le Grand-Conseil apprit un matin que toutes s'étaient enfuies. Les unes avaient passé entre les pierres : d'autres, plus intrépides, étaient descendues avec des cordes.

Enfin, Spendius résolut d'accomplir son projet.

La guerre, en le retenant au loin, l'en avait jusqu'alors empêché ; et depuis qu'on était revenu devant Carthage, il lui semblait que les habitants soupçonnaient son entreprise. Mais bientôt ils diminuèrent les sentinelles de l'aqueduc. On n'avait pas trop de monde pour la défense de l'enceinte.

L'ancien esclave s'exerça pendant plusieurs jours à tirer des flèches contre les phénicoptères du Lac. Puis, un soir que la lune brillait, il pria Mâtho d'allumer au milieu de la nuit un grand feu de paille, en même temps que tous ses hommes pousseraient des cris ; et, prenant avec lui Zarxas, il s'en alla par le bord du golfe, dans la direction de Tunis.

A la hauteur des dernières arches, ils revinrent droit vers l'aqueduc ; la place était découverte : ils s'avancèrent en rampant jusqu'à la base des piliers.

Les sentinelles de la plate-forme se promenaient tranquillement.

De hautes flammes parurent ; des clairons retentirent ; les soldats en vedette, croyant à un assaut, se précipitèrent du côté de Carthage.

Un homme était resté. Il apparaissait en noir sur le fond du ciel. La lune donnait derrière lui, et son ombre démesurée faisait au loin sur la plaine comme un obélisque qui marchait.

Ils attendirent qu'il fût bien placé devant eux Zarxas saisit sa fronde ; par prudence ou par férocité, Spendius l'arrêta. — " Non, le ronflement de la balle ferait du bruit ! A moi ! "

Alors, il banda son arc de toutes ses forces, en l'appuyant par le bas contre l'orteil de son pied gauche ; il visa, et la flèche partit.

L'homme ne tomba point. Il disparut.

— " S'il était blessé, nous l'entendrions ! " dit Spendius ; et il monta vivement d'étage en étage, comme il avait fait la première fois, en s'aidant d'une corde et d'un harpon. Puis, quand il fut en haut, près du cadavre, il la laissa retomber. Le Baléare y attacha un pic avec un maillet et s'en retourna.

Les trompettes ne sonnaient plus. Tout maintenant était tranquille. Spendius avait soulevé une des dalles, était entré dans l'eau, et l'avait refermée sur lui.

En calculant la distance d'après le nombre de ses pas, il arriva juste à l'endroit où il avait remarqué une fissure oblique ; et, pendant trois heures, jusqu'au matin, il travailla d'une façon continue, furieuse, respirant à peine par les interstices des dalles supérieures, assailli d'angoisses et vingt fois croyant mourir. Enfin, on entendit un craquement ; une pierre énorme, en ricochant sur les arcs inférieurs, roula jusqu'en bas, — et, tout à coup, une cataracte, un fleuve entier tomba du ciel dans la plaine. L'aqueduc, coupé par le milieu, se déversait. C'était la mort pour Carthage, et la victoire pour les Barbares.

En un instant, les Carthaginois réveillés apparurent sur les murailles, sur les maisons, sur les temples. Les Barbares se poussaient, criaient. Ils dansaient en délire autour de la grande chute d'eau, et, dans l'extravagance de leur joie, venaient s'y mouiller la tête.

On aperçut au sommet de l'aqueduc un homme avec une tunique brune, déchirée. Il se tenait penché tout au bord, les deux mains sur les hanches, et il regardait en bas, sous lui, comme étonné de son oeuvre.

Puis il se redressa. Il parcourut l'horizon d'un air superbe qui semblait dire : " Tout cela maintenant est à moi ! " Les applaudissements des Barbares éclatèrent ; les Carthaginois, comprenant enfin leur désastre, hurlaient de désespoir. Alors, il se mit à courir sur la plate-forme, d'un bout à l'autre, — et, comme un conducteur de char triomphant aux jeux Olympiques, Spendius, éperdu d'orgueil, levait les bras.

Chapitre 13 MOLOCH

Les Barbares n'avaient pas besoin d'une circonvallation du côté de l'Afrique : elle leur appartenait. Mais, pour rendre plus facile l'approche des murailles, on abattit le retranchement qui bordait le fossé. Ensuite, Mâtho divisa l'armée par grands demi-cercles, de façon à envelopper mieux Carthage. Les hoplites des Mercenaires furent placés au premier rang ; derrière eux, les frondeurs et les cavaliers ; tout au fond, les bagages, les chariots, les chevaux ; en deçà de cette multitude, à trois cents pas des tours, se hérissaient les machines.

Sous la variété infinie de leurs appellations (qui changèrent plusieurs fois dans le cours des siècles), elles pouvaient se réduire à deux systèmes : les unes agissant comme des frondes et les autres comme des arcs.

Les premières, les catapultes, se composaient d'un châssis carré, avec deux montants verticaux et une barre horizontale. A sa partie antérieure, un cylindre, muni de câbles, retenait un gros timon portant une cuillère pour recevoir les projectiles ; la base en était prise dans un écheveau de fils tordus, et, quand on lâchait les cordes, il se relevait et venait frapper contre la barre, ce qui, l'arrêtant par une secousse, multipliait sa vigueur.

Les secondes offraient un mécanisme plus compliqué : sur une petite colonne, une traverse était fixée par son milieu où aboutissait à angle droit une espèce de canal ; aux extrémités de la traverse s'élevaient deux chapiteaux qui contenaient un entortillage de crins ; deux poutrelles s'y trouvaient prises pour maintenir les bouts d'une corde que l'on amenait jusqu'au bas du canal, sur une tablette de bronze. Par un ressort, cette plaque de métal se détachait, et, glissant sur des rainures, poussait les flèches.

Les catapultes s'appelaient également des onagres, comme les ânes sauvages qui lancent des cailloux avec leurs pieds, et les balistes des scorpions, à cause d'un crochet dressé sur la tablette, et qui, s'abaissant d'un coup de poing, faisait partir le ressort.

Leur construction exigeait de savants calculs ; leurs bois devaient être choisis dans les essences les plus dures, leurs engrenages, tous d'airain ; elles se bandaient avec des leviers, des moufles, des cabestans ou des tympans ; de forts pivots variaient la direction de leur tir, des cylindres les faisaient s'avancer, et les plus considérables, que l'on apportait pièce à pièce, étaient remontées en face de l'ennemi.

Spendius disposa les trois grandes catapultes vers les trois angles principaux ;

devant chaque porte, il plaça un bélier, devant chaque tour une baliste, et des carrobalistes circuleraient par-derrière. Mais il fallait les garantir contre les feux des assiégés et combler d'abord le fossé qui les séparait des murailles.

On avança des galeries en claies de joncs verts et des cintres en chêne, pareils à d'énormes boucliers glissant sur trois roues ; de petites cabanes couvertes de peaux fraîches et rembourrées de varech abritaient les travailleurs ; les catapultes et les balistes furent défendues par des rideaux de cordages que l'on avait trempés dans du vinaigre pour les rendre incombustibles sur la grève. Les femmes et les enfants allaient prendre des cailloux sur la grève, ramassaient de la terre avec leurs mains et l'apportaient aux soldats.

Les Carthaginois se préparaient aussi.

Hamilcar les avait bien vite rassurés en déclarant qu'il restait de l'eau dans les citernes pour cent vingt-trois jours. Cette affirmation, sa présence au milieu d'eux, et celle du zaïmph surtout, leur donnèrent bon espoir. Carthage se releva de son accablement ; ceux qui n'étaient pas d'origine chananéenne furent emportés dans la passion des autres.

On arma les esclaves, on vida les arsenaux ; les citoyens eurent chacun leur poste et leur emploi. Douze cents hommes survivaient des transfuges, le Suffète les fit tous capitaines ; et les charpentiers, les armuriers, les forgerons et les orfèvres furent préposés aux machines. Les Carthaginois en avaient gardé quelques-unes, malgré les conditions de la paix romaine. On les répara. Ils s'entendaient à ces ouvrages.

Les deux côtés, septentrional et oriental, défendus par la mer et par le golfe, restaient inaccessibles. Sur la muraille faisant face aux Barbares, on monta des troncs d'arbre, des meules de moulin, des vases pleins de soufre, des cuves pleines d'huile, et l'on bâtit des fourneaux. On entassa des pierres sur la plate-forme des tours, et les maisons qui touchaient immédiatement au rempart furent bourrées avec du sable pour l'affermir et augmenter son épaisseur.

Devant ces dispositions, les Barbares s'irritèrent. Ils voulurent combattre tout de suite. Les poids qu'ils mirent dans les catapultes étaient d'une pesanteur si exorbitante, que les timons se rompirent ; l'attaque fut retardée.

Enfin, le treizième jour du mois de Schabar, — au soleil levant — , on entendit contre la porte de Khamon un grand coup.

Soixante-quinze soldats tiraient des cordes, disposées à la base d'une poutre gigantesque, horizontalement suspendue par des chaînes descendant d'une potence, et une tête de bélier, tout en airain, la terminait. On l'avait emmaillotée de peaux de boeuf ; des bracelets en fer la cerclaient de place en place ; elle était trois fois grosse comme le corps d'un homme, longue de cent vingt coudées, et, sous la foule des bras nus la poussant et la ramenant, elle avançait et reculait avec une oscillation régulière.

Les autres béliers devant les autres portes commencèrent à se mouvoir. Dans les roues creuses des tympans, on aperçut des hommes qui montaient d'échelon en échelon. Les poulies, les chapiteaux grincèrent, les rideaux de cordages s'abattirent, et des volées de pierres et des volées de flèches s'élancèrent à la fois ; tous les frondeurs éparpillés couraient. Quelques-uns s'approchaient du rempart, en cachant sous leurs boucliers des pots de résine ; puis ils les lançaient à tour de bras. Cette grêle de balles, de dards et de feux passait par-dessus les premiers rangs et faisait une courbe qui retombait derrière les murs. Mais, à leur sommet, de longues grues à mâter les vaisseaux se dressèrent ; et il en descendit de ces pinces énormes qui se terminaient par deux demi-cercles dentelés à l'intérieur. Elles mordirent les béliers. Les soldats, se cramponnant à la poutre, tiraient en arrière. Les Carthaginois halaient pour la faire monter ; et l'engagement se prolongea jusqu'au soir.

Quand les Mercenaires, le lendemain, reprirent leur besogne, le haut des murailles se trouvait entièrement tapissé par des balles de coton, des toiles, des coussins ; les créneaux étaient bouchés avec des nattes ; et, sur le rempart, entre les grues, on distinguait un alignement de fourches et de tranchoirs emmanchés à des bâtons. Aussitôt, une résistance furieuse commença.

Des troncs d'arbres, tenus par des câbles, tombaient et retombaient alternativement en battant les béliers ; des crampons, lancés par des balistes, arrachaient le toit des cabanes ; et, de la plate-forme des tours, des ruisseaux de silex et de galets se déversaient.

Enfin, les béliers rompirent la porte de Khamon et la porte de Tagaste. Mais les Carthaginois avaient entassé à l'intérieur une telle abondance de matériaux que leurs battants ne s'ouvrirent pas. Ils restèrent debout.

Alors, on poussa contre les murailles des tarières, qui, s'appliquant aux joints des blocs, les descelleraient. Les machines furent mieux gouvernées, leurs servants répartis par escouades ; du matin au soir, elles fonctionnaient, sans s'interrompre, avec la monotone précision d'un métier de tisserand.

Spendius ne se fatiguait pas de les conduire. C'était lui-même qui bandait les écheveaux des balistes. Pour qu'il y eût, dans leurs tensions jumelles, une parité complète, on serrait leurs cordes en frappant tour à tour de droite et de gauche, jusqu'au moment où les deux côtés rendaient un son égal. Spendius montait sur leur membrure. Avec le bout de son pied, il les battait tout doucement, — et il tendait l'oreille comme un musicien qui accorde une lyre. Puis, quand le timon de la catapulte se relevait, quand la colonne de la baliste tremblait à la secousse du ressort, que les pierres s'élançaient en rayons et que les dards couraient en ruisseau, il se penchait le corps tout entier et jetait ses bras dans l'air, comme pour les suivre.

Les soldats, admirant son adresse, exécutaient ses ordres. Dans la gaieté de leur travail, ils débitaient des plaisanteries sur les noms des machines. Ainsi, les tenailles à prendre les béliers s'appelant des loups, et les galexies couvertes des treilles, on était des agneaux, on allait faire la vendange ; et, en armant leurs pièces, ils disaient aux onagres : " Allons, rue bien ! ", et aux scorpions : " Traverse-les jusqu'au coeur ! " Ces facéties, toujours les mêmes, soutenaient leur courage.

Cependant, les machines ne démolissaient point le rempart. Il était formé par deux murailles et tout rempli de terre ; elles abattaient leurs parties supérieures. Mais les assiégés, chaque fois, les relevaient. Mâtho ordonna de construire des tours en bois qui devaient être aussi hautes que les tours de pierre. On jeta, dans le fossé, du gazon, des pieux, des galets et des chariots avec leurs roues afin de l'emplir plus vite ; avant qu'il fût comblé, l'immense foule des Barbares ondula sur la plaine d'un seul mouvement, et vint battre le pied des murs, comme une mer débordée.

On avança les échelles de corde, les échelles droites et les sambuques, c'est-à-dire deux mâts d'où s'abaissaient, par des palans, une série de bambous que terminait un pont mobile. Elles formaient de nombreuses lignes droites appuyées contre le mur, et les Mercenaires, à la file les uns des autres, montaient en tenant leurs armes à la main. Pas un Carthaginois ne se montrait ; déjà, ils touchaient aux deux tiers du rempart. Les créneaux s'ouvrirent, en vomissant, comme des gueules de dragon, des feux et de la fumée ; le sable s'éparpillait, entrait par le joint des armures ; le pétrole s'attachait aux vêtements ; le plomb liquide sautillait sur les casques, faisait des trous dans les chairs ; une pluie d'étincelles s'éclaboussait contre les visages, — et des orbites sans yeux semblaient pleurer des larmes grosses comme des amandes. Des hommes, tout jaunes d'huile, brûlaient par la chevelure. Ils se mettaient à courir, enflammaient les autres. On les étouffait en leur jetant, de loin, sur la face, des manteaux trempés de sang. Quelques-uns qui n'avaient pas de blessure restaient immobiles, plus raides que des pieux, la bouche ouverte et les deux bras écartés.

L'assaut, pendant plusieurs jours de suite, recommença, — les Mercenaires espérant triompher par un excès de force et d'audace.

Quelquefois un homme sur les épaules d'un autre enfonçait une fiche entre les pierres, puis s'en servait comme d'un échelon pour atteindre au-delà, en plaçait une seconde, une troisième ; et, protégés par le bord des créneaux dépassant la muraille, peu à peu, ils s'élevaient ainsi ; mais, toujours, à une certaine hauteur, ils retombaient. Le grand fossé trop plein débordait ; sous les pas des vivants, les blessés pêle-mêle s'entassaient avec les cadavres et les moribonds. Au milieu des entrailles ouvertes, des cervelles épandues et des flaques de sang, les troncs calcinés faisaient des taches noires ; et des bras et des jambes à moitié sortis d'un monceau se tenaient tout debout, comme des échalas dans un vignoble incendié.

Les échelles se trouvant insuffisantes, on employa les tollénones, — instruments composés d'une longue poutre établie transversalement sur une autre, et portant à son extrémité une corbeille quadrangulaire où trente fantassins pouvaient se tenir avec leurs armes.

Mâtho voulut monter dans la première qui fut prête. Spendius l'arrêta.

Des hommes se courbèrent sur un moulinet ; la grande poutre se leva, devint horizontale, se dressa presque verticalement, et, trop chargée par le bout, elle pliait comme un immense roseau. Les soldats cachés jusqu'au menton se tassaient ; on n'apercevait que les plumes des casques. Enfin, quand elle fut à cinquante coudées dans l'air, elle tourna de droite et de gauche plusieurs fois, puis s'abaissa ; et, comme un bras de géant qui tiendrait sur sa main une cohorte de pygmées, elle déposa au bord du mur la corbeille pleine d'hommes. Ils sautèrent dans la foule et jamais ils ne revinrent.

Tous les autres tollénones furent bien vite disposés. Mais il en aurait fallu cent fois davantage pour prendre la ville. On les utilisa d'une façon meurtrière : des archers éthiopiens se plaçaient dans les corbeilles ; puis, les câbles étant assujettis, ils restaient suspendus et tiraient des flèches empoisonnées. Les cinquante tollénones, dominant les créneaux, entouraient ainsi Carthage, comme de monstrueux vautours ; et les Nègres riaient de voir les gardes sur le rempart mourir dans des convulsions atroces.

Hamilcar y envoya des hoplites. : il leur faisait boire chaque matin le jus de certaines herbes qui les gardait du poison.

Un soir, par un temps obscur, il embarqua les meilleurs de ses soldats sur des gabares, des planches, et, tournant à la droite du port, il vint débarquer à la Taenia. Puis ils s'avancèrent jusqu'aux premières lignes des Barbares, et, les prenant par le flanc, ils en firent un grand carnage. Des hommes suspendus à des cordes descendaient la nuit du haut des murs avec des torches à la main, brûlaient les ouvrages des Mercenaires, et remontaient.

Mâtho était acharné ; chaque obstacle renforçait sa colère ; il en arrivait à des choses terribles et extravagantes. Il convoqua Salammbô, mentalement, à un rendez-vous ; puis il l'attendit. Elle ne vint pas ; cela lui parut une trahison nouvelle, — et, désormais, il l'exécra. S'il avait vu son cadavre, il se serait peut-être en allé. Il doubla les avant-postes, il planta des fourches au bas du rempart, il enfouit des chausse-trapes dans la terre, et il commanda aux Libyens de lui apporter toute une forêt pour y mettre le feu et brûler Carthage, comme une tanière de renards.

Spendius s'obstinait au siège. Il cherchait à inventer des machines épouvantables et comme jamais on n'en avait construit.

Les autres Barbares, campés au loin sur l'isthme, s'ébahissaient de ces lenteurs ; ils murmuraient ; on les lâcha.

Alors, ils se précipitèrent avec leurs coutelas et leurs javelots, dont ils battaient les portes. Mais la nudité de leurs corps facilitant leurs blessures, les Carthaginois les massacraient abondamment ; et les Mercenaires s'en réjouirent, sans doute par jalousie du pillage. Il en résulta des querelles, des combats entre eux. Puis, la campagne étant ravagée, bientôt on s'arracha les vivres. Ils se décourageaient. Des hordes nombreuses s'en allèrent. La foule était si grande qu'il n'y parut pas.

Les meilleurs tentèrent de creuser des mines ; le terrain mal soutenu s'éboula. Ils les recommencèrent en d'autres places ; Hamilcar devinait toujours leur direction en appliquant son oreille contre un bouclier de bronze. Il perça des contre-mines sous le chemin que devaient parcourir les tours de bois ; quand on voulut les pousser, elles s'enfoncèrent dans des trous.

Enfin, tous reconnurent que la ville était imprenable, tant que l'on n'aurait pas élevé jusqu'à la hauteur des murailles une longue terrasse qui permettrait de combattre sur le même niveau, on en paverait le sommet pour faire rouler dessus les machines. Alors, il serait bien impossible à Carthage de résister.

Elle commençait à souffrir de la soif. L'eau, qui valait au début du siège deux késitah le bât, se vendait maintenant un shekel d'argent ; les provisions de viande et de blé s'épuisaient aussi ; on avait peur de la faim ; quelques-uns même parlaient de bouches inutiles, ce qui effrayait tout le monde.

Depuis la place de Khamon jusqu'au temple de Melkarth, des cadavres encombraient les rues ; et, comme on était à la fin de l'été, de grosses mouches noires harcelaient les combattants. Des vieillards transportaient les blessés, et les gens dévots continuaient les funérailles fictives de leurs proches et de leurs amis, défunts au loin pendant la guerre. Des statues de cire avec des cheveux et des vêtements s'étalaient en travers des portes. Elles se fondaient à la chaleur des cierges brûlant près d'elles ; la peinture coulait sur leurs épaules, et des pleurs ruisselaient sur la face des vivants, qui psalmodiaient à côté des chansons lugubres. La foule, pendant ce temps-là, courait ; des bandes armées passaient ; les capitaines criaient des ordres, et l'on entendait toujours le heurt des béliers qui battaient le rempart.

La température devint si lourde que les corps, se gonflant, ne pouvaient plus entrer dans les cercueils. On les brûlait au milieu des cours. Mais les feux, trop à l'étroit, incendiaient les murailles voisines, et de longues flammes, tout à coup, s'échappaient des maisons comme du sang qui jaillit d'une artère. Ainsi Moloch possédait Carthage ; il étreignait les remparts, il se roulait dans les rues, il dévorait jusqu'aux cadavres.

Des hommes qui portaient, en signe de désespoir, des manteaux faits de haillons ramassés, s'établirent au coin des carrefours. Ils déclamaient contre les Anciens, contre Hamilcar, prédisaient au peuple une ruine entière et l'engageaient à tout détruire et à tout se permettre. Les plus dangereux étaient les buveurs de jusquiame ; dans leurs crises, ils se croyaient des bêtes féroces et sautaient sur les passants qu'ils déchiraient. Des attroupements se faisaient autour d'eux ; : on en oubliait la défense de Carthage. Le Suffète imagina d'en payer d'autres pour soutenir sa politique.

Afin de retenir dans la ville le génie des Dieux, on avait couvert de chaînes leurs simulacres. On posa des voiles noirs sur les Patæques et des cilices autour des autels ; on tâchait d'exciter l'orgueil et la jalousie des Baals en leur chantant à l'oreille : " Tu vas te laisser vaincre ! les autres sont plus forts, peut-être ? Montre-toi ! aide-nous ! afin que les peuples ne disent pas : Où sont maintenant leurs Dieux ? "

Une anxiété permanente agitait les collèges des pontifes. Ceux de la Rabbetna surtout avaient peur, — le rétablissement du zaïmph n'ayant pas servi. Ils se tenaient enfermés dans la troisième enceinte, inexpugnable comme une forteresse. Un seul d'entre eux se hasardait à sortir, le grand-prêtre Schahabarim.

Il venait chez Salammbô. Mais il restait tout silencieux, la contemplant, les prunelles fixes, ou bien il prodiguait les paroles, et les reproches qu'il lui faisait étaient plus durs que jamais.

Par une contradiction inconcevable, il ne pardonnait pas à la jeune fille d'avoir suivi ses ordres ; — Schahabarim avait tout deviné, — et l'obsession de cette idée avivait les jalousies de son impuissance. Il l'accusait d'être la cause de la guerre. Mâtho, à l'en croire, assiégeait Carthage pour reprendre le zaïmph ; et il déversait des imprécations et des ironies sur ce Barbare, qui prétendait posséder des choses saintes. Ce n'était pas cela pourtant que le prêtre voulait dire.

Mais, à présent, Salammbô n'éprouvait pour lui aucune terreur. Les angoisses dont elle souffrait autrefois l'avaient abandonnée. Une tranquillité singulière l'occupait. Ses regards, moins errants, brillaient d'une flamme limpide.

Cependant, le python était redevenu malade ; et, comme Salammbô paraissait au contraire se guérir, la vieille Taanach s'en réjouissait, convaincue qu'il prenait par ce dépérissement la langueur de sa maîtresse.

Un matin, elle le trouva derrière le lit de peaux de boeuf, tout enroulé sur lui-même, plus froid qu'un marbre, et la tête disparaissant sous un amas de vers. A ses cris, Salammbô survint. Elle le retourna quelque temps avec le bout de sa sandale, et l'esclave fut ébahie de son insensibilité.

La fille d'Hamilcar ne prolongeait plus ses jeûnes avec tant de ferveur. Elle passait des journées au haut de sa terrasse, les deux coudes contre la balustrade, s'amusant à regarder devant elle. Le sommet des murailles au bout de la ville découpait sur le ciel des zigzags inégaux, et les lances des sentinelles y faisaient, tout du long, comme une bordure d'épis. Elle apercevait au-delà, entre les tours, les manoeuvres des Barbares ; les jours que le siège était interrompu, elle pouvait même distinguer leurs occupations. Ils raccommodaient leurs armes, se graissaient la chevelure, ou bien lavaient dans la mer leurs bras sanglants ; les tentes étaient closes ; les bêtes de somme mangeaient ; et, au loin, les faux des chars, tous rangés en demi-cercle, semblaient un cimeterre d'argent étendu à la base des monts. Les discours de Schahabarim revenaient à sa mémoire. Elle attendait son fiancé Narr'Havas. Elle aurait voulu, malgré sa haine, revoir Mâtho. De tous les Carthaginois, elle était la seule personne, peut-être, qui lui eût parlé sans peur.

Souvent son père arrivait dans sa chambre. Il s'asseyait en haletant sur les coussins et il la considérait d'un air presque attendri, comme s'il eût trouvé dans ce spectacle un délassement à ses fatigues. Il l'interrogeait quelquefois sur son voyage au camp des Mercenaires. Il lui demanda même si personne, par hasard, ne l'y avait poussée ; et, d'un signe de tête, elle répondit que non, tant Salammbô était fière d'avoir sauvé le zaïmph.

Mais le Suffète revenait toujours à Mâtho, sous prétexte de renseignements militaires. Il ne comprenait rien à l'emploi des heures qu'elle avait passées dans la tente. En effet, Salammbô ne parlait pas de Giscon ; car, les mots ayant par eux-mêmes un pouvoir effectif, les malédictions que l'on rapportait à quelqu'un pouvaient se tourner contre lui ; et elle taisait son envie d'assassinat, de peur d'être blâmée de n'y avoir point cédé. Elle disait que le schalischim paraissait furieux, qu'il avait crié beaucoup, puis qu'il s'était endormi. Salammbô n'en racontait pas davantage, par honte peut-être, ou bien par un excès de candeur faisant qu'elle n'attachait guère d'importance aux baisers du soldat. Tout cela, du reste, flottait dans sa tête, mélancolique et brumeux comme le souvenir d'un rêve accablant ; et elle n'aurait su de quelle manière, par quels discours l'exprimer.

Un soir qu'ils se trouvaient ainsi l'un en face de l'autre, Taanach tout effarée survint. Un vieillard, avec un enfant, était là, dans les cours, et voulait voir le Suffète.

Hamilcar pâlit, puis répliqua vivement :

— " Qu'il monte ! "

Iddibal entra, sans se prosterner. Il tenait par la main un jeune garçon couvert d'un manteau en poil de bouc ; et aussitôt relevant le capuchon qui abritait sa figure :

— " Le voilà, Maître ! Prends-le ! "

Le Suffète et l'esclave s'enfoncèrent dans un coin de la chambre.

L'enfant était resté au milieu, tout debout ; et, d'un regard plus attentif qu'étonné, il parcourait le plafond, les meubles, les colliers de perles traînant sur les draperies de pourpre, et cette majestueuse jeune femme inclinée vers lui.

Il avait dix ans peut-être, et n'était pas plus haut qu'un glaive romain. Ses cheveux crépus ombrageaient son front bombé. On aurait dit que ses prunelles cherchaient des espaces. Les narines de son nez mince palpitaient largement ; sur toute sa personne s'étalait l'indéfinissable splendeur de ceux qui sont destinés aux grandes entreprises. Quand il eut rejeté son manteau trop lourd, il resta revêtu d'une peau de lynx attachée autour de sa taille, et il appuyait résolument sur les dalles ses petits pieds nus tout blancs de poussière. Mais, sans doute, il devina que l'on agitait des choses importantes, car il se tenait immobile, une main derrière le dos et le menton baissé, avec un doigt dans la bouche.

Enfin Hamilcar, d'un signe, attira Salammbô et il lui dit à voix basse :

— " Tu le garderas chez toi, entends-tu ! Il faut que personne, même de la maison, ne connaisse son existence ! "

Puis, derrière la porte, il demanda encore une fois à Iddibal s'il était bien sûr qu'on ne les eût pas remarqués.

— " Non ! " fit l'esclave ; " les rues étaient vides. "

La guerre emplissant toutes les provinces, il avait eu peur pour le fils de son maître. Alors ne sachant où le cacher, il était venu le long des côtes, sur une chaloupe : et, depuis trois jours Iddibal louvoyait dans le golfe, en observant les remparts. Enfin ce soir-là, comme les alentours de Khamon semblaient déserts, il avait franchi la passe lestement et débarqué près de l'arsenal, l'entrée du port étant libre.

Mais bientôt les Barbares établirent, en face, un immense radeau pour empêcher les Carthaginois d'en sortir. Ils relevaient les tours de bois, et, en même temps, la terrasse montait.

Les communications avec le dehors étant interceptées, une famine intolérable commença.

On tua tous les chiens, tous les mulets, tous les ânes, puis les quinze éléphants que le Suffète avait ramenés. Les lions du temple de Moloch étaient devenus furieux et les hiérodoules n'osaient plus s'en approcher. On les nourrit d'abord avec les blessés des Barbares ; ensuite on leur jeta des cadavres encore tièdes ; ils les refusèrent et tous moururent. Au crépuscule, des gens erraient le long des vieilles enceintes, et cueillaient entre les pierres des herbes et des fleurs qu'ils faisaient bouillir dans du vin ; — le vin coûtait moins cher que l'eau. D'autres se glissaient jusqu'aux avant-postes de l'ennemi et venaient sous les tentes voler de la nourriture ; les Barbares, pris de stupéfaction, quelquefois les laissaient s'en retourner. Enfin un jour arriva où les Anciens résolurent d'égorger, entre eux, les chevaux d'Eschmoûn. C'étaient des bêtes saintes, dont les pontifes tressaient les crinières avec des rubans d'or, et qui signifiaient par leur existence le mouvement du soleil, l'idée du feu sous la forme la plus haute. Leurs chairs, coupées en portions égales, furent enfouies derrière l'autel. Puis, tous les soirs, alléguant quelque dévotion, les Anciens montaient vers le temple, se régalaient en cachette ; et ils remportaient sous leur tunique un morceau pour leurs enfants. Dans les quartiers déserts, loin des murs, les habitants moins misérables, par peur des autres, s'étaient barricadés.

Les pierres des catapultes et les démolitions ordonnées pour la défense avaient accumulé des tas de ruines au milieu des rues. Aux heures les plus tranquilles, tout à coup, des masses de peuple se précipitaient en criant ; et, du haut de l'Acropole, les incendies faisaient comme des haillons de pourpre dispersés sur les terrasses, et que le vent tordait.

Les trois grandes catapultes, malgré tous ces travaux, ne s'arrêtaient pas. Leurs ravages étaient extraordinaires ; ainsi, la tête d'un homme alla rebondir sur le fronton des Syssites ; dans la rue de Kinisdo, une femme qui accouchait fut écrasée par un bloc de marbre, et son enfant avec le lit emporté jusqu'au carrefour de Cinasyn où l'on retrouva la couverture.

Ce qu'il y avait de plus irritant, c'était les balles des frondeurs. Elles tombaient sur les toits, dans les jardins et au milieu des cours, tandis que l'on mangeait attablé devant un maigre repas et le coeur gros de soupirs. Ces atroces projectiles portaient des lettres gravées qui s'imprimaient dans les chairs ; et, sur les cadavres, on lisait des injures, telles que pourceau, chacal, vermine, et parfois des plaisanteries : attrapé ! ou : je l'ai bien mérité.

La partie du rempart qui s'étendait depuis l'angle des ports jusqu'à la hauteur des citernes fut enfoncée. Alors les gens de Malqua se trouvèrent pris entre la vieille enceinte de Byrsa par-derrière et les Barbares par-devant. Mais on avait assez que d'épaissir la muraille et de la rendre le plus haut possible sans s'occuper d'eux ; on les abandonna ; tous périrent, et, bien qu'ils fussent haïs généralement, on en conçut pour Hamilcar une grande horreur.

Le lendemain, il ouvrit les fosses où il gardait du blé ; ses intendants le donnèrent au peuple. Pendant trois jours on se gorgea.

La soif n'en devint que plus intolérable ; et toujours ils voyaient devant eux la longue cascade que faisait en tombant l'eau claire de l'aqueduc. Sous les rayons du soleil, une vapeur fine remontait de sa base, avec un arc-en-ciel à côté, et un petit ruisseau, formant des courbes sur la plage, se déversait dans le golfe.

Hamilcar ne faiblissait pas. Il comptait sur un événement, sur quelque chose de décisif, d'extraordinaire.

Ses propres esclaves arrachèrent les lames d'argent du temple de Melkarth, on tira du port quatre longs bateaux, avec des cabestans, on les amena jusqu'au bas des Mappales, le mur qui donnait sur le rivage fut troué : et ils partirent pour les Gaules afin d'y acheter, à n'importe à quel prix, des Mercenaires. Cependant Hamilcar se désolait de ne pouvoir communiquer avec le roi des Numides, car il le savait derrière les Barbares et prêt à tomber sur eux. Mais Narr'Havas, trop faible, n'allait pas se risquer seul ; et le Suffète fit rehausser le rempart de douze palmes, entasser dans l'Acropole tout le matériel des arsenaux et encore une fois réparer les machines.

On se servait, pour les entortillages des catapultes, de tendons pris au cou des taureaux ou bien aux jarrets des cerfs. Cependant, il n'existait dans Carthage ni cerfs ni taureaux. Hamilcar demanda aux Anciens les cheveux de leurs femmes ; toutes les sacrifièrent ; la quantité ne fut pas suffisante. On avait, dans les bâtiments des Syssites, douze cents esclaves nubiles, de celles que l'on destinait aux prostitutions de la Grèce et de l'Italie, et leurs cheveux, rendus élastiques par l'usage des onguents, se trouvaient merveilleux pour les machines de guerre. Mais la perte plus tard serait trop considérable. Donc, il fut décidé qu'on choisirait, parmi les épouses des plébéiens, les plus belles chevelures. Sans aucun souci des besoins de la patrie, elles crièrent en désespérées quand les serviteurs des Cent vinrent, avec des ciseaux, mettre la main sur elles.

Un redoublement de fureur animait les Barbares. On les voyait au loin prendre la graisse des morts pour huiler leurs machines, et d'autres en arrachaient les ongles qu'ils cousaient bout à bout afin de se faire des cuirasses. Ils imaginèrent de mettre dans les catapultes des vases pleins de serpents apportés par les Nègres ; les pots d'argile se cassaient sur les dalles, les serpents couraient, semblaient pulluler, et, tant ils étaient nombreux, sortir des murs naturellement. Puis, les Barbares, mécontents de leur invention, la perfectionnèrent ; ils lançaient toutes sortes d'immondices, des excréments humains, des morceaux de charogne, des cadavres. La peste reparut. Les dents des Carthaginois leur tombaient de la bouche, et ils avaient les gencives décolorées comme celles des chameaux après un voyage trop long.

Les machines furent dressées sur la terrasse, bien qu'elle n'atteignît pas encore partout à la hauteur du rempart. Devant les Vingt-trois tours des fortifications se dressaient vingt-trois autres tours de bois. Tous les tollénones étaient remontés, et au milieu, un peu plus en arrière, apparaissait la formidable hélépole de Démétrius Poliorcète, que Spendius, enfin, avait reconstruite. Pyramidale comme le phare d'Alexandrie, elle était haute de cent trente coudées et large de vingt-trois, avec neuf étages allant tous en diminuant vers le sommet et qui étaient défendus par des écailles d'airain, percés de portes nombreuses, remplis de soldats ; sur la plate-forme supérieure se dressait une catapulte flanquée de deux balistes.

Alors Hamilcar fit planter des croix pour ceux qui parleraient de se rendre ; les femmes mêmes furent embrigadées. Ils couchaient dans les rues et l'on attendait plein d'angoisses.

Puis un matin, un peu avant le lever du soleil (c'était le septième jour du mois de Nyssan), ils entendirent un grand cri poussé par tous les Barbares à la fois ; les trompettes à tube de plomb ronflaient, les grandes cornes paphlagoniennes mugissaient comme des taureaux. Tous se levèrent et coururent au rempart.

Une forêt de lances, de piques et d'épées se hérissait à sa base. Elle sauta contre les murailles, les échelles s'y accrochèrent ; et, dans la baie des créneaux, des têtes de Barbares parurent.

Des poutres soutenues par de longues files d'hommes battaient les portes ; et, aux endroits où la terrasse manquait, les Mercenaires, pour démolir le mur, arrivaient en cohortes serrées, la première ligne se tenant accroupie, la seconde pliant le jarret, et les autres successivement se dressaient jusqu'aux derniers qui restaient tout droits : tandis qu'ailleurs, pour monter dessus, les plus hauts s'avançaient en tête, les plus bas à la queue, et tous, du bras gauche, appuyaient sur leurs casques leurs boucliers en les réunissant par le bord si étroitement, qu'on aurait dit un assemblage de grandes tortues. Les projectiles glissaient sur ces masses obliques.

Les Carthaginois jetaient des meules de moulin, des pilons, des cuves, des tonneaux, des lits, tout ce qui pouvait faire un poids et assommer. Quelques-uns guettaient dans les embrasures avec un filet de pêcheur, et quand arrivait le Barbare, il se trouvait pris sous les mailles et se débattait comme un poisson. Ils démolissaient eux-mêmes leurs créneaux ; des pans de mur s'écroulaient en soulevant une grande poussière ; et, les catapultes de la terrasse tirant les unes contre les autres, leurs pierres se heurtaient, et éclataient en mille morceaux qui faisaient sur les combattants une large pluie.

Bientôt les deux foules ne formèrent plus qu'une grosse chaîne de corps humains ; elle débordait dans les intervalles de la terrasse, et, un peu plus lâche aux deux bouts, se roulait sans avancer perpétuellement. Ils s'étreignaient couchés à plat ventre comme des lutteurs. On s'écrasait. Les femmes penchées sur les créneaux hurlaient. On les tirait par leurs voiles, et la blancheur de leurs flancs, tout à coup découverts, brillait entre les bras des nègres y enfonçant des poignards. Des cadavres, trop pressés dans la foule, ne tombaient pas ; soutenus par les épaules de leurs compagnons, ils allaient quelques minutes tout debout et les yeux fixes. Quelques-uns, les deux tempes traversées par une javeline, balançaient leur tête comme des ours. Des bouches ouvertes pour crier restaient béantes ; des mains s'envolaient coupées. Il y eut là de grands coups, et dont parlèrent pendant longtemps ceux qui survécurent.

Cependant, des flèches jaillissaient du sommet des tours de bois et des tours de pierre. Les tollénones faisaient aller rapidement leurs longues antennes ; et comme les Barbares avaient saccagé sous les Catacombes le vieux cimetière des autochtones, ils lançaient sur les Carthaginois des dalles de tombeaux. Sous le poids des corbeilles trop lourdes, quelquefois les câbles se coupaient, et des masses d'hommes, tous levant les bras, tombaient du haut des airs.

Jusqu'au milieu du jour, les vétérans des hoplites s'étaient acharnés contre la Taenia pour pénétrer dans le port et détruire la flotte. Hamilcar fit allumer sur la toiture de Khamon un feu de paille humide ; et la fumée les aveuglant, ils se rabattirent à gauche et vinrent augmenter l'horrible cohue qui se poussait dans Malqua. Des syntagmes, composés d'hommes robustes, choisis tout exprès, avaient enfoncé trois portes. De hauts barrages, faits avec des planches garnies de clous, les arrêtèrent ; une quatrième céda facilement ; ils s'élancèrent par-dessus en courant, et roulèrent dans une fosse où l'on avait caché des pièges. A l'angle sud-est, Autharite et ses hommes abattirent le rempart, dont la fissure était bouchée avec des briques. Le terrain par-derrière montait ; ils le gravirent lestement. Mais ils trouvèrent en haut une seconde muraille, composée de pierres et de longues poutres étendues tout à plat et qui alternaient comme les pièces d'un échiquier. C'était une mode gauloise adaptée par le Suffète au besoin de la situation ; les Gaulois se crurent devant une ville de leur pays. Ils attaquèrent avec mollesse et furent repoussés.

Depuis la rue de Khamon jusqu'au Marché-aux-herbes, tout le chemin de ronde appartenait maintenant aux Barbares, et les Samnites achevaient à coups d'épieux les moribonds ; ou bien, un pied sur le mur, ils contemplaient en bas, sous eux, les ruines fumantes, et au loin la bataille qui recommençait.

Les frondeurs, distribués par-derrière, tiraient toujours. Mais à force d'avoir servi, le ressort des frondes acarnaniennes était brisé, et plusieurs, comme des pâtres, envoyaient des cailloux avec la main : les autres lançaient des boules de plomb avec le manche d'un fouet. Zarxas, les épaules couvertes de ses longs cheveux noirs, se portait partout en bondissant et entraînait les Baléares. Deux panetières étaient suspendues à ses hanches ; il y plongeait continuellement la main gauche et son bras droit tournoyait, comme la roue d'un char.

Mâtho s'était d'abord retenu de combattre, pour mieux commander tous les Barbares à la fois. On l'avait vu le long du golfe avec les Mercenaires, près de la lagune avec les Numides, sur les bords du lac entre les Nègres, et du fond de la plaine il poussait les masses de soldats qui arrivaient incessamment contre les lignes de fortifications. Peu à peu il s'était rapproché ; l'odeur du sang, le spectacle du carnage et le vacarme des clairons avaient fini par lui faire bondir le coeur. Alors il était rentré dans sa tente, et, jetant sa cuirasse, avait pris sa peau de lion, plus commode pour la bataille. Le mufle s'adaptait sur la tête en bordant le visage d'un cercle de crocs ; les deux pattes antérieures se croisaient sur la poitrine, et celles de derrière avançaient leurs ongles jusqu'au bas de ses genoux.

Il avait gardé son fort ceinturon, où luisait une hache à double tranchant, et avec sa grande épée dans les deux mains s'était précipité par la brèche, impétueusement. Comme un émondeur qui coupe des branches de saule, et qui tâche d'en abattre le plus possible afin de gagner plus d'argent, il marchait en fauchant autour de lui les Carthaginois. Ceux qui tentaient de le saisir par les flancs, il les renversait à coups de pommeau ; quand ils l'attaquaient en face, il les perçait ; s'ils fuyaient, il les fendait. Deux hommes à la fois sautèrent sur son dos ; il recula d'un bond contre une porte et les écrasa. Son épée s'abaissait, se relevait. Elle éclata sur l'angle d'un mur. Alors il prit sa lourde hache, et par-devant, par-derrière, il éventrait les Carthaginois comme un troupeau de brebis. Ils s'écartaient de plus en plus, et il arriva tout seul devant la seconde enceinte, au bas de l'Acropole. Les matériaux lancés du sommet encombraient les marches et débordaient par-dessus la muraille. Mâtho, au milieu des ruines, se retourna pour appeler ses compagnons.

Il aperçut leurs aigrettes disséminées sur la multitude ; elles s'enfonçaient, ils allaient périr ; il s'élança vers eux ; alors, la vaste couronne de plumes rouges se resserrant, bientôt ils se rejoignirent et l'entourèrent. Mais des rues latérales une foule énorme se dégorgeait. Il fut pris aux hanches, soulevé, et entraîné jusqu'en dehors du rempart, dans un endroit où la terrasse était haute.

Mâtho cria un commandement : tous les boucliers se rabattirent sur les casques ; il sauta dessus, pour s'accrocher quelque part afin de rentrer dans Carthage ; et, tout en brandissant la terrible hache, il courait sur les boucliers, pareils à des vagues de bronze, comme un dieu marin sur des flots et qui secoue son trident.

Cependant un homme en robe blanche se promenait au bord du rempart, impassible et indifférent à la mort qui l'entourait. Parfois il étendait sa main droite contre ses yeux pour découvrir quelqu'un. Mâtho vint à passer sous lui. Tout à coup ses prunelles flamboyèrent, sa face livide se crispa ; et en levant ses deux bras maigres il lui criait des injures.

Mâtho ne les entendit pas ; mais il sentit entrer dans son coeur un regard si cruel et furieux qu'il en poussa un rugissement. Il lança vers lui la longue hache ; des gens se jetèrent sur Schahabarim ; et Mâtho, ne le voyant plus, tomba à la renverse, épuisé.

Un craquement épouvantable se rapprochait, mêlé au rythme de voix rauques qui chantaient en cadence.

C'était la grande hélépole, entourée par une foule de soldats. Ils la tiraient à deux mains, halaient avec des cordes et poussaient de l'épaule ; — car le talus, montant de la plaine sur la terre, bien qu'il fût extrêmement doux, se trouvait impraticable pour des machines d'un poids prodigieux. Elle avait cependant huit roues cerclées de fer, et depuis le matin elle avançait ainsi, lentement, pareille à une montagne qui se fût élevée sur une autre. Puis il sortit de sa base un immense bélier ; le long des trois faces regardant la ville les portes s'abattirent, et dans l'intérieur apparurent, comme des colonnes de fer, des soldats cuirassés. On en voyait qui grimpaient et descendaient les deux escaliers traversant ses étages. Quelques-uns attendaient pour s'élancer que les crampons des portes touchassent le mur ; au milieu de la plate-forme supérieure, les écheveaux des balistes tournaient, et le grand timon de la catapulte s'abaissait.

Hamilcar était, à ce moment-là, debout sur le toit de Melkarth. Il avait jugé qu'elle devait venir directement vers lui, contre l'endroit de la muraille le plus invulnérable, et, à cause de cela même, dégarni de sentinelles. Depuis longtemps déjà ses esclaves apportaient des outres sur le chemin de ronde, où ils avaient élevé, avec de l'argile, deux cloisons transversales formant une sorte de bassin. L'eau coulait insensiblement sur la terrasse, et Hamilcar, chose extraordinaire, ne semblait point s'en inquiéter.

Mais, quand l'hélépole fut à trente pas environ, il commanda d'établir des planches par-dessus les rues, entre les maisons, depuis les citernes jusqu'au rempart ; et des gens à la file se passaient, de main en main, des casques et des amphores qu'ils vidaient continuellement. Les Carthaginois cependant s'indignaient de cette eau perdue. Le bélier démolissait la muraille ; tout à coup, une fontaine s'échappa des pierres disjointes. Alors la haute masse d'airain, à neuf étages et qui contenait et occupait plus de trois mille soldats, commença doucement à osciller comme un navire. En effet, l'eau pénétrant la terrasse avait devant elle effondré le chemin ; ses roues s'embourbèrent ; au premier étage, entre des rideaux de cuir, la tête de Spendius apparut soufflant à pleines joues dans un cornet d'ivoire. La grande machine, comme soulevée convulsivement, avança de dix pas peut-être ; mais le terrain de plus en plus s'amollissait, la fange gagnait les essieux et l'hélépole s'arrêta en penchant effroyablement d'un seul côté. La catapulte roula jusqu'au bord de la plate-forme ; et, emportée par la charge de son timon, elle tomba, fracassant sous elle les étages inférieurs. Les soldats, debout sur les portes, glissèrent dans l'abîme, ou bien ils se retenaient à l'extrémité des longues poutres, et augmentaient, par leur poids, l'inclinaison de l'hélépole — qui se démembrait en craquant dans toutes ses jointures.

Les autres Barbares s'élancèrent pour les secourir. Ils se tassaient en foule compacte. Les Carthaginois descendirent le rempart, et, les assaillant par-derrière, ils les tuèrent tout à leur aise. Mais les chars garnis de faux accoururent. Ils galopaient sur le contour de cette multitude ; elle remonta la muraille ; la nuit survint ; peu à peu les Barbares se retirèrent.

On ne voyait plus, sur la plaine, qu'une sorte de fourmillement tout noir, depuis le golfe bleuâtre jusqu'à la lagune toute blanche ; et le lac, où du sang avait coulé, s'étalait, plus loin, comme une grande mare pourpre.

La terrasse était maintenant si chargée de cadavres qu'on l'aurait crue construite avec des corps humains. Au milieu se dressait l'hélépole couverte d'armures ; et, de temps à autre, des fragments énormes s'en détachaient comme les pierres d'une pyramide qui s'écroule. On distinguait sur les murailles de larges traînées faites par les ruisseaux de plomb. Une tour de bois abattue, çà et là, brûlait ; et les maisons apparaissaient vaguement, comme les gradins d'un amphithéâtre en ruine.

De lourdes fumées montaient, en roulant des étincelles qui se perdaient dans le ciel noir.

Cependant, les Carthaginois, que la soif dévorait, s'étaient précipités vers les citernes. Ils en rompirent les portes. Une flaque bourbeuse s'étalait au fond.

Que devenir à présent ? D'ailleurs les Barbares étaient innombrables, et, leur fatigue passée, ils recommenceraient.

Le peuple, toute la nuit, délibéra par sections, au coin des rues. Les uns disaient qu'il fallait renvoyer les femmes, les malades et les vieillards ; d'autres proposèrent d'abandonner la ville pour s'établir au loin dans une colonie. Mais les vaisseaux manquaient, et le soleil parut qu'on n'avait rien décidé.

On ne se battit point ce jour-là, tous étant trop accablés. Les gens qui donnaient avaient l'air de cadavres.

Alors les Carthaginois, en réfléchissant sur la cause de leurs désastres, se rappelèrent qu'ils n'avaient point expédié en Phénicie l'offrande annuelle due à Melkarth-Tyrien ; et une immense terreur les prit. Les Dieux, indignés contre la République, allaient sans doute poursuivre leur vengeance.

On les considérait comme des maîtres cruels, que l'on apaisait avec des supplications et qui se laissaient corrompre à force de présents. Tous étaient faibles près de Moloch-le-dévorateur. L'existence, la chair même des hommes lui appartenaient ; — aussi, pour la sauver, les Carthaginois avaient coutume de lui en offrir une portion qui calmait sa fureur. On brûlait les enfants au front ou à la nuque avec des mèches de laine ; et cette façon de satisfaire le Baal rapportant aux prêtres beaucoup d'argent, ils ne manquaient pas de la recommander comme plus facile et plus douce.

Mais cette fois, il s'agissait de la République elle-même. Or, tout profit devant être racheté par une perte quelconque, toute transaction se réglant d'après le besoin du plus faible et l'exigence du plus fort, il n'y avait pas de douleur trop considérable pour le Dieu, puisqu'il se délectait dans les plus horribles et que l'on était maintenant à sa discrétion. Il fallait donc l'assouvir complètement. Les exemples prouvaient que ce moyen-là contraignait le fléau à disparaître. D'ailleurs, ils croyaient qu'une immolation par le feu purifierait Carthage. La férocité du peuple en était d'avance alléchée. Puis, le choix devait exclusivement tomber sur les grandes familles.

Les Anciens s'assemblèrent. La séance fut longue. Hannon y était venu. Comme il ne pouvait plus s'asseoir, il resta couché près de la porte, à demi perdu dans les franges de la haute tapisserie ; et quand le pontife de Moloch leur demanda s'ils consentiraient à livrer leurs enfants, sa voix, tout à coup, éclata dans l'ombre comme le rugissement d'un Génie au fond d'une caverne. Il regrettait, disait-il, de n'avoir pas à en donner de son propre sang ; et il contemplait Hamilcar, en face de lui à l'autre bout de la salle. Le Suffète fut tellement troublé par ce regard qu'il en baissa les yeux. Tous approuvèrent en opinant de la tête successivement ; et, d'après les rites, il dut répondre au grand prêtre : " Oui, que cela soit. " Alors les Anciens décrétèrent le sacrifice par une périphrase traditionnelle, — parce qu'il y a des choses plus gênantes à dire qu'à exécuter.

La décision, presque immédiatement, fut connue dans Carthage ; des lamentations retentirent. Partout on entendait les femmes crier ; leurs époux les consolaient ou les invectivaient en leur faisant des remontrances.

Mais trois heures après, une nouvelle plus extraordinaire se répandit : le Suffète avait trouvé des sources au bas de la falaise. On y courut. Des trous creusés dans le sable laissaient voir de l'eau ; et déjà quelques-uns étendus à plat ventre y buvaient.

Hamilcar ne savait pas lui-même si c'était par un conseil des Dieux ou le vague souvenir d'une révélation que son père autrefois lui aurait faite ; mais, en quittant les Anciens, il était descendu sur la plage, et, avec ses esclaves, il s'était mis à fouir le gravier.

Il donna des vêtements, des chaussures et du vin. Il donna tout le reste du blé qu'il gardait chez lui. Il fit même entrer la foule dans son palais, et il ouvrit les cuisines, les magasins et toutes les chambres, — celle de Salammbô exceptée. Il annonça que six mille Mercenaires gaulois allaient venir, et que le roi de Macédoine envoyait des soldats.

Mais, dès le second jour, les sources diminuèrent ; le soir du troisième, elles étaient complètement taries. Alors le décret des Anciens circula de nouveau sur toutes les lèvres et les prêtres de Moloch commencèrent leur besogne.

Des hommes en robes noires se présentèrent dans les maisons. Beaucoup d'avance les désertaient sous le prétexte d'une affaire ou d'une friandise qu'ils allaient acheter ; les serviteurs de Moloch survenaient et prenaient les enfants. D'autres les livraient eux-mêmes, stupidement. Puis on les emmenait dans le temple de Tanit, où les prêtresses étaient chargées jusqu'au jour solennel de les amuser et de les nourrir.

Ils arrivèrent chez Hamilcar tout à coup et, le trouvant dans ses jardins :

— " Barca ! nous venons pour la chose que tu sais... ton fils ! " Ils ajoutèrent que des gens l'avaient rencontré un soir de l'autre lune, au milieu des Mappales, conduit par un vieillard.

Il fut d'abord comme suffoqué. Mais bien vite comprenant que toute dénégation serait vaine, Hamilcar s'inclina : et il les introduisit dans la maison-de-commerce. Des esclaves accourus d'un signe en surveillaient les alentours.

Il entra dans la chambre de Salammbô tout éperdu.

Il saisit d'une main Hannibal, arracha de l'autre la ganse d'un vêtement qui traînait, attacha ses pieds, ses mains, en passa l'extrémité dans la bouche pour lui faire un bâillon et il le cacha sous le lit de peaux de boeuf, en laissant retomber jusqu'à terre une large draperie.

Ensuite il se promena de droite et de gauche ; il levait les bras, il tournait sur lui-même, il se mordait les lèvres. Puis il resta les prunelles fixes et haletant comme s'il allait mourir.

Mais il frappa trois fois dans ses mains. Giddenem parut.

— " Ecoute ! " dit-il. " tu vas prendre parmi les esclaves un enfant mâle de huit à neuf ans avec les cheveux noirs et le front bombé ! Amène-le ! hâte-toi ! "

Bientôt, Giddenem rentra, en présentant un jeune garçon.

C'était un pauvre enfant, à la fois maigre et bouffi ; sa peau semblait grisâtre comme l'infect haillon suspendu à ses flancs ; il baissait la tête dans ses épaules, et, du revers de sa main, frottait ses yeux, tout remplis de mouches.

Comment pourrait-on jamais le confondre avec Hannibal ! et le temps manquait pour en choisir un autre ! Hamilcar regardait Giddenem ; il avait envie de l'étrangler.

— " Va-t'en ! " cria-t-il ; le maître-des-esclaves s'enfuit.

Donc le malheur qu'il redoutait depuis si longtemps était venu, et il cherchait avec des efforts démesurés s'il n'y avait pas une manière, un moyen d'y échapper.

Abdalonim, tout à coup, parla derrière la porte. On demandait le Suffète. Les serviteurs de Moloch s'impatientaient.

Hamilcar retint un cri, comme à la brûlure d'un fer rouge ; et il recommença de nouveau à parcourir la chambre tel qu'un insensé. Puis il s'affaissa au bord de la balustrade, et, les coudes sur ses genoux, il serrait son front dans ses deux poings fermés.

La vasque de porphyre contenait encore un peu d'eau claire pour les ablutions de Salammbô. Malgré sa répugnance et tout son orgueil, le Suffète y plonge l'enfant, et, comme un marchand d'esclaves, il se mit à le laver et à le frotter avec les strigiles et la terre rouge. Il prit ensuite dans les casiers autour de la muraille deux carrés de pourpre, lui en posa un sur la poitrine, l'autre sur le dos, et il les réunit contre ses clavicules par deux agrafes de diamants. Il versa un parfum sur sa tête ; il passa autour de son cou un collier d'électrum, et il le chaussa de sandales à talons de perles, — les propres sandales de sa fille ! Mais il trépignait de honte et d'irritation ; Salammbô, qui s'empressait à le servir, était aussi pâle que lui. L'enfant souriait, ébloui par ces splendeurs, et même, s'enhardissant, il commençait à battre des mains et à sauter quand Hamilcar l'entraîna.

Il le tenait par le bras, fortement, comme s'il avait eu peur de le perdre ; et l'enfant, auquel il faisait mal, pleurait un peu tout en courant près de lui.

A la hauteur de l'ergastule, sous un palmier, une voix s'éleva, une voix lamentable et suppliante. Elle murmurait : " Maître ! oh ! Maître ! "

Hamilcar se retourna, et il aperçut à ses côtés un homme d'apparence abjecte, un de ces misérables vivant au hasard dans la maison.

— " Que veux-tu ? " dit le Suffète.

L'esclave, qui tremblait horriblement, balbutia :

— " Je suis son père ! "

Hamilcar marchait toujours ; l'autre le suivait, les reins courbés, les jarrets fléchis, la tête en avant. Son visage était convulsé par une angoisse indicible, et les sanglots qu'il retenait l'étouffaient, tant il avait envie tout à la fois de le questionner et de lui crier :

— " Grâce ! "

Enfin il osa le toucher d'un doigt, sur le coude, légèrement.

— " Est-ce que tu vas le ? ... " Il n'eut pas la force d'achever, et Hamilcar s'arrêta, tout ébahi de cette douleur.

Il n'avait jamais pensé, — tant l'abîme les séparant l'un de l'autre se trouvait immense, — qu'il pût y avoir entre eux rien de commun. Cela même lui parut une sorte d'outrage et comme un empiétement sur ses privilèges. Il répondit par un regard plus froid et plus lourd que la hache d'un bourreau ; l'esclave, s'évanouissant, tomba dans la poussière, à ses pieds. Hamilcar enjamba par-dessus.

Les trois hommes en robes noires l'attendaient dans la grande salle, debout contre le disque de pierre. Tout de suite, il déchira ses vêtements et il se roulait sur les dalles en poussant des cris aigus :

— " Ah ! pauvre petit Hannibal ! oh ! mon fils ! ma consolation ! mon espoir ! ma vie ! Tuez-moi aussi ! emportez-moi ! Malheur ! malheur ! " Il se labourait la face avec ses ongles, s'arrachait les cheveux et hurlait comme les pleureuses des funérailles. " Emmenez-le donc ! je souffre trop ! allez-vous-en ! tuez-moi comme lui. " Les serviteurs de Moloch s'étonnaient que le grand Hamilcar eût le coeur si faible. Ils en étaient presque attendris.

On entendit un bruit de pieds nus avec un râle saccadé, pareil à la respiration d'une bête féroce qui accourt ; et, sur le seuil de la troisième galerie, entre les montants d'ivoire, un homme apparut, blême, terrible, les bras écartés ; il s'écria :

— " Mon enfant ! "

Hamilcar, d'un bond, s'était jeté sur l'esclave ; et, en lui couvrant la bouche de ses mains, il criait encore plus haut :

— " C'est le vieillard qui l'a élevé ! il l'appelle mon enfant ! il en deviendra fou ! assez ! assez ! " Et, chassant par les épaules les trois prêtres et leur victime, il sortit avec eux, et, d'un grand coup de pied, referma la porte derrière lui.

Hamilcar tendit l'oreille pendant quelques minutes, craignant toujours de les voir revenir. Il songea ensuite à se défaire de l'esclave pour être bien sûr qu'il ne parlerait pas ; mais le péril n'était point complètement disparu, et cette mort, si les Dieux s'en irritaient, pouvait se retourner contre son fils. Alors, changeant d'idée, il lui envoya par Taanach les meilleures choses des cuisines : un quartier de bouc, des fèves et des conserves de grenades. L'esclave, qui n'avait pas mangé depuis longtemps, se rua dessus ; ses larmes tombaient dans les plats.

Hamilcar, revenu enfin près de Salammbô, dénoua les cordes d'Hannibal. L'enfant, exaspéré, le mordit à la main jusqu'au sang. Il le repoussa d'une caresse.

Pour le faire se tenir paisible, Salammbô voulut l'effrayer avec Lamia, une ogresse de Cyrène.

— " Où donc est-elle ! " demanda-t-il.

On lui conta que les brigands allaient venir pour le mettre en prison. Il reprit :
— " Qu'ils viennent, et je les tue ! "

Hamilcar lui dit alors l'épouvantable vérité. Mais il s'emporta contre son père, prétendant qu'il pouvait bien anéantir tout le peuple, puisqu'il était le maître de Carthage.

Enfin, épuisé d'efforts et de colère, il s'endormit, d'un sommeil farouche. Il parlait en rêvant, le dos appuyé contre un coussin d'écarlate ; sa tête retombait un peu en arrière, et son petit bras, écarté de son corps, restait tout droit dans une attitude impérative.

Quand la nuit fut noire, Hamilcar l'enleva doucement et descendit sans flambeau l'escalier des galères. En passant par la maison-de-commerce, il prit une couffe de raisins avec une buire d'eau pure ; l'enfant se réveilla devant la statue d'Alètes, dans le caveau des pierreries ; et il souriait, — comme l'autre — , sur le bras de son père, à la lueur des clartés qui l'environnaient.

Hamilcar était bien sûr qu'on ne pouvait lui prendre son fils. C'était un endroit impénétrable, communiquant avec le rivage par un souterrain que lui seul connaissait, et, en jetant les yeux à l'entour, il aspira une large bouffée d'air. Puis il le déposa sur un escabeau, près des boucliers d'or.

Personne, à présent, ne le voyait ; il n'avait plus rien à observer ; alors, il se soulagea. Comme une mère qui retrouve son premier-né perdu, il se jeta sur son fils ; il l'étreignait contre sa poitrine, il riait et pleurait à la fois, l'appelait des noms les plus doux, le couvrait de baisers ; le petit Hannibal, effrayé par cette tendresse terrible, se taisait maintenant.

Hamilcar s'en revint à pas muets, en tâtant les murs autour de lui ; et il arriva dans la grande salle, où la lumière de la lune entrait par une des fentes du dôme ; au milieu, l'esclave, repu, dormait, couché de tout son long sur les pavés de marbre. Il le regarda, et une sorte de pitié l'émut. Du bout de son cothurne, il lui avança un tapis sous la tête. Puis il releva les yeux et considéra Tanit, dont le mince croissant brillait dans le ciel, et il se sentit plus fort que les Baals et plein de mépris pour eux.

Les dispositions du sacrifice étaient déjà commencées.

On abattit dans le temple de Moloch un pan de mur pour en tirer le dieu d'airain, sans toucher aux cendres de l'autel. Puis, dès que le soleil se montra, les hiérodoules le poussèrent vers la place de Khamon.

Il allait à reculons, en glissant sur des cylindres ; ses épaules dépassaient la hauteur des murailles ; du plus loin qu'ils l'apercevaient, les Carthaginois s'enfuyaient bien vite, car on ne pouvait contempler impunément le Baal que dans l'exercice de sa colère.

Une senteur d'aromates se répandit par les rues. Tous les temples à la fois venaient de s'ouvrir ; il en sortit des tabernacles montés sur des chariots ou sur des litières que des pontifes portaient. De gros panaches de plumes se balançaient à leurs angles, et des rayons s'échappaient de leurs faîtes aigus, terminés par des boules de cristal, d'or, d'argent ou de cuivre.

C'étaient les Baalim chananéens, dédoublements du Baal suprême, qui retournaient vers leur principe, pour s'humilier devant sa force et s'anéantir devant sa splendeur.

Le pavillon de Melkarth, en pourpre fine, abritait une flamme de pétrole ; sur celui de Khamon, couleur d'hyacinthe, se dressait un phallus d'ivoire, bordé d'un cercle de pierreries ; entre les rideaux d'Eschmoûn, bleus comme l'éther, un python endormi faisait un cercle avec sa queue ; et les Dieux-Patæques, tenus dans les bras de leurs prêtres, semblaient de grands enfants emmaillotés, dont les talons frôlaient la terre.

Ensuite venaient toutes les formes inférieures de la divinité : Baal-Samin, dieu des espaces célestes ; Baal-Peor, dieu des monts sacrés ; Baal-Zeboub, dieu de la corruption et ceux des pays voisins et des races congénères ; l'Iarbal de la Libye, l'Adrammelech de la Chaldée, le Kijun des Syriens ; Derceto, à figure de vierge, rampait sur ses nageoires, et le cadavre de Tammouz était traîné au milieu d'un catafalque, entre des flambeaux et des chevelures. Pour asservir les rois du firmament au Soleil et empêcher que leurs influences particulières ne gênassent la sienne, on brandissait au bout de longues perches des étoiles en métal diversement coloriées ; et tous s'y trouvaient, depuis le noir Nebo, génie de Mercure, jusqu'au hideux Rahab, qui est la constellation du Crocodile. Les Abaddirs, pierres tombées de la lune, tournaient dans des frondes en fils d'argent ; de petits pains, reproduisant le sexe d'une femme, étaient portés sur des corbeilles par les prêtres de Cérès ; d'autres amenaient leurs fétiches, leurs amulettes ; des idoles oubliées reparurent ; et même on avait pris aux vaisseaux leurs symboles mystiques, comme si Carthage eût voulu se recueillir tout entière dans une pensée de mort et de désolation.

Devant chacun des tabernacles, un homme tenait en équilibre, sur sa tête, un large vase où fumait de l'encens. Des nuages çà et là planaient, et l'on distinguait, dans ces grosses vapeurs, les tentures, les pendeloques et les broderies des pavillons sacrés. Ils avançaient lentement, à cause de leur poids énorme. L'essieu des chars quelquefois s'accrochait dans les rues, alors les dévots profitaient de l'occasion pour toucher les Baalim avec leurs vêtements, qu'ils gardaient ensuite comme des choses saintes.

La statue d'airain continuait à s'avancer vers la place de Khamon. Les Riches, portant des sceptres à pomme d'émeraude, partirent du fond de Mégara ; les Anciens, coiffés de diadèmes, s'étaient assemblés dans Kinisdo, et les maîtres des finances, les gouverneurs des provinces, les marchands, les soldats, les matelots et la horde nombreuse employée aux funérailles, tous, avec les insignes de leur magistrature ou les instruments de leur métier, se dirigeaient vers les tabernacles qui descendaient de l'Acropole, entre les collèges des pontifes.

Par déférence pour Moloch, ils s'étaient ornés de leurs joyaux les plus splendides. Des diamants étincelaient sur les vêtements noirs, mais les anneaux trop larges tombaient des mains amaigries, — et rien n'était lugubre comme cette foule silencieuse où les pendants d'oreilles battaient contre des faces pâles, où les tiares d'or serraient des fronts crispés par un désespoir atroce.

Enfin le Baal arriva juste au milieu de la place. Ses pontifes, avec des treillages, disposèrent une enceinte pour écarter la multitude, et ils restèrent à ses pieds, autour de lui.

Les prêtres de Khamon, en robes de laine fauve, s'alignèrent devant leur temple, sous les colonnes du portique ; ceux d'Eschmoûn, en manteaux de lin, avec des colliers à tête de coucoupha et des tiares pointues, s'établirent sur les marches de l'Acropole ; les prêtres de Melkarth, en tuniques violettes, prirent pour eux le côté de l'Occident ; les prêtres des Abaddirs, serrés dans des bandes d'étoffes phrygiennes, se placèrent à l'Orient ; et l'on rangea sur le côté du Midi, avec les nécromanciens tout couverts de tatouages, les hurleurs en manteaux rapiécés, les desservants des Patæques et les Yidonim qui, pour connaître l'avenir, se mettaient dans la bouche un os de mort. Les prêtres de Cérès, habillés de robes bleues, s'étaient arrêtés, prudemment, dans la rue de Satheb, et psalmodiaient à voix basse un thesmophorion en dialecte mégarien.

De temps en temps, il arrivait des files d'hommes complètement nus, les bras écartés et tous se tenant par les épaules. Ils tiraient, des profondeurs de leur poitrine, une intonation rauque et caverneuse ; leurs prunelles, tendues vers le colosse, brillaient dans la poussière, et ils se balançaient le corps à intervalles égaux, tous à la fois, comme ébranlés par un seul mouvement. Ils étaient si furieux que, pour établir l'ordre, les hiérodoules, à coups de bâton, les firent se coucher sur le ventre, la face posée contre les treillages d'airain.

Ce fut alors que, du fond de la Place, un homme en robe blanche s'avança. Il perça lentement la foule et l'on reconnut un prêtre de Tanit, — le grand-prêtre Schahabarim. Des huées s'élevèrent, car la tyrannie du principe mâle prévalait ce jour-là dans toutes les consciences, et la Déesse était même tellement oubliée, que l'on n'avait pas remarqué l'absence de ses pontifes. Mais l'ébahissement redoubla quand on l'aperçut ouvrant dans les treillages une des portes destinées à ceux qui entreraient pour offrir les victimes. C'était, croyaient les prêtres de Moloch, un outrage qu'il venait faire à leur dieu ; avec de grands gestes, ils essayaient de le repousser. Nourris par les viandes des holocaustes, vêtus de pourpre comme des rois et portant des couronnes à triple étage, ils conspuaient ce pâle eunuque exténué de macérations, et des rires de colère secouaient sur leur poitrine leur barbe noire étalée en soleil.

Schahabarim, sans répondre, continuait à marcher ; et, traversant pas à pas toute l'enceinte, il arriva sous les jambes du colosse, puis il le toucha des deux côtés en écartant les deux bras, ce qui était une formule solennelle d'adoration. Depuis trop longtemps, la Rabbet le torturait ; et, par désespoir, ou peut-être à défaut d'un dieu satisfaisant complètement sa pensée, il se déterminait enfin pour celui-là.

La foule, épouvantée par cette apostasie, poussa un long murmure. On sentait se rompre le dernier lien qui attachait les âmes à une divinité clémente.

Mais Schahabarim, à cause de sa mutilation, ne pouvait participer au culte du Baal. Les hommes en manteaux rouges l'exclurent de l'enceinte ; puis, quand il fut dehors, il tourna autour de tous les collèges, successivement, et le prêtre, désormais sans dieu, disparut dans la foule. Elle s'écartait à son approche.

Cependant, un feu d'aloès, de cèdre et de laurier brûlait entre les jambes du colosse. Ses longues ailes enfonçaient leur pointe dans la flamme ; les onguents dont il était frotté coulaient comme de la sueur sur ses membres d'airain. Autour de la dalle ronde où il appuyait ses pieds, les enfants, enveloppés de voiles noirs, formaient un cercle immobile ; et ses bras démesurément longs abaissaient leurs paumes jusqu'à eux, comme pour saisir cette couronne et l'emporter dans le ciel.

Les Riches, les Anciens, les femmes, toute la multitude se tassait derrière les prêtres et sur les terrasses des maisons. Les grandes étoiles peintes ne tournaient plus : les tabernacles étaient posés par terre ; et les fumées des encensoirs montaient perpendiculairement, telles que des arbres gigantesques étalant au milieu de l'azur leurs rameaux bleuâtres.

Plusieurs s'évanouirent ; d'autres devenaient inertes et pétrifiés dans leur extase. Une angoisse infinie pesait sur les poitrines. Les dernières clameurs une à une s'éteignaient ; — et le peuple de Carthage haletait, absorbé dans le désir de sa terreur.

Enfin, le grand-prêtre de Moloch passa la main gauche sous les voiles des enfants, et il leur arracha du front une mèche de cheveux qu'il jeta sur les flammes. Alors, les hommes en manteaux rouges entonnèrent l'hymne sacré.

— " Hommage à toi, Soleil ! roi des deux zones, créateur qui s'engendre, Père et Mère, Père et Fils, Dieu et Déesse, Déesse et Dieu ! " Et leur voix se perdit dans l'explosion des instruments sonnant tous à la fois, pour étouffer les cris des victimes. Les scheminith à huit cordes, les kinnor, qui en avaient dix, et les nebal, qui en avaient douze, grinçaient, sifflaient, tonnaient. Des outres énormes hérissées de tuyaux faisaient un clapotement aigu ; les tambourins, battus à tour de bras, retentissaient de coups sourds et rapides ; et, malgré la fureur des clairons, les salsalim claquaient, comme des ailes de sauterelle.

Les hiérodoules, avec un long crochet, ouvrirent les sept compartiments étagés sur le corps du Baal. Dans le plus haut, on introduisit de la farine ; dans le second, deux tourterelles ; dans le troisième, un singe ; dans le quatrième, un bélier ; dans le cinquième, une brebis ; et, comme on n'avait pas de boeufs pour le sixième, on y jeta une peau tannée prise au sanctuaire. La septième case restait béante.

Avant de rien entreprendre, il était bon d'essayer les bras du Dieu. De minces chaînettes partant de ses doigts gagnaient ses épaules et redescendaient par-derrière, où des hommes, tirant dessus, faisaient monter, jusqu'à la hauteur de ses coudes, ses deux mains ouvertes qui, en se rapprochant, arrivaient contre son ventre ; elles remuèrent plusieurs fois de suite, à petits coups saccadés. Puis les instruments se turent. Le feu ronflait.

Les pontifes de Moloch se promenaient sur la grande dalle, en examinant la multitude.

Il fallait un sacrifice individuel, une oblation toute volontaire et qui était considérée comme entraînant les autres. Mais personne, jusqu'à présent, ne se montrait, et les sept allées conduisant des barrières au colosse étaient complètement vides. Alors, pour encourager le peuple, les prêtres tirèrent de leurs ceintures des poinçons et ils se balafraient le visage. On fit entrer dans l'enceinte les Dévoués, étendus sur terre, en dehors. On leur jeta un paquet d'horribles ferrailles et chacun choisit sa torture. Ils se passaient des broches entre les seins ; ils se fendaient les joues ; ils se mirent des couronnes d'épines sur la tête ; puis ils s'enlacèrent par les bras, et, entourant les enfants, ils formaient un autre grand cercle qui se contractait et s'élargissait. Ils arrivaient contre la balustrade, se rejetaient en arrière et recommençaient toujours, attirant à eux la foule par le vertige de ce mouvement tout plein de sang et de cris.

Peu à peu, des gens entrèrent jusqu'au fond des allées ; ils lançaient dans la flamme des perles, des vases d'or, des coupes, des flambeaux, toutes leurs richesses ; les offrandes, de plus en plus, devenaient splendides et multipliées. Enfin, un homme qui chancelait, un homme pâle et hideux de terreur, poussa un enfant ; puis on aperçut entre les mains du colosse une petite masse noire ; elle s'enfonça dans l'ouverture ténébreuse. Les prêtres se penchèrent au bord de la grande dalle, — et un chant nouveau éclata, célébrant les joies de la mort et les renaissances de l'éternité.

Ils montaient lentement, et, comme la fumée en s'envolant faisait de hauts tourbillons, ils semblaient de loin disparaître dans un nuage. Pas un ne bougeait. Ils étaient liés aux poignets et aux chevilles, et la sombre draperie les empêchait de rien voir et d'être reconnus.

Hamilcar, en manteau rouge comme les prêtres de Moloch, se tenait auprès du Baal, debout devant l'orteil de son pied droit. Quand on amena le quatorzième enfant, tout le monde put s'apercevoir qu'il eut un grand geste d'horreur. Mais bientôt, reprenant son attitude, il croisa ses bras et il regardait par terre. De l'autre côté de la statue, le Grand-Pontife restait immobile comme lui. Baissant sa tête chargée d'une mitre assyrienne, il observait sur sa poitrine la plaque d'or recouverte de pierres fatidiques, et où la flamme se mirant faisait des lueurs irisées. Il pâlissait, éperdu. Hamilcar inclinait son front ; et ils étaient tous les deux si près du bûcher que le bas de leurs manteaux, se soulevant, de temps à autre l'effleurait.

Les bras d'airain allaient plus vite. Ils ne s'arrêtaient plus. Chaque fois que l'on y posait un enfant, les prêtres de Moloch étendaient la main sur lui, pour le charger des crimes du peuple, en vociférant : " Ce ne sont pas des hommes, mais des boeufs ! " et la multitude à l'entour répétait : " Des boeufs ! des boeufs ! " Les dévots criaient : " Seigneur ! mange ! " et les prêtres de Proserpine, se conformant par la terreur au besoin de Carthage, marmottaient la formule éleusiaque : " Verse la pluie ! enfante ! "

Les victimes, à peine au bord de l'ouverture, disparaissaient comme une goutte d'eau sur une plaque rougie, et une fumée blanche montait dans la grande couleur écarlate.

Cependant, l'appétit du Dieu ne s'apaisait pas. Il en voulait toujours. Afin de lui en fournir davantage, on les empila sur ses mains avec une grosse chaîne par-dessus, qui les retenait. Des dévots au commencement avaient voulu les compter, pour voir si leur nombre correspondait aux jours de l'année solaire ; mais on en mit d'autres, et il était impossible de les distinguer dans le mouvement vertigineux des horribles bras. Cela dura longtemps, indéfiniment jusqu'au soir. Puis les parois intérieures prirent un éclat plus sombre. Alors, on aperçut des chairs qui brûlaient. Quelques-uns même croyaient reconnaître des cheveux, des membres, des corps entiers.

Le jour tomba ; des nuages s'amoncelèrent au-dessus du Baal. Le bûcher, sans flammes à présent, faisait une pyramide de charbons jusqu'à ses genoux ; complètement rouge comme un géant tout couvert de sang, il semblait, avec sa tête qui se renversait, chanceler sous le poids de son ivresse.

A mesure que les prêtres se hâtaient, la frénésie du peuple augmentait ; le nombre des victimes diminuant, les uns criaient de les épargner, les autres qu'il en fallait encore. On aurait dit que les murs chargés de monde s'écroulaient sous les hurlements d'épouvante et de volupté mystique. Puis des fidèles arrivèrent dans les allées, traînant leurs enfants qui s'accrochaient à eux ; et ils les battaient pour leur faire lâcher prise et eux ; et les remettre aux hommes rouges. Les joueurs d'instruments quelquefois s'arrêtaient, épuisés ; alors, on entendait les cris des mères et le grésillement de la graisse qui tombait sur les charbons. Les buveurs de jusquiame, marchant à quatre pattes, tournaient autour du colosse et rugissaient comme des tigres, les Yidonim vaticinaient, les Dévoués chantaient avec leurs lèvres fendues ; on avait rompu les grillages, tous voulaient leur part du sacrifice ; et les pères dont les enfants étaient morts autrefois jetaient dans le feu leurs effigies, leurs jouets, leurs ossements conservés.

Quelques-uns qui avaient des couteaux se précipitèrent sur les autres. On s'entr'égorgea. Avec des vans de bronze, les hiérodoules prirent au bord de la dalle les cendres tombées ; et ils les lançaient dans l'air, afin que le sacrifice s'éparpillât sur la ville et jusqu'à la région des étoiles.

Ce grand bruit et cette grande lumière avaient attiré les Barbares au pied des murs ; se cramponnant pour mieux voir sur les débris de l'hélépole, ils regardaient, béants d'horreur.

Chapitre 14 LE DEFILE DE LA HACHE

Les Carthaginois n'étaient pas rentrés dans leurs maisons que les nuages s'amoncelèrent plus épais ; ceux qui levaient la tête vers le colosse sentirent sur leur front de grosses gouttes, et la pluie tomba.

Elle tomba toute la nuit, abondamment, à flots ; le tonnerre grondait ; c'était la voix de Moloch ; il avait vaincu Tanit ; et, maintenant fécondée, elle ouvrait du haut du ciel son vaste sein. Parfois on l'apercevait dans une éclaircie lumineuse étendue sur des coussins de nuages ; puis les ténèbres se refermaient comme si, trop lasse encore, elle voulait se rendormir ; les Carthaginois, — croyant tous que l'eau est enfantée par la lune, — criaient pour faciliter son travail.

La pluie battait les terrasses et débordait par-dessus, formait des lacs dans les cours, des cascades sur les escaliers, des tourbillons au coin des rues. Elle se versait en lourdes masses tièdes et en rayons pressés ; des angles de tous les édifices de gros jets écumeux sautaient ; contre les murs il y avait comme des nappes blanchâtres vaguement suspendues, et les toits des temples, lavés, brillaient en noir à la lueur des éclairs. Par mille chemins des torrents descendaient de l'Acropole ; des maisons s'écroulaient tout à coup ; et des poutrelles, des plâtras, des meubles passaient dans les ruisseaux, qui couraient sur les dalles impétueusement.

On avait exposé des amphores, des buires, des toiles ; mais les torches s'éteignaient ; on prit des brandons au bûcher du Baal, et les Carthaginois, pour boire, se tenaient le cou renversé, la bouche ouverte. D'autres, au bord des flaques bourbeuses, y plongeaient leurs bras jusqu'à l'aisselle, et se gorgeaient d'eau si abondamment qu'ils la vomissaient comme des buffles. La fraîcheur peu à peu se répandait ; ils aspiraient l'air humide en faisant jouer leurs membres, et, dans le bonheur de cette ivresse, bientôt un immense espoir surgit. Toutes les misères furent oubliées. La patrie encore une fois renaissait.

Ils éprouvaient comme le besoin de rejeter sur d'autres l'excès de la fureur qu'ils n'avaient pu employer contre eux-mêmes. Un tel sacrifice ne devait pas être inutile ; — bien qu'ils n'eussent aucun remords, ils se trouvaient emportés par cette frénésie que donne la complicité des crimes irréparables.

Les Barbares avaient reçu l'orage dans leurs tentes mal closes ; et, tout transis encore le lendemain, ils pataugeaient au milieu de la boue, en cherchant leurs munitions et leurs armes, gâtées, perdues.

Hamilcar, de lui-même, alla trouver Hannon ; et, suivant ses pleins pouvoirs, il lui confia le commandement. Le vieux Suffète hésita quelques minutes entre sa rancune et son appétit de l'autorité. Il accepta cependant.

Ensuite Hamilcar fit sortir une galère armée d'une catapulte à chaque bout. Il la plaça dans le golfe en face du radeau ; puis il embarqua sur les vaisseaux disponibles ses troupes les plus robustes. Il s'enfuyait donc ; et, cinglant vers le nord, il disparut dans la brume.

Mais trois jours après (on allait recommencer l'attaque), des gens de la côte Lybique arrivèrent tumultueusement. Barca était entré chez eux. Il avait partout levé des vivres et il s'étendait dans le pays.

Alors les Barbares furent indignés comme s'il les trahissait. Ceux qui s'ennuyaient le plus du siège, les Gaulois surtout, n'hésitèrent pas à quitter les murs pour tâcher de le rejoindre. Spendius voulait reconstruire l'hélépole ; Mâtho s'était tracé une ligne idéale depuis sa tente jusqu'à Mégara, il s'était juré de la suivre ; et aucun de leurs hommes ne bougea. Mais les autres, commandés par Autharite, s'en allèrent, abandonnant la portion occidentale du rempart. L'incurie était si profonde que l'on ne songea même pas à les remplacer.

Narr'Havas les épiait de loin dans les montagnes. Il fit, pendant la nuit, passer tout son monde sur le côté extérieur de la Lagune, par le bord de la mer, et il entra dans Carthage.

Il s'y présenta comme un sauveur, avec six mille hommes, tous portant de la farine sous leurs manteaux, et quarante éléphants chargés de fourrages et de viandes sèches. On s'empressa vite autour d'eux ; on leur donna des noms. L'arrivée d'un pareil secours réjouissait encore moins les Carthaginois que le spectacle même de ces forts animaux consacrés au Baal ; c'était un gage de sa tendresse, une preuve qu'il allait enfin, pour les défendre, se mêler de la guerre.

Narr'Havas reçut les compliments des Anciens. Puis il monta vers le palais de Salammbô.

Il ne l'avait pas revue depuis cette fois où, dans la tente d'Hamilcar, entre les cinq armées, il avait senti sa petite main froide et douce attachée contre la sienne ; après les fiançailles, elle était partie pour Carthage. Son amour, détourné par d'autres ambitions, lui était revenu ; et maintenant, il comptait jouir de ses droits, l'épouser, la prendre.

Salammbô ne comprenait pas comment ce jeune homme pourrait jamais devenir son maître ! Bien qu'elle demandât, tous les jours, à Tanit la mort de Mâtho, son horreur pour le Libyen diminuait. Elle sentait confusément que la haine dont il l'avait persécutée était une chose presque religieuse, — et elle aurait voulu voir dans la personne de Narr'Havas comme un reflet de cette violence qui la tenait encore éblouie. Elle souhaitait le connaître davantage et cependant sa présence l'eût embarrassée. Elle lui fit répondre qu'elle ne devait pas le recevoir.

D'ailleurs, Hamilcar avait défendu à ses gens d'admettre chez elle le roi des Numides ; en reculant jusqu'à la fin de la guerre cette récompense, il espérait l'entretenir son dévouement ; et Narr'Havas, par crainte du Suffète, se retira.

Mais il se montra hautain envers les Cent. Il changea leurs dispositions. Il exigea des prérogatives pour ses hommes et les établit dans les postes importants ; aussi les Barbares ouvrirent tous de grands yeux en apercevant les Numides sur les tours.

La surprise des Carthaginois fut encore plus forte lorsque arrivèrent, sur une vieille trirème punique, quatre cents des leurs, faits prisonniers pendant la guerre de Sicile. En effet, Hamilcar avait secrètement renvoyé aux Quirites les équipages des vaisseaux latins pris avant la défection des villes tyriennes ; et Rome, par échange de bons procédés, lui rendait maintenant ses captifs. Elle dédaigna les ouvertures des Mercenaires dans la Sardaigne, et même elle ne voulut point reconnaître comme sujets les habitants d'Utique.

Hiéron, qui gouvernait à Syracuse, fut entraîné par cet exemple. Il lui fallait, pour conserver ses Etats, un équilibre entre les deux peuples ; il avait donc intérêt au salut des Chananéens, et il se déclara leur ami en leur envoyant douze cents boeufs avec cinquante-trois mille nebel de pur froment.

Une raison plus profonde faisait secourir Carthage : on sentait bien que si les Mercenaires triomphaient, depuis le soldat jusqu'au laveur d'écuelles, tout s'insurgerait, et qu'aucun gouvernement, aucune maison ne pourrait y résister.

Hamilcar, pendant ce temps-là, battait les campagnes orientales. Il refoula les Gaulois et tous les Barbares se trouvèrent eux-mêmes comme assiégés.

Alors il se mit à les harceler. Il arrivait, s'éloignait, et, renouvelant toujours cette manoeuvre, peu à peu, il les détacha de leurs campements. Spendius fut obligé de les suivre ; Mâtho, à la fin, céda comme lui.

Il ne dépassa point Tunis. Il s'enferma dans ses murs. Cette obstination était pleine de sagesse ; car bientôt on aperçut Narr'Havas qui sortait par la porte de Khamon avec ses éléphants et ses soldats ; Hamilcar le rappelait. Mais déjà les autres Barbares erraient dans les provinces à la poursuite du Suffète.

Il avait reçu à Clypea trois mille Gaulois. Il fit venir des chevaux de la Cyrénaïque, des armures du Brutium, et il recommença la guerre.

Jamais son génie ne fut aussi impérieux et fertile. Pendant cinq lunes il les traîna derrière lui. Il avait un but où il voulait les conduire.

Les Barbares avaient tenté d'abord de l'envelopper par de petits détachements ; il leur échappait toujours. Ils ne se quittèrent plus. Leur armée était de quarante mille hommes environ, et plusieurs fois ils eurent la jouissance de voir les Carthaginois reculer.

Ce qui les tourmentait, c'était les cavaliers de Narr'Havas ! Souvent, aux heures les plus lourdes, quand on avançait par les plaines en sommeillant sous le poids des armes, tout à coup une grosse ligne de poussière montait à l'horizon ; des galops accouraient, et du sein d'un nuage plein de prunelles flamboyantes, une pluie de dards se précipitait. Les Numides, couverts de manteaux blancs, poussaient de grands cris, levaient les bras en serrant des genoux leurs étalons cabrés, les faisaient tourner brusquement, puis disparaissaient. Ils avaient toujours à quelque distance, sur les dromadaires, des provisions de javelots, et ils revenaient plus terribles, hurlaient comme des loups, s'enfuyaient comme des vautours. Ceux des Barbares placés au bord des files tombaient un à un, — et l'on continuait ainsi jusqu'au soir, où l'on tâchait d'entrer dans les montagnes.

Bien qu'elles fussent périlleuses pour les éléphants, Hamilcar s'y engagea. Il suivit la longue chaîne qui s'étend depuis le promontoire Hermaeum jusqu'au sommet du Zagouan. C'était, croyaient-ils, un moyen de cacher l'insuffisance de ses troupes. Mais l'incertitude continuelle où il les maintenait finissait par les exaspérer plus qu'aucune défaite. Ils ne se décourageaient pas, et marchaient derrière lui.

Enfin, un soir, entre la Montagned'Argent et la Montagne-de-Plomb, au milieu de grosses roches, à l'entrée d'un défilé, ils surprirent un corps de vélites ; et l'armée entière était certainement devant ceux-là, car on entendait un bruit de pas avec des clairons ; aussitôt les Carthaginois s'enfuirent par la gorge. Elle dévalait dans une plaine ayant la forme d'un fer de hache et environnée de hautes falaises. Pour atteindre les vélites, les Barbares s'y élancèrent ; tout au fond, parmi des boeufs qui galopaient, d'autres Carthaginois couraient tumultueusement. On aperçut un homme en manteau rouge, c'était le Suffète, on se le criait ; un redoublement de fureur et de joie les emporta. Plusieurs, soit paresse ou prudence, étaient restés au seuil du défilé. Mais de la cavalerie, débouchant d'un bois, à coups de pique et de sabre, les rabattit sur les autres ; et bientôt tous les Barbares furent en bas, dans la plaine.

Puis, cette grande masse d'hommes ayant oscillé quelque temps, s'arrêta ; ils ne découvraient aucune issue.

Ceux qui étaient le plus près du défilé revinrent en arrière ; mais le passage avait entièrement disparu. On héla ceux de l'avant pour les faire continuer ; ils s'écrasaient contre la montagne, et de loin ils invectivèrent leurs compagnons qui ne savaient pas retrouver la route.

En effet, à peine les Barbares étaient-ils descendus, que des hommes, tapis derrière les roches, en les soulevant avec des poutres, les avaient renversées ; et comme la pente était rapide, ces blocs énormes, roulant pêle-mêle, avaient bouché l'étroit orifice, complètement.

A l'autre extrémité de la plaine s'étendait un long couloir, çà et là fendu par des crevasses, et qui conduisait à un ravin montant vers le plateau supérieur où se tenait l'armée punique. Dans ce couloir, contre la paroi de la falaise, on avait d'avance disposé des échelles ; et, protégés par les détours des crevasses, les vélites, avant d'être rejoints, purent les saisir et remonter. Plusieurs même s'engagèrent jusqu'au bas de la ravine ; on les tira avec des câbles, car le terrain en cet endroit était un sable mouvant et d'une telle inclinaison que, même sur les genoux, il eût été impossible de le gravir. Les Barbares, presque immédiatement, y arrivèrent. Mais une herse, haute de quarante coudées, et faite à la mesure exacte de l'intervalle, s'abaissa devant eux tout à coup, comme un rempart qui serait tombé du ciel.

Donc les combinaisons du Suffète avaient réussi. Aucun des Mercenaires ne connaissait la montagne, et, marchant à la tête des colonnes, ils avaient entraîné les autres. Les roches, un peu étroites par la base, s'étaient facilement abattues, et, tandis que tous couraient, son armée, dans l'horizon, avait crié comme en détresse. Hamilcar, il est vrai, pouvait perdre ses vélites, la moitié seulement y resta. Il en eût sacrifié vingt fois davantage pour le succès d'une pareille entreprise.

Jusqu'au matin, les Barbares se poussèrent en files compactes d'un bout à l'autre de la plaine. Ils tâtaient la montagne avec leurs mains, cherchant à découvrir un passage.

Enfin le jour se leva ; ils aperçurent partout autour d'eux une grande muraille blanche, taillée à pic. Et pas un moyen de salut, pas un espoir ! Les deux sorties naturelles de cette impasse étaient fermées par la herse et par l'amoncellement des roches.

Alors, tous se regardèrent sans parler. Ils s'affaissèrent sur eux-mêmes, en se sentant un froid de glace dans les reins, et aux paupières une pesanteur accablante.

Ils se relevèrent, et bondirent contre les roches. Mais les plus basses, pressées par le poids des autres, étaient inébranlables. Ils tâchèrent de s'y cramponner pour atteindre au sommet ; la forme ventrue de ces grosses masses repoussait toute prise. Ils voulurent fendre le terrain des deux côtés de la gorge : leurs instruments se brisèrent. Avec les mâts des tentes, ils firent un grand feu ; le feu ne pouvait pas brûler la montagne.

Ils revinrent sur la herse ; elle était garnie de longs clous, épais comme des pieux, aigus comme les dards d'un porc-épic et plus serrés que les crins d'une brosse. Mais tant de rage les animait qu'ils se précipitèrent contre elle. Les premiers y entrèrent jusqu'à l'échine, les seconds refluèrent par-dessus ; et tout retomba, en laissant à ces horribles branches des lambeaux humains et des chevelures ensanglantées.

Quand le découragement se fut un peu calmé, on examina ce qu'il y avait de vivres. Les Mercenaires, dont les bagages étaient perdus, en possédaient à peine pour deux jours ; et tous les autres s'en trouvaient dénués, — car ils attendaient un convoi promis par les villages du Sud.

Cependant des taureaux vagabondaient, ceux que les Carthaginois avaient lâchés dans la gorge afin d'attirer les Barbares. Ils les tuèrent à coups de lance ; on les mangea, et, les estomacs étant remplis, les pensées furent moins lugubres.

Le lendemain, ils égorgèrent tous les mulets, une quarantaine environ, puis on racla leurs peaux, on fit bouillir leurs entrailles, on pila les ossements, et ils ne désespéraient pas encore ; l'armée de Tunis, prévenue sans doute, allait venir.

Mais le soir du cinquième jour, la faim redoubla ; ils rongèrent les baudriers des glaives et les petites éponges bordant le fond des casques.

Ces quarante mille hommes étaient tassés dans l'espèce d'hippodrome que formait autour d'eux la montagne. Quelques-uns restaient devant la herse ou à la base des roches ; les autres couvraient la plaine confusément. Les forts s'évitaient, et les timides recherchaient les braves, qui ne pouvaient pourtant les sauver.

On avait, à cause de leur infection, enterré vivement les cadavres des vélites ; la place des fosses ne s'apercevait plus.

Tous les Barbares languissaient, couchés par terre. Entre leurs lignes, çà et là, un vétéran passait ; et ils hurlaient des malédictions contre les Carthaginois, contre Hamilcar — et contre Mâtho, bien qu'il fût innocent de leur désastre ; mais il leur semblait que leurs douleurs eussent été moindres s'il les avait partagées. Puis ils gémissaient ; quelques-uns pleuraient tout bas, comme de petits enfants.

Ils venaient vers les capitaines et ils les suppliaient de leur accorder quelque chose qui apaisât leurs souffrances. Les autres ne répondaient rien, — ou, saisis de fureur, ils ramassaient une pierre et la leur jetaient au visage.

Plusieurs, en effet, conservaient soigneusement, dans un trou en terre, une réserve de nourriture, quelques poignées de dattes, un peu de farine ; et on mangeait cela pendant la nuit, en baissant la tête sous son manteau. Ceux qui avaient des épées les gardaient nues dans leurs mains ; les plus défiants se tenaient debout, adossés contre la montagne.

Ils accusaient leurs chefs et les menaçaient. Autharite ne craignait pas de se montrer. Avec cette obstination de Barbare que rien ne rebute, vingt fois par jour il s'avançait jusqu'au fond, vers les roches, espérant chaque fois les trouver peut-être déplacées ; et balançant ses lourdes épaules couvertes de fourrures, il rappelait à ses compagnons un ours qui sort de sa caverne, au printemps, pour voir si les neiges sont fondues. Spendius, entouré de Grecs, se cachait dans une des crevasses ; comme il avait peur, il fit répandre le bruit de sa mort.

Ils étaient maintenant d'une maigreur hideuse ; leur peau se plaquait de marbrures bleuâtres. Le soir du neuvième jour, trois Ibériens moururent.

Leurs compagnons, effrayés, quittèrent la place. On les dépouilla ; et ces corps nus et blancs restèrent sur le sable, au soleil.

Alors des Garamantes se mirent lentement à rôder tout autour. C'étaient des hommes accoutumés à l'existence des solitudes et qui ne respectaient aucun dieu. Enfin le plus vieux de la troupe fit un signe, et se baissant vers les cadavres, avec leurs couteaux, ils en prirent des lanières ; puis, accroupis sur les talons, ils mangeaient. Les autres regardaient de loin ; on poussa des cris d'horreur ; — beaucoup cependant, au fond de l'âme, jalousaient leur courage.

Au milieu de la nuit, quelques-uns de ceux-là se rapprochèrent, et, dissimulant leur désir, ils en demandaient une mince bouchée, seulement pour essayer, disaient-ils. De plus hardis survinrent ; leur le nombre augmenta ; ce fut bientôt une foule. Mais presque tous, en sentant cette chair froide au bord des lèvres, laissaient leur main retomber ; d'autres, au contraire, la dévoraient avec délices.

Afin d'être entraînés par l'exemple, ils s'excitaient mutuellement. Tel qui avait d'abord refusé allait voir les Garamantes et ne revenait plus. Ils faisaient cuire les morceaux sur des charbons à la pointe d'une épée ; on les salait avec de la poussière et l'on se disputait les meilleurs. Quand il ne resta plus rien des trois cadavres, les yeux se portèrent sur toute la plaine pour en trouver d'autres.

Mais ne possédait-on pas des Carthaginois, vingt captifs faits dans la dernière rencontre et que personne, jusqu'à présent, n'avait remarqués ? Ils disparurent ; c'était une vengeance, d'ailleurs. — Puis, comme il fallait vivre, comme le goût de cette nourriture s'était développé, comme on se mourait, on égorgea les porteurs d'eau, les palefreniers, tous les valets des Mercenaires. Chaque jour on en tuait. Quelques-uns mangeaient beaucoup, reprenaient des forces et n'étaient plus tristes.

Bientôt cette ressource vint à manquer. Alors l'envie se tourna sur les blessés et les malades. Puisqu'ils ne pouvaient se guérir, autant les délivrer de leurs tortures ; et, sitôt qu'un homme chancelait, tous s'écriaient qu'il était maintenant perdu et devait servir aux autres. Pour accélérer leur mort, on employait des ruses ; on leur volait le dernier reste de leur immonde portion ; comme par mégarde, on marchait sur eux ; les agonisants, pour faire croire à leur vigueur, tâchaient d'étendre les bras, de se relever, de rire. Des gens évanouis se réveillaient au contact d'une lame ébréchée qui leur sciait un membre ; — et ils tuaient encore par férocité, sans besoin, pour assouvir leur fureur.

Un brouillard lourd et tiède, comme il en arrive dans ces régions à la fin de l'hiver, le quatorzième jour, s'abattit sur l'armée. Ce changement de la température amena des morts nombreuses, et la corruption se développait effroyablement vite dans la chaude humidité retenue par les parois de la montagne. La bruine qui tombait sur les cadavres, en les amollissant, fit bientôt de toute la plaine une large pourriture. Des vapeurs blanchâtres flottaient au-dessus ; elles piquaient les narines, pénétraient la peau, troublaient les yeux ; et les Barbares croyaient entrevoir les souffles exhalés, les âmes de leurs compagnons. Un dégoût immense les accabla. Ils n'en voulaient plus, ils aimaient mieux mourir.

Deux jours après, le temps redevint pur et la faim les reprit. Il leur semblait parfois qu'on leur arrachait l'estomac avec des tenailles. Alors, ils se roulaient saisis de convulsions, jetaient dans leur bouche des poignées de terre, se mordaient les bras et éclataient en rires frénétiques.

La soif les tourmentait encore plus, car ils n'avaient pas une goutte d'eau, les outres, depuis le neuvième jour, étant complètement taries. Pour tromper le besoin, ils s'appliquaient sur la langue les écailles métalliques des ceinturons, les pommeaux en ivoire, les fers des glaives. D'anciens conducteurs de caravane se comprimaient le ventre avec des cordes. D'autres suçaient un caillou. On buvait de l'urine refroidie dans les casques d'airain.

Et ils attendaient toujours l'armée de Tunis ! La longueur du temps qu'elle mettait à venir, d'après leurs conjectures, certifiait son arrivée prochaine. D'ailleurs Mâtho, qui était un brave, ne les abandonnerait pas. " Ce sera pour demain ! " se disaient-ils ; et demain se passait.

Au commencement, ils avaient fait des prières, des voeux, pratiqué toutes sortes d'incantations. A présent ils ne sentaient, pour leurs Divinités, que de la haine, et, par vengeance, tâchaient de ne plus y croire.

Les hommes de caractère violent périrent les premiers ; les Africains résistèrent mieux que les Gaulois. Zarxas, entre les Baléares, restait étendu tout de son long, les cheveux par-dessus le bras, inerte. Spendius trouva une plante à larges feuilles emplies d'un suc abondant, et, l'ayant déclarée vénéneuse afin d'en écarter les autres, il s'en nourrissait.

On était trop faible pour abattre, d'un coup de pierre, les corbeaux qui volaient. Quelquefois, lorsqu'un gypaète, posé sur un cadavre, le déchiquetait depuis longtemps déjà, un homme se mettait à ramper vers lui avec un javelot entre les dents. Il s'appuyait d'une main, et, après avoir bien visé, il lançait son arme. La bête aux plumes blanches, troublée par le bruit, s'interrompait, regardait tout à l'entour d'un air tranquille, comme un cormoran sur un écueil, puis elle replongeait son hideux bec jaune ; et l'homme désespéré retombait à plat ventre dans la poussière. Quelques-uns parvenaient à découvrir des caméléons, des serpents. Mais ce qui les faisait vivre, c'était l'amour de la vie. Ils tendaient leur âme sur cette idée, exclusivement, — et se rattachaient à l'existence par un effort de volonté qui la prolongeait.

Les plus stoïques se tenaient les uns près des autres, assis en rond, au milieu de la plaine, çà et là, entre les morts ; et, enveloppés dans leurs manteaux, ils s'abandonnaient silencieusement à leur tristesse.

Ceux qui étaient nés dans les villes se rappelaient des rues toutes retentissantes, des tavernes, des théâtres, des bains, et les boutiques des barbiers où l'on écoute des histoires. D'autres revoyaient des campagnes au coucher du soleil, quand les blés jaunes ondulent et que les grands boeufs remontent les collines avec le soc des charrues sur le cou. Les voyageurs rêvaient à des citernes, les chasseurs à leurs forêts, les vétérans à des batailles, — et, dans la somnolence qui les engourdissait, leurs pensées se heurtaient avec l'emportement et la netteté des songes. Des hallucinations les envahissaient tout à coup ; ils cherchaient dans la montagne une porte pour s'enfuir et voulaient passer au travers. D'autres, croyant naviguer par une tempête, commandaient la manœuvre d'un navire, ou bien ils se reculaient épouvantés, apercevant, dans les nuages, des bataillons puniques. Il y en avait qui se figuraient être à un festin, et ils chantaient.

Beaucoup, par une étrange manie, répétaient le même mot ou faisaient continuellement le même geste. Puis, quand ils venaient à relever la tête et à se regarder, des sanglots les étouffaient en découvrant l'horrible ravage de leurs figures. Quelques-uns ne souffraient plus, et, pour employer les heures, ils se racontaient les périls auxquels ils avaient échappé.

Leur mort à tous était certaine, imminente. Combien de fois n'avaient-ils pas tenté de s'ouvrir un passage ! Quant à implorer les conditions du vainqueur, par quel moyen ? ils ne savaient même pas où se trouvait Hamilcar.

Le vent soufflait du côté de la ravine. Il faisait couler le sable par-dessus la herse en cascades, perpétuellement ; et les manteaux et les chevelures des Barbares s'en recouvraient comme si la terre, montant sur eux, avait voulu les ensevelir. Rien ne bougeait ; l'éternelle montagne, chaque matin, leur semblait encore plus haute.

Quelquefois des bandes d'oiseaux passaient à tire d'aile, en plein ciel bleu, dans la liberté de l'air. Ils fermaient les yeux pour ne pas les voir.

On sentait d'abord un bourdonnement dans les oreilles, les ongles noircissaient, le froid gagnait la poitrine, on se couchait sur le côté et l'on s'éteignait sans un cri.

Le dix-neuvième jour, deux mille Asiatiques étaient morts, quinze cents de l'Archipel, huit mille de la Libye, les plus jeunes des Mercenaires et des tribus complètes ; — en tout vingt mille soldats, la moitié de l'armée.

Autharite, qui n'avait plus que cinquante Gaulois, allait se faire tuer pour en finir, quand, au sommet de la montagne, en face de lui, il crut voir un homme.

Cet homme, à cause de l'élévation, ne paraissait pas plus grand qu'un nain. Cependant Autharite reconnut à son bras gauche un bouclier en forme de trèfle. Il s'écria : " Un Carthaginois ! " Et, dans la plaine, devant la herse et sous les roches, immédiatement tous se levèrent. Le soldat se promenait au bord du précipice ; d'en bas, les Barbares le regardaient.

Spendius ramassa une tête de boeuf ; puis avec deux ceintures ayant composé un diadème, il le planta sur les cornes au bout d'une perche, en témoignage d'intentions pacifiques. Le Carthaginois disparut. Ils attendirent.

Enfin, le soir, comme une pierre se détachant de la falaise, tout à coup il tomba d'en haut un baudrier. Fait de cuir rouge et couvert de broderie avec trois étoiles de diamant, il portait empreint à son milieu la marque du Grand-Conseil : un cheval sous un palmier. C'était la réponse d'Hamilcar, le sauf-conduit qu'il envoyait.

Ils n'avaient rien à craindre ; tout changement de fortune amenait la fin de leurs maux. Une joie démesurée les agita, ils s'embrassaient, pleuraient. Spendius, Autharite et Zarxas, quatre Italiotes, un Nègre et deux Spartiates s'offrirent comme parlementaires. On les accepta tout de suite . Ils ne savaient cependant par quel moyen s'en aller.

Mais un craquement retentit dans la direction des roches ; et la plus élevée, ayant oscillé sur elle-même, rebondit jusqu'en bas. En effet, si du côté des Barbares elles étaient inébranlables, car il aurait fallu leur faire remonter un plan oblique (et, d'ailleurs, elles se trouvaient tassées par l'étroitesse de la gorge), de l'autre, au contraire, il suffisait de les heurter fortement pour qu'elles descendissent. Les Carthaginois les poussèrent, et, au jour levant, elles s'avançaient dans la plaine comme les gradins d'un immense escalier en ruine.

Les Barbares ne pouvaient encore les gravir. On leur tendit des échelles ; tous s'y élancèrent. La décharge d'une catapulte les refoula ; les Dix seulement furent emmenés.

Ils marchaient entre les Clinabares, et appuyaient leur main sur la croupe des chevaux pour se soutenir. Maintenant que leur première joie était passée, ils commençaient à concevoir des inquiétudes. Les exigences d'Hamilcar seraient cruelles. Mais Spendius les rassurait.

— " C'est moi qui parlerai ! " Et il se vantait de connaître les choses bonnes à dire pour le salut de l'armée.

Derrière tous les buissons, ils rencontraient des sentinelles en embuscade. Elles se prosternaient devant le baudrier que Spendius avait mis sur son épaule.

Quand ils arrivèrent dans le camp punique, la foule s'empressa autour d'eux, et ils entendaient comme des chuchotements, des rires. La porte d'une tente s'ouvrit.

Hamilcar était tout au fond, assis sur un escabeau, près d'une table basse où brillait un glaive nu. Des capitaines, debout, l'entouraient.

En apercevant ces hommes, il fit un geste en arrière, puis il se pencha pour les examiner.

Ils avaient les pupilles extraordinairement dilatées avec un grand cercle noir autour des yeux, qui se prolongeait jusqu'au bas de leurs oreilles ; leurs nez bleuâtres saillissaient entre leurs joues creuses, fendillées par des rides profondes ; la peau de leur corps, trop large pour leurs muscles, disparaissait sous une poussière de couleur ardoise ; leurs lèvres se collaient contre leurs dents jaunes ; ils exhalaient une infecte odeur ; on aurait dit des tombeaux entrouverts, des sépulcres vivants.

Au milieu de la tente, il y avait, sur une natte où les capitaines allaient s'asseoir, un plat de courges qui fumait. Les Barbares y attachaient leurs yeux en grelottant de tous les membres, et des larmes venaient à leurs paupières. Ils se contenaient, cependant.

Hamilcar se détourna pour parler à quelqu'un. Alors, ils se ruèrent dessus, tous, à plat ventre. Leurs visages trempaient dans la graisse, et le bruit de leur déglutition se mêlait aux sanglots de joie qu'ils poussaient. Plutôt par étonnement que par pitié, sans doute, on les laissa finir la gamelle. Puis, quand ils se furent relevés, Hamilcar commanda, d'un signe, à l'homme qui portait le baudrier de parler. Spendius avait peur ; il balbutiait.

Hamilcar, en l'écoutant, faisait tourner autour de son doigt une grosse bague d'or, celle qui avait empreint sur le baudrier le sceau de Carthage. Il la laissa tomber par terre : Spendius, tout de suite, la ramassa ; devant son maître, ses habitudes d'esclave le reprenaient. Les autres frémirent, indignés de cette bassesse.

Mais le Grec haussa la voix, et, rapportant les crimes d'Hannon, qu'il savait être l'ennemi de Barca, tâchant de l'apitoyer avec le détail de leurs misères et les souvenirs de leur dévouement, il parla pendant longtemps, d'une façon rapide, insidieuse, violente même ; à la fin, il s'oubliait, entraîné par la chaleur de son esprit.

Hamilcar répliqua qu'il acceptait leurs excuses. Donc la paix allait se conclure, et maintenant elle serait définitive ! Mais il exigeait qu'on lui livrât dix des Mercenaires, à son choix, sans armes et sans tunique.

Ils ne s'attendaient pas à cette clémence ; Spendius s'écria :

— " Oh ! vingt, si tu veux Maître ! "

— " Non ! dix me suffisent ", répondit doucement Hamilcar.

On les fit sortir de la tente afin qu'ils pussent délibérer. Dès qu'ils furent seuls, Autharite réclama pour les compagnons sacrifiés, et Zarxas dit à Spendius :

— " Pourquoi ne l'as-tu pas tué ? son glaive était là, près de toi ! "

— " Lui ! ", fit Spendius ; et il répéta plusieurs fois :

" Lui ! lui ! " comme si la chose eût été impossible et Hamilcar quelqu'un d'immortel.

Tant de lassitude les accablait qu'ils s'étendirent par terre, sur le dos, ne sachant à quoi se résoudre.

Spendius les engageait à céder. Enfin, ils y consentirent, et ils rentrèrent.

Alors le Suffète mit sa main dans les mains des dix Barbares tour à tour, en serrant leurs pouces ; puis il la frotta sur son vêtement, car leur peau visqueuse causait au toucher une impression rude et molle, un fourmillement gras qui horripilait. Ensuite, il leur dit :

— " Vous êtes bien tous les chefs des Barbares et vous avez juré pour eux ? "

— " Oui ! " répondirent-ils.

— " Sans contrainte, du fond de l'âme, avec l'intention d'accomplir vos promesses ? "

Ils assurèrent qu'ils s'en retournaient vers les autres pour les exécuter.

— " Eh bien ! " reprit le Suffète, " d'après la convention passée entre moi, Barca, et les ambassadeurs des Mercenaires, c'est vous que je choisis, et je vous garde ! "

Spendius tomba évanoui sur la natte. Les Barbares, comme l'abandonnant, se resserrèrent les uns près des autres : et il n'y eut pas un mot, pas une plainte.

Leurs compagnons, qui les attendaient, ne les voyant pas revenir, se crurent trahis. Sans doute, les parlementaires s'étaient donnés au Suffète.

Ils attendirent encore deux jours : puis, le matin du troisième, leur résolution fut prise. Avec des cordes, des pics et des flèches disposées comme des échelons entre des lambeaux de toile, ils parvinrent à escalader les roches ; et, laissant derrière eux les plus faibles, trois mille environ, ils se mirent en marche pour rejoindre l'armée de Tunis.

Au haut de la gorge s'étalait une prairie clairsemée d'arbustes ; les Barbares en dévorèrent les bourgeons. Ensuite, ils trouvèrent un champ de fèves ; et tout disparut comme si un nuage de sauterelles eût passé par là. Trois heures après, ils arrivèrent sur un second plateau, que bordait une ceinture de collines vertes.

Entre les ondulations de ces monticules, des gerbes couleur d'argent brillaient, espacées les unes des autres ; les Barbares, éblouis par le soleil, apercevaient confusément, en dessous, de grosses masses noires qui les supportaient. Elles se levèrent, comme si elles se fussent épanouies. C'étaient des lances dans des tours, sur des éléphants effroyablement armés.

Outre l'épieu de leur poitrail, les poinçons de leurs défenses, les plaques d'airain qui couvraient leurs flancs, et les poignards tenus à leurs grenouillères, — ils avaient au bout de leurs trompes un bracelet de cuir où était passé le manche d'un large coutelas ; partis tous à la fois du fond de la plaine, ils s'avançaient de chaque côté, parallèlement.

Une terreur sans nom glaça les Barbares. Ils ne tentèrent même pas de s'enfuir. Déjà, ils se trouvaient enveloppés.

Les éléphants entrèrent dans cette masse d'hommes ; et les éperons de leur poitrail la divisaient, les lances de leurs défenses la retournaient comme des socs de charrues ; ils coupaient, taillaient, hachaient avec les faux de leurs trompes ; les tours, pleines de phalariques, semblaient des volcans en marche ; on ne distinguait qu'un large amas où les chairs humaines faisaient des taches blanches, les morceaux d'airain des plaques grises, le sang des fusées rouges ; les horribles animaux, passant au milieu de tout cela, creusaient des sillons noirs. Le plus furieux était conduit par un Numide couronné d'un diadème de plumes. Il lançait des javelots avec une vitesse effrayante, tout en jetant par intervalles un long sifflement aigu ; — les grosses bêtes, dociles comme des chiens, pendant le carnage tournaient un oeil de son côté.

Leur cercle peu à peu se rétrécissait ; les Barbares, affaiblis, ne résistaient pas ; bientôt, les éléphants furent au centre de la plaine. L'espace leur manquait ; ils se tassaient, à demi cabrés, les ivoires s'entrechoquaient. Tout à coup, Narr'Havas les apaisa, et, tournant la croupe, ils s'en revinrent au trot vers les collines.

Cependant, deux syntagmes s'étaient réfugiés à droite dans un pli du terrain, avaient jeté leurs armes, et, tous à genoux vers les tentes puniques, ils levaient leurs bras pour implorer grâce.

On leur attacha les jambes et les mains ; puis, quand ils furent étendus par terre les uns près des autres, on ramena les éléphants.

Les poitrines craquaient comme des coffres que l'on brise ; chacun de leurs pas en écrasait deux ; leurs gros pieds enfonçaient dans les corps avec un mouvement des hanches qui les faisait paraître boiter. Ils continuaient, et allèrent jusqu'au bout.

Le niveau de la plaine redevint immobile. La nuit tomba. Hamilcar se délectait devant le spectacle de sa vengeance ; mais soudain il tressaillit.

Il voyait, et tous voyaient à six cents pas de là, sur la gauche, au sommet d'un mamelon, des Barbares encore ! En effet, quatre cents des plus solides, des Mercenaires Etrusques, Libyens et Spartiates, dès le commencement avaient gagné les hauteurs, et jusque-là s'y étaient tenus incertains. Après ce massacre de leurs compagnons, ils résolurent de traverser les Carthaginois ; déjà ils descendaient en colonnes serrées, d'une façon merveilleuse et formidable.

Un héraut leur fut immédiatement expédié. Le Suffète avait besoin de soldats ; il les recevait sans condition, tant il admirait leur bravoure. Ils pouvaient même, ajouta l'homme de Carthage, se rapprocher quelque peu, dans un endroit qu'il leur désigna, et où ils trouveraient des vivres.

Les Barbares y coururent et passèrent la nuit à manger. Alors, les Carthaginois éclatèrent en rumeurs contre la partialité du Suffète pour les Mercenaires.

Céda-t-il à ces expansions d'une haine insatiable, ou bien était-ce un raffinement de perfidie ? Le lendemain, il vint lui-même sans épée, tête nue, dans une escorte de Clinabares, et il leur déclara qu'ayant trop de monde à nourrir, son intention n'était pas de les conserver. Cependant, comme il lui fallait des hommes et qu'il ne savait par quel moyen choisir les bons, ils allaient se combattre à outrance ; puis il admettrait les vainqueurs dans sa garde particulière. Cette mort-là en valait bien une autre ; — et alors, écartant ses soldats (car les étendards puniques cachaient aux Mercenaires l'horizon), il leur montra les cent quatre-vingt-douze éléphants de Narr'Havas formant une seule ligne droite et dont les trompes brandissaient de larges fers, pareils à des bras de géant qui auraient tenu des haches sur leurs têtes.

Les Barbares s'entre-regardèrent silencieusement. Ce n'était pas la mort qui les faisait pâlir, mais l'horrible contrainte où ils se trouvaient réduits.

La communauté de leur existence avait établi entre ces hommes des amitiés profondes. Le camp, pour la plupart, remplaçait la patrie ; vivant sans famille, ils reportaient sur un compagnon leur besoin de tendresse, et l'on s'endormait côte à côte, sous le même manteau, à la clarté des étoiles. Puis, dans ce vagabondage perpétuel à travers toutes sortes de pays, de meurtres et d'aventures, il s'était formé d'étranges amours, — unions obscènes aussi sérieuses que des mariages, où le plus fort défendait le plus jeune au milieu des batailles, l'aidait à franchir les précipices, épongeait sur son front la sueur des fièvres, volait pour lui de la nourriture ; et l'autre, enfant ramassé au bord d'une route, puis devenu Mercenaire, payait ce dévouement par mille soins délicats et des complaisances d'épouse.

Ils échangèrent leurs colliers et leurs pendants d'oreilles, cadeaux qu'ils s'étaient faits autrefois, après un grand péril, dans des heures d'ivresse. Tous demandaient à mourir, et aucun ne voulait frapper. On en voyait un jeune, çà et là, qui disait à un autre dont la barbe était grise : " Non ! non, tu es le plus robuste ! Tu nous vengeras, tue-moi ! " et l'homme répondait : " J'ai moins d'années à vivre ! Frappe au coeur, et n'y pense plus ! Les frères se contemplaient, les deux mains serrées, et l'amant faisait à son amant des adieux éternels, debout, en pleurant sur son épaule.

Ils retirèrent leurs cuirasses pour que la pointe des glaives s'enfonçât plus vite. Alors, parurent les marques des grands coups qu'ils avaient reçus pour Carthage ; on aurait dit des inscriptions sur des colonnes.

Ils se mirent sur quatre rangs égaux à la façon des gladiateurs, et ils commencèrent par des engagements timides. Quelques-uns s'étaient bandé les yeux, et leurs glaives ramaient dans l'air, doucement, comme des bâtons d'aveugle. Les Carthaginois poussèrent des huées en leur criant qu'ils étaient des lâches. Les Barbares s'animèrent, et bientôt le combat fut général, précipité, terrible.

Parfois deux hommes s'arrêtaient tout sanglants, tombaient dans les bras l'un de l'autre et mouraient en se donnant des baisers. Aucun ne reculait. Ils se ruaient contre les lames tendues. Leur délire était si furieux que les Carthaginois, de loin, avaient peur.

Enfin, ils s'arrêtèrent. Leurs poitrines faisaient un grand bruit rauque, et l'on apercevait leurs prunelles, entre leurs longs cheveux qui pendaient comme s'ils fussent sortis d'un bain de pourpre. Plusieurs tournaient sur eux-mêmes, rapidement, tels que des panthères blessées au front. D'autres se tenaient immobiles en considérant un cadavre à leurs pieds ; puis, tout à coup, ils s'arrachaient le visage avec les ongles, prenaient leur glaive à deux mains et se l'enfonçaient dans le ventre.

Il en restait soixante encore. Ils demandèrent à boire. On leur cria de jeter leurs glaives ; et, quand ils les eurent jetés, on leur apporta de l'eau.

Pendant qu'ils buvaient, la figure enfoncée dans les vases, soixante Carthaginois, sautant sur eux, les tuèrent avec des stylets, dans le dos.

Hamilcar avait fait cela pour complaire aux instincts de son armée, et, par cette trahison, l'attacher à sa personne.

Donc, la guerre était finie ; du moins, il le croyait ; Mâtho ne résisterait pas ; dans son impatience, le Suffète ordonna tout de suite le départ.

Ses éclaireurs vinrent lui dire que l'on avait distingué un convoi qui s'en allait vers la Montagne-de-Plomb. Hamilcar ne s'en soucia. Une fois les Mercenaires anéantis, les Nomades ne l'embarrasseraient plus. L'important était de prendre Tunis. A grandes journées, il marcha dessus.

Il avait envoyé Narr'Havas à Carthage porter la nouvelle de la victoire ; et le roi des Numides, fier de ses succès, se présenta chez Salammbô.

Elle le reçut dans ses jardins, sous un large sycomore, entre des oreillers de cuir jaune, avec Taanach auprès d'elle. Son visage était couvert d'une écharpe blanche, qui, lui passant sur la bouche et sur le front, ne laissait voir que les yeux ; mais ses lèvres brillaient dans la transparence du tissu comme les pierreries de ses doigts, — car Salammbô tenait ses deux mains enveloppées, et, tout le temps qu'ils parlèrent, elle ne fit pas un geste.

Narr'Havas lui annonça la défaite des Barbares. Elle le remercia par une bénédiction des services qu'il avait rendus à son père. Alors il se mit à raconter toute la campagne.

Les colombes, sur les palmiers autour d'eux, roucoulaient doucement, et d'autres oiseaux voletaient parmi les herbes : des galéoles à collier, des cailles de Tartessus et des pintades puniques. Le jardin, depuis longtemps inculte, avait multiplié ses verdures ; des coloquintes montaient dans le branchage des canéficiers, des ascléplas parsemaient les champs de roses, toutes sortes de végétations formaient des entrelacements, des berceaux ; et des rayons de soleil, qui descendaient obliquement, marquaient çà et là, comme dans les bois, l'ombre d'une feuille sur la terre. Les bêtes domestiques, redevenues sauvages, s'enfuyaient au moindre bruit. Parfois on apercevait une gazelle traînant à ses petits sabots noirs des plumes de paon, dispersées. Les clameurs de la ville, au loin, se perdaient dans le murmure des flots. Le ciel était tout bleu ; pas une voile n'apparaissait sur la mer.

Narr'Havas ne parlait plus ; Salammbô, sans lui répondre, le regardait. Il avait une robe de lin, où des fleurs étaient peintes, avec des franges d'or par le bas ; deux flèches d'argent retenaient ses cheveux tressés au bord de ses oreilles ; il s'appuyait de la main droite contre le bois d'une pique, orné par des cercles d'électrum et des touffes de poil.

En le considérant, une foule de pensées vagues l'absorbait. Ce jeune homme à voix douce et à taille féminine captivait ses yeux par la grâce de sa personne et lui semblait être comme une soeur aînée que les Baals envoyaient pour la protéger. Le souvenir de Mâtho la saisit : elle ne résista pas au désir de savoir ce qu'il devenait.

Narr'Havas répondit que les Carthaginois s'avançaient vers Tunis, afin de le prendre. A mesure qu'il exposait leurs chances de réussite et la faiblesse de Mâtho, elle paraissait se réjouir dans un espoir extraordinaire. Ses lèvres tremblaient, sa poitrine haletait. Quand il promit enfin de le tuer lui-même, elle s'écria :

— " Oui ! tue-le, il le faut ! "

Le Numide répliqua qu'il souhaitait ardemment cette mort puisque, la guerre terminée, il serait son époux.

Salammbô tressaillit, et elle baissa la tête.

Mais Narr'Havas, poursuivant, compara ses désirs à des fleurs qui languissent après la pluie, à des voyageurs perdus qui attendent le jour. Il lui dit encore qu'elle était plus belle que la lune, meilleure que le vent du matin et que le visage de l'hôte. Il ferait venir pour elle, du pays des Noirs, des choses comme il n'y en avait pas à Carthage, et les appartements de leur maison seraient sablés avec de la poudre d'or.

Le soir tombait, des senteurs de baume s'exhalaient. Pendant longtemps, ils se regardèrent en silence, — et les yeux de Salammbô, au fond de ses longues draperies, avaient l'air de deux étoiles dans l'ouverture d'un nuage. Avant que le soleil fût couché, il se retira.

Les Anciens se sentirent soulagés d'une grande inquiétude quand il partit de Carthage. Le peuple l'avait reçu avec des acclamations encore plus enthousiastes que la première fois. Si Hamilcar et le roi des Numides triomphaient seuls des Mercenaires, il serait impossible de leur résister. Donc ils résolurent, pour affaiblir Barca, de faire participer à la délivrance de la République celui qu'ils aimaient, le vieil Hannon.

Il se porta immédiatement vers les provinces occidentales, afin de se venger dans les lieux mêmes qui avaient vu sa honte. Mais les habitants et les Barbares étaient morts, cachés ou enfuis. Alors sa colère se déchargea sur la campagne. Il brûla les ruines des ruines, il ne laissa pas un seul arbre, pas un brin d'herbe ; les enfants et les infirmes que l'on rencontrait, on les suppliciait ; il donnait à ses soldats les femmes à violer avant leur égorgement ; les plus belles étaient jetées dans sa litière, — car son atroce maladie l'enflammait de désirs impétueux ; il les assouvissait avec toute la fureur d'un homme désespéré.

Souvent, à la crête des collines, des tentes noires s'abattaient comme renversées par le vent, et de larges disques à bordure brillante, que l'on reconnaissait pour des roues de chariot, en tournant avec un son plaintif, peu à peu s'enfonçaient dans les vallées. Les tribus, qui avaient abandonné le siège de Carthage, erraient ainsi par les provinces, attendant une occasion, quelque victoire des Mercenaires pour revenir. Mais, soit terreur ou famine, elles reprirent toutes le chemin de leurs contrées, et disparurent.

Hamilcar ne fut point jaloux des succès d'Hannon. Cependant il avait hâte d'en finir ; il lui ordonna de se rabattre sur Tunis ; et Hannon, qui aimait sa patrie, au jour fixé se trouva sous les murs de la ville.

Elle avait pour se défendre sa population d'autochtones, douze mille Mercenaires, puis tous les Mangeurs-de-choses-immondes, car ils étaient comme Mâtho rivés à l'horizon de Carthage, et la plèbe et le Schalischim contemplaient de loin ses hautes murailles, en rêvant par-derrière des jouissances infinies. Dans cet accord de haines, la résistance fut lestement organisée. On prit des outres pour faire des casques, on coupa tous les palmiers dans les jardins pour avoir des lances, on creusa des citernes et, quant aux vivres, ils pêchaient aux bords du lac de gros poissons blancs, nourris de cadavres et d'immondices. Leurs remparts, maintenus en ruine par la jalousie de Carthage, étaient si faibles, que l'on pouvait, d'un coup d'épaule, les abattre. Mâtho en boucha les trous avec les pierres des maisons. C'était la dernière lutte ; il n'espérait rien, et cependant il se disait que la fortune était changeante.

Les Carthaginois, en approchant, remarquèrent, sur le rempart, un homme qui dépassait les créneaux de toute la ceinture. Les flèches volant autour de lui n'avaient pas l'air de plus l'effrayer qu'un essaim d'hirondelles. Aucune, par extraordinaire, ne le toucha.

Hamilcar établit son camp sur le côté méridional -. Narr'Havas, à sa droite, occupait la plaine de Rhàdès. Hannon le bord du Lac ; et les trois généraux devaient garder leur position respective pour attaquer l'enceinte, tous, en même temps.

Mais Hamilcar voulut d'abord montrer aux Mercenaires qu'il les châtierait comme des esclaves. Il fit crucifier les dix ambassadeurs, les uns près des autres, sur un monticule, en face de la ville.

A ce spectacle, les assiégés abandonnèrent le rempart.

Mâtho s'était dit que, s'il pouvait passer entre les murs et les tentes de Narr'Havas assez rapidement pour que les Numides n'eussent pas le temps de sortir, il tomberait sur les derrières de l'infanterie carthaginoise, qui se trouverait prise entre sa division et ceux de l'intérieur. Il s'élança dehors avec les vétérans.

Narr'Havas l'aperçut ; il franchit la plage du Lac et vint avertir Hannon d'expédier des hommes au secours d'Hamilcar. Croyait-il Barca trop faible pour résister aux Mercenaires ? Etait-ce une perfidie ou une sottise ? Nul jamais ne put le savoir.

Hannon, par désir d'humilier son rival, ne balança pas. Il cria de sonner les trompettes, et toute son armée se précipita sur les Barbares. Ils se retournèrent et coururent droit aux Carthaginois ; ils les renversaient, les écrasaient sous leurs pieds, et, les refoulant ainsi, ils arrivèrent jusqu'à la tente d'Hannon qui était alors, au milieu de trente Carthaginois, les plus illustres des Anciens.

Il parut stupéfait de leur audace ; il appelait ses capitaines. Tous avançaient leurs poings sous sa gorge, en vociférant des injures. La foule se poussait, et ceux qui avaient la main sur lui le retenaient à grand-peine. Cependant, il tâchait de leur dire à l'oreille : — " Je te donnerai tout ce que tu veux ! Je suis riche ! Sauve-moi ! - " Ils le tiraient ; si lourd qu'il fût, ses pieds ne touchaient plus la terre. On avait entraîné les Anciens. Sa terreur redoubla. — " Vous m'avez battu ! Je suis votre captif ! Je me rachète ! Ecoutez-moi, mes amis ! " Et, porté par toutes ces épaules qui le serraient aux flancs, il répétait : " Qu'allez-vous faire ? Que voulez-vous ? Je ne m'obstine pas, vous voyez bien ! J'ai toujours été bon ! "

Une, croix gigantesque était dressée à la porte. Les Barbares hurlaient : " Ici ! ici ! " mais il éleva la voix encore plus haut ; et, au nom de leurs Dieux, il les somma de le mener au Schalischim, parce qu'il avait à lui confier une chose d'où leur salut dépendait.

Ils s'arrêtèrent, quelques-uns prétendant qu'il était sage d'appeler Mâtho. On partit à sa recherche.

Hannon tomba sur l'herbe ; et il voyait, autour de lui, encore d'autres croix, comme si le supplice dont il allait périr se fût d'avance multiplié, il faisait des efforts pour se convaincre qu'il se trompait, qu'il n'y en avait qu'une seule, et même pour croire qu'il n'y en avait pas du tout. Enfin on le releva.

— " Parle ! " dit Mâtho.

Il offrit de livrer Hamilcar, puis ils entreraient dans Carthage et seraient rois tous les deux.

Mâtho s'éloigna, en faisant signe aux autres de se hâter. C'était, pensait-il, une ruse pour gagner du temps.

Le Barbare se trompait ; Hannon était dans une de ces extrémités où l'on ne considère plus rien, et d'ailleurs il exécrait tellement Hamilcar que, sur le moindre espoir de salut, il l'aurait sacrifié avec tous ses soldats.

A la base des trente croix, les Anciens languissaient par terre ; déjà des cordes étaient passées sous leurs aisselles. Alors le vieux Suffète, comprenant qu'il fallait mourir, pleura. Ils arrachèrent ce qui lui restait de vêtements — et l'horreur de sa personne apparut. Des ulcères couvraient cette masse sans nom ; la graisse de ses jambes lui cachait les ongles des pieds ; il pendait à ses doigts comme des lambeaux verdâtres ; et les larmes qui ruisselaient entre les tubercules de ses joues donnaient à son visage quelque chose d'effroyablement triste, ayant l'air d'occuper plus de place que sur un autre visage humain. Son bandeau royal, à demi dénoué, traînait avec ses cheveux blancs dans la poussière.

Ils crurent n'avoir pas de cordes assez fortes pour le grimper jusqu'au bout de la croix, et ils le clouèrent dessus, avant qu'elle fût dressée, à la mode punique. Mais son orgueil se réveilla dans la douleur. Il se mit à les accabler d'injures. Il écumait et se tordait, comme un monstre marin que l'on égorge sur un rivage, en leur prédisant qu'ils finiraient tous plus horriblement encore et qu'il serait vengé.

Il l'était. De l'autre côté de la ville, d'où s'échappaient maintenant des jets de flammes avec des colonnes de fumée, les ambassadeurs des Mercenaires agonisaient.

Quelques-uns, évanouis d'abord, venaient de se ranimer sous la fraîcheur du vent ; mais ils restaient le menton sur la poitrine, et leur corps descendait un peu, malgré les clous de leurs bras fixés plus haut que leur tête ; de leurs talons et de leurs mains, du sang tombait par grosses gouttes, lentement, comme des branches d'un arbre tombent des fruits mûrs, — et Carthage, le golfe, les montagnes et les plaines, tout leur paraissait tourner, tel qu'une immense roue ; quelquefois, un nuage de poussière montant du sol les enveloppait dans ses tourbillons ; ils étaient brûlés par une soif horrible, leur langue se retournait dans leur bouche, et ils sentaient sur eux une sueur glaciale couler, avec leur âme qui s'en allait.

Cependant, ils entrevoyaient à une profondeur infinie des rues, des soldats en marche, des balancements de glaives ; et le tumulte de la bataille leur arrivait vaguement, comme le bruit de la mer à des naufragés qui meurent dans la mâture d'un navire. Les Italiotes, plus robustes que les autres, criaient encore ; les Lacédémoniens, se taisant, gardaient leurs paupières fermées ; Zarxas, si vigoureux autrefois, penchait comme un roseau brisé ; l'Ethiopien, près de lui, avait la tête renversée en arrière par-dessus les bras de la croix ; Autharite, immobile, roulait des yeux ; sa grande chevelure, prise dans une fente de bois, se tenait droite sur son front, et le râle qu'il poussait semblait plutôt un rugissement de colère. Quant à Spendius, un étrange courage lui était venu ; maintenant il méprisait la vie, par la certitude qu'il avait d'un affranchissement presque immédiat et éternel, et il attendait la mort avec impassibilité.

Au milieu de leur défaillance, quelquefois ils tressaillaient à un frôlement de plumes, qui leur passait contre la bouche. De grandes ailes balançaient des ombres autour d'eux, des croassements claquaient dans l'air ; et comme la croix de Spendius était la plus haute, ce fut sur la sienne que le premier vautour s'abattit. Alors il tourna son visage vers Autharite, et lui dit lentement, avec un indéfinissable sourire :

— " Te rappelles-tu les lions sur la route de Sicca ? "

— " C'étaient nos frères ! " répondit le Gaulois en expirant.

Le Suffète, pendant ce temps-là, avait troué l'enceinte, et il était parvenu à la citadelle. Sous une rafale de vent, la fumée tout à coup s'envola, découvrant l'horizon jusqu'aux murailles de Carthage ; il crut même distinguer des gens qui regardaient sur la plate-forme d'Eschmoûn ; puis, en ramenant ses yeux, il aperçut, à gauche, au bord du Lac, trente croix démesurées.

En effet, pour les rendre plus effroyables, ils les avaient construites avec les mâts de leurs tentes attachés bout à bout ; et les trente cadavres des Anciens apparaissaient tout en haut dans le ciel. Il y avait sur leurs poitrines comme des papillons blancs ; c'étaient les barbes des flèches qu'on leur avait tirées d'en bas.

Au faîte de la plus grande, un large ruban d'or brillait ; il pendait sur l'épaule, le bras manquait de ce côté-là, et Hamilcar eut de la peine à reconnaître Hannon.

Ses os spongieux ne tenant pas sous les fiches de fer, des portions de ses membres s'étaient détachées, — et il ne restait à la croix que d'informes débris, pareils à ces fragments d'animaux suspendus contre la porte des chasseurs.

Le Suffète n'avait rien pu savoir : la ville, devant lui, masquait tout ce qui était au-delà, par-derrière ; et les capitaines envoyés successivement aux deux généraux n'avaient pas reparu. Alors, des fuyards arrivèrent, racontant la déroute ; et l'armée punique s'arrêta. Cette catastrophe, tombant au milieu de leur victoire, les stupéfiait. Ils n'entendaient plus les ordres d'Hamilcar.

Mâtho en profitait pour continuer ses ravages dans les Numides.

Le camp d'Hannon bouleversé, il était revenu sur eux. Les éléphants sortirent. Mais les Mercenaires, avec des brandons arrachés aux murs, s'avancèrent par la plaine en agitant des flammes, et les grosses bêtes, effrayées, coururent se précipiter dans le golfe, où elles se tuaient les unes les autres en se débattant, et se noyèrent sous le poids de leurs cuirasses. Déjà Narr'Havas avait lâché sa cavalerie ; tous se jetèrent la face contre le sol ; puis, quand les chevaux furent à trois pas d'eux, ils bondirent sous leurs ventres qu'ils ouvraient d'un coup de poignard, et la moitié des Numides avait péri quand Barca survint.

Les Mercenaires, épuisés, ne pouvaient tenir contre ses troupes. Ils reculèrent en bon ordre jusqu'à la montagne des Eaux-Chaudes. Le Suffète eut la prudence de ne pas les poursuivre. Il se porta vers les embouchures du Macar.

Tunis lui appartenait ; mais elle ne faisait plus qu'un amoncellement de décombres fumants. Les ruines descendaient par les brèches des murs, jusqu'au milieu de la plaine ; — tout au fond, entre les bords du golfe, les cadavres des éléphants, poussés par la brise, s'entrechoquaient, comme un archipel de rochers noirs flottant sur l'eau.

Narr'Havas, pour soutenir cette guerre, avait épuisé ses forêts, pris les jeunes et les vieux, les mâles et les femelles, et la force militaire de son royaume ne s'en releva pas. Le peuple, qui les avait vus de loin périr, en fut désolé ; des hommes se lamentaient dans les rues en les appelant par leurs noms, comme des amis défunts :

— " Ah ! l'invincible ! la Victoire ! le Foudroyant ! l'Hirondelle ! " Le premier jour même, on en parla plus que des citoyens morts. Mais le lendemain on aperçut les tentes des Mercenaires sur la montagne des Eaux-Chaudes. Alors le désespoir fut si profond, que beaucoup de gens, des femmes surtout, se précipitèrent, la tête en bas, du haut de l'Acropole.

On ignorait les desseins d'Hamilcar. Il vivait seul, dans sa tente, n'ayant près de lui qu'un jeune garçon, et jamais personne ne mangeait avec eux, pas même Narr'Havas. Cependant, il lui témoignait des égards extraordinaires depuis la défaite d'Hannon ; mais le roi des Numides avait trop d'intérêts à devenir son fils pour ne pas s'en méfier.

Cette inertie voilait des manoeuvres habiles. Par toutes sortes d'artifices, Hamilcar séduisit les chefs des villages ; et les Mercenaires furent chassés, repoussés, traqués comme des bêtes féroces. Dès qu'ils entraient dans un bois, les arbres s'enflammaient autour d'eux ; quand ils buvaient à une source, elle était empoisonnée ; on murait les cavernes où ils se cachaient pour dormir. Les populations qui les avaient jusque-là défendus, leurs anciens complices, maintenant les poursuivaient ; ils reconnaissaient toujours dans ces bandes des armures carthaginoises.

Plusieurs étaient rongés au visage par des dartres rouges ; cela leur était venu, pensaient-ils, en touchant Hannon. D'autres s'imaginaient que c'était pour avoir mangé les poissons de Salammbô, et, loin de s'en repentir, ils rêvaient des sacrilèges encore plus abominables, afin que l'abaissement des Dieux puniques fût plus grand. Ils auraient voulu les exterminer.

Ils se traînèrent ainsi pendant trois mois le long de la côte orientale, puis derrière la montagne de Selloum et jusqu'aux premiers sables du désert. Ils cherchaient une place de refuge, n'importe laquelle. Utique et Hippo-Zaryte seules ne les avaient pas trahis ; mais Hamilcar enveloppait ces deux villes. Puis ils remontèrent dans le nord, au hasard, sans même connaître les routes. A force de misères, leur tête était troublée.

Ils n'avaient plus que le sentiment d'une exaspération qui allait en se développant ; et ils se retrouvèrent un jour dans les gorges du Cobus, encore une fois devant Carthage !

Alors les engagements se multiplièrent. La fortune se maintenait égale ; mais ils étaient, les uns et les autres, tellement excédés, qu'ils souhaitaient, au lieu de ces escarmouches, une grande bataille, pourvu qu'elle fût bien la dernière.

Mâtho avait envie d'en porter lui-même la proposition au Suffète. Un de ses Libyens se dévoua. Tous, en le voyant partir, étaient convaincus qu'il ne reviendrait pas.

Il revint le soir même.

Hamilcar acceptait leur défi. On se rencontrerait le lendemain, au soleil levant, dans la plaine de Rhadès.

Les Mercenaires voulurent savoir s'il n'avait rien dit de plus, et le Libyen ajouta :

— " Comme je restais devant lui, il m'a demandé ce que j'attendais : j'ai répondu : " Qu'on me tue ! "

Alors il a repris : " Non, va-t'en ! ce sera pour demain avec les autres. "

Cette générosité étonna les Barbares ; quelques-uns en furent terrifiés, et Mâtho regretta que le parlementaire n'eût pas été tué.

Il lui restait encore trois mille Africains, douze cents Grecs, quinze cents Campaniens, deux cents Ibères, quatre cents Etrusques, cinq cents Samnites, quarante Gaulois et une troupe de Naffur, bandits nomades rencontrés dans la région-des-dattes, en tout, sept mille deux cent dix-neuf soldats, mais pas une syntagme complète. Ils avaient bouché les trous de leurs cuirasses avec des omoplates de quadrupèdes et remplacé leurs cothurnes d'airain par des sandales en chiffons. Des plaques de cuivre ou de fer alourdissaient leurs vêtements ; leurs cottes de mailles pendaient en guenilles autour d'eux et les balafres apparaissaient, comme des fils de pourpre, entre les poils de leurs bras et de leurs visages.

Les colères de leurs compagnons morts leur revenaient à l'âme et multipliaient leur vigueur ; ils sentaient confusément qu'ils étaient les desservants d'un dieu épandu dans les coeurs d'opprimés, et comme les pontifes de la vengeance universelle ! Puis la douleur d'une injustice exorbitante les enrageait et surtout la vue de Carthage à l'horizon. Ils firent le serment de combattre les uns pour les autres jusqu'à la mort.

On tua les bêtes de somme et l'on mangea le plus possible, afin de se donner des forces ; ensuite ils dormirent. Quelques-uns prièrent, tournés vers des constellations différentes.

Les Carthaginois arrivèrent dans la plaine avant eux. Ils frottèrent le bord des boucliers avec de l'huile pour faciliter le glissement des flèches ; les fantassins, qui portaient de longues chevelures, se les coupèrent sur le front, par prudence ; et Hamilcar, dès la cinquième heure, fit renverser toutes les gamelles, sachant qu'il est désavantageux de combattre l'estomac trop plein. Son armée montait à quatorze mille hommes, le double environ de l'armée barbare. Jamais il n'avait éprouvé, cependant, une pareille inquiétude ; s'il succombait, c'était l'anéantissement de la république et il périrait crucifié ; s'il triomphait au contraire, par les Pyrénées, les Gaules et les Alpes il gagnerait l'Italie, et l'empire des Barca deviendrait éternel. Vingt fois pendant la nuit il se releva pour surveiller tout, lui-même, jusque dans les détails les plus minimes. Quant aux Carthaginois, ils étaient exaspérés par leur longue épouvante.

Narr'Havas doutait de la fidélité de ses Numides. D'ailleurs les Barbares pouvaient les vaincre. Une faiblesse étrange l'avait pris ; à chaque moment, il buvait de larges coupes d'eau.

Mais un homme qu'il ne connaissait pas ouvrit sa tente, et déposa par terre une couronne de sel gemme, ornée de dessins hiératiques faits avec du soufre et des losanges de nacre ; on envoyait quelquefois au fiancé sa couronne de mariage : c'était une preuve d'amour, une sorte d'invitation.

Cependant la fille d'Hamilcar n'avait point de tendresse pour Narr'Havas.

Le souvenir de Mâtho la gênait d'une façon intolérable ; il lui semblait que la mort de cet homme débarrasserait sa pensée, comme pour se guérir de la blessure des vipères, on les écrase sur la plaie. Le roi des Numides était dans sa dépendance ; il attendait impatiemment les noces, et comme elles devaient suivre la victoire, Salammbô lui faisait ce présent afin d'exciter son courage. Alors ses angoisses disparurent, et il ne songea plus qu'au bonheur de posséder une femme si belle.

La même vision avait assailli Mâtho ; mais il la rejeta tout de suite, et son amour, qu'il refoulait, se répandit sur ses compagnons d'armes. Il les chérissait comme des portions de sa propre personne, de sa haine, — et il se sentait l'esprit plus haut, les bras plus forts ; tout ce qu'il fallait exécuter lui apparut nettement. Si parfois des soupirs lui échappaient, c'est qu'il pensait à Spendius.

Il rangea les Barbares sur six rangs égaux. Au milieu, il établit les Etrusques, tous attachés par une chaîne de bronze, les hommes de trait se tenaient par-derrière, et sur deux ailes il distribua des Naffur, montés sur des chameaux à poils ras, couverts de plumes d'autruche.

Le Suffète disposa les Carthaginois dans un ordre pareil. En dehors de l'infanterie, près des vélites, il plaça les Clinabares, au-delà les Numides ; quand le jour parut, ils étaient les uns et les autres ainsi alignés face à face. Tous, de loin, se contemplaient avec leurs grands yeux farouches. Il y eut d'abord une hésitation. Enfin les deux armées s'ébranlèrent.

Les Barbares s'avançaient lentement, pour ne point s'essouffler, en battant la terre avec leurs pieds ; le centre de l'armée punique formait une courbe convexe. Puis un choc terrible éclata, pareil au craquement de deux flottes qui s'abordent. Le premier rang des Barbares s'était vite entrouvert, et les gens de trait, cachés derrière les autres, lançaient leurs balles, leurs flèches, leurs javelots. Cependant, la courbe des Carthaginois peu à peu s'aplatissait, elle devint toute droite, puis s'infléchit ; alors les deux sections des vélites se rapprochèrent parallèlement, comme les branches d'un compas qui se referme. Les Barbares, acharnés contre la phalange, entraient dans sa crevasse ; ils se perdaient. Mâtho les arrêta, — et tandis que les ailes carthaginoises continuaient à s'avancer, il fit écouler en dehors les trois rangs intérieurs de sa ligne ; bientôt ils débordèrent ses flancs, et son armée apparut sur une triple longueur.

Mais les Barbares placés aux deux bouts se trouvaient les plus faibles, ceux de la gauche surtout, qui avaient épuisé leurs carquois, et la troupe des vélites, enfin arrivée contre eux, les entamait largement.

Mâtho les tira en arrière. Sa droite contenait des Campaniens armés de haches ; il la poussa sur la gauche carthaginoise ; le centre attaquait l'ennemi et ceux de l'autre extrémité, hors de péril, tenaient les vélites en respect.

Alors Hamilcar divisa ses cavaliers par escadrons, mit entre eux des hoplites, et il les lâcha sur les Mercenaires.

Ces masses en forme de cône présentaient un front de chevaux, et leurs parois plus larges se hérissaient toutes remplies de lances. Il était impossible aux Barbares de résister ; seuls, les fantassins grecs avaient des armures d'airain ; tous les autres, des coutelas au bout d'une perche, des faux prises dans les métairies, des glaives fabriqués avec la jante d'une roue ; les lames trop molles se tordaient en frappant, et pendant qu'ils étaient à les redresser sous leurs talons, les Carthaginois, de droite et de gauche, les massacraient commodément.

Mais les Etrusques, rivés à leur chaîne, ne bougeaient pas ; ceux qui étaient morts, ne pouvant tomber, faisaient obstacle avec leurs cadavres ; et cette grosse ligne de bronze tour à tour s'écartait et se resserrait, souple comme un serpent, inébranlable comme un mur. Les Barbares venaient se reformer derrière elle, haletaient une minute, — puis ils repartaient, avec les tronçons de leurs armes à la main.

Beaucoup déjà n'en avaient plus, et ils sautaient sur les Carthaginois qu'ils mordaient au visage, comme des chiens. Les Gaulois, par orgueil, se dépouillèrent de leurs sayons ; ils montraient de loin leurs grands corps tout blancs ; pour épouvanter l'ennemi, ils élargissaient leurs blessures. Au milieu des syntagmes puniques on n'entendait plus la voix du crieur annonçant les ordres ; les étendards au-dessus de la poussière répétaient leurs signaux, et chacun allait, emporté dans l'oscillation de la grande masse qui l'entourait.

Hamilcar commanda aux Numides d'avancer. Mais les Naffur se précipitèrent à leur rencontre.

Habillés de vastes robes noires, avec une houppe de cheveux au sommet du crâne et un bouclier en cuir de rhinocéros, ils manoeuvraient un fer sans manche retenu par une corde ; et leurs chameaux, tout hérissés de plumes, poussaient de longs gloussements rauques. Les lames tombaient à des places précises, puis remontaient d'un coup sec, avec un membre après elles. Les bêtes furieuses galopaient à travers les syntagmes. Quelques-unes, dont les jambes étaient rompues, allaient en sautillant, comme des autruches blessées.

L'infanterie punique tout entière revint sur les Barbares ; elle les coupa. Leurs manipules tournoyaient, espacées les unes des autres. Les armes des Carthaginois plus brillantes les encerclaient comme des couronnes d'or ; un fourmillement s'agitait au milieu, et le soleil, frappant dessus, mettait aux pointes des glaives des lueurs blanches qui voltigeaient. Cependant, des files de Clinabares restaient étendues sur la plaine ; des Mercenaires arrachaient leurs armures, s'en revêtaient, puis ils retournaient au combat. Les Carthaginois, trompés, plusieurs fois s'engagèrent au milieu d'eux. Une hébétude les immobilisait, ou bien ils refluaient, et de triomphantes clameurs s'élevant au loin avaient l'air de les pousser comme des épaves dans une tempête. Hamilcar se désespérait ; tout allait périr sous le génie de Mâtho et l'invincible courage des Mercenaires !

Mais un large bruit de tambourins éclata dans l'horizon. C'était une foule, des vieillards, des malades, des enfants de quinze ans et même des femmes qui, ne résistant plus à leur angoisse, étaient partis de Carthage, et, pour se mettre sous la protection d'une chose formidable, ils avaient pris, chez Hamilcar, le seul éléphant que possédait maintenant la République, celui dont la trompe était coupée.

Alors il sembla aux Carthaginois que la Patrie, abandonnant ses murailles, venait leur commander de mourir pour elle. Un redoublement de fureur les saisit, et les Numides entraînèrent tous les autres.

Les Barbares, au milieu de la plaine, s'étaient adossés contre un monticule. Ils n'avaient aucune chance de vaincre, pas même de survivre ; mais c'étaient les meilleurs, les plus intrépides et les plus forts.

Les gens de Carthage se mirent à envoyer, par-dessus les Numides, des broches, des lardoires, des marteaux ; ceux dont les consuls avaient eu peur mouraient sous des bâtons lancés par des femmes ; la populace punique exterminait les Mercenaires.

Ils s'étaient réfugiés sur le haut de la colline. Leur cercle, à chaque brèche nouvelle, se refermait ; deux fois il descendit, une secousse le repoussait aussitôt ; et les Carthaginois, pêle-mêle, étendaient les bras ; ils allongeaient leurs piques entre les jambes de leurs compagnons et fouillaient, au hasard, devant eux. Ils glissaient dans le sang ; la pente du terrain trop rapide faisait rouler en bas les cadavres. L'éléphant qui tâchait de gravir le monticule en avait jusqu'au ventre ; et sa trompe écourtée, large du bout, de temps à autre se levait, comme une énorme sangsue.

Puis tous s'arrêtèrent. Les Carthaginois, en grinçant des dents, contemplaient le haut de la colline où les Barbares se tenaient debout.

Enfin, ils s'élancèrent brusquement, et la mêlée recommença. Souvent les Mercenaires les laissaient approcher en leur criant qu'ils voulaient se rendre ; puis avec un ricanement effroyable, d'un coup, ils se tuaient, et à mesure que les morts tombaient, les autres pour se défendre montaient dessus. C'était comme une pyramide, qui peu à peu grandissait.

Bientôt ils ne furent que cinquante, puis que vingt, que trois et que deux seulement, un Samnite armé d'une hache, et Mâtho qui avait encore son épée.

Le Samnite, courbé sur ses jarrets, poussait alternativement sa hache de droite et de gauche, en avertissant Mâtho des coups qu'on lui portait. " Maître, par-ci !

par-là ! baisse-toi ! "

Mâtho avait perdu ses épaulières, son casque, sa cuirasse : il était complètement nu, — plus livide que les morts, les cheveux tout droits, avec deux plaques d'écume au coin des lèvres, — et son épée tournoyait si rapidement, qu'elle faisait une auréole autour de lui. Une pierre la brisa près de la garde ; le Samnite était tué et le flot des Carthaginois se resserrait, ils le touchaient. Alors il leva vers le ciel ses deux mains vides, puis il ferma les yeux, — et ouvrant les bras, comme un homme du haut d'un promontoire qui se jette à la mer, il se lança dans les piques.

Elles s'écartèrent devant lui. Plusieurs fois il courut contre les Carthaginois. Mais toujours ils reculaient, en détournant leurs armes.

Son pied heurta un glaive. Mâtho voulut le saisir. Il se sentit lié par les poings et les genoux, et il tomba.

C'était Narr'Havas qui le suivait depuis quelque temps, pas à pas, avec un de ces larges filets à prendre les bêtes farouches, et profitant du moment qu'il se baissait, il l'en avait enveloppé.

Puis on l'attacha sur l'éléphant, les quatre membres en croix ; et tous ceux qui n'étaient pas blessés, l'escortant, se précipitèrent à grand tumulte vers Carthage.

La nouvelle de la victoire y était parvenue, chose inexplicable, dès la troisième heure de la nuit ; la clepsydre de Khamon avait versé la cinquième comme ils arrivaient à Malqua ; alors Mâtho ouvrit les yeux. Il y avait tant de lumières sur les maisons que la ville paraissait toute en flammes.

Une immense clameur venait à lui, vaguement, et, couché sur le dos, il regardait les étoiles.

Puis une porte se referma, et des ténèbres l'enveloppèrent.

Le lendemain, à la même heure, le dernier des hommes restés dans le défilé de la Hache expirait.

Le jour que leurs compagnons étaient partis, les Zuaèces qui s'en retournaient avaient fait ébouler les roches, et ils les avaient nourris quelque temps.

Les Barbares s'attendaient toujours à voir paraître Mâtho, — et ils ne voulaient point quitter la montagne par découragement, par langueur, par cette obstination des malades qui se refusent à changer de place ; enfin, les provisions épuisées, les Zuaèces s'en allèrent. On savait qu'ils n'étaient plus que treize cents à peine, et l'on n'eut pas besoin, pour en finir, d'employer des soldats.

Les bêtes féroces, les lions surtout, depuis trois ans que la guerre durait, s'étaient multipliés. Narr'Havas avait fait une grande battue, puis courant sur eux, après avoir attaché des chèvres de distance en distance, il les avait poussés vers le défilé de la Hache ; — et tous maintenant y vivaient, quand arriva l'homme envoyé par les Anciens pour savoir ce qui restait des Barbares.

Sur l'étendue de la plaine, des lions et des cadavres étaient couchés, et les morts se confondaient avec des vêtements et des armures. A presque tous le visage ou bien un bras manquait ; quelques-uns paraissaient intacts encore ; d'autres étaient desséchés complètement et des crânes poudreux emplissaient des casques ; des pieds qui n'avaient plus de chair sortaient tout droit des cnémides, des squelettes gardaient leurs manteaux ; des ossements, nettoyés par le soleil, faisaient des taches luisantes au milieu du sable.

Les lions reposaient, la poitrine contre le sol et les deux pattes allongées, tout en clignant leurs paupières sous l'éclat du jour, exagéré par la réverbération des roches blanches. D'autres, assis sur leur croupe, regardaient fixement devant eux ; ou bien, à demi perdus dans leurs grosses crinières, ils dormaient roulés en boule, et tous avaient l'air repus, las, ennuyés. Ils étaient immobiles comme la montagne et comme les morts. La nuit descendait ; de larges bandes rouges rayaient le ciel à l'Occident.

Dans un de ces amas qui bosselaient irrégulièrement la plaine, quelque chose de plus vague qu'un spectre se leva. Alors un des lions se mit à marcher, découpant avec sa forme monstrueuse une ombre noire sur le fond du ciel pourpre ; — quand il fut tout près de l'homme, il le renversa, d'un seul coup de patte.

Puis étalé dessus à plat ventre, du bout de ses crocs, lentement, il étirait les entrailles.

Ensuite il ouvrit sa gueule toute grande, et durant quelques minutes il poussa un long rugissement, que les échos de la montagne répétèrent, et qui se perdit enfin dans la solitude.

Tout à coup, de petits graviers roulèrent d'en haut. On entendit un frôlement de pas rapides, — et du côté de la herse, du côté de la gorge, des museaux pointus, des oreilles droites parurent ; des prunelles fauves brillaient. C'étaient les chacals arrivant pour manger les restes.

Le Carthaginois, qui regardait penché au haut du précipice, s'en retourna.

Chapitre 15 MATHO

Carthage était en joie, — une joie profonde, universelle, démesurée, frénétique ; on avait bouché les trous des ruines, repeint les statues des Dieux, des branches de myrte parsemaient les rues, au coin des carrefours, l'encens fumait, et la multitude sur les terrasses faisait avec ses vêtements bigarrés comme des tas de fleurs qui s'épanouissaient dans l'air.

Le continuel glapissement des voix était dominé par le cri des porteurs d'eau arrosant les dalles ; des esclaves d'Hamilcar offraient, en son nom, de l'orge grillée et des morceaux de viande crue ; on s'abordait ; on s'embrassait en pleurant ; les villes tyriennes étaient prises, les Nomades dispersés, tous les Barbares anéantis. L'Acropole disparaissait sous des velariums de couleur ; les éperons des trirèmes, alignés en dehors du môle, resplendissaient comme une digue de diamants ; partout on sentait l'ordre rétabli, une existence nouvelle qui recommençait, un vaste bonheur épandu : c'était le jour du mariage de Salammbô avec le roi des Numides.

Sur la terrasse du temple de Khamon, de gigantesques orfèvreries chargeaient trois longues tables où allaient s'asseoir les Prêtres, les Anciens et les Riches, et il y en avait une quatrième plus haute, pour Hamilcar, pour Narr'Havas et pour elle ; car Salammbô par la restitution du voile ayant sauvé la Patrie, le peuple faisait de ses noces une réjouissance nationale, et en bas, sur la place, il attendait qu'elle parût.

Mais un autre désir, plus âcre, irritait son impatience : la mort de Mâtho était promise pour la cérémonie.

On avait proposé d'abord de l'écorcher vif, de lui couler du plomb dans les entrailles, de le faire mourir de faim ; on l'attacherait contre un arbre, et un singe, derrière lui, le frapperait sur la tête avec une pierre ; il avait offensé Tanit, les Cynocéphales de Tanit la vengeraient. D'autres étaient d'avis qu'on le promenât sur un dromadaire, après lui avoir passé en plusieurs endroits du corps des mèches de lin trempées d'huile ; — et ils se plaisaient à l'idée du grand animal vagabondant par les rues avec cet homme qui se tordrait sous les feux comme un candélabre agité par le vent.

Mais quels citoyens seraient chargés de son supplice et pourquoi en frustrer les autres ? On aurait voulu un genre de mort où la ville entière participât, et que toutes les mains, toutes les armes, toutes les choses carthaginoises, et jusqu'aux dalles des rues et aux flots du golfe pussent le déchirer, l'écraser, l'anéantir. Donc les Anciens décidèrent qu'il irait de sa prison à la place de Khamon, sans aucune escorte, les bras attachés dans le dos ; et il était défendu de le frapper au coeur, pour le faire vivre plus longtemps, de lui crever les yeux, afin qu'il pût voir jusqu'au bout sa torture, de rien lancer contre sa personne et de porter sur elle plus de trois doigts d'un seul coup.

Bien qu'il ne dût paraître qu'à la fin du jour, quelquefois on croyait l'apercevoir, et la foule se précipitait vers l'Acropole, les rues se vidaient, puis elle revenait avec un long murmure. Des gens, depuis la veille, se tenaient debout à la même place, et de loin ils s'interpellaient en se montrant leurs ongles, qu'ils avaient laissés croître pour les enfoncer mieux dans sa chair. D'autres se promenaient agités ; quelques-uns étaient pâles comme s'ils avaient attendu leur propre exécution.

Tout à coup, derrière les Mappales, de hauts éventails de plumes se levèrent au-dessus des têtes. C'était Salammbô qui sortait de son palais ; un soupir d'allégement s'exhala.

Mais le cortège fut longtemps à venir ; il marchait pas à pas.

D'abord défilèrent les prêtres des Patæques, puis ceux Eschmoûn, ceux de Melkartb et tous les autres collèges successivement, avec les mêmes insignes et dans le même ordre qu'ils avaient observé lors du sacrifice. Les pontifes de Moloch passèrent le front baissé, et la multitude, par une espèce de remords, s'écartait d'eux. Mais les prêtres de la Rabbetna s'avançaient d'un pas fier, avec des lyres à la main ; les prêtresses les suivaient dans des robes transparentes de couleur jaune ou noire, en poussant des cris d'oiseau, en se tordant comme des vipères ; ou bien au son des flûtes, elles tournaient pour imiter la danse des étoiles, et leurs vêtements légers envoyaient dans les rues des bouffées de senteurs molles. On applaudissait parmi ces femmes les Kedeschim aux paupières peintes, symbolisant l'hermaphrodisme de la Divinité, et parfumés et vêtus comme elles, ils leur ressemblaient malgré leurs seins plats et leurs hanches plus étroites. D'ailleurs le principe femelle, ce jour-là, dominait, confondait tout : une lasciveté mystique circulait dans l'air pesant ; déjà les flambeaux s'allumaient au fond des bois sacrés ; il devait y avoir pendant la nuit une grande prostitution ; trois vaisseaux avaient amené de la Sicile des courtisanes et il en était venu du désert.

Les collèges, à mesure qu'ils arrivaient, se rangeaient dans les cours du temple, sur les galeries extérieures et le long des doubles escaliers qui montaient contre les murailles, en se rapprochant par le haut. Des files de robes blanches apparaissaient entre les colonnades, et l'architecture se peuplait de statues de pierre.

Puis survinrent les maîtres des finances, les gouverneurs des provinces et tous les Riches. Il se fit en bas un large tumulte. Des rues avoisinantes la foule se dégorgeait ; des hiérodoules la repoussaient à coups de bâton ; et au milieu des Anciens, couronnés de tiares d'or, sur une litière que surmontait un dais de pourpre, on aperçut Salammbô.

Alors s'éleva un immense cri ; les cymbales et les crotales sonnèrent plus fort, les tambourins tonnaient et le grand dais de pourpre s'enfonça entre les deux pylônes.

Il reparut au premier étage. Salammbô marchait dessous, lentement ; puis elle traversa la terrasse pour aller s'asseoir au fond, sur une espèce de trône taillé dans une carapace de tortue. On lui avança sous les pieds un escabeau d'ivoire à trois marches : au bord de la première, deux enfants nègres se tenaient à genoux, et quelquefois elle appuyait sur leur tête ses deux bras, chargés d'anneaux trop lourds.

Des chevilles aux hanches, elle était prises dans un réseau de mailles étroites imitant les écailles d'un poisson et qui luisaient comme de la nacre : une zone toute bleue serrant sa taille laissait voir ses deux seins, par deux échancrures en forme de croissant. Des pendeloques d'escarboucles en cachaient les pointes. Elle avait une coiffure faite avec des plumes de paon étoilées de pierreries ; un large manteau, blanc comme de la neige, retombait derrière elle, et les coudes au corps, les genoux serrés, avec des cercles de diamants au haut des bras, elle restait toute droite, dans une attitude hiératique.

Sur deux sièges plus bas étaient son père et son époux. Narr'Havas, habillé d'une simarre blonde, portait sa couronne de sel gemme d'où s'échappaient deux tresses de cheveux, tordues comme des cornes d'Ammon ; et Hamilcar, en tunique violette brochée de pampres d'or, gardait à son flanc un glaive de bataille.

Dans l'espace que les tables enfermaient, le python du temple d'Eschmoûn, couché par terre, entre des flaques d'huile rose, décrivait en se mordant la queue un grand cercle noir. Il y avait au milieu du cercle une colonne de cuivre supportant un oeuf de cristal ; et, comme le soleil frappait dessus, des rayons de tous les côtés en partaient.

Derrière Salammbô se développaient les prêtres de Tanit en robe de lin ; les Anciens, à sa droite, formaient, avec leurs tiares, une grande ligne d'or, et, de l'autre côté, les Riches, avec leurs sceptres d'émeraude, une grande ligne verte, — tandis que, tout au fond, où étaient rangés les prêtres de Moloch, on aurait dit, à cause de leurs manteaux, une muraille de pourpre. Les autres collèges occupaient les terrasses inférieures. La multitude encombrait les rues. Elle remontait sur les maisons et allait par longues files jusqu'au haut de l'Acropole. Ayant ainsi le peuple à ses pieds, le firmament sur sa tête, et autour d'elle l'immensité de la mer, le golfe, les montagnes et les perspectives des provinces, Salammbô resplendissante se confondait avec Tanit et semblait le génie même de Carthage, son âme corporifiée.

Le festin devait durer toute la nuit, et des lampadaires à plusieurs branches étaient plantés, comme des arbres, sur les tapis de laine peinte qui enveloppaient les tables basses. De grandes buires d'électrum, des amphores de verre bleu, des cuillères d'écaille et des petits pains ronds se pressaient dans la double série des assiettes à bordures de perles ; des grappes de raisin avec leurs feuilles étaient enroulées comme des thyrses à des ceps d'ivoire ; des blocs de neige se fondaient sur des plateaux d'ébène, et des limons, des grenades, des courges et des pastèques faisaient des monticules sous les hautes argenteries ; des sangliers, la gueule ouverte, se vautraient dans la poussière des épices ; des lièvres, couverts de leurs poils, paraissaient bondir entre les fleurs ; des viandes composées emplissaient des coquilles ; les pâtisseries avaient des formes symboliques ; quand on retirait les cloches des plats, il s'envolait des colombes.

Cependant les esclaves, la tunique retroussée, circulaient sur la pointe des orteils ; de temps à autre, les lyres sonnaient un hymne, ou bien un choeur de voix s'élevait. La rumeur du peuple, continue comme le bruit de la mer, flottait vaguement autour du festin et semblait le bercer dans une harmonie plus large ; quelques-uns se rappelaient le banquet des Mercenaires ; on s'abandonnait à des rêves de bonheur ; le soleil commençait à descendre, et le croissant de la lune se levait déjà dans l'autre partie du ciel.

Mais Salammbô, comme si quelqu'un l'eût appelée, tourna la tête : le peuple, qui la regardait, suivit la direction de ses yeux.

Au sommet de l'Acropole, la porte du cachot, taillé dans le roc au pied du temple, venait de s'ouvrir ; et dans ce trou noir, un homme sur le seuil était debout.

Il en sortit courbé en deux, avec l'air effaré des bêtes fauves quand on les rend libres tout à coup.

La lumière l'éblouissait, ; il resta quelque temps immobile. Tous l'avaient reconnu et ils retenaient leur haleine.

Le corps de cette victime était pour eux une chose particulière et décorée d'une splendeur presque religieuse. Ils se penchaient pour le voir, les femmes surtout. Elles brûlaient de contempler celui qui avait fait mourir leurs enfants et leurs époux ; et du fond de leur âme, malgré elles, surgissait une infâme curiosité, le désir de le connaître complètement, envie mêlée de remords et qui se tournait en un surcroît d'exécration.

Enfin il s'avança ; alors l'étourdissement de la surprise s'évanouit. Quantité de bras se levèrent et on ne le vit plus.

L'escalier de l'Acropole avait soixante marches. Il les descendit comme s'il eût roulé dans un torrent, du haut d'une montagne ; trois fois on l'aperçut qui bondissait, puis en bas, il retomba sur les deux talons.

Ses épaules saignaient, sa poitrine haletait à larges secousses ; et il faisait pour rompre ses liens de tels efforts que ses bras croisés sur ses reins nus se gonflaient, comme des tronçons de serpent.

De l'endroit où il se trouvait, plusieurs rues partaient devant lui. Dans chacune d'elles, un triple rang de chaînes en bronze, fixées au nombril des Dieux Patæques, s'étendait d'un bout à l'autre, parallèlement : la foule était tassée contre les maisons, et, au milieu des serviteurs, des Anciens se promenaient en brandissant des lanières.

Un d'eux le poussa en avant, d'un grand coup ; Mâtho se mit à marcher.

Ils allongeaient leurs bras par-dessus les chaînes, en criant qu'on lui avait laissé le chemin trop large ; et il allait, palpé, piqué, déchiqueté par tous ces doigts ; lorsqu'il était au bout d'une rue, une autre apparaissait, plusieurs fois il se jeta de côté pour les mordre, on s'écartait bien vite, les chaînes le retenaient, et la foule éclatait de rire.

Un enfant lui déchira l'oreille ; une jeune fille, dissimulant sous sa manche la pointe d'un fuseau, lui fendit la joue ; on lui enlevait des poignées de cheveux, des lambeaux de chair ; d'autres avec des bâtons où tenaient des éponges imbibées d'immondices lui tamponnaient le visage. Du côté droit de sa gorge, un flot de sang jaillit : aussitôt le délire commença. Ce dernier des Barbares leur représentait tous les Barbares, toute l'armée ; ils se vengeaient sur lui de tous les désastres, de leurs terreurs, de leurs opprobres. La rage du peuple se développait en s'assouvissant ; les chaînes trop tendues se courbaient, allaient se rompre ; ils ne sentaient pas les coups des esclaves frappant sur eux pour les refouler ; d'autres se cramponnaient aux saillies des maisons ; toutes les ouvertures dans les murailles étaient bouchées par des têtes ; et le mal qu'ils ne pouvaient lui faire, ils le hurlaient.

C'étaient des injures atroces, immondes, avec des encouragements ironiques et des imprécations ; et comme ils n'avaient pas assez de sa douleur présente, ils lui en annonçaient d'autres plus terribles encore pour l'éternité.

Ce vaste aboiement emplissait Carthage, avec une continuité stupide. Souvent une seule syllabe, — une intonation rauque, profonde, frénétique, — était répétée durant quelques minutes par le peuple entier. De la base au sommet les murs en vibraient, et les deux parois de la rue semblaient à Mâtho venir contre lui et l'enlever du sol, comme deux bras immenses qui l'étouffaient dans l'air.

Cependant il se souvenait d'avoir, autrefois, éprouvé quelque chose de pareil. C'était la même foule sur les terrasses, les mêmes regards, la même colère ; mais alors il marchait libre, tous s'écartaient, un Dieu le recouvrait ; — et ce souvenir, peu à peu se précisant, lui apportait une tristesse écrasante. Des ombres passaient devant ses yeux ; la ville tourbillonnait dans sa tête, son sang ruisselait par une blessure de sa hanche, il se sentait mourir ; ses jarrets plièrent, et il s'affaissa tout doucement, sur les dalles.

Quelqu'un alla prendre, au péristyle du temple de Melkarth, la barre d'un trépied rougie par des charbons, et, la glissant sous la première chaîne, il l'appuya contre sa plaie. On vit la chair fumer ; les huées du peuple étouffèrent sa voix ; il était debout.

Six pas plus loin, et une troisième, une quatrième fois encore il tomba ; toujours un supplice nouveau le relevait. On lui envoyait avec des tubes des gouttelettes d'huile bouillante ; on sema sous ses pas des tessons de verre ; il continuait à marcher. Au coin de la rue de Sateb, il s'accota sous l'auvent d'une boutique, le dos contre la muraille, et n'avança plus.

Les esclaves du Conseil le frappèrent avec leurs fouets en cuir d'hippopotame, si furieusement et pendant si longtemps que les franges de leur tunique étaient trempées de sueur. Mâtho paraissait insensible ; tout à coup, il prit son élan et il se mit à courir au hasard, en faisant avec ses lèvres le bruit des gens qui grelottent par un grand froid. Il enfila la rue de Boudès, la rue de Scepo, traversa le Marché-aux-Herbes et arriva sur la place de Khamon.

Il appartenait aux prêtres, maintenant ; les esclaves venaient d'écarter la foule ; il y avait plus d'espace. Mâtho regarda autour de lui, et ses yeux rencontrèrent Salammbô.

Dès le premier pas qu'il avait fait, elle s'était levée ; puis, involontairement, à mesure qu'il se rapprochait, elle s'était avancée peu à peu jusqu'au bord de la terrasse ; et bientôt, toutes les choses extérieures s'effaçant, elle n'avait aperçu que Mâtho. Un silence s'était fait dans son âme, — un de ces abîmes où le monde entier disparaît sous la pression d'une pensée unique, d'un souvenir, d'un regard. Cet homme, qui marchait vers elle, l'attirait.

Il n'avait plus, sauf les yeux, d'apparence humaine ; c'était une longue forme complètement rouge ; ses liens rompus pendaient le long de ses cuisses, mais on ne les distinguait pas des tendons de ses poignets tout dénudés ; sa bouche restait grande ouverte ; de ses orbites sortaient deux flammes qui avaient l'air de monter jusqu'à ses cheveux ; — et le misérable marchait toujours !

Il arriva juste au pied de la terrasse. Salammbô était penchée sur la balustrade ; ces effroyables prunelles la contemplaient, et la conscience lui surgit de tout ce qu'il avait souffert pour elle. Bien qu'il agonisât, elle le revoyait dans sa tente, à genoux, lui entourant la taille de ses bras, balbutiant des paroles douces ; elle avait soif de les sentir encore, de les entendre ; : elle ne voulait pas qu'il mourût ! A ce moment-là. Mâtho eut un grand tressaillement ; elle allait crier. Il s'abattit à la renverse et ne bougea plus. Salammbô, presque évanouie, fut rapportée sur son trône par les prêtres s'empressant autour d'elle. Ils la félicitaient ; c'était son oeuvre. Tous battaient des mains et trépignaient, en hurlant son nom. Un homme s'élança sur le cadavre. Bien qu'il fût sans barbe, il avait à l'épaule le manteau des prêtres de Moloch, et à la ceinture l'espèce de couteau leur servant à dépecer les viandes sacrées et que terminait, au bout du manche, une spatule d'or. D'un seul coup il fendit la poitrine de Mâtho, puis en arracha le coeur, le posa sur la cuiller, et Schahabarim, levant son bras, l'offrit au soleil.

Le soleil s'abaissait derrière les flots ; ses rayons arrivaient comme de longues flèches sur le coeur tout rouge. L'astre s'enfonçait dans la mer à mesure que les battements diminuaient ; à la dernière palpitation, il disparut.

Alors, depuis le golfe jusqu'à la lagune et de l'isthme jusqu'au phare, dans toutes les rues, sur toutes les maisons et sur tous les temples, ce fut un seul cri ; quelquefois il s'arrêtait, puis recommençait ; les édifices en tremblaient ; Carthage était comme convulsée dans le spasme d'une joie titanique et d'un espoir sans bornes.

Narr'Havas, enivré d'orgueil, passa son bras gauche sous la taille de Salammbô, en signe de possession ; et, de la droite, prenant une patère d'or, il but au génie de Carthage.

Salammbô se leva comme son époux, avec une coupe à la main, afin de boire aussi. Elle retomba, la tête en arrière, par-dessus le dossier du trône, — blême, raidie, les lèvres ouvertes, — et ses cheveux dénoués pendaient jusqu'à terre.

Ainsi mourut la fille d'Hamilcar pour avoir touché au manteau de Tanit.

SENITMENTAL EDUCATION

Translated by M. Walter Dunne

First published in 1869, this was Flaubert’s last novel to be published during his lifetime. The novel concerns the life of Frederic Moreau, a young man living through the revolution of 1848 and the founding of the Second French Empire, and his love for an older woman. Flaubert based many of the protagonist's experiences, including the romantic events, on his own life. The writer later explained, "I want to write the moral history of the men of my generation-- or, more accurately, the history of their feelings. It's a book about love, about passion; but passion such as can exist nowadays--that is to say, inactive."

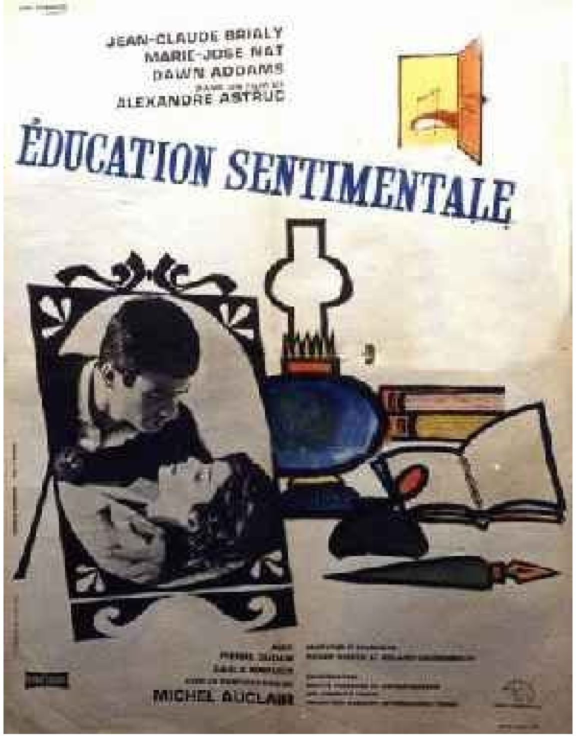
Many of the novel’s characters are marked by fickleness and self-interest. For example, Frederic is originally infatuated with Madame Arnoux, but throughout the novel his love increases and decreases. He is unable to decide on a profession and instead lives on his uncle's inheritance. The novel is noted for its cynical tone, stressing Flaubert's harsh judgment of his times.

L'ÉDUCATION
SENTIMENTALE
— HISTOIRE D'UN JEUNE HOMME —
PAR
GUSTAVE FLAUBERT
TOME PREMIER

PARIS
MICHEL LÉVY FRÈRES, ÉDITEURS
RUE VIVIENNE, 2 BIS, ET BOULEVARD DES ITALIENS, 15
A LA LIBRAIRIE NOUVELLE
—
1870

1869

The titlepage of an early edition


JEAN-CLAUDE BRIALY
MARIE-JOSE NAT
DAWN ADDAMS
ALEXANDRE ASTRUC
ÉDUCATION SENTIMENTALE
MICHEL AUCLAIR

The 1962 film adaptation

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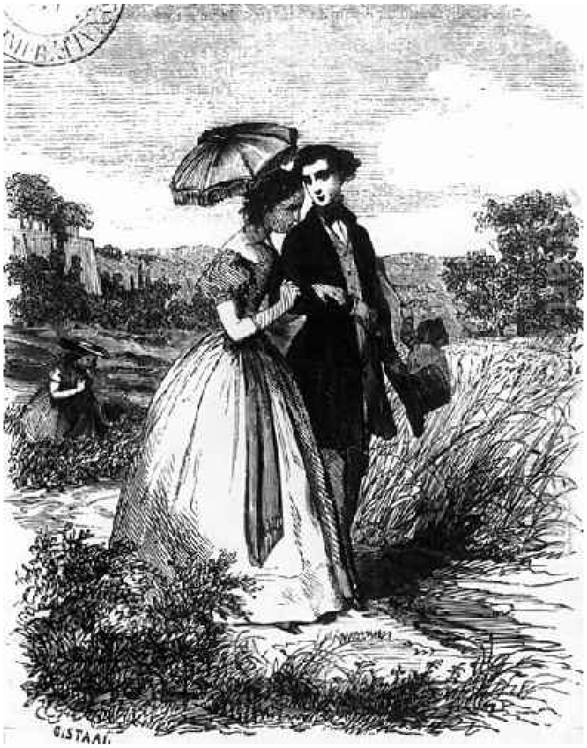


An original illustration

CHAPTER I.

A Promising Pupil.

On the 15th of September, 1840, about six o'clock in the morning, the *Ville de Montereau*, just on the point of starting, was sending forth great whirlwinds of smoke, in front of the Quai St. Bernard.

People came rushing on board in breathless haste. The traffic was obstructed by casks, cables, and baskets of linen. The sailors answered nobody. People jostled one another. Between the two paddle-boxes was piled up a heap of parcels; and the uproar was drowned in the loud hissing of the steam, which, making its way through the plates of sheet-iron, enveloped everything in a white cloud, while the bell at the prow kept ringing continuously.

At last, the vessel set out; and the two banks of the river, stocked with warehouses, timber-yards, and manufactories, opened out like two huge ribbons being unrolled.

A young man of eighteen, with long hair, holding an album under his arm, remained near the helm without moving. Through the haze he surveyed steeples, buildings of which he did not know the names; then, with a parting glance, he took in the Île St. Louis, the Cité, Nôtre Dame; and presently, as Paris disappeared from his view, he heaved a deep sigh.

Frederick Moreau, having just taken his Bachelor's degree, was returning home to Nogent-sur-Seine, where he would have to lead a languishing existence for two months, before going back to begin his legal studies. His mother had sent him, with enough to cover his expenses, to Havre to see an uncle, from whom she had expectations of his receiving an inheritance. He had returned from that place only yesterday; and he indemnified himself for not having the opportunity of spending a little time in the capital by taking the longest possible route to reach his own part of the country.

The hubbub had subsided. The passengers had all taken their places. Some of them stood warming themselves around the machinery, and the chimney spat forth with a slow, rhythmic rattle its plume of black smoke. Little drops of dew trickled over the copper plates; the deck quivered with the vibration from within; and the two paddle-wheels, rapidly turning round, lashed the water. The edges of the river were covered with sand. The vessel swept past rafts of wood which began to oscillate under the rippling of the waves, or a boat without sails in which a man sat fishing. Then the wandering haze cleared off; the sun appeared; the hill which ran along the course of the Seine to the right subsided by degrees the hill which ran along the course of the Seine to the right subsided by degrees, and another rose nearer on the opposite bank.

It was crowned with trees, which surrounded low-built houses, covered with roofs in the Italian style. They had sloping gardens divided by fresh walls, iron railings, grass-plots, hot-houses, and vases of geraniums, laid out regularly on the terraces where one could lean forward on one's elbow. More than one spectator longed, on beholding those attractive residences which looked so peaceful, to be the owner of one of them, and to dwell there till the end of his days with a good billiard-table, a sailing-boat, and a woman or some other object to dream about. The agreeable novelty of a journey by water made such outbursts natural. Already the wags on board were beginning their jokes. Many began to sing. Gaiety prevailed, and glasses of brandy were poured out.

Frederick was thinking about the apartment which he would occupy over there, on the plan of a drama, on subjects for pictures, on future passions. He found that the happiness merited by the excellence of his soul was slow in arriving. He declaimed some melancholy verses. He walked with rapid step along the deck. He went on till he reached the end at which the bell was; and, in the centre of a group of passengers and sailors, he saw a gentleman talking soft nothings to a country-woman, while fingering the gold cross which she wore over her breast. He was a jovial blade of forty with frizzled hair. His robust form was encased in a jacket of black velvet, two emeralds sparkled in his cambric shirt, and his wide, white trousers fell over odd-looking red boots of Russian leather set off with blue designs.

The presence of Frederick did not discompose him. He turned round and glanced several times at the young man with winks of enquiry. He next offered cigars to all who were standing around him. But getting tired, no doubt, of their society, he moved away from them and took a seat further up. Frederick followed him.

The conversation, at first, turned on the various kinds of tobacco, then quite naturally it glided into a discussion about women. The gentleman in the red boots gave the young man advice; he put forward theories, related anecdotes, referred to himself by way of illustration, and he gave utterance to all these things in a paternal tone, with the ingenuousness of entertaining depravity.

He was republican in his opinions. He had travelled; he was familiar with the inner life of theatres, restaurants, and newspapers, and knew all the theatrical celebrities, whom he called by their Christian names. Frederick told him confidentially about his projects; and the elder man took an encouraging view of them.

But he stopped talking to take a look at the funnel, then he went mumbling rapidly through a long calculation in order to ascertain "how much each stroke of rapidly through a long calculation in order to ascertain "how much each stroke of the piston at so many times per minute would come to," etc., and having found the number, he spoke about the scenery, which he admired immensely. Then he gave expression to his delight at having got away from business.

Frederick regarded him with a certain amount of respect, and politely manifested a strong desire to know his name. The stranger, without a moment's hesitation, replied:

"Jacques Arnoux, proprietor of *L'Art Industriel*, Boulevard Montmartre."

A man-servant in a gold-laced cap came up and said:

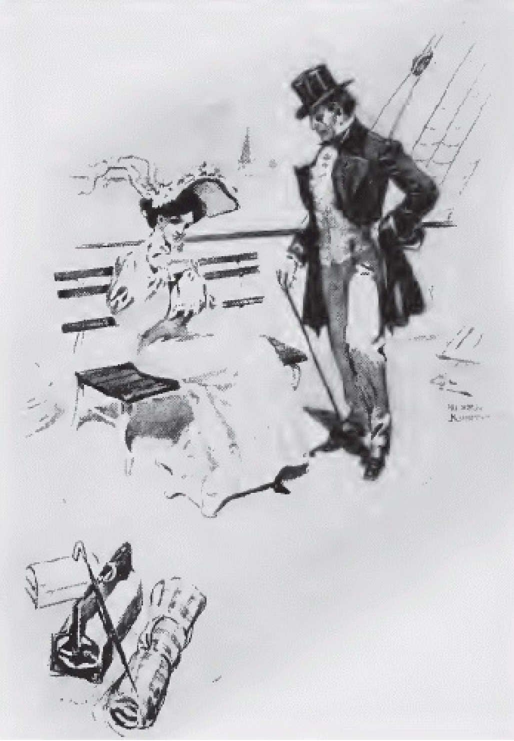
"Would Monsieur have the kindness to go below? Mademoiselle is crying."

L'Art Industriel was a hybrid establishment, wherein the functions of an art-journal and a picture-shop were combined. Frederick had seen this title several times in the bookseller's window in his native place on big prospectuses, on which the name of Jacques Arnoux displayed itself magisterially.

The sun's rays fell perpendicularly, shedding a glittering light on the iron hoops around the masts, the plates of the barricades, and the surface of the water, which, at the prow, was cut into two furrows that spread out as far as the borders of the meadows. At each winding of the river, a screen of pale poplars presented itself with the utmost uniformity. The surrounding country at this point had an empty look. In the sky there were little white clouds which remained motionless, and the sense of weariness, which vaguely diffused itself over everything, seemed to retard the progress of the steamboat and to add to the insignificant appearance of the passengers. Putting aside a few persons of good position who were travelling first class, they were artisans or shopmen with their wives and children. As it was customary at that time to wear old clothes when travelling, they nearly all had their heads covered with shabby Greek caps or discoloured hats, thin black coats that had become quite threadbare from constant rubbing against writing-desks, or frock-coats with the casings of their buttons loose from continual service in the shop. Here and there some roll-collar waistcoat afforded a glimpse of a calico shirt stained with coffee. Pinchbeck pins were stuck into cravats that were all torn. List shoes were kept up by stitched straps. Two or three roughs who held in their hands bamboo canes with leathern loops, kept looking askance at their fellow-passengers; and fathers of families opened their eyes wide while making enquiries. People chatted either standing up or squatting over their luggage; some went to sleep in various corners of the vessel; several occupied themselves with eating. The deck was soiled with walnut shells, butt-ends of cigars, peelings of pears, and the droppings of pork-butchers' meat, which had been carried wrapped up in paper. Three cabinet-makers in blouses took their stand in front of the bottle case; a harp-player in rags was resting with his elbows on his instrument. At intervals could be heard the sound of falling coals in the furnace, a shout, or a laugh; and the captain kept walking on the bridge from one paddle-box to the other without stopping for a moment.

Frederick, to get back to his place, pushed forward the grating leading into the part of the vessel reserved for first-class passengers, and in so doing disturbed two sportsmen with their dogs.

What he then saw was like an apparition. She was seated in the middle of a bench all alone, or, at any rate, he could see no one, dazzled as he was by her eyes. At the moment when he was passing, she raised her head; his shoulders bent involuntarily; and, when he had seated himself, some distance away, on the same side, he glanced towards her.



She wore a wide straw hat with red ribbons which fluttered in the wind behind her. Her black tresses, twining around the edges of her large brows, descended very low, and seemed amorously to press the oval of her face. Her robe of light muslin spotted with green spread out in numerous folds. She was in the act of embroidering something; and her straight nose, her chin, her entire person was cut out on the background of the luminous air and the blue sky.

As she remained in the same attitude, he took several turns to the right and to the left to hide from her his change of position; then he placed himself close to her parasol which lay against the bench, and pretended to be looking at a sloop on the river.

Never before had he seen more lustrous dark skin, a more seductive figure, or more delicately shaped fingers than those through which the sunlight gleamed.

He stared with amazement at her work-basket, as if it were something extraordinary. What was her name, her place of residence, her life, her past? He longed to become familiar with the furniture of her apartment, all the dresses that she had worn, the people whom she visited; and the desire of physical possession yielded to a deeper yearning, a painful curiosity that knew no bounds.

A negress, wearing a silk handkerchief tied round her head, made her appearance, holding by the hand a little girl already tall for her age. The child, whose eyes were swimming with tears, had just awakened. The lady took the little one on her knees. "Mademoiselle was not good, though she would soon be seven; her mother would not love her any more. She was too often pardoned for being naughty." And Frederick heard those things with delight, as if he had made a discovery, an acquisition.

He assumed that she must be of Andalusian descent, perhaps a Creole: had she brought this negress across with her from the West Indian Islands?

Meanwhile his attention was directed to a long shawl with violet stripes thrown behind her back over the copper support of the bench. She must have, many a time, wrapped it around her waist, as the vessel sped through the midst of the waves; drawn it over her feet, gone to sleep in it!

Frederick suddenly noticed that with the sweep of its fringes it was slipping off, and it was on the point of falling into the water when, with a bound, he secured it. She said to him:

"Thanks, Monsieur."

Their eyes met.

"Are you ready, my dear?" cried my lord Arnoux, presenting himself at the hood of the companion-ladder.

Mademoiselle Marthe ran over to him, and, clinging to his neck, she began pulling at his moustache. The strains of a harp were heard — she wanted to see the music played; and presently the performer on the instrument, led forward by the negress, entered the place reserved for saloon passengers. Arnoux recognized in him a man who had formerly been a model, and "thou'd" him, to the astonishment of the bystanders. At length the harpist, flinging back his long hair over his shoulders, stretched out his hands and began playing.

It was an Oriental ballad all about poniards, flowers, and stars. The man in rags sang it in a sharp voice; the twanging of the harp strings broke the harmony of the tune with false notes. He played more vigorously: the chords vibrated, and their metallic sounds seemed to send forth sobs, and, as it were, the plaint of a proud and vanquished love. On both sides of the river, woods extended as far as the edge of the water. A current of fresh air swept past them, and Madame Arnoux gazed vaguely into the distance. When the music stopped, she moved her eyes several times as if she were starting out of a dream.

The harpist approached them with an air of humility. While Arnoux was searching his pockets for money, Frederick stretched out towards the cap his closed hand, and then, opening it in a shamefaced manner, he deposited in it a louis d'or. It was not vanity that had prompted him to bestow this alms in her presence, but the idea of a blessing in which he thought she might share — an almost religious impulse of the heart.

Arnoux, pointing out the way, cordially invited him to go below. Frederick declared that he had just lunched; on the contrary, he was nearly dying of hunger; and he had not a single centime in his purse.

After that, it occurred to him that he had a perfect right, as well as anyone else, to remain in the cabin.

Ladies and gentlemen were seated before round tables, lunching, while an attendant went about serving out coffee. Monsieur and Madame Arnoux were in the far corner to the right. He took a seat on the long bench covered with velvet, having picked up a newspaper which he found there.

They would have to take the diligence at Montereau for Châlons. Their tour in Switzerland would last a month. Madame Arnoux blamed her husband for his weakness in dealing with his child. He whispered in her ear something agreeable, no doubt, for she smiled. Then, he got up to draw down the window curtain at her back. Under the low, white ceiling, a crude light filled the cabin. Frederick, sitting opposite to the place where she sat, could distinguish the shade of her eyelashes. She just moistened her lips with her glass and broke a little piece of crust between her fingers. The lapis-lazuli locket fastened by a little gold chain to her wrist made a ringing sound, every now and then, as it touched her plate. Those present, however, did not appear to notice it.

At intervals one could see, through the small portholes, the side of a boat taking away passengers or putting them on board. Those who sat round the tables stooped towards the openings, and called out the names of the various places they passed along the river.

Arnoux complained of the cooking. He grumbled particularly at the amount of the bill, and got it reduced. Then, he carried off the young man towards the forecastle to drink a glass of grog with him. But Frederick speedily came back again to gaze at Madame Arnoux, who had returned to the awning, beneath which she seated herself. She was reading a thin, grey-covered volume. From time to time, the corners of her mouth curled and a gleam of pleasure lighted up her forehead. He felt jealous of the inventor of those things which appeared to interest her so much. The more he contemplated her, the more he felt that there were yawning abysses between them. He was reflecting that he should very soon lose sight of her irrevocably, without having extracted a few words from her, without leaving her even a souvenir!

On the right, a plain stretched out. On the left, a strip of pasture-land rose gently to meet a hillock where one could see vineyards, groups of walnut-trees, a mill embedded in the grassy slopes, and, beyond that, little zigzag paths over the white mass of rocks that reached up towards the clouds. What bliss it would have been to ascend side by side with her, his arm around her waist, while her gown would sweep the yellow leaves, listening to her voice and gazing up into her glowing eyes! The steamboat might stop, and all they would have to do was to step out of it; and yet this thing, simple as it might be, was not less difficult than it would have been to move the sun.

A little further on, a château appeared with pointed roof and square turrets. A flower garden spread out in the foreground; and avenues ran, like dark archways, under the tall linden trees. He pictured her to himself passing along by this group of trees. At that moment a young lady and a young man showed themselves on the steps in front of the house, between the trunks of the orange trees. Then the entire scene vanished.

The little girl kept skipping playfully around the place where he had stationed himself on the deck. Frederick wished to kiss her. She hid herself behind her nurse. Her mother scolded her for not being nice to the gentleman who had rescued her own shawl. Was this an indirect overture?

"Is she going to speak to me?" he asked himself.

Time was flying. How was he to get an invitation to the Arnoux's house? And he could think of nothing better than to draw her attention to the autumnal hues, adding:

"We are close to winter — the season of balls and dinner-parties."

But Arnoux was entirely occupied with his luggage. They had arrived at the point of the river's bank facing Surville. The two bridges drew nearer. They passed a ropewalk, then a range of low-built houses, inside which there were pots of tar and splinters of wood; and brats went along the sand turning head over heels. Frederick recognised a man with a sleeved waistcoat, and called out to him:

"Make haste!"

They were at the landing-place. He looked around anxiously for Arnoux amongst the crowd of passengers, and the other came and shook hands with him, saying:

"A pleasant time, dear Monsieur!"

When he was on the quay, Frederick turned around. She was standing beside the helm. He cast a look towards her into which he tried to put his whole soul. She remained motionless, as if he had done nothing. Then, without paying the

She remained motionless, as if he had done nothing. Then, without paying the slightest attentions to the obeisances of his man-servant:

"Why didn't you bring the trap down here?"

The man made excuses.

"What a clumsy fellow you are! Give me some money."

And after that he went off to get something to eat at an inn.

A quarter of an hour later, he felt an inclination to turn into the coachyard, as if by chance. Perhaps he would see her again.

"What's the use of it?" said he to himself.

The vehicle carried him off. The two horses did not belong to his mother. She had borrowed one of M. Chambrion, the tax-collector, in order to have it yoked alongside of her own. Isidore, having set forth the day before, had taken a rest at Bray until evening, and had slept at Montereau, so that the animals, with restored vigour, were trotting briskly.

Fields on which the crops had been cut stretched out in apparently endless succession; and by degrees Villeneuve, St. Georges, Ablon, Châtillon, Corbeil, and the other places — his entire journey — came back to his recollection with such vividness that he could now recall to mind fresh details, more intimate particulars.... Under the lowest flounce of her gown, her foot showed itself encased in a dainty silk boot of maroon shade. The awning made of ticking formed a wide canopy over her head, and the little red tassels of the edging kept perpetually trembling in the breeze.

She resembled the women of whom he had read in romances. He would have added nothing to the charms of her person, and would have taken nothing from them. The universe had suddenly become enlarged. She was the luminous point towards which all things converged; and, rocked by the movement of the vehicle, with half-dosed eyelids, and his face turned towards the clouds, he abandoned himself to a dreamy, infinite joy.

At Bray, he did not wait till the horses had got their oats; he walked on along the road ahead by himself. Arnoux had, when he spoke to her, addressed her as "Marie." He now loudly repeated the name "Marie!" His voice pierced the air and was lost in the distance.

The western sky was one great mass of flaming purple. Huge stacks of wheat, rising up in the midst of the stubble fields, projected giant shadows. A dog began to bark in a farm-house in the distance. He shivered, seized with disquietude for which he could assign no cause.

When Isidore had come up with him, he jumped up into the front seat to drive. His fit of weakness was past. He had thoroughly made up his mind to effect an introduction into the house of the Arnoux, and to become intimate with them. Their house should be amusing; besides, he liked Arnoux; then, who could them. Their house should be amusing, besides, he liked Arnoux; then, who could tell? Thereupon a wave of blood rushed up to his face; his temples throbbed; he cracked his whip, shook the reins, and set the horses going at such a pace that the old coachman repeatedly exclaimed:

"Easy! easy now, or they'll get broken-winded!"

Gradually Frederick calmed down, and he listened to what the man was saying. Monsieur's return was impatiently awaited. Mademoiselle Louise had cried in her anxiety to go in the trap to meet him.

"Who, pray, is Mademoiselle Louise?"

"Monsieur Roque's little girl, you know."

"Ah! I had forgotten," rejoined Frederick, carelessly.

Meanwhile, the two horses could keep up the pace no longer. They were both getting lame; and nine o'clock struck at St. Laurent's when he arrived at the parade in front of his mother's house.

This house of large dimensions, with a garden looking out on the open country, added to the social importance of Madame Moreau, who was the most respected lady in the district.

She came of an old family of nobles, of which the male line was now extinct. Her husband, a plebeian whom her parents forced her to marry, met his death by a sword-thrust, during her pregnancy, leaving her an estate much encumbered. She received visitors three times a week, and from time to time, gave a fashionable dinner. But the number of wax candles was calculated beforehand, and she looked forward with some impatience to the payment of her rents. These pecuniary embarrassments, concealed as if there were some guilt attached to them, imparted a certain gravity to her character. Nevertheless, she displayed no prudery, no sourness, in the practice of her peculiar virtue. Her most trifling charities seemed munificent alms. She was consulted about the selection of servants, the education of young girls, and the art of making preserves, and Monseigneur used to stay at her house on the occasion of his episcopal visitations.

Madame Moreau cherished a lofty ambition for her son. Through a sort of prudence grounded on the expectation of favours, she did not care to hear blame cast on the Government. He would need patronage at the start; then, with its aid, he might become a councillor of State, an ambassador, a minister. His triumphs at the college of Sens warranted this proud anticipation; he had carried off there the prize of honour.

When he entered the drawing-room, all present arose with a great racket; he was embraced; and the chairs, large and small, were drawn up in a big semi-circle around the fireplace. M. Gamblin immediately asked him what was his opinion about Madame Lafarge. This case, the rage of the period, did not fail to lead to a violent discussion. Madame Moreau stopped it, to the regret, however, of M. Gamblin. He deemed it serviceable to the young man in his character of a future lawyer, and, nettled at what had occurred, he left the drawing-room.

Nothing should have caused surprise on the part of a friend of Père Roque! The reference to Père Roque led them to talk of M. Dambreuse, who had just become the owner of the demesne of La Fortelle. But the tax-collector had drawn Frederick aside to know what he thought of M. Guizot's latest work. They were all anxious to get some information about his private affairs, and Madame Benoît went cleverly to work with that end in view by inquiring about his uncle. How was that worthy relative? They no longer heard from him. Had he not a distant cousin in America?

The cook announced that Monsieur's soup was served. The guests discreetly retired. Then, as soon as they were alone in the dining-room, his mother said to him in a low tone:

"Well?"

The old man had received him in a very cordial manner, but without disclosing his intentions.

Madame Moreau sighed.

"Where is she now?" was his thought.

The diligence was rolling along the road, and, wrapped up in the shawl, no doubt, she was leaning against the cloth of the coupé, her beautiful head nodding asleep.

He and his mother were just going up to their apartments when a waiter from the Swan of the Cross brought him a note.

"What is that, pray?"

"It is Deslauriers, who wants me," said he.

"Ha! your chum!" said Madame Moreau, with a contemptuous sneer. "Certainly it is a nice hour to select!"

Frederick hesitated. But friendship was stronger. He got his hat.

"At any rate, don't be long!" said his mother to him.

CHAPTER II.

Damon and Pythias.

Charles Deslauriers' father, an ex-captain in the line, who had left the service in 1818, had come back to Nogent, where he had married, and with the amount of the dowry bought up the business of a process-server, which brought him barely enough to maintain him. Embittered by a long course of unjust treatment, suffering still from the effects of old wounds, and always regretting the Emperor, he vented on those around him the fits of rage that seemed to choke him. Few children received so many whackings as his son. In spite of blows, however, the brat did not yield. His mother, when she tried to interpose, was also ill-treated. Finally, the captain planted the boy in his office, and all the day long kept him bent over his desk copying documents, with the result that his right shoulder was noticeably higher than his left.

In 1833, on the invitation of the president, the captain sold his office. His wife died of cancer. He then went to live at Dijon. After that he started in business at Troyes, where he was connected with the slave trade; and, having obtained a small scholarship for Charles, placed him at the college of Sens, where Frederick came across him. But one of the pair was twelve years old, while the other was fifteen; besides, a thousand differences of character and origin tended to keep them apart.

Frederick had in his chest of drawers all sorts of useful things — choice articles, such as a dressing-case. He liked to lie late in bed in the morning, to look at the swallows, and to read plays; and, regretting the comforts of home, he thought college life rough. To the process-server's son it seemed a pleasant life. He worked so hard that, at the end of the second year, he had got into the third form. However, owing to his poverty or to his quarrelsome disposition, he was regarded with intense dislike. But when on one occasion, in the courtyard where pupils of the middle grade took exercise, an attendant openly called him a beggar's child, he sprang at the fellow's throat, and would have killed him if three of the ushers had not intervened. Frederick, carried away by admiration, pressed him in his arms. From that day forward they became fast friends. The affection of a *grandee* no doubt flattered the vanity of the youth of meaner rank, and the other accepted as a piece of good fortune this devotion freely offered to him. During the holidays Charles's father allowed him to remain in the college. A translation of Plato which he opened by chance excited his enthusiasm. Then he became smitten with a love of metaphysical studies; and he made rapid progress, for he approached the subject with all the energy of youth and the self-confidence of an emancipated intellect. Jouffroy, Cousin, Laromiguière, Malebranche, and the Scotch metaphysicians — everything that could be found in the library dealing with this branch of knowledge passed through his hands. He found it necessary to steal the key in order to get the books.

Frederick's intellectual distractions were of a less serious description. He made sketches of the genealogy of Christ carved on a post in the Rue des Trois Rois, then of the gateway of a cathedral. After a course of mediæval dramas, he took up memoirs — Froissart, Comines, Pierre de l'Estoile, and Brantôme.

The impressions made on his mind by this kind of reading took such a hold of it that he felt a need within him of reproducing those pictures of bygone days. His ambition was to be, one day, the Walter Scott of France. Deslauriers dreamed of formulating a vast system of philosophy, which might have the most far-reaching applications.

They chatted over all these matters at recreation hours, in the playground, in front of the moral inscription painted under the clock. They kept whispering to each other about them in the chapel, even with St. Louis staring down at them. They dreamed about them in the dormitory, which looked out on a burial-ground. On walking-days they took up a position behind the others, and talked without stopping.

They spoke of what they would do later, when they had left college. First of all, they would set out on a long voyage with the money which Frederick would take out of his own fortune on reaching his majority. Then they would come back to Paris; they would work together, and would never part; and, as a relaxation from their labours, they would have love-affairs with princesses in boudoirs lined with satin, or dazzling orgies with famous courtesans. Their rapturous expectations were followed by doubts. After a crisis of verbose gaiety, they would often lapse into profound silence.

On summer evenings, when they had been walking for a long time over stony paths which bordered on vineyards, or on the high-road in the open country, and when they saw the wheat waving in the sunlight, while the air was filled with the fragrance of angelica, a sort of suffocating sensation took possession of them, and they stretched themselves on their backs, dizzy, intoxicated. Meanwhile the other lads, in their shirt-sleeves, were playing at base or flying kites. Then, as the usher called in the two companions from the playground, they would return, taking the path which led along by the gardens watered by brooklets; then they would pass through the boulevards overshadowed by the old city walls. The deserted streets rang under their tread. The grating flew back; they ascended the stairs; and they felt as sad as if they had had a great debauch.

The proctor maintained that they mutually cried up each other. Nevertheless, if Frederick worked his way up to the higher forms, it was through the exhortations of his friend; and, during the vacation in 1837, he brought Deslauriers to his mother's house.

Madame Moreau disliked the young man. He had a terrible appetite. He was fond of making republican speeches. To crown all, she got it into her head that he had been the means of leading her son into improper places. Their relations towards each other were watched. This only made their friendship grow stronger, and they bade one another adieu with heartfelt pangs when, in the following year, Deslauriers left the college in order to study law in Paris.

Frederick anxiously looked forward to the time when they would meet again. For two years they had not laid eyes on each other; and, when their embraces were over, they walked over the bridges to talk more at their ease.

The captain, who had now set up a billiard-room at Villenauxe, reddened with anger when his son called for an account of the expense of tutelage, and even cut down the cost of victuals to the lowest figure. But, as he intended to become a candidate at a later period for a professor's chair at the school, and as he had no money, Deslauriers accepted the post of principal clerk in an attorney's office at Troyes. By dint of sheer privation he spared four thousand francs; and, by not drawing upon the sum which came to him through his mother, he would always have enough to enable him to work freely for three years while he was waiting for a better position. It was necessary, therefore, to abandon their former project of living together in the capital, at least for the present.

Frederick hung down his head. This was the first of his dreams which had crumbled into dust.

"Be consoled," said the captain's son. "Life is long. We are young. We'll meet again. Think no more about it!"

He shook the other's hand warmly, and, to distract his attention, questioned him about his journey.

Frederick had nothing to tell. But, at the recollection of Madame Arnoux, his vexation disappeared. He did not refer to her, restrained by a feeling of bashfulness. He made up for it by expatiating on Arnoux, recalling his talk, his agreeable manner, his stories; and Deslauriers urged him strongly to cultivate this new acquaintance.

Frederick had of late written nothing. His literary opinions were changed. Passion was now above everything else in his estimation. He was equally enthusiastic about Werther, René, Franck, Lara, Lélia, and other ideal creations of less merit. Sometimes it seemed to him that music alone was capable of giving expression to his internal agitation. Then, he dreamed of symphonies; or else the surface of things seized hold of him, and he longed to paint. He had, however, composed verses. Deslauriers considered them beautiful, but did not ask him to write another poem.

As for himself, he had given up metaphysics. Social economy and the French Revolution absorbed all his attention. Just now he was a tall fellow of twenty-two, thin, with a wide mouth, and a resolute look. On this particular evening, he wore a poor-looking paletot of lasting; and his shoes were white with dust, for he had come all the way from Villenauxe on foot for the express purpose of seeing Frederick.

Isidore arrived while they were talking. Madame begged of Monsieur to return home, and, for fear of his catching cold, she had sent him his cloak.

"Wait a bit!" said Deslauriers. And they continued walking from one end to the other of the two bridges which rest on the narrow islet formed by the canal and the river.

When they were walking on the side towards Nogent, they had, exactly in front of them, a block of houses which projected a little. At the right might be seen the church, behind the mills in the wood, whose sluices had been closed up; and, at the left, the hedges covered with shrubs, along the skirts of the wood, formed a boundary for the gardens, which could scarcely be distinguished. But on the side towards Paris the high road formed a sheer descending line, and the meadows lost themselves in the distance under the vapours of the night. Silence reigned along this road, whose white track clearly showed itself through the surrounding gloom. Odours of damp leaves ascended towards them. The waterfall, where the stream had been diverted from its course a hundred paces further away, kept rumbling with that deep harmonious sound which waves make in the night time.

Deslauriers stopped, and said:

"'Tis funny to have these worthy folks sleeping so quietly! Patience! A new '89 is in preparation. People are tired of constitutions, charters, subtleties, lies! Ah, if I had a newspaper, or a platform, how I would shake off all these things! But, in order to undertake anything whatever, money is required. What a curse it is to be a tavern-keeper's son, and to waste one's youth in quest of bread!"

He hung down his head, bit his lips, and shivered under his threadbare overcoat.

Frederick flung half his cloak over his friend's shoulder. They both wrapped themselves up in it; and, with their arms around each other's waists, they walked down the road side by side.

"How do you think I can live over there without you?" said Frederick.

The bitter tone of his friend had brought back his own sadness.

The bitter tone of his friend had brought back his own sadness.

"I would have done something with a woman who loved me. What are you laughing at? Love is the feeding-ground, and, as it were, the atmosphere of genius. Extraordinary emotions produce sublime works. As for seeking after her whom I want, I give that up! Besides, if I should ever find her, she will repel me. I belong to the race of the disinherited, and I shall be extinguished with a treasure that will be of paste or of diamond — I know not which."

Somebody's shadow fell across the road, and at the same time they heard these words:

"Excuse me, gentlemen!"

The person who had uttered them was a little man attired in an ample brown frock-coat, and with a cap on his head which under its peak afforded a glimpse of a sharp nose.

"Monsieur Roque?" said Frederick.

"The very man!" returned the voice.

This resident in the locality explained his presence by stating that he had come back to inspect the wolf-traps in his garden near the water-side.

"And so you are back again in the old spot? Very good! I ascertained the fact through my little girl. Your health is good, I hope? You are not going away again?"

Then he left them, repelled, probably, by Frederick's chilling reception.

Madame Moreau, indeed, was not on visiting terms with him. Père Roque lived in peculiar relations with his servant-girl, and was held in very slight esteem, although he was the vice-president at elections, and M. Dambreuse's manager.

"The banker who resides in the Rue d'Anjou," observed Deslauriers. "Do you know what you ought to do, my fine fellow?"

Isidore once more interrupted. His orders were positive not to go back without Frederick. Madame would be getting uneasy at his absence.

"Well, well, he will go back," said Deslauriers. "He's not going to stay out all night."

And, as soon as the man-servant had disappeared:

"You ought to ask that old chap to introduce you to the Dambreuses. There's nothing so useful as to be a visitor at a rich man's house. Since you have a black coat and white gloves, make use of them. You must mix in that set. You can introduce me into it later. Just think! — a man worth millions! Do all you can to make him like you, and his wife, too. Become her lover!"

Frederick uttered an exclamation by way of protest.

"Why, I can quote classical examples for you on that point, I rather think!

Remember Rastignac in the *Comédie Humaine*. You will succeed, I have no doubt."

Frederick had so much confidence in Deslauriers that he felt his firmness giving way, and forgetting Madame Arnoux, or including her in the prediction made with regard to the other, he could not keep from smiling.

The clerk added:

"A last piece of advice: pass your examinations. It is always a good thing to have a handle to your name: and, without more ado, give up your Catholic and Satanic poets, whose philosophy is as old as the twelfth century! Your despair is silly. The very greatest men have had more difficult beginnings, as in the case of Mirabeau. Besides, our separation will not be so long. I will make that pickpocket of a father of mine disgorge. It is time for me to be going back. Farewell! Have you got a hundred sous to pay for my dinner?"

Frederick gave him ten francs, what was left of those he had got that morning from Isidore.

Meanwhile, some forty yards away from the bridges, a light shone from the garret-window of a low-built house.

Deslauriers noticed it. Then he said emphatically, as he took off his hat:

"Your pardon, Venus, Queen of Heaven, but Penury is the mother of wisdom. We have been slandered enough for that — so have mercy."

This allusion to an adventure in which they had both taken part, put them into a jovial mood. They laughed loudly as they passed through the streets.

Then, having settled his bill at the inn, Deslauriers walked back with Frederick as far as the crossway near the Hôtel-Dieu, and after a long embrace, the two friends parted.

CHAPTER III.

Sentiment and Passion.

Two months later, Frederick, having debarked one morning in the Rue Coq-Héron, immediately thought of paying his great visit.

Chance came to his aid. Père Roque had brought him a roll of papers and requested him to deliver them up himself to M. Dambreuse; and the worthy man accompanied the package with an open letter of introduction in behalf of his young fellow-countryman.

Madame Moreau appeared surprised at this proceeding. Frederick concealed the delight that it gave him.

M. Dambreuse's real name was the Count d'Ambreuse; but since 1825, gradually abandoning his title of nobility and his party, he had turned his attention to business; and with his ears open in every office, his hand in every enterprise, on the watch for every opportunity, as subtle as a Greek and as laborious as a native of Auvergne, he had amassed a fortune which might be called considerable. Furthermore, he was an officer of the Legion of Honour, a member of the General Council of the Aube, a deputy, and one of these days would be a peer of France. However, affable as he was in other respects, he wearied the Minister by his continual applications for relief, for crosses, and licences for tobacconists' shops; and in his complaints against authority he was inclined to join the Left Centre.

His wife, the pretty Madame Dambreuse, of whom mention was made in the fashion journals, presided at charitable assemblies. By wheedling the duchesses, she appeased the rancours of the aristocratic faubourg, and led the residents to believe that M. Dambreuse might yet repent and render them some services.

The young man was agitated when he called on them.

"I should have done better to take my dress-coat with me. No doubt they will give me an invitation to next week's ball. What will they say to me?"

His self-confidence returned when he reflected that M. Dambreuse was only a person of the middle class, and he sprang out of the cab briskly on the pavement of the Rue d'Anjou.

When he had pushed forward one of the two gateways he crossed the courtyard, mounted the steps in front of the house, and entered a vestibule paved with coloured marble. A straight double staircase, with red carpet, fastened with copper rods, rested against the high walls of shining stucco. At the end of the stairs there was a banana-tree, whose wide leaves fell down over the velvet of stairs there was a banana-tree, whose wide leaves fell down over the velvet of the baluster. Two bronze candelabra, with porcelain globes, hung from little chains; the atmosphere was heavy with the fumes exhaled by the vent-holes of the hot-air stoves; and all that could be heard was the ticking of a big clock fixed at the other end of the vestibule, under a suit of armour.

A bell rang; a valet made his appearance, and introduced Frederick into a little apartment, where one could observe two strong boxes, with pigeon-holes filled with pieces of pasteboard. In the centre of it, M. Dambreuse was writing at a roll-top desk.

He ran his eye over Père Roque's letter, tore open the canvas in which the papers had been wrapped, and examined them.

At some distance, he presented the appearance of being still young, owing to his slight figure. But his thin white hair, his feeble limbs, and, above all, the extraordinary pallor of his face, betrayed a shattered constitution. There was an expression of pitiless energy in his sea-green eyes, colder than eyes of glass. His cheek-bones projected, and his finger-joints were knotted.

At length, he arose and addressed to the young man a few questions with regard to persons of their acquaintance at Nogent and also with regard to his studies, and then dismissed him with a bow. Frederick went out through another lobby, and found himself at the lower end of the courtyard near the coach-house.

A blue brougham, to which a black horse was yoked, stood in front of the steps before the house. The carriage door flew open, a lady sprang in, and the vehicle, with a rumbling noise, went rolling along the gravel. Frederick had come up to the courtyard gate from the other side at the same moment. As there was not room enough to allow him to pass, he was compelled to wait. The young lady, with her head thrust forward past the carriage blind, talked to the door-keeper in a very low tone. All he could see was her back, covered with a violet mantle. However, he took a glance into the interior of the carriage, lined with blue rep, with silk lace and fringes. The lady's ample robes filled up the space within. He stole away from this little padded box with its perfume of iris, and, so to speak, its vague odour of feminine elegance. The coachman slackened the reins, the horse brushed abruptly past the starting-point, and all disappeared.

Frederick returned on foot, following the track of the boulevard.

He regretted not having been able to get a proper view of Madame Dambreuse. A little higher than the Rue Montmartre, a regular jumble of vehicles made him turn round his head, and on the opposite side, facing him, he read on a marble plate:

"JACQUES ARNOUX."

How was it that he had not thought about her sooner? It was Deslauriers' fault; and he approached the shop, which, however, he did not enter. He was waiting for *her* to appear.

The high, transparent plate-glass windows presented to one's gaze statuettes, drawings, engravings, catalogues and numbers of *L'Art Industriel,* arranged in a skilful fashion; and the amounts of the subscription were repeated on the door, which was decorated in the centre with the publisher's initials. Against the walls could be seen large pictures whose varnish had a shiny look, two chests laden with porcelain, bronze, alluring curiosities; a little staircase separated them, shut off at the top by a Wilton portière; and a lustre of old Saxe, a green carpet on the floor, with a table of marqueterie, gave to this interior the appearance rather of a drawing-room than of a shop.

Frederick pretended to be examining the drawings. After hesitating for a long time, he went in. A clerk lifted the portière, and in reply to a question, said that Monsieur would not be in the shop before five o'clock. But if the message could be conveyed — —

"No! I'll come back again," Frederick answered blandly.

The following days were spent in searching for lodgings; and he fixed upon an apartment in a second story of a furnished mansion in the Rue Hyacinthe.

With a fresh blotting-case under his arm, he set forth to attend the opening lecture of the course. Three hundred young men, bare-headed, filled an amphitheatre, where an old man in a red gown was delivering a discourse in a monotonous voice. Quill pens went scratching over the paper. In this hall he found once more the dusty odour of the school, a reading-desk of similar shape, the same wearisome monotony! For a fortnight he regularly continued his attendance at law lectures. But he left off the study of the Civil Code before getting as far as Article 3, and he gave up the Institutes at the *Summa Divisio Personarum*.

The pleasures that he had promised himself did not come to him; and when he had exhausted a circulating library, gone over the collections in the Louvre, and been at the theatre a great many nights in succession, he sank into the lowest depths of idleness.

His depression was increased by a thousand fresh annoyances. He found it necessary to count his linen and to bear with the door keeper, a bore with the figure of a male hospital nurse who came in the morning to make up his bed, smelling of alcohol and grunting. He did not like his apartment, which was ornamented with an alabaster time-piece. The partitions were thin; he could hear the students making punch, laughing and singing.

Tired of this solitude, he sought out one of his old schoolfellows named Baptiste Martinon; and he discovered this friend of his boyhood in a middle-class boarding-house in the Rue Saint-Jacques, cramming up legal procedure before a coal fire. A woman in a print dress sat opposite him darning his socks.

Martinon was what people call a very fine man — big, chubby, with a regular physiognomy, and blue eyes far up in his face. His father, an extensive landowner, had destined him for the magistracy; and wishing already to present a grave exterior, he wore his beard cut like a collar round his neck.

As there was no rational foundation for Frederick's complaints, and as he could not give evidence of any misfortune, Martinon was unable in any way to understand his lamentations about existence. As for him, he went every morning to the school, after that took a walk in the Luxembourg, in the evening swallowed his half-cup of coffee; and with fifteen hundred francs a year, and the love of this workwoman, he felt perfectly happy.

"What happiness!" was Frederick's internal comment.

At the school he had formed another acquaintance, a youth of aristocratic family, who on account of his dainty manners, suggested a resemblance to a young lady.

M. de Cisy devoted himself to drawing, and loved the Gothic style. They frequently went together to admire the Sainte-Chapelle and Nôtre Dame. But the young patrician's rank and pretensions covered an intellect of the feeblest order. Everything took him by surprise. He laughed immoderately at the most trifling joke, and displayed such utter simplicity that Frederick at first took him for a wag, and finally regarded him as a booby.

The young man found it impossible, therefore, to be effusive with anyone; and he was constantly looking forward to an invitation from the Dambreuses.

On New Year's Day, he sent them visiting-cards, but received none in return.

He made his way back to the office of *L'Art Industriel*.

A third time he returned to it, and at last saw Arnoux carrying on an argument with five or six persons around him. He scarcely responded to the young man's bow; and Frederick was wounded by this reception. None the less he cogitated over the best means of finding his way to her side.

His first idea was to come frequently to the shop on the pretext of getting pictures at low prices. Then he conceived the notion of slipping into the letter-box of the journal a few "very strong" articles, which might lead to friendly relations. Perhaps it would be better to go straight to the mark at once, and declare his love? Acting on this impulse, he wrote a letter covering a dozen pages, full of lyric movements and apostrophes; but he tore it up, and did nothing, attempted nothing — bereft of motive power by his want of success.

Above Arnoux's shop, there were, on the first floor, three windows which were lighted up every evening. Shadows might be seen moving about behind them, especially one; this was hers; and he went very far out of his way in order to gaze at these windows and to contemplate this shadow.

A negress who crossed his path one day in the Tuileries, holding a little girl by the hand, recalled to his mind Madame Arnoux's negress. She was sure to come there, like the others; every time he passed through the Tuileries, his heart began to beat with the anticipation of meeting her. On sunny days he continued his walk as far as the end of the Champs-Élysées.

Women seated with careless ease in open carriages, and with their veils floating in the wind, filed past close to him, their horses advancing at a steady walking pace, and with an unconscious see-saw movement that made the varnished leather of the harness crackle. The vehicles became more numerous, and, slackening their motion after they had passed the circular space where the roads met, they took up the entire track. The horses' manes and the carriage lamps were close to each other. The steel stirrups, the silver curbs and the brass rings, flung, here and there, luminous points in the midst of the short breeches, the white gloves, and the furs, falling over the blazonry of the carriage doors. He felt as if he were lost in some far-off world. His eyes wandered along the rows of female heads, and certain vague resemblances brought back Madame Arnoux to his recollection. He pictured her to himself, in the midst of the others, in one of those little broughams like Madame Dambreuse's brougham.

But the sun was setting, and the cold wind raised whirling clouds of dust. The coachmen let their chins sink into their neckcloths; the wheels began to revolve more quickly; the road-metal grated; and all the equipages descended the long sloping avenue at a quick trot, touching, sweeping past one another, getting out of one another's way; then, at the Place de la Concorde, they went off in different directions. Behind the Tuileries, there was a patch of slate-coloured sky. The trees of the garden formed two enormous masses violet-hued at their summits. The gas-lamps were lighted; and the Seine, green all over, was torn into strips of silver moiré, near the piers of the bridges.

He went to get a dinner for forty-three sous in a restaurant in the Rue de la Harpe. He glanced disdainfully at the old mahogany counter, the soiled napkins, the dingy silver-plate, and the hats hanging up on the wall.

Those around him were students like himself. They talked about their professors, and about their mistresses. Much he cared about professors! Had he a mistress? To avoid being a witness of their enjoyment, he came as late as possible. The tables were all strewn with remnants of food. The two waiters, worn out with attendance on customers, lay asleep, each in a corner of his own; and an odour of cooking, of an argand lamp, and of tobacco, filled the deserted dining-room. Then he slowly toiled up the streets again. The gas lamps vibrated, casting on the mud long yellowish shafts of flickering light. Shadowy forms surmounted by umbrellas glided along the footpaths. The pavement was slippery; the fog grew thicker, and it seemed to him that the moist gloom, wrapping him around, descended into the depths of his heart.

He was smitten with a vague remorse. He renewed his attendance at lectures. But as he was entirely ignorant of the matters which formed the subject of explanation, things of the simplest description puzzled him. He set about writing a novel entitled *Sylvio, the Fisherman's Son*. The scene of the story was Venice. The hero was himself, and Madame Arnoux was the heroine. She was called Antonia; and, to get possession of her, he assassinated a number of noblemen, and burned a portion of the city; after which achievements he sang a serenade under her balcony, where fluttered in the breeze the red damask curtains of the Boulevard Montmartre.

The reminiscences, far too numerous, on which he dwelt produced a disheartening effect on him; he went no further with the work, and his mental vacuity redoubled.

After this, he begged of Deslauriers to come and share his apartment. They might make arrangements to live together with the aid of his allowance of two thousand francs; anything would be better than this intolerable existence. Deslauriers could not yet leave Troyes. He urged his friend to find some means of distracting his thoughts, and, with that end in view, suggested that he should call on Sénécal.

Sénécal was a mathematical tutor, a hard-headed man with republican convictions, a future Saint-Just, according to the clerk. Frederick ascended the five flights, up which he lived, three times in succession, without getting a visit from him in return. He did not go back to the place.

He now went in for amusing himself. He attended the balls at the Opera House. These exhibitions of riotous gaiety froze him the moment he had passed the door. Besides, he was restrained by the fear of being subjected to insult on the subject of money, his notion being that a supper with a domino, entailing considerable expense, was rather a big adventure.

It seemed to him, however, that he must needs love her. Sometimes he used to wake up with his heart full of hope, dressed himself carefully as if he were going to keep an appointment, and started on interminable excursions all over Paris. Whenever a woman was walking in front of him, or coming in his direction, he would say: "Here she is!" Every time it was only a fresh disappointment. The idea of Madame Arnoux strengthened these desires. Perhaps he might find her on his way; and he conjured up dangerous complications, extraordinary perils from which he would save her, in order to get near her.

So the days slipped by with the same tiresome experiences, and enslavement to contracted habits. He turned over the pages of pamphlets under the arcades of the Odéon, went to read the *Revue des Deux Mondes* at the café, entered the hall of the Collége de France, and for an hour stopped to listen to a lecture on Chinese or political economy. Every week he wrote long letters to Deslauriers, dined from time to time with Martinon, and occasionally saw M. de Cisy. He hired a piano and composed German waltzes.

One evening at the theatre of the Palais-Royal, he perceived, in one of the stage-boxes, Arnoux with a woman by his side. Was it she? The screen of green taffeta, pulled over the side of the box, hid her face. At length, the curtain rose, and the screen was drawn aside. She was a tall woman of about thirty, rather faded, and, when she laughed, her thick lips uncovered a row of shining teeth. She chatted familiarly with Arnoux, giving him, from time to time, taps, with her fan, on the fingers. Then a fair-haired young girl with eyelids a little red, as if she had just been weeping, seated herself between them. Arnoux after that remained stooped over her shoulder, pouring forth a stream of talk to which she listened without replying. Frederick taxed his ingenuity to find out the social position of these women, modestly attired in gowns of sober hue with flat, turned-up collars.

At the close of the play, he made a dash for the passages. The crowd of people going out filled them up. Arnoux, just in front of him, was descending the staircase step by step, with a woman on each arm.

Suddenly a gas-burner shed its light on him. He wore a crape hat-band. She was dead, perhaps? This idea tormented Frederick's mind so much, that he hurried, next day, to the office of *L'Art Industriel*, and paying, without a moment's delay, for one of the engravings exposed in the window for sale, he asked the shop-assistant how was Monsieur Arnoux.

The shop-assistant replied:

"Why, quite well!"

Frederick, growing pale, added:

"And Madame?"

"Madame, also."

Frederick forgot to carry off his engraving.

The winter drew to an end. He was less melancholy in the spring time, and began to prepare for his examination. Having passed it indifferently, he started immediately afterwards for Nogent.

He refrained from going to Troyes to see his friend, in order to escape his mother's comments. Then, on his return to Paris at the end of the vacation, he left his lodgings, and took two rooms on the Quai Napoléon which he furnished. He had given up all hope of getting an invitation from the Dambreuses. His great passion for Madame Arnoux was beginning to die out.

CHAPTER IV.

The Inexpressible She!

One morning, in the month of December, while going to attend a law lecture, he thought he could observe more than ordinary animation in the Rue Saint-Jacques. The students were rushing precipitately out of the cafés, where, through the open windows, they were calling one another from one house to the other. The shop keepers in the middle of the footpath were looking about them anxiously; the window-shutters were fastened; and when he reached the Rue Soufflot, he perceived a large assemblage around the Panthéon.

Young men in groups numbering from five to a dozen walked along, arm in arm, and accosted the larger groups, which had stationed themselves here and there. At the lower end of the square, near the railings, men in blouses were holding forth, while policemen, with their three-cornered hats drawn over their ears, and their hands behind their backs, were strolling up and down beside the walls making the flags ring under the tread of their heavy boots. All wore a mysterious, wondering look; they were evidently expecting something to happen. Each held back a question which was on the edge of his lips.

Frederick found himself close to a fair-haired young man with a prepossessing face and a moustache and a tuft of beard on his chin, like a dandy of Louis XIII.'s time. He asked the stranger what was the cause of the disorder.

"I haven't the least idea," replied the other, "nor have they, for that matter! 'Tis their fashion just now! What a good joke!"

And he burst out laughing. The petitions for Reform, which had been signed at the quarters of the National Guard, together with the property-census of Humann and other events besides, had, for the past six months, led to inexplicable gatherings of riotous crowds in Paris, and so frequently had they broken out anew, that the newspapers had ceased to refer to them.

"This lacks graceful outline and colour," continued Frederick's neighbour. "I am convinced, messire, that we have degenerated. In the good epoch of Louis XI., and even in that of Benjamin Constant, there was more mutinousness amongst the students. I find them as pacific as sheep, as stupid as greenhorns, and only fit to be grocers. Gadzooks! And these are what we call the youth of the schools!"

He held his arms wide apart after the fashion of Frederick Lemaitre in *Robert Macaire*.

"Youth of the schools, I give you my blessing!"

"Youth of the schools, I give you my blessing!"

After this, addressing a rag picker, who was moving a heap of oyster-shells up against the wall of a wine-merchant's house:

"Do you belong to them — the youth of the schools?"

The old man lifted up a hideous countenance in which one could trace, in the midst of a grey beard, a red nose and two dull eyes, bloodshot from drink.

"No, you appear to me rather one of those men with patibulary faces whom we see, in various groups, liberally scattering gold. Oh, scatter it, my patriarch, scatter it! Corrupt me with the treasures of Albion! Are you English? I do not reject the presents of Artaxerxes! Let us have a little chat about the union of customs!"

Frederick felt a hand laid on his shoulder. It was Martinon, looking exceedingly pale.

"Well!" said he with a big sigh, "another riot!"

He was afraid of being compromised, and uttered complaints. Men in blouses especially made him feel uneasy, suggesting a connection with secret societies.

"You mean to say there are secret societies," said the young man with the moustaches. "That is a worn-out dodge of the Government to frighten the middle-class folk!"

Martinon urged him to speak in a lower tone, for fear of the police.

"You believe still in the police, do you? As a matter of fact, how do you know, Monsieur, that I am not myself a police spy?"

And he looked at him in such a way, that Martinon, much discomposed, was, at first, unable to see the joke. The people pushed them on, and they were all three compelled to stand on the little staircase which led, by one of the passages, to the new amphitheatre.

The crowd soon broke up of its own accord. Many heads could be distinguished. They bowed towards the distinguished Professor Samuel Rondelot, who, wrapped in his big frock-coat, with his silver spectacles held up high in the air, and breathing hard from his asthma, was advancing at an easy pace, on his way to deliver his lecture. This man was one of the judicial glories of the nineteenth century, the rival of the Zachariæs and the Ruhdorffs. His new dignity of peer of France had in no way modified his external demeanour. He was known to be poor, and was treated with profound respect.

Meanwhile, at the lower end of the square, some persons cried out:

"Down with Guizot!"

"Down with Pritchard!"

"Down with the sold ones!"

"Down with Louis Philippe!"

The crowd swayed to and fro, and, pressing against the gate of the courtyard

The crowd swayed to and fro, and, pressing against the gate of the courtyard, which was shut, prevented the professor from going further. He stopped in front of the staircase. He was speedily observed on the lowest of three steps. He spoke; the loud murmurs of the throng drowned his voice. Although at another time they might love him, they hated him now, for he was the representative of authority. Every time he tried to make himself understood, the outcries recommenced. He gesticulated with great energy to induce the students to follow him. He was answered by vociferations from all sides. He shrugged his shoulders disdainfully, and plunged into the passage. Martinon profited by his situation to disappear at the same moment.

"What a coward!" said Frederick.

"He was prudent," returned the other.

There was an outburst of applause from the crowd, from whose point of view this retreat, on the part of the professor, appeared in the light of a victory. From every window, faces, lighted with curiosity, looked out. Some of those in the crowd struck up the "Marseillaise;" others proposed to go to Béranger's house.

"To Laffitte's house!"

"To Chateaubriand's house!"

"To Voltaire's house!" yelled the young man with the fair moustaches.

The policemen tried to pass around, saying in the mildest tones they could assume:

"Move on, messieurs! Move on! Take yourselves off!"

Somebody exclaimed:

"Down with the slaughterers!"

This was a form of insult usual since the troubles of the month of September. Everyone echoed it. The guardians of public order were hooted and hissed. They began to grow pale. One of them could endure it no longer, and, seeing a low-sized young man approaching too close, laughing in his teeth, pushed him back so roughly, that he tumbled over on his back some five paces away, in front of a wine-merchant's shop. All made way; but almost immediately afterwards the policeman rolled on the ground himself, felled by a blow from a species of Hercules, whose hair hung down like a bundle of tow under an oilskin cap. Having stopped for a few minutes at the corner of the Rue Saint-Jacques, he had very quickly laid down a large case, which he had been carrying, in order to make a spring at the policeman, and, holding down that functionary, punched his face unmercifully. The other policemen rushed to the rescue of their comrade. The terrible shop-assistant was so powerfully built that it took four of them at least to get the better of him. Two of them shook him, while keeping a grip on his collar; two others dragged his arms; a fifth gave him digs of the knee in the ribs; and all of them called him "brigand," "assassin," "rioter." With his breast bare, and his clothes in rags, he protested that he was innocent; he could not, in cold blood, look at a child receiving a beating.

"My name is Dussardier. I'm employed at Messieurs Valincart Brothers' lace and fancy warehouse, in the Rue de Cléry. Where's my case? I want my case!"

He kept repeating:

"Dussardier, Rue de Cléry. My case!"

However, he became quiet, and, with a stoical air, allowed himself to be led towards the guard-house in the Rue Descartes. A flood of people came rushing after him. Frederick and the young man with the moustaches walked immediately behind, full of admiration for the shopman, and indignant at the violence of power.

As they advanced, the crowd became less thick.

The policemen from time to time turned round, with threatening looks; and the rowdies, no longer having anything to do, and the spectators not having anything to look at, all drifted away by degrees. The passers-by, who met the procession, as they came along, stared at Dussardier, and in loud tones, gave vent to abusive remarks about him. One old woman, at her own door, bawled out that he had stolen a loaf of bread from her. This unjust accusation increased the wrath of the two friends. At length, they reached the guard-house. Only about twenty persons were now left in the attenuated crowd, and the sight of the soldiers was enough to disperse them.

Frederick and his companion boldly asked to have the man who had just been imprisoned delivered up. The sentinel threatened, if they persisted, to ram them into jail too. They said they required to see the commander of the guard-house, and stated their names, and the fact that they were law-students, declaring that the prisoner was one also.

They were ushered into a room perfectly bare, in which, amid an atmosphere of smoke, four benches might be seen lining the roughly-plastered walls. At the lower end there was an open wicket. Then appeared the sturdy face of Dussardier, who, with his hair all tousled, his honest little eyes, and his broad snout, suggested to one's mind in a confused sort of way the physiognomy of a good dog.

"Don't you recognise us?" said Hussonnet.

This was the name of the young man with the moustaches.

"Why — — " stammered Dussardier.

"Don't play the fool any further," returned the other. "We know that you are, just like ourselves, a law-student."

In spite of their winks, Dussardier failed to understand. He appeared to be collecting his thoughts; then, suddenly:

"Has my case been found?"

Frederick raised his eyes, feeling much discouraged.

Hussonnet, however, said promptly:

"Ha! your case, in which you keep your notes of lectures? Yes, yes, make your mind easy about it!"

They made further pantomimic signs with redoubled energy, till Dussardier at last realised that they had come to help him; and he held his tongue, fearing that he might compromise them. Besides, he experienced a kind of shamefacedness at seeing himself raised to the social rank of student, and to an equality with those young men who had such white hands.

"Do you wish to send any message to anyone?" asked Frederick.

"No, thanks, to nobody."

"But your family?"

He lowered his head without replying; the poor fellow was a bastard. The two friends stood quite astonished at his silence.

"Have you anything to smoke?" was Frederick's next question.

He felt about, then drew forth from the depths of one of his pockets the remains of a pipe — a beautiful pipe, made of white talc with a shank of blackwood, a silver cover, and an amber mouthpiece.

For the last three years he had been engaged in completing this masterpiece. He had been careful to keep the bowl of it constantly thrust into a kind of sheath of chamois, to smoke it as slowly as possible, without ever letting it lie on any cold stone substance, and to hang it up every evening over the head of his bed. And now he shook out the fragments of it into his hand, the nails of which were covered with blood, and with his chin sunk on his chest, his pupils fixed and dilated, he contemplated this wreck of the thing that had yielded him such delight with a glance of unutterable sadness.

"Suppose we give him some cigars, eh?" said Hussonnet in a whisper, making a gesture as if he were reaching them out.

Frederick had already laid down a cigar-holder, filled, on the edge of the wicket.

"Pray take this. Good-bye! Cheer up!"

Dussardier flung himself on the two hands that were held out towards him. He pressed them frantically, his voice choked with sobs.

"What? For me! — for me!"

The two friends tore themselves away from the effusive display of gratitude which he made, and went off to lunch together at the Café Tabourey, in front of the Luxembourg.

While cutting up the beefsteak, Hussonnet informed his companion that he did work for the fashion journals, and manufactured catchwords for *L'Art Industriel*.

"At Jacques Arnoux's establishment?" said Frederick.

"Do you know him?"

"Yes! — no! — that is to say, I have seen him — I have met him."

He carelessly asked Hussonnet if he sometimes saw Arnoux's wife.

"From time to time," the Bohemian replied.

Frederick did not venture to follow up his enquiries. This man henceforth would fill up a large space in his life. He paid the lunch-bill without any protest on the other's part.

There was a bond of mutual sympathy between them; they gave one another their respective addresses, and Hussonnet cordially invited Frederick to accompany him to the Rue de Fleurus.

They had reached the middle of the garden, when Arnoux's clerk, holding his breath, twisted his features into a hideous grimace, and began to crow like a cock. Thereupon all the cocks in the vicinity responded with prolonged "cock-a-doodle-doos."

"It is a signal," explained Hussonnet.

They stopped close to the Théàtre Bobino, in front of a house to which they had to find their way through an alley. In the skylight of a garret, between the nasturtiums and the sweet peas, a young woman showed herself, bare-headed, in her stays, her two arms resting on the edge of the roof-gutter.

"Good-morrow, my angel! good-morrow, ducky!" said Hussonnet, sending her kisses.

He made the barrier fly open with a kick, and disappeared.

Frederick waited for him all the week. He did not venture to call at Hussonnet's residence, lest it might look as if he were in a hurry to get a lunch in return for the one he had paid for. But he sought the clerk all over the Latin Quarter. He came across him one evening, and brought him to his apartment on the Quai Napoléon.

They had a long chat, and unbosomed themselves to each other. Hussonnet yearned after the glory and the gains of the theatre. He collaborated in the writing of vaudevilles which were not accepted, "had heaps of plans," could turn a couplet; he sang out for Frederick a few of the verses he had composed. Then, noticing on one of the shelves a volume of Hugo and another of Lamartine, he broke out into sarcastic criticisms of the romantic school. These poets had neither good sense nor correctness, and, above all, were not French! He plumed himself on his knowledge of the language, and analysed the most beautiful phrases with that snarling severity, that academic taste which persons of playful disposition exhibit when they are discussing serious art.

Frederick was wounded in his predilections, and he felt a desire to cut the discussion short. Why not take the risk at once of uttering the word on which his happiness depended? He asked this literary youth whether it would be possible to get an introduction into the Arnoux's house through his agency.

The thing was declared to be quite easy, and they fixed upon the following day.

Hussonnet failed to keep the appointment, and on three subsequent occasions he did not turn up. One Saturday, about four o'clock, he made his appearance. But, taking advantage of the cab into which they had got, he drew up in front of the Théâtre Français to get a box-ticket, got down at a tailor's shop, then at a dressmaker's, and wrote notes in the door-keeper's lodge. At last they came to the Boulevard Montmartre. Frederick passed through the shop, and went up the staircase. Arnoux recognised him through the glass-partition in front of his desk, and while continuing to write he stretched out his hand and laid it on Frederick's shoulder.

Five or six persons, standing up, filled the narrow apartment, which was lighted by a single window looking out on the yard, a sofa of brown damask wool occupying the interior of an alcove between two door-curtains of similar material. Upon the chimney-piece, covered with old papers, there was a bronze Venus. Two candelabra, garnished with rose-coloured wax-tapers, supported it, one at each side. At the right near a cardboard chest of drawers, a man, seated in an armchair, was reading the newspaper, with his hat on. The walls were hidden from view beneath the array of prints and pictures, precious engravings or sketches by contemporary masters, adorned with dedications testifying the most sincere affection for Jacques Arnoux.

"You're getting on well all this time?" said he, turning round to Frederick.

And, without waiting for an answer, he asked Hussonnet in a low tone:

"What is your friend's name?" Then, raising his voice:

"Take a cigar out of the box on the cardboard stand."

The office of *L'Art Industriel*, situated in a central position in Paris, was a convenient place of resort, a neutral ground wherein rivalries elbowed each other familiarly. On this day might be seen there Anténor Braive, who painted portraits of kings; Jules Burrieu, who by his sketches was beginning to popularise the wars in Algeria; the caricaturist Sombary, the sculptor Vourdat, and others. And not a single one of them corresponded with the student's preconceived ideas. Their manners were simple, their talk free and easy. The mystic Lovarias told an obscene story; and the inventor of Oriental landscape, the famous Dittmer, wore a knitted shirt under his waistcoat, and went home in the omnibus.

The first topic that came on the carpet was the case of a girl named Apollonie, formerly a model, whom Burrieu alleged that he had seen on the boulevard in a carriage. Hussonnet explained this metamorphosis through the succession of persons who had loved her.

"How well this sly dog knows the girls of Paris!" said Arnoux.

"After you, if there are any of them left, sire," replied the Bohemian, with a military salute, in imitation of the grenadier offering his flask to Napoléon.

Then they talked about some pictures in which Apollonie had sat for the female figures. They criticised their absent brethren, expressing astonishment at the sums paid for their works; and they were all complaining of not having been sufficiently remunerated themselves, when the conversation was interrupted by the entrance of a man of middle stature, who had his coat fastened by a single button, and whose eyes glittered with a rather wild expression.

"What a lot of shopkeepers you are!" said he. "God bless my soul! what does that signify? The old masters did not trouble their heads about the million — Correggio, Murillo — — "

"Add Pellerin," said Sombary.

But, without taking the slightest notice of the epigram, he went on talking with such vehemence, that Arnoux was forced to repeat twice to him:

"My wife wants you on Thursday. Don't forget!"

This remark recalled Madame Arnoux to Frederick's thoughts. No doubt, one might be able to reach her through the little room near the sofa. Arnoux had just opened the portière leading into it to get a pocket-handkerchief, and Frédéric had seen a wash-stand at the far end of the apartment.

But at this point a kind of muttering sound came from the corner of the chimney-piece; it was caused by the personage who sat in the armchair reading the newspaper. He was a man of five feet nine inches in height, with rather heavy eyelashes, a head of grey hair, and an imposing appearance; and his name was Regimbart.

"What's the matter now, citizen?" said Arnoux.

"Another fresh piece of rascality on the part of Government!"

The thing that he was referring to was the dismissal of a schoolmaster.

Pellerin again took up his parallel between Michael Angelo and Shakespeare. Dittmer was taking himself off when Arnoux pulled him back in order to put two bank notes into his hand. Thereupon Hussonnet said, considering this an opportune time:

"Couldn't you give me an advance, my dear master — — ?"

But Arnoux had resumed his seat, and was administering a severe reprimand to an old man of mean aspect, who wore a pair of blue spectacles.

"Ha! a nice fellow you are, Père Isaac! Here are three works cried down, destroyed! Everybody is laughing at me! People know what they are now! What do you want me to do with them? I'll have to send them off to California — or to the devil! Hold your tongue!"

The specialty of this old worthy consisted in attaching the signatures of the great masters at the bottom of these pictures. Arnoux refused to pay him, and dismissed him in a brutal fashion. Then, with an entire change of manner, he bowed to a gentleman of affectedly grave demeanour, who wore whiskers and displayed a white tie round his neck and the cross of the Legion of Honour over his breast.

With his elbow resting on the window-fastening, he kept talking to him for a long time in honeyed tones. At last he burst out:

"Ah! well, I am not bothered with brokers, Count."

The nobleman gave way, and Arnoux paid him down twenty-five louis. As soon as he had gone out:

"What a plague these big lords are!"

"A lot of wretches!" muttered Regimbart.

As it grew later, Arnoux was much more busily occupied. He classified articles, tore open letters, set out accounts in a row; at the sound of hammering in the warehouse he went out to look after the packing; then he went back to his ordinary work; and, while he kept his steel pen running over the paper, he indulged in sharp witticisms. He had an invitation to dine with his lawyer that evening, and was starting next day for Belgium.

The others chatted about the topics of the day — Cherubini's portrait, the hemicycle of the Fine Arts, and the next Exhibition. Pellerin railed at the Institute. Scandalous stories and serious discussions got mixed up together. The apartment with its low ceiling was so much stuffed up that one could scarcely move; and the light of the rose-coloured wax-tapers was obscured in the smoke of their cigars, like the sun's rays in a fog.

The door near the sofa flew open, and a tall, thin woman entered with abrupt movements, which made all the trinkets of her watch rattle under her black taffeta gown.

It was the woman of whom Frederick had caught a glimpse last summer at the Palais-Royal. Some of those present, addressing her by name, shook hands with her. Hussonnet had at last managed to extract from his employer the sum of fifty francs. The clock struck seven.

All rose to go.

Arnoux told Pellerin to remain, and accompanied Mademoiselle Vatnaz into the dressing-room.

Frederick could not hear what they said; they spoke in whispers. However, the woman's voice was raised:

"I have been waiting ever since the job was done, six months ago."

There was a long silence, and then Mademoiselle Vatnaz reappeared. Arnoux had again promised her something.

"Oh! oh! later, we shall see!"

"Good-bye! happy man," said she, as she was going out.

Arnoux quickly re-entered the dressing-room, rubbed some cosmetic over his moustaches, raised his braces, stretched his straps; and, while he was washing his hands:

"I would require two over the door at two hundred and fifty apiece, in Boucher's style. Is that understood?"

"Be it so," said the artist, his face reddening.

"Good! and don't forget my wife!"

Frederick accompanied Pellerin to the top of the Faubourg Poissonnière, and asked his permission to come to see him sometimes, a favour which was graciously accorded.

Pellerin read every work on æsthetics, in order to find out the true theory of the Beautiful, convinced that, when he had discovered it, he would produce masterpieces. He surrounded himself with every imaginable auxiliary — drawings, plaster-casts, models, engravings; and he kept searching about, eating his heart out. He blamed the weather, his nerves, his studio, went out into the street to find inspiration there, quivered with delight at the thought that he had caught it, then abandoned the work in which he was engaged, and dreamed of another which should be finer. Thus, tormented by the desire for glory, and wasting his days in discussions, believing in a thousand fooleries — in systems, in criticisms, in the importance of a regulation or a reform in the domain of Art — he had at fifty as yet turned out nothing save mere sketches. His robust pride prevented him from experiencing any discouragement, but he was always irritated, and in that state of exaltation, at the same time factitious and natural, which is characteristic of comedians.

On entering his studio one's attention was directed towards two large pictures, in which the first tones of colour laid on here and there made on the white canvas spots of brown, red, and blue. A network of lines in chalk stretched overhead, like stitches of thread repeated twenty times; it was impossible to understand what it meant. Pellerin explained the subject of these two compositions by pointing out with his thumb the portions that were lacking. The first was intended to represent "The Madness of Nebuchadnezzar," and the second "The Burning of Rome by Nero." Frederick admired them.

second "The Burning of Rome by Nero." Frederick admired them.

He admired academies of women with dishevelled hair, landscapes in which trunks of trees, twisted by the storm, abounded, and above all freaks of the pen, imitations from memory of Callot, Rembrandt, or Goya, of which he did not know the models. Pellerin no longer set any value on these works of his youth. He was now all in favour of the grand style; he dogmatised eloquently about Phidias and Winckelmann. The objects around him strengthened the force of his language; one saw a death's head on a prie-dieu, yataghans, a monk's habit. Frederick put it on.

When he arrived early, he surprised the artist in his wretched folding-bed, which was hidden from view by a strip of tapestry; for Pellerin went to bed late, being an assiduous frequenter of the theatres. An old woman in tatters attended on him. He dined at a cook-shop, and lived without a mistress. His acquirements, picked up in the most irregular fashion, rendered his paradoxes amusing. His hatred of the vulgar and the "bourgeois" overflowed in sarcasms, marked by a superb lyricism, and he had such religious reverence for the masters that it raised him almost to their level.

But why had he never spoken about Madame Arnoux? As for her son, at one time he called Pellerin a decent fellow, at other times a charlatan. Frederick was waiting for some disclosures on his part.

One day, while turning over one of the portfolios in the studio, he thought he could trace in the portrait of a female Bohemian some resemblance to Mademoiselle Vatnaz; and, as he felt interested in this lady, he desired to know what was her exact social position.

She had been, as far as Pellerin could ascertain, originally a schoolmistress in the provinces. She now gave lessons in Paris, and tried to write for the small journals.

According to Frederick, one would imagine from her manners with Arnoux that she was his mistress.

"Pshaw! he has others!"

Then, turning away his face, which reddened with shame as he realised the baseness of the suggestion, the young man added, with a swaggering air:

"Very likely his wife pays him back for it?"

"Not at all; she is virtuous."

Frederick again experienced a feeling of compunction, and the result was that his attendance at the office of the art journal became more marked than before.

The big letters which formed the name of Arnoux on the marble plate above the shop seemed to him quite peculiar and pregnant with significance, like some sacred writing. The wide footpath, by its descent, facilitated his approach; the door almost turned of its own accord; and the handle, smooth to the touch, gave door almost turned of its own accord, and the handle, smooth to the touch, gave him the sensation of friendly and, as it were, intelligent fingers clasping his. Unconsciously, he became quite as punctual as Regimbart.

Every day Regimbart seated himself in the chimney corner, in his armchair, got hold of the *National*, and kept possession of it, expressing his thoughts by exclamations or by shrugs of the shoulders. From time to time he would wipe his forehead with his pocket-handkerchief, rolled up in a ball, which he usually stuck in between two buttons of his green frock-coat. He had trousers with wrinkles, bluchers, and a long cravat; and his hat, with its turned-up brim, made him easily recognised, at a distance, in a crowd.

At eight o'clock in the morning he descended the heights of Montmartre, in order to imbibe white wine in the Rue Nôtre Dame des Victoires. A late breakfast, following several games of billiards, brought him on to three o'clock. He then directed his steps towards the Passage des Panoramas, where he had a glass of absinthe. After the sitting in Arnoux's shop, he entered the Bordelais smoking-divan, where he swallowed some bitters; then, in place of returning home to his wife, he preferred to dine alone in a little café in the Rue Gaillon, where he desired them to serve up to him "household dishes, natural things." Finally, he made his way to another billiard-room, and remained there till midnight, in fact, till one o'clock in the morning, up till the last moment, when, the gas being put out and the window-shutters fastened, the master of the establishment, worn out, begged of him to go.

And it was not the love of drinking that attracted Citizen Regimbart to these places, but the inveterate habit of talking politics at such resorts. With advancing age, he had lost his vivacity, and now exhibited only a silent moroseness. One would have said, judging from the gravity of his countenence, that he was turning over in his mind the affairs of the whole world. Nothing, however, came from it; and nobody, even amongst his own friends, knew him to have any occupation, although he gave himself out as being up to his eyes in business.

Arnoux appeared to have a very great esteem for him. One day he said to Frederick:

"He knows a lot, I assure you. He is an able man."

On another occasion Regimbart spread over his desk papers relating to the kaolin mines in Brittany. Arnoux referred to his own experience on the subject.

Frederick showed himself more ceremonious towards Regimbart, going so far as to invite him from time to time to take a glass of absinthe; and, although he considered him a stupid man, he often remained a full hour in his company solely because he was Jacques Arnoux's friend.

After pushing forward some contemporary masters in the early portions of their career, the picture-dealer, a man of progressive ideas, had tried, while clinging to his artistic ways, to extend his pecuniary profits. His object was to emancipate the fine arts, to get the sublime at a cheap rate. Over every industry associated with Parisian luxury he exercised an influence which proved fortunate with respect to little things, but fatal with respect to great things. With his mania for pandering to public opinion, he made clever artists swerve from their true path, corrupted the strong, exhausted the weak, and got distinction for those of mediocre talent; he set them up with the assistance of his connections and of his magazine. Tyros in painting were ambitious of seeing their works in his shop-window, and upholsterers brought specimens of furniture to his house. Frederick regarded him, at the same time, as a millionaire, as a *dilettante*, and as a man of action. However, he found many things that filled him with astonishment, for my lord Arnoux was rather sly in his commercial transactions.

He received from the very heart of Germany or of Italy a picture purchased in Paris for fifteen hundred francs, and, exhibiting an invoice that brought the price up to four thousand, sold it over again through complaisance for three thousand five hundred. One of his usual tricks with painters was to exact as a drink-allowance an abatement in the purchase-money of their pictures, under the pretence that he would bring out an engraving of it. He always, when selling such pictures, made a profit by the abatement; but the engraving never appeared. To those who complained that he had taken an advantage of them, he would reply by a slap on the stomach. Generous in other ways, he squandered money on cigars for his acquaintances, "thee'd" and "thou'd" persons who were unknown, displayed enthusiasm about a work or a man; and, after that, sticking to his opinion, and, regardless of consequences, spared no expense in journeys, correspondence, and advertising. He looked upon himself as very upright, and, yielding to an irresistible impulse to unbosom himself, ingenuously told his friends about certain indelicate acts of which he had been guilty. Once, in order to annoy a member of his own trade who inaugurated another art journal with a big banquet, he asked Frederick to write, under his own eyes, a little before the hour fixed for the entertainment, letters to the guests recalling the invitations.

"This impugns nobody's honour, do you understand?"

And the young man did not dare to refuse the service.

Next day, on entering with Hussonnet M. Arnoux's office, Frederick saw through the door (the one opening on the staircase) the hem of a lady's dress disappearing.

"A thousand pardons!" said Hussonnet. "If I had known that there were women — — "

"Oh! as for that one, she is my own," replied Arnoux. "She just came in to pay me a visit as she was passing."

"You don't say so!" said Frederick.

"Why, yes; she is going back home again."

The charm of the things around him was suddenly withdrawn. That which had seemed to him to be diffused vaguely through the place had now vanished — or, rather, it had never been there. He experienced an infinite amazement, and, as it were, the painful sensation of having been betrayed.

Arnoux, while rummaging about in his drawer, began to smile. Was he laughing at him? The clerk laid down a bundle of moist papers on the table.

"Ha! the placards," exclaimed the picture-dealer. "I am not ready to dine this evening."

Regimbart took up his hat.

"What, are you leaving me?"

"Seven o'clock," said Regimbart.

Frederick followed him.

At the corner of the Rue Montmartre, he turned round. He glanced towards the windows of the first floor, and he laughed internally with self-pity as he recalled to mind with what love he had so often contemplated them. Where, then, did she reside? How was he to meet her now? Once more around the object of his desire a solitude opened more immense than ever!

"Are you coming to take it?" asked Regimbart.

"To take what?"

"The absinthe."

And, yielding to his importunities, Frederick allowed himself to be led towards the Bordelais smoking-divan. Whilst his companion, leaning on his elbow, was staring at the decanter, he was turning his eyes to the right and to the left. But he caught a glimpse of Pellerin's profile on the footpath outside; the painter gave a quick tap at the window-pane, and he had scarcely sat down when Regimbart asked him why they no longer saw him at the office of *L'Art Industriel*.

"May I perish before ever I go back there again. The fellow is a brute, a mere tradesman, a wretch, a downright rogue!"

These insulting words harmonised with Frederick's present angry mood. Nevertheless, he was wounded, for it seemed to him that they hit at Madame Arnoux more or less.

"Why, what has he done to you?" said Regimbart.

Pellerin stamped with his foot on the ground, and his only response was an energetic puff.

He had been devoting himself to artistic work of a kind that he did not care to connect his name with, such as portraits for two crayons, or pasticcios from the great masters for amateurs of limited knowledge; and, as he felt humiliated by these inferior productions, he preferred to hold his tongue on the subject as a general rule. But "Arnoux's dirty conduct" exasperated him too much. He had to relieve his feelings.

In accordance with an order, which had been given in Frederick's very presence, he had brought Arnoux two pictures. Thereupon the dealer took the liberty of criticising them. He found fault with the composition, the colouring, and the drawing — above all the drawing; he would not, in short, take them at any price. But, driven to extremities by a bill falling due, Pellerin had to give them to the Jew Isaac; and, a fortnight later, Arnoux himself sold them to a Spaniard for two thousand francs.

"Not a sou less! What rascality! and, faith, he has done many other things just as bad. One of these mornings we'll see him in the dock!"

"How you exaggerate!" said Frederick, in a timid voice.

"Come, now, that's good; I exaggerate!" exclaimed the artist, giving the table a great blow with his fist.

This violence had the effect of completely restoring the young man's self-command. No doubt he might have acted more nicely; still, if Arnoux found these two pictures — —

"Bad! say it out! Are you a judge of them? Is this your profession? Now, you know, my youngster, I don't allow this sort of thing on the part of mere amateurs."

"Ah! well, it's not my business," said Frederick.

"Then, what interest have you in defending him?" returned Pellerin, coldly.

The young man faltered:

"But — since I am his friend — — "

"Go, and give him a hug for me. Good evening!"

And the painter rushed away in a rage, and, of course, without paying for his drink.

Frederick, whilst defending Arnoux, had convinced himself. In the heat of his eloquence, he was filled with tenderness towards this man, so intelligent and kind, whom his friends calumniated, and who had now to work all alone, abandoned by them. He could not resist a strange impulse to go at once and see him again. Ten minutes afterwards he pushed open the door of the picture-warehouse.

Arnoux was preparing, with the assistance of his clerks, some huge placards for an exhibition of pictures.

"Halloa! what brings you back again?"

This question, simple though it was, embarrassed Frederick, and, at a loss for an answer, he asked whether they had happened to find a notebook of his — a little notebook with a blue leather cover.

"The one that you put your letters to women in?" said Arnoux.

Frederick, blushing like a young girl, protested against such an assumption.

"Your verses, then?" returned the picture-dealer.

He handled the pictorial specimens that were to be exhibited, discovering their form, colouring, and frames; and Frederick felt more and more irritated by his air of abstraction, and particularly by the appearance of his hands — large hands, rather soft, with flat nails. At length, M. Arnoux arose, and saying, "That's disposed of!" he chucked the young man familiarly under the chin. Frederick was offended at this liberty, and recoiled a pace or two; then he made a dash for the shop-door, and passed out through it, as he imagined, for the last time in his life. Madame Arnoux herself had been lowered by the vulgarity of her husband.

During the same week he got a letter from Deslauriers, informing him that the clerk would be in Paris on the following Thursday. Then he flung himself back violently on this affection as one of a more solid and lofty character. A man of this sort was worth all the women in the world. He would no longer have any need of Regimbart, of Pellerin, of Hussonnet, of anyone! In order to provide his friend with as comfortable lodgings as possible, he bought an iron bedstead and a second armchair, and stripped off some of his own bed-covering to garnish this one properly. On Thursday morning he was dressing himself to go to meet Deslauriers when there was a ring at the door.

Arnoux entered.

"Just one word. Yesterday I got a lovely trout from Geneva. We expect you by-and-by — at seven o'clock sharp. The address is the Rue de Choiseul 24 *bis*. Don't forget!"

Frederick was obliged to sit down; his knees were tottering under him. He repeated to himself, "At last! at last!" Then he wrote to his tailor, to his hatter, and to his bootmaker; and he despatched these three notes by three different messengers.

The key turned in the lock, and the door-keeper appeared with a trunk on his shoulder.

Frederick, on seeing Deslauriers, began to tremble like an adulteress under the glance of her husband.

"What has happened to you?" said Deslauriers. "Surely you got my letter?"

Frederick had not enough energy left to lie. He opened his arms, and flung himself on his friend's breast.

Then the clerk told his story. His father thought to avoid giving an account of the expense of tutelage, fancying that the period limited for rendering such accounts was ten years; but, well up in legal procedure, Deslauriers had managed to get the share coming to him from his mother into his clutches — seven thousand francs clear — which he had there with him in an old pocket-book.

"'Tis a reserve fund, in case of misfortune. I must think over the best way of investing it, and find quarters for myself to-morrow morning. To-day I'm perfectly free, and am entirely at your service, my old friend."

"Oh! don't put yourself about," said Frederick. "If you had anything of importance to do this evening — — "

"Come, now! I would be a selfish wretch — — "

This epithet, flung out at random, touched Frederick to the quick, like a reproachful hint.

The door-keeper had placed on the table close to the fire some chops, cold meat, a large lobster, some sweets for dessert, and two bottles of Bordeaux.

Deslauriers was touched by these excellent preparations to welcome his arrival.

"Upon my word, you are treating me like a king!"

They talked about their past and about the future; and, from time to time, they grasped each other's hands across the table, gazing at each other tenderly for a moment.

But a messenger came with a new hat. Deslauriers, in a loud tone, remarked that this head-gear was very showy. Next came the tailor himself to fit on the coat, to which he had given a touch with the smoothing-iron.

"One would imagine you were going to be married," said Deslauriers.

An hour later, a third individual appeared on the scene, and drew forth from a big black bag a pair of shining patent leather boots. While Frederick was trying them on, the bootmaker slyly drew attention to the shoes of the young man from the country.

"Does Monsieur require anything?"

"Thanks," replied the clerk, pulling behind his chair his old shoes fastened with strings.

This humiliating incident annoyed Frederick. At length he exclaimed, as if an idea had suddenly taken possession of him:

"Ha! deuce take it! I was forgetting."

"What is it, pray?"

"I have to dine in the city this evening."

"At the Dambreuses'? Why did you never say anything to me about them in your letters?"

"It is not at the Dambreuses', but at the Arnoux's."

"It is not at the Dambreuses', but at the Arnoux's."

"You should have let me know beforehand," said Deslauriers. "I would have come a day later."

"Impossible," returned Frederick, abruptly. "I only got the invitation this morning, a little while ago."

And to redeem his error and distract his friend's mind from the occurrence, he proceeded to unfasten the tangled cords round the trunk, and to arrange all his belongings in the chest of drawers, expressed his willingness to give him his own bed, and offered to sleep himself in the dressing-room bedstead. Then, as soon as it was four o'clock, he began the preparations for his toilet.

"You have plenty of time," said the other.

At last he was dressed and off he went.

"That's the way with the rich," thought Deslauriers.

And he went to dine in the Rue Saint-Jacques, at a little restaurant kept by a man he knew.

Frederick stopped several times while going up the stairs, so violently did his heart beat. One of his gloves, which was too tight, burst, and, while he was fastening back the torn part under his shirt-cuff, Arnoux, who was mounting the stairs behind him, took his arm and led him in.

The anteroom, decorated in the Chinese fashion, had a painted lantern hanging from the ceiling, and bamboos in the corners. As he was passing into the drawing-room, Frederick stumbled against a tiger's skin. The place had not yet been lighted up, but two lamps were burning in the boudoir in the far corner.

Mademoiselle Marthe came to announce that her mamma was dressing. Arnoux raised her as high as his mouth in order to kiss her; then, as he wished to go to the cellar himself to select certain bottles of wine, he left Frederick with the little girl.

She had grown much larger since the trip in the steamboat. Her dark hair descended in long ringlets, which curled over her bare arms. Her dress, more puffed out than the petticoat of a *danseuse*, allowed her rosy calves to be seen, and her pretty childlike form had all the fresh odour of a bunch of flowers. She received the young gentleman's compliments with a coquettish air, fixed on him her large, dreamy eyes, then slipping on the carpet amid the furniture, disappeared like a cat.

After this he no longer felt ill at ease. The globes of the lamps, covered with a paper lace-work, sent forth a white light, softening the colour of the walls, hung with mauve satin. Through the fender-bars, as through the slits in a big fan, the coal could be seen in the fireplace, and close beside the clock there was a little chest with silver clasps. Here and there things lay about which gave the place a look of home — a doll in the middle of the sofa, a fichu against the back of a look of home — a doll in the middle of the sofa, a fichu against the back of a chair, and on the work-table a knitted woollen vest, from which two ivory needles were hanging with their points downwards. It was altogether a peaceful spot, suggesting the idea of propriety and innocent family life.

Arnoux returned, and Madame Arnoux appeared at the other doorway. As she was enveloped in shadow, the young man could at first distinguish only her head. She wore a black velvet gown, and in her hair she had fastened a long Algerian cap, in a red silk net, which coiling round her comb, fell over her left shoulder.

Arnoux introduced Frederick.

"Oh! I remember Monsieur perfectly well," she responded.

Then the guests arrived, nearly all at the same time — Dittmer, Lovarias, Burrieu, the composer Rosenwald, the poet Théophile Lorris, two art critics, colleagues of Hussonnet, a paper manufacturer, and in the rear the illustrious Pierre Paul Meinsius, the last representative of the grand school of painting, who blithely carried along with his glory his forty-five years and his big paunch.

When they were passing into the dining-room, Madame Arnoux took his arm. A chair had been left vacant for Pellerin. Arnoux, though he took advantage of him, was fond of him. Besides, he was afraid of his terrible tongue, so much so, that, in order to soften him, he had given a portrait of him in *L'Art Industriel*, accompanied by exaggerated eulogies; and Pellerin, more sensitive about distinction than about money, made his appearance about eight o'clock quite out of breath. Frederick fancied that they had been a long time reconciled.

He liked the company, the dishes, everything. The dining-room, which resembled a mediæval parlour, was hung with stamped leather. A Dutch whatnot faced a rack for chibouks, and around the table the Bohemian glasses, variously coloured, had, in the midst of the flowers and fruits, the effect of an illumination in a garden.

He had to make his choice between ten sorts of mustard. He partook of daspachio, of curry, of ginger, of Corsican blackbirds, and a species of Roman macaroni called lasagna; he drank extraordinary wines, lip-fraeli and tokay. Arnoux indeed prided himself on entertaining people in good style. With an eye to the procurement of eatables, he paid court to mail-coach drivers, and was in league with the cooks of great houses, who communicated to him the secrets of rare sauces.

But Frederick was particularly amused by the conversation. His taste for travelling was tickled by Dittmer, who talked about the East; he gratified his curiosity about theatrical matters by listening to Rosenwald's chat about the opera; and the atrocious existence of Bohemia assumed for him a droll aspect when seen through the gaiety of Hussonnet, who related, in a picturesque when seen through the gaiety of Hussonnet, who related, in a picturesque fashion, how he had spent an entire winter with no food except Dutch cheese. Then, a discussion between Lovarias and Burrieu about the Florentine School gave him new ideas with regard to masterpieces, widened his horizon, and he found difficulty in restraining his enthusiasm when Pellerin exclaimed:

"Don't bother me with your hideous reality! What does it mean — reality? Some see things black, others blue — the multitude sees them brute-fashion. There is nothing less natural than Michael Angelo; there is nothing more powerful! The anxiety about external truth is a mark of contemporary baseness; and art will become, if things go on that way, a sort of poor joke as much below religion as it is below poetry, and as much below politics as it is below business. You will never reach its end — yes, its end! — which is to cause within us an impersonal exaltation, with petty works, in spite of all your finished execution. Look, for instance, at Bassolier's pictures: they are pretty, coquettish, spruce, and by no means dull. You might put them into your pocket, bring them with you when you are travelling. Notaries buy them for twenty thousand francs, while pictures of the ideal type are sold for three sous. But, without ideality, there is no grandeur; without grandeur there is no beauty. Olympus is a mountain. The most swagger monument will always be the Pyramids. Exuberance is better than taste; the desert is better than a street-pavement, and a savage is better than a hairdresser!"

Frederick, as these words fell upon his ear, glanced towards Madame Arnoux. They sank into his soul like metals falling into a furnace, added to his passion, and supplied the material of love.

His chair was three seats below hers on the same side. From time to time, she bent forward a little, turning aside her head to address a few words to her little daughter; and as she smiled on these occasions, a dimple took shape in her cheek, giving to her face an expression of more dainty good-nature.

As soon as the time came for the gentlemen to take their wine, she disappeared. The conversation became more free and easy. M. Arnoux shone in it, and Frederick was astonished at the cynicism of men. However, their preoccupation with woman established between them and him, as it were, an equality, which raised him in his own estimation.

When they had returned to the drawing-room, he took up, to keep himself in countenance, one of the albums which lay about on the table. The great artists of the day had illustrated them with drawings, had written in them snatches of verse or prose, or their signatures simply. In the midst of famous names he found many that he had never heard of before, and original thoughts appeared only underneath a flood of nonsense. All these effusions contained a more or less direct expression of homage towards Madame Arnoux. Frederick would have been afraid to write a line beside them.

She went into her boudoir to look at the little chest with silver clasps which he had noticed on the mantel-shelf. It was a present from her husband, a work of the Renaissance. Arnoux's friends complimented him, and his wife thanked him. His tender emotions were aroused, and before all the guests he gave her a kiss.

After this they all chatted in groups here and there. The worthy Meinsius was with Madame Arnoux on an easy chair close beside the fire. She was leaning forward towards his ear; their heads were just touching, and Frederick would have been glad to become deaf, infirm, and ugly if, instead, he had an illustrious name and white hair — in short, if he only happened to possess something which would install him in such intimate association with her. He began once more to eat out his heart, furious at the idea of being so young a man.

But she came into the corner of the drawing-room in which he was sitting, asked him whether he was acquainted with any of the guests, whether he was fond of painting, how long he had been a student in Paris. Every word that came out of her mouth seemed to Frederick something entirely new, an exclusive appendage of her personality. He gazed attentively at the fringes of her head-dress, the ends of which caressed her bare shoulder, and he was unable to take away his eyes; he plunged his soul into the whiteness of that feminine flesh, and yet he did not venture to raise his eyelids to glance at her higher, face to face.

Rosenwald interrupted them, begging of Madame Arnoux to sing something. He played a prelude, she waited, her lips opened slightly, and a sound, pure, long-continued, silvery, ascended into the air.

Frederick did not understand a single one of the Italian words. The song began with a grave measure, something like church music, then in a more animated strain, with a crescendo movement, it broke into repeated bursts of sound, then suddenly subsided, and the melody came back again in a tender fashion with a wide and easy swing.

She stood beside the keyboard with her arms hanging down and a far-off look on her face. Sometimes, in order to read the music, she advanced her forehead for a moment and her eyelashes moved to and fro. Her contralto voice in the low notes took a mournful intonation which had a chilling effect on the listener, and then her beautiful head, with those great brows of hers, bent over her shoulder; her bosom swelled; her eyes were wide apart; her neck, from which roulades made their escape, fell back as if under aërial kisses. She flung out three sharp notes, came down again, cast forth one higher still, and, after a silence, finished with an organ-point.

Rosenwald did not leave the piano. He continued playing, to amuse himself. From time to time a guest stole away. At eleven o'clock, as the last of them were going off, Arnoux went out along with Pellerin, under the pretext of seeing him home. He was one of those people who say that they are ill when they do not "take a turn" after dinner. Madame Arnoux had made her way towards the anteroom. Dittmer and Hussonnet bowed to her. She stretched out her hand to them. She did the same to Frederick; and he felt, as it were, something penetrating every particle of his skin.

He quitted his friends. He wished to be alone. His heart was overflowing. Why had she offered him her hand? Was it a thoughtless act, or an encouragement? "Come now! I am mad!" Besides, what did it matter, when he could now visit her entirely at his ease, live in the very atmosphere she breathed?

The streets were deserted. Now and then a heavy wagon would roll past, shaking the pavements. The houses came one after another with their grey fronts, their closed windows; and he thought with disdain of all those human beings who lived behind those walls without having seen her, and not one of whom dreamed of her existence. He had no consciousness of his surroundings, of space, of anything, and striking the ground with his heel, rapping with his walking-stick on the shutters of the shops, he kept walking on continually at random, in a state of excitement, carried away by his emotions. Suddenly he felt himself surrounded by a circle of damp air, and found that he was on the edge of the quays.

The gas-lamps shone in two straight lines, which ran on endlessly, and long red flames flickered in the depths of the water. The waves were slate-coloured, while the sky, which was of clearer hue, seemed to be supported by vast masses of shadow that rose on each side of the river. The darkness was intensified by buildings whose outlines the eye could not distinguish. A luminous haze floated above the roofs further on. All the noises of the night had melted into a single monotonous hum.

He stopped in the middle of the Pont Neuf, and, taking off his hat and exposing his chest, he drank in the air. And now he felt as if something that was inexhaustible were rising up from the very depths of his being, an afflux of tenderness that enervated him, like the motion of the waves under his eyes. A church-clock slowly struck one, like a voice calling out to him.

Then, he was seized with one of those shuddering sensations of the soul in which one seems to be transported into a higher world. He felt, as it were, endowed with some extraordinary faculty, the aim of which he could not determine. He seriously asked himself whether he would be a great painter or a great poet; and he decided in favour of painting, for the exigencies of this profession would bring him into contact with Madame Arnoux. So, then, he had found his vocation! The object of his existence was now perfectly clear, and there could be no mistake about the future.

When he had shut his door, he heard some one snoring in the dark closet near his apartment. It was his friend. He no longer bestowed a thought on him.

His own face presented itself to his view in the glass. He thought himself handsome, and for a minute he remained gazing at himself.

CHAPTER V.

"Love Knoweth No Laws."

Before twelve o'clock next day he had bought a box of colours, paintbrushes, and an easel. Pellerin consented to give him lessons, and Frederick brought him to his lodgings to see whether anything was wanting among his painting utensils.

Deslauriers had come back, and the second armchair was occupied by a young man. The clerk said, pointing towards him:

"'Tis he! There he is! Sénécal!" Frederick disliked this young man. His forehead was heightened by the way in which he wore his hair, cut straight like a brush. There was a certain hard, cold look in his grey eyes; and his long black coat, his entire costume, savoured of the pedagogue and the ecclesiastic.

They first discussed topics of the hour, amongst others the *Stabat* of Rossini. Sénécal, in answer to a question, declared that he never went to the theatre.

Pellerin opened the box of colours.

"Are these all for you?" said the clerk.

"Why, certainly!"

"Well, really! What a notion!" And he leaned across the table, at which the mathematical tutor was turning over the leaves of a volume of Louis Blanc. He had brought it with him, and was reading passages from it in low tones, while Pellerin and Frederick were examining together the palette, the knife, and the bladders; then the talk came round to the dinner at Arnoux's.

"The picture-dealer, is it?" asked Sénécal. "A nice gentleman, truly!"

"Why, now?" said Pellerin. Sénécal replied:

"A man who makes money by political turpitude!"

And he went on to talk about a well-known lithograph, in which the Royal Family was all represented as being engaged in edifying occupations: Louis Philippe had a copy of the Code in his hand; the Queen had a Catholic prayer-book; the Princesses were embroidering; the Duc de Nemours was girding on a sword; M. de Joinville was showing a map to his young brothers; and at the end of the apartment could be seen a bed with two divisions. This picture, which was entitled "A Good Family," was a source of delight to commonplace middle-class people, but of grief to patriots.

Pellerin, in a tone of vexation, as if he had been the producer of this work himself, observed by way of answer that every opinion had some value. Sénécal protested: Art should aim exclusively at promoting morality amongst the masses! The only subjects that ought to be reproduced were those which masses. The only subjects that ought to be reproduced were those which impelled people to virtuous actions; all others were injurious.

"But that depends on the execution," cried Pellerin. "I might produce masterpieces."

"So much the worse for you, then; you have no right — — "

"What?"

"No, monsieur, you have no right to excite my interest in matters of which I disapprove. What need have we of laborious trifles, from which it is impossible to derive any benefit — those Venuses, for instance, with all your landscapes? I see there no instruction for the people! Show us rather their miseries! arouse enthusiasm in us for their sacrifices! Ah, my God! there is no lack of subjects — the farm, the workshop — — "

Pellerin stammered forth his indignation at this, and, imagining that he had found an argument:

"Molière, do you accept him?"

"Certainly!" said Sénécal. "I admire him as the precursor of the French Revolution."

"Ha! the Revolution! What art! Never was there a more pitiable epoch!"

"None greater, Monsieur!"

Pellerin folded his arms, and looking at him straight in the face:

"You have the appearance of a famous member of the National Guard!"

His opponent, accustomed to discussions, responded:

"I am not, and I detest it just as much as you. But with such principles we corrupt the crowd. This sort of thing, however, is profitable to the Government. It would not be so powerful but for the complicity of a lot of rogues of that sort."

The painter took up the defence of the picture-dealer, for Sénécal's opinions exasperated him. He even went so far as to maintain that Arnoux was really a man with a heart of gold, devoted to his friends, deeply attached to his wife.

"Oho! if you offered him a good sum, he would not refuse to let her serve as a model."

Frederick turned pale.

"So then, he has done you some great injury, Monsieur?"

"Me? no! I saw him once at a café with a friend. That's all."

Sénécal had spoken truly. But he had his teeth daily set on edge by the announcements in *L'Art Industriel*. Arnoux was for him the representative of a world which he considered fatal to democracy. An austere Republican, he suspected that there was something corrupt in every form of elegance, and the more so as he wanted nothing and was inflexible in his integrity.

They found some difficulty in resuming the conversation. The painter soon recalled to mind his appointment, the tutor his pupils; and, when they had gone, recalled to mind his appointment, the tutor his pupils, and, when they had gone, after a long silence, Deslauriers asked a number of questions about Arnoux.

"You will introduce me there later, will you not, old fellow?"

"Certainly," said Frederick. Then they thought about settling themselves. Deslauriers had without much trouble obtained the post of second clerk in a solicitor's office; he had also entered his name for the terms at the Law School, and bought the indispensable books; and the life of which they had dreamed now began.

It was delightful, owing to their youth, which made everything assume a beautiful aspect. As Deslauriers had said nothing as to any pecuniary arrangement, Frederick did not refer to the subject. He helped to defray all the expenses, kept the cupboard well stocked, and looked after all the household requirements; but if it happened to be desirable to give the door-keeper a rating, the clerk took that on his own shoulders, still playing the part, which he had assumed in their college days, of protector and senior.

Separated all day long, they met again in the evening. Each took his place at the fireside and set about his work. But ere long it would be interrupted. Then would follow endless outpourings, unaccountable bursts of merriment, and occasional disputes about the lamp flaring too much or a book being mislaid, momentary ebullitions of anger which subsided in hearty laughter.

While in bed they left open the door of the little room where Deslauriers slept, and kept chattering to each other from a distance.

In the morning they walked in their shirt-sleeves on the terrace. The sun rose; light vapours passed over the river. From the flower-market close beside them the noise of screaming reached their ears; and the smoke from their pipes whirled round in the clear air, which was refreshing to their eyes still puffed from sleep. While they inhaled it, their hearts swelled with great expectations.

When it was not raining on Sunday they went out together, and, arm in arm, they sauntered through the streets. The same reflection nearly always occurred to them at the same time, or else they would go on chatting without noticing anything around them. Deslauriers longed for riches, as a means for gaining power over men. He was anxious to possess an influence over a vast number of people, to make a great noise, to have three secretaries under his command, and to give a big political dinner once a month.

Frederick would have furnished for himself a palace in the Moorish fashion, to spend his life reclining on cashmere divans, to the murmur of a jet of water, attended by negro pages. And these things, of which he had only dreamed, became in the end so definite that they made him feel as dejected as if he had lost them.

"What is the use of talking about all these things," said he, "when we'll never have them?"

"Who knows?" returned Deslauriers.

In spite of his democratic views, he urged Frederick to get an introduction into the Dambreuses' house.

The other, by way of objection, pointed to the failure of his previous attempts.

"Bah! go back there. They'll give you an invitation!"

Towards the close of the month of March, they received amongst other bills of a rather awkward description that of the restaurant-keeper who supplied them with dinners. Frederick, not having the entire amount, borrowed a hundred crowns from Deslauriers. A fortnight afterwards, he renewed the same request, and the clerk administered a lecture to him on the extravagant habits to which he gave himself up in the Arnoux's society.

As a matter of fact, he put no restraint upon himself in this respect. A view of Venice, a view of Naples, and another of Constantinople occupying the centre of three walls respectively, equestrian subjects by Alfred de Dreux here and there, a group by Pradier over the mantelpiece, numbers of *L'Art Industriel* lying on the piano, and works in boards on the floor in the corners, encumbered the apartment which he occupied to such an extent that it was hard to find a place to lay a book on, or to move one's elbows about freely. Frederick maintained that he needed all this for his painting.

He pursued his art-studies under Pellerin. But when he called on the artist, the latter was often out, being accustomed to attend at every funeral and public occurrence of which an account was given in the newspapers, and so it was that Frederick spent entire hours alone in the studio. The quietude of this spacious room, which nothing disturbed save the scampering of the mice, the light falling from the ceiling, or the hissing noise of the stove, made him sink into a kind of intellectual ease. Then his eyes, wandering away from the task at which he was engaged, roamed over the shell-work on the wall, around the objects of virtù on the whatnot, along the torsos on which the dust that had collected made, as it were, shreds of velvet; and, like a traveller who has lost his way in the middle of a wood, and whom every path brings back to the same spot, continually, he found underlying every idea in his mind the recollection of Madame Arnoux.

He selected days for calling on her. When he had reached the second floor, he would pause on the threshold, hesitating as to whether he ought to ring or not. Steps drew nigh, the door opened, and the announcement "Madame is gone out," a sense of relief would come upon him, as if a weight had been lifted from his heart. He met her, however. On the first occasion there were three other ladies with her; the next time it was in the afternoon, and Mademoiselle Marthe's writing-master came on the scene. Besides, the men whom Madame Arnoux received were not very punctilious about paying visits. For the sake of prudence he deemed it better not to call again.

But he did not fail to present himself regularly at the office of *L'Art Industriel* every Wednesday in order to get an invitation to the Thursday dinners, and he remained there after all the others, even longer than Regimbart, up to the last moment, pretending to be looking at an engraving or to be running his eye through a newspaper. At last Arnoux would say to him, "Shall you be disengaged to-morrow evening?" and, before the sentence was finished, he would give an affirmative answer. Arnoux appeared to have taken a fancy to him. He showed him how to become a good judge of wines, how to make hot punch, and how to prepare a woodcock ragoût. Frederick followed his advice with docility, feeling an attachment to everything connected with Madame Arnoux — her furniture, her servants, her house, her street.

During these dinners he scarcely uttered a word; he kept gazing at her. She had a little mole close to her temple. Her head-bands were darker than the rest of her hair, and were always a little moist at the edges; from time to time she stroked them with only two fingers. He knew the shape of each of her nails. He took delight in listening to the rustle of her silk skirt as she swept past doors; he stealthily inhaled the perfume that came from her handkerchief; her comb, her gloves, her rings were for him things of special interest, important as works of art, almost endowed with life like individuals; all took possession of his heart and strengthened his passion.

He had not been sufficiently self-contained to conceal it from Deslauriers. When he came home from Madame Arnoux's, he would wake up his friend, as if inadvertently, in order to have an opportunity of talking about her.

Deslauriers, who slept in the little off-room, close to where they had their water-supply, would give a great yawn. Frederick seated himself on the side of the bed. At first, he spoke about the dinner; then he referred to a thousand petty details, in which he saw marks of contempt or of affection. On one occasion, for instance, she had refused his arm, in order to take Dittmer's; and Frederick gave vent to his humiliation:

"Ah! how stupid!"

Or else she had called him her "dear friend."

"Then go after her gaily!"

"But I dare not do that," said Frederick.

"Well, then, think no more about her! Good night!"

Deslauriers thereupon turned on his side, and fell asleep. He felt utterly unable to comprehend this love, which seemed to him the last weakness of adolescence; and, as his own society was apparently not enough to content

Frederick, he conceived the idea of bringing together, once a week, those whom they both recognised as friends.

They came on Saturday about nine o'clock. The three Algerine curtains were carefully drawn. The lamp and four wax-lights were burning. In the middle of the table the tobacco-pot, filled with pipes, displayed itself between the beer-bottles, the tea-pot, a flagon of rum, and some fancy biscuits.

They discussed the immortality of the soul, and drew comparisons between the different professors.

One evening Hussonnet introduced a tall young man, attired in a frock-coat, too short in the wrists, and with a look of embarrassment in his face. It was the young fellow whom they had gone to release from the guard-house the year before.

As he had not been able to restore the box of lace which he had lost in the scuffle, his employer had accused him of theft, and threatened to prosecute him. He was now a clerk in a wagon-office. Hussonnet had come across him that morning at the corner of the street, and brought him along, for Dussardier, in a spirit of gratitude, had expressed a wish to see "the other."

He stretched out towards Frederick the cigar-holder, still full, which he had religiously preserved, in the hope of being able to give it back. The young men invited him to pay them a second visit; and he was not slow in doing so.

They all had sympathies in common. At first, their hatred of the Government reached the height of an unquestionable dogma. Martinon alone attempted to defend Louis Philippe. They overwhelmed him with the commonplaces scattered through the newspapers — the "Bastillization" of Paris, the September laws, Pritchard, Lord Guizot — so that Martinon held his tongue for fear of giving offence to somebody. During his seven years at college he had never incurred the penalty of an imposition, and at the Law School he knew how to make himself agreeable to the professors. He usually wore a big frock-coat of the colour of putty, with india-rubber goloshes; but one evening he presented himself arrayed like a bridegroom, in a velvet roll-collar waistcoat, a white tie, and a gold chain.

The astonishment of the other young men was greatly increased when they learned that he had just come away from M. Dambreuse's house. In fact, the banker Dambreuse had just bought a portion of an extensive wood from Martinon senior; and, when the worthy man introduced his son, the other had invited them both to dinner.

"Was there a good supply of truffles there?" asked Deslauriers. "And did you take his wife by the waist between the two doors, *sicut decet*?"

Hereupon the conversation turned on women. Pellerin would not admit that there were beautiful women (he preferred tigers); besides the human female was an inferior creature in the æsthetic hierarchy.

"What fascinates you is just the very thing that degrades her as an idea; I mean her breasts, her hair — — "

"Nevertheless," urged Frederick, "long black hair and large dark eyes — — "

"Oh! we know all about that," cried Hussonnet. "Enough of Andalusian beauties on the lawn. Those things are out of date; no thank you! For the fact is, honour bright! a fast woman is more amusing than the Venus of Milo. Let us be Gallic, in Heaven's name, and after the Regency style, if we can!

'Flow, generous wines; ladies, deign to smile!'

We must pass from the dark to the fair. Is that your opinion, Father Dussardier?"

Dussardier did not reply. They all pressed him to ascertain what his tastes were.

"Well," said he, colouring, "for my part, I would like to love the same one always!"

This was said in such a way that there was a moment of silence, some of them being surprised at this candour, and others finding in his words, perhaps, the secret yearning of their souls.

Sénécal placed his glass of beer on the mantelpiece, and declared dogmatically that, as prostitution was tyrannical and marriage immoral, it was better to practice abstinence. Deslauriers regarded women as a source of amusement — nothing more. M. de Cisy looked upon them with the utmost dread.

Brought up under the eyes of a grandmother who was a devotee, he found the society of those young fellows as alluring as a place of ill-repute and as instructive as the Sorbonne. They gave him lessons without stint; and so much zeal did he exhibit that he even wanted to smoke in spite of the qualms that upset him every time he made the experiment. Frederick paid him the greatest attention. He admired the shade of this young gentleman's cravat, the fur on his overcoat, and especially his boots, as thin as gloves, and so very neat and fine that they had a look of insolent superiority. His carriage used to wait for him below in the street.

One evening, after his departure, when there was a fall of snow, Sénécal began to complain about his having a coachman. He declaimed against kid-gloved exquisites and against the Jockey Club. He had more respect for a workman than for these fine gentlemen.

"For my part, anyhow, I work for my livelihood! I am a poor man!"

"That's quite evident," said Frederick, at length, losing patience.

The tutor conceived a grudge against him for this remark.

But, as Regimbart said he knew Sénécal pretty well, Frederick, wishing to be civil to a friend of the Arnoux, asked him to come to the Saturday meetings; and the two patriots were glad to be brought together in this way.

However, they took opposite views of things.

Sénécal — who had a skull of the angular type — fixed his attention merely on systems, whereas Regimbart, on the contrary, saw in facts nothing but facts. The thing that chiefly troubled him was the Rhine frontier. He claimed to be an authority on the subject of artillery, and got his clothes made by a tailor of the Polytechnic School.

The first day, when they asked him to take some cakes, he disdainfully shrugged his shoulders, saying that these might suit women; and on the next few occasions his manner was not much more gracious. Whenever speculative ideas had reached a certain elevation, he would mutter: "Oh! no Utopias, no dreams!" On the subject of Art (though he used to visit the studios, where he occasionally out of complaisance gave a lesson in fencing) his opinions were not remarkable for their excellence. He compared the style of M. Marast to that of Voltaire, and Mademoiselle Vatnaz to Madame de Staël, on account of an Ode on Poland in which "there was some spirit." In short, Regimbart bored everyone, and especially Deslauriers, for the Citizen was a friend of the Arnoux family. Now the clerk was most anxious to visit those people in the hope that he might there make the acquaintance of some persons who would be an advantage to him.

"When are you going to take me there with you?" he would say. Arnoux was either overburdened with business, or else starting on a journey. Then it was not worth while, as the dinners were coming to an end.

If he had been called on to risk his life for his friend, Frederick would have done so. But, as he was desirous of making as good a figure as possible, and with this view was most careful about his language and manners, and so attentive to his costume that he always presented himself at the office of *L'Art Industriel* irreproachably gloved, he was afraid that Deslauriers, with his shabby black coat, his attorney-like exterior, and his swaggering kind of talk, might make himself disagreeable to Madame Arnoux, and thus compromise him and lower him in her estimation. The other results would have been bad enough, but the last one would have annoyed him a thousand times more.

The clerk saw that his friend did not wish to keep his promise, and Frederick's silence seemed to him an aggravation of the insult. He would have liked to exercise absolute control over him, to see him developing in accordance with the ideal of their youth; and his inactivity excited the clerk's indignation as a breach of duty and a want of loyalty towards himself. Moreover, Frederick, with his thoughts full of Madame Arnoux, frequently talked about her husband; and Deslauriers now began an intolerable course of boredom by repeating the name a hundred times a day, at the end of each remark, like the parrot-cry of an idiot.

When there was a knock at the door, he would answer, "Come in, Arnoux!" At the restaurant he asked for a Brie cheese "in imitation of Arnoux," and at night, pretending to wake up from a bad dream, he would rouse his comrade by howling out, "Arnoux! Arnoux!" At last Frederick, worn out, said to him one day, in a piteous voice:

"Oh! don't bother me about Arnoux!"

"Never!" replied the clerk:

"He always, everywhere, burning or icy cold, The pictured form of Arnoux — — "

"Hold your tongue, I tell you!" exclaimed Frederick, raising his fist.

Then less angrily he added:

"You know well this is a painful subject to me."

"Oh! forgive me, old fellow," returned Deslauriers with a very low bow. "From this time forth we will be considerate towards Mademoiselle's nerves. Again, I say, forgive me. A thousand pardons!"

And so this little joke came to an end.

But, three weeks later, one evening, Deslauriers said to him:

"Well, I have just seen Madame Arnoux."

"Where, pray?"

"At the Palais, with Balandard, the solicitor. A dark woman, is she not, of the middle height?"

Frederick made a gesture of assent. He waited for Deslauriers to speak. At the least expression of admiration he would have been most effusive, and would have fairly hugged the other. However, Deslauriers remained silent. At last, unable to contain himself any longer, Frederick, with assumed indifference, asked him what he thought of her.

Deslauriers considered that "she was not so bad, but still nothing extraordinary."

"Ha! you think so," said Frederick.

They soon reached the month of August, the time when he was to present himself for his second examination. According to the prevailing opinion, the subjects could be made up in a fortnight. Frederick, having full confidence in his own powers, swallowed up in a trice the first four books of the Code of Procedure, the first three of the Penal Code, many bits of the system of criminal investigation, and a part of the Civil Code, with the annotations of M. Poncelet. The night before, Deslauriers made him run through the whole course, a process which did not finish till morning, and, in order to take advantage of even the last quarter of an hour, continued questioning him while they walked along the footpath together.

As several examinations were taking place at the same time, there were many persons in the precincts, and amongst others Hussonnet and Cisy: young men never failed to come and watch these ordeals when the fortunes of their comrades were at stake.

Frederick put on the traditional black gown; then, followed by the throng, with three other students, he entered a spacious apartment, into which the light penetrated through uncurtained windows, and which was garnished with benches ranged along the walls. In the centre, leather chairs were drawn round a table adorned with a green cover. This separated the candidates from the examiners in their red gowns and ermine shoulder-knots, the head examiners wearing gold-laced flat caps.

Frederick found himself the last but one in the series — an unfortunate place. In answer to the first question, as to the difference between a convention and a contract, he defined the one as if it were the other; and the professor, who was a fair sort of man, said to him, "Don't be agitated, Monsieur! Compose yourself!" Then, having asked two easy questions, which were answered in a doubtful fashion, he passed on at last to the fourth. This wretched beginning made Frederick lose his head. Deslauriers, who was facing him amongst the spectators, made a sign to him to indicate that it was not a hopeless case yet; and at the second batch of questions, dealing with the criminal law, he came out tolerably well. But, after the third, with reference to the "mystic will," the examiner having remained impassive the whole time, his mental distress redoubled; for Hussonnet brought his hands together as if to applaud, whilst Deslauriers liberally indulged in shrugs of the shoulders. Finally, the moment was reached when it was necessary to be examined on Procedure. The professor, displeased at listening to theories opposed to his own, asked him in a churlish tone:

"And so this is your view, monsieur? How do you reconcile the principle of article 1351 of the Civil Code with this application by a third party to set aside a judgment by default?"

Frederick had a great headache from not having slept the night before. A ray of sunlight, penetrating through one of the slits in a Venetian blind, fell on his face. Standing behind the seat, he kept wriggling about and tugging at his moustache.

"I am still awaiting your answer," the man with the gold-edged cap observed.

And as Frederick's movements, no doubt, irritated him:

"You won't find it in that moustache of yours!"

This sarcasm made the spectators laugh. The professor, feeling flattered

This sarcasm made the spectators laugh. The professor, feeling flattered, adopted a wheedling tone. He put two more questions with reference to adjournment and summary jurisdiction, then nodded his head by way of approval. The examination was over. Frederick retired into the vestibule.

While an usher was taking off his gown, to draw it over some other person immediately afterwards, his friends gathered around him, and succeeded in fairly bothering him with their conflicting opinions as to the result of his examination. Presently the announcement was made in a sonorous voice at the entrance of the hall: "The third was — put off!"

"Sent packing!" said Hussonnet. "Let us go away!"

In front of the door-keeper's lodge they met Martinon, flushed, excited, with a smile on his face and the halo of victory around his brow. He had just passed his final examination without any impediment. All he had now to do was the thesis. Before a fortnight he would be a licentiate. His family enjoyed the acquaintance of a Minister; "a beautiful career" was opening before him.

"All the same, this puts you into a mess," said Deslauriers.

There is nothing so humiliating as to see blockheads succeed in undertakings in which we fail. Frederick, filled with vexation, replied that he did not care a straw about the matter. He had higher pretensions; and as Hussonnet made a show of leaving, Frederick took him aside, and said to him:

"Not a word about this to them, mind!"

It was easy to keep it secret, since Arnoux was starting the next morning for Germany.

When he came back in the evening the clerk found his friend singularly altered: he danced about and whistled; and the other was astonished at this capricious change of mood. Frederick declared that he did not intend to go home to his mother, as he meant to spend his holidays working.

At the news of Arnoux's departure, a feeling of delight had taken possession of him. He might present himself at the house whenever he liked without any fear of having his visits broken in upon. The consciousness of absolute security would make him self-confident. At last he would not stand aloof, he would not be separated from her! Something more powerful than an iron chain attached him to Paris; a voice from the depths of his heart called out to him to remain.

There were certain obstacles in his path. These he got over by writing to his mother: he first of all admitted that he had failed to pass, owing to alterations made in the course — a mere mischance — an unfair thing; besides, all the great advocates (he referred to them by name) had been rejected at their examinations. But he calculated on presenting himself again in the month of November. Now, having no time to lose, he would not go home this year; and he asked, in addition to the quarterly allowance, for two hundred and fifty francs, to get coached in to the quarterly allowance, for two hundred and fifty francs, to get coached in law by a private tutor, which would be of great assistance to him; and he threw around the entire epistle a garland of regrets, condolences, expressions of endearment, and protestations of filial love.

Madame Moreau, who had been expecting him the following day, was doubly grieved. She threw a veil over her son's misadventure, and in answer told him to "come all the same." Frederick would not give way, and the result was a falling out between them. However, at the end of the week, he received the amount of the quarter's allowance together with the sum required for the payment of the private tutor, which helped to pay for a pair of pearl-grey trousers, a white felt hat, and a gold-headed switch. When he had procured all these things he thought:

"Perhaps this is only a hairdresser's fancy on my part!"

And a feeling of considerable hesitation took possession of him.

In order to make sure as to whether he ought to call on Madame Arnoux, he tossed three coins into the air in succession. On each occasion luck was in his favour. So then Fate must have ordained it. He hailed a cab and drove to the Rue de Choiseul.

He quickly ascended the staircase and drew the bell-pull, but without effect. He felt as if he were about to faint.

Then, with fierce energy, he shook the heavy silk tassel. There was a resounding peal which gradually died away till no further sound was heard. Frederick got rather frightened.

He pasted his ear to the door — not a breath! He looked in through the keyhole, and only saw two reed-points on the wall-paper in the midst of designs of flowers. At last, he was on the point of going away when he changed his mind. This time, he gave a timid little ring. The door flew open, and Arnoux himself appeared on the threshold, with his hair all in disorder, his face crimson, and his features distorted by an expression of sullen embarrassment.

"Hallo! What the deuce brings you here? Come in!"

He led Frederick, not into the boudoir or into the bedroom, but into the dining-room, where on the table could be seen a bottle of champagne and two glasses; and, in an abrupt tone:

"There is something you want to ask me, my dear friend?"

"No! nothing! nothing!" stammered the young man, trying to think of some excuse for his visit. At length, he said to Arnoux that he had called to know whether they had heard from him, as Hussonnet had announced that he had gone to Germany.

"Not at all!" returned Arnoux. "What a feather-headed fellow that is to take everything in the wrong way!"

In order to conceal his agitation, Frederick kept walking from right to left in the dining-room. Happening to come into contact with a chair, he knocked down a parasol which had been laid across it, and the ivory handle got broken.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "How sorry I am for having broken Madame Arnoux's parasol!"

At this remark, the picture-dealer raised his head and smiled in a very peculiar fashion. Frederick, taking advantage of the opportunity thus offered to talk about her, added shyly:

"Could I not see her?"

No. She had gone to the country to see her mother, who was ill.

He did not venture to ask any questions as to the length of time that she would be away. He merely enquired what was Madame Arnoux's native place.

"Chartres. Does this astonish you?"

"Astonish me? Oh, no! Why should it! Not in the least!"

After that, they could find absolutely nothing to talk about. Arnoux, having made a cigarette for himself, kept walking round the table, puffing. Frederick, standing near the stove, stared at the walls, the whatnot, and the floor; and delightful pictures flitted through his memory, or, rather, before his eyes. Then he left the apartment.

A piece of a newspaper, rolled up into a ball, lay on the floor in the anteroom. Arnoux snatched it up, and, raising himself on the tips of his toes, he stuck it into the bell, in order, as he said, that he might be able to go and finish his interrupted siesta. Then, as he grasped Frederick's hand:

"Kindly tell the porter that I am not in."

And he shut the door after him with a bang.

Frederick descended the staircase step by step. The ill-success of this first attempt discouraged him as to the possible results of those that might follow. Then began three months of absolute boredom. As he had nothing to do, his melancholy was aggravated by the want of occupation.

He spent whole hours gazing from the top of his balcony at the river as it flowed between the quays, with their bulwarks of grey stone, blackened here and there by the seams of the sewers, with a pontoon of washerwomen moored close to the bank, where some brats were amusing themselves by making a water-spaniel swim in the slime. His eyes, turning aside from the stone bridge of Nôtre Dame and the three suspension bridges, continually directed their glance towards the Quai-aux-Ormes, resting on a group of old trees, resembling the linden-trees of the Montereau wharf. The Saint-Jacques tower, the Hôtel de Ville, Saint-Gervais, Saint-Louis, and Saint-Paul, rose up in front of him amid a confused mass of roofs; and the genius of the July Column glittered at the eastern side like a large gold star, whilst at the other end the dome of the Tuileries showed its outlines against the sky in one great round mass of blue. Madame Arnoux's house must be on this side in the rear!

He went back to his bedchamber; then, throwing himself on the sofa, he abandoned himself to a confused succession of thoughts — plans of work, schemes for the guidance of his conduct, attempts to divine the future. At last, in order to shake off broodings all about himself, he went out into the open air.

He plunged at random into the Latin Quarter, usually so noisy, but deserted at this particular time, for the students had gone back to join their families. The huge walls of the colleges, which the silence seemed to lengthen, wore a still more melancholy aspect. All sorts of peaceful sounds could be heard — the flapping of wings in cages, the noise made by the turning of a lathe, or the strokes of a cobbler's hammer; and the old-clothes men, standing in the middle of the street, looked up at each house fruitlessly. In the interior of a solitary café the barmaid was yawning between her two full decanters. The newspapers were left undisturbed on the tables of reading-rooms. In the ironing establishments linen quivered under the puffs of tepid wind. From time to time he stopped to look at the window of a second-hand book-shop; an omnibus which grazed the footpath as it came rumbling along made him turn round; and, when he found himself before the Luxembourg, he went no further.

Occasionally he was attracted towards the boulevards by the hope of finding there something that might amuse him. After he had passed through dark alleys, from which his nostrils were greeted by fresh moist odours, he reached vast, desolate, open spaces, dazzling with light, in which monuments cast at the side of the pavement notches of black shadow. But once more the wagons and the shops appeared, and the crowd had the effect of stunning him, especially on Sunday, when, from the Bastille to the Madeleine, it kept swaying in one immense flood over the asphalt, in the midst of a cloud of dust, in an incessant clamour. He felt disgusted at the meanness of the faces, the silliness of the talk, and the idiotic self-satisfaction that oozed through these sweating foreheads. However, the consciousness of being superior to these individuals mitigated the weariness which he experienced in gazing at them.

Every day he went to the office of *L'Art Industriel*; and in order to ascertain when Madame Arnoux would be back, he made elaborate enquiries about her mother. Arnoux's answer never varied — "the change for the better was continuing" — his wife, with his little daughter, would be returning the following week. The longer she delayed in coming back, the more uneasiness Frederick exhibited, so that Arnoux, touched by so much affection, brought him five or six times a week to dine at a restaurant.

In the long talks which they had together on these occasions Frederick discovered that the picture-dealer was not a very intellectual type of man. Arnoux might, however, take notice of his chilling manner; and now Frederick deemed it advisable to pay back, in a small measure, his polite attentions.

So, being anxious to do things on a good scale, the young man sold all his new clothes to a second-hand clothes-dealer for the sum of eighty francs, and having increased it with a hundred more francs which he had left, he called at Arnoux's house to bring him out to dine. Regimbart happened to be there, and all three of them set forth for Les Trois Frères Provençaux.

The Citizen began by taking off his surtout, and, knowing that the two others would defer to his gastronomic tastes, drew up the *menu*. But in vain did he make his way to the kitchen to speak himself to the *chef*, go down to the cellar, with every corner of which he was familiar, and send for the master of the establishment, to whom he gave "a blowing up." He was not satisfied with the dishes, the wines, or the attendance. At each new dish, at each fresh bottle, as soon as he had swallowed the first mouthful, the first draught, he threw down his fork or pushed his glass some distance away from him; then, leaning on his elbows on the tablecloth, and stretching out his arms, he declared in a loud tone that he could no longer dine in Paris! Finally, not knowing what to put into his mouth, Regimbart ordered kidney-beans dressed with oil, "quite plain," which, though only a partial success, slightly appeased him. Then he had a talk with the waiter all about the latter's predecessors at the "Provençaux": — "What had become of Antoine? And a fellow named Eugène? And Théodore, the little fellow who always used to attend down stairs? There was much finer fare in those days, and Burgundy vintages the like of which they would never see again."

Then there was a discussion as to the value of ground in the suburbs, Arnoux having speculated in that way, and looked on it as a safe thing. In the meantime, however, he would lie out of the interest on his money. As he did not want to sell out at any price, Regimbart would find out some one to whom he could let the ground; and so these two gentlemen proceeded at the close of the dessert to make calculations with a lead pencil.

They went out to get coffee in the smoking-divan on the ground-floor in the Passage du Saumon. Frederick had to remain on his legs while interminable games of billiards were being played, drenched in innumerable glasses of beer; and he lingered on there till midnight without knowing why, through want of energy, through sheer senselessness, in the vague expectation that something might happen which would give a favourable turn to his love.

When, then, would he next see her? Frederick was in a state of despair about it. But, one evening, towards the close of November, Arnoux said to him:

"My wife, you know, came back yesterday!"

Next day, at five o'clock, he made his way to her house. He began by congratulating her on her mother's recovery from such a serious illness.

"Why, no! Who told you that?"

"Arnoux!"

She gave vent to a slight "Ah!" then added that she had grave fears at first, which, however, had now been dispelled. She was seated close beside the fire in an upholstered easy-chair. He was on the sofa, with his hat between his knees; and the conversation was difficult to carry on, as it was broken off nearly every minute, so he got no chance of giving utterance to his sentiments. But, when he began to complain of having to study legal quibbles, she answered, "Oh! I understand — business!" and she let her face fall, buried suddenly in her own reflections.

He was eager to know what they were, and even did not bestow a thought on anything else. The twilight shadows gathered around them.

She rose, having to go out about some shopping; then she reappeared in a bonnet trimmed with velvet, and a black mantle edged with minever. He plucked up courage and offered to accompany her.

It was now so dark that one could scarcely see anything. The air was cold, and had an unpleasant odour, owing to a heavy fog, which partially blotted out the fronts of the houses. Frederick inhaled it with delight; for he could feel through the wadding of his coat the form of her arm; and her hand, cased in a chamois glove with two buttons, her little hand which he would have liked to cover with kisses, leaned on his sleeve. Owing to the slipperiness of the pavement, they lost their balance a little; it seemed to him as if they were both rocked by the wind in the midst of a cloud.

The glitter of the lamps on the boulevard brought him back to the realities of existence. The opportunity was a good one, there was no time to lose. He gave himself as far as the Rue de Richeliéu to declare his love. But almost at that very moment, in front of a china-shop, she stopped abruptly and said to him:

"We are at the place. Thanks. On Thursday — is it not? — as usual."

The dinners were now renewed; and the more visits he paid at Madame Arnoux's, the more his love-sickness increased. The contemplation of this woman had an enervating effect upon him, like the use of a perfume that is too strong. It penetrated into the very depths of his nature, and became almost a kind of habitual sensation, a new mode of existence.

The prostitutes whom he brushed past under the gaslight, the female ballad-singers breaking into bursts of melody, the ladies rising on horseback at full gallop, the shopkeepers' wives on foot, the grisettes at their windows, all women brought her before his mental vision, either from the effect of their resemblance to her or the violent contrast to her which they presented. As he walked along by the shops, he gazed at the cashmeres, the laces, and the jewelled eardrops, imagining how they would look draped around her figure, sewn in her corsage, or lighting up her dark hair. In the flower-girls' baskets the bouquets blossomed for her to choose one as she passed. In the shoemakers' show-windows the little satin slippers with swan's-down edges seemed to be waiting for her foot. Every street led towards her house; the hackney-coaches stood in their places to carry her home the more quickly; Paris was associated with her person, and the great city, with all its noises, roared around her like an immense orchestra.

When he went into the Jardin des Plantes the sight of a palm-tree carried him off into distant countries. They were travelling together on the backs of dromedaries, under the awnings of elephants, in the cabin of a yacht amongst the blue archipelagoes, or side by side on mules with little bells attached to them who went stumbling through the grass against broken columns. Sometimes he stopped in the Louvre before old pictures; and, his love embracing her even in vanished centuries, he substituted her for the personages in the paintings. Wearing a hennin on her head, she was praying on bended knees before a stained-glass window. Lady Paramount of Castile or Flanders, she remained seated in a starched ruff and a body lined with whalebone with big puffs. Then he saw her descending some wide porphyry staircase in the midst of senators under a dais of ostriches' feathers in a robe of brocade. At another time he dreamed of her in yellow silk trousers on the cushions of a harem — and all that was beautiful, the scintillation of the stars, certain tunes in music, the turn of a phrase, the outlines of a face, led him to think about her in an abrupt, unconscious fashion.

As for trying to make her his mistress, he was sure that any such attempt would be futile.

One evening, Dittmer, on his arrival, kissed her on the forehead; Lovarias did the same, observing:

"You give me leave — don't you? — as it is a friend's privilege?"

Frederick stammered out:

"It seems to me that we are all friends."

"Not all old friends!" she returned.

This was repelling him beforehand indirectly.

Besides, what was he to do? To tell her that he loved her? No doubt, she would decline to listen to him or else she would feel indignant and turn him out of the house. But he preferred to submit to even the most painful ordeal rather than run the horrible risk of seeing her no more. He envied pianists for their talents and soldiers for their scars. He longed for a dangerous attack of sickness, hoping in this way to make her take an interest in him.

One thing caused astonishment to himself, that he felt in no way jealous of Arnoux; and he could not picture her in his imagination undressed, so natural did her modesty appear, and so far did her sex recede into a mysterious background.

Nevertheless, he dreamed of the happiness of living with her, of "theeing" and "thouing" her, of passing his hand lingeringly over her head-bands, or remaining in a kneeling posture on the floor, with both arms clasped round her waist, so as to drink in her soul through his eyes. To accomplish this it would be necessary to conquer Fate; and so, incapable of action, cursing God, and accusing himself of being a coward, he kept moving restlessly within the confines of his passion just as a prisoner keeps moving about in his dungeon. The pangs which he was perpetually enduring were choking him. For hours he would remain quite motionless, or else he would burst into tears; and one day when he had not the strength to restrain his emotion, Deslauriers said to him:

"Why, goodness gracious! what's the matter with you?"

Frederick's nerves were unstrung. Deslauriers did not believe a word of it. At the sight of so much mental anguish, he felt all his old affection reawakening, and he tried to cheer up his friend. A man like him to let himself be depressed, what folly! It was all very well while one was young; but, as one grows older, it is only loss of time.

"You are spoiling my Frederick for me! I want him whom I knew in bygone days. The same boy as ever! I liked him! Come, smoke a pipe, old chap! Shake yourself up a little! You drive me mad!"

"It is true," said Frederick, "I am a fool!"

The clerk replied:

"Ah! old troubadour, I know well what's troubling you! A little affair of the heart? Confess it! Bah! One lost, four found instead! We console ourselves for virtuous women with the other sort. Would you like me to introduce you to some women? You have only to come to the Alhambra."

(This was a place for public balls recently opened at the top of the Champs-Elysées, which had gone down owing to a display of licentiousness somewhat ruder than is usual in establishments of the kind.)

"That's a place where there seems to be good fun. You can take your friends, if you like. I can even pass in Regimbart for you."

Frederick did not think fit to ask the Citizen to go. Deslauriers deprived himself of the pleasure of Sénécal's society. They took only Hussonnet and Cisy along with Dussardier; and the same hackney-coach set the group of five down at the entrance of the Alhambra.

at the entrance of the Alhambra.

Two Moorish galleries extended on the right and on the left, parallel to one another. The wall of a house opposite occupied the entire backguard; and the fourth side (that in which the restaurant was) represented a Gothic cloister with stained-glass windows. A sort of Chinese roof screened the platform reserved for the musicians. The ground was covered all over with asphalt; the Venetian lanterns fastened to posts formed, at regular intervals, crowns of many-coloured flame above the heads of the dancers. A pedestal here and there supported a stone basin, from which rose a thin streamlet of water. In the midst of the foliage could be seen plaster statues, and Hebes and Cupid, painted in oil, and presenting a very sticky appearance; and the numerous walks, garnished with sand of a deep yellow, carefully raked, made the garden look much larger than it was in reality.

Students were walking their mistresses up and down; drapers' clerks strutted about with canes in their hands; lads fresh from college were smoking their regalias; old men had their dyed beards smoothed out with combs. There were English, Russians, men from South America, and three Orientals in tarbooshes. Lorettes, grisettes, and girls of the town had come there in the hope of finding a protector, a lover, a gold coin, or simply for the pleasure of dancing; and their dresses, with tunics of water-green, cherry-red, or violet, swept along, fluttered between the ebony-trees and the lilacs. Nearly all the men's clothes were of striped material; some of them had white trousers, in spite of the coolness of the evening. The gas was lighted.

Hussonnet was acquainted with a number of the women through his connection with the fashion-journals and the smaller theatres. He sent them kisses with the tips of his fingers, and from time to time he quitted his friends to go and chat with them.

Deslauriers felt jealous of these playful familiarities. He accosted in a cynical manner a tall, fair-haired girl, in a nankeen costume. After looking at him with a certain air of sullenness, she said:

"No! I wouldn't trust you, my good fellow!" and turned on her heel.

His next attack was on a stout brunette, who apparently was a little mad; for she gave a bounce at the very first word he spoke to her, threatening, if he went any further, to call the police. Deslauriers made an effort to laugh; then, coming across a little woman sitting by herself under a gas-lamp, he asked her to be his partner in a quadrille.

The musicians, perched on the platform in the attitude of apes, kept scraping and blowing away with desperate energy. The conductor, standing up, kept beating time automatically. The dancers were much crowded and enjoyed themselves thoroughly. The bonnet-strings, getting loose, rubbed against the themselves thoroughly. The bonnet-strings, getting loose, rubbed against the cravats; the boots sank under the petticoats; and all this bouncing went on to the accompaniment of the music. Deslauriers hugged the little woman, and, seized with the delirium of the cancan, whirled about, like a big marionnette, in the midst of the dancers. Cisy and Deslauriers were still promenading up and down. The young aristocrat kept ogling the girls, and, in spite of the clerk's exhortations, did not venture to talk to them, having an idea in his head that in the resorts of these women there was always "a man hidden in the cupboard with a pistol who would come out of it and force you to sign a bill of exchange."

They came back and joined Frederick. Deslauriers had stopped dancing; and they were all asking themselves how they were to finish up the evening, when Hussonnet exclaimed:

"Look! Here's the Marquise d'Amaëgui!"

The person referred to was a pale woman with a *retroussé* nose, mittens up to her elbows, and big black earrings hanging down her cheeks, like two dog's ears. Hussonnet said to her:

"We ought to organise a little fête at your house — a sort of Oriental rout. Try to collect some of your friends here for these French cavaliers. Well, what is annoying you? Are you going to wait for your hidalgo?"

The Andalusian hung down her head: being well aware of the by no means lavish habits of her friend, she was afraid of having to pay for any refreshments he ordered. When, at length, she let the word "money" slip from her, Cisy offered five napoleons — all he had in his purse; and so it was settled that the thing should come off.

But Frederick was absent. He fancied that he had recognised the voice of Arnoux, and got a glimpse of a woman's hat; and accordingly he hastened towards an arbour which was not far off.

Mademoiselle Vatnaz was alone there with Arnoux.

"Excuse me! I am in the way?"

"Not in the least!" returned the picture-merchant.

Frederick, from the closing words of their conversation, understood that Arnoux had come to the Alhambra to talk over a pressing matter of business with Mademoiselle Vatnaz; and it was evident that he was not completely reassured, for he said to her, with some uneasiness in his manner:

"You are quite sure?"

"Perfectly certain! You are loved. Ah! what a man you are!"

And she assumed a pouting look, putting out her big lips, so red that they seemed tinged with blood. But she had wonderful eyes, of a tawny hue, with specks of gold in the pupils, full of vivacity, amorousness, and sensuality. They illuminated, like lamps, the rather yellow tint of her thin face. Arnoux seemed to illuminated, like lamps, the rather yellow tint of her thin face. Arnoux seemed to enjoy her exhibition of pique. He stooped over her, saying:

"You are nice — give me a kiss!"

She caught hold of his two ears, and pressed her lips against his forehead.

At that moment the dancing stopped; and in the conductor's place appeared a handsome young man, rather fat, with a waxen complexion. He had long black hair, which he wore in the same fashion as Christ, and a blue velvet waistcoat embroidered with large gold palm-branches. He looked as proud as a peacock, and as stupid as a turkey-cock; and, having bowed to the audience, he began a ditty. A villager was supposed to be giving an account of his journey to the capital. The singer used the dialect of Lower Normandy, and played the part of a drunken man. The refrain —

"Ah! I laughed at you there, I laughed at you there, In that rascally city of Paris!"

was greeted with enthusiastic stampings of feet. Delmas, "a vocalist who sang with expression," was too shrewd to let the excitement of his listeners cool. A guitar was quickly handed to him and he moaned forth a ballad entitled "The Albanian Girl's Brother."

The words recalled to Frederick those which had been sung by the man in rags between the paddle-boxes of the steamboat. His eyes involuntarily attached themselves to the hem of the dress spread out before him.

After each couplet there was a long pause, and the blowing of the wind through the trees resembled the sound of the waves.

Mademoiselle Vatnaz blushed the moment she saw Dussardier. She soon rose, and stretching out her hand towards him:

"You do not remember me, Monsieur Auguste?"

"How do you know her?" asked Frederick.

"We have been in the same house," he replied.

Cisy pulled him by the sleeve; they went out; and, scarcely had they disappeared, when Madame Vatnaz began to pronounce a eulogy on his character. She even went so far as to add that he possessed "the genius of the heart."

Then they chatted about Delmas, admitting that as a mimic he might be a success on the stage; and a discussion followed in which Shakespeare, the Censorship, Style, the People, the receipts of the Porte Saint-Martin, Alexandre Dumas, Victor Hugo, and Dumersan were all mixed up together.

Arnoux had known many celebrated actresses; the young men bent forward their heads to hear what he had to say about these ladies. But his words were drowned in the noise of the music; and, as soon as the quadrille or the polka was over, they all squatted round the tables, called the waiter, and laughed. Bottles of beer and of effervescent lemonade went off with detonations amid the foliage; women clucked like hens; now and then, two gentlemen tried to fight; and a thief was arrested. The dancers, in the rush of a gallop, encroached on the walks. Panting, with flushed, smiling faces, they filed off in a whirlwind which lifted up the gowns with the coat-tails. The trombones brayed more loudly; the rhythmic movement became more rapid. Behind the mediæval cloister could be heard crackling sounds; squibs went off; artificial suns began turning round; the gleam of the Bengal fires, like emeralds in colour, lighted up for the space of a minute the entire garden; and, with the last rocket, a great sigh escaped from the assembled throng.

It slowly died away. A cloud of gunpowder floated into the air. Frederick and Deslauriers were walking step by step through the midst of the crowd, when they happened to see something that made them suddenly stop: Martinon was in the act of paying some money at the place where umbrellas were left; and he was accompanying a woman of fifty, plain-looking, magnificently dressed, and of problematic social rank.

"That sly dog," said Deslauriers, "is not so simple as we imagine. But where in the world is Cisy?"

Dussardier pointed out to them the smoking-divan, where they perceived the knightly youth, with a bowl of punch before him, and a pink hat by his side, to keep him company. Hussonnet, who had been away for the past few minutes, reappeared at the same moment.

A young girl was leaning on his arm, and addressing him in a loud voice as "My little cat."

"Oh! no!" said he to her — "not in public! Call me rather 'Vicomte.' That gives you a cavalier style — Louis XIII. and dainty boots — the sort of thing I like! Yes, my good friends, one of the old *régime*! — nice, isn't she?" — and he chucked her by the chin — "Salute these gentlemen! they are all the sons of peers of France. I keep company with them in order that they may get an appointment for me as an ambassador."

"How insane you are!" sighed Mademoiselle Vatnaz. She asked Dussardier to see her as far as her own door.

Arnoux watched them going off; then, turning towards Frederick:

"Did you like the Vatnaz? At any rate, you're not quite frank about these affairs. I believe you keep your amours hidden."

Frederick, turning pale, swore that he kept nothing hidden.

"Can it be possible you don't know what it is to have a mistress?" said Arnoux.

Frederick felt a longing to mention a woman's name at random. But the story might be repeated to her. So he replied that as a matter of fact he had no mistress.

The picture-dealer reproached him for this.

"This evening you had a good opportunity! Why didn't you do like the others, each of whom went off with a woman?"

"Well, and what about yourself?" said Frederick, provoked by his persistency.

"Oh! myself — that's quite a different matter, my lad! I go home to my own one!"

Then he called a cab, and disappeared.

The two friends walked towards their own destination. An east wind was blowing. They did not exchange a word. Deslauriers was regretting that he had not succeeded in making a *shine* before a certain newspaper-manager, and Frederick was lost once more in his melancholy broodings. At length, breaking silence, he said that this public-house ball appeared to him a stupid affair.

"Whose fault is it? If you had not left us, to join that Arnoux of yours — — "

"Bah! anything I could have done would have been utterly useless!"

But the clerk had theories of his own. All that was necessary in order to get a thing was to desire it strongly.

"Nevertheless, you yourself, a little while ago — — "

"I don't care a straw about that sort of thing!" returned Deslauriers, cutting short Frederick's allusion. "Am I going to get entangled with women?"

And he declaimed against their affectations, their silly ways — in short, he disliked them.

"Don't be acting, then!" said Frederick.

Deslauriers became silent. Then, all at once:

"Will you bet me a hundred francs that I won't *do* the first woman that passes?"

"Yes — it's a bet!"

The first who passed was a hideous-looking beggar-woman, and they were giving up all hope of a chance presenting itself when, in the middle of the Rue de Rivoli, they saw a tall girl with a little bandbox in her hand.

Deslauriers accosted her under the arcades. She turned up abruptly by the Tuileries, and soon diverged into the Place du Carrousel. She glanced to the right and to the left. She ran after a hackney-coach; Deslauriers overtook her. He walked by her side, talking to her with expressive gestures. At length, she accepted his arm, and they went on together along the quays. Then, when they reached the rising ground in front of the Châtelet, they kept tramping up and down for at least twenty minutes, like two sailors keeping watch. But, all of a sudden, they passed over the Pont-au-Change, through the Flower Market, and along the Quai Napoléon. Frederick came up behind them. Deslauriers gave him to understand that he would be in their way, and had only to follow his own example.

"How much have you got still?"

"Two hundred sous pieces."

"That's enough — good night to you!"

Frederick was seized with the astonishment one feels at seeing a piece of foolery coming to a successful issue.

"He has the laugh at me," was his reflection. "Suppose I went back again?"

Perhaps Deslauriers imagined that he was envious of this paltry love! "As if I had not one a hundred times more rare, more noble, more absorbing." He felt a sort of angry feeling impelling him onward. He arrived in front of Madame Arnoux's door.

None of the outer windows belonged to her apartment. Nevertheless, he remained with his eyes pasted on the front of the house — as if he fancied he could, by his contemplation, break open the walls. No doubt, she was now sunk in repose, tranquil as a sleeping flower, with her beautiful black hair resting on the lace of the pillow, her lips slightly parted, and one arm under her head. Then Arnoux's head rose before him, and he rushed away to escape from this vision.

The advice which Deslauriers had given to him came back to his memory. It only filled him with horror. Then he walked about the streets in a vagabond fashion.

When a pedestrian approached, he tried to distinguish the face. From time to time a ray of light passed between his legs, tracing a great quarter of a circle on the pavement; and in the shadow a man appeared with his dosser and his lantern. The wind, at certain points, made the sheet-iron flue of a chimney shake. Distant sounds reached his ears, mingling with the buzzing in his brain; and it seemed to him that he was listening to the indistinct flourish of quadrille music. His movements as he walked on kept up this illusion. He found himself on the Pont de la Concorde.

Then he recalled that evening in the previous winter, when, as he left her house for the first time, he was forced to stand still, so rapidly did his heart beat with the hopes that held it in their clasp. And now they had all withered!

Dark clouds were drifting across the face of the moon. He gazed at it, musing on the vastness of space, the wretchedness of life, the nothingness of everything. The day dawned; his teeth began to chatter, and, half-asleep, wet with the morning mist, and bathed in tears, he asked himself, Why should I not make an end of it? All that was necessary was a single movement. The weight of his forehead dragged him along — he beheld his own dead body floating in the water. Frederick stooped down. The parapet was rather wide, and it was through pure weariness that he did not make the attempt to leap over it.

Then a feeling of dismay swept over him. He reached the boulevards once more, and sank down upon a seat. He was aroused by some police-officers, who were convinced that he had been indulging a little too freely.

He resumed his walk. But, as he was exceedingly hungry, and as all the restaurants were closed, he went to get a "snack" at a tavern by the fish-markets; after which, thinking it too soon to go in yet, he kept sauntering about the Hôtel de Ville till a quarter past eight.

Deslauriers had long since got rid of his wench; and he was writing at the table in the middle of his room. About four o'clock, M. de Cisy came in.

Thanks to Dussardier, he had enjoyed the society of a lady the night before; and he had even accompanied her home in the carriage with her husband to the very threshold of their house, where she had given him an assignation. He parted with her without even knowing her name.

"And what do you propose that I should do in that way?" said Frederick.

Thereupon the young gentleman began to cudgel his brains to think of a suitable woman; he mentioned Mademoiselle Vatnaz, the Andalusian, and all the rest. At length, with much circumlocution, he stated the object of his visit. Relying on the discretion of his friend, he came to aid him in taking an important step, after which he might definitely regard himself as a man; and Frederick showed no reluctance. He told the story to Deslauriers without relating the facts with reference to himself personally.

The clerk was of opinion that he was now going on very well. This respect for his advice increased his good humour. He owed to that quality his success, on the very first night he met her, with Mademoiselle Clémence Daviou, embroideress in gold for military outfits, the sweetest creature that ever lived, as slender as a reed, with large blue eyes, perpetually staring with wonder. The clerk had taken advantage of her credulity to such an extent as to make her believe that he had been decorated. At their private conversations he had his frock-coat adorned with a red ribbon, but divested himself of it in public in order, as he put it, not to humiliate his master. However, he kept her at a distance, allowed himself to be fawned upon, like a pasha, and, in a laughing sort of way, called her "daughter of the people." Every time they met, she brought him little bunches of violets. Frederick would not have cared for a love affair of this sort.

Meanwhile, whenever they set forth arm-in-arm to visit Pinson's or Barillot's circulating library, he experienced a feeling of singular depression. Frederick did not realise how much pain he had made Deslauriers endure for the past year, while brushing his nails before going out to dine in the Rue de Choiseul!

One evening, when from the commanding position in which his balcony stood, he had just been watching them as they went out together, he saw Hussonnet, some distance off, on the Pont d'Arcole. The Bohemian began calling him by making signals towards him, and, when Frederick had descended the five flights of stairs:

"Here is the thing — it is next Saturday, the 24th, Madame Arnoux's feast-day."

"How is that, when her name is Marie?"

"And Angèle also — no matter! They will entertain their guests at their country-house at Saint-Cloud. I was told to give you due notice about it. You'll find a vehicle at the magazine-office at three o'clock. So that makes matters all right! Excuse me for having disturbed you! But I have such a number of calls to make!"

Frederick had scarcely turned round when his door-keeper placed a letter in his hand:

"Monsieur and Madame Dambreuse beg of Monsieur F. Moreau to do them the honour to come and dine with them on Saturday the 24th inst. — R.S.V.P."

"Too late!" he said to himself. Nevertheless, he showed the letter to Deslauriers, who exclaimed:

"Ha! at last! But you don't look as if you were satisfied. Why?"

After some little hesitation, Frederick said that he had another invitation for the same day.

"Be kind enough to let me run across to the Rue de Choiseul. I'm not joking! I'll answer this for you if it puts you about."

And the clerk wrote an acceptance of the invitation in the third person.

Having seen nothing of the world save through the fever of his desires, he pictured it to himself as an artificial creation discharging its functions by virtue of mathematical laws. A dinner in the city, an accidental meeting with a man in office, a smile from a pretty woman, might, by a series of actions deducing themselves from one another, have gigantic results. Certain Parisian drawing-rooms were like those machines which take a material in the rough and render it a hundred times more valuable. He believed in courtesans advising diplomatists, in wealthy marriages brought about by intrigues, in the cleverness of convicts, in the capacity of strong men for getting the better of fortune. In short, he considered it so useful to visit the Dambreuses, and talked about it so plausibly, that Frederick was at a loss to know what was the best course to take.

The least he ought to do, as it was Madame Arnoux's feast-day, was to make her a present. He naturally thought of a parasol, in order to make reparation for his awkwardness. Now he came across a shot-silk parasol with a little carved ivory handle, which had come all the way from China. But the price of it was a hundred and seventy-five francs, and he had not a sou, having in fact to live on the credit of his next quarter's allowance. However, he wished to get it; he was determined to have it; and, in spite of his repugnance to doing so, he had recourse to Deslauriers.

Deslauriers answered Frederick's first question by saying that he had no money.

"I want some," said Frederick — "I want some very badly!"

As the other made the same excuse over again, he flew into a passion.

"You might find it to your advantage some time — — "

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh! nothing."

The clerk understood. He took the sum required out of his reserve-fund, and when he had counted out the money, coin by coin:

"I am not asking you for a receipt, as I see you have a lot of expense!"

Frederick threw himself on his friend's neck with a thousand affectionate protestations. Deslauriers received this display of emotion frigidly. Then, next morning, noticing the parasol on the top of the piano:

"Ah! it was for that!"

"I will send it, perhaps," said Frederick, with an air of carelessness.

Good fortune was on his side, for that evening he got a note with a black border from Madame Dambreuse announcing to him that she had lost an uncle, and excusing herself for having to defer till a later period the pleasure of making his acquaintance. At two o'clock, he reached the office of the art journal. Instead of waiting for him in order to drive him in his carriage, Arnoux had left the city the night before, unable to resist his desire to get some fresh air.

Every year it was his custom, as soon as the leaves were budding forth, to start early in the morning and to remain away several days, making long journeys across the fields, drinking milk at the farm-houses, romping with the village girls, asking questions about the harvest, and carrying back home with him stalks of salad in his pocket-handkerchief. At length, in order to realise a long-cherished dream of his, he had bought a country-house.

While Frederick was talking to the picture-dealer's clerk, Mademoiselle Vatnaz suddenly made her appearance, and was disappointed at not seeing Arnoux. He would, perhaps, be remaining away two days longer. The clerk advised her "to go there" — she could not go there; to write a letter — she was afraid that the letter might get lost. Frederick offered to be the bearer of it himself. She rapidly scribbled off a letter, and implored of him to let nobody see him delivering it.

him delivering it.

Forty minutes afterwards, he found himself at Saint-Cloud. The house, which was about a hundred paces farther away than the bridge, stood half-way up the hill. The garden-walls were hidden by two rows of linden-trees, and a wide lawn descended to the bank of the river. The railed entrance before the door was open, and Frederick went in.

Arnoux, stretched on the grass, was playing with a litter of kittens. This amusement appeared to absorb him completely. Mademoiselle Vatnaz's letter drew him out of his sleepy idleness.

"The deuce! the deuce! — this is a bore! She is right, though; I must go."

Then, having stuck the missive into his pocket, he showed the young man through the grounds with manifest delight. He pointed out everything — the stable, the cart-house, the kitchen. The drawing-room was at the right, on the side facing Paris, and looked out on a floored arbour, covered over with clematis. But presently a few harmonious notes burst forth above their heads: Madame Arnoux, fancying that there was nobody near, was singing to amuse herself. She executed quavers, trills, arpeggios. There were long notes which seemed to remain suspended in the air; others fell in a rushing shower like the spray of a waterfall; and her voice passing out through the Venetian blind, cut its way through the deep silence and rose towards the blue sky. She ceased all at once, when M. and Madame Oudry, two neighbours, presented themselves.

Then she appeared herself at the top of the steps in front of the house; and, as she descended, he caught a glimpse of her foot. She wore little open shoes of reddish-brown leather, with three straps crossing each other so as to draw just above her stockings a wirework of gold.

Those who had been invited arrived. With the exception of Maître Lefaucheur, an advocate, they were the same guests who came to the Thursday dinners. Each of them had brought some present — Dittmer a Syrian scarf, Rosenwald a scrap-book of ballads, Burieu a water-colour painting, Sombary one of his own caricatures, and Pellerin a charcoal-drawing, representing a kind of dance of death, a hideous fantasy, the execution of which was rather poor. Hussonnet dispensed with the formality of a present.

Frederick was waiting to offer his, after the others.

She thanked him very much for it. Thereupon, he said:

"Why, 'tis almost a debt. I have been so much annoyed — — "

"At what, pray?" she returned. "I don't understand."

"Come! dinner is waiting!" said Arnoux, catching hold of his arm; then in a whisper: "You are not very knowing, certainly!"

Nothing could well be prettier than the dining-room, painted in water-green. At one end, a nymph of stone was dipping her toe in a basin formed like a shell

At one end, a nymph of stone was dipping her toe in a basin formed like a shell. Through the open windows the entire garden could be seen with the long lawn flanked by an old Scotch fir, three-quarters stripped bare; groups of flowers swelled it out in unequal plots; and at the other side of the river extended in a wide semi-circle the Bois de Boulogne, Neuilly, Sèvres, and Meudon. Before the railed gate in front a canoe with sail outspread was tacking about.

They chatted first about the view in front of them, then about scenery in general; and they were beginning to plunge into discussions when Arnoux, at half-past nine o'clock, ordered the horse to be put to the carriage.

"Would you like me to go back with you?" said Madame Arnoux.

"Why, certainly!" and, making her a graceful bow: "You know well, madame, that it is impossible to live without you!"

Everyone congratulated her on having so good a husband.

"Ah! it is because I am not the only one," she replied quietly, pointing towards her little daughter.

Then, the conversation having turned once more on painting, there was some talk about a Ruysdaél, for which Arnoux expected a big sum, and Pellerin asked him if it were true that the celebrated Saul Mathias from London had come over during the past month to make him an offer of twenty-three thousand francs for it.

"'Tis a positive fact!" and turning towards Frederick: "That was the very same gentleman I brought with me a few days ago to the Alhambra, much against my will, I assure you, for these English are by no means amusing companions."

Frederick, who suspected that Mademoiselle Vatnaz's letter contained some reference to an intrigue, was amazed at the facility with which my lord Arnoux found a way of passing it off as a perfectly honourable transaction; but his new lie, which was quite needless, made the young man open his eyes in speechless astonishment.

The picture-dealer added, with an air of simplicity:

"What's the name, by-the-by, of that young fellow, your friend?"

"Deslauriers," said Frederick quickly.

And, in order to repair the injustice which he felt he had done to his comrade, he praised him as one who possessed remarkable ability.

"Ah! indeed? But he doesn't look such a fine fellow as the other — the clerk in the wagon-office."

Frederick bestowed a mental imprecation on Dussardier. She would now be taking it for granted that he associated with the common herd.

Then they began to talk about the ornamentation of the capital — the new districts of the city — and the worthy Oudry happened to refer to M. Dambreuse as one of the big speculators.

as one of the big speculators.

Frederick, taking advantage of the opportunity to make a good figure, said he was acquainted with that gentleman. But Pellerin launched into a harangue against shopkeepers — he saw no difference between them, whether they were sellers of candles or of money. Then Rosenwald and Burieu talked about old china; Arnoux chatted with Madame Oudry about gardening; Sombary, a comical character of the old school, amused himself by chaffing her husband, referring to him sometimes as "Odry," as if he were the actor of that name, and remarking that he must be descended from Oudry, the dog-painter, seeing that the bump of the animals was visible on his forehead. He even wanted to feel M. Oudry's skull; but the latter excused himself on account of his wig; and the dessert ended with loud bursts of laughter.

When they had taken their coffee, while they smoked, under the linden-trees, and strolled about the garden for some time, they went out for a walk along the river.

The party stopped in front of a fishmonger's shop, where a man was washing eels. Mademoiselle Marthe wanted to look at them. He emptied the box in which he had them out on the grass; and the little girl threw herself on her knees in order to catch them, laughed with delight, and then began to scream with terror. They all got spoiled, and Arnoux paid for them.

He next took it into his head to go out for a sail in the cutter.

One side of the horizon was beginning to assume a pale aspect, while on the other side a wide strip of orange colour showed itself in the sky, deepening into purple at the summits of the hills, which were steeped in shadow. Madame Arnoux seated herself on a big stone with this glittering splendour at her back. The other ladies sauntered about here and there. Hussonnet, at the lower end of the river's bank, went making ducks and drakes over the water.

Arnoux presently returned, followed by a weather-beaten long boat, into which, in spite of the most prudent remonstrances, he packed his guests. The boat got upset, and they had to go ashore again.

By this time wax-tapers were burning in the drawing-room, all hung with chintz, and with branched candlesticks of crystal fixed close to the walls. Mère Oudry was sleeping comfortably in an armchair, and the others were listening to M. Lefaucheux expatiating on the glories of the Bar. Madame Arnoux was sitting by herself near the window. Frederick came over to her.

They chatted about the remarks which were being made in their vicinity. She admired oratory; he preferred the renown gained by authors. But, she ventured to suggest, it must give a man greater pleasure to move crowds directly by addressing them in person, face to face, than it does to infuse into their souls by his pen all the sentiments that animate his own. Such triumphs as these did not tempt Frederick much, as he had no ambition.

Then he broached the subject of sentimental adventures. She spoke pityingly of the havoc wrought by passion, but expressed indignation at hypocritical vileness, and this rectitude of spirit harmonised so well with the regular beauty of her face that it seemed indeed as if her physical attractions were the outcome of her moral nature.

She smiled, every now and then, letting her eyes rest on him for a minute. Then he felt her glances penetrating his soul like those great rays of sunlight which descend into the depths of the water. He loved her without mental reservation, without any hope of his love being returned, unconditionally; and in those silent transports, which were like outbursts of gratitude, he would fain have covered her forehead with a rain of kisses. However, an inspiration from within carried him beyond himself — he felt moved by a longing for self-sacrifice, an imperative impulse towards immediate self-devotion, and all the stronger from the fact that he could not gratify it.

He did not leave along with the rest. Neither did Hussonnet. They were to go back in the carriage; and the vehicle was waiting just in front of the steps when Arnoux rushed down and hurried into the garden to gather some flowers there. Then the bouquet having been tied round with a thread, as the stems fell down unevenly, he searched in his pocket, which was full of papers, took out a piece at random, wrapped them up, completed his handiwork with the aid of a strong pin, and then offered it to his wife with a certain amount of tenderness.

"Look here, my darling! Excuse me for having forgotten you!"

But she uttered a little scream: the pin, having been awkwardly fixed, had cut her, and she hastened up to her room. They waited nearly a quarter of an hour for her. At last, she reappeared, carried off Marthe, and threw herself into the carriage.

"And your bouquet?" said Arnoux.

"No! no — it is not worth while!" Frederick was running off to fetch it for her; she called out to him:

"I don't want it!"

But he speedily brought it to her, saying that he had just put it into an envelope again, as he had found the flowers lying on the floor. She thrust them behind the leathern apron of the carriage close to the seat, and off they started.

Frederick, seated by her side, noticed that she was trembling frightfully. Then, when they had passed the bridge, as Arnoux was turning to the left:

"Why, no! you are making a mistake! — that way, to the right!"

She seemed irritated; everything annoyed her. At length, Marthe having closed her eyes, Madame Arnoux drew forth the bouquet, and flung it out through the carriage-door, then caught Frederick's arm, making a sign to him with the other hand to say nothing about it.

After this, she pressed her handkerchief against her lips, and sat quite motionless.

The two others, on the dickey, kept talking about printing and about subscribers. Arnoux, who was driving recklessly, lost his way in the middle of the Bois de Boulogne. Then they plunged into narrow paths. The horse proceeded along at a walking pace; the branches of the trees grazed the hood. Frederick could see nothing of Madame Arnoux save her two eyes in the shade. Marthe lay stretched across her lap while he supported the child's head.

"She is tiring you!" said her mother.

He replied:

"No! Oh, no!"

Whirlwinds of dust rose up slowly. They passed through Auteuil. All the houses were closed up; a gas-lamp here and there lighted up the angle of a wall; then once more they were surrounded by darkness. At one time he noticed that she was shedding tears.

Was this remorse or passion? What in the world was it? This grief, of whose exact nature he was ignorant, interested him like a personal matter. There was now a new bond between them, as if, in a sense, they were accomplices; and he said to her in the most caressing voice he could assume:

"You are ill?"

"Yes, a little," she returned.

The carriage rolled on, and the honeysuckles and the syringas trailed over the garden fences, sending forth puffs of enervating odour into the night air. Her gown fell around her feet in numerous folds. It seemed to him as if he were in communication with her entire person through the medium of this child's body which lay stretched between them. He stooped over the little girl, and spreading out her pretty brown tresses, kissed her softly on the forehead.

"You are good!" said Madame Arnoux.

"Why?"

"Because you are fond of children."

"Not all!"

He said no more, but he let his left hand hang down her side wide open, fancying that she would follow his example perhaps, and that he would find her palm touching his. Then he felt ashamed and withdrew it. They soon reached the paved street. The carriage went on more quickly; the number of gaslights vastly increased — it was Paris. Hussonnet, in front of the lumber-room, jumped down from his seat. Frederick waited till they were in the courtyard before alighting;

then he lay in ambush at the corner of the Rue de Choiseul, and saw Arnoux slowly making his way back to the boulevards.

Next morning he began working as hard as ever he could.

He saw himself in an Assize Court, on a winter's evening, at the close of the advocates' speeches, when the jurymen are looking pale, and when the panting audience make the partitions of the prætorium creak; and after having being four hours speaking, he was recapitulating all his proofs, feeling with every phrase, with every word, with every gesture, the chopper of the guillotine, which was suspended behind him, rising up; then in the tribune of the Chamber, an orator who bears on his lips the safety of an entire people, drowning his opponents under his figures of rhetoric, crushing them under a repartee, with thunders and musical intonations in his voice, ironical, pathetic, fiery, sublime. She would be there somewhere in the midst of the others, hiding beneath her veil her enthusiastic tears. After that they would meet again, and he would be unaffected by discouragements, calumnies, and insults, if she would only say, "Ah, that is beautiful!" while drawing her light hand across his brow.

These images flashed, like beacon-lights, on the horizon of his life. His intellect, thereby excited, became more active and more vigorous. He buried himself in study till the month of August, and was successful at his final examination.

Deslauriers, who had found it so troublesome to coach him once more for the second examination at the close of December, and for the third in February, was astonished at his ardour. Then the great expectations of former days returned. In ten years it was probable that Frederick would be deputy; in fifteen a minister. Why not? With his patrimony, which would soon come into his hands, he might, at first, start a newspaper; this would be the opening step in his career; after that they would see what the future would bring. As for himself, he was still ambitious of obtaining a chair in the Law School; and he sustained his thesis for the degree of Doctor in such a remarkable fashion that it won for him the compliments of the professors.

Three days afterwards, Frederick took his own degree. Before leaving for his holidays, he conceived the idea of getting up a picnic to bring to a close their Saturday reunions.

He displayed the utmost gaiety on the occasion. Madame Arnoux was now with her mother at Chartres. But he would soon come across her again, and would end by being her lover.

Deslauriers, admitted the same day to the young advocates' pleading rehearsals at Orsay, had made a speech which was greatly applauded. Although he was sober, he drank a little more wine than was good for him, and said to

Dussardier at dessert:

"You are an honest fellow! — and, when I'm a rich man, I'll make you my manager."

All were in a state of delight. Cisy was not going to finish his law-course. Martinon intended to remain during the period before his admission to the Bar in the provinces, where he would be nominated a deputy-magistrate. Pellerin was devoting himself to the production of a large picture representing "The Genius of the Revolution." Hussonnet was, in the following week, about to read for the Director of Public Amusements the scheme of a play, and had no doubt as to its success:

"As for the framework of the drama, they may leave that to me! As for the passions, I have knocked about enough to understand them thoroughly; and as for witticisms, they're entirely in my line!"

He gave a spring, fell on his two hands, and thus moved for some time around the table with his legs in the air. This performance, worthy of a street-urchin, did not get rid of Sénécal's frowns. He had just been dismissed from the boarding-school, in which he had been a teacher, for having given a whipping to an aristocrat's son. His straitened circumstances had got worse in consequence: he laid the blame of this on the inequalities of society, and cursed the wealthy. He poured out his grievances into the sympathetic ears of Regimbart, who had become every day more and more disillusioned, saddened, and disgusted. The Citizen had now turned his attention towards questions arising out of the Budget, and blamed the Court party for the loss of millions in Algeria.

As he could not sleep without having paid a visit to the Alexandre smoking-divan, he disappeared at eleven o'clock. The rest went away some time afterwards; and Frederick, as he was parting with Hussonnet, learned that Madame Arnoux was to have come back the night before.

He accordingly went to the coach-office to change his time for starting to the next day; and, at about six o'clock in the evening, presented himself at her house. Her return, the door keeper said, had been put off for a week. Frederick dined alone, and then lounged about the boulevards.

Rosy clouds, scarf-like in form, stretched beyond the roofs; the shop-tents were beginning to be taken away; water-carts were letting a shower of spray fall over the dusty pavement; and an unexpected coolness was mingled with emanations from cafés, as one got a glimpse through their open doors, between some silver plate and gilt ware, of flowers in sheaves, which were reflected in the large sheets of glass. The crowd moved on at a leisurely pace. Groups of men were chatting in the middle of the footpath; and women passed along with an indolent expression in their eyes and that camelia tint in their complexions which intense heat imparts to feminine flesh. Something immeasurable in its vastness seemed to pour itself out and enclose the houses. Never had Paris looked so beautiful. He saw nothing before him in the future but an interminable series of years all full of love.

He stopped in front of the theatre of the Porte Saint-Martin to look at the bill; and, for want of something to occupy him, paid for a seat and went in.

An old-fashioned dramatic version of a fairy-tale was the piece on the stage. There was a very small audience; and through the skylights of the top gallery the vault of heaven seemed cut up into little blue squares, whilst the stage lamps above the orchestra formed a single line of yellow illuminations. The scene represented a slave-market at Pekin, with hand-bells, tomtoms, sweeping robes, sharp-pointed caps, and clownish jokes. Then, as soon as the curtain fell, he wandered into the foyer all alone and gazed out with admiration at a large green landau which stood on the boulevard outside, before the front steps of the theatre, yoked to two white horses, while a coachman with short breeches held the reins.

He had just got back to his seat when, in the balcony, a lady and a gentleman entered the first box in front of the stage. The husband had a pale face with a narrow strip of grey beard round it, the rosette of a Government official, and that frigid look which is supposed to characterise diplomatists.

His wife, who was at least twenty years younger, and who was neither tall nor under-sized, neither ugly nor pretty, wore her fair hair in corkscrew curls in the English fashion, and displayed a long-bodiced dress and a large black lace fan. To make people so fashionable as these come to the theatre at such a season one would imagine either that there was some accidental cause, or that they had got tired of spending the evening in one another's society. The lady kept nibbling at her fan, while the gentleman yawned. Frederick could not recall to mind where he had seen that face.

In the next interval between the acts, while passing through one of the lobbies, he came face to face with both of them. As he bowed in an undecided manner, M. Dambreuse, at once recognising him, came up and apologised for having treated him with unpardonable neglect. It was an allusion to the numerous visiting-cards he had sent in accordance with the clerk's advice. However, he confused the periods, supposing that Frederick was in the second year of his law-course. Then he said he envied the young man for the opportunity of going into the country. He sadly needed a little rest himself, but business kept him in Paris.

Madame Dambreuse, leaning on his arm, nodded her head slightly, and the agreeable sprightliness of her face contrasted with its gloomy expression a short time before.

time before.

"One finds charming diversions in it, nevertheless," she said, after her husband's last remark. "What a stupid play that was — was it not, Monsieur?" And all three of them remained there chatting about theatres and new pieces.

Frederick, accustomed to the grimaces of provincial dames, had not seen in any woman such ease of manner combined with that simplicity which is the essence of refinement, and in which ingenuous souls trace the expression of instantaneous sympathy.

They would expect to see him as soon as he returned. M. Dambreuse told him to give his kind remembrances to Père Roque.

Frederick, when he reached his lodgings, did not fail to inform Deslauriers of their hospitable invitation.

"Grand!" was the clerk's reply; "and don't let your mamma get round you! Come back without delay!"

On the day after his arrival, as soon as they had finished breakfast, Madame Moreau brought her son out into the garden.

She said she was happy to see him in a profession, for they were not as rich as people imagined. The land brought in little; the people who farmed it paid badly. She had even been compelled to sell her carriage. Finally, she placed their situation in its true colours before him.

During the first embarrassments which followed the death of her late husband, M. Roque, a man of great cunning, had made her loans of money which had been renewed, and left long unpaid, in spite of her desire to clear them off. He had suddenly made a demand for immediate payment, and she had gone beyond the strict terms of the agreement by giving up to him, at a contemptible figure, the farm of Presles. Ten years later, her capital disappeared through the failure of a banker at Melun. Through a horror which she had of mortgages, and to keep up appearances, which might be necessary in view of her son's future, she had, when Père Roque presented himself again, listened to him once more. But now she was free from debt. In short, there was left them an income of about ten thousand francs, of which two thousand three hundred belonged to him — his entire patrimony.

"It isn't possible!" exclaimed Frederick.

She nodded her head, as if to declare that it was perfectly possible.

But his uncle would leave him something?

That was by no means certain!

And they took a turn around the garden without exchanging a word. At last she pressed him to her heart, and in a voice choked with rising tears:

"Ah! my poor boy! I have had to give up my dreams!"

He seated himself on a bench in the shadow of the large acacia

He seated himself on a bench in the shadow of the large acacia.

Her advice was that he should become a clerk to M. Prouharam, solicitor, who would assign over his office to him; if he increased its value, he might sell it again and find a good practice.

Frederick was no longer listening to her. He was gazing automatically across the hedge into the other garden opposite.

A little girl of about twelve with red hair happened to be there all alone. She had made earrings for herself with the berries of the service-tree. Her bodice, made of grey linen-cloth, allowed her shoulders, slightly gilded by the sun, to be seen. Her short white petticoat was spotted with the stains made by sweets; and there was, so to speak, the grace of a young wild animal about her entire person, at the same time, nervous and thin. Apparently, the presence of a stranger astonished her, for she had stopped abruptly with her watering-pot in her hand darting glances at him with her large bright eyes, which were of a limpid greenish-blue colour.

"That is M. Roque's daughter," said Madame Moreau. "He has just married his servant and legitimised the child that he had by her."

CHAPTER VI.

Blighted Hopes.

Ruined, stripped of everything, undermined!

He remained seated on the bench, as if stunned by a shock. He cursed Fate; he would have liked to beat somebody; and, to intensify his despair, he felt a kind of outrage, a sense of disgrace, weighing down upon him; for Frederick had been under the impression that the fortune coming to him through his father would mount up one day to an income of fifteen thousand livres, and he had so informed the Arnoux' in an indirect sort of way. So then he would be looked upon as a braggart, a rogue, an obscure blackguard, who had introduced himself to them in the expectation of making some profit out of it! And as for her — Madame Arnoux — how could he ever see her again now?

Moreover, that was completely impossible when he had only a yearly income of three thousand francs, He could not always lodge on the fourth floor, have the door keeper as a servant, and make his appearance with wretched black gloves turning blue at the ends, a greasy hat, and the same frock-coat for a whole year. No, no! never! And yet without her existence was intolerable. Many people were well able to live without any fortune, Deslauriers amongst the rest; and he thought himself a coward to attach so much importance to matters of trifling consequence. Need would perhaps multiply his faculties a hundredfold. He excited himself by thinking on the great men who had worked in garrets. A soul like that of Madame Arnoux ought to be touched at such a spectacle, and she would be moved by it to sympathetic tenderness. So, after all, this catastrophe was a piece of good fortune; like those earthquakes which unveil treasures, it had revealed to him the hidden wealth of his nature. But there was only one place in the world where this could be turned to account — Paris; for to his mind, art, science, and love (those three faces of God, as Pellerin would have said) were associated exclusively with the capital. That evening, he informed his mother of his intention to go back there. Madame Moreau was surprised and indignant. She regarded it as a foolish and absurd course. It would be better to follow her advice, namely, to remain near her in an office. Frederick shrugged his shoulders, "Come now" — looking on this proposal as an insult to himself.

Thereupon, the good lady adopted another plan. In a tender voice broken by sobs she began to dwell on her solitude, her old age, and the sacrifices she had made for him. Now that she was more unhappy than ever, he was abandoning her. Then, alluding to the anticipated close of her life:

her. Then, alluding to the anticipated close of her life:

"A little patience — good heavens! you will soon be free!"

These lamentations were renewed twenty times a day for three months; and at the same time the luxuries of a home made him effeminate. He found it enjoyable to have a softer bed and napkins that were not torn, so that, weary, enervated, overcome by the terrible force of comfort, Frederick allowed himself to be brought to Maître Prouharam's office.

He displayed there neither knowledge nor aptitude. Up to this time, he had been regarded as a young man of great means who ought to be the shining light of the Department. The public would now come to the conclusion that he had imposed upon them.

At first, he said to himself:

"It is necessary to inform Madame Arnoux about it;" and for a whole week he kept formulating in his own mind dithyrambic letters and short notes in an eloquent and sublime style. The fear of avowing his actual position restrained him. Then he thought that it was far better to write to the husband. Arnoux knew life and could understand the true state of the case. At length, after a fortnight's hesitation:

"Bah! I ought not to see them any more: let them forget me! At any rate, I shall be cherished in her memory without having sunk in her estimation! She will believe that I am dead, and will regret me — perhaps."

As extravagant resolutions cost him little, he swore in his own mind that he would never return to Paris, and that he would not even make any enquiries about Madame Arnoux.

Nevertheless, he regretted the very smell of the gas and the noise of the omnibuses. He mused on the things that she might have said to him, on the tone of her voice, on the light of her eyes — and, regarding himself as a dead man, he no longer did anything at all.

He arose very late, and looked through the window at the passing teams of wagoners. The first six months especially were hateful.

On certain days, however, he was possessed by a feeling of indignation even against her. Then he would go forth and wander through the meadows, half covered in winter time by the inundations of the Seine. They were cut up by rows of poplar-trees. Here and there arose a little bridge. He tramped about till evening, rolling the yellow leaves under his feet, inhaling the fog, and jumping over the ditches. As his arteries began to throb more vigorously, he felt himself carried away by a desire to do something wild; he longed to become a trapper in America, to attend on a pasha in the East, to take ship as a sailor; and he gave vent to his melancholy in long letters to Deslauriers.

The latter was struggling to get on. The slothful conduct of his friend and his eternal jeremiads appeared to him simply stupid. Their correspondence soon became a mere form. Frederick had given up all his furniture to Deslauriers, who stayed on in the same lodgings. From time to time his mother spoke to him. At length he one day told her about the present he had made, and she was giving him a rating for it, when a letter was placed in his hands.

"What is the matter now?" she said, "you are trembling?"

"There is nothing the matter with me," replied Frederick.

Deslauriers informed him that he had taken Sénécal under his protection, and that for the past fortnight they had been living together. So now Sénécal was exhibiting himself in the midst of things that had come from the Arnoux's shop. He might sell them, criticise, make jokes about them. Frederick felt wounded in the depths of his soul. He went up to his own apartment. He felt a yearning for death.

His mother called him to consult him about a plantation in the garden.

This garden was, after the fashion of an English park, cut in the middle by a stick fence; and the half of it belonged to Père Roque, who had another for vegetables on the bank of the river. The two neighbours, having fallen out, abstained from making their appearance there at the same hour. But since Frederick's return, the old gentleman used to walk about there more frequently, and was not stinted in his courtesies towards Madame Moreau's son. He pitied the young man for having to live in a country town. One day he told him that Madame Dambreuse had been anxious to hear from him. On another occasion he expatiated on the custom of Champagne, where the stomach conferred nobility.

"At that time you would have been a lord, since your mother's name was De Fouvens. And 'tis all very well to talk — never mind! there's something in a name. After all," he added, with a sly glance at Frederick, "that depends on the Keeper of the Seals."

This pretension to aristocracy contrasted strangely with his personal appearance. As he was small, his big chestnut-coloured frock-coat exaggerated the length of his bust. When he took off his hat, a face almost like that of a woman with an extremely sharp nose could be seen; his hair, which was of a yellow colour, resembled a wig. He saluted people with a very low bow, brushing against the wall.

Up to his fiftieth year, he had been content with the services of Catherine, a native of Lorraine, of the same age as himself, who was strongly marked with small-pox. But in the year 1834, he brought back with him from Paris a handsome blonde with a sheep-like type of countenance and a "queenly carriage." Ere long, she was observed strutting about with large earrings; and everything was explained by the birth of a daughter who was introduced to the world under the name of Elisabeth Olympe Louise Roque.

Catherine, in her first ebullition of jealousy, expected that she would curse this child. On the contrary, she became fond of the little girl, and treated her with the utmost care, consideration, and tenderness, in order to supplant her mother and render her odious — an easy task, inasmuch as Madame Éléonore entirely neglected the little one, preferring to gossip at the tradesmen's shops. On the day after her marriage, she went to pay a visit at the Sub-prefecture, no longer "thee'd" and "thou'd" the servants, and took it into her head that, as a matter of good form, she ought to exhibit a certain severity towards the child. She was present while the little one was at her lessons. The teacher, an old clerk who had been employed at the Mayor's office, did not know how to go about the work of instructing the girl. The pupil rebelled, got her ears boxed, and rushed away to shed tears on the lap of Catherine, who always took her part. After this the two women wrangled, and M. Roque ordered them to hold their tongues. He had married only out of tender regard for his daughter, and did not wish to be annoyed by them.

She often wore a white dress with ribbons, and pantalettes trimmed with lace; and on great festival-days she would leave the house attired like a princess, in order to mortify a little the matrons of the town, who forbade their brats to associate with her on account of her illegitimate birth.

She passed her life nearly always by herself in the garden, went see-sawing on the swing, chased butterflies, then suddenly stopped to watch the floral beetles swooping down on the rose-trees. It was, no doubt, these habits which imparted to her face an expression at the same time of audacity and dreaminess. She had, moreover, a figure like Marthe, so that Frederick said to her, at their second interview:

"Will you permit me to kiss you, mademoiselle?"

The little girl lifted up her head and replied:

"I will!"

But the stick-hedge separated them from one another.

"We must climb over," said Frederick.

"No, lift me up!"

He stooped over the hedge, and raising her off the ground with his hands, kissed her on both cheeks; then he put her back on her own side by a similar process; and this performance was repeated on the next occasions when they found themselves together.

Without more reserve than a child of four, as soon as she heard her friend coming, she sprang forward to meet him, or else, hiding behind a tree, she began yelping like a dog to frighten him.

One day, when Madame Moreau had gone out, he brought her up to his own room. She opened all the scent-bottles, and pomaded her hair plentifully; then, without the slightest embarrassment, she lay down on the bed, where she remained stretched out at full length, wide awake.

"I fancy myself your wife," she said to him.

Next day he found her all in tears. She confessed that she had been "weeping for her sins;" and, when he wished to know what they were, she hung down her head, and answered:

"Ask me no more!"

The time for first communion was at hand. She had been brought to confession in the morning. The sacrament scarcely made her wiser. Occasionally, she got into a real passion; and Frederick was sent for to appease her.

He often brought her with him in his walks. While he indulged in day-dreams as he walked along, she would gather wild poppies at the edges of the corn-fields; and, when she saw him more melancholy than usual, she tried to console him with her pretty childish prattle. His heart, bereft of love, fell back on this friendship inspired by a little girl. He gave her sketches of old fogies, told her stories, and devoted himself to reading books for her.

He began with the *Annales Romantiques*, a collection of prose and verse celebrated at the period. Then, forgetting her age, so much was he charmed by her intelligence, he read for her in succession, *Atala*, *Cinq-Mars*, and *Les Feuilles d'Automne*. But one night (she had that very evening heard *Macbeth* in Letourneur's simple translation) she woke up, exclaiming:

"The spot! the spot!" Her teeth chattered, she shivered, and, fixing terrified glances on her right hand, she kept rubbing it, saying:

"Always a spot!"

At last a doctor was brought, who directed that she should be kept free from violent emotions.

The townsfolk saw in this only an unfavourable prognostic for her morals. It was said that "young Moreau" wished to make an actress of her later.

Soon another event became the subject of discussion — namely, the arrival of uncle Barthélemy. Madame Moreau gave up her sleeping-apartment to him, and was so gracious as to serve up meat to him on fast-days.

The old man was not very agreeable. He was perpetually making comparisons between Havre and Nogent, the air of which he considered heavy, the bread bad, the streets ill-paved, the food indifferent, and the inhabitants very lazy. "How wretched trade is with you in this place!" He blamed his deceased brother for his extravagance, pointing out by way of contrast that he had himself accumulated an income of twenty-seven thousand livres a year. At last, he left at the end of the week, and on the footboard of the carriage gave utterance to these by no means reassuring words:

"I am always very glad to know that you are in a good position."

"You will get nothing," said Madame Moreau as they re-entered the dining-room.

He had come only at her urgent request, and for eight days she had been seeking, on her part, for an opening — only too clearly perhaps. She repented now of having done so, and remained seated in her armchair with her head bent down and her lips tightly pressed together. Frederick sat opposite, staring at her; and they were both silent, as they had been five years before on his return home by the Montereau steamboat. This coincidence, which presented itself even to her mind, recalled Madame Arnoux to his recollection.

At that moment the crack of a whip outside the window reached their ears, while a voice was heard calling out to him.

It was Père Roque, who was alone in his tilted cart. He was going to spend the whole day at La Fortelle with M. Dambreuse, and cordially offered to drive Frederick there.

"You have no need of an invitation as long as you are with me. Don't be afraid!"

Frederick felt inclined to accept this offer. But how would he explain his fixed sojourn at Nogent? He had not a proper summer suit. Finally, what would his mother say? He accordingly decided not to go.

From that time, their neighbour exhibited less friendliness. Louise was growing tall; Madame Éléonore fell dangerously ill; and the intimacy broke off, to the great delight of Madame Moreau, who feared lest her son's prospects of being settled in life might be affected by association with such people.

She was thinking of purchasing for him the registrarship of the Court of Justice. Frederick raised no particular objection to this scheme. He now accompanied her to mass; in the evening he took a hand in a game of "all fours." He became accustomed to provincial habits of life, and allowed himself to slide into them; and even his love had assumed a character of mournful sweetness, a kind of soporific charm. By dint of having poured out his grief in his letters, mixed it up with everything he read, given full vent to it during his walks through the country, he had almost exhausted it, so that Madame Arnoux was for him, as it were, a dead woman whose tomb he wondered that he did not know, so tranquil and resigned had his affection for her now become.

One day, the 12th of December, 1845, about nine o'clock in the morning, the cook brought up a letter to his room. The address, which was in big characters, was written in a hand he was not acquainted with; and Frederick, feeling sleepy, was in no great hurry to break the seal. At length, when he did so, he read:

"Justice of the Peace at Havre, 3rd Arrondissement.

"Monsieur, — Monsieur Moreau, your uncle, having died intestate — — "

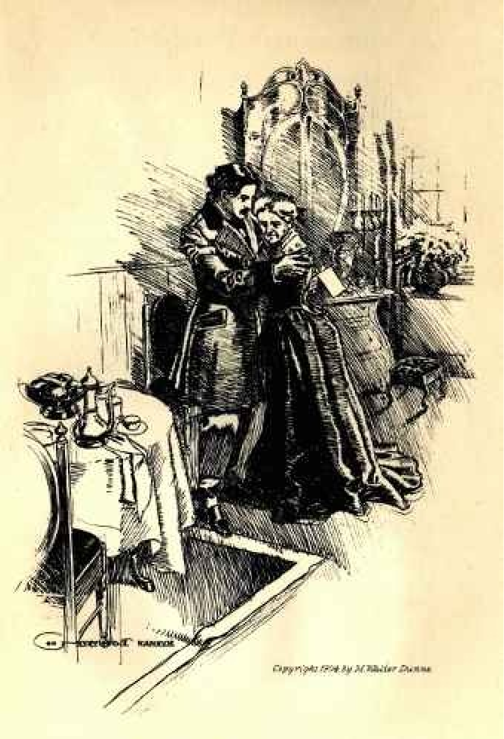
He had fallen in for the inheritance! As if a conflagration had burst out behind the wall, he jumped out of bed in his shirt, with his feet bare. He passed his hand over his face, doubting the evidence of his own eyes, believing that he was still dreaming, and in order to make his mind more clearly conscious of the reality of the event, he flung the window wide open.

There had been a fall of snow; the roofs were white, and he even recognised in the yard outside a washtub which had caused him to stumble after dark the evening before.

He read the letter over three times in succession. Could there be anything more certain? His uncle's entire fortune! A yearly income of twenty-seven thousand livres! And he was overwhelmed with frantic joy at the idea of seeing Madame Arnoux once more. With the vividness of a hallucination he saw himself beside her, at her house, bringing her some present in silver paper, while at the door stood a tilbury — no, a brougham rather! — a black brougham, with a servant in brown livery. He could hear his horse pawing the ground and the noise of the curb-chain mingling with the rippling sound of their kisses. And every day this was renewed indefinitely. He would receive them in his own house: the dining-room would be furnished in red leather; the boudoir in yellow silk; sofas everywhere! and such a variety of whatnots, china vases, and carpets! These images came in so tumultuous a fashion into his mind that he felt his head turning round. Then he thought of his mother; and he descended the stairs with the letter in his hand.

Madame Moreau made an effort to control her emotion, but could not keep herself from swooning. Frederick caught her in his arms and kissed her on the forehead.

"Dear mother, you can now buy back your carriage — laugh then! shed no more tears! be happy!"



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Laugh then!
shed no more tears!
Be happy!

Laugh then! shed no more tears! be happy!

Ten minutes later the news had travelled as far as the faubourgs. Then M. Benoist, M. Gamblin, M. Chambion, and other friends hurried towards the house. Frederick got away for a minute in order to write to Deslauriers. Then other visitors turned up. The afternoon passed in congratulations. They had other visitors turned up. The afternoon passed in congratulations. They had forgotten all about "Roque's wife," who, however, was declared to be "very low."

When they were alone, the same evening, Madame Moreau said to her son that she would advise him to set up as an advocate at Troyes. As he was better known in his own part of the country than in any other, he might more easily find there a profitable connection.

"Ah, it is too hard!" exclaimed Frederick. He had scarcely grasped his good fortune in his hands when he longed to carry it to Madame Arnoux. He announced his express determination to live in Paris.

"And what are you going to do there?"

"Nothing!"

Madame Moreau, astonished at his manner, asked what he intended to become.

"A minister," was Frederick's reply. And he declared that he was not at all joking, that he meant to plunge at once into diplomacy, and that his studies and his instincts impelled him in that direction. He would first enter the Council of State under M. Dambreuse's patronage.

"So then, you know him?"

"Oh, yes — through M. Roque."

"That is singular," said Madame Moreau. He had awakened in her heart her former dreams of ambition. She internally abandoned herself to them, and said no more about other matters.

If he had yielded to his impatience, Frederick would have started that very instant. Next morning every seat in the diligence had been engaged; and so he kept eating out his heart till seven o'clock in the evening.

They had sat down to dinner when three prolonged tolls of the church-bell fell on their ears; and the housemaid, coming in, informed them that Madame Éléonore had just died.

This death, after all, was not a misfortune for anyone, not even for her child. The young girl would only find it all the better for herself afterwards.

As the two houses were close to one another, a great coming and going and a clatter of tongues could be heard; and the idea of this corpse being so near them threw a certain funereal gloom over their parting. Madame Moreau wiped her eyes two or three times. Frederick felt his heart oppressed.

When the meal was over, Catherine stopped him between two doors. Mademoiselle had peremptorily expressed a wish to see him. She was waiting for him in the garden. He went out there, strode over the hedge, and knocking more or less against the trees, directed his steps towards M. Roque's house. Lights were glittering through a window in the second story then a form

Lights were glittering through a window in the second story then a form appeared in the midst of the darkness, and a voice whispered:

"'Tis I!"

She seemed to him taller than usual, owing to her black dress, no doubt. Not knowing what to say to her, he contented himself with catching her hands, and sighing forth:

"Ah! my poor Louise!"

She did not reply. She gazed at him for a long time with a look of sad, deep earnestness.

Frederick was afraid of missing the coach; he fancied that he could hear the rolling of wheels some distance away, and, in order to put an end to the interview without any delay:

"Catherine told me that you had something — — "

"Yes — 'tis true! I wanted to tell you — — "

He was astonished to find that she addressed him in the plural; and, as she again relapsed into silence:

"Well, what?"

"I don't know. I forget! Is it true that you're going away?"

"Yes, I'm starting just now."

She repeated: "Ah! just now? — for good? — we'll never see one another again?"

She was choking with sobs.

"Good-bye! good-bye! embrace me then!"

And she threw her arms about him passionately.

CHAPTER VII.

A Change of Fortune.

Then he had taken his place behind the other passengers in the front of the diligence, and when the vehicle began to shake as the five horses started into a brisk trot all at the same time, he allowed himself to plunge into an intoxicating dream of the future. Like an architect drawing up the plan of a palace, he mapped out his life beforehand. He filled it with dainties and with splendours; it rose up to the sky; a profuse display of allurements could be seen there; and so deeply was he buried in the contemplation of these things that he lost sight of all external objects.

At the foot of the hill of Sourdun his attention was directed to the stage which they had reached in their journey. They had travelled only about five kilometres at the most. He was annoyed at this tardy rate of travelling. He pulled down the coach-window in order to get a view of the road. He asked the conductor several times at what hour they would reach their destination. However, he eventually regained his composure, and remained seated in his corner of the vehicle with eyes wide open.

The lantern, which hung from the postilion's seat, threw its light on the buttocks of the shaft-horses. In front, only the manes of the other horses could be seen undulating like white billows. Their breathing caused a kind of fog to gather at each side of the team. The little iron chains of the harness rang; the windows shook in their sashes; and the heavy coach went rolling at an even pace over the pavement. Here and there could be distinguished the wall of a barn, or else an inn standing by itself. Sometimes, as they entered a village, a baker's oven threw out gleams of light; and the gigantic silhouettes of the horses kept rushing past the walls of the opposite houses. At every change of horses, when the harness was unfastened, there was a great silence for a minute. Overhead, under the awning, some passenger might be heard tapping with his feet, while a woman sitting at the threshold of the door screened her candle with her hand. Then the conductor would jump on the footboard, and the vehicle would start on its way again.

At Mormans, the striking of the clocks announced that it was a quarter past one.

"So then we are in another day," he thought, "we have been in it for some time!"

But gradually his hopes and his recollections, Nogent, the Rue de Choiseul

But gradually his hopes and his recollections, Nogent, the Rue de Choiseul, Madame Arnoux, and his mother, all got mixed up together.

He was awakened by the dull sound of wheels passing over planks: they were crossing the Pont de Charenton — it was Paris. Then his two travelling companions, the first taking off his cap, and the second his silk handkerchief, put on their hats, and began to chat.

The first, a big, red-faced man in a velvet frock-coat, was a merchant; the second was coming up to the capital to consult a physician; and, fearing that he had disturbed this gentleman during the night, Frederick spontaneously apologised to him, so much had the young man's heart been softened by the feelings of happiness that possessed it. The wharf of the wet dock being flooded, no doubt, they went straight ahead; and once more they could see green fields. In the distance, tall factory-chimneys were sending forth their smoke. Then they turned into Ivry. Then drove up a street: all at once, he saw before him the dome of the Panthéon.

The plain, quite broken up, seemed a waste of ruins. The enclosing wall of the fortifications made a horizontal swelling there; and, on the footpath, on the ground at the side of the road, little branchless trees were protected by laths bristling with nails. Establishments for chemical products and timber-merchants' yards made their appearance alternately. High gates, like those seen in farm-houses, afforded glimpses, through their opening leaves, of wretched yards within, full of filth, with puddles of dirty water in the middle of them. Long wine-shops, of the colour of ox's blood, displayed in the first floor, between the windows, two billiard-cues crossing one another, with a wreath of painted flowers. Here and there might be noticed a half-built plaster hut, which had been allowed to remain unfinished. Then the double row of houses was no longer interrupted; and over their bare fronts enormous tin cigars showed themselves at some distance from each other, indicating tobacconists' shops. Midwives' signboards represented in each case a matron in a cap rocking a doll under a counterpane trimmed with lace. The corners of the walls were covered with placards, which, three-quarters torn, were quivering in the wind like rags. Workmen in blouses, brewers' drays, laundresses' and butchers' carts passed along. A thin rain was falling. It was cold. There was a pale sky; but two eyes, which to him were as precious as the sun, were shining behind the haze.

They had to wait a long time at the barrier, for vendors of poultry, wagoners, and a flock of sheep caused an obstruction there. The sentry, with his great-coat thrown back, walked to and fro in front of his box, to keep himself warm. The clerk who collected the city-dues clambered up to the roof of the diligence, and a cornet-à-piston sent forth a flourish. They went down the boulevard at a quick trot, the whipple-trees clapping and the traces hanging loose. The lash of the whip went cracking through the moist air. The conductor uttered his sonorous shout:

"Look alive! look alive! oho!" and the scavengers drew out of the way, the pedestrians sprang back, the mud gushed against the coach-windows; they crossed dung-carts, cabs, and omnibuses. At length, the iron gate of the Jardin des Plantes came into sight.

The Seine, which was of a yellowish colour, almost reached the platforms of the bridges. A cool breath of air issued from it. Frederick inhaled it with his utmost energy, drinking in this good air of Paris, which seems to contain the effluvia of love and the emanations of the intellect. He was touched with emotion at the first glimpse of a hackney-coach. He gazed with delight on the thresholds of the wine-merchants' shops garnished with straw, on the shoe-blacks with their boxes, on the lads who sold groceries as they shook their coffee-burners. Women hurried along at a jog-trot with umbrellas over their heads. He bent forward to try whether he could distinguish their faces — chance might have led Madame Arnoux to come out.

The shops displayed their wares. The crowd grew denser; the noise in the streets grew louder. After passing the Quai Saint-Bernard, the Quai de la Tournelle, and the Quai Montebello, they drove along the Quai Napoléon. He was anxious to see the windows there; but they were too far away from him. Then they once more crossed the Seine over the Pont-Neuf, and descended in the direction of the Louvre; and, having traversed the Rues Saint-Honoré, Croix des Petits-Champs, and Du Bouloi, he reached the Rue Coq-Héron, and entered the courtyard of the hotel.

To make his enjoyment last the longer, Frederick dressed himself as slowly as possible, and even walked as far as the Boulevard Montmartre. He smiled at the thought of presently beholding once more the beloved name on the marble plate. He cast a glance upwards; there was no longer a trace of the display in the windows, the pictures, or anything else.

He hastened to the Rue de Choiseul. M. and Madame Arnoux no longer resided there, and a woman next door was keeping an eye on the porter's lodge. Frederick waited to see the porter himself. After some time he made his appearance — it was no longer the same man. He did not know their address.

Frederick went into a café, and, while at breakfast, consulted the Commercial Directory. There were three hundred Arnoux in it, but no Jacques Arnoux. Where, then, were they living? Pellerin ought to know.

He made his way to the very top of the Faubourg Poissonnière, to the artist's studio. As the door had neither a bell nor a knocker, he rapped loudly on it with his knuckles, and then called out — shouted. But the only response was the echo of his voice from the empty house.

After this he thought of Hussonnet; but where could he discover a man of that sort? On one occasion he had waited on Hussonnet when the latter was paying a visit to his mistress's house in the Rue de Fleurus. Frederick had just reached the Rue de Fleurus when he became conscious of the fact that he did not even know the lady's name.

He had recourse to the Prefecture of Police. He wandered from staircase to staircase, from office to office. He found that the Intelligence Department was closed for the day, and was told to come back again next morning.

Then he called at all the picture-dealers' shops that he could discover, and enquired whether they could give him any information as to Arnoux's whereabouts. The only answer he got was that M. Arnoux was no longer in the trade.

At last, discouraged, weary, sickened, he returned to his hotel, and went to bed. Just as he was stretching himself between the sheets, an idea flashed upon him which made him leap up with delight:

"Regimbart! what an idiot I was not to think of him before!"

Next morning, at seven o'clock, he arrived in the Rue Nôtre Dame des Victoires, in front of a dram-shop, where Regimbart was in the habit of drinking white wine. It was not yet open. He walked about the neighbourhood, and at the end of about half-an-hour, presented himself at the place once more. Regimbart had left it.

Frederick rushed out into the street. He fancied that he could even notice Regimbart's hat some distance away. A hearse and some mourning coaches intercepted his progress. When they had got out of the way, the vision had disappeared.

Fortunately, he recalled to mind that the Citizen breakfasted every day at eleven o'clock sharp, at a little restaurant in the Place Gaillon. All he had to do was to wait patiently till then; and, after sauntering about from the Bourse to the Madeleine, and from the Madeleine to the Gymnase, so long that it seemed as if it would never come to an end, Frederick, just as the clocks were striking eleven, entered the restaurant in the Rue Gaillon, certain of finding Regimbart there.

"Don't know!" said the restaurant-keeper, in an unceremonious tone.

Frederick persisted: the man replied:

"I have no longer any acquaintance with him, Monsieur" — and, as he spoke, he raised his eyebrows majestically and shook his head in a mysterious fashion.

But, in their last interview, the Citizen had referred to the Alexandre smoking-divan. Frederick swallowed a cake, jumped into a cab, and asked the driver whether there happened to be anywhere on the heights of Sainte-

Geneviève a certain Café Alexandre. The cabman drove him to the Rue des Francs Bourgeois Saint-Michel, where there was an establishment of that name, and in answer to his question:

"M. Regimbart, if you please?" the keeper of the café said with an unusually gracious smile:

"We have not seen him as yet, Monsieur," while he directed towards his wife, who sat behind the counter, a look of intelligence. And the next moment, turning towards the clock:

"But he'll be here, I hope, in ten minutes, or at most a quarter of an hour. Celestin, hurry with the newspapers! What would Monsieur like to take?"

Though he did not want to take anything, Frederick swallowed a glass of rum, then a glass of kirsch, then a glass of curaçoa, then several glasses of grog, both cold and hot. He read through that day's *Siècle*, and then read it over again; he examined the caricatures in the *Charivari* down to the very tissue of the paper. When he had finished, he knew the advertisements by heart. From time to time, the tramp of boots on the footpath outside reached his ears — it was he! and some one's form would trace its outlines on the window-panes; but it invariably passed on.

In order to get rid of the sense of weariness he experienced, Frederick shifted his seat. He took up his position at the lower end of the room; then at the right; after that at the left; and he remained in the middle of the bench with his arms stretched out. But a cat, daintily pressing down the velvet at the back of the seat, startled him by giving a sudden spring, in order to lick up the spots of syrup on the tray; and the child of the house, an insufferable brat of four, played noisily with a rattle on the bar steps. His mother, a pale-faced little woman, with decayed teeth, was smiling in a stupid sort of way. What in the world could Regimbart be doing? Frederick waited for him in an exceedingly miserable frame of mind.

The rain clattered like hail on the covering of the cab. Through the opening in the muslin curtain he could see the poor horse in the street more motionless than a horse made of wood. The stream of water, becoming enormous, trickled down between two spokes of the wheels, and the coachman was nodding drowsily with the horsecloth wrapped round him for protection, but fearing lest his fare might give him the slip, he opened the door every now and then, with the rain dripping from him as if falling from a mountain torrent; and, if things could get worn out by looking at them, the clock ought to have by this time been utterly dissolved, so frequently did Frederick rivet his eyes on it. However, it kept going. "Mine host" Alexandre walked up and down repeating, "He'll come! Cheer up! he'll come!" and, in order to divert his thoughts, talked politics, holding forth at some length. He even carried civility so far as to propose a game of dominoes.

At length when it was half-past four, Frederick, who had been there since about twelve, sprang to his feet, and declared that he would not wait any longer.

"I can't understand it at all myself," replied the café-keeper, in a tone of straightforwardness. "This is the first time that M. Ledoux has failed to come!"

"What! Monsieur Ledoux?"

"Why, yes, Monsieur!"

"I said Regimbart," exclaimed Frederick, exasperated.

"Ah! a thousand pardons! You are making a mistake! Madame Alexandre, did not Monsieur say M. Ledoux?"

And, questioning the waiter: "You heard him yourself, just as I did?"

No doubt, to pay his master off for old scores, the waiter contented himself with smiling.

Frederick drove back to the boulevards, indignant at having his time wasted, raging against the Citizen, but craving for his presence as if for that of a god, and firmly resolved to drag him forth, if necessary, from the depths of the most remote cellars. The vehicle in which he was driving only irritated him the more, and he accordingly got rid of it. His ideas were in a state of confusion. Then all the names of the cafés which he had heard pronounced by that idiot burst forth at the same time from his memory like the thousand pieces of an exhibition of fireworks — the Café Gascard, the Café Grimbert, the Café Halbout, the Bordelais smoking-divan, the Havanais, the Havrais, the Bœuf à la Mode, the Brasserie Allemande, and the Mère Morel; and he made his way to all of them in succession. But in one he was told that Regimbart had just gone out; in another, that he might perhaps call at a later hour; in a third, that they had not seen him for six months; and, in another place, that he had the day before ordered a leg of mutton for Saturday. Finally, at Vautier's dining-rooms, Frederick, on opening the door, knocked against the waiter.

"Do you know M. Regimbart?"

"What, monsieur! do I know him? 'Tis I who have the honour of attending on him. He's upstairs — he is just finishing his dinner!"

And, with a napkin under his arm, the master of the establishment himself accosted him:

"You're asking him for M. Regimbart, monsieur? He was here a moment ago."

Frederick gave vent to an oath, but the proprietor of the dining-rooms stated that he would find the gentleman as a matter of certainty at Bouttevilain's.

"I assure you, on my honour, he left a little earlier than usual, for he had a business appointment with some gentlemen. But you'll find him, I tell you again, at Bouttevilain's, in the Rue Saint-Martin, No. 92, the second row of steps at the left, at the end of the courtyard — first floor — door to the right!"

At last, he saw Regimbart, in a cloud of tobacco-smoke, by himself, at the lower end of the refreshment-room, near the billiard-table, with a glass of beer in front of him, and his chin lowered in a thoughtful attitude.

"Ah! I have been a long time searching for you!"

Without rising, Regimbart extended towards him only two fingers, and, as if he had seen Frederick the day before, he gave utterance to a number of commonplace remarks about the opening of the session.

Frederick interrupted him, saying in the most natural tone he could assume:

"Is Arnoux going on well?"

The reply was a long time coming, as Regimbart was gargling the liquor in his throat:

"Yes, not badly."

"Where is he living now?"

"Why, in the Rue Paradis Poissonnière," the Citizen returned with astonishment.

"What number?"

"Thirty-seven — confound it! what a funny fellow you are!"

Frederick rose.

"What! are you going?"

"Yes, yes! I have to make a call — some business matter I had forgotten! Good-bye!"

Frederick went from the smoking-divan to the Arnoux's residence, as if carried along by a tepid wind, with a sensation of extreme ease such as people experience in dreams.

He found himself soon on the second floor in front of a door, at the ringing of whose bell a servant appeared. A second door was flung open. Madame Arnoux was seated near the fire. Arnoux jumped up, and rushed across to embrace Frederick. She had on her lap a little boy not quite three years old. Her daughter, now as tall as herself, was standing up at the opposite side of the mantelpiece.

"Allow me to present this gentleman to you," said Arnoux, taking his son up in his arms. And he amused himself for some minutes in making the child jump up in the air very high, and then catching him with both hands as he came down.

"You'll kill him! — ah! good heavens, have done!" exclaimed Madame Arnoux.

But Arnoux, declaring that there was not the slightest danger, still kept tossing up the child, and even addressed him in words of endearment such as nurses use in the Marseillaise dialect, his natal tongue: "Ah! my fine picheoun!

my ducksy of a little nightingale!"

Then, he asked Frederick why he had been so long without writing to them, what he had been doing down in the country, and what brought him back.

"As for me, I am at present, my dear friend, a dealer in faïence. But let us talk about yourself!"

Frederick gave as reasons for his absence a protracted lawsuit and the state of his mother's health.

He laid special stress on the latter subject in order to make himself interesting. He ended by saying that this time he was going to settle in Paris for good; and he said nothing about the inheritance, lest it might be prejudicial to his past.

The curtains, like the upholstering of the furniture, were of maroon damask wool. Two pillows were close beside one another on the bolster. On the coal-fire a kettle was boiling; and the shade of the lamp, which stood near the edge of the chest of drawers, darkened the apartment. Madame Arnoux wore a large blue merino dressing-gown. With her face turned towards the fire and one hand on the shoulder of the little boy, she unfastened with the other the child's bodice. The youngster in his shirt began to cry, while scratching his head, like the son of M. Alexandre.

Frederick expected that he would have felt spasms of joy; but the passions grow pale when we find ourselves in an altered situation; and, as he no longer saw Madame Arnoux in the environment wherein he had known her, she seemed to him to have lost some of her fascination; to have degenerated in some way that he could not comprehend — in fact, not to be the same. He was astonished at the serenity of his own heart. He made enquiries about some old friends, about Pellerin, amongst others.

"I don't see him often," said Arnoux. She added:

"We no longer entertain as we used to do formerly!"

Was the object of this to let him know that he would get no invitation from them? But Arnoux, continuing to exhibit the same cordiality, reproached him for not having come to dine with them uninvited; and he explained why he had changed his business.

"What are you to do in an age of decadence like ours? Great painting is gone out of fashion! Besides, we may import art into everything. You know that, for my part, I am a lover of the beautiful. I must bring you one of these days to see my earthenware works."

And he wanted to show Frederick immediately some of his productions in the store which he had between the ground-floor and the first floor.

Dishes, soup-tureens, and washhand-basins encumbered the floor. Against the walls were laid out large squares of pavement for bathrooms and dressing-walls were laid out large squares of pavement for bathrooms and dressing-rooms, with mythological subjects in the Renaissance style; whilst in the centre, a pair of whatnots, rising up to the ceiling, supported ice-urns, flower-pots, candelabra, little flower-stands, and large statuettes of many colours, representing a negro or a shepherdess in the Pompadour fashion. Frederick, who was cold and hungry, was bored with Arnoux's display of his wares. He hurried off to the Café Anglais, where he ordered a sumptuous supper, and while eating, said to himself:

"I was well off enough below there with all my troubles! She scarcely took any notice of me! How like a shopkeeper's wife!"

And in an abrupt expansion of healthfulness, he formed egoistic resolutions. He felt his heart as hard as the table on which his elbows rested. So then he could by this time plunge fearlessly into the vortex of society. The thought of the Dambreuses recurred to his mind. He would make use of them. Then he recalled Deslauriers to mind. "Ah! faith, so much the worse!" Nevertheless, he sent him a note by a messenger, making an appointment with him for the following day, in order that they might breakfast together.

Fortune had not been so kind to the other.

He had presented himself at the examination for a fellowship with a thesis on the law of wills, in which he maintained that the powers of testators ought to be restricted as much as possible; and, as his adversary provoked him in such a way as to make him say foolish things, he gave utterance to many of these absurdities without in any way inducing the examiners to falter in deciding that he was wrong. Then chance so willed it that he should choose by lot, as a subject for a lecture, Prescription. Thereupon, Deslauriers gave vent to some lamentable theories: the questions in dispute in former times ought to be brought forward as well as those which had recently arisen; why should the proprietor be deprived of his estate because he could furnish his title-deeds only after the lapse of thirty-one years? This was giving the security of the honest man to the inheritor of the enriched thief. Every injustice was consecrated by extending this law, which was a form of tyranny, the abuse of force! He had even exclaimed: "Abolish it; and the Franks will no longer oppress the Gauls, the English oppress the Irish, the Yankee oppress the Redskins, the Turks oppress the Arabs, the whites oppress the blacks, Poland — — "

The President interrupted him: "Well! well! Monsieur, we have nothing to do with your political opinions — you will have them represented in your behalf by-and-by!"

Deslauriers did not wish to have his opinions represented; but this unfortunate Title XX. of the Third Book of the Civil Code had become a sort of mountain over which he stumbled. He was elaborating a great work on "Prescription over which he stumbled. He was elaborating a great work on "Prescription considered as the Basis of the Civil Law and of the Law of Nature amongst Peoples"; and he got lost in Dunod, Rogerius, Balbus, Merlin, Vazeille, Savigny, Traplong, and other weighty authorities on the subject. In order to have more leisure for the purpose of devoting himself to this task, he had resigned his post of head-clerk. He lived by giving private tuitions and preparing theses; and at the meetings of newly-fledged barristers to rehearse legal arguments he frightened by his display of virulence those who held conservative views, all the young doctrinaires who acknowledged M. Guizot as their master — so that in a certain set he had gained a sort of celebrity, mingled, in a slight degree, with lack of confidence in him as an individual.

He came to keep the appointment in a big paletot, lined with red flannel, like the one Sénécal used to wear in former days.

Human respect on account of the passers-by prevented them from straining one another long in an embrace of friendship; and they made their way to Véfour's arm-in-arm, laughing pleasantly, though with tear-drops lingering in the depths of their eyes. Then, as soon as they were free from observation, Deslauriers exclaimed:

"Ah! damn it! we'll have a jolly time of it now!"

Frederick was not quite pleased to find Deslauriers all at once associating himself in this way with his own newly-acquired inheritance. His friend exhibited too much pleasure on account of them both, and not enough on his account alone.

After this, Deslauriers gave details about the reverse he had met with, and gradually told Frederick all about his occupations and his daily existence, speaking of himself in a stoical fashion, and of others in tones of intense bitterness. He found fault with everything; there was not a man in office who was not an idiot or a rascal. He flew into a passion against the waiter for having a glass badly rinsed, and, when Frederick uttered a reproach with a view to mitigating his wrath: "As if I were going to annoy myself with such numbskulls, who, you must know, can earn as much as six and even eight thousand francs a year, who are electors, perhaps eligible as candidates. Ah! no, no!"

Then, with a sprightly air, "But I've forgotten that I'm talking to a capitalist, to a Mondor, for you are a Mondor now!"

And, coming back to the question of the inheritance, he gave expression to this view — that collateral successorship (a thing unjust in itself, though in the present case he was glad it was possible) would be abolished one of these days at the approaching revolution.

"Do you believe in that?" said Frederick.

"Be sure of it!" he replied. "This sort of thing cannot last. There is too much suffering. When I see into the wretchedness of men like Sénécal — — "

"Always Sénécal!" thought Frederick.

"But, at all events, tell me the news? Are you still in love with Madame Arnoux? Is it all over — eh?"

Frederick, not knowing what answer to give him, closed his eyes and hung down his head.

With regard to Arnoux, Deslauriers told him that the journal was now the property of Hussonnet, who had transformed it. It was called "*L'Art*, a literary institution — a company with shares of one hundred francs each; capital of the firm, forty thousand francs," each shareholder having the right to put into it his own contributions; for "the company has for its object to publish the works of beginners, to spare talent, perchance genius, the sad crises which drench," *etc.*

"You see the dodge!" There was, however, something to be effected by the change — the tone of the journal could be raised; then, without any delay, while retaining the same writers, and promising a continuation of the feuilleton, to supply the subscribers with a political organ: the amount to be advanced would not be very great.

"What do you think of it? Come! would you like to have a hand in it?"

Frederick did not reject the proposal; but he pointed out that it was necessary for him to attend to the regulation of his affairs.

"After that, if you require anything — — "

"Thanks, my boy!" said Deslauriers.

Then, they smoked puros, leaning with their elbows on the shelf covered with velvet beside the window. The sun was shining; the air was balmy. Flocks of birds, fluttering about, swooped down into the garden. The statues of bronze and marble, washed by the rain, were glistening. Nursery-maids wearing aprons, were seated on chairs, chatting together; and the laughter of children could be heard mingling with the continuous plash that came from the sheaf-jets of the fountain.

Frederick was troubled by Deslauriers' irritability; but under the influence of the wine which circulated through his veins, half-asleep, in a state of torpor, with the sun shining full on his face, he was no longer conscious of anything save a profound sense of comfort, a kind of voluptuous feeling that stupefied him, as a plant is saturated with heat and moisture. Deslauriers, with half-closed eyelids, was staring vacantly into the distance. His breast swelled, and he broke out in the following strain:

"Ah! those were better days when Camille Desmoulins, standing below there on a table, drove the people on to the Bastille. Men really lived in those times;

they could assert themselves, and prove their strength! Simple advocates commanded generals. Kings were beaten by beggars; whilst now — — "

He stopped, then added all of a sudden:

"Pooh! the future is big with great things!"

And, drumming a battle-march on the window-panes, he declaimed some verses of Barthélemy, which ran thus:

"'That dread Assembly shall again appear, Which, after forty years, fills you with fear, Marching with giant stride and dauntless soul'

— I don't know the rest of it! But 'tis late; suppose we go?"

And he went on setting forth his theories in the street.

Frederick, without listening to him, was looking at certain materials and articles of furniture in the shop-windows which would be suitable for his new residence in Paris; and it was, perhaps, the thought of Madame Arnoux that made him stop before a second-hand dealer's window, where three plates made of fine ware were exposed to view. They were decorated with yellow arabesques with metallic reflections, and were worth a hundred crowns apiece. He got them put by.

"For my part, if I were in your place," said Deslauriers, "I would rather buy silver plate," revealing by this love of substantial things the man of mean extraction.

As soon as he was alone, Frederick repaired to the establishment of the celebrated Pomadère, where he ordered three pairs of trousers, two coats, a pelisse trimmed with fur, and five waistcoats. Then he called at a bootmaker's, a shirtmaker's, and a hatter's, giving them directions in each shop to make the greatest possible haste. Three days later, on the evening of his return from Havre, he found his complete wardrobe awaiting him in his Parisian abode; and impatient to make use of it, he resolved to pay an immediate visit to the Dambreuses. But it was too early yet — scarcely eight o'clock.

"Suppose I went to see the others?" said he to himself.

He came upon Arnoux, all alone, in the act of shaving in front of his glass. The latter proposed to drive him to a place where they could amuse themselves, and when M. Dambreuse was referred to, "Ah, that's just lucky! You'll see some of his friends there. Come on, then! It will be good fun!"

Frederick asked to be excused. Madame Arnoux recognised his voice, and wished him good-day, through the partition, for her daughter was indisposed, and she was also rather unwell herself. The noise of a soup-ladle against a glass could be heard from within, and all those quivering sounds made by things being lightly moved about, which are usual in a sick-room. Then Arnoux left his dressing-room to say good-bye to his wife. He brought forward a heap of reasons for going out:

"You know well that it is a serious matter! I must go there; 'tis a case of necessity. They'll be waiting for me!"

"Go, go, my dear! Amuse yourself!"

Arnoux hailed a hackney-coach:

"Palais Royal, No. 7 Montpensier Gallery." And, as he let himself sink back in the cushions:

"Ah! how tired I am, my dear fellow! It will be the death of me! However, I can tell it to you — to you!"

He bent towards Frederick's ear in a mysterious fashion:

"I am trying to discover again the red of Chinese copper!"

And he explained the nature of the glaze and the little fire.

On their arrival at Chevet's shop, a large hamper was brought to him, which he stowed away in the hackney-coach. Then he bought for his "poor wife" pine-apples and various dainties, and directed that they should be sent early next morning.

After this, they called at a costumer's establishment; it was to a ball they were going.

Arnoux selected blue velvet breeches, a vest of the same material, and a red wig; Frederick a domino; and they went down the Rue de Laval towards a house the second floor of which was illuminated by coloured lanterns.

At the foot of the stairs they heard violins playing above.

"Where the deuce are you bringing me to?" said Frederick.

"To see a nice girl! don't be afraid!"

The door was opened for them by a groom; and they entered the anteroom, where paletots, mantles, and shawls were thrown together in a heap on some chairs. A young woman in the costume of a dragoon of Louis XIV.'s reign was passing at that moment. It was Mademoiselle Rosanette Bron, the mistress of the place.

"Well?" said Arnoux.

"'Tis done!" she replied.

"Ah! thanks, my angel!"

And he wanted to kiss her.

"Take care, now, you foolish man! You'll spoil the paint on my face!"

Arnoux introduced Frederick.

"Step in there, Monsieur; you are quite welcome!"

She drew aside a door-curtain, and cried out with a certain emphasis:

"Here's my lord Arnoux, girl, and a princely friend of his!"

Frederick was at first dazzled by the lights. He could see nothing save some silk and velvet dresses, naked shoulders, a mass of colours swaying to and fro to the accompaniment of an orchestra hidden behind green foliage, between walls hung with yellow silk, with pastel portraits here and there and crystal chandeliers in the style of Louis XVI.'s period. High lamps, whose globes of roughened glass resembled snowballs, looked down on baskets of flowers placed on brackets in the corners; and at the opposite side, at the rear of a second room, smaller in size, one could distinguish, in a third, a bed with twisted posts, and at its head a Venetian mirror.

The dancing stopped, and there were bursts of applause, a hubbub of delight, as Arnoux was seen advancing with his hamper on his head; the eatables contained in it made a lump in the centre.

"Make way for the lustre!"

Frederick raised his eyes: it was the lustre of old Saxe that had adorned the shop attached to the office of *L'Art Industriel*. The memory of former days was brought back to his mind. But a foot-soldier of the line in undress, with that silly expression of countenance ascribed by tradition to conscripts, planted himself right in front of him, spreading out his two arms in order to emphasise his astonishment, and, in spite of the hideous black moustaches, unusually pointed, which disfigured his face, Frederick recognised his old friend Hussonnet. In a half-Alsatian, half-negro kind of gibberish, the Bohemian loaded him with congratulations, calling him his colonel. Frederick, put out of countenance by the crowd of personages assembled around him, was at a loss for an answer. At a tap on the desk from a fiddlestick, the partners in the dance fell into their places.

They were about sixty in number, the women being for the most part dressed either as village-girls or marchionesses, and the men, who were nearly all of mature age, being got up as wagoners, 'longshoremen, or sailors.

Frederick having taken up his position close to the wall, stared at those who were going through the quadrille in front of him.

An old beau, dressed like a Venetian Doge in a long gown or purple silk, was dancing with Mademoiselle Rosanette, who wore a green coat, laced breeches, and boots of soft leather with gold spurs. The pair in front of them consisted of an Albanian laden with yataghans and a Swiss girl with blue eyes and skin white as milk, who looked as plump as a quail with her chemise-sleeves and red corset exposed to view. In order to turn to account her hair, which fell down to her hips, a tall blonde, a walking lady in the opera, had assumed the part of a female savage; and over her brown swaddling-cloth she displayed nothing save leathern breeches, glass bracelets, and a tinsel diadem, from which rose a large sheaf of peacock's feathers. In front of her, a gentleman who had intended to represent Pritchard, muffled up in a grotesquely big black coat, was beating time with his elbows on his snuff-box. A little Watteau shepherd in blue-and-silver, like moonlight, dashed his crook against the thyrsus of a Bacchante crowned with grapes, who wore a leopard's skin over her left side, and buskins with gold ribbons. On the other side, a Polish lady, in a spencer of nacarat-coloured velvet, made her gauze petticoat flutter over her pearl-gray stockings, which rose above her fashionable pink boots bordered with white fur. She was smiling on a big-paunched man of forty, disguised as a choir-boy, who was skipping very high, lifting up his surplice with one hand, and with the other his red clerical cap. But the queen, the star, was Mademoiselle Loulou, a celebrated dancer at public halls. As she had now become wealthy, she wore a large lace collar over her vest of smooth black velvet; and her wide trousers of poppy-coloured silk, clinging closely to her figure, and drawn tight round her waist by a cashmere scarf, had all over their seams little natural white camellias. Her pale face, a little puffed, and with the nose somewhat *retroussé*, looked all the more pert from the disordered appearance of her wig, over which she had with a touch of her hand clapped a man's grey felt hat, so that it covered her right ear; and, with every bounce she made, her pumps, adorned with diamond buckles, nearly reached the nose of her neighbour, a big mediæval baron, who was quite entangled in his steel armour. There was also an angel, with a gold sword in her hand, and two swan's wings over her back, who kept rushing up and down, every minute losing her partner who appeared as Louis XIV., displaying an utter ignorance of the figures and confusing the quadrille.

Frederick, as he gazed at these people, experienced a sense of forlornness, a feeling of uneasiness. He was still thinking of Madame Arnoux and it seemed to him as if he were taking part in some plot that was being hatched against her.

When the quadrille was over, Mademoiselle Rosanette accosted him. She was slightly out of breath, and her gorget, polished like a mirror, swelled up softly under her chin.

"And you, Monsieur," said she, "don't you dance?"

Frederick excused himself; he did not know how to dance.

"Really! but with me? Are you quite sure?" And, poising herself on one hip, with her other knee a little drawn back, while she stroked with her left hand the mother-of-pearl pommel of her sword, she kept staring at him for a minute with a half-beseeching, half-teasing air. At last she said "Good night! then," made a pirouette, and disappeared.

Frederick, dissatisfied with himself, and not well knowing what to do, began to wander through the ball-room.

He entered the boudoir padded with pale blue silk, with bouquets of flowers from the fields, whilst on the ceiling, in a circle of gilt wood, Cupids, emerging out of an azure sky, played over the clouds, resembling down in appearance. This display of luxuries, which would to-day be only trifles to persons like Rosanette, dazzled him, and he admired everything — the artificial convolvuli which adorned the surface of the mirror, the curtains on the mantelpiece, the Turkish divan, and a sort of tent in a recess in the wall, with pink silk hangings and a covering of white muslin overhead. Furniture made of dark wood with inlaid work of copper filled the sleeping apartment, where, on a platform covered with swan's-down, stood the large canopied bedstead trimmed with ostrich-feathers. Pins, with heads made of precious stones, stuck into pincushions, rings trailing over trays, lockets with hoops of gold, and little silver chests, could be distinguished in the shade under the light shed by a Bohemian urn suspended from three chainlets. Through a little door, which was slightly ajar, could be seen a hot-house occupying the entire breadth of a terrace, with an aviary at the other end.

Here were surroundings specially calculated to charm him. In a sudden revolt of his youthful blood he swore that he would enjoy such things; he grew bold; then, coming back to the place opening into the drawing-room, where there was now a larger gathering — it kept moving about in a kind of luminous pulverulence — he stood to watch the quadrilles, blinking his eyes to see better, and inhaling the soft perfumes of the women, which floated through the atmosphere like an immense kiss.

But, close to him, on the other side of the door, was Pellerin — Pellerin, in full dress, his left arm over his breast and with his hat and a torn white glove in his right.

"Halloa! 'Tis a long time since we saw you! Where the deuce have you been? Gone to travel in Italy? 'Tis a commonplace country enough — Italy, eh? not so unique as people say it is? No matter! Will you bring me your sketches one of these days?"

And, without giving him time to answer, the artist began talking about himself. He had made considerable progress, having definitely satisfied himself as to the stupidity of the line. We ought not to look so much for beauty and unity in a work as for character and diversity of subject.

"For everything exists in nature; therefore, everything is legitimate; everything is plastic. It is only a question of catching the note, mind you! I have discovered the secret." And giving him a nudge, he repeated several times, "I have discovered the secret, you see! just look at that little woman with the head-dress of a sphinx who is dancing with a Russian postilion — that's neat, dry, fixed, all in flats and in stiff tones — indigo under the eyes, a patch of vermilion on the cheek, and bistre on the temples — pif! paf!" And with his thumb he drew, as it were, pencil-strokes in the air. "Whilst the big one over there," he went on, pointing towards a fishwife in a cherry gown with a gold cross hanging from her neck, and a lawn fichu fastened round her shoulders, "is nothing but curves. The nostrils are spread out just like the borders of her cap; the corners of the mouth are rising up; the chin sinks: all is fleshy, melting, abundant, tranquil, and sunshiny — a true Rubens! Nevertheless, they are both perfect! Where, then, is the type?" He grew warm with the subject. "What is this but a beautiful woman? What is it but the beautiful? Ah! the beautiful — tell me what that is — — "

Frederick interrupted him to enquire who was the merry-andrew with the face of a he-goat, who was in the very act of blessing all the dancers in the middle of a pastourelle.

"Oh! he's not much! — a widower, the father of three boys. He leaves them without breeches, spends his whole day at the club, and lives with the servant!"

"And who is that dressed like a bailiff talking in the recess of the window to a Marquise de Pompadour?"

"The Marquise is Mademoiselle Vandael, formerly an actress at the Gymnase, the mistress of the Doge, the Comte de Palazot. They have now been twenty years living together — nobody can tell why. Had she fine eyes at one time, this woman? As for the citizen by her side, his name is Captain d'Herbigny, an old man of the hurdy-gurdy sort that you can play on, with nothing in the world except his Cross of the Legion of Honour and his pension. He passes for the uncle of the grisettes at festival times, arranges duels, and dines in the city."

"A rascal?" said Frederick.

"No! an honest man!"

"Ha!"

The artist was going on to mention the names of many others, when, perceiving a gentleman who, like Molière's physician, wore a big black serge gown opening very wide as it descended in order to display all his trinkets:

"The person who presents himself there before you is Dr. Des Rogis, who, full of rage at not having made a name for himself, has written a book of medical pornography, and willingly blacks people's boots in society, while he is at the same time discreet. These ladies adore him. He and his wife (that lean châtelaine in the grey dress) trip about together at every public place — aye, and at other places too. In spite of domestic embarrassments, they have a *day* — artistic teas, at which verses are recited. Attention!"

In fact, the doctor came up to them at that moment; and soon they formed all three, at the entrance to the drawing-room, a group of talkers, which was presently augmented by Hussonnet, then by the lover of the female savage, a young poet who displayed, under a court cloak of Francis I.'s reign, the most pitiful of anatomies, and finally a sprightly youth disguised as a Turk of the barrier. But his vest with its yellow galloon had taken so many voyages on the backs of strolling dentists, his wide trousers full of creases, were of so faded a red, his turban, rolled about like an eel in the Tartar fashion, was so poor in appearance — in short, his entire costume was so wretched and made-up, that the women did not attempt to hide their disgust. The doctor consoled him by pronouncing eulogies on his mistress, the lady in the dress of a 'longshorewoman. This Turk was a banker's son.

Between two quadrilles, Rosanette advanced towards the mantelpiece, where an obese little old man, in a maroon coat with gold buttons, had seated himself in an armchair. In spite of his withered cheeks, which fell over his white cravat, his hair, still fair, and curling naturally like that of a poodle, gave him a certain frivolity of aspect.

She was listening to him with her face bent close to his. Presently, she accommodated him with a little glass of syrup; and nothing could be more dainty than her hands under their laced sleeves, which passed over the facings of her green coat. When the old man had swallowed it, he kissed them.

"Why, that's M. Oudry, a neighbor of Arnoux!"

"He has lost her!" said Pellerin, smiling.

A Longjumeau postilion caught her by the waist. A waltz was beginning. Then all the women, seated round the drawing-room on benches, rose up quickly at the same time; and their petticoats, their scarfs, and their head-dresses went whirling round.

They whirled so close to him that Frederick could notice the beads of perspiration on their foreheads; and this gyral movement, more and more lively, regular, provocative of dizzy sensations, communicated to his mind a sort of intoxication, which made other images surge up within it, while every woman passed with the same dazzling effect, and each of them with a special kind of exciting influence, according to her style of beauty.

The Polish lady, surrendering herself in a languorous fashion, inspired him with a longing to clasp her to his heart while they were both spinning forward on a sledge along a plain covered with snow. Horizons of tranquil voluptuousness in a châlet at the side of a lake opened out under the footsteps of the Swiss girl, who waltzed with her bust erect and her eyelashes drooping. Then, suddenly, the Bacchante, bending back her head with its dark locks, made him dream of devouring caresses in a wood of oleanders, in the midst of a storm, to the confused accompaniment of tabours. The fishwife, who was panting from the rapidity of the music, which was far too great for her, gave vent to bursts of laughter; and he would have liked, while drinking with her in some tavern in the "Porcherons," to rumple her fichu with both hands, as in the good old times. But the 'longshorewoman, whose light toes barely skimmed the floor, seemed to conceal under the suppleness of her limbs and the seriousness of her face all the refinements of modern love, which possesses the exactitude of a science and the mobility of a bird. Rosanette was whirling with arms akimbo; her wig, in an awkward position, bobbing over her collar, flung iris-powder around her; and, at every turn, she was near catching hold of Frederick with the ends of her gold spurs.

During the closing bar of the waltz, Mademoiselle Vatnaz made her appearance. She had an Algerian handkerchief on her head, a number of piastres on her forehead, antimony at the edges of her eyes, with a kind of paletot made of black cashmere falling over a petticoat of sparkling colour, with stripes of silver; and in her hand she held a tambourine.

Behind her back came a tall fellow in the classical costume of Dante, who happened to be — she now made no concealment any longer about it — the ex-singer of the Alhambra, and who, though his name was Auguste Delamare, had first called himself Anténor Delamarre, then Delmas, then Belmar, and at last Delmar, thus modifying and perfecting his name, as his celebrity increased, for he had forsaken the public-house concert for the theatre, and had even just made his *début* in a noisy fashion at the Ambigu in *Gaspardo le Pécheur*.

Hussonnet, on seeing him, knitted his brows. Since his play had been rejected, he hated actors. It was impossible to conceive the vanity of individuals of this sort, and above all of this fellow. "What a prig! Just look at him!"

After a light bow towards Rosanette, Delmar leaned back against the mantelpiece; and he remained motionless with one hand over his heart, his left foot thrust forward, his eyes raised towards heaven, with his wreath of gilt laurels above his cowl, while he strove to put into the expression of his face a considerable amount of poetry in order to fascinate the ladies. They made, at some distance, a great circle around him.

But the Vatnaz, having given Rosanette a prolonged embrace, came to beg of Hussonnet to revise, with a view to the improvement of the style, an educational work which she intended to publish, under the title of "The Young Ladies' Garland," a collection of literature and moral philosophy.

The man of letters promised to assist her in the preparation of the work. Then she asked him whether he could not in one of the prints to which he had access give her friend a slight puff, and even assign to him, later, some part. Hussonnet had forgotten to take a glass of punch on account of her.

It was Arnoux who had brewed the beverage; and, followed by the Comte's groom carrying an empty tray, he offered it to the ladies with a self-satisfied air.

When he came to pass in front of M. Oudry, Rosanette stopped him.

"Well — and this little business?"

He coloured slightly; finally, addressing the old man:

"Our fair friend tells me that you would have the kindness — — "

"What of that, neighbour? I am quite at your service!"

And M. Dambreuse's name was pronounced. As they were talking to one another in low tones, Frederick could only hear indistinctly; and he made his way to the other side of the mantelpiece, where Rosanette and Delmar were chatting together.

The mummer had a vulgar countenance, made, like the scenery of the stage, to be viewed from a distance — coarse hands, big feet, and a heavy jaw; and he disparaged the most distinguished actors, spoke of poets with patronising contempt, made use of the expressions "my organ," "my physique," "my powers," enamelling his conversation with words that were scarcely intelligible even to himself, and for which he had quite an affection, such as "*morbidezza*," "analogue," and "homogeneity."

Rosanette listened to him with little nods of approbation. One could see her enthusiasm bursting out under the paint on her cheeks, and a touch of moisture passed like a veil over her bright eyes of an indefinable colour. How could such a man as this fascinate her? Frederick internally excited himself to greater contempt for him, in order to banish, perhaps, the species of envy which he felt with regard to him.

Mademoiselle Vatnaz was now with Arnoux, and, while laughing from time to time very loudly, she cast glances towards Rosanette, of whom M. Oudry did not lose sight.

Then Arnoux and the Vatnaz disappeared. The old man began talking in a subdued voice to Rosanette.

"Well, yes, 'tis settled then! Leave me alone!"

And she asked Frederick to go and give a look into the kitchen to see whether Arnoux happened to be there.

A battalion of glasses half-full covered the floor; and the saucepans, the pots, the turbot-kettle, and the frying-stove were all in a state of commotion. Arnoux was giving directions to the servants, whom he "thee'd" and "thou'd," beating up the mustard, tasting the sauces, and larking with the housemaid.

"All right," he said; "tell them 'tis ready! I'm going to have it served up."

The dancing had ceased. The women came and sat down; the men were walking about. In the centre of the drawing-room, one of the curtains stretched over a window was swelling in the wind; and the Sphinx, in spite of the observations of everyone, exposed her sweating arms to the current of air.

Where could Rosanette be? Frederick went on further to find her, even into her boudoir and her bedroom. Some, in order to be alone, or to be in pairs, had retreated into the corners. Whisperings intermingled with the shade. There were little laughs stifled under handkerchiefs, and at the sides of women's corsages one could catch glimpses of fans quivering with slow, gentle movements, like the beating of a wounded bird's wings.

As he entered the hot-house, he saw under the large leaves of a caladium near the jet d'eau, Delmar lying on his face on the sofa covered with linen cloth. Rosanette, seated beside him, had passed her fingers through his hair; and they were gazing into each other's faces. At the same moment, Arnoux came in at the opposite side — that which was near the aviary. Delmar sprang to his feet; then he went out at a rapid pace, without turning round; and even paused close to the door to gather a hibiscus flower, with which he adorned his button-hole. Rosanette hung down her head; Frederick, who caught a sight of her profile, saw that she was in tears.

"I say! What's the matter with you?" exclaimed Arnoux.

She shrugged her shoulders without replying.

"Is it on account of him?" he went on.

She threw her arms round his neck, and kissing him on the forehead, slowly:

"You know well that I will always love you, my big fellow! Think no more about it! Let us go to supper!"

A copper chandelier with forty wax tapers lighted up the dining-room, the walls of which were hidden from view under some fine old earthenware that was hung up there; and this crude light, falling perpendicularly, rendered still whiter, amid the side-dishes and the fruits, a huge turbot which occupied the centre of the tablecloth, with plates all round filled with crayfish soup. With a rustle of garments, the women, having arranged their skirts, their sleeves, and their scarfs, took their seats beside one another; the men, standing up, posted themselves at the corners. Pellerin and M. Oudry were placed near Rosanette. Arnoux was facing her. Palazot and his female companion had just gone out.

"Good-bye to them!" said she. "Now let us begin the attack!"

And the choir-boy, a facetious man with a big sign of the cross, said grace.

The ladies were scandalised, and especially the fishwife, the mother of a young girl of whom she wished to make an honest woman. Neither did Arnoux like "that sort of thing," as he considered that religion ought to be respected.

A German clock with a cock attached to it happening to chime out the hour of two, gave rise to a number of jokes about the cuckoo. All kinds of talk followed — puns, anecdotes, bragging remarks, bets, lies taken for truth, improbable assertions, a tumult of words, which soon became dispersed in the form of chats between particular individuals. The wines went round; the dishes succeeded each other; the doctor carved. An orange or a cork would every now and then be flung from a distance. People would quit their seats to go and talk to some one at another end of the table. Rosanette turned round towards Delmar, who sat motionless behind her; Pellerin kept babbling; M. Oudry smiled. Mademoiselle Vatnaz ate, almost alone, a group of crayfish, and the shells crackled under her long teeth. The angel, poised on the piano-stool — the only place on which her wings permitted her to sit down — was placidly masticating without ever stopping.

"What an appetite!" the choir-boy kept repeating in amazement, "what an appetite!"

And the Sphinx drank brandy, screamed out with her throat full, and wriggled like a demon. Suddenly her jaws swelled, and no longer being able to keep down the blood which rushed to her head and nearly choked her, she pressed her napkin against her lips, and threw herself under the table.

Frederick had seen her falling: "'Tis nothing!" And at his entreaties to be allowed to go and look after her, she replied slowly:

"Pooh! what's the good? That's just as pleasant as anything else. Life is not so amusing!"

Then, he shivered, a feeling of icy sadness taking possession of him, as if he had caught a glimpse of whole worlds of wretchedness and despair — a chafing-dish of charcoal beside a folding-bed, the corpses of the Morgue in leathern aprons, with the tap of cold water that flows over their heads.

Meanwhile, Hussonnet, squatted at the feet of the female savage, was howling in a hoarse voice in imitation of the actor Grassot:

"Be not cruel, O Celuta! this little family fête is charming! Intoxicate me with delight, my loves! Let us be gay! let us be gay!"

And he began kissing the women on the shoulders. They quivered under the tickling of his moustaches. Then he conceived the idea of breaking a plate against his head by rapping it there with a little energy. Others followed his example. The broken earthenware flew about in bits like slates in a storm; and the 'longshorewoman exclaimed:

"Don't bother yourselves about it; these cost nothing. We get a present of them from the merchant who makes them!"

Every eye was riveted on Arnoux. He replied:

"Ha! about the invoice — allow me!" desiring, no doubt, to pass for not being, or for no longer being, Rosanette's lover.

But two angry voices here made themselves heard:

"Idiot!"

Idiot!

"Rascal!"

"I am at your command!"

"So am I at yours!"

It was the mediæval knight and the Russian postilion who were disputing, the latter having maintained that armour dispensed with bravery, while the other regarded this view as an insult. He desired to fight; all interposed to prevent him, and in the midst of the uproar the captain tried to make himself heard.

"Listen to me, messieurs! One word! I have some experience, messieurs!"

Rosanette, by tapping with her knife on a glass, succeeded eventually in restoring silence, and, addressing the knight, who had kept his helmet on, and then the postilion, whose head was covered with a hairy cap:

"Take off that saucepan of yours! and you, there, your wolf's head! Are you going to obey me, damn you? Pray show respect to my epaulets! I am your commanding officer!"

They complied, and everyone present applauded, exclaiming, "Long live the Maréchale! long live the Maréchale!" Then she took a bottle of champagne off the stove, and poured out its contents into the cups which they successively stretched forth to her. As the table was very large, the guests, especially the women, came over to her side, and stood erect on tiptoe on the slats of the chairs, so as to form, for the space of a minute, a pyramidal group of head-dresses, naked shoulders, extended arms, and stooping bodies; and over all these objects a spray of wine played for some time, for the merry-andrew and Arnoux, at opposite corners of the dining-room, each letting fly the cork of a bottle, splashed the faces of those around them.

The little birds of the aviary, the door of which had been left open, broke into the apartment, quite scared, flying round the chandelier, knocking against the window-panes and against the furniture, and some of them, alighting on the heads of the guests, presented the appearance there of large flowers.

The musicians had gone. The piano had been drawn out of the anteroom. The Vatnaz seated herself before it, and, accompanied by the choir-boy, who thumped his tambourine, she made a wild dash into a quadrille, striking the keys like a horse pawing the ground, and wriggling her waist about, the better to mark the time. The Maréchale dragged out Frederick; Hussonnet took the windmill; the 'longshorewoman put out her joints like a circus-clown; the merry-andrew exhibited the manœuvres of an orang-outang; the female savage, with outspread arms, imitated the swaying motion of a boat. At last, unable to go on any further, they all stopped; and a window was flung open.

The broad daylight penetrated the apartment with the cool breath of morning. There was an exclamation of astonishment, and then came silence. The yellow

There was an exclamation of astonishment, and then came silence. The yellow flames flickered, making the sockets of the candlesticks crack from time to time. The floor was strewn with ribbons, flowers, and pearls. The pier-tables were sticky with the stains of punch and syrup. The hangings were soiled, the dresses rumpled and dusty. The plaits of the women's hair hung loose over their shoulders, and the paint, trickling down with the perspiration, revealed pallid faces and red, blinking eyelids.

The Maréchale, fresh as if she had come out of a bath, had rosy checks and sparkling eyes. She flung her wig some distance away, and her hair fell around her like a fleece, allowing none of her uniform to be seen except her breeches, the effect thus produced being at the same time comical and pretty.

The Sphinx, whose teeth chattered as if she had the ague, wanted a shawl.

Rosanette rushed up to her own room to look for one, and, as the other came after her, she quickly shut the door in her face.

The Turk remarked, in a loud tone, that M. Oudry had not been seen going out. Nobody noticed the maliciousness of this observation, so worn out were they all.

Then, while waiting for vehicles, they managed to get on their broad-brimmed hats and cloaks. It struck seven. The angel was still in the dining-room, seated at the table with a plate of sardines and fruit stewed in melted butter in front of her, and close beside her was the fishwife, smoking cigarettes, while giving her advice as to the right way to live.

At last, the cabs having arrived, the guests took their departure. Hussonnet, who had an engagement as correspondent for the provinces, had to read through fifty-three newspapers before his breakfast. The female savage had a rehearsal at the theatre; Pellerin had to see a model; and the choir-boy had three appointments. But the angel, attacked by the preliminary symptoms of indigestion, was unable to rise. The mediæval baron carried her to the cab.

"Take care of her wings!" cried the 'longshorewoman through the window.

At the top of the stairs, Mademoiselle Vatnaz said to Rosanette:

"Good-bye, darling! That was a very nice evening party of yours."

Then, bending close to her ear: "Take care of him!"

"Till better times come," returned the Maréchale, in drawling tones, as she turned her back.

Arnoux and Frederick returned together, just as they had come. The dealer in faïence looked so gloomy that his companion wished to know if he were ill.

"I? Not at all!"

He bit his moustache, knitted his brows; and Frederick asked him, was it his business that annoyed him.

"By no means!"

"By no means."

Then all of a sudden:

"You know him — Père Oudry — don't you?"

And, with a spiteful expression on his countenance:

"He's rich, the old scoundrel!"

After this, Arnoux spoke about an important piece of ware-making, which had to be finished that day at his works. He wanted to see it; the train was starting in an hour.

"Meantime, I must go and embrace my wife."

"Ha! his wife!" thought Frederick. Then he made his way home to go to bed, with his head aching terribly; and, to appease his thirst, he swallowed a whole carafe of water.

Another thirst had come to him — the thirst for women, for licentious pleasure, and all that Parisian life permitted him to enjoy. He felt somewhat stunned, like a man coming out of a ship, and in the visions that haunted his first sleep, he saw the shoulders of the fishwife, the loins of the 'longshorewoman, the calves of the Polish lady, and the head-dress of the female savage flying past him and coming back again continually. Then, two large black eyes, which had not been at the ball, appeared before him; and, light as butterflies, burning as torches, they came and went, ascended to the cornice and descended to his very mouth.

Frederick made desperate efforts to recognise those eyes, without succeeding in doing so. But already the dream had taken hold of him. It seemed to him that he was yoked beside Arnoux to the pole of a hackney-coach, and that the Maréchale, astride of him, was disembowelling him with her gold spurs.

CHAPTER VIII.

Frederick Entertains

Frederick found a little mansion at the corner of the Rue Rumfort, and he bought it along with the brougham, the horse, the furniture, and two flower-stands which were taken from the Arnoux's house to be placed on each side of his drawing-room door. In the rear of this apartment were a bedroom and a closet. The idea occurred to his mind to put up Deslauriers there. But how could he receive her — *her*, his future mistress? The presence of a friend would be an obstacle. He knocked down the partition-wall in order to enlarge the drawing-room, and converted the closet into a smoking-room.

He bought the works of the poets whom he loved, books of travel, atlases, and dictionaries, for he had innumerable plans of study. He hurried on the workmen, rushed about to the different shops, and in his impatience to enjoy, carried off everything without even holding out for a bargain beforehand.

From the tradesmen's bills, Frederick ascertained that he would have to expend very soon forty thousand francs, not including the succession duties, which would exceed thirty-seven thousand. As his fortune was in landed property, he wrote to the notary at Havre to sell a portion of it in order to pay off his debts, and to have some money at his disposal. Then, anxious to become acquainted at last with that vague entity, glittering and indefinable, which is known as "society," he sent a note to the Dambreuses to know whether he might be at liberty to call upon them. Madame, in reply, said she would expect a visit from him the following day.

This happened to be their reception-day. Carriages were standing in the courtyard. Two footmen rushed forward under the marquée, and a third at the head of the stairs began walking in front of him.

He was conducted through an anteroom, a second room, and then a drawing-room with high windows and a monumental mantel-shelf supporting a timepiece in the form of a sphere, and two enormous porcelain vases, in each of which bristled, like a golden bush, a cluster of sconces. Pictures in the manner of Espagnolet hung on the walls. The heavy tapestry portières fell majestically, and the armchairs, the brackets, the tables, the entire furniture, which was in the style of the Second Empire, had a certain imposing and diplomatic air.

Frederick smiled with pleasure in spite of himself.

At last he reached an oval apartment wainscoted in cypress-wood, stuffed with dainty furniture, and letting in the light through a single sheet of plate-glass with dainty furniture, and letting in the light through a single sheet of plate-glass, which looked out on a garden. Madame Dambreuse was seated at the fireside, with a dozen persons gathered round her in a circle. With a polite greeting, she made a sign to him to take a seat, without, however, exhibiting any surprise at not having seen him for so long a time.

Just at the moment when he was entering the room, they had been praising the eloquence of the Abbé Cœur. Then they deplored the immorality of servants, a topic suggested by a theft which a *valet-de-chambre* had committed, and they began to indulge in tittle-tattle. Old Madame de Sommery had a cold; Mademoiselle de Turvisot had got married; the Montcharrons would not return before the end of January; neither would the Bretancourts, now that people remained in the country till a late period of the year. And the triviality of the conversation was, so to speak, intensified by the luxuriousness of the surroundings; but what they said was less stupid than their way of talking, which was aimless, disconnected, and utterly devoid of animation. And yet there were present men versed in life — an ex-minister, the curé of a large parish, two or three Government officials of high rank. They adhered to the most hackneyed commonplaces. Some of them resembled weary dowagers; others had the appearance of horse-jockeys; and old men accompanied their wives, of whom they were old enough to be the grandfathers.

Madame Dambreuse received all of them graciously. When it was mentioned that anyone was ill, she knitted her brows with a painful expression on her face, and when balls or evening parties were discussed, assumed a joyous air. She would ere long be compelled to deprive herself of these pleasures, for she was going to take away from a boarding-school a niece of her husband, an orphan. The guests extolled her devotedness: this was behaving like a true mother of a family.

Frederick gazed at her attentively. The dull skin of her face looked as if it had been stretched out, and had a bloom in which there was no brilliancy; like that of preserved fruit. But her hair, which was in corkscrew curls, after the English fashion, was finer than silk; her eyes of a sparkling blue; and all her movements were dainty. Seated at the lower end of the apartment, on a small sofa, she kept brushing off the red flock from a Japanese screen, no doubt in order to let her hands be seen to greater advantage — long narrow hands, a little thin, with fingers tilting up at the points. She wore a grey moiré gown with a high-necked body, like a Puritan lady.

Frederick asked her whether she intended to go to La Fortelle this year. Madame Dambreuse was unable to say. He was sure, however, of one thing, that one would be bored to death in Nogent.

Then the visitors thronged in more quickly. There was an incessant rustling of

Then the visitors thronged in more quickly. There was an incessant rustling of robes on the carpet. Ladies, seated on the edges of chairs, gave vent to little sneering laughs, articulated two or three words, and at the end of five minutes left along with their young daughters. It soon became impossible to follow the conversation, and Frederick withdrew when Madame Dambreuse said to him:

"Every Wednesday, is it not, Monsieur Moreau?" making up for her previous display of indifference by these simple words.

He was satisfied. Nevertheless, he took a deep breath when he got out into the open air; and, needing a less artificial environment, Frederick recalled to mind that he owed the Maréchale a visit.

The door of the anteroom was open. Two Havanese lapdogs rushed forward. A voice exclaimed:

"Delphine! Delphine! Is that you, Felix?"

He stood there without advancing a step. The two little dogs kept yelping continually. At length Rosanette appeared, wrapped up in a sort of dressing-gown of white muslin trimmed with lace, and with her stockingless feet in Turkish slippers.

"Ah! excuse me, Monsieur! I thought it was the hairdresser. One minute; I am coming back!"

And he was left alone in the dining-room. The Venetian blinds were closed. Frederick, as he cast a glance round, was beginning to recall the hubbub of the other night, when he noticed on the table, in the middle of the room, a man's hat, an old felt hat, bruised, greasy, dirty. To whom did this hat belong? Impudently displaying its torn lining, it seemed to say:

"I have the laugh, after all! I am the master!"

The Maréchale suddenly reappeared on the scene. She took up the hat, opened the conservatory, flung it in there, shut the door again (other doors flew open and closed again at the same moment), and, having brought Frederick through the kitchen, she introduced him into her dressing-room.

It could at once be seen that this was the most frequented room in the house, and, so to speak, its true moral centre. The walls, the armchairs, and a big divan with a spring were adorned with a chintz pattern on which was traced a great deal of foliage. On a white marble table stood two large washhand-basins of fine blue earthenware. Crystal shelves, forming a whatnot overhead, were laden with phials, brushes, combs, sticks of cosmetic, and powder-boxes. The fire was reflected in a high cheval-glass. A sheet was hanging outside a bath, and odours of almond-paste and of benzoin were exhaled.

"You'll excuse the disorder. I'm dining in the city this evening."

And as she turned on her heel, she was near crushing one of the little dogs. Frederick declared that they were charming. She lifted up the pair of them, and raising their black snouts up to her face:

"Come! do a laugh — kiss the gentleman!"

A man dressed in a dirty overcoat with a fur collar here entered abruptly.

"Felix, my worthy fellow," said she, "you'll have that business of yours disposed of next Sunday without fail."

The man proceeded to dress her hair. Frederick told her he had heard news of her friends, Madame de Rochegune, Madame de Saint-Florentin, and Madame Lombard, every woman being noble, as if it were at the mansion of the Dambreuses. Then he talked about the theatres. An extraordinary performance was to be given that evening at the Ambigu.

"Shall you go?"

"Faith, no! I'm staying at home."

Delphine appeared. Her mistress gave her a scolding for having gone out without permission.

The other vowed that she was just "returning from market."

"Well, bring me your book. You have no objection, isn't that so?"

And, reading the pass-book in a low tone, Rosanette made remarks on every item. The different sums were not added up correctly.

"Hand me over four sous!"

Delphine handed the amount over to her, and, when she had sent the maid away:

"Ah! Holy Virgin! could I be more unfortunate than I am with these creatures?"

Frederick was shocked at this complaint about servants. It recalled the others too vividly to his mind, and established between the two houses a kind of vexatious equality.

When Delphine came back again, she drew close to the Maréchale's side in order to whisper something in her ear.

"Ah, no! I don't want her!"

Delphine presented herself once more.

"Madame, she insists."

"Ah, what a plague! Throw her out!"

At the same moment, an old lady, dressed in black, pushed forward the door. Frederick heard nothing, saw nothing. Rosanette rushed into her apartment to meet her.

When she reappeared her cheeks were flushed, and she sat down in one of the armchairs without saying a word. A tear fell down her face; then, turning towards the young man, softly:

"What is your Christian name?"

"Frederick."

"Ha! Federico! It doesn't annoy you when I address you in that way?"

And she gazed at him in a coaxing sort of way that was almost amorous.

All of a sudden she uttered an exclamation of delight at the sight of Mademoiselle Vatnaz.

The lady-artist had no time to lose before presiding at her *table d'hôte* at six o'clock sharp; and she was panting for breath, being completely exhausted. She first took out of her pocket a gold chain in a paper, then various objects that she had bought.

"You should know that there are in the Rue Joubert splendid Suède gloves at thirty-six sous. Your dyer wants eight days more. As for the guipure, I told you that they would dye it again. Bugneaux has got the instalment you paid. That's all, I think. You owe me a hundred and eighty-five francs."

Rosanette went to a drawer to get ten napoleons. Neither of the pair had any money. Frederick offered some.

"I'll pay you back," said the Vatnaz, as she stuffed the fifteen francs into her handbag. "But you are a naughty boy! I don't love you any longer — you didn't get me to dance with you even once the other evening! Ah! my dear, I came across a case of stuffed humming-birds which are perfect loves at a shop in the Quai Voltaire. If I were in your place, I would make myself a present of them. Look here! What do you think of it?"

And she exhibited an old remnant of pink silk which she had purchased at the Temple to make a mediæval doublet for Delmar.

"He came to-day, didn't he?"

"No."

"That's singular."

And, after a minute's silence:

"Where are you going this evening?"

"To Alphonsine's," said Rosanette, this being the third version given by her as to the way in which she was going to pass the evening.

Mademoiselle Vatnaz went on: "And what news about the old man of the mountain?"

But, with an abrupt wink, the Maréchale bade her hold her tongue; and she accompanied Frederick out as far as the anteroom to ascertain from him whether he would soon see Arnoux.

"Pray ask him to come — not before his wife, mind!"

At the top of the stairs an umbrella was placed against the wall near a pair of goloshes.

"Vatnaz's goloshes," said Rosanette. "What a foot, eh? My little friend is rather strongly built!"

And, in a melodramatic tone, making the final letter of the word roll:

"Don't tru-us-st her!"

Frederick, emboldened by a confidence of this sort, tried to kiss her on the neck.

"Oh, do it! It costs nothing!"

He felt rather light-hearted as he left her, having no doubt that ere long the Maréchale would be his mistress. This desire awakened another in him; and, in spite of the species of grudge that he owed her, he felt a longing to see Madame Arnoux.

Besides, he would have to call at her house in order to execute the commission with which he had been entrusted by Rosanette.

"But now," thought he (it had just struck six), "Arnoux is probably at home."

So he put off his visit till the following day.

She was seated in the same attitude as on the former day, and was sewing a little boy's shirt.

The child, at her feet, was playing with a wooden toy menagerie. Marthe, a short distance away, was writing.

He began by complimenting her on her children. She replied without any exaggeration of maternal silliness.

The room had a tranquil aspect. A glow of sunshine stole in through the window-panes, lighting up the angles of the different articles of furniture, and, as Madame Arnoux sat close beside the window, a large ray, falling on the curls over the nape of her neck, penetrated with liquid gold her skin, which assumed the colour of amber.

Then he said:

"This young lady here has grown very tall during the past three years! Do you remember, Mademoiselle, when you slept on my knees in the carriage?"

Marthe did not remember.

"One evening, returning from Saint-Cloud?"

There was a look of peculiar sadness in Madame

Arnoux's face. Was it in order to prevent any allusion on his part to the memories they possessed in common?

Her beautiful black eyes, whose sclerotics were glistening, moved gently under their somewhat drooping lids, and her pupils revealed in their depths an inexpressible kindness of heart. He was seized with a love stronger than ever, a passion that knew no bounds. It enervated him to contemplate the object of his attachment; however, he shook off this feeling. How was he to make the most of himself? by what means? And, having turned the matter over thoroughly in his mind, Frederick could think of none that seemed more effectual than money.

He began talking about the weather, which was less cold than it had been at Havre.

"You have been there?"

"Yes; about a family matter — an inheritance."

"Ah! I am very glad," she said, with an air of such genuine pleasure that he felt quite touched, just as if she had rendered him a great service.

She asked him what he intended to do, as it was necessary for a man to occupy himself with something.

He recalled to mind his false position, and said that he hoped to reach the Council of State with the help of M. Dambreuse, the secretary.

"You are acquainted with him, perhaps?"

"Merely by name."

Then, in a low tone:

"*He* brought you to the ball the other night, did he not?"

Frederick remained silent.

"That was what I wanted to know; thanks!"

After that she put two or three discreet questions to him about his family and the part of the country in which he lived. It was very kind of him not to have forgotten them after having lived so long away from Paris.

"But could I do so?" he rejoined. "Have you any doubt about it?"

Madame Arnoux arose: "I believe that you entertain towards us a true and solid affection. *Au revoir!*"

And she extended her hand towards him in a sincere and virile fashion.

Was this not an engagement, a promise? Frederick felt a sense of delight at merely living; he had to restrain himself to keep from singing. He wanted to burst out, to do generous deeds, and to give alms. He looked around him to see if there were anyone near whom he could relieve. No wretch happened to be passing by; and his desire for self-devotion evaporated, for he was not a man to go out of his way to find opportunities for benevolence.

Then he remembered his friends. The first of whom he thought was Hussonnet, the second, Pellerin. The lowly position of Dussardier naturally called for consideration. As for Cisy, he was glad to let that young aristocrat get a slight glimpse as to the extent of his fortune. He wrote accordingly to all four to come to a housewarming the following Sunday at eleven o'clock sharp; and he told Deslauriers to bring Sénécal.

The tutor had been dismissed from the third boarding-school in which he had been employed for not having given his consent to the distribution of prizes — a custom which he looked upon as dangerous to equality. He was now with an engine-builder, and for the past six months had been no longer living with Deslauriers. There had been nothing painful about their parting.

Sénécal had been visited by men in blouses — all patriots, all workmen, all honest fellows, but at the same time men whose society seemed distasteful to the advocate. Besides, he disliked certain ideas of his friend, excellent though they might be as weapons of warfare. He held his tongue on the subject through motives of ambition, deeming it prudent to pay deference to him in order to exercise control over him, for he looked forward impatiently to a revolutionary movement, in which he calculated on making an opening for himself and occupying a prominent position.

Sénécal's convictions were more disinterested. Every evening, when his work was finished, he returned to his garret and sought in books for something that might justify his dreams. He had annotated the *Contrat Social*; he had crammed himself with the *Revue Indépendante*; he was acquainted with Mably, Morelly, Fourier, Saint-Simon, Comte, Cabet, Louis Blanc — the heavy cartload of Socialistic writers — those who claim for humanity the dead level of barracks, those who would like to amuse it in a brothel or to bend it over a counter; and from a medley of all these things he constructed an ideal of virtuous democracy, with the double aspect of a farm in which the landlord was to receive a share of the produce, and a spinning-mill, a sort of American Lacedæmon, in which the individual would only exist for the benefit of society, which was to be more omnipotent, absolute, infallible, and divine than the Grand Lamas and the Nebuchadnezzars. He had no doubt as to the approaching realisation of this ideal; and Sénécal raged against everything that he considered hostile to it with the reasoning of a geometrician and the zeal of an Inquisitor. Titles of nobility, crosses, plumes, liveries above all, and even reputations that were too loud-sounding scandalised him, his studies as well as his sufferings intensifying every day his essential hatred of every kind of distinction and every form of social superiority.

"What do I owe to this gentleman that I should be polite to him? If he wants me, he can come to me."

Deslauriers, however, forced him to go to Frederick's reunion.

They found their friend in his bedroom. Spring-roller blinds and double curtains, Venetian mirrors — nothing was wanting there. Frederick, in a velvet vest, was lying back on an easy-chair, smoking cigarettes of Turkish tobacco.

Sénécal wore the gloomy look of a bigot arriving in the midst of a pleasure-party.

Deslauriers gave him a single comprehensive glance; then, with a very low bow:

"Monseigneur, allow me to pay my respects to you!"

Dussardier leaped on his neck. "So you are a rich man now. Ah! upon my soul, so much the better!"

Cisy made his appearance with crape on his hat. Since the death of his grandmother, he was in the enjoyment of a considerable fortune, and was less bent on amusing himself than on being distinguished from others — not being the same as everyone else — in short, on "having the proper stamp." This was his favourite phrase.

However, it was now midday, and they were all yawning.

Frederick was waiting for some one.

At the mention of Arnoux's name, Pellerin made a wry face. He looked on him as a renegade since he had abandoned the fine arts.

"Suppose we pass over him — what do you say to that?"

They all approved of this suggestion.

The door was opened by a man-servant in long gaiters; and the dining-room could be seen with its lofty oak plinths relieved with gold, and its two sideboards laden with plate.

The bottles of wine were heating on the stove; the blades of new knives were glittering beside oysters. In the milky tint of the enamelled glasses there was a kind of alluring sweetness; and the table disappeared from view under its load of game, fruit, and meats of the rarest quality.

These attentions were lost on Sénécal. He began by asking for household bread (the hardest that could be got), and in connection with this subject, spoke of the murders of Buzançais and the crisis arising from lack of the means of subsistence.

Nothing of this sort could have happened if agriculture had been better protected, if everything had not been given up to competition, to anarchy, and to the deplorable maxim of "Let things alone! let things go their own way!" It was in this way that the feudalism of money was established — the worst form of feudalism. But let them take care! The people in the end will get tired of it, and may make the capitalist pay for their sufferings either by bloody proscriptions or by the plunder of their houses.

Frederick saw, as if by a lightning-flash, a flood of men with bare arms invading Madame Dambreuse's drawing-room, and smashing the mirrors with blows of pikes.

Sénécal went on to say that the workman, owing to the insufficiency of wages, was more unfortunate than the helot, the negro, and the pariah, especially if he has children.

"Ought he to get rid of them by asphyxia, as some English doctor, whose name I don't remember — a disciple of Malthus — advises him?"

name I don't remember — a disciple of Malthus — advises him?"

And, turning towards Cisy: "Are we to be obliged to follow the advice of the infamous Malthus?"

Cisy, who was ignorant of the infamy and even of the existence of Malthus, said by way of reply, that after all, much human misery was relieved, and that the higher classes — —

"Ha! the higher classes!" said the Socialist, with a sneer. "In the first place, there are no higher classes. 'Tis the heart alone that makes anyone higher than another. We want no alms, understand! but equality, the fair division of products."

What he required was that the workman might become a capitalist, just as the soldier might become a colonel. The trade-wardenships, at least, in limiting the number of apprentices, prevented workmen from growing inconveniently numerous, and the sentiment of fraternity was kept up by means of the fêtes and the banners.

Hussonnet, as a poet, regretted the banners; so did Pellerin, too — a predilection which had taken possession of him at the Café Dagneaux, while listening to the Phalansterians talking. He expressed the opinion that Fourier was a great man.

"Come now!" said Deslauriers. "An old fool who sees in the overthrow of governments the effects of Divine vengeance. He is just like my lord Saint-Simon and his church, with his hatred of the French Revolution — a set of buffoons who would fain re-establish Catholicism."

M. de Cisy, no doubt in order to get information or to make a good impression, broke in with this remark, which he uttered in a mild tone:

"These two men of science are not, then, of the same way of thinking as Voltaire?"

"That fellow! I make you a present of him!"

"How is that? Why, I thought — — "

"Oh! no, he did not love the people!"

Then the conversation came down to contemporary events: the Spanish marriages, the dilapidations of Rochefort, the new chapter-house of Saint-Denis, which had led to the taxes being doubled. Nevertheless, according to Sénécal, they were not high enough!

"And why are they paid? My God! to erect the palace for apes at the Museum, to make showy staff-officers parade along our squares, or to maintain a Gothic etiquette amongst the flunkeys of the Château!"

"I have read in the *Mode*," said Cisy, "that at the Tuileries ball on the feast of Saint-Ferdinand, everyone was disguised as a miser."

"How pitiable!" said the Socialist, with a shrug of his shoulders, as if to

"How pitiable!" said the Socialist, with a shrug of his shoulders, as if to indicate his disgust.

"And the Museum of Versailles!" exclaimed Pellerin. "Let us talk about it! These idiots have foreshortened a Delacroix and lengthened a Gros! At the Louvre they have so well restored, scratched, and made a jumble of all the canvases, that in ten years probably not one will be left. As for the errors in the catalogue, a German has written a whole volume on the subject. Upon my word, the foreigners are laughing at us."

"Yes, we are the laughing-stock of Europe," said Sénécal.

"'Tis because Art is conveyed in fee-simple to the Crown."

"As long as you haven't universal suffrage — — "

"Allow me!" — for the artist, having been rejected at every *salon* for the last twenty years, was filled with rage against Power.

"Ah! let them not bother us! As for me, I ask for nothing. Only the Chambers ought to pass enactments in the interests of Art. A chair of æsthetics should be established with a professor who, being a practical man as well as a philosopher, would succeed, I hope, in grouping the multitude. You would do well, Hussonnet, to touch on this matter with a word or two in your newspaper?"

"Are the newspapers free? are we ourselves free?" said Deslauriers in an angry tone. "When one reflects that there might be as many as twenty-eight different formalities to set up a boat on the river, it makes me feel a longing to go and live amongst the cannibals! The Government is eating us up. Everything belongs to it — philosophy, law, the arts, the very air of heaven; and France, bereft of all energy, lies under the boot of the gendarme and the cassock of the devil-dodger with the death-rattle in her throat!"

The future Mirabeau thus poured out his bile in abundance. Finally he took his glass in his right hand, raised it, and with his other arm akimbo, and his eyes flashing:

"I drink to the utter destruction of the existing order of things — that is to say, of everything included in the words Privilege, Monopoly, Regulation, Hierarchy, Authority, State!" — and in a louder voice — "which I would like to smash as I do this!" dashing on the table the beautiful wine-glass, which broke into a thousand pieces.

They all applauded, and especially Dussardier.

The spectacle of injustices made his heart leap up with indignation. Everything that wore a beard claimed his sympathy. He was one of those persons who fling themselves under vehicles to relieve the horses who have fallen. His erudition was limited to two works, one entitled *Crimes of Kings*, and the other *Mysteries of the Vatican*. He had listened to the advocate with open-mouthed delight. At length, unable to stand it any longer:

"For my part, the thing I blame Louis Philippe for is abandoning the Poles!"

"One moment!" said Hussonnet. "In the first place, Poland has no existence; 'tis an invention of Lafayette! The Poles, as a general rule, all belong to the Faubourg Saint-Marceau, the real ones having been drowned with Poniatowski." In short, "he no longer gave into it;" he had "got over all that sort of thing; it was just like the sea-serpent, the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, and that antiquated hum-bug about the Saint-Bartholomew massacre!"

Sénécal, while he did not defend the Poles, extolled the latest remarks made by the men of letters. The Popes had been calumniated, inasmuch as they, at any rate, defended the people, and he called the League "the aurora of Democracy, a great movement in the direction of equality as opposed to the individualism of Protestants."

Frederick was a little surprised at these views. They probably bored Cisy, for he changed the conversation to the *tableaux vivants* at the Gymnase, which at that time attracted a great number of people.

Sénécal regarded them with disfavour. Such exhibitions corrupted the daughters of the proletariat. Then, it was noticeable that they went in for a display of shameless luxury. Therefore, he approved of the conduct of the Bavarian students who insulted Lola Montès. In imitation of Rousseau, he showed more esteem for the wife of a coal-porter than for the mistress of a king.

"You don't appreciate dainties," retorted Hussonnet in a majestic tone. And he took up the championship of ladies of this class in order to praise Rosanette. Then, as he happened to make an allusion to the ball at her house and to Arnoux's costume, Pellerin remarked:

"People maintain that he is becoming shaky?"

The picture-dealer had just been engaged in a lawsuit with reference to his grounds at Belleville, and he was actually in a kaolin company in Lower Brittany with other rogues of the same sort.

Dussardier knew more about him, for his own master, M. Moussinot, having made enquiries about Arnoux from the banker, Oscar Lefébvre, the latter had said in reply that he considered him by no means solvent, as he knew about bills of his that had been renewed.

The dessert was over; they passed into the drawing-room, which was hung, like that of the Maréchale, in yellow damask in the style of Louis XVI.

Pellerin found fault with Frederick for not having chosen in preference the Neo-Greek style; Sénécal rubbed matches against the hangings; Deslauriers did not make any remark.

There was a bookcase set up there, which he called "a little girl's library." The principal contemporary writers were to be found there. It was impossible to speak about their works, for Hussonnet immediately began relating anecdotes with reference to their personal characteristics, criticising their faces, their habits, their dress, glorifying fifth-rate intellects and disparaging those of the first; and all the while making it clear that he deplored modern decadence.

He instanced some village ditty as containing in itself alone more poetry than all the lyrics of the nineteenth century. He went on to say that Balzac was overrated, that Byron was effaced, and that Hugo knew nothing about the stage.

"Why, then," said Sénécal, "have you not got the volumes of the working-men poets?"

And M. de Cisy, who devoted his attention to literature, was astonished at not seeing on Frederick's table some of those new physiological studies — the physiology of the smoker, of the angler, of the man employed at the barrier.

They went on irritating him to such an extent that he felt a longing to shove them out by the shoulders.

"But they are making me quite stupid!" And then he drew Dussardier aside, and wished to know whether he could do him any service.

The honest fellow was moved. He answered that his post of cashier entirely sufficed for his wants.

After that, Frederick led Deslauriers into his own apartment, and, taking out of his escritoire two thousand francs:

"Look here, old boy, put this money in your pocket. 'Tis the balance of my old debts to you."

"But — what about the journal?" said the advocate. "You are, of course, aware that I spoke about it to Hussonnet."

And, when Frederick replied that he was "a little short of cash just now," the other smiled in a sinister fashion.

After the liqueurs they drank beer, and after the beer, grog; and then they lighted their pipes once more. At last they left, at five o'clock in the evening, and they were walking along at each others' side without speaking, when Dussardier broke the silence by saying that Frederick had entertained them in excellent style. They all agreed with him on that point.

Then Hussonnet remarked that his luncheon was too heavy. Sénécal found fault with the trivial character of his household arrangements. Cisy took the same view. It was absolutely devoid of the "proper stamp."

"For my part, I think," said Pellerin, "he might have had the grace to give me an order for a picture."

Deslauriers held his tongue, as he had the bank-notes that had been given to him in his breeches' pocket.

Frederick was left by himself. He was thinking about his friends, and it seemed to him as if a huge ditch surrounded with shade separated him from them. He had nevertheless held out his hand to them, and they had not responded to the sincerity of his heart.

He recalled to mind what Pellerin and Dussardier had said about Arnoux. Undoubtedly it must be an invention, a calumny? But why? And he had a vision of Madame Arnoux, ruined, weeping, selling her furniture. This idea tormented him all night long. Next day he presented himself at her house.

At a loss to find any way of communicating to her what he had heard, he asked her, as if in casual conversation, whether Arnoux still held possession of his building grounds at Belleville.

"Yes, he has them still."

"He is now, I believe, a shareholder in a kaolin company in Brittany."

"That's true."

"His earthenware-works are going on very well, are they not?"

"Well — I suppose so — — "

And, as he hesitated:

"What is the matter with you? You frighten me!"

He told her the story about the renewals. She hung down her head, and said:

"I thought so!"

In fact, Arnoux, in order to make a good speculation, had refused to sell his grounds, had borrowed money extensively on them, and finding no purchasers, had thought of rehabilitating himself by establishing the earthenware manufactory. The expense of this had exceeded his calculations. She knew nothing more about it. He evaded all her questions, and declared repeatedly that it was going on very well.

Frederick tried to reassure her. These in all probability were mere temporary embarrassments. However, if he got any information, he would impart it to her.

"Oh! yes, will you not?" said she, clasping her two hands with an air of charming supplication.

So then, he had it in his power to be useful to her. He was now entering into her existence — finding a place in her heart.

Arnoux appeared.

"Ha! how nice of you to come to take me out to dine!"

Frederick was silent on hearing these words.

Arnoux spoke about general topics, then informed his wife that he would be returning home very late, as he had an appointment with M. Oudry.

"At his house?"

"Why, certainly, at his house."

As they went down the stairs, he confessed that, as the Marechale had no engagement at home, they were going on a secret pleasure-party to the Moulin Rouge; and, as he always needed somebody to be the recipient of his outpourings, he got Frederick to drive him to the door.

In place of entering, he walked about on the footpath, looking up at the windows on the second floor. Suddenly the curtains parted.

"Ha! bravo! Père Oudry is no longer there! Good evening!"

Frederick did not know what to think now.

From this day forth, Arnoux was still more cordial than before; he invited the young man to dine with his mistress; and ere long Frederick frequented both houses at the same time.

Rosanette's abode furnished him with amusement. He used to call there of an evening on his way back from the club or the play. He would take a cup of tea there, or play a game of loto. On Sundays they played charades; Rosanette, more noisy than the rest, made herself conspicuous by funny tricks, such as running on all-fours or muffling her head in a cotton cap. In order to watch the passers-by through the window, she had a hat of waxed leather; she smoked chibouks; she sang Tyrolese airs. In the afternoon, to kill time, she cut out flowers in a piece of chintz and pasted them against the window-panes, smeared her two little dogs with varnish, burned pastilles, or drew cards to tell her fortune. Incapable of resisting a desire, she became infatuated about some trinket which she happened to see, and could not sleep till she had gone and bought it, then bartered it for another, sold costly dresses for little or nothing, lost her jewellery, squandered money, and would have sold her chemise for a stage-box at the theatre. Often she asked Frederick to explain to her some word she came across when reading a book, but did not pay any attention to his answer, for she jumped quickly to another idea, while heaping questions on top of each other. After spasms of gaiety came childish outbursts of rage, or else she sat on the ground dreaming before the fire with her head down and her hands clasping her knees, more inert than a torpid adder. Without minding it, she made her toilet in his presence, drew on her silk stockings, then washed her face with great splashes of water, throwing back her figure as if she were a shivering naiad; and her laughing white teeth, her sparkling eyes, her beauty, her gaiety, dazzled Frederick, and made his nerves tingle under the lash of desire.

Nearly always he found Madame Arnoux teaching her little boy how to read, or standing behind Marthe's chair while she played her scales on the piano. When she was doing a piece of sewing, it was a great source of delight to him to pick up her scissors now and then. In all her movements there was a tranquil majesty. Her little hands seemed made to scatter alms and to wipe away tears, and her voice, naturally rather hollow, had caressing intonations and a sort of and her voice, naturally rather hollow, had caressing intonations and a sort of breezy lightness.

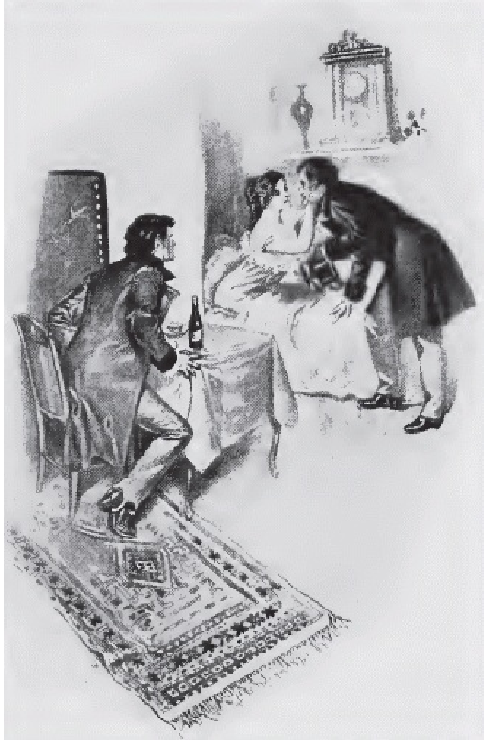
She did not display much enthusiasm about literature; but her intelligence exercised a charm by the use of a few simple and penetrating words. She loved travelling, the sound of the wind in the woods, and a walk with uncovered head under the rain.

Frederick listened to these confidences with rapture, fancying that he saw in them the beginning of a certain self-abandonment on her part.

His association with these two women made, as it were, two different strains of music in his life, the one playful, passionate, diverting, the other grave and almost religious, and vibrating both at the same time, they always increased in volume and gradually blended with one another; for if Madame Arnoux happened merely to touch him with her finger, the image of the other immediately presented itself to him as an object of desire, because from that quarter a better opportunity was thrown in his way, and, when his heart happened to be touched while in Rosanette's company, he was immediately reminded of the woman for whom he felt such a consuming passion.

This confusion was, in some measure, due to a similarity which existed between the interiors of the two houses. One of the trunks which was formerly to be seen in the Boulevard Montmartre now adorned Rosanette's dining-room. The same courses were served up for dinner in both places, and even the same velvet cap was to be found trailing over the easy-chairs; then, a heap of little presents — screens, boxes, fans — went to the mistress's house from the wife's and returned again, for Arnoux, without the slightest embarrassment, often took back from the one what he had given to her in order to make a present of it to the other.

The Maréchale laughed with Frederick at the utter disregard for propriety which his habits exhibited. One Sunday, after dinner, she led him behind the door, and showed him in the pocket of Arnoux's overcoat a bag of cakes which he had just pilfered from the table, in order, no doubt, to regale his little family with it at home. M. Arnoux gave himself up to some rogueries which bordered on vileness. It seemed to him a duty to practise fraud with regard to the city dues; he never paid when he went to the theatre, or if he took a ticket for the second seats always tried to make his way into the first; and he used to relate as an excellent joke that it was a custom of his at the cold baths to put into the waiters' collection-box a breeches' button instead of a tensous piece — and this did not prevent the Maréchale from loving him.



One day, however, she said, while talking about him:

"Ah! he's making himself a nuisance to me, at last! I've had enough of him! Faith, so much the better — I'll find another instead!"

Frederick believed that the other had already been found, and that his name was M. Oudry.

"Well," said Rosanette, "what does that signify?"

Then, in a voice choked with rising tears:

"I ask very little from him, however, and he won't give me that."

He had even promised a fourth of his profits in the famous kaolin mines. No profit made its appearance any more than the cashmere with which he had been luring her on for the last six months.

Frederick immediately thought of making her a present. Arnoux might regard it as a lesson for himself, and be annoyed at it.

For all that, he was good-natured, his wife herself said so, but so foolish! Instead of bringing people to dine every day at his house, he now entertained his acquaintances at a restaurant. He bought things that were utterly useless, such as gold chains, timepieces, and household articles. Madame Arnoux even pointed out to Frederick in the lobby an enormous supply of tea-kettles, foot-warmers, and samovars. Finally, she one day confessed that a certain matter caused her much anxiety. Arnoux had made her sign a promissory note payable to M. Dambreuse.

Meanwhile Frederick still cherished his literary projects as if it were a point of honour with himself to do so. He wished to write a history of aesthetics, a of honour with himself to do so. He wished to write a history of æsthetics, a result of his conversations with Pellerin; next, to write dramas dealing with different epochs of the French Revolution, and to compose a great comedy, an idea traceable to the indirect influence of Deslauriers and Hussonnet. In the midst of his work her face or that of the other passed before his mental vision. He struggled against the longing to see her, but was not long ere he yielded to it; and he felt sadder as he came back from Madame Arnoux's house.

One morning, while he was brooding over his melancholy thoughts by the fireside, Deslauriers came in. The incendiary speeches of Sénécal had filled his master with uneasiness, and once more he found himself without resources.

"What do you want me to do?" said Frederick.

"Nothing! I know you have no money. But it will not be much trouble for you to get him a post either through M. Dambreuse or else through Arnoux. The latter ought to have need of engineers in his establishment."

Frederick had an inspiration. Sénécal would be able to let him know when the husband was away, carry letters for him and assist him on a thousand occasions when opportunities presented themselves. Services of this sort are always rendered between man and man. Besides, he would find means of employing him without arousing any suspicion on his part. Chance offered him an auxiliary; it was a circumstance that omened well for the future, and he hastened to take advantage of it; and, with an affectation of indifference, he replied that the thing was feasible perhaps, and that he would devote attention to it.

And he did so at once. Arnoux took a great deal of pains with his earthenware works. He was endeavouring to discover the copper-red of the Chinese, but his colours evaporated in the process of baking. In order to avoid cracks in his ware, he mixed lime with his potter's clay; but the articles got broken for the most part; the enamel of his paintings on the raw material boiled away; his large plates became bulged; and, attributing these mischances to the inferior plant of his manufactory, he was anxious to start other grinding-mills and other drying-rooms. Frederick recalled some of these things to mind, and, when he met Arnoux, said that he had discovered a very able man, who would be capable of finding his famous red. Arnoux gave a jump; then, having listened to what the young man had to tell him, replied that he wanted assistance from nobody.

Frederick spoke in a very laudatory style about Sénécal's prodigious attainments, pointing out that he was at the same time an engineer, a chemist, and an accountant, being a mathematician of the first rank.

The earthenware-dealer consented to see him.

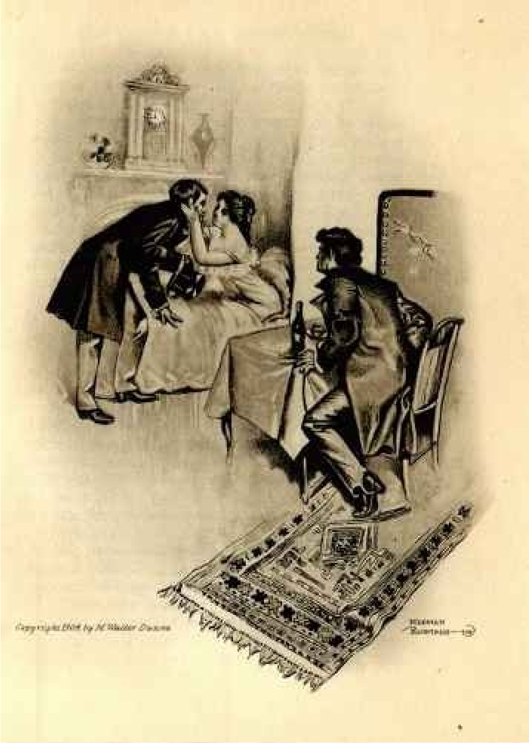
But they squabbled over the emoluments. Frederick interposed, and, at the end of a week, succeeded in getting them to come to an agreement.

But as the works were situated at Creil, Sénécal could not assist him in any

But as the works were situated at Creil, Senecal could not assist him in any way. This thought alone was enough to make his courage flag, as if he had met with some misfortune. His notion was that the more Arnoux would be kept apart from his wife the better would be his own chance with her. Then he proceeded to make repeated apologies for Rosanette. He referred to all the wrongs she had sustained at the other's hands, referred to the vague threats which she had uttered a few days before, and even spoke about the cashmere without concealing the fact that she had accused Arnoux of avarice.

Arnoux, nettled at the word (and, furthermore, feeling some uneasiness), brought Rosanette the cashmere, but scolded her for having made any complaint to Frederick. When she told him that she had reminded him a hundred times of his promise, he pretended that, owing to pressure of business, he had forgotten all about it.

The next day Frederick presented himself at her abode, and found the Maréchale still in bed, though it was two o'clock, with Delmar beside her finishing a *pâté de foie gras* at a little round table. Before he had advanced many paces, she broke out into a cry of delight, saying: "I have him! I have him!" Then she seized him by the ears, kissed him on the forehead, thanked him effusively, "thee'd" and "thou'd" him, and even wanted to make him sit down on the bed. Her fine eyes, full of tender emotion, were sparkling with pleasure. There was a smile on her humid mouth. Her two round arms emerged through the sleeveless opening of her night-dress, and, from time to time, he could feel through the cambric the well-rounded outlines of her form.



Then she seized him by the ears and kissed him

Then she seized him by the ears and kissed him.

All this time Delmar kept rolling his eyeballs about.

"But really, my dear, my own pet..."

It was the same way on the occasion when he saw her next. As soon as Frederick entered, she sat up on a cushion in order to embrace him with more

Frederick entered, she sat up on a cushion in order to embrace him with more ease, called him a darling, a "dearie," put a flower in his button-hole, and settled his cravat. These delicate attentions were redoubled when Delmar happened to be there. Were they advances on her part? So it seemed to Frederick.

As for deceiving a friend, Arnoux, in his place, would not have had many scruples on that score, and he had every right not to adhere to rigidly virtuous principles with regard to this man's mistress, seeing that his relations with the wife had been strictly honourable, for so he thought — or rather he would have liked Arnoux to think so, in any event, as a sort of justification of his own prodigious cowardice. Nevertheless he felt somewhat bewildered; and presently he made up his mind to lay siege boldly to the Maréchale.

So, one afternoon, just as she was stooping down in front of her chest of drawers, he came across to her, and repeated his overtures without a pause.

Thereupon, she began to cry, saying that she was very unfortunate, but that people should not despise her on that account.

He only made fresh advances. She now adopted a different plan, namely, to laugh at his attempts without stopping. He thought it a clever thing to answer her sarcasms with repartees in the same strain, in which there was even a touch of exaggeration. But he made too great a display of gaiety to convince her that he was in earnest; and their comradeship was an impediment to any outpouring of serious feeling. At last, when she said one day, in reply to his amorous whispers, that she would not take another woman's leavings, he answered.

"What other woman?"

"Ah! yes, go and meet Madame Arnoux again!"

For Frederick used to talk about her often. Arnoux, on his side, had the same mania. At last she lost patience at always hearing this woman's praises sung, and her insinuation was a kind of revenge.

Frederick resented it. However, Rosanette was beginning to excite his love to an unusual degree. Sometimes, assuming the attitude of a woman of experience, she spoke ill of love with a sceptical smile that made him feel inclined to box her ears. A quarter of an hour afterwards, it was the only thing of any consequence in the world, and, with her arms crossed over her breast, as if she were clasping some one close to her: "Oh, yes, 'tis good! 'tis good!" and her eyelids would quiver in a kind of rapturous swoon. It was impossible to understand her, to know, for instance, whether she loved Arnoux, for she made fun of him, and yet seemed jealous of him. So likewise with the Vatnaz, whom she would sometimes call a wretch, and at other times her best friend. In short, there was about her entire person, even to the very arrangement of her chignon over her head, an inexpressible something, which seemed like a challenge; and he desired her for the satisfaction, above all, of conquering her and being her master.

her for the satisfaction, above all, of conquering her and being her master.

How was he to accomplish this? for she often sent him away unceremoniously, appearing only for a moment between two doors in order to say in a subdued voice, "I'm engaged — for the evening;" or else he found her surrounded by a dozen persons; and when they were alone, so many impediments presented themselves one after the other, that one would have sworn there was a bet to keep matters from going any further. He invited her to dinner; as a rule, she declined the invitation. On one occasion, she accepted it, but did not come.

A Machiavellian idea arose in his brain.

Having heard from Dussardier about Pellerin's complaints against himself, he thought of giving the artist an order to paint the Maréchale's portrait, a life-sized portrait, which would necessitate a good number of sittings. He would not fail to be present at all of them. The habitual incorrectness of the painter would facilitate their private conversations. So then he would urge Rosanette to get the picture executed in order to make a present of her face to her dear Arnoux. She consented, for she saw herself in the midst of the Grand Salon in the most prominent position with a crowd of people staring at her picture, and the newspapers would all talk about it, which at once would set her afloat.

As for Pellerin, he eagerly snatched at the offer. This portrait ought to place him in the position of a great man; it ought to be a masterpiece. He passed in review in his memory all the portraits by great masters with which he was acquainted, and decided finally in favour of a Titian, which would be set off with ornaments in the style of Veronese. Therefore, he would carry out his design without artificial backgrounds in a bold light, which would illuminate the flesh-tints with a single tone, and which would make the accessories glitter.

"Suppose I were to put on her," he thought, "a pink silk dress with an Oriental bournous? Oh, no! the bournous is only a rascally thing! Or suppose, rather, I were to make her wear blue velvet with a grey background, richly coloured? We might likewise give her a white guipure collar with a black fan and a scarlet curtain behind." And thus, seeking for ideas, he enlarged his conception, and regarded it with admiration.

He felt his heart beating when Rosanette, accompanied by Frederick, called at his house for the first sitting. He placed her standing up on a sort of platform in the midst of the apartment, and, finding fault with the light and expressing regret at the loss of his former studio, he first made her lean on her elbow against a pedestal, then sit down in an armchair, and, drawing away from her and coming near her again by turns in order to adjust with a fillip the folds of her dress, he watched her with eyelids half-closed, and appealed to Frederick's taste with a passing word.

"Well, no," he exclaimed; "I return to my own idea. I will set you up in the Venetian style."

She would have a poppy-coloured velvet gown with a jewelled girdle; and her wide sleeve lined with ermine would afford a glimpse of her bare arm, which was to touch the balustrade of a staircase rising behind her. At her left, a large column would mount as far as the top of the canvas to meet certain structures so as to form an arch. Underneath one would vaguely distinguish groups of orange-trees almost black, through which the blue sky, with its streaks of white cloud, would seem cut into fragments. On the baluster, covered with a carpet, there would be, on a silver dish, a bouquet of flowers, a chaplet of amber, a poniard, and a little chest of antique ivory, rather yellow with age, which would appear to be disgorging gold sequins. Some of them, falling on the ground here and there, would form brilliant splashes, as it were, in such a way as to direct one's glance towards the tip of her foot, for she would be standing on the last step but one in a natural position, as if in the act of moving under the glow of the broad sunlight.

He went to look for a picture-case, which he laid on the platform to represent the step. Then he arranged as accessories, on a stool by way of balustrade, his pea-jacket, a buckler, a sardine-box, a bundle of pens, and a knife; and when he had flung in front of Rosanette a dozen big sous, he made her assume the attitude he required.

"Just try to imagine that these things are riches, magnificent presents. The head a little on one side! Perfect! and don't stir! This majestic posture exactly suits your style of beauty."

She wore a plaid dress and carried a big muff, and only kept from laughing outright by an effort of self-control.

"As regards the head-dress, we will mingle with it a circle of pearls. It always produces a striking effect with red hair."

The Maréchale burst out into an exclamation, remarking that she had not red hair.

"Nonsense! The red of painters is not that of ordinary people."

He began to sketch the position of the masses; and he was so much preoccupied with the great artists of the Renaissance that he kept talking about them persistently. For a whole hour he went on musing aloud on those splendid lives, full of genius, glory, and sumptuous displays, with triumphal entries into the cities, and galas by torchlight among half-naked women, beautiful as goddesses.

"You were made to live in those days. A creature of your calibre would have deserved a monseigneur."

Rosanette thought the compliments he paid her very pretty. The day was fixed for the next sitting. Frederick took it on himself to bring the accessories.

As the heat of the stove had stupefied her a little, they went home on foot through the Rue du Bac, and reached the Pont Royal.

It was fine weather, piercingly bright and warm. Some windows of houses in the city shone in the distance, like plates of gold, whilst behind them at the right the turrets of Nôtre Dame showed their outlines in black against the blue sky, softly bathed at the horizon in grey vapours.

The wind began to swell; and Rosanette, having declared that she felt hungry, they entered the "Patisserie Anglaise."

Young women with their children stood eating in front of the marble buffet, where plates of little cakes had glass covers pressed down on them. Rosanette swallowed two cream-tarts. The powdered sugar formed moustaches at the sides of her mouth. From time to time, in order to wipe it, she drew out her handkerchief from her muff, and her face, under her green silk hood, resembled a full-blown rose in the midst of its leaves.

They resumed their walk. In the Rue de la Paix she stood before a goldsmith's shop to look at a bracelet. Frederick wished to make her a present of it.

"No!" said she; "keep your money!"

He was hurt by these words.

"What's the matter now with the ducky? We are melancholy?"

And, the conversation having been renewed, he began making the same protestations of love to her as usual.

"You know well 'tis impossible!"

"Why?"

"Ah! because — — "

They went on side by side, she leaning on his arm, and the flounces of her gown kept flapping against his legs. Then, he recalled to mind one winter twilight when on the same footpath Madame Arnoux walked thus by his side, and he became so much absorbed in this recollection that he no longer saw Rosanette, and did not bestow a thought upon her.

She kept looking straight before her in a careless fashion, lagging a little, like a lazy child. It was the hour when people had just come back from their promenade, and equipages were making their way at a quick trot over the hard pavement.

Pellerin's flatteries having probably recurred to her mind, she heaved a sigh.

"Ah! there are some lucky women in the world. Decidedly, I was made for a rich man!"

He replied, with a certain brutality in his tone:

"You have one, in the meantime!" for M. Oudry was looked upon as a man that could count a million three times over.

She asked for nothing better than to get free from him.

"What prevents you from doing so?" And he gave utterance to bitter jests about this old bewigged citizen, pointing out to her that such an intrigue was unworthy of her, and that she ought to break it off.

"Yes," replied the Maréchale, as if talking to herself. "'Tis what I shall end by doing, no doubt!"

Frederick was charmed by this disinterestedness. She slackened her pace, and he fancied that she was fatigued. She obstinately refused to let him take a cab, and she parted with him at her door, sending him a kiss with her finger-tips.

"Ah! what a pity! and to think that imbeciles take me for a man of wealth!"

He reached home in a gloomy frame of mind.

Hussonnet and Deslauriers were awaiting him. The Bohemian, seated before the table, made sketches of Turks' heads; and the advocate, in dirty boots, lay asleep on the sofa.

"Ha! at last," he exclaimed. "But how sullen you look! Will you listen to me?"

His vogue as a tutor had fallen off, for he crammed his pupils with theories unfavourable for their examinations. He had appeared in two or three cases in which he had been unsuccessful, and each new disappointment flung him back with greater force on the dream of his earlier days — a journal in which he could show himself off, avenge himself, and spit forth his bile and his opinions. Fortune and reputation, moreover, would follow as a necessary consequence. It was in this hope that he had got round the Bohemian, Hussonnet happening to be the possessor of a press.

At present, he printed it on pink paper. He invented hoaxes, composed rebuses, tried to engage in polemics, and even intended, in spite of the situation of the premises, to get up concerts. A year's subscription was to give a right to a place in the orchestra in one of the principal theatres of Paris. Besides, the board of management took on itself to furnish foreigners with all necessary information, artistic and otherwise. But the printer gave vent to threats; there were three quarters' rent due to the landlord. All sorts of embarrassments arose; and Hussonnet would have allowed *L'Art* to perish, were it not for the exhortations of the advocate, who kept every day exciting his mind. He had brought the other with him, in order to give more weight to the application he was now making.

"We've come about the journal," said he.

"What! are you still thinking about that?" said Frederick, in an absent tone.

"Certainly, I am thinking about it!"

And he explained his plan anew. By means of the Bourse returns, they would get into communication with financiers, and would thus obtain the hundred thousand francs indispensable as security. But, in order that the print might be transformed into a political journal, it was necessary beforehand to have a large *clientèle*, and for that purpose to make up their minds to go to some expense — so much for the cost of paper and printing, and for outlay at the office; in short, a sum of about fifteen thousand francs.

"I have no funds," said Frederick.

"And what are we to do, then?" said Deslauriers, with folded arms.

Frederick, hurt by the attitude which Deslauriers was assuming, replied:

"Is that my fault?"

"Ah! very fine. A man has wood in his fire, truffles on his table, a good bed, a library, a carriage, every kind of comfort. But let another man shiver under the slates, dine at twenty sous, work like a convict, and sprawl through want in the mire — is it the rich man's fault?"

And he repeated, "Is it the rich man's fault?" with a Ciceronian irony which smacked of the law-courts.

Frederick tried to speak.

"However, I understand one has certain wants — aristocratic wants; for, no doubt, some woman — — "

"Well, even if that were so? Am I not free — — ?"

"Oh! quite free!"

And, after a minute's silence:

"Promises are so convenient!"

"Good God! I don't deny that I gave them!" said Frederick.

The advocate went on:

"At college we take oaths; we are going to set up a phalanx; we are going to imitate Balzac's Thirteen. Then, on meeting a friend after a separation: 'Good night, old fellow! Go about your business!' For he who might help the other carefully keeps everything for himself alone."

"How is that?"

"Yes, you have not even introduced me to the Dambreuses."

Frederick cast a scrutinising glance at him. With his shabby frock-coat, his spectacles of rough glass, and his sallow face, that advocate seemed to him such a typical specimen of the penniless pedant that he could not prevent his lips from curling with a disdainful smile.

Deslauriers perceived this, and reddened.

He had already taken his hat to leave. Hussonnet, filled with uneasiness, tried to mollify him with appealing looks, and, as Frederick was turning his back on him:

"Look here, my boy, become my Mæcenas! Protect the arts!"

Frederick, with an abrupt movement of resignation, took a sheet of paper, and, having scrawled some lines on it, handed it to him. The Bohemian's face lighted up.

Then, passing across the sheet of paper to Deslauriers:

"Apologise, my fine fellow!"

Their friend begged his notary to send him fifteen thousand francs as quickly as possible.

"Ah! I recognise you in that," said Deslauriers.

"On the faith of a gentleman," added the Bohemian, "you are a noble fellow, you'll be placed in the gallery of useful men!"

The advocate remarked:

"You'll lose nothing by it, 'tis an excellent speculation."

"Faith," exclaimed Hussonnet, "I'd stake my head at the scaffold on its success!"

And he said so many foolish things, and promised so many wonderful things, in which perhaps he believed, that Frederick did not know whether he did this in order to laugh at others or at himself.

The same evening he received a letter from his mother. She expressed astonishment at not seeing him yet a minister, while indulging in a little banter at his expense. Then she spoke of her health, and informed him that M. Roque had now become one of her visitors.

"Since he is a widower, I thought there would be no objection to inviting him to the house. Louise is greatly changed for the better." And in a postscript: "You have told me nothing about your fine acquaintance, M. Dambreuse; if I were you, I would make use of him."

Why not? His intellectual ambitions had left him, and his fortune (he saw it clearly) was insufficient, for when his debts had been paid, and the sum agreed on remitted to the others, his income would be diminished by four thousand at least! Moreover, he felt the need of giving up this sort of life, and attaching himself to some pursuit. So, next day, when dining at Madame Arnoux's, he said that his mother was tormenting him in order to make him take up a profession.

"But I was under the impression," she said, "that M. Dambreuse was going to get you into the Council of State? That would suit you very well."

So, then, she wished him to take this course. He regarded her wish as a command.

The banker, as on the first occasion, was seated at his desk, and, with a gesture, intimated that he desired Frederick to wait a few minutes; for a gentleman who was standing at the door with his back turned had been discussing some serious topic with him.

The subject of their conversation was the proposed amalgamation of the different coal-mining companies.

On each side of the glass hung portraits of General Foy and Louis Philippe. Cardboard shelves rose along the panels up to the ceiling, and there were six straw chairs, M. Dambreuse not requiring a more fashionably-furnished apartment for the transaction of business. It resembled those gloomy kitchens in which great banquets are prepared.

Frederick noticed particularly two chests of prodigious size which stood in the corners. He asked himself how many millions they might contain. The banker unlocked one of them, and as the iron plate revolved, it disclosed to view nothing inside but blue paper books full of entries.

At last, the person who had been talking to M. Dambreuse passed in front of Frederick. It was Père Oudry. The two saluted one another, their faces colouring — a circumstance which surprised M. Dambreuse. However, he exhibited the utmost affability, observing that nothing would be easier than to recommend the young man to the Keeper of the Seals. They would be too happy to have him, he added, concluding his polite attentions by inviting him to an evening party which he would be giving in a few days.

Frederick was stepping into a brougham on his way to this party when a note from the Maréchale reached him. By the light of the carriage-lamps he read:

"Darling, I have followed your advice: I have just expelled my savage. After to-morrow evening, liberty! Say whether I am not brave!"

Nothing more. But it was clearly an invitation to him to take the vacant place. He uttered an exclamation, squeezed the note into his pocket, and set forth.

Two municipal guards on horseback were stationed in the street. A row of lamps burned on the two front gates, and some servants were calling out in the courtyard to have the carriages brought up to the end of the steps before the house under the marquée.

Then suddenly the noise in the vestibule ceased.

Large trees filled up the space in front of the staircase. The porcelain globes shed a light which waved like white moiré satin on the walls.

Frederick rushed up the steps in a joyous frame of mind. An usher announced his name. M. Dambreuse extended his hand. Almost at the very same moment, Madame Dambreuse appeared. She wore a mauve dress trimmed with lace. The ringlets of her hair were more abundant than usual, and not a single jewel did she display.

She complained of his coming to visit them so rarely, and seized the opportunity to exchange a few confidential words with him.

The guests began to arrive. In their mode of bowing they twisted their bodies on one side or bent in two, or merely lowered their heads a little. Then, a married pair, a family passed in, and all scattered themselves about the drawing-room, which was already filled. Under the chandelier in the centre, an enormous ottoman-seat supported a stand, the flowers of which, bending forward, like plumes of feathers, hung over the heads of the ladies seated all around in a ring, while others occupied the easy-chairs, which formed two straight lines symmetrically interrupted by the large velvet curtains of the windows and the lofty bays of the doors with their gilded lintels.

The crowd of men who remained standing on the floor with their hats in their hands seemed, at some distance, like one black mass, into which the ribbons in the button-holes introduced red points here and there, and rendered all the more dull the monotonous whiteness of their cravats. With the exception of the very young men with the down on their faces, all appeared to be bored. Some dandies, with an expression of sullenness on their countenances, were swinging on their heels. There were numbers of men with grey hair or wigs. Here and there glistened a bald pate; and the visages of many of these men, either purple or exceedingly pale, showed in their worn aspect the traces of immense fatigues: for they were persons who devoted themselves either to political or commercial pursuits. M. Dambreuse had also invited a number of scholars and magistrates, two or three celebrated doctors, and he deprecated with an air of humility the eulogies which they pronounced on his entertainment and the allusions to his wealth.

An immense number of men-servants, with fine gold-laced livery, kept moving about on every side. The large branched candlesticks, like bouquets of flame, threw a glow over the hangings. They were reflected in the mirrors; and at the bottom of the dining-room, which was adorned with a jessamine treillage, the sideboard resembled the high altar of a cathedral or an exhibition of jewellery, there were so many dishes, bells, knives and forks, silver and silver-gilt spoons in the midst of crystal ware glittering with iridescence.

The three other reception-rooms overflowed with artistic objects — landscapes by great masters on the walls, ivory and porcelain at the sides of the tables, and Chinese ornaments on the brackets. Lacquered screens were displayed in front of the windows, clusters of camelias rose above the mantel-shelves, and a light music vibrated in the distance, like the humming of bees.

The quadrilles were not numerous, and the dancers, judged by the indifferent fashion in which they dragged their pumps after them, seemed to be going through the performance of a duty.

Frederick heard some phrases, such as the following:

Frederick heard some phrases, such as the following:

"Were you at the last charity fête at the Hôtel Lambert, Mademoiselle?" "No, Monsieur." "It will soon be intolerably warm here." "Oh! yes, indeed; quite suffocating!" "Whose polka, pray, is this?" "Good heavens, Madame, I don't know!"

And, behind him, three greybeards, who had posted themselves in the recess of a window, were whispering some *risqué* remarks. A sportsman told a hunting story, while a Legitimist carried on an argument with an Orléanist. And, wandering about from one group to another, he reached the card-room, where, in the midst of grave-looking men gathered in a circle, he recognised Martinon, now attached to the Bar of the capital.

His big face, with its waxen complexion, filled up the space encircled by his collar-like beard, which was a marvel with its even surface of black hair; and, observing the golden mean between the elegance which his age might yearn for and the dignity which his profession exacted from him, he kept his thumbs stuck under his armpits, according to the custom of beaux, and then put his hands into his waistcoat pockets after the manner of learned personages. Though his boots were polished to excess, he kept his temples shaved in order to have the forehead of a thinker.

After he had addressed a few chilling words to Frederick, he turned once more towards those who were chatting around him. A land-owner was saying: "This is a class of men that dreams of upsetting society."

"They are calling for the organisation of labour," said another: "Can this be conceived?"

"What could you expect," said a third, "when we see M. de Genoude giving his assistance to the *Siècle*?"

"And even Conservatives style themselves Progressives. To lead us to what? To the Republic! as if such a thing were possible in France!"

Everyone declared that the Republic was impossible in France.

"No matter!" remarked one gentleman in a loud tone. "People take too much interest in the Revolution. A heap of histories, of different kinds of works, are published concerning it!"

"Without taking into account," said Martinon, "that there are probably subjects of far more importance which might be studied."

A gentleman occupying a ministerial office laid the blame on the scandals associated with the stage:

"Thus, for instance, this new drama of *La Reine Margot* really goes beyond the proper limits. What need was there for telling us about the Valois? All this exhibits loyalty in an unfavourable light. 'Tis just like your press! There is no use in talking, the September laws are altogether too mild. For my part, I would like to have court-martials, to gag the journalists! At the slightest display of insolence, drag them before a council of war, and then make an end of the business!"

"Oh, take care, Monsieur! take care!" said a professor. "Don't attack the precious boons we gained in 1830! Respect our liberties!" It would be better, he contended, to adopt a policy of decentralisation, and to distribute the surplus populations of the towns through the country districts.

"But they are gangrened!" exclaimed a Catholic. "Let religion be more firmly established!"

Martinon hastened to observe:

"As a matter of fact, it is a restraining force."

All the evil lay in this modern longing to rise above one's class and to possess luxuries.

"However," urged a manufacturer, "luxury aids commerce. Therefore, I approve of the Duc de Nemours' action in insisting on having short breeches at his evening parties."

"M. Thiers came to one of them in a pair of trousers. You know his joke on the subject?"

"Yes; charming! But he turned round to the demagogues, and his speech on the question of incompatibilities was not without its influence in bringing about the attempt of the twelfth of May."

"Oh, pooh!"

"Ay, ay!"

The circle had to make a little opening to give a passage to a man-servant carrying a tray, who was trying to make his way into the card-room.

Under the green shades of the wax-lights the tables were covered with two rows of cards and gold coins. Frederick stopped beside one corner of the table, lost the fifteen napoleons which he had in his pocket, whirled lightly about, and found himself on the threshold of the boudoir in which Madame Dambreuse happened to be at that moment.

It was filled with women sitting close to one another in little groups on seats without backs. Their long skirts, swelling round them, seemed like waves, from which their waists emerged; and their breasts were clearly outlined by the slope of their corsages. Nearly every one of them had a bouquet of violets in her hand. The dull shade of their gloves showed off the whiteness of their arms, which formed a contrast with its human flesh tints. Over the shoulders of some of them hung fringe or mourning-weeds, and, every now and then, as they quivered with emotion, it seemed as if their bodices were about to fall down.

But the decorum of their countenances tempered the exciting effect of their costumes. Several of them had a placidity almost like that of animals; and this resemblance to the brute creation on the part of half-nude women made him think of the interior of a harem — indeed, a grosser comparison suggested itself to the young man's mind.

Every variety of beauty was to be found there — some English ladies, with the profile familiar in "keepsakes"; an Italian, whose black eyes shot forth lava-like flashes, like a Vesuvius; three sisters, dressed in blue; three Normans, fresh as April apples; a tall red-haired girl, with a set of amethysts. And the bright scintillation of diamonds, which trembled in aigrettes worn over their hair, the luminous spots of precious stones laid over their breasts, and the delightful radiance of pearls which adorned their foreheads mingled with the glitter of gold rings, as well as with the lace, powder, the feathers, the vermilion of dainty mouths, and the mother-of-pearl hue of teeth. The ceiling, rounded like a cupola, gave to the boudoir the form of a flower-basket, and a current of perfumed air circulated under the flapping of their fans.

Frederick, planting himself behind them, put up his eyeglass and scanned their shoulders, not all of which did he consider irreproachable. He thought about the Maréchale, and this dispelled the temptations that beset him or consoled him for not yielding to them.

He gazed, however, at Madame Dambreuse, and he considered her charming, in spite of her mouth being rather large and her nostrils too dilated. But she was remarkably graceful in appearance. There was, as it were, an expression of passionate languor in the ringlets of her hair, and her forehead, which was like agate, seemed to cover a great deal, and indicated a masterful intelligence.

She had placed beside her her husband's niece, a rather plain-looking young person. From time to time she left her seat to receive those who had just come in; and the murmur of feminine voices, made, as it were, a cackling like that of birds.

They were talking about the Tunisian ambassadors and their costumes. One lady had been present at the last reception of the Academy. Another referred to the *Don Juan* of Molière, which had recently been performed at the Théâtre Français.

But with a significant glance towards her niece, Madame Dambreuse laid a finger on her lips, while the smile which escaped from her contradicted this display of austerity.

Suddenly, Martinon appeared at the door directly in front of her. She arose at once. He offered her his arm. Frederick, in order to watch the progress of these gallantries on Martinon's part, walked past the card-table, and came up with them in the large drawing-room. Madame Dambreuse very soon quitted her cavalier, and began chatting with Frederick himself in a very familiar tone.

She understood that he did not play cards, and did not dance.

"Young people have a tendency to be melancholy!" Then, with a single comprehensive glance around:

"Besides, this sort of thing is not amusing — at least for certain natures!"

And she drew up in front of the row of armchairs, uttering a few polite remarks here and there, while some old men with double eyeglasses came to pay court to her. She introduced Frederick to some of them. M. Dambreuse touched him lightly on the elbow, and led him out on the terrace.

He had seen the Minister. The thing was not easy to manage. Before he could be qualified for the post of auditor to the Council of State, he should pass an examination. Frederick, seized with an unaccountable self-confidence, replied that he had a knowledge of the subjects prescribed for it.

The financier was not surprised at this, after all the eulogies M. Roque had pronounced on his abilities.

At the mention of this name, a vision of little Louise, her house and her room, passed through his mind, and he remembered how he had on nights like this stood at her window listening to the wagoners driving past. This recollection of his griefs brought back the thought of Madame Arnoux, and he relapsed into silence as he continued to pace up and down the terrace. The windows shone amid the darkness like slabs of flame. The buzz of the ball gradually grew fainter; the carriages were beginning to leave.

"Why in the world," M. Dambreuse went on, "are you so anxious to be attached to the Council of State?"

And he declared, in the tone of a man of broad views, that the public functions led to nothing — he could speak with some authority on that point — business was much better.

Frederick urged as an objection the difficulty of grappling with all the details of business.

"Pooh! I could post you up well in them in a very short time."

Would he like to be a partner in any of his own undertakings?

The young man saw, as by a lightning-flash, an enormous fortune coming into his hands.

"Let us go in again," said the banker. "You are staying for supper with us, are you not?"

It was three o'clock. They left the terrace.

In the dining-room, a table at which supper was served up awaited the guests.

M. Dambreuse perceived Martinon, and, drawing near his wife, in a low tone:

"Is it you who invited him?"

"Is it you who invited him?"

She answered dryly:

"Yes, of course."

The niece was not present.

The guests drank a great deal of wine, and laughed very loudly; and risky jokes did not give any offence, all present experiencing that sense of relief which follows a somewhat prolonged period of constraint.

Martinon alone displayed anything like gravity. He refused to drink champagne, as he thought this good form, and, moreover, he assumed an air of tact and politeness, for when M. Dambreuse, who had a contracted chest, complained of an oppression, he made repeated enquiries about that gentleman's health, and then let his blue eyes wander in the direction of Madame Dambreuse.

She questioned Frederick in order to find out which of the young ladies he liked best. He had noticed none of them in particular, and besides, he preferred the women of thirty.

"There, perhaps, you show your sense," she returned.

Then, as they were putting on their pelisses and paletots, M. Dambreuse said to him:

"Come and see me one of these mornings and we'll have a chat."

Martinon, at the foot of the stairs, was lighting a cigar, and, as he puffed it, he presented such a heavy profile that his companion allowed this remark to escape from him:

"Upon my word, you have a fine head!"

"It has turned a few other heads," replied the young magistrate, with an air of mingled self-complacency and annoyance.

As soon as Frederick was in bed, he summed up the main features of the evening party. In the first place, his own toilet (he had looked at himself several times in the mirrors), from the cut of his coat to the knot of his pumps left nothing to find fault with. He had spoken to influential men, and seen wealthy ladies at close quarters. M. Dambreuse had shown himself to be an admirable type of man, and Madame Dambreuse an almost bewitching type of woman. He weighed one by one her slightest words, her looks, a thousand things incapable of being analysed. It would be a right good thing to have such a mistress. And, after all, why should he not? He would have as good a chance with her as any other man. Perhaps she was not so hard to win? Then Martinon came back to his recollection; and, as he fell asleep, he smiled with pity for this worthy fellow.

He woke up with the thought of the Maréchale in his mind. Those words of her note, "After to-morrow evening," were in fact an appointment for the very same day.

He waited until nine o'clock, and then hurried to her house.

He waited until nine o'clock, and then hurried to her house.

Some one who had been going up the stairs before him shut the door. He rang the bell; Delphine came out and told him that "Madame" was not there.

Frederick persisted, begging of her to admit him. He had something of a very serious nature to communicate to her; only a word would suffice. At length, the hundred-sous-piece argument proved successful, and the maid let him into the anteroom.

Rosanette appeared. She was in a negligée, with her hair loose, and, shaking her head, she waved her arms when she was some paces away from him to indicate that she could not receive him now.

Frederick descended the stairs slowly. This caprice was worse than any of the others she had indulged in. He could not understand it at all.

In front of the porter's lodge Mademoiselle Vatnaz stopped him.

"Has she received you?"

"No."

"You've been put out?"

"How do you know that?"

"'Tis quite plain. But come on; let us go away. I am suffocating!"

She made him accompany her along the street; she panted for breath; he could feel her thin arm trembling on his own. Suddenly, she broke out:

"Ah! the wretch!"

"Who, pray?"

"Why, he — he — Delmar!"

This revelation humiliated Frederick. He next asked:

"Are you quite sure of it?"

"Why, when I tell you I followed him!" exclaimed the Vatnaz. "I saw him going in! Now do you understand? I ought to have expected it for that matter — 'twas I, in my stupidity, that introduced him to her. And if you only knew all; my God! Why, I picked him up, supported him, clothed him! And then all the paragraphs I got into the newspapers about him! I loved him like a mother!"

Then, with a sneer:

"Ha! Monsieur wants velvet robes! You may be sure 'tis a speculation on his part. And as for her! — to think that I knew her to earn her living as a seamstress! If it were not for me, she would have fallen into the mire twenty times over! But I will plunge her into it yet! I'll see her dying in a hospital — and everything about her will be known!"

And, like a torrent of dirty water from a vessel full of refuse, her rage poured out in a tumultuous fashion into Frederick's ear the recital of her rival's disgraceful acts.

"She lived with Jumillac, with Flacourt, with little Allard, with Bertinaux

She lived with Jumillac, with Flacourt, with little Allard, with Bertinaux, with Saint-Valéry, the pock-marked fellow! No, 'twas the other! They are two brothers — it makes no difference. And when she was in difficulties, I settled everything. She is so avaricious! And then, you will agree with me, 'twas nice and kind of me to go to see her, for we are not persons of the same grade! Am I a fast woman — I? Do I sell myself? Without taking into account that she is as stupid as a head of cabbage. She writes 'category' with a 'th.' After all, they are well met. They make a precious couple, though he styles himself an artist and thinks himself a man of genius. But, my God! if he had only intelligence, he would not have done such an infamous thing! Men don't, as a rule, leave a superior woman for a hussy! What do I care about him after all? He is becoming ugly. I hate him! If I met him, mind you, I'd spit in his face." She spat out as she uttered the words.

"Yes, this is what I think about him now. And Arnoux, eh? Isn't it abominable? He has forgiven her so often! You can't conceive the sacrifices he has made for her. She ought to kiss his feet! He is so generous, so good!"

Frederick was delighted at hearing Delmar disparaged. He had taken sides with Arnoux. This perfidy on Rosanette's part seemed to him an abnormal and inexcusable thing; and, infected with this elderly spinster's emotion, he felt a sort of tenderness towards her. Suddenly he found himself in front of Arnoux's door. Mademoiselle Vatnaz, without his attention having been drawn to it, had led him down towards the Rue Poissonnière.

"Here we are!" said she. "As for me, I can't go up; but you, surely there is nothing to prevent you?"

"From doing what?"

"From telling him everything, faith!"

Frederick, as if waking up with a start, saw the baseness towards which she was urging him.

"Well?" she said after a pause.

He raised his eyes towards the second floor. Madame Arnoux's lamp was burning. In fact there was nothing to prevent him from going up.

"I am going to wait for you here. Go on, then!"

This direction had the effect of chilling him, and he said:

"I shall be a long time up there; you would do better to return home. I will call on you to-morrow."

"No, no!" replied the Vatnaz, stamping with her foot. "Take him with you! Bring him there! Let him catch them together!"

"But Delmar will no longer be there."

She hung down her head.

"Yes; that's true, perhaps."

"Yes, that's true, perhaps."

And she remained without speaking in the middle of the street, with vehicles all around her; then, fixing on him her wild-cat's eyes:

"I may rely on you, may I not? There is now a sacred bond between us. Do what you say, then; we'll talk about it to-morrow."

Frederick, in passing through the lobby, heard two voices responding to one another.

Madame Arnoux's voice was saying:

"Don't lie! don't lie, pray!"

He went in. The voices suddenly ceased.

Arnoux was walking from one end of the apartment to the other, and Madame was seated on the little chair near the fire, extremely pale and staring straight before her. Frederick stepped back, and was about to retire, when Arnoux grasped his hand, glad that some one had come to his rescue.

"But I am afraid — — " said Frederick.

"Stay here, I beg of you!" he whispered in his ear.

Madame remarked:

"You must make some allowance for this scene, Monsieur Moreau. Such things sometimes unfortunately occur in households."

"They do when we introduce them there ourselves," said Arnoux in a jolly tone. "Women have crotchets, I assure you. This, for instance, is not a bad one — see! No; quite the contrary. Well, she has been amusing herself for the last hour by teasing me with a heap of idle stories."

"They are true," retorted Madame Arnoux, losing patience; "for, in fact, you bought it yourself."

"I?"

"Yes, you yourself, at the Persian House."

"The cashmere," thought Frederick.

He was filled with a consciousness of guilt, and got quite alarmed.

She quickly added:

"It was on Saturday, the fourteenth."

"The fourteenth," said Arnoux, looking up, as if he were searching in his mind for a date.

"And, furthermore, the clerk who sold it to you was a fair-haired young man."

"How could I remember what sort of man the clerk was?"

"And yet it was at your dictation he wrote the address, 18 Rue de Laval."

"How do you know?" said Arnoux in amazement.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh! 'tis very simple: I went to get my cashmere altered, and the superintendent of the millinery department told me that they had just sent another of the same sort to Madame Arnoux."

"Is it my fault if there is a Madame Arnoux in the same street?"

"Yes; but not Jacques Arnoux," she returned.

Thereupon, he began to talk in an incoherent fashion, protesting that he was innocent. It was some misapprehension, some accident, one of those things that happen in some way that is utterly unaccountable. Men should not be condemned on mere suspicion, vague probabilities; and he referred to the case of the unfortunate Lesurques.

"In short, I say you are mistaken. Do you want me to take my oath on it?"

"'Tis not worth while."

"Why?"

She looked him straight in the face without saying a word, then stretched out her hand, took down the little silver chest from the mantelpiece, and handed him a bill which was spread open.

Arnoux coloured up to his ears, and his swollen and distorted features betrayed his confusion.

"But," he said in faltering tones, "what does this prove?"

"Ah!" she said, with a peculiar ring in her voice, in which sorrow and irony were blended. "Ah!"

Arnoux held the bill in his hands, and turned it round without removing his eyes from it, as if he were going to find in it the solution of a great problem.

"Ah! yes, yes; I remember," said he at length. "'Twas a commission. You ought to know about that matter, Frederick." Frederick remained silent. "A commission that Père Oudry entrusted to me."

"And for whom?"

"For his mistress."

"For your own!" exclaimed Madame Arnoux, springing to her feet and standing erect before him.

"I swear to you!"

"Don't begin over again. I know everything."

"Ha! quite right. So you're spying on me!"

She returned coldly:

"Perhaps that wounds your delicacy?"

"Since you are in a passion," said Arnoux, looking for his hat, "and can't be reasoned with — — "

Then, with a big sigh:

"Don't marry, my poor friend, don't, if you take my advice!"

And he took himself off, finding it absolutely necessary to get into the open air.

Then there was a deep silence, and it seemed as if everything in the room had become more motionless than before. A luminous circle above the lamp whitened the ceiling, while at the corners stretched out bits of shade resembling pieces of black gauze placed on top of one another. The ticking of the clock and the crackling of the fire were the only sounds that disturbed the stillness.

Madame Arnoux had just seated herself in the armchair at the opposite side of the chimney-piece. She bit her lip and shivered. She drew her hands up to her face; a sob broke from her, and she began to weep.

He sat down on the little couch, and in the soothing tone in which one addresses a sick person:

"You don't suspect me of having anything to do with — — ?"

She made no reply. But, continuing presently to give utterance to her own thoughts:

"I leave him perfectly free! There was no necessity for lying on his part!"

"That is quite true," said Frederick. "No doubt," he added, "it was the result of Arnoux's habits; he had acted thoughtlessly, but perhaps in matters of a graver character — — "

"What do you see, then, that can be graver?"

"Oh, nothing!"

Frederick bent his head with a smile of acquiescence. Nevertheless, he urged, Arnoux possessed certain good qualities; he was fond of his children.

"Ay, and he does all he can to ruin them!"

Frederick urged that this was due to an excessively easy-going disposition, for indeed he was a good fellow.

She exclaimed:

"But what is the meaning of that — a good fellow?"

And he proceeded to defend Arnoux in the vaguest kind of language he could think of, and, while expressing his sympathy with her, he rejoiced, he was delighted, at the bottom of his heart. Through retaliation or need of affection she would fly to him for refuge. His love was intensified by the hope which had now grown immeasurably stronger in his breast.

Never had she appeared to him so captivating, so perfectly beautiful. From time to time a deep breath made her bosom swell. Her two eyes, gazing fixedly into space, seemed dilated by a vision in the depths of her consciousness, and her lips were slightly parted, as if to let her soul escape through them. Sometimes she pressed her handkerchief over them tightly. He would have liked to be this dainty little piece of cambric moistened with her tears. In spite of himself, he cast a look at the bed at the end of the alcove, picturing to himself her head lying on the pillow, and so vividly did this present itself to his imagination that he had to restrain himself to keep from clasping her in his arms. She closed her eyelids, and now she appeared quiescent and languid. Then he drew closer to her, and, bending over her, he eagerly scanned her face. At that moment, he heard the noise of boots in the lobby outside — it was the other. They heard him shutting the door of his own room. Frederick made a sign to Madame Arnoux to ascertain from her whether he ought to go there.

She replied "Yes," in the same voiceless fashion; and this mute exchange of thoughts between them was, as it were, an assent — the preliminary step in adultery.

Arnoux was just taking off his coat to go to bed.

"Well, how is she going on?"

"Oh! better," said Frederick; "this will pass off."

But Arnoux was in an anxious state of mind.

"You don't know her; she has got hysterical now! Idiot of a clerk! This is what comes of being too good. If I had not given that cursed shawl to Rosanette!"

"Don't regret having done so a bit. Nobody could be more grateful to you than she is."

"Do you really think so?"

Frederick had not a doubt of it. The best proof of it was her dismissal of Père Oudry.

"Ah! poor little thing!"

And in the excess of his emotion, Arnoux wanted to rush off to her forthwith.

"'Tisn't worth while. I am calling to see her. She is unwell."

"All the more reason for my going."

He quickly put on his coat again, and took up his candlestick. Frederick cursed his own stupidity, and pointed out to him that for decency's sake he ought to remain this night with his wife. He could not leave her; it would be very nasty.

"I tell you candidly you would be doing wrong. There is no hurry over there. You will go to-morrow. Come; do this for my sake."

Arnoux put down his candlestick, and, embracing him, said:

"You are a right good fellow!"

CHAPTER IX.

The Friend of the Family.

Then began for Frederick an existence of misery. He became the parasite of the house.

If anyone were indisposed, he called three times a day to know how the patient was, went to the piano-tuner's, contrived to do a thousand acts of kindness; and he endured with an air of contentment Mademoiselle Marthe's poutings and the caresses of little Eugène, who was always drawing his dirty hands over the young man's face. He was present at dinners at which Monsieur and Madame, facing each other, did not exchange a word, unless it happened that Arnoux provoked his wife with the absurd remarks he made. When the meal was over, he would play about the room with his son, conceal himself behind the furniture, or carry the little boy on his back, walking about on all fours, like the Bearnais. At last, he would go out, and she would at once plunge into the eternal subject of complaint — Arnoux.

It was not his misconduct that excited her indignation, but her pride appeared to be wounded, and she did not hide her repugnance towards this man, who showed an absence of delicacy, dignity, and honour.

"Or rather, he is mad!" she said.

Frederick artfully appealed to her to confide in him. Ere long he knew all the details of her life. Her parents were people in a humble rank in life at Chartres. One day, Arnoux, while sketching on the bank of the river (at this period he believed himself to be a painter), saw her leaving the church, and made her an offer of marriage. On account of his wealth, he was unhesitatingly accepted. Besides, he was desperately in love with her. She added:

"Good heavens! he loves me still, after his fashion!"

They spent the few months immediately after their marriage in travelling through Italy.

Arnoux, in spite of his enthusiasm at the sight of the scenery and the masterpieces, did nothing but groan over the wine, and, to find some kind of amusement, organised picnics along with some English people. The profit which he had made by reselling some pictures tempted him to take up the fine arts as a commercial speculation. Then, he became infatuated about pottery. Just now other branches of commerce attracted him; and, as he had become more and more vulgarised, he contracted coarse and extravagant habits. It was not so much for his vices she had to reproach him as for his entire conduct. No change could for his vices she had to reproach him as for his entire conduct. No change could be expected in him, and her unhappiness was irreparable.

Frederick declared that his own life in the same way was a failure.

He was still a young man, however. Why should he despair? And she gave him good advice: "Work! and marry!" He answered her with bitter smiles; for in place of giving utterance to the real cause of his grief, he pretended that it was of a different character, a sublime feeling, and he assumed the part of an Antony to some extent, the man accursed by fate — language which did not, however, change very materially the complexion of his thoughts.

For certain men action becomes more difficult as desire becomes stronger. They are embarrassed by self-distrust, and terrified by the fear of making themselves disliked. Besides, deep attachments resemble virtuous women: they are afraid of being discovered, and pass through life with downcast eyes.

Though he was now better acquainted with Madame Arnoux (for that very reason perhaps), he was still more faint-hearted than before. Each morning he swore in his own mind that he would take a bold course. He was prevented from doing so by an unconquerable feeling of bashfulness; and he had no example to guide him, inasmuch as she was different from other women. From the force of his dreams, he had placed her outside the ordinary pale of humanity. At her side he felt himself of less importance in the world than the sprigs of silk that escaped from her scissors.

Then he thought of some monstrous and absurd devices, such as surprises at night, with narcotics and false keys — anything appearing easier to him than to face her disdain.

Besides, the children, the two servant-maids, and the relative position of the rooms caused insurmountable obstacles. So then he made up his mind to possess her himself alone, and to bring her to live with him far away in the depths of some solitude. He even asked himself what lake would be blue enough, what seashore would be delightful enough for her, whether it would be in Spain, Switzerland, or the East; and expressly fixing on days when she seemed more irritated than usual, he told her that it would be necessary for her to leave the house, to find out some ground to justify such a step, and that he saw no way out of it but a separation. However, for the sake of the children whom she loved, she would never resort to such an extreme course. So much virtue served to increase his respect for her.

He spent each afternoon in recalling the visit he had paid the night before, and in longing for the evening to come in order that he might call again. When he did not dine with them, he posted himself about nine o'clock at the corner of the street, and, as soon as Arnoux had slammed the hall-door behind him, Frederick quickly ascended the two flights of stairs, and asked the servant-girl in an ingenuous fashion:

"Is Monsieur in?"

Then he would exhibit surprise at finding that Arnoux was gone out.

The latter frequently came back unexpectedly. Then Frederick had to accompany him to the little café in the Rue Sainte-Anne, which Regimbart now frequented.

The Citizen began by giving vent to some fresh grievance which he had against the Crown. Then they would chat, pouring out friendly abuse on one another, for the earthenware manufacturer took Regimbart for a thinker of a high order, and, vexed at seeing him neglecting so many chances of winning distinction, teased the Citizen about his laziness. It seemed to Regimbart that Arnoux was a man full of heart and imagination, but decidedly of lax morals, and therefore he was quite unceremonious towards a personage he respected so little, refusing even to dine at his house on the ground that "such formality was a bore."

Sometimes, at the moment of parting, Arnoux would be seized with hunger. He found it necessary to order an omelet or some roasted apples; and, as there was never anything to eat in the establishment, he sent out for something. They waited. Regimbart did not leave, and ended by consenting in a grumbling fashion to have something himself. He was nevertheless gloomy, for he remained for hours seated before a half-filled glass. As Providence did not regulate things in harmony with his ideas, he was becoming a hypochondriac, no longer cared even to read the newspapers, and at the mere mention of England's name began to bellow with rage. On one occasion, referring to a waiter who attended on him carelessly, he exclaimed:

"Have we not enough of insults from the foreigner?"

Except at these critical periods he remained taciturn, contemplating "an infallible stroke of business that would burst up the whole shop."

Whilst he was lost in these reflections, Arnoux in a monotonous voice and with a slight look of intoxication, related incredible anecdotes in which he always shone himself, owing to his assurance; and Frederick (this was, no doubt, due to some deep-rooted resemblances) felt more or less attracted towards him. He reproached himself for this weakness, believing that on the contrary he ought to hate this man.

Arnoux, in Frederick's presence, complained of his wife's ill-temper, her obstinacy, her unjust accusations. She had not been like this in former days.

"If I were you," said Frederick, "I would make her an allowance and live alone."

Arnoux made no reply; and the next moment he began to sound her praises.

She was good, devoted, intelligent, and virtuous; and, passing to her personal beauty, he made some revelations on the subject with the thoughtlessness of people who display their treasures at taverns.

His equilibrium was disturbed by a catastrophe.

He had been appointed one of the Board of Superintendence in a kaolin company. But placing reliance on everything that he was told, he had signed inaccurate reports and approved, without verification, of the annual inventories fraudulently prepared by the manager. The company had now failed, and Arnoux, being legally responsible, was, along with the others who were liable under the guaranty, condemned to pay damages, which meant a loss to him of thirty thousand francs, not to speak of the costs of the judgment.

Frederick read the report of the case in a newspaper, and at once hurried off to the Rue de Paradis.

He was ushered into Madame's apartment. It was breakfast-time. A round table close to the fire was covered with bowls of *café au lait*. Slippers trailed over the carpet, and clothes over the armchairs. Arnoux was attired in trousers and a knitted vest, with his eyes bloodshot and his hair in disorder. Little Eugène was crying at the pain caused by an attack of mumps, while nibbling at a slice of bread and butter. His sister was eating quietly. Madame Arnoux, a little paler than usual, was attending on all three of them.

"Well," said Arnoux, heaving a deep sigh, "you know all about it?"

And, as Frederick gave him a pitying look: "There, you see, I have been the victim of my own trustfulness!"

Then he relapsed into silence, and so great was his prostration, that he pushed his breakfast away from him. Madame Arnoux raised her eyes with a shrug of the shoulders. He passed his hand across his forehead.

"After all, I am not guilty. I have nothing to reproach myself with. 'Tis a misfortune. It will be got over — ay, and so much the worse, faith!"

He took a bite of a cake, however, in obedience to his wife's entreaties.

That evening, he wished that she should go and dine with him alone in a private room at the Maison d'Or. Madame Arnoux did not at all understand this emotional impulse, taking offence, in fact, at being treated as if she were a light woman. Arnoux, on the contrary, meant it as a proof of affection. Then, as he was beginning to feel dull, he went to pay the Maréchale a visit in order to amuse himself.

Up to the present, he had been pardoned for many things owing to his reputation for good-fellowship. His lawsuit placed him amongst men of bad character. No one visited his house.

Frederick, however, considered that he was bound in honour to go there more frequently than ever. He hired a box at the Italian opera, and brought them there with him every week. Meanwhile, the pair had reached that period in unsuitable unions when an invincible lassitude springs from concessions which people get into the habit of making, and which render existence intolerable. Madame Arnoux restrained her pent-up feelings from breaking out; Arnoux became gloomy; and Frederick grew sad at witnessing the unhappiness of these two ill-fated beings.

She had imposed on him the obligation, since she had given him her confidence, of making enquiries as to the state of her husband's affairs. But shame prevented him from doing so. It was painful to him to reflect that he coveted the wife of this man, at whose dinner-table he constantly sat. Nevertheless, he continued his visits, excusing himself on the ground that he was bound to protect her, and that an occasion might present itself for being of service to her.

Eight days after the ball, he had paid a visit to M. Dambreuse. The financier had offered him twenty shares in a coal-mining speculation; Frederick did not go back there again. Deslauriers had written letters to him, which he left unanswered. Pellerin had invited him to go and see the portrait; he always put it off. He gave way, however, to Cisy's persistent appeals to be introduced to Rosanette.

She received him very nicely, but without springing on his neck as she used to do formerly. His comrade was delighted at being received by a woman of easy virtue, and above all at having a chat with an actor. Delmar was there when he called. A drama in which he appeared as a peasant lecturing Louis XIV. and prophesying the events of '89 had made him so conspicuous, that the same part was continually assigned to him; and now his function consisted of attacks on the monarchs of all nations. As an English brewer, he inveighed against Charles I.; as a student at Salamanca, he cursed Philip II.; or, as a sensitive father, he expressed indignation against the Pompadour — this was the most beautiful bit of acting! The brats of the street used to wait at the door leading to the side-scenes in order to see him; and his biography, sold between the acts, described him as taking care of his aged mother, reading the Bible, assisting the poor, in fact, under the aspect of a Saint Vincent de Paul together with a dash of Brutus and Mirabeau. People spoke of him as "Our Delmar." He had a mission; he became another Christ.

All this had fascinated Rosanette; and she had got rid of Père Oudry, without caring one jot about consequences, as she was not of a covetous disposition.

Arnoux, who knew her, had taken advantage of the state of affairs for some time past to spend very little money on her. M. Roque had appeared on the scene, and all three of them carefully avoided anything like a candid explanation. Then, fancying that she had got rid of the other solely on his account, Arnoux increased her allowance, for she was living at a very expensive rate. She had even sold her cashmere in her anxiety to pay off her old debts, as she said; and he was continually giving her money, while she bewitched him and imposed upon him pitilessly. Therefore, bills and stamped paper rained all over the house. Frederick felt that a crisis was approaching.

One day he called to see Madame Arnoux. She had gone out. Monsieur was at work below stairs in the shop. In fact, Arnoux, in the midst of his Japanese vases, was trying to take in a newly-married pair who happened to be well-to-do people from the provinces. He talked about wheel-moulding and fine-moulding, about spotted porcelain and glazed porcelain; the others, not wishing to appear utterly ignorant of the subject, listened with nods of approbation, and made purchases.

When the customers had gone out, he told Frederick that he had that very morning been engaged in a little altercation with his wife. In order to obviate any remarks about expense, he had declared that the Maréchale was no longer his mistress. "I even told her that she was yours."

Frederick was annoyed at this; but to utter reproaches might only betray him. He faltered: "Ah! you were in the wrong — greatly in the wrong!"

"What does that signify?" said Arnoux. "Where is the disgrace of passing for her lover? I am really so myself. Would you not be flattered at being in that position?"

Had she spoken? Was this a hint? Frederick hastened to reply:

"No! not at all! on the contrary!"

"Well, what then?"

"Yes, 'tis true; it makes no difference so far as that's concerned."

Arnoux next asked: "And why don't you call there oftener?"

Frederick promised that he would make it his business to go there again.

"Ah! I forgot! you ought, when talking about Rosanette, to let out in some way to my wife that you are her lover. I can't suggest how you can best do it, but you'll find out that. I ask this of you as a special favour — eh?"

The young man's only answer was an equivocal grimace. This calumny had undone him. He even called on her that evening, and swore that Arnoux's accusation was false.

"Is that really so?"

He appeared to be speaking sincerely, and, when she had taken a long breath of relief, she said to him:

"I believe you," with a beautiful smile. Then she hung down her head, and, without looking at him:

"Besides, nobody has any claim on you!"

So then she had divined nothing; and she despised him, seeing that she did not think he could love her well enough to remain faithful to her! Frederick, forgetting his overtures while with the other, looked on the permission accorded to him as an insult to himself.

After this she suggested that he ought now and then to pay Rosanette a visit, to get a little glimpse of what she was like.

Arnoux presently made his appearance, and, five minutes later, wished to carry him off to Rosanette's abode.

The situation was becoming intolerable.

His attention was diverted by a letter from a notary, who was going to send him fifteen thousand francs the following day; and, in order to make up for his neglect of Deslauriers, he went forthwith to tell him this good news.

The advocate was lodging in the Rue des Trois-Maries, on the fifth floor, over a courtyard. His study, a little tiled apartment, chilly, and with a grey paper on the walls, had as its principal decoration a gold medal, the prize awarded him on the occasion of taking out his degree as a Doctor of Laws, which was fixed in an ebony frame near the mirror. A mahogany bookcase enclosed under its glass front a hundred volumes, more or less. The writing-desk, covered with sheep-leather, occupied the centre of the apartment. Four old armchairs upholstered in green velvet were placed in the corners; and a heap of shavings made a blaze in the fireplace, where there was always a bundle of sticks ready to be lighted as soon as he rang the bell. It was his consultation-hour, and the advocate had on a white cravat.

The announcement as to the fifteen thousand francs (he had, no doubt, given up all hope of getting the amount) made him chuckle with delight.

"That's right, old fellow, that's right — that's quite right!"

He threw some wood into the fire, sat down again, and immediately began talking about the journal. The first thing to do was to get rid of Hussonnet.

"I'm quite tired of that idiot! As for officially professing opinions, my own notion is that the most equitable and forcible position is to have no opinions at all."

Frederick appeared astonished.

"Why, the thing is perfectly plain. It is time that politics should be dealt with scientifically. The old men of the eighteenth century began it when Rousseau and the men of letters introduced into the political sphere philanthropy, poetry, and other fudge, to the great delight of the Catholics — a natural alliance, however, since the modern reformers (I can prove it) all believe in Revelation. But, if you sing high masses for Poland, if, in place of the God of the

But, if you sing high masses for Poland, if, in place of the God of the Dominicans, who was an executioner, you take the God of the Romanticists, who is an upholsterer, if, in fact, you have not a wider conception of the Absolute than your ancestors, Monarchy will penetrate underneath your Republican forms, and your red cap will never be more than the headpiece of a priest. The only difference will be that the cell system will take the place of torture, the outrageous treatment of Religion that of sacrilege, and the European Concert that of the Holy Alliance; and in this beautiful order which we admire, composed of the wreckage of the followers of Louis XIV., the last remains of the Voltaireans, with some Imperial white-wash on top, and some fragments of the British Constitution, you will see the municipal councils trying to give annoyance to the Mayor, the general councils to their Prefect, the Chambers to the King, the Press to Power, and the Administration to everybody. But simple-minded people get enraptured about the Civil Code, a work fabricated — let them say what they like — in a mean and tyrannical spirit, for the legislator, in place of doing his duty to the State, which simply means to observe customs in a regular fashion, claims to model society like another Lycurgus. Why does the law impede fathers of families with regard to the making of wills? Why does it place shackles on the compulsory sale of real estate? Why does it punish as a misdemeanour vagrancy, which ought not even to be regarded as a technical contravention of the Code. And there are other things! I know all about them! and so I am going to write a little novel, entitled 'The History of the Idea of Justice,' which will be amusing. But I am infernally thirsty! And you?"

He leaned out through the window, and called to the porter to go and fetch them two glasses of grog from the public-house over the way.

"To sum up, I see three parties — no! three groups — in none of which do I take the slightest interest: those who have, those who have nothing, and those who are trying to have. But all agree in their idiotic worship of Authority! For example, Mably recommends that the philosophers should be prevented from publishing their doctrines; M. Wronsky, the geometrician, describes the censorship as the 'critical expression of speculative spontaneity'; Père Enfantin gives his blessing to the Hapsburgs for having passed a hand across the Alps in order to keep Italy down; Pierre Leroux wishes people to be compelled to listen to an orator; and Louis Blanc inclines towards a State religion — so much rage for government have these vassals whom we call the people! Nevertheless, there is not a single legitimate government, in spite of their sempiternal principles. But 'principle' signifies 'origin.' It is always necessary to go back to a revolution, to an act of violence, to a transitory fact. Thus, our principle is the national sovereignty embodied in the Parliamentary form, though the Parliament does not assent to this! But in what way could the sovereignty of the people be more assent to this! But in what way could the sovereignty of the people be more sacred than the Divine Right? They are both fictions. Enough of metaphysics; no more phantoms! There is no need of dogmas in order to get the streets swept! It will be said that I am turning society upside down. Well, after all, where would be the harm of that? It is, indeed, a nice thing — this society of yours."

Frederick could have given many answers. But, seeing that his theories were far less advanced than those of Sénécal, he was full of indulgence towards Deslauriers. He contented himself with arguing that such a system would make them generally hated.

"On the contrary, as we should have given to each party a pledge of hatred against his neighbour, all will reckon on us. You are about to enter into it yourself, and to furnish us with some transcendent criticism!"

It was necessary to attack accepted ideas — the Academy, the Normal School, the Consérvatoire, the Comédie Française, everything that resembled an institution. It was in that way that they would give uniformity to the doctrines taught in their review. Then, as soon as it had been thoroughly well-established, the journal would suddenly be converted into a daily publication. Thereupon they could find fault with individuals.

"And they will respect us, you may be sure!"

Deslauriers touched upon that old dream of his — the position of editor-in-chief, so that he might have the unutterable happiness of directing others, of entirely cutting down their articles, of ordering them to be written or declining them. His eyes twinkled under his goggles; he got into a state of excitement, and drank a few glasses of brandy, one after the other, in an automatic fashion.

"You'll have to stand me a dinner once a week. That's indispensable, even though you should have to squander half your income on it. People would feel pleasure in going to it; it would be a centre for the others, a lever for yourself; and by manipulating public opinion at its two ends — literature and politics — you will see how, before six months have passed, we shall occupy the first rank in Paris."

Frederick, as he listened to Deslauriers, experienced a sensation of rejuvenescence, like a man who, after having been confined in a room for a long time, is suddenly transported into the open air. The enthusiasm of his friend had a contagious effect upon him.

"Yes, I have been an idler, an imbecile — you are right!"

"All in good time," said Deslauriers. "I have found my Frederick again!"

And, holding up his jaw with closed fingers:

"Ah! you have made me suffer! Never mind, I am fond of you all the same."

They stood there gazing into each other's faces, both deeply affected, and were on the point of embracing each other.

were on the point of embracing each other.

A woman's cap appeared on the threshold of the anteroom.

"What brings you here?" said Deslauriers.

It was Mademoiselle Clémence, his mistress.

She replied that, as she happened to be passing, she could not resist the desire to go in to see him, and in order that they might have a little repast together, she had brought some cakes, which she laid on the table.

"Take care of my papers!" said the advocate, sharply. "Besides, this is the third time that I have forbidden you to come at my consultation-hours."

She wished to embrace him.

"All right! Go away! Cut your stick!"

He repelled her; she heaved a great sigh.

"Ah! you are plaguing me again!"

"'Tis because I love you!"

"I don't ask you to love me, but to oblige me!"

This harsh remark stopped Clémence's tears. She took up her station before the window, and remained there motionless, with her forehead against the pane.

Her attitude and her silence had an irritating effect on Deslauriers.

"When you have finished, you will order your carriage, will you not?"

She turned round with a start.

"You are sending me away?"

"Exactly."

She fixed on him her large blue eyes, no doubt as a last appeal, then drew the two ends of her tartan across each other, lingered for a minute or two, and went away.

"You ought to call her back," said Frederick.

"Come, now!"

And, as he wished to go out, Deslauriers went into the kitchen, which also served as his dressing-room. On the stone floor, beside a pair of boots, were to be seen the remains of a meagre breakfast, and a mattress with a coverlid was rolled up on the floor in a corner.

"This will show you," said he, "that I receive few marchionesses. 'Tis easy to get enough of them, ay, faith! and some others, too! Those who cost nothing take up your time — 'tis money under another form. Now, I'm not rich! And then they are all so silly, so silly! Can you chat with a woman yourself?"

As they parted, at the corner of the Pont Neuf, Deslauriers said: "It's agreed, then; you'll bring the thing to me to-morrow as soon as you have it!"

"Agreed!" said Frederick.

When he awoke next morning, he received through the post a cheque on the bank for fifteen thousand francs.

This scrap of paper represented to him fifteen big bags of money; and he said to himself that, with such a sum he could, first of all, keep his carriage for three years instead of selling it, as he would soon be forced to do, or buy for himself two beautiful damaskeened pieces of armour, which he had seen on the Quai Voltaire, then a quantity of other things, pictures, books and what a quantity of bouquets of flowers, presents for Madame Arnoux! anything, in short, would have been preferable to risking losing everything in that journal! Deslauriers seemed to him presumptuous, his insensibility on the night before having chilled Frederick's affection for him; and the young man was indulging in these feelings of regret, when he was quite surprised by the sudden appearance of Arnoux, who sat down heavily on the side of the bed, like a man overwhelmed with trouble.

"What is the matter now?"

"I am ruined!"

He had to deposit that very day at the office of Maître Beaumont, notary, in the Rue Saint-Anne, eighteen thousand francs lent him by one Vanneroy.

"'Tis an unaccountable disaster. I have, however, given him a mortgage, which ought to keep him quiet. But he threatens me with a writ if it is not paid this afternoon promptly."

"And what next?"

"Oh! the next step is simple enough; he will take possession of my real estate. Once the thing is publicly announced, it means ruin to me — that's all! Ah! if I could find anyone to advance me this cursed sum, he might take Vanneroy's place, and I should be saved! You don't chance to have it yourself?"

The cheque had remained on the night-table near a book. Frederick took up a volume, and placed it on the cheque, while he replied:

"Good heavens, my dear friend, no!"

But it was painful to him to say "no" to Arnoux.

"What, don't you know anyone who would — — ?"

"Nobody! and to think that in eight days I should be getting in money! There is owing to me probably fifty thousand francs at the end of the month!"

"Couldn't you ask some of the persons that owe you money to make you an advance?"

"Ah! well, so I did!"

"But have you any bills or promissory notes?"

"Not one!"

"What is to be done?" said Frederick.

"That's what I'm asking myself," said Arnoux. "'Tisn't for myself, my God! but for my children and my poor wife!"

Then, letting each phrase fall from his lips in a broken fashion:

"In fact — I could rough it — I could pack off all I have — and go and seek my fortune — I don't know where!"

"Impossible!" exclaimed Frederick.

Arnoux replied with an air of calmness:

"How do you think I could live in Paris now?"

There was a long silence. Frederick broke it by saying:

"When could you pay back this money?"

Not that he had it; quite the contrary! But there was nothing to prevent him from seeing some friends, and making an application to them.

And he rang for his servant to get himself dressed.

Arnoux thanked him.

"The amount you want is eighteen thousand francs — isn't it?"

"Oh! I could manage easily with sixteen thousand! For I could make two thousand five hundred out of it, or get three thousand on my silver plate, if Vanneroy meanwhile would give me till to-morrow; and, I repeat to you, you may inform the lender, give him a solemn undertaking, that in eight days, perhaps even in five or six, the money will be reimbursed. Besides, the mortgage will be security for it. So there is no risk, you understand?"

Frederick assured him that he thoroughly understood the state of affairs, and added that he was going out immediately.

He would be sure on his return to bestow hearty maledictions on Deslauriers, for he wished to keep his word, and in the meantime, to oblige Arnoux.

"Suppose I applied to M. Dambreuse? But on what pretext could I ask for money? 'Tis I, on the contrary, that should give him some for the shares I took in his coal-mining company. Ah! let him go hang himself — his shares! I am really not liable for them!"

And Frederick applauded himself for his own independence, as if he had refused to do some service for M. Dambreuse.

"Ah, well," said he to himself afterwards, "since I'm going to meet with a loss in this way — for with fifteen thousand francs I might gain a hundred thousand! such things sometimes happen on the Bourse — well, then, since I am breaking my promise to one of them, am I not free? Besides, when Deslauriers might wait? No, no; that's wrong; let us go there."

He looked at his watch.

"Ah! there's no hurry. The bank does not close till five o'clock."

And, at half-past four, when he had cashed the cheque:

"'Tis useless now; I should not find him in. I'll go this evening." Thus giving himself the opportunity of changing his mind, for there always remain in the conscience some of those sophistries which we pour into it ourselves. It preserves the after-taste of them, like some unwholesome liquor.

He walked along the boulevards, and dined alone at the restaurant. Then he listened to one act of a play at the Vaudeville, in order to divert his thoughts. But his bank-notes caused him as much embarrassment as if he had stolen them. He would not have been very sorry if he had lost them.

When he reached home again he found a letter containing these words:

"What news? My wife joins me, dear friend, in the hope, *etc.* — Yours."

And then there was a flourish after his signature.

"His wife! She appeals to me!"

At the same moment Arnoux appeared, to have an answer as to whether he had been able to obtain the sum so sorely needed.

"Wait a moment; here it is," said Frederick.

And, twenty-four hours later, he gave this reply to Deslauriers:

"I have no money."

The advocate came back three days, one after the other, and urged Frederick to write to the notary. He even offered to take a trip to Havre in connection with the matter.

At the end of the week, Frederick timidly asked the worthy Arnoux for his fifteen thousand francs. Arnoux put it off till the following day, and then till the day after. Frederick ventured out late at night, fearing lest Deslauriers might come on him by surprise.

One evening, somebody knocked against him at the corner of the Madeleine. It was he.

And Deslauriers accompanied Frederick as far as the door of a house in the Faubourg Poissonnière.

"Wait for me!"

He waited. At last, after three quarters of an hour, Frederick came out, accompanied by Arnoux, and made signs to him to have patience a little longer. The earthenware merchant and his companion went up the Rue de Hauteville arm-in-arm, and then turned down the Rue de Chabrol.

The night was dark, with gusts of tepid wind. Arnoux walked on slowly, talking about the Galleries of Commerce — a succession of covered passages which would have led from the Boulevard Saint-Denis to the Châtelet, a marvellous speculation, into which he was very anxious to enter; and he stopped from time to time in order to have a look at the grisettes' faces in front of the shop-windows, and then, raising his head again, resumed the thread of his discourse.

Frederick heard Deslauriers' steps behind him like reproaches, like blows falling on his conscience. But he did not venture to claim his money, through a feeling of bashfulness, and also through a fear that it would be fruitless. The other was drawing nearer. He made up his mind to ask.

Arnoux, in a very flippant tone, said that, as he had not got in his outstanding debts, he was really unable to pay back the fifteen thousand francs.

"You have no need of money, I fancy?"

At that moment Deslauriers came up to Frederick, and, taking him aside:

"Be honest. Have you got the amount? Yes or no?"

"Well, then, no," said Frederick; "I've lost it."

"Ah! and in what way?"

"At play."

Deslauriers, without saying a single word in reply, made a very low bow, and went away. Arnoux had taken advantage of the opportunity to light a cigar in a tobacconist's shop. When he came back, he wanted to know from Frederick "who was that young man?"

"Oh! nobody — a friend."

Then, three minutes later, in front of Rosanette's door:

"Come on up," said Arnoux; "she'll be glad to see you. What a savage you are just now!"

A gas-lamp, which was directly opposite, threw its light on him; and, with his cigar between his white teeth and his air of contentment, there was something intolerable about him.

"Ha! now that I think of it, my notary has been at your place this morning about that mortgage-registry business. 'Tis my wife reminded me about it."

"A wife with brains!" returned Frederick automatically.

"I believe you."

And once more Arnoux began to sing his wife's praises. There was no one like her for spirit, tenderness, and thrift; he added in a low tone, rolling his eyes about: "And a woman with so many charms, too!"

"Good-bye!" said Frederick.

Arnoux made a step closer to him.

"Hold on! Why are you going?" And, with his hand half-stretched out towards Frederick, he stared at the young man, quite abashed by the look of anger in his face.

Frederick repeated in a dry tone, "Good-bye!"

He hurried down the Rue de Bréda like a stone rolling headlong, raging against Arnoux, swearing in his own mind that he would never see the man again, nor her either, so broken-hearted and desolate did he feel. In place of the rupture which he had anticipated, here was the other, on the contrary, exhibiting towards her a most perfect attachment from the ends of her hair to the inmost depths of her soul. Frederick was exasperated by the vulgarity of this man. Everything, then, belonged to him! He would meet Arnoux again at his mistress's door; and the mortification of a rupture would be added to rage at his own powerlessness. Besides, he felt humiliated by the other's display of integrity in offering him guaranties for his money. He would have liked to strangle him, and over the pangs of disappointment floated in his conscience, like a fog, the sense of his baseness towards his friend. Rising tears nearly suffocated him.

Deslauriers descended the Rue des Martyrs, swearing aloud with indignation; for his project, like an obelisk that has fallen, now assumed extraordinary proportions. He considered himself robbed, as if he had suffered a great loss. His friendship for Frederick was dead, and he experienced a feeling of joy at it — it was a sort of compensation to him! A hatred of all rich people took possession of him. He leaned towards Sénécal's opinions, and resolved to make every effort to propagate them.

All this time, Arnoux was comfortably seated in an easy-chair near the fire, sipping his cup of tea, with the Maréchale on his knees.

Frederick did not go back there; and, in order to distract his attention from his disastrous passion, he determined to write a "History of the Renaissance." He piled up confusedly on his table the humanists, the philosophers, and the poets, and he went to inspect some engravings of Mark Antony, and tried to understand Machiavelli. Gradually, the serenity of intellectual work had a soothing effect upon him. While his mind was steeped in the personality of others, he lost sight of his own — which is the only way, perhaps, of getting rid of suffering.

One day, while he was quietly taking notes, the door opened, and the man-servant announced Madame Arnoux.

It was she, indeed! and alone? Why, no! for she was holding little Eugène by the hand, followed by a nurse in a white apron. She sat down, and after a preliminary cough:

"It is a long time since you came to see us."

As Frederick could think of no excuse at the moment, she added:

"It was delicacy on your part!"

He asked in return:

"Delicacy about what?"

"About what you have done for Arnoux!" said she.

Frederick made a significant gesture. "What do I care about him, indeed? It was for your sake I did it!"

She sent off the child to play with his nurse in the drawing-room. Two or three words passed between them as to their state of health; then the conversation hung fire.

She wore a brown silk gown, which had the colour of Spanish wine, with a

She wore a brown silk gown, which had the colour of Spanish wine, with a paletot of black velvet bordered with sable. This fur made him yearn to pass his hand over it; and her head-bands, so long and so exquisitely smooth, seemed to draw his lips towards them. But he was agitated by emotion, and, turning his eyes towards the door:

"'Tis rather warm here!"

Frederick understood what her discreet glance meant.

"Ah! excuse me! the two leaves of the door are merely drawn together."

"Yes, that's true!"

And she smiled, as much as to say:

"I'm not a bit afraid!"

He asked her presently what was the object of her visit.

"My husband," she replied with an effort, "has urged me to call on you, not venturing to take this step himself!"

"And why?"

"You know M. Dambreuse, don't you?"

"Yes, slightly."

"Ah! slightly."

She relapsed into silence.

"No matter! finish what you were going to say."

Thereupon she told him that, two days before, Arnoux had found himself unable to meet four bills of a thousand francs, made payable at the banker's order and with his signature attached to them. She felt sorry for having compromised her children's fortune. But anything was preferable to dishonour; and, if M. Dambreuse stopped the proceedings, they would certainly pay him soon, for she was going to sell a little house which she had at Chartres.

"Poor woman!" murmured Frederick. "I will go. Rely on me!"

"Thanks!"

And she arose to go.

"Oh! there is nothing to hurry you yet."

She remained standing, examining the trophy of Mongolian arrows suspended from the ceiling, the bookcase, the bindings, all the utensils for writing. She lifted up the bronze bowl which held his pens. Her feet rested on different portions of the carpet. She had visited Frederick several times before, but always accompanied by Arnoux. They were now alone together — alone in his own house. It was an extraordinary event — almost a successful issue of his love.

She wished to see his little garden. He offered her his arm to show her his property — thirty feet of ground enclosed by some houses, adorned with shrubs at the corners and flower-borders in the middle. The early days of April had arrived. The leaves of the lilacs were already showing their borders of green. A arrived. The leaves of the lilacs were already showing their borders of green. A breath of pure air was diffused around, and the little birds chirped, their song alternating with the distant sound that came from a coachmaker's forge.

Frederick went to look for a fire-shovel; and, while they walked on side by side, the child kept making sand-pies in the walk.

Madame Arnoux did not believe that, as he grew older, he would have a great imagination; but he had a winning disposition. His sister, on the other hand, possessed a caustic humour that sometimes wounded her.

"That will change," said Frederick. "We must never despair."

She returned:

"We must never despair!"

This automatic repetition of the phrase he had used appeared to him a sort of encouragement; he plucked a rose, the only one in the garden.

"Do you remember a certain bouquet of roses one evening, in a carriage?"

She coloured a little; and, with an air of bantering pity:

"Ah, I was very young then!"

"And this one," went on Frederick, in a low tone, "will it be the same way with it?"

She replied, while turning about the stem between her fingers, like the thread of a spindle:

"No, I will preserve it."

She called over the nurse, who took the child in her arms; then, on the threshold of the door in the street, Madame Arnoux inhaled the odour of the flower, leaning her head on her shoulder with a look as sweet as a kiss.

When he had gone up to his study, he gazed at the armchair in which she had sat, and every object which she had touched. Some portion of her was diffused around him. The caress of her presence lingered there still.

"So, then, she came here," said he to himself.

And his soul was bathed in the waves of infinite tenderness.

Next morning, at eleven o'clock, he presented himself at M. Dambreuse's house. He was received in the dining-room. The banker was seated opposite his wife at breakfast. Beside her sat his niece, and at the other side of the table appeared the governess, an English woman, strongly pitted with small-pox.

M. Dambreuse invited his young friend to take his place among them, and when he declined:

"What can I do for you? I am listening to whatever you have to say to me."

Frederick confessed, while affecting indifference, that he had come to make a request in behalf of one Arnoux.

"Ha! ha! the ex-picture-dealer," said the banker, with a noiseless laugh which exposed his gums. "Oudry formerly gave security for him; he has given a lot of exposed his gums. "Oudry formerly gave security for him, he has given a lot of trouble."

And he proceeded to read the letters and newspapers which lay close beside him on the table.

Two servants attended without making the least noise on the floor; and the loftiness of the apartment, which had three portières of richest tapestry, and two white marble fountains, the polish of the chafing-dish, the arrangement of the side-dishes, and even the rigid folds of the napkins, all this sumptuous comfort impressed Frederick's mind with the contrast between it and another breakfast at the Arnouxs' house. He did not take the liberty of interrupting M. Dambreuse.

Madame noticed his embarrassment.

"Do you occasionally see our friend Martinon?"

"He will be here this evening," said the young girl in a lively tone.

"Ha! so you know him?" said her aunt, fixing on her a freezing look.

At that moment one of the men-servants, bending forward, whispered in her ear.

"Your dressmaker, Mademoiselle — Miss John!"

And the governess, in obedience to this summons, left the room along with her pupil.

M. Dambreuse, annoyed at the disarrangement of the chairs by this movement, asked what was the matter.

"'Tis Madame Regimbart."

"Wait a moment! Regimbart! I know that name. I have come across his signature."

Frederick at length broached the question. Arnoux deserved some consideration; he was even going, for the sole purpose of fulfilling his engagements, to sell a house belonging to his wife.

"She is considered very pretty," said Madame Dambreuse.

The banker added, with a display of good-nature:

"Are you on friendly terms with them — on intimate terms?"

Frederick, without giving an explicit reply, said that he would be very much obliged to him if he considered the matter.

"Well, since it pleases you, be it so; we will wait. I have some time to spare yet; suppose we go down to my office. Would you mind?"

They had finished breakfast. Madame Dambreuse bowed slightly towards Frederick, smiling in a singular fashion, with a mixture of politeness and irony. Frederick had no time to reflect about it, for M. Dambreuse, as soon as they were alone:

"You did not come to get your shares?"

And, without permitting him to make any excuses:

"Well! well! 'tis right that you should know a little more about the business."

He offered Frederick a cigarette, and began his statement.

The General Union of French Coal Mines had been constituted. All that they were waiting for was the order for its incorporation. The mere fact of the amalgamation had diminished the cost of superintendence, and of manual labour, and increased the profits. Besides, the company had conceived a new idea, which was to interest the workmen in its undertaking. It would erect houses for them, healthful dwellings; finally, it would constitute itself the purveyor of its *employés*, and would have everything supplied to them at net prices.

"And they will be the gainers by it, Monsieur: there's true progress! that's the way to reply effectively to certain Republican brawlings. We have on our Board" — he showed the prospectus — "a peer of France, a scholar who is a member of the Institute, a retired field-officer of genius. Such elements reassure the timid capitalists, and appeal to intelligent capitalists!"

The company would have in its favour the sanction of the State, then the railways, the steam service, the metallurgical establishments, the gas companies, and ordinary households.

"Thus we heat, we light, we penetrate to the very hearth of the humblest home. But how, you will say to me, can we be sure of selling? By the aid of protective laws, dear Monsieur, and we shall get them! — that is a matter that concerns us! For my part, however, I am a downright prohibitionist! The country before anything!"

He had been appointed a director; but he had no time to occupy himself with certain details, amongst other things with the editing of their publications.

"I find myself rather muddled with my authors. I have forgotten my Greek. I should want some one who could put my ideas into shape."

And suddenly: "Will you be the man to perform those duties, with the title of general secretary?"

Frederick did not know what reply to make.

"Well, what is there to prevent you?"

His functions would be confined to writing a report every year for the shareholders. He would find himself day after day in communication with the most notable men in Paris. Representing the company with the workmen, he would ere long be worshipped by them as a natural consequence, and by this means he would be able, later, to push him into the General Council, and into the position of a deputy.

Frederick's ears tingled. Whence came this goodwill? He got confused in returning thanks. But it was not necessary, the banker said, that he should be dependent on anyone. The best course was to take some shares, "a splendid investment besides, for your capital guarantees your position, as your position does your capital."

"About how much should it amount to?" said Frederick.

"Oh, well! whatever you please — from forty to sixty thousand francs, I suppose."

This sum was so trifling in M. Dambreuse's eyes, and his authority was so great, that the young man resolved immediately to sell a farm.

He accepted the offer. M. Dambreuse was to select one of his disengaged days for an appointment in order to finish their arrangements.

"So I can say to Jacques Arnoux — — ?"

"Anything you like — the poor chap — anything you like!"

Frederick wrote to the Arnouxs' to make their minds easy, and he despatched the letter by a man-servant, who brought back the letter: "All right!" His action in the matter deserved better recognition. He expected a visit, or, at least, a letter. He did not receive a visit, and no letter arrived.

Was it forgetfulness on their part, or was it intentional? Since Madame Arnoux had come once, what was to prevent her from coming again? The species of confidence, of avowal, of which she had made him the recipient on the occasion, was nothing better, then, than a manœuvre which she had executed through interested motives.

"Are they playing on me? and is she an accomplice of her husband?" A sort of shame, in spite of his desire, prevented him from returning to their house.

One morning (three weeks after their interview), M. Dambreuse wrote to him, saying that he expected him the same day in an hour's time.

On the way, the thought of Arnoux oppressed him once more, and, not having been able to discover any reason for his conduct, he was seized with a feeling of wretchedness, a melancholy presentiment. In order to shake it off, he hailed a cab, and drove to the Rue de Paradis.

Arnoux was away travelling.

"And Madame?"

"In the country, at the works."

"When is Monsieur coming back?"

"To-morrow, without fail."

He would find her alone; this was the opportune moment. Something imperious seemed to cry out in the depths of his consciousness: "Go, then, and meet her!"

But M. Dambreuse? "Ah! well, so much the worse. I'll say that I was ill."

He rushed to the railway-station, and, as soon as he was in the carriage:

"Perhaps I have done wrong. Pshaw! what does it matter?"

Green plains stretched out to the right and to the left. The train rolled on. The little station-houses glistened like stage-scenery, and the smoke of the locomotive kept constantly sending forth on the same side its big fleecy masses, which danced for a little while on the grass, and were then dispersed.

Frederick, who sat alone in his compartment, gazed at these objects through sheer weariness, lost in that languor which is produced by the very excess of impatience. But cranes and warehouses presently appeared. They had reached Creil.

The town, built on the slopes of two lowlying hills (the first of which was bare, and the second crowned by a wood), with its church-tower, its houses of unequal size, and its stone bridge, seemed to him to present an aspect of mingled gaiety, reserve, and propriety. A long flat barge descended to the edge of the water, which leaped up under the lash of the wind.

Fowl perched on the straw at the foot of the crucifix erected on the spot; a woman passed with some wet linen on her head.

After crossing the bridge, he found himself in an isle, where he beheld on his right the ruins of an abbey. A mill with its wheels revolving barred up the entire width of the second arm of the Oise, over which the manufactory projected. Frederick was greatly surprised by the imposing character of this structure. He felt more respect for Arnoux on account of it. Three paces further on, he turned up an alley, which had a grating at its lower end.

He went in. The door-keeper called him back, exclaiming:

"Have you a permit?"

"For what purpose?"

"For the purpose of visiting the establishment."

Frederick said in a rather curt tone that he had come to see M. Arnoux.

"Who is M. Arnoux?"

"Why, the chief, the master, the proprietor, in fact!"

"No, monsieur! These are MM. Lebœuf and Milliet's works!"

The good woman was surely joking! Some workmen arrived; he came up and spoke to two or three of them. They gave the same response.

Frederick left the premises, staggering like a drunken man; and he had such a look of perplexity, that on the Pont de la Boucherie an inhabitant of the town, who was smoking his pipe, asked whether he wanted to find out anything. This man knew where Arnoux's manufactory was. It was situated at Montataire.

Frederick asked whether a vehicle was to be got. He was told that the only place where he could find one was at the station. He went back there. A shaky-looking calash, to which was yoked an old horse, with torn harness hanging over the shafts, stood all alone in front of the luggage office. An urchin who was looking on offered to go and find Père Pilon. In ten minutes' time he came back, and announced that Père Pilon was at his breakfast. Frederick, unable to stand this any longer, walked away. But the gates of the thoroughfare across the line were closed. He would have to wait till two trains had passed. At last, he made a dash into the open country.

The monotonous greenery made it look like the cover of an immense billiard-table. The scoriæ of iron were ranged on both sides of the track, like heaps of stones. A little further on, some factory chimneys were smoking close beside each other. In front of him, on a round hillock, stood a little turreted château, with the quadrangular belfry of a church. At a lower level, long walls formed irregular lines past the trees; and, further down again, the houses of the village spread out.

They had only a single story, with staircases consisting of three steps made of uncemented blocks. Every now and then the bell in front of a grocery-shop could be heard tinkling. Heavy steps sank into the black mire, and a light shower was falling, which cut the pale sky with a thousand hatchings.

Frederick pursued his way along the middle of the street. Then, he saw on his left, at the opening of a pathway, a large wooden arch, whereon was traced, in letters of gold, the word "Faïences."

It was not without an object that Jacques Arnoux had selected the vicinity of Creil. By placing his works as close as possible to the other works (which had long enjoyed a high reputation), he had created a certain confusion in the public mind, with a favourable result so far as his own interests were concerned.

The main body of the building rested on the same bank of a river which flows through the meadowlands. The master's house, surrounded by a garden, could be distinguished by the steps in front of it, adorned with four vases, in which cactuses were bristling.

Heaps of white clay were drying under sheds. There were others in the open air; and in the midst of the yard stood Sénécal with his everlasting blue paletot lined with red.

The ex-tutor extended towards Frederick his cold hand.

"You've come to see the master? He's not there."

Frederick, nonplussed, replied in a stupefied fashion:

"I knew it." But the next moment, correcting himself:

"'Tis about a matter that concerns Madame Arnoux. Can she receive me?"

"Ha! I have not seen her for the last three days," said Sénécal.

And he broke into a long string of complaints. When he accepted the post of manager, he understood that he would have been allowed to reside in Paris, and not be forced to bury himself in this country district, far from his friends, deprived of newspapers. No matter! he had overlooked all that. But Arnoux appeared to pay no heed to his merits. He was, moreover, shallow and retrograde — no one could be more ignorant. In place of seeking for artistic improvements, it would have been better to introduce firewood instead of coal and gas. The shop-keeping spirit *thrust itself in* — Sénécal laid stress on the last words. In short, he disliked his present occupation, and he all but appealed to Frederick to say a word in his behalf in order that he might get an increase of salary.

"Make your mind easy," said the other.

He met nobody on the staircase. On the first floor, he pushed his way head-foremost into an empty room. It was the drawing-room. He called out at the top of his voice. There was no reply. No doubt, the cook had gone out, and so had the housemaid. At length, having reached the second floor, he pushed a door open. Madame Arnoux was alone in this room, in front of a press with a mirror attached. The belt of her dressing-gown hung down her hips; one entire half of her hair fell in a dark wave over her right shoulder; and she had raised both arms in order to hold up her chignon with one hand and to put a pin through it with the other. She broke into an exclamation and disappeared.

Then, she came back again properly dressed. Her waist, her eyes, the rustle of her dress, her entire appearance, charmed him. Frederick felt it hard to keep from covering her with kisses.

"I beg your pardon," said she, "but I could not — — "

He had the boldness to interrupt her with these words:

"Nevertheless — you looked very nice — just now."

She probably thought this compliment a little coarse, for her cheeks reddened. He was afraid that he might have offended her. She went on:

"What lucky chance has brought you here?"

He did not know what reply to make; and, after a slight chuckle, which gave him time for reflection:

"If I told you, would you believe me?"

"Why not?"

Frederick informed her that he had had a frightful dream a few nights before.

"I dreamt that you were seriously ill — near dying."

"Oh! my husband and I are never ill."

"I have dreamt only of you," said he.

She gazed at him calmly: "Dreams are not always realised."

Frederick stammered, sought to find appropriate words to express himself in, and then plunged into a flowing period about the affinity of souls. There existed a force which could, through the intervening bounds of space, bring two persons into communication with each other, make known to each the other's feelings, and enable them to reunite.

She listened to him with downcast face, while she smiled with that beautiful smile of hers. He watched her out of the corner of his eye with delight, and poured out his love all the more freely through the easy channel of a commonplace remark.

She offered to show him the works; and, as she persisted, he made no objection.

In order to divert his attention with something of an amusing nature, she showed him the species of museum that decorated the staircase. The specimens, hung up against the wall or laid on shelves, bore witness to the efforts and the successive fads of Arnoux. After seeking vainly for the red of Chinese copper, he had wished to manufacture majolicas, faiënce, Etruscan and Oriental ware, and had, in fact, attempted all the improvements which were realised at a later period.

So it was that one could observe in the series big vases covered with figures of mandarins, porringers of shot reddish-brown, pots adorned with Arabian inscriptions, drinking-vessels in the style of the Renaissance, and large plates on which two personages were outlined as it were on bloodstone, in a delicate, aërial fashion. He now made letters for signboards and wine-labels; but his intelligence was not high enough to attain to art, nor commonplace enough to look merely to profit, so that, without satisfying anyone, he had ruined himself.

They were both taking a view of these things when Mademoiselle Marthe passed.

"So, then, you did not recognise him?" said her mother to her.

"Yes, indeed," she replied, bowing to him, while her clear and sceptical glance — the glance of a virgin — seemed to say in a whisper: "What are you coming here for?" and she rushed up the steps with her head slightly bent over her shoulder.

Madame Arnoux led Frederick into the yard attached to the works, and then explained to him in a grave tone how different clays were ground, cleaned, and sifted.

"The most important thing is the preparation of pastes."

And she introduced him into a hall filled with vats, in which a vertical axis with horizontal arms kept turning. Frederick felt some regret that he had not flatly declined her offer a little while before.

"These things are merely the slobberings," said she.

He thought the word grotesque, and, in a measure, unbecoming on her lips.

Wide straps ran from one end of the ceiling to the other, so as to roll themselves round the drums, and everything kept moving continuously with a provoking mathematical regularity.

They left the spot, and passed close to a ruined hut, which had formerly been used as a repository for gardening implements.

"It is no longer of any use," said Madame Arnoux.

He replied in a tremulous voice:

"Happiness may have been associated with it!"

The clacking of the fire-pump drowned his words, and they entered the workshop where rough drafts were made.

Some men, seated at a narrow table, placed each in front of himself on a revolving disc a piece of paste. Then each man with his left hand scooped out the insides of his own piece while smoothing its surface with the right; and vases could be seen bursting into shape like blossoming flowers.

Madame Arnoux had the moulds for more difficult works shown to him.

In another portion of the building, the threads, the necks, and the projecting lines were being formed. On the floor above, they removed the seams, and stopped up with plaster the little holes that had been left by the preceding operations.

At every opening in the walls, in corners, in the middle of the corridor, everywhere, earthenware vessels had been placed side by side.

Frederick began to feel bored.

"Perhaps these things are tiresome to you?" said she.

Fearing lest it might be necessary to terminate his visit there and then, he affected, on the contrary, a tone of great enthusiasm. He even expressed regret at not having devoted himself to this branch of industry.

She appeared surprised.

"Certainly! I would have been able to live near you."

And as he tried to catch her eye, Madame Arnoux, in order to avoid him, took off a bracket little balls of paste, which had come from abortive readjustments, flattened them out into a thin cake, and pressed her hand over them.

"Might I carry these away with me?" said Frederick.

"Good heavens! are you so childish?"

He was about to reply when in came Sénécal.

The sub-manager, on the threshold, had noticed a breach of the rules. The workshops should be swept every week. This was Saturday, and, as the workmen had not done what was required, Sénécal announced that they would have to remain an hour longer.

"So much the worse for you!"

They stooped over the work assigned to them unmurmuringly, but their rage could be divined by the hoarse sounds which came from their chests. They were, moreover, very easy to manage, having all been dismissed from the big manufactory. The Republican had shown himself a hard taskmaster to them. A mere theorist, he regarded the people only in the mass, and exhibited an utter absence of pity for individuals.

Frederick, annoyed by his presence, asked Madame Arnoux in a low tone whether they could have an opportunity of seeing the kilns. They descended to the ground-floor; and she was just explaining the use of caskets, when Sénécal, who had followed close behind, placed himself between them.

He continued the explanation of his own motion, expatiated on the various kinds of combustibles, the process of placing in the kiln, the pyroscopes, the cylindrical furnaces; the instruments for rounding, the lustres, and the metals, making a prodigious display of chemical terms, such as "chloride," "sulphuret," "borax," and "carbonate." Frederick did not understand a single one of them, and kept turning round every minute towards Madame Arnoux.

"You are not listening," said she. "M. Sénécal, however, is very clear. He knows all these things much better than I."

The mathematician, flattered by this eulogy, proposed to show the way in which colours were laid on. Frederick gave Madame Arnoux an anxious, questioning look. She remained impassive, not caring to be alone with him, very probably, and yet unwilling to leave him.

He offered her his arm.

"No — many thanks! the staircase is too narrow!"

And, when they had reached the top, Sénécal opened the door of an apartment filled with women.

They were handling brushes, phials, shells, and plates of glass. Along the cornice, close to the wall, extended boards with figures engraved on them; scraps of thin paper floated about, and a melting-stove sent forth fumes that made the temperature oppressive, while there mingled with it the odour of turpentine.

The workwomen had nearly all sordid costumes. It was noticeable, however, that one of them wore a Madras handkerchief, and long earrings. Of slight frame, and, at the same time, plump, she had large black eyes and the fleshy lips of a negress. Her ample bosom projected from under her chemise, which was fastened round her waist by the string of her petticoat; and, with one elbow on the board of the work-table and the other arm hanging down, she gazed vaguely at the open country, a long distance away. Beside her were a bottle of wine and some pork chops.

The regulations prohibited eating in the workshops, a rule intended to secure cleanliness at work and to keep the hands in a healthy condition.

Sénécal, through a sense of duty or a longing to exercise despotic authority, shouted out to her ere he had come near her, while pointing towards a framed shouted out to her ere he had come near her, while pointing towards a framed placard:

"I say, you girl from Bordeaux over there! read out for me Article 9!"

"Well, what then?"

"What then, mademoiselle? You'll have to pay a fine of three francs."

She looked him straight in the face in an impudent fashion.

"What does that signify to me? The master will take off your fine when he comes back! I laugh at you, my good man!"

Sénécal, who was walking with his hands behind his back, like an usher in the study-room, contented himself with smiling.

"Article 13, insubordination, ten francs!"

The girl from Bordeaux resumed her work. Madame Arnoux, through a sense of propriety, said nothing; but her brows contracted. Frederick murmured:

"Ha! you are very severe for a democrat!"

The other replied in a magisterial tone:

"Democracy is not the unbounded license of individualism. It is the equality of all belonging to the same community before the law, the distribution of work, order."

"You are forgetting humanity!" said Frederick.

Madame Arnoux took his arm. Sénécal, perhaps, offended by this mark of silent approbation, went away.

Frederick experienced an immense relief. Since morning he had been looking out for the opportunity to declare itself; now it had arrived. Besides, Madame Arnoux's spontaneous movements seemed to him to contain promises; and he asked her, as if on the pretext of warming their feet, to come up to her room. But, when he was seated close beside her, he began once more to feel embarrassed. He was at a loss for a starting-point. Sénécal, luckily, suggested an idea to his mind.

"Nothing could be more stupid," said he, "than this punishment!"

Madame Arnoux replied: "There are certain severe measures which are indispensable!"

"What! you who are so good! Oh! I am mistaken, for you sometimes take pleasure in making other people suffer!"

"I don't understand riddles, my friend!"

And her austere look, still more than the words she used, checked him. Frederick was determined to go on. A volume of De Musset chanced to be on the chest of drawers; he turned over some pages, then began to talk about love, about his hopes and his transports.

All this, according to Madame Arnoux, was criminal or factitious. The young man felt wounded by this negative attitude with regard to his passion, and, in man felt wounded by this negative attitude with regard to his passion, and, in order to combat it, he cited, by way of proof, the suicides which they read about every day in the newspapers, extolled the great literary types, Phèdre, Dido, Romeo, Desgrieux. He talked as if he meant to do away with himself.

The fire was no longer burning on the hearth; the rain lashed against the window-panes. Madame Arnoux, without stirring, remained with her hands resting on the sides of her armchair. The flaps of her cap fell like the fillets of a sphinx. Her pure profile traced out its clear-cut outlines in the midst of the shadow.

He was anxious to cast himself at her feet. There was a creaking sound in the lobby, and he did not venture to carry out his intention.

He was, moreover, restrained by a kind of religious awe. That robe, mingling with the surrounding shadows, appeared to him boundless, infinite, incapable of being touched; and for this very reason his desire became intensified. But the fear of doing too much, and, again, of not doing enough, deprived him of all judgment.

"If she dislikes me," he thought, "let her drive me away; if she cares for me, let her encourage me."

He said, with a sigh:

"So, then, you don't admit that a man may love — a woman?"

Madame Arnoux replied:

"Assuming that she is at liberty to marry, he may marry her; when she belongs to another, he should keep away from her."

"So happiness is impossible?"

"No! But it is never to be found in falsehood, mental anxiety, and remorse."

"What does it matter, if one is compensated by the enjoyment of supreme bliss?"

"The experience is too costly."

Then he sought to assail her with irony.

"Would not virtue in that case be merely cowardice?"

"Say rather, clear-sightedness. Even for those women who might forget duty or religion, simple good sense is sufficient. A solid foundation for wisdom may be found in self-love."

"Ah, what shop-keeping maxims these are of yours!"

"But I don't boast of being a fine lady."

At that moment the little boy rushed in.

"Mamma, are you coming to dinner?"

"Yes, in a moment."

Frederick arose. At the same instant, Marthe made her appearance.

He could not make up his mind to go away, and, with a look of entreaty:

He could not make up his mind to go away, and, with a look of entreaty:

"These women you speak of are very unfeeling, then?"

"No, but deaf when it is necessary to be so."

And she remained standing on the threshold of her room with her two children beside her. He bowed without saying a word. She mutely returned his salutation.

What he first experienced was an unspeakable astonishment. He felt crushed by this mode of impressing on him the emptiness of his hopes. It seemed to him as if he were lost, like a man who has fallen to the bottom of an abyss and knows that no help will come to him, and that he must die. He walked on, however, but at random, without looking before him. He knocked against stones; he mistook his way. A clatter of wooden shoes sounded close to his ear; it was caused by some of the working-girls who were leaving the foundry. Then he realised where he was.

The railway lamps traced on the horizon a line of flames. He arrived just as the train was starting, let himself be pushed into a carriage, and fell asleep.

An hour later on the boulevards, the gaiety of Paris by night made his journey all at once recede into an already far-distant past. He resolved to be strong, and relieved his heart by vilifying Madame Arnoux with insulting epithets.

"She is an idiot, a goose, a mere brute; let us not bestow another thought on her!"

When he got home, he found in his study a letter of eight pages on blue glazed paper, with the initials "R. A."

It began with friendly reproaches.

"What has become of you, my dear? I am getting quite bored."

But the handwriting was so abominable, that Frederick was about to fling away the entire bundle of sheets, when he noticed in the postscript the following words:

"I count on you to come to-morrow and drive me to the races."

What was the meaning of this invitation? Was it another trick of the Maréchale? But a woman does not make a fool of the same man twice without some object; and, seized with curiosity, he read the letter over again attentively.

Frederick was able to distinguish "Misunderstanding — to have taken a wrong path — disillusions — poor children that we are! — like two rivers that join each other!" *etc.*

He kept the sheets for a long time between his fingers. They had the odour of orris; and there was in the form of the characters and the irregular spaces between the lines something suggestive, as it were, of a disorderly toilet, that fired his blood.

"Why should I not go?" said he to himself at length. "But if Madame Arnoux were to know about it? Ah! let her know! So much the better! and let her feel jealous over it! In that way I shall be avenged!"

CHAPTER X.

At the Races.

The Maréchale was prepared for his visit, and had been awaiting him.

"This is nice of you!" she said, fixing a glance of her fine eyes on his face, with an expression at the same time tender and mirthful.

When she had fastened her bonnet-strings, she sat down on the divan, and remained silent.

"Shall we go?" said Frederick. She looked at the clock on the mantelpiece.

"Oh, no! not before half-past one!" as if she had imposed this limit to her indecision.

At last, when the hour had struck:

"Ah! well, *andiamo, caro mio*!" And she gave a final touch to her head-bands, and left directions for Delphine.

"Is Madame coming home to dinner?"

"Why should we, indeed? We shall dine together somewhere — at the Café Anglais, wherever you wish."

"Be it so!"

Her little dogs began yelping around her.

"We can bring them with us, can't we?"

Frederick carried them himself to the vehicle. It was a hired berlin with two post-horses and a postilion. He had put his man-servant in the back seat. The Maréchale appeared satisfied with his attentions. Then, as soon as she had seated herself, she asked him whether he had been lately at the Arnouxs'.

"Not for the past month," said Frederick.

"As for me, I met him the day before yesterday. He would have even come to-day, but he has all sorts of troubles — another lawsuit — I don't know what. What a queer man!"

Frederick added with an air of indifference:

"Now that I think of it, do you still see — what's that his name is? — that ex-vocalist — Delmar?"

She replied dryly:

"No; that's all over."

So it was clear that there had been a rupture between them. Frederick derived some hope from this circumstance.

They descended the Quartier Bréda at an easy pace. As it happened to be Sunday, the streets were deserted, and some citizens' faces presented themselves

Sunday, the streets were deserted, and some citizens' faces presented themselves at the windows. The carriage went on more rapidly. The noise of wheels made the passers-by turn round; the leather of the hood, which had slid down, was glittering. The man-servant doubled himself up, and the two Havanese, beside one another, seemed like two ermine muffs laid on the cushions. Frederick let himself jog up and down with the rocking of the carriage-straps. The Maréchale turned her head to the right and to the left with a smile on her face.

Her straw hat of mother-of-pearl colour was trimmed with black lace. The hood of her bournous floated in the wind, and she sheltered herself from the rays of the sun under a parasol of lilac satin pointed at the top like a pagoda.

"What loves of little fingers!" said Frederick, softly taking her other hand, her left being adorned with a gold bracelet in the form of a curb-chain.

"I say! that's pretty! Where did it come from?"

"Oh! I've had it a long time," said the Maréchale.

The young man did not challenge this hypocritical answer in any way. He preferred to profit by the circumstance. And, still keeping hold of the wrist, he pressed his lips on it between the glove and the cuff.

"Stop! People will see us!"

"Pooh! What does it signify?"

After passing by the Place de la Concorde, they drove along the Quai de la Conférence and the Quai de Billy, where might be noticed a cedar in a garden. Rosanette believed that Lebanon was situated in China; she laughed herself at her own ignorance, and asked Frederick to give her lessons in geography. Then, leaving the Trocadéro at the right, they crossed the Pont de Jéna, and drew up at length in the middle of the Champ de Mars, near some other vehicles already drawn up in the Hippodrome.

The grass hillocks were covered with common people. Some spectators might be seen on the balcony of the Military School; and the two pavilions outside the weighing-room, the two galleries contained within its enclosure, and a third in front of that of the king, were filled with a fashionably dressed crowd whose deportment showed their regard for this as yet novel form of amusement.

The public around the course, more select at this period, had a less vulgar aspect. It was the era of trouser-straps, velvet collars, and white gloves. The ladies, attired in showy colours, displayed gowns with long waists; and seated on the tiers of the stands, they formed, so to speak, immense groups of flowers, spotted here and there with black by the men's costumes. But every glance was directed towards the celebrated Algerian Bou-Maza, who sat, impassive, between two staff officers in one of the private galleries. That of the Jockey Club contained none but grave-looking gentlemen.

The more enthusiastic portion of the throng were seated underneath, close to

The more enthusiastic portion of the throng were seated underneath, close to the track, protected by two lines of sticks which supported ropes. In the immense oval described by this passage, cocoanut-sellers were shaking their rattles, others were selling programmes of the races, others were hawking cigars, with loud cries. On every side there was a great murmur. The municipal guards passed to and fro. A bell, hung from a post covered with figures, began ringing. Five horses appeared, and the spectators in the galleries resumed their seats.

Meanwhile, big clouds touched with their winding outlines the tops of the elms opposite. Rosanette was afraid that it was going to rain.

"I have umbrellas," said Frederick, "and everything that we need to afford ourselves diversion," he added, lifting up the chest, in which there was a stock of provisions in a basket.

"Bravo! we understand each other!"

"And we'll understand each other still better, shall we not?"

"That may be," she said, colouring.

The jockeys, in silk jackets, were trying to draw up their horses in order, and were holding them back with both hands. Somebody lowered a red flag. Then the entire five bent over the bristling manes, and off they started. At first they remained pressed close to each other in a single mass; this presently stretched out and became cut up. The jockey in the yellow jacket was near falling in the middle of the first round; for a long time it was uncertain whether Filly or Tibi should take the lead; then Tom Pouce appeared in front. But Clubstick, who had been in the rear since the start, came up with the others and outstripped them, so that he was the first to reach the winning-post, beating Sir Charles by two lengths. It was a surprise. There was a shout of applause; the planks shook with the stamping of feet.

"We are amusing ourselves," said the Maréchale. "I love you, darling!"

Frederick no longer doubted that his happiness was secure. Rosanette's last words were a confirmation of it.

A hundred paces away from him, in a four-wheeled cabriolet, a lady could be seen. She stretched her head out of the carriage-door, and then quickly drew it in again. This movement was repeated several times. Frederick could not distinguish her face. He had a strong suspicion, however, that it was Madame Arnoux. And yet this seemed impossible! Why should she have come there?

He stepped out of his own vehicle on the pretence of strolling into the weighing-room.

"You are not very gallant!" said Rosanette.

He paid no heed to her, and went on. The four-wheeled cabriolet, turning back, broke into a trot.

Frederick at the same moment, found himself button-holed by Cisy.

"Good-morrow, my dear boy! how are you going on? Hussonnet is over there! Are you listening to me?"

Frederick tried to shake him off in order to get up with the four-wheeled cabriolet. The Maréchale beckoned to him to come round to her. Cisy perceived her, and obstinately persisted in bidding her good-day.

Since the termination of the regular period of mourning for his grandmother, he had realised his ideal, and succeeded in "getting the proper stamp." A Scotch plaid waistcoat, a short coat, large bows over the pumps, and an entrance-card stuck in the ribbon of his hat; nothing, in fact, was wanting to produce what he described himself as his *chic* — a *chic* characterised by Anglomania and the swagger of the musketeer. He began by finding fault with the Champ de Mars, which he referred to as an "execrable turf," then spoke of the Chantilly races, and the droll things that had occurred there, swore that he could drink a dozen glasses of champagne while the clock was striking the midnight hour, offered to make a bet with the Maréchale, softly caressed her two lapdogs; and, leaning against the carriage-door on one elbow, he kept talking nonsense, with the handle of his walking-stick in his mouth, his legs wide apart, and his back stretched out. Frederick, standing beside him, was smoking, while endeavouring to make out what had become of the cabriolet.

The bell having rung, Cisy took himself off, to the great delight of Rosanette, who said he had been boring her to death.

The second race had nothing special about it; neither had the third, save that a man was thrown over the shaft of a cart while it was taking place. The fourth, in which eight horses contested the City Stakes, was more interesting.

The spectators in the gallery had clambered to the top of their seats. The others, standing up in the vehicles, followed with opera-glasses in their hands the movements of the jockeys. They could be seen starting out like red, yellow, white, or blue spots across the entire space occupied by the crowd that had gathered around the ring of the hippodrome. At a distance, their speed did not appear to be very great; at the opposite side of the Champ de Mars, they seemed even to be slackening their pace, and to be merely slipping along in such a way that the horses' bellies touched the ground without their outstretched legs bending at all. But, coming back at a more rapid stride, they looked bigger; they cut the air in their wild gallop. The sun's rays quivered; pebbles went flying about under their hoofs. The wind, blowing out the jockeys' jackets, made them flutter like veils. Each of them lashed the animal he rode with great blows of his whip in order to reach the winning-post — that was the goal they aimed at. One swept away the figures, another was hoisted off his saddle, and, in the midst of a burst of applause, the victorious horse dragged his feet to the weighing-room, all covered with sweat, his knees stiffened, his neck and shoulders bent down, while his rider, looking as if he were expiring in his saddle, clung to the animal's flanks.

The final start was retarded by a dispute which had arisen. The crowd, getting tired, began to scatter. Groups of men were chatting at the lower end of each gallery. The talk was of a free-and-easy description. Some fashionable ladies left, scandalised by seeing fast women in their immediate vicinity.

There were also some specimens of the ladies who appeared at public balls, some light-comedy actresses of the boulevards, and it was not the best-looking portion of them that got the most appreciation. The elderly Georgine Aubert, she whom a writer of vaudevilles called the Louis XI. of her profession, horribly painted, and giving vent every now and then to a laugh resembling a grunt, remained reclining at full length in her big calash, covered with a sable fur-tippet, as if it were midwinter. Madame de Remoussat, who had become fashionable by means of a notorious trial in which she figured, sat enthroned on the seat of a brake in company with some Americans; and Thérèse Bachelu, with her look of a Gothic virgin, filled with her dozen furbelows the interior of a trap which had, in place of an apron, a flower-stand filled with roses. The Maréchale was jealous of these magnificent displays. In order to attract attention, she began to make vehement gestures and to speak in a very loud voice.

Gentlemen recognised her, and bowed to her. She returned their salutations while telling Frederick their names. They were all counts, viscounts, dukes, and marquises, and carried a high head, for in all eyes he could read a certain respect for his good fortune.

Cisy had a no less happy air in the midst of the circle of mature men that surrounded them. Their faces wore cynical smiles above their cravats, as if they were laughing at him. At length he gave a tap in the hand of the oldest of them, and made his way towards the Maréchale.

She was eating, with an affectation of gluttony, a slice of *pâté de foie gras*. Frederick, in order to make himself agreeable to her, followed her example, with a bottle of wine on his knees.

The four-wheeled cabriolet reappeared. It *was* Madame Arnoux! Her face was startlingly pale.

"Give me some champagne," said Rosanette.

And, lifting up her glass, full to the brim as high as possible, she exclaimed:

"Look over there! Look at my protector's wife, one of the virtuous women!"

There was a great burst of laughter all round her; and the cabriolet disappeared from view. Frederick tugged impatiently at her dress, and was on the point of flying into a passion. But Cisy was there, in the same attitude as before, and, with increased assurance, he invited Rosanette to dine with him that very evening.

"Impossible!" she replied; "we're going together to the Café Anglais."

Frederick, as if he had heard nothing, remained silent; and Cisy quitted the Maréchale with a look of disappointment on his face.

While he had been talking to her at the right-hand door of the carriage, Hussonnet presented himself at the opposite side, and, catching the words "Café Anglais":

"It's a nice establishment; suppose we had a pick there, eh?"

"Just as you like," said Frederick, who, sunk down in the corner of the berlin, was gazing at the horizon as the four-wheeled cabriolet vanished from his sight, feeling that an irreparable thing had happened, and that there was an end of his great love. And the other woman was there beside him, the gay and easy love! But, worn out, full of conflicting desires, and no longer even knowing what he wanted, he was possessed by a feeling of infinite sadness, a longing to die.

A great noise of footsteps and of voices made him raise his head. The little ragamuffins assembled round the track sprang over the ropes and came to stare at the galleries. Thereupon their occupants rose to go. A few drops of rain began to fall. The crush of vehicles increased, and Hussonnet got lost in it.

"Well! so much the better!" said Frederick.

"We like to be alone better — don't we?" said the Maréchale, as she placed her hand in his.

Then there swept past him with a glitter of copper and steel a magnificent landau to which were yoked four horses driven in the Daumont style by two jockeys in velvet vests with gold fringes. Madame Dambreuse was by her husband's side, and Martinon was on the other seat facing them. All three of them gazed at Frederick in astonishment.

"They have recognised me!" said he to himself.

Rosanette wished to stop in order to get a better view of the people driving away from the course. Madame Arnoux might again make her appearance! He called out to the postilion:

"Go on! go on! forward!" And the berlin dashed towards the Champs-Élysées in the midst of the other vehicles — calashes, britzkas, wurths, tandems, tilburies, dog-carts, tilted carts with leather curtains, in which workmen in a jovial mood were singing, or one-horse chaises driven by fathers of families. In victorias crammed with people some young fellows seated on the others' feet let their legs both hang down. Large broughams, which had their seats lined with cloth, carried dowagers fast asleep, or else a splendid machine passed with a seat as simple and coquettish as a dandy's black coat.

The shower grew heavier. Umbrellas, parasols, and mackintoshes were put into requisition. People cried out at some distance away: "Good-day!" "Are you quite well?" "Yes!" "No!" "Bye-bye!" — and the faces succeeded each other with the rapidity of Chinese shadows.

Frederick and Rosanette did not say a word to each other, feeling a sort of dizziness at seeing all these wheels continually revolving close to them.

At times, the rows of carriages, too closely pressed together, stopped all at the same time in several lines. Then they remained side by side, and their occupants scanned one another. Over the sides of panels adorned with coats-of-arms indifferent glances were cast on the crowd. Eyes full of envy gleamed from the interiors of hackney-coaches. Depreciatory smiles responded to the haughty manner in which some people carried their heads. Mouths gaping wide expressed idiotic admiration; and, here and there, some lounger, in the middle of the road, fell back with a bound, in order to avoid a rider who had been galloping through the midst of the vehicles, and had succeeded in getting away from them. Then, everything set itself in motion once more; the coachmen let go the reins, and lowered their long whips; the horses, excited, shook their curb-chains, and flung foam around them; and the cruppers and the harness getting moist, were smoking with the watery evaporation, through which struggled the rays of the sinking sun. Passing under the Arc de Triomphe, there stretched out at the height of a man, a reddish light, which shed a glittering lustre on the naves of the wheels, the handles of the carriage-doors, the ends of the shafts, and the rings of the carriage-beds; and on the two sides of the great avenue — like a river in which manes, garments, and human heads were undulating — the trees, all glittering with rain, rose up like two green walls. The blue of the sky overhead, reappearing in certain places, had the soft hue of satin.

Then, Frederick recalled the days, already far away, when he yearned for the inexpressible happiness of finding himself in one of these carriages by the side of one of these women. He had attained to this bliss, and yet he was not thereby one jot the happier.

The rain had ceased falling. The pedestrians, who had sought shelter between the columns of the Public Storerooms, took their departure. Persons who had been walking along the Rue Royale, went up again towards the boulevard. In front of the residence of the Minister of Foreign Affairs a group of boobies had taken up their posts on the steps.

When it had got up as high as the Chinese Baths, as there were holes in the pavement, the berlin slackened its pace. A man in a hazel-coloured paletot was walking on the edge of the footpath. A splash, spurting out from under the springs, showed itself on his back. The man turned round in a rage. Frederick grew pale; he had recognised Deslauriers.

At the door of the Café Anglais he sent away the carriage. Rosanette had gone in before him while he was paying the postilion.

He found her subsequently on the stairs chatting with a gentleman. Frederick took her arm; but in the lobby a second gentleman stopped her.

"Go on," said she; "I am at your service."

And he entered the private room alone. Through the two open windows people could be seen at the casements of the other houses opposite. Large watery masses were quivering on the pavement as it began to dry, and a magnolia, placed on the side of a balcony, shed a perfume through the apartment. This fragrance and freshness had a relaxing effect on his nerves. He sank down on the red divan underneath the glass.

The Maréchale here entered the room, and, kissing him on the forehead:

"Poor pet! there's something annoying you!"

"Perhaps so," was his reply.

"You are not alone; take heart!" — which was as much as to say: "Let us each forget our own concerns in a bliss which we shall enjoy in common."

Then she placed the petal of a flower between her lips and extended it towards him so that he might peck at it. This movement, full of grace and of almost voluptuous gentleness, had a softening influence on Frederick.

"Why do you give me pain?" said he, thinking of Madame Arnoux.

"I give you pain?"

And, standing before him, she looked at him with her lashes drawn close together and her two hands resting on his shoulders.

All his virtue, all his rancour gave way before the utter weakness of his will.

He continued:

"Because you won't love me," and he took her on his knees.

She gave way to him. He pressed his two hands round her waist. The crackling sound of her silk dress inflamed him.

"Where are they?" said Hussonnet's voice in the lobby outside.

The Maréchale arose abruptly, and went across to the other side of the room, where she sat down with her back to the door.

She ordered oysters, and they seated themselves at table.

Hussonnet was not amusing. By dint of writing every day on all sorts of subjects, reading many newspapers, listening to a great number of discussions, and uttering paradoxes for the purpose of dazzling people, he had in the end lost the exact idea of things, blinding himself with his own feeble fireworks. The embarrassments of a life which had formerly been frivolous, but which was now full of difficulty, kept him in a state of perpetual agitation; and his impotency, which he did not wish to avow, rendered him snappish and sarcastic. Referring to a new ballet entitled *Ozai*, he gave a thorough blowing-up to the dancing, and then, when the opera was in question, he attacked the Italians, now replaced by a company of Spanish actors, "as if people had not quite enough of Castilles already!" Frederick was shocked at this, owing to his romantic attachment to Spain, and, with a view to diverting the conversation into a new channel, he enquired about the Collége of France, where Edgar Quinet and Mickiewicz had attended. But Hussonnet, an admirer of M. de Maistre, declared himself on the side of Authority and Spiritualism. Nevertheless, he had doubts about the most well-established facts, contradicted history, and disputed about things whose certainty could not be questioned; so that at mention of the word "geometry," he exclaimed: "What fudge this geometry is!" All this he intermingled with imitations of actors. Sainville was specially his model.

Frederick was quite bored by these quibbles. In an outburst of impatience he pushed his foot under the table, and pressed it on one of the little dogs.

Thereupon both animals began barking in a horrible fashion.

"You ought to get them sent home!" said he, abruptly.

Rosanette did not know anyone to whom she could intrust them.

Then, he turned round to the Bohemian:

"Look here, Hussonnet; sacrifice yourself!"

"Oh! yes, my boy! That would be a very obliging act!"

Hussonnet set off, without even requiring to have an appeal made to him.

In what way could they repay him for his kindness? Frederick did not bestow a thought on it. He was even beginning to rejoice at finding himself alone with her, when a waiter entered.

"Madame, somebody is asking for you!"

"What! again?"

"However, I must see who it is," said Rosanette.

He was thirsting for her; he wanted her. This disappearance seemed to him an act of prevarication, almost a piece of rudeness. What, then, did she mean? Was it not enough to have insulted Madame Arnoux? So much for the latter, all the same! Now he hated all women; and he felt the tears choking him, for his love had been misunderstood and his desire eluded.

The Maréchale returned, and presented Cisy to him.

"I have invited Monsieur. I have done right, have I not?"

"How is that! Oh! certainly."

Frederick, with the smile of a criminal about to be executed, beckoned to the gentleman to take a seat.

The Maréchale began to run her eye through the bill of fare, stopping at every fantastic name.

"Suppose we eat a turban of rabbits *à la Richeliéu* and a pudding *à la d'Orléans*?"

"Oh! not Orléans, pray!" exclaimed Cisy, who was a Legitimist, and thought of making a pun.

"Would you prefer a turbot *à la* Chambord?" she next asked.

Frederick was disgusted with this display of politeness.

The Maréchale made up her mind to order a simple fillet of beef cut up into steaks, some crayfishes, truffles, a pine-apple salad, and vanilla ices.

"We'll see what next. Go on for the present! Ah! I was forgetting! Bring me a sausage! — not with garlic!"

And she called the waiter "young man," struck her glass with her knife, and flung up the crumbs of her bread to the ceiling. She wished to drink some Burgundy immediately.

"It is not taken in the beginning," said Frederick.

This was sometimes done, according to the Vicomte.

"Oh! no. Never!"

"Yes, indeed; I assure you!"

"Ha! you see!"

The look with which she accompanied these words meant: "This is a rich man — pay attention to what he says!"

Meantime, the door was opening every moment; the waiters kept shouting; and on an infernal piano in the adjoining room some one was strumming a waltz. Then the races led to a discussion about horsemanship and the two rival systems. Cisy was upholding Baucher and Frederick the Comte d'Aure when Rosanette shrugged her shoulders:

"Enough — my God! — he is a better judge of these things than you are — come now!"

She kept nibbling at a pomegranate, with her elbow resting on the table. The wax-candles of the candelabrum in front of her were flickering in the wind. This white light penetrated her skin with mother-of-pearl tones, gave a pink hue to her lids, and made her eyeballs glitter. The red colour of the fruit blended with the purple of her lips; her thin nostrils heaved; and there was about her entire person an air of insolence, intoxication, and recklessness that exasperated Frederick, and yet filled his heart with wild desires.

Then, she asked, in a calm voice, who owned that big landau with chestnut-coloured livery.

Cisy replied that it was "the Comtesse Dambreuse"

"They're very rich — aren't they?"

"Oh! very rich! although Madame Dambreuse, who was merely a Mademoiselle Boutron and the daughter of a prefect, had a very modest fortune."

Her husband, on the other hand, must have inherited several estates — Cisy enumerated them: as he visited the Dambreuses, he knew their family history.

Frederick, in order to make himself disagreeable to the other, took a pleasure in contradicting him. He maintained that Madame Dambreuse's maiden name was De Boutron, which proved that she was of a noble family.

"No matter! I'd like to have her equipage!" said the Maréchale, throwing herself back on the armchair.

And the sleeve of her dress, slipping up a little, showed on her left wrist a bracelet adorned with three opals.

Frederick noticed it.

"Look here! why — — "

All three looked into one another's faces, and reddened.

The door was cautiously half-opened; the brim of a hat could be seen, and then Hussonnet's profile exhibited itself.

"Pray excuse me if I disturb the lovers!"

But he stopped, astonished at seeing Cisy, and that Cisy had taken his own seat.

Another cover was brought; and, as he was very hungry, he snatched up at random from what remained of the dinner some meat which was in a dish, fruit out of a basket, and drank with one hand while he helped himself with the other, all the time telling them the result of his mission. The two bow-wows had been taken home. Nothing fresh at the house. He had found the cook in the company of a soldier — a fictitious story which he had especially invented for the sake of effect.

The Maréchale took down her cloak from the window-screw. Frederick made a rush towards the bell, calling out to the waiter, who was some distance away:

"A carriage!"

"I have one of my own," said the Vicomte.

"But, Monsieur!"

"Nevertheless, Monsieur!"

And they stared into each other's eyes, both pale and their hands trembling.

At last, the Maréchale took Cisy's arm, and pointing towards the Bohemian seated at the table:

"Pray mind him! He's choking himself. I wouldn't care to let his devotion to my pugs be the cause of his death."

The door closed behind him.

"Well?" said Hussonnet.

"Well, what?"

"I thought — — "

"What did you think?"

"Were you not — — ?"

He completed the sentence with a gesture.

"Oh! no — never in all my life!"

Hussonnet did not press the matter further.

He had an object in inviting himself to dinner. His journal, — which was no longer called *L'Art*, but *Le Flambart*, with this epigraph, "Gunners, to your cannons!" — not being at all in a flourishing condition, he had a mind to change it into a weekly review, conducted by himself, without any assistance from Deslauriers. He again referred to the old project and explained his latest plan.

Frederick, probably not understanding what he was talking about, replied with some vague words. Hussonnet snatched up several cigars from the tables, said "Good-bye, old chap," and disappeared.

Frederick called for the bill. It had a long list of items; and the waiter, with his napkin under his arm, was expecting to be paid by Frederick, when another, a sallow-faced individual, who resembled Martinon, came and said to him:

"Beg pardon; they forgot at the bar to add in the charge for the cab."

"What cab?"

"The cab the gentleman took a short time ago for the little dogs."

And the waiter put on a look of gravity, as if he pitied the poor young man. Frederick felt inclined to box the fellow's ears. He gave the waiter the twenty francs' change as a *pour-boire*.

"Thanks, Monseigneur," said the man with the napkin, bowing low.

CHAPTER XI.

A Dinner and a Duel.

Frederick passed the whole of the next day in brooding over his anger and humiliation. He reproached himself for not having given a slap in the face to Cisy. As for the Maréchale, he swore not to see her again. Others as good-looking could be easily found; and, as money would be required in order to possess these women, he would speculate on the Bourse with the purchase-money of his farm. He would get rich; he would crush the Maréchale and everyone else with his luxury. When the evening had come, he was surprised at not having thought of Madame Arnoux.

"So much the better. What's the good of it?"

Two days after, at eight o'clock, Pellerin came to pay him a visit. He began by expressing his admiration of the furniture and talking in a wheedling tone. Then, abruptly:

"You were at the races on Sunday?"

"Yes, alas!"

Thereupon the painter decried the anatomy of English horses, and praised the horses of Gericourt and the horses of the Parthenon.

"Rosanette was with you?"

And he artfully proceeded to speak in flattering terms about her.

Frederick's freezing manner put him a little out of countenance.

He did not know how to bring about the question of her portrait. His first idea had been to do a portrait in the style of Titian. But gradually the varied colouring of his model had bewitched him; he had gone on boldly with the work, heaping up paste on paste and light on light. Rosanette, in the beginning, was enchanted. Her appointments with Delmar had interrupted the sittings, and left Pellerin all the time to get bedazzled. Then, as his admiration began to subside, he asked himself whether the picture might not be on a larger scale. He had gone to have another look at the Titians, realised how the great artist had filled in his portraits with such finish, and saw wherein his own shortcomings lay; and then he began to go over the outlines again in the most simple fashion. After that, he sought, by scraping them off, to lose there, to mingle there, all the tones of the head and those of the background; and the face had assumed consistency and the shades vigour — the whole work had a look of greater firmness. At length the Maréchale came back again. She even indulged in some hostile criticisms. The painter naturally persevered in his own course. After getting into a violent painter naturally persevered in his own course. After getting into a violent passion at her silliness, he said to himself that, after all, perhaps she was right. Then began the era of doubts, twinges of reflection which brought about cramps in the stomach, insomnia, feverishness and disgust with himself. He had the courage to make some retouchings, but without much heart, and with a feeling that his work was bad.

He complained merely of having been refused a place in the Salon; then he reproached Frederick for not having come to see the Maréchale's portrait.

"What do I care about the Maréchale?"

Such an expression of unconcern emboldened the artist.

"Would you believe that this brute has no interest in the thing any longer?"

What he did not mention was that he had asked her for a thousand crowns. Now the Maréchale did not give herself much bother about ascertaining who was going to pay, and, preferring to screw money out of Arnoux for things of a more urgent character, had not even spoken to him on the subject.

"Well, and Arnoux?"

She had thrown it over on him. The ex-picture-dealer wished to have nothing to do with the portrait.

"He maintains that it belongs to Rosanette."

"In fact, it is hers."

"How is that? 'Tis she that sent me to you," was Pellerin's answer.

If he had been thinking of the excellence of his work, he would not have dreamed perhaps of making capital out of it. But a sum — and a big sum — would be an effective reply to the critics, and would strengthen his own position. Finally, to get rid of his importunities, Frederick courteously enquired his terms.

The extravagant figure named by Pellerin quite took away his breath, and he replied:

"Oh! no — no!"

"You, however, are her lover — 'tis you gave me the order!"

"Excuse me, I was only an intermediate agent."

"But I can't remain with this on my hands!"

The artist lost his temper.

"Ha! I didn't imagine you were so covetous!"

"Nor I that you were so stingy! I wish you good morning!"

He had just gone out when Sénécal made his appearance.

Frederick was moving about restlessly, in a state of great agitation.

"What's the matter?"

Sénécal told his story.

"On Saturday, at nine o'clock, Madame Arnoux got a letter which summoned her back to Paris. As there happened to be nobody in the place at the time to go to Creil for a vehicle, she asked me to go there myself. I refused, for this was no part of my duties. She left, and came back on Sunday evening. Yesterday morning, Arnoux came down to the works. The girl from Bordeaux made a complaint to him. I don't know what passed between them; but he took off before everyone the fine I had imposed on her. Some sharp words passed between us. In short, he closed accounts with me, and here I am!"

Then, with a pause between every word:

"Furthermore, I am not sorry. I have done my duty. No matter — you were the cause of it."

"How?" exclaimed Frederick, alarmed lest Sénécal might have guessed his secret.

Sénécal had not, however, guessed anything about it, for he replied:

"That is to say, but for you I might have done better."

Frederick was seized with a kind of remorse.

"In what way can I be of service to you now?"

Sénécal wanted some employment, a situation.

"That is an easy thing for you to manage. You know many people of good position, Monsieur Dambreuse amongst others; at least, so Deslauriers told me."

This allusion to Deslauriers was by no means agreeable to his friend. He scarcely cared to call on the Dambreuses again after his undesirable meeting with them in the Champ de Mars.

"I am not on sufficiently intimate terms with them to recommend anyone."

The democrat endured this refusal stoically, and after a minute's silence:

"All this, I am sure, is due to the girl from Bordeaux, and to your Madame Arnoux."

This "your" had the effect of wiping out of Frederick's heart the slight modicum of regard he entertained for Sénécal. Nevertheless, he stretched out his hand towards the key of his escritoire through delicacy.

Sénécal anticipated him:

"Thanks!"

Then, forgetting his own troubles, he talked about the affairs of the nation, the crosses of the Legion of Honour wasted at the Royal Fête, the question of a change of ministry, the Drouillard case and the Bénier case — scandals of the day — declaimed against the middle class, and predicted a revolution.

His eyes were attracted by a Japanese dagger hanging on the wall. He took hold of it; then he flung it on the sofa with an air of disgust.

"Come, then! good-bye! I must go to Nôtre Dame de Lorette."

"Hold on! Why?"

"The anniversary service for Godefroy Cavaignac is taking place there to-day.

He died at work — that man! But all is not over. Who knows?"

And Sénécal, with a show of fortitude, put out his hand:

"Perhaps we shall never see each other again! good-bye!"

This "good-bye," repeated several times, his knitted brows as he gazed at the dagger, his resignation, and the solemnity of his manner, above all, plunged Frederick into a thoughtful mood, but very soon he ceased to think about Sénécal.

During the same week, his notary at Havre sent him the sum realised by the sale of his farm — one hundred and seventy-four thousand francs. He divided it into two portions, invested the first half in the Funds, and brought the second half to a stock-broker to take his chance of making money by it on the Bourse.

He dined at fashionable taverns, went to the theatres, and was trying to amuse himself as best he could, when Hussonnet addressed a letter to him announcing in a gay fashion that the Maréchale had got rid of Cisy the very day after the races. Frederick was delighted at this intelligence, without taking the trouble to ascertain what the Bohemian's motive was in giving him the information.

It so happened that he met Cisy, three days later. That aristocratic young gentleman kept his counteance, and even invited Frederick to dine on the following Wednesday.

On the morning of that day, the latter received a notification from a process-server, in which M. Charles Jean Baptiste Oudry apprised him that by the terms of a legal judgment he had become the purchaser of a property situated at Belleville, belonging to M. Jacques Arnoux, and that he was ready to pay the two hundred and twenty-three thousand for which it had been sold. But, as it appeared by the same decree that the amount of the mortgages with which the estate was encumbered exceeded the purchase-money, Frederick's claim would in consequence be completely forfeited.

The entire mischief arose from not having renewed the registration of the mortgage within the proper time. Arnoux had undertaken to attend to this matter formally himself, and had then forgotten all about it. Frederick got into a rage with him for this, and when the young man's anger had passed off:

"Well, afterwards — — what?"

"If this can save him, so much the better. It won't kill me! Let us think no more about it!"

But, while moving about his papers on the table, he came across Hussonnet's letter, and noticed the postscript, which had not at first attracted his attention. The Bohemian wanted just five thousand francs to give the journal a start.

"Ah! this fellow is worrying me to death!"

And he sent a curt answer, unceremoniously refusing the application. After that, he dressed himself to go to the Maison d'Or.

Cisy introduced his guests, beginning with the most respectable of them, a big, white-haired gentleman.

"The Marquis Gilbert des Aulnays, my godfather. Monsieur Anselme de Forchambeaux," he said next — (a thin, fair-haired young man, already bald); then, pointing towards a simple-mannered man of forty: "Joseph Boffreu, my cousin; and here is my old tutor, Monsieur Vezou" — a person who seemed a mixture of a ploughman and a seminarist, with large whiskers and a long frock-coat fastened at the end by a single button, so that it fell over his chest like a shawl.

Cisy was expecting some one else — the Baron de Comaing, who "might perhaps come, but it was not certain." He left the room every minute, and appeared to be in a restless frame of mind. Finally, at eight o'clock, they proceeded towards an apartment splendidly lighted up and much more spacious than the number of guests required. Cisy had selected it for the special purpose of display.

A vermilion épergne laden with flowers and fruit occupied the centre of the table, which was covered with silver dishes, after the old French fashion; glass bowls full of salt meats and spices formed a border all around it. Jars of iced red wine stood at regular distances from each other. Five glasses of different sizes were ranged before each plate, with things of which the use could not be divined — a thousand dinner utensils of an ingenious description. For the first course alone, there was a sturgeon's jowl moistened with champagne, a Yorkshire ham with tokay, thrushes with sauce, roast quail, a béchamel vol-au-vent, a stew of red-legged partridges, and at the two ends of all this, fringes of potatoes which were mingled with truffles. The apartment was illuminated by a lustre and some girandoles, and it was hung with red damask curtains.

Four men-servants in black coats stood behind the armchairs, which were upholstered in morocco. At this sight the guests uttered an exclamation — the tutor more emphatically than the rest.

"Upon my word, our host has indulged in a foolishly lavish display of luxury. It is too beautiful!"

"Is that so?" said the Vicomte de Cisy; "Come on, then!"

And, as they were swallowing the first spoonful:

"Well, my dear old friend Aulnays, have you been to the Palais-Royal to see *Père et Portier*?"

"You know well that I have no time to go!" replied the Marquis.

His mornings were taken up with a course of arboriculture, his evenings were spent at the Agricultural Club, and all his afternoons were occupied by a study of the implements of husbandry in manufactories. As he resided at Saintonge for three fourths of the year, he took advantage of his visits to the capital to get fresh information; and his large-brimmed hat, which lay on a side-table, was crammed with pamphlets.

But Cisy, observing that M. de Forchambeaux refused to take wine:

"Go on, damn it, drink! You're not in good form for your last bachelor's meal!"

At this remark all bowed and congratulated him.

"And the young lady," said the tutor, "is charming, I'm sure?"

"Faith, she is!" exclaimed Cisy. "No matter, he is making a mistake; marriage is such a stupid thing!"

"You talk in a thoughtless fashion, my friend!" returned M. des Aulnays, while tears began to gather in his eyes at the recollection of his own dead wife.

And Forchambeaux repeated several times in succession:

"It will be your own case — it will be your own case!"

Cisy protested. He preferred to enjoy himself — to "live in the free-and-easy style of the Regency days." He wanted to learn the shoe-trick, in order to visit the thieves' taverns of the city, like Rodolphe in the *Mysteries of Paris*; drew out of his pocket a dirty clay pipe, abused the servants, and drank a great quantity; then, in order to create a good impression about himself, he disparaged all the dishes. He even sent away the truffles; and the tutor, who was exceedingly fond of them, said through servility;

"These are not as good as your grandmother's snow-white eggs."

Then he began to chat with the person sitting next to him, the agriculturist, who found many advantages from his sojourn in the country, if it were only to be able to bring up his daughters with simple tastes. The tutor approved of his ideas and toadied to him, supposing that this gentleman possessed influence over his former pupil, whose man of business he was anxious to become.

Frederick had come there filled with hostility to Cisy; but the young aristocrat's idiocy had disarmed him. However, as the other's gestures, face, and entire person brought back to his recollection the dinner at the Café Anglais, he got more and more irritated; and he lent his ears to the complimentary remarks made in a low tone by Joseph, the cousin, a fine young fellow without any money, who was a lover of the chase and a University prizeman. Cisy, for the sake of a laugh, called him a "catcher"[A] several times; then suddenly:

"Ha! here comes the Baron!"

At that moment, there entered a jovial blade of thirty, with somewhat rough-looking features and active limbs, wearing his hat over his ear and displaying a flower in his button-hole. He was the Vicomte's ideal. The young aristocrat was delighted at having him there; and stimulated by his presence, he even attempted a pun; for he said, as they passed a heath-cock:

"There's the best of La Bruyère's characters!"[B]

After that, he put a heap of questions to M. de Comaing about persons unknown to society; then, as if an idea had suddenly seized him:

"Tell me, pray! have you thought about me?"

The other shrugged his shoulders:

"You are not old enough, my little man. It is impossible!"

Cisy had begged of the Baron to get him admitted into his club. But the other having, no doubt, taken pity on his vanity:

"Ha! I was forgetting! A thousand congratulations on having won your bet, my dear fellow!"

"What bet?"

"The bet you made at the races to effect an entrance the same evening into that lady's house."

Frederick felt as if he had got a lash with a whip. He was speedily appeased by the look of utter confusion in Cisy's face.

In fact, the Maréchale, next morning, was filled with regret when Arnoux, her first lover, her good friend, had presented himself that very day. They both gave the Vicomte to understand that he was in the way, and kicked him out without much ceremony.

He pretended not to have heard what was said.

The Baron went on:

"What has become of her, this fine Rose? Is she as pretty as ever?" showing by his manner that he had been on terms of intimacy with her.

Frederick was chagrined by the discovery.

"There's nothing to blush at," said the Baron, pursuing the topic, "'tis a good thing!"

Cisy smacked his tongue.

"Whew! not so good!"

"Ha!"

"Oh dear, yes! In the first place, I found her nothing extraordinary, and then, you pick up the like of her as often as you please, for, in fact, she is for sale!"

"Not for everyone!" remarked Frederick, with some bitterness.

"He imagines that he is different from the others," was Cisy's comment. "What a good joke!"

And a laugh ran round the table.

Frederick felt as if the palpitations of his heart would suffocate him. He swallowed two glasses of water one after the other.

But the Baron had preserved a lively recollection of Rosanette.

"Is she still interested in a fellow named Arnoux?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," said Cisy, "I don't know that gentleman!"

Nevertheless, he suggested that he believed Arnoux was a sort of swindler.

"A moment!" exclaimed Frederick.

"However, there is no doubt about it! Legal proceedings have been taken against him."

"That is not true!"

Frederick began to defend Arnoux, vouched for his honesty, ended by convincing himself of it, and concocted figures and proofs. The Vicomte, full of spite, and tipsy in addition, persisted in his assertions, so that Frederick said to him gravely:

"Is the object of this to give offence to me, Monsieur?"

And he looked Cisy full in the face, with eyeballs as red as his cigar.

"Oh! not at all. I grant you that he possesses something very nice — his wife."

"Do you know her?"

"Faith, I do! Sophie Arnoux; everyone knows her."

"You mean to tell me that?"

Cisy, who had staggered to his feet, hiccoughed:

"Everyone — knows — her."

"Hold your tongue. It is not with women of her sort you keep company!"

"I — flatter myself — it is."

Frederick flung a plate at his face. It passed like a flash of lightning over the table, knocked down two bottles, demolished a fruit-dish, and breaking into three pieces, by knocking against the épergne, hit the Vicomte in the stomach.

All the other guests arose to hold him back. He struggled and shrieked, possessed by a kind of frenzy.

M. des Aulnays kept repeating:

"Come, be calm, my dear boy!"

"Why, this is frightful!" shouted the tutor.

Forchambeaux, livid as a plum, was trembling. Joseph indulged in repeated outbursts of laughter. The attendants sponged out the traces of the wine, and gathered up the remains of the dinner from the floor; and the Baron went and shut the window, for the uproar, in spite of the noise of carriage-wheels, could be heard on the boulevard.

As all present at the moment the plate had been flung had been talking at the same time, it was impossible to discover the cause of the attack — whether it was on account of Arnoux, Madame Arnoux, Rosanette, or somebody else. One thing only they were certain of, that Frederick had acted with indescribable thing only they were certain of, that Frederick had acted with indescribable brutality. On his part, he refused positively to testify the slightest regret for what he had done.

M. des Aulnays tried to soften him. Cousin Joseph, the tutor, and Forchambeaux himself joined in the effort. The Baron, all this time, was cheering up Cisy, who, yielding to nervous weakness, began to shed tears.

Frederick, on the contrary, was getting more and more angry, and they would have remained there till daybreak if the Baron had not said, in order to bring matters to a close:

"The Vicomte, Monsieur, will send his seconds to call on you to-morrow."

"Your hour?"

"Twelve, if it suits you."

"Perfectly, Monsieur."

Frederick, as soon as he was in the open air, drew a deep breath. He had been keeping his feelings too long under restraint; he had satisfied them at last. He felt, so to speak, the pride of virility, a superabundance of energy within him which intoxicated him. He required two seconds. The first person he thought of for the purpose was Regimbart, and he immediately directed his steps towards the Rue Saint-Denis. The shop-front was closed, but some light shone through a pane of glass over the door. It opened and he went in, stooping very low as he passed under the penthouse.

A candle at the side of the bar lighted up the deserted smoking-room. All the stools, with their feet in the air, were piled on the table. The master and mistress, with their waiter, were at supper in a corner near the kitchen; and Regimbart, with his hat on his head, was sharing their meal, and even disturbed the waiter, who was compelled every moment to turn aside a little. Frederick, having briefly explained the matter to him, asked Regimbart to assist him. The Citizen at first made no reply. He rolled his eyes about, looked as if he were plunged in reflection, took several strides around the room, and at last said:

"Yes, by all means!" and a homicidal smile smoothed his brow when he learned that the adversary was a nobleman.

"Make your mind easy; we'll rout him with flying colours! In the first place, with the sword — — "

"But perhaps," broke in Frederick, "I have not the right."

"I tell you 'tis necessary to take the sword," the Citizen replied roughly. "Do you know how to make passes?"

"A little."

"Oh! a little. This is the way with all of them; and yet they have a mania for committing assaults. What does the fencing-school teach? Listen to me: keep a good distance off, always confining yourself in circles, and parry — parry as you retire; that is permitted. Tire him out. Then boldly make a lunge on him! and, above all, no malice, no strokes of the La Fougère kind.[C] No! a simple one-two, and some disengagements. Look here! do you see? while you turn your wrist as if opening a lock. Père Vauthier, give me your cane. Ha! that will do."

He grasped the rod which was used for lighting the gas, rounded his left arm, bent his right, and began to make some thrusts against the partition. He stamped with his foot, got animated, and pretended to be encountering difficulties, while he exclaimed: "Are you there? Is that it? Are you there?" and his enormous silhouette projected itself on the wall with his hat apparently touching the ceiling. The owner of the café shouted from time to time: "Bravo! very good!" His wife, though a little unnerved, was likewise filled with admiration; and Théodore, who had been in the army, remained riveted to the spot with amazement, the fact being, however, that he regarded M. Regimbart with a species of hero-worship.

Next morning, at an early hour, Frederick hurried to the establishment in which Dussardier was employed. After having passed through a succession of departments all full of clothing-materials, either adorning shelves or lying on tables, while here and there shawls were fixed on wooden racks shaped like toadstools, he saw the young man, in a sort of railed cage, surrounded by account-books, and standing in front of a desk at which he was writing. The honest fellow left his work.

The seconds arrived before twelve o'clock.

Frederick, as a matter of good taste, thought he ought not to be present at the conference.

The Baron and M. Joseph declared that they would be satisfied with the simplest excuses. But Regimbart's principle being never to yield, and his contention being that Arnoux's honour should be vindicated (Frederick had not spoken to him about anything else), he asked that the Vicomte should apologise. M. de Comaing was indignant at this presumption. The Citizen would not abate an inch. As all conciliation proved impracticable, there was nothing for it but to fight.

Other difficulties arose, for the choice of weapons lay with Cisy, as the person to whom the insult had been offered. But Regimbart maintained that by sending the challenge he had constituted himself the offending party. His seconds loudly protested that a buffet was the most cruel of offences. The Citizen carped at the words, pointing out that a buffet was not a blow. Finally, they decided to refer the matter to a military man; and the four seconds went off to consult the officers in some of the barracks.

They drew up at the barracks on the Quai d'Orsay. M. de Comaing, having accosted two captains, explained to them the question in dispute.

The captains did not understand a word of what he was saying, owing to the confusion caused by the Citizen's incidental remarks. In short, they advised the gentlemen who consulted them to draw up a minute of the proceedings; after which they would give their decision. Thereupon, they repaired to a café; and they even, in order to do things with more circumspection, referred to Cisy as H, and Frederick as K.

Then they returned to the barracks. The officers had gone out. They reappeared, and declared that the choice of arms manifestly belonged to H.

They all returned to Cisy's abode. Regimbart and Dussardier remained on the footpath outside.

The Vicomte, when he was informed of the solution of the case, was seized with such extreme agitation that they had to repeat for him several times the decision of the officers; and, when M. de Comaing came to deal with Regimbart's contention, he murmured "Nevertheless," not being very reluctant himself to yield to it. Then he let himself sink into an armchair, and declared that he would not fight.

"Eh? What?" said the Baron. Then Cisy indulged in a confused flood of mouthings. He wished to fight with firearms — to discharge a single pistol at close quarters.

"Or else we will put arsenic into a glass, and draw lots to see who must drink it. That's sometimes done. I've read of it!"

The Baron, naturally rather impatient, addressed him in a harsh tone:

"These gentlemen are waiting for your answer. This is indecent, to put it shortly. What weapons are you going to take? Come! is it the sword?"

The Vicomte gave an affirmative reply by merely nodding his head; and it was arranged that the meeting should take place next morning at seven o'clock sharp at the Maillot gate.

Dussardier, being compelled to go back to his business, Regimbart went to inform Frederick about the arrangement. He had been left all day without any news, and his impatience was becoming intolerable.

"So much the better!" he exclaimed.

The Citizen was satisfied with his deportment.

"Would you believe it? They wanted an apology from us. It was nothing — a mere word! But I knocked them off their beam-ends nicely. The right thing to do, wasn't it?"

"Undoubtedly," said Frederick, thinking that it would have been better to choose another second.

Then, when he was alone, he repeated several times in a very loud tone:

"I am going to fight! Hold on, I am going to fight! 'Tis funny!"

And, as he walked up and down his room, while passing in front of the mirror, he noticed that he was pale.

"Have I any reason to be afraid?"

He was seized with a feeling of intolerable misery at the prospect of exhibiting fear on the ground.

"And yet, suppose I happen to be killed? My father met his death the same way. Yes, I shall be killed!"

And, suddenly, his mother rose up before him in a black dress; incoherent images floated before his mind. His own cowardice exasperated him. A paroxysm of courage, a thirst for human blood, took possession of him. A battalion could not have made him retreat. When this feverish excitement had cooled down, he was overjoyed to feel that his nerves were perfectly steady. In order to divert his thoughts, he went to the opera, where a ballet was being performed. He listened to the music, looked at the *danseuses* through his opera-glass, and drank a glass of punch between the acts. But when he got home again, the sight of his study, of his furniture, in the midst of which he found himself for the last time, made him feel ready to swoon.

He went down to the garden. The stars were shining; he gazed up at them. The idea of fighting about a woman gave him a greater importance in his own eyes, and surrounded him with a halo of nobility. Then he went to bed in a tranquil frame of mind.

It was not so with Cisy. After the Baron's departure, Joseph had tried to revive his drooping spirits, and, as the Vicomte remained in the same dull mood:

"However, old boy, if you prefer to remain at home, I'll go and say so."

Cisy durst not answer "Certainly;" but he would have liked his cousin to do him this service without speaking about it.

He wished that Frederick would die during the night of an attack of apoplexy, or that a riot would break out so that next morning there would be enough of barricades to shut up all the approaches to the Bois de Boulogne, or that some emergency might prevent one of the seconds from being present; for in the absence of seconds the duel would fall through. He felt a longing to save himself by taking an express train — no matter where. He regretted that he did not understand medicine so as to be able to take something which, without endangering his life, would cause it to be believed that he was dead. He finally wished to be ill in earnest.

In order to get advice and assistance from someone, he sent for M. des Aulnays. That worthy man had gone back to Saintonge on receiving a letter informing him of the illness of one of his daughters. This appeared an ominous circumstance to Cisy. Luckily, M. Vezou, his tutor, came to see him. Then he unbosomed himself.

"What am I to do? my God! what am I do?"

"If I were in your place, Monsieur, I should pay some strapping fellow from the market-place to go and give him a drubbing."

"He would still know who brought it about," replied Cisy.

And from time to time he uttered a groan; then:

"But is a man bound to fight a duel?"

"'Tis a relic of barbarism! What are you to do?"

Out of complaisance the pedagogue invited himself to dinner. His pupil did not eat anything, but, after the meal, felt the necessity of taking a short walk.

As they were passing a church, he said:

"Suppose we go in for a little while — to look?"

M. Vezou asked nothing better, and even offered him holy water.

It was the month of May. The altar was covered with flowers; voices were chanting; the organ was resounding through the church. But he found it impossible to pray, as the pomps of religion inspired him merely with thoughts of funerals. He fancied that he could hear the murmurs of the *De Profundis*.

"Let us go away. I don't feel well."

They spent the whole night playing cards. The Vicomte made an effort to lose in order to exorcise ill-luck, a thing which M. Vezou turned to his own advantage. At last, at the first streak of dawn, Cisy, who could stand it no longer, sank down on the green cloth, and was soon plunged in sleep, which was disturbed by unpleasant dreams.

If courage, however, consists in wishing to get the better of one's own weakness, the Vicomte was courageous, for in the presence of his seconds, who came to seek him, he stiffened himself up with all the strength he could command, vanity making him realise that to attempt to draw back now would destroy him. M. de Comaing congratulated him on his good appearance.

But, on the way, the jolting of the cab and the heat of the morning sun made him languish. His energy gave way again. He could not even distinguish any longer where they were. The Baron amused himself by increasing his terror, talking about the "corpse," and of the way they meant to get back clandestinely to the city. Joseph gave the rejoinder; both, considering the affair ridiculous, were certain that it would be settled.

Cisy kept his head on his breast; he lifted it up slowly, and drew attention to the fact that they had not taken a doctor with them.

"'Tis needless," said the Baron.

"Then there's no danger?"

"Then there's no danger?"

Joseph answered in a grave tone:

"Let us hope so!"

And nobody in the carriage made any further remark.

At ten minutes past seven they arrived in front of the Maillot gate. Frederick and his seconds were there, the entire group being dressed all in black. Regimbart, instead of a cravat, wore a stiff horsehair collar, like a trooper; and he carried a long violin-case adapted for adventures of this kind. They exchanged frigid bows. Then they all plunged into the Bois de Boulogne, taking the Madrid road, in order to find a suitable place.

Regimbart said to Frederick, who was walking between him and Dussardier:

"Well, and this scare — what do we care about it? If you want anything, don't annoy yourself about it; I know what to do. Fear is natural to man!"

Then, in a low tone:

"Don't smoke any more; in this case it has a weakening effect."

Frederick threw away his cigar, which had only a disturbing effect on his brain, and went on with a firm step. The Vicomte advanced behind, leaning on the arms of his two seconds. Occasional wayfarers crossed their path. The sky was blue, and from time to time they heard rabbits skipping about. At the turn of a path, a woman in a Madras neckerchief was chatting with a man in a blouse; and in the large avenue under the chestnut-trees some grooms in vests of linen-cloth were walking horses up and down.

Cisy recalled the happy days when, mounted on his own chestnut horse, and with his glass stuck in his eye, he rode up to carriage-doors. These recollections intensified his wretchedness. An intolerable thirst parched his throat. The buzzing of flies mingled with the throbbing of his arteries. His feet sank into the sand. It seemed to him as if he had been walking during a period which had neither beginning nor end.

The seconds, without stopping, examined with keen glances each side of the path they were traversing. They hesitated as to whether they would go to the Catelan Cross or under the walls of the Bagatelle. At last they took a turn to the right; and they drew up in a kind of quincunx in the midst of the pine-trees.

The spot was chosen in such a way that the level ground was cut equally into two divisions. The two places at which the principals in the duel were to take their stand were marked out. Then Regimbart opened his case. It was lined with red sheep's-leather, and contained four charming swords hollowed in the centre, with handles which were adorned with filigree. A ray of light, passing through the leaves, fell on them, and they appeared to Cisy to glitter like silver vipers on a sea of blood.

The Citizen showed that they were of equal length. He took one himself, in

The Citizen showed that they were of equal length. He took one himself, in order to separate the combatants in case of necessity. M. de Comaing held a walking-stick. There was an interval of silence. They looked at each other. All the faces had in them something fierce or cruel.

Frederick had taken off his coat and his waistcoat. Joseph aided Cisy to do the same. When his cravat was removed a blessed medal could be seen on his neck. This made Regimbart smile contemptuously.

Then M. de Comaing (in order to allow Frederick another moment for reflection) tried to raise some quibbles. He demanded the right to put on a glove, and to catch hold of his adversary's sword with the left hand. Regimbart, who was in a hurry, made no objection to this. At last the Baron, addressing Frederick:

"Everything depends on you, Monsieur! There is never any dishonour in acknowledging one's faults."

Dussardier made a gesture of approval. The Citizen gave vent to his indignation:

"Do you think we came here as a mere sham, damn it! Be on your guard, each of you!"

The combatants were facing one another, with their seconds by their sides.

He uttered the single word:

"Come!"

Cisy became dreadfully pale. The end of his blade was quivering like a horsewhip. His head fell back, his hands dropped down helplessly, and he sank unconscious on the ground. Joseph raised him up and while holding a scent-bottle to his nose, gave him a good shaking.

The Vicomte reopened his eyes, then suddenly grasped at his sword like a madman. Frederick had held his in readiness, and now awaited him with steady eye and uplifted hand.

"Stop! stop!" cried a voice, which came from the road simultaneously with the sound of a horse at full gallop, and the hood of a cab broke the branches. A man bending out his head waved a handkerchief, still exclaiming:

"Stop! stop!"

M. de Comaing, believing that this meant the intervention of the police, lifted up his walking-stick.

"Make an end of it. The Vicomte is bleeding!"

"I?" said Cisy.

In fact, he had in his fall taken off the skin of his left thumb.

"But this was by falling," observed the Citizen.

The Baron pretended not to understand.

Arnoux had jumped out of the cab

Arnoux had jumped out of the cab.

"I have arrived too late? No! Thanks be to God!"

He threw his arms around Frederick, felt him, and covered his face with kisses.

"I am the cause of it. You wanted to defend your old friend! That's right — that's right! Never shall I forget it! How good you are! Ah! my own dear boy!"

He gazed at Frederick and shed tears, while he chuckled with delight. The Baron turned towards Joseph:

"I believe we are in the way at this little family party. It is over, messieurs, is it not? Vicomte, put your arm into a sling. Hold on! here is my silk handkerchief."

Then, with an imperious gesture: "Come! no spite! This is as it should be!"

The two adversaries shook hands in a very lukewarm fashion. The Vicomte, M. de Comaing, and Joseph disappeared in one direction, and Frederick left with his friends in the opposite direction.

As the Madrid Restaurant was not far off, Arnoux proposed that they should go and drink a glass of beer there.

"We might even have breakfast."

But, as Dussardier had no time to lose, they confined themselves to taking some refreshment in the garden.

They all experienced that sense of satisfaction which follows happy *dénouements*. The Citizen, nevertheless, was annoyed at the duel having been interrupted at the most critical stage.

Arnoux had been apprised of it by a person named Compain, a friend of Regimbart; and with an irrepressible outburst of emotion he had rushed to the spot to prevent it, under the impression, however, that he was the occasion of it. He begged of Frederick to furnish him with some details about it. Frederick, touched by these proofs of affection, felt some scruples at the idea of increasing his misapprehension of the facts.

"For mercy's sake, don't say any more about it!"

Arnoux thought that this reserve showed great delicacy. Then, with his habitual levity, he passed on to some fresh subject.

"What news, Citizen?"

And they began talking about banking transactions, and the number of bills that were falling due. In order to be more undisturbed, they went to another table, where they exchanged whispered confidences.

Frederick could overhear the following words: "You are going to back me up with your signature." "Yes, but you, mind!" "I have negotiated it at last for three hundred!" "A nice commission, faith!"

In short, it was clear that Arnoux was mixed up in a great many shady

In short, it was clear that Arnoux was mixed up in a great many shady transactions with the Citizen.

Frederick thought of reminding him about the fifteen thousand francs. But his last step forbade the utterance of any reproachful words even of the mildest description. Besides, he felt tired himself, and this was not a convenient place for talking about such a thing. He put it off till some future day.

Arnoux, seated in the shade of an evergreen, was smoking, with a look of joviality in his face. He raised his eyes towards the doors of private rooms looking out on the garden, and said he had often paid visits to the house in former days.

"Probably not by yourself?" returned the Citizen.

"Faith, you're right there!"

"What blackguardism you do carry on! you, a married man!"

"Well, and what about yourself?" retorted Arnoux; and, with an indulgent smile: "I am even sure that this rascal here has a room of his own somewhere into which he takes his friends."

The Citizen confessed that this was true by simply shrugging his shoulders. Then these two gentlemen entered into their respective tastes with regard to the sex: Arnoux now preferred youth, work-girls; Regimbart hated affected women, and went in for the genuine article before anything else. The conclusion which the earthenware-dealer laid down at the close of this discussion was that women were not to be taken seriously.

"Nevertheless, he is fond of his own wife," thought Frederick, as he made his way home; and he looked on Arnoux as a coarse-grained man. He had a grudge against him on account of the duel, as if it had been for the sake of this individual that he risked his life a little while before.

But he felt grateful to Dussardier for his devotedness. Ere long the book-keeper came at his invitation to pay him a visit every day.

Frederick lent him books — Thiers, Dulaure, Barante, and Lamartine's *Girondins*.

The honest fellow listened to everything the other said with a thoughtful air, and accepted his opinions as those of a master.

One evening he arrived looking quite scared.

That morning, on the boulevard, a man who was running so quickly that he had got out of breath, had jostled against him, and having recognised in him a friend of Sénécal, had said to him:

"He has just been taken! I am making my escape!"

There was no doubt about it. Dussardier had spent the day making enquiries. Sénécal was in jail charged with an attempted crime of a political nature.

The son of an overseer, he was born at Lyons, and having had as his teacher a former disciple of Chalier, he had, on his arrival in Paris, obtained admission into the "Society of Families." His ways were known, and the police kept a watch on him. He was one of those who fought in the outbreak of May, 1839, and since then he had remained in the shade; but, his self-importance increasing more and more, he became a fanatical follower of Alibaud, mixing up his own grievances against society with those of the people against monarchy, and waking up every morning in the hope of a revolution which in a fortnight or a month would turn the world upside down. At last, disgusted at the inactivity of his brethren, enraged at the obstacles that retarded the realisation of his dreams, and despairing of the country, he entered in his capacity of chemist into the conspiracy for the use of incendiary bombs; and he had been caught carrying gunpowder, of which he was going to make a trial at Montmartre — a supreme effort to establish the Republic.

Dussardier was no less attached to the Republican idea, for, from his point of view, it meant enfranchisement and universal happiness. One day — at the age of fifteen — in the Rue Transnonain, in front of a grocer's shop, he had seen soldiers' bayonets reddened with blood and exhibiting human hairs pasted to the butt-ends of their guns. Since that time, the Government had filled him with feelings of rage as the very incarnation of injustice. He frequently confused the assassins with the gendarmes; and in his eyes a police-spy was just as bad as a parricide. All the evil scattered over the earth he ingenuously attributed to Power; and he hated it with a deep-rooted, undying hatred that held possession of his heart and made his sensibility all the more acute. He had been dazzled by Sénécal's declamations. It was of little consequence whether he happened to be guilty or not, or whether the attempt with which he was charged could be characterised as an odious proceeding! Since he was the victim of Authority, it was only right to help him.

"The Peers will condemn him, certainly! Then he will be conveyed in a prison-van, like a convict, and will be shut up in Mont Saint-Michel, where the Government lets people die! Austen had gone mad! Steuben had killed himself! In order to transfer Barbès into a dungeon, they had dragged him by the legs and by the hair. They trampled on his body, and his head rebounded along the staircase at every step they took. What abominable treatment! The wretches!"

He was choking with angry sobs, and he walked about the apartment in a very excited frame of mind.

"In the meantime, something must be done! Come, for my part, I don't know what to do! Suppose we tried to rescue him, eh? While they are bringing him to the Luxembourg, we could throw ourselves on the escort in the passage! A dozen resolute men — that sometimes is enough to accomplish it!"

There was so much fire in his eyes that Frederick was a little startled by his look. He recalled to mind Sénécal's sufferings and his austere life. Without feeling the same enthusiasm about him as Dussardier, he experienced nevertheless that admiration which is inspired by every man who sacrifices himself for an idea. He said to himself that, if he had helped this man, he would not be in his present position; and the two friends anxiously sought to devise some contrivance whereby they could set him free.

It was impossible for them to get access to him.

Frederick examined the newspapers to try to find out what had become of him, and for three weeks he was a constant visitor at the reading-rooms.

One day several numbers of the *Flambard* fell into his hands. The leading article was invariably devoted to cutting up some distinguished man. After that came some society gossip and some scandals. Then there were some chaffing observations about the Odéon Carpentras, pisciculture, and prisoners under sentence of death, when there happened to be any. The disappearance of a packet-boat furnished materials for a whole year's jokes. In the third column a picture-canvasser, under the form of anecdotes or advice, gave some tailors' announcements, together with accounts of evening parties, advertisements as to auctions, and analysis of artistic productions, writing in the same strain about a volume of verse and a pair of boots. The only serious portion of it was the criticism of the small theatres, in which fierce attacks were made on two or three managers; and the interests of art were invoked on the subjects of the decorations of the Rope-dancers' Gymnasium and of the actress who played the part of the heroine at the Délassements.

Frederick was passing over all these items when his eyes alighted on an article entitled "A Lass between three Lads." It was the story of his duel related in a lively Gallic style. He had no difficulty in recognising himself, for he was indicated by this little joke, which frequently recurred: "A young man from the College of Sens who has no sense." He was even represented as a poor devil from the provinces, an obscure booby trying to rub against persons of high rank. As for the Vicomte, he was made to play a fascinating part, first by having forced his way into the supper-room, then by having carried off the lady, and, finally, by having behaved all through like a perfect gentleman.

Frederick's courage was not denied exactly, but it was pointed out that an intermediary — the *protector* himself — had come on the scene just in the nick of time. The entire article concluded with this phrase, pregnant perhaps with sinister meaning:

"What is the cause of their affection? A problem! and, as Bazile says, who the deuce is it that is deceived here?"

This was, beyond all doubt, Hussonnet's revenge against Frederick for having refused him five thousand francs.

What was he to do? If he demanded an explanation from him, the Bohemian would protest that he was innocent, and nothing would be gained by doing this. The best course was to swallow the affront in silence. Nobody, after all, read the *Flambard*.

As he left the reading-room, he saw some people standing in front of a picture-dealer's shop. They were staring at the portrait of a woman, with this fine traced underneath in black letters: "Mademoiselle Rosanette Bron, belonging to M. Frederick Moreau of Nogent."

It was indeed she — or, at least, like her — her full face displayed, her bosom uncovered, with her hair hanging loose, and with a purse of red velvet in her hands, while behind her a peacock leaned his beak over her shoulder, covering the wall with his immense plumage in the shape of a fan.

Pellerin had got up this exhibition in order to compel Frederick to pay, persuaded that he was a celebrity, and that all Paris, roused to take his part, would be interested in this wretched piece of work.

Was this a conspiracy? Had the painter and the journalist prepared their attack on him at the same time?

His duel had not put a stop to anything. He had become an object of ridicule, and everyone had been laughing at him.

Three days afterwards, at the end of June, the Northern shares having had a rise of fifteen francs, as he had bought two thousand of them within the past month, he found that he had made thirty thousand francs by them. This caress of fortune gave him renewed self-confidence. He said to himself that he wanted nobody's help, and that all his embarrassments were the result of his timidity and indecision. He ought to have begun his intrigue with the Maréchale with brutal directness and refused Hussonnet the very first day. He should not have compromised himself with Pellerin. And, in order to show that he was not a bit embarrassed, he presented himself at one of Madame Dambreuse's ordinary evening parties.

In the middle of the anteroom, Martinon, who had arrived at the same time as he had, turned round:

"What! so you are visiting here?" with a look of surprise, and as if displeased at seeing him.

"Why not?"

And, while asking himself what could be the cause of such a display of hostility on Martinon's part, Frederick made his way into the drawing-room.

The light was dim, in spite of the lamps placed in the corners, for the three windows, which were wide open, made three large squares of black shadow stand parallel with each other. Under the pictures, flower-stands occupied, at a man's height, the spaces on the walls, and a silver teapot with a samovar cast their reflections in a mirror on the background. There arose a murmur of hushed voices. Pumps could be heard creaking on the carpet. He could distinguish a number of black coats, then a round table lighted up by a large shaded lamp, seven or eight ladies in summer toilets, and at some little distance Madame Dambreuse in a rocking armchair. Her dress of lilac taffeta had slashed sleeves, from which fell muslin puffs, the charming tint of the material harmonising with the shade of her hair; and she sat slightly thrown back with the tip of her foot on a cushion, with the repose of an exquisitely delicate work of art, a flower of high culture.

M. Dambreuse and an old gentleman with a white head were walking from one end of the drawing-room to the other. Some of the guests chatted here and there, sitting on the edges of little sofas, while the others, standing up, formed a circle in the centre of the apartment.

They were talking about votes, amendments, counter-amendments, M. Grandin's speech, and M. Benoist's reply. The third party had decidedly gone too far. The Left Centre ought to have had a better recollection of its origin. Serious attacks had been made on the ministry. It must be reassuring, however, to see that it had no successor. In short, the situation was completely analogous to that of 1834.

As these things bored Frederick, he drew near the ladies. Martinon was beside them, standing up, with his hat under his arm, showing himself in three-quarter profile, and looking so neat that he resembled a piece of Sèvres porcelain. He took up a copy of the *Revue des Deux Mondes* which was lying on the table between an *Imitation* and an *Almanach de Gotha*, and spoke of a distinguished poet in a contemptuous tone, said he was going to the "conferences of Saint-Francis," complained of his larynx, swallowed from time to time a pellet of gummatum, and in the meantime kept talking about music, and played the part of the elegant trifler. Mademoiselle Cécile, M. Dambreuse's niece, who happened to be embroidering a pair of ruffles, gazed at him with her pale blue eyes; and Miss John, the governess, who had a flat nose, laid aside her tapestry on his account. Both of them appeared to be exclaiming internally:

"How handsome he is!"

Madame Dambreuse turned round towards him.

"Please give me my fan which is on that pier-table over there. You are taking the wrong one! 'tis the other!"

She arose, and when he came across to her, they met in the middle of the drawing-room face to face. She addressed a few sharp words to him, no doubt of a reproachful character, judging by the haughty expression of her face. Martinon tried to smile; then he went to join the circle in which grave men were holding discussions. Madame Dambreuse resumed her seat, and, bending over the arm of her chair, said to Frederick:

"I saw somebody the day before yesterday who was speaking to me about you — Monsieur de Cisy. You know him, don't you?"

"Yes, slightly."

Suddenly Madame Dambreuse uttered an exclamation:

"Oh! Duchesse, what a pleasure to see you!"

And she advanced towards the door to meet a little old lady in a Carmelite taffeta gown and a cap of guipure with long borders. The daughter of a companion in exile of the Comte d'Artois, and the widow of a marshal of the Empire; who had been created a peer of France in 1830, she adhered to the court of a former generation as well as to the new court, and possessed sufficient influence to procure many things. Those who stood talking stepped aside, and then resumed their conversation.

It had now turned on pauperism, of which, according to these gentlemen, all the descriptions that had been given were grossly exaggerated.

"However," urged Martinon, "let us confess that there is such a thing as want! But the remedy depends neither on science nor on power. It is purely an individual question. When the lower classes are willing to get rid of their vices, they will free themselves from their necessities. Let the people be more moral, and they will be less poor!"

According to M. Dambreuse, no good could be attained without a superabundance of capital. Therefore, the only practicable method was to intrust, "as the Saint-Simonians, however, proposed (good heavens! there was some merit in their views — let us be just to everybody) — to intrust, I say, the cause of progress to those who can increase the public wealth." Imperceptibly they began to touch on great industrial undertakings — the railways, the coal-mines. And M. Dambreuse, addressing Frederick, said to him in a low whisper:

"You have not called about that business of ours?"

Frederick pleaded illness; but, feeling that this excuse was too absurd:

"Besides, I need my ready money."

"Is it to buy a carriage?" asked Madame Dambreuse, who was brushing past him with a cup of tea in her hand, and for a minute she watched his face with her head bent slightly over her shoulder.

She believed that he was Rosanette's lover — the allusion was obvious. It seemed even to Frederick that all the ladies were staring at him from a distance and whispering to one another.

In order to get a better idea as to what they were thinking about, he once more approached them. On the opposite side of the table, Martinon, seated near Mademoiselle Cécile, was turning over the leaves of an album. It contained lithographs representing Spanish costumes. He read the descriptive titles aloud: "A Lady of Seville," "A Valencia Gardener," "An Andalusian Picador"; and once, when he had reached the bottom of the page, he continued all in one breath:

"Jacques Arnoux, publisher. One of your friends, eh?"

"That is true," said Frederick, hurt by the tone he had assumed.

Madame Dambreuse again interposed:

"In fact, you came here one morning — about a house, I believe — a house belonging to his wife." (This meant: "She is your mistress.")

He reddened up to his ears; and M. Dambreuse, who joined them at the same moment, made this additional remark:

"You appear even to be deeply interested in them."

These last words had the effect of putting Frederick out of countenance. His confusion, which, he could not help feeling, was evident to them, was on the point of confirming their suspicions, when M. Dambreuse drew close to him, and, in a tone of great seriousness, said:

"I suppose you don't do business together?"

He protested by repeated shakes of the head, without realising the exact meaning of the capitalist, who wished to give him advice.

He felt a desire to leave. The fear of appearing faint-hearted restrained him. A servant carried away the teacups. Madame Dambreuse was talking to a diplomatist in a blue coat. Two young girls, drawing their foreheads close together, showed each other their jewellery. The others, seated in a semicircle on armchairs, kept gently moving their white faces crowned with black or fair hair. Nobody, in fact, minded them. Frederick turned on his heels; and, by a succession of long zigzags, he had almost reached the door, when, passing close to a bracket, he remarked, on the top of it, between a china vase and the wainscoting, a journal folded up in two. He drew it out a little, and read these words — *The Flambard*.

Who had brought it there? Cisy. Manifestly no one else. What did it matter, however? They would believe — already, perhaps, everyone believed — in the article. What was the cause of this rancour? He wrapped himself up in ironical silence. He felt like one lost in a desert. But suddenly he heard Martinon's voice:

"Talking of Arnoux, I saw in the newspapers, amongst the names of those accused of preparing incendiary bombs, that of one of his *employés*, Sénécal. Is that our Sénécal?"

"The very same!"

Martinon repeated several times in a very loud tone:

"What? our Sénécal! our Sénécal!"

Then questions were asked him about the conspiracy. It was assumed that his connection with the prosecutor's office ought to furnish him with some information on the subject.

He declared that he had none. However, he knew very little about this individual, having seen him only two or three times. He positively regarded him as a very ill-conditioned fellow. Frederick exclaimed indignantly:

"Not at all! he is a very honest fellow."

"All the same, Monsieur," said a landowner, "no conspirator can be an honest man."

Most of the men assembled there had served at least four governments; and they would have sold France or the human race in order to preserve their own incomes, to save themselves from any discomfort or embarrassment, or even through sheer baseness, through worship of force. They all maintained that political crimes were inexcusable. It would be more desirable to pardon those which were provoked by want. And they did not fail to put forward the eternal illustration of the father of a family stealing the eternal loaf of bread from the eternal baker.

A gentleman occupying an administrative office even went so far as to exclaim:

"For my part, Monsieur, if I were told that my brother were a conspirator I would denounce him!"

Frederick invoked the right of resistance, and recalling to mind some phrases that Deslauriers had used in their conversations, he referred to Delosmes, Blackstone, the English Bill of Rights, and Article 2 of the Constitution of '91. It was even by virtue of this law that the fall of Napoléon had been proclaimed. It had been recognised in 1830, and inscribed at the head of the Charter. Besides, when the sovereign fails to fulfil the contract, justice requires that he should be overthrown.

"Why, this is abominable!" exclaimed a prefect's wife.

All the rest remained silent, filled with vague terror, as if they had heard the noise of bullets. Madame Dambreuse rocked herself in her chair, and smiled as she listened to him.

A manufacturer, who had formerly been a member of the Carbonari, tried to show that the Orléans family possessed good qualities. No doubt there were some abuses.

"Well, what then?"

"But we should not talk about them, my dear Monsieur! If you knew how all these clamourings of the Opposition injure business!"

"What do I care about business?" said Frederick.

He was exasperated by the rottenness of these old men; and, carried away by the recklessness which sometimes takes possession of even the most timid, he attacked the financiers, the deputies, the government, the king, took up the defence of the Arabs, and gave vent to a great deal of abusive language. A few of those around him encouraged him in a spirit of irony:

"Go on, pray! continue!" whilst others muttered: "The deuce! what enthusiasm!" At last he thought the right thing to do was to retire; and, as he was going away, M. Dambreuse said to him, alluding to the post of secretary:

"No definite arrangement has been yet arrived at; but make haste!"

And Madame Dambreuse:

"You'll call again soon, will you not?"

Frederick considered their parting salutation a last mockery. He had resolved never to come back to this house, or to visit any of these people again. He imagined that he had offended them, not realising what vast funds of indifference society possesses. These women especially excited his indignation. Not a single one of them had backed him up even with a look of sympathy. He felt angry with them for not having been moved by his words. As for Madame Dambreuse, he found in her something at the same time languid and cold, which prevented him from defining her character by a formula. Had she a lover? and, if so, who was her lover? Was it the diplomatist or some other? Perhaps it was Martinon? Impossible! Nevertheless, he experienced a sort of jealousy against Martinon, and an unaccountable ill-will against her.

Dussardier, having called this evening as usual, was awaiting him. Frederick's heart was swelling with bitterness; he unburdened it, and his grievances, though vague and hard to understand, saddened the honest shop-assistant. He even complained of his isolation. Dussardier, after a little hesitation, suggested that they ought to call on Deslauriers.

Frederick, at the mention of the advocate's name, was seized with a longing to see him once more. He was now living in the midst of profound intellectual solitude, and found Dussardier's company quite insufficient. In reply to the latter's question, Frederick told him to arrange matters any way he liked.

Deslauriers had likewise, since their quarrel, felt a void in his life. He yielded without much reluctance to the cordial advances which were made to him. The pair embraced each other, then began chatting about matters of no consequence.

Frederick's heart was touched by Deslauriers' display of reserve, and in order to make him a sort of reparation, he told the other next day how he had lost the fifteen thousand francs without mentioning that these fifteen thousand francs had been originally intended for him. The advocate, nevertheless, had a shrewd suspicion of the truth; and this misadventure, which justified, in his own mind, his prejudices against Arnoux, entirely disarmed his rancour; and he did not again refer to the promise made by his friend on a former occasion.

Frederick, misled by his silence, thought he had forgotten all about it. A few days afterwards, he asked Deslauriers whether there was any way in which he could get back his money.

They might raise the point that the prior mortgage was fraudulent, and might take proceedings against the wife personally.

"No! no! not against her!" exclaimed Frederick, and, yielding to the ex-law-clerk's questions, he confessed the truth. Deslauriers was convinced that Frederick had not told him the entire truth, no doubt through a feeling of delicacy. He was hurt by this want of confidence.

They were, however, on the same intimate terms as before, and they even found so much pleasure in each other's society that Dussardier's presence was an obstacle to their free intercourse. Under the pretence that they had appointments, they managed gradually to get rid of him.

There are some men whose only mission amongst their fellow-men is to serve as go-betweens; people use them in the same way as if they were bridges, by stepping over them and going on further.

Frederick concealed nothing from his old friend. He told him about the coal-mine speculation and M. Dambreuse's proposal. The advocate grew thoughtful.

"That's queer! For such a post a man with a good knowledge of law would be required!"

"But you could assist me," returned Frederick.

"Yes! — hold on! faith, yes! certainly."

During the same week Frederick showed Dussardier a letter from his mother.

Madame Moreau accused herself of having misjudged M. Roque, who had given a satisfactory explanation of his conduct. Then she spoke of his means, and of the possibility, later, of a marriage with Louise.

"That would not be a bad match," said Deslauriers.

Frederick said it was entirely out of the question. Besides, Père Roque was an old trickster. That in no way affected the matter, in the advocate's opinion.

At the end of July, an unaccountable diminution in value made the Northern shares fall. Frederick had not sold his. He lost sixty thousand francs in one day. His income was considerably reduced. He would have to curtail his expenditure, or take up some calling, or make a brilliant catch in the matrimonial market.

Then Deslauriers spoke to him about Mademoiselle Roque. There was

Then Deslauriers spoke to him about Mademoiselle Roque. There was nothing to prevent him from going to get some idea of things by seeing for himself. Frederick was rather tired of city life. Provincial existence and the maternal roof would be a sort of recreation for him.

The aspect of the streets of Nogent, as he passed through them in the moonlight, brought back old memories to his mind; and he experienced a kind of pang, like persons who have just returned home after a long period of travel.

At his mother's house, all the country visitors had assembled as in former days — MM. Gamblin, Heudras, and Chambrion, the Lebrun family, "those young ladies, the Augers," and, in addition, Père Roque, and, sitting opposite to Madame Moreau at a card-table, Mademoiselle Louise. She was now a woman. She sprang to her feet with a cry of delight. They were all in a flutter of excitement. She remained standing motionless, and the paleness of her face was intensified by the light issuing from four silver candlesticks.

When she resumed play, her hand was trembling. This emotion was exceedingly flattering to Frederick, whose pride had been sorely wounded of late. He said to himself: "You, at any rate, will love me!" and, as if he were thus taking his revenge for the humiliations he had endured in the capital, he began to affect the Parisian lion, retailed all the theatrical gossip, told anecdotes as to the doings of society, which he had borrowed from the columns of the cheap newspapers, and, in short, dazzled his fellow-townspeople.

Next morning, Madame Moreau expatiated on Louise's fine qualities; then she enumerated the woods and farms of which she would be the owner. Père Roque's wealth was considerable.

He had acquired it while making investments for M. Dambreuse; for he had lent money to persons who were able to give good security in the shape of mortgages, whereby he was enabled to demand additional sums or commissions. The capital, owing to his energetic vigilance, was in no danger of being lost. Besides, Père Roque never had any hesitation in making a seizure. Then he bought up the mortgaged property at a low price, and M. Dambreuse, having got back his money, found his affairs in very good order.

But this manipulation of business matters in a way which was not strictly legal compromised him with his agent. He could refuse Père Roque nothing, and it was owing to the latter's solicitations that M. Dambreuse had received Frederick so cordially.

The truth was that in the depths of his soul Père Roque cherished a deep-rooted ambition. He wished his daughter to be a countess; and for the purpose of gaining this object, without imperilling the happiness of his child, he knew no other young man so well adapted as Frederick.

Through the influence of M. Dambreuse, he could obtain the title of his

Through the influence of M. Dambreuse, he could obtain the title of his maternal grandfather, Madame Moreau being the daughter of a Comte de Fouvens, and besides being connected with the oldest families in Champagne, the Lavernades and the D'Etrignys. As for the Moreaus, a Gothic inscription near the mills of Villeneuve-l'Archevèque referred to one Jacob Moreau, who had rebuilt them in 1596; and the tomb of his own son, Pierre Moreau, first esquire of the king under Louis XIV., was to be seen in the chapel of Saint-Nicholas.

So much family distinction fascinated M. Roque, the son of an old servant. If the coronet of a count did not come, he would console himself with something else; for Frederick might get a deputyship when M. Dambreuse had been raised to the peerage, and might then be able to assist him in his commercial pursuits, and to obtain for him supplies and grants. He liked the young man personally. In short, he desired to have Frederick for a son-in-law, because for a long time past he had been smitten with this notion, which only grew all the stronger day by day. Now he went to religious services, and he had won Madame Moreau over to his views, especially by holding before her the prospect of a title.

So it was that, eight days later, without any formal engagement, Frederick was regarded as Mademoiselle Roque's "intended," and Père Roque, who was not troubled with many scruples, often left them together.

CHAPTER XII.

Little Louise Grows Up.

Deslauriers had carried away from Frederick's house the copy of the deed of subrogation, with a power of attorney in proper form, giving him full authority to act; but, when he had reascended his own five flights of stairs and found himself alone in the midst of his dismal room, in his armchair upholstered in sheep-leather, the sight of the stamped paper disgusted him.

He was tired of these things, and of restaurants at thirty-two sous, of travelling in omnibuses, of enduring want and making futile efforts. He took up the papers again; there were others near them. They were prospectuses of the coal-mining company, with a list of the mines and the particulars as to their contents, Frederick having left all these matters in his hands in order to have his opinion about them.

An idea occurred to him — that of presenting himself at M. Dambreuse's house and applying for the post of secretary. This post, it was perfectly certain, could not be obtained without purchasing a certain number of shares. He recognised the folly of his project, and said to himself:

"Oh! no, that would be a wrong step."

Then he ransacked his brains to think of the best way in which he could set about recovering the fifteen thousand francs. Such a sum was a mere trifle to Frederick. But, if he had it, what a lever it would be in his hands! And the ex-law-clerk was indignant at the other being so well off.

"He makes a pitiful use of it. He is a selfish fellow. Ah! what do I care for his fifteen thousand francs!"

Why had he lent the money? For the sake of Madame Arnoux's bright eyes. She was his mistress! Deslauriers had no doubt about it. "There was another way in which money was useful!"

And he was assailed by malignant thoughts.

Then he allowed his thoughts to dwell even on Frederick's personal appearance. It had always exercised over him an almost feminine charm; and he soon came to admire it for a success which he realised that he was himself incapable of achieving.

"Nevertheless, was not the will the main element in every enterprise? and, since by its means we may triumph over everything — — "

"Ha! that would be funny!"

But he felt ashamed of such treachery, and the next moment:

But he felt ashamed of such treachery, and the next moment:

"Pooh! I am afraid?"

Madame Arnoux — from having heard her spoken about so often — had come to be depicted in his imagination as something extraordinary. The persistency of this passion had irritated him like a problem. Her austerity, which seemed a little theatrical, now annoyed him. Besides, the woman of the world — or, rather, his own conception of her — dazzled the advocate as a symbol and the epitome of a thousand pleasures. Poor though he was, he hankered after luxury in its more glittering form.

"After all, even though he should get angry, so much the worse! He has behaved too badly to me to call for any anxiety about him on my part! I have no assurance that she is his mistress! He has denied it. So then I am free to act as I please!"

He could no longer abandon the desire of taking this step. He wished to make a trial of his own strength, so that one day, all of a sudden, he polished his boots himself, bought white gloves, and set forth on his way, substituting himself for Frederick, and almost imagining that he was the other by a singular intellectual evolution, in which there was, at the same time, vengeance and sympathy, imitation and audacity.

He announced himself as "Doctor Deslauriers."

Madame Arnoux was surprised, as she had not sent for any physician.

"Ha! a thousand apologies! — 'tis a doctor of law! I have come in Monsieur Moreau's interest."

This name appeared to produce a disquieting effect on her mind.

"So much the better!" thought the ex-law-clerk.

"Since she has a liking for him, she will like me, too!" buoying up his courage with the accepted idea that it is easier to supplant a lover than a husband.

He referred to the fact that he had the pleasure of meeting her on one occasion at the law-courts; he even mentioned the date. This remarkable power of memory astonished Madame Arnoux. He went on in a tone of mild affectation:

"You have already found your affairs a little embarrassing?"

She made no reply.

"Then it must be true."

He began to chat about one thing or another, about her house, about the works; then, noticing some medallions at the sides of the mirror:

"Ha! family portraits, no doubt?"

He remarked that of an old lady, Madame Arnoux's mother.

"She has the appearance of an excellent woman, a southern type."

And, on being met with the objection that she was from Chartres:

"Chartres! pretty town!"

He praised its cathedral and public buildings, and coming back to the portrait, traced resemblances between it and Madame Arnoux, and cast flatteries at her indirectly. She did not appear to be offended at this. He took confidence, and said that he had known Arnoux a long time.

"He is a fine fellow, but one who compromises himself. Take this mortgage, for example — one can't imagine such a reckless act — — "

"Yes, I know," said she, shrugging her shoulders.

This involuntary evidence of contempt induced Deslauriers to continue. "That kaolin business of his was near turning out very badly, a thing you may not be aware of, and even his reputation — — "

A contraction of the brows made him pause.

Then, falling back on generalities, he expressed his pity for the "poor women whose husbands frittered away their means."

"But in this case, monsieur, the means belong to him. As for me, I have nothing!"

No matter, one never knows. A woman of experience might be useful. He made offers of devotion, exalted his own merits; and he looked into her face through his shining spectacles.

She was seized with a vague torpor; but suddenly said:

"Let us look into the matter, I beg of you."

He exhibited the bundle of papers.

"This is Frederick's letter of attorney. With such a document in the hands of a process-server, who would make out an order, nothing could be easier; in twenty-four hours — — " (She remained impassive; he changed his manœuvre.)

"As for me, however, I don't understand what impels him to demand this sum, for, in fact, he doesn't want it."

"How is that? Monsieur Moreau has shown himself so kind."

"Oh! granted!"

And Deslauriers began by eulogising him, then in a mild fashion disparaged him, giving it out that he was a forgetful individual, and over-fond of money.

"I thought he was your friend, monsieur?"

"That does not prevent me from seeing his defects. Thus, he showed very little recognition of — how shall I put it? — the sympathy — — "

Madame Arnoux was turning over the leaves of a large manuscript book.

She interrupted him in order to get him to explain a certain word.

He bent over her shoulder, and his face came so close to hers that he grazed her cheek. She blushed. This heightened colour inflamed Deslauriers, he hungrily kissed her head.

"What are you doing, Monsieur?" And, standing up against the wall, she compelled him to remain perfectly quiet under the glance of her large blue eyes glowing with anger.

"Listen to me! I love you!"

She broke into a laugh, a shrill, discouraging laugh. Deslauriers felt himself suffocating with anger. He restrained his feelings, and, with the look of a vanquished person imploring mercy:

"Ha! you are wrong! As for me, I would not go like him."

"Of whom, pray, are you talking?"

"Of Frederick."

"Ah! Monsieur Moreau troubles me little. I told you that!"

"Oh! forgive me! forgive me!" Then, drawling his words, in a sarcastic tone:

"I even imagined that you were sufficiently interested in him personally to learn with pleasure — — "

She became quite pale. The ex-law-clerk added:

"He is going to be married."

"He!"

"In a month at latest, to Mademoiselle Roque, the daughter of M. Dambreuse's agent. He has even gone down to Nogent for no other purpose but that."

She placed her hand over her heart, as if at the shock of a great blow; but immediately she rang the bell. Deslauriers did not wait to be ordered to leave. When she turned round he had disappeared.

Madame Arnoux was gasping a little with the strain of her emotions. She drew near the window to get a breath of air.

On the other side of the street, on the footpath, a packer in his shirt-sleeves was nailing down a trunk. Hackney-coaches passed. She closed the window-blinds and then came and sat down. As the high houses in the vicinity intercepted the sun's rays, the light of day stole coldly into the apartment. Her children had gone out; there was not a stir around her. It seemed as if she were utterly deserted.

"He is going to be married! Is it possible?"

And she was seized with a fit of nervous trembling.

"Why is this? Does it mean that I love him?"

Then all of a sudden:

"Why, yes; I love him — I love him!"

It seemed to her as if she were sinking into endless depths. The clock struck three. She listened to the vibrations of the sounds as they died away. And she remained on the edge of the armchair, with her eyeballs fixed and an unchanging smile on her face.

The same afternoon, at the same moment, Frederick and Mademoiselle Louise were walking in the garden belonging to M. Roque at the end of the island.

Old Catherine was watching them, some distance away. They were walking side by side and Frederick said:

"You remember when I brought you into the country?"

"How good you were to me!" she replied. "You assisted me in making sand-pies, in filling my watering-pot, and in rocking me in the swing!"

"All your dolls, who had the names of queens and marchionesses — what has become of them?"

"Really, I don't know!"

"And your pug Moricaud?"

"He's drowned, poor darling!"

"And the *Don Quixote* of which we coloured the engravings together?"

"I have it still!"

He recalled to her mind the day of her first communion, and how pretty she had been at vespers, with her white veil and her large wax-taper, whilst the girls were all taking their places in a row around the choir, and the bell was tinkling.

These memories, no doubt, had little charm for Mademoiselle Roque. She had not a word to say; and, a minute later:

"Naughty fellow! never to have written a line to me, even once!"

Frederick urged by way of excuse his numerous occupations.

"What, then, are you doing?"

He was embarrassed by the question; then he told her that he was studying politics.

"Ha!"

And without questioning him further:

"That gives you occupation; while as for me — — !"

Then she spoke to him about the barrenness of her existence, as there was nobody she could go to see, and nothing to amuse her or distract her thoughts. She wished to go on horseback.

"The vicar maintains that this is improper for a young lady! How stupid these proprieties are! Long ago they allowed me to do whatever I pleased; now, they won't let me do anything!"

"Your father, however, is fond of you!"

"Yes; but — — "

She heaved a sigh, which meant: "That is not enough to make me happy."

Then there was silence. They heard only the noise made by their boots in the sand, together with the murmur of falling water; for the Seine, above Nogent, is cut into two arms. That which turns the mills discharges in this place the superabundance of its waves in order to unite further down with the natural course of the stream; and a person coming from the bridge could see at the right, on the other bank of the river, a grassy slope on which a white house looked down. At the left, in the meadow, a row of poplar-trees extended, and the horizon in front was bounded by a curve of the river. It was flat, like a mirror. Large insects hovered over the noiseless water. Tufts of reeds and rushes bordered it unevenly; all kinds of plants which happened to spring up there bloomed out in buttercups, caused yellow clusters to hang down, raised trees in distaff-shape with amaranth-blossoms, and made green rockets spring up at random. In an inlet of the river white water-lilies displayed themselves; and a row of ancient willows, in which wolf-traps were hidden, formed, on that side of the island, the sole protection of the garden.

In the interior, on this side, four walls with a slate coping enclosed the kitchen-garden, in which the square patches, recently dug up, looked like brown plates. The bell-glasses of the melons shone in a row on the narrow hotbed. The artichokes, the kidney-beans, the spinach, the carrots and the tomatoes succeeded each other till one reached a background where asparagus grew in such a fashion that it resembled a little wood of feathers.

All this piece of land had been under the Directory what is called "a folly." The trees had, since then, grown enormously. Clematis obstructed the hornbeams, the walks were covered with moss, brambles abounded on every side. Fragments of statues let their plaster crumble in the grass. The feet of anyone walking through the place got entangled in iron-wire work. There now remained of the pavilion only two apartments on the ground floor, with some blue paper hanging in shreds. Before the façade extended an arbour in the Italian style, in which a vine-tree was supported on columns of brick by a rail-work of sticks.

Soon they arrived at this spot; and, as the light fell through the irregular gaps on the green herbage, Frederick, turning his head on one side to speak to Louise, noticed the shadow of the leaves on her face.

She had in her red hair, stuck in her chignon, a needle, terminated by a glass bell in imitation of emerald, and, in spite of her mourning, she wore (so artless was her bad taste) straw slippers trimmed with pink satin — a vulgar curiosity probably bought at some fair.

He remarked this, and ironically congratulated her.

"Don't be laughing at me!" she replied.

Then surveying him altogether, from his grey felt hat to his silk stockings:

"What an exquisite you are!"

After this, she asked him to mention some works which she could read. He gave her the names of several; and she said:

"Oh! how learned you are!"

While yet very small, she had been smitten with one of those childish passions which have, at the same time, the purity of a religion and the violence of a natural instinct. He had been her comrade, her brother, her master, had diverted her mind, made her heart beat more quickly, and, without any desire for such a result, had poured out into the very depths of her being a latent and continuous intoxication. Then he had parted with her at the moment of a tragic crisis in her existence, when her mother had only just died, and these two separations had been mingled together. Absence had idealised him in her memory. He had come back with a sort of halo round his head; and she gave herself up ingenuously to the feelings of bliss she experienced at seeing him once more.

For the first time in his life Frederick felt himself beloved; and this new pleasure, which did not transcend the ordinary run of agreeable sensations, made his breast swell with so much emotion that he spread out his two arms while he flung back his head.

A large cloud passed across the sky.

"It is going towards Paris," said Louise. "You'd like to follow it — wouldn't you?"

"I! Why?"

"Who knows?"

And surveying him with a sharp look:

"Perhaps you have there" (she searched her mind for the appropriate phrase) "something to engage your affections."

"Oh! I have nothing to engage my affections there."

"Are you perfectly certain?"

"Why, yes, Mademoiselle, perfectly certain!"

In less than a year there had taken place in the young girl an extraordinary transformation, which astonished Frederick. After a minute's silence he added:

"We ought to 'thee' and 'thou' each other, as we used to do long ago — shall we do so?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because — — "

He persisted. She answered, with downcast face:

"I dare not!"

They had reached the end of the garden, which was close to the shell-bank. Frederick, in a spirit of boyish fun, began to send pebbles skimming over the

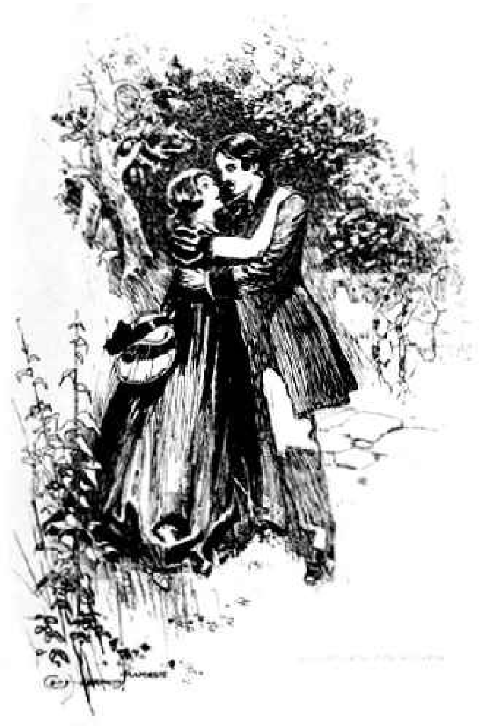
Frederick, in a spirit of boyish fun, began to send pebbles skimming over the water. She bade him sit down. He obeyed; then, looking at the waterfall:

"'Tis like Niagara!" He began talking about distant countries and long voyages. The idea of making some herself exercised a fascination over her mind. She would not have been afraid either of tempests or of lions.

Seated close beside each other, they collected in front of them handfuls of sand, then, while they were chatting, they let it slip through their fingers, and the hot wind, which rose from the plains, carried to them in puffs odours of lavender, together with the smell of tar escaping from a boat behind the lock. The sun's rays fell on the cascade. The greenish blocks of stone in the little wall over which the water slipped looked as if they were covered with a silver gauze that was perpetually rolling itself out. A long strip of foam gushed forth at the foot with a harmonious murmur. Then it bubbled up, forming whirlpools and a thousand opposing currents, which ended by intermingling in a single limpid stream of water.

Louise said in a musing tone that she envied the existence of fishes:

"It must be so delightful to tumble about down there at your ease, and to feel yourself caressed on every side."



"Can I live without you!"

She shivered with sensuously enticing movements; but a voice exclaimed:

"Where are you?"

"Your maid is calling you," said Frederick.

"All right! all right!" Louise did not disturb herself.

"She will be angry," he suggested.

"It is all the same to me! and besides — — " Mademoiselle Roque gave him to understand by a gesture that the girl was entirely subject to her will.

She arose, however, and then complained of a headache. And, as they were passing in front of a large cart-shed containing some faggots:

"Suppose we sat down there, *under shelter*?"

He pretended not to understand this dialectic expression, and even teased her about her accent. Gradually the corners of her mouth were compressed, she bit her lips; she stepped aside in order to sulk.

Frederick came over to her, swore he did not mean to annoy her, and that he was very fond of her.

"Is that true?" she exclaimed, looking at him with a smile which lighted up her entire face, smeared over a little with patches of bran.

He could not resist the sentiment of gallantry which was aroused in him by her fresh youthfulness, and he replied:

"Why should I tell you a lie? Have you any doubt about it, eh?" and, as he spoke, he passed his left hand round her waist.

A cry, soft as the cooing of a dove, leaped up from her throat. Her head fell back, she was going to faint, when he held her up. And his virtuous scruples were futile. At the sight of this maiden offering herself to him he was seized with fear. He assisted her to take a few steps slowly. He had ceased to address her in soothing words, and no longer caring to talk of anything save the most trifling subjects, he spoke to her about some of the principal figures in the society of Nogent.

Suddenly she repelled him, and in a bitter tone:

"You would not have the courage to run away with me!"

He remained motionless, with a look of utter amazement in his face. She burst into sobs, and hiding her face in his breast:

"Can I live without you?"

He tried to calm her emotion. She laid her two hands on his shoulders in order to get a better view of his face, and fixing her green eyes on his with an almost fierce tearfulness:

"Will you be my husband?"

"But," Frederick began, casting about in his inner consciousness for a reply. "Of course, I ask for nothing better."

At that moment M. Roque's cap appeared behind a lilac-tree.

He brought his young friend on a trip through the district in order to show off his property; and when Frederick returned, after two days' absence, he found three letters awaiting him at his mother's house.

The first was a note from M. Dambreuse, containing an invitation to dinner for the previous Tuesday. What was the occasion of this politeness? So, then, they had forgiven his prank.

The second was from Rosanette. She thanked him for having risked his life on her behalf. Frederick did not at first understand what she meant; finally, after a considerable amount of circumlocution, while appealing to his friendship, relying on his delicacy, as she put it, and going on her knees to him on account of the pressing necessity of the case, as she wanted bread, she asked him for a loan of five hundred francs. He at once made up his mind to supply her with the amount.

The third letter, which was from Deslauriers, spoke of the letter of attorney, and was long and obscure. The advocate had not yet taken any definite action. He urged his friend not to disturb himself: "'Tis useless for you to come back!" even laying singular stress on this point.

Frederick got lost in conjectures of every sort; and he felt anxious to return to Paris. This assumption of a right to control his conduct excited in him a feeling of revolt.

Moreover, he began to experience that nostalgia of the boulevard; and then

Moreover, he began to experience that nostalgia of the boulevard; and then, his mother was pressing him so much, M. Roque kept revolving about him so constantly, and Mademoiselle Louise was so much attached to him, that it was no longer possible for him to avoid speedily declaring his intentions.

He wanted to think, and he would be better able to form a right estimate of things at a distance.

In order to assign a motive for his journey, Frederick invented a story; and he left home, telling everyone, and himself believing, that he would soon return.

CHAPTER XIII.

Rosanette as a Lovely Turk.

His return to Paris gave him no pleasure. It was an evening at the close of August. The boulevards seemed empty. The passers-by succeeded each other with scowling faces. Here and there a boiler of asphalt was smoking; several houses had their blinds entirely drawn. He made his way to his own residence in the city. He found the hangings covered with dust; and, while dining all alone, Frederick was seized with a strange feeling of forlornness; then his thoughts reverted to Mademoiselle Roque. The idea of being married no longer appeared to him preposterous. They might travel; they might go to Italy, to the East. And he saw her standing on a hillock, or gazing at a landscape, or else leaning on his arm in a Florentine gallery while she stood to look at the pictures. What a pleasure it would be to him merely to watch this good little creature expanding under the splendours of Art and Nature! When she had got free from the commonplace atmosphere in which she had lived, she would, in a little while, become a charming companion. M. Roque's wealth, moreover, tempted him. And yet he shrank from taking this step, regarding it as a weakness, a degradation.

But he was firmly resolved (whatever he might do) on changing his mode of life — that is to say, to lose his heart no more in fruitless passions; and he even hesitated about executing the commission with which he had been intrusted by Louise. This was to buy for her at Jacques Arnoux's establishment two large-sized statues of many colours representing negroes, like those which were at the Prefecture at Troyes. She knew the manufacturer's number, and would not have any other. Frederick was afraid that, if he went back to their house, he might once again fall a victim to his old passion.

These reflections occupied his mind during the entire evening; and he was just about to go to bed when a woman presented herself.

"'Tis I," said Mademoiselle Vatnaz, with a laugh. "I have come in behalf of Rosanette."

So, then, they were reconciled?

"Good heavens, yes! I am not ill-natured, as you are well aware. And besides, the poor girl — it would take too long to tell you all about it."

In short, the Maréchale wanted to see him; she was waiting for an answer, her letter having travelled from Paris to Nogent. Mademoiselle Vatnaz did not know what was in it what was in it.

Then Frederick asked her how the Maréchale was going on.

He was informed that she was now *with* a very rich man, a Russian, Prince Tzernoukoff, who had seen her at the races in the Champ de Mars last summer.

"He has three carriages, a saddle-horse, livery servants, a groom got up in the English fashion, a country-house, a box at the Italian opera, and a heap of other things. There you are, my dear friend!"

And the Vatnaz, as if she had profited by this change of fortune, appeared gayer and happier. She took off her gloves and examined the furniture and the objects of virtù in the room. She mentioned their exact prices like a second-hand dealer. He ought to have consulted her in order to get them cheaper. Then she congratulated him on his good taste:

"Ha! this is pretty, exceedingly nice! There's nobody like you for these ideas."

The next moment, as her eyes fell on a door close to the pillar of the alcove:

"That's the way you let your friends out, eh?"

And, in a familiar fashion, she laid her finger on his chin. He trembled at the contact of her long hands, at the same time thin and soft. Round her wrists she wore an edging of lace, and on the body of her green dress lace embroidery, like a hussar. Her bonnet of black tulle, with borders hanging down, concealed her forehead a little. Her eyes shone underneath; an odour of patchouli escaped from her head-bands. The carcel-lamp placed on a round table, shining down on her like the footlights of a theatre, made her jaw protrude.

She said to him, in an unctuous tone, while she drew forth from her purse three square slips of paper:

"You will take these from me?"

They were three tickets for Delmar's benefit performance.

"What! for him?"

"Certainly."

Mademoiselle Vatnaz, without giving a further explanation, added that she adored him more than ever. If she were to be believed, the comedian was now definitely classed amongst "the leading celebrities of the age." And it was not such or such a personage that he represented, but the very genius of France, the People. He had "the humanitarian spirit; he understood the priesthood of Art." Frederick, in order to put an end to these eulogies, gave her the money for the three seats.

"You need not say a word about this over the way. How late it is, good heavens! I must leave you. Ah! I was forgetting the address — 'tis the Rue Grange-Batelier, number 14."

And, at the door:

"Good-bye, beloved man!"

"Good-bye, beloved man!"

"Beloved by whom?" asked Frederick. "What a strange woman!"

And he remembered that Dussardier had said to him one day, when talking about her:

"Oh, she's not much!" as if alluding to stories of a by no means edifying character.

Next morning he repaired to the Maréchale's abode. She lived in a new house, the spring-roller blinds of which projected into the street. At the head of each flight of stairs there was a mirror against the wall; before each window there was a flower-stand, and all over the steps extended a carpet of oil-cloth; and when one got inside the door, the coolness of the staircase was refreshing.

It was a man-servant who came to open the door, a footman in a red waistcoat. On a bench in the anteroom a woman and two men, tradespeople, no doubt, were waiting as if in a minister's vestibule. At the left, the door of the dining-room, slightly ajar, afforded a glimpse of empty bottles on the sideboards, and napkins on the backs of chairs; and parallel with it ran a corridor in which gold-coloured sticks supported an espalier of roses. In the courtyard below, two boys with bare arms were scrubbing a landau. Their voices rose to Frederick's ears, mingled with the intermittent sounds made by a currycomb knocking against a stone.

The man-servant returned. "Madame will receive Monsieur," and he led Frederick through a second anteroom, and then into a large drawing-room hung with yellow brocatel with twisted fringes at the corners which were joined at the ceiling, and which seemed to be continued by flowerings of lustre resembling cables. No doubt there had been an entertainment there the night before. Some cigar-ashes had been allowed to remain on the pier-tables.

At last he found his way into a kind of boudoir with stained-glass windows, through which the sun shed a dim light. Trefoils of carved wood adorned the upper portions of the doors. Behind a balustrade, three purple mattresses formed a divan; and the stem of a narghileh made of platinum lay on top of it. Instead of a mirror, there was on the mantelpiece a pyramid-shaped whatnot, displaying on its shelves an entire collection of curiosities, old silver trumpets, Bohemian horns, jewelled clasps, jade studs, enamels, grotesque figures in china, and a little Byzantine virgin with a vermilion ape; and all this was mingled in a golden twilight with the bluish shade of the carpet, the mother-of-pearl reflections of the foot-stools, and the tawny hue of the walls covered with maroon leather. In the corners, on little pedestals, there were bronze vases containing clusters of flowers, which made the atmosphere heavy.

Rosanette presented herself, attired in a pink satin vest with white cashmere trousers, a necklace of piasters, and a red cap encircled with a branch of jasmine.

Frederick started back in surprise, then said he had brought the thing she had been speaking about, and he handed her the bank-note. She gazed at him in astonishment; and, as he still kept the note in his hand, without knowing where to put it:

"Pray take it!"

She seized it; then, as she flung it on the divan:

"You are very kind."

She wanted it to meet the rent of a piece of ground at Bellevue, which she paid in this way every year. Her unceremoniousness wounded Frederick's sensibility. However, so much the better! this would avenge him for the past.

"Sit down," said she. "There — closer." And in a grave tone: "In the first place, I have to thank you, my dear friend, for having risked your life."

"Oh! that's nothing!"

"What! Why, 'tis a very noble act!" — and the Maréchale exhibited an embarrassing sense of gratitude; for it must have been impressed upon her mind that the duel was entirely on account of Arnoux, as the latter, who believed it himself, was not likely to have resisted the temptation of telling her so.

"She is laughing at me, perhaps," thought Frederick.

He had nothing further to detain him, and, pleading that he had an appointment, he rose.

"Oh! no, stay!"

He resumed his seat, and presently complimented her on her costume.

She replied, with an air of dejection:

"'Tis the Prince who likes me to dress in this fashion! And one must smoke such machines as that, too!" Rosanette added, pointing towards the narghileh. "Suppose we try the taste of it? Have you any objection?"

She procured a light, and, finding it hard to set fire to the tobacco, she began to stamp impatiently with her foot. Then a feeling of languor took possession of her; and she remained motionless on the divan, with a cushion under her arm and her body twisted a little on one side, one knee bent and the other leg straight out.

The long serpent of red morocco, which formed rings on the floor, rolled itself over her arm. She rested the amber mouthpiece on her lips, and gazed at Frederick while she blinked her eyes in the midst of the cloud of smoke that enveloped her. A gurgling sound came from her throat as she inhaled the fumes, and from time to time she murmured:

"The poor darling! the poor pet!"

He tried to find something of an agreeable nature to talk about. The thought of Vatnaz recurred to his memory.

He remarked that she appeared to him very lady-like.

"Yes, upon my word," replied the Maréchale. "She is very lucky in having me, that same lady!" — without adding another word, so much reserve was there in their conversation.

Each of them felt a sense of constraint, something that formed a barrier to confidential relations between them. In fact, Rosanette's vanity had been flattered by the duel, of which she believed herself to be the occasion. Then, she was very much astonished that he did not hasten to take advantage of his achievement; and, in order to compel him to return to her, she had invented this story that she wanted five hundred francs. How was it that Frederick did not ask for a little love from her in return? This was a piece of refinement that filled her with amazement, and, with a gush of emotion, she said to him:

"Will you come with us to the sea-baths?"

"What does 'us' mean?"

"Myself and my bird. I'll make you pass for a cousin of mine, as in the old comedies."

"A thousand thanks!"

"Well, then, you will take lodgings near ours."

The idea of hiding himself from a rich man humiliated him.

"No! that is impossible."

"Just as you please!"

Rosanette turned away with tears in her eyes. Frederick noticed this, and in order to testify the interest which he took in her, he said that he was delighted to see her at last in a comfortable position.

She shrugged her shoulders. What, then, was troubling her? Was it, perchance, that she was not loved.

"Oh! as for me, I have always people to love me!"

She added:

"It remains to be seen in what way."

Complaining that she was "suffocating with the heat," the Maréchale unfastened her vest; and, without any other garment round her body, save her silk chemise, she leaned her head on his shoulder so as to awaken his tenderness.

A man of less introspective egoism would not have bestowed a thought at such a moment on the possibility of the Vicomte, M. de Comaing, or anyone else appearing on the scene. But Frederick had been too many times the dupe of these very glances to compromise himself by a fresh humiliation.

She wished to know all about his relationships and his amusements. She even enquired about his financial affairs, and offered to lend him money if he wanted it. Frederick, unable to stand it any longer, took up his hat.

"I'm off, my pet! I hope you'll enjoy yourself thoroughly down there. *Au* *revoir!*"

She opened her eyes wide; then, in a dry tone:

"*Au revoir!*"

He made his way out through the yellow drawing-room, and through the second anteroom. There was on the table, between a vase full of visiting-cards and an inkstand, a chased silver chest. It was Madame Arnoux's. Then he experienced a feeling of tenderness, and, at the same time, as it were, the scandal of a profanation. He felt a longing to raise his hands towards it, and to open it. He was afraid of being seen, and went away.

Frederick was virtuous. He did not go back to the Arnouxs' house. He sent his man-servant to buy the two negroes, having given him all the necessary directions; and the case containing them set forth the same evening for Nogent. Next morning, as he was repairing to Deslauriers' lodgings, at the turn where the Rue Vivienne opened out on the boulevard, Madame Arnoux presented herself before him face to face.

The first movement of each of them was to draw back; then the same smile came to the lips of both, and they advanced to meet each other. For a minute, neither of them uttered a single word.

The sunlight fell round her, and her oval face, her long eyelashes, her black lace shawl, which showed the outline of her shoulders, her gown of shot silk, the bouquet of violets at the corner of her bonnet; all seemed to him to possess extraordinary magnificence. An infinite softness poured itself out of her beautiful eyes; and in a faltering voice, uttering at random the first words that came to his lips:

"How is Arnoux?"

"Well, I thank you!"

"And your children?"

"They are very well!"

"Ah! ah! What fine weather we are getting, are we not?"

"Splendid, indeed!"

"You're going out shopping?"

And, with a slow inclination of the head:

"Good-bye!"

She put out her hand, without having spoken one word of an affectionate description, and did not even invite him to dinner at her house. No matter! He would not have given this interview for the most delightful of adventures; and he pondered over its sweetness as he proceeded on his way.

Deslauriers, surprised at seeing him, dissembled his spite; for he cherished still through obstinacy some hope with regard to Madame Arnoux; and he had written to Frederick to prolong his stay in the country in order to be free in his manœuvres.

He informed Frederick, however, that he had presented himself at her house in order to ascertain if their contract stipulated for a community of property between husband and wife: in that case, proceedings might be taken against the wife; "and she put on a queer face when I told her about your marriage."

"Now, then! What an invention!"

"It was necessary in order to show that you wanted your own capital! A person who was indifferent would not have been attacked with the species of fainting fit that she had."

"Really?" exclaimed Frederick.

"Ha! my fine fellow, you are betraying yourself! Come! be honest!"

A feeling of nervous weakness stole over Madame Arnoux's lover.

"Why, no! I assure you! upon my word of honour!"

These feeble denials ended by convincing Deslauriers. He congratulated his friend, and asked him for some details. Frederick gave him none, and even resisted a secret yearning to concoct a few. As for the mortgage, he told the other to do nothing about it, but to wait. Deslauriers thought he was wrong on this point, and remonstrated with him in rather a churlish fashion.

He was, besides, more gloomy, malignant, and irascible than ever. In a year, if fortune did not change, he would embark for America or blow out his brains. Indeed, he appeared to be in such a rage against everything, and so uncompromising in his radicalism, that Frederick could not keep from saying to him:

"Here you are going on in the same way as Sénécal!"

Deslauriers, at this remark, informed him that that individual to whom he alluded had been discharged from Sainte-Pelagie, the magisterial investigation having failed to supply sufficient evidence, no doubt, to justify his being sent for trial.

Dussardier was so much overjoyed at the release of Sénécal, that he wanted to invite his friends to come and take punch with him, and begged of Frederick to be one of the party, giving the latter, at the same time, to understand that he would be found in the company of Hussonnet, who had proved himself a very good friend to Sénécal.

In fact, the *Flambard* had just become associated with a business establishment whose prospectus contained the following references: "Vineyard Agency. Office of Publicity. Debt Recovery and Intelligence Office, etc." But the Bohemian was afraid that his connection with trade might be prejudicial to his literary reputation, and he had accordingly taken the mathematician to keep the accounts. Although the situation was a poor one, Sénécal would but for it have died of starvation. Not wishing to mortify the worthy shopman, Frederick accepted his invitation.

Dussardier, three days beforehand, had himself waxed the red floor of his garret, beaten the armchair, and knocked off the dust from the chimney-piece, on which might be seen under a globe an alabaster timepiece between a stalactite and a cocoanut. As his two chandeliers and his chamber candlestick were not sufficient, he had borrowed two more candlesticks from the doorkeeper; and these five lights shone on the top of the chest of drawers, which was covered with three napkins in order that it might be fit to have placed on it in such a way as to look attractive some macaroons, biscuits, a fancy cake, and a dozen bottles of beer. At the opposite side, close to the wall, which was hung with yellow paper, there was a little mahogany bookcase containing the *Fables of Lachambeaudie*, the *Mysteries of Paris*, and Norvins' *Napoléon* — and, in the middle of the alcove, the face of Béranger was smiling in a rosewood frame.

The guests (in addition to Deslauriers and Sénécal) were an apothecary who had just been admitted, but who had not enough capital to start in business for himself, a young man of his own house, a town-traveller in wines, an architect, and a gentleman employed in an insurance office. Regimbart had not been able to come. Regret was expressed at his absence.

They welcomed Frederick with a great display of sympathy, as they all knew through Dussardier what he had said at M. Dambreuse's house. Sénécal contented himself with putting out his hand in a dignified manner.

He remained standing near the chimney-piece. The others seated, with their pipes in their mouths, listened to him, while he held forth on universal suffrage, from which he predicted as a result the triumph of Democracy and the practical application of the principles of the Gospel. However, the hour was at hand. The banquets of the party of reform were becoming more numerous in the provinces. Piedmont, Naples, Tuscany — —

"'Tis true," said Deslauriers, interrupting him abruptly. "This cannot last longer!"

And he began to draw a picture of the situation. We had sacrificed Holland to obtain from England the recognition of Louis Philippe; and this precious English alliance was lost, owing to the Spanish marriages. In Switzerland, M. Guizot, in tow with the Austrian, maintained the treaties of 1815. Prussia, with her Zollverein, was preparing embarrassments for us. The Eastern question was still pending.

"The fact that the Grand Duke Constantine sends presents to M. d'Aumale is no reason for placing confidence in Russia. As for home affairs, never have so many blunders, such stupidity, been witnessed. The Government no longer even keeps up its majority. Everywhere, indeed, according to the well-known expression, it is naught! naught! naught! And in the teeth of such public scandals," continued the advocate, with his arms akimbo, "they declare themselves satisfied!"

The allusion to a notorious vote called forth applause. Dussardier uncorked a bottle of beer; the froth splashed on the curtains. He did not mind it. He filled the pipes, cut the cake, offered each of them a slice of it, and several times went downstairs to see whether the punch was coming up; and ere long they lashed themselves up into a state of excitement, as they all felt equally exasperated against Power. Their rage was of a violent character for no other reason save that they hated injustice, and they mixed up with legitimate grievances the most idiotic complaints.

The apothecary groaned over the pitiable condition of our fleet. The insurance agent could not tolerate Marshal Soult's two sentinels. Deslauriers denounced the Jesuits, who had just installed themselves publicly at Lille. Sénécal execrated M. Cousin much more for eclecticism, by teaching that certitude can be deduced from reason, developed selfishness and destroyed solidarity. The traveller in wines, knowing very little about these matters, remarked in a very loud tone that he had forgotten many infamies:

"The royal carriage on the Northern line must have cost eighty thousand francs. Who'll pay the amount?"

"Aye, who'll pay the amount?" repeated the clerk, as angrily as if this amount had been drawn out of his own pocket.

Then followed recriminations against the lynxes of the Bourse and the corruption of officials. According to Sénécal they ought to go higher up, and lay the blame, first of all, on the princes who had revived the morals of the Regency period.

"Have you not lately seen the Duc de Montpensier's friends coming back from Vincennes, no doubt in a state of intoxication, and disturbing with their songs the workmen of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine?"

"There was even a cry of 'Down with the thieves!'" said the apothecary. "I was there, and I joined in the cry!"

"So much the better! The people are at last waking up since the Teste-Cubières case."[D]

"For my part, that case caused me some pain," said Dussardier, "because it imputed dishonour to an old soldier!"

"Do you know," Sénécal went on, "what they have discovered at the Duchesse de Praslin's house — — ?"

But here the door was sent flying open with a kick. Hussonnet entered.

"Hail, messeigneurs," said he, as he seated himself on the bed.

No allusion was made to his article, which he was sorry, however, for having written, as the Maréchale had sharply reprimanded him on account of it.

He had just seen at the Théâtre de Dumas the *Chevalier de Maison-Rouge,* and declared that it seemed to him a stupid play.

Such a criticism surprised the democrats, as this drama, by its tendency, or rather by its scenery, flattered their passions. They protested. Sénécal, in order to bring this discussion to a close, asked whether the play served the cause of Democracy.

"Yes, perhaps; but it is written in a style — — "

"Well, then, 'tis a good play. What is style? 'Tis the idea!"

And, without allowing Frederick to say a word:

"Now, I was pointing out that in the Praslin case — — "

Hussonnet interrupted him:

"Ha! here's another worn-out trick! I'm disgusted at it!"

"And others as well as you," returned Deslauriers.

"It has only got five papers taken. Listen while I read this paragraph."

And drawing his note-book out of his pocket, he read:

"'We have, since the establishment of the best of republics, been subjected to twelve hundred and twenty-nine press prosecutions, from which the results to the writers have been imprisonment extending over a period of three thousand one hundred and forty-one years, and the light sum of seven million one hundred and ten thousand five hundred francs by way of fine.' That's charming, eh?"

They all sneered bitterly.

Frederick, incensed against the others, broke in:

"*The Democratie Pacifique* has had proceedings taken against it on account of its feuilleton, a novel entitled *The Woman's Share*."

"Come! that's good," said Hussonnet. "Suppose they prevented us from having our share of the women!"

"But what is it that's not prohibited?" exclaimed Deslauriers. "To smoke in the Luxembourg is prohibited; to sing the Hymn to Pius IX. is prohibited!"

"And the typographers' banquet has been interdicted," a voice cried, with a thick articulation.

It was that of an architect, who had sat concealed in the shade of the alcove, and who had remained silent up to that moment. He added that, the week before, a man named Rouget had been convicted of offering insults to the king.

"That gurnet[E] is fried," said Hussonnet.

This joke appeared so improper to Sénécal, that he reproached Hussonnet for defending the Juggler of the Hôtel de Ville, the friend of the traitor Dumouriez.

"I? quite the contrary!"

He considered Louis Philippe commonplace, one of the National Guard types of men, all that savoured most of the provision-shop and the cotton night-cap! And laying his hand on his heart, the Bohemian gave utterance to the rhetorical phrases:

"It is always with a new pleasure.... Polish nationality will not perish.... Our great works will be pursued.... Give me some money for my little family...."

They all laughed hugely, declaring that he was a delightful fellow, full of wit. Their delight was redoubled at the sight of the bowl of punch which was brought in by the keeper of a café.

The flames of the alcohol and those of the wax-candles soon heated the apartment, and the light from the garret, passing across the courtyard, illuminated the side of an opposite roof with the flue of a chimney, whose black outlines could be traced through the darkness of night. They talked in very loud tones all at the same time. They had taken off their coats; they gave blows to the furniture; they touched glasses.

Hussonnet exclaimed:

"Send up some great ladies, in order that this may be more Tour de Nesles, have more local colouring, and be more Rembrandtesque, gadzooks!"

And the apothecary, who kept stirring about the punch indefinitely, began to sing with expanded chest:

"I've two big oxen in my stable,
Two big white oxen — — "

Sénécal laid his hand on the apothecary's mouth; he did not like disorderly conduct; and the lodgers pressed their faces against the window-panes, surprised at the unwonted uproar that was taking place in Dussardier's room.

The honest fellow was happy, and said that this recalled to his mind their little parties on the Quai Napoléon in days gone by; however, they missed many who used to be present at these reunions, "Pellerin, for instance."

"We can do without him," observed Frederick.

And Deslauriers enquired about Martinon.

"What has become of that interesting gentleman?"

Frederick, immediately giving vent to the ill-will which he bore to Martinon, attacked his mental capacity, his character, his false elegance, his entire personality. He was a perfect specimen of an upstart peasant! The new aristocracy, the mercantile class, was not as good as the old — the nobility. He maintained this, and the democrats expressed their approval, as if he were a member of the one class, and they were in the habit of visiting the other. They were charmed with him. The apothecary compared him to M. d'Alton Shée, who, though a peer of France, defended the cause of the people.

The time had come for taking their departure. They all separated with great handshakings. Dussardier, in a spirit of affectionate solicitude, saw Frederick and Deslauriers home. As soon as they were in the street, the advocate assumed a thoughtful air, and, after a moment's silence:

"You have a great grudge, then, against Pellerin?"

Frederick did not hide his rancour.

The painter, in the meantime, had withdrawn the notorious picture from the show-window. A person should not let himself be put out by trifles. What was the good of making an enemy for himself?

"He has given way to a burst of ill-temper, excusable in a man who hasn't a sou. You, of course, can't understand that!"

And, when Deslauriers had gone up to his own apartments, the shopman did not part with Frederick. He even urged his friend to buy the portrait. In fact, Pellerin, abandoning the hope of being able to intimidate him, had got round them so that they might use their influence to obtain the thing for him.

Deslauriers spoke about it again, and pressed him on the point, urging that the artist's claims were reasonable.

"I am sure that for a sum of, perhaps, five hundred francs — — "

"Oh, give it to him! Wait! here it is!" said Frederick.

The picture was brought the same evening. It appeared to him a still more atrocious daub than when he had seen it first. The half-tints and the shades were darkened under the excessive retouchings, and they seemed obscured when brought into relation with the lights, which, having remained very brilliant here and there, destroyed the harmony of the entire picture.

Frederick revenged himself for having had to pay for it by bitterly disparaging it. Deslauriers believed in Frederick's statement on the point, and expressed approval of his conduct, for he had always been ambitious of constituting a phalanx of which he would be the leader. Certain men take delight in making their friends do things which are disagreeable to them.

Meanwhile, Frederick did not renew his visits to the Dambreuses. He lacked the capital for the investment. He would have to enter into endless explanations on the subject; he hesitated about making up his mind. Perhaps he was in the right. Nothing was certain now, the coal-mining speculation any more than other things. He would have to give up society of that sort. The end of the matter was that Deslauriers was dissuaded from having anything further to do with the undertaking.

From sheer force of hatred he had grown virtuous, and again he preferred

Frederick in a position of mediocrity. In this way he remained his friend's equal and in more intimate relationship with him.

Mademoiselle Roque's commission had been very badly executed. Her father wrote to him, supplying him with the most precise directions, and concluded his letter with this piece of foolery: "At the risk of giving you *nigger on the brain*!"

Frederick could not do otherwise than call upon the Arnouxs', once more. He went to the warehouse, where he could see nobody. The firm being in a tottering condition, the clerks imitated the carelessness of their master.

He brushed against the shelves laden with earthenware, which filled up the entire space in the centre of the establishment; then, when he reached the lower end, facing the counter, he walked with a more noisy tread in order to make himself heard.

The portières parted, and Madame Arnoux appeared.

"What! you here! you!"

"Yes," she faltered, with some agitation. "I was looking for — — "

He saw her handkerchief near the desk, and guessed that she had come down to her husband's warehouse to have an account given to her as to the business, to clear up some matter that caused her anxiety.

"But perhaps there is something you want?" said she.

"A mere nothing, madame."

"These shop-assistants are intolerable! they are always out of the way."

They ought not to be blamed. On the contrary, he congratulated himself on the circumstance.

She gazed at him in an ironical fashion.

"Well, and this marriage?"

"What marriage?"

"Your own!"

"Mine? I'll never marry as long as I live!"

She made a gesture as if to contradict his words.

"Though, indeed, such things must be, after all? We take refuge in the commonplace, despairing of ever realising the beautiful existence of which we have dreamed."

"All your dreams, however, are not so — candid!"

"What do you mean?"

"When you drive to races with women!"

He cursed the Maréchale. Then something recurred to his memory.

"But it was you begged of me yourself to see her at one time in the interest of Arnoux."

She replied with a shake of her head:

"And you take advantage of it to amuse yourself?"

"And you take advantage of it to amuse yourself?"

"Good God! let us forget all these foolish things!"

"'Tis right, since you are going to be married."

And she stifled a sigh, while she bit her lips.

Then he exclaimed:

"But I tell you again I am not! Can you believe that I, with my intellectual requirements, my habits, am going to bury myself in the provinces in order to play cards, look after masons, and walk about in wooden shoes? What object, pray, could I have for taking such a step? You've been told that she was rich, haven't you? Ah! what do I care about money? Could I, after yearning long for that which is most lovely, tender, enchanting, a sort of Paradise under a human form, and having found this sweet ideal at last when this vision hides every other from my view — — "

And taking her head between his two hands, he began to kiss her on the eyelids, repeating:

"No! no! no! never will I marry! never! never!"

She submitted to these caresses, her mingled amazement and delight having bereft her of the power of motion.

The door of the storeroom above the staircase fell back, and she remained with outstretched arms, as if to bid him keep silence. Steps drew near. Then some one said from behind the door:

"Is Madame there?"

"Come in!"

Madame Arnoux had her elbow on the counter, and was twisting about a pen between her fingers quietly when the book-keeper threw aside the portière.

Frederick started up, as if on the point of leaving.

"Madame, I have the honour to salute you. The set will be ready — will it not? I may count on this?"

She made no reply. But by thus silently becoming his accomplice in the deception, she made his face flush with the crimson glow of adultery.

On the following day he paid her another visit. She received him; and, in order to follow up the advantage he had gained, Frederick immediately, without any preamble, attempted to offer some justification for the accidental meeting in the Champ de Mars. It was the merest chance that led to his being in that woman's company. While admitting that she was pretty — which really was not the case — how could she for even a moment absorb his thoughts, seeing that he loved another woman?

"You know it well — I told you it was so!"

Madame Arnoux hung down her head.

"I am sorry you said such a thing."

"I am sorry you said such a thing."

"Why?"

"The most ordinary proprieties now demand that I should see you no more!"

He protested that his love was of an innocent character. The past ought to be a guaranty as to his future conduct. He had of his own accord made it a point of honour with himself not to disturb her existence, not to deafen her with his complaints.

"But yesterday my heart overflowed."

"We ought not to let our thoughts dwell on that moment, my friend!"

And yet, where would be the harm in two wretched beings mingling their griefs?

"For, indeed, you are not happy any more than I am! Oh! I know you. You have no one who responds to your craving for affection, for devotion. I will do anything you wish! I will not offend you! I swear to you that I will not!"

And he let himself fall on his knees, in spite of himself, giving way beneath the weight of the feelings that oppressed his heart.

"Rise!" she said; "I desire you to do so!"

And she declared in an imperious tone that if he did not comply with her wish, she would never see him again.

"Ha! I defy you to do it!" returned Frederick. "What is there for me to do in the world? Other men strive for riches, celebrity, power! But I have no profession; you are my exclusive occupation, my whole wealth, the object, the centre of my existence and of my thoughts. I can no more live without you than without the air of heaven! Do you not feel the aspiration of my soul ascending towards yours, and that they must intermingle, and that I am dying on your account?"

Madame Arnoux began to tremble in every limb.

"Oh! leave me, I beg of you?"

The look of utter confusion in her face made him pause. Then he advanced a step. But she drew back, with her two hands clasped.

"Leave me in the name of Heaven, for mercy's sake!"

And Frederick loved her so much that he went away.

Soon afterwards, he was filled with rage against himself, declared in his own mind that he was an idiot, and, after the lapse of twenty-four hours, returned.

Madame was not there. He remained at the head of the stairs, stupefied with anger and indignation. Arnoux appeared, and informed Frederick that his wife had, that very morning, gone out to take up her residence at a little country-house of which he had become tenant at Auteuil, as he had given up possession of the house at Saint-Cloud.

"This is another of her whims. No matter, as she is settled at last; and myself

This is another of her whims. No matter, as she is settled at last, and myself, too, for that matter, so much the better. Let us dine together this evening, will you?"

Frederick pleaded as an excuse some urgent business; then he hurried away of his own accord to Auteuil.

Madame Arnoux allowed an exclamation of joy to escape her lips. Then all his bitterness vanished.

He did not say one word about his love. In order to inspire her with confidence in him, he even exaggerated his reserve; and on his asking whether he might call again, she replied: "Why, of course!" putting out her hand, which she withdrew the next moment.

From that time forth, Frederick increased his visits. He promised extra fares to the cabman who drove him. But often he grew impatient at the slow pace of the horse, and, alighting on the ground, he would make a dash after an omnibus, and climb to the top of it out of breath. Then with what disdain he surveyed the faces of those around him, who were not going to see her!

He could distinguish her house at a distance, with an enormous honeysuckle covering, on one side, the planks of the roof. It was a kind of Swiss châlet, painted red, with a balcony outside. In the garden there were three old chestnut-trees, and on a rising ground in the centre might be seen a parasol made of thatch, held up by the trunk of a tree. Under the slatework lining the walls, a big vine-tree, badly fastened, hung from one place to another after the fashion of a rotten cable. The gate-bell, which it was rather hard to pull, was slow in ringing, and a long time always elapsed before it was answered. On each occasion he experienced a pang of suspense, a fear born of irresolution.

Then his ears would be greeted with the pattering of the servant-maid's slippers over the gravel, or else Madame Arnoux herself would make her appearance. One day he came up behind her just as she was stooping down in the act of gathering violets.

Her daughter's capricious disposition had made it necessary to send the girl to a convent. Her little son was at school every afternoon. Arnoux was now in the habit of taking prolonged luncheons at the Palais-Royal with Regimbart and their friend Compain. They gave themselves no bother about anything that occurred, no matter how disagreeable it might be.

It was clearly understood between Frederick and her that they should not belong to each other. By this convention they were preserved from danger, and they found it easier to pour out their hearts to each other.

She told him all about her early life at Chartres, which she spent with her mother, her devotion when she had reached her twelfth year, then her passion for music, when she used to sing till nightfall in her little room, from which the ramparts could be seen.

He related to her how melancholy broodings had haunted him at college, and how a woman's face shone brightly in the cloudland of his imagination, so that, when he first laid eyes upon her, he felt that her features were quite familiar to him.

These conversations, as a rule, covered only the years during which they had been acquainted with each other. He recalled to her recollection insignificant details — the colour of her dress at a certain period, a woman whom they had met on a certain day, what she had said on another occasion; and she replied, quite astonished:

"Yes, I remember!"

Their tastes, their judgments, were the same. Often one of them, when listening to the other, exclaimed:

"That's the way with me."

And the other replied:

"And with me, too!"

Then there were endless complaints about Providence:

"Why was it not the will of Heaven? If we had only met — — !"

"Ah! if I had been younger!" she sighed.

"No, but if I had been a little older."

And they pictured to themselves a life entirely given up to love, sufficiently rich to fill up the vastest solitudes, surpassing all other joys, defying all forms of wretchedness, in which the hours would glide away in a continual outpouring of their own emotions, and which would be as bright and glorious as the palpitating splendour of the stars.

They were nearly always standing at the top of the stairs exposed to the free air of heaven. The tops of trees yellowed by the autumn raised their crests in front of them at unequal heights up to the edge of the pale sky; or else they walked on to the end of the avenue into a summer-house whose only furniture was a couch of grey canvas. Black specks stained the glass; the walls exhaled a mouldy smell; and they remained there chatting freely about all sorts of topics — anything that happened to arise — in a spirit of hilarity. Sometimes the rays of the sun, passing through the Venetian blind, extended from the ceiling down to the flagstones like the strings of a lyre. Particles of dust whirled amid these luminous bars. She amused herself by dividing them with her hand. Frederick gently caught hold of her; and he gazed on the twinings of her veins, the grain of her skin, and the form of her fingers. Each of those fingers of hers was for him more than a thing — almost a person.

She gave him her gloves, and, the week after, her handkerchief. She called him "Frederick;" he called her "Marie," adoring this name, which, as he said, was expressly made to be uttered with a sigh of ecstasy, and which seemed to contain clouds of incense and scattered heaps of roses.

They soon came to an understanding as to the days on which he would call to see her; and, leaving the house as if by mere chance, she walked along the road to meet him.

She made no effort whatever to excite his love, lost in that listlessness which is characteristic of intense happiness. During the whole season she wore a brown silk dressing-gown with velvet borders of the same colour, a large garment, which united the indolence of her attitudes and her grave physiognomy. Besides, she had just reached the autumnal period of womanhood, in which reflection is combined with tenderness, in which the beginning of maturity colours the face with a more intense flame, when strength of feeling mingles with experience of life, and when, having completely expanded, the entire being overflows with a richness in harmony with its beauty. Never had she possessed more sweetness, more leniency. Secure in the thought that she would not err, she abandoned herself to a sentiment which seemed to her won by her sorrows. And, moreover, it was so innocent and fresh! What an abyss lay between the coarseness of Arnoux and the adoration of Frederick!

He trembled at the thought that by an imprudent word he might lose all that he had gained, saying to himself that an opportunity might be found again, but that a foolish step could never be repaired. He wished that she should give herself rather than that he should take her. The assurance of being loved by her delighted him like a foretaste of possession, and then the charm of her person troubled his heart more than his senses. It was an indefinable feeling of bliss, a sort of intoxication that made him lose sight of the possibility of having his happiness completed. Apart from her, he was consumed with longing.

Ere long the conversations were interrupted by long spells of silence. Sometimes a species of sexual shame made them blush in each other's presence. All the precautions they took to hide their love only unveiled it; the stronger it grew, the more constrained they became in manner. The effect of this dissimulation was to intensify their sensibility. They experienced a sensation of delight at the odour of moist leaves; they could not endure the east wind; they got irritated without any apparent cause, and had melancholy forebodings. The sound of a footstep, the creaking of the wainscoting, filled them with as much terror as if they had been guilty. They felt as if they were being pushed towards the edge of a chasm. They were surrounded by a tempestuous atmosphere; and when complaints escaped Frederick's lips, she made accusations against herself.

"Yes, I am doing wrong. I am acting as if I were a coquette! Don't come any more!"

Then he would repeat the same oaths, to which on each occasion she listened with renewed pleasure.

His return to Paris, and the fuss occasioned by New Year's Day, interrupted their meetings to some extent. When he returned, he had an air of greater self-confidence. Every moment she went out to give orders, and in spite of his entreaties she received every visitor that called during the evening.

After this, they engaged in conversations about Léotade, M. Guizot, the Pope, the insurrection at Palermo, and the banquet of the Twelfth Arrondissement, which had caused some disquietude. Frederick eased his mind by railing against Power, for he longed, like Deslauriers, to turn the whole world upside down, so soured had he now become. Madame Arnoux, on her side, had become sad.

Her husband, indulging in displays of wild folly, was flirting with one of the girls in his pottery works, the one who was known as "the girl from Bordeaux." Madame Arnoux was herself informed about it by Frederick. He wanted to make use of it as an argument, "inasmuch as she was the victim of deception."

"Oh! I'm not much concerned about it," she said.

This admission on her part seemed to him to strengthen the intimacy between them. Would Arnoux be seized with mistrust with regard to them?

"No! not now!"

She told him that, one evening, he had left them talking together, and had afterwards come back again and listened behind the door, and as they both were chatting at the time of matters that were of no consequence, he had lived since then in a state of complete security.

"With good reason, too — is that not so?" said Frederick bitterly.

"Yes, no doubt!"

It would have been better for him not to have given so risky an answer.

One day she was not at home at the hour when he usually called. To him there seemed to be a sort of treason in this.

He was next displeased at seeing the flowers which he used to bring her always placed in a glass of water.

"Where, then, would you like me to put them?"

"Oh! not there! However, they are not so cold there as they would be near your heart!"

Not long afterwards he reproached her for having been at the Italian opera the night before without having given him a previous intimation of her intention to go there. Others had seen, admired, fallen in love with her, perhaps; Frederick was fastening on those suspicions of his merely in order to pick a quarrel with her, to torment her; for he was beginning to hate her, and the very least he might expect was that she should share in his sufferings!

One afternoon, towards the middle of February, he surprised her in a state of great mental excitement. Eugène had been complaining about his sore throat. The doctor had told her, however, that it was a trifling ailment — a bad cold, an attack of influenza. Frederick was astonished at the child's stupefied look. Nevertheless, he reassured the mother, and brought forward the cases of several children of the same age who had been attacked with similar ailments, and had been speedily cured.

"Really?"

"Why, yes, assuredly!"

"Oh! how good you are!"

And she caught his hand. He clasped hers tightly in his.

"Oh! let it go!"

"What does it signify, when it is to one who sympathises with you that you offer it? You place every confidence in me when I speak of these things, but you distrust me when I talk to you about my love!"

"I don't doubt you on that point, my poor friend!"

"Why this distrust, as if I were a wretch capable of abusing — — "

"Oh! no! — --"

"If I had only a proof! — --"

"What proof?"

"The proof that a person might give to the first comer — what you have granted to myself!"

And he recalled to her recollection how, on one occasion, they had gone out together, on a winter's twilight, when there was a fog. This seemed now a long time ago. What, then, was to prevent her from showing herself on his arm before the whole world without any fear on her part, and without any mental reservation on his, not having anyone around them who could importune them?

"Be it so!" she said, with a promptness of decision that at first astonished Frederick.

But he replied, in a lively fashion:

"Would you like me to wait at the corner of the Rue Tronchet and the Rue de la Ferme?"

"Good heavens, my friend!" faltered Madame Arnoux.

Without giving her time to reflect, he added:

"Next Tuesday, I suppose?"

"Tuesday?"

"Yes, between two and three o'clock."

"I will be there!"

And she turned aside her face with a movement of shame. Frederick placed his lips on the nape of her neck.

"Oh! this is not right," she said. "You will make me repent."

He turned away, dreading the fickleness which is customary with women. Then, on the threshold, he murmured softly, as if it were a thing that was thoroughly understood:

"On Tuesday!"

She lowered her beautiful eyes in a cautious and resigned fashion.

Frederick had a plan arranged in his mind.

He hoped that, owing to the rain or the sun, he might get her to stop under some doorway, and that, once there, she would go into some house. The difficulty was to find one that would suit.

He made a search, and about the middle of the Rue Tronchet he read, at a distance on a signboard, "Furnished apartments."

The waiter, divining his object, showed him immediately above the ground-floor a room and a closet with two exits. Frederick took it for a month, and paid in advance. Then he went into three shops to buy the rarest perfumery. He got a piece of imitation guipure, which was to replace the horrible red cotton foot-coverlets; he selected a pair of blue satin slippers, only the fear of appearing coarse checked the amount of his purchases. He came back with them; and with more devotion than those who are erecting processional altars, he altered the position of the furniture, arranged the curtains himself, put heather in the fireplace, and covered the chest of drawers with violets. He would have liked to pave the entire apartment with gold. "To-morrow is the time," said he to himself. "Yes, to-morrow! I am not dreaming!" and he felt his heart throbbing violently under the delirious excitement begotten by his anticipations. Then, when everything was ready, he carried off the key in his pocket, as if the happiness which slept there might have flown away along with it.

A letter from his mother was awaiting him when he reached his abode:

"Why such a long absence? Your conduct is beginning to look ridiculous. I understand your hesitating more or less at first with regard to this union. However, think well upon it."

And she put the matter before him with the utmost clearness: an income of forty-five thousand francs. However, "people were talking about it;" and M. Roque was waiting for a definite answer. As for the young girl, her position was truly most embarrassing.

"She is deeply attached to you."

Frederick threw aside the letter even before he had finished reading it, and opened another epistle which came from Deslauriers.

"Dear Old Boy, — The *pear* is ripe. In accordance with your promise, we may count on you. We meet to-morrow at daybreak, in the Place du Panthéon. Drop into the Café Soufflot. It is necessary for me to have a chat with you before the manifestation takes place."

"Oh! I know them, with their manifestations! A thousand thanks! I have a more agreeable appointment."

And on the following morning, at eleven o'clock, Frederick had left the house. He wanted to give one last glance at the preparations. Then, who could tell but that, by some chance or other, she might be at the place of meeting before him? As he emerged from the Rue Tronchet, he heard a great clamour behind the Madeleine. He pressed forward, and saw at the far end of the square, to the left, a number of men in blouses and well-dressed people.

In fact, a manifesto published in the newspapers had summoned to this spot all who had subscribed to the banquet of the Reform Party. The Ministry had, almost without a moment's delay, posted up a proclamation prohibiting the meeting. The Parliamentary Opposition had, on the previous evening, disclaimed any connection with it; but the patriots, who were unaware of this resolution on the part of their leaders, had come to the meeting-place, followed by a great crowd of spectators. A deputation from the schools had made its way, a short time before, to the house of Odillon Barrot. It was now at the residence of the Minister for Foreign Affairs; and nobody could tell whether the banquet would take place, whether the Government would carry out its threat, and whether the National Guards would make their appearance. People were as much enraged against the deputies as against Power. The crowd was growing bigger and bigger, when suddenly the strains of the "Marseillaise" rang through the air.

It was the students' column which had just arrived on the scene. They marched along at an ordinary walking pace, in double file and in good order, with angry faces, bare hands, and all exclaiming at intervals:

"Long live Reform! Down with Guizot!"

Frederick's friends were there, sure enough. They would have noticed him and dragged him along with them. He quickly sought refuge in the Rue de l'Arcade.

When the students had taken two turns round the Madeleine, they went down in the direction of the Place de la Concorde. It was full of people; and, at a distance, the crowd pressed close together, had the appearance of a field of dark ears of corn swaying to and fro.

At the same moment, some soldiers of the line ranged themselves in battle-array at the left-hand side of the church.

The groups remained standing there, however. In order to put an end to this, some police-officers in civilian dress seized the most riotous of them in a brutal fashion, and carried them off to the guard-house. Frederick, in spite of his indignation, remained silent; he might have been arrested along with the others, and he would have missed Madame Arnoux.

A little while afterwards the helmets of the Municipal Guards appeared. They kept striking about them with the flat side of their sabres. A horse fell down. The people made a rush forward to save him, and as soon as the rider was in the saddle, they all ran away.

Then there was a great silence. The thin rain, which had moistened the asphalt, was no longer falling. Clouds floated past, gently swept on by the west wind.

Frederick began running through the Rue Tronchet, looking before him and behind him.

At length it struck two o'clock.

"Ha! now is the time!" said he to himself. "She is leaving her house; she is approaching," and a minute after, "she would have had time to be here."

Up to three he tried to keep quiet. "No, she is not going to be late — a little patience!"

And for want of something to do he examined the most interesting shops that he passed — a bookseller's, a saddler's and a mourning warehouse. Soon he knew the names of the different books, the various kinds of harness, and every sort of material. The persons who looked after these establishments, from seeing him continually going backwards and forwards, were at first surprised, and then alarmed, and they closed up their shop-fronts.

No doubt she had met with some impediment, and for that reason she must be enduring pain on account of it. But what delight would be afforded in a very short time! For she would come — that was certain. "She has given me her promise!" In the meantime an intolerable feeling of anxiety was gradually seizing hold of him. Impelled by an absurd idea, he returned to his hotel, as if he expected to find her there. At the same moment, she might have reached the street in which their meeting was to take place. He rushed out. Was there no one? And he resumed his tramp up and down the footpath.

He stared at the gaps in the pavement, the mouths of the gutters, the candelabra, and the numbers above the doors. The most trifling objects became for him companions, or rather, ironical spectators, and the regular fronts of the houses seemed to him to have a pitiless aspect. He was suffering from cold feet. He felt as if he were about to succumb to the dejection which was crushing him. The reverberation of his footsteps vibrated through his brain.

When he saw by his watch that it was four o'clock, he experienced, as it were, a sense of vertigo, a feeling of dismay. He tried to repeat some verses to himself, to enter on a calculation, no matter of what sort, to invent some kind of story. Impossible! He was beset by the image of Madame Arnoux; he felt a longing to run in order to meet her. But what road ought he to take so that they might not pass each other?

He went up to a messenger, put five francs into his hand, and ordered him to go to the Rue de Paradis to Jacques Arnoux's residence to enquire "if Madame were at home." Then he took up his post at the corner of the Rue de la Ferme and of the Rue Tronchet, so as to be able to look down both of them at the same time. On the boulevard, in the background of the scene in front of him, confused masses of people were gliding past. He could distinguish, every now and then, the aigrette of a dragoon or a woman's hat; and he strained his eyes in the effort to recognise the wearer. A child in rags, exhibiting a jack-in-the-box, asked him, with a smile, for alms.

The man with the velvet vest reappeared. "The porter had not seen her going out." What had kept her in? If she were ill he would have been told about it. Was it a visitor? Nothing was easier than to say that she was not at home. He struck his forehead.

"Ah! I am stupid! Of course, 'tis this political outbreak that prevented her from coming!"

He was relieved by this apparently natural explanation. Then, suddenly: "But her quarter of the city is quiet." And a horrible doubt seized hold of his mind: "Suppose she was not coming at all, and merely gave me a promise in order to get rid of me? No, no!" What had prevented her from coming was, no doubt, some extraordinary mischance, one of those occurrences that baffled all one's anticipations. In that case she would have written to him.

And he sent the hotel errand-boy to his residence in the Rue Rumfort to find out whether there happened to be a letter waiting for him there.

No letter had been brought. This absence of news reassured him.

He drew omens from the number of coins which he took up in his hand out of his pocket by chance, from the physiognomies of the passers-by, and from the colour of different horses; and when the augury was unfavourable, he forced himself to disbelieve in it. In his sudden outbursts of rage against Madame Arnoux, he abused her in muttering tones. Then came fits of weakness that nearly made him swoon, followed, all of a sudden, by fresh rebounds of hopefulness. She would make her appearance presently! She was there, behind his back! He turned round — there was nobody there! Once he perceived, about thirty paces away, a woman of the same height, with a dress of the same kind. He came up to her — it was not she. It struck five — half-past five — six. The gas-lamps were lighted, Madame Arnoux had not come.

The night before, she had dreamed that she had been, for some time, on the footpath in the Rue Tronchet. She was waiting there for something the nature of which she was not quite clear about, but which, nevertheless, was of great importance; and, without knowing why, she was afraid of being seen. But a pestiferous little dog kept barking at her furiously and biting at the hem of her dress. Every time she shook him off he returned stubbornly to the attack, always barking more violently than before. Madame Arnoux woke up. The dog's barking continued. She strained her ears to listen. It came from her son's room. She rushed to the spot in her bare feet. It was the child himself who was coughing. His hands were burning, his face flushed, and his voice singularly hoarse. Every minute he found it more difficult to breathe freely. She waited there till daybreak, bent over the coverlet watching him.

At eight o'clock the drum of the National Guard gave warning to M. Arnoux that his comrades were expecting his arrival. He dressed himself quickly and went away, promising that he would immediately be passing the house of their doctor, M. Colot.

At ten o'clock, when M. Colot did not make his appearance, Madame Arnoux despatched her chambermaid for him. The doctor was away in the country; and the young man who was taking his place had gone out on some business.

Eugène kept his head on one side on the bolster with contracted eyebrows and dilated nostrils. His pale little face had become whiter than the sheets; and there escaped from his larynx a wheezing caused by his oppressed breathing, which became gradually shorter, dryer, and more metallic. His cough resembled the noise made by those barbarous mechanical inventions by which toy-dogs are enabled to bark.

Madame Arnoux was seized with terror. She rang the bell violently, calling out for help, and exclaiming:

"A doctor! a doctor!"

Ten minutes later came an elderly gentleman in a white tie, and with grey whiskers well trimmed. He put several questions as to the habits, the age, and the constitution of the young patient, and studied the case with his head thrown back. He next wrote out a prescription.

The calm manner of this old man was intolerable. He smelt of aromatics. She would have liked to beat him. He said he would come back in the evening.

The horrible coughing soon began again. Sometimes the child arose suddenly. Convulsive movements shook the muscles of his breast; and in his efforts to breathe his stomach shrank in as if he were suffocating after running too hard. Then he sank down, with his head thrown back and his mouth wide open. With infinite pains, Madame Arnoux tried to make him swallow the contents of the infinite pains, Madame Arnoux tried to make him swallow the contents of the phials, hippo wine, and a potion containing trisulphate of antimony. But he pushed away the spoon, groaning in a feeble voice. He seemed to be blowing out his words.

From time to time she re-read the prescription. The observations of the formulary frightened her. Perhaps the apothecary had made some mistake. Her powerlessness filled her with despair. M. Colot's pupil arrived.

He was a young man of modest demeanour, new to medical work, and he made no attempt to disguise his opinion about the case. He was at first undecided as to what he should do, for fear of compromising himself, and finally he ordered pieces of ice to be applied to the sick child. It took a long time to get ice. The bladder containing the ice burst. It was necessary to change the little boy's shirt. This disturbance brought on an attack of even a more dreadful character than any of the previous ones.

The child began tearing off the linen round his neck, as if he wanted to remove the obstacle that was choking him; and he scratched the walls and seized the curtains of his bedstead, trying to get a point of support to assist him in breathing.

His face was now of a bluish hue, and his entire body, steeped in a cold perspiration, appeared to be growing lean. His haggard eyes were fixed with terror on his mother. He threw his arms round her neck, and hung there in a desperate fashion; and, repressing her rising sobs, she gave utterance in a broken voice to loving words:

"Yes, my pet, my angel, my treasure!"

Then came intervals of calm.

She went to look for playthings — a punchinello, a collection of images, and spread them out on the bed in order to amuse him. She even made an attempt to sing.

She began to sing a little ballad which she used to sing years before, when she was nursing him wrapped up in swaddling-clothes in this same little upholstered chair. But a shiver ran all over his frame, just as when a wave is agitated by the wind. The balls of his eyes protruded. She thought he was going to die, and turned away her eyes to avoid seeing him.

The next moment she felt strength enough in her to look at him. He was still living. The hours succeeded each other — dull, mournful, interminable, hopeless, and she no longer counted the minutes, save by the progress of this mental anguish. The shakings of his chest threw him forward as if to shatter his body. Finally, he vomited something strange, which was like a parchment tube. What was this? She fancied that he had evacuated one end of his entrails. But he now began to breathe freely and regularly. This appearance of well-being now began to breathe freely and regularly. This appearance of well-being frightened her more than anything else that had happened. She was sitting like one petrified, her arms hanging by her sides, her eyes fixed, when M. Colot suddenly made his appearance. The child, in his opinion, was saved.

She did not realise what he meant at first, and made him repeat the words. Was not this one of those consoling phrases which were customary with medical men? The doctor went away with an air of tranquillity. Then it seemed as if the cords that pressed round her heart were loosened.

"Saved! Is this possible?"

Suddenly the thought of Frederick presented itself to her mind in a clear and inexorable fashion. It was a warning sent to her by Providence. But the Lord in His mercy had not wished to complete her chastisement. What expiation could she offer hereafter if she were to persevere in this love-affair? No doubt insults would be flung at her son's head on her account; and Madame Arnoux saw him a young man, wounded in a combat, carried off on a litter, dying. At one spring she threw herself on the little chair, and, letting her soul escape towards the heights of heaven, she vowed to God that she would sacrifice, as a holocaust, her first real passion, her only weakness as a woman.

Frederick had returned home. He remained in his armchair, without even possessing enough of energy to curse her. A sort of slumber fell upon him, and, in the midst of his nightmare, he could hear the rain falling, still under the impression that he was there outside on the footpath.

Next morning, yielding to an incapacity to resist the temptation which clung to him, he again sent a messenger to Madame Arnoux's house.

Whether the true explanation happened to be that the fellow did not deliver his message, or that she had too many things to say to explain herself in a word or two, the same answer was brought back. This insolence was too great! A feeling of angry pride took possession of him. He swore in his own mind that he would never again cherish even a desire; and, like a group of leaves carried away by a hurricane, his love disappeared. He experienced a sense of relief, a feeling of stoical joy, then a need of violent action; and he walked on at random through the streets.

Men from the faubourgs were marching past armed with guns and old swords, some of them wearing red caps, and all singing the "Marseillaise" or the "Girondins." Here and there a National Guard was hurrying to join his mayoral department. Drums could be heard rolling in the distance. A conflict was going on at Porte Saint-Martin. There was something lively and warlike in the air. Frederick kept walking on without stopping. The excitement of the great city made him gay.

On the Frascati hill he got a glimpse of the Maréchale's windows; a wild idea occurred to him, a reaction of youthfulness. He crossed the boulevard.

The yard-gate was just being closed; and Delphine, who was in the act of writing on it with a piece of charcoal, "Arms given," said to him in an eager tone:

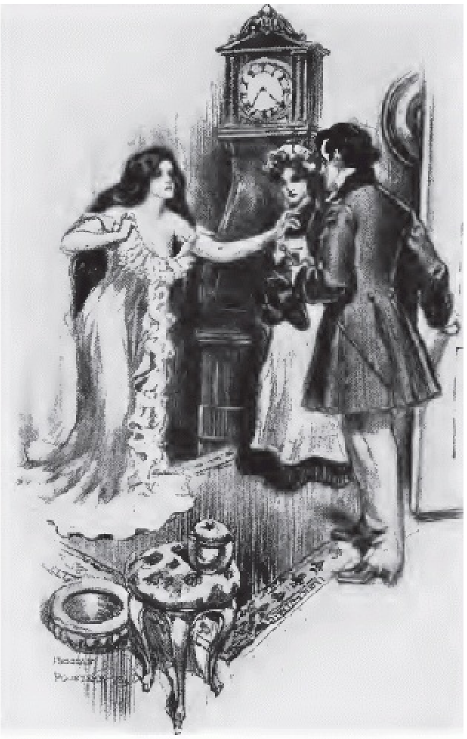
"Ah! Madame is in a nice state! She dismissed a groom who insulted her this morning. She thinks there's going to be pillage everywhere. She is frightened to death! and the more so as Monsieur has gone!"

"What Monsieur?"

"The Prince!"

Frederick entered the boudoir. The Maréchale appeared in her petticoat, and her hair hanging down her back in disorder.

"Ah! thanks! You are going to save me! 'tis the second time! You are one of those who never count the cost!"



"A thousand pardons!" said Frederick, catching her round the waist with both hands.

"How now? What are you doing?" stammered the Maréchale, at the same time, surprised and cheered up by his manner.

He replied:

"I am the fashion! I'm reformed!"

She let herself fall back on the divan, and continued laughing under his kisses.

They spent the afternoon looking out through the window at the people in the street. Then he brought her to dine at the Trois Frères Provençaux. The meal was a long and dainty one. They came back on foot for want of a vehicle.

At the announcement of a change of Ministry, Paris had changed. Everyone was in a state of delight. People kept promenading about the streets, and every floor was illuminated with lamps, so that it seemed as if it were broad daylight. The soldiers made their way back to their barracks, worn out and looking quite depressed. The people saluted them with exclamations of "Long live the Line!"

They went on without making any response. Among the National Guard, on the contrary, the officers, flushed with enthusiasm, brandished their sabres, vociferating:

"Long live Reform!"

And every time the two lovers heard this word they laughed.

Frederick told droll stories, and was quite gay.

Making their way through the Rue Duphot, they reached the boulevards. Venetian lanterns hanging from the houses formed wreaths of flame. Underneath, a confused swarm of people kept in constant motion. In the midst of those moving shadows could be seen, here and there, the steely glitter of bayonets. There was a great uproar. The crowd was too compact, and it was impossible to make one's way back in a straight line. They were entering the Rue Caumartin, when suddenly there burst forth behind them a noise like the crackling made by an immense piece of silk in the act of being torn across. It was the discharge of musketry on the Boulevard des Capucines.

"Ha! a few of the citizens are getting a crack," said Frederick calmly; for there are situations in which a man of the least cruel disposition is so much detached from his fellow-men that he would see the entire human race perishing without a single throb of the heart.

The Maréchale was clinging to his arm with her teeth chattering. She declared that she would not be able to walk twenty steps further. Then, by a refinement of hatred, in order the better to offer an outrage in his own soul to Madame Arnoux, he led Rosanette to the hotel in the Rue Tronchet, and brought her up to the room which he had got ready for the other.

The flowers were not withered. The guipure was spread out on the bed. He drew forth from the cupboard the little slippers. Rosanette considered this forethought on his part a great proof of his delicacy of sentiment. About one o'clock she was awakened by distant rolling sounds, and she saw that he was sobbing with his head buried in the pillow.

"What's the matter with you now, my own darling?"

"'Tis the excess of happiness," said Frederick. "I have been too long yearning after you!"

CHAPTER XIV.

The Barricade.

He was abruptly roused from sleep by the noise of a discharge of musketry; and, in spite of Rosanette's entreaties, Frederick was fully determined to go and see what was happening. He hurried down to the Champs-Elysées, from which shots were being fired. At the corner of the Rue Saint-Honoré some men in blouses ran past him, exclaiming:

"No! not that way! to the Palais-Royal!"

Frederick followed them. The grating of the Convent of the Assumption had been torn away. A little further on he noticed three paving-stones in the middle of the street, the beginning of a barricade, no doubt; then fragments of bottles and bundles of iron-wire, to obstruct the cavalry; and, at the same moment, there rushed suddenly out of a lane a tall young man of pale complexion, with his black hair flowing over his shoulders, and with a sort of pea-coloured swaddling-cloth thrown round him. In his hand he held a long military musket, and he dashed along on the tips of his slippers with the air of a somnambulist and with the nimbleness of a tiger. At intervals a detonation could be heard.

On the evening of the day before, the spectacle of the wagon containing five corpses picked up from amongst those that were lying on the Boulevard des Capucines had charged the disposition of the people; and, while at the Tuileries the aides-de-camp succeeded each other, and M. Molé, having set about the composition of a new Cabinet, did not come back, and M. Thiers was making efforts to constitute another, and while the King was cavilling and hesitating, and finally assigned the post of commander-in-chief to Bugeaud in order to prevent him from making use of it, the insurrection was organising itself in a formidable manner, as if it were directed by a single arm.

Men endowed with a kind of frantic eloquence were engaged in haranguing the populace at the street-corners, others were in the churches ringing the tocsin as loudly as ever they could. Lead was cast for bullets, cartridges were rolled about. The trees on the boulevards, the urinals, the benches, the gratings, the gas-burners, everything was torn off and thrown down. Paris, that morning, was covered with barricades. The resistance which was offered was of short duration, so that at eight o'clock the people, by voluntary surrender or by force, had got possession of five barracks, nearly all the municipal buildings, the most favourable strategic points. Of its own accord, without any effort, the Monarchy was melting away in rapid dissolution, and now an attack was made on the was melting away in rapid dissolution, and now an attack was made on the guard-house of the Château d'Eau, in order to liberate fifty prisoners, who were not there.

Frederick was forced to stop at the entrance to the square. It was filled with groups of armed men. The Rue Saint-Thomas and the Rue Fromanteau were occupied by companies of the Line. The Rue de Valois was choked up by an enormous barricade. The smoke which fluttered about at the top of it partly opened. Men kept running overhead, making violent gestures; they vanished from sight; then the firing was again renewed. It was answered from the guard-house without anyone being seen inside. Its windows, protected by oaken window-shutters, were pierced with loop-holes; and the monument with its two storys, its two wings, its fountain on the first floor and its little door in the centre, was beginning to be speckled with white spots under the shock of the bullets. The three steps in front of it remained unoccupied.

At Frederick's side a man in a Greek cap, with a cartridge-box over his knitted vest, was holding a dispute with a woman with a Madras neckerchief round her shoulders. She said to him:

"Come back now! Come back!"

"Leave me alone!" replied the husband. "You can easily mind the porter's lodge by yourself. I ask, citizen, is this fair? I have on every occasion done my duty — in 1830, in '32, in '34, and in '39! To-day they're fighting again. I must fight! Go away!"

And the porter's wife ended by yielding to his remonstrances and to those of a National Guard near them — a man of forty, whose simple face was adorned with a circle of white beard. He loaded his gun and fired while talking to Frederick, as cool in the midst of the outbreak as a horticulturist in his garden. A young lad with a packing-cloth thrown over him was trying to coax this man to give him a few caps, so that he might make use of a gun he had, a fine fowling-piece which a "gentleman" had made him a present of.

"Catch on behind my back," said the good man, "and keep yourself from being seen, or you'll get yourself killed!"

The drums beat for the charge. Sharp cries, hurrahs of triumph burst forth. A continual ebbing to and fro made the multitude sway backward and forward. Frederick, caught between two thick masses of people, did not move an inch, all the time fascinated and exceedingly amused by the scene around him. The wounded who sank to the ground, the dead lying at his feet, did not seem like persons really wounded or really dead. The impression left on his mind was that he was looking on at a show.

In the midst of the surging throng, above the sea of heads, could be seen an old man in a black coat. mounted on a white horse with a velvet saddle. He held in one hand a green bough, in the other a paper, and he kept shaking them persistently; but at length, giving up all hope of obtaining a hearing, he withdrew from the scene.

The soldiers of the Line had gone, and only the municipal troops remained to defend the guard-house. A wave of dauntless spirits dashed up the steps; they were flung down; others came on to replace them, and the gate resounded under blows from iron bars. The municipal guards did not give way. But a wagon, stuffed full of hay, and burning like a gigantic torch, was dragged against the walls. Faggots were speedily brought, then straw, and a barrel of spirits of wine. The fire mounted up to the stones along the wall; the building began to send forth smoke on all sides like the crater of a volcano; and at its summit, between the balustrades of the terrace, huge flames escaped with a harsh noise. The first story of the Palais-Royal was occupied by National Guards. Shots were fired through every window in the square; the bullets whizzed, the water of the fountain, which had burst, was mingled with the blood, forming little pools on the ground. People slipped in the mud over clothes, shakos, and weapons. Frederick felt something soft under his foot. It was the hand of a sergeant in a grey great-coat, lying on his face in the stream that ran along the street. Fresh bands of people were continually coming up, pushing on the combatants at the guard-house. The firing became quicker. The wine-shops were open; people went into them from time to time to smoke a pipe and drink a glass of beer, and then came back again to fight. A lost dog began to howl. This made the people laugh.

Frederick was shaken by the impact of a man falling on his shoulder with a bullet through his back and the death-rattle in his throat. At this shot, perhaps directed against himself, he felt himself stirred up to rage; and he was plunging forward when a National Guard stopped him.

"'Tis useless! the King has just gone! Ah! if you don't believe me, go and see for yourself!"

This assurance calmed Frederick. The Place du Carrousel had a tranquil aspect. The Hôtel de Nantes stood there as fixed as ever; and the houses in the rear; the dome of the Louvre in front, the long gallery of wood at the right, and the waste plot of ground that ran unevenly as far as the sheds of the stall-keepers were, so to speak, steeped in the grey hues of the atmosphere, where indistinct murmurs seemed to mingle with the fog; while, at the opposite side of the square, a stiff light, falling through the parting of the clouds on the façade of the Tuileries, cut out all its windows into white patches. Near the Arc de Triomphe a dead horse lay on the ground. Behind the gratings groups consisting of five or six persons were chatting. The doors leading into the château were open, and the servants at the thresholds allowed the people to enter.

Below stairs, in a kind of little parlour, bowls of *café au lait* were handed round. A few of those present sat down to the table and made merry; others remained standing, and amongst the latter was a hackney-coachman. He snatched up with both hands a glass vessel full of powdered sugar, cast a restless glance right and left, and then began to eat voraciously, with his nose stuck into the mouth of the vessel.

At the bottom of the great staircase a man was writing his name in a register.

Frederick was able to recognise him by his back.

"Hallo, Hussonnet!"

"Yes, 'tis I," replied the Bohemian. "I am introducing myself at court. This is a nice joke, isn't it?"

"Suppose we go upstairs?"

And they reached presently the Salle des Maréchaux. The portraits of those illustrious generals, save that of Bugeaud, which had been pierced through the stomach, were all intact. They were represented leaning on their sabres with a gun-carriage behind each of them, and in formidable attitudes in contrast with the occasion. A large timepiece proclaimed it was twenty minutes past one.

Suddenly the "Marseillaise" resounded. Hussonnet and Frederick bent over the balusters. It was the people. They rushed up the stairs, shaking with a dizzying, wave-like motion bare heads, or helmets, or red caps, or else bayonets or human shoulders with such impetuosity that some people disappeared every now and then in this swarming mass, which was mounting up without a moment's pause, like a river compressed by an equinoctial tide, with a continuous roar under an irresistible impulse. When they got to the top of the stairs, they were scattered, and their chant died away. Nothing could any longer be heard but the tramp of all the shoes intermingled with the chopping sound of many voices. The crowd not being in a mischievous mood, contented themselves with looking about them. But, from time to time, an elbow, by pressing too hard, broke through a pane of glass, or else a vase or a statue rolled from a bracket down on the floor. The wainscotings cracked under the pressure of people against them. Every face was flushed; the perspiration was rolling down their features in large beads. Hussonnet made this remark:

"Heroes have not a good smell."

"Ah! you are provoking," returned Frederick.

And, pushed forward in spite of themselves, they entered an apartment in which a dais of red velvet rose as far as the ceiling. On the throne below sat a representative of the proletariat in effigy with a black beard, his shirt gaping open, a jolly air, and the stupid look of a baboon. Others climbed up the platform to sit in his place.

"What a myth!" said Hussonnet. "There you see the sovereign people!"

The armchair was lifted up on the hands of a number of persons and passed across the hall, swaying from one side to the other.

"By Jove, 'tis like a boat! The Ship of State is tossing about in a stormy sea! Let it dance the cancan! Let it dance the cancan!"

They had drawn it towards a window, and in the midst of hisses, they launched it out.

"Poor old chap!" said Hussonnet, as he saw the effigy falling into the garden, where it was speedily picked up in order to be afterwards carried to the Bastille and burned.

Then a frantic joy burst forth, as if, instead of the throne, a future of boundless happiness had appeared; and the people, less through a spirit of vindictiveness than to assert their right of possession, broke or tore the glasses, the curtains, the lustres, the tapers, the tables, the chairs, the stools, the entire furniture, including the very albums and engravings, and the corbels of the tapestry. Since they had triumphed, they must needs amuse themselves! The common herd ironically wrapped themselves up in laces and cashmeres. Gold fringes were rolled round the sleeves of blouses. Hats with ostriches' feathers adorned blacksmiths' heads, and ribbons of the Legion of Honour supplied waistbands for prostitutes. Each person satisfied his or her caprice; some danced, others drank. In the queen's apartment a woman gave a gloss to her hair with pomatum. Behind a folding-screen two lovers were playing cards. Hussonnet pointed out to Frederick an individual who was smoking a dirty pipe with his elbows resting on a balcony; and the popular frenzy redoubled with a continuous crash of broken porcelain and pieces of crystal, which, as they rebounded, made sounds resembling those produced by the plates of musical glasses.

Then their fury was overshadowed. A nauseous curiosity made them rummage all the dressing-rooms, all the recesses. Returned convicts thrust their arms into the beds in which princesses had slept, and rolled themselves on the top of them, to console themselves for not being able to embrace their owners. Others, with sinister faces, roamed about silently, looking for something to steal, but too great a multitude was there. Through the bays of the doors could be seen in the suite of apartments only the dark mass of people between the gilding of the walls under a cloud of dust. Every breast was panting. The heat became more and more suffocating; and the two friends, afraid of being stifled, seized the opportunity of making their way out.

In the antechamber, standing on a heap of garments, appeared a girl of the town as a statue of Liberty, motionless, her grey eyes wide open — a fearful sight.

They had taken three steps outside the château when a company of the National Guards, in great-coats, advanced towards them, and, taking off their foraging-caps, and, at the same time, uncovering their skulls, which were slightly bald, bowed very low to the people. At this testimony of respect, the ragged victors bridled up. Hussonnet and Frederick were not without experiencing a certain pleasure from it as well as the rest.

They were filled with ardour. They went back to the Palais-Royal. In front of the Rue Fromanteau, soldiers' corpses were heaped up on the straw. They passed close to the dead without a single quiver of emotion, feeling a certain pride in being able to keep their countenance.

The Palais overflowed with people. In the inner courtyard seven piles of wood were flaming. Pianos, chests of drawers, and clocks were hurled out through the windows. Fire-engines sent streams of water up to the roofs. Some vagabonds tried to cut the hose with their sabres. Frederick urged a pupil of the Polytechnic School to interfere. The latter did not understand him, and, moreover, appeared to be an idiot. All around, in the two galleries, the populace, having got possession of the cellars, gave themselves up to a horrible carouse. Wine flowed in streams and wetted people's feet; the mudlarks drank out of the tail-ends of the bottles, and shouted as they staggered along.

"Come away out of this," said Hussonnet; "I am disgusted with the people."

All over the Orléans Gallery the wounded lay on mattresses on the ground, with purple curtains folded round them as coverlets; and the small shopkeepers' wives and daughters from the quarter brought them broth and linen.

"No matter!" said Frederick; "for my part, I consider the people sublime."

The great vestibule was filled with a whirlwind of furious individuals. Men tried to ascend to the upper storys in order to put the finishing touches to the work of wholesale destruction. National Guards, on the steps, strove to keep them back. The most intrepid was a chasseur, who had his head bare, his hair bristling, and his straps in pieces. His shirt caused a swelling between his trousers and his coat, and he struggled desperately in the midst of the others. Hussonnet, who had sharp sight, recognised Arnoux from a distance.

Then they went into the Tuileries garden, so as to be able to breathe more freely. They sat down on a bench; and they remained for some minutes with their eyes closed, so much stunned that they had not the energy to say a word. The people who were passing came up to them and informed them that the Duchesse d'Orléans had been appointed Regent, and that it was all over. They were experiencing that species of comfort which follows rapid *dénouements*, when at the windows of the attics in the château appeared men-servants tearing their liveries to pieces. They flung their torn clothes into the garden, as a mark of renunciation. The people hooted at them, and then they retired.

The attention of Frederick and Hussonnet was distracted by a tall fellow who was walking quickly between the trees with a musket on his shoulder. A cartridge-box was pressed against his pea-jacket; a handkerchief was wound round his forehead under his cap. He turned his head to one side. It was Dussardier; and casting himself into their arms:

"Ah! what good fortune, my poor old friends!" without being able to say another word, so much out of breath was he with fatigue.

He had been on his legs for the last twenty-four hours. He had been engaged at the barricades of the Latin Quarter, had fought in the Rue Rabuteau, had saved three dragoons' lives, had entered the Tuileries with Colonel Dunoyer, and, after that, had repaired to the Chamber, and then to the Hôtel de Ville.

"I have come from it! all goes well! the people are victorious! the workmen and the employers are embracing one another. Ha! if you knew what I have seen! what brave fellows! what a fine sight it was!"

And without noticing that they had no arms:

"I was quite certain of finding you there! This has been a bit rough — no matter!"

A drop of blood ran down his cheek, and in answer to the questions put to him by the two others:

"Oh! 'tis nothing! a slight scratch from a bayonet!"

"However, you really ought to take care of yourself."

"Pooh! I am substantial! What does this signify? The Republic is proclaimed! We'll be happy henceforth! Some journalists, who were talking just now in front of me, said they were going to liberate Poland and Italy! No more kings! You understand? The entire land free! the entire land free!"

And with one comprehensive glance at the horizon, he spread out his arms in a triumphant attitude. But a long file of men rushed over the terrace on the water's edge.

"Ah, deuce take it! I was forgetting. I must be off. Good-bye!"

He turned round to cry out to them while brandishing his musket:

"Long live the Republic!"

From the chimneys of the château escaped enormous whirlwinds of black smoke which bore sparks along with them. The ringing of the bells sent out over the city a wild and startling alarm. Right and left, in every direction, the conquerors discharged their weapons.

Frederick, though he was not a warrior, felt the Gallic blood leaping in his veins. The magnetism of the public enthusiasm had seized hold of him. He inhaled with a voluptuous delight the stormy atmosphere filled with the odour of gunpowder; and, in the meantime, he quivered under the effluvium of an immense love, a supreme and universal tenderness, as if the heart of all humanity were throbbing in his breast.

Hussonnet said with a yawn:

"It would be time, perhaps, to go and instruct the populace."

Frederick followed him to his correspondence-office in the Place de la Bourse; and he began to compose for the Troyes newspaper an account of recent events in a lyric style — a veritable tit-bit — to which he attached his signature. Then they dined together at a tavern. Hussonnet was pensive; the eccentricities of the Revolution exceeded his own.

After leaving the café, when they repaired to the Hôtel de Ville to learn the news, the boyish impulses which were natural to him had got the upper hand once more. He scaled the barricades like a chamois, and answered the sentinels with broad jokes of a patriotic flavour.

They heard the Provisional Government proclaimed by torchlight. At last, Frederick got back to his house at midnight, overcome with fatigue.

"Well," said he to his man-servant, while the latter was undressing him, "are you satisfied?"

"Yes, no doubt, Monsieur; but I don't like to see the people dancing to music."

Next morning, when he awoke, Frederick thought of Deslauriers. He hastened to his friend's lodgings. He ascertained that the advocate had just left Paris, having been appointed a provincial commissioner. At the *soirée* given the night before, he had got into contact with Ledru-Rollin, and laying siege to him in the name of the Law Schools, had snatched from him a post, a mission. However, the doorkeeper explained, he was going to write and give his address in the following week.

After this, Frederick went to see the Maréchale. She gave him a chilling reception. She resented his desertion of her. Her bitterness disappeared when he had given her repeated assurances that peace was restored.

All was quiet now. There was no reason to be afraid. He kissed her, and she declared herself in favour of the Republic, as his lordship the Archbishop of Paris had already done, and as the magistracy, the Council of State, the Institute, the marshals of France, Changarnier, M. de Falloux, all the Bonapartists, all the Legitimists, and a considerable number of Orléanists were about to do with a swiftness indicative of marvellous zeal.

The fall of the Monarchy had been so rapid that, as soon as the first stupefaction that succeeded it had passed away, there was amongst the middle class a feeling of astonishment at the fact that they were still alive. The summary execution of some thieves, who were shot without a trial, was regarded as an act of signal justice. For a month Lamartine's phrase was repeated with reference to the red flag, "which had only gone the round of the Champ de Mars, while the tricoloured flag," etc.; and all ranged themselves under its shade, each party seeing amongst the three colours only its own, and firmly determined, as soon as it would be the most powerful, to tear away the two others.

As business was suspended, anxiety and love of gaping drove everyone into the open air. The careless style of costume generally adopted attenuated differences of social position. Hatred masked itself; expectations were openly indulged in; the multitude seemed full of good-nature. The pride of having gained their rights shone in the people's faces. They displayed the gaiety of a carnival, the manners of a bivouac. Nothing could be more amusing than the aspect of Paris during the first days that followed the Revolution.

Frederick gave the Maréchale his arm, and they strolled along through the streets together. She was highly diverted by the display of rosettes in every buttonhole, by the banners hung from every window, and the bills of every colour that were posted upon the walls, and threw some money here and there into the collection-boxes for the wounded, which were placed on chairs in the middle of the pathway. Then she stopped before some caricatures representing Louis Philippe as a pastry-cook, as a mountebank, as a dog, or as a leech. But she was a little frightened at the sight of Caussidière's men with their sabres and scarfs. At other times it was a tree of Liberty that was being planted. The clergy vied with each other in blessing the Republic, escorted by servants in gold lace; and the populace thought this very fine. The most frequent spectacle was that of deputations from no matter what, going to demand something at the Hôtel de Ville, for every trade, every industry, was looking to the Government to put a complete end to its wretchedness. Some of them, it is true, went to offer it advice or to congratulate it, or merely to pay it a little visit, and to see the machine performing its functions. One day, about the middle of the month of March, as they were passing the Pont d'Arcole, having to do some commission for Rosanette in the Latin Quarter, Frederick saw approaching a column of individuals with oddly-shaped hats and long beards. At its head, beating a drum, walked a negro who had formerly been an artist's model; and the man who bore the banner, on which this inscription floated in the wind, "Artist-Painters," was no other than Pellerin.

He made a sign to Frederick to wait for him, and then reappeared five minutes afterwards, having some time before him; for the Government was, at that moment, receiving a deputation from the stone-cutters. He was going with his colleagues to ask for the creation of a Forum of Art, a kind of Exchange where the interests of Æsthetics would be discussed. Sublime masterpieces would be produced, inasmuch as the workers would amalgamate their talents. Ere long Paris would be covered with gigantic monuments. He would decorate them. He had even begun a figure of the Republic. One of his comrades had come to take it, for they were closely pursued by the deputation from the poulterers.

"What stupidity!" growled a voice in the crowd. "Always some humbug, nothing strong!"

It was Regimbart. He did not salute Frederick, but took advantage of the occasion to give vent to his own bitterness.

The Citizen spent his days wandering about the streets, pulling his moustache, rolling his eyes about, accepting and propagating any dismal news that was communicated to him; and he had only two phrases: "Take care! we're going to be run over!" or else, "Why, confound it! they're juggling with the Republic!" He was discontented with everything, and especially with the fact that we had not taken back our natural frontiers.

The very name of Lamartine made him shrug his shoulders. He did not consider Ledru-Rollin "sufficient for the problem," referred to Dupont (of the Eure) as an old numbskull, Albert as an idiot, Louis Blanc as an Utopist, and Blanqui as an exceedingly dangerous man; and when Frederick asked him what would be the best thing to do, he replied, pressing his arm till he nearly bruised it:

"To take the Rhine, I tell you! to take the Rhine, damn it!"

Then he blamed the Reactionaries. They were taking off the mask. The sack of the château of Neuilly and Suresne, the fire at Batignolles, the troubles at Lyons, all the excesses and all the grievances, were just now being exaggerated by having superadded to them Ledru-Rollin's circular, the forced currency of bank-notes, the fall of the funds to sixty francs, and, to crown all, as the supreme iniquity, a final blow, a culminating horror, the duty of forty-five centimes! And over and above all these things, there was again Socialism! Although these theories, as new as the game of goose, had been discussed sufficiently for forty years to fill a number of libraries, they terrified the wealthier citizens, as if they had been a hailstorm of aërolites; and they expressed indignation at them by virtue of that hatred which the advent of every idea provokes, simply because it is an idea — an odium from which it derives subsequently its glory, and which causes its enemies to be always beneath it, however lowly it may be.

Then Property rose in their regard to the level of Religion, and was confounded with God. The attacks made on it appeared to them a sacrilege; almost a species of cannibalism. In spite of the most humane legislation that ever existed, the spectre of '93 reappeared, and the chopper of the guillotine vibrated existed, the spectre of '93 reappeared, and the chopper of the guillotine vibrated in every syllable of the word "Republic," which did not prevent them from despising it for its weakness. France, no longer feeling herself mistress of the situation, was beginning to shriek with terror, like a blind man without his stick or an infant that had lost its nurse.

Of all Frenchmen, M. Dambreuse was the most alarmed. The new condition of things threatened his fortune, but, more than anything else, it deceived his experience. A system so good! a king so wise! was it possible? The ground was giving way beneath their feet! Next morning he dismissed three of his servants, sold his horses, bought a soft hat to go out into the streets, thought even of letting his beard grow; and he remained at home, prostrated, reading over and over again newspapers most hostile to his own ideas, and plunged into such a gloomy mood that even the jokes about the pipe of Flocon[F] had not the power to make him smile.

As a supporter of the last reign, he was dreading the vengeance of the people so far as concerned his estates in Champagne when Frederick's lucubration fell into his hands. Then it occurred to his mind that his young friend was a very useful personage, and that he might be able, if not to serve him, at least to protect him, so that, one morning, M. Dambreuse presented himself at Frederick's residence, accompanied by Martinon.

This visit, he said, had no object save that of seeing him for a little while, and having a chat with him. In short, he rejoiced at the events that had happened, and with his whole heart adopted "our sublime motto, *Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity*," having always been at bottom a Republican. If he voted under the other *régime* with the Ministry, it was simply in order to accelerate an inevitable downfall. He even inveighed against M. Guizot, "who has got us into a nice hobble, we must admit!" By way of retaliation, he spoke in an enthusiastic fashion about Lamartine, who had shown himself "magnificent, upon my word of honour, when, with reference to the red flag — — "

"Yes, I know," said Frederick. After which he declared that his sympathies were on the side of the working-men.

"For, in fact, more or less, we are all working-men!" And he carried his impartiality so far as to acknowledge that Proudhon had a certain amount of logic in his views. "Oh, a great deal of logic, deuce take it!"

Then, with the disinterestedness of a superior mind, he chatted about the exhibition of pictures, at which he had seen Pellerin's work. He considered it original and well-painted.

Martinon backed up all he said with expressions of approval; and likewise was of his opinion that it was necessary to rally boldly to the side of the Republic. And he talked about the husbandman, his father, and assumed the part

Republic. And he talked about the husbandman, his father, and assumed the part of the peasant, the man of the people. They soon came to the question of the elections for the National Assembly, and the candidates in the arrondissement of La Fortelle. The Opposition candidate had no chance.

"You should take his place!" said M. Dambreuse.

Frederick protested.

"But why not?" For he would obtain the suffrages of the Extremists owing to his personal opinions, and that of the Conservatives on account of his family; "And perhaps also," added the banker, with a smile, "thanks to my influence, in some measure."

Frederick urged as an obstacle that he did not know how to set about it.

There was nothing easier if he only got himself recommended to the patriots of the Aube by one of the clubs of the capital. All he had to do was to read out, not a profession of faith such as might be seen every day, but a serious statement of principles.

"Bring it to me; I know what goes down in the locality; and you can, I say again, render great services to the country — to us all — to myself."

In such times people ought to aid each other, and, if Frederick had need of anything, he or his friends — —

"Oh, a thousand thanks, my dear Monsieur!"

"You'll do as much for me in return, mind!"

Decidedly, the banker was a decent man.

Frederick could not refrain from pondering over his advice; and soon he was dazzled by a kind of dizziness.

The great figures of the Convention passed before his mental vision. It seemed to him that a splendid dawn was about to rise. Rome, Vienna and Berlin were in a state of insurrection, and the Austrians had been driven out of Venice. All Europe was agitated. Now was the time to make a plunge into the movement, and perhaps to accelerate it; and then he was fascinated by the costume which it was said the deputies would wear. Already he saw himself in a waistcoat with lapels and a tricoloured sash; and this itching, this hallucination, became so violent that he opened his mind to Dambreuse.

The honest fellow's enthusiasm had not abated.

"Certainly — sure enough! Offer yourself!"

Frederick, nevertheless, consulted Deslauriers.

The idiotic opposition which trammelled the commissioner in his province had augmented his Liberalism. He at once replied, exhorting Frederick with the utmost vehemence to come forward as a candidate. However, as the latter was desirous of having the approval of a great number of persons, he confided the thing to Rosanette one day, when Mademoiselle Vatnaz happened to be present.

thing to Rosanette one day, when Mademoiselle Vatnaz happened to be present.

She was one of those Parisian spinsters who, every evening when they have given their lessons or tried to sell little sketches, or to dispose of poor manuscripts, return to their own homes with mud on their petticoats, make their own dinner, which they eat by themselves, and then, with their soles resting on a foot-warmer, by the light of a filthy lamp, dream of a love, a family, a hearth, wealth — all that they lack. So it was that, like many others, she had hailed in the Revolution the advent of vengeance, and she delivered herself up to a Socialistic propaganda of the most unbridled description.

The enfranchisement of the proletariat, according to the Vatnaz, was only possible by the enfranchisement of woman. She wished to have her own sex admitted to every kind of employment, to have an enquiry made into the paternity of children, a different code, the abolition, or at least a more intelligent regulation, of marriage. In that case every Frenchwoman would be bound to marry a Frenchman, or to adopt an old man. Nurses and midwives should be officials receiving salaries from the State.

There should be a jury to examine the works of women, special editors for women, a polytechnic school for women, a National Guard for women, everything for women! And, since the Government ignored their rights, they ought to overcome force by force. Ten thousand citizenesses with good guns ought to make the Hôtel de Ville quake!

Frederick's candidature appeared to her favourable for carrying out her ideas. She encouraged him, pointing out the glory that shone on the horizon. Rosanette was delighted at the notion of having a man who would make speeches at the Chamber.

"And then, perhaps, they'll give you a good place?"

Frederick, a man prone to every kind of weakness, was infected by the universal mania. He wrote an address and went to show it to M. Dambreuse.

At the sound made by the great door falling back, a curtain gaped open a little behind a casement, and a woman appeared at it He had not time to find out who she was; but, in the anteroom, a picture arrested his attention — Pellerin's picture — which lay on a chair, no doubt provisionally.

It represented the Republic, or Progress, or Civilisation, under the form of Jesus Christ driving a locomotive, which was passing through a virgin forest. Frederick, after a minute's contemplation, exclaimed:

"What a vile thing!"

"Is it not — eh?" said M. Dambreuse, coming in unexpectedly just at the moment when the other was giving utterance to this opinion, and fancying that it had reference, not so much to the picture as to the doctrine glorified by the work. Martinon presented himself at the same time. They made their way into the

Martinon presented himself at the same time. They made their way into the study, and Frederick was drawing a paper out of his pocket, when Mademoiselle Cécile, entering suddenly, said, articulating her words in an ingenuous fashion:

"Is my aunt here?"

"You know well she is not," replied the banker. "No matter! act as if you were at home, Mademoiselle."

"Oh! thanks! I am going away!"

Scarcely had she left when Martinon seemed to be searching for his handkerchief.

"I forgot to take it out of my great-coat — excuse me!"

"All right!" said M. Dambreuse.

Evidently he was not deceived by this manœuvre, and even seemed to regard it with favour. Why? But Martinon soon reappeared, and Frederick began reading his address.

At the second page, which pointed towards the preponderance of the financial interests as a disgraceful fact, the banker made a grimace. Then, touching on reforms, Frederick demanded free trade.

"What? Allow me, now!"

The other paid no attention, and went on. He called for a tax on yearly incomes, a progressive tax, a European federation, and the education of the people, the encouragement of the fine arts on the liberal scale.

"When the country could provide men like Delacroix or Hugo with incomes of a hundred thousand francs, where would be the harm?"

At the close of the address advice was given to the upper classes.

"Spare nothing, ye rich; but give! give!"

He stopped, and remained standing. The two who had been listening to him did not utter a word. Martinon opened his eyes wide; M. Dambreuse was quite pale. At last, concealing his emotion under a bitter smile:

"That address of yours is simply perfect!" And he praised the style exceedingly in order to avoid giving his opinion as to the matter of the address.

This virulence on the part of an inoffensive young man frightened him, especially as a sign of the times.

Martinon tried to reassure him. The Conservative party, in a little while, would certainly be able to take its revenge. In several cities the commissioners of the provisional government had been driven away; the elections were not to occur till the twenty-third of April; there was plenty of time. In short, it was necessary for M. Dambreuse to present himself personally in the Aube; and from that time forth, Martinon no longer left his side, became his secretary, and was as attentive to him as any son could be.

Frederick arrived at Rosanette's house in a very self-complacent mood.

Delmar happened to be there, and told him of his intention to stand as a candidate at the Seine elections. In a placard addressed to the people, in which he addressed them in the familiar manner which one adopts towards an individual, the actor boasted of being able to understand them, and of having, in order to save them, got himself "crucified for the sake of art," so that he was the incarnation, the ideal of the popular spirit, believing that he had, in fact, such enormous power over the masses that he proposed by-and-by, when he occupied a ministerial office, to quell any outbreak by himself alone; and, with regard to the means he would employ, he gave this answer: "Never fear! I'll show them my head!"

Frederick, in order to mortify him, gave him to understand that he was himself a candidate. The mummer, from the moment that his future colleague aspired to represent the province, declared himself his servant, and offered to be his guide to the various clubs.

They visited them, or nearly all, the red and the blue, the furious and the tranquil, the puritanical and the licentious, the mystical and the intemperate, those that had voted for the death of kings, and those in which the frauds in the grocery trade had been denounced; and everywhere the tenants cursed the landlords; the blouse was full of spite against broadcloth; and the rich conspired against the poor. Many wanted indemnities on the ground that they had formerly been martyrs of the police; others appealed for money in order to carry out certain inventions, or else there were plans of phalansteria, projects for cantonal bazaars, systems of public felicity; then, here and there a flash of genius amid these clouds of folly, sudden as splashes, the law formulated by an oath, and flowers of eloquence on the lips of some soldier-boy, with a shoulder-belt strapped over his bare, shirtless chest. Sometimes, too, a gentleman made his appearance — an aristocrat of humble demeanour, talking in a plebeian strain, and with his hands unwashed, so as to make them look hard. A patriot recognised him; the most virtuous mobbed him; and he went off with rage in his soul. On the pretext of good sense, it was desirable to be always disparaging the advocates, and to make use as often as possible of these expressions: "To carry his stone to the building," "social problem," "workshop."

Delmar did not miss the opportunities afforded him for getting in a word; and when he no longer found anything to say, his device was to plant himself in some conspicuous position with one of his arms akimbo and the other in his waistcoat, turning himself round abruptly in profile, so as to give a good view of his head. Then there were outbursts of applause, which came from Mademoiselle Vatnaz at the lower end of the hall.

Frederick, in spite of the weakness of orators, did not dare to try the experiment of speaking. All those people seemed to him too unpolished or too hostile.

But Dussardier made enquiries, and informed him that there existed in the Rue Saint-Jacques a club which bore the name of the "Club of Intellect." Such a name gave good reason for hope. Besides, he would bring some friends there.

He brought those whom he had invited to take punch with him — the bookkeeper, the traveller in wines, and the architect; even Pellerin had offered to come, and Hussonnet would probably form one of the party, and on the footpath before the door stood Regimbart, with two individuals, the first of whom was his faithful Compain, a rather thick-set man marked with small-pox and with bloodshot eyes; and the second, an ape-like negro, exceedingly hairy, and whom he knew only in the character of "a patriot from Barcelona."

They passed though a passage, and were then introduced into a large room, no doubt used by a joiner, and with walls still fresh and smelling of plaster. Four argand lamps were hanging parallel to each other, and shed an unpleasant light. On a platform, at the end of the room, there was a desk with a bell; underneath it a table, representing the rostrum, and on each side two others, somewhat lower, for the secretaries. The audience that adorned the benches consisted of old painters of daubs, ushers, and literary men who could not get their works published.

In the midst of those lines of paletots with greasy collars could be seen here and there a woman's cap or a workman's linen smock. The bottom of the apartment was even full of workmen, who had in all likelihood come there to pass away an idle hour, and who had been introduced by some speakers in order that they might applaud.

Frederick took care to place himself between Dussardier and Regimbart, who was scarcely seated when he leaned both hands on his walking-stick and his chin on his hands and shut his eyes, whilst at the other end of the room Delmar stood looking down at the assembly. Sénécal appeared at the president's desk.

The worthy bookkeeper thought Frederick would be pleased at this unexpected discovery. It only annoyed him.

The meeting exhibited great respect for the president. He was one who, on the twenty-fifth of February, had desired an immediate organisation of labour. On the following day, at the Prado, he had declared himself in favour attacking the Hôtel de Ville; and, as every person at that period took some model for imitation, one copied Saint-Just, another Danton, another Marat; as for him, he tried to be like Blanqui, who imitated Robespierre. His black gloves, and his hair brushed back, gave him a rigid aspect exceedingly becoming.

He opened the proceedings with the declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen — a customary act of faith. Then, a vigorous voice struck up Béranger's "Souvenirs du Peuple."

Other voices were raised:

"No! no! not that!"

"'La Casquette!'" the patriots at the bottom of the apartment began to howl.

And they sang in chorus the favourite lines of the period:

"Doff your hat before my cap —
Kneel before the working-man!"

At a word from the president the audience became silent.

One of the secretaries proceeded to inspect the letters.

Some young men announced that they burned a number of the *Assemblée Nationale* every evening in front of the Panthéon, and they urged on all patriots to follow their example.

"Bravo! adopted!" responded the audience.

The Citizen Jean Jacques Langreneux, a printer in the Rue Dauphin, would like to have a monument raised to the memory of the martyrs of Thermidor.

Michel Evariste Népomucène, ex-professor, gave expression to the wish that the European democracy should adopt unity of language. A dead language might be used for that purpose — as, for example, improved Latin.

"No; no Latin!" exclaimed the architect.

"Why?" said the college-usher.

And these two gentlemen engaged in a discussion, in which the others also took part, each putting in a word of his own for effect; and the conversation on this topic soon became so tedious that many went away. But a little old man, who wore at the top of his prodigiously high forehead a pair of green spectacles, asked permission to speak in order to make an important communication.

It was a memorandum on the assessment of taxes. The figures flowed on in a continuous stream, as if they were never going to end. The impatience of the audience found vent at first in murmurs, in whispered talk. He allowed nothing to put him out. Then they began hissing; they catcalled him. Sénécal called the persons who were interrupting to order. The orator went on like a machine. It was necessary to catch him by the shoulder in order to stop him. The old fellow looked as if he were waking out of a dream, and, placidly lifting his spectacles, said:

"Pardon me, citizens! pardon me! I am going — a thousand excuses!"

Frederick was disconcerted with the failure of the old man's attempts to read this written statement. He had his own address in his pocket, but an extemporaneous speech would have been preferable.

Finally the president announced that they were about to pass on to the important matter, the electoral question. They would not discuss the big Republican lists. However, the "Club of Intellect" had every right, like every other, to form one, "with all respect for the pachas of the Hôtel de Ville," and the citizens who solicited the popular mandate might set forth their claims.

"Go on, now!" said Dussardier.

A man in a cassock, with woolly hair and a petulant expression on his face, had already raised his hand. He said, with a stutter, that his name was Ducretot, priest and agriculturist, and that he was the author of a work entitled "Manures." He was told to send it to a horticultural club.

Then a patriot in a blouse climbed up into the rostrum. He was a plebeian, with broad shoulders, a big face, very mild-looking, with long black hair. He cast on the assembly an almost voluptuous glance, flung back his head, and, finally, spreading out his arms:

"You have repelled Ducretot, O my brothers! and you have done right; but it was not through irreligion, for we are all religious."

Many of those present listened open-mouthed, with the air of catechumens and in ecstatic attitudes.

"It is not either because he is a priest, for we, too, are priests! The workman is a priest, just as the founder of Socialism was — the Master of us all, Jesus Christ!"

The time had arrived to inaugurate the Kingdom of God. The Gospel led directly to '89. After the abolition of slavery, the abolition of the proletariat. They had had the age of hate — the age of love was about to begin.

"Christianity is the keystone and the foundation of the new edifice — — "

"You are making game of us?" exclaimed the traveller in wines. "Who has given me such a priest's cap?"

This interruption gave great offence. Nearly all the audience got on benches, and, shaking their fists, shouted: "Atheist! aristocrat! low rascal!" whilst the president's bell kept ringing continuously, and the cries of "Order! order!" redoubled. But, aimless, and, moreover, fortified by three cups of coffee which he had swallowed before coming to the meeting, he struggled in the midst of the others:

"What? I an aristocrat? Come, now!"

When, at length, he was permitted to give an explanation, he declared that he would never be at peace with the priests; and, since something had just been said about economical measures, it would be a splendid one to put an end to the churches, the sacred pyxes, and finally all creeds.

Somebody raised the objection that he was going very far.

"Yes! I am going very far! But, when a vessel is caught suddenly in a storm

— — "

Without waiting for the conclusion of this simile, another made a reply to his observation:

"Granted! But this is to demolish at a single stroke, like a mason devoid of judgment — — "

"You are insulting the masons!" yelled a citizen covered with plaster. And persisting in the belief that provocation had been offered to him, he vomited forth insults, and wished to fight, clinging tightly to the bench whereon he sat. It took no less than three men to put him out.

Meanwhile the workman still remained on the rostrum. The two secretaries gave him an intimation that he should come down. He protested against the injustice done to him.

"You shall not prevent me from crying out, 'Eternal love to our dear France! eternal love all to the Republic!'"

"Citizens!" said Compain, after this — "Citizens!"

And, by dint of repeating "Citizens," having obtained a little silence, he leaned on the rostrum with his two red hands, which looked like stumps, bent forward his body, and blinking his eyes:

"I believe that it would be necessary to give a larger extension to the calf's head."

All who heard him kept silent, fancying that they had misunderstood his words.

"Yes! the calf's head!"

Three hundred laughs burst forth at the same time. The ceiling shook.

At the sight of all these faces convulsed with mirth, Compain shrank back. He continued in an angry tone:

"What! you don't know what the calf's head is!"

It was a paroxysm, a delirium. They held their sides. Some of them even tumbled off the benches to the ground with convulsions of laughter. Compain, not being able to stand it any longer, took refuge beside Regimbart, and wanted to drag him away.

"No! I am remaining till 'tis all over!" said the Citizen.

This reply caused Frederick to make up his mind; and, as he looked about to the right and the left to see whether his friends were prepared to support him, he saw Pellerin on the rostrum in front of him.

The artist assumed a haughty tone in addressing the meeting.

"I would like to get some notion as to who is the candidate amongst all these that represents art. For my part, I have painted a picture."

"We have nothing to do with painting pictures!" was the churlish remark of a thin man with red spots on his cheek-bones.

Pellerin protested against this interruption.

But the other, in a tragic tone:

"Ought not the Government to make an ordinance abolishing prostitution and want?"

And this phrase having at once won to his side the popular favour, he thundered against the corruption of great cities.

"Shame and infamy! We ought to catch hold of wealthy citizens on their way out of the Maison d'Or and spit in their faces — unless it be that the Government countenances debauchery! But the collectors of the city dues exhibit towards our daughters and our sisters an amount of indecency — — "

A voice exclaimed, some distance away:

"This is blackguard language! Turn him out!"

"They extract taxes from us to pay for licentiousness! Thus, the high salaries paid to actors — — "

"Help!" cried Pellerin.

He leaped from the rostrum, pushed everybody aside, and declaring that he regarded such stupid accusations with disgust, expatiated on the civilising mission of the player. Inasmuch as the theatre was the focus of national education, he would record his vote for the reform of the theatre; and to begin with, no more managements, no more privileges!

"Yes; of any sort!"

The actor's performance excited the audience, and people moved backwards and forwards knocking each other down.

"No more academies! No more institutes!"

"No missions!"

"No more bachelorships! Down with University degrees!"

"Let us preserve them," said Sénécal; "but let them be conferred by universal suffrage, by the people, the only true judge!"

Besides, these things were not the most useful. It was necessary to take a level which would be above the heads of the wealthy. And he represented them as gorging themselves with crimes under their gilded ceilings; while the poor, writhing in their garrets with famine, cultivated every virtue. The applause became so vehement that he interrupted his discourse. For several minutes he remained with his eyes closed, his head thrown back, and, as it were, lulling himself to sleep over the fury which he had aroused.

Then he began to talk in a dogmatic fashion, in phrases as imperious as laws. The State should take possession of the banks and of the insurance offices. Inheritances should be abolished. A social fund should be established for the workers. Many other measures were desirable in the future. For the time being, these would suffice, and, returning to the question of the elections: "We want pure citizens, men entirely fresh. Let some one offer himself."

Frederick arose. There was a buzz of approval made by his friends. But Sénécal, assuming the attitude of a Fouquier-Tinville, began to ask questions as to his Christian name and surname, his antecedents, life, and morals.

Frederick answered succinctly, and bit his lips. Sénécal asked whether anyone saw any impediment to this candidature.

"No! no!"

But, for his part, he saw some. All around him bent forward and strained their ears to listen. The citizen who was seeking for their support had not delivered a certain sum promised by him for the foundation of a democratic journal. Moreover, on the twenty-second of February, though he had had sufficient notice on the subject, he had failed to be at the meeting-place in the Place de Panthéon.

"I swear that he was at the Tuileries!" exclaimed Dussardier.

"Can you swear to having seen him at the Panthéon?"

Dussardier hung down his head. Frederick was silent. His friends, scandalised, regarded him with disquietude.

"In any case," Sénécal went on, "do you know a patriot who will answer to us for your principles?"

"I will!" said Dussardier.

"Oh! this is not enough; another!"

Frederick turned round to Pellerin. The artist replied to him with a great number of gestures, which meant:

"Ah! my dear boy, they have rejected myself! The deuce! What would you have?"

Thereupon Frederick gave Regimbart a nudge.

"Yes, that's true; 'tis time! I'm going."

And Regimbart stepped upon the platform; then, pointing towards the Spaniard, who had followed him:

"Allow me, citizens, to present to you a patriot from Barcelona!"

The patriot made a low bow, rolled his gleaming eyes about, and with his hand on his heart:

"Ciudadanos! mucho aprecio el honor that you have bestowed on me! however great may be vuestra bondad, mayor vuestra atención!"

"I claim the right to speak!" cried Frederick.

"Desde que se proclamo la constitutión de Cadiz, ese pacto fundamental of las libertades Españolas, hasta la ultima revolución, nuestra patria cuenta numerosos y heroicos mártires."

numerosos y heroicos martires."

Frederick once more made an effort to obtain a hearing:

"But, citizens! — --"

The Spaniard went on: "El martes proximo tendra lugar en la iglesia de la Magdelena un servicio fúnebre."

"In fact, this is ridiculous! Nobody understands him!"

This observation exasperated the audience.

"Turn him out! Turn him out!"

"Who? I?" asked Frederick.

"Yourself!" said Sénécal, majestically. "Out with you!"

He rose to leave, and the voice of the Iberian pursued him:

"Y todos los Españoles descarien ver alli reunidas las disputaciónes de los clubs y de la milicia nacional. An oración fúnebre en honour of the libertad Española y del mundo entero will be prononciado por un miembro del clero of Paris en la sala Bonne Nouvelle. Honour al pueblo frances que llamaria yo el primero pueblo del mundo, sino fuese ciudadano de otra nación!"

"Aristo!" screamed one blackguard, shaking his fist at Frederick, as the latter, boiling with indignation, rushed out into the yard adjoining the place where the meeting was held.

He reproached himself for his devotedness, without reflecting that, after all, the accusations brought against him were just.

What fatal idea was this candidature! But what asses! what idiots! He drew comparisons between himself and these men, and soothed his wounded pride with the thought of their stupidity.

Then he felt the need of seeing Rosanette. After such an exhibition of ugly traits, and so much magniloquence, her dainty person would be a source of relaxation. She was aware that he had intended to present himself at a club that evening. However, she did not even ask him a single question when he came in. She was sitting near the fire, ripping open the lining of a dress. He was surprised to find her thus occupied.

"Hallo! what are you doing?"

"You can see for yourself," said she, dryly. "I am mending my clothes! So much for this Republic of yours!"

"Why do you call it mine?"

"Perhaps you want to make out that it's mine!"

And she began to upbraid him for everything that had happened in France for the last two months, accusing him of having brought about the Revolution and with having ruined her prospects by making everybody that had money leave Paris, and that she would by-and-by be dying in a hospital.

"It is easy for you to talk lightly about it, with your yearly income! However

"It is easy for you to talk lightly about it, with your yearly income! However, at the rate at which things are going on, you won't have your yearly income long."

"That may be," said Frederick. "The most devoted are always misunderstood, and if one were not sustained by one's conscience, the brutes that you mix yourself up with would make you feel disgusted with your own self-denial!"

Rosanette gazed at him with knitted brows.

"Eh? What? What self-denial? Monsieur has not succeeded, it would seem? So much the better! It will teach you to make patriotic donations. Oh, don't lie! I know you have given them three hundred francs, for this Republic of yours has to be kept. Well, amuse yourself with it, my good man!"

Under this avalanche of abuse, Frederick passed from his former disappointment to a more painful disillusion.

He withdrew to the lower end of the apartment. She came up to him.

"Look here! Think it out a bit! In a country as in a house, there must be a master, otherwise, everyone pockets something out of the money spent. At first, everybody knows that Ledru-Rollin is head over ears in debt. As for Lamartine, how can you expect a poet to understand politics? Ah! 'tis all very well for you to shake your head and to presume that you have more brains than others; all the same, what I say is true! But you are always cavilling; a person can't get in a word with you! For instance, there's Fournier-Fontaine, who had stores at Saint-Roch! do you know how much he failed for? Eight hundred thousand francs! And Gomer, the packer opposite to him — another Republican, that one — he smashed the tongs on his wife's head, and he drank so much absinthe that he is going to be put into a private asylum. That's the way with the whole of them — the Republicans! A Republic at twenty-five percent. Ah! yes! plume yourself upon it!"

Frederick took himself off. He was disgusted at the foolishness of this girl, which revealed itself all at once in the language of the populace. He felt himself even becoming a little patriotic once more.

The ill-temper of Rosanette only increased. Mademoiselle Vatnaz irritated him with her enthusiasm. Believing that she had a mission, she felt a furious desire to make speeches, to carry on disputes, and — sharper than Rosanette in matters of this sort — overwhelmed her with arguments.

One day she made her appearance burning with indignation against Hussonnet, who had just indulged in some blackguard remarks at the Woman's Club. Rosanette approved of this conduct, declaring even that she would take men's clothes to go and "give them a bit of her mind, the entire lot of them, and to whip them."

Frederick entered at the same moment

Frederick entered at the same moment.

"You'll accompany me — won't you?"

And, in spite of his presence, a bickering match took place between them, one of them playing the part of a citizen's wife and the other of a female philosopher.

According to Rosanette, women were born exclusively for love, or in order to bring up children, to be housekeepers.

According to Mademoiselle Vatnaz, women ought to have a position in the Government. In former times, the Gaulish women, and also the Anglo-Saxon women, took part in the legislation; the squaws of the Hurons formed a portion of the Council. The work of civilisation was common to both. It was necessary that all should contribute towards it, and that fraternity should be substituted for egoism, association for individualism, and cultivation on a large scale for minute subdivision of land.

"Come, that is good! you know a great deal about culture just now!"

"Why not? Besides, it is a question of humanity, of its future!"

"Mind your own business!"

"This is my business!"

They got into a passion. Frederick interposed. The Vatnaz became very heated, and went so far as to uphold Communism.

"What nonsense!" said Rosanette. "How could such a thing ever come to pass?"

The other brought forward in support of her theory the examples of the Essenes, the Moravian Brethren, the Jesuits of Paraguay, the family of the Pingons near Thiers in Auvergne; and, as she gesticulated a great deal, her gold chain got entangled in her bundle of trinkets, to which was attached a gold ornament in the form of a sheep.

Suddenly, Rosanette turned exceedingly pale.

Mademoiselle Vatnaz continued extricating her trinkets.

"Don't give yourself so much trouble," said Rosanette. "Now, I know your political opinions."

"What?" replied the Vatnaz, with a blush on her face like that of a virgin.

"Oh! oh! you understand me."

Frederick did not understand. There had evidently been something taking place between them of a more important and intimate character than Socialism.

"And even though it should be so," said the Vatnaz in reply, rising up unflinchingly. "'Tis a loan, my dear — set off one debt against the other."

"Faith, I don't deny my own debts. I owe some thousands of francs — a nice sum. I borrow, at least; I don't rob anyone."

Mademoiselle Vatnaz made an effort to laugh.

"Oh! I would put my hand in the fire for him."

"Take care! it is dry enough to burn."

The spinster held out her right hand to her, and keeping it raised in front of her:

"But there are friends of yours who find it convenient for them."

"Andalusians, I suppose? as castanets?"

"You beggar!"

The Maréchale made her a low bow.

"There's nobody so charming!"

Mademoiselle Vatnaz made no reply. Beads of perspiration appeared on her temples. Her eyes fixed themselves on the carpet. She panted for breath. At last she reached the door, and slamming it vigorously: "Good night! You'll hear from me!"

"Much I care!" said Rosanette. The effort of self-suppression had shattered her nerves. She sank down on the divan, shaking all over, stammering forth words of abuse, shedding tears. Was it this threat on the part of the Vatnaz that had caused so much agitation in her mind? Oh, no! what did she care, indeed, about that one? It was the golden sheep, a present, and in the midst of her tears the name of Delmar escaped her lips. So, then, she was in love with the mummer?

"In that case, why did she take on with me?" Frederick asked himself. "How is it that he has come back again? Who compels her to keep me? Where is the sense of this sort of thing?"

Rosanette was still sobbing. She remained all the time stretched at the edge of the divan, with her right cheek resting on her two hands, and she seemed a being so dainty, so free from self-consciousness, and so sorely troubled, that he drew closer to her and softly kissed her on the forehead.

Thereupon she gave him assurances of her affection for him; the Prince had just left her, they would be free. But she was for the time being short of money. "You saw yourself that this was so, the other day, when I was trying to turn my old linings to use." No more equipages now! And this was not all; the upholsterer was threatening to resume possession of the bedroom and the large drawing-room furniture. She did not know what to do.

Frederick had a mind to answer:

"Don't annoy yourself about it. I will pay."

But the lady knew how to lie. Experience had enlightened her. He confined himself to mere expressions of sympathy.

Rosanette's fears were not vain. It was necessary to give up the furniture and to quit the handsome apartment in the Rue Drouot. She took another on the Boulevard Poissonnière, on the fourth floor.

The curiosities of her old boudoir were quite sufficient to give to the three rooms a coquettish air. There were Chinese blinds, a tent on the terrace, and in the drawing-room a second-hand carpet still perfectly new, with ottomans covered with pink silk. Frederick had contributed largely to these purchases. He had felt the joy of a newly-married man who possesses at last a house of his own, a wife of his own — and, being much pleased with the place, he used to sleep there nearly every evening.

One morning, as he was passing out through the anteroom, he saw, on the third floor, on the staircase, the shako of a National Guard who was ascending it. Where in the world was he going?

Frederick waited. The man continued his progress up the stairs, with his head slightly bent down. He raised his eyes. It was my lord Arnoux!

The situation was clear. They both reddened simultaneously, overcome by a feeling of embarrassment common to both.

Arnoux was the first to find a way out of the difficulty.

"She is better — isn't that so?" as if Rosanette were ill, and he had come to learn how she was.

Frederick took advantage of this opening.

"Yes, certainly! at least, so I was told by her maid," wishing to convey that he had not been allowed to see her.

Then they stood facing each other, both undecided as to what they would do next, and eyeing one another intently. The question now was, which of the two was going to remain. Arnoux once more solved the problem.

"Pshaw! I'll come back by-and-by. Where are you going? I go with you!"

And, when they were in the street, he chatted as naturally as usual. Unquestionably he was not a man of jealous disposition, or else he was too good-natured to get angry. Besides, his time was devoted to serving his country. He never left off his uniform now. On the twenty-ninth of March he had defended the offices of the *Presse*. When the Chamber was invaded, he distinguished himself by his courage, and he was at the banquet given to the National Guard at Amiens.

Hussonnet, who was still on duty with him, availed himself of his flask and his cigars; but, irreverent by nature, he delighted in contradicting him, disparaging the somewhat inaccurate style of the decrees; and decrying the conferences at the Luxembourg, the women known as the "Vésuviennes," the political section bearing the name of "Tyroliens"; everything, in fact, down to the Car of Agriculture, drawn by horses to the ox-market, and escorted by ill-favoured young girls. Arnoux, on the other hand, was the upholder of authority, and dreamed of uniting the different parties. However, his own affairs had taken an unfavourable turn, and he was more or less anxious about them.

He was not much troubled about Frederick's relations with the Maréchale; for this discovery made him feel justified (in his conscience) in withdrawing the allowance which he had renewed since the Prince had left her. He pleaded by way of excuse for this step the embarrassed condition in which he found himself, uttered many lamentations — and Rosanette was generous. The result was that M. Arnoux regarded himself as the lover who appealed entirely to the heart, an idea that raised him in his own estimation and made him feel young again. Having no doubt that Frederick was paying the Maréchale, he fancied that he was "playing a nice trick" on the young man, even called at the house in such a stealthy fashion as to keep the other in ignorance of the fact, and when they happened to meet, left the coast clear for him.

Frederick was not pleased with this partnership, and his rival's politeness seemed only an elaborate piece of sarcasm. But by taking offence at it, he would have removed from his path every opportunity of ever finding his way back to Madame Arnoux; and then, this was the only means whereby he could hear about her movements. The earthenware-dealer, in accordance with his usual practice, or perhaps with some cunning design, recalled her readily in the course of conversation, and asked him why he no longer came to see her.

Frederick, having exhausted every excuse he could frame, assured him that he had called several times to see Madame Arnoux, but without success. Arnoux was convinced that this was so, for he had often referred in an eager tone at home to the absence of their friend, and she had invariably replied that she was out when he called, so that these two lies, in place of contradicting, corroborated each other.

The young man's gentle ways and the pleasure of finding a dupe in him made Arnoux like him all the better. He carried familiarity to its extreme limits, not through disdain, but through assurance. One day he wrote saying that very urgent business compelled him to be away in the country for twenty-four hours. He begged of the young man to mount guard in his stead. Frederick dared not refuse, so he repaired to the guard-house in the Place du Carrousel.

He had to submit to the society of the National Guards, and, with the exception of a sugar-refiner, a witty fellow who drank to an inordinate extent, they all appeared to him more stupid than their cartridge-boxes. The principal subject of conversation amongst them was the substitution of sashes for belts. Others declaimed against the national workshops.

One man said:

"Where are we going?"

The man to whom the words had been addressed opened his eyes as if he were standing on the verge of an abyss.

"Where are we going?"

Then, one who was more daring than the rest exclaimed:

"It cannot last! It must come to an end!"

And as the same kind of talk went on till night, Frederick was bored to death.

Great was his surprise when, at eleven o'clock, he suddenly beheld Arnoux, who immediately explained that he had hurried back to set him at liberty, having disposed of his own business.

The fact was that he had no business to transact. The whole thing was an invention to enable him to spend twenty-four hours alone with Rosanette. But the worthy Arnoux had placed too much confidence in his own powers, so that, now in the state of lassitude which was the result, he was seized with remorse. He had come to thank Frederick, and to invite him to have some supper.

"A thousand thanks! I'm not hungry. All I want is to go to bed."

"A reason the more for having a snack together. How flabby you are! One does not go home at such an hour as this. It is too late! It would be dangerous!"

Frederick once more yielded. Arnoux was quite a favorite with his brethren-in-arms, who had not expected to see him — and he was a particular crony of the refiner. They were all fond of him, and he was such a good fellow that he was sorry Hussonnet was not there. But he wanted to shut his eyes for one minute, no longer.

"Sit down beside me!" said he to Frederick, stretching himself on the camp-bed without taking off his belt and straps. Through fear of an alarm, in spite of the regulation, he even kept his gun in his hand, then stammered out some words:

"My darling! my little angel!" and ere long was fast asleep.

Those who had been talking to each other became silent; and gradually there was a deep silence in the guard-house. Frederick tormented by the fleas, kept staring about him. The wall, painted yellow, had, half-way up, a long shelf, on which the knapsacks formed a succession of little humps, while underneath, the muskets, which had the colour of lead, rose up side by side; and there could be heard a succession of snores, produced by the National Guards, whose stomachs were outlined through the darkness in a confused fashion. On the top of the stove stood an empty bottle and some plates. Three straw chairs were drawn around the table, on which a pack of cards was displayed. A drum, in the middle of the bench, let its strap hang down.

A warm breath of air making its way through the door caused the lamp to smoke. Arnoux slept with his two arms wide apart; and, as his gun was placed in a slightly crooked position, with the butt-end downward, the mouth of the barrel came up right under his arm. Frederick noticed this, and was alarmed.

"But, no, I'm wrong, there's nothing to be afraid of! And yet, suppose he met his death!"

And immediately pictures unrolled themselves before his mind in endless succession.

He saw himself with her at night in a post-chaise, then on a river's bank on a summer's evening, and under the reflection of a lamp at home in their own house. He even fixed his attention on household expenses and domestic arrangements, contemplating, feeling already his happiness between his hands; and in order to realise it, all that was needed was that the cock of the gun should rise. The end of it could be pushed with one's toe, the gun would go off — it would be a mere accident — nothing more!

Frederick brooded over this idea like a playwright in the agonies of composition. Suddenly it seemed to him that it was not far from being carried into practical operation, and that he was going to contribute to that result — that, in fact, he was yearning for it; and then a feeling of absolute terror took possession of him. In the midst of this mental distress he experienced a sense of pleasure, and he allowed himself to sink deeper and deeper into it, with a dreadful consciousness all the time that his scruples were vanishing. In the wildness of his reverie the rest of the world became effaced, and he could only realise that he was still alive from the intolerable oppression on his chest.

"Let us take a drop of white wine!" said the refiner, as he awoke.

Arnoux sprang to his feet, and, as soon as the white wine was swallowed, he wanted to relieve Frederick of his sentry duty.

Then he brought him to have breakfast in the Rue de Chartres, at Parly's, and as he required to recuperate his energies, he ordered two dishes of meat, a lobster, an omelet with rum, a salad, etc., and finished this off with a brand of Sauterne of 1819 and one of '42 Romanée, not to speak of the champagne at dessert and the liqueurs.

Frederick did not in any way gainsay him. He was disturbed in mind as if by the thought that the other might somehow trace on his countenance the idea that had lately flitted before his imagination. With both elbows on the table and his head bent forward, so that he annoyed Frederick by his fixed stare, he confided some of his hobbies to the young man.

He wanted to take for farming purposes all the embankments on the Northern line, in order to plant potatoes there, or else to organise on the boulevards a monster cavalcade in which the celebrities of the period would figure. He would let all the windows, which would, at the rate of three francs for each person, produce a handsome profit. In short, he dreamed of a great stroke of fortune by means of a monopoly. He assumed a moral tone, nevertheless, found fault with excesses and all sorts of misconduct, spoke about his "poor father," and every evening, as he said, made an examination of his conscience before offering his soul to God.

"A little curaçao, eh?"

"Just as you please."

As for the Republic, things would right themselves; in fact, he looked on himself as the happiest man on earth; and forgetting himself, he exalted Rosanette's attractive qualities, and even compared her with his wife. It was quite a different thing. You could not imagine a lovelier person!

"Your health!"

Frederick touched glasses with him. He had, out of complaisance, drunk a little too much. Besides, the strong sunlight dazzled him; and when they went up the Rue Vivienne together again, their shoulders touched each other in a fraternal fashion.

When he got home, Frederick slept till seven o'clock. After that he called on the Maréchale. She had gone out with somebody — with Arnoux, perhaps! Not knowing what to do with himself, he continued his promenade along the boulevard, but could not get past the Porte Saint-Martin, owing to the great crowd that blocked the way.

Want had abandoned to their own resources a considerable number of workmen, and they used to come there every evening, no doubt for the purpose of holding a review and awaiting a signal.

In spite of the law against riotous assemblies, these clubs of despair increased to a frightful extent, and many citizens repaired every day to the spot through bravado, and because it was the fashion.

All of a sudden Frederick caught a glimpse, three paces away, of M. Dambreuse along with Martinon. He turned his head away, for M. Dambreuse having got himself nominated as a representative of the people, he cherished a secret spite against him. But the capitalist stopped him.

"One word, my dear monsieur! I have some explanations to make to you."

"I am not asking you for any."

"Pray listen to me!"

It was not his fault in any way. Appeals had been made to him; pressure had, to a certain extent, been placed on him. Martinon immediately endorsed all that he had said. Some of the electors of Nogent had presented themselves in a deputation at his house.

"Besides, I expected to be free as soon as — — "

A crush of people on the footpath forced M. Dambreuse to get out of the way. A minute after he reappeared, saying to Martinon:

A minute after he reappeared, saying to Martinon:

"This is a genuine service, really, and you won't have any reason to regret —— "

All three stood with their backs resting against a shop in order to be able to chat more at their ease.

From time to time there was a cry of, "Long live Napoléon! Long live Barbès! Down with Marie!"

The countless throng kept talking in very loud tones; and all these voices, echoing through the houses, made, so to speak, the continuous ripple of waves in a harbour. At intervals they ceased; and then could be heard voices singing the "Marseillaise."

Under the court-gates, men of mysterious aspect offered sword-sticks to those who passed. Sometimes two individuals, one of whom preceded the other, would wink, and then quickly hurry away. The footpaths were filled with groups of staring idlers. A dense crowd swayed to and fro on the pavement. Entire bands of police-officers, emerging from the alleys, had scarcely made their way into the midst of the multitude when they were swallowed up in the mass of people. Little red flags here and there looked like flames. Coachmen, from the place where they sat high up, gesticulated energetically, and then turned to go back. It was a case of perpetual movement — one of the strangest sights that could be conceived.

"How all this," said Martinon, "would have amused Mademoiselle Cécile!"

"My wife, as you are aware, does not like my niece to come with us," returned M. Dambreuse with a smile.

One could scarcely recognise in him the same man. For the past three months he had been crying, "Long live the Republic!" and he had even voted in favour of the banishment of Orléans. But there should be an end of concessions. He exhibited his rage so far as to carry a tomahawk in his pocket.

Martinon had one, too. The magistracy not being any longer irremovable, he had withdrawn from Parquet, so that he surpassed M. Dambreuse in his display of violence.

The banker had a special antipathy to Lamartine (for having supported Ledru-Rollin) and, at the same time, to Pierre Leroux, Proudhon, Considérant, Lamennais, and all the cranks, all the Socialists.

"For, in fact, what is it they want? The duty on meat and arrest for debt have been abolished. Now the project of a bank for mortgages is under consideration; the other day it was a national bank; and here are five millions in the Budget for the working-men! But luckily, it is over, thanks to Monsieur de Falloux! Good-bye to them! let them go!"

In fact, not knowing how to maintain the three hundred thousand men in the

In fact, not knowing how to maintain the three hundred thousand men in the national workshops, the Minister of Public Works had that very day signed an order inviting all citizens between the ages of eighteen and twenty to take service as soldiers, or else to start for the provinces to cultivate the ground there.

They were indignant at the alternative thus put before them, convinced that the object was to destroy the Republic. They were aggrieved by the thought of having to live at a distance from the capital, as if it were a kind of exile. They saw themselves dying of fevers in desolate parts of the country. To many of them, moreover, who had been accustomed to work of a refined description, agriculture seemed a degradation; it was, in short, a mockery, a decisive breach of all the promises which had been made to them. If they offered any resistance, force would be employed against them. They had no doubt of it, and made preparations to anticipate it.

About nine o'clock the riotous assemblies which had formed at the Bastille and at the Châtelet ebbed back towards the boulevard. From the Porte Saint-Denis to the Porte Saint-Martin nothing could be seen save an enormous swarm of people, a single mass of a dark blue shade, nearly black. The men of whom one caught a glimpse all had glowing eyes, pale complexions, faces emaciated with hunger and excited with a sense of wrong.

Meanwhile, some clouds had gathered. The tempestuous sky roused the electricity that was in the people, and they kept whirling about of their own accord with the great swaying movements of a swelling sea, and one felt that there was an incalculable force in the depths of this excited throng, and as it were, the energy of an element. Then they all began exclaiming: "Lamps! lamps!" Many windows had no illumination, and stones were flung at the panes. M. Dambreuse deemed it prudent to withdraw from the scene. The two young men accompanied him home. He predicted great disasters. The people might once more invade the Chamber, and on this point he told them how he should have been killed on the fifteenth of May had it not been for the devotion of a National Guard.

"But I had forgotten! he is a friend of yours — your friend the earthenware manufacturer — Jacques Arnoux!" The rioters had been actually throttling him, when that brave citizen caught him in his arms and put him safely out of their reach.

So it was that, since then, there had been a kind of intimacy between them.

"It would be necessary, one of these days, to dine together, and, since you often see him, give him the assurance that I like him very much. He is an excellent man, and has, in my opinion, been slandered; and he has his wits about him in the morning. My compliments once more! A very good evening!"

Frederick, after he had quitted M. Dambreuse, went back to the Maréchale.

and, in a very gloomy fashion, said that she should choose between him and Arnoux. She replied that she did not understand "dumps of this sort," that she did not care about Arnoux, and had no desire to cling to him. Frederick was thirsting to fly from Paris. She did not offer any opposition to this whim; and next morning they set out for Fontainebleau.

The hotel at which they stayed could be distinguished from others by a fountain that rippled in the middle of the courtyard attached to it. The doors of the various apartments opened out on a corridor, as in monasteries. The room assigned to them was large, well-furnished, hung with print, and noiseless, owing to the scarcity of tourists. Alongside the houses, people who had nothing to do kept passing up and down; then, under their windows, when the day was declining, children in the street would engage in a game of base; and this tranquillity, following so soon the tumult they had witnessed in Paris, filled them with astonishment and exercised over them a soothing influence.

Every morning at an early hour, they went to pay a visit to the château. As they passed in through the gate, they had a view of its entire front, with the five pavilions covered with sharp-pointed roofs, and its staircase of horseshoe-shape opening out to the end of the courtyard, which is hemmed in, to right and left, by two main portions of the building further down. On the paved ground lichens blended their colours here and there with the tawny hue of bricks, and the entire appearance of the palace, rust-coloured like old armour, had about it something of the impassiveness of royalty — a sort of warlike, melancholy grandeur.

At last, a man-servant made his appearance with a bunch of keys in his hand. He first showed them the apartments of the queens, the Pope's oratory, the gallery of Francis I., the mahogany table on which the Emperor signed his abdication, and in one of the rooms cut in two the old Galerie des Cerfs, the place where Christine got Monaldeschi assassinated. Rosanette listened to this narrative attentively, then, turning towards Frederick:

"No doubt it was through jealousy? Mind yourself!" After this they passed through the Council Chamber, the Guards' Room, the Throne Room, and the drawing-room of Louis XIII. The uncurtained windows sent forth a white light. The handles of the window-fastenings and the copper feet of the pier-tables were slightly tarnished with dust. The armchairs were everywhere hidden under coarse linen covers. Above the doors could be seen reliquaries of Louis XIV., and here and there hangings representing the gods of Olympus, Psyche, or the battles of Alexander.

As she was passing in front of the mirrors, Rosanette stopped for a moment to smooth her head-bands.

After passing through the donjon-court and the Saint-Saturnin Chapel, they reached the Festal Hall.

They were dazzled by the magnificence of the ceiling, which was divided into octagonal apartments set off with gold and silver, more finely chiselled than a jewel, and by the vast number of paintings covering the walls, from the immense chimney-piece, where the arms of France were surrounded by crescents and quivers, down to the musicians' gallery, which had been erected at the other end along the entire width of the hall. The ten arched windows were wide open; the sun threw its lustre on the pictures, so that they glowed beneath its rays; the blue sky continued in an endless curve the ultramarine of the arches; and from the depths of the woods, where the lofty summits of the trees filled up the horizon, there seemed to come an echo of flourishes blown by ivory trumpets, and mythological ballets, gathering together under the foliage princesses and nobles disguised as nymphs or fauns — an epoch of ingenuous science, of violent passions, and sumptuous art, when the ideal was to sweep away the world in a vision of the Hesperides, and when the mistresses of kings mingled their glory with the stars. There was a portrait of one of the most beautiful of these celebrated women in the form of Diana the huntress, and even the Infernal Diana, no doubt in order to indicate the power which she possessed even beyond the limits of the tomb. All these symbols confirmed her glory, and there remained about the spot something of her, an indistinct voice, a radiation that stretched out indefinitely. A feeling of mysterious retrospective voluptuousness took possession of Frederick.

In order to divert these passionate longings into another channel, he began to gaze tenderly on Rosanette, and asked her would she not like to have been this woman?

"What woman?"

"Diane de Poitiers!"

He repeated:

"Diane de Poitiers, the mistress of Henry II."

She gave utterance to a little "Ah!" that was all.

Her silence clearly demonstrated that she knew nothing about the matter, and had failed to comprehend his meaning, so that out of complaisance he said to her:

"Perhaps you are getting tired of this?"

"No, no — quite the reverse." And lifting up her chin, and casting around her a glance of the vaguest description, Rosanette let these words escape her lips:

"It recalls some memories to me!"

Meanwhile, it was easy to trace on her countenance a strained expression, a certain sense of awe; and, as this air of gravity made her look all the prettier, Frederick overlooked it.

The carps' pond amused her more. For a quarter of an hour she kept flinging pieces of bread into the water in order to see the fishes skipping about.

Frederick had seated himself by her side under the linden-trees. He saw in imagination all the personages who had haunted these walls — Charles V., the Valois Kings, Henry IV., Peter the Great, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and "the fair mourners of the stage-boxes," Voltaire, Napoléon, Pius VII., and Louis Philippe; and he felt himself environed, elbowed, by these tumultuous dead people. He was stunned by such a confusion of historic figures, even though he found a certain fascination in contemplating them, nevertheless.

At length they descended into the flower-garden.

It is a vast rectangle, which presents to the spectator, at the first glance, its wide yellow walks, its square grass-plots, its ribbons of boxwood, its yew-trees shaped like pyramids, its lowlying green swards, and its narrow borders, in which thinly-sown flowers make spots on the grey soil. At the end of the garden may be seen a park through whose entire length a canal makes its way.

Royal residences have attached to them a peculiar kind of melancholy, due, no doubt, to their dimensions being much too large for the limited number of guests entertained within them, to the silence which one feels astonished to find in them after so many flourishes of trumpets, to the immobility of their luxurious furniture, which attests by the aspect of age and decay it gradually assumes the transitory character of dynasties, the eternal wretchedness of all things; and this exhalation of the centuries, enervating and funereal, like the perfume of a mummy, makes itself felt even in untutored brains. Rosanette yawned immoderately. They went back to the hotel.

After their breakfast an open carriage came round for them. They started from Fontainebleau at a point where several roads diverged, then went up at a walking pace a gravelly road leading towards a little pine-wood. The trees became larger, and, from time to time, the driver would say, "This is the Frères Siamois, the Pharamond, the Bouquet de Roi," not forgetting a single one of these notable sites, sometimes even drawing up to enable them to admire the scene.

They entered the forest of Franchard. The carriage glided over the grass like a sledge; pigeons which they could not see began cooing. Suddenly, the waiter of a café made his appearance, and they alighted before the railing of a garden in which a number of round tables were placed. Then, passing on the left by the walls of a ruined abbey, they made their way over big boulders of stone, and soon reached the lower part of the gorge.

It is covered on one side with sandstones and juniper-trees tangled together, while on the other side the ground, almost quite bare, slopes towards the hollow of the valley, where a foot-track makes a pale line through the brown heather; and far above could be traced a flat cone-shaped summit with a telegraph-tower behind it.

Half-an-hour later they stepped out of the vehicle once more, in order to climb the heights of Aspremont.

The roads form zigzags between the thick-set pine-trees under rocks with angular faces. All this corner of the forest has a sort of choked-up look — a rather wild and solitary aspect. One thinks of hermits in connection with it — companions of huge stags with fiery crosses between their horns, who were wont to welcome with paternal smiles the good kings of France when they knelt before their grottoes. The warm air was filled with a resinous odour, and roots of trees crossed one another like veins close to the soil. Rosanette slipped over them, grew dejected, and felt inclined to shed tears.

But, at the very top, she became joyous once more on finding, under a roof made of branches, a sort of tavern where carved wood was sold. She drank a bottle of lemonade, and bought a holly-stick; and, without one glance towards the landscape which disclosed itself from the plateau, she entered the Brigands' Cave, with a waiter carrying a torch in front of her. Their carriage was awaiting them in the Bas Breau.

A painter in a blue blouse was working at the foot of an oak-tree with his box of colours on his knees. He raised his head and watched them as they passed.

In the middle of the hill of Chailly, the sudden breaking of a cloud caused them to turn up the hoods of their cloaks. Almost immediately the rain stopped, and the paving-stones of the street glistened under the sun when they were re-entering the town.

Some travellers, who had recently arrived, informed them that a terrible battle had stained Paris with blood. Rosanette and her lover were not surprised. Then everybody left; the hotel became quiet, the gas was put out, and they were lulled to sleep by the murmur of the fountain in the courtyard.

On the following day they went to see the Wolf's Gorge, the Fairies' Pool, the Long Rock, and the *Marlotte*.[G] Two days later, they began again at random, just as their coachman thought fit to drive them, without asking where they were, and often even neglecting the famous sites.

They felt so comfortable in their old landau, low as a sofa, and covered with a rug made of a striped material which was quite faded. The moats, filled with brushwood, stretched out under their eyes with a gentle, continuous movement. White rays passed like arrows through the tall ferns. Sometimes a road that was no longer used presented itself before them, in a straight line, and here and there might be seen a feeble growth of weeds. In the centre between four cross-roads, a crucifix extended its four arms. In other places, stakes were bending down like dead trees, and little curved paths, which were lost under the leaves, made them feel a longing to pursue them. At the same moment the horse turned round; they entered there; they plunged into the mire. Further down moss had sprouted out at the sides of the deep ruts.

They believed that they were far away from all other people, quite alone. But suddenly a game-keeper with his gun, or a band of women in rags with big bundles of fagots on their backs, would hurry past them.

When the carriage stopped, there was a universal silence. The only sounds that reached them were the blowing of the horse in the shafts with the faint cry of a bird more than once repeated.

The light at certain points illuminating the outskirts of the wood, left the interior in deep shadow, or else, attenuated in the foreground by a sort of twilight, it exhibited in the background violet vapours, a white radiance. The midday sun, falling directly on wide tracts of greenery, made splashes of light over them, hung gleaming drops of silver from the ends of the branches, streaked the grass with long lines of emeralds, and flung gold spots on the beds of dead leaves. When they let their heads fall back, they could distinguish the sky through the tops of the trees. Some of them, which were enormously high, looked like patriarchs or emperors, or, touching one another at their extremities formed with their long shafts, as it were, triumphal arches; others, sprouting forth obliquely from below, seemed like falling columns. This heap of big vertical lines gaped open. Then, enormous green billows unrolled themselves in unequal embossments as far as the surface of the valleys, towards which advanced the brows of other hills looking down on white plains, which ended by losing themselves in an undefined pale tinge.

Standing side by side, on some rising ground, they felt, as they drank in the air, the pride of a life more free penetrating into the depths of their souls, with a superabundance of energy, a joy which they could not explain.

The variety of trees furnished a spectacle of the most diversified character. The beeches with their smooth white bark twisted their tops together. Ash trees softly curved their bluish branches. In the tufts of the hornbeams rose up holly stiff as bronze. Then came a row of thin birches, bent into elegiac attitudes; and the pine-trees, symmetrical as organ pipes, seemed to be singing a song as they swayed to and fro. There were gigantic oaks with knotted forms, which had been violently shaken, stretched themselves out from the soil and pressed close against each other, and with firm trunks resembling torsos, launched forth to heaven despairing appeals with their bare arms and furious threats, like a group of Titans struck motionless in the midst of their rage. An atmosphere of gloom, a feverish languor, brooded over the pools, whose sheets of water were cut into feverish languor, brooded over the pools, whose sheets of water were cut into flakes by the overshadowing thorn-trees. The lichens on their banks, where the wolves come to drink, are of the colour of sulphur, burnt, as it were, by the footprints of witches, and the incessant croaking of the frogs responds to the cawing of the crows as they wheel through the air. After this they passed through the monotonous glades, planted here and there with a staddle. The sound of iron falling with a succession of rapid blows could be heard. On the side of the hill a group of quarrymen were breaking the rocks. These rocks became more and more numerous and finally filled up the entire landscape, cube-shaped like houses, flat like flagstones, propping up, overhanging, and became intermingled with each other, as if they were the ruins, unrecognisable and monstrous, of some vanished city. But the wild chaos they exhibited made one rather dream of volcanoes, of deluges, of great unknown cataclysms. Frederick said they had been there since the beginning of the world, and would remain so till the end. Rosanette turned aside her head, declaring that this would drive her out of her mind, and went off to collect sweet heather. The little violet blossoms, heaped up near one another, formed unequal plates, and the soil, which was giving way underneath, placed soft dark fringes on the sand spangled with mica.

One day they reached a point half-way up a hill, where the soil was full of sand. Its surface, untrodden till now, was streaked so as to resemble symmetrical waves. Here and there, like promontories on the dry bed of an ocean, rose up rocks with the vague outlines of animals, tortoises thrusting forward their heads, crawling seals, hippopotami, and bears. Not a soul around them. Not a single sound. The shingle glowed under the dazzling rays of the sun, and all at once in this vibration of light the specimens of the brute creation that met their gaze began to move about. They returned home quickly, flying from the dizziness that had seized hold of them, almost dismayed.

The gravity of the forest exercised an influence over them, and hours passed in silence, during which, allowing themselves to yield to the lulling effects of springs, they remained as it were sunk in the torpor of a calm intoxication. With his arm around her waist, he listened to her talking while the birds were warbling, noticed with the same glance the black grapes on her bonnet and the juniper-berries, the draperies of her veil, and the spiral forms assumed by the clouds, and when he bent towards her the freshness of her skin mingled with the strong perfume of the woods. They found amusement in everything. They showed one another, as a curiosity, gossamer threads of the Virgin hanging from bushes, holes full of water in the middle of stones, a squirrel on the branches, the way in which two butterflies kept flying after them; or else, at twenty paces from them, under the trees, a hind strode on peacefully, with an air of nobility and gentleness, its doe walking by its side.

gentleness, its doe walking by its side.

Rosanette would have liked to run after it to embrace it.

She got very much alarmed once, when a man suddenly presenting himself, showed her three vipers in a box. She wildly flung herself on Frederick's breast. He felt happy at the thought that she was weak and that he was strong enough to defend her.

That evening they dined at an inn on the banks of the Seine. The table was near the window, Rosanette sitting opposite him, and he contemplated her little well-shaped white nose, her turned-up lips, her bright eyes, the swelling bands of her nut-brown hair, and her pretty oval face. Her dress of raw silk clung to her somewhat drooping shoulders, and her two hands, emerging from their sleeves, joined close together as if they were one — carved, poured out wine, moved over the table-cloth. The waiters placed before them a chicken with its four limbs stretched out, a stew of eels in a dish of pipe-clay, wine that had got spoiled, bread that was too hard, and knives with notches in them. All these things made the repast more enjoyable and strengthened the illusion. They fancied that they were in the middle of a journey in Italy on their honeymoon. Before starting again they went for a walk along the bank of the river.

The soft blue sky, rounded like a dome, leaned at the horizon on the indentations of the woods. On the opposite side, at the end of the meadow, there was a village steeple; and further away, to the left, the roof of a house made a red spot on the river, which wound its way without any apparent motion. Some rushes bent over it, however, and the water lightly shook some poles fixed at its edge in order to hold nets. An osier bow-net and two or three old fishing-boats might be seen there. Near the inn a girl in a straw hat was drawing buckets out of a well. Every time they came up again, Frederick heard the grating sound of the chain with a feeling of inexpressible delight.

He had no doubt that he would be happy till the end of his days, so natural did his felicity appear to him, so much a part of his life, and so intimately associated with this woman's being. He was irresistibly impelled to address her with words of endearment. She answered with pretty little speeches, light taps on the shoulder, displays of tenderness that charmed him by their unexpectedness. He discovered in her quite a new sort of beauty, in fact, which was perhaps only the reflection of surrounding things, unless it happened to bud forth from their hidden potentialities.

When they were lying down in the middle of the field, he would stretch himself out with his head on her lap, under the shelter of her parasol; or else with their faces turned towards the green sward, in the centre of which they rested, they kept gazing towards one another so that their pupils seemed to intermingle, thirsting for one another and ever satiating their thirst, and then with half-closed thirsting for one another and ever satiating their thirst, and then with half-closed eyelids they lay side by side without uttering a single word.

Now and then the distant rolling of a drum reached their ears. It was the signal-drum which was being beaten in the different villages calling on people to go and defend Paris.

"Oh! look here! 'tis the rising!" said Frederick, with a disdainful pity, all this excitement now presenting to his mind a pitiful aspect by the side of their love and of eternal nature.

And they talked about whatever happened to come into their heads, things that were perfectly familiar to them, persons in whom they took no interest, a thousand trifles. She chatted with him about her chambermaid and her hairdresser. One day she was so self-forgetful that she told him her age — twenty-nine years. She was becoming quite an old woman.

Several times, without intending it, she gave him some particulars with reference to her own life. She had been a "shop girl," had taken a trip to England, and had begun studying for the stage; all this she told without any explanation of how these changes had come about; and he found it impossible to reconstruct her entire history.

She related to him more about herself one day when they were seated side by side under a plane-tree at the back of a meadow. At the road-side, further down, a little barefooted girl, standing amid a heap of dust, was making a cow go to pasture. As soon as she caught sight of them she came up to beg, and while with one hand she held up her tattered petticoat, she kept scratching with the other her black hair, which, like a wig of Louis XIV.'s time, curled round her dark face, lighted by a magnificent pair of eyes.

"She will be very pretty by-and-by," said Frederick.

"How lucky she is, if she has no mother!" remarked Rosanette.

"Eh? How is that?"

"Certainly. I, if it were not for mine — — "

She sighed, and began to speak about her childhood. Her parents were weavers in the Croix-Rousse. She acted as an apprentice to her father. In vain did the poor man wear himself out with hard work; his wife was continually abusing him, and sold everything for drink. Rosanette could see, as if it were yesterday, the room they occupied with the looms ranged lengthwise against the windows, the pot boiling on the stove, the bed painted like mahogany, a cupboard facing it, and the obscure loft where she used to sleep up to the time when she was fifteen years old. At length a gentleman made his appearance on the scene — a fat man with a face of the colour of boxwood, the manners of a devotee, and a suit of black clothes. Her mother and this man had a conversation together, with the result that three days afterwards — Rosanette stopped, and with a look in which there was as much bitterness as shamelessness:

"It was done!"

Then, in response to a gesture of Frederick.

"As he was married (he would have been afraid of compromising himself in his own house), I was brought to a private room in a restaurant, and told that I would be happy, that I would get a handsome present.

"At the door, the first thing that struck me was a candelabrum of vermilion on a table, on which there were two covers. A mirror on the ceiling showed their reflections, and the blue silk hangings on the walls made the entire apartment resemble an alcove; I was seized with astonishment. You understand — a poor creature who had never seen anything before. In spite of my dazed condition of mind, I got frightened. I wanted to go away. However, I remained.

"The only seat in the room was a sofa close beside the table. It was so soft that it gave way under me. The mouth of the hot-air stove in the middle of the carpet sent out towards me a warm breath, and there I sat without taking anything. The waiter, who was standing near me, urged me to eat. He poured out for me immediately a large glass of wine. My head began to swim, I wanted to open the window. He said to me:

"'No, Mademoiselle! that is forbidden.'"

"And he left me.

"The table was covered with a heap of things that I had no knowledge of. Nothing there seemed to me good. Then I fell back on a pot of jam, and patiently waited. I did not know what prevented him from coming. It was very late — midnight at last — I couldn't bear the fatigue any longer. While pushing aside one of the pillows, in order to hear better, I found under my hand a kind of album — a book of engravings, they were vulgar pictures. I was sleeping on top of it when he entered the room."

She hung down her head and remained pensive.

The leaves rustled around them. Amid the tangled grass a great foxglove was swaying to and fro. The sunlight flowed like a wave over the green expanse, and the silence was interrupted at intervals by the browsing of the cow, which they could no longer see.

Rosanette kept her eyes fixed on a particular spot, three paces away from her, her nostrils heaving, and her mind absorbed in thought. Frederick caught hold of her hand.

"How you suffered, poor darling!"

"Yes," said she, "more than you imagine! So much so that I wanted to make an end of it — they had to fish me up!"

"What?"

"Ah! think no more about it! I love you, I am happy! kiss me!"

And she picked off, one by one, the sprigs of the thistles which clung to the hem of her gown.

Frederick was thinking more than all on what she had not told him. What were the means by which she had gradually emerged from wretchedness? To what lover did she owe her education? What had occurred in her life down to the day when he first came to her house? Her latest avowal was a bar to these questions. All he asked her was how she had made Arnoux's acquaintance.

"Through the Vatnaz."

"Wasn't it you that I once saw with both of them at the Palais-Royal?"

He referred to the exact date. Rosanette made a movement which showed a sense of deep pain.

"Yes, it is true! I was not gay at that time!"

But Arnoux had proved himself a very good fellow. Frederick had no doubt of it. However, their friend was a queer character, full of faults. He took care to recall them. She quite agreed with him on this point.

"Never mind! One likes him, all the same, this camel!"

"Still — even now?" said Frederick.

She began to redden, half smiling, half angry.

"Oh, no! that's an old story. I don't keep anything hidden from you. Even though it might be so, with him it is different. Besides, I don't think you are nice towards your victim!"

"My victim!"

Rosanette caught hold of his chin.

"No doubt!"

And in the lisping fashion in which nurses talk to babies:

"Have always been so good! Never went a-by-by with his wife?"

"I! never at any time!"

Rosanette smiled. He felt hurt by this smile of hers, which seemed to him a proof of indifference.

But she went on gently, and with one of those looks which seem to appeal for a denial of the truth:

"Are you perfectly certain?"

"Not a doubt of it!"

Frederick solemnly declared on his word of honour that he had never bestowed a thought on Madame Arnoux, as he was too much in love with another woman.

"Why, with you, my beautiful one!"

"Ah! don't laugh at me! You only annoy me!"

He thought it a prudent course to invent a story — to pretend that he was swayed by a passion. He manufactured some circumstantial details. This woman, however, had rendered him very unhappy.

"Decidedly, you have not been lucky," said Rosanette.

"Oh! oh! I may have been!" wishing to convey in this way that he had been often fortunate in his love-affairs, so that she might have a better opinion of him, just as Rosanette did not avow how many lovers she had had, in order that he might have more respect for her — for there will always be found in the midst of the most intimate confidences restrictions, false shame, delicacy, and pity. You divine either in the other or in yourself precipices or miry paths which prevent you from penetrating any farther; moreover, you feel that you will not be understood. It is hard to express accurately the thing you mean, whatever it may be; and this is the reason why perfect unions are rare.

The poor Maréchale had never known one better than this. Often, when she gazed at Frederick, tears came into her eyes; then she would raise them or cast a glance towards the horizon, as if she saw there some bright dawn, perspectives of boundless felicity. At last, she confessed one day to him that she wished to have a mass said, "so that it might bring a blessing on our love."

How was it, then, that she had resisted him so long? She could not tell herself. He repeated his question a great many times; and she replied, as she clasped him in her arms:

"It was because I was afraid, my darling, of loving you too well!"

On Sunday morning, Frederick read, amongst the list of the wounded given in a newspaper, the name of Dussardier. He uttered a cry, and showing the paper to Rosanette, declared that he was going to start at once for Paris.

"For what purpose?"

"In order to see him, to nurse him!"

"You are not going, I'm sure, to leave me by myself?"

"Come with me!"

"Ha! to poke my nose in a squabble of that sort? Oh, no, thanks!"

"However, I cannot — — "

"Ta! ta! ta! as if they had need of nurses in the hospitals! And then, what concern is he of yours any longer? Everyone for himself!"

He was roused to indignation by this egoism on her part, and he reproached himself for not being in the capital with the others. Such indifference to the misfortunes of the nation had in it something shabby, and only worthy of a small shopkeeper. And now, all of a sudden, his intrigue with Rosanette weighed on his mind as if it were a crime. For an hour they were quite cool towards each other.

Then she appealed to him to wait, and not expose himself to danger.

"Suppose you happen to be killed?"

"Well, I should only have done my duty!"

Rosanette gave a jump. His first duty was to love her; but, no doubt, he did not care about her any longer. There was no common sense in what he was going to do. Good heavens! what an idea!

Frederick rang for his bill. But to get back to Pans was not an easy matter. The Leloir stagecoach had just left; the Lecomte berlins would not be starting; the diligence from Bourbonnais would not be passing till a late hour that night, and perhaps it might be full, one could never tell. When he had lost a great deal of time in making enquiries about the various modes of conveyance, the idea occurred to him to travel post. The master of the post-house refused to supply him with horses, as Frederick had no passport. Finally, he hired an open carriage — the same one in which they had driven about the country — and at about five o'clock they arrived in front of the Hôtel du Commerce at Melun.

The market-place was covered with piles of arms. The prefect had forbidden the National Guards to proceed towards Paris. Those who did not belong to his department wished to go on. There was a great deal of shouting, and the inn was packed with a noisy crowd.

Rosanette, seized with terror, said she would not go a step further, and once more begged of him to stay. The innkeeper and his wife joined in her entreaties. A decent sort of man who happened to be dining there interposed, and observed that the fighting would be over in a very short time. Besides, one ought to do his duty. Thereupon the Maréchale redoubled her sobs. Frederick got exasperated. He handed her his purse, kissed her quickly, and disappeared.

On reaching Corbeil, he learned at the station that the insurgents had cut the rails at regular distances, and the coachman refused to drive him any farther; he said that his horses were "overspent."

Through his influence, however, Frederick managed to procure an indifferent cabriolet, which, for the sum of sixty francs, without taking into account the price of a drink for the driver, was to convey him as far as the Italian barrier. But at a hundred paces from the barrier his coachman made him descend and turn back. Frederick was walking along the pathway, when suddenly a sentinel thrust out his bayonet. Four men seized him, exclaiming:

"This is one of them! Look out! Search him! Brigand! scoundrel!"

And he was so thoroughly stupefied that he let himself be dragged to the guard-house of the barrier, at the very point where the Boulevards des Gobelins and de l'Hôpital and Rues Godefroy and Mauffetard converge.

Four barricades formed at the ends of four different ways enormous sloping ramparts of paving-stones. Torches were glimmering here and there. In spite of the rising clouds of dust he could distinguish foot-soldiers of the Line and National Guards, all with their faces blackened, their chests uncovered, and an aspect of wild excitement. They had just captured the square, and had shot down a number of men. Their rage had not yet cooled. Frederick said he had come from Fontainebleau to the relief of a wounded comrade who lodged in the Rue Bellefond. Not one of them would believe him at first. They examined his hands; they even put their noses to his ear to make sure that he did not smell of powder.

However, by dint of repeating the same thing, he finally satisfied a captain, who directed two fusiliers to conduct him to the guard-house of the Jardin des Plantes. They descended the Boulevard de l'Hôpital. A strong breeze was blowing. It restored him to animation.

After this they turned up the Rue du Marché aux Chevaux. The Jardin des Plantes at the right formed a long black mass, whilst at the left the entire front of the Pitié, illuminated at every window, blazed like a conflagration, and shadows passed rapidly over the window-panes.

The two men in charge of Frederick went away. Another accompanied him to the Polytechnic School. The Rue Saint-Victor was quite dark, without a gas-lamp or a light at any window to relieve the gloom. Every ten minutes could be heard the words:

"Sentinels! mind yourselves!"

And this exclamation, cast into the midst of the silence, was prolonged like the repeated striking of a stone against the side of a chasm as it falls through space.

Every now and then the stamp of heavy footsteps could be heard drawing nearer. This was nothing less than a patrol consisting of about a hundred men. From this confused mass escaped whisperings and the dull clanking of iron; and, moving away with a rhythmic swing, it melted into the darkness.

In the middle of the crossing, where several streets met, a dragoon sat motionless on his horse. From time to time an express rider passed at a rapid gallop; then the silence was renewed. Cannons, which were being drawn along the streets, made, on the pavement, a heavy rolling sound that seemed full of menace — a sound different from every ordinary sound — which oppressed the heart. The sounds was profound, unlimited — a black silence. Men in white blouses accosted the soldiers, spoke one or two words to them, and then vanished like phantoms.

The guard-house of the Polytechnic School overflowed with people. The threshold was blocked up with women, who had come to see their sons or their husbands. They were sent on to the Panthéon, which had been transformed into a dead-house; and no attention was paid to Frederick. He pressed forward dead-house; and no attention was paid to Frederick. He pressed forward resolutely, solemnly declaring that his friend Dussardier was waiting for him, that he was at death's door. At last they sent a corporal to accompany him to the top of the Rue Saint-Jacques, to the Mayor's office in the twelfth arrondissement.

The Place du Panthéon was filled with soldiers lying asleep on straw. The day was breaking; the bivouac-fires were extinguished.

The insurrection had left terrible traces in this quarter. The soil of the streets, from one end to the other, was covered with risings of various sizes. On the wrecked barricades had been piled up omnibuses, gas-pipes, and cart-wheels. In certain places there were little dark pools, which must have been blood. The houses were riddled with projectiles, and their framework could be seen under the plaster that was peeled off. Window-blinds, each attached only by a single nail, hung like rags. The staircases having fallen in, doors opened on vacancy. The interiors of rooms could be perceived with their papers in strips. In some instances dainty objects had remained in them quite intact. Frederick noticed a timepiece, a parrot-stick, and some engravings.

When he entered the Mayor's office, the National Guards were chattering without a moment's pause about the deaths of Bréa and Négrier, about the deputy Charbonnel, and about the Archbishop of Paris. He heard them saying that the Duc d'Aumale had landed at Boulogne, that Barbès had fled from Vincennes, that the artillery were coming up from Bourges, and that abundant aid was arriving from the provinces. About three o'clock some one brought good news.

Truce-bearers from the insurgents were in conference with the President of the Assembly.

Thereupon they all made merry; and as he had a dozen francs left, Frederick sent for a dozen bottles of wine, hoping by this means to hasten his deliverance. Suddenly a discharge of musketry was heard. The drinking stopped. They peered with distrustful eyes into the unknown — it might be Henry V.

In order to get rid of responsibility, they took Frederick to the Mayor's office in the eleventh arrondissement, which he was not permitted to leave till nine o'clock in the morning.

He started at a running pace from the Quai Voltaire. At an open window an old man in his shirt-sleeves was crying, with his eyes raised. The Seine glided peacefully along. The sky was of a clear blue; and in the trees round the Tuileries birds were singing.

Frederick was just crossing the Place du Carrousel when a litter happened to be passing by. The soldiers at the guard-house immediately presented arms; and the officer, putting his hand to his shako, said: "Honour to unfortunate bravery!" This phrase seemed to have almost become a matter of duty. He who pronounced it appeared to be, on each occasion, filled with profound emotion. A pronounced it appeared to be, on each occasion, filled with profound emotion. A group of people in a state of fierce excitement followed the litter, exclaiming:

"We will avenge you! we will avenge you!"

The vehicles kept moving about on the boulevard, and women were making lint before the doors. Meanwhile, the outbreak had been quelled, or very nearly so. A proclamation from Cavaignac, just posted up, announced the fact. At the top of the Rue Vivienne, a company of the Garde Mobile appeared. Then the citizens uttered cries of enthusiasm. They raised their hats, applauded, danced, wished to embrace them, and to invite them to drink; and flowers, flung by ladies, fell from the balconies.

At last, at ten o'clock, at the moment when the cannon was booming as an attack was being made on the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, Frederick reached the abode of Dussardier. He found the bookkeeper in his garret, lying asleep on his back. From the adjoining apartment a woman came forth with silent tread — Mademoiselle Vatnaz.

She led Frederick aside and explained to him how Dussardier had got wounded.

On Saturday, on the top of a barricade in the Rue Lafayette, a young fellow wrapped in a tricoloured flag cried out to the National Guards: "Are you going to shoot your brothers?" As they advanced, Dussardier threw down his gun, pushed away the others, sprang over the barricade, and, with a blow of an old shoe, knocked down the insurgent, from whom he tore the flag. He had afterwards been found under a heap of rubbish with a slug of copper in his thigh. It was found necessary to make an incision in order to extract the projectile. Mademoiselle Vatnaz arrived the same evening, and since then had not quitted his side.

She intelligently prepared everything that was needed for the dressings, assisted him in taking his medicine or other liquids, attended to his slightest wishes, left and returned again with footsteps more light than those of a fly, and gazed at him with eyes full of tenderness.

Frederick, during the two following weeks, did not fail to come back every morning. One day, while he was speaking about the devotion of the Vatnaz, Dussardier shrugged his shoulders:

"Oh! no! she does this through interested motives."

"Do you think so?"

He replied: "I am sure of it!" without seeming disposed to give any further explanation.

She had loaded him with kindnesses, carrying her attentions so far as to bring him the newspapers in which his gallant action was extolled. He even confessed to Frederick that he felt uneasy in his conscience to Frederick that he felt uneasy in his conscience.

Perhaps he ought to have put himself on the other side with the men in blouses; for, indeed, a heap of promises had been made to them which had not been carried out. Those who had vanquished them hated the Republic; and, in the next place, they had treated them very harshly. No doubt they were in the wrong — not quite, however; and the honest fellow was tormented by the thought that he might have fought against the righteous cause. Sénécal, who was immured in the Tuileries, under the terrace at the water's edge, had none of this mental anguish.

There were nine hundred men in the place, huddled together in the midst of filth, without the slightest order, their faces blackened with powder and clotted blood, shivering with ague and breaking out into cries of rage, and those who were brought there to die were not separated from the rest. Sometimes, on hearing the sound of a detonation, they believed that they were all going to be shot. Then they dashed themselves against the walls, and after that fell back again into their places, so much stupefied by suffering that it seemed to them that they were living in a nightmare, a mournful hallucination. The lamp, which hung from the arched roof, looked like a stain of blood, and little green and yellow flames fluttered about, caused by the emanations from the vault. Through fear of epidemics, a commission was appointed. When he had advanced a few steps, the President recoiled, frightened by the stench from the excrements and from the corpses.

As soon as the prisoners drew near a vent-hole, the National Guards who were on sentry, in order to prevent them from shaking the bars of the grating, prodded them indiscriminately with their bayonets.

As a rule they showed no pity. Those who were not beaten wished to signalise themselves. There was a regular outbreak of fear. They avenged themselves at the same time on newspapers, clubs, mobs, speech-making — everything that had exasperated them during the last three months, and in spite of the victory that had been gained, equality (as if for the punishment of its defenders and the exposure of its enemies to ridicule) manifested itself in a triumphal fashion — an equality of brute beasts, a dead level of sanguinary vileness; for the fanaticism of self-interest balanced the madness of want, aristocracy had the same fits of fury as low debauchery, and the cotton cap did not show itself less hideous than the red cap. The public mind was agitated just as it would be after great convulsions of nature. Sensible men were rendered imbeciles for the rest of their lives on account of it.

Père Roque had become very courageous, almost foolhardy. Having arrived on the 26th at Paris with some of the inhabitants of Nogent, instead of going back at the same time with them, he had gone to give his assistance to the

National Guard encamped at the Tuileries; and he was quite satisfied to be placed on sentry in front of the terrace at the water's side. There, at any rate, he had these brigands under his feet! He was delighted to find that they were beaten and humiliated, and he could not refrain from uttering invectives against them.

One of them, a young lad with long fair hair, put his face to the bars, and asked for bread. M. Roque ordered him to hold his tongue. But the young man repeated in a mournful tone:

"Bread!"

"Have I any to give you?"

Other prisoners presented themselves at the vent-hole, with their bristling beards, their burning eyeballs, all pushing forward, and yelling:

"Bread!"

Père Roque was indignant at seeing his authority slighted. In order to frighten them he took aim at them; and, borne onward into the vault by the crush that nearly smothered him, the young man, with his head thrown backward, once more exclaimed:

"Bread!"

"Hold on! here it is!" said Père Roque, firing a shot from his gun. There was a fearful howl — then, silence. At the side of the trough something white could be seen lying.

After this, M. Roque returned to his abode, for he had a house in the Rue Saint-Martin, which he used as a temporary residence; and the injury done to the front of the building during the riots had in no slight degree contributed to excite his rage. It seemed to him, when he next saw it, that he had exaggerated the amount of damage done to it. His recent act had a soothing effect on him, as if it indemnified him for his loss.

It was his daughter herself who opened the door for him. She immediately made the remark that she had felt uneasy at his excessively prolonged absence. She was afraid that he had met with some misfortune — that he had been wounded.

This manifestation of filial love softened Père Roque. He was astonished that she should have set out on a journey without Catherine.

"I sent her out on a message," was Louise's reply.

And she made enquiries about his health, about one thing or another; then, with an air of indifference, she asked him whether he had chanced to come across Frederick:

"No; I didn't see him!"

It was on his account alone that she had come up from the country.

Some one was walking at that moment in the lobby.

"Oh! excuse me — — "

And she disappeared.

Catherine had not found Frederick. He had been several days away, and his intimate friend, M. Deslauriers, was now living in the provinces.

Louise once more presented herself, shaking all over, without being able to utter a word. She leaned against the furniture.

"What's the matter with you? Tell me — what's the matter with you?" exclaimed her father.

She indicated by a wave of her hand that it was nothing, and with a great effort of will she regained her composure.

The keeper of the restaurant at the opposite side of the street brought them soup. But Père Roque had passed through too exciting an ordeal to be able to control his emotions. "He is not likely to die;" and at dessert he had a sort of fainting fit. A doctor was at once sent for, and he prescribed a potion. Then, when M. Roque was in bed, he asked to be as well wrapped up as possible in order to bring on perspiration. He gasped; he moaned.

"Thanks, my good Catherine! Kiss your poor father, my chicken! Ah! those revolutions!"

And, when his daughter scolded him for having made himself ill by tormenting his mind on her account, he replied:

"Yes! you are right! But I couldn't help it! I am too sensitive!"

CHAPTER XV.

"How Happy Could I Be With Either."

Madame Dambreuse, in her boudoir, between her niece and Miss John, was listening to M. Roque as he described the severe military duties he had been forced to perform.

She was biting her lips, and appeared to be in pain.

"Oh! 'tis nothing! it will pass away!"

And, with a gracious air:

"We are going to have an acquaintance of yours at dinner with us, — Monsieur Moreau."

Louise gave a start.

"Oh! we'll only have a few intimate friends there — amongst others, Alfred de Cisy."

And she spoke in terms of high praise about his manners, his personal appearance, and especially his moral character.

Madame Dambreuse was nearer to a correct estimate of the state of affairs than she imagined; the Vicomte was contemplating marriage. He said so to Martinon, adding that Mademoiselle Cécile was certain to like him, and that her parents would accept him.

To warrant him in going so far as to confide to another his intentions on the point, he ought to have satisfactory information with regard to her dowry. Now Martinon had a suspicion that Cécile was M. Dambreuse's natural daughter; and it is probable that it would have been a very strong step on his part to ask for her hand at any risk. Such audacity, of course, was not unaccompanied by danger; and for this reason Martinon had, up to the present, acted in a way that could not compromise him. Besides, he did not see how he could well get rid of the aunt. Cisy's confidence induced him to make up his mind; and he had formally made his proposal to the banker, who, seeing no obstacle to it, had just informed Madame Dambreuse about the matter.

Cisy presently made his appearance. She arose and said:

"You have forgotten us. Cécile, shake hands!"

At the same moment Frederick entered the room.

"Ha! at last we have found you again!" exclaimed Père Roque. "I called with Cécile on you three times this week!"

Frederick had carefully avoided them. He pleaded by way of excuse that he spent all his days beside a wounded comrade.

spent all his days beside a wounded comrade.

For a long time, however, a heap of misfortunes had happened to him, and he tried to invent stories to explain his conduct. Luckily the guests arrived in the midst of his explanation. First of all M. Paul de Grémonville, the diplomatist whom he met at the ball; then Fumichon, that manufacturer whose conservative zeal had scandalised him one evening. After them came the old Duchesse de Montreuil Nantua.

But two loud voices in the anteroom reached his ears. They were that of M. de Nonancourt, an old beau with the air of a mummy preserved in cold cream, and that of Madame de Larsillois, the wife of a prefect of Louis Philippe. She was terribly frightened, for she had just heard an organ playing a polka which was a signal amongst the insurgents. Many of the wealthy class of citizens had similar apprehensions; they thought that men in the catacombs were going to blow up the Faubourg Saint-Germain. Some noises escaped from cellars, and things that excited suspicion were passed up to windows.

Everyone in the meantime made an effort to calm Madame de Larsillois. Order was re-established. There was no longer anything to fear.

"Cavaignac has saved us!"

As if the horrors of the insurrection had not been sufficiently numerous, they exaggerated them. There had been twenty-three thousand convicts on the side of the Socialists — no less!

They had no doubt whatever that food had been poisoned, that Gardes Mobiles had been sawn between two planks, and that there had been inscriptions on flags inciting the people to pillage and incendiarism.

"Aye, and something more!" added the ex-prefect.

"Oh, dear!" said Madame Dambreuse, whose modesty was shocked, while she indicated the three young girls with a glance.

M. Dambreuse came forth from his study accompanied by Martinon. She turned her head round and responded to a bow from Pellerin, who was advancing towards her. The artist gazed in a restless fashion towards the walls. The banker took him aside, and conveyed to him that it was desirable for the present to conceal his revolutionary picture.

"No doubt," said Pellerin, the rebuff which he received at the Club of Intellect having modified his opinions.

M. Dambreuse let it slip out very politely that he would give him orders for other works.

"But excuse me. Ah! my dear friend, what a pleasure!"

Arnoux and Madame Arnoux stood before Frederick.

He had a sort of vertigo. Rosanette had been irritating him all the afternoon with her display of admiration for soldiers, and the old passion was re-awakened.

The steward came to announce that dinner was on the table. With a look she directed the Vicomte to take Cécile's arm, while she said in a low tone to Martinon, "You wretch!" And then they passed into the dining-room.

Under the green leaves of a pineapple, in the middle of the table-cloth, a dorado stood, with its snout reaching towards a quarter of roebuck and its tail just grazing a bushy dish of crayfish. Figs, huge cherries, pears, and grapes (the first fruits of Parisian cultivation) rose like pyramids in baskets of old Saxe. Here and there a bunch of flowers mingled with the shining silver plate. The white silk blinds, drawn down in front of the windows, filled the apartment with a mellow light. It was cooled by two fountains, in which there were pieces of ice; and tall men-servants, in short breeches, waited on them. All these luxuries seemed more precious after the emotion of the past few days. They felt a fresh delight at possessing things which they had been afraid of losing; and Nonancourt expressed the general sentiment when he said: "Ah! let us hope that these Republican gentlemen will allow us to dine!"

"In spite of their fraternity!" Père Roque added, with an attempt at wit.

These two personages were placed respectively at the right and at the left of Madame Dambreuse, her husband being exactly opposite her, between Madame Larsillois, at whose side was the diplomatist and the old Duchesse, whom Fumichon elbowed. Then came the painter, the dealer in faïence, and Mademoiselle Louise; and, thanks to Martinon, who had carried her chair to enable her to take a seat near Louise, Frederick found himself beside Madame Arnoux.

She wore a black barège gown, a gold hoop on her wrist, and, as on the first day that he dined at her house, something red in her hair, a branch of fuchsia twisted round her chignon. He could not help saying: "'Tis a long time since we saw each other."

"Ah!" she returned coldly.

He went on, in a mild tone, which mitigated the impertinence of his question: "Have you thought of me now and then?"

"Why should I think of you?"

Frederick was hurt by these words.

"You are right, perhaps, after all."

But very soon, regretting what he had said, he swore that he had not lived a single day without being ravaged by the remembrance of her.

"I don't believe a single word of it, Monsieur."

"However, you know that I love you!"

Madame Arnoux made no reply.

"You know that I love you!"

She still kept silent.

"Well, then, go be hanged!" said Frederick to himself.

And, as he raised his eyes, he perceived Mademoiselle Roque at the other side of Madame Arnoux.

She thought it gave her a coquettish look to dress entirely in green, a colour which contrasted horribly with her red hair. The buckle of her belt was large and her collar cramped her neck. This lack of elegance had, no doubt, contributed to the coldness which Frederick at first displayed towards her. She watched him from where she sat, some distance away from him, with curious glances; and Arnoux, close to her side, in vain lavished his gallantries — he could not get her to utter three words, so that, finally abandoning all hope of making himself agreeable to her, he listened to the conversation. She now began rolling about a slice of Luxembourg pineapple in her pea-soup.

Louis Blanc, according to Fumichon, owned a large house in the Rue Saint-Dominique, which he refused to let to the workmen.

"For my part, I think it rather a funny thing," said Nonancourt, "to see Ledru-Rollin hunting over the Crown lands."

"He owes twenty thousand francs to a goldsmith!" Cisy interposed, "and 'tis maintained — — "

Madame Darnbreuse stopped him.

"Ah! how nasty it is to be getting hot about politics! and for such a young man, too! fie, fie! Pay attention rather to your fair neighbour!"

After this, those who were of a grave turn of mind attacked the newspapers. Arnoux took it on himself to defend them. Frederick mixed himself up in the discussion, describing them as commercial establishments just like any other house of business. Those who wrote for them were, as a rule, imbeciles or humbugs; he gave his listeners to understand that he was acquainted with journalists, and combated with sarcasms his friend's generous sentiments.

Madame Arnoux did not notice that this was said through a feeling of spite against her.

Meanwhile, the Vicomte was torturing his brain in the effort to make a conquest of Mademoiselle Cécile. He commenced by finding fault with the shape of the decanters and the graving of the knives, in order to show his artistic tastes. Then he talked about his stable, his tailor and his shirtmaker. Finally, he took up the subject of religion, and seized the opportunity of conveying to her that he fulfilled all his duties.

Martinon set to work in a better fashion. With his eyes fixed on her continually, he praised, in a monotonous fashion, her birdlike profile, her dull fair hair, and her hands, which were unusually short. The plain-looking young girl was delighted at this shower of flatteries.

It was impossible to hear anything, as all present were talking at the tops of their voices. M. Roque wanted "an iron hand" to govern France. Nonancourt even regretted that the political scaffold was abolished. They ought to have all these scoundrels put to death together.

"Now that I think of it, are we speaking of Dussardier?" said M. Dambreuse, turning towards Frederick.

The worthy shopman was now a hero, like Sallesse, the brothers Jeanson, the wife of Pequillet, *etc.*

Frederick, without waiting to be asked, related his friend's history; it threw around him a kind of halo.

Then they came quite naturally to refer to different traits of courage.

According to the diplomatist, it was not hard to face death, witness the case of men who fight duels.

"We might take the Vicomte's testimony on that point," said Martinon.

The Vicomte's face got very flushed.

The guests stared at him, and Louise, more astonished than the rest, murmured: "What is it, pray?"

"He *sank* before Frederick," returned Arnoux, in a very low tone.

"Do you know anything, Mademoiselle?" said Nonancourt presently, and he repeated her answer to Madame Dambreuse, who, bending forward a little, began to fix her gaze on Frederick.

Martinon did not wait for Cécile's questions. He informed her that this affair had reference to a woman of improper character. The young girl drew back slightly in her chair, as if to escape from contact with such a libertine.

The conversation was renewed. The great wines of Bordeaux were sent round, and the guests became animated. Pellerin had a dislike to the Revolution, because he attributed to it the complete loss of the Spanish Museum.

This is what grieved him most as a painter.

As he made the latter remark, M. Roque asked:

"Are you not yourself the painter of a very notable picture?"

"Perhaps! What is it?"

"It represents a lady in a costume — faith! — a little light, with a purse, and a peacock behind."

Frederick, in his turn, reddened. Pellerin pretended that he had not heard the words.

"Nevertheless, it is certainly by you! For your name is written at the bottom of it, and there is a line on it stating that it is Monsieur Moreau's property."

One day, when Père Roque and his daughter were waiting at his residence to see him, they saw the Maréchale's portrait. The old gentleman had even taken it for "a Gothic painting."

"No," said Pellerin rudely, "'tis a woman's portrait."

Martinon added:

"And a living woman's, too, and no mistake! Isn't that so, Cisy?"

"Oh! I know nothing about it."

"I thought you were acquainted with her. But, since it causes you pain, I must beg a thousand pardons!"

Cisy lowered his eyes, proving by his embarrassment that he must have played a pitiable part in connection with this portrait. As for Frederick, the model could only be his mistress. It was one of those convictions which are immediately formed, and the faces of the assembly revealed it with the utmost clearness.

"How he lied to me!" said Madame Arnoux to herself.

"It is for her, then, that he left me," thought Louise.

Frederick had an idea that these two stories might compromise him; and when they were in the garden, Mademoiselle Cécile's wooer burst out laughing in his face.

"Oh, not at all! 'twill do you good! Go ahead!"

What did he mean? Besides, what was the cause of this good nature, so contrary to his usual conduct? Without giving any explanation, he proceeded towards the lower end, where the ladies were seated. The men were standing round them, and, in their midst, Pellerin was giving vent to his ideas. The form of government most favourable for the arts was an enlightened monarchy. He was disgusted with modern times, "if it were only on account of the National Guard" — he regretted the Middle Ages and the days of Louis XIV. M. Roque congratulated him on his opinions, confessing that they overcame all his prejudices against artists. But almost without a moment's delay he went off when the voice of Fumichon attracted his attention.

Arnoux tried to prove that there were two Socialisms — a good and a bad. The manufacturer saw no difference whatever between them, his head becoming dizzy with rage at the utterance of the word "property."

"'Tis a law written on the face of Nature! Children cling to their toys. All peoples, all animals are of my opinion. The lion even, if he were able to speak, would declare himself a proprietor! Thus I myself, messieurs, began with a capital of fifteen thousand francs. Would you be surprised to hear that for thirty years I used to get up at four o'clock every morning? I've had as much pain as five hundred devils in making my fortune! And people will come and tell me I'm not the master, that my money is not my money; in short, that property is theft!"

"But Proudhon — — "

"Let me alone with your Proudhon! if he were here I think I'd strangle him!"

He would have strangled him. After the intoxicating drink he had swallowed Fumichon did not know what he was talking about any longer, and his apoplectic face was on the point of bursting like a bombshell.

"Good morrow, Arnoux," said Hussonnet, who was walking briskly over the grass.

He brought M. Dambreuse the first leaf of a pamphlet, bearing the title of "The Hydra," the Bohemian defending the interests of a reactionary club, and in that capacity he was introduced by the banker to his guests.

Hussonnet amused them by relating how the dealers in tallow hired three hundred and ninety-two street boys to bawl out every evening "Lamps,"[H] and then turning into ridicule the principles of '89, the emancipation of the negroes, and the orators of the Left; and he even went so far as to do "Prudhomme on a Barricade," perhaps under the influence of a kind of jealousy of these rich people who had enjoyed a good dinner. The caricature did not please them overmuch. Their faces grew long.

This, however, was not a time for joking, so Nonancourt observed, as he recalled the death of Monseigneur Affre and that of General de Bréa. These events were being constantly alluded to, and arguments were constructed out of them. M. Roque described the archbishop's end as "everything that one could call sublime." Fumichon gave the palm to the military personage, and instead of simply expressing regret for these two murders, they held disputes with a view to determining which ought to excite the greatest indignation. A second comparison was next instituted, namely, between Lamoricière and Cavaignac, M. Dambreuse glorifying Cavaignac, and Nonancourt, Lamoricière.

Not one of the persons present, with the exception of Arnoux, had ever seen either of them engaged in the exercise of his profession. None the less, everyone formulated an irrevocable judgment with reference to their operations.

Frederick, however, declined to give an opinion on the matter, confessing that he had not served as a soldier. The diplomatist and M. Dambreuse gave him an approving nod of the head. In fact, to have fought against the insurrection was to have defended the Republic. The result, although favourable, consolidated it; and now they had got rid of the vanquished, they wanted to be conquerors.

As soon as they had got out into the garden, Madame Dambreuse, taking Cisy aside, chided him for his awkwardness. When she caught sight of Martinon, she sent him away, and then tried to learn from her future nephew the cause of his witticisms at the Vicomte's expense.

"There's nothing of the kind."

"And all this, as it were, for the glory of M. Moreau. What is the object of it?"

"There's no object. Frederick is a charming fellow. I am very fond of him."

"And so am I, too. Let him come here. Go and look for him!"

After two or three commonplace phrases, she began by lightly disparaging her guests, and in this way she placed him on a higher level than the others. He did not fail to run down the rest of the ladies more or less, which was an ingenious way of paying her compliments. But she left his side from time to time, as it was a reception-night, and ladies were every moment arriving; then she returned to her seat, and the entirely accidental arrangement of the chairs enabled them to avoid being overheard.

She showed herself playful and yet grave, melancholy and yet quite rational. Her daily occupations interested her very little — there was an order of sentiments of a less transitory kind. She complained of the poets, who misrepresent the facts of life, then she raised her eyes towards heaven, asking of him what was the name of a star.

Two or three Chinese lanterns had been suspended from the trees; the wind shook them, and lines of coloured light quivered on her white dress. She sat, after her usual fashion, a little back in her armchair, with a footstool in front of her. The tip of a black satin shoe could be seen; and at intervals Madame Dambreuse allowed a louder word than usual, and sometimes even a laugh, to escape her.

These coquetries did not affect Martinon, who was occupied with Cécile; but they were bound to make an impression on M. Roque's daughter, who was chatting with Madame Arnoux. She was the only member of her own sex present whose manners did not appear disdainful. Louise came and sat beside her; then, yielding to the desire to give vent to her emotions: "Does he not talk well — Frederick Moreau, I mean?"

"Do you know him?"

"Oh! intimately! We are neighbours; and he used to amuse himself with me when I was quite a little girl."

Madame Arnoux cast at her a sidelong glance, which meant:

"I suppose you are not in love with him?"

The young girl's face replied with an untroubled look:

"Yes."

"You see him often, then?"

"Oh, no! only when he comes to his mother's house. 'Tis ten months now since he came. He promised, however, to be more particular."

"The promises of men are not to be too much relied on, my child."

"But he has not deceived me!"

"As he did others!"

Louise shivered: "Can it be by any chance that he promised something to her;" and her features became distracted with distrust and hate.

Madame Arnoux was almost afraid of her; she would have gladly withdrawn what she had said. Then both became silent.

As Frederick was sitting opposite them on a folding-stool, they kept staring at him, the one with propriety out of the corner of her eye, the other boldly, with parted lips, so that Madame Dambreuse said to him: "Come, now, turn round, and let her have a good look at you!"

"Whom do you mean?"

"Why, Monsieur Roque's daughter!"

And she rallied him on having won the heart of this young girl from the provinces. He denied that this was so, and tried to make a laugh of it.

"Is it credible, I ask you? Such an ugly creature!"

However, he experienced an intense feeling of gratified vanity. He recalled to mind the reunion from which he had returned one night, some time before, his heart filled with bitter humiliation, and he drew a deep breath, for it seemed to him that he was now in the environment that really suited him, as if all these things, including the Dambreuse mansion, belonged to himself. The ladies formed a semicircle around him while they listened to what he was saying, and in order to create an effect, he declared that he was in favor of the re-establishment of divorce, which he maintained should be easily procurable, so as to enable people to quit one another and come back to one another without any limit as often as they liked. They uttered loud protests; a few of them began to talk in whispers. Little exclamations every now and then burst forth from the place where the wall was overshadowed with aristolochia. One would imagine that it was a mirthful cackling of hens; and he developed his theory with that self-complacency which is generated by the consciousness of success. A man-servant brought into the arbour a tray laden with ices. The gentlemen drew close together and began to chat about the recent arrests.

Thereupon Frederick revenged himself on the Vicomte by making him believe that he might be prosecuted as a Legitimist. The other urged by way of reply that he had not stirred outside his own room. His adversary enumerated in a heap the possible mischances. MM. Dambreuse and Grémonville found the discussion very amusing. Then they paid Frederick compliments, while expressing regret at the same time that he did not employ his abilities in the defence of order. They grasped his hand with the utmost warmth; he might for the future count on them. At last, just as everyone was leaving, the Vicomte made a low bow to Cécile: "Mademoiselle, I have the honour of wishing you a very good evening."

She replied coldly:

"Good evening." But she gave Martinon a parting smile.

Pére Roque, in order to continue the conversation between himself and Arnoux, offered to see him home, "as well as Madame" — they were going the same way. Louise and Frederick walked in front of them. She had caught hold of his arm; and, when she was some distance away from the others she said: "Ah! at last! at last! I've had enough to bear all the evening! How nasty those women were! What haughty airs they had!"

He made an effort to defend them.

"First of all, you might certainly have spoken to me the moment you came in, after being away a whole year!"

"It was not a year," said Frederick, glad to be able to give some sort of rejoinder on this point in order to avoid the other questions.

"Be it so; the time appeared very long to me, that's all. But, during this horrid dinner, one would think you felt ashamed of me. Ah! I understand — I don't possess what is needed in order to please as they do."

"You are mistaken," said Frederick.

"Really! Swear to me that you don't love anyone!"

He did swear.

"You love nobody but me alone?"

"I assure you, I do not."

This assurance filled her with delight. She would have liked to lose her way in the streets, so that they might walk about together the whole night.

"I have been so much tormented down there! Nothing was talked about but barricades. I imagined I saw you falling on your back covered with blood! Your mother was confined to her bed with rheumatism. She knew nothing about what was happening. I had to hold my tongue. I could stand it no longer, so I took Catherine with me."

And she related to him all about her departure, her journey, and the lie she told her father.

"He's bringing me back in two days. Come to-morrow evening, as if you were merely paying a casual visit, and take advantage of the opportunity to ask for my hand in marriage."

Never had Frederick been further from the idea of marriage. Besides, Mademoiselle Roque appeared to him a rather absurd young person. How different she was from a woman like Madame Dambreuse! A very different future was in store for him. He had found reason to-day to feel perfectly certain on that point; and, therefore, this was not the time to involve himself, from mere sentimental motives, in a step of such momentous importance. It was necessary sentimental motives, in a step of such momentous importance. It was necessary now to be decisive — and then he had seen Madame Arnoux once more. Nevertheless he was rather embarrassed by Louise's candour.

He said in reply to her last words:

"Have you considered this matter?"

"How is that?" she exclaimed, frozen with astonishment and indignation.

He said that to marry at such a time as this would be a piece of folly.

"So you don't want to have me?"

"Nay, you don't understand me!"

And he plunged into a confused mass of verbiage in order to impress upon her that he was kept back by more serious considerations; that he had business on hand which it would take a long time to dispose of; that even his inheritance had been placed in jeopardy (Louise cut all this explanation short with one plain word); that, last of all, the present political situation made the thing undesirable. So, then, the most reasonable course was to wait patiently for some time. Matters would, no doubt, right themselves — at least, he hoped so; and, as he could think of no further grounds to go upon just at that moment, he pretended to have been suddenly reminded that he should have been with Dussardier two hours ago.

Then, bowing to the others, he darted down the Rue Hauteville, took a turn round the Gymnase, returned to the boulevard, and quickly rushed up Rosanette's four flights of stairs.

M. and Madame Arnoux left Pére Roque and his daughter at the entrance of the Rue Saint-Denis. Husband and wife returned home without exchanging a word, as he was unable to continue chattering any longer, feeling quite worn out. She even leaned against his shoulder. He was the only man who had displayed any honourable sentiments during the evening. She entertained towards him feelings of the utmost indulgence. Meanwhile, he cherished a certain degree of spite against Frederick.

"Did you notice his face when a question was asked about the portrait? When I told you that he was her lover, you did not wish to believe what I said!"

"Oh! yes, I was wrong!"

Arnoux, gratified with his triumph, pressed the matter even further.

"I'd even make a bet that when he left us, a little while ago, he went to see her again. He's with her at this moment, you may be sure! He's finishing the evening with her!"

Madame Arnoux had pulled down her hat very low.

"Why, you're shaking all over!"

"That's because I feel cold!" was her reply.

As soon as her father was asleep, Louise made her way into Catherine's room, and, catching her by the shoulders, shook her.

and, catching her by the shoulders, shook her.

"Get up — quick! as quick as ever you can! and go and fetch a cab for me!"

Catherine replied that there was not one to be had at such an hour.

"Will you come with me yourself there, then?"

"Where, might I ask?"

"To Frederick's house!"

"Impossible! What do you want to go there for?"

It was in order to have a talk with him. She could not wait. She must see him immediately.

"Just think of what you're about to do! To present yourself this way at a house in the middle of the night! Besides, he's asleep by this time!"

"I'll wake him up!"

"But this is not a proper thing for a young girl to do!"

"I am not a young girl — I'm his wife! I love him! Come — put on your shawl!"

Catherine, standing at the side of the bed, was trying to make up her mind how to act. She said at last: "No! I won't go!"

"Well, stay behind then! I'll go there by myself!"

Louise glided like an adder towards the staircase. Catherine rushed after her, and came up with her on the footpath outside the house. Her remonstrances were fruitless; and she followed the girl, fastening her undervest as she hurried along in the rear. The walk appeared to her exceedingly tedious. She complained that her legs were getting weak from age.

"I'll go on after you — faith, I haven't the same thing to drive me on that you have!"

Then she grew softened.

"Poor soul! You haven't anyone now but your Catau, don't you see?"

From time to time scruples took hold of her mind.

"Ah, this is a nice thing you're making me do! Suppose your father happened to wake and miss you! Lord God, let us hope no misfortune will happen!"

In front of the Théâtre des Variétés, a patrol of National Guards stopped them.

Louise immediately explained that she was going with her servant to look for a doctor in the Rue Rumfort. The patrol allowed them to pass on.

At the corner of the Madeleine they came across a second patrol, and, Louise having given the same explanation, one of the National Guards asked in return: "Is it for a nine months' ailment, ducky?"

"Oh, damn it!" exclaimed the captain, "no blackguardisms in the ranks! Pass on, ladies!"

In spite of the captain's orders, they still kept cracking jokes.

In spite of the captain's orders, they still kept cracking jokes.

"I wish you much joy!"

"My respects to the doctor!"

"Mind the wolf!"

"They like laughing," Catherine remarked in a loud tone. "That's the way it is to be young."

At length they reached Frederick's abode.

Louise gave the bell a vigorous pull, which she repeated several times. The door opened a little, and, in answer to her inquiry, the porter said: "No!"

"But he must be in bed!"

"I tell you he's not. Why, for nearly three months he has not slept at home!"

And the little pane of the lodge fell down sharply, like the blade of a guillotine.

They remained in the darkness under the archway.

An angry voice cried out to them:

"Be off!"

The door was again opened; they went away.

Louise had to sit down on a boundary-stone; and clasping her face with her hands, she wept copious tears welling up from her full heart. The day was breaking, and carts were making their way into the city.

Catherine led her back home, holding her up, kissing her, and offering her every sort of consolation that she could extract from her own experience. She need not give herself so much trouble about a lover. If this one failed her, she could find others.

CHAPTER XVI.

Unpleasant News from Rosanette.

When Rosanette's enthusiasm for the Gardes Mobiles had calmed down, she became more charming than ever, and Frederick insensibly glided into the habit of living with her.

The best portion of the day was the morning on the terrace. In a light cambric dress, and with her stockingless feet thrust into slippers, she kept moving about him — went and cleaned her canaries' cage, gave her gold-fishes some water, and with a fire-shovel did a little amateur gardening in the box filled with clay, from which arose a trellis of nasturtiums, giving an attractive look to the wall. Then, resting, with their elbows on the balcony, they stood side by side, gazing at the vehicles and the passers-by; and they warmed themselves in the sunlight, and made plans for spending the evening. He absented himself only for two hours at most, and, after that, they would go to some theatre, where they would get seats in front of the stage; and Rosanette, with a large bouquet of flowers in her hand, would listen to the instruments, while Frederick, leaning close to her ear, would tell her comic or amatory stories. At other times they took an open carriage to drive to the Bois de Boulogne. They kept walking about slowly until the middle of the night. At last they made their way home through the Arc de Triomphe and the grand avenue, inhaling the breeze, with the stars above their heads, and with all the gas-lamps ranged in the background of the perspective like a double string of luminous pearls.

Frederick always waited for her when they were going out together. She was a very long time fastening the two ribbons of her bonnet; and she smiled at herself in the mirror set in the wardrobe; then she would draw her arm over his, and, making him look at himself in the glass beside her: "We produce a good effect in this way, the two of us side by side. Ah! my poor darling, I could eat you!"

He was now her chattel, her property. She wore on her face a continuous radiance, while at the same time she appeared more languishing in manner, more rounded in figure; and, without being able to explain in what way, he found her altered, nevertheless.

One day she informed him, as if it were a very important bit of news, that my lord Arnoux had lately set up a linen-draper's shop for a woman who was formerly employed in his pottery-works. He used to go there every evening — "he spent a great deal on it no later than a week ago; he had even given her a set he spent a great deal on it no later than a week ago; he had even given her a set of rosewood furniture."

"How do you know that?" said Frederick.

"Oh! I'm sure of it."

Delphine, while carrying out some orders for her, had made enquiries about the matter, She must, then, be much attached to Arnoux to take such a deep interest in his movements. He contented himself with saying to her in reply: "What does this signify to you?"

Rosanette looked surprised at this question.

"Why, the rascal owes me money. Isn't it atrocious to see him keeping beggars?"

Then, with an expression of triumphant hate in her face:

"Besides, she is having a nice laugh at him. She has three others on hand. So much the better; and I'll be glad if she eats him up, even to the last farthing!"

Arnoux had, in fact, let himself be made use of by the girl from Bordeaux with the indulgence which characterises senile attachments. His manufactory was no longer going on. The entire state of his affairs was pitiable; so that, in order to set them afloat again, he was at first projecting the establishment of a *café chantant,* at which only patriotic pieces would be sung. With a grant from the Minister, this establishment would become at the same time a focus for the purpose of propagandism and a source of profit. Now that power had been directed into a different channel, the thing was impossible.

His next idea was a big military hat-making business. He lacked capital, however, to give it a start.

He was not more fortunate in his domestic life. Madame Arnoux was less agreeable in manner towards him, sometimes even a little rude. Berthe always took her father's part. This increased the discord, and the house was becoming intolerable. He often set forth in the morning, passed his day in making long excursions out of the city, in order to divert his thoughts, then dined at a rustic tavern, abandoning himself to his reflections.

The prolonged absence of Frederick disturbed his habits. Then he presented himself one afternoon, begged of him to come and see him as in former days, and obtained from him a promise to do so.

Frederick did not feel sufficient courage within him to go back to Madame Arnoux's house. It seemed to him as if he had betrayed her. But this conduct was very pusillanimous. There was no excuse for it. There was only one way of ending the matter, and so, one evening, he set out on his way.

As the rain was falling, he had just turned up the Passage Jouffroy, when, under the light shed from the shop-windows, a fat little man accosted him. Frederick had no difficulty in recognising Compain, that orator whose motion

Frederick had no difficulty in recognising Compain, that orator whose motion had excited so much laughter at the club. He was leaning on the arm of an individual whose head was muffled in a zouave's red cap, with a very long upper lip, a complexion as yellow as an orange, a tuft of beard under his jaw, and big staring eyes listening with wonder.

Compain was, no doubt, proud of him, for he said:

"Let me introduce you to this jolly dog! He is a bootmaker whom I include amongst my friends. Come and let us take something!"

Frederick having thanked him, he immediately thundered against Rateau's motion, which he described as a manœuvre of the aristocrats. In order to put an end to it, it would be necessary to begin '93 over again! Then he enquired about Regimbart and some others, who were also well known, such as Masselin, Sanson, Lecornu, Maréchal, and a certain Deslauriers, who had been implicated in the case of the carbines lately intercepted at Troyes.

All this was new to Frederick. Compain knew nothing more about the subject. He quitted the young man with these words: "You'll come soon, will you not? for you belong to it."

"To what?"

"The calf's head!"

"What calf's head?"

"Ha, you rogue!" returned Compain, giving him a tap on the stomach.

And the two terrorists plunged into a café.

Ten minutes later Frederick was no longer thinking of Deslauriers. He was on the footpath of the Rue de Paradis in front of a house; and he was staring at the light which came from a lamp in the second floor behind a curtain.

At length he ascended the stairs.

"Is Arnoux there?"

The chambermaid answered:

"No; but come in all the same."

And, abruptly opening a door:

"Madame, it is Monsieur Moreau!"

She arose, whiter than the collar round her neck.

"To what do I owe the honour — of a visit — so unexpected?"

"Nothing. The pleasure of seeing old friends once more."

And as he took a seat:

"How is the worthy Arnoux going on?"

"Very well. He has gone out."

"Ah, I understand! still following his old nightly practices. A little distraction!"

"And why not? After a day spent in making calculations, the head needs a rest."

She even praised her husband as a hard-working man. Frederick was irritated at hearing this eulogy; and pointing towards a piece of black cloth with a narrow blue braid which lay on her lap: "What is it you are doing there?"

"A jacket which I am trimming for my daughter."

"Now that you remind me of it, I have not seen her. Where is she, pray?"

"At a boarding-school," was Madame Arnoux's reply.

Tears came into her eyes. She held them back, while she rapidly plied her needle. To keep himself in countenance, he took up a number of *L'Illustration* which had been lying on the table close to where she sat.

"These caricatures of Cham are very funny, are they not?"

"Yes."

Then they relapsed into silence once more.

All of a sudden, a fierce gust of wind shook the window-panes.

"What weather!" said Frederick.

"It was very good of you, indeed, to come here in the midst of this dreadful rain."

"Oh! what do I care about that? I'm not like those whom it prevents, no doubt, from going to keep their appointments."

"What appointments?" she asked with an ingenuous air.

"Don't you remember?"

A shudder ran through her frame and she hung down her head.

He gently laid his hand on her arm.

"I assure you that you have given me great pain."

She replied, with a sort of wail in her voice:

"But I was frightened about my child."

She told him about Eugène's illness, and all the tortures which she had endured on that day.

"Thanks! thanks! I doubt you no longer. I love you as much as ever."

"Ah! no; it is not true!"

"Why so?"

She glanced at him coldly.

"You forget the other! the one you took with you to the races! the woman whose portrait you have — your mistress!"

"Well, yes!" exclaimed Frederick, "I don't deny anything! I am a wretch! Just listen to me!"

If he had done this, it was through despair, as one commits suicide. However, he had made her very unhappy in order to avenge himself on her with his own shame.

"What mental anguish! Do you not realise what it means?"

Madame Arnoux turned away her beautiful face while she held out her hand to him; and they closed their eyes, absorbed in a kind of intoxication that was like a sweet, ceaseless rocking. Then they stood face to face, gazing at one another.

"Could you believe it possible that I no longer loved you?"

She replied in a low voice, full of caressing tenderness:

"No! in spite of everything, I felt at the bottom of my heart that it was impossible, and that one day the obstacle between us two would disappear!"

"So did I; and I was dying to see you again."

"I once passed close to you in the Palais-Royal!"

"Did you really?"

And he spoke to her of the happiness he experienced at coming across her again at the Dambreuses' house.

"But how I hated you that evening as I was leaving the place!"

"Poor boy!"

"My life is so sad!"

"And mine, too! If it were only the vexations, the anxieties, the humiliations, all that I endure as wife and as mother, seeing that one must die, I would not complain; the frightful part of it is my solitude, without anyone."

"But you have me here with you!"

"Oh! yes!"

A sob of deep emotion made her bosom swell. She spread out her arms, and they strained one another, while their lips met in a long kiss.

A creaking sound on the floor not far from them reached their ears. There was a woman standing close to them; it was Rosanette. Madame Arnoux had recognised her. Her eyes, opened to their widest, scanned this woman, full of astonishment and indignation. At length Rosanette said to her: "I have come to see Monsieur Arnoux about a matter of business."

"You see he is not here."

"Ah! that's true," returned the Maréchale. "Your nurse is right! A thousand apologies!"

And turning towards Frederick:

"So here you are — you?"

The familiar tone in which she addressed him, and in her own presence, too, made Madame Arnoux flush as if she had received a slap right across the face.

"I tell you again, he is not here!"

Then the Maréchale, who was looking this way and that, said quietly: "Let us go back together! I have a cab waiting below."

He pretended not to hear.

"Come! let us go!"

"Ah! yes! this is a good opportunity! Go! go!" said Madame Arnoux.

They went off together, and she stooped over the head of the stairs in order to see them once more, and a laugh — piercing, heart-rending, reached them from the place where she stood. Frederick pushed Rosanette into the cab, sat down opposite her, and during the entire drive did not utter a word.

The infamy, which it outraged him to see once more flowing back on him, had been brought about by himself alone. He experienced at the same time the dishonour of a crushing humiliation and the regret caused by the loss of his new-found happiness. Just when, at last, he had it in his grasp, it had for ever more become impossible, and that through the fault of this girl of the town, this harlot. He would have liked to strangle her. He was choking with rage. When they had got into the house he flung his hat on a piece of furniture and tore off his cravat.

"Ha! you have just done a nice thing — confess it!"

She planted herself boldly in front of him.

"Ah! well, what of that? Where's the harm?"

"What! You are playing the spy on me?"

"Is that my fault? Why do you go to amuse yourself with virtuous women?"

"Never mind! I don't wish you to insult them."

"How have I insulted them?"

He had no answer to make to this, and in a more spiteful tone:

"But on the other occasion, at the Champ de Mars — — "

"Ah! you bore us to death with your old women!"

"Wretch!"

He raised his fist.

"Don't kill me! I'm pregnant!"

Frederick staggered back.

"You are lying!"

"Why, just look at me!"

She seized a candlestick, and pointing at her face:

"Don't you recognise the fact there?"

Little yellow spots dotted her skin, which was strangely swollen. Frederick did not deny the evidence. He went to the window, and opened it, took a few steps up and down the room, and then sank into an armchair.

This event was a calamity which, in the first place, put off their rupture, and, in the next place, upset all his plans. The notion of being a father, moreover, appeared to him grotesque, inadmissible. But why? If, in place of the Maréchale — — And his reverie became so deep that he had a kind of hallucination. He saw there, on the carpet, in front of the chimney-piece, a little girl. She resembled Madame Arnoux and himself a little — dark, and yet fair, with two black eyes, very large eyebrows, and a red ribbon in her curling hair. (Oh, how he would have loved her!) And he seemed to hear her voice saying: "Papa! papa!"

Rosanette, who had just undressed herself, came across to him, and noticing a tear in his eyelids, kissed him gravely on the forehead.

He arose, saying:

"By Jove, we mustn't kill this little one!"

Then she talked a lot of nonsense. To be sure, it would be a boy, and its name would be Frederick. It would be necessary for her to begin making its clothes; and, seeing her so happy, a feeling of pity for her took possession of him. As he no longer cherished any anger against her, he desired to know the explanation of the step she had recently taken. She said it was because Mademoiselle Vatnaz had sent her that day a bill which had been protested for some time past; and so she hastened to Arnoux to get the money from him.

"I'd have given it to you!" said Frederick.

"It is a simpler course for me to get over there what belongs to me, and to pay back to the other one her thousand francs."

"Is this really all you owe her?"

She answered:

"Certainly!"

On the following day, at nine o'clock in the evening (the hour specified by the doorkeeper), Frederick repaired to Mademoiselle Vatnaz's residence.

In the anteroom, he jostled against the furniture, which was heaped together. But the sound of voices and of music guided him. He opened a door, and tumbled into the middle of a rout. Standing up before a piano, which a young lady in spectacles was fingering, Delmar, as serious as a pontiff, was declaiming a humanitarian poem on prostitution; and his hollow voice rolled to the accompaniment of the metallic chords. A row of women sat close to the wall, attired, as a rule, in dark colours without neck-bands or sleeves. Five or six men, all people of culture, occupied seats here and there. In an armchair was seated a former writer of fables, a mere wreck now; and the pungent odour of the two lamps was intermingled with the aroma of the chocolate which filled a number of bowls placed on the card-table.

Mademoiselle Vatnaz, with an Oriental shawl thrown over her shoulders, sat at one side of the chimney-piece. Dussardier sat facing her at the other side. He seemed to feel himself in an embarrassing position. Besides, he was rather intimidated by his artistic surroundings. Had the Vatnaz, then, broken off with

Delmar? Perhaps not. However, she seemed jealous of the worthy shopman; and Frederick, having asked to let him exchange a word with her, she made a sign to him to go with them into her own apartment. When the thousand francs were paid down before her, she asked, in addition, for interest.

"'Tisn't worth while," said Dussardier.

"Pray hold your tongue!"

This want of moral courage on the part of so brave a man was agreeable to Frederick as a justification of his own conduct. He took away the bill with him, and never again referred to the scandal at Madame Arnoux's house. But from that time forth he saw clearly all the defects in the Maréchale's character.

She possessed incurable bad taste, incomprehensible laziness, the ignorance of a savage, so much so that she regarded Doctor Derogis as a person of great celebrity, and she felt proud of entertaining himself and his wife, because they were "married people." She lectured with a pedantic air on the affairs of daily life to Mademoiselle Irma, a poor little creature endowed with a little voice, who had as a protector a gentleman "very well off," an ex-clerk in the Custom-house, who had a rare talent for card tricks. Rosanette used to call him "My big Loulou." Frederick could no longer endure the repetition of her stupid words, such as "Some custard," "To Chaillot," "One could never know," etc.; and she persisted in wiping off the dust in the morning from her trinkets with a pair of old white gloves. He was above all disgusted by her treatment of her servant, whose wages were constantly in arrear, and who even lent her money. On the days when they settled their accounts, they used to wrangle like two fish-women; and then, on becoming reconciled, used to embrace each other. It was a relief to him when Madame Dambreuse's evening parties began again.

There, at any rate, he found something to amuse him. She was well versed in the intrigues of society, the changes of ambassadors, the personal character of dressmakers; and, if commonplaces escaped her lips, they did so in such a becoming fashion, that her language might be regarded as the expression of respect for propriety or of polite irony. It was worth while to watch the way in which, in the midst of twenty persons chatting around her, she would, without overlooking any of them, bring about the answers she desired and avoid those that were dangerous. Things of a very simple nature, when related by her, assumed the aspect of confidences. Her slightest smile gave rise to dreams; in short, her charm, like the exquisite scent which she usually carried about with her, was complex and indefinable.

While he was with her, Frederick experienced on each occasion the pleasure of a new discovery, and, nevertheless, he always found her equally serene the next time they met, like the reflection of limpid waters.

But why was there such coldness in her manner towards her niece? At times she even darted strange looks at her.

As soon as the question of marriage was started, she had urged as an objection to it, when discussing the matter with M. Dambreuse, the state of "the dear child's" health, and had at once taken her off to the baths of Balaruc. On her return fresh pretexts were raised by her — that the young man was not in a good position, that this ardent passion did not appear to be a very serious attachment, and that no risk would be run by waiting. Martinon had replied, when the suggestion was made to him, that he would wait. His conduct was sublime. He lectured Frederick. He did more. He enlightened him as to the best means of pleasing Madame Dambreuse, even giving him to understand that he had ascertained from the niece the sentiments of her aunt.

As for M. Dambreuse, far from exhibiting jealousy, he treated his young friend with the utmost attention, consulted him about different things, and even showed anxiety about his future, so that one day, when they were talking about Père Roque, he whispered with a sly air: "You have done well."

And Cécile, Miss John, the servants and the porter, every one of them exercised a fascination over him in this house. He came there every evening, quitting Rosanette for that purpose. Her approaching maternity rendered her graver in manner, and even a little melancholy, as if she were tortured by anxieties. To every question put to her she replied: "You are mistaken; I am quite well."

She had, as a matter of fact, signed five notes in her previous transactions, and not having the courage to tell Frederick after the first had been paid, she had gone back to the abode of Arnoux, who had promised her, in writing, the third part of his profits in the lighting of the towns of Languedoc by gas (a marvellous undertaking!), while requesting her not to make use of this letter at the meeting of shareholders. The meeting was put off from week to week.

Meanwhile the Maréchale wanted money. She would have died sooner than ask Frederick for any. She did not wish to get it from him; it would have spoiled their love. He contributed a great deal to the household expenses; but a little carriage, which he hired by the month, and other sacrifices, which were indispensable since he had begun to visit the Dambreuses, prevented him from doing more for his mistress. On two or three occasions, when he came back to the house at a different hour from his usual time, he fancied he could see men's backs disappearing behind the door, and she often went out without wishing to state where she was going. Frederick did not attempt to enquire minutely into these matters. One of these days he would make up his mind as to his future course of action. He dreamed of another life which would be more amusing and more noble. It was the fact that he had such an ideal before his mind that more noble. It was the fact that he had such an ideal before his mind that rendered him indulgent towards the Dambreuse mansion.

It was an establishment in the neighbourhood of the Rue de Poitiers. There he met the great M. A., the illustrious B., the profound C., the eloquent Z., the immense Y., the old terrors of the Left Centre, the paladins of the Right, the burgraves of the golden mean; the eternal good old men of the comedy. He was astonished at their abominable style of talking, their meannesses, their rancours, their dishonesty — all these personages, after voting for the Constitution, now striving to destroy it; and they got into a state of great agitation, and launched forth manifestoes, pamphlets, and biographies. Hussonnet's biography of Fumichon was a masterpiece. Nonancourt devoted himself to the work of propagandism in the country districts; M. de Grémonville worked up the clergy; and Martinon brought together the young men of the wealthy class. Each exerted himself according to his resources, including Cisy himself. With his thoughts now all day long absorbed in matters of grave moment, he kept making excursions here and there in a cab in the interests of the party.

M. Dambreuse, like a barometer, constantly gave expression to its latest variation. Lamartine could not be alluded to without eliciting from this gentleman the quotation of a famous phrase of the man of the people: "Enough of poetry!" Cavaignac was, from this time forth, nothing better in his eyes than a traitor. The President, whom he had admired for a period of three months, was beginning to fall off in his esteem (as he did not appear to exhibit the "necessary energy"); and, as he always wanted a savior, his gratitude, since the affair of the Conservatoire, belonged to Changarnier: "Thank God for Changarnier.... Let us place our reliance on Changarnier.... Oh, there's nothing to fear as long as Changarnier — — "

M. Thiers was praised, above all, for his volume against Socialism, in which he showed that he was quite as much of a thinker as a writer. There was an immense laugh at Pierre Leroux, who had quoted passages from the philosophers in the Chamber. Jokes were made about the phalansterian tail. The "Market of Ideas" came in for a meed of applause, and its authors were compared to Aristophanes. Frederick patronised the work as well as the rest.

Political verbiage and good living had an enervating effect on his morality. Mediocre in capacity as these persons appeared to him, he felt proud of knowing them, and internally longed for the respectability that attached to a wealthy citizen. A mistress like Madame Dambreuse would give him a position.

He set about taking the necessary steps for achieving that object.

He made it his business to cross her path, did not fail to go and greet her with a bow in her box at the theatre, and, being aware of the hours when she went to church, he would plant himself behind a pillar in a melancholy attitude. There church, he would plant himself behind a pillar in a melancholy attitude. There was a continual interchange of little notes between them with regard to curiosities to which they drew each other's attention, preparations for a concert, or the borrowing of books or reviews. In addition to his visit each night, he sometimes made a call just as the day was closing; and he experienced a progressive succession of pleasures in passing through the large front entrance, through the courtyard, through the anteroom, and through the two reception-rooms. Finally, he reached her boudoir, which was as quiet as a tomb, as warm as an alcove, and in which one jostled against the upholstered edging of furniture in the midst of objects of every sort placed here and there — chiffoniers, screens, bowls, and trays made of lacquer, or shell, or ivory, or malachite, expensive trifles, to which fresh additions were frequently made. Amongst single specimens of these rarities might be noticed three Etretat rollers which were used as paper-presses, and a Frisian cap hung from a Chinese folding-screen. Nevertheless, there was a harmony between all these things, and one was even impressed by the noble aspect of the entire place, which was, no doubt, due to the loftiness of the ceiling, the richness of the portières, and the long silk fringes that floated over the gold legs of the stools.

She nearly always sat on a little sofa, close to the flower-stand, which garnished the recess of the window. Frederick, seating himself on the edge of a large wheeled ottoman, addressed to her compliments of the most appropriate kind that he could conceive; and she looked at him, with her head a little on one side, and a smile playing round her mouth.

He read for her pieces of poetry, into which he threw his whole soul in order to move her and excite her admiration. She would now and then interrupt him with a disparaging remark or a practical observation; and their conversation relapsed incessantly into the eternal question of Love. They discussed with each other what were the circumstances that produced it, whether women felt it more than men, and what was the difference between them on that point. Frederick tried to express his opinion, and, at the same time, to avoid anything like coarseness or insipidity. This became at length a species of contest between them, sometimes agreeable and at other times tedious.

Whilst at her side, he did not experience that ravishment of his entire being which drew him towards Madame Arnoux, nor the feeling of voluptuous delight with which Rosanette had, at first, inspired him. But he felt a passion for her as a thing that was abnormal and difficult of attainment, because she was of aristocratic rank, because she was wealthy, because she was a devotee — imagining that she had a delicacy of sentiment as rare as the lace she wore, together with amulets on her skin, and modest instincts even in her depravity.

He made a certain use of his old passion for Madame Arnoux, uttering in his

He made a certain use of his old passion for Madame Arnoux, uttering in his new flame's hearing all those amorous sentiments which the other had caused him to feel in downright earnest, and pretending that it was Madame Dambreuse herself who had occasioned them. She received these avowals like one accustomed to such things, and, without giving him a formal repulse, did not yield in the slightest degree; and he came no nearer to seducing her than Martinon did to getting married. In order to bring matters to an end with her niece's suitor, she accused him of having money for his object, and even begged of her husband to put the matter to the test. M. Dambreuse then declared to the young man that Cécile, being the orphan child of poor parents, had neither expectations nor a dowry.

Martinon, not believing that this was true, or feeling that he had gone too far to draw back, or through one of those outbursts of idiotic infatuation which may be described as acts of genius, replied that his patrimony, amounting to fifteen thousand francs a year, would be sufficient for them. The banker was touched by this unexpected display of disinterestedness. He promised the young man a tax-collectorship, undertaking to obtain the post for him; and in the month of May, 1850, Martinon married Mademoiselle Cécile. There was no ball to celebrate the event. The young people started the same evening for Italy. Frederick came next day to pay a visit to Madame Dambreuse. She appeared to him paler than usual. She sharply contradicted him about two or three matters of no importance. However, she went on to observe, all men were egoists.

There were, however, some devoted men, though he might happen himself to be the only one.

"Pooh, pooh! you're just like the rest of them!"

Her eyelids were red; she had been weeping.

Then, forcing a smile:

"Pardon me; I am in the wrong. Sad thoughts have taken possession of my mind."

He could not understand what she meant to convey by the last words.

"No matter! she is not so hard to overcome as I imagined," he thought.

She rang for a glass of water, drank a mouthful of it, sent it away again, and then began to complain of the wretched way in which her servants attended on her. In order to amuse her, he offered to become her servant himself, pretending that he knew how to hand round plates, dust furniture, and announce visitors — in fact, to do the duties of a *valet-de-chambre*, or, rather, of a running-footman, although the latter was now out of fashion. He would have liked to cling on behind her carriage with a hat adorned with cock's feathers.

"And how I would follow you with majestic stride, carrying your pug on my arm!"

"You are facetious," said Madame Dambreuse.

Was it not a piece of folly, he returned, to take everything seriously? There were enough of miseries in the world without creating fresh ones. Nothing was worth the cost of a single pang. Madame Dambreuse raised her eyelids with a sort of vague approval.

This agreement in their views of life impelled Frederick to take a bolder course. His former miscalculations now gave him insight. He went on: "Our grandsires lived better. Why not obey the impulse that urges us onward?" After all, love was not a thing of such importance in itself.

"But what you have just said is immoral!"

She had resumed her seat on the little sofa. He sat down at the side of it, near her feet.

"Don't you see that I am lying! For in order to please women, one must exhibit the thoughtlessness of a buffoon or all the wild passion of tragedy! They only laugh at us when we simply tell them that we love them! For my part, I consider those hyperbolical phrases which tickle their fancy a profanation of true love, so that it is no longer possible to give expression to it, especially when addressing women who possess more than ordinary intelligence."

She gazed at him from under her drooping eyelids. He lowered his voice, while he bent his head closer to her face.

"Yes! you frighten me! Perhaps I am offending you? Forgive me! I did not intend to say all that I have said! 'Tis not my fault! You are so beautiful!"

Madame Dambreuse closed her eyes, and he was astonished at his easy victory. The tall trees in the clouds streaked the sky with long strips of red, and on every side there seemed to be a suspension of vital movements. Then he recalled to mind, in a confused sort of way, evenings just the same as this, filled with the same unbroken silence. Where was it that he had known them?

He sank upon his knees, seized her hand, and swore that he would love her for ever. Then, as he was leaving her, she beckoned to him to come back, and said to him in a low tone: "Come by-and-by and dine with us! We'll be all alone!"

It seemed to Frederick, as he descended the stairs, that he had become a different man, that he was surrounded by the balmy temperature of hot-houses, and that he was beyond all question entering into the higher sphere of patrician adulteries and lofty intrigues. In order to occupy the first rank there all he required was a woman of this stamp. Greedy, no doubt, of power and of success, and married to a man of inferior calibre, for whom she had done prodigious services, she longed for some one of ability in order to be his guide. Nothing was impossible now. He felt himself capable of riding two hundred leagues on horseback, of travelling for several nights in succession without fatigue. His heart overflowed with pride.

Just in front of him, on the footpath, a man wrapped in a seedy overcoat was walking, with downcast eyes, and with such an air of dejection that Frederick, as he passed, turned aside to have a better look at him. The other raised his head. It was Deslauriers. He hesitated. Frederick fell upon his neck.

"Ah! my poor old friend! What! 'tis you!"

And he dragged Deslauriers into his house, at the same time asking his friend a heap of questions.

Ledru-Rollin's ex-commissioner commenced by describing the tortures to which he had been subjected. As he preached fraternity to the Conservatives, and respect for the laws to the Socialists, the former tried to shoot him, and the latter brought cords to hang him with. After June he had been brutally dismissed. He found himself involved in a charge of conspiracy — that which was connected with the seizure of arms at Troyes. He had subsequently been released for want of evidence to sustain the charge. Then the acting committee had sent him to London, where his ears had been boxed in the very middle of a banquet at which he and his colleagues were being entertained. On his return to Paris — — "Why did you not call here, then, to see me?"

"You were always out! Your porter had mysterious airs — I did not know what to think; and, in the next place, I had no desire to reappear before you in the character of a defeated man."

He had knocked at the portals of Democracy, offering to serve it with his pen, with his tongue, with all his energies. He had been everywhere repelled. They had mistrusted him; and he had sold his watch, his bookcase, and even his linen.

"It would be much better to be breaking one's back on the pontoons of Belle Isle with Sénécal!"

Frederick, who had been fastening his cravat, did not appear to be much affected by this news.

"Ha! so he is transported, this good Sénécal?"

Deslauriers replied, while he surveyed the walls with an envious air: "Not everybody has your luck!"

"Excuse me," said Frederick, without noticing the allusion to his own circumstances, "but I am dining in the city. We must get you something to eat; order whatever you like. Take even my bed!"

This cordial reception dissipated Deslauriers' bitterness.

"Your bed? But that might inconvenience you!"

"Oh, no! I have others!"

"Oh, all right!" returned the advocate, with a laugh. "Pray, where are you dining?"

"At Madame Dambreuse's."

"Can it be that you are — perhaps — — ?"

"You are too inquisitive," said Frederick, with a smile, which confirmed this hypothesis.

Then, after a glance at the clock, he resumed his seat.

"That's how it is! and we mustn't despair, my ex-defender of the people!"

"Oh, pardon me; let others bother themselves about the people henceforth!"

The advocate detested the working-men, because he had suffered so much on their account in his province, a coal-mining district. Every pit had appointed a provisional government, from which he received orders.

"Besides, their conduct has been everywhere charming — at Lyons, at Lille, at Havre, at Paris! For, in imitation of the manufacturers, who would fain exclude the products of the foreigner, these gentlemen call on us to banish the English, German, Belgian, and Savoyard workmen. As for their intelligence, what was the use of that precious trades' union of theirs which they established under the Restoration? In 1830 they joined the National Guard, without having the common sense to get the upper hand of it. Is it not the fact that, since the morning when 1848 dawned, the various trade-bodies had not reappeared with their banners? They have even demanded popular representatives for themselves, who are not to open their lips except on their own behalf. All this is the same as if the deputies who represent beetroot were to concern themselves about nothing save beetroot. Ah! I've had enough of these dodgers who in turn prostrate themselves before the scaffold of Robespierre, the boots of the Emperor, and the umbrella of Louis Philippe — a rabble who always yield allegiance to the person that flings bread into their mouths. They are always crying out against the venality of Talleyrand and Mirabeau; but the messenger down below there would sell his country for fifty centimes if they'd only promise to fix a tariff of three francs on his walk. Ah! what a wretched state of affairs! We ought to set the four corners of Europe on fire!"

Frederick said in reply:

"The spark is what you lack! You were simply a lot of shopboys, and even the best of you were nothing better than penniless students. As for the workmen, they may well complain; for, if you except a million taken out of the civil list, and of which you made a grant to them with the meanest expressions of flattery, you have done nothing for them, save to talk in stilted phrases! The workman's certificate remains in the hands of the employer, and the person who is paid wages remains (even in the eye of the law), the inferior of his master, because his word is not believed. In short, the Republic seems to me a worn-out institution. Who knows? Perhaps Progress can be realised only through an aristocracy or through a single man? The initiative always comes from the top, and whatever may be the people's pretensions, they are lower than those placed over them!"

"That may be true," said Deslauriers.

According to Frederick, the vast majority of citizens aimed only at a life of peace (he had been improved by his visits to the Dambreuses), and the chances were all on the side of the Conservatives. That party, however, was lacking in new men.

"If you came forward, I am sure — — "

He did not finish the sentence. Deslauriers saw what Frederick meant, and passed his two hands over his head; then, all of a sudden: "But what about yourself? Is there anything to prevent you from doing it? Why would you not be a deputy?"

In consequence of a double election there was in the Aube a vacancy for a candidate. M. Dambreuse, who had been re-elected as a member of the Legislative Assembly, belonged to a different arrondissement.

"Do you wish me to interest myself on your behalf?" He was acquainted with many publicans, schoolmasters, doctors, notaries' clerks and their masters. "Besides, you can make the peasants believe anything you like!"

Frederick felt his ambition rekindling.

Deslauriers added:

"You would find no trouble in getting a situation for me in Paris."

"Oh! it would not be hard to manage it through Monsieur Dambreuse."

"As we happened to have been talking just now about coal-mines," the advocate went on, "what has become of his big company? This is the sort of employment that would suit me, and I could make myself useful to them while preserving my own independence."

Frederick promised that he would introduce him to the banker before three days had passed.

The dinner, which he enjoyed alone with Madame Dambreuse, was a delightful affair. She sat facing him with a smile on her countenance at the opposite side of the table, whereon was placed a basket of flowers, while a lamp suspended above their heads shed its light on the scene; and, as the window was open, they could see the stars. They talked very little, distrusting themselves, no doubt; but, the moment the servants had turned their backs, they sent across a kiss to one another from the tips of their lips. He told her about his idea of becoming a candidate. She approved of the project, promising even to get M. Dambreuse to use every effort on his behalf.

As the evening advanced, some of her friends presented themselves for the purpose of congratulating her, and, at the same time, expressing sympathy with her; she must be so much pained at the loss of her niece. Besides, it was all very well for newly-married people to go on a trip; by-and-by would come incumbrances, children. But really, Italy did not realise one's expectations. They had not as yet passed the age of illusions; and, in the next place, the honeymoon made everything look beautiful. The last two who remained behind were M. de Grémonville and Frederick. The diplomatist was not inclined to leave. At last he departed at midnight. Madame Dambreuse beckoned to Frederick to go with him, and thanked him for this compliance with her wishes by giving him a gentle pressure with her hand more delightful than anything that had gone before.

The Maréchale uttered an exclamation of joy on seeing him again. She had been waiting for him for the last five hours. He gave as an excuse for the delay an indispensable step which he had to take in the interests of Deslauriers. His face wore a look of triumph, and was surrounded by an aureola which dazzled Rosanette.

"'Tis perhaps on account of your black coat, which fits you well; but I have never seen you look so handsome! How handsome you are!"

In a transport of tenderness, she made a vow internally never again to belong to any other man, no matter what might be the consequence, even if she were to die of want.

Her pretty eyes sparkled with such intense passion that Frederick took her upon his knees and said to himself: "What a rascally part I am playing!" while admiring his own perversity.

CHAPTER XVII.

A Strange Betrothal.

M. Dambreuse, when Deslauriers presented himself at his house, was thinking of reviving his great coal-mining speculation. But this fusion of all the companies into one was looked upon unfavourably; there was an outcry against monopolies, as if immense capital were not needed for carrying out enterprises of this kind!

Deslauriers, who had read for the purpose the work of Gobet and the articles of M. Chappe in the *Journal des Mines*, understood the question perfectly. He demonstrated that the law of 1810 established for the benefit of the grantee a privilege which could not be transferred. Besides, a democratic colour might be given to the undertaking. To interfere with the formation of coal-mining companies was against the principle even of association.

M. Dambreuse intrusted to him some notes for the purpose of drawing up a memorandum. As for the way in which he meant to pay for the work, he was all the more profuse in his promises from the fact that they were not very definite.

Deslauriers called again at Frederick's house, and gave him an account of the interview. Moreover, he had caught a glimpse of Madame Dambreuse at the bottom of the stairs, just as he was going out.

"I wish you joy — upon my soul, I do!"

Then they had a chat about the election. There was something to be devised in order to carry it.

Three days later Deslauriers reappeared with a sheet of paper covered with handwriting, intended for the newspapers, and which was nothing less than a friendly letter from M. Dambreuse, expressing approval of their friend's candidature. Supported by a Conservative and praised by a Red, he ought to succeed. How was it that the capitalist had put his signature to such a lucubration? The advocate had, of his own motion, and without the least appearance of embarrassment, gone and shown it to Madame Dambreuse, who, thinking it quite appropriate, had taken the rest of the business on her own shoulders.

Frederick was astonished at this proceeding. Nevertheless, he approved of it; then, as Deslauriers was to have an interview with M. Roque, his friend explained to him how he stood with regard to Louise.

"Tell them anything you like; that my affairs are in an unsettled state, that I am putting them in order. She is young enough to wait!"

am putting them in order. She is young enough to wait."

Deslauriers set forth, and Frederick looked upon himself as a very able man. He experienced, moreover, a feeling of gratification, a profound satisfaction. His delight at being the possessor of a rich woman was not spoiled by any contrast. The sentiment harmonised with the surroundings. His life now would be full of joy in every sense.

Perhaps the most delicious sensation of all was to gaze at Madame Dambreuse in the midst of a number of other ladies in her drawing-room. The propriety of her manners made him dream of other attitudes. While she was talking in a tone of coldness, he would recall to mind the loving words which she had murmured in his ear. All the respect which he felt for her virtue gave him a thrill of pleasure, as if it were a homage which was reflected back on himself; and at times he felt a longing to exclaim:

"But I know her better than you! She is mine!"

It was not long ere their relations came to be socially recognised as an established fact. Madame Dambreuse, during the whole winter, brought Frederick with her into fashionable society.

He nearly always arrived before her; and he watched her as she entered the house they were visiting with her arms uncovered, a fan in her hand, and pearls in her hair. She would pause on the threshold (the lintel of the door formed a framework round her head), and she would open and shut her eyes with a certain air of indecision, in order to see whether he was there.

She drove him back in her carriage; the rain lashed the carriage-blinds. The passers-by seemed merely shadows wavering in the mire of the street; and, pressed close to each other, they observed all these things vaguely with a calm disdain. Under various pretexts, he would linger in her room for an entire additional hour.

It was chiefly through a feeling of ennui that Madame Dambreuse had yielded. But this latest experience was not to be wasted. She desired to give herself up to an absorbing passion; and so she began to heap on his head adulations and caresses.

She sent him flowers; she had an upholstered chair made for him. She made presents to him of a cigar-holder, an inkstand, a thousand little things for daily use, so that every act of his life should recall her to his memory. These kind attentions charmed him at first, and in a little while appeared to him very simple.

She would step into a cab, get rid of it at the opening into a by-way, and come out at the other end; and then, gliding along by the walls, with a double veil on her face, she would reach the street where Frederick, who had been keeping watch, would take her arm quickly to lead her towards his house. His two men-servants would have gone out for a walk, and the doorkeeper would have been servants would have gone out for a walk, and the doorkeeper would have been sent on some errand. She would throw a glance around her — nothing to fear! — and she would breathe forth the sigh of an exile who beholds his country once more. Their good fortune emboldened them. Their appointments became more frequent. One evening, she even presented herself, all of a sudden, in full ball-dress. These surprises might have perilous consequences. He reproached her for her lack of prudence. Nevertheless, he was not taken with her appearance. The low body of her dress exposed her thinness too freely.

It was then that he discovered what had hitherto been hidden from him — the disillusion of his senses. None the less did he make professions of ardent love; but in order to call up such emotions he found it necessary to evoke the images of Rosanette and Madame Arnoux.

This sentimental atrophy left his intellect entirely untrammelled; and he was more ambitious than ever of attaining a high position in society. Inasmuch as he had such a stepping-stone, the very least he could do was to make use of it.

One morning, about the middle of January, Sénécal entered his study, and in response to his exclamation of astonishment, announced that he was Deslauriers' secretary. He even brought Frederick a letter. It contained good news, and yet it took him to task for his negligence; he would have to come down to the scene of action at once. The future deputy said he would set out on his way there in two days' time.

Sénécal gave no opinion on the other's merits as a candidate. He spoke about his own concerns and about the affairs of the country.

Miserable as the state of things happened to be, it gave him pleasure, for they were advancing in the direction of Communism. In the first place, the Administration led towards it of its own accord, since every day a greater number of things were controlled by the Government. As for Property, the Constitution of '48, in spite of its weaknesses, had not spared it. The State might, in the name of public utility, henceforth take whatever it thought would suit it. Sénécal declared himself in favour of authority; and Frederick noticed in his remarks the exaggeration which characterised what he had said himself to Deslauriers. The Republican even inveighed against the masses for their inadequacy.

"Robespierre, by upholding the right of the minority, had brought Louis XVI. to acknowledge the National Convention, and saved the people. Things were rendered legitimate by the end towards which they were directed. A dictatorship is sometimes indispensable. Long live tyranny, provided that the tyrant promotes the public welfare!"

Their discussion lasted a long time; and, as he was taking his departure, Sénécal confessed (perhaps it was the real object of his visit) that Deslauriers was getting very impatient at M. Dambreuse's silence.

But M. Dambreuse was ill. Frederick saw him every day, his character of an intimate friend enabling him to obtain admission to the invalid's bedside.

General Changarnier's recall had powerfully affected the capitalist's mind. He was, on the evening of the occurrence, seized with a burning sensation in his chest, together with an oppression that prevented him from lying down. The application of leeches gave him immediate relief. The dry cough disappeared; the respiration became more easy; and, eight days later, he said, while swallowing some broth:

"Ah! I'm better now — but I was near going on the last long journey!"

"Not without me!" exclaimed Madame Dambreuse, intending by this remark to convey that she would not be able to outlive him.

Instead of replying, he cast upon her and upon her lover a singular smile, in which there was at the same time resignation, indulgence, irony, and even, as it were, a touch of humour, a sort of secret satisfaction almost amounting to actual joy.

Frederick wished to start for Nogent. Madame Dambreuse objected to this; and he unpacked and re-packed his luggage by turns according to the changes in the invalid's condition.

Suddenly M. Dambreuse spat forth considerable blood. The "princes of medical science," on being consulted, could not think of any fresh remedy. His legs swelled, and his weakness increased. He had several times evinced a desire to see Cécile, who was at the other end of France with her husband, now a collector of taxes, a position to which he had been appointed a month ago. M. Dambreuse gave express orders to send for her. Madame Dambreuse wrote three letters, which she showed him.

Without trusting him even to the care of the nun, she did not leave him for one second, and no longer went to bed. The ladies who had their names entered at the door-lodge made enquiries about her with feelings of admiration, and the passers-by were filled with respect on seeing the quantity of straw which was placed in the street under the windows.

On the 12th of February, at five o'clock, a frightful hæmoptysis came on. The doctor who had charge of him pointed out that the case had assumed a dangerous aspect. They sent in hot haste for a priest.

While M. Dambreuse was making his confession, Madame kept gazing curiously at him some distance away. After this, the young doctor applied a blister, and awaited the result.

The flame of the lamps, obscured by some of the furniture, lighted up the apartment in an irregular fashion. Frederick and Madame Dambreuse, at the foot of the bed, watched the dying man. In the recess of a window the priest and the doctor chatted in low tones. The good sister on her knees kept mumbling prayers.

At last came a rattling in the throat. The hands grew cold; the face began to turn white. Now and then he drew a deep breath all of a sudden; but gradually this became rarer and rarer. Two or three confused words escaped him. He turned his eyes upward, and at the same moment his respiration became so feeble that it was almost imperceptible. Then his head sank on one side on the pillow.

For a minute, all present remained motionless.

Madame Dambreuse advanced towards the dead body of her husband, and, without an effort — with the unaffectedness of one discharging a duty — she drew down the eyelids. Then she spread out her two arms, her figure writhing as if in a spasm of repressed despair, and quitted the room, supported by the physician and the nun.

A quarter of an hour afterwards, Frederick made his way up to her apartment.

There was in it an indefinable odour, emanating from some delicate substances with which it was filled. In the middle of the bed lay a black dress, which formed a glaring contrast with the pink coverlet.

Madame Dambreuse was standing at the corner of the mantelpiece. Without attributing to her any passionate regret, he thought she looked a little sad; and, in a mournful voice, he said:

"You are enduring pain?"

"I? No — not at all."

As she turned around, her eyes fell on the dress, which she inspected. Then she told him not to stand on ceremony.

"Smoke, if you like! You can make yourself at home with me!"

And, with a great sigh:

"Ah! Blessed Virgin! — what a riddance!"

Frederick was astonished at this exclamation. He replied, as he kissed her hand:

"All the same, you were free!"

This allusion to the facility with which the intrigue between them had been carried on hurt Madame Dambreuse.

"Ah! you don't know the services that I did for him, or the misery in which I lived!"

"What!"

"Why, certainly! Was it a safe thing to have always near him that bastard, a daughter, whom he introduced into the house at the end of five years of married life, and who, were it not for me, might have led him into some act of folly?"

Then she explained how her affairs stood. The arrangement on the occasion of her marriage was that the property of each party should be separate.[I] The amount of her inheritance was three hundred thousand francs. M. Dambreuse had guaranteed by the marriage contract that in the event of her surviving him, she should have an income of fifteen thousand francs a year, together with the ownership of the mansion. But a short time afterwards he had made a will by which he gave her all he possessed, and this she estimated, so far as it was possible to ascertain just at present, at over three millions.

Frederick opened his eyes widely.

"It was worth the trouble, wasn't it? However, I contributed to it! It was my own property I was protecting; Cécile would have unjustly robbed me of it."

"Why did she not come to see her father?"

As he asked her this question Madame Dambreuse eyed him attentively; then, in a dry tone:

"I haven't the least idea! Want of heart, probably! Oh! I know what she is! And for that reason she won't get a farthing from me!"

She had not been very troublesome, he pointed out; at any rate, since her marriage.

"Ha! her marriage!" said Madame Dambreuse, with a sneer. And she grudged having treated only too well this stupid creature, who was jealous, self-interested, and hypocritical. "All the faults of her father!" She disparaged him more and more. There was never a person with such profound duplicity, and with such a merciless disposition into the bargain, as hard as a stone — "a bad man, a bad man!"

Even the wisest people fall into errors. Madame Dambreuse had just made a serious one through this overflow of hatred on her part. Frederick, sitting opposite her in an easy chair, was reflecting deeply, scandalised by the language she had used.

She arose and knelt down beside him.

"To be with you is the only real pleasure! You are the only one I love!"

While she gazed at him her heart softened, a nervous reaction brought tears into her eyes, and she murmured:

"Will you marry me?"

At first he thought he had not understood what she meant. He was stunned by this wealth.

She repeated in a louder tone:

"Will you marry me?"

At last he said with a smile:

"Have you any doubt about it?"

Then the thought forced itself on his mind that his conduct was infamous, and in order to make a kind of reparation to the dead man, he offered to watch by his side himself. But, feeling ashamed of this pious sentiment, he added, in a flippant tone:

"It would be perhaps more seemly."

"Perhaps so, indeed," she said, "on account of the servants."

The bed had been drawn completely out of the alcove. The nun was near the foot of it, and at the head of it sat a priest, a different one, a tall, spare man, with the look of a fanatical Spaniard. On the night-table, covered with a white cloth, three wax-tapers were burning.

Frederick took a chair, and gazed at the corpse.

The face was as yellow as straw. At the corners of the mouth there were traces of blood-stained foam. A silk handkerchief was tied around the skull, and on the breast, covered with a knitted waistcoat, lay a silver crucifix between the two crossed hands.

It was over, this life full of anxieties! How many journeys had he not made to various places? How many rows of figures had he not piled together? How many speculations had he not hatched? How many reports had he not heard read? What quackeries, what smiles and curvets! For he had acclaimed Napoléon, the Cossacks, Louis XVIII., 1830, the working-men, every *régime*, loving power so dearly that he would have paid in order to have the opportunity of selling himself.

But he had left behind him the estate of La Fortelle, three factories in Picardy, the woods of Crancé in the Yonne, a farm near Orléans, and a great deal of personal property in the form of bills and papers.

Frederick thus made an estimate of her fortune; and it would soon, nevertheless, belong to him! First of all, he thought of "what people would say"; then he asked himself what present he ought to make to his mother, and he was concerned about his future equipages, and about employing an old coachman belonging to his own family as the doorkeeper. Of course, the livery would not be the same. He would convert the large reception-room into his own study. There was nothing to prevent him by knocking down three walls from setting up a picture-gallery on the second-floor. Perhaps there might be an opportunity for introducing into the lower portion of the house a hall for Turkish baths. As for M. Dambreuse's office, a disagreeable spot, what use could he make of it?

These reflections were from time to time rudely interrupted by the sounds made by the priest in blowing his nose, or by the good sister in settling the fire.

But the actual facts showed that his thoughts rested on a solid foundation. The corpse was there. The eyelids had reopened, and the pupils, although steeped in clammy gloom, had an enigmatic, intolerable expression.

Frederick fancied that he saw there a judgment directed against himself, and he felt almost a sort of remorse, for he had never any complaint to make against this man, who, on the contrary — —

"Come, now! an old wretch!" and he looked at the dead man more closely in order to strengthen his mind, mentally addressing him thus:

"Well, what? Have I killed you?"

Meanwhile, the priest read his breviary; the nun, who sat motionless, had fallen asleep. The wicks of the three wax-tapers had grown longer.

For two hours could be heard the heavy rolling of carts making their way to the markets. The window-panes began to admit streaks of white. A cab passed; then a group of donkeys went trotting over the pavement. Then came strokes of hammers, cries of itinerant vendors of wood and blasts of horns. Already every other sound was blended with the great voice of awakening Paris.

Frederick went out to perform the duties assigned to him. He first repaired to the Mayor's office to make the necessary declaration; then, when the medical officer had given him a certificate of death, he called a second time at the municipal buildings in order to name the cemetery which the family had selected, and to make arrangements for the funeral ceremonies.

The clerk in the office showed him a plan which indicated the mode of interment adopted for the various classes, and a programme giving full particulars with regard to the spectacular portion of the funeral. Would he like to have an open funeral-car or a hearse with plumes, plaits on the horses, and aigrettes on the footmen, initials or a coat-of-arms, funeral-lamps, a man to display the family distinctions? and what number of carriages would he require?

Frederick did not economise in the slightest degree. Madame Dambreuse was determined to spare no expense.

After this he made his way to the church.

The curate who had charge of burials found fault with the waste of money on funeral pomps. For instance, the officer for the display of armorial distinctions was really useless. It would be far better to have a goodly display of wax-tapers. A low mass accompanied by music would be appropriate.

Frederick gave written directions to have everything that was agreed upon carried out, with a joint undertaking to defray all the expenses.

He went next to the Hôtel de Ville to purchase a piece of ground. A grant of a piece which was two metres in length and one in breadth[J] cost five hundred francs. Did he want a grant for fifty years or forever?

"Oh, forever!" said Frederick.

He took the whole thing seriously and got into a state of intense anxiety about

He took the whole thing seriously and got into a state of intense anxiety about it. In the courtyard of the mansion a marble-cutter was waiting to show him estimates and plans of Greek, Egyptian, and Moorish tombs; but the family architect had already been in consultation with Madame; and on the table in the vestibule there were all sorts of prospectuses with reference to the cleaning of mattresses, the disinfection of rooms, and the various processes of embalming.

After dining, he went back to the tailor's shop to order mourning for the servants; and he had still to discharge another function, for the gloves that he had ordered were of beaver, whereas the right kind for a funeral were floss-silk.

When he arrived next morning, at ten o'clock, the large reception-room was filled with people, and nearly everyone said, on encountering the others, in a melancholy tone:

"It is only a month ago since I saw him! Good heavens! it will be the same way with us all!"

"Yes; but let us try to keep it as far away from us as possible!"

Then there were little smiles of satisfaction; and they even engaged in conversations entirely unsuited to the occasion. At length, the master of the ceremonies, in a black coat in the French fashion and short breeches, with a cloak, cambric mourning-bands, a long sword by his side, and a three-cornered hat under his arm, gave utterance, with a bow, to the customary words:

"Messieurs, when it shall be your pleasure."

The funeral started. It was the market-day for flowers on the Place de la Madeleine. It was a fine day with brilliant sunshine; and the breeze, which shook the canvas tents, a little swelled at the edges the enormous black cloth which was hung over the church-gate. The escutcheon of M. Dambreuse, which covered a square piece of velvet, was repeated there three times. It was: *Sable, with an arm sinister or and a clenched hand with a glove argent*; with the coronet of a count, and this device: *By every path*.

The bearers lifted the heavy coffin to the top of the staircase, and they entered the building. The six chapels, the hemicycles, and the seats were hung with black. The catafalque at the end of the choir formed, with its large wax-tapers, a single focus of yellow lights. At the two corners, over the candelabra, flames of spirits of wine were burning.

The persons of highest rank took up their position in the sanctuary, and the rest in the nave; and then the Office for the Dead began.

With the exception of a few, the religious ignorance of all was so profound that the master of the ceremonies had, from time to time, to make signs to them to rise, to kneel, or to resume their seats. The organ and the two double-basses could be heard alternately with the voices. In the intervals of silence, the only sounds that reached the ear were the mumblings of the priest at the altar; then the sounds that reached the ear were the mumblings of the priest at the altar; then the music and the chanting went on again.

The light of day shone dimly through the three cupolas, but the open door let in, as it were, a stream of white radiance, which, entering in a horizontal direction, fell on every uncovered head; and in the air, half-way towards the ceiling of the church, floated a shadow, which was penetrated by the reflection of the gildings that decorated the ribbing of the pendentives and the foliage of the capitals.

Frederick, in order to distract his attention, listened to the *Dies iræ*. He gazed at those around him, or tried to catch a glimpse of the pictures hanging too far above his head, wherein the life of the Magdalen was represented. Luckily, Pellerin came to sit down beside him, and immediately plunged into a long dissertation on the subject of frescoes. The bell began to toll. They left the church.

The hearse, adorned with hanging draperies and tall plumes, set out for Père-Lachaise drawn by four black horses, with their manes plaited, their heads decked with tufts of feathers, and with large trappings embroidered with silver flowing down to their shoes. The driver of the vehicle, in Hessian boots, wore a three-cornered hat with a long piece of crape falling down from it. The cords were held by four personages: a questor of the Chamber of Deputies, a member of the General Council of the Aube, a delegate from the coal-mining company, and Fumichon, as a friend. The carriage of the deceased and a dozen mourning-coaches followed. The persons attending at the funeral came in the rear, filling up the middle of the boulevard.

The passers-by stopped to look at the mournful procession. Women, with their brats in their arms, got up on chairs, and people, who had been drinking glasses of beer in the cafés, presented themselves at the windows with billiard-cues in their hands.

The way was long, and, as at formal meals at which people are at first reserved and then expansive, the general deportment speedily relaxed. They talked of nothing but the refusal of an allowance by the Chamber to the President. M. Piscatory had shown himself harsh; Montalembert had been "magnificent, as usual," and MM. Chamballe, Pidoux, Creton, in short, the entire committee would be compelled perhaps to follow the advice of MM. Quentin-Bauchard and Dufour.

This conversation was continued as they passed through the Rue de la Roquette, with shops on each side, in which could be seen only chains of coloured glass and black circular tablets covered with drawings and letters of gold — which made them resemble grottoes full of stalactites and crockery-ware shops. But, when they had reached the cemetery-gate, everyone instantaneously shops. But, when they had reached the cemetery-gate, everyone instantaneously ceased speaking.

The tombs among the trees: broken columns, pyramids, temples, dolmens, obelisks, and Etruscan vaults with doors of bronze. In some of them might be seen funereal boudoirs, so to speak, with rustic armchairs and folding-stools. Spiders' webs hung like rags from the little chains of the urns; and the bouquets of satin ribbons and the crucifixes were covered with dust. Everywhere, between the balusters on the tombstones, may be observed crowns of immortelles and chandeliers, vases, flowers, black discs set off with gold letters, and plaster statuettes — little boys or little girls or little angels sustained in the air by brass wires; several of them have even a roof of zinc overhead. Huge cables made of glass strung together, black, white, or azure, descend from the tops of the monuments to the ends of the flagstones with long folds, like boas. The rays of the sun, striking on them, made them scintillate in the midst of the black wooden crosses. The hearse advanced along the broad paths, which are paved like the streets of a city. From time to time the axletrees cracked. Women, kneeling down, with their dresses trailing in the grass, addressed the dead in tones of tenderness. Little white fumes arose from the green leaves of the yew trees. These came from offerings that had been left behind, waste material that had been burnt.

M. Dambreuse's grave was close to the graves of Manuel and Benjamin Constant. The soil in this place slopes with an abrupt decline. One has under his feet there the tops of green trees, further down the chimneys of steam-pumps, then the entire great city.

Frederick found an opportunity of admiring the scene while the various addresses were being delivered.

The first was in the name of the Chamber of Deputies, the second in the name of the General Council of the Aube, the third in the name of the coal-mining company of Saone-et-Loire, the fourth in the name of the Agricultural Society of the Yonne, and there was another in the name of a Philanthropic Society. Finally, just as everyone was going away, a stranger began reading a sixth address, in the name of the Amiens Society of Antiquaries.

And thereupon they all took advantage of the occasion to denounce Socialism, of which M. Dambreuse had died a victim. It was the effect produced on his mind by the exhibitions of anarchic violence, together with his devotion to order, that had shortened his days. They praised his intellectual powers, his integrity, his generosity, and even his silence as a representative of the people, "for, if he was not an orator, he possessed instead those solid qualities a thousand times more useful," etc., with all the requisite phrases — "Premature end; eternal regrets; the better land; farewell, or rather no, *au revoir!*"

The clay, mingled with stones, fell on the coffin, and he would never again be a subject for discussion in society.

However, there were a few allusions to him as the persons who had followed his remains left the cemetery. Hussonnet, who would have to give an account of the interment in the newspapers, took up all the addresses in a chaffing style, for, in truth, the worthy Dambreuse had been one of the most notable *pots-de-vin*[K] of the last reign. Then the citizens were driven in the mourning-coaches to their various places of business; the ceremony had not lasted very long; they congratulated themselves on the circumstance.

Frederick returned to his own abode quite worn out.

When he presented himself next day at Madame Dambreuse's residence, he was informed that she was busy below stairs in the room where M. Dambreuse had kept his papers.

The cardboard receptacles and the different drawers had been opened confusedly, and the account-books had been flung about right and left. A roll of papers on which were endorsed the words "Repayment hopeless" lay on the ground. He was near falling over it, and picked it up. Madame Dambreuse had sunk back in the armchair, so that he did not see her.

"Well? where are you? What is the matter!"

She sprang to her feet with a bound.

"What is the matter? I am ruined, ruined! do you understand?"

M. Adolphe Langlois, the notary, had sent her a message to call at his office, and had informed her about the contents of a will made by her husband before their marriage. He had bequeathed everything to Cécile; and the other will was lost. Frederick turned very pale. No doubt she had not made sufficient search.

"Well, then, look yourself!" said Madame Dambreuse, pointing at the objects contained in the room.

The two strong-boxes were gaping wide, having been broken open with blows of a cleaver, and she had turned up the desk, rummaged in the cupboards, and shaken the straw-mattings, when, all of a sudden, uttering a piercing cry, she dashed into corner where she had just noticed a little box with a brass lock. She opened it — nothing!

"Ah! the wretch! I, who took such devoted care of him!"

Then she burst into sobs.

"Perhaps it is somewhere else?" said Frederick.

"Oh! no! it was there! in that strong-box, I saw it there lately. 'Tis burned! I'm certain of it!"

One day, in the early stage of his illness, M. Dambreuse had gone down to this room to sign some documents.

"'Tis then he must have done the trick!"

And she fell back on a chair, crushed. A mother grieving beside an empty cradle was not more woeful than Madame Dambreuse was at the sight of the open strong-boxes. Indeed, her sorrow, in spite of the baseness of the motive which inspired it, appeared so deep that he tried to console her by reminding her that, after all, she was not reduced to sheer want.

"It is want, when I am not in a position to offer you a large fortune!"

She had not more than thirty thousand livres a year, without taking into account the mansion, which was worth from eighteen to twenty thousand, perhaps.

Although to Frederick this would have been opulence, he felt, none the less, a certain amount of disappointment. Farewell to his dreams and to all the splendid existence on which he had intended to enter! Honour compelled him to marry Madame Dambreuse. For a minute he reflected; then, in a tone of tenderness:

"I'll always have yourself!"

She threw herself into his arms, and he clasped her to his breast with an emotion in which there was a slight element of admiration for himself.

Madame Dambreuse, whose tears had ceased to flow, raised her face, beaming all over with happiness, and seizing his hand:

"Ah! I never doubted you! I knew I could count on you!"

The young man did not like this tone of anticipated certainty with regard to what he was pluming himself on as a noble action.

Then she brought him into her own apartment, and they began to arrange their plans for the future. Frederick should now consider the best way of advancing himself in life. She even gave him excellent advice with reference to his candidature.

The first point was to be acquainted with two or three phrases borrowed from political economy. It was necessary to take up a specialty, such as the stud system, for example; to write a number of notes on questions of local interest, to have always at his disposal post-offices or tobacconists' shops, and to do a heap of little services. In this respect M. Dambreuse had shown himself a true model. Thus, on one occasion, in the country, he had drawn up his wagonette, full of friends of his, in front of a cobbler's stall, and had bought a dozen pairs of shoes for his guests, and for himself a dreadful pair of boots, which he had not even the courage to wear for an entire fortnight. This anecdote put them into a good humour. She related others, and that with a renewal of grace, youthfulness, and wit.

She approved of his notion of taking a trip immediately to Nogent. Their parting was an affectionate one; then, on the threshold, she murmured once more:

"You love me — do you not?"

"Eternally," was his reply.

A messenger was waiting for him at his own house with a line written in lead-pencil informing him that Rosanette was about to be confined. He had been so much preoccupied for the past few days that he had not bestowed a thought upon the matter.

She had been placed in a special establishment at Chaillot.

Frederick took a cab and set out for this institution.

At the corner of the Rue de Marbeuf he read on a board in big letters: "Private Lying-in-Hospital, kept by Madame Alessandri, first-class midwife, ex-pupil of the Maternity, author of various works, etc." Then, in the centre of the street, over the door — a little side-door — there was another signboard: "Private Hospital of Madame Alessandri," with all her titles.

Frederick gave a knock. A chambermaid, with the figure of an Abigail, introduced him into the reception-room, which was adorned with a mahogany table and armchairs of garnet velvet, and with a clock under a globe.

Almost immediately Madame appeared. She was a tall brunette of forty, with a slender waist, fine eyes, and the manners of good society. She apprised Frederick of the mother's happy delivery, and brought him up to her apartment.

Rosanette broke into a smile of unutterable bliss, and, as if drowned in the floods of love that were suffocating her, she said in a low tone:

"A boy — there, there!" pointing towards a cradle close to her bed.

He flung open the curtains, and saw, wrapped up in linen, a yellowish-red object, exceedingly shrivelled-looking, which had a bad smell, and which was bawling lustily.

"Embrace him!"

He replied, in order to hide his repugnance:

"But I am afraid of hurting him."

"No! no!"

Then, with the tips of his lips, he kissed his child.

"How like you he is!"

And with her two weak arms, she clung to his neck with an outburst of feeling which he had never witnessed on her part before.

The remembrance of Madame Dambreuse came back to him. He reproached himself as a monster for having deceived this poor creature, who loved and suffered with all the sincerity of her nature. For several days he remained with her till night.

She felt happy in this quiet place; the window-shutters in front of it remained always closed. Her room, hung with bright chintz, looked out on a large garden. Madame Alessandri, whose only shortcoming was that she liked to talk about her intimate acquaintanceship with eminent physicians, showed her the utmost attention. Her associates, nearly all provincial young ladies, were exceedingly bored, as they had nobody to come to see them. Rosanette saw that they regarded her with envy, and told this to Frederick with pride. It was desirable to speak low, nevertheless. The partitions were thin, and everyone stood listening at hiding-places, in spite of the constant thrumming of the pianos.

At last, he was about to take his departure for Nogent, when he got a letter from Deslauriers. Two fresh candidates had offered themselves, the one a Conservative, the other a Red; a third, whatever he might be, would have no chance. It was all Frederick's fault; he had let the lucky moment pass by; he should have come sooner and stirred himself.

"You have not even been seen at the agricultural assembly!" The advocate blamed him for not having any newspaper connection.

"Ah! if you had followed my advice long ago! If we had only a public print of our own!"

He laid special stress on this point. However, many persons who would have voted for him out of consideration for M. Dambreuse, abandoned him now. Deslauriers was one of the number. Not having anything more to expect from the capitalist, he had thrown over his *protégé*.

Frederick took the letter to show it to Madame Dambreuse.

"You have not been to Nogent, then?" said she.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I saw Deslauriers three days ago."

Having learned that her husband was dead, the advocate had come to make a report about the coal-mines, and to offer his services to her as a man of business. This seemed strange to Frederick; and what was his friend doing down there?

Madame Dambreuse wanted to know how he had spent his time since they had parted.

"I have been ill," he replied.

"You ought at least to have told me about it."

"Oh! it wasn't worth while;" besides, he had to settle a heap of things, to keep appointments and to pay visits.

From that time forth he led a double life, sleeping religiously at the Maréchale's abode and passing the afternoon with Madame Dambreuse, so that there was scarcely a single hour of freedom left to him in the middle of the day.

The infant was in the country at Andilly. They went to see it once a week.

The wet-nurse's house was on rising ground in the village, at the end of a little yard as dark as a pit, with straw on the ground, hens here and there, and a vegetable-cart under the shed.

Rosanette would begin by frantically kissing her baby, and, seized with a kind of delirium, would keep moving to and fro, trying to milk the she-goat, eating big pieces of bread, and inhaling the odour of manure; she even wanted to put a little of it into her handkerchief.

Then they took long walks, in the course of which she went into the nurseries, tore off branches from the lilac-trees which hung down over the walls, and exclaimed, "Gee ho, donkey!" to the asses that were drawing cars along, and stopped to gaze through the gate into the interior of one of the lovely gardens; or else the wet-nurse would take the child and place it under the shade of a walnut-tree; and for hours the two women would keep talking the most tiresome nonsense.

Frederick, not far away from them, gazed at the beds of vines on the slopes, with here and there a clump of trees; at the dusty paths resembling strips of grey ribbon; at the houses, which showed white and red spots in the midst of the greenery; and sometimes the smoke of a locomotive stretched out horizontally to the bases of the hills, covered with foliage, like a gigantic ostrich's feather, the thin end of which was disappearing from view.

Then his eyes once more rested on his son. He imagined the child grown into a young man; he would make a companion of him; but perhaps he would be a blockhead, a wretched creature, in any event. He was always oppressed by the illegality of the infant's birth; it would have been better if he had never been born! And Frederick would murmur, "Poor child!" his heart swelling with feelings of unutterable sadness.

They often missed the last train. Then Madame Dambreuse would scold him for his want of punctuality. He would invent some falsehood.

It was necessary to invent some explanations, too, to satisfy Rosanette. She could not understand how he spent all his evenings; and when she sent a messenger to his house, he was never there! One day, when he chanced to be at home, the two women made their appearance almost at the same time. He got the Maréchale to go away, and concealed Madame Dambreuse, pretending that his mother was coming up to Paris.

Ere long, he found these lies amusing. He would repeat to one the oath which he had just uttered to the other, send them bouquets of the same sort, write to them at the same time, and then would institute a comparison between them. There was a third always present in his thoughts. The impossibility of possessing her seemed to him a justification of his perfidies, which were intensified by the fact that he had to practise them alternately; and the more he deceived, no matter fact that he had to practise them alternately, and the more he deceived, no matter which of the two, the fonder of him she grew, as if the love of one of them added heat to that of the other, and, as if by a sort of emulation, each of them were seeking to make him forget the other.

"Admire my confidence in you!" said Madame Dambreuse one day to him, opening a sheet of paper, in which she was informed that M. Moreau and a certain Rose Bron were living together as husband and wife.

"Can it be that this is the lady of the races?"

"What an absurdity!" he returned. "Let me have a look at it!"

The letter, written in Roman characters, had no signature. Madame Dambreuse, in the beginning, had tolerated this mistress, who furnished a cloak for their adultery. But, as her passion became stronger, she had insisted on a rupture — a thing which had been effected long since, according to Frederick's account; and when he had ceased to protest, she replied, half closing her eyes, in which shone a look like the point of a stiletto under a muslin robe:

"Well — and the other?"

"What other?"

"The earthenware-dealer's wife!"

He shrugged his shoulders disdainfully. She did not press the matter.

But, a month later, while they were talking about honour and loyalty, and he was boasting about his own (in a casual sort of way, for the sake of precaution), she said to him:

"It is true — you are acting uprightly — you don't go back there any more?"

Frederick, who was at the moment thinking of the Maréchale, stammered:

"Where, pray?"

"To Madame Arnoux's."

He implored her to tell him from whom she got the information. It was through her second dressmaker, Madame Regimbart.

So, she knew all about his life, and he knew nothing about hers!

In the meantime, he had found in her dressing-room the miniature of a gentleman with long moustaches — was this the same person about whose suicide a vague story had been told him at one time? But there was no way of learning any more about it! However, what was the use of it? The hearts of women are like little pieces of furniture wherein things are secreted, full of drawers fitted into each other; one hurts himself, breaks his nails in opening them, and then finds within only some withered flower, a few grains of dust — or emptiness! And then perhaps he felt afraid of learning too much about the matter.

She made him refuse invitations where she was unable to accompany him, stuck to his side, was afraid of losing him; and, in spite of this union which was stuck to his side, was afraid of losing him, and, in spite of this union which was every day becoming stronger, all of a sudden, abysses disclosed themselves between the pair about the most trifling questions — an estimate of an individual or a work of art.

She had a style of playing on the piano which was correct and hard. Her spiritualism (Madame Dambreuse believed in the transmigration of souls into the stars) did not prevent her from taking the utmost care of her cash-box. She was haughty towards her servants; her eyes remained dry at the sight of the rags of the poor. In the expressions of which she habitually made use a candid egoism manifested itself: "What concern is that of mine? I should be very silly! What need have I?" and a thousand little acts incapable of analysis revealed hateful qualities in her. She would have listened behind doors; she could not help lying to her confessor. Through a spirit of despotism, she insisted on Frederick going to the church with her on Sunday. He obeyed, and carried her prayer-book.

The loss of the property she had expected to inherit had changed her considerably. These marks of grief, which people attributed to the death of M. Dambreuse, rendered her interesting, and, as in former times, she had a great number of visitors. Since Frederick's defeat at the election, she was ambitious of obtaining for both of them an embassy in Germany; therefore, the first thing they should do was to submit to the reigning ideas.

Some persons were in favour of the Empire, others of the Orléans family, and others of the Comte de Chambord; but they were all of one opinion as to the urgency of decentralisation, and several expedients were proposed with that view, such as to cut up Paris into many large streets in order to establish villages there, to transfer the seat of government to Versailles, to have the schools set up at Bourges, to suppress the libraries, and to entrust everything to the generals of division; and they glorified a rustic existence on the assumption that the uneducated man had naturally more sense than other men! Hatreds increased — hatred of primary teachers and wine-merchants, of the classes of philosophy, of the courses of lectures on history, of novels, red waistcoats, long beards, of independence in any shape, or any manifestation of individuality, for it was necessary "to restore the principle of authority" — let it be exercised in the name of no matter whom; let it come from no matter where, as long as it was Force, Authority! The Conservatives now talked in the very same way as Sénécal. Frederick was no longer able to understand their drift, and once more he found at the house of his former mistress the same remarks uttered by the same men.

The salons of the unmarried women (it was from this period that their importance dates) were a sort of neutral ground where reactionaries of different kinds met. Hussonnet, who gave himself up to the depreciation of contemporary glories (a good thing for the restoration of Order), inspired Rosanette with a longing to have evening parties like any other. He undertook to publish accounts of them, and first of all he brought a man of grave deportment, Fumichon; then came Nonancourt, M. de Grémonville, the Sieur de Larsilloix, ex-prefect, and Cisy, who was now an agriculturist in Lower Brittany, and more Christian than ever.

In addition, men who had at one time been the Maréchale's lovers, such as the Baron de Comaing, the Comte de Jumillac, and others, presented themselves; and Frederick was annoyed by their free-and-easy behaviour.

In order that he might assume the attitude of master in the house, he increased the rate of expenditure there. Then he went in for keeping a groom, took a new habitation, and got a fresh supply of furniture. These displays of extravagance were useful for the purpose of making his alliance appear less out of proportion with his pecuniary position. The result was that his means were soon terribly reduced — and Rosanette was entirely ignorant of the fact!

One of the lower middle-class, who had lost caste, she adored a domestic life, a quiet little home. However, it gave her pleasure to have "an at home day." In referring to persons of her own class, she called them "Those women!" She wished to be a society lady, and believed herself to be one. She begged of him not to smoke in the drawing-room any more, and for the sake of good form tried to make herself look thin.

She played her part badly, after all; for she grew serious, and even before going to bed always exhibited a little melancholy, just as there are cypress trees at the door of a tavern.

He found out the cause of it; she was dreaming of marriage — she, too! Frederick was exasperated at this. Besides, he recalled to mind her appearance at Madame Arnoux's house, and then he cherished a certain spite against her for having held out against him so long.

He made enquiries none the less as to who her lovers had been. She denied having had any relations with any of the persons he mentioned. A sort of jealous feeling took possession of him. He irritated her by asking questions about presents that had been made to her, and were still being made to her; and in proportion to the exciting effect which the lower portion of her nature produced upon him, he was drawn towards her by momentary illusions which ended in hate.

Her words, her voice, her smile, all had an unpleasant effect on him, and especially her glances with that woman's eye forever limpid and foolish. Sometimes he felt so tired of her that he would have seen her die without being moved at it. But how could he get into a passion with her? She was so mild that there was no hope of picking a quarrel with her.

Deslauriers reappeared, and explained his sojourn at Nogent by saying that he was making arrangements to buy a lawyer's office. Frederick was glad to see him again. It was somebody! and as a third person in the house, he helped to break the monotony.

The advocate dined with them from time to time, and whenever any little disputes arose, always took Rosanette's part, so that Frederick, on one occasion, said to him:

"Ah! you can have with her, if it amuses you!" so much did he long for some chance of getting rid of her.

About the middle of the month of June, she was served with an order made by the law courts by which Maître Athanase Gautherot, sheriff's officer, called on her to pay him four thousand francs due to Mademoiselle Clemence Vatnaz; if not, he would come to make a seizure on her.

In fact, of the four bills which she had at various times signed, only one had been paid; the money which she happened to get since then having been spent on other things that she required.

She rushed off at once to see Arnoux. He lived now in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, and the porter was unable to tell her the name of the street. She made her way next to the houses of several friends of hers, could not find one of them at home, and came back in a state of utter despair.

She did not wish to tell Frederick anything about it, fearing lest this new occurrence might prejudice the chance of a marriage between them.

On the following morning, M. Athanase Gautherot presented himself with two assistants close behind him, one of them sallow with a mean-looking face and an expression of devouring envy in his glance, the other wearing a collar and straps drawn very tightly, with a sort of thimble of black taffeta on his index-finger — and both ignobly dirty, with greasy necks, and the sleeves of their coats too short.

Their employer, a very good-looking man, on the contrary, began by apologising for the disagreeable duty he had to perform, while at the same time he threw a look round the room, "full of pretty things, upon my word of honour!" He added, "Not to speak of the things that can't be seized." At a gesture the two bailiff's men disappeared.

Then he became twice as polite as before. Could anyone believe that a lady so charming would not have a genuine friend! A sale of her goods under an order of the courts would be a real misfortune. One never gets over a thing like that. He tried to excite her fears; then, seeing that she was very much agitated, suddenly assumed a paternal tone. He knew the world. He had been brought into business relations with all these ladies — and as he mentioned their names, he examined the frames of the pictures on the walls. They were old pictures of the worthy Arnoux, sketches by Sombary, water-colours by Burieu, and three landscapes by Dittmer. It was evident that Rosanette was ignorant of their value, Maître Gautherot turned round to her:

"Look here! to show that I am a decent fellow, do one thing: give me up those Dittmers here — and I am ready to pay all. Do you agree?"

At that moment Frederick, who had been informed about the matter by Delphine in the anteroom, and who had just seen the two assistants, came in with his hat on his head, in a rude fashion. Maître Gautherot resumed his dignity; and, as the door had been left open:

"Come on, gentlemen — write down! In the second room, let us say — an oak table with its two leaves, two sideboards — — "

Frederick here stopped him, asking whether there was not some way of preventing the seizure.

"Oh! certainly! Who paid for the furniture?"

"I did."

"Well, draw up a claim — you have still time to do it."

Maître Gautherot did not take long in writing out his official report, wherein he directed that Mademoiselle Bron should attend at an enquiry in chambers with reference to the ownership of the furniture, and having done this he withdrew.

Frederick uttered no reproach. He gazed at the traces of mud left on the floor by the bailiff's shoes, and, speaking to himself:

"It will soon be necessary to look about for money!"

"Ah! my God, how stupid I am!" said the Maréchale.

She ransacked a drawer, took out a letter, and made her way rapidly to the Languedoc Gas Lighting Company, in order to get the transfer of her shares.

She came back an hour later. The interest in the shares had been sold to another. The clerk had said, in answer to her demand, while examining the sheet of paper containing Arnoux's written promise to her: "This document in no way constitutes you the proprietor of the shares. The company has no cognisance of the matter." In short, he sent her away unceremoniously, while she choked with rage; and Frederick would have to go to Arnoux's house at once to have the matter cleared up.

But Arnoux would perhaps imagine that he had come to recover in an indirect fashion the fifteen thousand francs due on the mortgage which he had lost; and then this claim from a man who had been his mistress's lover seemed to him a piece of baseness.

Selecting a middle course, he went to the Dambreuse mansion to get Madame

Regimbart's address, sent a messenger to her residence, and in this way ascertained the name of the café which the Citizen now haunted.

It was the little café on the Place de la Bastille, in which he sat all day in the corner to the right at the lower end of the establishment, never moving any more than if he were a portion of the building.

After having gone successively through the half-cup of coffee, the glass of grog, the "bishop," the glass of mulled wine, and even the red wine and water, he fell back on beer, and every half hour he let fall this word, "Bock!" having reduced his language to what was actually indispensable. Frederick asked him if he saw Arnoux occasionally.

"No!"

"Look here — why?"

"An imbecile!"

Politics, perhaps, kept them apart, and so Frederick thought it a judicious thing to enquire about Compain.

"What a brute!" said Regimbart.

"How is that?"

"His calf's head!"

"Ha! explain to me what the calf's head is!"

Regimbart's face wore a contemptuous smile.

"Some tomfoolery!"

After a long interval of silence, Frederick went on to ask:

"So, then, he has changed his address?"

"Who?"

"Arnoux!"

"Yes — Rue de Fleurus!"

"What number?"

"Do I associate with the Jesuits?"

"What, Jesuits!"

The Citizen replied angrily:

"With the money of a patriot whom I introduced to him, this pig has set up as a dealer in beads!"

"It isn't possible!"

"Go there, and see for yourself!"

It was perfectly true; Arnoux, enfeebled by a fit of sickness, had turned religious; besides, he had always had a stock of religion in his composition, and (with that mixture of commercialism and ingenuity which was natural to him), in order to gain salvation and fortune both together, he had begun to traffick in religious objects.

Frederick had no difficulty in discovering his establishment, on whose signboard appeared these words: "*Emporium of Gothic Art* — Restoration of articles used in ecclesiastical ceremonies — Church ornaments — Polychromatic sculpture — Frankincense of the Magi, Kings, &c., &c."

At the two corners of the shop-window rose two wooden statues, streaked with gold, cinnabar, and azure, a Saint John the Baptist with his sheepskin, and a Saint Genevieve with roses in her apron and a distaff under her arm; next, groups in plaster, a good sister teaching a little girl, a mother on her knees beside a little bed, and three collegians before the holy table. The prettiest object there was a kind of châlet representing the interior of a crib with the ass, the ox, and the child Jesus stretched on straw — real straw. From the top to the bottom of the shelves could be seen medals by the dozen, every sort of beads, holy-water basins in the form of shells, and portraits of ecclesiastical dignitaries, amongst whom Monsignor Affre and our Holy Father shone forth with smiles on their faces.

Arnoux sat asleep at his counter with his head down. He had aged terribly. He had even round his temples a wreath of rosebuds, and the reflection of the gold crosses touched by the rays of the sun fell over him.

Frederick was filled with sadness at this spectacle of decay. Through devotion to the Maréchale he, however, submitted to the ordeal, and stepped forward. At the end of the shop Madame Arnoux showed herself; thereupon, he turned on his heel.

"I couldn't see him," he said, when he came back to Rosanette.

And in vain he went on to promise that he would write at once to his notary at Havre for some money — she flew into a rage. She had never seen a man so weak, so flabby. While she was enduring a thousand privations, other people were enjoying themselves.

Frederick was thinking about poor Madame Arnoux, and picturing to himself the heart-rending impoverishment of her surroundings. He had seated himself before the writing-desk; and, as Rosanette's voice still kept up its bitter railing:

"Ah! in the name of Heaven, hold your tongue!"

"Perhaps you are going to defend them?"

"Well, yes!" he exclaimed; "for what's the cause of this display of fury?"

"But why is it that you don't want to make them pay up? 'Tis for fear of vexing your old flame — confess it!"

He felt an inclination to smash her head with the timepiece. Words failed him. He relapsed into silence.

Rosanette, as she walked up and down the room, continued:

"I am going to hurl a writ at this Arnoux of yours. Oh! I don't want your assistance. I'll get legal advice."

Three days later, Delphine rushed abruptly into the room where her mistress sat.

"Madame! madame! there's a man here with a pot of paste who has given me a fright!"

Rosanette made her way down to the kitchen, and saw there a vagabond whose face was pitted with smallpox. Moreover, one of his arms was paralysed, and he was three fourths drunk, and hiccoughed every time he attempted to speak.

This was Maître Gautherot's bill-sticker. The objections raised against the seizure having been overruled, the sale followed as a matter of course.

For his trouble in getting up the stairs he demanded, in the first place, a half-glass of brandy; then he wanted another favour, namely, tickets for the theatre, on the assumption that the lady of the house was an actress. After this he indulged for some minutes in winks, whose import was perfectly incomprehensible. Finally, he declared that for forty sous he would tear off the corners of the poster which he had already affixed to the door below stairs. Rosanette found herself referred to by name in it — a piece of exceptional harshness which showed the spite of the Vatnaz.

She had at one time exhibited sensibility, and had even, while suffering from the effects of a heartache, written to Béranger for his advice. But under the ravages of life's storms, her spirit had become soured, for she had been forced, in turn, to give lessons on the piano, to act as manageress of a *table d'hôte*, to assist others in writing for the fashion journals, to sublet apartments, and to traffic in lace in the world of light women, her relations with whom enabled her to make herself useful to many persons, and amongst others to Arnoux. She had formerly been employed in a commercial establishment.

There it was one of her functions to pay the workwomen; and for each of them there were two livres, one of which always remained in her hands. Dussardier, who, through kindness, kept the amount payable to a girl named Hortense Baslin, presented himself one day at the cash-office at the moment when Mademoiselle Vatnaz was presenting this girl's account, 1,682 francs, which the cashier paid her. Now, on the very day before this, Dussardier had entered down the sum as 1,082 in the girl Baslin's book. He asked to have it given back to him on some pretext; then, anxious to bury out of sight the story of this theft, he stated that he had lost it. The workwoman ingenuously repeated this falsehood to Mademoiselle Vatnaz, and the latter, in order to satisfy her mind about the matter, came with a show of indifference to talk to the shopman on the subject. He contented himself with the answer: "I have burned it!" — that was all. A little while afterwards she quitted the house, without believing that the book had been really destroyed, and filled with the idea that Dussardier had preserved it.

On hearing that he had been wounded, she rushed to his abode, with the object of getting it back. Then, having discovered nothing, in spite of the closest searches, she was seized with respect, and presently with love, for this youth, so loyal, so gentle, so heroic and so strong! At her age such good fortune in an affair of the heart was a thing that one would not expect. She threw herself into it with the appetite of an ogress; and she had given up literature, Socialism, "the consoling doctrines and the generous Utopias," the course of lectures which she had projected on the "Desubalternization of Woman" — everything, even Delmar himself; finally she offered to unite herself to Dussardier in marriage.

Although she was his mistress, he was not at all in love with her. Besides, he had not forgotten her theft. Then she was too wealthy for him. He refused her offer. Thereupon, with tears in her eyes, she told him about what she had dreamed — it was to have for both of them a confectioner's shop. She possessed the capital that was required beforehand for the purpose, and next week this would be increased to the extent of four thousand francs. By way of explanation, she referred to the proceedings she had taken against the Maréchale.

Dussardier was annoyed at this on account of his friend. He recalled to mind the cigar-holder that had been presented to him at the guard-house, the evenings spent in the Quai Napoléon, the many pleasant chats, the books lent to him, the thousand acts of kindness which Frederick had done in his behalf. He begged of the Vatnaz to abandon the proceedings.

She rallied him on his good nature, while exhibiting an antipathy against Rosanette which he could not understand. She longed only for wealth, in fact, in order to crush her, by-and-by, with her four-wheeled carriage.

Dussardier was terrified by these black abysses of hate, and when he had ascertained what was the exact day fixed for the sale, he hurried out. On the following morning he made his appearance at Frederick's house with an embarrassed countenance.

"I owe you an apology."

"For what, pray?"

"You must take me for an ingrate, I, whom she is the — — " He faltered.

"Oh! I'll see no more of her. I am not going to be her accomplice!" And as the other was gazing at him in astonishment:

"Isn't your mistress's furniture to be sold in three days' time?"

"Who told you that?"

"Herself — the Vatnaz! But I am afraid of giving you offence — — "

"Impossible, my dear friend!"

"Ah! that is true — you are so good!"

And he held out to him, in a cautious fashion, a hand in which he clasped a little pocket-book made of sheep-leather.

It contained four thousand francs — all his savings.

"What! Oh! no! no! — --"

"I knew well I would wound your feelings," returned Dussardier, with a tear in the corner of his eye.

Frederick pressed his hand, and the honest fellow went on in a piteous tone:

"Take the money! Give me that much pleasure! I am in such a state of despair. Can it be, furthermore, that all is over? I thought we should be happy when the Revolution had come. Do you remember what a beautiful thing it was? how freely we breathed! But here we are flung back into a worse condition of things than ever.

"Now, they are killing our Republic, just as they killed the other one — the Roman! ay, and poor Venice! poor Poland! poor Hungary! What abominable deeds! First of all, they knocked down the trees of Liberty, then they restricted the right to vote, shut up the clubs, re-established the censorship and surrendered to the priests the power of teaching, so that we might look out for the Inquisition. Why not? The Conservatives want to give us a taste of the stick. The newspapers are fined merely for pronouncing an opinion in favour of abolishing the death-penalty. Paris is overflowing with bayonets; sixteen departments are in a state of siege; and then the demand for amnesty is again rejected!"

He placed both hands on his forehead, then, spreading out his arms as if his mind were in a distracted state:

"If, however, we only made the effort! if we were only sincere, we might understand each other. But no! The workmen are no better than the capitalists, you see! At Elbœuf recently they refused to help at a fire! There are wretches who profess to regard Barbès as an aristocrat! In order to make the people ridiculous, they want to get nominated for the presidency Nadaud, a mason — just imagine! And there is no way out of it — no remedy! Everybody is against us! For my part, I have never done any harm; and yet this is like a weight pressing down on my stomach. If this state of things continues, I'll go mad. I have a mind to do away with myself. I tell you I want no money for myself! You'll pay it back to me, deuce take it! I am lending it to you."

Frederick, who felt himself constrained by necessity, ended by taking the four thousand francs from him. And so they had no more disquietude so far as the Vatnaz was concerned.

But it was not long ere Rosanette was defeated in her action against Arnoux; and through sheer obstinacy she wished to appeal.

and through sheer obstinacy she wished to appeal.

Deslauriers exhausted his energies in trying to make her understand that Arnoux's promise constituted neither a gift nor a regular transfer. She did not even pay the slightest attention to him, her notion being that the law was unjust — it was because she was a woman; men backed up each other amongst themselves. In the end, however, she followed his advice.

He made himself so much at home in the house, that on several occasions he brought Sénécal to dine there. Frederick, who had advanced him money, and even got his own tailor to supply him with clothes, did not like this unceremoniousness; and the advocate gave his old clothes to the Socialist, whose means of existence were now of an exceedingly uncertain character.

He was, however, anxious to be of service to Rosanette. One day, when she showed him a dozen shares in the Kaolin Company (that enterprise which led to Arnoux being cast in damages to the extent of thirty thousand francs), he said to her:

"But this is a shady transaction, and you have now a grand chance!"

She had the right to call on him to pay her debts. In the first place, she could prove that he was jointly bound to pay all the company's liabilities, since he had certified personal debts as collective debts — in short, he had embezzled sums which were payable only to the company.

"All this renders him guilty of fraudulent bankruptcy under articles 586 and 587 of the Commercial Code, and you may be sure, my pet, we'll send him packing."

Rosanette threw herself on his neck. He entrusted her case next day to his former master, not having time to devote attention to it himself, as he had business at Nogent. In case of any urgency, Sénécal could write to him.

His negotiations for the purchase of an office were a mere pretext. He spent his time at M. Roque's house, where he had begun not only by sounding the praises of their friend, but by imitating his manners and language as much as possible; and in this way he had gained Louise's confidence, while he won over that of her father by making an attack on Ledru-Rollin.

If Frederick did not return, it was because he mingled in aristocratic society, and gradually Deslauriers gave them to understand that he was in love with somebody, that he had a child, and that he was keeping a fallen creature.

The despair of Louise was intense. The indignation of Madame Moreau was not less strong. She saw her son whirling towards the bottom of a gulf the depth of which could not be determined, was wounded in her religious ideas as to propriety, and as it were, experienced a sense of personal dishonour; then all of a sudden her physiognomy underwent a change. To the questions which people put to her with regard to Frederick, she replied in a sly fashion:

put to her with regard to Frederick, she replied in a sly fashion:

"He is well, quite well.'"

She was aware that he was about to be married to Madame Dambreuse.

The date of the event had been fixed, and he was even trying to think of some way of making Rosanette swallow the thing.

About the middle of autumn she won her action with reference to the kaolin shares. Frederick was informed about it by Sénécal, whom he met at his own door, on his way back from the courts.

It had been held that M. Arnoux was privy to all the frauds, and the ex-tutor had such an air of making merry over it that Frederick prevented him from coming further, assuring Sénécal that he would convey the intelligence to Rosanette. He presented himself before her with a look of irritation on his face.

"Well, now you are satisfied!"

But, without minding what he had said:

"Look here!"

And she pointed towards her child, which was lying in a cradle close to the fire. She had found it so sick at the house of the wet-nurse that morning that she had brought it back with her to Paris.

All the infant's limbs were exceedingly thin, and the lips were covered with white specks, which in the interior of the mouth became, so to speak, clots of blood-stained milk.

"What did the doctor say?"

"Oh! the doctor! He pretends that the journey has increased his — I don't know what it is, some name in 'ite' — in short, that he has the thrush.[L] Do you know what that is?"

Frederick replied without hesitation: "Certainly," adding that it was nothing.

But in the evening he was alarmed by the child's debilitated look and by the progress of these whitish spots, resembling mould, as if life, already abandoning this little frame, had left now nothing but matter from which vegetation was sprouting. His hands were cold; he was no longer able to drink anything; and the nurse, another woman, whom the porter had gone and taken on chance at an office, kept repeating:

"It seems to me he's very low, very low!"

Rosanette was up all night with the child.

In the morning she went to look for Frederick.

"Just come and look at him. He doesn't move any longer."

In fact, he was dead. She took him up, shook him, clasped him in her arms, calling him most tender names, covered him with kisses, broke into sobs, turned herself from one side to the other in a state of distraction, tore her hair, uttered a number of shrieks, and then let herself sink on the edge of the divan, where she number of shrieks, and then let herself sink on the edge of the divan, where she lay with her mouth open and a flood of tears rushing from her wildly-glaring eyes.

Then a torpor fell upon her, and all became still in the apartment. The furniture was overturned. Two or three napkins were lying on the floor. It struck six. The night-light had gone out.

Frederick, as he gazed at the scene, could almost believe that he was dreaming. His heart was oppressed with anguish. It seemed to him that this death was only a beginning, and that behind it was a worse calamity, which was just about to come on.

Suddenly, Rosanette said in an appealing tone:

"We'll preserve the body — shall we not?"

She wished to have the dead child embalmed. There were many objections to this. The principal one, in Frederick's opinion, was that the thing was impracticable in the case of children so young. A portrait would be better. She adopted this idea. He wrote a line to Pellerin, and Delphine hastened to deliver it.

Pellerin arrived speedily, anxious by this display of zeal to efface all recollection of his former conduct. The first thing he said was:

"Poor little angel! Ah, my God, what a misfortune!"

But gradually (the artist in him getting the upper hand) he declared that nothing could be made out of those yellowish eyes, that livid face, that it was a real case of still-life, and would, therefore, require very great talent to treat it effectively; and so he murmured:

"Oh, 'tisn't easy — 'tisn't easy!"

"No matter, as long as it is life-like," urged Rosanette.

"Pooh! what do I care about a thing being life-like? Down with Realism! 'Tis the spirit that must be portrayed by the painter! Let me alone! I am going to try to conjure up what it ought to be!"

He reflected, with his left hand clasping his brow, and with his right hand clutching his elbow; then, all of a sudden:

"Ha, I have an idea! a pastel! With coloured mezzotints, almost spread out flat, a lovely model could be obtained with the outer surface alone!"

He sent the chambermaid to look for his box of colours; then, having a chair under his feet and another by his side, he began to throw out great touches with as much complacency as if he had drawn them in accordance with the bust. He praised the little Saint John of Correggio, the Infanta Rosa of Velasquez, the milk-white flesh-tints of Reynolds, the distinction of Lawrence, and especially the child with long hair that sits in Lady Gower's lap.

"Besides, could you find anything more charming than these little toads? The type of the sublime (Raphael has proved it by his Madonnas) is probably a mother with her child?"

Rosanette, who felt herself stifling, went away; and presently Pellerin said:

"Well, about Arnoux; you know what has happened?"

"No! What?"

"However, it was bound to end that way!"

"What has happened, might I ask?"

"Perhaps by this time he is — — Excuse me!"

The artist got up in order to raise the head of the little corpse higher.

"You were saying — — " Frederick resumed.

And Pellerin, half-closing his eyes, in order to take his dimensions better:

"I was saying that our friend Arnoux is perhaps by this time locked up!"

Then, in a tone of satisfaction:

"Just give a little glance at it. Is that the thing?"

"Yes, 'tis quite right. But about Arnoux?"

Pellerin laid down his pencil.

"As far as I could understand, he was sued by one Mignot, an intimate friend of Regimbart — a long-headed fellow that, eh? What an idiot! Just imagine! one day — — "

"What! it's not Regimbart that's in question, is it?"

"It is, indeed! Well, yesterday evening, Arnoux had to produce twelve thousand francs; if not, he was a ruined man."

"Oh! this perhaps is exaggerated," said Frederick.

"Not a bit. It looked to me a very serious business, very serious!"

At that moment Rosanette reappeared, with red spots under her eyes, which glowed like dabs of paint. She sat down near the drawing and gazed at it. Pellerin made a sign to the other to hold his tongue on account of her. But Frederick, without minding her:

"Nevertheless, I can't believe — — "

"I tell you I met him yesterday," said the artist, "at seven o'clock in the evening, in the Rue Jacob. He had even taken the precaution to have his passport with him; and he spoke about embarking from Havre, he and his whole camp."

"What! with his wife?"

"No doubt. He is too much of a family man to live by himself."

"And are you sure of this?"

"Certain, faith! Where do you expect him to find twelve thousand francs?"

Frederick took two or three turns round the room. He panted for breath, bit his lips, and then snatched up his hat.

"Where are you going now?" said Rosanette.

He made no reply, and the next moment he had disappeared.

CHAPTER XVIII.

An Auction.

Twelve thousand francs should be procured, or, if not, he would see Madame Arnoux no more; and until now there had lingered in his breast an unconquerable hope. Did she not, as it were, constitute the very substance of his heart, the very basis of his life? For some minutes he went staggering along the footpath, his mind tortured with anxiety, and nevertheless gladdened by the thought that he was no longer by the other's side.

Where was he to get the money? Frederick was well aware from his own experience how hard it was to obtain it immediately, no matter at what cost. There was only one person who could help him in the matter — Madame Dambreuse. She always kept a good supply of bank-notes in her escritoire. He called at her house; and in an unblushing fashion: "Have you twelve thousand francs to lend me?"

"What for?"

That was another person's secret. She wanted to know who this person was. He would not give way on this point. They were equally determined not to yield. Finally, she declared that she would give nothing until she knew for what purpose it was wanted.

Frederick's face became very flushed; and he stated that one of his comrades had committed a theft. It was necessary to replace the sum this very day.

"Let me know his name? His name? Come! what's his name?"

"Dussardier!"

And he threw himself on his knees, imploring of her to say nothing about it.

"What idea have you got into your head about me?" Madame Dambreuse replied. "One would imagine that you were the guilty party yourself. Pray, have done with your tragic airs! Hold on! here's the money! and much good may it do him!"

He hurried off to see Arnoux. That worthy merchant was not in his shop. But he was still residing in the Rue de Paradis, for he had two domiciles.

In the Rue de Paradis, the porter said that M. Arnoux had been away since the evening before. As for Madame, he ventured to say nothing; and Frederick, having rushed like an arrow up the stairs, laid his ear against the keyhole. At length, the door was opened. Madame had gone out with Monsieur. The servant could not say when they would be back; her wages had been paid, and she was leaving herself leaving herself.

Suddenly he heard the door creaking.

"But is there anyone in the room?"

"Oh, no, Monsieur! it is the wind."

Thereupon he withdrew. There was something inexplicable in such a rapid disappearance.

Regimbart, being Mignot's intimate friend, could perhaps enlighten him? And Frederick got himself driven to that gentleman's house at Montmartre in the Rue l'Empereur.

Attached to the house there was a small garden shut in by a grating which was stopped up with iron plates. Three steps before the hall-door set off the white front; and a person passing along the footpath could see the two rooms on the ground-floor, the first of which was a parlour with ladies' dresses lying on the furniture on every side, and the second the workshop in which Madame Regimbart's female assistants were accustomed to sit.

They were all convinced that Monsieur had important occupations, distinguished connections, that he was a man altogether beyond comparison. When he was passing through the lobby with his hat cocked up at the sides, his long grave face, and his green frock-coat, the girls stopped in the midst of their work. Besides, he never failed to address to them a few words of encouragement, some observation which showed his ceremonious courtesy; and, afterwards, in their own homes they felt unhappy at not having been able to preserve him as their ideal.

No one, however, was so devoted to him as Madame Regimbart, an intelligent little woman, who maintained him by her handicraft.

As soon as M. Moreau had given his name, she came out quickly to meet him, knowing through the servants what his relations were with Madame Dambreuse. Her husband would be back in a moment; and Frederick, while he followed her, admired the appearance of the house and the profusion of oil-cloth that was displayed in it. Then he waited a few minutes in a kind of office, into which the Citizen was in the habit of retiring, in order to be alone with his thoughts.

When they met, Regimbart's manner was less cranky than usual.

He related Arnoux's recent history. The ex-manufacturer of earthenware had excited the vanity of Mignot, a patriot who owned a hundred shares in the *Siècle*, by professing to show that it would be necessary from the democratic standpoint to change the management and the editorship of the newspaper; and under the pretext of making his views prevail in the next meeting of shareholders, he had given the other fifty shares, telling him that he could pass them on to reliable friends who would back up his vote. Mignot would have no personal responsibility, and need not annoy himself about anyone; then, when he had achieved success, he would be able to secure a good place in the administration of at least from five to six thousand francs. The shares had been delivered. But Arnoux had at once sold them, and with the money had entered into partnership with a dealer in religious articles. Thereupon came complaints from Mignot, to which Arnoux sent evasive answers. At last the patriot had threatened to bring against him a charge of cheating if he did not restore his share-certificates or pay an equivalent sum — fifty thousand francs.

Frederick's face wore a look of despondency.

"That is not the whole of it," said the Citizen. "Mignot, who is an honest fellow, has reduced his claim to one fourth. New promises on the part of the other, and, of course, new dodges. In short, on the morning of the day before yesterday Mignot sent him a written application to pay up, within twenty-four hours, twelve thousand francs, without prejudice to the balance."

"But I have the amount!" said Frederick.

The Citizen slowly turned round:

"Humbug!"

"Excuse me! I have the money in my pocket. I brought it with me."

"How you do go at it! By Jove, you do! However, 'tis too late now — the complaint has been lodged, and Arnoux is gone."

"Alone?"

"No! along with his wife. They were seen at the Havre terminus."

Frederick grew exceedingly pale. Madame Regimbart thought he was going to faint. He regained his self-possession with an effort, and had even sufficient presence of mind to ask two or three questions about the occurrence. Regimbart was grieved at the affair, considering that it would injure the cause of Democracy. Arnoux had always been lax in his conduct and disorderly in his life.

"A regular hare-brained fellow! He burned the candle at both ends! The petticoat has ruined him! 'Tis not himself that I pity, but his poor wife!" For the Citizen admired virtuous women, and had a great esteem for Madame Arnoux.

"She must have suffered a nice lot!"

Frederick felt grateful to him for his sympathy; and, as if Regimbart had done him a service, pressed his hand effusively.

"Have you done all that's necessary in the matter?" was Rosanette's greeting to him when she saw him again.

He had not been able to pluck up courage to do it, he answered, and walked about the streets at random to divert his thoughts.

At eight o'clock, they passed into the dining-room; but they remained seated face to face in silence, gave vent each to a deep sigh every now and then, and pushed away their plates.

Frederick drank some brandy. He felt quite shattered, crushed, annihilated, no longer conscious of anything save a sensation of extreme fatigue.

She went to look at the portrait. The red, the yellow, the green, and the indigo made glaring stains that jarred with each other, so that it looked a hideous thing — almost ridiculous.

Besides, the dead child was now unrecognisable. The purple hue of his lips made the whiteness of his skin more remarkable. His nostrils were more drawn than before, his eyes more hollow; and his head rested on a pillow of blue taffeta, surrounded by petals of camelias, autumn roses, and violets. This was an idea suggested by the chambermaid, and both of them had thus with pious care arranged the little corpse. The mantelpiece, covered with a cloth of guipure, supported silver-gilt candlesticks with bunches of consecrated box in the spaces between them. At the corners there were a pair of vases in which pastilles were burning. All these things, taken in conjunction with the cradle, presented the aspect of an altar; and Frederick recalled to mind the night when he had watched beside M. Dambreuse's death-bed.

Nearly every quarter of an hour Rosanette drew aside the curtains in order to take a look at her child. She saw him in imagination, a few months hence, beginning to walk; then at college, in the middle of the recreation-ground, playing a game of base; then at twenty years a full-grown young man; and all these pictures conjured up by her brain created for her, as it were, the son she would have lost, had he only lived, the excess of her grief intensifying in her the maternal instinct.

Frederick, sitting motionless in another armchair, was thinking of Madame Arnoux.

No doubt she was at that moment in a train, with her face leaning against a carriage window, while she watched the country disappearing behind her in the direction of Paris, or else on the deck of a steamboat, as on the occasion when they first met; but this vessel carried her away into distant countries, from which she would never return. He next saw her in a room at an inn, with trunks covering the floor, the wall-paper hanging in shreds, and the door shaking in the wind. And after that — to what would she be compelled to turn? Would she have to become a school-mistress or a lady's companion, or perhaps a chambermaid? She was exposed to all the vicissitudes of poverty. His utter ignorance as to what her fate might be tortured his mind. He ought either to have opposed her departure or to have followed her. Was he not her real husband? And as the thought impressed itself on his consciousness that he would never meet her again, that it was all over forever, that she was lost to him beyond recall, he felt, so to speak, a rending of his entire being, and the tears that had been gathering since morning in his heart overflowed.

Rosanette noticed the tears in his eyes.

"Ah! you are crying just like me! You are grieving, too?"

"Yes! yes! I am — — "

He pressed her to his heart, and they both sobbed, locked in each other's arms.

Madame Dambreuse was weeping too, as she lay, face downwards, on her bed, with her hands clasped over her head.

Olympe Regimbart having come that evening to try on her first coloured gown after mourning, had told her about Frederick's visit, and even about the twelve thousand francs which he had ready to transfer to M. Arnoux.

So, then, this money, the very money which he had got from her, was intended to be used simply for the purpose of preventing the other from leaving Paris — for the purpose, in fact, of preserving a mistress!

At first, she broke into a violent rage, and determined to drive him from her door, as she would have driven a lackey. A copious flow of tears produced a soothing effect upon her. It was better to keep it all to herself, and say nothing about it.

Frederick brought her back the twelve thousand francs on the following day.

She begged of him to keep the money lest he might require it for his friend, and she asked a number of questions about this gentleman. Who, then, had tempted him to such a breach of trust? A woman, no doubt! Women drag you into every kind of crime.

This bantering tone put Frederick out of countenance. He felt deep remorse for the calumny he had invented. He was reassured by the reflection that Madame Dambreuse could not be aware of the facts. All the same, she was very persistent about the subject; for, two days later, she again made enquiries about his young friend, and, after that, about another — Deslauriers.

"Is this young man trustworthy and intelligent?"

Frederick spoke highly of him.

"Ask him to call on me one of these mornings; I want to consult him about a matter of business."

She had found a roll of old papers in which there were some bills of Arnoux, which had been duly protested, and which had been signed by Madame Arnoux. It was about these very bills Frederick had called on M. Dambreuse on one occasion while the latter was at breakfast; and, although the capitalist had not sought to enforce repayment of this outstanding debt, he had not only got judgment on foot of them from the Tribunal of Commerce against Arnoux, but also against his wife, who knew nothing about the matter, as her husband had not thought fit to give her any information on the point.

Here was a weapon placed in Madame Dambreuse's hands — she had no doubt about it. But her notary would advise her to take no step in the affair. She would have preferred to act through some obscure person, and she thought of that big fellow with such an impudent expression of face, who had offered her his services.

Frederick ingenuously performed this commission for her.

The advocate was enchanted at the idea of having business relations with such an aristocratic lady.

He hurried to Madame Dambreuse's house.

She informed him that the inheritance belonged to her niece, a further reason for liquidating those debts which she should repay, her object being to overwhelm Martinon's wife by a display of greater attention to the deceased's affairs.

Deslauriers guessed that there was some hidden design underlying all this. He reflected while he was examining the bills. Madame Arnoux's name, traced by her own hand, brought once more before his eyes her entire person, and the insult which he had received at her hands. Since vengeance was offered to him, why should he not snatch at it?

He accordingly advised Madame Dambreuse to have the bad debts which went with the inheritance sold by auction. A man of straw, whose name would not be divulged, would buy them up, and would exercise the legal rights thus given him to realise them. He would take it on himself to provide a man to discharge this function.

Towards the end of the month of November, Frederick, happening to pass through the street in which Madame Arnoux had lived, raised his eyes towards the windows of her house, and saw posted on the door a placard on which was printed in large letters: "Sale of valuable furniture, consisting of kitchen utensils, body and table linen, shirts and chemises, lace, petticoats, trousers, French and Indian cashmeres, an Erard piano, two Renaissance oak chests, Venetian mirrors, Chinese and Japanese pottery."

"'Tis their furniture!" said Frederick to himself, and his suspicions were confirmed by the doorkeeper.

As for the person who had given instructions for the sale, he could get no information on that head. But perhaps the auctioneer, Maître Berthelmot, might be able to throw light on the subject.

The functionary did not at first want to tell what creditor was having the sale carried out. Frederick pressed him on the point. It was a gentleman named Sénécal, an agent; and Maître Berthelmot even carried his politeness so far as to lend his newspaper — the *Petites Affiches* — to Frederick.

The latter, on reaching Rosanette's house, flung down this paper on the table spread wide open.

"Read that!"

"Well, what?" said she with a face so calm that it roused up in him a feeling of revolt.

"Ah! keep up that air of innocence!"

"I don't understand what you mean."

"'Tis you who are selling out Madame Arnoux yourself!"

She read over the announcement again.

"Where is her name?"

"Oh! 'tis her furniture. You know that as well as I do."

"What does that signify to me?" said Rosanette, shrugging her shoulders.

"What does it signify to you? But you are taking your revenge, that's all. This is the consequence of your persecutions. Haven't you outraged her so far as to call at her house? — you, a worthless creature! and this to the most saintly, the most charming, the best woman that ever lived! Why do you set your heart on ruining her?"

"I assure you, you are mistaken!"

"Come now! As if you had not put Sénécal forward to do this!"

"What nonsense!"

Then he was carried away with rage.

"You lie! you lie! you wretch! You are jealous of her! You have got a judgment against her husband! Sénécal is already mixed up in your affairs. He detests Arnoux; and your two hatreds have entered into a combination with one another. I saw how delighted he was when you won that action of yours about the kaolin shares. Are you going to deny this?"

"I give you my word — — "

"Oh, I know what that's worth — your word!"

And Frederick reminded her of her lovers, giving their names and circumstantial details. Rosanette drew back, all the colour fading from her face.

"You are astonished at this. You thought I was blind because I shut my eyes. Now I have had enough of it. We do not die through the treacheries of a woman of your sort. When they become too monstrous we get out of the way. To inflict punishment on account of them would be only to degrade oneself."

She twisted her arms about.

"My God, who can it be that has changed him?"

"Nobody but yourself."

"And all this for Madame Arnoux!" exclaimed Rosanette, weeping.

He replied coldly:

"I have never loved any woman but her!"

At this insult her tears ceased to flow.

"That shows your good taste! A woman of mature years, with a complexion like liquorice, a thick waist, big eyes like the ventholes of a cellar, and just as empty! As you like her so much, go and join her!"

"This is just what I expected. Thank you!"

Rosanette remained motionless, stupefied by this extraordinary behaviour.

She even allowed the door to be shut; then, with a bound, she pulled him back into the anteroom, and flinging her arms around him: "Why, you are mad! you are mad! this is absurd! I love you!" Then she changed her tone to one of entreaty: "Good heavens! for the sake of our dead infant!"

"Confess that it was you who did this trick!" said Frederick.

She still protested that she was innocent.

"You will not acknowledge it?"

"No!"

"Well, then, farewell! and forever!"

"Listen to me!"

Frederick turned round:

"If you understood me better, you would know that my decision is irrevocable!"

"Oh! oh! you will come back to me again!"

"Never as long as I live!"

And he slammed the door behind him violently.

Rosanette wrote to Deslauriers saying that she wanted to see him at once.

He called one evening, about five days later; and, when she told him about the rupture: "That's all! A nice piece of bad luck!"

She thought at first that he would have been able to bring back Frederick; but now all was lost. She ascertained through the doorkeeper that he was about to be married to Madame Dambreuse.

Deslauriers gave her a lecture, and showed himself an exceedingly gay fellow, quite a jolly dog; and, as it was very late, asked permission to pass the night in an armchair.

Then, next morning, he set out again for Nogent, informing her that he was unable to say when they would meet once more. In a little while, there would perhaps be a great change in his life.

Two hours after his return, the town was in a state of revolution. The news went round that M. Frederick was going to marry Madame Dambreuse. At length the three Mesdemoiselles Auger, unable to stand it any longer, made their way to the house of Madame Moreau, who with an air of pride confirmed this intelligence. Père Roque became quite ill when he heard it. Louise locked herself up; it was even rumoured that she had gone mad.

Meanwhile, Frederick was unable to hide his dejection. Madame Dambreuse, in order to divert his mind, no doubt, from gloomy thoughts, redoubled her attentions. Every afternoon they went out for a drive in her carriage; and, on one occasion, as they were passing along the Place de la Bourse, she took the idea into her head to pay a visit to the public auction-rooms for the sake of amusement.

It was the 1st of December, the very day on which the sale of Madame Arnoux's furniture was to take place. He remembered the date, and manifested his repugnance, declaring that this place was intolerable on account of the crush and the noise. She only wanted to get a peep at it. The brougham drew up. He had no alternative but to accompany her.

In the open space could be seen washhand-stands without basins, the wooden portions of armchairs, old hampers, pieces of porcelain, empty bottles, mattresses; and men in blouses or in dirty frock-coats, all grey with dust, and mean-looking faces, some with canvas sacks over their shoulders, were chatting in separate groups or hailing each other in a disorderly fashion.

Frederick urged that it was inconvenient to go on any further.

"Pooh!"

And they ascended the stairs. In the first room, at the right, gentlemen, with catalogues in their hands, were examining pictures; in another, a collection of Chinese weapons were being sold. Madame Dambreuse wanted to go down again. She looked at the numbers over the doors, and she led him to the end of the corridor towards an apartment which was blocked up with people.

He immediately recognised the two whatnots belonging to the office of *L'Art Industriel*, her work-table, all her furniture. Heaped up at the end of the room according to their respective heights, they formed a long slope from the floor to the windows, and at the other sides of the apartment, the carpets and the curtains hung down straight along the walls. There were underneath steps occupied by old men who had fallen asleep. At the left rose a sort of counter at which the auctioneer, in a white cravat, was lightly swinging a little hammer. By his side a young man was writing, and below him stood a sturdy fellow, between a commercial traveller and a vendor of countermarks, crying out: "Furniture for sale." Three attendants placed the articles on a table, at the sides of which sat in a row second-hand dealers and old-clothes' women. The general public at the auction kept walking in a circle behind them.

When Frederick came in, the petticoats, the neckerchiefs, and even the chemises were being passed on from hand to hand, and then given back. Sometimes they were flung some distance, and suddenly strips of whiteness went flying through the air. After that her gowns were sold, and then one of her hats, the broken feather of which was hanging down, then her furs, and then three pairs of boots; and the disposal by sale of these relics, wherein he could trace in a confused sort of way the very outlines of her form, appeared to him an atrocity, as if he had seen carrion crows mangling her corpse. The atmosphere of the room, heavy with so many breaths, made him feel sick. Madame Dambreuse offered him her smelling-bottle. She said that she found all this highly amusing.

The bedroom furniture was now exhibited. Maître Berthelmot named a price. The crier immediately repeated it in a louder voice, and the three auctioneer's assistants quietly waited for the stroke of the hammer, and then carried off the article sold to an adjoining apartment. In this way disappeared, one after the other, the large blue carpet spangled with camellias, which her dainty feet used to touch so lightly as she advanced to meet him, the little upholstered easy-chair, in which he used to sit facing her when they were alone together, the two screens belonging to the mantelpiece, the ivory of which had been rendered smoother by the touch of her hands, and a velvet pincushion, which was still bristling with pins. It was as if portions of his heart had been carried away with these things; and the monotony of the same voices and the same gestures benumbed him with fatigue, and caused within him a mournful torpor, a sensation like that of death itself.

There was a rustle of silk close to his ear. Rosanette touched him.

It was through Frederick himself that she had learned about this auction. When her first feelings of vexation was over, the idea of deriving profit from it occurred to her mind. She had come to see it in a white satin vest with pearl buttons, a furbelowed gown, tight-fitting gloves on her hands, and a look of triumph on her face.

He grew pale with anger. She stared at the woman who was by his side.

Madame Dambreuse had recognised her, and for a minute they examined each other from head to foot minutely, in order to discover the defect, the blemish — the one perhaps envying the other's youth, and the other filled with spite at the extreme good form, the aristocratic simplicity of her rival.

At last Madame Dambreuse turned her head round with a smile of inexpressible insolence.

The crier had opened a piano — her piano! While he remained standing before it he ran the fingers of his right hand over the keys, and put up the instrument at twelve hundred francs; then he brought down the figures to one thousand, then to eight hundred, and finally to seven hundred.

Madame Dambreuse, in a playful tone, laughed at the appearance of some socket that was out of gear.

The next thing placed before the second-hand dealers was a little chest with medallions and silver corners and clasps, the same one which he had seen at the first dinner in the Rue de Choiseul, which had subsequently been in Rosanette's house, and again transferred back to Madame Arnoux's residence. Often, during their conversations his eyes wandered towards it. He was bound to it by the dearest memories, and his soul was melting with tender emotions about it, when suddenly Madame Dambreuse said: "Look here! I am going to buy that!"

"But it is not a very rare article," he returned.

She considered it, on the contrary, very pretty, and the appraiser commended its delicacy.

"A gem of the Renaissance! Eight hundred francs, messieurs! Almost entirely of silver! With a little whiting it can be made to shine brilliantly."

And, as she was pushing forward through the crush of people:

"What an odd idea!" said Frederick.

"You are annoyed at this!"

"No! But what can be done with a fancy article of that sort?"

"Who knows? Love-letters might be kept in it, perhaps!"

She gave him a look which made the allusion very clear.

"A reason the more for not robbing the dead of their secrets."

"I did not imagine she was dead." And then in a loud voice she went on to bid: "Eight hundred and eighty francs!"

"What you're doing is not right," murmured Frederick.

She began to laugh.

"But this is the first favour, dear, that I am asking from you."

"Come, now! doesn't it strike you that at this rate you won't be a very considerate husband?"

Some one had just at that moment made a higher bid.

"Nine hundred francs!"

"Nine hundred francs!" repeated Maître Berthelmot.

"Nine hundred and ten — fifteen — twenty — thirty!" squeaked the auctioneer's crier, with jerky shakes of his head as he cast a sweeping glance at those assembled around him.

"Show me that I am going to have a wife who is amenable to reason," said Frederick.

And he gently drew her towards the door.

The auctioneer proceeded:

"Come, come, messieurs; nine hundred and thirty. Is there any bidder at nine hundred and thirty?"

Madame Dambreuse, just as she had reached the door, stopped, and raising her voice to a high pitch: "One thousand francs!"

There was a thrill of astonishment, and then a dead silence.

"A thousand francs, messieurs, a thousand francs! Is nobody advancing on this bid? Is that clear? Very well, then — one thousand francs! going! — gone!"

And down came the ivory hammer. She passed in her card, and the little chest was handed over to her. She thrust it into her muff.

Frederick felt a great chill penetrating his heart.

Madame Dambreuse had not let go her hold of his arm; and she had not the courage to look up at his face in the street, where her carriage was awaiting her.

She flung herself into it, like a thief flying away after a robbery, and then turned towards Frederick. He had his hat in his hand.

"Are you not going to come in?"

"No, Madame!"

And, bowing to her frigidly, he shut the carriage-door, and then made a sign to the coachman to drive away.

The first feeling that he experienced was one of joy at having regained his independence. He was filled with pride at the thought that he had avenged Madame Arnoux by sacrificing a fortune to her; then, he was amazed at his own act, and he felt doubled up with extreme physical exhaustion.

Next morning his man-servant brought him the news.

The city had been declared to be in a state of siege; the Assembly had been dissolved; and a number of the representatives of the people had been imprisoned at Mazas. Public affairs had assumed to his mind an utterly unimportant aspect, so deeply preoccupied was he by his private troubles.

He wrote to several tradesmen countermanding various orders which he had given for the purchase of articles in connection with his projected marriage, which now appeared to him in the light of a rather mean speculation; and he execrated Madame Dambreuse, because, owing to her, he had been very near perpetrating a vile action. He had forgotten the Maréchale, and did not even bother himself about Madame Arnoux — absorbed only in one thought — lost amid the wreck of his dreams, sick at heart, full of grief and disappointment, and in his hatred of the artificial atmosphere wherein he had suffered so much, he longed for the freshness of green fields, the repose of provincial life, a sleeping existence spent beneath his natal roof in the midst of ingenuous hearts. At last, when Wednesday evening arrived, he made his way out into the open air.

On the boulevard numerous groups had taken up their stand. From time to

On the boulevard numerous groups had taken up their stand. From time to time a patrol came and dispersed them; they gathered together again in regular order behind it. They talked freely and in loud tones, made chaffing remarks about the soldiers, without anything further happening.

"What! are they not going to fight?" said Frederick to a workman.

"They're not such fools as to get themselves killed for the well-off people! Let them take care of themselves!"

And a gentleman muttered, as he glanced across at the inhabitants of the faubourgs: "Socialist rascals! If it were only possible, this time, to exterminate them!"

Frederick could not, for the life of him, understand the necessity of so much rancour and vituperative language. His feeling of disgust against Paris was intensified by these occurrences, and two days later he set out for Nogent by the first train.

The houses soon became lost to view; the country stretched out before his gaze. Alone in his carriage, with his feet on the seat in front of him, he pondered over the events of the last few days, and then on his entire past. The recollection of Louise came back to his mind.

"She, indeed, loved me truly! I was wrong not to snatch at this chance of happiness. Pooh! let us not think any more about it!"

Then, five minutes afterwards: "Who knows, after all? Why not, later?"

His reverie, like his eyes, wandered afar towards vague horizons.

"She was artless, a peasant girl, almost a savage; but so good!"

In proportion as he drew nearer to Nogent, her image drew closer to him. As they were passing through the meadows of Sourdun, he saw her once more in imagination under the poplar-trees, as in the old days, cutting rushes on the edges of the pools. And now they had reached their destination; he stepped out of the train.

Then he leaned with his elbows on the bridge, to gaze again at the isle and the garden where they had walked together one sunshiny day, and the dizzy sensation caused by travelling, together with the weakness engendered by his recent emotions, arousing in his breast a sort of exaltation, he said to himself: "She has gone out, perhaps; suppose I were to go and meet her!"

The bell of Saint-Laurent was ringing, and in the square in front of the church there was a crowd of poor people around an open carriage, the only one in the district — the one which was always hired for weddings. And all of a sudden, under the church-gate, accompanied by a number of well-dressed persons in white cravats, a newly-married couple appeared.

He thought he must be labouring under some hallucination. But no! It was, indeed, Louise! covered with a white veil which flowed from her red hair down indeed, Louise! covered with a white veil which flowed from her red hair down to her heels; and with her was no other than Deslauriers, attired in a blue coat embroidered with silver — the costume of a prefect.

How was this?

Frederick concealed himself at the corner of a house to let the procession pass.

Shamefaced, vanquished, crushed, he retraced his steps to the railway-station, and returned to Paris.

The cabman who drove him assured him that the barricades were erected from the Château d'Eau to the Gymnase, and turned down the Faubourg Saint-Martin. At the corner of the Rue de Provence, Frederick stepped out in order to reach the boulevards.

It was five o'clock. A thin shower was falling. A number of citizens blocked up the footpath close to the Opera House. The houses opposite were closed. No one at any of the windows. All along the boulevard, dragoons were galloping behind a row of wagons, leaning with drawn swords over their horses; and the plumes of their helmets, and their large white cloaks, rising up behind them, could be seen under the glare of the gas-lamps, which shook in the wind in the midst of a haze. The crowd gazed at them mute with fear.

In the intervals between the cavalry-charges, squads of policemen arrived on the scene to keep back the people in the streets.

But on the steps of Tortoni, a man — Dussardier — who could be distinguished at a distance by his great height, remained standing as motionless as a caryatide.

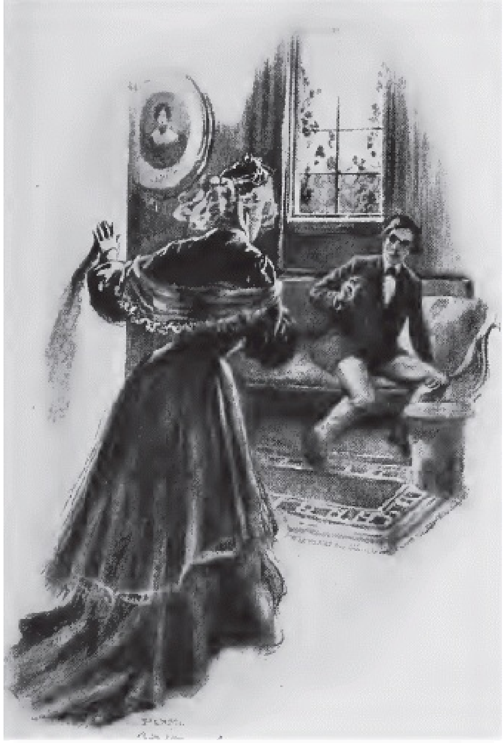
One of the police-officers, marching at the head of his men, with his three-cornered hat drawn over his eyes, threatened him with his sword.

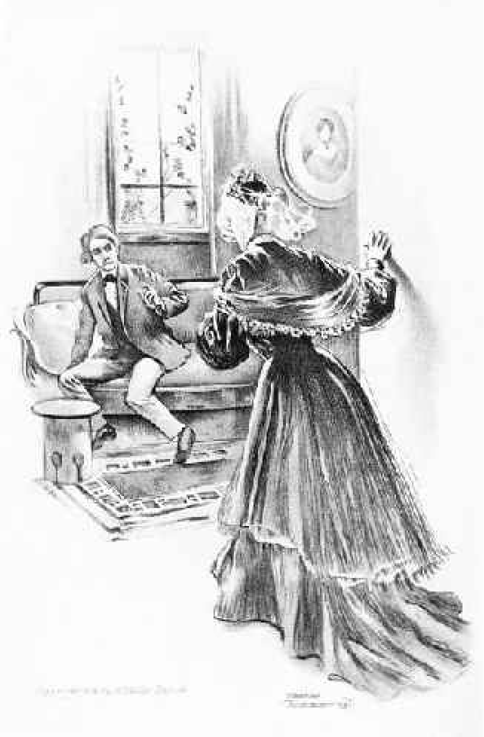
The other thereupon took one step forward, and shouted:

"Long live the Republic!"

The next moment he fell on his back with his arms crossed.

A yell of horror arose from the crowd. The police-officer, with a look of command, made a circle around him; and Frederick, gazing at him in open-mouthed astonishment, recognised Sénécal.





When a woman suddenly came in

CHAPTER XIX.

A Bitter-Sweet Reunion.

He travelled.

He realised the melancholy associated with packet-boats, the chill one feels on waking up under tents, the dizzy effect of landscapes and ruins, and the bitterness of ruptured sympathies.

He returned home.

He mingled in society, and he conceived attachments to other women. But the constant recollection of his first love made these appear insipid; and besides the vehemence of desire, the bloom of the sensation had vanished. In like manner, his intellectual ambitions had grown weaker. Years passed; and he was forced to support the burthen of a life in which his mind was unoccupied and his heart devoid of energy.

Towards the end of March, 1867, just as it was getting dark, one evening, he was sitting all alone in his study, when a woman suddenly came in.

"Madame Arnoux!"

"Frederick!"

She caught hold of his hands, and drew him gently towards the window, and, as she gazed into his face, she kept repeating: "'Tis he! Yes, indeed — 'tis he!"

In the growing shadows of the twilight, he could see only her eyes under the black lace veil that hid her face.

When she had laid down on the edge of the mantelpiece a little pocket-book bound in garnet velvet, she seated herself in front of him, and they both remained silent, unable to utter a word, smiling at one another.

At last he asked her a number of questions about herself and her husband.

They had gone to live in a remote part of Brittany for the sake of economy, so as to be able to pay their debts. Arnoux, now almost a chronic invalid, seemed to have become quite an old man. Her daughter had been married and was living at Bordeaux, and her son was in garrison at Mostaganem.

Then she raised her head to look at him again:

"But I see you once more! I am happy!"

He did not fail to let her know that, as soon as he heard of their misfortune, he had hastened to their house.

"I was fully aware of it!"

"How?"

She had seen him in the street outside the house, and had hidden herself

She had seen him in the street outside the house, and had hidden herself.

"Why did you do that?"

Then, in a trembling voice, and with long pauses between her words: "I was afraid! Yes — afraid of you and of myself!"

This disclosure gave him, as it were, a shock of voluptuous joy. His heart began to throb wildly. She went on: "Excuse me for not having come sooner." And, pointing towards the little pocket-book covered with golden palm-branches: "I embroidered it on your account expressly. It contains the amount for which the Belleville property was given as security."

Frederick thanked her for letting him have the money, while chiding her at the same time for having given herself any trouble about it.

"No! 'tis not for this I came! I was determined to pay you this visit — then I would go back there again."

And she spoke about the place where they had taken up their abode.

It was a low-built house of only one story; and there was a garden attached to it full of huge box-trees, and a double avenue of chestnut-trees, reaching up to the top of the hill, from which there was a view of the sea.

"I go there and sit down on a bench, which I have called 'Frederick's bench.'"

Then she proceeded to fix her gaze on the furniture, the objects of virtù, the pictures, with eager intentness, so that she might be able to carry away the impressions of them in her memory. The Maréchale's portrait was half-hidden behind a curtain. But the gilding and the white spaces of the picture, which showed their outlines through the midst of the surrounding darkness, attracted her attention.

"It seems to me I knew that woman?"

"Impossible!" said Frederick. "It is an old Italian painting."

She confessed that she would like to take a walk through the streets on his arm.

They went out.

The light from the shop-windows fell, every now and then, on her pale profile; then once more she was wrapped in shadow, and in the midst of the carriages, the crowd, and the din, they walked on without paying any heed to what was happening around them, without hearing anything, like those who make their way across the fields over beds of dead leaves.

They talked about the days which they had formerly spent in each other's society, the dinners at the time when *L'Art Industriel* flourished, Arnoux's fads, his habit of drawing up the ends of his collar and of squeezing cosmetic over his moustache, and other matters of a more intimate and serious character. What delight he experienced on the first occasion when he heard her singing! How lovely she looked on her feast-day at Saint-Cloud! He recalled to her memory the little garden at Auteuil, evenings at the theatre, a chance meeting on the boulevard, and some of her old servants, including the negress.

She was astonished at his vivid recollection of these things.

"Sometimes your words come back to me like a distant echo, like the sound of a bell carried on by the wind, and when I read passages about love in books, it seems to me that it is about you I am reading."

"All that people have found fault with as exaggerated in fiction you have made me feel," said Frederick. "I can understand Werther, who felt no disgust at his Charlotte for eating bread and butter."

"Poor, dear friend!"

She heaved a sigh; and, after a prolonged silence:

"No matter; we shall have loved each other truly!"

"And still without having ever belonged to each other!"

"This perhaps is all the better," she replied.

"No, no! What happiness we might have enjoyed!"

"Oh, I am sure of it with a love like yours!"

And it must have been very strong to endure after such a long separation.

Frederick wished to know from her how she first discovered that he loved her.

"It was when you kissed my wrist one evening between the glove and the cuff. I said to myself, 'Ah! yes, he loves me — he loves me;' nevertheless, I was afraid of being assured of it. So charming was your reserve, that I felt myself the object, as it were, of an involuntary and continuous homage."

He regretted nothing now. He was compensated for all he had suffered in the past.

When they came back to the house, Madame Arnoux took off her bonnet. The lamp, placed on a bracket, threw its light on her white hair. Frederick felt as if some one had given him a blow in the middle of the chest.

In order to conceal from her his sense of disillusion, he flung himself on the floor at her feet, and seizing her hands, began to whisper in her ear words of tenderness: "Your person, your slightest movements, seemed to me to have a more than human importance in the world. My heart was like dust under your feet. You produced on me the effect of moonlight on a summer's night, when around us we find nothing but perfumes, soft shadows, gleams of whiteness, infinity; and all the delights of the flesh and of the spirit were for me embodied in your name, which I kept repeating to myself while I tried to kiss it with my lips. I thought of nothing further. It was Madame Arnoux such as you were with your two children, tender, grave, dazzlingly beautiful, and yet so good! This image effaced every other. Did I not think of it alone? for I had always in the very depths of my soul the music of your voice and the brightness of your eyes!"

She accepted with transports of joy these tributes of adoration to the woman whom she could no longer claim to be. Frederick, becoming intoxicated with his own words, came to believe himself in the reality of what he said. Madame Arnoux, with her back turned to the light of the lamp, stooped towards him. He felt the caress of her breath on his forehead, and the undefined touch of her entire body through the garments that kept them apart. Their hands were clasped; the tip of her boot peeped out from beneath her gown, and he said to her, as if ready to faint: "The sight of your foot makes me lose my self-possession."

An impulse of modesty made her rise. Then, without any further movement, she said, with the strange intonation of a somnambulist: "At my age! — he — Frederick! Ah! no woman has ever been loved as I have been. No! Where is the use in being young? What do I care about them, indeed? I despise them — all those women who come here!"

"Oh! very few women come to this place," he returned, in a complaisant fashion.

Her face brightened up, and then she asked him whether he meant to be married.

He swore that he never would.

"Are you perfectly sure? Why should you not?"

"'Tis on your account!" said Frederick, clasping her in his arms.

She remained thus pressed to his heart, with her head thrown back, her lips parted, and her eyes raised. Suddenly she pushed him away from her with a look of despair, and when he implored of her to say something to him in reply, she bent forward and whispered: "I would have liked to make you happy!"

Frederick had a suspicion that Madame Arnoux had come to offer herself to him, and once more he was seized with a desire to possess her — stronger, fiercer, more desperate than he had ever experienced before. And yet he felt, the next moment, an unaccountable repugnance to the thought of such a thing, and, as it were, a dread of incurring the guilt of incest. Another fear, too, had a different effect on him — lest disgust might afterwards take possession of him. Besides, how embarrassing it would be! — and, abandoning the idea, partly through prudence, and partly through a resolve not to degrade his ideal, he turned on his heel and proceeded to roll a cigarette between his fingers.

She watched him with admiration.

"How dainty you are! There is no one like you! There is no one like you!"

It struck eleven.

"Already!" she exclaimed; "at a quarter-past I must go."

She sat down again, but she kept looking at the clock, and he walked up and down the room, puffing at his cigarette. Neither of them could think of anything further to say to the other. There is a moment at the hour of parting when the person that we love is with us no longer.

At last, when the hands of the clock got past the twenty-five minutes, she slowly took up her bonnet, holding it by the strings.

"Good-bye, my friend — my dear friend! I shall never see you again! This is the closing page in my life as a woman. My soul shall remain with you even when you see me no more. May all the blessings of Heaven be yours!"

And she kissed him on the forehead, like a mother.

But she appeared to be looking for something, and then she asked him for a pair of scissors.

She unfastened her comb, and all her white hair fell down.

With an abrupt movement of the scissors, she cut off a long lock from the roots.

"Keep it! Good-bye!"

When she was gone, Frederick rushed to the window and threw it open. There on the footpath he saw Madame Arnoux beckoning towards a passing cab. She stepped into it. The vehicle disappeared.

And this was all.

CHAPTER XX.

"Wait Till You Come to Forty Year."

About the beginning of this winter, Frederick and Deslauriers were chatting by the fireside, once more reconciled by the fatality of their nature, which made them always reunite and be friends again.

Frederick briefly explained his quarrel with Madame Dambreuse, who had married again, her second husband being an Englishman.

Deslauriers, without telling how he had come to marry Mademoiselle Roque, related to his friend how his wife had one day eloped with a singer. In order to wipe away to some extent the ridicule that this brought upon him, he had compromised himself by an excess of governmental zeal in the exercise of his functions as prefect. He had been dismissed. After that, he had been an agent for colonisation in Algeria, secretary to a pasha, editor of a newspaper, and canvasser for advertisements, his latest employment being the office of settling disputed cases for a manufacturing company.

As for Frederick, having squandered two thirds of his means, he was now living like a citizen of comparatively humble rank.

Then they questioned each other about their friends.

Martinon was now a member of the Senate.

Hussonnet occupied a high position, in which he was fortunate enough to have all the theatres and entire press dependent upon him.

Cisy, given up to religion, and the father of eight children, was living in the château of his ancestors.

Pellerin, after turning his hand to Fourrièrism, homœopathy, table-turning, Gothic art, and humanitarian painting, had become a photographer; and he was to be seen on every dead wall in Paris, where he was represented in a black coat with a very small body and a big head.

"And what about your chum Sénécal?" asked Frederick.

"Disappeared — I can't tell you where! And yourself — what about the woman you were so passionately attached to, Madame Arnoux?"

"She is probably at Rome with her son, a lieutenant of chasseurs."

"And her husband?"

"He died a year ago."

"You don't say so?" exclaimed the advocate. Then, striking his forehead:

"Now that I think of it, the other day in a shop I met that worthy Maréchale, holding by the hand a little boy whom she has adopted. She is the widow of a holding by the hand a little boy whom she has adopted. She is the widow of a certain M. Oudry, and is now enormously stout. What a change for the worse! — she who formerly had such a slender waist!"

Deslauriers did not deny that he had taken advantage of the other's despair to assure himself of that fact by personal experience.

"As you gave me permission, however."

This avowal was a compensation for the silence he had maintained with reference to his attempt with Madame Arnoux.

Frederick would have forgiven him, inasmuch as he had not succeeded in the attempt.

Although a little annoyed at the discovery, he pretended to laugh at it; and the allusion to the Maréchale brought back the Vatnaz to his recollection.

Deslauriers had never seen her any more than the others who used to come to the Arnoux's house; but he remembered Regimbart perfectly.

"Is he still living?"

"He is barely alive. Every evening regularly he drags himself from the Rue de Grammont to the Rue Montmartre, to the cafés, enfeebled, bent in two, emaciated, a spectre!"

"Well, and what about Compain?"

Frederick uttered a cry of joy, and begged of the ex-delegate of the provisional government to explain to him the mystery of the calf's head.

"'Tis an English importation. In order to parody the ceremony which the Royalists celebrated on the thirtieth of January, some Independents founded an annual banquet, at which they have been accustomed to eat calves' heads, and at which they make it their business to drink red wine out of calves' skulls while giving toasts in favour of the extermination of the Stuarts. After Thermidor, the Terrorists organised a brotherhood of a similar description, which proves how prolific folly is."

"You seem to me very dispassionate about politics?"

"Effect of age," said the advocate.

And then they each proceeded to summarise their lives.

They had both failed in their objects — the one who dreamed only of love, and the other of power.

What was the reason of this?

"'Tis perhaps from not having taken up the proper line," said Frederick.

"In your case that may be so. I, on the contrary, have sinned through excess of rectitude, without taking into account a thousand secondary things more important than any. I had too much logic, and you too much sentiment."

Then they blamed luck, circumstances, the epoch at which they were born.

Frederick went on:

"We have never done what we thought of doing long ago at Sens, when you wished to write a critical history of Philosophy and I a great mediæval romance about Nogent, the subject of which I had found in Froissart: 'How Messire Brokars de Fenestranges and the Archbishop of Troyes attacked Messire Eustache d'Ambrecicourt.' Do you remember?"

And, exhuming their youth with every sentence, they said to each other:

"Do you remember?"

They saw once more the college playground, the chapel, the parlour, the fencing-school at the bottom of the staircase, the faces of the ushers and of the pupils — one named Angelmare, from Versailles, who used to cut off trousers-straps from old boots, M. Mirbal and his red whiskers, the two professors of linear drawing and large drawing, who were always wrangling, and the Pole, the fellow-countryman of Copernicus, with his planetary system on pasteboard, an itinerant astronomer whose lecture had been paid for by a dinner in the refectory, then a terrible debauch while they were out on a walking excursion, the first pipes they had smoked, the distribution of prizes, and the delightful sensation of going home for the holidays.

It was during the vacation of 1837 that they had called at the house of the Turkish woman.

This was the phrase used to designate a woman whose real name was Zoraide Turc; and many persons believed her to be a Mohammedan, a Turk, which added to the poetic character of her establishment, situated at the water's edge behind the rampart. Even in the middle of summer there was a shadow around her house, which could be recognised by a glass bowl of goldfish near a pot of mignonette at a window. Young ladies in white nightdresses, with painted cheeks and long earrings, used to tap at the panes as the students passed; and as it grew dark, their custom was to hum softly in their hoarse voices at the doorsteps.

This home of perdition spread its fantastic notoriety over all the arrondissement. Allusions were made to it in a circumlocutory style: "The place you know — a certain street — at the bottom of the Bridges." It made the farmers' wives of the district tremble for their husbands, and the ladies grow apprehensive as to their servants' virtue, inasmuch as the sub-prefect's cook had been caught there; and, to be sure, it exercised a fascination over the minds of all the young lads of the place.

Now, one Sunday, during vesper-time, Frederick and Deslauriers, having previously curled their hair, gathered some flowers in Madame Moreau's garden, then made their way out through the gate leading into the fields, and, after taking a wide sweep round the vineyards, came back through the Fishery, and stole into the Turkish woman's house with their big bouquets still in their hands.

Frederick presented his as a lover does to his betrothed. But the great heat, the fear of the unknown, and even the very pleasure of seeing at one glance so many women placed at his disposal, excited him so strangely that he turned exceedingly pale, and remained there without advancing a single step or uttering a single word. All the girls burst out laughing, amused at his embarrassment. Fancying that they were turning him into ridicule, he ran away; and, as Frederick had the money, Deslauriers was obliged to follow him.

They were seen leaving the house; and the episode furnished material for a bit of local gossip which was not forgotten three years later.

They related the story to each other in a prolix fashion, each supplementing the narrative where the other's memory failed; and, when they had finished the recital:

"That was the best time we ever had!" said Frederick.

"Yes, perhaps so, indeed! It was the best time we ever had," said Deslauriers.

L'ÉDUCATION SENTIMENTALE

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PREMIÈRE PARTIE

CHAPITRE 1

Le 15 septembre 1840, vers six heures du matin, la *Ville-de-Montereau,* près de partir, fumait à gros tourbillons devant le quai Saint-Bernard.

Des gens arrivaient hors d’haleine ; des barriques, des câbles, des corbeilles de linge gênaient la circulation ; les matelots ne répondaient à personne ; on se heurtait ; les colis montaient entre les deux tambours, et le tapage s’absorbait dans le bruissement de la vapeur, qui, s’échappant par des plaques de tôle, enveloppait tout d’une nuée blanchâtre, tandis que la cloche, à l’avant, tintait sans discontinuer.

Enfin le navire partit ; et les deux berges, peuplées de magasins, de chantiers et d’usines, filèrent comme deux larges rubans que l’on déroule.

Un jeune homme de dix-huit ans, à longs cheveux et qui tenait un album sous son bras, restait auprès du gouvernail, immobile. À travers le brouillard, il contemplait des clochers, des édifices dont il ne savait pas les noms ; puis il embrassa, dans un dernier coup d’œil, l’île Saint-Louis, la Cité, Notre-Dame ; et bientôt, Paris disparaissant, il poussa un grand soupir.

M. Frédéric Moreau, nouvellement reçu bachelier, s’en retournait à Nogent-sur-Seine, où il devait languir pendant deux mois, avant d’aller *faire son droit*. Sa mère, avec la somme indispensable, l’avait envoyé au Havre voir un oncle, dont elle espérait, pour lui, l’héritage ; il en était revenu la veille seulement ; et il se dédommageait de ne pouvoir séjourner dans la capitale, en regagnant sa province par la route la plus longue.

Le tumulte s’apaisait ; tous avaient pris leur place ; quelques-uns, debout, se chauffaient autour de la machine, et la cheminée crachait avec un râle lent et rythmique son panache de fumée noire ; des gouttelettes de rosée coulaient sur les cuivres ; le pont tremblait sous une petite vibration intérieure, et les deux roues, tournant rapidement, battaient l’eau.

La rivière était bordée par des grèves de sable. On rencontrait des trains de bois qui se mettaient à onduler sous le remous des vagues, ou bien, dans un bateau sans voiles, un homme assis pêchait ; puis les brumes errantes se fondirent, le soleil parut, la colline qui suivait à droite le cours de la Seine peu à peu s’abaissa, et il en surgit une autre, plus proche, sur la rive opposée.

Des arbres la couronnaient parmi des maisons basses couvertes de toits à l’italienne. Elles avaient des jardins en pente que divisaient des murs neufs, des grilles de fer, des gazons, des serres chaudes, et des vases de géraniums, espacés régulièrement sur des terrasses où l’on pouvait s’accouder. Plus d’un, en apercevant ces coquettes résidences, si tranquilles, enviait d’en être le propriétaire, pour vivre là jusqu’à la fin de ses jours, avec un bon billard, une chaloupe, une femme ou quelque autre rêve. Le plaisir tout nouveau d’une excursion maritime facilitait les épanchements. Déjà les farceurs commençaient leurs plaisanteries. Beaucoup chantaient. On était gai. Il se versait des petits verres.

Frédéric pensait à la chambre qu’il occuperait là-bas, au plan d’un drame, à des sujets de tableaux, à des passions futures. Il trouvait que le bonheur mérité par l’excellence de son âme tardait à venir. Il se déclama des vers mélancoliques ; il marchait sur le pont à pas rapides ; il s’avança jusqu’au bout, du côté de la cloche ; — et, dans un cercle de passagers et de matelots, il vit un monsieur qui contait des galanteries à une paysanne, tout en lui maniant la croix d’or qu’elle portait sur la poitrine. C’était un gaillard d’une quarantaine d’années, à cheveux crépus. Sa taille robuste emplissait une jaquette de velours noir, deux émeraudes brillaient à sa chemise de batiste, et son large pantalon blanc tombait sur d’étranges bottes rouges, en cuir de Russie, rehaussées de dessins bleus.

La présence de Frédéric ne le dérangea pas. Il se tourna vers lui plusieurs fois, en l’interpellant par des clins d’œil ; ensuite il offrit des cigares à tous ceux qui l’entouraient. Mais, ennuyé de cette compagnie, sans doute, il alla se mettre plus loin ; Frédéric le suivit.

La conversation roula d’abord sur les différentes espèces de tabacs, puis, tout naturellement, sur les femmes. Le monsieur en bottes rouges donna des conseils au jeune homme ; il exposait des théories, narrait des anecdotes, se citait lui-même en exemple, débitant tout cela d’un ton paterne, avec une ingénuité de corruption divertissante.

Il était républicain : il avait voyagé, il connaissait l’intérieur des théâtres, des restaurants, des journaux, et tous les artistes célèbres, qu’il appelait familièrement par leurs prénoms ; Frédéric lui confia bientôt ses projets ; il les encouragea.

Mais il s’interrompit pour observer le tuyau de la cheminée, puis il marmotta vite un long calcul, afin de savoir “combien chaque coup de piston, à tant de fois par minute, devait, etc.” — Et, la somme trouvée, il admira beaucoup le paysage. Il se disait heureux d’être échappé aux affaires.

Frédéric éprouvait un certain respect pour lui, et ne résista pas à l’envie de savoir son nom. L’inconnu répondit tout d’une haleine :

— “Jacques Arnoux propriétaire de *l’Art industriel,* boulevard Montmartre.”

Un domestique ayant un galon d’or à la casquette vint lui dire :

— “Si Monsieur voulait descendre ? Mademoiselle pleure.”

Il disparut.

L’Art industriel était un établissement hybride, comprenant un journal de peinture et un magasin de tableaux. Frédéric avait vu ce titre-là, plusieurs fois, à l’étalage du libraire de son pays natal, sur d’immenses prospectus, où le nom de Jacques Arnoux se développait magistralement.

Le soleil dardait d’aplomb, en faisant reluire les gabillots de fer autour des mâts, les plaques du bastingage et la surface de l’eau ; elle se coupait à la proue en deux sillons, qui se déroulaient jusqu’au bord des prairies. À chaque détour de la rivière, on retrouvait le même rideau de peupliers pâles. La campagne était toute vide. Il y avait dans le ciel de petits nuages blancs arrêtés, — et l’ennui, vaguement répandu, semblait alanguir la marche du bateau et rendre l’aspect des voyageurs plus insignifiant encore.

À part quelques bourgeois, aux Premières, c’étaient des ouvriers, des gens de boutique avec leurs femmes et leurs enfants. Comme on avait coutume alors de se vêtir sordidement en voyage, presque tous portaient de vieilles calottes grecques ou des chapeaux déteints, de maigres habits noirs, râpés par le frottement du bureau, ou des redingotes ouvrant la capsule de leurs boutons pour avoir trop servi au magasin ; çà et là, quelque gilet à châle laissait voir une chemise de calicot, maculée de café ; des épingles de chrysocale piquaient des cravates en lambeaux ; des sous-pieds cousus retenaient des chaussons de lisière ; deux ou trois gredins qui tenaient des bambous à ganse de cuir lançaient des regards obliques, et des pères de famille ouvraient de gros yeux, en faisant des questions. Ils causaient debout, ou bien accroupis sur leurs bagages ; d’autres dormaient dans des coins ; plusieurs mangeaient. Le pont était sali par des écales de noix, des bouts de cigares, des pelures de poires, des détritus de charcuterie apportée dans du papier ; trois ébénistes, en blouse, stationnaient devant la cantine ; un joueur de harpe en haillons se reposait, accoudé sur son instrument ; on entendait par intervalles le bruit du charbon de terre dans le fourneau, un éclat de voix, un rire ; — et le capitaine, sur la passerelle, marchait d’un tambour à l’autre, sans s’arrêter. Frédéric, pour rejoindre sa place, poussa la grille des Premières, dérangea deux chasseurs avec leurs chiens.

Ce fut comme une apparition :

Elle était assise, au milieu du banc, toute seule ; ou du moins il ne distingua personne, dans l’éblouissement que lui envoyèrent ses yeux. En même temps qu’il passait, elle leva la tête ; il fléchit involontairement les épaules ; et, quand il se fut mis plus loin, du même côté, il la regarda.

Elle avait un large chapeau de paille, avec des rubans roses qui palpitaient au vent, derrière elle. Ses bandeaux noirs, contournant la pointe de ses grands sourcils, descendaient très bas et semblaient presser amoureusement l’ovale de sa figure. Sa robe de mousseline claire, tachetée de petits pois, se répandait à plis nombreux. Elle était en train de broder quelque chose ; et son nez droit, son menton, toute sa personne se découpait sur le fond de l’air bleu.

Comme elle gardait la même attitude, il fit plusieurs tours de droite et de gauche pour dissimuler sa manœuvre ; puis il se planta tout près de son ombrelle, posée contre le banc, et il affectait d’observer une chaloupe sur la rivière.

Jamais il n’avait vu cette splendeur de sa peau brune, la séduction de sa taille, ni cette finesse des doigts que la lumière traversait. Il considérait son panier à ouvrage avec ébahissement, comme une chose extraordinaire. Quels étaient son nom, sa demeure, sa vie, son passé ? Il souhaitait connaître les meubles de sa chambre, toutes les robes qu’elle avait portées, les gens qu’elle fréquentait ; et le désir de la possession physique même disparaissait sous une envie plus profonde, dans une curiosité douloureuse qui n’avait pas de limites.

Une négresse, coiffée d’un foulard, se présenta, en tenant par la main une petite fille, déjà grande. L’enfant, dont les yeux roulaient des larmes, venait de s’éveiller. Elle la prit sur ses genoux. “Mademoiselle n’était pas sage, quoiqu’elle eût sept ans bientôt ; sa mère ne l’aimerait plus ; on lui pardonnait trop ses caprices.” Et Frédéric se réjouissait d’entendre ces choses, comme s’il eût fait une découverte, une acquisition.

Il la supposait d’origine andalouse, créole peut-être ; elle avait ramené des îles cette négresse avec elle ?

Cependant, un long châle à bandes violettes était placé derrière son dos, sur le bordage de cuivre. Elle avait dû, bien des fois, au milieu de la mer, durant les soirs humides, en envelopper sa taille, s’en couvrir les pieds, dormir dedans ! Mais, entraîné par les franges, il glissait peu à peu, il allait tomber dans l’eau, Frédéric fit un bond et le rattrapa. Elle lui dit :

— “Je vous remercie, monsieur.”

Leurs yeux se rencontrèrent.

— “Ma femme, es-tu prête ?” cria le sieur Arnoux, apparaissant dans le capot de l’escalier.

Mlle Marthe courut vers lui, et, cramponnée à son cou, elle tirait ses moustaches. Les sons d’une harpe retentirent, elle voulut voir la musique ; et bientôt le joueur d’instrument, amené par la négresse, entra dans les Premières. Arnoux le reconnut pour un ancien modèle ; il le tutoya, ce qui surprit les assistants. Enfin le harpiste rejeta ses longs cheveux derrière ses épaules, étendit les bras et se mit à jouer.

C’était une romance orientale, où il était question de poignards, de fleurs et d’étoiles. L’homme en haillons chantait cela d’une voix mordante ; les battements de la machine coupaient la mélodie à fausse mesure ; il pinçait plus fort : les cordes vibraient, et leurs sons métalliques semblaient exhaler des sanglots, et comme la plainte d’un amour orgueilleux et vaincu. Des deux côtés de la rivière, des bois s’inclinaient jusqu’au bord de l’eau ; un courant d’air frais passait ; Mme Arnoux regardait au loin d’une manière vague. Quand la musique s’arrêta, elle remua les paupières plusieurs fois, comme si elle sortait d’un songe.

Le harpiste s’approcha d’eux, humblement. Pendant qu’Arnoux cherchait de la monnaie, Frédéric allongea vers la casquette sa main fermée, et, l’ouvrant avec pudeur, il y déposa un louis d’or. Ce n’était pas la vanité qui Je poussait à faire cette aumône devant elle, mais une pensée de bénédiction où il l’associait, un mouvement de cœur presque religieux.

Arnoux, en lui montrant le chemin, l’engagea cordialement à descendre. Frédéric affirma qu’il venait de déjeuner ; il se mourait de faim, au contraire ; et il ne possédait plus un centime au fond de sa bourse.

Ensuite il songea qu’il avait bien le droit, comme un autre, de se tenir dans la chambre.

Autour des tables rondes, des bourgeois mangeaient, un garçon de café circulait ; M. et Mme Arnoux étaient dans le fond, à droite ; il s’assit sur la longue banquette de velours, ayant ramassé un journal qui se trouvait là.

Ils devaient, à Montereau, prendre la diligence de Châlons. Leur voyage en Suisse durerait un mois. Mme Arnoux blâma son mari de sa faiblesse pour son enfant. Il chuchota dans son oreille, une gracieuseté, sans doute, car elle sourit. Puis il se dérangea pour fermer derrière son cou le rideau de la fenêtre.

Le plafond, bas et tout blanc, rabattait une lumière crue. Frédéric, en face, distinguait l’ombre de ses cils. Elle trempait ses lèvres dans son verre, cassait un peu de croûte entre ses doigts ; le médaillon de lapis-lazuli, attaché par une chaînette d’or à son poignet, de temps à autre sonnait contre son assiette. Ceux qui étaient là, pourtant, n’avaient pas l’air de la remarquer.

Quelquefois, par les hublots, on voyait glisser le flanc d’une barque qui accostait le navire pour prendre ou déposer des voyageurs. Les gens attablés se penchaient aux ouvertures et nommaient les pays riverains.

Arnoux se plaignait de la cuisine : il se récria considérablement devant l’addition, et il la fit réduire. Puis il emmena le jeune homme à l’avant du bateau pour boire des grogs. Mais Frédéric s’en retourna bientôt sous la tente, où Mme Arnoux était revenue. Elle lisait un mince volume à couverture grise. Les deux coins de sa bouche se relevaient par moments, et un éclair de plaisir illuminait son front. Il jalousa celui qui avait inventé ces choses dont elle paraissait occupée. Plus il la contemplait, plus il sentait entre elle et lui se creuser des abîmes. Il songeait qu’il faudrait la quitter tout à l’heure, irrévocablement, sans en avoir arraché une parole, sans lui laisser même un souvenir !

Une plaine s’étendait à droite ; à gauche un herbage allait doucement rejoindre une colline, où l’on apercevait des vignobles, des noyers, un moulin dans la verdure, et des petits chemins au-delà, formant des zigzags sur la roche blanche qui touchait au bord du ciel. Quel bonheur de monter côte à côte, le bras autour de sa taille, pendant que sa robe balayerait les feuilles jaunies, en écoutant sa voix, sous le rayonnement de ses yeux ! Le bateau pouvait s’arrêter, ils n’avaient qu’à descendre ; et cette chose bien simple n’était pas plus facile, cependant, que de remuer le soleil !

Un peu plus loin, on découvrit un château, à toit pointu, avec des tourelles carrées. Un parterre de fleurs s’étalait devant sa façade ; et des avenues s’enfonçaient, comme des voûtes noires, sous les hauts tilleuls. Il se la figura passant au bord des charmilles. A ce moment, une jeune dame et un jeune homme se montrèrent sur le perron, entre les caisses d’orangers. Puis tout disparut.

La petite fille jouait autour de lui. Frédéric voulut la baiser. Elle se cacha derrière sa bonne ; sa mère la gronda de n’être pas aimable pour le monsieur qui avait sauvé son châle. Etait-ce une ouverture indirecte ?

— “Va-t-elle enfin me parler ?” se demandait-il.

Le temps pressait. Comment obtenir une invitation chez Arnoux ? Et il n’imagina rien de mieux que de lui faire remarquer la couleur de l’automne, en ajoutant :

— “Voilà bientôt l’hiver, la saison des bals et des dîners !”

Mais Arnoux était tout occupé de ses bagages. La côte de Surville apparut, les deux ponts se rapprochaient, on longea une corderie, ensuite une rangée de maisons basses ; il y avait, en dessous, des marmites de goudron, des éclats de bois ; et des gamins couraient sur le sable, en faisant la roue. Frédéric reconnut un homme avec un gilet à manches, il lui cria :

— “Dépêche-toi.”

On arrivait. Il chercha péniblement Arnoux dans la foule des passagers, et l’autre répondit en lui serrant la main :

— “Au plaisir, cher monsieur !”

Quand il fut sur le quai, Frédéric se retourna. Elle était près du gouvernail, debout. Il lui envoya un regard où il avait tâché de mettre toute son âme comme s’il n’eût rien fait, elle demeura immobile. Puis, sans égard aux salutations de son domestique :

— “Pourquoi n’as-tu pas amené la voiture jusqu’ici ?”

Le bonhomme s’excusait.

— “Quel maladroit ! Donne-moi de l’argent !” Et il alla manger dans une auberge.

Un quart d’heure après, il eut envie d’entrer comme par hasard dans la cour des diligences. Il la verrait encore, peut-être ?

— “A quoi bon ?” se dit-il.

Et l’américaine l’emporta. Les deux chevaux n’appartenaient pas à sa mère. Elle avait emprunté celui de M. Chambrion, le receveur, pour l’atteler auprès du sien. Isidore, parti la veille, s’était reposé à Bray jusqu’au soir et avait couché à Montereau, si bien que les bêtes rafraîchies trottaient lestement.

Des champs moissonnés se prolongeaient à n’en plus finir. Deux lignes d’arbres bordaient la route, les tas de cailloux se succédaient ; et peu à peu, Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, Ablon, Châtillon, Corbeil et les autres pays, tout son voyage lui revint à la mémoire, d’une façon si nette qu’il distinguait maintenant des détails nouveaux, des particularités plus intimes ; sous le dernier volant de sa robe, son pied passait dans une mince bottine en soie, de couleur marron ; la tente de coutil formait un large dais sur sa tête, et les petits glands rouges de la bordure tremblaient à la brise, perpétuellement.

Elle ressemblait aux femmes des livres romantiques. Il n’aurait voulu rien ajouter, rien retrancher à sa personne. L’univers venait tout à coup de s’élargir. Elle était le point lumineux où l’ensemble des choses convergeait ; et, bercé par le mouvement de la voiture, les paupières à demi closes, le regard dans les nuages, il s’abandonnait à une joie rêveuse et infinie.

A Bray, il n’attendit pas qu’on eût donné l’avoine, il alla devant, sur la route, tout seul. Arnoux l’avait appelée “Marie !” Il cria très haut “Marie !” Sa voix se perdit dans l’air.

Une large couleur de pourpre enflammait le ciel à l’occident. De grosses meules de blé, qui se levaient au milieu des chaumes, projetaient des ombres géantes. Un chien se mit à aboyer dans une ferme, au loin. Il frissonna, pris d’une inquiétude sans cause.

Quand Isidore l’eut rejoint, il se plaça sur le siège pour conduire. Sa défaillance était passée. Il était bien résolu à s’introduire, n’importe comment, chez les Arnoux, et à se lier avec eux. Leur maison devait être amusante, Arnoux lui plaisait d’ailleurs ; puis, qui sait ? Alors, un flot de sang lui monta au visage : ses tempes bourdonnaient, il fit claquer son fouet, secoua les rênes, et il menait les chevaux tel train, que le vieux cocher répétait :

— “Doucement ! doucement vous les rendrez poussifs.”

Peu à peu Frédéric se calma, et il écouta parler son domestique.

On attendait Monsieur avec grande impatience. Mlle Louise avait pleuré pour partir dans la voiture.

— “Qu’est-ce donc, Mlle Louise ?”

— “La petite à M. Roque, vous savez ?”

— “Ah ! j’oubliais !” répliqua Frédéric, négligemment.

Cependant, les deux chevaux n’en pouvaient plus. Ils boitaient l’un et l’autre ; et neuf heures sonnaient à Saint-Laurent lorsqu’il arriva sur la place d’Armes, devant la maison de sa mère. Cette maison, spacieuse, avec un jardin donnant sur la campagne, ajoutait à la considération de Mme Moreau, qui était la personne du pays la plus respectée.

Elle sortait d’une vieille famille de gentilshommes, éteinte maintenant. Son mari, un plébéien que ses parents lui avaient fait épouser, était mort d’un coup d’épée, pendant sa grossesse, en lui laissant une fortune compromise. Elle recevait trois fois la semaine et donnait de temps à autre un beau dîner. Mais le nombre des bougies était calculé d’avance, et elle attendait impatiemment ses fermages. Cette gêne, dissimulée comme un vice, la rendait sérieuse. Cependant, sa vertu s’exerçait sans étalage de pruderie, sans aigreur. Ses moindres charités semblaient de grandes aumônes. On la consultait sur le choix des domestiques, l’éducation des jeunes filles, l’art des confitures, et Monseigneur descendait chez elle dans ses tournées épiscopales.

Mme Moreau nourrissait une haute ambition pour son fils. Elle n’aimait pas à entendre blâmer le Gouvernement, par une sorte de prudence anticipée. Il aurait besoin de protections d’abord ; puis, grâce à ses moyens, il deviendrait conseiller d’Etat, ambassadeur, ministre. Ses triomphes au collège de Sens légitimaient cet orgueil il avait remporté le prix d’honneur.

Quand il entra dans le salon, tous se levèrent à grand bruit, on l’embrassa ; et avec les fauteuils et les chaises on fit un large demi-cercle autour de la cheminée. M. Gamblin lui demanda immédiatement son opinion sur Mme Lafargel. Ce procès. la fureur de l’époque, ne manqua pas d’amener une discussion violente ; Mme Moreau l’arrêta, au regret toutefois de M. Gamblin ; il la jugeait utile pour le jeune homme, en sa qualité de futur jurisconsulte, et il sortit du salon, piqué.

Rien ne devait surprendre dans un ami du père Roque A propos du père Roque, on parla de M. Dambreuse, qui venait d’acquérir le domaine de la Fortelle. Mais le Percepteur avait entraîné Frédéric à l’écart, pour savoir ce qu’il pensait du dernier ouvrage de M. Guizot. Tous désiraient connaître ses affaires ; et Mme Benoît s’y prit adroitement en s’informant de son oncle. Comment allait ce bon parent ? Il ne donnait plus de ses nouvelles. N’avait-il pas un arrière-cousin en Amérique ?

La cuisinière annonça que le potage de Monsieur était servi. On se retira, par discrétion. Puis, dès qu’ils furent seuls, dans la salle, sa mère lui dit, à voix basse :

— “Eh bien ?”

Le vieillard l’avait reçu très cordialement, mais sans montrer ses intentions.

Mme Moreau soupira.

— “Où est-elle, à présent ?” songeait-il.

La diligence roulait, et, enveloppée dans le châle sans doute, elle appuyait contre le drap du coupé sa belle tête endormie.

Ils montaient dans leurs chambres quand un garçon du Cygne de la Croix apporta un billet.

— “Qu’est-ce donc ?”

— “C’est Deslauriers qui a besoin de moi”, dit-il.

— “Ah ! ton camarade !” fit Mme Moreau avec un ricanement de mépris. “L’heure est bien choisie, vraiment !”

Frédéric hésitait. Mais l’amitié fut plus forte. Il prit son chapeau.

— “Au moins, ne sois pas longtemps !” lui dit sa mère.

CHAPITRE 2

Le père de Charles Deslauriers, ancien capitaine de ligne, démissionnaire en 1818, était revenu se marier à Nogent, et, avec l’argent de la dot, avait acheté une charge d’huissier, suffisant à peine pour le faire vivre. Aigri par de longues injustices, souffrant de ses vieilles blessures, et toujours regrettant l’Empereur, il dégorgeait sur son entourage les colères qui l’étouffaient. Peu d’enfants furent plus battus que son fils. Le gamin ne cédait pas, malgré les coups. Sa mère, quand elle tâchait de s’interposer, était rudoyée comme lui. Enfin le Capitaine le plaça dans son étude, et tout le long du jour, il le tenait courbé sur son pupitre à copier des actes, ce qui lui rendit l’épaule droite visiblement plus forte que l’autre.

En 1833, d’après l’invitation de M. le président, le Capitaine vendit son étude. Sa femme mourut d’un cancer. Il alla vivre à Dijon ; ensuite il s’établit marchand d’hommes à Troyes ; et, ayant obtenu pour Charles une demi-bourse, le mit au collège de Sens, où Frédéric le reconnut. Mais l’un avait douze ans, l’autre quinze ; d’ailleurs, mille différences de caractère et d’origine les séparaient.

Frédéric possédait dans sa commode toutes sortes de provisions, des choses recherchées, un nécessaire de toilette, par exemple. Il aimait à dormir tard le matin, à regarder les hirondelles, à lire des pièces de théâtre, et, regrettant les douceurs de la maison, il trouvait rude la vie de collège.

Elle semblait bonne au fils de l’huissier. Il travaillait si bien, qu’au bout de la seconde année, il passa dans la classe de Troisième. Cependant, à cause de sa pauvreté, ou de son humeur querelleuse, une sourde malveillance l’entourait. Mais un domestique, une fois, l’ayant appelé enfant de gueux, en pleine cour des Moyens, il lui sauta à la gorge et l’aurait tué, sans trois maîtres d’études qui intervinrent. Frédéric, emporté d’admiration, le serra dans ses bras. A partir de ce jour, l’intimité fut complète. L’affection d’un grand, sans doute, flatta la vanité du petit, et l’autre accepta comme un bonheur ce dévouement qui s’offrait.

Son père, pendant les vacances, le laissait au collège. Une traduction de Platon ouverte par hasard l’enthousiasma. Alors il s’éprit d’études métaphysiques ; et ses progrès furent rapides, car il les abordait avec des forces jeunes et dans l’orgueil d’une intelligence qui s’affranchit ; Jouffroy, Cousin, Laromiguière, Malebranche, les Ecossais, tout ce que la bibliothèque contenait, y passa. Il avait eu besoin d'en voler la clef, pour se procurer des livres.

Les distractions de Frédéric étaient moins sérieuses. Il dessina dans la rue des Trois-Rois la généalogie du Christ, sculptée sur un poteau, puis le portail de la cathédrale. Après les drames moyen âge, il entama les mémoires : Froissart, Comines, Pierre de l'Estoile, Brantôme.

Les images que ces lectures amenaient à son esprit l'obsédaient si fort, qu'il éprouvait le besoin de les reproduire. Il ambitionnait d'être un jour le Walter Scott de la France. Deslauriers méditait un vaste système de philosophie, qui aurait les applications les plus lointaines.

Ils causaient de tout cela, pendant les récréations, dans la cour, en face de l'inscription morale peinte sous l'horloge ; ils en chuchotaient dans la chapelle, à la barbe de saint Louis ; ils en rêvaient dans le dortoir, d'où l'on domine un cimetière. Les jours de promenade, ils se rangeaient derrière les autres, et ils parlaient interminablement.

Ils parlaient de ce qu'ils feraient plus tard, quand ils seraient sortis du collège. D'abord, ils entreprendraient un grand voyage avec l'argent que Frédéric prélèverait sur sa fortune, à sa majorité. Puis ils reviendraient à Paris, ils travailleraient ensemble, ne se quitteraient pas ; — et, comme délassement à leurs travaux, ils auraient des amours de princesses dans des boudoirs de satin, ou de fulgurantes orgies avec des courtisanes illustres. Des doutes succédaient à leurs emportements d'espoir. Après des crises de gaieté verbeuse, ils tombaient dans des silences profonds.

Les soirs d'été, quand ils avaient marché longtemps par les chemins pierreux au bord des vignes, ou sur la grande route en pleine campagne, et que les blés ondulaient au soleil, tandis que des senteurs d'angélique passaient dans l'air, une sorte d'étouffement les prenait, et ils s'étendaient sur le dos, étourdis, enivrés. Les autres, en manches de chemise, jouaient aux barres ou faisaient partir des cerfs-volants. Le pion les appelait. On s'en revenait, en suivant les jardins que traversaient de petits ruisseaux, puis les boulevards ombragés par les vieux murs ; les rues désertes sonnaient sous leurs pas ; la grille s'ouvrait, on remontait l'escalier ; et ils étaient tristes comme après de grandes débauches.

M. le censeur prétendait qu'ils s'exaltaient mutuellement. Cependant, si Frédéric travailla dans les hautes classes, ce fut par les exhortations de son ami ; et, aux vacances de 1837, il l'emmena chez sa mère.

Le jeune homme déplut à Mme Moreau. Il mangea extraordinairement, il refusa d'assister le dimanche aux offices, il tenait des discours républicains ; enfin, elle crut savoir qu'il avait conduit son fils dans des lieux déshonnêtes. On surveilla leurs relations. Ils ne s'en aimèrent que davantage ; et les adieux furent pénibles, quand Deslauriers, l'année suivante, partit du collège, pour étudier le droit à Paris.

Frédéric comptait bien l’y rejoindre. ils ne s’étaient pas vus depuis deux ans ; et, leurs embrassades étant finies, ils allèrent sur les ponts afin de causer plus à l’aise.

Le Capitaine, qui tenait maintenant un billard à Villenauxe, s’était fâché rouge lorsque son fils avait réclamé ses comptes de tutelle, et même lui avait coupé les vivres, tout net. Mais comme il voulait concourir plus tard pour une chaire de professeur à l’Ecole et qu’il n’avait pas d’argent, Deslauriers acceptait à Troyes une place de maître clerc chez un avoué. A force de privations, il économiserait quatre mille francs ; et, s’il ne devait rien toucher de la succession maternelle, il aurait toujours de quoi travailler librement, pendant trois années, en attendant une position. Il fallait donc abandonner leur vieux projet de vivre ensemble dans la Capitale, pour le présent du moins.

Frédéric baissa la tête. C’était le premier de ses rêves qui s’écroulait.

— “Console-toi”, dit le fils du capitaine, “la vie est longue : nous sommes jeunes. Je te rejoindrai ! N’y pense plus !”

Il le secouait par les mains, et, pour le distraire, lui fit des questions sur son voyage.

Frédéric n’eut pas grand’chose à narrer. Mais, au souvenir de Mme Arnoux, son chagrin s’évanouit. Il ne paria pas d’elle, retenu par une pudeur. Il s’étendit en revanche sur Arnoux, rapportant ses discours, ses manières, ses relations ; et Deslauriers l’engagea fortement à cultiver cette connaissance.

Frédéric, dans ces derniers temps n’avait rien écrit ses opinions littéraires étaient changées : il estimait pardessus tout la passion ; Werther, René, Frank, Lara, Lélia et d’autres plus médiocres l’enthousiasmaient presque également. Quelquefois la musique lui semblait seule capable d’exprimer ses troubles intérieurs ; alors, il rêvait des symphonies ; ou bien la surface des choses l’appréhendait, et il voulait peindre. Il avait composé des vers, pourtant ; Deslauriers les trouva fort beaux, mais sans demander une autre pièce.

Quant à lui, il ne donnait plus dans la métaphysique. L’économie sociale et la Révolution française le préoccupaient. C’était, à présent, un grand diable de vingt-deux ans, maigre, avec une large bouche, l’air résolu. Il portait, ce soir-là, un mauvais paletot de lasting ; et ses souliers étaient blancs de poussière, car il avait fait la route de Villenauxe à pied, exprès pour voir Frédéric.

Isidore les aborda. Madame priait Monsieur de revenir, et, craignant qu’il n’eût froid, elle lui envoyait son manteau.

— “Reste donc !” dit Deslauriers.

Et ils continuèrent à se promener d’un bout à l’autre des deux ponts qui s’appuient sur l’île étroite, formée par le canal et la rivière.

Quand ils allaient du côté de Nogent, ils avaient, en face, un pâté de maisons s’inclinant quelque peu ; à droite, l’église apparaissait derrière les moulins de bois dont les vannes étaient fermées ; et, à gauche les haies d’arbustes, le long de la rive, terminaient des jardins, que l’on distinguait à peine. Mais, du côté de Paris, la grande route descendait en ligne droite, et des prairies se perdaient au loin, dans les vapeurs de la nuit. Elle était silencieuse et d’une clarté blanchâtre. Des odeurs de feuillage humide montaient jusqu’à eux ; la chute de la prise d’eau, cent pas plus loin, murmurait, avec ce gros bruit doux que font les ondes dans les ténèbres.

Deslauriers s’arrêta, et il dit :

— “Ces bonnes gens qui dorment tranquilles, c’est drôle ! Patience ! un nouveau 89 se prépare ! On est las de constitutions, de chartes, de subtilités, de mensonges ! Ah ! si j’avais un journal ou une tribune, comme je vous secouerais tout cela ! Mais, pour entreprendre n’importe quoi, il faut de l’argent ! Quelle malédiction que d’être le fils d’un cabaretier et de perdre sa jeunesse à la quête de son pain !”

Il baissa la tête, se mordit les lèvres, et il grelottait sous son vêtement mince.

Frédéric lui jeta la moitié de son manteau sur les épaules. Ils s’en enveloppèrent tous deux ; et, se tenant par la taille, ils marchaient dessous, côte à côte.

— “Comment veux-tu que je vive là-bas, sans toi ?” disait Frédéric. L’amertume de son ami avait ramené sa tristesse. “J’aurais fait quelque chose avec une femme qui m’eût aimé… Pourquoi ris-tu ? L’amour est la pâture et comme l’atmosphère du génie. Les émotions extraordinaires produisent les œuvres sublimes. Quant à chercher celle qu’il me faudrait, j’y renonce ! D’ailleurs, si jamais je la trouve, elle me repoussera. Je suis de la race des déshérités, et je m’éteindrai avec un trésor qui était de strass ou de diamant, je n’en sais rien.”

L’ombre de quelqu’un s’allongea sur les pavés, en même temps qu’ils entendirent ces mots :

— “Serviteur, messieurs !”

Celui qui les prononçait était un petit homme, habillé d’une ample redingote brune, et coiffé d’une casquette laissant paraître sous la visière un nez pointu.

— “M. Roque ?” dit Frédéric.

— “Lui-même !” reprit la voix.

Le Nogentais justifia sa présence en contant qu’il revenait d’inspecter ses pièges à loup, dans son jardin, au bord de l’eau.

— “Et vous voilà de retour dans nos pays ? Très bien ! j’ai appris cela par ma fillette. La santé est toujours bonne, j’espère ? Vous ne partez pas encore ?”

Et il s’en alla, rebuté, sans doute, par l’accueil de Frédéric.

Mme Moreau, en effet, ne le fréquentait pas ; le père Roque vivait en concubinage avec sa bonne, et on le considérait fort peu, bien qu’il fût le croupier d’élections, le régisseur de M. Dambreuse.

— “Le banquier qui demeure rue d’Anjou ?” reprit Deslauriers. “Sais-tu ce que tu devrais faire, mon brave ?”

Isidore les interrompit encore une fois. Il avait ordre de ramener Frédéric, définitivement. Madame s’inquiétait, de son absence.

— “Bien, bien ! on y va”, dit Deslauriers ; “il ne découchera pas.”

Et, le domestique étant parti :

— “Tu devrais prier ce vieux de t’introduire chez les Dambreuse ; rien n’est utile comme de fréquenter une maison riche ! Puisque tu as un habit noir et des gants blancs, profites-en ! Il faut que tu ailles dans ce monde là ! Tu m’y mèneras plus tard. Un homme à millions, pense donc ! Arrange-toi pour lui plaire, et à sa femme aussi. Deviens son amant !”

Frédéric se récriait.

— “Mais je te dis là des choses classiques, il me semble ? Rappelle-toi Rastignac dans la Comédie humaine ! Tu réussiras, j’en suis sûr !”

Frédéric avait tant de confiance en Deslauriers, qu’il se sentit ébranlé, et oubliant Mme Arnoux, ou la comprenant dans la prédiction faite sur l’autre, il ne put s’empêcher de sourire.

Le clerc ajouta :

— “Dernier conseil : passe tes examens ! Un titre est toujours bon ; et lâche-moi franchement tes poètes catholiques et sataniques, aussi avancés en philosophie qu’on l’était au XIIe siècle. Ton désespoir est bête. De très grands particuliers ont eu des commencements plus difficiles, à commencer par Mirabeau. D’ailleurs, notre séparation ne sera pas si longue. Je ferai rendre gorge à mon filou de père. Il est temps que je m’en retourne, adieu ! — ” As-tu cent sous pour que je paye mon dîner ? "

Frédéric lui donna dix francs, le reste de la somme prise le matin à Isidore.

Cependant à vingt toises des ponts, sur la rive gauche, une lumière brillait dans la lucarne d’une maison basse.

Deslauriers l’aperçut. Alors, il dit emphatiquement, tout en retirant son chapeau :

— “Vénus, reine des cieux, serviteur ! Mais la Pénurie est la mère de la Sagesse. Nous a-t-on assez calomniés pour ça, miséricorde !”

Cette allusion à une aventure commune les mit en joie. Ils riaient très haut, dans les rues.

Puis, ayant soldé sa dépense à l’auberge, Deslauriers reconduisit Frédéric jusqu’au carrefour de l’Hôtel-Dieu ; — et, après une longue étreinte, les deux amis se séparèrent.

CHAPITRE 3

Deux mois plus tard, Frédéric, débarqué un matin rue Coq-Héron, songea immédiatement à faire sa grande visite.

Le hasard l’avait servi. Le père Roque était venu lui apporter un rouleau de papiers, en le priant de les remettre lui-même chez M. Dambreuse ; et il accompagnait l’envoi d’un billet décacheté, où il présentait son jeune compatriote.

Mme Moreau parut surprise de cette démarche. Frédéric dissimula le plaisir qu’elle lui causait.

M. Dambreuse s’appelait de son vrai nom le comte d’Ambreuse ; mais, dès 1825, abandonnant peu à peu sa noblesse et son parti, il s’était tourné vers l’industrie ; et, l’oreille dans tous les bureaux, la main dans toutes les entreprises, à l’affût des bonnes occasions, subtil comme un Grec et laborieux comme un Auvergnat, il avait amassé une fortune que l’on disait considérable ; de plus, il était officier de la Légion d’honneur, membre du conseil général de l’Aube, député, pair de France un de ces jours ; complaisant du reste, il fatiguait le ministre par ses demandes continuelles de secours, de croix, de bureaux de tabac ; et, dans ses bouderies contre le pouvoir, il inclinait au centre gauche. Sa femme, la jolie Mme Dambreuse, que citaient les journaux de modes, présidait les assemblées de charité. En cajolant les duchesses, elle apaisait les rancunes du noble faubourg et laissait croire que M. Dambreuse pouvait encore se repentir et rendre des services.

Le jeune homme était troublé en allant chez eux.

— “J’aurais mieux fait de prendre mon habit. On m’invitera sans doute au bal pour la semaine prochaine ? Que va-t-on me dire ?”

L’aplomb lui revint en songeant que M. Dambreuse n’était qu’un bourgeois, et il sauta gaillardement de son cabriolet sur le trottoir de la rue d’Anjou.

Quand il eut poussé une des deux portes cochères, il traversa la cour, gravit le perron et entra dans un vestibule pavé en marbre de couleur.

Un double escalier droit, avec un tapis rouge à baguettes de cuivre, s’appuyait contre les hautes murailles en stuc luisant. Il y avait, au bas des marches, un bananier dont les feuilles larges retombaient sur le velours de la rampe. Deux candélabres de bronze tenaient des globes de porcelaine suspendus à des chaînettes ; les soupiraux des calorifères béants exhalaient un air lourd ; et l’on n’entendait que le tic-tac d’une grande horloge, dressée à l’autre bout du vestibule, sous une panoplie.

Un timbre sonna ; un valet parut, et introduisit Frédéric dans une petite pièce, où l'on distinguait deux coffres-forts, avec des casiers remplis de cartons. M. Dambreuse écrivait au milieu, sur un bureau à cylindre.

Il parcourut la lettre du père Roque, ouvrit avec son canif la toile qui enfermait les papiers, et les examina.

De loin, à cause de sa taille mince, il pouvait sembler jeune encore. Mais ses rares cheveux blancs, ses membres débiles et surtout la pâleur extraordinaire de son visage, accusaient un tempérament délabré. Une énergie impitoyable reposait dans ses yeux glauques, plus froids que des yeux de verre. Il avait les pommettes saillantes, et des mains à articulations noueuses.

Enfin, s'étant levé, il adressa au jeune homme quelques questions sur des personnes de leur connaissance, sur Nogent, sur ses études ; puis il le congédia en s'inclinant. Frédéric sortit par un autre corridor, et se trouva dans le bas de la cour, auprès des remises.

Un coupé bleu, attelé d'un cheval noir, stationnait devant le perron. La portière s'ouvrit, une dame y monta, et la voiture, avec un bruit sourd, se mit à rouler sur le sable.

Frédéric, en même temps qu'elle, arriva de l'autre côté, sous la porte cochère. L'espace n'étant pas assez large, il fut contraint d'attendre. La jeune femme, penchée en dehors du vasistas, parlait tout bas au concierge. Il n'apercevait que son dos, couvert d'une mante violette. Cependant, il plongeait dans l'intérieur de la voiture, tendue de reps bleu, avec des passementeries et des effilés de soie. Les vêtements de la dame l'emplissaient ; il s'échappait de cette petite boîte capitonnée un parfum d'iris, et comme une vague senteur d'élégances féminines. Le cocher lâcha les rênes, le cheval frôla la borne brusquement, et tout disparut.

Frédéric s'en revint à pied, en suivant les boulevards.

Il regrettait de n'avoir pu distinguer Mme Dambreuse.

Un peu plus haut que la rue Montmartre, un embarras de voitures lui fit tourner la tête ; et, de l'autre côté, en face, il lut sur une plaque de marbre :

JACQUES ARNOUX.

Comment n'avait-il pas songé à elle, plus tôt ? La faute venait de Deslauriers, et il s'avança vers la boutique, il n'entra pas, cependant ; il attendit qu'elle parût.

Les hautes glaces transparentes offraient aux regards, dans une disposition habile, des statuettes, des dessins, des gravures, des catalogues, des numéros de l'Art industriel ; et les prix de l'abonnement étaient répétés sur la porte, que décoraient à son milieu, les initiales de l'éditeur. On apercevait, contre les murs, de grands tableaux dont le vernis brillait, puis, dans le fond deux bahuts, chargés de porcelaines, de bronzes, de curiosités alléchantes ; un petit escalier les séparait, fermé dans le haut par une portière de moquette ; et un lustre en vieux saxe, un tapis vert sur le plancher, avec une table en marqueterie, donnaient à cet intérieur plutôt l'apparence d'un salon que d'une boutique.

Frédéric faisait semblant d'examiner les dessins. Après des hésitations infinies, il entra.

Un employé souleva la portière, et répondit que Monsieur ne serait pas "au magasin" avant cinq heures. Mais si la commission pouvait se transmettre…

— "Non ! je reviendrai", répliqua doucement Frédéric.

Les jours suivants furent employés à se chercher un logement ; et il se décida pour une chambre au second étage, dans un hôtel garni, rue Saint-Hyacinthe.

En portant sous son bras un buvard tout neuf, il se rendit à l'ouverture des cours. Trois cents jeunes gens, nu-tête, emplissaient un amphithéâtre où un vieillard en robe rouge dissertait d'une voix monotone ; des plumes grinçaient sur le papier. Il retrouvait dans cette salle l'odeur poussiéreuse des classes, une chaire de forme pareille, le même ennui ! Pendant quinze jours, il y retourna. Mais on n'était pas encore à l'article 3, qu'il avait lâché le Code civil, et il abandonna les Institutes à la Summa divisio personarum.

Les joies qu'il s'était promises n'arrivaient pas ; et, quand il eut épuisé un cabinet de lecture, parcouru les collections du Louvre, et plusieurs fois de suite été au spectacle, il tomba dans un désœuvrement sans fond.

Mille choses nouvelles ajoutaient à sa tristesse. Il lui fallait compter son linge et subir le concierge, rustre à tournure d'infirmier, qui venait le matin retaper son lit, en sentant l'alcool et en grommelant. Son appartement, orné d'une pendule d'albâtre, lui déplaisait. Les cloisons étaient minces ; il entendait les étudiants faire du punch, rire, chanter.

Las de cette solitude, il rechercha un de ses anciens camarades nommé Baptiste Martinon ; et il le découvrit dans une pension bourgeoise de la rue Saint-Jacques, bûchant sa procédure, devant un feu de charbon de terre.

En face de lui, une femme en robe d'indienne reprisait des chaussettes.

Martinon était ce qu'on appelle un fort bel homme grand, joufflu, la physionomie régulière et des yeux bleuâtres à fleur de tête ; son père, un gros cultivateur, le destinait à la magistrature, — et, voulant déjà paraître sérieux, il portait sa barbe taillée en collier.

Comme les ennuis de Frédéric n'avaient point de cause raisonnable et qu'il ne pouvait arguer d'aucun malheur, Martinon ne comprit rien à ses lamentations sur l'existence. Lui, il allait tous les matins à l'Ecole, se promenait ensuite dans le Luxembourg, prenait le soir sa demi-tasse au café, et, avec quinze cents francs par an et l'amour de cette ouvrière, il se trouvait parfaitement heureux.

— "Quel bonheur !" exclama intérieurement Frédéric.

Il avait fait à l’Ecole une autre connaissance, celle de M. de Cisy, enfant de grande famille et qui semblait une demoiselle, à la gentillesse de ses manières.

M. de Cisy s’occupait de dessin, aimait le gothique. Plusieurs fois ils allèrent ensemble admirer la Sainte-Chapelle et Notre-Dame. Mais la distinction du jeune patricien recouvrait une intelligence des plus pauvres. Tout le surprenait ; il riait beaucoup à la moindre plaisanterie, et montrait une ingénuité si complète, que Frédéric le prit d’abord pour un farceur, et finalement le considéra comme un nigaud.

Les épanchements n’étaient donc possibles avec personne ; et il attendait toujours l’invitation des Dambreuse.

Au jour de l’an, il leur envoya des cartes de visite, mais il n’en reçut aucune.

Il était retourné à l’Art industriel.

Il y retourna une troisième fois, et il vit enfin Arnoux qui se disputait au milieu de cinq à six personnes et répondit à peine à son salut ; Frédéric en fut blessé. Il n’en chercha pas moins comment parvenir jusqu’à elle.

Il eut d’abord l’idée de se présenter souvent, pour marchander des tableaux. Puis il songea à glisser dans la boîte du journal quelques articles “très forts”, ce qui amènerait des relations. Peut-être valait-il mieux courir droit au but, déclarer son amour ? Alors, il composa une lettre de douze pages, pleine de mouvements lyriques et d’apostrophes ; mais il la déchira, et ne fit rien, ne tenta rien, — immobilisé par la peur de l’insuccès.

Au-dessus de la boutique d’Arnoux, il y avait au premier étage trois fenêtres, éclairées chaque soir. Des ombres circulaient par derrière, une surtout ; c’était la sienne ; — et il se dérangeait de très loin pour regarder ces fenêtres et contempler cette ombre.

Une négresse, qu’il croisa un jour dans les Tuileries tenant une petite fille par la main, lui rappela la négresse de Mme Arnoux. Elle devait y venir comme les autres ; toutes les fois qu’il traversait les Tuileries, son cœur battait, espérant la rencontrer. Les jours de soleil, il continuait sa promenade jusqu’au bout des Champs-Elysées.

Des femmes, nonchalamment assises dans des calèches, et dont les voiles flottaient au vent, défilaient près de lui, au pas ferme de leurs chevaux, avec un balancement insensible qui faisait craquer les cuirs vernis. Les voitures devenaient plus nombreuses, et, se ralentissant à partir du Rond-Point, elles occupaient toute la voie. Les crinières étaient près des crinières, les lanternes près des lanternes ; les étriers d’acier, les gourmettes d’argent, les boucles de cuivre, jetaient çà et là des points lumineux entre les culottes courtes, les gants blancs, et les fourrures qui retombaient sur le blason des portières. Il se sentait comme perdu dans un monde lointain. Ses yeux erraient sur les têtes féminines ;

et de vagues ressemblances amenaient à sa mémoire Mme Arnoux. Il se la figurait, au milieu des autres, dans un de ces petits coupés, pareils au coupé de Mme Dambreuse. — Mais le soleil se couchait, et le vent froid soulevait des tourbillons de poussière. Les cochers baissaient le menton dans leurs cravates, les roues se mettaient à tourner plus vite, le macadam grinçait ; et tous les équipages descendaient au grand trot la longue avenue, en se frôlant, se dépassant, s’écartant les uns des autres, puis, sur la place de la Concorde, se dispersaient. Derrière les Tuileries, le ciel prenait la teinte des ardoises. Les arbres du jardin formaient deux masses énormes, violacées par le sommet. Les becs de gaz s’allumaient ; et la Seine, verdâtre dans toute son étendue, se déchirait en moires d’argent contre les piles des ponts.

Il allait dîner, moyennant quarante-trois sols le cachet, dans un restaurant, rue de la Harpe.

Il regardait avec dédain le vieux comptoir d’acajou, les serviettes tachées, l’argenterie crasseuse et les chapeaux suspendus contre la muraille. Ceux qui l’entouraient étaient des étudiants comme lui. Ils causaient de leurs professeurs, de leurs maîtresses. Il s’inquiétait bien des professeurs ! Est-ce qu’il avait une maîtresse ! Pour éviter leurs joies, il arrivait le plus tard possible. Des restes de nourriture couvraient toutes les tables. Les deux garçons fatigués dormaient dans des coins, et une odeur de cuisine. de quinquet et de tabac emplissait la salle déserte.

Puis il remontait lentement les rues. Les réverbères se balançaient, en faisant trembler sur la boue de longs reflets jaunâtres. Des ombres glissaient au bord des trottoirs, avec des parapluies. Le pavé était gras, la brume tombait, et il lui semblait que les ténèbres humides, l’enveloppant, descendaient indéfiniment dans son cœur.

Un remords le prit. Il retourna aux cours. Mais comme il ne connaissait rien aux matières élucidées, des choses très simples l’embarrassèrent.

Il se mit à écrire un roman intitulé : Sylvio, le fils du pêcheur. La chose se passait à Venise. Le héros, c’était lui-même ; l’héroïne, Mme Arnoux. Elle s’appelait Antonia ; — et, pour l’avoir, il assassinait plusieurs gentilshommes, brûlait une partie de la ville et chantait sous son balcon, où palpitaient à la brise les rideaux en damas rouge du boulevard Montmartre. Les réminiscences trop nombreuses dont il s’aperçut le découragèrent ; il n’alla pas plus loin, et son désœuvrement redoubla.

Alors, il supplia Deslauriers de venir partager sa chambre. Ils s’arrangeraient pour vivre avec ses deux mille francs de pension ; tout valait mieux que cette existence intolérable. Deslauriers ne pouvait encore quitter Troyes. Il l’engageait à se distraire, et à fréquenter Sénécal.

Sénécal était un répétiteur de mathématiques, homme de forte tête et de convictions républicaines, un futur Saint-Just, disait le clerc. Frédéric avait monté trois fois ses cinq étages, sans en recevoir aucune visite. Il n'y retourna plus.

Il voulut s'amuser. Il se rendit aux bals de l'Opéra. Ces gaietés tumultueuses le glaçaient dès la porte. D'ailleurs, il était retenu par la crainte d'un affront pécuniaire, s'imaginant qu'un souper avec un domino entraînait à des frais considérables, était une grosse aventure.

Il lui semblait, cependant, qu'on devait l'aimer ! Quelquefois, il se réveillait le cœur plein d'espérance, s'habillait soigneusement comme pour un rendez-vous, et il faisait dans Paris des courses interminables. A chaque femme qui marchait devant lui, ou qui s'avançait à sa rencontre, il se disait : “La voilà !” C'était, chaque fois, une déception nouvelle. L'idée de Mme Arnoux fortifiait ces convoitises. Il la trouverait peut-être sur son chemin ; et il imaginait, pour l'aborder, des complications du hasard, des périls extraordinaires dont il la sauverait.

Ainsi les jours s'écoulaient, dans la répétition des mêmes ennuis et des habitudes contractées. Il feuilletait des brochures sous les arcades de l'Odéon, allait lire la Revue des Deux Mondes au café, entrait dans une salle du Collège de France, écoutait pendant une heure une leçon de chinois ou d'économie politique. Toutes les semaines, il écrivait longuement à Deslauriers, dînait de temps en temps avec Martinon, voyait quelquefois M. de Cisy.

Il loua un piano, et composa des valses allemandes.

Un soir, au théâtre du Palais-Royal, il aperçut, dans une loge d'avant-scène, Arnoux près d'une femme. Etait-ce elle ? L'écran de taffetas vert, tiré au bord de la loge, masquait son visage. Enfin la toile se leva ; l'écran s'abattit. C'était une longue personne, de trente ans environ, fanée, et dont les grosses lèvres découvraient, en riant, des dents splendides. Elle causait familièrement avec Arnoux et lui donnait des coups d'éventail sur les doigts. Puis une jeune fille blonde, les paupières un peu rouges comme si elle venait de pleurer, s'assit entre eux. Arnoux resta dès lors à demi penché sur son épaule, en lui tenant des discours qu'elle écoutait sans répondre. Frédéric s'ingéniait à découvrir la condition de ces femmes, modestement habillées de robes sombres, à cols plats rabattus.

A la fin du spectacle, il se précipita dans les couloirs. La foule les remplissait. Arnoux, devant lui, descendait l'escalier, marche à marche, donnant le bras aux deux femmes.

Tout à coup, un bec de gaz l'éclaira. Il avait un crêpe à son chapeau. Elle était morte, peut-être ? Cette idée tourmenta Frédéric si fortement, qu'il courut le lendemain à l’Art industriel, et, payant vite une des gravures étalées devant la montre, il demanda au garçon de boutique comment se portait M. Arnoux.

Le garçon répondit :

— “Mais très bien !”

Frédéric ajouta en pâlissant :

— “Et Madame ?”

— “Madame, aussi !”

Frédéric oublia d’emporter sa gravure.

L’hiver se termina. Il fut moins triste au printemps, se mit à préparer son examen, et, l’ayant subi d’une façon médiocre, partit ensuite pour Nogent.

Il n’alla point à Troyes voir son ami, afin d’éviter les observations de sa mère. Puis, à la rentrée, il abandonna son logement et prit, sur le quai Napoléon, deux pièces, qu’il meubla. L’espoir d’une invitation chez les Dambreuse l’avait quitté ; sa grande passion pour Mme Arnoux commençait à s’éteindre.

CHAPITRE 4

Un matin du mois de décembre, en se rendant au cours de procédure, il crut remarquer dans la rue Saint-Jacques plus d’animation qu’à l’ordinaire. Les étudiants sortaient précipitamment des cafés, ou, par les fenêtres ouvertes, ils s’appelaient d’une maison à l’autre ; les boutiquiers, au milieu du trottoir, regardaient d’un air inquiet ; les volets se fermaient ; et, quand il arriva dans la rue Soufflot, il aperçut un grand rassemblement autour du Panthéon.

Des jeunes gens, par bandes inégales de cinq à douze, se promenaient en se donnant le bras et abordaient les groupes plus considérables qui stationnaient çà et là ; au fond de la place, contre les grilles, des hommes en blouse péroraient, tandis que, le tricorne sur l’oreille et les mains derrière le dos, des sergents de ville erraient le long des murs, en faisant sonner les dalles sous leurs fortes bottes. Tous avaient un air mystérieux, ébahi ; on attendait quelque chose évidemment ; chacun retenait au bord des lèvres une interrogation.

Frédéric se trouvait auprès d’un jeune homme blond, à figure avenante, et portant moustache et barbiche comme un raffiné du temps de Louis XIII. Il lui demanda la cause du désordre.

— “Je n’en sais rien,” reprit l’autre, “ni eux non plus ! C’est leur mode à présent ! quelle bonne farce !”

Et il éclata de rire.

Les pétitions pour la Réforme, que l’on faisait signer dans la garde nationale, jointes au recensement Humann, d’autres événements encore, amenaient depuis six mois, dans Paris, d’inexplicables attroupements ; et même ils se renouvelaient si souvent, que les journaux n’en parlaient plus.

— “Cela manque de galbe et de couleur”, continua le voisin de Frédéric. “Le cuyde, messire, que nous avons dégénéré ! A la bonne époque de Loys onzième, voire de Benjamin Constant, il y avait plus de mutinerie parmi les escholiers. le les treuve pacifiques comme moutons, bêtes comme cornichons, et idoines à estre épiciers, Pasque-Dieu ! Et voilà ce qu’on appelle la Jeunesse des écoles !”

Il écarta les bras, largement, comme Frédéric Lemaître dans Robert Macaire.

— “Jeunesse des écoles, je te bénis !”

Ensuite, apostrophant un chiffonnier, qui remuait des écailles d’huîtres contre la borne d’un marchand de vin :

— “En fais-tu partie, toi, de la Jeunesse des écoles ?”

Le vieillard releva une face hideuse où l’on distinguait, au milieu d’une barbe grise, un nez rouge, et deux yeux avinés stupides.

— “Non ! tu me parais plutôt un de ces hommes à figure patibulaire que l’on voit, dans divers groupes, semant l’or à pleines mains… Oh ! sème, mon patriarche, sème ! Corromps-moi avec les trésors d’Albion ! Are you English ? Je ne repousse pas les présents d’Artaxerxès Causons un peu de l’union douanière.”

Frédéric sentit quelqu’un lui toucher à l’épaule ; il se retourna. C’était Martinon, prodigieusement pâle.

— “Eh bien !” fit-il en poussant un gros soupir, encore une émeute ! "

Il avait peur d’être compromis, se lamentait. Des hommes en blouse, surtout, l’inquiétaient, comme appartenant à des sociétés secrètes.

— “Est-ce qu’il y a des sociétés secrètes,” dit le jeune homme à moustaches. “C’est une vieille blague du Gouvernement, pour épouvanter les bourgeois !”

Martinon l’engagea à parier plus bas, dans la crainte de la police.

— “Vous croyez encore à la police, vous ? Au fait, que savez-vous, monsieur, si je ne suis pas moi-même un mouchard ?”

Et il le regarda d’une telle manière, que Martinon, fort ému, ne comprit point d’abord la plaisanterie. La foule les poussait, et ils avaient été forcés, tous les trois, de se mettre sur le petit escalier conduisant, par un couloir, dans le nouvel amphithéâtre.

Bientôt la multitude se fendit d’elle-même ; plusieurs têtes se découvrirent ; on saluait l’illustre professeur Samuel Rondelot, qui, enveloppé de sa grosse redingote, levant en l’air ses lunettes d’argent et soufflant de son asthme, s’avançait à pas tranquilles, pour faire son cours. Cet homme était une des gloires judiciaires du XIXe siècle, le rival des Zacharioe, des Rudorff. Sa dignité nouvelle de pair de France n’avait modifié en rien ses allures. On le savait pauvre, et un grand respect l’entourait.

Cependant, du fond de la place, quelques-uns crièrent :

— “A bas Guizot !”

— “A bas Pritchard !”

— “A bas les vendus !”

— “A bas Louis-Philippe !”

La foule oscilla, et, se pressant contre la porte de la cour qui était fermée, elle empêchait le professeur d’aller plus loin. Il s’arrêta devant l’escalier. On l’aperçut bientôt sur la dernière des trois marches. Il parla ; un bourdonnement couvrit sa voix. Bien qu’on l’aimât tout à l’heure, on le haïssait maintenant, car il représentait l’Autorité. Chaque fois qu’il essayait de se faire entendre, les cris recommençaient. Il fit un grand geste pour engager les étudiants à le suivre. Une vocifération universelle lui répondit. Il haussa les épaules dédaigneusement et s’enfonça dans le couloir. Martinon avait profité de sa place pour disparaître en même temps.

— “Quel lâche !” dit Frédéric.

— “Il est prudent !” reprit l’autre.

La foule éclata en applaudissements. Cette retraite du professeur devenait une victoire pour elle. A toutes les fenêtres, des curieux regardaient. Quelques-uns entonnaient la Marseillaise ; d’autres proposaient d’aller chez Béranger.

— “Chez Laffite !”

— “Chez Chateaubriand !”

— “Chez Voltaire !” hurla le jeune homme à moustaches blondes.

Les sergents de ville tâchaient de circuler, en disant le plus doucement qu’ils pouvaient :

— “Partez, messieurs, partez, retirez-vous !”

Quelqu’un cria :

— “A bas les assommeurs !”

C’était une injure usuelle depuis les troubles du mois de septembre. Tous la répétèrent. On huait, on sifflait les gardiens de l’ordre public ; ils commençaient à pâlir ; un d’eux n’y résista plus, et, avisant un petit jeune homme qui s’approchait de trop près, en lui riant au nez, il le repoussa si rudement, qu’il le fit tomber cinq pas plus loin, sur le dos, devant la boutique du marchand de vin. Tous s’écartèrent ; mais presque aussitôt il roula lui-même, terrassé par une sorte d’Hercule dont la chevelure, telle qu’un paquet d’étoupes, débordait sous une casquette en toile cirée.

Arrêté depuis quelques minutes au coin de la rue Saint-Jacques, il avait lâché bien vite un large carton qu’il portait pour bondir vers le sergent de ville et, le tenant renversé sous lui, il labourait sa face à grands coups de poing. Les autres sergents accoururent. Le terrible garçon était si fort, qu’il en fallut quatre, au moins, pour le dompter. Deux le secouaient par le collet, deux autres le tiraient par les bras, un cinquième lui donnait, avec le genou, des bourrades dans les reins, et tous l’appelaient brigand, assassin, émeutier. La poitrine nue et les vêtements en lambeaux, il protestait de son innocence ; il n’avait pu, de sang-froid, voir battre un enfant.

— “Je m’appelle Dussardier ! chez MM. Valinçart frères, dentelles et nouveautés, rue de Cléry. Où est mon carton ? Je veux mon carton” Il répétait : “Dussardier !… rue de Cléry. Mon carton !”

Il s’apaisa pourtant, et, d’un air stoïque, se laissa conduire vers le poste de la rue Descartes. Un flot de monde le suivit. Frédéric et le jeune homme à moustaches marchaient immédiatement par derrière, pleins d’admiration pour le commis et révoltés contre la violence du Pouvoir.

A mesure que l’on avançait, la foule devenait moins grosse.

Les sergents de ville, de temps à autre, se retournaient d’un air féroce ; et les tapageurs n’ayant plus rien à faire, les curieux rien à voir, tous s’en allaient peu à peu. Des passants, que l’on croisait, considéraient Dussardier et se livraient tout haut à des commentaires outrageants. Une vieille femme, sur sa porte, s’écria même qu’il avait volé un pain ; cette injustice augmenta l’irritation des deux amis. Enfin on arriva devant le corps de garde. Il ne restait qu’une vingtaine de personnes. La vue des soldats suffit pour les disperser.

Frédéric et son camarade réclamèrent, hardiment, celui qu’on venait de mettre en prison. Le factionnaire les menaça, s’ils insistaient, de les y fourrer eux-mêmes. Ils demandèrent le chef du poste, et déclinèrent leur nom avec leur qualité d’élèves en droit, affirmant que le prisonnier était leur condisciple.

On les fit entrer dans une pièce toute nue, où quatre bancs s’allongeaient contre les murs de plâtre, enfumés. Au fond, un guichet s’ouvrit. Alors parut le robuste visage de Dussardier, qui, dans le désordre de sa chevelure, avec ses petits yeux francs et son nez carré du bout, rappelait confusément la physionomie d’un bon chien.

— “Tu ne nous reconnais pas ?” dit Hussonnet. C’était le nom du jeune homme à moustaches.

— “Mais…”, balbutia Dussardier.

— “Ne fais donc plus l’imbécile”, reprit l’autre ; “on sait que tu es, comme nous, élève en droit.”

Malgré leurs clignements de paupières, Dussardier ne devinait rien. Il parut se recueillir, puis tout à coup :

— “A-t-on trouvé mon carton ?”

Frédéric leva les yeux, découragé. Hussonnet répliqua.

— “Ah ! ton carton, où tu mets tes notes de cours ? Oui, oui ! rassure-toi !”

Ils redoublaient leur pantomime. Dussardier comprit enfin qu’ils venaient pour le servir ; et il se tut, craignant de les compromettre. D’ailleurs, il éprouvait une sorte de honte en se voyant haussé au rang social d’étudiant et le pareil de ces jeunes hommes qui avaient des mains si blanches.

— “Veux-tu faire dire quelque chose à quelqu’un ?” demanda Frédéric.

— “Non, merci, à personne.”

— “Mais ta famille ?”

Il baissa la tête sans répondre : le pauvre garçon était bâtard. Les deux amis restaient étonnés de son silence.

— “As-tu de quoi fumer ?” reprit Frédéric.

Il se palpa, puis retira du fond de sa poche les débris d’une pipe, — une belle pipe en écume de mer, avec un tuyau en bois noir, un couvercle d’argent et un bout d’ambre.

Depuis trois ans, il travaillait à en faire un chef-d'œuvre. Il avait eu soin d'en tenir le fourneau constamment serré dans une gaine de chamois, de la fumer le plus lentement possible, sans jamais la poser sur du marbre, et, chaque soir, de la suspendre au chevet de son lit. A présent, il en secouait les morceaux dans sa main dont les ongles saignaient ; et, le menton sur la poitrine, les prunelles fixes, béant, il contemplait ces ruines de sa joie avec un regard d'une ineffable tristesse.

— "Si nous lui donnions des cigares, hein ?" dit tout bas Hussonnet, en faisant le geste d'en atteindre.

Frédéric avait déjà posé, au bord du guichet, un porte-cigares rempli.

— "Prends donc ! Adieu, bon courage !"

Dussardier se jeta sur les deux mains qui s'avançaient. Il les serrait frénétiquement, la voix entrecoupée par des sanglots.

— "Comment ?… à moi ! à moi !"

Les deux amis se dérobèrent à sa reconnaissance, sortirent, et allèrent déjeuner ensemble au café Tabourey, devant le Luxembourg.

Tout en séparant le beefsteak, Hussonnet apprit à son compagnon qu'il travaillait dans des journaux de modes et fabriquait des réclames pour l'Art industriel.

— "Chez Jacques Arnoux", dit Frédéric.

— "Vous le connaissez ?"

— "Oui ! non !… C'est-à-dire je l'ai vu, je l'ai rencontré."

Il demanda négligemment à Hussonnet s'il voyait quelquefois sa femme.

— "De temps à autre", reprit le bohème.

Frédéric n'osa poursuivre ses questions ; cet homme venait de prendre une place démesurée dans sa vie ; il paya la note du déjeuner, sans qu'il y eût de la part de l'autre aucune protestation.

La sympathie était mutuelle ; ils échangèrent leurs adresses, et Hussonnet l'invita cordialement à l'accompagner jusqu'à la rue de Fleurus.

Ils étaient au milieu du jardin quand l'employé d'Arnoux, retenant son haleine, contourna son visage dans une grimace abominable et se mit à faire le coq. Alors tous les coqs qu'il y avait aux environs lui répondirent par des cocoricos prolongés.

— "C'est un signal", dit Hussonnet.

Ils s'arrêtèrent près du théâtre Bobino, devant une maison où l'on pénétrait par une allée. Dans la lucarne d'un grenier, entre des capucines et des pois de senteur, une jeune femme se montra, nu-tête, en corset, et appuyant ses deux bras contre le bord de la gouttière.

— "Bonjour, mon ange, bonjour, bibiche", fit Hussonnet, en lui envoyant des baisers.

Il ouvrit la barrière d’un coup de pied, et disparut.

Frédéric l’attendit toute la semaine. Il n’osait aller chez lui, pour n’avoir point l’air impatient de se faire rendre à déjeuner ; mais il le chercha par tout le quartier latin. Il le rencontra un soir, et l’emmena dans sa chambre sur le quai Napoléon.

La causerie fut longue ; ils s’épanchèrent. Hussonnet ambitionnait la gloire et les profits du théâtre. Il collaborait à des vaudevilles non reçus, “avait des masses de plans”, tournait le couplet ; il en chanta quelques-uns. Puis, remarquant dans l’étagère un volume de Hugo et un autre de Lamartine, il se répandit en sarcasmes sur l’école romantique. Ces poètes-là n’avaient ni bon sens ni correction, et n’étaient pas Français, surtout ! Il se vantait de savoir sa langue et épluchait les phrases les plus belles avec cette sévérité hargneuse, ce goût académique qui distinguent les personnes d’humeur folâtre quand elles abordent l’art sérieux.

Frédéric fut blessé dans ses prédilections ; il avait envie de rompre. Pourquoi ne pas hasarder, tout de suite, le mot d’où son bonheur dépendait ? Il demanda au garçon de lettres s’il pouvait le présenter chez Arnoux.

La chose était facile, et ils convinrent du jour suivant.

Hussonnet manqua le rendez-vous ; il en manqua trois autres. Un samedi, vers quatre heures, il apparut. Mais, profitant de la voiture, il s’arrêta d’abord au Théâtre Français pour avoir un coupon de loge ; il se fit descendre chez un tailleur, chez une couturière ; il écrivait des billets chez les concierges. Enfin ils arrivèrent boulevard Montmartre. Frédéric traversa la boutique, monta l’escalier. Arnoux le reconnut dans la glace placée devant son bureau ; et, tout en continuant à écrire, lui tendit la main par-dessus l’épaule.

Cinq ou six personnes, debout, emplissaient l’appartement étroit, qu’éclairait une seule fenêtre donnant sur la cour ; un canapé en damas de laine brune occupant au fond l’intérieur d’une alcôve, entre deux portières d’étoffe semblable. Sur la cheminée couverte de paperasses, il y avait une Vénus en bronze ; deux candélabres, garnis de bougies roses, la flanquaient parallèlement. A droite, près d’un cartonnier, un homme dans un fauteuil lisait le journal, en gardant son chapeau sur sa tête ; les murailles disparaissaient sous des estampes et des tableaux, gravures précieuses ou esquisses de maîtres contemporains, ornées de dédicaces, qui témoignaient pour Jacques Arnoux de l’affection la plus sincère.

— “Cela va toujours bien ?” fit-il en se tournant vers Frédéric.

Et, sans attendre sa réponse, il demanda bas à Hussonnet :

— “Comment l’appelez-vous, votre ami ?”

Puis tout haut :

— “Prenez donc un cigare, sur le cartonnier, dans la boîte.”

L’Art industriel, posé au point central de Paris, était un lieu de rendez-vous commode, un terrain neutre où les rivalités se coudoyaient familièrement. On y voyait ce jour-là, Anténor Braive, le. portraitiste des rois ; Jules Burrieu, qui commençait à populariser par ses dessins les guerres d’Algérie ; le caricaturiste Sombaz, le sculpteur Vourdat, d’autres encore, et aucun ne répondait aux préjugés de l’étudiant. Leurs manières étaient simples, leurs propos libres. Le mystique Lovarias débita un conte obscène ; et l’inventeur du paysage oriental, le fameux Dittmer, portait une camisole de tricot sous son gilet, et prit l’omnibus pour s’en retourner.

Il fut d’abord question d’une nommée Apollonie, un ancien modèle que Burrieu prétendait avoir reconnue sur le boulevard, dans une daumont. Hussonnet expliqua cette métamorphose par la série de ses entreteneurs.

— “Comme ce gaillard-là connaît les filles de Paris !” dit Arnoux.

— “Après vous, s’il en reste, sire”, répliqua le bohème, avec un salut militaire, pour imiter le grenadier offrant sa gourde à Napoléon.

Puis on discuta quelques toiles, où la tête d’Apollonia avait servi. Les confrères absents furent critiqués. On s’étonnait du prix de leurs œuvres ; et tous se plaignaient de ne point gagner suffisamment, lorsque entra un homme de taille moyenne, l’habit fermé par un seul bouton, les yeux vifs, l’air un peu fou.

— “Quel tas de bourgeois vous êtes !” dit-il. “Qu’est-ce que cela fait, miséricorde ! Les vieux qui confectionnaient des chefs-d’œuvre ne s’inquiétaient pas du million. Corrège, Murillo…”

— “Ajoutez Pellerin”, dit Sombaz.

Mais sans relever l’épigramme, il continua de discourir avec tant de véhémence, qu’Arnoux fut contraint de lui répéter deux fois :

— “Ma femme a besoin de vous, jeudi. N’oubliez pas !”

Cette parole ramena la pensée de Frédéric sur Mme Arnoux. Sans doute, on pénétrait chez elle par le cabinet près du divan ? Arnoux, pour prendre un mouchoir, venait de l’ouvrir ; Frédéric avait aperçu, dans le fond, un lavabo. Mais une sorte de grommellement sortit du coin de la cheminée ; c’était le personnage qui lisait son journal, dans le fauteuil. Il avait cinq pieds neuf pouces, les paupières un peu tombantes, la chevelure grise, l’air majestueux — et s’appelait Regimbart.

— “Qu’est-ce donc, citoyen ?” dit Arnoux.

— “Encore une nouvelle canaillerie du Gouvernement !”

Il s’agissait de la destitution d’un maître d’école.

Pellerin reprit son parallèle entre Michel-Ange et Shakespeare. Dittmer s’en allait. Arnoux le rattrapa pour lui mettre dans la main deux billets de banque. Alors, Hussonnet, croyant le moment favorable :

— “Vous ne pourriez pas m’avancer, mon cher patron ?…”

Mais Arnoux s’était rassis et gourmandait un vieillard d’aspect sordide, en lunettes bleues.

— “Ah ! vous êtes joli, père Isaac ! Voilà trois œuvres décriées, perdues ! Tout le monde se fiche de moi ! On les connaît maintenant ! Que voulez-vous que j’en fasse ? Il faudra que je les envoie en Californie !… au diable ! Taisez-vous !”

La spécialité de ce bonhomme consistait à mettre au bas de ces tableaux des signatures de maîtres anciens. Arnoux refusait de le payer ; il le congédia brutalement. Puis, changeant de manières, il salua un monsieur décoré, gourmé, avec favoris et cravate blanche.

Le coude sur l’espagnolette de la fenêtre, il lui parla pendant longtemps, d’un air mielleux. Enfin il éclata :

— “Eh ! je ne suis pas embarrassé d’avoir des courtiers, monsieur le comte !”

Le gentilhomme s’étant résigné, Arnoux lui solda vingt-cinq louis, et, dès qu’il fut dehors :

— “Sont-ils assommants, ces grands seigneurs !”

— “Tous des misérables !” murmura Regimbart.

A mesure que l’heure avançait, les occupations d’Arnoux redoublaient ; il classait des articles, décachetait des lettres, alignait des comptes ; au bruit du marteau dans le magasin, sortait pour surveiller les emballages, puis reprenait sa besogne et, tout en faisant courir sa plume de fer sur le papier, il ripostait aux plaisanteries. Il devait dîner le soir chez son avocat, et partait le lendemain pour la Belgique.

Les autres causaient des choses du jour : le portrait de Cherubini, l’hémicycle des Beaux-Arts l’exposition prochaine. Pellerin déblatérait contre l’Institut. Les cancans, les discussions s’entrecroisaient. L’appartement, bas de plafond, était si rempli, qu’on ne pouvait remuer ; et la lumière des bougies roses passait dans la fumée des cigares comme des rayons de soleil dans la brume.

La porte, près du divan, s’ouvrit, et une grande femme mince entra, — avec des gestes brusques qui faisaient sonner sur sa robe en taffetas noir toutes les breloques de sa montre.

C’était la femme entrevue, l’été dernier, au Palais Royal. Quelques-uns, l’appelant par son nom, échangèrent avec elle des poignées de main. Hussonnet avait enfin arraché une cinquantaine de francs ; la pendule sonna sept heures ; tous se retirèrent.

Arnoux dit à Pellerin de rester, et conduisit Mlle Vatnaz dans le cabinet.

Frédéric n’entendait pas leurs paroles ils chuchotaient. Cependant, la voix féminine s’éleva :

— “Depuis six mois que l’affaire est faite, j’attends toujours !”

Il y eut un long silence, Mlle Vatnaz reparut. Arnoux lui avait encore promis quelque chose.

— “Oh ! oh ! plus tard, nous verrons !”

— “Adieu, homme heureux !” dit-elle, en s’en allant.

Arnoux rentra vivement dans le cabinet, écrasa du cosmétique sur ses moustaches, haussa ses bretelles pour tendre ses sous-pieds ; et, tout en se lavant les mains :

— “Il me faudrait deux dessus de porte, à deux cent cinquante la pièce, genre Boucher, est-ce convenu ?”

— “Soit”, dit l’artiste, devenu rouge.

— “Bon ! et n’oubliez pas ma femme !”

Frédéric accompagna Pellerin jusqu’au haut du faubourg Poissonnière, et lui demanda la permission de venir le voir quelquefois, faveur qui fut accordée gracieusement.

Pellerin lisait tous les ouvrages d’esthétique pour découvrir la véritable théorie du Beau, convaincu, quand il l’aurait trouvée, de faire des chefs-d’œuvre. il s’entourait de tous les auxiliaires imaginables, dessins, plâtres, modèles, gravures ; et il cherchait, se rongeait ; il accusait le temps, ses nerfs, son atelier, sortait dans la rue pour rencontrer l’inspiration, tressaillait de l’avoir saisie, puis abandonnait son œuvre et en rêvait une autre qui devait être plus belle. Ainsi tourmenté par des convoitises de gloire et perdant ses jours en discussions, croyant à mille niaiseries, aux systèmes, aux critiques, à l’importance d’un règlement ou d’une réforme en matière d’art, il n’avait, à cinquante ans, encore produit que des ébauches. Son orgueil robuste l’empêchait de subir aucun découragement, mais il était toujours irrité, et dans cette exaltation à la fois factice et naturelle qui constitue les comédiens.

On remarquait en entrant chez lui deux grands tableaux, où les premiers tons, posés çà et là, faisaient sur la toile blanche des taches de brun, de rouge et de bleu. Un réseau de lignes à la craie s’étendait par-dessus, comme les mailles vingt fois reprises d’un filet ; il était même impossible d’y rien comprendre. Pellerin expliqua le sujet de ces deux compositions en indiquant avec le pouce les parties qui manquaient. L’une devait représenter la démence de Nabuchodonosor, l’autre l’incendie de Rome par Néron. Frédéric les admira.

Il admira des académies de femmes échevelées, des paysages où les troncs d’arbre tordus par la tempête foisonnaient, et surtout des caprices à la plume, souvenirs de Callot, de Rembrandt ou de Goya, dont il ne connaissait pas les modèles. Pellerin n’estimait plus ces travaux de sa jeunesse ; maintenant, il était pour le grand style ; il dogmatisa sur Phidias et Winckelmann éloquemment. Les choses autour de lui renforçaient la puissance de sa parole : on voyait une tête de mort sur un prie-Dieu, des yatagans, une robe de moine ; Frédéric l’endossa.

Quand il arrivait de bonne heure, il le surprenait dans son mauvais lit de sangle, que cachait un lambeau de tapisserie ; car Pellerin se couchait tard, fréquentant les théâtres avec assiduité. Il était servi par une vieille femme en haillons, dînait à la gargote et vivait sans maîtresse. Ses connaissances, ramassées pêle-mêle, rendaient ses paradoxes amusants. Sa haine contre le commun et le bourgeois débordait en sarcasmes d’un lyrisme superbe, et il avait pour les maîtres une telle religion, qu’elle le montait presque jusqu’à eux.

Mais pourquoi ne parlait-il jamais de Mme Arnoux ? Quant à son mari, tantôt il l’appelait un bon garçon, d’autres fois un charlatan. Frédéric attendait ses confidences.

Un jour en feuilletant un de ses cartons, il trouva dans le portrait d’une bohémienne quelque chose de Mlle Vatnaz, et, comme cette personne l’intéressait, il voulut savoir sa position.

Elle avait été, croyait Pellerin, d’abord institutrice en province ; maintenant, elle donnait des leçons et tâchait d’écrire dans les petites feuilles.

D’après ses manières avec Arnoux, on pouvait, selon Frédéric, la supposer sa maîtresse.

— “Ah ! bah ! il en a d’autres !”

Alors, le jeune homme, en détournant son visage qui rougissait de honte sous l’infamie de sa pensée, ajouta d’un air crâne :

— “Sa femme le lui rend, sans doute ?”

— “Pas du tout ! elle est honnête !”

Frédéric eut un remords, et se montra plus assidu au journal.

Les grandes lettres composant le nom d’Arnoux sur la plaque de marbre, au haut de la boutique, lui semblaient toutes particulières et grosses de significations, comme une écriture sacrée. Le large trottoir, descendant, facilitait sa marche, la porte tournait presque d’elle-même ; et la poignée, lisse au toucher, avait la douceur et comme l’intelligence d’une main dans la sienne. Insensiblement, il devint aussi ponctuel que Regimbart.

Tous les jours, Regimbart s’asseyait au coin du feu, dans son fauteuil, s’emparait du National, ne le quittait plus, et exprimait sa pensée par des exclamations ou de simples haussements d’épaules. De temps à autre, il s’essuyait le front avec son mouchoir de poche roulé en boudin, et qu’il portait sur sa poitrine, entre deux boutons de sa redingote verte. Il avait un pantalon à plis, des souliers-bottes, une cravate longue ; et son chapeau à bords retroussés le faisait reconnaître, de loin, dans les foules.

A huit heures du matin, il descendait des hauteurs de Montmartre, pour prendre le vin blanc dans la rue Notre-Dame-des-Victoires. Son déjeuner, que suivaient plusieurs parties de billard, le conduisait jusqu'à trois heures. Il se dirigeait alors vers le passage des Panoramas, pour prendre l'absinthe. Après la séance chez Arnoux, il entrait à l'estaminet Bordelais, pour prendre le vermouth ; puis, au lieu de rejoindre sa femme, souvent il préférait dîner seul, dans un petit café de la place Gaillon, où il voulait qu'on lui servît “des plats de ménage, des choses naturelles” ! Enfin il se transportait dans un autre billard, et y restait jusqu'à minuit, jusqu'à une heure du matin, jusqu'au moment où le gaz éteint et les volets fermés, le maître de l'établissement, exténué, le suppliait de sortir.

Et ce n'était pas l'amour des boissons qui attirait dans ces endroits le citoyen Regimbart, mais l'habitude ancienne d'y causer politique ; avec l'âge, sa verve était tombée, il n'avait plus qu'une morosité silencieuse. On aurait dit, à voir le sérieux de son visage, qu'il roulait le monde dans sa tête. Rien n'en sortait ; et personne, même de ses amis, ne lui connaissait d'occupations, bien qu'il se donnât pour tenir un cabinet d'affaires.

Arnoux paraissait l'estimer infiniment. Il dit un jour a Frédéric :

— “Celui-là en sait long, allez ! C'est un homme fort”

Une autre fois, Regimbart étala sur son pupitre des papiers concernant des mines de kaolin en Bretagne Arnoux s'en rapportait à son expérience.

Frédéric se montra plus cérémonieux pour Regimbart, — jusqu'à lui offrir l'absinthe de temps à autre ; et quoiqu'il le jugeât stupide, souvent il demeurait dans sa compagnie pendant une grande heure, uniquement parce que c'était l'ami de Jacques Arnoux.

Après avoir poussé dans leurs débuts des maîtres contemporains, le marchand de tableaux, homme de progrès, avait tâché, tout en conservant des allures artistiques, d'étendre ses profits pécuniaires. Il recherchait l'émancipation des arts, le sublime à bon marché. Toutes les industries du luxe parisien subirent son influence, qui fut bonne pour les petites choses, et funeste pour les grandes. Avec sa rage de flatter l'opinion, il détourna de leur voie les artistes habiles, corrompit les forts, épuisa les faibles et illustra les médiocres ; il en disposait par ses relations et par sa revue. Les rapins ambitionnaient de voir leurs œuvres à sa vitrine et les tapissiers prenaient chez lui des modèles d'ameublement. Frédéric le considérait à la fois comme millionnaire, comme dilettante, comme homme d'action. Bien des choses, pourtant, l'étonnaient, car le sieur Arnoux était malicieux dans son commerce.

Il recevait du fond de l'Allemagne ou de l'Italie une toile achetée à Paris quinze cents francs, et, exhibant une facture qui la portait à quatre mille, la revendait trois mille cinq cents, par complaisance. Un de ses tours ordinaires avec les peintres était d'exiger comme pot-de-vin une réduction de leur tableau, sous prétexte d'en publier la gravure ; il vendait toujours la réduction et jamais la gravure ne paraissait. A ceux qui se plaignaient d'être exploités, il répondait par une tape sur le ventre. Excellent d'ailleurs, il prodiguait les cigares, tutoyait les inconnus, s'enthousiasmait pour une œuvre ou pour un homme, et, s'obstinant alors, ne regardant à rien, multipliait les courses, les correspondances, les réclames. Il se croyait fort honnête, et, dans son besoin d'expansion, racontait naïvement ses indélicatesses.

Une fois, pour vexer un confrère qui inaugurait un autre journal de peinture par un grand festin, il pria Frédéric d'écrire sous ses yeux, un peu avant l'heure du rendez-vous, des billets où l'on désinvitait les convives.

— “Cela n'attaque pas l'honneur, vous comprenez ?”

Et le jeune homme n'osa lui refuser ce service.

Le lendemain, en entrant avec Hussonnet dans son bureau, Frédéric vit par la porte (celle qui s'ouvrait sur l'escalier) le bas d'une robe disparaître.

— “Mille excuses !” dit Hussonnet. “Si j'avais cru qu'il y eût des femmes…”

— “Oh ! pour celle-là c'est la mienne”, reprit Arnoux. “Elle montait me faire une petite visite, en passant.”

— “Comment ?” dit Frédéric.

— “Mais oui ! elle s'en retourne chez elle, à la maison.”

Le charme des choses ambiantes se retira tout à coup. Ce qu'il y sentait confusément épandu venait de s'évanouir, ou plutôt n'y avait jamais été. Il éprouvait une surprise infinie et comme la douleur d'une trahison.

Arnoux, en fouillant dans son tiroir, souriait. Se moquait-il de lui ? Le commis déposa sur la table une liasse de papiers humides.

— “Ah ! les affiches !” s'écria le marchand. “Je ne suis pas près de dîner ce soir !”

Regimbart prenait son chapeau.

— “Comment, vous me quittez ?”

— “Sept heures !” dit Regimbart.

Frédéric le suivit.

Au coin de la rue Montmartre, il se retourna ; il regarda les fenêtres du premier étage ; et il rit intérieurement de pitié sur lui-même, en se rappelant avec quel amour il les avait si souvent contemplées ! Où donc vivait-elle ? Comment la rencontrer maintenant ? La solitude se rouvrait autour de son désir plus immense que jamais !

— “Venez-vous la prendre ?” dit Regimbart.

— “Prendre qui ?”

— “L’absinthe !”

Et, cédant à ses obsessions, Frédéric se laissa conduire à l’estaminet Bordelais. Tandis que son compagnon, posé sur, le coude, considérait la carafe, il jetait les yeux de droite et de gauche. Mais il aperçut le profil de Pellerin sur le trottoir ; il cogna vivement contre le carreau, et le peintre n’était pas assis que Regimbart lui demanda pourquoi on ne le voyait plus à l’Art industriel.

— “Que je crève, si j’y retourne ! C’est une brute, un bourgeois, un misérable, un drôle !”

Ces injures flattaient la colère de Frédéric. Il en était blessé cependant, car il lui semblait qu’elles atteignaient un peu Mme Arnoux.

— “Qu’est-ce donc qu’il vous a fait !” dit Regimbart.

Pellerin battit le sol avec son pied, et souffla fortement, au lieu de répondre.

Il se livrait à des travaux clandestins, tels que portraits aux deux crayons ou pastiches de grands maîtres pour les amateurs peu éclairés ; et, comme ces travaux l’humiliaient, il préférait se taire, généralement. Mais “la crasse d’Arnoux” l’exaspérait trop. Il se soulagea.

D’après une commande, dont Frédéric avait été le témoin, il lui avait apporté deux tableaux. Le marchand, alors, s’était permis des critiques ! Il avait blâmé la composition, la couleur et le dessin, le dessin surtout, bref, à aucun prix n’en avait voulu. Mais, forcé par l’échéance dure billet, Pellerin les avait cédés au juif Isaac ; et, quinze jours plus tard, Arnoux, lui-même les vendait à un Espagnol, pour deux mille francs.

— “Pas un sou de moins ! Quelle gredinerie ! et il en fait bien d’autres, parbleu ! Nous le verrons, un de ces matins, en cour d’assises.”

— “Comme vous exagérez !” dit Frédéric d’une voix timide.

— “Allons ! bon ! j’exagère !” s’écria l’artiste, en donnant sur la table un grand coup de poing.

Cette violence rendit au jeune homme tout son aplomb. Sans doute, on pouvait se conduire plus gentiment ; cependant, si Arnoux trouvait ces deux toiles…

— “Mauvaises ! lâchez le mot ! Les connaissez-vous ? Est-ce votre métier ? Or, vous savez, mon petit, moi, je n’admets pas cela, les amateurs !”

— “Eh ! ce ne sont pas mes affaires !” dit Frédéric.

— “Quel intérêt avez-vous donc à le défendre ?” reprit froidement Pellerin.

Le jeune homme balbutia :

— “Mais… parce que je suis son ami.”

— “Embrassez-le de ma part ! bonsoir !”

Et le peintre sortit furieux, sans parler, bien entendu, de sa consommation.

Frédéric s’était convaincu lui-même, en défendant Arnoux. Dans l’échauffement de son éloquence, il fut pris de tendresse pour cet homme intelligent et bon, que ses amis calomniaient et qui maintenant travaillait tout seul, abandonné. Il ne résista pas au singulier besoin de le revoir immédiatement. Dix minutes après, il poussait la porte du magasin.

Arnoux élaborait, avec son commis, des affiches monstres pour une exposition de tableaux.

— “Tiens ! qui vous ramène ?”

Cette question bien simple embarrassa Frédéric ; et, ne sachant que répondre, il demanda si l’on n’avait point trouvé par hasard son calepin, un petit calepin en cuir bleu.

— “Celui où vous mettez vos lettres de femmes ?” dit Arnoux.

Frédéric, en rougissant comme une vierge, se défendit d’une telle supposition.

— “Vos poésies, alors ?” répliqua le marchand.

Il maniait les spécimens étalés, en discutait la forme, la couleur, la bordure ; et Frédéric se sentait de plus en plus irrité par son air de méditation, et surtout par ses mains qui se promenaient sur les affiches, — de grosses mains, un peu molles, à ongles plats. Enfin Arnoux se leva ; et, en disant : “C’est fait !” il lui passa la main sous le menton, familièrement. Cette privauté déplut à Frédéric, il se recula ; puis il franchit le seuil du bureau, pour la dernière fois de son existence, croyait-il. Mme Arnoux, elle-même se trouvait comme diminuée par la vulgarité de son mari.

Il reçut, dans la même semaine, une lettre où Deslauriers annonçait qu’il arriverait à Paris, jeudi prochain. Alors, il se rejeta violemment sur cette affection plus solide et plus haute. Un pareil homme valait toutes les femmes. Il n’aurait plus besoin de Regimbart, de Pellerin, d’Hussonnet, de personne ! Afin de mieux loger son ami, il acheta une couchette de fer, un second fauteuil, dédoubla sa literie ; et, le jeudi matin, il s’habillait pour aller au-devant de Deslauriers quand un coup de sonnette retentit à sa porte. Arnoux entra.

— “Un mot, seulement ! Hier, on m’a envoyé de Genève une belle truite ; nous comptons sur vous, tantôt, à sept heures juste… C’est rue de Choiseul, 24 bis. N’oubliez pas !”

Frédéric fut obligé de s’asseoir. Ses genoux chancelaient. Il se répétait : “Enfin ! enfin !” Puis il écrivit à son tailleur, à son chapelier, à son bottier ; et il fit porter ces trois billets par trois commissionnaires différents. La clef tourna dans la serrure et le concierge parut, avec une malle sur l’épaule.

Frédéric, en apercevant Deslauriers, se mit à trembler comme une femme adultère sous le regard de son époux.

— “Qu’est-ce donc qui te prend ?” dit Deslauriers, “tu dois cependant avoir reçu de moi une lettre ?”

Frédéric n’eut pas la force de mentir.

Il ouvrit les bras et se jeta sur sa poitrine.

Ensuite, le clerc conta son histoire. Son père n’avait pas voulu rendre ses comptes de tutelle, s’imaginant que ces comptes-là se prescrivaient par dix ans. Mais, fort en procédure, Deslauriers avait enfin arraché tout l’héritage de sa mère, sept mille francs nets, qu’il tenait là, sur lui, dans un vieux portefeuille.

— “C’est une réserve, en cas de malheur. Il faut que j’avise à les placer et à me caser moi-même, dès demain matin. Pour aujourd’hui, vacance complète, et tout à toi, mon vieux !”

— “Oh ! ne te gêne pas !” dit Frédéric. “Si tu avais ce soir quelque chose d’important…”

— “Allons donc ! Je serais un fier misérable…”

Cette épithète, lancée au hasard, toucha Frédéric en plein cœur, comme une allusion outrageante.

Le concierge avait disposé sur la table, auprès du feu, des côtelettes, de la galantine, une langouste, un dessert, et deux bouteilles de vin de Bordeaux. Une réception si bonne émut Deslauriers.

— “Tu me traites comme un roi, ma parole !”

Ils causèrent de leur passé, de l’avenir ; et, de temps à autre, ils se prenaient les mains par-dessus la table, en se regardant une minute avec attendrissement. Mais un commissionnaire apporta un chapeau neuf. Deslauriers remarqua, tout haut, combien la coiffe était brillante.

Puis le tailleur, lui-même, vint remettre l’habit auquel il avait donné un coup de fer.

— “On croirait que tu vas te marier”, dit Deslauriers.

Une heure après, un troisième individu survint et retira d’un grand sac noir une paire de bottes vernies, splendides. Pendant que Frédéric les essayait, le bottier observait narquoisement la chaussure du provincial.

— “Monsieur n’a besoin de rien ?”

— “Merci”, répliqua le Clerc, en rentrant sous sa chaise ses vieux souliers à cordons.

Cette humiliation gêna Frédéric. Il reculait à faire son aveu. Enfin, il s’écria, comme saisi par une idée :

— “Ah ! saprelotte, j’oubliais !”

— “Quoi donc ?”

— “Ce soir, je dîne en ville !”

— “Chez les Dambreuse” Pourquoi ne m’en parles-tu jamais dans tes lettres ? "

Ce n’était pas chez les Dambreuse, mais chez les Arnoux.

— “Tu aurais dû m’avertir !” dit Deslauriers. “Je serais venu un jour plus tard.”

— “Impossible !” répliqua brusquement Frédéric. “On ne m’a invité que ce matin, tout à l’heure.”

Et, pour racheter sa faute et en distraire son ami, il dénoua les cordes emmêlées de sa malle, il arrangea dans la commode toutes ses affaires, il voulait lui donner son propre lit, coucher dans le cabinet au bois. Puis, dès quatre heures, il commença les préparatifs de sa toilette.

— “Tu as bien le temps !” dit l’autre.

Enfin, il s’habilla, il partit.

— “Voilà les riches !” pensa Deslauriers.

il alla dîner rue Saint-Jacques, chez un petit restaurateur qu’il connaissait.

Frédéric s’arrêta plusieurs fois dans l’escalier, tant son cœur battait fort. Un de ses gants trop juste éclata ; et, tandis qu’il enfonçait la déchirure sous la manchette de sa chemise, Arnoux, qui montait par derrière, le saisit au bras et le fit entrer.

L’antichambre, décorée à la chinoise, avait une lanterne peinte, au plafond, et des bambous dans les coins. En traversant le salon, Frédéric trébucha contre une peau de tigre. On n’avait point allumé les flambeaux, mais deux lampes brûlaient dans le boudoir tout au fond.

Mlle Marthe vint dire que sa maman s’habillait. Arnoux l’enleva jusqu’à la hauteur de sa bouche pour la baiser ; puis, voulant choisir lui-même dans la cave certaines bouteilles de vin, il laissa Frédéric avec l’enfant.

Elle avait grandi beaucoup depuis le voyage de Montereau. Ses cheveux bruns descendaient en longs anneaux frisés sur ses bras nus. Sa robe, plus bouffante que le jupon d’une danseuse, laissait voir ses mollets roses, et toute sa gentille personne sentait frais comme un bouquet. Elle reçut les compliments du monsieur avec des airs de coquette, fixa sur lui ses yeux profonds, puis, se coulant parmi les meubles, disparut comme un chat.

Il n’éprouvait plus aucun trouble. Les globes des lampes, recouverts d’une dentelle en papier, envoyaient un jour laiteux et qui attendrissait la couleur des murailles, tendues de satin mauve. A travers les lames du garde-feu, pareil à un gros éventail, on apercevait les charbons dans la cheminée ; il y avait, contre la pendule, un coffret à fermoirs d’argent. Çà et là, des choses intimes traînaient : une poupée au milieu de la causeuse, un fichu contre le dossier d’une chaise, et, sur la table à ouvrage, un tricot de laine d’où pendaient en dehors deux aiguilles d’ivoire, la pointe en bas. C’était un endroit paisible, honnête et familier tout ensemble.

Arnoux rentra ; et, par l’autre portière, Mme Arnoux parut. Comme elle se trouvait enveloppée d’ombre, il ne distingua d’abord que sa tête. Elle avait une robe de velours noir et, dans les cheveux, une longue bourse algérienne en filet de soie rouge qui, s’entortillant à son peigne, lui tombait sur l’épaule gauche.

Arnoux présenta Frédéric.

— “Oh je reconnais Monsieur parfaitement”, répondit-elle.

Puis les convives arrivèrent tous, presque en même temps : Dittmer, Lovarias, Burieu, le compositeur Rosenwald, le poète Théophile Lorris, deux critiques d’art collègues d’Hussonnet, un fabricant de papier, et enfin l’illustre Pierre-Paul Meinsius, le dernier représentant de la grande peinture, qui portait gaillardement avec sa gloire ses quatre-vingts années et son gros ventre.

Lorsqu’on passa dans la salle à manger, Mme Arnoux prit son bras. Une chaise était restée vide pour Pellerin. Arnoux l’aimait, tout en l’exploitant. D’ailleurs, il redoutait sa terrible langue — si bien que, pour l’attendrir, il avait publié dans l’Art industriel son portrait accompagné d’éloges hyperboliques ; et Pellerin, plus sensible à la gloire qu’à l’argent, apparut vers huit heures, tout essoufflé. Frédéric s’imagina qu’ils étaient réconciliés depuis longtemps.

La compagnie, les mets, tout lui plaisait. La salle, telle qu’un parloir moyen âge, était tendue de cuir battu ; une étagère hollandaise se dressait devant un râtelier de chibouques ; et, autour de la table, les verres de Bohême, diversement colorés, faisaient au milieu des fleurs et des fruits comme une illumination dans un jardin.

Il eut à choisir entre dix espèces de moutarde. Il mangea du daspachio, du cari, du gingembre, des merles de Corse, des lasagnes romaines ; il but des vins extraordinaires, du lip-fraoli et du tokay. Arnoux se piquait effectivement de bien recevoir. Il courtisait en vue des comestibles tous les conducteurs de malle-poste, et il était lié avec des cuisiniers de grandes maisons qui lui communiquaient des sauces.

Mais la causerie surtout amusait Frédéric. Son goût pour les voyages fut caressé par Dittmer, qui parla de l’Orient ; il assouvit sa curiosité des choses du théâtre en écoutant Rosenwald causer de l’Opéra ; et l’existence atroce de la bohème lui parut drôle, à travers la gaieté d’Hussonnet, lequel narra, d’une manière pittoresque, comment il avait passé tout un hiver, n’ayant pour nourriture que du fromage de Hollande. Puis, une discussion entre Lovarias et Burrieu, sur l’école florentine, lui révéla des chefs-d’œuvre, lui ouvrit des horizons, et il eut du mal à contenir son enthousiasme quand Pellerin s’écria :

— “Laissez-moi tranquille avec votre hideuse réalité. Qu’est-ce que cela veut dire, la réalité ? Les uns voient noir, d’autres bleu, la multitude voit bête. Rien de moins naturel que Michel-Ange, rien de plus fort ! Le souci de la vérité extérieure dénote la bassesse contemporaine ; et l’art deviendra, si l’on continue, je ne sais quelle rocambole au-dessous de la religion comme poésie, et de la politique comme intérêt. Vous n’arriverez pas à son but, — oui, son but ! — qui est de nous causer une exaltation impersonnelle, avec de petites œuvres, malgré toutes vos finasseries d’exécution. Voilà les tableaux de Bassolier, par exemple : c’est joli, coquet, propret, et pas lourd ! Ça peut se mettre dans la poche, se prendre en voyage ! Les notaires achètent ça vingt mille francs ; il y a pour trois sous d’idées ; mais, sans l’idée, rien de grand ! sans grandeur, pas de beau ! L’Olympe est une montagne ! Le plus crâne monument, ce sera toujours les Pyramides. Mieux vaut l’exubérance que le goût, le désert qu’un trottoir, et un sauvage qu’un coiffeur !”

Frédéric, en écoutant ces choses, regardait Mme Arnoux. Elles tombaient dans son esprit comme des métaux dans une fournaise, s’ajoutaient à sa passion et faisaient de l’amour.

Il était assis trois places au-dessous d’elle, sur le même côté. De temps à autre, elle se penchait un peu, en tournant la tête pour adresser quelques mots à sa petite fille ; et, comme elle souriait alors, une fossette se creusait dans sa joue, ce qui donnait à son visage un air de bonté plus délicate.

Au moment des liqueurs, elle disparut. La conversation devint très libre ; M. Arnoux y brilla, et Frédéric fut étonné du cynisme de ces hommes. Cependant, leur préoccupation de la femme établissait entre eux et lui comme une égalité, qui le haussait dans sa propre estime.

Rentré au salon, il prit, par contenance, un des albums traînant sur la table. Les grands artistes de l’époque l’avaient illustré de dessins, y avaient mis de la prose, des vers, ou simplement leurs signatures ; parmi les noms fameux, il s’en trouvait beaucoup d’inconnus, et les pensées curieuses n’apparaissaient que sous un débordement de sottises. Toutes contenaient un hommage plus ou moins direct à Mme Arnoux. Frédéric aurait eu peur d’écrire une ligne à côté.

Elle alla chercher dans son boudoir le coffret à fermoirs d’argent qu’il avait remarqué sur la cheminée. C’était un cadeau de son mari, un ouvrage de la Renaissance. Les amis d’Arnoux le complimentèrent, sa femme le remerciait ; il fut pris d’attendrissement, et lui donna devant le monde un baiser.

Ensuite, tous causèrent çà et là, par groupes ; le bonhomme Meinsius était avec Mme Arnoux, sur une bergère, près du feu ; elle se penchait vers son oreille, leurs têtes se touchaient ; — et Frédéric aurait accepté d’être sourd, infirme et laid pour un nom illustre et des cheveux blancs, enfin pour avoir quelque chose qui l’intronisât dans une intimité pareille. Il se rongeait le cœur, furieux contre sa jeunesse.

Mais elle vint dans l’angle du salon où il se tenait, lui demanda s’il connaissait quelques-uns des convives, s'il aimait la peinture, depuis combien de temps il étudiait à Paris. Chaque mot qui sortait de sa bouche semblait à Frédéric être une chose nouvelle, une dépendance exclusive de sa personne. Il regardait attentivement les effilés de sa coiffure, caressant par le bout son épaule nue ; et il n'en détachait pas ses yeux, il enfonçait son âme dans la blancheur de cette chair féminine ; cependant, il n'osait lever ses paupières, pour la voir plus haut, face à face.

Rosenwald les interrompit, en priant Mme Arnoux de chanter quelque chose. Il préluda, elle attendait ; ses lèvres s'entrouvrirent, et un son pur, long, filé, monta dans l'air.

Frédéric ne comprit rien aux paroles italiennes.

Cela commençait sur un rythme grave, tel qu'un chant d'église, puis, s'animant crescendo, multipliait les éclats sonores, s'apaisait tout à coup ; et la mélodie revenait amoureusement, avec une oscillation large et paresseuse.

Elle se tenait debout, près du clavier, les bras tombants, le regard perdu. Quelquefois, pour lire la musique, elle clignait ses paupières en avançant le front, un instant. Sa voix de contralto prenait dans les cordes basses une intonation lugubre qui glaçait, et alors sa belle tête, aux grands sourcils, s'inclinait sur son épaule ; sa poitrine se gonflait, ses bras s'écartaient, son cou d'où s'échappaient des roulades se renversait mollement comme sous des baisers aériens ; elle lança trois notes aiguës, redescendit, en jeta une plus haute encore, et, après un silence, termina par un point d'orgue.

Rosenwald n'abandonna pas le piano. Il continua de jouer, pour lui-même. De temps à autre, un des convives disparaissait. A onze heures, comme les derniers s'en allaient, Arnoux sortit avec Pellerin, sous prétexte de le reconduire. Il était de ces gens qui se disent malades quand ils n'ont pas fait leur tour après dîner.

Mme Arnoux s'était avancée dans l'antichambre ; Dittmer et Hussonnet la saluaient, elle leur tendit la main ; elle la tendit également à Frédéric ; et il éprouva comme une pénétration à tous les atomes de sa peau.

Il quitta ses amis ; il avait besoin d'être seul. Son cœur débordait. Pourquoi cette main offerte ? Etait-ce un geste irréfléchi, ou un encouragement ? “Allons donc ! je suis fou !” Qu'importait d'ailleurs, puisqu'il pouvait maintenant la fréquenter tout à son aise, vivre dans son atmosphère.

Les rues étaient désertes. Quelquefois une charrette lourde passait, en ébranlant les pavés. Les maisons se succédaient avec leurs façades grises, leurs fenêtres closes ; et il songeait dédaigneusement à tous ces êtres humains couchés derrière ces murs, qui existaient sans la voir, et dont pas un même ne se doutait qu'elle vécût ! Il n'avait plus conscience du milieu, de l'espace, de rien ; et, battant le soi du talon, en frappant avec sa canne les volets des boutiques, il allait toujours devant lui, au hasard, éperdu, entraîné. Un air humide l'enveloppa ; il se reconnut au bord des quais.

Les réverbères brillaient en deux lignes droites, indéfiniment, et de longues flammes rouges vacillaient dans la profondeur de l'eau. Elle était de couleur ardoise, tandis que le ciel, plus clair, semblait soutenu par les grandes, masses d'ombre qui se levaient de chaque côté du fleuve.

Des édifices, que l'on n'apercevait pas, faisaient des redoublements d'obscurité. Un brouillard lumineux flottait au-delà, sur les toits ; tous les bruits se fondaient en un seul bourdonnement ; un vent léger soufflait.

Il s'était arrêté au milieu du Pont-Neuf, et, tête nue, poitrine ouverte, il aspirait l'air. Cependant, il sentait monter du fond de lui-même quelque chose d'intarissable, un afflux de tendresse qui l'énervait, comme le mouvement des ondes sous ses yeux. A l'horloge d'une église, une heure sonna, lentement, pareille à une voix qui l'eût appelé.

Alors, il fut saisi par un de ces frissons de l'âme où il vous semble qu'on est transporté dans un monde supérieur. Une faculté extraordinaire, dont il ne savait pas l'objet, lui était venue. Il se demanda, sérieusement, s'il serait un grand peintre ou un grand poète ; — et il se décida pour la peinture, car les exigences de ce métier le rapprocheraient de Mme Arnoux. Il avait donc trouvé sa vocation ! Le but de son existence était clair maintenant, et l'avenir infaillible.

Quand il eut refermé sa porte, il entendit quelqu'un qui ronflait, dans le cabinet noir, près de la chambre. C'était l'autre. Il n'y pensait plus.

Son visage s'offrait à lui dans la glace. Il se trouva beau et resta une minute à se regarder.

CHAPITRE 5

Le lendemain, avant midi, il s’était acheté une boîte de couleurs, des pinceaux, un chevalet. Pellerin consentit à lui donner des leçons, et Frédéric l’emmena dans son logement pour voir si rien ne manquait parmi ses ustensiles de peinture.

Deslauriers était rentré. Un jeune homme occupait le second fauteuil. Le clerc dit en le montrant :

— “C’est lui ! le voilà ! Sénécal !”

Ce garçon déplut à Frédéric. Son front était rehaussé par la coupe de ses cheveux taillés en brosse. Quelque chose de dur et de froid perçait dans ses yeux gris ; et sa longue redingote noire, tout son costume sentait le pédagogue et l’ecclésiastique.

D’abord, on causa des choses du jour, entre autres du Stabat de Rossini ; Sénécal, interrogé, déclara qu’il n’allait jamais au théâtre. Pellerin ouvrit la boîte de couleurs.

— “Est-ce pour toi, tout cela ?” dit le clerc.

— “Mais sans doute !”

— “Tiens ! quelle idée !”

Et il se pencha sur la table, où le répétiteur de mathématiques feuilletait un volume de Louis Blanc. Il l’avait apporté lui-même, et lisait à voix basse des passages, tandis que Pellerin et Frédéric examinaient ensemble la palette, le couteau, les vessies, puis ils vinrent à s’entretenir du dîner chez Arnoux.

— “Le marchand de tableaux ?” demanda Sénécal. “Joli monsieur, vraiment !”

— “Pourquoi donc ?” dit Pellerin.

Sénécal répliqua :

— “Un homme qui bat monnaie avec des turpitudes politiques”

Et il se mit à parier d’une lithographie célèbre, représentant toute la famille royale livrée à des occupations édifiantes : Louis-Philippe tenait un code, la reine un paroissien, les princesses brodaient, le duc de Nemours ceignait un sabre ; M. de Joinville montrait une carte géographique à ses jeunes frères ; on apercevait, dans le fond, un lit à deux compartiments. Cette image, intitulée Une bonne famille, avait fait les délices des bourgeois, mais l’affliction des patriotes. Pellerin, d’un ton vexé comme s’il en était l’auteur, répondit que toutes les opinions se valaient ; Sénécal protesta. L’Art devait exclusivement viser à la moralisation des masses ! Il ne fallait reproduire que des sujets poussant aux actions vertueuses ; les autres étaient nuisibles.

— “Mais ça dépend de l’exécution ?” cria Pellerin. “Je peux faire des chefs-d’œuvre !”

— “Tant pis pour vous, alors ! on n’a pas le droit…”

— “Comment ?”

— “Non ! monsieur, vous n’avez pas le droit de m’intéresser à des choses que je réprouve ! Qu’avons-nous besoin de laborieuses bagatelles, dont il est impossible de tirer aucun profit, de ces Vénus, par exemple, avec tous vos paysages ? Je ne vois pas là d’enseignement pour le peuple ! Montrez-nous ses misères, plutôt ! enthousiasmez-nous pour ses sacrifices ! Eh ! bon Dieu, les sujets ne manquent pas : la ferme, l’atelier…”

Pellerin en balbutiait d’indignation, et, croyant avoir trouvé un argument :

— “Molière, l’acceptez-vous ?”

— “Soit !” dit Sénécal. “Je l’admire comme précurseur de la Révolution française.”

— “Ah ! la Révolution ! Quel art ! Jamais il n’y a eu d’époque plus pitoyable !”

— “Pas de plus grande, monsieur.”

Pellerin se croisa les bras, et, le regardant en face :

— “Vous m’avez l’air d’un fameux garde national !”

Son antagoniste, habitué aux discussions, répondit :

— “Je n’en suis pas ! et je la déteste autant que vous Mais, avec des principes pareils, on corrompt les foules Ça fait le compte du Gouvernement, du reste ! il ne serait pas si fort sans la complicité d’un tas de farceurs comme celui-là.”

Le peintre prit la défense du marchand, car les opinions de Sénécal l’exaspéraient. Il osa même soutenir que Jacques Arnoux était un véritable cœur d’or, dévoué à ses amis, chérissant sa femme.

— “Oh ! oh ! si on lui offrait une bonne somme, il ne la refuserait pas pour servir de modèle.”

Frédéric devint blême.

— “Il vous a donc fait bien du tort, monsieur ?”

— “A moi ? non ! Je l’ai vu, une fois, au café, avec un ami. Voilà tout.”

Sénécal disait vrai. Mais il se trouvait agacé, quotidiennement, par les réclames de l’Art industriel. Arnoux était, pour lui, le représentant d’un monde qu’il jugeait funeste à la démocratie. Républicain austère, il suspectait de corruption toutes les élégances, n’ayant d’ailleurs aucun besoin, et étant d’une probité inflexible.

La conversation eut peine à reprendre. Le peintre se rappela bientôt son rendez-vous, le répétiteur ses élèves ; et, quand ils furent sortis, après un long silence, Deslauriers fit différentes questions sur Arnoux.

— “Tu m’y présenteras plus tard, n’est-ce pas, mon vieux ?”

— “Certainement”, dit Frédéric.

Puis ils avisèrent à leur installation. Deslauriers avait obtenu, sans peine, une place de second clerc chez un avoué, pris à l’Ecole de droit son inscription, acheté les livres indispensables, — et la vie qu’ils avaient tant rêvée commença.

Elle fut charmante, grâce à la beauté de leur jeunesse. Deslauriers n’ayant parlé d’aucune convention pécuniaire, Frédéric n’en paria pas. Il subvenait à toutes les dépenses, rangeait l’armoire, s’occupait du ménage ; mais, s’il fallait donner une mercuriale au concierge, le Clerc s’en chargeait, continuant, comme au collège, son rôle de protecteur et d’aîné.

Séparés tout le long du jour, ils se retrouvaient le soir. Chacun prenait sa place au coin du feu et se mettait à la besogne. Ils ne tardaient pas à l’interrompre. C’étaient des épanchements sans fin, des gaietés sans cause, et des disputes quelquefois, à propos de la lampe qui filait ou d’un livre égaré, colères d’une minute, que des rires apaisaient.

La porte du cabinet au bois restant ouverte, ils bavardaient de loin, dans leur lit.

Le matin, ils se promenaient en manches de chemise sur leur terrasse ; le soleil se levait, des brumes légères passaient sur le fleuve, on entendait un glapissement dans le marché aux fleurs à côté ; — et les fumées de leurs pipes tourbillonnaient dans l’air pur, qui rafraîchissait leurs yeux encore bouffis ; ils sentaient, en l’aspirant, un vaste espoir épandu.

Quand il ne pleuvait pas, le dimanche, ils sortaient ensemble ; et, bras dessus bras dessous, ils s’en allaient par les rues. Presque toujours la même réflexion leur survenait à la fois, ou bien ils causaient, sans rien voir autour d’eux. Deslauriers ambitionnait la richesse, comme moyen de puissance sur les hommes. Il aurait voulu remuer beaucoup de monde, faire beaucoup de bruit, avoir trois secrétaires sous ses ordres, et un grand dîner politique une fois par semaine. Frédéric se meublait un palais à la moresque, pour vivre couché sur des divans de cachemire, au murmure d’un jet d’eau, servi par des pages nègres ; — et ces choses rêvées devenaient à la fin tellement précises, qu’elles le désolaient comme s’il les avait perdues.

— “A quoi bon causer de tout cela”, disait-il, “puisque jamais nous ne l’aurons !”

— “Qui sait ?” reprenait Deslauriers.

Malgré ses opinions démocratiques, il l’engageait à s’introduire chez les Dambreuse. L’autre objectait ses tentatives.

— “Bah ! retournes-y ! On t’invitera !”

Ils reçurent, vers le milieu du mois de mars, parmi des notes assez lourdes, celles du restaurateur qui leur apportait à dîner. Frédéric, n’ayant point la somme suffisante, emprunta cent écus à Deslauriers ; quinze jours plus tard, il réitéra la même demande, et le Clerc le gronda pour les dépenses auxquelles il se livrait chez Arnoux.

Effectivement, il n’y mettait point de modération. Une vue de Venise, une vue de Naples et une autre de Constantinople occupant le milieu des trois murailles, des sujets équestres d’Alfred de Dreux çà et là, un groupe de Pradier sur la cheminée, des numéros de l’Art industriel sur le piano, et des cartonnages par terre dans les angles, encombraient le logis d’une telle façon, qu’on avait peine à poser un livre, à remuer les coudes. Frédéric prétendait qu’il lui fallait tout cela pour sa peinture.

Il travaillait chez Pellerin. Mais souvent Pellerin était en courses, — ayant coutume d’assister à tous les enterrements et événements dont les journaux devaient rendre compte ; — et Frédéric passait des heures entièrement seul dans l’atelier. Le calme de cette grande pièce, où l’on n’entendait que le trottinement des souris, la lumière qui tombait du plafond, et jusqu’au ronflement du poêle, tout le plongeait d’abord dans une sorte de bien-être intellectuel. Puis ses yeux, abandonnant son ouvrage, se portaient sur les écaillures de la muraille, parmi les bibelots de l’étagère, le long des torses où la poussière amassée faisait comme des lambeaux de velours ; et, tel qu’un voyageur perdu au milieu d’un bois et que tous les chemins ramènent à la même place, continuellement, il retrouvait au fond de chaque idée le souvenir de Mme Arnoux.

Il se fixait des jours pour aller chez elle ; arrivé au second étage, devant sa porte, il hésitait à sonner. Des pas se rapprochaient ; on ouvrait, et, à ces mots : “Madame est sortie”, c’était une délivrance, et comme un fardeau de moins sur son cœur.

Il la rencontra, pourtant. La première fois, il y avait trois dames avec elle ; une autre après-midi, le maître d’écriture de Mlle Marthe survint. D’ailleurs, les hommes que recevait Mme Arnoux ne lui faisaient point de visites. Il n’y retourna plus, par discrétion.

Mais il ne manquait pas, pour qu’on l’invitât aux dîners du jeudi, de se présenter à l’Art industriel, chaque mercredi, régulièrement ; et il y restait après tous les autres, plus longtemps que Regimbart, jusqu’à la dernière minute, en feignant de regarder une gravure, de parcourir un journal. Enfin Arnoux lui disait : — “Etes-vous libre, demain soir ?” Il acceptait avant que la phrase fût achevée. Arnoux semblait le prendre en affection. Il lui montra l’art de reconnaître les vins, à brûler le punch, à faire des salmis de bécasses ; Frédéric suivait docilement ses conseils, — aimant tout ce qui dépendait de Mme Arnoux, ses meubles, ses domestiques, sa maison, sa rue.

Il ne parlait guère pendant ces dîners ; il la contemplait. Elle avait à droite, contre la tempe, un petit grain de beauté ; ses bandeaux étaient plus noirs que le reste de sa chevelure et toujours comme un peu humides sur les bords ; elle les flattait de temps à autre, avec deux doigts seulement. Il connaissait la forme de chacun de ses ongles, il se délectait à écouter le sifflement de sa robe de soie quand elle passait auprès des portes, il humait en cachette la senteur de son mouchoir ; son peigne, ses gants, ses bagues étaient pour lui des choses particulières, importantes comme des œuvres d'art, presque animées comme des personnes ; toutes lui prenaient le cœur et augmentaient sa passion.

Il n'avait pas eu la force de la cacher à Deslauriers. Quand il revenait de chez Mme Arnoux, il le réveillait comme par mégarde, afin de pouvoir causer d'elle.

Deslauriers, qui couchait dans le cabinet au bois, près de la fontaine, poussait un long bâillement. Frédéric s'asseyait au pied de son lit. D'abord il parlait du dîner, puis il racontait mille détails insignifiants, où il voyait des marques de mépris ou d'affection. Une fois, par exemple, elle avait refusé son bras, pour prendre celui de Dittmer, et Frédéric se désolait.

— “Ah ! quelle bêtise !”

Ou bien elle l'avait appelé son “ami” .

— “Vas-y gaiement, alors !”

— “Mais je n'ose pas”, disait Frédéric.

— “Eh bien, n'y pense plus Bonsoir.”

Deslauriers se retournait vers la ruelle et s'endormait. Il ne comprenait rien à cet amour, qu'il regardait comme une dernière faiblesse d'adolescence ; et, son intimité ne lui suffisant plus, sans doute, il imagina de réunir leurs amis communs une fois la semaine.

Ils arrivaient le samedi, vers neuf heures. Les trois rideaux d'algérienne étaient soigneusement tirés ; la lampe et quatre bougies brûlaient ; au milieu de la table, le pot à tabac, tout plein de pipes, s'étalait entre les bouteilles de bière, la théière, un flacon de rhum et des petits fours. On discutait sur l'immortalité de l'âme, on faisait des parallèles entre les professeurs.

Hussonnet, un soir, introduisit un grand jeune homme habillé d'une redingote trop courte des poignets, et la contenance embarrassée. C'était le garçon qu'ils avaient réclamé au poste, l'année dernière.

N'ayant pu rendre à son maître le carton de dentelle perdu dans la bagarre, celui-ci l'avait accusé de vol, menacé des tribunaux ; maintenant, il était commis dans une maison de roulage. Hussonnet, le matin, l'avait rencontré au coin d'une rue ; et il l'amenait, car Dussardier, par reconnaissance, voulait voir “l'autre” .

Il tendit à Frédéric le porte-cigares encore plein, et qu'il avait gardé religieusement avec l'espoir de le rendre. Les jeunes gens l'invitèrent à revenir. Il n'y manqua pas.

Tous sympathisaient. D'abord, leur haine du Gouvernement avait la hauteur d'un dogme indiscutable. Martinon seul tâchait de défendre Louis-Philippe. On l'accablait sous les lieux communs traînant dans les journaux : l'embastillement de Paris, les lois de septembre, Pritchard, lord Guizot, — si bien que Martinon se taisait, craignant d'offenser quelqu'un. En sept ans de collège, il n'avait pas mérité de pensum, et, à l'Ecole de droit, il savait plaire aux professeurs. Il portait ordinairement une grosse redingote couleur mastic avec des claques en caoutchouc ; mais il apparut un soir dans une toilette de marié : gilet de velours à châle, cravate blanche, chaîne d'or.

L'étonnement redoubla quand on sut qu'il sortait de chez M. Dambreuse. En effet, le banquier Dambreuse venait d'acheter au père Martinon une partie de bois considérable ; le bonhomme lui ayant présenté son fils, il les avait invités à dîner tous les deux.

— “Y avait-il beaucoup de truffes”, demanda Deslauriers, “et as-tu pris la taille à son épouse, entre deux portes, sicut decet ?”

Alors, la conversation s'engagea sur les femmes. Pellerin n'admettait pas qu'il y eût de belles femmes (il préférait les tigres) ; d'ailleurs, la femelle de l'homme était une créature inférieure dans la hiérarchie esthétique :

— “Ce qui vous séduit est particulièrement ce qui la dégrade comme idée ; je veux dire les seins, les cheveux…”

— “Cependant”, objecta Frédéric, “de longs cheveux noirs, avec de grands yeux noirs…”

— “Oh ! connu !” s'écria Hussonnet. " Assez d'Andalouses sur la pelouse ! des choses antiques ? serviteur ! Car enfin, voyons, pas de blagues ! une lorette est plus amusante que la Vénus de Milo ! Soyons Gaulois, nom d'un petit bonhomme ! et Régence si nous pouvons !

Coulez, bons vins ; femmes, daignez sourire !

Il faut passer de la brune à la blonde ! — Est-ce votre avis, père Dussardier ? "

Dussardier ne répondit pas. Tous le pressèrent pour connaître ses goûts.

— “Eh bien”, fit-il en rougissant, “moi, je voudrais aimer la même, toujours !”

Cela fut dit d'une telle façon, qu'il y eut un moment de silence, les uns étant surpris de cette candeur, et les autres y découvrant, peut-être, la secrète convoitise de leur âme.

Sénécal posa sur le chambranle sa chope de bière, et déclara dogmatiquement que, la prostitution étant une tyrannie et le mariage une immoralité, il valait mieux s’abstenir. Deslauriers prenait les femmes comme une distraction, rien de plus. M. de Cisy avait à leur endroit toute espèce de crainte.

Elevé sous les yeux d’une grand-mère dévote, il trouvait la compagnie de ces jeunes gens alléchante comme un mauvais lieu et instructive comme une Sorbonne. On ne lui ménageait pas les leçons ; et il se montrait plein de zèle, jusqu’à vouloir fumer, en dépit des maux de cœur qui le tourmentaient chaque fois, régulièrement. Frédéric l’entourait de soins. Il admirait la nuance de ses cravates, la fourrure de son paletot et surtout ses bottes, minces comme des gants et qui semblaient insolentes de netteté et de délicatesse ; sa voiture l’attendait en bas dans la rue.

Un soir qu’il venait de partir, et que la neige tombait, Sénécal se mit à plaindre son cocher. Puis il déclama contre les gants jaunes, le Jockey-Club. Il faisait plus de cas d’un ouvrier que de ces messieurs.

— “Moi, je travaille, au moins ! je suis pauvre !”

— “Cela se voit”, dit à la fin Frédéric, impatienté.

Le répétiteur lui garda rancune pour cette parole.

Mais, Regimbart ayant dit qu’il connaissait un peu Sénécal, Frédéric, voulant faire une politesse à l’ami d’Arnoux, le pria de venir aux réunions du samedi, et la rencontre fut agréable aux deux patriotes.

Ils différaient cependant.

Sénécal — qui avait un crâne en pointe — ne considérait que les systèmes. Regimbart, au contraire, ne voyait dans les faits que les faits. Ce qui l’inquiétait principalement, c’était la frontière du Rhin. Il prétendait se connaître en artillerie, et se faisait habiller par le tailleur de l’Ecole polytechnique.

Le premier jour, quand on lui offrit des gâteaux, il leva les épaules dédaigneusement, en disant que cela convenait aux femmes ; et il ne parut guère plus gracieux les fois suivantes. Du moment que les idées atteignaient une certaine hauteur, il murmurait : “Oh ! pas d’utopies, pas de rêves !” En fait d’art (bien qu’il fréquentât les ateliers, où quelquefois il donnait, par complaisance, une leçon d’escrime), ses opinions n’étaient point transcendantes. Il comparait le style de M. Marrast à celui de Voltaire et Mlle Vatnaz à Mme de Staël, à cause d’une ode sur la Pologne, “où il y avait du cœur” . Enfin, Regimbart assommait tout le monde et particulièrement Deslauriers, car le Citoyen était un familier d’Arnoux. Or, le clerc ambitionnait de fréquenter cette maison, espérant y faire des connaissances profitables. “Quand donc m’y mèneras-tu ?” disait-il. Arnoux se trouvait surchargé de besogne, ou bien il partait en voyage ; puis, ce n’était pas la peine, les dîners allaient finir.

S’il avait fallu risquer sa vie pour son ami, Frédéric l’eût fait. Mais comme il tenait à se montrer le plus avantageusement possible, comme il surveillait son langage, ses manières et son costume jusqu'à venir au bureau de l'Art industriel toujours irréprochablement ganté, il avait peur que Deslauriers, avec son vieil habit noir, sa tournure de procureur et ses discours outrecuidants, ne déplût à Mme Arnoux, ce qui pouvait le compromettre, le rabaisser lui-même auprès d'elle. Il admettait bien les autres, mais celui-là, précisément, l'aurait gêné mille fois plus. Le Clerc s'apercevait qu'il ne voulait pas tenir sa promesse, et le silence de Frédéric lui semblait une aggravation d'injure.

Il aurait voulu le conduire absolument, le voir se développer d'après l'idéal de leur jeunesse ; et sa fainéantise le révoltait, comme une désobéissance et comme une trahison. D'ailleurs Frédéric, plein de l'idée de Mme Arnoux, parlait de son mari souvent ; et Deslauriers commença une intolérable scie, consistant à répéter son nom cent fois par jour, à la fin de chaque phrase, comme un tic d'idiot. Quand on frappait à sa porte, il répondait : “Entrez, Arnoux !” Au restaurant, il demandait un fromage de Brie “à l'instar d'Arnoux” ; et, la nuit, feignant d'avoir un cauchemar, il réveillait son compagnon en hurlant : “Arnoux ! Arnoux !” Enfin, un jour, Frédéric, excédé, lui dit d'une voix lamentable :

— “Mais laisse-moi tranquille avec Arnoux !”

— “Jamais !” répondit le clerc.

Toujours lui ! lui partout ! ou brûlante ou glacée !
L'image de l'Arnoux…

«

Tais-toi donc !” s'écria Frédéric en levant le poing.

Il reprit doucement :

— “C'est un sujet qui m'est pénible, tu sais bien.”

— “Oh ! pardon, mon bonhomme”, répliqua Deslauriers en s'inclinant très bas, “on respectera désormais les nerfs de Mademoiselle ! Pardon encore une fois. Mille excuses !”

Ainsi fut terminée la plaisanterie.

Mais, trois semaines après, un soir, il lui dit :

— “Eh bien, je l'ai vue tantôt, Mme Arnoux !”

— “Où donc ?”

— “Au Palais, avec Balandard, avoué ; une femme brune, n'est-ce pas, de taille moyenne ?”

Frédéric fit un signe d'assentiment. Il attendait que Deslauriers parlât. Au moindre mot d'admiration, il se serait épanché largement, était tout prêt à le chérir ; l'autre se taisait toujours ; enfin, n'y tenant plus, il lui demanda d'un air indifférent ce qu'il pensait d'elle.

Deslauriers la trouvait “pas mal, sans avoir pourtant rien d'extraordinaire.”

— “Ah ! tu trouves”, dit Frédéric.

Arriva le mois d'août, époque de son deuxième examen. D'après l'opinion courante, quinze jours devaient suffire pour en préparer les matières. Frédéric, ne doutant pas de ses forces, avala d'emblée les quatre premiers livres du Code de procédure, les trois premiers du Code pénal, plusieurs morceaux d'instruction criminelle et une partie du Code civil, avec les annotations de M. Poncelet. La veille, Deslauriers lui fit faire une récapitulation qui se prolongea jusqu'au matin ; et, pour mettre à profit le dernier quart d'heure, il continua à l'interroger sur le trottoir, tout en marchant.

Comme plusieurs examens se passaient simultanément, il y avait beaucoup de monde dans la cour, entre autres Hussonnet et Cisy ; on ne manquait pas de venir à ces épreuves quand il s'agissait des camarades. Fré déric endossa la robe noire traditionnelle ; puis il entra suivi de la foule, avec trois autres étudiants, dans une grande pièce, éclairée par des fenêtres sans rideaux et garnie de banquettes, le long des murs. Au milieu, des chaises de cuir entouraient une table, décorée d'un tapis vert. Elle séparait les candidats de MM. les examinateurs en robe rouge, tous portant des chausses d'hermine sur l'épaule, avec des toques à galons d'or sur le chef.

Frédéric se trouvait l'avant-dernier dans la série, position mauvaise. A la première question sur la différence entre une convention et un contrat, il définit l'une pour l'autre ; et le professeur, un brave homme, lui dit : — “Ne vous troublez pas, monsieur, remettez-vous !” puis, ayant fait deux demandes faciles, suivies de réponses obscures, il passa enfin au quatrième. Frédéric fut démoralisé par ce piètre commencement. Deslauriers, en face, dans le public, lui faisait signe que tout n'était pas encore perdu ; et à la deuxième interrogation sur le droit criminel, il se montra passable. Mais, après la troisième, relative au testament mystique, l'examinateur étant resté impassible tout le temps, son angoisse redoubla ; car Hussonnet joignait les mains comme pour applaudir, tandis que Deslauriers prodiguait les haussements d'épaules. Enfin, le moment arriva où il fallut répondre sur la Procédure ! Il s'agissait de la tierce opposition. Le professeur, choqué d'avoir entendu des théories contraires aux siennes, lui demanda d'un ton brutal :

— “Et vous, monsieur, est-ce votre avis ? Comment conciliez-vous le principe de l'article 1351 du Code civil avec cette voie d'attaque extraordinaire !”

Frédéric se sentait un grand mal de tête, pour avoir passé la nuit sans dormir. Un rayon de soleil, entrant par l'intervalle d'une jalousie, le frappait au visage.

Debout derrière la chaise, il se dandinait et tirait sa moustache.

— “J’ attends toujours votre réponse !” reprit l’homme à la toque d’or.

Et, comme le geste de Frédéric l’agaçait sans doute :

— “Ce n’est pas dans votre barbe que vous la trouverez !”

Ce sarcasme causa un rire dans l’auditoire ; le professeur, flatté, s’amadoua. Il lui fit deux questions encore sur l’ajournement et sur l’affaire sommaire, puis baissa la tête en signe d’approbation ; l’acte public était fini. Frédéric rentra dans le vestibule.

Pendant que l’huissier le dépouillait de sa robe, pour la repasser à un autre immédiatement, ses amis l’entourèrent, en achevant de l’ahurir avec leurs opinions contradictoires sur le résultat de l’examen. On le proclama bientôt d’une voix sonore, à l’entrée de la salle : “Le troisième était… ajourné !”

— “Emballé !” dit Hussonnet, “allons-nous-en !” Devant la loge du concierge, ils rencontrèrent Martinon, rouge, ému, avec un sourire dans les yeux et l’auréole du triomphe sur le front. Il venait de subir sans encombre son dernier examen. Restait seulement la thèse. Avant quinze jours, il serait licencié. Sa famille connaissait un ministre, “une belle carrière” s’ouvrait devant lui.

— “Celui-là t’enfonce tout de même”, dit Deslauriers.

Rien n’est humiliant comme de voir les sots réussir dans les entreprises où l’on échoue. Frédéric, vexé, répondit qu’il s’en moquait. Ses prétentions étaient plus hautes ; et, comme Hussonnet faisait mine de s’en aller, il le prit à l’écart pour lui dire :

— " Pas un mot de tout cela, chez eux, bien entendu ! Le secret était facile, puisque Arnoux, le lendemain, partait en voyage pour l’Allemagne.

Le soir, en rentrant, le Clerc trouva son ami singulièrement changé : il pirouettait, sifflait ; et, l’autre s’étonnant de cette humeur, Frédéric déclara qu’il n’irait pas chez sa mère ; il emploierait ses vacances à travailler.

A la nouvelle du départ d’Arnoux, une joie l’avait saisi. Il pouvait se présenter là-bas, tout à son aise, sans crainte d’être interrompu dans ses visites. La conviction d’une sécurité absolue lui donnerait du courage. Enfin il ne serait pas éloigné, ne serait pas séparé d’elle ! Quelque chose de plus fort qu’une chaîne de fer l’attachait à Paris, une voix intérieure lui criait de rester.

Des obstacles s’y opposaient. Il les franchit en écrivant à sa mère ; il confessait d’abord son échec, occasionné par des changements faits dans le programme, — un hasard, une injustice ; — d’ailleurs, tous les grands avocats (il citait leurs noms) avaient été refusés à leurs examens. Mais il comptait se présenter de nouveau au mois de novembre. Or, n’ayant pas de temps à perdre, il n’irait point à la maison cette année ; et il demandait, outre l’argent d’un trimestre, deux cent cinquante francs, pour des répétitions de droit, fort utiles ;

— le tout enguirlandé de regrets, condoléances, chatteries et protestations d’amour filial.

Mme Moreau, qui l’attendait le lendemain, fut chagrinée doublement. Elle cacha la mésaventure de son fils, et lui répondit “de venir tout de même”. Frédéric ne céda pas. Une brouille s’ensuivit. A la fin de la semaine, néanmoins, il reçut l’argent du trimestre avec la somme destinée aux répétitions, et qui servit à payer un pantalon gris perle, un chapeau de feutre blanc et une badine à pomme d’or.

Quand tout cela fut en sa possession :

— “C’est peut-être une idée de coiffeur que j’ai eue ?” songea-t-il.

Et une grande hésitation le prit.

Pour savoir s’il irait chez Mme Arnoux, il jeta par trois fois, dans l’air, des pièces de monnaie. Toutes les fois, le présage fut heureux. Donc, la fatalité l’ordonnait. Il se fit conduire en fiacre rue de Choiseul.

Il monta vivement l’escalier, tira le cordon de la sonnette ; elle ne sonna pas ; il se sentait près de défaillir.

Puis il ébranla, d’un coup furieux, le lourd gland de soie rouge. Un carillon retentit, s’apaisa par degrés ; et l’on n’entendait plus rien. Frédéric eut peur.

Il colla son oreille contre la porte ; pas un souffle ! Il mit son oeil au trou de la serrure, et il n’apercevait dans l’antichambre que deux pointes de roseau, sur la muraille, parmi les fleurs du papier. Enfin, il tournait les talons quand il se ravisa. Cette fois, il donna un petit coup, léger. La porte s’ouvrit ; et, sur le seuil, les cheveux ébouriffés, la face cramoisie et l’air maussade, Arnoux lui-même parut.

— “Tiens ! Qui diable vous amène ? Entrez !”

Il l’introduisit, non dans le boudoir ou dans sa chambre, mais dans la salle à manger, où l’on voyait sur la table une bouteille de vin de Champagne avec deux verres ; et, d’un ton brusque :

— “Vous avez quelque chose à me demander, cher ami ?”

— “Non ! rien ! rien !” balbutia le jeune homme, cherchant un prétexte à sa visite.

Enfin, il dit qu’il était venu savoir de ses nouvelles, car il le croyait en Allemagne, sur le rapport d’Hussonnet.

— “Nullement !” reprit Arnoux. “Quelle linotte que ce garçon-là, pour entendre tout de travers !”

Afin de dissimuler son trouble, Frédéric marchait de droite et de gauche, dans la salle. En heurtant le pied d’une chaise, il fit tomber une ombrelle posée dessus ; le manche d’ivoire se brisa.

— “Mon Dieu !” s’écria-t-il, “comme je suis chagrin d’avoir brisé l’ombrelle de Mme Arnoux.”

A ce mot, le marchand releva la tête, et eut un singulier sourire. Frédéric, prenant l’occasion qui s’offrait de parler d’elle, ajouta timidement :

— “Est-ce que je ne pourrai pas la voir ?”

Elle était dans son pays, près de sa mère malade.

Il n’osa faire de questions sur la durée de cette absence. Il demanda seulement quel était le pays de Mme Arnoux.

— “Chartres ! Cela vous étonne ?”

— “Moi ? non ! pourquoi ? Pas le moins du monde !”

Ils ne trouvèrent, ensuite, absolument rien à se dire. Arnoux, qui s’était fait une cigarette, tournait autour de la table, en soufflant. Frédéric, debout contre le poêle, contemplait les murs, l’étagère, le parquet ; et des images charmantes défilaient dans sa mémoire, devant ses yeux plutôt. Enfin il se retira.

Un morceau de journal, roulé en boule, traînait par terre, dans l’antichambre ; Arnoux le prit ; et, se haussant sur la pointe des pieds, il l’enfonça dans la sonnette, pour continuer, dit-il, sa sieste interrompue. Puis, en lui donnant une poignée de main :

— “Avertissez le concierge, s’il vous plaît, que je n’y suis pas !”

Et il referma la porte sur son dos, violemment.

Frédéric descendit l’escalier marche à marche. L’insuccès de cette première tentative le décourageait sur le hasard des autres. Alors commencèrent trois mois d’ennui. Comme il n’avait aucun travail, son désœuvrement renforçait sa tristesse.

Il passait des heures à regarder, du haut de son balcon, la rivière qui coulait entre les quais grisâtres, noircis, de place en place, par la bavure des égouts, avec un ponton de blanchisseuses amarré contre le bord, où des gamins quelquefois s’amusaient, dans la vase, à faire baigner un caniche. Ses yeux délaissant à gauche le pont de pierre de Notre-Dame et trois ponts suspendus, se dirigeaient toujours vers le quai aux Ormes, sur un massif de vieux arbres, pareils aux tilleuls du port de Montereau. La tour Saint-Jacques, l’hôtel de ville, Saint-Gervais, Saint-Louis, Saint-Paul se levaient en face, parmi les toits confondus, — et le génie de la colonne de Juillet resplendissait à l’orient comme une large étoile d’or, tandis qu’à l’autre extrémité le dôme des Tuileries arrondissait, sur le ciel, sa lourde masse bleue. C’était par derrière, de ce côté-là, que devait être la maison de Mme Arnoux.

Il rentrait dans sa chambre ; puis, couché sur son divan, s’abandonnait à une méditation désordonnée plans d’ouvrage, projets de conduite, élancements vers l’avenir. Enfin, pour se débarrasser de lui-même, il sortait.

Il remontait, au hasard, le quartier latin, si tumultueux d’habitude, mais désert à cette époque, car les étudiants étaient partis dans leurs familles. Les grands murs des collèges, comme allongés par le silence, avaient un aspect plus morne encore ; on entendait toutes sortes de bruits paisibles, des battements d'ailes dans des cages, le ronflement d'un tour, le marteau d'un savetier ; et les marchands d'habits, au milieu des rues, interrogeaient de l'oeil chaque fenêtre, inutilement. Au fond des cafés solitaires, la dame du comptoir bâillait entre ses carafons remplis ; les journaux demeuraient en ordre sur la table des cabinets de lecture ; dans l'atelier des repasseuses, des linges frissonnaient sous les bouffées du vent tiède. De temps à autre, il s'arrêtait à l'étalage d'un bouquiniste ; un omnibus, qui descendait en frôlant le trottoir, le faisait se retourner ; et, parvenu devant le Luxembourg, il n'allait pas plus loin.

Quelquefois, l'espoir d'une distraction l'attirait vers les boulevards. Après de sombres ruelles exhalant des fraîcheurs humides, il arrivait sur de grandes places désertes, éblouissantes de lumière, et où les monuments dessinaient au bord du pavé des dentelures d'ombre noire. Mais les charrettes, les boutiques recommençaient, et la foule l'étourdissait, — le dimanche surtout, — quand, depuis la Bastille jusqu'à la Madeleine, c'était un immense flot ondulant sur l'asphalte, au milieu de la poussière, dans une rumeur continue ; il se sentait tout écœuré par la bassesse des figures, la niaiserie des propos, la satisfaction imbécile transpirant sur les fronts en sueur ! Cependant, la conscience de mieux valoir que ces hommes atténuait la fatigue de les regarder.

Il allait tous les jours à l'Art industriel ; — et pour savoir quand reviendrait Mme Arnoux, il s'informait de sa mère très longuement. La réponse d'Arnoux ne variait pas ; "le mieux se continuait", sa femme, avec la petite, serait de retour la semaine prochaine. Plus elle tardait à revenir, plus Frédéric témoignait d'inquiétude, — si bien qu'Arnoux, attendri par tant d'affection, l'emmena cinq ou six fois dîner au restaurant.

Frédéric, dans ces longs tête-à-tête, reconnut que le marchand de peinture n'était pas fort spirituel. Arnoux pouvait s'apercevoir de ce refroidissement ; et puis c'était l'occasion de lui rendre, un peu, ses politesses.

Voulant donc faire les choses très bien, il vendit à un brocanteur tous ses habits neufs, moyennant la somme de quatre-vingts francs ; et, l'ayant grossie de cent autres qui lui restaient, il vint chez Arnoux le prendre pour dîner. Regimbart s'y trouvait. Ils s'en allèrent aux Trois Frères Provençaux.

Le Citoyen commença par retirer sa redingote, et, sur de la déférence des deux autres, écrivit la carte. Mais il eut beau se transporter dans la cuisine pour parler lui-même au chef, descendre à la cave dont il connaissait tous les coins, et faire monter le maître de l'établissement, auquel il "donna un savon", il ne fut content ni des mets, ni des vins, ni du service ! A chaque plat nouveau, à chaque bouteille différente, dès la première bouchée, la première gorgée, il laissait tomber sa fourchette, ou repoussait au loin son verre ; puis s'accoudant sur la nappe de toute la longueur de son bras, il s'écriait qu'on ne pouvait plus dîner à Paris ! Enfin, ne sachant qu'imaginer pour sa bouche, Regimbart se commanda des haricots à l'huile, "tout bonnement", lesquels, bien qu'à moitié réussis, l'apaisèrent un peu. Puis il eut, avec le garçon, un dialogue, roulant sur les anciens garçons des Provençaux : "Qu'était devenu Antoine ? Et un nommé Eugène ? Et Théodore, le petit, qui servait toujours en bas ? Il y avait dans ce temps-là une chère autrement distinguée, et des têtes de Bourgogne comme on n'en reverra plus"

Ensuite, il fut question de la valeur des terrains dans la banlieue, une spéculation d'Arnoux, infaillible. En attendant, il perdait ses intérêts. Puisqu'il ne voulait vendre à aucun prix, Regimbart lui découvrirait quelqu'un ; et ces deux messieurs firent, avec un crayon, des calculs jusqu'à la fin du dessert.

On s'en alla prendre le café, passage du Saumon, dans un estaminet, à l'entresol. Frédéric assista, sur ses jambes, à d'interminables parties de billard, abreuvées d'innombrables chopes ; — et il resta là, jusqu'à minuit, sans savoir pourquoi, par lâcheté, par bêtise, dans l'espérance confuse d'un événement quelconque favorable à son amour.

Quand donc la reverrait-il ? Frédéric se désespérait. Mais, un soir, vers la fin de novembre, Arnoux lui dit :

— "Ma femme est revenue hier, vous savez !"

Le lendemain, à cinq heures, il entrait chez elle. Il débuta par des félicitations, à propos de sa mère, dont la maladie avait été si grave.

— "Mais non ! Qui vous l'a dit ?"

— "Arnoux !"

Elle fit un "ah" léger, puis ajouta qu'elle avait eu d'abord, des craintes sérieuses, maintenant disparues.

Elle se tenait près du feu, dans la bergère de tapisserie. Il était sur le canapé, avec son chapeau entre ses genoux ; et l'entretien fut pénible, elle l'abandonnait à chaque minute il ne trouvait pas de joint pour y introduire ses sentiments. Mais, comme il se plaignait d'étudier la chicane, elle répliqua : — "Oui…. je conçois…. les affaires… !" en baissant la figure, absorbée tout à coup par des réflexions.

Il avait soif de les connaître, et même ne songeait pas à autre chose. Le crépuscule amassait de l'ombre autour d'eux.

Elle se leva, ayant une course à faire, puis reparut avec une capote de velours, et une mante noire, bordée de petit-gris. Il osa offrir de l'accompagner.

On n'y voyait plus ; le temps était froid, et un lourd brouillard, estompant la façade des maisons, puait dans l’air. Frédéric le humait avec délices ; car il sentait à travers la ouate du vêtement la forme de son bras ; et sa main, prise dans un gant chamois à deux boutons, sa petite main qu’il aurait voulu couvrir de baisers, s’appuyait sur sa manche. A cause du pavé glissant, ils oscillaient un peu ; il lui semblait qu’ils étaient tous les deux comme bercés par le vent, au milieu d’un nuage.

L’éclat des lumières, sur le boulevard, le remit dans la réalité. L’occasion était bonne, le temps pressait. Il se donna jusqu’à la rue de Richelieu pour déclarer son amour. Mais, presque aussitôt, devant un magasin de porcelaines, elle s’arrêta net, en lui disant :

— “Nous y sommes, je vous remercie ! A jeudi, n’est-ce pas, comme d’habitude ?”

Les dîners recommencèrent ; et plus il fréquentait Mme Arnoux, plus ses langueurs augmentaient.

La contemplation de cette femme l’énervait, comme l’usage d’un parfum trop fort. Cela descendit dans les profondeurs de son tempérament, et devenait presque une manière générale de sentir, un mode nouveau d’exister.

Les prostituées qu’il rencontrait aux feux du gaz, les cantatrices poussant leurs roulades, les écuyères sur leurs chevaux au galop, les bourgeoises à pied, les grisettes à leur fenêtre, toutes les femmes lui rappelaient celle-là, par des similitudes ou par des contrastes violents. Il regardait, le long des boutiques, les cachemires, les dentelles et les pendeloques de pierreries, en les imaginant drapés autour de ses reins, cousues à son corsage, faisant des feux dans sa chevelure noire. A l’éventaire des marchandes, les fleurs s’épanouissaient pour qu’elle les choisît en passant ; dans la montre des cordonniers, les petites pantoufles de satin à bordure de cygne semblaient attendre son pied ; toutes les rues conduisaient vers sa maison : les voitures ne stationnaient sur les places que pour y mener plus vite ; Paris se rapportait à sa personne, et la grande ville avec toutes ses voix, bruissait, comme un immense orchestre, autour d’elle.

Quand il allait au Jardin des Plantes, la vue d’un palmier l’entraînait vers des pays lointains. Ils voyageaient ensemble, au dos des dromadaires, sous le tendelet des éléphants, dans la cabine d’un yacht parmi des archipels bleus, ou côte à côte sur deux mulets à clochettes, qui trébuchent dans les herbes contre des colonnes brisées. Quelquefois, il s’arrêtait au Louvre devant de vieux tableaux ; et son amour l’embrassant jusque dans les siècles disparus, il la substituait aux personnages des peintures. Coiffée d’un hennin, elle priait à deux genoux derrière un vitrage de plomb. Seigneuresse des Castilles ou des Flandres, elle se tenait assise, avec une fraise empesée et un corps de baleines à gros bouillons. Puis elle descendait quelque grand escalier de porphyre, au milieu des sénateurs, sous un dais de plumes d'autruche, dans une robe de brocart. D'autres fois, il la rêvait en pantalon de soie jaune, sur les coussins d'un harem ; — et tout ce qui était beau, le scintillement des étoiles, certains airs de musique, l'allure d'une phrase, un contour, l'amenaient à sa pensée d'une façon brusque et insensible.

Quant à essayer d'en faire sa maîtresse, il était sûr que toute tentative serait vaine.

Un soir, Dittmer, qui arrivait, la baisa sur le front ; Lovarias fit de même, en disant :

— "Vous permettez, n'est-ce pas, selon le privilège des amis ?"

Frédéric balbutia :

— "Il me semble que nous sommes tous des amis ?"

— "Pas tous des vieux !" reprit-elle.

C'était le repousser d'avance, indirectement.

Que faire, d'ailleurs ? Lui dire qu'il l'aimait ? Elle l'éconduirait sans doute : ou bien, S'indignant, le chasserait de sa maison ! Or, il préférait toutes les douleurs à l'horrible chance de ne plus la voir.

Il enviait le talent des pianistes, les balafres des soldats. Il souhaitait une maladie dangereuse, espérant de cette façon l'intéresser.

Une chose l'étonnait, c'est qu'il n'était pas jaloux d'Arnoux ; et il ne pouvait se la figurer autrement que vêtue, — tant sa pudeur semblait naturelle, et reculait son sexe dans une ombre mystérieuse.

Cependant, il songeait au bonheur de vivre avec elle, de la tutoyer, de lui passer la main sur les bandeaux longuement, ou de se tenir par terre, à genoux, les deux bras autour de sa taille, à boire son âme dans ses yeux ! Il aurait fallu, pour cela, subvertir la destinée ; et, incapable d'action, maudissant Dieu et s'accusant d'être lâche, il tournait dans son désir, comme un prisonnier dans son cachot. Une angoisse permanente l'étouffait. Il restait pendant des heures immobile, ou bien, il éclatait en larmes ; et, un jour qu'il n'avait pas eu la force de se contenir, Deslauriers lui dit :

— "Mais, saprelotte ! qu'est-ce que tu as ?"

Frédéric souffrait des nerfs. Deslauriers n'en crut rien. Devant une pareille douleur, il avait senti se réveiller sa tendresse, et il le réconforta. Un homme comme lui se laisser abattre, quelle sottise ! Passe encore dans la jeunesse, mais plus tard, c'est perdre son temps.

— "Tu me gâtes mon Frédéric ! Je redemande l'ancien. Garçon, toujours du même ! Il me plaisait ! Voyons, fume une pipe, animal ! Secoue-toi un peu, tu me désoles !"

— "C'est vrai", dit Frédéric, "je suis fou !"

Le Clerc reprit :

— “Ah ! vieux troubadour, je sais bien ce qui t’afflige Le petit cœur ? Avoue-le ! Bah ! une de perdue, quatre de trouvées ! On se console des femmes vertueuses avec les autres. Veux-tu que je t’en fasse connaître, des femmes ? Tu n’as qu’à venir à l’Alhambra.” (C’était un bal public ouvert récemment au haut des Champs-Elysées, et qui se ruina dès la seconde saison, par un luxe prématuré dans ce genre d’établissements.) “On s’y amuse à ce qu’il paraît. Allons-y ! Tu prendras tes amis si tu veux ; je te passe même Regimbart !”

Frédéric n’invita pas le Citoyen. Deslauriers se priva de Sénécal. Ils emmenèrent seulement Hussonnet et Cisy avec Dussardier ; et le même fiacre les descendit tous les cinq à la porte de l’Alhambra.

Deux galeries moresques s’étendaient à droite et à gauche, parallèlement. Le mur d’une maison, en face, occupait tout le fond, et le quatrième côté (celui du restaurant) figurait un cloître gothique à vitraux de couleurs. Une sorte de toiture chinoise abritait l’estrade où jouaient les musiciens ; le sol autour était couvert d’asphalte, et des lanternes vénitiennes accrochées à des poteaux formaient, de loin, sur les quadrilles, une couronne de feux multicolores. Un piédestal, çà et là, supportait une cuvette de pierre, d’où s’élevait un mince filet d’eau. On apercevait dans les feuillages des statues en plâtre, Hébés ou Cupidons tout gluants de peinture à l’huile ; et les allées nombreuses, garnies d’un sable très jaune soigneusement ratissé, faisaient paraître le jardin beaucoup plus vaste qu’il ne l’était.

Des étudiants promenaient leurs maîtresses ; des commis en nouveautés se pavanaient une canne entre les doigts ; des collégiens fumaient des régalias ; de vieux célibataires caressaient avec un peigne leur barbe teinte ; il y avait des Anglais, des Russes, des gens de l’Amérique du Sud, trois Orientaux en tarbouch. Des lorettes, des grisettes et des filles étaient venues là, espérant trouver un protecteur, un amoureux, une pièce d’or, ou simplement pour le plaisir de la danse ; et leurs robes à tunique vert d’eau, bleue, cerise, ou violette, passaient, s’agitaient entre les ébéniers et les lilas. Presque tous les hommes portaient des étoffes à carreaux, quelques-uns des pantalons blancs, malgré la fraîcheur du soir. On allumait les becs de gaz.

Hussonnet, par ses relations avec les journaux de modes et les petits théâtres, connaissait beaucoup de femmes ; il leur envoyait des baisers par le bout des doigts, et de temps à autre, quittant ses amis, allait causer avec elles.

Deslauriers fut jaloux de ces allures. Il aborda cyniquement une grande blonde, vêtue de nankin. Après l’avoir considéré d’un air maussade, elle dit : — “Non ! pas de confiance, mon bonhomme !” et tourna les talons.

Il recommença près d’une grosse brune, qui était folle sans doute, car elle bondit dès le premier mot, en le menaçant, s'il continuait, d'appeler les sergents de ville. Deslauriers s'efforça de rire ; puis, découvrant une petite femme assise à l'écart sous un réverbère, il lui proposa une contredanse.

Les musiciens, juchés sur l'estrade, dans des postures de singe, raclaient et soufflaient, impétueusement. Le chef d'orchestre, debout, battait la mesure d'une façon automatique. On était tassé, on s'amusait ; les brides dénouées des chapeaux effleuraient les cravates, les bottes s'enfonçaient sous les jupons ; tout cela sautait en cadence ; Deslauriers pressait contre lui la petite femme, et, gagné par le délire du cancan, se démenait au milieu des quadrilles comme une grande marionnette. Cisy et Dussardier continuaient leur promenade ; le jeune aristocrate lorgnait les filles, et, malgré les exhortations du commis, n'osait leur parler, s'imaginant qu'il y avait toujours chez ces femmes-là "un homme caché dans l'armoire avec un pistolet, et qui en sort pour vous faire souscrire des lettres de change" .

Ils revinrent près de Frédéric. Deslauriers ne dansait plus ; et tous se demandaient comment finir la soirée, quand Hussonnet s'écria :

— "Tiens ! la marquise d'Amaëgui !"

C'était une femme pâle, à nez retroussé, avec des mitaines jusqu'aux coudes et de grandes boucles noires qui pendaient le long de ses joues, comme deux oreilles de chien. Hussonnet lui dit :

— "Nous devrions organiser une petite fête chez toi, un raout oriental ? Tâche d'herboriser quelques-unes de tes amies pour ces chevaliers français ? Eh bien, qu'est-ce qui te gêne ? Attendrais-tu ton hidalgo ?"

L'Andalouse baissait la tête ; sachant les habitudes peu luxueuses de son ami, elle avait peur d'en être pour ses rafraîchissements. Enfin au mot d'argent lâché par elle, Cisy proposa cinq napoléons, toute sa bourse ; la chose fut décidée. Mais Frédéric n'était plus là.

Il avait cru reconnaître la voix d'Arnoux, avait aperçu un chapeau de femme, et il s'était enfoncé bien vite dans le bosquet à côté.

Mlle Vatnaz se trouvait seule avec Arnoux.

— "Excusez-moi ! je vous dérange ?"

— "Pas le moins du monde !" reprit le marchand.

Frédéric, aux derniers mots de leur conversation, comprit qu'il était accouru à l'Alhambra pour entretenir Mlle Vatnaz d'une affaire urgente ; et sans doute Arnoux n'était pas complètement rassuré, car il lui dit d'un air inquiet :

— "Vous êtes bien sûre ?"

— "Très sûre ! on vous aime ! Ah ! quel homme !"

Et elle lui faisait la moue, en avançant ses grosses lèvres, presque sanguinolentes à force d'être rouges. Mais elle avait d'admirables yeux fauves avec des points d’or dans les prunelles, tout pleins d’esprit, d’amour et de sensualité. Ils éclairaient, comme des lampes, le teint un peu jaune de sa figure maigre. Arnoux semblait jouir de ses rebuffades. Il se pencha de son côté en lui disant — “Vous êtes gentille, embrassez-moi !” Elle le prit par les deux oreilles, et le baisa sur le front.

A ce moment, les danses s’arrêtèrent ; et, à la place du chef d’orchestre, parut un beau jeune homme, trop gras et d’une blancheur de cire. Il avait de longs cheveux noirs disposés à la manière du Christ, un gilet de velours azur à grandes palmes d’or, l’air orgueilleux comme un paon, bête comme un dindon ; et quand il eut salué le public, il entama une chansonnette. C’était un villageois narrant lui-même son voyage dans la Capitale ; l’artiste parlait bas-normand, faisait l’homme soûl ; le refrain :

Ah ! j’ai t’y ri, j’ai t’y ri,

Dans ce gueusard de Paris

soulevait des trépignements d’enthousiasme. Delmas, “chanteur expressif”, était trop malin pour le laisser refroidir. On lui passa vivement une guitare, et il gémit une romance intitulée le Frère de l’Albanaise.

Les paroles rappelèrent à Frédéric celles que chantait l’homme en haillons, entre les tambours du bateau. Ses yeux s’attachaient involontairement sur le bas de la robe étalée devant lui. Après chaque couplet, il y avait une longue pause, — et le souffle du vent dans les arbres ressemblait au bruit des ondes.

Mlle Vatnaz, en écartant d’une main les branches d’un troène qui lui masquait la vue de l’estrade, contemplait le chanteur, fixement, les narines ouvertes, les cils rapprochés, et comme perdue dans une joie sérieuse.

— “Très bien !” dit Arnoux. “Je comprends pourquoi vous êtes ce soir à l’Alhambra ! Delmas vous plaît, ma chère.”

Elle ne voulut rien avouer.

— “Ah ! quelle pudeur !”

Et, montrant Frédéric :

— “Est-ce à cause de lui ? Vous auriez tort. Pas de garçon plus discret !”

Les autres, qui cherchaient leur ami, entrèrent dans la salle de verdure. Hussonnet les présenta. Arnoux fit une distribution de cigares et régala de sorbets la compagnie.

Mlle Vatnaz avait rougi en apercevant Dussardier. Elle se leva bientôt, et, lui tendant la main :

— “Vous ne me remettez pas, monsieur Auguste ?”

— “Comment la connaissez-vous ?” demanda Frédéric.

— “Nous avons été dans la même maison !” reprit-il.

Cisy le tirait par la manche, ils sortirent ; et, à peine disparu, Mlle Vatnaz commença l’éloge de son caractère. Elle ajouta même qu’il avait le génie du cœur.

Puis on causa de Delmas, qui pourrait, comme mime, avoir des succès au théâtre ; et il s’ensuivit une discussion, où l’on mêla Shakespeare, la Censure, le Style, le Peuple, les recettes de la Porte-Saint-Martin, Alexandre Dumas, Victor Hugo et Dumersan. Arnoux avait connu plusieurs actrices célèbres ; les jeunes gens se penchaient pour l’écouter. Mais ses paroles étaient couvertes par le tapage de la musique ; et, sitôt le quadrille ou la polka terminés, tous s’abattaient sur les tables, appelaient le garçon, riaient ; les bouteilles de bière et de limonade gazeuse détonaient dans les feuillages, des femmes criaient comme des poules ; quelquefois, deux messieurs voulaient se battre ; un voleur fut arrêté.

Au galop, les danseurs envahirent les allées. Haletant, souriant, et la face rouge, ils défilaient dans un tourbillon qui soulevait les robes avec les basques des habits ; les trombones rugissaient plus fort ; le rythme s'accélérait ; derrière le cloître moyen âge, on entendit des crépitations, des pétards éclatèrent ; des soleils se mirent à tourner ; la lueur des feux de Bengale, couleur d'émeraude, éclaira pendant une minute tout le jardin ; — et, à la dernière fusée, la multitude exhala un grand soupir.

Elle s'écoula lentement. Un nuage de poudre à canon flottait dans l'air. Frédéric et Deslauriers marchaient au milieu de la foule pas à pas, quand un spectacle les arrêta : Martinon se faisait rendre de la monnaie au dépôt des parapluies ; et il accompagnait une femme d'une cinquantaine d'années, laide, magnifiquement vêtue, et d'un rang social problématique.

— "Ce gaillard-là", dit Deslauriers, "est moins simple qu'on ne suppose. Mais où est donc Cisy ?"

Dussardier leur montra l'estaminet, où ils aperçurent le fils des preux, devant un bol de punch, en compagnie d'un chapeau rose.

Hussonnet, qui s'était absenté depuis cinq minutes, reparut au même moment.

Une jeune fille s'appuyait sur son bras, en l'appelant tout haut "mon petit chat" .

— "Mais non !" lui disait-il. "Non ! pas en public ! Appelle-moi Vicomte, plutôt ! Ça vous donne un genre cavalier, Louis XIII et bottes molles, qui me plaît ! Oui, mes bons, une ancienne ! N'est-ce pas qu'elle est gentille ?"

Il lui prenait le menton.

— "Salue ces messieurs ce sont tous des fils de pairs de France ! je les fréquente pour qu'ils me nomment ambassadeur !"

— "Comme vous êtes fou !" soupira Mlle Vatnaz.

Elle pria Dussardier de la reconduire jusqu'à sa porte.

Arnoux les regarda s'éloigner, puis, se tournant vers Frédéric :

— "Vous plairait-elle, la Vatnaz ? Au reste, vous n'êtes pas franc là-dessus ? Je crois que vous cachez vos amours ?"

Frédéric, devenu blême, jura qu'il ne cachait rien.

— "C'est qu'on ne vous connaît pas de maîtresse", reprit Arnoux.

Frédéric eut envie de citer un nom, au hasard. Mais l'histoire pouvait lui être racontée. Il répondit qu'effectivement, il n'avait pas de maîtresse.

Le marchand l'en blâma.

— "Ce soir, l'occasion était bonne ! Pourquoi n'avez-vous pas fait comme les autres, qui s'en vont tous avec une femme ?"

— "Eh bien, et vous ?" dit Frédéric, impatienté d'une telle persistance.

— "Ah ! moi ! mon petit c'est différent ! Je m'en retourne auprès de la mienne !"

Il appela un cabriolet, et disparut.

Les deux amis s’en allèrent à pied. Un vent d’est soufflait. Ils ne parlaient ni l’un ni l’autre. Deslauriers regrettait de n’avoir pas brillé devant le directeur d’un journal, et Frédéric s’enfonçait dans sa tristesse. Enfin, il dit que le bastringue lui avait paru stupide.

— “A qui la faute ? Si tu ne nous avais pas lâchés pour ton Arnoux !”

— “Bah ! tout ce que j’aurais pu faire eût été complètement inutile !”

Mais le Clerc avait des théories. Il suffisait pour obtenir les choses, de les désirer fortement.

— “Cependant, toi-même, tout à l’heure…”

— “Je m’en moquais bien !” fit Deslauriers, arrêtant net l’allusion. “Est-ce que je vais m’empêtrer de femmes !”

Et il déclama contre leurs mièvreries, leurs sottises bref, elles lui déplaisaient.

“Ne pose donc pas !” dit Frédéric.

Deslauriers se tut. Puis, tout à coup :

— “Veux-tu parier cent francs que je fais la première qui passe ?”

— “Oui ! accepté !”

La première qui passa était une mendiante hideuse ; et ils désespéraient du hasard, lorsqu’au milieu de la rue de Rivoli, ils aperçurent une grande fille, portant à la main un petit carton.

Deslauriers l’accosta sous les arcades. Elle inclina brusquement du côté des Tuileries, et elle prit bientôt par la Place du Carrousel ; elle jetait des regards de droite et de gauche. Elle courut après un fiacre ; Deslauriers la rattrapa. Il marchait près d’elle, en lui parlant avec des gestes expressifs. Enfin elle accepta son bras, et ils continuèrent le long des quais. Puis, à la hauteur du Châtelet, pendant vingt minutes au moins, ils se promenèrent sur le trottoir, comme deux marins faisant leur quart. Mais, tout à coup, ils traversèrent le pont au Change, le marché aux Fleurs, le quai Napoléon. Frédéric entra derrière eux. Deslauriers lui fit comprendre qu’il les gênerait, et n’avait qu’à suivre son exemple.

— “Combien as-tu encore ?”

— “Deux pièces de cent sous.”

— “C’est assez ! bonsoir.”

Frédéric fut saisi par l’étonnement que l’on éprouve à voir une farce réussir “Il se moque de moi”, pensa-t-il. Si je remontais ? “Deslauriers croirait, peut-être, qu’il lui enviait cet amour ?” Comme si je n’en avais pas un, et cent fois plus rare, plus noble, plus fort ! " Une espèce de colère le poussait. Il arriva devant la porte de Mme Arnoux.

Aucune des fenêtres extérieures ne dépendait de son logement. Cependant, il restait les yeux collés sur la façade, — comme s’il avait cru, par cette contemplation, pouvoir fendre les murs. Maintenant, sans doute, elle reposait, tranquille comme une fleur endormie, avec ses beaux cheveux noirs parmi les dentelles de l’oreiller, les lèvres entre-closes, la tête sur un bras.

Celle d’Arnoux lui apparut. Il s’éloigna, pour fuir cette vision.

Le conseil de Deslauriers vint à sa mémoire ; il en eut horreur. Alors, il vagabonda dans les rues.

Quand un piéton s’avançait, il tâchait de distinguer son visage. De temps à autre, un rayon de lumière lui passait entre les jambes, décrivait au ras du pavé un immense quart de cercle ; et un homme surgissait, dans l’ombre, avec sa hotte et sa lanterne. Le vent, en de certains endroits, secouait le tuyau de tôle d’une cheminée ; des sons lointains s’élevaient, se mêlant au bourdonnement de sa tête, et il croyait entendre, dans les airs, la vague ritournelle des contredanses. Le mouvement de sa marche entretenait cette ivresse ; il se trouva sur le pont de la Concorde.

Alors, il se ressouvint de ce soir de l’autre hiver, — où, sortant de chez elle, pour la première fois, il lui avait fallu s’arrêter, tant son cœur battait vite sous l’étreinte de ses espérances. Toutes étaient mortes, maintenant !

Des nues sombres couraient sur la face de la lune. Il la contempla, en rêvant à la grandeur des espaces, à la misère de la vie, au néant de tout. Le jour parut ; ses dents claquaient ; et, à moitié endormi, mouillé par le brouillard et tout plein de larmes, il se demanda pourquoi n’en pas finir ? Rien qu’un mouvement à faire ! Le poids de son front l’entraînait, il voyait son cadavre flottant sur l’eau ; Frédéric se pencha. Le parapet était un peu large, et ce fut par lassitude qu’il n’essaya pas de le franchir.

Une épouvante le saisit. Il regagna les boulevards et s’affaissa sur un banc. Des agents de police le réveillèrent, convaincus qu’il “avait fait la noce” .

Il se remit à marcher. Mais comme il se sentait grand faim, et que tous les restaurants étaient fermés, il alla souper dans un cabaret des Halles. Après quoi, jugeant qu’il était encore trop tôt, il flâna aux alentours de l’hôtel de ville, jusqu’à huit heures et un quart.

Deslauriers avait depuis longtemps congédié sa donzelle ; et il écrivait sur la table, au milieu de la chambre. Vers quatre heures, M. de Cisy entra.

Grâce à Dussardier, la veille au soir, il s’était abouché avec une dame ; et même il l’avait reconduite en voiture, avec son mari, jusqu’au seuil de sa maison, où elle lui avait donné rendez-vous. Il en sortait. On ne connaissait pas ce nom-là !

— “Que voulez-vous que j’y fasse ?” dit Frédéric.

Alors le gentilhomme battit la campagne ; il parla de Mlle Vatnaz, de l’Andalouse, et de toutes les autres. Enfin, avec beaucoup de périphrases, il exposa le but de sa visite : se fiant à la discrétion de son ami, il venait pour qu’il l’assistât dans une démarche, après laquelle il se regarderait définitivement comme un homme ; et Frédéric ne le refusa pas. Il conta l’histoire à Deslauriers, sans dire la vérité sur ce qui le concernait personnellement.

Le Clerc trouva qu’ “il allait maintenant très bien.” Cette déférence à ses conseils augmenta sa bonne humeur.

C’était par elle qu’il avait séduit, dès le premier jour, Mlle Clémence Daviou, brodeuse en or pour équipements militaires, la plus douce personne qui fût, et svelte comme un roseau, avec de grands yeux bleus, continuellement ébahis. Le Clerc abusait de sa candeur, jusqu’à fui faire croire qu’il était décoré, il ornait sa redingote d’un ruban rouge, dans leurs tête-à-tête, mais s’en privait en public, pour ne point humilier son patron, disait-il. Du reste, il la tenait à distance, se laissait caresser comme un pacha, et l’appelait “fille du peuple” par manière de rire. Elle lui apportait chaque fois de petits bouquets de violettes. Frédéric n’aurait pas voulu d’un tel amour.

Cependant, lorsqu’ils sortaient, bras dessus bras dessous, pour se rendre dans un cabinet chez Pinson ou chez Barillot, il éprouvait une singulière tristesse. Frédéric ne savait pas combien, depuis un an, chaque jeudi, il avait fait souffrir Deslauriers, quand il se brossait les ongles, avant d’aller dîner rue de Choiseul !

Un soir que, du haut de son balcon, il venait de les regarder partir, il vit de loin Hussonnet sur le pont d’Arcole. Le bohème se mit à l’appeler par des signaux, et, Frédéric ayant descendu ses cinq étages :

— “Voici la chose : C’est samedi prochain, 24, la fête de Mme Arnoux.”

— “Comment, puisqu’elle s’appelle Marie ?”

— “Angèle aussi, n’importe ! On festoiera dans leur maison de campagne, à Saint-Cloud ; je suis chargé de vous en prévenir. Vous trouverez un véhicule à trois heures, au Journal ! Ainsi convenu Pardon de vous avoir dérangé. Mais j’ai tant de courses.”

Frédéric n’avait pas tourné les talons que son portier lui remit une lettre :

“Monsieur et Madame Dambreuse prient Monsieur F. Moreau de leur faire l’honneur de venir dîner chez eux samedi 24 courant. — R. S. V. P.”

— “Trop tard”, pensa-t-il.

Néanmoins, il montra la lettre à Deslauriers, lequel s’écria :

— “Ah ! enfin ! Mais tu n’as pas l’air content.”

— “Pourquoi ?”

Frédéric, ayant hésité quelque peu, dit qu’il avait le même jour une autre invitation.

— “Fais-moi le plaisir d’envoyer bouler la rue de Choiseul. Pas de bêtises ! Je vais répondre pour toi, si ça te gêne.”

Et le Clerc écrivit une acceptation, à la troisième personne.

N’ayant jamais vu le monde qu’à travers la fièvre de ses convoitises, il se l’imaginait comme une création artificielle, fonctionnant en vertu de lois mathématiques. Un dîner en ville, la rencontre d’un homme en place, le sourire d’une jolie femme pouvaient, par une série d’actions se déduisant les unes des autres, avoir de gigantesques résultats. Certains salons parisiens étaient comme ces machines qui prennent la matière à l’état brut et la rendent centuplée de valeur. Il croyait aux courtisanes conseillant les diplomates, aux riches mariages

obtenus par les intrigues, au génie des galériens, aux docilités du hasard sous la main des forts. Enfin il estimait la fréquentation des Dambreuse tellement utile, et il parla si bien, que Frédéric ne savait plus à quoi se résoudre.

Il n’en devait pas moins, puisque c’était la fête de Mme Arnoux, lui offrir un cadeau ; il songea, naturellement, à une ombrelle, afin de réparer sa maladresse.

Or, il découvrit une marquise en soie gorge-pigeon, à petit manche d’ivoire ciselé, et qui arrivait de la Chine. Mais cela coûtait cent soixante-quinze francs et il n’avait pas un sou, vivant même à crédit sur le trimestre prochain. Cependant, il la voulait, il y tenait, et, malgré sa répugnance, il eut recours à Deslauriers.

Deslauriers lui répondit qu’il n’avait pas d’argent.

— “J’en ai besoin”, dit Frédéric, “grand besoin !”

Et, l’autre ayant répété la même excuse, il s’emporta.

— “Tu pourrais bien, quelquefois…”

— “Quoi donc ?”

— “Rien !”

Le Clerc avait compris. Il leva sur sa réserve la somme en question, et, quand il l’eut versée pièce à pièce : — “Je ne te réclame pas de quittance, puisque je vis à tes crochets.”

Frédéric lui sauta au cou, avec mille protestations affectueuses. Deslauriers resta froid. Puis, le lendemain, apercevant l’ombrelle sur le piano :

— “Ah ! c’était pour cela !”

— “Je l’enverrai peut-être”, dit lâchement Frédéric.

Le hasard le servit, car il reçut, dans la soirée, un billet bordé de noir, et où Mme Dambreuse, lui annonçant la perte d’un oncle, s’excusait de remettre à plus tard le plaisir de faire sa connaissance.

Il arriva dès deux heures au bureau du Journal. Au lieu de l’attendre pour le mener dans sa voiture, Arnoux était parti la veille, ne résistant plus à son besoin de grand air.

Chaque année, aux premières feuilles, durant plusieurs jours de suite, il décampait le matin, faisait de longues courses à travers champs, buvait du lait dans les fermes, batifolait avec les villageoises, s’informait des récoltes, et rapportait des pieds de salade dans son mouchoir. Enfin, réalisant un vieux rêve, il s'était acheté une maison de campagne.

Pendant que Frédéric parlait au commis, Mlle Vatnaz survint, et fut désappointée de ne pas voir Arnoux. Il resterait là-bas encore deux jours, peut-être. Le commis lui conseilla “d'y aller” ; elle ne pouvait y aller ; d'écrire une lettre, elle avait peur que la lettre ne fût perdue.

Frédéric s'offrit à la porter lui-même. Elle en fit une rapidement, et le conjura de la remettre sans témoins.

Quarante minutes après, il débarquait à Saint-Cloud.

La maison, cent pas plus loin que le pont, se trouvait à mi-hauteur de la colline. Les murs du jardin étaient cachés par deux rangs de tilleuls, et une large pelouse descendait jusqu'au bord de la rivière. La porte de la grille étant ouverte, Frédéric entra.

Arnoux, étendu sur l'herbe, jouait avec une portée de petits chats. Cette distraction paraissait l'absorber infiniment. La lettre de Mlle Vatnaz le tira de sa torpeur.

— “Diable, diable ! c'est ennuyeux ! elle a raison ; il faut que je parte.”

Puis, ayant fourré la missive dans sa poche, il prit plaisir à montrer son domaine. Il montra tout, l'écurie, le hangar, la cuisine. Le salon était à droite, et, du côté de Paris, donnait sur une varangue en treillage, chargée d'une clématite. Mais, au-dessus de leur tête, une roulade éclata ; Mme Arnoux, se croyant seule, s'amusait à chanter. Elle faisait des gammes, des trilles, des arpèges. Il y avait de longues notes qui semblaient se tenir suspendues ; d'autres tombaient précipitées, comme les gouttelettes d'une cascade ; et sa voix, passant par la jalousie, coupait le grand silence, et montait vers le ciel bleu.

Elle cessa tout à coup, quand M. et Mme Oudry, deux voisins, se présentèrent.

Puis elle parut elle-même au haut du perron ; et, comme elle descendait les marches, il aperçut son pied. Elle avait de petites chaussures découvertes, en peau mordorée, avec trois pattes transversales, ce qui dessinait sur ses bas un grillage d'or.

Les invités arrivèrent. Sauf Me Lefaucheux, avocat, c'étaient les convives du jeudi. Chacun avait apporté quelque cadeau : Dittmer une écharpe syrienne, Rosenwald un album de romances, Burieu une aquarelle, Sombaz sa propre caricature, et Pellerin un fusain, représentant une espèce de danse macabre, hideuse fantaisie d'une exécution médiocre. Hussonnet s'était dispensé de tout présent.

Frédéric attendit après les autres, pour offrir le sien. Elle l'en remercia beaucoup. Alors, il dit :

— “Mais… c'est presque une dette ! J'ai été si fâché.”

— “De quoi donc ?” reprit-elle. “Je ne comprends pas !”

— “A table !” fit Arnoux, en le saisissant par le bras ; puis, dans l’oreille : “Vous n’êtes guère malin, vous !”

Rien n’était plaisant comme la salle à manger, peinte d’une couleur vert d’eau. A l’un des bouts, une nymphe de pierre trempait son orteil dans un bassin en forme de coquille. Par les fenêtres ouvertes, on apercevait tout le jardin avec la longue pelouse que flanquait un vieux pin d’Ecosse, aux trois quarts dépouillé ; des massifs de fleurs la bombaient inégalement ; et, au-delà du fleuve, se développaient, en large demi-cercle, le bois de Boulogne, Neuilly, Sèvres, Meudon. Devant la grille, en face, un canot à la voile prenait des bordées.

On causa d’abord de cette vue que l’on avait, puis du paysage en général ; et les discussions commençaient quand Arnoux donna l’ordre à son domestique d’atteler l’américaine vers les neuf heures et demie. Une lettre de son caissier le rappelait.

— “Veux-tu que je m’en retourne avec toi ?”, dit Mme Arnoux.

— “Mais certainement !” et, en lui faisant un beau salut : “Vous savez bien, Madame, qu’on ne peut vivre sans vous !”

Tous la complimentèrent d’avoir un si bon mari.

— “Ah ! c’est que je ne suis pas seule !” répliqua-t-elle doucement, en montrant sa petite fille.

Puis, la conversation ayant repris sur la peinture, on parla d’un Ruysdaël, dont Arnoux espérait des sommes considérables, et Pellerin lui demanda s’il était vrai que le fameux Saül Mathias, de Londres, fût venu, le mois passé, lui en offrir vingt-trois mille francs.

— “Rien de plus vrai !” et, se tournant vers Frédéric “C’est même le monsieur que je promenais l’autre jour à l’Alhambra, bien malgré moi, je vous assure, car ces Anglais ne sont pas drôles”

Frédéric, soupçonnant dans la lettre de Mlle Vatnaz quelque histoire de femme, avait admiré l’aisance du sieur Arnoux à trouver un moyen honnête de déguerpir ; mais son nouveau mensonge, absolument inutile, lui fit écarquiller les yeux.

Le marchand ajouta, d’un air simple :

— “Comment l’appelez-vous donc, ce grand jeune homme, votre ami ?”

— “Deslauriers”, dit vivement Frédéric.

Et, pour réparer les torts qu’ils se sentait à son endroit, il le vanta comme une intelligence supérieure.

— “Ah ! vraiment ? Mais il n’a pas l’air si brave garçon que l’autre, le commis de roulage.”

Frédéric maudit Dussardier. Elle allait croire qu’il frayait avec les gens du commun.

Ensuite, il fut question des embellissements de la Capitale, des quartiers nouveaux, et le bonhomme Oudry vint à citer, parmi les grands spéculateurs, M. Dambreuse.

Frédéric, saisissant l’occasion de se faire valoir, dit qu’il le connaissait. Mais Pellerin se lança dans une catilinaire contre les épiciers ; vendeurs de chandelles ou d’argent, il n’y voyait pas de différence. Puis, Rosenwald et Burieu devisèrent porcelaines ; Arnoux causait jardinage avec Mme Oudry ; Sombaz, loustic de la vieille école, s’amusait à blaguer son époux ; il l’appelait Odry, comme l’acteur, déclara qu’il devait descendre d’Oudry, le peintre des chiens, car la bosse des animaux était visible sur son front. Il voulut même lui tâter le crâne, l’autre s’en défendait à cause de sa perruque ; et le dessert finit avec des éclats de rire.

Quand on eut pris le café, sous les tilleuls, en fumant, et fait plusieurs tours dans le jardin, on alla se promener le long de la rivière.

La compagnie s’arrêta devant un pêcheur, qui nettoyait des anguilles, dans une boutique à poisson. Mlle Marthe voulut les voir. Il vida sa boîte sur l’herbe ; et la petite fille se jetait à genoux pour les rattraper, riait de plaisir, criait d’effroi. Toutes furent perdues. Arnoux les paya.

Il eut, ensuite, l’idée de faire une promenade en canot. Un côté de l’horizon commençait à pâlir. tandis que, de l’autre, une large couleur orange s’étalait dans le ciel et était plus empourprée au faîte des collines, devenues complètement noires. Mme Arnoux se tenait assise sur une grosse pierre, ayant cette lueur d’incendie derrière elle. Les autres personnes flânaient, çà et là ; Hussonnet, au bas de la berge, faisait des ricochets sur l’eau.

Arnoux revint, suivi par une vieille chaloupe, où malgré les représentations les plus sages il empila ses convives. Elle sombrait ; il fallut débarquer.

Déjà des bougies brûlaient dans le salon, tout tendu de perse, avec des girandoles en cristal contre les murs. La mère Oudry s’endormait doucement dans un fauteuil, et les autres écoutaient M. Lefaucheux, dissertant sur les gloires du barreau. Mme Arnoux était seule près de la croisée, Frédéric l’aborda.

Ils causèrent de ce que l’on disait. Elle admirait les orateurs ; lui, il préférait la gloire des écrivains. Mais on devait sentir, reprit-elle, une plus forte jouissance à remuer les foules directement, soi-même, à voir que l’on fait passer dans leur âme tous les sentiments de la sienne. Ces triomphes ne tentaient guère Frédéric, qui n’avait point d’ambition.

— “Ah ! pourquoi ?” dit-elle. “Il faut en avoir un peu !”

Ils étaient l’un près de l’autre, debout, dans l’embrasure de la croisée. La nuit, devant eux, s’étendait comme un immense voile sombre, piqué d’argent. C’était la première fois qu’ils ne parlaient pas de choses insignifiantes. Il vint même à savoir ses antipathies et ses goûts : certains parfums lui faisaient mal, les livres d’histoire l’intéressaient, elle croyait aux songes.

Il entama le chapitre des aventures sentimentales. Elle plaignait les désastres de la passion, mais était révoltée par les turpitudes hypocrites ; et cette droiture d’esprit se rapportait si bien à la beauté régulière de son visage, qu’elle semblait en dépendre.

Elle souriait quelquefois, arrêtant sur lui ses yeux, une minute. Alors, il sentait ses regards pénétrer son âme, comme ces grands rayons de soleil qui descendent jusqu’au fond de l’eau. Il l’aimait sans arrière-pensée, sans espoir de retour, absolument ; et, dans ces muets transports, pareils à des élans de reconnaissance, il aurait voulu couvrir son front d’une pluie de baisers. Cependant, un souffle intérieur l’enlevait comme hors de lui ; c’était une envie de se sacrifier, un besoin de dévouement immédiat, et d’autant plus fort qu’il ne pouvait l’assouvir.

Il ne partit pas avec les autres, Hussonnet non plus. Ils devaient s’en retourner dans la voiture ; et l’américaine attendait au bas du perron, quand Arnoux descendit dans le jardin, pour cueillir des roses. Puis, le bouquet étant lié avec un fil, comme les tiges dépassaient inégalement, il fouilla dans sa poche, pleine de papiers, en prit un au hasard, les enveloppa, consolida son œuvre avec une forte épingle et il l’offrit à sa femme, avec une certaine émotion.

— “Tiens, ma chérie, excuse-moi de t’avoir oubliée !” Mais elle poussa un petit cri ; l’épingle, sottement mise, l’avait blessée, et elle remonta dans sa chambre. On l’attendit près d’un quart d’heure. Enfin elle reparut, enleva Marthe, se jeta dans la voiture.

— “Et ton bouquet ?” dit Arnoux.

— “Non ! non ! ce n’est pas la peine !”

Frédéric courait pour l’aller prendre ; elle lui cria :

— “Je n’en veux pas !”

Mais il l’apporta bientôt, disant qu’il venait de le remettre dans l’enveloppe, car il avait trouvé les fleurs à terre. Elle les enfonça dans le tablier de cuir, contre le siège, et l’on partit.

Frédéric, assis près d’elle, remarqua qu’elle tremblait horriblement. Puis, quand on eut passé le pont, comme Arnoux tournait à gauche :

— “Mais non ! tu te trompes ! par là, à droite !”

Elle semblait irritée ; tout la gênait. Enfin, Marthe ayant fermé les yeux, elle tira le bouquet et le lança par la portière, puis saisit au bras Frédéric, en lui faisant signe, avec l’autre main, de n’en jamais parler.

Ensuite, elle appliqua son mouchoir contre ses lèvres, et ne bougea plus.

Les deux autres, sur le siège, causaient imprimerie, abonnés. Arnoux, qui conduisait sans attention, se perdit au milieu du bois de Boulogne. Alors, on s’enfonça dans de petits chemins. Le cheval marchait au pas ; les branches des arbres frôlaient la capote. Frédéric n’apercevait de Mme Arnoux que ses deux yeux, dans l’ombre ; Marthe s’était allongée sur elle, et il lui soutenait la tête.

— “Elle vous fatigue !” dit sa mère.

Il répondit :

— “Non ! oh non !”

De lents tourbillons de poussière se levaient ; on traversait Auteuil ; toutes les maisons étaient closes ; un réverbère, çà et là, éclairait l’angle d’un mur, puis on rentrait dans les ténèbres ; une fois, il s’aperçut qu’elle pleurait.

Etait-ce un remords ? un désir ? quoi donc ? Ce chagrin, qu’il ne savait pas, l’intéressait comme une chose personnelle ; maintenant, il y avait entre eux un lien nouveau, une espèce de complicité ; et il lui dit, de la voix la plus caressante qu’il put :

— “Vous souffrez ?”

— “Oui, un peu”, reprit-elle.

La voiture roulait, et les chèvrefeuilles et les seringas débordaient les clôtures des jardins, envoyaient dans la nuit des bouffées d’odeurs amollissantes. Les plis nombreux de sa robe couvraient ses pieds. Il lui semblait communiquer avec toute sa personne par ce corps d’enfant étendu entre eux. Il se pencha vers la petite fille, et, écartant ses jolis cheveux bruns, la baisa au front, doucement.

— “Vous êtes bon !” dit Mme Arnoux.

— “Pourquoi ?”

— “Parce que vous aimez les enfants.”

— “Pas tous !”

Il n’ajouta rien, mais il étendit la main gauche de son côté et la laissa toute grande ouverte, — s’imaginant qu’elle allait faire comme lui, peut-être, et qu’il rencontrerait la sienne. Puis il eut honte, et la retira.

On arriva bientôt sur le pavé. La voiture allait plus vite, les becs de gaz se multiplièrent, c’était Paris. Hussonnet, devant le Garde-Meuble, sauta du siège. Frédéric attendit pour descendre que l’on fût arrivé dans la cour ; puis il s’embusqua au coin de la rue de Choiseul, et aperçut Arnoux qui remontait lentement vers les boulevards.

Dès le lendemain, il se mit à travailler de toutes ses forces.

Il se voyait dans une cour d’assises, par un soir d’hiver, à la fin des plaidoiries, quand les jurés sont pâles et que la foule haletante fait craquer les cloisons du prétoire, parlant depuis quatre heures déjà, résumant toutes ses preuves, en découvrant de nouvelles, et sentant à chaque phrase, à chaque mot, à chaque geste le couperet de la guillotine, suspendu derrière lui, se relever ; puis, à la tribune de la Chambre, orateur qui porte sur ses lèvres le salut de tout un peuple, noyant ses adversaires sous ses prosopopées, les écrasant d'une riposte, avec des foudres et des intonations musicales dans la voix, ironique, pathétique, emporté, sublime ; elle serait là, quelque part, au milieu des autres, cachant sous son voile ses pleurs d'enthousiasme ; ils se retrouveraient ensuite ; — et les découragements, les calomnies et les injures ne l'atteindraient pas, si elle disait : — "Ah ! cela est beau !" en lui passant sur le front ses mains légères.

Ces images fulguraient, comme des phares, à l'horizon de sa vie. Son esprit, excité, devint plus leste et plus fort. Jusqu'au mois d'août, il s'enferma, et fut reçu à son dernier examen.

Deslauriers, qui avait eu tant de mal à lui seriner encore une fois le deuxième à la fin de décembre et le troisième en février, s'étonnait de son ardeur. Alors, les vieux espoirs revinrent. Dans dix ans, il fallait que Frédéric fût député ; dans quinze, ministre ; pourquoi pas ? Avec son patrimoine qu'il allait toucher bientôt, il pouvait, d'abord, fonder un journal ; ce serait le début ; ensuite, on verrait. Quant à lui, il ambitionnait toujours une chaire à l'Ecole de droit ; et il soutint sa thèse pour le doctorat d'une façon si remarquable, qu'elle lui valut les compliments des professeurs.

Frédéric passa la sienne trois jours après. Avant de partir en vacances, il eut l'idée d'un pique-nique, pour clore les réunions du samedi.

Il s'y montra gai. Mme Arnoux était maintenant près de sa mère, à Chartres. Mais il la retrouverait bientôt, et finirait par être son amant.

Deslauriers, admis le jour même à la parlote d'Orsay avait fait un discours fort applaudi. Quoiqu'il fût sobre, il se grisa, et dit au dessert à Dussardier :

— "Tu es honnête, toi ! Quand je serai riche, je t'instituerai mon régisseur."

Tous étaient heureux ; Cisy ne finirait pas son droit ; Martinon allait continuer son stage en province, où il serait nommé substitut ; Pellerin se disposait à un grand tableau figurant le Génie de la Révolution ; Hussonnet, la semaine prochaine, devait lire au directeur des Dé lassements le plan d'une pièce, et ne doutait pas du succès :

— "Car la charpente du drame, on me l'accorde ! Les passions, j'ai assez roulé ma bosse pour m'y connaître quant aux traits d'esprit, c'est mon métier !"

Il fit un saut, retomba sur les deux mains, et marcha quelque temps autour de la table, les jambes en l'air.

Cette gaminerie ne dérida pas Sénécal. Il venait d'être chassé de sa pension, pour avoir battu un fils d'aristocrate. Sa misère augmentant, il s'en prenait à l'ordre social, maudissait les riches ; et il s'épancha dans le sein de Regimbart, lequel était de plus en plus désillusionné, attristé, dégoûté. Le Citoyen se tournait, maintenant, vers les questions budgétaires, et accusait la Camarilla de perdre des millions en Algérie.

Comme il ne pouvait dormir sans avoir stationné à l’estaminet Alexandre, il disparut dès onze heures. Les autres se retirèrent plus tard ; et Frédéric, en faisant ses faisant ses adieux à Hussonnet, apprit que Mme Arnoux avait dû revenir la veille.

Il alla donc aux Messageries changer sa place pour le lendemain, et, vers six heures du soir, se présenta chez elle. Son retour, lui dit le concierge, était différé d’une semaine. Frédéric dîna seul, puis flâna sur les boulevards.

Des nuages roses, en forme d’écharpe, s’allongeaient au-delà des toits ; on commençait à relever les tentes des boutiques ; des tombereaux d’arrosage versaient une pluie sur la poussière, et une fraîcheur inattendue se mêlait aux émanations des cafés, laissant voir par leurs portes ouvertes, entre des argenteries et des dorures, des fleurs en gerbes qui se miraient dans les hautes glaces. La foule marchait lentement. Il y avait des groupes d’hommes causant au milieu du trottoir ; et des femmes passaient, avec une mollesse dans les yeux et ce teint de camélia que donne aux chairs féminines la lassitude des grandes chaleurs. Quelque chose d’énorme s’épanchait, enveloppait les maisons. Jamais Paris ne lui avait semblé si beau. Il n’apercevait, dans l’avenir, qu’une interminable série d’années toutes pleines d’amour.

Il s’arrêta devant le théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin à regarder l’affiche ; et, par désœuvrement, prit un billet.

On jouait une vieille féerie. Les spectateurs étaient rares ; et, dans les lucarnes du paradis, le jour se découpait en petits carrés bleus, tandis que les quinquets de la rampe formaient une seule ligne de lumières jaunes. La scène représentait un marché d’esclaves à Pékin, avec clochettes, tam-tams, sultanes, bonnets pointus et calembours. Puis, la toile baissée, il erra dans le foyer, solitairement, et admira sur le boulevard, au bas du perron, un grand landau vert, attelé de deux chevaux blancs, tenus par un cocher en culotte courte.

Il regagnait sa place, quand, au balcon, dans la première loge d’avant-scène, entrèrent une dame et un monsieur. Le mari avait un visage pâle, bordé d’un filet de barbe grise, la rosette d’officier, et cet aspect glacial qu’on attribue aux diplomates.

Sa femme, de vingt ans plus jeune pour le moins, ni grande ni petite, ni laide ni jolie, portait ses cheveux blonds tire-bouchonnés à l’anglaise, une robe à corsage plat, et un large éventail de dentelle noire. Pour que des gens d’un pareil monde fussent venus au spectacle dans cette saison, il fallait supposer un hasard, ou l’ennui de passer leur soirée en tête-à-tête. La dame mordillait son éventail, et le monsieur bâillait. Frédéric ne pouvait se rappeler où il avait vu cette figure.

A l’entracte suivant, comme il traversait un couloir il les rencontra tous les deux ; sur le vague salut qu’il fit, M. Dambreuse, le reconnaissant, l’aborda et s’excusa, tout de suite, de négligences impardonnables. C’était une allusion aux cartes de visite nombreuses, envoyées d’après les conseils du Clerc. Toutefois il confondait les époques, croyant que Frédéric était à sa seconde année de droit. Puis il l’envia de partir pour la campagne. Il aurait eu besoin de se reposer, mais les affaires le retenaient à Paris.

Mme Dambreuse, appuyée sur son bras, inclinait la tête, légèrement ; et l’aménité spirituelle de son visage contrastait avec son expression chagrine de tout à l’heure.

— “On y trouve pourtant de belles distractions !” dit-elle, aux derniers mots de son mari. “Comme ce spectacle est bête ! n’est-ce pas, monsieur ?” Et tous trois restèrent debout, à causer théâtres et pièces nouvelles.

Frédéric, habitué aux grimaces des bourgeoises provinciales, n’avait vu chez aucune femme une pareille aisance de manières, cette simplicité, qui est un raffinement, et où les naïfs aperçoivent l’expression d’une sympathie instantanée.

On comptait sur lui, dès son retour ; M. Dambreuse le chargea de ses souvenirs pour le père Roque.

Frédéric ne manqua pas, en rentrant, de conter cet accueil à Deslauriers.

— “Fameux !” reprit le Clerc, “et ne te laisse pas entortiller par ta maman ! Reviens tout de suite !”

Le lendemain de son arrivée, après leur déjeuner, Mme Moreau emmena son fils dans le jardin.

Elle se dit heureuse de lui voir un état, car ils n’étaient pas aussi riches que l’on croyait ; la terre rapportait peu ; les fermiers payaient mal ; elle avait même été contrainte de vendre sa voiture. Enfin, elle lui exposa leur situation.

Dans les premiers embarras de son veuvage, un homme astucieux, M. Roque, lui avait fait des prêts d’argent, renouvelés, prolongés malgré elle. Il était venu les réclamer tout à coup ; et elle avait passé par ses conditions, en lui cédant à un prix dérisoire la ferme de Presles. Dix ans plus tard, son capital disparaissait dans la faillite d’un banquier, à Melun. Par horreur des hypothèques et pour conserver des apparences utiles à l’avenir de son fils, comme le père Roque se présentait de nouveau, elle l’avait écouté, encore une fois. Mais elle était quitte, maintenant. Bref, il leur restait environ dix mille francs de rente, dont deux mille trois cents à lui, tout son patrimoine !

— “Ce n’est pas possible !” s’écria Frédéric.

Elle eut un mouvement de tête signifiant que cela était très possible.

Mais son oncle lui laisserait quelque chose ? Rien n’était moins sûr !

Et ils firent un tour de jardin, sans parler. Enfin elle l’attira contre son cœur, et, d’une voix que les larmes étouffaient :

— “Ah ! mon pauvre garçon ! Il m’a fallu abandonner bien des rêves !”

Il s’assit sur le banc, à l’ombre du grand acacia.

Ce qu’elle lui conseillait, c’était de se mettre clerc chez M. Prouharam, avoué, lequel lui céderait son étude ; s’il la faisait bien valoir, il pourrait la revendre, et trouver un bon parti.

Frédéric n’entendait plus. Il regardait machinalement, par-dessus la haie, dans l’autre jardin, en face.

Une petite fille d’environ douze ans, et qui avait les cheveux rouges, se trouvait là, toute seule. Elle s’était fait des boucles d’oreilles avec des baies de sorbier ; son corset de toile grise laissait à découvert ses épaules, un peu dorées par le soleil ; des taches de confitures maculaient son jupon blanc ; — et il y avait comme une grâce de jeune bête sauvage dans toute sa personne, à la fois nerveuse et fluette. La présence d’un inconnu l’étonnait, sans doute, car elle s’était brusquement arrêtée, avec son arrosoir à la main, en dardant sur lui ses prunelles, d’un vert-bleu limpide.

— “C’est la fille de M. Roque”, dit Mme Moreau. “Il vient d’épouser sa servante et de légitimer son enfant.”

CHAPITRE 6

Ruiné, dépouillé, perdu !

Il était resté sur le banc, comme étourdi par une commotion. Il maudissait le sort, il aurait voulu battre quelqu'un ; et, pour renforcer son désespoir, il sentait peser sur lui une sorte d'outrage, un déshonneur ; — car Frédéric s'était imaginé que sa fortune paternelle monterait un jour à quinze mille livres de rente, et il l'avait fait savoir, d'une façon indirecte, aux Arnoux. Il allait donc passer pour un hâbleur, un drôle, un obscur polisson, qui s'était introduit chez eux dans l'espérance d'un profit quelconque ! Et elle, Mme Arnoux, comment la revoir, maintenant ?

Cela, d'ailleurs, était complètement impossible, n'ayant que trois mille francs de rente ! Il ne pouvait loger toujours au quatrième, avoir pour domestique le portier, et se présenter avec de pauvres gants noirs bleuis du bout, un chapeau gras, la même redingote pendant un an. Non, non ! jamais ! Cependant, l'existence était intolérable sans elle. Beaucoup vivaient bien qui n'avaient pas de fortune, Deslauriers entre autres ; — et il se trouva lâche d'attacher une pareille importance à des choses médiocres. La misère, peut-être, centuplerait ses facultés. Il s'exalta, en pensant aux grands hommes qui travaillent dans les mansardes. Une âme comme celle de Mme Arnoux devait s'émouvoir à ce spectacle, et elle s'attendrirait. Ainsi, cette catastrophe était un bonheur après tout ; comme ces tremblements de terre qui découvrent des trésors, elle lui avait révélé les secrètes opulences de sa nature. Mais il n'existait au monde qu'un seul endroit pour les faire valoir : Paris ! car, dans ses idées, l'art, la science et l'amour (ces trois faces de Dieu, comme eût dit Pellerin) dépendaient exclusivement de la Capitale.

Il déclara le soir, à sa mère, qu'il y retournerait. Mme Moreau fut surprise et indignée. C'était une folie, une absurdité. Il ferait mieux de suivre ses conseils, c'est-à-dire de rester près d'elle, dans une étude. Frédéric haussa les épaules :

— “Allons donc !” se trouvant insulté par cette proposition.

Alors, la bonne dame employa une autre méthode. D'une voix tendre et avec de petits sanglots, elle se mit à lui parler de sa solitude, de sa vieillesse, des sacrifices qu'elle avait faits. Maintenant qu'elle était plus malheureuse, il l'abandonnait. Puis, faisant allusion à sa fin prochaine :

— “Un peu de patience, mon Dieu ! bientôt tu seras libre !”

Ces lamentations se répétèrent vingt fois par jour, durant trois mois ; et, en même temps, les délicatesses du foyer le corrompaient ; il jouissait d’avoir un lit plus mou, des serviettes sans déchirures ; si bien que, lassé, énervé, vaincu enfin par la terrible force de la douceur, Frédéric se laissa conduire chez maître Prouharam.

Il n’y montra ni science ni aptitude. On l’avait considéré jusqu’alors comme un jeune homme de grands moyens, qui devait être la gloire du département. Ce fut une déception publique.

D’abord il s’était dit “Il faut avertir Mme Arnoux”, et, pendant une semaine, il avait médité des lettres dithyrambiques, et de courts billets, en style lapidaire et sublime. La crainte d’avouer sa situation le retenait. Puis il songea qu’il valait mieux écrire au mari. Arnoux connaissait la vie et saurait le comprendre. Enfin, après quinze jours d’hésitation :

“Bah !

je ne dois plus les revoir ; qu’ils m’oublient ! Au moins, je n’aurai pas déchu dans son souvenir ! Elle me croira mort, et me regrettera… peut-être.”

Comme les résolutions excessives lui coûtaient peu, il s’était juré ne jamais revenir à Paris, et même de ne point s’informer de Mme Arnoux.

Cependant, il regrettait jusqu’à la senteur du gaz et au tapage des omnibus. Il rêvait à toutes les paroles qu’on lui avait dites, au timbre de sa voix, à la lumière de ses yeux, — et, se considérant comme un homme mort, il ne faisait plus rien, absolument.

Il se levait très tard, et regardait par sa fenêtre les attelages de rouliers qui passaient. Les six premiers mois, surtout, furent abominables.

En de certains jours, pourtant, une indignation le prenait contre lui-même. Alors, il sortait. Il s’en allait dans les prairies, à moitié couvertes durant l’hiver par les débordements de la Seine. Des lignes de peupliers les divisent. Çà et là, un petit pont s’élève. Il vagabondait jusqu’au soir, roulant les feuilles jaunes sous ses pas, aspirant la brume, sautant les fossés ; à mesure que ses artères battaient plus fort, des désirs d’action furieuse l’emportaient ; il voulait se faire trappeur en Amérique, servir un pacha en Orient, s’embarquer comme matelot ; et il exhalait sa mélancolie dans de longues lettres à Deslauriers.

Celui-là se démenait pour percer, La conduite lâche de son ami et ses éternelles jérémiades lui semblaient stupides. Bientôt, leur correspondance devint presque nulle. Frédéric avait donné tous ses meubles à Deslauriers, qui gardait son logement. Sa mère lui en parlait de temps à autre ; un jour enfin, il déclara son cadeau, et elle le grondait, quand il reçut une lettre.

— “Qu’est-ce donc ?” dit-elle, “tu trembles ?”

— “Je n’ai rien !” répliqua Frédéric.

Deslauriers lui apprenait qu’il avait recueilli Sénécal ; et depuis quinze jours, ils vivaient ensemble. Donc, Sénécal s’étalait, maintenant, au milieu des choses qui provenaient de chez Arnoux ! Il pouvait les vendre, faire des remarques dessus, des plaisanteries. Frédéric se sentit blessé, jusqu’au fond de l’âme. Il monta dans sa chambre. Il avait envie de mourir.

Sa mère l’appela. C’était pour le consulter, à propos d’une plantation dans le jardin.

Ce jardin, en manière de parc anglais, était coupé à son milieu par une clôture de bâtons, et la moitié appartenait au père Roque, qui en possédait un autre, pour les légumes, sur le bord de la rivière. Les deux voisins, brouillés, s’abstenaient d’y paraître aux mêmes heures. Mais, depuis que Frédéric était revenu, le bonhomme s’y promenait plus souvent et n’épargnait pas les politesses au fils de Mme Moreau. Il le plaignait d’habiter une petite ville. Un jour, il raconta que M. Dambreuse avait demandé de ses nouvelles. Une autre fois, il s’étendit sur la coutume de Champagne, où le ventre anoblissait.

— “Dans ce temps-là, vous auriez été un seigneur, puisque votre mère s’appelait de Fouvens. Et on a beau dire, allez ! c’est quelque chose, un nom ! Après tout”, ajouta-t-il, en le regardant d’un air malin, “cela dépend du garde des sceaux.”

Cette prétention d’aristocratie jurait singulièrement avec sa personne. Comme il était petit, sa grande redingote marron exagérait la longueur de son buste. Quand il ôtait sa casquette, on apercevait un visage presque féminin avec un nez extrêmement pointu ; ses cheveux de couleur jaune ressemblaient à une perruque ; il saluait le monde très bas, en frisant les murs.

Jusqu’à cinquante ans, il s’était contenté des services de Catherine, une Lorraine du même âge que lui, et fortement marquée de petite vérole. Mais, vers 1834, il ramena de Paris une belle blonde, à figure moutonnière, à “port de reine” . On la vit bientôt se pavaner avec de grandes boucles d’oreilles, et tout fut expliqué, par la naissance d’une fille, déclarée sous les noms d’Elisabeth-Olympe-Louise Roque.

Catherine, dans sa jalousie, s’attendait à exécrer cette enfant. Au contraire, elle l’aima. Elle l’entoura de soins, d’attentions et de caresses, pour supplanter sa mère et la rendre odieuse, entreprise facile, car Mme Eléonore négligeait complètement la petite, préférant bavarder chez les fournisseurs. Dès le lendemain de son mariage, elle alla faire une visite à la sous-préfecture, ne tutoya plus les servantes, et crut devoir, par bon ton, se montrer sévère pour son enfant. Elle assistait à ses leçons ; le professeur, un vieux bureaucrate de la mairie, ne savait pas s’y prendre. L’élève s’insurgeait, recevait des gifles, et allait pleurer sur les genoux de Catherine, qui lui donnait invariablement raison. Alors, les deux femmes se querellaient ; M. Roque les faisait taire. Il s’était marié par tendresse pour sa fille, et ne voulait pas qu'on la tourmentât.

Souvent elle portait une robe blanche en lambeaux avec un pantalon garni de dentelles ; et, aux grandes fêtes, sortait vêtue comme une princesse, afin de mortifier un peu les bourgeois, qui empêchaient leurs marmots de la fréquenter, vu sa naissance illégitime.

Elle vivait seule, dans son jardin, se balançait à l'escarpolette, courait après les papillons, puis tout à coup s'arrêtait à contempler les cétoines s'abattant sur les rosiers. C'étaient ces habitudes, sans doute, qui donnaient à sa figure une expression à la fois de hardiesse et de rêverie. Elle avait la taille de Marthe, d'ailleurs, si bien que Frédéric lui dit, dès leur seconde entrevue :

— “Voulez-vous me permettre de vous embrasser, mademoiselle ?”

La petite personne leva la tête, et répondit :

— “Je veux bien !”

Mais la haie de bâtons les séparait l'un de l'autre.

— “Il faut monter dessus”, dit Frédéric.

— “Non, enlève-moi !”

Il se pencha par-dessus la haie et la saisit au bout de ses bras, en la baisant sur les deux joues ; puis il la remit chez elle, par le même procédé, qui se renouvela les fois suivantes.

Sans plus de réserve qu'une enfant de quatre ans, sitôt qu'elle entendait venir son ami, elle s'élançait à sa rencontre, ou bien, se cachant derrière un arbre, elle poussait un jappement de chien, pour l'effrayer.

Un jour que Mme Moreau était sortie, il la fit monter dans sa chambre. Elle ouvrit tous les flacons d'odeur et se pommada les cheveux abondamment ; puis, sans la moindre gêne, elle se coucha sur le lit où elle restait tout de son long, éveillée.

— “Je m'imagine que je suis ta femme”, disait-elle.

Le lendemain, il l'aperçut tout en larmes. Elle avoua “qu'elle pleurait ses péchés”, et, comme il cherchait à les connaître, elle répondit en baissant les yeux — “Ne m'interroge pas davantage !”

La première communion approchait ; on l'avait conduite le matin à confesse.

Le sacrement ne la rendit guère plus sage. Elle entrait parfois dans de véritables colères ; on avait recours à M. Frédéric pour la calmer.

Souvent il l'emmenait avec lui dans ses promenades.

Tandis qu'il rêvassait en marchant, elle cueillait des coquelicots au bord des blés, et, quand elle le voyait plus triste qu'à l'ordinaire, elle tâchait de le consoler par de gentilles paroles. Son cœur, privé d'amour, se rejeta sur cette amitié d'enfant ; il lui dessinait des bonshommes, lui contait des histoires et il se mit à lui faire des lectures.

Il commença par les Annales romantiques, un recueil de vers et de prose, alors célèbre. Puis, oubliant son âge, tant son intelligence le charmait, il lut successivement Atala, Cinq-Mars, les Feuilles d'automne. Mais, une nuit (le soir même, elle avait entendu Macbeth, dans la simple traduction de Letourneur), elle se réveilla en criant : "La tache ! la tache !", ses dents claquaient, elle tremblait, et, fixant des yeux épouvantés sur sa main droite, elle la frottait en disant : "Toujours une tache !" Enfin arriva le médecin, qui prescrivit d'éviter les émotions.

Les bourgeois ne virent là-dedans qu'un pronostic défavorable pour ses mœurs. On disait que "le fils Moreau" voulait en faire plus tard une actrice.

Bientôt il fut question d'un autre événement, à savoir l'arrivée de l'oncle Barthélemy. Mme Moreau lui donna sa chambre à coucher, et poussa la condescendance jusqu'à servir du gras les jours maigres.

Le vieillard fut médiocrement aimable. C'étaient de perpétuelles comparaisons entre le Havre et Nogent, dont il trouvait l'air lourd, le pain mauvais, les rues mal pavées, la nourriture médiocre et les habitants des paresseux. — "Quel pauvre commerce chez vous !" Il blâma les extravagances de défunt Son frère, tandis que, lui, il avait amassé vingt-sept mille livres de rente ! Enfin, il partit au bout de la semaine, et sur le marchepied de la voiture, lâcha ces mots peu rassurants :

— "Je suis toujours bien aise de vous savoir dans une bonne position."

— "Tu n'auras rien !" dit Mme Moreau en rentrant dans la salle.

Il n'était venu que sur ses instances ; et, huit jours durant, elle avait sollicité de sa part une ouverture, trop clairement peut-être. Elle se repentait d'avoir agi, et restait dans son fauteuil, la tête basse, les lèvres serrées. Frédéric, en face d'elle, l'observait ; et ils se taisaient tous les deux, comme il y avait cinq ans, au retour de Montereau. Cette coïncidence, s'offrant même à sa pensée, lui rappela Mme Arnoux.

A ce moment, des coups de fouet retentirent sous la fenêtre, en même temps qu'une voix l'appelait.

C'était le père Roque, seul dans sa tapissière. Il allait passer toute la journée à la Fortelle, chez M. Dambreuse, et proposa cordialement à Frédéric de l'y conduire.

— "Vous n'avez pas besoin d'invitation avec moi soyez sans crainte !"

Frédéric eut envie d'accepter. Mais comment expliquerait-il son séjour définitif à Nogent ? Il n'avait pas un costume d'été convenable ; enfin que dirait sa mère ? Il refusa.

Dès lors, le voisin se montra moins amical. Louise grandissait ; Mme Eléonore tomba malade dangereusement ; et la liaison se dénoua au grand plaisir de Mme Moreau, qui redoutait pour l'établissement de son fils la fréquentation de pareilles gens.

Elle rêvait de lui acheter le greffe du tribunal ; Frédéric ne repoussait pas trop cette idée. Maintenant, il l'accompagnait à la messe, il faisait le soir sa partie d'impériale, il s'accoutumait à la province, s'y enfonçait ; — et même son amour avait pris comme une douceur funèbre, un charme assoupissant. A force d'avoir versé sa douleur dans ses lettres, de l'avoir mêlée à ses lectures, promenée dans la campagne et partout épandue, il l'avait presque tarie, si bien que Mme Arnoux était pour lui comme une morte dont il s'étonnait de ne pas connaître le tombeau, tant cette affection était devenue tranquille et résignée.

Un jour, le 12 décembre 1845, vers neuf heures du matin, la cuisinière monta une lettre dans sa chambre. L'adresse, en gros caractères, était d'une écriture inconnue ; et Frédéric, sommeillant, ne se pressa pas de la décacheter. Enfin il lut :

" Justice de paix du Havre. IIIe arrondissement.

" Monsieur,

“M. Moreau, votre oncle, étant mort ab intestat…”

Il héritait !

Comme si un incendie eût éclaté derrière le mur, il sauta hors de son lit, pieds nus, en chemise : il se passa la main sur le visage, doutant de ses yeux, croyant qu'il rêvait encore, et, pour se raffermir dans la réalité, il ouvrit la fenêtre toute grande.

Il était tombé de la neige ; les toits étaient blancs et même il reconnut dans la cour un baquet à lessive, qui l'avait fait trébucher la veille au soir.

Il relut la lettre trois fois de suite ; rien de plus vrai ? toute la fortune de l'oncle ! Vingt-sept mille livres de rente ! — et une joie frénétique le bouleversa, à l'idée de revoir Mme Arnoux. Avec la netteté d'une hallucination, il s'aperçut auprès d'elle, chez elle, lui apportant quelque cadeau dans du papier de soie, tandis qu'à la porte stationnerait son tilbury, non, un coupé plutôt un coupé noir, avec un domestique en livrée brune il entendait piaffer son cheval et le bruit de la gourmette se confondant avec le murmure de leurs baisers. Cela se renouvellerait tous les jours, indéfiniment. Il les recevrait chez lui, dans sa maison ; la salle à manger serait en cuir rouge, le boudoir en soie jaune, des divans partout et quelles étagères quels vases de Chine ! quels tapis ! Ces images arrivaient si tumultueusement, qu'il sentait la tête lui tourner. Alors, il se rappela sa mère ; et il descendit, tenant toujours la lettre à sa main.

Mme Moreau tâcha de contenir son émotion et eut une défaillance. Frédéric la prit dans ses bras et la baisa au front.

— “Bonne mère, tu peux racheter ta voiture maintenant ; ris donc, ne pleure plus, sois heureuse”

Dix minutes après, la nouvelle circulait jusqu’aux faubourgs. Alors, Me Benoist, M. Gambin, M. Chambion, tous les amis, accoururent. Frédéric s’échappa une minute pour écrire à Deslauriers. D’autres visites survinrent. L’après-midi se passa en félicitations. On en oubliait la femme Roque, qui était cependant “très bas” .

Le soir, quand ils furent seuls, tous les deux, Mme Moreau dit à son fils qu’elle lui conseillait de s’établir à Troyes, avocat. Etant plus connu dans son pays que dans un autre, il pourrait plus facilement y trouver des partis avantageux.

— “Ah ! c’est trop fort !” s’écria Frédéric.

A peine avait-il son bonheur entre les mains qu’on voulait le lui prendre. Il signifia sa résolution formelle d’habiter Paris.

— “Pour quoi y faire ?”

— “Rien !”

Mme Moreau, surprise de ses façons, lui demanda ce qu’il voulait devenir.

— “Ministre !” répliqua Frédéric.

Et il affirma qu’il ne plaisantait nullement, qu’il prétendait se lancer dans la diplomatie, que ses études et ses instincts l’y poussaient. Il entrerait d’abord au Conseil d’Etat, avec la protection de M. Dambreuse.

— “Tu le connais donc ?”

— “Mais oui ! par M. Roque !”

— “Cela est singulier”, dit Mme Moreau.

Il avait réveillé dans son cœur ses vieux rêves d’ambition. Elle s’y abandonna intérieurement, et ne reparla plus des autres.

S’il eût écouté son impatience, Frédéric fût parti à l’instant même. Le lendemain, toutes les places dans les diligences étaient retenues ; il se rongea jusqu’au surlendemain, à sept heures du soir.

Ils s’asseyaient pour dîner, quand tintèrent à l’église trois longs coups de cloche ; et la domestique, entrant, annonça que Mme Eléonore venait de mourir.

Cette mort, après tout, n’était un malheur pour personne, pas même pour son enfant. La jeune fille ne s’en trouverait que mieux, plus tard.

Comme les deux maisons se touchaient, on entendait un grand va-et-vient, un bruit de paroles ; et l’idée de ce cadavre près d’eux jetait quelque chose de funèbre sur leur séparation. Mme Moreau, deux ou trois fois, s’essuya les yeux. Frédéric avait le cœur serré.

Le repas fini, Catherine l’arrêta entre deux portes. Mademoiselle voulait, absolument, le voir. Elle l’attendait dans le jardin. Il sortit, enjamba la haie, et, tout en se cognant aux arbres quelque peu, se dirigea vers la maison de M.

Roque. Des lumières brillaient à une fenêtre au second étage ; puis une forme apparut dans les ténèbres, et une voix chuchota :

— “C’est moi.”

Elle lui sembla plus grande qu’à l’ordinaire, à cause de sa robe noire, sans doute. Ne sachant par quelle phrase l’aborder, il se contenta de lui prendre les mains, en soupirant :

— “Ah ! ma pauvre Louise !”

Elle ne répondit pas. Elle le regarda profondément, pendant longtemps. Frédéric avait peur de manquer la voiture ; il croyait entendre un roulement tout au loin, et, pour en finir :

— “Catherine m’a prévenu que tu avais quelque chose…”

— “Oui, c’est vrai ! je voulais vous dire…”

Ce vous l’étonna ; et, comme elle se taisait encore :

— “Eh bien, quoi ?”

— “Je ne sais plus. J’ai oublié ! Est-ce vrai que vous partez ?”

— “Oui, tout à l’heure.”

Elle répéta :

— “Ah ! tout à l’heure ?… tout à fait ?… nous ne nous reverrons plus ?”

Des sanglots l’étouffaient.

— “Adieu ! adieu ! embrasse-moi donc !”

Et elle le serra dans ses bras avec emportement.

DEUXIEME PARTIE

CHAPITRE 1

Quand il fut à sa place, dans le coupé, au fond, et que la diligence s’ébranla, emportée par les cinq chevaux détalant à la fois, il sentit une ivresse le submerger. Comme un architecte qui fait le plan d’un palais, il arrangea, d’avance, sa vie. Il l’emplit de délicatesses et de splendeurs ; elle montait jusqu’au ciel ; une prodigalité de choses y apparaissait ; et cette contemplation était si profonde, que les objets extérieurs avaient disparu.

Au bas de la côte de Sourdun, il s’aperçut de l’endroit où l’on était. On n’avait fait que cinq kilomètres, tout au plus ! Il fut indigné. Il abattit le vasistas pour voir la route. Il demanda plusieurs fois au conducteur dans combien de temps, au juste, on arriverait. Il se calma cependant, et il restait dans son coin, les yeux ouverts.

La lanterne, suspendue au siège du postillon, éclairait les croupes des limoniers. Il n’apercevait au-delà que les crinières des autres chevaux qui ondulaient comme des vagues blanches ; leurs haleines formaient un brouillard de chaque côté de l’attelage ; les chaînettes de fer sonnaient, les glaces tremblaient dans leur châssis ; et la lourde voiture, d’un train égal, roulait sur le pavé. Çà et là, on distinguait le mur d’une grange, ou bien une auberge, toute seule. Parfois en passant dans les villages, le four d’un boulanger projetait des lueurs d’incendie, et la silhouette monstrueuse des chevaux courait sur l’autre maison en face. Aux relais, quand on avait dételé, il se faisait un grand silence, pendant une minute. Quelqu’un piétinait en haut, sous la bâche, tandis qu’au seuil d’une porte, une femme, debout, abritait sa chandelle avec sa main. Puis, le conducteur sautant sur le marchepied, la diligence repartait.

A Mormans, on entendit sonner une heure et un quart. — “C’est donc aujourd’hui”, pensa-t-il, “aujourd’hui même, tantôt !”

Mais, Peu à Peu ses espérances et ses souvenirs, Nogent, la rue de Choiseul, Mme Arnoux, sa mère, tout se confondait.

Un bruit sourd de planches le réveilla, on traversait le pont de Charenton, c’était Paris. Alors, ses deux compagnons, Otant l’un sa casquette, l’autre son foulard, se couvrirent de leur chapeau et causèrent. Le premier, un gros homme rouge, en redingote de velours, était un négociant ; le second venait dans la Capitale pour consulter un médecin ; — et, craignant de l’avoir incommodé pendant la nuit, Frédéric lui fit spontanément des excuses, tant il avait l’âme attendrie par le bonheur.

Le quai de la gare se trouvant inondé, sans doute, on continua tout droit, et la campagne recommença. Au loin de hautes cheminées d’usines fumaient. Puis on tourna dans Ivry. On monta une rue ; tout à coup il aperçut le dôme du Panthéon.

La plaine, bouleversée, semblait de vagues ruines. L’enceinte des fortifications y faisait un renflement horizontal ; et, sur les trottoirs en terre qui bordaient la route, de petits arbres sans branches étaient défendus par des lattes hérissées de clous. Des établissements de produits chimiques alternaient avec des chantiers de marchands de bois. De hautes portes, comme il y en a dans les fermes, laissaient voir, par leurs battants entrouverts, l’intérieur d’ignobles cours pleines d’immondices, avec des flaques d’eau sale au milieu. De longs cabarets, couleur sang de bœuf, portaient à leur premier étage, entre les fenêtres, deux queues de billard en sautoir dans une couronne de fleurs peintes ; çà et là, une bicoque de plâtre à moitié construite était abandonnée. Puis, la double ligne de maisons ne discontinua plus ; et, sur la nudité de leurs façades, se détachait, de loin en loin, un gigantesque cigare de fer-blanc, pour indiquer un débit de tabac. Des enseignes de sage-femme représentaient une matrone en bonnet, dodelinant un poupon dans une courtepointe garnie de dentelles. Des affiches couvraient l’angle des murs, et, aux trois quarts déchirées tremblaient au vent comme des guenilles. Des ouvriers en blouse passaient, et des haquets de brasseurs, des fourgons de blanchisseuses, des carrioles de bouchers ; une pluie fine tombait, il faisait froid, le ciel était pâle, mais deux yeux qui valaient pour lui le soleil resplendissaient derrière la brume.

On s’arrêta longtemps à la barrière, car des coquetiers, des rouliers et un troupeau de moutons y faisaient de l’encombrement. Le factionnaire, la capote rabattue, allait et venait devant sa guérite pour se réchauffer. Le commis de l’octroi grimpa sur l’impériale, et une fanfare de cornet à piston éclata. On descendit le boulevard au grand trot, les palonniers battants, les traits flottants. La mèche du long fouet claquait dans l’air humide. Le conducteur lançait son cri sonore : “Allume ! allume ! ohé !” et les balayeurs se rangeaient, les piétons sautaient en arrière, la boue jaillissait contre les vasistas, on croisait des tombereaux, des cabriolets, des omnibus. Enfin la grille du Jardin des plantes se déploya.

La Seine, jaunâtre, touchait presque au tablier des ponts. Une fraîcheur s’en exhalait. Frédéric l’aspira de toutes ses forces, savourant ce bon air de Paris qui semble contenir des effluves amoureuses et des émanations intellectuelles ; il eut un attendrissement en apercevant le premier fiacre. Et il aimait jusqu’au seuil des marchands de vin garni de paille, jusqu’aux décrotteurs avec leurs boîtes, jusqu’aux garçons épiciers secouant leur brûloir à café. Des femmes trottinaient sous des parapluies ; il se penchait pour distinguer leur figure ; un hasard pouvait avoir fait sortir Mme Arnoux.

Les boutiques défilaient, la foule augmentait, le bruit devenait plus fort. Après le quai Saint-Bernard, le quai de la Tournelle et le quai Montebello, on prit le quai Napoléon ; il voulut voir ses fenêtres, elles étaient loin. Puis on repassa la Seine sur le Pont-Neuf, on descendit jusqu’au Louvre ; et, par les rues Saint-Honoré, Croix des-Petits-Champs et du Bouloi, on atteignit la rue Coq-Héron, et l’on entra dans la cour de l’hôtel.

Pour faire durer son plaisir, Frédéric s’habilla le plus lentement possible, et même il se rendit à pied au boulevard Montmartre ; il souriait à l’idée de revoir, tout à l’heure, sur la plaque de marbre le nom chéri ; il leva les yeux. Plus de vitrines, plus de tableaux, rien !

Il courut à la rue de Choiseul. M. et Mme Arnoux n’y habitaient pas, et une voisine gardait la loge du portier ; Frédéric l’attendit ; enfin, il parut, ce n’était plus le même. Il ne savait point leur adresse.

Frédéric entra dans un café, et, tout en déjeunant, consulta l’Almanach du Commerce. Il y avait trois cents Arnoux, mais pas de Jacques Arnoux ! Où donc logeaient-ils ? Pellerin devait le savoir.

Il se transporta tout en haut du faubourg Poissonnière, à son atelier. La porte n’ayant ni sonnette ni marteau, il donna de grands coups de poing, et il appela, cria. Le vide seul lui répondit.

Il songea ensuite à Hussonnet. Mais où découvrir un pareil homme ? Une fois, Il l’avait accompagné jusqu’à la maison de sa maîtresse, rue de Fleurus. Parvenu dans la rue de Fleurus, Frédéric s’aperçut qu’il ignorait le nom de la demoiselle.

Il eut recours à la Préfecture de police. Il erra d’escalier en escalier, de bureau en bureau. Celui des renseignements se fermait. On lui dit de repasser le lendemain.

Puis il entra chez tous les marchands de tableaux qu’il put découvrir, pour savoir si l’on ne connaissait point Arnoux. M. Arnoux ne faisait plus le commerce.

Enfin, découragé, harassé, malade, il s’en revint à son hôtel et se coucha. Au moment où il s’allongeait entre ses draps, une idée le fit bondir de joie :

— “Regimbart ! quel imbécile je suis de n’y avoir pas songé !”

Le lendemain, dès sept heures, il arriva rue Notre-Dame-des-Victoires devant la boutique d’un rogommiste, où Regimbart avait coutume de prendre le vin blanc. Elle n’était pas encore ouverte ; il fit un tour de promenade aux environs, et, au bout d’une demi-heure, s’y présenta de nouveau. Regimbart en sortait. Frédéric s’élança dans la rue. Il crut même apercevoir au loin son chapeau ; un corbillard et des voitures de deuil s’interposèrent. L’embarras passé, la vision avait disparu.

Heureusement, il se rappela que le Citoyen déjeunait tous les jours à onze heures précises chez un petit restaurateur de la place Gaillon. Il s’agissait de patienter ; et, après une interminable flânerie de la Bourse à la Madeleine, et de la Madeleine au Gymnase, Frédéric, à onze heures précises, entra dans le restaurant de la place Gaillon, sûr d’y trouver son Regimbart.

— “Connais pas !” dit le gargotier d’un ton rogue.

Frédéric insistait ; il reprit :

— “Je ne le connais plus, monsieur !” avec un haussement de sourcils majestueux et des oscillations de la tête, qui décelaient un mystère.

Mais, dans leur dernière entrevue, le Citoyen avait parlé de l’estaminet Alexandre. Frédéric avala une et, sautant dans un cabriolet, s’enquit près du cocher s’il n’y avait point quelque part, sur les hauteurs de Sainte-Geneviève, un certain café Alexandre. Le cocher le conduisit rue des Francs-Bourgeois-Saint-Michel dans un établissement de ce nom-là, et à sa question : — “M. Regimbart, s’il vous plaît ?” le cafetier lui répondit, avec un sourire extra-gracieux :

— “Nous ne l’avons pas encore vu, monsieur”, tandis qu’il jetait à son épouse assise dans le comptoir, un regard d’intelligence.

Et aussitôt se tournant vers l’horloge :

— “Mais nous l’aurons, j’espère, d’ici à dix minutes, un quart d’heure tout au plus. — Célestin, vite les feuilles ! — Qu’est-ce que monsieur désire prendre ?”

Quoique n’ayant besoin de rien prendre, Frédéric avala un verre de rhum, puis un verre de kirsch, puis un verre de curaçao, puis différents grogs, tant froids que chauds. Il lut tout le Siècle du jour, et le relut ; il examina, jusque dans les grains du papier, la caricature du Charivari ; à la fin, il savait par cœur les annonces. De temps à autre, des bottes résonnaient sur le trottoir, c’était lui ! et la forme de quelqu’un se profilait sur les carreaux ; mais cela passait toujours !

Afin de se désennuyer, Frédéric changeait de place ; il alla se mettre dans le fond, puis à droite, ensuite à gauche ; et il restait au milieu de la banquette, les deux bras étendus. Mais un chat, foulant délicatement le velours du dossier, lui faisait des peurs en bondissant tout à coup, pour lécher les taches de sirop sur le plateau ; et l’enfant de la maison, un intolérable mioche de quatre ans, jouait avec une crécelle sur les marches du comptoir. Sa maman, petite femme pâlotte, à dents gâtées souriait d’un air stupide. Que pouvait donc faire Regimbart ? Frédéric l’attendait, perdu dans une détresse illimitée.

La pluie sonnait comme grêle, sur la capote du cabriolet. Par l’écartement du rideau de mousseline, il apercevait dans la rue le pauvre cheval, plus immobile qu’un cheval de bois. Le ruisseau, devenu énorme, coulait entre deux rayons des roues, et le cocher s’abritant de la couverture sommeillait ; mais, craignant que son bourgeois ne s’esquivât, de temps à autre il entrouvrait la porte, tout ruisselant comme un fleuve ; — et si les regards pouvaient user les choses, Frédéric aurait dissous l’horloge à force d’attacher dessus les yeux. Elle marchait, cependant. Le sieur Alexandre se promenait — de long en large, en répétant : “il va venir, allez ! il va venir !” et, pour le distraire, lui tenait des discours, parlait politique. Il poussa même la complaisance jusqu’à lui proposer une partie de dominos.

Enfin, à quatre heures et demie, Frédéric, qui était là depuis midi, se leva d’un bond, déclarant qu’il n’attendait plus.

— “Je n’y comprends rien moi-même”, répondit le cafetier d’un air candide, “c’est la première fois que manque M. Ledoux !”

— “Comment, M. Ledoux ?”

— “Mais oui, monsieur !”

— “J’ai dit Regimbart” s’écria Frédéric exaspéré.

— “Ah ! mille excuses vous faites erreur ! — N’est-ce pas, madame Alexandre, monsieur a dit : M. Ledoux ?”

Et, interpellant le garçon :

— “Vous l’avez entendu. vous-même, comme Moi’ ?” Pour se venger de son maître, sans doute. le garçon se contenta de sourire.

Frédéric se fit ramener vers les boulevards, indigné du temps perdu. furieux contre le Citoyen, implorant sa présence comme celle d’un dieu, et bien résolu à l’extraire du fond des caves les plus lointaines. Sa voiture l’agaçait, il la renvoya ; ses idées se brouillaient ; puis tous les noms des cafés qu’il avait entendu prononcer par cet imbécile jaillirent de sa mémoire, à la fois, comme les mille pièces d’un feu d’artifice : café Gascard, café Grimbert, café Halbout. estaminet Bordelais, Havanais, Havrais, Bœuf à la mode. brasserie Allemande, Mère Morel ; et il se transporta dans tous successivement. Mais, dans l’un. Regimbart venait de sortir ; dans un autre, il viendrait peut-être ; dans un troisième, on ne l’avait pas vu depuis six mois ; ailleurs, il avait commandé, hier. un gigot pour samedi. Enfin, chez Vautier, limonadier, Frédéric, ouvrant la porte, se heurta contre le garçon.

— “Connaissez-vous M. Regimbart ?”

— “Comment, monsieur, si je le connais ? C’est moi qui ai l’honneur de le servir. Il est en haut ; il achève de dîner !”

Et, la serviette sous le bras, le maître de l’établissement, lui-même, l’aborda :

— “Vous demandez M. Regimbart, monsieur ? il était ici à l’instant.”

Frédéric poussa un juron, mais le limonadier affirma qu’il le trouverait chez Bouttevilain, infailliblement.

— “Je vous en donne ma parole d’honneur ! il est parti un peu plus tôt que de coutume, car il a un rendez-vous d’affaires avec des messieurs. Mais vous le trouverez, je vous le répète, chez Bouttevilain, rue Saint-Martin, deuxième perron, à gauche, au fond de la cour, entresol, porte à droite !”

Enfin, il l’aperçut à travers la fumée des pipes, seul, au fond de l’arrière-buvette après le billard, une chope devant lui, le menton baissé et dans une attitude méditative.

— “Ah ! il y a longtemps que je vous cherchais, vous !”

Sans s’émouvoir, Regimbart lui tendit deux doigts seulement, et comme s’il l’avait vu la veille, il débita plusieurs phrases insignifiantes sur l’ouverture de la session.

Frédéric l’interrompit, en lui disant, de l’air le plus naturel qu’il put :

— “Arnoux va bien ?”

La réponse fut longue à venir, Regimbart se gargarisait avec son liquide.

— “Oui, pas mal !”

— “Où demeure-t-il donc, maintenant ?”

— “Mais… rue Paradis-Poissonnière”, répondit le Citoyen étonné.

— “Quel numéro ?”

— “Trente-sept, parbleu, vous êtes drôle !”

Frédéric se leva :

— “Comment, vous partez ?”

— “Oui, oui, j’ai une course, une affaire que j’oubliais ! Adieu !”

Frédéric alla de l’estaminet chez Arnoux, comme soulevé par un vent tiède et avec l’aisance extraordinaire que l’on éprouve dans les songes.

Il se trouva bientôt à un second étage, devant une porte dont la sonnette retentissait ; une servante parut ; une seconde porte s’ouvrit, Mme Arnoux était assise près du feu. Arnoux fit un bond et l’embrasse. Elle avait sur ses genoux un petit garçon de trois ans, à peu près ; sa fille, grande comme elle maintenant, se tenait debout, de l’autre côté de la cheminée.

— “Permettez-moi de vous présenter ce monsieur-là”, dit Arnoux, en prenant son fils par les aisselles.

Et il s’amusa quelques minutes à le faire sauter en l’air, très haut, pour le recevoir au bout de ses bras.

— “Tu vas le tuer ! ah ! mon Dieu ! finis donc !” s’écriait Mme Arnoux.

Mais Arnoux, jurant qu’il n’y avait pas de danger, continuait, et même zézéyait des caresses en patois marseillais, son langage natal. — “Ah ! brave pichoûn, mon poulit rossignolet ! !” Puis il demanda à Frédéric pourquoi il avait été si longtemps sans leur é crire, ce qu’il avait pu faire là-bas, ce qui le ramenait.

— “Moi, à présent, cher ami, je suis marchand de faïences. Mais causons de vous !”

Frédéric allégua un long procès, la santé de sa mère il insista beaucoup là-dessus, afin de se rendre intéressant. Bref, il se fixait à Paris, définitivement cette fois ; et il ne dit rien de l’héritage, — dans la peur de nuire à son passé.

Les rideaux, comme les meubles, étaient en damas de laine marron ; deux oreillers se touchaient contre le traversin ; une bouillotte chauffait dans les charbons ; et l’abat-jour de la lampe, posé au bord de la commode, assombrissait l’appartement. Mme Arnoux avait une robe de chambre en mérinos gros bleu. Le regard tourné vers les cendres et une main sur l’épaule du petit garçon, elle défaisait, de l’autre, le lacet de la brassière ; le mioche en chemise pleurait tout en se grattant la tête, comme M. Alexandre fils.

Frédéric s’était attendu à des spasmes de joie mais les passions s’étiolent quand on les dépayse, et, ne retrouvant plus Mme Arnoux dans le milieu où il l’avait connue, elle lui semblait avoir perdu quelque chose, porter confusément comme une dégradation, enfin n’être pas la même. Le calme de son cœur le stupéfiait. Il s’informa des anciens amis, de Pellerin, entre autres.

— “Je ne le vois pas souvent”, dit Arnoux.

Elle ajouta :

— “Nous ne recevons plus, comme autrefois !” Etait-ce pour l’avertir qu’on ne lui ferait aucune invitation ? Mais Arnoux, poursuivant ses cordialités, lui reprocha de n’être pas venu dîner avec eux, à l’improviste ; et il expliqua pourquoi il avait changé d’industrie.

— “Que voulez-vous faire dans une époque de décadence comme la nôtre ? La grande peinture est passée de mode ! D’ailleurs, on peut mettre de l’art partout. Vous savez, moi, j’aime le Beau ! il faudra un de ces jours que je vous mène à ma fabrique.”

Et il voulut lui montrer, immédiatement, quelques-uns de ses produits dans son magasin à l’entresol.

Les plats, les soupières, les assiettes et les cuvettes encombraient le plancher. Contre les murs étaient dressés de larges carreaux de pavage pour salles de bain et cabinets de toilette, avec sujets mythologiques dans le style de la Renaissance, tandis qu’au milieu une double étagère, montant jusqu’au plafond, supportait des vases à contenir la glace, des pots à fleurs, des candélabres, de petites jardinières et de grandes statuettes polychromes figurant un nègre ou une bergère pompadour. Les démonstrations d’Arnoux ennuyaient Frédéric, qui avait froid et faim.

Il courut au café Anglais, y soupa splendidement, et, tout en mangeant, il se disait :

— “J’étais bien bon là-bas avec mes douleurs ! A peine si elle m’a reconnu !

quelle bourgeoise !”

Et, dans un brusque épanouissement de santé, il se fit des résolutions d’égoïsme. Il se sentait le cœur dur comme la table où ses coudes posaient. Donc, il pouvait, maintenant, se jeter au milieu du monde, sans peur. L’idée des Dambreuse lui vint ; il les utiliserait ; puis il se rappela Deslauriers. “Ah ! ma foi, tant pis !” Cependant, il lui envoya, par un commissionnaire, un billet lui donnant rendez-vous le lendemain au Palais-Royal, afin de déjeuner ensemble.

La fortune n’était pas si douce pour celui-là.

Il s’était présenté au concours d’agrégation avec une thèse sur le droit de tester, où il soutenait qu’on devait le restreindre autant que possible ; — et, son adversaire l’excitant à lui faire dire des sottises, il en avait dit beaucoup, sans que les examinateurs bronchassent. Puis le hasard avait voulu qu’il tirât au sort, pour sujet de leçon, la Prescription. Alors, Deslauriers s’était livré à des théories déplorables ; les vieilles contestations devaient se produire comme les nouvelles ; pourquoi le propriétaire serait-il privé de son bien parce qu’il n’en peut fournir les titres qu’après trente et un an révolus ? C’était donner la sécurité de l’honnête homme à l’héritier du voleur enrichi. Toutes les injustices étaient consacrées par une extension de ce droit, qui était la tyrannie, l’abus de la force ! Il s’était même écrié :

— “Abolissons-le ; et les Francs ne pèseront plus sur les Gaulois, les Anglais sur les Irlandais, les Yankees sur les Peaux-Rouges, les Turcs sur les Arabes, les blancs sur les nègres, la Pologne…”

Le président l’avait interrompu :

— “Bien ! bien ! monsieur ! nous n’avons que faire de vos opinions politiques, vous vous représenterez plus tard !”

Deslauriers n’avait pas voulu se représenter. Mais ce malheureux titre XX du IIIe livre du Code civil était devenu pour lui une montagne d’achoppement. Il élaborait un grand ouvrage sur la Prescription, considérée comme base du droit civil et du droit naturel des peuples ; et il était perdu dans Dunod, Rogérius, Balbus, Merlin, Vazeille, Savigny, Tropiong, et autres lectures considérables. Afin de s’y livrer plus à l’aise, il s’était démis de sa place de maître-clerc. Il vivait en donnant des répétitions, en fabriquant des thèses ; et, aux séances de la Parlote, il effrayait par sa virulence le parti conservateur, tous les jeunes doctrinaires issus de M. Guizot, — si bien qu’il avait, dans un certain monde, une espèce de célébrité, quelque peu mêlée de défiance pour sa personne.

Il arriva au rendez-vous, portant un gros paletot doublé de flanelle rouge, comme celui de Sénécal autrefois.

Le respect humain, à cause du public qui passait, les empêcha de s’étreindre longuement, et ils allèrent jusque chez Véfour, bras dessus bras dessous, en ricanant de plaisir, avec une larme au fond des yeux. Puis, dès qu'ils furent seuls, Deslauriers s'écria :

— "Ah ! saprelotte, nous allons nous la repasser douce, maintenant !"

Frédéric n'aima point cette manière de s'associer, tout de suite, à sa fortune. Son ami témoignait trop de joie pour eux deux, et pas assez pour lui seul.

Ensuite, Deslauriers conta son échec, et peu à peu ses travaux, son existence, parlant de lui-même stoïquement et des autres avec aigreur. Tout lui déplaisait. Pas un homme en place qui ne fût un crétin ou une canaille. Pour un verre mal rincé, il s'emporta contre le garçon, et, sur le reproche anodin de Frédéric :

— "Comme si j'allais me gêner pour de pareils cocos, qui vous gagnent jusqu'à des six et huit mille francs par an, qui sont électeurs, éligibles peut-être ! Ah non,, non !"

Puis, d'un air enjoué :

— "Mais j'oublie que je parle à un capitaliste, à un Mondor, car tu es un Mondor, maintenant !"

Et, revenant sur l'héritage, il exprima cette idée : que les successions collatérales (chose injuste en soi, bien qu'il se réjouît de celle-là) seraient abolies, un de ces jours, à la prochaine révolution.

— "Tu crois ?" dit Frédéric.

— "Compte dessus" répondit-il. "Ça ne peut pas durer on souffre trop Quand je vois dans la misère des gens comme Sénécal…"

— "Toujours le Sénécal !" pensa Frédéric.

— "Quoi de neuf, du reste ? Es-tu encore amoureux de M^me^ Arnoux ! C'est passé, hein ?"

Frédéric, ne sachant que répondre, ferma les yeux en baissant la tête.

À propos d'Arnoux, Deslauriers lui apprit que son journal appartenait maintenant à Hussonnet, lequel l'avait transformé. Cela s'appelait "*L'Art*, institut littéraire, société par actions de cent francs chacune ; capital social : quarante mille francs", avec la faculté pour chaque actionnaire de pousser là sa copie ; car "la société a pour but de publier les œuvres des débutants, d'épargner au talent, au génie peut-être. les crises douloureuses qui abreuvent, etc…, tu vois la blague" Il y avait cependant quelque chose à faire, c'était de hausser le ton de ladite feuille, puis tout à coup, gardant les mêmes rédacteurs et promettant la suite du feuilleton, de servir aux abonnés un journal politique les avances ne seraient pas énormes.

— "Qu'en penses-tu, voyons veux-tu t'y mettre ?"

Frédéric ne repoussa pas la proposition. Mais il fallait attendre le règlement de ses affaires.

— "Alors, si tu as besoin de quelque chose…"

— “Merci, mon petit !” dit Deslauriers.

Ensuite, ils fumèrent des puros, accoudés sur la planche de velours, au bord de la fenêtre. Le soleil brillait, l’air était doux, des troupes d’oiseaux voletant s’abattaient dans le jardin ; les statues de bronze et de marbre, lavées par la pluie, miroitaient ; des bonnes en tablier causaient assises sur des chaises ; et l’on entendait les rires des enfants, avec le murmure continu que faisait la gerbe du jet d’eau.

Frédéric s’était senti troublé par l’amertume de Deslauriers ; mais, sous l’influence du vin qui circulait dans ses veines, à moitié endormi, engourdi, et recevant la lumière en plein visage, il n’éprouvait plus qu’un immense bien-être, voluptueusement stupide, — comme une plante saturée de chaleur et d’humidité. Deslauriers, les paupières entre-closes, regardait au loin, vaguement. Sa poitrine se gonflait, et il se mit à dire :

— “Ah ! c’était plus beau, quand Camille Desmoulins, debout là-bas sur une table, poussait le peuple à la Bastille ! On vivait dans ce temps-là, on pouvait s’affirmer, prouver sa force ! De simples avocats commandaient à des généraux, des va-nu-pieds battaient les rois, tandis qu’à présent…”

Il se tut, puis tout à coup :

— “Bah ! l’avenir est gros”

Et, tambourinant la charge sur les vitres, il déclama ces vers de Barthélémy :

Elle reparaîtra, la terrible Assemblée
Dont, après quarante ans, votre tête est troublée,
Colosse qui sans peur marche d’un pas puissant.

“Je ne sais plus le reste ! Mais il est tard, si nous partions ?”

Et il continua, dans la rue, à exposer ses théories.

Frédéric, sans l’écouter, observait à la devanture des marchands les étoffes et les meubles convenables pour son installation ; et ce fut peut-être la pensée de Mme Arnoux qui le fit s’arrêter à l’étalage d’un brocanteur, devant trois assiettes de faïence. Elles étaient décorées d’arabesques jaunes, à reflets métalliques, et valaient cent écus la pièce. Il les fit mettre de côté.

— “Moi, à ta place”, dit Deslauriers, “je m’achèterais plutôt de l’argenterie”, décelant, par cet amour du cossu, l’homme de mince origine.

Dès qu’il fut seul, Frédéric se rendit chez le célèbre Pomadère, où il se commanda trois pantalons, deux habits, une pelisse de fourrure et cinq gilets ; puis chez un bottier, chez un chemisier, et chez un chapelier, ordonnant partout qu’on se hâtât le plus possible.

Trois jours après, le soir, à son retour du Havre, il trouva chez lui sa garde-robe complète ; et, impatient de s’en servir, il résolut de faire à l’instant même une visite aux Dambreuse. Mais il était trop tôt, huit heures à peine.

— “Si j’allais chez les autres ?”, se dit-il.

Arnoux, seul, devant sa glace, était en train de se raser. Il lui proposa de le conduire dans un endroit où il s’amuserait, et, au nom de M. Dambreuse :

— “Ah ! ça se trouve bien ! Vous verrez là de ses amis venez donc ! ce sera drôle !”

Frédéric s’excusait, Mme Arnoux reconnut sa voix et lui souhaita le bonjour à travers la cloison, car sa fille était indisposée, elle-même souffrante ; et l’on entendait le bruit d’une cuiller contre un verre, et tout ce frémissement de choses délicatement remuées qui se fait dans la chambre d’un malade. Puis Arnoux disparut pour dire adieu à sa femme. Il entassait les raisons :

— “Tu sais bien que c’est sérieux. Il faut que j’y aille, j’y ai besoin, on m’attend.”

— “Va, va, mon ami. Amuse-toi !”

Arnoux héla un fiacre.

— “Palais-Royal ! galerie Montpensier.”

Et, se laissant tomber sur les coussins :

— “Ah ! comme je suis las, mon cher ! j’en crèverai. Du reste, je peux bien vous le dire, à vous.”

Il se pencha vers son oreille, mystérieusement :

— “Je cherche à retrouver le rouge de cuivre des Chinois.”

Et il expliqua ce qu’étaient la couverte et le petit feu.

Arrivé chez Chevet, on lui remit une grande corbeille, qu’il fit porter sur le fiacre. Puis il choisit pour “sa pauvre femme” du raisin, des ananas, différentes curiosités de bouche et recommanda qu’elles fussent envoyées de bonne heure, le lendemain.

Ils allèrent ensuite chez un costumier ; c’était d’un bal qu’il s’agissait. Arnoux prit une culotte de velours bleu, une veste pareille, une perruque rouge ; Frédéric un domino ; et ils descendirent rue de Laval, devant une maison illuminée au second étage par des lanternes de couleur.

Dès le bas de l’escalier, on entendait le bruit des violons.

— “Où diable me menez-vous ?” dit Frédéric.

— “Chez une bonne fille ! n’ayez pas peur !”

Un groom leur ouvrit la porte, et ils entrèrent dans l’antichambre, où des paletots, des manteaux et des châles étaient jetés en pile sur des chaises. Une jeune femme, en costume de dragon Louis XV, la traversait en ce moment-là. C’était Mlle Rose-Annette Bron, la maîtresse du lieu.

— “Eh bien ?” dit Arnoux.

— “C’est fait !” répondit-elle.

— “Ah ! merci, mon ange !”

Et il voulut l’embrasser.

— “Prends donc garde, imbécile ! tu vas gâter mon maquillage !”

Arnoux présenta Frédéric.

— “Tapez là dedans, monsieur, soyez le bienvenu !” Elle écarta une portière derrière elle, et se mit à crier emphatiquement :

— “Le sieur Arnoux, marmiton, et un prince de ses amis !”

Frédéric fut d’abord ébloui par les lumières ; il n’aperçut que de la soie, du velours, des épaules nues, une masse de couleurs qui se balançait aux sons d’un orchestre caché par des verdures, entre des murailles tendues de soie jaune, avec des portraits au pastel, çà et là, et des torchères de cristal en style Louis XVI. De hautes lampes, dont les globes dépolis ressemblaient à des boules de neige, dominaient des corbeilles de fleurs, posées sur des consoles, dans les coins ; — et, en face, après une seconde pièce plus petite, on distinguait, dans une troisième, un lit à colonnes torses, ayant une glace de Venise à son chevet.

Les danses s’arrêtèrent, et il y eut des applaudissements, un vacarme de joie, à la vue d’Arnoux s’avançant avec son panier sur la tête ; les victuailles faisaient bosse au milieu. — “Gare au lustre !” Frédéric leva les yeux : c’était le lustre en vieux saxe qui ornait la boutique de l’Art industriel ; le souvenir des anciens jours passa dans sa mémoire ; mais un fantassin de la Ligne en petite tenue, avec cet air nigaud que la tradition donne aux conscrits, se planta devant lui, en écartant les deux bras pour marquer l’étonnement ; et il reconnut, malgré les effroyables moustaches noires extra-pointues qui le défiguraient, son ancien ami Hussonnet. Dans un charabia moitié alsacien, moitié nègre, le bohème l’accablait de félicitations, l’appelant son colonel. Frédéric, décontenancé par toutes ces personnes ne savait que répondre. Un archet ayant frappé sur un pupitre, danseurs et danseuses se mirent en place.

Ils étaient une soixantaine environ, les femmes pour la plupart en villageoises ou en marquises, et les hommes, presque tous d’âge mûr, en costumes de routier, de débardeur ou de matelot.

Frédéric, s’étant rangé contre le mur, regarda le quadrille devant lui.

Un vieux beau, vêtu, comme un doge vénitien, d’une longue simarre de soie pourpre, dansait avec Mme Rosanette, qui portait un habit vert, une culotte de tricot et des bottes molles à éperons d’or. Le couple en face se composait d’un Arnaute chargé de yatagans et d’une Suissesse aux yeux bleus, blanche comme du lait, potelée comme une caille, en manches de chemise et corset rouge. Pour faire valoir sa chevelure qui lui descendait jusqu’aux jarrets, une grande blonde, marcheuse à l’Opéra, s’était mise en femme sauvage ; et, par-dessus son maillot de couleur brune, n’avait qu’un pagne de cuir, des bracelets de verroterie, et un diadème de clinquant, d’où s’élevait une haute gerbe en plumes de paon. Devant elle, un Pritchard, affublé d’un habit noir grotesquement large, battait la mesure avec son coude sur sa tabatière. Un petit berger Watteau, azur et argent comme un clair de lune, choquait sa houlette contre le thyrse d’une Bacchante, couronnée de raisins, une peau de léopard sur le flanc gauche et des cothurnes à rubans d’or. De l’autre côté une Polonaise, en spencer de velours nacarat, balançait son jupon de gaze sur ses bas de soie gris perle, pris dans des bottines roses cerclées de fourrure blanche. Elle souriait à un quadragénaire ventru, déguisé en enfant de chœur, et qui gambadait très haut, levant d’une main son surplis et retenant de l’autre sa calotte rouge. Mais la reine, l’étoile, c’était mademoiselle Loulou, célèbre danseuse des bals publics. Comme elle se trouvait riche maintenant, elle portait une large collerette de dentelle sur sa veste de velours noir uni ; et son large pantalon de soie ponceau, collant sur la croupe et serré à la taille par une écharpe de cachemire, avait, tout le long de la couture, des petits camélias blancs naturels. Sa mine pâle, un peu bouffie et à nez retroussé, semblait plus insolente encore par l’ébouriffure de sa perruque où tenait un chapeau d’homme, en feutre gris, plié d’un coup de poing sur l’oreille droite ; et, dans les bonds qu’elle faisait, ses escarpins à boucles de diamants atteignaient presque au nez de son voisin, un grand Baron moyen âge tout empêtré dans une armure de fer. Il y avait aussi un Ange, un glaive d’or à la main, deux ailes de cygne dans le dos, et qui, allant, venant, perdant à toute minute son cavalier, un Louis XIV, ne comprenait rien aux figures et embarrassait la contredanse.

Frédéric, en regardant ces personnes, éprouvait un sentiment d’abandon, un malaise. Il songeait encore à Mme Arnoux et il lui semblait participer à quelque chose d’hostile se tramant contre elle.

Quand le quadrille fut achevé, Mme Rosanette l’aborda. Elle haletait un peu, et son hausse-col, poli comme un miroir, se soulevait doucement sous son menton.

— “Et vous, monsieur”, dit-elle, “vous ne dansez pas ?”

Frédéric s’excusa, il ne savait pas danser.

— “Vraiment ! mais avec moi ? bien sûr ?”

Et, posée sur une seule hanche, l’autre genou un peu rentré, en caressant de la main gauche le pommeau de nacre de son épée, elle le considéra pendant une minute, d’un air moitié suppliant, moitié gouailleur. Enfin elle dit “Bonsoir !”, fit une pirouette, et disparut.

Frédéric, mécontent de lui-même, et ne sachant que faire, se mit à errer dans le bal.

Il entra dans le boudoir, capitonné de soie bleu pâle avec des bouquets de fleurs des champs, tandis qu’au plafond, dans un cercle de bois doré, des

Amours, émergeant d’un ciel d’azur, batifolaient sur des nuages en forme d’édredon. Ces élégances, qui seraient aujourd’hui des misères pour les pareilles de Rosanette, l’éblouirent ; et il admira tout : les volubilis artificiels ornant le contour de la glace, les rideaux de la cheminée, le divan turc, et, dans un renfoncement de la muraille, une manière de tente tapissée de soie rose, avec de la mousseline blanche par-dessus. Des meubles noirs à marqueterie de cuivre garnissaient la chambre à coucher, où se dressait, sur une estrade couverte d’une peau de cygne, le grand lit à baldaquin et à plumes d’autruche. Des épingles à tête de pierreries fichées dans des pelotes, des bagues traînant sur des plateaux, des médaillons à cercle d’or et des coffrets d’argent se distinguaient dans l’ombre, sous la lueur qu’épanchait une urne de Bohême, suspendue à trois chaînettes. Par une petite porte entrebâillée, on apercevait une serre chaude occupant toute la largeur d’une terrasse, et que terminait une volière à l’autre bout.

C’était bien là un milieu fait pour lui plaire. Dans une brusque révolte de sa jeunesse, il se jura d’en jouir, s’enhardit ; puis, revenu à l’entrée du salon, où il y avait plus de monde maintenant (tout s’agitait dans une sorte de pulvérulence lumineuse), il resta debout à contempler les quadrilles, clignant les yeux pour mieux voir, — et humant les molles senteurs de femmes, qui circulaient comme un immense baiser épandu.

Mais il y avait près de lui, de l’autre côté de la porte, Pellerin ; — Pellerin en grande toilette, le bras gauche dans la poitrine et tenant de la droite, avec son chapeau, un gant blanc, déchiré.

— “Tiens, il y a longtemps qu’on ne vous a vu ! où diable étiez-vous donc ? parti en voyage, en Italie ? Poncif, hein, l’Italie ? pas si raide qu’on dit ? N’importe ! apportez-moi vos esquisses, un de ces jours ?”

Et, sans attendre sa réponse, l’artiste se mit à parler de lui-même.

Il avait fait beaucoup de progrès, ayant reconnu définitivement la bêtise de la Ligne. On ne devait pas tant s’enquérir de la Beauté et de l’Unité, dans une œuvre, que du caractère et de la diversité des choses.

— “Car tout existe dans la nature, donc tout est légitime, tout est plastique. Il s’agit seulement d’attraper la note, voilà. J’ai découvert le secret !” Et lui donnant un coup de coude, il répéta plusieurs fois : — “J’ai découvert le secret, vous voyez ! Ainsi regardez-moi cette petite femme à coiffure de sphinx qui danse avec un postillon russe, c’est net, sec, arrêté, tout en méplats et en tons crus : de l’indigo sous les yeux, une plaque de cinabre à la joue, du bistre sur les tempes ; pif ! paf ! — Et il jetait, avec le pouce, comme des coups de pinceau dans l’air. — ” Tandis que la grosse, là-bas “, continua-t-il en montrant une Poissarde, en robe cerise avec une croix d’or au cou et un fichu de linon noué dans le dos, — ” rien que des rondeurs ; les narines s’épatent comme les ailes de son bonnet, les coins de la bouche se relèvent, le menton s’abaisse, tout est gras, fondu, copieux, tranquille et soleillant, un vrai Rubens ! Elles sont parfaites cependant ! Où est le type alors ? “Il s’échauffait.” Qu’est-ce qu’une belle femme ? Qu’est-ce que le beau ? Ah ! le beau ! me direz-vous… " Frédéric l’interrompit pour savoir ce qu’était un pierrot à profil de bouc, en train de bénir tous les danseurs au milieu d’une pastourelle.

— “Rien du tout ! un veuf, père de trois garçons. Il les laisse sans culottes, passe sa vie au club, et couche avec la bonne.”

— “Et celui-là, costumé en bailli, qui parle dans l’embrasure de la fenêtre à une marquise-Pompadour ?” — “La marquise, c’est Mme Vandaël, l’ancienne actrice du Gymnase, la maîtresse du Doge, le comte de Palazot. Voilà vingt ans qu’ils sont ensemble ; on ne sait pourquoi. Avait-elle de beaux yeux, autrefois, cette femme-là ! Quant au citoyen près d’elle, on le nomme le capitaine d’Herbigny, un vieux de la vieille, qui n’a pour toute fortune que sa croix d’honneur et sa pension, sert d’oncle aux grisettes dans les solennités, arrange les duels et dîne en ville.”

— “Une canaille ?” dit Frédéric.

— “Non ! un honnête homme !”

— “Ah !”

L’artiste lui en nomma d’autres encore, quand, apercevant un monsieur qui portait comme les médecins de Molière une grande robe de serge noire, mais bien ouverte de haut en bas, afin de montrer toutes ses breloques :

— “Ceci vous représente le docteur Des Rogis, enragé de n’être pas célèbre, a écrit un livre de pornographie médicale, cire volontiers les bottes dans le grand monde, est discret ; ces dames l’adorent. Lui et son épouse (cette maigre châtelaine en robe grise) se trimbalent ensemble dans tous les endroits publics, et autres. Malgré la gêne du ménage, on a un jour, — thés artistiques où il se dit des vers. — Attention !”

En effet, le Docteur les aborda ; et bientôt ils formèrent tous les trois, à l’entrée du salon, un groupe de causeurs, où vint s’adjoindre Hussonnet, puis l’amant de la Femme-Sauvage, un jeune poète, exhibant, sous un court mantel à la François, la plus piètre des anatomies, et enfin un garçon d’esprit, déguisé en Turc de barrière. Mais sa veste à galons jaunes avait si bien voyagé sur le dos des dentistes ambulants, son large pantalon à plis était d’un rouge si déteint, son turban roulé comme une anguille à la tartare d’un aspect si pauvre, tout son costume enfin tellement déplorable et réussi, que les femmes ne dissimulaient pas leur dégoût. Le docteur l’en consola par de grands éloges sur la Débardeuse sa maîtresse. Ce Turc était fils d’un banquier.

Entre deux quadrilles, Rosanette se dirigea vers la cheminée, où était installé, dans un fauteuil, un petit vieillard replet, en habit marron, à boutons d’or. Malgré ses joues flétries qui tombaient sur sa haute cravate blanche, ses cheveux encore blonds, et frisés naturellement comme les poils d’un caniche, lui donnaient quelque chose de folâtre.

Elle l’écouta, penchée vers son visage. Ensuite, elle lui accommoda une verre de sirop ; et rien n’était mignon comme ses mains sous leurs manches de dentelles qui dépassaient les parements de l’habit vert. Quand le bonhomme eut bu, il les baisa.

— “Mais c’est M. Oudry, le voisin d’Arnoux !”

— “Il l’a perdu !” dit en riant Pellerin.

— “Comment ?”

Un postillon de Longjumeau la saisit par la taille, une valse commençait. Alors, toutes les femmes, assises autour du salon sur des banquettes, se levèrent à la file, prestement ; et leurs jupes, leurs écharpes, leurs coiffures se mirent à tourner.

Elles tournaient si près de lui, que Frédéric distinguait les gouttelettes de leur front ; — et ce mouvement giratoire de plus en plus vif et régulier, vertigineux, communiquant à sa pensée une sorte d’ivresse, y faisait surgir d’autres images, tandis que toutes passaient dans le même éblouissement, et chacune avec une excitation particulière selon le genre de sa beauté. La Polonaise, qui s’abandonnait d’une façon langoureuse, lui inspirait l’envie de la tenir contre son cœur, en filant tous les deux dans un traîneau sur une plaine couverte de neige. Des horizons de volupté tranquille, au bord d’un lac, dans un chalet, se déroulaient sous les pas de la Suissesse, qui valsait le torse droit et les paupières baissées. Puis, tout à coup, la Bacchante, penchant en arrière sa tête brune, le faisait rêver à des caresses dévoratrices, dans des bois de lauriers-roses, par un temps d’orage, au bruit confus des tambourins. La Poissarde, que la mesure trop rapide essoufflait, poussait des rires ; et il aurait voulu, buvant avec elle aux Porcherons, chiffonner à pleines mains son fichu, comme au bon vieux temps. Mais la Débardeuse, dont les orteils légers effleuraient à peine le parquet, semblait receler dans la souplesse de ses membres et le sérieux de son visage tous les raffinements de l’amour moderne, qui a la justesse d’une science et la mobilité d’un oiseau. Rosanette tournait, le poing sur la hanche ; sa perruque à marteau, sautillant sur son collet, envoyait de la poudre d’iris autour d’elle ; et, à chaque tour, du bout de ses éperons d’or, elle manquait d’attraper Frédéric.

Au dernier accord de la valse, Mlle Vatnaz parut. Elle avait un mouchoir algérien sur la tête, beaucoup de piastres sur le front, de l’antimoine au bord des yeux, avec une espèce de paletot en cachemire noir tombant sur un jupon clair, lamé d'argent, et elle tenait un tambour de basque à la main.

Derrière son dos marchait un grand garçon, dans le costume classique du Dante, et qui était (elle ne s'en cachait plus, maintenant) l'ancien chanteur de l'Alhambra, — lequel, s'appelant Auguste Delamare, s'était fait appeler primitivement Anténor Dellamarre, puis Delmas, puis Belmar, et enfin Delmar, modifiant ainsi et perfectionnant son nom, d'après sa gloire croissante ; car il avait quitté le bastringue pour le théâtre, et venait même de débuter bruyamment à l'Ambigu, dans Gaspardo le Pêcheur.

Hussonnet, en l'apercevant, se renfrogna. Depuis qu'on avait refusé sa pièce, il exécrait les comédiens. On n'imaginait pas la vanité de ces Messieurs, de celui-là, surtout ! " — Quel poseur, voyez donc !"

Après un léger salut à Rosanette, Delmar s'était adossé à la cheminée ; et il restait immobile, une main sur le cœur, le pied gauche en avant, les yeux au ciel, avec sa couronne de lauriers dorés par-dessus son capuchon, tout en s'efforçant de mettre dans son regard beaucoup de poésie, pour fasciner les dames. On faisait, de loin, un grand cercle autour de lui.

Mais la Vatnaz, quand elle eut embrassé longuement Rosanette, s'en vint prier Hussonnet de revoir, sous le point de vue du style, un ouvrage d'éducation qu'elle voulait publier : la Guirlande des jeunes Personnes, recueil de littérature et de morale. L'homme de lettres promit son concours. Alors, elle lui demanda s'il ne pourrait pas. dans une des feuilles où il avait accès, faire mousser quelque peu son ami, et même lui confier plus tard un rôle. Hussonnet en oublia de prendre un verre de punch.

C'était Arnoux qui l'avait fabriqué ; et, suivi par le groom du Comte portant un plateau vide, il l'offrait aux personnes avec satisfaction.

Quand il vint à passer devant M. Oudry, Rosanette l'arrêta.

— "Eh bien, et cette affaire ?"

Il rougit quelque peu ; enfin, s'adressant au bon homme :

— "Notre amie m'a dit que vous auriez l'obligeance…"

— "Comment donc, mon voisin ! tout à vous."

Et le nom de M. Dambreuse fut prononcé ; comme ils s'entretenaient à demi-voix, Frédéric les entendait confusément ; il se porta vers l'autre coin de la cheminée, où Rosanette et Delmar causaient ensemble.

Le cabotin avait une mine vulgaire, faite comme les décors de théâtre pour être contemplée à distance, des mains épaisses, de grands pieds, une mâchoire lourde ; et il dénigrait les acteurs les plus illustres, traitait de haut les poètes, disait : "mon organe, mon physique, mes moyens", en émaillant son discours de mots peu intelligibles pour lui-même, et qu'il affectionnait, tels que "morbidezza, analogue et homogénéité" .

Rosanette l’écoutait avec de petits mouvements de tête approbatifs. On voyait l’admiration s’épanouir sous le fard de ses joues, et quelque chose d’humide passait comme un voile sur ses yeux clairs, d’une indéfinissable couleur. Comment un pareil homme pouvait-il la charmer ? Frédéric s’excitait intérieurement à le mépriser encore plus, pour bannir, peut-être, l’espèce d’envie qu’il lui portait.

Mlle Vatnaz était maintenant avec Arnoux ; et, tout en riant très haut, de temps à autre, elle jetait un coup d’oeil sur son amie, que M. Oudry ne perdait pas de vue.

Puis Arnoux et la Vatnaz disparurent ; le bonhomme vint parler bas à Rosanette.

— “Eh bien, oui, c’est convenu ! Laissez-moi tranquille.”

Et elle pria Frédéric d’aller voir dans la cuisine si M. Arnoux n’y était pas.

Un bataillon de verres à moitié pleins couvrait le plancher ; et les casseroles, les marmites, la turbotière, la poêle à frire sautaient. Arnoux commandait aux domestiques en les tutoyant, battait la rémolade, goûtait les sauces, rigolait avec la bonne.

— “Bien”, dit-il, “avertissez-la ! Je fais servir.”

On ne dansait plus, les femmes venaient de se rasseoir, les hommes se promenaient. Au milieu du salon, un des rideaux tendus sur une fenêtre se bombait au vent ; et la Sphinx, malgré les observations de tout le monde, exposait au courant d’air ses bras en sueur. Où donc était Rosanette ? Frédéric la chercha plus loin, jusque dans le boudoir et dans la chambre. Quelques-uns, pour être seuls, ou deux à deux, s’y étaient réfugiés. L’ombre et les chuchotements se mêlaient. Il y avait de petits rires sous des mouchoirs, et l’on entrevoyait au bord des corsages des frémissements d’éventails, lents et doux comme des battements d’aile d’oiseau blessé.

En entrant dans la serre, il vit, sous les larges feuilles d’un caladium, près le jet d’eau, Delmar, couché à plat ventre sur le canapé de toile ; Rosanette, assise près de lui, avait la main passée dans ses cheveux ; et ils se regardaient. Au même moment, Arnoux entra par l’autre côté, celui de la volière. Delmar se leva d’un bond, puis il sortit à pas tranquilles sans se retourner ; et même, s’arrêta près de la porte, pour cueillir une fleur d’hibiscus dont il garnit sa boutonnière. Rosanette pencha le visage ; Frédéric, qui la voyait de profil, s’aperçut qu’elle pleurait.

— “Tiens ! qu’as-tu donc ?” dit Arnoux.

Elle haussa les épaules sans répondre.

— “Est-ce à cause de lui ?” reprit-il.

Elle étendit les bras autour de son cou, et, le baisant au front, lentement :

— “Tu sais bien que je t’aimerai toujours, mon gros. N’y pensons plus ! Allons souper !”

Un lustre de cuivre à quarante bougies éclairait la salle, dont les murailles disparaissaient sous de vieilles faïences accrochées ; et cette lumière crue, tombant d’aplomb, rendait plus blanc encore, parmi les hors-d’œuvre et les fruits, un gigantesque turbot occupant le milieu de la nappe, bordée par des assiettes pleines de potage à la bisque. Avec un froufrou d’étoffes, les femmes, tassant leurs jupes, leurs manches et leurs écharpes, s’assirent les unes près des autres ; les hommes, debout, s’établirent dans les angles. Pellerin et M. Oudry furent placés près de Rosanette ; Arnoux était en face. Palazot et son amie venaient de partir.

— “Bon voyage !” dit-elle, “attaquons !”

Et l’Enfant de chœur, homme facétieux, en faisant un grand signe de croix, commença le Benedicite.

Les dames furent scandalisées, et principalement la Poissarde, mère d’une fille dont elle voulait faire une femme honnête. Arnoux, non plus, “n’aimait pas ça”, trouvant qu’on devait respecter la religion.

Une horloge allemande, munie d’un coq, carillonnant deux heures, provoqua sur le coucou force plaisanteries. Toutes sortes de propos s’ensuivirent : calembours, anecdotes, vantardises, gageures, mensonges tenus pour vrais, assertions improbables, un tumulte de paroles qui bientôt s’éparpilla en conversations particulières. Les vins circulaient, les plats se succédaient, le docteur découpait. On se lançait de loin une orange, un bouchon ; on quittait sa place pour causer avec quelqu’un. Souvent Rosanette se tournait vers Delmar, immobile derrière elle ; Pellerin bavardait, M. Oudry souriait. Mlle Vatnaz mangea presque à elle seule le buisson d’écrevisses, et les carapaces sonnaient sous ses longues dents. L’Ange, posée sur le tabouret du piano (seul endroit où ses ailes lui permissent de s’asseoir), mastiquait placidement, sans discontinuer.

— “Quel fourchette !” répétait l’Enfant de chœur ébahi, “quelle fourchette !”

Et la Sphinx buvait de l’eau-de-vie, criait à plein gosier, se démenait comme un démon. Tout à coup ses joues s’enflèrent, et, ne résistant plus au sang qui l’étouffait, elle porta sa serviette contre ses lèvres, puis la jeta sous la table.

Frédéric l’avait vue.

— “Ce n’est rien !”

Et, à ses instances pour partir et se soigner, elle répondit lentement :

— “Bah ! à quoi bon ? autant ça qu’autre chose ! la vie n’est pas si drôle !”

Alors, il frissonna, pris d’une tristesse glaciale, comme s’il avait aperçu des mondes entiers de misère et de désespoir, un réchaud de charbon près d’un lit de sangle, et les cadavres de la Morgue en tablier de cuir, avec le robinet d’eau froide qui coule sur leurs cheveux.

Cependant, Hussonnet, accroupi aux pieds de la Femme-Sauvage, braillait d'une voix enrouée, pour imiter l'acteur Grassot :

— "Ne sois pas cruelle, ô Celuta cette petite fête de famille est charmante ! Enivrez-moi de voluptés, mes amours ! Folichonnons ! folichonnons !"

Et il se mit à baiser les femmes sur l'épaule. Elles tressaillaient, piquées par ses moustaches ; puis il imagina de casser contre sa tête une assiette, en la heurtant d'un petit coup. D'autres l'imitèrent — , les morceaux de faïence volaient comme des ardoises par un grand vent, et la Débardeuse s'écria :

— "Ne vous gênez pas ! ça ne coûte rien ! Le bourgeois qui en fabrique nous en cadote !"

Tous les yeux se portèrent sur Arnoux. Il répliqua :

— "Ah ! sur facture, permettez !" tenant, sans doute, à passer pour n'être pas, ou n'être plus l'amant de Rosanette.

Mais deux voix furieuses s'élevèrent :

— "Imbécile !"

— "Polisson !"

— "A vos ordres !"

— "Aux vôtres !"

C'était le Chevalier moyen âge et le Postillon russe qui se disputaient ; celui-ci ayant soutenu que des armures dispensaient d'être brave, l'autre avait pris cela pour une injure. Il voulait se battre, tous s'interposaient, et le Capitaine, au milieu du tumulte, tâchait de se faire entendre.

— "Messieurs, écoutez-moi ! un mot ! J'ai de l'expérience, messieurs !"

Rosanette, ayant frappé avec son couteau sur un verre, finit par obtenir du silence ; et, s'adressant au Chevalier qui gardait son casque, puis au Postillon coiffé d'un bonnet à longs poils :

— "Retirez d'abord votre casserole ! ça m'échauffe ! — et vous, là-bas, votre tête de loup. — Voulez-vous bien m'obéir, saprelotte Regardez donc mes épaulettes Je suis votre maréchale"

Il s'exécutèrent, et tous applaudirent en criant — "Vive la Maréchale ! vive la Maréchale !" Alors, elle prit sur le poêle une bouteille de vin de Champagne, et elle le versa de haut, dans les coupes qu'on lui tendait. Comme la table était trop large, les convives, les femmes surtout, se portèrent de son côté, en se dressant sur la pointe des pieds, sur les barreaux des chaises, ce qui forma pendant une minute un groupe pyramidal de coiffures, d'épaules nues, de bras tendus, de corps penchés ; — et de longs jets de vin rayonnaient dans tout cela, car le Pierrot et Arnoux, aux deux angles de la salle, lâchant chacun une bouteille, éclaboussaient les visages. Les petits oiseaux de la volière, dont on avait laissé la porte ouverte, envahirent la salle, tout effarouchés, voletant autour du lustre, se cognant contre les carreaux, contre les meubles ; et quelques-uns, posés sur les têtes, faisaient au milieu des chevelures comme de larges fleurs.

Les musiciens étaient partis. On tira le piano de l’antichambre dans le salon. La Vatnaz s’y mit, et, accompagnée de l’Enfant de chœur qui battait du tambour de basque, elle entama une contredanse avec furie, tapant les touches comme un cheval qui piaffe, et se dandinant de la taille, pour mieux marquer la mesure. La Maréchale entraîna Frédéric, Hussonnet faisait la roue, la Débardeuse se disloquait comme un clown, le Pierrot avait des façons d’orang-outang, la Sauvagesse, les bras écartés, imitait l’oscillation d’une chaloupe. Enfin tous, n’en pouvant plus, s’arrêtèrent ; et on ouvrit une fenêtre.

Le grand jour entra, avec la fraîcheur du matin. Il y eut une exclamation d’étonnement, puis un silence. Les flammes jaunes vacillaient, en faisant de temps à autre éclater leurs bobèches ; des rubans, des fleurs et des perles jonchaient le parquet ; des taches de punch et de sirop poissaient les consoles ; les tentures étaient salies, les costumes fripés, poudreux ; les nattes pendaient sur les épaules ; et le maquillage, coulant avec la sueur, découvrait des faces blêmes, dont les paupières rouges clignotaient.

La Maréchale, fraîche comme au sortir d’un bain, avait les joues roses, les yeux brillants. Elle jeta au loin sa perruque ; et ses cheveux tombèrent autour d’elle comme une toison, ne laissant voir de tout son vêtement que sa culotte, ce qui produisit un effet à la fois comique et gentil.

La Sphinx, dont les dents claquaient de fièvre, eut besoin d’un châle.

Rosanette courut dans sa chambre pour le chercher, et, comme l’autre la suivait, elle lui ferma la porte au nez, vivement.

Le Turc observa, tout haut, qu’on n’avait pas vu sortir M. Oudry. Aucun ne releva cette malice, tant on était fatigué.

Puis, en attendant les voitures, on s’embobelina dans les capelines et les manteaux. Sept heures sonnèrent. L’Ange était toujours dans la salle, attablée devant une compote de beurre et de sardines ; et la Poissarde, près d’elle, fumait des cigarettes, tout en lui donnant des conseils sur l’existence.

Enfin, les fiacres étant survenus, les invités s’en allèrent. Hussonnet, employé dans une correspondance pour la province, devait lire avant son déjeuner cinquante-trois journaux la Sauvagesse avait une répétition à son théâtre, Pellerin un modèle, l’Enfant de chœur trois rendez-vous. Mais l’Ange, envahie par les premiers symptômes d’une indigestion, ne put se lever. Le Baron moyen âge la porta jusqu’au fiacre.

— “Prends garde à ses ailes !” cria par la fenêtre la Débardeuse.

On était sur le palier quand Mlle Vatnaz dit à Rosanette :

— “Adieu, chère ! C’était très bien, ta soirée.”

Puis se penchant à son oreille :

— “Garde-le !”

— “Jusqu’à des temps meilleurs”, reprit la Maréchale en tournant le dos, lentement.

Arnoux et Frédéric s’en revinrent ensemble, comme ils étaient venus. Le marchand de faïence avait un air tellement sombre, que son compagnon le crut indisposé.

— “Moi ? pas du tout !”

il se mordait la moustache, fronçait les sourcils, et Frédéric lui demanda si ce n’était pas ses affaires qui le tourmentaient.

— “Nullement !”

Puis tout à coup :

— “Vous le connaissiez, n’est-ce pas, le père Oudry ?”

Et, avec une expression de rancune :

— “Il est riche, le vieux gredin !”

Ensuite, Arnoux parla d’une cuisson importante que l’on devait finir aujourd’hui, à sa fabrique. Il voulait la voir. Le train partait dans une heure. “Il faut cependant que j’aille embrasser ma femme.”

— “Ah ! sa femme !” pensa Frédéric.

Puis il se coucha, avec une douleur intolérable à l’occiput ; et il but une carafe d’eau, pour calmer sa soif.

Une autre soif lui était venue, celle des femmes, du luxe et de tout ce que comporte l’existence parisienne. Il se sentait quelque peu étourdi, comme un homme qui descend d’un vaisseau ; et, dans l’hallucination du premier sommeil, il voyait passer et repasser continuellement les épaules de la Poissarde, les reins de la Débardeuse, les mollets de la Polonaise, la chevelure de la Sauvagesse. Puis deux grands yeux noirs, qui n’étaient pas dans le bal, parurent ; et légers comme des papillons, ardents comme des torches, ils allaient, venaient, vibraient, montaient dans la corniche, descendaient jusqu’à sa bouche. Frédéric s’acharnait à reconnaître ces yeux sans y parvenir. Mais déjà le rêve l’avait pris ; il lui semblait qu’il était attelé près d’Arnoux, au timon d’un fiacre, et que la Maréchale, à califourchon sur lui, l’éventrait avec ses éperons d’or.

CHAPITRE 2

Frédéric trouva, au coin de la rue Rumford, un petit hôtel et il s'acheta, tout à la fois le coupé, le cheval, les meubles et deux jardinières prises chez Arnoux, pour mettre aux deux coins de la porte dans son salon. Derrière cet appartement, étaient une chambre et un cabinet. L'idée lui vint d'y loger Deslauriers. Mais, comment la recevrait-il, elle, sa maîtresse future ? La présence d'un ami serait une gêne. Il abattit le refend pour agrandir le salon, et fit du cabinet un fumoir.

Il acheta les poètes qu'il aimait, des Voyages, des Atlas, des Dictionnaires, car il avait des plans de travail sans nombre ; il pressait les ouvriers, courait les magasins, et, dans son impatience de jouir, emportait tout sans marchander.

D'après les notes des fournisseurs, Frédéric s'aperçut qu'il aurait à débourser prochainement une quarantaine de mille francs, non compris les droits de succession, lesquels dépasseraient trente-sept mille ; comme sa fortune était en biens territoriaux, il écrivit au notaire du Havre d'en vendre une partie, pour se libérer de ses dettes et avoir quelque argent à sa disposition. Puis, voulant connaître enfin cette chose vague, miroitante et indéfinissable qu'on appelle le monde, il demanda par un billet aux Dambreuse s'ils pouvaient le recevoir. Madame répondit qu'elle espérait sa visite pour le lendemain.

C'était jour de réception. Des voitures stationnaient dans la cour. Deux valets se précipitèrent sous la marquise, et un troisième, au haut de l'escalier, se mit à marcher devant lui.

Il traversa une antichambre, une seconde pièce, puis un grand salon à hautes fenêtres, et dont la cheminée monumentale supportait une pendule en forme de sphère, avec deux vases de porcelaine monstrueux où se hérissaient, comme deux buissons d'or, deux faisceaux de bobèches. Des tableaux dans la manière de l'Espagnolet étaient appendus au mur ; les lourdes portières en tapisserie tombaient majestueusement ; et les fauteuils, les consoles, les tables, tout le mobilier, qui était de style Empire, avait quelque chose d'imposant et de diplomatique. Frédéric souriait de plaisir, malgré lui.

Enfin il arriva dans un appartement ovale, lambrissé de bois de rose, bourré de meubles mignons et qu'éclairait une seule glace donnant sur un jardin. Mme Dambreuse était auprès du feu, une douzaine de personnes formant cercle autour d'elle. Avec un mot aimable, elle lui fit signe de s'asseoir, mais sans paraître surprise de ne l'avoir pas vu depuis longtemps.

On vantait, quand il entra, l'éloquence de l'abbé Cœur. Puis on déplora l’immoralité des domestiques, à propos d’un vol commis par un valet de chambre ; et les cancans se déroulèrent. La vieille dame de Sommery avait un rhume, Mlle de Turvisot se mariait, les Montcharron ne reviendraient pas avant la fin de janvier, les Bretancourt non plus, maintenant on restait tard à la campagne ; et la misère des propos se trouvait comme renforcée par le luxe des choses ambiantes ; mais ce qu’on disait était moins stupide que la manière de causer, sans but, sans suite et sans animation. Il y avait là, cependant, des hommes versés dans la vie, un ancien ministre, le curé d’une grande paroisse, deux ou trois hauts fonctionnaires du gouvernement ; ils s’en tenaient aux lieux communs les plus rebattus. Quelques-uns ressemblaient. à des douairières fatiguées, d’autres avaient des tournures de maquignon ; et des vieillards accompagnaient leurs femmes, dont ils auraient pu se faire passer pour les grands-pères.

Mme Dambreuse les recevait tous avec grâce. Dès qu’on parlait d’un malade, elle fronçait les sourcils douloureusement, et prenait un air joyeux s’il était question de bals ou de soirées. Elle serait bientôt contrainte de s’en priver, car elle allait faire sortir de pension une nièce de son mari, une orpheline. On exalta son dévouement ; c’était se conduire en véritable mère de famille.

Frédéric l’observait. La peau mate de son visage paraissait tendue, et d’une fraîcheur sans éclat, comme celle d’un fruit conservé. Mais ses cheveux, tire-bouchonnés à l’anglaise, étaient plus fins que de la soie, ses yeux d’un azur brillant, tous ses gestes délicats. Assise au fond, sur la causeuse, elle caressait les floches rouges d’un écran japonaise, pour faire valoir ses mains, sans doute, de longues mains étroites, un peu maigres, avec des doigts retroussés par le bout. Elle portait une robe de moire grise, à corsage montant, comme une puritaine.

Frédéric lui demanda si elle ne viendrait pas cette année à la Fortelle. Mme Dambreuse n’en savait rien. Il concevait cela, du reste : Nogent devait l’ennuyer. Les visites augmentaient. C’était un bruissement continu de robes sur les tapis ; les dames posées au bord des chaises, poussaient de petits ricanements, articulaient deux ou trois mots, et, au bout de cinq minutes, partaient avec leurs jeunes filles. Bientôt, la conversation fut impossible à suivre, et Frédéric se retirait quand Mme Dambreuse lui dit

— “Tous les mercredis, n’est-ce pas, monsieur Moreau ?” rachetant par cette seule phrase ce qu’elle avait montré d’indifférence.

Il était content. Néanmoins, il huma dans la rue une large bouffée d’air ; et, par besoin d’un milieu moins artificiel, Frédéric se ressouvint qu’il devait une visite à la Maréchale.

La porte de l’antichambre était ouverte. Deux bichons havanais accoururent. Une voix cria :

— “Delphine ! Delphine ! — Est-ce vous, Félix ?”

Il se tenait sans avancer ; les deux petits chiens jappaient toujours. Enfin Rosanette parut, enveloppée dans une sorte de peignoir en mousseline blanche garnie de dentelles, pieds nus dans des babouches.

— “Ah ! pardon, monsieur ! Je vous prenais pour le coiffeur. Une minute ! je reviens !”

Et il resta seul dans la salle à manger.

Les persiennes en étaient closes. Frédéric la parcourait des yeux, en se rappelant le tapage de l’autre nuit, lorsqu’il remarqua au milieu, sur la table, un chapeau d’homme, un vieux feutre bossué, gras, immonde. A qui donc ce chapeau ? Montrant impudemment sa coiffe décousue, il semblait dire : “Je m’en moque après tout Je suis le maître !”

La Maréchale survint. Elle le prit, ouvrit la serre, l’y jeta, referma la porte (d’autres portes, en même temps, s’ouvraient et se refermaient), et, ayant fait passer Frédéric par la cuisine, elle l’introduisit dans son cabinet de toilette.

On voyait, tout de suite, que c’était l’endroit de la maison le plus hanté, et comme son vrai centre moral. Une perse à grands feuillages tapissait les murs, les fauteuils et un vaste divan élastique ; sur une table de marbre blanc s’espaçaient deux larges cuvettes en faïence bleue ; des planches de cristal formant étagère au-dessus étaient encombrées par des fioles, des brosses, des peignes, des bâtons de cosmétique, des boîtes à poudre ; le feu se mirait dans une haute psyché ; un drap pendait en dehors d’une baignoire, et des senteurs de pâte d’amandes et de benjoin s’exhalaient.

— “Vous excuserez le désordre ! Ce soir, je dîne en ville.”

Et, comme elle tournait sur ses talons, elle faillit écraser un des petits chiens. Frédéric les déclara charmants. Elle les souleva tous les deux, et haussant jusqu’à lui leur museau noir :

— “Voyons, faites une risette, baisez le monsieur.” Un homme, habillé d’une sale redingote à collet de fourrure, entra brusquement.

— “Félix, mon brave”, dit-elle, “vous aurez votre affaire dimanche prochain, sans faute.”

L’homme se mit à la coiffer. Il lui apprenait des nouvelles de ses amies : Mme de Rochegune, Mme de Saint-Florentin, Mme Lombard, toutes étant nobles comme à l’hôtel Dambreuse. Puis il causa théâtres ; on donnait le soir à l’Ambigu une représentation extraordinaire.

— “Irez-vous ?”

— “Ma foi, non ! Je reste chez moi.”

Delphine parut. Elle la gronda pour être sortie sans sa permission. L’autre jura qu’elle “rentrait du marché” .

— “Eh bien, apportez-moi votre livre ! — Vous permettez, n’est-ce pas ?”

Et, lisant à demi-voix le cahier, Rosanette faisait des observations sur chaque article. L’addition était fausse.

— “Rendez-moi quatre sous !”

Delphine les rendit, et, quand elle l’eut congédiée

— “Ah ! Sainte Vierge ! est-on assez malheureux avec ces gens-là !”

Frédéric fut choqué de cette récrimination. Elle lui rappelait trop les autres, et établissait entre les deux maisons une sorte d’égalité fâcheuse.

Delphine, étant revenue, s’approcha de la Maréchale pour chuchoter un mot à son oreille.

— “Eh non ! je n’en veux pas !”

Delphine se présenta de nouveau.

— “Madame, elle insiste.”

— “Ah ! quel embêtement ! Flanque-la dehors !”

Au même instant, une vieille dame habillée de noir poussa la porte. Frédéric n’entendit rien, ne vit rien ; Rosanette s’était précipitée dans la chambre, à sa rencontre.

Quand elle reparut, elle avait les pommettes rouges et elle s’assit dans un des fauteuils, sans parler. Une larme tomba sur sa joue ; puis se tournant vers le jeune homme, doucement :

— “Quel est votre petit nom ?”

— “Frédéric.”

— “Ah ! Federico ! Ça ne vous gêne pas que je vous appelle comme ça ?”

Et elle le regardait d’une façon câline, presque amoureuse. Tout à coup, elle poussa un cri de joie à la vue de Mlle Vatnaz.

La femme artiste n’avait pas de temps à perdre, devant, à six heures juste, présider sa table d’hôte ; et elle haletait, n’en pouvant plus. D’abord, elle retira de son cabas une chaîne de montre avec un papier, puis différents objets, des acquisitions.

— “Tu sauras qu’il y a, rue Joubert, des gants de Suède à trente-six sous magnifiques ! Ton teinturier demande encore huit jours. Pour la guipure, j’ai dit qu’on repasserait. Bugneaux a reçu l’acompte. Voilà tout, il me semble ? C’est cent quatre-vingt-cinq francs que tu me dois !”

Rosanette alla prendre dans un tiroir dix napoléons. Aucune des deux n’avait de monnaie, Frédéric en offrit.

— “Je vous les rendrai”, dit la Vatnaz, en fourrant les quinze francs dans son sac. “Mais vous êtes un vilain. Je ne vous aime plus, vous ne m’avez pas fait danser une seule fois, l’autre jour ! — Ah ! ma chère, j’ai découvert, quai Voltaire, à une boutique, un cadre d’oiseaux-mouches empaillés qui sont des amours. A ta place, je me les donnerais. Tiens ! Comment trouves-tu ?”

Et elle exhiba un vieux coupon de soie rose qu’elle avait acheté au Temple pour faire un pourpoint moyen âge à Delmar.

— “Il est venu aujourd’hui, n’est-ce pas ?”

— “Non !”

— “C’est singulier”

Et, une minute après :

— “Où vas-tu ce soir ?”

— “Chez Alphonsine”, dit Rosanette ; ce qui était la troisième version sur la manière dont elle devait passer la soirée.

Mlle Vatnaz reprit :

— “Et le vieux de la Montagne, quoi de neuf ?”

Mais, d’un brusque clin d’oeil, la Maréchale lui commanda de se taire ; et elle reconduisit Frédéric jusque dans l’antichambre, pour savoir s’il verrait bientôt Arnoux.

— “Priez-le donc de venir ; pas devant son épouse, bien entendu !”

Au haut des marches, un parapluie était posé contre le mur, près d’une paire de socques.

— “Les caoutchoucs de la Vatnaz”, dit Rosanette. “Quel pied, hein ? Elle est forte, ma petite amie !”

Et d’un ton mélodramatique, en faisant rouler la dernière lettre du mot :

— “Ne pas s’y fierrr !”

Frédéric, enhardi par cette espèce de confidence, voulut la baiser sur le col. Elle dit froidement :

— “Oh ! faites ! Ça ne coûte rien !”

Il était léger en sortant de là, ne doutant pas que la Maréchale ne devînt bientôt sa maîtresse. Ce désir en éveilla un autre ; et, malgré l’espèce de rancune qu’il lui gardait, il eut envie de voir Mme Arnoux.

D’ailleurs, il devait y aller pour la commission de Rosanette.

— “Mais, à présent”, songea-t-il (six heures sonnaient), “Arnoux est chez lui, sans doute.”

Il ajourna sa visite au lendemain.

Elle se tenait dans la même attitude que le premier jour, et cousait une chemise d’enfant. Le petit garçon, à ses pieds, jouait avec une ménagerie de bois ; Marthe, un peu plus loin, écrivait.

Il commença par la complimenter de ses enfants. Elle répondit sans aucune exagération de bêtise maternelle.

La chambre avait un aspect tranquille. Un beau soleil passait par les carreaux, les angles des meubles reluisaient, et, comme Mme Arnoux était assise auprès de la fenêtre, un grand rayon, frappant les accroche-cœurs de sa nuque, pénétrait d'un fluide d'or sa peau ambrée. Alors, il dit :

— "Voilà une jeune personne qui est devenue bien grande depuis trois ans ! — Vous rappelez-vous, Mademoiselle, quand vous dormiez sur mes genoux, dans la voiture ?" Marthe ne se rappelait pas. "Un soir, en revenant de Saint-Cloud ?"

Mme Arnoux eut un regard singulièrement triste. Etait-ce pour lui défendre toute allusion à leur souvenir commun ?

Ses beaux yeux noirs, dont la sclérotique brillait, se mouvaient doucement sous leurs paupières un peu lourdes, et il y avait dans la profondeur de ses prunelles une bonté infinie. Il fut ressaisi par un amour plus fort que jamais, immense : c'était une contemplation qui l'engourdissait, il la secoua pourtant. Comment se faire valoir ? par quels moyens ? Et, ayant bien cherché, Frédéric ne trouva rien de mieux que l'argent. Il se mit à parier du temps, lequel était moins froid qu'au Havre.

— "Vous y avez été ?"

— "Oui, pour une affaire… de famille… un héritage." — "Ah ! j'en suis bien contente", reprit-elle avec un air de plaisir tellement vrai, qu'il en fut touché comme d'un grand service.

Puis elle lui demanda ce qu'il voulait faire, un homme devant s'employer à quelque chose. Il se rappela son mensonge et dit qu'il espérait parvenir au conseil d'Etat, grâce à M. Dambreuse, le député.

— "Vous le connaissez peut-être ?"

— "De nom, seulement."

Puis, d'une voix basse :

— "Il vous a mené au bal, l'autre jour, n'est-ce pas ?" Frédéric se taisait.

— "C'est ce que je voulais savoir, merci."

Ensuite, elle lui fit deux ou trois questions discrètes sur sa famille et sa province. C'était bien aimable, d'être resté là-bas si longtemps, sans les oublier.

— "Mais…. le pouvais-je ?" reprit-il. "En doutiez-vous ?"

Mme Arnoux se leva.

— "Je crois que vous nous portez une bonne et solide affection. — Adieu…. au revoir !"

Et elle tendit sa main d'une manière franche et virile. N'était-ce pas un engagement, une promesse ? Frédéric se sentait tout joyeux de vivre ; il se retenait pour ne pas chanter, il avait besoin de se répandre, de faire des générosités et des aumônes. Il regarda autour de lui s'il n'y avait personne à secourir. Aucun misérable ne passait ; et sa velléité de dévouement s'évanouit, car il n'était pas homme à en chercher au loin les occasions.

Puis il se ressouvint de ses amis. Le premier auquel il songea fut Hussonnet, le second Pellerin. La position infime de Dussardier commandait naturellement des égards ; quant à Cisy. il se réjouissait de lui faire voir un peu sa fortune. Il écrivit donc à tous les quatre de venir pendre la crémaillère le dimanche suivant, à onze heures juste, et il chargea Deslauriers d'amener Sénécal.

Le répétiteur avait été congédié de son troisième pensionnat pour n'avoir point voulu de distribution de prix, usage qu'il regardait comme funeste à l'égalité. Il é tait maintenant chez un constructeur de machines, et n'habitait plus avec Deslauriers depuis six mois.

Leur séparation n'avait eu rien de pénible. Sénécal, dans les derniers temps, recevait des hommes en blouse, tous patriotes, tous travailleurs, tous braves gens, mais dont la compagnie semblait fastidieuse à l'avocat. D'ailleurs, certaines idées de son ami, excellentes comme armes de guerre, lui déplaisaient. Il s'en taisait par ambition, tenant à le ménager pour le conduire, car il attendait avec impatience un grand bouleversement où il comptait bien faire son trou, avoir sa place.

Les convictions de Sénécal étaient plus désintéressées. Chaque soir, quand sa besogne était finie, il regagnait sa mansarde, et il cherchait dans les livres de quoi justifier ses rêves. Il avait annoté le Contrat social. Il se bourrait de la Revue Indépendante. Il connaissait Mably, Morelly, Fourier, Saint-Simon, Comte, Cabet, Louis Blanc, la lourde charretée des écrivains socialistes, ceux qui réclament pour l'humanité le niveau des casernes, ceux qui voudraient la divertir dans un lupanar ou la plier sur un comptoir ; et, du mélange de tout cela, il s'était fait un idéal de démocratie vertueuse, ayant le double aspect d'une métairie et d'une filature, une sorte de Lacédémone américaine où l'individu n'existerait que pour servir la Société, plus omnipotente, absolue, infaillible et divine que les Grands Lamas et les Nabuchodonosors. Il n'avait pas un doute sur l'éventualité prochaine de cette conception, et tout ce qu'il jugeait lui être hostile, Sénécal s'acharnait dessus, avec des raisonnements de géomètre et une bonne foi d'inquisiteur. Les titres nobiliaires, les croix, les panaches, les livrées surtout, et même les réputations trop sonores le scandalisaient, — ses études comme ses souffrances avivant chaque jour sa haine essentielle de toute distinction ou supériorité quelconque.

— “Qu'est-ce que je dois à ce monsieur pour lui faire des politesses ? S'il voulait de moi, il pouvait venir” Deslauriers l'entraîna.

Ils trouvèrent leur ami dans sa chambre à coucher. Stores et doubles rideaux, glace de Venise, rien n'y manquait ; Frédéric, en veste de velours, était renversé dans une bergère, où il fumait des cigarettes de tabac turc.

Sénécal se rembrunit, comme les cagots amenés dans les réunions de plaisir.

Deslauriers embrassa tout d’un seul coup d’oeil ; puis, le saluant très bas :

— “Monseigneur ! je vous présente mes respects”

Dussardier lui sauta au cou.

— “Vous êtes donc riche, maintenant ? Ah ! tant mieux, nom d’un chien, tant mieux !”

Cisy parut, avec un crêpe à son chapeau. Depuis la mort de sa grand-mère, il jouissait d’une fortune considérable, et tenait moins à s’amuser qu’à se distinguer des autres, à n’être pas comme tout le monde, enfin à “avoir du cachet” . C’était son mot.

Il était midi cependant, et tous bâillaient ; Frédéric attendait quelqu’un. Au nom d’Arnoux, Pellerin fit la grimace. Il le considérait comme un renégat depuis qu’il avait abandonné les arts.

— “Si l’on se passait de lui ? qu’en dites-vous ?”

Tous approuvèrent.

Un domestique en longues guêtres ouvrit la porte, et l’on aperçut la salle à manger avec sa haute plinthe en chêne relevé d’or et ses deux dressoirs chargés de vaisselle. Les bouteilles de vin chauffaient sur le poêle les lames des couteaux neufs miroitaient près des huîtres il y avait dans le ton laiteux des verres-mousseline comme une douceur engageante, et la table disparaissait sous du gibier, des fruits, des choses extraordinaires. Ces attentions furent perdues pour Sénécal.

Il commença par demander du pain de ménage (le plus ferme possible), et, à ce propos, paria des meurtres de Buzançais et de la crise des subsistances.

Rien de tout cela ne serait survenu si on protégeait mieux l’agriculture, si tout n’était pas livré à la concurrence, à l’anarchie, à la déplorable maxime du “laissez faire, laissez passer” ! Voilà comment se constituait la féodalité de l’argent, pire que l’autre ! Mais qu’on y prenne garde ! le peuple, à la fin, se lassera, et pourrait faire payer ses souffrances aux détenteurs du capital, soit par de sanglantes proscriptions, ou par le pillage de leurs hôtels.

Frédéric entrevit dans un éclair, un flot d’hommes aux bras nus envahissant le grand salon de Mme Dambreuse, cassant les glaces à coups de pique.

Sénécal continuait : l’ouvrier, vu l’insuffisance des salaires, était plus malheureux que l’ilote, le nègre et le paria, s’il a des enfants surtout.

— “Doit-il s’en débarrasser par l’asphyxie, comme le lui conseille je ne sais plus quel docteur anglais, issu de Malthus”

Et se tournant vers Cisy :

— “En serons-nous réduits aux conseils de l’infâme Malthus ?”

Cisy, qui ignorait l’infamie et même l’existence de Malthus, répondit qu’on secourait pourtant beaucoup de misères, et que les classes élevées…

— “Ah ! les classes élevées !” dit, en ricanant, le socialiste. “D’abord, il n’y a pas de classes élevées ; on n’est élevé que par le cœur ! Nous ne voulons pas d’aumônes, entendez-vous ! mais l’égalité, la juste répartition des produits.”

Ce qu’il demandait, c’est que l’ouvrier pût devenir capitaliste, comme le soldat colonel. Les jurandes, au moins, en limitant le nombre des apprentis, empêchaient l’encombrement des travailleurs, et le sentiment de la fraternité se trouvait entretenu par les fêtes, les bannières.

Hussonnet comme poète, regrettait les bannières Pellerin aussi, prédilection qui lui était venue au café Dagneaux, en écoutant causer des phalanstériens. Il déclara Fourier un grand homme.

— “Allons donc !” dit Deslauriers. “Une vieille bête ! qui voit dans les bouleversements d’empires des effets de la vengeance divine. C’est comme le sieur Saint-Simon et son église, avec sa haine de la Révolution française : un tas de farceurs qui voudraient nous refaire le catholicisme !”

M. de Cisy, pour s’éclairer, sans doute, ou donner de lui une bonne opinion, se mit à dire doucement :

— “Ces deux savants ne sont donc pas de l’avis de Voltaire ?”

— “Celui-là, je vous l’abandonne !” reprit Sénécal.

— “Comment ? moi, je croyais…”

— “Eh non ! il n’aimait pas le peuple”

Puis la conversation descendit aux événements contemporains : les mariages espagnols, les dilapidations de Rochefort, le nouveau chapitre de Saint-Denis, ce qui amènerait un redoublement d’impôts. Selon Sénécal, on en payait assez, cependant !

— “Et pourquoi, mon Dieu ? pour élever des palais aux singes du Muséum, faire parader sur nos places de brillants états-majors, ou soutenir, parmi les valets du Château, une étiquette gothique !”

— “, J’ai lu dans la Mode”, dit Cisy, “qu’à la Saint-Ferdinand, au bal des Tuileries, tout le monde était déguisé en chicards.”

— “Si ce n’est pas pitoyable !” fit le socialiste, en haussant de dégoût les épaules.

— “Et le musée de Versailles !” s’écria Pellerin. “Parlons-en ! Ces imbéciles-là ont raccourci un Delacroix et rallongé un Gros ! Au Louvre, on a si bien restauré, gratté et tripoté toutes les toiles, que, dans dix ans, peut-être pas une ne restera. Quant aux erreurs du catalogue, un Allemand a écrit dessus tout un livre. Les étrangers, ma parole, se fichent de nous !”

— “Oui, nous sommes la risée de l’Europe”, dit Sénécal.

— “C’est parce que l’Art est inféodé à la Couronne.”

— “Tant que vous n’aurez pas le suffrage universel…”

— “Permettez !” car l’artiste, refusé depuis vingt ans à tous les Salons, était furieux contre le Pouvoir. “Eh qu’on nous laisse tranquilles. Moi, je ne demande rien seulement les Chambres devraient statuer sur les intérêts de l’Art. Il faudrait établir une chaire d’esthétique, et dont le professeur, un homme à la fois praticien et philosophe, parviendrait, j’espère, à grouper la multitude. — Vous feriez bien, Hussonnet, de toucher un mot de ça dans votre journal ?”

— “Est-ce que les journaux sont libres ? est-ce que nous le sommes ?” dit Deslauriers avec emportement. “Quand on pense qu’il peut y avoir jusqu’à vingt-huit formalités pour établir un batelet sur une rivière, ça me donne envie d’aller vivre chez les anthropophages ! Le Gouvernement nous dévore ! Tout est à lui, la philosophie, le droit, les arts, l’air du ciel ; et la France râle, énervée, sous la botte du gendarme et la soutane du calotin !”

Le futur Mirabeau épanchait ainsi sa bile, largement. Enfin, il prit son verre, se leva, et, le poing sur la hanche, l’oeil allumé :

— “Je bois à la destruction complète de l’ordre actuel, c’est-à-dire de tout ce qu’on nomme Privilège, Monopole, Direction, Hiérarchie, Autorité, Etat !” et, d’une voix plus haute : “que je voudrais briser comme ceci !” en lançant sur la table le beau verre à patte, qui se fracassa en mille morceaux.

Tous applaudirent, et Dussardier principalement.

Le spectacle des injustices lui faisait bondir le cœur. Il s’inquiétait de Barbès ; il était de ceux qui se jettent sous les voitures pour porter secours aux chevaux tombé s. Son érudition se bornait à deux ouvrages, l’un intitulé *Crimes des rois*, l’autre *Mystères du Vatican*. Il avait écouté l’avocat bouche béante, avec délices. Enfin, n’y tenant plus :

— “Moi, ce que je reproche à Louis-Philippe, c’est d’abandonner les Polonais !”

— “Un moment !” dit Hussonnet. “D’abord, la Pologne n’existe pas ; c’est une invention de Lafayette ! Les Polonais, règle générale, sont tous du faubourg Saint-Marceau, les véritables s’étant noyés avec Poniatowski.” Bref, “il ne donnait plus là-dedans”, il était “revenu de tout ça !” C’était comme le serpent de mer, la révocation de l’édit de Nantes et “cette vieille blague de la Saint-Barthélemy !”

Sénécal, sans défendre les Polonais, releva les derniers mots de l’homme de lettres. On avait calomnié les papes, qui, après tout, défendaient le peuple, et il appelait la Ligue “l’aurore de la Démocratie, un grand mouvement égalitaire contre l’individualisme des protestants.”

Frédéric était un peu surpris par ces idées. Elles ennuyaient Cisy probablement, car il mit la conversation sur les tableaux vivants du Gymnase, qui attiraient alors beaucoup de monde.

Sénécal s’en affligea. De tels spectacles corrompaient les filles du prolétaire ; puis on les voyait étaler un luxe insolent. Aussi approuvait-il les étudiants bavarois qui avaient outragé Lola Montés. A l’instar de Rousseau, il faisait plus de cas de la femme d’un charbonnier que de la maîtresse d’un roi.

— “Vous blaguez les truffes !” répliqua majestueusement Hussonnet. Et il prit la défense de ces dames, en faveur de Rosanette. Puis, comme il parlait de son bal et du costume d’Arnoux :

— “On prétend qu’il branle dans le manche ?” dit Pellerin.

Le marchand de tableaux venait d’avoir un procès pour ses terrains de Belleville, et il était actuellement dans une compagnie de kaolin bas-breton avec d’autres farceurs de son espèce.

Dussardier en savait davantage ; car son patron à lui, M. Moussinot, ayant été aux informations sur Arnoux près du banquier Oscar Lefebvre, celui-ci avait répondu qu’il le jugeait peu solide, connaissant quelques-uns de ses renouvellements.

Le dessert était fini ; on passa dans le salon, tendu, comme celui de la Maréchale, en damas jaune, et de style Louis XVI.

Pellerin blâma Frédéric de n’avoir pas choisi, plutôt, le style néo-grec ; Sénécal frotta des allumettes contre les tentures, Deslauriers ne fit aucune observation. Il en fit dans la bibliothèque, qu’il appela une bibliothèque de petite fille. La plupart des littérateurs contemporains s’y trouvaient. Il fut impossible de parler de leurs ouvrages, car Hussonnet, immédiatement, contait des anecdotes sur leurs personnes, critiquait leurs figures, leurs mœurs, leur costume, exaltant les esprits de quinzième ordre, dénigrant ceux du premier, et déplorant, bien entendu, la décadence moderne. Telle chansonnette de villageois contenait, à elle seule, plus de poésie que tous les lyriques du XIXe siècle ; Balzac était surfait, Byron démoli, Hugo n’entendait rien au théâtre, *etc.*

— “Pourquoi donc”, dit Sénécal, “n’avez-vous pas les volumes de nos poètes-ouvriers ?”

Et M. de Cisy, qui s’occupait de littérature, s’étonna de ne pas voir sur la table de Frédéric “quelques-unes de ces physiologies nouvelles, physiologie du fumeur, du pêcheur à la ligne, de l’employé de barrière” .

Ils arrivèrent à l’agacer tellement, qu’il eut envie de les pousser dehors par les épaules. “Mais je deviens bête !” Et, prenant Dussardier à l’écart, il lui demanda s’il pouvait le servir en quelque chose.

Le brave garçon fut attendri. Avec sa place de caissier, il n’avait besoin de rien.

Ensuite, Frédéric emmena Deslauriers dans sa chambre, et, tirant de son secrétaire deux mille francs :

— “Tiens, mon brave, empoche ! C’est le reliquat de mes vieilles dettes.”

— “Mais… et le Journal ?” dit l’avocat. “J’en ai parlé à Hussonnet, tu sais bien.”

Et, Frédéric ayant répondu qu’il se trouvait “un peu gêné, maintenant”, l’autre eut un mauvais sourire.

Après les liqueurs, on but de la bière ; après la bière, des grogs ; on refuma des pipes. Enfin, à cinq heures du soir, tous s’en allèrent ; et ils marchaient les uns près des autres, sans parler, quand Dussardier se mit à dire que Frédéric les avait reçus parfaitement. Tous en convinrent.

Hussonnet déclara son déjeuner un peu trop lourd. Sénécal critiqua la futilité de son intérieur. Cisy pensait de même. Cela manquait de “cachet”, absolument.

— “Moi, je trouve”, dit Pellerin, “qu’il aurait bien pu me commander un tableau.”

Deslauriers se taisait, en tenant dans la poche de son pantalon ses billets de banque.

Frédéric était resté seul. Il pensait à ses amis, et sentait entre eux et lui comme un grand fossé plein d’ombre qui les séparait. Il leur avait tendu la main cependant, et ils n’avaient pas répondu à la franchise de son cœur.

Il se rappela les mots de Pellerin et de Dussardier sur Arnoux. C’était une invention, une calomnie sans doute ? Mais pourquoi ? Et il aperçut Mme Arnoux, ruinée, pleurant, vendant ses meubles. Cette idée le tourmenta toute la nuit ; le lendemain, il se présenta chez elle.

Ne sachant comment s’y prendre pour communiquer ce qu’il savait, il lui demanda en manière de conversation si Arnoux avait toujours ses terrains de Belleville.

— “Oui, toujours.”

— “Il est maintenant dans une compagnie pour du kaolin de Bretagne, je crois ?”

— “C’est vrai.”

— “Sa fabrique marche très bien, n’est-ce pas ?”

— “Mais… je le suppose.”

Et, comme il hésitait :

— “Qu’avez-vous donc ? vous me faites peur !”

Il lui apprit l’histoire des renouvellements.

Elle baissa la tête, et dit :

— “Je m’en doutais”

En effet, Arnoux, pour faire une bonne spéculation, s’était refusé à vendre ses terrains, avait emprunté dessus largement, et, ne trouvant point d’acquéreurs, avait cru se rattraper par l’établissement d’une manufacture. Les frais avaient dépassé les devis. Elle n’en savait pas davantage ; il éludait toute question et affirmait continuellement que “ça allait très bien” .

Frédéric tâcha de la rassurer. C’étaient peut-être des embarras momentanés. Du reste, s’il apprenait quelque chose, il lui en ferait part.

— “Oh ! oui, n’est-ce pas ?” dit-elle, en joignant ses deux mains, avec un air de supplication charmant.

Il pouvait donc lui être utile. Le voilà qui entrait dans son existence, dans son cœur.

Arnoux parut.

— “Ah ! comme c’est gentil, de venir me prendre pour dîner !”

Frédéric en resta muet.

Arnoux paria de choses indifférentes, puis avertit sa femme qu’il rentrerait fort tard, ayant un rendez-vous avec M. Oudry.

— “Chez lui ?”

— “Mais certainement, chez lui.”

Il avoua, tout en descendant l’escalier, que, la Maréchale se trouvant libre, ils allaient faire ensemble une partie fine au Moulin-Rouge ; et, comme il lui fallait toujours quelqu’un pour recevoir ses épanchements, il se fit conduire par Frédéric jusqu’à la porte.

Au lieu d’entrer, il se promena sur le trottoir, en observant les fenêtres du second étage. Tout à coup les rideaux s’écartèrent.

— “Ah ! bravo ! le père Oudry n’y est plus. Bonsoir !” C’était donc le père Oudry qui l’entretenait ? Frédéric ne savait que penser maintenant.

A partir de ce jour-là, Arnoux fut encore plus cordial qu’auparavant ; il l’invitait à dîner chez sa maîtresse, et bientôt Frédéric hanta tout à la fois les deux maisons.

Celle de Rosanette l’amusait. On venait là le soir, en sortant du club ou du spectacle ; on prenait une tasse de thé, on faisait une partie de loto ; le dimanche, on jouait des charades ; Rosanette, plus turbulente que les autres, se distinguait par des inventions drolatiques, comme de courir à quatre pattes ou de s’affubler d’un bonnet de coton. Pour regarder les passants par la croisée, elle avait un chapeau de cuir bouilli ; elle fumait des chibouques, elle chantait des tyroliennes. L’après-midi, par désœuvrement, elle découpait des fleurs dans un morceau de toile perse, les collait elle-même sur ses carreaux, barbouillait de fard ses deux petits chiens, faisait brûler des pastilles, ou se tirait la bonne aventure. Incapable de résister à une envie, elle s’engouait d’un bibelot qu’elle avait vu, n’en dormait pas, courait l’acheter, le troquait contre un autre, et gâchait les étoffes, perdait ses bijoux, gaspillait l’argent, aurait vendu sa chemise pour une loge d’avant-scène. Souvent, elle demandait à Frédéric l’explication d’un mot qu’elle avait lu, mais n'écoutait pas sa réponse, car elle sautait vite à une autre idée, en multipliant les questions. Après des spasmes de gaieté, c'étaient des colères enfantines ; ou bien elle rêvait, assise par terre, devant le feu, la tête basse et le genou dans ses deux mains, plus inerte qu'une couleuvre engourdie. Sans y prendre garde, elle s'habillait devant lui, tirait avec lenteur ses bas de soie, puis se lavait à grande eau le visage, en se renversant la taille comme une naïade qui frissonne — , et le rire de ses dents blanches, les étincelles de ses yeux, sa beauté, sa gaieté éblouissaient Frédéric, et lui fouettaient les nerfs.

Presque toujours, il trouvait Mme Arnoux montrant à lire à son bambin, ou derrière la chaise de Marthe qui faisait des gammes sur son piano ; quand elle travaillait à un ouvrage de couture, c'était pour lui un grand bonheur que de ramasser, quelquefois, ses ciseaux. Tous ses mouvements étaient d'une majesté tranquille ; ses petites mains semblaient faites pour épandre des aumônes, pour essuyer des pleurs ; et sa voix, un peu sourde naturellement, avait des intonations caressantes et comme des légèretés de brise.

Elle ne s'exaltait point pour la littérature, mais son esprit charmait par des mots simples et pénétrants. Elle aimait les voyages, le bruit du vent dans les bois, et à se promener tête nue sous la pluie. Frédéric écoutait ces choses délicieusement, croyant voir un abandon d'elle-même qui commençait.

La fréquentation de ces deux femmes faisait dans sa vie comme deux musiques : l'une folâtre, emportée, divertissante, l'autre grave et presque religieuse ; et, vibrant à la fois, elles augmentaient toujours, et peu à peu se mêlaient ; — car, si Mme Arnoux venait à l'effleurer du doigt seulement, l'image de l'autre, tout de suite, se présentait à son désir, parce qu'il avait, de ce côté-là, une chance moins lointaine ; — et, dans la compagnie de Rosanette, quand il lui arrivait d'avoir le cœur ému, il se rappelait immédiatement son grand amour.

Cette confusion était provoquée par des similitudes entre les deux logements. Un des bahuts que l'on voyait autrefois boulevard Montmartre ornait à présent la salle à manger de Rosanette, l'autre, le salon de Mme Arnoux. Dans les deux maisons, les services de table étaient pareils, et l'on retrouvait jusqu'à la même calotte de velours traînant sur les bergères ; puis une foule de petits cadeaux, des écrans, des boîtes, des éventails allaient et venaient de chez la maîtresse chez l'épouse, car, sans la moindre gêne, Arnoux, souvent, reprenait à l'une ce qu'il lui avait donné, pour l'offrir à l'autre.

La Maréchale riait avec Frédéric de ses mauvaises façons. Un dimanche, après dîner, elle l'emmena derrière la porte, et lui fit voir dans son paletot un sac de gâteaux, qu'il venait d'escamoter sur la table, afin d'en régaler, sans doute, sa petite famille. M. Arnoux se livrait à des espiègleries côtoyant la turpitude.

C'était pour lui un devoir que de frauder l'octroi ; il n'allait jamais au spectacle en payant, avec un billet de secondes prétendait toujours se pousser aux premières, et racontait comme une farce excellente qu'il avait coutume, aux bains froids, de mettre dans le tronc du garçon un bouton de culotte pour une pièce de dix sous, ce qui n'empêchait point la Maréchale de l'aimer.

Un jour, cependant, elle dit, en parlant de lui — "Ah ! il m'embête, à la fin ! J'en ai assez ! Ma foi, tant pis, j'en trouverai un autre !"

Frédéric croyait "l'autre" déjà trouvé et qu'il s'appelait M. Oudry.

— "Eh bien", dit Rosanette, "qu'est-ce que cela fait ?"

Puis, avec des larmes dans la voix :

— "Je lui demande bien peu de chose, pourtant, et il ne veut pas, l'animal ! Il ne veut pas ! Quant à ses promesses, oh ! c'est différent."

Il lui avait même promis un quart de ses bénéfices dans les fameuses mines de kaolin ; aucun bénéfice ne se montrait, pas plus que le cachemire dont il la leurrait depuis six mois.

Frédéric pensa, immédiatement, à lui en faire cadeau. Arnoux pouvait prendre cela pour une leçon et se fâcher.

Il était bon cependant, sa femme elle-même le disait. Mais si fou ! Au lieu d'amener tous les jours du monde à dîner chez lui, à présent il traitait ses connaissances chez le restaurateur. Il achetait des choses complètement inutiles, telles que des chaînes d'or, des pendules, des articles de ménage. Mme Arnoux montra même à Frédéric, dans le couloir, une énorme provision de bouillottes, chaufferettes et samovars. Enfin, un jour, elle avoua ses inquiétudes : Arnoux lui avait fait signer un billet, souscrit à l'ordre de M. Dambreuse.

Cependant, Frédéric conservait ses projets littéraires, par une sorte de point d'honneur vis-à-vis de lui-même. Il voulut écrire une histoire de l'esthétique, résultat de ses conversations avec Pellerin, puis mettre en drames différentes époques de la Révolution française et composer une grande comédie, par l'influence indirecte de Deslauriers et d'Hussonnet. Au milieu de son travail, souvent le visage de l'une ou de l'autre passait devant lui ; il luttait contre l'envie de la voir, ne tardait pas à y céder ; et il était plus triste en revenant de chez Mme Arnoux.

Un matin qu'il ruminait sa mélancolie au coin de son feu, Deslauriers entra. Les discours incendiaires de Sénécal avaient inquiété son patron, et, une fois de plus, il se trouvait sans ressources.

— "Que veux-tu que j'y fasse ?" dit Frédéric.

— "Rien ! tu n'as pas d'argent, je le sais. Mais ça ne te gênerait guère de lui découvrir une place, soit par M. Dambreuse ou bien Arnoux ?"

Celui-ci devait avoir besoin d'ingénieurs dans son établissement. Frédéric eut une inspiration : Sénécal pourrait l’avertir des absences du mari, porter des lettres, l’aider dans mille occasions qui se présenteraient. D’homme à homme, on se rend toujours ces services-là. D’ailleurs, il trouverait moyen de l’employer sans qu’il s’en doutât. Le hasard lui offrait un auxiliaire, c’était de bon augure, il fallait le saisir ; et, affectant de l’indifférence, il répondit que la chose peut-être était faisable et qu’il s’en occuperait.

Il s’en occupa tout de suite. Arnoux se donnait beaucoup de peine dans sa fabrique. Il cherchait le rouge de cuivre des Chinois mais ses couleurs se volatilisaient par la cuisson. Afin d’éviter les gerçures de ses faïences, il mêlait de la chaux à son argile ; mais les pièces se brisaient pour la plupart, l’émail de ses peintures sur cru bouillonnait, ses grandes plaques gondolaient ; et, attribuant ces mécomptes au mauvais outillage de sa fabrique, il voulait se faire faire d’autres moulins à broyer, d’autres séchoirs. Frédéric se rappela quelques-unes de ces choses ; et il l’aborda en annonçant qu’il avait découvert un homme très fort, capable de trouver son fameux rouge. Arnoux en fit un bond, puis, l’ayant écouté, répondit qu’il n’avait besoin de personne.

Frédéric exalta les connaissances prodigieuses de Sénécal, tout à la fois ingénieur, chimiste et comptable, étant un mathématicien de première force.

Le faïencier consentit à le voir.

Tous deux se chamaillèrent sur les émoluments. Frédéric s’interposa et parvint, au bout de la semaine, à leur faire conclure un arrangement.

Mais, l’usine étant située à Creil, Sénécal ne pouvait en rien l’aider. Cette réflexion, très simple, abattit son courage comme une mésaventure.

Il songea que plus Arnoux serait détaché de sa femme, plus il aurait de chance auprès d’elle. Alors, il se mit à faire l’apologie de Rosanette, continuellement ; il lui représenta tous ses torts à son endroit, conta les vagues menaces de l’autre jour, et même parla du cachemire, sans taire qu’elle l’accusait d’avarice.

Arnoux, piqué du mot (et, d’ailleurs, concevant des inquiétudes), apporta le cachemire à Rosanette, mais la gronda de s’être plainte à Frédéric ; comme elle disait lui avoir cent fois rappelé sa promesse, il prétendit qu’il ne s’en était pas souvenu, ayant trop d’occupations.

Le lendemain, Frédéric se présenta chez elle. Bien qu’il fût deux heures, la Maréchale était encore couchée ; et, à son chevet, Delmar, installé devant un guéridon, finissait une tranche de foie gras. Elle cria de loin : “Je l’ai, je l’ai” ; puis, le prenant par les oreilles, elle l’embrassa au front, le remercia beaucoup, le tutoya, voulut même le faire asseoir sur son lit. Ses jolis yeux tendres pétillaient, sa bouche humide souriait, ses deux bras ronds sortaient de sa chemise qui n’avait pas de manches ; et, de temps à autre, il sentait, à travers la batiste, les fermes contours de son corps. Delmar, pendant ce temps-là, roulait ses prunelles.

— “Mais, véritablement, mon amie, ma chère amie !…”

Il en fut de même les fois suivantes. Dès que Frédéric entrait, elle montait debout sur un coussin, pour qu’il l’embrassât mieux, l’appelait un mignon, un chéri, mettait une fleur à sa boutonnière, arrangeait sa cravate ; ces gentillesses redoublaient toujours lorsque Delmar se trouvait là.

Etaient-ce des avances ? Frédéric le crut. Quant à tromper un ami, Arnoux, à sa place, ne s’en gênerait guère ! et il avait bien le droit de n’être pas vertueux avec sa maîtresse, l’ayant toujours été avec sa femme ; car il croyait l’avoir été, ou plutôt il aurait voulu se le faire accroire, pour la justification de sa prodigieuse couardise. Il se trouvait stupide cependant, et résolut de s’y prendre avec la Maréchale carrément.

Donc une après-midi, comme elle se baissait devant sa commode, il s’approcha d’elle et eut un geste d’une éloquence si peu ambiguë, qu’elle se redressa tout empourprée. Il recommença de suite ; alors, elle fondit en larmes, disant qu’elle était bien malheureuse et que ce n’était pas une raison pour qu’on la méprisât.

Il réitéra ses tentatives. Elle prit un autre genre, qui fut de rire toujours. Il crut malin de riposter par le même ton, et en l’exagérant. Mais il se montrait trop gai pour qu’elle le crût sincère ; et leur camaraderie faisait obstacle à l’épanchement de toute émotion sérieuse. Enfin, un jour elle répondit qu’elle n’acceptait pas les restes d’une autre.

— “Quelle autre ?”

— “Eh oui ! va retrouver madame Arnoux !”

Car Frédéric en parlait souvent ; Arnoux, de son côté, avait la même manie ; elle s’impatientait, à la fin, d’entendre toujours vanter cette femme ; et son imputation était une espèce de vengeance.

Frédéric lui en garda rancune.

Elle commençait, du reste, à l’agacer fortement. Quelquefois, se posant comme expérimentée, elle disait du mal de l’amour avec un rire sceptique qui donnait des démangeaisons de la gifler. Un quart d’heure après, c’était la seule chose qu’il y eût au monde, et, croisant ses bras sur sa poitrine, comme pour serrer quelqu’un, elle murmurait : “Oh ! oui, c’est bon ! c’est si bon !” les paupières entre-closes et à demi pâmée d’ivresse. Il était impossible de la connaître, de savoir, par exemple, si elle aimait Arnoux, car elle se moquait de lui et en paraissait jalouse. De même pour la Vatnaz, qu’elle appelait une misérable, d’autres fois sa meilleure amie. Elle avait, enfin, sur toute sa personne et jusque dans le retroussement de son chignon, quelque chose d’inexprimable qui ressemblait à un défi ; — et il la désirait, pour le plaisir surtout de la vaincre et de la dominer.

Comment faire ? car souvent elle le renvoyait sans nulle cérémonie, apparaissant une minute entre deux portes pour chuchoter : “Je suis occupée ; à ce soir !” ou bien il la trouvait au milieu de douze personnes ; et quand ils étaient seuls, on aurait juré une gageure, tant les empêchements se succédaient. Il l’invitait à dîner, elle refusait toujours ; une fois, elle accepta, mais ne vint pas.

Une idée machiavélique surgit dans sa cervelle.

Connaissant par Dussardier les récriminations de Pellerin sur son compte, il imagina de lui commander le portrait de la Maréchale, un portrait grandeur nature, qui exigerait beaucoup de séances ; il n’en manquerait pas une seule ; l’inexactitude habituelle de l’artiste faciliterait les tête-à-tête. Il engagea donc Rosanette à se faire peindre, pour offrir son visage à son cher Arnoux. Elle accepta, car elle se voyait au milieu du Grand Salon, à la place d’honneur, avec une foule devant elle, et les journaux en parleraient, ce qui “la lancerait” tout à coup.

Quant à Pellerin, il saisit la proposition avidement. Ce portrait devait le poser en grand homme, être un chef-d’œuvre.

Il passa en revue dans sa mémoire tous les portraits de maître qu’il connaissait, et se décida finalement pour un Titien, lequel serait rehaussé d’ornements à la Véronèse.

Donc il exécuterait son projet sans ombres factices, dans une lumière franche éclairant les chairs d’un seul ton, et faisant étinceler les accessoires.

— “Si je lui mettais”, pensa-t-il, “une robe de soie rose, avec un burnous oriental ? oh non ! canaille le burnous ! ou plutôt si je l’habillais de velours bleu, sur un fond gris, très coloré ? On pourrait lui donner également une collerette de guipure blanche, avec un éventail noir et un rideau d’écarlate par derrière ?”

Et, cherchant ainsi, il élargissait chaque jour sa conception et s’en émerveillait.

Il eut un battement de cœur quand Rosanette, accompagnée de Frédéric, arriva chez lui pour la première séance. Il la plaça debout, sur une manière d’estrade, au milieu de l’appartement ; et, en se plaignant du jour et regrettant son ancien atelier, il la fit d’abord s’accouder contre un piédestal, puis asseoir dans un fauteuil, et tour à tour s’éloignant d’elle et s’en rapprochant pour corriger d’une chiquenaude les plis de sa robe, il la regardait les paupières entre-closes, et consultait d’un mot Frédéric.

— “Eh bien, non !” s’écria-t-il. “J’en reviens à mon idée ! Je vous flanque en Vénitienne !”

Elle aurait une robe de velours ponceau avec une ceinture d’orfèvrerie, et sa large manche doublée d’hermine laisserait voir son bras nu qui toucherait à la balustrade d’un escalier montant derrière elle. A sa gauche, une grande colonne irait jusqu'au haut de la toile rejoindre des architectures, décrivant un arc. On apercevait en dessous, vaguement, des massifs d'orangers presque noirs, où se découperait un ciel bleu, rayé de nuages blancs. Sur le balustre couvert d'un tapis, il y aurait, dans un plat d'argent, un bouquet de fleurs, un chapelet d'ambre, un poignard et un coffret de vieil ivoire un peu jaune dégorgeant des sequins d'or ; quelques-uns même, tombés par terre çà et là, formeraient une suite d'éclaboussures brillantes, de manière à conduire l'oeil vers la pointe de son pied, car elle serait posée sur l'avant-dernière marche, dans un mouvement naturel et en pleine lumière.

Il alla chercher une caisse à tableaux, qu'il mit sur l'estrade pour figurer la marche ; puis il disposa comme accessoires sur un tabouret en guise de balustrade, sa vareuse, un bouclier, une boîte de sardines, un paquet de plumes, un couteau, et, quand il eut jeté devant Rosanette une douzaine de gros sous, il lui fit prendre sa pose.

— "Imaginez-vous que ces choses-là sont des richesses, des présents splendides. La tête un peu à droite ! Parfait ! et ne bougez plus ! Cette attitude majestueuse va bien à votre genre de beauté ?"

Elle avait une robe écossaise avec un gros manchon et se retenait pour ne pas rire.

— "Quant à la coiffure, nous la mêlerons à un tortis de perles : cela fait toujours bon effet dans les cheveux rouges."

La Maréchale se récria, disant qu'elle n'avait pas les cheveux rouges.

— "Laissez donc ! Le Rouge des peintres n'est pas celui des bourgeois !"

Il commença à esquisser la position des masses ; et il était si préoccupé des grands artistes de la Renaissance, qu'il en parlait. Pendant une heure, il rêva tout haut à ces existences magnifiques, pleines de génie, de gloire et de somptuosités avec des entrées triomphales dans les villes, et des galas à la lueur des flambeaux, entre des femmes à moitié nues, belles comme des déesses.

— "Vous étiez faite pour vivre dans ce temps-là. Une créature de votre calibre aurait mérité un monseigneur !" Rosanette trouvait ses compliments fort gentils. On fixa le jour de la séance prochaine ; Frédéric se chargeait d'apporter les accessoires.

Comme la chaleur du poêle l'avait étourdie quelque peu, ils s'en retournèrent à pied par la rue du Bac et arrivèrent sur le pont Royal.

Il faisait un beau temps, âpre et splendide. Le soleil s'abaissait ; quelques vitres de maison, dans la Cité, brillaient au loin comme des plaques d'or, tandis que, par derrière, à droite, les tours de Notre-Dame se profilaient en noir sur le ciel bleu, mollement baigné à l'horizon dans des vapeurs grises. Le vent souffla et Rosanette ayant déclaré qu'elle avait faim, ils entrèrent à la Pâtisserie anglaise.

Des jeunes femmes, avec leurs enfants, mangeaient debout contre le buffet de marbre, où se pressaient, sous des cloches de verre, les assiettes de petits gâteaux. Rosanette avala deux tartes à la crème. Le sucre en poudre faisait des moustaches au coin de sa bouche. De temps à autre, pour l'essuyer, elle tirait son mouchoir de son manchon ; et sa figure ressemblait, sous sa capote de soie verte, à une rose épanouie entre ses feuilles.

lis se remirent en marche ; dans la rue de la Paix, elle s'arrêta, devant la boutique d'un orfèvre, à considérer un bracelet ; Frédéric voulut lui en faire cadeau.

— “Non”, dit-elle, “garde ton argent.”

Il fut blessé de cette parole.

— “Qu'a donc le mimi ? On est triste ?” Et, la conversation s'étant renouée, il en vint, comme d'habitude, à des protestations d'amour.

— “Tu sais bien que c'est impossible !”

— “Pourquoi ?”

— “Ah ! parce que…”

Ils allaient côte à côte, elle appuyée sur son bras, et les volants de sa robe lui battaient contre les jambes. Alors, il se rappela un crépuscule d'hiver, où, sur le même trottoir, Mme Arnoux marchait ainsi à son côté ; et ce souvenir l'absorba tellement, qu'il ne s'apercevait plus de Rosanette et n'y songeait pas.

Elle regardait, au hasard, devant elle, tout en se laissant un peu traîner, comme un enfant paresseux. C'était l'heure où l'on rentrait de la promenade, et des équipages défilaient au grand trot sur le pavé sec. Les flatteries de Pellerin lui revenant sans doute à la mémoire, elle poussa un soupir.

— “Ah ! il y en a qui sont heureuses ! Je suis faite pour un homme riche, décidément.”

Il répliqua d'un ton brutal :

— “Vous en avez un, cependant !” car M. Oudry passait pour trois fois millionnaire.

Elle ne demandait pas mieux que de s'en débarrasser.

— “Qui vous en empêche ?”

Et il exhala d'amères plaisanteries sur ce vieux bourgeois à perruque, lui montrant qu'une pareille liaison était indigne, et qu'elle devait la rompre !

— “Oui”, répondit la Maréchale, comme se parlant à elle-même. “C'est ce que je finirai par faire, sans doute !”

Frédéric fut charmé de ce désintéressement. Elle se ralentissait, il la crut fatiguée. Elle s'obstina à ne pas vouloir de voiture et elle le congédia devant sa porte, en lui envoyant un baiser du bout des doigts.

— “Ah ! quel dommage ! et songer que des imbéciles me trouvent riche !”

Il était sombre en arrivant chez lui.

Hussonnet et Deslauriers l’attendaient.

Le bohème, assis devant sa table, dessinait des têtes de Turcs, et l’avocat, en bottes crottées, sommeillait sur le divan.

“Ah ! enfin”, s’écria-t-il. “Mais quel air farouche ! Peux-tu m’écouter ?”

Sa vogue comme répétiteur diminuait, car il bourrait ses élèves de théories défavorables pour leurs examens. Il avait plaidé deux ou trois fois, avait perdu, et chaque déception nouvelle le rejetait plus fortement vers son vieux rêve : un journal où il pourrait s’étaler, se venger, cracher sa bile et ses idées. Fortune et réputation, d’ailleurs, s’ensuivraient. C’était dans cet espoir qu’il avait circonvenu le bohème, Hussonnet possédant une feuille.

A présent, il la tirait sur papier rose ; il inventait des canards, composait des rébus, tâchait d’engager des polémiques, et même (en dépit du local) voulait monter des concerts ! L’abonnement d’un an “donnait droit à une place d’orchestre dans un des principaux théâtres de Paris ; de plus, l’administration se chargeait de fournir à MM. les étrangers tous les renseignements désirables, artistiques, et autres.” Mais l’imprimeur faisait des menaces, on devait trois termes au propriétaire, toutes sortes d’embarras surgissaient ; et Hussonnet aurait laissé périr l’Art, sans les exhortations de l’avocat, qui lui chauffait le moral quotidiennement. Il l’avait pris, afin de donner plus de poids à sa démarche.

— “Nous venons pour le Journal”, dit-il.

— “Tiens, tu y penses encore !” répondit Frédéric, d’un ton distrait.

— “Certainement ! j’y pense !”

Et il exposa de nouveau son plan. Par des comptes rendus de la Bourse, ils se mettraient en relations avec des financiers, et obtiendraient ainsi les cent mille francs de cautionnement indispensables. Mais, pour que la feuille pût être transformée en journal politique, il fallait auparavant avoir une large clientèle, et, pour cela, se résoudre à quelques dépenses, tant pour les frais de papeterie, d’imprimerie, de bureau, bref une somme de quinze mille francs.

— “Je n’ai pas de fonds”, dit Frédéric.

— “Et nous donc !” fit Deslauriers en croisant ses deux bras.

Frédéric, blessé du geste, répliqua :

— “Est-ce ma faute ?…”

— “Ah ! très bien ! Ils ont du bois dans leur cheminée, des truffes sur leur table, un bon lit, une bibliothèque, une voiture, toutes les douceurs ! Mais qu’un autre grelotte sous les ardoises, dîne à vingt sous, travaille comme un forçat et patauge dans la misère ! est-ce leur faute ?”

Et il répétait “Est-ce leur faute ?” avec une ironie cicéronienne qui sentait le

Palais. Frédéric voulait parler.

— “Du reste je comprends, on a des besoins… aristocratiques ; car sans doute… quelque femme…”

— “Eh bien, quand cela serait ? Ne suis-je pas libre ?…”

— “Oh ! très libre !”

Et, après une minute de silence :

— “C’est si commode, les promesses !”

— “Mon Dieu ! je ne les nie pas !” dit Frédéric.

L’avocat continuait :

— “Au collège, on fait des serments, on constituera une phalange, on imitera les Treize de Balzac. Puis, quand on se retrouve : Bonsoir, mon vieux, va te promener ! Car celui qui pourrait servir l’autre retient précieusement tout, pour lui seul.”

— “Comment ?”

— “Oui, tu ne nous as pas même présentés chez les Dambreuse !”

Frédéric le regarda ; avec sa pauvre redingote, ses lunettes dépolies et sa figure blême, l’avocat lui parut un tel cuistre, qu’il ne put empêcher sur ses lèvres un sourire dédaigneux. Deslauriers l’aperçut, et rougit.

Il avait déjà son chapeau pour s’en aller. Hussonnet, plein d’inquiétude, tâchait de l’adoucir par des regards suppliants, et, comme Frédéric lui tournait le dos :

— “Voyons, mon petit ! Soyez mon Mécène ! Protégez les arts !”

Frédéric, dans un brusque mouvement de résignation, prit une feuille de papier, et, ayant griffonné dessus quelques lignes, la lui tendit. Le visage du bohème s’illumina. Puis, repassant la lettre à Deslauriers :

“Faites des excuses, Seigneur !”

Leur ami conjurait son notaire de lui envoyer au plus vite, quinze mille francs.

— “Ah ! je te reconnais là !” dit Deslauriers.

— “Foi de gentilhomme !” ajouta le bohème, “vous êtes un brave, on vous mettra dans la galerie des hommes utiles !”

L’avocat reprit :

— “Tu n’y perdras rien, la spéculation est excellente.” — “Parbleu !” s’écria Hussonnet, “j’en fourrerais ma tête sur l’échafaud.”

Et il débita tant de sottises et promit tant de merveilles (auxquelles il croyait peut-être), que Frédéric ne savait pas si c’était pour se moquer des autres ou de lui-même.

Ce soir-là, il reçut une lettre de sa mère.

Elle s’étonnait de ne pas le voir encore ministre, tout en le plaisantant quelque peu. Puis elle parlait de sa santé, et lui apprenait que M. Roque venait maintenant chez elle. “Depuis qu’il est veuf, j’ai cru sans inconvénient de le recevoir. Louise est très changée à son avantage.” Et en post-scriptum : “Tu ne me dis rien de ta belle connaissance, M. Dambreuse ; à ta place, je l’utiliserais.”

Pourquoi pas ? Ses ambitions intellectuelles l’avaient quitté, et sa fortune (il s’en apercevait) était insuffisante ; car, ses dettes payées et la somme convenue remise aux autres, son revenu serait diminué de quatre mille francs, pour le moins ! D’ailleurs, il sentait le besoin de sortir de cette existence, de se raccrocher à quelque chose. Aussi, le lendemain, en dînant chez Mme Arnoux, il dit que sa mère le tourmentait pour qu’il embrassât une profession.

— “Mais je croyais”, reprit-elle, “que M. Dambreuse devait vous faire entrer au Conseil d’Etat ? Cela vous irait très bien.”

Elle le voulait donc. Il obéit.

Le banquier, comme la première fois, était assis à son bureau, et d’un geste le pria d’attendre quelques minutes, car un monsieur tournant le dos à la porte, l’entretenait de matières graves. Il s’agissait de charbons de terre et d’une fusion à opérer entre diverses compagnies.

Les portraits du général Foy et de Louis-Philippe se faisaient pendant de chaque côté de la glace ; des cartonniers montaient contre le lambris jusqu’au plafond, et il y avait six chaises de paille, M. Dambreuse n’ayant pas besoin pour ses affaires d’un appartement plus beau ; c’était comme ces sombres cuisines où s’élaborent de grands festins. Frédéric observa surtout deux coffres monstrueux, dressés dans les encoignures. Il se demandait combien de millions y pouvaient tenir. Le banquier en ouvrit un, et la planche de fer tourna, ne laissant voir à l’intérieur que des cahiers de papier bleu.

Enfin l’individu passa devant Frédéric. C’était le père Oudry. Tous deux se saluèrent en rougissant, ce qui parut étonner M. Dambreuse. Du reste, il se montra fort aimable. Rien n’était plus facile que de recommander son jeune ami au garde des sceaux. On serait trop heureux de l’avoir ; et il termina ses politesses en l’invitant à une soirée qu’il donnait dans quelques jours..

Frédéric montait en coupé pour s’y rendre quand arriva un billet de la Maréchale. A la lueur des lanternes, il lut : “Cher, j’ai suivi vos conseils. Je viens d’expulser mon Osage. A partir de demain soir, liberté ! Dites que je ne suis pas brave.”

Rien de plus ! Mais c’était le convier à la place vacante. Il poussa une exclamation, serra le billet dans sa poche et partit.

Deux municipaux à cheval stationnaient dans la rue. Une file de lampions brûlaient sur les deux portes cochères ; et des domestiques, dans la cour, criaient, pour faire avancer les voitures jusqu’au bas du perron sous la marquise. Puis, tout à coup, le bruit cessait dans le vestibule.

De grands arbres emplissaient la cage de l'escalier ; les globes de porcelaine versaient une lumière qui ondulait comme des moires de satin blanc sur les murailles. Frédéric monta les marches allègrement. Un huissier lança son nom : M. Dambreuse lui tendit la main presque aussitôt, Mme Dambreuse parut.

Elle avait une robe mauve garnie de dentelles, les boucles de sa coiffure plus abondantes qu'à l'ordinaire, et pas un seul bijou.

Elle se plaignit de ses rares visites, trouva moyen de dire quelque chose. Les invités arrivaient ; en manière de salut, ils jetaient leur torse de côté, ou se courbaient en deux, ou baissaient la figure seulement ; puis un couple conjugal, une famille passait, et tous se dispersaient dans le salon déjà plein.

Sous le lustre, au milieu, un pouf énorme supportait une jardinière, dont les fleurs, s'inclinant comme des panaches, surplombaient la tête des femmes assises en rond, tout autour, tandis que d'autres occupaient les bergères formant deux lignes droites interrompues symétriquement par les grands rideaux des fenêtres en velours nacarat et les hautes baies des portes à linteau doré.

La foule des hommes qui se tenaient debout sur le parquet, avec leur chapeau à la main, faisait de loin une seule masse noire, où les rubans des boutonnières mettaient des points rouges çà et là, et que rendait plus sombre la monotone blancheur des cravates. Sauf de petits jeunes gens à barbe naissante, tous paraissaient s'ennuyer ; quelques dandies, d'un air maussade, se balançaient sur leurs talons. Les têtes grises, les perruques étaient nombreuses ; de place en place, un crâne chauve luisait ; et les visages, ou empourprés ou très blêmes, laissaient voir dans leur flétrissure la trace d'immenses fatigues, — les gens qu'il y avait là appartenant à la politique ou aux affaires. M. Dambreuse avait aussi invité plusieurs savants, des magistrats, deux ou trois médecins illustres, et il repoussait avec d'humbles attitudes les éloges qu'on lui faisait sur sa soirée et les allusions à sa richesse.

Partout, une valetaille à larges galons d'or circulait. Les grandes torchères, comme des bouquets de feu, s'épanouissaient sur les tentures ; elles se répétaient dans les glaces ; et, au fond de la salle à manger, que tapissait un treillage de jasmin, le buffet ressemblait à un maître-autel de cathédrale ou à une exposition d'orfèvrerie, — tant il y avait de plats, de cloches, de couverts et de cuillers en argent et en vermeil, au milieu des cristaux à facettes qui entrecroisaient, par-dessus les viandes, des lueurs irisées. Les trois autres salons regorgeaient d'objets d'art : paysages de maîtres contre les murs, ivoires et porcelaines au bord des tables, chinoiseries sur les consoles ; des paravents de laque se développaient devant les fenêtres, des touffes de camélias montaient dans les cheminées ; et une musique légère vibrait, au loin, comme un bourdonnement d’abeilles.

Les quadrilles n’étaient pas nombreux, et les danseurs, à la manière nonchalante dont ils traînaient leurs escarpins, semblaient s’acquitter d’un devoir. Frédéric entendait des phrases comme celles-ci :

— “Avez-vous été à la dernière fête de charité de l’hôtel Lambert, Mademoiselle ?”

— “Non, Monsieur !”

— “Il va faire, tout à l’heure, une chaleur !”

— “Oh ! c’est vrai, étouffante”

— “De qui donc cette polka ?”

— “Mon Dieu ! je ne sais pas, Madame !”

Et, derrière lui, trois roquentins, postés dans une embrasure, chuchotaient des remarques obscènes ; d’autres causaient chemins de fer, libre-échange un sportman contait une histoire de chasse ; un légitimiste et un orléaniste. Il discutaient.

En errant de groupe en groupe, il arriva dans le salon des joueurs, où, dans un cercle de gens graves, il reconnut Martinon, “attaché maintenant au parquet de la Capitale” .

Sa grosse face couleur de cire emplissait convenablement son collier, lequel était une merveille, tant les poils noirs se trouvaient bien égalisés ; et, gardant un juste milieu entre l’élégance voulue par son âge et la dignité que réclamait sa profession, il accrochait son pouce dans son aisselle suivant l’usage des beaux, puis mettait son bras dans son gilet à la façon des doctrinaires. Bien qu’il eût des bottes extra-vernies, il portait les tempes rasées, pour se faire un front de penseur.

Après quelques mots débités froidement, il se retourna vers son conciliabule. Un propriétaire disait :

— “C’est une classe d’hommes qui rêvent le bouleversement de la société !”

— “Ils demandent l’organisation du travail !” reprit un autre. “Conçoit-on cela ?”

— “Que voulez-vous !” fit un troisième, “quand on voit M. de Genoude donner la main au *Siècle !*”

— “Et des conservateurs, eux-mêmes, s’intituler progressifs ! Pour nous amener, quoi ? la République ! comme si elle était possible en France !”

Tous déclarèrent que la République était impossible en France.

— “N’importe”, remarqua tout haut un monsieur. “On s’occupe trop de la Révolution ; on publie là-dessus un tas d’histoires, de livres !…”

— “Sans compter”, dit Martinon,, qu’il y a, peut-être, des sujets d’étude plus sérieux ! "

Un ministériel s’en prit aux scandales du théâtre :

— “Ainsi, par exemple, ce nouveau drame *la Reine Margot* dépasse véritablement les bornes ! Où était le besoin qu’on nous parlât des Valois ? Tout cela montre la royauté sous un jour défavorable ! C’est comme votre Presse ! Les lois de septembre, on a beau dire, sont infiniment trop douces Moi, je voudrais des cours martiales pour bâillonner les journalistes ! A la moindre insolence, traînés devant un conseil de guerre ! et allez donc !”

— “Oh ! prenez garde, Monsieur, prenez garde !” dit un professeur, “n’attaquez pas nos précieuses conquêtes de 1830 ! respectons nos libertés.” Il fallait décentraliser plutôt, répartir l’excédent des villes dans les campagnes.

— “Mais elles sont gangrenées !” s’écria un catholique. “Faites qu’on raffermisse la Religion !”

Martinon s’empressa de dire :

— “Effectivement, c’est un frein !”

Tout le mal gisait dans cette envie moderne de s’élever au-dessus de sa classe, d’avoir du luxe.

— “Cependant”, objecta un industriel, “le luxe favorise le commerce. Aussi j’approuve le duc de Nemours d’exiger la culotte courte à ses soirées.”

— “M. Thiers y est venu en pantalon. Vous connaissez son mot ?”

— “Oui, charmant ! Mais il tourne au démagogue, et son discours dans la question des incompatibilités n’a pas été sans influence sur l’attentat du 12 mai.”

— “Ah ! bah !”

— “Eh ! eh !”

Le cercle fut contraint de s’entrouvrir pour livrer passage à un domestique portant un plateau, et qui tâchait d’entrer dans le salon des joueurs.

Sous l’abat-jour vert des bougies, des rangées de cartes et de pièces d’or couvraient la table. Frédéric s’arrêta devant une d’elles, perdit les quinze napoléons qu’il avait dans sa poche, fit une pirouette, et se trouva au seuil du boudoir où était alors Mme Dambreuse.

Des femmes le remplissaient, les unes près des autres, sur des sièges sans dossier. Leurs longues jupes, bouffant autour d’elles, semblaient des flots d’où leur taille émergeait, et les seins s’offraient aux regards dans l’échancrure des corsages. Presque toutes portaient un bouquet de violettes à la main. Le ton mat de leurs gants faisaient ressortir la blancheur humaine de leurs bras ; des effilés, des herbes, leur pendaient sur les épaules, et on croyait quelquefois, à certains frissonnements, que la robe allait tomber. Mais la décence des figures tempérait les provocations du costume ; plusieurs même avaient une placidité presque bestiale, et ce rassemblement de femmes demi-nues faisait songer à un intérieur de harem ; il vint à l’esprit du jeune homme une comparaison plus grossière. En effet, toutes sortes de beautés se trouvaient là : des Anglaises à profil de keepsake, une Italienne dont les yeux noirs fulguraient comme un Vésuve, trois sœurs habillées de bleu, trois Normandes, fraîches comme des pommiers d'avril, une grande rousse avec une parure d'améthystes ; — et les blanches scintillations des diamants qui tremblaient en aigrettes dans les chevelures, les taches lumineuses des pierreries étalées sur les poitrines, et l'éclat doux des perles accompagnant les visages se mêlaient au miroitement des anneaux d'or, aux dentelles, à la poudre, aux plumes, au vermillon des petites bouches, à la nacre des dents. Le plafond, arrondi en coupole, donnait au boudoir la forme d'une corbeille ; et un courant d'air parfumé circulait sous le battement des éventails.

Frédéric, campé derrière elles avec son lorgnon dans l'oeil, ne jugeait pas toutes les épaules irréprochables ; il songeait à la Maréchale, ce qui refoulait ses tentations, ou l'en consolait.

Il regardait cependant Mme Dambreuse, et il la trouvait charmante, malgré sa bouche un peu longue et ses narines trop ouvertes. Mais sa grâce était particulière. Les boucles de sa chevelure avaient comme une langueur passionnée, et son front couleur d'agate semblait contenir beaucoup de choses et dénotait un maître.

Elle avait mis près d'elle la nièce de son mari, jeune personne assez laide. De temps à autre, elle se dérangeait pour recevoir celles qui entraient ; et le murmure des voix féminines, augmentant, faisait comme un caquetage d'oi seaux.

Il était question des ambassadeurs tunisiens et de leurs costumes. Un dame avait assisté à la dernière réception de l'Académie ; une autre parla du Don Juan de Molière, représenté nouvellement aux Français. Mais, désignant sa nièce d'un coup d'oeil, Mme Dambreuse posa un doigt contre sa bouche, et un sourire qui lui échappa démentait cette austérité.

Tout à coup, Martinon apparut, en face, sous l'autre porte. Elle se leva. Il lui offrit son bras. Frédéric, pour le voir continuer ses galanteries, traversa les tables de jeu et les rejoignit dans le grand salon ; Mme Dambreuse quitta aussitôt son cavalier, et l'entretint familièrement.

Elle comprenait qu'il ne jouât pas, ne dansât pas.

— "Dans la jeunesse on est triste !" Puis, enveloppant le bal d'un seul regard :

— "D'ailleurs, tout cela n'est pas drôle ! pour certaines natures du moins !"

Et elle s'arrêtait devant la rangée des fauteuils, distribuant çà et là des mots aimables, tandis que des vieux, qui avaient des binocles à deux branches, venaient lui faire la cour. Elle présenta Frédéric à quelques-uns. M. Dambreuse le toucha au coude légèrement, et l’emmena dehors sur la terrasse.

Il avait vu le Ministre. La chose n’était pas facile. Avant d’être présenté comme auditeur au Conseil d’Etat, on devait subir un examen ; Frédéric, pris d’une confiance inexplicable, répondit qu’il en savait les matières.

Le financier n’en était pas surpris, d’après tous les éloges que faisait de lui M. Roque.

A ce nom, Frédéric revit la petite Louise, sa maison, sa chambre ; et il se rappela des nuits pareilles, où il restait à sa fenêtre, écoutant les rouliers qui passaient. Ce souvenir de ses tristesses amena la pensée de Mme Arnoux ; et il se taisait, tout en continuant à marcher sur la terrasse. Les croisées dressaient au milieu des ténèbres de longues plaques rouges ; le bruit du bal s’affaiblissait les voitures commençaient à s’en aller.

— “Pourquoi donc”, reprit M. Dambreuse, “tenez-vous au Conseil d’Etat ?”

Et il affirma, d’un ton de libéral, que les fonctions publiques ne menaient à rien, il en savait quelque chose ; les affaires valaient mieux. Frédéric objecta la difficulté de les apprendre.

— “Ah ! bah ! en peu de temps, je vous y mettrais.” Voulait-il l’associer à ses entreprises ?

Le jeune homme aperçut, comme dans un éclair, une immense fortune qui allait venir.

— “Rentrons”, dit le banquier. “Vous soupez avec nous, n’est-ce pas ?”

Il était trois heures, on partait. Dans la salle à manger, une table servie attendait les intimes.

M. Dambreuse aperçut Martinon, et, s’approchant de sa femme, d’une voix basse :

— “C’est vous qui l’avez invité ?”

Elle répliqua sèchement :

— “Mais oui !”

La nièce n’était pas là. On but très bien, on rit très haut ; et des plaisanteries hasardeuses ne choquèrent point, tous éprouvant cet allégement qui suit les contraintes un peu longues. Seul, Martinon se montra sérieux ; il refusa de boire du vin de Champagne par bon genre, souple d’ailleurs et fort poli, car M. Dambreuse, qui avait la poitrine étroite, se plaignant d’oppression, il s’informa de sa santé à plusieurs reprises ; puis il dirigeait ses yeux bleuâtres du côté de Mme Dambreuse.

Elle interpella Frédéric, pour savoir quelles jeunes personnes lui avaient plu. Il n’en avait remarqué aucune, et préférait, d’ailleurs, les femmes de trente ans.

— “Ce n’est peut-être pas bête !” répondit-elle.

Puis, comme on mettait les pelisses et les paletots, M. Dambreuse lui dit :

— “Venez me voir un de ces matins, nous causerons !”

Martinon, au bas de l’escalier, alluma un cigare ; et il offrait, en le suçant, un profil tellement lourd, que son compagnon lâcha cette phrase :

— “Tu as une bonne tête, ma parole”

— “Elle en a fait tourner quelques-unes !” reprit le jeune magistrat, d’un air à la fois convaincu et vexé.

Frédéric, en se couchant, résuma la soirée. D’abord, sa toilette (il s’était observé dans les glaces plusieurs fois), depuis la coupe de l’habit jusqu’au nœud des escarpins, ne laissait rien à reprendre ; il avait parlé à des hommes considérables, avait vu de près des femmes riches, M. Dambreuse s’était montré excellent et Mme Dambreuse presque engageante. Il pesa un à un ses moindres mots, ses regards, mille choses inanalysables et cependant expressives. Ce serait crânement beau d’avoir une pareille maîtresse ! Pourquoi non, après tout ? Il en valait bien un autre ! Peut-être qu’elle n’était pas si difficile ? Martinon ensuite revint à sa mémoire ; et, en s’endormant, il souriait de pitié sur ce brave garçon.

L’idée de la Maréchale le réveilla ; ces mots de son billet : “A partir de demain soir”, étaient bien un rendez-vous pour le jour même. Il attendit jusqu’à neuf heures, et courut chez elle.

Quelqu’un, devant lui, qui montait l’escalier, ferma la porte. Il tira la sonnette ; Delphine vint ouvrir, et affirma que Madame n’y était pas.

Frédéric insista, pria. Il avait à lui communiquer quelque chose de très grave, un simple mot. Enfin l’argument de la pièce de cent sous réussit, et la bonne le laissa seul dans l’antichambre.

Rosanette parut. Elle était en chemise, les cheveux dénoués ; et, tout en hochant la tête, elle fit de foin avec les deux bras, un grand geste exprimant qu’elle ne pouvait le recevoir.

Frédéric descendit l’escalier, lentement. Ce caprice-là dépassait tous les autres. Il n’y comprenait rien.

Devant la loge du portier, Mlle Vatnaz l’arrêta.

— “Elle vous a reçu ?”

— “Non !”

— “On vous a mis à la porte ?”

— “Comment le savez-vous ?”

— “Ça se voit ! Mais venez ! sortons ! j’étouffe !”

Elle l’emmena dans la rue. Elle haletait. Il sentait son bras maigre trembler sur le sien. Tout à coup elle éclata.

— “Ah ! le misérable !”

— “Qui donc ?”

— “Mais c’est lui ! lui ! Delmar !”

Cette révélation humilia Frédéric ; il reprit :

— “En êtes-vous bien sûre ?”

— “Mais quand je vous dis que je l’ai suivi !” s’écria la Vatnaz ; “je l’ai vu entrer ! Comprenez-vous maintenant ? Je devais m’y attendre, d’ailleurs c’est moi, dans ma bêtise, qui l’ai mené chez elle. Et si vous saviez, mon Dieu ! Je l’ai recueilli, je l’ai nourri, je l’ai habillé ; et toutes mes démarches dans les journaux ! Je l’aimais comme une mère !” Puis, avec un ricanement : “Ah ! c’est qu’il faut à Monsieur des robes de velours ! une spéculation de sa part, vous pensez bien ! Et elle ! Dire que je l’ai connue confectionneuse de lingerie ! Sans moi, plus de vingt fois, elle serait tombée dans la crotte. Mais je l’y plongerai ! oh oui ! Je veux qu’elle crève à l’hôpital On saura tout !”

Et, comme un torrent d’eau de vaisselle qui charrie des ordures, sa colère fit passer tumultueusement sous Frédéric les hontes de sa rivale.

— “Elle a couché avec Jumillac, avec Flacourt, avec le petit Allard, avec Bertinaux, avec Saint-Valéry, le grêlé. Non ! l’autre ! Ils sont deux frères, n’importe ! Et quand elle avait des embarras, j’arrangeais tout. Qu’est-ce que j’y gagnais ? Elle est si avare ! Et puis, vous en conviendrez, c’était une jolie complaisance que de la voir, car enfin, nous ne sommes pas du même monde ! Est-ce que je suis une fille, moi ! Est-ce que je me vends ! Sans compter qu’elle est bête comme un chou ! Elle écrit catégorie par un th. Au reste, ils vont bien ensemble ; ça fait la paire, quoiqu’il s’intitule artiste et se croie du génie ! Mais, mon Dieu ! s’il avait seulement de l’intelligence, il n’aurait pas commis une infamie pareille ! On ne quitte pas une femme supérieure pour une coquine ! Je m’en moque, après tout. Il devient laid ! Je l’exècre ! Si je la rencontrais, tenez, je lui cracherais à la figure.” Elle cracha. “Oui, voilà le cas que j’en fais maintenant ! Et Arnoux, hein ? N’est-ce pas abominable ! Il lui a tant de fois pardonné ! On n’imagine pas ses sacrifices ! Elle devrait baiser ses pieds ! Il est si généreux, si bon !”

Frédéric jouissait à entendre dénigrer Delmar. Il avait accepté Arnoux. Cette perfidie de Rosanette lui semblait une chose anormale, injuste ; et, gagné par l’émotion de la vieille fille, il arrivait à sentir pour lui comme de l’attendrissement. Tout à Coup, il se trouva devant sa porte ; Mlle Vatnaz, sans qu’il s’en aperçût, lui avait fait descendre le faubourg Poissonnière.

— “Nous y voilà”, dit-elle. “Moi, je ne peux pas monter. Mais vous, rien ne vous empêche ?”

— “Pour quoi faire ?”

— “Pour lui dire tout, parbleu !”

Frédéric, comme se réveillant en sursaut, comprit l’infamie où on le poussait.

— “Eh bien ?” reprit-elle.

Il leva les yeux vers le second étage. La lampe de Mme Arnoux brûlait. Rien effectivement ne l'empêchait de monter.

— "Je vous attends ici. Allez donc !"

Ce commandement acheva de le refroidir, et il dit :

— "Je serai là-haut longtemps. Vous feriez mieux de vous en retourner. J'irai demain chez vous."

— "Non, non !" répliqua la Vatnaz, en tapant du pied. "Prenez-le ! emmenez-le ? faites qu'il les surprenne"

— "Mais Delmar n'y sera plus"

Elle baissa la tête.

— "Oui, c'est peut-être vrai ?"

Et elle resta sans parler, au milieu de la rue, entre les voitures ; puis, fixant sur lui ses yeux de chatte sauvage :

— "Je peux compter sur vous, n'est-ce pas ? Entre nous deux maintenant, c'est sacré ! Faites donc. A demain !"

Frédéric, en traversant le corridor, entendit deux voix qui se répondaient. Celle de Mme Arnoux disait :

— "Ne mens pas ! ne mens donc pas !"

Il entra. On se tut.

Arnoux marchait de long en large, et Madame était assise sur la petite chaise près du feu, extrêmement pâle, l'oeil fixe. Frédéric fit un mouvement pour se retirer. Arnoux lui saisit la main, heureux du secours qui lui arrivait.

— "Mais je crains…", dit Frédéric.

— "Restez donc !" souffla Arnoux dans son oreille. Madame reprit :

— "Il faut être indulgent, monsieur Moreau ! Ce sont de ces choses que l'on rencontre parfois dans les ménages."

— "C'est qu'on les y met", dit gaillardement Arnoux.

— "Les femmes vous ont des lubies ! Ainsi, celle-là, par exemple, n'est pas mauvaise. Non, au contraire ! Eh bien, elle s'amuse depuis une heure à me taquiner avec un tas d'histoires."

— "Elles sont vraies !" répliqua Mme Arnoux impatientée. "Car, enfin, tu l'as acheté."

— "Moi ?"

— "Oui, toi-même ! au Persan !"

— "Le cachemire !" pensa Frédéric.

Il se sentait coupable et avait peur.

Elle ajouta, de suite :

— "C'était l'autre mois, un samedi, le 14."

— "Ah ! ce jour-là, précisément, j'étais à Creil ! Ainsi, tu vois."

— “Pas du tout ! Car nous avons dîné chez les Bertin, le 14.”

— “Le 14… ?” fit Arnoux, en levant les yeux comme pour chercher une date.

— “Et même, le commis qui t’a vendu était un blond !”

— “Est-ce que je peux me rappeler le commis !”

— “Il a cependant écrit, sous ta dictée, l’adresse : 18, rue de Laval.”

— “Comment sais-tu ?” dit Arnoux stupéfait.

Elle leva les épaules.

— “Oh ! c’est bien simple : j’ai été pour faire réparer mon cachemire, et un chef de rayon m’a appris qu’on venait d’en expédier un autre pareil chez M^me^ Arnoux.”

— “Est-ce ma faute, à moi, s’il y a dans la même rue une dame Arnoux ?”

— “Oui ! mais pas Jacques Arnoux”, reprit-elle.

Alors, il se mit à divaguer, protestant de son innocence. C’était une méprise, un hasard, une de ces choses inexplicables comme il en arrive. On ne devait pas condamner les gens sur de simples soupçons, des indices vagues ; et il cita l’exemple de l’infortuné Lesurques.

— “Enfin, j’affirme que tu te trompes ! Veux-tu que je t’en jure ma parole ?”

— “Ce n’est point la peine.”

— “Pourquoi ?”

Elle le regarda en face, sans rien dire ; puis allongea la main, prit le coffret d’argent sur la cheminée, et lui tendit une facture grande ouverte.

Arnoux rougit jusqu’aux oreilles et ses traits décomposés s’enflèrent.

— “Eh bien ?”

— “Mais…” répondit-il, lentement, “qu’est-ce que ça prouve ?”

— “Ah” fit-elle, avec une intonation de voix singulière, où il y avait de la douleur et de l’ironie. “Ah !”

Arnoux gardait la note entre ses mains, et la retournait, n’en détachant pas les yeux comme s’il avait dû y découvrir la solution d’un grand problème.

— “Oh ! oui, oui, je me rappelle”, dit-il enfin. “C’est une commission. — Vous devez savoir cela, vous. Frédéric ?” Frédéric se taisait. “Une commission dont j’étais chargé… par… par le père Oudry.”

— “Et pour qui ?”

— “Pour sa maîtresse.”

— “Pour la vôtre !” s’écria Mme Arnoux, se levant toute droite.

— “Je te jure…”

— “Ne recommencez pas ! Je sais tout !”

— “Ah ! très bien ! Ainsi, on m’espionne !”

Elle répliqua froidement :

— “Cela blesse, peut-être, votre délicatesse ?”

— “Du moment qu’on s’emporte”, reprit Arnoux, en cherchant son chapeau, “et qu’il n’y a pas moyen de raisonner”

Puis, avec un grand soupir :

— “Ne vous mariez pas, mon pauvre ami, non, croyez-moi !”

Et il décampa, ayant besoin de prendre l’air.

Alors, il se fit un grand silence ; et tout, dans l’appartement, sembla plus immobile. Un cercle lumineux, au-dessus de la carcel, blanchissait le plafond, tandis que, dans les coins, l’ombre s’étendait comme des gazes noires superposées ; on entendait le tic-tac de la pendule avec la crépitation du feu.

Mme Arnoux venait de se rasseoir, à l’autre angle de la cheminée dans le fauteuil ; elle mordait ses lèvres en grelottant ; ses deux mains se levèrent, un sanglot lui échappa, elle pleurait.

Il se mit sur la petite chaise ; et, d’une voix caressante, comme on fait une personne malade :

— “Vous ne doutez pas que je ne partage… ?”

Elle ne répondit rien. Mais, continuant tout haut ses réflexions :

— “Je le laisse bien libre ! Il n’avait pas besoin de mentir !”

— “Certainement”, dit Frédéric.

C’était la conséquence de ses habitudes sans doute, il n’y avait pas songé, et peut-être que, dans des choses plus graves…

— “Que voyez-vous donc de plus grave ?”

— “Oh ! rien !”

Frédéric s’inclina, avec un sourire d’obéissance. Arnoux néanmoins possédait certaines qualités ; il aimait ses enfants.

— “Ah ! et il fait tout pour les ruiner !”

Cela venait de son humeur trop facile ; car, enfin, c’était un bon garçon.

Elle s’écria :

— “Mais qu’est-ce que cela veut dire, un bon garçon !”

Il le défendait ainsi, de la manière la plus vague qu’il pouvait trouver, et, tout en la plaignant, il se réjouissait, se délectait au fond de l’âme. Par vengeance ou besoin d’affection, elle se réfugierait vers lui. Son espoir, démesurément accru, renforçait son amour.

Jamais elle ne lui avait paru si captivante, si profondément belle. De temps à autre, une aspiration soulevait sa poitrine ; ses deux yeux fixes semblaient dilatés par une vision intérieure, et sa bouche demeurait entre-close comme pour donner son âme. Quelquefois, elle appuyait dessus fortement son mouchoir ; il aurait voulu être ce petit morceau de batiste tout trempé de larmes. Malgré lui, il regardait la couche, au fond de l’alcôve, en imaginant sa tête sur l’oreiller et il voyait cela si bien, qu’il se retenait pour ne pas la saisir dans ses bras. Elle ferma les paupières, apaisée, inerte. Alors, il s'approcha de plus près, et, penché sur elle, il examinait avidement sa figure. Un bruit de bottes résonna dans le couloir, c'était l'autre. Ils l'entendirent fermer la porte de sa chambre. Frédéric demanda, d'un signe, à Mme Arnoux, s'il devait y aller.

Elle répliqua "oui" de la même façon ; et ce muet échange de leurs pensées était comme un consentement, un début d'adultère.

Arnoux, près de se coucher, défaisait sa redingote.

— "Eh bien, comment va-t-elle ?"

— "Oh ! mieux !" dit Frédéric. "Cela se passera !"

Mais Arnoux était peiné.

— "Vous ne la connaissez pas ! Elle a maintenant des nerfs… ! Imbécile de commis ! Voilà ce que c'est que d'être trop bon ! Si je n'avais pas donné ce maudit châle à Rosanette !"

— "Ne regrettez rien ! Elle vous est on ne peut plus reconnaissante !"

— "Vous croyez ?"

Frédéric n'en doutait pas. La preuve, c'est qu'elle venait de congédier le père Oudry.

— "Ah ! pauvre biche !"

Et, dans l'excès de son émotion, Arnoux voulait courir chez elle.

— "Ce n'est pas la peine ! j'en viens. Elle est malade !"

— "Raison de plus !"

Il repassa vivement sa redingote et avait pris son bougeoir. Frédéric se maudit pour sa sottise, et lui représenta qu'il devait, par décence, rester ce soir auprès de sa femme. Il ne pouvait l'abandonner, ce serait très mal.

— "Franchement, vous auriez tort ! Rien ne presse, là-bas ! Vous irez demain ! Voyons faites cela pour moi." Arnoux déposa son bougeoir, et lui dit, en l'embrassant :

— "Vous êtes bon, vous !"

CHAPITRE 3

Alors commença pour Frédéric une existence misérable. Il fut le parasite de la maison.

Si quelqu'un était indisposé, il venait trois fois par jour savoir de ses nouvelles, allait chez l'accordeur de piano, inventait mille prévenances ; et il endurait d'un air content les bouderies de Mlle Marthe et les caresses du jeune Eugène, qui lui passait toujours ses mains sales sur la figure. Il assistait aux dîners où Monsieur et Madame, en face l'un de l'autre, n'échangeaient pas un mot : ou bien, Arnoux agaçait sa femme par des remarques saugrenues. Le repas terminé, il jouait dans la chambre avec son fils, se cachait derrière les meubles, ou le portait sur son dos, en marchant à quatre pattes, comme le Béarnais. Il s'en allait enfin — , et elle abordait immédiatement l'éternel sujet de plainte : Arnoux.

Ce n'était pas son inconduite qui l'indignait. Mais elle paraissait souffrir dans son orgueil, et laissait voir sa répugnance pour cet homme sans délicatesse, sans dignité, sans honneur.

— “Ou plutôt il est fou !” disait-elle.

Frédéric sollicitait adroitement ses confidences. Bientôt, il connut toute sa vie.

Ses parents étaient de petits bourgeois de Chartres. Un jour, Arnoux, dessinant au bord de la rivière (il se croyait peintre dans ce temps-là), l'avait aperçue comme elle sortait de l'église et demandée en mariage ; à cause de sa fortune, on n'avait pas hésité. D'ailleurs, il l'aimait éperdument. Elle ajouta : — “Mon Dieu, il m'aime encore à sa manière !”

Ils avaient, les premiers mois, voyagé en Italie.

Arnoux, malgré son enthousiasme devant les paysages et les chefs-d'œuvre, n'avait fait que gémir sur le vin, et organisait des pique-nique avec des Anglais, pour se distraire. Quelques tableaux bien revendus l'avaient poussé au commerce des arts. Puis il s'était engoué d'une manufacture de faïence. D'autres spéculations, à présent, le tentaient ; et, se vulgarisant de plus en plus, il prenait des habitudes grossières et dispendieuses. Elle avait moins à lui reprocher ses vices que toutes ses actions. Aucun changement ne pouvait survenir, et son malheur à elle était irréparable.

Frédéric affirmait que son existence, de même, se trouvait manquée.

Il était bien jeune cependant. Pourquoi désespérer ? Et elle lui donnait de bons conseils : “Travaillez ! mariez-vous !”

Il répondait par des sourires amers ; car, au lieu d’exprimer le véritable motif de son chagrin, il en feignait un autre, sublime, faisant un peu l’Antony, le maudit, — langage, du reste, qui ne dénaturait pas complètement sa pensée.

L’action, pour certains hommes, est d’autant plus impraticable que le désir est plus fort. La méfiance d’eux-mêmes les embarrasse, la crainte de déplaire les épouvante ; d’ailleurs, les affections profondes ressemblent aux honnêtes femmes ; elles ont peur d’être découvertes, et passent dans la vie les yeux baissés.

Bien qu’il connût Mme Arnoux davantage (à cause de cela, peut-être), il était encore plus lâche qu’autrefois. Chaque matin, il se jurait d’être hardi. Une invincible pudeur l’en empêchait ; et il ne pouvait se guider d’après aucun exemple puisque celle-là différait des autres. Par la force de ses rêves, il l’avait posée en dehors des conditions humaines. Il se sentait, à côté d’elle, moins important sur la terre que les brindilles de soie s’échappant de ses ciseaux.

Puis il pensait à des choses monstrueuses, absurdes, telles que des surprises, la nuit, avec des narcotiques et des fausses clefs, — tout lui paraissant plus facile que d’affronter son dédain.

D’ailleurs, les enfants, les deux bonnes, la disposition des pièces faisaient d’insurmontables obstacles. Donc, il résolut de la posséder à lui seul, et d’aller vivre ensemble bien loin, au fond d’une solitude ; il cherchait même sur quel lac assez bleu, au bord de quelle plage assez douce, si ce serait l’Espagne, la Suisse ou l’Orient ; et, choisissant exprès les jours où elle semblait plus irritée, il lui disait qu’il faudrait sortir de là, imaginer un moyen, et qu’il n’en voyait pas d’autre qu’une séparation. Mais, pour l’amour de ses enfants, jamais elle n’en viendrait à une telle extrémité. Tant de vertu augmenta son respect.

Ses après-midi se passaient à se rappeler la visite de la veille, à désirer celle du soir. Quand il ne dînait pas chez eux, vers neuf heures, il se postait au coin de la rue ; et, dès qu’Arnoux avait tiré la grande porte, Frédéric montait vivement les deux étages et demandait à la bonne d’un air ingénu : — “Monsieur est là ?”

Puis faisait l’homme surpris de ne pas le trouver.

Arnoux, souvent, rentrait à l’improviste. Alors, il fallait le suivre dans un petit café de la rue Sainte-Anne, que fréquentait maintenant Regimbart.

Le Citoyen commençait par articuler contre la Couronne quelque nouveau grief. Puis ils causaient, en se disant amicalement des injures ; car le fabricant tenait Regimbart pour un penseur de haute volée, et, chagriné de voir tant de moyens perdus, il le taquinait sur sa paresse. Le Citoyen jugeait Arnoux plein de cœur et d’imagination, mais décidément trop immoral ; aussi le traitait-il sans la moindre indulgence et refusait même de dîner chez lui, parce que “la cérémonie l’embêtait.”

Quelquefois, au moment des adieux, Arnoux était pris de fringale. Il “avait besoin” de manger une omelette ou des pommes cuites ; et, les comestibles ne se trouvant jamais dans l’établissement, il les envoyait chercher. On attendait. Regimbart ne s’en allait pas, et finissait, en grommelant, par accepter quelque chose.

Il était sombre néanmoins, car il restait pendant des heures, en face du même verre à moitié plein. La Providence ne gouvernant point les choses selon ses idées, il tournait à l’hypocondriaque, ne voulait même plus lire les journaux, et poussait des rugissements au seul nom de l’Angleterre. Il s’écria une fois, à propos d’un garçon qui le servait mal : — “Est-ce que nous n’avons pas assez des affronts de l’Etranger !”

En dehors de ces crises, il se tenait taciturne, méditant “un coup infaillible pour faire péter toute la boutique” .

Tandis qu’il était perdu dans ses réflexions, Arnoux, d’une voix monotone et avec un regard un peu ivre, contait d’incroyables anecdotes où il avait toujours brillé, grâce à son aplomb ; et Frédéric (cela tenait sans doute à des ressemblances profondes), éprouvait un certain entraînement pour sa personne. Il se reprochait cette faiblesse, trouvant qu’il aurait dû le haïr, au contraire.

Arnoux se lamentait devant lui sur l’humeur de sa femme, son entêtement, ses préventions injustes. Elle n’était pas comme cela autrefois.

— “A votre place”, disait Frédéric, “je lui ferais une pension, et je vivrais seul.”

Arnoux ne répondait rien ; et, un moment après, entamait son éloge. Elle était bonne, dévouée, intelligente, vertueuse ; et, passant à ses qualités corporelles, il prodiguait les révélations, avec l’étourderie de ces gens qui étaient leurs trésors dans les auberges.

Une catastrophe dérangea son équilibre.

Il était entré, comme membre du Conseil de surveillance, dans une compagnie de kaolin. Mais, se fiant à tout se qu’on lui disait, il avait signé des rapports inexacts et approuvé, sans vérification, les inventaires annuels frauduleusement dressés par le gérant. Or, la compagnie avait croulé, et Arnoux, civilement responsable, venait d’être condamné, avec les autres, à la garantie des dommages-intérêts, ce qui lui faisait une perte d’environ trente mille francs, aggravée par les motifs du jugement.

Frédéric apprit cela dans un journal, et se précipita vers la rue Paradis.

On le reçut dans la chambre de Madame. C’était l’heure du premier déjeuner. Des bols de café au lait encombraient un guéridon auprès du feu. Des savates traînaient sur le tapis, des vêtements sur les fauteuils. Arnoux, en caleçon et en veste de tricot, avait les yeux rouges et la chevelure ébouriffée ; le petit Eugène, à cause de ses oreillons, pleurait, tout en grignotant sa tartine ; sa sœur mangeait tranquillement ; Mme Arnoux, un peu plus pâle que d'habitude, les servait tous les trois.

— “Eh bien”, dit Arnoux, en poussant un gros soupir, “vous savez !” Et Frédéric ayant fait un geste de compassion : “Voilà ! J'ai été victime de ma confiance !” Puis il se tut ; et son abattement était si fort, qu'il repoussa le déjeuner. Mme Arnoux leva les yeux, avec un haussement d'épaules. Il se passa les mains sur le front.

— “Après tout, je ne suis pas coupable. Je n'ai rien à me reprocher. C'est un malheur ! On s'en tirera ! Ah ! ma foi, tant pis !”

Et il entama une brioche, obéissant, du reste, aux sollicitations de sa femme.

Le soir, il voulut dîner seul, avec elle, dans un cabinet particulier, à la Maison d'or. Mme Arnoux ne comprit rien à ce mouvement de cœur, s'offensant même d'être traitée en lorette ; — ce qui, de la part d'Arnoux, au contraire, était une preuve d'affection. Puis, comme il s'ennuyait, il alla se distraire chez la Maréchale.

Jusqu'à présent, on lui avait passé beaucoup de choses, grâce à son caractère bonhomme. Son procès le classa parmi les gens tarés. Une solitude se fit autour de sa maison.

Frédéric, par point d'honneur, crut devoir les fréquenter plus que jamais. Il loua une baignoire aux Italiens et les y conduisit chaque semaine. Cependant, ils en étaient à cette période où, dans les unions disparates, une invincible lassitude ressort des concessions que l'on s'est faites et rend l'existence intolérable. Mme Arnoux se retenait pour ne pas éclater, Arnoux s'assombrissait ; et le spectacle de ces deux êtres malheureux attristait Frédéric.

Elle l'avait chargé, puisqu'il possédait sa confiance, de s'enquérir de ses affaires. Mais il avait honte, il souffrait de prendre ses dîners en ambitionnant sa femme. Il continuait néanmoins, se donnant pour excuse qu'il devait la défendre, et qu'une occasion pouvait se présenter de lui être utile.

Huit jours après le bal, il avait fait une visite à M. Dambreuse. Le financier lui avait offert une vingtaine d'actions dans son entreprise de houilles ; Frédéric n'y était pas retourné. Deslauriers lui écrivait des lettres ; il les laissait sans réponse. Pellerin l'avait engagé à venir voir le portrait ; il l'éconduisait toujours. Il céda cependant à Cisy, qui l'obsédait pour faire la connaissance de Rosanette.

Elle le reçut fort gentiment, mais sans lui sauter au cou, comme autrefois. Son compagnon fut heureux d'être admis chez une impure, et surtout de causer avec un acteur ; Delmar se trouvait là.

Un drame, où il avait représenté un manant qui fait la leçon à Louis XIV et prophétise 89, l’avait mis en telle évidence, qu’on lui fabriquait sans cesse le même rôle ; et sa fonction, maintenant, consistait à bafouer les monarques de tous les pays. Brasseur anglais, il invectivait Charles Ier ; étudiant de Salamanque, maudissait Philippe Il ; ou, père sensible, s’indignait contre la Pompadour, c’était le plus beau ! Les gamins, pour le voir, l’attendaient à la porte des coulisses ; et sa biographie, vendue dans les entractes, le dépeignait comme soignant sa vieille mère, lisant l’Evangile, assistant les pauvres, enfin sous les couleurs d’un saint Vincent de Paul mélangé de Brutus et de Mirabeau. On disait : “Notre Delmar.” Il avait une mission, il devenait Christ.

Tout cela avait fasciné Rosanette ; et elle s’était débarrassée du père Oudry, sans se soucier de rien, n’étant pas cupide.

Arnoux, qui la connaissait, en avait profité pendant longtemps pour l’entretenir à peu de frais ; le bonhomme était venu, et ils avaient eu soin, tous les trois, de ne point s’expliquer franchement. Puis, s’imaginant qu’elle congédiait l’autre pour lui seul, Arnoux avait augmenté sa pension. Mais ses demandes se renouvelaient avec une fréquence inexplicable, car elle menait un train moins dispendieux ; elle avait même vendu jusqu’au cachemire. tenant à s’acquitter de ses vieilles dettes. disait-elle ; et il donnait toujours, elle l’ensorcelait. elle abusait de lui. sans pitié. Aussi les factures. les papiers timbrés pleuvaient dans la maison. Frédéric sentait une crise prochaine.

Un jour, il se présenta pour voir Mme Arnoux. Elle était sortie. Monsieur travaillait en bas dans le magasin.

En effet, Arnoux. au milieu de ses potiches. tâchait d’enfoncer de jeunes mariés. des bourgeois de la province. Il parlait du tournage et du tournassage. du truité et du glacé ; les autres. ne voulant pas avoir l’air de n’y rien comprendre. faisaient des signes d’approbation et achetaient.

Quand les chalands furent dehors. il conta qu’il avait eu, le matin. avec sa femme une petite altercation. Pour prévenir les observations sur la dépense, il avait affirmé que la Maréchale n’était plus sa maîtresse.

— “Je lui ai même dit que c’était la vôtre.”

Frédéric fut indigné ; mais des reproches pouvaient le trahir, il balbutia :

— “Ah ! vous avez eu tort, grand tort !”

— “Qu’est-ce que ça fait ?”, dit Arnoux. “Où est le déshonneur de passer pour son amant ? Je le suis bien, moi ! Ne seriez-vous pas flatté de l’être ?”

Avait-elle parlé ? Etait-ce une allusion’ ? Frédéric se hâta de répondre :

— “Non ! pas du tout ! au contraire !”

— “Eh bien. alors ?”

— “Oui, c’est vrai ! cela n’y fait rien.” Arnoux reprit :

— “Pourquoi ne venez-vous plus là-bas ?”

Frédéric promit d’y retourner.

— “Ah j’oubliais ! vous devriez…. en causant de Rosanette…. lâcher à ma femme quelque chose… je ne sais quoi. mais vous trouverez… quelque chose qui la persuade que vous êtes son amant. Je vous demande cela comme un service. hein ?” Le jeune homme. pour toute réponse. fit une grimace ambiguë. Cette calomnie le perdait. Il alla le soir même chez elle, et jura que l’allégation d’Arnoux était fausse.

— “Bien vrai ?”

Il paraissait sincère ; et, quand elle eut respiré largement, elle lui dit : “Je Vous crois”, avec un beau sourire ; puis elle baissa la tête, et, sans le regarder — “Au reste, personne n’a de droit sur vous !” Elle ne devinait donc rien, et elle le méprisait, puisqu’elle ne pensait pas qu’il put assez l’aimer pour lui être fidèle ! Frédéric, oubliant ses tentatives près de l’autre, trouvait la permission outrageante.

Ensuite, elle le pria d’aller quelquefois “chez cette femme”, pour voir un peu ce qui en était.

Arnoux survint, et, cinq minutes après, voulut l’entraîner chez Rosanette.

La situation devenait intolérable.

Il en fut distrait par une lettre du notaire qui devait lui envoyer le lendemain quinze mille francs ; et, pour réparer sa négligence envers Deslauriers, il alla lui apprendre tout de suite cette bonne nouvelle.

L’avocat logeait rue des Trois-Maries, au cinquième étage, sur une cour. Son cabinet, petite pièce carrelée, froide, et tendue d’un papier grisâtre, avait pour principale décoration une médaille en or, son prix de doctorat, insérée dans un cadre d’ébène contre la glace. Une bibliothèque d’acajou enfermait sous vitres cent volumes, à peu près. Le bureau, couvert de basane, tenait le milieu de l’appartement. Quatre vieux fauteuils de velours vert en occupaient les coins ; et des copeaux flambaient dans la cheminée, où il y avait toujours un fagot prêt à allumer au coup de sonnette. C’était l’heure de ses consultations l’avocat portait une cravate blanche.

L’annonce des quinze mille francs (il n’y comptait plus, sans doute) lui causa un ricanement de plaisir.

— " C’est bien, mon brave, c’est bien, c’est très bien Il jeta du bois dans le feu, se rassit, et parla immédiatement du Journal. La première chose à faire était de se débarrasser d’Hussonnet.

— “Ce crétin-là me fatigue ! Quant à desservir une opinion, le plus équitable, selon moi, et le plus fort, c’est de n’en avoir aucune.”

Frédéric parut étonné.

— “Mais sans doute ! il serait temps de traiter la Politique scientifiquement.

Les vieux du XVIIIe siècle commençaient, quand Rousseau, les littérateurs, y ont introduit la philanthropie, la poésie, et autres blagues, pour la plus grande joie des catholiques ; alliance naturelle, du reste, puisque les réformateurs modernes (je peux le prouver) croient tous à la Révélation. Mais, si vous chantez des messes pour la Pologne, si à la place du Dieu des dominicains, qui était un bourreau, vous prenez le Dieu des romantiques, qui est un tapissier ; si, enfin, vous n'avez pas de l'Absolu une conception plus large que vos aïeux, la monarchie percera sous vos formes républicaines, et votre bonnet rouge ne sera jamais qu'une calotte sacerdotale ! Seulement, le régime cellulaire aura remplacé la torture, l'outrage à la Religion le sacrilège, le concert européen la Sainte-Alliance ; et, dans ce bel ordre qu'on admire, fait de débris louisquatorziens, de ruines voltairiennes, avec du badigeon impérial par-dessus et des fragments de constitution anglaise, on verra les conseils municipaux tâchant de vexer le maire, les conseils généraux leur préfet, les chambres le roi, la presse le pouvoir, l'administration tout le monde ! Mais les bonnes âmes s'extasient sur le Code civil, œuvre fabriquée, quoi qu'on dise, dans un esprit mesquin, tyrannique ; car le législateur, au lieu de faire son état, qui est de régulariser la coutume, a prétendu modeler la société comme un Lycurgue ! Pourquoi la loi gêne-t-elle le père de famille en matière de testament ? Pourquoi entrave-t-elle la vente forcée des immeubles ? Pourquoi punit-elle comme délit le vagabondage, lequel ne devrait pas être même une contravention ! Et il y en a d'autres ! Je les connais ! aussi je vais écrire un petit roman intitulé Histoire de l'idée de justice, qui sera drôle ! Mais j'ai une soif abominable ! et toi ?”

Il se pencha par la fenêtre, et cria au portier d'aller chercher des grogs au cabaret.

— “En résumé, je vois trois partis…, non ! trois groupes, — et dont aucun ne m'intéresse : ceux qui ont, ceux qui n'ont plus, et ceux qui tâchent d'avoir. Mais tous s'accordent dans l'idolâtrie imbécile de l'Autorité ! Exemples : Mably recommande qu'on empêche les philosophes de publier leurs doctrines ; M. Wronski géomètre, appelle en son langage la censure” répression critique de la spontanéité spéculative “ ; le père Enfantin bénit les Habsbourg” d'avoir passé par-dessus les Alpes une main pesante pour comprimer l'Italie “ ; Pierre Leroux veut qu'on vous force à entendre un orateur, et Louis Blanc incline à une religion d'Etat, tant ce peuple de vassaux a la rage du gouvernement ! Pas un cependant n'est légitime, malgré leurs sempiternels principes. Mais, principe signifiant origine, il faut se reporter toujours à une révolution, à un acte de violence, à un fait transitoire. Ainsi, le principe du nôtre est la souveraineté nationale, comprise dans la forme parlementaire, quoique le parlement n'en convienne pas ! Mais en quoi la souveraineté du peuple serait-elle plus sacrée que le droit divin ? L'un et l'autre sont deux fictions ! Assez de métaphysique, plus de fantômes ! Pas n'est besoin de dogmes pour faire balayer les rues ! On dira que je renverse la société ! Eh bien, après ? où serait le mai ? Elle est propre, en effet, ta société."

Frédéric aurait eu beaucoup de choses à lui répondre. Mais, le voyant loin des théories de Sénécal, il était plein d'indulgence. Il se contenta d'objecter qu'un pareil système les ferait haïr généralement.

— "Au contraire, comme nous aurons donné à chaque parti un gage de haine contre son voisin, tous compteront sur nous. Tu vas t'y mettre aussi, toi, et nous faire de la critique transcendante"

Il fallait attaquer les idées reçues, l'Académie, l'Ecole normale, le Conservatoire, la Comédie-Française, tout ce qui ressemblait à une institution. C'est par là qu'ils donneraient un ensemble de doctrine à leur Revue. Puis, quand elle serait bien posée, le journal tout à coup deviendrait quotidien ; alors, ils s'en prendraient aux personnes.

— "Et on nous respectera, sois-en sûr !"

Deslauriers touchait à son vieux rêve : une rédaction en chef, c'est-à-dire au bonheur inexprimable de diriger les autres, de tailler en plein dans leurs articles, d'en commander, d'en refuser. Ses yeux pétillaient sous ses lunettes, il s'exaltait et buvait des petits verres, coup sur coup, machinalement.

— "Il faudra que tu donnes un dîner une fois la semaine. C'est indispensable, quand même la moitié de ton revenu y passerait ! On voudra y venir, ce sera un centre pour les autres, un levier pour toi ; et, maniant l'opinion par les deux bouts, littérature et politique, avant six mois, tu verras, nous tiendrons le haut du pavé dans Paris."

Frédéric, en l'écoutant, éprouvait une sensation de rajeunissement, comme un homme qui, après un long séjour dans une chambre, est transporté au grand air. Cet enthousiasme le gagnait.

— "Oui, j'ai été un paresseux, un imbécile, tu as raison !"

— "A la bonne heure !" s'écria Deslauriers ; "je retrouve mon Frédéric !"

Et, lui mettant le poing sous la mâchoire :

— "Ah ! tu m'as fait souffrir. N'importe ! je t'aime tout de même."

Ils étaient debout et se regardaient, attendris l'un et l'autre, et près de s'embrasser.

Un bonnet de femme parut au seuil de l'antichambre.

— "Qui t'amène ?" dit Deslauriers.

C'était Mlle Clémence, sa maîtresse.

Elle répondit nue, passant devant sa maison par hasard, elle n'avait pu résister au désir de le voir ; et, pour faire une petite collation ensemble, elle lui apportait des gâteaux, qu’elle déposa sur la table.

— “Prends garde à mes papiers !” reprit aigrement l’avocat. “D’ailleurs, c’est la troisième fois que je te défends de venir pendant mes consultations.”

Elle voulut l’embrasser.

— “Bien ! va-t’en ! file ton nœud !”

Il la repoussait, elle eut un grand sanglot.

— “Ah ! tu m’ennuies, à la fin !”

— “C’est que je t’aime !”

— “Je ne demande pas qu’on m’aime, mais qu’on m’oblige !”

Ce mot, si dur, arrêta les larmes de Clémence. Elle se planta devant la fenêtre, et y restait immobile, le front posé contre le carreau.

Son attitude et son mutisme agaçaient Deslauriers.

— “Quand tu auras fini, tu commanderas ton carrosse, n’est-ce pas !”

Elle se retourna en sursaut.

— “Tu me renvoies !”

— “Parfaitement !”

Elle fixa sur lui ses grands yeux bleus, pour une dernière prière sans doute, puis croisa les deux bouts de son tartan, attendit une minute encore et s’en alla.

— “Tu devrais la rappeler”, dit Frédéric.

— “Allons donc !”

Et, comme il avait besoin de sortir, Deslauriers passa dans sa cuisine, qui était son cabinet de toilette. Il y avait sur la dalle, près d’une paire de bottes, les débris d’un maigre déjeuner, et un matelas avec une couverture était roulé par terre dans un coin.

— “Ceci te démontre”, dit-il, “que je reçois peu de marquises ! On s’en passe aisément, va ! et des autres aussi. Celles qui ne coûtent rien prennent votre temps ; c’est de l’argent sous une autre forme ; or, je ne suis pas riche ! Et puis elles sont toutes si bêtes ! si bêtes ! Est-ce que tu peux causer avec une femme, toi ?” Ils se séparèrent à l’angle du pont Neuf.

— “Ainsi, c’est convenu ! tu m’apporteras la chose demain, dès que tu l’auras.”

— “Convenu !” dit Frédéric.

Le lendemain à son réveil, il reçut par la poste un bon de quinze mille francs sur la Banque.

Ce chiffon de papier lui représenta quinze gros sacs d’argent ; et il se dit qu’avec une somme pareille, il pourrait : d’abord garder sa voiture pendant trois ans, au lieu de la vendre comme il y serait forcé prochainement, ou s’acheter deux belles armures damasquinées qu’il avait vues sur le quai Voltaire, puis quantité de choses encore, des peintures, des livres et combien de bouquets de fleurs, de cadeaux pour Mme Arnoux ! Tout, enfin, aurait mieux valu que de risquer, que de perdre tant d’argent dans ce journal ! Deslauriers lui semblait présomptueux, son insensibilité de la veille le refroidissant à son endroit, et Frédéric s’abandonnait à ces regrets quand il fut tout surpris de voir entrer Arnoux, — lequel s’assit sur le bord de sa couche, pesamment, comme un homme accablé.

— “Qu’y a-t-il donc ?”

— “Je suis perdu !”

Il avait à verser, le jour même, en l’étude de Me Beauminet, notaire rue Sainte-Anne, dix-huit mille francs, prêtés par un certain Vanneroy.

— “C’est un désastre inexplicable ! Je lui ai donné une hypothèque qui devait le tranquilliser, pourtant ! Mais il me menace d’un commandement, s’il n’est pas payé cette après-midi, tantôt !”

— “Et alors ?”

— “Alors, c’est bien simple ! Il va faire exproprier mon immeuble. La première affiche me ruine, voilà tout ! Ah ! si je trouvais quelqu’un pour m’avancer cette maudite somme-là, il prendrait la place de Vanneroy et je serais sauvé ! Vous ne l’auriez pas, par hasard ?”

Le mandat était resté sur la table de nuit, près d’un livre. Frédéric souleva le volume et le posa par-dessus, en répondant : — “Mon Dieu, non, cher ami !”

Mais il lui coûtait de refuser à Arnoux.

— “Comment, vous ne trouvez personne qui veuille… ?”

— “Personne ! et songer que, d’ici à huit jours, j’aurai des rentrées ! On me doit peut-être… cinquante mille francs pour la fin du mois !”

— “Est-ce que vous ne pourriez pas prier les individus qui vous doivent d’avancer… ?”

— “Ah, bien, oui !”

— “Mais vous avez des valeurs quelconques, des billets ?”

— “Rien !”

— “Que faire ?” dit Frédéric.

— “C’est ce que je me demande”, reprit Arnoux.

Il se tut. et il marchait dans la chambre de long en large.

— “Ce n’est pas pour moi, mon Dieu ! mais pour mes enfants, pour ma pauvre femme !”

Puis, en détachant chaque mot :

— “Enfin… je serai fort…. j’emballerai tout cela… et j’irai chercher fortune… je ne sais où — ” Impossible ! " s’écria Frédéric.

Arnoux répliqua d’un air calme :

— “Comment voulez-vous que je vive à Paris. maintenant ?”

Il y eut un long silence.

Frédéric se mit à dire :

— “Quand le rendriez-vous, cet argent ?”

Non pas qu’il l’eût ; au contraire ! Mais rien ne l’empêchait de voir des amis, de faire des démarches. Et il sonna son domestique pour s’habiller. Arnoux le remerciait.

— “C’est dix-huit mille francs qu’il vous faut, n’est-ce pas ?”

— “Oh ! je me contenterais bien de seize mille ! Car j’en ferai bien deux mille cinq cents. trois mille avec mon argenterie, si Vanneroy. toutefois. m’accorde jusqu’à demain ; et, je vous le répète, vous pouvez affirmer, jurer au prêteur que. dans huit jours. peut-être même dans cinq ou six, l’argent sera remboursé. D’ailleurs, l’hypothèque en répond. Ainsi, pas de danger, vous comprenez ?”

Frédéric assura qu’il comprenait et qu’il allait sortir immédiatement.

Il resta chez lui. maudissant Deslauriers. car il voulait tenir sa parole, et cependant obliger Arnoux.

— “Si je m’adressais à M. Dambreuse ? Mais sous quel prétexte demander de l’argent ? C’est à moi, au contraire, d’en porter chez lui pour ses actions de houilles ! Ah ! qu’il aille se promener avec ses actions ! Je ne les dois pas !”

Et Frédéric s’applaudissait de son indépendance, comme s’il eût refusé un, service à M. Dambreuse.

— “Eh bien”, se dit-il ensuite, “puisque je fais une perte de ce côté-là car je pourrais, avec quinze mille francs, en gagner cent mille ! A la Bourse, ça se voit quelquefois… Donc, puisque je manque à l’un, ne suis-je libre ?… D’ailleurs, quand Deslauriers attendrait ! — Non, non, c’est mal, allons-y !”

Il regarda sa pendule.

— “Ah ! rien ne presse ! la Banque ne ferme qu’à cinq heures.”

Et, à quatre heures et demie, quand il eut touché son argent :

— “C’est inutile, maintenant ! Je ne le trouverais pas j’irai ce soir !” se donnant ainsi le moyen de revenir sur sa décision, car il reste toujours dans la conscience quelque chose des sophismes qu’on y a versés ; elle en garde l’arrière-goût, comme d’une liqueur mauvaise.

Il se promena sur les boulevards, et dîna seul au restaurant. Puis il entendit un acte au Vaudeville, pour se distraire. Mais ses billets de banque le gênaient, comme s’il les eût volés. Il n’aurait pas été chagrin de les perdre.

En rentrant chez lui, il trouva une lettre contenant ces mots :

" Quoi de neuf ?

Ma femme se joint à moi, cher ami, dans l’espérance, *etc.*

A vous "

Et un parafe.

— “Sa femme ! elle me prie !”

Au même moment, parut Arnoux, pour savoir s’il avait trouvé la somme urgente.

— “Tenez, la voilà !” dit Frédéric.

Et, vingt-quatre heures après, il répondit à Deslauriers :

— “Je n’ai rien reçu.”

L’Avocat revint trois jours de suite. Il le pressait d’écrire au notaire. Il offrit même de faire le voyage du Havre.

— “Non c’est inutile je vais y aller !”

La semaine finie, Frédéric demanda timidement au sieur Arnoux ses quinze mille francs.

Arnoux le remit au lendemain, puis au surlendemain. Frédéric se risquait dehors à la nuit close, craignant d’être surpris par Deslauriers.

Un soir, quelqu’un le heurta au coin de la Madeleine. C’était lui.

— “Je vais les chercher”, dit-il.

Et Deslauriers J’accompagna jusqu’à la porte d’une maison, dans le faubourg Poissonnière.

— “Attends-moi.”

Il attendit. Enfin, après quarante-trois minutes, Frédéric sortit avec Arnoux, et lui fit signe de patienter encore un peu. Le marchand de faïences et son compagnon montèrent, bras dessus, bras dessous, la rue Hauteville, prirent ensuite la rue de Chabrol.

La nuit était sombre, avec des rafales de vent tiède. Arnoux marchait doucement, tout en parlant des Galeries du Commerce : une suite de passages couverts qui auraient mené du boulevard Saint-Denis au Châtelet, spéculation merveilleuse, où il avait grande envie d’entrer ; et il s’arrêtait de temps à autre, pour voir aux carreaux des boutiques la figure des grisettes, puis reprenait son discours.

Frédéric entendait les pas de Deslauriers derrière lui, comme des reproches, comme des coups frappant sur sa conscience. Mais il n’osait faire sa réclamation, par mauvaise honte, et dans la crainte qu’elle ne fût inutile. L’autre se rapprochait. Il se décida.

Arnoux, d’un ton fort dégagé, dit que, ses recouvrements n’ayant pas eu lieu, il ne pouvait rendre actuellement les quinze mille francs.

— “Vous n’en avez pas besoin, j’imagine ?”

A ce moment, Deslauriers accosta Frédéric, et, le tirant à l’écart :

— “Sois franc, les as-tu, oui ou non ?”

— “Eh bien, non !” dit Frédéric, “Je les ai perdus !”

— “Ah ! et à quoi ?”

— “Au jeu !”

Deslauriers ne répondit pas un mot, salua très bas, et partit. Arnoux avait profité de l’occasion pour allumer un cigare dans un débit de tabac. Il revint en demandant quel était ce jeune homme.

— “Rien ! un ami !”

Puis, trois minutes après, devant la porte de Rosanette :

— “Montez donc”, dit Arnoux, “elle sera contente de vous voir. Quel sauvage vous êtes maintenant !”

Un réverbère, en face, l’éclairait ; et avec son cigare entre ses dents blanches et son air heureux, il avait quelque chose d’intolérable.

— “Ah ! à propos, mon notaire a été ce matin chez le vôtre, pour cette inscription d’hypothèque. C’est ma femme qui me l’a rappelé.”

— “Une femme de tête !” reprit machinalement Frédéric.

— “Je crois bien !”

Et Arnoux recommença son éloge. Elle n’avait pas sa pareille pour l’esprit, le cœur, l’économie ; il ajouta d’une voix basse, en roulant des yeux : — “Et comme corps de femme !”

— “Adieu !” dit Frédéric.

Arnoux fit un mouvement.

— “Tiens ! pourquoi ?”

Et, la main à demi tendue vers lui, il l’examinait, tout décontenancé par la colère de son visage.

Frédéric répliqua sèchement :

— “Adieu !”

Il descendit la rue de Bréda comme une pierre qui déroule, furieux contre Arnoux, se faisant le serment de ne jamais plus le revoir, ni elle non plus, navré, désolé. Au lieu de la rupture qu’il attendait, voilà que l’autre, au contraire, se mettait à la chérir et complètement, depuis le bout des cheveux jusqu’au fond de l’âme. La vulgarité de cet homme exaspérait Frédéric. Tout lui appartenait donc, à celui-là ! Il le retrouvait sur le seuil de la lorette ; et la mortification d’une rupture s’ajoutait à la rage de son impuissance. D’ailleurs, l’honnêteté d’Arnoux offrant des garanties pour son argent l’humiliait ; il aurait voulu l’étrangler et par-dessus son chagrin planait dans sa conscience, comme un brouillard, le sentiment de sa lâcheté envers son ami. Des larmes l’étouffaient.

Deslauriers dévalait la rue des Martyrs, en jurant tout haut d’indignation ; car son projet, tel qu’un obélisque abattu, lui paraissait maintenant d’une hauteur extraordinaire. Il s’estimait volé, comme s’il avait subi un grand dommage. Son amitié pour Frédéric était morte, et il en éprouvait de la joie ; c’était une compensation ! Une haine l’envahit contre les riches. Il pencha vers les opinions de Sénécal et se promettait de les servir.

Arnoux, pendant ce temps-là, commodément assis dans une bergère, auprès du feu, humait sa tasse de thé, en tenant la Maréchale sur ses genoux.

Frédéric ne retourna point chez eux ; et, pour se distraire de sa passion calamiteuse, adoptant le premier sujet qui se présenta, il résolut de composer une Histoire de la Renaissance. Il entassa pêle-mêle sur sa table les humanistes, les philosophes et les poètes ; il allait au cabinet des estampes, voir les gravures de Marc-Antoine ; il tâchait d’entendre Machiavel. Peu à peu, la sérénité du travail l’apaisa. En plongeant dans la personnalité des autres, il oublia la sienne, ce qui est la seule manière peut-être de n’en pas souffrir.

Un jour qu’il prenait des notes, tranquillement, la porte s’ouvrit et le domestique annonça Mme Arnoux.

C’était bien elle ! seule ? Mais non ! car elle tenait par la main le petit Eugène, suivi de sa bonne en tablier blanc. Elle s’assit ; et, quand elle eut toussé : — “Il y a longtemps que vous n’êtes venu à la maison.”

Frédéric ne trouvant pas d’excuse, elle ajouta :

— “C’est une délicatesse de votre part !”

Il reprit :

— “Quelle délicatesse ?”

— “Ce que vous avez fait pour Arnoux !” dit-elle.

Frédéric eut un geste signifiant :

— “Je m’en moque bien c’était pour vous !”

Elle envoya son enfant jouer avec la bonne, dans le salon. Ils échangèrent deux ou trois mots sur leur santé, puis l’entretien tomba.

Elle portait une robe de soie brune, de la couleur d’un vin d’Espagne, avec un paletot de velours noir, bordé de martre ; cette fourrure donnait envie de passer les mains dessus, et ses longs bandeaux, bien lissés, attiraient les lèvres. Mais une émotion la troublait, et, tournant les yeux du côté de la porte : — “Il fait un peu chaud, ici !”

Frédéric devina l’intention prudente de son regard.

— “Pardon ! les deux battants ne sont que poussés.”

— “Ah ! c’est vrai !”

Et elle sourit, comme pour dire : “Je ne crains rien.” Il lui demanda immédiatement ce qui l’amenait. — “Mon mari”, reprit-elle avec effort, “m’a engagée à venir chez vous, n’osant faire cette démarche lui-même.”

— “Et pourquoi ?”

— “Vous connaissez M. Dambreuse, n’est-ce pas ?”

— “Oui, un peu !”

— “Ah ! un peu.”

Elle se taisait.

— “N’importe ! achevez.”

Alors, elle conta que l’avant-veille, Arnoux n’avait pu payer quatre billets de mille francs souscrits à l’ordre du banquier, et sur lesquels il lui avait fait mettre sa signature. Elle se repentait d’avoir compromis la fortune de ses enfants. Mais tout valait mieux que le déshonneur ; et, si M. Dambreuse arrêtait les poursuites, on le payerait bientôt, certainement ; car elle allait vendre, à Chartres, une petite maison qu’elle avait.

— “Pauvre femme !” murmura Frédéric.

— “J’irai comptez sur moi.”

— “Merci !”

Et elle se leva pour partir.

— “Oh ! rien ne vous presse encore !”

Elle resta debout, examinant le trophée de flèches mongoles suspendu au plafond, la bibliothèque, les reliures, tous les ustensiles pour écrire ; elle souleva la cuvette de bronze qui contenait les plumes ; ses talons se posèrent à des places différentes sur le tapis. Elle était venue plusieurs fois chez Frédéric, mais toujours avec Arnoux.

Ils se trouvaient seuls, maintenant, — seuls, dans sa propre maison ; — c’était un événement extraordinaire, presque une bonne fortune.

Elle voulut voir son jardinet ; il lui offrit le bras pour lui montrer ses domaines, trente pieds de terrain, enclos par des maisons, ornés d’arbustes dans les angles et d’une plate-bande au milieu.

On était aux premiers jours d’avril. Les feuilles des lilas verdoyaient déjà, un souffle pur se roulait dans l’air, et de petits oiseaux pépiaient, alternant leur chanson avec le bruit lointain que faisait la forge d’un carrossier.

Frédéric alla chercher une pelle à feu ; et, tandis qu’ils se promenaient côte à côte, l’enfant élevait des tas de sable dans l’allée.

Mme Arnoux ne croyait pas qu’il eût plus tard une grande imagination, mais il était d’humeur caressante. Sa sœur, au contraire, avait une sécheresse naturelle qui la blessait quelquefois.

— “Cela changera”, dit Frédéric. “Il ne faut jamais désespérer.”

Elle répliqua :

— “Il ne faut jamais désespérer.”

Cette répétition machinale de sa phrase lui parut une sorte d’encouragement ; il cueillit une rose, la seule du jardin.

— “Vous rappelez-vous… un certain bouquet de roses, un soir, en voiture ?”

Elle rougit quelque peu ; et, avec un air de compassion railleuse :

— “Ah ! j’étais bien jeune !”

— “Et celle-là”, reprit à voix basse Frédéric, “en sera-t-il de même ?”

Elle répondit, tout en faisant tourner la tige entre ses doigts, comme le fil d’un fuseau :

— “Non ! je la garderai !”

Elle appela d’un geste la bonne, qui prit l’enfant sur son bras : puis, au seuil de la porte, dans la rue, Mme Arnoux aspira la fleur, en inclinant la tête sur son épaule, et avec un regard aussi doux qu’un baiser.

Quand il fut remonté dans son cabinet, il contempla le fauteuil où elle s’était assise et tous les objets qu’elle avait touchés. Quelque chose d’elle circulait autour de lui. La caresse de sa présence durait encore. — “Elle est donc venue là !” se disait-il.

Et les flots d’une tendresse infinie le submergeaient.

Le lendemain, à onze heures, il se présenta chez M. Dambreuse. On le reçut dans la salle à manger. Le banquier déjeunait en face de sa femme. Sa nièce était près d’elle, et de l’autre côté l’institutrice, une Anglaise, fortement marquée de petite vérole.

M. Dambreuse invita son jeune ami à prendre place au milieu d’eux, et, sur son refus : — “A quoi puis-je vous être bon ? Je vous écoute.” Frédéric avoua, en affectant de l’indifférence, qu’il venait faire une requête pour un certain Arnoux.

— “Ah ! ah ! l’ancien marchand de tableaux”, dit le banquier, avec un rire muet découvrant ses gencives.

“Oudry le garantissait, autrefois ; on s’est fâché.”

Et il se mit à parcourir les lettres et les journaux posés près de son couvert.

Deux domestiques servaient, sans faire de bruit sur le parquet — , et la hauteur de la salle, qui avait trois portières en tapisserie et deux fontaines de marbre blanc, le poli des réchauds, la disposition des hors-d’œuvre, et jusqu’aux plis raides des serviettes, tout ce bien-être luxueux établissait dans la pensée de Frédéric un contraste avec un autre déjeuner chez Arnoux. Il n’osait interrompre M. Dambreuse.

Madame remarqua son embarras.

— “Voyez-vous quelquefois notre ami Martinon ?”

— “Il viendra ce soir”, dit vivement la jeune fille.

— “Ah ! tu le sais ?” répliqua sa tante, en arrêtant sur elle un regard froid.

Puis, un des valets s’étant penché à son oreille :

— “Ta couturière, mon enfant !… miss John !”

Et l’institutrice, obéissante, disparut avec son élève.

M. Dambreuse, troublé par le dérangement des chaises, demanda ce qu’il y avait.

— “C’est Mme Regimbart.”

— “Tiens ! Regimbart ! Je connais ce nom-là. J’ai rencontré sa signature.”

Frédéric aborda enfin la question ; Arnoux méritait de l’intérêt ; il allait même, dans le seul but de remplir ses engagements, vendre une maison à sa femme.

— “Elle passe pour très jolie”, dit Mme Dambreuse.

Le banquier ajouta d’un air bonhomme :

— “Etes-vous leur ami… intime ?”

Frédéric, sans répondre nettement, dit qu’il lui serait fort obligé de prendre en considération…

— “Eh bien, puisque cela vous fait plaisir, soit ! on attendra ! J’ai du temps encore. Si nous descendions dans mon bureau, voulez-vous ?”

Le déjeuner était fini ; Mme Dambreuse s’inclina légèrement, tout en souriant d’un rire singulier, plein à la fois de politesse et d’ironie. Frédéric n’eut pas le temps d’y réfléchir ; car M. Dambreuse, dès qu’ils furent seuls : — “Vous n’êtes pas venu chercher vos actions.” Et, sans lui permettre de s’excuser : — “Bien ! bien ! il est juste que vous connaissiez l’affaire un peu mieux.”

Il lui offrit une cigarette et commença.

L’Union générale des Houilles françaises était constituée ; on n’attendait plus que l’ordonnance. Le fait seul de la fusion diminuait les frais de surveillance et de main-d’œuvre, augmentait les bénéfices. De plus, la Société imaginait une chose nouvelle, qui était d’intéresser les ouvriers à son entreprise. Elle leur bâtirait des maisons, des logements salubres ; enfin elle se constituait le fournisseur de ses employés, leur livrait tout à prix de revient.

— “Et ils gagneront, monsieur ; voilà du véritable progrès — , c’est répondre victorieusement à certaines criailleries républicaines ! Nous avons dans notre conseil”, il exhiba le prospectus, “un pair de France, un savant de l’Institut, un officier supérieur du génie en retraite, des noms connus ! De pareils éléments rassurent les capitaux craintifs et appellent les capitaux intelligents !” La Compagnie aurait pour elle les commandes de l’Etat, puis les chemins de fer, la marine à vapeur, les établissements métallurgiques, le gaz, les cuisines bourgeoises. “Ainsi, nous chauffons, nous éclairons, nous pénétrons jusqu’au foyer des plus humbles ménages. Mais comment, me direz-vous, pourrons-nous assurer la vente ? Grâce à des droits protecteurs, cher monsieur, et nous les obtiendrons ; cela nous regarde ! Moi, du reste, je suis franchement prohibitionniste ! le Pays avant tout !” On l’avait nommé directeur ; mais le temps lui manquait pour s’occuper de certains détails. de la rédaction entre autres. “Je suis un peu brouillé avec mes auteurs, j’ai oublié mon grec ! J’aurais besoin de quelqu'un… qui pût traduire mes idées.” Et tout à coup : “Voulez-vous être cet homme-là, avec le titre de secrétaire général ?” Frédéric ne sut que répondre.

— “Eh bien, qui vous empêche ?”

Ses fonctions se borneraient à écrire, tous les ans. un rapport pour les actionnaires. Il se trouverait en relations quotidiennes avec les hommes les plus considérables de Paris. Représentant la Compagnie près les ouvriers, il s'en ferait adorer, naturellement, ce qui lui permettrait, plus tard, de se pousser au Conseil général, à la députation.

Les oreilles de Frédéric tintaient. D'où provenait cette bienveillance ? Il se confondit en remerciements.

Mais il ne fallait point, dit le banquier, qu'il fût dépendant de personne. Le meilleur moyen, c'était de prendre des actions, “placement superbe d'ailleurs. car votre capital garantit votre position, comme votre position votre capital.”

— “A combien, environ, doit-il se monter ?” dit Frédéric.

— “Mon Dieu ! ce qui vous plaira ; de quarante à soixante mille francs, je suppose.”

Cette somme était si minime pour M. Dambreuse et son autorité si grande, que le jeune homme se décida immédiatement à vendre une ferme. Il acceptait. M. Dambreuse fixerait un de ces jours un rendez-vous pour terminer leurs arrangements.

— “Ainsi, je puis dire à Jacques Arnoux… ?”

— “Tout ce que vous voudrez ! le pauvre garçon ! Tout ce que vous voudrez !”

Frédéric écrivit aux Arnoux de se tranquilliser, et il fit porter la lettre par son domestique auquel on répondit : — “Très bien !”

Sa démarche, cependant, méritait mieux. Il s'attendait à une visite, à une lettre tout au moins. Il ne reçut pas de visite. Aucune lettre n'arriva.

Y avait-il oubli de leur part ou intention ? Puisque Mme Arnoux était venue une fois, qui l'empêchait de revenir ? L'espèce de sous-entendu, d'aveu qu'elle lui avait fait, n'était donc qu'une manœuvre exécutée par intérêt ? “Se sont-ils joués de moi ? est-elle complice ?” Une sorte de pudeur, malgré son envie, l'empêchait de retourner chez eux.

Un matin (trois semaines après leur entrevue), M. Dambreuse lui écrivit qu'il l'attendait le jour même, dans une heure.

En route, l'idée des Arnoux l'assaillit de nouveau ; et, ne découvrant point de raison à leur conduite, il fut pris par une angoisse, un pressentiment funèbre. Pour s'en débarrasser, il appela un cabriolet et se fit conduire rue Paradis.

Arnoux était en voyage.

— “Et Madame ?”

— “A la campagne, à la fabrique !”

— “Quand revient Monsieur ?”

— “Demain, sans faute !”

Il la trouverait seule ; c’était le moment. Quelque chose d’impérieux criait dans sa conscience : “Vas-y donc !” Mais M. Dambreuse ? “Eh bien, tant pis ! Je dirai que j’étais malade.” Il courut à la gare ; puis, dans le wagon “J’ai eu tort, peut-être ? Ah bah ! qu’importe.”

A droite et à gauche, des plaines vertes s’étendaient le convoi roulait ; les maisonnettes des stations glissaient comme des décors, et la fumée de la locomotive versait toujours du même côté ses gros flocons qui dansaient sur l’herbe quelque temps, puis se dispersaient.

Frédéric, seul sur sa banquette, regardait cela, par ennui, perdu dans cette langueur que donne l’excès même de l’impatience. Mais des grues, des magasins, parurent.

C’était Creil.

La ville, construite au versant de deux collines basses (dont la première est nue et la seconde couronnée par un bois), avec la tour de son église, ses maisons inégales et son pont de pierre, lui semblait avoir quelque chose de gai, de discret et de bon. Un grand bateau plat descendait au fil de l’eau, qui clapotait fouettée par le vent ; des poules, au pied du calvaire, picoraient dans la paille ; une femme passa, portant du linge mouillé sur la tête.

Après le pont, il se trouva dans une île, où l’on voit sur la droite les ruines d’une abbaye. Un moulin tournait, barrant dans toute sa largeur le second bras de l’Oise, que surplombe la manufacture. L’importance de cette construction étonna grandement Frédéric. Il en conçut plus de respect pour Arnoux. Trois pas plus loin, il prit une ruelle, terminée au fond par une grille.

Il était entré. La concierge le rappela en lui criant :

— “Avez-vous une permission ?”

— “Pourquoi ?”

— “Pour visiter l’établissement !”

Frédéric, d’un ton brutal, dit qu’il venait voir M. Arnoux.

— “Qu’est-ce que c’est que M. Arnoux ?”

— “Mais le chef, le maître, le propriétaire, enfin !”

— “Non, monsieur, c’est ici la fabrique de MM. Lebœuf et Milliet !”

La bonne femme plaisantait sans doute. Des ouvriers arrivaient ; il en aborda deux ou trois — , leur réponse fut la même.

Frédéric sortit de la cour, en chancelant comme un homme ivre ; et il avait l’air tellement ahuri que, sur le pont de la Boucherie, un bourgeois en train de fumer sa pipe lui demanda s’il cherchait quelque chose. Celui-là connaissait la manufacture d’Arnoux. Elle était située à Montataire.

Frédéric s’enquit d’une voiture, on n’en trouvait qu’à la gare. Il y retourna. Une calèche disloquée, attelée d’un vieux cheval dont les harnais décousus pendaient dans les brancards, stationnait devant le bureau des bagages, solitairement.

Un gamin s’offrit à découvrir “le père Pilon” . Il revint au bout de dix minutes ; le père Pilon déjeunait. Frédéric, n’y tenant plus, partit. Mais la barrière du passage était close. Il fallut attendre que deux convois eussent défilé, Enfin il se précipita dans la campagne.

La verdure monotone la faisait ressembler à un immense tapis de billard. Des scories de fer étaient rangées, sur les deux bords de la route, comme des mètres de cailloux. Un peu plus loin, des cheminées d’usine fumaient les unes près des autres. En face de lui se dressait sur une colline ronde, un petit château à tourelles, avec le clocher quadrangulaire d’une église. De longs murs, en dessous, formaient des lignes irrégulières parmi les arbres ; et, tout en bas, les maisons du village s’étendaient.

Elles sont à un seul étage, avec des escaliers de trois marches, faites de blocs sans ciment. On entendait, par intervalles, la sonnette d’un épicier. Des pas lourds s’enfonçaient dans la boue noire, et une pluie fine tombait, coupant de mille hachures le ciel pâle.

Frédéric suivit le milieu du pavé ; puis il rencontra sur sa gauche, à l’entrée d’un chemin, un grand arc de bois qui portait écrit en lettres d’or : FAIENCES.

Ce n’était pas sans but que Jacques Arnoux avait choisi le voisinage de Creil ; en plaçant sa manufacture le plus près possible de l’autre (accréditée depuis longtemps), il provoquait dans le public une confusion favorable à ses intérêts.

Le principal corps de bâtiment s’appuyait sur le bord même d’une rivière qui traverse la prairie. La maison de maître, entourée d’un jardin, se distinguait par son perron, orné de quatre vases où se hérissaient des cactus. Des amas de terre blanche séchaient sous des hangars ; il y en avait d’autres à l’air libre ; et au milieu de la cour se tenait Sénécal, avec son éternel paletot bleu, doublé de rouge.

L’ancien répétiteur tendit sa main froide.

— “Vous venez pour le patron ? Il n’est pas là.”

Frédéric, décontenancé, répondit bêtement :

— “Je le savais.” Mais, se reprenant aussitôt : “C’ est pour une affaire qui concerne Mme Arnoux. Peut-elle me recevoir ?”

— “Ah ! je ne l’ai pas vue depuis trois jours”, dit Sénécal.

Et il entama une kyrielle de plaintes. En acceptant les conditions du fabricant, il avait entendu demeurer à Paris, et non s’enfouir dans cette campagne, loin de ses amis, privé de journaux. N’importe ! il avait passé par là-dessus ! Mais Arnoux ne paraissait faire nulle attention à son mérite. Il était borné d’ailleurs, et rétrograde, ignorant comme pas un. Au lieu de chercher des perfectionnements artistiques, mieux aurait valu introduire des chauffages à la houille et au gaz. Le bourgeois s’enfonçait ; Sénécal appuya sur le mot. Bref, ses occupations lui déplaisaient ; et il somma presque Frédéric de parier en sa faveur, afin qu’on augmentât ses émoluments.

— “Soyez tranquille !” dit l’autre.

Il ne rencontra personne dans l’escalier. Au premier étage, il avança la tête dans une pièce vide ; c’était le salon. Il appela très haut. On ne répondit pas ; sans doute, la cuisinière était sortie, la bonne aussi ; enfin, parvenu au second étage, il poussa une porte. Mme Arnoux était seule, devant une armoire à glace. La ceinture de sa robe de chambre entrouverte pendait le long de ses hanches. Tout un côté de ses cheveux lui faisait un flot noir sur l’épaule droite ; et elle avait les deux bras levés, retenant d’une main son chignon, tandis que l’autre y enfonçait une épingle. Elle jeta un cri, et disparut.

Puis elle revint correctement habillée. Sa taille, ses yeux, le bruit de sa robe, tout l’enchanta. Frédéric se retenait pour ne pas la couvrir de baisers.

— “Je vous demande pardon”, dit-elle, “mais je ne pouvais…”

Il eut la hardiesse de l’interrompre :

— “Cependant…. vous étiez très bien… tout à l’heure.”

Elle trouva sans doute le compliment un peu grossier, car ses pommettes se colorèrent. Il craignait de l’avoir offensée. Elle reprit : — “Par quel bon hasard êtes-vous venu ?”

ne sut que répondre ; et, après un petit ricanement qui lui donna le temps de réfléchir :

— “Si je vous le disais, me croiriez-vous ?”

— “Pourquoi pas ?”

Frédéric conta qu’il avait eu, l’autre nuit un songe affreux :

— “J’ai rêvé que vous étiez gravement malade, près de mourir.”

— “Oh ! ni moi, ni mon mari ne sommes jamais malades !”

— “Je n’ai rêvé que de vous”, dit-il.

Elle le regarda d’un air calme.

— “Les rêves ne se réalisent pas toujours.”

Frédéric balbutia. chercha ses mots, et se lança enfin dans une longue période sur l’affinité des âmes. Une force existait qui peut, à travers les espaces, mettre en rapport deux personnes, les avertir de ce qu’elles éprouvent et les faire se rejoindre.

Elle l’écoutait la tête basse, tout en souriant de son beau sourire. Il l’observait du coin de l’oeil, avec joie, et épanchait son amour plus librement sous la facilité d’un lieu commun. Elle proposa de lui montrer la fabrique ; et, comme elle insistait, il accepta.

Pour le distraire d’abord par quelque chose d’amusant, elle lui fit voir l’espèce de musée qui décorait l’escalier. Les spécimens accrochés contre les murs ou posés sur des planchettes attestaient les efforts et les engouements successifs d’Arnoux. Après avoir cherché le rouge de cuivre des Chinois, il avait voulu faire des majoliques, des faënza, de l’étrusque, de l’oriental, tenté enfin quelques-uns des perfectionnements réalisés plus tard. Aussi remarquait-on, dans la série, de gros vases couverts de mandarins, des écuelles d’un mordoré chatoyant, des pots rehaussés d’écritures arabes, des buires dans le goût de la Renaissance, et de larges assiettes avec deux personnages, qui étaient comme dessinés à la sanguine, d’une façon mignarde et vaporeuse. Il fabriquait maintenant des lettres d’enseigne. des étiquettes à vin ; mais son intelligence n’était pas assez haute pour atteindre jusqu’à l’Art. ni assez bourgeoise non plus pour viser exclusivement au profit, si bien que, sans contenter personne. il se ruinait. Tous deux considéraient ces choses. quand Mlle Marthe passa.

— “Tu ne le reconnais donc pas ?” lui dit sa mère.

— “Si fait !” reprit-elle en le saluant, tandis que son regard limpide et soupçonneux. son regard de vierge semblait murmurer : “Que viens-tu faire ici, toi ?” et elle montait les marches, la tête un peu tournée sur l’épaule.

Mme Arnoux emmena Frédéric dans la cour. puis elle expliqua d’un ton sérieux comment on broie les terres. on les nettoie, on les tamisé.

— “L’important, c’est la préparation des pâtes.”

Et elle l’introduisit dans une salle que remplissaient des cuves, où virait sur lui-même un axe vertical armé de bras horizontaux. Frédéric s’en voulait de n’avoir pas refusé nettement sa proposition, tout à l’heure.

— “Ce sont les patouillards”, dit-elle.

Il trouva le mot grotesque, et comme inconvenant dans sa bouche.

De larges courroies filaient d’un bout à l’autre du plafond, pour s’enrouler sur des tambours, et tout s’agitait d’une façon continue, mathématique, agaçante.

Ils sortirent de là, et passèrent près d’une cabane en ruines, qui avait autrefois servi à mettre des instruments de jardinage.

— “Elle n’est plus utile”, dit Mme Arnoux.

Il répliqua d’une voix tremblante — “Le bonheur peut y tenir !” Le tintamarre de la pompe à feu couvrit ses paroles, et ils entrèrent dans l’atelier des ébauchages.

Des hommes, assis à une table étroite, posaient devant eux, sur un disque tournant, une masse de pâte ; leur main gauche en raclait l'intérieur, leur droite en caressait la surface, et l'on voyait s'élever des vases, comme des fleurs qui s'épanouissent.

Mme Arnoux fit exhiber les moules pour les ouvrages plus difficiles.

Dans une autre pièce, on pratiquait les filets, les gorges, les lignes saillantes. A l'étage supérieur, on enlevait les coutures, et l'on bouchait avec du plâtre les petits trous que les opérations précédentes avaient laissés.

Sur des claires-voies, dans des coins, au milieu des corridors, partout s'alignaient des poteries.

Frédéric commençait à s'ennuyer.

— “Cela vous fatigue peut-être ?” dit-elle.

Craignant qu'il ne fallût borner là sa visite, il affecta, au contraire, beaucoup d'enthousiasme. Il regrettait même de ne s'être pas voué à cette industrie.

Elle parut surprise.

— “Certainement ! j'aurais pu vivre près de vous” Et, comme il cherchait son regard, Mme Arnoux, afin de l'éviter, prit sur une console des boulettes de pâte, provenant des rajustages manqués, les aplatit en une galette, et imprima dessus sa main.

— “Puis-je emporter cela ?” dit Frédéric.

— “Etes-vous assez enfant, mon Dieu” Il allait répondre, Sénécal entra.

M. le sous-directeur, dès le seuil, s'aperçut d'une infraction au règlement. Les ateliers devaient être balayés toutes les semaines ; on était au samedi, et, comme les ouvriers n'en avaient rien fait, Sénécal leur déclara qu'ils auraient à rester une heure de plus. “Tant pis pour vous !”

Ils se penchèrent sur leurs pièces, sans murmurer ; mais on devinait leur colère au souffle rauque de leur poitrine. Ils étaient, d'ailleurs, peu faciles à conduire, tous ayant été chassés de la grande fabrique. Le républicain les gouvernait durement. Homme de théories, il ne considérait que les masses et se montrait impitoyable pour les individus.

Frédéric, gêné par sa présence, demanda bas à Mme Arnoux s'il n'y avait pas moyen de voir les fours. lis descendirent au rez-de-chaussée ; et elle était en train d'expliquer l'usage des cassettes, quand Sénécal, qui les avait suivis, s'interposa entre eux.

Il continua de lui-même la démonstration, s'étendit sur les différentes sortes de combustibles, l'enfournement, les pyroscopes, les alandiers, les engobes, les lustres et les métaux, prodiguant les termes de chimie, chlorure, sulfure, borax, carbonate. Frédéric n'y comprenait rien, et à chaque minute se retournait vers Mme Arnoux.

— “Vous n'écoutez pas”, dit-elle. “M. Sénécal pourtant est très clair. Il sait toutes ces choses beaucoup mieux que moi.”

Le mathématicien flatté de cet éloge, proposa de faire voir le posage des couleurs. Frédéric interrogea d’un regard anxieux Mme Arnoux. Elle demeura impassible, ne voulant sans doute ni être seule avec lui, ni le quitter cependant. il lui offrit son bras.

— “Non ! merci bien ! l’escalier est trop étroit”

Et, quand ils furent en haut, Sénécal ouvrit la porte d’un appartement rempli de femmes.

Elles maniaient des pinceaux, des fioles, des coquilles, des plaques de verre. Le long de la corniche, contre le mur, s’alignaient des planches gravées ; des bribes de papier fin voltigeaient ; et un poêle de fonte exhalait une température écœurante, où se mêlait l’odeur de la térébenthine.

Les ouvrières, presque toutes, avaient des costumes sordides. On en remarquait une, cependant, qui portait un madras et de longues boucles d’oreilles. Tout à la fois mince et potelée, elle avait de gros yeux noirs et les lèvres charnues d’une négresse. Sa poitrine abondante saillissait sous sa chemise, tenue autour de sa taille par le cordon de sa jupe ; et, un coude sur l’établi, tandis que l’autre bras pendait, elle regardait vaguement, au loin dans la campagne. A côté d’elle traînaient une bouteille de vin et de la charcuterie.

Le règlement interdisait de manger dans les ateliers, mesure de propreté pour la besogne et d’hygiène pour les travailleurs.

Sénécal, par sentiment du devoir ou besoin de despotisme, s’écria de loin, en indiquant une affiche dans un cadre : — “Hé ! là-bas, la Bordelaise ! lisez-moi tout haut l’article 9.”

— “Eh bien, après ?”

— “Après, mademoiselle ? C’est trois francs d’amende que vous payerez !”

Elle le regarda en face, impudemment.

— “Qu’est-ce que ça me fait ? Le patron à son retour, la lèvera votre amende ! Je me fiche de vous, mon bonhomme !”

Sénécal, qui se promenait les mains derrière le dos, comme un pion dans une salle d’études se contenta de sourire.

— “Article 13, insubordination, dix francs.”

La Bordelaise se remit à sa besogne. Mme Arnoux par convenance, ne disait rien, mais ses sourcils se froncèrent. Frédéric murmura : — “Ah ! pour un démocrate, vous êtes bien dur !”

L’autre répondit magistralement :

— “La Démocratie n’est pas le dévergondage de l’ individualisme. C’est le niveau commun sous la loi, la répartition du travail, l’ordre !”

— “Vous oubliez l’humanité !” dit Frédéric.

Mme Arnoux prit son bras ; Sénécal, offensé peut-être de cette approbation silencieuse, s’en alla.

Frédéric en ressentit un immense soulagement. Depuis le matin, il cherchait l’occasion de se déclarer ; elle était venue. D’ailleurs le mouvement spontané de Mme Arnoux lui semblait contenir des promesses ; et il demanda, comme pour se réchauffer les pieds, à monter dans sa chambre. Mais, quand il fut assis près d’elle, son embarras commença ; le point de départ lui manquait. Sénécal, heureusement, vint à sa pensée.

— “Rien de plus sot”, dit-il, “que cette punition”

Mme Arnoux reprit :

— “Il y a des sévérités indispensables.”

— “Comment, vous qui êtes si bonne ! Oh ! je me trompe car vous vous plaisez quelquefois à faire souffrir !”

— “Je ne comprends pas les énigmes, mon ami.”

Et son regard austère, plus encore que le mot, l’arrêta. Frédéric était déterminé à poursuivre. Un volume de Musset se trouvait par hasard sur la commode. Il en tourna quelques pages, puis se mit à parier de l’amour, de ses désespoirs et de ses emportements.

Tout cela, suivant Mme Arnoux, était criminel ou factice.

Le jeune homme se sentit blessé par cette négation et, pour la combattre, il cita en preuve les suicides qu’on voit dans les journaux, exalta les grands types littéraires, Phèdre, Didon, Roméo, Des Grieux. Il s’enferrait.

Le feu dans la cheminée ne brûlait plus, la pluie fouettait contre les vitres. Mme Arnoux, sans bouger, restait les deux mains sur les bras de son fauteuil ; les pattes de son bonnet tombaient comme les bandelettes d’un sphinx ; son profil pur se découpait en pâleur au milieu de l’ombre.

Il avait envie de se jeter à ses genoux. Un craquement se fit dans le couloir, il n’osa.

Il était empêché, d’ailleurs, par une sorte de crainte religieuse. Cette robe, se confondant avec les ténèbres, lui paraissait démesurée, infinie, insoulevable ; et précisément à cause de cela son désir redoublait. Mais, la peur de faire trop et de ne pas faire assez lui ôtait tout discernement.

— “Si je lui déplais”, pensait-il, — qu’elle me chasse ! Si elle veut de moi, qu’elle m’encourage ! "

Il dit en soupirant :

— “Donc, vous n’admettez pas qu’on puisse aimer…une femme ?”

M^{me} Arnoux répliqua :

— “Quant elle est à marier, on l’épouse ; lorsqu’elle appartient à un autre, on s’éloigne.”

— “Ainsi le bonheur est impossible ?”

— “Non ! Mais on ne le trouve jamais dans le mensonge, les inquiétudes et le remords.”

— “Qu’importe ! s’il est payé par des joies sublimes.”

— L’expérience est trop coûteuse. "

Il voulut l’attaquer par l’ironie.

— “La vertu ne serait donc que de la lâcheté ?”

— “Dites de la clairvoyance, plutôt. Pour celles même qui oublieraient le devoir ou la religion, le simple bon sens peut suffire. L’égoïsme fait une base Solide à la sagesse.”

— “Ah quelles maximes bourgeoises vous avez !”

— “Mais je ne me vante pas d’être une grande dame !”

A ce moment-là, le petit garçon accourut.

— “Maman, viens-tu dîner ?”

— “Oui, tout à l’heure !”

Frédéric se leva ; en même temps Marthe parut.

Il ne pouvait se résoudre à s’en aller ; et, avec un regard tout plein de supplications :

— “Ces femmes dont vous parlez sont donc bien insensibles ?”

— “Non ! mais sourdes quand il le faut.”

Et elle se tenait debout, sur le seuil de sa chambre, avec ses deux enfants à ses côtés. Il s’inclina sans dire un mot. Elle répondit silencieusement à son salut.

Ce qu’il éprouva d’abord, ce fut une stupéfaction infinie. Cette manière de lui faire comprendre l’inanité de son espoir l’écrasait. Il se sentait perdu comme un homme tombé au fond d’un abîme, qui sait qu’on ne le secourra pas et qu’il doit mourir.

Il marchait cependant, mais sans rien voir, au hasard il se heurtait contre les pierres ; il se trompa de chemin.

Un bruit de sabots retentit près de son oreille ; c’étaient les ouvriers qui sortaient de la fonderie. Alors il se reconnut.

A l’horizon les lanternes du chemin de fer traçaient une ligne de feux. Il arriva comme un convoi partait, se laissa pousser dans un wagon, et s’endormit.

Une heure après, sur les boulevards, la gaieté de Paris le soir recula tout à coup son voyage dans un passé déjà loin. Il voulut être fort, et allégea son cœur en dénigrant Mme Arnoux par des épithètes injurieuses : — “C’est une imbécile, une dinde, une brute, n’y pensons plus !”

Rentré chez lui, il trouva dans son cabinet une lettre de huit pages sur papier à glaçure bleue et initiales R. A.

Cela commençait par des reproches amicaux :

“Que devenez-vous, mon cher ? je m’ennuie.”

Mais l’écriture était si abominable, que Frédéric allait rejeter tout le paquet quand il aperçut, en post-scriptum : “Je compte sur vous demain pour me conduire aux courses.”

Que signifiait cette invitation ? était-ce encore un tour de la Maréchale ? Mais on ne se moque pas deux fois du même homme à propos de rien ; et pris de curiosité, il relut la lettre attentivement.

Frédéric distingua : “Malentendu… avoir fait fausse route… désillusions… Pauvres enfants que nous sommes !… Pareils à deux fleuves qui se rejoignent ! etc.”

Ce style contrastait avec le langage ordinaire de la lorette. Quel changement était donc survenu ?

Il garda longtemps les feuilles entre ses doigts. Elles sentaient l’iris ; et il y avait, dans la forme des caractères et l’espacement irrégulier des lignes, comme un désordre de toilette qui le troubla.

— “Pourquoi n’irais-je pas ?” se dit-il enfin. “Mais si Mme Arnoux le savait ? Ah ! qu’elle le sache ! Tant mieux et qu’elle en soit jalouse ça me vengera !”

IV

La Maréchale était prête et l’attendait.

— “C’est gentil, cela !” dit-elle, en fixant sur lui ses jolis yeux, à la fois tendres et gais.

Quand elle eut fait le nœud de sa capote, elle s’assit sur le divan et resta silencieuse.

— “Partons-nous ?” dit Frédéric.

Elle regarda la pendule.

— “Oh ! non ! pas avant une heure et demie”, comme si elle eût posé en elle-même cette limite à son incertitude.

Enfin l’heure ayant sonné :

— “Eh bien, andiamo, caro mio !”

Et elle donna un dernier tour à ses bandeaux, fit des recommandations à Delphine.

— “Madame revient dîner ?”

— “Pourquoi donc ? Nous dînerons ensemble quelque part, au café Anglais, où vous voudrez !”

— “Soit !”

Ses petits chiens jappaient autour d’elle.

— “On peut les emmener, n’est-ce pas ?”

Frédéric les porta, lui-même, jusqu’à la voiture. C’était une berline de louage avec deux chevaux de poste et un postillon ; il avait mis sur le siège de derrière son domestique. La Maréchale parut satisfaite de ses prévenances ; puis, dès qu’elle fut assise, lui demanda s’il avait été chez Arnoux, dernièrement.

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CHAPITRE 4

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— “Moi, je l’ai rencontré avant-hier, il serait même venu aujourd’hui. Mais il a toutes sortes d’embarras, encore un procès, je ne sais quoi. Quel drôle d’homme !”

— “Oui ! très drôle !”

Frédéric ajouta d’un air indifférent :

— “A propos, voyez-vous toujours… comment donc l’appelez-vous ?… cet ancien chanteur…. Delmar ?”

Elle répliqua sèchement :

— “Non ! c’est fini.”

Ainsi, leur rupture était certaine. Frédéric en conçut de l’espoir.

Ils descendirent au pas le quartier Bréda ; les rues, à cause du dimanche, étaient désertes, et des figures de bourgeois apparaissaient derrière des fenêtres. La voiture prit un train plus rapide ; le bruit des roues faisait se retourner les passants, le cuir de la capote rabattue brillait, le domestique se cambrait la taille, et les deux havanais l'un près de l'autre semblaient deux manchons d'hermine, posés sur les coussins. Frédéric se laissait aller au bercement des soupentes. La Maréchale tournait la tête, à droite et à gauche, en souriant.

Son chapeau de paille nacrée avait une garniture de dentelle noire. Le capuchon de son burnous flottait au vent ; et elle s'abritait du soleil, sous une ombrelle de satin lilas, pointue par le haut comme une pagode.

— "Quels amours de petits doigts !" dit Frédéric, en lui prenant doucement l'autre main, la gauche ornée d'un bracelet d'or, en forme de gourmette. "Tiens, c'est mignon ; d'où cela vient-il ?"

— "Oh ! il y a longtemps que je l'ai", dit la Maréchale.

Le jeune homme n'objecta rien à cette réponse hypocrite. Il aima mieux "profiter de la circonstance" . Et, lui tenant toujours le poignet, il appuya dessus ses lèvres. entre le gant et la manchette.

— "Finissez, on va nous voir !"

— "Bah ! qu'est-ce que cela fait !"

Après la place de la Concorde, ils prirent par le quai de la Conférence et le quai de Billy, où l'on remarque un cèdre dans un jardin. Rosanette croyait le Liban situé en Chine ; elle rit elle-même de son ignorance et pria Frédéric de lui donner des leçons de géographie. Puis, laissant à droite le Trocadéro ils traversèrent le pont d'Iéna, et s'arrêtèrent enfin, au milieu du Champ de Mars, près des autres voitures, déjà rangées dans l'Hippodrome.

Les tertres de gazon étaient couverts de menu peuple. On apercevait des curieux sur le balcon de l'Ecole Militaire ; et les deux pavillons en dehors du pesage, les deux tribunes comprises dans son enceinte, et une troisième devant celle du Roi se trouvaient remplies d'une foule en toilette qui témoignait, par son maintien, de la révérence pour ce divertissement encore nouveau. Le public des courses, plus spécial dans ce temps-là, avait un aspect moins vulgaire ; c'était l'époque des sous-pieds, des collets de velours et des gants blancs. Les femmes, vêtues de couleurs brillantes, portaient des robes à taille longue, et assises sur les gradins des estrades, elles faisaient comme de grands massifs de fleurs, tachetés de noir, çà et là, par les sombres costumes des hommes. Mais tous les regards se tournaient vers le célèbre Algérien Bou-Maza, qui se tenait impassible, entre deux officiers d'état-major, dans une des tribunes particulières. Celle du Jockey — Club contenait exclusivement des messieurs graves.

Les plus enthousiastes s'étaient placés, en bas, contre la piste, défendue par deux lignes de bâtons supportant des cordes ; dans l'ovale immense que décrivait cette allée, des marchands de coco agitaient leur crécelle, d'autres vendaient le programme des courses, d'autres criaient des cigares, un vaste bourdonnement s'élevait ; les gardes municipaux passaient et repassaient ; une cloche, suspendue à un poteau couvert de chiffres, tinta. Cinq chevaux parurent, et on rentra dans les tribunes.

Cependant, de gros nuages effleuraient de leurs volutes la cime des ormes, en face. Rosanette avait peur de la pluie.

— “J'ai des riflards”, dit Frédéric, “et tout ce qu'il faut pour se distraire”, ajouta-t-il en soulevant le coffre, où il y avait des provisions de bouche dans un panier.

— “Bravo ! nous nous comprenons !”

— “Et on se comprendra encore mieux, n'est-ce pas ?”

— “Cela se pourrait !” fit-elle en rougissant.

Les jockeys, en casaque de soie, tâchaient d'aligner leurs chevaux et les retenaient à deux mains. Quelqu'un abaissa un drapeau rouge. Alors, tous les cinq, se penchant sur les crinières, partirent. Ils restèrent d'abord serrés en une seule masse, bientôt elle s'allongea, se coupa ; celui qui portait la casaque jaune, au milieu du premier tour, faillit tomber longtemps il y eut de l'incertitude entre Filly et Tibi puis Tom Pouce parut en tête ; mais Culbstick, en arrière depuis le départ, les rejoignit et arriva premier, battant Sir Charles de deux longueurs ; ce fut une surprise ; on criait ; les baraques de planches vibraient sous les trépignements.

— “Nous nous amusons !” dit la Maréchale. “Je t'aime, mon chéri !”

Frédéric ne douta plus de son bonheur ; ce dernier mot de Rosanette le confirmait.

A cent pas de lui, dans un cabriolet milord, une dame parut. Elle se penchait en dehors de la portière, puis se Frédéric ne pouvait distinguer sa figure. Un soupçon le renfonçait vivement ; cela recommença plusieurs fois, saisit, il lui sembla que c'était Mme Arnoux. Impossible, cependant ! Pourquoi serait-elle venue ?

Il descendit de voiture, sous prétexte de flâner au pesage.

— “Vous n'êtes guère galant !” dit Rosanette.

Il n'écouta rien et s'avança. Le milord, tournant bride, se mit au trot.

Frédéric, au même moment ; fut happé par Cisy.

— “Bonjour, cher ! comment allez-vous ? Hussonnet est là-bas ! Ecoutez donc ?”

Frédéric tâchait de se dégager pour rejoindre le milord. La Maréchale lui faisait signe de retourner près d'elle. Cisy l'aperçut, et voulait obstinément lui dire bonjour.

Depuis que le deuil de sa grand-mère était fini, il réalisait son idéal, parvenait à avoir du cachet. Gilet écossais, habit court, larges bouffettes sur l’escarpin et carte d’entrée dans la ganse du chapeau, rien ne manquait effectivement à ce qu’il appelait lui-même son “chic”, un chic anglomane et mousquetaire. Il commença par se plaindre du Champ de Mars, turf exécrable, parla ensuite des courses de Chantilly et des farces qu’on y faisait, jura qu’il pouvait boire douze verres de vin de Champagne pendant les douze coups de minuit, proposa à la Maréchale de parier, caressait doucement ses deux bichons ; et de l’autre coude s’appuyant sur la portière, il continuait à débiter des sottises, le pommeau de son stick dans la bouche, les jambes écartées, les reins tendus. Frédéric, à côté de lui, fumait, tout en cherchant à découvrir ce que le milord était devenu.

La cloche ayant tinté, Cisy s’en alla, au grand plaisir de Rosanette, qu’il ennuyait beaucoup, disait-elle.

La seconde épreuve n’eut rien de particulier, la troisième non plus, sauf un homme qu’on emporta sur un brancard. La quatrième, où huit chevaux disputèrent le prix de la ville, fut plus intéressante.

Les spectateurs des tribunes avaient grimpé sur les bancs. Les autres, debout dans les voitures, suivaient avec des lorgnettes à la main l’évolution des jockeys ; on les voyait filer comme des taches rouges, jaunes, blanches et bleues sur toute la longueur de la foule, qui bordait le tour de l’Hippodrome. De loin, leur vitesse n’avait pas l’air excessive ; à l’autre bout du Champ de Mars, ils semblaient même se ralentir, et ne plus avancer que par une sorte de glissement, où les ventres des chevaux touchaient la terre sans que leurs jambes étendues pliassent. Mais, revenant bien vite, ils grandissaient ; leur passage coupait le vent, le sol tremblait, les cailloux volaient ; l’air, s’engouffrant dans les casaques des jockeys, les faisait palpiter comme des voiles ; à grands coups de cravache, ils fouaillaient leurs bêtes pour atteindre le poteau, c’était le but. On enlevait les chiffres. un autre était hissé ; et, au milieu des applaudissements, le cheval victorieux se traînait jusqu’au pesage, tout couvert de sueur, les genoux raidis, l’encolure basse, tandis que son cavalier, comme agonisant sur sa selle, se tenait les côtes.

Une contestation retarda le dernier départ. La foule qui s’ennuyait se répandit. Des groupes d’hommes causaient au bas des tribunes. Les propos étaient libres ; des femmes du monde partirent, scandalisées par le voisinage des lorettes.

Il y avait aussi des illustrations de bals publics, des comédiennes du boulevard ; — et ce n’était pas les plus belles qui recevaient le plus d’hommages. La vieille Georgine Aubert, celle qu’un vaudevilliste appelait le Louis XI de la prostitution, horriblement maquillée et poussant de temps à autre une espèce de rire pareil à un grognement, restait tout étendue dans sa longue calèche, sous une palatine de martre comme en plein hiver. Mme de Remoussot, mise à la mode par son procès, trônait sur le siège d'un break en compagnie d'Américains ; et Thérèse Bachelu, avec son air de vierge gothique, emplissait de ses douze falbalas l'intérieur d'un escargot qui avait, à la place du tablier, une jardinière pleine de roses. La Maréchale fut jalouse de ces gloires ; pour qu'on la remarquât, elle se mit à faire de grands gestes et à parler très haut.

Des gentlemen la reconnurent, lui envoyèrent des saluts. Elle y répondait en disant leurs noms à Frédéric. C'étaient tous comtes, vicomtes, ducs et marquis ; et il se rengorgeait, car tous les yeux exprimaient un certain respect pour sa bonne fortune.

Cisy n'avait pas l'air moins heureux dans le cercle d'hommes mûrs qui l'entourait. Ils souriaient du haut de leurs cravates, comme se moquant de lui ; enfin il tapa dans la main du plus vieux et s'avança vers la Maréchale.

Elle mangeait avec une gloutonnerie affectée une tranche de foie gras ; Frédéric, par obéissance, l'imitait, en tenant une bouteille de vin sur ses genoux.

Le milord reparut, c'était Mme Arnoux. Elle pâlit extraordinairement.

— “Donne-moi du champagne !” dit Rosanette.

Et, levant le plus haut possible son verre rempli, elle s'écria :

— “Ohé là-bas ! les femmes honnêtes, l'épouse de mon protecteur, ohé !”

Des rires éclatèrent autour d'elle, le milord disparut.

Frédéric la tirait par sa robe, il allait s'emporter. Mais Cisy était là, dans la même attitude que tout à l'heure ; et, avec un surcroît d'aplomb, il invita Rosanette à dîner pour le soir même.

— “Impossible !” répondit-elle. “Nous allons ensemble au café Anglais.”

Frédéric, comme s'il n'eût rien entendu, demeura muet ; et Cisy quitta la Maréchale d'un air désappointé.

Tandis qu'il lui parlait, debout contre la portière de droite, Hussonnet était survenu du côté gauche, et, relevant ce mot de café Anglais :

— “C'est un joli établissement ! si l'on y cassait une croûte, hein ?”

— “Comme vous voudrez”, dit Frédéric, qui, affaissé dans le coin de la berline, regardait à l'horizon le milord disparaître, sentant qu'une chose irréparable venait de se faire et qu'il avait perdu son grand amour. Et l'autre était là, près de lui, l'amour joyeux et facile ! Mais, lassé, plein de désirs contradictoires et ne sachant même plus ce qu'il voulait, il éprouvait une tristesse démesurée, une envie de mourir.

Un grand bruit de pas et de voix lui fit relever la tête les gamins, enjambant les cordes de la piste, venaient regarder les tribunes ; on s'en allait. Quelques gouttes de pluie tombèrent. L'embarras des voitures augmenta. Hussonnet était perdu.

— “Eh bien, tant mieux !” dit Frédéric.

— “On préfère être seul ?” reprit la Maréchale, en posant la main sur la sienne.

Alors passa devant eux, avec des miroitements de cuivre et d’acier, un splendide landau attelé de quatre chevaux, conduits à la Daumont par deux jockeys en veste de velours, à crépines d’or. Mme Dambreuse était près de son mari, Martinon sur l’autre banquette en face tous les trois avaient des figures étonnées.

— “Ils m’ont reconnu !” se dit Frédéric.

Rosanette voulut qu’on arrêtât, pour mieux voir le défilé. Mme Arnoux pouvait reparaître. Il cria au postillon :

— “Va donc ! va donc ! en avant !”

Et la berline se lança vers les Champs-Elysées au milieu des autres voitures, calèches, briskas, wursts, tandems, tilburys, dog-carts, tapissières à rideaux de cuir où chantaient des ouvriers en goguette, demi-fortune que dirigeaient avec prudence des pères de famille eux-mêmes. Dans des victorias bourrées de monde, quelque garçon, assis sur les pieds des autres, laissait pendre en dehors ses deux jambes. De grands coupés à siège de drap promenaient des douairières qui sommeillaient ; ou bien un stepper magnifique passait, emportant une chaise, simple et coquette comme l’habit noir d’un dandy. L’averse cependant redoublait. On tirait les parapluies, les parasols, les mackintosh ; on se criait de loin : “Bonjour ! — Ça va bien ? — Oui ! — Non ! — À tantôt !” et les figures se succédaient avec une vitesse d’ombres chinoises. Frédéric et Rosanette ne se parlaient pas, éprouvant une sorte d’hébétude à voir auprès d’eux continuellement, toutes ces roues tourner.

Par moments, les files de voitures, trop pressées, s’arrêtaient toutes à la fois sur plusieurs lignes. Alors, on restait les uns près des autres, et l’on s’examinait. Du bord des panneaux armoriés, des regards indifférents tombaient sur la foule ; des yeux pleins d’envie brillaient au fond des fiacres ; des sourires de dénigrement répondaient aux ports de tête orgueilleux ; des bouches grandes ouvertes exprimaient des admirations imbéciles ; et, çà et là, quelque flâneur, au milieu de la voie, se rejetait en arrière d’un bond pour éviter un cavalier qui galopait entre les voitures et parvenait à en sortir. Puis tout se remettait en mouvement ; les cochers lâchaient les rênes, abaissaient leurs longs fouets ; les chevaux, animés, secouant leur gourmette, jetaient de l’écume autour d’eux ; et les croupes et les harnais humides fumaient, dans la vapeur d’eau que le soleil couchant traversait. Passant sous l’Arc de triomphe, il allongeait à hauteur d’homme une lumière roussâtre, qui faisait étinceler les moyeux des roues, les poignées des portières, le bout des timons, les anneaux des sellettes ; et, sur les deux côtés de la grande avenue, — pareille à un fleuve où ondulaient des crinières, des vêtements, des têtes humaines — les arbres tout reluisants de pluie se dressaient, comme deux murailles vertes. Le bleu du ciel, au-dessus, reparaissant à de certaines places, avait des douceurs de satin.

Alors, Frédéric se rappela les jours déjà loin où il enviait l'inexprimable bonheur de se trouver dans une de ces voitures, à côté d'une de ces femmes. Il le possédait, ce bonheur-là, et n'en était pas plus joyeux.

La pluie avait fini de tomber. Les passants, réfugiés entre les colonnes du Garde-Meubles, s'en allaient. Des promeneurs, dans la rue Royale, remontaient vers le boulevard. Devant l'hôtel des Affaires Etrangères, une file de badauds stationnait sur les marches.

A la hauteur des Bains-Chinois, comme il y avait des trous dans le pavé, la berline se ralentit. Un homme en paletot noisette marchait au bord du trottoir. Une éclaboussure, jaillissant de dessous les ressorts, s'étala dans son dos. L'homme se retourna, furieux. Frédéric devint pâle ; il avait reconnu Deslauriers.

A la porte du café Anglais, il renvoya la voiture. Rosanette était montée devant lui, pendant qu'il payait le postillon.

Il la retrouva dans l'escalier, causant avec un monsieur. Frédéric prit son bras. Mais, au milieu du corridor, un deuxième seigneur l'arrêta.

— “Va toujours !” dit-elle, “je suis à toi !”

Et il entra seul dans le cabinet. Par les deux fenêtres ouvertes, on apercevait du monde aux croisées des autres maisons, vis-à-vis. De larges moires frissonnaient sur l'asphalte qui séchait, et un magnolia posé au bord du balcon embaumait l'appartement. Ce parfum et cette fraîcheur détendirent ses nerfs ; il s'affaissa sur le divan rouge, au-dessous de la glace.

La Maréchale revint ; et, le baisant au front :

— “On a des chagrins, pauvre mimi ?”

— “Peut-être !” répliqua-t-il.

— “Tu n'es pas le seul, va !” ce qui voulait dire : “Oublions chacun les nôtres dans une félicité commune !”

Puis elle posa un pétale de fleur entre ses lèvres, et la lui tendit à becqueter. Ce mouvement, d'une grâce et presque d'une mansuétude lascive, attendrit Frédéric.

— “Pourquoi me fais-tu de la peine ?” dit-il, en songeant à Mme Arnoux.

— “Moi, de la peine ?”

Et, debout devant lui, elle le regardait, les cils rapprochés et les deux mains sur les épaules.

Toute sa vertu, toute sa rancune sombra dans une lâcheté sans fond.

Il reprit :

— “Puisque tu ne veux pas m’aimer !” en l’attirant sur ses genoux.

Elle se laissait faire ; il lui entourait la taille à deux bras ; le pétillement de sa robe de soie l’enflammait.

— “Où sont-ils ?” dit la voix d’Hussonnet dans le corridor.

La Maréchale se leva brusquement, et alla se mettre à l’autre bout du cabinet, tournant le dos à la porte.

Elle demanda des huîtres ; et ils s’attablèrent.

Hussonnet ne fut pas drôle. A force d’écrire quotidiennement sur toutes sortes de sujets, de lire beaucoup de journaux, d’entendre beaucoup de discussions et d’émettre des paradoxes pour éblouir, il avait fini par perdre la notion exacte des choses, s’aveuglant lui-même avec ses faibles pétards. Les embarras d’une vie légère autrefois, mais à présent difficile, l’entretenaient dans une agitation perpétuelle ; et son impuissance, qu’il ne voulait pas s’avouer, le rendait hargneux, sarcastique. A propos d’Ozai, un ballet nouveau, il fit une sortie à fond contre la danse, et, à propos de la danse, contre l’Opéra ; puis, à propos de l’Opéra, contre les Italiens, remplacés, maintenant, par une troupe d’acteurs espagnols, “comme si l’on n’était pas rassasié des Castilles !” Frédéric fut choqué dans son amour romantique de l’Espagne ; et, afin de rompre la conversation, il s’informa du Collège de France, d’où l’on venait d’exclure Edgar Quinet et Mickiewicz. Mais Hussonnet, admirateur de M. De Maistre, se déclara pour l’Autorité et le Spiritualisme. Il doutait, cependant, des faits les mieux prouvés, niait l’histoire, et contestait les choses les plus positives, jusqu’à s’écrier au mot géométrie : “Quelle blague que la géométrie !” Le tout entremêlé d’imitations d’acteurs. Sainville était particulièrement son modèle.

Ces calembredaines assommaient Frédéric. Dans un mouvement d’impatience, il attrapa, avec sa botte, un des bichons sous la table.

Tous deux se mirent à aboyer d’une façon odieuse.

— “Vous devriez les faire reconduire !” dit-il brusquement.

Rosanette n’avait confiance en personne.

Alors, il se tourna vers le bohème.

— “Voyons, Hussonnet, dévouez-vous !”

— “Oh ! oui, mon petit ! Ce serait bien aimable !”

Hussonnet s’en alla, sans se faire prier.

De quelle manière payait-on sa complaisance ? Frédéric n’y pensa pas. Il commençait même à se réjouir du tête-à-tête, lorsqu’un garçon entra.

— “Madame, quelqu’un vous demande.”

— “Comment ! encore ?”

— “Il faut pourtant que je voie !” dit Rosanette.

Il en avait soif, besoin. Cette disparition lui semblait une forfaiture, presque une grossièreté. Que voulait-elle donc ? n’était-ce pas assez d’avoir outragé Mme Arnoux ? Tant pis pour celle-là, du reste ! Maintenant, il haïssait toutes les femmes ; et des pleurs l’étouffaient, car son amour était méconnu et sa concupiscence trompée.

La Maréchale rentra, et, lui présentant Cisy :

— “J’ai invité monsieur. J’ai bien fait, n’est-ce pas ?”

— “Comment donc ! certainement !” Frédéric, avec un sourire de supplicié, fit signe au gentilhomme de s’asseoir.

La Maréchale se mit à parcourir la carte, en s’arrêtant aux noms bizarres.

— “Si nous mangions, je suppose, un turban de lapins à la Richelieu et un pudding à la d’Orléans ?”

— “Oh ! pas d’Orléans !” s’écria Cisy, lequel était légitimiste et crut faire un mot.

— " Aimez-vous mieux un turbot à la Chambord reprit-elle.

Cette politesse choqua Frédéric.

La Maréchale se décida pour un simple tournedos, des écrevisses, des truffes, une salade d’ananas, des sorbets à la vanille.

— “Nous verrons ensuite. Allez toujours. Ah ! j’oubliais ! Apportez-moi un saucisson ! pas à l’ail !”

Et elle appelait le garçon “jeune homme”, frappait son verre avec son couteau, jetait au plafond la mie de son pain. Elle voulut boire tout de suite du vin de Bourgogne. — “On n’en prend pas dès le commencement”, dit Frédéric.

Cela se faisait quelquefois, suivant le Vicomte.

— “Eh non ! Jamais !”

— “Si fait, je vous assure !”

— “Ah ! tu vois !”

Le regard dont elle accompagna cette phrase signifiait :

“C’est un homme riche, celui-là, écoute-le !”

Cependant, la porte s’ouvrait à chaque minute, les garçons glapissaient, et, sur un infernal piano, dans le cabinet à côté, quelqu’un tapait une valse. Puis les courses amenèrent à parler d’équitation et des deux systèmes rivaux. Cisy défendait Baucher, Frédéric le comte d’Aure, quand Rosanette haussa les épaules.

— “Assez, mon Dieu ! il s’y connaît mieux que toi, va !”

Elle mordait dans une grenade, le coude posé sur la table ; les bougies du candélabre devant elle tremblaient au vent, cette lumière blanche pénétrait sa peau de tons nacrés, mettait du rose à ses paupières, faisait briller les globes de ses yeux ; la rougeur du fruit se confondait avec la pourpre de ses lèvres, ses narines minces battaient ; et toute sa personne avait quelque chose d'insolent, d'ivre et de noyé qui exaspérait Frédéric, et pourtant lui jetait au cœur des désirs fous.

Puis elle demanda, d'une voix calme, à qui appartenait ce grand landau avec une livrée marron.

— “A la comtesse Dambreuse”, répliqua Cisy.

— “Ils sont très riches, n'est-ce pas ?”

— “Oh ! très riches ! bien que Mme Dambreuse, qui est, tout simplement, une demoiselle Boutron, la fille d'un préfet, ait une fortune médiocre.”

Son mari, au contraire, devait recueillir plusieurs héritages, Cisy les énuméra ; fréquentant les Dambreuse, il savait leur histoire.

Frédéric, pour lui être désagréable, s'entêta à le contredire. Il soutint que Mme Dambreuse s'appelait de Boutron, certifiait sa noblesse.

— “N'importe ! je voudrais bien avoir son équipage dit la Maréchale, en se renversant sur le fauteuil.”

Et la manche de sa robe, glissant un peu, découvrit, à son poignet gauche, un bracelet orné de trois opales.

Frédéric l'aperçut.

Ils se considérèrent tous les trois, et rougirent.

La porte s'entrebâilla discrètement, le bord d'un chapeau parut, puis le profil d'Hussonnet.

— “Excusez, si je vous dérange, les amoureux !” Mais il s'arrêta, étonné de voir Cisy et de ce que Cisy avait pris sa place.

On apporta un autre couvert ; et, comme il avait grand faim, il empoignait au hasard, parmi les restes du dîner, de la viande dans un plat, un fruit dans une corbeille, buvait d'une main, se servait de l'autre, tout en racontant sa mission. Les deux toutous étaient reconduits. Rien de neuf au domicile. Il avait trouvé la cuisinière avec un soldat, histoire fausse, uniquement inventée pour produire de l'effet.

La Maréchale décrocha de la patère sa capote. Frédéric se précipita sur la sonnette en criant de loin au garçon :

— “Une voiture”

— “J'ai la mienne”, dit le Vicomte.

— “Mais, monsieur !”

— “Cependant, monsieur…”

Et ils se regardaient dans les prunelles, pâles tous les deux et les mains tremblantes.

Enfin, la Maréchale prit le bras de Cisy, et, en montrant le bohème attablé :

— “Soignez-le donc ! il s’étouffe. Je ne voudrais pas que son dévouement pour mes roquets le fît mourir !”

La porte retomba.

— “Eh bien ?” dit Hussonnet.

— “Eh bien, quoi ?”

— “Je croyais…”

— “Qu’est-ce que vous croyiez ?”

— “Est-ce que vous ne… ?”

Il compléta sa phrase par un geste.

“Eh non ! jamais de la vie !”

Hussonnet n’insista pas davantage.

Il avait eu un but en s’invitant à dîner. Son journal, qui ne s’appelait plus l’Art, mais le Flambard, avec cette épigraphe : “Canonniers, à vos pièces !” ne prospérant nullement, il avait envie de le transformer en une revue hebdomadaire, seul, sans le secours de Deslauriers. Il reparla de l’ancien projet, et exposa son plan nouveau.

Frédéric, ne comprenant pas sans doute, répondit par des choses vagues. Hussonnet empoigna plusieurs cigares sur la table, dit : “Adieu, mon bon”, et disparut.

Frédéric demanda la note. Elle était longue ; et le garçon, la serviette sous le bras, attendait son argent, quand un autre, un individu blafard qui ressemblait à Martinon, vint lui dire :

— “Faites excuse, on a oublié au comptoir de porter le fiacre.”

— “Quel fiacre ?”

— “Celui que ce monsieur a pris tantôt, pour les petits chiens.”

Et la figure du garçon s’allongea, comme s’il eût plaint le pauvre jeune homme. Frédéric eut envie de le gifler.

Il donna de pourboire les vingt francs qu’on lui rendait.

— “Merci, Monseigneur !” dit l’homme à la serviette, avec un grand salut.

Frédéric passa la journée du lendemain à ruminer sa colère et son humiliation. il se reprochait de n’avoir pas souffleté Cisy. Quant à la Maréchale, il se jura de ne plus la revoir ; d’autres aussi belles ne manquaient pas ; et, puisqu’il fallait de l’argent pour posséder ces femmes-là, il jouerait à la Bourse le prix de sa ferme, il serait riche, il écraserait de son luxe la Maréchale et tout le monde. Le soir venu, il s’étonna de n’avoir pas songé à Mme Arnoux.

— “Tant mieux ! à quoi bon ?”

Le surlendemain, dès huit heures, Pellerin vint lui faire visite. Il commença par des admirations sur le mobilier, des cajoleries. Puis, brusquement :

— “Vous étiez aux courses, dimanche ?”

— “Oui, hélas !”

Alors, le peintre déclama contre l’anatomie des chevaux anglais, vanta les chevaux de Géricault, les chevaux du Parthénon. “Rosanette était avec vous ?” Et il entama son éloge, adroitement.

La froideur de Frédéric le décontenança. Il ne savait comment en venir au portrait.

Sa première intention avait été de faire un Titien. Mais, peu à peu, la coloration variée de son modèle l’avait séduit ; et il avait travaillé franchement, accumulant pâte sur pâte et lumière sur lumière. Rosanette fut enchantée d’abord ; ses rendez-vous avec Delmar avaient interrompu les séances et laissé à Pellerin tout le temps de s’éblouir. Puis, l’admiration s’apaisant, il s’était demandé si sa peinture ne manquait point de grandeur. Il avait été revoir les Titien, avait compris la distance, reconnu sa faute ; et il s’était mis à repasser ses contours simplement. Ensuite il avait cherché, en les rongeant, à y perdre, à y mêler les tons de la tête et ceux des fonds ; et la figure avait pris de la consistance, les ombres de la vigueur ; tout paraissait plus ferme. Enfin la Maréchale était revenue. Elle s’était même permis des objections ; l’artiste, naturellement, avait persévéré. Après de grandes fureurs contre sa sottise, il s’était dit qu’elle pouvait avoir raison. Alors avait commencé l’ère des doutes, tiraillements de la pensée qui provoquent les crampes d’estomac, les insomnies, la fièvre, le dégoût de soi-même ; il avait eu le courage de faire des retouches, mais sans cœur et sentant que sa besogne était mauvaise.

Il se plaignit seulement d’avoir été refusé au Salon, puis reprocha à Frédéric de ne pas être venu voir le portrait de la Maréchale.

— “Je me moque bien de la Maréchale !”

Une déclaration pareille l’enhardit.

— “Croiriez-vous que cette bête-là n’en veut plus, maintenant ?”

Ce qu’il ne disait point, c’est qu’il avait réclamé d’elle mille écus. Or, la Maréchale s’était peu souciée de savoir qui payerait, et, préférant tirer d’Arnoux des choses plus urgentes, ne lui en avait même pas parlé.

— “Eh bien, et Arnoux ?” dit Frédéric.

Elle l’avait relancé vers lui. L’ancien marchand de tableaux n’avait que faire du portrait.

— “Il soutient que ça appartient à Rosanette.”

— “En effet, c’est à elle.”

— “Comment ! c’est elle qui m’envoie vers vous !” répliqua Pellerin.

S’il eût cru à l’excellence de son œuvre, il n’eût pas songé, peut-être, à l’exploiter. Mais une somme (et une somme considérable) serait un démenti à la critique, un raffermissement pour lui-même. Frédéric, afin de s’en délivrer, s’enquit de ses conditions, courtoisement.

L’extravagance du chiffre le révolta, il répondit :

— “Non, ah ! non !”

— “Vous êtes pourtant son amant, c’est vous qui m’avez fait la commande !”

— “J’ai été l’intermédiaire, permettez !”

— “Mais je ne peux pas rester avec ça sur les bras !”

L’artiste s’emportait.

— “Ah ! je ne vous croyais pas si cupide.”

— “Ni vous si avare ! Serviteur !”

Il venait de partir que Sénécal se présenta.

Frédéric, troublé, eut un mouvement d’inquiétude.

— “Qu’y a-t-il ?”

Sénécal conta son histoire.

— “Samedi, vers neuf heures, Mme Arnoux a reçu une lettre qui l’appelait à Paris ; comme personne, par hasard, ne se trouvait là pour aller à Creil chercher une voiture, elle avait envie de m’y faire aller moi-même. J’ai refusé, car ça ne rentre pas dans mes fonctions. Elle est partie, et revenue dimanche soir. Hier matin, Arnoux tombe à la fabrique. La Bordelaise s’est plainte. Je ne sais pas ce qui se passe entre eux, mais il a levé son amende devant tout le monde. Nous avons échangé des paroles vives. Bref, il m’a donné mon compte, et me voilà !”

Puis, détachant ses paroles :

— “Au reste, je ne me repens pas, j’ai fait mon devoir. N’importe, c’est à cause de vous.”

— “Comment ?” S’écria Frédéric, ayant peur que Sénécal ne l’eût deviné.

Sénécal n’avait rien deviné, car il reprit :

— " C’est-à-dire que, sans vous, j’aurais peut-être trouvé mieux.

Frédéric fut saisi d’une espèce de remords.

— “En quoi puis-je vous servir, maintenant ?” Sénécal demandait un emploi quelconque, une place.

— “Cela vous est facile. Vous connaissez tant de monde, M. Dambreuse entre autres, à ce que m’a dit Deslauriers.”

Ce rappel de Deslauriers fut désagréable à son ami. il ne se souciait guère de retourner chez les Dambreuse depuis la rencontre du Champ de Mars.

— “Je ne suis pas suffisamment intime dans la maison pour recommander quelqu’un.”

Le démocrate essuya ce refus stoïquement, et, après une minute de silence :

— “Tout cela, j’en suis sûr, vient de la Bordelaise et aussi de votre Mme Arnoux.”

Ce votre ôta du cœur de Frédéric le peu de bon vouloir qu’il gardait. Par délicatesse, cependant, il atteignit la clef de son secrétaire.

Sénécal le prévint.

— “Merci !”

Puis, oubliant ses misères, il parla des choses de la patrie, les croix d’honneur prodiguées à la fête du Roi, un changement de cabinet, les affaires Drouillard et Bénier, scandales de l’époque, déclama contre les bourgeois et prédit une révolution.

Un crid japonais suspendu contre le mur arrêta ses yeux. Il le prit, en essaya le manche, puis le rejeta sur le canapé, avec un air de dégoût.

— " Allons, adieu ! Il faut que j’aille à Notre-Dame de Lorette.

— “Tiens ! pourquoi ?”

— “C’est aujourd’hui le service anniversaire de Godefroy Cavaignac. Il est mort à l’œuvre, celui-là ! Mais tout n’est pas fini !… Qui sait ?”

Et Sénécal tendit sa main, bravement.

— “Nous ne nous reverrons peut-être jamais ! adieu !” Cet adieu, répété deux fois, son froncement de sourcils en contemplant le poignard, sa résignation et son air solennel, surtout, firent rêver Frédéric, qui bientôt n’y pensa plus.

Dans la même semaine, son notaire du Havre lui envoya le prix de sa ferme, cent soixante-quatorze mille francs. Il en fit deux parts, plaça la première sur l’Etat, et alla porter la seconde chez un agent de change pour la risquer à la Bourse.

Il mangeait dans les cabarets à la mode, fréquentait les théâtres et tâchait de se distraire, quand Hussonnet lui adressa une lettre, où il narrait gaiement que la Maréchale, dès le lendemain des courses, avait congédié Cisy. Frédéric en fut heureux, sans chercher pourquoi le bohème lui apprenait cette aventure.

Le hasard voulut qu’il rencontrât Cisy, trois jours après. Le gentilhomme fit bonne contenance, et l’invita même à dîner pour le mercredi suivant.

Frédéric, le matin de ce jour-là, reçut une notification d’huissier, où M. Charles-Jean-Baptiste Oudry lui apprenait qu’aux termes d’un jugement du tribunal, il s’était rendu acquéreur d’une propriété sise à Belleville appartenant au sieur Jacques Arnoux, et qu’il était prêt à payer les deux cent vingt-trois mille francs montant du prix de la vente. Mais il résultait du même acte que, la somme des hypothèques dont l’immeuble était grevé dépassant le prix de l’acquisition, la créance de Frédéric se trouvait complètement perdue.

Tout le mal venait de n’avoir pas renouvelé en temps utile une inscription hypothécaire. Arnoux s’était chargé de cette démarche, et l’avait ensuite oubliée. Frédéric s’emporta contre lui, et, quand sa colère fut passée :

— “Eh bien après…. quoi ? si cela peut le sauver, tant mieux ! je n’en mourrai pas ! n’y pensons plus !”

Mais, en remuant ses paperasses sur sa table, il rencontra la lettre

Mais, en remuant ses paperasses sur sa table, il rencontra la lettre d’Hussonnet, et aperçut le post-scriptum, qu’il n’avait point remarqué la première fois. Le bohème demandait cinq mille francs, tout juste, pour mettre l’affaire du journal en train.

— “Ah ! celui-là m’embête !”

Et il le refusa brutalement dans un billet laconique. Après quoi, il s’habilla pour se rendre à la Maison d’or.

Cisy présenta ses convives, en commençant par le plus respectable, un gros monsieur à cheveux blancs :

— “Le marquis Gilbert des Aulnays, mon parrain. M. Anselme de Forchambeaux”, dit-il ensuite (c’était un jeune homme blond et fluet, déjà chauve) ; puis, désignant un quadragénaire d’allures simples : “Joseph Boffreu, mon cousin ; et voici mon ancien professeur M. Vezou”, personnage moitié charretier, moitié séminariste, avec de gros favoris et une longue redingote boutonnée dans le bas par un seul bouton, de manière à faire châle sur la poitrine.

Cisy attendait encore quelqu’un, le baron de Comaing, “qui peut-être viendra, ce n’est pas sûr” . Il sortait à chaque minute, paraissait inquiet ; enfin, à huit heures, on passa dans une salle éclairée magnifiquement et trop spacieuse pour le nombre des convives. Cisy l’avait choisie par pompe, tout exprès.

Un surtout de vermeil, chargé de fleurs et de fruits, occupait le milieu de la table, couverte de plats d’argent, suivant la vieille mode française ; des raviers, pleins de salaisons et d’épices, formaient bordure tout autour ; des cruches de vin rosat frappé de glace se dressaient de distance en distance ; cinq verres de hauteur différente étaient alignés devant chaque assiette avec des choses dont on ne savait pas l’usage, mille ustensiles de bouche ingénieux ; — et il y avait, rien que pour le premier service : une hure d’esturgeon mouillée de champagne, un jambon d’York au tokay, des grives au gratin, des cailles rôties, un vol-au-vent Béchamel, un sauté de perdrix rouges, et, aux deux bouts de tout cela, des effilés de Pommes de terre qui étaient mêlés à des truffes. Un lustre et des girandoles illuminaient l’appartement, tendu de damas rouge. Quatre domestiques en habit noir se tenaient derrière les fauteuils de maroquin. A ce spectacle, les convives se récrièrent, le Précepteur surtout.

— “Notre amphitryon, ma parole, a fait de véritables folies ! C’est trop beau !”

— “Ça ?” dit le vicomte de Cisy, “allons donc !”

Et, dès la première cuillerée :

— “Eh bien, mon vieux des Aulnays, avez-vous été au Palais-Royal, voir Père et Portier ?”

— “Tu sais bien que je n’ai pas le temps !” répliqua le marquis.

Ses matinées étaient prises par un cours d’arboriculture, ses soirées par le Cercle agricole, et toutes ses après-midi par des études dans les fabriques d’instruments aratoires. Habitant la Saintonge les trois quarts de l’année, il profitait de ses voyages dans la Capitale pour s’instruire ; et son chapeau à larges bords, posé sur une console, était plein de brochures.

Mais Cisy, s’apercevant que M. de Forchambeaux refusait du vin :

— “Buvez donc, saprelotte ! Vous n’êtes pas crâne pour votre dernier repas de garçon !”

A ce mot, tous s’inclinèrent, on le congratulait.

— “Et la jeune personne”, dit le Précepteur, “est charmante, j’en suis sûr ?”

“Parbleu !” s’écria Cisy. “N’importe, il a tort c’est si bête, le mariage !”

— " Tu parles légèrement, mon ami répliqua M. des Aulnays, tandis qu’une larme roulait dans ses yeux, au souvenir de sa défunte.

Et Forchambeaux répéta plusieurs fois de suite, en ricanant :

— “Vous y viendrez vous-même, vous y viendrez !” Cisy protesta. Il aimait mieux se divertir, “être régence” . Il voulait apprendre la savate, pour visiter les tapis-francs de la Cité, comme le prince Rodolphe des Mystères de Paris tira de sa poche un brûle-gueule, rudoyait les domestiques, buvait extrêmement ; et, afin de donner de lui bonne opinion, dénigrait tous les plats.

Il renvoya même les truffes, et le Précepteur, qui s’en délectait, dit par bassesse :

— “Cela ne vaut pas les œufs à la neige de madame votre grand-mère”

Puis il se remit à causer avec son voisin l’agronome, lequel trouvait au séjour de la campagne beaucoup d’avantages, ne serait-ce que de pouvoir élever ses filles dans des goûts simples. Le Précepteur applaudissait à ses idées et le flagornait, lui supposant de l’influence sur son élève, dont il désirait secrètement être l’homme d’affaires.

Frédéric était venu plein d’humeur contre Cisy ; sa sottise l’avait désarmé. Mais ses gestes, sa figure, toute sa personne lui rappelant le dîner du café Anglais, l’agaçait de plus en plus ; et il écoutait les remarques désobligeantes que faisait à demi-voix le cousin Joseph, un brave garçon sans fortune, amateur de chasse, et boursier. Cisy, par manière de rire, l’appela “voleur” plusieurs fois ; puis, tout à coup :

— “Ah ! le baron !”

Alors entra un gaillard de trente ans, qui avait quelque chose de rude dans la physionomie, de souple dans les membres, le chapeau sur l’oreille, et une fleur à la boutonnière. C’était l’idéal du Vicomte. Il fut ravi de le posséder ; et, sa présence l’excitant, il tenta même un calembour, car il dit, comme on passait un coq de bruyère :

— “Voilà le meilleur des caractères de La Bruyère”

Ensuite, il adressa à M. de Comaing une foule de questions sur des personnes inconnues à la société ; puis, comme saisi d’une idée :

— “Dites donc ! avez-vous pensé à moi ?”

L’autre haussa les épaules.

— “Vous n’avez pas l’âge, mon petiot ! Impossible”

Cisy l’avait prié de le faire admettre à son club. Mais le baron, ayant sans doute pitié de son amour-propre :

— “Ah ! j’oubliais ! Mille félicitations pour votre pari, mon cher !”

— “Quel pari ?”

— “Celui que vous avez fait, aux courses, d’aller le soir même chez cette dame.”

Frédéric éprouva comme la sensation d’un coup de fouet. Il fut calmé tout de suite, par la figure décontenancée de Cisy.

En effet, la Maréchale, dès le lendemain, en était aux regrets, quand Arnoux, son premier amant, son homme, s’était présenté ce jour-là même. Tous deux avaient fait comprendre au Vicomte qu’il “gênait”, et on l’avait flanqué dehors, avec peu de cérémonie.

Il eut l’air de ne pas entendre. Le Baron ajouta :

— “Que devient-elle, cette brave Rose ?… a-t-elle toujours d’aussi jolies jambes ?” prouvant par ce mot qu’il la connaissait intimement.

Frédéric fut contrarié de la découverte.

— “Il n’y a pas de quoi rougir”, reprit le Baron “c’est une bonne affaire !”

Cisy claqua de la langue.

— “Peuh ! pas si bonne !”

— “Ah !”

— “Mon Dieu, oui ! D’abord, moi, je ne lui trouve rien d’extraordinaire, et puis on en récolte de pareilles tant qu’on veut, car enfin… elle est à vendre !”

— “Pas pour tout le monde !” reprit aigrement Frédéric.

— “il se croit différent des autres !” répliqua Cisy, “quelle farce !”

Et un rire parcourut la table.

Frédéric sentait les battements de son cœur l’étouffer. Il avala deux verres d’eau, coup sur coup.

Mais le Baron avait gardé bon souvenir de Rosanette.

— “Est-ce qu’elle est toujours avec un certain Arnoux ?”

— “Je n’en sais rien”, dit Cisy. “Je ne connais pas ce monsieur !”

Il avança, néanmoins, que c’était une manière d’escroc.

— “Un moment !”, s’écria Frédéric.

— “Cependant, la chose est certaine ! Il a même eu un procès.”

— “Ce n’est pas vrai”

Frédéric se mit à défendre Arnoux. Il garantissait sa probité, finissait par y croire, inventait des chiffres, des preuves. Le Vicomte, plein de rancune, et qui était gris d’ailleurs, s’entêta dans ses assertions, si bien que Frédéric lui dit gravement :

— “Est-ce pour m’offenser, monsieur ?”

Et il le regardait, avec des prunelles ardentes comme son cigare.

— “Oh ! pas du tout ! je vous accorde même qu’il a quelque chose de très bien : sa femme.”

— “Vous la connaissez ?”

— “Parbleu ! Sophie Arnoux, tout le monde connaît ça !”

— “Vous dites ?”

Cisy, qui s’était levé, répéta en balbutiant :

— “Tout le monde connaît ça !”

— “Taisez-vous ! Ce ne sont pas celles-là que vous fréquentez !”

— “Je m’en flatte.”

Frédéric lui lança son assiette au visage.

Elle passa comme un éclair par-dessus la table, renversa deux bouteilles, démolit un compotier, et, se brisant contre le surtout en trois morceaux, frappa le ventre du Vicomte.

Tous se levèrent pour le retenir. Il se débattait, en criant, pris d’une sorte de frénésie ; M. des Aulnays répétait :

— “Calmez-vous ! voyons ! cher enfant !”

— “Mais c’est épouvantable !” vociférait le Précepteur.

Forchambeaux, livide comme les prunes, tremblait Joseph riait aux éclats ; les garçons épongeaient le vin, ramassaient par terre les débris ; et le Baron alla fermer la fenêtre, car le tapage, malgré le bruit des voitures, aurait pu s’entendre du boulevard.

Comme tout le monde, au moment où l’assiette avait été lancée, parlait à la fois, il fut impossible de découvrir la raison de cette offense, si c’était à cause d’Arnoux, de Mme Arnoux, de Rosanette ou d’un autre. Ce qu’il y avait de certain, c’était la brutalité inqualifiable de Frédéric ; il se refusa positivement à en témoigner le moindre regret.

M. des Aulnays tâcha de l’adoucir, le cousin Joseph, le Précepteur, Forchambeaux lui-même. Le Baron pendant ce temps-là, réconfortait Cisy, qui, cédant à une faiblesse nerveuse, versait des larmes. Frédéric, au contraire, s’irritait de plus en plus ; et l’on serait resté là jusqu’au jour si le Baron n’avait dit pour en finir :

— “Le Vicomte, Monsieur, enverra demain chez vous ses témoins.”

— “Votre heure ?”

— “A midi, s’il vous plaît.”

— “Parfaitement, Monsieur.”

Frédéric, une fois dehors, respira à pleins poumons. Depuis trop longtemps, il contenait son cœur. Il venait de le satisfaire enfin ; il éprouvait comme un orgueil de virilité, une surabondance de forces intimes qui l’enivraient. Il avait besoin de deux témoins. Le premier auquel il songea fut Regimbart ; et il se dirigea tout de suite vers un estaminet de la rue Saint-Denis. La devanture était close. Mais de la lumière brillait à un carreau, au-dessus de la porte. Elle s’ouvrit, et il entra, en se courbant très bas sous l’auvent.

Une chandelle, au bord du comptoir, éclairait la salle déserte. Tous les tabourets, les pieds en l’air, étaient posés sur les tables. Le maître et la maîtresse avec leur garçon soupaient dans l’angle près de la cuisine ; — et Regimbart, le chapeau sur la tête, partageait leur repas, et même gênait le garçon, qui était contraint à chaque bouchée de se tourner de côté, quelque peu. Frédéric, lui ayant conté la chose brièvement, réclama son assistance. Le Citoyen commença par ne rien répondre ; il roulait des yeux, avait l’air de réfléchir, fit plusieurs tours dans la salle, et dit enfin :

— “Oui, volontiers !”

Et un sourire homicide le dérida, en apprenant que l’adversaire était un noble.

— “Nous le ferons marcher tambour battant, soyez tranquille ! D’abord…. avec l’épée…”

— “Mais peut-être”, objecta Frédéric, “que je n’ai pas le droit…”

— “Je vous dis qu’il faut prendre l’épée !” répliqua brutalement le Citoyen. “Savez-vous tirer ?”

— “Un peu !”

— “Ah ! un peu ! voilà comme ils sont tous ! Et ils ont la rage de faire assaut ! Qu’est-ce que ça prouve, la salle d’armes ! Ecoutez-moi : tenez-vous bien à distance en vous enfermant toujours dans des cercles, et rompez ! rompez ! C’est permis. Fatiguez-le ! Puis fendez-vous dessus, franchement ! Et surtout pas de malice, pas de coups à la La Fougère non ! de simples une-deux, des dégagements. Tenez, voyez-vous ? en tournant le poignet comme pour ouvrir une serrure. — Père Vauthier, donnez-moi votre canne ! Ah ! cela suffit.”

Il empoigna la baguette qui servait à allumer le gaz, arrondit le bras gauche, plia le droit, et se mit à pousser des bottes contre la cloison. Il frappait du pied, s’animait, feignait même de rencontrer des difficultés, tout en criant : “Y es-tu, là ? y es-tu ?” et sa silhouette énorme se projetait sur la muraille, avec son chapeau qui semblait toucher au plafond. Le limonadier disait de temps en temps : “Bravo ! très bien !” Son épouse également l’admirait, quoique émue ; et Théodore, un ancien soldat, en restait cloué d’ébahissement, étant, du reste, fanatique de M. Regimbart.

Le lendemain, de bonne heure, Frédéric courut au magasin de Dussardier. Après une suite de pièces, toutes remplies d’étoffes garnissant des rayons, ou étendues en travers sur des tables, tandis, que, çà et là, des champignons de bois supportaient des châles, il l’aperçut dans une espèce de cage grillée, au milieu de registres, et écrivant debout sur un pupitre. Le brave garçon lâcha immédiatement sa besogne.

Les témoins arrivèrent avant midi. Frédéric, par bon goût, crut devoir ne pas assister à la conférence.

Le Baron et M. Joseph déclarèrent qu’ils se contenteraient des excuses les plus simples. Mais Regimbart, ayant pour principe de ne céder jamais, et qui tenait à défendre l’honneur d’Arnoux (Frédéric ne lui avait point parlé d’autre chose), demanda que le Vicomte fît des excuses. M. de Comaing fut révolté de l’outrecuidance. Le Citoyen n’en voulut pas démordre. Toute conciliation devenant impossible, on se battrait.

D’autres difficultés surgirent — , car le choix des armes légalement, appartenait à Cisy, l’offensé. Mais Regimbart soutint que, par l’envoi du cartel, il se constituait l’offenseur. Ses témoins se récrièrent qu’un soufflet, cependant, était la plus cruelle des offenses. Le Citoyen épilogua sur les mots, un coup n’étant pas un soufflet. Enfin, on décida qu’on s’en rapporterait à des militaires ; et les quatre témoins sortirent, pour aller consulter des officiers dans une caserne quelconque.

Ils s’arrêtèrent à celle du quai d’Orsay. M. de Comaing, ayant abordé deux capitaines, leur exposa la contestation.

Les capitaines n’y comprirent goutte, embrouillée qu’elle fut par les phrases incidentes du Citoyen. Bref, ils conseillèrent à ces messieurs d’écrire un procès-verbal ; après quoi, ils décideraient. Alors, on se transporta dans un café ; et même, pour faire les choses plus discrètement, on désigna Cisy par H et Frédéric par un K.

Puis on retourna à la caserne. Les officiers étaient sortis. Ils reparurent, et déclarèrent qu’évidemment le choix des armes appartenait à M. H. Tous s’en revinrent chez Cisy. Regimbart et Dussardier restèrent sur le trottoir.

Le Vicomte, en apprenant la solution, fut pris d’un si grand trouble, qu’il se la fit répéter plusieurs fois ; et, quand M. de Comaing en vint aux prétentions de Regimbart, il murmura “cependant”, n’étant pas loin, en lui-même, d’y obtempérer. Puis il se laissa choir dans un fauteuil, et déclara qu’il ne se battrait pas.

— “Hein ? comment ?” dit le Baron.

Alors, Cisy s’abandonna à un flux labial désordonné.

Il voulait se battre au tromblon, à bout portant, avec un seul pistolet.

— “Ou bien on mettra de l’arsenic dans un verre, qui sera tiré au sort. Ça se fait quelquefois ; je l’ai lu !”

Le Baron, peu endurant naturellement, le rudoya.

— “Ces messieurs attendent votre réponse. C’est indécent, à la fin ! Que prenez-vous ? voyons ! Est-ce l’épée ?”

Le Vicomte répliqua “oui”, par un signe de tête ; et le rendez-vous fut fixé pour le lendemain, à la porte Maillot, à sept heures juste.

Dussardier étant contraint de s’en retourner à ses affaires, Regimbart alla prévenir Frédéric.

On l’avait laissé toute la journée sans nouvelles ; son impatience était devenue intolérable.

— “Tant mieux !” s’écria-t-il.

Le Citoyen fut satisfait de sa contenance.

— “On réclamait de nous des excuses, croiriez-vous ? Ce n’était rien, un simple mot ! Mais je les ai envoyés joliment bouler ! Comme je le devais, n’est-ce pas ?”

— “Sans doute”, dit Frédéric tout en songeant qu’il eût mieux fait de choisir un autre témoin.

Puis, quand il fut seul, il se répéta tout haut, plusieurs fois :

— “Je vais me battre. Tiens, je vais me battre ! C’est drôle”

Et, comme il marchait dans sa chambre, en passant devant sa glace, il s’aperçut qu’il était pâle.

— “Est-ce que j’aurais peur ?”

Une angoisse abominable le saisit à l’idée d’avoir peur sur le terrain.

— “Si j’étais tué, cependant ? Mon père est mort de la même façon. Oui, je serai tué”

Et, tout à coup, il aperçut sa mère, en robe noire ; des images incohérentes se déroulèrent dans sa tête. Sa propre lâcheté l’exaspéra. Il fut pris d’un paroxysme de bravoure, d’une soif carnassière. Un bataillon ne l’eût pas fait reculer. Cette fièvre calmée, il se sentit, avec joie, inébranlable. Pour se distraire, il se rendit à l’Opéra, où l’on donnait un ballet. Il écouta la musique, lorgna les danseuses, et but un verre de punch, pendant l’entracte. Mais, en rentrant chez lui, la vue de son cabinet, de ses meubles, où il se retrouvait peut-être pour la dernière fois, lui causa une faiblesse.

Il descendit dans son jardin. Les étoiles brillaient ; il les contempla. L’idée de se battre pour une femme le grandissait à ses yeux, l’ennoblissait. Puis il alla se coucher tranquillement.

Il n’en fut pas de même de Cisy. Après le départ du Baron, Joseph avait tâché de remonter son moral, et, comme le Vicomte demeurait froid :

— “Pourtant, mon brave, si tu préfères en rester là, j’irai le dire.”

Cisy n’osa répondre “certainement”, mais il en voulut à son cousin de ne pas lui rendre ce service sans en parler.

Il souhaita que Frédéric, pendant la nuit, mourût d’une attaque d’apoplexie, ou qu’une émeute survenant, il y eût le lendemain assez de barricades pour fermer tous les abords du bois de Boulogne. ou qu’un événement empêchât un des témoins de s’y rendre ; car le duel faute de témoins manquerait. Il avait envie de se sauver par un train express n’importe où. Il regretta de ne pas savoir la médecine pour prendre quelque chose qui, sans exposer ses jours, ferait croire à sa mort. Il arriva jusqu’à désirer être malade, gravement.

Afin d’avoir un conseil, un secours, il envoya chercher M. des Aulnays. L’excellent homme était retourné en Saintonge, sur une dépêche lui apprenant l’indisposition d’une de ses filles. Cela parut de mauvais augure à Cisy. Heureusement que M. Vezou, son précepteur, vint le voir. Alors il s’épancha.

— “Comment faire, mon Dieu ! comment faire ?”

— “Moi, à votre place, monsieur le Comte, je payerais un fort de la halle pour lui flanquer une raclée.”

— “Il saurait toujours de qui ça vient !” reprit Cisy.

Et, de temps à autre, il poussait un gémissement — , puis : “Mais est-ce qu’on a le droit de se battre en duel ?”

— “C’est un reste de barbarie ! Que voulez-vous !”

Par complaisance, le pédagogue s’invita lui-même à dîner. Son élève ne mangea rien, et, après le repas, sentit le besoin de faire un tour.

Il dit en passant devant une église :

— “Si nous entrions un peu… pour voir ?”

M. Vezou ne demanda pas mieux, et même lui présenta de l’eau bénite.

C’était le mois de Marie, des fleurs couvraient l’autel, des voix chantaient, l’orgue résonnait. Mais il lui fut impossible de prier, les pompes de la religion lui inspirant des idées de funérailles ; il entendait comme des bourdonnements de De profundis.

— “Allons-nous-en ! Je ne me sens pas bien !”

Ils employèrent toute la nuit à jouer aux cartes. Le Vicomte s’efforça de perdre, afin de conjurer la mauvaise chance, ce dont M. Vezou profita. Enfin, au petit jour, Cisy, qui n’en pouvait plus, s’affaissa sur le tapis vert, et eut un sommeil plein de songes désagréables.

Si le courage, pourtant, consiste à vouloir dominer sa faiblesse, le Vicomte fut courageux, car, à la vue de ses témoins qui venaient le chercher, il se roidit de toutes ses forces, la vanité lui faisant comprendre qu'une reculade le perdrait. M. de Comaing le complimenta sur sa bonne mine.

Mais, en route, le bercement du fiacre et la chaleur du soleil matinal l'énervèrent. Son énergie était retombée. Il ne distinguait même plus où l'on était.

Le Baron se divertit à augmenter sa frayeur, en parlant du “cadavre”, et de la manière de le rentrer en ville, clandestinement. Joseph donnait la réplique ; tous deux, jugeant l'affaire ridicule, étaient persuadés qu'elle s'arrangerait.

Cisy gardait sa tête sur sa poitrine ; il la releva doucement et fit observer qu'on n'avait pas pris de médecin.

— “C'est inutile”, dit le Baron.

— “Il n'y a pas de danger, alors ?”

Joseph répliqua d'un ton grave :

— “Espérons-le !”

Et personne dans la voiture ne paria plus.

A sept heures dix minutes, on arriva devant la porte Maillot. Frédéric et ses témoins s'y trouvaient, habillés de noir tous les trois. Regimbart, au lieu de cravate, avait un col de crin comme un troupier ; et il portait une espèce de longue boîte à violon, spéciale pour ce genre d'aventures. On échangea froidement un salut. Puis tous s'enfoncèrent dans le bois de Boulogne, par la route de Madrid, afin d'y trouver une place convenable.

Regimbart dit à Frédéric, qui marchait entre lui et Dussardier :

— “Eh bien, et cette venette, qu'en fait-on ? Si vous avez besoin de quelque chose, ne vous gênez pas, je connais ça ! La crainte est naturelle à l'homme.” Puis, à voix basse :

“Ne fumez plus, ça amollit !”

Frédéric jeta son cigare qui le gênait, et continua d'un pied ferme. Le Vicomte avançait par derrière, appuyé sur le bras de ses deux témoins.

De rares passants les croisaient. Le ciel était bleu, et on entendait, par moments, des lapins bondir. Au détour d'un sentier, une femme en madras causait avec un homme en blouse, et, dans la grande avenue sous les marronniers, des domestiques en veste de toile promenaient leurs chevaux. Cisy se rappelait les jours heureux où, monté sur son alezan et le lorgnon dans l'oeil, il chevauchait à la portière des calèches ; ces souvenirs renforçaient son angoisse ; une soif intolérable le brûlait — la susurration des mouches se confondait avec le battement de ses artères ; ses pieds enfonçaient dans le sable ; il lui semblait qu'il était en train de marcher depuis un temps infini.

Les témoins, sans s'arrêter, fouillaient de l'oeil les deux bords de la route. On délibéra si l’on irait à la croix Catelan ou sous les murs de Bagatelle. Enfin, on prit à droite ; et on s’arrêta dans une espèce de quinconce, entre des pins.

L’endroit fut choisi de manière à répartir également le niveau du terrain. On marqua les deux places où les adversaires devaient se poser. Puis Regimbart ouvrit sa boîte. Elle contenait, sur un capitonnage de basane rouge, quatre épées charmantes, creuses au milieu, avec des poignées garnies de filigrane. Un rayon lumineux, traversant les feuilles, tomba dessus ; et elles parurent à Cisy briller comme des vipères d’argent sur une mare de sang.

Le Citoyen fit voir qu’elles étaient de longueur pareille ; il prit la troisième pour lui-même, afin de séparer les combattants, en cas de besoin. M. de Comaing tenait une canne. Il y eut un silence. On se regarda. Toutes les figures avaient quelque chose d’effaré ou de cruel.

Frédéric avait mis bas sa redingote et son gilet. Joseph aida Cisy à faire de même ; sa cravate étant retirée, on aperçut à son cou une médaille bénite. Cela fit sourire de pitié Regimbart.

Alors, M. de Comaing (pour laisser à Frédéric encore un moment de réflexion) tâcha d’élever des chicanes. Il réclama le droit de mettre un gant, celui de saisir l’épée de son adversaire avec la main gauche ; Regimbart, qui était pressé, ne s’y refusa pas. Enfin le Baron, s’adressant à Frédéric :

— “Tout dépend de vous, Monsieur ! Il n’y a jamais de déshonneur à reconnaître ses fautes.”

Dussardier l’approuvait du geste. Le Citoyen s’indigna. — “Croyez-vous que nous sommes ici pour plumer les canards, fichtre ?… En garde !”

Les adversaires étaient l’un devant l’autre, leurs témoins de chaque côté. Il cria le signal :

— “Allons !”

Cisy devint effroyablement pâle. Sa lame tremblait par le bout, comme une cravache. Sa tête se renversait, ses bras s’écartèrent, il tomba sur le dos, évanoui. Joseph le releva ; et, tout en lui poussant sous les narines un flacon, il le secouait fortement. Le Vicomte rouvrit les yeux, puis tout à coup, bondit comme un furieux sur son épée. Frédéric avait gardé la sienne ; et il l’attendait, l’oeil fixe. la main haute.

— “Arrêtez, arrêtez !” cria une voix qui venait de la route, en même temps que le bruit d’un cheval au galop ; et la capote d’un cabriolet cassait les branches ! Un homme penché en dehors agitait un mouchoir, et criait toujours : “Arrêtez, arrêtez !”

M. de Comaing, croyant à une intervention de la police, leva sa canne.

— “Finissez donc ! le Vicomte saigne !”

— “Moi ?” dit Cisy.

En effet, il s’était, dans sa chute, écorché le pouce de la main gauche.

— “Mais c’est en tombant”, ajouta le Citoyen.

Le Baron feignit de ne pas entendre.

Arnoux avait sauté du cabriolet.

— “J’arrive trop tard ! Non ! Dieu soit loué !”

Il tenait Frédéric à pleins bras, le palpait, lui couvrait le visage de baisers.

— “Je sais le motif : vous avez voulu défendre votre vieil ami ! C’est bien, cela, c’est bien ! Jamais je ne l’oublierai ! Comme vous êtes bon ! Ah ! cher enfant !” Il le contemplait et versait des larmes, tout en ricanant de bonheur. Le Baron se tourna vers Joseph.

— “Je crois que nous sommes de trop dans cette petite fête de famille. C’est fini, n’est-ce pas, Messieurs ? — Vicomte mettez votre bras en écharpe ; tenez, voilà mon foulard.” Puis, avec un geste impérieux : “Allons ! pas de rancune ! Cela se doit !”

Les deux combattants se serrèrent la main, mollement. Le Vicomte, M. de Comaing et Joseph disparurent d’un côté, et Frédéric s’en alla de l’autre avec ses amis.

Comme le restaurant de Madrid n’était pas loin, Arnoux proposa de s’y rendre pour boire un verre de bière.

— “On pourrait même déjeuner”, dit Regimbart.

Mais, Dussardier n’en ayant pas le loisir, ils se bornèrent à un rafraîchissement, dans le jardin. Tous éprouvaient cette béatitude qui suit les dénouements heureux. Le Citoyen, cependant, était fâché qu’on eût interrompu le duel au bon moment.

Arnoux en avait eu connaissance par un nommé Compain, ami de Regimbart ; et dans un élan de cœur, il était accouru pour l’empêcher, croyant, du reste, en être la cause. Il pria Frédéric de lui fournir là-dessus quelques détails. Frédéric, ému par les preuves de sa tendresse, se fit scrupule d’augmenter son illusion — “De grâce, n’en parlons plus !”

Arnoux trouva cette réserve fort délicate. Puis, avec sa légèreté ordinaire, passant à une autre idée : “Quoi de neuf, Citoyen ?”

Et ils se mirent à causer traites, échéances. Afin d’être plus commodément, ils allèrent même chuchoter à l’écart sur une autre table.

Frédéric distingua ces mots : “Vous allez me souscrire. — Oui ! mais, vous, bien entendu… — Je l’ai négocié enfin pour trois cents ! — Jolie commission, ma foi !” Bref, il était clair qu’Arnoux tripotait avec le Citoyen beaucoup de choses.

Frédéric songea à lui rappeler ses quinze mille francs. Mais sa démarche récente interdisait les reproches, même les plus doux. D’ailleurs, il se sentait fatigué. L'endroit n'était pas convenable. Il remit cela à un autre jour.

Arnoux, assis à l'ombre d'un troène, fumait d'un air hilare. Il leva les yeux vers les portes des cabinets donnant toutes sur le jardin, et dit qu'il était venu là, autrefois, bien souvent.

— “Pas seul, sans doute ?” répliqua le Citoyen.

— “Parbleu !”

— “Quel polisson vous faites ! un homme marié !”

— “Eh bien, et vous donc !” reprit Arnoux ; et, avec un sourire indulgent : “Je suis même sûr que ce gredin-là possède quelque part, une chambre, où il reçoit des petites filles !”

Le Citoyen confessa que c'était vrai, par un simple haussement de sourcils. Alors, ces deux messieurs exposèrent leurs goûts : Arnoux préférait maintenant la jeunesse, les ouvrières ; Regimbart détestait “les mijaurées” et tenait avant tout au positif. La conclusion, fournie par le marchand de faïence fut qu'on ne devait pas traiter les femmes sérieusement.

— “Cependant, il aime la sienne !” songeait Frédéric, en s'en retournant ; et il le trouvait un malhonnête homme. Il lui en voulait de ce duel, comme si c'eût été pour lui qu'il avait, tout à l'heure, risqué sa vie.

Mais il était reconnaissant à Dussardier de son dévouement ; le commis, sur ses instances, arriva bientôt à lui faire une visite tous les jours.

Frédéric lui prêtait des livres : Thiers, Dulaure, Barante, les Girondins de Lamartine. Le brave garçon l'écoutait avec recueillement et acceptait ses opinions comme celles d'un maître.

Il arriva un soir tout effaré.

Le matin, sur le boulevard, un homme qui courait à perdre haleine s'était heurté contre lui ; et, l'ayant reconnu pour un ami de Sénécal, lui avait dit — “On vient de le prendre, je me sauve !” Rien de plus vrai. Dussardier avait passé la journée aux informations. Sénécal était sous les verrous, comme prévenu d'attentat politique.

Fils d'un contremaître, né à Lyon et ayant eu pour professeur un ancien disciple de Chalier, dès son arrivée à Paris, il s'était fait recevoir de la Société des Familles ; ses habitudes étaient connues ; la police le surveillait. Il s'était battu dans l'affaire de mai 1839, et, depuis lors se tenait à l'ombre, mais s'exaltant de plus en plus, fanatique d'Alibaud, mêlant ses griefs contre la société à ceux du peuple contre la monarchie, et s'éveillant chaque matin avec l'espoir d'une révolution qui, en quinze jours ou un mois, changerait le monde. Enfin, écœuré par la mollesse de ses frères, furieux des retards qu'on opposait à ses rêves et désespérant de la patrie, il était entré comme chimiste dans le complot des bombes incendiaires ; et on l'avait surpris portant de la poudre qu'il allait essayer à Montmartre, tentative suprême pour établir la République.

Dussardier ne la chérissait pas moins, car elle signifiait, croyait-il, affranchissement et bonheur universel. Un jour, — à quinze ans, — dans la rue Transnonain, devant la boutique d'un épicier, il avait vu des soldats la baïonnette rouge de sang, avec des cheveux collés à la crosse de leur fusil ; depuis ce temps-là, le Gouvernement l'exaspérait comme l'incarnation même de l'Injustice. Il confondait un peu les assassins et les gendarmes ; un mouchard valait à ses yeux un parricide. Tout le mal répandu sur la terre, il l'attribuait naïvement au Pouvoir ; et il le haïssait d'une haine essentielle, permanente, qui lui tenait tout le cœur et raffinait sa sensibilité. Les déclamations de Sénécal l'avaient ébloui. Qu'il fût coupable ou non, et sa tentative odieuse, peu importait ! Du moment qu'il était la victime de l'Autorité, on devait le servir.

— "Les Pairs le condamneront, certainement ! Puis il sera emmené dans une voiture cellulaire, comme un galérien et on l'enfermera au Mont-Saint-Michel, où le Gouvernement les fait mourir ! Austen est devenu fou ! Steuben s'est tué ! Pour transférer Barbès dans un cachot, on l'a tiré par les jambes, par les cheveux ! On lui piétinait le corps, et sa tête rebondissait à chaque marche tout le long de l'escalier. Quelle abomination ! les Misérables !"

Des sanglots de colère l'étouffaient, et il tournait dans la chambre, comme pris d'une grande angoisse.

— "Il faudrait faire quelque chose, cependant Voyons ! moi, je ne sais pas ! Si nous tâchions de le délivrer, hein ? Pendant qu'on le mènera au Luxembourg, on peut se jeter sur l'escorte dans le couloir ! Une douzaine d'hommes déterminés, ça passe partout."

Il y avait tant de flamme dans ses yeux, que Frédéric en tressaillit.

Sénécal lui apparut plus grand qu'il ne croyait. Il se rappela ses souffrances, sa vie austère ; sans avoir pour lui l'enthousiasme de Dussardier, il éprouvait néanmoins cette admiration qu'inspire tout homme se sacrifiant à une idée. Il se disait que, s'il l'eût secouru, Sénécal n'en serait pas là ; et les deux amis cherchèrent laborieusement quelque combinaison pour le sauver.

Il leur fut impossible de parvenir jusqu'à lui.

Frédéric s'enquérait de son sort dans les journaux, et pendant trois semaines fréquenta les cabinets de lecture.

Un jour, plusieurs numéros du Flambard lui tombèrent sous la main. L'article de fond, invariablement, était consacré à démolir un homme illustre. Venaient ensuite les nouvelles du monde, les cancans. Puis, on blaguait l'Odéon, Carpentras, la pisciculture, et les condamnés à mort quand il y en avait. La disparition d'un paquebot fournit matière à plaisanteries pendant un an. Dans la troisième colonne, un courrier des arts donnait, sous forme d'anecdote ou de conseil, des réclames de tailleurs, avec des comptes rendus de soirées, des annonces de ventes, des analyses d'ouvrages, traitant de la même encre un volume de vers et une paire de bottes. La seule partie sérieuse était la critique des petits théâtres, où l'on s'acharnait sur deux ou trois directeurs ; et les intérêts de l'Art étaient invoqués à propos des décors des Funambules ou d'une amoureuse des Délassements.

Frédéric allait rejeter tout cela quand ses yeux rencontrèrent un article intitulé : Une poulette entre trois cocos. C'était l'histoire de son duel, narrée en style sémillant, gaulois. Il se reconnut sans peine, car il était désigné par cette plaisanterie, laquelle revenait souvent : “Un jeune homme du collège de Sens et qui en manque.”, On le représentait même comme un pauvre diable de provincial, un obscur nigaud tâchant de frayer avec les grands seigneurs. Quant au Vicomte, il avait le beau rôle, d'abord dans le souper, où il s'introduisait de force, ensuite dans le pari, puisqu'il emmenait la demoiselle, et finalement sur le terrain, où il se comportait en gentilhomme. La bravoure de Frédéric n'était pas niée, précisément, mais on faisait comprendre qu'un intermédiaire, le protecteur lui-même, était survenu juste à temps. Le tout se terminait par cette phrase, grosse peut-être de perfidies :

“D'où vient leur tendresse ? Problème ! et, comme dit Bazile, qui diable est-ce qu'on trompe ici”

C'était, sans le moindre doute, une vengeance d'Hussonnet contre Frédéric, pour son refus des cinq mille francs.

Que faire ? S'il lui en demandait raison, le bohème protesterait de son innocence, et il n'y gagnerait rien. Le mieux était d'avaler la chose silencieusement. Personne, après tout, ne lisait le Flambard.

En sortant du cabinet de lecture, il aperçut du monde devant la boutique d'un marchand de tableaux. On regardait un portrait de femme, avec cette ligne écrite au bas en lettres noires : “Mlle Rose-Annette Bron, appartenant à M. Frédéric Moreau, de Nogent.”

C'était bien elle, — ou à peu près, — vue de face, les seins découverts, les cheveux dénoués, et tenant dans ses mains une bourse de velours rouge, tandis que, par derrière, un paon avançait son bec sur son épaule, en couvrant la muraille de ses grandes plumes en éventail.

Pellerin avait fait cette exhibition pour contraindre Frédéric au payement, persuadé qu'il était célèbre et que tout Paris, s'animant en sa faveur, allait s'occuper de cette misère.

Etait-ce une conjuration ? Le peintre et le journaliste avaient-ils monté leur coup ensemble ?

Son duel n'avait rien empêché. Il devenait ridicule, tout le monde se moquait de lui.

Trois jours après, à la fin de juin, les actions du Nord ayant fait quinze francs de hausse, comme il en avait acheté deux mille l'autre mois, il se trouva gagner trente mille francs. Cette caresse de la fortune lui redonna confiance. Il se dit qu'il n'avait besoin de personne, que tous ses embarras venaient de sa timidité, de ses hésitations. Il aurait dû commencer avec la Maréchale brutalement, refuser Hussonnet dès le premier jour, ne pas se compromettre avec Pellerin ; et, pour montrer que rien ne le gênait, il se rendit chez Mme Dambreuse, à une de ses soirées ordinaires.

Au milieu de l'antichambre, Martinon, qui arrivait en même temps que lui, se retourna.

— “Comment, tu viens ici, toi ?” avec l'air surpris et même contrarié de le voir.

— “Pourquoi pas ?”

Et, tout en cherchant la cause d'un tel abord, Frédéric s'avança dans le salon.

La lumière était faible. malgré les lampes posées dans les coins ; car les trois fenêtres, grandes ouvertes, dressaient parallèlement trois larges carrés d'ombre noire. Des jardinières, sous les tableaux, occupaient jusqu'à hauteur d'homme les intervalles de la muraille ; et une théière d'argent avec un samovar se mirait au fond, dans une glace. Un murmure de voix discrètes s'élevait. On entendait des escarpins craquer sur le tapis.

Il distingua des habits noirs, puis une table ronde éclairée par un grand abat-jour, sept ou huit femmes en toilettes d'été, et, un peu plus loin, Mme Dambreuse dans un fauteuil à bascule. Sa robe de taffetas lilas avait des manches à crevés, d'où s'échappaient des bouillons de mousseline, le ton doux de l'étoffe se mariant à la nuance de ses cheveux ; et elle se tenait quelque peu renversée en arrière, avec le bout de son pied sur un coussin, — tranquille comme une œuvre d'art pleine de délicatesse, une fleur de haute culture.

M. Dambreuse et un vieillard à chevelure blanche se promenaient dans toute la longueur du salon. Quelques-uns s'entretenaient au bord des petits divans, çà et là les autres, debout, formaient un cercle au milieu.

Ils causaient de votes, d'amendements, de sous-amendements, du discours de M. Grandin, de la réplique de M. Benoist. Le tiers parti décidément allait trop loin ! Le centre gauche aurait dû se souvenir un peu mieux de ses origines ! Le ministère avait reçu de graves atteintes ! Ce qui devait rassurer pourtant, c'est qu'on ne lui voyait point de successeur. Bref, la situation était complètement analogue à celle de 1834.

Comme ces choses ennuyaient Frédéric, il se rapprocha des femmes. Martinon était près d'elles, debout, le chapeau sous le bras, la figure de trois quarts, et si convenable, qu'il ressemblait à de la porcelaine de Sèvres. Il prit une Revue des Deux Mondes traînant sur la table, entre une Imitation et un Annuaire de Gotha, et jugea de haut un poète illustre, dit qu'il allait aux conférences de Saint-François, se plaignit de son larynx, avalait de temps à autre une boule de gomme ; et cependant, parlait musique, faisait le léger. Mlle Cécile, la nièce de M. Dambreuse, qui se brodait une paire de manchettes, le regardait, en dessous, avec ses prunelles d'un bleu pâle ; et miss John, l'institutrice à nez camus, en avait lâché sa tapisserie ; toutes deux paraissaient s'écrier intérieurement

— "Qu'il est beau !"

Mme Dambreuse se tourna vers lui — "Donnez-moi donc mon éventail, qui est sur cette console, là-bas. Vous vous trompez ! l'autre !"

Elle se leva ; et, comme il revenait, ils se rencontrèrent au milieu du salon, face à face ; elle lui adressa quelques mots, vivement, des reproches sans doute, à en juger par l'expression altière de sa figure ; Martinon tâchait de sourire ; puis il alla se mêler au conciliabule des hommes sérieux. Mme Dambreuse reprit sa place, et, se penchant sur le bras de son fauteuil, elle dit à Frédéric :

— "J'ai vu quelqu'un, avant-hier, qui m'a parlé de vous, M. de Cisy ; vous le connaissez, n'est-ce pas ?"

— "Oui… un peu."

Tout à coup Mme Dambreuse s'écria :

— "Duchesse, ah ! quel bonheur !"

Et elle s'avança jusqu'à la porte, au-devant d'une vieille petite dame, qui avait une robe de taffetas carmélite et un bonnet de guipure, à longues pattes. Fille d'un compagnon d'exil du comte d'Artois et veuve d'un maréchal de l'Empire créé pair de France en 1830, elle tenait à l'ancienne cour comme à la nouvelle et pouvait obtenir beaucoup de choses. Ceux qui causaient debout s'écartèrent, puis reprirent leur discussion.

Maintenant, elle roulait sur le paupérisme, dont toutes les peintures, d'après ces messieurs, étaient fort exagérées.

— "Cependant", objecta Martinon, "la misère existe, avouons-le ! Mais le remède ne dépend ni de la Science ni du Pouvoir. C'est une question purement individuelle. Quand les basses classes voudront se débarrasser de leurs vices, elles s'affranchiront de leurs besoins. Que le peuple soit plus moral, et il sera moins pauvre !"

Suivant M. Dambreuse, on n'arriverait à rien de bien sans une surabondance du capital. Donc, le seul moyen possible était de confier, "comme le voulaient, du reste, les saint-simoniens (mon Dieu, ils avaient du bon ! soyons justes envers tout le monde), de confier, dis-je, la cause du Progrès à ceux qui peuvent accroître la fortune publique" . Insensiblement on aborda les grandes exploitations industrielles, les chemins de fer, la houille. Et M. Dambreuse, s’adressant à Frédéric, lui dit tout bas :

— “Vous n’êtes pas venu pour notre affaire.” Frédéric allégua une maladie ; mais, sentant que l’excuse était trop bête :

— “D’ailleurs, j’ai eu besoin de mes fonds.”

— “Pour acheter une voiture ?” reprit Mme Dambreuse, qui passait près de lui, une tasse de thé à la main ; et elle le considéra pendant une minute, la tête un peu tournée sur son épaule.

Elle le croyait l’amant de Rosanette l’allusion était claire. Il sembla même à Frédéric que toutes les dames le regardaient de loin, en chuchotant. Pour mieux voir ce qu’elles pensaient, il se rapprocha d’elles, encore une fois.

De l’autre côté de la table, Martinon, auprès de Mlle Cécile, feuilletait un album. C’étaient des lithographies représentant des costumes espagnols. Il lisait tout haut les légendes : — Femme de Séville, — Jardinier de Valence, — Picador andalou " ; et, descendant une fois jusqu’au bas de la page, il continua d’une haleine :

— “Jacques Arnoux, éditeur. — Un de tes amis, hein ?”

— “C’est vrai”, dit Frédéric, blessé par son air.

M^{me} Dambreuse reprit :

— “En effet, vous êtes venu, un matin… pour… une maison, je crois ? oui, une maison appartenant à sa femme.” (Cela signifiait : “C’est votre maîtresse.”)

Il rougit jusqu’aux oreilles ; et M. Dambreuse, qui arrivait au même moment, ajouta :

— “Vous paraissiez même vous intéresser beaucoup à eux.” Ces derniers mots achevèrent de décontenancer Frédéric.

Son trouble, que l’on voyait, pensait-il, allait confirmer les soupçons, quand M. Dambreuse lui dit de plus près, d’un ton grave :

— “Vous ne faites pas d’affaires ensemble, je suppose ?”

Il protesta par des secousses de tête multipliées, sans comprendre l’intention du capitaliste, qui voulait lui donner un conseil de sembler lâche. Il avait envie de partir. La peur le retint. Un domestique enlevait les tasses de thé ; M^{me} Dambreuse causait avec un diplomate en habit bleu, deux jeunes filles, rapprochant leurs fronts, se faisaient voir une bague ; les autres, assises en demi-cercle sur des fauteuils, remuaient doucement leurs blancs visages, bordés de chevelures noires ou blondes ; personne enfin ne s’occupait de lui. Frédéric tourna les talons ; et, par une suite de longs zigzags, il avait presque gagné la porte, quand, passant près d’une console, il remarqua dessus, entre un vase de Chine et la boiserie, un journal plié en deux. Il le tira quelque peu, et lut ces mots : le Flambard.

Qui l’avait apporté ? Cisy ! Pas un autre évidemment. Qu’importait, du reste ! Ils allaient croire, tous déjà croyaient peut-être à l’article. Pourquoi cet acharnement ? Une ironie silencieuse l’enveloppait. Il se sentait comme perdu dans un désert. Mais la voix de Martinon s’éleva :

— " A propos d’Arnoux, j’ai lu parmi les prévenus des bombes incendiaires, le nom d’un de ses employés. Sénécal. Est-ce le nôtre ?

— “Lui-même”, dit Frédéric.

Martinon répéta, en criant très haut :

— “Comment, notre Sénécal ! notre Sénécal” Alors, on le questionna sur le complot ; sa place d’attaché au parquet devait lui fournir des renseignements.

Il confessa n’en pas avoir. Du reste, il connaissait fort peu le personnage, l’ayant vu deux ou trois fois seulement, et le tenait en définitive pour un assez mauvais drôle. Frédéric, indigné, s’écria :

— “Pas du tout ! c’est un très honnête garçon !”

— “Cependant, monsieur”, dit un propriétaire, “on n’est pas honnête quand on conspire !”

La plupart des hommes qui étaient là avaient servi, au moins, quatre gouvernements ; et ils auraient vendu la France ou le genre humain, pour garantir leur fortune, s’épargner un malaise, un embarras, ou même par simple bassesse, adoration instinctive de la force. Tous déclarèrent les crimes politiques inexcusables. Il fallait plutôt pardonner à ceux qui provenaient du besoin ! Et on ne manqua pas de mettre en avant l’éternel exemple du père de famille, volant l’éternel morceau de pain chez l’éternel boulanger.

Un administrateur s’écria même :

— “Moi, monsieur, si j’apprenais que mon frère conspire, je le dénoncerais !”

Frédéric invoqua le droit de résistance ; et. se rappelant quelques phrases que lui avait dites Deslauriers, il cita Desolmes, Blackstone, le bill des droits en Angleterre, et l’article 2 de la Constitution de 91. C’était même en vertu de ce droit-là qu’on avait proclamé la déchéance de Napoléon ; il avait été reconnu en 1830, inscrit en tête de la Charte.

— “D’ailleurs, quand le souverain manque au contrat, la justice veut qu’on le renverse.”

— “Mais c’est abominable !” exclama la femme d’un préfet.

Toutes les autres se taisaient, vaguement épouvantées, comme si elles eussent entendu le bruit des balles. Mme Dambreuse se balançait dans son fauteuil, et l’écoutait parler en souriant.

Un industriel, ancien carbonaro tâcha de lui démontrer que les d’Orléans étaient une belle famille sans doute, il y avait des abus…

— “Eh bien, alors ?”

— “Mais on ne doit pas les dire, cher monsieur ! Si vous saviez comme toutes ces criailleries de l’opposition nuisent aux affaires !”

— “Je me moque des affaires !” reprit Frédéric.

La pourriture de ces vieux l’exaspérait ; et, emporté par la bravoure qui saisit quelquefois les plus timides, il attaqua les financiers, les députés, le Gouvernement, le Roi, prit la défense des Arabes, débitait beaucoup de sottises. Quelques-uns l’encourageaient ironiquement : “Allez donc ! continuez !” tandis que d’autres murmuraient : “Diable ! quelle exaltation !” Enfin, il jugea convenable de se retirer ; et, comme il s’en allait, M. Dambreuse lui dit, faisant allusion à la place de secrétaire :

— “Rien n’est terminé encore ! Mais dépêchez-vous !” Et Mme Dambreuse :

— “A bientôt, n’est-ce pas ?”

Frédéric jugea leur adieu une dernière moquerie. était déterminé à ne jamais revenir dans cette maison, à ne plus fréquenter tous ces gens-là. Il croyait les avoir blessés, ne sachant pas quel large fonds d’indiffé rence le monde possède ! Ces femmes surtout l’indignaient. Pas une qui l’eût soutenu, même du regard. Il leur en voulait de ne pas les avoir émues. Quant à Mme Dambreuse, il lui trouvait quelque chose à la fois de langoureux et de sec, qui empêchait de la définir par une formule. Avait-elle un amant ? Quel amant ? Etait-ce le diplomate ou un autre ? Martinon, peut-être ? Impossible ! Cependant, il éprouvait une espèce de jalousie contre lui, et envers elle une malveillance inexplicable.

Dussardier, venu ce soir-là comme d’habitude, l’attendait. Frédéric avait le cœur gonflé ; il le dégorgea, et ses griefs, bien que vagues et difficiles à comprendre, attristèrent le brave commis ; il se plaignait même de son isolement. Dussardier, en hésitant un peu, proposa de se rendre chez Deslauriers.

Frédéric, au nom de l’avocat, fut pris par un besoin extrême de le revoir. Sa solitude intellectuelle était profonde, et la compagnie de Dussardier insuffisante. Il lui répondit d’arranger les choses comme il voudrait.

Deslauriers, également, sentait depuis leur brouille une privation dans sa vie. Il céda sans peine à des avances cordiales.

Tous deux s’embrassèrent, puis se mirent à causer de choses indifférentes.

La réserve de Deslauriers attendrit Frédéric ; et, pour lui faire une sorte de réparation, il lui conta le lendemain sa perte de quinze mille francs, sans dire que ces quinze mille francs lui étaient primitivement destinés. L’avocat n’en douta pas, néanmoins. Cette mésaventure, qui lui donnait raison dans ses préjugés contre Arnoux, désarma tout à fait sa rancune ; et il ne paria point de l’ancienne promesse.

Frédéric, trompé par son silence, crut qu’il l’avait oubliée. Quelques jours après, il lui demanda s'il n'existait pas de moyens de rentrer dans ses fonds, on pouvait discuter les hypothèques précédentes, attaques Arnoux comme stellionataire, faire des poursuites au domicile contre la femme.

— “Non ! non ! pas contre elle !” s'écria Frédéric ; et, cédant aux questions de l'ancien clerc, il avoua la vérité.

Deslauriers fut convaincu qu'il ne la disait pas complètement, par délicatesse sans doute. Ce défaut de confiance le blessa.

Ils étaient, cependant, aussi liés qu'autrefois, et même ils avaient tant de plaisir à se trouver ensemble, que la présence de Dussardier les gênait. Sous prétexte de rendez-vous, ils arrivèrent à s'en débarrasser peu à peu. Il y a des hommes n'ayant pour mission parmi les autres que de servir d'intermédiaires ; on les franchit comme des ponts, et l'on va plus loin.

Frédéric ne cachait rien à son ancien ami. Il lui dit l'affaire des houilles, avec la proposition de M. Dambreuse. L'avocat devint rêveur.

— “C'est drôle ! il faudrait pour cette place quelqu'un d'assez fort en droit !”

— “Mais tu pourras m'aider”, reprit Frédéric. — “Oui…. tiens…. parbleu ! certainement.” Dans la même semaine, il lui montra une lettre de sa mère.

Mme Moreau s'accusait d'avoir mal jugé M. Roque, lequel avait donné de sa conduite des explications satisfaisantes. Puis elle parlait de sa fortune, et de la possibilité, pour plus tard, d'un mariage avec Louise.

— “Ce ne serait peut-être pas bête !” dit Deslauriers Frédéric s'en rejeta loin ; le père Roque, d'ailleurs, était un vieux filou. Cela n'y faisait rien, selon l'avocat.

A la fin de juillet, une baisse inexplicable fit tomber les actions du Nord. Frédéric n'avait pas vendu les siennes ; il perdit d'un seul coup soixante mille francs. Ses revenus se trouvaient sensiblement diminués. Il devait ou restreindre sa dépense, ou prendre un état, ou faire un beau mariage.

Alors, Deslauriers lui parla de Mlle Roque. Rien ne l'empêchait d'aller voir un peu les choses par lui-même. Frédéric était un peu fatigué ; la province et la maison maternelle le délasseraient. Il partit.

L'aspect des rues de Nogent, qu'il monta sous le clair de la lune, le reporta dans de vieux souvenirs ; et il éprouvait une sorte d'angoisse, comme ceux qui reviennent après de longs voyages.

Il y avait chez sa mère tous les habitués d'autrefois : MM. Gamblin, Heudras et Chambrion, la famille Lebrun, “ces demoiselles Auger” ; de plus, le père Roque, et, en face de Mme Moreau, devant une table de jeu, Mlle Louise. C'était une femme, à présent. Elle se leva, en poussant un cri. Tous s'agitèrent. Elle était restée immobile, debout ; et les quatre flambeaux d'argent posés sur la table augmentaient sa pâleur. Quand elle se remit à jouer, sa main tremblait. Cette émotion flatta démesurément Frédéric, dont l’orgueil était malade ; il se dit : “Tu m’aimeras, toi !” et, prenant sa revanche des déboires qu’il avait essuyés là-bas, il se mit à faire le Parisien, le lion, donna des nouvelles des théâtres, rapporta des anecdotes du monde, puisées dans les petits journaux, enfin éblouit ses compatriotes.

Le lendemain, Mme Moreau s’étendit sur les qualités de Louise ; puis énuméra les bois, les fermes qu’elle posséderait. La fortune de M. Roque était considérable.

Il l’avait acquise en faisant des placements pour M. Dambreuse ; car il prêtait à des personnes pouvant offrir de bonnes garanties hypothécaires, ce qui lui permettait de demander des suppléments ou des commissions. Le capital, grâce à une surveillance active, ne risquait rien. D’ailleurs, le père Roque n’hésitait jamais devant une saisie ; puis il rachetait à bas prix les biens hypothéqués, et M. Dambreuse, voyant ainsi rentrer ses fonds, trouvait ses affaires très bien faites.

Mais cette manipulation extra-légale le compromettait vis-à-vis de son régisseur. Il n’avait rien à lui refuser. C’était sur ses instances qu’il avait si bien accueilli Frédéric.

En effet, le père Roque couvait au fond de son âme une ambition. Il voulait que sa fille fût comtesse ; et, pour y parvenir, sans mettre en jeu le bonheur de son enfant, il ne connaissait pas d’autre jeune homme que celui-là.

Par la protection de M. Dambreuse, on lui ferait avoir le titre de son aïeul, Mme Moreau étant la fille d’un comte de Fouvens, apparentée, d’ailleurs, aux plus vieilles familles champenoises, les Lavernade, les d’Etrigny. Quant aux Moreau, une inscription gothique, près des moulins de Villeneuve-l’Archevêque, parlait d’un Jacob Moreau qui les avait réédifiés en 1596 ; et la tombe de son fils, Pierre Moreau, premier écuyer du roi sous Louis XIV, se voyait dans la chapelle Saint-Nicolas.

Tant d’honorabilité fascinait M. Roque, fils d’un ancien domestique. Si la couronne comtale ne venait pas, il s’en consolerait sur autre chose ; car Frédéric pouvait parvenir à la députation quand M. Dambreuse serait élevé à la pairie, et alors l’aider dans ses affaires, lui obtenir des fournitures, des concessions. Le jeune homme lui plaisait, personnellement. Enfin il le voulait pour gendre, parce que, depuis longtemps, il s’était féru de cette idée, qui ne faisait que s’accroître.

Maintenant, il fréquentait l’église et il avait séduit Mme Moreau par l’espoir du titre, surtout. Elle s’était gardée cependant de faire une réponse décisive.

Donc, huit jours après, sans qu’aucun engagement eut été pris, Frédéric passait pour “le futur” de Mlle Louise ; et le père Roque, peu scrupuleux, les laissait ensemble quelquefois.

CHAPITRE 5

Deslauriers avait emporté de chez Frédéric la copie de l’acte de subrogation 188, avec une procuration en bonne forme lui conférant de pleins pouvoirs ; mais, quand il eut remonté ses cinq étages, et qu’il fut seul, au milieu de son triste cabinet, dans son fauteuil de basane, la vue du papier timbré l’écœura.

Il était las de ces choses, et des restaurants à trente-deux sous, des voyages en omnibus, de sa misère, de ses efforts. Il reprit les paperasses ; d’autres se trouvaient à côté ; c’étaient les prospectus de la compagnie houillère avec la liste des mines et le détail de leur contenance, Frédéric lui ayant laissé tout cela pour avoir dessus son opinion.

Une idée lui vint : celle de se présenter chez M. Dambreuse, et de demander la place de secrétaire. Cette Place, bien sûr, n’allait pas sans l’achat d’un certain nombre d’actions. Il reconnut la folie de son projet et se dit : — “Oh non ! ce serait mal.”

Alors, il chercha comment s’y prendre pour recouvrer les quinze mille francs. Une pareille somme n’était rien pour Frédéric ! Mais, s’il l’avait eue, lui, quel levier ! Et l’ancien clerc s’indigna que la fortune de l’autre fût grande.

— “Il en fait un usage pitoyable. C’est un égoïste. Eh je me moque bien de ses quinze mille francs !”

Pourquoi les avait-il Prêtés ? Pour les beaux yeux de Mme Arnoux. Elle était sa maîtresse ! Deslauriers n’en doutait pas. “Voilà une chose de plus à quoi sert l’argent !” Des pensées haineuses l’envahirent.

Puis, il songea à la personne même de Frédéric. Elle avait toujours exercé sur lui un charme presque féminin ; et il arriva bientôt à l’admirer pour un succès dont il se reconnaissait incapable.

Cependant, est-ce que la volonté n’était pas l’élément capital des entreprises ? et, puisque avec elle on triomphe de tout…

— “Ah ! ce serait drôle !”

Mais il eut honte de cette perfidie, et, une minute après :

— “Bah ! est-ce que j’ai peur ?”

Mme Arnoux (à force d’en entendre parler) avait fini par se peindre dans son imagination extraordinairement. La persistance de cet amour l’irritait comme un problème. Son austérité un peu théâtrale l’ennuyait maintenant. D’ailleurs, la femme du monde (ou ce qu’il jugeait telle) éblouissait l’avocat comme le symbole et le résumé de mille plaisirs inconnus. Pauvre, il convoitait le luxe sous sa forme la plus claire.

— “Après tout, quand il se fâcherait, tant pis ! Il s’est trop mal comporté envers moi, pour que je me gêne ! Rien ne m’assure qu’elle est sa maîtresse ! Il me l’a nié. Donc, je suis libre !”

Le désir de cette démarche ne le quitta plus. C’était une épreuve de ses forces qu’il voulait faire ; — si bien qu’un jour, tout à coup, il vernit lui-même ses bottes, acheta des gants blancs, et se mit en route, se substituant à Frédéric et s’imaginant presque être lui, par une singulière évolution intellectuelle, où il y avait à la fois de la vengeance et de la sympathie, de l’imitation et de l’audace.

Il fit annoncer “le docteur Deslauriers.”

Mme Arnoux fut surprise, n’ayant réclamé aucun médecin.

«

Ah ! mille excuses ! c’est docteur en droit. Je viens pour les intérêts de M. Moreau.”

Ce nom parut la troubler.

— “Tant mieux !” pensa l’ancien clerc ; “puisqu’elle a bien voulu de lui, elle voudra de moi !” s’encourageant par l’idée reçue qu’il est plus facile de supplanter un amant qu’un mari.

Il avait eu le plaisir de la rencontrer, une fois, au Palais ; il cita même la date. Tant de mémoire étonna Mme Arnoux. Il reprit d’un ton doucereux : — “Vous aviez déjà… quelques embarras… dans vos affaires !”

Elle ne répondit rien ; donc, c’était vrai.

Il se mit à causer de choses et d’autres, de son logement, de la fabrique ; puis, apercevant, aux bords de la glace, des médaillons : — “Ah ! des portraits de famille, sans doute ?”

Il remarqua celui d’une vieille femme, la mère de Mme Arnoux.

— “Elle a l’air d’une excellente personne, un type méridional.”

Et, sur l’objection qu’elle était de Chartres.

— “Chartres ! jolie ville.”

Il en vanta la cathédrale et les pâtés ; puis, revenant au portrait, y trouva des ressemblances avec Mme Arnoux, et lui lançait des flatteries indirectement. Elle n’en fut pas choquée. Il prit confiance et dit qu’il connaissait Arnoux depuis longtemps.

— “C’est un brave garçon ! mais qui se compromet ! Pour cette hypothèque, par exemple, on n’imagine pas…”

— “Oui ! je sais”, dit-elle, en haussant les épaules.

Ce témoignage involontaire de mépris engagea Deslauriers à poursuivre.

— “Son histoire de kaolin, vous l’ignorez peut-être, a failli tourner très mal, et même sa réputation…”

Un froncement de sourcils l’arrêta.

Alors se rabattant sur les généralités, il plaignit les pauvres femmes dont les époux gaspillent la fortune…

— “Mais elle est à lui, monsieur ; moi, je n’ai rien !” N’importe ! On ne savait pas… Une personne d’expérience pouvait servir. Il fit des offres de dévouement, exalta ses propres mérites — , et il la regardait en face, à travers ses lunettes qui miroitaient.

Une torpeur vague la prenait ; mais, tout à coup :

— “Voyons l’affaire, je vous prie !”

Il exhiba le dossier.

— “Ceci est la procuration de Frédéric. Avec un titre pareil aux mains d’un huissier qui fera un commandement, rien n’est plus simple : dans les vingt-quatre heures…” (Elle restait impassible, il changea de manœuvre.) “Moi, du reste, je ne comprends pas ce qui le pousse à réclamer cette somme ; car enfin il n’en a aucun besoin !”

— “Comment ! M. Moreau s’est montré assez bon…”

— “Oh ! d’accord !”

Et Deslauriers entama son éloge, puis vint à le dénigrer, tout doucement, le donnant pour oublieux, personnel, avare.

— “Je le croyais votre ami, monsieur ?”

— “Cela ne m’empêche pas de voir ses défauts. Ainsi, il reconnaît bien peu… comment dirais-je ? la sympathie…”

Mme Arnoux tournait les feuilles du gros cahier. Elle l’interrompit, pour avoir l’explication d’un mot.

Il se pencha sur son épaule, et si près d’elle, qu’il effleura sa joue. Elle rougit ; cette rougeur enflamma Deslauriers ; il lui baisa la main voracement.

— “Que faites-vous, monsieur !”

Et, debout contre la muraille, elle le maintenait immobile, sous ses grands yeux noirs irrités.

Elle partit d’un éclat de rire, un rire aigu, désespérant, atroce. Deslauriers sentit une colère à l’étrangler. Il se contint ; et, avec la mine d’un vaincu, demandant grâce : — “Ah ! vous avez tort ! Moi, je n’irais pas comme lui…”

— “De qui donc parlez-vous ?”

— “De Frédéric !”

— “Eh ! M. Moreau m’inquiète peu, je vous l’ai dit !”

— “Oh ! pardon !… pardon !”

Puis, d’une voix mordante, et faisant traîner ses phrases :

— “Je croyais même que vous vous intéressiez suffisamment à sa personne, pour apprendre avec plaisir…”

pour apprendre avec plaisir…

Elle devint toute pâle. L’ancien clerc ajouta :

— “Il va se marier.”

— “Lui !”

— “Dans un mois, au plus tard, avec Mlle Roque, la fille du régisseur de M. Dambreuse. Il est même parti à Nogent, rien que pour cela.”

Elle porta la main sur son cœur, comme au choc d’un grand coup ; mais tout de suite elle tira la sonnette, Deslauriers n’attendit pas qu’on le mît dehors. Quand elle se retourna, il avait disparu.

Mme Arnoux suffoquait un peu. Elle s’approcha de la fenêtre pour respirer.

De l’autre côté de la rue, sur le trottoir, un emballeur en manches de chemise clouait une caisse. Des fiacres passaient. Elle ferma la croisée et vint se rasseoir. Les hautes maisons voisines interceptant le soleil, un jour froid tombait dans l’appartement. Ses enfants étaient sortis, rien ne bougeait autour d’elle. C’était comme une désertion immense.

— “Il va se marier ! est-ce possible ?”

Et un tremblement nerveux la saisit.

— “Pourquoi cela ? est-ce que je l’aime ?”

Puis, tout à coup :

— “Mais oui, je l’aime !… je l’aime !”

Il lui semblait descendre dans quelque chose de profond, qui n’en finissait plus. La pendule sonna trois heures. Elle écouta les vibrations du timbre mourir. Et elle restait au bord de son fauteuil, les prunelles fixes, et souriant toujours.

La même après-midi, au même moment, Frédéric et Mlle Louise se promenaient dans le jardin que M. Roque possédait au bout de l’île. La vieille Catherine les surveillait, de loin ; ils marchaient côte à côte, et Frédéric disait :

— “Vous souvenez-vous quand je vous emmenais dans la campagne ?”

— “Comme vous étiez bon pour moi !” répondit-elle. “Vous m’aidiez à faire des gâteaux avec du sable, à remplir mon arrosoir, à me balancer sur l’escarpolette !”

— “Toutes vos poupées, qui avaient des noms de reines ou de marquises, que sont-elles devenues ?”

— “Ma foi, je n’en sais rien !”

— “Et votre roquet Moricaud !”

— “Il s’est noyé, le pauvre chéri !”

— “Et le Don Quichotte, dont nous coloriions ensemble les gravures”

— “Je l’ai encore !”

Il lui rappela le jour de sa première communion, et comme elle était gentille aux vêpres, avec son voile blanc et son grand cierge, pendant qu’elles défilaient toutes autour du chœur, et que la cloche tintait.

toutes autour du chœur, et que la cloche tintait.

Ces souvenirs, sans doute, avaient peu de charme pour Mlle Roque elle ne trouva rien à répondre ; et, une minute après : — “Méchant ! qui ne m’a pas donné une seule fois de ses nouvelles !”

Frédéric objecta ses nombreux travaux.

— “Qu’est-ce donc que vous faites ?”

Il fut embarrassé de la question, puis dit qu’il étudiait la politique.

— “Ah !”

Et, sans en demander davantage :

— “Cela vous occupe, mais moi !…”

Alors, elle lui conta l’aridité de son existence, n’ayant personne à voir, pas le moindre plaisir, la moindre distraction ! Elle désirait monter à cheval.

— “Le Vicaire prétend que c’est inconvenant pour une jeune fille ; est-ce bête, les convenances ! Autrefois, on me laissait faire tout ce que je voulais ; à présent, rien !”

— “Votre père vous aime, pourtant !”

— “Oui ; mais…”

Et elle poussa un soupir, qui signifiait : “Cela ne suffit pas à mon bonheur.”

Puis, il y eut un silence. Ils n’entendaient que le craquement du sable sous leurs pieds avec le murmure de la chute d’eau ; car la Seine, au-dessus de Nogent, est coupée en deux bras. Celui qui fait tourner les moulins dégorge en cet endroit la surabondance de ses ondes, pour rejoindre plus bas le cours naturel du fleuve ; et, lorsqu’on vient des ponts, on aperçoit, à droite sur l’autre berge, un talus de gazon que domine une maison blanche. A gauche, dans la prairie, des peupliers s’étendent, et l’horizon, en face, est borné par une courbe de la rivière ; elle était plate comme un miroir ; de grands insectes patinaient sur l’eau tranquille. Des touffes de roseaux et des joncs la bordent inégalement ; toutes sortes de plantes venues là s’épanouissaient en boutons d’or, laissaient pendre des grappes jaunes, dressaient des quenouilles de fleurs amarantes, faisaient au hasard des fusées vertes. Dans une anse du rivage, des nymphéas s’étalaient ; et un rang de vieux saules cachant des pièges à loup était, de ce côté de l’île, toute la défense du jardin.

En deçà, dans l’intérieur, quatre murs à chaperon d’ardoises enfermaient le potager, où les carrés de terre, labourés nouvellement, formaient des plaques brunes. Les cloches des melons brillaient à la file sur leur couche étroite ; les artichauts, les haricots, les épinards, les carottes et les tomates alternaient jusqu’à un plant d’asperges, qui semblait un petit bois de plumes.

Tout ce terrain avait été, sous le Directoire, ce qu’on appelait une folie. Les arbres, depuis lors, avaient démesurément grandi. De la clématite embarrassait les charmilles, les allées étaient couvertes de mousse, partout les ronces foisonnaient. Des tronçons de statue émiettaient leur plâtre sous les herbes. On se prenait en marchant dans quelques débris d’ouvrage en fil de fer. Il ne restait plus du pavillon que deux chambres au rez-de-chaussée avec des lambeaux de papier bleu. Devant la façade s’allongeait une treille à l’italienne, où, sur des piliers en brique, un grillage de bâtons supportait une vigne.

Ils vinrent là-dessous tous les deux, et, comme la lumière tombait par les trous inégaux de la verdure, Frédéric, en parlant à Louise de côté, observait l’ombre des feuilles sur son visage.

Elle avait dans ses cheveux rouges, à son chignon, une aiguille terminée par une boule de verre imitant l’émeraude ; et elle portait, malgré son deuil (tant son mauvais goût était naïf), des pantoufles en paille garnies de satin rose, curiosité vulgaire, achetées sans doute dans quelque foire.

Il s’en aperçut, et l’en complimenta ironiquement.

— “Ne vous moquez pas de moi !” reprit-elle.

Puis, le considérant tout entier, depuis son chapeau de feutre gris jusqu’à ses chaussettes de soie : — “Comme vous êtes coquet !”

Ensuite, elle le pria de lui indiquer des ouvrages à lire. Il en nomma plusieurs ; et elle dit : — “Oh ! comme vous êtes savant !”

Toute petite, elle s’était prise d’un de ces amours d’enfant qui ont à la fois la pureté d’une religion et la violence d’un besoin. Il avait été son camarade, son frère, son maître, avait amusé son esprit, fait battre son cœur et versé involontairement jusqu’au fond d’elle-même une ivresse latente et continue. Puis il l’avait quittée en pleine crise tragique, sa mère à peine morte, les deux désespoirs se confondant. L’absence l’avait idéalisé dans son souvenir ; il revenait avec une sorte d’auréole, et elle se livrait ingénument au bonheur de le voir.

Pour la première fois de sa vie, Frédéric se sentait aimé ; et ce plaisir nouveau, qui n’excédait pas l’ordre des sentiments agréables, lui causait comme un gonflement intime ; si bien qu’il écarta les deux bras, en se renversant la tête.

Un gros nuage passait alors sur le ciel.

— “Il va du côté de Paris”, dit Louise ; “vous voudriez le suivre, n’est-ce pas ?”

— “Moi ! pourquoi ?”

— “Qui sait ?”

Et, le fouillant d’un regard aigu :

— “Peut-être que vous avez là-bas… (elle chercha le mot), quelque affection.”

— “Eh ! je n’ai pas d’affection !”

— “Bien sûr ?”

— “Mais oui, mademoiselle, bien sûr !”

En moins d’un an, il s’était fait dans la jeune fille une transformation extraordinaire qui étonnait Frédéric.

Après une minute de silence, il ajouta :

— “Nous devrions nous tutoyer, comme autrefois ; voulez-vous ?”

— “Non.”

— “Pourquoi ?”

— “Parce que.”

Il insistait. Elle répondit, en baissant la tête :

— “Je n’ose pas.”

Ils étaient arrivés au bout du jardin, sur la grève du Livon. Frédéric, par gaminerie, se mit à faire des ricochets avec un caillou. Elle lui ordonna de s’asseoir. Il obéit ; puis, en regardant la chute d’eau : — “C’est comme le Niagara !”

Il vint à parier des contrées lointaines et de grands voyages. L’idée d’en faire la charmait. Elle n’aurait eu peur de rien, ni des tempêtes, ni des lions.

Assis, l’un près de l’autre, ils ramassaient devant eux des poignées de sable, puis les faisaient couler de leurs mains tout en causant ; — et le vent chaud qui arrivait des plaines leur apportait par bouffées des senteurs de lavande, avec le parfum du goudron s’échappant d’une barque, derrière l’écluse. Le soleil frappait la cascade ; les blocs verdâtres du petit mur où l’eau coulait apparaissaient comme sous une gaze d’argent se déroulant toujours. Une longue barre d’écume rejaillissait au pied, en cadence. Cela formait ensuite des bouillonnements, des tourbillons, mille courants opposés, et qui finissaient par se confondre en une seule nappe limpide.

Louise murmura qu’elle enviait l’existence des poissons.

— “Ça doit être si doux de se rouler là-dedans, à son aise, de se sentir caressé partout.”

Et elle frémissait, avec des mouvements d’une câlinerie sensuelle.

Mais une voix cria :

— “Où es-tu ?”

— “Votre bonne vous appelle”, dit Frédéric.

— “Bien ! bien !”

Louise ne se dérangeait pas.

— “Elle va se fâcher”, reprit-il.

— “Cela m’est égal ! et d’ailleurs…”, Mlle Roque faisant comprendre, par un geste, qu’elle la tenait à sa discrétion.

Elle se leva pourtant, puis se plaignit de mal de tête. Et, comme ils passaient devant un vaste hangar qui contenait des bourrées : — “Si nous nous mettions dessous, à l’égaud ?”

Il feignit de ne pas comprendre ce mot de patois, et même la taquina sur son accent. Peu à peu, les coins de sa bouche se pincèrent, elle mordait ses lèvres ; elle s’écarta pour bouder.

Frédéric la rejoignit, jura qu’il n’avait pas voulu lui faire de mal et qu’il l’aimait beaucoup.

— “Est-ce vrai ?” s’écria-t-elle, en le regardant avec un sourire qui éclairait tout son visage, un peu semé de taches de son.

Il ne résista pas à cette bravoure de sentiment, à la fraîcheur de sa jeunesse, et il reprit : — “Pourquoi te mentirais-je ?… tu en doutes… hein ?” en lui passant le bras gauche autour de la taille.

Un cri, suave comme un roucoulement, jaillit de sa gorge ; sa tête se renversa, elle défaillait, il la soutint. Et les scrupules de sa probité furent inutiles ; devant cette vierge qui s’offrait, une peur l’avait saisi. Il l’aida ensuite à faire quelques pas, doucement. Ses caresses de langage avaient cessé, et ne voulant plus dire que des choses insignifiantes, il lui parlait des personnes de la société nogentaise.

Tout à coup elle le repoussa, et, d’un ton amer :

— “Tu n’aurais pas le courage de m’emmener !”

Il resta immobile avec un grand air d’ébahissement. Elle éclata en sanglots, et s’enfonçant la tête dans sa poitrine : — “Est-ce que je peux vivre sans toi !”

Il tâchait de la calmer. Elle lui mit ses deux mains sur les épaules pour le mieux voir en face, et, dardant contre les siennes ses prunelles vertes, d’une humidité presque féroce : — “Veux-tu être mon mari ?”

— “Mais…”, répliqua Frédéric, cherchant quelque réponse. “Sans doute… Je ne demande pas mieux.”

A ce moment la casquette de M. Roque apparut derrière un lilas.

Il emmena son “jeune ami” pendant deux jours faire un petit voyage aux environs, dans ses propriétés ; et Frédéric, lorsqu’il revint, trouva chez sa mère trois lettres.

La première était un billet de M. Dambreuse l’invitant à dîner pour le mardi précédent. A propos de quoi cette politesse ? On lui avait donc pardonné son incartade ?

La seconde était de Rosanette. Elle le remerciait d’avoir risqué sa vie pour elle ; Frédéric ne comprit pas d’abord ce qu’elle voulait dire ; enfin, après beaucoup d’ambages, elle implorait de lui, en invoquant son amitié, se fiant à sa délicatesse, à deux genoux, disait-elle, vu la nécessité pressante, et comme on demande du pain, un petit secours de cinq cents francs. Il se décida tout de suite à les fournir.

La troisième lettre, venant de Deslauriers, parlait de la subrogation, et était longue, obscure. L’avocat n’avait pris encore aucun parti. Il l’engageait à ne pas se déranger : “C’est inutile que tu reviennes !” appuyant même là-dessus avec une insistance bizarre.

Frédéric se perdit dans toutes sortes de conjectures, et il eut envie de s’en retourner là-bas ; cette prétention au gouvernement de sa conduite le révoltait.

D’ailleurs, la nostalgie du boulevard commençait à le prendre ; et puis sa mère le pressait tellement, M. Roque tournait si bien autour de lui et Mlle Louise l’aimait si fort, qu’il ne pouvait rester plus longtemps sans se déclarer. Il avait besoin de réfléchir, et jugerait mieux les choses dans l’éloignement.

Pour motiver son voyage, Frédéric inventa une histoire ; et il partit, en disant à tout le monde et croyant lui-même qu’il reviendrait bientôt.

CHAPITRE 6

Son retour à Paris ne lui causa point de plaisir ; c’était le soir, à la fin du mois d’août, le boulevard semblait vide, les passants se succédaient avec des mines refrognées, çà et là une chaudière d’asphalte fumait, beaucoup de maisons avaient leurs persiennes entièrement closes ; il arriva chez lui ; de la poussière couvrait les tentures ; et, en dînant tout seul, Frédéric fut pris par un étrange sentiment d’abandon ; alors il songea à Mlle Roque.

L’idée de se marier ne lui paraissait plus exorbitante. Ils voyageraient, ils iraient en Italie, en Orient Et il l’apercevait debout sur un monticule, contemplant un paysage, ou bien appuyée à son bras dans une galerie florentine, s’arrêtant devant les tableaux. Quelle joie ce serait que de voir ce bon petit être s’épanouir aux splendeurs de l’Art et de la Nature ! Sortie de son milieu, en peu de temps, elle ferait une compagne charmante. La fortune de M. Roque le tentait, d’ailleurs. Cependant, une pareille détermination lui répugnait comme une faiblesse, un avilissement.

Mais il était bien résolu (quoi qu’il dût faire) à changer d’existence, c’est-à-dire à ne plus perdre son cœur dans des passions infructueuses, et même il hésitait à remplir la commission dont Louise l’avait chargé. C’était d’acheter pour elle, chez Jacques Arnoux, deux grandes statuettes polychromes représentant des nègres, comme ceux qui étaient à la préfecture de Troyes. Elle connaissait le chiffre du fabricant, n’en voulait pas d’un autre. Frédéric avait peur, s’il retournait chez eux, de tomber encore une fois dans son vieil amour.

Ces réflexions l’occupèrent toute la soirée ; et il allait se coucher quand une femme entra.

— “C’est moi”, dit en riant Mlle Vatnaz. “Je viens de la part de Rosanette.”

Elles s’étaient donc réconciliées ?

— “Mon Dieu, oui ! Je ne suis pas méchante, vous savez bien. Au surplus, la pauvre fille… Ce serait trop long à vous conter.”

Bref, la Maréchale désirait le voir, elle attendait une réponse, sa lettre s’étant promenée de Paris à Nogent Mlle Vatnaz ne savait point ce qu’elle contenait. Alors, Frédéric s’informa de la Maréchale.

Elle était, maintenant, avec un homme très riche, un Russe, le prince Tzernoukoff, qui l’avait vue aux courses du Champ de Mars, l’été dernier.

— “On a trois voitures, cheval de selle, livrée, groom dans le chic anglais, maison de campagne, loge aux Italiens, un tas de choses encore. Voilà, mon cher.”

Et la Vatnaz, comme si elle eût profité à ce changement de fortune, paraissait plus gaie, tout heureuse. Elle retira ses gants et examina dans la chambre les meubles et les bibelots. Elle les cotait à leur prix juste, comme un brocanteur. Il aurait dû la consulter pour les obtenir à meilleur compte ; et elle le félicitait de son bon goût :

— “Ah ! c’est mignon, extrêmement bien ! Il n’y a que vous pour ces idées.”

Puis, apercevant au chevet de l’alcôve une porte :

— “C’est par là qu’on fait sortir les petites femmes, hein ?”

Et, amicalement, elle lui prit le menton. Il tressaillit au contact de ses longues mains, tout à la fois maigres et douces. Elle avait autour des poignets une bordure de dentelle et sur le corsage de sa robe verte des passementeries, comme un hussard. Son chapeau de tulle noir, à bords descendants, lui cachait un peu le front ; ses yeux brillaient là-dessous ; une odeur de patchouli s’échappait de ses bandeaux ; la carcel posée sur un guéridon, en l’éclairant d’en bas comme une rampe de théâtre, faisait saillir sa mâchoire et tout à coup, devant cette femme laide qui avait dans la taille des ondulations de panthère, Frédéric sentit une convoitise énorme, un désir de volupté bestiale.

Elle lui dit d’une voix onctueuse, en tirant de son porte-monnaie trois carrés de papier :

— “Vous allez me prendre ça !”

C’était trois places pour une représentation au bénéfice de Delmar.

— “Comment ! lui ?”

— “Certainement !”

Mlle Vatnaz, sans s’expliquer davantage, ajouta qu’elle l’adorait plus que jamais. Le comédien, à l’en croire, se classait définitivement parmi “les sommités de l’époque” . Et ce n’était pas tel ou tel personnage qu’il représentait, mais le génie même de la France, le Peuple ! Il avait “l’âme humanitaire ; il comprenait le sacerdoce de l’Art” Frédéric, pour se délivrer de ces éloges, lui donna l’argent des trois places.

— “Inutile que vous en parliez là-bas ! — Comme il est tard, mon Dieu ! Il faut que je vous quitte. Ah ! j’oubliais l’adresse : c’est rue Grange-Batelière, 14.”

Et, sur le seuil :

— “Adieu, homme aimé !”

— “Aimé de qui ?” se demanda Frédéric. “Quelle singulière personne !”

Et il se ressouvint que Dussardier lui avait dit un jour, à propos d’elle : “Oh ! ce n’est pas grand-chose !” comme faisant allusion à des histoires peu honorables.

Le lendemain, il se rendit chez la Maréchale. Elle habitait une maison neuve, dont les stores avançaient sur la rue. Il y avait à chaque palier une glace contre le mur, une jardinière rustique devant les fenêtres, tout le long des marches un tapis de toile ; et, quand on arrivait du dehors, la fraîcheur de l’escalier délassait.

Ce fut un domestique mâle qui vint ouvrir, un valet en gilet rouge. Dans l’antichambre, sur la banquette, une femme et deux hommes, des fournisseurs sans doute attendaient, comme dans un vestibule de ministre. A gauche, la porte de la salle à manger, entrebâillée, laissait apercevoir des bouteilles vides sur les buffets, des serviettes au dos des chaises ; et parallèlement s’étendait une galerie, où des bâtons couleur d’or soutenaient un espalier de roses. En bas, dans la cour, deux garçons, les bras nus, frottaient un landau. Leur voix montait jusque-là, avec le bruit intermittent d’une étrille que l’on heurtait contre une pierre.

Le domestique revint. “Madame allait recevoir monsieur” ; et il lui fit traverser une deuxième antichambre, puis un grand salon, tendu de brocatelle jaune, avec des torsades dans les coins qui se rejoignaient sur le plafond et semblaient continuées par les rinceaux du lustre ayant la forme de câbles. On avait sans doute festoyé la nuit dernière. De la cendre de cigare était restée sur les consoles.

Enfin, il entra dans une espèce de boudoir qu’éclairaient confusément des vitraux de couleur. Des trèfles en bois découpé ornaient le dessus des portes ; derrière une balustrade, trois matelas de pourpre formaient divan, et le tuyau d’un narghilé de platine traînait dessus. La cheminée, au lieu de miroir, avait une étagère pyramidale, offrant sur ses gradins toute une collection de curiosités : de vieilles montres d’argent, des cornets de Bohême, des agrafes en pierreries, des boutons de jade, des émaux, des magots, une petite vierge byzantine à chape de vermeil ; et tout cela se fondait dans un crépuscule doré, avec la couleur bleuâtre du tapis, le reflet de nacre des tabourets, le ton fauve des murs couverts de cuir marron. Aux angles, sur des piédouches, des vases de bronze contenaient des touffes de fleurs qui alourdissaient l’atmosphère.

Rosanette parut, habillée d’une veste de satin rose, avec un pantalon de cachemire blanc, un collier de piastres, et une calotte rouge entourée d’une branche de jasmin.

Frédéric fit un mouvement de surprise ; puis dit qu’il apportait “la chose en question”, en lui présentant le billet de banque.

Elle le regarda fort ébahie ; et, comme il avait toujours le billet à la main, sans savoir où le poser :

— “Prenez-le donc”

Elle le saisit ; puis, l’ayant jeté sur le divan :

— “Vous êtes bien aimable.”

C’était pour solder un terrain à Bellevue, qu’elle payait ainsi par annuités. Un tel sans-façon blessa Frédéric. Du reste, tant mieux ! cela le vengeait du passé.

— “Asseyez-vous !” dit-elle, “là, plus près.” Et, d’un ton grave : “D’abord, j’ai à vous remercier, mon cher, d’avoir risqué votre vie.”

— “Oh ! ce n’est rien !”

— “Comment, mais c’est très beau !”

Et la Maréchale lui témoigna une gratitude embarrassante ; car elle devait penser qu’il s’était battu exclusivement pour Arnoux, celui-ci, qui se l’imaginait, ayant dû céder au besoin de le dire.

— “Elle se moque de moi, peut-être”, songeait Frédéric.

il n’avait plus rien à faire, et, alléguant un rendez-vous, il se leva.

— “Eh non ! Restez !”

Il se rassit et la complimenta sur son costume.

Elle répondit, avec un air d’accablement :

— “C’est le Prince qui m’aime comme ça ! Et il faut fumer des machines pareilles”, ajouta Rosanette, en montrant le narghilé. “Si nous en goûtions ? voulez-vous ?”

On apporta du feu, le tombac s’allumant difficilement, elle se mit à trépigner d’impatience. Puis une langueur la saisit ; et elle restait immobile sur le divan, un coussin sous l’aisselle, le corps un peu tordu, un genou plié, l’autre jambe toute droite. Le long serpent de maroquin rouge, qui formait des anneaux par terre, s’enroulait à son bras. Elle en appuyait le bec d’ambre sur ses lèvres et regardait Frédéric, en clignant les yeux, à travers la fumée dont les volutes l’enveloppaient. L’aspiration de sa poitrine faisait gargouiller l’eau, et elle murmurait de temps à autre :

— “Ce pauvre mignon ! ce pauvre chéri !”

Il tâchait de trouver un sujet de conversation agréable l’idée de la Vatnaz lui revint.

Il dit qu’elle lui avait semblé fort élégante.

— “Parbleu !” reprit la Maréchale. “Elle est bienheureuse de m’avoir, celle-là !” sans ajouter un mot de plus, tant il y avait de restriction dans leurs propos.

Tous les deux sentaient une contrainte, un obstacle. En effet, le duel dont Rosanette se croyait la cause avait flatté son amour-propre. Puis elle s’était fort étonnée qu’il n’accourût. pas se prévaloir de son action ; et, pour le contraindre à revenir, elle avait imaginé ce besoin de cinq cents francs. Comment se faisait-il que Frédéric ne demandait pas en retour un peu de tendresse ! C’était un raffinement qui l’émerveillait, et, dans un élan de cœur, elle lui dit :

— “Voulez-vous venir avec nous aux bains de mer ?”

— “Qui cela, nous ?”

— “Moi et mon oiseau ; je vous ferais passer pour mon cousin, comme dans les vieilles comédies.”

— “Mille grâces !”

— “Eh bien, alors, vous prendrez un logement près du nôtre.”

L’idée de se cacher d’un homme riche l’humiliait.

— “Non ! cela est impossible.”

— “A votre aise !”

Rosanette se détourna, ayant une larme aux paupières. Frédéric l’aperçut ; et, pour lui marquer de l’intérêt, il se dit heureux de la voir, enfin, dans Une excellente position.

Elle fit un haussement d’épaules. Qui donc l’affligeait ? Etait-ce, par hasard, qu’on ne l’aimait pas ? — “Oh ! moi, on m’aime toujours !”

Elle ajouta :

— “Reste à savoir de quelle manière.”

Se plaignant, d’étouffer de chaleur ", la Maréchale défit sa veste ; et, sans autre vêtement autour des reins que sa chemise de soie, elle inclinait la tête sur son épaule, avec un air d’esclave plein de provocations.

Un homme d’un égoïsme moins réfléchi n’eût pas songé que le Vicomte, M. de Comaing ou un autre pouvait survenir. Mais Frédéric avait été trop de fois la dupe de ces mêmes regards pour se compromettre dans une humiliation nouvelle.

Elle voulut connaître ses relations, ses amusements ; elle arriva même à s’informer de ses affaires, et à offrir de lui prêter de l’argent, s’il en avait besoin. Frédéric, n’y tenant plus, prit son chapeau.

— “Allons, ma chère, bien du plaisir là-bas ; au revoir !”

Elle écarquilla les yeux ; puis, d’un ton sec :

— “Au revoir !”

Il repassa par le salon jaune et par la seconde antichambre. Il y avait sur la table, entre un vase plein de cartes de visite et une écritoire, un coffret d’argent ciselé. C’était celui de Mme Arnoux ! Alors, il éprouva un attendrissement, et en même temps comme le scandale d’une profanation. Il avait envie d’y porter les mains, de l’ouvrir. Il eut peur d’être aperçu, et s’en alla.

Frédéric fut vertueux. Il ne retourna point chez Arnoux.

Il envoya son domestique acheter les deux nègres, lui ayant fait toutes les recommandations indispensables ; et la caisse partit, le soir même, pour Nogent. Le lendemain, comme il se rendait chez Deslauriers, au détour de la rue Vivienne et du boulevard, Mme Arnoux se montra devant lui, face à face.

Leur premier mouvement fut de reculer ; puis, le même sourire leur vint aux lèvres, et ils s’abordèrent. Pendant une minute, aucun des deux ne parla.

Le soleil l’entourait ; — et sa figure ovale, ses longs sourcils, son châle de dentelle noire, moulant la forme de ses épaules, sa robe de soie gorge-de-pigeon, le bouquet de violettes au coin de sa capote, tout lui parut d'une splendeur extraordinaire. Une suavité infinie s'épanchait de ses beaux yeux ; et, balbutiant, au hasard, les premières paroles venues :

— “Comment se porte Arnoux ?” dit Frédéric.

— “Je vous remercie.”

— “Et vos enfants ?”

— “Ils vont très bien.”

— “Ah !… ah… Quel beau temps nous avons, n'est-ce pas ?”

— “Magnifique, c'est vrai.”

— “Vous faites des courses ?”

— “Oui.”

Et avec une lente inclination de tête :

— “Adieu !”

Elle ne lui avait pas tendu la main, n'avait pas dit un seul mot affectueux, ne l'avait même pas invité à venir chez elle, n'importe ! il n'eût point donné cette rencontre pour la plus belle des aventures ; et il en ruminait la douceur tout en continuant sa route.

Deslauriers, surpris de le voir, dissimula son dépit, — car il conservait par obstination quelque espérance encore du côté de Mme Arnoux ; et il avait écrit à Frédéric de rester là-bas, pour être plus libre dans ses manœuvres.

Il dit cependant qu'il s'était présenté chez elle, afin de savoir si leur contrat stipulait la communauté ; alors, on aurait pu recourir contre la femme ; “et elle a fait une drôle de mine quand je lui ai appris ton mariage.”

— “Tiens ! quelle invention !”

— “Il le fallait, pour montrer que tu avais besoin de tes capitaux ! Une personne indifférente n'aurait pas eu l'espèce de syncope qui l'a prise.”

— “Vraiment ?” s'écria Frédéric.

— “Ah ! mon gaillard, tu te trahis ! Sois franc, voyons !”

Une lâcheté immense envahit l'amoureux de Mme Arnoux.

— “Mais non !… je t'assure !… ma parole d'honneur”

Ces molles dénégations achevèrent de convaincre Deslauriers. Il lui fit des compliments. Il lui demanda “des détails” . Frédéric n'en donna pas, et même résista à l'envie d'en inventer.

Quant à l'hypothèque, il lui dit de ne rien faire, d'attendre. Deslauriers trouva qu'il avait tort, et même fut brutal dans ses remontrances.

Il était d'ailleurs plus sombre, malveillant et irascible que jamais. Dans un an, si la fortune ne changeait pas, il s'embarquerait pour l'Amérique ou se ferait sauter la cervelle. Enfin il paraissait si furieux contre tout et d'un radicalisme tellement absolu que Frédéric ne put s’empêcher de lui dire :

— “Te voilà comme Sénécal.”

Deslauriers, à ce propos, lui apprit qu’il était sorti de Sainte-Pélagie, l’instruction n’ayant point fourni assez de preuves, sans doute, pour le mettre en jugement.

Dans la joie de cette délivrance, Dussardier voulut “offrir un punch”, et pria Frédéric “d’en être”, en l’avertissant toutefois qu’il se trouverait avec Hussonnet, lequel s’était montré excellent pour Sénécal.

En effet, le Flambard venait de s’adjoindre un cabinet d’affaires, portant sur ses prospectus : “Comptoir des vignobles. — Office de publicité. — Bureau de recouvrements et renseignements, etc.” Mais le bohème craignait que son industrie ne fît du tort à sa considération littéraire, et il avait pris le mathématicien pour tenir les comptes. Bien que la place fût médiocre, Sénécal, sans elle, serait mort de faim. Frédéric ne voulant point affliger le brave commis, accepta son invitation.

Dussardier, trois jours d’avance, avait ciré lui-même les pavés rouges de sa mansarde, battu le fauteuil et épousseté la cheminée, où l’on voyait sous un globe une pendule d’albâtre entre une stalactite et un coco. Comme ses deux chandeliers et son bougeoir n’étaient pas suffisants, il avait emprunté au concierge deux flambeaux ; et ces cinq luminaires brillaient sur la commode, que recouvraient trois serviettes, afin de supporter plus décemment des macarons, des biscuits, une brioche et douze bouteilles de bière. En face, contre la muraille tendue d’un papier jaune, une petite bibliothèque en acajou contenait les Fables de Lachambeaudie, les Mystères de Paris, le Napoléon, de Norvins — et, au milieu de l’alcôve, souriait, dans un cadre de palissandre, le visage de Béranger !

Les convives étaient (outre Deslauriers et Sénécal) un pharmacien nouvellement reçu, mais qui n’avait pas les fonds nécessaires pour s’établir ; un jeune homme de sa maison, un placeur de vins, un architecte et un monsieur employé dans les assurances. Regimbart n’avait pu venir. On le regretta.

Ils accueillirent Frédéric avec de grandes marques de sympathie, tous connaissant par Dussardier son langage chez M. Dambreuse. Sénécal se contenta de lui offrir la main, d’un air digne.

Il se tenait debout contre la cheminée. Les autres, assis et la pipe aux lèvres, l’écoutaient discourir sur le suffrage universel, d’où devait résulter le triomphe de la Démocratie, l’application des principes de l’Evangile. Du reste, le moment approchait ; les banquets réformistes se multipliaient dans les provinces ; le Piémont, Naples, la Toscane…

— “C’est vrai”, dit Deslauriers, lui coupant net la parole, “ça ne peut pas durer plus longtemps !” Et il se mit à faire un tableau de la situation.

Nous avions sacrifié la Hollande pour obtenir de l’Angleterre la reconnaissance de Louis-Philippe ; et cette fameuse alliance anglaise, elle était perdue, grâce aux mariages espagnols ! En Suisse, M. Guizot, à la remorque de l’Autrichien, soutenait les traités de 1815. La Prusse avec son Zollverein nous préparait des embarras. La question d’Orient restait pendante.

— “Ce n’est pas une raison parce que le grand-duc Constantin envoie des présents à M. d’Aumale Il pour se fier à la Russie. Quant à l’intérieur, jamais on n’a vu tant d’aveuglement, de bêtise ! Leur majorité même ne se tient plus Partout, enfin, c’est, selon le mot connu, rien ! rien ! rien Et, devant tant de hontes”, poursuivit l’avocat en mettant ses poings sur ses hanches, “ils se déclarent satisfaits”

Cette allusion à un vote célèbre provoqua des applaudissements. Dussardier déboucha une bouteille de bière la mousse éclaboussa les rideaux, il n’y prit garde ; il chargeait les pipes, coupait la brioche, en offrait, était descendu plusieurs fois pour voir si le punch allait venir ; et on ne tarda pas à s’exalter, tous ayant contre le Pouvoir la même exaspération. Elle était violente, sans autre cause que la haine de l’injustice ; et ils mêlaient aux griefs légitimes les reproches les plus bêtes.

Le pharmacien gémit sur l’état pitoyable de notre flotte. Le courtier d’assurances ne tolérait pas les deux flotte. Le courtier d’assurances ne tolérait pas les deux sentinelles du maréchal Soult. Deslauriers dénonça les jésuites, qui venaient de s’installer à Lille, publiquement. Sénécal exécrait bien plus M. Cousin ; car l’éclectisme enseignant à tirer la certitude de la raison, développait l’égoïsme, détruisait la solidarité ; le placeur de vins, comprenant peu ces matières, remarqua tout haut qu’il oubliait bien des infamies :

— “Le wagon royal de la ligne du Nord doit coûter quatre-vingt mille francs ! Qui le payera ?”

— “Oui, qui le payera ?” reprit l’employé de commerce, furieux comme si on eût puisé cet argent dans sa poche.

Il s’ensuivit des récriminations contre les loups-cerviers de la Bourse et la corruption des fonctionnaires. On devait remonter plus haut, selon Sénécal, et accuser, tout d’abord, les princes, qui ressuscitaient les mœurs de la Régence.

— “N’avez-vous pas vu, dernièrement, les amis du duc de Montpensier revenir de Vincennes, ivres sans doute, et troubler par leurs chansons les ouvriers du faubourg Saint-Antoine”

— “On a même crié : A bas les voleurs !” dit le pharmacien. “J’y étais, j’ai crié !”

— “Tant mieux ! le Peuple enfin se réveille depuis le procès Teste-Cubières !”

— “Moi, ce procès-là m’a fait de la peine”, dit Dussardier, “parce que ça déshonore un vieux soldat !”

— “Savez-vous”, continua Sénécal, “qu’on a découvert chez la duchesse de Praslin ?”

Mais un coup de pied ouvrit la porte. Hussonnet entra.

— “Salut, messeigneurs !”, dit-il en s’asseyant sur le lit. Aucune allusion ne fut faite à son article, qu’il regrettait, du reste. la Maréchale l’en ayant tancé vertement. Il venait de voir, au théâtre de Dumas, le Chevalier de Maison-Rouge, et “trouvait ça embêtant” .

Un jugement pareil étonna les démocrates, — ce drame, par ses tendances, ses décors plutôt, caressant leurs passions. Ils protestèrent. Sénécal, pour en finir, demanda si la pièce servait la Démocratie.

— “Oui…. peut-être ; mais c’est d’un style…”

— “Eh bien, elle est bonne, alors ; qu’est-ce que le style ? c’est l’idée !”

Et, sans permettre à Frédéric de parler :

— “J’avançais donc que, dans l’affaire Praslin…” Hussonnet l’interrompit.

— “Ah ! voilà encore une rengaine, celle-là ! M’embête-t-elle !”

— “Et d’autres que vous !” répliqua Deslauriers. “Elle a fait saisir rien que cinq journaux ! Ecoutez-moi cette note.”

Et, ayant tiré son calepin, il lut :

— “Nous avons subi, depuis l’établissement de la meilleure des républiques, douze cent vingt-neuf procès de presse, d’où il est résulté pour les écrivains : trois mille cent quarante et un ans de prison, avec la légère somme de sept millions cent dix mille cinq cents francs d’amende. — C’est coquet, hein ?”

Tous ricanèrent amèrement. Frédéric, animé comme les autres, reprit :

— “La Démocratie pacifique a un procès pour son feuilleton, un roman intitulé la Part des Femmes.”

— “Allons ! bon !” dit Hussonnet. “Si on nous défend notre part des femmes !”

— “Mais qu’est-ce qui n’est pas défendu ?” s’écria Deslauriers. “Il est défendu de fumer dans le Luxembourg, défendu de chanter l’hymne à Pie IX !”

— “Et on interdit le banquet des typographes !” articula une voix sourde.

C’était celle de l’architecte, caché par l’ombre de l’alcôve, et silencieux jusqu’à présent. Il ajouta que, la semaine dernière, on avait condamné pour outrages au Roi, un nommé Rouget.

— “Rouget est frit !” dit Hussonnet.

Cette plaisanterie parut tellement inconvenante à Sénécal, qu’il lui reprocha de défendre “le jongleur de l’hôtel de ville, l’ami du traître Dumouriez.”

— “Moi ? au contraire !”

Il trouvait Louis-Philippe poncif, garde national, tout ce qu’il y avait de plus épicier et bonnet de coton ! Et, mettant la main sur son cœur, le bohème débita les phrases sacramentelles : — “C’est toujours avec un nouveau plaisir… — La nationalité polonaise ne périra pas… — Nos grands travaux seront poursuivis… — Donnez-moi de l’argent pour ma petite famille…” Tous riaient beaucoup, le proclamant un gaillard délicieux, plein d’esprit ; la joie redoubla à la vue du bol de punch qu’un limonadier apportait.

Les flammes de l’alcool et celles des bougies échauffèrent vite l’appartement ; et la lumière de la mansarde, traversant la cour, éclairait en face le bord d’un toit, avec le tuyau d’une cheminée qui se dressait en noir sur la nuit. Ils parlaient très haut, tous à la fois ; ils avaient retiré leurs redingotes, ils heurtaient les meubles, ils choquaient les verres.

Hussonnet s’écria :

— “Faites monter des grandes dames, pour que ce soit plus Tour de Nesle couleur locale, et rembranesque, palsambleu !”

Et le pharmacien, qui tournait le punch indéfiniment, entonna à pleine poitrine :

J’ai deux grands bœufs dans mon étable,
Deux grands bœufs blancs…

Sénécal lui mit la main sur la bouche, il n’aimait pas le désordre ; et les locataires apparaissaient à leurs carreaux, surpris du tapage insolite qui se faisait dans le logement de Dussardier.

Le brave garçon était heureux, et dit que ça lui rappelait leurs petites séances d’autrefois, au quai Napoléon ; plusieurs manquaient cependant, “ainsi Pellerin…”

— “On peut s’en passer”, reprit Frédéric.

Et Deslauriers s’informa de Martinon.

— “Que devient-il, cet intéressant Monsieur ?” Aussitôt Frédéric, épanchant le mauvais vouloir qu’il lui portait, attaqua son esprit, son caractère, sa fausse élégance, l’homme tout entier. C’était bien un spécimen de paysan parvenu ! L’aristocratie nouvelle, la bourgeoisie, ne valait pas l’ancienne, la noblesse. Il soutenait cela ; et les démocrates approuvaient, — comme s’il avait fait partie de l’une et qu’ils eussent fréquenté l’autre. On fut enchanté de lui. Le pharmacien le compara même à M. d’Alton-Shée qui, bien que pair de France, défendait la cause du Peuple.

L’heure de s’en aller était venue. Tous se séparèrent avec de grandes poignées de main ; Dussardier, par tendresse, reconduisit Frédéric et Deslauriers. Dès qu’ils furent dans la rue, l’avocat eut l’air de réfléchir, et, après un moment de silence :

— “Tu lui en veux donc beaucoup, à Pellerin ?” Frédéric ne cacha pas sa rancune.

Le peintre, cependant, avait retiré de la montre le fameux tableau. On ne devait pas se brouiller pour des vétilles ! A quoi bon se faire un ennemi ?

— “Il a cédé à un mouvement d’humeur, excusable dans un homme qui n’a pas le sou. Tu ne peux pas comprendre ça, toi !”

Et, Deslauriers remonté chez lui, le commis ne lâcha point Frédéric ; il l’engagea même à acheter le portrait. En effet, Pellerin, désespérant de l’intimider, les avait circonvenus pour que, grâce à eux, il prît la chose.

Deslauriers en reparla, insista. Les prétentions de l’artiste étaient raisonnables.

— “Je suis sûr que, moyennant, peut-être, cinq cents francs…”

— “Ah ! donne-les ! tiens, les voici”, dit Frédéric.

Le soir même, le tableau fut apporté. Il lui parut plus abominable encore que la première fois. Les demi-teintes et les ombres s’étaient plombées sous les retouches trop nombreuses, et elles semblaient obscurcies par rapport aux lumières, qui, demeurées brillantes çà et là, détonnaient dans l’ensemble.

Frédéric se vengea de l’avoir payé, en le dénigrant amèrement. Deslauriers le crut sur parole et approuva sa conduite, car il ambitionnait toujours de constituer une phalange dont il serait le chef ; certains hommes se réjouissent de faire faire à leurs amis des choses qui leur sont désagréables.

Cependant, Frédéric n’était pas retourné chez les Dambreuse. Les capitaux lui manquaient. Ce seraient des explications à n’en plus finir ; il balançait à se décider. Peut-être avait-il raison ? Rien n’était sûr, maintenant, l’affaire des houilles pas plus qu’une autre ; il fallait abandonner un pareil monde ; enfin, Deslauriers le détourna de l’entreprise. A force de haine il devenait vertueux ; et puis il aimait mieux Frédéric dans la médiocrité. De cette manière, il restait son égal, et en communion plus intime avec lui.

La commission de Mlle Roque avait été fort mal exécutée. Son père l’écrivit, en fournissant les explications les plus précises, et terminait sa lettre par cette badinerie : “Au risque de vous donner un mal de nègre.” Frédéric ne pouvait faire autrement que de retourner chez Arnoux. Il monta dans le magasin, et ne vit personne. La maison de commerce croulant, les employés imitaient l’incurie de leur patron.

Il côtoya la longue étagère, chargée de faïences, qui occupait d’un bout à l’autre le milieu de l’appartement ; puis, arrivé au fond, devant le comptoir, il marcha plus fort pour se faire entendre.

La portière se relevant, Mme Arnoux parut.

— “Comment, vous ici ! vous !”

— “Oui”, balbutia-t-elle, un peu troublée. “Je cherchais…”

Il aperçut son mouchoir près du pupitre, et devina qu’elle était descendue chez son mari pour se rendre compte, éclaircir sans doute une inquiétude.

— “Mais… vous avez peut-être besoin de quelque chose ?” dit-elle.

— “Un rien, madame.”

— “Ces commis sont intolérables ils s’absentent toujours.”

On ne devait pas les blâmer. Au contraire, il se félicitait de la circonstance.

Elle le regarda ironiquement.

— “Eh bien, et ce mariage ?”

— “Quel mariage ?”

— “Le vôtre !”

— “Moi ? Jamais de la vie !”

Elle fit un geste de dénégation.

— “Quand cela serait, après tout ? On se réfugie dans le médiocre, par désespoir du beau qu’on a rêvé !”

— “Tous vos rêves, pourtant, n’étaient pas si… candides !”

— “Que voulez-vous dire ?”

— “Quand vous vous promenez aux courses avec… des personnes !”

Il maudit la Maréchale. Un souvenir lui revint.

— “Mais c’est vous-même, autrefois, qui m’avez prié de la voir, dans l’intérêt d’Arnoux”

Elle répliqua en hochant la tête :

— “Et vous en profitez pour vous distraire.”

— “Mon Dieu ! oublions toutes ces sottises”

— “C’est juste, puisque vous allez vous marier”

Et elle retenait son soupir, en mordant ses lèvres.

Alors, il s’écria :

— “Mais je vous répète que non ! Pouvez-vous croire que, moi, avec mes besoins d’intelligence, mes habitudes, j’aille m’enfouir en province pour jouer aux cartes, surveiller des maçons, et me promener en sabots ! Dans quel but, alors ? On vous a conté qu’elle était riche, n’est-ce pas ? Ah ! je me moque bien de l’argent ! Est-ce qu’après avoir désiré tout ce qu’il y a de plus beau, de plus tendre, de plus enchanteur, une sorte de paradis sous forme humaine, et quand je l’ai trouvé enfin, cet idéal, quand cette vision me cache toutes les autres…” Et, lui prenant la tête à deux mains, il se mit à la baiser sur les paupières, en répétant :

— “Non ! non ! non ! jamais je ne me marierai jamais ! jamais !”

Elle acceptait ces caresses, figée par la surprise et par le ravissement.

La porte du magasin sur l’escalier retomba. Elle fit un bond ; et elle restait la main étendue, comme pour lui commandé le silence. Des pas se rapprochèrent. Puis quelqu'un dit au-dehors :

— "Madame est-elle là ?"

— "Entrez !"

Mme Arnoux avait le coude sur le comptoir et roulait une plume entre ses doigts, tranquillement, quand le teneur de livres ouvrit la portière.

Frédéric se leva.

— "Madame, j'ai bien l'honneur de vous saluer. Le service, n'est-ce pas, sera prêt ? je puis compter dessus ?"

Elle ne répondit rien. Mais cette complicité silencieuse enflamma son visage de toutes les rougeurs de l'adultère.

Le lendemain, il retourna chez elle, on le reçut ; et, afin de poursuivre ses avantages, immédiatement, sans préambule, Frédéric commença par se justifier de la rencontre au Champ de Mars. Le hasard seul l'avait fait se trouver avec cette femme. En admettant qu'elle fût jolie (ce qui n'était pas vrai), comment pourrait-elle arrêter sa pensée, même une minute, puisqu'il en aimait une autre !

— "Vous le savez bien, je vous l'ai dit."

Mme Arnoux baissa la tête.

— "Je suis fâchée que vous me l'ayez dit."

— "Pourquoi ?"

— "Les convenances les plus simples exigent maintenant que je ne vous revoie plus !"

Il protesta de l'innocence de son amour. Le passé devait lui répondre de l'avenir ; il s'était promis à lui-même de ne pas troubler son existence, de ne pas l'étourdir de ses plaintes.

— "Mais, hier, mon cœur débordait."

— "Nous ne devons plus songer à ce moment-là, mon ami !"

Cependant, où serait le mal quand deux pauvres êtres confondraient leur tristesse ?

— "Car vous n'êtes pas heureuse non plus ! Oh ! je vous connais, vous n'avez personne qui réponde à vos besoins d'affection, de dévouement ; je ferai tout ce que vous voudrez ! Je ne vous offenserai pas !… je vous le jure."

Et il se laissa tomber sur les genoux, malgré lui, s'affaissant sous un poids intérieur trop lourd.

— "Levez-vous !" dit-elle, "je le veux !"

Et elle lui déclara impérieusement que. s'il n'obéissait pas. il ne la reverrait jamais.

— "Ah ! je vous en défie bien reprit Frédéric."

— "Qu'est-ce que j'ai à faire dans le monde ? Les autres s'évertuent pour la richesse, la célébrité. le pouvoir ! Moi. je n'ai pas d'état, vous êtes mon occupation exclusive. toute ma fortune, le but, le centre de mon existence, de mes pensées. Je ne peux pas plus vivre sans vous que sans l'air du ciel ! Est-ce que vous ne sentez pas l'aspiration de mon âme monter vers la vôtre. et qu'elles doivent se confondre. et que j'en meurs ?”

Mme Arnoux se mit à trembler de tous ses membres.

— “Oh ! allez-vous-en ? je vous en prie !” L'expression bouleversée de sa figure l'arrêta. Puis il fit un pas. Mais elle se reculait, en joignant les deux mains.

— “Laissez-moi ! au nom du ciel ! de grâce” Et Frédéric l'aimait tellement, qu'il sortit.

Bientôt, il fut pris de colère contre lui-même, se déclara un imbécile, et, vingt-quatre heures après, il revint.

Madame n'y était pas. Il resta sur le palier, étourdi de fureur et d'indignation. Arnoux parut, et lui apprit que sa femme. le matin même, était partie s'installer dans une petite maison de campagne qu'ils louaient à Auteuil, ne possédant plus celle de Saint-Cloud.

— “C'est encore une de ses lubies ! Enfin, puisque ça l'arrange ! et moi aussi du reste ; tant mieux ! Dînons-nous ensemble ce soir ?”

Frédéric allégua une affaire urgente, puis courut à Auteuil.

Mme Arnoux laissa échapper un cri de joie. Alors, toute sa rancune s'évanouit.

Il ne parla point de son amour. Pour lui inspirer plus de confiance. il exagéra même sa réserve ; et, lorsqu'il demanda s'il pouvait revenir, elle répondit : “Mais sans doute”, en offrant sa main, qu'elle retira presque aussitôt.

Frédéric, dès lors, multiplia ses visites. Il promettait au cocher de gros pourboires. Mais souvent, la lenteur du cheval l'impatientant, il descendait ; puis, hors d'haleine, grimpait dans un omnibus ; et comme il examinait dédaigneusement les figures des gens assis devant lui, et qui n'allaient pas chez elle !

Il reconnaissait de loin sa maison, à un chèvrefeuille énorme couvrant, d'un seul côté, les planches du toit ; c'était une manière de chalet suisse peint en rouge, avec un balcon extérieur. Il y avait dans le jardin trois vieux marronniers, et au milieu, sur un tertre, un parasol en chaume que soutenait un tronc d'arbre. Sous l'ardoise des murs, une grosse vigne mal attachée pendait de place en place, comme un câble pourri. La sonnette de la grille, un peu rude à tirer, prolongeait son carillon, et on était toujours longtemps avant de venir. Chaque fois, il éprouvait une angoisse, une peur indéterminée.

Puis il entendait claquer, sur le sable, les pantoufles de la bonne ; ou bien Mme Arnoux elle-même se présentait. Il arriva, un jour, derrière son dos, comme elle était accroupie, devant le gazon, à chercher de la violette.

L’humeur de sa fille l’avait forcée de la mettre au couvent. Son gamin passait l’après-midi dans une école, Arnoux faisait de longs déjeuners au Palais-Royal, avec Regimbart et l’ami Compain. Aucun fâcheux ne pouvait les surprendre.

Il était bien entendu qu’ils ne devaient pas s’appartenir. Cette convention qui les garantissait du péril, facilitait leurs épanchements.

Elle lui dit son existence d’autrefois, à Chartres, chez sa mère ; sa dévotion vers douze ans, puis sa fureur de musique, lorsqu’elle chantait jusqu’à la nuit, dans sa petite chambre, d’où l’on découvrait les remparts. Il lui conta ses mélancolies au collège, et comment dans son ciel poétique resplendissait un visage de femme, si bien qu’en la voyant pour la première fois, il l’avait reconnue.

Ces discours n’embrassaient, d’habitude, que les années de leur fréquentation. Il lui rappelait d’insignifiants détails, la couleur de sa robe à telle époque, quelle personne un jour était survenue, ce qu’elle avait dit une autre fois ; et elle répondait tout émerveillée “Oui, je me rappelle !”

Leurs goûts, leurs jugements étaient les mêmes.

Souvent celui des deux qui écoutait l’autre s’écriait :

— “Moi aussi !”

Et l’autre à son tour reprenait : — “Moi aussi !”

Puis c’étaient d’interminables plaintes sur la Providence :

— “Pourquoi le ciel ne l’a-t-il pas voulu ! Si nous nous étions rencontrés !…”

— “Ah ! si j’avais été plus jeune !” soupirait-elle.

— “Non ! moi, un peu plus vieux.”

Et ils s’imaginaient une vie exclusivement amoureuse, assez féconde pour remplir les plus vastes solitudes, excédant toutes joies, défiant toutes les misères, où les heures auraient disparu dans un continuel épanchement d’eux-mêmes, et qui aurait fait quelque chose de resplendissant et d’élevé comme la palpitation des étoiles.

Presque toujours, ils se tenaient en plein air au haut de l’escalier ; des cimes d’arbres jaunies par l’automne se mamelonnaient devant eux, inégalement jusqu’au bord du ciel pâle ; ou bien ils allaient au bout de l’avenue, dans un pavillon ayant pour tout meuble un canapé de toile grise. Des points noirs tachaient la glace ; les murailles exhalaient une odeur de moisi ; — et ils restaient là, causant d’eux-mêmes, des autres, de n’importe quoi, avec ravissement. Quelquefois, les rayons du soleil, traversant la jalousie, tendaient depuis le plafond jusque sur les dalles comme les cordes d’une lyre, des brins de poussière tourbillonnaient dans ces barres lumineuses. Elle s’amusait à les fendre avec sa main ; — Frédéric la saisissait, doucement ; et il contemplait l’entrelacs de ses veines, les grains de sa peau, la forme de ses doigts. Chacun de ses doigts était, pour lui, plus qu’une chose, presque une personne.

Elle lui donna ses gants, la semaine d’après son mouchoir. Elle l’appelait “Frédéric”, il l’appelait “Marie”, adorant ce nom-là, fait exprès, disait-il, pour être soupiré dans l’extase, et qui semblait contenir des nuages d’encens, des jonchées de roses.

Ils arrivèrent à fixer d’avance le jour de ses visites et sortant comme par hasard, elle allait au-devant de lui, sur la route.

Elle ne faisait rien pour exciter son amour, perdue dans cette insouciance qui caractérise les grands bonheurs. Pendant toute la saison, elle porta une robe de chambre en soie brune, bordée de velours pareil, vêtement large convenant à la mollesse de ses attitudes et de sa physionomie sérieuse. D’ailleurs, elle touchait au mois d’août des femmes, époque tout à la fois de réflexion et de tendresse, où la maturité qui commence colore le regard d’une flamme plus profonde, quand la force du cœur se mêle à l’expérience de la vie, et que, sur la fin de ses épanouissements, l’être complet déborde de richesses dans l’harmonie de sa beauté. Jamais elle n’avait eu plus de douceur, d’indulgence. Sûre de ne pas faillir, elle s’abandonnait à un sentiment qui lui semblait un droit conquis par ses chagrins. Cela était si bon, du reste, et si nouveau ! Quel abîme entre la grossièreté d’Arnoux et les adorations de Frédéric !

Il tremblait de perdre par un mot tout ce qu’il croyait avoir gagné, se disant qu’on peut ressaisir une occasion et qu’on ne rattrape jamais une sottise. Il voulait qu’elle se donnât, et non la prendre. L’assurance de son amour le délectait comme un avant-goût de la possession, et puis le charme de sa personne lui troublait le cœur plus que les sens. C’était une béatitude indéfinie, un tel enivrement, qu’il en oubliait jusqu’à la possibilité d’un bonheur absolu. Loin d’elle, des convoitises furieuses le dévoraient.

Bientôt il y eut dans leurs dialogues de grands intervalles de silence. Quelquefois, une sorte de pudeur sexuelle les faisait rougir l’un devant l’autre. Toutes les précautions pour cacher leur amour le dévoilaient ; plus il devenait fort, plus leurs manières étaient contenues. Par l’exercice d’un tel mensonge, leur sensibilité s’exaspéra, Ils jouissaient délicieusement de la senteur des feuilles humides, ils souffraient du vent d’est, ils avaient des irritations sans cause, des pressentiments funèbres ; un bruit de pas, le craquement d’une boiserie leur causaient des épouvantes comme s’ils avaient été coupables ; ils se sentaient poussés vers un abîme ; une atmosphère orageuse les enveloppait ; et, quand des doléances échappaient à Frédéric, elle s’accusait elle-même.

— “Oui ! je fais mal ! j’ai l’air d’une coquette ! Ne venez donc plus !”

Alors, il répétait les mêmes serments, — qu’elle écoutait chaque fois avec plaisir.

Son retour à Paris et les embarras du jour de l'an suspendirent un peu leurs entrevues. Quand il revint, il avait, dans les allures, quelque chose de plus hardi. Elle sortait à chaque minute pour donner des ordres, et recevait, malgré ses prières, tous les bourgeois qui venaient la voir. On se livrait alors, à des conversations sur Léotade, M. Guizot, le Pape, l'insurrection de Palerme et le banquet du XIIe arrondissement lequel inspirait des inquiétudes. Frédéric se soulageait en déblatérant contre le Pouvoir ; car il souhaitait, comme Deslauriers, un bouleversement universel, tant il était maintenant aigri. Mme Arnoux, de son côté, devenait sombre.

Son mari, prodiguant les extravagances, entretenait une ouvrière de la manufacture, celle qu'on appelait la Bordelaise. Mme Arnoux l'apprit elle-même à Frédéric. Il voulait tirer de là un argument "puisqu'on la trahissait."

— "Oh ! je ne m'en trouble guère !" dit-elle.

Cette déclaration lui parut affermir complètement leur intimité. Arnoux s'en méfiait-il ?

— "Non ! pas maintenant !"

Elle lui conta qu'un soir, il les avait laissés en tête-à-tête, puis était revenu, avait écouté derrière la porte, et, comme tous deux parlaient de choses indifférentes, il vivait, depuis ce temps-là, dans une entière sécurité :

— "Avec raison, n'est-ce pas ?" dit amèrement Frédéric.

— "Oui, sans doute"

Elle aurait fait mieux de ne pas risquer un pareil mot.

Un jour, elle ne se trouva point chez elle, à l'heure où il avait coutume d'y venir. Ce fut, pour lui, comme une trahison.

Il se fâcha ensuite de voir les fleurs qu'il apportait toujours plantées dans un verre d'eau.

— "Où voulez-vous donc qu'elles soient ?"

— "Oh ! pas là ! Du reste, elles y sont moins froidement que sur votre cœur."

Quelque temps après, il lui reprocha d'avoir été la veille aux Italiens, sans le prévenir. D'autres l'avaient vue, admirée, aimée peut-être ; Frédéric s'attachait à ses soupçons uniquement pour la quereller, la tourmenter ; car il commençait à la haïr, et c'était bien le moins qu'elle eût une part de ses souffrances !

Une après-midi (vers le milieu de février), il la surprit fort émue. Eugène se plaignait de mal à la gorge. Le docteur avait dit pourtant que ce n'était rien, un gros rhume, la grippe. Frédéric fut étonné par l'air ivre de l'enfant. Il rassura sa mère néanmoins, cita en exemple plusieurs bambins de son âge qui venaient d'avoir des affections semblables et s'étaient vite guéris.

— "Vraiment ?"

— “Mais oui, bien sûr !”

— “Oh ! comme vous êtes bon !”

Et elle lui prit la main. Il l’étreignit dans la sienne.

— “Oh ! laissez-la.”

— “Qu’est-ce que cela fait, puisque c’est au consolateur que vous l’offrez !… Vous me croyez bien pour ces choses, et vous doutez de moi… quand je vous parle de mon amour !”

— “Je n’en doute pas, mon pauvre ami !”

— “Pourquoi cette défiance, comme si j’étais un misérable capable d’abuser !…”

— “Oh ! non !…”

— “Si j’avais seulement une preuve”

— “Quelle Preuve ?”

— “Celle qu’on donnerait au premier venu, celle que vous m’avez accordée à moi-même.”

Et il lui rappela qu’une fois ils étaient sortis ensemble, par un crépuscule d’hiver, un temps de brouillard. Tout cela était bien loin, maintenant ! Qui donc l’empêchait de se montrer à son bras, devant tout le monde, sans crainte de sa part, sans arrière-pensée de la sienne, n’ayant personne autour d’eux pour les importuner ?

— “Soit !” dit-elle, avec une bravoure de décision qui stupéfia d’abord Frédéric.

Mais il reprit vivement :

— “Voulez-vous que je vous attende au coin de la rue Tronchet et de la rue de la Ferme ?”

— “Mon Dieu ! mon ami…”, balbutiait Mme Arnoux.

Sans lui donner le temps de réfléchir, il ajouta :

— “Mardi prochain, je suppose ?”

— “Mardi ?”

— “Oui, entre deux et trois heures.”

— “J’y serai !”

Et elle détourna son visage, par un mouvement de honte. Frédéric lui posa ses lèvres sur la nuque.

— “Oh ! ce n’est pas bien”, dit-elle. “Vous me feriez repentir.”

Il s’écarta, redoutant la mobilité ordinaire des femmes. Puis, sur le seuil, murmura, doucement, comme une chose bien convenue

— “A mardi !”

Elle baissa ses beaux yeux d’une façon discrète et résignée.

Frédéric avait un plan.

Il espérait que, grâce à la pluie ou au soleil, il pourrait la faire s’arrêter sous une porte, et qu’une fois sous la porte, elle entrerait dans la maison. Le difficile était d’en découvrir une convenable.

Il se mit donc en recherche, et, vers le milieu de la rue Tronchet, il lut de loin, sur une enseigne : Appartements meublés.

Le garçon, comprenant son intention, lui montra tout de suite, à l’entresol, une chambre et un cabinet avec deux sorties. Frédéric la retint pour un mois et paya d’avance.

Puis il alla dans trois magasins acheter la parfumerie la plus rare ; il se procura un morceau de fausse guipure pour remplacer l’affreux couvre-pieds de coton rouge, il choisit une paire de pantoufles en satin bleu ; la crainte seule de paraître grossier le modéra dans ses emplettes ; il revint avec elles et plus dévotement que ceux qui font des reposoirs, il changea les meubles de place, drapa lui-même les rideaux, mit des bruyères sur la cheminée, des violettes sur la commode ; il aurait voulu paver la chambre tout en or. “C’est demain”, se disait-il, “oui demain ! je ne rêve pas.” Et il sentait battre son cœur à grands coups sous le délire de son espérance ; puis, quand tout fut prêt, il emporta la clef dans sa poche, comme si le bonheur, qui dormait là, avait pu s’en envoler.

Une lettre de sa mère l’attendait chez lui.

“Pourquoi une si longue absence ? Ta conduite commence à paraître ridicule. Je comprends que, dans une certaine mesure, tu aies d’abord hésité devant cette union ; cependant, réfléchis !”

Et elle précisait les choses : quarante-cinq mille livres de rente. Du reste, “on en causait” ; et M. Roque attendait une réponse définitive. Quant à la jeune personne, sa position véritablement était embarrassante. “Elle t’aime beaucoup.”

Frédéric rejeta la lettre sans la finir, et en ouvrit une autre, un billet de Deslauriers.

“Mon vieux,

“La *poire* est mûre. Selon ta promesse, nous comptons sur toi. On se réunit demain au petit jour, place du Panthéon. Entre au café Soufflot. Il faut que je te parle avant la manifestation.”

“Oh ! je les connais, leurs manifestations. Mille grâces ! j’ai un rendez-vous plus agréable.”

Et, le lendemain, dès onze heures, Frédéric était sorti. Il voulait donner un dernier coup d’œil aux préparatifs ; puis, qui sait, elle pouvait, par un hasard quelconque, être en avance ? En débouchant de la rue Tronchet, il entendit derrière la Madeleine une grande clameur ; il s’avança ; et il aperçut au fond de la place, à gauche, des gens en blouse et des bourgeois.

En effet, un manifeste publié dans les journaux avait convoqué à cet endroit tous les souscripteurs du banquet réformiste. Le Ministère, presque immédiatement, avait affiché une proclamation l'interdisant. La veille au soir, l'opposition parlementaire y avait renoncé ; mais les patriotes, qui ignoraient cette résolution des chefs, étaient venus au rendez-vous, suivis par un grand nombre de curieux. Une députation des écoles s'était portée tout à l'heure chez Odilon Barrot. Elle était maintenant aux Affaires-Etrangères ; et on ne savait pas si le banquet aurait lieu, si le Gouvernement exécuterait sa menace, si les gardes nationaux se présenteraient. On en voulait aux Députés comme au Pouvoir. La foule augmentait de plus en plus, quand tout à coup vibra dans les airs le refrain de la Marseillaise.

C'était la colonne des étudiants qui arrivait. lis marchaient au pas, sur deux files, en bon ordre, l'aspect irrité, les mains nues, et tous criant par intervalles — "Vive la Réforme ! à bas Guizot !"

Les amis de Frédéric étaient là, bien sûr. Ils allaient l'apercevoir et l'entraîner. Il se réfugia vivement dans la rue de l'Arcade.

Quand les étudiants eurent fait deux fois le tour de la Madeleine, ils descendirent vers la place de la Concorde. Elle était remplie de monde ; et la foule tassée semblait, de loin, un champ d'épis noirs qui oscillaient.

Au même moment, des soldats de la ligne se rangèrent en bataille, à gauche de l'église.

Les groupes stationnaient, cependant. Pour en finir, des agents de police en bourgeois saisissaient les plus mutins et les emmenaient au poste, brutalement. Frédéric, malgré son indignation, resta muet ; on aurait pu le prendre avec les autres, et il aurait manqué Mme Arnoux.

Peu de temps après, parurent les casques des municipaux. Ils frappaient autour d'eux, à coups de plat de sabre. Un cheval s'abattit ; on courut lui porter secours et, dès que le cavalier fut en selle, tous s'enfuirent.

Alors, il y eut un grand silence. La pluie fine, qui avait mouillé l'asphalte, ne tombait plus. Des nuages s'en allaient, balayés mollement par le vent d'ouest.

Frédéric se mit à parcourir la rue Tronchet, en regardant devant lui et derrière lui.

Deux heures enfin sonnèrent. "Ah ! c'est maintenant !" se dit-il, "elle sort de sa maison, elle approche" ; et, une minute après : "Elle aurait eu le temps de venir." Jusqu'à trois heures, il tâcha de se calmer. "Non, elle n'est pas en retard ; un peu de patience !"

Et, par désœuvrement, il examinait les rares boutiques : un libraire, un sellier, un magasin de deuil. Bientôt il connut tous les noms des ouvrages, tous les harnais, toutes les étoffes. Les marchands, à force de le voir passer et repasser continuellement, furent étonnés d'abord, puis effrayés, et ils fermèrent leur devanture.

Sans doute, elle avait un empêchement, et elle en souffrait aussi. Mais quelle joie tout à l'heure ! — Car elle allait venir, cela était certain ! “Elle me l'a bien promis !” Cependant, une angoisse intolérable le gagnait.

Par un mouvement absurde, il rentra dans l'hôtel, comme si elle avait pu s'y trouver. A l'instant même, elle arrivait peut-être dans la rue. Il s'y jeta. Personne ? Et il se remit à battre le trottoir.

Il considérait les fentes des pavés, la gueule des gouttières, les candélabres, les numéros au-dessus des portes. Les objets les plus minimes devenaient pour lui des compagnons, ou plutôt des spectateurs ironiques ; et les façades régulières des maisons lui semblaient impitoyables. Il souffrait du froid aux pieds. Il se sentait dissoudre d'accablement. La répercussion de ses pas lui secouait la cervelle.

Quand il vit quatre heures à sa montre, il éprouva comme un vertige, une épouvante. Il tâcha de se répéter des vers, de calculer n'importe quoi, d'inventer une histoire. Impossible ! l'image de Mme Arnoux l'obsédait. Il avait envie de courir à sa rencontre. Mais quelle route prendre pour ne pas se croiser ?

Il aborda un commissionnaire, lui mit dans la main cinq francs, et le chargea d'aller rue Paradis, chez Jacques Arnoux, pour s'enquérir près du portier “si Madame était chez elle” . Puis il se planta au coin de la rue de la Ferme et de la rue Tronchet, de manière à voir simultanément dans toutes les deux. Au fond de la perspective, sur le boulevard, des masses confuses glissaient. Il distinguait parfois l'aigrette d'un dragon, un chapeau de femme ; et il tendait ses prunelles pour la reconnaître. Un enfant déguenillé qui montrait une marmotte, dans une boîte, lui demanda l'aumône, en souriant.

L'homme à la veste de velours reparut. “Le portier ne l'avait pas vue sortir.” Qui la retenait ? Si elle était malade, on l'aurait dit ! Etait-ce une visite ? Rien de plus facile que de ne pas recevoir. Il se frappa le front.

“Ah ! je suis bête ! C'est l'émeute !” Cette explication naturelle le soulagea. Puis, tout à coup : “Mais son quartier est tranquille.” Et un doute abominable l'assaillit. “Si elle allait ne pas venir ? si sa promesse n'était qu'une parole pour m'évincer ? Non ! non !” Ce qui l'empêchait sans doute, c'était un hasard extraordinaire, un de ces événements qui déjouent toute prévoyance. Dans ce cas-là, elle aurait écrit. Et il envoya le garçon d'hôtel à son domicile, rue Rumford, pour savoir s'il n'y avait point de lettre ?

On n'avait apporté aucune lettre. Cette absence de nouvelles le rassura.

Du nombre des pièces de monnaie prises au hasard dans sa main, de la physionomie des passants, de la couleur des chevaux, il tirait des présages ; et, quand l'augure était contraire, il s'efforçait de ne pas y croire. Dans ses accès de fureur contre Mme Arnoux, il l'injuriait à demi-voix. Puis c'étaient des faiblesses à s'évanouir, et tout à coup des rebondissements d'espérance. Elle allait paraître. Elle était là, derrière son dos. Il se retournait : rien ! Une fois, il aperçut, à trente pas environ, une femme de même taille, avec la même robe. Il la rejoignit ; ce n'était pas elle ! Cinq heures arrivèrent ! cinq heures et demie ! six heures ! Le gaz s'allumait. Mme Arnoux n'était pas venue.

Elle avait rêvé, la nuit précédente, qu'elle était sur le trottoir de la rue Tronchet depuis longtemps. Elle y attendait quelque chose d'indéterminé, de considérable néanmoins, et, sans savoir pourquoi, elle avait peur d'être aperçue. Mais un maudit petit chien, acharné contre elle, mordillait le bas de sa robe. Il revenait obstinément et aboyait toujours plus fort. Mme Arnoux se réveilla. L'aboiement du chien continuait. Elle tendit l'oreille. Cela partait de la chambre de son fils. Elle s'y précipita pieds nus. C'était l'enfant lui-même qui toussait. Il avait les mains brûlantes, la face rouge et la voix singulièrement rauque. L'embarras de sa respiration augmentait de minute en minute. Elle resta jusqu'au jour, penchée sur sa couverture, à l'observer.

A huit heures, le tambour de la garde nationale vint prévenir M. Arnoux que ses camarades l'attendaient. Il s'habilla vivement et s'en alla, en promettant de passer tout de suite chez leur médecin, M. Colot. A dix heures, M. Colot n'étant pas venu, Mme Arnoux expédia sa femme de chambre. Le docteur était en voyage, à la campagne, et le jeune homme qui le remplaçait faisait des courses.

Eugène tenait sa tête de côté, sur le traversin, en fronçant toujours ses sourcils, en dilatant ses narines ; sa pauvre petite figure devenait plus blême que ses draps ; et il s'échappait de son larynx un sifflement produit par chaque inspiration, de plus en plus courte, sèche, et comme métallique. Sa toux ressemblait au bruit de ces mécaniques barbares qui font japper les chiens de carton.

Mme Arnoux fut saisie d'épouvante. Elle se jeta sur les sonnettes, en appelant au secours, en criant :

— “Un médecin ! un médecin !”

Dix minutes après, arriva un vieux monsieur en cravate blanche et à favoris gris, bien taillés. Il fit beaucoup de questions sur les habitudes, l'âge et le tempérament du jeune malade, puis examina sa gorge, s'appliqua la tête dans son dos et écrivit une ordonnance. L'air tranquille de ce bonhomme était odieux. Il sentait l'embaumement. Elle aurait voulu le battre. Il dit qu'il reviendrait dans la soirée.

Bientôt les horribles quintes recommencèrent. Quelquefois, l'enfant se dressait tout à coup. Des mouvements convulsifs lui secouaient les muscles de la poitrine, et, dans ses aspirations, son ventre se creusait comme s’il eût suffoqué d’avoir couru. Puis il retombait la tête en arrière et la bouche grande ouverte. Avec des précautions infinies, Mme Arnoux tâchait de lui faire avaler le contenu des fioles, du sirop d’ipécacuana. une potion kermétisée. Mais il repoussait la cuiller, en gémissant d’une voix faible. On aurait dit qu’il soufflait ses paroles.

De temps à autre, elle relisait l’ordonnance. Les observations du formulaire l’effrayaient ; peut-être que le pharmacien s’était trompé ! Son impuissance la désespérait. L’élève de M. Colot arriva.

C’était un jeune homme d’allures modestes, neuf dans le métier, et qui ne cacha point son impression. Il resta d’abord indécis, par peur de se compromettre, et enfin prescrivit l’application de morceaux de glace. On fut longtemps à trouver de la glace. La vessie qui contenait les morceaux creva. Il fallut changer la chemise. Tout ce dérangement provoqua un nouvel accès plus terrible.

L’enfant se mit à arracher les linges de son cou, comme s’il avait voulu retirer l’obstacle qui l’étouffait, et il égratignait le mur, saisissait les rideaux de sa couchette, cherchant un point d’appui pour respirer, Son visage était bleuâtre maintenant, et tout son corps, trempé d’une sueur froide, paraissait maigrir. Ses yeux hagards s’attachaient sur sa mère avec terreur. Il lui jetait les bras autour du cou, s’y suspendait d’une façon désespérée ; et, en repoussant ses sanglots, elle balbutiait des paroles tendres.

— “Oui, mon amour, mon ange, mon trésor !” Puis, des moments de calme survenaient.

Elle alla chercher des joujoux, un polichinelle, une collection d’images, et les étala sur son lit, pour le distraire. Elle essaya même de chanter.

Elle commença une chanson qu’elle lui disait autrefois, quand elle le berçait en l’emmaillottant sur cette même petite chaise de tapisserie. Mais il frissonna dans la longueur entière de son corps, comme une onde sous un coup de vent ; les globes de ses yeux saillissaient : elle crut qu’il allait mourir, et se détourna pour ne pas le voir.

Un instant après, elle eut la force de le regarder. Il vivait encore. Les heures se succédèrent, lourdes, mornes, interminables, désespérantes ; et elle n’en comptait plus les minutes qu’à la progression de cette agonie. Les secousses de sa poitrine le jetaient en avant comme pour le briser ; à la, fin, il vomit quelque chose d’étrange, qui ressemblait à un tube de parchemin. Qu’était-ce ? Elle s’imagina qu’il avait rendu un bout de ses entrailles. Mais il respirait largement, régulièrement. Cette apparence de bien-être l’effraya plus que tout le reste ; elle se tenait comme pétrifiée, les bras pendants, les yeux fixes, quand M. Colot survint. L’enfant, selon lui, était sauvé.

Elle ne comprit pas d’abord, et se fit répéter la phrase.

N’était-ce pas une de ces consolations propres aux médecins ? Le docteur s’en alla d’un air tranquille. Alors, ce fut pour elle comme si les cordes qui serraient son cœur se fussent dénouées.

— “Sauvé ! Est-ce possible !”

Tout à coup l’idée de Frédéric lui apparut d’une façon nette et inexorable. C’était un avertissement de la Providence. Mais le Seigneur, dans sa miséricorde, n’avait pas voulu la punir tout à fait ! Quelle expiation, plus tard, si elle persévérait dans cet amour ! Sans doute, on insulterait son fils à cause d’elle ; et Mme Arnoux l’aperçut jeune homme, blessé dans une rencontre, rapporté sur un brancard, mourant. D’un bond, elle se précipita sur la petite chaise ; et de toutes ses forces, lançant son âme dans les hauteurs, elle offrit à Dieu, comme un holocauste, le sacrifice de sa première passion, de sa seule faiblesse.

Frédéric était revenu chez lui. Il restait dans son fauteuil, sans même avoir la force de la maudire. Une espèce de sommeil le gagna ; et, à travers son cauchemar, il entendait la pluie tomber, en croyant toujours qu’il était là-bas, sur le trottoir.

Le lendemain, par une dernière lâcheté, il envoya encore un commissionnaire chez Mme Arnoux.

Soit que le Savoyard ne fît pas la commission, ou qu’elle eût trop de choses à dire pour s’expliquer d’un mot, la même réponse fut rapportée. L’insolence était trop forte ! Une colère d’orgueil le saisit. Il se jura de n’avoir plus même un désir ; et, comme un feuillage emporté par un ouragan, son amour disparut. Il en ressentit un soulagement, une joie stoïque, puis un besoin d’actions violentes ; et il s’en alla au hasard, par les rues.

Des hommes des faubourgs passaient, armés de fusils, de vieux sabres, quelques-uns portant des bonnets rouges, et tous chantant la Marseillaise ou les Girondins. Çà et là, un garde national se hâtait pour rejoindre sa mairie. Des tambours, au loin, résonnaient. On se battait à la porte Saint-Martin. Il y avait dans l’air quelque chose de gaillard et de belliqueux. Frédéric marchait toujours. L’agitation de la grande ville le rendait gai.

A la hauteur de Frascati, il aperçut les fenêtres de la Maréchale ; une idée folle lui vint, une réaction de jeunesse. Il traversa le boulevard.

On fermait la porte cochère ; et Delphine, la femme de chambre, en train d’écrire dessus avec un charbon “Armes données”, lui dit vivement :

— “Ah ! Madame est dans un bel état ! Elle a renvoyé ce matin son groom qui l’insultait. Elle croit qu’on va piller partout ! Elle crève de peur ! d’autant plus que Monsieur est parti !”

— “Quel monsieur ?”

— “Le Prince !”

Frédéric entra dans le boudoir. La Maréchale parut, en jupon, les cheveux sur le dos, bouleversée.

— “Ah ! merci ! tu viens me sauver ! c’est la seconde fois ! tu n’en demandes jamais le prix, toi !”

— “Mille pardons !” dit Frédéric, en lui saisissant la taille dans les deux mains.

— “Comment ? que fais-tu ?” balbutia la Maréchale, à la fois surprise et égayée par ces manières.

Il répondit :

— “Je suis la mode, je me réforme.”

Elle se laissa renverser sur le divan, et continuait à rire sous ses baisers.

Ils passèrent l’après-midi à regarder, de leur fenêtre, le peuple dans la rue. Puis il l’emmena dîner aux Trois Frères Provençaux. Le repas fut long, délicat. ils s’en revinrent à pied, faute de voiture.

A la nouvelle d’un changement de ministère, Paris avait changé. Tout le monde était en joie ; des promeneurs circulaient, et des lampions à chaque étage faisaient une clarté comme en plein jour. Les soldats regagnaient lentement leurs casernes, harassés, l’air triste. On les saluait, en criant : “Vive la ligne !” Ils continuaient sans répondre. Dans la garde nationale, au contraire, les officiers, rouges d’enthousiasme, brandissaient leur sabre en vociférant : “Vive la réforme !” et ce mot-là, chaque fois, faisait rire les deux amants. Frédéric blaguait, était très gai.

Par la rue Duphot, ils atteignirent les boulevards. Des lanternes vénitiennes, suspendues aux maisons, formaient des guirlandes de feux. Un fourmillement confus s’agitait en dessous ; au milieu de cette ombre, par endroits, brillaient des blancheurs de baïonnettes. Un grand brouhaha s’élevait. La foule était trop compacte, le retour direct impossible ; et ils entraient dans la rue Caumartin, quand, tout à coup, éclata derrière eux un bruit, pareil au craquement d’une immense pièce de soie que l’on déchire. C’était la fusillade du boulevard des Capucines.

— “Ah ! on casse quelques bourgeois”, dit Frédéric tranquillement, car il y a des situations où l’homme le moins cruel est si détaché des autres, qu’il verrait périr le genre humain sans un battement de cœur.

La Maréchale, cramponnée à son bras, claquait des dents. Elle se déclara incapable de faire vingt pas de plus. Alors, par un raffinement de haine, pour mieux outrager en son âme Mme Arnoux, il l’emmena jusqu’à l’hôtel de la rue

Tronchet, dons le logement préparé pour l’autre.

Les fleurs n’étaient pas flétries. La guipure s’étalait sur le lit. Il tira de l’armoire les petites pantoufles. Rosanette trouva ces prévenances fort délicates.

Vers une heure, elle fut réveillée par des roulements lointains ; et elle le vit qui sanglotait, la tête enfoncée dans l’oreiller.

— “Qu’as-tu donc, cher amour ?”

— “C’est excès de bonheur”, dit Frédéric. “Il y avait trop longtemps que je te désirais !”

TROISIÈME PARTIE

CHAPITRE 1

Le bruit d’une fusillade le tira brusquement de son sommeil ; et, malgré les instances de Rosanette, Frédéric, à toute force, voulut aller voir ce qui se passait. Il descendait vers les Champs-Elysées, d’où les coups de feu étaient partis. A l’angle de la rue Saint-Honoré, des hommes en blouse le croisèrent en criant :

— “Non ! pas par là ! au Palais-Royal !”

Frédéric les suivit. On avait arraché les grilles de l’Assomption. Plus loin, il remarqua trois pavés au milieu de la voie, le commencement d’une barricade, sans doute, puis des tessons de bouteilles, et des paquets de fil de fer pour embarrasser la cavalerie ; quand tout à coup s’élança d’une ruelle un grand jeune homme pâle, dont les cheveux noirs flottaient sur les épaules, prises dans une espèce de maillot à pois de couleur. Il tenait un long fusil de soldat, et courait sur la pointe de ses pantoufles, avec l’air d’un somnambule et leste comme un tigre. On entendait, par intervalles, une détonation.

La veille au soir, le spectacle du chariot contenant cinq cadavres recueillis parmi ceux du boulevard des Capucines avait changé les dispositions du peuple ; et, pendant qu’aux Tuileries les aides de camp se succédaient, et que M. Molé, en train de faire un cabinet nouveau, ne revenait pas, et que M. Thiers tâchait d’en composer un autre, et que le Roi chicanait, hésitait, puis donnait à Bugeaud le commandement général pour l’empêcher de s’en servir, l’insurrection, comme dirigée par un seul bras, s’organisait formidablement. Des hommes d’une éloquence frénétique haranguaient la foule au coin des rues ; d’autres dans les églises sonnaient le tocsin à pleine volée ; on coulait du plomb, on roulait des cartouches ; les arbres des boulevards, les vespasiennes, les bancs, les grilles, les becs de gaz, tout fut arraché, renversé ; Paris, le matin, était couvert de barricades. La résistance ne dura pas ; partout la garde nationale s’interposait ; — si bien qu’à huit heures, le peuple, de bon gré ou de force, possédait cinq casernes, presque toutes les mairies, les points stratégiques les plus sûrs. D’elle-même, sans secousses, la monarchie se fondait dans une dissolution rapide ; et on attaquait maintenant le poste du Château-d’Eau pour délivrer cinquante prisonniers, qui n’y étaient pas.

Frédéric s’arrêta forcément à l’entrée de la place. Des groupes en armes l’emplissaient. Des compagnies de la ligne occupaient les rues Saint-Thomas et Fromanteau. Une barricade énorme bouchait la rue de Valois. La fumée qui se balançait à sa crête s’entrouvrit, des hommes couraient dessus en faisant de grands gestes, ils disparurent ; puis la fusillade recommença. Le poste y répondait, sans qu'on vît personne à l'intérieur ; ses fenêtres, défendues par des volets de chêne, étaient percées de meurtrières ; et le monument avec ses deux étages, ses deux ailes, sa fontaine au premier et sa petite porte au milieu, commençait à se moucheter de taches blanches sous le heurt des balles. Son perron de trois marches restait vide.

A côté de Frédéric, un homme en bonnet grec et portant une giberne par-dessus sa veste de tricot se disputait avec une femme coiffée d'un madras. Elle lui disait :

— "Mais reviens donc ! reviens donc !"

— "Laisse-moi tranquille !" répondait le mari. "Tu peux bien surveiller la loge toute seule. Citoyen, je vous le demande, est-ce juste ? J'ai fait mon devoir partout, en 1830, en 32, en 34, en 39 ! Aujourd'hui, on se bat ! Il faut que je me batte Va-t'en !"

Et la portière finit par céder à ses remontrances et celles d'un garde national près d'eux, quadragénaire dont la figure bonasse était ornée d'un collier de barbe blonde.

Il chargeait son arme et tirait, tout en conversant avec Frédéric, aussi tranquille au milieu de l'émeute qu'un horticulteur dans son jardin. Un jeune garçon en serpillière le cajolait pour obtenir des capsules, afin d'utiliser son fusil, une belle carabine de chasse que lui avait donnée "un monsieur" .

— "Empoigne dans mon dos", dit le bourgeois "et efface-toi ! tu vas te faire tuer !"

Les tambours battaient la charge. Des cris aigus, des hourras de triomphe s'élevaient. Un remous continuel faisait osciller la multitude. Frédéric, pris entre deux masses profondes, ne bougeait pas, fasciné d'ailleurs et s'amusant extrêmement. Les blessés qui tombaient, les morts étendus n'avaient pas l'air de vrais blessés, de vrais morts. Il lui semblait assister à un spectacle.

Au milieu de la houle, par-dessus des têtes, on aperçut un vieillard en habit noir sur un cheval blanc, à selle de velours. D'une main, il tenait un rameau vert, de l'autre un papier, et les secouait avec obstination. Enfin, désespérant de se faire entendre, il se retira.

La troupe de ligne avait disparu et les municipaux restaient seuls à défendre le poste. Un flot d'intrépides se rua sur le perron ; ils s'abattirent, d'autres survinrent ; et la porte, ébranlée sous des coups de barre de fer, retentissait ; les municipaux ne cédaient pas. Mais une calèche bourrée de foin, et qui brûlait comme une torche géante, fut traînée contre les murs. On apporta vite des fagots, de la paille, un baril d'esprit-de-vin. Le feu monta le long des pierres ; l'édifice se mit à fumer partout comme un solfatare ; et de larges flammes, au sommet, entre les balustres de la terrasse, s’échappaient avec un bruit strident. Le premier étage du Palais-Royal s’était peuplé de gardes nationaux. De toutes les fenêtres de la place, on tirait ; les balles sifflaient ; l’eau de la fontaine crevée se mêlait avec le sang, faisait des flaques par terre ; on glissait dans la boue sur des vêtements, des shakos, des armes ; Frédéric sentit sous son pied quelque chose de mou ; c’était la main d’un sergent en capote grise, couché la face dans le ruisseau. Des bandes nouvelles de peuple arrivaient toujours, poussant les combattants sur le poste. La fusillade devenait plus pressée. Les marchands de vins étaient ouverts ; on allait de temps à autre y fumer une pipe, boire une chope, puis on retournait se battre. Un chien perdu hurlait. Cela faisait rire.

Frédéric fut ébranlé par le choc d’un homme qui, une balle dans les reins, tomba sur son épaule, en râlant. A ce coup, dirigé peut-être contre lui, il se sentit furieux et il se jetait en avant quand un garde national l’arrêta.

— “C’est inutile ! le Roi vient de partir. Ah ! si vous ne me croyez pas, allez-y voir !”

Une pareille assertion calma Frédéric. La place du Carrousel avait un aspect tranquille. L’hôtel de Nantes s’y dressait toujours solitairement ; et les maisons par derrière, le dôme du Louvre en face, la longue galerie de bois à droite et le vague terrain qui ondulait jusqu’aux baraques des étalagistes, étaient comme noyés dans la couleur grise de l’air, où de lointains murmures semblaient se confondre avec la brume, — tandis qu’à l’autre bout de la place, un jour cru, tombant par un écartement des nuages sur la façade des Tuileries, découpait en blancheur toutes ses fenêtres. Il y avait près de l’Arc de triomphe un cheval mort, étendu. Derrière les grilles, des groupes de cinq à six personnes causaient. Les portes du château étaient ouvertes ; les domestiques sur le seuil laissaient entrer.

En bas, dans une petite salle, des bois de café au lait étaient servis. Quelques-uns des curieux s’attablèrent en plaisantant ; les autres restaient debout, et, parmi ceux-là, un cocher de fiacre. Il saisit à deux mains un bocal plein de sucre en poudre, jeta un regard inquiet de droite et de gauche, puis se mit à manger voracement, son nez plongeant dans le goulot. Au bas du grand escalier, un homme écrivait son nom sur un registre. Frédéric le reconnut par derrière.

— “Tiens, Hussonnet !”

— “Mais oui”, répondit le bohème. “Je m’introduis à la Cour. Voilà une bonne farce, hein ?”

— “Si nous montions ?”

Et ils arrivèrent dans la salle des Maréchaux. Les portraits de ces illustres, sauf celui de Bugeaud percé au ventre, étaient tous intacts. Ils se trouvaient appuyés sur leur sabre, un affût de canon derrière eux, et dans des attitudes formidables jurant avec la circonstance. Une grosse pendule marquait une heure vingt minutes.

Tout à coup la Marseillaise retentit. Hussonnet et Frédéric se penchèrent sur la rampe. C'était le peuple. Il se précipita dans l'escalier, en secouant à flots vertigineux des têtes nues, des casques, des bonnets rouges, des baïonnettes et des épaules, si impétueusement, que des gens disparaissaient dans cette masse grouillante qui montait toujours, comme un fleuve refoulé par une marée d'équinoxe, avec un long mugissement, sous une impulsion irrésistible. En haut, elle se répandit, et le chant tomba.

On n'entendait plus que les piétinements de tous les souliers, avec le clapotement des voix. La foule inoffensive se contentait de regarder. Mais, de temps à autre, un coude trop à l'étroit enfonçait une vitre ; ou bien un vase, une statuette déroulait d'une console, par terre. Les boiseries pressées craquaient. Tous les visages étaient rouges, la sueur en coulait à larges gouttes ; Hussonnet fit cette remarque :

— “Les héros ne sentent pas bon !”

— “Ah ! vous êtes agaçant”, reprit Frédéric.

Et poussés malgré eux, ils entrèrent dans un appartement où s'étendait, au plafond, un dais de velours rouge. Sur le trône, en dessous, était assis un prolétaire à barbe noire, la chemise entrouverte, l'air hilare et stupide comme un magot. D'autres gravissaient l'estrade pour s'asseoir à sa place.

— “Quel mythe !” dit Hussonnet. “Voilà le peuple souverain !”

Le fauteuil fut enlevé à bout de bras, et traversa toute la salle en se balançant.

— “Saprelotte ! comme il chaloupe ! Le vaisseau de l'Etat est ballotté sur une mer orageuse ! Cancane-t-il ! cancane-t-il !”

On l'avait approché d'une fenêtre, et, au milieu des sifflets, on le lança.

— “Pauvre vieux !” dit Hussonnet en le voyant tomber dans le jardin, où il fut repris vivement pour être promené ensuite jusqu'à la Bastille, et brûlé.

Alors, une joie frénétique éclata, comme si, à la place du trône, un avenir de bonheur illimité avait paru ; et le peuple, moins par vengeance que pour affirmer sa possession, brisa, lacéra les glaces et les rideaux, les lustres, les flambeaux, les tables, les chaises, les tabourets, tous les meubles, jusqu'à des albums de dessins, jusqu'à des corbeilles de tapisserie. Puisqu'on était victorieux, ne fallait-il pas s'amuser ! La canaille s'affubla ironiquement de dentelles et de cachemires. Des crépines d'or s'enroulèrent aux manches des blouses, des chapeaux à plumes d'autruche ornaient la tête des forgerons, des rubans de la Légion d'honneur firent des ceintures aux prostituées. Chacun satisfaisait son caprice ; les uns dansaient, d'autres buvaient. Dans la chambre de la reine, une femme lustrait ses bandeaux avec de la pommade derrière un paravent, deux amateurs jouaient aux cartes Hussonnet montra à Frédéric un individu qui fumait son brûle-gueule accoudé sur un balcon ; et le délire redoublait au tintamarre continu des porcelaines brisées et des morceaux de cristal qui sonnaient, en rebondissant, comme des lames d'harmonica.

Puis la fureur s'assombrit. Une curiosité obscène fit fouiller tous les cabinets, tous les recoins, ouvrir tous les tiroirs. Des galériens enfoncèrent leurs bras dans la couche des princesses, et se roulaient dessus par consolation de ne pouvoir les violer. D'autres, à figures plus sinistres, erraient silencieusement, cherchant à voler quelque chose ; mais la multitude était trop nombreuse. Par les baies des portes, on n'apercevait dans l'enfilade des appartements que la sombre masse du peuple entre les dorures, sous un nuage de poussière. Toutes les poitrines haletaient ; la chaleur de plus en plus devenait suffocante ; les deux amis, craignant d'être étouffés, sortirent.

Dans l'antichambre, debout sur un tas de vêtements, se tenait une fille publique, en statue de la Liberté, — immobile, les yeux grands ouverts, effrayante.

Ils avaient fait trois pas dehors, quand un peloton de gardes municipaux en capotes s'avança vers eux, et qui, retirant leurs bonnets de police, et découvrant à la fois leurs crânes un peu chauves, saluèrent le peuple très bas. A ce témoignage de respect, les vainqueurs déguenillés se rengorgèrent. Hussonnet et Frédéric ne furent pas, non plus, sans en éprouver un certain plaisir.

Une ardeur les animait. Ils s'en retournèrent au Palais-Royal. Devant la rue Fromanteau, des cadavres de soldats étaient entassés sur de la paille. Ils passèrent auprès impassiblement, étant même fiers de sentir qu'ils faisaient bonne contenance.

Le palais regorgeait de monde. Dans la cour intérieure, sept bûchers flambaient. On lançait par les fenêtres des pianos, des commodes et des pendules. Des pompes à incendie crachaient de l'eau jusqu'aux toits. Des chenapans tâchaient de couper des tuyaux avec leurs sabres. Frédéric engagea un polytechnicien à s'interposer. Le polytechnicien ne comprit pas, semblait imbécile, d'ailleurs. Tout autour, dans les deux galeries, la populace, maîtresse des caves, se livrait à une horrible godaille. Le vin coulait en ruisseaux, mouillait les pieds, les voyous buvaient dans des culs de bouteille, et vociféraient en titubant.

— "Sortons de là", dit Hussonnet, "ce peuple me dégoûte."

Tout le long de la galerie d'Orléans, des blessés gisaient par terre sur des matelas, ayant pour couvertures des rideaux de pourpre ; et de petites bourgeoises du quartier leur apportaient des bouillons, du linge.

— "N'importe !" dit Frédéric, "moi, je trouve le peuple sublime."

Le grand vestibule était rempli par un tourbillon de gens furieux, des hommes voulaient monter aux étages supérieurs pour achever de détruire tout ; des gardes nationaux sur les marches s'efforçaient de les retenir. Le plus intrépide était un chasseur, nu-tête, la chevelure hérissée, les buffleteries en pièces. Sa chemise faisait un bourrelet entre son pantalon et son habit, et il se débattait au milieu des autres avec acharnement. Hussonnet, qui avait la vue perçante, reconnut de loin Arnoux.

Puis ils gagnèrent le jardin des Tuileries, pour respirer plus à l'aise. Ils s'assirent sur un banc ; et ils restèrent pendant quelques minutes les paupières closes, tellement étourdis, qu'ils n'avaient pas la force de parler. Les passants autour d'eux, s'abordaient. La duchesse d'Orléans était nommée régente ; tout était fini ; et on éprouvait cette sorte de bien-être qui suit les dénouements rapides, quand à chacune des mansardes du château parurent des domestiques déchirant leurs habits de livrée. Ils les jetaient dans le jardin, en signe d'abjuration. Le peuple les hua. Ils se retirèrent.

L'attention de Frédéric et d'Hussonnet fut distraite par un grand gaillard qui marchait vivement entre les arbres, avec un fusil sur l'épaule. Une cartouchière lui serrait à la taille sa vareuse rouge, un mouchoir s'enroulait à son front sous sa casquette. Il tourna la tête. C'était Dussardier ; et, se jetant dans leurs bras :

— “Ah ! quel bonheur, mes pauvres vieux !” sans pouvoir dire autre chose, tant il haletait de joie et de fatigue.

Depuis quarante-huit heures, il était debout. Il avait travaillé aux barricades du quartier Latin, s'était battu rue Rambuteau, avait sauvé trois dragons, était entré aux Tuileries avec la colonne Dunoyer, s'était porté ensuite à la Chambre, puis à l'hôtel de ville.

— “J'en arrive ! tout va bien ! le peuple triomphe ! les ouvriers et les bourgeois s'embrassent ! ah ! si vous saviez ce que j'ai vu ! quels braves gens comme c'est beau !”

Et, sans s'apercevoir qu'ils n'avaient pas d'armes :

— “J'étais bien sûr de vous trouver là ! Ç'a été rude un moment, n'importe !”

Une goutte de sang lui coulait sur la joue, et, aux questions des deux autres :

— “Oh ! rien ! l'éraflure d'une baïonnette !”

— “Il faudrait vous soigner, pourtant.”

— “Bah ! je suis solide ! qu'est-ce que ça fait ? La République est proclamée ! on sera heureux maintenant !”

Des journalistes qui causaient tout à l'heure devant moi, disaient qu'on va affranchir la Pologne et l'Italie ! Plus de rois ! comprenez-vous ! Toute la terre libre ! toute la terre libre ! "

Et, embrassant l'horizon d'un seul regard, il écarta les bras dans une attitude triomphante. Mais une longue file d’hommes couraient sur la terrasse, au bord de l’eau.

— “Ah ! saprelotte ! j’oubliais ! Les forts sont occupés. Il faut que j’y aille ! adieu !”

Il se retourna pour leur crier, tout en brandissant son fusil :

— “Vive la République !”

Des cheminées du château, il s’échappait d’énormes tourbillons de fumée noire, qui emportaient des étincelles. La sonnerie des cloches faisait, au loin, comme des bêlements effarés. De droite et de gauche, partout, les vainqueurs déchargeaient leurs armes. Frédéric, bien qu’il ne fût pas guerrier, sentit bondir son sang gaulois. Le magnétisme des foules enthousiastes l’avait pris. Il humait voluptueusement l’air orageux, plein des senteurs de la poudre ; et cependant il frissonnait sous les effluves d’un immense amour, d’un attendrissement suprême et universel, comme si le cœur de l’humanité tout entière avait battu dans sa poitrine.

Hussonnet dit, en bâillant :

— “Il serait temps, peut-être, d’aller instruire les populations !”

Frédéric le suivit à son bureau de correspondance, place de la Bourse ; et il se mit à composer pour le journal de Troyes un compte rendu des événements en style lyrique, un véritable morceau, — qu’il signa. Puis ils dînèrent ensemble dans une taverne. Hussonnet était pensif ; les excentricités de la Révolution dépassaient les siennes.

Après le café, quand ils se rendirent à l’hôtel de ville, pour savoir du nouveau, son naturel gamin avait repris le dessus. Il escaladait les barricades, comme un chamois, et répondait aux sentinelles des gaudrioles patriotiques.

lis entendirent. à la lueur des torches, proclamer le Gouvernement provisoire. Enfin, à minuit, Frédéric, brisé de fatigue, regagna sa maison.

— “Eh bien”, dit-il à son domestique en train de le déshabiller, “es-tu content ?”

— “Oui, sans doute, monsieur ! Mais ce que je n’aime pas, c’est ce peuple en cadence !”

Le lendemain, à son réveil, Frédéric pensa à Deslauriers. Il courut chez lui. L’avocat venait de partir, étant nommé commissaire en province. Dans la soirée de la veille, il était parvenu jusqu’à Ledru-Rollin et, l’obsédant au nom des Ecoles, en avait arraché une place, une mission. Du reste, disait le portier, il devait écrire la semaine prochaine, pour donner son adresse.

Après quoi, Frédéric s’en alla voir la Maréchale. Elle le reçut aigrement, car elle lui en voulait de son abandon. Sa rancune s’évanouit sous des assurances de paix réitérées. Tout était tranquille, maintenant, aucune raison d’avoir peur ; il l’embrassait ; et elle se déclara pour la République, — comme avait déjà fait Monseigneur l’Archevêque de Paris, et comme devaient faire avec une prestesse de zèle merveilleuse : la Magistrature, le Conseil d’Etat, l’Institut, les Maréchaux de France, Changarnier, M. de Falloux tous les bonapartistes, tous les légitimistes, et un nombre considérable d’orléanistes.

La chute de la Monarchie avait été si prompte, que, la première stupéfaction passée, il y eut chez les bourgeois comme un étonnement de vivre encore. L’exécution sommaire de quelques voleurs, fusillés sans jugements, parut une chose très juste. On se redit, pendant un mois, la phrase de Lamartine sur le drapeau rouge, “qui n’avait fait que le tour du Champ de Mars, tandis que le drapeau tricolore”, etc ; et tous se rangèrent sous son ombre, chaque parti ne voyant des trois couleurs que la sienne — et se promettant bien, dès qu’il serait le plus fort, d’arracher les deux autres.

Comme les affaires étaient suspendues, l’inquiétude et la badauderie poussaient tout le monde hors de chez soi. Le négligé des costumes atténuait la différence des rangs sociaux, la haine se cachait, les espérances s’étalaient, la foule était pleine de douceur. L’orgueil d’un droit conquis éclatait sur les visages. On avait une gaieté de carnaval, des allures de bivac ; rien ne fut amusant comme l’aspect de Paris, les premiers jours.

Frédéric prenait la Maréchale à son bras ; et ils flânaient ensemble dans les rues. Elle se divertissait des rosettes décorant toutes les boutonnières, des étendards suspendus à toutes les fenêtres, des affiches de toute couleur placardées contre les murailles, et jetait çà et là quelque monnaie dans le tronc pour les blessés, établi sur une chaise, au milieu de la voie. Puis elle s’arrêtait devant des caricatures qui représentaient Louis-Philippe en pâtissier, en saltimbanque, en chien, en sangsue. Mais les hommes de Caussidière avec leur sabre et leur écharpe, l’effrayaient un peu. D’autres fois, c’était un arbre de la Liberté qu’on plantait. MM. les ecclésiastiques concouraient à la cérémonie, bénissant la République, escortés par des serviteurs à galons d’or ; et la multitude trouvait cela très bien. Le spectacle le plus fréquent était celui des députations de n’importe quoi, allant réclamer quelque chose à l’hôtel de ville, — car chaque métier, chaque industrie attendait du Gouvernement la fin radicale de sa misère. Quelques-uns, il est vrai, se rendaient près de lui pour le conseiller, ou le féliciter, ou tout simplement pour lui faire une petite visite, et voir fonctionner la machine.

Vers le milieu du mois de mars, un jour qu’il traversait le pont d’Arcole, ayant à faire une commission pour Rosanette dans le quartier Latin, Frédéric vit s’avancer une colonne d’individus à chapeaux bizarres, à longues barbes. En tête et battant du tambour marchait un nègre, un ancien modèle d’atelier, et l’homme qui portait la bannière sur laquelle flottait au vent cette inscription “Artistes peintres”, n’était autre que Pellerin.

Il fit signe à Frédéric de l’attendre, puis reparut cinq minutes après, ayant du temps devant lui, car le Gouvernement recevait à ce moment-là les tailleurs de pierre. Il allait avec ses collègues réclamer la création d’un Forum de l’Art, une espèce de Bourse où l’on débattrait les intérêts de l’esthétique ; des œuvres sublimes se produiraient puisque les travailleurs mettraient en commun leur génie. Paris, bientôt, serait couvert de monuments gigantesques ; il les décorerait ; il avait même commencé une figure de la République. Un de ses camarades vint le prendre, car ils étaient talonnés par la députation du commerce de la volaille.

— “Quelle bêtise !” grommela une voix dans la foule. “Toujours des blagues ! Rien de fort !”

C’était Regimbart. Il ne salua pas Frédéric, mais profita de l’occasion pour épandre son amertume.

Le Citoyen employait ses jours à vagabonder dans les rues, tirant sa moustache, roulant des yeux, acceptant et propageant des nouvelles lugubres ; et il n’avait que deux phrases : “Prenez garde, nous allons être débordés !” ou bien : “Mais, sacrebleu ! on escamote la République !” Il était mécontent de tout, et particulièrement de ce que nous n’avions pas repris nos frontières naturelles. Le nom seul de Lamartine lui faisait hausser les épaules. Il ne trouvait pas Ledru-Rollin, suffisant pour le problème ", traita Dupont (de l’Eure) de vieille ganache ; Albert, d’idiot ; Louis Blanc, d’utopiste, Blanqui, d’homme extrêmement dangereux ; et, quand Frédéric lui demanda ce qu’il aurait fallu faire, il répondit en lui serrant le bras à le broyer :

— “Prendre le Rhin, je vous dis, prendre le Rhin ! fichtre !”

Puis il accusa la réaction.

Elle se démasquait. Le sac des châteaux de Neuilly et de Suresne, l’incendie des Batignolles, les troubles de Lyon tous les excès, tous les griefs, on les exagérait à présent, en y ajoutant la circulaire de Ledru-Rollin le cours forcé des billets de Banque, la rente tombée à soixante francs, enfin, comme iniquité suprême, comme dernier coup, comme surcroît d’horreur, l’impôt des quarante-cinq centimes ! — Et, par-dessus tout cela, il y avait encore le Socialisme ! Bien que ces théories, aussi neuves que le jeu d’oie, eussent été depuis quarante ans suffisamment débattues pour emplir des bibliothèques, elles épouvantèrent les bourgeois, comme une grêle d’aérolithes ; et on fut indigné, en vertu de cette haine que provoque l’avènement de toute idée parce que c’est une idée, exécration dont elle tire plus tard sa gloire, et qui fait que ses ennemis sont toujours au-dessous d’elle, si médiocre qu’elle puisse être.

Alors, la Propriété monta dans les respects au niveau de la Religion et se confondit avec Dieu. Les attaques qu'on lui portait parurent du sacrilège, presque de l'anthropophagie. Malgré la législation la plus humaine qui fut jamais, le spectre de 93 reparut, et le couperet de la guillotine vibra dans toutes les syllabes du mot République ; — ce qui n'empêchait pas qu'on la méprisait pour sa faiblesse. La France, ne sentant plus de maître, se mit à crier d'effarement, comme un aveugle sans bâton, comme un marmot qui a perdu sa bonne.

De tous les Français, celui qui tremblait le plus fort était M. Dambreuse. L'état nouveau des choses menaçait sa fortune, mais surtout dupait son expérience. Un système si bon, un roi si sage ! était-ce possible ! La terre allait crouler ! Dès le lendemain, il congédia trois domestiques, vendit ses chevaux, s'acheta, pour sortir dans les rues, un chapeau mou, pensa même à laisser croître sa barbe ; et il restait chez lui, prostré, se repaissant amèrement des journaux les plus hostiles à ses idées, et devenu tellement sombre, que les plaisanteries sur la pipe de Flocon n'avaient pas même la force de le faire sourire.

Comme soutien du dernier règne, il redoutait les vengeances du peuple sur ses propriétés de la Champagne, quand l'élucubration de Frédéric lui tomba dans les mains. Alors il s'imagina que son jeune ami é tait un personnage très influent et qu'il pourrait sinon le servir, du moins le défendre ; de sorte qu'un matin, M. Dambreuse se présenta chez lui, accompagné de Martinon.

Cette visite n'avait pour but, dit-il, que de le voir un peu et de causer. Somme toute, il se réjouissait des événements, et il adoptait de grand cœur “notre sublime devise : Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité, ayant toujours été républicain, au fond” . S'il votait, sous l'autre régime, avec le ministère, c'était simplement pour accélérer une chute inévitable. Il s'emporta même contre M. Guizot, “qui nous a mis dans un joli pétrin, convenons-en !” En revanche, il admirait beaucoup Lamartine, lequel s'était montré “magnifique, ma parole d'honneur, quand, à propos du drapeau rouge…”

— “Oui ! je sais”, dit Frédéric.

Après quoi, il déclara sa sympathie pour les ouvriers. — “Car enfin, plus ou moins, nous sommes tous ouvriers !” Et il poussait l'impartialité jusqu'à reconnaître que Proudhon avait de la logique. “Oh ! beaucoup de logique ! diable !” Puis, avec le détachement d'une intelligence supérieure, il causa de l'exposition de peinture, où il avait vu le tableau de Pellerin. Il trouvait cela original, bien touché.

Martinon appuyait tous ses mots par des remarques approbatives ; lui aussi pensait qu'il fallait — se rallier franchement à la République ", et il parla de son père laboureur, faisait le paysan, l'homme du peuple. On arriva bientôt aux élections pour l’Assemblée nationale, et aux candidats dans l’arrondissement de la Fortelle. Celui de l’opposition n’avait pas de chances.

— “Vous devriez prendre sa place !” dit M. Dambreuse.

Frédéric se récria.

— “Eh ! pourquoi donc ?” car il obtiendrait les suffrages des ultras, vu ses opinions personnelles, celui des conservateurs, à cause de sa famille.

— “Et peut-être aussi”, ajouta le banquier en souriant, “grâce un peu à mon influence.”

Frédéric objecta qu’il ne saurait comment s’y prendre. Rien de plus facile, en se faisant recommander aux patriotes de l’Aube par un club de la capitale. Il s’agissait de lire, non une profession de foi comme on en voyait quotidiennement, mais une exposition de principes sérieuse.

— “Apportez-moi cela ; je sais ce qui convient dans la localité ! Et vous pourriez, je vous le répète, rendre de grands services au pays, à nous tous, à moi-même.”

Par des temps pareils, on devait s’entraider, et, si Frédéric avait besoin de quelque chose, lui, ou ses amis…

— “Oh ! mille grâces, cher monsieur !”

— “A charge de revanche, bien entendu !”

Le banquier était un brave homme, décidément.

Frédéric ne put s’empêcher de réfléchir à son conseil et bientôt, une sorte de vertige l’éblouit.

Les grandes figures de la Convention passèrent devant ses yeux. Il lui sembla qu’une aurore magnifique allait se lever. Rome, Vienne, Berlin, étaient en insurrection, les Autrichiens chassés de Venise ; toute l’Europe s’agitait. C’était l’heure de se précipiter dans le mouvement, de l’accélérer peut-être ; et puis il était séduit par le costume que les députés, disait-on, porteraient. Déjà, il se voyait en gilet à revers avec une ceinture tricolore ; et ce prurit, cette hallucination devint si forte, qu’il s’en ouvrit à Dussardier.

L’enthousiasme du brave garçon ne faiblissait pas.

— “Certainement, bien sûr ! Présentez-vous !” Frédéric, néanmoins, consulta Deslauriers. L’opposition idiote qui entravait le commissaire dans sa province avait augmenté son libéralisme. Il lui envoya immédiatement des exhortations violentes.

Cependant, Frédéric avait besoin d’être approuvé par un plus grand nombre ; et il confia la chose à Rosanette, un jour que Mlle Vatnaz se trouvait là.

Elle était une de ces célibataires parisiennes qui, chaque soir, quand elles ont donné leurs leçons, ou tâché de vendre de petits dessins, de placer de pauvres manuscrits, rentrent chez elles avec de la crotte à leurs jupons, font leur dîner, le mangent toutes seules, puis, les pieds sur une chaufferette, à la lueur d'une lampe malpropre, rêvent un amour, une famille, un foyer, la fortune, tout ce qui leur manque. Aussi, comme beaucoup d'autres, avait-elle salué dans la Révolution l'avènement de la vengeance ; — et elle se livrait à une propagande socialiste, effrénée.

L'affranchissement du prolétaire, selon la Vatnaz, n'était possible que par l'affranchissement de la femme. Elle voulait son admissibilité à tous les emplois, la recherche de la paternité, un autre code, l'abolition, ou tout au moins “une réglementation du mariage plus intelligente” . Alors, chaque Française serait tenue d'épouser un Français ou d'adopter un vieillard.

Il fallait que les nourrices et les accoucheuses fussent des fonctionnaires salariés par l'Etat ; qu'il y eût un jury pour examiner les œuvres de femmes, des éditeurs spéciaux pour les femmes, une école polytechnique pour les femmes, une garde nationale pour les femmes, tout pour les femmes ! Et, puisque le Gouvernement méconnaissait leurs droits, elles devaient vaincre la force par la force. Dix mille citoyennes, avec de bons fusils, pouvaient faire trembler l'hôtel de ville !

La candidature de Frédéric lui parut favorable à ses idées. Elle l'encouragea, en lui montrant la gloire à l'horizon. Rosanette se réjouit d'avoir un homme qui parlerait à la Chambre.

— “Et puis on te donnera, peut-être, une bonne place.”

Frédéric, homme de toutes les faiblesses, fut gagné par la démence universelle. Il écrivit un discours, et alla le faire voir à M. Dambreuse.

Au bruit de la grande porte qui retombait, un rideau s'entrouvrit derrière une croisée ; une femme y parut. Il n'eut pas le temps de la reconnaître ; mais, dans l'antichambre, un tableau l'arrêta, le tableau de Pellerin, posé sur une chaise, provisoirement sans doute.

Cela représentait la République, ou le Progrès, ou la Civilisation, sous la figure de Jésus-Christ conduisant une locomotive, laquelle traversait une forêt vierge. Frédéric, après une minute de contemplation, s'écria :

— “Quelle turpitude !”

— “N'est-ce pas, hein ?” dit M. Dambreuse, survenu sur cette parole et s'imaginant qu'elle concernait non la peinture, mais la doctrine glorifiée par le tableau.

Martinon arriva au même moment. Ils passèrent dans le cabinet ; et Frédéric tirait un papier de sa poche, quand Mlle Cécile, entrant tout à coup, articula d'un air ingénu :

— “Ma tante est-elle ici ?”

— “Tu sais bien que non”, répliqua le banquier. “N'importe ! faites comme chez vous, mademoiselle.”

— “Oh ! merci ! je m’en vais.”

A peine sortie, Martinon eut l’air de chercher son mouchoir.

— “Je l’ai oublié dans mon paletot, excusez-moi !”

— “Bien !” dit M. Dambreuse.

Evidemment, il n’était pas dupe de cette manœuvre, et même semblait la favoriser. Pourquoi ? Mais bientôt Martinon reparut, et Frédéric entama son discours. Dès la seconde page, qui signalait comme une honte la prépondérance des intérêts pécuniaires, le banquier fit la grimace. Puis, abordant les réformes, Frédéric demandait la liberté du commerce.

— “Comment… ? mais permettez !”

L’autre n’entendait pas, et continua. Il réclamait l’impôt sur la rente, l’impôt progressif, une fédération européenne, et l’instruction du peuple, des encouragements aux beaux-arts les plus larges.

— “Quand le pays fournirait à des hommes comme Delacroix ou Hugo cent mille francs de rente, où serait le mal ?”

Le tout finissait par des conseils aux classes supérieures.

— “N’épargnez rien, ô riches ! donnez ! donnez !”

Il s’arrêta, et resta debout. Ses deux auditeurs assis ne parlaient pas ; Martinon écarquillait les yeux, M. Dambreuse était tout pâle. Enfin dissimulant son émotion sous un aigre sourire :

— “C’est parfait, votre discours !” Et il en vanta beaucoup la forme, pour n’avoir pas à s’exprimer sur le fond.

Cette virulence de la part d’un jeune homme inoffensif l’effrayait, surtout comme symptôme. Martinon tâcha de le rassurer. Le parti conservateur, d’ici peu, prendrait sa revanche, certainement ; dans plusieurs villes on avait chassé les commissaires du gouvernement provisoire : les élections n’étaient fixées qu’au 23 avril, on avait du temps ; bref, il fallait que M. Dambreuse, lui-même, se présentât dans l’Aube ; et, dès lors, Martinon ne le quitta plus, devint son secrétaire et l’entoura de soins filiaux.

Frédéric arriva fort content de sa personne chez Rosanette. Delmar y était, et lui apprit que “définitivement” il se portait comme candidat aux élections de la Seine. Dans une affiche adressée “au Peuple” et où il le tutoyait, l’acteur se vantait de le comprendre, “lui”, et des êtres fait, pour son salut, “crucifier par l’Art”, si bien qu’il était son incarnation, son idéal ; — croyant effectivement avoir sur les masses une influence énorme, jusqu’à proposer plus tard dans un bureau de ministère de réduire une émeute à lui seul ; et, quant aux moyens qu’il emploierait, il fit cette réponse :

— “N’ayez pas peur ! Je leur montrerai ma tête” Frédéric, pour le mortifier, lui notifia sa propre candidature. Le cabotin, du moment que son futur collègue visait la province, se déclara son serviteur et offrit de le piloter dans les clubs.

Ils les visitèrent tous, ou presque tous, les rouges et les bleus, les furibonds et les tranquilles, les puritains, les débraillés, les mystiques et les pochards, ceux où l’on décrétait la mort des Rois, ceux où l’on dénonçait les fraudes de l’Epicerie ; et, partout, les locataires maudissaient les propriétaires, la blouse s’en prenait à l’habit, et les riches conspiraient contre les pauvres. Plusieurs voulaient des indemnités comme anciens martyrs de la police, d’autres imploraient de l’argent pour mettre en jeu des inventions, ou bien c’étaient des plans de phalanstères, des projets de bazars cantonaux, des systèmes de félicité publique ; — puis, çà et là, un éclair d’esprit dans ces nuages de sottise, des apostrophes, soudaines comme des éclaboussures, le droit formulé par un juron, et des fleurs d’éloquence aux lèvres d’un goujat, portant à cru le baudrier d’un sabre sur sa poitrine sans chemise. Quelquefois aussi, figurait un monsieur, aristocrate humble d’allures, disant des choses plébéiennes, et qui ne s’était pas lavé les mains pour les faire paraître calleuses. Un patriote le reconnaissait, les plus vertueux le houspillaient ; et il sortait la rage dans l’âme. On devait, par affectation de bon sens, dénigrer toujours les avocats, et servir le plus souvent possible ces locutions : “apporter sa pierre à l’édifice, — problème social, — atelier.”

Delmar ne ratait pas les occasions d’empoigner la parole ; et, quand il ne trouvait plus rien à dire, sa ressource était de se camper le poing sur la hanche, l’autre bras dans le gilet, en se tournant de profil, brusquement, de manière à bien montrer sa tête. Alors, des applaudissements éclataient, ceux de Mlle Vatnaz au fond de la salle.

Frédéric, malgré la faiblesse des orateurs, n’osait se risquer. Tous ces gens lui semblaient trop incultes ou trop hostiles.

Mais Dussardier se mit en recherche, et lui annonça qu’il existait, rue Saint-Jacques, un club intitulé le Club de l’Intelligence. Un nom pareil donnait bon espoir. D’ailleurs, il amènerait des amis.

Il amena ceux qu’il avait invités à son punch : le teneur de livres, le placeur de vins, l’architecte ; Pellerin même était venu, peut-être qu’Hussonnet allait venir ; et sur le trottoir, devant la porte, stationnait Regimbart avec deux individus, dont le premier était son fidèle Compain, homme un peu courtaud, marqué de petite vérole, les yeux rouges ; et le second, une espèce de singe-nègre, extrêmement chevelu, et qu’il connaissait seulement pour être “un patriote de Barcelone.”

Ils passèrent par une allée, puis furent introduits dans une grande pièce, à usage de menuisier sans doute, et dont les murs encore neufs sentaient le plâtre.

Quatre quinquets accrochés parallèlement y faisaient une lumière désagréable. Sur une estrade, au fond, il y avait un bureau avec une sonnette, en dessous une table figurant la tribune, et de chaque côté deux autres plus basses, pour les secrétaires. L'auditoire qui garnissait les bancs était composé de vieux rapins, de pions, d'hommes de lettres inédits. Sur ces lignes de paletots à collets gras, on voyait de place en place le bonnet d'une femme ou le bourgeron d'un ouvrier. Le fond de la salle était même plein d'ouvriers, venus là sans doute par désœuvrement, ou qu'avaient introduits des orateurs pour se faire applaudir.

Frédéric eut soin de se mettre entre Dussardier et Regimbart, qui, à peine assis, posa ses deux mains sur sa canne, son menton sur ses deux mains et ferma les paupières, tandis qu'à l'autre extrémité de la salle, Delmar, debout, dominait l'assemblée.

Au bureau du président, Sénécal parut.

Cette surprise, avait pensé le bon commis, plairait à Frédéric. Elle le contraria.

La foule témoignait à son président une grande déférence. Il était de ceux qui, le 25 février, avaient voulu l'organisation immédiate du travail ; le lendemain, au Prado, il s'était prononcé pour qu'on attaquât l'Hôtel de ville ; et, comme chaque personnage se réglait alors sur un modèle, l'un copiant Saint-Just, l'autre Danton, l'autre Marat, lui, il tâchait de ressembler à Blanqui, lequel imitait Robespierre. Ses gants noirs et ses cheveux en brosse lui donnaient un aspect rigide, extrêmement convenable.

Il ouvrit la séance par la déclaration des Droits de l'homme et du citoyen, acte de foi habituel. Puis une voix vigoureuse entonna *les Souvenirs du peuple* de Béranger.

D'autres voix s'élevèrent.

— “Non ! non ! pas ça !”

— “*La Casquette !*” se mirent à hurler, au fond, les patriotes.

Et ils chantèrent en chœur la poésie du jour :

Chapeau bas devant ma casquette,
À genoux devant l'ouvrier !

Sur un mot du président, l'auditoire se tut. Un des secrétaires procéda au dépouillement des lettres.

— “Des jeunes gens annoncent qu'ils brûlent chaque soir devant le Panthéon un numéro de l'*Assemblée nationale*, et ils engagent tous les patriotes à suivre leur exemple.”

— “Bravo ! adopté !” répondit la foule.

— “Le citoyen Jean-Jacques Langreneux, typographe, rue Dauphine, voudrait qu’on élevât un monument à la mémoire des martyrs de thermidor.”

— “Michel-Evariste-Népomucène Vincent, ex-professeur, émet le vœu que la démocratie européenne adopte l’unité de langage. On pourrait se servir d’une langue morte, comme par exemple du latin perfectionné.”

— “Non ! pas de latin !” s’écria l’architecte.

— “Pourquoi ?” reprit un maître d’études.

Et ces deux messieurs engagèrent une discussion, où d’autres se mêlèrent, chacun jetant son mot pour éblouir, et qui ne tarda pas à devenir tellement fastidieuse, que beaucoup s’en allaient.

Mais un petit vieillard, portant au bas de son front prodigieusement haut des lunettes vertes, réclama la parole pour une communication urgente.

C’était un mémoire sur la répartition des impôts. Les chiffres découlaient, cela n’en finissait plus ! L’impatience éclata d’abord en murmures, en conversations ; rien ne le troublait. Puis on se mit à siffler, on appelait “Azor” ; Sénécal gourmanda le public ; l’orateur continuait comme une machine. Il fallut, pour l’arrêter, le prendre par le coude. Le bonhomme eut l’air de sortir d’un songe, et, levant tranquillement ses lunettes :

— “Pardon ! citoyens ! pardon ! Je me retire ! mille excuses !”

L’insuccès de cette lecture déconcerta Frédéric. Il avait son discours dans sa poche, mais une improvisation eût mieux valu.

Enfin, le président annonça qu’ils allaient passer à l’affaire importante, la question électorale. On ne discuterait pas les grandes listes républicaines. Cependant, le Club de l’Intelligence avait bien le droit, comme un autre, d’en former une, “n’en déplaise à MM. les pachas de l’hôtel de ville”, et les citoyens qui briguaient le mandat populaire pouvaient exposer leurs titres.

— “Allez-y donc !” dit Dussardier.

Un homme en soutane, crépu, et de physionomie pétulante, avait déjà levé la main. Il déclara, en bredouillant, s’appeler Ducretot, prêtre et agronome auteur d’un ouvrage intitulé Des engrais. On le renvoya vers un cercle horticole.

Puis un patriote en blouse gravit la tribune. Celui-là était un plébéien, large d’épaules, une grosse figure très douce et de longs cheveux noirs. Il parcourut l’assemblée d’un regard presque voluptueux, se renversa la tête, et enfin, écartant les bras :

— “Vous avez repoussé Ducretot, O mes frères ! et vous avez bien fait, mais ce n’est pas par irréligion, car nous sommes tous religieux.”

Plusieurs écoutaient la bouche ouverte, avec des airs de catéchumènes, des poses extatiques.

— “Ce n’est pas, non plus, parce qu’il est prêtre, car, nous aussi, nous sommes prêtres ! L’ouvrier est prêtre, comme l’était le fondateur du socialisme, notre Maître à tous, Jésus-Christ !”

Le moment était venu d’inaugurer le règne de Dieu. L’Evangile conduisait tout droit à 89 ! Après l’abolition de l’esclavage, l’abolition du prolétariat. On avait eu l’âge de haine, allait commencer l’âge d’amour.

— “Le christianisme est la clef de voûte et le fondement de l’édifice nouveau…”

— “Vous fichez-vous de nous ?” s’écria le placeur d’alcools. “Qu’est-ce qui m’a donné un calotin pareil !” Cette interruption causa un grand scandale. Presque tous montèrent sur les bancs, et, le poing tendu, vociféraient : “Athée ! aristocrate ! canaille !” pendant que la sonnette du président tintait sans discontinuer et que les cris “A l’ordre ! à l’ordre !” redoublaient. Mais, intrépide, et soutenu d’ailleurs par “trois cafés” pris avant de venir, il se débattait au milieu des autres.

— “Comment, moi ! un aristocrate ? allons donc !” Admis enfin à s’expliquer, il déclara qu’on ne serait jamais tranquille avec les prêtres, et, puisqu’on avait parlé tout à l’heure d’économies, c’en serait une fameuse que de supprimer les églises, les saints ciboires, et finalement tous les cultes.

Quelqu’un lui objecta qu’il allait loin.

— “Oui ! je vais loin ! Mais, quand un vaisseau est surpris par la tempête…”

Sans attendre la fin de la comparaison, un autre lui répondit :

— “D’accord ! mais c’est démolir d’un seul coup, comme un maçon sans discernement…”

— “Vous insultez les maçons !” hurla un citoyen couvert de plâtre ; et, s’obstinant à croire qu’on l’avait provoqué, il vomit des injures, voulait se battre, se cramponnait à son banc. Trois hommes ne furent pas de trop pour le mettre dehors.

Cependant, l’ouvrier se tenait toujours à la tribune. Les deux secrétaires l’avertirent d’en descendre. Il protesta contre le passe-droit qu’on lui faisait.

— “Vous ne m’empêcherez pas de crier : amour éternel à notre chère France ! amour éternel aussi à la République !”

— “Citoyens !” dit alors Compain, “citoyens !”

Et, à force de répéter : “Citoyens”, ayant obtenu un peu de silence, il appuya sur la tribune ses deux mains rouges, pareilles à des moignons, se porta le corps en avant, et, clignant des yeux :

— “Je crois qu’il faudrait donner une plus large extension à la tête de veau.”

Tous se taisaient, croyant avoir mal entendu.

— “Oui ! la tête de veau !”

Trois cents rires éclatèrent d’un seul coup. Le plafond trembla. Devant toutes ces faces bouleversées par la joie, Compain se reculait. Il reprit d’un ton furieux :

— “Comment ! vous ne connaissez pas la tête de veau”

Ce fut un paroxysme, un délire. On se pressait les côtes. Quelques-uns même tombaient par terre, sous les bancs. Compain n’y tenant plus, se réfugia près de Regimbart et il voulait l’entraîner.

— “Non ! je reste jusqu’au bout !” dit le Citoyen.

Cette réponse détermina Frédéric ; et, comme il cherchait de droite et de gauche ses amis pour le soutenir, il aperçut, devant lui, Pellerin à la tribune. L’artiste le prit de haut avec la foule.

— “Je voudrais savoir un peu où est le candidat de l’Art dans tout cela ? Moi, j’ai fait un tableau…”

— “Nous n’avons que faire des tableaux !” dit brutalement un homme maigre, ayant des plaques rouges aux pommettes.

Pellerin se récria qu’on l’interrompait.

Mais l’autre, d’un ton tragique :

— “Est-ce que le Gouvernement n’aurait pas dû déjà abolir, par un décret, la prostitution et la misère ?”

Et, cette parole lui ayant livré tout de suite la faveur du peuple, il tonna contre la corruption des grandes villes.

— " Honte et infamie ! On devrait happer les bourgeois au sortir de la Maison d’or et leur cracher à la figure ! Au moins, si le Gouvernement ne favorisait pas la débauche ! Mais les employés de l’octroi sont envers nos filles et nos sœurs d’une indécence…

Une voix proféra de loin :

— “C’est rigolo !”

— “A la porte !”

— “On tire de nous des contributions pour solder le libertinage ! Ainsi, les forts appointements d’acteur…”

— “A moi !” s’écria Delmar.

Il bondit à la tribune, écarta tout le monde, prit sa pose ; et, déclarant qu’il méprisait d’aussi plates accusations, s’étendit sur la mission civilisatrice du comédien. Puisque le théâtre était le foyer de l’instruction nationale, il votait pour la réforme du théâtre ; et, d’abord, plus de directions, plus de privilèges !

— “Oui ! d’aucune sorte !”

Le jeu de l’acteur échauffait la multitude, et des motions subversives se croisaient.

— “Plus d’académies ! plus d’Institut”

— “Plus de missions !”

— “Plus de baccalauréat !”

— “A bas les grades universitaires !”

— “Conservons-les”, dit Sénécal, “mais qu’ils soient conférés par le suffrage universel, par le Peuple, seul vrai juge !”

Le plus utile, d’ailleurs, n’était pas cela. Il fallait d’abord passer le niveau sur la tête des riches ! Et il les représenta se gorgeant de crimes sous leurs plafonds dorés, tandis que les pauvres, se tordant de faim dans leurs galetas, cultivaient toutes les vertus. Les applaudissements devinrent si forts, qu’il s’interrompit. Pendant quelques minutes, il resta les paupières closes, la tête renversée et comme se berçant sur cette colère qu’il soulevait.

Puis, il se remit à parler d’une façon dogmatique, en phrases impérieuses comme des lois. L’Etat devait s’emparer de la Banque et des Assurances. Les héritages seraient abolis. On établirait un fond social pour les travailleurs. Bien d’autres mesures étaient bonnes dans l’avenir. Celles-là, pour le moment, suffisaient ; et, revenant aux élections :

— “Il nous faut des citoyens purs, des hommes entièrement neufs ! Quelqu’un se présente-t-il ?”

Frédéric se leva. Il y eut un bourdonnement d’approbation causé par ses amis. Mais Sénécal, prenant une figure à la Fouquier-Tinville, se mit à l’interroger sur ses nom, prénoms, antécédents, vie et mœurs.

Frédéric lui répondait sommairement et se mordait les lèvres. Sénécal demanda si quelqu’un voyait un empêchement à cette candidature.

— “Non ! non !”

Mais lui, il en voyait. Tous se penchèrent et tendirent les oreilles. Le citoyen postulant n’avait pas livré une certaine somme promise pour une fondation démocratique, un journal. De plus, le 22 février, bien que suffisamment averti, il avait manqué au rendez-vous, place du Panthéon.

— “Je jure qu’il était aux Tuileries !” s’écria Dussardier.

— “Pouvez-vous jurer l’avoir vu au Panthéon ?” Dussardier baissa la tête. Frédéric se taisait ; ses amis scandalisés le regardaient avec inquiétude.

— “Au moins”, reprit Sénécal, “connaissez-vous un patriote qui nous réponde de vos principes ?”

— “Moi !” dit Dussardier.

— “Oh ! cela ne suffit pas ! un autre !”

Frédéric se tourna vers Pellerin. L’artiste lui répondit par une abondance de gestes qui signifiait :

— “Ah ! mon cher, ils m’ont repoussé ! Diable ! que voulez-vous !”

Alors, Frédéric poussa du coude Regimbart.

— “Oui ! c’est vrai ! il est temps ! j’y vais !”

Et Regimbart enjamba l’estrade ; puis, montrant l’Espagnol qui l’avait suivi :

— “Permettez-moi, citoyens, de vous présenter un patriote de Barcelone.”

Le patriote fit un grand salut, roula comme un automate ses yeux d’argent, et, la main sur le cœur :

— “Ciudadanos ! mucho aprecio el honor que me dispensáis, y si grande es vuestra bondad mayor es vuestro atención.”

— “Je réclame la parole !” cria Frédéric.

— “Desde que se proclamó la constitución de Cadiz, ese pacto fondamental de las libertades españolas, hasta la última revolución, nuestra patria cuenta numerosos y heroicos mártires.”

Frédéric encore une fois voulut se faire entendre :

— “Mais citoyens !…”

L’Espagnol continuait :

— “El martes próximo tendrá lugar en la iglesia de la Magdelena un servicio fúnebre.”

— “C’est absurde à la fin ! personne ne comprend !”

Cette observation exaspéra la foule.

— “A la porte ! à la porte !”

— “Qui ? moi ?” demanda Frédéric.

— “Vous-même !” dit majestueusement Sénécal.

— “Sortez !”

Il se leva pour sortir ; et la voix de libérien le poursuivait :

— “Y todos los españoles desearían ver allí reunidas las deputaciones de los clubs y de la milicia nacional. Una oración fúnebre en honor de la libertad española y del mundo entero, serà pronunciada por un miembro del clero de Paris en la sala Bonne-Nouvelle. Honor al pueblo francés, que llamaría yo el primero pueblo del mundo, si no fuese ciudadano de otra nación”

— “Aristo !” glapit un voyou, en montrant le poing à Frédéric, qui s’élançait dans la cour, indigné.

Il se reprocha son dévouement, sans réfléchir que les accusations portées contre lui étaient justes, après tout. Quelle fatale idée que cette candidature ! Mais quels ânes, quels crétins ! Il se comparait à ces hommes, et soulageait avec leur sottise la blessure de son orgueil. Puis il éprouva le besoin de voir Rosanette. Après tant de laideurs et d’emphase, sa gentille personne serait un délassement. Elle savait qu’il avait dû, le soir, se présenter dans un club. Cependant, lorsqu’il entra, elle ne lui fit pas même une question.

Elle se tenait près du feu, décousant la doublure d’une robe. Un pareil ouvrage le surprit.

— “Tiens ? qu’est-ce que tu fais ?”

— “Tu le vois”, dit-elle sèchement. “Je raccommode mes hardes ! C’est ta République.”

— “Pourquoi ma République ?”

— “C’est la mienne, peut-être ?”

Et elle se mit à lui reprocher tout ce qui se passait en France depuis deux mois, l’accusant d’avoir fait la révolution, d’être cause qu’on était ruiné, que les gens riches abandonnaient Paris, et qu’elle mourrait plus tard à l’hôpital.

— “Tu en parles à ton aise, toi, avec tes rentes ! Du reste, au train dont ça va, tu ne les auras pas longtemps, tes rentes.”

— “Cela se peut”, dit Frédéric, “les plus dévoués sont toujours méconnus ; et, si l’on n’avait pour soi sa conscience, les brutes avec qui l’on se compromet vous dégoûteraient de l’abnégation !”

Rosanette le regarda, les cils rapprochés.

— “Hein ? Quoi ? Quelle abnégation ? Monsieur n’a pas réussi, à ce qu’il paraît ? Tant mieux ! ça t’apprendra à faire des dons patriotiques. Oh ! ne mens pas ! Je sais que tu leur as donné trois cents francs, car elle se fait entretenir, ta République ! Eh bien, amuse-toi avec elle, mon bonhomme !”

Sous cette avalanche de sottises, Frédéric passait de son autre désappointement à une déception plus lourde.

Il s’était retiré au fond de la chambre. Elle vint à lui.

— “Voyons ! raisonne un peu ! Dans un pays comme dans une maison, il faut un maître ; autrement, chacun fait danser l’anse du panier. D’abord, tout le monde sait que Ledru-Rollin est couvert de dettes ! Quant à Lamartine, comment veux-tu qu’un poète s’entende à la politique ? Ah ! tu as beau hocher la tête et te croire plus d’esprit que les autres, c’est pourtant vrai ! Mais tu ergotes toujours ; on ne peut pas placer un mot avec toi ! Voilà par exemple Fournier-Fontaine, des magasins de Saint-Roch : sais-tu de combien il manque ? De huit cent mille francs ! Et Gomer, l’emballeur d’en face, un autre républicain celui-là, il cassait les pincettes sur la tête de sa femme, et il a bu tant d’absinthe, qu’on va le mettre dans une maison de santé. C’est comme ça qu’ils sont tous, les républicains ! Une République à vingt-cinq pour cent ! Ah oui ! vante-toi !”

Frédéric s’en alla. L’ineptie de cette fille, se dévoilant tout à coup dans un langage populacier, le dégoûtait. Il se sentit même un peu redevenu patriote.

La mauvaise humeur de Rosanette ne fit que s’accroître. Mlle Vatnaz l’irritait par son enthousiasme. Se croyant une mission, elle avait la rage de pérorer, de catéchiser, et, plus forte que son amie dans ces matières, l’accablait d’arguments.

Un jour, elle arriva tout indignée contre Hussonnet, qui venait de se permettre des polissonneries, au club des femmes. Rosanette approuva cette conduite, déclarant même qu’elle prendrait des habits d’homme pour aller “leur dire leur fait, à toutes, et les fouetter” . Frédéric entrait au même moment.

— “Tu m’accompagneras, n’est-ce pas ?”

Et, malgré sa présence, elles se chamaillèrent, l’une faisant la bourgeoise, l’autre la philosophe.

Les femmes, selon Rosanette, étaient nées exclusivement pour l’amour ou pour élever des enfants, pour tenir un ménage.

D’après Mlle Vatnaz, la femme devait avoir sa place dans l’Etat. Autrefois, les Gauloises légiféraient, les Anglo-Saxonnes aussi, les épouses des Hurons faisaient partie du Conseil. L’œuvre civilisatrice était commune. Il fallait toutes y concourir, et substituer enfin à l’égoïsme la fraternité, à l’individualisme l’association, au morcellement la grande culture.

— “Allons, bon ! tu te connais en culture, à présent” Pourquoi pas ? D’ailleurs, il s’agit de l’humanité, de son avenir ! "

— “Mêle-toi du tien !”

— “Ça me regarde !”

Elles se fâchaient. Frédéric s’interposa. La Vatnaz s’échauffait, et arriva même à soutenir le Communisme.

— “Quelle bêtise !” dit Rosanette. “Est-ce que jamais ça pourra se faire ?”

L’autre cita en preuve les Esséniens, les frères Moraves, les Jésuites du Paraguay, la famille des Pingons, près de Thiers en Auvergne ; et, comme elle gesticulait beaucoup, sa chaîne de montre se prit dans son paquet de breloques, à un petit mouton d’or suspendu.

Tout à coup, Rosanette pâlit extraordinairement. Mlle Vatnaz continuait à dégager son bibelot. — “Ne te donne pas tant de mal”, dit Rosanette “maintenant, je connais tes opinions politiques.”

— “Quoi ?” reprit la Vatnaz, devenue rouge comme une vierge.

— “Oh ! oh ! tu me comprends !”

Frédéric ne comprenait pas. Entre elles, évidemment, il était survenu quelque chose de plus capital et de plus intime que le socialisme.

— “Et quand cela serait”, répliqua la Vatnaz, se redressant intrépidement.

— “C’est un emprunt, ma chère, dette pour dette !”

— “Parbleu, je ne nie pas les miennes ! Pour quelques mille francs, belle histoire ! J’emprunte au moins ; je ne vole personne !”

Mlle Vatnaz s’efforça de rire.

— “Oh ! j’en mettrais ma main au feu.”

— “Prends garde ! Elle est assez sèche pour brûler.”

La vieille fille lui présenta sa main droite, et, la gardant levée juste en face d’elle :

— “Mais il y a de tes amis qui la trouvent à leur convenance !”

— “Des Andalous, alors ? comme castagnettes !”

— “Gueuse !”

La Maréchale fit un grand salut.

— “On n’est pas plus ravissante !”

Mlle Vatnaz ne répondit rien. Des gouttes de sueur parurent à ses tempes. Ses yeux se fixaient sur le tapis.

Elle haletait. Enfin, elle gagna la porte, et, la faisant claquer vigoureusement :

— “Bonsoir ! Vous aurez de mes nouvelles !”

— “A l’avantage !” dit Rosanette.

Sa contrainte l’avait brisée. Elle tomba sur le divan, toute tremblante, balbutiant des injures, versant des larmes. Etait-ce cette menace de la Vatnaz qui la tourmentait ? Eh non ! elle s’en moquait bien ! A tout compter, l’autre lui devait de l’argent, peut-être ? C’était le mouton d’or, un cadeau ; et, au milieu de ses pleurs, le nom de Delmar lui échappa. Donc, elle aimait le cabotin !

— “Alors, pourquoi m’a-t-elle pris ?” se demanda Frédéric. “D’où vient qu’il est revenu ? Qui la force à me garder ? Quel est le sens de tout cela ?”

Les petits sanglots de Rosanette continuaient. Elle était toujours au bord du divan, étendue de côté, la joue droite sur ses deux mains, — et semblait un être si délicat, inconscient et endolori, qu’il se rapprocha d’elle, et la baisa au front, doucement.

Alors, elle lui fit des assurances de tendresse ; le Prince venait de partir, ils seraient libres. Mais elle se trouvait pour le moment… gênée. “Tu l’as vu toi-même l’autre jour, quand j’utilisais mes vieilles doublures.” Plus d’équipages à présent ! Et ce n’était pas tout ; le tapissier menaçait de reprendre les meubles de la chambre et du grand salon. Elle ne savait que faire.

Frédéric eut envie de répondre : “Ne t’inquiète pas ! je payerai !” Mais la dame pouvait mentir. L’expérience l’avait instruit. Il se borna simplement à des consolations.

Les craintes de Rosanette n’étaient pas vaines ; il fallut rendre les meubles et quitter le bel appartement de la rue Drouot. Elle en prit un autre, sur le boulevard Poissonnière, au quatrième. Les curiosités de son ancien boudoir furent suffisantes pour donner aux trois pièces un air coquet. On eut des stores chinois, une tente sur la terrasse, dans le salon un tapis de hasard encore tout neuf, avec des poufs de soie rose. Frédéric avait contribué largement à ces acquisitions ; il éprouvait la joie d’un nouveau marié qui possède enfin une maison à lui, une femme à lui ; et, se plaisant là beaucoup, il venait y coucher presque tous les soirs.

Un matin, comme il sortait de l’antichambre, il aperçut au troisième étage, dans l’escalier, le shako d’un garde national qui montait. Où allait-il donc ?

Frédéric attendit. L'homme montait toujours, la tête un peu baissée : il leva les yeux. C'était le sieur Arnoux. La situation était claire. Ils rougirent en même temps, saisis par le même embarras.

Arnoux, le premier, trouva moyen d'en sortir.

— “Elle va mieux, n'est-il pas vrai ?” comme si, Rosanette étant malade, il se fût présenté pour avoir de ses nouvelles.

Frédéric profita de cette ouverture.

— “Oui, certainement ! Sa bonne me l'a dit, du moins”, voulant faire entendre qu'on ne l'avait pas reçu.

Puis ils restèrent face à face, irrésolus l'un et l'autre, et s'observant. C'était à qui des deux ne s'en irait pas. Arnoux, encore une fois, trancha la question.

— “Ah ! bah ! je reviendrai plus tard ! Où vouliez-vous aller ? Je vous accompagne !”

Et, quand ils furent dans la rue, il causa aussi naturellement que d'habitude. Sans doute, il n'avait point le caractère jaloux, ou bien il était trop bonhomme pour se fâcher.

D'ailleurs, la patrie le préoccupait. Maintenant il ne quittait plus l'uniforme. Le 29 mars, il avait défendu les bureaux de la Presse. Quand on envahit la Chambre il se signala par son courage, et il fut du banquet offert à la garde nationale d'Amiens.

Hussonnet, toujours de service avec lui, profitait, plus que personne, de sa gourde et de ses cigares ; mais, irrévérencieux par nature, il se plaisait à le contredire, dénigrant le style peu correct des décrets, les conférences du Luxembourg, les vésuviennes, les tyroliens, tout, jusqu'au char de l'Agriculture, traîné par des chevaux à la place de bœufs et escorté de jeunes filles laides. Arnoux, au contraire, défendait le Pouvoir et rêvait la fusion des partis. Cependant, ses affaires prenaient une tournure mauvaise. Il s'en inquiétait médiocrement.

Les relations de Frédéric et de la Maréchale ne l'avaient point attristé ; car cette découverte l'autorisa (dans sa conscience) à supprimer la pension qu'il lui refaisait depuis le départ du Prince. Il allégua l'embarras des circonstances, gémit beaucoup, et Rosanette fut généreuse. Alors M. Arnoux se considéra comme l'amant de cœur, ce qui le rehaussait dans son estime, et le rajeunit. Ne doutant pas que Frédéric ne payât la Maréchale, il s'imaginait “faire une bonne farce”, arriva même à s'en cacher, et lui laissait le champ libre quand ils se rencontraient.

Ce partage blessait Frédéric ; et les politesses de son rival lui semblaient une gouaillerie trop prolongée. Mais, en se fâchant, il se fût ôté toute chance d'un retour vers l'autre, et puis c'était le seul moyen d'en entendre parler. Le marchand de faïences, suivant son usage, ou, par malice peut-être, la rappelait volontiers dans sa conversation, et lui demandait même pourquoi il ne venait plus la voir.

Frédéric, ayant épuisé tous les prétextes, assura qu'il avait été chez madame Arnoux plusieurs fois, inutilement. Arnoux en demeura convaincu, car souvent il s'extasiait devant elle sur l'absence de leur ami ; et toujours elle répondait avoir manqué sa visite ; de sorte que ces deux mensonges, au lieu de se couper se corroboraient.

La douceur du jeune homme et la joie de l'avoir pour dupe faisaient qu'Arnoux le chérissait davantage. Il poussait la familiarité jusqu'aux dernières bornes, non par dédain, mais par confiance. Un jour, il lui écrivit qu'une affaire urgente l'attirait pour vingt-quatre heures en province — , il le priait de monter la garde à sa place. Frédéric n'osa le refuser, et se rendit au poste du Carrousel.

Il eut à subir la société des gardes nationaux ! et, sauf un épurateur, homme facétieux qui buvait d'une manière exorbitante, tous lui parurent plus bêtes que leur giberne. L'entretien capital fut sur le remplacement des buffleteries par le ceinturon. D'autres s'emportaient contre les ateliers nationaux. On disait : “Où allons-nous ?” Celui qui avait reçu l'apostrophe répondait en ouvrant les yeux, comme au bord d'un abîme : “Où allons-nous ?” Alors un plus hardi s'écriait : “Ça ne peut pas durer ! il faut en finir !” Et, les mêmes discours se répétant jusqu'au soir, Frédéric s'ennuya mortellement.

La surprise fut grande, quand, à onze heures, il vit paraître Arnoux, lequel, tout de suite, dit qu'il accourait pour le libérer, son affaire étant finie.

Il n'avait pas eu d'affaire. C'était une invention pour passer vingt-quatre heures, seul, avec Rosanette. Mais le brave Arnoux avait trop présumé de lui-même, si bien que, dans sa lassitude, un remords l'avait pris. Il venait faire des remerciements à Frédéric et lui offrir à souper.

— “Mille grâces ! je n'ai pas faim ! je ne demande que mon lit !”

— “Raison de plus pour déjeuner ensemble, tantôt !”

Quel mollasse vous êtes ! On ne rentre pas chez soi maintenant ! Il est trop tard ! Ce serait dangereux ! " Frédéric, encore une fois, céda. Arnoux, qu'on ne s'attendait pas à voir, fut choyé de ses frères d'armes, principalement de l'épurateur. Tous l'aimaient ; et il é tait si bon garçon, qu'il regretta la présence d'Hussonnet. Mais il avait besoin de fermer l'oeil une minute, pas davantage.

— “Mettez-vous près de moi”, dit-il à Frédéric, tout en s'allongeant sur le lit de camp, sans ôter ses buffleteries. Par peur d'une alerte, en dépit du règlement, il garda même son fusil ; puis balbutia quelques mots : “Ma chérie ! mon petit ange !” et ne tarda pas à s'endormir.

Ceux qui parlaient se turent ; et peu à peu il se fit dans le poste un grand silence. Frédéric, tourmenté par les puces, regardait autour de lui. La muraille, peinte en jaune, avait à moitié de sa hauteur une longue planche où les sacs formaient une suite de petites bosses, tandis qu'au-dessous, les fusils couleur de plomb étaient dressés les uns près des autres — , et il s'élevait des ronflements, produits par les gardes nationaux, dont les ventres se dessinaient d'une manière confuse, dans l'ombre. Une bouteille vide et des assiettes couvraient le poêle. Trois chaises de paille entouraient la table, où s'étalait un jeu de cartes. Un tambour, au milieu du banc, laissait pendre sa bricole. Le vent chaud arrivant par la porte, faisait fumer le quinquet. Arnoux dormait les deux bras ouverts ; et comme son fusil était posé la crosse en bas un peu obliquement, la gueule du canon lui arrivait sous l'aisselle. Frédéric le remarqua et fut effrayé.

— "Mais non ! j'ai tort ! il n'y a rien à craindre ! S'il mourait cependant…"

Et, tout de suite, des tableaux à n'en plus finir se déroulèrent. Il s'aperçut avec elle, la nuit, dans une chaise de poste ; puis au bord d'un fleuve par un soir d'été, et sous le reflet d'une lampe, chez eux, dans leur maison. Il s'arrêtait même à des calculs de ménage, des dispositions domestiques, contemplant, palpant déjà son bonheur ; — et, pour le réaliser, il aurait fallu seulement que le chien du fusil se levât ! On pouvait le pousser du bout de l'orteil ; le coup partirait, ce serait un hasard, rien de plus !

Frédéric s'étendit sur cette idée, comme un dramaturge qui compose. Tout à coup, il lui sembla qu'elle n'était pas loin de se résoudre en action, et qu'il allait y contribuer, qu'il en avait envie ; alors, une grande peur le saisit. Au milieu de cette angoisse, il éprouvait un plaisir, et s'y enfonçait de plus en plus, sentant avec effroi ses scrupules disparaître ; dans la fureur de sa rêverie, le reste du monde s'effaçait ; et il n'avait conscience de lui-même que par un intolérable serrement à la poitrine.

— "Prenons-nous le vin blanc ?" dit l'épurateur qui s'éveillait.

Arnoux sauta par terre ; et le vin blanc étant pris, voulut monter la faction de Frédéric.

Puis il l'emmena déjeuner rue de Chartres, chez Parly et, comme il avait besoin de se refaire, il se commanda deux plats de viande, un homard, une omelette au rhum, une salade, etc., le tout arrosé d'un Sauterne 1819, avec un romanée, sans compter le champagne au dessert, et les liqueurs.

Frédéric ne le contraria nullement. Il était gêné, comme si l'autre avait pu découvrir, sur son visage, les traces de sa pensée.

Les deux coudes au bord de la table, et penché très bas, Arnoux, en le fatiguant de son regard, lui confiait ses imaginations.

Il avait envie de prendre à ferme tous les remblais de la ligne du Nord pour y semer des pommes de terre, ou bien d'organiser sur les boulevards une cavalcade monstre, où les “célébrités de l’époque” figureraient. Il louerait toutes les fenêtres, ce qui, à raison de trois francs, en moyenne, produirait un joli bénéfice. Bref, il rêvait un grand coup de fortune par un accaparement. Il était moral, cependant, blâmait les excès, l’inconduite, parlait de son “pauvre père”, et, tous les soirs, disait-il, faisait son examen de conscience, avant d’offrir son âme à Dieu.

— “Un peu de curaçao, hein ?”

— “Comme vous voudrez.”

Quant à la République, les choses s’arrangeraient ; enfin, il se trouvait l’homme le plus heureux de la terre ; et, s’oubliant, il vanta les qualités de Rosanette, la compara même à sa femme. C’était bien autre chose ! On n’imaginait pas d’aussi belles cuisses.

— “A votre santé !”

Frédéric trinqua. Il avait, par complaisance, un peu trop bu ; d’ailleurs, le grand soleil l’éblouissait ; et, quand ils remontèrent ensemble la rue Vivienne, leurs épaulettes se touchaient fraternellement.

Rentré chez lui, Frédéric dormit jusqu’à sept heures. Ensuite, il s’en alla chez la Maréchale. Elle était sortie avec quelqu’un. Avec Arnoux, peut-être ? Ne sachant que faire, il continua sa promenade sur le boulevard, mais ne put dépasser la porte Saint-Martin, tant il y avait de monde.

La misère abandonnait à eux-mêmes un nombre considérable d’ouvriers ; et ils venaient là, tous les soirs, se passer en revue sans doute, et attendre un signal. Malgré la loi contre les attroupements, ces clubs du désespoir augmentaient d’une manière effrayante, et beaucoup de bourgeois s’y rendaient quotidiennement, par bravade, par mode.

Tout à coup, Frédéric aperçut, à trois pas de distance, M. Dambreuse avec Martinon ; il tourna la tête, car M. Dambreuse s’étant fait nommer représentant, il lui gardait rancune. Mais le capitaliste l’arrêta.

— “Un mot, cher monsieur ! J’ai des explications à vous fournir.”

— “Je n’en demande pas.”

— “De grâce ! écoutez-moi.”

Ce n’était nullement sa faute. On l’avait prié, contraint en quelque sorte. Martinon, tout de suite, appuya ses paroles : des Nogentais en députation s’étaient présentés chez lui.

— “D’ailleurs, j’ai cru être libre, du moment…”

Une poussée de monde sur le trottoir força M. Dambreuse à s’écarter. Une minute après, il reparut, en disant à Martinon :

— “C’est un vrai service, cela ! Vous n’aurez pas à vous repentir…”

Tous les trois s’adossèrent contre une boutique, afin de causer plus à l’aise.

On criait de temps en temps : “Vive Napoléon ! vive Barbès ! à bas Marie !” La foule innombrable parlait très haut ; — et toutes ces voix, répercutées par les maisons, faisaient comme le bruit continuel des vagues dans un port. A de certains moments, elles se taisaient ; alors, la Marseillaise s’élevait. Sous les portes cochères, des hommes d’allures mystérieuses proposaient des cannes à dard. Quelquefois, deux individus, passant l’un devant l’autre, clignaient de l’oeil, et s’éloignaient prestement. Des groupes de badauds occupaient les trottoirs ; une multitude compacte s’agitait sur le pavé. Des bandes entières d’agents de police, sortant des ruelles, y disparaissaient à peine entrés. De petits drapeaux rouges, çà et là, semblaient des flammes ; les cochers, du haut de leur siège, faisaient de grands gestes, puis s’en retournaient. C’était un mouvement, un spectacle des plus drôles.

— “Comme tout cela”, dit Martinon, “aurait amusé Mlle Cécile !”

— “Ma femme, vous savez bien, n’aime pas que ma nièce vienne avec nous”, reprit en souriant M. Dambreuse.

On ne l’aurait pas reconnu. Depuis trois mois il criait “Vive la République !” et même il avait voté le bannissement des d’Orléans. Mais les concessions devaient finir. Il se montrait furieux jusqu’à porter un casse-tête dans sa poche.

Martinon, aussi, en avait un. La magistrature n’étant plus inamovible, il s’était retiré du Parquet, si bien qu’il dépassait en violences M. Dambreuse.

Le banquier haïssait particulièrement Lamartine (pour avoir soutenu Ledru-Rollin), et avec lui Pierre Leroux, Proudhon, Considérant, Lamennais tous les cerveaux brûlés, tous les socialistes.

— “Car enfin, que veulent-ils ? On a supprimé l’octroi sur la viande et la contrainte par corps ; maintenant, on étudie le projet d’une banque hypothécaire ; l’autre jour, c’était une banque nationale ! et voilà cinq millions au budget pour les ouvriers ! Mais heureusement c’est fini, grâce à M. de Falloux ! Bon voyage ! qu’ils s’en aillent !”

En effet, ne sachant comment nourrir les cent trente mille hommes des ateliers nationaux, le ministre des travaux publics avait, ce jour-là même, signé un arrêté qui invitait tous les citoyens entre dix-huit et vingt ans à prendre du service comme soldats, ou bien à partir vers les provinces, pour y remuer la terre.

Cette alternative les indigna, persuadés qu’on voulait détruire la République. L’existence loin de la Capitale les affligeait comme un exil ; ils se voyaient mourants par les fièvres, dans des régions farouches. Pour beaucoup, d’ailleurs, accoutumés à des travaux délicats, l’agriculture semblait un avilissement ; c’était un leurre enfin, une dérision, le déni formel de toutes les promesses. S’ils résistaient, on emploierait la force ; ils n’en doutaient pas et se disposaient à la prévenir.

Vers neuf heures, les attroupements formés à la Bastille et au Châtelet refluèrent sur le boulevard. De la porte Saint-Denis à la porte Saint-Martin, cela ne faisait plus qu’un grouillement énorme, une seule masse d’un bleu sombre, presque noir. Les hommes que l’on entrevoyait avaient tous les prunelles ardentes, le teint pâle, des figures amaigries par la faim, exaltées par l’injustice. Cependant, des nuages s’amoncelaient ; le ciel orageux chauffant l’électricité de la multitude, elle tourbillonnait sur elle-même, indécise, avec un large balancement de houle ; et l’on sentait dans ses profondeurs une force incalculable, et comme l’énergie d’un élément. Puis tous se mirent à chanter : — Des lampions ! des lampions ! ".

Plusieurs fenêtres ne s’éclairaient pas ; des cailloux furent lancés dans leurs carreaux. M. Dambreuse jugea prudent de s’en aller. Les deux jeunes gens le reconduisirent.

Il prévoyait de grands désastres. Le peuple, encore une fois, pouvait envahir la Chambre ; et, à ce propos, il raconta comment il serait mort le 15 mai, sans le dévouement d’un garde national.

— “Mais c’est votre ami, j’oubliais ! votre ami, le fabricant de faïences, Jacques Arnoux !”

Les gens de l’émeute l’étouffaient ; ce brave citoyen l’avait pris dans ses bras et déposé à l’écart. Aussi, depuis lors, une sorte de liaison s’était faite.

— “Il faudra un de ces jours dîner ensemble, et, puisque vous le voyez souvent, assurez-le que je l’aime beaucoup. C’est un excellent homme, calomnié, selon moi — , et il a de l’esprit, le mâtin ! Mes compliments encore une fois ! bien le bonsoir !…”

Frédéric, après avoir quitté M. Dambreuse, retourna chez la Maréchale ; et, d’un air très sombre, dit qu’elle devait opter entre lui et Arnoux. Elle répondit avec douceur qu’elle ne comprenait goutte à des “ragots pareils”, n’aimait pas Arnoux, n’y tenait aucunement. Frédéric avait soif d’abandonner Paris. Elle ne repoussa pas cette fantaisie, et ils partirent pour Fontainebleau dès le lendemain.

L’hôtel où ils logèrent se distinguait des autres par un jet d’eau clapotant au milieu de sa cour. Les portes des chambres s’ouvraient sur un corridor, comme dans les monastères. Celle qu’on leur donna était grande, fournie de bons meubles, tendue d’indienne, et silencieuse, vu a rareté des voyageurs. Le long des maisons, des bourgeois inoccupés passaient ; puis, sous leurs fenêtres, quand le jour tomba, des enfants dans la rue firent une partie de barres ; — et cette tranquillité. succédant pour eux au tumulte de Paris, leur causait une surprise, un apaisement.

Le matin de bonne heure, ils allèrent visiter le château. Comme ils entraient par la grille, ils aperçurent sa façade tout entière, avec les cinq pavillons à toits aigus et son escalier en fer à cheval se déployant au fond de la cour, que bordent de droite et de gauche deux corps de bâtiments plus bas. Des lichens sur les pavés se mêlent de loin au ton fauve des briques ; et l'ensemble du palais, couleur de rouille comme une vieille armure, avait quelque chose de royalement impassible, une sorte de grandeur militaire et triste.

Enfin, un domestique, portant un trousseau de clefs, parut. Il leur montra d'abord les appartements des reines, l'oratoire du Pape, la galerie de François Ier, la petite table d'acajou sur laquelle l'Empereur signa son abdication, et, dans une des pièces qui divisaient l'ancienne galerie des Cerfs, l'endroit où Christine fit assassiner Monaldeschi. Rosanette écouta cette histoire attentivement ; puis, se tournant vers Frédéric :

— “C'était par jalousie, sans doute ? Prends garde à toi !”

Ensuite, ils traversèrent la salle du Conseil, la salle des Gardes, la salle du Trône, le salon de Louis XIII. Les hautes croisées, sans rideaux, épanchaient une lumière blanche ; de la poussière ternissait légèrement les poignées des espagnolettes, le pied de cuivre des consoles ; des nappes de grosses toiles cachaient partout les fauteuils ; on voyait au-dessus des portes des chasses Louis XV, et çà et là des tapisseries représentant les dieux de l'Olympe, Psyché ou les batailles d'Alexandre.

Quand elle passait devant les glaces, Rosanette s'arrêtait une minute pour lisser ses bandeaux.

Après la cour du donjon et la chapelle Saint-Saturnin, ils arrivèrent dans la salle des fêtes.

Ils furent éblouis par la splendeur du plafond, divisé en compartiments octogones, rehaussé d'or et d'argent, plus ciselé qu'un bijou, et par l'abondance des peintures qui couvrent les murailles depuis la gigantesque cheminée où des croissants et des carquois entourent les armes de France, jusqu'à la tribune pour les musiciens, construite à l'autre bout, dans la largeur de la salle. Les dix fenêtres en arcades étaient grandes ouvertes ; le soleil faisait briller les peintures, le ciel bleu continuait indéfiniment l'outremer des cintres ; et, du fond des bois, dont les cimes vaporeuses emplissaient l'horizon, il semblait venir un écho des hallalis poussés dans les trompes d'ivoire, et des ballets mythologiques, assemblant sous le feuillage des princesses et des seigneurs travestis en nymphes et en sylvains, — époque de science ingénue, de passions violentes et d'art somptueux, quand l'idéal était d'emporter le monde dans un rêve des Hespérides, et que les maîtresses des rois se confondaient avec les astres. La plus belle de ces fameuses s'était fait peindre, à droite, sous la figure de Diane Chasseresse, et même en Diane Infernale, sans doute pour marquer sa puissance jusque par-delà le tombeau. Tous ces symboles confirment sa gloire ; et il reste là quelque chose d'elle, une voix indistincte, un rayonnement qui se prolonge.

Frédéric fut pris par une concupiscence rétrospective et inexprimable. Afin de distraire son désir, il se mit à considérer tendrement Rosanette, en lui demandant si elle n'aurait pas voulu être cette femme.

— “Quelle femme ?”

— “Diane de Poitiers !”

Il répéta :

— “Diane de Poitiers, la maîtresse d'Henri II.”

Elle fit un petit : “Ah !” Ce fut tout.

Son mutisme prouvait clairement qu'elle ne savait rien, ne comprenait pas, si bien que par complaisance il lui dit :

— “Tu t'ennuies peut-être ?”

— “Non, non, au contraire !”

Et, le menton levé, tout en promenant à l'entour un regard des plus vagues, Rosanette lâcha ce mot “Ça rappelle des souvenirs !”

Cependant, on apercevait sur sa mine un effort, une intention de respect ; et, comme cet air sérieux la rendait plus jolie, Frédéric l'excusa.

L'étang des carpes la divertit davantage. Pendant un quart d'heure, elle jeta des morceaux de pain dans l'eau, pour voir les poissons bondir.

Frédéric s'était assis près d'elle, sous les tilleuls. Il songeait à tous les personnages qui avaient hanté ces murs, Charles-Quint, les Valois, Henri IV, Pierre le Grand, Jean-Jacques Rousseau et “les belles pleureuses des premières loges”, Voltaire, Napoléon, Pie VII, Louis-Philippe — , il se sentait environné, coudoyé par ces morts tumultueux ; une telle confusion d'images l'étourdissait, bien qu'il y trouvât du charme pourtant.

Enfin ils descendirent dans le parterre.

C'est un vaste rectangle, laissant voir d'un seul coup d'oeil ses larges allées jaunes, ses carrés de gazon, ses rubans de buis, ses ifs en pyramide, ses verdures basses et ses étroites plates-bandes, où des fleurs clairsemées font des taches sur la terre grise. Au bout du jardin, un parc se déploie, traversé dans toute son étendue par un long canal.

Les résidences royales ont en elles une mélancolie particulière, qui tient sans doute à leurs dimensions trop considérables pour le petit nombre de leurs hôtes, au silence qu'on est surpris d'y trouver après tant de fanfares, à leur luxe immobile prouvant par sa vieillesse la fugacité dès dynasties, l'éternelle misère de tout ; — et cette exhalaison des siècles, engourdissante et funèbre comme un parfum de momie, se fait sentir même aux têtes naïves. Rosanette bâillait démesurément. Ils s'en retournèrent à l'hôtel.

Après leur déjeuner, on leur amena une voiture découverte. Ils sortirent de Fontainebleau par un large rond-point, puis montèrent au pas une route sablonneuse dans un bois de petits pins. Les arbres devinrent plus grands ; et le cocher, de temps à autre, disait : “Voici les Frères-Siamois, le Pharamond, le Bouquet-du-Roi…”, n’oubliant aucun des sites célèbres, parfois même s’arrêtant pour les faire admirer.

Ils entrèrent dans la futaie de Franchard. La voiture glissait comme un traîneau sur le gazon ; des pigeons qu’on ne voyait pas roucoulaient ; tout à coup, un garçon de café parut ; et ils descendirent devant la barrière d’un jardin où il y avait des tables rondes. Puis, laissant à gauche les murailles d’une abbaye en ruines, ils marchèrent sur de grosses roches, et atteignirent bientôt le fond de la gorge.

Elle est couverte, d’un côté, par un entremêlement de grès et de genévriers, tandis que, de l’autre, le terrain presque nu s’incline vers le creux du vallon, où, dans la couleur des bruyères, un sentier fait une ligne pâle ; et on aperçoit tout au loin un sommet en cône aplati, avec la tour d’un télégraphe par derrière.

Une demi-heure après, ils mirent pied à terre encore une fois pour gravir les hauteurs d’Aspremont.

Le chemin fait des zigzags entre les pins trapus sous des rochers à profils anguleux ; tout ce coin de la forêt a quelque chose d’étouffé, d’un peu sauvage et de recueilli. On pense aux ermites, compagnons des grands cerfs portant une croix de feu entre leurs cornes, et qui recevaient avec de paternels sourires les bons rois de France, agenouillés devant leur grotte. Une odeur résineuse emplissait l’air chaud, des racines à ras du sol s’entrecroisaient comme des veines. Rosanette tré buchait dessus, était désespérée, avait envie de pleurer.

Mais, tout au haut, la joie lui revint, en trouvant sous un toit de branchages une manière de cabaret, où l’on vend des bois sculptés. Elle but une bouteille de limonade, s’acheta un bâton de houx ; et, sans donner un coup d’oeil au paysage que l’on découvre du plateau, elle entra dans la Caverne-des-Brigands, précédée d’un gamin portant une torche.

Leur voiture les attendait dans le Bas-Bréau.

Un peintre en blouse bleue travaillait au pied d’un chêne, avec sa boîte à couleurs sur les genoux. Il leva la tête et les regarda passer.

Au milieu de la côte de Chailly, un nuage, crevant tout à coup, leur fit rabattre la capote. Presque aussitôt la pluie s’arrêta ; et les pavés des rues brillaient sous le soleil quand ils rentrèrent dans la ville.

Des voyageurs, arrivés nouvellement, leur apprirent qu’une bataille épouvantable ensanglantait Paris. Rosanette et son amant n’en furent pas surpris. Puis tout le monde s’en alla, l’hôtel redevint paisible, le gaz s’éteignit, et ils s’endormirent au murmure du jet d’eau dans la cour.

Le lendemain, ils allèrent voir la Gorge-au-Loup, la Marc-aux-Fées, le Long-Rocher, la Mariotte ; le surlendemain, ils recommencèrent au hasard, comme leur cocher voulait, sans demander où ils étaient, et souvent même négligeant les sites fameux.

Ils se trouvaient si bien dans leur vieux landau, bas comme un sofa et couvert d’une toile à raies déteintes ! Les fossés pleins de broussailles filaient sous leurs yeux, avec un mouvement doux et continu. Des rayons blancs traversaient comme des flèches les hautes fougères ; quelquefois, un chemin, qui ne servait plus, se présentait devant eux, en ligne droite ; et des herbes s’y dressaient çà et là, mollement. Au centre des carrefours, une croix étendait ses quatre bras ; ailleurs, des poteaux se penchaient comme des arbres morts, et de petits sentiers courbes, en se perdant sous les feuilles, donnaient envie de les suivre ; au même moment, le cheval tournait, ils y entraient, on enfonçait dans la boue ; plus loin, de la mousse avait poussé au bord des ornières profondes.

Ils se croyaient loin des autres, bien seuls. Mais tout à coup passait un garde-chasse avec son fusil, ou une bande de femmes en haillons, traînant sur leur dos de longues bourrées.

Quand la voiture s’arrêtait, il se faisait un silence universel ; seulement, on entendait le souffle du cheval dans les brancards, avec un cri d’oiseau très faible, répété.

La lumière, à de certaines places éclairant la lisière du bois, laissait les fonds dans l’ombre ; ou bien, atténuée sur les premiers plans par une sorte de crépuscule, elle étalait dans les lointains des vapeurs violettes, une clarté blanche. Au milieu du jour. le soleil, tombant d’aplomb sur les larges verdures, les éclaboussait, suspendait des gouttes argentines à la pointe des branches, rayait le gazon de traînées d’émeraudes, jetait des taches d’or sur les couches de feuilles mortes ; en se renversant la tête, on apercevait le ciel, entre les cimes des arbres. Quelques-uns, d’une altitude démesurée, avaient des airs de patriarches et d’empereurs, ou se touchant par le bout, formaient avec leurs longs fûts comme des arcs de triomphe ; d’autres, poussés dès le bas obliquement, semblaient des colonnes près de tomber.

Cette foule de grosses lignes verticales s’entrouvrait. Alors, d’énormes flots verts se déroulaient en bosselages inégaux jusqu’à la surface des vallées où s’avançait la croupe d’autres collines dominant des plaines blondes, qui finissaient par se perdre dans une pâleur indécise.

Debout, l’un près de l’autre, sur quelque éminence du terrain, ils sentaient, tout en humant le vent, leur entrer dans l’âme comme l’orgueil d’une vie plus libre, avec une surabondance de forces, une joie sans cause.

La diversité des arbres faisait un spectacle changeant. Les hêtres à l’écorce blanche et lisse entremêlaient leurs couronnes ; des frênes courbaient mollement leurs glauques ramures ; dans les cépées de charmes, des houx pareils à du bronze se hérissaient ; puis venait une file de minces bouleaux, inclinés dans des attitudes élégiaques ; et les pins, symétriques comme des tuyaux d’orgue, en se balançant continuellement, semblaient chanter. Il y avait des chênes rugueux, énormes, qui se convulsaient, s’étiraient du sol, s’étreignaient les uns les autres, et, fermes sur leurs troncs, pareils à des torses, se lançaient avec leurs bras nus des appels de désespoir, des menaces furibondes, comme un groupe de Titans immobilisés dans leur colère. Quelque chose de plus lourd, une langueur fiévreuse planait au-dessus des mares, découpant la nappe de leurs eaux entre des buissons d’épines ; les lichens de leur berge, où les loups viennent boire, sont couleur de soufre, brûlés comme par le pas des sorcières, et le coassement ininterrompu des grenouilles répond au cri des corneilles qui tournoient. Ensuite, ils traversaient des clairières monotones, plantées d’un baliveau çà et là.

Un bruit de fer, des coups drus et nombreux sonnaient : c’était, au flanc d’une colline, une compagnie de carriers battant les roches. Elles se multipliaient de plus en plus, et finissaient par emplir tout le paysage, cubiques comme des maisons, plates comme des dalles, s’étayant, se surplombant, se confondant, telles que les ruines méconnaissables et monstrueuses de quelque cité disparue. Mais la furie même de leur chaos fait plutôt rêver à des volcans, à des déluges, aux grands cataclysmes ignorés. Frédéric disait qu’ils étaient là depuis le commencement du monde et resteraient ainsi jusqu’à la fin ; Rosanette détournait la tête, en affirmant que “ça la rendrait folle”, et s’en allait cueillir des bruyè res. Leurs petites fleurs violettes, tassées les unes près des autres, formaient des plaques inégales, et la terre qui s’écroulait de dessous mettait comme des franges noires au bord des sables pailletés de mica.

Ils arrivèrent un jour à mi-hauteur d’une colline tout en sable. Sa surface, vierge de pas, était rayée en ondulations symétriques ; çà et là, telles que des promontoires sur le lit desséché d’un océan, se levaient des roches ayant de vagues formes d’animaux, tortues avançant la tête, phoques qui rampent, hippopotames et ours. Personne. Aucun bruit. Les sables, frappés par le soleil, éblouissaient ; — et tout à coup, dans cette vibration de la lumière, les bêtes parurent remuer. Ils s’en retournèrent vite, fuyant le vertige, presque effrayés.

Le sérieux de la forêt les gagnait ; et ils avaient des heures de silence où, se laissant aller au bercement des ressorts, ils demeuraient comme engourdis dans une ivresse tranquille. Le bras sous la taille, il l’écoutait parier pendant que les oiseaux gazouillaient, observait presque du même coup d’oeil les raisins noirs de sa capote et les baies des genévriers, les draperies de son voile, les volutes des nuages ; et, quand il se penchait vers elle, la fraîcheur de sa peau se mêlait au grand parfum des bois. Ils s’amusaient de tout ; ils se montraient, comme une curiosité, des fils de la Vierge suspendus aux buissons, des trous pleins d’eau au milieu des pierres, un écureuil sur les branches, le vol de deux papillons qui les suivaient ; ou bien, à vingt pas d’eux, sous les arbres, une biche marchait, tranquillement, d’un air noble et doux, avec son faon côte à côte. Rosanette aurait voulu courir après, pour l’embrasser.

Elle eut bien peur une fois, quand un homme, se présentant tout à coup, lui montra dans une boîte trois vipères. Elle se jeta vivement contre Frédéric ; — il fut heureux de ce qu’elle était faible et de se sentir assez fort pour la défendre.

Ce soir-là, ils dînèrent dans une auberge, au bord de la Seine. La table était près de la fenêtre, Rosanette en face de lui ; et il contemplait son petit nez fin et blanc, ses lèvres retroussées, ses yeux clairs, ses bandeaux châtains qui bouffaient, sa jolie figure ovale. Sa robe de foulard écru collait à ses épaules un peu tombantes ; et, sortant de leurs manchettes tout unies, ses deux mains découpaient, versaient à boire, s’avançaient sur la nappe. On leur servit un poulet avec les quatre membres étendus, une matelote d’anguilles dans un compotier en terre de pipe, du vin râpeux, du pain trop dur, des couteaux ébréchés. Tout cela augmentait le plaisir, l’illusion. Ils se croyaient presque au milieu d’un voyage, en Italie, dans leur lune de miel.

Avant de repartir, ils allèrent se promener le long de la berge.

Le ciel d’un bleu tendre, arrondi comme un dôme, s’appuyait à l’horizon sur la dentelure des bois. En face, au bout de la prairie, il y avait un clocher dans un village ; et, plus loin, à gauche, le toit d’une maison faisait une tache rouge sur la rivière, qui semblait immobile dans toute la longueur de sa sinuosité. Des joncs se penchaient pourtant, et l’eau secouait légèrement des perches plantées au bord pour tenir des filets ; une masse d’osier, deux ou trois vieilles chaloupes étaient là. Près de l’auberge, une fille en chapeau de paille tirait des seaux d’un puits ; — chaque fois qu’ils remontaient, Frédéric écoutait avec une jouissance inexprimable le grincement de la chaîne.

Il ne doutait pas qu’il ne fût heureux pour jusqu’à la fin de ses jours, tant son bonheur lui paraissait naturel, inhérent à sa vie et à la personne de cette femme. Un besoin le poussait à lui dire des tendresses. Elle y répondait par de gentilles paroles, de petites tapes sur l’épaule, des douceurs dont la surprise le charmait. Il lui découvrait enfin une beauté toute nouvelle, qui n’était peut-être que le reflet des choses ambiantes, à moins que leurs virtualités secrètes ne l’eussent fait s’épanouir.

Quand ils se reposaient au milieu de la campagne, il s’étendait la tête sur ses genoux, à l’abri de son ombrelle ; — ou bien couchés sur le ventre au milieu de l’herbe, ils restaient l’un en face de l’autre, à se regarder, plongeant dans leurs prunelles, altérés d’eux-mêmes, s’en assouvissant toujours, puis les paupières entrefermées, ne parlant plus.

Quelquefois, ils entendaient tout au loin des roulements de tambour. C’était la générale que l’on battait dans les villages, pour aller défendre Paris.

— “Ah ! tiens ! l’émeute !” disait Frédéric avec une pitié dédaigneuse, toute cette agitation lui apparaissant misérable à côté de leur amour et de la nature éternelle.

Et ils causaient de n’importe quoi, de choses qu’ils savaient parfaitement, de personnes qui ne les intéressaient pas, de mille niaiseries. Elle l’entretenait de sa femme de chambre et de son coiffeur. Un jour, elle s’oublia à dire son âge : vingt-neuf ans ; elle devenait vieille.

En plusieurs fois, sans le vouloir, elle lui apprit des détails sur elle-même. Elle avait été “demoiselle dans un magasin”, avait fait un voyage en Angleterre, commencé des études pour être actrice ; tout cela sans transitions, et il ne pouvait reconstruire un ensemble. Elle en conta plus long, un jour qu’ils étaient assis sous un platane, au revers d’un pré. En bas, sur le bord de la route, une petite fille nu-pieds dans la poussière, faisait paître une vache. Dès qu’elle les aperçut, elle vint leur demander l’aumône ; et, tenant d’une main son jupon en lambeaux, elle grattait de l’autre ses cheveux noirs qui entouraient comme une perruque à la Louis XIV, toute sa tête brune, illuminée par des yeux splendides.

— “Elle sera bien jolie plus tard”, dit Frédéric.

— “Quelle chance pour elle si elle n’a pas de mère !” reprit Rosanette.

— “Hein ? comment ?”

— “Mais oui ; moi, sans la mienne…”

Elle soupira, et se mit à parler de son enfance. Ses parents étaient des canuts de la Croix-Rousse. Elle servait son père comme apprentie. Le pauvre bonhomme avait beau s’exténuer, sa femme l’invectivait et vendait tout pour aller boire. Rosanette voyait leur chambre, avec les métiers rangés en longueur contre les fenêtres, le pot-bouille sur le poêle, le lit peint en acajou, une armoire en face, et la soupente obscure où elle avait couché jusqu’à quinze ans. Enfin un monsieur était venu, un homme gras, la figure couleur de buis, des façons de dévot, habillé de noir. Sa mère et lui eurent ensemble une conversation, si bien que, trois jours après… Rosanette s’arrêta, et, avec un regard plein d’impudeur et d’amertume :

— “C’était fait !”

Puis, répondant au geste de Frédéric :

— “Comme il était marié (il aurait craint de se compromettre dans sa maison), on m’emmena dans un cabinet de restaurateur, et on m’avait dit que je serais heureuse, que je recevrais un beau cadeau.

“Dès la porte, la première chose qui m’a frappée, c’était un candélabre de vermeil, sur une table où il y avait deux couverts. Une glace au plafond les reflétait, et les tentures des murailles en soie bleue faisaient ressembler tout l’appartement à une alcôve. Une surprise m’a saisie. Tu comprends, un pauvre être qui n’a jamais rien vu ! Malgré mon éblouissement, j’avais peur. Je désirais m’en aller. Je suis restée pourtant.

“Le seul siège qu’il y eût était un divan contre la table. Il a cédé sous moi avec mollesse ; la bouche du calorifère dans le tapis m’envoyait une haleine chaude, et je restai là sans rien prendre. Le garçon qui se tenait debout m’a engagée à manger. Il m’a versé tout de suite un grand verre de vin ; la tête me tournait, j’ai voulu ouvrir la fenêtre, il m’a dit : — ” Non, mademoiselle, c’est défendu. “Et il m’a quittée. La table était couverte d’un tas de choses que je ne connaissais pas. Rien ne m’a semblé bon. Alors je me suis rabattue sur un pot de confitures, et j’attendais toujours. Je ne sais quoi l’empêchait de venir. Il était très tard, minuit au moins, je n’en pouvais plus de fatigue ; en repoussant un des oreillers pour mieux m’étendre, je rencontre sous ma main une sorte d’album, un cahier — , c’étaient des images obscènes… Je dormais dessus, quand il est entré.” Elle baissa la tête, et demeura pensive.

Les feuilles autour d’eux susurraient, dans un fouillis d’herbes une grande digitale se balançait, la lumière coulait comme une onde sur le gazon ; et le silence était coupé à intervalles rapides par le broutement de la vache qu’on ne voyait plus.

Rosanette considérait un point par terre, à trois pas d’elle, fixement, les narines battantes, absorbée. Frédéric lui prit la main.

— “Comme tu as souffert, pauvre chérie !”

— “Oui”, dit-elle “plus que tu ne crois… Jusqu’à vouloir en finir ; on m’a repêchée.”

— “Comment ?”

— “Ah ! n’y pensons plus !… Je t’aime, je suis heureuse ! embrasse-moi.”

Et elle ôta, une à une, les brindilles de chardons accrochées dans le bas de sa robe.

Frédéric songeait surtout à ce qu’elle n’avait pas dit. Par quels degrés avait-elle pu sortir de la misère ? A quel amant devait-elle son éducation Que s’était-il passé dans sa vie jusqu’au jour où il était venu chez elle pour la première fois ? Son dernier aveu interdisait les questions. Il lui demanda, seulement, comment elle avait fait la connaissance d’Arnoux.

— “Par la Vatnaz.”

— “N’était-ce pas toi que j’ai vue, une fois, au Palais-Royal, avec eux deux ?”

Il cita la date précise. Rosanette fit un effort.

— “Oui, c’est vrai !… Je n’étais pas gaie dans ce temps-là !”

Mais Arnoux s’était montré excellent. Frédéric n’en doutait pas ; cependant, leur ami était un drôle d’homme, plein de défauts ; il eut soin de les rappeler. Elle en convenait.

— “N’importe !… On l’aime tout de même, ce chameau-là !”

— “Encore, maintenant ?” dit Frédéric.

Elle se mit à rougir, moitié riante, moitié fâchée.

— “Eh ! non ! C’est de l’histoire ancienne. Je ne te cache rien. Quand même cela serait, lui, c’est différent ! D’ailleurs, je ne te trouve pas gentil pour ta victime.”

— “Ma victime ?”

Rosanette lui prit le menton.

— “Sans doute !”

Et, zézayant à la manière des nourrices :

— “Avons pas toujours été bien sage ! Avons fait dodo avec sa femme !”

— “Moi ! jamais de la vie !”

Rosanette sourit. Il fut blessé de son sourire, preuve d’indifférence, crut-il. Mais elle reprit doucement, et avec un de ces regards qui implorent le mensonge : — “Bien sûr ?”

— “Certainement !”

Frédéric jura sa parole d’honneur qu’il n’avait jamais pensé à Mme Arnoux, étant trop amoureux d’une autre.

— “De qui donc ?”

— “Mais de vous, ma toute belle !”

— “Ah ! ne te moque pas de moi ! Tu m’agaces !”

Il jugea prudent d’inventer une histoire, une passion. Il trouva des détails circonstanciés. Cette personne du reste, l’avait rendu fort malheureux.

— “Décidément, tu n’as pas de chance !” dit Rosanette.

— “Oh ! oh ! peut-être !” voulant faire entendre par là plusieurs bonnes fortunes, afin de donner de lui meilleure opinion, de même que Rosanette n’avouait pas tous ses amants pour qu’il l’estimât davantage ; — car, au milieu des confidences les plus intimes, il y a toujours des restrictions, par fausse honte, délicatesse, pitié. On découvre chez l’autre ou dans soi-même des précipices ou des fanges qui empêchent de poursuivre ; on sent, d’ailleurs, que l’on ne serait pas compris ; il est difficile d’exprimer exactement quoi que ce soit ; aussi les unions complètes sont rares.

La pauvre Maréchale n’en avait jamais connu de meilleure. Souvent, quand elle considérait Frédéric, des larmes lui arrivaient aux paupières, puis elle levait les yeux, ou les projetait vers l’horizon, comme si elle avait aperçu quelque grande aurore, des perspectives de félicité sans bornes. Enfin, un jour, elle avoua qu’elle souhaitait faire dire une messe, “pour que ça porte bonheur à notre amour” .

D’où venait donc qu’elle lui avait résisté pendant si longtemps ? Elle n’en savait rien elle-même. Il renouvela plusieurs fois sa question ; et elle répondait en le serrant dans ses bras :

— “C’est que j’avais peur de t’aimer trop, mon chéri !”

Le dimanche matin, Frédéric lut dans un journal, sur une liste de blessés, le nom de Dussardier. Il jeta un cri, et, montrant le papier à Rosanette, déclara qu’il allait partir immédiatement.

— “Pourquoi faire ?”

— “Mais pour le voir, le soigner !”

— “Tu ne vas pas me laisser seule, j’imagine ?”

— “Viens avec moi.”

— “Ah ! que j’aille me fourrer dans une bagarre pareille ! Merci bien !”

— “Cependant, je ne peux pas…”

— “Ta ta ta ! Comme si on manquait d’infirmiers dans les hôpitaux ! Et puis, qu’est-ce que ça le regardait encore, celui-là ? Chacun pour soi !”

Il fut indigné de cet égoïsme ; et il se reprocha de n’être pas là-bas avec les autres. Tant d’indifférence aux malheurs de la patrie avait quelque chose de mesquin et de bourgeois. Son amour lui pesa tout à coup comme un crime. Ils se boudèrent pendant une heure.

Puis elle le supplia d’attendre, de ne pas s’exposer.

— “Si par hasard on te tue !”

— " Eh ! je n’aurai fait que mon devoir !

Rosanette bondit. D’abord, son devoir était de l’aimer.

C’est qu’il ne voulait plus d’elle, sans doute ! Ça n’avait pas le sens commun ! Quelle idée, mon Dieu !

Frédéric sonna pour avoir la note. Mais il n’était pas facile de s’en retourner à Paris. La voiture des messageries Leloir venait de partir, les berlines Lecomte ne partiraient pas, la diligence du Bourbonnais ne passerait que tard dans la nuit, et serait peut-être pleine ; on n’en savait rien. Quand il eut perdu beaucoup de temps à ces informations, l’idée lui vint de prendre la poste. Le maître de poste refusa de fournir des chevaux, Frédéric n’ayant point de passeport. Enfin, il loua une calèche (la même qui les avait promenés) et ils arrivèrent devant l’hôtel du Commerce, à Melun, vers cinq heures.

La place du Marché était couverte de faisceaux d’armes. Le préfet avait défendu aux gardes nationaux de se porter sur Paris. Ceux qui n’étaient pas de son département voulaient continuer leur route. On criait. L’auberge était pleine de tumulte.

Rosanette, prise de peur, déclara qu’elle n’irait pas plus loin, et le supplia encore de rester. L’aubergiste et sa femme se joignirent à elle. Un brave homme qui dînait s’en mêla, affirmant que la bataille serait terminée d’ici à peu ; d’ailleurs, il fallait faire son devoir. Alors, la Maréchale redoubla de sanglots. Frédéric était exaspéré. Il lui donna sa bourse, l’embrassa vivement, et disparut.

Arrivé à Corbeil, dans la gare, on lui apprit que les insurgés avaient de distance en distance coupé les rails, et le cocher refusa de le conduire plus loin ; ses chevaux, disait-il, étaient “rendus” .

Par sa protection cependant, Frédéric obtint un mauvais cabriolet qui, pour la somme de soixante francs, sans compter le pourboire, consentit à le mener jusqu’à la barrière d’Italie. Mais, à cent pas de la barrière, son conducteur le fit descendre et s’en retourna. Frédéric marchait sur la route, quand tout à coup une sentinelle croisa la baïonnette. Quatre hommes l’empoignèrent en vociférant :

— “C’en est un ! Prenez garde ! Fouillez-le ! Brigand Canaille”

Et sa stupéfaction fut si profonde, qu’il se laissa entraîner au poste de la barrière, dans le rond-point même où convergent les boulevards des Gobelins et de l’Hôpital et les rues Godefroy et Mouffetard.

Quatre barricades formaient, au bout des quatre voies, d’énormes talus de pavés ; des torches çà et là grésillaient ; malgré la poussière qui s’élevait, il distingua des fantassins de la ligne et des gardes nationaux, tous le visage noir, débraillés, hagards. lis venaient de prendre la place, avaient fusillé plusieurs hommes ; leur colère durait encore. Frédéric dit qu’il arrivait de Fontainebleau au secours d’un camarade blessé logeant rue Bellefond ; personne d’abord ne voulut le croire ; on examina ses mains, on flaira même son oreille pour s’assurer qu’il ne sentait pas la poudre.

Cependant, à force de répéter la même chose, il finit par convaincre un capitaine, qui ordonna à deux fusiliers de le conduire au poste du Jardin des Plantes.

Ils descendirent le boulevard de l’Hôpital. Une forte brise soufflait. Elle le ranima.

Ils tournèrent ensuite par la rue du Marché-aux-Chevaux. Le Jardin des Plantes, à droite, faisait une grande masse noire ; tandis qu’à gauche, la façade entière de la Pitié, éclairée à toutes ses fenêtres, flambait comme un incendie, et des ombres passaient rapidement sur les carreaux.

Les deux hommes de Frédéric s’en allèrent. Un autre l’accompagna jusqu’à l’Ecole polytechnique.

La rue Saint-Victor était toute sombre, sans un bec de gaz ni une lumière aux maisons. De dix minutes en dix minutes, on entendait :

— “Sentinelles ! prenez garde à vous !”

Et ce cri jeté au milieu du silence, se prolongeait comme la répercussion d’une pierre tombant dans un abîme.

Quelquefois, un battement de pas lourds s’approchait. C’était une patrouille de cent hommes au moins ; des chuchotements, de vagues cliquetis de fer s’échappaient de cette masse confuse ; et, s’éloignant avec un balancement rythmique, elle se fondait dans l’obscurité.

Il y avait au centre des carrefours un dragon à cheval, immobile. De temps en temps, une estafette passait au grand galop, puis le silence recommençait. Des canons en marche faisaient au loin sur le pavé un roulement sourd et formidable ; le cœur se serrait à ces bruits différant de tous les bruits ordinaires. Ils semblaient même élargir le silence, qui était profond, absolu ; un silence noir. Des hommes en blouse blanche abordaient les soldats, leur disaient un mot, et s’évanouissaient comme des fantômes.

Le poste de l’Ecole polytechnique regorgeait de monde. Des femmes encombraient le seuil, demandant à voir leur fils ou leur mari. On les renvoyait au Panthéon transformé en dépôt de cadavres, — et on n’écoutait pas Frédéric. Il s’obstina, jurant que son ami Dussardier l’attendait, allait mourir. On lui donna enfin un caporal pour le mener au haut de la rue Saint-Jacques, à la mairie du XIIe arrondissement.

La place du Panthéon était pleine de soldats couchés sur de la paille. Le jour se levait. Les feux de bivac s’éteignaient.

L’insurrection avait laissé dans ce quartier-là des traces formidables. Le soi des rues se trouvait, d’un bout à l’autre, inégalement bosselé. Sur les barricades en ruines, il restait des omnibus, des tuyaux de gaz, des roues de charrettes ; de petites flaques noires, en de certains endroits, devaient être du sang. Les maisons étaient criblées de projectiles, et leur charpente se montrait sous les écaillures du plâtre. Des jalousies, tenant par un clou, pendaient comme des haillons. Les escaliers ayant croulé, des portes s’ouvraient sur le vide. On apercevait l’intérieur des chambres avec leurs papiers en lambeaux ; des choses délicates s’y étaient conservées, quelquefois. Frédéric observa une pendule, un bâton de perroquet, des gravures.

Quand il entra dans la mairie, les gardes nationaux bavardaient intarissablement sur les morts de Bréa et de Négrier, du représentant Charbonnel et de l’archevêque de Paris. On disait que le duc d’Aumale était débarqué à Boulogne, Barbès enfui de Vincennes, que l’artillerie arrivait de Bourges et que les secours de la province affluaient. Vers trois heures, quelqu’un apporta de bonnes nouvelles ; des parlementaires de l’émeute étaient chez le président de l’Assemblée.

Alors, on se réjouit ; et, comme il avait encore douze francs, Frédéric fit venir douze bouteilles de vin, espérant par là hâter sa délivrance. Tout à coup, on crut entendre une fusillade. Les libations s’arrêtèrent ; on regarda l’inconnu avec des yeux méfiants ; ce pouvait être Henri VI.

Pour n’avoir aucune responsabilité, ils le transportèrent à la mairie du XIe arrondissement, d’où on ne lui permit pas de sortir avant neuf heures du matin.

Il alla en courant jusqu’au quai Voltaire. A une fenêtre ouverte, un vieillard en manches de chemise pleurait, les yeux levés. La Seine coulait paisiblement. Le ciel était tout bleu ; dans les arbres des Tuileries, des oiseaux chantaient.

Frédéric traversait le Carrousel quand une civière vint à passer. Le poste, tout de suite, présenta les armes, et l’officier dit en mettant la main à son shako : “Honneur au courage malheureux !” Cette parole était devenue presque obligatoire ; celui qui la prononçait paraissait toujours solennellement ému. Un groupe de gens furieux escortait la civière, en criant :

— “Nous vous vengerons ! nous vous vengerons !”

Les voitures circulaient sur le boulevard, et des femmes devant les portes faisaient de la charpie. Cependant, l’émeute était vaincue, ou à peu près ; une proclamation de Cavaignac, affichée tout à l’heure, l’annonçait. Au haut de la rue Vivienne, un peloton de mobiles parut. Alors, les bourgeois poussèrent des cris d’enthousiasme ; ils levaient leurs chapeaux, applaudissaient, dansaient, voulaient les embrasser, leur offrir à boire ; et des fleurs jetées par des dames tombaient des balcons.

Enfin, à dix heures, au moment où le canon grondait pour prendre le faubourg Saint-Antoine, Frédéric arriva chez Dussardier. Il le trouva dans sa mansarde, étendu sur le dos et dormant. De la pièce voisine une femme sortit à pas muets, Mlle Vatnaz.

Elle emmena Frédéric à l’écart, et lui apprit comment Dussardier avait reçu sa blessure.

Le samedi, au haut d’une barricade, dans la rue Lafayette, un gamin enveloppé d’un drapeau tricolore criait aux gardes nationaux : “Allez-vous tirer contre vos frères !” Comme ils s’avançaient, Dussardier avait jeté bas son fusil, écarté les autres, bondi sur la barricade, et, d’un coup de savate, abattu l’insurgé en lui arrachant le drapeau. On l’avait retrouvé sous les décombres, la cuisse percée d’un lingot de cuivre. Il avait fallu débrider la plaie, extraire le projectile. Mlle Vatnaz était arrivée le soir même, et, depuis ce temps-là, ne le quittait plus.

Elle préparait avec intelligence tout ce qu’il fallait pour les pansements, l’aidait à boire, épiait ses moindres désirs, allait et venait plus légère qu’une mouche, et le contemplait avec des yeux tendres.

Frédéric, pendant deux semaines, ne manqua pas de revenir tous les matins ; un jour qu'il parlait du dévouement de la Vatnaz, Dussardier haussa les épaules.

— "Eh non ! c'est par intérêt"

— "Tu crois ?"

Il reprit : "J'en suis sûr !" sans vouloir s'expliquer davantage.

Elle le comblait de prévenances, jusqu'à lui apporter les journaux où l'on exaltait sa belle action. Ces hommages paraissaient l'importuner. Il avoua même à Frédéric l'embarras de sa conscience.

Peut-être qu'il aurait dû se mettre de l'autre bord, avec les blouses ; car enfin on leur avait promis un tas de choses qu'on n'avait pas tenues. Leurs vainqueurs détestaient la République ; et puis, on s'était montré bien dur pour eux ! Ils avaient tort, sans doute, pas tout à fait, cependant ; et le brave garçon était torturé par cette idée qu'il pouvait avoir combattu la justice.

Sénécal, enfermé aux Tuileries sous la terrasse du bord de l'eau, n'avait rien de ces angoisses.

Ils étaient là, neuf cents hommes, entassés dans l'ordure, pêle-mêle, noirs de poudre et de sang caillé, grelottant la fièvre, criant de rage, et on ne retirait pas ceux qui venaient à mourir parmi les autres. Quelquefois, au bruit soudain d'une détonation, ils croyaient qu'on allait tous les fusiller ; alors, ils se précipitaient contre les murs, puis retombaient à leur place, tellement hébétés par la douleur, qu'il leur semblait vivre dans un cauchemar, une hallucination funèbre. La lampe suspendue à la voûte avait l'air d'une tache de sang ; et de petites flammes vertes et jaunes voltigeaient, produites par les émanations du caveau. Dans la crainte des épidémies, une commission fut nommée. Dès les premières marches, le président se rejeta en arrière, épouvanté par l'odeur des excréments et des cadavres. Quand les prisonniers s'approchaient d'un soupirail, les gardes nationaux qui étaient de faction — pour les empêcher d'ébranler les grilles, fourraient des coups de baïonnette, au hasard, dans le tas.

Ils furent, généralement, impitoyables. Ceux qui ne s'étaient pas battus voulaient se signaler. C'était un débordement de peur. On se vengeait à la fois des journaux, des clubs, des attroupements, des doctrines, de tout ce qui exaspérait depuis trois mois ; et, en dépit de la victoire, l'égalité (comme pour le châtiment de ses défenseurs et la dérision de ses ennemis) se manifestait triomphalement, une égalité de bêtes brutes, un même niveau de turpitudes sanglantes ; car le fanatisme des intérêts équilibra les délires du besoin, l'aristocratie eut les fureurs de la crapule, et le bonnet de coton ne se montra pas moins hideux que le bonnet rouge. La raison publique était troublée comme après les grands bouleversements de la nature. Des gens d'esprit en restèrent idiots pour toute leur vie.

Le père Roque était devenu très brave, presque téméraire. Arrivé le 26 à Paris avec les Nogentais, au lieu de s'en retourner en même temps qu'eux, il avait été s'adjoindre à la garde nationale qui campait aux Tuileries ; et il fut très content d'être placé en sentinelle devant la terrasse du bord de l'eau. Au moins, là, il les avait sous lui, ces brigands ! Il jouissait de leur défaite, de leur abjection, et ne pouvait se retenir de les invectiver.

Un d'eux, un adolescent à longs cheveux blonds, mit sa face aux barreaux en demandant du pain. M. Roque lui ordonna de se taire. Mais le jeune homme répétait d'une voix lamentable :

— “Du pain !”

— “Est-ce que j'en ai, moi ?”

D'autres prisonniers apparurent dans le soupirail, avec leurs barbes hérissées, leurs prunelles flamboyantes. tous se poussant et hurlant :

— “Du pain !”

Le père Roque fut indigné de voir son autorité méconnue. Pour leur faire peur, il les mit en joue ; et, porté jusqu'à la voûte par le flot qui l'étouffait, le jeune homme, la tête en arrière, cria encore une fois : — “Du pain !”

— “Tiens ! en voilà !” dit le père Roque, en lâchant son coup de fusil.

Il y eut un énorme hurlement, puis rien. Au bord du baquet, quelque chose de blanc était resté.

Après quoi, M. Roque s'en retourna chez lui ; car il possédait, rue Saint-Martin, une maison où il s'était réservé un pied-à-terre ; et les dommages causés par l'émeute à la devanture de son immeuble n'avaient pas contribué médiocrement à le rendre furieux. Il lui sembla, en la revoyant, qu'il s'était exagéré le mal. Son action de tout à l'heure l'apaisait, comme une indemnité.

Ce fut sa fille elle-même qui lui ouvrit la porte. Elle lui dit, tout de suite, que son absence trop longue l'avait inquiétée ; elle avait craint un malheur, une blessure.

Cette preuve d'amour filial attendrit le père Roque. Il s'étonna qu'elle se fût mise en route sans Catherine.

— “Je l'ai envoyée faire une commission”, répondit Louise.

Et elle s'informa de sa santé, de choses et d'autres ; puis, d'un air indifférent, lui demanda si par hasard il n'avait pas rencontré Frédéric.

— “Non ! pas le moins du monde !”

C'était pour lui seul qu'elle avait fait le voyage.

Quelqu'un marcha dans le corridor.

— “Ah ! pardon…”

Et elle disparut.

Catherine n’avait point trouvé Frédéric. Il était absent depuis plusieurs jours, et son ami intime, M. Deslauriers, habitait maintenant la province.

Louise reparut toute tremblante, sans pouvoir parler.

Elle s’appuyait contre les meubles.

— “Qu’as-tu ? qu’as-tu donc ?” s’écria son père.

Elle fit signe que ce n’était rien, et par un grand effort de volonté se remit.

Le traiteur d’en face apporta la soupe. Mais le père Roque avait subi une trop violente émotion. “Ça ne pouvait pas passer”, et il eut au dessert une espèce de défaillance. On envoya chercher vivement un médecin, qui prescrivit une potion. Puis, quand il fut dans son lit, M. Roque exigea le plus de couvertures possible, pour se faire suer. Il soupirait, il geignait.

— “Merci, ma bonne Catherine ! — Baise ton pauvre père, ma poulette ! Ah ! ces révolutions !”

Et, comme sa fille le grondait de s’être rendu malade en se tourmentant pour elle, il répliqua :

— “Oui ! tu as raison ! Mais c’est plus fort que moi ! Je suis trop sensible !”

CHAPITRE 2

Mme Dambreuse, dans son boudoir, entre sa nièce et miss John, écoutait parler M. Roque, contant ses fatigues militaires.

Elle se mordait les lèvres, semblait souffrir.

— “Oh ! ce n’est rien ! ça se passera !”

Et, d’un air gracieux :

— “Nous aurons à dîner une de vos connaissances, M. Moreau.”

Louise tressaillit.

— “Puis seulement quelques intimes, Alfred de Cisy, entre autres.”

Et elle vanta ses manières, sa figure, et principalement ses mœurs.

Mme Dambreuse mentait moins qu’elle ne croyait ; le Vicomte rêvait le mariage. Il l’avait dit à Martinon, ajoutant qu’il était sûr de plaire à Mlle Cécile et que ses parents l’accepteraient.

Pour risquer une telle confidence, il devait avoir sur la dot des renseignements avantageux. Or, Martinon soupçonnait Cécile d’être la fille naturelle de M. Dambreuse ; et il eût été, probablement, très fort de demander sa main à tout hasard. Cette audace offrait des dangers ; aussi Martinon, jusqu’à présent, s’était conduit de manière à ne pas se compromettre ; d’ailleurs, il ne savait comment se débarrasser de la tante. Le mot de Cisy le détermina ; et il avait fait sa requête au banquier, lequel, n’y voyant pas d’obstacle, venait d’en prévenir Mme Dambreuse.

Cisy parut. Elle se leva, dit :

— “Vous nous oubliez… Cécile, shake hands !”

Au même moment, Frédéric entrait.

— “Ah ! enfin ! on vous retrouve !” s’écria le père Roque. “J’ai été trois fois chez vous, avec Louise, cette semaine !”

Frédéric les avait soigneusement évités. Il allégua qu’il passait tous ses jours près d’un camarade blessé. Depuis longtemps, du reste, un tas de choses l’avaient pris ; et il cherchait des histoires. Heureusement, les convives arrivèrent : d’abord M. Paul de Grémonville le diplomate entrevu au bal ; puis Fumichon, cet industriel dont le dévouement conservateur l’avait un soir scandalisé ; la vieille duchesse de Montreuil-Nantua les suivait.

Mais deux voix s’élevèrent dans l’antichambre.

— “J’en suis certaine”, disait l’une.

— “Chère belle dame ! chère belle dame !” répondait l’autre, “de grâce, calmez-vous !”

C’était M. de Nonancourt, un vieux beau, l’air momifié dans du cold-cream, et Mme de Larsillois, l’épouse d’un préfet de Louis-Philippe. Elle tremblait extrêmement, car elle avait entendu, tout à l’heure, sur un orgue, une polka qui était un signal entre les insurgés. Beaucoup de bourgeois avaient des imaginations pareilles on croyait que des hommes, dans les catacombes, allaient faire sauter le faubourg Saint-Germain ; des rumeurs s’échappaient des caves ; il se passait aux fenêtres des choses suspectes.

Tout le monde s’évertua cependant à tranquilliser Mme de Larsillois. L’ordre était rétabli. Plus rien à craindre. “Cavaignac nous a sauvés !” Comme si les horreurs de l’insurrection n’eussent pas été suffisamment nombreuses, on les exagérait. Il y avait eu vingt-trois mille forçats du côté des socialistes, — pas moins ! On ne doutait nullement des vivres empoisonnés, des mobiles sciés entre deux planches, et des inscriptions des drapeaux qui réclamaient le pillage, l’incendie.

— “Et quelque chose de plus !” ajouta l’ex-préfète.

— “Ah ! chère !” dit par pudeur Mme Dambreuse, en désignant d’un coup d’oeil les trois jeunes filles.

M. Dambreuse sortit de son cabinet avec Martinon. Elle détourna la tête, et répondit aux saluts de Pellerin qui s’avançait. L’artiste considérait les murailles, d’une façon inquiète. Le banquier le prit à part, et lui fit comprendre qu’il avait dû, pour le moment, cacher sa toile révolutionnaire.

— “Sans doute !” dit Pellerin, son échec au Club de l’Intelligence ayant modifié ses opinions.

M. Dambreuse glissa fort poliment qu’il lui commanderait d’autres travaux.

— “Mais pardon !… — Ah ! cher ami ! quel bonheur !” Arnoux et Mme Arnoux étaient devant Frédéric.

Il eut comme un vertige. Rosanette, avec son admiration pour les soldats, l’avait agacé toute l’après-midi ; et le vieil amour se réveilla.

Le maître d’hôtel vint annoncer que Madame était servie. D’un regard, elle ordonna au Vicomte de prendre le bras de Cécile, dit tout bas à Martinon : “Misérable !” et on passa dans la salle à manger.

Sous les feuilles vertes d’un ananas, au milieu de la nappe, une dorade s’allongeait, le museau tendu vers un quartier de chevreuil et touchant de sa queue un buisson d’écrevisses. Des figues, des cerises énormes, des poires et des raisins (primeurs de la culture parisienne) montaient en pyramides dans des corbeilles de vieux saxe ; une touffe de fleurs, par intervalles, se mêlait aux claires argenteries ; les stores de soie blanche abaissés devant les fenêtres emplissaient l’appartement d’une lumière douce ; il était rafraîchi par deux fontaines où il y avait des morceaux de glace ; et de grands domestiques en culotte courte servaient. Tout cela semblait meilleur après l'émotion des jours passés. On rentrait dans la jouissance des choses que l'on avait eu peur de perdre ; et Nonancourt exprima le sentiment général en disant : — "Ah ! espérons que MM. les républicains vont nous permettre de dîner !"

— "Malgré leur fraternité !" ajouta spirituellement le père Roque.

Ces deux honorables étaient à la droite et à la gauche de Mme Dambreuse ayant devant elle son mari, entre Mme de Larsillois flanquée du diplomate et la vieille duchesse, que Fumichon coudoyait. Puis venaient le peintre, le marchand de faïences, Mlle Louise ; et grâce à Martinon qui lui avait enlevé sa place pour se mettre auprès de Cécile', Frédéric se trouvait à côté de Mme Arnoux.

Elle portait une robe de barège noir, un cercle d'or au poignet, et comme le premier jour où il avait dîné chez elle, quelque chose de rouge dans les cheveux, une branche de fuchsia entortillée à son chignon. Il ne put s'empêcher de lui dire : — "Voilà longtemps que nous ne nous sommes vus !"

— "Ah !" répliqua-t-elle froidement.

Il reprit, avec une douceur dans la voix qui atténuait l'impertinence de sa question : — "Avez-vous quelquefois pensé à moi ?"

— "Pourquoi y penserais-je ?"

Frédéric fut blessé par ce mot.

— "Vous avez peut-être raison, après tout."

Mais, se repentant vite, il jura qu'il n'avait pas vécu un seul jour sans être ravagé par son souvenir.

— "Je n'en crois absolument rien, monsieur."

— "Cependant, vous savez que je vous aime !"

Mme Arnoux ne répondit pas.

— "Vous savez que je vous aime."

Elle se taisait toujours.

— "Eh bien, va te promener !", se dit Frédéric.

Et, levant les yeux, il aperçut, à l'autre bout de la table, Mlle Roque.

Elle avait cru coquet de s'habiller tout en vert, couleur qui jurait grossièrement avec le ton de ses cheveux rouges. Sa boucle de ceinture était trop haute, sa collerette l'engonçait ; ce peu d'élégance avait contribué sans doute au froid abord de Frédéric. Elle l'observait de loin, curieusement ; et Arnoux, près d'elle, avait beau prodiguer les galanteries, il n'en pouvait tirer trois paroles, si bien que, renonçant à plaire, il écouta la conversation. Elle roulait maintenant sur les purées d'ananas du Luxembourg.

Louis Blanc, d'après Fumichon, possédait un hôtel rue Saint-Dominique et refusait de louer aux ouvriers.

— “Moi, ce que je trouve drôle”, dit Nonancourt, “c’est Ledru-Rollin chassant dans les domaines de la Couronne !”

— “Il doit vingt mille francs à un orfèvre ajouta Cisy ;” et même on prétend… "

Mme Dambreuse l’arrêta.

— “Ah ! que c’est vilain de s’échauffer pour la politique ! Un jeune homme, fi donc ! Occupez-vous plutôt de votre voisine !”

Ensuite, les gens sérieux attaquèrent les journaux.

Arnoux prit leur défense ; Frédéric s’en mêla, les appelant des maisons de commerce pareilles aux autres. Leurs écrivains, généralement, étaient des imbéciles, ou des blagueurs ; il se donna pour les connaître, et combattait par des sarcasmes les sentiments généreux de son ami. Mme Arnoux ne voyait pas que c’était une vengeance contre elle.

Cependant, le Vicomte se torturait l’intellect afin de conquérir Mlle Cécile. D’abord, il étala des goûts d’artiste, en blâmant la forme des carafons et la gravure des couteaux. Puis il parla de son écurie, de son tailleur et de son chemisier ; enfin, il aborda le chapitre de la religion et trouva moyen de faire entendre qu’il accomplissait tous ses devoirs.

Martinon s’y prenait mieux. D’un train monotone, et en la regardant continuellement, il vantait son profil d’oiseau, sa fade chevelure blonde, ses mains trop courtes. La laide jeune fille se délectait sous cette averse de douceurs.

On n’en pouvait rien entendre, tous parlant très haut.

M. Roque voulait pour gouverner la France “un bras de fer” . Nonancourt regretta même que l’échafaud politique fût aboli. On aurait dû tuer en masse tous ces gredins-là !

— “Ce sont même des lâches”, dit Fumichon. “Je ne vois pas de bravoure à se mettre derrière les barricades !”

— “A propos, parlez-nous donc de Dussardier !” dit M. Dambreuse en se tournant vers Frédéric.

Le brave commis était maintenant un héros, comme Sallesse, les frères Jeanson, la femme Péquillet, *etc*.

Frédéric, sans se faire prier, débita l’histoire de son ami ; il lui en revint une espèce d’auréole.

On arriva, tout naturellement, à relater différents traits de courage. Suivant le diplomate, il n’était pas difficile d’affronter la mort, témoin ceux qui se battent en duel.

— “On peut s’en rapporter au Vicomte”, dit Martinon.

Le Vicomte devint très rouge.

Les convives le regardaient ; et Louise, plus étonnée que les autres, murmura : — “Qu’est-ce donc ?”

— “Il a calé devant Frédéric”, reprit tout bas Arnoux. “Vous savez quelque chose, mademoiselle ?” demanda aussitôt Nonancourt ; et il dit sa réponse à Mme Dambreuse, qui, se penchant un peu, se mit à regarder Frédéric.

Martinon n’attendit pas les questions de Cécile. Il lui apprit que cette affaire concernait une personne inqualifiable. La jeune fille se recula légèrement sur sa chaise, comme pour fuir le contact de ce libertin.

La conversation avait recommencé. Les grands vins de Bordeaux circulaient, — on s’animait — , Pellerin en voulait à la révolution à cause du musée espagnol, définitivement perdu. C’était ce qui l’affligeait le plus, comme peintre. A ce mot, M. Roque l’interpella.

— “Ne seriez-vous pas l’auteur d’un tableau très remarquable ?”

— “Peut-être ! Lequel ?”

— “Cela représente une dame dans un costume… ma foi !… un peu… léger, avec une bourse et un paon derrière.”

Frédéric à son tour s’empourpra. Pellerin faisait semblant de ne pas entendre.

— “Cependant c’est bien de vous ! Car il y a votre nom écrit au bas, et une ligne sur le cadre constatant que c’est la propriété de M. Moreau.”

Un jour que le père Roque et sa fille l’attendaient chez lui, ils avaient vu le portrait de la Maréchale. Le bonhomme l’avait même pris pour “un tableau gothique.”

— “Non !” dit Pellerin brutalement ; “c’est un portrait de femme.”

Martinon ajouta :

— “D’une femme très vivante ! N’est-ce pas, Cisy ?”

— “Eh ! je n’en sais rien.”

— “Je croyais que vous la connaissiez. Mais du moment que ça vous fait de la peine, mille excuses !”

Cisy baissa les yeux, prouvant par son embarras qu’il avait dû jouer un rôle pitoyable à l’occasion de ce portrait. Quant à Frédéric, le modèle ne pouvait être que sa maîtresse. Ce fut une de ces convictions qui se forment tout de suite, et les figures de l’assemblée la manifestaient clairement.

— “Comme il me mentait !” se dit Mme Arnoux.

— “C’est donc pour cela qu’il m’a quittée !” pensa Louise.

Frédéric s’imaginait que ces deux histoires pouvaient le compromettre ; et, quand on fut dans le jardin, il en fit des reproches à Martinon.

L’amoureux de Mlle Cécile lui éclata de rire au nez.

— “Eh ! pas du tout ! ça te servira ! Va de l’avant !” Que voulait-il dire ? D’ailleurs, pourquoi cette bienveillance si contraire à ses habitudes ? Sans rien expliquer, il s’en alla vers le fond, où les dames étaient assises. Les hommes se tenaient debout, et Pellerin, au milieu d’eux. émettait des idées. Ce qu’il y avait de plus favorable pour les arts, c’était une monarchie bien entendue. Les temps modernes le dégoûtaient, “quand ce ne serait qu’à cause de la garde nationale”, il regrettait le Moyen Age, Louis XIV ; M. Roque le félicita de ses opinions, avouant même qu’elles renversaient tous ses préjugés sur les artistes. Mais il s’éloigna presque aussitôt, attiré par la voix de Fumichon. Arnoux tâchait d’établir qu’il y a deux socialismes, un bon et un mauvais. L’industriel n’y voyait pas de différence, la tête lui tournant de colère au mot propriété.

— “C’est un droit écrit dans la nature ! Les enfants tiennent à leurs joujoux ; tous les peuples sont de mon avis, tous les animaux ; le lion même, s’il pouvait parler, se déclarerait propriétaire ? Ainsi, moi, messieurs, j’ai commencé avec quinze mille francs de capital ! Pendant trente ans, savez-vous, je me levais régulièrement à quatre heures du matin ! J’ai eu un mal des cinq cents diables à faire ma fortune ! Et on viendra me soutenir que je n’en suis pas le maître, que mon argent n’est pas mon argent, enfin, que la propriété, c’est le vol !”

— “Mais Proudhon…”

— “Laissez-moi tranquille, avec votre Proudhon ! S’il était là, je crois que je l’étranglerais !”

Il l’aurait étranglé. Après les liqueurs surtout, Fumichon ne se connaissait plus ; et son visage apoplectique était près d’éclater comme un obus.

— “Bonjour, Arnoux”, dit Hussonnet, qui passa lestement sur le gazon.

Il apportait à M. Dambreuse la première feuille d’une brochure intitulée l’Hydre, le bohème défendant les intérêts d’un cercle réactionnaire, et le banquier le présenta comme tel à ses hôtes.

Hussonnet les divertit, en soutenant d’abord que les marchands de suif payaient trois cent quatre-vingt-douze gamins pour crier chaque soir : “Des lampions !” puis en blaguant les principes de 89, l’affranchissement des nègres, les orateurs de la gauche ; il se lança même jusqu’à faire Prudhomme sur une barricade, peut-être par l’effet d’une jalousie naïve contre ces bourgeois qui avaient bien dîné. La charge plut médiocrement. Leurs figures s’allongèrent.

Ce n’était pas le moment de plaisanter, du reste Nonancourt le dit, en rappelant la mort de Monseigneur Affre et celle du général Bréa. Elles étaient toujours rappelées ; on en faisait des arguments. M. Roque déclara le trépas de l’Archevêque : “tout ce qu’il y avait de plus sublime” ; Fumichon donnait la palme au militaire ; et, au lieu de déplorer simplement ces deux meurtres, on discuta pour savoir lequel devait exciter la plus forte indignation. Un second parallèle vint après, celui de Lamoricière et de Cavaignac, M. Dambreuse exaltant Cavaignac et Nonancourt Lamoricière. Personne de la compagnie, sauf Arnoux, n’avait pu les voir à l’œuvre. Tous n’en formulèrent pas moins sur leurs opérations un jugement irrévocable. Frédéric s'était récusé, confessant qu'il n'avait pas pris les armes. Le diplomate et M. Dambreuse lui firent un signe de tête approbatif. En effet, avoir combattu l'émeute, c'était avoir défendu la République. Le résultat, bien que favorable, la consolidait ; et, maintenant qu'on était débarrassé des vaincus, on souhaitait l'être des vainqueurs.

A peine dans le jardin, Mme Dambreuse, prenant Cisy, l'avait gourmandé de sa maladresse ; à la vue de Martinon, elle le congédia, puis voulut savoir de son futur neveu la cause de ses plaisanteries sur le Vicomte.

— "Il n'y en a pas."

— "Et tout cela comme pour la gloire de M. Moreau ! Dans quel but ?"

— "Dans aucun. Frédéric est un charmant garçon. Je l'aime beaucoup."

— "Et moi aussi ! Qu'il vienne ! Allez le chercher !"

Après deux ou trois phrases banales, elle commença par déprécier légèrement ses convives, ce qui était le mettre au-dessus d'eux. Il ne manqua pas de dénigrer un peu les autres femmes, manière habile de lui adresser des compliments. Mais elle le quittait de temps en temps, c'était soir de réception, des dames arrivaient ; puis elle revenait à sa place, et la disposition toute fortuite des sièges leur permettait de n'être pas entendus.

Elle se montra enjouée, sérieuse, mélancolique et raisonnable. Les préoccupations du jour l'intéressaient médiocrement ; il y avait tout un ordre de sentiments moins transitoires. Elle se plaignit des poètes qui dénaturent la vérité, puis elle leva les yeux vers le ciel, en lui demandant le nom d'une étoile.

On avait mis dans les arbres deux ou trois lanternes chinoises ; le vent les agitait, des rayons colorés tremblaient sur sa robe blanche. Elle se tenait, comme d'habitude, un peu en arrière dans son fauteuil, avec un tabouret devant elle ; on apercevait la pointe d'un soulier de satin noir ; et Mme Dambreuse, par intervalles, lançait une parole plus haute, quelquefois même un rire.

Ces coquetteries n'atteignaient pas Martinon, occupé de Cécile ; mais elles allaient frapper la petite Roque, qui causait avec Mme Arnoux. C'était la seule, parmi ces femmes, dont les manières ne lui semblaient pas dédaigneuses. Elle était venue s'asseoir à côté d'elle ; puis, cédant à un besoin d'épanchement : — "N'est-ce pas qu'il parle bien, Frédéric Moreau ?"

— "Vous le connaissez ?"

— "Oh ! beaucoup ! Nous sommes voisins. Il m'a fait jouer toute petite."

Mme Arnoux lui jeta un long regard qui signifiait : "Vous ne l'aimez pas, j'imagine ?"

Celui de la jeune fille répliqua sans trouble : — "Si"

— "Vous le voyez souvent, alors ?"

— "Oh ! non ! seulement quand il vient chez sa mère. Voilà dix mois qu'il n’est venu ! Il avait promis cependant d’être plus exact.”

— “Il ne faut pas trop croire aux promesses des hommes, mon enfant.” — “Mais il ne m’a pas trompée, moi !”

— “Comme d’autres !”

Louise frissonna : “Est-ce que, par hasard, il lui aurait aussi promis quelque chose, à elle ?” et sa figure était crispée de défiance et de haine.

Mme Arnoux en eut presque peur ; elle aurait voulu rattraper son mot. Puis, toutes deux se turent.

Comme Frédéric se trouvait en face, sur un pliant, elles le considéraient, l’une avec décence, du coin des paupières, l’autre franchement, la bouche ouverte, si bien que Mme Dambreuse lui dit : — “Tournez-vous donc, pour qu’elle vous voie !”

— “Qui cela ?”

— “Mais la fille de M. Roque !”

Et elle le plaisanta sur l’amour de cette jeune provinciale. Il s’en défendait, en tâchant de rire.

— “Est-ce croyable ! je vous le demande ! Une laideron pareille !”

Cependant, il éprouvait un plaisir de vanité immense. Il se rappelait l’autre soirée, celle dont il était sorti, le cœur plein d’humiliations ; et il respirait largement ; il se sentait dans son vrai milieu, presque dans son domaine, comme si tout cela, y compris l’hôtel Dambreuse, lui avait appartenu. Les dames formaient un demi-cercle en l’écoutant ; et, afin de briller, il se prononça pour le rétablissernent du divorce, qui devait être facile jusqu’à pouvoir se quitter et se reprendre indéfiniment, tant qu’on voudrait. Elles se récrièrent ; d’autres chuchotaient ; il y avait de petits éclats de voix dans l’ombre, au pied du mur couvert d’aristoloches. C’était comme un caquetage de poules en gaieté ; et il développait sa théorie, avec cet aplomb que la conscience du succès procure. Un domestique apporta dans la tonnelle un plateau chargé de glaces. Les messieurs s’en rapprochèrent. lis causaient des arrestations.

Alors, Frédéric se vengea du Vicomte en lui faisant accroire qu’on allait peut-être le poursuivre comme légitimiste. L’autre objectait qu’il n’avait pas bougé de sa chambre ; son adversaire accumula les chances mauvaises ; MM. Dambreuse et de Grémonville eux-mêmes s’amusaient. Puis ils complimentèrent Frédéric, tout en regrettant qu’il n’employât pas ses facultés à la défense de l’ordre ; et leur poignée de main fut cordiale ; il pouvait désormais compter sur eux. Enfin, comme tout le monde s’en allait, le Vicomte s’inclina très bas devant Cécile : — “Mademoiselle, j’ai bien l’honneur de vous souhaiter le bonsoir.”

Elle répondit d’un ton sec :

— “Bonsoir !” Mais elle envoya un sourire à Martinon.

Le père Roque, pour continuer sa discussion avec Arnoux, lui proposa de le reconduire “ainsi que madame”, leur route étant la même. Louise et Frédéric marchaient devant. Elle avait saisi son bras ; et, quand elle fut un peu loin des autres : — “Ah ! enfin ! enfin ! Ai-je assez souffert toute la soirée ! Comme ces femmes sont méchantes ! Quels airs de hauteur !”

Il voulut les défendre.

— “D’abord, tu pouvais bien me parler en entrant, depuis un an que tu n’es venu !”

— “Il n’y a pas un an”, dit Frédéric, heureux de la reprendre sur ce détail pour esquiver les autres.

— “Soit ! Le temps m’a paru long, voilà tout ! Mais, pendant cet abominable dîner, c’était à croire que tu avais honte de moi ! Ah ! je comprends, je n’ai pas ce qu’il faut pour plaire, comme elles.”

— “Tu te trompes”, dit Frédéric.

— “Vraiment ! Jure-moi que tu n’en aimes aucune ?”

Il jura.

— “Et c’est moi seule que tu aimes ?”

— “Parbleu !”

Cette assurance la rendit gaie. Elle aurait voulu se perdre dans les rues, pour se promener ensemble toute la nuit.

— “J’ai été si tourmentée là-bas ! On ne parlait que de barricades ! Je te voyais tombant sur le dos, couvert de sang ! Ta mère était dans son lit avec ses rhumatismes. Elle ne savait rien. Il fallait me taire ! Je n’y tenais plus Alors, j’ai pris Catherine.”

Et elle lui conta son départ, toute sa route, et le mensonge fait à son père.

— “Il me ramène dans deux jours. Viens demain soir, comme par hasard, et profites-en pour me demander en mariage.”

Jamais Frédéric n’avait été plus loin du mariage. D’ailleurs, Mlle Roque lui semblait une petite personne assez ridicule. Quelle différence avec une femme comme Mme Dambreuse ! Un bien autre avenir lui était réservé ! Il en avait la certitude aujourd’hui ; aussi n’était-ce pas le moment de s’engager, par un coup de cœur, dans une détermination de cette importance. Il fallait maintenant être positif ; — et puis il avait revu Mme Arnoux. Cependant la franchise de Louise l’embarrassait.

Il répliqua : — “As-tu bien réfléchi à cette démarche ?”

— “Comment !” s’écria-t-elle, glacée de surprise et d’indignation.

Il dit que se marier actuellement serait une folie.

— “Ainsi tu ne veux pas de moi ?”

— “Mais tu ne me comprends pas !”

Et il se lança dans un verbiage très embrouillé, pour lui faire entendre qu’il était retenu par des considérations majeures, qu’il avait des affaires à n’en plus finir, que même sa fortune était compromise (Louise tranchait tout, d’un mot net), enfin que les circonstances politiques s’y opposaient. Donc, le plus raisonnable était de patienter quelque temps. Les choses s’arrangeraient, sans doute ; du moins, il l’espérait ; et, comme il ne trouvait plus de raisons, il feignit de se rappeler brusquement qu’il aurait dû être depuis deux heures chez Dussardier.

Puis, ayant salué les autres, il s’enfonça dans la rue Hauteville, fit le tour du Gymnase, revint sur le boulevard, et monta en courant les quatre étages de Rosanette.

M. et Mme Arnoux quittèrent le père Roque et sa fille, à l’entrée de la rue Saint-Denis. Ils s’en retournèrent sans rien dire ; lui, n’en pouvant plus d’avoir bavardé, et elle, éprouvant une grande lassitude ; elle s’appuyait même sur son épaule. C’était le seul homme qui eût montré pendant la soirée des sentiments honnêtes. Elle se sentit pour lui pleine d’indulgence. Cependant, il gardait un peu de rancune contre Frédéric.

— “As-tu vu sa mine, lorsqu’il a été question du portrait ? Quand je te disais qu’il est son amant ? Tu ne voulais pas me croire !”

— “Oh ! oui, j’avais tort !”

Arnoux, content de son triomphe, insista.

— “Je parie même qu’il nous a lâchés, tout à l’heure pour aller la rejoindre ! Il est maintenant chez elle, va ! Il y passe la nuit.”

Mme Arnoux avait rabattu sa capeline très bas.

— “Mais tu trembles !”

— “C’est que j’ai froid”, reprit-elle.

Dès que son père fut endormi, Louise entra dans la chambre de Catherine, et, la secouant par l’épaule : — “Lève-toi !… vite ! plus vite ! et va me chercher un fiacre.”

Catherine lui répondit qu’il n’y en avait plus à cette heure.

— “Tu vas m’y conduire toi-même, alors ?”

— “Où donc ?”

— “Chez Frédéric !”

— “Pas possible ! A cause ?”

C’était pour lui parier. Elle ne pouvait attendre. Elle voulait le voir tout de suite.

— “Y pensez-vous ! Se présenter comme ça dans une maison au milieu de la nuit ! D’ailleurs, à présent, il dort !”

— “Je le réveillerai !”

— “Mais ce n’est pas convenable pour une demoiselle !”

— “Je ne suis pas une demoiselle ! Je suis sa femme Je l’aime ! Allons, mets ton châle.”

Catherine, debout au bord de son lit, réfléchissait. Elle finit par dire : — “Non ! je ne veux pas !”

— “Eh bien reste ! Moi, j’y vais !”

Louise glissa comme une couleuvre dans l’escalier. Catherine s’élança par derrière, la rejoignit sur le trottoir. Ses représentations furent inutiles ; et elle la suivait, tout en achevant de nouer sa camisole. Le chemin lui parut extrêmement long. Elle se plaignait de ses vieilles jambes.

— “Après ça, moi, je n’ai pas ce qui vous pousse, dame !”

Puis elle s’attendrissait.

— “Pauvre cœur ! Il n’y a encore que ta Catau, vois-tu !”

Des scrupules, de temps en temps, la reprenaient.

— “Ah ! vous me faites faire quelque chose de joli ! Si votre père se réveillait ! Seigneur Dieu ! Pourvu qu’un malheur n’arrive pas !”

Devant le théâtre des Variétés, une patrouille de gardes nationaux les arrêta. Louise dit tout de suite qu’elle allait avec sa bonne dans la rue Rumford chercher un médecin. On les laissa passer.

Au coin de la Madeleine, elles rencontrèrent une seconde patrouille ; et, Louise ayant donné la même explication, un des citoyens reprit : — “Est-ce pour une maladie de neuf mois, ma petite chatte ?”

— “Gougibaud !” s’écria le capitaine, “pas de polissonneries dans les rangs ! — Mesdames, circulez !”

Malgré l’injonction, les traits d’esprit continuèrent :

— “Bien du plaisir !”

— “Mes respects au docteur !”

— “Prenez garde au loup !”

— “Ils aiment à rire”, remarqua tout haut Catherine.

— “C’est jeune !”

Enfin, elles arrivèrent chez Frédéric. Louise tira la sonnette avec vigueur, plusieurs fois. La porte s’entrebâilla ; et le concierge répondit à sa demande : — “Non !”

— “Mais il doit être couché ?”

— “Je vous dit que non ! Voilà près de trois mois qu’il ne couche pas chez lui !”

Et le petit carreau de la loge retomba nettement, comme une guillotine. Elles restaient dans l’obscurité, sous la voûte. Une voix furieuse leur cria : — “Sortez donc !”

La porte se rouvrit ; elles sortirent.

Louise fut obligée de s’asseoir sur une borne ; et elle pleura, la tête dans ses mains, abondamment, de tout son cœur. Le jour se levait, des charrettes passaient.

Catherine la ramena en la soutenant, en la baisant, en lui disant toutes sortes de bonnes choses tirées de son expérience. Il ne fallait pas se faire tant de mal pour les amoureux. Si celui-là manquait, elle en trouverait d’autres !

CHAPITRE 3

Quand l'enthousiasme de Rosanette pour les gardes mobiles se fut calmé, elle redevint plus charmante que jamais, et Frédéric prit l'habitude insensiblement de vivre chez elle.

Le meilleur de la journée, c'était le matin sur leur terrasse. En caraco de batiste et pieds nus dans ses pantoufles, elle allait et venait autour de lui, nettoyait la cage de ses serins, donnait de l'eau à ses poissons rouges, et jardinait avec une pelle à feu dans la caisse remplie de terre, d'où s'élevait un treillage de capucines garnissant le mur. Puis, accoudés sur leur balcon, ils regardaient ensemble les voitures, les passants ; et on se chauffait au soleil, on faisait des projets pour la soirée. Il s'absentait pendant deux heures tout au plus ; ensuite, ils allaient dans un théâtre quelconque, aux avant-scènes ; et Rosanette, un gros bouquet de fleurs à la main, écoutait les instruments, tandis que Frédéric, penché à son oreille, lui contait des choses joviales ou galantes. D'autres fois, ils prenaient une calèche pour les conduire au bois de Boulogne ; ils se promenaient tard, jusqu'au milieu de la nuit. Enfin, ils s'en revenaient par l'Arc de triomphe et la grande avenue, en humant l'air, avec les étoiles sur leur tête, et, jusqu'au fond de la perspective, tous les becs de gaz alignés comme un double cordon de perles lumineuses.

Frédéric l'attendait toujours quand ils devaient sortir elle était fort longue à disposer autour de son menton les deux rubans de sa capote et elle se souriait à elle-même, devant son armoire à glace. Puis passait son bras sur le sien et le forçant à se mirer près d'elle : — "Nous faisons bien comme cela, tous les deux côte à côte ! Ah pauvre amour, je te mangerais !"

Il était maintenant sa chose, sa propriété. Elle en avait sur le visage un rayonnement continu, en même temps qu'elle paraissait plus langoureuse de manières, plus ronde dans ses formes ; et, sans pouvoir dire de quelle façon, il la trouvait changée, cependant.

Un jour, elle lui apprit comme une nouvelle très importante que le sieur Arnoux venait de monter un magasin de blanc à une ancienne ouvrière de sa fabrique ; il y venait tous les soirs, "dépensait beaucoup, pas plus tard que l'autre semaine, lui avait même donné un ameublement de palissandre."

— "Comment le sais-tu ?" dit Frédéric.

— "Oh ! j'en suis sûre !"

Delphine, exécutant ses ordres, avait pris des informations. Elle aimait donc bien Arnoux, pour s'en occuper si fortement ! Il se contenta de lui répondre — "Qu'est-ce que cela te fait ?"

Rosanette eut l'air surprise de cette demande.

— "Mais la canaille me doit de l'argent ! N'est-ce pas abominable de le voir entretenir des gueuses !"

Puis, avec une expression de haine triomphante :

— "Au reste, elle se moque de lui joliment ! Elle a trois autres particuliers. Tant mieux ! et qu'elle le mange jusqu'au dernier liard, j'en serai contente !"

Arnoux, en effet, se laissait exploiter par la Bordelaise, avec l'indulgence des amours séniles.

Sa fabrique ne marchait plus ; l'ensemble de ses affaires était pitoyable ; si bien que, pour les remettre à flot, il pensa d'abord à établir un café chantant, où l'on n'aurait chanté rien que des œuvres patriotiques ; le ministre lui accordant une subvention, cet établissement serait devenu tout à la fois un foyer de propagande et une source de bénéfices. La direction du Pouvoir ayant changé, c'était une chose impossible. Maintenant, il rêvait une grande chapellerie militaire. Les fonds lui manquaient pour commencer.

Il n'était pas plus heureux dans son intérieur domestique. Mme Arnoux se montrait moins douce pour lui, parfois même un peu rude. Marthe se rangeait toujours du côté de son père. Cela augmentait le désaccord, et la maison devenait intolérable. Souvent, il en partait dès le matin, passait sa journée à faire de longues courses, pour s'étourdir, puis dînait dans un cabaret de campagne, en s'abandonnant à ses réflexions.

L'absence prolongée de Frédéric troublait ses habitudes. Donc, il parut, une après-midi, le supplia de venir le voir comme autrefois, et en obtint la promesse. Frédéric n'osait retourner chez Mme Arnoux. Il lui semblait l'avoir trahie. Mais cette conduite était bien lâche. Les excuses manquaient. Il faudrait en finir par là ! et, un soir, il se mit en marche.

Comme la pluie tombait, il venait d'entrer dans le passage Jouffroy quand, sous la lumière des devantures, un gros petit homme en casquette l'aborda. Frédéric n'eut pas de peine à reconnaître Compain, cet orateur dont la motion avait causé tant de rires au club. Il s'appuyait sur le bras d'un individu affublé d'un bonnet rouge de zouave, la lèvre supérieure très longue, le teint jaune comme une orange, la mâchoire couverte d'une barbiche, et qui le contemplait avec de gros yeux, lubrifiés d'admiration.

Compain, sans doute, en était fier, car il dit :

— "Je vous présente ce gaillard-là ! C'est un bottier de mes amis, un patriote ! Prenons-nous quelque chose ?"

Frédéric l'ayant remercié, il tonna immédiatement contre la proposition

Rateau, une manœuvre des aristocrates. Pour en finir, il fallait recommencer ! Puis, il s’informa de Regimbart et de quelques autres, aussi fameux, tels que Masselin, Sanson, Lecornu, Maréchal, et un certain Deslauriers, compromis dans l’affaire des carabines interceptées dernièrement à Troyes.

Tout cela était nouveau pour Frédéric. Compain n’en savait pas davantage. Il le quitta, en disant : — “A bientôt, n’est-ce pas, car vous en êtes ?”

— “De quoi ?”

— “De la tête de veau”

— “Quelle tête de veau ?”

— “Ah ! farceur !” reprit Compain, en lui donnant une tape sur le ventre.

Et les deux terroristes s’enfoncèrent dans un café.

Dix minutes après, Frédéric ne songeait plus à Deslauriers. Il était sur le trottoir de la rue Paradis, devant une maison ; et il regardait au second étage, derrière des rideaux, la lueur d’une lampe.

Enfin, il monta l’escalier.

— “Arnoux y est-il ?”

La femme de chambre répondit :

— “Non ! mais entrez tout de même.”

Et, ouvrant brusquement une porte :

— “Madame, c’est M. Moreau !”

Elle se leva plus pâle que sa collerette. Elle tremblait.

— “Qui me vaut l’honneur… d’une visite… aussi imprévue ?”

— " Rien ! Le plaisir de revoir d’anciens amis Et, tout en s’asseyant : — “Comment va ce bon Arnoux ?”

— “Parfaitement ! Il est sorti.”

— “Ah ! je comprends ! toujours ses vieilles habitudes du soir ; un peu de distraction !”

— “Pourquoi pas ? Après une journée de calculs, la tête a besoin de se reposer !”

Elle vanta même son mari, comme travailleur. Cet é loge irritait Frédéric ; et, désignant sur ses genoux un morceau de drap noir, avec des soutaches bleues : — “Qu’est-ce que vous faites là ?”

— “Une veste que j’arrange pour ma fille.”

— “A propos, je ne l’aperçois pas, où est-elle donc ?”

— “Dans une pension”, reprit Mme Arnoux.

Des larmes lui vinrent aux yeux — , elle les retenait, en poussant son aiguille rapidement. Il avait pris par contenance un numéro de l’Illustration, sur la table, près d’elle.

— “Ces caricatures de Cham sont très drôles, n’est-ce pas ?”

— “Oui.”

Puis ils retombèrent dans leur silence.

Une rafale ébranla tout à coup les carreaux.

— “Quel temps !” dit Frédéric.

— “En effet ; c’est bien aimable d’être venu par cette horrible pluie !”

— “Oh ! moi, je m’en moque ! Je ne suis pas comme ceux qu’elle empêche, sans doute, d’aller à leurs rendez-vous !”

— “Quels rendez-vous ?” demanda-t-elle naïvement.

— “Vous ne vous rappelez pas ?”

Un frisson la saisit, et elle baissa la tête.

Il lui posa doucement la main sur le bras.

— “Je vous assure que vous m’avez fait bien souffrir !”

Elle reprit, avec une sorte de lamentation dans la voix :

— “Mais j’avais peur pour mon enfant !”

Elle lui conta la maladie du petit Eugène et toutes les angoisses de cette journée.

— “Merci ! merci ! Je ne doute plus ! je vous aime comme toujours !”

— “Eh non ! ce n’est pas vrai !”

— “Pourquoi ?”

Elle le regarda froidement.

— “Vous oubliez l’autre ! Celle que vous promenez aux courses ! La femme dont vous avez le portrait, votre maîtresse !”

— “Eh bien, oui !” s’écria Frédéric, “Je ne nie rien Je suis un misérable ! écoutez-moi !” S’il l’avait eue, c’était par désespoir, comme on se suicide. Du reste, il l’avait rendue fort malheureuse, pour se venger sur elle de sa propre honte. “Quel supplice ! Vous ne comprenez pas ?”

Mme Arnoux tourna son beau visage, en lui tendant la main ; et ils fermèrent les yeux, absorbés dans une ivresse qui était comme un bercement doux et infini. Puis ils restèrent à se contempler, face à face, l’un près de l’autre.

— “Est-ce que vous pouviez croire que je ne vous aimais plus ?”

Elle répondit d’une voix basse, pleine de caresses :

— " Non ! En dépit de tout, je sentais au fond de mon cœur que cela était impossible et qu’un jour l’obstacle entre nous deux s’évanouirait !

— “Moi aussi ! et j’avais des besoins de vous revoir, à en mourir !”

— “Une fois”, reprit-elle, “dans le Palais-Royal, j’ai suis passé à côté de vous !”

— “Vraiment ?”

Et il lui dit le bonheur qu’il avait eu en la retrouvant chez les Dambreuse.

— “Mais comme je vous détestais le soir, en sortant de là !”

— “Pauvre garçon !”

— “Ma vie est si triste.”

— “Et la mienne !… S’il n’y avait que les chagrins, les inquiétudes, les humiliations, tout ce que j’endure comme épouse et comme mère, puisqu’on doit mourir, je ne me plaindrais pas ; ce qu’il y a d’affreux, c’est ma solitude, sans personne…”

— “Mais je suis là, moi !”

— “Oh ! oui !”

Un sanglot de tendresse l’avait soulevée. Ses bras s’écartèrent ; et ils s’étreignirent debout, dans un long baiser.

Un craquement se fit sur le parquet. Une femme était près d’eux, Rosanette. Mme Arnoux l’avait reconnue ; ses yeux, ouverts démesurément, l’examinaient, tout pleins de surprise et d’indignation. Enfin, Rosanette lui dit : — “Je viens parler à M. Arnoux, pour affaires.”

— “Il n’y est pas, vous le voyez.”

— “Ah ! c’est vrai !” reprit la Maréchale, “votre bonne avait raison ! Mille excuses !”

Et, se tournant vers Frédéric :

— “Te voilà ici, toi ?”

Ce tutoiement, donné devant elle, fit rougir Mme Arnoux, comme un soufflet en plein visage.

— “Il n’y est pas, je vous le répète !”

Alors, la Maréchale, qui regardait çà et là, dit tranquillement :

— “Rentrons-nous ? J’ai un fiacre, en bas.”

Il faisait semblant de ne pas entendre.

— “Allons, viens !”

— “Ah ! oui ! c’est une occasion ! Partez ! partez !” dit Mme Arnoux.

Ils sortirent. Elle se pencha sur la rampe pour les voir encore ; et un rire aigu, déchirant, tomba sur eux, du haut de l’escalier. Frédéric poussa Rosanette dans le fiacre, se mit en face d’elle, et, pendant toute la route, ne prononça pas un mot.

L’infamie dont le rejaillissement l’outrageait, c’était lui-même qui en était cause. Il éprouvait tout à la fois la honte d’une humiliation écrasante et le regret de sa félicité ; quand il allait enfin la saisir, elle était devenue irrévocablement impossible ! — et par la faute de celle-là, de cette fille, de cette catin. Il aurait voulu l’étrangler ; il étouffait. Rentrés chez eux, il jeta son chapeau sur un meuble, arracha sa cravate.

— “Ah ! tu viens de faire quelque chose de propre, avoue-le !”

Elle se campa fièrement devant lui.

— “Eh bien, après ? Où est le mal ?”

— “Comment ! Tu m’espionnes ?”

— “Est-ce ma faute ? Pourquoi vas-tu te divertir chez les femmes honnêtes ?”

— “N’importe ! Je ne veux pas que tu les insultes.”

— “En quoi l’ai-je insultée ?”

Il n’eut rien à répondre ; et, d’un accent plus haineux :

— “Mais, l’autre fois, au Champ-de-Mars…”

— “Ah ! tu nous ennuies avec tes anciennes !”

— “Misérable !”

Il leva le poing.

— “Ne me tue pas ! Je suis enceinte !”

Frédéric se recula.

— “Tu mens !”

— “Mais regarde-moi !”

Elle prit un flambeau, et, montrant son visage :

— “T’y connais-tu ?”

De petites taches jaunes maculaient sa peau, qui était singulièrement bouffie. Frédéric ne nia pas l’évidence. Il alla ouvrir la fenêtre, fit quelques pas de long en large, puis s’affaissa dans un fauteuil.

Cet événement était une calamité, qui d’abord ajournait leur rupture, — et puis bouleversait tous ses projets. L’idée d’être père, d’ailleurs, lui paraissait grotesque, inadmissible. Mais pourquoi ? Si, au lieu de la Maréchale… ? Et sa rêverie devint tellement profonde, qu’il eut une sorte d’hallucination. Il voyait là, sur le tapis, devant la cheminée, une petite fille. Elle ressemblait à Mme Arnoux et à lui-même, un peu ; — brune et blanche, avec des yeux noirs, de très grands sourcils, un ruban rose dans ses cheveux bouclants ! (Oh ! comme il l’aurait aimée !) Et il lui semblait entendre sa voix : “Papa ! papa !”

Rosanette, qui venait de se déshabiller, s’approcha de lui, aperçut une larme à ses paupières, et le baisa sur le front, gravement. Il se leva, en disant : — " Parbleu ! On ne le tuera pas, ce marmot !

Alors, elle bavarda beaucoup. Ce serait un garçon, bien sûr ! On l’appellerait Frédéric. Il fallait commencer son trousseau ; — et, en la voyant si heureuse, une pitié le prit. Comme il ne ressentait, maintenant, aucune colère, il voulut savoir la raison de sa démarche, tout à l’heure.

C’est que Mlle Vatnaz lui avait envoyé, ce jour-là même, un billet protesté depuis longtemps ; et elle avait couru chez Arnoux pour avoir de l’argent.

— “Je t’en aurais donné !” dit Frédéric.

— “C’était plus simple de prendre là-bas ce qui m’appartient, et de rendre à l’autre ses mille francs.” — “Est-ce au moins tout ce que tu lui dois ?” Elle répondit : — “Certainement !”

Le lendemain, à neuf heures du soir (heure indiquée par le portier), Frédéric se rendit chez Mlle Vatnaz.

Il se cogna dans l’antichambre contre les meubles entassés. Mais un bruit de voix et de musique le guidait. Il ouvrit une porte et tomba au milieu d’un raout. Debout, devant le piano que touchait une demoiselle en lunettes, Delmar, sérieux comme un pontife, déclamait une poésie humanitaire sur la prostitution et sa voix caverneuse roulait, soutenue par les accords plaqués. Un rang de femmes occupait la muraille, vêtues généralement de couleurs sombres, sans col de chemises ni manchettes. Cinq ou six hommes, tous des penseurs, étaient çà et là, sur des chaises. Il y avait dans un fauteuil un ancien fabuliste, une ruine ; — et l’odeur âcre de deux lampes se mêlait à l’arôme du chocolat, qui emplissait des bois encombrant la table à jeu.

Mlle Vatnaz, une écharpe orientale autour des reins, se tenait à un coin de la cheminée. Dussardier était à l’autre bout, en face ; il avait l’air un peu embarrassé de sa position. D’ailleurs, ce milieu artistique l’intimidait.

La Vatnaz en avait-elle fini avec Delmar ? non peut-être. Cependant, elle semblait jalouse du brave commis ; et, Frédéric ayant réclamé d’elle un mot d’entretien, elle lui fit signe de passer avec eux dans sa chambre. Quand les mille francs furent alignés, elle demanda, en plus, les intérêts.

— “Pas la peine !” dit Dussardier.

— “Tais-toi donc !”

Cette lâcheté d’un homme si courageux fut agréable à Frédéric comme une justification de la sienne. Il rapporta le billet, et ne reparla jamais de l’esclandre chez Mme Arnoux. Mais, dès lors, toutes les défectuosités de la Maréchale lui apparurent.

Elle avait un mauvais goût irrémédiable, une incompréhensible paresse, une ignorance de sauvage, jusqu’à considérer comme très célèbre le docteur Desrogis ; et elle était fière de le recevoir, lui et son épouse, parce que c’étaient — des gens mariés “. Elle régentait d’un air pédantesque sur les choses de la vie Mlle Irma, pauvre petite créature douée d’une petite voix, ayant pour protecteur un monsieur” très bien “, ex-employé dans les douanes, et fort aux tours de cartes ; Rosanette l’appelait” mon gros loulou “. Frédéric ne pouvait souffrir, non plus, la répétition de ses mots bêtes tels que” Du flan ! A Chaillot. On n’a jamais pu savoir, *etc.* "-, et elle s’obstinait à épousseter le matin ses bibelots avec une paire de vieux gants blancs ! Il était révolté surtout par ses façons envers sa bonne, — dont les gages étaient sans cesse arriérés, et qui même lui prêtait de l’argent. Les jours qu’elles réglaient leurs comptes, elles se chamaillaient comme deux poissardes, puis on se réconciliait en s’embrassant. Le tête-à-tête devenait triste. Ce fut un soulagement pour lui, quand les soirées de Mme Dambreuse recommencèrent.

Celle-là, au moins, l’amusait ! Elle savait les intrigues du monde, les mutations d’ambassadeurs, le personnel des couturières ; et, s’il lui échappait des lieux communs, c’était dans une formule tellement convenue, que sa phrase pouvait passer pour une déférence ou pour une ironie. Il fallait la voir au milieu de vingt personnes qui causaient, n’en oubliant aucune, amenant les réponses qu’elle voulait, évitant les périlleuses ! Des choses très simples, racontées par elle, semblaient des confidences ; le moindre de ses sourires faisait rêver ; son charme enfin, comme l’exquise odeur qu’elle portait ordinairement, était complexe et indéfinissable. Frédéric, dans sa compagnie, éprouvait chaque fois le plaisir d’une découverte ; et cependant, il la retrouvait toujours avec sa même sérénité, pareille au miroitement des eaux limpides. Mais pourquoi ses manières envers sa nièce avaient-elles tant de froideur ? Elle lui lançait même, par moments, de singuliers coups d’oeil.

Dès qu’il fut question de mariage, elle avait objecté à M. Dambreuse la santé de “la chère enfant”, et l’avait emmenée tout de suite aux bains de Balaruc. A son retour, des prétextes nouveaux avaient surgi : le jeune homme manquait de position, ce grand amour ne paraissait pas sérieux, on ne risquait rien d’attendre. Martinon avait répondu qu’il attendrait. Sa conduite fut sublime. Il prôna Frédéric. Il fit plus : il le renseigna sur les moyens de plaire à Mme Dambreuse, laissant même entrevoir qu’il connaissait, par la nièce, les sentiments de la tante.

Quant à M. Dambreuse, loin de montrer de la jalousie, il entourait d’égards son jeune ami, le consultait sur différentes choses, s’inquiétait même de son avenir, si bien qu’un jour, comme on parlait du père Roque, il lui dit à l’oreille, d’un air finot : “Vous avez bien fait.”

Et Cécile, miss John, les domestiques, le portier, pas un qui ne fût charmant pour lui, dans cette maison. Il y venait tous les soirs, abandonnant Rosanette. Sa maternité future la rendait plus sérieuse, même un peu triste, comme si des inquiétudes l’eussent tourmentée. A toutes les questions, elle répondait : — “Tu te trompes ! Je me porte bien !”

C’étaient cinq billets qu’elle avait souscrits autrefois et, n’osant le dire à Frédéric après le payement du premier, elle était retournée chez Arnoux, lequel lui avait promis, par écrit, le tiers de ses bénéfices dans l’éclairage au gaz des villes du Languedoc (une entreprise merveilleuse !), en lui recommandant de ne pas se servir de cette lettre avant l’assemblée des actionnaires ; l’assemblée était remise de semaine en semaine.

Cependant, la Maréchale avait besoin d’argent. Elle serait morte plutôt que d’en demander à Frédéric. Elle n’en voulait pas de lui. Cela aurait gâté leur amour. Il subvenait bien aux frais du ménage ; mais une petite voiture louée au mois, et d’autres sacrifices indispensables depuis qu’il fréquentait les Dambreuse, l’empêchaient d’en faire plus pour sa maîtresse. Deux ou trois fois, en rentrant à des heures inaccoutumées, il crut voir des dos masculins disparaître entre les portes ; et elle sortait souvent sans vouloir dire où elle allait. Frédéric n’essaya pas de creuser les choses. Un de ces jours, il prendrait un parti définitif. Il rêvait une autre vie, qui serait plus amusante et plus noble. Un pareil idéal le rendait indulgent pour l’hôtel Dambreuse.

C’était une succursale intime de la rue de Poitiers. Il y rencontra le grand M. A., l’illustre B., le profond C., l’éloquent Z., l’immense Y., les vieux ténors du centre gauche, les paladins de la droite, les burgraves du juste-milieu, les éternels bonshommes de la comédie. Il fut stupéfait par leur exécrable langage, leurs petitesses, leurs rancunes, leur mauvaise foi, — tous ces gens qui avaient voté la Constitution s’évertuant à la démolir ; et ils s’agitaient beaucoup, lançaient des manifestes, des pamphlets, des biographies ; celle de Fumichon par Hussonnet fut un chef-d’œuvre. Nonancourt s’occupait de la propagande dans les campagnes, M. de Grémonville travaillait le clergé, Martinon ralliait de jeunes bourgeois. Chacun, selon ses moyens, s’employa, jusqu’à Cisy lui-même. Pensant maintenant aux choses sérieuses, tout le long de la journée il faisait des courses en cabriolet, pour le parti.

M. Dambreuse, tel qu’un baromètre, en exprimait constamment la dernière variation. On ne parlait pas de Lamartine sans qu’il citât ce mot d’un homme du peuple : “Assez de lyre !” Cavaignac n’était plus, à ses yeux, qu’un traître. Le Président, qu’il avait admiré pendant trois mois, commençait à déchoir dans son estime (ne lui trouvant pas “l’énergie nécessaire”) — , et, comme il lui fallait toujours un sauveur, sa reconnaissance, depuis l’affaire du Conservatoire, appartenait à Changarnier : “Dieu merci, Changarnier… Espérons que Changarnier… Oh ! rien à craindre tant que Changarnier…”

On exaltait avant tout M. Thiers pour son volume contre le Socialisme, où il s’était montré aussi penseur qu’écrivain. On riait énormément de Pierre Leroux, qui citait à la Chambre des passages des philosophes. On faisait des plaisanteries sur la queue phalanstériennel. On allait applaudir la Foire aux Idées ; et on comparait les auteurs à Aristophane. Frédéric y alla, comme les autres.

Le verbiage politique et la bonne chère engourdissaient sa moralité. Si médiocres que lui parussent ces personnages, il était fier de les connaître et intérieurement souhaitait la considération bourgeoise. Une maîtresse comme Mme Dambreuse le poserait.

Il se mit à faire tout ce qu’il faut.

Il se trouvait sur son passage à la promenade, ne manquait pas d’aller la saluer dans sa loge au théâtre ; et, sachant les heures où elle se rendait à l'église, il se campait derrière un pilier dans une pose mélancolique. Pour des indications de curiosités, des renseignements sur un concert, des emprunts de livres ou de revues, c'était un échange continuel de petits billets. Outre sa visite du soir, il lui en faisait quelquefois une autre vers la fin du jour ; et il avait une gradation de joies à passer successivement par la grande porte, par la cour. par l'antichambre par les deux salons ; enfin, il arrivait dans son boudoir, discret comme un tombeau, tiède comme une alcôve, où l'on se heurtait aux capitons des meubles parmi toutes sortes d'objets çà et là : chiffonnières, écrans. coupes et plateaux en laque, en écaille, en ivoire, en malachite, bagatelles dispendieuses, souvent renouvelées. Il y en avait de simples : trois galets d'Etretat pour servir de presse-papier, un bonnet de Frisonne suspendu à un paravent chinois ; toutes ces choses s'harmoniaient cependant ; on était même saisi par la noblesse de l'ensemble, ce qui tenait peut-être à la hauteur du plafond, à l'opulence des portières et aux longues crépines de soie, flottant sur les bâtons dorés des tabourets.

Elle était presque toujours sur une petite causeuse, près de la jardinière garnissant l'embrasure de la fenêtre. Assis au bord d'un gros pouf à roulettes, il lui adressait les compliments les plus justes possible ; et elle le regardait la tête un peu de côté, la bouche souriante.

Il lui lisait des pages de poésie, en y mettant toute son âme, afin de l'émouvoir, et pour se faire admirer. Elle l'arrêtait par une remarque dénigrante ou une observation pratique ; et leur causerie retombait sans cesse dans l'éternelle question de l'Amour ! Ils se demandaient ce qui l'occasionnait, si les femmes le sentaient mieux que les hommes, quelles étaient là-dessus leurs différences. Frédéric tâchait d'émettre son opinion, en évitant à la fois la grossièreté et la fadeur. Cela devenait une espèce de lutte, agréable par moments, fastidieuse en d'autres.

Il n'éprouvait pas à ses côtés ce ravissement de tout son être qui l'emportait vers Mme Arnoux, ni le désordre gai où l'avait mis d'abord Rosanette. Mais il la convoitait comme une chose anormale et difficile, parce qu'elle était noble, parce qu'elle était riche, parce qu'elle était dévote, — se figurant qu'elle avait des délicatesses de sentiment, rares comme ses dentelles, avec des amulettes sur la peau et des pudeurs dans la dépravation.

Il se servit du vieil amour. Il lui conta, comme inspiré par elle, tout ce que Mme Arnoux autrefois lui avait fait ressentir, ses langueurs, ses appréhensions, ses rêves.

Elle recevait cela comme une personne accoutumée à ces choses, sans le repousser formellement ne cédait rien ; et il n'arrivait pas plus à la séduire que Martinon à se marier. Pour en finir avec l'amoureux de sa nièce, elle l'accusa de viser à l’argent, et pria même son mari d’en faire l’épreuve. M. Dambreuse déclara donc au jeune homme que Cécile, étant l’orpheline de parents pauvres, n’avait aucune “espérance” ni dot.

Martinon, ne croyant pas que cela fût vrai, ou trop avancé pour se dédire, ou par un de ces entêtements d’idiot qui sont des actes de génie, répondit que son patrimoine, quinze mille livres de rente, leur suffirait. Ce désintéressement imprévu toucha le banquier. Il lui promit un cautionnement de receveur, en s’engageant à obtenir la place ; et, au mois de mai 1850, Martinon épousa Mlle Cécile. Il n’y eut pas de bal. Les jeunes gens partirent le soir même pour l’Italie. Frédéric, le lendemain, vint faire une visite à Mme Dambreuse. Elle lui parut plus pâle que d’habitude. Elle le contredit avec aigreur sur deux ou trois sujets sans importance. Du reste, tous les hommes étaient des égoïstes.

Il y en avait pourtant de dévoués, quand ce ne serait que lui.

— “Ah bah ! comme les autres !”

Ses paupières étaient rouges — , elle pleurait. Puis, en s’efforçant de sourire : “Excusez-moi ! J’ai tort ! C’est une idée triste qui m’est venue”

Il n’y comprenait rien.

— “N’importe ! elle est moins forte que je ne croyais”, pensa-t-il.

Elle sonna pour avoir un verre d’eau, en but une gorgée, le renvoya, puis se plaignit de ce qu’on la servait horriblement. Afin de l’amuser, il s’offrit comme domestique, se prétendant capable de donner des assiettes, d’épousseter les meubles, d’annoncer le monde, d’être enfin un valet de chambre ou plutôt un chasseur, bien que la mode en fût passée. Il aurait voulu se tenir derrière sa voiture avec un chapeau de plumes de coq.

— “Et comme je vous suivrais à pied majestueusement, en portant sur le bras un petit chien !”

— “Vous êtes gai”, dit Mme Dambreuse.

N’était-ce pas une folie, reprit-il, de considérer tout sérieusement ? Il y avait bien assez de misères sans s’en forger. Rien ne méritait la peine d’une douleur. Mme Dambreuse leva les sourcils, d’une manière de vague approbation.

Cette parité de sentiments poussa Frédéric à plus de hardiesse. Ses mécomptes d’autrefois lui faisaient, maintenant, une clairvoyance. Il poursuivit : — “Nos grands-pères vivaient mieux. Pourquoi ne pas obéir à l’impulsion qui nous pousse ?” L’amour, après tout, n’était pas en soi une chose si importante.

— “Mais c’est immoral, ce que vous dites là !” Elle s’était remise sur la causeuse. Il s’assit au bord, contre ses pieds.

— “Ne voyez-pas que je mens ! Car, pour plaire aux femmes, il faut étaler une insouciance de bouffon ou des fureurs de tragédie ! Elles se moquent de nous quand on leur dit qu’on les aime, simplement ! Moi, je trouve ces hyperboles où elles s’amusent une profanation de l’amour vrai ; si bien qu’on ne sait plus comment l’exprimer, surtout devant celles… qui ont… beaucoup d’esprit.”

Elle le considérait les cils entre-clos. Il baissait la voix, en se penchant vers son visage.

— “Oui ! vous me faites peur ! Je vous offense, peut-être ?… Pardon !… Je ne voulais pas dire tout cela ! Ce n’est pas ma faute ! Vous êtes si belle”

Mme Dambreuse ferma les yeux, et il fut surpris par la facilité de sa victoire. Les grands arbres du jardin qui frissonnaient mollement s’arrêtèrent. Des nuages immobiles rayaient le ciel de longues bandes rouges, et il y eut comme une suspension universelle des choses. Alors, des soirs semblables, avec des silences pareils, revinrent dans son esprit, confusément. Où était-ce ?…

Il se mit à genoux, prit sa main, et lui jura un amour éternel. Puis, comme il partait, elle le rappela d’un signe et lui dit tout bas : — “Revenez dîner ! Nous serons seuls !”

Il semblait à Frédéric, en descendant l’escalier, qu’il était devenu un autre homme, que la température embaumante des serres chaudes l’entourait, qu’il entrait définitivement dans le monde supérieur des adultères patriciens et des hautes intrigues. Pour y tenir la première place, il suffisait d’une femme comme celle-là. Avide, sans doute, de pouvoir et d’action, et mariée à un homme médiocre qu’elle avait prodigieusement servi, elle désirait quelqu’un de fort pour le conduire ? Rien d’impossible maintenant ! Il se sentait capable de faire deux cents lieues à cheval, de travailler pendant plusieurs nuits de suite, sans fatigue son cœur débordait d’orgueil.

Sur le trottoir, devant lui, un homme couvert d’un vieux paletot marchait la tête basse, et avec un tel air d’accablement, que Frédéric se retourna, pour le voir. L’autre releva sa figure. C’était Deslauriers. Il hésitait. Frédéric lui sauta au cou.

— “Ah ! mon pauvre vieux ! Comment ! c’est toi !”

Et il l’entraîna vers sa maison, en lui faisant beaucoup de questions à la fois.

L’ex-commissaire de Ledru-Rollin conta, d’abord, les tourments qu’il avait eus. Comme il prêchait la fraternité aux conservateurs et le respect des lois aux socialistes, les uns lui avaient tiré des coups de fusil, les autres apporté une corde pour le pendre. Après juin, on l’avait destitué brutalement. Il s’était jeté dans un complot, celui des armes saisies à Troyes. On l’avait relâché, faute de preuves. Puis le comité d’action l’avait envoyé à Londres, où il s’était flanqué des gifles avec ses frères, au milieu d’un banquet. De retour à Paris…

— “Pourquoi n’es-tu pas venu chez moi ?”

— “Tu étais toujours absent ! Ton suisse avait des allures mystérieuses, je ne savais que penser ; et puis je ne voulais pas reparaître en vaincu.”

Il avait frappé aux portes de la Démocratie, s’offrant à la servir de sa plume, de sa parole, de ses démarches ; partout on l’avait repoussé ; on se méfiait de lui — , et il avait vendu sa montre, sa bibliothèque, son linge.

— “Mieux vaudrait crever sur les pontons de Belle-Isle, avec Sénécal !”

Frédéric, qui arrangeait alors sa cravate, n’eut pas l’air très ému par cette nouvelle.

— “Ah ! il est déporté, ce bon Sénécal ?” Deslauriers répliqua, en parcourant les murailles d’un air envieux : — “Tout le monde n’a pas ta chance !”

— “Excuse-moi”, dit Frédéric, sans remarquer l’allusion, “mais je dîne en ville. On va le faire à manger ; commande ce que tu voudras ! Prends même mon lit.” Devant une cordialité si complète, l’amertume de Deslauriers disparut.

— “Ton lit ? Mais… ça te gênerait !”

— “Eh non ! J’en ai d’autres !”

— “Ah ! très bien”, reprit l’avocat, en riant. “Où dînes-tu donc ?”

— “Chez Mme Dambreuse.”

— “Est-ce que… par hasard… ce serait… ?”

— “Tu es trop curieux”, dit Frédéric avec un sourire, qui confirmait cette supposition.

Puis, ayant regardé la pendule, il se rassit.

— “C’est comme ça ! et il ne faut pas désespérer, vieux défenseur du peuple !”

— “Miséricorde ! que d’autres s’en mêlent !”

L’avocat détestait les ouvriers, pour en avoir souffert dans sa province, un pays de houille. Chaque puits d’extraction avait nommé un gouvernement provisoire lui intimant des ordres.

— " D’ailleurs, leur conduite a été charmante partout à Lyon, à Lille, au Havre, à Paris ! Car, à l’exemple des fabricants qui voudraient exclure les produits de l’étranger, ces messieurs réclament pour qu’on bannisse les travailleurs anglais, allemands, belges et savoyards ! Quant à leur intelligence, à quoi a servi, sous la Restauration, leur fameux compagnonnage ? En 1830, ils sont entrés dans la garde nationale, sans même avoir le bon sens de la dominer ! Est-ce que, dès le lendemain de 48, les corps de métiers n’ont pas reparu avec des étendards à eux ! Ils demandaient même des représentants du peuple à eux, lesquels n’auraient parlé que pour eux ! Tout comme les députés de la betterave ne s’inquiètent que de la betterave Ah ! j’en ai assez de ces cocos-là, se prosternant tour à tour devant l’échafaud de Robespierre, les bottes de l’Empereur, le parapluie de Louis-Philippe, racaille éternellement dévouée à qui lui jette du pain dans la gueule ! On crie toujours contre la vénalité de Talleyrand et de Mirabeau ; mais le commissionnaire d'en bas vendrait la patrie pour cinquante centimes, si on lui promettait de tarifer sa course à trois francs ! Ah ! quelle faute ! Nous aurions dû mettre le feu aux quatre coins de l'Europe !

Frédéric lui répondit :

— "L'étincelle manquait ! Vous étiez simplement de petits bourgeois, et les meilleurs d'entre vous, des cuistres ! Quant aux ouvriers, ils peuvent se plaindre ; car, si l'on excepte un million soustrait à la liste civile, et que vous leur avez octroyé avec la plus basse flagornerie, vous n'avez rien fait pour eux que des phrases ! Le livret demeure aux mains du patron, et le salarié (même devant la justice) reste l'inférieur de son maître, puisque sa parole n'est pas crue. Enfin, la République me paraît vieille. Qui sait ? Le Progrès, peut-être, n'est réalisable que par une aristocratie ou par un homme ? L'initiative vient toujours d'en haut ! Le peuple est mineur, quoi qu'on prétende !"

— "C'est peut-être vrai", dit Deslauriers.

Selon Frédéric, la grande masse des citoyens n'aspirait qu'au repos (il avait profité à l'hôtel Dambreuse), et toutes les chances étaient pour les conservateurs. Ce parti-là, cependant, manquait d'hommes neufs.

— "Si tu te présentais, je suis sûr…"

Il n'acheva pas. Deslauriers comprit, se passa les deux mains sur le front ; puis, tout à coup : — "Mais toi ? Rien ne t'empêche ? Pourquoi ne serais-tu pas député ?"

Par suite d'une double élection, il y avait, dans l'Aube, une candidature vacante. M. Dambreuse, réélu à la Législative, appartenait à un autre arrondissement.

— "Veux-tu que je m'en occupe ?"

Il connaissait beaucoup de cabaretiers, d'instituteurs, de médecins, de clercs d'étude et leurs patrons.

— "D'ailleurs, on fait accroire aux paysans tout ce qu'on veut !"

Frédéric sentait se rallumer son ambition. Deslauriers ajouta :

— "Tu devrais bien me trouver une place à Paris."

— "Oh ! ce ne sera pas difficile, par M. Dambreuse."

— "Puisque nous parlions de houilles", reprit l'avocat, "que devient sa grande société ? C'est une occupation de ce genre qu'il me faudrait ! — et je leur serais utile, tout en gardant mon indépendance."

Frédéric promit de le conduire chez le banquier avant trois jours.

Son repas en tête-à-tête avec Mme Dambreuse fut une chose exquise. Elle souriait en face de lui, de l'autre côté de la table, par-dessus des fleurs dans une corbeille, à la lumière de la lampe suspendue ; et, comme la fenêtre était ouverte, on apercevait des étoiles. Ils causèrent fort peu, se méfiant d'eux-mêmes, sans doute ; mais, dès que les domestiques tournaient le dos, ils s'envoyaient un baiser, du bout des lèvres. Il dit son idée de candidature. Elle l'approuva, s'engageant même à y faire travailler M. Dambreuse.

Le soir, quelques amis se présentèrent pour la féliciter et pour la plaindre ; elle devait être si chagrine de n'avoir plus sa nièce ! C'était fort bien, d'ailleurs, aux jeunes mariés de s'être mis en voyage ; plus tard, les embarras, les enfants surviennent ! Mais l'Italie ne répondait pas à l'idée qu'on s'en faisait. Après cela. ils étaient dans l'âge des illusions ! et puis la lune de miel embellissait tout ! Les deux derniers qui restèrent furent M. de Grémonville et Frédéric. Le diplomate ne voulait pas s'en aller. Enfin, à minuit, il se leva. Mme Dambreuse fit signe à Frédéric de partir avec lui, et le remercia de cette obéissance par une pression de main, plus suave que tout le reste.

La Maréchale poussa un cri de joie en le revoyant. Elle l'attendait depuis cinq heures. Il donna pour excuse une démarche indispensable dans l'intérêt de Deslauriers. Sa figure avait un air de triomphe, une auréole, dont Rosanette fut éblouie.

— “C'est peut-être à cause de ton habit noir qui te va bien ; mais je ne t'ai jamais trouvé si beau ! Comme tu es beau !”

Dans un transport de sa tendresse, elle se jura intérieurement de ne plus appartenir à d'autres, quoiqu'il advînt, quand elle devrait crever de misère !

Ses jolis yeux humides pétillaient d'une passion tellement puissante, que Frédéric l'attira sur ses genoux et il se dit : “Quelle canaille je fais” en s'applaudissant de sa perversité.

CHAPITRE 4

M. Dambreuse. quand Deslauriers se présenta chez lui, songeait à raviver sa grande affaire de houilles. Mais cette fusion de toutes les compagnies en une seule était mal vue ; on criait au monopole, comme s'il ne fallait pas, pour de telles exploitations, d'immenses capitaux !

Deslauriers, qui venait de lire exprès l'ouvrage de Gobet et les articles de M. Chappe dans le Journal des Mines, connaissait la question parfaitement. Il démontra que la loi de 1810 établissait au profit du concessionnaire un droit impermutable. D'ailleurs, on pouvait donner à l'entreprise une couleur démocratique : empêcher les réunions houillères était un attentat contre le principe même d'association.

M. Dambreuse lui confia des notes pour rédiger un mémoire. Quant à la manière dont il payerait son travail, il fit des promesses d'autant meilleures qu'elles n'étaient pas précises.

Deslauriers s'en revint chez Frédéric et lui rapporta la conférence. De plus, il avait vu Mme Dambreuse au bas de l'escalier, comme il sortait.

— “Je t'en fais mes compliments, saprelotte !”

Puis ils causèrent de l'élection. Il y avait quelque chose à inventer.

Trois jours après, Deslauriers reparut avec une feuille d'écriture destinée aux journaux et qui était une lettre familière, où M. Dambreuse approuvait la candidature de leur ami. Soutenue par un conservateur et prônée par un rouge, elle devait réussir. Comment le capitaliste signait-il une pareille élucubration ? L'avocat, sans le moindre embarras, de lui-même, avait été la montrer à Mme Dambreuse, qui, la trouvant fort bien, s'était chargée du reste.

Cette démarche surprit Frédéric. Il l'approuva cependant ; puis, comme Deslauriers s'aboucherait avec M. Roque, il lui conta sa position vis-à-vis de Louise.

— “Dis-leur tout ce que tu voudras, que mes affaires sont troubles ; je les arrangerai ; elle est assez jeune pour attendre !”

Deslauriers partit ; et Frédéric se considéra comme un homme très fort. Il éprouvait, d'ailleurs, un assouvissement, une satisfaction profonde. Sa joie de posséder une femme riche n'était gâtée par aucun contraste ; le sentiment s'harmoniait avec le milieu. Sa vie, maintenant, avait des douceurs partout.

La plus exquise, peut-être, était de contempler Mme Dambreuse, entre plusieurs personnes, dans son salon. La convenance de ses manières le faisait rêver à d’autres attitudes ; pendant qu’elle causait d’un ton froid, il se rappelait ses mots d’amour balbutiés ; tous les respects pour sa vertu le délectaient comme un hommage retournant vers lui ; et il avait parfois des envies de s’écrier : “Mais je la connais mieux que vous ! Elle est à moi !”

Leur liaison ne tarda pas à être une chose convenue, acceptée. Mme Dambreuse, durant tout l’hiver, traîna Frédéric dans le monde.

Il arrivait presque toujours avant elle ; et il la voyait entrer, les bras nus, l’éventail à la main, des perles dans les cheveux. Elle s’arrêtait sur le seuil (le linteau de la porte l’entourait comme un cadre), et elle avait un léger mouvement d’indécision, en clignant les paupières, pour découvrir s’il était là. Elle le ramenait dans sa voiture ; la pluie fouettait les vasistas ; les passants, tels que des ombres, s’agitaient dans la boue ; et, serrés l’un contre l’autre, ils apercevaient tout cela, confusément, avec un dédain tranquille. Sous des prétextes différents, il restait encore une bonne heure dans sa chambre.

C’était par ennui, surtout, que Mme Dambreuse avait cédé. Mais cette dernière épreuve ne devait pas être perdue. Elle voulait un grand amour, et elle se mit à le combler d’adulations et de caresses.

Elle lui envoyait des fleurs ; elle lui fit une chaise en tapisserie ; elle lui donna un porte-cigares, une écritoire, mille petites choses d’un usage quotidien, pour qu’il n’eût pas une action indépendante de son souvenir. Ces prévenances le charmèrent d’abord, et bientôt lui parurent toutes simples.

Elle montait dans un fiacre, le renvoyait à l’entrée d’un passage, sortait par l’autre bout ; puis, se glissant le long des murs, avec un double voile sur le visage, elle atteignait la rue où Frédéric en sentinelle lui prenait le bras, vivement, pour la conduire dans sa maison. Ses deux domestiques se promenaient, le portier faisait des courses ; elle jetait les yeux tout à l’entour ; rien à craindre ! et elle poussait comme un soupir d’exilé qui revoit sa patrie. La chance les enhardit. Leurs rendez-vous se multiplièrent. Un soir même, elle se présenta tout à coup en grande toilette de bal. Ces surprises pouvaient être dangereuses ; il la blâma de son imprudence ; elle lui déplut, du reste. Son corsage ouvert découvrait trop sa poitrine maigre.

Il reconnut alors ce qu’il s’était caché, la désillusion de ses sens. Il n’en feignait pas moins de grandes ardeurs ; mais pour les ressentir, il lui fallait évoquer l’image de Rosanette ou de Mme Arnoux.

Cette atrophie sentimentale lui laissait la tête entièrement libre, et plus que jamais il ambitionnait une haute position dans le monde. Puisqu’il avait un marchepied pareil, c’était bien le moins qu’il s’en servît.

Vers le milieu de janvier, un matin, Sénécal entra dans son cabinet ; et à son exclamation d’étonnement, répondit qu’il était secrétaire de Deslauriers. Il lui apportait même une lettre. Elle contenait de bonnes nouvelles, et le blâmait cependant de sa négligence ; il fallait venir là-bas.

Le futur député dit qu'il se mettrait en route le surlendemain.

Sénécal n'exprima pas d'opinion sur cette candidature. Il parla de sa personne, et des affaires du pays.

Si lamentables qu'elles fussent, elles le réjouissaient ; car on marchait au communisme. D'abord, l'Administration y menait d'elle-même, puisque, chaque jour, il y avait plus de choses régies par le Gouvernement. Quant à la Propriété, la Constitution de 48, malgré ses faiblesses, ne l'avait pas ménagée ; au nom de l'utilité publique, l'Etat pouvait prendre désormais ce qu'il jugeait lui convenir. Sénécal se déclara pour l'Autorité ; et Frédéric aperçut dans ses discours l'exagération de ses propres paroles à Deslauriers. Le républicain tonna même contre l'insuffisance des masses.

— "Robespierre, en défendant le droit du petit nombre, amena Louis XVI devant la Convention nationale, et sauva le peuple. La fin des choses les rend légitimes. La dictature est quelquefois indispensable. Vive la tyrannie, pourvu que le tyran fasse le bien !"

Leur discussion dura longtemps, et, comme il s'en allait, Sénécal avoua (c'était le but de sa visite, peut-être) que Deslauriers s'impatientait beaucoup du silence de M. Dambreuse.

Mais M. Dambreuse était malade. Frédéric le voyait tous les jours, sa qualité d'intime le faisait admettre près de lui.

La révocation du général Changarnier avait ému extrêmement le capitaliste. Le soir même, il fut pris d'une grande chaleur dans la poitrine, avec une oppression à ne pouvoir se tenir couché. Des sangsues amenèrent un soulagement immédiat. La toux sèche disparut, la respiration devint plus calme ; et, huit jours après, il dit en avalant un bouillon :

— "Ah ! ça va mieux ! Mais j'ai manqué faire le grand voyage !"

— " Pas sans moi s'écria Mme Dambreuse, notifiant par ce mot qu'elle n'aurait pu lui survivre.

Au lieu de répondre, il étala sur elle et sur son amant un singulier sourire, où il y avait à la fois de la résignation, de l'indulgence, de l'ironie, et même comme une pointe, un sous-entendu presque gai.

Frédéric voulut partir pour Nogent, Mme Dambreuse s'y opposa ; et il défaisait et refaisait tour à tour ses paquets, selon les alternatives de la maladie.

Tout à coup, M. Dambreuse cracha le sang abondamment. "Les princes de la science", consultés, n'avisèrent à rien de nouveau. Ses jambes enflaient, et la faiblesse augmentait. Il avait témoigné plusieurs fois le désir de voir Cécile, qui était à l'autre bout de la France, avec son mari, nommé receveur depuis un mois.

Il ordonna expressément qu’on la fît venir. Mme Dambreuse écrivit trois lettres, et les lui montra.

Sans se fier même à la religieuse, elle ne le quittait pas d’une seconde, ne se couchait plus. Les personnes qui se faisaient inscrire chez le concierge s’informaient d’elle avec admiration ; et les passants étaient saisis de respect devant la quantité de paille qu’il y avait dans la rue, sous les fenêtres.

Le 12 février, à cinq heures, une hémoptysie effrayante se déclara. Le médecin de garde dit le danger. On courut vite chez un prêtre.

Pendant la confession de M. Dambreuse, Madame le regardait de loin, curieusement. Après quoi, le jeune docteur posa un vésicatoire, et attendit.

La lumière des lampes, masquée par des meubles, é clairait la chambre inégalement. Frédéric et Mme Dambreuse, au pied de la couche, observaient le moribond. Dans l’embrasure d’une croisée, le prêtre et le médecin causaient à demi-voix ; la bonne sœur à genoux, marmottait des prières.

Enfin, un râle s’éleva. Les mains se refroidissaient, la face commençait à pâlir. Quelquefois, il tirait tout à coup une aspiration énorme ; elles devinrent de plus en plus rares ; deux ou trois paroles confuses lui échappèrent ; il exhala un petit souffle en même temps qu’il tournait ses yeux, et le tête retomba de côté sur l’oreiller.

Tous, pendant une minute, restèrent immobiles.

Mme Dambreuse s’approcha ; et, sans effort, avec la simplicité du devoir, elle lui ferma les paupières.

Puis elle écarta les deux bras, en se tordant la taille comme dans le spasme d’un désespoir contenu, et sortit de l’appartement, appuyée sur le médecin et la religieuse. Un quart d’heure après, Frédéric monta dans sa chambre.

On y sentait une odeur indéfinissable, émanation des choses délicates qui l’emplissaient. Au milieu du lit, une robe noire s’étalait, tranchant sur le couvre-pied rose.

Mme Dambreuse était au coin de la cheminée, debout. Sans lui supposer de violents regrets, il la croyait un peu triste ; et, d’une voix dolente :

— “Tu souffres ?”

— “Moi ? Non, pas du tout.”

Comme elle se retournait, elle aperçut la robe, l’examina ; puis elle lui dit de ne pas se gêner.

— “Fume si tu veux ! Tu es chez moi”

Et, avec un grand soupir :

— “Ah ! sainte Vierge ! quel débarras” Frédéric fut étonné de l’exclamation. Il reprit en lui baisant la main :

— “On était libre, pourtant !”

Cette allusion à l'aisance de leurs amours parut blesser Mme Dambreuse.

— "Eh ! tu ne sais pas les services que je lui rendais, ni dans quelles angoisses j'ai vécu !"

— "Comment ?"

— "Mais oui ! Etait-ce une sécurité que d'avoir toujours près de soi cette bâtarde, une enfant introduite dans la maison au bout de cinq ans de ménage, et qui, sans moi, bien sûr, l'aurait amené à quelque sottise ?"

Alors, elle expliqua ses affaires. Ils s'étaient mariés sous le régime de la séparation. Son patrimoine était de trois cent mille francs. M. Dambreuse, par leur contrat, lui avait assuré, en cas de survivance, quinze mille livres de rente avec la propriété de l'hôtel. Mais, peu de temps après, il avait fait un testament où il lui donnait toute sa fortune ; et elle l'évaluait, autant qu'il était possible de le savoir maintenant, à plus de trois millions.

Frédéric ouvrit de grands yeux.

— "Ça en valait la peine, n'est-ce pas ? J'y ai contribué, du reste ! C'était mon bien que je défendais ; Cécile m'aurait dépouillée, injustement."

— "Pourquoi n'est-elle pas venue voir son père ?" dit Frédéric.

A cette question, Mme Dambreuse le considéra ; puis, d'un ton sec :

— "Je n'en sais rien ! Faute de cœur, sans doute ! Oh ! je la connais ! Aussi elle n'aura pas de moi une obole !" Elle n'était guère gênante, du moins depuis son mariage.

— "Ah ! son mariage !" fit en ricanant Mme Dambreuse.

Et elle s'en voulait d'avoir trop bien traité cette pécore-là, qui était jalouse, intéressée, hypocrite. "Tous les défauts de son père !" Elle le dénigrait de plus en plus. Personne d'une fausseté aussi profonde, impitoyable d'ailleurs, dur comme un caillou, "un mauvais homme, un mauvais homme !"

Il échappe des fautes, même aux plus sages. Mme Dambreuse venait d'en faire une, par ce débordement de haine. Frédéric, en face d'elle, dans une bergère, réfléchissait, scandalisé.

Elle se leva, se mit doucement sur ses genoux.

— "Toi seul es bon ! Il n'y a que toi que j'aime !" En le regardant, son cœur s'amollit, une réaction nerveuse lui amena des larmes aux paupières, et elle murmura :

— "Veux-tu m'épouser !"

Il crut d'abord n'avoir pas compris. Cette richesse l'étourdissait. Elle répéta plus haut :

— "Veux-tu m'épouser !"

Enfin, il dit, en souriant :

— "Tu en doutes ?"

Puis une pudeur le prit et, pour faire au défunt une sorte de réparation, il s’offrit à le veiller lui-même. Mais comme il avait honte de ce pieux sentiment, il ajouta d’un ton dégagé :

— “Ce serait peut-être plus convenable.”

— “Oui, peut-être bien”, dit-elle, “à cause des domestiques !”

On avait tiré le lit complètement hors de l’alcôve. La religieuse était au pied ; et au chevet se tenait un prêtre, un autre, un grand homme maigre, l’air espagnol et fanatique. Sur la table de nuit, couverte d’une serviette blanche, trois flambeaux brûlaient.

Frédéric prit une chaise, et regarda le mort.

Son visage était jaune comme de la paille ; un peu d’écume sanguinolente marquait les coins de sa bouche. Il avait un foulard autour du crâne, un gilet de tricot, et un crucifix d’argent sur la poitrine, entre ses bras croisés.

Elle était finie, cette existence pleine d’agitations ! Combien n’avait-il pas fait de courses dans les bureaux, aligné de chiffres, tripoté d’affaires, entendu de rapports ! Que de boniments, de sourires, de courbettes ! Car il avait acclamé Napoléon, les Cosaques, Louis XVIII, 1830, les ouvriers, tous les régimes, chérissant le Pouvoir d’un tel amour, qu’il aurait payé pour se vendre.

Mais il laissait le domaine de la Fortelle, trois manufactures en Picardie, le bois de Crancé dans l’Yonne, une ferme près d’Orléans, des valeurs mobilières considérables.

Frédéric fit ainsi la récapitulation de sa fortune ; et elle allait, pourtant, lui appartenir ! Il songea d’abord à “ce qu’on dirait”, à un cadeau pour sa mère, à ses futurs attelages, à un vieux cocher de sa famille dont il voulait faire le concierge. La livrée ne serait plus la même, naturellement. Il prendrait le grand salon comme cabinet de travail. Rien n’empêchait, en abattant trois murs, d’avoir, au second étage, une galerie de tableaux. Il y avait moyen, peut-être, d’organiser en bas une salle de bains turcs. Quant au bureau de M. Dambreuse, pièce déplaisante, à quoi pouvait-elle servir ?

Le prêtre qui venait à se moucher, ou la bonne sœur arrangeant le feu, interrompait brutalement ces imaginations. Mais la réalité les confirmait ; le cadavre était toujours là. Ses paupières s’étaient rouvertes ; et les pupilles, bien que noyées dans des ténèbres visqueuses, avaient une expression énigmatique, intolérable. Frédéric croyait y voir comme un jugement porté sur lui ; et il sentait presque un remords, car il n’avait jamais eu à se plaindre de cet homme, qui, au contraire… “Allons donc ! un vieux misérable !” et il le considérait de plus près, pour se raffermir, en lui criant mentalement — “Eh bien, quoi ? Est-ce que je t’ai tué ?” Cependant, le prêtre lisait son bréviaire ; la religieuse, immobile, sommeillait ; les mèches des trois flambeaux s’allongeaient.

On entendit, pendant deux heures, le roulement sourd des charrettes défilant vers les Halles. Les carreaux blanchirent, un fiacre passa, puis une compagnie d'ânesses qui trottinaient sur le pavé, et des coups de marteau, des cris de vendeurs ambulants, des éclats de trompette ; tout déjà se confondait dans la grande voix de Paris qui s'éveille.

Frédéric se mit en courses. Il se transporta premièrement à la mairie pour faire la déclaration ; puis, quand le médecin des morts eut donné un certificat, il revint à la mairie dire quel cimetière la famille choisissait, et pour s'entendre avec le bureau des pompes funèbres.

L'employé exhiba un dessin et un programme, l'un indiquant les diverses classes d'enterrement, l'autre le détail complet du décor. Voulait-on un char avec galerie ou un char avec panaches, des tresses aux chevaux, des aigrettes aux valets, des initiales ou un blason, des lampes funèbres, un homme pour porter les honneurs, et combien de voitures ? Frédéric fut large ; Mme Dambreuse tenait à ne rien ménager.

Puis, il se rendit à l'église.

Le vicaire des convois commença par blâmer l'exploitation des pompes funèbres ; ainsi l'officier pour les pièces d'honneur était vraiment inutile ; beaucoup de cierges valait mieux ! On convint d'une messe basse relevée de musique. Frédéric signa ce qui était convenu, avec obligation solidaire de payer tous les frais.

Il alla ensuite à l'Hôtel de Ville pour l'achat du terrain. Une concession de deux mètres en longueur sur un de largeur, coûtait cinq cents francs. Etait-ce une concession mi-séculaire ou perpétuelle ?

— “Oh ! perpétuelle !” dit Frédéric.

Il prenait la chose au sérieux, se donnait du mal. Dans la cour de l'hôtel, un marbrier l'attendait pour lui montrer des devis et plans de tombeaux grecs, égyptiens, mauresques ; mais l'architecte de la maison en avait déjà conféré avec Madame ; et, sur la table, dans le vestibule, il y avait toutes sortes de prospectus relatifs au nettoyage des matelas, à la désinfection des chambres, à divers procédés d'embaumement.

Après son dîner, il retourna chez le tailleur pour le deuil des domestiques ; et il dut faire une dernière course, car il avait commandé des gants de castor, et c'étaient des gants de filoselle qui convenaient.

Quand il arriva le lendemain, à dix heures, le grand salon s'emplissait de monde, et presque tous, en s'abordant d'un air mélancolique, disaient :

— “Moi qui l'ai encore vu il y a un mois ! Mon Dieu ! c'est notre sort à tous !”

— “Oui ; mais tâchons que ce soit le plus tard possible !”

Alors, on poussait un petit rire de satisfaction, et même on engageait des dialogues parfaitement étrangers à la circonstance. Enfin, le maître des cérémonies, en habit noir à la française et culotte courte, avec manteau, pleureuses, brette au côté et tricorne sous le bras, articula, en saluant, les mots d'usage :

— “Messieurs, quand il vous fera plaisir.”

On partit.

C'était jour de marché aux fleurs sur la place de la Madeleine. Il faisait un temps clair et doux ; et la brise, qui secouait un peu les baraques de toile, gonflait, par les bords, l'immense drap noir accroché sur le portail. L'écusson de M. Dambreuse, occupant un carré de velours, s'y répétait trois fois. Il était de sable au senestrochère d'or, à poing fermé, ganté d'argent, avec la couronne de comte, et cette devise : Par toutes voies.

Les porteurs montèrent jusqu'au haut de l'escalier le lourd cercueil, et l'on entra.

Les six chapelles, l'hémicycle et les chaises étaient tendus de noir. Le catafalque au bas du chœur formait, avec ses grands cierges, un seul foyer de lumières jaunes. Aux deux angles, sur des candélabres, des flammes d'esprit de vin brûlaient.

Les plus considérables prirent place dans le sanctuaire, les autres dans la nef ; et l'office commença.

A part quelques-uns, l'ignorance religieuse de tous était si profonde, que le maître des cérémonies, de temps à autre, leur faisait signe de se lever, de s'agenouiller, de se rasseoir. L'orgue et deux contrebasses alternaient avec les voix ; dans les intervalles de silence, on entendait le marmottement du prêtre à l'autel ; puis la musique et les chants reprenaient.

Un jour mat tombait des trois coupoles ; mais la porte ouverte envoyait horizontalement comme un fleuve de clarté blanche qui frappait toutes les têtes nues ; et dans l'air, à mi-hauteur du vaisseau, flottait une ombre, pénétrée par le reflet des ors décorant la nervure des pendentifs et le feuillage des chapiteaux.

Frédéric, pour se distraire, écouta le Dies irae ; il considérait les assistants, tâchait de voir les peintures trop élevées qui représentent la vie de Madeleine. Heureusement, Pellerin vint se mettre près de lui, et commença tout de suite, à propos de fresques, une longue dissertation. La cloche tinta. On sortit de l'église.

Le corbillard, orné de draperies pendantes et de hauts plumets, s'achemina vers le Père-Lachaise, tiré par quatre chevaux noirs ayant des tresses dans la crinière, des panaches sur la tête, et qu'enveloppaient jusqu'aux sabots de larges caparaçons brodés d'argent. Leur cocher, en bottes à l'écuyère, portait un chapeau à trois cornes avec un long crêpe retombant. Les cordons étaient tenus par quatre personnages : un questeur de la Chambre des députés, un membre du conseil général de l'Aube, un délégué des houilles, — et Fumichon, comme ami. La calèche du défunt et douze voitures de deuil suivaient. Les conviés, par derrière, emplissaient le milieu du boulevard.

Pour voir tout cela, les passants s'arrêtaient ; des femmes, leur marmot entre les bras, montaient sur des chaises ; et des gens qui prenaient des chopes dans les cafés apparaissaient aux fenêtres, une queue de billard à la main.

La route était longue ; et, — comme dans les repas de cérémonie où l'on est réservé d'abord, puis expansif, la tenue générale se relâcha bientôt. On ne causait que du refus d'allocation fait par la Chambre au Président.

M. Piscatory s'était montré trop acerbe, Montalembert “magnifique, comme d'habitudes”, et MM. Chambolle, Pidoux, Creton, enfin toute la commission aurait dû suivre, peut-être, l'avis de MM. Quentin-Bauchard et Dufour.

Ces entretiens continuèrent dans la rue de la Roquette, bordée par des boutiques, où l'on ne voit que des chaînes en verre de couleur et des rondelles noires couvertes de dessins et de lettres d'or, — ce qui les fait ressembler à des grottes pleines de stalactites et à des magasins de faïence. Mais, devant la grille du cimetière, tout le monde, instantanément, se tut.

Les tombes se levaient au milieu des arbres, colonnes brisées, pyramides, temples, dolmens, obélisques, caveaux étrusques à porte de bronze. On apercevait dans quelques-uns des espèces de boudoirs funèbres, avec des fauteuils rustiques et des pliants. Des toiles d'araignée pendaient comme des haillons aux chaînettes des urnes ; et de la poussière couvrait les bouquets à rubans de satin et les crucifix. Partout, entre les balustres, sur les tombeaux, des couronnes d'immortelles et des chandeliers, des vases, des fleurs, des disques noirs rehaussés de lettres d'or, des statuettes de plâtre : petits garçons et petites demoiselles ou petits anges tenus en l'air par un fil de laiton ; plusieurs même ont un toit de zinc sur la tête. D'énormes câbles en verre filé, noir, blanc et azur, descendent du haut des stèles jusqu'au pied des dalles, avec de longs replis, comme des boas. Le soleil, frappant dessus, les faisait scintiller entre les croix de bois noir ; — et le corbillard s'avançait dans les grands chemins, qui sont pavés comme les rues d'une ville. De temps à autre, les essieux claquaient. Des femmes à genoux, la robe traînant dans l'herbe, parlaient doucement aux morts. Des lumignons blanchâtres sortaient de la verdure des ifs. C'étaient des offrandes abandonnées, des débris que l'on brûlait.

La fosse de M. Dambreuse était dans le voisinage de Manuel et de Benjamin Constant. Le terrain dévale, en cet endroit, par une pente abrupte. On a sous les pieds des sommets d'arbres verts ; plus loin, des cheminées de pompes à feu, puis toute la grande ville.

Frédéric put admirer le paysage pendant qu'on prononçait les discours.

Le premier fut au nom de la Chambre des députés, le deuxième au nom du conseil général de l'Aube, le troisième au nom de la Société houillère de Saône-et-Loire, le quatrième au nom de la Société d'agriculture de l'Yonne ; et il y en eut un autre, au nom d'une Société philanthropique. Enfin, on s'en allait, lorsqu'un inconnu se mit à lire un sixième discours, au nom de la Société des antiquaires d'Amiens.

Et tous profitèrent de l'occasion pour tonner contre le Socialisme, dont M. Dambreuse était mort victime. C'était le spectacle de l'anarchie et son dévouement à l'ordre qui avait abrégé ses jours. On exalta ses lumières, sa probité, sa générosité et même son mutisme comme représentant du peuple, car, s'il n'était pas orateur, il possédait en revanche ces qualités solides, mille fois préférables, etc…. avec tous les mots qu'il faut dire : “Fin prématurée, — regrets éternels l'autre patrie, — adieu, ou plutôt non, au revoir !”

La terre, mêlée de cailloux, retomba ; et il ne devait plus en être question dans le monde.

On en parla encore un peu en descendant le cimetière et on ne se gênait pas pour l'apprécier. Hussonnet, qui devait rendre compte de l'enterrement dans les journaux, reprit même, en blague, tous les discours ; — car enfin le bonhomme Dambreuse avait été un des potdevinistes les plus distingués du dernier règne. Puis les voitures de deuil reconduisirent les bourgeois à leurs affaires. La cérémonie n'avait pas duré trop longtemps ; on s'en félicitait.

Frédéric, fatigué, rentra chez lui.

Quand il se présenta le lendemain à l'hôtel Dambreuse, on l'avertit que Madame travaillait en bas, dans le bureau. Les cartons, les tiroirs étaient ouverts pêle-mêle, les livres de comptes jetés de droite et de gauche ; un rouleau de paperasses ayant pour titre : “Recouvrements désespérés”, traînait par terre ; il manqua tomber dessus et le ramassa. Mme Dambreuse disparaissait ensevelie dans le grand fauteuil.

— “Eh bien ? Où êtes-vous donc ? qu'y a-t-il” Elle se leva d'un bond.

— “Ce qu'il y a ? Je suis ruinée, ruinée ! entends-tu ?” M. Adolphe Langlois, le notaire, l'avait fait venir en son étude, et lui avait communiqué un testament, écrit par son mari, avant leur mariage. Il léguait tout à Cécile ; et l'autre testament était perdu. Frédéric devint très pâle. Sans doute elle avait mal cherché ?

— “Mais regarde donc !” dit Mme Dambreuse, en lui montrant l'appartement.

Les deux coffres-forts bâillaient, défoncés à coups de merlin ; et elle avait retourné le pupitre, fouillé les placards, secoué les paillassons, quand tout à coup, poussant un cri aigu, elle se précipita dans un angle où elle venait d’apercevoir une petite boîte à serrure de cuivre ; elle l’ouvrit, rien !

— “Ah ! le misérable ! Moi qui l’ai soigné avec tant de dévouement !”

Puis elle éclata en sanglots.

— “Il est peut-être ailleurs ?” dit Frédéric.

— “Eh non ! Il était là dans ce coffre-fort. Je l’ai vu dernièrement. Il est brûlé j’en suis certaine !”

Un jour, au commencement de sa maladie, M. Dambreuse était descendu pour donner des signatures.

— “C’est alors qu’il aura fait le coup !”

Et elle retomba sur une chaise, anéantie. Une mère en deuil n’est pas plus lamentable près d’un berceau vide que ne l’était Mme Dambreuse devant les coffres-forts béants. Enfin sa douleur — malgré la bassesse du motif — semblait tellement profonde, qu’il tâcha de la consoler en lui disant qu’après tout, elle n’était pas réduite à la misère.

— “C’est la misère, puisque je ne peux pas t’offrir une grande fortune !”

Elle n’avait plus que trente mille livres de rente, sans compter l’hôtel, qui en valait de dix-huit à vingt, peut-être.

Bien que ce fût de l’opulence pour Frédéric, il n’en ressentait pas moins une déception. Adieu ses rêves, et toute la grande vie qu’il aurait menée ! L’honneur le forçait à épouser Mme Dambreuse. Il réfléchit une minute ; puis, d’un air tendre :

— “J’aurai toujours ta personne !”

Elle se jeta dans ses bras ; et il la serra contre sa poitrine, avec un attendrissement où il y avait un peu d’admiration pour lui-même. Mme Dambreuse, dont les larmes ne coulaient plus, releva sa figure, toute rayonnante de bonheur, et, lui prenant la main :

— “Ah ! je n’ai jamais douté de toi ! J’y comptais !”

Cette certitude anticipée de ce qu’il regardait comme une belle action déplut au jeune homme.

Puis elle l’emmena dans sa chambre, et ils firent des projets. Frédéric devait songer maintenant à se pousser. Elle lui donna même sur sa candidature d’admirables conseils.

Le premier point était de savoir deux ou trois phrases d’économie politique. Il fallait prendre une spécialité, comme les haras par exemple, écrire plusieurs mémoires sur une question d’intérêt local, avoir toujours à sa disposition des bureaux de poste ou de tabac, rendre une foule de petits services. M. Dambreuse s’était montré là-dessus un vrai modèle. Ainsi, une fois à la campagne, il avait fait arrêter son char à bancs, plein d’amis, devant l’échoppe d’un savetier, avait pris pour ses hôtes douze paires de chaussures, et pour lui des bottes épouvantables — qu’il eut même l’héroïsme de porter durant quinze jours. Cette anecdote les rendit gais. Elle en conta d’autres, et avec un revif de grâce, de jeunesse et d’esprit.

Elle approuva son idée d’un voyage immédiat à Nogent. Leurs adieux furent tendres ; puis, sur le seuil, elle murmura encore une fois :

— “Tu m’aimes, n’est-ce pas ?”

— “Eternellement !” répondit-il.

Un commissionnaire l’attendait chez lui avec un mot au crayon, le prévenant que Rosanette allait accoucher. Il avait eu tant d’occupation depuis quelques jours, qu’il n’y pensait plus. Elle s’était mise dans un établissement spécial, à Chaillot.

Frédéric prit un fiacre et partit.

Au coin de la rue de Marbeuf, il lut sur une planche en grosses lettres : — “Maison de santé et d’accouchement tenue par Mme Alessandri, sage-femme de première classe, ex-élève de la Maternité, auteur de divers ouvrages, etc.” Puis, au milieu de la rue, sur la porte, une petite porte bâtarde, l’enseigne répétait (sans le mot accouchement) : “Maison de santé de Mme Alessandri”, avec tous ses titres.

Frédéric donna un coup de marteau.

Une femme de chambre, à tournure de soubrette, l’introduisit dans le salon, orné d’une table en acajou, de fauteuils en velours grenat, et d’une pendule sous globe.

Presque aussitôt, Madame parut. C’était une grande brune de quarante ans, la taille mince, de beaux yeux, l’usage du monde. Elle apprit à Frédéric l’heureuse délivrance de la mère, et le fit monter dans sa chambre.

Rosanette se mit à sourire ineffablement, et, comme submergée sous les flots d’amour qui l’étouffaient, elle dit d’une voix basse :

— “Un garçon, là, là !” en désignant près de son lit une barcelonnette.

Il écarta les rideaux, et aperçut, au milieu des linges, quelque chose d’un rouge jaunâtre, extrêmement ridé, qui sentait mauvais et vagissait.

— “Embrasse-le !”

Il répondit, pour cacher sa répugnance :

— “Mais j’ai peur de lui faire mal ?”

— “Non ! non !”

Alors, il baisa, du bout des lèvres, son enfant.

— “Comme il te ressemble !”

Et, de ses deux bras faibles, elle se suspendit à son cou, avec une effusion de sentiment qu’il n’avait jamais vue.

Le souvenir de Mme Dambreuse lui revint. Il se reprocha comme une monstruosité de trahir ce pauvre être, qui aimait et souffrait dans toute la franchise de sa nature. Pendant plusieurs jours, il lui tint compagnie jusqu’au soir.

Elle se trouvait heureuse dans cette maison discrète les volets de la façade restaient même constamment fermés ; sa chambre tendue en perse claire, donnait sur un grand jardin ; Mme Alessandri, dont le seul défaut était de citer comme intimes les médecins illustres, l’entourait d’attentions ; ses compagnes, presque toutes des demoiselles de la province, s’ennuyaient beaucoup, n’ayant personne qui vînt les voir ; Rosanette s’aperçut qu’on l’enviait, et le dit à Frédéric avec fierté. Il fallait parler bas, cependant ; les cloisons étaient minces et tout le monde se tenait aux écoutes, malgré le bruit continuel des pianos.

Il allait enfin partir pour Nogent, quand il reçut une lettre de Deslauriers.

Deux candidats nouveaux se présentaient, l’un conservateur, l’autre rouge ; un troisième, quel qu’il fût, n’avait pas de chances. C’était la faute de Frédéric ; il avait laissé passer le bon moment, il aurait dû venir plus tôt, se remuer. “On ne t’a même pas vu aux comices agricoles ! — L’avocat le blâmait de n’avoir aucune attache dans les journaux.” Ah ! si tu avais suivi autrefois mes conseils ! Si nous avions une feuille publique à nous ! " Il insistait là-dessus. Du reste, beaucoup de personnes qui auraient voté en sa faveur, par considération pour M. Dambreuse, l’abandonneraient maintenant. Deslauriers était de ceux-là. N’ayant plus rien à attendre du capitaliste, il lâchait son protégé.

Frédéric porta sa lettre à Mme Dambreuse.

— “Tu n’as donc pas été à Nogent ?” dit-elle.

— “Pourquoi ?”

— “C’est que j’ai vu Deslauriers il y a trois jours.” Sachant la mort de son mari, l’avocat était venu rapporter des notes sur les houilles et lui offrir ses services comme homme d’affaires. Cela parut étrange à Frédéric ; et que faisait son ami, là-bas ?

Mme Dambreuse voulut savoir l’emploi de son temps depuis leur séparation.

— “J’ai été malade”, répondit-il.

— “Tu aurais dû me prévenir, au moins.”

— “Oh ! cela n’en valait pas la peine” ; d’ailleurs, il avait eu une foule de dérangements, des rendez-vous, des visites.

Il mena dès lors une existence double, couchant religieusement chez la Maréchale et passant l’après-midi chez Mme Dambreuse, si bien qu’il lui restait à peine, au milieu de la journée, une heure de liberté.

L’enfant était à la campagne, à Andilly. On allait le voir toutes les semaines.

La maison de la nourrice se trouvait sur la hauteur du village, au fond d’une petite cour, sombre comme un puits, avec de la paille par terre, des poules çà et là, une charrette à légumes sous le hangar. Rosanette commençait par baiser frénétiquement son poupon ; et, prise d’une sorte de délire, allait et venait, essayait de traire la chèvre, mangeait du gros pain, aspirait l’odeur du fumier, voulait en mettre un peu dans son mouchoir.

Puis ils faisaient de grandes promenades ; elle entrait chez les pépiniéristes, arrachait les branches de lilas qui pendaient en dehors des murs, criait : “Hue, bourriquet !” aux ânes traînant une carriole, s’arrêtait à contempler, par la grille, l’intérieur des beaux jardins ; ou bien la nourrice prenait l’enfant, on le posait à l’ombre sous un noyer ; et les deux femmes débitaient, pendant des heures, d’assommantes niaiseries.

Frédéric, près d’elles, contemplait les carrés de vignes sur les pentes du terrain, avec la touffe d’un arbre de place en place, les sentiers poudreux pareils à des rubans grisâtres, les maisons étalant dans la verdure des taches blanches et rouges ; et, quelquefois, la fumée d’une locomotive allongeait horizontalement, au pied des collines couvertes de feuillages, comme une gigantesque plume d’autruche dont le bout léger s’envolait.

Puis ses yeux retombaient sur son fils. Il se le figurait jeune homme, il en ferait son compagnon ; mais ce serait peut-être un sot, un malheureux à coup sûr. L’illégalité de sa naissance l’opprimerait toujours ; mieux aurait valu pour lui ne pas naître, et Frédéric murmurait : “Pauvre enfant !” le cœur gonflé d’une incompréhensible tristesse.

Souvent, ils manquaient le dernier départ. Alors, Mme Dambreuse le grondait de son inexactitude. Il lui faisait une histoire.

Il fallait en inventer aussi pour Rosanette. Elle ne comprenait pas à quoi il employait toutes ses soirées ; et, quand on envoyait chez lui, il n’y était jamais ! Un jour, comme il s’y trouvait, elles apparurent presque à la fois. Il fit sortir la Maréchale et cacha Mme Dambreuse, en disant que sa mère allait arriver.

Bientôt ces mensonges le divertirent ; il répétait à l’une le serment qu’il venait de faire à l’autre, leur envoyait deux bouquets semblables, leur écrivait en même temps, puis établissait entre elles des comparaisons ; — il y en avait une troisième toujours présente à sa pensée. L’impossibilité de l’avoir le justifiait de ses perfidies, qui avivaient le plaisir, en y mettant de l’alternance ; et plus il avait trompé n’importe laquelle des deux, plus elle l’aimait, comme si leurs amours se fussent échauffés réciproquement et que, dans une sorte d’émulation, chacune eût voulu lui faire oublier l’autre.

— “Admire ma confiance !” lui dit un jour Mme Dambreuse, en dépliant un papier, où on la prévenait que M. Moreau vivait conjugalement avec une certaine Rose Bron. “Est-ce la demoiselle des courses, par hasard ?”

— “Quelle absurdité !” reprit-il. “Laisse-moi voir.”

La lettre, écrite en caractères romains, n’était pas signée. Mme Dambreuse, au début, avait toléré cette maîtresse qui couvrait leur adultère. Mais, sa passion devenant plus forte, elle avait exigé une rupture, chose faite depuis longtemps, selon Frédéric ; et, quand il eut fini ses protestations, elle répliqua, tout en clignant ses paupières où brillait un regard pareil à la pointe d’un stylet sous de la mousseline :

— “Eh bien, et l’autre ?”

— “Quelle autre ?”

— “La femme du faïencier !”

Il leva les épaules dédaigneusement. Elle n’insista pas.

Mais, un mois plus tard, comme ils parlaient d’honneur et de loyauté, et qu’il vantait la sienne (d’une manière incidente, par précaution), elle lui dit :

— “C’est vrai, tu es honnête, tu n’y retournes plus.”

Frédéric, qui pensait à la Maréchale, balbutia :

— “Où donc ?”

— “Chez Mme Arnoux.”

Il la supplia de lui avouer d’où elle tenait ce renseignement. C’était par sa couturière en second, Mme Regimbart.

Ainsi, elle connaissait sa vie, et lui ne savait rien de la sienne !

Cependant, il avait découvert dans son cabinet de toilette la miniature d’un monsieur à longues moustaches : était-ce le même sur lequel on lui avait conté autrefois une vague histoire de suicide ? Mais, il n’existait aucun moyen d’en savoir davantage ! A quoi bon, du reste ? Les cœurs des femmes sont comme ces petits meubles à secret, pleins de tiroirs emboîtés les uns dans les autres ; on se donne du mal, on se casse les ongles, et on trouve au fond quelque fleur desséchée, des brins de poussière — ou le vide ! Et puis il craignait peut-être d’en trop apprendre.

Elle lui faisait refuser les invitations où elle ne pouvait se rendre avec lui, le tenait à ses côtés, avait peur de le perdre ; et, malgré cette union chaque jour plus grande, tout à coup des abîmes se découvraient entre eux, à propos de choses insignifiantes, l’appréciation d’une personne, d’une œuvre d’art.

Elle avait une façon de jouer du piano, correcte et dure. Son spiritualisme (Mme Dambreuse croyait à la transmigration des âmes dans les étoiles) ne l’empêchait pas de tenir sa caisse admirablement. Elle était hautaine avec ses gens ; ses yeux restaient secs devant les haillons des pauvres. Un égoïsme ingénu éclatait dans ses locutions ordinaires : “Qu’est-ce que cela me fait ? je serais bien bonne ! est-ce que j’ai besoin !” et mille petites actions inanalysables, odieuses. Elle aurait écouté derrière les portes ; elle devait mentir à son confesseur. Par esprit de domination, elle voulut que Frédéric l’accompagnât le dimanche à l’église. Il obéit, et porta le livre.

La perte de son héritage l’avait considérablement changée. Ces marques d’un chagrin qu’on attribuait à la mort de M. Dambreuse la rendaient intéressante, et, comme autrefois, elle recevait beaucoup de monde. Depuis l’insuccès électoral de Frédéric, elle ambitionnait pour eux deux une légation en Allemagne, aussi la première chose à faire était de se soumettre aux idées régnantes.

Les uns désiraient l’Empire, d’autres les Orléans, d’autres le comte de Chambord ; mais tous s’accordaient sur l’urgence de la décentralisation, et plusieurs moyens étaient proposés, tels que ceux-ci : couper Paris en une foule de grandes rues afin d’y établir des villages, transférer à Versailles le siège du gouvernement, mettre à Bourges les écoles, supprimer les bibliothèques, confier tout aux généraux de division ; — et on exaltait les campagnes, l’homme illettré ayant naturellement plus de sens que les autres ! Les haines foisonnaient : haine contre les instituteurs primaires et contre les marchands de vin, contre les classes de philosophie, contre les cours d’histoire, contre les romans, les gilets rouges, les barbes longues, contre toute indépendance, toute manifestation individuelle ; car il fallait “relever le principe d’autorité”, qu’elle s’exerçât au nom de n’importe qui, qu’elle vînt de n’importe où, pourvu que ce fût la Force, l’Autorité ! Les conservateurs parlaient maintenant comme Sénécal. Frédéric ne comprenait plus ; et il retrouvait chez son ancienne maîtresse les mêmes propos, débités par les mêmes hommes !

Les salons des filles (c’est de ce temps-là que date leur importance) étaient un terrain neutre, où les réactionnaires de bords différents se rencontraient. Hussonnet, qui se livrait au dénigrement des gloires contemporaines (bonne chose pour la restauration de l’Ordre), inspira l’envie à Rosanette d’avoir, comme une autre, ses soirées ; il en ferait des comptes rendus ; et il amena d’abord un homme sérieux, Fumichon ; puis parurent Nonancourt, M. de Grémonville, le sieur de Larsillois, ex-préfet, et Cisy, qui était maintenant agronome, bas breton et plus que jamais chrétien.

Il venait, en outre, d’anciens amants de la Maréchale, tels que le baron de Comaing, le comte de Jumillac et quelques autres ; la liberté de leurs allures blessait Frédéric.

Afin de se poser comme le maître, il augmenta le train de la maison. Alors, on prit un groom, on changea de logement, et on eut un mobilier nouveau. Ces dépenses étaient utiles pour faire paraître son mariage moins disproportionné à sa fortune. Aussi diminuait-elle effroyablement et Rosanette ne comprenait rien à tout cela !

Bourgeoise déclassée elle adorait la vie de ménage, un petit intérieur paisible. Cependant, elle était contente d’avoir “un jour” ; disait : “Ces femmes-là !” en parlant de ses pareilles — , voulait être “une dame du monde”, s’en croyait une. Elle le pria de ne plus fumer dans le salon, essaya de lui faire faire maigre, par bon genre.

Elle mentait à son rôle enfin, car elle devenait sérieuse, et même, avant de se coucher, montrait toujours un peu de mélancolie, comme il y a des cyprès à la porte d’un cabaret.

Il en découvrit la cause : elle rêvait mariage, — elle aussi ! Frédéric en fut exaspéré. D’ailleurs, il se rappelait son apparition chez Mme Arnoux, et puis il lui gardait rancune pour sa longue résistance.

Il n’en cherchait pas moins quels avaient été ses amants. Elle les niait tous. Une sorte de jalousie l’envahit. Il s’irrita des cadeaux qu’elle avait reçus, qu’elle recevait et, à mesure que le fond même de sa personne l’agaçait davantage, un goût des sens âpre et bestial l’entraînait vers elle, illusions d’une minute qui se résolvaient en haine.

Ses paroles, sa voix, son sourire, tout vint à lui déplaire, ses regards surtout, cet oeil de femme éternellement limpide et inepte. Il s’en trouvait tellement excédé quelquefois, qu’il l’aurait vue mourir sans émotion. Mais comment se fâcher ? Elle était d’une douceur désespérante.

Deslauriers reparut, et expliqua son séjour à Nogent en disant qu’il y marchandait une étude d’avoué. Frédéric fut heureux de le revoir ; c’était quelqu’un ! Il le mit en tiers dans la compagnie.

L’avocat dînait chez eux de temps à autre, et, quand il s’élevait de petites contestations, se déclarait toujours pour Rosanette, si bien qu’une fois Frédéric lui dit :

— " Eh ! couche avec elle si ça t’amuse tant il souhaitait un hasard qui l’en débarrassât.

Vers le milieu du mois de juin, elle reçut un commandement où maître Athanase Gautherot, huissier, lui enjoignait de solder quatre mille francs dus à la demoiselle Clémence Vatnaz ; sinon, qu’il viendrait le lendemain la saisir.

En effet, des quatre billets autrefois souscrits un seul était payé ; — l’argent qu’elle avait pu avoir depuis lors ayant passé à d’autres besoins.

Elle courut chez Arnoux. Il habitait le faubourg Saint-Germain, et le portier ignorait la rue. Elle se transporta chez plusieurs amis, ne trouva personne, et rentra désespérée. Elle ne voulait rien dire à Frédéric, tremblant que cette nouvelle histoire ne fît du tort à son mariage.

Le lendemain matin, Me Athanase Gautherot se présenta, flanqué de deux acolytes, l’un blême, à figure chafouine, l’air dévoré d’envie, l’autre portant un faux-col et des sous-pieds très tendus, avec un délot de taffetas noir à l’index ; — et tous deux, ignoblement sales, avaient des cols gras, des manches de redingote trop courtes.

Leur patron, un fort bel homme, au contraire, commença par s’excuser de sa mission pénible, tout en regardant l’appartement, “plein de jolies choses, ma parole d’honneur !” Il ajouta “outre celles qu’on ne peut saisir” . Sur un geste, les deux recors disparurent.

Alors, ses compliments redoublèrent. Pouvait-on croire qu’une personne aussi… charmante n’eût pas d’ami sérieux ! Une vente par autorité de justice était un véritable malheur ! On ne s’en relève jamais. Il tâcha de l’effrayer ; puis, la voyant émue, prit subitement un ton paterne. Il connaissait le monde, il avait eu affaire à toutes ces dames ; et, en les nommant, il examinait les cadres sur les murs. C’étaient d’anciens tableaux du brave Arnoux, des esquisses de Sombaz, des aquarelles de Burieu, trois paysages de Dittmer. Rosanette n’en savait pas le prix, évidemment. Maître Gautherot se tourna vers elle :

— “Tenez ! Pour vous montrer que je suis un bon garçon, faisons une chose : cédez-moi ces Dittmer-là ! et je paye tout. Est-ce convenu ?”

A ce moment, Frédéric, que Delphine avait instruit dans l’antichambre et qui venait de voir les deux praticiens, entra le chapeau sur la tête, d’un air brutal. Maître Gautherot reprit sa dignité ; et, comme la porte était restée ouverte :

— “Allons, messieurs, écrivez ! Dans la seconde pièce, nous disons : une table de chêne, avec ses deux rallonges, deux buffets…”

Frédéric l’arrêta, demandant s’il n’y avait pas quelque moyen d’empêcher la saisie ?

— “Oh ! parfaitement ! Qui a payé les meubles ?”

— “Moi.”

— “Eh bien, formulez une revendication ; c’est toujours du temps que vous aurez devant vous.”

Maître Gautherot acheva vivement ses écritures, et, dans le même procès-verbal, assigna en référé Mlle Bron, puis se retira.

Frédéric ne fit pas un reproche. Il contemplait, sur le tapis, les traces de boue laissées par les chaussures des praticiens ; et, se parlant à lui-même :

— “Il va falloir chercher de l’argent !”

— “Ah ! mon Dieu, que je suis bête !” dit la Maréchale.

Elle fouilla dans un tiroir, prit une lettre, et s’en alla vivement à la Société d’éclairage du Languedoc, afin d’obtenir le transfert de ses actions.

Elle revint une heure après. Les titres étaient vendus à un autre ! Le commis lui avait répondu en examinant son papier, la promesse écrite par Arnoux : “Cet acte ne vous constitue nullement propriétaire. La Compagnie ne connaît pas cela.” Bref, il l’avait congédiée, elle en suffoquait ; et Frédéric devait se rendre à l’instant même chez Arnoux, pour éclaircir la chose.

Mais Arnoux croirait, peut-être, qu’il venait pour recouvrer indirectement les quinze mille francs de son hypothèque perdue ; et puis cette réclamation à un homme qui avait été l’amant de sa maîtresse lui semblait une turpitude. Choisissant un moyen terme, il alla prendre à l’hôtel Dambreuse l’adresse de Mme Regimbart, envoya chez elle un commissionnaire, et connut ainsi le café que hantait maintenant le Citoyen.

C’était un petit café sur la place de la Bastille, où il se tenait toute la journée, dans le coin de droite, au fond, ne bougeant pas plus que s’il avait fait partie de l’immeuble.

Après avoir passé successivement par la demi-tasse, le grog, le bischof, le vin chaud et même l’eau rougie, il était revenu à la bière ; et, de demi-heure en demi-heure, laissait tomber ce mot : “Bock !” ayant réduit son langage à l’indispensable. Frédéric lui demanda s’il voyait quelquefois Arnoux.

— “Non !”

— “Tiens, pourquoi ?”

— “Un imbécile !”

La politique, peut-être, les séparait, et Frédéric crut bien faire de s’informer de Compain.

— “Quelle brute !” dit Regimbart.

— “Comment cela ?”

— “Sa tête de veau !”

— “Ah ! apprenez-moi ce que c’est que la tête de veau !”

Regimbart eut un sourire de pitié.

— “Des bêtises !”

Frédéric, après un long silence, reprit :

— “Il a donc changé de logement ?”

— “Qui ?”

— “Arnoux !”

— “Oui : rue de Fleurus !”

— “Quel numéro ?”

— “Est-ce que je fréquente les jésuites ?”

— “Comment, jésuites !”

Le Citoyen répondit, furieux :

— “Avec l’argent d’un patriote que je lui ai fait connaître, ce cochon-là s’est établi marchand de chapelets !”

— “Pas possible !”

— “Allez-y voir !”

Rien de plus vrai ; Arnoux, affaibli par une attaque, avait tourné à la religion ; d’ailleurs, “il avait toujours eu un fond de religion”, et (avec l’alliage de mercantilisme et d’ingénuité qui lui était naturel), pour faire son salut et sa fortune, il s’était mis dans le commerce des objets religieux.

Frédéric n’eut pas de mal à découvrir son établissement, dont l’enseigne portait : “Aux arts gothiques. Restauration du culte. — Ornements d’église. — Sculpture polychrome. — Encens des rois mages, etc.”

Aux deux coins de la vitrine s’élevaient deux statues en bois, bariolées d’or, de cinabre et d’azur ; un saint Jean-Baptiste avec sa peau de mouton, et une sainte Geneviève, des roses dans son tablier et une quenouille sous son bras ; puis des groupes en plâtre ; une bonne sœur instruisant une petite fille, une mère à genoux près d’une couchette, trois collégiens devant la sainte table. Le plus joli était une manière de chalet figurant l’intérieur de la crèche avec l’âne, le bœuf et l’enfant Jésus étalé sur de la paille, de la vraie paille. Du haut en bas des étagères, on voyait des médailles à la douzaine, des chapelets de toute espèce, des bénitiers en forme de coquille, et les portraits des gloires ecclésiastiques, parmi lesquelles brillaient Mgr Affre et notre Saint-Père, tous deux souriant.

Arnoux, à son comptoir, sommeillait la tête basse. Il était prodigieusement vieilli, avait même autour des tempes une couronne de boutons roses, et le reflet des croix d’or frappées par le soleil tombait dessus.

Frédéric, devant cette décadence, fut pris de tristesse. Par dévouement pour la Maréchale, il se résigna cependant, et il s’avançait ; au fond de la boutique, Mme Arnoux parut ; alors, il tourna les talons.

— “Je ne l’ai pas trouvé”, dit-il en rentrant.

Et il eut beau reprendre qu’il allait écrire, tout de suite, à son notaire du Havre pour avoir de l’argent, Rosanette s’emporta. On n’avait jamais vu un homme si faible, si mollasse ; pendant qu’elle endurait mille privations, les autres se gobergeaient.

Frédéric songeait à la pauvre Mme Arnoux, se figurant la médiocrité navrante de son intérieur. Il s’était mis au secrétaire et, comme la voix aigre de Rosanette continuait :

— “Ah au nom du ciel, tais-toi !”

— “Vas-tu les défendre, par hasard ?”

— “Eh bien, oui !” s’écria-t-il, “car d’où vient cet acharnement ?”

— “Mais toi, pourquoi ne veux-tu pas qu’ils payent ? C’est dans la peur d’affliger ton ancienne, avoue-le !” Il eut envie de l’assommer avec la pendule ; les paroles lui manquèrent. Il se tut. Rosanette, tout en marchant dans la chambre, ajouta :

— “Je vais lui flanquer un procès, à ton Arnoux. Oh je n’ai pas besoin de toi !” et, pinçant les lèvres Je consulterai. "

Trois jours après, Delphine entra brusquement.

— “Madame, madame, il y a là un homme avec un pot de colle qui me fait peur.”

Rosanette passa dans la cuisine, et vit un chenapan, la face criblée de petite vérole, paralytique d’un bras, aux trois quarts ivre et bredouillant.

C’était l’afficheur de maître Gautherot. L’opposition à la saisie ayant été repoussée, la vente, naturellement, s’ensuivait.

Pour sa peine d’avoir monté l’escalier, il réclama d’abord un petit verre ; — puis il implora une autre faveur, à savoir des billets de spectacle, croyant que Madame était une actrice. Il fut ensuite plusieurs minutes à faire des clignements d’yeux incompréhensibles ; enfin, il déclara que, moyennant quarante sous, il déchirerait les coins de l’affiche déjà posée en bas, contre la porte. Rosanette s’y trouvait désignée par son nom, rigueur exceptionnelle qui marquait toute la haine de la Vatnaz.

Elle avait été sensible autrefois, et même, dans une peine de cœur, avait écrit à Béranger pour en obtenir un conseil. Mais elle s’était aigrie sous les bourrasques de l’existence, ayant, tour à tour, donné des leçons de piano, présidé une table d’hôte, collaboré à des journaux de modes, sous-loué des appartements, fait le trafic des dentelles dans le monde des femmes légères ; où ses relations lui permirent d’obliger beaucoup de personnes, Arnoux entre autres. Elle avait travaillé auparavant dans une maison de commerce.

Elle y soldait les ouvrières ; et il y avait pour chacune d’elles deux livres, dont l’un restait toujours entre ses mains. Dussardier, qui tenait par obligeance celui d’une nommée Hortense Baslin, se présenta un jour à la caisse au moment où Mlle Vatnaz apportait le compte de cette fille, 1.682 francs, que le caissier lui paya. Or, la veille même, Dussardier n’en avait inscrit que 1.082 sur le livre de la Baslin. Il le redemanda sous un prétexte ; puis, voulant ensevelir cette histoire de vol, lui conta qu’il l’avait perdu. L’ouvrière redit naïvement son mensonge à Mlle Vatnaz ; celle-ci, pour en avoir le cœur net, d’un air indifférent, vint en parler au brave commis. Il se contenta de répondre : “Je l’ai brûlé” ; ce fut tout. Elle quitta la maison peu de temps après, sans croire à l’anéantissement du livre, et s’imaginant que Dussardier le gardait.

A la nouvelle de sa blessure, elle était accourue chez lui dans l’intention de le reprendre. Puis, n’ayant rien découvert, malgré les perquisitions les plus fines, elle avait été saisie de respect, et bientôt d’amour, pour ce garçon, si loyal, si doux, si héroïque et si fort ! Une pareille bonne fortune à son âge était inespérée. Elle se jeta dessus avec un appétit d’ogresse ; — et elle en avait abandonné la littérature, le socialisme, “les doctrines consolantes et les utopies généreuses”, le cours qu’elle professait sur la Désubalternisation de la femme, tout, Delmar lui-même ; enfin, elle offrit à Dussardier de s’unir par un mariage.

Bien qu’elle fût sa maîtresse, il n’en était nullement amoureux. D’ailleurs, il n’avait pas oublié son vol. Puis elle était trop riche. Il la refusa. Alors, elle lui dit, en pleurant, les rêves qu’elle avait faits : c’était d’avoir à eux deux un magasin de confection. Elle possédait les premiers fonds indispensables, qui s’augmenteraient de quatre mille francs la semaine prochaine ; et elle narra ses poursuites contre la Maréchale.

Dussardier en fut chagrin, à cause de son ami. Il se rappelait le porte-cigares offert au corps de garde, les soirs du quai Napoléon, tant de bonnes causeries, de livres prêtés, les mille complaisances de Frédéric. Il pria la Vatnaz de se désister.

Elle le railla de sa bonhomie, en manifestant contre Rosanette une exécration incompréhensible ; elle ne souhaitait même la fortune que pour l’écraser plus tard avec son carrosse.

Ces abîmes de noirceur effrayèrent Dussardier ; et, quand il sut positivement le jour de la vente, il sortit. Dès le lendemain matin, il entrait chez Frédéric avec une contenance embarrassée.

— “J’ai des excuses à vous faire.”

— “De quoi donc ?”

— “Vous devez me prendre pour un ingrat, moi dont elle est…” Il balbutiait. “Oh ! je ne la verrai plus, je ne serai pas son complice !” Et, l’autre le regardant tout surpris : “Est-ce qu’on ne va pas, dans trois jours, vendre les meubles de votre maîtresse ?”

— “Qui vous a dit cela ?”

— “Elle-même, la Vatnaz ! Mais j’ai peur de vous offenser…”

— “Impossible, cher ami !”

— “Ah ! c’est vrai, vous êtes si bon !”

Et il lui tendit, d’une main discrète, un petit portefeuille de basane.

C’était quatre mille francs, toutes ses économies.

— “Comment ! Ah ! non ! — non !…”

— “Je savais bien que je vous blesserais”, répliqua Dussardier, avec une larme au bord des yeux.

Frédéric lui serra la main ; et le brave garçon reprit d’une voix dolente : — “Acceptez-les Faites-moi ce plaisir-là ! Je suis tellement désespéré ! Est-ce que tout n’est pas fini, d’ailleurs ? — J’avais cru, quand la révolution est arrivée, qu’on serait heureux. Vous rappelez-vous comme c’était beau ! comme on respirait bien Mais nous voilà retombés pire que jamais.”

Et, fixant ses yeux à terre :

— “Maintenant, ils tuent notre République, comme ils ont tué l’autre, la romaine ! et la pauvre Venise, la pauvre Pologne, la pauvre Hongrie ! Quelles abominations ! D’abord, on a abattu les arbres d’e la liberté, puis restreint le droit de suffrage, fermé les clubs, rétabli la censure et livré l'enseignement aux prêtres, en attendant l'Inquisition. Pourquoi pas ? Des conservateurs nous souhaitent bien les Cosaques ! On condamne les journaux quand ils parlent contre la peine de mort, Paris regorge de baïonnettes, seize départements sont en état de siège et l'amnistie qui est encore une fois repoussée"

Il se prit le front à deux mains puis, écartant les bras comme dans une grande détresse

— "Si on tâchait, cependant. Si on était de bonne foi, on pourrait s'entendre ! Mais non ! Les ouvriers ne valent pas mieux que les bourgeois, voyez-vous ! A Elbeuf, dernièrement, ils ont refusé leurs secours dans un incendie. Des misérables traitent Barbès d'aristocrate ! Pour qu'on se moque du peuple, ils veulent nommer à la présidence Nadaud, un maçon, je vous demande un peu ! Et il n'y a pas de moyen ! pas de remède ! Tout le monde est contre nous ! — Moi, je n'ai jamais fait de mai ; et, pourtant, c'est comme un poids qui me pèse sur l'estomac. J'en deviendrai fou, si ça continue. J'ai envie de me faire tuer. Je vous dis que je n'ai pas besoin de mon argent ! Vous me le rendrez, parbleu ! je vous le prête."

Frédéric, que la nécessité contraignait, finit par prendre ses quatre mille francs. Ainsi, du côté de la Vatnaz, ils n'avaient plus d'inquiétude.

Mais Rosanette perdit bientôt son procès contre Arnoux, et, par entêtement, voulait en appeler.

Deslauriers s'exténuait à lui faire comprendre que la promesse d'Arnoux ne constituait ni une donation, ni une cession régulière ; elle n'écoutait même pas, trouvant la loi injuste ; c'est parce qu'elle était une femme, les hommes se soutenaient entre eux ! A la fin, cependant, elle suivit ses conseils.

Il se gênait si peu dans la maison, que, plusieurs fois, il amena Sénécal y dîner. Ce sans-façon déplut à Frédéric, qui lui avançait de l'argent, le faisait même habiller par son tailleur et l'avocat donnait ses vieilles redingotes au socialiste, dont les moyens d'existence étaient inconnus.

Il aurait voulu servir Rosanette, cependant. Un jour qu'elle lui montrait douze actions de la Compagnie du kaolin (cette entreprise qui avait fait condamner Arnoux à trente mille francs), il lui dit :

— "Mais c'est véreux ! c'est superbe !"

Elle avait le droit de l'assigner pour le remboursement de ses créances. Elle prouverait d'abord qu'il était tenu solidairement à payer tout le passif de la Compagnie, puis qu'il avait déclaré comme dettes collectives des dettes personnelles, enfin qu'il avait diverti plusieurs effets à la Société.

— "Tout cela le rend coupable de banqueroute frauduleuse, articles 586 et 587 du Code de commerce ; et nous l'emballerons, soyez-en sûre, ma mignonne.”

Rosanette lui sauta au cou. Il la recommanda le lendemain à son ancien patron, ne pouvant s’occuper lui-même du procès, car il avait besoin à Nogent ; Sénécal lui écrirait, en cas d’urgence.

Ses négociations pour l’achat d’une étude étaient un prétexte. Il passait son temps chez M. Roque, où il avait commencé non seulement par faire l’éloge de leur ami, mais par l’imiter d’allures et de langage autant que possible ; — ce qui lui avait obtenu la confiance de Louise, tandis qu’il gagnait celle de son père en se déchaînant contre Ledru-Rollin.

Si Frédéric ne revenait pas, c’est qu’il fréquentait le grand monde ; et peu à peu Deslauriers leur apprit qu’il aimait quelqu’un, qu’il avait un enfant, qu’il entretenait une créature.

Le désespoir de Louise fut immense, l’indignation de Mme Moreau non moins forte. Elle voyait son fils tourbillonnant vers le fond d’un gouffre vague, était blessée dans sa religion des convenances et en éprouvait comme un déshonneur personnel, quand tout à coup sa physionomie changea. Aux questions qu’on lui faisait sur Frédéric, elle répondait d’un air narquois

— “Il va bien, très bien.”

Elle savait son mariage avec Mme Dambreuse.

L’époque en était fixée ; et même il cherchait comment faire avaler la chose à Rosanette.

Vers le milieu de l’automne, elle gagna son procès relatif aux actions de kaolin. Frédéric l’apprit en rencontrant à sa porte Sénécal, qui sortait de l’audience.

On avait reconnu M. Arnoux complice de toutes les fraudes ; et l’ex-répétiteur avait un tel air de s’en réjouir, que Frédéric l’empêcha d’aller plus loin, en assurant qu’il se chargeait de sa commission près de Rosanette. Il entra chez elle la figure irritée.

— “Eh bien, te voilà contente !”

Mais, sans remarquer ces paroles :

— “Regarde donc !”

Et elle lui montra son enfant couché dans un berceau, près du feu. Elle l’avait trouvé si mal le matin chez sa nourrice, qu’elle l’avait ramené à Paris.

Tous ses membres étaient maigris extraordinairement et ses lèvres couvertes de points blancs, qui faisaient dans l’intérieur de sa bouche comme des caillots de lait.

— “Qu’a dit le médecin ?”

— “Ah ! le médecin ! Il prétend que le voyage a augmenté son… je ne sais plus, un nom en ite… enfin qu’il a le muguet. Connais-tu cela ?”

Frédéric n’hésita pas à répondre :

— “Certainement”, ajoutant que ce n’était rien.

Mais dans la soirée, il fut effrayé par l’aspect débile de l’enfant et le progrès de ces taches blanchâtres, pareilles à de la moisissure, comme si la vie, abandonnant déjà ce pauvre petit corps, n’eût laissé qu’une matière où la végétation poussait. Ses mains étaient froides ; il ne pouvait plus boire, maintenant ; et la nourrice, une autre que le portier avait été prendre au hasard dans un bureau, répétait :

— “Il me paraît bien bas, bien bas !”

Rosanette fut debout toute la nuit.

Le matin, elle alla trouver Frédéric.

— “Viens donc voir. Il ne remue plus.”

En effet, il était mort. Elle le prit, le secoua, l’étreignait en l’appelant des noms les plus doux, le couvrait de baisers et de sanglots, tournait sur elle-même éperdue, s’arrachait les cheveux, poussait des cris et se laissa tomber au bord du divan, où elle restait la bouche ouverte, avec un flot de larmes tombant de ses yeux fixes. Puis une torpeur la gagna, et tout devint tranquille dans l’appartement. Les meubles étaient renversés. Deux ou trois serviettes traînaient. Six heures sonnèrent. La veilleuse s’éteignit.

Frédéric, en regardant tout cela, croyait presque rêver. Son cœur se serrait d’angoisse. Il lui semblait que cette mort n’était qu’un commencement, et qu’il y avait par derrière un malheur plus considérable près de survenir.

Tout à coup Rosanette dit d’une voix tendre :

— “Nous le conserverons, n’est-ce pas ?”

Elle désirait le faire embaumer. Bien des raisons s’y opposaient. La meilleure, selon Frédéric, c’est que la chose était impraticable sur des enfants si jeunes. Un portrait valait mieux. Elle adopta cette idée. Il écrivit un mot à Pellerin, et Delphine courut le porter.

Pellerin arriva promptement, voulant effacer par ce zèle tout souvenir de sa conduite. Il dit d’abord :

— “Pauvre petit ange ! Ah ! mon Dieu, quel malheur !”

Mais, peu à peu (l’artiste en lui l’emportant), il déclara qu’on ne pouvait rien faire avec ces yeux bistrés, cette face livide, que c’était une véritable nature morte, qu’il faudrait beaucoup de talent ; et il murmurait :

— “Oh ! pas commode, pas commode !”

— “Pourvu que ce soit ressemblant”, objecta Rosanette.

— “Eh ! je me moque de la ressemblance ! A bas le Réalisme ! C’est l’esprit qu’on peint ! Laissez-moi ! Je vais tâcher de me figurer ce que ça devait être.”

Il réfléchit, le front dans la main gauche, le coude dans la droite ; puis, tout à coup :

— “Ah ! une idée ! un pastel ! Avec des demi-teintes colorées, passées presque à plat, on peut obtenir un beau modelé, sur les bords seulement.”

Il envoya la femme de chambre chercher sa boîte ; puis, ayant une chaise sous les pieds et une autre près de lui, il commença à jeter de grands traits, aussi calme que s’il eût travaillé d’après la bosse. Il vantait les petits saint Jean de Corrège, l’infante Rose de Velasquez, les chairs lactées de Reynolds, la distinction de Lawrence, et surtout l’enfant aux longs cheveux qui est sur les genoux de lady Gower.

— “D’ailleurs, peut-on trouver rien de plus charmant que ces crapauds-là ! Le type du sublime (Raphaël l’a prouvé par ses madones), c’est peut-être une mère avec son enfant ?”

Rosanette, qui suffoquait, sortit — , et Pellerin dit aussitôt :

— “Eh bien, Arnoux !… vous savez ce qui arrive ?”

— “Non ! Quoi ?”

— “Ça devait finir comme ça, du reste !”

— “Qu’est-ce donc ?”

— “Il est peut-être maintenant… Pardon”

L’artiste se leva pour exhausser la tête du petit cadavre.

— “Vous disiez…” reprit Frédéric.

Et Pellerin, tout en clignant pour mieux prendre ses mesures :

— “Je disais que notre ami Arnoux est peut-être, maintenant, coffré !”

Puis, d’un ton satisfait :

— “Regardez un peu ! Est-ce ça ?”

— “Oui, très bien ! Mais Arnoux ?”

Pellerin déposa son crayon.

— “D’après ce que j’ai pu comprendre, il se trouve poursuivi par un certain Mignot, un intime de Regimbart, une bonne tête, celui-là, hein ? Quel idiot ! figurez-vous qu’un jour…”

— “Eh ! il ne s’agit pas de Regimbart !”

— “C’est vrai. Eh bien, Arnoux, hier au soir, devait trouver douze mille francs, sinon, il était perdu.”

— “Oh ! c’est peut-être exagéré”, dit Frédéric.

— “Pas le moins du monde ! Ça m’avait l’air grave, très grave”

Rosanette, à ce moment, reparut avec des rougeurs sous les paupières, ardentes comme des plaques de fard.

Elle se mit près du carton et regarda. Pellerin fit signe qu’il se taisait à cause d’elle. Mais Frédéric, sans y prendre garde :

— “Cependant, je ne peux pas croire…”

— “Je vous répète que je l’ai rencontré hier”, dit l’artiste, “à sept heures du soir, rue Jacob. Il avait même son passeport, par précaution ; et il parlait de s’embarquer au Havre, lui et toute sa smala.”

— “Comment ! Avec sa femme ?”

— “Sans doute ! Il est trop bon père de famille pour vivre tout seul.”

— “Et vous en êtes sûr ?”

— “Parbleu ! Où voulez-vous qu’il ait trouvé douze mille francs ?”

Frédéric fit deux ou trois tours dans la chambre. Il haletait, se mordait les lèvres, puis saisit son chapeau.

— “Où vas-tu donc ?” dit Rosanette.

Il ne répondit pas, et disparut.

CHAPITRE 5

Il fallait douze mille francs, ou bien il ne reverrait plus Mme Arnoux ; et, jusqu’à présent, un espoir invincible lui était resté. Est-ce qu’elle ne faisait pas comme la substance de son cœur, le fond même de sa vie ? Il fut pendant quelques minutes à chanceler sur le trottoir, se rongeant d’angoisses, heureux néanmoins de n’être plus chez l’autre.

Où avoir de l’argent ? Frédéric savait par lui-même combien il est difficile d’en obtenir tout de suite, à n’importe quel prix. Une seule personne pouvait l’aider, Mme Dambreuse. Elle gardait toujours dans son secrétaire plusieurs billets de banque. Il alla chez elle ; et, d’un ton hardi : — “As-tu douze mille francs à me prêter ?”

— “Pourquoi ?”

C’était le secret d’un autre. Elle voulait le connaître. Il ne céda pas. Tous deux s’obstinaient. Enfin, elle déclara ne rien donner, avant de savoir dans quel but. Frédéric devint très rouge. Un de ses camarades avait commis un vol. La somme devait être restituée aujourd’hui même.

— “Tu l’appelles ? Son nom ? Voyons, son nom ?”

— “Dussardier !”

Et il se jeta à ses genoux, en la suppliant de n’en rien dire.

— “Quelle idée as-tu de moi ?” reprit Mme Dambreuse. “On croirait que tu es le coupable. Finis donc tes airs tragiques ! Tiens, les voilà ! et grand bien lui fasse !”

Il courut chez Arnoux. Le marchand n’était pas dans sa boutique. Mais il logeait toujours rue Paradis, car il possédait deux domiciles.

Rue Paradis, le portier jura que M. Arnoux était absent depuis la veille ; quant à Madame, il n’osait rien dire ; et Frédéric, ayant monté l’escalier comme une flèche, colla son oreille contre la serrure. Enfin, on ouvrit. Madame était partie avec Monsieur. La bonne ignorait quand ils reviendraient ; ses gages étaient payés ; elle-même s’en allait.

Tout à coup un craquement de porte se fit entendre.

— “Mais il y a quelqu’un ?”

— “Oh ! non, monsieur ! C’est le vent.”

Alors, il se retira. N’importe, une disparition si prompte avait quelque chose d’inexplicable.

Regimbart, étant l’intime de Mignot, pouvait peut-être l’éclairer ? Et Frédéric se fit conduire chez lui, à Montmartre, rue de l’Empereur.

Sa maison était flanquée d’un jardinet, clos par une grille que bouchaient des plaques de fer. Un perron de trois marches relevait la façade blanche ; et en passant sur le trottoir, on apercevait les deux pièces du rez-de-chaussée, dont la première était un salon avec des robes partout sur les meubles, et la seconde l’atelier où se tenaient les ouvrières de Mme Regimbart.

Toutes étaient convaincues que Monsieur avait de grandes occupations, de grandes relations, que c’était un homme complètement hors ligne. Quand il traversait le couloir, avec son chapeau à bords retroussés, sa longue figure sérieuse et sa redingote verte, elles en interrompaient leur besogne. D’ailleurs, il ne manquait pas de leur adresser toujours quelque mot d’encouragement, une politesse sous forme de sentence et, plus tard, dans leur ménage, elles se trouvaient malheureuses, parce qu’elles l’avaient gardé pour idéal.

Aucune cependant ne l’aimait comme Mme Regimbart, petite personne intelligente qui le faisait vivre avec son métier.

Dès que M. Moreau eut dit son nom, elle vint prestement le recevoir, sachant par les domestiques ce qu’il était à Mme Dambreuse. Son mari “rentrait à l’instant même” ; et Frédéric tout en la suivant, admira la tenue du logis et la profusion de toile cirée qu’il y avait. Puis il attendit quelques minutes dans une manière de bureau, où le Citoyen se retirait pour penser.

Son accueil fut moins rébarbatif que d’habitude.

Il conta l’histoire d’Arnoux. L’ex-fabricant de faïences avait enguirlandé Mignot, un patriote, possesseur de cent actions du Siècle, en lui démontrant qu’il fallait, au point de vue démocratique, changer la gérance et la rédaction du journal ; et, sous prétexte de faire triompher son avis dans la prochaine assemblée des actionnaires, il lui avait demandé cinquante actions, en disant qu’il les repasserait à des amis sûrs, lesquels appuieraient son vote ; Mignot n’aurait aucune responsabilité, ne se fâcherait avec personne ; puis, le succès obtenu, il lui ferait avoir dans l’administration une bonne place, de cinq à six mille francs pour le moins. Les actions avaient été livrées. Mais Arnoux, tout de suite, les avait vendues ; et, avec l’argent, s’était associé à un marchand d’objets religieux. Là-dessus, réclamations de Mignot, lanternements d’Arnoux ; enfin, le patriote l’avait menacé d’une plainte en escroquerie, s’il ne restituait ses titres ou la somme équivalente : cinquante mille francs.

Frédéric eut l’air désespéré.

— “Ce n’est pas tout”, dit le Citoyen. “Mignot, qui est un brave homme, s’est rabattu sur le quart. Nouvelles promesses de l’autre, nouvelles farces naturellement. Bref, avant-hier matin, Mignot l’a sommé d’avoir à lui rendre dans les vingt-quatre heures sans préjudice du reste, douze mille francs.”

— “Mais je les ai !” dit Frédéric.

Le Citoyen se retourna lentement :

— “Blagueur !”

— “Pardon ! ils sont dans ma poche. Je les apportais.”

— “Comme vous y allez, vous ! Nom d’un petit bonhomme ! Du reste, il n’est plus temps ; la plainte est déposée, et Arnoux parti.”

— “Seul ?”

— “Non ! avec sa femme. On les a rencontrés à la gare du Havre.”

Frédéric pâlit extraordinairement. Mme Regimbart crut qu’il allait s’évanouir. Il se contint, et même il eut la force d’adresser deux ou trois questions sur l’aventure. Regimbart s’en attristait, tout cela en somme nuisant à la Démocratie. Arnoux avait toujours été sans conduite et sans ordre.

— “Une vraie tête de linotte ! Il brûlait la chandelle par les deux bouts ! Le cotillon l’a perdu ! Ce n’est pas lui que je plains, mais sa pauvre femme !” car le Citoyen admirait les femmes vertueuses, et faisait grand cas de Mme Arnoux. “Elle a dû joliment souffrir !”

Frédéric lui sut gré de cette sympathie ; et, comme s’il en avait reçu un service, il serra sa main avec effusion.

— “As-tu fait toutes les courses nécessaires ?” dit Rosanette en le revoyant.

Il n’en avait pas eu le courage, répondit-il, et avait marché au hasard, dans les rues, pour s’étourdir.

A huit heures, ils passèrent dans la salle à manger ; mais ils restèrent silencieux l’un devant l’autre, poussaient par intervalles un long soupir et renvoyaient leur assiette. Frédéric but de l’eau-de-vie. Il se sentait tout délabré, écrasé, anéanti, n’ayant plus conscience de rien que d’une extrême fatigue.

Elle alla chercher le portrait. Le rouge, le jaune, le vert et l’indigo s’y heurtaient par taches violentes, en faisaient une chose hideuse, presque dérisoire.

D’ailleurs, le petit mort était méconnaissable, maintenant. Le ton violacé de ses lèvres augmentait la blancheur de sa peau ; les narines étaient encore plus minces, les yeux plus caves ; et sa tête reposait sur un oreiller de taffetas bleu, entre des pétales de camélias, des roses d’automne et des violettes ; c’était une idée de la femme de chambre ; elles l’avaient ainsi arrangé toutes les deux, dévotement. La cheminée, couverte d’une housse en guipure, supportait des flambeaux de vermeil espacés par des bouquets de buis bénit ; aux coins, dans les deux vases, des pastilles du sérail brûlaient ; tout cela formait avec le berceau une manière de reposoir ; et Frédéric se rappela sa veillée près de M. Dambreuse.

Tous les quarts d’heure, à peu près, Rosanette ouvrait les rideaux pour contempler son enfant. Elle l’apercevait, dans quelques mois d’ici, commençant à marcher, puis au collège au milieu de la cour, jouant aux barres ; puis à vingt ans, jeune homme ; et toutes ces images, qu’elle se créait, lui faisaient comme autant de fils qu’elle aurait perdus, — l’excès de la douleur multipliant sa maternité.

Frédéric, immobile dans l’autre fauteuil, pensait à Mme Arnoux.

Elle était en chemin de fer, sans doute, le visage au carreau d’un wagon, et regardant la campagne s’enfuir derrière elle du côté de Paris, ou bien sur le pont d’un bateau à vapeur, comme la première fois qu’il l’avait rencontrée ; mais celui-là s’en allait indéfiniment vers des pays d’où elle ne sortirait plus. Puis il la voyait dans une chambre d’auberge, avec des malles par terre, un papier de tenture en lambeaux, la porte qui tremblait au vent. Et après ? que deviendrait-elle ? Institutrice, dame de compagnie, femme de chambre, peut-être ? Elle était livrée à tous les hasards de la misère. Cette ignorance de son sort le torturait. Il aurait dû s’opposer à sa fuite ou partir derrière elle. N’était-il pas son véritable époux ? Et, en songeant qu’il ne la retrouverait jamais, que c’était bien fini, qu’elle était irrévocablement perdue, il sentait comme un déchirement de tout son être ; ses larmes accumulées depuis le matin débordèrent.

Rosanette s’en aperçut.

— “Ah ! tu pleures comme moi ! Tu as du chagrin ?”

— “Oui ! oui ! j’en ai !…”

Il la serra contre son cœur, et tous deux sanglotaient en se tenant embrassés.

Mme Dambreuse aussi pleurait, couchée sur son lit, à plat ventre, la tête dans ses mains.

Olympe Regimbart, étant venue le soir lui essayer sa première robe de couleur, avait conté la visite de Frédéric, et même qu’il tenait tout prêts douze mille francs destinés à M. Arnoux.

Ainsi cet argent, son argent à elle, était pour empêcher le départ de l’autre, pour se conserver une maîtresse ?

Elle eut d’abord un accès de rage ; et elle avait résolu de le chasser comme un laquais. Des larmes abondantes la calmèrent. Il valait mieux tout renfermer, ne rien dire.

Frédéric, le lendemain, rapporta les douze mille francs.

Elle le pria de les garder, en cas de besoin, pour son ami, et elle l’interrogea beaucoup sur ce monsieur. Qui donc l’avait poussé à un tel abus de confiance ? Une femme, sans doute ! Les femmes vous entraînent à tous les crimes.

Ce ton de persiflage décontenança Frédéric. Il éprouvait un grand remords de sa calomnie. Ce qui le rassurait, c’est que Mme Dambreuse ne pouvait connaître la vérité.

Elle y mit de l’entêtement, cependant ; car, le surlendemain, elle s’informa encore de son petit camarade, puis d’un autre, de Deslauriers.

— “Est-ce un homme sûr et intelligent ?” Frédéric le vanta.

— “Priez-le de passer à la maison un de ces matins je désirerais le consulter pour une affaire.”

Elle avait trouvé un rouleau de paperasses contenant des billets d’Arnoux parfaitement protestés, et sur lesquels Mme Arnoux avait mis sa signature. C’était pour ceux-là que Frédéric était venu une fois chez M. Dambreuse pendant son déjeuner ; et, bien que le capitaliste n’eût pas voulu en poursuivre le recouvrement, il avait fait prononcer par le Tribunal de commerce, non seulement la condamnation d’Arnoux, mais celle de sa femme, qui l’ignorait, son mari n’ayant pas jugé convenable de l’en avertir.

C’était une arme, cela ! Mme Dambreuse n’en doutait pas. Mais son notaire lui conseillerait peut-être l’abstention, elle eût préféré quelqu’un d’obscur ; et elle s’était rappelé ce grand diable, à mine impudente, qui lui avait offert ses services.

Frédéric fit naïvement sa commission.

L’avocat fut enchanté d’être mis en rapport avec une si grande dame.

Il accourut.

Elle le prévint que la succession appartenait à sa nièce, motif de plus pour liquider ces créances qu’elle rembourserait, tenant à accabler les époux Martinon des meilleurs procédés.

Deslauriers comprit qu’il y avait là-dessous un mystère ; il y rêvait en considérant les billets. Le nom de Mme Arnoux, tracé par elle-même, lui remit devant les yeux toute sa personne et l’outrage qu’il en avait reçu. Puisque la vengeance s’offrait, pourquoi ne pas la saisir ?

Il conseilla donc à Mme Dambreuse de faire vendre aux enchères les créances désespérées qui dépendaient de la succession. Un homme de paille les rachèterait en sous-main et exercerait les poursuites. Il se chargeait de fournir cet homme-là.

Vers la fin du mois de novembre, Frédéric, en passant dans la rue de Mme Arnoux, leva les yeux vers ses fenêtres, et aperçut contre la porte une affiche, où il y avait en grosses lettres : “Vente d’un riche mobilier, consistant en batterie de cuisine, linge de corps et de table, chemises, dentelles, jupons, pantalons, cachemires français et de l’Inde, piano d’Erard, deux bahuts de chêne Renaissance, miroirs de Venise, poteries de Chine et du Japon.”

— “C’est leur mobilier !” se dit Frédéric ; et le portier confirma ses soupçons.

Quant à la personne qui faisait vendre, il l’ignorait. Mais le commissaire-priseur, Me Berthelmot, donnerait peut-être des éclaircissements.

L’officier ministériel ne voulut point, tout d’abord, dire quel créancier poursuivait la vente. Frédéric insista. C’était un sieur Sénécal, agent d’affaires ;

et Me Berthelmot poussa même la complaisance jusqu'à prêter son journal des Petites Affiches.

Frédéric, en arrivant chez Rosanette, le jeta sur la table tout ouvert.

— “Lis donc !”

— “Eh bien, quoi ?” dit-elle, avec une figure tellement placide, qu'il en fut révolté.

— “Ah ! garde ton innocence !”

— “Je ne comprends pas.”

— “C'est toi qui fais vendre Mme Arnoux ?”

Elle relut l'annonce.

— “Où est son nom ?”

— “Eh ! c'est son mobilier ! Tu le sais mieux que moi !”

— “Qu'est-ce que ça me fait ?” dit Rosanette en haussant les épaules.

— “Ce que ça te fait ? Mais tu te venges, voilà tout ! C'est la suite de tes persécutions ! Est-ce que tu ne l'as pas outragée jusqu'à venir chez elle ! Toi, une fille de rien. La femme la plus sainte, la plus charmante et la meilleure ! Pourquoi t'acharnes-tu à la ruiner ?”

— “Tu te trompe, je t'assure !”

— “Allons donc ! Comme si tu n'avais pas mis Sénécal en avant !”

— “Quelle bêtise !”

Alors, une fureur l'emporta.

— “Tu mens ! tu mens, misérable ! Tu es jalouse d'elle ! Tu possèdes une condamnation contre son mari ! Sénécal s'est déjà mêlé de tes affaires ! Il déteste Arnoux, vos deux haines s'entendent. J'ai vu sa joie quand tu as gagné ton procès pour le kaolin. Le nieras-tu, celui-là ?”

— “Je te donne ma parole…”

— “Oh ! je la connais, ta parole !”

Et Frédéric lui rappela ses amants par leurs noms, avec des détails circonstanciés. Rosanette, toute pâlissante, se reculait.

— “Cela t'étonne ! Tu me croyais aveugle parce que je fermais les yeux. J'en ai assez, aujourd'hui ! On ne meurt pas pour les trahisons d'une femme de ton espèce. Quand elles deviennent trop monstrueuses, on s'en écarte ; ce serait se dégrader que de les punir !”

Elle se tordait les bras.

— “Mon Dieu, qu'est-ce donc qui l'a changé ?”

— “Pas d'autres que toi-même !”

— “Et tout cela pour Mme Arnoux !…” s'écria Rosanette en pleurant.

Il reprit froidement :

— “Je n'ai jamais aimé qu'elle !”

A cette insulte, ses larmes s’arrêtèrent.

— “Ça prouve ton bon goût ! Une personne d’un âge mûr, le teint couleur de réglisse, la taille épaisse, des yeux grands comme des soupiraux de cave, et vides comme eux ! Puisque ça te plaît, va la rejoindre”

— “C’est ce que j’attendais ! Merci !”

Rosanette demeura immobile, stupéfiée par ces façons extraordinaires. Elle laissa même la porte se refermer ; puis, d’un bond, elle le rattrapa dans l’antichambre, et, l’entourant de ses bras : — “Mais tu es fou ! tu es fou ! c’est absurde ! je t’aime !” Elle le suppliait : “Mon Dieu, au nom de notre petit enfant !”

— “Avoue que c’est toi qui as fait le coup !” dit Frédéric.

Elle protesta encore de son innocence.

— “Tu ne veux pas avouer ?”

— “Non !”

— “Eh bien, adieu ! et pour toujours !”

— “Ecoute-moi !”

Frédéric se retourna.

— “Si tu me connaissais mieux, tu saurais que ma décision est irrévocable !”

— “Oh ! oh ! tu me reviendras !”

— “Jamais de la vie !”

Et il fit claquer la porte violemment.

Rosanette écrivit à Deslauriers qu’elle avait besoin de lui tout de suite.

Il arriva cinq jours après, un soir ; et, quand elle eut conté sa rupture : — “Ce n’est que ça ! Beau malheur !”

Elle avait cru d’abord qu’il pourrait lui ramener Frédéric ; mais, à présent, tout était perdu. Elle avait appris, par son portier, son prochain mariage avec Mme Dambreuse.

Deslauriers lui fit de la morale, se montra même singulièrement gai, farceur ; et, comme il était fort tard, demanda la permission de passer la nuit sur un fauteuil. Puis, le lendemain matin, il repartit pour Nogent, en la prévenant qu’il ne savait pas quand ils se reverraient d’ici à peu, il y aurait peut-être un grand changement dans sa vie.

Deux heures après son retour, la ville était en révolution. On disait que M. Frédéric allait épouser Mme Dambreuse. Enfin, les trois demoiselles Auger, n’y tenant plus, se transportèrent chez Mme Moreau, qui confirma cette nouvelle avec orgueil. Le père Roque en fut malade. Louise s’enferma. Le bruit courut même qu’elle était folle.

Cependant, Frédéric ne pouvait cacher sa tristesse. Mme Dambreuse, pour l’en distraire sans doute, redoublait d’attentions. Toutes les après-midi, elle le promenait dans sa voiture ; et, une fois qu’ils passaient sur la place de la Bourse, elle eut l’idée d’entrer dans l’hôtel des commissaires-priseurs, par amusement.

C’était le 1er décembre, jour même où devait se faire la vente de Mme Arnoux. Il se rappela la date, et manifesta sa répugnance, en déclarant ce lieu intolérable, à cause de la foule et du bruit. Elle désirait y jeter un coup d’oeil seulement. Le coupé s’arrêta. Il fallait bien la suivre.

On voyait, dans la cour, des lavabos sans cuvettes, des bois de fauteuils, de vieux paniers, des tessons de porcelaine, des bouteilles vides, des matelas ; et des hommes en blouse ou en sale redingote, tout gris de poussière, la figure ignoble, quelques-uns avec des sacs de toile sur l’épaule, causaient par groupes distincts ou se hélaient tumultueusement.

Frédéric objecta les inconvénients d’aller plus loin.

— “Ah ! bah !”

Et ils montèrent l’escalier.

Dans la première salle, à droite, des messieurs, un catalogue à la main, examinaient des tableaux ; dans une autre, on vendait une collection d’armes chinoises ; Mme Dambreuse voulut descendre. Elle regardait les numéros au-dessus des portes, et elle le mena jusqu’à l’extrémité du corridor, vers une pièce encombrée de monde.

Il reconnut immédiatement les deux étagères de l’Art industriel, sa table à ouvrage, tous ses meubles ! Entassé s au fond, par rang de taille, ils formaient un large talus depuis le plancher jusqu’aux fenêtres ; et, sur les autres côtés de l’appartement, les tapis et les rideaux pendaient droit le long des murs. Il y avait, en dessous, des gradins occupés par de vieux bonshommes qui sommeillaient. A gauche, s’élevait une espèce de comptoir, où le commissaire-priseur en cravate blanche brandissait légèrement un petit marteau. Un jeune homme, près de lui, écrivait ; et, plus bas, debout, un robuste gaillard, tenant du commis-voyageur et du marchand de contremarques, criait les meubles à vendre. Trois garçons les apportaient sur une table, que bordaient, assis en ligne, des brocanteurs et des revendeuses. La foule circulait derrière eux.

Quand Frédéric entra, les jupons, les fichus, les mouchoirs et jusqu’aux chemises étaient passés de main en main, retournés ; quelquefois, on les jetait de loin, et des blancheurs traversaient l’air tout à coup. Ensuite, on vendit ses robes, puis un de ses chapeaux dont la plume cassée retombait, puis ses fourrures, puis trois paires de bottines et le partage de ces reliques, où il retrouvait confusément les formes de ses membres, lui semblait une atrocité, comme s’il avait vu des corbeaux déchiquetant son cadavre. L’atmosphère de la salle, toute chargée d’haleines, l’écœurait. Mme Dambreuse lui offrit son flacon ; elle se divertissait beaucoup, disait-elle.

On exhiba les meubles de la chambre à coucher.

Me Berthelmot annonçait un prix. Le crieur, tout de suite, le répétait plus fort ; et les trois commissaires attendaient tranquillement le coup de marteau, puis emportaient l'objet dans une pièce contiguë. Ainsi disparurent, les uns après les autres, le grand tapis bleu semé de camélias que ses pieds mignons frôlaient en venant vers lui, la petite bergère de tapisserie où il s'asseyait toujours en face d'elle quand ils étaient seuls ; les deux écrans de la cheminée, dont l'ivoire était rendu plus doux par le contact de ses mains ; une pelote de velours, encore hérissée d'épingles. C'était comme des parties de son cœur qui s'en allaient avec ces choses ; et la monotonie des mêmes voix, des mêmes gestes l'engourdissait de fatigue, lui causait une torpeur funèbre, une dissolution.

Un craquement de soie se fit à son oreille ; Rosanette le touchait.

Elle avait eu connaissance de cette vente par Frédéric lui-même. Son chagrin passé, l'idée d'en tirer profit lui était venue. Elle arrivait pour la voir, en gilet de satin blanc à boutons de perles, avec une robe à falbalas, étroitement gantée, l'air vainqueur.

Il pâlit de colère. Elle regarda la femme qui l'accompagnait.

Mme Dambreuse l'avait reconnue ; et, pendant une minute, elles se considérèrent de haut en bas, scrupuleusement, afin de découvrir le défaut, la tare, — l'une enviant peut-être la jeunesse de l'autre, et celle-ci dépitée par l'extrême bon ton, la simplicité aristocratique de sa rivale.

Enfin, Mme Dambreuse détourna la tête, avec un sourire d'une insolence inexprimable.

Le crieur avait ouvert un piano, — son piano ! Tout en restant debout, il fit une gamme de la main droite, et annonça l'instrument pour douze cents francs, puis se rabattit à mille, à huit cents, à sept cents.

Mme Dambreuse, d'un ton folâtre, se moquait du sabot.

On posa devant les brocanteurs un petit coffret avec des médaillons, des angles et des fermoirs d'argent, le même qu'il avait vu au premier dîner dans la rue de Choiseul, qui ensuite avait été chez Rosanette, était revenu chez Mme Arnoux ; souvent, pendant leurs conversations, ses yeux le rencontraient ; il était lié à ses souvenirs les plus chers, et son âme se fondait d'attendrissement, quand Mme Dambreuse dit tout à coup : — “Tiens ! je vais l'acheter.”

— “Mais ce n'est pas curieux”, reprit-il.

Elle le trouvait, au contraire, fort joli ; et le crieur en prônait la délicatesse : — “Un bijou de la Renaissance ! Huit cents francs, messieurs ! En argent presque tout entier ! Avec un peu de blanc d'Espagne, ça brillera !”

Et, comme elle se poussait dans la foule :

— “Quelle singulière idée !” dit Frédéric.

— “Cela vous fâche ?”

— “Non ! Mais que peut-on faire de ce bibelot ?”

— “Qui sait ? y mettre des lettres d’amour, peut-être ?”

Elle eut un regard qui rendait l’allusion fort claire.

— “Raison de plus pour ne pas dépouiller les morts de leurs secrets.”

— “Je ne la croyais pas si morte.”

Elle ajouta distinctement : “Huit cent quatre-vingts francs !”

— “Ce que vous faites n’est pas bien”, murmura Frédéric.

Elle riait.

— “Mais, chère amie, c’est la première grâce que je vous demande.”

— “Mais vous ne serez pas un mari aimable, savez-vous ?”

Quelqu’un venait de lancer une surenchère ; elle leva la main :

— “Neuf cents francs !”

— “Neuf cents francs !” répéta Me Berthelmot.

— “Neuf cent dix… — quinze… vingt… trente !” glapissait le crieur, tout en parcourant du regard l’assistance, avec des hochements de tête saccadés.

— “Prouvez-moi que ma femme est raisonnable”, dit Frédéric.

Il l’entraîna doucement vers la porte.

Le commissaire-priseur continuait.

— “Allons, allons, messieurs, neuf cent trente ! Y a-t-il marchand à neuf cent trente ?”

Mme Dambreuse, qui était arrivée sur le seuil, s’arrêta ; et, d’une voix haute : — “Mille francs !”

Il y eut un frisson dans le public, un silence.

— “Mille francs, messieurs, mille francs Personne ne dit rien ? bien vu ? mille francs Adjugé” Le marteau d’ivoire s’abattit.

Elle fit passer sa carte, on lui envoya le coffret. Elle le plongea dans son manchon.

Frédéric sentit un grand froid lui traverser le cœur.

Mme Dambreuse n’avait pas quitté son bras ; et elle n’osa le regarder en face jusque dans la rue, où l’attendait sa voiture.

Elle s’y jeta comme un voleur qui s’échappe, et, quand elle fut assise, se retourna vers Frédéric. Il avait son chapeau à la main.

— “Vous ne montez pas ?”

— “Non, madame !”

Et, la saluant froidement, il ferma la portière, puis fit signe au cocher de partir.

Il éprouva d’abord un sentiment de joie et d’indépendance reconquise. Il était fier d’avoir vengé Mme Arnoux en lui sacrifiant une fortune ; puis il fut étonné de son action, et une courbature infinie l’accabla.

Le lendemain matin, son domestique lui apprit les nouvelles. L’état de siège était décrété, l’Assemblée dissoute, et une partie des représentants du peuple à Mazas. Les affaires publiques le laissèrent indifférent, tant il était préoccupé des siennes.

Il écrivit à des fournisseurs pour décommander plusieurs emplettes relatives à son mariage, qui lui apparaissait maintenant comme une spéculation un peu ignoble, et il exécrait Mme Dambreuse parce qu’il avait manqué, à cause d’elle, commettre une bassesse. Il en oubliait la Maréchale, ne s’inquiétait même pas de Mme Arnoux, ne songeant qu’à lui, à lui seul, — perdu dans les décombres de ses rêves, malade, plein de douleur et de découragement ; et, en haine du milieu factice où il avait tant souffert, il souhaita la fraîcheur de l’herbe, le repos de la province, une vie somnolente passée à l’ombre du toit natal avec des cœurs ingénus. Le mercredi soir enfin, il sortit.

Des groupes nombreux stationnaient sur le boulevard. De temps à autre, une patrouille les dissipait ; ils se reformaient derrière elle. On parlait librement, on vociférait contre la troupe des plaisanteries et des injures, sans rien de plus.

— “Comment ! est-ce qu’on ne va pas se battre ?” dit Frédéric à un ouvrier.

L’homme en blouse lui répondit :

— “Pas si bêtes de nous faire tuer pour les bourgeois Qu’ils s’arrangent !”

Et un monsieur grommela, tout en regardant de travers le faubourien : — “Canailles de socialistes ! Si on pouvait, cette fois, les exterminer !”

Frédéric ne comprenait rien à tant de rancune et de sottise. Son dégoût de Paris en augmenta ; et, le surlendemain, il partit pour Nogent par le premier convoi.

Les maisons bientôt disparurent, la campagne s’élargit. Seul dans son wagon et les pieds sur la banquette, il ruminait les événements des derniers jours, tout son passé. Le souvenir de Louise lui revint.

— “Elle m’aimait, celle-là ! J’ai eu tort de ne pas saisir ce bonheur… Bah ! n’y pensons plus”

Puis, cinq minutes après :

— “Qui sait, cependant ?… plus tard, pourquoi pas ?”

Sa rêverie, comme ses yeux, s’enfonçait dans de vagues horizons.

— “Elle était naïve, une paysanne, presque une sauvage, mais si bonne !”

A mesure qu’il avançait vers Nogent, elle se rapprochait de lui. Quand on traversa les prairies de Sourdun, il l’aperçut sous les peupliers comme autrefois, coupant des joncs au bord des flaques d’eau ; on arrivait ; il descendit.

Puis il s’accouda sur le pont, pour revoir l’île et le jardin où ils s’étaient promenés un jour de soleil ; — et l’étourdissement du voyage et du grand air, la faiblesse qu’il gardait de ses émotions récentes, lui causant une sorte d’exaltation, il se dit : — “Elle est peut-être sortie ; si j’allais la rencontrer” La cloche de Saint-Laurent tintait ; et il y avait sur la place, devant l’église, un rassemblement de pauvres, avec une calèche, la seule du pays (celle qui servait pour les noces), quand, sous le portail, tout à coup, dans un flot de bourgeois en cravate blanche, deux nouveaux mariés parurent.

Il se crut halluciné. Mais non ! C’était bien elle, Louise couverte d’un voile blanc qui tombait de ses cheveux rouges à ses talons ; et c’était bien lui, Deslauriers ! — portant un habit bleu brodé d’argent, un costume de préfet. Pourquoi donc ?

Frédéric se cacha dans l’angle d’une maison, pour laisser passer le cortège.

Honteux, vaincu, écrasé, il retourna vers le chemin de fer, et s’en revint à Paris.

Son cocher de fiacre assura que les barricades étaient dressées depuis le Château-d’Eau jusqu’au Gymnase, et prit par le faubourg Saint-Martin. Au coin de la rue de Provence, Frédéric mit pied à terre pour gagner les boulevards.

Il était cinq heures, une pluie fine tombait. Des bourgeois occupaient le trottoir du côté de l’Opéra. Les maisons d’en face étaient closes. Personne aux fenêtres. Dans toute la largeur du boulevard, des dragons galopaient, à fond de train, penchés sur leurs chevaux, le sabre nu ; et les crinières de leurs casques et leurs grands manteaux blancs soulevés derrière eux passaient sur la lumière des becs de gaz, qui se tordaient au vent dans la brume. La foule les regardait, muette, terrifiée.

Entre les charges de cavalerie, des escouades de sergents de ville survenaient, pour faire refluer le monde dans les rues.

Mais, sur les marches de Tortoni, un homme, — Dussardier, — remarquable de loin à sa haute taille, restait sans plus bouger qu’une cariatide.

Un des agents qui marchait en tête, le tricorne sur les yeux, le menaça de son épée.

L’autre alors, s’avançant d’un pas, se mit à crier :

— “Vive la République !”

Il tomba sur le dos, les bras en croix.

Un hurlement d’horreur s’éleva de la foule. L’agent fit un cercle autour de lui avec son regard ; et Frédéric, béant, reconnut Sénécal.

CHAPITRE 6

Il voyagea.

Il connut la mélancolie des paquebots, les froids réveils sous la tente, l’étourdissement des paysages et des ruines, l’amertume des sympathies interrompues.

Il revint.

Il fréquenta le monde, et il eut d’autres amours, encore. Mais le souvenir continuel du premier les lui rendait insipides ; et puis la véhémence du désir, la fleur même de la sensation était perdue. Ses ambitions d’esprit avaient également diminué. Des années passèrent ; et il supportait le désœuvrement de son intelligence et l’inertie de son cœur.

Vers la fin de mars 1867, à la nuit tombante, comme il était seul dans son cabinet, une femme entra.

— “Madame Arnoux !”

— “Frédéric !”

Elle le saisit par les mains, l’attira doucement vers la fenêtre, et elle le considérait tout en répétant :

— “C’est lui ! C’est donc lui !”

Dans la pénombre du crépuscule, il n’apercevait que ses yeux sous la voilette de dentelle noire qui masquait sa figure.

Quand elle eut déposé au bord de la cheminée un petit portefeuille de velours grenat, elle s’assit. Tous deux restèrent sans pouvoir parler, se souriant l’un à l’autre.

Enfin, il lui adressa quantité de questions sur elle et son mari.

lis habitaient le fond de la Bretagne, pour vivre économiquement et payer leurs dettes. Arnoux, presque toujours malade, semblait un vieillard maintenant. Sa fille était mariée à Bordeaux, et son fils en garnison à Mostaganem. Puis elle releva la tête :

— “Mais je vous revois ! Je suis heureuse !”

ne manqua pas de lui dire qu’à la nouvelle de leur catastrophe, il était accouru chez eux.

— “Je le savais !”

— “Comment ?”

Elle l’avait aperçu dans la cour, et s’était cachée.

— “Pourquoi ?”

Alors, d’une voix tremblante, et avec de longs intervalles entre ses mots :

— “J’avais peur ! Oui… peur de vous… de moi !”

Cette révélation lui donna comme un saisissement de volupté. Son cœur battait à grands coups. Elle reprit “Excusez-moi de n’être pas venue plus tôt.” Et désignant le petit portefeuille grenat couvert de palmes d’or :

— “Je l’ai brodé à votre intention, tout exprès. Il contient cette somme, dont les terrains de Belleville devaient répondre.”

Frédéric la remercia du cadeau, tout en la blâmant de s’être dérangée.

— “Non ! Ce n’est pas pour cela que je suis venue Je tenais à cette visite, puis je m’en retournerai… là-bas.”

Et elle lui parla de l’endroit qu’elle habitait.

C’était une maison basse, à un seul étage, avec un jardin rempli de buis énormes et une double avenue de châtaigniers montant jusqu’au haut de la colline, d’où l’on découvre la mer.

— “Je vais m’asseoir là, sur un banc, que j’ai appelé le banc Frédéric.”

Puis elle se mit à regarder les meubles, les bibelots, les cadres, avidement, pour les emporter dans sa mé moire. Le portrait de la Maréchale était à demi caché par un rideau. Mais les ors et les blancs, qui se détachaient au milieu des ténèbres, l’attirèrent.

— “Je connais cette femme, il me semble ?”

— “Impossible !” dit Frédéric. “C’est une vieille peinture italienne.”

Elle avoua qu’elle désirait faire un tour à son bras, dans les rues.

Ils sortirent.

La lueur des boutiques éclairait, par intervalles, son profil pâle ; puis l’ombre l’enveloppait de nouveau ; et, au milieu des voitures, de la foule et du bruit, ils allaient sans se distraire d’eux-mêmes, sans rien entendre, comme ceux qui marchent ensemble dans la campagne, sur un lit de feuilles mortes.

Ils se racontèrent leurs anciens jours, les dîners du temps de l’Art industriel, les manies d’Arnoux, sa façon de tirer les pointes de son faux-col, d’écraser du cosmétique sur ses moustaches, d’autres choses plus intimes et plus profondes. Quel ravissement il avait eu la première fois, en l’entendant chanter Comme elle était belle, le jour de sa fête, à Saint-Cloud ! Il lui rappela le petit jardin d’Auteuil, des soirs au théâtre, une rencontre sur le boulevard, d’anciens domestiques, sa négresse.

Elle s’étonnait de sa mémoire. Cependant, elle lui dit :

— “Quelquefois, vos paroles me reviennent comme un écho lointain, comme le son d’une cloche apporté par le vent ; et il me semble que vous êtes là, quand je lis des passages d’amour dans les livres.”

— “Tout ce qu’on y blâme d’exagéré, vous me l’avez fait ressentir”, dit

Frédéric. “Je comprends Werther, que ne dégoûtent pas les tartines de Charlotte.”

— “Pauvre cher ami !”

Elle soupira ; et, après un long silence :

— “N’importe, nous nous serons bien aimés.”

— “Sans nous appartenir, pourtant !”

— “Cela vaut peut-être mieux”, reprit-elle.

— “Non ! non ! Quel bonheur nous aurions eu !”

— “Oh ! je le crois, avec un amour comme le vôtre !”

Et il devait être bien fort pour durer après une séparation si longue !

Frédéric lui demanda comment elle l’avait découvert.

— “C’est un soir que vous m’avez baisé le poignet entre le gant et la manchette. Je me suis dit :” Mais il m’aime… il m’aime. “J’avais peur de m’en assurer, cependant. Votre réserve était si charmante, que j’en jouissais comme d’un hommage involontaire et continu.”

Il ne regretta rien. Ses souffrances d’autrefois étaient payées.

Quand ils rentrèrent, Mme Arnoux ôta son chapeau. La lampe, posée sur une console, éclaira ses cheveux blancs. Ce fut comme un heurt en pleine poitrine.

Pour lui cacher cette déception, il se posa par terre à ses genoux, et, prenant ses mains, se mit à lui dire des tendresses.

— “Votre personne, vos moindres mouvements me semblaient avoir dans le monde une importante extrahumaine. Mon cœur, comme de la poussière, se soulevait derrière vos pas. Vous me faisiez l’effet d’un clair de lune par une nuit d’été, quand tout est parfums, ombres douces, blancheurs, infini ; et les délices de la chair et de l’âme étaient contenues pour moi dans votre nom, que je me répétais, en tâchant de le baiser sur mes lèvres. Je n’imaginais rien au-delà. C’était Mme Arnoux telle que vous étiez, avec ses deux enfants, tendre, sérieuse, belle à éblouir, et si bonne ! Cette image-là effaçait toutes les autres. Est-ce que j’y pensais, seulement ! puisque j’avais toujours au fond de moi-même la musique de votre voix et la splendeur de vos yeux !” Elle acceptait avec ravissement ces adorations pour la femme quelle n’était plus. Frédéric, se grisant par ses paroles, arrivait à croire ce qu’il disait. Madame Arnoux, le dos tourné à la lumière, se penchait vers lui. Il sentait sur son front la caresse de son haleine, à travers ses vêtements le contact indécis de tout son corps. Leurs mains se serrèrent ; la pointe de sa bottine s’avançait un peu sous sa robe, et il lui dit, presque défaillant :

— “La vue de votre pied me trouble.”

Un mouvement de pudeur la fit se lever. Puis, immobile, et avec l’intonation singulière des somnambules :

— “A mon âge ! lui ! Frédéric !… Aucune n’a jamais été aimée comme moi ! Non, non ! à quoi sert d’être jeune ? Je m’en moque bien je les méprise, toutes celles qui viennent ici !”

— “Oh ! il n’en vient guère !” reprit-il complaisamment.

Son visage s’épanouit, et elle voulut savoir s’il se marierait.

Il jura que non.

— “Bien sûr ? pourquoi ?”

— “A cause de vous”, dit Frédéric en la serrant dans ses bras.

Elle y restait, la taille en arrière, la bouche entrouverte, les yeux levés. Tout à coup, elle le repoussa avec un air de désespoir ; et, comme il la suppliait de lui répondre, elle dit en baissant la tête :

— “J’aurais voulu vous rendre heureux.”

Frédéric soupçonna Mme Arnoux d’être venue pour s’offrir ; et il était repris par une convoitise plus forte que jamais, furieuse, enragée. Cependant, il sentait quelque chose d’inexprimable, une répulsion, et comme l’effroi d’un inceste. Une autre crainte l’arrêta, celle d’en avoir dégoût plus tard. D’ailleurs, quel embarras ce serait !

— et tout à la fois par prudence et pour ne pas dégrader son idéal, il tourna sur ses talons et se mit à faire une cigarette.

Elle le contemplait, tout émerveillée.

— “Comme vous êtes délicat ! Il n’y a que vous ! Il n’y a que vous !”

Onze heures sonnèrent.

— “Déjà !” dit-elle ; “au quart, je m’en irai.”

Elle se rassit ; mais elle observait la pendule, et il continuait à marcher en fumant. Tous les deux ne trouvaient plus rien à se dire. Il y a un moment, dans les séparations, où la personne aimée n’est déjà plus avec nous.

Enfin, l’aiguille ayant dépassé vingt-cinq minutes, elle prit son chapeau par les brides, lentement.

— “Adieu, mon ami, mon cher ami ! Je ne vous reverrai jamais ! C’était ma dernière démarche de femme. Mon âme ne vous quittera pas. Que toutes les bénédictions du ciel soient sur vous !”

Et elle le baisa au front, comme une mère.

Mais elle parut chercher quelque chose, et lui demanda des ciseaux. Elle défit son peigne ; tous ses cheveux blancs tombèrent. Elle s’en coupa, brutalement, à la racine, une longue mèche.

— “Gardez-les ! Adieu !”

Quand elle fut sortie, Frédéric ouvrit sa fenêtre, Mme Arnoux, sur le trottoir, fit signe d’avancer à un fiacre qui passait. Elle monta dedans. La voiture disparut.

Et ce fut tout.

CHAPITRE 7

Vers le commencement de cet hiver, Frédéric et Deslauriers causaient au coin du feu, réconciliés encore une fois, par la fatalité de leur nature qui les faisait toujours se rejoindre et s’aimer.

L’un expliqua sommairement sa brouille avec Mme Dambreuse, laquelle s’était remariée à un Anglais.

L’autre, sans dire comment il avait épousé Mlle Roque, conta que sa femme, un beau jour, s’était enfuie avec un chanteur. Pour se laver un peu du ridicule, il s’était compromis dans sa préfecture par des excès de zèle gouvernemental. On l’avait destitué. Il avait été, ensuite, chef de colonisation en Algérie, secrétaire d’un pacha, gérant d’un journal, courtier d’annonces, pour être finalement employé au contentieux dans une compagnie industrielle.

Quant à Frédéric, ayant mangé les deux tiers de sa fortune, il vivait en petit bourgeois.

Puis, ils s’informèrent mutuellement de leurs amis.

Martinon était maintenant sénateur.

Hussonnet occupait une haute place, où il se trouvait avoir sous sa main tous les théâtres et toute la presse.

Cisy, enfoncé dans la religion et père de huit enfants, habitait le château de ses aïeux.

Pellerin, après avoir donné dans le fouriérisme, l’homéopathie, les tables tournantes, l’art gothique et la peinture humanitaire, était devenu photographe ; et sur toutes les murailles de Paris, on le voyait représenté en habit noir avec un corps minuscule et une grosse tête.

— “Et ton intime Sénécal ?” demanda Frédéric.

— “Disparu ! Je ne sais ! Et toi, ta grande passion, Mme Arnoux ?”

— “Elle doit être à Rome avec son fils, lieutenant de chasseurs.”

— “Et son mari ?”

— “Mort l’année dernière.”

— “Tiens !” dit l’avocat.

Puis se frappant le front :

— “A propos, l’autre jour, dans une boutique, j’ai rencontré cette bonne Maréchale, tenant par la main un petit garçon qu’elle a adopté. Elle est veuve d’un certain M. Oudry, et très grosse maintenant, énorme. Quelle décadence ! Elle qui avait autrefois la taille si mince.”

Deslauriers ne cacha pas qu’il avait profité de son désespoir pour s’en assurer par lui-même.

— “Comme tu me l’avais permis, du reste.”

Cet aveu était une compensation au silence qu’il gardait touchant sa tentative près de Mme Arnoux. Frédéric l’eût pardonnée, puisqu’elle n’avait pas réussi. Bien que vexé un peu de la découverte, il fit semblant d’en rire ; et l’idée de la Maréchale lui amena celle de la Vatnaz.

Deslauriers ne l’avait jamais vue, non plus que bien d’autres qui venaient chez Arnoux ; mais il se souvenait parfaitement de Regimbart.

— “Vit-il encore ?”

— “A peine ! Tous les soirs, régulièrement, depuis la rue de Grammont jusqu’à la rue Montmartre, il se traîne devant les cafés, affaibli, courbé en deux, vidé, un spectre !”

— “Eh bien, et Compain ?”

Frédéric poussa un cri de joie, et pria l’ex-délégué du Gouvernement provisoire de lui apprendre le mystère de la tête de veau.

— “C’est une importation anglaise. Pour parodier la cérémonie que les royalistes célébraient le 30 janvier, des Indépendants fondèrent un banquet annuel, où l’on mangeait des têtes de veau, et on buvait du vin rouge dans des crânes de veau, en portant des toasts à l’extermination des Stuarts. Après thermidor, des terroristes organisèrent une confrérie toute pareille, ce qui prouve que la bêtise est féconde.”

— “Tu me parais bien calmé sur la politique ?”

— “Effet de l’âge”, dit l’avocat.

Et ils résumèrent leur vie.

Ils l’avaient manquée tous les deux, celui qui avait rêvé l’amour, celui qui avait rêvé le pouvoir. Quelle en était la raison ?

— “C’est peut-être le défaut de ligne droite”, dit Frédéric.

— “Pour toi, cela se peut. Moi, au contraire, j’ai péché par excès de rectitude, sans tenir compte de mille choses secondaires, plus fortes que tout. J’avais trop de logique, et toi de sentiment.”

Puis, ils accusèrent le hasard, les circonstances, l’époque où ils étaient nés.

Frédéric reprit :

— “Ce n’est pas là ce que nous croyions devenir autrefois, à Sens, quand tu voulais faire une histoire critique de la Philosophie, et moi, un grand roman moyen âge sur Nogent, dont j’avais trouvé le sujet dans Froissart : Comment messire Brokars de Fénestranges et l’évêque de Troyes assaillirent messire Eustache d’Ambrecicourt. Te rappelles-tu ?”

Et, exhumant leur jeunesse, à chaque phrase, ils se disaient : — “Te rappelles-tu ?”

Ils revoyaient la cour du collège, la chapelle, le parloir, la salle d’armes au bas de l’escalier, des figures de pions et d’élèves, un nommé Angelmarre, de Versailles, qui se taillait des sous-pieds dans de vieilles bottes, M. Mirbal et ses favoris rouges, les deux professeurs de dessin linéaire et de grand dessin, Varaud et Suriret, toujours en dispute, et le Polonais, le compatriote de Copernic, avec son système planétaire en carton, astronome ambulant dont on avait payé la séance par un repas au réfectoire, — puis une terrible ribote en promenade, leurs premières pipes fumées, les distributions des prix, la joie des vacances.

C’était pendant celles de 1837 qu’ils avaient été chez la Turque.

On appelait ainsi une femme qui se nommait de son vrai nom Zoraïde Turc ; et beaucoup de personnes la croyaient une musulmane, une Turque, ce qui ajoutait à la poésie de son établissement, situé au bord de l’eau, derrière le rempart ; même en plein été, il y avait de l’ombre autour de sa maison, reconnaissable à un bocal de poissons rouges près d’un pot de réséda sur une fenêtre. Des demoiselles en camisole blanche, avec du fard aux pommettes et de longues boucles d’oreilles, frappaient aux carreaux quand on passait, et, le soir, sur le pas de la porte, chantonnaient doucement d’une voix rauque.

Ce lieu de perdition projetait dans tout l’arrondissement un éclat fantastique. On le désignait par des périphrases : “L’endroit que vous savez, — une certaine rue, — au bas des Ponts.” Les fermières des alentours en tremblaient pour leurs maris, les bourgeoises le redoutaient pour leurs bonnes, parce que la cuisinière de M. le sous-préfet y avait été surprise ; et c’était, bien entendu, l’obsession secrète de tous les adolescents.

Or, un dimanche, pendant qu’on était aux Vêpres, Frédéric et Deslauriers, s’étant fait préalablement friser, cueillirent des fleurs dans le jardin de Mme Moreau, puis sortirent par la porte des champs, et, après un grand détour dans les vignes, revinrent par la Pêcherie et se glissèrent chez la Turque, en tenant toujours leurs gros bouquets.

Frédéric présenta le sien, comme un amoureux à sa fiancée. Mais la chaleur qu’il, faisait, l’appréhension de l’inconnu, une espèce de remords, et jusqu’au plaisir de voir, d’un seul coup d’oeil, tant de femmes à sa disposition, l’émurent tellement, qu’il devint très pâle et restait sans avancer, sans rien dire. Toutes riaient, joyeuses de son embarras ; croyant qu’on s’en moquait, il s’enfuit ; et, comme Frédéric avait l’argent, Deslauriers fut bien obligé de le suivre.

On les vit sortir. Cela fit une histoire, qui n’était pas oubliée trois ans après.

Ils se la contèrent prolixement, chacun complétant les souvenirs de l’autre ; et, quand ils eurent fini : — “C’est là ce que nous avons eu de meilleur !” dit Frédéric.

— “Oui, peut-être bien ? C’est là ce que nous avons eu de meilleur !” dit

Deslauriers.

FIN

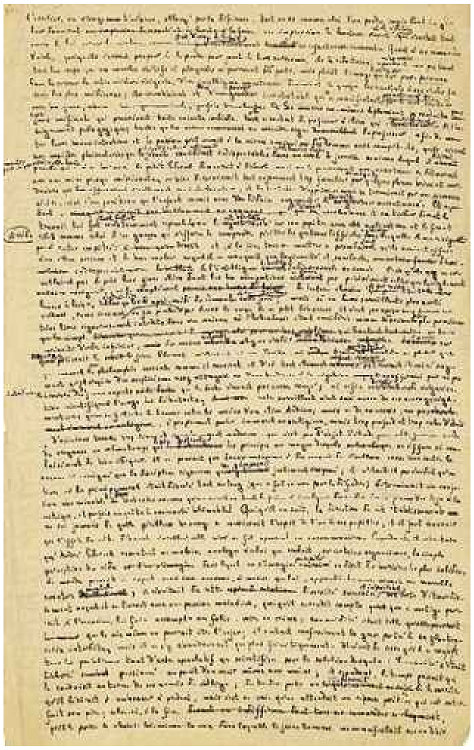
BOUVARD AND PÉCUCHET

Translated by D. F. Hannigan

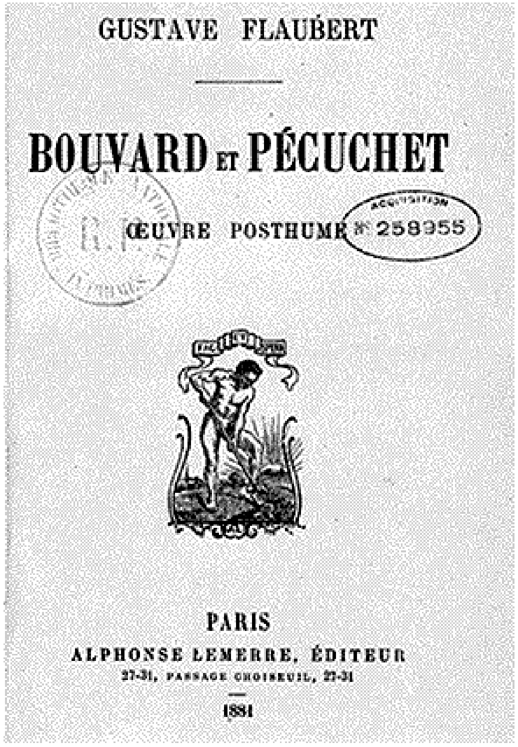
This unfinished satirical work was published posthumously in 1881, a year after Flaubert's death. Although conceived in 1863 as *Les Deux Cloportes*, Flaubert did not begin the novel in earnest until 1872, at a time when he was threatened with financial ruin. Over time, the novel obsessed him to the degree that he claimed to have read over 1500 books in preparation of it composition. It was intended it to be his masterpiece, although it received lukewarm reviews, with many critics failing to appreciate its merits.

The novel concerns the adventures of two Parisian copy-clerks, François Denys Bartholomée Bouvard and Juste Romain Cyrille Pécuchet, who are of the same age and temperament. They meet one hot summer day in 1838 by the canal Saint-Martin and form an instant, symbiotic friendship. When Bouvard inherits a sizable fortune, the two decide to move to the countryside. They find a 94-acre property near the town of Chavignolles in Normandy, between Caen and Falaise. Their search for intellectual stimulation leads them, over the course of years, to flounder through almost every branch of knowledge. Flaubert uses their quest to expose the hidden weaknesses of the sciences and arts, as nearly every project Bouvard and Pécuchet set their minds on comes to grief. Their endeavours are interleaved with the story of their deteriorating relations with the local villagers; and the Revolution of 1848 is the occasion for much despondent discussion.

The manuscript breaks off near the end of the novel. According to Flaubert's notes, the townsfolk, enraged by Bouvard and Pécuchet's antics, try to force them out of the area, or have them committed.



The original manuscript


GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

BOUVARD ET PÉCUCHET

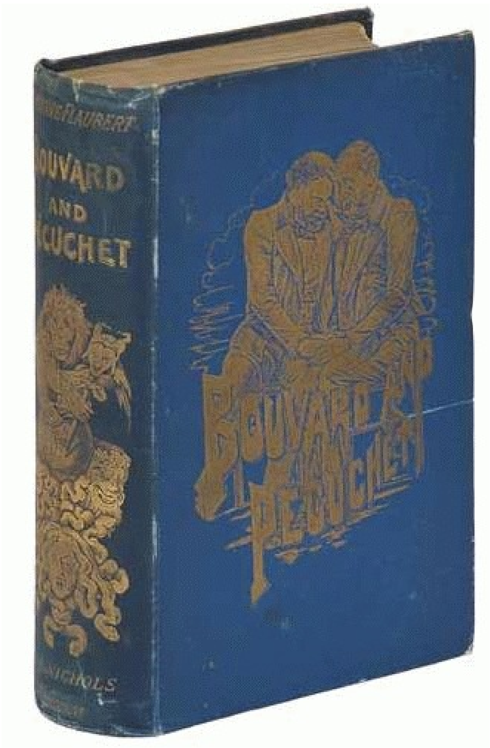
ŒUVRE POSTHUME

ACQUISITION
N° 258955

PARIS
ALPHONSE LEMERRE, ÉDITEUR
27-31, PASSAGE CHOISEUIL, 27-31

1881

The titlepage of the first edition


FLAUBERT
BOUVARD AND PECUCHET
NICHOLS
BOUVARD ET PECUCHET

The first English edition

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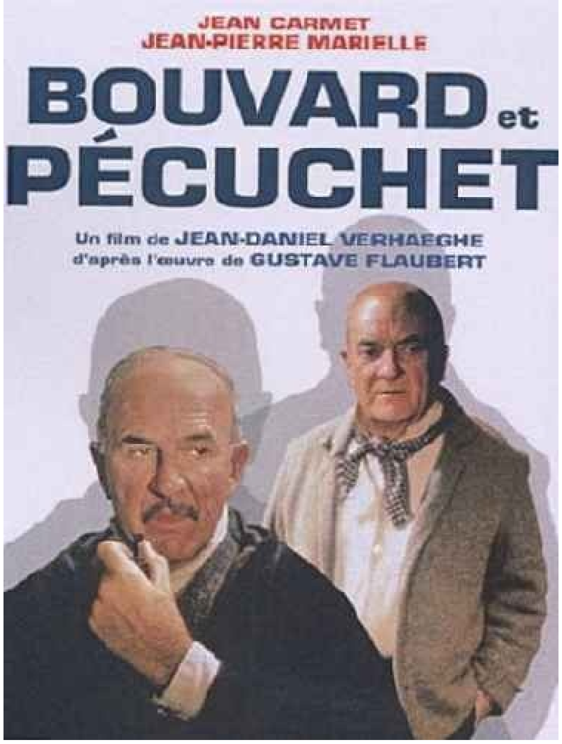

JEAN CARMET
JEAN-PIERRE MARIELLE
BOUVARD et PÉCUCHET
Un film de JEAN-DANIEL VERHAEGHE
d'après l'œuvre de GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

The 1989 French television adaptation

CHAPTER I.

Kindred Souls.

As there were thirty-three degrees of heat the Boulevard Bourdon was absolutely deserted.

Farther down, the Canal St. Martin, confined by two locks, showed in a straight line its water black as ink. In the middle of it was a boat, filled with timber, and on the bank were two rows of casks.

Beyond the canal, between the houses which separated the timber-yards, the great pure sky was cut up into plates of ultramarine; and under the reverberating light of the sun, the white façades, the slate roofs, and the granite wharves glowed dazzlingly. In the distance arose a confused noise in the warm atmosphere; and the idleness of Sunday, as well as the melancholy engendered by the summer heat, seemed to shed around a universal languor.

Two men made their appearance.

One came from the direction of the Bastille; the other from that of the Jardin des Plantes. The taller of the pair, arrayed in linen cloth, walked with his hat back, his waistcoat unbuttoned, and his cravat in his hand. The smaller, whose form was covered with a maroon frock-coat, wore a cap with a pointed peak.

As soon as they reached the middle of the boulevard, they sat down, at the same moment, on the same seat.

In order to wipe their foreheads they took off their headgear, each placing his beside himself; and the little man saw "Bouvard" written in his neighbour's hat, while the latter easily traced "Pécuchet" in the cap of the person who wore the frock-coat.

"Look here!" he said; "we have both had the same idea — to write our names in our head-coverings!"

"Yes, faith, for they might carry off mine from my desk."

"'Tis the same way with me. I am an employé."

Then they gazed at each other. Bouvard's agreeable visage quite charmed Pécuchet.

His blue eyes, always half-closed, smiled in his fresh-coloured face. His trousers, with big flaps, which creased at the end over beaver shoes, took the shape of his stomach, and made his shirt bulge out at the waist; and his fair hair, which of its own accord grew in tiny curls, gave him a somewhat childish look.

He kept whistling continually with the tips of his lips.

Bouvard was struck by the serious air of Pécuchet. One would have thought

Bouvard was struck by the serious air of Pécuchet. One would have thought that he wore a wig, so flat and black were the locks which adorned his high skull. His face seemed entirely in profile, on account of his nose, which descended very low. His legs, confined in tight wrappings of lasting, were entirely out of proportion with the length of his bust. His voice was loud and hollow.

This exclamation escaped him:

"How pleasant it would be in the country!"

But, according to Bouvard, the suburbs were unendurable on account of the noise of the public-houses outside the city. Pécuchet was of the same opinion. Nevertheless, he was beginning to feel tired of the capital, and so was Bouvard.

And their eyes wandered over heaps of stones for building, over the hideous water in which a truss of straw was floating, over a factory chimney rising towards the horizon. Sewers sent forth their poisonous exhalations. They turned to the opposite side; and they had in front of them the walls of the Public Granary.

Decidedly (and Pécuchet was surprised at the fact), it was still warmer in the street than in his own house. Bouvard persuaded him to put down his overcoat. As for him, he laughed at what people might say about him.

Suddenly, a drunken man staggered along the footpath; and the pair began a political discussion on the subject of working-men. Their opinions were similar, though perhaps Bouvard was rather more liberal in his views.

A noise of wheels sounded on the pavement amid a whirlpool of dust. It turned out to be three hired carriages which were going towards Bercy, carrying a bride with her bouquet, citizens in white cravats, ladies with their petticoats huddled up so as almost to touch their armpits, two or three little girls, and a student.

The sight of this wedding-party led Bouvard and Pécuchet to talk about women, whom they declared to be frivolous, waspish, obstinate. In spite of this, they were often better than men; but at other times they were worse. In short, it was better to live without them. For his part, Pécuchet was a bachelor.

"As for me, I'm a widower," said Bouvard, "and I have no children."

"Perhaps you are lucky there. But, in the long run, solitude is very sad."

Then, on the edge of the wharf, appeared a girl of the town with a soldier, — sallow, with black hair, and marked with smallpox. She leaned on the soldier's arm, dragging her feet along, and swaying on her hips.

When she was a short distance from them, Bouvard indulged in a coarse remark. Pécuchet became very red in the face, and, no doubt to avoid answering, gave him a look to indicate the fact that a priest was coming in their direction.

The ecclesiastic slowly descended the avenue, along which lean elm trees were placed as landmarks, and Bouvard, when he no longer saw the priest's three-cornered head-piece, expressed his relief; for he hated Jesuits. Pécuchet, without absolving them from blame, exhibited some respect for religion.

Meanwhile, the twilight was falling, and the window-blinds in front of them were raised. The passers-by became more numerous. Seven o'clock struck.

Their words rushed on in an inexhaustible stream; remarks succeeding to anecdotes, philosophic views to individual considerations. They disparaged the management of the bridges and causeways, the tobacco administration, the theatres, our marine, and the entire human race, like people who had undergone great mortifications. In listening to each other both found again some ideas which had long since slipped out of their minds; and though they had passed the age of simple emotions, they experienced a new pleasure, a kind of expansion, the tender charm associated with their first appearance on life's stage.

Twenty times they had risen and sat down again, and had proceeded along the boulevard from the upper to the lower lock, each time intending to take their departure, but not having the strength to do so, held back by a kind of fascination.

However, they came to parting at last, and they had clasped each other's hands, when Bouvard said all of a sudden:

"Faith! what do you say to our dining together?"

"I had the very same idea in my own head," returned Pécuchet, "but I hadn't the courage to propose it to you."

And he allowed himself to be led towards a little restaurant facing the Hôtel de Ville, where they would be comfortable.

Bouvard called for the *menu*. Pécuchet was afraid of spices, as they might inflame his blood. This led to a medical discussion. Then they glorified the utility of science: how many things could be learned, how many researches one could make, if one had only time! Alas! earning one's bread took up all one's time; and they raised their arms in astonishment, and were near embracing each other over the table on discovering that they were both copyists, Bouvard in a commercial establishment, and Pécuchet in the Admiralty, which did not, however, prevent him from devoting a few spare moments each evening to study. He had noted faults in M. Thiers's work, and he spoke with the utmost respect of a certain professor named Dumouchel.

Bouvard had the advantage of him in other ways. His hair watch-chain, and his manner of whipping-up the mustard-sauce, revealed the greybeard, full of experience; and he ate with the corners of his napkin under his armpits, giving utterance to things which made Pécuchet laugh. It was a peculiar laugh, one very low note, always the same, emitted at long intervals. Bouvard's laugh was explosive, sonorous, uncovering his teeth, shaking his shoulders, and making the customers at the door turn round to stare at him.

When they had dined they went to take coffee in another establishment. Pécuchet, on contemplating the gas-burners, groaned over the spreading torrent of luxury; then, with an imperious movement, he flung aside the newspapers. Bouvard was more indulgent on this point. He liked all authors indiscriminately, having been disposed in his youth to go on the stage.

He had a fancy for trying balancing feats with a billiard-cue and two ivory balls, such as Barberou, one of his friends, had performed. They invariably fell, and, rolling along the floor between people's legs, got lost in some distant corner. The waiter, who had to rise every time to search for them on all-fours under the benches, ended by making complaints. Pécuchet picked a quarrel with him; the coffee-house keeper came on the scene, but Pécuchet would listen to no excuses, and even cavilled over the amount consumed.

He then proposed to finish the evening quietly at his own abode, which was quite near, in the Rue St. Martin. As soon as they had entered he put on a kind of cotton nightgown, and did the honours of his apartment.

A deal desk, placed exactly in the centre of the room caused inconvenience by its sharp corners; and all around, on the boards, on the three chairs, on the old armchair, and in the corners, were scattered pell-mell a number of volumes of the "Roret Encyclopædia," "The Magnetiser's Manual," a Fénelon, and other old books, with heaps of waste paper, two cocoa-nuts, various medals, a Turkish cap, and shells brought back from Havre by Dumouchel. A layer of dust velveted the walls, which otherwise had been painted yellow. The shoe-brush was lying at the side of the bed, the coverings of which hung down. On the ceiling could be seen a big black stain, produced by the smoke of the lamp.

Bouvard, on account of the smell no doubt, asked permission to open the window.

"The papers will fly away!" cried Pécuchet, who was more afraid of the currents of air.

However, he panted for breath in this little room, heated since morning by the slates of the roof.

Bouvard said to him: "If I were in your place, I would remove my flannel."

"What!" And Pécuchet cast down his head, frightened at the idea of no longer having his healthful flannel waistcoat.

"Let me take the business in hand," resumed Bouvard; "the air from outside will refresh you."

At last Pécuchet put on his boots again, muttering, "Upon my honour, you are bewitching me." And, notwithstanding the distance, he accompanied Bouvard as far as the latter's house at the corner of the Rue de Béthune, opposite the Pont de la Tournelle.

Bouvard's room, the floor of which was well waxed, and which had curtains of cotton cambric and mahogany furniture, had the advantage of a balcony overlooking the river. The two principal ornaments were a liqueur-frame in the middle of the chest of drawers, and, in a row beside the glass, daguerreotypes representing his friends. An oil painting occupied the alcove.

"My uncle!" said Bouvard. And the taper which he held in his hand shed its light on the portrait of a gentleman.

Red whiskers enlarged his visage, which was surmounted by a forelock curling at its ends. His huge cravat, with the triple collar of his shirt, and his velvet waistcoat and black coat, appeared to cramp him. You would have imagined there were diamonds on his shirt-frill. His eyes seemed fastened to his cheekbones, and he smiled with a cunning little air.

Pécuchet could not keep from saying, "One would rather take him for your father!"

"He is my godfather," replied Bouvard carelessly, adding that his baptismal name was François-Denys-Bartholemée.

Pécuchet's baptismal name was Juste-Romain-Cyrille, and their ages were identical — forty-seven years. This coincidence caused them satisfaction, but surprised them, each having thought the other much older. They next vented their admiration for Providence, whose combinations are sometimes marvellous.

"For, in fact, if we had not gone out a while ago to take a walk we might have died before knowing each other."

And having given each other their employers' addresses, they exchanged a cordial "good night."

"Don't go to see the women!" cried Bouvard on the stairs.

Pécuchet descended the steps without answering this coarse jest.

Next day, in the space in front of the establishment of MM. Descambos Brothers, manufacturers of Alsatian tissues, 92, Rue Hautefeuille, a voice called out:

"Bouvard! Monsieur Bouvard!"

The latter glanced through the window-panes and recognised Pécuchet, who articulated more loudly:

"I am not ill! I have remained away!"

"Why, though?"

"This!" said Pécuchet, pointing at his breast.

All the talk of the day before, together with the temperature of the apartment and the labours of digestion, had prevented him from sleeping, so much so that, unable to stand it any longer, he had flung off his flannel waistcoat. In the morning he recalled his action, which fortunately had no serious consequences, and he came to inform Bouvard about it, showing him in this way that he had placed him very high in his esteem.

He was a small shopkeeper's son, and had no recollection of his mother, who died while he was very young. At fifteen he had been taken away from a boarding-school to be sent into the employment of a process-server. The gendarmes invaded his employer's residence one day, and that worthy was sent off to the galleys — a stern history which still caused him a thrill of terror. Then he had attempted many callings — apothecary's apprentice, usher, book-keeper in a packet-boat on the Upper Seine. At length, a head of a department in the Admiralty, smitten by his handwriting, had employed him as a copying-clerk; but the consciousness of a defective education, with the intellectual needs engendered by it, irritated his temper, and so he lived altogether alone, without relatives, without a mistress. His only distraction was to go out on Sunday to inspect public works.

The earliest recollections of Bouvard carried him back across the banks of the Loire into a farmyard. A man who was his uncle had brought him to Paris to teach him commerce. At his majority, he got a few thousand francs. Then he took a wife, and opened a confectioner's shop. Six months later his wife disappeared, carrying off the cash-box. Friends, good cheer, and above all, idleness, had speedily accomplished his ruin. But he was inspired by the notion of utilising his beautiful chirography, and for the past twelve years he had clung to the same post in the establishment of MM. Descambos Brothers, manufacturers of tissues, 92, Rue Hautefeuille. As for his uncle, who formerly had sent him the celebrated portrait as a memento, Bouvard did not even know his residence, and expected nothing more from him. Fifteen hundred francs a year and his salary as copying-clerk enabled him every evening to take a nap at a coffee-house. Thus their meeting had the importance of an adventure. They were at once drawn together by secret fibres. Besides, how can we explain sympathies? Why does a certain peculiarity, a certain imperfection, indifferent or hateful in one person, prove a fascination in another? That which we call the thunderbolt is true as regards all the passions.

Before the month was over they "thou'd" and "thee'd" each other.

Frequently they came to see each other at their respective offices. As soon as one made his appearance, the other shut up his writing-desk, and they went off together into the streets. Bouvard walked with long strides, whilst Pécuchet, taking innumerable steps, with his frock-coat flapping at his heels, seemed to slip along on rollers. In the same way, their peculiar tastes were in harmony.

Bouvard smoked his pipe, loved cheese, regularly took his half-glass of brandy. Pécuchet snuffed, at dessert ate only preserves, and soaked a piece of sugar in his coffee. One was self-confident, flighty, generous; the other prudent, thoughtful, and thrifty.

In order to please him, Bouvard desired to introduce Pécuchet to Barberou. He was an ex-commercial traveller, and now a purse-maker — a good fellow, a patriot, a ladies' man, and one who affected the language of the faubourgs. Pécuchet did not care for him, and he brought Bouvard to the residence of Dumouchel. This author (for he had published a little work on mnemonics) gave lessons in literature at a young ladies' boarding-school, and had orthodox opinions and a grave deportment. He bored Bouvard.

Neither of the two friends concealed his opinion from the other. Each recognised the correctness of the other's view. They altered their habits, they quitting their humdrum lodgings, and ended by dining together every day.

They made observations on the plays at the theatre, on the government, the dearness of living, and the frauds of commerce. From time to time, the history of Collier or the trial of Fualdès turned up in their conversations; and then they sought for the causes of the Revolution.

They lounged along by the old curiosity shops. They visited the School of Arts and Crafts, St. Denis, the Gobelins, the Invalides, and all the public collections.

When they were asked for their passports, they made pretence of having lost them, passing themselves off as two strangers, two Englishmen.

In the galleries of the Museum, they viewed the stuffed quadrupeds with amazement, the butterflies with delight, and the metals with indifference; the fossils made them dream; the conchological specimens bored them. They examined the hot-houses through the glass, and groaned at the thought that all these leaves distilled poisons. What they admired about the cedar was that it had been brought over in a hat.

At the Louvre they tried to get enthusiastic about Raphael. At the great library they desired to know the exact number of volumes.

On one occasion they attended at a lecture on Arabic at the College of France, and the professor was astonished to see these two unknown persons attempting to take notes. Thanks to Barberou, they penetrated into the green-room of a little theatre. Dumouchel got them tickets for a sitting at the Academy. They inquired about discoveries, read the prospectuses, and this curiosity developed their intelligence. At the end of a horizon, growing every day more remote, they perceived things at the same time confused and marvellous.

When they admired an old piece of furniture they regretted that they had not lived at the period when it was used, though they were absolutely ignorant of lived at the period when it was used, though they were absolutely ignorant of what period it was. In accordance with certain names, they imagined countries only the more beautiful in proportion to their utter lack of definite information about them. The works of which the titles were to them unintelligible, appeared to their minds to contain some mysterious knowledge.

And the more ideas they had, the more they suffered. When a mail-coach crossed them in the street, they felt the need of going off with it. The Quay of Flowers made them sigh for the country.

One Sunday they started for a walking tour early in the morning, and, passing through Meudon, Bellevue, Suresnes, and Auteuil, they wandered about all day amongst the vineyards, tore up wild poppies by the sides of fields, slept on the grass, drank milk, ate under the acacias in the gardens of country inns, and got home very late — dusty, worn-out, and enchanted.

They often renewed these walks. They felt so sad next day that they ended by depriving themselves of them.

The monotony of the desk became odious to them. Always the eraser and the sandarac, the same inkstand, the same pens, and the same companions. Looking on the latter as stupid fellows, they talked to them less and less. This cost them some annoyances. They came after the regular hour every day, and received reprimands.

Formerly they had been almost happy, but their occupation humiliated them since they had begun to set a higher value on themselves, and their disgust increased while they were mutually glorifying and spoiling each other. Pécuchet contracted Bouvard's bluntness, and Bouvard assumed a little of Pécuchet's moroseness.

"I have a mind to become a mountebank in the streets!" said one to the other.

"As well to be a rag-picker!" exclaimed his friend.

What an abominable situation! And no way out of it. Not even the hope of it!

One afternoon (it was the 20th of January, 1839) Bouvard, while at his desk, received a letter left by the postman.

He lifted up both hands; then his head slowly fell back, and he sank on the floor in a swoon.

The clerks rushed forward; they took off his cravat; they sent for a physician. He re-opened his eyes; then, in answer to the questions they put to him:

"Ah! the fact is — — the fact is — — A little air will relieve me. No; let me alone. Kindly give me leave to go out."

And, in spite of his corpulence, he rushed, all breathless, to the Admiralty office, and asked for Pécuchet.

Pécuchet appeared.

"My uncle is dead! I am his heir!"

"My uncle is dead! I am his heir!"

"It isn't possible!"

Bouvard showed him the following lines:

OFFICE OF MAÎTRE TARDIVEL, NOTARY.

Savigny-en-Septaine, 14th January, 1839.

Sir, — I beg of you to call at my office in order to take notice there of the will of your natural father, M. François-Denys-Bartholomée Bouvard, ex-merchant in the town of Nantes, who died in this parish on the 10th of the present month. This will contains a very important disposition in your favour.

Tardivel, *Notary*.

Pécuchet was obliged to sit down on a boundary-stone in the courtyard outside the office.

Then he returned the paper, saying slowly:

"Provided that this is not — some practical joke."

"You think it is a farce!" replied Bouvard, in a stifled voice like the rattling in the throat of a dying man.

But the postmark, the name of the notary's office in printed characters, the notary's own signature, all proved the genuineness of the news; and they regarded each other with a trembling at the corners of their mouths and tears in their staring eyes.

They wanted space to breathe freely. They went to the Arc de Triomphe, came back by the water's edge, and passed beyond Nôtre Dame. Bouvard was very flushed. He gave Pécuchet blows with his fist in the back, and for five minutes talked utter nonsense.

They chuckled in spite of themselves. This inheritance, surely, ought to mount up — — ?

"Ah! that would be too much of a good thing. Let's talk no more about it."

They did talk again about it. There was nothing to prevent them from immediately demanding explanations. Bouvard wrote to the notary with that view.

The notary sent a copy of the will, which ended thus:

"Consequently, I give to François-Denys-Bartholemée Bouvard, my recognised natural son, the portion of my property disposable by law."

The old fellow had got this son in his youthful days, but he had carefully kept it dark, making him pass for a nephew; and the "nephew" had always called him "my uncle," though he had his own idea on the matter. When he was about forty, M. Bouvard married; then he was left a widower. His two legitimate sons having gone against his wishes, remorse took possession of him for the desertion of his other child during a long period of years. He would have even sent for the lad but for the influence of his female cook. She left him, thanks to the manœuvres but for the influence of his female cook. She left him, thanks to the manœuvres of the family, and in his isolation, when death drew nigh, he wished to repair the wrongs he had done by bequeathing to the fruit of his early love all that he could of his fortune. It ran up to half a million francs, thus giving the copying-clerk two hundred and fifty thousand francs. The eldest of the brothers, M. Étienne, had announced that he would respect the will.

Bouvard fell into a kind of stupefied condition. He kept repeating in a low tone, smiling with the peaceful smile of drunkards: "An income of fifteen thousand livres!" — and Pécuchet, whose head, however, was stronger, was not able to get over it.

They were rudely shaken by a letter from Tardivel. The other son, M. Alexandre, declared his intention to have the entire matter decided by law, and even to question the legacy, if he could, requiring, first of all, to have everything sealed, and to have an inventory taken and a sequestrator appointed, *etc.* Bouvard got a bilious attack in consequence. Scarcely had he recovered when he started for Savigny, from which place he returned without having brought the matter nearer to a settlement, and he could only grumble about having gone to the expense of a journey for nothing. Then followed sleepless nights, alternations of rage and hope, of exaltation and despondency. Finally, after the lapse of six months, his lordship Alexandre was appeased, and Bouvard entered into possession of his inheritance.

His first exclamation was: "We will retire into the country!" And this phrase, which bound up his friend with his good fortune, Pécuchet had found quite natural. For the union of these two men was absolute and profound. But, as he did not wish to live at Bouvard's expense, he would not go before he got his retiring pension. Two years more; no matter! He remained inflexible, and the thing was decided.

In order to know where to settle down, they passed in review all the provinces. The north was fertile, but too cold; the south delightful, so far as the climate was concerned, but inconvenient because of the mosquitoes; and the middle portion of the country, in truth, had nothing about it to excite curiosity. Brittany would have suited them, were it not for the bigoted tendency of its inhabitants. As for the regions of the east, on account of the Germanic *patois* they could not dream of it. But there were other places. For instance, what about Forez, Bugey, and Rumois? The maps said nothing about them. Besides, whether their house happened to be in one place or in another, the important thing was to have one. Already they saw themselves in their shirt-sleeves, at the edge of a plat-band, pruning rose trees, and digging, dressing, settling the ground, growing tulips in pots. They would awaken at the singing of the lark to follow the plough; they would go with baskets to gather apples, would look on at butter-making, the thrashing of corn, sheep-shearing, bee-culture, and would feel delight in the lowing of cows and in the scent of new-mown hay. No more writing! No more heads of departments! No more even quarters' rent to pay! For they had a dwelling-house of their own! And they would eat the hens of their own poultry-yard, the vegetables of their own garden, and would dine without taking off their wooden shoes! "We'll do whatever we like! We'll let our beards grow!"

They would purchase horticultural implements, then a heap of things "that might perhaps be useful," such as a tool-chest (there was always need of one in a house), next, scales, a land-surveyor's chain, a bathing-tub in case they got ill, a thermometer, and even a barometer, "on the Gay-Lussac system," for physical experiences, if they took a fancy that way. It would not be a bad thing either (for a person cannot always be working out of doors), to have some good literary works; and they looked out for them, very embarrassed sometimes to know if such a book was really "a library book."

Bouvard settled the question. "Oh! we shall not want a library. Besides, I have my own."

They prepared their plans beforehand. Bouvard would bring his furniture, Pécuchet his big black table; they would turn the curtains to account; and, with a few kitchen utensils, this would be quite sufficient. They swore to keep silent about all this, but their faces spoke volumes. So their colleagues thought them funny. Bouvard, who wrote spread over his desk, with his elbows out, in order the better to round his letters, gave vent to a kind of whistle while half-closing his heavy eyelids with a waggish air. Pécuchet, squatted on a big straw foot-stool, was always carefully forming the pot-hooks of his large handwriting, but all the while swelling his nostrils and pressing his lips together, as if he were afraid of letting his secret slip.

After eighteen months of inquiries, they had discovered nothing. They made journeys in all the outskirts of Paris, both from Amiens to Evreux, and from Fontainebleau to Havre. They wanted a country place which would be a thorough country place, without exactly insisting on a picturesque site; but a limited horizon saddened them.

They fled from the vicinity of habitations, and only redoubled their solitude.

Sometimes they made up their minds; then, fearing they would repent later, they changed their opinion, the place having appeared unhealthy, or exposed to the sea-breeze, or too close to a factory, or difficult of access.

Barberou came to their rescue. He knew what their dream was, and one fine day he called on them to let them know that he had been told about an estate at

Chavignolles, between Caen and Falaise. This comprised a farm of thirty-eight hectares, with a kind of château, and a garden in a very productive state.

They proceeded to Calvados, and were quite enraptured. For the farm, together with the house (one would not be sold without the other), only a hundred and forty-three thousand francs were asked. Bouvard did not want to give more than a hundred and twenty thousand.

Pécuchet combated his obstinacy, begged of him to give way, and finally declared that he would make up the surplus himself. This was his entire fortune, coming from his mother's patrimony and his own savings. Never had he breathed a word, reserving this capital for a great occasion.

The entire amount was paid up about the end of 1840, six months before his retirement.

Bouvard was no longer a copying-clerk. At first he had continued his functions through distrust of the future; but he had resigned once he was certain of his inheritance. However, he willingly went back to MM. Descambos; and the night before his departure he stood drinks to all the clerks.

Pécuchet, on the contrary, was morose towards his colleagues, and went off, on the last day, roughly clapping the door behind him.

He had to look after the packing, to do a heap of commissions, then to make purchases, and to take leave of Dumouchel.

The professor proposed to him an epistolary interchange between them, of which he would make use to keep Pécuchet well up in literature; and, after fresh felicitations, wished him good health.

Barberou exhibited more sensibility in taking leave of Bouvard. He expressly gave up a domino-party, promised to go to see him "over there," ordered two aniseed cordials, and embraced him.

Bouvard, when he got home, inhaled over the balcony a deep breath of air, saying to himself, "At last!" The lights along the quays quivered in the water, the rolling of omnibuses in the distance gradually ceased. He recalled happy days spent in this great city, supper-parties at restaurants, evenings at the theatre, gossips with his portress, all his habitual associations; and he experienced a sinking of the heart, a sadness which he dared not acknowledge even to himself.

Pécuchet was walking in his room up to two o'clock in the morning. He would come back there no more: so much the better! And yet, in order to leave behind something of himself, he printed his name on the plaster over the chimney-piece.

The larger portion of the baggage was gone since the night before. The garden implements, the bedsteads, the mattresses, the tables, the chairs, a cooking apparatus, and three casks of Burgundy would go by the Seine, as far as

Havre, and would be despatched thence to Caen, where Bouvard, who would wait for them, would have them brought on to Chavignolles.

But his father's portrait, the armchairs the liqueur-case, the old books, the time-piece, all the precious objects were put into a furniture waggon, which would proceed through Nonancourt, Verneuil, and Falaise. Pécuchet was to accompany it.

He installed himself beside the conductor, upon a seat, and, wrapped up in his oldest frock-coat, with a comforter, mittens, and his office foot-warmer, on Sunday, the 20th of March, at daybreak, he set forth from the capital.

The movement and the novelty of the journey occupied his attention during the first few hours. Then the horses slackened their pace, which led to disputes between the conductor and the driver. They selected execrable inns, and, though they were accountable for everything, Pécuchet, through excess of prudence, slept in the same lodgings.

Next day they started again, at dawn, and the road, always the same, stretched out, uphill, to the verge of the horizon. Yards of stones came after each other; the ditches were full of water; the country showed itself in wide tracts of green, monotonous and cold; clouds scudded through the sky. From time to time there was a fall of rain. On the third day squalls arose. The awning of the waggon, badly fastened on, went clapping with the wind, like the sails of a ship. Pécuchet lowered his face under his cap, and every time he opened his snuff-box it was necessary for him, in order to protect his eyes, to turn round completely.

During the joltings he heard all his baggage swinging behind him, and shouted out a lot of directions. Seeing that they were useless, he changed his tactics. He assumed an air of good-fellowship, and made a display of civilities; in the troublesome ascents he assisted the men in pushing on the wheels: he even went so far as to pay for the coffee and brandy after the meals. From that time they went on more slowly; so much so that, in the neighbourhood of Gauburge, the axletree broke, and the waggon remained tilted over. Pécuchet immediately went to inspect the inside of it: the sets of porcelain lay in bits. He raised his arms, while he gnashed his teeth, and cursed these two idiots; and the following day was lost owing to the waggon-driver getting tipsy: but he had not the energy to complain, the cup of bitterness being full.

Bouvard had quitted Paris only on the third day, as he had to dine once more with Barberou. He arrived in the coach-yard at the last moment; then he woke up before the cathedral of Rouen: he had mistaken the *diligence*.

In the evening, all the places for Caen were booked. Not knowing what to do, he went to the Theatre of Arts, and he smiled at his neighbours, telling them he had retired from business, and had lately purchased an estate in the neighbourhood. When he started on Friday for Caen, his packages were not there. He received them on Sunday, and despatched them in a cart, having given notice to the farmer who was working the land that he would follow in the course of a few hours.

At Falaise, on the ninth day of his journey, Pécuchet took a fresh horse, and even till sunset they kept steadily on. Beyond Bretteville, having left the high-road, he got off into a cross-road, fancying that every moment he could see the gable-ends of Chavignolles. However, the ruts hid them from view; they vanished, and then the party found themselves in the midst of ploughed fields. The night was falling. What was to become of them? At last Pécuchet left the waggon behind, and, splashing in the mire, advanced in front of it to reconnoitre. When he drew near farm-houses, the dogs barked. He called out as loudly as ever he could, asking what was the right road. There was no answer. He was afraid, and got back to the open ground. Suddenly two lanterns flashed. He perceived a cabriolet, and rushed forward to meet it. Bouvard was inside.

But where could the furniture waggon be? For an hour they called out to it through the darkness. At length it was found, and they arrived at Chavignolles.

A great fire of brushwood and pine-apples was blazing in the dining-room. Two covers were placed there. The furniture, which had come by the cart, was piled up near the vestibule. Nothing was wanting. They sat down to table.

Onion soup had been prepared for them, also a chicken, bacon, and hard-boiled eggs. The old woman who cooked came from time to time to inquire about their tastes. They replied, "Oh! very good, very good!" and the big loaf, hard to cut, the cream, the nuts, all delighted them. There were holes in the flooring, and the damp was oozing through the walls. However, they cast around them a glance of satisfaction, while eating on the little table on which a candle was burning. Their faces were reddened by the strong air. They stretched out their stomachs; they leaned on the backs of their chairs, which made a cracking sound in consequence, and they kept repeating: "Here we are in the place, then! What happiness! It seems to me that it is a dream!"

Although it was midnight, Pécuchet conceived the idea of taking a turn round the garden. Bouvard made no objection. They took up the candle, and, screening it with an old newspaper, walked along the paths. They found pleasure in mentioning aloud the names of the vegetables.

"Look here — carrots! Ah! — cabbages!"

Next, they inspected the espaliers. Pécuchet tried to discover the buds. Sometimes a spider would scamper suddenly over the wall, and the two shadows of their bodies appeared magnified, repeating their gestures. The ends of the grass let the dew trickle out. The night was perfectly black, and everything remained motionless in a profound silence, an infinite sweetness. In the distance remained motionless in a profound silence, an infinite sweetness. In the distance a cock was crowing.

Their two rooms had between them a little door, which was hidden by the papering of the wall. By knocking a chest of drawers up against it, nails were shaken out; and they found the place gaping open. This was a surprise.

When they had undressed and got into bed, they kept babbling for some time. Then they went asleep — Bouvard on his back, with his mouth open, his head bare; Pécuchet on his right side, his knees in his stomach, his head muffled in a cotton night-cap; and the pair snored under the moonlight which made its way in through the windows.

CHAPTER II.

Experiments in Agriculture.

How happy they felt when they awoke next morning! Bouvard smoked a pipe, and Pécuchet took a pinch of snuff, which they declared to be the best they had ever had in their whole lives. Then they went to the window to observe the landscape.

In front of them lay the fields, with a barn and the church-bell at the right and a screen of poplars at the left.

Two principal walks, forming a cross, divided the garden into four parts. The vegetables were contained in wide beds, where, at different spots, arose dwarf cypresses and trees cut in distaff fashion. On one side, an arbour just touched an artificial hillock; while, on the other, the espaliers were supported against a wall; and at the end, a railed opening gave a glimpse of the country outside. Beyond the wall there was an orchard, and, next to a hedge of elm trees, a thicket; and behind the railed opening there was a narrow road.

They were gazing on this spectacle together, when a man, with hair turning grey, and wearing a black overcoat, appeared walking along the pathway, striking with his cane all the bars of the railed fence. The old servant informed them that this was M. Vaucorbeil, a doctor of some reputation in the district. She mentioned that the other people of note were the Comte de Faverges, formerly a deputy, and an extensive owner of land and cattle; M. Foureau, who sold wood, plaster, all sorts of things; M. Marescot, the notary; the Abbé Jeufroy; and the widow Bordin, who lived on her private income. The old woman added that, as for herself, they called her Germaine, on account of the late Germain, her husband. She used to go out as a charwoman, but would be very glad to enter into the gentlemen's service. They accepted her offer, and then went out to take a look at their farm, which was situated over a thousand yards away.

When they entered the farmyard, Maître Gouy, the farmer, was shouting at a servant-boy, while his wife, on a stool, kept pressed between her legs a turkey-hen, which she was stuffing with balls of flour.

The man had a low forehead, a thin nose, a downward look, and broad shoulders. The woman was very fair-haired, with her cheek-bones speckled with bran, and that air of simplicity which may be seen in the faces of peasants on the windows of churches.

In the kitchen, bundles of hemp hung from the ceiling. Three old guns stood in a row over the upper part of the chimney-piece. A dresser loaded with in a row over the upper part of the chimney-piece. A dresser loaded with flowered crockery occupied the space in the middle of the wall; and the window-panes with their green bottle-glass threw over the tin and copper utensils a sickly lustre.

The two Parisians wished to inspect the property, which they had seen only once — and that a mere passing glance. Maître Gouy and his wife escorted them, and then began a litany of complaints.

All the appointments, from the carthouse to the boilery, stood in need of repair. It would be necessary to erect an additional store for the cheese, to put fresh iron on the railings, to raise the boundaries, to deepen the ponds, and to plant anew a considerable number of apple trees in the three enclosures.

Then they went to look at the lands under cultivation. Maître Gouy ran them down, saying that they ate up too much manure; cartage was expensive; it was impossible to get rid of stones; and the bad grass poisoned the meadows. This depreciation of his land lessened the pleasure experienced by Bouvard in walking over it.

They came back by the hollow path under an avenue of beech trees. On this side the house revealed its front and its courtyard. It was painted white, with a coating of yellow. The carthouse and the storehouse, the bakehouse and the woodshed, made, by means of a return, two lower wings. The kitchen communicated with a little hall. Next came the vestibule, a second hall larger than the other, and the drawing-room. The four rooms on the first floor opened on the corridor facing the courtyard. Pécuchet selected one of them for his collections. The last was to be the library; and, on opening some of the presses, they found a few ancient volumes, but they had no fancy for reading the titles of them. The most urgent matter was the garden.

Bouvard, while passing close to the row of elm trees, discovered under their branches a plaster figure of a woman. With two fingers she held wide her petticoat, with her knees bent and her head over her shoulder, as if she were afraid of being surprised.

"I beg your pardon! Don't inconvenience yourself!" — and this pleasantry amused them so much that they kept repeating it twenty times a day for three months.

Meanwhile, the people of Chavignolles were desirous to make their acquaintance. Persons came to look at them through the railed fence. They stopped up the openings with boards. This thwarted the inhabitants. To protect himself from the sun Bouvard wore on his head a handkerchief, fastened so as to look like a turban. Pécuchet wore his cap, and he had a big apron with a pocket in front, in which a pair of pruning-shears, his silk handkerchief, and his snuff-box jostled against one another. Bare-armed, side by side, they dug, weeded, and pruned, imposing tasks on each other, and eating their meals as quickly as ever they could, taking care, however, to drink their coffee on the hillock, in order to enjoy the view.

If they happened to come across a snail, they pounced on it and crushed it, making grimaces with the corners of their mouths, as if they were cracking nuts. They never went out without their grafting implements, and they used to cut the worms in two with such force that the iron of the implement would sink three inches deep. To get rid of caterpillars, they struck the trees furiously with switches.

Bouvard planted a peony in the middle of the grass plot, and tomatoes so that they would hang down like chandeliers under the arch of the arbour.

Pécuchet had a large pit dug in front of the kitchen, and divided it into three parts, where he could manufacture composts which would grow a heap of things, whose detritus would again bring other crops, providing in this way other manures to a limitless extent; and he fell into reveries on the edge of the pit, seeing in the future mountains of fruits, floods of flowers, and avalanches of vegetables. But the horse-dung, so necessary for the beds, was not to be had, inasmuch as the farmers did not sell it, and the innkeepers refused to supply it. At last, after many searches, in spite of the entreaties of Bouvard, and flinging aside all shamefacedness, he made up his mind to go for the dung himself.

It was in the midst of this occupation that Madame Bordin accosted him one day on the high-road. When she had complimented him, she inquired about his friend. This woman's black eyes, very small and very brilliant, her high complexion, and her assurance (she even had a little moustache) intimidated Pécuchet. He replied curtly, and turned his back on her — an impoliteness of which Bouvard disapproved.

Then the bad weather came on, with frost and snow. They installed themselves in the kitchen, and went in for trellis-work, or else kept going from one room to another, chatted by the chimney corner, or watched the rain coming down.

Since the middle of Lent they had awaited the approach of spring, and each morning repeated: "Everything is starting out!" But the season was late, and they consoled their impatience by saying: "Everything is going to start out!"

At length they were able to gather the green peas. The asparagus gave a good crop; and the vine was promising.

Since they were able to work together at gardening, they must needs succeed at agriculture; and they were seized with an ambition to cultivate the farm. With common sense and study of the subject, they would get through it beyond a doubt.

But they should first see how others carried on operations, and so they drew up a letter in which they begged of M. de Faverges to do them the honour of allowing them to visit the lands which he cultivated.

The count made an appointment immediately to meet them.

After an hour's walking, they reached the side of a hill overlooking the valley of the Orne. The river wound its way to the bottom of the valley. Blocks of red sandstone stood here and there, and in the distance larger masses of stone formed, as it were, a cliff overhanging fields of ripe corn. On the opposite hill the verdure was so abundant that it hid the house from view. Trees divided it into unequal squares, outlining themselves amid the grass by more sombre lines.

Suddenly the entire estate came into view. The tiled roofs showed where the farm stood. To the right rose the château with its white façade, and beyond it was a wood. A lawn descended to the river, into which a row of plane trees cast their shadows.

The two friends entered a field of lucern, which people were spreading. Women wearing straw hats, with cotton handkerchiefs round their heads, and paper shades, were lifting with rakes the hay which lay on the ground, while at the end of the plain, near the stacks, bundles were being rapidly flung into a long cart, yoked to three horses.

The count advanced, followed by his manager. He was dressed in dimity; and his stiff figure and mutton-chop whiskers gave him at the same time the air of a magistrate and a dandy. Even when he was speaking, his features did not appear to move.

As soon as they had exchanged some opening courtesies, he explained his system with regard to fodder: the swathes should be turned without scattering them; the ricks should be conical, and the bundles made immediately on the spot, and then piled together by tens. As for the English rake, the meadow was too uneven for such an implement.

A little girl, with her stockingless feet in old shoes, and showing her skin through the rents in her dress, was supplying the women with cider, which she poured out of a jug supported against her hip. The count asked where this child came from, but nobody could tell. The women who were making the hay had picked her up to wait on them during the harvesting. He shrugged his shoulders, and just as he was moving away from the spot, he gave vent to some complaints as to the immorality of our country districts.

Bouvard eulogised his lucern field.

It was fairly good, in spite of the ravages of the *cuscute*.

The future agriculturists opened their eyes wide at the word "cuscute."

On account of the number of his cattle, he resorted to artificial meadowing;

besides, it went well before the other crops — a thing that did not always happen in the case of fodder.

"This at least appears to me incontestable."

"Oh! incontestable," replied Bouvard and Pécuchet in one breath. They were on the borders of a field which had been carefully thinned. A horse, which was being led by hand, was dragging along a large box, mounted on three wheels. Seven ploughshares below were opening in parallel lines small furrows, in which the grain fell through pipes descending to the ground.

"Here," said the count, "I sow turnips. The turnip is the basis of my quadrennial system of cultivation."

And he was proceeding to deliver a lecture on the drill-plough when a servant came to look for him, and told him that he was wanted at the château.

His manager took his place — a man with a forbidding countenance and obsequious manners.

He conducted "these gentlemen" to another field, where fourteen harvesters, with bare breasts and legs apart, were cutting down rye. The steels whistled in the chaff, which came pouring straight down. Each of them described in front of him a large semicircle, and, all in a line, they advanced at the same time. The two Parisians admired their arms, and felt smitten with an almost religious veneration for the opulence of the soil. Then they proceeded to inspect some of the ploughed lands. The twilight was falling, and the crows swooped down into the ridges.

As they proceeded they met a flock of sheep pasturing here and there, and they could hear their continual browsing. The shepherd, seated on the stump of a tree, was knitting a woollen stocking, with his dog beside him.

The manager assisted Bouvard and Pécuchet to jump over a wooden fence, and they passed close to two orchards, where cows were ruminating under the apple trees.

All the farm-buildings were contiguous and occupied the three sides of the yard. Work was carried on there mechanically by means of a turbine moved by a stream which had been turned aside for the purpose. Leathern bands stretched from one roof to the other, and in the midst of dung an iron pump performed its operations.

The manager drew their attention to little openings in the sheepfolds nearly on a level with the floor, and ingenious doors in the pigsties which could shut of their own accord.

The barn was vaulted like a cathedral, with brick arches resting on stone walls.

In order to amuse the gentlemen, a servant-girl threw a handful of oats before the hens. The shaft of the press appeared to them enormously big. Next they went up to the pigeon-house. The dairy especially astonished them. By turning cocks in the corners, you could get enough water to flood the flagstones, and, as you entered, a sense of grateful coolness came upon you as a surprise. Brown jars, ranged close to the barred opening in the wall, were full to the brim of milk, while the cream was contained in earthen pans of less depth. Then came rolls of butter, like fragments of a column of copper, and froth overflowed from the tin pails which had just been placed on the ground.

But the gem of the farm was the ox-stall. It was divided into two sections by wooden bars standing upright their full length, one portion being reserved for the cattle, and the other for persons who attended on them. You could scarcely see there, as all the loopholes were closed up. The oxen were eating, with little chains attached to them, and their bodies exhaled a heat which was kept down by the low ceiling. But someone let in the light, and suddenly a thin stream of water flowed into the little channel which was beside the racks. Lowings were heard, and the horns of the cattle made a rattling noise like sticks. All the oxen thrust their muzzles between the bars, and proceeded to drink slowly.

The big teams made their way into the farmyard, and the foals began to neigh. On the ground floor two or three lanterns flashed and then disappeared. The workpeople were passing, dragging their wooden shoes over the pebbles, and the bell was ringing for supper.

The two visitors took their departure.

All they had seen delighted them, and their resolution was taken. After that evening, they took out of their library the four volumes of *La Maison Rustique*, went through Gasperin's course of lectures, and subscribed to an agricultural journal.

In order to be able to attend the fairs more conveniently, they purchased a car, which Bouvard used to drive.

Dressed in blue blouses, with large-brimmed hats, gaiters up to their knees, and horse-dealers' cudgels in their hands, they prowled around cattle, asked questions of labourers, and did not fail to attend at all the agricultural gatherings.

Soon they wearied Maître Gouy with their advice, and especially by their depreciation of his system of fallowing. But the farmer stuck to his routine. He asked to be allowed a quarter, putting forward as a reason the heavy falls of hail. As for the farm-dues, he never furnished any of them. His wife raised an outcry at even the most legitimate claims. At length Bouvard declared his intention not to renew the lease.

Thenceforth Maître Gouy economised the manures, allowed weeds to grow up, ruined the soil; and he took himself off with a fierce air, which showed that he was meditating some scheme of revenge.

Bouvard had calculated that 20,000 francs, that is to say, more than four times the rent of the farm, would be enough to start with. His notary sent the amount from Paris.

The property which they had undertaken to cultivate comprised fifteen hectares of grounds and meadows, twenty-three of arable land, and five of waste land, situated on a hillock covered with stones, and known by the name of La Butte.

They procured all the indispensable requirements for the purpose: four horses, a dozen cows, six hogs, one hundred and sixty sheep, and for the household two carters, two women, a shepherd, and in addition a big dog.

In order to get cash at once, they sold their fodder. The price was paid to them directly, and the gold napoleons counted over a chest of oats appeared to them more glittering than any others, more rare and valuable.

In the month of November they brewed cider. It was Bouvard that whipped the horse, while Pécuchet on the trough shovelled off the strained apples.

They panted while pressing the screw, drew the juice off into the vat, looked after the bung-holes, with heavy wooden shoes on their feet; and in all this they found a huge diversion.

Starting with the principle that you cannot have too much corn, they got rid of about half of their artificial meadows; and, as they had not rich pasturing, they made use of oil-cakes, which they put into the ground without pounding, with the result that the crop was a wretched one.

The following year they sowed the ground very thickly. Storms broke out, and the ears of corn were scattered.

Nevertheless, they set their hearts on the cheese, and undertook to clear away the stones from La Butte. A hamper carried away the stones. The whole year, from morn to eve, in sunshine or in rain, the everlasting hamper was seen, with the same man and the same horse, toiling up the hill, coming down, and going up again. Sometimes Bouvard walked in the rear, making a halt half-way up the hill to dry the sweat off his forehead.

As they had confidence in nobody, they treated the animals themselves, giving them purgatives and clysters.

Serious irregularities occurred in the household. The girl in the poultry-yard became *enceinte*. Then they took married servants; but the place soon swarmed with children, cousins, male and female, uncles, and sisters-in-law. A horde of people lived at their expense; and they resolved to sleep in the farm-house successively.

But when evening came they felt depressed, for the filthiness of the room was offensive to them; and besides, Germaine, who brought in the meals, grumbled at every journey. They were preyed upon in all sorts of ways. The threshers in the barn stuffed corn into the pitchers out of which they drank. Pécuchet caught one of them in the act, and exclaimed, while pushing him out by the shoulders:

"Wretch! You are a disgrace to the village that gave you birth!"

His presence inspired no respect. Moreover, he was plagued with the garden. All his time would not have sufficed to keep it in order. Bouvard was occupied with the farm. They took counsel and decided on this arrangement.

The first point was to have good hotbeds. Pécuchet got one made of brick. He painted the frames himself; and, being afraid of too much sunlight, he smeared over all the bell-glasses with chalk. He took care to cut off the tops of the leaves for slips. Next he devoted attention to the layers. He attempted many sorts of grafting — flute-graft, crown-graft, shield-graft, herbaceous grafting, and whip-grafting. With what care he adjusted the two libers! how he tightened the ligatures! and what a heap of ointment it took to cover them again!

Twice a day he took his watering-pot and swung it over the plants as if he would have shed incense over them. In proportion as they became green under the water, which fell in a thin shower, it seemed to him as if he were quenching his own thirst and reviving along with them. Then, yielding to a feeling of intoxication, he snatched off the rose of the watering-pot, and poured out the liquid copiously from the open neck.

At the end of the elm hedge, near the female figure in plaster, stood a kind of log hut. Pécuchet locked up his implements there, and spent delightful hours there picking the berries, writing labels, and putting his little pots in order. He sat down to rest himself on a box at the door of the hut, and then planned fresh improvements.

He had put two clumps of geraniums at the end of the front steps. Between the cypresses and the distaff-shaped trees he had planted sunflowers; and as the plots were covered with buttercups, and all the walks with fresh sand, the garden was quite dazzling in its abundance of yellow hues.

But the bed swarmed with larvæ. In spite of the dead leaves placed there to heat the plants, under the painted frames and the whitened bell-glasses, only a stunted crop made its appearance. He failed with the broccoli, the mad-apples, the turnips, and the watercress, which he had tried to raise in a tub. After the thaw all the artichokes were ruined. The cabbages gave him some consolation. One of them especially excited his hopes. It expanded and shut up quickly, but ended by becoming prodigious and absolutely uneatable. No matter — Pécuchet was content with being the possessor of a monstrosity!

Then he tried his hand at what he regarded as the *summum* of art — the growing of melons.

He sowed many varieties of seed in plates filled with vegetable mould, which he deposited in the soil of the bed. Then he raised another bed, and when it had put forth its virgin buddings he transplanted the best of them, putting bell-glasses over them. He made all the cuttings in accordance with the precepts of *The Good Gardener*. He treated the flowers tenderly; he let the fruits grow in a tangle, and then selected one on either arm, removed the others, and, as soon as they were as large as nuts, he slipped a little board around their rind to prevent them from rotting by contact with dung. He heated them, gave them air, swept off the mist from the bell-glasses with his pocket-handkerchief, and, if he saw lowering clouds, he quickly brought out straw mattings to protect them.

He did not sleep at night on account of them. Many times he even got up out of bed, and, putting on his boots without stockings, shivering in his shirt, he traversed the entire garden to throw his own counterpane over his hotbed frames.

The melons ripened. Bouvard grinned when he saw the first of them. The second was no better; neither was the third. For each of them Pécuchet found a fresh excuse, down to the very last, which he threw out of the window, declaring that he could not understand it at all.

The fact was, he had planted some things beside others of a different species; and so the sweet melons got mixed up with the kitchen-garden melons, the big Portugal with the Grand Mogul variety; and this anarchy was completed by the proximity of the tomatoes — the result being abominable hybrids that had the taste of pumpkins.

Then Pécuchet devoted his attention to the flowers. He wrote to Dumouchel to get shrubs with seeds for him, purchased a stock of heath soil, and set to work resolutely.

But he planted passion-flowers in the shade and pansies in the sun, covered the hyacinths with dung, watered the lilies near their blossoms, tried to stimulate the fuchsias with glue, and actually roasted a pomegranate by exposing it to the heat of the kitchen fire.

When the weather got cold, he screened the eglantines under domes of strong paper which had been lubricated with a candle. They looked like sugarloaves held up by sticks.

The dahlias had enormous props; and between these straight lines could be seen the winding branches of a Sophora Japonica, which remained motionless, without either perishing or growing.

However, since even the rarest trees flourish in the gardens of the capital, they must needs grow successfully at Chavignolles; and Pécuchet provided himself with the Indian lilac, the Chinese rose, and the eucalyptus, then in the beginning of its fame. But all his experiments failed; and at each successive failure he was vastly astonished.

Bouvard, like him, met with obstacles. They held many consultations, opened a book, then passed on to another, and did not know what to resolve upon when there was so much divergence of opinion.

Thus, Puvis recommends marl, while the Roret Manual is opposed to it. As for plaster, in spite of the example of Franklin, Riefel and M. Rigaud did not appear to be in raptures about it.

According to Bouvard, fallow lands were a Gothic prejudice. However, Leclerc has noted cases in which they are almost indispensable. Gasparin mentions a native of Lyons who cultivated cereals in the same field for half a century: this upsets the theory as to the variation of crops. Tull extols tillage to the prejudice of rich pasture; and there is Major Beetson, who by means of tillage would abolish pasture altogether.

In order to understand the indications of the weather, they studied the clouds according to the classification of Luke Howard. They contemplated those which spread out like manes, those which resemble islands, and those which might be taken for mountains of snow — trying to distinguish the nimbus from the cirrus and the stratus from the cumulus. The shapes had altered even before they had discovered the names.

The barometer deceived them; the thermometer taught them nothing; and they had recourse to the device invented in the time of Louis XIV. by a priest from Touraine. A leech in a glass bottle was to rise up in the event of rain, to stick to the bottom in settled weather, and to move about if a storm were threatening. But nearly always the atmosphere contradicted the leech. Three others were put in along with it. The entire four behaved differently.

After many reflections, Bouvard realised that he had made a mistake. His property required cultivation on a large scale, the concentrated system, and he risked all the disposable capital that he had left — thirty thousand francs.

Stimulated by Pécuchet, he began to rave about pasture. In the pit for composts were heaped up branches of trees, blood, guts, feathers — everything that he could find. He used Belgian cordial, Swiss wash, lye, red herrings, wrack, rags; sent for guano, tried to manufacture it himself; and, pushing his principles to the farthest point, he would not suffer even urine or other refuse to be lost. Into his farmyard were carried carcasses of animals, with which he manured his lands. Their cut-up carrion strewed the fields. Bouvard smiled in the midst of this stench. A pump fixed to a dung-cart spattered the liquid manure over the crops. To those who assumed an air of disgust, he used to say, "But 'tis gold! 'tis gold!" And he was sorry that he had not still more manures. Happy the land where natural grottoes are found full of the excrements of birds!

The colza was thin; the oats only middling; and the corn sold very badly on account of its smell. A curious circumstance was that La Butte, with the stones cleared away from it at last, yielded less than before.

He deemed it advisable to renew his material. He bought a Guillaume scarifier, a Valcourt weeder, an English drill-machine, and the great swing-plough of Mathieu de Dombasle, but the ploughboy disparaged it.

"Do you learn to use it!"

"Well, do you show me!"

He made an attempt to show, but blundered, and the peasants sneered. He could never make them obey the command of the bell. He was incessantly bawling after them, rushing from one place to another, taking down observations in a note-book, making appointments and forgetting all about them — and his head was boiling over with industrial speculations.

He got the notion into his head of cultivating the poppy for the purpose of getting opium from it, and above all the milk-vetch, which he intended to sell under the name of "family coffee."

Finally, in order to fatten his oxen the more quickly, he blooded them for an entire fortnight.

He killed none of his pigs, and gorged them with salted oats. The pigsty soon became too narrow. The animals obstructed the farmyard, broke down the fences, and went gnawing at everything.

In the hot weather twenty-five sheep began to get spoiled, and shortly afterwards died. The same week three bulls perished owing to Bouvard's blood-lettings.

In order to destroy the maggots, he thought of shutting up the fowls in a hencoop on rollers, which two men had to push along behind the plough — a thing which had only the effect of breaking the claws of the fowls.

He manufactured beer with germander-leaves, and gave it to the harvesters as cider. The children cried, the women moaned, and the men raged. They all threatened to go, and Bouvard gave way to them.

However, to convince them of the harmlessness of his beverage, he swallowed several bottles of it in their presence; then he got cramps, but concealed his pains under a playful exterior. He even got the mixture sent to his own residence. He drank some of it with Pécuchet in the evening, and both of them tried to persuade themselves that it was good. Besides, it was necessary not to let it go to waste. Bouvard's colic having got worse, Germaine went for the doctor.

He was a grave-looking man, with a round forehead, and he began by frightening his patient. He thought the gentleman's attack of cholerine must be connected with the beer which people were talking about in the country. He desired to know what it was composed of, and found fault with it in scientific terms with shruggings of the shoulders. Pécuchet, who had supplied the recipe for it, was mortified.

In spite of pernicious limings, stinted redressings, and unseasonable weedings, Bouvard had in front of him, in the following year, a splendid crop of wheat. He thought of drying it by fermentation, in the Dutch fashion, on the Clap-Meyer system: that is to say, he got it thrown down all of a heap and piled up in stacks, which would be overturned as soon as the damp escaped from them, and then exposed to the open air — after which Bouvard went off without the least uneasiness.

Next day, while they were at dinner, they heard under the beech trees the beating of a drum. Germaine ran out to know what was the matter, but the man was by this time some distance away. Almost at the same moment the church-bell rang violently.

Bouvard and Pécuchet felt alarmed, and, impatient to learn what had happened, they rushed bareheaded along the Chavignolles road.

An old woman passed them. She knew nothing about it. They stopped a little boy, who replied:

"I believe it's a fire!"

And the drum continued beating and the bell ringing more loudly than before. At length they reached the nearest houses in the village. The grocer, some yards away, exclaimed:

"The fire is at your place!"

Pécuchet stepped out in double-quick time; and he said to Bouvard, who trotted by his side with equal speed:

"One, two! one, two!" — counting his steps regularly, like the chasseurs of Vincennes.

The road which they took was a continuously uphill one; the sloping ground hid the horizon from their view. They reached a height close to La Butte, and at a single glance the disaster was revealed to them.

All the stacks, here and there, were flaming like volcanoes in the midst of the plain, stripped bare in the evening stillness. Around the biggest of them there were about three hundred persons, perhaps; and under the command of M. Foureau, the mayor, in a tricoloured scarf, youngsters, with poles and crooks, were dragging down the straw from the top in order to save the rest of it.

Bouvard, in his eagerness, was near knocking down Madame Bordin, who happened to be there. Then, seeing one of his servant-boys, he loaded him with insults for not having given him warning. The servant-boy, on the contrary insults for not having given him warning. The servant-boy, on the contrary, through excess of zeal, had at first rushed to the house, then to the church, next to where Monsieur himself was staying, and had returned by the other road.

Bouvard lost his head. His entire household gathered round him, all talking together, and he forbade them to knock down the stacks, begged of them to give him some help, called for water, and asked where were the firemen.

"We've got to get them first!" exclaimed the mayor.

"That's your fault!" replied Bouvard.

He flew into a passion, and made use of improper language, and everyone wondered at the patience of M. Foureau, who, all the same, was a surly individual, as might be seen from his big lips and bulldog jaw.

The heat of the stacks became so great that nobody could come close to them any longer. Under the devouring flames the straw writhed with a crackling sound, and the grains of corn lashed one's face as if they were buckshot. Then the stack fell in a huge burning pile to the ground, and a shower of sparks flew out of it, while fiery waves floated above the red mass, which presented in its alternations of colour parts rosy as vermilion and others like clotted blood. The night had come, the wind was swelling; from time to time, a flake of fire passed across the black sky.

Bouvard viewed the conflagration with tears in his eyes, which were veiled by his moist lids, and his whole face was swollen with grief. Madame Bordin, while playing with the fringes of her green shawl, called him "Poor Monsieur!" and tried to console him. Since nothing could be done, he ought to do himself justice.

Pécuchet did not weep. Very pale, or rather livid, with open mouth, and hair stuck together with cold sweat, he stood apart, brooding. But the curé who had suddenly arrived on the scene, murmured, in a wheedling tone:

"Ah! really, what a misfortune! It is very annoying. Be sure that I enter into your feelings."

The others did not affect any regret. They chatted and smiled, with hands spread out before the flame. An old man picked out burning straws to light his pipe with; and one blackguard cried out that it was very funny.

"Yes, 'tis nice fun!" retorted Bouvard, who had just overheard him.

The fire abated, the burning piles subsided, and an hour later only ashes remained, making round, black marks on the plain. Then all withdrew.

Madame Bordin and the Abbé Jeufroy led MM. Bouvard and Pécuchet back to their abode.

On the way the widow addressed very polite reproaches to her neighbour on his unsociableness, and the ecclesiastic expressed his great surprise at not having up to the present known such a distinguished parishioner of his.

up to the present known such a distinguished parishioner of his.

When they were alone together, they inquired into the cause of the conflagration, and, in place of recognising, like the rest of the world, that the moist straw had taken fire of its own accord, they suspected that it was a case of revenge. It proceeded, no doubt, from Maître Gouy, or perhaps from the mole-catcher. Six months before Bouvard had refused to accept his services, and even maintained, before a circle of listeners, that his trade was a baneful one, and that the government ought to prohibit it. Since that time the man prowled about the locality. He wore his beard full-grown, and appeared to them frightful-looking, especially in the evening, when he presented himself outside the farmyard, shaking his long pole garnished with hanging moles.

The damage done was considerable, and in order to know their exact position, Pécuchet for eight days worked at Bouvard's books, which he pronounced to be "a veritable labyrinth." After he had compared the day-book, the correspondence, and the ledger covered with pencil-notes and discharges, he realised the truth: no goods to sell, no funds to get in, and in the cash-box zero. The capital showed a deficit of thirty-three thousand francs.

Bouvard would not believe it, and more than twenty times they went over the accounts. They always arrived at the same conclusion. Two years more of such farming, and their fortune would be spent on it! The only remedy was to sell out.

To do that, it was necessary to consult a notary. The step was a disagreeable one: Pécuchet took it on himself.

In M. Marescot's opinion, it was better not to put up any posters. He would speak about the farm to respectable clients, and would let them make proposals.

"Very well," said Bouvard, "we have time before us." He intended to get a tenant; then they would see. "We shall not be more unlucky than before; only now we are forced to practise economy!"

Pécuchet was disgusted with gardening, and a few days later he remarked:

"We ought to give ourselves up exclusively to tree culture — not for pleasure, but as a speculation. A pear which is the product of three soils is sometimes sold in the capital for five or six francs. Gardeners make out of apricots twenty-five thousand livres in the year! At St. Petersburg, during the winter, grapes are sold at a napoleon per grape. It is a beautiful industry, you must admit! And what does it cost? Attention, manuring, and a fresh touch of the pruning-knife."

It excited Bouvard's imagination so much that they sought immediately in their books for a nomenclature for purchasable plants, and, having selected names which appeared to them wonderful, they applied to a nurseryman from Falaise, who busied himself in supplying them with three hundred stalks for which he had not found a sale. They got a lock-smith for the props, an iron-worker for the fasteners, and a carpenter for the rests. The forms of the trees worker for the fasteners, and a carpenter for the rests. The forms of the trees were designed beforehand. Pieces of lath on the wall represented candelabra. Two posts at the ends of the plat-bands supported steel threads in a horizontal position; and in the orchard, hoops indicated the structure of vases, cone-shaped switches that of pyramids, so well that, in arriving in the midst of them, you imagined you saw pieces of some unknown machinery or the framework of a pyrotechnic apparatus.

The holes having been dug, they cut the ends of all the roots, good or bad, and buried them in a compost. Six months later the plants were dead. Fresh orders to the nurseryman, and fresh plantings in still deeper holes. But the rain softening the soil, the grafts buried themselves in the ground of their own accord, and the trees sprouted out.

When spring had come, Pécuchet set about the pruning of pear trees. He did not cut down the shoots, spared the superfluous side branches, and, persisting in trying to lay the "duchesses" out in a square when they ought to go in a string on one side, he broke them or tore them down invariably. As for the peach trees, he got mixed up with over-mother branches, under-mother branches, and second-under-mother branches. The empty and the full always presented themselves when they were not wanted, and it was impossible to obtain on an espalier a perfect rectangle, with six branches to the right and six to the left, not including the two principal ones, the whole forming a fine bit of herringbone work.

Bouvard tried to manage the apricot trees, but they rebelled. He lowered their stems nearly to a level with the ground; none of them shot up again. The cherry trees, in which he had made notches, produced gum.

At first, they cut very long, which destroyed the principal buds, and then very short, which led to excessive branching; and they often hesitated, not knowing how to distinguish between buds of trees and buds of flowers. They were delighted to have flowers, but when they recognised their mistake, they tore off three fourths of them to strengthen the remainder.

Incessantly they kept talking about "sap" and "cambium," "paling up," "breaking down," and "blinding of an eye." In the middle of their dining-room they had in a frame the list of their young growths, as if they were pupils, with a number which was repeated in the garden on a little piece of wood, at the foot of the tree. Out of bed at dawn, they kept working till nightfall with their twigs carried in their belts. In the cold mornings of spring, Bouvard wore his knitted vest under his blouse, and Pécuchet his old frock-coat under his packcloth wrapper; and the people passing by the open fence heard them coughing in the damp atmosphere.

Sometimes Pécuchet drew forth his manual from his pocket, and he studied a paragraph of it standing up with his grafting-tool near him in the attitude of the gardener who decorated the frontispiece of the book. This resemblance flattered him exceedingly, and made him entertain more esteem for the author.

Bouvard was continually perched on a high ladder before the pyramids. One day he was seized with dizziness, and, not daring to come down farther, he called on Pécuchet to come to his aid.

At length pears made their appearance, and there were plums in the orchard. Then they made use of all the devices which had been recommended to them against the birds. But the bits of glass made dazzling reflections, the clapper of the wind-mill woke them during the night, and the sparrows perched on the lay figure. They made a second, and even a third, varying the dress, but without any useful result.

However, they could hope for some fruit. Pécuchet had just given an intimation of the fact to Bouvard, when suddenly the thunder resounded and the rain fell — a heavy and violent downpour. The wind at intervals shook the entire surface of the espalier. The props gave way one after the other, and the unfortunate distaff-shaped trees, while swaying under the storm, dashed their pears against one another.

Pécuchet, surprised by the shower, had taken refuge in the hut. Bouvard stuck to the kitchen. They saw splinters of wood, branches, and slates whirling in front of them; and the sailors' wives who, on the sea-shore ten leagues away, were gazing out at the sea, had not eyes more wistful or hearts more anxious. Then, suddenly, the supports and wooden bars of espaliers facing one another, together with the rail-work, toppled down into the garden beds.

What a picture when they went to inspect the scene! The cherries and plums covered the grass, amid the dissolving hailstones. The Passe Colmars were destroyed, as well as the Besi des Vétérans and the Triomphes de Jordoigne. There was barely left amongst the apples even a few Bon Papas; and a dozen Tetons de Venus, the entire crop of peaches, rolled into the pools of water by the side of the box trees, which had been torn up by the roots.

After dinner, at which they ate very little, Pécuchet said softly:

"We should do well to see after the farm, lest anything has happened to it."

"Bah! only to find fresh causes of sadness."

"Perhaps so; for we are not exactly lucky."

And they made complaints against Providence and against nature.

Bouvard, with his elbows on the table, spoke in little whispers; and as all their troubles began to subside, their former agricultural projects came back to their recollection, especially the starch manufacture and the invention of a new sort of cheese.

Pécuchet drew a loud breath; and while he crammed several pinches of snuff into his nostrils, he reflected that, if fate had so willed it, he might now be a member of an agricultural society, might be delivering brilliant lectures, and might be referred to as an authority in the newspapers.

Bouvard cast a gloomy look around him.

"Faith! I'm anxious to get rid of all this, in order that we may settle down somewhere else!"

"Just as you like," said Pécuchet; and the next moment: "The authors recommend us to suppress every direct passage. In this way the sap is counteracted, and the tree necessarily suffers thereby. In order to be in good health, it would be necessary for it to have no fruit! However, those which we prune and which we never manure produce them not so big, it is true, but more luscious. I require them to give me a reason for this! And not only each kind demands its particular attentions, but still more each individual tree, according to climate, temperature, and a heap of things! Where, then, is the rule? and what hope have we of any success or profit?"

Bouvard replied to him, "You will see in Gasparin that the profit cannot exceed the tenth of the capital. Therefore, we should be doing better by investing this capital in a banking-house. At the end of fifteen years, by the accumulation of interest, we'd have it doubled, without having our constitutions ground down."

Pécuchet hung down his head.

"Arboriculture may be a humbug!"

"Like agriculture!" replied Bouvard.

Then they blamed themselves for having been too ambitious, and they resolved to husband thenceforth their labour and their money. An occasional pruning would suffice for the orchard. The counter-espaliers were forbidden, and dead or fallen trees should not be replaced; but he was going to do a nasty job — nothing less than to destroy all the others which remained standing. How was he to set about the work?

Pécuchet made several diagrams, while using his mathematical case. Bouvard gave him advice. They arrived at no satisfactory result. Fortunately, they discovered amongst their collection of books Boitard's work entitled *L'Architecte des Jardins*.

The author divides them into a great number of styles. First there is the melancholy and romantic style, which is distinguished by immortelles, ruins, tombs, and "a votive offering to the Virgin, indicating the place where a lord has fallen under the blade of an assassin." The terrible style is composed of overhanging rocks, shattered trees, burning huts; the exotic style, by planting Peruvian torch-thistles, "in order to arouse memories in a colonist or a traveller." The grave style should, like Ermenonville, offer a temple to philosophy. The majestic style is characterised by obelisks and triumphal arches; the mysterious style by moss and by grottoes; while a lake is appropriate to the dreamy style. There is even the fantastic style, of which the most beautiful specimen might have been lately seen in a garden at Würtemberg — for there might have been met successively a wild boar, a hermit, several sepulchres, and a barque detaching itself from the shore of its own accord, in order to lead you into a boudoir where water-spouts lave you when you are settling yourself down upon a sofa.

Before this horizon of marvels, Bouvard and Pécuchet experienced a kind of bedazzlement. The fantastic style appeared to them reserved for princes. The temple to philosophy would be cumbersome. The votive offering of the Madonna would have no signification, having regard to the lack of assassins, and — so much the worse for the colonists and the travellers — the American plants would cost too much. But the rocks were possible, as well as the shattered trees, the immortelles, and the moss; and in their enthusiasm for new ideas, after many experiments, with the assistance of a single man-servant, and for a trifling sum, they made for themselves a residence which had no analogy to it in the entire department.

The elm hedge, open here and there, allowed the light of day to fall on the thicket, which was full of winding paths in the fashion of a labyrinth. They had conceived the idea of making in the espalier wall an archway, through which the prospect could be seen. As the arch could not remain suspended, the result was an enormous breach and a fall of wreckage to the ground.

They had sacrificed the asparagus in order to build on the spot an Etruscan tomb, that is to say, a quadrilateral figure in dark plaster, six feet in height, and looking like a dog-hole. Four little pine trees at the corners flanked the monument, which was to be surmounted by an urn and enriched by an inscription.

In the other part of the kitchen garden, a kind of Rialto projected over a basin, presenting on its margin encrusted shells of mussels. The soil drank up the water — no matter! they would contrive a glass bottom which would keep it back.

The hut had been transformed into a rustic summer-house with the aid of coloured glass.

At the top of the hillock, six trees, cut square, supported a tin head-piece with the edges turned up, and the whole was meant to signify a Chinese pagoda.

They had gone to the banks of the Orne to select granite, and had broken it, marked the pieces with numbers, and carried them back themselves in a cart, then had joined the fragments together with cement, placing them one above the other in a mass; and in the middle of the grass arose a rock resembling a gigantic potato.

Something further was needed to complete the harmony. They pulled down the largest linden tree they had (however, it was three quarters dead), and laid it down the entire length of the garden, in such a way that one would imagine it had been carried thither by a torrent or levelled to the ground by a thunderstorm.

The task finished, Bouvard, who was on the steps, cried from a distance:

"Here! you can see best!" — "See best!" was repeated in the air.

Pécuchet answered:

"I am going there!" — "Going there!"

"Hold on! 'Tis an echo!" — "Echo!"

The linden tree had hitherto prevented it from being produced, and it was assisted by the pagoda, as it faced the barn, whose gables rose above the row of trees.

In order to try the effect of the echo, they amused themselves by giving vent to comical phrases: Bouvard yelled out language of a blackguard description.

He had been several times at Falaise, under the pretence of going there to receive money, and he always came back with little parcels, which he locked up in the chest of drawers. Pécuchet started one morning to repair to Bretteville, and returned very late with a basket, which he hid under his bed. Next day, when he awoke, Bouvard was surprised. The first two yew trees of the principal walk, which the day before were still spherical, had the appearance of peacocks, and a horn with two porcelain knobs represented the beak and the eyes. Pécuchet had risen at dawn, and trembling lest he should be discovered, he had cut the two trees according to the measurement given in the written instructions sent him by Dumouchel.

For six months the others behind the two above mentioned assumed the forms of pyramids, cubes, cylinders, stags, or armchairs; but there was nothing equal to the peacocks. Bouvard acknowledged it with many eulogies.

Under pretext of having forgotten his spade, he drew his comrade into the labyrinth, for he had profited by Pécuchet's absence to do, himself too, something sublime.

The gate leading into the fields was covered over with a coating of plaster, under which were ranged in beautiful order five or six bowls of pipes, representing Abd-el-Kader, negroes, naked women, horses' feet, and death's-heads.

"Do you understand my impatience?"

"I rather think so!"

And in their emotion they embraced each other.

Like all artists, they felt the need of being applauded, and Bouvard thought of giving a great dinner.

"Take care!" said Pécuchet, "you are going to plunge into entertainments. It is a whirlpool!"

The matter, however, was decided. Since they had come to live in the country, they had kept themselves isolated. Everybody, through eagerness to make their acquaintance, accepted their invitation, except the Count de Faverges, who had been summoned to the capital by business. They fell back on M. Hurel, his factotum.

Beljambe, the innkeeper, formerly a *chef* at Lisieux, was to cook certain dishes; Germaine had engaged the services of the poultry-wench; and Marianne, Madame Bordin's servant-girl, would also come. Since four o'clock the range was wide open; and the two proprietors, full of impatience, awaited their guests.

Hurel stopped under the beech row to adjust his frock-coat. Then the curé stepped forward, arrayed in a new cassock, and, a second later, M. Foureau, in a velvet waistcoat. The doctor gave his arm to his wife, who walked with some difficulty, assisting herself with her parasol. A stream of red ribbons fluttered behind them — it was the cap of Madame Bordin, who was dressed in a lovely robe of shot silk. The gold chain of her watch dangled over her breast, and rings glittered on both her hands, which were partly covered with black mittens. Finally appeared the notary, with a Panama hat on his head, and an eyeglass — for the professional practitioner had not stifled in him the man of the world. The drawing-room floor was waxed so that one could not stand upright there. The eight Utrecht armchairs had their backs to the wall; a round table in the centre supported the liqueur case; and above the mantelpiece could be seen the portrait of Père Bouvard. The shades, reappearing in the imperfect light, made the mouth grin and the eyes squint, and a slight mouldiness on the cheek-bones seemed to produce the illusion of real whiskers. The guests traced a resemblance between him and his son, and Madame Bordin added, glancing at Bouvard, that he must have been a very fine man.

After an hour's waiting, Pécuchet announced that they might pass into the dining-room.

The white calico curtains with red borders were, like those of the drawing-room, completely drawn before the windows, and the sun's rays passing across them, flung a brilliant light on the wainscotings, the only ornament of which was a barometer.

Bouvard placed the two ladies beside him, while Pécuchet had the mayor on his left and the curé on his right.

They began with the oysters. They had the taste of mud. Bouvard was annoyed, and was prodigal of excuses, and Pécuchet got up in order to go into the kitchen and make a scene with Beljambe.

During the whole of the first course, which consisted of a brill with a vol-au-vent and stewed pigeons, the conversation turned on the mode of manufacturing cider; after which they discussed what meats were digestible or indigestible. Naturally, the doctor was consulted. He looked at matters sceptically, like a man who had dived into the depths of science, and yet did not brook the slightest contradiction.

At the same time, with the sirloin of beef, Burgundy was supplied. It was muddy. Bouvard, attributing this accident to the rinsing of the bottles, got them to try three others without more success; then he poured out some St. Julien, manifestly not long enough in bottle, and all the guests were mute. Hurel smiled without discontinuing; the heavy steps of the waiters resounded over the flooring.

Madame Vaucorbeil, who was dumpy and waddling in her gait (she was near her confinement), had maintained absolute silence. Bouvard, not knowing what to talk to her about, spoke of the theatre at Caen.

"My wife never goes to the play," interposed the doctor.

M. Marescot observed that, when he lived in Paris, he used to go only to the Italian operas.

"For my part," said Bouvard, "I used to pay for a seat in the pit sometimes at the Vaudeville to hear farces."

Foureau asked Madame Bordin whether she liked farces.

"That depends on what kind they are," she said.

The mayor rallied her. She made sharp rejoinders to his pleasantries. Then she mentioned a recipe for preparing gherkins. However, her talents for housekeeping were well known, and she had a little farm, which was admirably looked after.

Foureau asked Bouvard, "Is it your intention to sell yours?"

"Upon my word, up to this I don't know what to do exactly."

"What! not even the Escalles piece?" interposed the notary. "That would suit you, Madame Bordin."

The widow replied in an affected manner:

"The demands of M. Bouvard would be too high."

"Perhaps someone could soften him."

"I will not try."

"Bah! if you embraced him?"

"Let us try, all the same," said Bouvard.

And he kissed her on both cheeks, amid the plaudits of the guests.

Almost immediately after this incident, they uncorked the champagne, whose detonations caused an additional sense of enjoyment. Pécuchet made a sign; the detonations caused an additional sense of enjoyment. Pécuchet made a sign, the curtains opened, and the garden showed itself.

In the twilight it looked dreadful. The rockery, like a mountain, covered the entire grass plot; the tomb formed a cube in the midst of spinaches, the Venetian bridge a circumflex accent over the kidney-beans, and the summer-house beyond a big black spot, for they had burned its straw roof to make it more poetic. The yew trees, shaped like stags or armchairs, succeeded to the tree that seemed thunder-stricken, extending transversely from the elm row to the arbour, where tomatoes hung like stalactites. Here and there a sunflower showed its yellow disk.62 The Chinese pagoda, painted red, seemed a lighthouse on the hillock. The peacocks' beaks, struck by the sun, reflected back the rays, and behind the railed gate, now freed from its boards, a perfectly flat landscape bounded the horizon.

In the face of their guests' astonishment Bouvard and Pécuchet experienced a veritable delight.

Madame Bordin admired the peacocks above all; but the tomb was not appreciated, nor the cot in flames, nor the wall in ruins. Then each in turn passed over the bridge. In order to fill the basin, Bouvard and Pécuchet had been carrying water in carts all the morning. It had escaped between the foundation stones, which were imperfectly joined together, and covered them over again with lime.

While they were walking about, the guests indulged in criticism.

"In your place that's what I'd have done." — "The green peas are late." — "Candidly, this corner is not all right." — "With such pruning you'll never get fruit."

Bouvard was obliged to answer that he did not care a jot for fruit.

As they walked past the hedge of trees, he said with a sly air:

"Ah! here's a lady that puts us out of countenance: a thousand excuses!"

It was a well-seasoned joke; everyone knew "the lady in plaster."

Finally, after many turns in the labyrinth, they arrived in front of the gate with the pipes. Looks of amazement were exchanged. Bouvard observed the faces of his guests, and, impatient to learn what was their opinion, asked:

"What do you say to it?"

Madame Bordin burst out laughing. All the others followed her example, after their respective ways — the curé giving a sort of cluck like a hen, Hurel coughing, the doctor mourning over it, while his wife had a nervous spasm, and Foureau, an unceremonious type of man, breaking an Abd-el-Kader and putting it into his pocket as a souvenir.

When they had left the tree-hedge, Bouvard, to astonish the company with the echo, exclaimed with all his strength:

echo, exclaimed with all his strength:

"Servant, ladies!"

Nothing! No echo. This was owing to the repairs made in the barn, the gable and the roof having been demolished.

The coffee was served on the hillock; and the gentlemen were about to begin a game of ball, when they saw in front of them, behind the railed fence, a man staring at them.

He was lean and sunburnt, with a pair of red trousers in rags, a blue waistcoat, no shirt, his black beard cut like a brush. He articulated, in a hoarse voice:

"Give me a glass of wine!"

The mayor and the Abbé Jeufroy had at once recognised him. He had formerly been a joiner at Chavignolles.

"Come, Gorju! take yourself off," said M. Foureau. "You ought not to be asking for alms."

"I! Alms!" cried the exasperated man. "I served seven years in the wars in Africa. I've only just got up out of a hospital. Good God! must I turn cutthroat?"

His anger subsided of its own accord, and, with his two fists on his hips, he surveyed the assembled guests with a melancholy and defiant air. The fatigue of bivouacs, absinthe, and fever, an entire existence of wretchedness and debauchery, stood revealed in his dull eyes. His white lips quivered, exposing the gums. The vast sky, empurpled, enveloped him in a blood-red light; and his obstinacy in remaining there caused a species of terror.

Bouvard, to have done with him, went to look for the remnants of a bottle. The vagabond swallowed the wine greedily, then disappeared amongst the oats, gesticulating as he went.

After this, blame was attached by those present to Bouvard. Such kindnesses encouraged disorder. But Bouvard, irritated at the ill-success of his garden, took up the defence of the people. They all began talking at the same time.

Foureau extolled the government. Hurel saw nothing in the world but landed property. The Abbé Jeufroy complained of the fact that it did not protect religion. Pécuchet attacked the taxes. Madame Bordin exclaimed at intervals, "As for me, I detest the Republic." And the doctor declared himself in favour of progress: "For, indeed, gentlemen, we have need of reforms."

"Possibly," said Foureau; "but all these ideas are injurious to business."

"I laugh at business!" cried Pécuchet.

Vaucorbeil went on: "At least let us make allowance for abilities."

Bouvard would not go so far.

"That is your opinion," replied the doctor; "there's an end of you, then! Good evening. And I wish you a deluge in order to sail in your basin!"

"And I, too, am going," said M. Foureau the next moment; and, pointing to the pocket where the Abd-el-Kader was, "If I feel the want of another, I'll come back."

The curé, before departing, timidly confided to Pécuchet that he did not think this imitation of a tomb in the midst of vegetables quite decorous. Hurel, as he withdrew, made a low bow to the company. M. Marescot had disappeared after dessert. Madame Bordin again went over her recipe for gherkins, promised a second for plums with brandy, and made three turns in the large walk; but, passing close to the linden tree, the end of her dress got caught, and they heard her murmuring:

"My God! what a piece of idiocy this tree is!"

At midnight the two hosts, beneath the arbour, gave vent to their resentment.

No doubt one might find fault with two or three little details here and there in the dinner; and yet the guests had gorged themselves like ogres, showing that it was not so bad. But, as for the garden, so much depreciation sprang from the blackest jealousy. And both of them, lashing themselves into a rage, went on:

"Ha! water is needed in the basin, is it? Patience! they may see even a swan and fishes in it!"

"They scarcely noticed the pagoda."

"To pretend that the ruins are not proper is an imbecile's view."

"And the tomb objectionable! Why objectionable? Hasn't a man the right to erect one in his own demesne? I even intend to be buried in it!"

"Don't talk like that!" said Pécuchet.

Then they passed the guests in review.

"The doctor seems to me a nice snob!"

"Did you notice the sneer of M. Marescot before the portrait?"

"What a low fellow the mayor is! When you dine in a house, hang it! you should show some respect towards the curios."

"Madame Bordin!" said Bouvard.

"Ah! that one's a schemer. Don't annoy me by talking about her."

Disgusted with society, they resolved to see nobody any more, but live exclusively by themselves and for themselves.

And they spent days in the wine-cellar, picking the tartar off the bottles, re-varnished all the furniture, enamelled the rooms; and each evening, as they watched the wood burning, they discussed the best system of fuel.

Through economy they tried to smoke hams, and attempted to do the washing themselves. Germaine, whom they inconvenienced, used to shrug her shoulders. When the time came for making preserves she got angry, and they took up their station in the bakehouse. It was a disused wash-house, where there was, under the faggots, a big, old-fashioned tub, excellently fitted for their projects, the ambition having seized them to manufacture preserves.

Fourteen glass bottles were filled with tomatoes and green peas. They coated the stoppers with quicklime and cheese, attached to the rims silk cords, and then plunged them into boiling water. It evaporated; they poured in cold water; the difference of temperature caused the bowls to burst. Only three of them were saved. Then they procured old sardine boxes, put veal cutlets into them, and plunged them into a vessel of boiling water. They came out as round as balloons. The cold flattened them out afterwards. To continue their experiments, they shut up in other boxes eggs, chiccory, lobsters, a hotchpotch of fish, and a soup! —and they applauded themselves like M. Appert, "on having fixed the seasons." Such discoveries, according to Pécuchet, carried him beyond the exploits of conquerors.

They improved upon Madame Bordin's pickles by spicing the vinegar with pepper; and their brandy plums were very much superior. By the process of steeping ratafia, they obtained raspberry and absinthe. With honey and angelica in a cask of Bagnolles, they tried to make Malaga wine; and they likewise undertook the manufacture of champagne! The bottles of Châblis diluted with water must burst of themselves. Then he no longer was doubtful of success.

Their studies widening, they came to suspect frauds in all articles of food. They cavilled with the baker on the colour of his bread; they made the grocer their enemy by maintaining that he adulterated his chocolate. They went to Falaise for a jujube, and, even under the apothecary's own eyes, they submitted his paste to the test of water. It assumed the appearance of a piece of bacon, which indicated gelatine.

After this triumph, their pride rose to a high pitch. They bought up the stock of a bankrupt distiller, and soon there arrived in the house sieves, barrels, funnels, skimmers, filters, and scales, without counting a bowl of wood with a ball attached and a Moreshead still, which required a reflecting-furnace with a basket funnel. They learned how sugar is clarified, and the different kinds of boilings, the large and the small system of boiling twice over, the blowing system, the methods of making up in balls, the reduction of sugar to a viscous state, and the making of burnt sugar. But they longed to use the still; and they broached the fine liqueurs, beginning with the aniseed cordial. The liquid nearly always drew away the materials with it, or rather they stuck together at the bottom; at other times they were mistaken as to the amount of the ingredients. Around them shone great copper pans; egg-shaped vessels projected their narrow openings; saucepans hung from the walls. Frequently one of them culled herbs on the table, while the other made the ball swing in the suspended bowl. They stirred the ladles; they tasted the mashes.

Bouvard, always in a perspiration, had no garment on save his shirt and his trousers, drawn up to the pit of his stomach by his short braces; but, giddy as a bird, he would forget the opening in the centre of the cucurbit, or would make the fire too strong.

Pécuchet kept muttering calculations, motionless in his long blouse, a kind of child's smock-frock with sleeves; and they looked upon themselves as very serious people engaged in very useful occupations.

At length they dreamed of a cream which would surpass all others. They would put into it coriander as in Kummel, kirsch as in Maraschino, hyssop as in Chartreuse, amber-seed as in Vespetro cordial, and sweet calamus as in Krambambuly; and it would be coloured red with sandalwood. But under what name should they introduce it for commercial purposes? — for they would want a name easy to retain and yet fanciful. Having turned the matter over a long time, they determined that it should be called "Bouvarine."

About the end of autumn stains appeared in the three glass bowls containing the preserves. The tomatoes and green peas were rotten. That must have been due to the way they had stopped up the vessels. Then the problem of stoppage tormented them. In order to try the new methods, they required money; and the farm had eaten up their resources.

Many times tenants had offered themselves; but Bouvard would not have them. His principal farm-servant carried on the cultivation according to his directions, with a risky economy, to such an extent that the crops diminished and everything was imperilled; and they were talking about their embarrassments when Maître Gouy entered the laboratory, escorted by his wife, who remained timidly in the background.

Thanks to all the dressings they had got, the lands were improved, and he had come to take up the farm again. He ran it down. In spite of all their toils, the profits were uncertain; in short, if he wanted it, that was because of his love for the country, and his regret for such good masters.

They dismissed him coldly. He came back the same evening.

Pécuchet had preached at Bouvard; they were on the point of giving way. Gouy asked for a reduction of rent; and when the others protested, he began to bellow rather than speak, invoking the name of God, enumerating his labours, and extolling his merits. When they called on him to state his terms, he hung down his head instead of answering. Then his wife, seated near the door, with a big basket on her knees, made similar protestations, screeching in a sharp voice, like a hen that has been hurt.

At last the lease was agreed on, the rent being fixed at three thousand francs a year — a third less than it had been formerly.

Before they had separated, Maître Gouy offered to buy up the stock, and the bargaining was renewed.

The valuation of the chattels occupied fifteen days. Bouvard was dying of fatigue. He let everything go for a sum so contemptible that Gouy at first opened his eyes wide, and exclaiming, "Agreed!" slapped his palm.

After which the proprietors, following the old custom, proposed that they should take a "nip" at the house, and Pécuchet opened a bottle of his Malaga, less through generosity than in the hope of eliciting eulogies on the wine.

But the husbandman said, with a sour look, "It's like liquorice syrup." And his wife, "in order to get rid of the taste," asked for a glass of brandy.

A graver matter engaged their attention. All the ingredients of the "Bouvarine" were now collected. They heaped them together in the cucurbit, with the alcohol, lighted the fire, and waited. However, Pécuchet, annoyed by the misadventure about the Malaga, took the tin boxes out of the cupboard and pulled the lid off the first, then off the second, and then off the third. He angrily flung them down, and called out to Bouvard. The latter had fastened the cock of the worm in order to try the effect on the preserves.

The disillusion was complete. The slices of veal were like boiled boot-soles; a muddy fluid had taken the place of the lobster; the fish-stew was unrecognisable; mushroom growths had sprouted over the soup, and an intolerable smell tainted the laboratory.

Suddenly, with the noise of a bombshell, the still burst into twenty pieces, which jumped up to the ceiling, smashing the pots, flattening out the skimmers and shattering the glasses. The coal was scattered about, the furnace was demolished, and next day Germaine found a spatula in the yard.

The force of the steam had broken the instrument to such an extent that the cucurbit was pinned to the head of the still.

Pécuchet immediately found himself squatted behind the vat, and Bouvard lay like one who had fallen over a stool. For ten minutes they remained in this posture, not daring to venture on a single movement, pale with terror, in the midst of broken glass. When they were able to recover the power of speech, they asked themselves what was the cause of so many misfortunes, and of the last above all? And they could understand nothing about the matter except that they were near being killed. Pécuchet finished with these words:

"It is, perhaps, because we do not know chemistry!"

CHAPTER III.

Amateur Chemists.

In order to understand chemistry they procured Regnault's course of lectures, and were, in the first place, informed that "simple bodies are perhaps compound." They are divided into metalloids and metals — a difference in which, the author observes, there is "nothing absolute." So with acids and bases, "a body being able to behave in the manner of acids or of bases, according to circumstances."

The notation appeared to them irregular. The multiple proportions perplexed Pécuchet.

"Since one molecule of *a*, I suppose, is combined with several particles of *b*, it seems to me that this molecule ought to be divided into as many particles; but, if it is divided, it ceases to be unity, the primordial molecule. In short, I do not understand."

"No more do I," said Bouvard.

And they had recourse to a work less difficult, that of Girardin, from which they acquired the certainty that ten litres of air weigh a hundred grammes, that lead does not go into pencils, and that the diamond is only carbon.

What amazed them above all is that the earth, as an element, does not exist.

They grasped the working of straw, gold, silver, the lye-washing of linen, the tinning of saucepans; then, without the least scruple, Bouvard and Pécuchet launched into organic chemistry.

What a marvel to find again in living beings the same substances of which the minerals are composed! Nevertheless they experienced a sort of humiliation at the idea that their own personality contained phosphorus, like matches; albumen, like the whites of eggs; and hydrogen gas, like street-lamps.

After colours and oily substances came the turn of fermentation. This brought them to acids — and the law of equivalents once more confused them. They tried to elucidate it by means of the atomic theory, which fairly swamped them.

In Bouvard's opinion instruments would have been necessary to understand all this. The expense was very great, and they had incurred too much already. But, no doubt, Dr. Vaucorbeil could enlighten them.

They presented themselves during his consultation hours.

"I hear you, gentlemen. What is your ailment?"

Pécuchet replied that they were not patients, and, having stated the object of their visit:

their visit.

"We want to understand, in the first place, the higher atomicity."

The physician got very red, then blamed them for being desirous to learn chemistry.

"I am not denying its importance, you may be sure; but really they are shoving it in everywhere! It exercises a deplorable influence on medicine."

And the authority of his language was strengthened by the appearance of his surroundings. Over the chimney-piece trailed some diachylum and strips for binding. In the middle of the desk stood the surgical case. A basin in a corner was full of probes, and close to the wall there was a representation of a human figure deprived of the skin.

Pécuchet complimented the doctor on it.

"It must be a lovely study, anatomy."

M. Vaucorbeil expatiated on the fascination he had formerly found in dissections; and Bouvard inquired what were the analogies between the interior of a woman and that of a man.

In order to satisfy him, the doctor fetched from his library a collection of anatomical plates.

"Take them with you! You can look at them more at your ease in your own house."

The skeleton astonished them by the prominence of the jawbone, the holes for the eyes, and the frightful length of the hands.

They stood in need of an explanatory work. They returned to M. Vaucorbeil's residence, and, thanks to the manual of Alexander Lauth, they learned the divisions of the frame, wondering at the backbone, sixteen times stronger, it is said, than if the Creator had made it straight (why sixteen times exactly?). The metacarpals drove Bouvard crazy; and Pécuchet, who was in a desperate state over the cranium, lost courage before the sphenoid, although it resembles a Turkish or "Turkesque" saddle.

As for the articulations, they were hidden under too many ligaments; so they attacked the muscles. But the insertions were not easily discovered; and when they came to the vertebral grooves they gave it up completely.

Then Pécuchet said:

"If we took up chemistry again, would not this be only utilising the laboratory?"

Bouvard protested, and he thought he had a recollection of artificial corpses being manufactured according to the custom of hot countries.

Barberou, with whom he communicated, gave him some information about the matter. For ten francs a month they could have one of the manikins of M. Auzoux; and the following week the carrier from Falaise deposited before their gate an oblong box.

Full of emotion, they carried it into the bakehouse. When the boards were unfastened, the straw fell down, the silver paper slipped off, and the anatomical figure made its appearance.

It was brick-coloured, without hair or skin, and variegated with innumerable strings, red, blue, and white. It did not look like a corpse, but rather like a kind of plaything, very ugly, very clean, and smelling of varnish.

They next took off the thorax; and they perceived the two lungs, like a pair of sponges, the heart like a big egg, slightly sidewise behind the diaphragm, the kidneys, the entire bundle of entrails.

"To work!" said Pécuchet. The day and the evening were spent at it. They had put blouses on, just as medical students do in the dissecting-rooms; and, by the light of three candles, they were working at their pieces of pasteboard, when a fist knocked at the door.

"Open!"

It was M. Foureau, followed by the keeper.

Germaine's masters were pleased to show him the manikin. She had rushed immediately to the grocer's shop to tell the thing, and the whole village now imagined that they had a real corpse concealed in their house. Foureau, yielding to the public clamour, had come to make sure about the fact. A number of persons, anxious for information, stood outside the porch.

When he entered, the manikin was lying on its side, and the muscles of the face, having been loosened, caused a monstrous protrusion, and looked frightful.

"What brings you here?" said Pécuchet.

Foureau stammered: "Nothing, nothing at all." And, taking up one of the pieces from the table, "What is this?"

"The buccinator," replied Bouvard.

Foureau said nothing, but smiled in a sly fashion, jealous of their having an amusement which he could not afford.

The two anatomists pretended to be pursuing their investigations. The people outside, getting bored with waiting, made their way into the bakehouse, and, as they began pushing one another a little, the table shook.

"Ah! this is too annoying," exclaimed Pécuchet. "Let us be rid of the public!"

The keeper made the busybodies take themselves off.

"Very well," said Bouvard; "we don't want anyone."

Foureau understood the allusion, and put it to them whether, not being medical men, they had the right to keep such an object in their possession. However, he was going to write to the prefect.

What a country district it was! There could be nothing more foolish, barbarous, and retrograde. The comparison which they instituted between themselves and the others consoled them — they felt a longing to suffer in the cause of science.

The doctor, too, came to see them. He disparaged the model as too far removed from nature, but took advantage of the occasion to give them a lecture.

Bouvard and Pécuchet were delighted; and at their request M. Vaucorbeil lent them several volumes out of his library, declaring at the same time that they would not reach the end of them. They took note of the cases of childbirth, longevity, obesity, and extraordinary constipation given in the *Dictionary of Medical Sciences*. Would that they had known the famous Canadian, De Beaumont, the polyphagi, Tarare and Bijou, the dropsical woman from the department of Eure, the Piedmontese who went every twenty days to the water-closet, Simon de Mirepoix, who was ossified at the time of his death, and that ancient mayor of Angoulême whose nose weighed three pounds!

The brain inspired them with philosophic reflections. They easily distinguished in the interior of it the *septum lucidum*, composed of two lamellæ, and the pineal gland, which is like a little red pea. But there were peduncles and ventricles, arches, columns, strata, ganglions, and fibres of all kinds, and the foramen of Pacchioni and the "body" of Paccini; in short, an inextricable mass of details, enough to wear their lives out.

Sometimes, in a fit of dizziness, they would take the figure completely to pieces, then would get perplexed about putting back each part in its proper place. This was troublesome work, especially after breakfast, and it was not long before they were both asleep, Bouvard with drooping chin and protruding stomach, and Pécuchet with his hands over his head and both elbows on the table.

Often at that moment M. Vaucorbeil, having finished his morning rounds, would open the door.

"Well, comrades, how goes anatomy?"

"Splendidly," they would answer.

Then he would put questions to them, for the pleasure of confusing them.

When they were tired of one organ they went on to another, in this way taking up and then throwing aside the heart, the stomach, the ear, the intestines; for the pasteboard manikin bored them to death, despite their efforts to become interested in him. At last the doctor came on them suddenly, just as they were nailing him up again in his box.

"Bravo! I expected that."

At their age they could not undertake such studies; and the smile that accompanied these words wounded them deeply.

What right had he to consider them incapable? Did science belong to this gentleman, as if he were himself a very superior personage? Then, accepting his challenge, they went all the way to Bayeux to purchase books there. What they required was physiology, and a second-hand bookseller procured for them the treatises of Richerand and Adelon, celebrated at the period.

All the commonplaces as to ages, sexes, and temperaments appeared to them of the highest importance. They were much pleased to learn that there are in the tartar of the teeth three kinds of animalcules, that the seat of taste is in the tongue, and the sensation of hunger in the stomach.

In order to grasp its functions better, they regretted that they had not the faculty of ruminating, as Montègre, M. Gosse, and the brother of Gerard had; and they masticated slowly, reduced the food to pulp, and insalivated it, accompanying in thought the alimentary mass passing into their intestines, and following it with methodical scrupulosity and an almost religious attention to its final consequences.

In order to produce digestion artificially, they piled up meat in a bottle, in which was the gastric juice of a duck, and they carried it under their armpits for a fortnight, without any other result save making their persons smell unpleasantly. You might have seen them running along the high-road in wet clothes under a burning sun. This was for the purpose of determining whether thirst is quenched by the application of water to the epidermis. They came back out of breath, both of them having caught cold.

Experiments in hearing, speech, and vision were then made in a lively fashion; but Bouvard made a show-off on the subject of generation.

Pécuchet's reserve with regard to this question had always surprised him. His friend's ignorance appeared to him so complete that Bouvard pressed him for an explanation, and Pécuchet, colouring, ended by making an avowal.

Some rascals had on one occasion dragged him into a house of ill-fame, from which he made his escape, preserving himself for the woman whom he might fall in love with some day. A fortunate opportunity had never come to him, so that, what with bashfulness, limited means, obstinacy, the force of custom, at fifty-two years, and in spite of his residence in the capital, he still possessed his virginity.

Bouvard found difficulty in believing it; then he laughed hugely, but stopped on perceiving tears in Pécuchet's eyes — for he had not been without attachments, having by turns been smitten by a rope-dancer, the sister-in-law of an architect, a bar-maid, and a young washerwoman; and the marriage had even been arranged when he had discovered that she was *enceinte* by another man.

Bouvard said to him:

"There is always a way to make up for lost time. Come — no sadness! I will take it on myself, if you like."

Pécuchet answered, with a sigh, that he need not think any more about it; and they went on with their physiology.

Is it true that the surfaces of our bodies are always letting out a subtle vapour? The proof of it is that the weight of a man is decreasing every minute. If each day what is wanting is added and what is excessive subtracted, the health would be kept in perfect equilibrium. Sanctorius, the discoverer of this law, spent half a century weighing his food every day together with its excretions, and took the weights himself, giving himself no rest, save for the purpose of writing down his computations.

They tried to imitate Sanctorius; but, as their scales could not bear the weight of both of them, it was Pécuchet who began.

He took his clothes off, in order not to impede the perspiration, and he stood on the platform of the scales perfectly naked, exposing to view, in spite of his modesty, his unusually long torso, resembling a cylinder, together with his short legs and his brown skin. Beside him, on his chair, his friend read for him:

"'Learned men maintain that animal heat is developed by the contractions of the muscles, and that it is possible by moving the thorax and the pelvic regions to raise the temperature of a warm bath.'"

Bouvard went to look for their bathing-tub, and, when everything was ready, plunged into it, provided with a thermometer. The wreckage of the distillery, swept towards the end of the room, presented in the shadow the indistinct outlines of a hillock. Every now and then they could hear the mice nibbling; there was a stale odour of aromatic plants, and finding it rather agreeable, they chatted serenely.

However, Bouvard felt a little cool.

"Move your members about!" said Pécuchet.

He moved them, without at all changing with the thermometer. "'Tis decidedly cold."

"I am not hot either," returned Pécuchet, himself seized with a fit of shivering. "But move about your pelvic regions — move them about!"

Bouvard spread open his thighs, wriggled his sides, balanced his stomach, puffed like a whale, then looked at the thermometer, which was always falling.

"I don't understand this at all! Anyhow, I am stirring myself!"

"Not enough!"

And he continued his gymnastics.

This had gone on for three hours when once more he grasped the tube.

"What! twelve degrees! Oh, good-night! I'm off to bed!"

A dog came in, half mastiff, half hound, mangy, with yellowish hair and lolling tongue.

What were they to do? There was no bell, and their housekeeper was deaf. They were quaking, but did not venture to budge, for fear of being bitten.

Pécuchet thought it a good idea to hurl threats at him, and at the same time to roll his eyes about.

Then the dog began to bark; and he jumped about the scales, in which Pécuchet, by clinging on to the cords and bending his knees, tried to raise himself up as high as ever he could.

"You're getting your death of cold up there!" said Bouvard; and he began making smiling faces at the dog, while pretending to give him things.

The dog, no doubt, understood these advances. Bouvard went so far as to caress him, stuck the animal's paws on his shoulders, and rubbed them with his finger-nails.

"Hollo! look here! there, he's off with my breeches!"

The dog cuddled himself upon them, and lay quiet.

At last, with the utmost precautions, they ventured the one to come down from the platform of the scales, and the other to get out of the bathing-tub; and when Pécuchet had got his clothes on again, he gave vent to this exclamation:

"You, my good fellow, will be of use for our experiments."

What experiments? They might inject phosphorus into him, and then shut him up in a cellar, in order to see whether he would emit fire through the nostrils.

But how were they to inject it? and furthermore, they could not get anyone to sell them phosphorus.

They thought of putting him under a pneumatic bell, of making him inhale gas, and of giving him poison to drink. All this, perhaps, would not be funny! Eventually, they thought the best thing they could do was to apply a steel magnet to his spinal marrow.

Bouvard, repressing his emotion, handed some needles on a plate to Pécuchet, who fixed them against the vertebræ. They broke, slipped, and fell on the ground. He took others, and quickly applied them at random. The dog burst his bonds, passed like a cannon-ball through the window, ran across the yard to the vestibule, and presented himself in the kitchen.

Germaine screamed when she saw him soaked with blood, and with twine round his paws.

Her masters, who had followed him, came in at the same moment. He made one spring and disappeared.

The old servant turned on them.

"This is another of your tomfooleries, I'm sure! And my kitchen, too! It's nice! This perhaps will drive him mad! People are in jail who are not as bad as you!"

They got back to the laboratory in order to examine the magnetic needles.

Not one of them had the least particle of the filings drawn off.

Then Germaine's assumption made them uneasy. He might get rabies, come back unawares, and make a dash at them.

Next day they went making inquiries everywhere, and for many years they turned up a by-path whenever they saw in the open country a dog at all resembling this one.

Their other experiments were unsuccessful. Contrary to the statements in the text-books, the pigeons which they bled, whether their stomachs were full or empty, died in the same space of time. Kittens sunk under water perished at the end of five minutes; and a goose, which they had stuffed with madder, presented periostea that were perfectly white.

The question of nutrition puzzled them.

How did it happen that the same juice is produced by bones, blood, lymph, and excrementitious materials? But one cannot follow the metamorphoses of an article of food. The man who uses only one of them is chemically equal to him who absorbs several. Vauquelin, having made a calculation of all the lime contained in the oats given as food to a hen, found a greater quantity of it in the shells of her eggs. So, then, a creation of substance takes place. In what way? Nothing is known about it.

It is not even known what is the strength of the heart. Borelli says it is what is necessary for lifting a weight of one hundred and eighty thousand pounds, while Kiell estimates it at about eight ounces; and from this they drew the conclusion that physiology is — as a well-worn phrase expresses it — the romance of medicine. As they were unable to understand it, they did not believe in it.

A month slipped away in doing nothing. Then they thought of their garden. The dead tree, displayed in the middle of it, was annoying, and accordingly, they squared it. This exercise fatigued them. Bouvard very often found it necessary to get the blacksmith to put his tools in order.

One day, as he was making his way to the forge, he was accosted by a man carrying a canvas bag on his back, who offered to sell him almanacs, pious books, holy medals, and lastly, the *Health Manual* of François Raspail.

This little book pleased him so much that he wrote to Barberou to send him the large work. Barberou sent it on, and in his letter mentioned an apothecary's shop for the prescriptions given in the work.

The simplicity of the doctrine charmed them. All diseases proceed from worms. They spoil the teeth, make the lungs hollow, enlarge the liver, ravage the intestines, and cause noises therein. The best thing for getting rid of them is camphor. Bouvard and Pécuchet adopted it. They took it in snuff, they chewed it and distributed it in cigarettes, in bottles of sedative water and pills of aloes. They even undertook the care of a hunchback. It was a child whom they had come across one fair-day. His mother, a beggar woman, brought him to them every morning. They rubbed his hump with camphorated grease, placed there for twenty minutes a mustard poultice, then covered it over with diachylum, and, in order to make sure of his coming back, gave him his breakfast.

As his mind was fixed on intestinal worms, Pécuchet noticed a singular spot on Madame Bordin's cheek. The doctor had for a long time been treating it with bitters. Round at first as a twenty-sou piece, this spot had enlarged and formed a red circle. They offered to cure it for her. She consented, but made it a condition that the ointment should be applied by Bouvard. She took a seat before the window, unfastened the upper portion of her corset, and remained with her cheek turned up, looking at him with a glance of her eye which would have been dangerous were it not for Pécuchet's presence. In the prescribed doses, and in spite of the horror felt with regard to mercury, they administered calomel. One month afterwards Madame Bordin was cured. She became a propagandist in their behalf, and the tax-collector, the mayor's secretary, the mayor himself, and everybody in Chavignolles sucked camphor by the aid of quills.

However, the hunchback did not get straight; the collector gave up his cigarette; it stopped up his chest twice as much. Foureau made complaints that the pills of aloes gave him hemorrhoids. Bouvard got a stomachache, and Pécuchet fearful headaches. They lost confidence in Raspail, but took care to say nothing about it, fearing that they might lessen their own importance.

They now exhibited great zeal about vaccine, learned how to bleed people over cabbage leaves, and even purchased a pair of lancets.

They accompanied the doctor to the houses of the poor, and then consulted their books. The symptoms noticed by the writers were not those which they had just observed. As for the names of diseases, they were Latin, Greek, French — a medley of every language. They are to be counted by thousands; and Linnæus's system of classification, with its genera and its species, is exceedingly convenient; but how was the species to be fixed? Then they got lost in the philosophy of medicine. They raved about the life-principle of Van Helmont, vitalism, Brownism, organicism, inquired of the doctor whence comes the germ of scrofula, towards what point the infectious miasma inclines, and the means in all cases of disease to distinguish the cause from its effects.

"The cause and the effect are entangled in one another," replied Vaucorbeil.

His want of logic disgusted them — and they went by themselves to visit the sick, making their way into the houses on the pretext of philanthropy. At the further end of rooms, on dirty mattresses, lay persons with faces hanging on one further end of rooms, on dirty mattresses, lay persons with faces hanging on one side, others who had them swollen or scarlet, or lemon-coloured, or very violet-hued, with pinched nostrils, trembling mouths, rattlings in the throat, hiccoughs, perspirations, and emissions like leather or stale cheese.

They read the prescriptions of their physicians, and were surprised at the fact that anodynes are sometimes excitants, and emetics purgatives, that the same remedy suits different ailments, and that a malady may disappear under opposite systems of treatment.

Nevertheless, they gave advice, got on the moral hobby again, and had the assurance to auscultate. Their imagination began to ferment. They wrote to the king, in order that there might be established in Calvados an institute of nurses for the sick, of which they would be the professors.

They would go to the apothecary at Bayeux (the one at Falaise had always a grudge against them on account of the jujube affair), and they gave him directions to manufacture, like the ancients, *pila purgatoria*, that is to say, medicaments in the shape of pellets, which, by dint of handling, become absorbed in the individual.

In accordance with the theory that by diminishing the heat we impede the watery humours, they suspended in her armchair to the beams of the ceiling a woman suffering from meningitis, and they were swinging her with all their force when the husband, coming on the scene, kicked them out. Finally, they scandalised the curé thoroughly by introducing the new fashion of thermometers in the rectum.

Typhoid fever broke out in the neighbourhood. Bouvard declared that he would not have anything to do with it. But the wife of Gouy, their farmer, came groaning to them. Her man was a fortnight sick, and M. Vaucorbeil was neglecting him. Pécuchet devoted himself to the case.

Lenticular spots on the chest, pains in the joints, stomach distended, tongue red, these were all symptoms of dothienenteritis. Recalling the statement of Raspail that by taking away the regulation of diet the fever may be suppressed, he ordered broth and a little meat.

The doctor suddenly made his appearance. His patient was on the point of eating, with two pillows behind his back, between his wife and Pécuchet, who were sustaining him. He drew near the bed, and flung the plate out through the window, exclaiming:

"This is a veritable murder!"

"Why?"

"You perforate the intestine, since typhoid fever is an alteration of its follicular membrane."

"Not always!"

"Not always!"

And a dispute ensued as to the nature of fevers. Pécuchet believed that they were essential in themselves; Vaucorbeil made them dependent on our bodily organs.

"Therefore, I remove everything that might excite them excessively."

"But regimen weakens the vital principle."

"What twaddle are you talking with your vital principle? What is it? Who has seen it?"

Pécuchet got confused.

"Besides," said the physician, "Gouy does not want food."

The patient made a gesture of assent under his cotton nightcap.

"No matter, he requires it!"

"Not a bit! his pulse is at ninety-eight!"

"What matters about his pulse?" And Pécuchet proceeded to give authorities.

"Let systems alone!" said the doctor.

Pécuchet folded his arms. "So then, you are an empiric?"

"By no means; but by observing — — "

"But if one observes badly?"

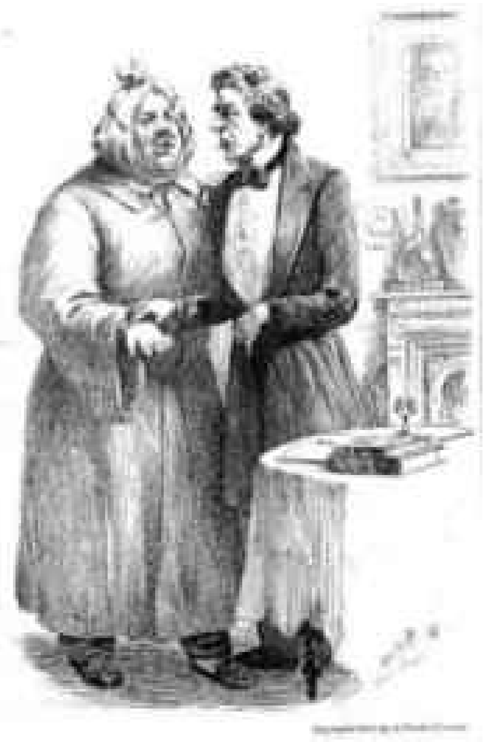
Vaucorbeil took this phrase for an allusion to Madame Bordin's skin eruption — a story about which the widow had made a great outcry, and the recollection of which irritated him.

"To start with, it is necessary to have practised."

"Those who revolutionised the science did not practise — Van Helmont, Boerhaave, Broussais himself."

Without replying, Vaucorbeil stooped towards Gouy, and raising his voice:

"Which of us two do you select as your doctor?"



Mutually becoming afflicted, they looked at their tongues

The patient, who was falling asleep, perceived angry faces, and began to blubber. His wife did not know either what answer to make, for the one was clever, but the other had perhaps a secret.

"Very well," said Vaucorbeil, "since you hesitate between a man furnished with a diploma — — "

Pécuchet sneered.

"Why do you laugh?"

"Because a diploma is not always an argument."

The doctor saw himself attacked in his means of livelihood, in his prerogative, in his social importance. His wrath gave itself full vent.

"We shall see that when you are brought up before the courts for illegally practising medicine!" Then, turning round to the farmer's wife, "Get him killed by this gentleman at your ease, and I'm hanged if ever I come back to your house!"

And he dashed past the beech trees, shaking his walking-stick as he went.

When Pécuchet returned, Bouvard was himself in a very excited state. He had just had a visit from Foureau, who was exasperated about his hemorrhoids. Vainly had he contended that they were a safeguard against every disease. Foureau, who would listen to nothing, had threatened him with an action for damages. He lost his head over it.

Pécuchet told him the other story, which he considered more serious, and was a little shocked at Bouvard's indifference.

Gouy, next day, had a pain in his abdomen. This might be due to the ingestion of the food. Perhaps Vaucorbeil was not mistaken. A physician, after all, ought to have some knowledge of this! And a feeling of remorse took possession of Pécuchet! He was afraid lest he might turn out a homicide.

For prudence' sake they sent the hunchback away. But his mother cried a great deal at his losing the breakfast, not to speak of the infliction of having made them come every day from Barneval to Chavignolles.

Foureau calmed down, and Gouy recovered his strength. At the present moment the cure was certain. A success like this emboldened Pécuchet.

"If we studied obstetrics with the aid of one of these manikins — — "

"Enough of manikins!"

"There are half-bodies made with skin invented for the use of students of midwifery. It seems to me that I could turn over the fœtus!"

But Bouvard was tired of medicine.

"The springs of life are hidden from us, the ailments too numerous, the remedies problematical. No reasonable definitions are to be found in the authors of health, disease, diathesis, or even pus."

However, all this reading had disturbed their brains.

Bouvard, whenever he caught a cold, imagined he was getting inflammation of the lungs. When leeches did not abate a stitch in the side, he had recourse to a blister, whose action affected the kidneys. Then he fancied he had an attack of stone.

Pécuchet caught lumbago while lopping the elm trees, and vomited after his dinner — a circumstance which frightened him very much. Then, noticing that his colour was rather yellow, suspected a liver complaint, and asked himself, "Have I pains?" and ended by having them.

Mutually becoming afflicted, they looked at their tongues, felt each other's pulses, made a change as to the use of mineral waters, purged themselves — and dreaded cold, heat, wind, rain, flies, and principally currents of air.

Pécuchet imagined that taking snuff was fatal. Besides, sneezing sometimes causes the rupture of an aneurism; and so he gave up the snuff-box altogether. From force of habit he would thrust his fingers into it, then suddenly become conscious of his imprudence.

As black coffee shakes the nerves, Bouvard wished to give up his half cup; but he used to fall asleep after his meals, and was afraid when he woke up, for prolonged sleep is a foreboding of apoplexy.

Their ideal was Cornaro, that Venetian gentleman who by the regulation of his diet attained to an extreme old age. Without actually imitating him, they might take the same precautions; and Pécuchet took down from his bookshelves a *Manual of Hygiene* by Doctor Morin.

"How had they managed to live till now?"

Their favourite dishes were there prohibited. Germaine, in a state of perplexity, did not know any longer what to serve up to them.

Every kind of meat had its inconveniences. Puddings and sausages, red herrings, lobsters, and game are "refractory." The bigger a fish is, the more gelatine it contains, and consequently the heavier it is. Vegetables cause acidity, macaroni makes people dream; cheeses, "considered generally, are difficult of digestion." A glass of water in the morning is "dangerous." Everything you eat or drink being accompanied by a similar warning, or rather by these words: "Bad!" "Beware of the abuse of it!" "Does not suit everyone!" Why bad? Wherein is the abuse of it? How are you to know whether a thing like this suits you?

What a problem was that of breakfast! They gave up coffee and milk on account of its detestable reputation, and, after that, chocolate, for it is "a mass of indigestible substances." There remained, then, tea. But "nervous persons ought to forbid themselves the use of it completely." Yet Decker, in the seventeenth century, prescribed twenty decalitres of it a day, in order to cleanse the spongy parts of the pancreas.

This direction shook Morin in their estimation, the more so as he condemns every kind of head-dress, hats, women's caps, and men's caps — a requirement which was revolting to Pécuchet.

Then they purchased Becquerel's treatise, in which they saw that pork is in itself "a good aliment," tobacco "perfectly harmless in its character," and coffee "indispensable to military men."

Up to that time they had believed in the unhealthiness of damp places. Not at all! Casper declares them less deadly than others. One does not bathe in the sea without refreshing one's skin. Bégin advises people to cast themselves into it while they are perspiring freely. Wine taken neat after soup is considered excellent for the stomach; Levy lays the blame on it of impairing the teeth. Lastly, the flannel waistcoat — that safeguard, that preserver of health, that palladium cherished by Bouvard and inherent to Pécuchet, without any evasions or fear of the opinions of others — is considered unsuitable by some authors for men of a plethoric and sanguine temperament!

What, then, is hygiene? "Truth on this side of the Pyrenees, error on the other side," M. Levy asserts; and Becquerel adds that it is not a science.

So then they ordered for their dinner oysters, a duck, pork and cabbage, cream, a Pont l'Evêque cheese, and a bottle of Burgundy. It was an enfranchisement, almost a revenge; and they laughed at Cornaro! It was only an imbecile that could be tyrannised over as he had been! What vileness to be always thinking about prolonging one's existence! Life is good only on the condition that it is enjoyed.

"Another piece?"

"Yes, I will."

"So will I."

"Your health."

"Yours."

"And let us laugh at the rest of the world."

They became elated. Bouvard announced that he wanted three cups of coffee, though he was not a military man. Pécuchet, with his cap over his ears, took pinch after pinch, and sneezed without fear; and, feeling the need of a little champagne, they ordered Germaine to go at once to the wine-shop to buy a bottle of it. The village was too far away; she refused. Pécuchet got indignant:

"I command you — understand! — I command you to hurry off there."

She obeyed, but, grumbling, resolved soon to have done with her masters; they were so incomprehensible and fantastic.

Then, as in former days, they went to drink their coffee and brandy on the hillock.

The harvest was just over, and the stacks in the middle of the fields rose in dark heaps against the tender blue of a calm night. Nothing was astir about the farms. Even the crickets were no longer heard. The fields were all wrapped in sleep.

The pair digested while they inhaled the breeze which blew refreshingly against their cheeks.

Above, the sky was covered with stars; some shone in clusters, others in a row, or rather alone, at certain distances from each other. A zone of luminous dust, extending from north to south, bifurcated above their heads. Amid these splendours there were vast empty spaces, and the firmament seemed a sea of azure with archipelagoes and islets.

"What a quantity!" exclaimed Bouvard.

"We do not see all," replied Pécuchet. "Behind the Milky Way are the nebulæ, and behind the nebulæ, stars still; the most distant is separated from us by three millions of myriamètres."

He had often looked into the telescope of the Place Vendôme, and he recalled the figures.

"The sun is a million times bigger than the earth; Sirius is twelve times the size of the sun; comets measure thirty-four millions of leagues."

"'Tis enough to make one crazy!" said Bouvard.

He lamented his ignorance, and even regretted that he had not been in his youth at the Polytechnic School.

Then Pécuchet, turning him in the direction of the Great Bear, showed him the polar star; then Cassiopeia, whose constellation forms a Y; Vega, of the Lyra constellation — all scintillating; and at the lower part of the horizon, the red Aldebaran.

Bouvard, with his head thrown back, followed with difficulty the angles, quadrilaterals, and pentagons, which it is necessary to imagine in order to make yourself at home in the sky.

Pécuchet went on:

"The swiftness of light is eighty thousand leagues a second; one ray of the Milky Way takes six centuries to reach us; so that a star at the moment we observe it may have disappeared. Several are intermittent; others never come back; and they change positions. Every one of them is in motion; every one of them is passing on."

"However, the sun is motionless."

"It was believed to be so formerly. But to-day men of science declare that it rushes towards the constellation of Hercules!"

This put Bouvard's ideas out of order — and, after a minute's reflection:

"Science is constructed according to the data furnished by a corner of space. Perhaps it does not agree with all the rest that we are ignorant of, which is much vaster, and which we cannot discover."

vaster, and which we cannot discover.

So they talked, standing on the hillock, in the light of the stars; and their conversation was interrupted by long intervals of silence.

At last they asked one another whether there were men in the stars. Why not? And as creation is harmonious, the inhabitants of Sirius ought to be gigantic, those of Mars of middle stature, those of Venus very small. Unless it should be everywhere the same thing. There are merchants up there, and gendarmes; they trade there; they fight there; they dethrone kings there.

Some shooting stars slipped suddenly, describing on the sky, as it were, the parabola of an enormous rocket.

"Stop!" said Bouvard; "here are vanishing worlds."

Pécuchet replied:

"If ours, in its turn, kicks the bucket, the citizens of the stars will not be more moved than we are now. Ideas like this may pull down your pride."

"What is the object of all this?"

"Perhaps it has no object."

"However — — " And Pécuchet repeated two or three times "however," without finding anything more to say.

"No matter. I should very much like to know how the universe is made."

"That should be in Buffon," returned Bouvard, whose eyes were closing.

"I am not equal to any more of it. I am going to bed."

The *Epoques de la Nature* informed them that a comet by knocking against the sun had detached one portion of it, which became the earth. First, the poles had cooled; all the waters had enveloped the globe; they subsided into the caverns; then the continents separated from each other, and the beasts and man appeared.

The majesty of creation engendered in them an amazement infinite as itself. Their heads got enlarged. They were proud of reflecting on such lofty themes.

The minerals ere long proved wearisome to them, and for distraction they sought refuge in the *Harmonies* of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre.

Vegetable and terrestrial harmonies, aërial, aquatic, human, fraternal, and even conjugal — every one of them is here dealt with, not omitting the invocations to Venus, to the Zephyrs, and to the Loves. They exhibited astonishment at fishes having fins, birds wings, seeds an envelope; full of that philosophy which discovers virtuous intentions in Nature, and regards her as a kind of St. Vincent de Paul, always occupied in performing acts of benevolence.

Then they wondered at her prodigies, the water-spouts, the volcanoes, the virgin forests; and they bought M. Depping's work on the *Marvels and Beauties of Nature in France*. Cantal possesses three of them, Hérault five, Burgundy two

— no more, while Dauphiné reckons for itself alone up to fifteen marvels. But soon we shall find no more of them. The grottoes with stalactites are stopped up; the burning mountains are extinguished; the natural ice-houses have become heated; and the old trees in which they said mass are falling under the leveller's axe, or are on the point of dying.

Their curiosity next turned towards the beasts.

They re-opened their Buffon, and got into ecstasies over the strange tastes of certain animals.

But all the books are not worth one personal observation. They hurried out into the farmyard, and asked the labourers whether they had seen bulls consorting with mares, hogs seeking after cows, and the males of partridges doing strange things among themselves.

"Never in their lives." They thought such questions even a little queer for gentlemen of their age.

They took a fancy to try abnormal unions. The least difficult is that of the he-goat and the ewe. Their farmer had not a he-goat in his possession; a neighbour lent his, and, as it was the period of rutting, they shut the two beasts up in the press, concealing themselves behind the casks in order that the event might be quietly accomplished.

Each first ate a little heap of hay; then they ruminated; the ewe lay down, and she bleated continuously, while the he-goat, standing erect on his crooked legs, with his big beard and his drooping ears, fixed on her his eyes, which glittered in the shade.

At length, on the evening of the third day, they deemed it advisable to assist nature, but the goat, turning round on Pécuchet, hit him in the lower part of the stomach with his horns. The ewe, seized with fear, began turning about in the press as if in a riding-school. Bouvard ran after her, threw himself on top of her to hold her, and fell on the ground with both hands full of wool.

They renewed their experiments on hens and a drake, on a mastiff and a sow, in the hope that monsters might be the result, not understanding anything about the question of species.

This word denotes a group of individuals whose descendants reproduce themselves, but animals classed as of different species may possess the power of reproduction, while others comprised in the same species have lost the capacity. They flattered themselves that they would obtain clear ideas on this subject by studying the development of germs; and Pécuchet wrote to Dumouchel in order to get a microscope.

By turns they put on the glass surface hairs, tobacco, finger-nails, and a fly's claw, but they forgot the drop of water which is indispensable; a*t* other times it was the little lamel, and they pushed each other forward, and put the instrument out of order; then, when they saw only a haze, they blamed the optician. They went so far as to have doubts about the microscope. Perhaps the discoveries that have been attributed to it are not so certain?

Dumouchel, in sending on the invoice to them, begged of them to collect on his account some serpent-stones and sea-urchins, of which he had always been an admirer, and which were commonly found in country districts. In order to interest them in geology he sent them the *Lettres* of Bertrand with the *Discours* of Cuvier on the revolutions of the globe.

After the perusal of these two works they imagined the following state of things:

First, an immense sheet of water, from which emerged promontories speckled with lichens, and not one human being, not one sound. It was a world silent, motionless, and bare; there long plants swayed to and fro in a fog that resembled the vapour of a sweating-room. A red sun overheated the humid atmosphere. Then volcanoes burst forth; the igneous rocks sent up mountains of liquid flame, and the paste of the streaming porphyry and basalt began to congeal. Third picture: in shallow seas have sprung up isles of madrepore; a cluster of palm trees overhangs them here and there. There are shells like carriage wheels, tortoises three metres in length, lizards of sixty feet; amphibians stretch out amid the reeds their ostrich necks and crocodile jaws; winged serpents fly about. Finally, on the large continents, huge mammifers make their appearance, their limbs misshapen, like pieces of wood badly squared, their hides thicker than plates of bronze, or else shaggy, thick-lipped, with manes and crooked fangs. Flocks of mammoths browsed on the plains where, since, the Atlantic has been; the paleotherium, half horse, half tapir, overturned with his tumbling the ant-hills of Montmartre; and the *cervus giganteus* trembled under the chestnut trees at the growls of the bears of the caverns, who made the dog of Beaugency, three times as big as a wolf, yelp in his den.

All these periods had been separated from one another by cataclysms, of which the latest is our Deluge. It was like a drama of fairyland in several acts, with man for apotheosis.

They were astounded when they learned that there existed on stones imprints of dragon-flies and birds' claws; and, having run through one of the Roret manuals, they looked out for fossils.

One afternoon, as they were turning over some flints in the middle of the high-road, the curé passed, and, accosting them in a wheedling tone:

"These gentlemen are busying themselves with geology. Very good."

For he held this science in esteem. It confirmed the authority of the Scriptures by proving the fact of the Deluge.

Bouvard talked about coprolites, which are animals' excrements in a petrified state.

The Abbé Jeufroy appeared surprised at the matter. After all, if it were so, it was a reason the more for wondering at Providence.

Pécuchet confessed that, up to the present, their inquiries had not been fruitful; and yet the environs of Falaise, like all Jurassic soils, should abound in remains of animals.

"I have been told," replied the Abbé Jeufroy, "that the jawbone of an elephant was at one time found at Villers."

However, one of his friends, M. Larsoneur, advocate, member of the bar at Lisieux, and archæologist, would probably supply them with information about it. He had written a history of Port-en-Bessin, in which the discovery of an alligator was noticed.

Bouvard and Pécuchet exchanged glances: the same hope took possession of both; and, in spite of the heat, they remained standing a long time questioning the ecclesiastic, who sheltered himself from the sun under a blue cotton umbrella. The lower part of his face was rather heavy, and his nose was pointed. He was perpetually smiling, or bent his head while he closed his eyelids.

The church-bell rang the Angelus.

"A very good evening, gentlemen! You will allow me, will you not?"

At his suggestion they waited three weeks for Larsoneur's reply. At length it arrived.

The name of the man who had dug up the tooth of the mastodon was Louis Bloche. Details were wanting. As to his history, it was comprised in one of the volumes of the Lisieux Academy, and he could not lend his own copy, as he was afraid of spoiling the collection. With regard to the alligator, it had been discovered in the month of November, 1825, under the cliff of the Hachettes of Sainte-Honorine, near Port-en-Bessin, in the arrondissement of Bayeux. His compliments followed.

The obscurity that enshrouded the mastodon provoked in Pécuchet's mind a longing to search for it. He would fain have gone to Villers forthwith.

Bouvard objected that, to save themselves a possibly useless and certainly expensive journey, it would be desirable to make inquiries. So they wrote a letter to the mayor of the district, in which they asked him what had become of one Louis Bloche. On the assumption of his death, his descendants or collateral relations might be able to enlighten them as to his precious discovery, when he made it, and in what public place in the township this testimony of primitive times was deposited? Were there any prospects of finding similar ones? What was the cost of a man and a car for a day?

And vainly did they make application to the deputy-mayor, and then to the first municipal councillor. They received no news from Villers. No doubt the inhabitants were jealous about their fossils — unless they had sold them to the English. The journey to the Hachettes was determined upon.

Bouvard and Pécuchet took the public conveyance from Falaise to Caen. Then a covered car brought them from Caen to Bayeux; from Bayeux, they walked to Port-en-Bessin.

They had not been deceived. There were curious stones alongside the Hachettes; and, assisted by the directions of the innkeeper, they succeeded in reaching the strand.

The tide was low. It exposed to view all its shingles, with a prairie of sea-wrack as far as the edge of the waves. Grassy slopes cut the cliff, which was composed of soft brown earth that had hardened and become in its lower strata a rampart of greyish stone. Tiny streams of water kept flowing down incessantly, while in the distance the sea rumbled. It seemed sometimes to suspend its throbbing, and then the only sound heard was the murmur of the little springs.

They staggered over the sticky soil, or rather they had to jump over holes.

Bouvard sat down on a mound overlooking the sea and contemplated the waves, thinking of nothing, fascinated, inert. Pécuchet brought him over to the side of the cliff to show him a serpent-stone incrusted in the rock, like a diamond in its gangue. It broke their nails; they would require instruments; besides, night was coming on. The sky was empurpled towards the west, and the entire sea-shore was wrapped in shadow. In the midst of the blackish wrack the pools of water were growing wider. The sea was coming towards them. It was time to go back.

Next day, at dawn, with a mattock and a pick, they made an attack on their fossil, whose covering cracked. It was an ammonite nodosus, corroded at the ends but weighing quite six pounds; and in his enthusiasm Pécuchet exclaimed:

"We cannot do less than present it to Dumouchel!"

They next chanced upon sponges, lampshells, orks — but no alligator. In default of it, they were hoping to get the backbone of a hippopotamus or an ichthyosaurus, the bones of any animals whatever that were contemporaneous with the Deluge, when they discovered against the cliff, at a man's height, outlines which assumed the form of a gigantic fish.

They deliberated as to the means by which they could get possession of it. Bouvard would extricate it at the top, while Pécuchet beneath would demolish the rock in order to make it descend gently without spoiling it.

Just as they were taking breath they saw above their heads a custom-house officer in a cloak, who was gesticulating with a commanding air.

"Well! What! Let us alone!" And they went on with their work, Bouvard on the tips of his toes, trapping with his mattock, Pécuchet, with his back bent, digging with his pick.

But the custom-house officer reappeared farther down, in an open space between the rocks, making repeated signals. They treated him with contempt. An oval body bulged out under the thinned soil, and sloped down, was on the point of slipping.

Suddenly another individual, with a sabre, presented himself.

"Your passports?"

It was the field-guard on his rounds, and, at the same instant, the man from the custom-house came up, having hastened through a ravine.

"Take them into custody for me, Père Morin, or the cliff will fall in!"

"It is for a scientific object," replied Pécuchet.

Then a mass of stone fell, grazing them all four so closely that a little more and they were dead men.

When the dust was scattered, they recognised the mast of a ship, which crumbled under the custom-house officer's boot.

Bouvard said with a sigh, "We did no great harm!"

"One should not do anything within the fortification limits," returned the guard.

"In the first place, who are you, in order that I may take out a summons against you?"

Pécuchet refused to give his name, cried out against such injustice**.**

"Don't argue! follow me!"

As soon as they reached the port a crowd of ragamuffins ran after them. Bouvard, red as a poppy, put on an air of dignity; Pécuchet, exceedingly pale, darted furious looks around; and these two strangers, carrying stones in their pocket-handkerchiefs, did not present a good appearance. Provisionally, they put them up at the inn, whose master on the threshold guarded the entrance. Then the mason came to demand back his tools. They were paying him for them, and still there were incidental expenses! — and the field-guard did not come back! Wherefore? At last, a gentleman, who wore the cross of the Legion of Honour, set them free, and they went away, after giving their Christian names, surnames, and their domicile, with an undertaking on their part to be more circumspect in future.

Besides a passport, they were in need of many things, and before undertaking fresh explorations they consulted the *Geological Traveller's Guide*, by Boné. It was necessary to have, in the first place, a good soldier's knapsack, then a surveyor's chain, a file, a pair of nippers, a compass, and three hammers, passed into a belt, which is hidden under the frock-coat, and "thus preserves you from that original appearance which one ought to avoid on a journey." As for the stick, Pécuchet freely adopted the tourist's stick, six feet high, with a long iron point. Bouvard preferred the walking-stick umbrella, or many-branched umbrella, the knob of which is removed in order to clasp on the silk, which is kept separately in a little bag. They did not forget strong shoes with gaiters, "two pairs of braces" each "on account of perspiration," and, although one cannot present himself everywhere in a cap, they shrank from the expense of "one of those folding hats, which bear the name of 'Gibus,' their inventor."

The same work gives precepts for conduct: "To know the language of the part of the country you visit": they knew it. "To preserve a modest deportment": this was their custom. "Not to have too much money about you": nothing simpler. Finally, in order to spare yourself embarrassments of all descriptions, it is a good thing to adopt the "description of engineer."

"Well, we will adopt it."

Thus prepared, they began their excursions; were sometimes eight days away, and passed their lives in the open air.

Sometimes they saw, on the banks of the Orne, in a rent, pieces of rock raising their slanting surfaces between some poplar trees and heather; or else they were grieved by meeting, for the entire length of the road, nothing but layers of clay. In the presence of a landscape they admired neither the series of perspectives nor the depth of the backgrounds, nor the undulations of the green surfaces; but that which was not visible to them, the underpart, the earth: and for them every hill was only a fresh proof of the Deluge.

To the Deluge mania succeeded that of erratic blocks. The big stones alone in the fields must come from vanished glaciers, and they searched for moraines and faluns.

They were several times taken for pedlars on account of their equipage; and when they had answered that they were "engineers," a dread seized them — the usurpation of such a title might entail unpleasant consequences.

At the end of each day they panted beneath the weight of their specimens; but they dauntlessly carried them off home with them. They were deposited on the doorsteps, on the stairs, in the bedrooms, in the dining-room, and in the kitchen; and Germaine used to make a hubbub about the quantity of dust. It was no slight task, before pasting on the labels, to know the names of the rocks; the variety of colours and of grain made them confuse argil and marl, granite and gneiss, quartz and limestone.

And the nomenclature plagued them. Why Devonian, Cambrian, Jurassic —

as if the portions of the earth designated by these names were not in other places as well as in Devonshire, near Cambridge, and in the Jura? It was impossible to know where you are there. That which is a system for one is for another a stratum, for a third a mere layer. The plates of the layers get intermingled and entangled in one another; but Omalius d'Halloy warns you not to believe in geological divisions.

This statement was a relief to them; and when they had seen coral limestones in the plain of Caen, phillades at Balleroy, kaolin at St. Blaise, and oolite everywhere, and searched for coal at Cartigny and for mercury at Chapelle-en-Juger, near St. Lô, they decided on a longer excursion: a journey to Havre, to study the fire-resisting quartz and the clay of Kimmeridge.

As soon as they had stepped out of the packet-boat they asked what road led under the lighthouses.

Landslips blocked up the way; it was dangerous to venture along it.

A man who let out vehicles accosted them, and offered them drives around the neighbourhood — Ingouville, Octeville, Fécamp, Lillebonne, "Rome, if it was necessary."

His charges were preposterous, but the name of Falaise had struck them. By turning off the main road a little, they could see Étretat, and they took the coach that started from Fécamp to go to the farthest point first.

In the vehicle Bouvard and Pécuchet had a conversation with three peasants, two old women, and a seminarist, and did not hesitate to style themselves engineers.

They stopped in front of the bay. They gained the cliff, and five minutes after, rubbed up against it to avoid a big pool of water which was advancing like a gulf stream in the middle of the sea-shore. Then they saw an archway which opened above a deep grotto; it was sonorous and very bright, like a church, with descending columns and a carpet of sea-wrack all along its stone flooring.

This work of nature astonished them, and as they went on their way collecting shells, they started considerations as to the origin of the world.

Bouvard inclined towards Neptunism; Pécuchet, on the contrary, was a Plutonist.

"The central fire had broken the crust of the globe, heaved up the masses of earth, and made fissures. It is, as it were, an interior sea, which has its flow and ebb, its tempests; a thin film separates us from it. We could not sleep if we thought of all that is under our heels. However, the central fire diminishes, and the sun grows more feeble, so much so that one day the earth will perish of refrigeration. It will become sterile; all the wood and all the coal will be converted into carbonic acid, and no life can subsist there."

"We haven't come to that yet," said Bouvard.

"Let us expect it," returned Pécuchet.

No matter, this end of the world, far away as it might be, made them gloomy; and, side by side, they walked in silence over the shingles.

The cliff, perpendicular, a mass of white, striped with black here and there by lines of flint, stretched towards the horizon like the curve of a rampart five leagues wide. An east wind, bitter and cold, was blowing; the sky was grey; the sea greenish and, as it were, swollen. From the highest points of rocks birds took wing, wheeled round, and speedily re-entered their hiding places. Sometimes a stone, getting loosened, would rebound from one place to another before reaching them.

Pécuchet continued his reflections aloud:

"Unless the earth should be destroyed by a cataclysm! We do not know the length of our period. The central fire has only to overflow."

"However, it is diminishing."

"That does not prevent its explosions from having produced the Julia Island, Monte Nuovo, and many others."

Bouvard remembered having read these details in Bertrand.

"But such catastrophes do not happen in Europe."

"A thousand pardons! Witness that of Lisbon. As for our own countries, the coal-mines and the firestone useful for war are numerous, and may very well, when decomposing, form the mouths of volcanoes. ***M***oreover, the volcanoes always burst near the sea."

Bouvard cast his eyes over the waves, and fancied he could distinguish in the distance a volume of smoke ascending to the sky.

"Since the Julia Island," returned Pécuchet, "has disappeared, the fragments of the earth formed by the same cause will perhaps have the same fate. An islet in the Archipelago is as important as Normandy and even as Europe."

Bouvard imagined Europe swallowed up in an abyss.

"Admit," said Pécuchet, "that an earthquake takes place under the British Channel: the waters rush into the Atlantic; the coasts of France and England, tottering on their bases, bend forward and reunite — and there you are! The entire space between is wiped out."

Instead of answering, Bouvard began walking so quickly that he was soon a hundred paces away from Pécuchet. Being alone, the idea of a cataclysm disturbed him. He had eaten nothing since morning; his temples were throbbing. All at once the soil appeared to him to be shaking, and the cliff over his head to be bending forward at its summit. At that moment a shower of gravel rolled down from the top of it. Pécuchet observed him scampering off wildly, understood his fright, and cried from a distance:

"Stop! stop! The period is not completed!"

And in order to overtake him he made enormous bounds with the aid of his tourist's stick, all the while shouting out:

"The period is not completed! The period is not completed!"

Bouvard, in a mad state, kept running without stopping. The many-branched umbrella fell down, the skirts of his coat were flying, the knapsack was tossing on his back. He was like a tortoise with wings about to gallop amongst the rocks. One bigger than the rest concealed him from view.

Pécuchet reached the spot out of breath, saw nobody, then returned in order to gain the fields through a defile, which Bouvard, no doubt, had taken.

This narrow ascent was cut by four great steps in the cliff, as lofty as the heights of two men, and glittering like polished alabaster.

At an elevation of fifty feet Pécuchet wished to descend; but as the sea was dashing against him in front, he set about clambering up further. At the second turning, when he beheld the empty space, terror froze him. As he approached the third, his legs were becoming weak. Volumes of air vibrated around him, a cramp gripped his epigastrium; he sat down on the ground, with eyes closed, no longer having consciousness of aught save the beatings of his own heart, which were suffocating him; then he flung his tourist's stick on the ground, and on his hands and knees resumed his ascent. But the three hammers attached to his belt began to press against his stomach; the stones with which he had crammed his pockets knocked against his sides; the peak of his cap blinded him; the wind increased in violence. At length he reached the upper ground, and there found Bouvard, who had ascended higher through a less difficult defile. A cart picked them up. They forgot all about Étretat.

The next evening, at Havre, while waiting for the packet-boat, they saw at the tail-end of a newspaper, a short scientific essay headed, "On the Teaching of Geology." This article, full of facts, explained the subject as it was understood at the period.

"There has never been a complete cataclysm of the globe, but the same space has not always the same duration, and is exhausted more quickly in one place than in another. Lands of the same age contain different fossils, just as depositaries very far distant from each other enclose similar ones. The ferns of former times are identical with the ferns of to-day. Many contemporary zoophytes are found again in the most ancient layers. To sum up, actual modifications explain former convulsions. The same causes are always in operation; Nature does not proceed by leaps; and the periods, Brogniart asserts, are, after all, only abstractions."

Cuvier's work up to this time had appeared to them surrounded with the glory of an aureola at the summit of an incontestable science. It was sapped. Creation had no longer the same discipline, and their respect for this great man diminished.

From biographies and extracts they learned something of the doctrines of Lamarck and Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire.

All that was contrary to accepted ideas, the authority of the Church.

Bouvard experienced relief as if from a broken yoke. "I should like to see now what answer Citizen Jeufroy would make to me about the Deluge!"

They found him in his little garden, where he was awaiting the members of the vestry, who were to meet presently with a view to the purchase of a chasuble.

"These gentlemen wish for — — ?"

"An explanation, if you please."

And Bouvard began, "What means, in Genesis, 'The abyss which was broken up,' and 'The cataracts of heaven?' For an abyss does not get broken up, and heaven has no cataracts."

The abbé closed his eyelids, then replied that it was always necessary to distinguish between the sense and the letter. Things which shock you at first, turn out right when they are sifted.

"Very well, but how do you explain the rain which passed over the highest mountains — those that are two leagues in height. Just think of it! Two leagues! — a depth of water that makes two leagues!"

And the mayor, coming up, added:

"Bless my soul! What a bath!"

"Admit," said Bouvard, "that Moses exaggerates like the devil."

The curé had read Bonald, and answered:

"I am ignorant of his motives; it was, no doubt, to inspire a salutary fear in the people of whom he was the leader."

"Finally, this mass of water — where did it come from?"

"How do I know? The air was changed into water, just as happens every day."

Through the garden gate they saw M. Girbal, superintendent of taxes, making his way in, together with Captain Heurtaux, a landowner; and Beljambe, the innkeeper, appeared, assisting with his arm Langlois, the grocer, who walked with difficulty on account of his catarrh.

Pécuchet, without bestowing a thought on them, took up the argument:

"Excuse me, M. Jeufroy. The weight of the atmosphere, science demonstrates to us, is equal to that of a mass of water which would make a covering of ten metres around the globe. Consequently, if all the air that had been condensed fell down in a liquid state, it would augment very little the mass of existing waters."

The vestrymen opened their eyes wide, and listened.

The curé lost patience. "Will you deny that shells have been found on the mountains? What put them there, if not the Deluge? They are not accustomed, I believe, to grow out of the ground of themselves alone, like carrots!" And this joke having made the assembly laugh, he added, pressing his lips together: "Unless this be another discovery of science!"

Bouvard was pleased to reply by referring to the rising of mountains, the theory of Elie de Beaumont.

"Don't know him," returned the abbé.

Foureau hastened to explain: "He is from Caen. I have seen him at the Prefecture."

"But if your Deluge," Bouvard broke in again, "had sent shells drifting, they would be found broken on the surface, and not at depths of three hundred metres sometimes."

The priest fell back on the truth of the Scriptures, the tradition of the human race, and the animals discovered in the ice in Siberia.

"That does not prove that man existed at the time they did."

The earth, in Pécuchet's view, was much older. "The delta of the Mississippi goes back to tens of thousands of years. The actual epoch is a hundred thousand, at least. The lists of Manetho — — "

The Count de Faverges appeared on the scene. They were all silent at his approach.

"Go on, pray. What were you talking about?"

"These gentlemen are wrangling with me," replied the abbé.

"About what?"

"About Holy Writ, M. le Comte."

Bouvard immediately pleaded that they had a right, as geologists, to discuss religion.

"Take care," said the count; "you know the phrase, my dear sir, 'A little science takes us away from it, a great deal leads us back to it'?" And in a tone at the same time haughty and paternal: "Believe me, you will come back to it! you will come back to it!"

"Perhaps so. But what were we to think of a book in which it is pretended that the light was created before the sun? as if the sun were not the sole cause of light!"

"You forget the light which we call boreal," said the ecclesiastic.

Bouvard, without answering this point, strongly denied that light could be on one side and darkness on the other, that evening and morning could have existed when there were no stars, or that the animals made their appearance suddenly, instead of being formed by crystallisation.

As the walks were too narrow, while gesticulating, they trod on the flower-borders. Langlois took a fit of coughing.

The captain exclaimed: "You are revolutionaries!"

Girbal: "Peace! peace!"

The priest: "What materialism!"

Foureau: "Let us rather occupy ourselves with our chasuble!"

"No! let me speak!" And Bouvard, growing more heated, went on to say that man was descended from the ape!

All the vestrymen looked at each other, much amazed, and as if to assure themselves that they were not apes.

Bouvard went on: "By comparing the fœtus of a woman, of a bitch, of a bird, of a frog — — "

"Enough!"

"For my part, I go farther!" cried Pécuchet. "Man is descended from the fishes!"

There was a burst of laughter. But without being disturbed:

"The *Telliamed* — an Arab book — — "

"Come, gentlemen, let us hold our meeting."

And they entered the sacristy.

The two comrades had not given the Abbé Jeufroy such a fall as they expected; therefore, Pécuchet found in him "the stamp of Jesuitism." His "boreal light," however, caused them uneasiness. They searched for it in Orbigny's manual.

"This is a hypothesis to explain why the vegetable fossils of Baffin's Bay resemble the Equatorial plants. We suppose, in place of the sun, a great luminous source of heat which has now disappeared, and of which the Aurora Borealis is but perhaps a vestige."

Then a doubt came to them as to what proceeds from man, and, in their perplexity, they thought of Vaucorbeil.

He had not followed up his threats. As of yore, he passed every morning before their grating, striking all the bars with his walking-stick one after the other.

Bouvard watched him, and, having stopped him, said he wanted to submit to him a curious point in anthropology.

"Do you believe that the human race is descended from fishes?"

"What nonsense!"

"From apes rather — isn't that so?"

"Directly, that is impossible!"

On whom could they depend? For, in fact, the doctor was not a Catholic!

They continued their studies, but without enthusiasm, being weary of eocene and miocene, of Mount Jurillo, of the Julia Island, of the mammoths of Siberia and of the fossils, invariably compared in all the authors to "medals which are authentic testimonies," so much so that one day Bouvard threw his knapsack on the ground, declaring that he would not go any farther.

"Geology is too defective. Some parts of Europe are hardly known. As for the rest, together with the foundation of the oceans, we shall always be in a state of ignorance on the subject."

Finally, Pécuchet having pronounced the word "mineral kingdom":

"I don't believe in it, this mineral kingdom, since organic substances have taken part in the formation of flint, of chalk, and perhaps of gold. Hasn't the diamond been charcoal; coal a collection of vegetables? and by heating it to I know not how many degrees, we get the sawdust of wood, so that everything passes, everything goes to ruin, and everything is transformed. Creation is carried out in an undulating and fugitive fashion. Much better to occupy ourselves with something else."

He stretched himself on his back and went to sleep, while Pécuchet, with his head down and one knee between his hands, gave himself up to his own reflections.

A border of moss stood on the edge of a hollow path overhung by ash trees, whose slender tops quivered; angelica, mint, and lavender exhaled warm, pungent odours. The atmosphere was drowsy, and Pécuchet, in a kind of stupor, dreamed of the innumerable existences scattered around him — of the insects that buzzed, the springs hidden beneath the grass, the sap of plants, the birds in their nests, the wind, the clouds — of all Nature, without seeking to unveil her mysteries, enchanted by her power, lost in her grandeur.

"I'm thirsty!" said Bouvard, waking up.

"So am I. I should be glad to drink something."

"That's easy," answered a man who was passing by in his shirt-sleeves with a plank on his shoulder. And they recognised that vagabond to whom, on a former occasion, Bouvard had given a glass of wine. He seemed ten years younger, wore his hair foppishly curled, his moustache well waxed, and twisted his figure about in quite a Parisian fashion. After walking about a hundred paces, he opened the gateway of a farmyard, threw down his plank against the wall, and led them into a large kitchen.

"Mélie! are you there, Mélie?"

A young girl appeared. At a word from him she drew some liquor and came back to the table to serve the gentlemen.

Her wheat-coloured head bands fell over a cap of grey linen. Her worn dress

Her wheat-coloured head-bands fell over a cap of grey linen. Her worn dress of poor material fell down her entire body without a crease, and, with her straight nose and blue eyes, she had about her something dainty, rustic, and ingenuous.

"She's nice, eh?" said the joiner, while she was bringing them the glasses. "You might take her for a lady dressed up as a peasant-girl, and yet able to do rough work! Poor little heart, come! When I'm rich I'll marry you!"

"You are always talking nonsense, *Monsieur* Gorju," she replied, in a soft voice, with a slightly drawling accent.

A stable boy came in to get some oats out of an old chest, and let the lid fall down so awkwardly that it made splinters of wood fly upwards.

Gorju declaimed against the clumsiness of all "these country fellows," then, on his knees in front of the article of furniture, he tried to put the piece in its place. Pécuchet, while offering to assist him, traced beneath the dust faces of notable characters.

It was a chest of the Renaissance period, with a twisted fringe below, vine branches in the corner, and little columns dividing its front into five portions. In the centre might be seen Venus-Anadyomene standing on a shell, then Hercules and Omphale, Samson and Delilah, Circe and her swine, the daughters of Lot making their father drunk; and all this in a state of complete decay, the chest being worm-eaten, and even its right panel wanting.

Gorju took a candle, in order to give Pécuchet a better view of the left one, which exhibited Adam and Eve under a tree in Paradise in an affectionate attitude.

Bouvard equally admired the chest.

"If you keep it they'll give it to you cheap."

They hesitated, thinking of the necessary repairs.

Gorju might do them, cabinet-making being a branch of his trade.

"Let us go. Come on."

And he dragged Pécuchet towards the fruit-garden, where Madame Castillon, the mistress, was spreading linen.

Mélie, when she had washed her hands, took from where it lay beside the window her lace-frame, sat down in the broad daylight and worked.

The lintel of the door enclosed her like a picture-frame. The bobbins disentangled themselves under her fingers with a sound like the clicking of castanets. Her profile remained bent.

Bouvard asked her questions as to her family, the part of the country she came from, and the wages she got.

She was from Ouistreham, had no relations alive, and earned seventeen shillings a month; in short, she pleased him so much that he wished to take her shillings a month; in short, she pleased him so much that he wished to take her into his service to assist old Germaine.

Pécuchet reappeared with the mistress of the farm-house, and, while they went on with their bargaining, Bouvard asked Gorju in a very low tone whether the girl would consent to become their servant.

"Lord, yes."

"However," said Bouvard, "I must consult my friend."

The bargain had just been concluded, the price fixed for the chest being thirty-five francs. They were to come to an understanding about the repairs.

They had scarcely got out into the yard when Bouvard spoke of his intentions with regard to Mélie.

Pécuchet stopped (in order the better to reflect), opened his snuff-box, took a pinch, and, wiping the snuff off his nose:

"Indeed, it is a good idea. Good heavens! yes! why not? Besides, you are the master."

Ten minutes afterwards, Gorju showed himself on the top of a ditch, and questioning them: "When do you want me to bring you the chest?"

"To-morrow."

"And about the other question, have you both made up your minds?"

"It's all right," replied Pécuchet.

CHAPTER IV.

Researches in Archæology.

Six months later they had become archæologists, and their house was like a museum.

In the vestibule stood an old wooden beam. The staircase was encumbered with the geological specimens, and an enormous chain was stretched on the ground all along the corridor. They had taken off its hinges the door between the two rooms in which they did not sleep, and had condemned the outer door of the second in order to convert both into a single apartment.

As soon as you crossed the threshold, you came in contact with a stone trough (a Gallo-Roman sarcophagus); the ironwork next attracted your attention. Fixed to the opposite wall, a warming-pan looked down on two andirons and a hearthplate representing a monk caressing a shepherdess. On the boards all around, you saw torches, locks, bolts, and nuts of screws. The floor was rendered invisible beneath fragments of red tiles. A table in the centre exhibited curiosities of the rarest description: the shell of a Cauchoise cap, two argil urns, medals, and a phia***l*** of opaline glass. An upholstered armchair had at its back a triangle worked with guipure. A piece of a coat of mail adorned the partition to the right, and on the other side sharp spikes sustained in a horizontal position a unique specimen of a halberd.

The second room, into which two steps led down, contained the old books which they had brought with them from Paris, and those which, on their arrival, they had found in a press. The leaves of the folding-doors had been removed hither. They called it the library.

The back of the door was entirely covered by the genealogical tree of the Croixmare family. In the panelling on the return side, a pastel of a lady in the dress of the period of Louis XV. made a companion picture to the portrait of Père Bouvard. The casing of the glass was decorated with a sombrero of black felt, and a monstrous galoche filled with leaves, the remains of a nest.

Two cocoanuts (which had belonged to Pécuchet since his younger days) flanked on the chimney-piece an earthenware cask on which a peasant sat astride. Close by, in a straw basket, was a little coin brought up by a duck.

In front of the bookcase stood a shell chest of drawers trimmed with plush. The cover of it supported a cat with a mouse in its mouth — a petrifaction from St. Allyre; a work-box, also of shell work, and on this box a decanter of brandy contained a Bon Chrétien pear.

contained a Bon Chrétien pear.

But the finest thing was a statue of St. Peter in the embrasure of the window. His right hand, covered with a glove of apple-green colour, was pressing the key of Paradise. His chasuble, ornamented with fleurs-de-luce, was azure blue, and his tiara very yellow, pointed like a pagoda. He had flabby cheeks, big round eyes, a gaping mouth, and a crooked nose shaped like a trumpet. Above him hung a canopy made of an old carpet in which you could distinguish two Cupids in a circle of roses, and at his feet, like a pillar, rose a butter-pot bearing these words in white letters on a chocolate ground: "Executed in the presence of H.R.H. the Duke of Angoulême at Noron, 3rd of October, 1847."

Pécuchet, from his bed, saw all these things in a row, and sometimes he went as far as Bouvard's room to lengthen the perspective.

One spot remained empty, exactly opposite to the coat of arms, that intended for the Renaissance chest. It was not finished; Gorju was still working at it, jointing the panels in the bakehouse, squaring them or undoing them.

At eleven o'clock he took his breakfast, chatted after that with Mélie, and often did not make his appearance again for the rest of the day.

In order to have pieces of furniture in good style, Bouvard and Pécuchet went scouring the country. What they brought back was not suitable; but they had come across a heap of curious things. Their first passion was a taste for articles of *virtù*; then came the love of the Middle Ages.

To begin with, they visited cathedrals; and the lofty naves mirroring themselves in the holy-water fonts, the glass ornaments dazzling as hangings of precious stones, the tombs in the recesses of the chapels, the uncertain light of crypts — everything, even to the coolness of the walls, thrilled them with a shudder of joy, a religious emotion.

They were soon able to distinguish the epochs, and, disdainful of sacristans, they would say: "Ha! a Romanesque apsis!" "That's of the twelfth century!" "Here we are falling back again into the flamboyant!"

They strove to interpret the sculptured symbols on the capitals, such as the two griffins of Marigny pecking at a tree in blossom; Pécuchet read a satire in the singers with grotesque jaws which terminate the mouldings at Feugerolles; and as for the exuberance of the man that covers one of the mullions at Hérouville, that was a proof, according to Bouvard, of our ancestors' love of broad jokes.

They ended by not tolerating the least symptom of decadence. All was decadence, and they deplored vandalism, and thundered against badigeon.

But the style of a monument does not always agree with its supposed date. The semicircular arch of the thirteenth century still holds sway in Provence. The ogive is, perhaps, very ancient; and authors dispute as to the anteriority of the ogive is, perhaps, very ancient, and authors dispute as to the anteriority of the Romanesque to the Gothic. This want of certainty disappointed them.

After the churches they studied fortresses — those of Domfront and Falaise. They admired under the gate the grooves of the portcullis, and, having reached the top, they first saw all the country around them, then the roofs of the houses in the town, the streets intersecting one another, the carts on the square, the women at the washhouse. The wall descended perpendicularly as far as the palisade; and they grew pale as they thought that men had mounted there, hanging to ladders. They would have ventured into the subterranean passages but that Bouvard found an obstacle in his stomach and Pécuchet in his horror of vipers.

They desired to make the acquaintance of the old manor-houses — Curcy, Bully, Fontenay, Lemarmion, Argonge. Sometimes a Carlovingian tower would show itself at the corner of some farm-buildings behind a heap of manure. The kitchen, garnished with stone benches, made them dream of feudal junketings. Others had a forbiddingly fierce aspect with their three enceintes still visible, their loopholes under the staircase, and their high turrets with pointed sides. Then they came to an apartment in which a window of the Valois period, chased so as to resemble ivory, let in the sun, which heated the grains of colza that strewed the floor. Abbeys were used as barns. The inscriptions on tombstones were effaced. In the midst of fields a gable-end remained standing, clad from top to bottom in ivy which trembled in the wind.

A number of things excited in their breasts a longing to possess them — a tin pot, a paste buckle, printed calicoes with large flowerings. The shortness of money restrained them.

By a happy chance, they unearthed at Balleroy in a tinman's house a Gothic church window, and it was big enough to cover, near the armchair, the right side of the casement up to the second pane. The steeple of Chavignolles displayed itself in the distance, producing a magnificent effect. With the lower part of a cupboard Gorju manufactured a prie-dieu to put under the Gothic window, for he humoured their hobby. So pronounced was it that they regretted monuments about which nothing at all is known — such as the villa residence of the bishops of Séez.

"Bayeux," says M. de Caumont, "must have possessed a theatre." They searched for the site of it without success.

The village of Montrecy contained a meadow celebrated for the number of medals which chanced formerly to have been found there. They calculated on making a fine harvest in this place. The caretaker refused to admit them.

They were not more fortunate as to the connection which existed between a cistern at Falaise and the faubourg of Caen. Ducks which had been put in there reappeared at Vaucelles, quacking, "Can, can, can" — whence is derived the reappeared at Vaucelles, quacking, "Cau, cau, cau" — whence is derived the name of the town!

No step, no sacrifice, was too great for them.

At the inn of Mesnil-Villement, in 1816, M. Galeron got a breakfast for the sum of four sous. They took the same meal there, and ascertained with surprise that things were altered!

Who was the founder of the abbey of St. Anne? Is there any relationship between Marin Onfroy, who, in the twelfth century, imported a new kind of potato, and Onfroy, governor of Hastings at the period of the Conquest? How were they to procure *L'Astucieuse Pythonisse*, a comedy in verse by one Dutrezor, produced at Bayeux, and just now exceedingly rare? Under Louis XIV., Hérambert Dupaty, or Dupastis Hérambert, composed a work which has never appeared, full of anecdotes about Argentan: the question was how to recover these anecdotes. What have become of the autograph memoirs of Madame Dubois de la Pierre, consulted for the unpublished history of L'Aigle by Louis Dasprès, curate of St. Martin? So many problems, so many curious points, to clear up.

But a slight mark often puts one on the track of an invaluable discovery.

Accordingly, they put on their blouses, in order not to put people on their guard, and, in the guise of hawkers, they presented themselves at houses, where they expressed a desire to buy up old papers. They obtained heaps of them. These included school copybooks, invoices, newspapers that were out of date — nothing of any value.

At last Bouvard and Pécuchet addressed themselves to Larsoneur.

He was absorbed in Celtic studies, and while summarily replying to their questions put others to them.

Had they observed in their rounds any traces of dog-worship, such as are seen at Montargis, or any special circumstances with regard to the fires on St. John's night, marriages, popular sayings, etc.? He even begged of them to collect for him some of those flint axes, then called *celtæ*, which the Druids used in their criminal holocausts.

They procured a dozen of them through Gorju, sent him the smallest of them, and with the others enriched the museum. There they walked with delight, swept the place themselves, and talked about it to all their acquaintances.

One afternoon Madame Bordin and M. Marescot came to see it.

Bouvard welcomed them, and began the demonstration in the porch.

The beam was nothing less than the old gibbet of Falaise, according to the joiner who had sold it, and who had got this information from his grand-father.

The big chain in the corridor came from the subterranean cells of the keep of

Torteval. In the notary's opinion it resembled the boundary chains in front of the entrance-courts of manor-houses. Bouvard was convinced that it had been used in former times to bind the captives. He opened the door of the first chamber.

"What are all these tiles for?" exclaimed Madame Bordin.

"To heat the stoves. But let us be a little regular, if you please. This is a tomb discovered in an inn where they made use of it as a horse-trough."

After this, Bouvard took up the two urns filled with a substance which consisted of human dust, and he drew the phials up to his eyes, for the purpose of showing the way the Romans used to shed tears in it.

"But one sees only dismal things at your house!"

Indeed it was a rather grave subject for a lady. So he next drew out of a case several copper coins, together with a silver denarius.

Madame Bordin asked the notary what sum this would be worth at the present day.

The coat of mail which he was examining slipped out of his fingers; some of the links snapped.

Bouvard stifled his annoyance. He had even the politeness to unfasten the halberd, and, bending forward, raising his arms and stamping with his heels, he made a show of hamstringing a horse, stabbing as if with a bayonet and overpowering an enemy.

The widow inwardly voted him a rough person.

She went into raptures over the shell chest of drawers.

The cat of St. Allyre much astonished her, the pear in the decanter not quite so much; then, when she came to the chimney-piece: "Ha! here's a hat that would need mending!"

Three holes, marks of bullets, pierced its brims.

It was the head-piece of a robber chief under the Directory, David de la Bazoque, caught in the act of treason, and immediately put to death.

"So much the better! They did right," said Madame Bordin.

Marescot smiled disdainfully as he gazed at the different objects. He did not understand this galoche having been the sign of a hosier, nor the purport of the earthenware cask — a common cider-keg — and, to be candid, the St. Peter was lamentable with his drunkard's physiognomy.

Madame Bordin made this observation:

"All the same, it must have cost you a good deal?"

"Oh! not too much, not too much."

A slater had given it to him for fifteen francs.

After this, she found fault on the score of propriety with the low dress of the lady in the powdered wig.

"Where is the harm," replied Bouvard, "when one possesses something beautiful?" And he added in a lower tone: "Just as you are yourself, I'm sure."

(The notary turned his back on them, and studied the branches of the Croixmare family.)

She made no response but began to play with her long gold chain. Her bosom swelled out the black taffeta of her corsage, and, with her eyelashes slightly drawn together, she lowered her chin like a turtle-dove bridling up; then, with an ingenuous air:

"What is this lady's name?"

"It is unknown; she was one of the Regent's mistresses, you know; he who played so many pranks."

"I believe you; the memoirs of the time — — "

And the notary, without giving her time to finish the sentence, deplored this example of a prince carried away by his passions.

"But you are all like that!"

The two gentlemen protested, and then followed a dialogue on women and on love. Marescot declared that there were many happy unions; sometimes even, without suspecting it, we have close beside us what we require for our happiness.

The allusion was direct. The widow's cheeks flushed scarlet; but, recovering her composure almost the next moment:

"We are past the age for folly, are we not, M. Bouvard?"

"Ha! ha! For my part, I don't admit that."

And he offered his arm to lead her towards the adjoining room.

"Be careful about the steps. All right? Now observe the church window."

They traced on its surface a scarlet cloak and two angels' wings. All the rest was lost under the leads which held in equilibrium the numerous breakages in the glass. The day was declining; the shadows were lengthening; Madame Bordin had become grave.

Bouvard withdrew, and presently reappeared muffled up in a woollen wrapper, then knelt down at the prie-dieu with his elbows out, his face in his hands, the light of the sun falling on his bald patch; and he was conscious of this effect, for he said:

"Don't I look like a monk of the Middle Ages?"

Then he raised his forehead on one side, with swimming eyes, and trying to give a mystical expression to his face. The solemn voice of Pécuchet was heard in the corridor:

"Don't be afraid. It is I." And he entered, his head covered with a helmet — an iron pot with pointed ear-pieces.

Bouvard did not quit the prie-dieu. The two others remained standing. A minute slipped away in glances of amazement.

Madame Bordin appeared rather cold to Pécuchet. However he wished to know whether everything had been shown to them.

"It seems to me so." And pointing towards the wall: "Ah! pray excuse us; there is an object which we may restore in a moment."

The widow and Marescot thereupon took their leave. The two friends conceived the idea of counterfeiting a competition. They set out on a race after each other; one giving the other the start. Pécuchet won the helmet.

Bouvard congratulated him upon it, and received praises from his friend on the subject of the wrapper.

Mélie arranged it with cords, in the fashion of a gown. They took turns about in receiving visits.

They had visits from Girbal, Foureau, and Captain Heurtaux, and then from inferior persons — Langlois, Beljambe, their husbandmen, and even the servant-girls of their neighbours; and, on each occasion, they went over the same explanations, showed the place where the chest would be, affected a tone of modesty, and claimed indulgence for the obstruction.

Pécuchet on these days wore the Zouave's cap which he had formerly in Paris, considering it more in harmony with an artistic environment. At ***a*** particular moment, he would put the helmet on his head, and incline it over the back of his neck, in order to have his face free. Bouvard did not forget the movement with the halberd; finally, with one glance, they would ask each other whether the visitor was worthy of having "the monk of the Middle Ages" represented.

What a thrill they felt when M. de Faverges' carriage drew up before the garden gate! He had only a word to say to them. This was the occasion of his visit:

Hurel, his man of business, had informed him that, while searching everywhere for documents, they had bought up old papers at the farm of Aubrye.

That was perfectly true.

Had they not discovered some letters of Baron de Gonneval, a former aide-de-camp of the Duke of Angoulême, who had stayed at Aubrye? He wished to have this correspondence for family reasons.

They had not got it in the house, but they had in their possession something that would interest him if he would be good enough to follow them into their library.

Never before had such well-polished boots creaked in the corridor. They knocked against the sarcophagus. He even went near smashing several tiles, moved an armchair about, descended two steps; and, when they reached the second chamber, they showed him under the canopy, in front of the St. Peter, the butter-pot made at Noron.

Bouvard and Pécuchet thought that the date might some time be of use. Through politeness, the nobleman inspected their museum. He kept repeating, "Charming! very nice!" all the time giving his mouth little taps with the handle of his switch; and said that, for his part, he thanked them for having rescued those remains of the Middle Ages, an epoch of religious faith and chivalrous devotion. He loved progress, and would have given himself up like them to these interesting studies, but that politics, the General Council, agriculture, a veritable whirlwind, drove him away from them.

"After you, however, one would have merely gleanings, for soon you will have captured all the curiosities of the department."

"Without vanity, we think so," said Pécuchet.

However, one might still discover some at Chavignolles; for example, there was, close to the cemetery wall in the lane, a holy-water basin buried under the grass from time immemorial.

They were pleased with the information, then exchanged a significant glance — "Is it worth the trouble?" — but already the Count was opening the door.

Mélie, who was behind it, fled abruptly.

As he passed out of the house into the grounds, he observed Gorju smoking his pipe with folded arms.

"You employ this fellow? I would not put much confidence in him in a time of disturbance."

And M. de Faverges sprang lightly into his tilbury.

Why did their servant-maid seem to be afraid of him?

They questioned her, and she told them she had been employed on his farm. She was that little girl who poured out drink for the harvesters when they came there two years before. They had taken her on as a help at the château, and dismissed her in consequence of false reports.

As for Gorju, how could they find fault with him? He was very handy, and showed the utmost consideration for them.

Next day, at dawn, they repaired to the cemetery. Bouvard felt with his walking-stick at the spot indicated. They heard the sound of a hard substance. They pulled up some nettles, and discovered a stone basin, a baptismal font, out of which plants were sprouting. It is not usual, however, to bury baptismal fonts outside churches.

Pécuchet made a sketch of it; Bouvard wrote out a description of it; and they sent both to Larsoneur. His reply came immediately.

"Victory, my dear associates! Unquestionably, it is a druidical bowl!"

However, let them be careful about the matter. The axe was doubtful; and as much for his sake as for their own, he pointed out a series of works to be consulted.

In a postscript, Larsoneur confessed his longing to have a look at this bowl, which opportunity would be afforded him in a few days, when he would be starting on a trip from Brittany.

Then Bouvard and Pécuchet plunged into Celtic archæology.

According to this science, the ancient Gauls, our ancestors, adored Kirk and Kron, Taranis Esus, Nelalemnia, Heaven and Earth, the Wind, the Waters, and, above all, the great Teutates, who is the Saturn of the Pagans; for Saturn, when he reigned in Phœnicia, wedded a nymph named Anobret, by whom he had a child called Jeüd. And Anobret presents the same traits as Sara; Jeüd was sacrificed (or near being so), like Isaac; therefore, Saturn is Abraham; whence the conclusion must be drawn that the religion of the Gauls had the same principles as that of the Jews.

Their society was very well organised. The first class of persons amongst them included the people, the nobility, and the king; the second, the jurisconsults; and in the third, the highest, were ranged, according to Taillepied, "the various kinds of philosophers," that is to say, the Druids or Saronides, themselves divided into Eubages, Bards, and Vates.

One section of them prophesied, another sang, while a third gave instruction in botany, medicine, history, and literature, in short, all the arts of their time.

Pythagoras and Plato were their pupils. They taught metaphysics to the Greeks, sorcery to the Persians, aruspicy to the Etruscans, and to the Romans the plating of copper and the traffic in hams.

But of this people, who ruled the ancient world, there remain only stones either isolated or in groups of three, or placed together so as to resemble a rude chamber, or forming enclosures.

Bouvard and Pécuchet, filled with enthusiasm, studied in succession the stone on the Post-farm at Ussy, the Coupled Stone at Quest, the Standing Stone near L'Aigle, and others besides.

All these blocks, of equal insignificance, speedily bored them; and one day, when they had just seen the menhir at Passais, they were about to return from it when their guide led them into a beech wood, which was blocked up with masses of granite, like pedestals or monstrous tortoises. The most remarkable of them is hollowed like a basin. One of its sides rises, and at the further end two channels run down to the ground; this must have been for the flowing of blood — impossible to doubt it! Chance does not make these things.

The roots of the trees were intertwined with these rugged pedestals. In the distance rose columns of fog like huge phantoms. It was easy to imagine under the leaves the priests in golden tiaras and white robes, and their human victims with arms bound behind their backs, and at the side of the bowl the Druidess watching the red stream, whilst around her the multitude yelled, to the accompaniment of cymbals and of trumpets made from the horns of the wild bull.

Immediately they decided on their plan. And one night, by the light of the moon, they took the road to the cemetery, stealing in like thieves, in the shadows of the houses. The shutters were fastened, and quiet reigned around every dwelling-place; not a dog barked.

Gorju accompanied them. They set to work. All that could be heard was the noise of stones knocking against the spade as it dug through the soil.

The vicinity of the dead was disagreeable to them. The church clock struck with a rattling sound, and the rosework on its tympanum looked like an eye espying a sacrilege. At last they carried off the bowl.

They came next morning to the cemetery to see the traces of the operation.

The abbé, who was taking the air at his door, begged of them to do him the honour of a visit, and, having introduced them into his breakfast-parlour, he gazed at them in a singular fashion.

In the middle of the sideboard, between the plates, was a soup-tureen decorated with yellow bouquets.

Pécuchet praised it, at a loss for something to say.

"It is old Rouen," returned the curé; "an heirloom. Amateurs set a high value on it — M. Marescot especially." As for him, thank God, he had no love of curiosities; and, as they appeared not to understand, he declared that he had seen them himself stealing the baptismal font.

The two archæologists were quite abashed. The article in question was not in actual use.

No matter! they should give it back.

No doubt! But, at least, let them be permitted to get a painter to make a drawing of it.

"Be it so, gentlemen."

"Between ourselves, is it not?" said Bouvard, "under the seal of confession."

The ecclesiastic, smiling, reassured them with a gesture.

It was not he whom they feared, but rather Larsoneur. When he would be passing through Chavignolles, he would feel a hankering after the bowl; and his chatterings might reach the ears of the Government. Out of prudence they kept it hidden in the bakehouse, then in the arbour, in the trunk, in a cupboard. Gorju was tired of dragging it about.

The possession of such a rare piece of furniture bound them the closer to the Celticism of Normandy.

Its sources were Egyptian. Séez, in the department of the Orne, is sometimes written Saïs, like the city of the Delta. The Gauls swore by the bull, an idea derived from the bull Apis. The Latin name of Bellocastes, which was that of the people of Bayeux, comes from Beli Casa, dwelling, sanctuary of Belus — Belus and Osiris, the same divinity!

"There is nothing," says Mangou de la Londe, "opposed to the idea that druidical monuments existed near Bayeux." "This country," adds M. Roussel, "is like the country in which the Egyptians built the temple of Jupiter Ammon."

So then there was a temple in which riches were shut up. All the Celtic monuments contain them.

"In 1715," relates Dom Martin, "one Sieur Heribel exhumed in the vicinity of Bayeux, several argil vases full of bones, and concluded (in accordance with tradition and authorities which had disappeared) that this place, a necropolis, was the Mount Faunus in which the Golden Calf is buried."

In the first place, where is Mount Faunus? The authors do not point it out. The natives know nothing about it. It would be necessary to devote themselves to excavations, and with that view they forwarded a petition to the prefect, to which they got no response.

Perhaps Mount Faunus had disappeared, and was not a hill but a barrow?

Several of them contain skeletons that have the position of the fœtus in the mother's womb. This meant that for them the tomb was, as it were, a second gestation, preparing them for another life. Therefore the barrow symbolises the female organ, just as the raised stone is the male organ.

In fact, where menhirs are found, an obscene creed has persisted. Witness what took place at Guerande, at Chichebouche, at Croissic, at Livarot. In former times the towers, the pyramids, the wax tapers, the boundaries of roads, and even the trees had a phallic meaning. Bouvard and Pécuchet collected whipple-trees of carriages, legs of armchairs, bolts of cellars, apothecaries' pestles. When people came to see them they would ask, "What do you think that is like?" and then they would confide the secret. And, if anyone uttered an exclamation, they would shrug their shoulders in pity.

One evening as they were dreaming about the dogmas of the Druids, the abbé cautiously stole in.

Immediately they showed the museum, beginning with the church window; but they longed to reach the new compartment — that of the phallus. The ecclesiastic stopped them, considering the exhibition indecent. He came to demand back his baptismal font.

Bouvard and Pécuchet begged for another fortnight, the time necessary for

Bouvard and Pécuchet begged for another fortnight, the time necessary for taking a moulding of it.

"The sooner the better," said the abbé.

Then he chatted on general topics.

Pécuchet, who had left the room a minute, on coming back slipped a napoleon into his hand.

The priest made a backward movement.

"Oh! for your poor!"

And, colouring, M. Jeufroy crammed the gold piece into his cassock.

To give back the bowl, the bowl for sacrifices! Never, while they lived! They were even anxious to learn Hebrew, which is the mother-tongue of Celtic, unless indeed the former language be derived from it! And they had planned a journey into Brittany, commencing with Rennes, where they had an appointment with Larsoneur, with a view of studying that urn mentioned in the Memorials of the Celtic Academy, which appeared to have contained the ashes of Queen Artimesia, when the mayor entered unceremoniously with his hat on, like the boorish individual he was.

"All this won't do, my fine fellows! You must give it up!"

"What, pray?"

"Rogues! I know well you are concealing it!"

Someone had betrayed them.

They replied that they had the curé's permission to keep it.

"We'll soon see that!"

Foureau went away. An hour later he came back.

They were obstinate.

In the first place, this holy-water basin was not wanted, as it really was not a holy-water basin at all. They would prove this by a vast number of scientific reasons. Next, they offered to acknowledge in their will that it belonged to the parish. They even proposed to buy it.

"And, besides, it is my property," Pécuchet asseverated.

The twenty francs accepted by M. Jeufroy furnished a proof of the contract, and if he compelled them to go before a justice of the peace, so much the worse: he would be taking a false oath!

During these disputes he had again seen the soup-tureen many times, and in his soul had sprung up the desire, the thirst for possession of this piece of earthenware. If the curé was willing to give it to him, he would restore the bowl, otherwise not.

Through weariness or fear of scandal, M. Jeufroy yielded it up. It was placed amongst their collection near the Cauchoise cap. The bowl decorated the church porch; and they consoled themselves for the loss of it with the reflection that the people of Chavignolles were ignorant of its value.

But the soup-tureen inspired them with a taste for earthenware — a new subject for study and for explorations through the country.

It was the period when persons of good position were looking out for old Rouen dishes. The notary possessed a few of them, and derived from the fact, as it were, an artistic reputation which was prejudicial to his profession, but for which he made up by the serious side of his character.

When he learned that Bouvard and Pécuchet had got the soup-tureen, he came to propose to them an exchange.

Pécuchet would not consent to this.

"Let us say no more about it!" and Marescot proceeded to examine their ceramic collection.

All the specimens hung up along the wall were blue on a background of dirty white, and some showed their horn of plenty in green or reddish tones. There were shaving-dishes, plates and saucers, objects long sought for, and brought back in the recesses of one's frock-coat close to one's heart.

Marescot praised them, and then talked about other kinds of faïence, the Hispano-Arabian, the Dutch, the English, and the Italian, and having dazzled them with his erudition:

"Might I see your soup-tureen again?"

He made it ring by rapping on it with his fingers, then he contemplated the two S's painted on the lid.

"The mark of Rouen!" said Pécuchet.

"Ho! ho! Rouen, properly speaking, would not have any mark. When Moutiers was unknown, all the French faïence came from Nevers. So with Rouen to-day. Besides, they imitate it to perfection at El-bœuf."

"It isn't possible!"

"Majolica is cleverly imitated. Your specimen is of no value; and as for me, I was about to do a downright foolish thing."

When the notary had gone, Pécuchet sank into an armchair in a state of nervous prostration.

"We shouldn't have given back the bowl," said Bouvard; "but you get excited, and always lose your head."

"Yes, I do lose my head"; and Pécuchet, snatching up the soup-tureen, flung it some distance away from him against the sarcophagus.

Bouvard, more self-possessed, picked up the broken pieces one by one; and some time afterwards this idea occurred to him: "Marescot, through jealousy, might have been making fools of us!"

"How?"

"There's nothing to show me that the soup-tureen was not genuine! Whereas the other specimens which he pretended to admire are perhaps counterfeit."

And so the day closed with uncertainties and regrets.

This was no reason for abandoning their tour into Brittany.

They even purposed to take Gorju along with them to assist them in their excavations.

For some time past, he had slept at the house, in order to finish the more quickly the repairing of the chest.

The prospect of a change of place annoyed him, and when they talked about menhirs and barrows which they calculated on seeing: "I know better ones," said he to them; "in Algeria, in the South, near the sources of Bou-Mursoug, you meet quantities of them." He then gave a description of a tomb which chanced to be open right in front of him, and which contained a skeleton squatting like an ape with its two arms around its legs.

Larsoneur, when they informed him of the circumstance, would not believe a word of it.

Bouvard sifted the matter, and started the question again.

How does it happen that the monuments of the Gauls are shapeless, whereas these same Gauls were civilised in the time of Julius Cæsar? No doubt they were traceable to a more ancient people.

Such a hypothesis, in Larsoneur's opinion, betrayed a lack of patriotism.

No matter; there is nothing to show that these monuments are the work of Gauls. "Show us a text!"

The Academician was displeased, and made no reply; and they were very glad of it, so much had the Druids bored them.

If they did not know what conclusion to arrive at as to earthenware and as to Celticism, it was because they were ignorant of history, especially the history of France.

The work of Anquetil was in their library; but the series of "do-nothing kings" amused them very little. The villainy of the mayors of the Palace did not excite their indignation, and they gave Anquetil up, repelled by the ineptitude of his reflections.

Then they asked Dumouchel, "What is the best history of France?"

Dumouchel subscribed, in their names, to a circulating library, and forwarded to them the work of Augustin Thierry, together with two volumes of M. de Genoude.

According to Genoude, royalty, religion, and the national assemblies — here are "the principles" of the French nation, which go back to the Merovingians.

The Carlovingians fell away from them. The Capetians, being in accord with the people, made an effort to maintain them. Absolute power was established under Louis XIII., in order to conquer Protestantism, the final effort of feudalism; and '89 is a return to the constitution of our ancestors.

Pécuchet admired his ideas. They excited Bouvard's pity, as he had read Augustin Thierry first: "What trash you talk with your French nation, seeing that France did not exist! nor the national assemblies! and the Carlovingians usurped nothing at all! and the kings did not set free the communes! Read for yourself."

Pécuchet gave way before the evidence, and surpassed him in scientific strictness. He would have considered himself dishonoured if he had said "Charlemagne" and not "Karl the Great," "Clovis" in place of "Clodowig."

Nevertheless he was beguiled by Genoude, deeming it a clever thing to join together both ends of French history, so that the middle period becomes rubbish; and, in order to ease their minds about it, they took up the collection of Buchez and Roux.

But the fustian of the preface, that medley of Socialism and Catholicism, disgusted them; and the excessive accumulation of details prevented them from grasping the whole.

They had recourse to M. Thiers.

It was during the summer of 1845, in the garden beneath the arbour. Pécuchet, his feet resting on a small chair, read aloud in his cavernous voice, without feeling tired, stopping to plunge his fingers into his snuff-box. Bouvard listened, his pipe in his mouth, his legs wide apart, and the upper part of his trousers unbuttoned.

Old men had spoken to them of '93, and recollections that were almost personal gave life to the prosy descriptions of the author. At that time the high-roads were covered with soldiers singing the "Marseillaise." At the thresholds of doors women sat sewing canvas to make tents. Sometimes came a wave of men in red caps, bending forward a pike, at the end of which could be seen a discoloured head with the hair hanging down. The lofty tribune of the Convention looked down upon a cloud of dust, amid which wild faces were yelling cries "Death!" Anyone who passed, at midday, close to the basin of the Tuileries could hear each blow of the guillotine, as if they were cutting up sheep.

And the breeze moved the vine-leaves of the arbour; the ripe barley swayed at intervals; a blackbird was singing. And, casting glances around them, they relished this tranquil scene.

What a pity that from the beginning they had failed to understand one another! For if the royalists had reflected like the patriots, if the court had exhibited more candour, and its adversaries less violence, many of the calamities would not have happened.

By force of chattering in this way they roused themselves into a state of excitement. Bouvard, being liberal-minded and of a sensitive nature, was a Constitutionalist, ***a*** Girondist, a Thermidorian; Pécuchet, being of a bilious temperament and a lover of authority, declared himself a *sans-culotte*, and even a Robespierrist. He expressed approval of the condemnation of the King, the most violent decrees, the worship of the Supreme Being. Bouvard preferred that of Nature. He would have saluted with pleasure the image of a big woman pouring out from her breasts to her adorers not water but Chambertin.

In order to have more facts for the support of their arguments they procured other works: Montgaillard, Prudhomme, Gallois, Lacretelle, etc.; and the contradictions of these books in no way embarrassed them. Each took from them what might vindicate the cause that he espoused.

Thus Bouvard had no doubt that Danton accepted a hundred thousand crowns to bring forward motions that would destroy the Republic; while in Pécuchet's opinion Vergniaud would have asked for six thousand francs a month.

"Never! Explain to me, rather, why Robespierre's sister had a pension from Louis XVIII."

"Not at all! It was from Bonaparte. And, since you take it that way, who is the person that a few months before Égalité's death had a secret conference with him? I wish they would reinsert in the *Memoirs of La Campan* the suppressed paragraphs. The death of the Dauphin appears to me equivocal. The powder magazine at Grenelle by exploding killed two thousand persons. The cause was unknown, they tell us: what nonsense!" For Pécuchet was not far from understanding it, and threw the blame for every crime on the manœuvres of the aristocrats, gold, and the foreigner.

In the mind of Bouvard there could be no dispute as to the use of the words, "Ascend to heaven, son of St. Louis," as to the incident about the virgins of Verdun, or as to the *culottes* clothed in human skin. He accepted Prudhomme's lists, a million of victims, exactly.

But the Loire, red with gore from Saumur to Nantes, in a line of eighteen leagues, made him wonder. Pécuchet in the same degree entertained doubts, and they began to distrust the historians.

For some the Revolution is a Satanic event; others declare it to be a sublime exception. The vanquished on each side naturally play the part of martyrs.

Thierry demonstrates, with reference to the Barbarians, that it is foolish to institute an inquiry as to whether such a prince was good or was bad. Why not follow this method in the examination of more recent epochs? But history must needs avenge morality: we feel grateful to Tacitus for having lacerated Tiberius.

After all, whether the Queen had lovers; whether Dumouriez, since Valmy, intended to betray her; whether in Prairial it was the Mountain or the Girondist party that began, and in Thermidor the Jacobins or the Plain; what matters it to the development of the Revolution, of which the causes were far to seek and the results incalculable?

Therefore it was bound to accomplish itself, to be what it was; but, suppose the flight of the King without impediment, Robespierre escaping or Bonaparte assassinated — chances which depended upon an innkeeper proving less scrupulous, a door being left open, or a sentinel falling asleep — and the progress of the world would have taken a different direction.

They had no longer on the men and the events of that period a single well-balanced idea. In order to form an impartial judgment upon it, it would have been necessary to have read all the histories, all the memoirs, all the newspapers, and all the manuscript productions, for through the least omission might arise an error, which might lead to others without limit.

They abandoned the subject. But the taste for history had come to them, the need of truth for its own sake.

Perhaps it is easier to find it in more ancient epochs? The authors, being far removed from the events, ought to speak of them without passion. And they began the good Rollin.

"What a heap of rubbish!" exclaimed Bouvard, after the first chapter.

"Wait a bit," said Pécuchet, rummaging at the end of their library, where lay heaped up the books of the last proprietor, an old lawyer, an accomplished man with a mania for literature; and, having put out of their places a number of novels and plays, together with an edition of Montesquieu and translations of Horace, he obtained what he was looking for — Beaufort's work on Roman History.

Titus Livius attributes the foundation of Rome to Romulus; Sallust gives the credit of it to the Trojans under Æneas. Coriolanus died in exile, according to Fabius Pictor; through the stratagems of Attius Tullius, if we may believe Dionysius. Seneca states that Horatius Cocles came back victorious; and Dionysius that he was wounded in the leg. And La Mothe le Vayer gives expression to similar doubts with reference to other nations.

There is no agreement as to the antiquity of the Chaldeans, the age of Homer, the existence of Zoroaster, the two empires of Assyria. Quintus Curtius has manufactured fables. Plutarch gives the lie to Herodotus. We should have a different idea of Cæsar if Vercingetorix had written his Commentaries.

Ancient history is obscure through want of documents. There is an abundance of them in modern history; and Bouvard and Pécuchet came back to France, and began Sismondi.

The succession of so many men filled them with a desire to understand them more thoroughly, to enter into their lives. They wanted to read the originals — Gregory of Tours, Monstrelet, Commines, all those whose names were odd or agreeable. But the events got confused through want of knowledge of the dates.

Fortunately they possessed Dumouchel's work on mnemonics, a duodecimo in boards with this epigraph: "To instruct while amusing."

It combined the three systems of Allevy, of Pâris, and of Fenaigle.

Allevy transforms numbers into external objects, the number 1 being expressed by a tower, 2 by a bird, 3 by a camel, and so on. Pâris strikes the imagination by means of rebuses: an armchair garnished with clincher-nails will give "Clou, vis — Clovis"; and, as the sound of frying makes "ric, ric," whitings in a stove will recall "Chilperic." Fenaigle divides the universe into houses, which contain rooms, each having four walls with nine panels, and each panel bearing an emblem. A pharos on a mountain will tell the name of "Phar-a-mond" in Pâris's system; and, according to Allevy's directions, by placing above a mirror, which signifies 4, a bird 2, and a hoop 0, we shall obtain 420, the date of that prince's accession.

For greater clearness, they took as their mnemotechnic basis their own house, their domicile, associating a distinct fact with each part of it; and the courtyard, the garden, the outskirts, the entire country, had for them no meaning any longer except as objects for facilitating memory. The boundaries in the fields defined certain epochs; the apple trees were genealogical stems, the bushes battles; everything became symbolic. They sought for quantities of absent things on their walls, ended by seeing them, but lost the recollection of what dates they represented.

Besides the dates are not always authentic. They learned out of a manual for colleges that the birth of Jesus ought to be carried back five years earlier than the date usually assigned for it; that there were amongst the Greeks three ways of counting the Olympiads, and eight amongst the Latin of making the year begin. So many opportunities for mistakes outside of those which result from the zodiacs, from the epochs, and from the different calendars!

And from carelessness as to dates they passed to contempt for facts.

What is important is the philosophy of history!

Bouvard could not finish the celebrated discourse of Bossuet.

"The eagle of Meaux is a farce-actor! He forgets China, the Indies, and America; but is careful to let us know that Theodosius was 'the joy of the universe,' that Abraham 'treated kings as his equals,' and that the philosophy of the Greeks has come down from the Hebrews. His preoccupation with the

Hebrews provokes me.″

Pécuchet shared this opinion, and wished to make him read Vico.

"Why admit," objected Bouvard, "that fables are more true than the truths of historians?"

Pécuchet tried to explain myths, and got lost in the *Scienza Nuova*.

"Will you deny the design of Providence?"

"I don't know it!" said Bouvard. And they decided to refer to Dumouchel.

The professor confessed that he was now at sea on the subject of history.

"It is changing every day. There is a controversy as to the kings of Rome and the journeys of Pythagoras. Doubts have been thrown on Belisarius, William Tell, and even on the Cid, who has become, thanks to the latest discoveries, a common robber. It is desirable that no more discoveries should be made, and the Institute ought even to lay down a kind of canon prescribing what it is necessary to believe!"

In a postscript he sent them some rules of criticism taken from Daunou's course of lectures:

"To cite by way of proof the testimony of multitudes is a bad method of proof; they are not there to reply.

"To reject impossible things. Pausanias was shown the stone swallowed by Saturn.

"Architecture may lie: instance, the arch of the Forum, in which Titus is called the first conqueror of Jerusalem, which had been conquered before him by Pompey.

"Medals sometimes deceive. Under Charles IX. money was minted from the coinage of Henry II.

"Take into account the skill of forgers and the interestedness of apologists and calumniators.″

Few historians have worked in accordance with these rules, but all in view of one special cause, of one religion, of one nation, of one party, of one system, in order to curb kings, to advise the people, or to offer moral examples.

The others, who pretend merely to narrate, are no better; for everything cannot be told — some selection must be made. But in the selection of documents some special predilection will have the upper hand, and, as this varies according to the conditions under which the writer views the matter, history will never be fixed.

"It is sad," was their reflection. However, one might take a subject, exhaust the sources of information concerning it, make a good analysis of them, then condense it into a narrative, which would be, as it were, an epitome of the facts reflecting the entire truth.

"Do you wish that we should attempt to compose a history?"

"I ask for nothing better. But of what?"

"Suppose we write the life of the Duke of Angoulême?"

"But he was an idiot!" returned Bouvard.

"What matter? Personages of an inferior mould have sometimes an enormous influence, and he may have controlled the machinery of public affairs."

The books would furnish them with information; and M. de Faverges, no doubt, would have them himself, or could procure them from some elderly gentleman of his acquaintance.

They thought over this project, discussed it, and finally determined to spend a fortnight at the municipal library at Caen in making researches there**.**

The librarian placed at their disposal some general histories and some pamphlets with a coloured lithograph portrait representing at three-quarters' length Monseigneur the Duke of Angoulême.

The blue cloth of his uniform disappeared under the epaulets, the stars, and the large red ribbon of the Legion of Honour; a very high collar surrounded his long neck; his pear-shaped head was framed by the curls of his hair and by his scanty whiskers and heavy eyelashes; and a very big nose and thick lips gave his face an expression of commonplace good-nature.

When they had taken notes, they drew up a programme:

"Birth and childhood but slightly interesting. One of his tutors is the Abbé Guénée, Voltaire's enemy. At Turin he is made to cast a cannon; and he studies the campaigns of Charles VIII. Also he is nominated, despite his youth, colonel of a regiment of noble guards.

"1797. — His marriage.

"1814. — The English take possession of Bordeaux. He runs up behind them and shows his person to the inhabitants. Description of the prince's person.

"1815. — Bonaparte surprises him. Immediately he appeals to the King of Spain; and Toulon, were it not for Masséna, would have been surrendered to England.

"Operations in the South. He is beaten, but released under the promise to restore the crown diamonds carried off at full gallop by the King, his uncle.

"After the Hundred Days he returns with his parents and lives in peace. Several years glide away.

"War with Spain. Once he has crossed the Pyrenees, victories everywhere follow the grandso***n*** of Henry IV. He takes the Trocadéro, reaches the pillars of Hercules, crushes the factions, embraces Ferdinand, and returns.

"Triumphal arches; flowers presented by young girls; dinners at the Prefecture; 'Te Deum' in the cathedrals. The Parisians are at the height of intoxication. The city offers him a banquet. Songs containing allusions to the hero are sung at the theatre.

"The enthusiasm diminishes; for in 1827 a ball organised by subscription proves a failure.

"As he is High Admiral of France, he inspects the fleet, which is going to start for Algiers.

"July 1830. — Marmont informs him of the state of affairs. Then he gets into such a rage that he wounds himself in the hand with the general's sword. The King entrusts him with the command of all the forces.

"He meets detachments of the line in the Bois de Boulogne, and has not a word to say to them.

"From St. Cloud he flies to the bridge of Sèvres. Coldness of the troops. That does not shake him. The Royal family leave Trianon. He sits down at the foot of an oak, unrolls a map, meditates, remounts his horse, passes in front of St. Cyr, and sends to the students words of hope.

"At Rambouillet the bodyguards bid him good-bye. He embarks, and during the entire passage is ill. End of his career.

"The importance possessed by the bridges ought here to be noticed. First, he exposes himself needlessly on the bridge of the Inn; he carries the bridge St. Esprit and the bridge of Lauriol; at Lyons the two bridges are fatal to him, and his fortune dies before the bridge of Sèvres.

"List of his virtues. Needless to praise his courage, to which he joined a far-seeing policy. For he offered every soldier sixty francs to desert the Emperor, and in Spain he tried to corrupt the Constitutionalists with ready money.

"His reserve was so profound that he consented to the marriage arranged between his father and the Queen of Etruria, to the formation of a new cabinet after the Ordinances, to the abdication in favour of Chambord — to everything that they asked him.

"Firmness, however, was not wanting in him. At Angers, he cashiered the infantry of the National Guard, who, jealous of the cavalry, had succeeded by means of a stratagem in forming his escort, so that his Highness found himself jammed into the ranks at the cost of having his knees squeezed. But he censured the cavalry, the cause of the disorder, and pardoned the infantry — a veritable judgment of Solomon.

"His piety manifested itself by numerous devotions, and his clemency by obtaining the pardon of General Debelle, who had borne arms against him.

"Intimate details; characteristics of the Prince:

"At the château of Beauregard, in his childhood, he took pleasure in deepening, along with his brother, a sheet of water, which may still be seen. On one occasion, he visited the barracks of the chasseurs, called for a glass of wine, and drank the King's health.

"While walking, in order to mark the step, he used to keep repeating to himself: 'One, two — one, two — one, two!'

"Some of his sayings have been preserved: —

"To a deputation from Bordeaux*:*

"'What consoles me for not being at Bordeaux is to find myself amidst you.'

"To the Protestants of Nismes:

"'I am a good Catholic, but I shall never forget that my distinguished ancestor was a Protestant.'

"To the pupils of St. Cyr, when all was lost:

"'Right, my friends! The news is good! This is right — all right!'

"After Charles X.'s abdication:

"'Since they don't want me, let them settle it themselves.'

"And in 1814, at every turn, in the smallest village:

"'No more war; no more conscription; no more united rights.'

"His style was as good as his utterance. His proclamations surpassed everything.

"The first, of the Count of Artois, began thus:

"'Frenchmen, your King's brother has arrived!'

"That of the prince:

"'I come. I am the son of your kings. You are Frenchmen!'

"Order of the day, dated from Bayonne:

"'Soldiers, I come!'

"Another, in the midst of disaffection:

"'Continue to sustain with the vigour which befits the French soldier the struggle which you have begun. France expects it of you.'

"Lastly, at Rambouillet:

"'The King has entered into an arrangement with the government established at Paris, and everything brings us to believe that this arrangement is on the point of being concluded.'

"'Everything brings us to believe' was sublime.*"*

"One thing vexed me," said Bouvard, "that there is no mention of his love affairs!" And they made a marginal note: "To search for the prince's amours."

At the moment when they were taking their leave, the librarian, bethinking himself of it, showed them another portrait of the Duke of Angoulême.

In this one he appeared as a colonel of cuirassiers, on a vaulting-horse, his eyes still smaller, his mouth open, and his hair straight.

How were they to reconcile the two portraits? Had he straight hair, or rather crisped — unless he carried affectation so far as to get it curled?

A grave question, from Pécuchet's point of view, for the mode of wearing the hair indicates the temperament, and the temperament the individual.

Bouvard considered that we know nothing of a man as long as we are ignorant of his passions; and in order to clear up these two points, they presented themselves at the château of Faverges. The count was not there; this retarded their work. They returned home annoyed.

The door of the house was wide open; there was nobody in the kitchen. They went upstairs, and who should they see in the middle of Bouvard's room but Madame Bordin, looking about her right and left!

"Excuse me," she said, with a forced laugh, "I have for the last hour been searching for your cook, whom I wanted for my preserves."

They found her in the wood-house on a chair fast asleep. They shook her. She opened her eyes.

"What is it now? You are always prodding at me with your questions!"

It was clear that Madame Bordin had been putting some to her in their absence.

Germaine got out of her torpor, and complained of indigestion.

"I am remaining to take care of you," said the widow.

Then they perceived in the courtyard a big cap, the lappets of which were fluttering. It was Madame Castillon, proprietress of a neighbouring farm. She was calling out: "Gorju! Gorju!"

And from the corn-loft the voice of their little servant-maid answered loudly:

"He is not there!"

At the end of five minutes she came down, with her cheeks flushed and looking excited. Bouvard and Pécuchet reprimanded her for having been so slow. She unfastened their gaiters without a murmur.

Then they went to look at the chest. The bakehouse was covered with its scattered fragments; the carvings were damaged, the leaves broken.

At this sight, in the face of this fresh disaster, Bouvard had to keep back his tears, and Pécuchet got a fit of nervous shivering.

Gorju, making his appearance almost immediately, explained the matter. He had just put the chest outside in order to varnish it, when a wandering cow knocked it down on the ground.

"Whose cow?" said Pécuchet.

"I don't know."

"Ah! you left the door open, as you did some time ago. It is your fault."

At any rate, they would have nothing more to do with him. He had been trifling with them too long, and they wanted no more of him or his work.

"These gentlemen were wrong. The damage was not so great. It would be all settled before three weeks." And Gorju accompanied them into the kitchen, where Germaine was seen dragging herself along to see after the dinner.

They noticed on the table a bottle of Calvados, three quarters emptied.

"By you, no doubt," said Pécuchet to Gorju.

"By me! never!"

Bouvard met his protest by observing:

"You are the only man in the house."

"Well, and what about the women?" rejoined the workman, with a side wink.

Germaine caught him up:

"You'd better say 'twas I!"

"Certainly it was you."

"And perhaps 'twas I smashed the press?"

Gorju danced about.

"Don't you see that she's drunk?"

Then they squabbled violently with each other, he with a pale face and a biting manner, she purple with rage, tearing tufts of grey hair from under her cotton cap. Madame Bordin took Germaine's part, while Mélie took Gorju's.

The old woman burst out:

"Isn't it an abomination that you two should be spending days together in the grove, not to speak of the nights? — a sort of Parisian, eating up honest women, who comes to our master's house to play tricks on them!"

Bouvard opened his eyes wide.

"What tricks?"

"I tell you he's making fools of you!"

"Nobody can make a fool of me!" exclaimed Pécuchet, and, indignant at her insolence, exasperated by the mortification inflicted on him, he dismissed her, telling her to go and pack. Bouvard did not oppose this decision, and they went out, leaving Germaine in sobs over her misfortune, while Madame Bordin was trying to console her.

In the course of the evening, as they grew calmer, they went over these occurrences, asked themselves who had drunk the Calvados, how the chest got broken, what Madame Castillon wanted when she was calling Gorju, and whether he had dishonoured Mélie.

"We are not able to tell," said Bouvard, "what is happening in our own household, and we lay claim to discover all about the hair and the love affairs of the Duke of Angoulême."

Pécuchet added: "How many questions there are in other respects important and still more difficult!"

Whence they concluded that external facts are not everything. It is necessary to complete them by means of psychology. Without imagination, history is defective.

"Let us send for some historical romances!"

CHAPTER V.

Romance and the Drama.

They first read Walter Scott.

It was like the surprise of a new world.

The men of the past who had for them been only phantoms or names, became living beings, kings, princes, wizards, footmen, gamekeepers, monks, gipsies, merchants, and soldiers, who deliberate, fight, travel, trade, eat and drink, sing and pray, in the armouries of castles, on the blackened benches of inns, in the winding streets of cities, under the sloping roofs of booths, in the cloisters of monasteries. Landscapes artistically arranged formed backgrounds for the narratives, like the scenery of a theatre. You follow with your eyes a horseman galloping along the strand; you breathe amid the heather the freshness of the wind; the moon shines on the lake, over which a boat is skimming; the sun glitters on the breast-plates; the rain falls over leafy huts. Without having any knowledge of the models, they thought these pictures lifelike and the illusion was complete.

And so the winter was spent.

When they had breakfasted, they would instal themselves in the little room, one at each side of the chimney-piece, and, facing each other, book in hand, they would begin to read in silence. When the day wore apace, they would go out for a walk along the road, then, having snatched a hurried dinner, they would resume their reading far into the night. In order to protect himself from the lamp, Bouvard wore blue spectacles, while Pécuchet kept the peak of his cap drawn over his forehead.

Germaine had not gone, and Gorju now and again came to dig in the garden; for they had yielded through indifference, forgetful of material things.

After Walter Scott, Alexandre Dumas diverted them after the fashion of a magic-lantern. His personages, active as apes, strong as bulls, gay as chaffinches, enter on the scene and talk abruptly, jump off roofs to the pavement, receive frightful wounds from which they recover, are believed to be dead, and yet reappear. There are trap-doors under the boards, antidotes, disguises; and all things get entangled, hurry along, and are finally unravelled without a minute for reflection. Love observes the proprieties, fanaticism is cheerful, and massacres excite a smile.

Rendered hard to please by these two masters, they could not tolerate the balderdash of the *Belisaraire*, the foolery of the *Numa Pompilius*, of Marchangy, and Vicomte d'Arlincourt. The colouring of Frédéric Soulié (like that of the book-lover Jacob) appeared to them insufficient; and M. Villemain scandalised them by showing at page 85 of his *Lascaris*, a Spaniard smoking a pipe — a long Arab pipe — in the middle of the fifteenth century**.**

Pécuchet consulted the *Biographie Universelle*, and undertook to revise Dumas from the point of view of science.

The author in *Les Deux Dianes* makes a mistake with regard to dates. The marriage of the Dauphin, Francis, took place on the 15th of October, 1548, and not on the 20th of May, 1549. How does he know (see *Le Page du Duc de Savoie*) that Catherine de Medicis, after her husband's death, wished to resume the war? It is not very probable that the Duke of Anjou was crowned at night in a church, an episode which adorns *La Dame de Montsoreau*. *La Reine Margot* especially swarms with errors. The Duke of Nevers was not absent. He gave his opinion at the council before the feast of St. Bartholomew, and Henry of Navarre did not follow the procession four days after. Henry III. did not come back from Poland so quickly. Besides, how many flimsy devices! The miracle of the hawthorn, the balcony of Charles IX., the poisoned glass of Jeanne d'Albret — Pécuchet no longer had any confidence in Dumas.

He even lost all respect for Walter Scott on account of the oversights in his *Quentin Durward*. The murder of the Archbishop of Liège is anticipated by fifteen years. The wife of Robert de Lamarck was Jeanne d'Arschel and not Hameline de Croy. Far from being killed by a soldier, he was put to death by Maximilian; and the face of Temeraire, when his corpse was found, did not express any menace, inasmuch as the wolves had half devoured it.

None the less, Bouvard went on with Walter Scott, but ended by getting weary of the repetitio***n*** of the same effects. The heroine usually lives in the country with her father, and the lover, a plundered heir, is re-established in his rights and triumphs over his rivals. There are always a mendicant philosopher, a morose nobleman, pure young girls, facetious retainers, and interminable dialogues, stupid prudishness, and an utter absence of depth.

In his dislike to bric-à-brac, Bouvard took up George Sand.

He went into raptures over the beautiful adulteresses and noble lovers, would have liked to be Jacques, Simon, Lélio, and to have lived in Venice. He uttered sighs, did not know what was the matter with him, and felt himself changed.

Pécuchet, who was working up historical literature studied plays. He swallowed two *Pharamonds*, three *Clovises*, four *Charlemagnes*, several *Philip Augustuses*, a crowd of *Joan of Arcs*, many *Marquises de Pompadours*, and some *Conspiracies of Cellamare*.

Nearly all of them appeared still more stupid than the romances. For there exists for the stage a conventional history which nothing can destroy. Louis XI. will not fail to kneel before the little images in his hat; Henry IV. will be constantly jovial, Mary Stuart tearful, Richelieu cruel; in short, all the characters seem taken from a single block, from love of simplicity and regard for ignorance, so that the playwright, far from elevating, lowers, and, instead of instructing, stupefies.

As Bouvard had spoken eulogistically to him about George Sand, Pécuchet proceeded to read *Consuelo*, *Horace*, and *Mauprat*, was beguiled by the author's vindication of the oppressed, the socialistic and republican aspect of her works, and the discussions contained in them.

According to Bouvard, however, these elements spoiled the story, and he asked for love-tales at the circulating library.

They read aloud, one after the other, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, *Delphine*, *Adolphe*, and *Ourika*. But the listener's yawns proved contagious, for the book slipped out of the reader's hand to the floor.

They found fault with the last-mentioned works for making no reference to the environment, the period, the costume of the various personages. The heart alone is the theme — nothing but sentiment! as if there were nothing else in the world.

They next went in for novels of the humorous order, such as the *Voyage autour de ma Chambre*, by Xavier de Maistre, and *Sous les Tilleuls*, by Alphonse Karr. In books of this description the author must interrupt the narrative in order to talk about his dog, his slippers, or his mistress.

A style so free from formality charmed them at first, then appeared stupid to them, for the author effaces his work while displaying in it his personal surroundings.

Through need of the dramatic element, they plunged into romances of adventure. The more entangled, extraordinary, and impossible the plot was, the more it interested them. They did their best to foresee the *dénouement*, became very excited over it, and tired themselves out with a piece of child's play unworthy of serious minds.

The work of Balzac amazed them like a Babylon, and at the same time like grains of dust under the microscope.

In the most commonplace things arise new aspects. They never suspected that there were such depths in modern life.

"What an observer!" exclaimed Bouvard.

"For my part I consider him chimerical," Pécuchet ended by declaring. "He believes in the occult sciences, in monarchy, in rank; is dazzled by rascals; turns up millions for you like centimes; and middle-class people are not with him middle-class people at all, but giants. Why inflate what is unimportant, and waste description on silly things? He wrote one novel on chemistry, another on banking, another on printing-machines, just as one Ricard produced *The Cabman*, *The Water-Carrier* and *The Cocoa-Nut Seller*. We should soon have books on every trade and on every province; then on every town and on the different stories of every house, and on every individual — which would be no longer literature but statistics or ethnography."

The process was of little consequence in Bouvard's estimation. He wanted to get information — to acquire a deeper knowledge of human nature. He read Paul de Kock again, and ran through the *Old Hermits of the Chaussée d'Antin*.

"Why lose one's time with such absurdities?" said Pécuchet.

"But they might be very interesting as a series of documents."

"Go away with your documents! I want something to lift me up, and take me away from the miseries of this world."

And Pécuchet, craving for the ideal, led Bouvard unconsciously towards tragedy.

The far-off times in which the action takes place**,** the interests with which it is concerned, and the high station of its leading personages impressed them with a certain sense of grandeur.

One day Bouvard took up *Athalie*, and recited the dream so well that Pécuchet wished to attempt it in his turn. From the opening sentence his voice got lost in a sort of humming sound. It was monotonous and, though strong, indistinct.

Bouvard, full of experience, advised him, in order to render it well-modulated, to roll it out from the lowest tone to the highest, and to draw it back by making use of an ascending and descending scale; and he himself went through this exercise every morning in bed, according to the precept of the Greeks. Pécuchet, at the time mentioned, worked in the same fashion: each had his door closed, and they went on bawling separately.

The features that pleased them in tragedy were the emphasis, the political declamations, and the maxims on the perversity of things.

They learned by heart the most celebrated dialogues of Racine and Voltaire, and they used to declaim them in the corridor. Bouvard, as if he were at the Théâtre Français, strutted, with his hand on Pécuchet's shoulder, stopping at intervals; and, with rolling eyes, he would open wide his arms, and accuse the

Fates. He would give forth fine bursts of grief from the *Philoctète* of La Harpe, a nice death-rattle from *Gabrielle de Vergy*, and, when he played Dionysius, tyrant of Syracuse, the way in which he represented that personage gazing at his son while exclaiming, "Monster, worthy of me!" was indeed terrible. Pécuchet forgot his part in it. The ability, and not the will, was what he lacked.

On one occasion, in the *Cléopâtre* of Marmontel, he fancied that he could reproduce the hissing of the asp, just as the automaton invented for the purpose by Vaucanson might have done it. The abortive effort made them laugh all the evening. The tragedy sank in their estimation.

Bouvard was the first to grow tired of it, and, dealing frankly with the subject, demonstrated how artificial and limping it was, the silliness of its incidents, and the absurdity of the disclosures made to confidants.

They then went in for comedy, which is the school for fine shading. Every sentence must be dislocated, every word must be underlined, and every syllable must be weighed. Pécuchet could not manage it, and got quite stranded in *Celimène*. Moreover, he thought the lovers very cold, the disputes a bore, and the valets intolerable — Clitandre and Sganarelle as unreal as Ægistheus and Agamemnon.

There remained the serious comedy or tragedy of everyday life, where we see fathers of families afflicted, servants saving their masters, rich men offering others their fortunes, innocent seamstresses and villainous corrupters, a species which extends from Diderot to Pixérécourt. All these plays preaching about virtue disgusted them by their triviality.

The drama of 1830 fascinated them by its movement, its colouring, its youthfulness. They made scarcely any distinction between Victor Hugo, Dumas, or Bouchardy, and the diction was no longer to be pompous or fine, but lyrical, extravagant.

One day, as Bouvard was trying to make Pécuchet understand Frédéric Lemaître's acting, Madame Bordin suddenly presented herself in a green shawl, carrying with her a volume of Pigault-Lebrun, the two gentlemen being so polite as to lend her novels now and then.

"But go on!" for she had been a minute there already, and had listened to them with pleasure.

They hoped she would excuse them. She insisted.

"Faith!" said Bouvard, "there's nothing to prevent — — "

Pécuchet, through bashfulness, remarked that he could not act unprepared and without costume.

"To do it effectively, we should need to disguise ourselves!"

And Bouvard looked about for something to put on, but found only the Greek cap, which he snatched up.

As the corridor was not big enough, they went down to the drawing-room. Spiders crawled along the walls, and the geological specimens that encumbered the floor had whitened with their dust the velvet of the armchairs. On the chair which had least dirt on it they spread a cover, so that Madame Bordin might sit down.

It was necessary to give her something good.

Bouvard was in favour of the *Tour de Nesle*. But Pécuchet was afraid of parts which called for too much action.

"She would prefer some classical piece! *Phèdre*, for instance."

"Be it so."

Bouvard set forth the theme: "It is about a queen whose husband has a son by another wife. She has fallen madly in love with the young man. Are we there? Start!

"'Yes, prince! for Theseus I grow faint, I burn — I love him!'"

And, addressing Pécuchet's side-face, he gushed out admiration of his port, his visage, "that charming head"; grieved at not having met him with the Greek fleet; would have gladly been lost with him in the labyrinth.

The border of the red cap bent forward amorously, and his trembling voice and his appealing face begged of the cruel one to take pity on a hopeless flame.

Pécuchet, turning aside, breathed hard to emphasise his emotion.

Madame Bordin, without moving, kept her eyes wide open, as if gazing at people whirling round; Mélie was listening behind the door; Gorju, in his shirt-sleeves, was staring at them through the window. Bouvard made a dash into the second part. His acting gave expression to the delirium of the senses, remorse, despair; and he flung himself on the imaginary sword of Pécuchet with such violence that, slipping over some of the stone specimens, he was near tumbling on the ground.

"Pay no attention! Then Theseus arrives, and she poisons herself."

"Poor woman!" said Madame Bordin.

After this they begged of her to choose a piece for them.

She felt perplexed about making a selection. She had seen only three pieces: *Robert le Diable* in the capital, *Le Jeune Mari* at Rouen, and another at Falaise which was very funny, and which was called *La Brouette du Vinaigrier*.

Finally, Bouvard suggested to her the great scene of Tartuffe in the second act.

Pécuchet thought an explanation was desirable:

"You must know that Tartuffe — — "

Madame Bordin interrupted him: "We know what a Tartuffe is."

Bouvard had wished for a robe for a certain passage.

"I see only the monk's habit," said Pécuchet.

"No matter; bring it here."

He reappeared with it and a copy of Molière.

The opening was tame, but at the place where Tartuffe caresses Elmire's knees, Pécuchet assumed the tone of a gendarme:

"*What is your hand doing there?*"

Bouvard instantly replied in a sugary voice:

"*I am feeling your dress; the stuff of it is marrowy.*"

And he shot forth glances from his eyes, bent forward his mouth, sniffed with an exceedingly lecherous air, and ended by even addressing himself to Madame Bordin.

His impassioned gaze embarrassed her, and when he stopped, humble and palpitating, she almost sought for something to say in reply.

Pécuchet took refuge in the book: "*The declaration is quite gallant.*"

"Ha! yes," cried she; "he is a bold wheedler."

"Is it not so?" returned Bouvard confidently. "But here's another with a more modern touch about it." And, having opened his coat, he squatted over a piece of ashlar, and, with his head thrown back, burst forth:

"Your eyes' bright flame my vision floods with joy. Sing me some song like those, in bygone years, You sang at eve, your dark eye filled with tears."

"That is like me," she thought.

"Drink and be merry! let the wine-cup flow: Give me this hour, and all the rest may go!"

"How droll you are!" And she laughed with a little laugh, which made her throat rise up, and exposed her teeth.

"Ah! say, is it not sweet To love and see your lover at your feet?"

He knelt down.

"Finish, then."

"'Oh! let me sleep and dream upon thy breast, My beauty, Doña Sol, my love!'

"Here the bells are heard, and they are disturbed by a mountaineer."

"Fortunately; for, but for that — — " And Madame Bordin smiled, in place of finishing the sentence.

It was getting dark. She arose.

It had been raining a short time before, and the path through the beech grove not being dry enough, it was more convenient to return across the fields. Bouvard accompanied her into the garden, in order to open the gate for her.

At first they walked past the trees cut like distaffs, without a word being

At first they walked past the trees cut like distaffs, without a word being spoken on either side. He was still moved by his declamation, and she, at the bottom of her heart, felt a certain kind of fascination, a charm which was generated by the influence of literature. There are occasions when art excites commonplace natures; and worlds may be unveiled by the clumsiest interpreters.

The sun had reappeared, making the leaves glisten, and casting luminous spots here and there amongst the brakes. Three sparrows with little chirpings hopped on the trunk of an old linden tree which had fallen to the ground. A hawthorn in blossom exhibited its pink sheath; lilacs drooped, borne down by their foliage.

"Ah! that does one good!" said Bouvard, inhaling the air till it filled his lungs.

"You are so painstaking."

"It is not that I have talent; but as for fire, I possess some of that."

"One can see," she returned, pausing between the words, "that you — were in love — in your early days."

"Only in my early days, you believe?"

She stopped. "I know nothing about it."

"What does she mean?" And Bouvard felt his heart beating.

A little pool in the middle of the gravel obliging them to step aside, they got up on the hedgerow.

Then they chatted about the recital.

"What is the name of your last piece?"

"It is taken from *Hernani*, a drama."

"Ha!" then slowly and as if in soliloquy, "it must be nice to have a gentleman say such things to you — in downright earnest."

"I am at your service," replied Bouvard.

"You?"

"Yes, I."

"What a joke!"

"Not the least in the world!"

And, having cast a look about him, he caught her from behind round the waist and kissed the nape of her neck vigorously.

She became very pale as if she were going to faint, and leaned one hand against a tree, then opened her eyes and shook her head.

"It is past."

He looked at her in amazement.

The grating being open, she got up on the threshold of the little gateway.

There was a water-channel at the opposite side. She gathered up all the folds of her petticoat and stood on the brink hesitatingly.

"Do you want my assistance?"

"Do you want my assistance?"

"Unnecessary."

"Why not?"

"Ha! you are too dangerous!" And as she jumped down, he could see her white stocking.

Bouvard blamed himself for having wasted an opportunity. Bah! he should have one again — and then not all women are alike. With some of them you must be blunt, while audacity destroys you with others. In short, he was satisfied with himself — and he did not confide his hope to Pécuchet; this was through fear of the remarks that would be passed, and not at all through delicacy.

From that time forth they used to recite in the presence of Mélie and Gorju, all the time regretting that they had not a private theatre.

The little servant-girl was amused without understanding a bit of it, wondering at the language, charmed at the roll of the verses. Gorju applauded the philosophic passages in the tragedies, and everything in the people's favour in the melodramas, so that, delighted at his good taste, they thought of giving him lessons, with a view to making an actor of him subsequently. This prospect dazzled the workman.

Their performances by this time became the subject of general gossip. Vaucorbeil spoke to them about the matter in a sly fashion. Most people regarded their acting with contempt.

They only prided themselves the more upon it. They crowned themselves artists. Pécuchet wore moustaches, and Bouvard thought he could not do anything better, with his round face and his bald patch, than to give himself a head *à la* Béranger. Finally, they determined to write a play.

The subject was the difficulty. They searched for it while they were at breakfast, and drank coffee, a stimulant indispensable for the brain, then two or three little glasses. They would next take a nap on their beds, after which they would make their way down to the fruit garden and take a turn there; and at length they would leave the house to find inspiration outside, and, after walking side by side, they would come back quite worn out.

Or else they would shut themselves up together. Bouvard would sweep the table, lay down paper in front of him, dip his pen, and remain with his eyes on the ceiling; whilst Pécuchet, in the armchair, would be plunged in meditation, with his legs stretched out and his head down.

Sometimes they felt a shivering sensation, and, as it were, the passing breath of an idea, but at the very moment when they were seizing it, it had vanished.

But methods exist for discovering subjects. You take a title at random, and a fact trickles out of it. You develop a proverb; you combine a number of adventures so as to form only one. None of these devices came to anything. In adventures so as to form only one. None of these devices came to anything. In vain they ran through collections of anecdotes, several volumes of celebrated trials, and a heap of historical works.

And they dreamed of being acted at the Odéon, had their thoughts fixed on theatrical performances, and sighed for Paris.

"I was born to be an author instead of being buried in the country!" said Bouvard.

"And I likewise," chimed in Pécuchet.

Then came an illumination to their minds. If they had so much trouble about it, the reason was their ignorance of the rules.

They studied them in the *Pratique du Théâtre*, by D'Aubignac, and in some works not quite so old-fashioned.

Important questions are discussed in them: Whether comedy can be written in verse; whether tragedy does not go outside its limits by taking its subject from modern history; whether the heroes ought to be virtuous; what kinds of villains it allows; up to what point horrors are permissible in it; that the details should verge towards a single end; that the interest should increase; that the conclusion should harmonise with the opening — these were unquestionable propositions.

"Invent resorts that can take hold of me,"

says Boileau. By what means were they to "invent resorts?"

"So that in all your speeches passion's dart May penetrate, and warm, and move the heart."

How were they to "warm the heart?"

Rules, therefore, were not sufficient; there was need, in addition, for genius. And genius is not sufficient either. Corneille, according to the French Academy, understands nothing about the stage; Geoffroy disparaged Voltaire; Souligny scoffed at Racine; La Harpe blushed at Shakespeare's name.

Becoming disgusted with the old criticism, they wished to make acquaintance with the new, and sent for the notices of plays in the newspapers.

What assurance! What obstinacy! What dishonesty! Outrages on masterpieces; respect shown for platitudes; the gross ignorance of those who pass for scholars, and the stupidity of others whom they describe as witty.

Perhaps it is to the public that one must appeal.

But works that have been applauded sometimes displeased them, and amongst plays that were hissed there were some that they admired.

Thus the opinions of persons of taste are unreliable, while the judgment of the multitude is incomprehensible.

Bouvard submitted the problem to Barberou. Pécuchet, on his side, wrote to Dumouchel.

The ex-commercial traveller was astonished at the effeminacy engendered by

The ex-commercial traveller was astonished at the effeminacy engendered by provincial life. His old Bouvard was turning into a blockhead; in short, "he was no longer in it at all."

"The theatre is an article of consumption like any other. It is advertised in the newspapers. We go to the theatre to be amused. The good thing is the thing that amuses."

"But, idiot," exclaimed Pécuchet, "what amuses you is not what amuses me; and the others, as well as yourself, will be weary of it by and by. If plays are written expressly to be acted, how is it that the best of them can be always read?"

And he awaited Dumouchel's reply. According to the professor, the immediate fate of a play proved nothing. The *Misanthrope* and *Athalie* are dying out. *Zaïre* is no longer understood. Who speaks to-day of Ducange or of Picard? And he recalled all the great contemporary successes from *Fanchon la Vielleuse* to *Gaspardo le Pêcheur*, and deplored the decline of our stage. The cause of it is the contempt for literature, or rather for style; and, with the aid of certain authors mentioned by Dumouchel, they learned the secret of the various styles; how we get the majestic, the temperate, the ingenuous, the touches that are noble and the expressions that ar***e*** low. "Dogs" may be heightened by "devouring"; "to vomit" is to be used only figuratively; "fever" is applied to the passions; "valiance" is beautiful in verse.

"Suppose we made verses?" said Pécuchet.

"Yes, later. Let us occupy ourselves with prose first."

A strict recommendation is given to choose a classic in order to mould yourself upon it; but all of them have their dangers, and not only have they sinned in point of style, but still more in point of phraseology.

This assertion disconcerted Bouvard and Pécuchet, and they set about studying grammar.

Has the French language, in its idiomatic structure definite articles and indefinite, as in Latin? Some think that it has, others that it has not. They did not venture to decide.

The subject is always in agreement with the verb, save on the occasions when the subject is not in agreement with it.

There was formerly no distinction between the verbal adjective and the present participle; but the Academy lays down one not very easy to grasp.

They were much pleased to learn that the pronoun *leur* is used for persons, but also for things, while *où* and *en* are used for things and sometimes for persons.

Ought we to say *Cette femme a l'air bon* or *l'air bonne*? — *une bûche de bois sec*, or *de bois sèche*? — *ne pas laisser de*, or *que de*? — *une troupe de voleurs* *survint*, or *survinrent*?

Other difficulties: *Autour* and *à l'entour* of which Racine and Boileau did not see the difference; *imposer*, or *en imposer*, synonyms with Massillon and Voltaire; *croasser* and *coasser*, confounded by La Fontaine, who knew, however, how to distinguish a crow from a frog.

The grammarians, it is true, are at variance. Some see a beauty where others discover a fault. They admit principles of which they reject the consequences, announce consequences of which they repudiate the principles, lean on tradition, throw over the masters, and adopt whimsical refinements.

Ménage, instead of *lentilles* and *cassonade*, approves of *nentilles* and *castonade*; Bonhours, *jérarchie* and not *hiérarchie* and M. Chapsal speaks of *les œils de la soupe*.

Pécuchet was amazed above all at Jénin. What! *z'annetons* would be better than *hannetons*, *z'aricots* than *haricots*! and, under Louis XIV., the pronunciation was *Roume* and *Monsieur de Lioune*, instead of *Rome* and *Monsieur de Lionne*!

Littré gave them the finishing stroke by declaring that there never had been, and never could be positive orthography. They concluded that syntax is a whim and grammar an illusion.

At this period, moreover, a new school of rhetoric declared that we should write as we speak, and that all would be well so long as we felt and observed.

As they had felt and believed that they had observed, they considered themselves qualified to write. A play is troublesome on account of the narrowness of its framework, but the novel has more freedom. In order to write one they searched among their personal recollections.

Pécuchet recalled to mind one of the head-clerks in his own office, a very nasty customer, and he felt a longing to take revenge on him by means of a book.

Bouvard had, at the smoking saloon, made the acquaintance of an old writing-master, who was a miserable drunkard. Nothing could be so ludicrous as this character.

At the end of the week, they imagined that they could fuse these two subjects into one. They left off there, and passed on to the following: a woman who causes the unhappiness of a family; a wife, her husband, and her lover; a woman who would be virtuous through a defect in her conformation; an ambitious man; a bad priest. They tried to bind together with these vague conceptions things supplied by their memory, and then made abridgments or additions.

Pécuchet was for sentiment and ideality, Bouvard for imagery and colouring; and they began to understand each other no longer, each wondering that the other should be so shallow other should be so shallow.

The science which is known as æsthetics would perhaps settle their differences. A friend of Dumouchel, a professor of philosophy, sent them a list of works on the subject. They worked separately and communicated their ideas to one another.

In the first place, what is the Beautiful?

For Schelling, it is the infinite expressing itself through the finite; for Reid, an occult quality; for Jouffroy, an indecomposable fact; for De Maistre, that which is pleasing to virtue; for P. André, that which agrees with reason.

And there are many kinds of beauty: a beauty in the sciences — geometry is beautiful; a beauty in morals — it cannot be denied that the death of Socrates was beautiful; a beauty in the animal kingdom — the beauty of the dog consists in his sense of smell. A pig could not be beautiful, having regard to his dirty habits; no more could a serpent, for it awakens in us ideas of vileness. The flowers, the butterflies, the birds may be beautiful. Finally, the first condition of beauty is unity in variety: there is the principle.

"Yet," said Bouvard, "two squint eyes are more varied than two straight eyes, and produce an effect which is not so good — as a rule."

They entered upon the question of the Sublime.

Certain objects are sublime in themselves: the noise of a torrent, profound darkness, a tree flung down by the storm. A character is beautiful when it triumphs, and sublime when it struggles.

"I understand," said Bouvard; "the Beautiful is the beautiful, and the Sublime the very beautiful."

But how were they to be distinguished?

"By means of tact," answered Pécuchet.

"And tact — where does that come from?"

"From taste."

"What is taste?"

It is defined as a special discernment, a rapid judgment, the power of distinguishing certain relationships.

"In short, taste is taste; but all that does not tell the way to have it."

It is necessary to observe the proprieties. But the proprieties vary; and, let a work be ever so beautiful, it will not be always irreproachable. There is, however, a beauty which is indestructible, and of whose laws we are ignorant, for its genesis is mysterious.

Since an idea cannot be interpreted in every form, we ought to recognise limits amongst the arts, and in each of the arts many forms; but combinations arise in which the style of one will enter into another without the ill result of deviating from the end — of not being true.

The too rigid application of truth is hurtful to beauty, and preoccupation with beauty impedes truth. However, without an ideal there is no truth; this is why types are of a more continuous reality than portraits. Art, besides, only aims at verisimilitude; but verisimilitude depends on the observer, and is a relative and transitory thing.

So they got lost in discussions. Bouvard believed less and less in æsthetics.

"If it is not a humbug, its correctness will be demonstrated by examples. Now listen."

And he read a note which had called for much research on his part:

"'Bouhours accuses Tacitus of not having the simplicity which history demands. M. Droz, a professor, blames Shakespeare for his mixture of the serious and the comic. Nisard, another professor, thinks that André Chénier is, as a poet, beneath the seventeenth century. Blair, an Englishman, finds fault with the picture of the harpies in Virgil. Marmontel groans over the liberties taken by Homer. Lamotte does not admit the immortality of his heroes. Vida is indignant at his similes. In short, all the makers of rhetorics, poetics, and æsthetics, appear to me idiots."

"You are exaggerating," said Pécuchet.

He was disturbed by doubts; for, if (as Longinus observes) ordinary minds are incapable of faults, the faults must be associated with the masters, and we are bound to admire them. This is going too far. However, the masters are the masters. He would have liked to make the doctrines harmonise with th***e*** works, the critics with the poets, to grasp the essence of the Beautiful; and these questions exercised him so much that his bile was stirred up. He got a jaundice from it.

It was at its crisis when Marianne, Madame Bordin's cook, came with a request from her mistress for an interview with Bouvard.

The widow had not made her appearance since the dramatic performance. Was this an advance? But why should she employ Marianne as an intermediary? And all night Bouvard's imagination wandered.

Next day, about two o'clock, he was walking in the corridor, and glancing out through the window from time to time. The door-bell rang. It was the notary.

He crossed the threshold, ascended the staircase, and seated himself in the armchair, and, after a preliminary exchange of courtesies, said that, tired of waiting for Madame Bordin, he had started before her. She wished to buy the Ecalles from him.

Bouvard experienced a kind of chilling sensation, and he hurried towards Pécuchet's room.

Pécuchet did not know what reply to make. He was in an anxious frame of mind, as M. Vaucorbeil was to be there presently.

At length Madame Bordin arrived. The delay was explained by the manifest attention she had given to her toilette, which consisted of a cashmere frock, a hat, and fine kid gloves — a costume befitting a serious occasion.

After much frivolous preliminary talk she asked whether a thousand crown-pieces would not be sufficient.

"One acre! A thousand crown-pieces! Never!"

She half closed her eyes. "Oh! for me!"

And all three remained silent.

M. de Faverges entered. He had a morocco case under his arm, like a solicitor; and, depositing it on the table, said:

"These are pamphlets! They deal with reform — a burning question; but here is a thing which no doubt belongs to you."

And he handed Bouvard the second volume of the *Mémoires du Diable*.

Mélie, just now, had been reading it in the kitchen; and, as one ought to watch over the morals of persons of that class, he thought he was doing the right thing in confiscating the book.

Bouvard had lent it to his servant-maid. They chatted about novels. Madame Bordin liked them when they were not dismal.

"Writers," said M. de Faverges, "paint life in colours that are too flattering."

"It is necessary to paint," urged Bouvard.

"Then nothing can be done save to follow the example."

"It is not a question of example."

"At least, you will admit that they might fall into the hands of a young daughter. I have one."

"And a charming one!" said the notary, with the expression of countenance he wore on the days of marriage contracts.

"Well, for her sake, or rather for that of the persons that surround her, I prohibit them in my house, for the people, my dear sir — — "

"What have the people done?" said Vaucorbeil, appearing suddenly at the door.

Pécuchet, who had recognised his voice, came to mingle with the company.

"I maintain," returned the count, "that it is necessary to prevent them from reading certain books."

Vaucorbeil observed: "Then you are not in favour of education?"

"Yes, certainly. Allow me — — "

"When every day," said Marescot, "an attack is made on the government."

"Where's the harm?"

And the nobleman and the physician proceeded to disparage Louis Philippe, recalling the Pritchard case, and the September laws against the liberty of the press:

"And that of the stage," added Pécuchet.

Marescot could stand this no longer.

"It goes too far, this stage of yours!"

"That I grant you," said the count — "plays that glorify suicide."

"Suicide is a fine thing! Witness Cato," protested Pécuchet.

Without replying to the argument, M. de Faverges stigmatised those works in which the holiest things are scoffed at: the family, property, marriage.

"Well, and Molière?" said Bouvard.

Marescot, a man of literary taste, retorted that Molière would not pass muster any longer, and was, furthermore, a little overrated.

"Finally," said the count, "Victor Hugo has been pitiless — yes, pitiless — towards Marie Antoinette, by dragging over the hurdle the type of the Queen in the character of Mary Tudor."

"What!" exclaimed Bouvard, "I, an author, I have no right — — "

"No, sir, you have no right to show us crime without putting beside it a corrective — without presenting to us a lesson."

Vaucorbeil thought also that art ought to have an object — to aim at the improvement of the masses. "Let us chant science, our discoveries, patriotism," and he broke into admiration of Casimir Delavigne.

Madame Bordin praised the Marquis de Foudras.

The notary replied: "But the language — are you thinking of that?"

"The language? How?"

"He refers to the style," said Pécuchet. "Do you consider his works well written?"

"No doubt, exceedingly interesting."

He shrugged his shoulders, and she blushed at the impertinence.

Madame Bordin had several times attempted to come back to her own business transaction. It was too late to conclude it. She went off on Marescot's arm.

The count distributed his pamphlets, requesting them to hand them round to other people.

Vaucorbeil was leaving, when Pécuchet stopped him.

"You are forgetting me, doctor."

His yellow physiognomy was pitiable, with his moustaches and his black hair, which was hanging down under a silk handkerchief badly fastened.

"Purge yourself," said the doctor. And, giving him two little slaps as if to a child: "Too much nerves, too much artist!"

"No, surely!"

They summed up what they had just heard. The morality of art is contained for every person in that which flatters that person's interests. No one has any love for literature.

After this they turned over the count's pamphlets.

They found in all of a demand for universal suffrage.

"It seems to me," said Pécuchet, "that we shall soon have some squabbling."

For he saw everything in dark colours, perhaps on account of his jaundice.

CHAPTER VI.

Revolt of the People.

In the morning of the 25th of February, 1848, the news was brought to Chavignolles, by a person who had come from Falaise, that Paris was covered with barricades, and the next day the proclamation of the Republic was posted up outside the mayor's office.

This great event astonished the inhabitants.

But when they learned that the Court of Cassation, the Court of Appeal, the Court of Exchequer, the Chamber of Notaries, the order of advocates, the Council of State, the University, the generals, and M. de la Roche-Jacquelein himself had given promise of their adherence to the provisional government, their breasts began to expand; and, as trees of liberty were planted at Paris, the municipal council decided that they ought to have them at Chavignolles.

Bouvard made an offer of one, his patriotism exulting in the triumph of the people; as for Pécuchet, the fall of royalty confirmed his anticipations so exactly that he must needs be satisfied.

Gorju, obeying them with zeal, removed one of the poplar trees that skirted the meadow above L***a*** Butte, and transported it to "the Cows' Pass," at the entrance of the village, the place appointed for the purpose.

Before the hour for the ceremony, all three awaited the procession. They heard a drum beating, and then beheld a silver cross. After this appeared two torches borne by the chanters, then the curé, with stole, surplice, cope, and biretta. Four altar-boys escorted him, a fifth carried the holy-water basin, and in the rear came the sacristan. He got up on the raised edge of the hole in which stood the poplar tree, adorned with tri-coloured ribbons. On the opposite side could be seen the mayor and his two deputies, Beljambe and Marescot; then the principal personages of the district, M. de Faverges, Vaucorbeil, Coulon, the justice of the peace, an old fogy with a sleepy face. Heurtaux wore a foraging-cap, and Alexandre Petit, the new schoolmaster, had put on his frock-coat, a threadbare green garment — his Sunday coat. The firemen, whom Girbal commanded, sword in hand, stood in single file. On the other side shone the white plates of some old shakos of the time of Lafayette — five or six, no more — the National Guard having fallen into desuetude at Chavignolles. Peasants and their wives, workmen from neighbouring factories, and village brats, crowded together in the background; and Placquevent, the keeper, five feet eight inches in height, kept them in check with a look as he walked to and fro with inches in height, kept them in check with a look as he walked to and fro with folded arms.

The curé's speech was like that of other priests in similar circumstances. After thundering against kings, he glorified the Republic. "Do we not say 'the republic of letters,' 'the Christian republic'? What more innocent than the one, more beautiful than the other? Jesus Christ formulated our sublime device: the tree of the people was the tree of the Cross. In order that religion may give her fruits, she has need of charity." And, in the name of charity, the ecclesiastic implored his brethren not to commit any disorder; to return home peaceably.

Then he sprinkled the tree while he invoked the blessing of God. "May it grow, and may it recall to us our enfranchisement from all servitude, and that fraternity more bountiful than the shade of its branches. Amen."

Some voices repeated "Amen"; and, after an interval of drum-beating, the clergy, chanting a *Te Deum,* returned along the road to the church.

Their intervention had produced an excellent effect. The simple saw in it a promise of happiness, the patriotic a mark of deference, a sort of homage rendered to their principles.

Bouvard and Pécuchet thought they should have been thanked for their present, or at least that an allusion should have been made to it; and they unbosomed themselves on the subject to Faverges and the doctor.

What mattered wretched considerations of that sort? Vaucorbeil was delighted with the Revolution; so was the count. He execrated the Orléans family. They would never see them any more! Good-bye to them! All for the people henceforth! And followed by Hurel, his factotum, he went to meet the curé.

Foureau was walking with his head down, between the notary and the innkeeper, irritated by the ceremony, as he was apprehensive of a riot; and instinctively he turned round towards Placquevent, who, together with the captain, gave vent to loud regrets at Girbal's unsatisfactoriness and the sorry appearance of his men.

Some workmen passed along the road singing the "Marseillaise," with Gorju among them brandishing a stick; Petit was escorting them, with fire in his eyes.

"I don't like that!" said Marescot. "They are making a great outcry, and getting too excited."

"Oh, bless my soul!" replied Coulon; "young people must amuse themselves."

Foureau heaved a sigh. "Queer amusement! and then the guillotine at the end of it!" He had visions of the scaffold, and was anticipating horrors.

Chavignolles felt the rebound of the agitation in Paris. The villagers subscribed to the newspapers. Every morning people crowded to the post-office, and the postmistress would not have been able to get herself free from them had and the postmistress would not have been able to get herself free from them had it not been for the captain, who sometimes assisted her. Then would follow a chat on the green.

The first violent discussion was on the subject of Poland.

Heurtaux and Bouvard called for its liberation.

M. de Faverges took a different view.

"What right have we to go there? That would be to let loose Europe against us. No imprudence!"

And everybody approving of this, the two Poles held their tongues.

On another occasion, Vaucorbeil spoke in favour of Ledru-Rollin's circulars.

Foureau retorted with a reference to the forty-five centimes.

"But the government," said Pécuchet, "has suppressed slavery."

"What does slavery matter to me?"

"Well, what about the abolition of the death-penalty in political cases?"

"Faith," replied Foureau, "they would like to abolish everything. However, who knows? the tenants are already showing themselves very exacting."

"So much the better! The proprietors," according to Pécuchet, "had been too much favoured. He that owns an estate — — "

Foureau and Marescot interrupted him, exclaiming that he was a communist.

"I — a communist!"

And all kept talking at the same time. When Pécuchet proposed to establish a club, Foureau had the hardihood to reply that they would never see such a thing at Chavignolles.

After this, Gorju demanded guns for the National Guard, the general opinion having fixed on him as instructor. The only guns in the place were those of the firemen. Girbal had possession of them. Foureau did not care to deliver them up.

Gorju looked at him.

"You will find, however, that I know how to use them."

For he added to his other occupations that of poaching, and the innkeeper often bought from him a hare or a rabbit.

"Faith! take them!" said Foureau.

The same evening they began drilling. It was under the lawn, in front of the church. Gorju, in a blue smock-frock, with a neckcloth around his loins, went through the movements in an automatic fashion. When he gave the orders, his voice was gruff.

"Draw in your bellies!"

And immediately, Bouvard, keeping back his breath, drew in his stomach, and stretched out his buttocks.

"Good God! you're not told to make an arch."

Pécuchet confused the ranks and the files, half-turns to the right and half-

Pécuchet confused the ranks and the files, half-turns to the right and half turns to the left; but the most pitiable sight was the schoolmaster: weak and of a slim figure, with a ring of fair beard around his neck, he staggered under the weight of his gun, the bayonet of which incommoded his neighbours.

They wore trousers of every colour, dirty shoulder-belts, old regimentals that were too short, leaving their shirts visible over their flanks; and each of them pretended that he had not the means of doing otherwise. A subscription was started to clothe the poorest of them. Foureau was niggardly, while women made themselves conspicuous. Madame Bordin gave five francs, in spite of her hatred of the Republic. M. de Faverges equipped a dozen men, and was not missing at the drill. Then he took up his quarters at the grocer's, and gave those who came in first a drink.

The powerful then began fawning on the lower class. Everyone went after the working-men. People intrigued for the favour of being associated with them. They became nobles.

Those of the canton were, for the most part, weavers; others worked in the cotton mills or at a paper factory lately established.

Gorju fascinated them by his bluster, taught them the shoe trick, and brought those whom he treated as chums to Madame Castillon's house for a drink.

But the peasants were more numerous, and on market days M. de Faverges would walk about the green, make inquiries as to their wants, and try to convert them to his own ideas. They listened without answering, like Père Gouy, ready to accept any government so long as it reduced the taxes.

By dint of babbling, Gorju was making a name for himself. Perhaps they might send him into the Assembly!

M. de Faverges also was thinking of it, while seeking not to compromise himself.

The Conservatives oscillated between Foureau and Marescot, but, as the notary stuck to his office, Foureau was chosen — a boor, an idiot. The doctor waxed indignant. Rejected in the competition, he regretted Paris, and the consciousness of his wasted life gave him a morose air. A more distinguished career was about to open for him — what a revenge! He drew up a profession of faith, and went to read it to MM. Bouvard and Pécuchet.

They congratulated him upon it. Their opinions were identical with his. However, they wrote better, had a knowledge of history, and could cut as good a figure as he in the Chamber. Why not? But which of them ought to offer himself? And they entered upon a contest of delicacy.

Pécuchet preferred that it should be his friend rather than himself.

"No, it suits you better! you have a better deportment!"

"Perhaps so," returned Bouvard, "but you have a better tuft of hair!" And, without solving the difficulty, they arranged their plans of conduct.

This vertigo of deputyship had seized on others**.** The captain dreamed of it under his foraging-cap while puffing at his pipe, and the schoolmaster too in his school, and the curé also between two prayers, so that he sometimes surprised himself with his eyes towards heaven, in the act of saying, "Grant, O my God, that I may be a deputy!"

The doctor having received some encouragement, repaired to the house of Heurtaux, and explained to him what his chances were. The captain did not stand on ceremony about it. Vaucorbeil was known, undoubtedly, but little liked by his professional brethren, especially in the case of chemists. Everyone would bark at him; the people did not want a gentleman; his best patients would leave him. And, when he weighed these arguments, the physician regretted his weakness.

As soon as he had gone, Heurtaux went to see Placquevent. Between old soldiers there should be mutual courtesy, but the rural guard, devoted though he was to Foureau, flatly refused to help him.

The curé demonstrated to M. de Faverges that the hour had not come. It was necessary to give the Republic time to get used up.

Bouvard and Pécuchet represented to Gorju that he would never be strong enough to overcome the coalition of the peasants and the village shop-keepers, filled him with uncertainty, and deprived him of all confidence.

Petit, through pride, had allowed his ambition to be seen. Beljambe warned him that, if he failed, his dismissal was certain.

Finally, the curé got orders from the bishop to keep quiet.

Then, only Foureau remained**.**

Bouvard and Pécuchet opposed him, bringing up against him his unfriendly attitude about the guns, his opposition to the club, his reactionary views, his avarice; and even persuaded Gouy that he wished to bring back the old *régime*. Vague as was the meaning of this word to the peasant's mind, he execrated it with a hatred that had accumulated in the souls of his forefathers throughout ten centuries; and he turned all his relatives, and those of his wife, brothers-in-law, cousins, grand-nephews (a horde of them), against Foureau.

Gorju, Vaucorbeil, and Petit kept working for the overthrow of the mayor; and, the ground being thus cleared, Bouvard and Pécuchet, without any doubt, were likely to succeed.

They drew lots to know which would present himself. The drawing decided nothing, and they went to consult the doctor on the subject.

He had news for them: Flacardoux, editor of *Le Calvados,* had announced his candidature. The two friends had a keen sense of having been deceived. Each felt the other's disappointment more than his own. But politics had an exciting influence on them. When the election-day arrived they went to inspect the urns. Flacardoux had carried it!

M. de Faverges had fallen back on the National Guard, without obtaining the epaulet of commander. The people of Chavignolles contrived to get Beljambe nominated.

This favouritism on the part of the public, so whimsical and unforeseen, dismayed Heurtaux. He had neglected his duties, confining himself to inspecting the military operations now and then, and giving utterance to a few remarks. No matter! He considered it a monstrous thing that an innkeeper should be preferred to one who had been formerly a captain in the Imperial service, and he said, after the invasion of the Chamber on the 15th of May: "If the military grades give themselves away like that in the capital, I shall be no longer astonished at what may happen."

The reaction began.

People believed in Louis Blanc's pineapple soup, in Flocon's bed of gold, and Ledru-Rollin's royal orgies; and as the province pretends to know everything that happens in Paris, the inhabitants of Chavignolles had no doubt about these inventions, and gave credence to the most absurd reports.

M. de Faverges one evening came to look for the curé, in order to tell him that the Count de Chambord had arrived in Normandy.

Joinville, according to Foureau, had made preparations with his sailors to put down "these socialists of yours." Heurtaux declared that Louis Napoleon would shortly be consul.

The factories had stopped. Poor people wandered in large groups about the country.

One Sunday (it was in the early days of June) a gendarme suddenly started in the direction of Falaise. The workmen of Acqueville, Liffard, Pierre-Pont, and Saint-Rémy were marching on Chavignolles. The sheds were shut up. The municipal council assembled and passed a resolution, to prevent catastrophes, that no resistance should be offered. The gendarmes were kept in, and orders were given to them not to show themselves. Soon was heard, as it were, the rumbling of a storm. Then the song of the Girondists shook the windows, and men, arm in arm, passed along the road from Caen, dusty, sweating, in rags. They filled up the entire space in front of the council chamber, and a great hurly-burly arose.

Gorju and two of his comrades entered the chamber. One of them was lean and wretched-looking, with a knitted waistcoat, the ribbons of which were hanging down; the other, black as coal — a machinist, no doubt — with hair like a brush, thick eyebrows, and old list shoes. Gorju, like a hussar, wore his waistcoat slung over his shoulder.

All three remained standing, and the councillors, seated round the table, which was covered with a blue cloth, gazed at their faces, pale from privation.

"Citizens!" said Gorju, "we want work."

The mayor trembled. He could not find his voice.

Marescot replied from the place where he sat that the council would consider the matter directly; and when the comrades had gone out they discussed several suggestions.

The first was to have stones drawn.

In order to utilise the stones, Girbal proposed a road from Angleville to Tournebu.

That from Bayeux had positively rendered the same service.

They could clear out the pond! This was not sufficient as a public work. Or rather, dig a second pond! But in what place?

Langlois' advice was to construct an embankment along the Mortins as a protection against an inundation. It would be better, Beljambe thought, to clear away the heather.

It was impossible to arrive at any conclusion. To appease the crowd, Coulon went down over th***e*** peristyle and announced that they were preparing charity workshops.

"Charity! Thanks!" cried Gorju. "Down with the aristocrats! We want the right to work!"

It was the question of the time. He made use of it as a source of popularity. He was applauded.

In turning round he elbowed Bouvard, whom Pécuchet had dragged to the spot, and they entered into conversation. Nothing could keep them back; the municipal building was surrounded; the council could not escape.

"Where shall you get money?" said Bouvard.

"In the rich people's houses. Besides, the government will give orders for public works."

"And if works are not wanted?"

"They will have them made in advance."

"But wages will fall," urged Pécuchet. "When work happens to be lacking, it is because there are too many products; and you demand to have them increased!"

Gorju bit his moustache. "However, with the organisation of labour — — "

"Then the government will be the master!"

Some of those around murmured:

"No, no! no more masters!"

Gorju got angry. "No matter! Workers should be supplied with capital, or rather credit should be established."

"In what way?"

"Ah! I don't know; but credit ought to be established."

"We've had enough of that," said the machinist. "They are only plaguing us, these farce-actors!"

And he climbed up the steps, declaring that he would break open the door.

There he was met by Placquevent, with his right knee bent and his fists clenched:

"Advance one inch further!"

The machinist recoiled. The shouting of the mob reached the chamber. All arose with the desire to run away. The help from Falaise had not arrived. They bewailed the count's absence. Marescot kept twisting a pen; Père Coulon groaned; Heurtaux lashed himself into a fury to make them send for the gendarmes.

"Command them to come!" said Foureau.

"I have no authority."

The noise, however, redoubled. The whole green was covered with people, and they were all staring at the first story of the building when, at the window in the middle, under the clock, Pécuchet made his appearance.

He had ingeniously gone up by the back-stairs, and, wishing to be like Lamartine, he began a harangue to the populace:

"Citizens! — --"

But his cap, his nose, his frock-coat, his entire personality lacked distinction.

The man in the knitted waistcoat asked him:

"Are you a workman?"

"No."

"A master, then?"

"Nor that either."

"Well, take yourself off, then."

"Why?" returned Pécuchet, haughtily.

And the next moment he disappeared, in the machinist's clutch, into the recess of the window.

Gorju came to his assistance. "Let him alone! He's a decent fellow." They clenched.

The door flew open, and Marescot, on the threshold, announced the decision of the council. Hurel had suggested his doing so.

The road from Tournebu would have a branch road in the direction of

Angleville and leading towards the château of Faverges.

It was a sacrifice which the commune took upon itself in the interest of the working-men.

They dispersed.

When Bouvard and Pécuchet re-entered their house, women's voices fell upon their ears. The servants and Madame Bordin were breaking into exclamations, the widow's screams being the loudest; and at sight of them she cried:

"Ha! this is very fortunate! I have been waiting for you for the last three hours! My poor garden has not a single tulip left! Filth everywhere on the grass! No way of getting rid of him!"

"Who is it?"

"Père Gouy."

He had come with a cartload of manure, and had scattered it pell-mell over the grass.

"He is now digging it up. Hurry on and make him stop."

"I am going with you," said Bouvard.

At the bottom of the steps outside, a horse in the shafts of a dung-cart was gnawing at a bunch of oleanders. The wheels, in grazing the flower borders, had bruised the box trees, broken a rhododendron, knocked down the dahlias; and clods of black muck, like molehills, embossed the green sward. Gouy was vigorously digging it up.

One day Madame Bordin had carelessly said to him that she would like to have it turned up. He set about the job, and, in spite of her orders to desist, went on with it. This was the way that he interpreted the right to work, Gorju's talk having turned his brain.

He went away only after violent threats from Bouvard.

Madame Bordin, by way of compensation, did not pay for the manual labour, and kept the manure. She was wise: the doctor's wife, and even the notary's, though of higher social position, respected her for it.

The charity workshops lasted a week. No trouble occurred. Gorju left the neighbourhood.

Meanwhile, the National Guard was always on foot: on Sunday, a review; military promenades, occasionally; and, every night, patrols. They disturbed the village. They rang the bells of houses for fun; they made their way into the bedrooms where married couples were snoring on the same bolster; then they uttered broad jokes, and the husband, rising, would go and get them a glass each. Afterwards, they would return to the guard-house to play a hundred of dominoes, would consume a quantity of cider there, and eat cheese, while the sentinel, worn out, would keep opening the door every other minute. There was a prevailing absence of discipline, owing to Beljambe's laxity.

When the days of June came, everyone was in favour of "flying to the relief of Paris"; but Foureau could not leave the mayoral premises, Marescot his office, the doctor his patients, or Girbal his firemen. M. de Faverges was at Cherbourg. Beljambe kept his bed. The captain grumbled: "They did not want me; so much the worse!" — and Bouvard had the wisdom to put restraint on Pécuchet.

The patrols throughout the country were extended farther. They were panic-stricken by the shadow of a haystack, or by the forms of branches. On one occasion the entire National Guard turned and ran. In the moonlight they had observed, under an apple tree, a man with a gun, taking aim at them. At another time, on a dark night, the patrol halting under the beech trees, heard some one close at hand.

"Who is there?"

No answer.

They allowed the person to pursue his course, following him at a distance, for he might have a pistol or a tomahawk; but when they were in the village, within reach of help, the dozen men of the company rushed together upon him, exclaiming:

"Your papers!" They pulled him about and overwhelmed him with insults. The men at the guard-house had gone out. They dragged him there; and by the light of the candle that was burning on top of the stove they at last recognised Gorju.

A wretched greatcoat of lasting was flapping over his shoulders. His toes could be seen through the holes in his boots. Scratches and bruises stained his face with blood. He was fearfully emaciated, and rolled his eyes about like a wolf.

Foureau, coming up speedily, questioned him as to how he chanced to be under the beech trees, what his object was in coming back to Chavignolles, and also as to the employment of his time for the past six weeks.

"That is no business of yours. I have my liberty."

Placquevent searched him to find out whether he had cartridges about him.

They were about to imprison him provisionally.

Bouvard interposed.

"No use," replied the mayor; "we know your opinions."

"Nevertheless — — "

"Ha! be careful; I give you warning. Be careful."

Bouvard persisted no further.

Gorju then turned towards Pécuchet: "And you, master, have you not a word to say for me?"

Pécuchet hung down his head, as if he had a suspicion against his innocence.

The poor wretch smiled bitterly.

"I protected you, all the same."

At daybreak, two gendarmes took him to Falaise.

He was not tried before a court-martial, but was sentenced by the civil tribunal to three months' imprisonment for the misdemeanour of language tending towards the destruction of society. From Falaise he wrote to his former employers to send him soon a certificate of good life and morals, and as their signature required to be legalised by the mayor or the deputy, they preferred to ask Marescot to do this little service for them.

They were introduced into a dining-room, decorated with dishes of fine old earthenware; a Boule clock occupied the narrowest shelf. On the mahogany table, without a cloth, were two napkins, a teapot and finger-glasses. Madame Marescot crossed the room in a dressing-gown of blue cashmere. She was a Parisian who was bored with the country. Then the notary came in, with his cap in one hand, a newspaper in the other; and at once, in the most polite fashion, he affixed his seal, although their *protégé* was a dangerous man.

"Really," said Bouvard, "for a few words — — "

"But words lead to crimes, my dear sir, give me leave to say."

"And yet," said Pécuchet, "what line of demarcation can you lay down between innocent and guilty phrases? The thing that just now is prohibited may be subsequently applauded." And he censured the harshness with which the insurgents had been treated.

Marescot naturally rested his case on the necessity of protecting society, the public safety — the supreme law.

"Pardon me!" said Pécuchet, "the right of a single individual is as much entitled to respect as those of all, and you have nothing to oppose to him but force if he turns your axiom upon yourself."

Instead of replying, Marescot lifted his brows disdainfully. Provided that he continued to draw up legal documents, and to live among his plates, in his comfortable little home, injustices of every kind might present themselves without affecting him. Business called him away. He excused himself.

His theory of public safety excited their indignation. The Conservatives now talked like Robespierre.

Another matter for astonishment: Cavaignac was flagging; the Garde Mobile was exposing itself to suspicion. Ledru-Rollin had ruined himself even in Vaucorbeil's estimation. The debates on the Constitution interested nobody, and on the 10th of December all the inhabitants of Chavignolles voted for Bonaparte. The six millions of votes made Pécuchet grow cold with regard to the people, and Bouvard and he proceeded to study the question of universal suffrage.

As it belongs to everybody, it cannot possess intelligence. One ambitious man will always be the leader; the others will follow him like a flock of sheep, the electors not being compelled even to know how to read. This was the reason, in Bouvard's opinion, that there were so many frauds at presidential elections.

"None," replied Bouvard; "I believe rather in the gullibility of the people. Think of all who buy the patent health-restorer, the Dupuytren pomatum, the Châtelaine's water, *etc*. Those boobies constitute the majority of the electorate, and we submit to their will. Why cannot an income of three thousand francs be made out of rabbits? Because the overcrowding of them is a cause of death. In the same way, through the mere fact of its being a multitude, the germs of stupidity contained in it are developed, and thence result consequences that are incalculable."

"Your scepticism frightens me," said Pécuchet.

At a later period, in the spring, they met M. de Faverges, who apprised them of the expedition to Rome. We should not attack the Italians, but we should require guaranties. Otherwise our influence would be destroyed. Nothing would be more legitimate than this intervention.

Bouvard opened his eyes wide. "On the subject of Poland, you expressed a contrary opinion."

"It is no longer the same thing." It was now a question of the Pope**.**

And M. de Faverges, when he said, "We wish," "We shall do," "We calculate clearly," represented a group.

Bouvard and Pécuchet were disgusted with the minority quite as much as with the majority. The common people, in short, were just the same as the aristocracy.

The right of intervention appeared dubious to them. They sought for its principles in Calvo, Martens, Vattel; and Bouvard's conclusion was this:

"There may be intervention to restore a prince to the throne, to emancipate a people, or, for the sake of precaution, in view of a public danger. In other cases it is an outrage on the rights of others, an abuse of force, a piece of hypocritical violence."

"And yet," said Pécuchet, "peoples have a solidarity as well as men."

"Perhaps so." And Bouvard sank into a reverie.

The expedition to Rome soon began.

At home, through hatred of revolutionary ideas, the leaders of the Parisian middle class got two printing-offices sacked. The great party of order was formed.

It had for its chiefs in the arrondissement the count, Foureau, Marescot, and the curé. Every day, about four o'clock, they walked from one end of the green to the other, and talked over the events of the day. The principal business was the distribution of pamphlets. The titles did not lack attractiveness: "God will be pleased with it"; "The sharing"; "Let us get out of the mess"; "Where are we going?" The finest things among them were the dialogues in the style of villagers, with oaths and bad French, to elevate the mental faculties of the peasants. By a new law, the hawking of pamphlets would be in the hands of the prefects; and they had just crammed Proudhon into St. Pélagie — gigantic triumph!

The trees of liberty were generally torn down. Chavignolles obeyed orders. Bouvard saw with his own eyes the fragments of his poplar on a wheelbarrow. They helped to warm the gendarmes, and the stump was offered to the curé, who had blessed it. What a mockery!

The schoolmaster did not hide his way of thinking.

Bouvard and Pécuchet congratulated him on it one day as they were passing in front of his door. Next day he presented himself at their residence.

At the end of the week they returned his visit.

The day was declining. The brats had just gone home, and the schoolmaster, in half-sleeves, was sweeping the yard. His wife, with a neckerchief tied round her head, was suckling a baby. A little girl was hiding herself behind her petticoat; a hideous-looking child was playing on the ground at her feet. The water from the washing she had been doing in the kitchen was flowing to the lower end of the house.

"You see," said the schoolmaster, "how the government treats us."

And forthwith he began finding fault with capital as an infamous thing. It was necessary to democratise it, to enfranchise matter.

"I ask for nothing better," said Pécuchet.

At least, they ought to have recognised the right to assistance.

"One more right!" said Bouvard.

No matter! The provisional government had acted in a flabby fashion by not ordaining fraternity.

"Then try to establish it."

As there was no longer daylight, Petit rudely ordered his wife to carry a candle to his study.

The lithograph portraits of the orators of the Left were fastened with pins to the plaster walls. A bookshelf stood above a deal writing-desk. There were a chair, stool, and an old soap-box for persons to sit down upon. He made a show of laughing. But want had laid its traces on his cheeks, and his narrow temples indicated the stubbornness of a ram, an intractable pride. He never would yield.

"Besides, see what sustains me!"

It was a pile of newspapers on a shelf, and in feverish phrases he explained the articles of his faith: disarmament of troops, abolition of the magistracy, equality of salaries, a levelling process by which the golden age was to be brought about under the form of the Republic, with a dictator at its head — a fellow that would carry this out for us briskly!

Then he reached for a bottle of aniseed cordial and three glasses, in order to propose the toast of the hero, the immortal victim, the great Maximilian.

On the threshold appeared the black cassock of the priest. Having saluted those present in an animated fashion, he addressed the schoolmaster, speaking almost in a whisper:

"Our business about St. Joseph, what stage is it at?"

"They have given nothing," replied the schoolmaster.

"That is your fault!"

"I have done what I could."

"Ha! really?"

Bouvard and Pécuchet discreetly rose. Petit made them sit down again, and addressing the curé:

"Is that all?"

The Abbé Jeufroy hesitated. Then, with a smile which tempered his reprimand:

"It is supposed that you are rather negligent about sacred history."

"Oh, sacred history!" interrupted Bouvard.

"What fault have you to find with it, sir?"

"I — none. Only there are perhaps more useful things to be learned than the anecdote of Jonas and the story of the kings of Israel."

"You are free to do as you please," replied the priest drily.

And without regard for the strangers, or on account of their presence:

"The catechism hour is too short."

Petit shrugged his shoulders.

"Mind! You will lose your boarders!"

The ten francs a month for these pupils formed the best part of his remuneration. But the cassock exasperated him.

"So much the worse; take your revenge!"

"A man of my character does not revenge himself," said the priest, without being moved. "Only I would remind you that the law of the fifteenth of March assigns us to the superintendence of primary education."

"Ah! I know that well," cried the schoolmaster. "It is given even to colonels of gendarmes. Why not to the rural guard? That would complete the thing!"

And he sank upon the stool, biting his fingers, repressing his rage, stifled by the feeling of his own powerlessness.

The priest touched him lightly on the shoulder.

"I did not intend to annoy you, my friend. Keep yourself quiet. Be a little reasonable. Here is Easter close at hand; I hope you will show an example by going to communion along with the others."

"That is too much! I — I submit to such absurdities!"

At this blasphemy the curé turned pale, his eyeballs gleamed, his jaw quivered.

"Silence, unhappy man! silence! And it is his wife who looks after the church linen!"

"Well, what then? What has she done to you?"

"She always stays away from mass. Like yourself, for that matter!"

"Oh! a schoolmaster is not sent away for a thing of that kind!"

"He can be removed."

The priest said no more.

He was at the end of the room, in the shadow.

Petit was thinking, with his head resting on his chest.

They would arrive at the other end of France, their last sou eaten up by the journey, and they would again find down there, under different names, the same curé, the same superintendent, the same prefect — all, even to the minister, were like links in a chain dragging him down. He had already had one warning — others would follow. After that? — and in a kind of hallucination he saw himself walking along a high-road, a bag on his back, those whom he loved by his side, and his hand held out towards a post-chaise.

At that moment his wife was seized with a fit of coughing in the kitchen, the new-born infant began to squeal, and the boy was crying.

"Poor children!" said the priest in a softened voice.

The father thereupon broke into sobs:

"Yes, yes! whatever you require!"

"I count upon it," replied the curé.

And, having made the customary bow:

"Well, good evening to you, gentlemen."

The schoolmaster remained with his face in his hands.

He pushed away Bouvard. "No! let me alone. I feel as if I'd like to die. I am an unfortunate man."

The two friends, when they reached their own house, congratulated themselves on their independence. The power of the clergy terrified them.

It was now employed for the purpose of strengthening public order. The

Republic was about to disappear.

Three millions of electors found themselves excluded from universal suffrage. The security required from newspapers was raised; the press censorship was re-established. It was even suggested that it should be put in force against the fiction columns. Classical philosophy was considered dangerous. The commercial classes preached the dogma of material interests; and the populace seemed satisfied.

The country-people came back to their old masters.

M. de Faverges, who had estates in Eure, was declared a member of the Legislative Assembly, and his re-election for the general council of Calvados was certain beforehand.

He thought proper to invite the leading personages in the district to a luncheon.

The vestibule in which three servants were waiting to take their overcoats, the billiard-room and the pair of drawing-rooms, the plants in china vases, the bronzes on the mantel-shelves, the gold wand*s* on the panelled walls, the heavy curtains, the wide armchairs — this display of luxury struck them at once as a mark of courtesy towards them; and, when they entered the dining-room, at the sight of the table laden with meats in silver dishes, together with the row of glasses before each plate, the side-dishes here and there, and a salmon in the middle, every face brightened up.

The party numbered seventeen, including two sturdy agriculturists, the sub-prefect of Bayeux and one person from Cherbourg. M. de Faverges begged his guests to excuse the countess, who was absent owing to a headache; and, after some commendations of the pears and grapes, which filled four baskets at the corners, he asked about the great news — the project of a descent on England by Changarnier.

Heurtaux desired it as a soldier, the curé through hatred of the Protestants, and Foureau in the interests of commerce.

"You are giving expression," said Pécuchet, "to the sentiments of the Middle Ages."

"The Middle Ages had their good side," returned Marescot. "For instance, our cathedrals."

"However, sir, the abuses — — "

"No matter — the Revolution would not have come."

"Ha! the Revolution — there's the misfortune," said the ecclesiastic with a sigh.

"But everyone contributed towards it, and (excuse me, Monsieur le Comte) the nobles themselves by their alliance with the philosophers."

"What is it you want? Louis XVIII. legalised spoliation. Since that time the parliamentary system is sapping the foundations."

A joint of roast beef made its appearance, and for some minutes nothing was heard save the sounds made by forks and moving jaws, and by the servants crossing the floor with the two words on their lips, which they repeated continually:

"Madeira! Sauterne!"

The conversation was resumed by the gentleman from Cherbourg:

"How were they to stop on the slope of an abyss?"

"Amongst the Athenians," said Marescot — "amongst the Athenians, towards whom we bear certain resemblances, Solon checkmated the democrats by raising the electoral census."

"It would be better," said Hurel, "to suppress the Chamber: every disorder comes from Paris."

"Let us decentralise," said the notary.

"On a large scale," added the count.

In Foureau's opinion, the communal authorities should have absolute control, even to the extent of prohibiting travellers from using their roads, if they thought fit.

And whilst the dishes followed one another — fowl with gravy, lobsters, mushrooms, salads, roast larks — many topics were handled: the best system of taxation, the advantages of the large system of land cultivation, the abolition of the death penalty. The sub-prefect did not forget to cite that charming witticism of a clever man: "Let Messieurs the Assassins begin!"

Bouvard was astonished at the contrast between the surroundings and the remarks that reached his ears; for one would think that the language used should always harmonise with the environment, and that lofty ceilings should be made for great thoughts. Nevertheless, he was flushed at dessert, and saw the fruit-dishes as if through a fog. Bordeaux, Burgundy, and Malaga were amongst the wines sent round. M. de Faverges, who knew the people he had to deal with, made the champagne flow. The guests, touching glasses, drank to his success at the election; and more than three hours elapsed before they passed out into the smoking-room, where coffee was served.

A caricature from *Charivari* was trailing on the floor between some copies of the *Univers*. It represented a citizen the skirts of whose frock-coat allowed a tail to be seen with an eye at the end of it. Marescot explained it amid much laughter.

They swallowed their liqueurs, and the ashes of their cigars fell on the paddings of the furniture.

The abbé, desirous to convince Girbal, began an attack on Voltaire. Coulon fell asleep. M. de Faverges avowed his devotion to Chambord.

"The bees furnish an argument for monarchy."

"But the ants for the Republic." However, the doctor adhered to it no longer.

"You are right," said the sub-prefect; "the form of government matters little."

"With liberty," suggested Pécuchet.

"An honest man has no need of it," replied Foureau. "I make no speeches, for my part. I am not a journalist. And I tell you that France requires to be governed with a rod of iron."

All called for a deliverer. As they were going out, Bouvard and Pécuchet heard M. de Faverges saying to the Abbé Jeufroy:

"We must re-establish obedience. Authority perishes if it be made the subject of discussion. The Divine Right — there is nothing but that!"

"Exactly, Monsieur le Comte."

The pale rays of an October sun were lengthening out behind the woods. A moist wind was blowing, and as they walked over the dead leaves they breathed like men who had just been set free.

All that they had not found the opportunity of saying escaped from them in exclamations:

"What idiots!"

"What baseness!"

"How is it possible to imagine such obstinacy!"

"In the first place, what is the meaning of the Divine Right?"

Dumouchel's friend, that professor who had supplied them with instruction on the subject of æsthetics, replied to their inquiries in a learned letter.

"The theory of Divine Right was formulated in the reign of Charles II. by the Englishman Filmer. Here it is:

"'The Creator gave the first man dominion over the world. It was transmitted to his descendants, and the power of the king emanates from God.'

"'He is His image,' writes Bossuet. 'The paternal empire accustoms us to the domination of one alone. Kings have been made after the model of parents.'

"Locke refuted this doctrine: 'The paternal power is distinguished from the monarchic, every subject having the same right over his children that the monarch has over his own. Royalty exists only through the popular choice; and even the election was recalled at the ceremony of coronation, in which two bishops, pointing towards the king, asked both nobles and peasants whether they accepted him as such.'

"Therefore, authority comes from the people.

"'They have the right to do what they like,' says Helvetius; to 'change their constitution,' says Vattel; to 'revolt against injustice,' according to the contention of Glafey, Hotman, Mably, and others; and St. Thomas Aquinas authorises them to 'deliver themselves from a tyrant.' 'They are even,' says Jurieu, 'dispensed from being right.'"

Astonished at the axiom, they took up Rousseau's *Contrat Social*. Pécuchet went through to the end. Then closing his eyes, and throwing back his head, he made an analysis of it.

"A convention is assumed whereby the individual gives up his liberty.

"The people at the same time undertook to protect him against the inequalities of nature, and made him owner of the things he had in his possession."

"Where is the proof of the contract?"

"Nowhere! And the community does not offer any guaranty. The citizens occupy themselves exclusively with politics. But as callings are necessary, Rousseau is in favour of slavery. 'The sciences have destroyed the human race. The theatre is corrupting, money fatal, and the state ought to impose a religion under the penalty of death.'"

"What!" said they, "here is the pontiff of democracy."

All the champions of reform had copied him; and they procured the *Examen du Socialisme*, by Morant.

The first chapter explained the doctrine of Saint-Simon.

At the top the Father, at the same time Pope and Emperor. Abolition of inheritance; all property movable and immovable forming a social fund, which should be worked on a hierarchical basis. The manufacturers are to govern the public fortune. But there is nothing to be afraid of; they will have as a leader the "one who loves the most."

One thing is lacking: woman. On the advent of woman depends the salvation of the world.

"I do not understand."

"Nor I."

And they turned to Fourierism:

"'All misfortunes come from constraint. Let the attraction be free, and harmony will be established.

"'In our souls are shut up a dozen leading passions: five egoistical, four animistic, and three distributive. The first class have reference to individuals, the second to groups, the last to groups of groups, or series, of which the whole forms a phalanx, a society of eighteen hundred persons dwelling in a palace. Every morning carriages convey the workers into the country, and bring them back in the evening. Standards are carried, festivities are held, cakes are eaten.

Every woman, if she desires it, can have three men — the husband, the lover, and the procreator. For celibates, the Bayadère system is established — — '"

"That fits me!" said Bouvard. And he lost himself in dreams of the harmonious world.

"'By the restoration of climatures, the earth will become more beautiful; by the crossing of races, human life will become longer. The clouds will be guided as the thunderbolt is now: it will rain at night in the cities so that they will be clean. Ships will cross the polar seas, thawed beneath the Aurora Borealis. For everything is produced by the conjunction of two fluids, male and female, gushing out from the poles, and the northern lights are a symptom of the blending of the planets — a prolific emission.'"

"This is beyond me!" said Pécuchet.

After Saint-Simon and Fourier the problem resolves itself into questions of wages.

Louis Blanc, in the interests of the working class, wishes to abolish external commerce; Lafarelle to tax machinery; another to take off the drink duties, to restore trade wardenships, or to distribute soups.

Proudhon conceives the idea of a uniform tariff, and claims for the state the monopoly of sugar.

"These socialists," said Bouvard, "always call for tyranny."

"Oh, no!"

"Yes, indeed!"

"You are absurd!"

"Well, I am shocked at you!"

They sent for the works of which they had only summaries. Bouvard noted a number of passages, and, pointing them out, said:

"Read for yourself. They offer as examples to us the Essenes, the Moravian Brethren, the Jesuits of Paraguay, and even the government of prisons."

"'Amongst the Icarians breakfast was over in twenty minutes; women were delivered at the hospitals. As for books, it was forbidden to print them without the authorisation of the Republic.'"

"But Cabet is an idiot."

"Here, now, we have from Saint-Simon: 'The publicists should submit their works to a committee of manufacturers.'

"And from Pierre Leroux: 'The law will compel the citizens to listen to an orator.'

"And from Auguste Comte: 'The priests will educate the youth, will exercise supervision over literary works, and will reserve to themselves the power of regulating procreation.'"

These quotations troubled Pécuchet. In the evening, at dinner, he replied:

"I admit that there are absurdities in the works of the inventors of Utopias; nevertheless they deserve our sympathy. The hideousness of the world tormented them, and, in order to make it beautiful, they endured everything. Recall to mind More decapitated, Campanella put seven times to the torture, Buonarotti with a chain round his neck, Saint-Simon dying of want; many others. They might have lived in peace; but no! they marched on their way with their heads towards the sky, like heroes."

"Do you believe," said Bouvard, "that the world will change, thanks to the theories of some particular gentleman?"

"What does it matter?" said Pécuchet; "it is time to cease stagnating in selfishness. Let us look out for the best system."

"Then you expect to find it?"

"Certainly."

"You?"

And, in the fit of laughter with which Bouvard was seized, his shoulders and stomach kept shaking in harmony. Redder than the jams before them, with his napkin under his armpits, he kept repeating, "Ha! ha! ha!" in an irritating fashion.

Pécuchet left the room, slamming the door after him.

Germaine went all over the house to call him, and he was found at the end of his own apartment in an easy chair, without fire or candle, his cap drawn over his eyes. He was not unwell, but had given himself up to his own broodings.

When the quarrel was over they recognised that a foundation was needed for their studies — political economy.

They inquired into supply and demand, capital and rent, importation and prohibition.

One night Pécuchet was awakened by the creaking of a boot in the corridor. The evening before, according to custom, he had himself drawn all the bolts; and he called out to Bouvard, who was fast asleep.

They remained motionless under the coverlets. The noise was not repeated.

The servants, on being questioned, said they had heard nothing.

But, while walking through the garden, they remarked in the middle of a flower-bed, near the gateway, the imprint of a boot-sole, and two of the sticks used as supports for the trees were broken. Evidently some one had climbed over.

It was necessary to give notice of it to the rural guard.

As he was not at the municipal building, Pécuchet thought of going to the grocer's shop.

Who should they see in the back shop, beside Placquevent, in the midst of the topers, but Gorju — Gorju, rigged out like a well-to-do citizen, entertaining the company!

This meeting was taken as a matter of course.

So on they lapsed into a discussion about progress.

Bouvard had no doubt it existed in the domain of science. But in that of literature it was not so manifest; and if comfort increases, the poetic side of life disappears.

Pécuchet, in order to bring home conviction on the point, took a piece of paper: "I trace across here an undulating line. Those who happen to travel over it, whenever it sinks, can no longer see the horizon. It rises again nevertheless, and, in spite of its windings, they reach the top. This is an image of progress."

Madame Bordin entered at this point.

It was the 3rd of December, 1851. She had the newspaper in her hand.

They read very quickly, side by side, the news of the appeal to the people, the dissolution of the Chamber, and the imprisonment of the deputies.

Pécuchet turned pale. Bouvard gazed at the widow.

"What! have you nothing to say?"

"What do you wish me to do here?" (They had forgotten to offer her a seat.) "I came here simply out of courtesy towards you, and you are scarcely civil to-day."

And out she went, disgusted at their want of politeness.

The astonishing news had struck them dumb. Then they went about the village venting their indignation.

Marescot, whom they found surrounded by a pile of deeds, took a different view. The babbling of the Chamber was at an end, thank Heaven! Henceforth they would have a business policy.

Beljambe knew nothing about the occurrences, and, furthermore, he laughed at them.

In the market-place they stopped Vaucorbeil.

The physician had got over all that. "You are very foolish to bother yourselves."

Foureau passed them by, remarking with a sly air, "The democrats are swamped."

And the captain, with Girbal's arm in his, exclaimed from a distance, "Long live the Emperor!"

But Petit would be sure to understand them, and Bouvard having tapped at a window-pane, the schoolmaster quitted his class.

He thought it a good joke to have Thiers in prison. This would avenge the people.

"Ha! ha! my gentlemen deputies, your turn now!"

The volley of musketry on the boulevards met with the approval of the people of Chavignolles. No mercy for the vanquished, no pity for the victims! Once you revolt, you are a scoundrel!

"Let us be grateful to Providence," said the curé, "and under Providence to Louis Bonaparte. He gathers around him the most distinguished men. The Count de Faverges will be made a senator."

Next day they had a visit from Placquevent.

"These gentlemen" had talked a great deal. He required a promise from them to hold their tongues.

"Do you wish to know my opinion?" said Pécuchet. "Since the middle class is ferocious and the working-men jealous-minded, whilst the people, after all, accept every tyrant, so long as they are allowed to keep their snouts in the mess, Napoleon has done right. Let him gag them, the rabble, and exterminate them — this will never be too much for their hatred of right, their cowardice, their incapacity, and their blindness."

Bouvard mused: "Hey! progress! what humbug!" He added: "And politics, a nice heap of dirt!"

"It is not a science," returned Pécuchet. "The military art is better: you can tell what will happen — we ought to turn our hands to it."

"Oh, thanks," was Bouvard's answer. "I am disgusted with everything. Better for us to sell our barrack, and go in the name of God's thunder amongst the savages."

"Just as you like."

Mélie was drawing water out in the yard.

The wooden pump had a long lever. In order to make it work, she bent her back, so that her blue stockings could be seen as high as the calf of her legs. Then, with a rapid movement, she raised her right arm, while she turned her head a little to one side; and Pécuchet, as he gazed at her, felt quite a new sensation, a charm, a thrill of intense delight.

CHAPTER VII.

"Unlucky in Love."

And now the days began to be sad. They studied no longer, fearing lest they might be disillusioned. The inhabitants of Chavignolles avoided them. The newspapers they tolerated gave them no information; and so their solitude was unbroken, their time completely unoccupied.

Sometimes they would open a book, and then shut it again — what was the use of it? On other days they would be seized with the idea of cleaning up the garden: at the end of a quarter of an hour they would be fatigued; or they would set out to have a look at the farm, and come back disenchanted; or they tried to interest themselves in household affairs, with the result of making Germaine break out into lamentations. They gave it up.

Bouvard wanted to draw up a catalogue for the museum, and declared their curios stupid.

Pécuchet borrowed Langlois' duck-gun to shoot larks with; the weapon burst at the first shot, and was near killing him.

Then they lived in the midst of that rural solitude so depressing when the grey sky covers in its monotony a heart without hope. The step of a man in wooden shoes is heard as he steals along by the wall, or perchance it is the rain dripping from the roof to the ground. From time to time a dead leaf just grazes one of the windows, then whirls about and flies away. The indistinct echoes of some funeral bell are borne to the ear by the wind. From a corner of the stable comes the lowing of a cow. They yawned in each other's faces, consulted the almanac, looked at the clock, waited for meal-time; and the horizon was ever the same — fields in front, the church to the right, a screen of poplars to the left, their tops swaying incessantly in the hazy atmosphere with a melancholy air.

Habits which they formerly tolerated now gave them annoyance. Pécuchet became quite a bore from his mania for putting his handkerchief on the tablecloth. Bouvard never gave up his pipe, and would keep twisting himself about while he was talking. They started disputes about the dishes, or about the quality of the butter; and while they were chatting face to face each was thinking of different things.

A certain occurrence had upset Pécuchet's mind.

Two days after the riot at Chavignolles, while he was airing his political grievance, he had reached a road covered with tufted elms, and heard behind his back a voice exclaiming, "Stop!"

back a voice exclaiming, "Stop!"

It was Madame Castillon. She was rushing across from the opposite side without perceiving him.

A man who was walking along in front of her turned round. It was Gorju; and they met some six feet away from Pécuchet, the row of trees separating them from him.

"Is it true," said she, "you are going to fight?"

Pécuchet slipped behind the ditch to listen.

"Well, yes," replied Gorju; "I am going to fight. What has that to do with you?"

"He asks *me* such a question!" cried she, flinging her arms about him. "But, if you are killed, my love! Oh! remain!"

And her blue eyes appealed to him, still more than her words.

"Let me alone. I have to go."

There was an angry sneer on her face.

"The other has permitted it, eh?"

"Don't speak of her."

He raised his fist.

"No, dear; no. I don't say anything." And big tears trickled down her cheeks as far as the frilling of her collarette.

It was midday. The sun shone down upon the fields covered with yellow grain. Far in the distance carriage-wheels softly slipped along the road. There was a torpor in the air — not a bird's cry, not an insect's hum. Gorju cut himself a switch and scraped off the bark.

Madame Castillon did not raise her head again. She, poor woman, was thinking of her vain sacrifices for him, the debts she had paid for him, her future liabilities, and her lost reputation. Instead of complaining, she recalled for him the first days of their love, when she used to go every night to meet him in the barn, so that her husband on one occasion, fancying it was a thief, fired a pistol-shot through the window. The bullet was in the wall still. "From the moment I first knew you, you seemed to me as handsome as a prince. I love your eyes, your voice, your walk, your smell," and in a lower tone she added: "and as for your person, I am fairly crazy about it."

He listened with a smile of gratified vanity.

She clasped him with both hands round the waist, her head bent as if in adoration.

"My dear heart! my dear love! my soul! my life! Come! speak! What is it you want? Is it money? We'll get it. I was in the wrong. I annoyed you. Forgive me; and order clothes from the tailor, drink champagne — enjoy yourself. I will allow everything — everything."

allow everything — everything."

She murmured with a supreme effort, "Even her — as long as you come back to me."

He just touched her lips with his, drawing one arm around her to prevent her from falling; and she kept murmuring, "Dear heart! dear love! how handsome you are! My God! how handsome you are!"

Pécuchet, without moving an inch, his chin just touching the top of the ditch, stared at them in breathless astonishment.

"Come, no swooning," said Gorju. "You'll only have me missing the coach. A glorious bit of devilment is getting ready, and I'm in the swim; so just give me ten sous to stand the conductor a drink."

She took five francs out of her purse. "You will soon give them back to me. Have a little patience. He has been a good while paralysed. Think of that! And, if you liked, we could go to the chapel of Croix-Janval, and there, my love, I would swear before the Blessed Virgin to marry you as soon as he is dead."

"Ah! he'll never die — that husband of yours."

Gorju had turned on his heel. She caught hold of him again, and clinging to his shoulders:

"Let me go with you. I will be your servant. You want some one. But don't go away! don't leave me! Death rather! Kill me!"

She crawled towards him on her knees, trying to seize his hands in order to kiss them. Her cap fell off, then her comb, and her hair got dishevelled. It was turning white around her ears, and, as she looked up at him, sobbing bitterly, with red eyes and swollen lips, he got quite exasperated, and pushed her back.

"Be off, old woman! Good evening."

When she had got up, she tore off the gold cross that hung round her neck, and flinging it at him, cried:

"There, you ruffian!"

Gorju went off, lashing the leaves of the trees with his switch.

Madame Castillon ceased weeping. With fallen jaw and tear-dimmed eyes she stood motionless, petrified with despair; no longer a being, but a thing in ruins.

What he had just chanced upon was for Pécuchet like the discovery of a new world — a world in which there were dazzling splendours, wild blossomings, oceans, tempests, treasures, and abysses of infinite depth. There was something about it that excited terror; but what of that? He dreamed of love, desired to feel it as she felt it, to inspire it as he inspired it.

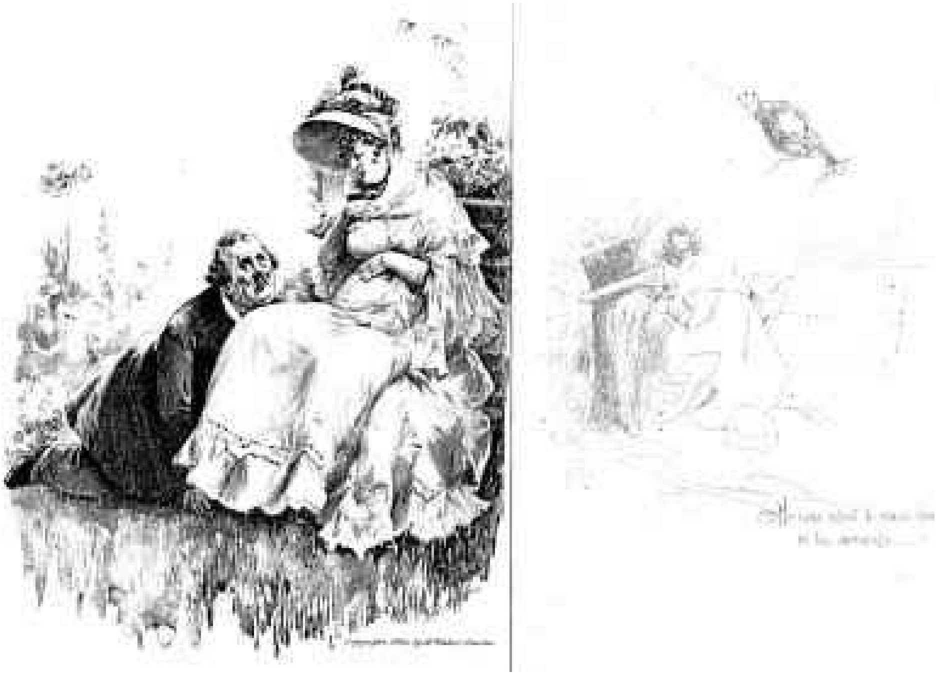
However, he execrated Gorju, and could hardly keep from giving information about him at the guard-house.

Pécuchet was mortified by the slim waist, the regular curls, and the smooth beard of Madame Castillon's lover, as well as by the air of a conquering hero which the fellow assumed, while his own hair was pasted to his skull like a soaked wig, his torso wrapped in a greatcoat resembled a bolster, two of his front teeth were out, and his physiognomy had a harsh expression. He thought that Heaven had dealt unkindly with him, and felt that he was one of the disinherited; moreover, his friend no longer cared for him.

Bouvard deserted him every evening. Since his wife was dead, there was nothing to prevent him from taking another, who, by this time, might be coddling him up and looking after his house. And now he was getting too old to think of it.

But Bouvard examined himself in the glass. His cheeks had kept their colour; his hair curled just the same as of yore; not a tooth was loose; and, at the idea that he had still the power to please, he felt a return of youthfulness. Madame Bordin rose in his memory. She had made advances to him, first on the occasion of the burning of the stacks, next at the dinner which they gave, then in the museum at the recital, and lastly, without resenting any want of attention on his part, she had called three Sundays in succession. He paid her a return visit, and repeated it, making up his mind to woo and win her.

Since the day when Pécuchet had watched the little servant-maid drawing water, he had frequently talked to her, and whether she was sweeping the corridor or spreading out the linen, or taking up the saucepans, he could never grow tired of looking at her — surprised himself at his emotions, as in the days of adolescence. He had fevers and languors on account of her, and he was stung by the picture left in his memory of Madame Castillon straining Gorju to her breast.



He was about to clasp her in his arms

He questioned Bouvard as to the way libertines set about seducing women.

"They make them presents; they bring them to restaurants for supper."

"Very good. But after that?"

"Some of them pretend to faint, in order that you may carry them over to a sofa; others let their handkerchiefs fall on the ground. The best of them plainly make an appointment with you." And Bouvard launched forth into descriptions which inflamed Pécuchet's imagination, like engravings of voluptuous scenes.

"The first rule is not to believe what they say. I have known those who, under the appearance of saints, were regular Messalinas. Above all, you must be bold."

But boldness cannot be had to order.

From day to day Pécuchet put off his determination, and besides he was intimidated by the presence of Germaine.

Hoping that she would ask to have her wages paid, he exacted additional work from her, took notice every time she got tipsy, referred in a loud voice to her want of cleanliness, her quarrelsomeness, and did it all so effectively that she had to go.

Then Pécuchet was free! With what impatience he waited for Bouvard to go out! What a throbbing of the heart he felt as soon as the door closed!

Mélie was working at a round table near the window by the light of a candle; from time to time she broke the threads with her teeth, then she half-closed her eyes while adjusting it in the slit of the needle. At first he asked her what kind of men she liked. Was it, for instance, Bouvard's style?

"Oh, no." She preferred thin men.

He ventured to ask her if she ever had had any lovers.

"Never."

Then, drawing closer to her, he surveyed her piquant nose, her small mouth, her charmingly-rounded figure. He paid her some compliments, and exhorted her to prudence.

In bending over her he got a glimpse, under her corsage, of her white skin, from which emanated a warm odour that made his cheeks tingle. One evening he touched with his lips the wanton hairs at the back of her neck, and he felt shaken even to the marrow of his bones. Another time he kissed her on the chin, and had to restrain himself from putting his teeth in her flesh, so savoury was it. She returned his kiss. The apartment whirled round; he no longer saw anything.

He made her a present of a pair of lady's boots, and often treated her to a glass of aniseed cordial.

To save her trouble he rose early, chopped up the wood, lighted the fire, and was so attentive as to clean Bouvard's shoes.

Mélie did not faint or let her handkerchief fall, and Pécuchet did not know what to do, his passion increasing through the fear of satisfying it.

Bouvard was assiduously paying his addresses to Madame Bordin. She used to receive him rather cramped in her gown of shot silk, which creaked like a horse's harness, all the while fingering her long gold chain to keep herself in countenance.

Their conversations turned on the people of Chavignolles or on "the dear departed," who had been an usher at Livarot.

Then she inquired about Bouvard's past, curious to know something of his "youthful freaks," the way in which he had fallen heir to his fortune, and the interests by which he was bound to Pécuchet.

He admired the appearance of her house, and when he came to dinner there was struck by the neatness with which it was served and the excellent fare placed on the table. A succession of dishes of the most savoury description, which intermingled at regular intervals with a bottle of old Pomard, brought them to the dessert, at which they remained a long time sipping their coffee; and, with dilating nostrils, Madame Bordin dipped into her saucer her thick lip, lightly shaded with a black down.

One day she appeared in a low dress. Her shoulders fascinated Bouvard. As he sat in a little chair before her, he began to pass his hands along her arms. The widow seemed offended. He did not repeat this attention, but he pictured to himself those ample curves, so marvellously smooth and fine.

Any evening when he felt dissatisfied with Mélie's cooking, it gave him pleasure to enter Madame Bordin's drawing-room. It was there he should have lived.

The globe of the lamp, covered with a red shade, shed a tranquil light. She was seated close to the fire, and his foot touched the hem of her skirt.

After a few opening words the conversation flagged.

However, she kept gazing at him, with half-closed lids, in a languid fashion, but unbending withal.

Bouvard could not stand it any longer, and, sinking on his knees to the floor, he stammered:

"I love you! Marry me!"

Madame Bordin drew a strong breath; then, with an ingenuous air, said he was jesting; no doubt he was trying to have a laugh at her expense — it was not fair. This declaration stunned her.

Bouvard returned that she did not require anyone's consent. "What's to hinder you? Is it the trousseau? Our linen has the same mark, a B — we'll unite our capital letters!"

The idea caught her fancy. But a more important matter prevented her from arriving at a decision before the end of the month. And Bouvard groaned.

She had the politeness to accompany him to the gate, escorted by Marianne, who carried a lantern.

The two friends kept their love affairs hidden from each other.

Pécuchet counted on always cloaking his intrigue with the servant-maid. If Bouvard made any opposition to it, he could carry her off to other places, even though it were to Algeria, where living is not so dear. But he rarely indulged in such speculations, full as he was of his passion, without thinking of the consequences.

Bouvard conceived the idea of converting the museum into the bridal chamber, unless Pécuchet objected, in which case he might take up his residence at his wife's house.

One afternoon in the following week — it was in her garden; the buds were just opening, and between the clouds there were great blue spaces — she stopped to gather some violets, and said as she offered them to him:

"Salute Madame Bouvard!"

"What! Is it true?"

"Perfectly true."

He was about to clasp her in his arms. She kept him back. "What a man!" Then, growing serious, she warned him that she would shortly be asking him for a favour.

"'Tis granted."

They fixed the following Thursday for the formality of signing the marriage contract.

Nobody should know anything about it up to the last moment.

"Agreed."

And off he went, looking up towards the sky, nimble as a roebuck.

Pécuchet on the morning of the same day said in his own mind that he would die if he did not obtain the favours of his little maid, and he followed her into the cellar, hoping the darkness would give him courage.

She tried to go away several times, but he detained her in order to count the bottles, to choose laths, or to look into the bottoms of casks — and this occupied a considerable time.

She stood facing him under the light that penetrated through an air-hole, with her eyes cast down, and the corner of her mouth slightly raised.

"Do you love me?" said Pécuchet abruptly.

"Yes, I do love you."

"Well, then prove it to me."

And throwing his left arm around her, he embraced her with ardour.

"You're going to do me some harm."

"No, my little angel. Don't be afraid."

"If Monsieur Bouvard — — "

"I'll tell him nothing. Make your mind easy."

There was a heap of faggots behind them. She sank upon them, and hid her face under one arm; — and another man would have understood that she was no novice.

Bouvard arrived soon for dinner.

The meal passed in silence, each of them being afraid of betraying himself, while Mélie attended them with her usual impassiveness.

Pécuchet turned away his eyes to avoid hers; and Bouvard, his gaze resting on the walls, pondered meanwhile on his projected improvements.

Eight days after he came back in a towering rage.

"The damned traitress!"

"Who, pray?"

"Madame Bordin."

And he related how he had been so infatuated as to offer to make her his wife, but all had come to an end a quarter of an hour since at Marescot's office. She wished to have for her marriage portion the Ecalles meadow, which he could not dispose of, having partly retained it, like the farm, with the money of another person.

"Exactly," said Pécuchet.

"I had had the folly to promise her any favour she asked — and this was what she was after! I attribute her obstinacy to this; for if she loved me she would have given way to me."

The widow, on the contrary, had attacked him in insulting language, and referred disparagingly to his physique, his big paunch.

"My paunch! Just imagine for a moment!"

Meanwhile Pécuchet had risen several times, and seemed to be in pain.

Bouvard asked him what was the matter, and thereupon Pécuchet, having first taken the precaution to shut the door, explained in a hesitating manner that he was affected with a certain disease.

"What! You?"

"I — myself."

"Oh, my poor fellow! And who is the cause of this?"

Pécuchet became redder than before, and said in a still lower tone:

"It can be only Mélie."

Bouvard remained stupefied.

The first thing to do was to send the young woman away.

She protested with an air of candour.

Pécuchet's case was, however, serious; but he was ashamed to consult a physician.

Bouvard thought of applying to Barberou.

They gave him particulars about the matter, in order that he might communicate with a doctor who would deal with the case by correspondence.

Barberou set to work with zeal, believing it was Bouvard's own case, and calling him an old dotard, even though he congratulated him about it.

"At my age!" said Pécuchet. "Is it not a melancholy thing? But why did she do this?"

"You pleased her."

"She ought to have given me warning."

"Does passion reason?" And Bouvard renewed his complaints about Madame Bordin.

Often had he surprised her before the Ecalles, in Marescot's company, having a gossip with Germaine. So many manœuvres for a little bit of land!

"She is avaricious! That's the explanation."

So they ruminated over their disappointments by the fireside in the breakfast parlour, Pécuchet swallowing his medicines and Bouvard puffing at his pipe; and they began a discussion about women.

"Strange want! — or is it a want?" "They drive men to crime — to heroism as well as to brutishness." "Hell under a petticoat," "paradise in a kiss," "the turtle's warbling," "the serpent's windings," "the cat's claws," "the sea's treachery," "the moon's changeableness." They repeated all the commonplaces that have been uttered about the sex.

It was the desire for women that had suspended their friendship. A feeling of remorse took possession of them. "No more women. Is not that so? Let us live without them!" And they embraced each other tenderly.

There should be a reaction; and Bouvard, when Pécuchet was better, considered that a course of hydropathic treatment would be beneficial.

Germaine, who had come back since the other servant's departure, carried the bathing-tub each morning into the corridor.

The two worthies, naked as savages, poured over themselves big buckets of water; they then rushed back to their rooms. They were seen through the garden fence, and people were scandalised.

CHAPTER VIII.

New Diversions.

Satisfied with their regimen, they desired to improve their constitutions by gymnastics; and taking up the *Manual of Amoros*, they went through its atlas. All those young lads squatting, lying back, standing, bending their legs, lifting weights, riding on beams, climbing ladders, cutting capers on trapezes — such a display of strength and agility excited their envy.

However, they were saddened by the splendour of the gymnasium described in the preface; for they would never be able to get a vestibule for the equipages, a hippodrome for the races, a sweep of water for the swimming, or a "mountain of glory" — an artificial hillock over one hundred feet in height.

A wooden vaulting-horse with the stuffing would have been expensive: they abandoned the idea. The linden tree, thrown down in the garden, might have been used as a horizontal pole; and, when they were skilful enough to go over it from one end to the other, in order to have a vertical one, they set up a beam of counter-espaliers. Pécuchet clambered to the top; Bouvard slipped off, always fell back, finally gave it up.

The "orthosomatic sticks" pleased him better; that is to say, two broomsticks bound by two cords, the first of which passes under the armpits, and the second over the wrists; and for hours he would remain in this apparatus, with his chin raised, his chest extended, and his elbows close to his sides.

For want of dumbbells, the wheelwright turned out four pieces of ash resembling sugar-loaves with necks of bottles at the ends. These should be carried to the right and to the left, to the front and to the back; but being too heavy they fell out of their hands, at the risk of bruising their legs. No matter! They set their hearts on Persian clubs, and even fearing lest they might break, they rubbed them every evening with wax and a piece of cloth.

Then they looked out for ditches. When they found one suitable for their purpose, they rested a long pole in the centre, sprang forward on the left foot, reached the opposite side, and then repeated the performance. The country being flat, they could be seen at a distance; and the villagers asked one another what were these extraordinary things skipping towards the horizon.

When autumn arrived they went in for chamber gymnastics, which completely bored them. Why had they not the indoor apparatus or post-armchair invented in Louis XIV.'s time by the Abbé of St. Pierre? How was it made? Where could they get the information?

Where could they get the information?

Dumouchel did not deign to answer their letter on the subject.

Then they erected in the bakehouse a brachial weighing-machine. Over two pulleys attached to the ceiling a rope was passed, holding a crossbeam at each end. As soon as they had caught hold of it one pushed against the ground with his toes, while the other lowered his arms to a level with the floor; the first by his weight would draw towards him the second, who, slackening his rope a little, would ascend in his turn. In less than five minutes their limbs were dripping with perspiration.

In order to follow the prescriptions of the Manual, they tried to make themselves ambidextrous, even to the extent of depriving themselves for a time of the use of their right hands. They did more: Amoros points out certain snatches of verse which ought to be sung during the manœuvres, and Bouvard and Pécuchet, as they proceeded, kept repeating the hymn No. 9: "A king, a just king is a blessing on earth."

When they beat their breast-bones: "Friends, the crown and the glory," *etc.*

At the various steps of the race:

"Let us catch the beast that cowers! Soon the swift stag shall be ours! Yes! the race shall soon be won, Come, run! come, run! come, run!"

And, panting more than hounds, they cheered each other on with the sounds of their voices.

One side of gymnastics excited their enthusiasm — its employment as a means of saving life. But they would have required children in order to learn how to carry them in sacks, and they begged the schoolmaster to furnish them with some. Petit objected that their families would be annoyed at it. They fell back on the succour of the wounded. One pretended to have swooned: the other rolled him away in a wheelbarrow with the utmost precaution.

As for military escalades, the author extols the ladder of Bois-Rosé, so called from the captain who surprised Fécamp in former days by climbing up the cliff.

In accordance with the engraving in the book, they trimmed a rope with little sticks and fixed it under the cart-shed. As soon as the first stick is bestridden and the third grasped, the limbs are thrown out in order that the second, which a moment before was against the chest, might be directly under the thighs. The climber then springs up and grasps the fourth, and so goes on.

In spite of prodigious strainings of the hips, they found it impossible to reach the second step. Perhaps there is less trouble in hanging on to stones with your hands, just as Bonaparte's soldiers did at the attack of Fort Chambray? and to make one capable of such an action, Amoros has a tower in his establishment.

The wall in ruins might do as a substitute for it. They attempted the assault with it. But Bouvard, having withdrawn his foot too quickly from a hole, got with it. But Bouvard, having withdrawn his foot too quickly from a hole, got frightened, and was seized with dizziness.

Pécuchet blamed their method for it. They had neglected that which relates to the phalanxes, so that they should go back to first principles.

His exhortations were fruitless; and then, in his pride and presumption, he went in for stilts.

Nature seemed to have destined him for them, for he immediately made use of the great model with flat boards four feet from the ground, and, balanced thereon, he stalked over the garden like a gigantic stork taking exercise.

Bouvard, at the window, saw him stagger and then flop down all of a heap over the kidney-beans, whose props, giving way as he descended, broke his fall.

He was picked up covered with mould, his nostrils bleeding — livid; and he fancied that he had strained himself.

Decidedly, gymnastics did not agree with men of their age. They abandoned them, did not venture to move about any longer for fear of accidents, and they remained the whole day sitting in the museum dreaming of other occupations.

This change of habits had an influence on Bouvard's health. He became very heavy, puffed like a whale after his meals, tried to make himself thin, ate less, and began to grow weak.

Pécuchet, in like manner, felt himself "undermined," had itchings in his skin and lumps in his throat.

"This won't do," said they; "this won't do."

Bouvard thought of going to select at the inn some bottles of Spanish wine in order to put his bodily machinery in order.

As he was going out, Marescot's clerk and three men brought from Beljambe a large walnut table. "Monsieur" was much obliged to him for it. It had been conveyed in perfect order.

Bouvard in this way learned about the new fashion of table-turning. He joked about it with the clerk.

However, all over Europe, America, Australia and the Indies, millions of mortals passed their lives in making tables turn; and they discovered the way to make prophets of canaries, to give concerts without instruments, and to correspond by means of snails. The press, seriously offering these impostures to the public, increased its credulity.

The spirit-rappers had alighted at the château of Faverges, and thence had spread through the village; and the notary questioned them particularly.

Shocked at Bouvard's scepticism, he invited the two friends to an evening party at table-turning.

Was this a trap? Madame Bordin was to be there. Pécuchet went alone.

There were present as spectators the mayor, the tax-collector, the captain

There were present as spectators the mayor, the tax-collector, the captain, other residents and their wives, Madame Vaucorbeil, Madame Bordin, of course, besides Mademoiselle Laverrière, Madame Marescot's former schoolmistress, a rather squint-eyed lady with her hair falling over her shoulders in the corkscrew fashion of 1830. In an armchair sat a cousin from Paris, attired in a blue coat and wearing an air of insolence.

The two bronze lamps, the whatnot containing a number of curiosities, ballads embellished with vignettes on the piano, and small water-colours in huge frames, had always excited astonishment in Chavignolles. But this evening all eyes were directed towards the mahogany table. They would test it by and by, and it had the importance of things which contain a mystery. A dozen guests took their places around it with outstretched hands and their little fingers touching one another. Only the ticking of the clock could be heard. The faces indicated profound attention. At the end of ten minutes several complained of tinglings in the arms.

Pécuchet was incommoded.

"You are pushing!" said the captain to Foureau.

"Not at all."

"Yes, you are!"

"Ah! sir."

The notary made them keep quiet.

By dint of straining their ears they thought they could distinguish cracklings of wood.

An illusion! Nothing had budged.

The other day when the Aubert and Lorraine families had come from Lisieux and they had expressly borrowed Beljambe's table for the occasion, everything had gone on so well. But this to-day exhibited a certain obstinacy. Why?

The carpet undoubtedly counteracted it, and they changed to the dining-room.

The round table, which was on rollers, glided towards the right-hand side. The operators, without displacing their fingers, followed its movements, and of its own accord it made two turns. They were astounded.

Then M. Alfred articulated in a loud voice:

"Spirit, how do you find my cousin?"

The table, slowly oscillating, struck nine raps. According to a slip of paper, in which the number of raps were translated by letters, this meant "Charming."

A number of voices exclaimed "Bravo!"

Then Marescot, to tease Madame Bordin, called on the spirit to declare her exact age.

The foot of the table came down with five taps.

"What? five years!" cried Girbal.

"What! five years!" cried Girbal.

"The tens don't count," replied Foureau.

The widow smiled, though she was inwardly annoyed.

The replies to the other questions were missing, so complicated was the alphabet.

Much better was the plane table — an expeditious medium of which Mademoiselle Laverrière had made use for the purpose of noting down in an album the direct communications of Louis XII., Clémence Isaure, Franklin, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and others. These mechanical contrivances are sold in the Rue d'Aumale. M. Alfred promised one of them; then addressing the schoolmistress: "But for a quarter of an hour we should have a little music; don't you think so? A mazurka!"

Two metal chords vibrated. He took his cousin by the waist, disappeared with her, and came back again.

The sweep of her dress, which just brushed the doors as they passed, cooled their faces. She flung back her head; he curved his arms. The gracefulness of the one, the playful air of the other, excited general admiration; and, without waiting for the rout cakes, Pécuchet took himself off, amazed at the evening's exhibition.

In vain did he repeat: "But I have seen it! I have seen it!"

Bouvard denied the facts, but nevertheless consented to make an experiment himself.

For a fortnight they spent every afternoon facing each other, with their hands over a table, then over a hat, over a basket, and over plates. All these remained motionless.

The phenomenon of table-turning is none the less certain. The common herd attribute it to spirits; Faraday to prolonged nervous action; Chevreuil to unconscious efforts; or perhaps, as Segouin admits, there is evolved from the assembly of persons an impulse, a magnetic current.

This hypothesis made Pécuchet reflect. He took into his library the *Magnetiser's Guide*, by Montacabère, read it over attentively, and initiated Bouvard in the theory: All animated bodies receive and communicate the influence of the stars — a property analogous to the virtue of the loadstone. By directing this force we may cure the sick; there is the principle. Science has developed since Mesmer; but it is always an important thing to pour out the fluid and to make passes, which, in the first place, must have the effect of inducing sleep.

"Well! send me to sleep," said Bouvard.

"Impossible!" replied Pécuchet: "in order to be subject to the magnetic action, and to transmit it, faith is indispensable."

Then, gazing at Bouvard: "Ah! what a pity!"

Then, gazing at Bouvard: "Ah! what a pity!"

"How?"

"Yes, if you wished, with a little practice, there would not be a magnetiser anywhere like you."

For he possessed everything that was needed: easiness of access, a robust constitution, and a solid mind.

The discovery just made of such a faculty in himself was flattering to Bouvard. He took a plunge into Montacabère's book on the sly.

Then, as Germaine used to feel buzzings in her ears that deafened her, he said to her one evening in a careless tone:

"Suppose we try magnetism?"

She did not make any objection to it. He sat down in front of her, took her two thumbs in his hands, and looked fixedly at her, as if he had not done anything else all his life.

The old dame, with her feet on a footwarmer, began by bending her neck; her eyes closed, and quite gently she began to snore. At the end of an hour, during which they had been staring at her, Pécuchet said in a low tone:

"What do you feel?"

She awoke.

Later, no doubt, would come lucidity.

This success emboldened them, and, resuming with self-confidence, the practice of medicine, they nursed Chamberlan, the beadle, for pains in his ribs; Migraine the mason, who had a nervous affection of the stomach; Mère Varin, whose encephaloid under the collar-bone required, in order to nourish her, plasters of meat; a gouty patient, Père Lemoine, who used to crawl by the side of taverns; a consumptive; a person afflicted with hemiplegia, and many others. They also treated corns and chilblains.

After an investigation into the disease, they cast questioning glances at each other to determine what passes to use, whether the currents should be large or small, ascending or descending, longitudinal, transversal, bidigital, tridigital, or even quindigital.

When the one had had too much of it, the other replaced him. Then, when they had come back to their own house, they noted down their observation in their diary of treatment.

Their suave manners captivated everyone. However, Bouvard was liked better, and his reputation spread as far as Falaise, where he had cured La Barbée, the daughter of Père Barbée, a retired captain of long standing.

She had felt something like a nail in the back of her head, spoke in a hoarse voice, often remained several days without eating, and then would devour plaster or coal. Her nervous crises, beginning with sobs, ended in floods of tears; and every kind of remedy, from diet-drinks to moxas, had been employed, so that, through sheer weariness, she accepted Bouvard's offer to cure her.

When he had dismissed the servant-maid and bolted the door, he began rubbing her abdomen, while leaning over the seat of the ovaries. A sense of relief manifested itself by sighs and yawns. He placed his finger between her eyebrows and the top of her nose: all at once she became inert. If one lifted her arms, they fell down again. Her head remained in whatever attitude he wished, and her lids, half closed, vibrating with a spasmodic movement, allowed her eyeballs to be seen rolling slowly about; they riveted themselves on the corners convulsively.

Bouvard asked her if she were in pain. She replied that she was not. Then he inquired what she felt now. She indicated the inside of her body.

"What do you see there?"

"A worm."

"What is necessary in order to kill it?"

She wrinkled her brow. "I am looking for — I am not able! I am not able!"

At the second sitting she prescribed for herself nettle-broth; at the third, catnip. The crises became mitigated, then disappeared. It was truly a miracle. The nasal addigitation did not succeed with the others, and, in order to bring on somnambulism, they projected the construction of a mesmeric tub. Pécuchet already had even collected the filings and cleaned a score of bottles, when a scruple made him hesitate**.**

Amongst the patients there would be persons of the other sex.

"And what are we to do if this should give rise to an outburst of erotic mania?"

This would not have proved any impediment to Bouvard; but for fear of impostures and attempts to extort hush-money, it was better to put aside the project. They contented themselves with a collection of musical glasses, which they carried about with them to the different houses, so as to delight the children.

One day, when Migraine was worse, they had recourse to the musical glasses. The crystalline sounds exasperated him; but Deleuze enjoins that one should not be frightened by complaints; and so they went on with the music.

"Enough! enough!" he cried.

"A little patience!" Bouvard kept repeating.

Pécuchet tapped more quickly on the glass plates, and the instrument was vibrating in the midst of the poor man's cries when the doctor appeared, attracted by the hubbub.

"What! you again?" he exclaimed, enraged at finding them always with his patients.

They explained their magnetic method of curing. Then he declaimed against magnetism — "a heap of juggleries, whose effects came only from the imagination."

However, animals are magnetised. Montacabère so states, and M. Fontaine succeeded in magnetising a lion. They had not a lion, but chance had offered them another animal.

For on the following day a ploughboy came to inform them that they were wanted up at the farm for a cow in a hopeless condition.

They hurried thither. The apple trees were in bloom, and the herbage in the farmyard was steaming under the rays of the rising sun.

At the side of a pond, half covered with a cloth, a cow was lowing, while she shivered under the pails of water that were being emptied over her body, and, enormously swollen, she looked like a hippopotamus.

Without doubt she had got "venom" while grazing amid the clover. Père Gouy and his wife were afflicted because the veterinary surgeon was not able to come, and the wheelwright who had a charm against swelling did not choose to put himself out of his way; but "these gentlemen, whose library was famous, must know the secret."

Having tucked up their sleeves, they placed themselves one in front of the horns, the other at the rump, and, with great internal efforts and frantic gesticulations, they spread wide their fingers in order to scatter streams of fluid over the animal, while the farmer, his wife, their son, and the neighbours regarded them almost with terror.

The rumblings which were heard in the cow's belly caused borborygms in the interior of her bowels. She emitted wind.

Pécuchet thereupon said: "This is an opening door for hope — an outlet, perhaps."

The outlet produced its effect: the hope gushed forth in a bundle of yellow stuff, bursting with the force of a shell. The hide got loose; the cow got rid of her swelling. An hour later there was no longer any sign of it.

This was certainly not the result of imagination. Therefore the fluid contained some special virtue. It lets itself be shut up in the objects to whom it is given without being impaired. Such an expedient saves displacements. They adopted it; and they sent their clients magnetised tokens, magnetised handkerchiefs, magnetised water, and magnetised bread.

Then, continuing their studies, they abandoned the passes for the system of Puységur, which replaces the magnetiser by means of an old tree, about the trunk of which a cord is rolled.

A pear tree in their fruit garden seemed made expressly for the purpose. They prepared it by vigorously encircling it with many pressures. A bench was placed underneath. Their clients sat in a row, and the results obtained there were so marvellous that, in order to get the better of Vaucorbeil, they invited him to a *séance* along with the leading personages of the locality.

Not one failed to attend. Germaine received them in the breakfast-room, making excuses on behalf of her masters, who would join them presently.

From time to time they heard the bell ringing. It was the patients whom she was bringing in by another way. The guests nudged one another, drawing attention to the windows covered with dust, the stains on the panels, the frayed pictures; and the garden, too, was in a wretched state. Dead wood everywhere! The orchard was barricaded with two sticks thrust into a gap in the wall.

Pécuchet made his appearance. "At your service, gentlemen."

And they saw at the end of the garden, under the Edouïn pear tree, a number of persons seated.

Chamberlan, clean-shaven like a priest, in a short cassock of lasting, with a leathern cap, gave himself up to the shivering sensations engendered by the pains in his ribs. Migraine, whose stomach was always tormenting him, made wry faces close beside him. Mère Varin, to hide her tumour, wore a shawl with many folds. Père Lemoine, his feet stockingless in his old shoes, had his crutches under his knees; and La Barbée, who wore her Sunday clothes, looked exceedingly pale.

At the opposite side of the tree were other persons. A woman with an albino type of countenance was sponging the suppurating glands of her neck; a little girl's face half disappeared under her blue glasses; an old man, whose spine was deformed by a contraction, with his involuntary movements knocked against Marcel, a sort of idiot clad in a tattered blouse and a patched pair of trousers. His hare-lip, badly stitched, allowed his incisors to be seen, and his jaw, which was swollen by an enormous inflammation, was muffled up in linen.

They were all holding in their hands pieces of twine that hung down from the tree. The birds were singing, and the air was impregnated with the refreshing smell of grass. The sun played with the branches, and the ground was smooth as moss.

Meanwhile, instead of going to sleep, the subjects of the experiment were straining their eyes.

"Up to the present," said Foureau, "it is not funny. Begin. I am going away for a minute."

And he came back smoking an Abd-el-Kader, the last that was left from the gate with the pipes.

Pécuchet recalled to mind an admirable method of magnetising. He put into his mouth the noses of all the patients in succession, and inhaled their breath, in order to attract the electricity to himself; and at the same time Bouvard clasped the tree, with the object of augmenting the fluid.

The mason interrupted his hiccoughs; the beadle was agitated; the man with the contraction moved no more. It was possible now to approach them, and make them submit to all the tests.

The doctor, with his lancet, pricked Chamberlan's ear, which trembled a little. Sensibility in the case of the others was manifest. The gouty man uttered a cry. As for La Barbée, she smiled, as if in a dream, and a stream of blood trickled under her jaw.

Foureau, in order to make the experiment himself, would fain have seized the lancet, but the doctor having refused, he vigorously pinched the invalid.

The captain tickled her nostrils with a feather; the tax-collector plunged a pin under her skin.

"Let her alone now," said Vaucorbeil; "it is nothing astonishing, after all. Simply a hysterical female! The devil will have his pains for nothing."

"That one there," said Pécuchet, pointing towards Victoire, the scrofulous woman, "is a physician. She recognises diseases, and indicates the remedies."

Langlois burned to consult her about his catarrh; but Coulon, more courageous, asked her for something for his rheumatism.

Pécuchet placed his right hand in Victoire's left, and, with her lids closed uninterruptedly, her cheeks a little red, her lips quivering, the somnambulist, after some rambling utterances, ordered *valum becum*.

She had assisted in an apothecary's shop at Bayeux. Vaucorbeil drew the inference that what she wanted to say was *album Græcum* a term which is to be found in pharmacy.

Then they accosted Père Lemoine, who, according to Bouvard, could see objects through opaque bodies. He was an ex-schoolmaster, who had sunk into debauchery. White hairs were scattered about his face, and, with his back against the tree and his palms open, he was sleeping in the broad sunlight in a majestic fashion.

The physician drew over his eyes a double neckcloth; and Bouvard, extending a newspaper towards him, said imperiously:

"Read!"

He lowered his brow, moved the muscles of his face, then threw back his head, and ended by spelling out:

"Cons-ti-tu-tion-al."

But with skill the muffler could be slipped off!

These denials by the physician roused Pécuchet's indignation. He even ventured to pretend that La Barbée could describe what was actually taking place in his own house.

"May be so," returned the doctor.

Then, taking out his watch:

"What is my wife occupying herself with?"

For a long time La Barbée hesitated; then with a sullen air:

"Hey! what? I am there! She is sewing ribbons on a straw hat."

Vaucorbeil snatched a leaf from his note-book and wrote a few lines on it, which Marescot's clerk hastened to deliver.

The *séance* was over. The patients went away.

Bouvard and Pécuchet, on the whole, had not succeeded. Was this due to the temperature, or to the smell of tobacco, or to the Abbé Jeufroy's umbrella**,** which had a lining of copper, a metal unfavourable to the emission of the fluid?

Vaucorbeil shrugged his shoulders. However, he could not deny the honesty of MM. Deleuze, Bertrand, Morin, Jules Cloquet. Now these masters lay down that somnambulists have predicted events, and submitted without pain to cruel operations.

The abbé related stories more astonishing. A missionary had seen Brahmins rushing, heads down, through a street; the Grand Lama of Thibet rips open his bowels in order to deliver oracles.

"Are you joking?" said the physician.

"By no means."

"Come, now, what tomfoolery that is!"

And the question being dropped, each of them furnished an anecdote.

"As for me," said the grocer, "I had a dog who was always sick when the month began on a Friday."

"We were fourteen children," observed the justice of the peace. "I was born on the 14th, my marriage took place on the 14th, and my saint's-day falls on the 14th. Explain this to me."

Beljambe had often reckoned in a dream the number of travellers he would have next day at his inn; and Petit told about the supper of Cazotte.

The curé then made this reflection:

"Why do we not see into it quite easily?"

"The demons — is that what you say?" asked Vaucorbeil.

Instead of again opening his lips, the abbé nodded his head.

Marescot spoke of the Pythia of Delphi.

"Beyond all question, miasmas."

"Oh! miasmas now!"

"As for me, I admit the existence of a fluid," remarked Bouvard.

"Nervoso-siderial," added Pécuchet.

"But prove it, show it, this fluid of yours! Besides, fluids are out of fashion. Listen to me."

Vaucorbeil moved further up to get into the shade. The others followed him.

"If you say to a child, 'I am a wolf; I am going to eat you,' he imagines that you are a wolf, and he is frightened. Therefore, this is a vision conjured up by words. In the same way the somnambulist accepts any fancies that you desire him to accept. He recollects instead of imagining, and has merely sensations when he believes that he is thinking. In this manner it is possible for crimes to be suggested, and virtuous people may see themselves ferocious beasts, and involuntarily become cannibals."

Glances were cast towards Bouvard and Pécuchet. Their scientific pursuits were fraught with dangers to society.

Marescot's clerk reappeared in the garden flourishing a letter from Madame Vaucorbeil.

The doctor tore it open, turned pale, and finally read these words:

"*I am sewing ribbons on a straw hat.*"

Amazement prevented them from bursting into a laugh.

"A mere coincidence, deuce take it! It proves nothing."

And as the two magnetisers wore looks of triumph, he turned round at the door to say to them:

"Don't go further. These are risky amusements."

The curé, while leading away his beadle, reproved them sternly:

"Are you mad? Without my permission! Practices forbidden by the Church!"

They had all just taken their leave; Bouvard and Pécuchet were talking to the schoolmaster on the hillock, when Marcel rushed from the orchard, the bandage of his chin undone, and stuttered:

"Cured! cured! good gentlemen."

"All right! enough! Let us alone."

Petit, a man of advanced ideas, thought the doctor's explanation commonplace and unenlightened. Science is a monopoly in the hands of the rich. She excludes the people. To the old-fashioned analysis of the Middle Ages it is time that a large and ready-witted synthesis should succeed. Truth should be arrived at through the heart. And, declaring himself a spiritualist, he pointed out several works, no doubt imperfect, but the heralds of a new dawn.

They sent for them.

Spiritualism lays down as a dogma the fated amelioration of our species.

Earth will one day become Heaven. And this is the reason why the doctrine fascinated the schoolmaster. Without being Catholic, it was known to St. Augustine and St. Louis. Allan Kardec even has published some fragments dictated by them which are in accordance with contemporary opinions. It is practical as well as benevolent, and reveals to us, like the telescope, the supernal worlds.

Spirits, after death and in a state of ecstasy, are transported thither. But sometimes they descend upon our globe, where they make furniture creak, mingle in our amusements, taste the beauties of Nature, and the pleasures of the arts.

Nevertheless, there are amongst us many who possess an astral trunk — that is to say, behind the ear a long tube which ascends from the hair to the planets, and permits us to converse with the spirits of Saturn. Intangible things are not less real, and from the earth to the stars, from the stars to the earth, a see-saw motion takes place, a transmission, a continual change of place.

Then Pécuchet's heart swelled with extravagant aspirations, and when night had come Bouvard surprised him at the window contemplating those luminous spaces which are peopled with spirits.

Swedenborg made rapid journeys to them. For in less than a year he explored Venus, Mars, Saturn, and, twenty-three times, Jupiter. Moreover, he saw Jesus Christ in London; he saw St. Paul; he saw St. John; he saw Moses; and in 1736 he saw the Last Judgment.

He has also given us descriptions of Heaven.

Flowers, palaces, market-places, and churches are found there, just as with us. The angels, who were formerly human beings, lay their thoughts upon leaves, chat about domestic affairs or else on spiritual matters; and the ecclesiastical posts are assigned to those who, in their earthly career, cultivated the Holy Scripture.

As for Hell, it is filled with a nauseous smell, with hovels, heaps of filth, quagmires, and ill-clad persons.

And Pécuchet racked his brain in order to comprehend what was beautiful in these revelations. To Bouvard they seemed the delirium of an imbecile. All such matters transcend the bounds of Nature. Who, however, can know anything about them? And they surrendered themselves to the following reflections:

Jugglers can cause illusions amongst a crowd; a man with violent passions can excite other people by them; but how can the will alone act upon inert matter? A Bavarian, it is said, was able to ripen grapes; M. Gervais revived a heliotrope; one with greater power scattered the clouds at Toulouse.

It is necessary to admit an intermediary substance between the universe and ourselves? The od, a new imponderable, a sort of electricity, is perhaps nothing else. Its emissions explain the light that those who have been magnetised believe they see: the wandering flames in cemeteries, the forms of phantoms.

These images would not, therefore, be illusions, and the extraordinary gifts of persons who are possessed, like those of clairvoyants, would have a physical cause.

Whatever be their origin, there is an essence, a secret and universal agent. If we could take possession of it, there would be no need of force, of duration. That which requires ages would develop in a minute; every miracle would be practicable, and the universe would be at our disposal.

Magic springs from this eternal yearning of the human mind. Its value has no doubt been exaggerated, but it is not a falsehood. Some Orientals who are skilled in it perform prodigies. All travellers have vouched for its existence, and at the Palais Royal M. Dupotet moves with his finger the magnetic needle.

How to become magicians? This idea appeared to them foolish at first, but it returned, tormented them, and they yielded to it, even while affecting to laugh.

A course of preparation is indispensable.

In order to excite themselves the better, they kept awake at night, fasted, and, wishing to convert Germaine into a more delicate medium, they limited her diet. She indemnified herself by drinking, and consumed so much brandy that she speedily ended in becoming intoxicated. Their promenades in the corridor awakened her. She confused the noise of their footsteps with the hummings in her ears and the voices which she imagined she heard coming from the walls. One day, when she had put a plaice into the pantry, she was frightened on seeing it covered with flame; she became worse than ever after that, and ended by believing that they had cast a spell over her.

Hoping to behold visions, they pressed the napes of each other's necks; they made themselves little bags of belladonna; finally they adopted the magic box, out of which rises a mushroom bristling with nails, to be worn over the heart by means of a ribbon attached to the breast. Everything proved unsuccessful. But they might make use of the sphere of Dupotet!

Pécuchet, with a piece of charcoal, traced on the ground a black shield, in order to enclose within its compass the animal spirits whose duty it is to assist the ambient spirits, and rejoicing at having the mastery over Bouvard, he said to him, with a pontifical air:

"I defy you to cross it!"

Bouvard viewed this circular space. Soon his heart began throbbing, his eyes became clouded.

"Ha! let us make an end of it!" And he jumped over it, to get rid of an inexpressible sense of unpleasantness.

Pécuchet, whose exultation was increasing, desired to make a corpse appear.

Under the Directory a man in the Rue de l'Échiquier exhibited the victims of the Terror. There are innumerable examples of persons coming back from the other world. Though it may be a mere appearance, what matter? The thing was to produce the effect.

The nearer to us we feel the phantom, the more promptly it responds to our appeal. But he had no relic of his family — ring, miniature, or lock of hair — while Bouvard was in a position to conjure up his father; but, as he testified a certain repugnance on the subject, Pécuchet asked him:

"What are you afraid of?"

"I? Oh! nothing at all! Do what you like."

They kept Chamberlan in their pay, and he supplied them by stealth with an old death's-head. A seamster cut out for them two long black robes with hoods attached, like monks' habits. The Falaise coach brought them a large parcel in a wrapper. Then they set about the work, the one interested in executing it, the other afraid to believe in it.

The museum was spread out like a catafalque. Three wax tapers burned at the side of the table pushed against the wall beneath the portrait of Père Bouvard, above which rose the death's-head. They had even stuffed a candle into the interior of the skull, and rays of light shot out through the two eyeholes.

In the centre, on a chafing-dish, incense was smoking. Bouvard kept in the background, and Pécuchet, turning his back to him, cast handfuls of sulphur into the fireplace.

Before invoking a corpse the consent of the demons is required. Now, this day being a Friday — a day which is assigned to Béchet — they should occupy themselves with Béchet first of all.

Bouvard, having bowed to the right and to the left, bent his chin, and raised his arms, began:

"In the names of Ethaniel, Anazin, Ischyros — — "

He forgot the rest.

Pécuchet rapidly breathed forth the words, which had been jotted down on a piece of pasteboard:

"Ischyros, Athanatos, Adonaï, Sadaï, Eloy, Messiasös" (the litany was a long one), "I implore thee, I look to thee, I command thee, O Béchet!"

Then, lowering his voice:

"Where art thou, Béchet? Béchet! Béchet! Béchet!"

Bouvard sank into the armchair, and he was very pleased at not seeing Béchet, a certain instinct reproaching him with making an experiment which was a kind of sacrilege.

Where was his father's soul? Could it hear him? What if, all at once, it were about to appear?

The curtains slowly moved under the wind, which made its way in through a cracked pane of glass, and the wax-tapers caused shadows to oscillate above the corpse's skull and also above the painted face. An earthy colour made them equally brown. The cheek-bones were consumed by mouldiness, the eyes no longer possessed any lustre; but a flame shone above them in the eyeholes of the empty skull. It seemed sometimes to take the other's place, to rest on the collar of the frock-coat, to have a beard on it; and the canvas, half unfastened, swayed and palpitated.

Little by little they felt, as it were, the sensation of being touched by a breath, the approach of an impalpable being. Drops of sweat moistened Pécuchet's forehead, and Bouvard began to gnash his teeth: a cramp gripped his epigastrium; the floor, like a wave, seemed to flow under his heels; the sulphur burning in the chimney fell down in spirals. At the same moment bats flitted about. A cry arose. Who was it?

And their faces under their hoods presented such a distorted aspect that, gazing at each other, they were becoming more frightened than before, not venturing either to move or to speak, when behind the door they heard groans like those of a soul in torture.

At length they ran the risk. It was their old housekeeper, who, espying them through a slit in the partition, imagined she saw the devil, and, falling on her knees in the corridor, kept repeatedly making the sign of the Cross.

All reasoning was futile. She left them the same evening, having no desire to be employed by such people.

Germaine babbled. Chamberlan lost his place, and he formed against them a secret coalition, supported by the Abbé Jeufroy, Madame Bordin, and Foureau.

Their way of living, so unlike that of other people, gave offence. They became objects of suspicion, and even inspired a vague terror.

What destroyed them above all in public opinion was their choice of a servant. For want of another, they had taken Marcel.

His hare-lip, his hideousness, and the gibberish he talked made people avoid him. A deserted child, he had grown up, the sport of chance, in the fields, and from his long-continued privations he became possessed by an insatiable appetite. Animals that had died of disease, putrid bacon, a crushed dog — everything agreed with him so long as the piece was thick; and he was as gentle as a sheep, but utterly stupid.

Gratitude had driven him to offer himself as a servant to MM. Bouvard and

Pécuchet; and then, believing that they were wizards, he hoped for extraordinary gains.

Soon after the first days of his employment with them, he confided to them a secret. On the heath of Poligny a man had formerly found an ingot of gold. The anecdote is related by the historians of Falaise; they were ignorant of its sequel: Twelve brothers, before setting out on a voyage, had concealed twelve similar ingots along the road from Chavignolles to Bretteville, and Marcel begged of his masters to begin a search for them over again. These ingots, said they to each other, had perhaps been buried just before emigration.

This was a case for the use of the divining-rod. Its virtues are doubtful. They studied the question, however, and learned that a certain Pierre Garnier gives scientific reasons to vindicate its claims: springs and metals throw out corpuscles which have an affinity with the wood.

"This is scarcely probable. Who knows, however? Let us make the attempt."

They cut themselves a forked branch from a hazel tree, and one morning set forth to discover the treasure.

"It must be given up," said Bouvard.

"Oh, no! bless your soul!"

After they had been three hours travelling, a thought made them draw up: "The road from Chavignolles to Bretteville! — was it the old or the new road? It must be the old!"

They went back, and rushed through the neighbourhood at random, the direction of the old road not being easy to discover.

Marcel went jumping from right to left, like a spaniel running at field-sports. Bouvard was compelled to call him back every five minutes. Pécuchet advanced step by step, holding the rod by the two branches, with the point upwards. Often it seemed to him that a force and, as it were, a cramp-iron drew it towards the ground; and Marcel very rapidly made a notch in the neighbouring trees, in order to find the place later.

Pécuchet, however, slackened his pace. His mouth was open; the pupils of his eyes were contracted. Bouvard questioned him, caught hold of his shoulders, and shook him. He did not stir, and remained inert, exactly like La Barbée. Then he said he felt around his heart a kind of compression, a singular experience, arising from the rod, no doubt, and he no longer wished to touch it.

They returned next day to the place where the marks had been made on the trees. Marcel dug holes with a spade; nothing, however, came of it, and each time they felt exceedingly sheepish. Pécuchet sat down by the side of a ditch, and while he mused, with his head raised, striving to hear the voices of the spirits through his astral body, asking himself whether he even had one, he fixed his eyes on the peak of his cap; the ecstasy of the previous day once more took possession of him. It lasted a long time, and became dreadful.

Above some oats in a by-path appeared a felt hat: it was that of M. Vaucorbeil on his mare.

Bouvard and Marcel called out to him.

The crisis was drawing to an end when the physician arrived. In order to examine Pécuchet he lifted his cap, and perceiving a forehead covered with coppery marks:

"Ha! ha! *Fructus belli!* Those are love-spots, my fine fellow! Take care of yourself. The deuce! let us not trifle with love."

Pécuchet, ashamed, again put on his cap, a sort of head-piece that swelled over a peak shaped like a half-moon, the model of which he had taken from the Atlas of Amoros.

The doctor's words astounded him. He kept thinking of them with his eyes staring before him, and suddenly had another seizure.

Vaucorbeil watched him, then, with a fillip, knocked off his cap.

Pécuchet recovered his faculties.

"I suspected as much," said the physician; "the glazed peak hypnotises you like a mirror; and this phenomenon is not rare with persons who look at a shining substance too attentively."

He pointed out how the experiment might be made on hens, then mounted his nag, and slowly disappeared from their view.

Half a league further on they noticed, in a farmyard, a pyramidal object stretched out towards the horizon. It might have been compared to an enormous bunch of black grapes marked here and there with red dots. It was, in fact, a long pole, garnished, according to the Norman custom, with cross-bars, on which were perched turkeys bridling in the sunshine.

"Let us go in." And Pécuchet accosted the farmer, who yielded to their request.

They traced a line with whiting in the middle of the press, tied down the claws of a turkey-cock, then stretched him flat on his belly, with his beak placed on the line. The fowl shut his eyes, and soon presented the appearance of being dead. The same process was gone through with the others. Bouvard passed them quickly across to Pécuchet, who ranged them on the side on which they had become torpid.

The people about the farm-house exhibited uneasiness. The mistress screamed, and a little girl began to cry.

Bouvard loosened all the turkeys. They gradually revived; but one could not tell what might be the consequences.

At a rather tart remark of Pécuchet, the farmer grasped his pitchfork tightly.

"Clear out, in God's name, or I'll smash your head!"

They scampered off.

No matter! the problem was solved: ecstasy is dependent on material causes.

What, then, is matter? What is spirit? Whence comes the influence of the one on the other, and the reciprocal exchange of influence?

In order to inform themselves on the subject, they made researches in the works of Voltaire, Bossuet, Fénelon; and they renewed their subscription to a circulating library.

The ancient teachers were inaccessible owing to the length of their works, or the difficulty of the language; but Jouffroy and Damiron initiated them into modern philosophy, and they had authors who dealt with that of the last century.

Bouvard derived his arguments from Lamettrie, Locke, and Helvetius; Pécuchet from M. Cousin, Thomas Reid, and Gérando. The former adhered to experience; for the latter, the ideal was everything. The one belonged to the school of Aristotle, the other to that of Plato; and they proceeded to discuss the subject.

"The soul is immaterial," said Pécuchet.

"By no means," said his friend. "Lunacy, chloroform, a bleeding will overthrow it; and, inasmuch as it is not always thinking, it is not a substance which does nothing but think."

"Nevertheless," rejoined Pécuchet, "I have in myself something superior to my body, which sometimes confutes it."

"A being in a being — *homo duplex*! Look here, now! Different tendencies disclose opposite motives. That's all!"

"But this something, this soul, remains identical amid all changes from without. Therefore, it is simple, indivisible, and thus spiritual."

"If the soul were simple," replied Bouvard, "the newly-born would recollect, would imagine, like the adult. Thought, on the contrary, follows the development of the brain. As to its being indivisible, neither the perfume of a rose nor the appetite of a wolf, any more than a volition or an affirmation, is cut in two."

"That makes no difference," said Pécuchet. "The soul is exempt from the qualities of matter."

"Do you admit weight?" returned Bouvard. "Now, if matter can fall, it can in the same way think. Having had a beginning, the soul must come to an end, and as it is dependent on certain organs, it must disappear with them."

"For my part, I maintain that it is immortal. God could not intend — — "

"But if God does not exist?"

"What?" And Pécuchet gave utterance to the three Cartesian proofs: "'*Primo*: God is comprehended in the idea that we have of Him; *secundo*: Existence is possible to Him; *tertio*: How can I, a finite being, have an idea of the Infinite? And, since we have this idea, it comes to us from God; therefore, God exists.'"

He passed on to the testimony of conscience, the traditions of different races, and the need of a Creator.

"When I see a clock — — "

"Yes! yes! That's a well-known argument. But where is the clockmaker's father?"

"However, a cause is necessary."

Bouvard was doubtful about causes. "From the fact that one phenomenon succeeds another phenomenon, the conclusion is drawn that it is caused by the first. Prove it."

"But the spectacle of the universe indicates an intention and a plan."

"Why? Evil is as perfectly organised as good. The worm that works its way into a sheep's head and causes it to die, is as valuable from an anatomical point of view as the sheep itself. Abnormalities surpass the normal functions. The human body could be better constructed. Three fourths of the globe are sterile. That celestial lamp-post, the moon, does not always show itself! Do you think the ocean was destined for ships, and the wood of trees for fuel for our houses?"

Pécuchet answered: "Yet the stomach is made to digest, the leg to walk, the eye to see, although there are dyspepsias, fractures, and cataracts. No arrangements without an end. The effects came on at the exact time or at a later period. Everything depends on laws; therefore, there are final causes."

Bouvard imagined that perhaps Spinoza would furnish him with some arguments, and he wrote to Dumouchel to get him Saisset's translation.

Dumouchel sent him a copy belonging to his friend Professor Varelot, exiled on the 2nd of December.

Ethics terrified them with its axioms, its corollaries. They read only the pages marked with pencil, and understood this:

"'The substance is that which is of itself, by itself, without cause, without origin. This substance is God. He alone is extension, and extension is without bounds.'"

"What can it be bound with?"

"'But, though it be infinite, it is not the absolute infinite, for it contains only one kind of perfection, and the Absolute contains all.'"

They frequently stopped to think it out the better. Pécuchet took pinches of snuff, and Bouvard's face glowed with concentrated attention.

"Does this amuse you?"

"Yes, undoubtedly. Go on forever."

"'God displays Himself in an infinite number of attributes which express, each in its own way, the infinite character of His being. We know only two of them — extension and thought.

"'From thought and extension flow innumerable modes, which contain others. He who would at the same time embrace all extension and all thought would see there no contingency, nothing accidental, but a geometrical succession of terms, bound amongst themselves by necessary laws.'"

"Ah! that would be beautiful!" exclaimed Bouvard.

"'If God had a will, an end, if He acted for a cause, that would mean that He would have some want, that He would lack some one perfection. He would not be God.

"'Thus our world is but one point in the whole of things, and the universe, impenetrable by our knowledge, is a portion of an infinite number of universes emitting close to ours infinite modifications. Extension envelops our universe, but is enveloped by God, who contains in His thought all possible universes, and His thought itself is enveloped in His substance.'"

It appeared to them that this substance was filled at night with an icy coldness, carried away in an endless course towards a bottomless abyss, leaving nothing around them but the Unseizable, the Immovable, the Eternal.

This was too much for them, and they renounced it. And wishing for something less harsh, they bought the course of philosophy, by M. Guesnier, for the use of classes.

The author asks himself what would be the proper method, the ontological or the psychological.

The first suited the infancy of societies, when man directed his attention towards the external world. But at present, when he turns it in upon himself, "we believe the second to be more scientific."

The object of psychology is to study the acts which take place in our own breasts. We discover them by observation.

"Let us observe." And for a fortnight, after breakfast, they regularly searched their consciousness at random, hoping to make great discoveries there — and made none, which considerably astonished them.

"'One phenomenon occupies the ego, viz., the idea. What is its nature? It has been supposed that the objects are put into the brain, and that the brain transmits these images to our souls, which gives us the knowledge of them.'"

But if the idea is spiritual, how are we to represent matter? Thence comes scepticism as to external perceptions. If it is material, spiritual objects could not be represented. Thence scepticism as to the reality of internal notions.

"For another reason let us here be careful. This hypothesis will lead us to atheism."

For an image, being a finite thing, cannot possibly represent the Infinite.

"Yet," argued Bouvard, "when I think of a forest, of a person, of a dog, I see this forest, this person, this dog. Therefore the ideas do represent them."

And they proceeded to deal with the origin of ideas.

According to Locke, there are two originating causes — sensation and reflection; and Condillac reduces everything to sensation.

But then reflection will lack a basis. It has need of a subject, of a sentient being; and it is powerless to furnish us with the great fundamental truths: God, merit and demerit, the Just, the Beautiful — ideas which are all *innate*, that is to say, anterior to facts, and to experience, and universal.

"If they were universal we should have them from our birth."

"By this word is meant dispositions to have them; and Descartes — — "

"Your Descartes is muddled, for he maintains that the fœtus possesses them, and he confesses in another place that this is in an implied fashion."

Pécuchet was astonished. "Where is this found?"

"In Gérando." And Bouvard tapped him lightly on the stomach.

"Make an end of it, then," said Pécuchet.

Then, coming to Condillac:

"'Our thoughts are not metamorphoses of sensation. It causes them, puts them in play. In order to put them in play a motive power is necessary, for matter of itself cannot produce movement.' And I found that in your Voltaire," Pécuchet added, making a low bow to him.

Thus they repeated again and again the same arguments, each treating the other's opinion with contempt, without persuading his companion that his own was right.

But philosophy elevated them in their own estimation. They recalled with disdain their agricultural and political preoccupations.

At present they were disgusted with the museum. They would have asked nothing better than to sell the articles of *virtù* contained in it. So they passed on to the second chapter: "Faculties of the Soul."

"'They are three in number, no more: that of feeling, that of knowing, and that of willing.

"'In the faculty of feeling we should distinguish physical sensibility from moral sensibility. Physical sensations are naturally classified into five species, being transmitted through the medium of the senses. The facts of moral sensibility, on the contrary, owe nothing to the body. What is there in common between the pleasure of Archimedes in discovering the laws of weight and the filthy gratification of Apicius in devouring a wild-boar's head?

"'This moral sensibility has five *genera*, and its second genus, moral desires, is divided into five species, and the phenomena of the fourth genus, affection, are subdivided into two other species, amongst which is the love of oneself — a legitimate propensity, no doubt, but one which, when it becomes exaggerated, takes the name of egoism.

"'In the faculty of knowing we find rational perception, in which there are two principal movements and four degrees.

"'Abstraction may present perils to whimsical minds.

"'Memory brings us into contact with the past, as foresight does with the future.

"'Imagination is rather a special faculty, *sui generis*.'"

So many intricacies in order to demonstrate platitudes, the pedantic tone of the author, and the monotony of his forms of expression — "We are prepared to acknowledge it," "Far from us be the thought," "Let us interrogate our consciousness" — the sempiternal eulogy on Dugald Stewart; in short, all this verbiage, disgusted them so much that, jumping over the faculty of willing, they went into logic.

It taught them the nature of analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction, and the principal causes of our errors.

Nearly all come from the misuse of words.

"The sun is going to bed." "The weather is becoming brown," "The winter is drawing near" — vicious modes of speech which would make us believe in personal entities, when it is only a question of very simple occurrences. "I remember such an object," "such an axiom," "such a truth" — illusion! These are ideas and not at all things which remain in me; and the rigour of language requires, "I remember such an act of my mind by which I perceived that object," "whereby I have deduced that axiom," "whereby I have admitted this truth."

As the term that describes an incident does not embrace it in all its aspects, they try to employ only abstract words, so that in place of saying, "Let us make a tour," "It is time to dine," "I have the colic," they give utterance to the following phrases: "A promenade would be salutary," "This is the hour for absorbing aliments," "I experience a necessity for disburdenment."

Once masters of logic, they passed in review the different criterions; first, that of common sense.

If the individual can know nothing, why should all individuals know more? An error, were it a hundred thousand years old, does not by the mere fact of its being old constitute truth. The multitude invariably pursues the path of routine. It is, on the contrary, the few who are guided by progress.

Is it better to trust to the evidence of the senses? They sometimes deceive, and never give information save as to externals. The innermost core escapes them.

Reason offers more safeguards, being immovable and impersonal; but in order that it may be manifested it is necessary that it should incarnate itself. Then, reason becomes my reason; a rule is of little value if it is false. Nothing can show such a rule to be right.

We are recommended to control it with the senses; but they may make the darkness thicker. From a confused sensation a defective law will be inferred, which, later, will obstruct the clear view of things.

Morality remains.

This would make God descend to the level of the useful, as if our wants were the measure of the Absolute.

As for the evidence — denied by the one, affirmed by the other — it is its own criterion. M. Cousin has demonstrated it.

"I see no longer anything but revelation," said Bouvard. "But, to believe it, it is necessary to admit two preliminary cognitions — that of the body which has felt, and that of the intelligence which has perceived; to admit sensation and reason. Human testimonies! and consequently open to suspicion."

Pécuchet reflected — folded his arms. "But we are about to fall into the frightful abyss of scepticism."

In Bouvard's opinion it frightened only weak brains.

"Thank you for the compliment," returned Pécuchet. "However, there are indisputable facts. We can arrive at truth within a certain limit."

"Which? Do two and two always make four? Is that which is contained in some degree less than that which contains it? What is the meaning of nearly true, a fraction of God, the part of an indivisible thing?"

"Oh, you are a mere sophist!" And Pécuchet, annoyed, remained for three days in a sulk.

They employed themselves in running through the contents of several volumes. Bouvard smiled from time to time, and renewing the conversation, said:

"The fact is, it is hard to avoid doubt; thus, for the existence of God, Descartes', Kant's, and Leibnitz's proofs are not the same, and mutually destroy one another. The creation of the world by atoms, or by a spirit, remains inconceivable. I feel myself, at the same time, matter and thought, while all the time I am ignorant of what one or the other really is. Impenetrability, solidity, weight, seem to me to be mysteries just as much as my soul, and, with much stronger reason, the union of the soul and the body. In order to explain it, Leibnitz invented his harmony, Malebranche premotion, Cudworth a mediator, and Bossuet sees in it a perpetual miracle."

"Exactly," said Pécuchet. And they both confessed that they were tired of philosophy. Such a number of systems confused them. Metaphysics is of no use: one can live without it. Besides, their pecuniary embarrassments were increasing. They owed one bill to Beljambe for three hogsheads of wine, another to Langlois for two stone of sugar, a sum of one hundred francs to the tailor, and sixty to the shoemaker.

Their expenditures were continuous, of course, and meantime Maître Gouy did not pay up.

They went to Marescot to ask him to raise money for them, either by the sale of the Ecalles meadow, or by a mortgage on their farm, or by giving up their house on the condition of getting a life annuity and keeping the usufruct.

In Marescot's opinion this would be an impracticable course; but a better means might be devised, and they should be informed about it.

After this they thought of their poor garden. Bouvard undertook the pruning of the row of elms and Pécuchet the trimming of the espalier. Marcel would have to dig the borders.

At the end of a quarter of an hour they stopped. The one closed his pruning-knife, the other laid down his scissors, and they began to walk to and fro quietly, Bouvard in the shade of the linden trees, with his waistcoat off, his chest held out and his arms bare; Pécuchet close to the wall, with his head hanging down, his arms behind his back, the peak of his cap turned over his neck for precaution; and thus they proceeded in parallel lines without even seeing Marcel, who was resting at the side of the hut eating a scrap of bread.

In this reflective mood thoughts arose in their minds. They grasped at them, fearing to lose them; and metaphysics came back again — came back with respect to the rain and the sun, the gravel in their shoes, the flowers on the grass — with respect to everything. When they looked at the candle burning, they asked themselves whether the light is in the object or in our eyes. Since stars may have disappeared by the time their radiance has reached us, we admire, perhaps, things that have no existence.

Having found a Raspail cigarette in the depths of a waistcoat, they crumbled it over some water, and the camphor moved about. Here, then, is movement in matter. One degree more of movement might bring on life!

But if matter in movement were sufficient to create beings, they would not be so varied. For in the beginning lands, water, men, and plants had no existence. What, then, is this primordial matter, which we have never seen, which is no portion of created things, and which yet has produced them all?

Sometimes they wanted a book. Dumouchel, tired of assisting them, no longer answered their letters. They enthusiastically took up the new question, especially Pécuchet. His need of truth became a burning thirst.

Moved by Bouvard's preachings, he gave up spiritualism, but soon resumed it again only to abandon it once more, and, clasping his head with his hands, he would exclaim:

"Oh, doubt! doubt! I would much prefer nothingness."

Bouvard perceived the insufficiency of materialism, and tried to stop at that, declaring, however, that he had lost his head over it.

They began with arguments on a solid basis, but the basis gave way; and suddenly they had no longer a single idea — just as a bird takes wing the moment we wish to catch it.

During the winter evenings they chatted in the museum at the corner of the fire, staring at the coals. The wind, whistling in the corridor, shook the window-panes; the black masses of trees swayed to and fro, and the dreariness of the night intensified the seriousness of their thoughts.

Bouvard from time to time walked towards the further end of the apartment and then came back. The torches and the pans on the walls threw slanting shadows on the ground; and the St. Peter, see*n* in profile, showed on the ceiling the silhouette of his nose, resembling a monstrous hunting-horn.

They found it hard to move about amongst the various articles, and Bouvard, by not taking precautions, often knocked against the statue. With its big eyes, its drooping lip, and its air of a drunkard, it also annoyed Pécuchet. For a long time he had wished to get rid of it, but through carelessness put it off from day to day.

One evening, in the middle of a dispute on the monad, Bouvard hit his big toe against St. Peter's thumb, and turning on him in a rage, exclaimed:

"He plagues me, this jackanapes! Let us toss him out!"

It was difficult to do this over the staircase. They flung open the window, and gently tried to tip St. Peter over the edge. Pécuchet, on his knees, attempted to raise his heels, while Bouvard pressed against his shoulders. The old codger in stone did not budge. After this they had recourse to the halberd as a lever, and finally succeeded in stretching him out quite straight. Then, after a see-saw motion, he dashed into the open space, his tiara going before him. A heavy crash reached their ears, and next day they found him broken into a dozen pieces in the old pit for composts.

An hour afterwards the notary came in, bringing good news to them. A lady in the neighbourhood was willing to advance a thousand crown-pieces on the security of a mortgage of their farm, and, as they were expressing their satisfaction at the proposal:

"Pardon me. She adds, as a condition, that you should sell her the Ecalles meadow for fifteen hundred francs. The loan will be advanced this very day. The money is in my office."

They were both disposed to give way.

Bouvard ended by saying: "Good God! be it so, then."

"Agreed," said Marescot. And then he mentioned the lender's name: it was Madame Bordin.

"I suspected 'twas she!" exclaimed Pécuchet.

Bouvard, who felt humiliated, had not a word to say.

She or some one else — what did it matter? The principal thing was to get out of their difficulties.

When they received the money (they were to get the sum for the Ecalles later) they immediately paid all their bills; and they were returning to their abode when, at the corner of the market-place, they were stopped by Farmer Gouy.

He had been on his way to their house to apprise them of a misfortune. The wind, the night before, had blown down twenty apple trees into the farmyard, overturned the boilery, and carried away the roof of the barn.

They spent the remainder of the afternoon in estimating the amount of the damage, and they continued the inquiry on the following day with the assistance of the carpenter, the mason, and the slater. The repairs would cost at least about eighteen hundred francs.

Then, in the evening, Gouy presented himself. Marianne herself had, a short time before, told him all about the sale of the Ecalles meadow — a piece of land with a splendid yield, suitable in every way, and scarcely requiring any cultivation at all, the best bit in the whole farm! — and he asked for a reduction.

The two gentlemen refused it. The matter was submitted to the justice of the peace, who decided in favour of the farmer. The loss of the Ecalles, which was valued at two thousand francs per acre, caused him an annual depreciation of seventy, and he was sure to win in the courts.

Their fortune was diminished. What were they to do? And soon the question would be, How were they to live?

They both sat down to table full of discouragement. Marcel knew nothing about it in the kitchen. His dinner this time was better than theirs.

The soup was like dish-water, the rabbit had a bad smell, the kidney-beans were underdone, the plates were dirty, and at dessert Bouvard burst into a passion and threatened to break everything on Marcel's head.

"Let us be philosophers," said Pécuchet. "A little less money, the intrigues of a woman, the clumsiness of a servant — what is it but this? You are too much immersed in matter."

"But when it annoys me?" said Bouvard.

"For my part, I don't admit it," rejoined Pécuchet.

He had recently been reading an analysis of Berkeley, and added:

"I deny extension, time, space, even substance! for the true substance is the mind-perceiving qualities."

"Quite so," said Bouvard; "but get rid of the world, and you'll have no proof left of God's existence."

Pécuchet uttered a cry, and a long one too, although he had a cold in his head, caused by the iodine of potassium, and a continual feverishness increased his excitement. Bouvard, being uneasy about him, sent for the doctor.

Vaucorbeil ordered orange-syrup with the iodine, and for a later stage cinnabar baths.

"What's the use?" replied Pécuchet. "One day or another the form will die out. The essence does not perish."

"No doubt," said the physician, "matter is indestructible. However — — "

"Ah, no! — ah, no! The indestructible thing is being. This body which is there before me — yours, doctor — prevents me from knowing your real self, and is, so to speak, only a garment, or rather a mask."

Vaucorbeil believed he was mad.

"Good evening. Take care of your mask."

Pécuchet did not stop. He procured an introduction to the Hegelian philosophy, and wished to explain it to Bouvard.

"All that is rational is real. There is not even any reality save the idea. The laws of the mind are laws of the universe; the reason of man is identical with that of God."

Bouvard pretended to understand.

"Therefore the absolute is, at the same time, the subject and the object, the unity whereby all differences come to be settled. Thus, things that are contradictory are reconciled. The shadow permits the light; heat and cold intermingled produce temperature. Organism maintains itself only by the destruction of organism; everywhere there is a principle that disunites, a principle that connects."

They were on the hillock, and the curé was walking past the gateway with his breviary in his hand.

Pécuchet asked him to come in, as he desired to finish the explanation of Hegel, and to get some notion of what the curé would say about it.

The man of the cassock sat down beside them, and Pécuchet broached the question of Christianity.

"No religion has established this truth so well: 'Nature is but a moment of the idea.'"

"A moment of the idea!" murmured the priest in astonishment.

"Why, yes. God in taking a visible envelope showed his consubstantial union with it."

"With nature — oh! oh!"

"By His decease He bore testimony to the essence of death; therefore, death was in Him, made and makes part of God."

The ecclesiastic frowned.

"No blasphemies! it was for the salvation of the human race that He endured sufferings."

"Error! We look at death in the case of the individual, where, no doubt, it is a calamity; but with relation to things it is different. Do not separate mind from matter."

"However, sir, before the Creation — — "

"There was no Creation. It has always existed. Otherwise this would be a new being adding itself to the Divine idea, which is absurd."

The priest arose; business matters called him elsewhere.

"I flatter myself I've floored him!" said Pécuchet. "One word more. Since the existence of the world is but a continual passage from life to death, and from death to life, so far from everything existing, nothing is. But everything is becoming — do you understand?"

"Yes; I do understand — or rather I don't."

Idealism in the end exasperated Bouvard.

"I don't want any more of it. The famous *cogito* stupefies me. Ideas of things are taken for the things themselves. What we understand very slightly is explained by means of words which we don't understand at all — substance, extension, force, matter, and soul. So much abstraction, imagination. As for God, it is impossible to know in what way He is, if He is at all. Formerly, He used to cause the wind, the thunderstorms, revolutions. At present, He is diminishing. Besides, I don't see the utility of Him."

"And morality — in this state of affairs."

"Ah! so much the worse."

"It lacks a foundation in fact," said Pécuchet.

And he remained silent, driven into a corner by premises which he had himself laid down. It was a surprise — a crushing bit of logic.

Bouvard no longer even believed in matter.

The certainty that nothing exists (deplorable though it may be) is none the less a certainty. Few persons are capable of possessing it. This transcendency on their part inspired them with pride, and they would have liked to make a display of it. An opportunity presented itself.

One morning, while they were going to buy tobacco, they saw a crowd in front of Langlois' door. The public conveyance from Falaise was surrounded, and there was much excitement about a convict named Touache, who was wandering about the country. The conductor had met him at Croix-Verte between two gendarmes, and the people of Chavignolles breathed a sigh of relief.

Girbal and the captain remained on the green; then the justice of the peace made his appearance, curious to obtain information, and after him came M. Marescot in a velvet cap and sheepskin slippers.

Langlois invited them to honour his shop with their presence; they would be more at their ease; and in spite of the customers and the loud ringing of the bell, the gentlemen continued their discussion as to Touache's offences.

"Goodness gracious!" said Bouvard, "he had bad instincts. That was the whole of it!"

"They are conquered by virtue," replied the notary.

"But if a person has not virtue?"

And Bouvard positively denied free-will.

"Yet," said the captain, "I can do what I like. I am free, for instance, to move my leg."

"No, sir, for you have a motive for moving it."

The captain looked out for something to say in reply, and found nothing. But Girbal discharged this shaft:

"A Republican speaking against liberty. That is funny."

"A droll story," chimed in Langlois.

Bouvard turned on him with this question:

"Why don't you give all you possess to the poor?"

The grocer cast an uneasy glance over his entire shop.

"Look here, now, I'm not such an idiot! I keep it for myself."

"If you were St. Vincent de Paul, you would act differently, since you would have his character. You obey your own. Therefore, you are not free."

"That's a quibble!" replied the company in chorus.

Bouvard did not flinch, and said, pointing towards the scales on the counter:

"It will remain motionless so long as each scale is empty. So with the will; and the oscillation of the scales between two weights which seem equal represents the strain on our mind when it is hesitating between different motives, till the moment when the more powerful motive gets the better of it and leads it to a determination."

"All that," said Girbal, "makes no difference for Touache, and does not prevent him from being a downright vicious rogue."

Pécuchet addressed the company:

"Vices are properties of Nature, like floods, tempests."

The notary stopped, and raising himself on tiptoe at every word:

"I consider your system one of complete immorality. It gives scope to every kind of excess, excuses crimes, and declares the guilty innocent."

"Exactly," replied Bouvard; "the wretch who follows his appetites is right from his own point of view just as much as the honest man who listens to reason."

"Do not defend monsters!"

"Wherefore monsters? When a person is born blind, an idiot, a homicide, this appears to us to be opposed to order, as if order were known to us, as if Nature were striving towards an end."

"You then raise a question about Providence?"

"I do raise a question about it."

"Look rather to history," exclaimed Pécuchet. "Recall to mind the assassinations of kings, the massacres amongst peoples, the dissensions in families, the affliction of individuals."

"And at the same time," added Bouvard, for they mutually excited each other, "this Providence takes care of little birds, and makes the claws of crayfishes grow again. Oh! if by Providence you mean a law which rules everything, I am of the same opinion, and even more so."

"However, sir," said the notary, "there are principles."

"What stuff is that you're talking? A science, according to Condillac, is so much the better the less need it has of them. They do nothing but summarise acquired knowledge, and they bring us back to those conceptions which are exactly the disputable ones."

"Have you, like us," went on Pécuchet, "scrutinised and explored the arcana of metaphysics?"

"It is true, gentlemen — it is true!"

Then the company broke up.

But Coulon, drawing them aside, told them in a paternal tone that he was no devotee certainly, and that he even hated the Jesuits. However, he did not go as far as they did. Oh, no! certainly not. And at the corner of the green they passed in front of the captain, who, as he lighted his pipe, growled:

"All the same, I do what I like, by God!"

Bouvard and Pécuchet gave utterance on other occasions to their scandalous paradoxes. They threw doubt on the honesty of men, the chastity of women, the intelligence of government, the good sense of the people — in short, they sapped the foundations of everything.

Foureau was provoked by their behaviour, and threatened them with imprisonment if they went on with such discourses.

The evidence of their own superiority caused them pain. As they maintained immoral propositions, they must needs be immoral: calumnies were invented about them. Then a pitiable faculty developed itself in their minds, that of observing stupidity and no longer tolerating it. Trifling things made them feel sad: the advertisements in the newspapers, the profile of a shopkeeper, an idiotic remark overheard by chance. Thinking over what was said in their own village, and on the fact that there were even as far as the Antipodes other Coulons, other Marescots, other Foureaus, they felt, as it were, the heaviness of all the earth weighing down upon them.

They no longer went out of doors, and received no visitors.

One afternoon a dialogue arose, outside the front entrance, between Marcel and a gentleman who wore dark spectacles and a hat with a large brim. It was the academician Larsoneur. He observed a curtain half-opening and doors being shut. This step on his part was an attempt at reconciliation; and he went away in a rage, directing the man-servant to tell his masters that he regarded them as a pair of common fellows.

Bouvard and Pécuchet did not care about this. The world was diminishing in importance, and they saw it as if through a cloud that had descended from their brains over their eyes.

Is it not, moreover, an illusion, a bad dream? Perhaps, on the whole, prosperity and misfortune are equally balanced. But the welfare of the species does not console the individual.

"And what do others matter to me?" said Pécuchet.

His despair afflicted Bouvard. It was he who had brought his friend to this pass, and the ruinous condition of their house kept their grief fresh by daily irritations.

In order to revive their spirits they tried discussions, and prescribed tasks for themselves, but speedily fell back into greater sluggishness, into more profound discouragement.

At the end of each meal they would remain with their elbows on the table groaning with a lugubrious air.

Marcel would give them a scared look, and then go back to his kitchen, where he stuffed himself in solitude.

About the middle of midsummer they received a circular announcing the marriage of Dumouchel with Madame Olympe-Zulma Poulet, a widow.

"God bless him!"

And they recalled the time when they were happy.

Why were they no longer following the harvesters? Where were the days when they went through the different farm-houses looking everywhere for antiquities? Nothing now gave them such hours of delight as those which were occupied with the distillery and with literature. A gulf lay between them and that time. It was irrevocable.

They thought of taking a walk as of yore through the fields, wandered too far, and got lost. The sky was dotted with little fleecy clouds, the wind was shaking the tiny bells of the oats; a stream was purling along through a meadow — and then, all at once, an infectious odour made them halt, and they saw on the pebbles between the thorn trees the putrid carcass of a dog.

The four limbs were dried up. The grinning jaws disclosed teeth of ivory under the bluish lips; in place of the stomach there was a mass of earth-coloured flesh which seemed to be palpitating with the vermin that swarmed all over it. It writhed, with the sun's rays falling on it, under the gnawing of so many mouths, in this intolerable stench — a stench which was fierce and, as it were, devouring.

Yet wrinkles gathered on Bouvard's forehead, and his eyes filled with tears.

Pécuchet said in a stoical fashion, "One day we shall be like that."

The idea of death had taken hold of them. They talked about it on their way back.

After all, it has no existence. We pass away into the dew, into the breeze, into the stars. We become part of the sap of trees, the brilliance of precious stones, the plumage of birds. We give back to Nature what she lent to each of us, and the nothingness before us is not a bit more frightful than the nothingness behind us.

They tried to picture it to themselves under the form of an intense night, a bottomless pit, a continual swoon. Anything would be better than such an existence — monotonous, absurd, and hopeless.

They enumerated their unsatisfied wants. Bouvard had always wished for horses, equipages, a big supply of Burgundy, and lovely women ready to accommodate him in a splendid habitation. Pécuchet's ambition was philosophical knowledge. Now, the vastest of problems, that which contains all others, can be solved in one minute. When would it come, then? "As well to make an end of it at once."

"Just as you like," said Bouvard.

And they investigated the question of suicide.

Where is the evil of casting aside a burden which is crushing you? and of doing an act harmful to nobody? If it offended God, should we have this power? It is not cowardice, though people say so, and to scoff at human pride is a fine thing, even at the price of injury to oneself — the thing that men regard most highly.

They deliberated as to the different kinds of death. Poison makes you suffer. In order to cut your throat you require too much courage. In the case of asphyxia, people often fail to effect their object.

Finally, Pécuchet carried up to the garret two ropes belonging to their gymnastic apparatus. Then, having fastened them to the same crossbeam of the roof, he let a slip-knot hang down from the end of each, and drew two chairs underneath to reach the ropes.

This method was the one they selected.

They asked themselves what impression it would cause in the district, what would become of their library, their papers, their collections. The thought of death made them feel tenderly about themselves. However, they did not abandon their project, and by dint of talking about it they grew accustomed to the idea.

On the evening of the 24th of December, between ten and eleven o'clock, they sat thinking in the museum, both differently attired. Bouvard wore a blouse over his knitted waistcoat, and Pécuchet, through economy, had not left off his monk's habit for the past three months.

As they were very hungry (for Marcel, having gone out at daybreak, had not reappeared), Bouvard thought it would be a healthful thing for him to drink a quart bottle of brandy, and for Pécuchet to take some tea.

While he was lifting up the kettle he spilled some water on the floor.

"Awkward!" exclaimed Bouvard.

Then, thinking the infusion too small, he wanted to strengthen it with two additional spoonfuls.

"This will be execrable," said Pécuchet.

"Not at all."

And while each of them was trying to draw the work-box closer to himself, the tray upset and fell down. One of the cups was smashed — the last of their fine porcelain tea-service.

Bouvard turned pale.

"Go on! Confusion! Don't put yourself about!"

"Truly, a great misfortune! I attribute it to my father."

"Your natural father," corrected Pécuchet, with a sneer.

"Ha! you insult me!"

"No; but I am tiring you out! I see it plainly! Confess it!"

And Pécuchet was seized with anger, or rather with madness. So was Bouvard. The pair began shrieking, the one excited by hunger, the other by alcohol. Pécuchet's throat at length emitted no sound save a rattling.

"It is infernal, a life like this. I much prefer death. Adieu!"

He snatched up the candlestick and rushed out, slamming the door behind him.

Bouvard, plunged in darkness, found some difficulty in opening it. He ran after Pécuchet, and followed him up to the garret.

The candle was on the floor, and Pécuchet was standing on one of the chairs, with a rope in his hand. The spirit of imitation got the better of Bouvard.

"Wait for me!"

And he had just got up on the other chair when, suddenly stopping:

"Why, we have not made our wills!"

"Hold on! That's quite true!"

Their breasts swelled with sobs. They leaned against the skylight to take breath.

The air was chilly and a multitude of stars glittered in a sky of inky blackness.

The whiteness of the snow that covered the earth was lost in the haze of the horizon.

They perceived, close to the ground, little lights, which, as they drew near, looked larger, all reaching up to the side of the church.

Curiosity drove them to the spot. It was the midnight mass. These lights came from shepherds' lanterns. Some of them were shaking their cloaks under the porch.

The serpent snorted; the incense smoked. Glasses suspended along the nave represented three crowns of many-coloured flames; and, at the end of the perspective at the two sides of the tabernacle, immense wax tapers were pointed with red flames. Above the heads of the crowd and the broad-brimmed hats of the women, beyond the chanters, the priest could be distinguished in his chasuble of gold. To his sharp voice responded the strong voices of the men who filled up the gallery, and the wooden vault quivered above its stone arches. The walls were decorated with the stations of the Cross. In the midst of the choir, before the altar, a lamb was lying down, with its feet under its belly and its ears erect.

The warm temperature imparted to them both a strange feeling of comfort, and their thoughts, which had been so tempestuous only a short time before, became peaceful, like waves when they are calmed.

They listened to the Gospel and the *Credo*, and watched the movements of the priest. Meanwhile, the old, the young, the beggar women in rags, the mothers in high caps, the strong young fellows with tufts of fair down on their faces, were all praying, absorbed in the same deep joy, and saw the body of the Infant Christ shining, like a sun, upon the straw of a stable. This faith on the part of others touched Bouvard in spite of his reason, and Pécuchet in spite of the hardness of his heart.

There was a silence; every back was bent, and, at the tinkling of a bell, the little lamb bleated.

The host was displayed by the priest, as high as possible between his two hands. Then burst forth a strain of gladness inviting the whole world to the feet of the King of Angels. Bouvard and Pécuchet involuntarily joined in it, and they felt, as it were, a new dawn rising in their souls.

BOUVARD ET PÉCUCHET

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CHAPITRE I

Comme il faisait une chaleur de 33 degrés, le boulevard Bourdon se trouvait absolument désert.

Plus bas le canal Saint-Martin, fermé par les deux écluses étalait en ligne droite son eau couleur d'encre. Il y avait au milieu, un bateau plein de bois, et sur la berge deux rangs de barriques.

Au delà du canal, entre les maisons que séparent des chantiers le grand ciel pur se découpait en plaques d'outremer, et sous la réverbération du soleil, les façades blanches, les toits d'ardoises, les quais de granit éblouissaient. Une rumeur confuse montait du loin dans l'atmosphère tiède ; et tout semblait engourdi par le désoeuvrement du dimanche et la tristesse des jours d'été.

Deux hommes parurent.

L'un venait de la Bastille, l'autre du Jardin des Plantes. Le plus grand, vêtu de toile, marchait le chapeau en arrière, le gilet déboutonné et sa cravate à la main. Le plus petit, dont le corps disparaissait dans une redingote marron, baissait la tête sous une casquette à visière pointue.

Quand ils furent arrivés au milieu du boulevard, ils s'assirent à la même minute, sur le même banc.

Pour s'essuyer le front, ils retirèrent leurs coiffures, que chacun posa près de soi ; et le petit homme aperçut écrit dans le chapeau de son voisin : Bouvard ; pendant que celui-ci distinguait aisément dans la casquette du particulier en redingote le mot : Pécuchet.

— Tiens ! dit-il nous avons eu la même idée, celle d'inscrire notre nom dans nos couvre-chefs.

— Mon Dieu, oui ! on pourrait prendre le mien à mon bureau !

— C'est comme moi, je suis employé.

Alors ils se considérèrent.

L'aspect aimable de Bouvard charma de suite Pécuchet.

Ses yeux bleuâtres, toujours entreclos, souriaient dans son visage colore. Un pantalon à grand-pont, qui godait par le bas sur des souliers de castor, moulait son ventre, faisait bouffer sa chemise à la ceinture ; — et ses cheveux blonds, frisés d'eux-mêmes en boucles légères, lui donnaient quelque chose d'enfantin.

Il poussait du bout des lèvres une espèce de sifflement continu.

L'air sérieux de Pécuchet frappa Bouvard.

On aurait dit qu'il portait une perruque, tant les mèches garnissant son crâne élevé étaient plates et noires. Sa figure semblait tout en profil, à cause du nez qui descendait très bas. Ses jambes prises dans des tuyaux de lasting manquaient de proportion avec la longueur du buste ; et il avait une voix forte, caverneuse.

Cette exclamation lui échappa : — Comme on serait bien à la campagne !

Mais la banlieue, selon Bouvard, était assommante par le tapage des guinguettes. Pécuchet pensait de même. Il commençait néanmoins à se sentir fatigué de la capitale, Bouvard aussi.

Et leurs yeux erraient sur des tas de pierres à bâtir, sur l'eau hideuse où une botte de paille flottait, sur la cheminée d'une usine se dressant à l'horizon ; des miasmes d'égout s'exhalaient. Ils se tournèrent de l'autre côté. Alors, ils eurent devant eux les murs du Grenier d'abondance.

Décidément (et Pécuchet en était surpris) on avait encore plus chaud dans les rues que chez soi !

Bouvard l'engagea à mettre bas sa redingote. Lui, il se moquait du qu'en dira-t-on !

Tout à coup un ivrogne traversa en zigzag le trottoir ; — et à propos des ouvriers, ils entamèrent une conversation politique. Leurs opinions étaient les mêmes, bien que Bouvard fût peut-être plus libéral.

Un bruit de ferrailles sonna sur le pavé, dans un tourbillon de poussière. C'étaient trois calèches de remise qui s'en allaient vers Bercy, promenant une mariée avec son bouquet, des bourgeois en cravate blanche, des dames enfouies jusqu'aux aisselles dans leur jupon, deux ou trois petites filles, un collégien. La vue de cette noce amena Bouvard et Pécuchet à parler des femmes, — qu'ils déclarèrent frivoles, acariâtres, têtues. Malgré cela, elles étaient souvent meilleures que les hommes ; d'autres fois elles étaient pires. Bref, il valait mieux vivre sans elles ; aussi Pécuchet était resté célibataire.

— Moi je suis veuf dit Bouvard et sans enfants !

— C'est peut-être un bonheur pour vous ? Mais la solitude à la longue était bien triste.

Puis, au bord du quai, parut une fille de joie, avec un soldat. Blême, les cheveux noirs et marquée de petite vérole, elle s'appuyait sur le bras du militaire, en traînant ses savates et balançant les hanches.

Quand elle fut plus loin, Bouvard se permit une réflexion obscène. Pécuchet devint très rouge, et sans doute pour s'éviter de répondre, lui désigna du regard un prêtre qui s'avançait.

L'ecclésiastique descendit avec lenteur l'avenue des maigres ormeaux jalonnant le trottoir, et Bouvard dès qu'il n'aperçut plus le tricorne, se déclara soulagé car il exécrait les jésuites. Pécuchet, sans les absoudre, montra quelque déférence pour la religion.

Cependant le crépuscule tombait et des persiennes en face s'étaient relevées.

Les passants devinrent plus nombreux. Sept heures sonnèrent.

Leurs paroles coulaient intarissablement, les remarques succédant aux anecdotes, les aperçus philosophiques aux considérations individuelles. Ils dénigrèrent le corps des Ponts et chaussées, la régie des tabacs, le commerce, les théâtres, notre marine et tout le genre humain, comme des gens qui ont subi de grands déboires. Chacun en écoutant l'autre retrouvait des parties de lui-même oubliées ; — et bien qu'ils eussent passé l'âge des émotions naïves, ils éprouvaient un plaisir nouveau, une sorte d'épanouissement, le charme des tendresses à leur début.

Vingt fois ils s'étaient levés, s'étaient rassis et avaient fait la longueur du boulevard depuis l'écluse d'amont jusqu'à l'écluse d'aval, chaque fois voulant s'en aller, n'en ayant pas la force, retenus par une fascination.

Ils se quittaient pourtant, et leurs mains étaient jointes, quand

Bouvard dit tout à coup :

— Ma foi ! si nous dînions ensemble ?

— J'en avais l'idée ! reprit Pécuchet mais je n'osais pas vous le proposer !

Et il se laissa conduire en face de l'Hôtel de Ville, dans un petit restaurant où l'on serait bien.

Bouvard commanda le menu.

Pécuchet avait peur des épices comme pouvant lui incendier le corps. Ce fut l'objet d'une discussion médicale. Ensuite, ils glorifièrent les avantages des sciences : que de choses à connaître ! que de recherches — si on avait le temps ! Hélas, le gagne-pain l'absorbait ; et ils levèrent les bras d'étonnement, ils faillirent s'embrasser par-dessus la table en découvrant qu'ils étaient tous les deux copistes, Bouvard dans une maison de commerce, Pécuchet au ministère de la marine, — ce qui ne l'empêchait pas de consacrer, chaque soir, quelques moments à l'étude. Il avait noté des fautes dans l'ouvrage de M. Thiers et il parla avec le plus grand respect d'un certain Dumouchel, professeur.

Bouvard l'emportait par d'autres côtés. Sa chaîne de montre en cheveux et la manière dont il battait la rémoulade décelaient le roquentin plein d'expérience ; et il mangeait le coin de la serviette dans l'aisselle, en débitant des choses qui faisaient rire Pécuchet. C'était un rire particulier, une seule note très basse, toujours la même, poussée à de longs intervalles. Celui de Bouvard était continu, sonore, découvrait ses dents, lui secouait les épaules, et les consommateurs à la porte s'en retournaient.

Le repas fini, ils allèrent prendre le café dans un autre établissement. Pécuchet en contemplant les becs de gaz gémit sur le débordement du luxe, puis d'un geste dédaigneux écarta les journaux. Bouvard était plus indulgent à leur endroit. Il aimait tous les écrivains en général, et avait eu dans sa jeunesse des dispositions pour être acteur !

Il voulut faire des tours d'équilibre avec une queue de billard et deux boules d'ivoire comme en exécutait Barberou, un de ses amis. Invariablement, elles tombaient, et roulant sur le plancher entre les jambes des personnes allaient se perdre au loin. Le garçon qui se levait toutes les fois pour les chercher à quatre pattes sous les banquettes finit par se plaindre. Pécuchet eut une querelle avec lui ; le limonadier survint, il n'écouta pas ses excuses et même chicana sur la consommation.

Il proposa ensuite de terminer la soirée paisiblement dans son domicile qui était tout près, rue Saint-Martin.

À peine entré, il endossa une manière de camisole en indienne et fit les honneurs de son appartement.

Un bureau de sapin placé juste dans le milieu incommodait par ses angles ; et tout autour, sur des planchettes, sur les trois chaises, sur le vieux fauteuil et dans les coins se trouvaient pêle-mêle plusieurs volumes de l'Encyclopédie Roret, le Manuel du magnétiseur, un Fénelon, d'autres bouquins, — avec des tas de paperasses, deux noix de coco, diverses médailles, un bonnet turc — et des coquilles, rapportées du Havre par Dumouchel. Une couche de poussière veloutait les murailles autrefois peintes en jaune. La brosse pour les souliers traînait au bord du lit dont les draps pendaient. On voyait au plafond une grande tache noire, produite par la fumée de la lampe.

Bouvard, à cause de l'odeur sans doute, demanda la permission d'ouvrir la fenêtre.

— Les papiers s'envoleraient ! s'écria Pécuchet qui redoutait, en plus, les courants d'air.

Cependant, il haletait dans cette petite chambre chauffée depuis le matin par les ardoises de la toiture.

Bouvard lui dit : — À votre place, j'ôterais ma flanelle !

— Comment ! et Pécuchet baissa la tête, s'effrayant à l'hypothèse de ne plus avoir son gilet de santé.

— Faites-moi la conduite reprit Bouvard l'air extérieur vous rafraîchira.

Enfin Pécuchet repassa ses bottes, en grommelant : Vous m'ensorcelez ma parole d'honneur ! — et malgré la distance, il l'accompagna jusque chez lui au coin de la rue de Béthune, en face le pont de la Tournelle.

La chambre de Bouvard, bien cirée, avec des rideaux de percale et des meubles en acajou, jouissait d'un balcon ayant vue sur la rivière. Les deux ornements principaux étaient un porte-liqueurs au milieu de la commode, et le long de la glace des daguerréotypes représentant des amis ; une peinture à l'huile occupait l'alcôve.

— Mon oncle ! dit Bouvard, et le flambeau qu'il tenait éclaira un monsieur.

Des favoris rouges élargissaient son visage surmonté d'un toupet frisant par la pointe. Sa haute cravate avec le triple col de la chemise, du gilet de velours, et de l'habit noir l'engonçaient. On avait figuré des diamants sur le jabot. Ses yeux étaient bridés aux pommettes, et il souriait d'un petit air narquois.

Pécuchet ne put s'empêcher de dire : — On le prendrait plutôt pour votre père !

— C'est mon parrain répliqua Bouvard, négligemment, ajoutant qu'il s'appelait de ses noms de baptême François, Denys, Bartholomée. Ceux de Pécuchet étaient Juste, Romain, Cyrille ; — et ils avaient le même âge : quarante-sept ans ! Cette coïncidence leur fit plaisir ; mais les surprit, chacun ayant cru l'autre beaucoup moins jeune. Ensuite, ils admirèrent la Providence dont les combinaisons parfois sont merveilleuses. — Car, enfin, si nous n'étions pas sortis tantôt pour nous promener, nous aurions pu mourir avant de nous connaître ! et s'étant donné l'adresse de leurs patrons, ils se souhaitèrent une bonne nuit.

— N'allez pas voir les dames ! cria Bouvard dans l'escalier.

Pécuchet descendit les marches sans répondre à la gaudriole.

Le lendemain, dans la cour de MM. Descambos frères, — tissus d'Alsace rue

Hautefeuille 92, une voix appela : — Bouvard ! Monsieur Bouvard !

Celui-ci passa la tête par les carreaux et reconnut Pécuchet qui articula plus fort.

— Je ne suis pas malade ! Je l'ai retirée !

— Quoi donc !

— Elle ! dit Pécuchet, en désignant sa poitrine.

Tous les propos de la journée, avec la température de l'appartement et les labeurs de la digestion l'avaient empêché de dormir, si bien que n'y tenant plus, il avait rejeté loin de lui sa flanelle. — Le matin, il s'était rappelé son action heureusement sans conséquence, et il venait en instruire Bouvard qui, par là, fut placé dans son estime à une prodigieuse hauteur.

Il était le fils d'un petit marchand, et n'avait pas connu sa mère, morte très jeune. On l'avait, à quinze ans, retiré de pension pour le mettre chez un huissier. Les gendarmes y survinrent ; et le patron fut envoyé aux galères, histoire farouche qui lui causait encore de l'épouvante. Ensuite, il avait essayé de plusieurs états, maître d'études, élève en pharmacie, comptable sur un des paquebots de la haute Seine. Enfin un chef de division séduit par son écriture, l'avait engagé comme expéditionnaire ; mais la conscience d'une instruction défectueuse, avec les besoins d'esprit qu'elle lui donnait, irritaient son humeur ; et il vivait complètement seul sans parents, sans maîtresse. Sa distraction était, le dimanche, d'inspecter les travaux publics.

Les plus vieux souvenirs de Bouvard le reportaient sur les bords de la Loire dans une cour de ferme. Un homme qui était son oncle, l'avait emmené à Paris pour lui apprendre le commerce. À sa majorité, on lui versa quelques mille francs. Alors il avait pris femme et ouvert une boutique de confiseur. Six mois plus tard, son épouse disparaissait, en emportant la caisse. Les amis, la bonne chère, et surtout la paresse avaient promptement achevé sa ruine. Mais il eut l'inspiration d'utiliser sa belle main ; et depuis douze ans, il se tenait dans la même place, MM. Descambos frères, tissus, rue Hautefeuille 92. Quant à son oncle, qui autrefois lui avait expédié comme souvenir le fameux portrait, Bouvard ignorait même sa résidence et n'en attendait plus rien. Quinze cents livres de revenu et ses gages de copiste lui permettaient d'aller, tous les soirs, faire un somme dans un estaminet.

Ainsi leur rencontre avait eu l'importance d'une aventure. Ils s'étaient, tout de suite, accrochés par des fibres secrètes. D'ailleurs, comment expliquer les sympathies ? Pourquoi telle particularité, telle imperfection indifférente ou odieuse dans celui-ci enchante-t-elle dans celui-là ? Ce qu'on appelle le coup de foudre est vrai pour toutes les passions. Avant la fin de la semaine, ils se tutoyèrent.

Souvent, ils venaient se chercher à leur comptoir. Dès que l'un paraissait, l'autre fermait son pupitre et ils s'en allaient ensemble dans les rues. Bouvard marchait à grandes enjambées, tandis que Pécuchet multipliant les pas, avec sa redingote qui lui battait les talons semblait glisser sur des roulettes. De même leurs goûts particuliers s'harmonisaient. Bouvard fumait la pipe, aimait le fromage, prenait régulièrement sa demi-tasse. Pécuchet prisait, ne mangeait au dessert que des confitures et trempait un morceau de sucre dans le café. L'un était confiant, étourdi, généreux. L'autre discret, méditatif, économe.

Pour lui être agréable, Bouvard voulut faire faire à Pécuchet la connaissance de Barberou. C'était un ancien commis-voyageur, actuellement boursier, très bon enfant, patriote, ami des dames, et qui affectait le langage faubourien. Pécuchet le trouva déplaisant et il conduisit Bouvard chez Dumouchel. Cet auteur — (car il avait publié une petite mnémotechnie) donnait des leçons de littérature dans un pensionnat de jeunes personnes, avait des opinions orthodoxes et la tenue sérieuse. Il ennuya Bouvard.

Aucun des deux n'avait caché à l'autre son opinion. Chacun en reconnut la justesse. Leurs habitudes changèrent ; et quittant leur pension bourgeoise, ils finirent par dîner ensemble tous les jours.

Ils faisaient des réflexions sur les pièces de théâtre dont on parlait, sur le gouvernement, la cherté des vivres, les fraudes du commerce. De temps à autre l'histoire du Collier ou le procès de Fualdès revenait dans leurs discours ; — et puis, ils cherchaient les causes de la Révolution.

Ils flânaient le long des boutiques de bric-à-brac. Ils visitèrent le Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers, Saint-Denis, les Gobelins, les Invalides, et toutes les collections publiques. Quand on demandait leur passeport, ils faisaient mine de l'avoir perdu, se donnant pour deux étrangers, deux Anglais.

Dans les galeries du Muséum, ils passèrent avec ébahissement devant les quadrupèdes empaillés, avec plaisir devant les papillons, avec indifférence devant les métaux ; les fossiles les firent rêver, la conchyliologie les ennuya. Ils examinèrent les serres chaudes par les vitres, et frémirent en songeant que tous ces feuillages distillaient des poisons. Ce qu'ils admirèrent du cèdre, c'est qu'on l'eût rapporté dans un chapeau.

Ils s'efforcèrent au Louvre de s'enthousiasmer pour Raphaël. À la grande bibliothèque ils auraient voulu connaître le nombre exact des volumes.

Une fois, ils entrèrent au cours d'arabe du Collège de France ; et le professeur fut étonné de voir ces deux inconnus qui tâchaient de prendre des notes. Grâce à Barberou, ils pénétrèrent dans les coulisses d'un petit théâtre. Dumouchel leur procura des billets pour une séance de l'Académie. Ils s'informaient des découvertes, lisaient les prospectus et par cette curiosité leur intelligence se développa. Au fond d'un horizon plus lointain chaque jour, ils apercevaient des choses à la fois confuses et merveilleuses.

En admirant un vieux meuble, ils regrettaient de n'avoir pas vécu à l'époque où il servait, bien qu'ils ignorassent absolument cette époque-là. D'après de certains noms, ils imaginaient des pays d'autant plus beaux qu'ils n'en pouvaient rien préciser. Les ouvrages dont les titres étaient pour eux inintelligibles leur semblaient contenir un mystère.

Et ayant plus d'idées, ils eurent plus de souffrances. Quand une malle-poste les croisait dans les rues, ils sentaient le besoin de partir avec elle. Le quai aux Fleurs les faisait soupirer pour la campagne.

Un dimanche ils se mirent en marche dès le matin ; et passant par Meudon, Bellevue, Suresnes, Auteuil, tout le long du jour ils vagabondèrent entre les vignes, arrachèrent des coquelicots au bord des champs, dormirent sur l'herbe, burent du lait, mangèrent sous les acacias des guinguettes, et rentrèrent fort tard, poudreux, exténués, ravis. Ils renouvelèrent souvent ces promenades. Les lendemains étaient si tristes qu'ils finirent par s'en priver.

La monotonie du bureau leur devenait odieuse. Continuellement le grattoir et la sandaraque, le même encrier, les mêmes plumes et les mêmes compagnons ! Les jugeant stupides, ils leur parlaient de moins en moins ; cela leur valut des taquineries. Ils arrivaient tous les jours après l'heure, et reçurent des semonces.

Autrefois, ils se trouvaient presque heureux. Mais leur métier les humiliait depuis qu'ils s'estimaient davantage ; — et ils se renforçaient dans ce dégoût, s'exaltaient mutuellement, se gâtaient. Pécuchet contracta la brusquerie de Bouvard, Bouvard prit quelque chose de la morosité de Pécuchet.

— J'ai envie de me faire saltimbanque sur les places publiques ! disait l'un.

— Autant être chiffonnier s'écriait l'autre.

Quelle situation abominable ! Et nul moyen d'en sortir ! Pas même d'espérance !

Un après-midi (c'était le 20 janvier 1839) Bouvard étant à son comptoir reçut une lettre, apportée par le facteur.

Ses bras se levèrent, sa tête peu à peu se renversait, et il tomba évanoui sur le carreau.

Les commis se précipitèrent ; on lui ôta sa cravate ; on envoya chercher un médecin.

Il rouvrit les yeux — puis aux questions qu'on lui faisait : — Ah !… c'est que… c'est que… un peu d'air me soulagera. Non ! laissez-moi ! permettez ! et malgré sa corpulence, il courut tout d'une haleine jusqu'au ministère de la marine, se passant la main sur le front, croyant devenir fou, tâchant de se calmer.

Il fit demander Pécuchet.

Pécuchet parut.

— Mon oncle est mort ! j'hérite !

— Pas possible !

Bouvard montra les lignes suivantes :

ÉTUDE DE Me TARDIVEL, NOTAIRE. Savigny-en-Septaine 14 janvier 39.

« Monsieur,

« Je vous prie de vous rendre en mon étude, pour y prendre connaissance du testament de votre père naturel M. François, Denys, Bartholomée Bouvard, ex-négociant dans la ville de Nantes, décédé en cette commune le 10 du présent mois. Ce testament contient en votre faveur une disposition très importante.

« Agréez, Monsieur, l'assurance de mes respects.

« TARDIVEL, notaire. »

Pécuchet fut obligé de s'asseoir sur une borne dans la cour. Puis, il rendit le papier en disant lentement :

— Pourvu… que ce ne soit pas… quelque farce ?

— Tu crois que c'est une farce ! reprit Bouvard d'une voix étranglée, pareille à un râle de moribond.

Mais le timbre de la poste, le nom de l'étude en caractères d'imprimerie, la signature du notaire, tout prouvait l'authenticité de la nouvelle ; — et ils se regardèrent avec un tremblement du coin de la bouche et une larme qui roulait dans leurs yeux fixes.

L'espace leur manquait. Ils allèrent jusqu'à l'Arc de Triomphe, revinrent par le bord de l'eau, dépassèrent Notre-Dame. Bouvard était très rouge. Il donna à Pécuchet des coups de poing dans le dos, et pendant cinq minutes déraisonna complètement.

Ils ricanaient malgré eux. Cet héritage, bien sûr, devait se monter… ? — Ah ! ce serait trop beau ! n'en parlons plus. Ils en reparlaient.

Rien n'empêchait de demander tout de suite des explications. Bouvard écrivit au notaire pour en avoir.

Le notaire envoya la copie du testament, lequel se terminait ainsi : En conséquence je donne à François, Denys, Bartholomée Bouvard mon fils naturel reconnu, la portion de mes biens disponible par la loi.

Le bonhomme avait eu ce fils dans sa jeunesse, mais il l'avait tenu à l'écart soigneusement, le faisant passer pour un neveu ; et le neveu l'avait toujours appelé mon oncle, bien que sachant à quoi s'en tenir. Vers la quarantaine, M. Bouvard s'était marié, puis était devenu veuf. Ses deux fils légitimes ayant tourné contrairement à ses vues, un remords l'avait pris sur l'abandon où il laissait depuis tant d'années son autre enfant. Il l'eût même fait venir chez lui, sans l'influence de sa cuisinière. Elle le quitta grâce aux manoeuvres de la famille — et dans son isolement près de mourir, il voulut réparer ses torts en léguant au fruit de ses premières amours tout ce qu'il pouvait de sa fortune. Elle s'élevait à la moitié d'un million, ce qui faisait pour le copiste deux cent cinquante mille francs. L'aîné des frères, M. Étienne, avait annoncé qu'il respecterait le testament.

Bouvard tomba dans une sorte d'hébétude. Il répétait à voix basse, en souriant du sourire paisible des ivrognes :

— Quinze mille livres de rente ! et Pécuchet, dont la tête pourtant était plus forte, n'en revenait pas.

Ils furent secoués brusquement par une lettre de Tardivel. L'autre fils, M. Alexandre, déclarait son intention de régler tout devant la justice, et même d'attaquer le legs s'il le pouvait, exigeant au préalable scellés, inventaire, nomination d'un séquestre, etc. ! Bouvard en eut une maladie bilieuse. À peine convalescent, il s'embarqua pour Savigny — d'où il revint, sans conclusion d'aucune sorte et déplorant ses frais de voyage.

Puis ce furent des insomnies, des alternatives de colère et d'espoir, d'exaltation et d'abattement. Enfin, au bout de six mois, le sieur Alexandre s'apaisant, Bouvard entra en possession de l'héritage.

Son premier cri avait été : — Nous nous retirerons à la campagne ! et ce mot qui liait son ami à son bonheur, Pécuchet l'avait trouvé tout simple. Car l'union de ces deux hommes était absolue et profonde.

Mais comme il ne voulait point vivre aux crochets de Bouvard, il ne partirait pas avant sa retraite. Encore deux ans ; n'importe ! Il demeura inflexible et la chose fut décidée.

Pour savoir où s'établir, ils passèrent en revue toutes les provinces. Le Nord était fertile mais trop froid, le Midi enchanteur par son climat, mais incommode vu les moustiques, et le Centre franchement n'avait rien de curieux. La Bretagne leur aurait convenu sans l'esprit cagot des habitants. Quant aux régions de l'Est, à cause du patois germanique, il n'y fallait pas songer. Mais il y avait d'autres pays. Qu'était-ce par exemple que le Forez, le Bugey, le Roumois ? Les cartes de géographie n'en disaient rien. Du reste, que leur maison fût dans tel endroit ou dans tel autre, l'important c'est qu'ils en auraient une.

Déjà, ils se voyaient en manches de chemise, au bord d'une plate-bande émondant des rosiers, et bêchant, binant, maniant de la terre, dépotant des tulipes. Ils se réveilleraient au chant de l'alouette, pour suivre les charrues, iraient avec un panier cueillir des pommes, regarderaient faire le beurre, battre le grain, tondre les moutons, soigner les ruches, et se délecteraient au mugissement des vaches et à la senteur des foins coupés. Plus d'écritures ! plus de chefs ! plus même de terme à payer ! — Car ils posséderaient un domicile à eux ! et ils mangeraient les poules de leur basse-cour, les légumes de leur jardin, et dîneraient en gardant leurs sabots ! — Nous ferons tout ce qui nous plaira ! nous laisserons pousser notre barbe !

Ils s'achetèrent des instruments horticoles, puis un tas de choses qui pourraient peut-être servir telles qu'une boîte à outils (il en faut toujours dans une maison), ensuite des balances, une chaîne d'arpenteur, une baignoire en cas qu'ils ne fussent malades, un thermomètre, et même un baromètre système Gay-Lussac pour des expériences de physique, si la fantaisie leur en prenait. Il ne serait pas mal, non plus (car on ne peut pas toujours travailler dehors), d'avoir quelques bons ouvrages de littérature ; — et ils en cherchèrent, — fort embarrassés parfois de savoir si tel livre était vraiment un livre de bibliothèque. Bouvard tranchait la question.

— Eh ! nous n'aurons pas besoin de bibliothèque.

— D'ailleurs, j'ai la mienne disait Pécuchet.

D'avance, ils s'organisaient. Bouvard emporterait ses meubles, Pécuchet sa grande table noire ; on tirerait parti des rideaux et avec un peu de batterie de cuisine ce serait bien suffisant. Ils s'étaient juré de taire tout cela ; mais leur figure rayonnait. Aussi leurs collègues les trouvaient drôles. Bouvard, qui écrivait étalé sur son pupitre et les coudes en dehors pour mieux arrondir sa bâtarde, poussait son espèce de sifflement tout en clignant d'un air malin ses lourdes paupières. Pécuchet huché sur un grand tabouret de paille soignait toujours les jambages de sa longue écriture — mais en gonflant les narines pinçait les lèvres, comme s'il avait peur de lâcher son secret.

Après dix-huit mois de recherches, ils n'avaient rien trouvé. Ils firent des voyages dans tous les environs de Paris, et depuis Amiens jusqu'à Évreux, et de Fontainebleau jusqu'au Havre. Ils voulaient une campagne qui fût bien la campagne, sans tenir précisément à un site pittoresque, mais un horizon borné les attristait. Ils fuyaient le voisinage des habitations et redoutaient pourtant la solitude. Quelquefois, ils se décidaient, puis craignant de se repentir plus tard, ils changeaient d'avis, l'endroit leur ayant paru malsain, ou exposé au vent de mer, ou trop près d'une manufacture ou d'un abord difficile.

Barberou les sauva.

Il connaissait leur rêve, et un beau jour vint leur dire qu'on lui avait parlé d'un domaine à Chavignolles, entre Caen et Falaise. Cela consistait en une ferme de trente-huit hectares, avec une manière de château et un jardin en plein rapport.

Ils se transportèrent dans le Calvados ; et ils furent enthousiasmés. Seulement, tant de la ferme que de la maison (l'une ne serait pas vendue sans l'autre) on exigeait cent quarante-trois mille francs. Bouvard n'en donnait que cent vingt mille.

Pécuchet combattit son entêtement, le pria de céder, enfin déclara qu'il compléterait le surplus. C'était toute sa fortune, provenant du patrimoine de sa mère et de ses économies. Jamais il n'en avait soufflé mot, réservant ce capital pour une grande occasion.

Tout fut payé vers la fin de 1840, six mois avant sa retraite.

Bouvard n'était plus copiste. D'abord, il avait continué ses fonctions par défiance de l'avenir, mais s'en était démis, une fois certain de l'héritage. Cependant il retournait volontiers chez les Messieurs Descambos, et la veille de son départ il offrit un punch à tout le comptoir.

Pécuchet, au contraire, fut maussade pour ses collègues, et sortit le dernier jour, en claquant la porte brutalement.

Il avait à surveiller les emballages, faire un tas de commissions, d'emplettes encore, et prendre congé de Dumouchel !

Le professeur lui proposa un commerce épistolaire, où il le tiendrait au courant de la Littérature ; et après des félicitations nouvelles lui souhaita une bonne santé. Barberou se montra plus sensible en recevant l'adieu de Bouvard. Il abandonna exprès une partie de dominos, promit d'aller le voir là-bas, commanda deux anisettes et l'embrassa.

Bouvard, rentré chez lui, aspira sur son balcon une large bouffée d'air en se disant : Enfin. Les lumières des quais tremblaient dans l'eau, le roulement des omnibus au loin s'apaisait. Il se rappela des jours heureux passés dans cette grande ville, des pique-niques au restaurant, des soirs au théâtre, les commérages de sa portière, toutes ses habitudes ; et il sentit une défaillance de coeur, une tristesse qu'il n'osait pas s'avouer.

Pécuchet jusqu'à deux heures du matin se promena dans sa chambre. Il ne reviendrait plus là ; tant mieux ! et cependant, pour laisser quelque chose de lui, il grava son nom sur le plâtre de la cheminée.

Le plus gros du bagage était parti dès la veille. Les instruments de jardin, les couchettes, les matelas, les tables, les chaises, un caléfacteur, la baignoire et trois fûts de Bourgogne iraient par la Seine, jusqu'au Havre, et de là seraient expédiés sur Caen, où Bouvard qui les attendrait les ferait parvenir à Chavignolles. Mais le portrait de son père, les fauteuils, la cave à liqueurs, les bouquins, la pendule, tous les objets précieux furent mis dans une voiture de déménagement qui s'acheminerait par Nonancourt, Verneuil et Falaise. Pécuchet voulut l'accompagner.

Il s'installa auprès du conducteur, sur la banquette, et couvert de sa plus vieille redingote, avec un cache-nez, des mitaines et sa chancelière de bureau, le dimanche 20 mars, au petit jour, il sortit de la Capitale.

Le mouvement et la nouveauté du voyage l'occupèrent les premières heures. Puis les chevaux se ralentirent, ce qui amena des disputes avec le conducteur et le charretier. Ils choisissaient d'exécrables auberges et bien qu'ils répondissent de tout, Pécuchet par excès de prudence couchait dans les mêmes gîtes. Le lendemain on repartait dès l'aube ; et la route, toujours la même, s'allongeait en montant jusqu'au bord de l'horizon. Les mètres de cailloux se succédaient, les fossés étaient pleins d'eau, la campagne s'étalait par grandes surfaces d'un vert monotone et froid, des nuages couraient dans le ciel, de temps à autre la pluie tombait. Le troisième jour des bourrasques s'élevèrent. La bâche du chariot, mal attachée, claquait au vent comme la voile d'un navire. Pécuchet baissait la figure sous sa casquette, et chaque fois qu'il ouvrait sa tabatière, il lui fallait, pour garantir ses yeux, se retourner complètement. Pendant les cahots, il entendait osciller derrière lui tout son bagage et prodiguait les recommandations. Voyant qu'elles ne servaient à rien, il changea de tactique ; il fit le bon enfant, eut des complaisances ; dans les montées pénibles, il poussait à la roue avec les hommes ; il en vint jusqu'à leur payer le gloria après les repas. Ils filèrent dès lors plus lestement, si bien qu'aux environs de Gauburge l'essieu se rompit et le chariot resta penché. Pécuchet visita tout de suite l'intérieur ; les tasses de porcelaine gisaient en morceaux. Il leva les bras, en grinçant des dents, maudit ces deux imbéciles ; et la journée suivante fut perdue, à cause du charretier qui se grisa ; mais il n'eut pas la force de se plaindre, la coupe d'amertume étant remplie.

Bouvard n'avait quitté Paris que le surlendemain, pour dîner encore une fois avec Barberou. Il arriva dans la cour des messageries à la dernière minute, puis se réveilla devant la cathédrale de Rouen ; il s'était trompé de diligence.

Le soir toutes les places pour Caen étaient retenues ; ne sachant que faire, il alla au Théâtre des Arts, et il souriait à ses voisins, disant qu'il était retiré du négoce et nouvellement acquéreur d'un domaine aux alentours. Quand il débarqua le vendredi à Caen ses ballots n'y étaient pas. Il les reçut le dimanche, et les expédia sur une charrette, ayant prévenu le fermier qu'il les suivrait de quelques heures.

À Falaise, le neuvième jour de son voyage, Pécuchet prit un cheval de renfort, et jusqu'au coucher du soleil on marcha bien. Au delà de Bretteville, ayant quitté la grande route, il s'engagea dans un chemin de traverse, croyant voir à chaque minute le pignon de Chavignolles. Cependant les ornières s'effaçaient, elles disparurent, et ils se trouvèrent au milieu des champs labourés. La nuit tombait. Que devenir ? Enfin Pécuchet abandonna le chariot, et pataugeant dans la boue, s'avança devant lui à la découverte. Quand il approchait des fermes, les chiens aboyaient. Il criait de toutes ses forces pour demander sa route. On ne répondait pas. Il avait peur et regagnait le large. Tout à coup deux lanternes brillèrent. Il aperçut un cabriolet, s'élança pour le rejoindre. Bouvard était dedans.

Mais où pouvait être la voiture du déménagement ? Pendant une heure, ils la hélèrent dans les ténèbres. Enfin, elle se retrouva, et ils arrivèrent à Chavignolles.

Un grand feu de broussailles et de pommes de pin flambait dans la salle. Deux couverts y étaient mis. Les meubles arrivés sur la charrette encombraient le vestibule. Rien ne manquait. Ils s'attablèrent.

On leur avait préparé une soupe à l'oignon, un poulet, du lard et des oeufs durs. La vieille femme qui faisait la cuisine venait de temps à autre s'informer de leurs goûts. Ils répondaient : Oh très bon ! très bon ! et le gros pain difficile à couper, la crème, les noix, tout les délecta ! Le carrelage avait des trous, les murs suintaient. Cependant, ils promenaient autour d'eux un regard de satisfaction, en mangeant sur la petite table où brûlait une chandelle. Leurs figures étaient rougies par le grand air. Ils tendaient leur ventre, ils s'appuyaient sur le dossier de leur chaise, qui en craquait, et ils se répétaient : — Nous y voilà donc ! quel bonheur ! il me semble que c'est un rêve !

Bien qu'il fût minuit, Pécuchet eut l'idée de faire un tour dans le jardin. Bouvard ne s'y refusa pas. Ils prirent la chandelle, et l'abritant avec un vieux journal, se promenèrent le long des plates-bandes.

Ils avaient plaisir à nommer tout haut les légumes : Tiens : des carottes !

Ah ! des choux.

Ensuite, ils inspectèrent les espaliers. Pécuchet tâcha de découvrir des bourgeons. Quelquefois une araignée fuyait tout à coup sur le mur ; — et les deux ombres de leur corps s'y dessinaient agrandies, en répétant leurs gestes. Les pointes des herbes dégouttelaient de rosée. La nuit était complètement noire ; et tout se tenait immobile dans un grand silence, une grande douceur. Au loin, un coq chanta.

Leurs deux chambres avaient entre elles une petite porte que le papier de la tenture masquait. En la heurtant avec une commode, on venait d'en faire sauter les clous. Ils la trouvèrent béante. Ce fut une surprise.

Déshabillés et dans leur lit, ils bavardèrent quelque temps, puis s'endormirent ; Bouvard sur le dos, la bouche ouverte, tête nue, Pécuchet sur le flanc droit, les genoux au ventre, affublé d'un bonnet de coton ; — et tous les deux ronflaient sous le clair de la lune, qui entrait par les fenêtres.

CHAPITRE II

Quelle joie, le lendemain en se réveillant ! Bouvard fuma une pipe, et Pécuchet huma une prise, qu'ils déclarèrent la meilleure de leur existence. Puis ils se mirent à la croisée, pour voir le paysage.

On avait en face de soi les champs, à droite une grange, avec le clocher de l'église, — et à gauche un rideau de peupliers.

Deux allées principales, formant la croix, divisaient le jardin en quatre morceaux. Les légumes étaient compris dans les plates-bandes, où se dressaient, de place en place, des cyprès nains et des quenouilles. D'un côté, une tonnelle aboutissait à un vigneau, de l'autre un mur soutenait les espaliers ; — et une claire-voie, dans le fond, donnait sur la campagne. Il y avait au delà du mur un verger, après la charmille un bosquet, derrière la claire-voie un petit chemin.

Ils contemplaient cet ensemble, quand un homme à chevelure grisonnante et vêtu d'un paletot noir, longea le sentier, en raclant avec sa canne tous les barreaux de la claire-voie. La vieille servante leur apprit que c'était M. Vaucorbeil, un docteur fameux dans l'arrondissement.

Les autres notables étaient le comte de Faverges, autrefois député, et dont on citait les vacheries, le maire M. Foureau qui vendait du bois, du plâtre, toute espèce de choses, M. Marescot le notaire, l'abbé Jeufroy, et Mme veuve Bordin, vivant de son revenu. — Quant à elle, on l'appelait la Germaine, à cause de feu Germain son mari. Elle faisait des journées mais aurait voulu passer au service de ces messieurs. Ils l'acceptèrent, et partirent pour leur ferme, située à un kilomètre de distance.

Quand ils entrèrent dans la cour, le fermier, maître Gouy, vociférait contre un garçon et la fermière sur un escabeau, serrait entre ses jambes une dinde qu'elle empâtait avec des gobes de farine. L'homme avait le front bas, le nez fin, le regard en dessous, et les épaules robustes. La femme était très blonde, avec les pommettes tachetées de son, et cet air de simplicité que l'on voit aux manants sur le vitrail des églises.

Dans la cuisine, des bottes de chanvre étaient suspendues au plafond. Trois vieux fusils s'échelonnaient sur la haute cheminée. Un dressoir chargé de faïences à fleurs occupait le milieu de la muraille ; — et les carreaux en verre de bouteille jetaient sur les ustensiles de fer-blanc et de cuivre rouge une lumière blafarde.

Les deux Parisiens désiraient faire leur inspection, n'ayant vu la propriété qu'une fois, sommairement. Maître Gouy et son épouse les escortèrent ; — et la kyrielle des plaintes commença.

Tous les bâtiments, depuis la charreterie jusqu'à la bouillerie, avaient besoin de réparations. Il aurait fallu construire une succursale pour les fromages, mettre aux barrières des ferrements neufs, relever les hauts-bords, creuser la mare et replanter considérablement de pommiers dans les trois cours.

Ensuite, on visita les cultures. Maître Gouy les déprécia. Elles mangeaient trop de fumier ; les charrois étaient dispendieux, — impossible d'extraire les cailloux, la mauvaise herbe empoisonnait les prairies ; — et ce dénigrement de sa terre atténua le plaisir que Bouvard sentait à marcher dessus.

Ils s'en revinrent par la cavée, sous une avenue de hêtres. La maison montrait de ce côté-là, sa cour d'honneur et sa façade.

Elle était peinte en blanc, avec des réchampis de couleur jaune. Le hangar et le cellier, le fournil et le bûcher faisaient en retour deux ailes plus basses. La cuisine communiquait avec une petite salle. On rencontrait ensuite le vestibule, une deuxième salle plus grande, et le salon. Les quatre chambres au premier s'ouvraient sur le corridor qui regardait la cour. Pécuchet en prit une pour ses collections ; la dernière fut destinée à la bibliothèque ; et comme ils ouvraient les armoires, ils trouvèrent d'autres bouquins, mais n'eurent pas la fantaisie d'en lire les titres. Le plus pressé, c'était le jardin.

Bouvard, en passant près de la charmille découvrit sous les branches une dame en plâtre. Avec deux doigts, elle écartait sa jupe, les genoux pliés, la tête sur l'épaule, comme craignant d'être surprise. — Ah ! pardon ! ne vous gênez pas ! — et cette plaisanterie les amusa tellement que vingt fois par jour pendant plus de trois semaines, ils la répétèrent.

Cependant, les bourgeois de Chavignolles désiraient les connaître — on venait les observer par la claire-voie. Ils en bouchèrent les ouvertures avec des planches. La population fut contrariée.

Pour se garantir du soleil, Bouvard portait sur la tête un mouchoir noué en turban, Pécuchet sa casquette ; et il avait un grand tablier avec une poche par devant, dans laquelle ballottaient un sécateur, son foulard et sa tabatière. Les bras nus, et côte à côte, ils labouraient, sarclaient, émondaient, s'imposaient des tâches, mangeaient le plus vite possible ; — mais allaient prendre le café sur le vigneau, pour jouir du point de vue.

S'ils rencontraient un limaçon, ils s'approchaient de lui, et l'écrasaient en faisant une grimace du coin de la bouche, comme pour casser une noix. Ils ne sortaient pas sans leur louchet, — et coupaient en deux les vers blancs d'une telle force que le fer de l'outil s'en enfonçait de trois pouces. Pour se délivrer des chenilles, ils battaient les arbres, à grands coups de gaule, furieusement.

Bouvard planta une pivoine au milieu du gazon — et des pommes d'amour qui devaient retomber comme des lustres, sous l'arceau de la tonnelle.

Pécuchet fit creuser devant la cuisine, un large trou, et le disposa en trois compartiments, où il fabriquerait des composts qui feraient pousser un tas de choses dont les détritus amèneraient d'autres récoltes, procurant d'autres engrais, tout cela indéfiniment ; — et il rêvait au bord de la fosse, apercevant dans l'avenir, des montagnes de fruits, des débordements de fleurs, des avalanches de légumes. Mais le fumier de cheval si utile pour les couches lui manquait. Les cultivateurs n'en vendaient pas ; les aubergistes en refusèrent. Enfin, après beaucoup de recherches, malgré les instances de Bouvard, et abjurant toute pudeur, il prit le parti d'aller lui-même au crottin !

C'est au milieu de cette occupation que Mme Bordin, un jour, l'accosta sur la grande route. Quand elle l'eut complimenté, elle s'informa de son ami. Les yeux noirs de cette personne, très brillants bien que petits, ses hautes couleurs, son aplomb (elle avait même un peu de moustache) intimidèrent Pécuchet. Il répondit brièvement et tourna le dos — impolitesse que blâma Bouvard.

Puis les mauvais jours survinrent, la neige, les grands froids. Ils s'installèrent dans la cuisine, et faisaient du treillage ; ou bien parcouraient les chambres, causaient au coin du feu, regardaient la pluie tomber.

Dès la mi-carême, ils guettèrent le printemps, et répétaient chaque matin : tout part. Mais la saison fut tardive ; et ils consolaient leur impatience, en disant : tout va partir.

Ils virent enfin lever les petits pois. Les asperges donnèrent beaucoup.

La vigne promettait.

Puisqu'ils s'entendaient au jardinage, ils devaient réussir dans l'agriculture ; — et l'ambition les prit de cultiver leur ferme. Avec du bon sens et de l'étude ils s'en tireraient, sans aucun doute.

D'abord, il fallait voir comment on opérait chez les autres ; — et ils rédigèrent une lettre, où ils demandaient à M. de Faverges l'honneur de visiter son exploitation. Le Comte leur donna tout de suite un rendez-vous.

Après une heure de marche, ils arrivèrent sur le versant d'un coteau qui domine la vallée de l'Orne. La rivière coulait au fond, avec des sinuosités. Des blocs de grès rouge s'y dressaient de place en place, et des roches plus grandes formaient au loin comme une falaise surplombant la campagne, couverte de blés mûrs. En face, sur l'autre colline, la verdure était si abondante qu'elle cachait les maisons. Des arbres la divisaient en carrés inégaux, se marquant au milieu de l'herbe par des lignes plus sombres.

L'ensemble du domaine apparut tout à coup. Des toits de tuiles indiquaient la ferme. Le château à façade blanche se trouvait sur la droite avec un bois au delà, et une pelouse descendait jusqu'à la rivière où des platanes alignés reflétaient leur ombre.

Les deux amis entrèrent dans une luzerne qu'on fanait. Des femmes portant des chapeaux de paille, des marmottes d'indienne ou des visières de papier, soulevaient avec des râteaux le foin laissé par terre — et à l'autre bout de la plaine, auprès des meules, on jetait des bottes vivement dans une longue charrette, attelée de trois chevaux. M. le Comte s'avança suivi de son régisseur.

Il avait un costume de basin, la taille raide et les favoris en côtelette, l'air à la fois d'un magistrat et d'un dandy. Les traits de sa figure, même quand il parlait, ne remuaient pas.

Les premières politesses échangées, il exposa son système relativement aux fourrages ; on retournait les andains sans les éparpiller, les meules devaient être coniques, et les bottes faites immédiatement sur place, puis entassées par dizaines. Quant au râteleur anglais, la prairie était trop inégale pour un pareil instrument.

Une petite fille les pieds nus dans des savates, et dont le corps se montrait par les déchirures de sa robe, donnait à boire aux femmes, en versant du cidre d'un broc, qu'elle appuyait contre sa hanche. Le comte demanda d'où venait cet enfant ; on n'en savait rien. Les faneuses l'avaient recueillie pour les servir pendant la moisson. Il haussa les épaules, et tout en s'éloignant proféra quelques plaintes sur l'immoralité de nos campagnes.

Bouvard fit l'éloge de sa luzerne. Elle était assez bonne, en effet, malgré les ravages de la cuscute ; les futurs agronomes ouvrirent les yeux au mot cuscute. Vu le nombre de ses bestiaux, il s'appliquait aux prairies artificielles ; c'était d'ailleurs un bon précédent pour les autres récoltes, ce qui n'a pas toujours lieu avec les racines fourragères. — Cela du moins me paraît incontestable.

Bouvard et Pécuchet reprirent ensemble : Oh ! incontestable.

Ils étaient sur la limite d'un champ tout plat, soigneusement ameubli. Un cheval que l'on conduisait à la main traînait un large coffre monté sur trois roues. Sept coutres, disposés en bas, ouvraient parallèlement des raies fines, dans lesquelles le grain tombait par des tuyaux descendant jusqu'au sol.

— Ici dit le comte je sème des turneps. Le turnep est la base de ma culture quadriennale et il entamait la démonstration du semoir. Mais un domestique vint le chercher. On avait besoin de lui, au château.

Son régisseur le remplaça, homme à figure chafouine et de façons obséquieuses.

Il conduisit ces messieurs vers un autre champ, où quatorze moissonneurs, la poitrine nue et les jambes écartées, fauchaient des seigles. Les fers sifflaient dans la paille qui se versait à droite. Chacun décrivait devant soi un large demi-cercle, et tous sur la même ligne, ils avançaient en même temps. Les deux Parisiens admirèrent leurs bras et se sentaient pris d'une vénération presque religieuse pour admirèrent leurs bras et se sentaient pris d'une vénération presque religieuse pour l'opulence de la terre.

Ils longèrent ensuite plusieurs pièces en labour. Le crépuscule tombait ; des corneilles s'abattaient dans les sillons.

Puis ils rencontrèrent le troupeau. Les moutons, çà et là, pâturaient et on entendait leur continuel broutement. Le berger, assis sur un tronc d'arbre, tricotait un bas de laine, ayant son chien près de lui.

Le régisseur aida Bouvard et Pécuchet à franchir un échalier, et ils traversèrent deux masures, où des vaches ruminaient sous les pommiers.

Tous les bâtiments de la ferme étaient contigus et occupaient les trois côtés de la cour. Le travail s'y faisait à la mécanique, au moyen d'une turbine, utilisant un ruisseau qu'on avait, exprès, détourné. Des bandelettes de cuir allaient d'un toit dans l'autre, et au milieu du fumier une pompe de fer manoeuvrait.

Le régisseur fit observer dans les bergeries de petites ouvertures à ras du sol, et dans les cases aux cochons, des portes ingénieuses, pouvant d'elles mêmes se fermer.

La grange était voûtée comme une cathédrale avec des arceaux de briques reposant sur des murs de pierre.

Pour divertir les messieurs, une servante jeta devant les poules des poignées d'avoine. L'arbre du pressoir leur parut gigantesque, et ils montèrent dans le pigeonnier. La laiterie spécialement les émerveilla. Des robinets dans les coins fournissaient assez d'eau pour inonder les dalles ; et en entrant, une fraîcheur vous surprenait. Des jarres brunes, alignées sur des claires-voies étaient pleines de lait jusqu'aux bords. Des terrines moins profondes contenaient de la crème. Les pains de beurre se suivaient, pareils aux tronçons d'une colonne de cuivre, et de la mousse débordait les seaux de fer-blanc, qu'on venait de poser par terre.

Mais le bijou de la ferme c'était la bouverie. Des barreaux de bois scellés perpendiculairement dans toute sa longueur la divisaient en deux sections, la première pour le bétail, la seconde pour le service. On y voyait à peine, toutes les meurtrières étant closes. Les boeufs mangeaient attachés à des chaînettes et leurs corps exhalaient une chaleur, que le plafond bas rabattait. Mais quelqu'un donna du jour. Un filet d'eau, tout à coup se répandit dans la rigole qui bordait les râteliers. Des mugissements s'élevèrent. Les cornes faisaient comme un cliquetis de bâtons. Tous les boeufs avancèrent leurs mufles entre les barreaux et buvaient lentement.

Les grands attelages entrèrent dans la cour et des poulains hennirent. Au rez-de-chaussée, deux ou trois lanternes s'allumèrent, puis disparurent. Les gens de travail passaient en traînant leurs sabots sur les cailloux — et la cloche pour le souper tinta.

Les deux visiteurs s'en allèrent

Les deux visiteurs s'en allèrent.

Tout ce qu'ils avaient vu les enchantait. Leur décision fut prise. Dès le soir, ils tirèrent de leur bibliothèque les quatre volumes de la Maison Rustique, se firent expédier le cours de Gasparin, et s'abonnèrent à un journal d'agriculture.

Pour se rendre aux foires plus commodément, ils achetèrent une carriole que Bouvard conduisait.

Habillés d'une blouse bleue, avec un chapeau à larges bords, des guêtres jusqu'aux genoux et un bâton de maquignon à la main, ils rôdaient autour des bestiaux, questionnaient les laboureurs, et ne manquaient pas d'assister à tous les comices agricoles.

Bientôt, ils fatiguèrent maître Gouy de leurs conseils, déplorant principalement son système de jachères. Mais le fermier tenait à sa routine. Il demanda la remise d'un terme sous prétexte de la grêle. Quant aux redevances, il n'en fournit aucune. Devant les réclamations les plus justes, sa femme poussait des cris. Enfin, Bouvard déclara son intention de ne pas renouveler le bail.

Dès lors maître Gouy épargna les fumures, laissa pousser les mauvaises herbes, ruina le fonds. Et il s'en alla d'un air farouche qui indiquait des plans de vengeance.

Bouvard avait pensé que vingt mille francs, c'est-à-dire plus de quatre fois le prix du fermage, suffirait au début. Son notaire de Paris les envoya.

Leur exploitation comprenait quinze hectares en cours et prairies, vingt-trois en terres arables, et cinq en friche situés sur un monticule couvert de cailloux et qu'on appelait la Butte.

Ils se procurèrent tous les instruments indispensables, quatre chevaux, douze vaches, six porcs, cent soixante moutons — et comme personnel, deux charretiers, deux femmes, un valet, un berger, de plus un gros chien.

Pour avoir tout de suite de l'argent ils vendirent leurs fourrages ; — on les paya chez eux ; l'or des napoléons comptés sur le coffre à l'avoine leur parut plus reluisant qu'un autre, extraordinaire et meilleur.

Au mois de novembre ils brassèrent du cidre. C'était Bouvard qui fouettait le cheval et Pécuchet monté dans l'auge retournait le marc avec une pelle. Ils haletaient en serrant la vis, puchaient dans la cuve, surveillaient les bondes, portaient de lourds sabots, s'amusaient énormément.

Partant de ce principe qu'on ne saurait avoir trop de blé, ils supprimèrent la moitié environ de leurs prairies artificielles, et comme ils n'avaient pas d'engrais ils se servirent de tourteaux qu'ils enterrèrent sans les concasser, — si bien que le rendement fut pitoyable.

L'année suivante, ils firent les semailles très dru. Des orages survinrent. Les épis versèrent.

Néanmoins, ils s'acharnaient au froment ; et ils entreprirent d'épierrer la Butte ; un banneau emportait les cailloux. Tout le long de l'année, du matin jusqu'au soir, par la pluie, par le soleil, on voyait l'éternel banneau avec le même homme et le même cheval, gravir, descendre et remonter la petite colline. Quelquefois Bouvard marchait derrière, faisant des haltes à mi-côte pour s'éponger le front.

Ne se fiant à personne, ils traitaient eux-mêmes les animaux, leur administraient des purgations, des clystères.

De graves désordres eurent lieu. La fille de basse-cour devint enceinte. Ils prirent des gens mariés ; les enfants pullulèrent, les cousins, les cousines, les oncles, les belles-soeurs. Une horde vivait à leurs dépens ; — et ils résolurent de coucher dans la ferme, à tour de rôle.

Mais le soir, ils étaient tristes. La malpropreté de la chambre les offusquait ; — et Germaine qui apportait les repas, grommelait à chaque voyage. On les dupait de toutes les façons. Les batteurs en grange fourraient du blé dans leur cruche à boire. Pécuchet en surprit un, et s'écria, en le poussant dehors par les épaules :

— Misérable ! tu es la honte du village qui t'a vu naître !

Sa personne n'inspirait aucun respect. — D'ailleurs, il avait des remords à l'encontre du jardin. Tout son temps ne serait pas de trop pour le tenir en bon état. — Bouvard s'occuperait de la ferme. Ils en délibérèrent ; et cet arrangement fut décidé.

Le premier point était d'avoir de bonnes couches. Pécuchet en fit construire une, en briques. Il peignit lui-même les châssis, et redoutant les coups de soleil barbouilla de craie toutes les cloches.

Il eut la précaution pour les boutures d'enlever les têtes avec les feuilles. Ensuite, il s'appliqua aux marcottages. Il essaya plusieurs sortes de greffes, greffes en flûte, en couronne, en écusson, greffe herbacée, greffe anglaise. Avec quel soin, il ajustait les deux libers ! comme il serrait les ligatures ! quel amas d'onguent pour les recouvrir !

Deux fois par jour, il prenait son arrosoir et le balançait sur les plantes, comme s'il les eût encensées. À mesure qu'elles verdissaient sous l'eau qui tombait en pluie fine, il lui semblait se désaltérer et renaître avec elles. Puis cédant à une ivresse il arrachait la pomme de l'arrosoir, et versait à plein goulot, copieusement.

Au bout de la charmille près de la dame en plâtre, s'élevait une manière de cahute faite en rondins. Pécuchet y enfermait ses instruments ; et il passait là des heures délicieuses à éplucher les graines, à écrire des étiquettes, à mettre en ordre ses petits pots. Pour se reposer, il s'asseyait devant la porte, sur une caisse, et alors projetait des embellissements.

Il avait créé au bas du perron deux corbeilles de géraniums ; entre les cyprès et les quenouilles, il planta des tournesols ; — et comme les plates-bandes étaient couvertes de boutons d'or, et toutes les allées de sable neuf, le jardin éblouissait par une abondance de couleurs jaunes.

Mais la couche fourmilla de larves ; — et malgré les réchauds de feuilles mortes, sous les châssis peints et sous les cloches barbouillées, il ne poussa que des végétations rachitiques. Les boutures ne reprirent pas ; les greffes se décollèrent ; la sève des marcottes s'arrêta, les arbres avaient le blanc dans leurs racines ; les semis furent une désolation. Le vent s'amusait à jeter bas les rames des haricots. L'abondance de la gadoue nuisit aux fraisiers, le défaut de pinçage aux tomates.

Il manqua les brocolis, les aubergines, les navets — et du cresson de fontaine, qu'il avait voulu élever dans un baquet. Après le dégel, tous les artichauts étaient perdus.

Les choux le consolèrent. Un, surtout, lui donna des espérances. Il s'épanouissait, montait, finit par être prodigieux, et absolument incomestible. N'importe ! Pécuchet fut content de posséder un monstre.

Alors il tenta ce qui lui semblait être le summum de l'art : l'élève du melon.

Il sema les graines de plusieurs variétés dans des assiettes remplies de terreau, qu'il enfouit dans sa couche. Puis, il dressa une autre couche ; et quand elle eut jeté son feu repiqua les plants les plus beaux, avec des cloches par-dessus. Il fit toutes les tailles suivant les préceptes du bon jardinier, respecta les fleurs, laissa se nouer les fruits, en choisit un sur chaque bras, supprima les autres ; et dès qu'ils eurent la grosseur d'une noix, il glissa sous leur écorce une planchette pour les empêcher de pourrir au contact du crottin. Il les bassinait, les aérait, enlevait avec son mouchoir la brume des cloches — et si des nuages paraissaient, il apportait vivement des paillassons. La nuit, il n'en dormait pas. Plusieurs fois même, il se releva ; et pieds nus dans ses bottes, en chemise, grelottant, il traversait tout le jardin pour aller mettre sur les bâches la couverture de son lit.

Les cantaloups mûrirent.

Au premier, Bouvard fit la grimace. Le second ne fut pas meilleur, le troisième non plus ; Pécuchet trouvait pour chacun une excuse nouvelle, jusqu'au dernier qu'il jeta par la fenêtre, déclarant n'y rien comprendre.

En effet, comme il avait cultivé les unes près des autres des espèces différentes, les sucrins s'étaient confondus avec les maraîchers, le gros Portugal avec le grand Mogol — et le voisinage des pommes d'amour complétant l'anarchie, il en était résulté d'abominables mulets qui avaient le goût de citrouilles.

Alors Pécuchet se tourna vers les fleurs. Il écrivit à Dumouchel pour avoir des arbustes avec des graines, acheta une provision de terre de bruyère et se mit à l'oeuvre résolument.

Mais il planta des passiflores à l'ombre, des pensées au soleil, couvrit de fumier les jacinthes, arrosa les lys après leur floraison, détruisit les rhododendrons par des excès d'abattage, stimula les fuchsias avec de la colle forte, et rôtit un grenadier, en l'exposant au feu dans la cuisine.

Aux approches du froid, il abrita les églantiers sous des dômes de papier fort enduits de chandelle ; cela faisait comme des pains de sucre, tenus en l'air par des bâtons. Les tuteurs des dahlias étaient gigantesques ; — et on apercevait, entre ces lignes droites les rameaux tortueux d'un sophora-japonica qui demeurait immuable, sans dépérir, ni sans pousser.

Cependant, puisque les arbres les plus rares prospèrent dans les jardins de la capitale, ils devaient réussir à Chavignolles ? et Pécuchet se procura le lilas des Indes, la rose de Chine et l'Eucalyptus, alors dans la primeur de sa réputation. Toutes les expériences ratèrent. Il était chaque fois fort étonné.

Bouvard, comme lui, rencontrait des obstacles. Ils se consultaient mutuellement, ouvraient un livre, passaient à un autre, puis ne savaient que résoudre devant la divergence des opinions.

Ainsi, pour la marne, Puvis la recommande ; le manuel Roret la combat.

Quant au plâtre, malgré l'exemple de Franklin, Rieffel et M. Rigaud n'en paraissent pas enthousiasmés.

Les jachères, selon Bouvard, étaient un préjugé gothique. Cependant, Leclerc note les cas où elles sont presque indispensables. Gasparin cite un Lyonnais qui pendant un demi-siècle a cultivé des céréales sur le même champ ; cela renverse la théorie des assolements. Tull exalte les labours au préjudice des engrais ; et voilà le major Beatson qui supprime les engrais, avec les labours !

Pour se connaître aux signes du temps, ils étudièrent les nuages d'après la classification de Luke-Howard. Ils contemplaient ceux qui s'allongent comme des crinières, ceux qui ressemblent à des îles, ceux qu'on prendrait pour des montagnes de neige — tâchant de distinguer les nimbus des cirrus, les stratus des cumulus ; les formes changeaient avant qu'ils eussent trouvé les noms.

Le baromètre les trompa ; le thermomètre n'apprenait rien ; et ils recoururent à l'expédient imaginé sous Louis XV, par un prêtre de Touraine. Une sangsue dans un bocal devait monter en cas de pluie, se tenir au fond par beau fixe, s'agiter aux menaces de la tempête. Mais l'atmosphère presque toujours contredit la sangsue. Ils en mirent trois autres, avec celle-là. Toutes les quatre se comportèrent différemment.

Après force méditations, Bouvard reconnut qu'il s'était trompé. Son domaine exigeait la grande culture, le système intensif, et il aventura ce qui lui restait de capitaux disponibles : trente mille francs.

Excité par Pécuchet, il eut le délire de l'engrais. Dans la fosse aux composts furent entassés des branchages, du sang, des boyaux, des plumes, tout ce qu'il pouvait découvrir. Il employa la liqueur belge, le lisier suisse, la lessive, des harengs saurs, du varech, des chiffons, fit venir du guano, tâcha d'en fabriquer — et poussant jusqu'au bout ses principes, ne tolérait pas qu'on perdit l'urine ; il supprima les lieux d'aisances. On apportait dans sa cour des cadavres d'animaux, dont il fumait ses terres. Leurs charognes dépecées parsemaient la campagne. Bouvard souriait au milieu de cette infection. Une pompe installée dans un tombereau crachait du purin sur les récoltes. À ceux qui avaient l'air dégoûté, il disait : Mais c'est de l'or ! c'est de l'or. — Et il regrettait de n'avoir pas encore plus de fumiers. Heureux les pays où l'on trouve des grottes naturelles pleines d'excréments d'oiseaux !

Le colza fut chétif, l'avoine médiocre ; et le blé se vendit fort mal, à cause de son odeur. Une chose étrange, c'est que la Butte enfin épierrée donnait moins qu'autrefois.

Il crut bon de renouveler son matériel. Il acheta un scarificateur Guillaume, un extirpateur Valcourt, un semoir anglais et le grand araire de Mathieu de Dombasle. Le charretier le dénigra.

— Apprends à t'en servir !

— Eh bien, montrez-moi !

Il essayait de montrer, se trompait, et les paysans ricanaient.

Jamais il ne put les astreindre au commandement de la cloche. Sans cesse, il criait derrière eux, courait d'un endroit à l'autre, notait ses observations sur un calepin, donnait des rendez-vous, n'y pensait plus — et sa tête bouillonnait d'idées industrielles. Il se promettait de cultiver le pavot en vue de l'opium, et surtout l'astragale qu'il vendrait sous le nom de café des familles.

Afin d'engraisser plus vite ses boeufs, il les saignait tous les quinze jours.

Il ne tua aucun de ses cochons et les gorgeait d'avoine salée. Bientôt la porcherie fut trop étroite. Ils embarrassaient la cour, défonçaient les clôtures, mordaient le monde.

Durant les grandes chaleurs, vingt-cinq moutons se mirent à tourner, et peu de temps après, crevèrent.

La même semaine, trois boeufs expiraient, conséquence des phlébotomies de Bouvard.

Il imagina pour détruire les mans d'enfermer des poules dans une cage à roulettes, que deux hommes poussaient derrière la charrue — ce qui ne manqua point de leur briser les pattes.

Il fabriqua de la bière avec des feuilles de petit chêne, et la donna aux moissonneurs en guise de cidre. Des maux d'entrailles se déclarèrent. Les enfants pleuraient, les femmes geignaient, les hommes étaient furieux. Ils menaçaient tous de partir ; et Bouvard leur céda.

Cependant, pour les convaincre de l'innocuité de son breuvage, il en absorba devant eux plusieurs bouteilles, se sentit gêné, mais cacha ses douleurs, sous un air d'enjouement. Il fit même transporter la mixture chez lui. Il en buvait le soir avec Pécuchet, et tous deux s'efforçaient de la trouver bonne. D'ailleurs, il ne fallait pas qu'elle fût perdue.

Les coliques de Bouvard devenant trop fortes, Germaine alla chercher le docteur.

C'était un homme sérieux, à front convexe, et qui commença par effrayer son malade. La cholérine de Monsieur devait tenir à cette bière dont on parlait dans le pays. Il voulut en savoir la composition, et la blâma en termes scientifiques, avec des haussements d'épaule. Pécuchet qui avait fourni la recette fut mortifié.

En dépit des chaulages pernicieux, des binages épargnés et des échardonnages intempestifs, Bouvard, l'année suivante, avait devant lui une belle récolte de froment. Il imagina de le dessécher par la fermentation, genre hollandais, système Clap-Mayer ; c'est-à-dire qu'il le fit abattre d'un seul coup, et tasser en meules, qui seraient démolies dès que le gaz s'en échapperait, puis exposées au grand air ; après quoi, Bouvard se retira sans la moindre inquiétude.

Le lendemain, pendant qu'ils dînaient, ils entendirent sous la hêtrée le battement d'un tambour. Germaine sortit pour voir ce qu'il y avait ; mais l'homme était déjà loin ; presque aussitôt la cloche de l'église tinta violemment.

Une angoisse saisit Bouvard et Pécuchet. Ils se levèrent, et impatients d'être renseignés, s'avancèrent tête nue, du côté de Chavignolles.

Une vieille femme passa. Elle ne savait rien. Ils arrêtèrent un petit garçon qui répondit : — Je crois que c'est le feu ? et le tambour continuait à battre, la cloche tintait plus fort. Enfin, ils atteignirent les premières maisons du village. L'épicier leur cria de loin : — Le feu est chez vous !

Pécuchet prit le pas gymnastique ; et il disait à Bouvard courant du même train à son côté : — Une, deux ; une, deux ; — en mesure ! comme les chasseurs de Vincennes.

La route qu'ils suivaient montait toujours ; le terrain en pente leur cachait l'horizon. Ils arrivèrent en haut, près de la Butte ; — et, d'un seul coup d'oeil, le désastre leur apparut.

Toutes les meules, çà et là, flambaient comme des volcans — au milieu de la plaine dénudée, dans le calme du soir.

Il y avait, autour de la plus grande, trois cents personnes peut-être ; et sous les ordres de M. Foureau, le maire, en écharpe tricolore, des gars avec des perches et des crocs tiraient la paille du sommet, afin de préserver le reste.

Bouvard dans son empressement faillit renverser Mme Bordin qui se trouvait là. Puis, apercevant un de ses valets, il l'accabla d'injures pour ne l'avoir pas averti. Le valet au contraire, par excès de zèle avait d'abord couru à la maison, à l'église, puis chez Monsieur, et était revenu par l'autre route.

Bouvard perdait la tête. Ses domestiques l'entouraient parlant à la fois ; — et il défendait d'abattre les meules, suppliait qu'on le secourût, exigeait de l'eau, réclamait des pompiers !

— Est-ce que nous en avons ! s'écria le maire.

— C'est de votre faute ! reprit Bouvard. Il s'emportait, proféra des choses inconvenantes ; — et tous admirèrent la patience de M. Foureau qui était brutal cependant, comme l'indiquaient ses grosses lèvres et sa mâchoire de bouledogue.

La chaleur des meules devint si forte qu'on ne pouvait plus en approcher. Sous les flammes dévorantes la paille se tordait avec des crépitations, les grains de blé vous cinglaient la figure comme des grains de plomb. Puis, la meule s'écroulait par terre en un large brasier, d'où s'envolaient des étincelles ; — et des moires ondulaient sur cette masse rouge, qui offrait dans les alternances de sa couleur, des parties roses comme du vermillon, et d'autres brunes comme du sang caillé. La nuit était venue ; le vent soufflait ; des tourbillons de fumée enveloppaient la foule ; — une flammèche, de temps à autre, passait sur le ciel noir.

Bouvard contemplait l'incendie, en pleurant doucement. Ses yeux disparaissaient sous leurs paupières gonflées ; — et il avait tout le visage comme élargi par la douleur. Mme Bordin, en jouant avec les franges de son châle vert l'appelait pauvre Monsieur, tâchait de le consoler. Puisqu'on n'y pouvait rien, il devait se faire une raison.

Pécuchet ne pleurait pas. Très pâle ou plutôt livide, la bouche ouverte et les cheveux collés par la sueur froide, il se tenait à l'écart, dans ses réflexions. — Mais le curé, survenu tout à coup, murmura d'une voix câline : — Ah ! quel malheur, véritablement ; c'est bien fâcheux ! Soyez sûr que je participe !…

Les autres n'affectaient aucune tristesse. Ils causaient en souriant, la main étendue devant les flammes. Un vieux ramassa des brins qui brûlaient pour allumer sa pipe. Des enfants se mirent à danser. Un polisson s'écria même que c'était bien amusant.

— Oui ! il est beau, l'amusement ! reprit Pécuchet qui venait de l'entendre.

Le feu diminua. Les tas s'abaissèrent ; — et une heure après, il ne restait plus que des cendres, faisant sur la plaine des marques rondes et noires. Alors on se retira.

Mme Bordin et l'abbé Jeufroy reconduisirent Messieurs Bouvard et Pécuchet jusqu'à leur domicile.

Pendant la route, la veuve adressa à son voisin des reproches fort aimables sur sa sauvagerie — et l'ecclésiastique exprima toute sa surprise de n'avoir pu connaître jusqu'à présent un de ses paroissiens aussi distingué.

Seul à seul, ils cherchèrent la cause de l'incendie — et au lieu de reconnaître avec tout le monde que la paille humide s'était enflammée spontanément, ils soupçonnèrent une vengeance. Elle venait, sans doute, de maître Gouy, ou peut-être du taupier ? Six mois auparavant Bouvard avait refusé ses services, et même soutenu dans un cercle d'auditeurs que son industrie étant funeste, le gouvernement la devait interdire. L'homme, depuis ce temps-là, rôdait aux environs. Il portait sa barbe entière, et leur semblait effrayant, surtout le soir quand il apparaissait au bord des cours, en secouant sa longue perche, garnie de taupes suspendues.

Le dommage était considérable, et pour se reconnaître dans leur situation, Pécuchet pendant huit jours travailla les registres de Bouvard qui lui parurent un véritable labyrinthe. Après avoir collationné le journal, la correspondance et le grand livre couvert de notes au crayon et de renvois, il découvrit la vérité : pas de marchandises à vendre, aucun effet à recevoir, et en caisse, zéro ; le capital se marquait par un déficit de trente-trois mille francs.

Bouvard n'en voulut rien croire, et plus de vingt fois, ils recommencèrent les calculs. Ils arrivaient toujours à la même conclusion. Encore deux ans d'une agronomie pareille, leur fortune y passait !

Le seul remède était de vendre.

Au moins fallait-il consulter un notaire. La démarche était trop pénible ; Pécuchet s'en chargea.

D'après l'opinion de M. Marescot, mieux valait ne point faire d'affiches. Il parlerait de la ferme à des clients sérieux et laisserait venir leurs propositions.

— Très bien ! dit Bouvard on a du temps devant soi ! Il allait prendre un fermier ; ensuite, on verrait. Nous ne serons pas plus malheureux qu'autrefois ! seulement nous voilà forcés à des économies !

Elles contrariaient Pécuchet à cause du jardinage, et quelques jours après, il dit :

— Nous devrions nous livrer exclusivement à l'arboriculture, non pour le plaisir, mais comme spéculation ! — Une poire qui revient à trois sols est quelquefois vendue dans la capitale jusqu'à des cinq et six francs ! Des jardiniers se font avec les abricots vingt-cinq mille livres de rentes ! À Saint Pétersbourg pendant l'hiver, on paie le raisin un napoléon la grappe ! C'est une belle industrie, tu en conviendras ! Et qu'est-ce que ça coûte ? des soins, du fumier, et le repassage d'une serpette !

Il monta tellement l'imagination de Bouvard, que tout de suite, ils cherchèrent dans leurs livres une nomenclature de plants à acheter ; — et ayant choisi des noms qui leur paraissaient merveilleux, ils s'adressèrent à un pépiniériste de Falaise, lequel s'empressa de leur fournir trois cents tiges dont il ne trouvait pas le placement.

Ils avaient fait venir un serrurier pour les tuteurs, un quincaillier pour les raidisseurs, un charpentier pour les supports. Les formes des arbres étaient d'avance dessinées. Des morceaux de latte sur le mur figuraient des candélabres. Deux poteaux à chaque bout des plates-bandes guindaient horizontalement des fils de fer ; — et dans le verger, des cerceaux indiquaient la structure des vases, des baguettes en cône celle des pyramides — si bien qu'en arrivant chez eux, on croyait voir les pièces de quelque machine inconnue, ou la carcasse d'un feu d'artifice.

Les trous étant creusés, ils coupèrent l'extrémité de toutes les racines, bonnes ou mauvaises, et les enfouirent dans un compost. Six mois après, les plants étaient morts. Nouvelles commandes au pépiniériste, et plantations nouvelles, dans des trous encore plus profonds ! Mais la pluie détrempant le sol, les greffes d'elles-mêmes s'enterrèrent et les arbres s'affranchirent.

Le printemps venu, Pécuchet se mit à la taille des poiriers. Il n'abattit pas les flèches, respecta les lambourdes ; — et s'obstinant à vouloir coucher d'équerre les duchesses qui devaient former les cordons unilatéraux, il les cassait ou les arrachait, invariablement. Quant aux pêchers, il s'embrouilla dans les sur-mères, les sous-mères, et les deuxièmes sous-mères. Des vides et des pleins se présentaient toujours où il n'en fallait pas ; — et impossible d'obtenir sur l'espalier un rectangle parfait, avec six branches à droite et six à gauche, — non compris les deux principales, le tout formant une belle arête de poisson.

Bouvard tâcha de conduire les abricotiers. Ils se révoltèrent. Il abattit leurs troncs à ras du sol ; aucun ne repoussa. Les cerisiers, auxquels il avait fait des entailles, produisirent de la gomme.

D'abord ils taillèrent très long, ce qui éteignait les yeux de la base, puis trop court, ce qui amenait des gourmands : et souvent ils hésitaient ne sachant pas distinguer les boutons à bois des boutons à fleurs. Ils s'étaient réjouis d'avoir des fleurs : mais ayant reconnu leur faute, ils en arrachaient les trois quarts, pour fortifier le reste.

Incessamment, ils parlaient de la sève et du cambium, du palissage, du cassage, de l'éborgnage. Ils avaient au milieu de leur salle à manger, dans un cadre, la liste de leurs élèves, avec un numéro qui se répétait dans le jardin, sur un petit morceau de bois, au pied de l'arbre.

Levés dès l'aube, ils travaillaient jusqu'à la nuit, le porte-jonc à la ceinture. Par les froides matinées de printemps Bouvard gardait sa veste de tricot sous sa blouse, Pécuchet sa vieille redingote sous sa serpillière ; — et les gens qui passaient le long de la claire-voie les entendaient tousser dans le brouillard.

Quelquefois Pécuchet tirait de sa poche son manuel ; et il en étudiait un paragraphe, debout, avec sa bêche auprès de lui, dans la pose du jardinier qui décorait le frontispice du livre. Cette ressemblance le flatta même beaucoup. Il en conçut plus d'estime pour l'auteur.

Bouvard était continuellement juché sur une haute échelle devant les pyramides. Un jour, il fut pris d'un étourdissement — et n'osant plus descendre, cria pour que Pécuchet vînt à son secours.

Enfin des poires parurent ; et le verger avait des prunes. Alors ils employèrent contre les oiseaux tous les artifices recommandés. Mais les fragments de glace miroitaient à éblouir, la cliquette du moulin à vent les réveillait pendant la nuit — et les moineaux perchaient sur le mannequin. Ils en firent un second, et même un troisième, dont ils varièrent le costume, inutilement.

Cependant, ils pouvaient espérer quelques fruits. Pécuchet venait d'en remettre la note à Bouvard quand tout à coup le tonnerre retentit et la pluie tomba, — une pluie lourde et violente. Le vent, par intervalles, secouait toute la surface de l'espalier. Les tuteurs s'abattaient l'un après l'autre — et les malheureuses quenouilles en se balançant entrechoquaient leurs poires.

Pécuchet surpris par l'averse s'était réfugié dans la cahute. Bouvard se tenait dans la cuisine. Ils voyaient tourbillonner devant eux, des éclats de bois, des branches, des ardoises ; — et les femmes de marin qui sur la côte, à dix lieues de là regardaient la mer, n'avaient pas l'oeil plus tendu et le coeur plus serré. Puis tout à coup, les supports et les barres des contre-espaliers avec le treillage, s'abattirent sur les plates-bandes.

Quel tableau, quand ils firent leur inspection ! Les cerises et les prunes couvraient l'herbe entre les grêlons qui fondaient. Les passe-colmar étaient perdus, comme le Bési-des-vétérans et les Triomphes-de-Jodoigne. À peine, s'il restait parmi les pommes quelques bons-papas. Et douze Tétons-de-Vénus, toute la récolte des pêches, roulaient dans les flaques d'eau, au bord des buis déracinés.

Après le dîner, où ils mangèrent fort peu, Pécuchet dit avec douceur :

— Nous ferions bien de voir à la ferme, s'il n'est pas arrivé quelque chose ?

— Bah ! pour découvrir encore des sujets de tristesse !

— Peut-être ? car nous ne sommes guère favorisés ! — et ils se plaignirent de la Providence et de la Nature.

Bouvard, le coude sur la table, poussait sa petite susurration — et, comme toutes les douleurs se tiennent, les anciens projets agricoles lui revinrent à la mémoire, particulièrement la féculerie et un nouveau genre de fromages.

Pécuchet respirait bruyamment ; — et tout en se fourrant dans les narines des prises de tabac, il songeait que si le sort l'avait voulu, il ferait maintenant partie d'une société d'agriculture, brillerait aux expositions, serait cité dans les journaux.

Bouvard promena autour de lui des yeux chagrins.

— Ma foi ! j'ai envie de me débarrasser de tout cela, pour nous établir autre part !

— Comme tu voudras dit Pécuchet ; — et un moment après :

— Les auteurs nous recommandent de supprimer tout canal direct. La sève, par là, se trouve contrariée, et l'arbre forcément en souffre. Pour se bien porter, il faudrait qu'il n'eût pas de fruits. Cependant, ceux qu'on ne taille et qu'on ne fume jamais en produisent — de moins gros, c'est vrai, mais de plus savoureux. J'exige qu'on m'en donne la raison ! — et, non seulement, chaque espèce réclame des soins particuliers, mais encore chaque individu, suivant le climat, la température, un tas de choses ! où est la règle, alors ? et quel espoir avons-nous d'aucun succès ou bénéfice ?

Bouvard lui répondit :

— Tu verras dans Gasparin que le bénéfice ne peut dépasser le dixième du capital. Donc on ferait mieux de placer ce capital dans une maison de banque ; au bout de quinze ans, par l'accumulation des intérêts, on aurait le double sans s'être foulé le tempérament.

Pécuchet baissa la tête.

— L'arboriculture pourrait bien être une blague ?

— Comme l'agronomie ! répliqua Bouvard.

Ensuite, ils s'accusèrent d'avoir été trop ambitieux — et ils résolurent de ménager désormais leur peine et leur argent. Un émondage de temps à autre suffirait au verger. Les contre-espaliers furent proscrits, et ils ne remplaceraient pas les arbres morts — mais il allait se présenter des intervalles fort vilains, à moins de détruire tous les autres qui restaient debout. Comment s'y prendre ?

Pécuchet fit plusieurs épures, en se servant de sa boîte de mathématiques. Bouvard lui donnait des conseils. Ils n'arrivaient à rien de satisfaisant. Heureusement qu'ils trouvèrent dans leur bibliothèque l'ouvrage de Boitard, intitulé *L'Architecte des Jardins*.

L'auteur les divise en une infinité de genres. Il y a, d'abord, le genre mélancolique et romantique, qui se signale par des immortelles, des ruines, des tombeaux, et un ex-voto à la Vierge, indiquant la place où un seigneur est tombé sous le fer d'un assassin ; on compose le genre terrible avec des rocs suspendus, des arbres fracassés, des cabanes incendiées, le genre exotique en plantant des cierges du Pérou pour faire naître des souvenirs à un colon ou à un voyageur. Le genre grave doit offrir, comme Ermenonville, un temple à la philosophie. Les obélisques et les arcs de triomphe caractérisent le genre majestueux, de la mousse et des grottes le genre mystérieux, un lac le genre rêveur. Il y a même le genre fantastique, dont le plus beau spécimen se voyait naguère dans un jardin wurtembergeois — car, on y rencontrait successivement, un sanglier, un ermite, plusieurs sépulcres, et une barque se détachant d'elle-même du rivage, pour vous conduire dans un boudoir, où des jets d'eau vous inondaient, quand on se posait sur le sofa.

Devant cet horizon de merveilles, Bouvard et Pécuchet eurent comme un éblouissement. Le genre fantastique leur parut réservé aux princes. Le temple à la philosophie serait encombrant. L'ex-voto à la madone n'aurait pas de signification, vu le manque d'assassins, et, tant pis pour les colons et les voyageurs, les plantes américaines coûtaient trop cher. Mais les rocs étaient possibles comme les arbres fracassés, les immortelles et la mousse ; — et dans un enthousiasme progressif, après beaucoup de tâtonnements, avec l'aide d'un seul valet, et pour une somme minime, ils se fabriquèrent une résidence qui n'avait pas d'analogue dans tout le département.

La charmille ouverte çà et là donnait jour sur le bosquet, rempli d'allées sinueuses en façon de labyrinthe. Dans le mur de l'espalier, ils avaient voulu faire un arceau sous lequel on découvrirait la perspective. Comme le chaperon ne pouvait se tenir suspendu, il en était résulté une brèche énorme, avec des ruines par terre.

Ils avaient sacrifié les asperges pour bâtir à la place un tombeau étrusque c'est-à-dire un quadrilatère en plâtre noir, ayant six pieds de hauteur, et l'apparence d'une niche à chien. Quatre sapinettes aux angles flanquaient ce monument, qui serait surmonté par une urne et enrichi d'une inscription.

Dans l'autre partie du potager une espèce de Rialto enjambait un bassin, offrant sur ses bords des coquilles de moules incrustées. La terre buvait l'eau, n'importe ! Il se formerait un fond de glaise, qui la retiendrait.

La cahute avait été transformée en cabane rustique, grâce à des verres de couleur. Au sommet du vigneau six arbres équarris supportaient un chapeau de fer-blanc à pointes retroussées, et le tout signifiait une pagode chinoise.

Ils avaient été sur les rives de l'Orne, choisir des granits, les avaient cassés, numérotés, rapportés eux-mêmes dans une charrette, puis avaient joint les morceaux avec du ciment, en les accumulant les uns par-dessus les autres ; et au milieu du gazon se dressait un rocher, pareil à une gigantesque pomme de terre.

Quelque chose manquait au delà pour compléter l'harmonie. Ils abattirent le plus gros tilleul de la charmille (aux trois quarts mort, du reste) et le couchèrent dans toute la longueur du jardin, de telle sorte qu'on pouvait le croire apporté par un torrent, ou renversé par la foudre.

La besogne finie, Bouvard qui était sur le perron, cria de loin :

— Ici ! on voit mieux !

— Voit mieux fut répété dans l'air.

Pécuchet répondit :

— J'y vais !

— Y vais !

— Tiens ! un écho !

— Écho !

Le tilleul, jusqu'alors l'avait empêché de se produire ; — et il était favorisé par la pagode, faisant face à la grange, dont le pignon surmontait la charmille.

Pour essayer l'écho, ils s'amusèrent à lancer des mots plaisants.

Bouvard en hurla d'obscènes.

Il avait été plusieurs fois à Falaise, sous prétexte d'argent à recevoir — et il en revenait toujours avec de petits paquets qu'il enfermait dans sa commode. Pécuchet partit un matin, pour se rendre à Bretteville, et rentra fort tard, avec un panier qu'il cacha sous son lit.

Le lendemain, à son réveil, Bouvard fut surpris. Les deux premiers ifs de la grand allée (qui la veille encore, étaient sphériques) avaient la forme de paons — et un cornet avec deux boutons de porcelaine figuraient le bec et les yeux. Pécuchet s'était levé dès l'aube ; et tremblant d'être découvert, il avait taillé les deux arbres à la mesure des appendices expédiés par Dumouchel. Depuis six mois, les autres derrière ceux-là imitaient, plus ou moins, des pyramides, des cubes, des cylindres, des cerfs ou des fauteuils. Mais rien n'égalait les paons, Bouvard le reconnut, avec de grands éloges.

Sous prétexte d'avoir oublié sa bêche, il entraîna son compagnon dans le labyrinthe. Car il avait profité de l'absence de Pécuchet, pour faire, lui aussi, quelque chose de sublime.

La porte des champs était recouverte d'une couche de plâtre, sur laquelle s'alignaient en bel ordre cinq cents fourneaux de pipes, représentant des Abd-el-Kader, des nègres, des turcos, des femmes nues, des pieds de cheval, et des têtes de mort !

— Comprends-tu mon impatience !

— Je crois bien !

Et dans leur émotion, ils s'embrassèrent.

Comme tous les artistes, ils eurent le besoin d'être applaudis — et

Bouvard songea à offrir un grand dîner.

— Prends garde ! dit Pécuchet tu vas te lancer dans les réceptions. C'est un gouffre !

La chose pourtant, fut décidée.

Depuis qu'ils habitaient le pays, ils se tenaient à l'écart. — Tout le monde, par désir de les connaître, accepta leur invitation, sauf le comte de Faverges, appelé dans la capitale pour affaires. Ils se rabattirent sur M. Hurel, son factotum.

Beljambe l'aubergiste, ancien chef à Lisieux devait cuisiner certains plats. Il fournissait un garçon. Germaine avait requis la fille de basse-cour. Marianne la servante de Mme Bordin viendrait aussi. Dès quatre heures la grille était grande ouverte, et les deux propriétaires, pleins d'impatience, attendaient leurs convives.

Hurel s'arrêta sous la hêtrée pour remettre sa redingote. Puis, le curé s'avança revêtu d'une soutane neuve, et un moment après M. Foureau, avec un gilet de velours. Le Docteur donnait le bras à sa femme qui marchait péniblement en s'abritant sous son ombrelle. Un flot de rubans roses s'agita derrière eux ; c'était le bonnet de Mme Bordin, habillée d'une belle robe de soie gorge de pigeon. La chaîne d'or de sa montre lui battait sur la poitrine, et les bagues brillaient à ses deux mains, couvertes de mitaines noires. — Enfin parut le notaire, un panama sur la tête, un lorgnon dans l'oeil ; car l'officier ministériel n'étouffait pas en lui l'homme du monde.

Le salon était ciré à ne pouvoir s'y tenir debout. Les huit fauteuils d'Utrecht s'adossaient le long de la muraille, une table ronde dans le milieu supportait la cave à liqueurs, et on voyait au-dessus de la cheminée le portrait du père Bouvard. Les embus reparaissant à contre-jour faisaient grimacer la bouche, loucher les yeux, et un peu de moisissure aux pommettes ajoutait à l'illusion des favoris. Les invités lui trouvèrent une ressemblance avec son fils, et Mme Bordin ajouta, en regardant Bouvard, qu'il avait dû être un fort bel homme.

Après une heure d'attente, Pécuchet annonça qu'on pouvait passer dans la salle.

Les rideaux de calicot blanc à bordure rouge étaient, comme ceux du salon, complètement tirés devant les fenêtres ; — et le soleil, traversant la toile, jetait une lumière blonde sur le lambris, qui avait pour tout ornement, un baromètre.

Bouvard plaça les deux dames auprès de lui, Pécuchet le maire à sa gauche, le curé à sa droite ; — et l'on entama les huîtres. Elles sentaient la vase. Bouvard fut désolé, prodigua les excuses ; et Pécuchet se leva pour aller dans la cuisine faire une scène à Beljambe.

Pendant tout le premier service, composé d'une barbue entre un vol-au-vent et des pigeons en compote, la conversation roula sur la manière de fabriquer le cidre. Après quoi on en vint aux mets digestes ou indigestes. Le Docteur, naturellement fut consulté. Il jugeait les choses avec scepticisme, comme un homme qui a vu le fond de la science, et cependant ne tolérait pas la moindre contradiction.

En même temps que l'aloyau, on servit du bourgogne. Il était trouble. Bouvard attribuant cet accident au rinçage de la bouteille, en fit goûter trois autres, sans plus de succès — puis versa du Saint-Julien, trop jeune, évidemment ; et tous les convives se turent. Hurel souriait sans discontinuer ; les pas lourds du garçon résonnaient sur les dalles.

Mme Vaucorbeil, courtaude et l'air bougon (elle était d'ailleurs vers la fin de sa grossesse), avait gardé un mutisme absolu. Bouvard ne sachant de quoi l'entretenir lui parla du théâtre de Caen.

— Ma femme ne va jamais au spectacle reprit le docteur.

M. Marescot, quand il habitait Paris, ne fréquentait que les Italiens.

— Moi dit Bouvard je me payais quelquefois un parterre au Vaudeville, pour entendre des farces !

Foureau demanda à Mme Bordin si elle aimait les farces ?

— Ça dépend de quelle espèce répondit-elle.

Le maire la lutinait. Elle ripostait aux plaisanteries. Ensuite elle indiqua une recette pour les cornichons. Du reste, ses talents de ménagère étaient connus, et elle avait une petite ferme admirablement soignée.

Foureau interpella Bouvard : — Est-ce que vous êtes dans l'intention de vendre la vôtre ?

— Mon Dieu, jusqu'à présent, je ne sais trop…

— Comment ! pas même la pièce des Écalles ? reprit le notaire ce serait à votre convenance, madame Bordin.

La veuve répliqua, en minaudant : — Les prétentions de M. Bouvard seraient trop fortes !

On pouvait, peut-être, l'attendrir.

— Je n'essaierai pas !

— Bah ! si vous l'embrassiez ?

— Essayons tout de même ! dit Bouvard — et il la baisa sur les deux joues, aux applaudissements de la société.

Presque aussitôt on déboucha le champagne, dont les détonations amenèrent un redoublement de joie. Pécuchet fit un signe. Les rideaux s'ouvrirent, et le jardin apparut.

C'était dans le crépuscule, quelque chose d'effrayant. Le rocher comme une montagne occupait le gazon, le tombeau faisait un cube au milieu des épinards, le pont vénitien un accent circonflexe par-dessus les haricots — et la cabane, au delà, une grande tache noire ; car ils avaient incendié son toit pour la rendre plus poétique. Les ifs en forme de cerfs ou de fauteuils se suivaient, jusqu'à l'arbre foudroyé, qui s'étendait transversalement de la charmille à la tonnelle, où des pommes d'amour pendaient comme des stalactites. Un tournesol, çà et là, étalait son disque jaune. La pagode chinoise peinte en rouge semblait un phare sur le vigneau. Les becs des paons frappés par le soleil se renvoyaient des feux, et derrière la claire-voie, débarrassée de ses planches, la campagne toute plate terminait l'horizon.

Devant l'étonnement de leurs convives Bouvard et Pécuchet ressentirent une véritable jouissance.

Mme Bordin surtout admira les paons. Mais le tombeau ne fut pas compris, ni la cabane incendiée, ni le mur en ruines. Puis, chacun à tour de rôle, passa sur le pont. Pour emplir le bassin, Bouvard et Pécuchet avaient charrié de l'eau pendant toute la matinée. Elle avait fui entre les pierres du fond, mal jointes, et de la vase les recouvrait.

Tout en se promenant on se permit des critiques : — À votre place j'aurais fait cela. — Les petits pois sont en retard. — Ce coin franchement n'est pas propre. — Avec une taille pareille, jamais vous n'obtiendrez de fruits.

Bouvard fut obligé de répondre qu'il se moquait des fruits.

Comme on longeait la charmille, il dit d'un air finaud :

— Ah ! voilà une personne que nous dérangeons ! mille excuses !

La plaisanterie ne fut pas relevée. Tout le monde connaissait la dame en plâtre !

Après plusieurs détours dans le labyrinthe, on arriva devant la porte aux pipes. Des regards de stupéfaction s'échangèrent. Bouvard observait le visage de ses hôtes, — et impatient de connaître leur opinion :

— Qu'en dites-vous ?

Mme Bordin éclata de rire : Tous firent comme elle. Le curé poussait une sorte de gloussement, Hurel toussait, le Docteur en pleurait, sa femme fut prise d'un spasme nerveux, — et Foureau, homme sans gêne, cassa un Abd-el-Kader qu'il mit dans sa poche, comme souvenir.

Quand on fut sorti de la charmille, Bouvard pour étonner son monde avec l'écho, cria de toutes ses forces :

— Serviteur ! Mesdames !

Rien ! pas d'écho. Cela tenait à des réparations faites à la grange, le pignon et la toiture étant démolis.

Le café fut servi sur le vigneau — et les Messieurs allaient commencer une partie de boules, quand ils virent en face derrière la claire-voie un homme qui les regardait.

Il était maigre et hâlé, avec un pantalon rouge en lambeaux, une veste bleue sans chemise, la barbe noire taillée en brosse ; et il articula d'une voix rauque :

— Donnez-moi un verre de vin !

Le maire et l'abbé Jeufroy l'avaient tout de suite reconnu. C'était un ancien menuisier de Chavignolles.

— Allons Gorju ! éloignez-vous dit M. Foureau. On ne demande pas l'aumône.

— Moi ? l'aumône ! s'écria l'homme exaspéré. J'ai fait sept ans la guerre en Afrique. Je relève de l'hôpital. Pas d'ouvrage ! Faut-il que j'assassine ? nom d'un nom !

Sa colère d'elle-même tomba — et les deux poings sur les hanches, il considérait les bourgeois d'un air mélancolique et gouailleur. La fatigue des bivouacs, l'absinthe et les fièvres, toute une existence de misère et de crapule se révélait dans ses yeux troubles. Ses lèvres pâles tremblaient en lui découvrant les gencives. Le grand ciel empourpré l'enveloppait d'une lueur sanglante — et son obstination à rester là causait une sorte d'effroi.

Bouvard, pour en finir, alla chercher le fond d'une bouteille. Le vagabond l'absorba gloutonnement ; puis disparut dans les avoines, en gesticulant.

Ensuite on blâma M. Bouvard. De telles complaisances favorisaient le désordre. Mais Bouvard irrité par l'insuccès de son jardin prit la défense du peuple ; — tous parlèrent à la fois.

Foureau exaltait le gouvernement. Hurel ne voyait dans le monde que la propriété foncière. L'abbé Jeufroy se plaignit de ce qu'on ne protégeait pas la religion. Pécuchet attaqua les impôts. Mme Bordin criait par intervalle : — Moi d'abord, je déteste la République et le docteur se déclara pour le progrès. Car enfin, monsieur, nous avons besoin de réformes.

— Possible ! répondit Foureau ; mais toutes ces idées-là nuisent aux affaires.

— Je me fiche des affaires ! s'écria Pécuchet.

Vaucorbeil poursuivit : — Au moins, donnez nous l'adjonction des capacités. Bouvard n'allait pas jusque-là.

— C'est votre opinion ? reprit le docteur. Vous êtes toisé ! Bonsoir ! et je vous souhaite un déluge pour naviguer dans votre bassin !

— Moi aussi, je m'en vais dit un moment après M. Foureau ; et désignant sa poche où était l'Abd-el-Kader : Si j'ai besoin d'un autre, je reviendrai.

Le curé, avant de partir confia timidement à Pécuchet qu'il ne trouvait pas convenable ce simulacre de tombeau au milieu des légumes. Hurel, en se retirant salua très bas la compagnie. M. Marescot avait disparu après le dessert.

Mme Bordin recommença le détail de ses cornichons, promit une seconde recette pour les prunes à l'eau-de-vie — et fit encore trois tours dans la grande allée ; — mais en passant près du tilleul le bas de sa robe s'accrocha ; et ils l'entendirent qui murmurait : — Mon Dieu ! quelle bêtise que cet arbre !

Jusqu'à minuit, les deux amphitryons, sous la tonnelle, exhalèrent leur ressentiment.

Sans doute, on pouvait reprendre dans le dîner deux ou trois petites choses par-ci, par-là ; et cependant les convives s'étaient gorgés comme des ogres, preuve qu'il n'était pas si mauvais. Mais pour le jardin, tant de dénigrement provenait de la plus basse jalousie ; et s'échauffant tous les deux :

— Ah ! l'eau manque dans le bassin ! Patience, on y verra jusqu'à un cygne et des poissons !

— À peine s'ils ont remarqué la pagode !

— Prétendre que les ruines ne sont pas propres est une opinion d'imbécile !

— Et le tombeau une inconvenance ! Pourquoi inconvenance ? Est-ce qu'on n'a pas le droit d'en construire un dans son domaine ? Je veux même m'y faire enterrer !

— Ne parle pas de ça ! dit Pécuchet.

Puis, ils passèrent en revue les convives.

— Le médecin m'a l'air d'un joli poseur !

— As-tu observé le ricanement de Marescot devant le portrait ?

— Quel goujat que M. le maire ! Quand on dîne dans une maison, que diable ! on respecte les curiosités.

— Mme Bordin dit Bouvard.

— Eh ! c'est une intrigante ! Laisse-moi tranquille.

Dégoûtés du monde, ils résolurent de ne plus voir personne, de vivre exclusivement chez eux, pour eux seuls.

Et ils passaient des jours dans la cave à enlever le tartre des bouteilles, revernirent tous les meubles, encaustiquèrent les chambres. Chaque soir, en regardant le bois brûler, ils dissertaient sur le meilleur système de chauffage.

Ils tâchèrent par économie de fumer des jambons, de couler eux-mêmes la lessive. Germaine qu'ils incommodaient haussait les épaules. À l'époque des confitures, elle se fâcha, et ils s'établirent dans le fournil.

C'était une ancienne buanderie, où il y avait sous les fagots, une grande cuve maçonnée excellente pour leurs projets, l'ambition leur étant venue de fabriquer des conserves.

Quatorze bocaux furent emplis de tomates et de petits pois ; ils en lutèrent les bouchons avec de la chaux vive et du fromage, appliquèrent sur les bords des bandelettes de toile, puis les plongèrent dans l'eau bouillante. Elle s'évaporait ; ils en versèrent de la froide ; la différence de température fit éclater les bocaux. Trois seulement furent sauvés.

Ensuite, ils se procurèrent de vieilles boîtes à sardines, y mirent des côtelettes de veau et les enfoncèrent dans le bain-marie. Elles sortirent rondes comme des ballons ; le refroidissement les aplatirait. Pour continuer l'expérience, ils enfermèrent dans d'autres boîtes, des oeufs, de la chicorée, du homard, une matelote, un potage ! — et ils s'applaudissaient, comme M. Appert d'avoir fixé les saisons ; de pareilles découvertes, selon Pécuchet, l'emportaient sur les exploits des conquérants.

Ils perfectionnèrent les achars de Mme Bordin, en épiçant le vinaigre avec du poivre ; et leurs prunes à l'eau-de-vie étaient bien supérieures ! Ils obtinrent par la macération des ratafias de framboise et d'absinthe. Avec du miel et de l'angélique dans un tonneau de Bagnols, ils voulurent faire du vin de Malaga ; et ils entreprirent également la confection d'un champagne ! Les bouteilles de chablis, coupées de moût, éclatèrent d'elles-mêmes. Alors, ils ne doutèrent plus de la réussite.

Leurs études se développant, ils en vinrent à soupçonner des fraudes dans toutes les denrées alimentaires.

Ils chicanaient le boulanger sur la couleur de son pain. Ils se firent un ennemi de l'épicier, en lui soutenant qu'il adultérait ses chocolats. Ils se transportèrent à Falaise, pour demander du jujube ; — et sous les yeux même du pharmacien soumirent sa pâte à l'épreuve de l'eau. Elle prit l'apparence d'une couenne de lard, ce qui dénotait de la gélatine.

Après ce triomphe, leur orgueil s'exalta. Ils achetèrent le matériel d'un distillateur en faillite — et bientôt arrivèrent dans la maison, des tamis, des barils, des entonnoirs, des écumoires, des chausses et des balances, sans compter une sébile à boulet et un alambic tête-de-maure, lequel exigea un fourneau réflecteur, avec une hotte de cheminée.

Ils apprirent comment on clarifie le sucre, et les différentes sortes de cuite : le grand et le petit perlé, le soufflé, le boulé, la morve et le caramel. Mais il leur tardait d'employer l'alambic ; et ils abordèrent les liqueurs fines, en commençant par l'anisette. Le liquide presque toujours entraînait avec lui les substances, ou bien elles se collaient dans le fond ; d'autres fois, ils s'étaient trompés sur le dosage. Autour d'eux les grandes bassines de cuivre reluisaient, les matras avançaient leur bec pointu, les poêlons décoraient le mur. Souvent l'un triait des herbes sur la table, tandis que l'autre faisait osciller le boulet de canon dans la sébile suspendue. Ils mouvaient les cuillers ; ils dégustaient les mélanges.

Bouvard, toujours en sueur, n'avait pour vêtement que sa chemise et son pantalon tiré jusqu'au creux de l'estomac par ses courtes bretelles ; mais étourdi comme un oiseau, il oubliait le diaphragme de la cucurbite, ou exagérait le feu. Pécuchet marmottait des calculs, immobile dans sa longue blouse, une espèce de sarrau d'enfant avec des manches ; et ils se considéraient comme des gens très sérieux, occupés de choses utiles.

Enfin ils rêvèrent une crème, qui devait enfoncer toutes les autres. Ils y mettraient de la coriandre comme dans le kummel, du kirsch comme dans le marasquin, de l'hysope comme dans la chartreuse, de l'ambrette comme dans le vespetro, du calamus aromaticus comme dans le krambambuli ; — et elle serait colorée en rouge avec du bois de santal. Mais sous quel nom l'offrir au commerce ? Car il fallait un nom facile à retenir, et pourtant bizarre. Ayant longtemps cherché, ils décidèrent qu'elle se nommerait la Bouvarine !

Vers la fin de l'automne, des taches parurent dans les trois bocaux de conserves. Les tomates et les petits pois étaient pourris. Cela devait dépendre du bouchage ? Alors le problème du bouchage les tourmenta. Pour essayer les méthodes nouvelles ils manquaient d'argent. Leur ferme les rongeait.

Plusieurs fois, des tenanciers s'étaient offerts. Bouvard n'en avait pas voulu. Mais son premier garçon cultivait d'après ses ordres, avec une épargne dangereuse, si bien que les récoltes diminuaient, tout périclitait ; et ils causaient de leur embarras, quand maître Gouy entra dans le laboratoire, escorté de sa femme qui se tenait en arrière, timidement.

Grâce à toutes les façons qu'elles avaient reçues, les terres s'étaient améliorées — et il venait pour reprendre la ferme. Il la déprécia. Malgré tous leurs travaux les bénéfices étaient chanceux, bref s'il la désirait c'était par amour du pays et regret d'aussi bons maîtres. On le congédia d'une manière froide. Il revint le soir même.

Pécuchet avait sermonné Bouvard ; ils allaient fléchir ; Gouy demanda une diminution de fermage ; et comme les autres se récriaient, il se mit à beugler plutôt qu'à parler, attestant le Bon Dieu, énumérant ses peines, vantant ses mérites. Quand on le sommait de dire son prix, il baissait la tête au lieu de répondre. Alors sa femme, assise près de la porte avec un grand panier sur les genoux recommençait les mêmes protestations, en piaillant d'une voix aiguë comme une poule blessée.

Enfin le bail fut arrêté aux conditions de trois mille francs par an, un tiers de moins qu'autrefois.

Séance tenante, maître Gouy proposa d'acheter le matériel ; — et les dialogues recommencèrent.

L'estimation des objets dura quinze jours. Bouvard s'en mourait de fatigue. Il lâcha tout pour une somme tellement dérisoire que Gouy, d'abord en écarquilla les yeux et s'écriant : — Convenu, lui frappa dans la main.

Après quoi, les propriétaires suivant l'usage offrirent de casser une croûte à la maison ; et Pécuchet ouvrit une des bouteilles de son malaga, moins par générosité que dans l'espoir d'en obtenir des éloges.

Mais le laboureur dit en rechignant : — C'est comme du sirop de réglisse, et sa femme pour se faire passer le goût implora un verre d'eau-de-vie.

Une chose plus grave les occupait ! Tous les éléments de la Bouvarine étaient enfin rassemblés.

Ils les entassèrent dans la cucurbite, avec de l'alcool, allumèrent le feu et attendirent. Cependant, Pécuchet tourmenté par la mésaventure du malaga prit dans l'armoire les boîtes de fer-blanc, fit sauter le couvercle de la première, puis de la seconde, de la troisième. Il les rejetait avec fureur, et appela Bouvard.

Bouvard ferma le robinet du serpentin pour se précipiter vers les conserves. La désillusion fut complète. Les tranches de veau ressemblaient à des semelles bouillies ; un liquide fangeux remplaçait le homard ; on ne reconnaissait plus la matelote. Des champignons avaient poussé sur le potage — et une intolérable odeur empestait le laboratoire.

Tout à coup, avec un bruit d'obus, l'alambic éclata en vingt morceaux, qui bondirent jusqu'au plafond, crevant les marmites, aplatissant les écumoires, fracassant les verres ; le charbon s'éparpilla, le fourneau fut démoli — et le lendemain, Germaine retrouva une spatule dans la cour.

La force de la vapeur avait rompu l'instrument, d'autant que la cucurbite se trouvait boulonnée au chapiteau.

Pécuchet, tout de suite, s'était accroupi derrière la cuve, et Bouvard comme écroulé sur un tabouret. Pendant dix minutes, ils demeurèrent dans cette posture, n'osant se permettre un seul mouvement, pâles de terreur, au milieu des tessons. Quand ils purent recouvrer la parole, ils se demandèrent quelle était la cause de tant d'infortunes, de la dernière surtout ? — et ils n'y comprenaient rien, sinon qu'ils avaient manqué périr. Pécuchet termina par ces mots :

— C'est que, peut-être, nous ne savons pas la chimie !

CHAPITRE III

Pour savoir la chimie, ils se procurèrent le cours de Regnault — et apprirent d'abord que les corps simples sont peut-être composés.

On les distingue en métalloïdes et en métaux, — différence qui n'a rien d'absolu, dit l'auteur. De même pour les acides et les bases, un corps pouvant se comporter à la manière des acides ou des bases, suivant les circonstances.

La notation leur parut baroque. — Les Proportions multiples troublèrent

Pécuchet.

— Puisqu'une molécule de A, je suppose, se combine avec plusieurs parties de B, il me semble que cette molécule doit se diviser en autant de parties ; mais si elle se divise, elle cesse d'être l'unité, la molécule primordiale. Enfin, je ne comprends pas.

— Moi, non plus ! disait Bouvard.

Et ils recoururent à un ouvrage moins difficile, celui de Girardin — où ils acquirent la certitude que dix litres d'air pèsent cent grammes, qu'il n'entre pas de plomb dans les crayons, que le diamant n'est que du carbone.

Ce qui les ébahit par-dessus tout, c'est que la terre comme élément n'existe pas.

Ils saisirent la manoeuvre du chalumeau, l'or, l'argent, la lessive du linge, l'étamage des casseroles ; puis sans le moindre scrupule, Bouvard et Pécuchet se lancèrent dans la chimie organique.

Quelle merveille que de retrouver chez les êtres vivants les mêmes substances qui composent les minéraux. Néanmoins, ils éprouvaient une sorte d'humiliation à l'idée que leur individu contenait du phosphore comme les allumettes, de l'albumine comme les blancs d'oeufs, du gaz hydrogène comme les réverbères.

Après les couleurs et les corps gras, ce fut le tour de la fermentation.

Elle les conduisit aux acides — et la loi des équivalents les embarrassa encore une fois. Ils tâchèrent de l'élucider avec la théorie des atomes, ce qui acheva de les perdre.

Pour entendre tout cela, selon Bouvard, il aurait fallu des instruments.

La dépense était considérable ; et ils en avaient trop fait.

Mais le docteur Vaucorbeil pouvait, sans doute, les éclairer.

Ils se présentèrent au moment de ses consultations.

— Messieurs, je vous écoute ! quel est votre mal ?

Pécuchet répliqua qu'ils n'étaient pas malades, et ayant exposé le but de leur visite :

— Nous désirons connaître premièrement l'atomicité supérieure.

Le médecin rougit beaucoup, puis les blâma de vouloir apprendre la chimie.

— Je ne nie pas son importance, soyez-en sûrs ! mais actuellement, on la fourre partout ! Elle exerce sur la médecine une action déplorable. Et l'autorité de sa parole se renforçait au spectacle des choses environnantes.

Du diachylum et des bandes traînaient sur la cheminée. La boite chirurgicale posait au milieu du bureau. Des sondes emplissaient une cuvette dans un coin — et il y avait contre le mur, la représentation d'un écorché.

Pécuchet en fit compliment au Docteur.

— Ce doit être une belle étude que l'Anatomie ?

M. Vaucorbeil s'étendit sur le charme qu'il éprouvait autrefois dans les dissections ; — et Bouvard demanda quels sont les rapports entre l'intérieur de la femme et celui de l'homme.

Afin de le satisfaire, le médecin tira de sa bibliothèque un recueil de planches anatomiques.

— Emportez-les ! Vous les regarderez chez vous plus à votre aise !

Le squelette les étonna par la proéminence de sa mâchoire, les trous de ses yeux, la longueur effrayante de ses mains. — Un ouvrage explicatif leur manquait ; ils retournèrent chez M. Vaucorbeil, et grâce au manuel d'Alexandre Lauth ils apprirent les divisions de la charpente, en s'ébahissant de l'épine dorsale, seize fois plus forte, dit-on, que si le Créateur l'eût fait droite. — Pourquoi seize fois, précisément ?

Les métacarpiens désolèrent Bouvard ; — Pécuchet acharné sur le crâne, perdit courage devant le sphénoïde, bien qu'il ressemble à une selle turque, ou turquesque.

Quant aux articulations, trop de ligaments les cachaient — et ils attaquèrent les muscles.

Mais les insertions n'étaient pas commodes à découvrir — et parvenus aux gouttières vertébrales, ils y renoncèrent complètement.

Pécuchet dit, alors :

— Si nous reprenions la chimie ? — ne serait ce que pour utiliser le laboratoire !

Bouvard protesta ; et il crut se rappeler que l'on fabriquait à l'usage des pays chauds des cadavres postiches.

Barberou, auquel il écrivit, lui donna là-dessus des renseignements. — Pour dix francs par mois, on pouvait avoir un des bonshommes de M. Auzoux — et la semaine suivante, le messager de Falaise déposa devant leur grille une caisse oblongue.

Ils la transportèrent dans le fournil, pleins d'émotion. Quand les planches furent déclouées, la paille tomba, les papiers de soie glissèrent, le mannequin apparut.

Il était couleur de brique, sans chevelure, sans peau, avec d'innombrables filets bleus, rouges et blancs le bariolant. Cela ne ressemblait point à un cadavre, mais à une espèce de joujou, fort vilain, très propre et qui sentait le vernis.

Puis ils enlevèrent le thorax ; et ils aperçurent les deux poumons pareils à deux éponges, le coeur tel qu'un gros oeuf, un peu de côté par derrière, le diaphragme, les reins, tout le paquet des entrailles.

— À la besogne ! dit Pécuchet.

La journée et le soir y passèrent.

Ils avaient mis des blouses, comme font les carabins dans les amphithéâtres, et à la lueur de trois chandelles, ils travaillaient leurs morceaux de carton, quand un coup de poing heurta la porte. — Ouvrez !

C'était M. Foureau, suivi du garde champêtre.

Les maîtres de Germaine s'étaient plu à lui montrer le bonhomme. Elle avait couru de suite chez l'épicière, pour conter la chose ; et tout le village croyait maintenant qu'ils recelaient dans leur maison un véritable mort. Foureau, cédant à la rumeur publique, venait s'assurer du fait. Des curieux se tenaient dans la cour.

Le mannequin, quand il entra, reposait sur le flanc ; et les muscles de la face étant décrochés, l'oeil faisait une saillie monstrueuse, avait quelque chose d'effrayant.

— Qui vous amène ? dit Pécuchet.

Foureau balbutia : — Rien ! rien du tout ! et prenant une des pièces sur la table : — Qu'est-ce que c'est ?

— Le buccinateur ! répondit Bouvard.

Foureau se tut — mais souriait d'une façon narquoise, jaloux de ce qu'ils avaient un divertissement au-dessus de sa compétence.

Les deux anatomistes feignaient de poursuivre leurs investigations. Les gens qui s'ennuyaient sur le seuil avaient pénétré dans le fournil — et comme on se poussait un peu, la table trembla.

— Ah ! c'est trop fort ! s'écria Pécuchet. Débarrassez-nous du public !

Le garde champêtre fit partir les curieux.

— Très bien ! dit Bouvard ! nous n'avons besoin de personne !

Foureau comprit l'allusion ; et lui demanda s'ils avaient le droit, n'étant pas médecins, de détenir un objet pareil ? Il allait, du reste, en écrire au Préfet. — Quel pays ! on n'était pas plus inepte, sauvage et rétrograde ! La comparaison qu'ils firent d'eux-mêmes avec les autres les consola. — Ils ambitionnaient de souffrir pour la science.

Le Docteur aussi vint les voir. Il dénigra le mannequin comme trop éloigné de la nature ; mais profita de la circonstance pour faire une leçon.

Bouvard et Pécuchet furent charmés ; et sur leur désir, M. Vaucorbeil leur prêta plusieurs volumes de sa bibliothèque, affirmant toutefois qu'ils n'iraient pas jusqu'au bout.

Ils prirent en note dans le Dictionnaire des Sciences médicales, les exemples d'accouchement, de longévité, d'obésité et de constipation extraordinaires. Que n'avaient-ils connu le fameux Canadien de Beaumont, les polyphages Tarare et Bijoux, la femme hydropique du département de l'Eure, le Piémontais qui allait à la garde-robe tous les vingt jours, Simorre de Mirepoix mort ossifié, et cet ancien maire d'Angoulême, dont le nez pesait trois livres !

Le cerveau leur inspira des réflexions philosophiques. Ils distinguaient fort bien dans l'intérieur, le *septum lucidum* composé de deux lamelles et la glande pinéale, qui ressemble à un petit pois rouge. Mais il y avait des pédoncules et des ventricules, des arcs, des piliers, des étages, des ganglions, et des fibres de toutes les sortes, et le foramen de Pacchioni, et le corps de Pacini, bref un amas inextricable, de quoi user leur existence.

Quelquefois dans un vertige, ils démontaient complètement le cadavre, puis se trouvaient embarrassés pour remettre en place les morceaux.

Cette besogne était rude, après le déjeuner surtout ! et ils ne tardaient pas à s'endormir, Bouvard le menton baissé, l'abdomen en avant, Pécuchet la tête dans les mains, avec ses deux coudes sur la table.

Souvent à ce moment-là, M. Vaucorbeil, qui terminait ses premières visites, entr'ouvrait la porte.

— Eh bien, les confrères, comment va l'anatomie ?

— Parfaitement ! répondaient-ils.

Alors il posait des questions pour le plaisir de les confondre.

Quand ils étaient las d'un organe, ils passaient à un autre — abordant ainsi et délaissant tour à tour le coeur, l'estomac, l'oreille, les intestins ; — car le bonhomme de carton les assommait, malgré leurs efforts pour s'y intéresser. Enfin le Docteur les surprit comme ils le reclouaient dans sa boîte.

— Bravo ! Je m'y attendais. On ne pouvait à leur âge entreprendre ces études ; — et le sourire accompagnant ses paroles les blessa profondément.

De quel droit les juger incapables ? est-ce que la science appartenait à ce monsieur ! Comme s'il était lui-même un personnage bien supérieur !

Donc acceptant son défi, ils allèrent jusqu'à Bayeux pour y acheter des livres. Ce qui leur manquait, c'était la physiologie ; — et un bouquiniste leur procura les traités de Richerand et d'Adelon, célèbres à l'époque.

Tous les lieux communs sur les âges, les sexes et les tempéraments leur semblèrent de la plus haute importance. Ils furent bien aises de savoir qu'il y a dans le tartre des dents trois espèces d'animalcules, que le siège du goût est sur la langue, et la sensation de la faim dans l'estomac.

Pour en saisir mieux les Fonctions, ils regrettaient de n'avoir pas la faculté de ruminer, comme l'avaient eue Montègre, M. Gosse, et le frère de Bérard ; — et ils mâchaient avec lenteur, trituraient, insalivaient, accompagnant de la pensée le bol alimentaire dans leurs entrailles, le suivaient même jusqu'à ses dernières conséquences, pleins d'un scrupule méthodique, d'une attention presque religieuse.

Afin de produire artificiellement des digestions, ils tassèrent de la viande dans une fiole, où était le suc gastrique d'un canard — et ils la portèrent sous leurs aisselles durant quinze jours, sans autre résultat que d'infecter leurs personnes.

On les vit courir le long de la grande route, revêtus d'habits mouillés et à l'ardeur du soleil. C'était pour vérifier si la soif s'apaise par l'application de l'eau sur l'épiderme. Ils rentrèrent haletants ; et tous les deux avec un rhume.

L'audition, la phonation, la vision furent expédiées lestement. Mais

Bouvard s'étala sur la génération.

Les réserves de Pécuchet en cette matière l'avaient toujours surpris.

Son ignorance lui parut si complète qu'il le pressa de s'expliquer — et

Pécuchet en rougissant finit par faire un aveu.

Des farceurs, autrefois, l'avaient entraîné dans une mauvaise maison — d'où il s'était enfui, se gardant pour la femme qu'il aimerait plus tard ; — une circonstance heureuse n'était jamais venue ; si bien, que par fausse honte, gêne pécuniaire, crainte des maladies, entêtement, habitude, à cinquante deux ans et malgré le séjour de la capitale, il possédait encore sa virginité.

Bouvard eut peine à le croire — puis il rit énormément, mais s'arrêta, en apercevant des larmes dans les yeux de Pécuchet.

Car les passions ne lui avaient pas manqué, s'étant tour à tour épris d'une danseuse de corde, de la belle-soeur d'un architecte, d'une demoiselle de comptoir — enfin d'une petite blanchisseuse ; — et le mariage allait même se conclure, quand il avait découvert qu'elle était enceinte d'un autre.

Bouvard lui dit :

— Il y a moyen toujours de réparer le temps perdu ! Pas de tristesse, voyons ! je me charge si tu veux…

Pécuchet répliqua, en soupirant, qu'il ne fallait plus y songer. — Et ils continuèrent leur physiologie.

Est-il vrai que la surface de notre corps dégage perpétuellement une vapeur subtile ? La preuve, c'est que le poids d'un homme décroît à chaque minute. Si chaque jour s'opère l'addition de ce qui manque et la soustraction de ce qui excède, la santé se maintiendra en parfait équilibre. Sanctorius, l'inventeur de cette loi, employa un demi-siècle à peser quotidiennement sa nourriture avec toutes ses excrétions, et se pesait lui-même, ne prenant de relâche que pour écrire ses calculs.

Ils essayèrent d'imiter Sanctorius. Mais comme leur balance ne pouvait les supporter tous les deux, ce fut Pécuchet qui commença.

Il retira ses habits, afin de ne pas gêner la perspiration — et il se tenait sur le plateau, complètement nu, laissant voir, malgré la pudeur, son torse très long pareil à un cylindre, avec des jambes courtes, les pieds plats et la peau brune. À ses côtés, sur une chaise, son ami lui faisait la lecture.

Des savants prétendent que la chaleur animale se développe par les contractions musculaires, et qu'il est possible en agitant le thorax et les membres pelviens de hausser la température d'un bain tiède.

Bouvard alla chercher leur baignoire — et quand tout fut prêt, il s'y plongea, muni d'un thermomètre.

Les ruines de la distillerie balayées vers le fond de l'appartement dessinaient dans l'ombre un vague monticule. On entendait par intervalles le grignotement des souris ; une vieille odeur de plantes aromatiques s'exhalait — et se trouvant là fort bien ils causaient avec sérénité.

Cependant Bouvard sentait un peu de fraîcheur.

— Agite tes membres ! dit Pécuchet.

Il les agita, sans rien changer au thermomètre ; — c'est froid, décidément.

— Je n'ai pas chaud, non plus reprit Pécuchet, saisi lui-même par un frisson mais agite tes membres pelviens ! agite-les !

Bouvard ouvrit les cuisses, se tordait les flancs, balançait son ventre, soufflait comme un cachalot ; — puis regardait le thermomètre, qui baissait toujours. — Je n'y comprends rien ! Je me remue, pourtant !

— Pas assez !

Et il reprenait sa gymnastique.

Elle avait duré trois heures, quand une fois encore il empoigna le tube.

— Comment ! douze degrés ! — Ah ! bonsoir ! Je me retire !

Un chien entra, moitié dogue moitié braque, le poil jaune, galeux, la langue pendante.

Que faire ? pas de sonnettes ! et leur domestique était sourde. Ils grelottaient mais n'osaient bouger, dans la peur d'être mordus.

Pécuchet crut habile de lancer des menaces, en roulant des yeux.

Alors le chien aboya ; — et il sautait autour de la balance, où Pécuchet se cramponnant aux cordes, et pliant les genoux, tâchait de s'élever le plus haut possible.

— Tu t'y prends mal dit Bouvard ; et il se mit à faire des risettes au chien en proférant des douceurs.

Le chien sans doute les comprit. — Il s'efforçait de le caresser, lui collait ses pattes sur les épaules, les éraflait avec ses ongles.

— Allons ! maintenant ! voilà qu'il a emporté ma culotte !

Il se coucha dessus, et demeura tranquille.

Enfin, avec les plus grandes précautions, ils se hasardèrent l'un à descendre du plateau, l'autre à sortir de la baignoire ; — et quand Pécuchet fut rhabillé, cette exclamation lui échappa :

— Toi, mon bonhomme, tu serviras à nos expériences !

Quelles expériences ?

On pouvait lui injecter du phosphore, puis l'enfermer dans une cave pour voir s'il rendrait du feu par les naseaux. Mais comment injecter ? et du reste, on ne leur vendrait pas de phosphore.

Ils songèrent à l'enfermer sous la machine pneumatique, à lui faire respirer des gaz, à lui donner pour breuvage des poisons. Tout cela peut être ne serait pas drôle ! Enfin ils choisirent l'aimantation de l'acier par le contact de la moelle épinière.

Bouvard, refoulant son émotion, tendait sur une assiette des aiguilles à Pécuchet, qui les plantait contre les vertèbres. Elles se cassaient, glissaient, tombaient par terre ; il en prenait d'autres, et les enfonçait vivement, au hasard. Le chien rompit ses attaches, passa comme un boulet de canon par les carreaux, traversa la cour, le vestibule et se présenta dans la cuisine.

Germaine poussa des cris en le voyant tout ensanglanté, avec des ficelles autour des pattes.

Ses maîtres qui le poursuivaient entrèrent au même moment. Il fit un bond et disparut.

La vieille servante les apostropha.

— C'est encore une de vos bêtises, j'en suis sûre ! — Et ma cuisine, elle est propre ! Ça le rendra peut-être enragé ! On en fourre en prison qui ne vous valent pas !

Ils regagnèrent le laboratoire, pour éprouver les aiguilles. Pas une n'attira la moindre limaille.

Puis, l'hypothèse de Germaine les inquiéta. Il pouvait avoir la rage, revenir à l'improviste, se précipiter sur eux.

Le lendemain, ils allèrent partout, aux informations — et pendant plusieurs années, ils se détournaient dans la campagne, sitôt qu'apparaissait un chien, ressemblant à celui-là.

Les autres expériences échouèrent. Contrairement aux auteurs, les pigeons qu'ils saignèrent l'estomac plein ou vide, moururent dans le même espace de temps. Des petits chats enfoncés sous l'eau périrent au bout de cinq minutes — et une oie, qu'ils avaient bourrée de garance, offrit des périostes d'une entière blancheur.

La nutrition les tourmentait.

Comment se fait-il que le même suc produise des os, du sang, de la lymphe et des matières excrémentielles ? Mais on ne peut suivre les métamorphoses d'un aliment. L'homme qui n'use que d'un seul est, chimiquement, pareil à celui qui en absorbe plusieurs. Vauquelin ayant calculé toute la chaux contenue dans l'avoine d'une poule, en retrouva davantage dans les coquilles de ses oeufs. Donc, il se fait une création de substance. De quelle manière ? on n'en sait rien.

On ne sait même pas quelle est la force du coeur. Borelli admet celle qu'il faut pour soulever un poids de cent quatre-vingt mille livres, et Keill l'évalue à huit onces, environ. D'où ils conclurent que la Physiologie est (suivant un vieux mot) le roman de la médecine. N'ayant pu la comprendre, ils n'y croyaient pas.

Un mois se passa dans le désoeuvrement. Puis ils songèrent à leur jardin.

L'arbre mort étalé dans le milieu était gênant. Ils l'équarrirent. Cet exercice les fatigua. — Bouvard avait, très souvent, besoin de faire arranger ses outils chez le forgeron.

Un jour qu'il s'y rendait, il fut accosté par un homme portant sur le dos un sac de toile, et qui lui proposa des almanachs, des livres pieux, des médailles bénites, enfin le Manuel de la Santé, par François Raspail.

Cette brochure lui plut tellement qu'il écrivit à Barberou de lui envoyer le grand ouvrage. Barberou l'expédia, et indiquait dans sa lettre, une pharmacie pour les médicaments.

La clarté de la doctrine les séduisit. Toutes les affections proviennent des vers. Ils gâtent les dents, creusent les poumons, dilatent le foie, ravagent les intestins, et y causent des bruits. Ce qu'il y a de mieux pour s'en délivrer c'est le camphre. Bouvard et Pécuchet l'adoptèrent. Ils en prisaient, ils en croquaient et distribuaient des cigarettes, des flacons d'eau sédative, et des pilules d'aloès. Ils entreprirent même la cure d'un bossu.

C'était un enfant qu'ils avaient rencontré un jour de foire. Sa mère, une mendiante, l'amenait chez eux tous les matins. Ils frictionnaient sa bosse avec de la graisse camphrée, y mettaient pendant vingt minutes un cataplasme de moutarde, puis la recouvraient de diachylum, et pour être sûrs qu'il reviendrait, lui donnaient à déjeuner.

Ayant l'esprit tendu vers les helminthes, Pécuchet observa sur la joue de Mme Bordin une tache bizarre. Le Docteur, depuis longtemps la traitait par les amers ; ronde au début comme une pièce de vingt sols, cette tache avait grandi, et formait un cercle rose. Ils voulurent l'en guérir. Elle accepta ; mais exigeait que ce fût Bouvard qui lui fît les onctions. Elle se posait devant la fenêtre, dégrafait le haut de son corsage et restait la joue tendue, en le regardant avec un oeil, qui aurait été dangereux sans la présence de Pécuchet. Dans les doses permises et malgré l'effroi du mercure ils administrèrent du calomel. Un mois plus tard, Mme Bordin était sauvée.

Elle leur fit de la propagande ; — et le percepteur des contributions, le secrétaire de la mairie, le maire lui-même, tout le monde dans Chavignolles suçait des tuyaux de plume.

Cependant le bossu ne se redressait pas. Le percepteur lâcha la cigarette, elle redoublait ses étouffements. Foureau se plaignit des pilules d'aloès qui lui occasionnaient des hémorroïdes, Bouvard eut des maux d'estomac et Pécuchet d'atroces migraines. Ils perdirent confiance dans le Raspail, mais eurent soin de n'en rien dire, craignant de diminuer leur considération.

Et ils montrèrent beaucoup de zèle pour la vaccine, apprirent à saigner sur des feuilles de chou, firent même l'acquisition d'une paire de lancettes.

Ils accompagnaient le médecin chez les pauvres, puis consultaient leurs livres.

Les symptômes notés par les auteurs n'étaient pas ceux qu'ils venaient de voir. Quant aux noms des maladies, du latin, du grec, du français, une bigarrure de toutes les langues.

On les compte par milliers, et la classification linnéenne est bien commode, avec ses genres et ses espèces ; mais comment établir les espèces ? Alors, ils s'égarèrent dans la philosophie de la médecine.

Ils rêvaient sur l'archée de Van Helmont, le vitalisme, le Brownisme, l'organicisme, demandaient au Docteur d'où vient le germe de la scrofule, vers quel endroit se porte le miasme contagieux, et le moyen dans tous les cas morbides de distinguer la cause de ses effets.

— La cause et l'effet s'embrouillent, répondait Vaucorbeil.

Son manque de logique les dégoûta ; — et ils visitèrent les malades tout seuls, pénétrant dans les maisons, sous prétexte de philanthropie.

Au fond des chambres sur de sales matelas, reposaient des gens dont la figure pendait d'un côté, d'autres l'avaient bouffie et d'un rouge écarlate, ou couleur de citron, ou bien violette, avec les narines pincées, la bouche tremblante ; et des râles, des hoquets, des sueurs, des exhalaisons de cuir et de vieux fromage.

Ils lisaient les ordonnances de leurs médecins, et étaient fort surpris que les calmants soient parfois des excitants, les vomitifs des purgatifs, qu'un même remède convienne à des affections diverses, et qu'une maladie s'en aille sous des traitements opposés.

Néanmoins, ils donnaient des conseils, remontaient le moral, avaient l'audace d'ausculter.

Leur imagination travaillait. Ils écrivirent au Roi, pour qu'on établit dans le Calvados un institut de gardes-malades, dont ils seraient les professeurs.

Ils se transportèrent chez le pharmacien de Bayeux (celui de Falaise leur en voulait toujours à cause de son jujube) et ils l'engagèrent à fabriquer comme les Anciens des *pila purgatoria*, c'est-à-dire des boulettes de médicaments, qui à force d'être maniées, s'absorbent dans l'individu.

D'après ce raisonnement qu'en diminuant la chaleur on entrave les phlegmasies, ils suspendirent dans son fauteuil, aux poutrelles du plafond, une femme affectée de méningite, et ils la balançaient à tour de bras quand le mari survenant les flanqua dehors.

Enfin au grand scandale de M. le curé, ils avaient pris la mode nouvelle d'introduire des thermomètres dans les derrières.

Une fièvre typhoïde se répandit aux environs : Bouvard déclara qu'il ne s'en mêlerait pas. Mais la femme de Gouy leur fermier vint gémir chez eux. Son homme était malade depuis quinze jours ; et M. Vaucorbeil le négligeait.

Pécuchet se dévoua.

Taches lenticulaires sur la poitrine, douleurs aux articulations, ventre ballonné, langue rouge, c'étaient tous les signes de la dothiénentérie. Se rappelant le mot de Raspail qu'en ôtant la diète on supprime la fièvre, il ordonna des bouillons, un peu de viande. Tout à coup, le docteur parut.

Son malade était en train de manger, deux oreillers derrière le dos, entre la fermière et Pécuchet qui le renforçaient.

Il s'approcha du lit, et jeta l'assiette par la fenêtre, en s'écriant :

— C'est un véritable meurtre !

— Pourquoi ?

— Vous perforez l'intestin, puisque la fièvre typhoïde est une altération de sa membrane folliculaire.

— Pas toujours !

Et une dispute s'engagea sur la nature des fièvres. Pécuchet croyait à leur essence. Vaucorbeil les faisait dépendre des organes. — Aussi j'éloigne tout ce qui peut surexciter !

— Mais la diète affaiblit le principe vital !

— Qu'est-ce que vous me chantez avec votre principe vital ! Comment est-il ? qui l'a vu ?

Pécuchet s'embrouilla.

— D'ailleurs disait le médecin, Gouy ne veut pas de nourriture.

Le malade fit un geste d'assentiment sous son bonnet de coton.

— N'importe ! il en a besoin !

— Jamais ! son pouls donne quatre-vingt-dix-huit pulsations.

— Qu'importe les pulsations ! Et Pécuchet nomma ses autorités.

— Laissons les systèmes ! dit le Docteur.

Pécuchet croisa les bras.

— Vous êtes un empirique, alors ?

— Nullement ! mais en observant.

— Et si on observe mal ?

Vaucorbeil prit cette parole pour une allusion à l'herpès de Mme Bordin, histoire clabaudée par la veuve, et dont le souvenir l'agaçait.

— D'abord, il faut avoir fait de la pratique.

— Ceux qui ont révolutionné la science, n'en faisaient pas ! Van Helmont,

Boerhave, Broussais, lui-même.

Vaucorbeil, sans répondre, se pencha vers Gouy, et haussant la voix :

— Lequel de nous deux choisissez-vous pour médecin ?

Le malade, somnolent, aperçut des visages en colère, et se mit à pleurer.

Sa femme non plus ne savait que répondre ; car l'un était habile ; mais l'autre avait peut-être un secret ?

— Très bien ! dit Vaucorbeil. Puisque vous balancez entre un homme nanti d'un diplôme :… Pécuchet ricana. Pourquoi riez-vous ?

— C'est qu'un diplôme n'est pas toujours un argument !

Le Docteur était attaqué dans son gagne-pain, dans sa prérogative, dans son importance sociale. Sa colère éclata.

— Nous le verrons quand vous irez devant les tribunaux pour exercice illégal de la médecine ! Puis se tournant vers la fermière : Faites-le tuer par monsieur tout à votre aise, et que je sois pendu si je reviens jamais dans votre maison.

Et il s'enfonça sous la hêtrée, en gesticulant avec sa canne.

Bouvard, quand Pécuchet rentra, était lui-même dans une grande agitation.

Il venait de recevoir Foureau, exaspéré par ses hémorroïdes. Vainement avait-il soutenu qu'elles préservent de toutes les maladies, Foureau n'écoutant rien, l'avait menacé de dommages et intérêts. Il en perdait la tête.

Pécuchet lui conta l'autre histoire, qu'il jugeait plus sérieuse — et fut un peu choqué de son indifférence.

Gouy, le lendemain eut une douleur dans l'abdomen. Cela pouvait tenir à l'ingestion de la nourriture ? Peut-être que Vaucorbeil ne s'était pas trompé ? Un médecin après tout doit s'y connaître ! et des remords assaillirent Pécuchet. Il avait peur d'être homicide.

Par prudence, ils congédièrent le bossu. Mais à cause du déjeuner lui échappant, sa mère cria beaucoup. Ce n'était pas la peine de les avoir fait venir tous les jours de Barneval à Chavignolles !

Foureau se calma — et Gouy reprenait des forces. À présent, la guérison était certaine ; un tel succès enhardit Pécuchet.

— Si nous travaillions les accouchements, avec un de ces mannequins…

— Assez de mannequins !

— Ce sont des demi-corps en peau, inventés pour les élèves sages-femmes.

Il me semble que je retournerais le foetus ?

Mais Bouvard était las de la médecine.

— Les ressorts de la vie nous sont cachés, les affections trop nombreuses, les remèdes problématiques — et on ne découvre dans les auteurs aucune définition raisonnable de la santé, de la maladie, de la diathèse, ni même du pus !

Cependant toutes ces lectures avaient ébranlé leur cervelle.

Bouvard, à l'occasion d'un rhume, se figura qu'il commençait une fluxion de poitrine. Des sangsues n'ayant pas affaibli le point de côté, il eut recours à un vésicatoire, dont l'action se porta sur les reins. Alors, il se crut attaqué de la pierre.

Pécuchet prit une courbature à l'élagage de la charmille, et vomit après son dîner, ce qui l'effraya beaucoup. Puis observant qu'il avait le teint un peu jaune, suspecta une maladie de foie, se demandait : Ai-je des douleurs ? et finit par en avoir.

S'attristant mutuellement, ils regardaient leur langue, se tâtaient le pouls, changeaient d'eau minérale, se purgeaient ; — et redoutaient le froid, la chaleur, le vent, la pluie, les mouches, principalement les courants d'air.

Pécuchet imagina que l'usage de la prise était funeste. D'ailleurs, un éternuement occasionne parfois la rupture d'un anévrisme — et il abandonna la tabatière. Par habitude, il y plongeait les doigts ; puis, tout à coup, se rappelait son imprudence.

Comme le café noir secoue les nerfs Bouvard voulut renoncer à la demi-tasse ; mais il dormait après ses repas, et avait peur en se réveillant ; car le sommeil prolongé est une menace d'apoplexie.

Leur idéal était Cornaro, ce gentilhomme vénitien, qui à force de régime atteignit une extrême vieillesse. Sans l'imiter absolument, on peut avoir les mêmes précautions, et Pécuchet tira de sa bibliothèque un Manuel d'hygiène par le docteur Morin.

Comment avaient-ils fait pour vivre jusque-là ? Les plats qu'ils aimaient s'y trouvent défendus. Germaine embarrassée ne savait plus que leur servir.

Toutes les viandes ont des inconvénients. Le boudin et la charcuterie, le hareng saur, le homard, et le gibier sont réfractaires. Plus un poisson est gros plus il contient de gélatine et par conséquent est lourd. Les légumes causent des aigreurs, le macaroni donne des rêves, les fromages considérés généralement, sont d'une digestion difficile. Un verre d'eau le matin est dangereux ; chaque boisson ou comestible étant suivi d'un avertissement pareil, ou bien de ces mots : mauvais ! — gardez-vous de l'abus ! — ne convient pas à tout le monde. — Pourquoi mauvais ? où est l'abus ? comment savoir si telle chose vous convient ?

Quel problème que celui du déjeuner ! Ils quittèrent le café au lait, sur sa détestable réputation ; et ensuite le chocolat, — car c'est un amas de substances indigestes ; restait donc le thé. Mais les personnes nerveuses doivent se l'interdire complètement. Cependant, Decker au XVIIe siècle en prescrivait vingt décalitres par jour, afin de nettoyer les marais du pancréas.

Ce renseignement ébranla Morin dans leur estime, d'autant plus qu'il condamne toutes les coiffures, chapeaux, bonnets et casquettes, exigence qui révolta Pécuchet. Alors ils achetèrent le traité de Becquerel où ils virent que le porc est en soi-même un bon aliment, le tabac d'une innocence parfaite, et le café indispensable aux militaires.

Jusqu'alors ils avaient cru à l'insalubrité des endroits humides. Pas du tout ! Casper les déclare moins mortels que les autres. On ne se baigne pas dans la mer sans avoir rafraîchi sa peau. Bégin veut qu'on s'y jette en pleine transpiration. Le vin pur après la soupe passe pour excellent à l'estomac. Lévy l'accuse d'altérer les dents. Enfin, le gilet de flanelle, cette sauvegarde, ce tuteur de la santé, ce palladium chéri de Bouvard et inhérent à Pécuchet, sans ambages ni crainte de l'opinion, des auteurs le déconseillent aux hommes pléthoriques et sanguins.

Qu'est-ce donc que l'hygiène ?

— Vérité en deçà des Pyrénées, erreur au delà affirme M. Lévy ; et

Becquerel ajoute qu'elle n'est pas une science.

Alors ils se commandèrent pour leur dîner des huîtres, un canard, du porc au choux, de la crème, un Pont-l'Évêque, et une bouteille de Bourgogne. Ce fut un affranchissement, presque une revanche ; et ils se moquaient de Cornaro ! Fallait-il être imbécile pour se tyranniser comme lui ! Quelle bassesse que de penser toujours au prolongement de son existence ! La vie n'est bonne qu'à la condition d'en jouir. — Encore un morceau ? — Je veux bien. — Moi de même ! — À ta santé ! — À la tienne ! — Et fichons-nous du reste ! Ils s'exaltaient.

Bouvard annonça qu'il voulait trois tasses de café, bien qu'il ne fût pas un militaire. Pécuchet, la casquette sur les oreilles, prisait coup sur coup, éternuait sans peur, et sentant le besoin d'un peu de champagne, ils ordonnèrent à Germaine d'aller de suite au cabaret, leur en acheter une bouteille. Le village était trop loin. Elle refusa. Pécuchet fut indigné.

— Je vous somme, entendez-vous ! je vous somme d'y courir.

Elle obéit, mais en bougonnant, résolue à lâcher bientôt ses maîtres, tant ils étaient incompréhensibles et fantasques.

Puis, comme autrefois, ils allèrent prendre le gloria sur le vigneau.

La moisson venait de finir — et des meules au milieu des champs dressaient leurs masses noires sur la couleur de la nuit, bleuâtre et douce. Les fermes étaient tranquilles. On n'entendait même plus les grillons. Toute la campagne dormait. Ils digéraient en humant la brise qui rafraîchissait leurs pommettes.

Le ciel très haut, était couvert d'étoiles ; les unes brillant par groupes, d'autres à la file, ou bien seules à des intervalles éloignés. Une zone de poussière lumineuse, allant du septentrion au midi, se bifurquait au-dessus de leurs têtes. Il y avait entre ces clartés, de grands espaces vides ; — et le firmament semblait une mer d'azur, avec des archipels et des îlots.

— Quelle quantité ! s'écria Bouvard.

— Nous ne voyons pas tout ! reprit Pécuchet. Derrière la voie lactée, ce sont les nébuleuses ; au delà des nébuleuses des étoiles encore ! La plus voisine est séparée de nous par trois cents billions de myriamètres ! Il avait regardé souvent dans le télescope de la place Vendôme et se rappelait les chiffres. Le Soleil est un million de fois plus gros que la Terre, Sirius a douze fois la grandeur du soleil, des comètes mesurent trente-quatre millions de lieues !

— C'est à rendre fou dit Bouvard. Il déplora son ignorance et même regrettait de n'avoir pas été, dans sa jeunesse, à l'École Polytechnique.

Alors Pécuchet le tournant vers la Grande Ourse, lui montra l'étoile polaire, puis Cassiopée dont la constellation forme un Y, Véga de la Lyre toute scintillante, et au bas de l'horizon, le rouge Aldebaran.

Bouvard, la tête renversée, suivait péniblement les triangles, quadrilatères et pentagones qu'il faut imaginer pour se reconnaître dans le ciel.

Pécuchet continua :

— La vitesse de la lumière est de quatre-vingt mille lieues dans une seconde. Un rayon de la Voie lactée met six siècles à nous parvenir — si bien qu'une étoile, quand on l'observe, peut avoir disparu. Plusieurs sont intermittentes, d'autres ne reviennent jamais ; — et elles changent de position ; tout s'agite, tout passe.

— Cependant, le Soleil est immobile ?

— On le croyait autrefois. Mais les savants aujourd'hui, annoncent qu'il se précipite vers la constellation d'Hercule !

Cela dérangeait les idées de Bouvard — et après une minute de réflexion :

— La science est faite, suivant les données fournies par un coin de l'étendue. Peut-être ne convient-elle pas à tout le reste qu'on ignore, qui est beaucoup plus grand, et qu'on ne peut découvrir.

Ils parlaient ainsi, debout sur le vigneau, à la lueur des astres — et leurs discours étaient coupés par de longs silences.

Enfin ils se demandèrent s'il y avait des hommes dans les étoiles. Pourquoi pas ? Et comme la création est harmonique, les habitants de Sirius devaient être démesurés, ceux de Mars d'une taille moyenne, ceux de Vénus très petits. À moins que ce ne soit partout la même chose ? Il existe là-haut des commerçants, des gendarmes ; on y trafique, on s'y bat, on y détrône des rois !…

Quelques étoiles filantes glissèrent tout à coup, décrivant sur le ciel comme la parabole d'une monstrueuse fusée.

— Tiens ! dit Bouvard voilà des mondes qui disparaissent.

Pécuchet reprit :

— Si le nôtre, à son tour, faisait la cabriole, les citoyens des étoiles ne seraient pas plus émus que nous ne le sommes maintenant ! De pareilles idées vous renfoncent l'orgueil.

— Quel est le but de tout cela ?

— Peut-être qu'il n'y a pas de but ?

— Cependant ! et Pécuchet répéta deux ou trois fois cependant sans trouver rien de plus à dire. — N'importe ! je voudrais bien savoir comment l'univers s'est fait !

— Cela doit être dans Buffon ! répondit Bouvard, dont les yeux se fermaient. Je n'en peux plus ! je vais me coucher !

Les Époques de la nature leur apprirent qu'une comète, en heurtant le soleil, en avait détaché une portion, qui devint la Terre. D'abord les pôles s'étaient refroidis. Toutes les eaux avaient enveloppé le globe. Elles s'étaient retirées dans les cavernes ; puis les continents se divisèrent, les animaux et l'homme parurent.

La majesté de la création leur causa un ébahissement, infini comme elle. Leur tête s'élargissait. Ils étaient fiers de réfléchir sur de si grands objets.

Les minéraux ne tardèrent pas à les fatiguer ; — et ils recoururent comme distraction, aux Harmonies de Bernardin de Saint-Pierre.

Harmonies végétales et terrestres, aériennes, aquatiques, humaines, fraternelles et même conjugales, tout y passa — sans omettre les invocations à Vénus, aux Zéphyrs et aux Amours ! Ils s'étonnaient que les poissons eussent des nageoires, les oiseaux des ailes, les semences une enveloppe — pleins de cette philosophie qui découvre dans la Nature des intentions vertueuses et la considère comme une espèce de saint Vincent de Paul, toujours occupé à répandre des bienfaits !

Ils admirèrent ensuite ses prodiges, les trombes, les volcans, les forêts vierges ; — et ils achetèrent l'ouvrage de M. Depping sur les Merveilles et beautés de la nature en France. Le Cantal en possède trois, l'Hérault cinq, la Bourgogne deux — pas davantage — tandis que le Dauphiné compte à lui seul jusqu'à quinze merveilles ! Mais bientôt, on n'en trouvera plus ! Les grottes à stalactites se bouchent, les montagnes ardentes s'éteignent, les glacières naturelles s'échauffent ; — et les vieux arbres dans lesquels on disait la messe tombent sous la cognée des niveleurs, ou sont en train de mourir.

Puis leur curiosité se tourna vers les bêtes.

Ils rouvrirent leur Buffon et s'extasièrent devant les goûts bizarres de certains animaux.

Mais tous les livres ne valant pas une observation personnelle, ils entraient dans les cours, et demandaient aux laboureurs s'ils avaient vu des taureaux se joindre à des juments, les cochons rechercher les vaches, et les mâles des perdrix commettre entre eux des turpitudes.

— Jamais de la vie ! On trouvait même ces questions un peu drôles pour des messieurs de leur âge.

Ils voulurent tenter des alliances anormales.

La moins difficile est celle du bouc et de la brebis. Leur fermier ne possédait pas de bouc. Une voisine prêta le sien ; et l'époque du rut étant venue, ils enfermèrent les deux bêtes dans le pressoir, en se cachant derrière les futailles, pour que l'événement pût s'accomplir en paix.

Chacune, d'abord, mangea son petit tas de foin. Puis, elles ruminèrent, la brebis se coucha ; — et elle bêlait sans discontinuer, pendant que le bouc, d'aplomb sur ses jambes torses, avec sa grande barbe et ses oreilles pendantes, fixait sur eux ses prunelles, qui luisaient dans l'ombre.

Enfin, le soir du troisième jour, ils jugèrent convenable de faciliter la nature. Mais le bouc se retournant contre Pécuchet, lui flanqua un coup de cornes au bas du ventre. La brebis, saisie de peur, se mit à tourner dans le pressoir comme dans un manège. Bouvard courut après, se jeta dessus pour la retenir, et tomba par terre avec des poignées de laine dans les deux mains.

Ils renouvelèrent leurs tentatives sur des poules et un canard, sur un dogue et une truie, avec l'espoir qu'il en sortirait des monstres et ne comprenant rien à la question de l'espèce.

Ce mot désigne un groupe d'individus dont les descendants se reproduisent. Mais des animaux classés comme d'espèces différentes peuvent se reproduire, et d'autres compris dans la même en ont perdu la faculté.

Ils se flattèrent d'obtenir là-dessus des idées nettes, en étudiant le développement des germes ; et Pécuchet écrivit à Dumouchel, pour avoir un microscope.

Tour à tour ils mirent sur la plaque de verre des cheveux, du tabac, des ongles, une patte de mouche. Mais ils avaient oublié la goutte d'eau, indispensable. C'était, d'autres fois, la petite lamelle ; — et ils se poussaient, dérangeaient l'instrument ; puis, n'apercevant que du brouillard accusaient l'opticien. Ils en arrivèrent à douter du microscope. Les découvertes qu'on lui attribue ne sont peut-être pas si positives.

Dumouchel, en leur adressant la facture, les pria de recueillir à son intention des ammonites et des oursins, curiosités dont il était toujours amateur, et fréquentes dans leur pays. Pour les exciter à la géologie, il leur envoyait les Lettres de Bertrand avec le Discours de Cuvier sur les révolutions du globe.

Après ces deux lectures, ils se figurèrent les choses suivantes.

D'abord une immense nappe d'eau, d'où émergeaient des promontoires, tachetés par des lichens ; et pas un être vivant, pas un cri ; c'était un monde silencieux, immobile et nu. — Puis de longues plantes se balançaient dans un brouillard qui ressemblait à la vapeur d'une étuve. Un soleil tout rouge surchauffait l'atmosphère humide. Alors des volcans éclatèrent, les roches ignées jaillissaient des montagnes ; et la pâte des porphyres et des basaltes qui coulait, se figea. — Troisième tableau : dans des mers peu profondes, des îles de madrépores ont surgi ; un bouquet de palmiers, de place en place, les domine. Il y a des coquillages pareils à des roues de chariot, des tortues qui ont trois mètres, des lézards de soixante pieds. Des amphibies allongent entre les roseaux leur col d'autruche à mâchoire de crocodile. Des serpents ailés s'envolent. — Enfin, sur les grands continents, de grands mammifères parurent, les membres difformes comme des pièces de bois mal équarries, le cuir plus épais que des plaques de bronze, ou bien velus, lippus, avec des crinières, et des défenses contournées. Des troupeaux de mammouths broutaient les plaines où fut depuis l'Atlantique ; le paléothérium, moitié cheval moitié tapir, bouleversait de son groin les fourmilières de Montmartre, et le *cervus giganteus* tremblait sous les châtaigniers, à la voix de l'ours des cavernes, qui faisait japper dans sa tanière, le chien de Beaugency trois fois haut comme un loup.

Toutes ces époques avaient été séparées les unes des autres par des cataclysmes, dont le dernier est notre déluge. C'était comme une féerie en plusieurs actes, ayant l'homme pour apothéose.

Ils furent stupéfaits d'apprendre qu'il existait sur des pierres des empreintes de libellules, de pattes d'oiseaux, — et ayant feuilleté un des manuels Roret, ils cherchèrent des fossiles.

Un après-midi, comme ils retournaient des silex au milieu de la grande route, M. le curé passa, et les abordant d'une voix pateline :

— Ces messieurs s'occupent de géologie ? fort bien !

Car il estimait cette science. Elle confirme l'autorité des Écritures, en prouvant le Déluge.

Bouvard parla des coprolithes, lesquels sont des excréments de bêtes, pétrifiés.

L'abbé Jeufroy parut surpris du fait ; après tout, s'il avait lieu, c'était une raison de plus, d'admirer la Providence.

Pécuchet avoua que leurs enquêtes jusqu'alors n'avaient pas été fructueuses, — et cependant les environs de Falaise, comme tous les terrains jurassiques, devaient abonder en débris d'animaux.

— J'ai entendu dire répliqua l'abbé Jeufroy qu'autrefois on avait trouvé à Villers la mâchoire d'un éléphant. Du reste, un de ses amis, M. Larsonneur, avocat, membre du barreau de Lisieux et archéologue, leur fournirait peut-être des renseignements ! Il avait fait une histoire de Port-en-Bessin où était notée la découverte d'un crocodile.

Bouvard et Pécuchet échangèrent un coup d'oeil ; le même espoir leur était venu ; — et malgré la chaleur, ils restèrent debout pendant longtemps, à interroger l'ecclésiastique qui s'abritait sous un parapluie de coton bleu. Il avait le bas du visage un peu lourd avec le nez pointu, souriait continuellement, ou penchait la tête en fermant les paupières.

La cloche de l'église tinta l'angélus.

— Bien le bonsoir, messieurs ! Vous permettez, n'est-ce pas ?

Recommandés par lui, ils attendirent durant trois semaines la réponse de Larsonneur. Enfin, elle arriva.

L'homme de Villers qui avait déterré la dent de mastodonte s'appelait Louis Bloche ; les détails manquaient. Quant à son histoire, elle occupait un des volumes de l'Académie Lexovienne, et il ne prêtait point son exemplaire, dans la peur de dépareiller la collection. Pour ce qui était de l'alligator, on l'avait découvert au mois de novembre 1825, sous la falaise des Hachettes, à Sainte-Honorine, près de Port-en-Bessin, arrondissement de Bayeux. Suivaient des compliments.

L'obscurité enveloppant le mastodonte irrita le désir de Pécuchet. Il aurait voulu se rendre tout de suite à Villers.

Bouvard objecta que pour s'épargner un déplacement peut-être inutile, et à coup sûr dispendieux, il convenait de prendre des informations — et ils écrivirent au Maire de l'endroit une lettre, où ils lui demandaient ce qu'était devenu un certain Louis Bloche. Dans l'hypothèse de sa mort, ses descendants ou collatéraux pouvaient-ils les instruire sur sa précieuse découverte ? Quand il la fit, à quelle place de la commune gisait ce document des âges primitifs ? Avait-on des chances d'en trouver d'analogues ? Quel était par jour le prix d'un homme et d'une charrette.

Et ils eurent beau s'adresser à l'Adjoint, puis au premier Conseiller Municipal, ils ne reçurent de Villers aucune nouvelle. Sans doute les habitants étaient jaloux de leurs fossiles ? À moins qu'ils ne les vendissent aux Anglais. Le voyage des Hachettes fut résolu.

Bouvard et Pécuchet prirent la diligence de Falaise pour Caen. Ensuite une carriole les transporta de Caen à Bayeux ; — et de Bayeux, ils allèrent à pied jusqu'à Port-en-Bessin.

On ne les avait pas trompés. La côte des Hachettes offrait des cailloux bizarres — et sur les indications de l'aubergiste, ils atteignirent la grève.

La marée étant basse, elle découvrait tous ses galets, avec une prairie de goémons jusqu'au bord des flots.

Des vallonnements herbeux découpaient la falaise, composée d'une terre molle et brune et qui se durcissant devenait dans ses strates inférieures, une muraille de pierre grise. Des filets d'eau en tombaient sans discontinuer, pendant que la mer au loin, grondait. Elle semblait parfois suspendre son battement ; — et on n'entendait plus que le petit bruit des sources.

Ils titubaient sur des herbes gluantes, ou bien ils avaient à sauter des trous. — Bouvard s'assit près du rivage, et contempla les vagues, ne pensant à rien, fasciné, inerte. Pécuchet le ramena vers la côte pour lui faire voir un ammonite, incrusté dans la roche, comme un diamant dans sa gangue. Leurs ongles s'y brisèrent, il aurait fallu des instruments, la nuit venait, d'ailleurs ! — Le ciel était empourpré à l'occident, et toute la place couverte d'une ombre. — Au milieu des varechs presque noirs, les flaques d'eau s'élargissaient. La mer montait vers eux ; il était temps de rentrer.

Le lendemain dès l'aube, avec une pioche et un pic, ils attaquèrent leur fossile dont l'enveloppe éclata. C'était un ammonite nodosus, rongé par les bouts mais pesant bien seize livres, et Pécuchet, dans l'enthousiasme, s'écria : — Nous ne pouvons faire moins que de l'offrir à Dumouchel !

Puis ils rencontrèrent des éponges, des térébratules, des orques, et pas de crocodile ! — à son défaut, ils espéraient une vertèbre d'hippopotame ou d'ichthyosaure, n'importe quel ossement contemporain du Déluge, quand ils distinguèrent à hauteur d'homme contre la falaise, des contours qui figuraient le galbe d'un poisson gigantesque.

Ils délibérèrent sur les moyens de l'obtenir.

Bouvard le dégagerait par le haut, tandis que Pécuchet en dessous, démolirait la roche pour le faire descendre, doucement, sans l'abîmer.

Comme ils reprenaient haleine, ils virent au-dessus de leur tête, dans la campagne un douanier en manteau, qui gesticulait d'un air de commandement.

— Eh bien ! quoi ? fiche-nous la paix ! et ils continuèrent leur besogne, Bouvard sur la pointe des orteils, tapant avec sa pioche, Pécuchet les reins pliés, creusant avec son pic.

Mais le douanier reparut, plus bas, dans un vallon, en multipliant les signaux : ils s'en moquaient bien ! Un corps ovale se bombait sous la terre amincie, et penchait, allait glisser.

Un autre individu, avec un sabre, se montra tout à coup.

— Vos passeports !

C'était le garde champêtre en tournée ; — et au même moment survint l'homme de la douane, accouru par une ravine.

— Empoignez-les, père Morin ! ou la falaise va s'écrouler !

— C'est dans un but scientifique répondit Pécuchet.

Alors une masse tomba, en les frôlant de si près tous les quatre, qu'un peu plus ils étaient morts.

Quand la poussière fut dissipée, ils reconnurent un mât de navire qui s'émietta sous la botte du douanier.

Bouvard dit en soupirant : — Nous ne faisions pas grand mal !

— On ne doit rien faire dans les limites du Génie ! reprit le garde champêtre. D'abord qui êtes-vous ? pour que je vous dresse procès !

Pécuchet se rebiffa, criant à l'injustice.

— Pas de raisons ! suivez-moi !

Dès qu'ils arrivèrent sur le port, une foule de gamins les escorta. Bouvard rouge comme un coquelicot, affectait un air digne. Pécuchet, très pâle, lançait des regards furieux ; — et ces deux étrangers, portant des cailloux dans leurs mouchoirs n'avaient pas une bonne figure. Provisoirement, on les colloqua dans l'auberge, dont le maître sur le seuil, barrait l'entrée. Puis le maçon réclama ses outils ; ils les payèrent ; encore des frais ! — et le garde champêtre ne revenait pas ! pourquoi ? Enfin un monsieur qui avait la croix d'honneur, les délivra ; et ils s'en allèrent, ayant donné leurs noms, prénoms et domicile, avec l'engagement d'être à l'avenir plus circonspects.

Outre un passeport, il leur manquait bien des choses ! et avant d'entreprendre des explorations nouvelles ils consultèrent le *Guide du voyageur géologue* par Boné.

Il faut avoir, premièrement, un bon havresac de soldat, puis une chaîne d'arpenteur, une lime, des pinces, une boussole, et trois marteaux, passés dans une ceinture qui se dissimule sous la redingote, et vous préserve ainsi de cette apparence originale, que l'on doit éviter en voyage. Comme bâton, Pécuchet adopta franchement le bâton de touriste, haut de six pieds, à longue pointe de fer. Bouvard préférait une canne-parapluie, ou parapluie-polybranches, dont le pommeau se retire, pour agrafer la soie contenue, à part, dans un petit sac. Ils n'oublièrent pas de forts souliers, avec des guêtres, chacun deux paires de bretelles, à cause de la transpiration et bien qu'on ne puisse se présenter partout en casquette ils reculèrent devant la dépense d'un de ces chapeaux qui se plient, et qui portent le nom du chapelier Gibus, leur inventeur. Le même ouvrage donne des préceptes de conduite : Savoir la langue du pays que l'on visite, ils la savaient. Garder une tenue modeste, c'était leur usage. Ne pas avoir d'argent sur soi, rien de plus simple. Enfin, pour s'épargner toutes sortes d'embarras, il est bon de prendre la qualité d'ingénieur !

— Eh bien ! nous la prendrons !

Ainsi préparés, ils commencèrent leurs courses, étaient absents quelquefois pendant huit jours, passaient leur vie au grand air.

Tantôt sur les bords de l'Orne, ils apercevaient dans une déchirure, des pans de rocs dressant leurs lames obliques entre des peupliers et des bruyères ; — ou bien ils s'attristaient de ne rencontrer le long du chemin que des couches d'argile. Devant un paysage, ils n'admiraient ni la série des plans, ni la profondeur des lointains ni les ondulations de la verdure ; mais ce qu'on ne voyait pas, le dessous, la terre ; — et toutes les collines étaient pour eux encore une preuve du Déluge.

À la manie du Déluge, succéda celle des blocs erratiques. Les grosses pierres seules dans les champs devaient provenir de glaciers disparus ; — et ils cherchaient des moraines et des faluns.

Plusieurs fois, on les prit pour des porte-balles, vu leur accoutrement — et quand ils avaient répondu qu'ils étaient des ingénieurs une crainte leur venait ; l'usurpation d'un titre pareil pouvait leur attirer des désagréments.

À la fin du jour, ils haletaient sous le poids de leurs échantillons, mais intrépides les rapportaient chez eux. Il y en avait le long des marches dans l'escalier, dans les chambres, dans la salle, dans la cuisine ; et Germaine se lamentait sur la quantité de poussière.

Ce n'était pas une mince besogne avant de coller les étiquettes, que de savoir les noms des roches ; la variété des couleurs et du grenu leur faisait confondre l'argile avec la marne, le granit et le gneiss, le quartz et le calcaire.

Et puis la nomenclature les irritait. Pourquoi dévonien, cambrien, jurassique, comme si les terres désignées par ces mots n'étaient pas ailleurs qu'en Devonshire, près de Cambridge, et dans le Jura ? Impossible de s'y reconnaître ! ce qui est système pour l'un est pour l'autre un étage, pour un troisième une simple assise. Les feuillets des couches, s'entremêlent, s'embrouillent ; mais Omalius d'Halloy vous prévient qu'il ne faut pas croire aux divisions géologiques.

Cette déclaration les soulagea — et quand ils eurent vu des calcaires à polypiers dans la plaine de Caen, des phillades à Balleroy, du kaolin à Saint-Blaise, de l'oolithe partout, et cherché de la houille à Cartigny, et du mercure à la

Chapelle-en-Juger près Saint-Lô, ils décidèrent une excursion plus lointaine, un voyage au Havre pour étudier le quartz pyromaque et l'argile de Kimmeridge !

À peine descendus du paquebot, ils demandèrent le chemin qui conduit sous les phares. Des éboulements l'obstruaient ; — il était dangereux de s'y hasarder.

Un loueur de voitures les accosta, et leur offrit des promenades aux environs, Ingouville, Octeville, Fécamp, Lillebonne, Rome s'il le fallait.

Ses prix étaient déraisonnables ; mais le nom de Fécamp les avait frappés : en se détournant un peu sur la route, on pouvait voir Étretat — et ils prirent la gondole de Fécamp, pour se rendre au plus loin, d'abord.

Dans la gondole Bouvard et Pécuchet firent la conversation avec trois paysans, deux bonnes femmes, un séminariste, et n'hésitèrent pas à se qualifier d'ingénieurs.

On s'arrêta devant le bassin. Ils gagnèrent la falaise, et cinq minutes après, la frôlèrent, pour éviter une grande flaque d'eau avançant comme un golfe au milieu du rivage. Ensuite, ils virent une arcade qui s'ouvrait sur une grotte profonde. Elle était sonore, très claire, pareille à une église, avec des colonnes de haut en bas, et un tapis de varech tout le long de ses dalles.

Cet ouvrage de la nature les étonna ; et ils s'élevèrent à des considérations sur l'origine du monde.

Bouvard penchait vers le neptunisme. Pécuchet au contraire était plutonien. Le feu central avait brisé la croûte du globe, soulevé les terrains, fait des crevasses. C'est comme une mer intérieure ayant son flux et reflux, ses tempêtes. Une mince pellicule nous en sépare. On ne dormirait pas si l'on songeait à tout ce qu'il y a sous nos talons. — Cependant le feu central diminue, et le soleil s'affaiblit, si bien que la Terre un jour périra de refroidissement. Elle deviendra stérile ; tout le bois et toute la houille se seront convertis en acide carbonique — et aucun être ne pourra subsister.

— Nous n'y sommes pas encore dit Bouvard.

— Espérons-le ! reprit Pécuchet.

N'importe ! cette fin du monde, si lointaine qu'elle fût, les assombrit — et côte à côte, ils marchaient silencieusement sur les galets.

La falaise, perpendiculaire, toute blanche et rayée en noir, çà et là, par des lignes de silex, s'en allait vers l'horizon tel que la courbe d'un rempart ayant cinq lieues d'étendue. Un vent d'est, âpre et froid soufflait. Le ciel était gris, la mer verdâtre et comme enflée. Du sommet des roches, des oiseaux s'envolaient, tournoyaient, rentraient vite dans leurs trous. Quelquefois, une pierre se détachant, rebondissait de place en place, avant de descendre jusqu'à eux.

Pécuchet poursuivait à haute voix ses pensées : — À moins que la terre ne soit anéantie par un cataclysme ? On ignore la longueur de notre période. Le feu central n'a qu'à déborder.

— Pourtant, il diminue ?

— Cela n'empêche pas ses explosions d'avoir produit l'île Julia, le

Monte-Nuovo, bien d'autres encore.

Bouvard se rappelait avoir lu ces détails dans Bertrand — Mais de pareils faits n'arrivent pas en Europe ?

— Mille excuses ! témoin celui de Lisbonne ! Quant à nos pays, les mines de houille et de pyrite martiale y sont nombreuses et peuvent très bien en se décomposant, former les bouches volcaniques. Les volcans, d'ailleurs, éclatent toujours près de la mer.

Bouvard promena sa vue sur les flots, et crut distinguer au loin, une fumée qui montait vers le ciel.

— Puisque l'île Julia reprit Pécuchet, a disparu, des terrains produits par la même cause, auront peut-être, le même sort ? Un îlot de l'Archipel est aussi important que la Normandie, et même que l'Europe.

Bouvard se figura l'Europe engloutie dans un abîme.

— Admets dit Pécuchet qu'un tremblement de terre ait lieu sous la Manche. Les eaux se ruent dans l'Atlantique. Les côtes de la France et de l'Angleterre en chancelant sur leur base, s'inclinent, se rejoignent, et v'lan ! tout l'entre-deux est écrasé.

Au lieu de répondre, Bouvard se mit à marcher tellement vite qu'il fut bientôt à cent pas de Pécuchet. Étant seul, l'idée d'un cataclysme le troubla. Il n'avait pas mangé depuis le matin. Ses tempes bourdonnaient. Tout à coup le sol, lui parut tressaillir, — et la falaise au-dessus de sa tête pencher par le sommet. À ce moment, une pluie de graviers, déroula d'en haut.

Pécuchet l'aperçut qui détalait avec violence, comprit sa terreur, cria, de loin :
— Arrête ! arrête ! la période n'est pas accomplie.

Et pour le rattraper, il faisait des sauts énormes avec son bâton de touriste, tout en vociférant : La période n'est pas accomplie ! la période n'est pas accomplie !

Bouvard en démence, courait toujours. Le parapluie polybranches tomba, les pans de sa redingote s'envolaient, le havresac ballottait à son dos. C'était comme une tortue avec des ailes, qui aurait galopé parmi les roches ; une plus grosse le cacha.

Pécuchet y parvint hors d'haleine, ne vit personne ; puis retourna en arrière pour gagner les champs par une valleuse que Bouvard avait prise, sans doute.

Ce raidillon étroit était taillé à grandes marches dans la falaise, de la largeur de deux hommes, et luisant comme de l'albâtre poli. À cinquante pieds d'élévation, Pécuchet voulut descendre. La mer battait son plein. Il se remit à grimper.

Au second tournant, quand il aperçut le vide, la peur le glaça. À mesure qu'il approchait du troisième, ses jambes devenaient molles. Les couches de l'air vibraient autour de lui, une crampe le pinçait à l'épigastre ; il s'assit par terre les yeux fermés, n'ayant plus conscience que des battements de son coeur qui l'étouffaient. Puis, il jeta son bâton de touriste, et avec les genoux et les mains reprit son ascension. Mais les trois marteaux tenus à la ceinture lui entraient dans le ventre, les cailloux dont ses poches étaient bourrées tapaient ses flancs ; la visière de sa casquette l'aveuglait, le vent redoublait de force ; enfin il atteignit le plateau et y trouva Bouvard qui était monté plus loin, par une valleuse moins difficile.

Une charrette les recueillit. Ils oublièrent Étretat.

Le lendemain soir au Havre, en attendant le paquebot, ils virent au bas d'un journal, un feuilleton intitulé De l'enseignement de la géologie.

Cet article, plein de faits, exposait la question comme elle était comprise à l'époque.

Jamais il n'y eut un cataclysme complet du globe ; mais la même espèce n'a pas toujours la même durée, et s'éteint plus vite dans tel endroit que dans tel autre. Des terrains de même âge contiennent des fossiles différents comme des dépôts très éloignés en renferment de pareils. Les fougères d'autrefois sont identiques aux fougères d'à présent. Beaucoup de zoophytes contemporains se retrouvent dans les couches les plus anciennes. En résumé, les modifications actuelles expliquent les bouleversements antérieurs. Les mêmes causes agissent toujours, la Nature ne fait pas de sauts, et les périodes, affirme Brongniart, ne sont après tout que des abstractions.

Cuvier jusqu'à présent leur avait apparu dans l'éclat d'une auréole, au sommet d'une science indiscutable. Elle était sapée. La Création n'avait plus la même discipline ; et leur respect pour ce grand homme diminua.

Par des biographies et des extraits, ils apprirent quelque chose des doctrines de Lamarck et de Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire.

Tout cela contrariait les idées reçues, l'autorité de l'Église.

Bouvard en éprouva comme l'allégement d'un joug brisé.

— Je voudrais voir, maintenant, ce que le citoyen Jeufroy me répondrait sur le Déluge !

Ils le trouvèrent dans son petit jardin où il attendait les membres du Conseil de fabrique, qui devaient se réunir tout à l'heure, pour l'acquisition d'une chasuble.

— Ces messieurs souhaitent… ?

— Un éclaircissement, s'il vous plaît, et Bouvard commença.

Que signifiaient dans la Genèse, l'abîme qui se rompit et les cataractes du ciel ? Car un abîme ne se rompt pas, et le ciel n'a point de cataractes !

L'abbé ferma les paupières, puis répondit qu'il fallait distinguer toujours entre le sens et la lettre. Des choses qui d'abord nous choquent deviennent légitimes en les approfondissant.

— Très bien ! mais comment expliquer la pluie qui dépassait les plus hautes montagnes, lesquelles mesurent deux lieues ! y pensez-vous, deux lieues ! une épaisseur d'eau ayant deux lieues !

Et le maire, survenant, ajouta : — Saprelotte, quel bain !

— Convenez dit Bouvard que Moïse exagère diablement.

Le curé avait lu Bonald, et répliqua : — J'ignore ses motifs ; c'était, sans doute, pour imprimer un effroi salutaire aux peuples qu'il dirigeait !

— Enfin, cette masse d'eau, d'où venait-elle ?

— Que sais-je ? L'air s'était changé en pluie, comme il arrive tous les jours.

Par la porte du jardin, on vit entrer M. Girbal, directeur des Contributions, avec le capitaine Heurtaux, propriétaire ; et Beljambe l'aubergiste donnait le bras à Langlois l'épicier, qui marchait péniblement à cause de son catarrhe.

Pécuchet, sans souci d'eux, prit la parole.

— Pardon, monsieur Jeufroy. Le poids de l'atmosphère (la science nous le démontre) est égal à celui d'une masse d'eau qui ferait autour du globe une enveloppe de dix mètres. Par conséquent, si tout l'air condensé tombait dessus à l'état liquide, il augmenterait bien peu la masse des eaux existantes.

Et les fabriciens ouvraient de grands yeux, écoutaient.

Le curé s'impatienta.

— Nierez-vous qu'on ait trouvé des coquilles sur les montagnes ? qui les y a mises, sinon le Déluge ? Elles n'ont pas coutume, je crois, de pousser toutes seules dans la terre comme des carottes ! Et ce mot ayant fait rire l'assemblée, il ajouta en pinçant les lèvres : À moins que ce ne soit encore une des découvertes de la science ?

Bouvard voulut répondre par le soulèvement des montagnes, la théorie d'Élie de Beaumont.

— Connais pas ! répondit l'Abbé.

Foureau s'empressa de dire : — Il est de Caen ! Je l'ai vu une fois à la Préfecture !

— Mais si votre Déluge repartit Bouvard avait charrié des coquilles, on les trouverait brisées à la surface, et non à des profondeurs de trois cents mètres quelquefois.

Le prêtre se rejeta sur la véracité des Écritures, la tradition du genre humain et les animaux découverts dans de la glace, en Sibérie.

Cela ne prouve pas que l'Homme ait vécu en même temps qu'eux ! La Terre, selon Pécuchet, était considérablement plus vieille. — Le Delta du Mississippi remonte à des dizaines de milliers d'années. L'époque actuelle en a cent mille, pour le moins. Les listes de Manéthon…

Le comte de Faverges s'avança.

Tous firent silence à son approche.

— Continuez, je vous prie ! Que disiez-vous ?

— Ces messieurs me querellaient répondit l'abbé.

— À propos de quoi ?

— Sur la sainte Écriture, monsieur le Comte !

Bouvard, de suite, allégua qu'ils avaient droit, comme géologues, à discuter religion.

— Prenez garde dit le comte. Vous savez le mot, cher monsieur, un peu de science en éloigne, beaucoup y ramène. Et d'un ton à la fois hautain et paternel : Croyez-moi ! vous y reviendrez ! vous y reviendrez !

Peut-être ! — mais que penser d'un livre, où l'on prétend que la lumière a été créée avant le soleil, comme si le soleil n'était pas la seule cause de la lumière !

— Vous oubliez celle qu'on appelle boréale dit l'ecclésiastique.

Bouvard, sans répondre à l'objection, nia fortement qu'elle ait pu être d'un côté et les ténèbres de l'autre, qu'il y ait eu un soir et un matin quand les astres n'existaient pas, et que les animaux aient apparu tout à coup, au lieu de se former par cristallisation.

Comme les allées étaient trop petites, en gesticulant, on marchait dans les plates-bandes. Langlois fut pris d'une quinte de toux. Le capitaine criait : Vous êtes des révolutionnaires ! Girbal : La paix ! la paix ! Le prêtre : Quel matérialisme ! Foureau : Occupons-nous plutôt de notre chasuble !

— Hou ! Laissez-moi parler ! Et Bouvard s'échauffant, alla jusqu'à dire que l'Homme descendait du Singe !

Tous les fabriciens se regardèrent, fort ébahis, et comme pour s'assurer qu'ils n'étaient pas des singes.

Bouvard reprit : — En comparant le foetus d'une femme, d'une chienne, d'un oiseau…

— Assez !

— Moi, je vais plus loin ! s'écria Pécuchet. L'homme descend des poissons ! Des rires éclatèrent. Mais sans se troubler : le Telliamed ! un livre arabe !…

— Allons, messieurs, en séance !

Et on entra dans la sacristie.

Les deux compagnons n'avaient pas roulé l'abbé Jeufroy, comme ils l'auraient cru — aussi Pécuchet lui trouva-t-il le cachet du jésuitisme.

Sa lumière boréale les inquiétait cependant ; ils la cherchèrent dans le manuel de d'Orbigny.

C'est une hypothèse, pour expliquer comment les végétaux fossiles de la baie de Baffin ressemblent aux plantes équatoriales. On suppose, à la place du soleil, un grand foyer lumineux, maintenant disparu, et dont les aurores boréales ne sont peut-être que les vestiges.

Puis un doute leur vint sur la provenance de l'Homme ; — et embarrassés, ils songèrent à Vaucorbeil.

Ses menaces n'avaient pas eu de suites. Comme autrefois, il passait le matin devant leur grille, en raclant avec sa canne tous les barreaux l'un après l'autre.

Bouvard l'épia — et l'ayant arrêté, dit qu'il voulait lui soumettre un point curieux d'anthropologie.

— Croyez-vous que le genre humain descende des poissons ?

— Quelle bêtise !

— Plutôt des singes, n'est-ce pas ?

— Directement, c'est impossible !

À qui se fier ? Car enfin le Docteur n'était pas un catholique !

Ils continuèrent leurs études, mais sans passion, étant las de l'éocène et du miocène, du Mont-Jorullo, de l'île Julia, des mammouths de Sibérie et des fossiles invariablement comparés dans tous les auteurs à des médailles qui sont des témoignages authentiques, si bien qu'un jour, Bouvard jeta son havresac par terre, en déclarant qu'il n'irait pas plus loin.

La géologie est trop défectueuse ! À peine connaissons-nous quelques endroits de l'Europe. Quant au reste, avec le fond des Océans, on l'ignorera toujours.

Enfin, Pécuchet ayant prononcé le mot de règne minéral :

— Je n'y crois pas, au règne minéral ! puisque des matières organiques ont pris part à la formation du silex, de la craie, de l'or peut-être ! Le diamant n'a-t-il pas été du charbon : la houille un assemblage de végétaux : — en la chauffant à je ne sais plus combien de degrés, on obtient de la sciure de bois, tellement que tout passe, tout coule. La création est faite d'une matière ondoyante et fugace. Mieux vaudrait nous occuper d'autre chose !

Il se coucha sur le dos, et se mit à sommeiller, pendant que Pécuchet la tête basse et un genou dans les mains, se livrait à ses réflexions.

Une lisière de mousse bordait un chemin creux, ombragé par des frênes dont les cimes légères tremblaient. Des angéliques, des menthes, des lavandes exhalaient des senteurs chaudes, épicées ; l'atmosphère était lourde ; et Pécuchet, dans une sorte d'abrutissement, rêvait aux existences innombrables éparses autour de lui, aux insectes qui bourdonnaient, aux sources cachées sous le gazon, à la sève des plantes, aux oiseaux dans leurs nids, au vent, aux nuages, à toute la Nature, sans chercher à découvrir ses mystères, séduit par sa force, perdu dans sa grandeur.

— J'ai soif ! dit Bouvard, en se réveillant.

— Moi de même ! Je boirais volontiers quelque chose !

— C'est facile reprit un homme qui passait, en manches de chemise, avec une planche sur l'épaule.

Et ils reconnurent ce vagabond, à qui Bouvard autrefois avait donné un verre de vin. Il semblait de dix ans plus jeune, portait les cheveux en accroche-coeur, la moustache bien cirée, et dandinait sa taille d'une façon parisienne.

Après cent pas environ, il ouvrit la barrière d'une cour, jeta sa planche contre un mur, et les fit entrer dans une haute cuisine.

— Mélie ! es-tu là, Mélie ?

Une jeune fille parut ; sur son commandement, alla tirer de la boisson et revint près de la table, servir ces messieurs.

Ses bandeaux, de la couleur des blés, dépassaient un béguin de toile grise. Tous ses pauvres vêtements descendaient le long de son corps sans un pli ; — et le nez droit, les yeux bleus, elle avait quelque chose de délicat, de champêtre et d'ingénu.

— Elle est gentille, hein ? dit le menuisier, pendant qu'elle apportait des verres. Si on ne jurerait pas une demoiselle, costumée en paysanne ! et rude à l'ouvrage, pourtant ! — Pauvre petit coeur, va ! quand je serai riche, je t'épouserai !

— Vous dites toujours des bêtises, monsieur Gorju répondit-elle d'une voix douce, sur un accent traînard.

Un valet d'écurie vint prendre de l'avoine dans un vieux coffre, et laissa retomber le couvercle si brutalement qu'un éclat de bois en jaillit.

Gorju s'emporta contre la lourdeur de tous ces gars de la campagne puis, à genoux devant le meuble, il cherchait la place du morceau. Pécuchet en voulant l'aider, distingua sous la poussière, des figures de personnages.

C'était un bahut de la Renaissance, avec une torsade en bas, des pampres dans les coins, et les colonnettes divisaient sa devanture en cinq compartiments. On voyait au milieu, Vénus-Anadyomène debout sur une coquille, puis Hercule et Omphale, Samson et Dalila, Circé et ses pourceaux, les filles de Loth enivrant leur père ; tout cela délabré, rongé de mites, et même le panneau de droite manquait. Gorju prit une chandelle pour mieux faire voir à Pécuchet celui de gauche, qui présentait sous l'arbre du Paradis, Adam et Ève dans une posture fort indécente.

Bouvard également admira le bahut.

— Si vous y tenez, on vous le céderait à bon compte.

Ils hésitaient, vu les réparations.

Gorju pouvait les faire, étant de son métier ébéniste. — Allons ! Venez ! et il entraîna Pécuchet vers la masure, où Mme Castillon, la maîtresse, étendait du linge.

Mélie quand elle eut lavé ses mains, prit sur le bord de la fenêtre, son métier à dentelles, s'assit en pleine lumière, et travailla.

Le linteau de la porte l'encadrait. Les fuseaux se débrouillaient sous ses doigts avec un claquement de castagnettes. Son profil restait penché.

Bouvard la questionna sur ses parents, son pays, les gages qu'on lui donnait.

Elle était de Ouistreham, n'avait plus de famille, gagnait une pistole par mois — enfin, elle lui plut tellement qu'il désira la prendre à son service pour aider la vieille Germaine.

Pécuchet reparut avec la fermière, et pendant qu'ils continuaient leur marchandage, Bouvard demanda tout bas à Gorju, si la petite bonne consentirait à devenir sa servante.

— Parbleu !

— Toutefois dit Bouvard, il faut que je consulte mon ami.

— Eh bien ! je ferai en sorte. Mais n'en parlez pas ! à cause de la bourgeoise.

Le marché venait de se conclure, moyennant trente-cinq francs. Pour le raccommodage on s'entendrait.

À peine dans la cour Bouvard dit son intention relativement à Mélie.

Pécuchet s'arrêta, afin de mieux réfléchir, ouvrit sa tabatière, huma une prise, et s'étant mouché :

— Au fait, c'est une idée ! mon Dieu, oui ! pourquoi pas ? D'ailleurs, tu es le maître !

Dix minutes après, Gorju se montra sur le haut-bord d'un fossé — et les interpellant :

— Quand faut-il que je vous apporte le meuble ?

— Demain !

— Et pour l'autre question, êtes-vous décidés ?

— Convenu ! répondit Pécuchet.

CHAPITRE IV

Six mois plus tard, ils étaient devenus des archéologues ; — et leur maison ressemblait à un musée.

Une vieille poutre de bois se dressait dans le vestibule. Les spécimens de géologie encombraient l'escalier ; — et une chaîne énorme s'étendait par terre tout le long du corridor.

Ils avaient décroché la porte entre les deux chambres où ils ne couchaient pas et condamné l'entrée extérieure de la seconde, pour ne faire de ces deux pièces qu'un même appartement.

Quand on avait franchi le seuil on se heurtait à une auge de pierre (un sarcophage gallo-romain) puis, les yeux étaient frappés par de la quincaillerie.

Contre le mur en face, une bassinoire dominait deux chenets et une plaque de foyer, qui représentait un moine caressant une bergère. Sur des planchettes tout autour, on voyait des flambeaux, des serrures, des boulons, des écrous. Le sol disparaissait sous des tessons de tuiles rouges. Une table au milieu exhibait les curiosités les plus rares : la carcasse d'un bonnet de Cauchoise, deux urnes d'argile, des médailles, une fiole de verre opalin. Un fauteuil en tapisserie avait sur son dossier un triangle de guipure. Un morceau de cotte de mailles ornait la cloison à droite ; et en dessous, des pointes maintenaient horizontalement une hallebarde, pièce unique.

La seconde chambre, où l'on descendait par deux marches, renfermait les anciens livres apportés de Paris, et ceux qu'en arrivant ils avaient découverts dans une armoire. Les vantaux en étaient retirés. Ils l'appelaient la bibliothèque.

L'arbre généalogique de la famille Croixmare occupait seul tout le revers de la porte. Sur le lambris en retour, la figure au pastel d'une dame en costume Louis XV faisait pendant au portrait du père Bouvard. Le chambranle de la glace avait pour décoration un sombrero de feutre noir, et une monstrueuse galoche, pleine de feuilles, les restes d'un nid.

Deux noix de coco (appartenant à Pécuchet depuis sa jeunesse) flanquaient sur la cheminée un tonneau de faïence, que chevauchait un paysan. Auprès, dans une corbeille de paille, il y avait un décime, rendu par un canard.

Devant la bibliothèque, se carrait une commode en coquillages, avec des ornements de peluche. Son couvercle supportait un chat tenant une souris dans sa gueule, — pétrification de Saint-Allyre, — une boîte à ouvrage en coquilles mêmement ; et sur cette boîte, une carafe d'eau-de-vie contenait une poire de bon-chrétien.

Mais le plus beau, c'était dans l'embrasure de la fenêtre, une statue de saint Pierre ! Sa main droite couverte d'un gant serrait la clef du Paradis, de couleur vert pomme ; sa chasuble que des fleurs de lis agrémentaient était bleu ciel, et sa tiare très jaune pointue comme une pagode. Il avait les joues fardées, de gros yeux ronds, la bouche béante, le nez de travers et en trompette. Au-dessus pendait un baldaquin fait d'un vieux tapis où l'on distinguait deux amours dans un cercle de roses — et à ses pieds comme une colonne se levait un pot à beurre, portant ces mots en lettres blanches sur fond chocolat : Exécuté devant S.A.R. Monseigneur le duc d'Angoulême, à Noron, le 3 d'octobre 1817.

Pécuchet, de son lit, apercevait tout cela en enfilade — et parfois même il allait jusque dans la chambre de Bouvard, pour allonger la perspective.

Une place demeurait vide en face de la cotte de mailles, celle du bahut renaissance.

Il n'était pas achevé. Gorju y travaillait encore ; varlopant les panneaux dans le fournil, et les ajustant, les démontant.

À onze heures, il déjeunait ; causait ensuite avec Mélie, et souvent ne reparaissait plus de toute la journée.

Pour avoir des morceaux dans le genre du meuble Bouvard et Pécuchet s'étaient mis en campagne. Ce qu'ils rapportaient ne convenait pas. Mais ils avaient rencontré une foule de choses curieuses. Le goût des bibelots leur était venu, puis l'amour du moyen âge.

D'abord, ils visitèrent les cathédrales ; — et les hautes nefs se mirant dans l'eau des bénitiers, les verreries éblouissantes comme des tentures de pierreries, les tombeaux au fond des chapelles, le jour incertain des cryptes, tout, jusqu'à la fraîcheur des murailles leur causa un frémissement de plaisir, une émotion religieuse.

Bientôt, ils furent capables de distinguer les époques — et dédaigneux des sacristains, ils disaient : — Ah ! une abside romane ! Cela est du XIIe siècle ! voilà que nous retombons dans le flamboyant !

Ils tâchaient de comprendre les symboles sculptés sur les chapiteaux, comme les deux griffons de Marigny becquetant un arbre en fleurs. Pécuchet vit une satire dans les chantres à mâchoire grotesque qui terminent les cintres de Feuguerolles ; — et pour l'exubérance de l'homme obscène couvrant un des meneaux d'Hérouville, cela prouvait, suivant Bouvard, que nos aïeux avaient chéri la gaudriole.

Ils arrivèrent à ne plus tolérer la moindre marque de décadence. Tout était de la décadence — et ils déploraient le vandalisme, tonnaient contre le badigeon.

Mais le style d'un monument ne s'accorde pas toujours avec la date qu'on lui suppose. Le plein cintre, au XIIIe siècle domine encore dans la Provence.

L'ogive est peut-être fort ancienne ! et des auteurs contestent l'antériorité du roman sur le gothique — Ce défaut de certitude les contrariait.

Après les églises ils étudièrent les châteaux forts, ceux de Domfront et de Falaise. Ils admiraient sous la porte les rainures de la herse, et parvenus au sommet, ils voyaient d'abord toute la campagne, puis les toits de la ville, les rues s'entrecroisant, des charrettes sur la place, des femmes au lavoir. Le mur dévalait à pic jusqu'aux broussailles des douves — et ils pâlissaient en songeant que des hommes avaient monté là, suspendus à des échelles. Ils se seraient risqués dans les souterrains, mais Bouvard avait pour obstacle son ventre, et Pécuchet la crainte des vipères.

Ils voulurent connaître les vieux manoirs, Curcy, Bully, Fontenay-le-Marmion, Argouges. Parfois, à l'angle des bâtiments, derrière le fumier se dresse une tour carlovingienne. La cuisine garnie de bancs en pierre fait songer à des ripailles féodales. D'autres ont un aspect exclusivement farouche, avec leurs trois enceintes encore visibles, des meurtrières sous l'escalier, de longues tourelles à pans aigus. Puis, on arrive dans un appartement, où une fenêtre du temps des Valois ciselée comme un ivoire laisse entrer le soleil qui chauffe sur le parquet des grains de colza, répandus. Des abbayes servent de grange. Les inscriptions des pierres tombales sont effacées. Au milieu des champs, un pignon reste debout — et du haut en bas est revêtu d'un lierre que le vent fait trembler.

Quantité de choses excitaient leurs convoitises, un pot d'étain, une boucle de strass, des indiennes à grands ramages. Le manque d'argent les retenait.

Par un hasard providentiel, ils déterrèrent à Balleroy, chez un étameur, un vitrail gothique, — qui fut assez grand pour couvrir près du fauteuil la partie droite de la croisée jusqu'au deuxième carreau. Le clocher de Chavignolles se montrait dans le lointain, produisant un effet splendide.

Avec un bas d'armoire, Gorju fabriqua un prie-Dieu pour mettre sous le vitrail, car il flattait leur manie. Elle était si forte qu'ils regrettaient les monuments sur lesquels on ne sait rien du tout, — comme la maison de plaisance des évêques de Séez.

— Bayeux, dit M. de Caumont, devait avoir un théâtre. Ils en cherchèrent la place inutilement.

Le village de Montrecy contient un pré célèbre, par des médailles d'empereurs qu'on y a découvertes autrefois. Ils comptaient y faire une belle récolte. Le gardien leur en refusa l'entrée.

Ils ne furent pas plus heureux sur la communication qui existait entre une citerne de Falaise et le faubourg de Caen. Des canards qu'on y avait introduits reparurent à Vaucelles, en grognant : — Can can can d'où est venu le nom de la ville.

Aucune démarche ne leur coûtait, aucun sacrifice.

À l'auberge de Mesnil-Villement, en 1816, M. Galeron eut un déjeuner pour la somme de quatre sols. — Ils y firent le même repas, et constatèrent avec surprise que les choses ne se passaient plus comme ça !

Quel est le fondateur de l'abbaye de Sainte-Anne ? Existe-t-il une parenté entre Marin-Onfroy, qui importa au XIIe siècle une nouvelle espèce de pommes, et Onfroy gouverneur d'Hastings, à l'époque de la conquête ? Comment se procurer L'Astucieuse Pythonisse, comédie en vers d'un certain Dutrésor, faite à Bayeux, et actuellement des plus rares ? Sous Louis XVI, Hérambert Dupaty, ou Dupastis Hérambert, composa un ouvrage, qui n'a jamais paru, plein d'anecdotes sur Argentan. — l s'agirait de retrouver ces anecdotes. Que sont devenus les mémoires autographes de Mme Dubois de la Pierre, consultés pour l'histoire inédite de Laigle, par Louis Dasprès, desservant de Saint-Martin ? — Autant de problèmes, de points curieux à éclaircir.

Mais souvent un faible indice met sur la voie d'une découverte inappréciable.

Donc, ils revêtirent leurs blouses, afin de ne pas donner l'éveil ; — et sous l'apparence de colporteurs, ils se présentaient dans les maisons, demandant à acheter de vieux papiers. On leur en vendit des tas. C'étaient des cahiers d'école, des factures, d'anciens journaux, rien d'utile.

Enfin, Bouvard et Pécuchet s'adressèrent à Larsonneur.

Il était perdu dans le celticisme, et répondant sommairement à leurs questions en fit d'autres.

Avaient-ils observé autour d'eux des traces de la religion du chien comme on en voit à Montargis ; et des détails spéciaux, sur les feux de la Saint-Jean, les mariages, les dictons populaires, etc. ? Il les priait même de recueillir pour lui, quelques-unes de ces haches en silex, appelées alors des celtoe, et que les druides employaient dans leurs criminels holocaustes.

Par Gorju, ils s'en procurèrent une douzaine, lui expédièrent la moins grande — les autres enrichirent le muséum.

Ils s'y promenaient avec amour, le balayaient eux-mêmes, en avaient parlé à toutes leurs connaissances.

Un après-midi, Mme Bordin, et M. Marescot se présentèrent pour le voir.

Bouvard les reçut, et commença la démonstration par le vestibule.

La poutre n'était rien moins que l'ancien gibet de Falaise, d'après le menuisier qui l'avait vendue — lequel tenait ce renseignement de son grand-père.

La grosse chaîne dans le corridor provenait des oubliettes du donjon de Torteval. Elle ressemblait suivant le notaire, aux chaînes des bornes devant les cours d'honneur. Bouvard était convaincu qu'elle servait autrefois à lier les captifs. Et il ouvrit la porte de la première chambre.

— Pourquoi toutes ces tuiles ? s'écria Mme Bordin.

— Pour chauffer les étuves ! mais un peu d'ordre, s'il vous plaît ! Ceci est un tombeau découvert dans une auberge où on l'employait comme abreuvoir.

Ensuite, Bouvard prit les deux urnes pleines d'une terre, qui était de la cendre humaine, et il approcha de ses yeux la fiole, afin de montrer par quelle méthode les Romains y versaient des pleurs.

— Mais on ne voit chez vous que des choses lugubres !

Effectivement, c'était un peu sérieux pour une dame, et alors il tira d'un carton plusieurs monnaies de cuivre, avec un denier d'argent.

Mme Bordin demanda au notaire, quelle somme aujourd'hui cela pourrait valoir.

La cotte de mailles qu'il examinait, lui échappa des doigts ; des anneaux se rompirent. Bouvard dissimula son mécontentement.

Il eut même l'obligeance de décrocher la hallebarde — et se courbant, levant les bras, battant du talon, il faisait mine de faucher les jarrets d'un cheval, de pointer comme à la baïonnette, d'assommer un ennemi. La veuve, intérieurement, le trouva un rude gaillard.

Elle fut enthousiasmée par la commode en coquillages. Le chat de Saint-Allyre l'étonna beaucoup, la poire dans la carafe un peu moins.

Puis arrivant à la cheminée :

— Ah ! voilà un chapeau qui aurait besoin de raccommodage.

Trois trous, des marques de balles, en perçaient les bords.

C'était celui d'un chef de voleurs sous le Directoire, David de La Bazoque, pris en trahison, et tué immédiatement.

— Tant mieux, on a bien fait ! dit Mme Bordin.

Marescot souriait devant les objets d'une façon dédaigneuse. Il ne comprenait pas cette galoche qui avait été l'enseigne d'un marchand de chaussures, ni pourquoi le tonneau de faïence, un vulgaire pichet de cidre ; — et le saint Pierre, franchement, était lamentable avec sa physionomie d'ivrogne.

Mme Bordin fit cette remarque : — Il a dû vous coûter bon, tout de même ?

— Oh pas trop ! pas trop !

Un couvreur d'ardoises l'avait donné pour quinze francs.

Ensuite, elle blâma, vu l'inconvenance, le décolletage de la dame en perruque poudrée.

— Où est le mal ? reprit Bouvard, quand on possède quelque chose de beau ? et il ajouta plus bas : Comme vous, je suis sûr ?

Le notaire leur tournait le dos, étudiant les branches de la famille Croixmare. Elle ne répondit rien, mais se mit à jouer avec sa longue chaîne de montre. Ses seins bombaient le taffetas noir de son corsage ; et les cils un peu rapprochés, elle baissait le menton, comme une tourterelle qui se rengorge. Puis d'un air ingénu :

— Comment s'appelait cette dame ?

— On l'ignore ! c'est une maîtresse du Régent, — vous savez — celui qui a fait tant de farces !

— Je crois bien ! les mémoires du temps !… et le notaire, sans finir sa phrase déplora cet exemple d'un prince, entraîné par ses passions.

— Mais vous êtes tous comme ça !

Les deux hommes se récrièrent ; et un dialogue s'en suivit sur les femmes, sur l'amour. Marescot affirma qu'il existe beaucoup d'unions heureuses. — Parfois même, sans qu'on s'en doute, on a près de soi, ce qu'il faudrait pour son bonheur. L'allusion était directe. Les joues de la veuve s'empourprèrent ; mais se remettant presque aussitôt :

— Nous n'avons plus l'âge des folies ! n'est-ce pas monsieur Bouvard ?

— Eh ! eh ! moi, je ne dis pas ça ! et il offrit son bras pour revenir dans l'autre chambre. Faites attention aux marches. Très bien ! Maintenant, observez le vitrail.

On y distinguait un manteau d'écarlate et les deux ailes d'un ange — tout le reste se perdant sous les plombs qui tenaient en équilibre les nombreuses cassures du verre. Le jour diminuait ; des ombres s'allongeaient ; Mme Bordin était devenue sérieuse.

Bouvard s'éloigna, et reparut, affublé d'une couverture de laine, puis s'agenouilla devant le prie-Dieu, les coudes en dehors, la face dans les mains, la lueur du soleil tombant sur sa calvitie ; — et il avait conscience de cet effet, car il dit : — Est-ce que je n'ai pas l'air d'un moine du moyen âge ? Ensuite, il leva le front obliquement, les yeux noyés, faisant prendre à sa figure une expression mystique.

On entendit dans le corridor la voix grave de Pécuchet :

— N'aie pas peur ! c'est moi !

Et il entra, la tête complètement recouverte d'un casque — un pot de fer à oreillons pointus.

Bouvard ne quitta pas le prie-Dieu. Les deux autres restaient debout.

Une minute se passa dans l'ébahissement.

Mme Bordin parut un peu froide à Pécuchet. Cependant, il voulut savoir si on lui avait tout montré.

— Il me semble ? et désignant la muraille : Ah ! pardon ! nous aurons ici un objet que l'on restaure en ce moment.

La veuve et Marescot se retirèrent.

Les deux amis avaient imaginé de feindre une concurrence. Ils allaient en courses l'un sans l'autre, le second faisant des offres supérieures à celles du premier. Pécuchet ainsi venait d'obtenir le casque.

Bouvard l'en félicita et reçut des éloges à propos de la couverture.

Mélie avec des cordons, l'arrangea en manière de froc. Ils la mettaient à tour de rôle, pour recevoir les visites.

Ils eurent celles de Girbal, de Foureau, du capitaine Heurtaux, puis de personnes inférieures, Langlois, Beljambe, leurs fermiers, jusqu'aux servantes des voisins ; — et chaque fois, ils recommençaient leurs explications, montraient la place où serait le bahut, affectaient de la modestie, réclamaient de l'indulgence pour l'encombrement.

Pécuchet, ces jours-là, portait le bonnet de zouave qu'il avait autrefois à Paris, l'estimant plus en rapport avec le milieu artistique. À un certain moment, il se coiffait du casque, et le penchait sur la nuque, afin de dégager son visage. Bouvard n'oubliait pas la manoeuvre de la hallebarde ; enfin, d'un coup d'oeil ils se demandaient si le visiteur méritait que l'on fît le moine du moyen âge.

Quelle émotion quand s'arrêta devant leur grille, la voiture de M. de Faverges ! Il n'avait qu'un mot à dire. Voici la chose.

Hurel, son homme d'affaires, lui avait appris que cherchant partout des documents ils avaient acheté de vieux papiers à la ferme de la Aubrye.

Rien de plus vrai.

N'y avaient-ils pas découvert, des lettres du baron de Gonneval, ancien aide de camp du duc d'Angoulême, et qui avait séjourné à la Aubrye ? On désirait cette correspondance, pour des intérêts de famille.

Elle n'était pas chez eux. Mais ils détenaient une chose qui l'intéressait s'il daignait les suivre, jusqu'à leur bibliothèque.

Jamais pareilles bottes vernies n'avaient craqué dans le corridor. Elles se heurtèrent contre le sarcophage. Il faillit même écraser plusieurs tuiles, tourna le fauteuil, descendit deux marches — et parvenus dans la seconde chambre, ils lui firent voir sous le baldaquin, devant le saint Pierre, le pot à beurre, exécuté à Noron.

Bouvard et Pécuchet avaient cru que la date, quelquefois, pouvait servir.

Le gentilhomme par politesse inspecta leur musée. — Il répétait : Charmant, très bien ! tout en se donnant sur la bouche de petits coups avec le pommeau de sa badine, — pour sa part, il les remerciait d'avoir sauvé ces débris du moyen âge, époque de foi religieuse et de dévouements chevaleresques. Il aimait le progrès, — et se fût livré, comme eux, à ces études intéressantes. — Mais la Politique, le conseil général, l'Agriculture, un véritable tourbillon l'en détournait !

— Après vous, toutefois, on n'aurait que des glanes ; car bientôt, vous aurez pris toutes les curiosités du département.

— Sans amour-propre, nous le pensons dit Pécuchet.

Et cependant, on pouvait en découvrir encore à Chavignolles, par exemple, il y avait contre le mur du cimetière dans la ruelle, un bénitier, enfoui sous les herbes, depuis un temps immémorial.

Ils furent heureux du renseignement, puis échangèrent un regard signifiant est-ce la peine ? mais déjà le Comte ouvrait la porte.

Mélie, qui se trouvait derrière, s'enfuit brusquement.

Comme il passait dans la cour, il remarqua Gorju, en train de fumer sa pipe, les bras croisés.

— Vous employez ce garçon ! Hum ! un jour d'émeute je ne m'y fierais pas.

Et M. de Faverges remonta dans son tilbury.

Pourquoi leur bonne semblait-elle en avoir peur ?

Ils la questionnèrent ; et elle conta qu'elle avait servi dans sa ferme. C'était cette petite fille qui versait à boire aux moissonneuses quand ils étaient venus. Deux ans plus tard, on l'avait prise comme aide, au château — et renvoyée par suite de faux rapports.

Pour Gorju, que lui reprocher ? Il était fort habile, et leur marquait infiniment de considération.

Le lendemain, dès l'aube, ils se rendirent au cimetière.

Bouvard, avec sa canne, tâta à la place indiquée. Un corps dur sonna. Ils arrachèrent quelques orties, et découvrirent une cuvette en grès, un font baptismal où des plantes poussaient.

On n'a pas coutume cependant d'enfouir les fonts baptismaux hors des églises.

Pécuchet en fit un dessin, Bouvard la description ; et ils envoyèrent le tout à Larsonneur.

Sa réponse fut immédiate.

— Victoire, mes chers confrères ! Incontestablement, c'est une cuve druidique !

Toutefois qu'ils y prissent garde ! La hache était douteuse. — Et autant pour lui que pour eux-mêmes il leur indiquait une série d'ouvrages à consulter.

Larsonneur confessait en post-scriptum, son envie de connaître cette cuve — ce qui aurait lieu, à quelque jour, quand il ferait le voyage de la Bretagne.

Alors Bouvard et Pécuchet se plongèrent dans l'archéologie celtique. D'après cette science, les anciens Gaulois, nos aïeux, adoraient Kirk et Kron, Taranis, Ésus, Nétalemnia, le Ciel et la Terre, le Vent, les Eaux, — et, par-dessus tout, le grand Teutatès, qui est le Saturne des Païens. — Car Saturne, quand il régnait en Phénicie épousa une nymphe nommée Anobret, dont il eut un enfant appelé Jeüd — et Anobret a les traits de Sara, Jeüd fut sacrifié (ou près de l'être) comme

Isaac ; — donc, Saturne est Abraham, d'où il faut conclure que la religion des Gaulois avait les mêmes principes que celle des Juifs.

Leur société était fort bien organisée. La première classe de personnes comprenait le peuple, la noblesse et le roi, la deuxième les jurisconsultes, — et dans la troisième, la plus haute, se rangeaient, suivant Taillepied, les diverses manières de philosophes c'est-à-dire les Druides ou Saronides, eux-mêmes divisés en Eubages, Bardes et Vates.

Les uns prophétisaient, les autres chantaient, d'autres enseignaient la Botanique, la Médecine, l'Histoire et la Littérature, bref tous les arts de leur époque. Pythagore et Platon furent leurs élèves. Ils apprirent la métaphysique aux Grecs, la sorcellerie aux Persans, l'aruspicine aux Étrusques — et aux Romains, l'étamage du cuivre et le commerce des jambons.

Mais de ce peuple, qui dominait l'ancien monde, il ne reste que des pierres, soit toutes seules, ou par groupes de trois, ou disposées en galeries, ou formant des enceintes.

Bouvard et Pécuchet, pleins d'ardeur, étudièrent successivement la Pierre-du-Post à Ussy, la Pierre-Couplée au Guest, la Pierre du Jarier, près de Laigie — d'autres encore !

Tous ces blocs, d'une égale insignifiance, les ennuyèrent promptement ; — et un jour qu'ils venaient de voir le menhir du Passais, ils allaient s'en retourner, quand leur guide les mena dans un bois de hêtres, encombré par des masses de granit pareilles à des piédestaux, ou à de monstrueuses tortues.

La plus considérable est creusée comme un bassin. Un des bords se relève — et du fond partent deux entailles qui descendent jusqu'à terre ; c'était pour l'écoulement du sang ; impossible d'en douter ! Le hasard ne fait pas de ces choses.

Les racines des arbres s'entremêlaient à ces rocs abrupts. Un peu de pluie tombait ; au loin, les flocons de brume montaient, comme de grands fantômes. Il était facile d'imaginer sous les feuillages, les prêtres en tiare d'or et en robe blanche, avec leurs victimes humaines les bras attachés dans le dos — et sur le bord de la cuve la druidesse, observant le ruisseau rouge, pendant qu'autour d'elle, la foule hurlait, au tapage des cymbales et des buccins faits d'une corne d'auroch.

Tout de suite, leur plan fut arrêté.

Et une nuit, par un clair de lune, ils prirent le chemin du cimetière, marchant comme des voleurs, dans l'ombre des maisons. Les persiennes étaient closes, et les masures tranquilles ; pas un chien n'aboya. Gorju les accompagnait, ils se mirent à l'ouvrage. On n'entendait que le bruit des cailloux heurtés par la bêche, qui creusait le gazon. Le voisinage des morts leur était désagréable ; l'horloge de l'église poussait un râle continu, et la rosace de son tympan avait l'air d'un oeil épiant les sacrilèges.

Enfin, ils emportèrent la cuve.

Le lendemain, ils revinrent au cimetière pour voir les traces de l'opération.

L'abbé, qui prenait le frais sur sa porte, les pria de lui faire l'honneur d'une visite ; et les ayant introduits dans sa petite salle, il les regarda singulièrement.

Au milieu du dressoir, entre les assiettes, il y avait une soupière décorée de bouquets jaunes.

Pécuchet la vanta, ne sachant que dire.

— C'est un vieux Rouen reprit le curé, un meuble de famille. Les amateurs le considèrent, M. Marescot, surtout. Pour lui, grâce à Dieu il n'avait pas l'amour des curiosités ; — et comme ils semblaient ne pas comprendre, il déclara les avoir aperçus lui-même dérobant le font baptismal.

Les deux archéologues furent très penauds, balbutièrent. L'objet en question n'était plus d'usage.

N'importe ! ils devaient le rendre.

Sans doute ! Mais au moins qu'on leur permît de faire venir un peintre pour le dessiner.

— Soit, messieurs.

— Entre nous, n'est-ce pas ? dit Bouvard sous le sceau de la confession !

L'ecclésiastique, en souriant les rassura d'un geste.

Ce n'était pas lui, qu'ils craignaient, mais plutôt Larsonneur. Quand il passerait par Chavignolles, il aurait envie de la cuve — et ses bavardages iraient jusqu'aux oreilles du gouvernement. Par prudence, ils la cachèrent dans le fournil, puis dans la tonnelle, dans la cahute, dans une armoire. Gorju était las de la trimbaler.

La possession d'un tel morceau les attachait au celticisme de la Normandie.

Ses origines sont égyptiennes. Séez, dans le département de l'Orne s'écrit parfois Saïs comme la ville du Delta. Les Gaulois juraient par le taureau, importation du boeuf Apis. Le nom latin de Bellocastes qui était celui des gens de Bayeux vient de Beli Casa, demeure, sanctuaire de Bélus. Bélus et Osiris même divinité. Rien ne s'oppose dit Mangon de la Lande à ce qu'il y ait eu, près de Bayeux, des monuments druidiques.

— Ce pays, ajoute M. Roussel, ressemble au pays où les Égyptiens bâtirent le temple de Jupiter-Ammon. Donc, il y avait un temple et qui enfermait des richesses. Tous les monuments celtiques en renferment.

En 1715, relate dom Martin, un sieur Héribel exhuma aux environs de Bayeux, plusieurs vases d'argile, pleins d'ossements — et conclut (d'après la tradition et des autorités évanouies) que cet endroit, une nécropole, était le mont Faunus, où l'on a enterré le Veau d'or.

Cependant le Veau d'or fut brûlé et avalé ! — à moins que la Bible ne se trompe ?

Premièrement, où est le mont Faunus ? Les auteurs ne l'indiquent pas. Les indigènes n'en savent rien. Il aurait fallu se livrer à des fouilles ; — et dans ce but, ils envoyèrent à M. le préfet, une pétition, qui n'eut pas de réponse.

Peut-être que le mont Faunus a disparu, et que ce n'était pas une colline mais un tumulus ? Que signifiaient les tumulus ?

Plusieurs contiennent des squelettes, ayant la position du foetus dans le sein de sa mère. Cela veut dire que le tombeau était pour eux comme une seconde gestation les préparant à une autre vie. Donc, le tumulus symbolise l'organe femelle, comme la pierre levée est l'organe mâle.

En effet, où il y a des menhirs, un culte obscène a persisté. Témoin ce qui se faisait à Guérande, à Chichebouche, au Croisic, à Livarot. Anciennement, les bornes des routes et même les arbres avaient la signification de phallus — et pour Bouvard et Pécuchet tout devint phallus. Ils recueillirent des palonniers de voiture, des jambes de fauteuil, des verrous de cave, des pilons de pharmacien. Quand on venait les voir, ils demandaient : À qui trouvez-vous que cela ressemble ? puis, confiaient le mystère — et si l'on se récriait, ils levaient, de pitié, les épaules.

Un soir, qu'ils rêvaient aux dogmes des druides, l'abbé se présenta, discrètement.

Tout de suite, ils montrèrent le musée, en commençant par le vitrail, mais il leur tardait d'arriver à un compartiment nouveau, celui des Phallus. L'ecclésiastique les arrêta, jugeant l'exhibition indécente. Il venait réclamer son font baptismal.

Bouvard et Pécuchet implorèrent quinze jours encore, le temps d'en prendre un moulage.

— Le plus tôt sera le mieux dit l'abbé. Puis il causa de choses indifférentes.

Pécuchet qui s'était absenté une minute, lui glissa dans la main un napoléon.

Le prêtre fit un mouvement en arrière.

— Ah ! pour vos pauvres !

Et M. Jeufroy, en rougissant fourra la pièce d'or dans sa soutane.

Rendre la cuve, la cuve aux sacrifices ? Jamais de la vie ! Ils voulaient même apprendre l'hébreu, qui est la langue mère du celtique, à moins qu'elle n'en dérive ? — et ils allaient faire le voyage de la Bretagne, — en commençant par Rennes où ils avaient un rendez-vous avec Larsonneur, pour étudier cette urne mentionnée dans les mémoires de l'Académie celtique et qui paraît avoir contenu les cendres de la reine Artémise — quand le maire entra, le chapeau sur la tête, sans façon, en homme grossier qu'il était.

— Ce n'est pas tout ça, mes petits pères ! Il faut le rendre !

— Quoi donc ?

— Farceurs ! je sais bien que vous le cachez !

On les avait trahis.

Ils répliquèrent qu'ils le détenaient avec la permission de monsieur le curé.

— Nous allons voir.

Et Foureau s'éloigna.

Il revint, une heure après.

— Le curé dit que non ! Venez vous expliquer.

Ils s'obstinèrent.

D'abord on n'avait pas besoin de ce bénitier, — qui n'était pas un bénitier. Ils le prouveraient par une foule de raisons scientifiques. Puis, ils offrirent de reconnaître, dans leur testament, qu'il appartenait à la commune.

Ils proposèrent même de l'acheter.

— Et d'ailleurs, c'est mon bien ! répétait Pécuchet. Les vingt francs, acceptés par M. Jeufroy, étaient une preuve du contrat — et s'il fallait comparaître devant le juge de paix, tant pis, il ferait un faux serment !

Pendant ces débats, il avait revu la soupière, plusieurs fois ; et dans son âme s'était développé le désir, la soif, le prurit de cette faïence. Si on voulait la lui donner, il remettrait la cuve. Autrement, non.

Par fatigue ou peur du scandale, M. Jeufroy la céda.

Elle fut mise dans leur collection, près du bonnet de Cauchoise. La cuve décora le porche de l'église ; et ils se consolèrent de ne plus l'avoir par cette idée que les gens de Chavignolles en ignoraient la valeur.

Mais la soupière leur inspira le goût des faïences — nouveau sujet d'études et d'explorations dans la campagne.

C'était l'époque où les gens distingués recherchaient les vieux plats de Rouen. Le notaire en possédait quelques-uns, et tirait de là comme une réputation d'artiste, préjudiciable à son métier, mais qu'il rachetait par des côtés sérieux.

Quand il sut que Bouvard et Pécuchet avaient acquis la soupière, il vint leur proposer un échange.

Pécuchet s'y refusa.

— N'en parlons plus ! et Marescot examina leur céramique.

Toutes les pièces accrochées le long des murs étaient bleues sur un fond d'une blancheur malpropre ; — et quelques-unes étalaient leur corne d'abondance aux tons verts et rougeâtres, plats à barbe, assiettes et soucoupes, objets longtemps poursuivis et rapportés sur le coeur, dans le sinus de la redingote.

Marescot en fit l'éloge, parla des autres faïences, de l'hispano-arabe, de la hollandaise, de l'anglaise, de l'italienne ; — et les ayant éblouis par son érudition : — Si je revoyais votre soupière ?

Il la fit sonner d'un coup de doigt, puis contempla les deux S peints sous le couvercle.

— La marque de Rouen ! dit Pécuchet.

— Oh ! oh ! Rouen, à proprement parler, n'avait pas de marque. Quand on ignorait Moustiers toutes les faïences françaises étaient de Nevers. De même pour Rouen, aujourd'hui ! D'ailleurs on l'imite dans la perfection à Elbeuf !

— Pas possible !

— On imite bien les majoliques ! Votre pièce n'a aucune valeur — et j'allais faire, moi, une belle sottise !

Quand le notaire eut disparu, Pécuchet s'affaissa dans le fauteuil, prostré !

— Il ne fallait pas rendre la cuve dit Bouvard mais tu t'exaltes ! tu t'emportes toujours.

— Oui ! je m'emporte et Pécuchet empoignant la soupière, la jeta loin de lui, contre le sarcophage.

Bouvard plus calme, ramassa les morceaux, un à un ; — et, quelque temps après, eut cette idée :

— Marescot par jalousie, pourrait bien s'être moqué de nous ?

— Comment ?

— Rien ne m'assure que la soupière ne soit pas authentique ? tandis que les autres pièces, qu'il a fait semblant d'admirer, sont fausses peut-être ?

Et la fin du jour se passa dans les incertitudes, les regrets.

Ce n'était pas une raison pour abandonner le voyage de la Bretagne. Ils comptaient même emmener Gorju, qui les aiderait dans leurs fouilles.

Depuis quelque temps, il couchait à la maison, afin de terminer plus vite le raccommodage du meuble. La perspective d'un déplacement le contraria et comme ils parlaient des menhirs et des tumulus qu'ils comptaient voir :

— Je connais mieux leur dit-il ; en Algérie, dans le Sud, près des sources de Bou-Mursoug, on en rencontre des quantités. Il fit même la description d'un tombeau, ouvert devant lui, par hasard ; — et qui contenait un squelette, accroupi comme un singe, les deux bras autour des jambes.

Larsonneur, qu'ils instruisirent du fait, n'en voulut rien croire.

Bouvard approfondit la matière, et le relança.

— Comment se fait-il que les monuments des Gaulois soient informes, tandis que ces mêmes Gaulois étaient civilisés au temps de Jules César ? Sans doute, ils proviennent d'un peuple plus ancien ?

— Une telle hypothèse, selon Larsonneur, manquait de patriotisme.

— N'importe ! rien ne dit que ces monuments soient l'oeuvre des

Gaulois. — Montrez-nous un texte !

L'académicien se fâcha, ne répondit plus ; — et ils en furent bien aises, tant les Druides les ennuyaient.

S'ils ne savaient à quoi s'en tenir sur la céramique et sur le celticisme c'est qu'ils ignoraient l'histoire, particulièrement l'histoire de France.

L'ouvrage d'Anquetil se trouvait dans leur bibliothèque ; mais la suite des rois fainéants les amusa fort peu, la scélératesse des maires du Palais ne les indigna point ; — et ils lâchèrent Anquetil, rebutés par l'ineptie de ses réflexions.

Alors ils demandèrent à Dumouchel quelle est la meilleure histoire de

France.

Dumouchel prit en leur nom, un abonnement à un cabinet de lecture et leur expédia les lettres d'Augustin Thierry, avec deux volumes de M. de Genoude.

D'après cet écrivain, la royauté, la religion, et les assemblées nationales, voilà les principes de la nation française, lesquels remontent aux Mérovingiens. Les Carlovingiens y ont dérogé. Les Capétiens, d'accord avec le peuple s'efforcèrent de les maintenir. Sous Louis XIII, le pouvoir absolu fut établi, pour vaincre le Protestantisme, dernier effort de la Féodalité — et 89 est un retour vers la constitution de nos aïeux.

Pécuchet admira ces idées.

Elles faisaient pitié à Bouvard, qui avait lu Augustin Thierry, d'abord.

— Qu'est-ce que tu me chantes, avec ta nation française ! puisqu'il n'existait pas de France, ni d'assemblées nationales ! et les Carlovingiens n'ont rien usurpé, du tout ! et les Rois n'ont pas affranchi les communes ! Lis, toi-même !

Pécuchet se soumit à l'évidence, et bientôt le dépassa en rigueur scientifique ! Il se serait cru déshonoré s'il avait dit : Charlemagne et non Karl le Grand, Clovis au lieu de Clodowig.

Néanmoins, il était séduit par Genoude, trouvant habile de faire se rejoindre les deux bouts de l'histoire de France, si bien que le milieu est du remplissage ; — et pour en avoir le coeur net, ils prirent la collection de Buchez et Roux.

Mais le pathos des préfaces, cet amalgame de socialisme et de catholicisme les écoeura ; les détails trop nombreux empêchaient de voir l'ensemble.

Ils recoururent à M. Thiers.

C'était pendant l'été de 1845, dans le jardin, sous la tonnelle. Pécuchet, un petit banc sous les pieds, lisait tout haut de sa voix caverneuse, sans fatigue, ne s'arrêtant que pour plonger les doigts dans sa tabatière. Bouvard l'écoutait la pipe à la bouche, les jambes ouvertes, le haut du pantalon déboutonné.

Des vieillards leur avaient parlé de 93 ; — et des souvenirs presque personnels animaient les plates descriptions de l'auteur. Dans ce temps-là, les grandes routes étaient couvertes de soldats qui chantaient la Marseillaise. Sur le seuil des portes, des femmes assises cousaient de la toile, pour faire des tentes. Quelquefois, arrivait un flot d'hommes en bonnet rouge, inclinant au bout d'une pique une tête décolorée, dont les cheveux pendaient. La haute tribune de la Convention dominait un nuage de poussière, où des visages furieux hurlaient des cris de mort. Quand on passait au milieu du jour près du bassin des Tuileries, on entendait le heurt de la guillotine, pareil à des coups de mouton.

Et la brise remuait les pampres de la tonnelle, les orges mûres se balançaient par intervalles, un merle sifflait. En portant des regards autour d'eux, ils savouraient cette tranquillité.

Quel dommage que dès le commencement, on n'ait pu s'entendre — car si les royalistes avaient pensé comme les patriotes, si la Cour y avait mis plus de franchise, et ses adversaires moins de violence, bien des malheurs ne seraient pas arrivés.

À force de bavarder là-dessus, ils se passionnèrent. Bouvard, esprit libéral et coeur sensible, fut constitutionnel, girondin, thermidorien. Pécuchet, bilieux et de tendances autoritaires, se déclara sans-culotte et même robespierriste.

Il approuvait la condamnation du roi, les décrets les plus violents, le culte de l'Être Suprême. Bouvard préférait celui de la nature. Il aurait salué avec plaisir l'image d'une grosse femme, versant de ses mamelles à ses adorateurs, non pas de l'eau, mais du chambertin.

Pour avoir plus de faits à l'appui de leurs arguments, ils se procurèrent d'autres ouvrages, Montgaillard, Prudhomme, Gallois, Lacretelle, etc. ; et les contradictions de ces livres ne les embarrassaient nullement. Chacun y prenait ce qui pouvait défendre sa cause.

Ainsi Bouvard ne doutait pas que Danton eût accepté cent mille écus pour faire des motions qui perdraient la République ; — et selon Pécuchet Vergniaud aurait demandé six mille francs par mois.

— Jamais de la vie ! Explique-moi plutôt, pourquoi la soeur de Robespierre avait une pension de Louis XVIII ?

— Pas du tout ! c'était de Bonaparte ; et puisque tu le prends comme ça, quel est le personnage qui peu de temps avant la mort d'Égalité eut avec lui une conférence secrète ? Je veux qu'on réimprime dans les mémoires de la Campan les paragraphes supprimés ! Le décès du Dauphin me paraît louche. La poudrière de Grenelle en sautant tua deux mille personnes ! Cause inconnue, dit-on, quelle bêtise ! car Pécuchet n'était pas loin de la connaître, et rejetait tous les crimes sur les manoeuvres des aristocrates, l'or de l'étranger.

Dans l'esprit de Bouvard, montez-au-ciel-fils-de-saint-Louis, les vierges de Verdun et les culottes en peau humaine étaient indiscutables. Il acceptait les listes de Prudhomme, un million de victimes tout juste.

Mais la Loire rouge de sang depuis Saumur jusqu'à Nantes, dans une longueur de dix-huit lieues, le fit songer. Pécuchet également conçut des doutes, et ils prirent en méfiance les historiens.

La Révolution est pour les uns, un événement satanique. D'autres la proclament une exception sublime. Les vaincus de chaque côté, naturellement sont des martyrs.

Thierry démontre, à propos des Barbares, combien il est sot de rechercher si tel prince fut bon ou fut mauvais. Pourquoi ne pas suivre cette méthode dans l'examen des époques plus récentes ? Mais l'Histoire doit venger la morale ; on est reconnaissant à Tacite d'avoir déchiré Tibère. Après tout, que la Reine ait eu des amants, que Dumouriez dès Valmy se proposât de trahir, en prairial que ce soit la Montagne ou la Gironde qui ait commencé, et en thermidor les Jacobins ou la Plaine, qu'importe au développement de la Révolution, dont les origines sont profondes et les résultats incalculables ! Donc, elle devait s'accomplir, être ce qu'elle fut ; mais supposez la fuite du Roi sans entrave, Robespierre s'échappant ou Bonaparte assassiné — hasards qui dépendaient d'un aubergiste moins scrupuleux, d'une porte ouverte, d'une sentinelle endormie, et le train du monde changeait.

Ils n'avaient plus sur les hommes et les faits de cette époque, une seule idée d'aplomb.

Pour la juger impartialement, il faudrait avoir lu toutes les histoires, tous les mémoires, tous les journaux et toutes les pièces manuscrites, car de la moindre omission une erreur peut dépendre qui en amènera d'autres à l'infini. Ils y renoncèrent.

Mais le goût de l'Histoire leur était venu, le besoin de la vérité pour elle-même.

Peut-être, est-elle plus facile à découvrir dans les époques anciennes ? Les auteurs, étant loin des choses, doivent en parler sans passion. Et ils commencèrent le bon Rollin.

— Quel tas de balivernes ! s'écria Bouvard, dès le premier chapitre.

— Attends un peu dit Pécuchet, en fouillant dans le bas de leur bibliothèque, où s'entassaient les livres du dernier propriétaire, un vieux jurisconsulte, maniaque et bel esprit ; — et ayant déplacé beaucoup de romans et de pièces de théâtre, avec un Montesquieu et des traductions d'Horace, il atteignit ce qu'il cherchait : l'ouvrage de Beaufort sur l'Histoire romaine.

Tite-Live attribue la fondation de Rome à Romulus. Salluste en fait honneur aux Troyens d'Énée. Coriolan mourut en exil selon Fabius Pictor, par les stratagèmes d'Attius Tullus, si l'on en croit Denys ; Sénèque affirme qu'Horatius

Coclès s'en retourna victorieux, Dion qu'il fut blessé à la jambe. Et La Mothe le Vayer émet des doutes pareils, relativement aux autres peuples.

On n'est pas d'accord sur l'antiquité des Chaldéens, le siècle d'Homère, l'existence de Zoroastre, les deux empires d'Assyrie. Quinte-Curce a fait des contes. Plutarque dément Hérodote. Nous aurions de César une autre idée, si le Vercingétorix avait écrit ses commentaires.

L'Histoire ancienne est obscure par le défaut de documents. Ils abondent dans la moderne ; — et Bouvard et Pécuchet revinrent à la France, entamèrent Sismondi.

La succession de tant d'hommes leur donnait envie de les connaître plus profondément, de s'y mêler. Ils voulaient parcourir les originaux, Grégoire de Tours, Monstrelet, Commines, tous ceux dont les noms étaient bizarres ou agréables.

Mais les événements s'embrouillèrent faute de savoir les dates.

Heureusement qu'ils possédaient la mnémotechnie de Dumouchel, un in-12 cartonné avec cette épigraphe : Instruire en amusant.

Elle combinait les trois systèmes d'Allévy, de Pâris, et de Feinaigle.

Allévy transforme les chiffres en figures, le nombre 1 s'exprimant par une tour, 2 par un oiseau, 3 par un chameau, ainsi du reste. Pâris frappe l'imagination au moyen de rébus ; un fauteuil garni de clous à vis donnera : Clou, vis = Clovis ; et comme le bruit de la friture fait ric, ric des merles dans une poêle rappelleront Chilpéric. Feinaigle divise l'univers en maisons, qui contiennent des chambres, ayant chacune quatre parois à neuf panneaux, chaque panneau portant un emblème. Donc, le premier roi de la première dynastie occupera dans la première chambre le premier panneau. Un phare sur un mont dira comment il s'appelait Phar à mond système Pâris — et d'après le conseil d'Allévy, en plaçant au-dessus un miroir qui signifie 4, un oiseau 2, et un cerceau 0, on obtiendra 420, date de l'avènement de ce prince.

Pour plus de clarté, ils prirent comme base mnémotechnique leur propre maison, leur domicile, attachant à chacune de ses parties un fait distinct ; — et la cour, le jardin, les environs, tout le pays, n'avait plus d'autre sens que de faciliter la mémoire. Les bornages dans la campagne limitaient certaines époques, les pommiers étaient des arbres généalogiques, les buissons des batailles, le monde devenait symbole. Ils cherchaient sur les murs, des quantités de choses absentes, finissaient par les voir, mais ne savaient plus les dates qu'elles représentaient.

D'ailleurs, les dates ne sont pas toujours authentiques. Ils apprirent dans un manuel pour les collèges, que la naissance de Jésus doit être reportée cinq ans plus tôt qu'on ne la met ordinairement, qu'il y avait chez les Grecs trois manières de compter les Olympiades, et huit chez les Latins de faire commencer l'année.

— Autant d'occasions pour les méprises, outre celles qui résultent des zodiaques, des ères, et des calendriers différents.

Et de l'insouciance des dates, ils passèrent au dédain des faits.

Ce qu'il y a d'important, c'est la philosophie de l'Histoire !

Bouvard ne put achever le célèbre discours de Bossuet.

— L'aigle de Meaux est un farceur ! Il oublie la Chine, les Indes et l'Amérique ! mais a soin de nous apprendre que Théodose était la joie de l'univers, qu'Abraham traitait d'égal avec les rois et que la philosophie des Grecs descend des Hébreux. Sa préoccupation des Hébreux m'agace !

Pécuchet partagea cette opinion, et voulut lui faire lire Vico.

— Comment admettre objectait Bouvard, que des fables soient plus vraies que les vérités des historiens ?

Pécuchet tâcha d'expliquer les mythes, se perdait dans la *Scienza Nuova*.

— Nieras-tu le plan de la Providence ?

— Je ne le connais pas ! dit Bouvard.

Et ils décidèrent de s'en rapporter à Dumouchel.

Le Professeur avoua qu'il était maintenant dérouté en fait d'histoire.

— Elle change tous les jours. On conteste les rois de Rome et les voyages de Pythagore ! On attaque Bélisaire, Guillaume Tell, et jusqu'au Cid, devenu, grâce aux dernières découvertes, un simple bandit. C'est à souhaiter qu'on ne fasse plus de découvertes, et même l'Institut devrait établir une sorte de canon, prescrivant ce qu'il faut croire !

Il envoyait en post-scriptum des règles de critique, prises dans le cours de Daunou :

— Citer comme preuve le témoignage des foules, mauvaise preuve ; elles ne sont pas là pour répondre.

— Rejetez les choses impossibles. On fit voir à Pausanias la pierre avalée par Saturne.

— L'architecture peut mentir, exemple : l'Arc du Forum, où Titus est appelé le premier vainqueur de Jérusalem, conquise avant lui par Pompée.

— Les médailles trompent, quelquefois. Sous Charles IX, on battit des monnaies avec le coin de Henri II.

— Tenez en compte l'adresse des faussaires, l'intérêt des apologistes et des calomniateurs.

Peu d'historiens ont travaillé d'après ces règles — mais tous en vue d'une cause spéciale, d'une religion, d'une nation, d'un parti, d'un système, ou pour gourmander les rois, conseiller le peuple, offrir des exemples moraux.

Les autres, qui prétendent narrer seulement, ne valent pas mieux. Car on ne peut tout dire. Il faut un choix. Mais dans le choix des documents, un certain esprit dominera ; — et comme il varie, suivant les conditions de l'écrivain, jamais l'histoire ne sera fixée.

C'est triste, pensaient-ils.

Cependant on pourrait prendre un sujet, épuiser les sources, en faire bien l'analyse — puis le condenser dans une narration, qui serait comme un raccourci des choses, reflétant la vérité tout entière. Une telle oeuvre semblait exécutable à Pécuchet.

— Veux-tu que nous essayions de composer une histoire ?

— Je ne demande pas mieux ! Mais laquelle ?

— Effectivement, laquelle ?

Bouvard s'était assis. Pécuchet marchait de long en large dans le musée ; quand le pot à beurre frappa ses yeux, et s'arrêtant tout à coup :

— Si nous écrivions la vie du duc d'Angoulême ?

— Mais c'était un imbécile ! répliqua Bouvard.

— Qu'importe ! Les personnages du second plan ont parfois une influence énorme — et celui-là, peut-être, tenait le rouage des affaires.

Les livres leur donneraient des renseignements — et M. de Faverges en possédait sans doute, par lui-même, ou par de vieux gentilshommes de ses amis.

Ils méditèrent ce projet, le débattirent, et résolurent enfin, de passer quinze jours à la Bibliothèque municipale de Caen, pour y faire des recherches.

Le Bibliothécaire mit à leur disposition des histoires générales et des brochures, avec une lithographie coloriée, représentant, de trois quarts, Monseigneur le duc d'Angoulême.

Le drap bleu de son habit d'uniforme disparaissait sous les épaulettes, les crachats, et le grand cordon rouge de la Légion d'honneur. Un collet extrêmement haut enfermait son long cou. Sa tête piriforme était encadrée par les frisons de sa chevelure et de ses minces favoris ; — et de lourdes paupières, un nez très fort et de grosses lèvres donnaient à sa figure une expression de bonté insignifiante.

Quand ils eurent pris des notes, ils rédigèrent un programme.

Naissance et enfance, peu curieuses. Un de ses gouverneurs est l'abbé Guénée, l'ennemi de Voltaire. À Turin, on lui fait fondre un canon, et il étudie les campagnes de Charles VIII. Aussi, est-il nommé, malgré sa jeunesse, colonel d'un régiment de gardes-nobles.

97. Son mariage.

1814. Les Anglais s'emparent de Bordeaux. Il accourt derrière eux — et montre sa personne aux habitants. Description de la personne du Prince.

1815. Bonaparte le surprend. Tout de suite, il appelle le roi d'Espagne, et

Toulon, sans Masséna, était livré à l'Angleterre.

Opérations dans le Midi. Il est battu, mais relâché sous la promesse de rendre les diamants de la couronne, emportés au grand galop par le Roi, son oncle.

Après les Cent-Jours, il revient avec ses parents, et vit tranquille.

Plusieurs années s'écoulent.

Guerre d'Espagne. — Dès qu'il a franchi les Pyrénées, la Victoire suit partout le petit-fils de Henri IV. Il enlève le Trocadéro, atteint les colonnes d'Hercule, écrase les factions, embrasse Ferdinand, et s'en retourne.

Arcs de triomphe, fleurs que présentent les jeunes filles, dîners dans les préfectures, *Te Deum* dans les cathédrales. Les Parisiens sont au comble de l'ivresse. La ville lui offre un banquet. On chante sur les théâtres des allusions au Héros.

L'enthousiasme diminue. Car en 1827 à Cherbourg un bal organisé par souscription rate.

Comme il est grand-amiral de France, il inspecte la flotte, qui va partir pour Alger.

Juillet 1830. Marmont lui apprend l'état des affaires. Alors il entre dans une telle fureur qu'il se blesse la main à l'épée du général.

Le roi lui confie le commandement de toutes les forces.

Il rencontre, au bois de Boulogne, des détachements de la ligne — et ne trouve pas un seul mot à leur dire.

De Saint-Cloud il vole au pont de Sèvres. Froideur des troupes. Ça ne l'ébranle pas. La famille royale quitte Trianon. Il s'assoit au pied d'un chêne, déploie une carte, médite, remonte à cheval, passe devant Saint-Cyr, et envoie aux élèves des paroles d'espérance.

À Rambouillet, les gardes du corps font leurs adieux.

Il s'embarque, et pendant toute la traversée est malade. Fin de sa carrière.

On doit y relever l'importance qu'eurent les ponts. D'abord il s'expose inutilement sur le pont de l'Inn, il enlève le Pont-Saint-Esprit et le pont de Lauriol ; à Lyon, les deux ponts lui sont funestes — et sa fortune expire devant le pont de Sèvres.

Tableau de ses vertus. Inutile de vanter son courage, auquel il joignait une grande politique. Car il offrit soixante francs à chaque soldat, pour abandonner l'Empereur — et en Espagne, il tâcha de corrompre à prix d'argent les Constitutionnels.

Sa réserve était si profonde qu'il consentit au mariage projeté entre son père et la reine d'Étrurie, à la formation d'un cabinet nouveau après les ordonnances, à l'abdication en faveur de Chambord, à tout ce que l'on voulait.

La fermeté pourtant ne lui manquait pas. À Angers, il cassa l'infanterie de la garde nationale, qui jalouse de la cavalerie, et au moyen d'une manoeuvre, était parvenue à lui faire escorte — tellement, que Son Altesse se trouva prise dans les fantassins à en avoir les genoux comprimés. Mais il blâma la cavalerie, cause du désordre, et pardonna à l'infanterie, véritable jugement de Salomon.

Sa piété se signala par de nombreuses dévotions, et sa clémence en obtenant la grâce du général Debelle, qui avait porté les armes contre lui.

Détails intimes — traits du Prince :

Au château de Beauregard, dans son enfance, il prit plaisir avec son frère à creuser une pièce d'eau que l'on voit encore. Une fois il visita la caserne des chasseurs, demanda un verre de vin, et le but à la santé du Roi.

Tout en se promenant, pour marquer le pas, il se répétait, à lui-même :

Une, deux ; une, deux ; une, deux !

On a conservé quelques-uns de ses mots :

À une députation de Bordelais : — Ce qui me console de n'être pas à Bordeaux c'est de me trouver au milieu de vous !

Aux protestants de Nîmes : — Je suis bon catholique ; mais je n'oublierai jamais que le plus illustre de mes ancêtres fut protestant.

Aux élèves de Saint-Cyr, quand tout est perdu : — Bien, mes amis ! Les nouvelles sont bonnes ! Ça va bien ! très bien.

Après l'abdication de Charles X : Puisqu'ils ne veulent pas de moi, qu'ils s'arrangent !

Et en 1814, à tout propos, dans le moindre village : — Plus de guerre, plus de conscription, plus de droits réunis.

Son style valait sa parole. Ses proclamations dépassent tout.

La première du comte d'Artois débutait ainsi : — Français, le frère de votre roi est arrivé.

Celle du prince : — J'arrive ! Je suis le fils de vos rois ! Vous êtes

Français.

Ordre du jour, daté de Bayonne : — Soldats, j'arrive !

Une autre, en pleine défection : — Continuez à soutenir avec la vigueur qui convient au soldat français, la lutte que vous avez commencée. La France l'attend de vous !

Dernière à Rambouillet. — Le roi est entré en arrangement avec le gouvernement établi à Paris ; et tout porte à croire que cet arrangement est sur le point d'être conclu. Tout porte à croire était sublime.

— Une chose me chiffonne dit Bouvard c'est qu'on ne mentionne pas ses affaires de coeur ?

Et ils notèrent en marge : Chercher les amours du Prince !

Au moment de partir, le bibliothécaire se ravisant, leur fit voir un autre portrait du duc d'Angoulême.

Sur celui-là, il était en colonel de cuirassiers, de profil, l'oeil encore plus petit, la bouche ouverte, avec des cheveux plats, voltigeant.

Comment concilier les deux portraits ? Avait-il les cheveux plats, ou bien crépus, à moins qu'il ne poussât la coquetterie jusqu'à se faire friser ?

Question grave, suivant Pécuchet ; car la chevelure donne le tempérament, le tempérament l'individu.

Bouvard pensait qu'on ne sait rien d'un homme tant qu'on ignore ses passions ; — et pour éclaircir ces deux points ils se présentèrent au château de Faverges. Le comte n'y était pas, cela retardait leur ouvrage. Ils rentrèrent chez eux, vexés.

La porte de la maison était grande ouverte. Personne dans la cuisine.

Ils montèrent l'escalier ; et que virent-ils au milieu de la chambre de

Bouvard ? Mme Bordin qui regardait de droite et de gauche.

— Excusez-moi dit-elle en s'efforçant de rire. Depuis une heure je cherche votre cuisinière, dont j'aurais besoin, pour mes confitures.

Ils la trouvèrent dans le bûcher sur une chaise, et dormant profondément. On la secoua. Elle ouvrit les yeux.

— Qu'est-ce encore ? Vous êtes toujours à me diguer avec vos questions !

Il était clair qu'en leur absence, Mme Bordin lui en faisait.

Germaine sortit de sa torpeur, et déclara une indigestion.

— Je reste pour vous soigner dit la veuve.

Alors ils aperçurent dans la cour, un grand bonnet, dont les barbes s'agitaient. C'était Mme Castillon la fermière. Elle cria : Gorju ! Gorju !

Et du grenier, la voix de leur petite bonne répondit hautement :

— Il n'est pas là !

Elle descendit au bout de cinq minutes, les pommettes rouges, en émoi. — Bouvard et Pécuchet lui reprochèrent sa lenteur. Elle déboucla leurs guêtres sans murmurer.

Ensuite, ils allèrent voir le bahut.

Ses morceaux épars jonchaient le fournil ; les sculptures étaient endommagées, les battants rompus.

À ce spectacle, devant cette déception nouvelle, Bouvard retint ses pleurs et Pécuchet en avait un tremblement.

Gorju se montrant presque aussitôt, exposa le fait : il venait de mettre le bahut dehors pour le vernir quand une vache errante l'avait jeté par terre.

— À qui la vache ? dit Pécuchet.

— Je ne sais pas.

— Eh ! vous aviez laissé la porte ouverte comme tout à l'heure ! C'est de votre faute !

Ils y renonçaient du reste : depuis trop longtemps, il les lanternait — et ne voulaient plus de sa personne ni de son travail.

Ces messieurs avaient tort. Le dommage n'était pas si grand. Avant trois semaines tout serait fini ; — et Gorju les accompagna jusque dans la cuisine où Germaine en se traînant, arrivait, pour faire le dîner.

Ils remarquèrent sur la table, une bouteille de calvados, aux trois quarts vidée.

— Sans doute par vous ? dit Pécuchet à Gorju.

— Moi ? jamais.

Bouvard objecta : — Vous étiez le seul homme dans la maison.

— Eh bien, et les femmes ? reprit l'ouvrier, avec un clin d'oeil oblique.

Germaine le surprit : — Dites plutôt que c'est moi !

— Certainement c'est vous !

— Et c'est moi, peut-être qui ai démoli l'armoire !

Gorju fit une pirouette. — Vous ne voyez donc pas qu'elle est saoule !

Alors, ils se chamaillèrent violemment, lui pâle, gouailleur, elle empourprée, et arrachant ses touffes de cheveux gris sous son bonnet de coton. Mme Bordin parlait pour Germaine, Mélie pour Gorju.

La vieille éclata.

— Si ce n'est pas une abomination ! que vous passiez des journées ensemble dans le bosquet, sans compter la nuit ! espèce de Parisien, mangeur de bourgeoises ! qui vient chez nos maîtres, pour leur faire accroire des farces.

Les prunelles de Bouvard s'écarquillèrent. — Quelles farces ?

— Je dis qu'on se fiche de vous !

— On ne se fiche pas de moi ! s'écria Pécuchet, et indigné de son insolence, exaspéré par les déboires, il la chassa ; qu'elle eût à déguerpir. Bouvard ne s'opposa point à cette décision — et ils se retirèrent, laissant Germaine pousser des sanglots sur son malheur, tandis que Mme Bordin tâchait de la consoler.

Le soir, quand ils furent calmes, ils reprirent ces événements, se demandèrent qui avait bu le calvados, comment le meuble s'était brisé, que réclamait Mme Castillon en appelant Gorju, — et s'il avait déshonoré Mélie ?

— Nous ne savons pas dit Bouvard, ce qui se passe dans notre ménage, et nous prétendons découvrir quels étaient les cheveux et les amours du duc d'Angoulême !

Pécuchet ajouta : — Combien de questions autrement considérables, et encore plus difficiles !

D'où ils conclurent que les faits extérieurs ne sont pas tout. Il faut les compléter par la psychologie. Sans l'imagination, l'Histoire est défectueuse. — Faisons venir quelques romans historiques !

CHAPITRE V

Ils lurent d'abord Walter Scott.

Ce fut comme la surprise d'un monde nouveau.

Les hommes du passé qui n'étaient pour eux que des fantômes ou des noms devinrent des êtres vivants, rois, princes, sorciers, valets, gardes-chasse, moines, bohémiens, marchands et soldats, qui délibèrent, combattent, voyagent, trafiquent, mangent et boivent, chantent et prient, dans la salle d'armes des châteaux, sur le banc noir des auberges, par les rues tortueuses des villes, sous l'auvent des échoppes, dans le cloître des monastères. Des paysages artistement composés, entourent les scènes comme un décor de théâtre. On suit des yeux un cavalier qui galope le long des grèves. On aspire au milieu des genêts la fraîcheur du vent, la lune éclaire des lacs où glisse un bateau, le soleil fait reluire les cuirasses, la pluie tombe sur les huttes de feuillage. Sans connaître les modèles, ils trouvaient ces peintures ressemblantes, et l'illusion était complète. L'hiver s'y passa.

Leur déjeuner fini, ils s'installaient dans la petite salle, aux deux bouts de la cheminée ; — et en face l'un de l'autre, avec un livre à la main, ils lisaient silencieusement. Quand le jour baissait, ils allaient se promener sur la grande route, dînaient en hâte, et continuaient leur lecture dans la nuit. Pour se garantir de la lampe Bouvard avait des conserves bleues, Pécuchet portait la visière de sa casquette inclinée sur le front.

Germaine n'était pas partie, et Gorju, de temps à autre, venait fouir au jardin, car ils avaient cédé par indifférence, oubli des choses matérielles.

Après Walter Scott, Alexandre Dumas les divertit à la manière d'une lanterne magique. Ses personnages, alertes comme des singes, forts comme des boeufs, gais comme des pinsons, entrent et partent brusquement, sautent des toits sur le pavé, reçoivent d'affreuses blessures dont ils guérissent, sont crus morts et reparaissent. Il y a des trappes sous les planchers, des antidotes, des déguisements — et tout se mêle, court et se débrouille, sans une minute pour la réflexion. L'amour conserve de la décence, le fanatisme est gai, les massacres font sourire.

Rendus difficiles par ces deux maîtres, ils ne purent tolérer le fatras de Bélisaire, la niaiserie de Numa Pompilius, Marchangy ni d'Arlincourt.

La couleur de Frédéric Soulié, comme celle du bibliophile Jacob leur parut insuffisante — et M. Villemain les scandalisa en montrant page 85 de son *Lascaris,* un Espagnol qui fume une pipe une longue pipe arabe au milieu du

XVe siècle.

Pécuchet consultait la biographie universelle — et il entreprit de réviser Dumas au point de vue de la science.

L'auteur, dans *Les Deux Diane* se trompe de dates. Le mariage du Dauphin François eut lieu le 14 octobre 1548, et non le 20 mars 1549. Comment sait-il (voir *Le Page du Duc de Savoie*) que Catherine de Médicis, après la mort de son époux voulait recommencer la guerre ? Il est peu probable qu'on ait couronné le duc d'Anjou, la nuit, dans une église, épisode qui agrémente *La Dame de Montsoreau*. *La Reine Margot*, principalement, fourmille d'erreurs. Le duc de Nevers n'était pas absent. Il opina au conseil avant la Saint-Barthélémy. Et Henri de Navarre ne suivit pas la procession quatre jours après. Et Henri III ne revint pas de Pologne aussi vite. D'ailleurs, combien de rengaines, le miracle de l'aubépine, le balcon de Charles IX, les gants empoisonnés de Jeanne d'Albret. Pécuchet n'eut plus confiance en Dumas.

Il perdit même tout respect pour Walter Scott, à cause des bévues de son *Quentin Durward*. Le meurtre de l'évêque de Liège est avancé de quinze ans. La femme de Robert de Lamarck était Jeanne d'Arschel et non Hameline de Croy. Loin d'être tué par un soldat, il fut mis à mort par Maximilien, et la figure du Téméraire, quand on trouva son cadavre, n'exprimait aucune menace, puisque les loups l'avaient à demi dévorée.

Bouvard n'en continua pas moins Walter Scott, mais finit par s'ennuyer de la répétition des mêmes effets. L'héroïne, ordinairement, vit à la campagne avec son père, et l'amoureux, un enfant volé, est rétabli dans ses droits et triomphe de ses rivaux. Il y a toujours un mendiant philosophe, un châtelain bourru, des jeunes filles pures, des valets facétieux et d'interminables dialogues, une pruderie bête, manque complet de profondeur.

En haine du bric-à-brac, Bouvard prit George Sand.

Il s'enthousiasma pour les belles adultères et les nobles amants, aurait voulu être Jacques, Simon, Bénédict, Lélio, et habiter Venise ! Il poussait des soupirs, ne savait pas ce qu'il avait, se trouvait lui-même changé.

Pécuchet, travaillant la littérature historique, étudiait les pièces de théâtre. Il avala deux Pharamond, trois Clovis, quatre Charlemagne, plusieurs Philippe-Auguste, une foule de Jeanne d'Arc, et bien des marquises de Pompadour, et des conspirations de Cellamare !

Presque toutes lui parurent encore plus bêtes que les romans. Car il existe pour le théâtre une histoire convenue, que rien ne peut détruire. Louis XI ne manquera pas de s'agenouiller devant les figurines de son chapeau ; Henri IV sera constamment jovial ; Marie Stuart pleureuse, Richelieu cruel — enfin, tous les caractères se montrent d'un seul bloc, par amour des idées simples et respect de l'ignorance — si bien que le dramaturge, loin d'élever abaisse, au lieu d'instruire abrutit.

Comme Bouvard lui avait vanté George Sand, Pécuchet se mit à lire *Consuelo*, *Horace*, *Mauprat*, fut séduit par la défense des opprimés, le côté social, et républicain, les thèses.

Suivant Bouvard, elles gâtaient la fiction et il demanda au cabinet de lecture des romans d'amour.

À haute voix et l'un après l'autre, ils parcoururent La *Nouvelle Héloïse, Delphine, Adolphe, Ourika*. Mais les bâillements de celui qui écoutait gagnaient son compagnon, dont les mains bientôt laissaient tomber le livre par terre. Ils reprochaient à tous ceux-là de ne rien dire sur le milieu, l'époque, le costume des personnages. Le coeur seul est traité ; toujours du sentiment ! comme si le monde ne contenait pas autre chose !

Ensuite, ils tâtèrent des romans humoristiques ; tels que Le *Voyage autour de ma chambre*, par Xavier de Maistre, *Sous les Tilleuls*, d'Alphonse Karr. Dans ce genre de livres, on doit interrompre la narration pour parler de son chien, de ses pantoufles, ou de sa maîtresse. Un tel sans-gêne, d'abord les charma, puis leur parut stupide ; — car l'auteur efface son oeuvre en y étalant sa personne.

Par besoin de dramatique, ils se plongèrent dans les romans d'aventures, l'intrigue les intéressait d'autant plus qu'elle était enchevêtrée, extraordinaire et impossible. Ils s'évertuaient à prévoir les dénouements, devinrent là dessus très forts, et se lassèrent d'une amusette, indigne d'esprits sérieux.

L'oeuvre de Balzac les émerveilla, tout à la fois comme une Babylone, et comme des grains de poussière sous le microscope. Dans les choses les plus banales, des aspects nouveaux surgirent. Ils n'avaient pas soupçonné la vie moderne aussi profonde.

— Quel observateur ! s'écriait Bouvard.

— Moi je le trouve chimérique finit par dire Pécuchet. Il croit aux sciences occultes, à la monarchie, à la noblesse, est ébloui par les coquins, vous remue les millions comme des centimes, et ses bourgeois ne sont pas des bourgeois, mais des colosses. Pourquoi gonfler ce qui est plat, et décrire tant de sottises ? Il a fait un roman sur la chimie, un autre sur la Banque, un autre sur les machines à imprimer. Comme un certain Ricard avait fait le cocher de fiacre, le porteur d'eau, le marchand de coco. Nous en aurons sur tous les métiers et sur toutes les provinces, puis sur toutes les villes et les étages de chaque maison et chaque individu, ce qui ne sera plus de la littérature, mais de la statistique ou de l'ethnographie.

Peu importait à Bouvard le procédé. Il voulait s'instruire, descendre plus avant dans la connaissance des moeurs. Il relut Paul de Kock, feuilleta de vieux ermites de la Chaussée d'Antin.

— Comment perdre son temps à des inepties pareilles ? disait Pécuchet.

— Mais par la suite, ce sera fort curieux, comme documents.

— Va te promener avec tes documents ! Je demande quelque chose qui m'exalte, qui m'enlève aux misères de ce monde !

Et Pécuchet, porté à l'idéal tourna Bouvard, insensiblement vers la

Tragédie.

Le lointain où elle se passe, les intérêts qu'on y débat et la condition de ses personnages leur imposaient comme un sentiment de grandeur.

Un jour, Bouvard prit *Athalie*, et débita le songe tellement bien, que Pécuchet voulut à son tour l'essayer. — Dès la première phrase, sa voix se perdit dans une espèce de bourdonnement. Elle était monotone, et bien que forte, indistincte.

Bouvard, plein d'expérience lui conseilla, pour l'assouplir, de la déployer depuis le ton le plus bas jusqu'au plus haut, et de la replier, — émettant deux gammes, l'une montante, l'autre descendante ; — et lui-même se livrait à cet exercice, le matin dans son lit, couché sur le dos, selon le précepte des Grecs. Pécuchet, pendant ce temps-là, travaillait de la même façon ; leur porte était close — et ils braillaient séparément.

Ce qui leur plaisait de la Tragédie, c'était l'emphase, les discours sur la Politique, les maximes de perversité.

Ils apprirent par coeur les dialogues les plus fameux de Racine et de Voltaire et ils les déclamaient dans le corridor. Bouvard, comme au Théâtre-Français, marchait la main sur l'épaule de Pécuchet en s'arrêtant par intervalles, et roulait ses yeux, ouvrait les bras, accusait les destins. Il avait de beaux cris de douleur dans le *Philoctète* de La Harpe, un joli hoquet dans *Gabrielle* de Vergy — et quand il faisait Denys tyran de Syracuse une manière de considérer son fils en l'appelant *Monstre, digne de moi !* qui était vraiment terrible. Pécuchet en oubliait son rôle. Les moyens lui manquaient, non la bonne volonté.

Une fois dans la Cléopâtre de Marmontel, il imagina de reproduire le sifflement de l'aspic, tel qu'avait dû le faire l'automate inventé exprès par Vaucanson. Cet effet manqué les fit rire jusqu'au soir. La Tragédie tomba dans leur estime.

Bouvard en fut las le premier, et y mettant de la franchise démontra combien elle est artificielle et podagre : la niaiserie de ses moyens, l'absurdité des confidents.

Ils abordèrent la Comédie — qui est l'école des nuances. Il faut disloquer la phrase, souligner les mots, peser les syllabes. Pécuchet n'en put venir à bout — et échoua complètement dans Célimène.

Du reste, il trouvait les amoureux bien froids, les raisonneurs assommants, les valets intolérables, Clitandre et Sganarelle aussi faux qu'Égisthe et qu'Agamemnon.

Restait la Comédie sérieuse, ou tragédie bourgeoise, celle où l'on voit des pères de famille désolés, des domestiques sauvant leurs maîtres, des richards offrant leur fortune, des couturières innocentes et d'infâmes suborneurs, genre qui se prolonge de Diderot jusqu'à Pixérécourt. Toutes ces pièces prêchant la vertu les choquèrent comme triviales.

Le drame de 1830 les enchanta par son mouvement, sa couleur, sa jeunesse. Ils ne faisaient guère de différence entre Victor Hugo, Dumas, ou Bouchardy ; — et la diction ne devait plus être pompeuse ou fine, — mais lyrique, désordonnée.

Un jour que Bouvard tâchait de faire comprendre à Pécuchet le jeu de Frédéric Lemaître, Mme Bordin se montra tout à coup avec son châle vert, et un volume de Pigault-Lebrun qu'elle rapportait, ces messieurs ayant l'obligeance de lui prêter des romans, quelquefois.

— Mais continuez ! car elle était là depuis une minute, et avait plaisir à les entendre.

Ils s'excusèrent. Elle insistait.

— Mon Dieu ! dit Bouvard rien ne nous empêche !…

Pécuchet allégua, par fausse honte, qu'ils ne pouvaient jouer à l'improviste, sans costume.

— Effectivement ! nous aurions besoin de nous déguiser. Et Bouvard chercha un objet quelconque, ne trouva que le bonnet grec, et le prit.

Comme le corridor manquait de largeur, ils descendirent dans le salon.

Des araignées couraient le long des murs — et les spécimens géologiques encombrant le sol avaient blanchi de leur poussière le velours des fauteuils. On étala sur le moins malpropre un torchon pour que Mme Bordin pût s'asseoir.

Il fallait lui servir quelque chose de bien. Bouvard était partisan de *La Tour de Nesle*. Mais Pécuchet avait peur des rôles qui demandent trop d'action.

— Elle aimera mieux du classique ! *Phèdre* par exemple ?

— Soit.

Bouvard conta le sujet. — C'est une reine, dont le mari, a, d'une autre femme, un fils. Elle est devenue folle du jeune homme — y sommes-nous ? En route !

— Oui, Prince, je languis, je brûle pour Thésée,

— Je l'aime !

Et parlant au profil de Pécuchet, il admirait son port, son visage, cette tête charmante, se désolait de ne l'avoir pas rencontré sur la flotte des Grecs, aurait voulu se perdre avec lui dans le labyrinthe.

La mèche du bonnet rouge s'inclinait amoureusement ; — et sa voix tremblante, et sa figure bonne conjuraient le cruel de prendre en pitié sa flamme. Pécuchet, en se détournant, haletait pour marquer de l'émotion.

Mme Bordin immobile écarquillait les yeux, comme devant les faiseurs de tours. Mélie écoutait derrière la porte. Gorju, en manches de chemise, les regardait par la fenêtre.

Bouvard entama la seconde tirade. Son jeu exprimait le délire des sens, le remords, le désespoir, et il se rua sur le glaive idéal de Pécuchet avec tant de violence que trébuchant dans les cailloux, il faillit tomber par terre.

— Ne faites pas attention ! Puis, Thésée arrive, et elle s'empoisonne !

— Pauvre femme ! dit Mme Bordin.

Ensuite ils la prièrent de leur désigner un morceau.

Le choix l'embarrassait. Elle n'avait vu que trois pièces : *Robert le Diable* dans la capitale, le *Jeune Mari* à Rouen — et une autre à Falaise qui était bien amusante et qu'on appelait *La Brouette du Vinaigrier*.

Enfin Bouvard lui proposa la grande scène de *Tartuffe*, au troisième acte.

Pécuchet crut une explication nécessaire :

Il faut savoir que *Tartuffe*…

Mme Bordin l'interrompit. On sait ce que c'est qu'un Tartuffe !

Bouvard eût désiré, pour un certain passage, une robe.

— Je ne vois que la robe de moine dit Pécuchet.

— N'importe ! mets-la !

Il reparut avec elle, et un Molière.

Le commencement fut médiocre. Mais Tartuffe venant à caresser les genoux d'Elmire, Pécuchet prit un ton de gendarme.

— Que fait là votre main ?

Bouvard bien vite répliqua d'une voix sucrée :

— Je tâte votre habit, l'étoffe en est moelleuse. Et il dardait ses prunelles, tendait la bouche, reniflait, avait un air extrêmement lubrique, finit même par s'adresser à Mme Bordin.

Les regards de cet homme la gênaient — et quand il s'arrêta, humble et palpitant, elle cherchait presque une réponse.

Pécuchet eut recours au livre : — La déclaration est tout à fait galante.

— Ah ! oui, s'écria-t-elle, c'est un fier enjôleur.

— N'est-ce pas ? reprit fièrement Bouvard. Mais en voilà une autre, d'un chic plus moderne, et ayant défait sa redingote, il s'accroupit sur un moellon et déclama la tête renversée.

Des flammes de tes yeux inonde ma paupière. Chante-moi quelque chant, comme parfois, le soir, Tu m'en chantais, avec des pleurs dans ton oeil noir.

— Ça me ressemble pensa-t-elle.

Soyons heureux ! buvons ! car la coupe est remplie, Car cette heure est à nous, et le reste est folie.

— Comme vous êtes drôle !

Et elle riait d'un petit rire, qui lui remontait la gorge et découvrait ses dents.

N'est-ce pas qu'il est doux D'aimer, et de savoir qu'on vous aime à genoux ?

Il s'agenouilla.

— Finissez donc !

Oh ! laisse-moi dormir et rêver sur ton sein, Doña Sol ! ma beauté ! mon amour !

— Ici on entend les cloches, un montagnard les dérange.

— Heureusement ! car sans cela… ! Et Mme Bordin sourit, au lieu de terminer sa phrase. Le jour baissait. Elle se leva.

Il avait plu tout à l'heure — et le chemin par la hêtrée n'étant pas facile, mieux valait s'en retourner par les champs. Bouvard l'accompagna dans le jardin, pour lui ouvrir la porte.

D'abord, ils marchèrent le long des quenouilles, sans parler. Il était encore ému de sa déclamation ; — et elle éprouvait au fond de l'âme comme une surprise, un charme qui venait de la Littérature. L'Art, en de certaines occasions, ébranle les esprits médiocres ; — et des mondes peuvent être révélés par ses interprètes les plus lourds.

Le soleil avait reparu, faisait luire les feuilles, jetait des taches lumineuses dans les fourrés, çà et là. Trois moineaux avec de petits cris sautillaient sur le tronc d'un vieux tilleul abattu. Une épine en fleurs étalait sa gerbe rose, des lilas alourdis se penchaient.

— Ah ! cela fait bien ! dit Bouvard, en humant l'air à pleins poumons.

— Aussi, vous vous donnez un mal !

— Ce n'est pas que j'aie du talent, mais pour du feu, j'en possède.

— On voit reprit-elle — et mettant un espace entre les mots que vous avez… aimé… autrefois.

— Autrefois, seulement — vous croyez !

Elle s'arrêta.

— Je n'en sais rien.

— Que veut-elle dire ? Et Bouvard sentait battre son coeur.

Une flaque au milieu du sable obligeant à un détour, les fit monter sous la charmille.

Alors ils causèrent de la représentation.

— Comment s'appelle votre dernier morceau ?

— C'est tiré de *Hernani*, un drame.

— Ah ! puis lentement, et se parlant à elle-même ce doit être bien agréable, un monsieur qui vous dit des choses pareilles, — pour tout de bon.

— Je suis à vos ordres répondit Bouvard.

— Vous ?

— Oui ! moi !

— Quelle plaisanterie !

— Pas le moins du monde !

Et ayant jeté un regard autour d'eux, il la prit à la ceinture, par derrière, et la baisa sur la nuque, fortement.

Elle devint très pâle comme si elle allait s'évanouir — et s'appuya d'une main contre un arbre ; puis, ouvrit les paupières, et secoua la tête.

— C'est passé.

Il la regardait, avec ébahissement.

La grille ouverte, elle monta sur le seuil de la petite porte. Une rigole coulait de l'autre côté. Elle ramassa tous les plis de sa jupe, et se tenait au bord, indécise.

— Voulez-vous mon aide ?

— Inutile !

— Pourquoi ?

— Ah ! vous êtes trop dangereux !

Et, dans le saut qu'elle fit, son bas blanc parut.

Bouvard se blâma d'avoir raté l'occasion. Bah ! elle se retrouverait ; — et puis les femmes ne sont pas toutes les mêmes. Il faut brusquer les unes, l'audace vous perd avec les autres. En somme, il était content de lui ; — et s'il ne confia pas son espoir à Pécuchet, ce fut dans la peur des observations, et nullement par délicatesse.

À partir de ce jour-là, ils déclamèrent souvent devant Mélie et Gorju tout en regrettant de n'avoir pas un théâtre de société.

La petite bonne s'amusait sans y rien comprendre, ébahie du langage, fascinée par le ronron des vers. Gorju applaudissait les tirades philosophiques des tragédies et tout ce qui était pour le peuple dans les mélodrames ; — si bien que charmés de son goût ils pensèrent à lui donner des leçons, pour en faire plus tard un acteur. Cette perspective éblouissait l'ouvrier.

Le bruit de leurs travaux s'était répandu. Vaucorbeil leur en parla d'une façon narquoise. Généralement on les méprisait.

Ils s'en estimaient davantage. Ils se sacrèrent artistes. Pécuchet porta des moustaches, et Bouvard ne trouva rien de mieux, avec sa mine ronde et sa calvitie, que de se faire une tête à la Béranger !

Enfin, ils résolurent de composer une pièce.

Le difficile c'était le sujet.

Ils le cherchaient en déjeunant, et buvaient du café, liqueur indispensable au cerveau, puis deux ou trois petits verres. Ensuite, ils allaient dormir sur leur lit ; après quoi, ils descendaient dans le verger, s'y promenaient, enfin sortaient pour trouver dehors l'inspiration, cheminaient côte à côte, et rentraient exténués.

Ou bien, ils s'enfermaient à double tour, Bouvard nettoyait la table, mettait du papier devant lui, trempait sa plume et restait les yeux au plafond, pendant que Pécuchet dans le fauteuil, méditait les jambes droites et la tête basse.

Parfois, ils sentaient un frisson et comme le vent d'une idée ; au moment de la saisir, elle avait disparu.

Mais il existe des méthodes pour découvrir des sujets. On prend un titre, au hasard, et un fait en découle ; on développe un proverbe, on combine des aventures en une seule. Pas un de ces moyens n'aboutit. Ils feuilletèrent vainement des recueils d'anecdotes, plusieurs volumes des causes célèbres, un tas d'histoires.

Et ils rêvaient d'être joués à l'Odéon, pensaient aux spectacles, regrettaient Paris.

— J'étais fait pour être auteur, et ne pas m'enterrer à la campagne ! disait Bouvard.

— Moi de même, répondait Pécuchet.

Une illumination lui vint : s'ils avaient tant de mal, c'est qu'ils ne savaient pas les règles.

Ils les étudièrent, dans *La Pratique du Théâtre* par d'Aubignac, et dans quelques ouvrages moins démodés.

On y débat des questions importantes : Si la comédie peut s'écrire en vers, — si la tragédie n'excède point les bornes en tirant sa fable de l'histoire moderne, — si les héros doivent être vertueux, — quel genre de scélérats elle comporte, — jusqu'à quel point les horreurs y sont permises ? Que les détails concourent à un seul but, que l'intérêt grandisse, que la fin réponde au commencement, sans doute !

« Inventez des ressorts qui puissent m'attacher », dit Boileau.

Par quel moyen inventer des ressorts ?

« Que dans tous vos discours la passion émue Aille chercher le coeur, l'échauffe et le remue. »

Comment chauffer le coeur ?

Donc les règles ne suffisent pas. Il faut, de plus, le génie.

Et le génie ne suffit pas. Corneille, suivant l'Académie française, n'entend rien au théâtre. Geoffroy dénigra Voltaire. Racine fut bafoué par Subligny. La Harpe rugissait au nom de Shakespeare.

La vieille critique les dégoûtant, ils voulurent connaître la nouvelle, et firent venir les comptes rendus de pièces, dans les journaux.

Quel aplomb ! Quel entêtement ! Quelle improbité ! Des outrages à des chefs-d'oeuvre, des révérences faites à des platitudes — et les âneries de ceux qui passent pour savants et la bêtise des autres que l'on proclame spirituels !

C'est peut-être au Public qu'il faut s'en rapporter ?

Mais des oeuvres applaudies parfois leur déplaisaient, et dans les sifflées quelque chose leur agréait.

Ainsi, l'opinion des gens de goût est trompeuse et le jugement de la foule inconcevable.

Bouvard posa le dilemme à Barberou. Pécuchet, de son côté, écrivit à Dumouchel.

L'ancien commis-voyageur s'étonna du ramollissement causé par la province, son vieux Bouvard tournait à la bedolle, bref n'y était plus du tout.

Le théâtre est un objet de consommation comme un autre. Cela rentre dans l'article-Paris. On va au spectacle pour se divertir. Ce qui est bien, c'est ce qui amuse.

— Mais imbécile s'écria Pécuchet ce qui t'amuse n'est pas ce qui m'amuse — et les autres et toi-même s'en fatigueront plus tard. Si les pièces sont absolument écrites pour être jouées, comment se fait-il que les meilleures soient toujours lues ? Et il attendit la réponse de Dumouchel.

Suivant le professeur, le sort immédiat d'une pièce ne prouvait rien. Le Misanthrope et Athalie tombèrent. Zaïre n'est plus comprise. Qui parle aujourd'hui de Ducange et de Picard ? — Et il rappelait tous les grands succès contemporains, depuis Fanchon la Vielleuse jusqu'à Gaspardo le Pêcheur, déplorait la décadence de notre scène. Elle a pour cause le mépris de la Littérature — ou plutôt du style.

Alors, ils se demandèrent en quoi consiste précisément le style ? — et grâce à des auteurs indiqués par Dumouchel, ils apprirent le secret de tous ses genres.

Comment on obtient le majestueux, le tempéré, le naïf, les tournures qui sont nobles, les mots qui sont bas. Chiens se relève par dévorants.

Vomir ne s'emploie qu'au figuré. Fièvre s'applique aux passions.

Vaillance est beau en vers.

— Si nous faisions des vers ? dit Pécuchet.

— Plus tard ! Occupons-nous de la prose, d'abord.

On recommande formellement de choisir un classique pour se mouler sur lui mais tous ont leurs dangers — et non seulement ils ont péché par le style — mais encore par la langue.

Une telle assertion déconcerta Bouvard et Pécuchet et ils se mirent à étudier la grammaire.

Avons-nous dans notre idiome des articles définis et indéfinis comme en latin ? Les uns pensent que oui, les autres que non. Ils n'osèrent se décider.

Le sujet s'accorde toujours avec le verbe, sauf les occasions où le sujet ne s'accorde pas.

Nulle distinction autrefois entre l'adjectif verbal et le participe présent, mais l'Académie en pose une peu commode à saisir.

Ils furent bien aises d'apprendre que leur, pronom, s'emploie pour les personnes mais aussi pour les choses, tandis que où et en s'emploient pour les choses et quelquefois pour les personnes.

Doit-on dire cette femme a l'air bon ou l'air bonne ? — une bûche de bois sec ou de bois sèche — ne pas laisser de ou que de — une troupe de voleurs survint, ou survinrent ?

Autres difficultés : Autour et à l'entour dont Racine et Boileau ne voyaient pas la différence — imposer ou en imposer synonymes chez Massillon et chez Voltaire ; croasser et coasser confondus par La Fontaine, qui pourtant savait reconnaître un corbeau d'une grenouille.

Les grammairiens, il est vrai, sont en désaccord ; ceux-ci voyant une beauté, où ceux-là découvrent une faute. Ils admettent des principes dont ils repoussent les conséquences, proclament les conséquences dont ils refusent les principes, s'appuient sur la tradition, rejettent les maîtres, et ont des raffinements bizarres. Ménage au lieu de lentilles et cassonade préconise nentilles et castonade. Bouhours jérarchie et non pas hiérarchie, et M. Chapsal les oeils de la soupe.

Pécuchet surtout fut ébahi par Génin. Comment ? des z'annetons vaudrait mieux que des hannetons, des z'aricots que des haricots — et sous Louis XIV, on prononçait Roume et M. de Loune pour Rome et M. de Lionne !

Littré leur porta le coup de grâce en affirmant que jamais il n'y eut d'orthographe positive, et qu'il ne saurait y en avoir.

Ils en conclurent que la syntaxe est une fantaisie et la grammaire une illusion.

En ce temps-là, d'ailleurs, une rhétorique nouvelle annonçait qu'il faut écrire comme on parle et que tout sera bien pourvu qu'on ait senti, observé.

Comme ils avaient senti et croyaient avoir observé, ils se jugèrent capables d'écrire. Une pièce est gênante par l'étroitesse du cadre ; mais le roman a plus de libertés. Pour en faire un, ils cherchèrent dans leurs souvenirs.

Pécuchet se rappela un de ses chefs de bureau, un très vilain monsieur, et il ambitionnait de s'en venger par un livre.

Bouvard avait connu à l'estaminet, un vieux maître d'écriture ivrogne et misérable. Rien ne serait drôle comme ce personnage.

Au bout de la semaine, ils imaginèrent de fondre ces deux sujets, en un seul — en demeuraient là, passèrent aux suivants : — une femme qui cause le malheur d'une famille — une femme, son mari et son amant — une femme qui serait vertueuse par défaut de conformation, un ambitieux, un mauvais prêtre.

Ils tâchaient de relier à ces conceptions incertaines des choses fournies par leur mémoire, retranchaient, ajoutaient. Pécuchet était pour le sentiment et l'idée, Bouvard pour l'image et la couleur — et ils commençaient à ne plus s'entendre, chacun s'étonnant que l'autre fût si borné.

La science qu'on nomme esthétique, trancherait peut-être leurs différends. Un ami de Dumouchel, professeur de philosophie, leur envoya une liste d'ouvrages sur la matière. Ils travaillaient à part, et se communiquaient leurs réflexions.

D'abord qu'est-ce que le Beau ?

Pour Schelling c'est l'infini s'exprimant par le fini, pour Reid une qualité occulte, pour Jouffroy un trait indécomposable, pour De Maistre ce qui plaît à la vertu ; pour le P. André, ce qui convient à la Raison.

Et il existe plusieurs sortes de Beau : un beau dans les sciences, la géométrie est belle, un beau dans les moeurs, on ne peut nier que la mort de Socrate ne soit belle. Un beau dans le règne animal. La Beauté du chien consiste dans son odorat. Un cochon ne saurait être beau, vu ses habitudes immondes ; un serpent non plus, car il éveille en nous des idées de bassesse. Les fleurs, les papillons, les oiseaux peuvent être beaux. Enfin la condition première du Beau, c'est l'unité dans la variété, voilà le principe.

— Cependant, dit Bouvard, deux yeux louches sont plus variés que deux yeux droits et produisent moins bon effet, — ordinairement.

Ils abordèrent la question du sublime.

Certains objets, sont d'eux-mêmes sublimes, le fracas d'un torrent, des ténèbres profondes, un arbre battu par la tempête. Un caractère est beau quand il triomphe, et sublime quand il lutte.

— Je comprends dit Bouvard le Beau est le Beau, et le Sublime le très

Beau.

Comment les distinguer ?

— Au moyen du tact, répondit Pécuchet.

— Et le tact, d'où vient-il ?

— Du goût !

— Qu'est-ce que le goût ?

On le définit un discernement spécial, un jugement rapide, l'avantage de distinguer certains rapports.

— Enfin le goût c'est le goût, — et tout cela ne dit pas la manière d'en avoir.

Il faut observer les bienséances ; mais les bienséances varient ; — et si parfaite que soit une oeuvre, elle ne sera pas toujours irréprochable. — Il y a, pourtant, un Beau indestructible, et dont nous ignorons les lois, car sa genèse est mystérieuse.

Puisqu'une idée ne peut se traduire par toutes les formes, nous devons reconnaître des limites entre les Arts, et dans chacun des Arts plusieurs genres. Mais des combinaisons surgissent où le style de l'un entrera dans l'autre sous peine de dévier du but, de ne pas être vrai.

L'application trop exacte du Vrai nuit à la Beauté, et la préoccupation de la Beauté empêche le Vrai. Cependant, sans idéal pas de Vrai ; — c'est pourquoi les types sont d'une réalité plus continue que les portraits. L'Art, d'ailleurs, ne traite que la vraisemblance — mais la vraisemblance dépend de qui l'observe, est une chose relative, passagère.

Ils se perdaient ainsi dans les raisonnements. Bouvard, de moins en moins, croyait à l'esthétique.

— Si elle n'est pas une blague, sa rigueur se démontrera par des exemples. Or, écoute. Et il lut une note, qui lui avait demandé bien des recherches.

Bouhours accuse Tacite de n'avoir pas la simplicité que réclame l'Histoire. M. Droz, un professeur, blâme Shakespeare pour son mélange du sérieux et du bouffon, Nisard, autre professeur, trouve qu'André Chénier est comme poète au-dessous du XVIIe siècle, Blair, Anglais, déplore dans Virgile le tableau des harpies. Marmontel gémit sur les licences d'Homère. Lamotte n'admet point l'immoralité de ses héros, Vida s'indigne de ses comparaisons. Enfin, tous les faiseurs de rhétoriques, de poétiques et d'esthétiques me paraissent des imbéciles !

— Tu exagères ! dit Pécuchet.

Des doutes l'agitaient — car si les esprits médiocres (comme observe Longin) sont incapables de fautes, les fautes appartiennent aux maîtres, et on devra les admirer ? C'est trop fort ! Cependant les maîtres sont les maîtres ! Il aurait voulu faire s'accorder les doctrines avec les oeuvres, les critiques et les poètes, saisir l'essence du Beau ; — et ces questions le travaillèrent tellement que sa bile en fut remuée. Il y gagna une jaunisse.

Elle était à son plus haut période, quand Marianne la cuisinière de Mme Bordin vint demander à Bouvard un rendez-vous pour sa maîtresse.

La veuve n'avait pas reparu depuis la séance dramatique. Était-ce une avance ? Mais pourquoi l'intermédiaire de Marianne ? — Et pendant toute la nuit, l'imagination de Bouvard s'égara.

Le lendemain, vers deux heures, il se promenait dans le corridor et regardait de temps à autre par la fenêtre ; un coup de sonnette retentit. C'était le notaire.

Il traversa la cour, monta l'escalier, se mit dans le fauteuil — et les premières politesses échangées, dit que las d'attendre Mme Bordin, il avait pris les devants. Elle désirait lui acheter les Écalles.

Bouvard sentit comme un refroidissement et passa dans la chambre de

Pécuchet.

Pécuchet ne sut que répondre. Il était soucieux ; — M. Vaucorbeil devant venir tout à l'heure.

Enfin, elle arriva. Son retard s'expliquait par l'importance de sa toilette : un cachemire, un chapeau, des gants glacés, la tenue qui sied aux occasions sérieuses.

Après beaucoup d'ambages, elle demanda si mille écus ne seraient pas suffisants ?

— Un acre ! Mille écus ? jamais !

Elle cligna ses paupières : — Ah ! pour moi !

Et tous les trois restaient silencieux. M. de Faverges entra.

Il tenait sous le bras, comme un avoué, une serviette de maroquin — et en la posant sur la table :

— Ce sont des brochures ! Elles ont trait à la Réforme — question brûlante ; — mais voici une chose qui vous appartient sans doute ? Et il tendit à Bouvard le second volume des Mémoires du Diable.

Mélie, tout à l'heure, le lisait dans la cuisine ; et comme on doit surveiller les moeurs de ces gens-là, il avait cru bien faire en confisquant le livre.

Bouvard l'avait prêté à sa servante. On causa des romans.

Mme Bordin les aimait, quand ils n'étaient pas lugubres.

— Les écrivains dit M. de Faverges nous peignent la vie sous des couleurs flatteuses !

— Il faut peindre ! objecta Bouvard.

— Alors, on n'a plus qu'à suivre l'exemple !…

— Il ne s'agit pas d'exemple !

— Au moins, conviendrez-vous qu'ils peuvent tomber entre les mains d'une jeune fille. Moi, j'en ai une.

— Charmante ! dit le notaire, en prenant la figure qu'il avait les jours de contrat de mariage.

— Eh bien, à cause d'elle, ou plutôt des personnes qui l'entourent, je les prohibe dans ma maison, car le Peuple, cher monsieur !…

— Qu'a-t-il fait, le Peuple ? dit Vaucorbeil, paraissant tout à coup sur le seuil.

Pécuchet, qui avait reconnu sa voix, vint se mêler à la compagnie.

— Je soutiens reprit le comte qu'il faut écarter de lui certaines lectures.

Vaucorbeil répliqua : — Vous n'êtes donc pas pour l'instruction ?

— Si fait ! Permettez ?

— Quand tous les jours dit Marescot on attaque le gouvernement !

— Où est le mal ?

Et le gentilhomme et le médecin se mirent à dénigrer Louis-Philippe, rappelant l'affaire Pritchard, les lois de septembre contre la liberté de la presse.

— Et celle du théâtre ! ajouta Pécuchet.

Marescot n'y tenait plus. — Il va trop loin, votre théâtre !

— Pour cela, je vous l'accorde ! dit le comte ; des pièces qui exaltent le suicide !

— Le suicide est beau ! — témoin Caton, objecta Pécuchet.

Sans répondre à l'argument, M. de Faverges stigmatisa ces oeuvres, où l'on bafoue les choses les plus saintes, la famille, la propriété, le mariage !

— Eh bien, et Molière ? dit Bouvard.

Marescot, homme de goût, riposta que Molière ne passerait plus — et d'ailleurs était un peu surfait.

— Enfin dit le comte Victor Hugo a été sans pitié — oui sans pitié, pour Marie-Antoinette, en traînant sur la claie, le type de la Reine dans le personnage de Marie Tudor !

— Comment ! s'écria Bouvard moi — auteur — je n'ai pas le droit…

— Non, monsieur, vous n'avez pas le droit de nous montrer le crime sans mettre à côté un correctif, sans nous offrir une leçon.

Vaucorbeil trouvait aussi que l'Art devait avoir un but : viser à l'amélioration des masses ! Chantez-nous la science, nos découvertes, le patriotisme et il admirait Casimir Delavigne.

Mme Bordin vanta le marquis de Foudras.

Le notaire reprit : — Mais la langue, y pensez-vous ?

— La langue ? comment ?

— On vous parle du style ! cria Pécuchet. Trouvez-vous ses ouvrages bien écrits ?

— Sans doute, fort intéressants !

Il leva les épaules — et elle rougit sous l'impertinence.

Plusieurs fois, Mme Bordin avait tâché de revenir à son affaire. Il était trop tard pour la conclure. Elle sortit au bras de Marescot.

Le comte distribua ses pamphlets, en recommandant de les propager.

Vaucorbeil allait partir, quand Pécuchet l'arrêta.

— Vous m'oubliez, Docteur !

Sa mine jaune était lamentable, avec ses moustaches, et ses cheveux noirs qui pendaient sous un foulard mal attaché.

— Purgez-vous dit le médecin ; et lui donnant deux petites claques comme à un enfant : Trop de nerfs, trop artiste !

Cette familiarité lui fit plaisir. Elle le rassurait ; — et dès qu'ils furent seuls :

— Tu crois que ce n'est pas sérieux ?

— Non ! bien sûr !

Ils résumèrent ce qu'ils venaient d'entendre. La moralité de l'Art se renferme pour chacun dans le côté qui flatte ses intérêts. On n'aime pas la Littérature.

Ensuite ils feuilletèrent les imprimés du Comte. Tous réclamaient le suffrage universel.

— Il me semble dit Pécuchet que nous aurons bientôt du grabuge ? Car il voyait tout en noir, peut-être à cause de sa jaunisse.

CHAPITRE VI

Dans la matinée du 25 février 1848, on apprit à Chavignolles, par un individu venant de Falaise, que Paris était couvert de barricades — et le lendemain, la proclamation de la République fut affichée sur la mairie.

Ce grand événement stupéfia les bourgeois.

Mais quand on sut que la Cour de cassation, la Cour d'appel, la Cour des Comptes, le Tribunal de commerce, la Chambre des notaires, l'Ordre des avocats, le Conseil d'État, l'Université, les généraux et M. de la Rochejacquelein lui-même donnaient leur adhésion au Gouvernement Provisoire, les poitrines se desserrèrent ; — et comme à Paris on plantait des arbres de la liberté, le Conseil municipal décida qu'il en fallait à Chavignolles.

Bouvard en offrit un, réjoui dans son patriotisme par le triomphe du Peuple — quant à Pécuchet, la chute de la Royauté confirmait trop ses prévisions pour qu'il ne fût pas content.

Gorju, leur obéissant avec zèle, déplanta un des peupliers qui bordaient la prairie au-dessous de la Butte, et le transporta jusqu'au Pas de la Vaque, à l'entrée du bourg, endroit désigné.

Avant l'heure de la cérémonie, tous les trois attendaient le cortège.

Un tambour retentit, une croix d'argent se montra ; ensuite, parurent deux flambeaux que tenaient des chantres, et M. le curé avec l'étole, le surplis, la chape et la barrette. Quatre enfants de choeur l'escortaient, un cinquième portait le seau pour l'eau bénite, et le sacristain le suivait.

Il monta sur le rebord de la fosse où se dressait le peuplier, garni de bandelettes tricolores. On voyait en face le maire et ses deux adjoints Beljambe et Marescot, puis les notables, M. de Faverges, Vaucorbeil, Coulon le juge de paix, bonhomme à figure somnolente ; Heurtaux s'était coiffé d'un bonnet de police — et Alexandre Petit le nouvel instituteur, avait mis sa redingote, une pauvre redingote verte, celle des dimanches. Les pompiers, que commandait Girbal sabre au poing, formaient un seul rang ; de l'autre côté brillaient les plaques blanches de quelques vieux shakos du temps de La Fayette — cinq ou six, pas plus, la garde nationale étant tombée en désuétude à Chavignolles. Des paysans et leurs femmes, des ouvriers des fabriques voisines, des gamins, se tassaient par derrière ; — et Placquevent, le garde champêtre, haut de cinq pieds huit pouces, les contenait du regard, en se promenant les bras croisés.

L'allocution du curé fut comme celle des autres prêtres dans la même circonstance. Après avoir tonné contre les Rois, il glorifia la République. Ne dit-on pas la République des Lettres, la République chrétienne ? Quoi de plus innocent que l'une, de plus beau que l'autre ? Jésus-Christ formula notre sublime devise ; l'arbre du peuple c'était l'arbre de la Croix. Pour que la Religion donne ses fruits, elle a besoin de la charité — et au nom de la charité, l'ecclésiastique conjura ses frères de ne commettre aucun désordre, de rentrer chez eux, paisiblement.

Puis, il aspergea l'arbuste, en implorant la bénédiction de Dieu. Qu'il se développe et qu'il nous rappelle l'affranchissement de toute servitude, et cette fraternité plus bienfaisante que l'ombrage de ses rameaux ! — Amen !

Des voix répétèrent Amen — et après un battement de tambour, le clergé, poussant un Te Deum, reprit le chemin de l'église.

Son intervention avait produit un excellent effet. Les simples y voyaient une promesse de bonheur, les patriotes une déférence, un hommage rendu à leurs principes.

Bouvard et Pécuchet trouvaient qu'on aurait dû les remercier pour leur cadeau, y faire une allusion, tout au moins ; — et ils s'en ouvrirent à Faverges et au docteur.

Qu'importaient de pareilles misères ! Vaucorbeil était charmé de la Révolution, le Comte aussi. Il exécrait les d'Orléans. On ne les reverrait plus ; bon voyage ! Tout pour le peuple, désormais ! — et suivi de Hurel, son factotum, il alla rejoindre M. le curé.

Foureau marchait la tête basse, entre le notaire et l'aubergiste, vexé par la cérémonie, ayant peur d'une émeute ; — et instinctivement il se retournait vers le garde champêtre, qui déplorait avec le Capitaine, l'insuffisance de Girbal, et la mauvaise tenue de ses hommes.

Des ouvriers passèrent sur la route, en chantant la Marseillaise. Gorju, au milieu d'eux, brandissait une canne ; Petit les escortait, l'oeil animé.

— Je n'aime pas cela ! dit Marescot, on vocifère, on s'exalte !

— Eh bon Dieu ! reprit Coulon, il faut que jeunesse s'amuse !

Foureau soupira. Drôle d'amusement ! et puis la guillotine, au bout ! Il avait des visions d'échafaud, s'attendait à des horreurs.

Chavignolles reçut le contrecoup des agitations de Paris. Les bourgeois s'abonnèrent à des journaux. Le matin, on s'encombrait au bureau de la poste, et la directrice ne s'en fût pas tirée sans le Capitaine, qui l'aidait, quelquefois. Ensuite, on restait sur la Place, à causer.

La première discussion violente eut pour objet la Pologne.

Heurtaux et Bouvard demandaient qu'on la délivrât.

M. de Faverges pensait autrement.

— De quel droit irions-nous là-bas ? C'était déchaîner l'Europe contre nous.

Pas d'imprudence ! Et tout le monde l'approuvant, les deux Polonais se turent.

Une autre fois, Vaucorbeil défendit les circulaires de Ledru-Rollin.

Foureau riposta par les 45 centimes.

Mais le gouvernement, dit Pécuchet, avait supprimé l'esclavage.

— Qu'est-ce que ça me fait, l'esclavage !

— Eh bien, et l'abolition de la peine de mort, en matière politique ?

— Parbleu ! reprit Foureau ; on voudrait tout abolir. Cependant qui sait ?

Les locataires déjà, se montrent d'une exigence !

— Tant mieux ! les propriétaires selon Pécuchet étaient favorisés. Celui qui possède un immeuble…

Foureau et Marescot l'interrompirent, criant qu'il était un communiste.

— Moi ? communiste !

Et tous parlaient à la fois, quand Pécuchet proposa de fonder un club !

Foureau eut la hardiesse de répondre que jamais on n'en verrait à

Chavignolles.

Ensuite, Gorju réclama des fusils pour la garde nationale — l'opinion l'ayant désigné comme instructeur.

Les seuls fusils qu'il y eût étaient ceux des pompiers. Girbal y tenait.

Foureau ne se souciait pas d'en délivrer.

Gorju le regarda. — On trouve, pourtant, que je sais m'en servir car il joignait à toutes ses industries celle du braconnage — et souvent M. le maire et l'aubergiste lui achetaient un lièvre ou un lapin.

— Ma foi ! prenez-les ! dit Foureau.

Le soir même, on commença les exercices.

C'était sur la pelouse, devant l'église. Gorju en bourgeron bleu, une cravate autour des reins, exécutait les mouvements d'une façon automatique. Sa voix, quand il commandait, était brutale. — Rentrez les ventres ! Et tout de suite, Bouvard s'empêchant de respirer, creusait son abdomen, tendait la croupe. — On ne vous dit pas de faire un arc, nom de Dieu ! Pécuchet confondait les files et les rangs, demi-tour à droite, demi-tour à gauche ; mais le plus lamentable était l'instituteur : débile et de taille exiguë, avec un collier de barbe blonde, il chancelait sous le poids de son fusil, dont la baïonnette incommodait ses voisins.

On portait des pantalons de toutes les couleurs, des baudriers crasseux, de vieux habits d'uniforme trop courts, laissant voir la chemise sur les flancs ; — et chacun prétendait n'avoir pas le moyen de faire autrement. Une souscription fut ouverte pour habiller les plus pauvres. Foureau lésina, tandis que des femmes se signalèrent. Mme Bordin offrit cinq francs, malgré sa haine de la République. M. de Faverges équipa douze hommes ; et ne manquait pas à la manoeuvre. Puis il s'installait chez l'épicier et payait des petits verres au premier venu.

Les puissants alors flagornaient la basse classe. Tout passait après les ouvriers. On briguait l'avantage de leur appartenir. Ils devenaient des nobles.

Ceux du canton, pour la plupart, étaient tisserands. D'autres travaillaient dans les manufactures d'indiennes, ou à une fabrique de papiers, nouvellement établie.

Gorju les fascinait par son bagout, leur apprenait la savate, menait boire les intimes chez Mme Castillon.

Mais les paysans étaient plus nombreux ; et les jours de marché, M. de Faverges se promenant sur la Place, s'informait de leurs besoins, tâchait de les convertir à ses idées. Ils écoutaient sans répondre, comme le père Gouy, prêt à accepter tout gouvernement, pourvu qu'on diminuât les impôts.

À force de bavarder, Gorju se fit un nom. Peut-être qu'on le porterait à l'Assemblée.

M. de Faverges y pensait comme lui, — tout en cherchant à ne pas se compromettre. Les conservateurs balançaient entre Foureau et Marescot. Mais le notaire tenant à son étude, Foureau fut choisi — un rustre, un crétin. Le docteur s'en indigna.

Fruit sec des concours, il regrettait Paris — et c'était la conscience de sa vie manquée qui lui donnait un air morose. Une carrière plus vaste allait se développer — quelle revanche ! Il rédigea une profession de foi et vint la lire à messieurs Bouvard et Pécuchet.

Ils l'en félicitèrent ; leurs doctrines étaient les mêmes.

Cependant, ils écrivaient mieux, connaissaient l'histoire, pouvaient aussi bien que lui figurer à la Chambre. Pourquoi pas ? Mais lequel devait se présenter ? Et une lutte de délicatesse s'engagea. Pécuchet préférait à lui-même, son ami. Non ! non, ça te revient ! tu as plus de prestance ! — Peut-être répondait Bouvard mais toi plus de toupet ! Et sans résoudre la difficulté, ils dressèrent des plans de conduite.

Ce vertige de la députation en avait gagné d'autres. Le Capitaine y rêvait sous son bonnet de police, tout en fumant sa bouffarde ; et l'instituteur aussi, dans son école, et le curé aussi entre deux prières — tellement que parfois il se surprenait les yeux au ciel, en train de dire : Faites, ô mon Dieu ! que je sois député !

Le Docteur, ayant reçu des encouragements, se rendit chez Heurtaux, et lui exposa les chances qu'il avait.

Le capitaine n'y mit pas de façons. Vaucorbeil était connu sans doute ; mais peu chéri de ses confrères, et spécialement des pharmaciens. Tous clabauderaient contre lui ; le peuple ne voulait pas d'un Monsieur ; ses meilleurs malades le quitteraient ; — et ayant pesé ces arguments, le médecin regretta sa faiblesse.

Dès qu'il fut parti, Heurtaux alla voir Placquevent. Entre vieux militaires on s'oblige ! Mais le garde champêtre, tout dévoué à Foureau, refusa net de le servir.

Le curé démontra à M. de Faverges que l'heure n'était pas venue. Il fallait donner à la République le temps de s'user.

Bouvard et Pécuchet représentèrent à Gorju qu'il ne serait jamais assez fort pour vaincre la coalition des paysans et des bourgeois, l'emplirent d'incertitudes, lui ôtèrent toute confiance.

Petit, par orgueil, avait laissé voir son désir. Beljambe le prévint que s'il échouait, sa destitution était certaine.

Enfin, Monseigneur ordonna au curé de se tenir tranquille.

Donc, il ne restait que Foureau.

Bouvard et Pécuchet le combattirent, rappelant sa mauvaise volonté pour les fusils, son opposition au club, ses idées rétrogrades, son avarice ; — et même persuadèrent à Gouy qu'il voulait rétablir l'ancien régime.

Si vague que fût cette chose-là pour le paysan, il l'exécrait d'une haine accumulée dans l'âme de ses aïeux, pendant dix siècles — et il tourna contre Foureau tous ses parents et ceux de sa femme, beaux-frères, cousins, arrière-neveux, une horde.

Gorju, Vaucorbeil et Petit continuaient la démolition de M. le maire ; et le terrain ainsi déblayé, Bouvard et Pécuchet, sans que personne s'en doutât, pouvaient réussir.

Ils tirèrent au sort pour savoir qui se présenterait. Le sort ne trancha rien — et ils allèrent consulter là-dessus, le docteur.

Il leur apprit une nouvelle. Flacardoux, rédacteur du Calvados, avait déclaré sa candidature. La déception des deux amis fut grande ; chacun, outre la sienne, ressentait celle de l'autre. Mais la Politique les échauffait. Le jour des élections, ils surveillèrent les urnes. Flacardoux l'emporta.

M. le comte s'était rejeté sur la garde nationale, sans obtenir l'épaulette de commandant. Les Chavignollais imaginèrent de nommer Beljambe.

Cette faveur du public, bizarre et imprévue, consterna Heurtaux. Il avait négligé ses devoirs, se bornant à inspecter parfois les manoeuvres, et émettre des observations. N'importe ! Il trouvait monstrueux qu'on préférât un aubergiste à un ancien Capitaine de l'Empire — et il dit, après l'envahissement de la Chambre au 15 mai : Si les grades militaires se donnent comme ça dans la capitale, je ne m'étonne plus de ce qui arrive !

La Réaction commençait.

On croyait aux purées d'ananas de Louis Blanc, au lit d'or de Flocon, aux orgies royales de Ledru-Rollin — et comme la province prétend connaître tout ce qui se passe à Paris, les bourgeois de Chavignolles ne doutaient pas de ces inventions, et admettaient les rumeurs les plus absurdes.

M. de Faverges, un soir, vint trouver le curé pour lui apprendre l'arrivée en Normandie du Comte de Chambord.

Joinville, d'après Foureau, se disposait avec ses marins, à vous réduire les socialistes. Heurtaux affirmait que prochainement Louis Bonaparte serait consul.

Les fabriques chômaient. Des pauvres, par bandes nombreuses, erraient dans la campagne.

Un dimanche (c'était dans les premiers jours de juin) un gendarme, tout à coup, partit vers Falaise. Les ouvriers d'Acqueville, Liffard, Pierre-Pont et Saint-Rémy marchaient sur Chavignolles.

Les auvents se fermèrent, le Conseil municipal s'assembla ; — et résolut, pour prévenir des malheurs, qu'on ne ferait aucune résistance. La gendarmerie fut même consignée, avec l'injonction de ne pas se montrer.

Bientôt on entendit comme un grondement d'orage. Puis le chant des Girondins ébranla les carreaux ; — et des hommes, bras dessus bras dessous, débouchèrent par la route de Caen, poudreux, en sueur, dépenaillés. Ils emplissaient la Place. Un grand brouhaha s'élevait.

Gorju et deux compagnons entrèrent dans la salle. L'un était maigre et à figure chafouine avec un gilet de tricot, dont les rosettes pendaient. L'autre noir de charbon — un mécanicien sans doute — avait les cheveux en brosse, de gros sourcils, et des savates de lisière. Gorju, comme un hussard, portait sa veste sur l'épaule.

Tous les trois restaient debout — et les Conseillers, siégeant autour de la table couverte d'un tapis bleu, les regardaient, blêmes d'angoisse.

— Citoyens ! dit Gorju il nous faut de l'ouvrage !

Le maire tremblait ; la voix lui manqua.

Marescot répondit à sa place, que le Conseil aviserait immédiatement ; — et les compagnons étant sortis, on discuta plusieurs idées.

La première fut de tirer du caillou.

Pour utiliser les cailloux, Girbal proposa un chemin d'Angleville à Tournebu.

Celui de Bayeux rendait absolument le même service.

On pouvait curer la mare ? ce n'était pas un travail suffisant ! ou bien creuser une seconde mare ! mais à quelle place ?

Langlois était d'avis de faire un remblai le long des Mortins, en cas d'inondation — mieux valait, selon Beljambe, défricher les bruyères. Impossible de rien conclure ! — Pour calmer la foule, Coulon descendit sur le péristyle, et annonça qu'ils préparaient des ateliers de charité.

— La charité ? Merci ! s'écria Gorju. À bas les aristos ! Nous voulons le droit au travail !

C'était la question de l'époque. Il s'en faisait un moyen de gloire. On applaudit.

En se retournant, il coudoya Bouvard, que Pécuchet avait entraîné jusque-là — et ils engagèrent une conversation. Rien ne pressait ; la mairie était cernée. Le Conseil n'échapperait pas.

— Où trouver de l'argent ? disait Bouvard.

— Chez les riches ! D'ailleurs, le gouvernement ordonnera des travaux.

— Et si on n'a pas besoin de travaux ?

— On en fera, par avance !

— Mais les salaires baisseront ! riposta Pécuchet. Quand l'ouvrage vient à manquer, c'est qu'il y a trop de produits ! — et vous réclamez pour qu'on les augmente !

Gorju se mordait la moustache. — Cependant… avec l'organisation du travail…

— Alors le gouvernement sera le maître ?

Quelques-uns, autour d'eux, murmurèrent : — Non ! non ! plus de maîtres !

Gorju s'irrita. — N'importe ! on doit fournir aux travailleurs un capital — ou bien instituer le crédit !

— De quelle manière ?

— Ah ! je ne sais pas ! mais on doit instituer le crédit !

— En voilà assez dit le mécanicien ; ils nous embêtent, ces farceurs-là !

Et il gravit le perron, déclarant qu'il enfoncerait la porte.

Placquevent l'y reçut, le jarret droit fléchi, les poings serrés.

— Avance un peu !

Le mécanicien recula.

Une nuée de la foule parvint dans la salle ; tous se levèrent, ayant envie de s'enfuir. Le secours de Falaise n'arrivait pas ! On déplorait l'absence de M. le Comte. Marescot tortillait une plume. Le père Coulon gémissait. Heurtaux s'emporta pour qu'on fît donner les gendarmes.

— Commandez-les ! dit Foureau.

— Je n'ai pas d'ordre.

Le bruit redoublait, cependant. La Place était couverte de monde ; — et tous observaient le premier étage de la mairie, quand à la croisée du milieu, sous l'horloge, on vit paraître Pécuchet.

Il avait pris adroitement l'escalier de service ; — et voulant faire comme Lamartine, il se mit à haranguer le peuple :

— Citoyens !

Mais sa casquette, son nez, sa redingote, tout son individu manquait de prestige.

L'homme au tricot l'interpella :

— Est-ce que vous êtes ouvrier ?

— Non.

— Patron, alors ?

— Pas davantage !

— Eh bien, retirez-vous !

— Pourquoi ? reprit fièrement Pécuchet.

Et aussitôt, il disparut dans l'embrasure, empoigné par le mécanicien.

Gorju vint à son aide. — Laisse-le ! c'est un brave ! Ils se colletaient.

La porte s'ouvrit, et Marescot sur le seuil, proclama la décision municipale. Hurel l'avait suggérée.

Le chemin de Tournebu aurait un embranchement sur Angleville, et qui mènerait au château de Faverges.

C'était un sacrifice que s'imposait la commune dans l'intérêt des travailleurs. Ils se dispersèrent.

En rentrant chez eux, Bouvard et Pécuchet eurent les oreilles frappées par des voix de femmes. Les servantes et Mme Bordin poussaient des exclamations, la veuve criait plus fort, — et à leur aspect : — Ah ! c'est bien heureux ! depuis trois heures que je vous attends ! mon pauvre jardin ! plus une seule tulipe ! des cochonneries partout, sur le gazon ! Pas moyen de le faire démarrer.

— Qui cela ?

— Le père Gouy !

Il était venu avec une charrette de fumier — et l'avait jetée tout à vrac au milieu de l'herbe. Il laboure maintenant ! Dépêchez-vous pour qu'il finisse !

— Je vous accompagne ! dit Bouvard.

Au bas des marches, en dehors, un cheval dans les brancards d'un tombereau mordait une touffe de lauriers-roses. Les roues, en frôlant les plates-bandes, avaient pilé les buis, cassé un rhododendron, abattu les dahlias — et des mottes de fumier noir, comme des taupinières, bosselaient le gazon. Gouy le bêchait avec ardeur.

Un jour, Mme Bordin avait dit négligemment qu'elle voulait le retourner. Il s'était mis à la besogne, et malgré sa défense continuait. C'est de cette manière qu'il entendait le droit au travail, le discours de Gorju lui ayant tourné la cervelle.

Il ne partit que sur les menaces violentes de Bouvard.

Mme Bordin, comme dédommagement, ne paya pas sa main-d'oeuvre et garda le fumier. Elle était judicieuse, l'épouse du médecin — et même celle du notaire, bien que d'un rang supérieur, la considéraient.

Les ateliers de charité durèrent une semaine. Aucun trouble n'advint.

Gorju avait quitté le pays.

Cependant la garde nationale était toujours sur pied ; le dimanche une revue, promenades militaires, quelquefois — et chaque nuit des rondes. Elles inquiétaient le village.

On tirait les sonnettes des maisons, par facétie ; on pénétrait dans les chambres où des époux ronflaient sur le même traversin ; alors on disait des gaudrioles ; et le mari se levant allait vous chercher des petits verres. Puis on revenait au corps de garde, jouer un cent de dominos ; on y buvait du cidre, on y mangeait du fromage, et le factionnaire qui s'ennuyait à la porte l'entrebâillait à chaque minute. L'indiscipline régnait, grâce à la mollesse de Beljambe.

Quand éclatèrent les journées de Juin, tout le monde fut d'accord pour voler au secours de Paris, mais Foureau ne pouvait quitter la mairie, Marescot son étude, le Docteur sa clientèle, Girbal ses pompiers. M. de Faverges était à Cherbourg. Beljambe s'alita. Le capitaine grommelait : On n'a pas voulu de moi, tant pis ! et Bouvard eut la sagesse de retenir Pécuchet.

Les rondes dans la campagne furent étendues plus loin.

Des paniques survenaient, causées par l'ombre d'une meule, ou les formes des branches ; une fois, tous les gardes nationaux s'enfuirent. Sous le clair de la lune, ils avaient aperçu dans un pommier, un homme avec un fusil — et qui les tenait en joue.

Une autre fois, par une nuit obscure, la patrouille faisant halte sous la hêtrée entendit quelqu'un devant elle.

— Qui vive ?

Pas de réponse !

On laissa l'individu continuer sa route, en le suivant à distance, car il pouvait avoir un pistolet ou un casse-tête — mais quand on fut dans le village, à portée des secours, les douze hommes du peloton, tous à la fois se précipitèrent sur lui, en criant : Vos papiers ! Ils le houspillaient, l'accablaient d'injures. Ceux du corps de garde étaient sortis. On l'y traîna ; — et à la lueur de la chandelle brûlant sur le poêle, on reconnut enfin Gorju.

Un méchant paletot de lasting craquait à ses épaules. Ses orteils se montraient par les trous de ses bottes. Des éraflures et des contusions faisaient saigner son visage. Il était amaigri prodigieusement, et roulait des yeux, comme un loup.

Foureau, accouru bien vite, lui demanda comment il se trouvait sous la hêtrée, ce qu'il revenait faire à Chavignolles, l'emploi de son temps, depuis six semaines.

Ça ne les regardait pas. Il était libre.

Placquevent le fouilla pour découvrir des cartouches. On allait provisoirement le coffrer.

Bouvard s'interposa.

— Inutile ! reprit le maire on connaît vos opinions.

— Cependant ?…

— Ah ! prenez garde, je vous en avertis ! Prenez garde.

Bouvard n'insista plus.

Gorju alors, se tourna vers Pécuchet : — Et vous, patron, vous ne dites rien ?

Pécuchet baissa la tête, comme s'il eût douté de son innocence.

Le pauvre diable eut un sourire d'amertume. — Je vous ai défendu, pourtant !

Au petit jour, deux gendarmes l'emmenèrent à Falaise.

Il ne fut pas traduit devant un conseil de guerre, mais condamné par la correctionnelle à trois mois de prison, pour délit de paroles tendant au bouleversement de la société.

De Falaise, il écrivit à ses anciens maîtres de lui envoyer prochainement un certificat de bonne vie et moeurs — et leur signature devant être légalisée par le maire ou par l'adjoint, ils préférèrent demander ce petit service à Marescot.

On les introduisit dans une salle à manger, que décoraient des plats de vieille faïence. Une horloge de Boulle occupait le panneau le plus étroit. Sur la table d'acajou, sans nappe, il y avait deux serviettes, une théière, des bols. Mme Marescot traversa l'appartement dans un peignoir de cachemire bleu. C'était une Parisienne qui s'ennuyait à la campagne. Puis le notaire entra, une toque à la main, un journal de l'autre ; — et tout de suite, d'un air aimable, il apposa son cachet — bien que leur protégé fût un homme dangereux.

— Vraiment dit Bouvard, pour quelques paroles !…

— Quand la parole amène des crimes, cher monsieur, permettez !

— Cependant reprit Pécuchet, quelle démarcation établir entre les phrases innocentes et les coupables ? Telle chose défendue maintenant sera par la suite applaudie. Et il blâma la manière féroce dont on traitait les insurgés.

Marescot allégua naturellement la défense de la Société, le Salut

Public, loi suprême.

— Pardon ! dit Pécuchet, le droit d'un seul est aussi respectable que celui de tous — et vous n'avez rien à lui objecter que la force — s'il retourne contre vous l'axiome.

Marescot, au lieu de répondre, leva les sourcils dédaigneusement. Pourvu qu'il continuât à faire des actes, et à vivre au milieu de ses assiettes, dans son petit intérieur confortable, toutes les injustices pouvaient se présenter sans l'émouvoir. Les affaires le réclamaient. Il s'excusa.

Sa doctrine du salut public les avait indignés. Les conservateurs parlaient maintenant comme Robespierre.

Autre sujet d'étonnement : Cavaignac baissait. La garde mobile devint suspecte. Ledru-Rollin s'était perdu, même dans l'esprit de Vaucorbeil. Les débats sur la Constitution n'intéressèrent personne ; — et au 10 décembre, tous les Chavignollais votèrent pour Bonaparte.

Les six millions de voix refroidirent Pécuchet à l'encontre du peuple ; — et Bouvard et lui étudièrent la question du suffrage universel.

Appartenant à tout le monde, il ne peut avoir d'intelligence. Un ambitieux le mènera toujours, les autres obéiront comme un troupeau, les électeurs n'étant pas même contraints de savoir lire ; — c'est pourquoi, suivant Pécuchet, il y avait eu tant de fraudes dans l'élection présidentielle.

— Aucune, reprit Bouvard, je crois plutôt à la sottise du peuple. Pense à tous ceux qui achètent la Revalescière, la pommade Dupuytren, l'eau des châtelaines, etc. ! Ces nigauds forment la masse électorale, et nous subissons leur volonté. Pourquoi ne peut-on se faire avec des lapins trois mille livres de rentes ? C'est qu'une agglomération trop nombreuse est une cause de mort. — De même, par le fait seul de la foule, les germes de bêtise qu'elle contient se développent et il en résulte des effets incalculables.

— Ton scepticisme m'épouvante ! dit Pécuchet.

Plus tard, au printemps, ils rencontrèrent M. de Faverges, qui leur apprit l'expédition de Rome. On n'attaquerait pas les Italiens. Mais il nous fallait des garanties. Autrement, notre influence était ruinée. Rien de plus légitime que cette intervention.

Bouvard écarquilla les yeux. — À propos de la Pologne, vous souteniez le contraire ?

— Ce n'est plus la même chose ! Maintenant, il s'agissait du Pape.

Et M. de Faverges en disant : Nous voulons, nous ferons, nous comptons bien représentait un groupe.

Bouvard et Pécuchet furent dégoûtés du petit nombre comme du grand. La plèbe en somme, valait l'aristocratie.

Le droit d'intervention leur semblait louche. Ils en cherchèrent les principes dans Calvo, Martens, Vattel ; — et Bouvard conclut : — On intervient pour remettre un prince sur le trône, pour affranchir un peuple — ou par précaution, en vue d'un danger. Dans les deux cas, c'est un attentat au droit d'autrui, un abus de la force, une violence hypocrite !

— Cependant, dit Pécuchet, les peuples comme les hommes sont solidaires.

— Peut-être ! Et Bouvard se mit à rêver.

Bientôt commença l'expédition de Rome à l'intérieur.

En haine des idées subversives, l'élite des bourgeois parisiens, saccagea deux imprimeries. Le grand parti de l'ordre se formait.

Il avait pour chefs dans l'arrondissement, M. le comte, Foureau, Marescot et le curé. Tous les jours, vers quatre heures, ils se promenaient d'un bout à l'autre de la Place, et causaient des événements. L'affaire principale était la distribution des brochures. Les titres ne manquaient pas de saveur : *Dieu le voudra — les Partageux — Sortons du gâchis — Où allons-nous ?* Ce qu'il y avait de plus beau, c'était les dialogues en style villageois, avec des jurons et des fautes de français, pour élever le moral des paysans. Par une loi nouvelle, le colportage se trouvait aux mains des préfets — et on venait de fourrer Proudhon à Sainte-Pélagie — immense victoire.

Les arbres de la liberté furent abattus généralement. Chavignolles obéit à la consigne. Bouvard vit de ses yeux les morceaux de son peuplier sur une brouette. Ils servirent à chauffer les gendarmes ; — et on offrit la souche à M. le Curé — qui l'avait béni, pourtant ! quelle dérision !

L'instituteur ne cacha pas sa manière de penser. Bouvard et Pécuchet l'en félicitèrent un jour qu'ils passaient devant sa porte.

Le lendemain, il se présenta chez eux. À la fin de la semaine, ils lui rendirent sa visite.

Le jour tombait ; les gamins venaient de partir, et le maître d'école en bouts de manche, balayait la cour. Sa femme coiffée d'un madras allaitait un enfant. Une petite fille se cacha derrière sa jupe ; un mioche hideux jouait par terre, à ses pieds ; l'eau du savonnage qu'elle faisait dans la cuisine coulait au bas de la maison.

— Vous voyez dit l'instituteur comme le gouvernement nous traite ! Et tout de suite, il s'en prit à l'infâme capital. Il fallait le démocratiser, affranchir la matière !

— Je ne demande pas mieux ! dit Pécuchet.

Au moins, on aurait dû reconnaître le droit à l'assistance.

— Encore un droit ! dit Bouvard.

N'importe ! le Provisoire avait été mollasse, en n'ordonnant pas la Fraternité.

— Tâchez donc de l'établir !

Comme il ne faisait plus clair, Petit commanda brutalement à sa femme de monter un flambeau dans son cabinet.

Des épingles fixaient aux murs de plâtre les portraits lithographiés des orateurs de la gauche. Un casier avec des livres dominait un bureau de sapin. On avait pour s'asseoir une chaise, un tabouret et une vieille caisse à savon ; il affectait d'en rire. Mais la misère plaquait ses joues, et ses tempes étroites dénotaient un entêtement de bélier, un intraitable orgueil. Jamais il ne calerait.

— Voilà d'ailleurs ce qui me soutient !

C'était un amas de journaux, sur une planche — et il exposa en paroles fiévreuses les articles de sa foi : désarmement des troupes, abolition de la magistrature, égalité des salaires, niveau — moyens par lesquels on obtiendrait l'âge d'or, sous la forme de la République — avec un dictateur à la tête, un gaillard pour vous mener ça, rondement !

Puis, il atteignit une bouteille d'anisette, et trois verres, afin de porter un toast au Héros, à l'immortelle victime, au grand Maximilien !

Sur le seuil, la robe noire du curé parut.

Ayant salué vivement la compagnie, il aborda l'instituteur, et lui dit presque à voix basse : — Notre affaire de Saint-Joseph, où en est-elle ?

— Ils n'ont rien donné ! reprit le maître d'école.

— C'est de votre faute !

— J'ai fait ce que j'ai pu !

— Ah ! — vraiment ?

Bouvard et Pécuchet se levèrent par discrétion. Petit les fit se rasseoir ; et s'adressant au curé : — Est-ce tout ?

L'abbé Jeufroy hésita ; — puis, avec un sourire qui tempérait sa réprimande :

— On trouve que vous négligez un peu l'histoire sainte.

— Oh ! l'histoire sainte ! reprit Bouvard.

— Que lui reprochez-vous, monsieur ?

— Moi ? rien ! Seulement il y a peut-être des choses plus utiles que l'anecdote de Jonas et les rois d'Israël !

— Libre à vous ! répliqua sèchement le prêtre — et sans souci des étrangers, ou à cause d'eux : L'heure du catéchisme est trop courte !

Petit leva les épaules.

— Faites attention. Vous perdrez vos pensionnaires !

Les dix francs par mois de ces élèves étaient le meilleur de sa place.

Mais la soutane l'exaspérait. — Tant pis, vengez-vous !

— Un homme de mon caractère ne se venge pas ! dit le prêtre, sans s'émouvoir. Seulement, — Je vous rappelle que la loi du 15 mars nous attribue la surveillance de l'instruction primaire.

— Eh ! je le sais bien ! s'écria l'instituteur. Elle appartient même aux colonels de gendarmerie ! Pourquoi pas au garde-champêtre ! ce serait complet !

Et il s'affaissa sur l'escabeau, mordant son poing, retenant sa colère, suffoqué par le sentiment de son impuissance.

L'ecclésiastique le toucha légèrement sur l'épaule.

— Je n'ai pas voulu vous affliger, mon ami ! Calmez-vous ! Un peu de raison ! Voilà Pâques bientôt ; j'espère que vous donnerez l'exemple, — en communiant avec les autres.

— Ah c'est trop fort ! moi ! moi ! me soumettre à de pareilles bêtises !

Devant ce blasphème le curé pâlit. Ses prunelles fulguraient. Sa mâchoire tremblait. — Taisez-vous, malheureux ! taisez-vous !

Et c'est sa femme qui soigne les linges de l'église !

— Eh bien ? quoi ? Qu'a-t-elle fait ?

— Elle manque toujours la messe ! — Comme vous, d'ailleurs !

— Eh ! on ne renvoie pas un maître d'école, pour ça !

— On peut le déplacer !

Le prêtre ne parla plus. Il était au fond de la pièce, dans l'ombre.

Petit, la tête sur la poitrine, songeait.

Ils arriveraient à l'autre bout de la France, leur dernier sou mangé par le voyage ; — et il retrouverait là-bas sous des noms différents, le même curé, le même recteur, le même préfet ! — tous, jusqu'au ministre, étaient comme les anneaux de sa chaîne accablante ! Il avait reçu déjà un avertissement, d'autres viendraient. Ensuite ? — et dans une sorte d'hallucination, il se vit marchant sur une grande route, un sac au dos, ceux qu'il aimait près de lui, la main tendue vers une chaise de poste !

À ce moment-là, sa femme dans la cuisine fut prise d'une quinte de toux, le nouveau-né se mit à vagir ; et le marmot pleurait.

— Pauvres enfants ! dit le prêtre d'une voix douce.

Le père alors éclata en sanglots. — Oui ! oui ! tout ce qu'on voudra !

— J'y compte reprit le curé ; — et ayant fait la révérence : — Messieurs, bien le bonsoir !

Le maître d'école restait la figure dans les mains. — Il repoussa Bouvard.

— Non ! laissez-moi ! j'ai envie de crever ! je suis un misérable !

Les deux amis regagnèrent leur domicile, en se félicitant de leur indépendance. Le pouvoir du clergé les effrayait.

On l'appliquait maintenant à raffermir l'ordre social. La République allait bientôt disparaître.

Trois millions d'électeurs se trouvèrent exclus du suffrage universel. Le cautionnement des journaux fut élevé, la censure rétablie. On en voulait aux romans-feuilletons ; la philosophie classique était réputée dangereuse ; les bourgeois prêchaient le dogme des intérêts matériels — et le Peuple semblait content.

Celui des campagnes revenait à ses anciens maîtres.

M. de Faverges, qui avait des propriétés dans l'Eure, fut porté à la Législative, et sa réélection au Conseil général du Calvados était d'avance certaine.

Il jugea bon d'offrir un déjeuner aux notables du pays.

Le vestibule où trois domestiques les attendaient pour prendre leurs paletots, le billard et les deux salons en enfilade, les plantes dans les vases de la Chine, les bronzes sur les cheminées, les baguettes d'or aux lambris, les rideaux épais, les larges fauteuils, ce luxe immédiatement les flatta comme une politesse qu'on leur faisait ; — et en entrant dans la salle à manger, au spectacle de la table couverte de viandes sur les plats d'argent, avec la rangée des verres devant chaque assiette, les hors d'oeuvre çà et là, et un saumon au milieu, tous les visages s'épanouirent.

Ils étaient dix-sept, y compris deux forts cultivateurs, le sous-préfet de Bayeux, et un individu de Cherbourg. M. de Faverges pria ses hôtes d'excuser la comtesse, empêchée par une migraine ; — et après des compliments sur les poires et les raisins qui emplissaient quatre corbeilles aux angles, il fut question de la grande nouvelle : le projet d'une descente en Angleterre par Changarnier.

Heurtaux la désirait comme soldat, le curé en haine des protestants,

Foureau dans l'intérêt du commerce.

— Vous exprimez dit Pécuchet des sentiments du moyen âge !

— Le moyen âge avait du bon ! reprit Marescot. Ainsi, nos cathédrales !…

— Cependant, monsieur, les abus !…

— N'importe, la Révolution ne serait pas arrivée !…

— Ah ! la Révolution, voilà le malheur ! dit l'ecclésiastique, en soupirant.

— Mais tout le monde y a contribué ! et — (excusez-moi, monsieur le comte), les nobles eux-mêmes par leur alliance avec les philosophes !

— Que voulez-vous ! Louis XVIII a légalisé la spoliation ! Depuis ce temps-là, le régime parlementaire vous sape les bases !…

Un roastbeef parut — et durant quelques minutes on n'entendit que le bruit des fourchettes et des mâchoires, avec le pas des servants sur le parquet et ces deux mots répétés : Madère ! Sauterne !

La conversation fut reprise par le monsieur de Cherbourg. Comment s'arrêter sur le penchant de l'abîme ?

— Chez les Athéniens dit Marescot chez les Athéniens, avec lesquels nous avons des rapports, Solon mata les démocrates, en élevant le cens électoral.

— Mieux vaudrait dit Hurel supprimer la Chambre ; tout le désordre vient de Paris.

— Décentralisons ! dit le notaire.

— Largement ! reprit le Comte.

D'après Foureau, la commune devait être maîtresse absolue, jusqu'à interdire ses routes aux voyageurs, si elle le jugeait convenable.

Et pendant que les plats se succédaient, poule au jus, écrevisses, champignons, légumes en salade, rôtis d'alouettes, bien des sujets furent traités :

le meilleur système d'impôts, les avantages de la grande culture, l'abolition de la peine de mort — le sous-préfet n'oublia pas de citer ce mot charmant d'un homme d'esprit : — Que MM. les assassins commencent !

Bouvard était surpris par le contraste des choses qui l'entouraient avec celles que l'on disait — car il semble toujours que les paroles doivent correspondre aux milieux, et que les hauts plafonds soient faits pour les grandes pensées. Néanmoins, il était rouge au dessert, et entrevoyait les compotiers dans un brouillard.

On avait pris des vins de Bordeaux, de Bourgogne et de Malaga… M. de Faverges qui connaissait son monde fit déboucher du champagne. Les convives, en trinquant burent au succès de l'élection — et il était plus de trois heures, quand ils passèrent dans le fumoir, pour prendre le café.

Une caricature du Charivari traînait sur une console, entre des numéros de l'Univers ; cela représentait un citoyen, dont les basques de la redingote laissaient voir une queue, se terminant par un oeil. Marescot en donna l'explication. On rit beaucoup.

Ils absorbaient des liqueurs — et la cendre des cigares tombait dans les capitons des meubles. L'abbé voulant convaincre Girbal attaqua Voltaire. Coulon s'endormit. M. de Faverges déclara son dévouement pour Chambord. — Les abeilles prouvent la monarchie.

— Mais les fourmilières la République ! Du reste, le médecin n'y tenait plus.

— Vous avez raison ! dit le sous-préfet. La forme du gouvernement importe peu !

— Avec la liberté ! objecta Pécuchet.

— Un honnête homme n'en a pas besoin répliqua Foureau. Je ne fais pas de discours, moi ! Je ne suis pas journaliste ! et je vous soutiens que la France veut être gouvernée par un bras de fer !

Tous réclamaient un Sauveur.

Et en sortant, Bouvard et Pécuchet entendirent M. de Faverges qui disait à l'abbé Jeufroy : — Il faut rétablir l'obéissance. L'autorité se meurt, si on la discute !

Le droit divin, il n'y a que ça !

— Parfaitement, monsieur le comte !

Les pâles rayons d'un soleil d'octobre s'allongeaient derrière les bois ; un vent humide soufflait ; — et en marchant sur les feuilles mortes, ils respiraient comme délivrés.

Tout ce qu'ils n'avaient pu dire s'échappa en exclamations :

— Quels idiots ! quelle bassesse ! Comment imaginer tant d'entêtement ?

D'abord, que signifie le droit divin ?

L'ami de Dumouchel, ce professeur qui les avait éclairés sur l'esthétique, répondit à leur question dans une lettre savante.

La théorie du droit divin a été formulée sous Charles II par l'Anglais

Filmer.

La voici :

Le Créateur donna au premier homme la souveraineté du monde. Elle fut transmise à ses descendants ; et la puissance du Roi émane de Dieu. *Il est son image,* écrit Bossuet. L'empire paternel accoutume à la domination d'un seul. On a fait les rois d'après le modèle des pères.

Locke réfuta cette doctrine. Le pouvoir paternel se distingue du monarchique, tout sujet ayant le même droit sur ses enfants que le monarque sur les siens. La royauté n'existe que par le choix populaire — et même l'élection était rappelée dans la cérémonie du sacre, où deux évêques, en montrant le Roi, demandaient aux nobles et aux manants, s'ils l'acceptaient pour tel.

Donc le Pouvoir vient du Peuple. Il a le droit de faire tout ce qu'il veut, dit Helvétius, de changer sa constitution, dit Vattel, de se révolter contre l'injustice, prétendent Glafey, Hotman, Mably, etc. ! — et saint Thomas d'Aquin l'autorise à se délivrer d'un tyran. Il est même, dit Jurieu, dispensé d'avoir raison.

Étonnés de l'axiome, ils prirent le *Contrat social* de Rousseau.

Pécuchet alla jusqu'au bout — puis fermant les yeux, et se renversant la tête, il en fit l'analyse.

— On suppose une convention, par laquelle l'individu aliéna sa liberté. Le Peuple, en même temps, s'engageait à le défendre contre les inégalités de la Nature et le rendait propriétaire des choses qu'il détient.

— Où est la preuve du contrat ?

— Nulle part ! et la communauté n'offre pas de garantie. Les citoyens s'occuperont exclusivement de politique. Mais comme il faut des métiers, Rousseau conseille l'esclavage. Les sciences ont perdu le genre humain. Le théâtre est corrupteur, l'argent funeste ; et l'État doit imposer une religion, sous peine de mort.

Comment, se dirent-ils, voilà le dieu de 93, le pontife de la démocratie !

Tous les réformateurs l'ont copié ; — et ils se procurèrent l'*Examen du socialisme,* par Morant.

Le chapitre premier expose la doctrine saint-simonienne.

Au sommet le Père, à la fois pape et empereur. Abolition des héritages, tous les biens meubles et immeubles composant un fonds social, qui sera exploité hiérarchiquement. Les industriels gouverneront la fortune publique. Mais rien à craindre ! on aura pour chef celui qui aime le plus.

Il manque une chose, la Femme. De l'arrivée de la Femme dépend le salut du monde.

— Je ne comprends pas.

— Ni moi !

Et ils abordèrent le Fouriérisme.

Tous les malheurs viennent de la contrainte. Que l'Attraction soit libre, et l'Harmonie s'établira.

Notre âme enferme douze passions principales, cinq égoïstes, quatre animiques, trois distributives. Elles tendent, les premières à l'individu, les suivantes aux groupes, les dernières aux groupes de groupes, ou séries, dont l'ensemble est la Phalange, société de dix-huit cents personnes, habitant un palais. Chaque matin, des voitures emmènent les travailleurs dans la campagne, et les ramènent le soir. On porte des étendards, on donne des fêtes, on mange des gâteaux. Toute femme, si elle y tient, possède trois hommes, le mari, l'amant et le géniteur. Pour les célibataires, le Bayadérisme est institué.

— Ça me va ! dit Bouvard ; et il se perdit dans les rêves du monde harmonien.

Par la restauration des climatures la terre deviendra plus belle, par le croisement des races la vie humaine plus longue. On dirigera les nuages comme on fait maintenant de la foudre, il pleuvra la nuit sur les villes pour les nettoyer. Des navires traverseront les mers polaires dégelées sous les aurores boréales — car tout se produit par la conjonction des deux fluides mâle et femelle, jaillissant des pôles — et les aurores boréales sont un symptôme du rut de la planète, une émission prolifique.

— Cela me passe dit Pécuchet.

Après Saint-Simon et Fourier, le problème se réduit à des questions de salaire.

Louis Blanc, dans l'intérêt des ouvriers veut qu'on abolisse le commerce extérieur, La Farelle qu'on impose les machines, un autre qu'on dégrève les boissons, ou qu'on refasse les jurandes, ou qu'on distribue des soupes. Proudhon imagine un tarif uniforme, et réclame pour l'État le monopole du sucre.

— Tes socialistes disait Bouvard, demandent toujours la tyrannie.

— Mais non !

— Si fait !

— Tu es absurde !

— Toi, tu me révoltes !

Ils firent venir les ouvrages dont ils ne connaissaient que les résumés.

Bouvard nota plusieurs endroits, et les montrant :

— Lis, toi-même ! Ils nous proposent comme exemple, les Esséniens, les Frères Moraves, les Jésuites du Paraguay, et jusqu'au régime des prisons.

Chez les Icariens, le déjeuner se fait en vingt minutes, les femmes accouchent à l'hôpital. Quant aux livres, défense d'en imprimer sans l'autorisation de la République.

— Mais Cabet est un idiot.

— Maintenant voilà du Saint-Simon : les publicistes soumettront leurs travaux à un comité d'industriels.

Et du Pierre Leroux : la loi forcera les citoyens à entendre un orateur.

Et de l'Auguste Comte : les prêtres éduqueront la jeunesse, dirigeront toutes les oeuvres de l'esprit, et engageront le Pouvoir à régler la procréation.

Ces documents affligèrent Pécuchet. Le soir, au dîner, il répliqua.

— Qu'il y ait chez les utopistes, des choses ridicules, j'en conviens. Cependant, ils méritent notre amour. La hideur du monde les désolait, et pour le rendre plus beau, ils ont tout souffert. Rappelle-toi Morus décapité, Campanella mis sept fois à la torture, Buonarroti avec une chaîne autour du cou, Saint-Simon crevant de misère, bien d'autres. Ils auraient pu vivre tranquilles ! mais non ! ils ont marché dans leur voie, la tête au ciel, comme des héros.

— Crois-tu que le monde reprit Bouvard, changera grâce aux théories d'un monsieur ?

— Qu'importe ! dit Pécuchet, il est temps de ne plus croupir dans l'égoïsme ! Cherchons le meilleur système !

— Alors, tu comptes le trouver ?

— Certainement !

— Toi ?

Et dans le rire dont Bouvard fut pris, ses épaules et son ventre sautaient d'accord. Plus rouge que les confitures, avec sa serviette sous l'aisselle, il répétait : Ah ! ah ! ah ! d'une façon irritante.

Pécuchet sortit de l'appartement, en faisant claquer la porte.

Germaine le héla par toute la maison ; — et on le découvrit au fond de sa chambre dans une bergère, sans feu ni chandelle et la casquette sur les sourcils. Il n'était pas malade ; mais se livrait à ses réflexions.

La brouille étant passée, ils reconnurent qu'une base manquait à leurs études : l'économie politique.

Ils s'enquirent de l'offre et de la demande, du capital et du loyer, de l'importation, de la prohibition.

Une nuit, Pécuchet fut réveillé par le craquement d'une botte dans le corridor. La veille comme d'habitude, il avait tiré lui-même tous les verrous — et il appela Bouvard qui dormait profondément.

Ils restèrent immobiles sous leurs couvertures. Le bruit ne recommença pas.

Les servantes interrogées n'avaient rien entendu.

Mais en se promenant dans leur jardin, ils remarquèrent au milieu d'une plate-bande, près de la claire-voie l'empreinte d'une semelle — et deux bâtons du treillage étaient rompus. — On l'avait escaladé, évidemment.

Il fallait prévenir le garde champêtre.

Comme il n'était pas à la mairie, Pécuchet se rendit chez l'épicier.

Que vit-il dans l'arrière-boutique, à côté de Placquevent, parmi les buveurs ? Gorju ! — Gorju nippé comme un bourgeois, — et régalant la compagnie.

Cette rencontre était insignifiante. Bientôt, ils arrivèrent à la question du Progrès.

Bouvard n'en doutait pas dans le domaine scientifique. Mais en littérature, il est moins clair — et si le bien-être augmente, la splendeur de la vie a disparu.

Pécuchet, pour le convaincre, prit un morceau de papier.

— Je trace obliquement une ligne ondulée. Ceux qui pourraient la parcourir, toutes les fois qu'elle s'abaisse, ne verraient plus l'horizon. Elle se relève pourtant, et malgré ses détours, ils atteindront le sommet. Telle est l'image du Progrès.

Mme Bordin entra.

C'était le 3 décembre 1851. Elle apportait le journal.

Ils lurent bien vite et côte à côte, l'Appel au peuple, la dissolution de la Chambre, l'emprisonne ment des députés.

Pécuchet devint blême. Bouvard considérait la veuve.

— Comment ? vous ne dites rien !

— Que voulez-vous que j'y fasse ? Ils oubliaient de lui offrir un siège. Moi qui suis venue, croyant vous faire plaisir. Ah ! vous n'êtes guère aimables aujourd'hui et elle sortit, choquée de leur impolitesse.

La surprise les avait rendus muets. Puis, ils allèrent dans le village, épandre leur indignation.

Marescot, qui les reçut au milieu des contrats, pensait différemment. Le bavardage de la Chambre était fini, grâce au ciel. On aurait désormais une politique d'affaires.

Beljambe ignorait les événements, et s'en moquait d'ailleurs.

Sous les Halles, ils arrêtèrent Vaucorbeil.

Le médecin était revenu de tout ça. — Vous avez bien tort de vous tourmenter.

Foureau passa près d'eux, en disant d'un air narquois : — Enfoncés les démocrates ! — Et le capitaine au bras de Girbal, cria de loin : Vive l'Empereur !

Mais Petit devait les comprendre — et Bouvard ayant frappé au carreau, le maître d'école quitta sa classe.

Il trouvait extrêmement drôle que Thiers fût en prison. Cela vengeait le

Peuple. — Ah ! ah ! messieurs les Députés, à votre tour !

La fusillade sur les boulevards eut l'approbation de Chavignolles. Pas de grâce aux vaincus, pas de pitié pour les victimes ! Dès qu'on se révolte on est un scélérat.

— Remercions la Providence ! disait le curé — et après elle Louis Bonaparte. Il s'entoure des hommes les plus distingués ! Le comte de Faverges deviendra sénateur.

Le lendemain, ils eurent la visite de Placquevent.

Ces messieurs avaient beaucoup parlé. Il les engageait à se taire.

— Veux-tu savoir mon opinion ? dit Pécuchet.

Puisque les bourgeois sont féroces, les ouvriers jaloux, les prêtres serviles — et que le Peuple enfin, accepte tous les tyrans, pourvu qu'on lui laisse le museau dans sa gamelle, Napoléon a bien fait ! — qu'il le bâillonne, le foule et l'extermine ! ce ne sera jamais trop, pour sa haine du droit, sa lâcheté, son ineptie, son aveuglement !

Bouvard songeait : — Hein, le Progrès, quelle blague ! Il ajouta : — Et la Politique, une belle saleté !

— Ce n'est pas une science reprit Pécuchet. L'art militaire vaut mieux, on prévoit ce qui arrive. Nous devrions nous y mettre ?

— Ah ! merci ! répliqua Bouvard. Tout me dégoûte. Vendons plutôt notre baraque — et allons au tonnerre de Dieu, chez les sauvages !

— Comme tu voudras !

Mélie dans la cour, tirait de l'eau.

La pompe en bois avait un long levier. Pour le faire descendre, elle courbait les reins — et on voyait alors ses bas bleus jusqu'à la hauteur de son mollet. Puis, d'un geste rapide, elle levait son bras droit, tandis qu'elle tournait un peu la tête — et Pécuchet en la regardant, sentait quelque chose de tout nouveau, un charme, un plaisir infini.

CHAPITRE VII

Des jours tristes commencèrent.

Ils n'étudiaient plus dans la peur de déceptions ; les habitants de Chavignolles s'écartaient d'eux ; les journaux tolérés n'apprenaient rien — et leur solitude était profonde, leur désoeuvrement complet.

Quelquefois, ils ouvraient un livre, et le refermaient ; à quoi bon ? En d'autres jours, ils avaient l'idée de nettoyer le jardin, au bout d'un quart d'heure une fatigue les prenait ; ou de voir leur ferme, ils en revenaient écoeurés ; ou de s'occuper de leur ménage, Germaine poussait des lamentations ; ils y renoncèrent.

Bouvard voulut dresser le catalogue du muséum, et déclara ces bibelots stupides. Pécuchet emprunta la canardière de Langlois pour tirer des alouettes ; l'arme éclatant du premier coup faillit le tuer.

Donc ils vivaient dans cet ennui de la campagne, si lourd quand le ciel blanc écrase de sa monotonie un coeur sans espoir. On écoute le pas d'un homme en sabots qui longe le mur, ou les gouttes de la pluie tomber du toit par terre. De temps à autre, une feuille morte vient frôler la vitre, puis tournoie, s'en va. Des glas indistincts sont apportés par le vent. Au fond de l'étable, une vache mugit.

Ils bâillaient l'un devant l'autre, consultaient le calendrier, regardaient la pendule, attendaient les repas ; — et l'horizon était toujours le même ! des champs en face, à droite l'église, à gauche un rideau de peupliers ; leurs cimes se balançaient dans la brume, perpétuellement, d'un air lamentable !

Des habitudes qu'ils avaient tolérées les faisaient souffrir. Pécuchet devenait incommode avec sa manie de poser sur la nappe son mouchoir. Bouvard ne quittait plus la pipe, et causait en se dandinant. Des contestations s'élevaient, à propos des plats ou de la qualité du beurre. Dans leur tête-à-tête ils pensaient à des choses différentes.

Un événement avait bouleversé Pécuchet.

Deux jours après l'émeute de Chavignolles, comme il promenait son déboire politique, il arriva dans un chemin, couvert par des ormes touffus ; et il entendit derrière son dos une voix crier : — Arrête !

C'était Mme Castillon. Elle courait de l'autre côté, sans l'apercevoir. Un homme, qui marchait devant elle, se retourna. C'était Gorju ; — et ils s'abordèrent à une toise de Pécuchet, la rangée des arbres les séparant de lui.

— Est-ce vrai ? dit-elle tu vas te battre ?

Pécuchet se coula dans le fossé, pour entendre :

— Eh bien ! oui, répliqua Gorju je vais me battre ! Qu'est-ce que ça te fait ?

— Il le demande ! s'écria-t-elle, en se tordant les bras. Mais si tu es tué, mon amour ? Oh reste ! — Et ses yeux bleus, plus encore que ses paroles, le suppliaient.

— Laisse-moi tranquille ! je dois partir !

Elle eut un ricanement de colère. — L'autre l'a permis, hein ?

— N'en parle pas ! Il leva son poing fermé.

— Non ! mon ami, non ! je me tais, je ne dis rien. Et de grosses larmes descendaient le long de ses joues dans les ruches de sa collerette.

Il était midi. Le soleil brillait sur la campagne, couverte de blés jaunes. Tout au loin, la bâche d'une voiture glissait lentement. Une torpeur s'étalait dans l'air — pas un cri d'oiseau, pas un bourdonnement d'insecte. Gorju s'était coupé une badine, et en raclait l'écorce. Mme Castillon ne relevait pas la tête.

Elle songeait, la pauvre femme, à la vanité de ses sacrifices, les dettes qu'elle avait soldées, ses engagements d'avenir, sa réputation perdue. Au lieu de se plaindre elle lui rappela les premiers temps de leur amour, quand elle allait, toutes les nuits, le rejoindre dans la grange ; — si bien qu'une fois son mari croyant à un voleur, avait lâché par la fenêtre un coup de pistolet. La balle était encore dans le mur. — Du moment que je t'ai connu, tu m'as semblé beau comme un prince. J'aime tes yeux, ta voix, ta démarche, ton odeur ! Elle ajouta plus bas : — Je suis en folie de ta personne !

Il souriait, flatté dans son orgueil.

Elle le prit à deux mains par les flancs, — et la tête renversée, comme en adoration.

— Mon cher coeur ! mon cher amour ! mon âme ! ma vie ! voyons ! parle ! que veux-tu ? — est-ce de l'argent ? on en trouvera. J'ai eu tort ! je t'ennuyais ! pardon ! et commande-toi des habits chez le tailleur, bois du champagne, fais la noce ! je te permets tout, — tout ! — Elle murmura dans un effort suprême : jusqu'à elle !… pourvu que tu reviennes à moi !

Il se pencha sur sa bouche, un bras autour de ses reins, pour l'empêcher de tomber ; — et elle balbutiait : — Cher coeur ! cher amour ! comme tu es beau ! mon Dieu, que tu es beau !

Pécuchet immobile, et la terre du fossé à la hauteur de son menton, les regardait, en haletant.

— Pas de faiblesse ! dit Gorju. Je n'aurais qu'à manquer la diligence ! on prépare un fameux coup de chien ; j'en suis ! — Donne-moi dix sous, pour que je paye un gloria au conducteur.

Elle tira cinq francs de sa bourse. — Tu me les rendras bientôt. Aie un peu de patience ! Depuis le temps qu'il est paralysé ! songe donc ! — Et si tu voulais nous irions à la chapelle de la Croix-Janval — et là, mon amour, je jurerais devant la sainte Vierge, de t'épouser, dès qu'il sera mort !

— Eh ! il ne meurt jamais, ton mari !

Gorju avait tourné les talons. Elle le rattrapa ; — et se cramponnant à ses épaules :

— Laisse-moi partir avec toi ! je serai ta domestique ! Tu as besoin de quelqu'un. Mais ne t'en va pas ! ne me quitte pas ! La mort plutôt ! Tue-moi !

Elle se traînait à ses genoux, tâchant de saisir ses mains pour les baiser ; son bonnet tomba, son peigne ensuite, et ses cheveux courts s'éparpillèrent. Ils étaient blancs sous les oreilles — et comme elle le regardait de bas en haut, toute sanglotante, avec ses paupières rouges et ses lèvres tuméfiées, une exaspération le prit, il la repoussa.

— Arrière la vieille ! Bonsoir !

Quand elle se fut relevée, elle arracha la croix d'or, qui pendait à son cou — et la jetant vers lui :

— Tiens ! canaille !

Gorju s'éloignait, — en tapant avec sa badine les feuilles des arbres.

Mme Castillon ne pleurait pas. La mâchoire ouverte et les prunelles éteintes elle resta sans faire un mouvement, — pétrifiée dans son désespoir, — n'étant plus un être, — mais une chose en ruines.

Ce qu'il venait de surprendre fut pour Pécuchet comme la découverte d'un monde — tout un monde ! — qui avait des lueurs éblouissantes, des floraisons désordonnées, des océans, des tempêtes, des trésors — et des abîmes d'une profondeur infinie ; — un effroi s'en dégageait ; qu'importe ! il rêva l'amour, ambitionnait de le sentir comme elle, de l'inspirer comme lui.

Pourtant, il exécrait Gorju — et, au corps de garde, avait eu peine à ne pas le trahir.

L'amant de Mme Castillon l'humiliait par sa taille mince, ses accroche-coeurs égaux, sa barbe floconneuse, un air de conquérant ; — tandis que sa chevelure — à lui — se collait sur son crâne comme une perruque mouillée, son torse dans sa houppelande ressemblait à un traversin, deux canines manquaient, et sa physionomie était sévère. Il trouvait le ciel injuste, se sentait comme déshérité, et son ami ne l'aimait plus. Bouvard l'abandonnait tous les soirs.

Après la mort de sa femme, rien ne l'eût empêché d'en prendre une autre — et qui maintenant le dorloterait, soignerait sa maison. Il était trop vieux pour y songer !

Mais Bouvard se considéra dans la glace. Ses pommettes gardaient leurs couleurs, ses cheveux frisaient comme autrefois ; pas une dent n'avait bougé ; — et à l'idée qu'il pouvait plaire, il eut un retour de jeunesse ; Mme Bordin surgit dans sa mémoire. — Elle lui avait fait des avances, la première fois lors de l'incendie des meules, la seconde à leur dîner, puis dans le muséum, pendant la déclamation, et dernièrement, elle était venue sans rancune, trois dimanches de suite. Il alla donc chez elle, et y retourna, se promettant de la séduire.

Depuis le jour où Pécuchet avait observé la petite bonne tirant de l'eau il lui parlait plus souvent ; — et soit qu'elle balayât le corridor, ou qu'elle étendit du linge, ou qu'elle tournât les casseroles, il ne pouvait se rassasier du bonheur de la voir, — surpris lui-même de ses émotions, comme dans l'adolescence. Il en avait les fièvres et les langueurs, — et était persécuté par le souvenir de Mme Castillon, étreignant Gorju.

Il questionna Bouvard sur la manière dont les libertins s'y prennent pour avoir des femmes.

— On leur fait des cadeaux ! on les régale au restaurant.

— Très bien ! Mais ensuite ?

— Il y en a qui feignent de s'évanouir, pour qu'on les porte sur un canapé, d'autres laissent tomber par terre leur mouchoir. Les meilleures vous donnent un rendez-vous, franchement. Et Bouvard se répandit en descriptions, qui incendièrent l'imagination de Pécuchet, comme des gravures obscènes. La première règle, c'est de ne pas croire à ce qu'elles disent. J'en ai connu, qui sous l'apparence de Saintes, étaient de véritables Messalines ! Avant tout, il faut être hardi !

Mais la hardiesse ne se commande pas. Pécuchet, quotidiennement ajournait sa décision, était d'ailleurs intimidé par la présence de Germaine.

Espérant qu'elle demanderait son compte, il en exigea un surcroît de besogne, notait les fois qu'elle était grise, remarquait tout haut, sa malpropreté, sa paresse, et fit si bien qu'on la renvoya.

Alors Pécuchet fut libre !

Avec quelle impatience, il attendait la sortie de Bouvard ! Quel battement de coeur, dès que la porte était refermée !

Mélie travaillait sur un guéridon, près de la fenêtre, à la clarté d'une chandelle. De temps à autre, elle cassait son fil avec ses dents, puis clignait les yeux, pour l'ajuster dans la fente de l'aiguille.

D'abord, il voulut savoir quels hommes lui plaisaient. Étaient-ce, par exemple, ceux du genre de Bouvard ? Pas du tout ; elle préférait les maigres. Il osa lui demander si elle avait eu des amoureux ? — Jamais !

Puis, se rapprochant, il contemplait son nez fin, sa bouche étroite, le tour de sa figure. Il lui adressa des compliments et l'exhortait à la sagesse.

En se penchant sur elle, il apercevait dans son corsage des formes blanches d'où émanait une tiède senteur, qui lui chauffait la joue. Un soir, il toucha des lèvres les cheveux follets de sa nuque, et il en ressentit un ébranlement jusqu'à la moelle des os. Une autre fois, il la baisa sous le menton, en se retenant de ne pas mordre sa chair, tant elle était savoureuse. Elle lui rendit son baiser. L'appartement tourna. Il n'y voyait plus.

Il lui fit cadeau d'une paire de bottines, et la régalait souvent d'un verre d'anisette.

Pour lui éviter du mal, il se levait de bonne heure, cassait le bois, allumait le feu, poussait l'attention jusqu'à nettoyer les chaussures de Bouvard.

Mélie ne s'évanouit pas, ne laissa pas tomber son mouchoir et Pécuchet ne savait à quoi se résoudre, son désir augmentant par la peur de le satisfaire.

Bouvard faisait assidûment la cour à Mme Bordin.

Elle le recevait, un peu sanglée dans sa robe de soie gorge-pigeon qui craquait comme le harnais d'un cheval, tout en maniant par contenance sa longue chaîne d'or.

Leurs dialogues roulaient sur les gens de Chavignolles, ou défunt son mari, autrefois huissier à Livarot.

Puis, elle s'informa du passé de Bouvard, curieuse de connaître ses farces de jeune homme, sa fortune incidemment, par quels intérêts il était lié à Pécuchet ?

Il admirait la tenue de sa maison, et quand il dînait chez elle, la netteté du service, l'excellence de la table. Une suite de plats, d'une saveur profonde, que coupait à intervalles égaux un vieux pommard, les menait jusqu'au dessert où ils étaient fort longtemps à prendre le café ; — et Mme Bordin, en dilatant les narines, trempait dans la soucoupe sa lèvre charnue, ombrée légèrement d'un duvet noir.

Un jour, elle apparut décolletée. Ses épaules fascinèrent Bouvard. Comme il était sur une petite chaise devant elle, il se mit à lui passer les deux mains le long des bras. La veuve se fâcha. Il ne recommença plus mais il se figurait des rondeurs d'une amplitude et d'une consistance merveilleuses.

Un soir, que la cuisine de Mélie l'avait dégoûté, il eut une joie en entrant dans le salon de Mme Bordin. C'est là qu'il aurait fallu vivre !

Le globe de la lampe, couvert d'un papier rose, épandait une lumière tranquille. Elle était assise auprès du feu ; et son pied passait le bord de sa robe. Dès les premiers mots, l'entretien tomba.

Cependant, elle le regardait, les cils à demi fermés, d'une manière langoureuse, avec obstination.

Bouvard n'y tint plus ! — et s'agenouillant sur le parquet, il bredouilla : — Je vous aime ! Marions-nous !

Mme Bordin respira fortement ; puis, d'un air ingénu, dit qu'il plaisantait, sans doute, on allait se moquer, ce n'était pas raisonnable. Cette déclaration l'étourdissait.

Bouvard objecta qu'ils n'avaient besoin du consentement de personne. Qui vous arrête ? est-ce le trousseau ? Notre linge a une marque pareille, un B ! nous unirons nos majuscules.

L'argument lui plut. Mais une affaire majeure l'empêchait de se décider avant la fin du mois. Et Bouvard gémit.

Elle eut la délicatesse de le reconduire, — escortée de Marianne, qui portait un falot.

Les deux amis s'étaient caché leur passion.

Pécuchet comptait voiler toujours son intrigue avec la bonne. Si Bouvard s'y opposait il l'emmènerait vers d'autres lieux, fût-ce en Algérie, où l'existence n'est pas chère ! Mais rarement il formait de ces hypothèses, plein de son amour, sans penser aux conséquences.

Bouvard projetait de faire du muséum la chambre conjugale, à moins que Pécuchet ne s'y refusât ; alors il habiterait le domicile de son épouse.

Un après-midi de la semaine suivante, — c'était chez elle dans son jardin ; les bourgeons commençaient à s'ouvrir ; et il y avait, entre les nuées, de grands espaces bleus, — elle se baissa pour cueillir des violettes, et dit, en les présentant :

— Saluez Mme Bouvard !

— Comment ! Est-ce vrai ?

— Parfaitement vrai.

Il voulut la saisir dans ses bras, elle le repoussa. Quel homme ! — puis devenue sérieuse, l'avertit que bientôt, elle lui demanderait une faveur.

— Je vous l'accorde !

Ils fixèrent la signature de leur contrat à jeudi prochain.

Personne jusqu'au dernier moment n'en devait rien savoir.

— Convenu !

Et il sortit les yeux au ciel, léger comme un chevreuil.

Pécuchet le matin du même jour s'était promis de mourir, s'il n'obtenait pas les faveurs de sa bonne — et il l'avait accompagnée dans la cave, espérant que les ténèbres lui donneraient de l'audace.

Plusieurs fois, elle avait voulu s'en aller ; mais il la retenait pour compter les bouteilles, choisir des lattes, ou voir le fond des tonneaux ; cela durait depuis longtemps.

Elle se trouvait en face de lui, sous la lumière du soupirail, droite, les paupières basses, le coin de la bouche un peu relevé.

— M'aimes-tu ? dit brusquement Pécuchet.

— Oui ! je vous aime.

— Eh bien, alors, prouve-le-moi !

Et l'enveloppant du bras gauche, il commença, de l'autre main, à dégrafer son corset.

— Vous allez me faire du mal ?

— Non ! mon petit ange ! N'aie pas peur !

— Si M. Bouvard…

— Je ne lui dirai rien ! Sois tranquille !

Un tas de fagots se trouvait derrière. Elle s'y laissa tomber, les seins hors de la chemise, la tête renversée ; — puis se cacha la figure sous un bras — et un autre eût compris qu'elle ne manquait pas d'expérience.

Bouvard, bientôt, arriva pour dîner.

Le repas se fit en silence, chacun ayant peur de se trahir. Mélie les servait impassible, comme d'habitude. Pécuchet tournait les yeux, pour éviter les siens, tandis que Bouvard considérant les murs, songeait à des améliorations.

Huit jours après, le jeudi, il rentra furieux.

— La sacrée garce !

— Qui donc ?

— Mme Bordin.

Et il conta qu'il avait poussé la démence jusqu'à vouloir en faire sa femme. Mais tout était fini, depuis un quart d'heure, chez Marescot.

Elle avait prétendu recevoir en dot les Écalles, dont il ne pouvait disposer — l'ayant comme la ferme, soldée en partie avec l'argent d'un autre.

— Effectivement ! dit Pécuchet.

— Et moi ! qui ai eu la bêtise de lui promettre une faveur, à son choix ! C'était celle-là ! j'y ai mis de l'entêtement ; si elle m'aimait, elle m'eût cédé ! La veuve, au contraire s'était emportée en injures, avait dénigré son physique, sa bedaine. Ma bedaine ! je te demande un peu.

Pécuchet cependant était sorti plusieurs fois, marchait les jambes écartées.

— Tu souffres ? dit Bouvard.

— Oh ! — oui ! je souffre !

Et ayant fermé la porte, Pécuchet après beaucoup d'hésitations, confessa qu'il venait de se découvrir une maladie secrète.

— Toi ?

— Moi-même !

— Ah ! mon pauvre garçon ! qui te l'a donnée ?

Il devint encore plus rouge, et dit d'une voix encore plus basse :

— Ce ne peut être que Mélie !

Bouvard en demeura stupéfait.

La première chose était de renvoyer la jeune personne.

Elle protesta d'un air candide.

Le cas de Pécuchet était grave, pourtant ; mais honteux de sa turpitude, il n'osait voir le médecin.

Bouvard imagina de recourir à Barberou.

Ils lui adressèrent le détail de la maladie, pour le montrer à un docteur qui la soignerait par correspondance. Barberou y mit du zèle, persuadé qu'elle concernait Bouvard, et l'appela vieux roquentin, tout en le félicitant.

— À mon âge ! disait Pécuchet n'est-ce pas lugubre ! Mais pourquoi m'a-t-elle fait ça !

— Tu lui plaisais.

— Elle aurait dû me prévenir.

— Est-ce que la passion raisonne ! Et Bouvard se plaignait de Mme Bordin.

Souvent, il l'avait surprise arrêtée devant les Écalles, dans la compagnie de Marescot, en conférence avec Germaine, — tant de manoeuvres pour un peu de terre !

— Elle est avare ! Voilà l'explication !

Ils ruminaient ainsi leur mécompte, dans la petite salle, au coin du feu, Pécuchet, tout en avalant ses remèdes, Bouvard en fumant des pipes — et ils dissertaient sur les femmes.

— Étrange besoin, est-ce un besoin ? — Elles poussent au crime, à l'héroïsme, et à l'abrutissement ! L'enfer sous un jupon, le paradis dans un baiser — ramage de tourterelle, ondulations de serpent, griffe de chat ; — perfidie de la mer, variété de la lune — ils dirent tous les lieux communs qu'elles ont fait répandre.

C'était le désir d'en avoir qui avait suspendu leur amitié. Un remords les prit. — Plus de femmes, n'est-ce pas ? Vivons sans elles ! — Et ils s'embrassèrent avec attendrissement.

Il fallait réagir ! — et Bouvard, après la guérison de Pécuchet, estima que l'hydrothérapie leur serait avantageuse.

Germaine, revenue dès le départ de l'autre, charriait tous les matins, la baignoire dans le corridor.

Les deux bonshommes, nus comme des sauvages, se lançaient de grands seaux d'eau ; — puis ils couraient pour rejoindre leurs chambres. — On les vit par la claire-voie ; — et des personnes furent scandalisées.

CHAPITRE VIII

Satisfaits de leur régime, ils voulurent s'améliorer le tempérament par de la gymnastique.

Et ayant pris le manuel d'Amoros, ils en parcoururent l'atlas.

Tous ces jeunes garçons, accroupis, renversés, debout, pliant les jambes, écartant les bras, montrant le poing, soulevant des fardeaux, chevauchant des poutres, grimpant à des échelles, cabriolant sur des trapèzes, un tel déploiement de force et d'agilité excita leur envie.

Cependant, ils étaient contristés par les splendeurs du gymnase, décrites dans la préface. Car jamais ils ne pourraient se procurer un vestibule pour les équipages, un hippodrome pour les courses, un bassin pour la natation, ni une montagne de gloire, colline artificielle, ayant trente-deux mètres de hauteur.

Un cheval de voltige en bois avec le rembourrage eût été dispendieux, ils y renoncèrent ; le tilleul abattu dans le jardin leur servit de mât horizontal ; et quand ils furent habiles à le parcourir d'un bout à l'autre, pour en avoir un vertical, ils replantèrent une poutrelle des contre-espaliers. Pécuchet gravit jusqu'en haut. Bouvard glissait, retombait toujours, finalement, y renonça.

Les bâtons orthosomatiques lui plurent davantage, c'est-à-dire deux manches à balai reliés par deux cordes dont la première se passe sous les aisselles, la seconde sur les poignets — et pendant des heures il gardait cet appareil, le menton levé, la poitrine en avant, les coudes le long du corps.

À défaut d'haltères, le charron leur tourna quatre morceaux de frêne qui ressemblaient à des pains de sucre, se terminant en goulot de bouteille. On doit porter ces massues à droite, à gauche, par devant, par derrière ; mais trop lourdes, elles échappaient de leurs doigts, au risque de leur broyer les jambes. N'importe, ils s'acharnèrent aux mils persanes et même craignant qu'elles n'éclatassent, tous les soirs, ils les frottaient avec de la cire et un morceau de drap.

Ensuite, ils recherchèrent des fossés. Quand ils en avaient trouvé un à leur convenance, ils appuyaient au milieu une longue perche, s'élançaient du pied gauche, atteignaient l'autre bord, puis recommençaient. La campagne étant plate, on les apercevait au loin ; — et les villageois se demandaient quelles étaient ces deux choses extraordinaires, bondissant à l'horizon.

L'automne venu, ils se mirent à la gymnastique de chambre ; elle les ennuya. Que n'avaient-ils le trémoussoir ou fauteuil de poste imaginé sous Louis XIV par l'abbé de Saint-Pierre ! Comment était-ce construit ? où se renseigner ?

Dumouchel ne daigna pas même leur répondre !

Alors, ils établirent dans le fournil une bascule brachiale. Sur deux poulies vissées au plafond passait une corde, tenant une traverse à chaque bout. Sitôt qu'ils l'avaient prise, l'un poussait la terre de ses orteils, l'autre baissait les bras jusqu'au niveau du sol ; le premier, par sa pesanteur, attirait le second, qui lâchant un peu la cordelette, montait à son tour ; en moins de cinq minutes leurs membres dégouttelaient de sueur.

Pour suivre les prescriptions du manuel, ils tâchèrent de devenir ambidextres, jusqu'à se priver de la main droite, temporairement. Ils firent plus : Amoros indique les pièces de vers qu'il faut chanter dans les manoeuvres — et Bouvard et Pécuchet, en marchant, répétaient l'hymne nº 9 :

Un roi, un roi juste est un bien sur la terre.

Quand ils se battaient les pectoraux : Amis, la couronne et la gloire, *etc.* Au pas de course :

À nous l'animal timide !
Atteignons le cerf rapide !
Oui ! nous vaincrons !
Courons ! courons ! courons !

Et plus haletants que des chiens, ils s'animaient au bruit de leurs voix.

Un côté de la gymnastique les exaltait : son emploi comme moyen de sauvetage.

Mais il aurait fallu des enfants, pour apprendre à les porter dans des sacs ; — et ils prièrent le maître d'école de leur en fournir quelques-uns. Petit objecta que les familles se fâcheraient. Ils se rabattirent sur les secours aux blessés. L'un feignait d'être évanoui ; et l'autre le charriait dans une brouette, avec toutes sortes de précautions.

Quant aux escalades militaires, l'auteur préconise l'échelle de Bois-Rosé, ainsi nommée du capitaine qui surprit Fécamp autrefois, en montant par la falaise.

D'après la gravure du livre, ils garnirent de bâtonnets un câble, et l'attachèrent sous le hangar.

Dès qu'on a enfourché le premier bâton, et saisi le troisième, on jette ses jambes en dehors, pour que le deuxième qui était tout à l'heure contre la poitrine se trouve juste sous les cuisses. On se redresse, on empoigne le quatrième et l'on continue. — Malgré de prodigieux déhanchements, il leur fut impossible d'atteindre le deuxième échelon.

Peut-être a-t-on moins de mal en s'accrochant aux pierres avec les mains, comme firent les soldats de Bonaparte à l'attaque du Fort-Chambray ? — et pour vous rendre capable d'une telle action, Amoros possède une tour dans son établissement.

Le mur en ruines pouvait la remplacer. Ils en tentèrent l'assaut.

Mais Bouvard, ayant retiré trop vite son pied d'un trou, eut peur et fut pris d'étourdissement.

Pécuchet en accusa leur méthode : ils avaient négligé ce qui concerne les phalanges — si bien qu'ils devaient se remettre aux principes.

Ses exhortations furent vaines ; — et dans sa présomption, il aborda les échasses.

La nature semblait l'y avoir destiné ; car il employa tout de suite le grand modèle, ayant des palettes à quatre pieds du sol ; — et tranquille là-dessus, il arpentait le jardin, pareil à une gigantesque cigogne qui se fût promenée.

Bouvard à la fenêtre le vit tituber — puis s'abattre d'un bloc sur les haricots, dont les rames en se fracassant amortirent sa chute. On le ramassa couvert de terreau, les narines saignantes, livide — et il croyait s'être donné un effort.

Décidément la gymnastique ne convenait point à des hommes de leur âge ; ils l'abandonnèrent, n'osaient plus se mouvoir par crainte des accidents, et restaient tout le long du jour assis dans le muséum, à rêver d'autres occupations.

Ce changement d'habitudes influa sur la santé de Bouvard. Il devint très lourd, soufflait après ses repas comme un cachalot, voulut se faire maigrir, mangea moins, et s'affaiblit.

Pécuchet également, se sentait miné, avait des démangeaisons à la peau et des plaques dans la gorge. Ça ne va pas, disaient-ils, ça ne va pas.

Bouvard imagina d'aller choisir à l'auberge quelques bouteilles de vin d'Espagne, afin de se remonter la machine.

Comme il en sortait, le clerc de Marescot et trois hommes apportaient à

Beljambe une grande table de noyer ; Monsieur l'en remerciait beaucoup.

Elle s'était parfaitement conduite.

Bouvard connut ainsi la mode nouvelle des tables tournantes. Il en plaisanta le clerc.

Cependant par toute l'Europe, en Amérique, en Australie et dans les Indes, des millions de mortels passaient leur vie à faire tourner des tables ; — et on découvrait la manière de rendre les serins prophètes, de donner des concerts sans instruments, de correspondre aux moyens des escargots. La Presse offrant avec sérieux ces bourdes au public, le renforçait dans sa crédulité.

Les Esprits-frappeurs avaient débarqué au château de Faverges, de là s'étaient répandus dans le village — et le notaire principalement, les questionnait.

Choqué du scepticisme de Bouvard, il convia les deux amis à une soirée de tables tournantes.

Était-ce un piège ? Mme Bordin se trouverait là. Pécuchet, seul, s'y rendit.

Il y avait, comme assistants, le maire, le percepteur, le capitaine, d'autres bourgeois et leurs épouses, Mme Vaucorbeil, Mme Bordin effectivement, de plus, une ancienne sous-maîtresse de Mme Marescot, Mlle Laverrière, personne un peu louche avec des cheveux gris tombant en spirales sur les épaules, à la façon de 1830. Dans un fauteuil se tenait un cousin de Paris, costumé d'un habit bleu et l'air impertinent.

Les deux lampes de bronze, l'étagère de curiosités, des romances à vignette sur le piano, et des aquarelles minuscules dans des cadres exorbitants faisaient toujours l'étonnement de Chavignolles. Mais ce soir-là les yeux se portaient vers la table d'acajou. On l'éprouverait tout à l'heure, et elle avait l'importance des choses qui contiennent un mystère.

Douze invités prirent place autour d'elle, les mains étendues, les petits doigts se touchant. On n'entendait que le battement de la pendule. Les visages dénotaient une attention profonde.

Au bout de dix minutes, plusieurs se plaignirent de fourmillements dans les bras. Pécuchet était incommodé.

— Vous poussez ! dit le capitaine à Foureau.

— Pas du tout !

— Si fait !

— Ah ! monsieur !

Le notaire les calma.

À force de tendre l'oreille, on crut distinguer des craquements de bois. — Illusion ! — Rien ne bougeait.

L'autre jour, quand les familles Aubert et Lormeau étaient venues de Lisieux et qu'on avait emprunté exprès la table de Beljambe, tout avait si bien marché ! Mais celle-là aujourd'hui montrait un entêtement !… Pourquoi ?

Le tapis sans doute la contrariait ; — et on passa dans la salle à manger.

Le meuble choisi fut un large guéridon, où s'installèrent Pécuchet, Girbal, Mme Marescot et son cousin M. Alfred.

Le guéridon, qui avait des roulettes, glissa vers la droite ; les opérateurs sans déranger leurs doigts suivirent son mouvement, et de lui-même il fit encore deux tours. On fut stupéfait.

Alors M. Alfred articula d'une voix haute :

— Esprit, comment trouves-tu ma cousine ?

Le guéridon en oscillant avec lenteur frappa neuf coups. D'après une pancarte, où le nombre des coups se traduisait par des lettres, cela signifiait — charmante. Des bravos éclatèrent.

Puis Marescot, taquinant Mme Bordin, somma l'esprit de déclarer l'âge exact qu'elle avait.

Le pied du guéridon retomba cinq fois.

— Comment ? cinq ans ! s'écria Girbal.

— Les dizaines ne comptent pas reprit Foureau.

La veuve sourit, intérieurement vexée.

Les réponses aux autres questions manquèrent, tant l'alphabet était compliqué. Mieux valait la Planchette, moyen expéditif et dont Mlle Laverrière s'était servie pour noter sur un album les communications directes de Louis XII, Clémence Isaure, Franklin, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *etc.* Ces mécaniques se vendaient rue d'Aumale ; M. Alfred en promit une, puis s'adressant à la sous-maîtresse :

— Mais pour le quart d'heure, un peu de piano, n'est-ce pas ? une mazurka !

Deux accords plaqués vibrèrent. Il prit sa cousine à la taille, disparut avec elle, revint. On était rafraîchi par le vent de la robe qui frôlait les portes en passant. Elle se renversait la tête, il arrondissait son bras. On admirait la grâce de l'une, l'air fringant de l'autre ; et sans attendre les petits fours, Pécuchet se retira, ébahi de la soirée.

Il eut beau répéter : — Mais j'ai vu ! Bouvard niait les faits et néanmoins consentit à expérimenter, lui-même.

Pendant quinze jours, ils passèrent leurs après-midi en face l'un de l'autre les mains sur une table, puis sur un chapeau, sur une corbeille, sur des assiettes. Tous ces objets demeurèrent immobiles.

Le phénomène des tables tournantes n'en est pas moins certain. Le vulgaire l'attribue à des Esprits, Faraday au prolongement de l'action nerveuse, Chevreul à l'inconscience des efforts, ou peut-être, comme admet Ségouin, se dégage-t-il de l'assemblage des personnes une impulsion, un courant magnétique ?

Cette hypothèse fit rêver Pécuchet. Il prit dans sa bibliothèque le Guide du magnétiseur par Montacabère, le relut attentivement, et initia Bouvard à la théorie.

Tous les corps animés reçoivent et communiquent l'influence des astres, propriété analogue à la vertu de l'aimant. En dirigeant cette force on peut guérir les malades, voilà le principe. La science, depuis Mesmer, s'est développée ; — mais il importe toujours de verser le fluide et de faire des passes qui, premièrement, doivent endormir.

— Eh bien, endors-moi dit Bouvard.

— Impossible répliqua Pécuchet pour subir l'action magnétique et pour la transmettre la foi est indispensable. Puis considérant Bouvard : — Ah ! quel dommage !

— Comment ?

— Oui, si tu voulais, avec un peu de pratique, il n'y aurait pas de magnétiseur comme toi !

Car il possédait tout ce qu'il faut : l'abord prévenant, une constitution robuste — et un moral solide.

Cette faculté qu'on venait de lui découvrir flatta Bouvard. Il se plongea sournoisement dans Montacabère.

Puis comme Germaine avait des bourdonnements d'oreilles, qui l'assourdissaient, il dit un soir d'un ton négligé : Si on essayait du magnétisme ? Elle ne s'y refusa pas. Il s'assit devant elle, lui prit les deux pouces dans ses mains, — et la regarda fixement, comme s'il n'eût fait autre chose de toute sa vie.

La bonne femme, une chaufferette sous les talons, commença par fléchir

le cou ; ses yeux se fermèrent, et tout doucement, elle se mit à ronfler.

Au bout d'une heure qu'ils la contemplaient Pécuchet dit à voix basse :

Que sentez-vous ?

Elle se réveilla.

Plus tard sans doute la lucidité viendrait.

Ce succès les enhardit ; — et reprenant avec aplomb l'exercice de la médecine ils soignèrent Chamberlan, le bedeau, pour ses douleurs intercostales, Migraine, le maçon, affecté d'une névrose de l'estomac, la mère Varin, dont l'encéphaloïde sous la clavicule exigeait pour se nourrir des emplâtres de viande, un goutteux, le père Lemoine, qui se traînait au bord des cabarets, un phtisique, un hémiplégique, bien d'autres. Ils traitèrent aussi des coryzas et des engelures.

Après l'exploration de la maladie, ils s'interrogeaient du regard pour savoir quelles passes employer, si elles devaient être à grands ou à petits courants, ascendantes ou descendantes, longitudinales, transversales, biditiges, triditiges ou même quinditiges. Quand l'un en avait trop, l'autre le remplaçait. Puis revenus chez eux, ils notaient les observations, sur le journal du traitement.

Leurs manières onctueuses captèrent le monde. Cependant on préférait

Bouvard ; et sa réputation parvint jusqu'à Falaise quand il eut guéri la

Barbée, la fille du père Barbey, un ancien capitaine au long cours.

Elle sentait comme un clou à l'occiput, parlait d'une voix rauque, restait souvent plusieurs jours sans manger, puis dévorait du plâtre ou du charbon. Ses crises nerveuses débutant par des sanglots se terminaient dans un flux de larmes ; et on avait pratiqué tous les remèdes, depuis les tisanes jusqu'aux moxas — si bien que par lassitude, elle accepta les offres de Bouvard.

Quand il eut congédié la servante et poussé les verrous, il se mit à frictionner son abdomen en appuyant sur la place des ovaires — un bien-être se manifesta par des soupirs et des bâillements. Il lui posa un doigt entre les sourcils au haut du nez — tout à coup elle devint inerte. Si on levait ses bras, ils retombaient ; sa tête garda les attitudes qu'il voulut — et les paupières à demi closes, en vibrant d'un mouvement spasmodique, laissaient apercevoir les globes des yeux, qui roulaient avec lenteur ; ils se fixèrent dans les angles, convulsés.

Bouvard lui demanda si elle souffrait ; elle répondit que non ; ce qu'elle éprouvait maintenant ? elle distinguait l'intérieur de son corps.

— Qu'y voyez-vous ?

— Un ver !

— Que faut-il pour le tuer ?

Son front se plissa : — Je cherche, — je ne peux pas ; je ne peux pas.

À la deuxième séance, elle se prescrivit un bouillon d'orties, à la troisième de l'herbe au chat. Les crises s'atténuèrent, disparurent. C'était vraiment comme un miracle.

L'addigitation nasale ne réussit point avec les autres ; et pour amener le somnambulisme ils projetèrent de construire un baquet mesmérien. — Déjà même Pécuchet avait recueilli de la limaille et nettoyé une vingtaine de bouteilles, quand un scrupule l'arrêta. Parmi les malades, il viendrait des personnes du sexe. — Et que ferons-nous s'il leur prend des accès d'érotisme furieux ?

Cela n'eût pas arrêté Bouvard ; mais à cause des potins et du chantage peut-être, mieux valait s'abstenir. Ils se contentèrent d'un harmonica et le portaient avec eux dans les maisons, ce qui réjouissait les enfants.

Un jour, que Migraine était plus mal, ils y recoururent. Les sons cristallins l'exaspérèrent ; mais Deleuze ordonne de ne pas s'effrayer des plaintes, la musique continua. Assez ! assez ! criait-il. — Un peu de patience répétait Bouvard. Pécuchet tapotait plus vite sur les lames de verre, et l'instrument vibrait, et le pauvre homme hurlait, quand le médecin parut attiré par le vacarme.

— Comment ! encore vous ! s'écria-t-il, furieux de les retrouver toujours chez ses clients. Ils expliquèrent leur moyen magnétique. Alors il tonna contre le magnétisme, un tas de jongleries, et dont les effets proviennent de l'imagination.

Cependant on magnétise des animaux. Montacabère l'affirme et M. Lafontaine est parvenu à magnétiser une lionne. Ils n'avaient pas de lionne. Le hasard leur offrit une autre bête.

Car le lendemain à six heures un valet de charrue vint leur dire qu'on les réclamait à la ferme, pour une vache désespérée.

Ils y coururent.

Les pommiers étaient en fleurs, et l'herbe dans la cour fumait sous le soleil levant. Au bord de la mare, à demi couverte d'un drap, une vache beuglait, grelottante des seaux d'eau qu'on lui jetait sur le corps ; — et démesurément gonflée, elle ressemblait à un hippopotame.

Sans doute, elle avait pris du venin en pâturant dans les trèfles. Le père et la mère Gouy se désolaient — car le vétérinaire ne pouvait venir, et un charron qui savait des mots contre l'enflure ne voulait pas se déranger, mais ces messieurs dont la bibliothèque était célèbre devaient connaître un secret.

Ayant retroussé leurs manches, ils se placèrent, l'un devant les cornes, l'autre à la croupe — et avec de grands efforts intérieurs et une gesticulation frénétique ils écartaient les doigts, pour épandre sur l'animal des ruisseaux de fluide tandis que le fermier, son épouse, leur garçon et des voisins les regardaient presque effrayés.

Les gargouillements que l'on entendait dans le ventre de la vache provoquèrent des borborygmes au fond de leurs entrailles. Elle émit un vent. Pécuchet dit alors :

— C'est une porte ouverte à l'espérance ! un débouché, peut-être ?

Le débouché s'opéra ; l'espérance jaillit dans un paquet de matières jaunes éclatant avec la force d'un obus. Les coeurs se desserrèrent, la vache dégonfla. Une heure après, il n'y paraissait plus.

Ce n'était pas l'effet de l'imagination, certainement. Donc, le fluide contient une vertu particulière. Elle se laisse enfermer dans des objets, où on ira la prendre sans qu'elle se trouve affaiblie. Un tel moyen épargne les déplacements. Ils l'adoptèrent ; — et ils envoyaient à leurs pratiques, des jetons magnétisés, des mouchoirs magnétisés, de l'eau magnétisée, du pain magnétisé.

Puis continuant leurs études, ils abandonnèrent les passes pour le système de Puységur, qui remplace le magnétiseur par un vieil arbre, au tronc duquel une corde s'enroule.

Un poirier dans leur masure semblait fait tout exprès. Ils le préparèrent en l'embrassant fortement à plusieurs reprises. Un banc fut établi en dessous. Leurs habitués s'y rangeaient ; et ils obtinrent des résultats si merveilleux que pour enfoncer Vaucorbeil ils le convièrent à une séance, avec les notables du pays.

Pas un n'y manqua.

Germaine les reçut dans la petite salle, en priant de faire excuse, ses maîtres allaient venir.

De temps à autre, on entendait un coup de sonnette. C'était les malades qu'elle introduisait ailleurs. Les invités se montraient du coude les fenêtres poussiéreuses, les taches sur les lambris, la peinture s'éraillant ; — et le jardin était lamentable ! Du bois mort partout ! — Deux bâtons, devant la brèche du mur, barraient le verger.

Pécuchet se présenta. — À vos ordres, messieurs ! et l'on vit au fond sous le poirier d'Édouïn, plusieurs personnes assises.

Chamberlan, sans barbe, comme un prêtre, et en soutanelle de lasting avec une calotte de cuir, s'abandonnait à des frissons occasionnés par sa douleur intercostale ; Migraine, souffrant toujours de l'estomac, grimaçait près de lui. La mère Varin, pour cacher sa tumeur portait un châle à plusieurs tours. Le père Lemoine, pieds nus dans des savates, avait ses béquilles sous les jarrets — et la Barbée en costume des dimanches était pâle, extraordinairement.

De l'autre côté de l'arbre, on trouva d'autres personnes : une femme à figure d'albinos épongeait les glandes suppurantes de son cou. Le visage d'une petite fille disparaissait à moitié sous des lunettes bleues. Un vieillard dont une contracture déformait l'échine heurtait de ses mouvements involontaires Marcel, une espèce d'idiot, couvert d'une blouse en loques et d'un pantalon rapiécé. Son bec-de-lièvre mal recousu laissait voir ses incisives — et des linges embobelinaient sa joue, tuméfiée par une énorme fluxion.

Tous tenaient à la main une ficelle descendant de l'arbre ; — et des oiseaux chantaient, l'odeur du gazon attiédi se roulait dans l'air. Le soleil passait entre les branches. On marchait sur de la mousse.

Cependant les sujets, au lieu de dormir, écarquillaient leurs paupières.

— Jusqu'à présent, ce n'est pas drôle dit Foureau. — Commencez, je m'éloigne une minute. Et il revint, en fumant dans un Abd-el-kader, reste dernier de la porte aux pipes.

Pécuchet se rappela un excellent moyen de magnétisation. Il mit dans sa bouche tous les nez des malades et aspira leur haleine pour tirer à lui l'électricité — et en même temps, Bouvard étreignait l'arbre, dans le but d'accroître le fluide.

Le maçon interrompit ses hoquets, le bedeau fut moins agité, l'homme à la contracture ne bougea plus. — On pouvait maintenant s'approcher d'eux, leur faire subir toutes les épreuves.

Le médecin, avec sa lancette, piqua sous l'oreille Chamberlan, qui tressaillit un peu. La sensibilité chez les autres fut évidente. Le goutteux poussa un cri. Quant à la Barbée, elle souriait comme dans un rêve, et un filet de sang lui coulait sous la mâchoire. Foureau, pour l'éprouver lui-même, voulut saisir la lancette, et le Docteur l'ayant refusée, il pinça la malade fortement. Le Capitaine lui chatouilla les narines avec une plume, le Percepteur allait lui enfoncer une épingle sous la peau.

— Laissez-la donc dit Vaucorbeil rien d'étonnant, après tout ! une hystérique ! le diable y perdrait son latin !

— Celle-là dit Pécuchet, en désignant Victoire la femme scrofuleuse est un médecin ! elle reconnaît les affections et indique les remèdes.

Langlois brûlait de la consulter sur son catarrhe ; il n'osa ; — mais

Coulon, plus brave, demanda quelque chose pour ses rhumatismes.

Pécuchet lui mit la main droite dans la main gauche de Victoire — et les cils toujours clos, les pommettes un peu rouges, les lèvres frémissantes, la somnambule, après avoir divagué, ordonna du Valum Becum.

Elle avait servi à Bayeux chez un apothicaire. Vaucorbeil en inféra qu'elle voulait dire de *l'album graecum* mot entrevu, peut-être, dans la pharmacie.

Puis il aborda le père Lemoine qui selon Bouvard percevait à travers les corps opaques.

C'était un ancien maître d'école tombé dans la crapule. Des cheveux blancs s'éparpillaient autour de sa figure ; — et adossé contre l'arbre, les paumes ouvertes, il dormait, en plein soleil, d'une façon majestueuse.

Le médecin attacha sur ses paupières une double cravate ; — et Bouvard lui présentant un journal dit impérieusement : — Lisez.

Il baissa le front, remua les muscles de sa face ; puis se renversa la tête, et finit par épeler : Cons-ti-tu-tionnel.

Mais avec de l'adresse on fait glisser tous les bandeaux !

Ces dénégations du médecin révoltaient Pécuchet. Il s'aventura jusqu'à prétendre que la Barbée pourrait décrire ce qui se passait actuellement dans sa propre maison.

— Soit répondit le docteur ; et ayant tiré sa montre : À quoi ma femme s'occupe-t-elle ?

La Barbée hésita longtemps — puis, d'un air maussade : — Hein ? quoi ? Ah ! j'y suis. Elle coud des rubans à un chapeau de paille.

Vaucorbeil arracha une feuille de son calepin, et écrivit un billet, que le clerc de Marescot s'empressa de porter.

La séance était finie. Les malades s'en allèrent.

Bouvard et Pécuchet en somme, n'avaient pas réussi. Cela tenait-il à la température, ou à l'odeur du tabac, ou au parapluie de l'abbé Jeufroy, qui avait une garniture de cuivre — métal contraire à l'émission fluidique ?

Vaucorbeil haussa les épaules.

Cependant, il ne pouvait contester la bonne foi de MM. Deleuze, Bertrand, Morin, Jules Cloquet. Or, ces maîtres affirment que des somnambules ont prédit des événements, subi, sans douleur, des opérations cruelles.

L'abbé rapporta des histoires plus étonnantes. Un missionnaire a vu des brahmanes parcourir une voûte la tête en bas, le Grand-Lama au Thibet se fend les boyaux, pour rendre des oracles.

— Plaisantez-vous ? dit le médecin.

— Nullement.

— Allons donc ! Quelle farce !

Et la question se détournant chacun produisit des anecdotes.

— Moi dit l'épicier j'ai eu un chien qui était toujours malade quand le mois commençait par un vendredi.

— Nous étions quatorze enfants reprit le juge de paix. Je suis né un 14, mon mariage eut lieu un 14 — et le jour de ma fête tombe un 14 ! Expliquez-moi ça.

Beljambe avait rêvé, bien des fois, le nombre de voyageurs qu'il aurait le lendemain à son auberge. Et Petit conta le souper de Cazotte.

Le curé, alors, fit cette réflexion : — Pourquoi ne pas voir là dedans, tout simplement…

— Les démons, n'est-ce pas ? dit Vaucorbeil.

L'abbé, au lieu de répondre, eut un signe de tête.

Marescot parla de la Pythie de Delphes. — Sans aucun doute, des miasmes…

— Ah ! les miasmes, maintenant !

— Moi, j'admets un fluide reprit Bouvard.

— Nervoso-sidéral ajouta Pécuchet.

— Mais prouvez-le ! montrez-le ! votre fluide ! D'ailleurs les fluides sont démodés ; écoutez-moi.

Vaucorbeil alla plus loin, se mettre à l'ombre. Les bourgeois le suivirent. Si vous dites à un enfant : Je suis un loup, je vais te manger, il se figure que vous êtes un loup et il a peur ; c'est donc un rêve commandé par des paroles. De même le somnambule accepte les fantaisies que l'on voudra. Il se souvient et n'imagine pas, n'a que les sensations quand il croit penser. De cette manière des crimes sont suggérés et des gens vertueux, pourront se voir bêtes féroces, et devenir anthropophages.

On regarda Bouvard et Pécuchet. Leur science avait des périls pour la société.

Le clerc de Marescot reparut dans le jardin, en brandissant une lettre de Mme Vaucorbeil.

Le Docteur la décacheta, — pâlit — et enfin lut ces mots :

— Je couds des rubans à un chapeau de paille !

La stupéfaction empêcha de rire.

— Une coïncidence, parbleu ! Ça ne prouve rien. Et comme les deux magnétiseurs avaient un air de triomphe, il se retourna sous la porte pour leur dire :

— Ne continuez plus ! ce sont des amusements dangereux !

Le curé, en emmenant son bedeau, le tança vertement.

— Êtes-vous fou ? sans ma permission ! des manoeuvres défendues par l'Église !

Tout le monde venait de partir ; Bouvard et Pécuchet causaient sur le vigneau avec l'instituteur quand Marcel débusqua du verger, la mentonnière défaite, et il bredouillait :

— Guéri ! guéri ! Bons messieurs !

— Bien ! assez ! laisse-nous tranquilles !

— Ah bons messieurs ! je vous aime ! serviteur !

Petit, homme de progrès, avait trouvé l'explication du médecin terre à terre, bourgeoise. La Science est un monopole aux mains des Riches. Elle exclut le Peuple. À la vieille analyse du moyen âge, il est temps que succède une synthèse large et primesautière ! La Vérité doit s'obtenir par le Coeur — et se déclarant spiritiste, il indiqua plusieurs ouvrages, défectueux sans doute, mais qui étaient le signe d'une aurore.

Ils se les firent envoyer.

Le spiritisme pose en dogme l'amélioration fatale de notre espèce. La terre un jour deviendra le ciel ; et c'est pourquoi cette doctrine charmait l'instituteur. Sans être catholique, elle se réclame de saint Augustin et de saint Louis. Allan-Kardec publie même des fragments dictés par eux et qui sont au niveau des opinions contemporaines. Elle est pratique, bienfaisante, et nous révèle, comme le télescope, les mondes supérieurs.

Les Esprits, après la mort et dans l'Extase, y sont transportés. Mais quelquefois ils descendent sur notre globe, où ils font craquer les meubles, se mêlent à nos divertissements, goûtent les beautés de la Nature et les plaisirs des Arts.

Cependant, plusieurs d'entre nous possèdent une trompe aromale, c'est-à-dire derrière le crâne un long tuyau qui monte depuis les cheveux jusqu'aux planètes et nous permet de converser avec les esprits de Saturne ; — les choses intangibles n'en sont pas moins réelles, et de la terre aux astres, des astres à la terre, c'est un va-et-vient, une transmission, un échange continu.

Alors le coeur de Pécuchet se gonfla d'aspirations désordonnées — et quand la nuit était venue, Bouvard le surprenait à sa fenêtre contemplant ces espaces lumineux, qui sont peuplés d'esprits.

Swedenborg y a fait de grands voyages. Car en moins d'un an il a exploré
Vénus, Mars, Saturne et vingt-trois fois Jupiter. De plus, il a vu à
Londres Jésus-Christ, il a vu saint Paul, il a vu saint Jean, il a vu
Moïse, et en 1736, il a même vu le Jugement dernier.

Aussi nous donne-t-il des descriptions du ciel.

On y trouve des fleurs, des palais, des marchés et des églises absolument comme chez nous.

Les anges, hommes autrefois, couchent leurs pensées sur des feuillets, devisent des choses du ménage, ou bien de matières spirituelles ; et les emplois ecclésiastiques appartiennent à ceux, qui dans leur vie terrestre, ont cultivé l'Écriture sainte.

Quant à l'enfer, il est plein d'une odeur nauséabonde, avec des cahutes, des tas d'immondices, des personnes mal habillées.

Et Pécuchet s'abîmait l'intellect pour comprendre ce qu'il y a de beau dans ces révélations. Elles parurent à Bouvard le délire d'un imbécile.

Tout cela dépasse les bornes de la Nature ! Qui les connaît, cependant ?

Et ils se livrèrent aux réflexions suivantes.

Des bateleurs peuvent illusionner une foule ; un homme ayant des passions violentes en remuera d'autres ; mais comment la seule volonté agirait-elle sur de la matière inerte ? Un Bavarois, dit-on, mûrit les raisins ; M. Gervais a ranimé un héliotrope ; un plus fort à Toulouse écarte les nuages.

Faut-il admettre une substance intermédiaire entre le monde et nous ? L'od, un nouvel impondérable, une sorte d'électricité, n'est pas autre chose, peut-être ? Ses émissions expliquent la lueur que les magnétisés croient voir, les feux errants des cimetières, la forme des fantômes.

Ces images ne seraient donc pas une illusion, et les dons extraordinaires des Possédés pareils à ceux des somnambules, auraient une cause physique ?

Quelle qu'en soit l'origine, il y a une essence, un agent secret et universel. Si nous pouvions le tenir, on n'aurait pas besoin de la force de la durée. Ce qui demande des siècles se développerait en une minute ; tout miracle serait praticable et l'univers à notre disposition.

La magie provenait de cette convoitise éternelle de l'esprit humain. On a, sans doute, exagéré sa valeur ; mais elle n'est pas un mensonge. Des Orientaux qui la connaissent exécutent des prodiges ; tous les voyageurs le déclarent ; et au Palais-Royal M. Dupotet trouble avec son doigt, l'aiguille aimantée.

Comment devenir magicien ? Cette idée leur parut folle d'abord, mais elle revint, les tourmenta, et ils y cédèrent, tout en affectant d'en rire.

Un régime préparatoire est indispensable.

Afin de mieux s'exalter, ils vivaient la nuit, jeûnaient, et voulant faire de Germaine un médium plus délicat rationnèrent sa nourriture. Elle se dédommageait sur la boisson, et but tant d'eau-de-vie, qu'elle acheva de s'alcooliser. Leurs promenades dans le corridor la réveillaient. Elle confondait le bruit de leurs pas avec ses bourdonnements d'oreilles et les voix imaginaires qu'elle entendait sortir des murs. Un jour qu'elle avait mis le matin un carrelet dans la cave, elle eut peur en le voyant tout couvert de feu, se trouva désormais plus mal ; et finit par croire qu'ils lui avaient jeté un sort.

Espérant gagner des visions, ils se comprimèrent la nuque, réciproquement, ils se firent des sachets de belladone, enfin ils adoptèrent la boîte magique ; une petite boîte, d'où s'élève un champignon hérissé de clous et que l'on garde sur le coeur par le moyen d'un ruban attaché à la poitrine. Tout rata. Mais ils pouvaient employer le cercle de Dupotet.

Pécuchet avec du charbon barbouilla sur le sol une rondelle noire, afin d'y enclore les esprits animaux que devaient aider les esprits ambiants — et heureux de dominer Bouvard, il lui dit d'un air pontifical : Je te défie de le franchir !

Bouvard considéra cette place ronde. Bientôt son coeur battit, ses yeux se troublaient. Ah ! finissons ! Et il sauta par-dessus pour fuir un malaise inexprimable.

Pécuchet, dont l'exaltation allait croissant, voulut faire apparaître un mort.

Sous le Directoire, un homme rue de l'Échiquier montrait les victimes de la Terreur. Les exemples de Revenants sont innombrables. Que ce soit une apparence, qu'importe ! il s'agit de la produire.

Plus le défunt nous touche de près, mieux il accourt à notre appel ; mais il n'avait aucune relique de sa famille, ni bague ni miniature, pas un cheveu, tandis que Bouvard était dans les conditions à évoquer son père — et comme il témoignait de la répugnance Pécuchet lui demanda : — Que crains-tu ?

— Moi ? Oh ! rien du tout ! Fais ce que tu voudras !

Ils soudoyèrent Chamberlan qui leur fournit en cachette une vieille tête de mort. Un couturier leur tailla deux houppelandes noires, avec un capuchon comme à la robe de moine. La voiture de Falaise leur apporta un long rouleau dans une enveloppe. Puis ils se mirent à l'oeuvre, l'un curieux de l'exécuter, l'autre ayant peur d'y croire.

Le muséum était tendu comme un catafalque. Trois flambeaux brûlaient au bord de la table poussée contre le mur sous le portrait du père Bouvard, que dominait la tête de mort. Ils avaient même fourré une chandelle dans l'intérieur du crâne ; — et des rayons se projetaient par les deux orbites.

Au milieu, sur une chaufferette, de l'encens fumait. Bouvard se tenait derrière — et Pécuchet, lui tournant le dos, jetait dans l'âtre des poignées de soufre.

Avant d'appeler un mort, il faut le consentement des démons. Or, ce jour-là étant un vendredi — jour qui appartient à Béchet, on devait s'occuper de Béchet premièrement. Bouvard ayant salué de droite et de gauche, fléchi le menton, et levé les bras, commença.

— Par Éthaniel, Amazin, Ischyros il avait oublié le reste. — Pécuchet bien vite souffla les mots, notés sur un carton.

— Ischyros, Athanatos, Adonaï, Sadaï, Éloy, Messias la kyrielle était longue je te conjure, je t'obsècre, je t'ordonne, ô Béchet puis baissant la voix : Où es-tu Béchet ? Béchet ! Béchet ! Béchet !

Bouvard s'affaissa dans le fauteuil ; et il était bien aise de ne pas voir Béchet — un instinct lui reprochant sa tentative comme un sacrilège. Où était l'âme de son père ? Pouvait-elle l'entendre ? Si tout à coup, elle allait venir ?

Les rideaux se remuaient avec lenteur sous le vent qui entrait par un carreau fêlé ; — et les cierges balançaient des ombres sur le crâne de mort et sur la figure peinte. Une couleur terreuse les brunissait également. De la moisissure dévorait les pommettes, les yeux n'avaient plus de lumière. Mais une flamme brillait au-dessus, dans les trous de la tête vide. Elle semblait quelquefois prendre la place de l'autre, poser sur le collet de la redingote, avoir ses favoris ; — et la toile, à demi déclouée, oscillait, palpitait.

Peu à peu, ils sentirent comme l'effleurement d'une haleine, l'approche d'un être impalpable. Des gouttes de sueur mouillaient le front de Pécuchet — et voilà que Bouvard se mit à claquer des dents, une crampe lui serrait l'épigastre, le plancher comme une onde fuyait sous ses talons, le soufre qui brûlait dans la cheminée se rabattit à grosses volutes, des chauves-souris en même temps tournoyaient, un cri s'éleva ; — qui était-ce ?

Et ils avaient sous leurs capuchons, des figures tellement décomposées, que leur effroi en redoublait — n'osant faire un geste, ni même parler — quand derrière la porte ils entendirent des gémissements, comme ceux d'une âme en peine.

Enfin, ils se hasardèrent.

C'était leur vieille bonne — qui les espionnant par une fente de la cloison, avait cru voir le Diable ; — et à genoux dans le corridor, elle multipliait les signes de croix.

Tout raisonnement fut inutile. Elle les quitta le soir même — ne voulant plus servir des gens pareils.

Germaine bavarda. Chamberlan perdit sa place ; — et il se forma contre eux une sourde coalition, entretenue par l'abbé Jeufroy, Mme Bordin, et Foureau.

Leur manière de vivre — qui n'était pas celle des autres — déplaisait. Ils devinrent suspects ; et même inspiraient une vague terreur.

Ce qui les ruina surtout dans l'opinion, ce fut le choix de leur domestique. À défaut d'un autre, ils avaient pris Marcel.

Son bec-de-lièvre, sa hideur et son baragouin écartaient de sa personne. Enfant abandonné, il avait grandi au hasard dans les champs et conservait de sa longue misère une faim irrassasiable. Les bêtes mortes de maladie, du lard en pourriture, un chien écrasé, tout lui convenait, pourvu que le morceau fût gros ; — et il était doux comme un mouton ; mais entièrement stupide.

La reconnaissance l'avait poussé à s'offrir comme serviteur chez Messieurs Bouvard et Pécuchet ; — et puis, les croyant sorciers, il espérait des gains extraordinaires.

Dès les premiers jours, il leur confia un secret. Sur la bruyère de Poligny, autrefois, un homme avait trouvé un lingot d'or. L'anecdote est rapportée dans les historiens de Falaise ; ils ignoraient la suite : douze frères avant de partir pour un voyage avaient caché douze lingots pareils, tout le long de la route, depuis Chavignolles jusqu'à Bretteville ; — et Marcel supplia ses maîtres de commencer les recherches. Ces lingots, se dirent-ils, avaient peut-être été enfouis au moment de l'émigration.

C'était le cas d'employer la baguette divinatoire. Les vertus en sont douteuses. Ils étudièrent la question, cependant ; — et apprirent qu'un certain Pierre Garnier donne pour les défendre des raisons scientifiques : les sources et les métaux projetteraient des corpuscules en affinité avec le bois.

Cela n'est guère probable. Qui sait, pourtant ? Essayons !

Ils se taillèrent une fourchette de coudrier — et un matin partirent à la découverte du trésor.

— Il faudra le rendre dit Bouvard.

— Ah ! non ! par exemple !

Après trois heures de marche, une réflexion les arrêta : La route de Chavignolles à Bretteville ! — était-ce l'ancienne, ou la nouvelle ? Ce devait être l'ancienne ?

Ils rebroussèrent chemin — et parcoururent les alentours, au hasard, le tracé de la vieille route n'étant pas facile à reconnaître.

Marcel courait de droite et de gauche, comme un épagneul en chasse ; toutes les cinq minutes, Bouvard était contraint de le rappeler ; Pécuchet avançait pas à pas, tenant la baguette par les deux branches, la pointe en haut. Souvent il lui semblait qu'une force, et comme un crampon, la tirait vers le sol ; — et Marcel bien vite faisait une entaille aux arbres voisins pour retrouver la place plus tard.

Pécuchet cependant se ralentissait. Sa bouche s'ouvrit, ses prunelles se convulsèrent. Bouvard l'interpella, le secoua par les épaules ; il ne remua pas, et demeurait inerte, absolument comme la Barbée.

Puis il conta qu'il avait senti autour du coeur une sorte de déchirement, état bizarre, provenant de la baguette, sans doute ; — et il ne voulait plus y toucher.

Le lendemain, ils revinrent devant les marques faites aux arbres. Marcel avec une bêche creusait des trous ; jamais la fouille n'amenait rien ; — et ils étaient chaque fois extrêmement penauds. Pécuchet s'assit au bord d'un fossé ; et comme il rêvait la tête levée, s'efforçant d'entendre la voix des Esprits par sa trompe aromale, se demandant même s'il en avait une, il fixa ses regards sur la visière de sa casquette ; l'extase de la veille le reprit. Elle dura longtemps, devenait effrayante.

Au-dessus des avoines, dans un sentier, un chapeau de feutre parut ; c'était M. Vaucorbeil trottinant sur sa jument. Bouvard et Marcel le hélèrent.

La crise allait finir quand arriva le médecin. Pour mieux examiner Pécuchet, il lui souleva sa casquette — et apercevant un front couvert de plaques cuivrées :

— Ah ! ah ! fructus belli ! — ce sont des syphilides, mon bonhomme ! soignez-vous ! diable ! ne badinons pas avec l'amour.

Pécuchet, honteux, remit sa casquette, une sorte de béret, bouffant sur une visière en forme de demi-lune, et dont il avait pris le modèle dans l'atlas d'Amoros.

Les paroles du Docteur le stupéfiaient. Il y songeait, les yeux en l'air — et tout à coup fut ressaisi.

Vaucorbeil l'observait, puis d'une chiquenaude, il fit tomber sa casquette.

Pécuchet recouvra ses facultés.

— Je m'en doutais dit le médecin la visière vernie vous hypnotise comme un miroir ; et ce phénomène n'est pas rare chez les personnes qui considèrent un corps brillant avec trop d'attention.

Il indiqua comment pratiquer l'expérience sur des poules, enfourcha son bidet, et disparut lentement.

Une demi-lieue plus loin, ils remarquèrent un objet pyramidal, dressé à l'horizon, dans une cour de ferme — on aurait dit une grappe de raisin noir monstrueuse, piquée de points rouges çà et là. C'était suivant l'usage normand, un long mât garni de traverses où juchaient des dindes se rengorgeant au soleil.

— Entrons et Pécuchet aborda le fermier qui consentit à leur demande.

Avec du blanc d'Espagne, ils tracèrent une ligne au milieu du pressoir, lièrent les pattes d'un dindon, puis l'étendirent à plat ventre, le bec posé sur la raie. La bête ferma les yeux, et bientôt sembla morte. Il en fut de même des autres. Bouvard les repassait vivement à Pécuchet, qui les rangeait de côté dès qu'elles étaient engourdies. Les gens de la ferme témoignèrent des inquiétudes. La maîtresse cria ; une petite fille pleurait.

Bouvard détacha toutes les volailles. Elles se ranimaient, progressivement ; mais on ne savait pas les conséquences. À une objection un peu rêche de Pécuchet le fermier empoigna sa fourche.

— Filez, nom de Dieu ! ou je vous crève la paillasse !

Ils détalèrent.

N'importe ! le problème était résolu ; l'extase dépend d'une cause matérielle.

Qu'est donc la matière ? Qu'est-ce que l'Esprit ? D'où vient l'influence de l'une sur l'autre, et réciproquement ?

Pour s'en rendre compte, ils firent des recherches dans Voltaire, dans Bossuet, dans Fénelon — et même ils reprirent un abonnement à un cabinet de lecture.

Les maîtres anciens étaient inaccessibles par la longueur des oeuvres ou la difficulté de l'idiome ; mais Jouffroy et Damiron les initièrent à la philosophie moderne ; — et ils avaient des auteurs touchant celle du siècle passé.

Bouvard tirait ses arguments de La Mettrie, de Locke, d'Helvétius ; Pécuchet de M. Cousin, Thomas Reid et Gérando. Le premier s'attachait à l'expérience, l'idéal était tout pour le second. Il y avait de l'Aristote dans celui-ci, du Platon dans celui-là — et ils discutaient.

— L'âme est immatérielle disait l'un.

— Nullement ! disait l'autre ; la folie, le chloroforme, une saignée la bouleversent et puisqu'elle ne pense pas toujours, elle n'est point une substance ne faisant que penser.

— Cependant objecta Pécuchet j'ai, en moi-même, quelque chose de supérieur à mon corps, et qui parfois le contredit.

— Un être dans l'être ? l'homo duplex ! allons donc ! Des tendances différentes révèlent des motifs opposés. Voilà tout.

— Mais ce quelque chose, cette âme, demeure identique sous les changements du dehors. Donc, elle est simple, indivisible et partant spirituelle !

— Si l'âme était simple répliqua Bouvard, le nouveau-né se rappellerait, imaginerait comme l'adulte ! La Pensée, au contraire, suit le développement du cerveau. Quant à être indivisible, le parfum d'une rose, ou l'appétit d'un loup, pas plus qu'une volition ou une affirmation ne se coupent en deux.

— Ça n'y fait rien ! dit Pécuchet ; l'âme est exempte des qualités de la matière !

— Admets-tu la pesanteur ? reprit Bouvard. Or si la matière peut tomber, elle peut de même penser. Ayant eu un commencement, notre âme doit finir, et dépendante des organes, disparaître avec eux.

— Moi, je la prétends immortelle ! Dieu ne peut vouloir…

— Mais si Dieu n'existe pas ?

— Comment ? Et Pécuchet débita les trois preuves cartésiennes ; primo, Dieu est compris dans l'idée que nous en avons ; secundo, l'existence lui est possible ; tertio, être fini, comment aurais-je une idée de l'infini ? — et puisque nous avons cette idée, elle nous vient de Dieu, donc Dieu existe !

Il passa au témoignage de la conscience, à la tradition des peuples, au besoin d'un créateur. Quand je vois une horloge…

— Oui ! oui ! connu ! mais où est le père de l'horloger ?

— Il faut une cause, pourtant !

Bouvard doutait des causes. — De ce qu'un phénomène succède à un phénomène on conclut qu'il en dérive. Prouvez-le !

— Mais le spectacle de l'univers dénote une intention, un plan !

— Pourquoi ? Le mal est organisé aussi parfaitement que le Bien. Le ver qui pousse dans la tête du mouton et le fait mourir équivaut comme anatomie au mouton lui-même. Les monstruosités surpassent les fonctions normales. Le corps humain pouvait être mieux bâti. Les trois quarts du globe sont stériles. La Lune, ce lampadaire, ne se montre pas toujours ! Crois-tu l'Océan destiné aux navires, et le bois des arbres au chauffage de nos maisons ?

Pécuchet répondit :

— Cependant, l'estomac est fait pour digérer, la jambe pour marcher, l'oeil pour voir, bien qu'on ait des dyspepsies, des fractures et des cataractes. Pas d'arrangement sans but ! Les effets surviennent actuellement, ou plus tard. Tout dépend de lois. Donc, il y a des causes finales.

Bouvard imagina que Spinoza peut-être, lui fournirait des arguments, et il écrivit à Dumouchel, pour avoir la traduction de Saisset.

Dumouchel lui envoya un exemplaire, appartenant à son ami le professeur Varlot, exilé au Deux décembre.

L'Éthique les effraya avec ses axiomes, ses corollaires. Ils lurent seulement les endroits marqués d'un coup de crayon, et comprirent ceci :

La substance est ce qui est de soi, par soi, sans cause, sans origine.

Cette substance est Dieu.

Il est seul l'Étendue — et l'Étendue n'a pas de bornes. Avec quoi la borner ?

Mais bien qu'elle soit infinie, elle n'est pas l'infini absolu ; car elle ne contient qu'un genre de perfection ; et l'Absolu les contient tous.

Souvent ils s'arrêtaient, pour mieux réfléchir. Pécuchet absorbait des prises de tabac et Bouvard était rouge d'attention.

— Est-ce que cela t'amuse ?

— Oui ! sans doute ! va toujours !

Dieu se développe en une infinité d'attributs, qui expriment chacun à sa manière, l'infinité de son être. Nous n'en connaissons que deux : l'Étendue et la Pensée.

De la Pensée et de l'Étendue, découlent des modes innombrables, lesquels en contiennent d'autres.

Celui qui embrasserait, à la fois, toute l'Étendue et toute la Pensée n'y verrait aucune contingence, rien d'accidentel — mais une suite géométrique de termes, liés entre eux par des lois nécessaires.

— Ah ! ce serait beau ! dit Pécuchet.

Donc, il n'y a pas de liberté chez l'homme, ni chez Dieu.

— Tu l'entends ! s'écria Bouvard.

Si Dieu avait une volonté, un but, s'il agissait pour une cause, c'est qu'il aurait un besoin, c'est qu'il manquerait d'une perfection. Il ne serait pas Dieu.

Ainsi notre monde n'est qu'un point dans l'ensemble des choses — et l'univers impénétrable à notre connaissance, une portion d'une infinité d'univers émettant près du nôtre des modifications infinies. L'Étendue enveloppe notre univers, mais est enveloppée par Dieu, qui contient dans sa pensée tous les univers possibles, et sa pensée elle-même est enveloppée dans sa substance.

Il leur semblait être en ballon, la nuit, par un froid glacial, emportés d'une course sans fin, vers un abîme sans fond, — et sans rien autour d'eux que l'insaisissable, l'immobile, l'Éternel. C'était trop fort. Ils y renoncèrent.

Et désirant quelque chose de moins rude, ils achetèrent le Cours de philosophie, à l'usage des classes, par monsieur Guesnier.

L'auteur se demande quelle sera la bonne méthode, l'ontologique ou la psychologique ?

La première convenait à l'enfance des sociétés, quand l'homme portait son attention vers le monde extérieur. Mais à présent qu'il la replie sur lui-même nous croyons la seconde plus scientifique et Bouvard et Pécuchet se décidèrent pour elle.

Le but de la psychologie est d'étudier les faits qui se passent au sein du moi ; on les découvre en observant.

— Observons ! Et pendant quinze jours, après le déjeuner habituellement, ils cherchaient dans leur conscience, au hasard — espérant y faire de grandes découvertes, et n'en firent aucune — ce qui les étonna beaucoup.

Un phénomène occupe le moi, à savoir l'idée. De quelle nature est-elle ? On a supposé que les objets se mirent dans le cerveau ; et le cerveau envoie ces images à notre esprit, qui nous en donne la connaissance.

Mais si l'idée est spirituelle, comment représenter la matière ? De là scepticisme quant aux perceptions externes. Si elle est matérielle, les objets spirituels ne seraient pas représentés ? De là scepticisme en fait de notions internes. D'ailleurs qu'on y prenne garde ! cette hypothèse nous mènerait à l'athéisme ! car une image étant une chose finie, il lui est impossible de représenter l'infini.

— Cependant objecta Bouvard quand je songe à une forêt, à une personne, à un chien, je vois cette forêt, cette personne, ce chien. Donc les idées les représentent.

Et ils abordèrent l'origine des idées.

D'après Locke, il y en a deux, la sensation, la réflexion — Condillac réduit tout à la sensation.

Mais alors, la réflexion manquera de base. Elle a besoin d'un sujet, d'un être sentant ; et elle est impuissante à nous fournir les grandes vérités fondamentales : Dieu, le mérite et le démérite, le juste, le beau, etc., notions qu'on nomme innées, c'est-à-dire antérieures à l'Expérience et universelles.

— Si elles étaient universelles, nous les aurions dès notre naissance.

— On veut dire, par ce mot, des dispositions à les avoir, et
Descartes…

— Ton Descartes patauge ! car il soutient que le foetus les possède et il avoue dans un autre endroit que c'est d'une façon implicite.

Pécuchet fut étonné.

— Où cela se trouve-t-il ?

— Dans Gérando ! Et Bouvard lui donna une claque sur le ventre.

— Finis donc ! dit Pécuchet. Puis venant à Condillac : Nos pensées ne sont pas des métamorphoses de la sensation ! Elle les occasionne, les met en jeu. Pour les mettre en jeu, il faut un moteur. Car la matière de soi-même ne peut produire le mouvement ; — et j'ai trouvé cela dans ton Voltaire ! ajouta Pécuchet, en lui faisant une salutation profonde.

Ils rabâchaient ainsi les mêmes arguments, — chacun méprisant l'opinion de l'autre, sans le convaincre de la sienne.

Mais la Philosophie les grandissait dans leur estime. Ils se rappelaient avec pitié leurs préoccupations d'Agriculture, de Littérature, de Politique.

À présent le muséum les dégoûtait. Ils n'auraient pas mieux demandé que d'en vendre les bibelots ; — et ils passèrent au chapitre deuxième : des facultés de l'âme.

On en compte trois, pas davantage ! Celle de sentir, celle de connaître, celle de vouloir.

Dans la faculté de sentir distinguons la sensibilité physique de la sensibilité morale.

Les sensations physiques se classent naturellement en cinq espèces, étant amenées par les organes des sens.

Les faits de la sensibilité morale, au contraire, ne doivent rien au corps. — Qu'y a-t-il de commun entre le plaisir d'Archimède trouvant les lois de la pesanteur et la volupté immonde d'Apicius dévorant une hure de sanglier !

Cette sensibilité morale a quatre genres ; — et son deuxième genre désirs moraux se divise en cinq espèces, et les phénomènes du quatrième genre affections se subdivisent en deux autres espèces, parmi lesquelles l'amour de soi penchant légitime, sans doute, mais qui devenu exagéré prend le nom d'égoïsme.

Dans la faculté de connaître, se trouve l'aperception rationnelle, où l'on trouve deux mouvements principaux et quatre degrés.

L'Abstraction peut offrir des écueils aux intelligences bizarres.

La mémoire fait correspondre avec le passé comme la prévoyance avec l'avenir.

L'imagination est plutôt une faculté particulière, sui generis.

Tant d'embarras pour démontrer des platitudes, le ton pédantesque de l'auteur, la monotonie des tournures Nous sommes prêts à le reconnaître — Loin de nous la pensée — Interrogeons notre conscience l'éloge sempiternel de Dugalt-Stewart, enfin tout ce verbiage, les écoeura tellement, que sautant par dessus la faculté de vouloir, ils entrèrent dans la Logique.

Elle leur apprit ce qu'est l'Analyse, la Synthèse, l'Induction, la Déduction et les causes principales de nos erreurs.

Presque toutes viennent du mauvais emploi des mots.

— Le soleil se couche, le temps se rembrunit, l'hiver approche locutions vicieuses et qui feraient croire à des entités personnelles quand il ne s'agit que d'événements bien simples ! — Je me souviens de tel objet, de tel axiome, de telle vérité illusion ! ce sont les idées, et pas du tout les choses, qui restent dans le moi, et la rigueur du langage exige Je me souviens de tel acte de mon esprit par lequel j'ai perçu cet objet, par lequel j'ai déduit cet axiome, par lequel j'ai admis cette vérité.

Comme le terme qui désigne un accident ne l'embrasse pas dans tous ses modes, ils tâchèrent de n'employer que des mots abstraits — si bien qu'au lieu de dire : Faisons un tour, — il est temps de dîner, — j'ai la colique ils émettaient ces phrases : Une promenade serait salutaire, — voici l'heure d'absorber des aliments, — j'éprouve un besoin d'exonération.

Une fois maîtres de l'instrument logique, ils passèrent en revue les différents critériums, d'abord celui du sens commun.

Si l'individu ne peut rien savoir, pourquoi tous les individus en sauraient-ils davantage ? Une erreur, fût-elle vieille de cent mille ans, par cela même qu'elle est vieille ne constitue pas la vérité. La Foule invariablement suit la routine ; c'est, au contraire, le petit nombre qui mène le Progrès.

Vaut-il mieux se fier au témoignage des sens ? Ils trompent parfois, et ne renseignent jamais que sur l'apparence. Le fond leur échappe.

La Raison offre plus de garanties, étant immuable et impersonnelle — mais pour se manifester, il lui faut s'incarner. Alors, la Raison devient ma raison. Une règle importe peu, si elle est fausse. Rien ne prouve que celle-là soit juste.

On recommande de la contrôler avec les sens ; mais ils peuvent épaissir leurs ténèbres. D'une sensation confuse, une loi défectueuse sera induite, et qui plus tard empêchera la vue nette des choses.

Reste la morale. C'est faire descendre Dieu au niveau de l'utile, comme si nos besoins étaient la mesure de l'Absolu !

Quant à l'Évidence, niée par l'un, affirmée par l'autre, elle est à elle-même son critérium. M. Cousin l'a démontré.

— Je ne vois plus que la Révélation dit Bouvard. Mais pour y croire il faut admettre deux connaissances préalables, celle du corps qui a senti, celle de l'intelligence qui a perçu, admettre le Sens et la Raison, témoignages humains, et par conséquent suspects.

Pécuchet réfléchit, se croisa les bras. — Mais nous allons tomber dans l'abîme effrayant du scepticisme.

Il n'effrayait, selon Bouvard, que les pauvres cervelles.

Il n'effrayait, selon Bouvard, que les pauvres cervelles.

— Merci du compliment ! répliqua Pécuchet. Cependant il y a des faits indiscutables. On peut atteindre la vérité dans une certaine limite.

— Laquelle ? Deux et deux font-ils quatre toujours ? Le contenu est-il, en quelque sorte, moindre que le contenant ? Que veut dire un à-peu-près du vrai, une fraction de Dieu, la partie d'une chose indivisible ?

— Ah ! tu n'es qu'un sophiste ! Et Pécuchet, vexé, bouda pendant trois jours.

Ils les employèrent à parcourir les tables de plusieurs volumes. Bouvard souriait de temps à autre — et renouant la conversation :

— C'est qu'il est difficile de ne pas douter ! Ainsi, pour Dieu, les preuves de Descartes, de Kant et de Leibniz ne sont pas les mêmes, et mutuellement se ruinent. La création du monde par les atomes, ou par un esprit, demeure inconcevable.

Je me sens à la fois matière et pensée tout en ignorant ce qu'est l'une et l'autre. L'impénétrabilité, la solidité, la pesanteur me paraissent des mystères aussi bien que mon âme — à plus forte raison l'union de l'âme et du corps.

Pour en rendre compte, Leibniz a imaginé son harmonie, Malebranche la prémotion, Cudworth un médiateur, et Bonnet y voit un miracle perpétuel qui est une bêtise, un miracle perpétuel ne serait plus un miracle.

— Effectivement ! dit Pécuchet.

Et tous deux s'avouèrent qu'ils étaient las des philosophes. Tant de systèmes vous embrouille. La métaphysique ne sert à rien. On peut vivre sans elle.

D'ailleurs leur gêne pécuniaire augmentait. Ils devaient trois barriques de vin à Beljambe, douze kilogrammes de sucre à Langlois, cent vingt francs au tailleur, soixante au cordonnier. La dépense allait toujours ; et maître Gouy ne payait pas.

Ils se rendirent chez Marescot, pour qu'il leur trouvât de l'argent, soit par la vente des Écalles, ou par une hypothèque sur leur ferme, ou en aliénant leur maison, qui serait payée en rentes viagères et dont ils garderaient l'usufruit — moyen impraticable, dit Marescot, mais une affaire meilleure se combinait et ils seraient prévenus.

Ensuite, ils pensèrent à leur pauvre jardin. Bouvard entreprit l'émondage de la charmille. Pécuchet la taille de l'espalier — Marcel devait fouir les plates-bandes.

Au bout d'un quart d'heure, ils s'arrêtaient, l'un fermait sa serpette, l'autre déposait ses ciseaux, et ils commençaient doucement à se promener, — Bouvard à l'ombre des tilleuls, sans gilet, la poitrine en avant, les bras nus, Pécuchet tout le long du mur, la tête basse, les mains dans le dos, la visière de sa casquette tournée sur le cou par précaution ; et ils marchaient ainsi parallèlement, sans même voir Marcel, qui se reposant au bord de la cahute mangeait une chiffe de pain.

Dans cette méditation, des pensées avaient surgi ; ils s'abordaient, craignant de les perdre ; et la métaphysique revenait.

Elle revenait à propos de la pluie ou du soleil, d'un gravier dans leur soulier, d'une fleur sur le gazon, à propos de tout.

En regardant brûler la chandelle, ils se demandaient si la lumière est dans l'objet ou dans notre oeil. Puisque des étoiles peuvent avoir disparu quand leur éclat nous arrive, nous admirons, peut-être, des choses qui n'existent pas.

Ayant retrouvé au fond d'un gilet une cigarette Raspail, ils l'émiettèrent sur de l'eau et le camphre tourna.

Voilà donc le mouvement dans la matière ! un degré supérieur du mouvement amènerait la vie.

Mais si la matière en mouvement suffisait à créer les êtres, ils ne seraient pas si variés. Car il n'existait à l'origine, ni terres, ni eaux, ni hommes, ni plantes. Qu'est donc cette matière primordiale, qu'on n'a jamais vue, qui n'est rien des choses du monde, et qui les a toutes produites ?

Quelquefois ils avaient besoin d'un livre. Dumouchel, fatigué de les servir, ne leur répondait plus, et ils s'acharnaient à la question, principalement Pécuchet.

Son besoin de vérité devenait une soif ardente.

Ému des discours de Bouvard, il lâchait le spiritualisme, le reprenait bientôt pour le quitter, et s'écriait la tête dans les mains : Oh ! le doute ! le doute ! j'aimerais mieux le néant !

Bouvard apercevait l'insuffisance du matérialisme, et tâchait de s'y retenir, déclarant, du reste, qu'il en perdait la boule.

Ils commençaient des raisonnements sur une base solide. Elle croulait ; — et tout à coup plus d'idée, — comme une mouche s'envole, dès qu'on veut la saisir.

Pendant les soirs d'hiver, ils causaient dans le muséum, au coin du feu, en regardant les charbons. Le vent qui sifflait dans le corridor faisait trembler les carreaux, les masses noires des arbres se balançaient, et la tristesse de la nuit augmentait le sérieux de leurs pensées.

Bouvard, de temps à autre, allait jusqu'au bout de l'appartement, puis revenait. Les flambeaux et les bassines contre les murs posaient sur le sol des ombres obliques ; et le saint Pierre, vu de profil, étalait au plafond, la silhouette de son nez, pareille à un monstrueux cor de chasse.

On avait peine à circuler entre les objets, et souvent Bouvard, n'y prenant garde, se cognait à la statue. Avec ses gros yeux, sa lippe tombante et son air d'ivrogne, elle gênait aussi Pécuchet. Depuis longtemps, ils voulaient s'en défaire ; mais par négligence, remettaient cela, de jour en jour.

Un soir au milieu d'une dispute sur la monade, Bouvard se frappa l'orteil au pouce de saint Pierre — et tournant contre lui son irritation :

— Il m'embête, ce coco-là, flanquons-le dehors !

C'était difficile par l'escalier. Ils ouvrirent la fenêtre, et l'inclinèrent sur le bord doucement. Pécuchet à genoux tâcha de soulever ses talons, pendant que Bouvard pesait sur ses épaules. Le bonhomme de pierre ne branlait pas ; ils durent recourir à la hallebarde, comme levier — et arrivèrent enfin à l'étendre tout droit. Alors, ayant basculé, il piqua dans le vide, la tiare en avant — un bruit mat retentit ; — et le lendemain, ils le trouvèrent cassé en douze morceaux, dans l'ancien trou aux composts.

Une heure après, le notaire entra, leur apportant une bonne nouvelle. Une personne de la localité avancerait mille écus, moyennant une hypothèque sur leur ferme ; et comme ils se réjouissaient : Pardon ! elle y met une clause ! c'est que vous lui vendrez les Écalles pour quinze cents francs. Le prêt sera soldé aujourd'hui même. L'argent est chez moi dans mon étude.

Ils avaient envie de céder l'un et l'autre. Bouvard finit par répondre : — Mon Dieu… soit !

— Convenu ! dit Marescot ; et il leur apprit le nom de la personne, qui était Mme Bordin.

— Je m'en doutais ! s'écria Pécuchet.

Bouvard, humilié, se tut.

Elle ou un autre, qu'importait ! le principal étant de sortir d'embarras.

L'argent touché (celui des Écalles le serait plus tard) ils payèrent immédiatement toutes les notes, et regagnaient leur domicile, quand au détour des Halles, le père Gouy les arrêta.

Il allait chez eux, pour leur faire part d'un malheur. Le vent, la nuit dernière, avait jeté bas vingt pommiers dans les cours, abattu la bouillerie, enlevé le toit de la grange. Ils passèrent le reste de l'après-midi à constater les dégâts, et le lendemain, avec le charpentier, le maçon, et le couvreur. Les réparations monteraient à dix-huit cents francs, pour le moins.

Puis le soir, Gouy se présenta. Marianne, elle-même, lui avait conté tout à l'heure la vente des Écalles. Une pièce d'un rendement magnifique, à sa convenance, qui n'avait presque pas besoin de culture, le meilleur morceau de toute la ferme ! — et il demandait une diminution.

Ces messieurs la refusèrent. On soumit le cas au juge de paix, et il conclut pour le fermier. La perte des Écalles, l'acre estimé deux mille francs, lui faisait un tort annuel de soixante-dix francs ; — et devant les tribunaux il gagnerait certainement.

Leur fortune se trouvait diminuée. Que faire ? Comment vivre bientôt ?

Ils se mirent tous les deux à table, pleins de découragement. Marcel n'entendait rien à la cuisine ; son dîner cette fois dépassa les autres. La soupe ressemblait à de l'eau de vaisselle, le lapin sentait mauvais, les haricots étaient incuits, les assiettes crasseuses, et au dessert, Bouvard éclata, menaçant de lui casser tout sur la tête.

— Soyons philosophes dit Pécuchet ; un peu moins d'argent, les intrigues d'une femme, la maladresse d'un domestique, qu'est-ce que tout cela ? Tu es trop plongé dans la matière !

— Mais quand elle me gêne, dit Bouvard.

— Moi, je ne l'admets pas ! repartit Pécuchet.

Il avait lu dernièrement une analyse de Berkeley, et ajouta : Je nie l'étendue, le temps, l'espace, voire la substance ! car la vraie substance c'est l'esprit percevant les qualités.

— Parfait dit Bouvard mais le monde supprimé, les preuves manqueront pour l'existence de Dieu.

Pécuchet se récria, et longuement, bien qu'il eût un rhume de cerveau, causé par l'iodure de potassium ; — et une fièvre permanente contribuait à son exaltation. Bouvard, s'en inquiétant, fit venir le médecin.

Vaucorbeil ordonna du sirop d'orange avec l'iodure, et pour plus tard des bains de cinabre.

— À quoi bon ? reprit Pécuchet. Un jour ou l'autre, la forme s'en ira. L'essence ne périt pas !

— Sans doute dit le médecin la matière est indestructible ! Cependant…

— Mais non ! mais non ! L'indestructible, c'est l'être. Ce corps qui est là devant moi, le vôtre, docteur, m'empêche de connaître votre personne, n'est pour ainsi dire qu'un vêtement, ou plutôt un masque.

Vaucorbeil le crut fou. — Bonsoir ! Soignez votre masque !

Pécuchet n'enraya pas. Il se procura une introduction à la philosophie hégélienne, et voulut l'expliquer à Bouvard.

— Tout ce qui est rationnel est réel. Il n'y a même de réel que l'idée. Les lois de l'Esprit sont les lois de l'univers ; la raison de l'homme est identique à celle de Dieu.

Bouvard feignait de comprendre.

— Donc, l'Absolu c'est à la fois le sujet et l'objet, l'unité où viennent se rejoindre toutes les différences. Ainsi les contradictoires sont résolus. L'ombre permet la lumière, le froid mêlé au chaud produit la température, l'organisme ne se maintient que par la destruction de l'organisme ; partout un principe qui divise, un principe qui enchaîne.

Ils étaient sur le vigneau ; et le curé passa le long de la claire-voie, son bréviaire à la main.

Pécuchet le pria d'entrer, pour finir devant lui l'exposition d'Hegel et voir un peu ce qu'il en dirait.

L'homme à la soutane s'assit près d'eux ; — et Pécuchet aborda le christianisme.

— Aucune religion n'a établi aussi bien cette vérité : La Nature n'est qu'un moment de l'idée !

— Un moment de l'idée ? murmura le prêtre, stupéfait.

— Mais oui ! Dieu, en prenant une enveloppe visible, a montré son union consubstantielle avec elle.

— Avec la Nature ? oh ! oh !

— Par son décès, il a rendu témoignage à l'essence de la mort ; donc, la mort était en lui, faisait, fait partie de Dieu.

L'ecclésiastique se renfrogna. Pas de blasphèmes ! c'était pour le salut du genre humain qu'il a enduré les souffrances…

— Erreur ! On considère la mort dans l'individu, où elle est un mal sans doute, mais relativement aux choses, c'est différent. Ne séparez pas l'esprit de la matière !

— Cependant, monsieur, avant la création…

— Il n'y a pas eu de création. Elle a toujours existé. Autrement ce serait un être nouveau s'ajoutant à la pensée divine ; ce qui est absurde.

Le prêtre se leva ; des affaires l'appelaient ailleurs.

Je me flatte de l'avoir crossé ! dit Pécuchet. Encore un mot ! Puisque l'existence du monde n'est qu'un passage continuel de la vie à la mort, et de la mort à la vie, loin que tout soit, rien n'est. Mais tout devient ; comprends-tu ?

— Oui ! je comprends, ou plutôt non ! L'idéalisme à la fin exaspérait Bouvard. Je n'en veux plus ! le fameux cogito m'embête. On prend les idées des choses pour les choses elles-mêmes. On explique ce qu'on entend fort peu, au moyen de mots qu'on n'entend pas du tout ! Substance, étendue, force, matière et âme, autant d'abstractions, d'imaginations. Quant à Dieu, impossible de savoir comment il est, ni même s'il est ! Autrefois, il causait le vent, la foudre, les révolutions. À présent, il diminue. D'ailleurs, je n'en vois pas l'utilité.

— Et la morale, dans tout cela ?

— Ah ! tant pis !

Elle manque de base, effectivement se dit Pécuchet.

Et il demeura silencieux, acculé dans une impasse, conséquence des prémisses qu'il avait lui-même posées. Ce fut une surprise, un écrasement.

Bouvard ne croyait même plus à la matière.

La certitude que rien n'existe (si déplorable qu'elle soit) n'en est pas moins une certitude. Peu de gens sont capables de l'avoir. Cette transcendance leur inspira de l'orgueil ; et ils auraient voulu l'étaler. Une occasion s'offrit.

Un matin, en allant acheter du tabac, ils virent un attroupement devant la porte de Langlois. On entourait la gondole de Falaise, et il était question de Touache, un galérien qui vagabondait dans le pays. Le conducteur l'avait rencontré à la Croix-Verte entre deux gendarmes et les Chavignollais exhalèrent un soupir de délivrance.

Girbal et le capitaine restèrent sur la Place ; puis, arriva le juge de paix curieux d'avoir des renseignements, et M. Marescot en toque de velours et pantoufles de basane.

Langlois les invita à honorer sa boutique de leur présence. Ils seraient là plus à leur aise ; et malgré les chalands, et le bruit de la sonnette, ces messieurs continuèrent à discuter les forfaits de Touache.

— Mon Dieu dit Bouvard il avait de mauvais instincts, voilà tout !

— On en triomphe par la vertu répliqua le notaire.

— Mais si on n'a pas de vertu ? Et Bouvard nia positivement le libre arbitre.

— Cependant dit le capitaine je peux faire ce que je veux ! je suis libre, par exemple… de remuer la jambe.

— Non ! monsieur, car vous avez un motif pour la remuer !

Le capitaine chercha une réponse, n'en trouva pas — mais Girbal décocha ce trait :

— Un républicain qui parle contre la liberté ! c'est drôle !

— Histoire de rire ! dit Langlois.

Bouvard l'interpella :

— D'où vient que vous ne donnez pas votre fortune aux pauvres ?

L'épicier, d'un regard inquiet, parcourut toute sa boutique.

— Tiens ! pas si bête ! je la garde pour moi !

— Si vous étiez saint Vincent de Paul, vous agiriez différemment, puisque vous auriez son caractère. Vous obéissez au vôtre. Donc vous n'êtes pas libre !

— C'est une chicane répondit en choeur l'assemblée.

Bouvard ne broncha pas ; — et désignant la balance sur le comptoir :

— Elle se tiendra inerte, tant qu'un des plateaux sera vide. De même, la volonté ; — et l'oscillation de la balance entre deux poids qui semblent égaux, figure le travail de notre esprit, quand il délibère sur les motifs, jusqu'au moment où le plus fort l'emporte, le détermine.

— Tout cela dit Girbal ne fait rien pour Touache, et ne l'empêche pas d'être un gaillard joliment vicieux.

Pécuchet prit la parole :

— Les vices sont des propriétés de la Nature, comme les inondations, les tempêtes.

Le notaire l'arrêta ; et se haussant à chaque mot sur la pointe des orteils :

— Je trouve votre système d'une immoralité complète. Il donne carrière à tous les débordements, excuse les crimes, innocente les coupables.

— Parfaitement dit Bouvard. Le malheureux qui suit ses appétits est dans son droit, comme l'honnête homme qui écoute la Raison.

— Ne défendez pas les monstres !

— Pourquoi monstres ? Quand il naît un aveugle, un idiot, un homicide, cela nous paraît du désordre, comme si l'ordre nous était connu, comme si la nature agissait pour une fin !

— Alors vous contestez la Providence ?

— Oui ! je la conteste !

— Voyez plutôt l'Histoire ! s'écria Pécuchet rappelez-vous les assassinats de rois, les massacres de peuples, les dissensions dans les familles, le chagrin des particuliers.

— Et en même temps ajouta Bouvard, car ils s'excitaient l'un l'autre cette Providence soigne les petits oiseaux, et fait repousser les pattes des écrevisses. Ah ! si vous entendez par Providence, une loi qui règle tout, je veux bien, et encore !

— Cependant, monsieur dit le notaire il y a des principes !

— Qu'est-ce que vous me chantez ! Une science, d'après Condillac, est d'autant meilleure qu'elle n'en a pas besoin ! Ils ne font que résumer des connaissances acquises, et nous reportent vers ces notions, qui précisément sont discutables.

— Avez-vous comme nous poursuivit Pécuchet, scruté, fouillé les arcanes de la métaphysique ?

— Il est vrai, messieurs, il est vrai !

Et la société se dispersa.

Mais Coulon les tirant à l'écart, leur dit d'un ton paterne, qu'il n'était pas dévot certainement et même il détestait les jésuites. Cependant il n'allait pas si loin qu'eux ! Oh non ! bien sûr ; — et au coin de la place, ils passèrent devant le capitaine, qui rallumait sa pipe en grommelant : Je fais pourtant ce que je veux, nom de Dieu !

Bouvard et Pécuchet proférèrent en d'autres occasions leurs abominables paradoxes. Ils mettaient en doute, la probité des hommes, la chasteté des femmes, l'intelligence du gouvernement, le bon sens du peuple, enfin sapaient les bases.

Foureau s'en émut, et les menaça de la prison, s'ils continuaient de tels discours.

L'évidence de leur supériorité blessait. Comme ils soutenaient des thèses immorales, ils devaient être immoraux ; des calomnies furent inventées.

Alors une faculté pitoyable se développa dans leur esprit, celle de voir la bêtise et de ne plus la tolérer.

Des choses insignifiantes les attristaient : les réclames des journaux, le profil d'un bourgeois, une sotte réflexion entendue par hasard.

En songeant à ce qu'on disait dans leur village, et qu'il y avait jusqu'aux antipodes d'autres Coulon, d'autres Marescot, d'autres Foureau, ils sentaient peser sur eux comme la lourdeur de toute la terre.

Ils ne sortaient plus, ne recevaient personne.

Un après-midi, un dialogue s'éleva dans la cour, entre Marcel et un monsieur ayant un chapeau à larges bords avec des conserves noires. C'était l'académicien Larsonneur. Il ne fut pas sans observer un rideau entrouvert, des portes qu'on fermait. Sa démarche était une tentative de raccommodement et il s'en alla furieux, chargeant le domestique de dire à ses maîtres qu'il les regardait comme des goujats.

Bouvard et Pécuchet ne s'en soucièrent. Le monde diminuait d'importance — ils l'apercevaient comme dans un nuage, descendu de leur cerveau sur leurs prunelles.

N'est-ce pas, d'ailleurs, une illusion, un mauvais rêve ? Peut-être, qu'en somme, les prospérités et les malheurs s'équilibrent ? Mais le bien de l'espèce ne console pas l'individu.

— Et que m'importent les autres ! disait Pécuchet.

Son désespoir affligeait Bouvard. C'était lui qui l'avait poussé jusque-là ; et le délabrement de leur domicile avivait leur chagrin par des irritations quotidiennes.

Pour se remonter, ils se faisaient des raisonnements, se prescrivaient des travaux, et retombaient vite dans une paresse plus forte, dans un découragement profond.

À la fin des repas, ils restaient les coudes sur la table, à gémir d'un air lugubre — Marcel en écarquillait les yeux, puis retournait dans sa cuisine où il s'empiffrait solitairement.

Au milieu de l'été, ils reçurent un billet de faire-part annonçant le mariage de Dumouchel avec Mme veuve Olympe-Zulma Poulet.

Que Dieu le bénisse ! et ils se rappelèrent le temps où ils étaient heureux. Pourquoi ne suivaient-ils plus les moissonneurs ? Où étaient les jours qu'ils entraient dans les fermes cherchant partout des antiquités ? Rien maintenant n'occasionnerait ces heures si douces qu'emplissaient la distillerie ou la Littérature. Un abîme les en séparait. Quelque chose d'irrévocable était venu.

Ils voulurent faire comme autrefois une promenade dans les champs, allèrent très loin, se perdirent. — De petits nuages moutonnaient dans le ciel, le vent balançait les clochettes des avoines, le long d'un pré un ruisseau murmurait, quand tout à coup une odeur infecte les arrêta ; et ils virent sur des cailloux, entre des joncs, la charogne d'un chien.

Les quatre membres étaient desséchés. Le rictus de la gueule découvrait sous des babines bleuâtres des crocs d'ivoire ; à la place du ventre, c'était un amas de couleur terreuse, et qui semblait palpiter tant grouillait dessus la vermine. Elle s'agitait, frappée par le soleil, sous le bourdonnement des mouches, dans cette intolérable odeur, une odeur féroce et comme dévorante.

Cependant Bouvard plissait le front ; et des larmes mouillèrent ses yeux. — Pécuchet dit stoïquement : Nous serons un jour comme ça !

L'idée de la mort les avait saisis. Ils en causèrent, en revenant.

Après tout, elle n'existe pas. On s'en va dans la rosée, dans la brise, dans les étoiles. On devient quelque chose de la sève des arbres, de l'éclat des pierres fines, du plumage des oiseaux. On redonne à la Nature ce qu'elle vous a prêté et le Néant qui est devant nous n'a rien de plus affreux que le néant qui se trouve derrière.

Ils tâchaient de l'imaginer sous la forme d'une nuit intense, d'un trou sans fond, d'un évanouissement continu. N'importe quoi valait mieux que cette existence monotone, absurde, et sans espoir.

Ils récapitulèrent leurs besoins inassouvis. Bouvard avait toujours désiré des chevaux, des équipages, les grands crus de Bourgogne, et de belles femmes complaisantes dans une habitation splendide. L'ambition de Pécuchet était le savoir philosophique. Or, le plus vaste des problèmes, celui qui contient les autres, peut se résoudre en une minute. Quand donc arriverait-elle ?

— Autant tout de suite, en finir.

— Comme tu voudras dit Bouvard.

Et ils examinèrent la question du suicide.

Où est le mal de rejeter un fardeau qui vous écrase ? et de commettre une action ne nuisant à personne ? Si elle offensait Dieu, aurions-nous ce pouvoir ? Ce n'est pas une lâcheté, bien qu'on dise ; — et l'insolence est belle, de bafouer même à son détriment, ce que les hommes estiment le plus.

Ils délibérèrent sur le genre de mort.

Le poison fait souffrir. Pour s'égorger, il faut trop de courage. Avec l'asphyxie, on se rate souvent.

Enfin, Pécuchet monta dans le grenier deux câbles de la gymnastique. Puis, les ayant liés à la même traverse du toit, laissa pendre un noeud coulant et avança dessous deux chaises, pour atteindre aux cordes.

Ce moyen fut résolu.

Ils se demandaient quelle impression cela causerait dans l'arrondissement, où iraient ensuite leur bibliothèque, leurs paperasses, leurs collections. La pensée de la mort les faisait s'attendrir sur eux-mêmes. Cependant, ils ne lâchaient point leur projet, et à force d'en parler, s'y accoutumèrent.

Le soir du 25 décembre, entre dix et onze heures, ils réfléchissaient dans le muséum, habillés différemment. Bouvard portait une blouse sur son gilet de tricot — et Pécuchet, depuis trois mois, ne quittait plus la robe de moine, par économie.

Comme ils avaient grand faim (car Marcel sorti dès l'aube n'avait pas reparu) Bouvard crut hygiénique de boire un carafon d'eau-de-vie et Pécuchet de prendre du thé.

En soulevant la bouilloire, il répandit de l'eau sur le parquet.

— Maladroit ! s'écria Bouvard.

Puis trouvant l'infusion médiocre, il voulut la renforcer par deux cuillerées de plus.

— Ce sera exécrable dit Pécuchet.

— Pas du tout !

Et chacun tirant à soi la boîte, le plateau tomba ; une des tasses fut brisée, la dernière du beau service en porcelaine.

Bouvard pâlit. — Continue ! saccage ! ne te gêne pas !

— Grand malheur, vraiment !

— Oui ! un malheur ! Je la tenais de mon père !

— Naturel ajouta Pécuchet, en ricanant.

— Ah ! tu m'insultes !

— Non, mais je te fatigue ! avoue-le !

Et Pécuchet fut pris de colère, ou plutôt de démence. Bouvard aussi. Ils criaient à la fois tous les deux, l'un irrité par la faim, l'autre par l'alcool. La gorge de Pécuchet n'émettait plus qu'un râle.

— C'est infernal, une vie pareille ; j'aime mieux la mort. Adieu.

Il prit le flambeau, tourna les talons, claqua la porte.

Bouvard, au milieu des ténèbres, eut peine à l'ouvrir, courut derrière lui, arriva dans le grenier.

La chandelle était par terre — et Pécuchet debout sur une des chaises avec le câble dans sa main.

L'esprit d'imitation emporta Bouvard : — Attends-moi ! Et il montait sur l'autre chaise quand s'arrêtant tout à coup :

— Mais… nous n'avons pas fait notre testament ?

— Tiens ! c'est juste !

Des sanglots gonflaient leur poitrine. Ils se mirent à la lucarne pour respirer.

L'air était froid ; et des astres nombreux brillaient dans le ciel, noir comme de l'encre. La blancheur de la neige, qui couvrait la terre, se perdait dans les brumes de l'horizon.

Ils aperçurent de petites lumières à ras du sol ; et grandissant, se rapprochant, toutes allaient du côté de l'église.

Une curiosité les y poussa.

C'était la messe de minuit. Ces lumières provenaient des lanternes des bergers. Quelques-uns, sous le porche, secouaient leurs manteaux.

Le serpent ronflait, l'encens fumait. Des verres, suspendus, dans la longueur de la nef, dessinaient trois couronnes de feux multicolores — et au bout de la perspective des deux côtés du tabernacle, les cierges géants dressaient des flammes rouges. Par dessus les têtes de la foule et les capelines des femmes, au delà des chantres, on distinguait le prêtre dans sa chasuble d'or ; à sa voix aiguë répondaient les voix fortes des hommes emplissant le jubé, et la voûte de bois tremblait, sur ses arceaux de pierre. Des images représentant le chemin de la croix décoraient les murs. Au milieu du choeur, devant l'autel, un agneau était couché, les pattes sous le ventre, les oreilles toutes droites.

La tiède température, leur procura un singulier bien-être ; et leurs pensées, orageuses tout à l'heure, se faisaient douces, comme des vagues qui s'apaisent.

Ils écoutèrent l'Évangile et le Credo, observaient les mouvements du prêtre. Cependant les vieux, les jeunes, les pauvresses en guenille, les fermières en haut bonnet, les robustes gars à blonds favoris, tous priaient, absorbés dans la même joie profonde ; — et voyaient sur la paille d'une étable, rayonner comme un soleil, le corps de l'enfant-Dieu. Cette foi des autres touchait Bouvard en dépit de sa raison, et Pécuchet malgré la dureté de son coeur.

Il y eut un silence ; tous les dos se courbèrent — et au tintement d'une clochette, le petit agneau bêla.

L'hostie fut montrée par le prêtre, au bout de ses deux bras, le plus haut possible. Alors éclata un chant d'allégresse, qui conviait le monde aux pieds du Roi des Anges. Bouvard et Pécuchet involontairement s'y mêlèrent ; et ils sentaient comme une aurore se lever dans leur âme.

CHAPITRE IX

Marcel reparut le lendemain à trois heures, la face verte, les yeux rouges, une bigne au front, le pantalon déchiré, empestant l'eau-de-vie, immonde.

Il avait été, selon sa coutume annuelle, à six lieues de là, près d'Iqueville faire le réveillon chez un ami ; — et bégayant plus que jamais, pleurant, voulant se battre, il implorait sa grâce comme s'il eût commis un crime. Ses maîtres l'octroyèrent. Un calme singulier les portait à l'indulgence.

La neige avait fondu tout à coup — et ils se promenaient dans leur jardin, humant l'air tiède, heureux de vivre.

Était-ce le hasard seulement, qui les avait détournés de la mort ? Bouvard se sentait attendri. Pécuchet se rappela sa première communion ; et pleins de reconnaissance pour la Force, la Cause dont ils dépendaient, l'idée leur vint de faire des lectures pieuses.

L'Évangile dilata leur âme, les éblouit comme un soleil. Ils apercevaient Jésus, debout sur la montagne, un bras levé, la foule en dessous l'écoutant — ou bien au bord du Lac, parmi les Apôtres qui tirent des filets — puis sur l'ânesse, dans la clameur des alléluias, la chevelure éventée par les palmes frémissantes — enfin au haut de la croix, inclinant sa tête, d'où tombe éternellement une rosée sur le monde. Ce qui les gagna, ce qui les délectait, c'est la tendresse pour les humbles, la défense des pauvres, l'exaltation des opprimés. — Et dans ce livre où le ciel se déploie, rien de théologal ; au milieu de tant de préceptes, pas un dogme ; nulle exigence que la pureté du coeur.

Quant aux miracles, leur raison n'en fut pas surprise ; dès l'enfance, ils les connaissaient. La hauteur de saint Jean ravit Pécuchet — et le disposa à mieux comprendre l'Imitation.

Ici plus de paraboles, de fleurs, d'oiseaux — mais des plaintes, un resserrement de l'âme sur elle-même. Bouvard s'attrista en feuilletant ces pages, qui semblent écrites par un temps de brume, au fond d'un cloître, entre un clocher et un tombeau. Notre vie mortelle y apparaît si lamentable qu'il faut, l'oubliant, se retourner vers Dieu ; — et les deux bonshommes, après toutes leurs déceptions, éprouvaient le besoin d'être simples, d'aimer quelque chose, de se reposer l'esprit.

Ils abordèrent l'Ecclésiaste, Isaïe, Jérémie.

Mais la Bible les effrayait avec ses prophètes à voix de lion, le fracas du tonnerre dans les nues, tous les sanglots de la Géhenne, et son Dieu dispersant les empires, comme le vent fait des nuages.

Ils lisaient cela le dimanche, à l'heure des vêpres, pendant que la cloche tintait.

Un jour, ils se rendirent à la messe, puis y retournèrent. C'était une distraction au bout de la semaine. Le comte et la comtesse de Faverges les saluèrent de loin, ce qui fut remarqué. Le juge de paix leur dit, en clignant de l'oeil : — Parfait ! je vous approuve. Toutes les bourgeoises, maintenant leur envoyaient le pain bénit.

L'abbé Jeufroy leur fit une visite ; ils la rendirent, on se fréquenta ; et le prêtre ne parlait pas de religion.

Ils furent étonnés de cette réserve ; si bien que Pécuchet, d'un air indifférent lui demanda comment s'y prendre pour obtenir la Foi.

— Pratiquez, d'abord.

Ils se mirent à pratiquer, l'un avec espoir, l'autre par défi, Bouvard étant convaincu qu'il ne serait jamais un dévot. Un mois durant, il suivit régulièrement tous les offices, mais, à l'encontre de Pécuchet, ne voulut pas s'astreindre au maigre.

Était-ce une mesure d'hygiène ? on sait ce que vaut l'Hygiène ! une affaire de convenance ? à bas les convenances ! une marque de soumission envers l'Église ? il s'en fichait également ! bref, déclarait cette règle absurde, pharisaïque, et contraire à l'esprit de l'Évangile.

Le vendredi saint des autres années, ils mangeaient ce que Germaine leur servait.

Mais Bouvard cette fois, s'était commandé un beefsteak. Il s'assit, coupa la viande ; — et Marcel le regardait scandalisé, tandis que Pécuchet dépiautait gravement sa tranche de morue.

Bouvard restait la fourchette d'une main, le couteau de l'autre. Enfin se décidant, il monta une bouchée à ses lèvres. Tout à coup ses mains tremblèrent, sa grosse mine pâlit, sa tête se renversait.

— Tu te trouves mal ?

— Non !… Mais… et il fit un aveu. Par suite de son éducation (c'était plus fort que lui) il ne pouvait manger du gras ce jour-là, dans la crainte de mourir.

Pécuchet, sans abuser de sa victoire, en profita pour vivre à sa guise.

Un soir, il rentra la figure empreinte d'une joie sérieuse, et lâchant le mot, dit qu'il venait de se confesser.

Alors ils discutèrent l'importance de la confession.

Bouvard admettait celle des premiers chrétiens qui se faisait en public : la moderne est trop facile. Cependant il ne niait pas que cette enquête sur nous-mêmes ne fût un élément de progrès, un levain de moralité.

Pécuchet, désireux de la perfection, chercha ses vices. Les bouffées d'orgueil depuis longtemps étaient parties. Son goût du travail l'exemptait de la paresse. Quant à la gourmandise, personne de plus sobre. Quelquefois des colères l'emportaient. Il se jura de n'en plus avoir.

Ensuite, il faudrait acquérir les vertus, premièrement l'Humilité ; — c'est-à-dire se croire incapable de tout mérite, indigne de la moindre récompense, immoler son esprit, et se mettre tellement bas que l'on vous foule aux pieds comme la boue des chemins. Il était loin encore de ces dispositions.

Une autre vertu lui manquait : la chasteté — car intérieurement, il regrettait Mélie, et le pastel de la dame en robe Louis XV, le gênait avec son décolletage.

Il l'enferma dans une armoire, redoubla de pudeur jusque à craindre de porter ses regards sur lui-même, et couchait avec un caleçon.

Tant de soins autour de la Luxure la développèrent. Le matin principalement il avait à subir de grands combats — comme en eurent saint Paul, saint Benoît et saint Jérôme, dans un âge fort avancé. De suite, ils recouraient à des pénitences furieuses. La douleur est une expiation, un remède et un moyen, un hommage à Jésus-Christ. Tout amour veut des sacrifices — et quel plus pénible que celui de notre corps !

Afin de se mortifier, Pécuchet supprima le petit verre après les repas, se réduisit à quatre prises dans la journée, par les froids extrêmes ne mettait plus de casquette.

Un jour, Bouvard qui rattachait la vigne, posa une échelle contre le mur de la terrasse près de la maison — et sans le vouloir, se trouva plonger dans la chambre de Pécuchet.

Son ami, nu jusqu'au ventre, avec le martinet aux habits, se frappait les épaules doucement, puis s'animant, retira sa culotte, cingla ses fesses, et tomba sur une chaise, hors d'haleine.

Bouvard fut troublé comme à la découverte d'un mystère, qu'on ne doit pas surprendre.

Depuis quelque temps, il remarquait plus de netteté sur les carreaux, moins de trous aux serviettes, une nourriture meilleure — changements qui étaient dus à l'intervention de Reine, la servante de M. le curé.

Mêlant les choses de l'église à celles de sa cuisine, forte comme un valet de charrue et dévouée bien qu'irrespectueuse, elle s'introduisait dans les ménages, donnait des conseils, y devenait maîtresse. Pécuchet se fiait absolument à son expérience.

Une fois, elle lui amena un individu replet, ayant de petits yeux à la chinoise, un nez en bec de vautour. C'était M. Goutman, négociant en articles de piété ; — il en déballa quelques-uns, enfermés dans des boîtes, sous le hangar : croix, médailles et chapelets de toutes les dimensions, candélabres pour oratoires, autels portatifs, bouquets de clinquant — et des sacrés-coeurs en carton bleu, des saint Joseph à barbe rouge, des calvaires de porcelaine. Pécuchet les convoita.

Le prix seul l'arrêtait.

Goutman ne demandait pas d'argent. Il préférait les échanges, et monté dans le muséum, il offrit, contre les vieux fers et tous les plombs, un stock de ses marchandises.

Elles parurent hideuses à Bouvard. Mais l'oeil de Pécuchet, les instances de Reine et le bagout du brocanteur finirent par le convaincre. Quand il le vit si coulant Goutman voulut, en outre, la hallebarde ; Bouvard, las d'en avoir démontré la manoeuvre, l'abandonna. L'estimation totale étant faite, ces messieurs devaient encore cent francs. On s'arrangea, moyennant quatre billets à trois mois d'échéance — et ils s'applaudirent du bon marché.

Leurs acquisitions furent distribuées dans tous les appartements. Une crèche remplie de foin et une cathédrale de liège décorèrent le muséum. Il y eut sur la cheminée de Pécuchet, un saint Jean-Baptiste en cire, le long du corridor les portraits des gloires épiscopales, et au bas de l'escalier, sous une lampe à chaînettes, une sainte Vierge en manteau d'azur et couronnée d'étoiles — Marcel nettoyait ces splendeurs, n'imaginant au paradis rien de plus beau.

Quel dommage que le saint Pierre fût brisé, et comme il aurait fait bien dans le vestibule ! Pécuchet s'arrêtait parfois devant l'ancienne fosse aux composts, où l'on reconnaissait la tiare, une sandale, un bout d'oreille, lâchait des soupirs, puis continuait à jardiner ; — car maintenant, il joignait les travaux manuels aux exercices religieux — et bêchait la terre, vêtu de la robe de moine, en se comparant à saint Bruno. Ce déguisement pouvait être un sacrilège ; il y renonça.

Mais il prenait le genre ecclésiastique, sans doute par la fréquentation du curé. Il en avait le sourire, la voix, et d'un air frileux glissait comme lui dans ses manches ses deux mains jusqu'aux poignets. Un jour vint où le chant du coq l'importuna ; les roses l'ennuyaient ; il ne sortait plus, ou jetait sur la campagne des regards farouches.

Bouvard se laissa conduire au mois de Marie. Les enfants qui chantaient des hymnes, les gerbes de lilas, les festons de verdure, lui avaient donné comme le sentiment d'une jeunesse impérissable. Dieu se manifestait à son coeur par la forme des nids, la clarté des sources, la bienfaisance du soleil ; — et la dévotion de son ami lui semblait extravagante, fastidieuse.

— Pourquoi gémis-tu pendant le repas ?

— Nous devons manger en gémissant répondit Pécuchet ; car l'Homme par cette voie, a perdu son innocence phrase qu'il avait lue dans le Manuel du séminariste, deux volumes in-12 empruntés à M. Jeufroy. Et il buvait de l'eau de la Salette, se livrait portes closes à des oraisons jaculatoires, espérait entrer dans la confrérie de Saint-François.

Pour obtenir le don de persévérance, il résolut de faire un pèlerinage à la sainte Vierge.

Le choix des localités l'embarrassa. Serait-ce à Notre-Dame de Fourvières, de Chartres, d'Embrun, de Marseille ou d'Auray ? Celle de la Délivrande, plus proche, convenait aussi bien. — Tu m'accompagneras !

— J'aurais l'air d'un cornichon dit Bouvard.

Après tout, il pouvait en revenir croyant, ne refusait pas de l'être, et céda par complaisance.

Les pèlerinages doivent s'accomplir à pied. Mais quarante-trois kilomètres seraient durs ; — et les gondoles n'étant pas congruentes à la méditation ils louèrent un vieux cabriolet, qui après douze heures de route les déposa devant l'auberge.

Ils eurent une pièce à deux lits, avec deux commodes, supportant deux pots à l'eau dans des petites cuvettes ovales, et l'hôtelier leur apprit que c'était la chambre des capucins. Sous la Terreur on y avait caché la dame de la Délivrande avec tant de précaution que les bons Pères y disaient la messe clandestinement.

Cela fit plaisir à Pécuchet, et il lut tout haut une notice sur la chapelle, prise en bas dans la cuisine.

Elle a été fondée au commencement du IIe siècle par saint Régnobert premier évêque de Lisieux, ou par saint Ragnebert qui vivait au VIIe, ou par Robert le Magnifique au milieu du XIe.

Les Danois, les Normands et surtout les Protestants l'ont incendiée et ravagée à différentes époques.

Vers 1112, la statue primitive fut découverte par un mouton, qui en frappant du pied dans un herbage, indiqua l'endroit où elle était — sur cette place le comte Baudouin érigea un sanctuaire.

Ses miracles sont innombrables : — un marchand de Bayeux captif chez les Sarrasins l'invoque, ses fers tombent et il s'échappe. — Un avare découvre dans son grenier un troupeau de rats, l'appelle à son secours et les rats s'éloignent. — Le contact d'une médaille ayant effleuré son effigie fit se repentir au lit de mort un vieux matérialiste de Versailles. — Elle rendit la parole au sieur Adeline qui l'avait perdue pour avoir blasphémé ; et par sa protection, M. et Mme de Becqueville eurent assez de force pour vivre chastement en état de mariage.

On cite parmi ceux qu'elle a guéris d'affections irrémédiables Mlle de Palfresne, Anne Lorieux, Marie Duchemin, François Dufai, et Mme de Jumillac, née d'Osseville.

Des personnages considérables l'ont visitée : Louis XI, Louis XIII, deux filles de Gaston d'Orléans, le cardinal Wiseman, Samirrhi, patriarche d'Antioche, Mgr Véroles, vicaire apostolique de la Mandchourie ; — et l'archevêque de Quélen vint lui rendre grâce pour la conversion du prince de Talleyrand.

— Elle pourra dit Pécuchet te convertir aussi !

Bouvard déjà couché, eut une sorte de grognement, et s'endormit tout à fait.

Le lendemain à six heures, ils entraient dans la chapelle.

On en construisait une autre ; — des toiles et des planches embarrassaient la nef et le monument, de style rococo, déplut à Bouvard, surtout l'autel de marbre rouge, avec ses pilastres corinthiens.

La statue miraculeuse dans une niche à gauche du choeur est enveloppée d'une robe à paillettes. Le bedeau survint, ayant pour chacun d'eux un cierge. Il le planta sur une manière de herse dominant la balustrade, demanda trois francs, fit une révérence, et disparut.

Ensuite ils regardèrent les ex-voto.

Des inscriptions sur plaques témoignent de la reconnaissance des fidèles. On admire deux épées en sautoir offertes par un ancien élève de l'École polytechnique, des bouquets de mariée, des médailles militaires, des coeurs d'argent, et dans l'angle au niveau du sol, une forêt de béquilles.

De la sacristie déboucha un prêtre portant le saint-ciboire.

Quand il fut resté quelques minutes au bas de l'autel, il monta les trois marches, dit l'Oremus, l'Introït et le Kyrie, que l'enfant de choeur à genoux récita tout d'une haleine.

Les assistants étaient rares, douze ou quinze vieilles femmes. On entendait le froissement de leurs chapelets, et le bruit d'un marteau cognant des pierres. Pécuchet incliné sur son prie-Dieu répondait aux Amen. Pendant l'élévation il supplia Notre-Dame de lui envoyer une foi constante et indestructible.

Bouvard dans un fauteuil, à ses côtés, lui prit son Eucologe, et s'arrêta aux litanies de la Vierge.

— Très pure, très chaste, vénérable, aimable — puissante, clémente — tour d'ivoire, maison d'or, porte du matin ces mots d'adoration, ces hyperboles l'emportèrent vers celle qui est célébrée par tant d'hommages.

Il la rêva comme on la figure dans les tableaux d'église, sur un amoncellement de nuages, des chérubins à ses pieds, l'Enfant-Dieu à sa poitrine — mère des tendresses que réclament toutes les afflictions de la terre, — idéal de la Femme transportée dans le ciel ; car sorti de ses entrailles l'Homme exalte son amour et n'aspire qu'à reposer sur son coeur.

La messe étant finie, ils longèrent les boutiques qui s'adossent contre le mur du côté de la Place. On y voit des images, des bénitiers, des urnes à filets d'or, des Jésus-Christ en noix de coco, des chapelets d'ivoire ; — et le soleil, frappant les verres des cadres, éblouissait les yeux, faisait ressortir la brutalité des peintures, la hideur des dessins. Bouvard, qui chez lui trouvait ces choses abominables, fut indulgent pour elles. Il acheta une petite Vierge en pâte bleue. Pécuchet comme souvenir se contenta d'un rosaire.

Les marchands criaient : — Allons ! allons ! pour cinq francs, pour trois francs, pour soixante centimes, pour deux sols ! ne refusez pas Notre-Dame !

Les deux pèlerins flânaient sans rien choisir. Des remarques désobligeantes s'élevèrent.

— Qu'est-ce qu'ils veulent ces oiseaux-là ?

— Ils sont peut-être des Turcs !

— Des protestants, plutôt !

Une grande fille tira Pécuchet par la redingote ; un vieux en lunettes lui posa la main sur l'épaule ; tous braillaient à la fois ; puis quittant leurs baraques, ils vinrent les entourer, redoublaient de sollicitations et d'injures.

Bouvard n'y tint plus. — Laissez-nous tranquilles, nom de Dieu ! La tourbe s'écarta.

Mais une grosse femme les suivit quelque temps sur la Place, et cria qu'ils s'en repentiraient.

En rentrant à l'auberge, ils trouvèrent dans le café Goutman. Son négoce l'appelait en ces parages — et il causait avec un individu examinant des bordereaux, sur la table, devant eux.

Cet individu avait une casquette de cuir, un pantalon très large, le teint rouge et la taille fine, malgré ses cheveux blancs, l'air à la fois d'un officier en retraite, et d'un vieux cabotin.

De temps à autre, il lâchait un juron puis, sur un mot de Goutman dit plus bas, se calmait de suite, et passait à un autre papier.

Bouvard qui l'observait, au bout d'un quart d'heure s'approcha de lui.

— Barberou, je crois ?

— Bouvard ! s'écria l'homme à la casquette, et ils s'embrassèrent.

Barberou depuis vingt ans avait enduré toutes sortes de fortunes. Gérant d'un journal, commis d'assurances, directeur d'un parc aux huîtres ; je vous conterai cela ; enfin revenu à son premier métier, il voyageait pour une maison de Bordeaux, et Goutman qui faisait le diocèse lui plaçait des vins chez les ecclésiastiques — mais permettez ; dans une minute, je suis à vous !

Il avait repris ses comptes, quand bondissant sur la banquette :

— Comment, deux mille ?

— Sans doute !

— Ah ! elle est forte, celle-là !

— Vous dites ?

— Je dis que j'ai vu Hérambert moi-même, répliqua Barberou furieux. La facture porte quatre mille ; pas de blagues !

Le brocanteur ne perdit point contenance.

— Eh bien ; elle vous libère ! après ?

Barberou se leva, et à sa figure blême d'abord, puis violette, Bouvard et Pécuchet croyaient qu'il allait étrangler Goutman.

Il se rassit, croisa les bras. Vous êtes une rude canaille, convenez-en !

— Pas d'injures, monsieur Barberou ; il y a des témoins ; prenez garde !

— Je vous flanquerai un procès !

— Ta ! ta ! ta !

Puis ayant bouclé son portefeuille, Goutman souleva le bord de son chapeau :

— À l'avantage ! et il sortit.

Barberou exposa les faits : pour une créance de mille francs doublée par suite de manoeuvres usuraires, il avait livré à Goutman trois mille francs de vins ; ce qui payerait sa dette avec mille francs de bénéfice ; mais au contraire, il en devait trois mille. Ses patrons le renverraient, on le poursuivrait ! — Crapule ! brigand ! sale juif ! — et ça dîne dans les presbytères ! D'ailleurs, tout ce qui touche à la calotte !… Il déblatéra contre les prêtres, et tapait sur la table avec tant de violence que la statuette faillit tomber.

— Doucement ! dit Bouvard.

— Tiens ! Qu'est-ce que ça ? et Barberou ayant défait l'enveloppe de la petite vierge : un bibelot du pèlerinage ! À vous ?

Bouvard, au lieu de répondre, sourit d'une manière ambiguë.

— C'est à moi ! dit Pécuchet.

— Vous m'affligez reprit Barberou ; mais je vous éduquerai là-dessus, — n'ayez pas peur ! Et comme on doit être philosophe, et que la tristesse ne sert à rien, il leur offrit à déjeuner.

Tous les trois s'attablèrent.

Barberou fut aimable, rappela le vieux temps, prit la taille de la bonne, voulut toiser le ventre de Bouvard. Il irait chez eux bientôt, et leur apporterait un livre farce.

L'idée de sa visite les réjouissait médiocrement. Ils en causèrent dans la voiture, pendant une heure, au trot du cheval. Ensuite Pécuchet ferma les paupières. Bouvard se taisait aussi. Intérieurement, il penchait vers la Religion.

M. Marescot s'était présenté la veille pour leur faire une communication importante. — Marcel n'en savait pas davantage.

Le notaire ne put les recevoir que trois jours après ; — et de suite exposa la chose. Pour une rente de sept mille cinq cents francs, Mme Bordin proposait à M. Bouvard de lui acheter leur ferme.

Elle la reluquait depuis sa jeunesse, en connaissait les tenants et aboutissants, défauts et avantages — et ce désir était comme un cancer qui la minait. Car la bonne dame en vraie Normande, chérissait par-dessus tout le bien moins pour la sécurité du capital que pour le bonheur de fouler un sol vous appartenant. Dans l'espoir de celui-là, elle avait pratiqué des enquêtes, une surveillance journalière, de longues économies, et elle attendait avec impatience, la réponse de Bouvard.

Il fut embarrassé, ne voulant pas que Pécuchet un jour se trouvât sans fortune ; mais il fallait saisir l'occasion, — qui était l'effet du pèlerinage. — La Providence pour la seconde fois se manifestait en leur faveur.

Ils offrirent les conditions suivantes : la rente non pas de sept mille cinq cents francs mais de six mille serait dévolue au dernier survivant. Marescot fit valoir que l'un était faible de santé. Le tempérament de l'autre le disposait à l'apoplexie, et Mme Bordin signa le contrat, emportée par la passion.

Bouvard en resta mélancolique. Quelqu'un désirait sa mort ; et cette réflexion lui inspira des pensées graves, des idées de Dieu, et d'éternité.

Trois jours après M. Jeufroy les invita au repas de cérémonie qu'il donnait une fois par an à des collègues.

Le dîner commença vers deux heures de l'après-midi, pour finir à onze du soir. On y but du poiré, on y débita des calembours. L'abbé Pruneau composa séance tenante un acrostiche, M. Bougon fit des tours de cartes, et Cerpet, jeune vicaire, chanta une petite romance qui frisait la galanterie. Un pareil milieu divertit Bouvard. Il fut moins sombre le lendemain.

Le curé vint le voir fréquemment. Il présentait la Religion sous des couleurs gracieuses. Que risque-t-on, du reste ? — et Bouvard consentit bientôt à s'approcher de la sainte table. Pécuchet, en même temps que lui, participerait au sacrement.

Le grand jour arriva.

L'église, à cause des premières communions était pleine de monde. Les bourgeois et les bourgeoises encombraient leurs bancs, et le menu peuple se tenait debout par derrière, ou dans le jubé, au-dessus de la porte.

Ce qui allait se passer tout à l'heure était inexplicable, songeait Bouvard ; mais la Raison ne suffit pas à comprendre certaines choses. De très grands hommes ont admis celle-là. Autant faire comme eux. Et dans une sorte d'engourdissement, il contemplait l'autel, l'encensoir, les flambeaux, la tête un peu vide car il n'avait rien mangé — et éprouvait une singulière faiblesse.

Pécuchet en méditant la Passion de Jésus-Christ s'excitait à des élans d'amour. Il aurait voulu lui offrir son âme, celle des autres — et les ravissements, les transports, les illuminations des saints, tous les êtres, l'univers entier. Bien qu'il priât avec ferveur, les différentes parties de la messe lui semblèrent un peu longues.

Enfin, les petits garçons s'agenouillèrent sur la première marche de l'autel, formant avec leurs habits, une bande noire, que surmontaient inégalement des chevelures blondes ou brunes. Les petites filles les remplacèrent, ayant sous leurs couronnes, des voiles qui tombaient ; de loin, on aurait dit un alignement de nuées blanches au fond du choeur.

Puis ce fut le tour des grandes personnes.

La première du côté de l'Évangile était Pécuchet ; mais trop ému, sans doute, il oscillait la tête de droite et de gauche. Le curé eut peine à lui mettre l'hostie dans la bouche, et il la reçut en tournant les prunelles.

Bouvard, au contraire, ouvrit si largement les mâchoires que sa langue lui pendait sur la lèvre comme un drapeau. En se relevant, il coudoya Mme Bordin. Leurs yeux se rencontrèrent. Elle souriait ; sans savoir pourquoi, il rougit.

Après Mme Bordin communièrent ensemble Mlle de Faverges, la Comtesse, leur dame de compagnie, — et un monsieur que l'on ne connaissait pas à Chavignolles.

Les deux derniers furent Placquevent, et Petit l'instituteur ; — quand tout à coup on vit paraître Gorju.

Il n'avait plus de barbiche ; — et il regagna sa place, les bras en croix sur la poitrine, d'une manière fort édifiante.

Le curé harangua les petits garçons. Qu'ils aient soin plus tard de ne point faire comme Judas qui trahit son Dieu, et de conserver toujours leur robe d'innocence. Pécuchet regretta la sienne. Mais on remuait des chaises ; les mères avaient hâte d'embrasser leurs enfants.

Les paroissiens à la sortie, échangèrent des félicitations. Quelques-uns pleuraient. Mme de Faverges en attendant sa voiture se tourna vers Bouvard et Pécuchet, et présenta son futur gendre : — M. le baron de Mahurot, ingénieur. Le comte se plaignait de ne pas les voir. Il serait revenu la semaine prochaine. Notez-le ! je vous prie. La calèche était arrivée ; les dames du château partirent. Et la foule se dispersa.

Ils trouvèrent dans leur cour un paquet au milieu de l'herbe. Le facteur, comme la maison était close, l'avait jeté par-dessus le mur. C'était l'ouvrage que Barberou avait promis, — Examen du Christianisme par Louis Hervieu, ancien élève de l'École normale. Pécuchet le repoussa. Bouvard ne désirait pas le connaître.

On lui avait répété que le sacrement le transformerait : durant plusieurs jours, il guetta des floraisons dans sa conscience. Il était toujours le même ; et un étonnement douloureux le saisit.

Comment ! la chair de Dieu se mêle à notre chair — et elle n'y cause rien ! La pensée qui gouverne les mondes n'éclaire pas notre esprit. Le suprême pouvoir nous abandonne à l'impuissance.

M. Jeufroy, en le rassurant, lui ordonna le Catéchisme de l'abbé Gaume.

Au contraire, la dévotion de Pécuchet s'était développée. Il aurait voulu communier sous les deux espèces, chantait des psaumes, en se promenant dans le corridor, arrêtait les Chavignollais pour discuter, et les convertir. Vaucorbeil lui rit au nez, Girbal haussa les épaules, et le capitaine l'appela Tartuffe. On trouvait maintenant qu'ils allaient trop loin.

Une excellente habitude c'est d'envisager les choses comme autant de symboles. Si le tonnerre gronde, figurez-vous le jugement dernier ; devant un ciel sans nuages, pensez au séjour des bienheureux ; dites-vous dans vos promenades que chaque pas vous rapproche de la mort. Pécuchet observa cette méthode. Quand il prenait ses habits il songeait à l'enveloppe charnelle dont la seconde personne de la Trinité s'est revêtue. Le tic-tac de l'horloge lui rappelait les battements de son coeur, une piqûre d'épingle les clous de la croix. Mais il eut beau se tenir à genoux pendant des heures, et multiplier les jeûnes, et se pressurer l'imagination, le détachement de soi-même ne se faisait pas ; impossible d'atteindre à la contemplation parfaite !

Il recourut à des auteurs mystiques : sainte Thérèse, Jean de la Croix, Louis de Grenade, Simpoli, — et de plus modernes, Monseigneur Chaillot. Au lieu des sublimités qu'il attendait, il ne rencontra que des platitudes, un style très lâche, de froides images, et force comparaisons tirées de la boutique des lapidaires.

Il apprit cependant qu'il y a une purgation active et une purgation passive, une vision interne et une vision externe, quatre espèces d'oraisons, neuf excellences dans l'amour, six degrés dans l'humilité, et que la blessure de l'âme ne diffère pas beaucoup du vol spirituel.

Des points l'embarrassaient.

— Puisque la chair est maudite, comment se fait-il que l'on doive remercier Dieu pour le bienfait de l'existence ? Quelle mesure garder entre la crainte indispensable au salut, et l'espérance qui ne l'est pas moins ? Où est le signe de la grâce ? etc. !

Les réponses de M. Jeufroy étaient simples : — Ne vous tourmentez pas ! À vouloir tout approfondir, on court sur une pente dangereuse.

Le Catéchisme de Persévérance par Gaume avait tellement dégoûté Bouvard qu'il prit le volume de Louis Hervieu — c'était un sommaire de l'exégèse moderne défendu par le gouvernement. Barberou, comme républicain l'avait acheté.

Il éveilla des doutes dans l'esprit de Bouvard — et d'abord sur le péché originel. — Si Dieu a créé l'Homme peccable, il ne devait pas le punir ; et le mal est antérieur à la chute, puisqu'il y avait déjà, des volcans, des bêtes féroces ! Enfin ce dogme bouleverse mes notions de justice !

— Que voulez-vous disait le curé c'est une de ces vérités dont tout le monde est d'accord sans qu'on puisse en fournir de preuves ; — et nous-mêmes nous faisons rejaillir sur les enfants les crimes de leurs pères. Ainsi les moeurs et les lois justifient ce décret de la Providence, que l'on retrouve dans la Nature.

Bouvard hocha la tête. Il doutait aussi de l'enfer.

— Car tout châtiment doit viser à l'amélioration du coupable — ce qui devient impossible avec une peine éternelle ! — et combien l'endurent ! Songez donc : tous les Anciens, les juifs, les musulmans, les idolâtres, les hérétiques et les enfants morts sans baptême, ces enfants créés par Dieu ! et dans quel but ? pour les punir d'une faute, qu'ils n'ont pas commise !

— Telle est l'opinion de saint Augustin ajouta le curé et saint Fulgence enveloppe dans la damnation jusqu'aux foetus. L'Église, il est vrai, n'a rien décidé à cet égard. Une remarque pourtant : ce n'est pas Dieu, mais le pécheur qui se damne lui-même ; et l'offense étant infinie, puisque Dieu est infini, la punition doit être infinie. Est-ce tout, monsieur ?

— Expliquez-moi la Trinité dit Bouvard.

— Avec plaisir ! — Prenons une comparaison : les trois côtés du triangle, ou plutôt notre âme, qui contient : être, connaître et vouloir ; ce qu'on appelle faculté chez l'Homme est personne en Dieu. Voilà le mystère.

— Mais les trois côtés du triangle ne sont pas chacun le triangle. Ces trois facultés de l'âme ne font pas trois âmes. Et vos personnes de la Trinité sont trois Dieux.

— Blasphème !

— Alors il n'y a qu'une personne, un Dieu, une substance affectée de trois manières !

— Adorons sans comprendre dit le curé.

— Soit ! dit Bouvard.

Il avait peur de passer pour un impie, d'être mal vu au château.

Maintenant ils y venaient trois fois la semaine — vers cinq heures — en hiver — et la tasse de thé les réchauffait. M. le comte par ses allures rappelait le chic de l'ancienne cour, la Comtesse placide et grasse, montrait sur toutes choses un grand discernement. Mlle Yolande leur fille, était le type de la jeune personne, l'Ange des keepsakes — et Mme de Noares leur dame de compagnie ressemblait à Pécuchet, ayant son nez pointu.

La première fois qu'ils entrèrent dans le salon, elle défendait quelqu'un.

— Je vous assure qu'il est changé ! Son cadeau le prouve.

Ce quelqu'un était Gorju. Il venait d'offrir aux futurs époux un prie-Dieu gothique. On l'apporta. Les armes des deux maisons s'y étalaient en reliefs de couleur. M. de Mahurot en parut content ; et Mme de Noares lui dit :

— Vous vous souviendrez de mon protégé !

Ensuite, elle amena deux enfants, un gamin d'une douzaine d'années et sa soeur, qui en avait dix peut-être. Par les trous de leurs guenilles, on voyait leurs membres rouges de froid. L'un était chaussé de vieilles pantoufles, l'autre n'avait plus qu'un sabot. Leurs fronts disparaissaient sous leurs chevelures et ils regardaient autour d'eux avec des prunelles ardentes comme de jeunes loups effarés.

Mme de Noares conta qu'elle les avait rencontrés le matin sur la grande route. Placquevent ne pouvait fournir aucun détail.

On leur demanda leur nom. Victor — Victorine. — Où était leur père ? — En prison. — Et avant, que faisait-il ? — Rien. — Leur pays. — Saint-Pierre. — Mais quel Saint-Pierre ? Les deux petits pour toute réponse disaient en reniflant : — Sais pas, sais pas. Leur mère était morte et ils mendiaient.

Mme de Noares exposa combien il serait dangereux de les abandonner ; elle attendrit la Comtesse, piqua d'honneur le Comte, fut soutenue par Mademoiselle, s'obstina, réussit. La femme du garde-chasse en prendrait soin. On leur trouverait de l'ouvrage plus tard ; — et comme ils ne savaient ni lire ni écrire, Mme de Noares leur donnerait elle-même des leçons afin de les préparer au catéchisme.

Quand M. Jeufroy venait au château, on allait quérir les deux mioches, il les interrogeait puis faisait une conférence, où il mettait de la prétention, à cause de l'auditoire.

Une fois, qu'il avait discouru sur les Patriarches, Bouvard en s'en retournant avec lui et Pécuchet, les dénigra fortement.

Jacob s'est distingué par des filouteries, David par les meurtres,

Salomon par ses débauches.

L'abbé lui répondit qu'il fallait voir plus loin. Le sacrifice d'Abraham est la figure de la Passion. Jacob une autre figure du Messie, comme Joseph, comme le serpent d'airain, comme Moïse.

— Croyez-vous dit Bouvard, qu'il ait composé le Pentateuque ?

— Oui ! sans doute !

— Cependant on y raconte sa mort ! même observation pour Josué — et quant

aux Juges, l'auteur nous prévient qu'à l'époque dont il fait l'histoire,

Israël n'avait pas encore de Rois. L'ouvrage fut donc écrit sous les

Rois. Les Prophètes aussi m'étonnent.

— Il va nier les Prophètes, maintenant !

— Pas du tout ! mais leur esprit échauffé percevait Jéhovah sous des formes diverses, celle d'un feu, d'une broussaille, d'un vieillard, d'une colombe ; et ils n'étaient pas certains de la Révélation puisqu'ils demandent toujours un signe.

— Ah ! — et vous avez découvert ces belles choses ?…

— Dans Spinoza ! À ce mot, le curé bondit. — L'avez-vous lu ?

— Dieu m'en garde !

— Pourtant, monsieur, la Science !…

— Monsieur, on n'est pas savant, si l'on n'est chrétien.

La Science lui inspirait des sarcasmes. — Fera-t-elle pousser un épi de grain, votre Science ! Que savons-nous ? disait-il.

Mais il savait que le monde a été créé pour nous ; il savait que les Archanges sont au-dessus des Anges ; — il savait que le corps humain ressuscitera tel qu'il était vers la trentaine.

Son aplomb sacerdotal agaçait Bouvard, qui par méfiance de Louis Hervieu écrivit à Varlot. Et Pécuchet mieux informé, demanda à M. Jeufroy des explications sur l'Écriture.

Les six jours de la Genèse veulent dire six grandes époques. Le rapt des vases précieux fait par les juifs aux Égyptiens doit s'entendre des richesses intellectuelles, les Arts, dont ils avaient dérobé le secret. Isaïe ne se dépouilla pas complètement — Nudus en latin signifiant nu jusqu'aux hanches ; ainsi Virgile conseille de se mettre nu, pour labourer, et cet écrivain n'eût pas donné un précepte contraire à la pudeur ! Ézéchiel dévorant un livre n'a rien d'extraordinaire ; ne dit-on pas dévorer une brochure, un journal ?

Mais si l'on voit partout des métaphores que deviendront les faits ?

L'abbé, soutenait cependant qu'ils étaient réels.

Cette manière de les entendre parut déloyale à Pécuchet. Il poussa plus loin ses recherches et apporta une note sur les contradictions de la Bible.

L'Exode nous apprend que pendant quarante ans on fit des sacrifices dans le désert ; on n'en fit aucun suivant Amos et Jérémie. Les Paralipomènes et Esdras ne sont point d'accord sur le dénombrement du Peuple. Dans le Deutéronome, Moïse voit le Seigneur face à face ; d'après l'Exode, jamais il ne put le voir. Où est, alors, l'inspiration ?

— Motif de plus pour l'admettre répliquait en souriant M. Jeufroy. Les imposteurs ont besoin de connivence, les sincères n'y prennent garde. Dans l'embarras recourons à l'Église. Elle est toujours infaillible.

De qui relève l'infaillibilité ?

Les conciles de Bâle et de Constance l'attribuent aux conciles. Mais souvent les conciles diffèrent, témoin ce qui se passa pour Athanase et pour Arius. Ceux de Florence et de Latran la décernent au pape. Mais Adrien VI déclare que le Pape, comme un autre, peut se tromper.

Chicanes ! Tout cela ne fait rien à la permanence du dogme.

L'ouvrage de Louis Hervieu en signale les variations : le baptême autrefois était réservé pour les adultes. L'extrême-onction ne fut un sacrement qu'au IXe siècle ; la Présence réelle a été décrétée au VIIIe, le Purgatoire, reconnu au XVe, l'Immaculée Conception est d'hier.

Et Pécuchet en arriva à ne plus savoir que penser de Jésus. Trois évangiles en font un homme. Dans un passage de saint Jean il paraît s'égaler à Dieu ; dans un autre du même se reconnaître son inférieur.

L'abbé ripostait par la lettre du roi Abgar, les Actes de Pilate et le témoignage des Sibylles dont le fond est véritable. Il retrouvait la Vierge dans les Gaules, l'annonce d'un Rédempteur en Chine, la Trinité partout, la Croix sur le bonnet du grand lama, en Égypte au poing des dieux ; — et même il fit voir une gravure, représentant un nilomètre, lequel était un phallus suivant Pécuchet.

M. Jeufroy consultait secrètement son ami Pruneau, qui lui cherchait des preuves dans les auteurs. Une lutte d'érudition s'engagea ; et fouetté par l'amour-propre Pécuchet devint transcendant, mythologue.

Il comparait la Vierge à Isis, l'eucharistie au Homa des Perses, Bacchus à Moïse, l'arche de Noé au vaisseau de Xithuros, ces ressemblances pour lui démontraient l'identité des religions.

Mais il ne peut y avoir plusieurs religions, puisqu'il n'y a qu'un Dieu — et quand il était à bout d'arguments, l'homme à la soutane s'écriait : — C'est un mystère !

Que signifie ce mot ? Défaut de savoir ; très bien. Mais s'il désigne une chose dont le seul énoncé implique contradiction, c'est une sottise ; — et Pécuchet ne quittait plus M. Jeufroy. Il le surprenait dans son jardin, l'attendait au confessionnal, le relançait dans la sacristie.

Le prêtre imaginait des ruses pour le fuir.

Un jour, qu'il était parti à Sassetot administrer quelqu'un, Pécuchet se porta au-devant de lui sur la route, manière de rendre la conversation inévitable.

C'était le soir, vers la fin d'août. Le ciel écarlate se rembrunit, et un gros nuage s'y forma, régulier dans le bas, avec des volutes au sommet.

Pécuchet d'abord, parla de choses indifférentes, puis ayant glissé le mot martyr :

— Combien pensez-vous qu'il y en ait eu ?

— Une vingtaine de millions, pour le moins.

— Leur nombre n'est pas si grand, dit Origène.

— Origène, vous savez, est suspect !

Un large coup de vent passa, inclinant l'herbe des fossés, et les deux rangs d'ormeaux jusqu'au bout de l'horizon.

Pécuchet reprit : — On classe dans les martyrs, beaucoup d'évêques gaulois, tués en résistant aux Barbares, ce qui n'est plus la question.

— Allez-vous défendre les Empereurs !

Suivant Pécuchet, on les avait calomniés. — L'histoire de la Légion thébaine est une fable. Je conteste également Symphorose et ses sept fils, Félicité et ses sept filles, et les sept vierges d'Ancyre, condamnées au viol, bien que septuagénaires, et les onze mille vierges de sainte Ursule, dont une compagne s'appelait Undecemilla, un nom pris pour un chiffre, — encore plus les dix martyrs d'Alexandrie !

— Cependant !… Cependant, ils se trouvent dans des auteurs dignes de créance.

Des gouttes d'eau tombèrent. Le curé déploya son parapluie ; — et Pécuchet, quand il fut dessous, osa prétendre que les catholiques avaient fait plus de martyrs chez les juifs, les musulmans, les protestants, et les libres penseurs que tous les Romains autrefois.

L'ecclésiastique se récria :

— Mais on compte dix persécutions depuis Néron jusqu'au César Galère !

— Eh bien, et les massacres des Albigeois ! et la Saint-Barthélemy ! et la Révocation de l'édit de Nantes !

— Excès déplorables sans doute mais vous n'allez pas comparer ces gens-là à saint Étienne, saint Laurent, Cyprien, Polycarpe, une foule de missionnaires.

— Pardon ! je vous rappellerai Hypatie, Jérôme de Prague, Jean Huss, Bruno, Vanini, Anne Du Bourg !

La pluie augmentait, et ses rayons dardaient si fort, qu'ils rebondissaient du sol, comme de petites fusées blanches. Pécuchet et M. Jeufroy marchaient avec lenteur serrés l'un contre l'autre, et le curé disait :

— Après des supplices abominables, on les jetait dans des chaudières !

— L'Inquisition employait de même la torture, et elle vous brûlait très bien.

— On exposait les dames illustres dans les lupanars !

— Croyez-vous que les dragons de Louis XIV fussent décents ?

— Et notez que les chrétiens n'avaient rien fait contre l'État !

— Les Huguenots pas davantage !

Le vent chassait, balayait la pluie dans l'air. Elle claquait sur les feuilles, ruisselait au bord du chemin, et le ciel couleur de boue se confondait avec les champs dénudés, la moisson étant finie. Pas un toit. Au loin seulement, la cabane d'un berger.

Le maigre paletot de Pécuchet n'avait plus un fil de sec. L'eau coulait le long de son échine, entrait dans ses bottes, dans ses oreilles, dans ses yeux, malgré la visière de la casquette Amoros. Le curé, en portant d'un bras la queue de sa soutane, se découvrait les jambes, et les pointes de son tricorne crachaient l'eau sur ses épaules comme des gargouilles de cathédrale.

Il fallut s'arrêter, et tournant leur dos à la tempête, ils restèrent face à face, ventre contre ventre, en tenant à quatre mains le parapluie qui oscillait.

M. Jeufroy n'avait pas interrompu la défense des catholiques.

— Ont-ils crucifié vos protestants, comme le fut saint Siméon, ou fait dévorer un homme par deux tigres comme il advint à saint Ignace ?

— Mais comptez-vous pour quelque chose, tant de femmes séparées de leurs maris, d'enfants arrachés à leurs mères ! Et les exils des pauvres, à travers la neige, au milieu des précipices ! On les entassait dans les prisons ; à peine morts on les traînait sur la claie.

L'abbé ricana : — Vous me permettrez de n'en rien croire ! Et nos martyrs à nous sont moins douteux. Sainte Blandine a été livrée dans un filet à une vache furieuse. Sainte Julie périt assommée de coups. Saint Taraque, saint Probus et saint Andronic, on leur a brisé les dents avec un marteau, déchiré les côtes avec des peignes de fer, traversé les mains avec des clous rougis, enlevé la peau du crâne !

— Vous exagérez dit Pécuchet. La mort des martyrs était dans ce temps-là une amplification de rhétorique !

— Comment de la rhétorique ?

— Mais oui ! tandis que moi, monsieur, je vous raconte de l'histoire. Les catholiques en Irlande éventrèrent des femmes enceintes pour prendre leurs enfants !

— Jamais.

— Et les donner aux pourceaux !

— Allons donc !

— En Belgique, ils les enterraient toutes vives.

— Quelle plaisanterie.

— On a leurs noms !

— Et quand même objecta le Prêtre, en secouant de colère son parapluie on ne peut les appeler des martyrs. Il n'y en a pas en dehors de l'Église.

— Un mot. Si la valeur du martyr dépend de la doctrine, comment servirait-il à en démontrer l'excellence ?

La pluie se calmait ; jusqu'au village ils ne parlèrent plus.

Mais, sur le seuil du presbytère, l'Abbé dit :

— Je vous plains ! véritablement, je vous plains !

Pécuchet conta de suite à Bouvard son altercation. Elle lui avait causé une malveillance antireligieuse ; — et une heure après, assis devant un feu de broussailles, il lisait le Curé Meslier. Ces négations lourdes le choquèrent ; puis se reprochant d'avoir méconnu, peut-être, des héros, il feuilleta dans la Biographie, l'histoire des martyrs les plus illustres.

Quelles clameurs du Peuple, quand ils entraient dans l'arène ! — et si les lions et les jaguars étaient trop doux, du geste et de la voix ils les excitaient à s'avancer. On les voyait tout couverts de sang, sourire debout le regard au ciel ; — sainte Perpétue renoua ses cheveux pour ne point paraître affligée. — Pécuchet se mit à réfléchir — La fenêtre était ouverte, la nuit tranquille, beaucoup d'étoiles brillaient — Il devait se passer dans leur âme des choses dont nous n'avons plus l'idée, une joie, un spasme divin ? — Et Pécuchet à force d'y rêver dit qu'il comprenait cela, aurait fait comme eux.

— Toi ?

— Certainement.

— Pas de blagues ! Crois-tu oui, ou non ?

— Je ne sais.

Il alluma une chandelle — puis ses yeux tombant sur le crucifix dans l'alcôve : — Combien de misérables ont recouru à celui-là ! et après un silence : On l'a dénaturé ! c'est la faute de Rome : la politique du Vatican !

Mais Bouvard admirait l'Église pour sa magnificence, et aurait souhaité au moyen âge être un cardinal. — J'aurais eu bonne mine sous la pourpre, conviens-en !

La casquette de Pécuchet posée devant les charbons n'était pas sèche encore. Tout en l'étirant, il sentit quelque chose dans la doublure, et une médaille de saint Joseph tomba. Ils furent troublés, le fait leur paraissant inexplicable.

Mme de Noares voulut savoir de Pécuchet s'il n'avait pas éprouvé comme un changement, un bonheur, et se trahit par ses questions. Une fois, pendant qu'il jouait au billard, elle lui avait cousu la médaille dans sa casquette.

Évidemment, elle l'aimait ; ils auraient pu se marier : elle était veuve ; et il ne soupçonna pas cet amour, qui peut-être eût fait le bonheur de sa vie.

Bien qu'il se montrât plus religieux que M. Bouvard, elle l'avait dédié à saint Joseph, dont le secours est excellent pour les conversions.

Personne, comme elle, ne connaissait tous les chapelets et les indulgences qu'ils procurent, l'effet des reliques, les privilèges des eaux saintes. Sa montre était retenue par une chaînette qui avait touché aux liens de saint Pierre. Parmi ses breloques luisait une perle d'or, à l'imitation de celle qui contient dans l'église d'Allouagne une larme de Notre-Seigneur. Un anneau à son petit doigt enfermait des cheveux du curé d'Ars ; — et comme elle cueillait des simples pour les malades, sa chambre ressemblait à une sacristie et à une officine d'apothicaire.

Son temps se passait à écrire des lettres, à visiter les pauvres, à dissoudre des concubinages, à répandre des photographies du Sacré-Coeur. Un monsieur devait lui envoyer de la Pâte des martyrs : mélange de cire pascale et de poussière humaine prise aux catacombes, et qui s'emploie dans les cas désespérés en mouches ou en pilules. Elle en promit à Pécuchet.

Il parut choqué d'un tel matérialisme.

Le soir, un valet du château lui apporta une hottée d'opuscules, relatant des paroles pieuses du grand Napoléon, des bons mots de curé dans les auberges, des morts effrayantes advenues à des impies. Mme de Noares savait tout cela par coeur, avec une infinité de miracles.

Elle en contait de stupides — des miracles sans but, comme si Dieu les eût faits pour ébahir le monde. Sa grand'mère, à elle-même, avait serré dans une armoire des pruneaux couverts d'un linge, et quand on ouvrit l'armoire un an plus tard, on en vit treize sur la nappe, formant la croix. — Expliquez-moi cela. C'était son mot après ses histoires, qu'elle soutenait avec un entêtement de bourrique, bonne femme d'ailleurs, et d'humeur enjouée.

Une fois pourtant, elle sortit de son caractère. Bouvard lui contestait le miracle de Pezilla : un compotier où l'on avait caché des hosties pendant la Révolution se dora de lui-même — tout seul.

Peut-être y avait-il, au fond, un peu de couleur jaune provenant de l'humidité ?

— Mais non ! je vous répète que non ! La dorure a pour cause le contact de l'Eucharistie et elle donna en preuve l'attestation des évêques. C'est, disentils, comme un bouclier, un… un palladium sur le diocèse de Perpignan. Demandez plutôt à M. Jeufroy !

Bouvard n'y tint plus ; et ayant repassé son Louis Hervieu, emmena Pécuchet.

L'ecclésiastique finissait de dîner. Reine offrit des sièges, et sur un geste, alla prendre deux petits verres qu'elle emplit de Rosolio.

Après quoi, Bouvard exposa ce qui l'amenait.

L'abbé ne répondit pas franchement. Tout est possible à Dieu — et les miracles sont une preuve de la Religion.

— Cependant, il y a des lois.

— Cela n'y fait rien. Il les dérange pour instruire, corriger.

— Que savez-vous s'il les dérange ? répliqua Bouvard. Tant que la Nature suit sa routine, on n'y pense pas ; mais dans un phénomène extraordinaire, nous voyons la main de Dieu.

— Elle peut y être dit l'ecclésiastique et quand un événement se trouve certifié par des témoins…

— Les témoins gobent tout, car il y a de faux miracles !

Le prêtre devint rouge. — Sans doute… quelquefois.

— Comment les distinguer des vrais ? Et si les vrais donnés en preuves ont eux-mêmes besoin de preuves, pourquoi en faire ?

Reine intervint, et prêchant comme son maître, dit qu'il fallait obéir.

— La vie est un passage, mais la mort est éternelle !

— Bref ajouta Bouvard, en lampant le Rosolio, les miracles d'autrefois ne sont pas mieux démontrés que les miracles d'aujourd'hui ; des raisons analogues défendent ceux des chrétiens et des païens.

Le curé jeta sa fourchette sur la table. — Ceux-là étaient faux, encore un coup ! — Pas de miracles en dehors de l'Église !

— Tiens se dit Pécuchet même argument que pour les martyrs : la doctrine s'appuie sur les faits et les faits sur la doctrine.

M. Jeufroy, ayant bu un verre d'eau, reprit :

— Tout en les niant, vous y croyez. Le monde, que convertissent douze pêcheurs, voilà, il me semble, un beau miracle ?

— Pas du tout ! Pécuchet en rendait compte d'une autre manière. Le monothéisme vient des Hébreux, la Trinité des Indiens. Le Logos est à Platon, la Vierge-mère à l'Asie.

N'importe ! M. Jeufroy tenait au surnaturel, ne voulait que le christianisme pût avoir humainement la moindre raison d'être, bien qu'il en vît chez tous les peuples, des prodromes ou des déformations. L'impiété railleuse du XVIIIe siècle, il l'eût tolérée ; mais la critique moderne avec sa politesse, l'exaspérait.

— J'aime mieux l'athée qui blasphème que le sceptique qui ergote !

Puis il les regarda d'un air de bravade, comme pour les congédier.

Pécuchet s'en retourna mélancolique. Il avait espéré l'accord de la Foi et de la Raison.

Bouvard lui fit lire ce passage de Louis Hervieu :

Pour connaître l'abîme qui les sépare, opposez leurs axiomes :

La Raison vous dit : Le tout enferme la partie ; et la Foi vous répond par la substantiation. Jésus communiant avec ses apôtres, avait son corps dans sa main, et sa tête dans sa bouche.

La Raison vous dit : On n'est pas responsable du crime des autres — et la

Foi vous répond par le Péché originel.

La Raison vous dit : Trois c'est trois — et la Foi déclare que : Trois c'est un.

Et ils ne fréquentèrent plus l'abbé.

C'était l'époque de la guerre d'Italie. Les honnêtes gens tremblaient pour le Pape. On tonnait contre Emmanuel. Mme de Noares allait jusqu'à lui souhaiter la mort.

Bouvard et Pécuchet ne protestaient que timidement. Quand la porte du salon tournait devant eux et qu'ils se miraient en passant dans les hautes glaces, tandis que par les fenêtres on apercevait les allées, où tranchait sur la verdure le gilet rouge d'un domestique, ils éprouvaient un plaisir ; et le luxe du milieu les faisait indulgents aux paroles qui s'y débitaient.

Le comte leur prêta tous les ouvrages de M. de Maistre. Il en développait les principes, devant un cercle d'intimes : Hurel, le curé, le juge de paix, le notaire et le baron son futur gendre, qui venait de temps à autre pour vingt-quatre heures au château.

— Ce qu'il y a d'abominable disait le comte c'est l'esprit de 89 ! D'abord on conteste Dieu, ensuite, on discute le gouvernement, puis arrive la liberté ; liberté d'injures, de révolte, de jouissances, ou plutôt de pillage. Si bien que la Religion et le Pouvoir doivent proscrire les indépendants, les hérétiques. On criera sans doute, à la Persécution ! comme si les bourreaux persécutaient les criminels. Je me résume. Point d'État sans Dieu ! la Loi ne pouvant être respectée que si elle vient d'en haut ; et actuellement il ne s'agit pas des Italiens mais de savoir qui l'emportera de la Révolution ou du Pape, de Satan ou de Jésus-Christ !

M. Jeufroy approuvait par des monosyllabes, Hurel avec un sourire, le juge de paix en dodelinant la tête. Bouvard et Pécuchet regardaient le plafond, Mme de Noares, la comtesse et Yolande travaillaient pour les pauvres — et M. de Mahurot près de sa fiancée, parcourait les feuilles.

Puis, il y avait des silences, où chacun semblait plongé dans la recherche d'un problème. Napoléon III n'était plus un Sauveur, et même il donnait un exemple déplorable, en laissant aux Tuileries, les maçons travailler le dimanche.

— On ne devrait pas permettre était la phrase ordinaire de M. le Comte. Économie sociale, beaux-arts, littérature, histoire, doctrines scientifiques, il décidait de tout, en sa qualité de chrétien et de père de famille ; — et plût à Dieu que le gouvernement à cet égard eût la même rigueur qu'il déployait dans sa maison. Le Pouvoir seul est juge des dangers de la science ; répandue trop largement elle inspire au peuple des ambitions funestes. Il était plus heureux, ce pauvre peuple, quand les seigneurs et les évêques tempéraient l'absolutisme du roi. Les industriels maintenant l'exploitent. Il va tomber en esclavage !

Et tous regrettaient l'ancien régime, Hurel par bassesse, Coulon par ignorance, Marescot, comme artiste.

Bouvard une fois chez lui, se retrempait avec La Mettrie, d'Holbach, *etc.* — et Pécuchet s'éloigna d'une religion, devenue un moyen de gouvernement. M. de Mahurot avait communié pour séduire mieux ces dames et s'il pratiquait, c'était à cause des domestiques.

Mathématicien et dilettante, jouant des valses sur le piano, et admirateur de Topffer, il se distinguait par un scepticisme de bon goût ; ce qu'on rapporte des abus féodaux, de l'Inquisition ou des Jésuites, préjugés, et il vantait le Progrès, bien qu'il méprisât tout ce qui n'était pas gentilhomme ou sorti de l'École

Polytechnique.

M. Jeufroy, de même, leur déplaisait. Il croyait aux sortilèges, faisait des plaisanteries sur les idoles, affirmait que tous les idiomes sont dérivés de l'hébreu ; sa rhétorique manquait d'imprévu ; invariablement, c'était le cerf aux abois, le miel et l'absinthe, l'or et le plomb, des parfums, des urnes — et l'âme chrétienne, comparée au soldat qui doit dire en face du Péché : Tu ne passes pas !

Pour éviter ses conférences, ils arrivaient au château le plus tard possible.

Un jour pourtant, ils l'y trouvèrent.

Depuis une heure, il attendait ses deux élèves. Tout à coup Mme de

Noares entra.

— La petite a disparu. J'amène Victor. Ah ! le malheureux.

Elle avait saisi dans sa poche, un dé d'argent perdu depuis trois jours, puis suffoquée par les sanglots : — Ce n'est pas tout ! ce n'est pas tout ! Pendant que je le grondais, il m'a montré son derrière ! Et avant que le Comte et la Comtesse aient rien dit : Du reste, c'est de ma faute, pardonnez-moi !

Elle leur avait caché que les deux orphelins étaient les enfants de

Touache, maintenant au bagne.

Que faire ?

Si le Comte les renvoyait, ils étaient perdus — et son acte de charité passerait pour un caprice.

M. Jeufroy ne fut pas surpris. L'homme étant corrompu naturellement il fallait le châtier pour l'améliorer.

Bouvard protesta. La douceur valait mieux.

Mais le Comte, encore une fois s'étendit sur le bras de fer, indispensable aux enfants, comme pour les peuples. Ces deux-là étaient pleins de vices, la petite fille menteuse, le gamin brutal. Ce vol, après tout on l'excuserait, l'insolence jamais, l'éducation devant être l'école du respect.

Donc Sorel, le garde-chasse, administrerait au jeune homme une bonne fessée immédiatement.

M. de Mahurot, qui avait à lui dire quelque chose, se chargea de la commission. Il prit un fusil dans l'antichambre et appela Victor, resté au milieu de la cour, la tête basse :

— Suis-moi dit le Baron.

Comme la route pour aller chez le garde, détournait peu de Chavignolles,

M. Jeufroy, Bouvard et Pécuchet l'accompagnèrent.

À cent pas du château, il les pria de ne plus parler, tant qu'il longerait le bois.

Le terrain dévalait jusqu'au bord de la rivière, où se dressaient de grands quartiers de roches. Elle faisait des plaques d'or sous le soleil couchant. En face les verdures des collines se couvraient d'ombre. Un air vif soufflait.

Des lapins sortirent de leurs terriers, et broutaient le gazon.

Un coup de feu partit, un deuxième, un autre, — et les lapins sautaient, déboulaient. Victor se jetait dessus pour les saisir, et haletait trempé de sueur.

— Tu arranges bien tes nippes dit le baron. — Sa blouse en loques avait du sang.

La vue du sang répugnait à Bouvard. Il n'admettait pas qu'on en pût verser.

M. Jeufroy reprit :

— Les circonstances quelquefois l'exigent. Si ce n'est pas le coupable qui donne le sien, il faut celui d'un autre, — vérité que nous enseigne la Rédemption.

Suivant Bouvard, elle n'avait guère servi, presque tous les hommes étant damnés, malgré le sacrifice de Notre-Seigneur.

— Mais quotidiennement, il le renouvelle dans l'Eucharistie.

— Et le miracle dit Pécuchet se fait avec des mots, quelle que soit l'indignité du Prêtre !

— Là est le mystère, monsieur !

Cependant Victor clouait ses yeux sur le fusil, tâchait même d'y toucher.

— À bas les pattes ! Et M, de Mahurot prit un sentier sous bois.

L'ecclésiastique avait Pécuchet d'un côté, Bouvard de l'autre — et il lui dit :

— Attention, vous savez : *Debetur pueris*.

Bouvard l'assura qu'il s'humiliait devant le Créateur, mais était indigné qu'on en fît un homme. On redoute sa vengeance, on travaille pour sa gloire ; il a toutes les vertus, un bras, un oeil, une politique, une habitation. Notre Père qui êtes aux cieux, qu'est-ce que cela veut dire ?

Et Pécuchet ajouta :

— Le monde s'est élargi ; la terre n'en fait plus le centre. Elle roule dans la multitude infinie de ses pareils. Beaucoup la dépassent en grandeur, et ce rapetissement de notre globe procure de Dieu un idéal plus sublime. Donc la Religion devait changer. Le Paradis est quelque chose d'enfantin avec ses bienheureux toujours contemplant, toujours chantant — et qui regardent d'en haut les tortures des damnés. Quand on songe que le christianisme a pour base une pomme !

Le curé se fâcha. — Niez la Révélation, ce sera plus simple.

— Comment voulez-vous que Dieu ait parlé ? dit Bouvard.

— Prouvez qu'il n'a pas parlé ! disait Jeufroy.

— Encore une fois, qui vous l'affirme ?

— L'Église !

— Beau témoignage !

Cette discussion ennuyait M. de Mahurot ; — et tout en marchant :

— Écoutez donc le curé ! il en sait plus que vous !

Bouvard et Pécuchet se firent des signes pour prendre un autre chemin, puis à la Croix-Verte : — Bien le bonsoir.

— Serviteur dit le baron.

Tout cela serait conté à M. de Faverges ; et peut-être qu'une rupture s'en suivrait ? tant pis ! Ils se sentaient méprisés par ces nobles ; on ne les invitait jamais à dîner ; et ils étaient las de Mme de Noares avec ses continuelles remontrances.

Ils ne pouvaient cependant garder le De Maistre ; — et une quinzaine après ils retournèrent au château, croyant n'être pas reçus.

Ils le furent.

Toute la famille se trouvait dans le boudoir, Hurel y compris, et par extraordinaire Foureau.

La correction n'avait point corrigé Victor. Il refusait d'apprendre son catéchisme ; et Victorine proférait des mots sales. Bref le garçon irait aux Jeunes Détenus, la petite fille dans un couvent. Foureau s'était chargé des démarches, et il s'en allait quand la Comtesse le rappela.

On attendait M. Jeufroy, pour fixer ensemble la date du mariage qui aurait lieu à la mairie, bien avant de se faire à l'église, afin de montrer que l'on honnissait le mariage civil.

Foureau tâcha de le défendre. Le Comte et Hurel l'attaquèrent. Qu'était une fonction municipale près d'un sacerdoce ! — et le Baron ne se fût pas cru marié s'il l'eût été, seulement devant une écharpe tricolore.

— Bravo ! dit M. Jeufroy, qui entrait. Le mariage étant établi par

Jésus…

Pécuchet l'arrêta. — Dans quel évangile ? Aux temps apostoliques on le considérait si peu, que Tertulien le compare à l'adultère.

— Ah ! par exemple !

— Mais oui ! et ce n'est pas un sacrement ! Il faut au sacrement un signe. Montrez-moi le signe, dans le mariage ! Le curé eut beau répondre qu'il figurait l'alliance de Dieu avec l'Église. Vous ne comprenez plus le christianisme ! et la Loi…

— Elle en garde l'empreinte dit M. de Faverges ; sans lui, elle autoriserait la Polygamie !

Une voix répliqua : Où serait le mal ?

C'était Bouvard, à demi caché par un rideau. On peut avoir plusieurs épouses, comme les patriarches, les mormons, les musulmans et néanmoins être honnête homme !

— Jamais s'écria le Prêtre ! l'honnêteté consiste à rendre ce qui est dû. Nous devons hommage à Dieu. Or qui n'est pas chrétien, n'est pas honnête !

— Autant que d'autres dit Bouvard.

Le comte croyant voir dans cette repartie une atteinte à la Religion l'exalta. Elle avait affranchi les esclaves.

Bouvard fit des citations, prouvant le contraire :

— Saint Paul leur recommande d'obéir aux maîtres comme à Jésus. — Saint Ambroise nomme la servitude un don de Dieu. — Le Lévitique, l'Exode et les Conciles l'ont sanctionnée. — Bossuet la classe pari le droit des gens. — Et Mgr Bouvier l'approuve.

Le comte objecta que le christianisme, pas moins, avait développé la civilisation.

— Et la paresse, en faisant de la Pauvreté, une vertu !

— Cependant, monsieur, la morale de l'Évangile ?

— Eh ! eh ! pas si morale ! Les ouvriers de la dernière heure sont autant payés que ceux de la première. On donne à celui qui possède, et on retire à celui qui n'a pas. Quant au précepte de recevoir des soufflets sans les rendre et de se laisser voler, il encourage les audacieux, les poltrons et les coquins.

Le scandale redoubla, quand Pécuchet eut déclaré qu'il aimait autant le Bouddhisme.

Le prêtre éclata de rire. — Ah ! ah ! ah ! le Bouddhisme.

Mme de Noares leva les bras. — Le Bouddhisme !

— Comment, — le Bouddhisme ? répétait le comte.

— Le connaissez-vous ? dit Pécuchet à M. Jeufroy, qui s'embrouilla.

— Eh bien, sachez-le ! mieux que le christianisme, et avant lui, il a reconnu le néant des choses terrestres. Ses pratiques sont austères, ses fidèles plus nombreux que tous les chrétiens, et pour l'incarnation, Vischnou n'en a pas une, mais neuf ! Ainsi, jugez !

— Des mensonges de voyageurs dit Mme de Noares.

— Soutenus par les francs-maçons ajouta le curé.

Et tous parlant à la fois : — Allez donc — Continuez ! — Fort joli ! — Moi, je le trouve drôle — Pas possible si bien que Pécuchet exaspéré, déclara qu'il se ferait bouddhiste !

— Vous insultez des chrétiennes ! dit le Baron. Mme de Noares s'affaissa dans un fauteuil. La Comtesse et Yolande se taisaient. Le comte roulait des yeux ; Hurel attendait des ordres. L'abbé, pour se contenir, lisait son bréviaire.

Cet exemple apaisa M. de Faverges ; et considérant les deux bonshommes : — Avant de blâmer l'Évangile, et quand on a des taches dans sa vie, il est certaines réparations…

— Des réparations ?

— Des taches ?

— Assez, messieurs ! vous devez me comprendre ! Puis s'adressant à Fourreau : Sorel est prévenu ! Allez-y ! Et Bouvard et Pécuchet se retirèrent sans saluer.

Au bout de l'avenue, ils exhalèrent tous les trois, leur ressentiment. On me traite en domestique grommelait Foureau ; — et les autres l'approuvant, malgré le souvenir des hémorroïdes, il avait pour eux comme de la sympathie.

Des cantonniers travaillaient dans la campagne. L'homme qui les commandait se rapprocha ; c'était Gorju. On se mit à causer. Il surveillait le cailloutage de la route votée en 1848, et devait cette place à M. de Mahurot, l'ingénieur, celui qui doit épouser Mlle de Faverges ! Vous sortez de là-bas, sans doute ?

— Pour la dernière fois ! dit brutalement Pécuchet.

Gorju prit un air naïf. — Une brouille ? tiens, tiens !

Et s'ils avaient pu voir sa mine, quand ils eurent tourné les talons, ils auraient compris qu'il en flairait la cause.

Un peu plus loin, ils s'arrêtèrent devant un enclos de treillage, qui contenait des loges à chien, et une maisonnette en tuiles rouges.

Victorine était sur le seuil. Des aboiements retentirent. La femme du garde parut.

Sachant pourquoi le maire venait, elle héla Victor.

Tout d'avance, était prêt, et leur trousseau dans deux mouchoirs, que fermaient des épingles. Bon voyage leur dit-elle, heureuse de n'avoir plus cette vermine !

Était-ce leur faute, s'ils étaient nés d'un père forçat ! Au contraire ils semblaient très doux, ne s'inquiétaient pas même de l'endroit où on les menait.

Bouvard et Pécuchet les regardaient marcher devant eux.

Victorine chantonnait des paroles indistinctes, son foulard au bras, comme une modiste qui porte un carton. Elle se retournait quelquefois ; et Pécuchet, devant ses frisettes blondes et sa gentille tournure, regrettait de n'avoir pas une enfant pareille. Élevée en d'autres conditions, elle serait charmante plus tard : quel bonheur que de la voir grandir, d'entendre tous les jours son ramage d'oiseau, quand il le voudrait de l'embrasser ; — et un attendrissement, lui montant du coeur aux lèvres, humecta ses paupières, l'oppressait un peu.

Victor comme un soldat, s'était mis son bagage sur le dos. Il sifflait — jetait des pierres aux corneilles dans les sillons, allait sous les arbres, pour se couper des badines — Foureau le rappela ; et Bouvard, en le retenant par la main jouissait de sentir dans la sienne ces doigts d'enfant robustes et vigoureux. Le pauvre petit diable ne demandait qu'à se développer librement, comme une fleur en plein air ! et il pourrirait entre des murs avec des leçons, des punitions, un tas de bêtises ! Bouvard fut saisi par une révolte de la pitié, une indignation contre le sort, une de ces rages où l'on veut détruire le gouvernement.

— Galope ! dit-il. Amuse-toi ! jouis de ton reste !

Le gamin s'échappa.

Sa soeur et lui coucheraient à l'auberge — et dès l'aube, le messager de Falaise prendrait Victor pour le descendre au pénitencier de Beaubourg — une religieuse de l'orphelinat de Grand-Camp emmènerait Victorine.

Foureau, ayant donné ces détails, se replongea dans ses pensées. Mais Bouvard voulut savoir combien pouvait coûter l'entretien des deux mioches.

— Bah !… L'affaire, peut-être, de trois cents francs ! Le comte m'en a remis vingt-cinq pour les premiers débours ! Quel pingre !

Et gardant sur le coeur, le mépris de son écharpe, Foureau hâtait le pas, silencieusement.

Bouvard murmura :

— Ils me font de la peine. Je m'en chargerais bien !

— Moi aussi dit Pécuchet, la même idée leur étant venue.

Il existait sans doute des empêchements ?

— Aucun ! répliqua Foureau. D'ailleurs il avait le droit comme maire de confier à qui bon lui semblait les enfants abandonnés. — Et après une longue hésitation : — Eh bien oui ! prenez-les ! ça le fera bisquer.

Bouvard et Pécuchet les emmenèrent.

En rentrant chez eux, ils trouvèrent au bas de l'escalier, sous la madone, Marcel à genoux, et qui priait avec ferveur. La tête renversée, les yeux demi clos, et dilatant son bec-de-lièvre, il avait l'air d'un fakir en extase.

— Quelle brute ! dit Bouvard.

— Pourquoi ? Il assiste peut-être à des choses que tu lui jalouserais si tu pouvais les voir. N'y a-t-il pas deux mondes, tout à fait distincts ? L'objet d'un raisonnement a moins de valeur que la manière de raisonner. Qu'importe la croyance ! Le principal est de croire.

Telles furent à la remarque de Bouvard les objections de Pécuchet.

CHAPITRE X

Ils se procurèrent plusieurs ouvrages touchant l'Éducation — et leur système fut résolu. Il fallait bannir toute idée métaphysique, — et d'après la méthode expérimentale suivre le développement de la Nature. Rien ne pressait, les deux élèves devant oublier ce qu'ils avaient appris.

Bien qu'ils eussent un tempérament solide, Pécuchet voulait comme un Spartiate les endurcir encore, les accoutumer à la faim, à la soif, aux intempéries, et même qu'ils portassent des chaussures trouées afin de prévenir les rhumes. Bouvard s'y opposa.

Le cabinet noir au fond du corridor devint leur chambre à coucher. Elle avait pour meubles deux lits de sangle, deux cuvettes, un broc. L'oeil-de-boeuf s'ouvrait au-dessus de leur tête ; et des araignées couraient le long du plâtre.

Souvent, ils se rappelaient l'intérieur d'une cabane où l'on se disputait. Une nuit, leur père était rentré avec du sang aux mains. Quelque temps après les gendarmes étaient venus. Ensuite ils avaient logé dans un bois. Des hommes qui faisaient des sabots embrassaient leur mère. Elle était morte ; une charrette les avait emmenés ; on les battait beaucoup, ils s'étaient perdus. Puis ils revoyaient le garde champêtre, Mme de Noares, Sorel, et sans se demander pourquoi cette autre maison, ils s'y trouvaient heureux. Aussi leur étonnement fut pénible quand au bout de huit mois les leçons recommencèrent.

Bouvard se chargea de la petite. Pécuchet du gamin.

Victor distinguait ses lettres, mais n'arrivait pas à former les syllabes. Il en bredouillait, s'arrêtait tout à coup, et avait l'air idiot. Victorine posait des questions. D'où vient que ch dans orchestre a le son d'un q et celui d'un k dans archéologie ? On doit par moments joindre deux voyelles, d'autres fois les détacher. Tout cela n'est pas juste. Elle s'indignait.

Les maîtres professaient à la même heure ; dans leurs chambres respectives — et la cloison étant mince, ces quatre voix, une flûtée, une profonde et deux aiguës composaient un charivari abominable. Pour en finir et stimuler les mioches par l'émulation, ils eurent l'idée de les faire travailler ensemble dans le muséum ; et on aborda l'écriture.

Les deux élèves à chaque bout de la table copiaient un exemple. Mais la position du corps était mauvaise. Il les fallait redresser ; leurs pages tombaient, les plumes se fendaient, l'encre se renversait.

Victorine en de certains jours, allait bien pendant cinq minutes puis traçait des griffonnages ; et prise de découragement restait les yeux au plafond. Victor ne tardait pas à s'endormir, vautré au milieu du bureau.

Peut-être souffraient-ils ? Une tension trop forte nuit aux jeunes cervelles. — Arrêtons-nous dit Bouvard.

Rien n'est stupide comme de faire apprendre par coeur ; mais si on n'exerce pas la mémoire, elle s'atrophiera ; — et ils leur serinèrent les premières fables de La Fontaine. Les enfants approuvaient la fourmi qui thésaurise, le loup qui mange l'agneau, le lion qui prend toutes les parts.

Devenus plus hardis, ils dévastaient le jardin. Mais quel amusement leur donner ?

Jean-Jacques, dans Émile conseille au gouverneur de faire faire à l'élève ses jouets lui-même en l'aidant un peu, sans qu'il s'en doute. Bouvard ne put réussir à fabriquer un cerceau, Pécuchet à coudre une balle.

Ils passèrent aux jeux instructifs, tels que des découpures, un verre ardent. Pécuchet leur montra son microscope ; — et la chandelle étant allumée, Bouvard dessinait avec l'ombre de ses doigts un lièvre ou un cochon sur la muraille. Le public s'en fatigua.

Des auteurs exaltent comme plaisir, un déjeuner champêtre, une partie de bateau ; était-ce praticable, franchement ? Fénelon recommande de temps à autre une conversation innocente. Impossible d'en imaginer une seule !

Ils revinrent aux leçons ; et les boules à facettes, les rayures, le bureau typographique, tout avait échoué, quand ils avisèrent un stratagème.

Comme Victor était enclin à la gourmandise, on lui présentait le nom d'un plat : bientôt il lut couramment dans le Cuisinier français. Victorine étant coquette, une robe lui serait donnée, si pour l'avoir, elle écrivait à la couturière : en moins de trois semaines elle accomplit ce prodige. C'était courtiser leurs défauts, moyen pernicieux mais qui avait réussi.

Maintenant qu'ils savaient écrire et lire, que leur apprendre ? Autre embarras. Les filles n'ont pas besoin d'être savantes comme les garçons. N'importe ! on les élève ordinairement en véritables brutes, tout leur bagage se bornant à des sottises mystiques.

Convient-il de leur enseigner les langues ? L'espagnol et l'italien prétend le Cygne de Cambrais ne servent qu'à lire des ouvrages dangereux. Un tel motif leur parut bête. Cependant Victorine n'aurait que faire de ces idiomes ; tandis que l'anglais est d'un usage plus commun. Pécuchet en étudia les règles, et il démontrait, avec sérieux, la façon d'émettre le th comme cela, tiens — the, the, the !

Mais avant d'instruire un enfant, il faudrait connaître ses aptitudes. On les devine par la Phrénologie. Ils s'y plongèrent. Puis voulurent en vérifier les assertions sur leurs personnes. Bouvard présentait la bosse de la bienveillance, de l'imagination, de la vénération et celle de l'énergie amoureuse ; vulgo : érotisme.

On sentait sur les temporaux de Pécuchet la philosophie et l'enthousiasme, joints à l'esprit de ruse.

Tels étaient leurs caractères.

Ce qui les surprit davantage, ce fut de reconnaître chez l'un comme l'autre le penchant à l'amitié ; — et charmés de la découverte, ils s'embrassèrent avec attendrissement.

Leur examen, ensuite, porta sur Marcel.

Son plus grand défaut et qu'ils n'ignoraient pas, était un extrême appétit. Néanmoins, Bouvard et Pécuchet furent effrayés en constatant au-dessus du pavillon de l'oreille, à la hauteur de l'oeil, l'organe de l'alimentivité. Avec l'âge leur domestique deviendrait peut-être comme cette femme de la Salpêtrière, qui mangeait quotidiennement huit livres de pain, engloutit une fois douze potages — et une autre, soixante bols de café. Ils ne pourraient y suffire.

Les têtes de leurs élèves n'avaient rien de curieux. Ils s'y prenaient mal sans doute ? Un moyen très simple développa leur expérience. Les jours de marché ils se faufilaient au milieu des paysans sur la Place, entre les sacs d'avoine, les paniers de fromages, les veaux, les chevaux, insensibles aux bousculades — et quand ils trouvaient un jeune garçon, avec son père, ils demandaient à lui palper le crâne dans un but scientifique.

Le plus grand nombre ne répondait même pas. D'autres croyant qu'il s'agissait d'une pommade pour la teigne refusaient vexés — quelques-uns par indifférence se laissaient emmener sous le porche de l'église, où l'on serait tranquille.

Un matin que Bouvard et Pécuchet commençaient leur manoeuvre le curé, tout à coup, parut ; et voyant ce qu'ils faisaient accusa la phrénologie de pousser au matérialisme et au fatalisme. Le voleur, l'assassin, l'adultère, n'ont plus qu'à rejeter leurs crimes sur la faute de leurs bosses.

Bouvard objecta que l'organe prédispose à l'action, sans pourtant vous y contraindre. De ce qu'un homme a le germe d'un vice, rien ne prouve qu'il sera vicieux. Du reste, j'admire les orthodoxes ; ils soutiennent les idées innées, et repoussent les penchants. Quelle contradiction !

Mais la Phrénologie, suivant M. Jeufroy, niait l'omnipotence divine, et il était malséant de la pratiquer à l'ombre du saint-lieu, en face même de l'autel. Retirez-vous ! non ! retirez-vous.

Ils s'établirent chez Ganot, le coiffeur. Pour vaincre toute hésitation Bouvard et Pécuchet allaient jusqu'à régaler les parents d'une barbe ou d'une frisure.

Le docteur, un après-midi vint s'y faire couper les cheveux. En s'asseyant dans le fauteuil, il aperçut reflétés par la glace, les deux phrénologues, qui promenaient leurs doigts sur des caboches d'enfant.

— Vous en êtes à ces bêtises-là ? dit-il.

— Pourquoi, bêtises ?

Vaucorbeil eut un sourire méprisant ; puis affirma qu'il n'y avait point dans le cerveau plusieurs organes. Ainsi, tel homme digère un aliment que ne digère pas tel autre. Faut-il supposer dans l'estomac autant d'estomacs qu'il s'y trouve de goûts ?

Cependant, un travail délasse d'un autre, un effort intellectuel ne tend pas à la fois, toutes les facultés. Chacune a donc un siège distinct.

— Les anatomistes ne l'ont pas rencontré dit Vaucorbeil.

— C'est qu'ils ont mal disséqué reprit Pécuchet.

— Comment ?

— Eh ! oui ! Ils coupent des tranches, sans égard à la connexion des parties, phrase d'un livre — qu'il se rappelait. Voilà une balourdise ! s'écria le médecin. Le crâne ne se moule pas sur le cerveau, l'extérieur sur l'intérieur. Gall se trompe et je vous défie de légitimer sa doctrine, en prenant au hasard, trois personnes dans la boutique.

La première était une paysanne, avec de gros yeux bleus.

Pécuchet, dit en l'observant :

— Elle a beaucoup de mémoire.

Son mari attesta le fait, et s'offrit lui-même à l'exploration.

— Oh ! vous mon brave, on vous conduit difficilement.

D'après les autres il n'y avait point dans le monde un pareil têtu.

La troisième épreuve se fit sur un gamin escorté de sa grand-mère.

Pécuchet déclara qu'il devait chérir la musique.

— Je crois bien ! dit la bonne femme montre à ces messieurs pour voir !

Il tira de sa blouse une guimbarde — et se mit à souffler dedans. Un fracas s'éleva. C'était la porte, claquée violemment par le docteur qui s'en allait.

Ils ne doutèrent plus d'eux-mêmes, et appelant les deux élèves recommencèrent l'analyse de leur boîte osseuse.

Celle de Victorine était généralement unie, marque de pondération — mais son frère avait un crâne déplorable ! une éminence très forte dans l'angle mastoïdien des pariétaux indiquait l'organe de la destruction, du meurtre ; — et plus bas, un renflement était le signe de la convoitise, du vol. Bouvard et Pécuchet en furent attristés pendant huit jours.

Il faudrait comprendre le sens des mots ; ce qu'on appelle la combativité implique le dédain de la mort. S'il fait des homicides, il peut de même produire des sauvetages. L'acquisivité englobe le tact des filous et l'ardeur des commerçants. L'irrévérence est parallèle à l'esprit de critique, la ruse à la circonspection. Toujours un instinct se dédouble en deux parties, une mauvaise, une bonne ; on détruira la seconde en cultivant la première ; et par cette méthode, un enfant audacieux, loin d'être un bandit deviendra un général. Le lâche n'aura seulement que de la prudence, l'avare de l'économie, le prodigue de la générosité.

Un rêve magnifique les occupa ; s'ils menaient à bien l'éducation de leurs élèves, ils fonderaient un établissement ayant pour but de redresser l'intelligence, dompter les caractères, ennoblir le coeur. Déjà ils parlaient des souscriptions et de la bâtisse.

Leur triomphe chez Ganot les avait rendus célèbres — et des gens les venaient consulter, afin qu'on leur dise leurs chances de fortune.

Il en défila de toutes les espèces : crânes en boule, en poire, en pains de sucre, de carrés, d'élevés, de resserrés, d'aplatis, avec des mâchoires de boeuf, des figures d'oiseau, des yeux de cochon — Tant de monde gênait le perruquier dans son travail. Les coudes frôlaient l'armoire à vitres contenant la parfumerie, on dérangeait les peignes, le lavabo fut brisé ; — et il flanqua dehors tous les amateurs, en priant Bouvard et Pécuchet de les suivre, ultimatum qu'ils acceptèrent sans murmurer, étant un peu fatigués de la cranioscopie.

Le lendemain, comme ils passaient devant le jardinet du capitaine, ils aperçurent causant avec lui Girbal, Coulon, le garde champêtre, et son fils cadet Zéphyrin, habillé en enfant de choeur. Sa robe était toute neuve, il se promenait dessous avant de la remettre dans la sacristie — et on le complimentait.

Placquevent pria ces Messieurs de palper son jeune homme, curieux de savoir ce qu'ils penseraient.

La peau du front avait l'air comme tendue ; un nez mince, très cartilagineux du bout, tombait obliquement sur des lèvres pincées ; le menton était pointu, le regard fuyant, l'épaule droite trop haute.

— Retire ta calotte lui dit son père.

Bouvard glissa les mains dans sa chevelure couleur de paille ; puis ce fut le tour de Pécuchet ; et ils se communiquaient à voix basse leurs observations.

— Biophilie manifeste. Ah ! ah ! l'approbativité ! Conscienciosité absente ! Amativité nulle !

— Eh bien ? dit le garde champêtre.

Pécuchet ouvrit sa tabatière, et huma une prise.

— Rien de bon ! hein ?

— Ma foi répliqua Bouvard ce n'est guère fameux.

Placquevent rougit d'humiliation. — Il fera, tout de même, ma volonté.

— Oh ! oh !

— Mais je suis son père, nom de Dieu, et j'ai bien le droit !…

— Dans une certaine mesure reprit Pécuchet.

Girbal s'en mêla :

— L'autorité paternelle est incontestable.

— Mais si le père est un idiot ?

— N'importe dit le Capitaine son pouvoir n'en est pas moins absolu.

— Dans l'intérêt des enfants ajouta Coulon.

D'après Bouvard et Pécuchet, ils ne devaient rien aux auteurs de leurs jours, et les parents, au contraire, leur doivent la nourriture, l'instruction, des prévenances, enfin tout !

Les bourgeois se récrièrent devant cette opinion immorale. Placquevent en était blessé comme d'une injure.

— Avec cela, ils sont jolis, ceux que vous ramassez sur les grandes routes ! ils iront loin ! Prenez garde.

— Garde à quoi ? dit aigrement Pécuchet.

— Oh ! je n'ai pas peur de vous !

— Ni moi, non plus.

Coulon intervint, modéra le garde champêtre, et le fit s'éloigner.

Pendant quelques minutes on resta silencieux. Puis il fut question des dahlias du capitaine qui ne lâcha point son monde, sans les avoir exhibés l'un après l'autre.

Bouvard et Pécuchet rejoignaient leur domicile, quand à cent pas devant eux, ils distinguèrent Placquevent, et Zéphyrin près de lui, levait le coude en manière de bouclier pour se garantir des gifles.

Ce qu'ils venaient d'entendre exprimait sous d'autres formes les idées de M. le comte ; mais l'exemple de leurs élèves témoignerait combien la liberté l'emporte sur la contrainte. Un peu de Discipline était cependant nécessaire.

Pécuchet cloua dans le muséum un tableau pour les démonstrations ; on tiendrait un journal où les actions de l'enfant notées le soir seraient relues le lendemain. Tout s'accomplirait au son de la cloche. Comme Dupont de Nemours, ils useraient de l'injonction paternelle d'abord, puis de l'injonction militaire et le tutoiement fut interdit.

Bouvard tâcha d'apprendre le calcul à Victorine. Quelquefois, il se trompait ; ils en riaient l'un et l'autre ; puis le baisant sur le cou, à la place qui n'a pas de barbe, elle demandait à s'en aller ; il la laissait partir.

Pécuchet aux heures des leçons avait beau tirer la cloche, et crier par la fenêtre l'injonction militaire, le gamin n'arrivait pas. Ses chaussettes lui pendaient toujours sur les chevilles ; à table même, il se fourrait les doigts dans le nez, et ne retenait point ses gaz. Broussais là-dessus défend les réprimandes ;

car il faut obéir aux sollicitations d'un instinct conservateur.

Victorine et lui, employaient un affreux langage, disant mé itou pour moi aussi, bère pour boire, al pour elle, un deventiau, de l'iau ; mais comme la grammaire ne peut être comprise des enfants, — et qu'ils la sauront s'ils entendent parler correctement, les deux bonshommes surveillaient leurs discours jusqu'à en être incommodés.

Ils différaient d'opinions quant à la géographie. Bouvard pensait qu'il est plus logique de débuter par la commune. Pécuchet par l'ensemble du monde.

Avec un arrosoir et du sable il voulut démontrer ce qu'était un fleuve, une île, un golfe ; et même sacrifia trois plates-bandes pour les trois continents ; mais les points cardinaux n'entraient pas dans la tête de Victor.

Par une nuit de janvier, Pécuchet l'emmena en rase campagne. Tout en marchant, il préconisait l'astronomie ; les navigateurs l'utilisent dans leurs voyages ; Christophe Colomb sans elle n'eût pas fait sa découverte. Nous devons de la reconnaissance à Copernic, Galilée, Newton.

Il gelait très fort et sur le bleu noir du ciel, une infinité de lumières scintillaient.

Pécuchet leva les yeux. Comment ? pas de grande ourse ; la dernière fois qu'il l'avait vue, elle était tournée d'un autre côté ; enfin il la reconnut puis montra l'étoile polaire, toujours au Nord, et sur laquelle on s'oriente.

Le lendemain, il posa au milieu du salon un fauteuil et se mit à valser autour.

— Imagine que ce fauteuil est le soleil, et que moi je suis la terre !

Elle se meut ainsi.

Victor le considérait plein d'étonnement.

Il prit ensuite une orange, y passa une baguette signifiant les pôles puis l'encercla d'un trait au charbon pour marquer l'équateur. Après quoi, il promena l'orange à l'entour d'une bougie, en faisant observer que tous les points de la surface n'étaient pas éclairés simultanément, ce qui produit la différence des climats, et pour celle des saisons, il pencha l'orange, car la terre ne se tient pas droite ce qui amène les équinoxes et les solstices.

Victor n'y avait rien compris. Il croyait que la terre pivote sur une longue aiguille et que l'équateur est un anneau, étreignant sa circonférence.

Au moyen d'un atlas, Pécuchet lui exposa l'Europe ; mais ébloui par tant de lignes et de couleurs, il ne retrouvait plus les noms. Les bassins et les montagnes ne s'accordaient pas avec les royaumes, l'ordre politique embrouillait l'ordre physique.

Tout cela, peut-être, s'éclaircirait en étudiant l'Histoire.

Il eût été plus pratique de commencer par le village, ensuite l'arrondissement, le département, la province. Mais Chavignolles n'ayant point d'annales, il fallait bien s'en tenir à l'Histoire universelle.

Tant de matières l'embarrassent qu'on doit seulement en prendre les Beautés.

Il y a pour la grecque : Nous combattrons à l'ombre, l'envieux qui bannit Aristide et la confiance d'Alexandre en son médecin ; pour la romaine : les oies du Capitole, le trépied de Scévola, le tonneau de Régulus. Le lit de roses de Guatimozin est considérable pour l'Amérique ; quant à la France, elle comporte le vase de Soissons, le chêne de saint Louis, la mort de Jeanne d'Arc, la poule au pot du Béarnais, — on n'a que l'embarras du choix. Sans compter À moi d'Auvergne, et le naufrage du Vengeur !

Victor confondait les hommes, les siècles et les pays.

Cependant, Pécuchet n'allait pas le jeter dans des considérations subtiles et la masse des faits est un vrai labyrinthe.

Il se rabattit sur la nomenclature des rois de France. Victor les oubliait, faute de connaître les dates. Mais si la mnémotechnie de Dumouchel avait été insuffisante pour eux, que serait-ce pour lui !

Conclusion : l'Histoire ne peut s'apprendre que par beaucoup de lectures.

Ils les feraient.

Le dessin est utile dans une foule de circonstances ; or Pécuchet eut l'audace de l'enseigner lui-même, d'après nature ! en abordant tout de suite le paysage. Un libraire de Bayeux lui envoya du papier, du caoutchouc, deux cartons, des crayons, et du fixatif pour leurs oeuvres — qui sous verre et dans des cadres orneraient le muséum.

Levés dès l'aurore, ils se mettaient en route, avec un morceau de pain dans la poche ; — et beaucoup de temps était perdu à chercher un site. Pécuchet voulait à la fois reproduire ce qui se trouvait sous ses pieds, l'extrême horizon et les nuages. Mais les lointains dominaient toujours les premiers plans ; la rivière dégringolait du ciel, le berger marchait sur le troupeau — un chien endormi avait l'air de courir. Pour sa part il y renonça.

Se rappelant avoir lu cette définition : Le dessin se compose de trois choses : la ligne, le grain, le grainé fin, de plus le trait de force — mais le trait de force, il n'y a que le maître seul qui le donne il rectifiait la ligne, collaborait au grain, surveillait le grainé fin, et attendait l'occasion de donner le trait de force. Elle ne venait jamais tant le paysage de l'élève était incompréhensible.

Sa soeur, paresseuse comme lui, bâillait devant la table de Pythagore. Mlle Reine lui montrait à coudre — et quand elle marquait du linge, elle levait les doigts si gentiment que Bouvard ensuite, n'avait pas le coeur de la tourmenter avec sa leçon de calcul. Un de ces jours, ils s'y remettraient.

Sans doute, l'arithmétique et la couture sont nécessaires dans un ménage.

Mais il est cruel, objecta Pécuchet, d'élever les filles en vue exclusivement du mari qu'elles auront. Toutes ne sont pas destinées à l'hymen, et si on veut que plus tard elles se passent des hommes il faut leur apprendre bien des choses.

On peut inculquer les sciences, à propos des objets les plus vulgaires ; — dire par exemple, en quoi consiste le vin ; et l'explication fournie Victor et Victorine devaient la répéter. Il en fut de même des épices, des meubles, de l'éclairage ; mais la lumière, c'était pour eux la lampe, et elle n'avait rien de commun avec l'étincelle d'un caillou, la flamme d'une bougie, la clarté de la lune.

Un jour, Victorine demanda d'où vient que le bois brûle ; ses maîtres se regardèrent embarrassés, la théorie de la combustion les dépassant.

Une autre fois, Bouvard depuis le potage jusqu'au fromage, parla des éléments nourriciers, et ahurit les deux petits sous la fibrine, la caséine, la graisse et le gluten.

Ensuite, Pécuchet voulut leur expliquer comment le sang se renouvelle, et il pataugea dans la circulation.

Le dilemme n'est point commode ; si l'on part des faits, le plus simple exige des raisons trop compliquées, et en posant d'abord les principes, on commence par l'Absolu, la Foi.

Que résoudre ? combiner les deux enseignements, le rationnel et l'empirique ; mais un double moyen vers un seul but est l'inverse de la méthode ? Ah ! tant pis !

Pour les initier à l'histoire naturelle, ils tentèrent quelques promenades scientifiques.

— Tu vois, disaient-ils en montrant un âne, un cheval, un boeuf, les bêtes à quatre pieds, ce sont des quadrupèdes. Les oiseaux présentent des plumes, les reptiles des écailles, et les papillons appartiennent à la classe des insectes. Ils avaient un filet pour en prendre — et Pécuchet tenant la bestiole avec délicatesse, leur faisait observer les quatre ailes, les six pattes, les deux antennes et la trompe osseuse qui aspire le nectar des fleurs.

Il cueillait des simples au revers des fossés, disait leurs noms ou en inventait, afin de garder son prestige. D'ailleurs, la nomenclature est le moins important de la Botanique.

Il écrivit cet axiome sur le tableau : Toute plante a des feuilles, un calice, et une corolle enfermant un ovaire ou péricarpe qui contient la graine.

Puis il ordonna à ses élèves d'herboriser au hasard dans la campagne.

Victor en rapporta des boutons d'or, sorte de renoncule dont la fleur est jaune. Victorine une touffe de graminées ; il y chercha vainement un péricarpe.

Bouvard qui se méfiait de son savoir fouilla toute la bibliothèque et découvrit dans le Redouté des Dames, le dessin d'une rose ; l'ovaire n'était pas situé dans la corolle, mais au-dessous des pétales.

— C'est une exception, dit Pécuchet.

Ils trouvèrent une rubiacée qui n'a pas de calice.

Ainsi le principe posé par Pécuchet était faux.

Il y avait dans leur jardin des tubéreuses, toutes sans calice. — Une étourderie ! La plupart des Liliacées en manquent.

Mais un hasard fit qu'ils virent une shérardie (description de la plante) — et elle avait un calice.

Allons, bon ! si les exceptions elles-mêmes ne sont pas vraies, à qui se fier ?

Un jour dans une de ces promenades, ils entendirent crier des paons, jetèrent les yeux par-dessus le mur, et au premier moment, ils ne reconnaissaient pas leur ferme. La grange avait un toit d'ardoises, les barrières étaient neuves, les chemins empierrés. Le père Gouy parut : Pas possible ! est-ce vous ? Que d'histoires depuis trois ans, la mort de sa femme entre autres. Quant à lui il se portait toujours comme un chêne.

— Entrez donc une minute.

On était au commencement d'avril — et les pommiers en fleurs alignaient dans les trois masures leurs touffes blanches et roses ; le ciel couleur de satin bleu, n'avait pas un nuage ; des nappes, des draps et des serviettes pendaient verticalement, attachés par des fiches de bois à des cordes tendues. Le père Gouy les soulevait pour passer quand tout à coup, ils rencontrèrent Mme Bordin, nu-tête, en camisole, — et Marianne lui offrait à pleins bras, des paquets de linge.

— Votre servante, messieurs ! Faites comme chez vous ! moi, je vais m'asseoir, je suis rompue.

Le fermier proposa à toute la compagnie un verre de boisson.

— Pas maintenant dit-elle j'ai trop chaud !

Pécuchet accepta, et disparut vers le cellier avec le père Gouy,

Marianne et Victor.

Bouvard s'assit par terre, à côté de Mme Bordin. Il recevait ponctuellement sa rente, n'avait pas à s'en plaindre, ne lui en voulait plus.

La grande lumière éclairait son profil, un de ses bandeaux noirs descendait trop bas, et les frisons de sa nuque se collaient à sa peau ambrée, moite de sueur. Chaque fois qu'elle respirait, ses deux seins montaient. Le parfum du gazon se mêlait à la bonne odeur de sa chair solide ; et Bouvard eut un revif de tempérament, qui le combla de joie. Alors il lui fit des compliments sur sa propriété.

Elle en fut ravie, et parla de ses projets. Pour agrandir les cours, elle abattrait le haut-bord.

Victorine, à ce moment-là, en grimpait le talus et cueillait des primevères, des hyacinthes et des violettes, sans avoir peur d'un vieux cheval, qui broutait l'herbe, au pied.

— N'est-ce pas qu'elle est gentille ? dit Bouvard.

— Oui ! c'est gentil, une petite fille ! et la veuve poussa un soupir, qui semblait exprimer le long chagrin de toute une vie.

— Vous auriez pu en avoir.

Elle baissa la tête.

— Il n'a tenu qu'à vous !

— Comment ?

Il eut un tel regard, qu'elle s'empourpra, comme à la sensation d'une caresse brutale — mais de suite, en s'éventant avec son mouchoir :

— Vous avez manqué le coche, mon cher !

— Je ne comprends pas et sans se lever, il se rapprochait.

Elle le considéra de haut en bas, longtemps, — puis, souriante et les prunelles humides : — C'est de votre faute !

Les draps, autour d'eux, les enfermaient comme les rideaux d'un lit.

Il se pencha sur le coude, lui frôlant les genoux de sa figure.

— Pourquoi ? hein ? pourquoi ? et comme elle se taisait, et qu'il était dans un état où les serments ne coûtent rien, il tâcha de se justifier, s'accusa de folie, d'orgueil : — Pardon ! ce sera comme autrefois !… voulez-vous ?… et il avait pris sa main, qu'elle laissait dans la sienne.

Un coup de vent brusque fit se relever les draps — et ils virent deux paons, un mâle et une femelle. La femelle se tenait immobile, les jarrets pliés, la croupe en l'air. Le mâle se promenant autour d'elle arrondissait sa queue en éventail, se rengorgeait, gloussait, puis sauta dessus, en rabattant ses plumes, qui la couvrirent comme un berceau ; — et les deux grands oiseaux tremblèrent, d'un seul frémissement.

Bouvard le sentit dans la paume de Mme Bordin. Elle se dégagea, bien vite. Il y avait devant eux, béant, et comme pétrifié le jeune Victor qui regardait ; un peu plus loin, Victorine étalée sur le dos en plein soleil, aspirait toutes les fleurs qu'elle s'était cueillies.

Le vieux cheval, effrayé par les paons, cassa sous une ruade une des cordes, s'y empêtra les jambes, et galopant dans les trois cours, traînait la lessive après lui.

Aux cris furieux de Mme Bordin Marianne accourut. Le père Gouy injuriait son cheval : Bougre de rosse ! carcan ! voleur, lui donnait des coups de pied dans le ventre, des coups sur les oreilles avec le manche d'un fouet.

Bouvard fut indigné de voir battre un animal.

Le paysan répondit : — J'en ai le droit ! il m'appartient.

Ce n'était pas une raison.

Et Pécuchet survenant, ajouta que les animaux avaient aussi leurs droits, car ils ont une âme, comme nous, — si toutefois la nôtre existe ?

— Vous êtes un impie s'écria Mme Bordin.

Trois choses l'exaspéraient : la lessive à recommencer, ses croyances qu'on outrageait, et la crainte d'avoir été entrevue tout à l'heure dans une pose suspecte.

— Je vous croyais plus forte dit Bouvard.

Elle répliqua magistralement :

— Je n'aime pas les polissons. Et Gouy s'en prit à eux d'avoir abîmé son cheval, dont les naseaux saignaient. Il grommelait tout bas : Sacrés gens de malheur ! j'allais l'enterrer, quand ils sont venus.

Les deux bonshommes se retirèrent en haussant les épaules.

Victor leur demanda pourquoi ils s'étaient fâchés contre Gouy.

— Il abuse de sa force, ce qui est mal.

— Pourquoi est-ce mal ?

Les enfants n'auraient-ils aucune notion du juste ? Peut-être.

Et le soir, Pécuchet ayant Bouvard à sa droite, sous la main quelques notes, et en face de lui les deux élèves, commença un cours de morale.

Cette science nous apprend à diriger nos actions.

Elles ont deux motifs, le plaisir, l'intérêt — et un troisième plus impérieux : le devoir.

Les devoirs se divisent en deux classes : Primo devoirs envers nous-mêmes, lesquels consistent à soigner notre corps, nous garantir de toute injure. Ils entendaient cela parfaitement. Secundo devoirs envers les autres, c'est-à-dire être toujours loyal, débonnaire, et même fraternel, le genre humain n'étant qu'une seule famille. Souvent une chose nous agrée qui nuit à nos semblables ; l'intérêt diffère du Bien, car le Bien est de soi-même irréductible. Les enfants ne comprenaient pas. Il remit à la fois prochaine, la sanction des devoirs.

Dans tout cela suivant Bouvard, il n'avait pas défini le Bien.

— Comment veux-tu le définir ? On le sent.

Alors les leçons de morale ne conviendraient qu'aux gens moraux ; et le cours de Pécuchet s'arrêta.

Ils firent lire à leurs élèves des historiettes tendant à inspirer l'amour de la vertu. Elles assommèrent Victor.

Pour frapper son imagination, Pécuchet suspendit aux murs de sa chambre des images, exposant la vie du Bon Sujet, et celle du Mauvais Sujet. Le premier, Adolphe, embrassait sa mère, étudiait l'allemand, secourait un aveugle, et était reçu à l'École Polytechnique. Le mauvais, Eugène, commençait par désobéir à son père, avait une querelle dans un café, battait son épouse, tombait ivre mort, fracturait une armoire — et un dernier tableau le représentait au bagne, où un monsieur accompagné d'un jeune garçon disait, en le montrant : Tu vois, mon fils, les dangers de l'inconduite.

Mais pour les enfants l'avenir n'existe pas. On avait beau prêcher, les saturer de cette maxime : le travail est honorable et les riches parfois sont malheureux, ils avaient connu des travailleurs nullement honorés, et se rappelaient le château où la vie semblait bonne. Les supplices du remords leur étaient dépeints avec tant d'exagération qu'ils flairaient la blague et se méfiaient du reste.

On essaya de les conduire par le point d'honneur, l'idée de l'opinion publique et le sentiment de la gloire, en leur vantant les grands hommes, surtout les hommes utiles, tels que Belzunce, Franklin, Jacquard ! Victor ne témoignait aucune envie de leur ressembler.

Un jour qu'il avait fait une addition sans faute, Bouvard cousit à sa veste un ruban qui signifiait la croix. Il se pavana dessous. Mais ayant oublié la mort de Henri IV, Pécuchet le coiffa d'un bonnet d'âne. Victor se mit à braire avec tant de violence et pendant si longtemps, qu'il fallut enlever ses oreilles de carton.

Sa soeur comme lui, se montrait flattée des éloges et indifférente aux blâmes.

Afin de les rendre plus sensibles, on leur donna un chat noir, qu'ils durent soigner ; — et on leur confiait deux ou trois sols pour qu'ils fissent l'aumône. Ils trouvèrent la prétention odieuse ; cet argent leur appartenait.

Se conformant à un désir des pédagogues, ils appelaient Bouvard mon oncle et Pécuchet bon ami mais ils les tutoyaient, et la moitié des leçons, ordinairement, se passait en disputes.

Victorine abusait de Marcel, montait sur son dos, le tirait par les cheveux ; pour se moquer de son bec-de-lièvre, parlait du nez comme lui, — et le pauvre homme n'osait se plaindre, tant il aimait la petite fille. Un soir, sa voix rauque s'éleva extraordinairement. Bouvard et Pécuchet descendirent dans la cuisine. Les deux élèves observaient la cheminée — et Marcel joignant les mains s'écriait : Retirez-le ! c'est trop ! c'est trop !

Le couvercle de la marmite sauta, comme un obus éclate. Une masse grisâtre bondit jusqu'au plafond, puis tourna sur elle-même frénétiquement, en poussant d'abominables cris.

On reconnut le chat, tout efflanqué, sans poil, la queue pareille à un cordon. Des yeux énormes lui sortaient de la tête. Ils étaient couleur de lait, comme vidés et pourtant regardaient.

La bête hideuse hurlait toujours, se jeta dans l'âtre, disparut, puis retomba au milieu des cendres, inerte.

C'était Victor qui avait commis cette atrocité ; — et les deux bonshommes se reculèrent — pâles de stupéfaction et d'horreur. Aux reproches qu'on lui adressa, il répondit comme le garde champêtre pour son fils, et comme le fermier pour son cheval : — Eh bien ? puisqu'il est à moi ! sans gêne, naïvement, dans la placidité d'un instinct assouvi.

L'eau bouillante de la marmite était répandue par terre, des casseroles, les pincettes, et des flambeaux jonchaient les dalles. Marcel fut quelque temps à nettoyer la cuisine — et ses maîtres enterrèrent le pauvre chat dans le jardin, sous la pagode.

Ensuite Bouvard et Pécuchet causèrent longuement de Victor. Le sang paternel se manifestait. Que faire ? Le rendre à M. de Faverges ou le confier à d'autres serait un aveu d'impuissance. Il s'amenderait peut-être un peu.

N'importe ! L'espoir était douteux, la tendresse n'existait plus ! Quel plaisir que d'avoir près de soi un adolescent curieux de vos idées, dont on observe les progrès, qui devient un frère plus tard ; mais Victor manquait d'esprit, de coeur encore plus ! et Pécuchet soupira, le genou plié dans ses mains jointes.

— La soeur ne vaut pas mieux dit Bouvard.

Il imaginait une fille, de quinze ans à peu près, l'âme délicate, l'humeur enjouée, ornant la maison des élégances de sa jeunesse ; et comme s'il eût été son père et qu'elle vînt de mourir, le bonhomme en pleura.

Puis cherchant à excuser Victor, il allégua l'opinion de Rousseau :

L'enfant n'a pas de responsabilité, ne peut être moral ou immoral.

Ceux-là, suivant Pécuchet avaient l'âge du discernement et ils étudièrent les moyens de les corriger.

Pour qu'une punition soit bonne, dit Bentham, elle doit être proportionnée à la faute, sa conséquence naturelle. L'enfant a brisé un carreau, on n'en remettra pas, qu'il souffre du froid. Si, n'ayant plus faim, il redemande d'un plat, cédez-lui ; une indigestion le fera vite se repentir. Il est paresseux ; qu'il reste sans travail ; l'ennui de soi-même l'y ramènera.

Mais Victor ne souffrirait pas du froid, son tempérament pouvait endurer des excès, et la fainéantise lui conviendrait.

Ils adoptèrent le système inverse, la punition médicinale. Des pensums lui furent donnés ; il devint plus paresseux. On le privait de confiture ; sa gourmandise en redoubla.

L'ironie aurait peut-être du succès ? Une fois qu'il était venu déjeuner les mains sales, Bouvard le railla, l'appelant joli coeur, muscadin, gants-jaunes. Victor écoutait le front bas, blêmit tout à coup, et jeta son assiette à la tête de Bouvard — puis furieux de l'avoir manqué, se précipita vers lui. Ce n'était pas trop que trois hommes pour le contenir. Il se roulait par terre, tâchait de mordre. — Pécuchet l'arrosa de loin avec une carafe ; de suite il fut calmé ; — mais enroué, pendant trois jours. Le moyen n'était pas bon.

Ils en prirent un autre ; au moindre symptôme de colère, le traitant comme un malade, ils le couchaient dans son lit. Victor s'y trouvait bien, et chantait.

Un jour, il dénicha dans la bibliothèque une vieille noix de coco ; — et commençait à la fendre, quand Pécuchet survint.

— Mon coco !

C'était un souvenir de Dumouchel ! Il l'avait apporté de Paris à Chavignolles, en leva les bras d'indignation. — Victor se mit à rire. Bon ami n'y tint plus — et d'une large calotte l'envoya bouler au fond de l'appartement ; — puis tremblant d'émotion, alla se plaindre à Bouvard.

Bouvard lui fit des reproches. — Es-tu bête avec ton coco ! Les coups abrutissent, la terreur énerve. Tu te dégrades toi-même !

Pécuchet objecta que les châtiments corporels sont quelquefois indispensables. Pestalozzi les employait ; et le célèbre Mélanchthon avoue que sans eux il n'eût rien appris.

Mais des punitions cruelles ont poussé des enfants au suicide ; on en relate des exemples.

Victor s'était barricadé dans sa chambre. Bouvard parlementa derrière la porte ; et pour la faire ouvrir, lui promit une tarte aux prunes. Dès lors il empira.

Restait un moyen, préconisé par Dupanloup : le regard sévère. Ils tâchaient d'imprimer à leurs visages un aspect effrayant et ne produisaient aucun effet.

Nous n'avons plus qu'à essayer de la Religion dit Bouvard.

Pécuchet se récria. Ils l'avaient bannie de leur programme.

Mais le raisonnement ne satisfait pas tous les besoins. Le coeur et l'imagination veulent autre chose. Le surnaturel pour bien des âmes est indispensable, et ils résolurent d'envoyer les enfants au catéchisme.

Reine proposa de les y conduire. Elle revenait dans la maison et savait se faire aimer par des manières caressantes. Victorine changea tout à coup, fut plus réservée, mielleuse, s'agenouillait devant la Madone, admirait le sacrifice d'Abraham, ricanait avec dédain au nom seul de protestant.

Elle déclara qu'on lui avait prescrit le jeûne. Ils s'en informèrent ; ce n'était pas vrai. Le jour de la Fête-Dieu, les juliennes disparurent d'une plate-bande pour décorer le reposoir ; elle nia effrontément les avoir coupées. Une autre fois elle prit à Bouvard vingt sols qu'elle mit dans le plat du sacristain.

Ils en conclurent que la morale se distingue de la Religion ; — quand elle n'a point d'autre base, son importance est secondaire.

Un soir, pendant qu'ils dînaient M. Marescot entra — Victor s'enfuit immédiatement.

Le notaire ayant refusé de s'asseoir, conta ce qui l'amenait. Le jeune

Touache avait battu, presque tué son fils.

Comme on savait les origines de Victor et qu'il était désagréable, les autres gamins l'appelaient Forçat ; et tout à l'heure il avait flanqué à M. Arnold Marescot une violente raclée. Le cher Arnold en portait des traces sur la figure. Sa mère est au désespoir, son costume en lambeaux, sa santé compromise, où allons-nous ?

Le notaire exigeait un châtiment rigoureux ; et que Victor ne fréquentât plus le catéchisme, afin de prévenir des collisions nouvelles.

Bouvard et Pécuchet, bien que blessés par son ton rogue, promirent tout ce qu'il voulut, calèrent.

Victor avait-il obéi au sentiment de l'honneur, ou de la vengeance ? En tout cas, ce n'était point un lâche..

Mais sa brutalité les effrayait. La musique adoucissant les moeurs,

Pécuchet imagina de lui apprendre le solfège.

Victor eut beaucoup de peine à lire couramment les notes, et à ne pas confondre les termes adagio, presto, sforzando. Son maître s'évertua à lui expliquer la gamme, l'accord parfait, le diatonique, le chromatique et les deux espèces d'intervalles, appelés majeur et mineur.

Il le fit se mettre tout droit, la poitrine en avant, la bouche grande ouverte, et pour l'instruire par l'exemple, poussa des intonations d'une voix fausse ; celle de Victor lui sortait du larynx péniblement tant il le contractait — quand un soupir commençait la mesure, il partait tout de suite, ou trop tard.

Pécuchet néanmoins, aborda le chant en partie double. Il prit une baguette pour tenir lieu d'archet, et faisait aller son bras magistralement, comme s'il avait eu un orchestre derrière lui ; mais occupé par deux besognes, il se trompait de temps ; — son erreur en amenait d'autres chez l'élève, et les yeux sur la portée, fronçant les sourcils, tendant les muscles de leur cou, ils continuaient au hasard, jusqu'au bas de la page.

Enfin Pécuchet dit à Victor : — Tu n'es pas près de briller aux orphéons et il abandonna l'enseignement de la musique. Locke d'ailleurs a peut-être raison : Elle engage dans des compagnies tellement dissolues qu'il vaut mieux s'occuper à autre chose.

Sans vouloir en faire un écrivain il serait commode pour Victor de savoir au moins trousser une lettre. Une réflexion les arrêta. Le style épistolaire ne peut s'apprendre ; car il appartient exclusivement aux femmes.

Ils songèrent ensuite à fourrer dans sa mémoire quelques morceaux de littérature ; et embarrassés du choix, consultèrent l'ouvrage de Mme Campan. Elle recommande la scène d'Éliacin, les choeurs d'Esther, Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, tout entier.

C'est un peu vieux. Quant aux romans, elle les prohibe, comme peignant le monde sous des couleurs trop favorables.

Cependant, elle permet Clarisse Harlowe et le Père de famille par miss

Opy. — Qui est-ce miss Opy ?

Ils ne découvrirent pas son nom dans la Biographie Michaud. Restait les contes de Fées. Ils vont espérer des palais de diamants dit Pécuchet. La littérature développe l'esprit mais exalte les passions.

Victorine fut renvoyée du catéchisme, à cause des siennes.

On l'avait surprise, embrassant le fils du notaire ; et Reine ne plaisantait pas ! sa figure était sérieuse sous son bonnet à gros tuyaux. Après un scandale pareil, comment garder une jeune fille si corrompue ?

Bouvard et Pécuchet qualifièrent le curé de vieille bête. Sa bonne le défendit. Ils ripostèrent, et elle s'en alla en roulant des yeux terribles, en grommelant : On vous connaît ! on vous connaît !

Victorine effectivement, s'était prise de tendresse pour Arnold, tant elle le trouvait joli avec son col brodé, sa veste de velours, ses cheveux sentant bon ; — et elle lui apportait des bouquets, jusqu'au moment où elle fut dénoncée par Zéphyrin.

Quelle niaiserie que cette aventure ! Les deux enfants étaient d'une innocence parfaite.

Fallait-il leur apprendre le mystère de la génération ? Je n'y verrais pas de mal dit Bouvard. Le philosophe Basedow l'exposait à ses élèves, ne détaillant toutefois que la grossesse et la naissance.

Pécuchet pensa différemment, Victor commençait à l'inquiéter.

Il le soupçonnait d'avoir une mauvaise habitude. Pourquoi pas ? des hommes graves la conservent toute leur vie, et on prétend que le Duc d'Angoulême s'y livrait. Il interrogea son disciple d'une telle façon qu'il lui ouvrit les idées, et peu de temps après n'eut aucun doute.

Alors il l'appela criminel, et voulait comme traitement lui faire lire

Tissot. Ce chef-d'oeuvre, selon Bouvard, était plus pernicieux qu'utile.

Mieux vaudrait lui inspirer un sentiment poétique. Aimé Martin rapporte qu'une mère, en pareil cas, prêta La Nouvelle Héloïse à son fils ; et pour se rendre digne de l'amour, le jeune homme se précipita dans le chemin de la Vertu.

Mais Victor n'était pas capable de rêver un Ange.

— Si plutôt nous le menions chez les dames ?

Pécuchet exprima son horreur des filles publiques.

Bouvard la jugeait idiote ; et même parla de faire exprès un voyage au

Havre.

— Y penses-tu ? on nous verrait entrer !

— Eh bien achète-lui un appareil !

— Mais le bandagiste croirait peut-être que c'est pour moi dit Pécuchet.

Il lui aurait fallu un plaisir émouvant comme la chasse ; elle amènerait la dépense d'un fusil, d'un chien. Ils préférèrent le fatiguer par l'exercice, et entreprirent des courses dans la campagne.

Le gamin leur échappait. Bien qu'ils se relayassent ils n'en pouvaient plus et le soir, n'avaient pas la force de tenir le journal.

Pendant qu'ils attendaient Victor ils causaient avec les passants — et par besoin de pédagogie, tâchaient de leur apprendre l'hygiène, déploraient la perte des eaux, le gaspillage des fumiers.

Ils en vinrent à inspecter les nourrices, et s'indignaient contre le régime de leurs poupons. Les unes les abreuvent de gruau, ce qui les fait périr de faiblesse. D'autres les bourrent de viande avant six mois — et ils crèvent d'indigestion. Plusieurs les nettoient avec leur propre salive ; toutes les manient brutalement.

Quand ils apercevaient sur une porte un hibou crucifié, ils entraient dans la ferme et disaient :

— Vous avez tort ; — ces animaux vivent de rats, de campagnols ; on a trouvé dans l'estomac d'une chouette jusqu'à cinquante larves de chenilles.

Les villageois les connaissaient pour les avoir vus, premièrement comme médecins, puis en quête de vieux meubles, puis à la recherche des cailloux, et ils répondaient :

— Allez donc, farceurs ! n'essayez pas de nous en remontrer !

Leur conviction s'ébranla. Car les moineaux purgent les potagers, mais gobent les cerises. Les hiboux dévorent les insectes, et en même temps, les chauves-souris, qui sont utiles — et si les taupes mangent les limaces, elles bouleversent le sol. Une chose dont ils étaient certains c'est qu'il faut détruire tout le gibier, funeste à l'Agriculture.

Un soir qu'ils passaient dans le bois de Faverges, ils arrivèrent devant la maison du garde. Sorel au bord de la route gesticulait entre trois individus.

Le premier était un certain Dauphin savetier, petit, maigre, et à figure sournoise. Le second le père Aubain, commissionnaire dans les villages, portait une vieille redingote jaune avec un pantalon de coutil bleu.

Le troisième Eugène, domestique chez M. Marescot, se distinguait par sa barbe, taillée comme celle des magistrats.

Sorel leur montrait un noeud coulant, en fil de cuivre — qui s'attachait à un fil de soie retenu par une brique, ce qu'on nomme un collet ; et il avait découvert le savetier, en train de l'établir.

— Vous êtes témoin, n'est-ce pas ?

Eugène baissa le menton d'une manière approbative — et le père Aubain répliqua :

Du moment que vous le dites

— Du moment que vous le dites.

Ce qui enrageait Sorel, c'était le toupet d'avoir dressé un piège aux abords de son logement, le gredin se figurant qu'on n'aurait pas l'idée d'en soupçonner dans cet endroit.

Dauphin prit le genre pleurard.

— Je marchais dessus, je tâchais même de le casser. On l'accusait toujours ; il était bien malheureux !

Sorel, sans lui répondre, avait tiré de sa poche, un calepin, une plume et de l'encre pour écrire un procès-verbal.

— Oh non ? dit Pécuchet.

Bouvard ajouta : Relâchez-le, c'est un brave homme !

— Lui ! un braconnier !

— Eh bien, quand cela serait ! Ils se mirent à défendre le braconnage. On sait d'abord, que les lapins rongent les jeunes pousses ; les lièvres abîment les céréales, sauf la bécasse peut-être…

— Laissez-moi donc tranquille. Et le garde écrivait, les dents serrées.

— Quel entêtement murmura Bouvard.

— Un mot de plus, je fais venir les gendarmes.

— Vous êtes un grossier personnage ! dit Pécuchet.

— Vous, des pas grand'chose, reprit Sorel.

Bouvard s'oubliant, le traita de butor, d'estafier ! — et Eugène répétait : La paix, la paix tandis que le père Aubain gémissait à trois pas d'eux sur un mètre de cailloux.

Troublés par ces voix, tous les chiens de la meute sortirent de leurs cabanes ; on voyait à travers le grillage, leurs prunelles ardentes, leurs mufles noirs, et courant çà et là, ils aboyaient effroyablement.

— Ne m'embêtez plus s'écria leur maître ou bien, je les lance sur vos culottes !

Les deux amis s'éloignèrent, contents d'avoir soutenu le Progrès, la Civilisation.

Dès le lendemain, on leur envoya une citation à comparaître devant le tribunal de simple police, pour injures envers le garde — et s'y entendre condamner à cent francs de dommages et intérêts sauf le recours du ministère public, vu les contraventions par eux commises. Coût six francs, soixante-quinze centimes. Tiercelin, huissier.

Pourquoi un ministère public ? La tête leur en tourna. Puis se calmant, ils préparèrent leur défense.

Le jour désigné, Bouvard et Pécuchet se rendirent à la Mairie, une heure trop tôt. Personne — des chaises et trois fauteuils entouraient une table couverte d'un tapis ; une niche était creusée dans la muraille pour recevoir un poêle, et le buste de l'Empereur occupant un piédouche dominait l'ensemble.

Il flânèrent jusqu'au grenier, où il y avait une pompe à incendie, plusieurs drapeaux, — et dans un coin par terre d'autres bustes en plâtre : Napoléon sans diadème, Louis XVIII, avec des épaulettes sur un frac, Charles X, reconnaissable à sa lèvre tombante, Louis-Philippe, les sourcils arqués, la chevelure en pyramide. L'inclinaison du toit lui frôlait la nuque et tous étaient salis par les mouches et la poussière. Ce spectacle démoralisa Bouvard et Pécuchet. Les gouvernements leur faisaient pitié quand ils revinrent dans la grande salle.

Ils y trouvèrent Sorel et le garde champêtre, l'un ayant sa plaque au bras, l'autre un képi.

Une douzaine de personnes causaient, incriminées, pour défaut de balayage, chiens errants, manque de lanterne ou avoir tenu pendant la messe un cabaret ouvert.

Enfin Coulon se présenta, affublé d'une robe en serge noire et d'une toque ronde avec du velours dans le bas. Son greffier se mit à sa gauche. Le Maire en écharpe, à droite. — Et on appela, de suite, l'affaire Sorel contre Bouvard et Pécuchet.

Louis-Martial-Eugène Lenepveur, valet de chambre à Chavignolles (Calvados), profita de sa position de témoin, pour épandre tout ce qu'il savait sur une foule de choses étrangères au débat.

Nicolas-Juste Aubain, manouvrier, craignait de déplaire à Sorel et de nuire à ces messieurs, il avait entendu de gros mots, en doutait cependant, allégua sa surdité.

Le juge de paix le fit se rasseoir, puis s'adressant au garde :

Persistez-vous dans vos déclarations ?

— Certainement.

Coulon ensuite demanda aux deux prévenus, ce qu'ils avaient à dire.

Bouvard soutenait n'avoir pas injurié Sorel, mais en défendant Dauphin avoir défendu l'intérêt de nos campagnes. Il rappela les abus féodaux, les chasses ruineuses des grands seigneurs.

— N'importe ! la contravention.

— Je vous arrête ! s'écria Pécuchet. Les mots contravention, crime et délit ne valent rien. — Prendre la peine, pour classer les faits punissables, c'est prendre une base arbitraire. Autant dire aux citoyens : Ne vous inquiétez pas de la valeur de vos actions. Elle n'est déterminée que par le châtiment du Pouvoir ; du reste, le Code pénal me paraît une oeuvre irrationnelle, sans principes.

— Cela se peut, répondit Coulon. Et il allait prononcer son jugement :

Attendu…

Mais Foureau qui était ministère public se leva. On avait outragé le garde dans l'exercice de ses fonctions. Si on ne respecte pas les propriétés, tout est perdu. Bref, plaise à M. le juge de paix d'appliquer le maximum de la peine.

Elle fut de dix francs, sous forme de dommages et intérêts envers Sorel.

— Très bien prononça Bouvard.

Coulon n'avait pas fini : — Les condamne à cinq francs d'amende comme coupables de la contravention relevée par le ministère public.

Pécuchet se tourna vers l'auditoire : L'amende est une bagatelle pour le riche mais un désastre pour le pauvre. Moi, ça ne me fait rien ! Et il avait l'air de narguer le tribunal.

— Je m'étonne, dit Coulon, que des Messieurs d'esprit…

— La loi vous dispense d'en avoir répliqua Pécuchet. Le juge de paix siège indéfiniment, tandis que le juge de la cour suprême est réputé capable jusqu'à soixante-quinze ans, — et celui de première instance ne l'est plus à soixante-dix.

Mais sur un geste de Foureau, Placquevent s'avança. Ils protestèrent.

— Ah ! si vous étiez nommés au concours !

— Ou par le conseil général.

— Ou un comité de prud'hommes !

— D'après un titre sérieux.

Placquevent les poussait ; — et ils sortirent, hués des autres prévenus croyant se faire bien voir par cette marque de bassesse.

Pour épancher leur indignation, ils allèrent le soir chez Beljambe.

Son café était vide, les notables ayant coutume d'en partir vers dix heures. On avait baissé le quinquet ; les murs et le comptoir s'apercevaient dans un brouillard.

Une femme survint.

C'était Mélie.

Elle ne parut pas troublée, — et en souriant, leur versa deux bocks.

Pécuchet mal à son aise, quitta vite l'établissement.

Bouvard y retourna seul, divertit quelques bourgeois par des sarcasmes contre le maire, et dès lors fréquenta l'estaminet.

Dauphin, six semaines après fut acquitté, faute de preuves. Quelle honte ! On suspectait ces mêmes témoins, que l'on avait crus déposant contre eux.

Et leur colère n'eut plus de bornes, quand l'Enregistrement les avertit d'avoir à payer l'amende. Bouvard attaqua l'Enregistrement comme nuisible à la propriété.

— Vous vous trompez ! dit le Percepteur.

— Allons donc ! Elle endure le tiers de la charge publique ! Je voudrais des procédés d'impôts, moins vexatoires, un cadastre meilleur, des changements au Régime hypothécaire, et qu'on supprimât la Banque de France, qui a le privilège de l'usure.

Girbal n'était pas de force, dégringola dans l'opinion, et ne reparut plus.

Cependant Bouvard plaisait à l'aubergiste ; il attirait du monde ; et en attendant les habitués, causait familièrement avec la bonne.

Il émit des idées drôles sur l'instruction primaire. On aurait dû, en sortant de l'école, pouvoir soigner les malades, comprendre les découvertes scientifiques, s'intéresser aux Arts ! — Les exigences de son programme le fâchèrent avec Petit ; et il blessa le Capitaine en prétendant que les soldats au lieu de perdre leur temps à la manoeuvre feraient mieux de cultiver des légumes.

Quand vint la question du libre échange, il ramena Pécuchet ; — et pendant tout l'hiver, il y eut dans le café, des regards furieux, des attitudes méprisantes, des injures et des vociférations, avec des coups de poing sur les tables qui faisaient sauter les canettes.

Langlois et les autres marchands, défendaient le commerce national ; Voisin filateur, Oudot gérant d'un laminoir et Mathieu orfèvre l'industrie nationale, les propriétaires et les fermiers l'agriculture nationale, chacun réclamant pour soi des privilèges, au détriment du plus grand nombre. — Les discours de Bouvard et de Pécuchet alarmaient.

Comme on les accusait de méconnaître la Pratique, de tendre au nivellement et à l'immoralité, ils développèrent ces trois conceptions.

Remplacer le nom de famille par un numéro matricule.

Hiérarchiser les Français, — et pour conserver son grade, il faudrait de temps à autre, subir un examen.

Plus de châtiments, plus de récompenses, mais dans tous les villages une chronique individuelle qui passerait à la Postérité.

On dédaigna leur système.

Ils en firent un article pour le journal de Bayeux, une note au Préfet, une pétition aux Chambres, un mémoire à l'Empereur.

Le journal n'inséra pas leur article ; le Préfet ne daigna répondre ; les Chambres furent muettes, et ils attendirent longtemps un pli du Château.

De quoi s'occupait l'Empereur ? de femmes sans doute !

Foureau leur conseilla plus de réserve de la part du sous-préfet.

Ils se moquaient du sous-préfet, du Préfet, et des Conseils de Préfecture, voire du Conseil d'État, la Justice administrative étant une monstruosité, car l'administration par des faveurs et des menaces gouverne injustement ses fonctionnaires. Bref ils devenaient incommodes ; — et les notables enjoignirent à Beljambe de ne plus recevoir ces deux particuliers.

Alors Bouvard et Pécuchet voulurent se signaler par une oeuvre qui forçant les respects, éblouirait leurs concitoyens — et ils ne trouvèrent pas autre chose que des projets d'embellissement pour Chavignolles.

Les trois quarts des maisons seraient démolies ; on ferait au milieu du bourg une place monumentale, un hospice du côté de Falaise, des abattoirs sur la route de Caen et au pas de la Vaque, une église romane et polychrome.

Pécuchet composa un lavis à l'encre de Chine, n'oubliant pas de teinter les bois en jaune, les prés en vert, les bâtiments en rouge ; les tableaux d'un Chavignolles idéal, le poursuivaient dans ses rêves ! Il se retournait sur son matelas. Bouvard, une nuit, en fut réveillé !

— Souffres-tu ?

Pécuchet balbutia : — Haussmann m'empêche de dormir.

Vers cette époque, il reçut une lettre de Dumouchel pour savoir le prix des bains de mer de la côte normande.

— Qu'il aille se promener avec ses bains ! Est-ce que nous avons le temps d'écrire ? Et quand ils se furent procuré une chaîne d'arpenteur, un graphomètre, un niveau d'eau et une boussole, d'autres études commencèrent.

Ils envahissaient les demeures ; souvent les bourgeois étaient surpris d'y voir ces deux hommes plantant des jalons dans les cours. Bouvard et Pécuchet annonçaient d'un air tranquille ce qui en adviendrait. Le Public s'inquiéta car enfin, l'autorité se rangerait peut-être à leur avis ?

Quelquefois, on les renvoyait brutalement. Victor escaladait les murs et montait dans les combles pour y appendre un signal, témoignait de la bonne volonté et même une certaine ardeur.

Ils étaient aussi plus contents de Victorine.

Quand elle repassait le linge elle poussait son fer sur la planche, en chantonnant d'une voix douce, s'intéressait au ménage, fit une calotte pour Bouvard, et ses points de piqué lui valurent les compliments de Romiche.

C'était un de ces tailleurs qui vont dans les fermes, raccommoder les habits. On l'eut quinze jours à la maison.

Bossu, avec des yeux rouges, il rachetait ses défauts corporels par une humeur bouffonne. Pendant que les maîtres étaient dehors il amusait Marcel et Victorine, en leur contant des farces, tirait sa langue jusqu'au menton, imitait le coucou, faisait le ventriloque, et le soir s'épargnant les frais d'auberge, allait coucher dans le fournil.

Or un matin, de très bonne heure, Bouvard sentant une envie de travail vint y prendre des copeaux, pour allumer son feu.

Un spectacle le pétrifia.

Derrière les débris du bahut, sur une paillasse Romiche et Victorine dormaient ensemble.

Il lui avait passé le bras sous la taille — et son autre main, longue comme celle d'un singe, la tenait par un genou, les paupières entre-closes, le visage encore convulsé dans un spasme de plaisir. Elle souriait, étendue sur le dos. Le bâillement de sa camisole laissait à découvert sa gorge enfantine marbrée de plaques rouges par les caresses du bossu. Ses cheveux blonds traînaient, et la clarté de l'aube jetait sur tous les deux une lumière blafarde.

Bouvard, au premier moment avait ressenti comme un heurt en pleine poitrine. Puis une pudeur l'empêcha de faire un pas, un geste. Des réflexions douloureuses l'assaillaient.

— Si jeune ! perdue ! perdue !

Ensuite il alla réveiller Pécuchet, d'un mot lui apprit tout.

— Ah ! le misérable !

— Nous n'y pouvons rien ! Calme-toi !

Et ils furent longtemps à soupirer l'un devant l'autre. Bouvard, sans redingote les bras croisés, Pécuchet au bord de sa couche, pieds nus, et en bonnet de coton.

Romiche devait partir ce jour-là, ayant terminé son ouvrage. Ils le payèrent d'une façon hautaine, silencieusement.

Mais la Providence leur en voulait.

Marcel les conduisit à pas de loup dans la chambre de Victor ; — et leur montra au fond de sa commode une pièce de vingt francs. Le gamin l'avait prié de lui en fournir la monnaie.

D'où provenait-elle ? d'un vol, bien sûr ! et commis durant leurs tournées d'ingénieurs.

Si on la réclamait ils auraient l'air complices.

Enfin ayant appelé Victor ils lui commandèrent d'ouvrir son tiroir ; la pièce n'y était plus.

Tantôt, pourtant, ils l'avaient maniée et Marcel était incapable de mentir. Cette histoire le révolutionnait tellement que depuis le matin, il gardait dans sa poche une lettre pour Bouvard.

Monsieur,

Craignant que M. Pécuchet ne soit malade, j'ai recours a votre obligeance. De qui donc la signature ? Olympe Dumouchel, née Charpeau.

Elle et son époux demandaient dans quelle localité balnéaire, Courseulles, Langrune ou Ouistreham, se trouvait la compagnie la moins bruyante ? tous les moyens de transport, le prix du blanchissage, mille choses.

Cette importunité les mit en colère contre Dumouchel, puis la fatigue les plongea dans un découragement plus lourd.

Ils récapitulèrent tout le mal qu'ils s'étaient donné, tant de leçons, de précautions, de tourments.

— Et songer disaient-ils que nous voulions autrefois, faire d'elle une sous-maîtresse ! et de lui dernièrement un piqueur de travaux !

— Si elle est vicieuse ce n'est pas la faute de ses lectures.

— Moi, pour le rendre honnête, je lui avais appris la biographie de Cartouche.

— Peut-être ont-ils manqué d'une famille, des soins d'une mère.

— J'en étais une ! objecta Bouvard.

— Hélas reprit Pécuchet. Mais il y a des natures dénuées de sens moral ; — et l'éducation n'y peut rien.

— Ah ! oui ! c'est beau, l'éducation.

Comme les orphelins ne savaient aucun métier, on leur chercherait deux places de domestiques, — et puis à la grâce de Dieu ! ils ne s'en mêleraient plus ! — Et désormais Mon oncle et Bon ami les firent manger à la cuisine.

Mais bientôt ils s'ennuyèrent, leur esprit ayant besoin d'un travail, leur existence d'un but !

D'ailleurs que prouve un insuccès ? Ce qui avait échoué sur des enfants, pouvait être moins difficile avec des hommes ? Et ils imaginèrent d'établir un cours d'adultes.

Il aurait fallu une conférence pour exposer leurs idées. La grande salle de l'auberge conviendrait à cela, parfaitement.

Beljambe, comme adjoint, eut peur de se compromettre, refusa d'abord, puis changea d'opinion, le fit dire par la servante. Bouvard dans l'excès de sa joie, la baisa sur les deux joues.

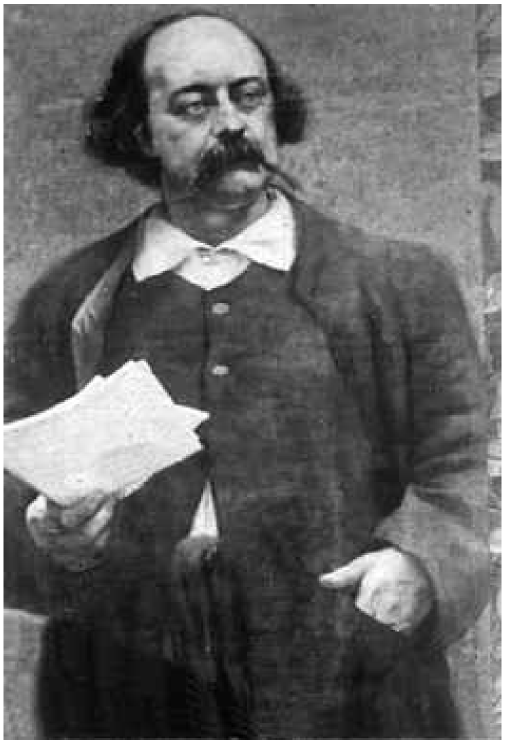
Le maire était absent, l'autre adjoint Marescot pris tout entier par son étude, ainsi la conférence aurait lieu et le tambour l'annonça, pour le dimanche suivant à trois heures.

La veille seulement, ils pensèrent à leur costume.

Pécuchet, grâce au ciel, avait conservé un vieil habit de cérémonie a collet de velours, deux cravates blanches, et des gants noirs. Bouvard mit sa redingote bleue, un gilet de nankin, des souliers de castor, et ils étaient fort émus en traversant le village.

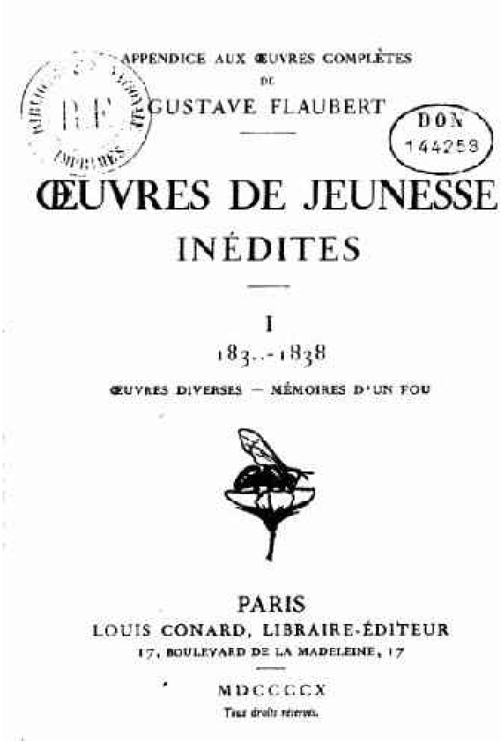
Ici s'arrête le manuscrit de Gustave Flaubert

The Short Stories



ŒUVRES DE JEUNESSE

In 1910 a collection of Flaubert’s early works was published for the first time. Many of these works have never been translated and are not available in English. However, the original French texts are provided for our readers.



R.F. IMPRIMÉS

APPENDICE AUX ŒUVRES COMPLÈTES
DE
GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

DON
144258

ŒUVRES DE JEUNESSE
INÉDITES

I
183..-1838

ŒUVRES DIVERSES — MÉMOIRES D'UN FOU

PARIS
LOUIS CONARD, LIBRAIRE-ÉDITEUR
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The titlepage of the first edition

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ART ET PROGRÈS .

LES SOIRÉES D'ÉTUDE,

JOURNAL LITTÉRAIRE.
Le rédacteur,
G^ve^ Flaubert.
6^e^ soirée.

VOYAGE EN ENFER.

I

Et j'étais au haut du mont Atlas, et de là je contemplais le monde et son or et sa boue, et sa vertu et son orgueil.

II

Et Satan m'apparut, et Satan me dit : "Viens avec moi, regarde, vois ; et puis ensuite tu verras mon royaume, mon monde à moi."

III

Et Satan m'emmena avec lui et me montra le monde.

IV

Et planant sur les airs, nous arrivâmes en Europe. Là il me montra des savants, des hommes de lettres, des femmes, des fats, des pédants, des rois et des sages ; ceux-là étaient les plus fous.

V

Et je vis un frère qui tuait son frère, une mère qui trompait sa fille, des écrivains qui par le prestige de leur plume abusaient du peuple, des prêtres qui trahissaient les fidèles, des pédants qui faisaient languir la jeunesse, et la guerre qui moissonne les hommes.

VI

Là, c'était un intrigant qui, rampant dans la boue, arrivait jusqu'aux pieds des grands, leur mordait le talon ; ils tombaient, et alors il tressaillait de la chute qu'avait faite cette tête en tombant dans la boue.

VII

Là un roi savourait, dans sa couche d'infamie où de père en fils ils reçoivent des leçons d'adultère , il savourait les grâces de la courtisane favorite qui gouvernait la France, et le peuple, lui, applaudissait ; c'est qu'il avait les yeux bandés.

VIII

Et je vis deux géants : le premier, vieux, courbé, ridé et maigre, s'appuyait sur un long bâton tortueux appelé pédantisme ; l'autre était jeune, fier, vigoureux, avait une taille d'hercule, une tête de poète et des bras d'or, il s'appuyait sur une énorme massue que le bâton tortueux avait pourtant abîmée ; la massue, c'était la raison.

IX

Et tous deux se battaient vigoureusement, et enfin le vieillard succomba. Je lui demandai son nom.

— Absolutisme, me dit-il.

— Et ton vainqueur ?

— Il a deux noms.

— Lesquels ?

— Les uns l'appellent : Civilisation, et les autres : Liberté.

X

Et puis Satan me mena dans un temple, mais un temple en ruines.

XI

Et le peuple fondait des cercueils pour en faire des boulets, et la poussière qui y était s'envolait de dépit ; c'est que ce siècle-là, c'était un siècle de sang.

XII

Et les ruines restèrent désertes. Et un homme, un pauvre homme en guenilles, à la tête blanche, un homme chargé de misère, d'infamie et d'opprobre, un de ceux dont le front, ridés de soucis renferme à vingt ans les maux d'un siècle, s'assit là au pied d'une colonne.

XIII

Et il paraissait comme la fourmi aux pieds de la pyramide.

XIV

Et il regarda les hommes longtemps, tous le regardèrent en dédain et en pitié, et il les maudit tous ; car ce vieillard, c'était la Vérité.

XV

— Montre-moi ton royaume ? dis-je à Satan.

— Le voilà !

— Comment donc ?

Et Satan me répondit :

— C'est que le monde, c'est l'enfer.

7^e soirée.

UNE PENSÉE.

Des fous bondissent, s’élancent et se redressent, fiers et aigus, c’est la valse, c’est le galop.

Et parmi toutes ces fleurs, une s’est élevée plus grande, plus belle et plus odoriférante.

Parmi toutes ces robes, qui m’ont froissé en me faisant tressaillir d’envie, une m’a fait plus tressaillir que les autres.

Parmi toutes ces tailles qui tourbillonnent, ces seins qui se gonflent, ces beaux yeux bleus qui regardent, une a tourbillonné près de moi, un sein a palpité pour moi, des yeux bleus m’ont regardé.

Je l’invite, elle danse ; je presse sa taille, je lui souris à elle, elle, et encore à elle. Se penchant sur moi comme fatiguée, ses lèvres brûlantes me disent un soupir… et je comprends ce soupir. Je la regarde, elle est heureuse, et j’oublie la valse et le monde et toutes ces femmes qui tourbillonnent et ces glaces qui reluisent et ces lumières qui flamboient. Mais le matin arrive, adieu !

Mais la pensée s’est envolée comme la rose qui se flétrit.

Une pensée d’amour c’est une rose de printemps.

G^ve^ Flaubert.

11^e^ soirée.

NOUVELLES.

La nouvelle que nous avions annoncée dimanche dernier, sur le duel de M. de Saint-Léger avec M. Lireux, est fausse.

Le bal Lalanne a été magnifique, les toilettes étaient superbes et les costumes riches et frais.

Quant au cheval, qu’en dirons-nous ? On nous en dit du bien et du mal.

Il ne pouvait, dit-on, se tenir sur ses pieds de derrière.

Je vous apprendrai que tous les professeurs ont lu mon journal ; dans le prochain numéro, je vous donnerai des détails sur cette affaire.

12^e^ soirée. **THÉÂTRES**.

Le bruit court que M^lle^ Cœline, chargée de dettes, a décampé de Rouen sans tambour ni trompette.

Le fameux *Martin* a manqué d’être avalé par son ours Néron. Dans une représentation à Besançon, une lutte cruelle s’est engagée entre l’homme et l’animal, le public effrayé a exigé qu’on baissât le rideau. Pourtant Martin, par l’ascendant qu’il a sur les animaux, est parvenu à renverser son ours.

(*Revue du théâtre*.)

La *Fille de l’avare* a été traduite en anglais et a obtenu peu de succès.

Nous recommandons la lecture des poésies de Chevalier rivalisant avec les *Feuilles d’automne.*

La Porte-Saint-Martin s’est un peu ressuscitée par la *Nonne sanglante ;* elle recommence à rentrer dans son tombeau.

À l’Ambigu, foule, foule et toujours foule.

Bocage fait sa tournée en province et y fait aussi sa petite récolte.

Herbin a fait un nouveau drame (*l’Athée*).

Nous perdons Mme Salard, Mme Lavry ! Pleurons !

G. Flaubert.

SAN PIETRO ORNANO.

(HISTOIRE CORSE.)

I

Une superbe frégate à la taille élancée et svelte entrait à voiles déployées dans le port de Gênes. Tout en elle indiquait la maîtresse et la souveraine, jusqu'à sa flamme blanche qui se laissait flotter à la brise du soir avec orgueil et majesté.

L'on voyait sur le gaillard d'arrière un homme qui paraissait le maître, quoiqu'il ne prit aucune part à la manœuvre ; son costume était à moitié grec et italien ; la tête, belle et fière, était entourée de longs cheveux qui venaient s'appuyer en boucles sur ses épaules nues et basanées ; un riche poignard et un long cimeterre pendaient à sa ceinture blanche et bleue, et dont le nœud doré, tombant jusqu'à terre, venait de temps en temps essuyer sur ses sandales rouges, un peu de cendre échappée de sa large pipe de jonc.

Enfin le navire s'était arrêté. Ornano en descendit ; son regard était hautain, et il semblait mépriser toute cette multitude qui montrait du doigt, avec respect et crainte, un homme qui, naguère paysan de Corse aux mains pleines de goudron, n'avait eu d'autre éducation que celle de dompter la tempête, de faire sauter une sainte-barbe, ou de bombarder une ville ; un homme qui n'avait d'autre nom que Pietro Ornano, d'autre seigneurie que sa frégate et d'autres sujets que ses marins. Mais ce paysan, ce corsaire, cet homme aux manières rustiques et sauvages, venait dans Gênes imposer des conditions et faire trembler un doge sur son trône.

La France était en guerre avec Gênes ; elle avait trouvé en Corse un puissant auxiliaire en la personne de San Pietro. C'était une de ces âmes vigoureusement trempées dans les vertus poussées jusqu'à l'excès ; il n'avait d'autre pensée que la gloire, d'autre idole que la gloire, d'autre religion que la gloire ; il ne connaissait d'autre plaisir que de commander ses matelots, de fumer son tabac d'Italie, de regarder l'horizon qui s'enfonce sous les vagues, et de se laisser ballotter par le roulis lorsque la mer est calme, lorsque le vent souffle à peine, lorsque les hirondelles viennent sur le beaupré.

Pourtant depuis quelques jours il était triste, son front se ridait souvent, et l'on pouvait deviner à ses soupirs réitérés, à ses longues rêveries, que quelque chose pouvait deviner à ses soupirs réitérés, à ses longues rêveries, que quelque chose lui déchirait le cœur et que son âme était en proie à des sentiments inconnus jusqu'alors.

II

Les portes du palais s'ouvrirent devant le marin ; les gardes lui présentèrent les armes, le grand escalier fut couvert de tapis, son nom résonna dans la salle du trône, et le doge lui-même descendit pour le recevoir.

— Je suis venu, dit San Pietro, pour traiter avec toi des conditions de la paix. La France, mon alliée, pour prix de mes services, m'a donné le pouvoir de les faire à mon gré. Écoute, je ne te demande ni or ni sang, mais je te demande ce qui m'est plus cher, à moi, que tous tes sujets, fussent-ils des rois, que ton trône, fût-il celui du monde ; je te demande ta fille, je te demande Vanina.

— À lui, Vanina ? répétèrent sourdement tous les courtisans assemblés.

— Oui, continua le corsaire, oui, à moi Vanina ! ou demain je fais bombarder Gênes, demain j'aurai Vanina ; et à toi l'esclavage et le malheur. Ton trône ? je le foulerai aux pieds, et ton palais, j'en ferai une prison pour toi. Vous pensiez donc qu'aucun sentiment ne pouvait m'émouvoir, vous croyiez que l'amour ne pouvait surgir de ce cœur de marin ; vous croyez que les passions ne remuent pas aussi fort le cœur d'un paysan que celui d'un roi ? Et pourtant s'il est ici une tête couronnée et un corsaire, le corsaire est roi et le monarque est esclave.

— Soit, répondit le doge, tu peux être le maître, mais souviens-toi de mes paroles, San Pietro : jamais, jamais, tu n'auras ma fille, je te la refuse ; et si tu peux conquérir ce trône, si tu peux, dans ta rage de tigre, le souiller et l'anéantir, si tu peux dans ta vengeance féroce incendier ce palais, si tu peux, démon, briser mon sceptre et ma couronne…, jamais tu n'auras Vanina, et Gênes sera plutôt ton esclave que ma fille ta maîtresse ! En effet, quelquefois la servitude forcée ennoblit les rois, mais le déshonneur volontaire les souille et les flétrit.

— Eh bien, demain, tu n'auras plus Vanina, dit le corsaire d'un ton solennel ; dans trente jours tu n'auras plus Gênes et dans trente et un jours, à un seul mot du corsaire, cette tête tombera.

Puis il descendit les degrés du palais, et, se retournant tout à coup avec ironie et dédain :

— Il est dommage, dit-il, de brûler une si belle colonnade !

III

Vers minuit, on vit débarquer une douzaine d’hommes sur la grève ; il y en avait un qui, couvert d’un masque noir, portait une longue dague et un riche cimeterre ; deux pistolets reluisaient à sa ceinture, et le clair de lune, qui venait frapper sur les canons, semblait lui faire deux étoiles à ses côtés. À l’aide d’une échelle de corde ils escaladèrent le grand mur des jardins du doge. Déjà l’homme au masque noir s’apprêtait à dresser son échelle pour monter sur la terrasse, quand une balle vint siffler à ses oreilles et renverser un de ses compagnons… Puis il y eut du sang, des cadavres, des cris, et Vanina fut enlevée.

Quand ils furent loin en mer, quand ils ne virent plus les phares de Gênes, l’homme ôta son masque, et la jeune fille évanouie reprit ses sens.

Elle pleura son père, ses esclaves, ses jardins où le soir elle aimait à contempler la mer, à entendre les vagues qui venaient mourir sur le rivage ; elle pleura son beau palais, ses bains de porphyre et ses cygnes du Gange.

Pourtant chaque jour apportait moins d’ennuis, de regrets et de larmes, et un peu plus d’amour pour Ornano.

Au bout d’un mois, le corsaire tint sa promesse ; avec quatre frégates il vint à l’improviste attaquer Gênes, Vanina était avec lui. L’entrée du port était fermée et ses bassins défendus ; deux bordées de canon suffirent et la palissade sauta.

Alors il entra, mais il ne s’aperçut pas que derrière lui les trois autres navires n’avaient pu passer et qu’il se trouvait emprisonné dans un port qu’il avait forcé ; alors, écumant de rage, il jura sur sa tête qu’il tuerait de sa propre main quiconque parlerait de se rendre.

Une minute auparavant un homme s’était jeté à la mer sur les ordres de Vanina.

— Que lui as-tu ordonné ? demanda-t-il à Vanina.

— Oh ! excuse-moi, pardon, Ornano ; mais je t’aimais et je lui ai ordonné d’aller demander grâce à mon père.

— Une carabine ! s’écria aussitôt San Pietro furieux, une carabine pour qu’il n’aille pas jusqu’à terre.

Mais on ne distinguait plus le marin perdu dans la fumée des canons. Ornano était resté pensif, la tête baissée sur sa poitrine ; son regard fixé sur Vanina était sinistre ; ses lèvres, pâles et tremblantes, semblaient se contracter d’un rire lugubre.

Un homme aux armes du doge aborda le navire et demanda à parler à Ornano ; il lui remit un message qu’il ouvrit en tremblant.

Vanina, appuyée sur son épaule, le parcourut avec avidité.

Vanina, appuyée sur son épaule, le parcourut avec avidité.

— Ta grâce, dit-elle.

Il pâlit, tourna sur elle un regard plein de pitié et d'amour, puis, s'adressant à l'envoyé :

— Ce soir, vous saurez ma réponse !

MATTEO FALCONE

OU

DEUX CERCUEILS POUR UN PROSCRIT.

C’était en Corse, dans un grand champ, sur un tas de foin que, à moitié éveillé, Albano, couché sur le dos, caressait sa chatte et ses petits, tout en regardant les nuages qui passaient sur le fond d’azur et le soleil qui reluisait de son éclat de pourpre et dardait ses rayons sur la plaine bordée de coteaux.

C’était un bel enfant qu’Albano : de longs cheveux tombaient en boucles sur ses épaules, à chaque sourire vous auriez dit une parole de joie, à chaque regard un éclair dans les yeux.

Il entend des coups de fusil qui se succèdent, il se détourne en sursaut, et aussitôt un homme vient se jeter en courant sur le tas de foin ; ses cheveux étaient épars, ses vêtements étaient en lambeaux, la peau de son genou était déchirée, beaucoup de sang s’en écoulait, et l’on voyait à la trace de ses pas que là un proscrit avait passé.

— Enfant, lui dit-il, cède-moi ta place. Oh ! je t’en prie ! que je me cache !

Albano jouait toujours avec sa chatte.

— Par grâce ! par pitié, oh ! cache-moi !

— Que voulez-vous ?

— Cache-moi !

Et il lui jeta une pièce de monnaie qui, en tombant, affaissa le foin.

Et le proscrit s’était mis sous la paille.

Albano pour un moment avait abandonné son jouet, et prenant sa pièce à deux mains, couché sur le ventre, il la faisait sautiller en souriant.

Au bout de cinq minutes, une douzaine de gardes l’entouraient. Un d’eux, qui marchait à leur tête et qui paraissait leur chef, s’approcha d’Albano et lui dit : — Enfant, n’as-tu pas vu un homme courir par ici ? il était blessé, avait les habits déchirés.

— De qui voulez-vous parler ?

— D’un homme que nous cherchons.

— Du tout, je n’ai rien vu, si ce n’est une chèvre qui cherchait son maître ;

encore marchait-elle à pas lents et je vous assure qu'elle était en fort bon état. Est-ce là votre affaire ?

— Tu te moques de la justice, Albano.

— Et pourquoi êtes-vous venus me réveiller ?

— Il le fallait.

— Allez à tous les diables !

— Ah ! c'est ainsi que tu traites la justice du canton ? Tiens, misérable.

Et il fit semblant de le mettre en joue.

— Vous n'oseriez, dit l'enfant avec fermeté, car mon père me vengerait, et, voyez-vous, mon père c'est Matteo Falcone, le plus intrépide chasseur de Corse et le plus vigoureux lutteur du canton.

Le prudent officier mit bas son arme et se tournant vers ses compagnons : — Allons, dit-il, il n'y a pas moyen d'en tirer quelque chose.

Puis il se retourna vers Albano, et, lui présentant une montre, il ajouta : — Albano, si on te la donnait ?

— Quoi ?

— Voudrais-tu ? …

Et l'enfant resta muet quelques instants, ballotté par l'envie d'avoir et un reste d'honneur qui lui surgissait alors plus fort et plus terrible, pour lui dire tout bas, mais avec puissance : Albano, tu es un lâche !

— Si tu nous le montrais, continua l'officier.

Albano lança un regard perçant sur le tas de foin, puis il prit la montre, et, la posant par terre, il la regarda luire aux rayons du soleil.

En ce moment arriva Matteo Falcone, père d'Albano. Il s'informa de tout ce que c'était, ce que signifiaient ces cris et cette scène de sang.

— Rien, lui dit-on, un prisonnier qui s'est enfui ; il s'était caché sous ce tas de foin et votre fils nous en a avertis… grâce à cette montre, dit l'officier en l'indiquant du doigt.

Le fugitif fut tiré de dessous le tas de foin, ses genoux chancelaient, ses lèvres étaient pâles et ses yeux rouges de colère, ses mains palpitantes tâtonnaient à sa ceinture comme pour y chercher un poignard ; il n'y trouva qu'une plaie profonde et retira son poing tout ensanglanté.

Promenant ses yeux autour de lui, il rencontra le regard de Matteo et lui dit : — C'est donc toi qui m'as livré ; va, tu es un lâche ! Sais-tu ce que j'ai fait, moi ? J'ai voulu venger une injure faite à ma fille ; j'ai frappé sur le prince, et son sang est retombé sur ma tête pour se mêler au mien. Adieu ! ils m'emmènent à l'échafaud ; adieu ! et l'on saura que Matteo est un traître !

— Ah ! le roi sera content, dit tout bas l'officier ; votre fils nous a été d'une grande utilité.

Le montagnard ne dit rien et mit une amorce à sa longue carabine.

Le soir, le Corse dit à Albano de le suivre jusque derrière la colline.

Il avait déjà pris son fusil et se disposait à sortir, quand sa femme lui demanda si elle ne pouvait pas aussi l'accompagner.

— Non, femme, reste, je te l'ordonne !

Et il y avait dans ces paroles un ton si positif et si imposant qu'elle tomba attérée sur le banc de pierre, et les regarda partir, muette d'anxiété et d'angoisse.

Un quart d'heure après, elle entendit un coup de fusil et le bruit que fait quelque chose en tombant dans l'eau… Elle poussa un sourd râlement, s'affaissa par terre, puis elle se releva et un rire étrange contracta ses lèvres.

Le lendemain, c'était à Ajaccio, on venait de retirer un enfant de la rivière. Oh ! le pauvre enfant ! de beaux cheveux blonds tombaient sur ses épaules, ses lèvres étaient tachetées de noir, ses mains, liées par un chapelet, étaient jointes comme pour la prière ; sa poitrine était percée d'une balle et l'on distinguait encore sa sanglante trace…

Une femme accourt, pâle, échevelée, et regarde longtemps fixement le cadavre ; elle se cramponna aux barreaux de la morgue et répétait avec douleur :
— Oh mon enfant ! mon enfant !

Puis elle tomba par terre en poussant un cri d'agonie…

Aussitôt arriva le fossoyeur apportant un cercueil.

— Vous vous êtes trompé, dit quelqu'un de la foule, il en faut deux !

CHEVRIN

ET LE ROI DE PRUSSE

OU

L’ON PREND SOUVENT LA TÊTE D’UN ROI
POUR CELLE D’UN ÂNE.

Votre grand-père ne vous a-t-il jamais parlé de Frédérick, roi de Prusse ? C’était un grand homme sec et courbé, à cheveux poudrés, et qui s’appuyait toujours sur une longue canne de jonc ; le collet de son habit vert, qu’il ne brossait jamais, de son habit vert tout râpé et qui l’avait accompagné à la conquête de la Poméranie, était encore rendu plus sale par une longue queue de cheveux qui lui tombait au milieu du dos. Eh bien, cet homme, d’un génie si vaste et qui, à ce qu’il semble, ne devait s’occuper que de conquêtes et de batailles, avait encore le temps non seulement d’écrire à Voltaire, oh ! cela vous le savez, mais encore de plaisanter avec ses courtisans.

Un jour il appela Chevrin, lui remit une petite boîte en lui disant affectueusement : — Chevrin, je t’ai toujours connu comme un ami fidèle, Voici un gage de ma reconnaissance.

Vous voudriez bien savoir ce que c’était que cette boîte ; un moment, je vais vous le dire.

Elle était petite, de bois de palissandre, incrustée d’or et ornée de pierres précieuses.

Chevrin l’emporte chez lui, l’ouvre avec impatience et voit non son brevet de général, non quelques billets de banque, ni une décoration, ni un beau poignard, ni une lettre de noblesse, ni une nomination à la chancellerie, ni même quelques pistoles, ni même une bague, ni même un simple bijou, ni même la plus petite chose, ni même le plus mauvais madrigal, mais c’était un portrait en miniature : les narines étaient ouvertes, la bouche béante si bien qu’elle semblait braire, avec ses oreilles gracieusement rabattues sur son col, et ses grands yeux ternes étaient ouverts comme l’original.

Ce n’était rien moins qu’un âne en toutes ses parties.

Chevrin resta muet à cet aspect, toutes ses espérances déchues, toutes ses illusions envolées comme un brouillard. Oh ! combien d’illusions, d’espérances, de rêves d’ambition se sont envolés comme un brouillard ! Oh ! combien d’illusions, d’espérances, de rêves d’ambition se sont évanouis devant… une tête d’âne !

ll lui vint une idée, non à l’âne, mais à l’homme. Il pensa que le roi oubliait ses services, qu’il abandonnait son ancien ami de bataille, et il pleura. Oh ! combien de pleurs ont coulé devant une tête d’âne !

Puis il pensa que le roi avait voulu plaisanter et il sourit, comme on a souri… devant une tête d’âne ; ensuite, pour mieux la voir, il l’approcha de la fenêtre. Combien n’a-t-on pas mis au jour de têtes d’ânes !

Néanmoins il se promit une vengeance.

Qu’on veuille bien se transporter à quelques mois de là. C’était à la table du roi de Prusse ; arrivé au dessert, Chevrin tire une boîte de sa poche ; c’était la certaine petite boîte qui contenait le portrait d’âne, mais cette fois elle était ouverte, et chacun, prenant une miniature renfermée dedans, regardait le roi scrupuleusement et ramenait ses yeux vers la peinture disant : “Oui, c’est bien lui, sa bouche mi-ouverte semble parler ; c’est bien là ses larges narines et ses grands yeux ouverts.”

Elle arrive enfin à Voltaire qui, criant plus fort en sa qualité de philosophe, dit au· roi : — Ah ! sire, je n’ai jamais rien vu de si ressemblant.

Le roi, qui se ressouvenait élu présent qu’il avait fait à Chevrin, croyait que c’était une représailles ; il trépignait d’indignation, était rouge de colère, et enfin, n’en pouvant plus, il se jette sur le portrait, le regarde et dit ensuite : — Je prenais mon portrait pour celui d’un âne.

Or on convint qu’il n’y a pas grande différence entre la tête d’un roi et celle d’un âne, puisque le possesseur s’y méprend.

DERNIÈRE SCÈNE

DE LA MORT

DE MARGUERITE DE BOURGOGNE.

Connaissez-vous la Normandie, ce beau pays si rempli de vieux castels dont chacun éveille le souvenir d’un nom célèbre ? la Normandie, où chaque champ a eu sa bataille, chaque pierre son nom ? la Normandie si remplie de vieilles légendes, de contes fantastiques, de traditions populaires qui tous se rattachent à quelques lambeaux de notre histoire du moyen âge ?

Eh bien, sur les bords de la Seine, les ruines du Château-Gaillard sont encore la debout, sur le roc, et semblent se rire, à la face de chaque génération qui naît et qui meurt, des sept siècles qui, en passant, n’ont fait que lui arracher petit à petit quelques pierres qui roulent dans le ravin quand l’ouragan gronde et que la pluie tombe.

Alors, en 1316, il était jeune encore. Au haut, c’était son drapeau blanc dont les flots se roulaient au souffle du vent ; à l’intérieur les gardes, et au bas, dans un cachot, une femme qui gémissait et regardait le soleil couchant d’un air d’adieu, de rage et de désespoir.

Elle était jeune encore, cette femme, vingt-six ans ; vingt-six ans, et pas un sourire à la bouche ; vingt-six ans, et peut-être le nombre de ses crimes surpassait-il celui de ses jours !

Vingt-six ans ! et c’était la Marguerite de Bourgogne, la Marguerite aux orgies sanglantes à la tour de Nesle ; Marguerite, la Femme aux nuits d’insomnie, aux rêves de sang ; Marguerite, la reine de France.

Ce jour-là, elle avait demandé en grâce qu’on lui permît de regarder plus longtemps à travers les barreaux de sa cellule ; elle avait demandé à prendre l’air plus longtemps, comme si elle eût voulu en prendre pour l’éternité. Plusieurs fois la main du geôlier s’avança pour fermer le volet.

— Encore cinq minutes, disait-elle d’une voix tendre et suppliante.

Et le geôlier avait soin d’aller chez lui, de retourner son sablier, ayant compté le temps qu’il avait mis à venir et celui qu’il mettrait à retourner au cachot ; puis il revenait de nouveau.

Enfin elle vit un cavalier qui s’avançait au galop, et rentra dans sa chambre en pensant à ce que pouvait être cet homme qui se dirigeait en toute hâte vers la pensant à ce que pouvait être cet homme qui se dirigeait en toute hâte vers la porte du donjon.

Peu de temps, après la porte du cachot roula sur ses gonds, et un homme se présenta. Il s’arrêta debout sur le seuil de la porte.

— Quoi, c’est vous ! lui dit Marguerite, vous, vous encore ici, Lyonnet ! Oh ! Lyonnet, il faut que tu sois mon démon pour me poursuivre ainsi jusque dans ma prison, pour m’accabler jusque dans mon cercueil.

Et elle se prit a rire amèrement :

— Écoute, Marguerite, tous les deux nous voulions un sceptre pour appui, et un peuple pour esclave. Eh bien, Marguerite, toi tu as tué ton père et tu es reine de France ; moi je n’ai tué personne et je ne suis rien.

— Tu m’accuses de la mort de mon père, Lyonnet, tandis que c’est toi, au contraire, toi qui a pris le poignard.

— Oui, cela est juste.

— D’où vient que tu me poursuis toujours ?

— C’est que, vois-tu, Marguerite, en commençant à t’aimer j’avais aimé une enfant pure et candide, et que maintenant, Marguerite, je hais l’enfant qui est la femme adultère.

— Non, tu ne m’as jamais aimée !

— Oh ! Marguerite, oui je t’aimais et je t’ai donné mon bonheur, car je me suis étourdi sur le crime de ton père, et j’ai perdu ma foi, et maintenant tout mon être est le mélange de tous les vices, de toute la haine qui peuvent tenir dans le cœur d’un homme ; mais cette haine a débordé du vase des passions, quelques gouttes sont tombées sur toi et te rongent.

— Ciel ! serais-tu ici l’exécuteur ?

— Écoute, Marguerite ! Non, tu ne m’as jamais aimé ! tu croyais pouvoir me dire dans mon cachot : “Lyonnet, tu m’as abaissée à la prière”, tu voyais mes larmes sans pitié, tu contemplais mon orgueil qui venait mourir aux pieds d’un assassin ; en bien, j’assisterai à ton agonie, je contemplerai tes dernières convulsions, je verrai la main gluante de l’exécuteur s’abaisser sur ta tête défaillante, et je la verrai, cette tête, tomber et rebondir sur le passé sanglant. Eh bien, maintenant, Marguerite, les temps sont changés et c’est moi qui suis le maître, et toi la victime ; oui, Marguerite, j’ai ordre de Louis de t’étrangler avec tes cheveux.

— Lyonnet, tu ne te ressouviens pas de nos amours, en Bourgogne, de tes promesses et de tes serments ?

— Non, non, à toi les orgies à la tour de Nesle, à toi la trace de sang que l’on voyait sur ses murs, à toi les cadavres que la Seine chaque matin roulait dans son lit ; à toi la honte, à toi l’ignominie, à toi la mort, à toi la malédiction !

— Oh ! grâce ! grâce, Lyonnet ! Nous partirons, nous irons vivre loin d'ici, vivre dans notre premier amour, oublier tout comme un rêve sanglant. Grâce ! grâce !

— Eh ! faisais-tu grâce à ceux qui, dans la tour de Nesle, te demandaient la vie sous le poignard de tes assassins ? Marguerite, malgré tous tes crimes, malgré toutes tes nuits sanglantes et tes orgies infâmes, quelque chose n'est-il pas resté ? As-tu quelque prière à faire ? Oh ! dis-la, et vite, car cette heure-ci est ta dernière.

Marguerite s'agenouilla, prononça quelques mots en balbutiant. Etait-ce des sanglots ou une prière ?

— Relève-toi, dit Lyonnet en la prenant par le bras ; bien d'autres me font attendre comme toi ; ils me demandent successivement une heure, une demi-heure, une minute, mais je donne plus : l'éternité !

— Oh ! ne me parle pas de l'éternité !

— Allons, Marguerite, défais ton bonnet, tes cheveux. Oh ! ils étaient beaux, tes cheveux ! c'était ta joie et ton orgueil. Oh ! tes cheveux ! qu'ils s'ondulaient bien sur tes épaules ! Oh ! tes cheveux ! qu'ils ont reçu de baisers brûlants et passionnés !

Aussitôt il en prit deux mèches et en entoura le cou de Marguerite.

On entendit un sourd râlement, un corps tomba par terre et la belle Marguerite était un cadavre !

Le lendemain on porta un cercueil à Vernonet, on creusa là une Fosse et l'on mit dessus une simple pierre avec cette inscription :

CI-GÎT

MARGUERITE DE BOURGOGNE

REINE DE FRANCE.

Des siècles ont passé sur cette tombe, le temps a rongé le cadavre, l'herbe a caché l'inscription. Le temps efface tout, les rois eux-mêmes ; mais leurs crimes — oui — mais plus tard.

PORTRAIT DE LORD BYRON.

C’était un de ces hommes à hautes conceptions, à idées généreuses et progressives, aux violentes passions, à une âme tout à la fois sensible et magnanime, bizarre en un mot ; lord Byron, c’était le fils du siècle.

Il ne croyait à rien, si ce n’est à tous les vices, à un Dieu vivant, existant pour le plaisir de faire le mal ; il ne croyait à rien, si ce n’est à l’amour de la patrie, à la puissance de son génie et à la fascination des yeux de sa maîtresse ; au delà, tout dans le monde n’était pour lui que préjugés, ambition, avarice.

L’honneur d’une femme lui semblait une rose, mais une rose dont chacun en passant pouvait prendre le parfum, le faner et le flétrir. Il eut cent maîtresses, n’en aima qu’une, et encore, celle-là, il la rudoyait et la dédaignait pour son amour fou et effréné. Il avait constamment une vingtaine de chevaux dans son écurie, il les adorait tous. Il n’aimait pas la France, parce qu’en France il ne fait pas assez de brouillards ni assez de neige ; en France on ne respire pas, comme à Venise, l’air embaumé de quelque villa.

C’était un athée, et il restait des journées entières dans une église, plongé dans une contemplation muette ou une méditation profonde.

Quand il était en Angleterre, il sortait seul, à cheval, et il aimait à faire blanchir d’écume sa gentille jument arabe, en contemplant la fumée de sa cigarette qui s’envolait au souffle du vent et qui se mêlait au brouillard de décembre.

Il fréquentait les tavernes, les écuries et les cochers ; souvent, sur la place, on le vit boxer avec les grooms. Il était chéri du peuple et haï de la noblesse. Plusieurs fois il fut sur le point d’adresser des discours à la multitude.

À Venise, souvent, le soir, il prenait un gondolier et faisait ainsi plusieurs lieues en mer, se laissant ballotter par le roulis ; rentré chez lui, il se défaisait de ses habits de deuil et restait toute la nuit à regarder une tête de mort posée au milieu de sa cheminée. Il aimait l’Italie, il l’adorait comme une mère ou une amante ; il l’aimait, parce que là on y trouve des cœurs qui aiment ou qui haïssent, des yeux qui vous lancent des éclairs d’amour ou de passion ; là on y trouve toujours quelque femme belle et inconnue, comme un songe doré de jeune homme ; là on y trouve ou amour ou poignard ; là on y trouve toujours quelques sons d’une guitare et d’une voix suave, qui résonnent le soir au clair de lune sur les eaux blanches du lac voisin ; là on y trouve enfin toujours quelque sujet de drame ou de roman.

Byron ne trouvait rien de beau comme la liberté, rien de hideux comme l’or. Plusieurs fois il affronta le danger par plaisir ou par vanité, et, en Grèce, il préféra la mort à une saignée. Il y alla pour concourir à la renaissance d’un pays mort par l’esclavage ; il alla pour relever le char de la Liberté de la fange où l’avaient enfoncé les tyrans, mais cette fange-là elle ennoblit, elle immortalisa Byron, le fils du siècle.

LE MOINE DES CHARTREUX

OU

L’ANNEAU DU PRIEUR.

Il y avait déjà huit jours que les caveaux de la Grande-Chartreuse avaient retenti du chant des morts, à l’enterrement du prieur, lorsque le Frère Bernardo, couché dans sa cellule, se rappela toute cette scène de deuil, et les plus petites circonstances de cette triste journée vinrent se représenter à sa mémoire, fraîches et récentes encore.

II voyait de là sa longue robe, sa ceinture de corde, sa barbe blanche, sa couche de marbre et ses mains posées en croix sur sa poitrine ; à cette pensée il s’arrêta. C’était cette même pensée qui le torturait depuis si longtemps, c’est-à-dire depuis quelques jours, qui ne lui laissait pas un instant de sommeil, pas une heure de repos ; cette même pensée qu’il aurait voulu pour tout au monde effacer, anéantir, et qui se représentait là, toujours plus forte et plus puissante, parce qu’elle était belle et gracieuse. Il se releva, se mit à genoux et chercha un peu de repos dans la prière. Oh ! non, ce fut en vain ; toujours là, toujours là !

Il alla à sa fenêtre pour voir si le charme d’une nuit tranquille, si le silence de la nature endormie n’inspireraient pas à son âme plus de repos que la prière ou la vue d’un christ. Non ! et pourtant l’air était pur, le ciel sans nuage, la lune sereine ; la campagne était belle, quelques cabanes, un bois et un vaste château en formaient l’horizon.

Et son front se rida, et il pensa encore à la tombe du prieur ; la même image vint se représenter à son esprit, et ses lèvres balbutiaient convulsivement quelques mots qui mouraient en naissant : “Oh, l’avoir ! le tenir ! le posséder ! rêver un monde dans une prison, penser à la vie dans un sépulcre ! Oui, j’irai, je le prendrai, cet anneau !”

En effet, n’était-il pas naturel que ce pauvre homme, qui n’avait pas la réalité pour jouir, souhaitât des illusions pour rêver ? Et on savait dans le couvent que cet anneau de prieur se rattachait à des souvenirs de jeunesse et d’amour, dont sa piété n’avait pu se défaire, car après la passion abattue il reste dans le cœur de l’homme des racines inviolables qui se rattachent à d’anciens souvenirs comme le lierre qui, pourtant mort, embrasse le chêne sur lequel il a grandi !

“Oh ! continuait Bernardo en regardant la forêt, là dedans peut-être se promène un jeune homme qui aspire à longs traits sa vie de bonheur, contemplant avec amour et extase un ciel pur et azuré, couvert de sa robe dorée ; il peut porter au loin ses yeux où respirent la vigueur et l’avenir, sans qu’ils retombent avec dédain sur les barreaux de la cage d’un homme !”

Puis regardant le châteaux “Oh ! là dedans il y a des hommes qui vivent, la valse peut-être bondit sur le parquet, saccadée et délirante. Il y a des femmes qui tourbillonnent entraînées dans les bras de leurs danseurs ; il y a des laquais aux livrées d’or, des chevaux dont la parure a peut-être coûté plus d’heures de travail que mes heures d’ennui ; il y a des lustres aux mille reflets, des diamants qui brillent dans les glaces ; il y a des roses de la vie !”

Puis il se remit sur son lit en cherchant le sommeil ; et il voyait dans un coin l’anneau qui brillait, comme si Satan le lui eût présenté sans cesse. Il se retourna, et il vit encore l’anneau dans tout son éclat.

Respirant à peine, il s’assit. “Maintenant, pensait-il en regardant la lune qui se reflétait sur les barreaux de sa cellule et sur le christ d’étain suspendu à son lit, maintenant il y en à qui vivent heureux et contents, sans penser à la veille, au lendemain, à la vie, à l’éternité, et qui vivent pour le jour dont ils recueillent les joies comme le parfum qui s’exhale d’une fleur. Mais partons ! tout dort, le jour va bientôt venir (à peine était-il minuit)”, et il lui semblait que l’aube pénétrât dans sa cellule ainsi que son anneau, souvenir du monde, qui allait habiter avec lui dans le tombeau de sa vie.

Aussitôt il prit un sac d’outils et la clef du caveau, qu’il s’était procurés, alluma une lanterne, descendit l’escalier et arriva à la porte de l’église qu’il ouvrit d’une main tremblante.

Chaque pas qu’il faisait lui semblait le pas de quelqu’un qui marchait derrière lui, et il se retournait en frissonnant, aussi pâle que les morts qui l’environnaient.

Il arrive haletant à la porte du caveau, l’ouvre et la referme.

Il descendit tous les degrés ; sur le dernier il s’arrêta et il plongea son regard dans un horizon de sépulcres, — et son regard se reporta ailleurs, et il ne vit encore que la mort, et la mort toujours. “Vite, vite, ouvrons le tombeau ! car peut-être va-t-on bientôt s’apercevoir de mon absence, peut-être même est-on déjà sur mes traces !” Et il voulut prendre sa lanterne et remonter un degré, mais la lanterne lui glissa des mains et il ne put lever le pied ; il prêta l’oreille, et n’entendit que le cri lointain des chouettes et des hiboux, mêlés au sifflement du vent qui s’en tonnait sous les voûtes. Alors il trembla comme la Feuille, ses dents claquèrent, ses jambes pliaient sous lui, car tout ce qui alors lui rappelait la vie était la mort pour son âme en torture. Enfin il avança et se mit à compter les tombes et a lire les inscriptions. À chaque marbre qu’il touchait, il lui semblait que le mort allait se réveiller pour le damner et le maudire. Pourtant il arrive à la tombe du prieur, l’ouvre, le déshabille de son linceul… l’anneau est là qui reluit comme dans ses rêves.

“Où donc est le forfait, disait-il, de prendre quelque chose à un cadavre ? En jouit-il de son anneau, puisqu’il n’a plus ni vie, ni souvenir, ni monde à rêver ?” et il saisit cette main froide et décharnée, s’arrêta encore un instant et regarda avec peine cette barbe blanche, cet air de majesté répandu sur le visage du vieillard. Oh ! c’est alors qu’il aurait voulu qu’il n’y eût dans le cœur des hommes ni remords ni conscience, qu’il aurait voulu oublier le passé, le présent même, et ne penser qu’à l’avenir et à ses rêves ! Et il touchait la main d’un cadavre !

Il arracha l’anneau, le passa à son doigt avec frénésie, puis reprit ses tenailles et recloua le cercueil. Aussitôt il entendit la cloche qui rappelait les moines à la prière de nuit, se leva… mais il se sentit retenu avec force par le bas de sa robe ; il tomba à la renverse et alla se fracasser le crâne contre la paroi du caveau, et son sang rejaillit sur le cercueil du prieur.

Une année se passa, puis deux, puis plusieurs, jusqu’à ce que l’on ouvrit le caveau pour enterrer un autre prieur. On trouva un squelette entouré d’une robe dont le bas était pris dans les clous du cercueil voisin ; son crâne était horriblement mutilé, un anneau était à son doigt. On creusa la terre à l’endroit même et on l’enterra par pitié ; le soir on dit un *De profundis* pour le repos de l’âme d’un corps inconnu que l’on avait trouvé dans les caveaux.

Eh bien ! il avait voulu l’anneau pour avoir la vie, lui ; il avait vécu, car rêver, craindre, attendre, posséder à l’agonie, c’est vivre ; à lui comme à bien d’autres, sa richesse fut dans le tombeau, et ses espérances vinrent se briser sous un suaire de mort.

MORT DU DUC DE GUISE

I

LE CLUB DU GUISARD.

— À notre brave duc de Guise !

— À la réussite de ses projets !

— Et mort aux royalistes !

Puis à ces paroles succédaient le bruit des verres qui s’entrechoquaient, le bourdonnement de toutes ces voix, les embrassades, et des serments tout à la fois terribles et féroces, furieux et frénétiques.

— Cher duc, dit La Chapelle-Marteau, ce dîner-là est peut-être le dernier que nous Faisons ensemble.

— Le dernier, et pourquoi ?

— Tiens, regarde ce billet et lis.

“Donnez-vous de garde ; on est sur le point de vous jouer un mauvais tour.” (*Historique.*)

— La plaisanterie est bonne ! Un crayon que je réponde à ce Nostradamus de malheur, un crayon !

Personne n’en avait.

— Eh bien, Mandreville, donne-moi ton poignard.

Et le Balafré, après en avoir noirci la pointe à la lampe suspendue au milieu d’eux, écrivit : “On n’oserait”, puis il jeta le billet sous la table.

La Chapelle-Marteau restait pensif ; le coude appuyé, et ses yeux se fixaient sur le duc de Guise.

— Eh quoi, ami, dit-il tout à coup, est-ce que ce billet n’éveille pas en vous des soupçons ?

— Sur le roi, n’est-ce pas ?

— Oui, et sur l’entretien qu’il a eu ce matin avec sa mère.

— Eh, savez-vous, dit le cardinal son frère, qui n’avait jusqu’alors desserré les dents que pour laisser sortir quelques bouffées de son tabac d’Égypte, savez-vous que la reine Catherine est roi, et qu’elle vous hait, cher ami ?

— Oui, je le sais, hélas, répondit le duc, dont la physionomie se rembrunissait de plus en plus ; je sais que le roi a de sombres projets et que mon nom l’oppresse et le gêne ; que ma réputation de vaillance et de gloire l’humilie ; je sais que mon regard le fait trembler, lui, Henri de Valois, assis sur son trône ; je sais que s’il n’emploie le bourreau, il se servira de l’assassin… Mandreville, passe-moi la bière !

Et il se versa avec vivacité, puis continua :

— C’est pourquoi, mes bons amis, je voudrais avoir un conseil de vous.

— Nous sommes tous prêts.

Et déposant leurs verres, ils se mirent à écouter en silence.

— Je suis d’avis, dit le Balafré, d’aller passer quelques jours à Orléans.

— Quitter ! partir d’ici ! dit l’archevêque de Lyon en prenant son verre et en le brisant avec violence sur la table, je ne vous reconnais pas là, duc ; comment ? fuir Blois au moment où les États semblent se prêter à vos vues, abandonner une conquête presque déjà finie ? Non ! Non ! Quitter Henri au moment où sa couronne plie sous vos mains fortes et puissantes, au moment où son sceptre va se briser en éclats, où son trône va vous servir de marchepied à un trône, mais à un trône qui remplacera le sien avec plus de grandeur et de gloire ! au moment où vous avez pu convoquer tant de membres de la Sainte-Union, vous, maintenant maître du clergé, du tiers état et de la noblesse ; maintenant que vous êtes roi, vous abandonnez vos titres, votre royaume, le fruit de tant d’adresse et d’industrie, et tout cela pourquoi ? pour une femme qui gronde et un enfant qui menace !

— Croix-Dieu ! dit Mandreville, si l’avis de l’archevêque n’est pas le meilleur que j’aie entendu de ma vie, je veux perdre ma place du paradis. Oui, Henri est un roi Faible et imbécile ; c’est un enfant que votre roi, chétif arbrisseau qu’emportera le premier souffle d’une révolution.

— Eh bien soit, dit le Guisard, en prenant sa moustache, soit, je me moque aussi bien d’Henri que du poignard de ses assassins, et puisque la mort doit venir, qu elle vienne me prendre d’un coup de stylet ou dans mon lit, peu m’importe, “car mes affaires sont réduites en tels termes que je la verrais entrer par la Fenêtre, je ne voudrais pas sortir par la porte pour Fuir” . *(Historique.)*

— Vive le duc de Guise ! vive le duc de Guise !

À ce cri ils se retirèrent, puis bientôt l’on n’entendit plus que le bruit de leurs bottes éperonnées qui résonnaient sur les dalles du grand escalier.

II

CHARLOTTE DE BEAUNE.

Le duc de Guise était revenu à sa place, quand deux coups de marteaux résonnèrent à la porte. Une jeune femme entra, ses dents claquaient, ses cheveux étaient en désordre, ses yeux égarés, ses lèvres tremblaient et une pâleur livide était empreinte sur tous ses traits.

— Oh ! cher Balafrê, dit-elle en entrant, tu ne sais pas tout ce que j’ai souffert ; oui, j’étais là à épier le moment, l’instant, la minute où je pourrais te parler.

— Qu’as-tu à me dire ?

— Ce n’est point un trône à t’annoncer, un trône dont tout à l’heure tu élevais déjà la gloire ; écoute, demain, tu dois mourir.

— Terreur d’enfant !

— Oui, tu dois mourir, te dis-je. Non, ce n’est pas une terreur d’enfant, ce ne sont pas des paroles de pauvre Femme ; le duc d’Alençon m’a dit que demain…

— Ensuite ?

— Que demain il ne resterait du duc de Guise qu’un cadavre mutilé.

— Comment ?

— Il m’a dit que son frère allait proposer au conseil de t’assassiner demain.

— Lui ? assassiner quelqu’un ? il n’oserait !

— Oh ! de grâce ! quitte Blois !

— Non ! plutôt quitter la vie !

— Oh ! mais tu es bien cruel. Oui, oui, je t’en prie, Fuis loin d`ici, repousse~moi, méprise-moi, mais par grâce, fuis !

— Ce ne serait jamais qu’avec toi, avec mon royaume et ma couronne.

— Tu plaisantes, ô mon Dieu !

— Et toi, tu as peur.

— Oui, je tremble, je tremble de crainte pour toi ; mais toi, demain, tu trembleras du frisson de la mort.

— Soit ! mais, Charlotte, un baiser avant la tombe, et je dormirai tranquille.

Et la nuit se passa en caresses et en joyeuses amours.

III

LE CONSEIL DU ROI.

Pendant que le duc de Guise discutait avec ses amis sur le moyen de s’emparer du trône d’Henri III, celui-ci discutait avec les siens sur celui qui serait propre à le conserver. Catherine l’avait prévu ; l’assassinat était alors à la mode. Ayant convoqué son conseil, le roi se leva tout à coup en disant :

— Mes chers amis, il a trop longtemps que le duc est roi et le roi duc. Maintenant il faut que tout change et rentre à la place où la Providence l’a placé. Oui, oui, M. de Guise voudrait gouverner, il voudrait un trône et je lui donnerai un cercueil ; je veux que, dès demain, la France soit débarrassée de cet autre monarque, et moi de ce compagnon à la royauté.

— Il n’est qu’un moyen, dit le baron de Rieux, un procès en Parlement.

— Et de faux témoins, ajoutait le duc de Maintenon, l’accusant de conjuration, de lèse-majesté, d’attentat sur le roi, que sais-je ! enfin quelque chose de semblable, puis une prison perpétuelle.

— Non, non, dit Henri, “mettre le Guisard en prison, ce serait mettre le sanglier dans un filet trop Faible, il romprait nos cordes” . (*Historique*.)

— Et un procès, vous dis-je, continua le baron de Rieux.

— À lui, un procès ? Oh ! non, il serait capable d’en faire un à ses juges. Oh ! non, non, des épées et des poignards, messieurs. Qui m’aime parmi vous ?

Et huit poignards se brandirent dans l’air.

— Eh bien, demain, dit le roi, demain sa tête tombera, demain il n’y aura d’autre roi que Henri III.

IV

UN ASSASSINAT PAR UN ROI.

— Larchant, tu lui présenteras une requête au bas de l’escalier ; Effrenati, tu te jetteras à ses jambes ; Saint-Malines, tu lui donneras le premier coup ; toi, Saignac, tu l’achèveras.

Et il posa trente gardes dans l’escalier, huit dans le cabinet.

Puis il rentra dans sa chambre. De toute la nuit il ne dormit pas, on eût dit qu’il s’agissait d’une bataille ou du sort de deux peuples. Oui tout ce conseil, tous ces gardes, tous ces assassins, tous ces appareils de guerre ne devaient servir enfin qu’à la mort d’un seul homme ; mais cet homme, c’était le duc de Guise. À la Saint·Bartl1élemy, Charles vit sans sourciller tout un peuple massacré par ses ordres, prêt à frapper son ennemi, Henri tremblait.

Le matin, le Balafré Put arrêté à la grille du château par un homme qui lui dit, les larmes aux yeux :

— Duc, vous ne sortirez pas d’ici.

— Allons, mon pauvre ami, va, sois tranquille, il y a longtemps que je suis en garde contre les pressentiments.

Arrivé au grand escalier, il se prit à saigner du nez.

— Du sang, encore, dit — il en riant amèrement.

Puis il continua à marmotter quelques paroles.

C’était bien là ce même duc de Guise, ferme et incrédule, et qui laissait échapper de temps à autre quelques marques de faiblesse comme d’autres en laissent échapper de grandeur.

Tout à coup Revol entra en tremblant ; il était pâle et ses jambes pliaient sous lui.

— Monsieur de Guise, dit-il, Sa Majesté vous demande, elle est en son vieux cabinet.

Le duc s’y rendit, et là il n’y vit point le roi, mais quelques gardes qu’il salua ; un d’entre eux lui marcha sur le pied. Était — ce le dernier avertissement de quelque ami ?

Aussitôt Montlery s’élance, le saisit par le bras, et, lui enfonçant le poignard, il s’écrie :

— Traître, tu en mourras !

Effrenati se jette à ses jambes, Saint-Malines lui porte un autre grand coup de poignard de la gorge dans la poitrine, Saignac lui enfonce l’épée dans les reins, Sariac s’approche de lui avec un stylet à lame écossaise et le lui enfonce dans le dos jusqu’à la garde. Le duc de Guise ne peut plus se soutenir, et il va mourir sur le lit du roi son assassin.

Il fallait donc que ce lit si honteux, témoin des débauches des rois, vit mourir en un seul homme toute la gloire d’un siècle !

Quelques minutes après, quand le cadavre fut froid comme le marbre, quand les épées et les poignards furent retirés, alors Henri entra pour contempler sa victime ; il lui donna un coup de pied à la tête en lui crachant au visage.

Un instant pourtant, ayant bien considéré toutes ces plaies profondes, cette terrible et mâle figure et dont les yeux ternes et livides semblaient lui reprocher son crime, oui, un instant, Henri trembla devant le cadavre du duc de Guise.

UN PARFUM À SENTIR

OU
LES BALADINS

Deux mots

Ces pages écrites sans suite, sans ordre, sans style, devront rester ensevelies dans la poussière de mon tiroir et si je me hasarde à les montrer à un petit nombre d'amis ce sera une marque de confiance dont je dois avant tout leur expliquer la pensée.

Mettre en présence et en contact la saltimbanque laide, méprisée, édentée, battue par son mari, la saltimbanque jolie, couronnée de fleurs, de parfums et d'amour, les réunir sous le même toit, les faire déchirer par la jalousie jusqu'au dénouement qui doit être bizarre et amer puis ensuite ayant montré toutes ces douleurs cachées, toutes ces plaies fardées par les faux rires et les costumes de parades, après avoir soulevé le manteau de la prostitution et du mensonge, faire demander au lecteur : À qui la faute ?

La faute ce n'est certes à aucun des personnages du drame.

La faute c'est aux circonstances, aux préjugés, à la société, à la nature qui s'est faite mauvaise mère.

Je demanderai ensuite aux généreux philanthropes qui n'ont d'autres preuves du progrès intellectuel que les chemins de fer et les écoles primaires, je leur demanderai à ces heureux savants s'ils ont lu mon conte quel remède ils apporteraient aux maux que je leur ai montrés. Rien n'est-ce pas ? et s'ils trouvaient le mot ils diraient ..a....

La faute, c'est à cette divinité sombre et mystérieuse qui née avec l'homme subsiste encore après son néant, qui s'aposte à la face de tous les siècles et de tous les empires et qui rit dans sa férocité en voyant la philosophie et les hommes se tordre dans leurs sophismes pour nier son existence tandis qu'elle les presse tous dans sa main de fer comme un géant qui jongle avec des crânes desséchés !

Gve Flaubert

Février 1836.

I

La parade allait commencer. Quelques musiciens accordaient leurs hautbois et leurs déchirants violons, des groupes se formaient autour de la tente, et des yeux de paysans se fixaient avec étonnement et volupté sur la grande enseigne où étaient écrits en lettres rouges et noires ces mots gigantesques : troupe acrobatique du sieur Pedrillo.

Plus loin sur un carré de toile peinte l'on distinguait facilement un homme aux formes athlétiques nu comme un sauvage et levant sur son dos une quantité énorme de poids. Une banderole tricolore lui sortait de la bouche sur laquelle était écrit : Je suis l'Hercule du Nord.

Vous dire ce que le pierrot hurla sur son estrade, vous le savez aussi bien que moi, certes dans votre enfance vous vous êtes plus d'une fois arrêté devant cette scène grotesque et vous avez ri comme les autres des coups de poing et des coups de pied qui viennent à chaque instant interrompre l'Orateur au milieu de son discours ou de sa narration.

Dans la tente c'était un spectacle différent : trois enfants dont le plus jeune avait à peine sept ans, sautaient sur la balustrade intérieure de l'escalier, ou bien s'exerçaient sur la corde à la

Représentation.

Débiles et faibles, leur teint était jaune et leurs traits indiquaient le malheur et la souffrance.

À travers leur chemisette rose et bordée d'argent, à travers le fard qui couvrait leurs joues, à travers leur sourire gracieux qu'ils répétaient alors, vous eussiez vu sans peine des membres amaigris, des joues creusées par la faim et des larmes cachées.

— Dis donc Auguste, disait le plus grand à un autre qui s'élevait avec la seule force du poignet de terre sur la corde, dis donc, répétait-il à voix basse et comme craignant d'être entendu d'un homme à figure sinistre qui se promenait autour d'eux, il me semble qu'il y a bien longtemps que maman est partie.

— Oh oui bien longtemps, reprit-il avec un gros soupir.

— Ne t'avais-je pas défendu, Ernesto de jamais parler de cette femme-là ? Elle m'ennuyait, elle est partie au diable, tant mieux, mais tais-toi, la première fois que tu m'échaufferas les oreilles avec son nom, je te battrai.

Et l'homme sortit dans la rue après cette recommandation.

— Il est toujours comme ça, reprit l’enfant aussitôt que Pedrillo fut sorti, n’ouvrant la bouche que pour nous dire des choses dures et qui vous font mal à l’âme. Oh il est bien méchant, notre pauvre mère au moins elle nous aimait celle-là.

— Oh maman n’est-ce pas, dit le plus jeune, il m’en ennuie bien, et il se mit à pleurer.

— Comme il la battait, dit Auguste, parce qu’il disait qu’elle était laide, pauvre femme.

— Essuie donc tes larmes, voilà le monde qui entre, il faut sourire au contraire.

Chacun prit sa place sur les bancs, et bientôt la tente se trouva pleine. La parade était finie et Pedrillo était rentré lui-même après avoir répété plusieurs fois de suite : Messieurs, messieurs, on ne paye qu’en sortant.

D’abord, le plus jeune des enfants monta d’un pas assez leste l’escalier qui conduisait à la corde. Les premiers pas furent incertains, mais bientôt il fut encouragé par la phrase banale de Pedrillo qui suivant des yeux ses moindres gestes lui répétait à chaque instant :

— Courage monsieur courage, bien très bien, vous aurez du sucre ce soir.

Il descendit.

Son autre frère monta après lui, et il se hasarda à faire quelques sauts, il tomba [sur la] tête ; Pedrillo le releva avec un regard furieux. Il alla se cacher en pleurant.

Le tour était à Ernesto.

Il tremblait de tous ses membres, et sa crainte augmenta lorsqu’il vit son père prendre une petite baguette de bois blanc qui jusqu’alors était restée sur le sol.

Les spectateurs l’entouraient, il était sur la corde, et le regard de Pedrillo pesait sur lui.

Il fallait avancer.

Pauvre enfant, comme son regard était timide et suivait scrupuleusement les contours de la baguette qui restait à bout portant devant ses yeux comme le fond du gouffre lorsqu’on est penché sur le bord d’un précipice.

De son côté la baguette suivait chaque mouvement du danseur, l’encourageait en s’abaissant avec grâce, le menaçait en s’agitant avec fureur, lui indiquait la danse en marquant la mesure, sur la corde. En un mot c’était son ange gardien, sa sauvegarde ou plutôt, le glaive de Damoclès pendu sur sa tête par l’idée d’un faux pas.

Depuis quelque temps le visage d’Ernesto se contractait convulsivement, l’on entendait quelque chose qui sifflait dans l’air, et les yeux du danseur aussitôt s’emplissaient de grosses larmes qu’il avait peine à dévorer.

Cependant il descendit bientôt, il y avait du sang sur la corde.

L’Hercule du Nord, nom théâtral de Pedrillo, avait commencé ses tours de force lorsqu’on entendit la sentinelle qui veillait à la porte se disputer avec quelqu’un du dehors.

— Non vous n’entrerez pas vous dis-je, vous n’entrerez pas.

— Je veux entrer moi.

— On ne reçoit pas des gens comme vous.

— Je veux parler à Pedrillo, moi, je veux lui parler, entendez-vous ?

— Corbleu, répétait le bon soldat irrité, corbleu vous dis-je, on n’entre pas ici habillée comme vous êtes. On ne reçoit pas des mendiants.

Cette dispute détourna l’attention des spectateurs. Pedrillo alla voir qui est-ce qui le demandait.

— Ah, ah c’est toi vieille sorcière, dit-il à une femme en haillons, et dont l’aspect était misérable. Je ne m’attendais pas à te voir de sitôt. Où étais-tu donc partie ? Mais tiens tu me diras tout cela plus tard. Entre Marguerite, nous représentons maintenant, entre tu vas nous servir, - tu vas sauter, entends-tu, fais de ton mieux.

Il n’y avait pas à répliquer, pourtant elle se hasarda à lui dire :

— Pedrillo tu vois bien qu’ils vont se moquer de moi, je suis mal habillée, et voulait dire autre chose mais elle n’osa.

— Entre, entre.

Il le fallut, mais aussitôt que les spectateurs la virent un murmure s’éleva accompagné d’un rire moqueur, de ce rire féroce que l’on donne à l’homme qui tombe, de ce rire dédaigneux que l’Orgueil en habits dorés jette à la prostitution, de ce rire que l’enfant souffle sur le papillon dont il arrache les ailes.

Ce ne fut pas sans peine que Marguerite monta l’escalier, à peine avait-elle fait deux pas qu’elle tomba lourdement à terre, un cri perçant sortit de sa poitrine, la baguette était rompue en morceaux.

En peu d’instants la tente fut déserte. La plupart des spectateurs sortirent.

Cette dernière scène domestique avait scandalisé le plus grand nombre et désenchanté un petit garçon aux joues rondes et rosées qui jusqu’alors avait souhaité d’être danseur de corde pour avoir des pantalons roses, et des bottines de maroquin.

II

— Ne t’en avais-je pas bien [prévenu] ? dit Marguerite lorsqu’elle fut seule avec ses enfants et Pedrillo.

— Qu’avais-tu donc ?

— Je suis malade, je souffre encore, va. Oh je souffre beaucoup, Pedrillo, si tu m’aimais comme je t’aime.

— Allons, vas-tu recommencer tes plaintes Marguerite, tu sais bien que ça m’ennuie. Voyons qu’as-tu donc eu ?

— Tu le sais mieux que moi. Comment, tu ne te souviens pas de ce jour où je suis tombée comme aujourd’hui... J’avais la jambe cassée... Le soir je ne voulus pas manger, je pleurais trop, je ne voulais pas te dire que désormais je t’étais devenue inutile. Je ne voulais pas aller à l’hôpital de peur d’abandonner Ernesto et Garofa.

— Eh bien tu as pourtant été à l’hôpital.

— Hélas oui, sans cela j’allais mourir.

Et les saltimbanques se retirèrent sous une toile à matelots derrière laquelle était posée sur des charbons la soupe du dîner qui bouillait à petit feu.

La nuit était venue, elle était froide et humide, un vent de novembre soufflait avec violence, et faisait trembler les arbres du boulevard, de temps en temps même il pénétrait dans la tente et venait faire vaciller la chandelle autour de laquelle étaient groupés les danseurs de corde. Rangés en rond autour d’une énorme grosse caisse, chacun tenait devant lui son écuelle dont la vapeur réchauffait [ses] doigts tremblotants.

Le mince flambeau qui les éclairait, tranchant sur l’obscurité de la nuit, se reflétait sur leurs visages ainsi groupés et leur donnait un air étrange et singulier.

Tous étaient silencieux, et attendaient que quelqu’un interrompît le silence, ce fut Pedrillo.

— Eh bien, dit-il en regardant Marguerite et en reprenant sa phrase qu’il avait commencée il y avait une demi-heure, c’était donc là que tu étais partie... Maintenant es-tu guérie ?

Marguerite leva la tête, regarda un moment ses enfants, puis la rabaissa et se prit à pleurer : non, dit-elle tout doucement, non je boite encore.

— Que ferai-je de toi Marguerite, voyons à quoi seras-tu bonne ?

La pauvre femme se pencha vers son mari, lui dit quelques mots à l’oreille, - Enfants, reprit celui-ci, allez dormir, - Entendez-vous, dépêchez-vous donc.

.

Cette phrase parut étrange, à Garofa qui dit d’un air attristé :

— Et du sucre ?

Pedrillo sourit amèrement : - Tu seras bien heureux si tu as du pain demain, pauvre enfant. Ce sourire était forcé. Ses lèvres bleuies par le froid laissèrent voir deux rangées de dents blanches et ses grands yeux noirs se fixaient sur l’enfant d’une manière qui lui fit peur.

En ce moment-là le vent redoublant de violence faisait craquer la cabane.

— Du sucre, mais pourtant tu m’en avais promis ?

— Tais-toi te dis-je.

— Oh papa je t’en prie.

Il le repoussa fortement, et le pauvre enfant s’en alla coucher en pleurant.

Pedrillo souffrait tout autant que lui, un mouvement convulsif lui faisait claquer les dents.

— Comme tu l’as rudoyé, dit Marguerite.

— C’est vrai, il resta dans une rêverie profonde et comme endormi même dans des pensées déchirantes.

Un second coup de vent vint éteindre la chandelle.

— J’ai froid, dit Marguerite en se rapprochant de lui, j’ai bien froid, prête-moi ton manteau.

— Mon manteau... mais je l’ai vendu mon manteau.

— Pourquoi ?

— Pour du pain Marguerite... ne faudra-t-il pas que je t’en donne aussi ?

— Que voulais-tu donc me dire tout à l’heure, que tu as fait retirer les enfants ?

— Ce que je voulais te dire, je ne sais...

— Mais j’ai bien froid.

— Que faire Marguerite, je n’ai plus rien, rien... il s’arrêta et reprit, rien qu’une balle...

— Oh par grâce pour moi Pedrillo.

Et elle l’entoura de ses deux bras rouges et amaigris.

À voir ainsi cette femme laide et couverte de haillons, embrasser avec tant d’amour cet homme qui la repoussait comme par un sentiment naturel, à voir cette misère et cette tendresse, c’était un spectacle hideux et sublime.

— Alors, dit Pedrillo, demain tu iras sur la place, avec tes enfants, tu prendras mon violon et tu tâcheras de faire que nous ayons du pain.

Une demi-heure après les baladins étaient tous endormis, le vent s’était apaisé.

La lune débarrassée de ses nuages qui l’entouraient, resplendissait belle et claire dans une blanche gelée d’hiver et argentait l’enseigne qui avait cessé de bondir et de se replier sur elle-même. La tente était tranquille, pourtant on entendait quelquefois des soupirs et des sanglots.

C’était une femme qui pleurait.

C’était une femme qui pleurait.

III

Le lendemain Marguerite se leva de bonne heure, elle n’avait pas dormi de la nuit ; ses mains étaient trempées d’une sueur moite et malade. Une humidité fiévreuse avait rougi ses pieds, sa tête était chaude et brûlante.

Elle prit le violon de Pedrillo, un vieux tapis de Perse, et sortit avec Ernesto et Garofa.

N’avez-vous jamais rencontré par un temps de neige ou d’hiver quelque figure de mendiant accroupi aux portiques d’une église ? Le soir au détour d’une rue sombre et étroite ne vous êtes-vous point senti arrêté par votre manteau ? Vous vous détourniez... et c’était quelque mendiant en haillons, quelque pauvre femme qui vous disait en pleurant ces mots amers : J’ai faim, et puis elle sanglotait quand votre ombre s’échappant s’arrêtait à la porte d’un spectacle entre les équipages et les livrées d’or.

Vous vous êtes peut-être rappelé ensuite au milieu d’un entracte ces figures tristes et décolorées vues à la lueur du réverbère, et si votre âme est bonne et généreuse, vous êtes sorti pour les revoir et les secourir. Mais il n’était plus temps... la femme peut-être était entrée au lupanar. Acheter un morceau de pain. Une vie de prostitution, et le mendiant se débattait entre les arches du Pont-Neuf tandis que l’orchestre grondait et que les mains applaudissaient d’enthousiasme.

Pour moi rien ne m’attriste tant que la misère cachée sous les haillons de la richesse, que le galon d’un laquais autour des cheveux nus de la pauvreté, qu’un chant qui couvre des sanglots, qu’une larme sous une goutte de miel.

Aussi je plains d’un amour bien sincère les baladins et les filles de joie.

Mais si vous aviez rencontré Marguerite avec ses deux enfants, Marguerite jouant du violon et ses enfants sautant sur le tapis, si vous aviez vu l’indifférence de cette foule curieuse et barbare qui s’avançait avec son regard stupide et ironique, votre coeur eût saigné devant cet excès d’égoïsme parvenu à son plus beau degré de logique.

C’est vrai, la société a bien autre chose à faire que de regarder une baladine et ses marmots, l’état s’occupe fort peu si elle [a] du pain, d’abord il n’a point d’argent à lui donner, ne faut-il pas qu’il paye ses 86 bourreaux ?

En effet, je l’avoue par une rude matinée de novembre personne n’est disposé à s’arrêter sur la place pour regarder des tours de force ? Qui se fût arrêté avec intérêt devant Marguerite ?

Ses cheveux étaient rouges et retenus par un peigne de corne blanche. Sa taille était large et mal faite. Quant à sa robe on ne la voyait pas, car un morceau de toile percé de couleur brune l’entourait jusqu’aux genoux, puis l’oeil descendant jusqu’à terre trouvait un mollet gros et mal fait entouré d’un bas rose, puis des pieds informes serrés dans des brodequins d’un cuir épais et cassé. Elle n’avait sur la tête qu’un bonnet de gaze, avec des rubans roses et quelques fleurs fanées qui tombaient sur ses joues pâles et sur sa mâchoire sans dents.

Il y avait déjà près d’une heure qu’Ernesto et Garofa s’épuisaient pour attirer les yeux de la foule, Marguerite avait plus d’une fois appelé de sa voix rauque et couverte de larmes, à la générosité des gens qui passaient devant eux, lorsqu’un brillant carrosse attelé de deux chevaux blancs passa auprès des danseurs en leur jetant de la boue sur leurs vêtements. Le manteau et les bas roses de Marguerite en furent couverts, elle baissa les yeux sur son violon et répandit quelques larmes qui coulèrent le long du bois et vinrent se perdre dans l’intérieur de l’instrument. Ses larmes redoublèrent et elle se cacha la tête sous son manteau. Alors elle fut en proie à une sorte de rêverie bizarre et déchirante. Elle se figurait entourée de carrosses qui lui jetaient de la boue, elle se voyait sifflée, méprisée, honnie, elle voyait ses enfants mourir de faim autour d’elle, son mari devenu fou, alors tous ses souvenirs repassèrent dans son esprit, elle voyait son lit, où [elle] était couchée à l’hôpital, elle se ressouvint de la soeur qui la soignait, des coups que Pedrillo lui avait donnés la veille, de l’accueil qu’on lui avait fait lorsqu’elle parut... et tous ses souvenirs passaient dans son esprit comme des ombres paraissant, disparaissant, et s’effaçant tour à tour. Elle ne dormait pas, mais elle rêvait, et ses yeux baissés sur sa poitrine répandaient des larmes qui étaient chaudes en tombant sur ses mains.

Depuis quelque temps elle ne jouait plus, ses enfants continuaient de danser, et l’on s’était arrêté en les voyant ainsi exécuter leurs exercices tandis que la femme tenait son violon sans en tirer une seule note.

Bientôt elle se réveilla en sursaut - Cette figure ébahie, avec ses deux grands yeux gris s’ouvrant tout à coup sembla grotesque et fit rire. Son accoutrement bizarre, ses bas roses avec son manteau troué et qui était presque pareil au tapis étendu sur le pavé, ses fleurs fanées et ses cheveux rouges étaient ridicules, une seule parole se fit entendre, - Qu’elle est laide, - et l’on s’en alla en riant.

Il faisait froid, bien froid même, Marguerite ne sentait plus ses doigts et n’avait pas la puissance de les remuer, elle laissa tomber le violon... il se brisa et les morceaux rebondirent sur le tapis en rendant un son criard et faussé.

Elle le regarda encore sautiller quelque temps, les bras croisés et la poitrine haletante. Qu’allait dire Pedrillo lorsqu’il verrait revenir Marguerite sans argent, sans argent.

Oh cette pensée-là torturait Marguerite, elle lui serrait le coeur, et le lui déchirait sans pitié. Mille projets ridicules d'éviter la colère de son mari lui venaient à l'esprit comme un cauchemar et puis s'évanouissaient poussés par d'autres plus bizarres encore.

Tantôt, elle voulait fuir avec ses enfants, où ? elle l'ignorait ! mais fuir, au moins, fuir le regard pénétrant et atroce de Pedrillo, fuir son rire lugubre, fuir ces mots : Qu'allons-nous devenir Marguerite ?

.

Une autre fois, elle pensait à Dieu,... puis elle invoquait Satan, et souhaitait mourir,... et elle tenait à la vie pour ses enfants. Que seraient-ils devenus sans elle ?

Enfin roulant le vieux tapis et enveloppant les éclats du violon, elle partit de cette place, où elle avait reçu tant d'affronts, versé tant de larmes.

Une idée riante lui vint à l'esprit, elle sourit légèrement,... c'est qu'elle pensait qu'en vendant son manteau ou le tapis, elle pourrait apporter de l'argent à Pedrillo, et faire raccommoder son violon.

....

Mais Pedrillo à son tour lui demanderait qu'est-ce qu'elle avait fait de son manteau.

Cette triste objection qu'elle se fit à elle-même, la rendit encore plus malheureuse, et elle accusa le ciel de lui avoir donné une minute l'espérance qui battue par la réalité fouette l'âme et la martyrise.

.

Il était environ alors deux ou trois heures d'après-midi, le soleil était beau et venait réchauffer comme il arrive de temps en temps dans les dimanches d'hiver toute une ville qui se promène sur les boulevards. C'était l'heure des vêpres, beaucoup de monde s'agitait dans les rues, et quelques boutiques étaient ouvertes.

Marguerite s'arrêta devant celle d'un pâtissier à l'entour de laquelle quelques gâteaux sortant du four répandaient une vapeur tiède et odoriférante et qui venait chatouiller le nez des passants.

Lorsqu'elle s'arrêta aux vitres, elle vit dans l'intérieur une mère de famille avec deux enfants qui étaient à peu près de l'âge d'Ernesto et de Garofa.

Tous les deux c'étaient de gentils garçons à la chevelure blonde, au teint frais et rosé. Leurs habits étaient propres et bien faits et leur linge dépassant à travers leur cravate de satin était blanc comme le sucre qui couvrait leurs gâteaux.

Cette vue fit mal à Marguerite.

À côté de la dame en chapeau et en manteau vert avec une ceinture en corde d'or se tenait une femme de chambre qui portait dans ses bras un petit épagneul noir. Quand les enfants en eurent assez ils donnèrent leurs restes à l'animal noir. Quand les enfants en eurent assez ils donnèrent leurs restes à l'animal qu'ils engageaient à prendre à force de caresses. Marguerite trépignait de colère elle qui avait faim, elle à qui ses enfants avaient demandé déjà plus d'une fois dans la journée du pain, un seul morceau de pain, son front était brûlant, et elle s'appuyait contre le carreau pour le refroidir.

Quand la dame eut payé les friandises elle sortit avec ses enfants, et sa robe de soie en passant effleura avec bruit les mains de Marguerite.

Par un singulier sentiment dont elle aurait eu peine à se rendre compte elle-même, elle resta encore longtemps le visage collé contre les vitres ; mais le pâtissier ennuyé la renvoya avec une injure.

Qu'avait-elle à dire ?

En traversant une rue sombre et tortueuse, elle vit étendue sur un lit une femme qui chantait des chansons obscènes. Alors elle repensa à Pedrillo, à ce qu'elle allait devenir... et puis elle regarda cette femme longtemps, elle écouta les chants...

— Oh non non - Qui voudrait de moi ?

IV

L'or roulait sur les tables. C'était une maison de jeu mais non un tripot autorisé par la loi, un tripot du Palais-Royal, où vous avez vu venir des ministres, des princes, des banquiers, avec leur cravate aussi bien mise qu'à l'ordinaire, avec une impassibilité de regard qui indiquait qu'ils étaient experts dans cet infâme commerce.

Mais une maison de jeu avec toute sa prostitution hideuse, un de ces taudis où parfois le lendemain on trouve quelque cadavre mutilé entre des verres brisés et des haillons tout rouges de sang.

La salle était basse et ses murs enfumés ; des hommes salement vêtus entouraient des tables autour desquelles d'autres visages se tassaient avec avidité, et leurs yeux flamboyaient à travers leurs épais sourcils, leurs dents se serraient, leurs mains se crispaient de rage. Et malgré les rides sombres de leur front vous auriez lu peut-être bien des crimes qui s'amoncelaient avec leurs angoisses.

Quelques femmes à moitié nues se promenaient paisiblement autour d'eux. Et plus loin dans un coin deux hommes armés debout devant une jeune fille couchée sur le pavé et liée avec des cordes tiraient à la courte paille.

— Vous frémissez peut-être, aimable lectrice, à la peinture de cette moitié de la société, la maison de jeu, l'autre c'est l'hôpital et la guillotine.

Ah voyez-vous jeune enfant, c'est que faussée par une éducation vicieuse, vous n'êtes pas descendue jusque dans la misère, vous n'avez pas vu son délire, vous n'avez pas entendu ses hurlements de rage, vous n'avez pas sondé ses plaies, vous n'avez pas compris ses douleurs amères, son désespoir et ses crimes.

Ah pauvre jeune fille c'est qu'il est des lieux dont vous ignorez l'existence, c'est qu'on vous a caché un mot qui est toute notre société : prostitution.

Puis quand le silence de l'attente avait fait place au bruit aigre du râteau, alors c'étaient les jurons les plus terribles, des serments hideux, des vengeances qui s'accomplissaient à l'instant de leur création, et la lueur de la lampe venait briller sur la lame de quelque poignard qui s'enfonçait dans la poitrine d'un homme.

Et alors le maître séparait les combattants en jetant une femme au milieu d'eux.

La porte violemment ébranlée remua tout à coup. On ouvrit.

Un homme entra.

Il avait un costume de Baladin. Sa taille était grande, une profusion de cheveux noirs et en désordre, lui couvraient les yeux, et empêchaient d'en voir l'expression. Mais elle devait être terrible dans ce moment-là. Sa main droite se tenait fortement serrée,... tenez, dit-il en jetant son argent sur une table,... tenez... et il s'arrêta pour pousser un rire convulsif... voilà dix francs.

Oh plaignez-le, ce joueur, ce baladin, cet homme de mauvaise vie, cet homme qui n'aime pas [ses] enfants. Qui bat sa femme. Oh plaignez-le parce que c'est un infâme, un baladin, un homme de mauvaise vie, un homme qui bat sa femme, et qui n'aime pas ses enfants.

C'est que la misère a voulu qu'il soit baladin, la faim lui a tellement aiguisé les dents qu'elle l'a poussé dans une maison de jeu. Son éducation l'a fait un homme de mauvaise vie, sa femme est laide, rouge, édentée. Oh une femme rouge, et ses enfants lui déplaisent parce qu'ils lui disent J'ai faim : et ce cri-là lui fait mal car il n'a rien à leur donner.

Plaignez-le. Tout à l'heure, sa femme est rentrée,... elle avait cassé son violon,... elle n'apportait pas de pain.

Il était 6 heures d'après-midi, il faisait froid et tous avaient faim.

Vouliez-vous qu'il laissât mourir ses enfants, ses pauvres enfants, qui les mains jointes comme devant l'autel rampaient à ses genoux, en lui disant avec un sourire et des larmes - du pain - .

À genoux les mains jointes devant un Saltimbanque - vous voyez bien que la misère fait faire des bassesses.

Et puis dans son désespoir, il avait battu sa femme, il avait maudit ses enfants, il avait appelé Satan... il avait chargé son pistolet... par un sentiment machinal il l’avait laissé tomber puis, la tête lui brûlait, tout tournait autour de lui, et il avait vendu son arme... il se trouvait alors dans une maison de jeu,... et c’est avec une sollicitude bien douloureuse qu’il regardait ses deux pièces rouler sur le tapis, ses deux pièces qui allaient décider de sa vie, de celle de ses enfants, de celle de sa femme.

Maintenant s’il perd, il se mettra brigand, assassin peut-être. - On le conduira sur l’échafaud, les mères en passant le montreront à leurs enfants comme un monstre, comme un être hideux dont un seul de ses regards peut faire mal et sa tête roulera sur les planches humides,... et la foule en passant, donnera encore des malédictions à son tronçon... Eh, voilà un bien grand coupable - C’est un homme qui avait faim.

Sa femme, si elle n’en meurt pas de douleur, elle mourra de misère ou bien encore elle se mettra ignoble fille de joie.

Et la foule lui crachera au visage en riant. C’est la femme d’un assassin, c’est une fille publique - et elle est laide -

Quant à ses enfants, la charité des hôpitaux les ramass[er]a peut-être ; on les élèv[er]a dans une crainte religieuse des autres hommes, on les séquestrera de la société. On leur donnera un habit s’ils ont froid, un morceau de pain s’ils ont faim. - Mais leurs larmes - Ah elles resteront longtemps à couler sur leur visage, elles creuseront leurs joues...

Les enfants des riches, en passant leur jetteront parfois, quelque or bien brillant, avec un rire d’ironie.

Et puis devenus hommes ils machineront des crimes en haine de cette société qui les a maudits parce qu’ils sont les fils du maudit.

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Voilà tout ce qui tournait, sautait, tourbillonnait, dansait dans Pedrillo.

Toutes ces idées-là se réalisaient dans son imagination ; il ne les inventait pas mais il les voyait, il les sentait.

Mais il ne comprenait pas par exemple pourquoi sa famille était malheureuse. Non il ne le comprenait pas, et se raidissant contre le ciel, s’il l’avait pu il aurait détruit la création, il aurait anéanti Dieu.

Sa respiration était forcée... il soupirait par moments... il croyait peut-être devenir fou. Il a vingt francs... il les prend avec joie, les serre, les embrasse,... il les rejette avec un geste d’orgueil...

La salle résonne de cris... pour qui cet or passe à travers les dents du râteau qui déborde de la table ?.. C’est à Pedrillo riche de dix mille francs.

... Il rit, il pleure, il saute, il les rejette encore une fois l’insensé, il est heureux maintenant. Dix mille francs. C’est un homme vertueux... il peut s’acheter un habit, donner une robe à sa femme, à ses enfants des jouets, dix mille francs - Il peut, avec son or dans ses poches jeter à la misère son contingent d’opprobre, c’est un homme honnête - dix mille francs - Ah Ah - Ses traits se décomposent, son rire s’apaise, son regard est moins vif, sa tête moins haute. - Ah - ah, il n’a plus que 400 francs... il pose sa main à sa poitrine... il a encore 50 francs... il jette un léger cri de douleur... il n’a plus que 5 francs... maintenant... rien.

La mauvaise fortune ne paraissait point l’avoir accablé - et comme son voisin lui en demanda la Cause : tenez, dit-il avec le même rire et le même accent qu’il avait eus en jetant ses dix francs - tenez et il découvrit sa poitrine, elle était toute sanglante, et ses mains avaient de la chair humaine au bout des ongles.

V

Il était nuit, mais une nuit sombre, sans astre, une de ces nuits qui font peur, qui vous font voir des fantômes, et des spectres dansant sur le mur blanc des cimetières, de ces nuits dont le vent fait frémir d’horreur et dresser les cheveux sur la tête, de ces nuits où l’on entend au loin le cri plaintif de quelque chien rôdant autour d’un hôpital.

Pedrillo était sorti de la maison de jeu.

L’air frais de la nuit vint rafraîchir son front et lui rendre le sentiment réel de sa position. Mais peu à peu l’imagination prit le dessus. Il rêvait en marchant, tous les objets qu’il voyait prenaient une forme gigantesque. Les arbres que le vent faisait frémir avec plus de furie que la nuit précédente lui apparaissaient comme des géants hideux, toutes les maisons étaient pour lui des tripots, entendait-il le bruit d’un orchestre en passant près d’un bal c’était la musique de l’enfer ; une femme passait-elle en tournoyant près d’un rideau rouge, c’était une courtisane. Le bruit des verres sur le plateau c’était une orgie. Bientôt la neige tomba, et regardant ses habits il se voyait entouré d’un linceul.

C’était ainsi assiégé qu’il parcourait les rues en courant. Quelquefois il s’arrêtait et s’asseyait sur une borne, il regardait quelque rayon de la lune, et les nuages qui roulaient sur les étoiles.

Ils prenaient tous les formes les plus bizarres et les plus grotesques. C’étaient des monstres, grimaçants... puis des tas d’or... une femme avec ses enfants... un lion rugissant dans sa cage... une morgue et un cadavre sur la dalle humide... et il entendait le sifflement des monstres, le bruit de l’or résonnant sur les tables.

Il voyait les larmes de cette femme et de ses enfants, il entendait le rugissement du lion... il sentait l’odeur cadavéreuse de ce corps déjà verdâtre. Il le regarda longtemps puis le nuage prit une autre forme... il eut peur, se mit à courir n’osant regarder derrière lui ; et quand il arriva à sa tente... il était haletant hors d’haleine et ses traits étaient bouleversés.

Marguerite était sur sa porte à l’attendre.

Elle n’osa rien lui demander, car elle comprit assez, elle dont le malheur avait plus d’une fois coupé son âme, elle comprit la sueur qui coulait de son visage. Elle vit pourquoi ses yeux étaient rouges de colère. Elle devina les choses qu’il pensait, à travers la pâleur de son front, et elle savait ce que voulaient dire ses claquements de dents.

Ils restèrent tous deux ainsi sans rien dire, sans se communiquer ni leur peine ni leur désespoir. - Mais leurs yeux pourtant avaient parlé et s’étaient dit des pensées tristes et déchirantes.

Le lendemain quand les enfants s’éveillèrent Pedrillo leur ordonna de faire leurs paquets, lui-même défit sa tente, la plia dans la voiture. Et à neuf heures du matin, tirée par la rossaille, la carriole roulait lentement sur le pavé. La pluie n’avait point cessé depuis la veille, elle venait battre sur les parois de bois de la voiture. Son bruit régulier avec celui du vent et le mouvement des soupentes endormirent peu à peu les baladins entassés sur leurs toiles et leurs costumes [de] parades.

Déjà tous, les yeux fermés, se laissaient balancer par les secousses, lorsque Ernesto qui conduisait le cheval rencontra deux voitures qui portaient une ménagerie. En passant à côté de celle de nos gens le montreur d’animaux reconnut à travers les vitres couvertes de vapeur la tête de Pedrillo. Or Pedrillo c’était une vieille connaissance.

Il réveilla la troupe en faisant claquer son fouet, et le premier mot qu’il adressa à son compagnon fut un juron accompagné des quelques F et autant de B puis après cet exorde il commença sa phrase en disant : Il fait joliment du bouillon aujourd’hui. Le père Éternel se vide la vessie.

Pedrillo leva sa figure bleuie et regarda cet homme avec surprise.

— Tiens c’est toi, dit-il étonné en ouvrant la lucarne.

— Parbleu est-ce que tu ne me reconnais pas ? Tu es donc bien fier. Pourtant tu n’as pas l’air trop bien fortuné. Et je crois que tu n’es pas foutu pour avoir une ménagerie comme la mienne. Ce disant il montra du doigt ses cages et une jeune fille assise à ses côtés.

Au premier village qu’ils rencontrèrent ils firent entrer leurs voitures sous le hangar d’une ferme ; et là les baladins descendirent et s’embrassèrent.

Pedrillo n’eut point de mal à embrasser Isabella. Mais quant à Isambart ce fut bien différent.

— Comment l’appelles-tu ? demanda-t-il à son ami.

— Marguerite.

— C’est une fraîche marguerite.

Et il toucha délicatement du bout de ses lèvres le front rougeâtre.

— Ah ça, continua-t-il, nous voilà réunis. Veux-tu voyager ensemble - Nous associer ?

— Mais... hum... hum comme tu voudras.

Il ne fallait pas laisser échapper une aussi belle condition - Pedrillo le comprit bien, il lui frappa vigoureusement dans la main en disant :

— Soit - tu es un brave -

Isambart fit la grimace mais il n’y avait plus moyen de reculer, et puis la famille de Pedrillo, pensait-il, fera des tours de corde tandis que moi je montrerai mes animaux, tout le monde y gagnera - Après ça qu’il prenne Isabellada s’il veut je n’y tiens guère.

Ils attendirent que la pluie fût passée, remontèrent dans les carrioles pour se diriger vers la ville la plus voisine où ils devaient donner des représentations. Quand Isambart disait ce mot, il ôtait son chapeau et ajoutait : À l’aimable société qui s’y trouvera.

VI

Vous avez vu cent fois Isambart. C’est un homme petit, trapu, au teint frais et rosé, au nez rouge, aux yeux gris. C’est lui qui dans toutes les troupes d’acrobates, vous a fait rire si vous êtes enfant, et pitié si vous êtes plus grand.

C’est lui qui avec ses bas rouges, sa culotte courte, ses souliers à larges boucles d’argent, son chapeau à l’hidalgo, gris, ras, et orné d’une plume de coq, c’est lui dis-je qui reçoit toujours la craie au milieu du visage, en en frappant la corde, c’est lui qui tombe par terre, reçoit les claques,... c’est lui qui allumant les quinquets se laisse dégringoler du haut de l’échelle. Puis il prend un air grave et singeant le régisseur il s’avance le chapeau sous le bras annoncer le programme.

Marguerite vous la connaissez aussi, c’est elle qui reçoit les trois sous que chaque spectateur doit donner en sortant, elle a les sabots aux pieds, des bas blancs bien tirés sur le mollet, et un mouchoir d’indienne sur la tête en forme de béret.

Vous avez vu Pedrillo. C’est cet homme grand, mince, marqué de petite vérole, qui saute sur la corde d’un pas léger, et qui bondit et qui saute sans vérole, qui saute sur la corde d'un pas léger, et qui bondit et qui saute sans balancier.

Depuis deux ans nos deux troupes vivaient en bonne intelligence, et la famille de Pedrillo ne s'était pas repentie de son association. Tous vivaient heureux, tranquilles, sans souci, mangeant le soir ce qu'ils avaient gagné tout le jour... Marguerite seule était malheureuse.

Et pourtant,... son mari ne la battait plus... ses enfants avaient du pain.

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Ah c'est que Isabellada était jeune, jolie, elle avait vingt ans ; ses dents étaient blanches, ses yeux beaux, ses cheveux noirs, sa taille fine, son pied mignon. Et Marguerite était laide, elle avait 40 ans, les yeux gris, les cheveux rouges, la taille grosse, le pied large. L'une était la femme et l'autre l'amante. L'une était celle qui donnait toujours des reproches,... et l'autre de si ardents baisers. - Isabellada était devenue mère, et elle avait un enfant aussi beau qu'elle. C'était le second amour de Pedrillo.

Isambart avait regardé tout cela d'un oeil de philosophe, et s'était contenté de faire là-dessus une mauvaise pointe en disant que l'on n'aurait plus besoin d'aller chercher de l'eau pour faire la soupe puisqu'on avait deux mers sous la tente. Il le répétait à tout venant et disait ensuite : n'est-ce pas que je suis farceur ?, et il en avait pour une demi-heure à rire.

Ce qui humiliait davantage Marguerite c'était cette comparaison perpétuelle de tous les jours, de tous les instants, qu'elle avait à soutenir avec Isabellada.

Ce mépris qui s'attachait à sa personne, à tout ce qu'elle faisait, mais ce qui lui faisait le plus de mal c'était lorsqu'elle entendait le soir les baisers des deux amants heureux, lorsqu'elle les voyait s'entrelacer de leurs bras sans crainte, sans pudeur. Mais avec amour. Et puis l'enfant de Pedrillo, elle [le] haïssait d'une jalousie sombre et amère.

Un jour, c'était dans l'été ; toute la troupe à l'exception des enfants dansait dans le carrefour d'une rue assez déserte.

Marguerite et Isabellada dansaient aussi. Pauvre Marguerite.

Pedrillo un bonnet chinois sur la tête, des timbales aux genoux, une flûte de Pan à la bouche, frappant de la grosse caisse, composait tout l'orchestre. Isabellada en robe blanche, une écharpe rose autour du cou, sautait, dansait, tourbillonnait sur le vieux tapis de Perse.

Son regard était vif et lançait des éclairs ; sa taille était fine, svelte et se pliait et s'abaissait et se dressait comme le cou d'un cygne.

Oh non ce n'était point une robe, c'était un léger jupon blanc avec des fleurs brodées au bas, un léger jupon tombant au milieu des cuisses sur des bas roses qui les serraient avec volupté.

C'était sa valse, sa danse, tourbillonnante comme des pensées d'amour qui

C'était sa valse, sa danse, tourbillonnante comme des pensées d'amour qui bondissent dans le coeur d'un poète.

Et sa gorge si blanche, blanche comme du marbre le plus blanc, sa gorge, si pure, si fraîche, si suave... Et sa tête... et ses yeux... et son sourire...

Oh la gorge d'une femme quand elle est jeune et jolie, quand on la sent comme une rose à travers la mousseline sautillante au mouvement de sa danse, oh la gorge d'une femme, n'est-ce pas que c'est là... dans vos rêves d'amour... dans vos nuits d'insomnies... dans ces nuits que l'on passe à pleurer et à maudire sa mère. N'est-ce pas que c'est sur sa gorge que vous a[vez] posé votre tête toute chaude et toute bouillante, c'est sur sa gorge que vous avez tressailli d'amour, que toutes les fibres de votre âme ont vibré comme la lyre touchée par le doigt d'une jeune fille et se sont raidies de volupté comme les muscles d'un athlète.

N'est-ce pas entre ses deux seins que vous avez dévoré de si ardents baisers.

N'est-ce pas dans son regard si doux que vous avez bu la vie, n'est-ce pas dans ses sourires que vous avez vécu.

N'est-ce pas que son pied mignon, sa jambe si bien faite étaient là sur votre lit à s'entrelacer dans les vôtres ?

Et puis sa figure, sur cette gorge, sur cette taille de femme, sur tout cet ensemble de gracieux, de céleste, de divin, il y avait dans son regard, dans le mouvement de sa prunelle, dans le bruit que sa robe faisait en tournant dans l'air, dans la manière dont son pied pivotait sur le tapis troué, quelque chose d'inexprimable et d'inouï, de rêveur et de pur.

Elle n'avait pas l'air d'une femme, ainsi sautant, tourbillonnant, dansant... Oh non ce n'était pas une femme c'était une pensée d'amour.

À la voir ainsi au milieu de cette musique aigre et bizarre, entre Isambart et Marguerite,... c'était un diamant sur un tas de boue.

Isambart faisait encore l'insipide paillasse, il avait un justaucorps, des bas bleus et blancs, et une perruque moitié rouge, moitié noire. - Sous ce costume grotesque il disait mille choses plaisantes, ennuyeuses.

Et Marguerite que faisait-elle ?

Elle souffrait, elle pleurait en silence. Oui mais [pour] vous ce n'est rien, souffrir, pleurer.

Je comprends.

Eh bien... chaque spectateur qui venait regarder avec extase la sylphide jetait les yeux sur l'autre femme qui était là à quelques pas.

Que faisait-elle ?

Des tours de force.

Oui à côté de cette jeune fille si belle, si fraîche, se trouvait là comme contrepoids une femme rouge aux joues épaisses, aux pieds mal faits, à la tenue contrepoids une femme rouge aux joues épaisses, aux pieds mal faits, à la tenue déhanchée. Elle s’avançait aussi au son de la même musique. Et ses pieds touchaient le même tapis que ceux d’Isabellada... Oui cette femme qui sautait si légèrement, qui vous inondait des éclairs de sa brillante prunelle, qui faisait tressaillir votre corps d’un long frisson d’amour quand sa robe en passant effleurait vos cuisses,... c’était une baladine comme Marguerite. Elle était au même degré que cette masse de chair qui se contournait avec force, qui marchait la tête renversée au même niveau que les pieds, ne laissant apercevoir sous sa longue robe bleue qu’un ventre à la place d’une tête et que des seins qui tombaient avec dégoût et pesanteur.

Puis lorsqu’elle se relevait son visage était couleur de pourpre, ses yeux tout violets et pleins de sang, et ses veines gonflées.

Et sur tout cet ensemble grotesque, il y avait pourtant répandu un certain air de courtisane, de flatterie, sa bouche sans dents voulait sourire elle faisait une grimace, son regard ennuie et pèse, mais elle déplaît souverainement lorsqu’elle dit d’une voix aigre et d’un ton de pie-grièche :

“Et regardez bien messieurs comme ceci est difficile.”

Et la musique continuait, Isabella dansait, sautait, tourbillonnait comme des pensées d’amour dans le coeur d’un poète.

De temps en temps quelque chose se faisait entendre dans un plat qui était sur le tapis.

— Y a gras, dit Isambart en défaisant sa perruque.

VII

Vous ne savez peut-être pas ce que sont les quatre masques qui s’avancent crochés tous ensemble dans la rue du théâtre.

Il y a un pierrot avec une tête de boeuf, c’est un homme petit, large, de bonne humeur et qui promet de s’en donner une bosse, c’est son expression.

À sa gauche est un domino noir qui marche la tête baissée,... ce domino a l’air d’une femme.

Puis c’est un Diavolo assez bien fait qui parle tout bas à une jolie Suissesse au cotillon court, et qui porte fièrement une tête sans masque.

Singulière chose qu’un bal masqué.

Ne croyez pas que je vous parle de ceux de l’Opéra qui naissent au mois de janvier, et meurent le mardi-gras, des bals de l’Opéra, où l’on s’ennuie, où je n’ai jamais été parce que là encore, vous voyez sur le masque la lunette d’or du banquier, sous la patte du singe le gant parfumé d'un dandy. Non. Mais c'était un bal du peuple, où il va seul, les manches retroussées, où pour 20 sous il rit toute une nuit dans sa bonne grosse joie.

Un bal où l'on s'intrigue plus qu'aux autres, où il est de mauvais goût de se fâcher, et que les directeurs bravant les préjugés des saisons livrent au public si le dimanche est beau, et si le pain n'est pas cher.

C'est à ces bals-là qu'il y a des danses impudiques et qui vous feraient rougir pauvre fille.

Et si vous [y] alliez le lendemain vous ne seriez plus vierge peut-être.

Et l'on s'y amuse pourtant, l'on est heureux - les hommes sans pudeur - les femmes souillées - sans honneur.

On est heureux sans vertus.

Singulier n'est-ce pas ? Vous ne vous êtes pas douté qu'on pût être heureux sans vertus.

— C'est vrai pourtant. En ce cas, à quoi servent-elles ?

Vous avez reconnu ces masques... ce sont nos saltimbanques.

Jadis ils n'avaient pas de pain, et aujourd'hui ils courent au théâtre.

C'est qu'ils ont de l'argent, oui de l'Argent. D'où leur vient-il ? d'Isabellada. Ne croyez point que ce soit aux animaux d'Isambart, et à ses grimaces, aux tours de force de Marguerite qu'ils doivent leur fortune.

Du tout ! C'est à cette belle enfant qui saute maintenant une valse hongroise, au milieu du bal, éperdue, enivrée, accablée d'applaudissements, de fleurs et du brouhaha d'une salle entière qui trépigne de joie.

Un seul masque reste pensif sur sa banquette. Il est triste, et les applaudissements de la salle le font pleurer. La grâce d'Isabellada lui est à charge.

C'est qu'aussi là comme autre part, il est venu apporter sous son masque et sa jalousie amère, et sa haine furieuse et ses peines, et ses plaies saignantes et ses blessures profondes.

C'est le domino noir.

Quant à Isambart il dansait, lourdement, criait fort, intriguait le premier venu et puis il allait s'asseoir à la table de jeu, avec d'autres pierrots, trichait, riait aux éclats, faisait du vacarme, attroupait tout le monde autour de lui, et puis il recommençait. Marguerite depuis quelque temps l'avait perdu de vue, lorsqu'elle se sentit frappée sur l'épaule.

Elle se retourna.

C'était un pierrot avec une tête de boeuf.

Elle reconnut notre homme.

Mais lorsque celui-ci vint à lui dire - Je te connais bien, beau masque - ce n'était plus sa voix - non bien sûr ce n'était pas lui - Qu'en savait-elle après tout n'était plus sa voix - non bien sûr ce n'était pas lui - Qu'en savait-elle après tout, car il y en avait tant d'autres du même costume et cette mode de porter des têtes d'animaux était alors fort en usage.

Quant à la voix elle était déguisée sous le masque.

— Je te connais bien, dit le pierrot, veux-tu que je te dise ton nom ?

— Oui.

— Marguerite La Rouge Laide.

Cette voix grêle et chevrotante, cette figure stupide de boeuf ouvrant ses larges narines, avec son rire imbécile fit peur à Marguerite. Elle se tapit dans son coin en tremblant.

— Tiens regarde, continua-t-il, cette jeune fille sauter là-bas, - la reconnais-tu ?

Et il montrait Isabellada, et sa large figure riait toujours, et sa voix continuait :

— Elle est plus jolie que toi, vois-tu comme son sein palpite, avec grâce, comme ses mains sont blanches, comme son costume lui dessine bien sa taille ?

Marguerite trépignait d'impatience, elle se mordait les lèvres, et commença à pleurer, et l'on vit ses larmes couler sur son masque noir et y laisser une trace blanche.

Et la tête de boeuf riait toujours ouvrant ses larges narines et ses lèvres s'écartaient avec une stupidité qui avait quelque chose de féroce, il continua avec plus de vitesse :

— Ce soir après le bal quand les lumières seront éteintes, lorsque tu retourneras dans ta tente joindre tes enfants, tu entendras non loin de toi le bruit des baisers d'amour.

— Oh grâce, grâce.

Et le masque riait de plus belle. Il se mit même à agiter ses longues manches autour de la tête de Marguerite et à lui en caresser les joues.

— Et cette femme que tout le monde admire maintenant sera à un seul homme. À ton mari.

— Ah pitié Isambart, pitié.

— Tenez, dit-il en riant et en s'adressant au public, en voilà une qui se fâche parce que je lui dis que son mari en caresse une autre, il se retourna vers Marguerite, l'amena dans l'embrasure d'une fenêtre. Alors elle ne pouvait plus lui échapper, il pouvait lui cracher toutes ces injures à la face, il pouvait lui raconter jusqu'au bout toutes les peines qu'elle avait eues, lui dire combien elle était laide, lui montrer toute la différence qu'il y avait entre elle et la danseuse, lui peindre jusqu'au dernier détail l'amour de Pedrillo, il pouvait lui représenter avec chaleur leurs entrelacements dans le lit nuptial, leurs mots à moitié dits, leurs soupirs entrecoupés.

C’est ce qu’il fit.

— Tu seras éveillée demain par les éclats de rire d’un enfant, ce sera le leur.

— Ô Isambart que t’ai-je fait ?

— Rien mais tu me déplais, tantôt quand je te voyais faire tes tours, que j’aurais eu de plaisir à jeter de la boue sur ta robe bleue, à tirer tes cheveux, à meurtrir tes seins. Je sais bien, tu ne m’as jamais rien fait - tu es peut-être meilleure qu’une autre. Mais enfin tu me déplais, je te souhaite du mal. C’est un caprice. D’abord pourquoi pleurer toujours, avoir un air si sombre, une démarche si déplaisante, une tournure qui me fait bisquer enfin ?

Et puis toujours geindre et se lamenter, - eh bien morbleu, pourquoi ne t’en vas-tu pas d’avec nous, car nous te nourrissons et ce n’est jamais pour toi que nous recevons de l’argent.

Tes enfants dis-tu ? et bien le bureau les ramassera bien. Moi à ta place, je ferais la vie au moins...

....

Ah non t’es trop laide.

Oh mais quand je vois tes yeux de chat à travers ton masque... qué figure qui me déplaît... il quitta son air en colère et partit en riant aux éclats.

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Isabellada, épuisée, demanda à Pedrillo à s’en aller, et en quittant le bal, elle s’appuya sur son bras langoureusement, laissa voir sa gorge décolletée, et son dos couvert d’une sueur odoriférante.

On l’applaudit encore.

VIII

Pedrillo en effet laissa seule Marguerite, et alla du côté de la ménagerie. Isambart les laissa tranquilles, se coucha vite, et ne se réveilla que le lendemain à une heure d’après-midi.

Le domino noir ôta son masque qui l’étouffait, et resta le coude appuyé sur la table, regardant brûler la chandelle et enfoncée dans ses souvenirs du bal.

Les paroles d’Isambart lui revenaient à l’esprit, elle entendait son rire éclatant perçant à travers son masque.

C’était le souvenir de la danse d’Isabellada qui lui faisait mal, tous ces applaudissements pour une autre, tous ces dédains pour elle, l’amour de Pedrillo applaudissements pour une autre, tous ces dédains pour elle, l'amour de Pedrillo pour son enfant. Et la tête de boeuf lui revenait encore dans l'esprit, avec ses narines ouvertes, et son rire féroce.

Son expression stupide l'effrayait encore.

Je ne sais si vous avez comme moi étudié, tous ces visages grotesques. Mais il y en a quelques-uns dont l'auteur doit être bien athée et bien misanthrope pour réunir sur le même carton la ressemblance de la brute avec l'homme.

La haine sans cause [d'Isambart] lui avait fait une singulière impression. Sa haine avait pour motif qu'elle marchait mal, que ses cheveux étaient rouges et qu'elle aimait ses enfants.

Ce remède ignoble à ses maux qu'il lui avait proposé... cette insulte outrageante de lui avoir fait sentir qu'on la nourrissait par pitié, qu'elle leur était à charge, tout cela la faisait souffrir, elle qui aimait tant son Pedrillo, elle qui n'avait demandé au ciel qu'une vie d'amour, qu'un mari qui l'aim[ât], qui comprît toutes ses tendres affections et qui sentît toute la poésie qu'il [y] avait dans ce coeur de Baladine, de femme honnie, méprisée de la société.

Ah, se disait-elle en elle-même, lorsqu'elle voyait passer en chapeau une femme honnête, - pourquoi ne suis-je point comme elle ? ; - et alors l'envie lui prenait au coeur. Quand elle voyait danser Isabellada - elle demandait au ciel pourquoi la nature ne l'avait point faite ainsi. Et elle haïssait la maîtresse de son mari - Oh dans ces moments-là quand elle avait froid, quand elle voyait Pedrillo vivre heureux et content - alors [elle] était méchante et ne croyait plus en Dieu.

Encore elle se serait passée d'argent - Elle demanda de l'amour à la société - On lui rit à la face - De l'humanité - On lui montra le chemin de l'hôpital - De la pitié - C'est une baladine - Ah de la pitié à une baladine - À une voleuse d'enfants, à une coureuse des rues -

Eh bien à cette société qui n'avait voulu lui donner ni pain, ni amour, ni pitié, elle voua la haine et la jalousie. À Dieu qu'elle avait imploré tant de fois les genoux sur le pavé, les larmes aux yeux, à Dieu qui n'écouta pas ses prières, elle donna l'impiété.

À la nature qui l'avait maltraitée le mépris.

Aussi quand elle voyait des gens riches, heureux, estimés, dont on prenait soin, elle leur souhaitait les calamités les plus grandes. Elle riait des prières des pauvres, de leurs voeux, de leurs reliques, et en passant elle crachait sur le seuil des églises.

Quand elle voyait une femme gracieuse, au doux sourire, aux yeux tendres et langoureux, aux cheveux de jais, au cou d'albâtre, elle se moquait de la foule qui l'admirait. Elle se disait :

— Qu'aurait-il fallu pour qu'elle fût comme moi ? Des cheveux d'une autre couleur, des yeux plus petits, une taille moins bien faite. Et elle serait comme Marguerite. Si son mari ne l’avait point aimée, l’avait méprisée, l’avait battue, elle serait laide, méprisée comme Marguerite.

C’est dans ces pensées-là qu’elle était alors puis peu à peu elle s’assoupit. Elle dormait le coude appuyé sur la table, la joue dans la main et la chandelle brûlait toujours.

IX

Le lendemain elle fut réveillée par la voix d’Ernesto qui se disputait avec Isabellada.

Elle se mit à les écouter.

— Pourquoi me l’avez-vous pris ? N’était-ce pas à moi ? Je veux la ravoir.

Marguerite s’habilla à la hâte, se cacha derrière la voiture aux animaux, et les regarda sans rien dire.

Elle vit la soeur d’Isambart, qui tenait la couverture d’un de ses enfants, et qui ne voulait pas lui rendre.

Elle avait déjà bien d’autres motifs pour haïr cette femme sans que celui-ci vînt s’y joindre encore, elle ne put supporter plus longtemps cette vue, elle sauta en un seul bond sur elle, lui arracha la couchette.

— Encore, toujours toi Isabellada. Elle prononça ce mot de la manière la plus dure qu’il lui était possible car son harmonie lui déplaisait.

— N’est-ce point assez, continua-t-elle avec verve et chaleur, n’est-ce point assez que tu viennes chez nous t’y établir, y dominer, y faire la souveraine, que tu prennes mon mari, que tu me l’enlèves tous les jours de ma couche pour le porter dans la tienne, n’est-ce pas assez, fille de Satan, de nous insulter en public par ta beauté que tu prostitues à l’admiration du premier venu, dis, réponds, n’est-ce pas assez, l’infamie et l’outrage ne sont-ils pas portés assez haut sans que tu viennes encore arracher les linges qui cachent le sang de nos plaies ? - Il retomberait sur toi, le sang, prends-y garde.

Ah ah, les belles filles, les jolies à qui tout le monde jette des fleurs, des louanges, de l’argent, vous nous donnez en échange le mépris, la honte et la misère.

Tiens Pedrillo, regarde si je n’ai pas raison.

— Qu’y a-t-il Isabellada ?

— Son enfant a voulu prendre la couverture du mien - et Marguerite soutient que c’est à elle.

— Marguerite qu’as-tu à dire ?

— Elle ment Pedrillo, ne l’écoute pas.

— C’est toi Marguerite, et il la repoussa durement dans la tente.

Là elle s’arracha les cheveux, déchira ses habits, se roula par terre, se mit le visage en sang.

Elle se releva.

Il faut donc boire l’amertume jusqu’à la lie, eh bien oui encore, encore, - Isabellada, danse mieux s’il est possible, Pedrillo aime-la plus encore et moi je vous haïrai davantage.

Tout à coup, elle se jeta aux genoux de Pedrillo qui entrait dans la tente au même moment.

— Que viens-tu faire ici ?

— Prendre de l’argent.

— Pour qui ?

— Pour elle.

— Ah oui, elle, elle, toujours.

Ah Pedrillo, tu l’aimes donc bien ?

— Oui.

— Grâce, oh ne m’accable plus de sa présence, de son nom, de sa beauté. Je t’en prie aime-moi. Que te faut-il pour te plaire ? Mais je t’en prie ne me parle plus.

Cette femme, le visage ensanglanté, les habits déchirés, pleurant, se tordant de rage à ses pieds, l’attendrit un moment.

— Que veux-(tu] ma Marguerite ?

— Pedrillo laisse pour maintenant, mais un jour quand elle, tu m’entends, Elle, quand elle m’aurait tuée par ses insultes, tu sais comme le lion de Numidie, rugit bien dans sa cage, tu sais avec quelle volupté il dévore la viande qu’on lui donne le soir. Eh bien, un jour je te demanderai, le même honneur.

— Qu’as-tu voyons, Marguerite, reviens à toi.

— Ce que j’ai. Je suis jalouse, ah tu ne l’as jamais été toi. Ce que j’ai, je suis folle peut-être, je n’en sais rien. Mais je la hais et je t’aime.

X

Il fait chaud, le soleil darde ses rayons sur la route pleine de poussière, et les pommiers qui la bordent ont leurs feuilles toutes brûlées - C’est par ces vigoureuses chaleurs du mois de juin qu’il est doux de se laisser ballotter par le mouvement de la calèche, de s’abandonner à quelque rêve plein de poésie tandis que les rideaux bleus des vasistas sont fermés et laissent passer cependant quelque petit nuage de poussière chassé par le vent et qui vient couvrir vos habits.

Cela est vrai. Mais tout le monde ne voyage pas en calèche, et nos baladins dormaient alors dans leurs carrioles. Marguerite et Pedrillo marchent à pied, et causent tous deux. Le silence n’était alors interrompu que par le son de leurs voix qui se faisait seul entendre au milieu de la campagne, par le pas des chevaux sur la poussière, et par le bourdonnement d’une abeille qui bourdonnait autour de la cage du lion et l’empêchait de se livrer à ses rêves ; car il en avait peut-être aussi, lui ; il pensait, à son soleil d’Afrique, à sa tanière qu’il avait laissée bien loin là-bas dans d’autres pays, il pensait à son vaste désert, à la lionne qui couchait avec lui sous l’ombre du palmier, et il mordait le bout de ses griffes avec mélancolie.

Laissons-le penser à son bonheur d’autrefois, laissons-le rêver à ses joies brutales, et revenons aux peines de Marguerite.

— Tu l’aimes donc bien, dit-elle tout à coup.

— Eh bien oui Marguerite, pourquoi toujours le demander ?

— Que lui trouves-tu de bien ?

— Tout - mais tu m’ennuies, que veux-tu ?

— La mort.

— Ah tu es folle.

— Peut-être, - tu es méchant, je ne te demande pas l’amour, je ne te demande pas la pitié, mais je te demande, la cause de cet amour puis la mort après.

— Quant à la cause je n’en sais rien, dit Pedrillo d’un ton courroucé. Quant à la mort, je t’en prie, Marguerite, tu sais que l’homme a des accès de colère.

— Et la femme des accès de jalousie, répondit Marguerite en riant ironiquement, oui de jalousie. C’est-à-dire de haine. Je te demandais la cause de ton amour pour Isabellada, eh bien moi je vais te dire la cause de ma haine pour elle et pour toi.

— Marguerite prends garde.

— Non - la voilà, la cause, elle est belle, je hais les belles parce que je suis laide. Tu l’aimes, et je la hais, je hais ceux qu’on aime, tu es heureux, toi, je hais les heureux, vous êtes riches et je hais les riches, parce qu’on ne m’aime pas, parce que je suis malheureuse, et misérable.

Pourquoi hein Pedrillo, pourquoi m’as-[tu] rejetée toujours comme quelque chose dont on a honte ? Ah oui, parce que tu craignais la risée publique, eh bien je te hais parce que j’aime ce que la société méprise, j’aime les baladins, moi, j’aime les filles de joie, et celles du dernier rang, et je déteste ton Isabellada. Oh si je pouvais je l’écraserais sous mon pied, avec quelle joie je piétinerais sur son corps, sur ses seins, sur sa tête, sur sa figure, je la mangerais, je la dévorerais avec plaisir.

Pedrillo fit un geste de colère.

— Marguerite prends garde, le lion est là dans sa cage. De grâce finis, pas un mot.

— Il fallait que tu fusses un homme sans pudeur et sans âme pour me mépriser ainsi, pour bafouer, pour salir, pour traîner dans la boue cette pauvre Marguerite qui t’aimait tant, qui s’était jetée dans tes bras, pleine de poésie et d’amour, et que tu as repoussée du pied comme un chien galeux qui veut lécher son maître.

— Ô Marguerite, Marguerite, tu vas me faire faire quelque chose d’odieux, d’horrible.

— Encore cette femme, elle avait des enfants et leur père les traitait sans pitié, pas de pain quelquefois - Et s’ils ne sont pas morts, c’est que Dieu a veillé sur eux. Le sanglier, la bête féroce, dévore quelquefois ses enfants, mais il ne les fait pas périr dans les agonies de la faim - Eh bien oui va jette-moi si tu veux à ce lion, je ne te demanderai ni secours ni pardon. Non car si tu m’as abreuvée d’amertume, je t’empoisonnerai d’injures, d’insultes et de reproches. Écoute, écoute j’en ai encore à dire, écoute que je dise encore une fois que je hais Isabellada. Oui je la déteste, je voudrais l’avoir entre mes mains, l’écraser, la déchirer de mes ongles et plonger ma tête dans son sang, et m’y désaltérer en la replongeant encore.

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Le lion rugit dans sa cage, il fait sonner sa queue, il remue sa crinière, et la gueule ouverte il attend une femme que Pedrillo a dans ses bras.

Celui-ci ouvre la porte et la précipite.

Déjà le fier animal l’avait saisie lorsqu’Isambart survenu à ses rugissements arracha Marguerite. Elle avait la poitrine déchirée et ses mains portaient l’empreinte de ses griffes.

XI

Quelle est cette femme qui sort en chancelant de l’hôpital ? Sa taille est grosse, ses cheveux rouges, son regard stupide. Un bonnet de dentelle avec des fleurs sales lui couvre la tête, ses habits sont déchirés et son aspect est misérable et fait pitié. C’est une folle.

Vous voyez bien que son rire est étrange, ses mots entrecoupés, qu’elle court, qu’elle s’arrête. Bien sûr. C’est une folle.

Ses mains et son visage [ont] des balafres. Bien sûr. C’est Marguerite. Oui c’était elle.

Elle marcha ainsi pendant deux jours, ne sachant où elle allait, sans avoir rien pris, rien ramassé, rien que la boue qu’on lui jetait en passant.

Les gamins couraient après elle et lorsqu’elle se détournait pour leur dire : il fallait que vous soyez sans pudeur et sans âme, sa figure grimaçant, son costume, et ses fleurs sur le bonnet déchiré les faisaient rire, et ils l’accablaient de leurs huées et de leurs cris de dédain.

Fatiguée, harassée, n’en pouvant plus, elle tomba presque évanouie sur le gazon d’un boulevard.

Tout à coup elle releva la tête, promena ses regards hébétés autour d’elle - et s’écria d’une voix tonnante, - Mes enfants où sont-ils ? - Auguste - Ernesto - Garofa -

Un tilbury vint à passer.

Une grande dame s’y charrait à son aise. Son cachemire blanc tombait derrière jusque sur le siège du domestique. Les plumes blanches et noires de son chapeau s’agitaient avec grâce dans l’air. Son sourire était doux, sa taille fine. Elle paraissait heureuse, elle avait des diamants, un équipage, des cachemires, et des colliers d’or.

Marguerite courut vers elle, s’accrocha aux rayons de la voiture et avec des trépignements de colère :

— N’est-ce pas assez d’infamie et d’injures sans venir, arracher le linge qui couvrait nos plaies ?... c’est toi Isabellada. Oh va je te reconnais bien, c’est toujours cet air de courtisane cette taille impudique.

Elle ne se trompait pas.

Un jour qu’Isabellada dansait sur la place, un grand seigneur la vit, et depuis ce jour elle devint sa dame de compagnie.

— Quelle est cette femme ? dit le monsieur qui était en tilbury.

— Je ne sais, une folle sans doute.

— Si je suis folle, peut-être.

— John chassez-la.

Le domestique lui donna des coups de fouet sur le visage. Mais elle restait toujours accrochée aux rayons de la roue.

— Non je ne m’en irai pas, disait-elle, écoute, écoute encore, si tu m’as abreuvée d’amertumes je peux t’empoisonner d’insultes, de reproches et d’outrages.

— La folle ! la folle ! criait le peuple en courant après Marguerite.

Elle s’arrêta, se frappa le front.

— La mort, dit-elle en riant.

Et elle se dirigea à grands pas vers la Seine.

XII

On venait de retirer un cadavre de l’eau, et il était exposé à la morgue.

C’était une femme, un bonnet de dentelle avec des fleurs sales lui couvrait la tête, ses habits étaient déchirés et laissaient voir des membres amaigris. Quelques mouches venaient bourdonner à l’entour et lécher le sang figé sur sa bouche entr’ouverte, ses bras gonflés étaient bleuâtres, et couverts de petites taches noires.

Le soleil était sur son déclin et un de ses derniers rayons perçant à travers les barreaux de la morgue vint frapper sur ses yeux à moitié fermés et leur donner un éclat singulier.

Ce corps couvert de balafres, de marques de griffes, gonflé, verdâtre, exposé ainsi sur la dalle humide était hideux et faisait mal à voir.

L’odeur nauséabonde, qui s’exhalait de ce cadavre en lambeaux, et qui faisait éloigner tous les passants oisifs, attira deux élèves en médecine.

— Tiens, dit l’un d’eux après l’avoir considérée quelque temps, elle était à l’hôpital l’autre jour. Il se tut et l’examina attentivement.

C’était un véritable élève en médecine, avec un habit vert râpé, couvert de duvet, une casquette rouge, et une pipe de faïence dans laquelle il fumait le fin Maryland.

— Mais si nous l’achetions ?

— Que voudrais-tu en faire ?

— Gare, cria la voix d’un cocher. C’était celui du tilbury de l’autre jour qui conduisait Mademoiselle à l’Opéra.

Nos disciples d’Esculape se rangèrent aussitôt.

En se retournant, le fumeur laissa tomber sa pipe.

— Sacré nom de Dieu, dit-il en frappant du pied, voilà la troisième que je casse de la journée.

1er avril 1836

Moralité

Maître Michel de Montaigne, Gascon docte et prud’homme, bardereau, a dict :

Cecy est un livre de bonne foy... je donne mon advis, non comme bon mais comme mien.

Moi je dirai aussi que c’est de bonne foy que sont écrites ces pages. Et même je les ai composées avec feu et enthousiasme.

J’ai voulu tonner contre les préjugés et je ferai peut-être crier contre un auteur aussi impudent que moi.

Quant à ce que j’ai mis comme titre Un parfum à sentir j’ai voulu dire par là que Marguerite était un parfum à sentir, j’aurais pu ajouter une fleur à voir, car pour Isabellada, sa beauté était tout.

Maintenant de peur que la très Sainte Église Catholique, Apostolique et Romaine, ne lance contre moi ses foudres à cause de mon titre cocasse

Conte philosophique, immoral, moral

(ad libitum)

je me justifierai quand on m’aura fait la définition de ce qui est moral d’avec ce qui ne l’est pas.

Ce que vous voudrez

Vous ne savez peut-être pas quel plaisir c’est ! composer !

Écrire, oh écrire c’est s’emparer du monde, de ses préjugés, de ses vertus et le résumer dans un livre.

C’est sentir sa pensée naître, grandir, vivre, se dresser debout sur son piédestal, et y rester toujours.

Je viens donc d’achever ce livre étrange, bizarre, incompréhensible. Le premier chapitre, je l’ai fait [en] un jour. J’ai été ensuite pendant un mois sans y travailler, en une semaine, j’en ai fait 5 autres, et en deux jours je l’ai achevé.

Je [ne] vous donnerai pas d’explications sur sa pensée philosophique. Elle en a une, triste, amère, sombre et sceptique... cherchez-la -

Je suis maintenant fatigué, harassé, et je tombe de lassitude sur mon fauteuil sans avoir la force de vous remercier si vous m’avez lu, ni celle de vous engager à ne pas le faire si vous ne connaissez pas le titre de mon originale production.

1er avril 1836

Gve Flaubert.

LA FEMME DU MONDE .

D’où je conclus, Dieu me pardonne et le Diable m’emporte, que Satan fait la queue au Père éternel.

Auberge des Adrets.

I

Tu ne me connais pas, frêle et chétive créature ; eh bien, écoute.

II

Mon nom est maudit sur la terre ; pourtant le malheur, le désespoir, l’envie qui y dominent en tyrans m’appellent souvent à leur secours.

III

Je me réjouis dans les grandes cités et je dirige mes coups sur les peuples des villes.

IV

Pourtant je vais aussi chez le laboureur, je prends ses brebis dans son étable, je prends la chèvre qui broute sur la colline, le chamois qui bondit sur le rocher aigu ; je prends l’oiseau dans son vol, et le roi sur son trône.

V

Du jour où Adam et sa compagne furent chassés du paradis, moi, la fille de Satan, je me tins depuis ce temps à la face de tous les empires, de tous les siècles, de toutes les dynasties de rois, que je brisais sous mes pieds de squelette.

VI

En vain j’ai entendu des peuples dévorés par la peste crier après la vie, en vain j’ai vu des rois qui se cramponnaient à leur couronne, en vain j’ai vu les larmes d’une mère qui me demandait son enfant ; leur prière me semblait ridicule.

VII

Et je broyais avec avidité, sous mes dents, brillante jeunesse, empire puissant, siècles pleins de gloire et d’honneur, rois, empereurs ; j’effaçais leur blason, leur gloire, et, dans mes mains décharnées, je réduisais en poudre le sceptre doré aussi facilement que la houlette du pasteur.

VIII

J’aime à m’introduire dans le lit d’une jeune fille, à creuser lentement ses joues, à lui sucer le sang, à la saisir peu à peu et à la ravir à son amant, à ses parents qui pleurent et sanglotent sur cette pauvre rose si vite fanée.

IX

Alors je me réjouis sur son front encore blanc, je contemple ses lèvres ridées par la fièvre, j’entends avec plaisir le bourdonnement des mouches qui viennent autour de sa tête, comme signes de putréfaction.

X

Et je ris avidement en voyant les vers qui rampent sur son corps.

XI

J’aime à prendre place aux banquets royaux, aux gais repas champêtres ; je m’assieds sur la pourpre, je m’étends sur l’herbe, et mon doigt glacé s’applique sur le front des seigneurs, sur le front du peuple.

XII

Souvent, en entendant les éclats de rire des enfants, en les voyant se parer de fleurs, je les ai emportés dans mes bras ; j’ai orné ma tête de leurs bouquets et j’ai ri comme eux ; mais, à ce son creux et sépulcral qui sortait de ma maigre poitrine, on reconnaissait que c’était une voix de fantôme.

XIII

Non, pourtant ! Ce fantôme était la plus vraie de toutes les vérités de la terre.

XIV

Et contre elle venant se briser tout, tout, et le fils de Dieu lui-même.

XV

Car cite-moi une vague de l’Océan, une parole de haine ou d’amour, un souffle dans l’air, un vol dans les cieux, un sourire sur les lèvres, qui ne soit effacé.

XVI

Tout l’avenir, te dis-je, viendra tomber devant ma faulx tranchante, — et même le monde.

XVII

Jadis, au temps des Caligula et des Néron, je hurlais dans l’arène, je venais aider Messaline à ses obscènes supplices, je frappais les chrétiens, et je rugissais dans le Colisée avec les tigres et les lions.

XVIII

En France, au temps des rois, je venais siéger à leurs conseils ; j’étais alors, par exemple, la Saint-Barthélemy.

XIX

Rien ne m’a échappé, pas même le siècle de Voltaire qui s’élevait haut et grand, la tête fière et le visage arrogant, tout boursouflé de philosophe, de corruption et d’emphase ; je lui ai envoyé 93.

XX

Le siècle du grand homme ne m’a pas échappé non plus, qui, avec son air de cagotisme et sa main de philanthrope, est une vieille courtisane qui revient de ses fautes et commence une nouvelle vie.

XXI

Eh bien, à lui, si content de ses colonies d’Afrique, de ses chemins, de ses voitures à vapeur, je lui ai envoyé un fléau, une peste, mais une peste qui vient comme une bombe éclater au milieu d’un banquet plein de parfums et de femmes, qui vous prend les hommes, les enfants, et les étouffe aussitôt, le choléra, le hideux choléra qui, avec ses ongles noirs, son teint vert, ses dents jaunes, ses membres qui se convulsionnent, entraîne l’homme à la tombe plus vite que la flèche ne traverse les airs, que l’éclair ne fend les cieux.

XXII

Il est vrai de dire que les sangsues du docteur Broussais, la vaccine, le pâte de Regnault aîné, le remède infaillibles pour les maladies secrètes, m’ont déconcertée un peu ; alors j’ai réuni mes forces et j’ai donné la Chambre des Pairs, la mascarade, l’attentat du 28, et la loi Fieschi.

XXIII

J’aime la voix d’une vieille femme qui prie sur un mort.

XXIV

J’aime le tintement rauque et glapissant des cloches.

XXV

XXV

J’aime à entendre vibrer son marteau alors qu’il frappe minuit, et que les sorciers se rendent au sabbat avec des sifflements étranges et aigus.

XXVI

Je bondis de volupté quand je me vautre à mon aise dans un beau char de parade, quand les hommes déploient la vanité jusqu’au bout ; c’est un curieux spectacle.

Allons donc, chien, rends des honneurs au chien qui pourrit sur la borne !

Allons donc, société, rends donc des honneurs au riche qui passe dans un corbillard ; les chevaux, tout couverts d’argent, font étinceler le pavé ; les dais, reluisants d’or et de pierreries, sont magnifiques ; on fait des discours sur les vertus du défunt ; il était libéral sans doute, et magnifique ; les pauvres ont deux sous, un pain et un cierge ; il dépensait splendidement son argent.

Allons donc, chien, fais le panégyrique du chien que dévorent les corbeaux ; dis qu’il mangeait avec gloutonnerie son morceau de cheval qu’on lui jetait chaque soir.

XXVII

J’aime encore à détailler toutes les souffrances qu’endurent ceux que je prends dans mes embrassements.

Maintenant, me reconnais-tu ? J’ai une tête de squelette, des mains de fer, et dans ces mains une faulx.

On m’appelle la Mort.

Le linceul qui entourait ses os se déchira et laissa voir à nu des entrailles à demi pourries que suçait un serpent.

LA PESTE A FLORENCE

Gve Flaubert
C’est que je te hais d’une haine de frère
Al. Dumas (Don Juan de Marana)
La Peste à Florence

Septembre 1836

I

Il y avait autrefois à Florence une femme d’environ 60 ans que l’on appelait Beatricia. Elle habitait dans le quartier le plus misérable de la ville et ses seuls moyens de vivre se réduisaient à dire la bonne aventure aux grands seigneurs et à vendre quelques drogues à ses voisins pauvres lorsqu’ils étaient malades. La mendicité complétait ses revenus.

Elle avait été grande [dame] dans sa jeunesse. Mais alors elle était si voûtée qu’on lui voyait à peine la figure. Ses traits étaient irréguliers, elle avait un grand nez aquilin, de petits yeux noirs, un menton allongé et une large bouche d’où sortaient deux ou trois dents longues, jaunes et chancelantes [qui] répandaient sans cesse de la salive sur sa lèvre inférieure. Son costume avait quelque chose de bizarre et d’étrange. Son jupon était bleu et sa camisole noire. Quant à ses chaussures - elle marchait toujours nu-pieds en s’appuyant sur un bâton plus haut qu’elle.

Joignez à cela une magnifique chevelure blanche qui lui couvrait les épaules et le dos et qui tombait des deux côtés de son visage sans ordre et sans soin car elle n’avait pas même un simple bandeau pour les retenir.

Le jour et une partie de la nuit elle se promenait dans les rues de Florence mais le soir elle rentrait chez elle pour manger et pour dire la Bonne aventure à ceux qui n’avaient pas voulu s’arrêter en public devant une pareille femme et qui avaient honte de leur superstition.

Un jour donc elle fut accostée par deux jeunes gens de distinction qui lui ordonnèrent de les conduire chez elle. Elle obéit et se mit à marcher devant eux.

Pendant la route et en traversant les rues sombres et tortueuses du vieux quartier de la ville le plus jeune des deux témoignait ses craintes à l’autre et lui reprochait l’envie démesurée qu’il avait de se faire dire son avenir.

reprochait l'envie démesurée qu'il avait de se faire dire son avenir.

— Quelle singulière idée as-tu, lui disait-il, de vouloir aller chez cette femme. - Cela est-il sensé ? - Songe que maintenant il est près de huit heures, que le jour baisse, songe encore qu'en allant dans ce sale quartier de la plus vile populace, nos riches épées, les plumes de nos feutres, et nos fraises de dentelles peuvent faire supposer qu'il y a de l'or...

— Ah tu es fou Garcia, interrompit François, quel lâche tu fais.

— Mais enfin cette femme la connais-tu ? Sais-tu son nom ?

— Oui. C'est Beatricia.

Ce mot produisit un singulier effet sur le jeune homme et l'arrêta tout court d'autant plus que la devineresse entendant prononcer son nom s'était retournée - et cette pâle figure le fixant avec ses longs cheveux blancs que le vent agitait légèrement le fit tressaillir.

Garcia comprima sa crainte et continua de marcher silencieusement mais se rapprochant de plus en plus de son frère François.

Enfin au bout d'une demi-heure de marche ils arrivèrent devant une longue allée qu'il fallait traverser avant d'arriver chez Beatricia.

— Tu peux faire tes opérations ici, lui dit Garcia en s'adressant à la vieille femme.

— Impossible, attendez encore quelques instants, nous voici arrivés, et elle ouvrit une porte qui donnait sur un escalier tortueux et en bois de chêne.

Après avoir monté bien des marches Beatricia ouvrit une autre porte. C'était celle de son cabinet éclairé par une lampe suspendue au plafond. Mais sa pâle lumière éclairait si peu que l'obscurité était presque complète. Pourtant avec quelque soin et comme l'appartement était bas et petit on voyait dans l'ombre quelques têtes de morts, et si la main par hasard tâtonnait sur une grande table ronde qui se trouvait là, elle rencontrait aussitôt des herbes mouillées et de longs cheveux encore tout sanglants.

— Vite dépêche-toi, dit François.

Beatricia lui prit la main et l'ayant amené sous la lampe, elle lui dit :

— Tiens, vois-tu ces trois lignes en forme d'M ? - Cela est signe de Bonheur. - Les autres lignes qui s'entrecroisent et s'entrelacent vers le pouce indiquent qu'il y aura des trahisons, ta famille, toi-même, tu mourras par la trahison d'un de tes proches. Mais je te le dis, tu verras bientôt réussir tes projets. Va.

— À moi, dit Garcia d'une voix tremblante. Beatricia lui prit sa main droite.

— Elle était brûlante.

— Ta vie sera entremêlée de biens et de maux. Mais le cancer de l'envie et de la haine te rongera le coeur, le glaive du meurtre sera dans ta main et tu trouveras dans le sang de ta victime l'expiation des humiliations de ta vie - Va.

— Adieu femme de l’enfer, dit Garcia en lui jetant une pièce d’or qui roula sur les pavés et alla frapper un crâne. Adieu, femme de Babylone, que la malédiction du ciel tombe sur ta maison et sur ta science et fasse que d’autres ne se laissent point prendre à tes discours... Ils sortirent aussitôt et l’escalier résonnait encore du bruit de leurs pas que Beatricia contemplait par sa fenêtre les étoiles qui brillaient au ciel et la lune qui argentait les toits de Florence.

II

Rentré chez Cosme son père, Garcia ne put fermer l’oeil de la nuit, il se leva n’en pouvant plus car la fièvre battait avec violence dans ses artères, et il rêva toute la nuit à la prédiction de Beatricia.

Je ne sais si comme moi vous êtes superstitieux mais il faut avouer qu’il [y] avait dans cette vieille femme aux longs cheveux blancs, dans son costume, dans toute sa personne, dans ses paroles sinistres, dans cet appareil lugubre qui décorait son appartement avec des crânes humains et avec des cheveux d’exécutés quelque chose de fantastique, de triste et même d’effrayant qui devait, au 17e siècle, en Italie, à Florence et la nuit effrayer un homme tel que Garcia de Médicis.

Il avait alors vingt ans. C’est-à-dire que depuis vingt ans il était en proie aux railleries, aux humiliations, aux insultes de sa famille. En effet c’était un homme méchant, traître et haineux que Garcia de Médicis mais qui dit que cette méchanceté maligne, cette sombre et ambitieuse jalousie qui tourmentèrent ses jours ne prirent pas naissance dans toutes les tracasseries qu’il eut à endurer ?

Il était faible, et maladif. François était fort et robuste, Garcia était laid, gauche, il était mou, sans énergie, sans esprit. François était un beau cavalier aux belles manières, c’était un galant homme. Il maniait habilement un cheval, et forçait le cerf aussi aisément que le meilleur chasseur des états du Pape.

C’était donc l’aîné le chéri de la famille. À lui tous les honneurs, les gloires, les titres et les dignités. Au pauvre Garcia l’obscurité et le mépris.

Cosme chérissait son fils aîné. Il avait demandé pour lui le cardinalat, il était sur le point de l’obtenir tandis que le cadet était resté simple lieutenant dans les troupes de son père.

Il y avait déjà longtemps que la haine de Garcia couvait lentement dans son coeur. Mais la prédiction de la vieille compléta l’oeuvre que l’orgueil avait commencée. Depuis qu’il savait que son frère allait être cardinal, cette idée-là lui faisait mal. Dans sa haine il souhaitait la mort de François. - Oh comment, se disait-il à lui-même en pleurant de rage et la tête dans ses mains. Oh comment, cet homme que je déteste sera Monseigneur le Cardinal François, plus qu'un duc, plus qu'un roi, presque le pape. Et moi... Ah moi son frère, toujours pauvre et obscur, comme le valet d'un bourgeois. - Quand on verra dans les rues de Florence la voiture de Monseigneur qui courra sur les dalles - si quelqu'enfant ignorant des choses de ce monde demande à sa mère :

— Quels sont ces hommes rouges derrière le Cardinal ?

— Ses valets.

— Et cet autre qui le suit à cheval habillé de noir ?

— Son frère. Son frère qui le suit à cheval. Ah dérision et pitié - Et dire - qu'il faudra respecter ce Cardinal, dire qu'il faudra l'appeler Monseigneur, se prosterner à ses pieds.

Ah quand j'étais jeune et pur, quand je croyais encore à l'avenir, au bonheur, à Dieu, - je méprisais les sarcasmes de l'impie. Ah je comprends maintenant, les joies du sang, les délices de la vengeance, et l'athéisme et l'impureté - et il sanglotait.

Le jour était déjà venu quand on vit de loin accourir un courrier aux armes du pape. Il se dirigea vers le palais ducal.

Garcia le vit, et il pleura amèrement.

III

C'était par une folle nuit d'Italie au mois d'août, à Florence. Le palais ducal était illuminé, le peuple dansait sur les places publiques. Partout c'était des danses, des rires et du bruit. Pourtant la peste avait exercé ses ravages sur Florence et avait décimé ses habitants.

Au palais aussi c'était des danses, des rires et du bruit mais non de joie. Car la peste là aussi avait fait ses ravages dans le coeur d'un homme, l'avait comprimé et l'avait endurci mais une autre peste que la contagion. Le malheur qui étreignait Garcia dans ses serres cruelles le serra si fort qu'il le broya comme le verre du festin entre les mains d'un homme ivre.

Or c'était Cosme de Médicis qui donnait toutes [ces] réjouissances publiques parce que son fils chéri François de Médicis était nommé Cardinal. C'était sans doute pour distraire le peuple des événements sinistres qui le préoccupaient, pauvre peuple - que l'on amuse avec du fard et des costumes de théâtre tandis qu'il agonise. Oh c'est que souvent un rire cache une larme.

qu'il agonise. Oh c'est que souvent un rire cache une larme.

Peut-être qu'au milieu de la danse dans le salon du duc quelqu'un des danseurs allait tomber sur le parquet et se convulsionner à la lueur des lustres et des glaces. Qui dit que cette jeune femme ne va pas s'évanouir tout à coup ? Peut-être son délire commence-t-il. Tenez, voyez-vous ses mains qui se crispent, ses pieds qui trépignent, ses dents qui claquent - Elle agonise, elle râle, ses mains défaillantes errent sur sa robe de satin, et elle expire dans sa parure de bal.

La fête était resplendissante et belle. Cosme avait appelé tous les savants et les artistes de l'Italie. Le Cardinal François était au comble de la gloire et des honneurs.

On lui jetait des couronnes, des fleurs, des odes, des vers. C'était des louanges et des flatteries, des adulations.

Dans un coin de la salle on voyait à un des groupes les plus considérables un homme vêtu de noir dont le maintien sérieux annonçait sans doute quelque profession savante. C'était le docteur Roderigo le médecin et l'ami des Médicis.

C'était un singulier homme que le docteur Roderigo. Alchimiste assez distingué pour son époque il était peu versé dans la science qui le faisait vivre et savait bien mieux celle dont il ne s'occupait que comme passe-temps.

L'étude des livres et celle des hommes avaient imprimé sur sa figure un certain sourire sceptique et moqueur qui effaçait légèrement les rides sombres de son front. Dans sa jeunesse il avait beaucoup étudié surtout la philosophie et la théologie mais au fond n'y ayant trouvé que doute et dégoût et il avait abandonné l'hypothèse pour la réalité et le livre pour le monde.

Autre livre aussi où il y a tant à lire.

Il était alors à s'entretenir avec le comte Salfieri et le duc de Florence. Il aimait particulièrement l'entretien de ce dernier parce qu'il trouvait là quelqu'un qui écoutait tous ses discours sans objection et qui y répondait toujours par un oui approbatif et lorsqu'on a une opinion hasardeuse, un système nouveau, on préfère l'exposer devant un homme supérieur à vous par le sang et inférieur par les moyens.

Voilà pourquoi le docteur Roderigo qui était un homme de beaucoup d'esprit aimait la société de Cosme II de Médicis qui n'en avait guère.

Il y avait déjà près de deux heures qu'il tenait le duc dans une dissertation sur les miracles de l'Ancien Testament et déjà plusieurs [fois] Cosme s'était avoué vaincu car à sa religion simple et naïve Roderigo opposait de puissantes objections et une logique vive et pressante.

— Rangez-vous donc, lui dit Salfieri, vous empêchez cette jeune fille de danser, allons autre part, ici nous gênons. Voulez-vous une partie de dés ?

— Volontiers, répondit le médecin saisissant cette occasion de finir la conversation car il avait quelquefois peur d’humilier le complaisant prince.

Quant à celui-ci après chaque entretien qu’il avait eu avec son médecin il s’en allait toujours avec une croyance de moins, une illusion détruite et un vide de plus dans l’âme. Il le quittait en disant tout bas : Ce diable de Roderigo - il est bien instruit, il est bien habile. Mais Dieu me pardonne si ce n’est pas péché de croire un pareil homme - pourtant ce qu’il dit est vrai.

Et le lendemain il courait entamer avec lui quelque discussion philosophique.

Sa magnificence s’était largement déployée dans la fête de ce jour, et rarement on en avait vu de pareille, tout était beau, digne et somptueux, c’était riche, c’était grandiose.

Mais au milieu de toutes ces figures où le luxe et la richesse éclataient, au milieu de ces femmes parées de perles, de fleurs et de diamants, entre les lustres, les glaces, au bruit du bolero qui bondissait, au milieu de ce bourdonnement de la fête, au retentissement de l’or sur les tables, au milieu donc de tout ce qu’il y avait d’enivrant dans le bal, d’entraînant dans la danse, d’enchanteur dans cette longue suite d’hommes et de femmes richement parés où il n’y avait que doux sourires, galantes paroles on voyait donc - apparaître là au milieu du bal comme le spectre de Banco la haute figure de Garcia - sombre et pâle.

— Il était venu là aussi lui - tout comme un autre - apporter au milieu des rires et de la joie sa blessure saignante et son profond chagrin. Il contemplait tout cela d’un oeil morne et triste, comme quelqu’un d’indifférent aux petites joies factices de la vie, comme le mourant regarde le soleil sur son grabat d’agonie.

À peine si depuis le commencement du bal quelqu’un lui avait adressé la parole, il était seul au milieu de tant de monde, seul avec son chagrin qui le rongeait et le bruit de la danse lui faisait mal, la vue de son frère l’irritait à un tel point que quelquefois en regardant toute cette foule joyeuse et en pensant à lui-même, à lui désespéré et misérable sous son habit de courtisan, il touchait à la garde de son épée et qu’il était tenté de déchirer avec ses ongles la femme dont la robe l’effleurait en passant l’homme qui dansait devant pour narguer la fête et pour nuire aux heureux.

Son frère s’aperçut qu’il était malade et vint à lui d’un air bienveillant.

— Qu’as-tu Garcia ? lui dit-il - Qu’as-tu, ta main crève ton gant, tu tourmentes la garde de ton épée.

— Moi oh je n’ai rien, Monseigneur.

— Tu es fier Garcia.

— Oh oui, je suis fier va, bien fier, plus fier que toi peut-être, c’est la fierté du mendiant qui insulte le grand seigneur dont le cheval l’éclabousse et il accompagna ces derniers mots d’un rire forcé.

Le cardinal lui avait tourné le dos en haussant les épaules, et il alla recevoir les félicitations du duc de Bellamonte qui arrivait alors suivi d’un nombreux cortège.

— Un homme venait de s’évanouir sur une banquette, le premier valet qui passait par là le prit dans ses bras et l’emmena hors de la salle.

Personne ne s’informa de cet homme.

— C’était Garcia.

IV

Quelques archers rangés en ordre dans la cour attendaient l’arrivée des seigneurs pour partir - Car leurs chevaux étaient impatients et ils piaffaient tous désireux qu’ils étaient de courir dans la plaine. - Les chiens que chaque cavalier tenait en laisse aboyaient autour d’eux en leur mordant les jambes et déjà plus d’un juron, plus d’un coup de cravache avaient calmé l’ardeur de quelques-uns.

Le duc et sa famille étaient prêts et n’attendaient plus que quelques dames et le bon docteur Roderigo qui arriva monté sur une superbe mule noire. La grande porte s’ouvrit et l’on se mit en route, les hommes montés sur des chevaux, et la carabine sur l’épaule et le couteau de chasse au côté gauche.

Quant aux dames elles suivaient par-derrière montées sur des haquenées et le faucon au poing.

Cosme et le Cardinal ouvraient la marche, en passant sous la porte la jument de ce dernier eut peur de la toque rouge d’une des sentinelles et fit un bond qui faillit renverser son cavalier.

— Mauvais présage, grommela le duc.

— Bah est-ce que vous croyez à ces niaiseries-là, vous plaisantez sans doute, dit Roderigo. Cosme se tut et enfonça l’éperon dans le flanc de son cheval qui partit au trot - On le suivit.

Le bruit des chevaux sur le pavé et celui des épées qui battaient sur la selle firent mettre tous les habitants aux fenêtres pour voir passer le cortège de Monseigneur le duc Cosme II de Médicis qui allait à la chasse avec son fils le Cardinal.

Arrivée sur une grande place la compagnie se divisa en trois bandes différentes. Le premier piqueur donna du cor et les cavaliers partirent au galop dans les rues de Florence.

dans les rues de Florence.

Cosme était avec Roderigo, Garcia avec François et Bellamonte avec les dames et les archers devait forcer le gibier.

Le temps était sombre et disposé à l’orage. L’air était étouffant et les chevaux étaient déjà blancs d’écume.

Il fait beau dans les bois, on y respire un air frais et pur. Alors on était en plein midi et chacun éprouvait la douce sensation que procure l’ombrage lorsque l’on voit au loin passer quelque rayon du soleil à travers les branches. Car il faut vous dire que l’on était alors dans la forêt.

Garcia vêtu de noir, sombre et pensif, avait suivi machinalement son frère qui s’était écarté pour aller à la piste du cerf dont il venait tout à l’heure de perdre les traces. Ils se trouvèrent bientôt isolés et seuls dans un endroit où le bois devenant de plus en plus épais, il leur fut impossible d’avancer. Ils s’arrêtèrent, descendirent de cheval et s’assirent sur l’herbe.

— Te voilà donc Cardinal, dit vivement Garcia qui jusqu’alors avait été silencieux et triste. Ah te voilà Cardinal, il tira son épée. Un Cardinal, et il rit de son rire forcé et éclatant dont le timbre avait quelque chose de cruel et de féroce -

— Cela t’étonne Garcia ?

— Oh non, te souviens-tu de la prédiction de Beatricia ?

— Oui, eh bien ?

— Te souviens-tu de sa chambre où il y avait des cheveux d’exécutés et des crânes humains - te souvient-il de ses longs cheveux blancs ? N’est-ce pas hein mon Cardinal, n’est-ce pas que cette femme avait quelque chose de satanique dans sa personne et d’infernal dans son regard ? - Et ses yeux brillaient avec une expression qui fit frémir François.

— Où veux-tu en venir avec cette femme ?

— Te souvient-il de sa prédiction ? - te souvient-il qu’elle t’avait dit que tes projets réussiraient ? Oui n’est-ce pas ? tu vois que j’ai la mémoire bonne quoiqu’il y ait deux jours et que ces deux jours aient été pour moi aussi longs que des siècles. Ah il y a dans la vie des jours qui laissent le soir plus d’une ride au front. Et des larmes roulaient dans ses yeux.

— Tu m’ennuies Garcia, lui dit brusquement son frère.

— Je t’ennuie. Ah. Eh bien tes projets ont réussi. La prédiction s’est accomplie, mais oublies-tu qu’elle avait dit que le cancer de la jalousie et de la rage m’abîmerait l’âme ? oublies-tu qu’elle avait dit que le sang serait mon breuvage et un crime la joie de ma vie ? oublies-tu cela ? - Va sa prédiction est juste. Vois-tu la trace des larmes que j’ai versées depuis deux jours ? Vois-tu les places de ma tête où manquent les cheveux ? Vois-tu les marques rouges de mes joues ? Vois-tu comme ma voix est cassée et affaiblie ? Car j'ai arraché mes cheveux de colère, je me suis déchiré le visage avec les ongles et j'ai passé les nuits à crier de rage et de désespoir.

Il sanglotait et on eût dit que le sang allait sortir de ses veines.

— Tu es fou Garcia, dit le Cardinal en se levant effrayé.

— Fou. Ah oui fou. Assassin peut-être. Écoute, Monseigneur le Cardinal François nommé par le pape. Écoute notre vie c'était un duel terrible à mort mais un duel à outrage dont le récit fait frémir d'horreur, tu as eu l'avantage jusqu'alors, la société t'a protégé. Tout est juste et bien fait - Tu m'as supplicié toute ma vie, je t'égorge maintenant, - et il l'avait renversé d'un bras furieux et tenait son épée sur sa poitrine.

— Oh pardon, pardon Garcia, disait François d'une voix tremblante - que t'ai-je fait ?

— Ce que tu m'as fait tiens ?

Et il lui cracha au visage.

— Je te rends injure pour injure, mépris pour mépris, tu es Cardinal j'insulte ta dignité de Cardinal, tu es beau, fort et puissant j'insulte ta force, ta beauté et ta puissance. Car je te tiens sous moi, tu palpites de crainte sous mon genou. Ah tu trembles. Tremble donc et souffre comme j'ai tremblé et souffert. Tu ne savais pas toi dont la sagesse est si vantée combien un homme ressemble au démon quand l'injustice l'a rendu bête féroce. Ah je souffre de te voir vivre tiens.

....

Et un cri perçant partit de dessous le feuillage et fit envoler un nid de chouettes.

Garcia remonta sur son cheval et partit au galop. Il avait des taches de sang sur sa fraise de dentelles.

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Les bons habitants de Florence furent réveillés vers minuit par un grand bruit de chevaux et de cavaliers qui traversaient les rues avec des torches et des flambeaux.

C'était monseigneur le duc qui revenait de la chasse.

Plus loin suivaient silencieusement quatre valets portant une litière, ils avaient l'air de vouloir passer inaperçus et ils marchaient à petits pas. À côté d'eux il y avait un homme qui paraissait leur chef. Il était triste, enveloppé dans son manteau et la tête baissée sur sa poitrine, il semblait vouloir comprimer des larmes.

Quand on arriva au château du duc une femme courut au-devant des chasseurs en demandant où était le Cardinal. Quand elle aperçut la litière elle demanda au duc son mari :

— Qu’y a-t-il là-dedans ?

L’homme au manteau lança à Garcia un regard sévère et froid puis hésitant quelques secondes il dit avec un accent qui faisait mal à entendre :

— Un cadavre -

V

Un demi-jour éclairait l’appartement et les rideaux bien fermés n’y laissaient entrer qu’une lumière douce et paisible.

Un homme s’y promenait à grands pas. C’était un vieillard. Il paraissait [avoir] des pensées qui lui remuaient fortement l’âme, tantôt il allait à sa table et y prenait une épée nue qu’il examinait avec répugnance, tantôt il allait vers le fond où était tendu un large rideau noir autour duquel venaient bourdonner les mouches. Il faisait frais dans cette chambre et l’on y sentait même quelque chose d’humide et de sépulcral semblable à l’odeur d’un amphithéâtre de dissection.

Enfin il s’arrêta tout à coup et frappant du pied avec colère : - Oh Oui - Oui que justice se fasse - il le faut. - Le sang du juste crie vengeance vers nous - Eh bien vengeance. Et il ordonna à un de ses valets d’appeler Garcia.

Celui-ci arriva bientôt, ses lèvres étaient blanches et ridées comme quelqu’un qui sort d’un accès de fièvre et ses cheveux noirs rejetés en arrière laissaient voir un front pâle où la malédiction de Dieu semblait empreinte.

— Vous m’avez demandé mon père ? dit-il en [entrant].

— Oui. Ah tu es déjà en toilette, tu as changé d’habits. Ce ne sont pas ceux que tu portais hier. Les taches se font bien voir sur un vêtement noir n’est-ce pas, Garcia ? Tes doigts sont humides. - Oh tu as bien lavé tes mains, tu t’es parfumé les cheveux.

— Mais pourquoi ces questions mon père ?

— Pourquoi ? Ah.

Garcia mon fils - N’est-ce pas sur mon honneur que la chasse est un royal plaisir mais quelquefois on oublie son gibier et s’il ne se trouvait pas quelqu’un assez complaisant pour le ramasser...

Il prit son épée et amenant Garcia au fond de la salle, il ouvrit le rideau de la main gauche et détournant les yeux - Vois et contemple ! ! !

Étendu sur un lit le cadavre était nu, et le sang suintait encore de ses blessures. Sa figure était horriblement contractée, ses yeux étaient ouverts et tournés du côté de Garcia - Et ce regard morne et terne de cadavre lui fit claquer tournés du côté de Garcia - Et ce regard morne et terne de cadavre lui fit claquer des dents. Sa bouche était entr'ouverte et quelques mouches à viande venaient bourdonner jusque sur ses dents, il y en avait alors cinq ou six qui restèrent collées dans du sang figé qu'il avait sur la joue puis il y avait ce teint livide de la peau, cette blancheur des ongles et quelques meurtrissures sur les bras et les genoux.

Garcia resta muet de stupeur et d'étonnement. - Il tomba à genoux, froid et immobile comme le cadavre du Cardinal. Quelque chose siffla dans l'air.

L'on entendit le bruit d'un corps pesant qui tombait sur le parquet et un râle horrible, un râle forcené, un râle d'enfer retentit sous les voûtes.

VI

Florence était en deuil - ses enfants mouraient par la peste. Depuis un mois elle régnait en souveraine dans la ville mais depuis deux jours surtout sa fureur avait augmenté. Le peuple mourait en maudissant Dieu et ses ministres, il blasphémait dans son délire et sur son lit d'angoisse et de douleur, s'il lui restait un mot à dire c'était une malédiction. Et puisqu'il était sûr de sa fin prochaine il se vautrait en riant stupidement dans la débauche et dans toute la boue du vice.

C'est qu'il est dans l'existence d'un homme de tels malheurs, des douleurs si vives, des désespoirs si poignants que l'on abandonne pour le plaisir d'insulter celui qui nous fait souffrir et que l'on jette avec mépris sa dignité d'homme comme un masque de théâtre. - Et l'on se livre à ce que la débauche a de plus sale, le vice de plus dégradant, on expire en buvant et au son de la musique.

C'est l'exécuté qui s'enivre avant son supplice.

C'est alors que les philosophes devraient considérer l'homme quand ils parlent de sa dignité et de l'esprit des masses.

Un événement important était pourtant venu distraire Florence plongée au milieu de ses cris de désespoir, et de ses prières, de ses voeux ridicules.

C'était la mort des deux fils de Cosme de Médicis que le fléau n'avait pas plus épargnés que le dernier laquais du dernier bourgeois.

C'était ce jour-là qu'on fêtait leurs obsèques et le peuple pour un instant s'était soulevé de son matelas, avait ouvert sa fenêtre de ses mains défaillantes et moites de sueur pour avoir la joie de contempler deux grands seigneurs que l'on portait en terre.

Le convoi passait triste et recueilli dans son deuil pompeux, au milieu de Florence.

Les corps de Garcia et de François étaient étendus sur des brancards tirés par des mules noires.

Tout était calme et paisible et l’on n’entendait que le pas lent des mules sur le pavé, le bruit du brancard dont les timons craquaient à chaque mouvement puis les chants [de] mort qui gémissaient à l’entour de ces deux cadavres puis dans le lointain de divers côtés on entendait comme un chant de tristesse le glas funèbre de la cloche qui gémissait de sa forte voix d’airain.

À côté des brancards marchaient le docteur Roderigo, le duc de Bellamonte, le comte de Salfieri.

— Est-il possible, dit ce dernier en s’adressant au médecin, est-il possible qu’un homme tué de la peste ait de si larges balafres ? Et il lui montrait les blessures de Garcia.

— Oui quelquefois. Ce sont des ventouses, et l’on n’entendait que le chant des morts et le glas funèbre des cloches qui gémissaient par les airs.

Moralité

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Car à toutes choses
il en
faut
une.

BIBLIOMANIE

CONTE.

Dans une rue étroite et sans soleil de Barcelone vivait, il y a peu de temps, un de ces hommes au front pâle, à l’œil terne, creux, un de ces êtres sataniques et bizarres tels qu’Hoffmann en déterrait dans ses songes.

C’était Giacomo le libraire.

Il avait trente ans et il passait déjà pour vieux et usé ; sa taille était haute, mais courbée comme celle d’un vieillard ; ses cheveux étaient longs, mais blancs ; ses mains étaient fortes et nerveuses, mais desséchées et couvertes de rides ; son costume était misérable et déguenillé, il avait l’air gauche et embarrassé, sa physionomie était pâle, triste, laide, et même insignifiante. On le voyait rarement dans les rues, si ce n’est les jours où l’on vendait à l’enchère des livres rares et curieux. Alors, ce n’était plus le même homme indolent et ridicule, ses yeux s’animaient, il courait, il marchait, il trépignait, il avait peine à modérer sa joie, ses inquiétudes, ses angoisses et ses douleurs ; il revenait chez lui haletant, essoufflé, hors d’haleine, il prenait le livre chéri, le couvait des yeux, et le regardait et l’aimait comme un avare son trésor, un père sa fille, un roi sa couronne.

Cet homme n’avait jamais parlé à personne, si ce n’est aux bouquinistes et aux brocanteurs ; il était taciturne et rêveur, sombre et triste ; il n’avait qu’une idée, qu’un amour, qu’une passion : les livres ; et cet amour, cette passion le brûlaient intérieurement, lui usaient ses jours, lui dévoraient son existence.

Souvent, la nuit, les voisins voyaient, à travers les vitres du libraire, une lumière qui vacillait, puis elle s’avançait, s’éloignait, montait, puis quelquefois elle s’éteignait ; alors ils entendaient frapper à leur porte et c’était Giacomo qui venait rallumer sa bougie qu’une rafale avait soufflée.

Ces nuits fiévreuses et brûlantes, il les passait dans ses livres. Il courait dans les magasins, il parcourait les galeries de sa bibliothèque avec extase et ravissement ; puis il s’arrêtait, les cheveux en désordre, les yeux fixes et étincelants, ses mains tremblaient en touchant le bois des rayons ; ils étaient chauds et humides.

Il prenait un livre, en retournait les feuillets, en tâtait le papier, en examinait les dorures, le couvert, les lettres, l’encre, les plis, et l’arrangement des dessins pour le mot *finis ;* puis il le changeait de place, le mettait dans un rayon plus élevé, et restait des heures entières à en regarder le titre et la forme.

Il allait ensuite vers ses manuscrits, car c’étaient les enfants chéris ; il en prenait un, le plus vieux, le plus usé, le plus sale, il en regardait le parchemin avec amour et bonheur, il en sentait la poussière sainte et vénérable, puis ses narines s’enflaient de joie et d’orgueil, et un sourire venait sur ses lèvres.

Oh ! il était heureux, cet homme, heureux au milieu de toute cette science dont il comprenait à peine la portée morale et la valeur littéraire ; il était heureux, assis entre tous ces livres, promenant les yeux sur les lettres dorées, sur les pages usées, sur le parchemin terni ; il aimait la science comme un aveugle aime le jour.

Non ! ce n’était point la science qu’il aimait, c’était sa forme et son expression ; il aimait un livre, parce que c’était un livre, il aimait son odeur, sa forme, son titre. Ce qu’il aimait dans un manuscrit, c’était sa vieille date illisible, les lettres gothiques bizarres et étranges, les lourdes dorures qui chargeaient ses dessins ; c’étaient ses pages couvertes de poussière, poussière dont il aspirait avec délice le parfum suave et tendre ; c'était ce joli mot *finis*, entouré de deux Amours, portés sur un ruban, s'appuyant sur une fontaine, gravé sur une tombe ou reposant dans une corbeille entre des roses, les pommes d'or et les bouquets bleus.

Cette passion l'avait absorbé tout entier, il mangeait à peine, il ne dormait plus, mais il rêvait des nuits et des jours entiers à son idée fixe : les livres.

Il rêvait à tout ce que devait avoir de divin, de sublime et de beau une bibliothèque royale, et il rêvait à s'en faire une aussi grande que celle d'un roi. Comme il respirait à son aise, comme il était fier et puissant, lorsqu'il plongeait sa vue dans les immenses galeries où son œil se perdait dans les livres ! il levait la tête ? des livres ! il l'abaissait ? des livres ! à droite, à gauche, encore !

Il passait dans Barcelone pour un homme étrange et infernal, pour un savant ou un sorcier.

Il savait à peine lire.

Personne n'osait lui parler, tant son front était sévère et pâle ; il avait l'air méchant et traître, et pourtant jamais il ne toucha à un enfant pour lui nuire ; il est vrai que jamais il ne fit l'aumône.

Il gardait tout son argent, tout son bien, toutes ses émotions pour ses livres ; il avait été moine, et pour eux il avait abandonné Dieu ; plus tard il leur sacrifia ce que les hommes ont de plus cher après leur Dieu : l'argent ; ensuite il leur donna ce qu'on a de plus cher après l'argent : son âme.

Depuis quelque temps surtout, ses veilles étaient plus longues ; on voyait plus tard sa lampe des nuits qui brûlait sur ses livres, c'est qu'il avait un nouveau trésor : un manuscrit.

Un matin, entra dans sa boutique un jeune étudiant de Salamanque. Il paraissait riche, car deux valets de pied tenaient sa mule à la porte de Giacomo ; il avait une toque de velours rouge, et des bagues brillaient sur ses doigts.

Il n'avait pourtant pas cet air de suffisance et de nullité habituel aux gens qui ont des valets galonnés, de beaux habits et la tête creuse ; non, cet homme était un savant, mais un riche savant, c'est-à-dire un homme qui, à Paris, écrit sur une table d'acajou, a des livres dorés sur tranches, des pantoufles brodées, des curiosités chinoises, une robe de chambre, une pendule en or, un chat qui dort sur un tapis et deux ou trois femmes qui lui font lire ses vers, sa prose et ses contes, qui lui disent : vous avez de l'esprit, et qui ne le trouvent qu'un fat.

Les manières de ce gentilhomme étaient polies ; en entrant il salua le libraire, fit une profonde révérence, et lui dit d'un ton affable :

— N'avez-vous point ici, maître, des manuscrits ?

Le libraire devint embarrassé et répondit en balbutiant :

— Mais, seigneur, qui vous l'a dit ?

— Personne, mais je le suppose.

Et il déposa sur le bureau du libraire une bourse pleine d’or, qu’il fit sonner en souriant ainsi que tout homme qui touche à de l’argent dont il est le possesseur.

— Seigneur, reprit Giacomo, il est vrai que j’en ai, mais je ne les vends pas, je les garde.

— Et pourquoi ? qu’en faites-vous ?

— Pourquoi, monseigneur ? — et il devint rouge de colère — ce que j’en fais ? Oh ! non, vous ignorez ce que c’est qu’un manuscrit !

— Pardon, maître Giacomo, je m’y connais, et pour en donner la preuve, je vous dirai que vous avez ici la *Chronique de Turquie !*

— Moi ? oh ! on vous a trompé, monseigneur.

— Non, Giacomo, répondit le gentilhomme ; rassurez-vous, je ne veux point vous le voler, mais vous l’acheter.

— Jamais !

— Oh ! vous me le vendrez, répondit l’écolier, car vous l’avez ici, il a été vendu chez Ricciami le jour de sa mort.

— Eh bien, oui, seigneur, je l’ai, c’est mon trésor, c’est ma vie. Oh ! vous ne me l’arracherez pas ! Écoutez ! je vais vous confier un secret : Baptisto, vous savez Baptisto, le libraire qui demeure sur la place Royale, mon rival et mon ennemi, eh bien, il ne l’a pas, lui, et moi je l’ai !

— Combien l’estimez-vous ?

Giacomo s’arrêta longtemps et répondit d’un air fier :

— Deux cents pistoles, monseigneur.

Il regarda le jeune homme d’un air triomphant ayant l’air de lui dire : vous allez vous en aller, c’est trop cher, et pourtant je ne le donnerai pas à moins.

Il se trompa, car celui-ci lui montrant la bourse :

— En voilà trois cents, dit-il.

Giacomo pâlit, il fut près de s’évanouir.

— Trois cents pistoles ? répéta-t-il, mais je suis un fou, monseigneur, je ne le vendrai pas pour quatre cents.

L’étudiant se mit à rire en fouillant dans sa poche, dont il tira deux autres bourses.

— Eh bien, Giacomo, en voilà cinq cents. Oh ! non, tu ne veux pas le vendre, Giacomo ? mais je l’aurai, je l’aurai aujourd’hui, à l’instant, il me le faut, dussé-je vendre cette bague donnée dans un baiser d’amour, dussé-je vendre mon épée garnie de diamants, mes hôtels et mes palais, dussé-je vendre mon âme ; il me faut ce livre, oui, il me le faut à toute force, à tout prix ; dans huit jours je soutiens une thèse à Salamanque, il me faut ce livre pour être docteur, il me faut être docteur pour être archevêque, il me faut la pourpre sur les épaules pour avoir la tiare au front.

Giacomo s'approcha de lui et le regarda avec admiration et respect comme le seul homme qu'il ait compris.

— Écoute, Giacomo, interrompit le gentilhomme, je vais te dire un secret qui va faire ta fortune et ton bonheur : ici il y a un homme, cet homme demeure à la barrière des Arabes, il a un livre, c'est le *Mystère de saint Michel.*

— Le *Mystère de saint Michel ?* dit Giacomo en poussant un cri de joie, oh ! merci, vous m'avez sauvé la vie.

— Vite ! donne-moi la *Chronique de Turquie.*

Giacomo courut vers un rayon ; là, il s'arrêta tout à coup, s'efforça de pâlir, et dit d'un air étonné :

— Mais, monseigneur, je ne l'ai pas.

— Oh ! Giacomo, tes ruses sont bien grossières et tes regards trahissent tes paroles.

— Oh ! monseigneur, je vous jure, je ne l'ai pas.

— Mais tu es un vieux fou, Giacomo ; tiens, voilà six cents pistoles.

Giacomo prit le manuscrit et le donna au jeune homme :

— Prenez-en soin, dit-il, lorsque celui-ci s'éloignait en riant et disait à ses valets en montant sur sa mule :

— Vous savez que votre maître est un fou, mais il vient de tromper un imbécile. L'idiot de moine bourru ! répéta-t-il en riant, il croit que je vais être pape !

Et le pauvre Giacomo restait triste et désespéré, appuyant son front brûlant sur les carreaux de sa boutique, en pleurant de rage et regardant avec peine et douleur son manuscrit, objet de ses soins et de ses affections, que portaient les grossiers valets du gentilhomme.

— Oh ! sois maudit ! homme de l'enfer ! sois maudit, maudit cent fois, toi qui m'as volé tout ce que j'aimais sur la terre. Oh ! je ne pourrai vivre maintenant ! je sais qu'il m'a trompé, l'infâme, il m'a trompé. S'il en était ainsi, oh ! je me vengerai ! Courons vite à la barrière des Arabes. Si cet homme allait me demander une somme que je n'ai pas ? que faire alors ? Oh ! c'est à en mourir !

Il prend l'argent que l'étudiant avait laissé sur son bureau et sortit en courant.

Pendant qu'il allait par les rues, il ne voyait rien de tout ce qui l'entourait, tout passait devant lui comme une fantasmagorie dont il ne comprenait pas l'énigme, il n'entendait ni la marche des passants ni le bruit des roues sur le pavé ; il ne pensait, il ne rêvait, il ne voyait qu'une chose : les livres. Il pensait au *Mystère de saint Michel*, il se le créait dans son imagination, large et mince avec un parchemin, orné de lettres d'or, il tâchait de deviner le nombre des pages qu'il devait contenir ; son cœur battait avec violence comme celui d'un homme qui attend son arrêt de mort.

Enfin il arriva.

L'étudiant ne l'avait pas trompé ! !

Sur un vieux tapis de Perse tout troué étaient étendus par terre une dizaine de livres. Giacomo, sans parler à l'homme qui dormait à côté, couché comme ses livres, et ronflait au soleil, tomba à genoux, se mit à parcourir d'un œil inquiet et soucieux dans les dos de livres, puis il se leva, pâle et abattu, et éveilla le bouquiniste en criant, et lui demanda :

— Eh l'ami, n'avez-vous pas ici le *Mystère de saint Michel ?*

— Quoi ! dit le marchand en ouvrant les yeux, ne voulez-vous pas parler d'un livre que j'ai ? regardez !

— L'imbécile ! dit Giacomo en frappant du pied, en as-tu d'autres que ceux-là ?

— Oui, tenez, les voici.

Et il lui montra un petit paquet de brochures liées avec des cordes. Giacomo les rompit, en lut le titre en une seconde.

— Enfer ! dit-il, ce n'est pas cela. Ne l'as-tu pas vendu par hasard ? Oh ! si tu le possèdes, donne, donne ; cent pistoles, deux cents, tout ce que tu voudras.

Le bouquiniste le regardant étonné :

— Oh ! vous voulez peut-être parler d'un petit livre que j'ai donné hier, pour huit maravédis, au curé de la cathédrale d'Oviedo ?

— Te souviens-tu du titre de ce livre ?

— Non.

— N'était-ce pas : *Mystère de saint Michel ?*

— Oui, c'est cela.

Giacomo s'écarta à quelques pas de là et tomba sur la poussière comme un homme fatigué d'une apparition qui l'obsède.

Quand il revint à lui, il faisait soir et le soleil qui rougissait à l'horizon était à son déclin. Il se leva et rentra chez lui, malade et désespéré.

Huit jours après, Giacomo n'avait pas oublié sa triste déception, et sa blessure était encore vive et saignante ; il n'avait point dormi depuis trois nuits, car ce jour-là devait se vendre le premier livre qui ait été imprimé en Espagne, exemplaire unique dans le royaume. Il y avait longtemps qu'il avait envie de l'avoir ; aussi fut-il heureux, le jour qu'on lui annonça que le propriétaire était mort.

Mais une inquiétude lui tenait à l'âme : Baptisto pourrait l'acheter, Baptisto, qui, depuis quelque temps, lui enlevait, non les chalands, peu lui importait ! mais tout ce qui paraissait de rare et de vieux, Baptisto dont il haïssait la renommée d'une haine d'artiste. Cet homme lui devenait à charge, c'était toujours lui qui enlevait les manuscrits ; aux ventes publiques, il enchérissait et il obtenait. Oh ! que de fois le pauvre moine, dans ses rêves d'ambition et d'orgueil, que de fois il vit venir à lui la longue main de Baptisto, qui passait à travers la foule comme aux jours de vente, pour venir lui enlever un trésor qu'il avait rêvé si longtemps, qu'il avait convoité avec tant d'amour et d'égoïsme ! Que de fois aussi il fut tenté de finir avec un crime ce que ni l'argent ni la patience n'avait pu faire ; mais il refoulait cette idée dans son cœur, tâchait de s'étourdir sur la haine qu'il portait à cet homme, et s'endormait sur ses livres.

Dès le matin, il fut devant la maison dans laquelle la vente allait avoir lieu ; il y fut avant le commissaire, avant le public, et avant le soleil.

Aussitôt que les portes s'en ouvrirent, il se précipita dans l'escalier, monta dans la salle et demanda ce livre. On le lui montra ; c'était déjà un bonheur.

Oh ! jamais il n'en avait vu de si beau et qui lui complût davantage. C'était une bible latine, avec des commentaires grecs ; il la regarda et l'admira plus que tous les autres, il le serrait entre ses doigts en riant amèrement, comme un homme qui se meurt de faim et qui voit de l'or.

Jamais, non plus, il n'avait tant désiré. Oh ! qu'il eût voulu alors, même au prix de tout ce qu'il avait, de ses livres, de ses manuscrits, de ses six cents pistoles, au prix de son sang, oh ! qu'il eût voulu avoir ce livre ! Vendre tout, tout pour avoir ce livre ; n'avoir que lui, mais l'avoir à lui ; pouvoir le montrer à toute l'Espagne, avec un rire d'insulte et de pitié pour le roi, pour les princes, pour les savants, pour Baptisto, et dire : À moi ! à moi ce livre ! — et le tenir dans ses deux mains toute sa vie, le palper comme il le touche, le sentir comme il le sent, et le posséder comme il le regarde !

Enfin l'heure arriva. Baptisto était au milieu, le visage serein, l'air calme et paisible. On arriva au livre, Giacomo offrit d'abord vingt pistoles, Baptisto se tut et ne regarda pas la bible. Déjà le moine avançait la main pour saisir ce livre, qui lui avait coûté si peu de peines et d'angoisses, quand Baptisto se mit à dire : quarante. Giacomo vit avec horreur son antagoniste qui s'enflammait à mesure que le prix montait plus haut.

— Cinquante ! cria-t-il de toutes ses forces.

— Soixante ! répondit Baptisto.

— Cent.

— Quatre cents.

— Cinq cents, ajouta le moine avec regret.

Et tandis qu'il trépignait d'impatience et de colère, Baptisto affectait un calme ironique et méchant. Déjà la voix aiguë et cassée de l'huissier avait répété trois fois : cinq cents, déjà Giacomo se rattachait au bonheur ; un souffle échappé des lèvres d'un homme vint le faire évanouir, car le libraire de la place Royale se pressant dans la foule, se mit à dire : six cents. La voix de l'huissier répéta six cents quatre fois, et aucune autre voix ne lui répondit ; seulement on voyait, à un des bouts de la table, un homme au front pâle, aux mains tremblantes, un homme qui riait amèrement de ce rire des damnés du Dante ; il baissait la tête, la main dans sa poitrine, et quand il la retira, elle était chaude et mouillée, car il avait de la chair et du sang au bout des ongles.

On se passa le livre de main en main pour le faire parvenir à Baptisto ; le livre passa devant Giacomo, il en sentit l'odeur, il le vit courir un instant devant ses yeux, puis s'arrêter à un homme qui le prit et l'ouvrit en riant. Alors le moine baissa la tête pour cacher son visage, car il pleurait.

En retournant par les rues, sa démarche était lente et pénible, il avait sa figure étrange et stupide, sa tournure grotesque et ridicule ; il avait l'air d'un homme enivré, car il chancelait ; ses yeux étaient à moitié fermés, il avait les paupières rouges et brûlantes ; la sueur coulait sur son front, et il balbutiait entre ses dents, comme un homme qui a trop bu et qui a pris trop de sa part au banquet de la fête.

Sa pensée n'était plus à lui, elle errait comme son corps, sans avoir de but ni d'intention ; elle était chancelante, irrésolue, lourde et bizarre ; sa tête lui pesait comme du plomb, son front le brûlait comme un brasier.

Oui, il était ivre de ce qu'il avait senti, il était fatigué de ses jours, il était soûl de l'existence.

Ce jour-la — c'était un dimanche — le peuple se promenait dans les rues en causant et en chantant. Le pauvre moine écouta leurs causeries et leurs chants ; il ramassa dans la route quelques bribes de phrases, quelques mots, quelques cris, mais il lui semblait que c'était toujours le même son, la même voix, c'était un brouhaha vague, confus, une musique bizarre et bruyante qui bourdonnait dans son cerveau et l'accablait.

— Tiens, disait un homme à son voisin, as-tu entendu parler de l'histoire de ce pauvre curé d'Oviedo, qui fut trouvé étranglé dans son lit ?

Ici c'était un groupe de femmes qui prenaient le frais du soir sur leurs portes ; voici ce qu'entendait Giacomo en passant devant elles :

— Dites donc, Martha, savez-vous qu'il y a eu, à Salamanque, un jeune riche, don Bernardo, vous savez ? celui qui, lorsqu'il vint ici il y a quelques jours, avait une mule noire si jolie et si bien équipée, et qui la faisait piaffer sur les pavés ; eh bien, le pauvre jeune homme, on m'a dit ce matin à l'église, qu'il était mort.

— Mort ? dit une jeune fille.

— Oui, petite, répondit la femme ; il est mort ici, à l'auberge de Saint-Pierre ; d'abord il se sentit mal à la tête, enfin il eut la fièvre, et au bout de quatre jours on le porta en terre.

Giacomo en entendit encore d'autres ; tous ces souvenirs le firent trembler, et un sourire de férocité vint errer sur sa bouche.

Le moine rentra chez lui épuisé et malade ; il se coucha par terre sous le banc de son bureau et dormit. Sa poitrine était oppressée, un son rauque et creux sortait de sa gorge ; il s'éveilla avec la fièvre ; un horrible cauchemar avait épuisé ses forces.

Il faisait nuit alors, et onze heures venaient de sonner à l'église voisine. Giacomo entendit des cris : “Au feu ! au feu”. Il ouvrit ses vitres, alla dans les rues et vit en effet des flammes qui s'élevaient au delà des toits ; il rentra chez lui et il allait reprendre sa lampe pour aller dans ses magasins, quand il entendit devant ses fenêtres, des hommes qui passaient en courant et qui disaient : “C'est sur la place Royale, le feu est chez Baptisto”.

Le moine tressaillit, un rire éclatant partit du fond de son cœur, et il se dirigea avec la foule vers la maison du libraire.

La maison était en feu, les flammes s'élevaient, hautes et terribles, et, chassées par les vents, elles s'élançaient vers le beau ciel bleu d'Espagne, qui planait sur Barcelone agitée et tumultueuse, comme un voile sur des larmes.

On voyait un homme à moitié nu, il se désespérait, s'arrachait les cheveux, se roulait par terre en blasphémant Dieu et en poussant des cris de rage et de désespoir, c'était Baptisto.

Le moine contemplait son désespoir et ses cris avec calme et bonheur, avec ce rire féroce de l'enfant riant des tortures du papillon dont il a arraché les ailes.

On voyait, dans un appartement élevé, des flammes qui brûlaient quelques liasses de papiers.

Giacomo prit une échelle, l'appuya contre la muraille noircie et chancelante, l'échelle tremblait sous ses pas, il monta en courant, arriva à cette fenêtre. Malédiction ! ce n'était que quelques vieux livres de librairie, sans valeur, ni mérite. Que faire ? il était entré, il fallait ou avancer au milieu de cette atmosphère enflammée ou redescendre par l'échelle dont le bois commençait à s'échauffer. Non ! il avança.

Il traversa plusieurs salles, le plancher tremblait sous ses pas, les portes tombaient lorsqu'il en approchait, les solives se pendaient sur sa tête, il courait au milieu de l'incendie, haletant et furieux.

Il lui fallait ce livre ! il le lui fallait ou la mort !

Il ne savait où diriger sa course, mais il courait.

Enfin il arriva devant une cloison qui était intacte, il la brisa avec un coup de pied et vit un appartement obscur et étroit ; il tâtonnait, sentit quelques livres sous ses doigts, il en toucha un, le prit et l'emporta hors de cette salle. C'était lui ! lui, le *Mystère de saint Michel !* Il retourna sur ses pas, comme un homme éperdu et en délire, il sauta par-dessus les trous, il volait dans la flamme, mais il ne retrouva point l'échelle qu'il avait dressée contre le mur ; il arriva à une fenêtre et descendit en dehors, se cramponnant avec les mains et les genoux aux sinuosités, ses vêtements commençaient à s'enflammer, et, lorsqu'il arriva dans la rue, il se roula dans le ruisseau pour éteindre les flammes qui le brûlaient.

Quelques mois se passèrent, et l'on n'entendait plus parler du libraire Giacomo, si ce n'est comme un de ces hommes singuliers et étranges, dont la multitude rit dans les rues parce qu'elle ne comprend point leurs passions et leurs manies.

L'Espagne était occupée d'intérêts plus graves et plus sérieux. Un mauvais génie semblait peser sur elle ; chaque jour, de nouveaux meurtres et de nouveaux crimes, et tout cela paraissait venir d'une main invisible et cachée ; c'était un poignard suspendu sur chaque toit et sur chaque famille ; c'était des gens qui disparaissaient tout à coup sans qu'on ait aucune trace du sang que leur blessure avait répandu ; un homme partait pour un voyage, il ne revenait plus ; on ne savait à qui attribuer cet horrible fléau, car il faut attribuer le malheur à quelqu'un d'étranger, mais le bonheur à soi.

En effet, il est des jours si néfastes dans la vie, des époques si funestes pour les hommes, que, ne sachant qui accabler de ses malédictions, on crie vers le ciel ; c'est dans ces époques malheureuses pour les peuples que l'on croit à la fatalité.

Une police vive et empressée avait tâché, il est vrai, de découvrir l'auteur de tous ces forfaits, l'espion soudoyé s'était introduit dans toutes les maisons, avait écouté toutes les paroles, entendu tous les cris, vu tous les regards, et il n'avait rien appris.

Le Procureur avait ouvert toutes les lettres, brisé tous les cachets, fouillé dans tous les coins, et il n'avait rien trouvé.

Un matin pourtant, Barcelone avait quitté sa robe de deuil pour aller s'entasser dans les salles de la Justice où l'on allait condamner à mort celui que l'on supposait être l'auteur de tous ces horribles meurtres. Le peuple cachait ses larmes dans un rire convulsif, car lorsqu'on souffre et qu'on pleure c'est une consolation bien égoïste, il est vrai, mais enfin, celle de voir d'autres souffrances et d'autres larmes.

Le pauvre Giacomo, si calme et si paisible, était accusé d'avoir brûlé la maison de Baptisto, d'avoir volé sa Bible ; il était chargé encore de mille autres accusations.

Il était donc là, assis sur les bancs des meurtriers et des brigands, lui, l’honnête bibliophile ; le pauvre Giacomo, qui ne pensait qu’à ses livres, était donc compromis dans les mystères de meurtre et d’échafaud.

La salle regorgeait de peuple. Enfin le Procureur se leva et lut son rapport ; il était long et diffus, à peine si on pouvait en distinguer l’action principale des parenthèses et des réflexions. Le Procureur disait qu’il avait trouvé dans la maison de Giacomo la Bible qui appartenait à Baptisto, puisque cette Bible était la seule en Espagne ; or il était probable que c’était Giacomo qui avait mis le feu à la maison de Baptisto pour s’emparer de ce livre rare et précieux. Il se tut et se rassit essoufflé.

Quant au moine, il était calme et paisible et ne répondit pas même par un regard à la multitude qui l’insultait.

Son avocat se leva, il parla longtemps et bien ; enfin quand il crut avoir ébranlé son auditoire, il souleva sa robe et en tira un livre, il l’ouvrit et le montra au public. C’était un autre exemplaire de cette Bible.

Giacomo poussa un cri, et tomba sur son banc en s’arrachant les cheveux. Le moment était critique, on attendait une parole de l’accusé, mais aucun son ne sortit de sa bouche ; enfin il se rassit, regarda ses juges et son avocat comme un homme qui s’éveille.

On lui demanda s’il était coupable d’avoir mis le feu chez Baptisto.

— Non, hélas ! répondit-il.

— Non ?

— Mais allez-vous me condamner ? Oh ! condamnez-moi, je vous en prie ! la vie m’est à charge, mon avocat vous a menti, ne le croyez pas. Oh ! condamnez-moi, j’ai tué don Bernardo, j’ai tué le curé, j’ai volé le livre, le livre unique, car il n’y en a pas deux en Espagne. Messeigneurs, tuez-moi, je suis un misérable.

Son avocat s’avança vers lui et lui montrant cette Bible :

— Je puis vous sauver, regardez !

Giacomo prit le livre, le regarda.

— Oh ! moi qui croyais que c’était le seul en Espagne ! Oh ! dites-moi, dites-moi que vous m’avez trompé. Malheur sur vous !

Et il tomba évanoui.

Les juges revinrent et prononcèrent son arrêt de mort.

Giacomo l’entendit sans frémir et il parut même plus calme et plus tranquille. On lui fit espérer qu’en demandant sa grâce au pape il l’obtiendrait peut-être, il n’en voulut point, et demanda seulement que sa bibliothèque fût donnée à l’homme qui avait le plus de livres en Espagne.

Puis lorsque le peuple se fut écoulé, il demanda à son avocat d’avoir la bonté de lui prêter son livre ; celui-ci le lui donna.

Giacomo le prit amoureusement, versa quelques larmes sur les feuillets, le déchira avec colère, puis il en jeta les morceaux à la figure de son défenseur, en lui disant :

— Vous en avez menti, monsieur l’avocat ! Je vous disais bien que c’était le seul en Espagne !

RAGE ET IMPUISSANCE .

CONTE MALSAIN

POUR LES NERFS SENSIBLES ET LES ÂMES DÉVOTES.

Dieu n’est qu’un mot rêvé pour expliquer le monde.

Alp. de Lamartine.

Tout dormait calme et paisible dans le village de Mussen. De toutes les lumières qui avaient disparu lentement et les unes après les autres, une seule brillait encore aux vitres de ce bon monsieur Ohmlin, le médecin du pays.

Minuit venait de sonner à la petite église, la pluie tombait par torrents, et la neige, sortie des flancs du mont Pilate, tourbillonnait dans l’air emportée par les rafales de l’avalanche, la grêle résonnait sur les toits.

Cette lumière isolée éclairait une chambre basse, où était assise une femme d’environ soixante et quelques années. Elle était voûtée et couverte de rides, elle cousait, mais la fatigue souvent, surmontant son courage, lui faisait fermer les yeux et pencher la tête ; puis, si quelque coup de vent plus furieux et plus bruyant que tous les autres venait à faire craquer les auvents, si la pluie redoublait de violence, alors elle se réveillait de son assoupissement, tournait ses petits yeux creux sur la chandelle, dont la longue flammèche jetait encore quelque lueur autour d’elle, frissonnait, rapprochait son fauteuil de la cheminée, puis faisait un signe de croix. C’était une de ces bonnes et honnêtes filles qui naissent et meurent dans les familles, qui servent leurs maîtres jusqu’à la mort, prennent soin des enfants et les élèvent.

Celle-ci avait vu naître M. Ohmlin, elle avait été sa nourrice, plus tard sa servante ; aussi tremblait-elle alors pour son pauvre maître, parti dès le matin dans les montagnes et qui n’était point encore de retour ; elle n’osait plus reprendre son ouvrage, se tenait assise prés du foyer, les bras croisés, les pieds sur l’âtre et la tête baissée sur ses mains ; elle écoutait avec terreur le vent qui sifflait dans la serrure et hurlait sur la montagne. Triste et pensive, elle tâchait de se rappeler une de ces légendes si terribles et si sanglantes qu’on contait chez elle, jadis, dans sa jeunesse, quand toute la famille, réunie autour du Foyer, écoutait avec plaisir une histoire de meurtre ou de fantôme qui se passait aussi dans les montagnes, par une nuit d’hiver bien sombre et bien froide, au milieu des glaciers, des neiges et des torrents.

C’est dans ces souvenirs d’enfance qu’errait ainsi son imagination, et la vieille Berthe se retraçait ainsi toute sa vie, qui s’était passée monotone et uniforme, dans son village, et qui, dans un cercle si étroit, avait eu aussi ses passions, ses angoisses et ses douleurs.

Mais bientôt elle entendit sur le pavé de la place voisine, avec les aboiements sinistres et lugubres d’un chien, le pas saccadé d’un mulet ; elle tressaillit, se leva de sa chaise en s’écriant : “c’est lui !”, puis elle courut à la porte et l’ouvrit. Après quelques instants, un homme parut dans la salle, il était entouré d’un large manteau brun tout blanc de neige, l’eau ruisselait sur ses vêtements.

— Du feu, Berthe, dit-il en entrant, du feu ! je me meurs de froid.

La vieille fille sortit, puis revint au bout de quelques minutes, apportant dans ses bras des copeaux et un fagot qu’elle alluma avec les tisons blanchis qui jetaient encore quelque chaleur dans la cheminée. Aussitôt un feu clair et pétillant éclaira l’appartement, M. Ohmlin retira son manteau, qui laissa voir un homme de taille ordinaire, maigre, mais fort de complexion. Ses joues étaient creuses et pâles, et quand il eut ôté son chapeau, on vit un crâne large et blanc, couvert de peu de cheveux noirs. Il avait l’aspect sérieux et réservé, sa barbe noire lui donnait un aspect triste et sombre, tempéré par un sourire bienveillant qui régnait sur ses lèvres.

Il s’assit, mit ses pieds sur les chenets et caressa un de ces beaux chiens des Alpes assis à ses côtés ; l’animal regardait tristement son maître et lui léchait ses mains humides, rougies par le froid.

— Eh bien, comment ça va-t-il ? dit Berthe en se rapprochant, vos dents ?

— Mal, Berthe, oh ! bien mal ! cet air froid des montagnes me fait souffrir ; il y a quatre nuits que je n’ai fermé l’œil, ce n’est pas cette nuit que je dormirai.

— Ici, Fox ! (c’était le nom du chien favori qui était étendu aux pieds du médecin).

Fox se mit à faire entendre ce son singulier et traînard que Berthe avait entendu lorsqu’il était arrivé avec son maître.

— Tais-toi, Fox, tais-toi !

La pauvre bête se mit à geindre, comme quelqu’un qui souffre ou qui pleure.

— Tais-toi, Fox, poursuivit Berthe, tais·toi !

Et elle le repoussa rudement du pied.

— Pourquoi veux-tu le faire taire ? dit M. Ohmlin, il est de mauvaise humeur ; dame ! c’est tout simple, il est fatigué et il a faim.

— Tiens ! dit Berthe en lui jetant un morceau de pain, qu’elle alla chercher dans une armoire placée à côté de la cheminée, tiens ! Fox vit le pain d’un œil terne et humide, tourna sa belle tête noire vers son maître et le regarda tristement.

— Pauvre bête, dit-il, qu’as-tu ?

— C’est signe de malheur, dit Berthe ; Dieu et saint Maurice nous en préservent !

— Vieille Folle ! il est malade.

— Avez-vous Faim ? Que voulez-vous ?

— Moi, oh ! rien, je vais dormir s’il m’est possible, ou plutôt non, j’ai encore quelques pilules d’opium, je vais en essayer ; adieu, Berthe, éteins le feu et dors bien, ma brave fille. Quant à toi, Fox, à la niche !

Et il ouvrit la porte qui donnait sur la cour. Fox n’obéit point, il se coucha par terre et se traîna aux pieds de M. Ohmlin ; celui-ci, impatienté, le laissa et monta précipitamment dans sa chambre, il se coucha même avec le frisson de la fièvre, avala son opium et s’endormit dans des rêves d’or.

Quant à Berthe, elle dormait profondément et était pourtant réveillée quelquefois par les gémissements plaintifs du pauvre Fox, qui était resté dans l’escalier. La neige avait diminué, les nuages s’étaient évanouis et la lune commençait à se montrer derrière les sommets du mont Pilate.

Le matin, vers les neuf heures, la vieille Berthe s’éveilla, fit sa prière et descendit dans la salle ; la porte n’était point ouverte, elle s’en étonna : “Comme il dort aujourd’hui, le pauvre homme ! se dit-elle, probablement il va bientôt sortir”, mais aussitôt maître Bernardo arriva ; c’était un médecin des environs.

— Où est-il ? dit-il en entrant.

— Dans sa chambre, je pense ; allez voir, il dort encore.

Celui-ci monta et entra sans cérémonie en criant :

— Allons ! levez-vous donc ! il est tard. M. Ohmlin ne répondit pas, sa tête était penchée hors de son lit, et ses bras étaient étendus hors de la couche. Bernardo s’en approcha et le remuant avec violence :

— Diable ! il a le sommeil dur !

Mais le corps céda aux mouvements de la main et retomba dans sa position première, comme un cadavre.

Bernardo pâlit, il prit ses mains, elles étaient froides ! il s’approcha de sa bouche, il ne respirait pas ! il mit ses doigts sur sa poitrine, pas un battement !

Il resta pâle et stupéfait, regarda les paupières et les ouvrit, pas un regard ! il ne vit que cet œil terne et à demi fermé qu’ont les morts dans leur sommeil.

Bernardo sortit de la chambre du médecin en courant, Berthe lui demanda ce qu’il avait, il ne répondit pas ; seulement il était pâle et ses lèvres étaient blanches.

Quelques heures après, une douzaine de médecins, tous tristes et calmes, entouraient le lit de leur confrère, et un seul mot errait sur leurs lèvres : il est mort !

Chacun s'approchait du corps inanimé, le retournait dans tous les sens, puis s'écartait avec horreur et dégoût en disant : il est mort !

Un seul d'entre eux osa croire que ce cadavre n'était qu'endormi, et manquant de preuves, il ne put appuyer sa prévision et finit par se rendre à l'avis des autres médecins.

C'était un de ces jours d'hiver tristes et pluvieux, une pluie fine battait dans l'air, et des flocons de neige blanchissaient les rues du village. Ce jour-là il était triste aussi, le village ! son père, son bienfaiteur était mort ! Les maisons étaient fermées, on ne se parlait pas, les enfants ne riaient plus sur la place, les hommes étaient attendris et l'on pleurait.

Le modeste convoi s'avançait vers le cimetière, beau de sa douleur ; quelques hommes, vêtus de noir, portaient le cercueil dont le drap noir se blanchissait de neige ; les enfants aux têtes blondes suivaient par derrière, silencieux et étonnés ; les prêtres chantaient tout bas, car les larmes couvraient leurs voix.

Un ami suivait le mort dans sa tombe, mais celui-là, sa douleur était profonde et triste, plus désespérée et plus certaine que celle de tous ces hommes ; celui-là était-ce une femme ? un enfant ? une maîtresse ? un ami ? Non ! c'était un chien, le pauvre Fox, marchant la tête baissée, suivant son maître avec des cris plaintifs et des larmes aussi grosses que celles d'un homme.

Le cimetière était à mi-côte, le chemin était glissant et boueux, on n'entendait que le pas des prêtres et des hommes dont les gros souliers ferrés s'enfonçaient dans la boue ; puis le chant des morts, la neige qui tombait, la pluie qui roulait dans les ornières et le vent qui agitait le drap du cercueil.

Enfin on creusa la terre, on y déposa le coffre avec quelques prières et pour l'éternité, le fossoyeur jeta dessus quelques pelletées de terre, qui résonnèrent sur le bois de chêne en rendant un son vide et creux.

On se sépara, la grille de fer résonna dans ses gonds, et le cimetière redevint silencieux et paisible.

De tous les amis du convoi, un seul était resté, Fox, couché sur la terre et regardant avec tristesse les bougies vacillantes qui s'éloignaient dans le brouillard, et ces longs vêtements noirs qui s'abaissaient lentement et comme des ombres, dans la vallée brumeuse.

La nuit arriva bientôt, belle et blanche de sa lune, dont la lueur mélancolique s'abattait sur les tombes comme le doute sur le mourant.

M. Ohmlin dormait toujours d'un sommeil lourd et pesant ; il rêvait et c'étaient des songes beaux d'illusions, voluptueux d'amour et d'enchantements.

Il rêvait l’Orient ! l’Orient, avec son soleil brûlant, son ciel bleu, ses minarets dorés, ses pagodes de pierre ; l’Orient ! avec sa poésie toute d’amour et d’encens ; l’Orient ! avec ses parfums, ses émeraudes, ses fleurs, ses jardins aux pommes d’or ; l’Orient ! avec ses Fées, ses caravanes dans les sables ; l’Orient ! avec ses sérails, séjour des fraîches voluptés. Il rêvait, l’insensé, des ailes blanches des anges qui chantaient les versets du Coran aux oreilles du Prophète ; il rêvait des lèvres de femmes pures et rosées, il rêvait de grands yeux noirs qui n’avaient d’amour que pour lui, il rêvait cette peau brune et olivâtre des femmes de l’Asie, doux satin qu’effleure si souvent dans ses nuits le poète qui les rêve ; il rêvait tout cela ! Mais le réveil allait venir, morne, impitoyable, comme la réalité qu’il apporte.

Il rêvait l’amour dans une tombe ! mais le rêve s’efface, et la tombe reste.

Il ouvre les yeux, se sent entouré dans de longs plis, il s’en dégage, palpe de ses mains tremblantes le bois qui l’entoure, sur sa tête, sur les côtés, partout, partout... Il se tâte lui-même, se sent nu. Oh ! c’est un songe, un songe horrible, infernal, un cauchemar ! Arrière toute idée d’éternité, lui qui veut s’accrocher à la vie !

Mais l’éternité est là, couchée avec toi, dans son lit de noces, t’attirant vers elle, riant derrière ta tête avec une grimace de démon.

Il a peur, peur de ce squelette hideux, dont il lui semble palper les os sur sa poitrine. Oh ! non ! c’est impossible !

Et il voulut se rendormir, oublier tout cela, s’étourdir sur la réalité, effacer de sa pensée cette masse de plomb qui pesait sur sa tête et se bercer dans d’autres rêves.

Non ! il avait trop rêvé. Ah ! d’autres rêves maintenant ? rêve l’éternité si tu veux. Eh bien, l’Orient ? maintenant rêve donc l’Orient dans ta tombe, dans une pensée de volupté et dans des rêves dorés ! Non ! non ! l’agonie et les rêves d’enfer, l’agonie qui s’ arrache les cheveux, se tord de désespoir, appelle Satan et maudit Dieu !

Pourtant sa première terreur fut muette et calme, c’était un étonnement étrange et stupide, une stupeur d’idiot. “Oh ! non, non, se disait-il, voulant se faire illusion, non ! cela est impossible ! Oh ! non, mourir ainsi dans une tombe, mourir de désespoir et de faim, oh ! ce serait affreux !”, et il touchait tout ce qui l’entourait. “Mais je suis un fou ! je rêve ! Ce bois ? eh bien, c’est ma couche ; ce linge ? mon drap... mais un enfer ! une tombe ! un linceul.”, et il poussa un de ces rires amers qui eût retenti bien fort s’il n’eût pas éclaté dans une tombe.

Et puis il avait froid, il se sentait nu, et l’humidité du sépulcre humectait sa peau ; il tremblait, ses dents claquaient, la fièvre battait dans ses artères ; il se sentit piqué au doigt, le porta à ses yeux, il ne vit rien, il faisait si noir ! à ses lèvres, il sentit l’odeur du sang ; il s’était écorché à un clou de sa tombe.

“Mourir ! mourir ainsi, sans secours, sans pitié ! Oh ! non ! je sortirai de cet enfer, je sortirai de cette tombe. Cela ne s’est jamais vu, c’est à devenir fou avant de mourir de désespoir... Et oui, je vais mourir... Oh ! mourir ! ne plus rien voir de tout ce qui se passe sur cette terre ; la nature, les champs, le ciel, les montagnes, tout cela, je vais le quitter, je les ai quittés pour toujours !” et il se tordait dans sa tombe comme le serpent sous les griffes du tigre.

Il pleurait de rage, il s’arrachait les cheveux, criait après la vie, lui, si plein de force et de santé.

Que de larmes il versa sur ses mains ! que de cris il jeta dans sa tombe ! que de coups de colère dont il frappa son cercueil ! Il prit son linceul, le déchira avec ses ongles, le mit en pièces avec ses dents ; il lui fallait quelque chose à broyer, à anéantir sous ses mains, lui qui se sentait si impitoyablement écrasé sous celles de la fatalité. Enfin il s’arrêta dans son désespoir, s’étendit sur sa planche, ferma les yeux et pensa à Dieu.

Un rayon d’espérance vint briller dans sa tombe, il pensa à son âme dont il doutait depuis longtemps ; il crut à Dieu qu’il blasphémait tout à l’heure, et il espéra la vie dont il désespérait.

Il prêta l’oreille, entendit sur sa tête un bruit faible et léger, il lui semblait qu’on grattait la terre sur lui ; plus il écoutait, plus le bruit devenait fort. Il sourit de bonheur, joignit les mains et pria Dieu : “Oh ! merci ! merci ! tu m’as rendu la vie. Tu me la donnes donc, la vie ? je ne mourrai pas dans cette tombe hideuse et froide ? je mourrai, mais plus tard, car je ne serai vieux que dans bien des années ! Je vais vivre, la vie est à moi, ses délices, ses joies”, et il pleurait de bonheur, il maudit son scepticisme d’homme du monde et ses préjugés impies : “Merci, merci, Dieu, de m’avoir rendu tout cela !”.

Il entendit distinctement sur sa tête des pas d’hommes, on venait le délivrer, oh ! c’était sur ! Quelque âme charitable aura eu pitié de son malheur, on se sera douté que dans cette tombe était un homme au lieu d’un cadavre, et on vient le déterrer, c’est tout simple, la chose est certaine, positive. Oh ! béni soit l’homme qui vient lui donner la vie ! Oh ! béni soit celui-là ! Son cœur battait avec violence, il riait de bonheur ; s’il eût pu, il aurait sauté de joie.

Les pas se rapprochèrent, puis s’écartèrent ; et tout redevint calme.

C’était le fossoyeur qui venait chercher sa pioche qu’il avait oubliée, et, comme il pleuvait, il craignait qu’elle ne se rouillât.

Un bon enfant, ce fossoyeur, qui fumait une petite pipe allemande, avait un chapeau de paille des montagnes, et aimait le vin du Rhin. Il avait l’âme charitable, car lorsqu’il vit un chien sale et couvert de boue, qui s’amusait à bouleverser la terre bénite, au lieu de le tuer comme tout autre eût fait à sa place, il se contenta de le repousser du pied.

M. Ohmlin écouta longtemps, bien longtemps, rien ! il écouta encore, rien ! Oh ! c'était fini, il fallait mourir ! Mourir, comme il l'avait prévu, de cette mort horrible et cruelle qui arrive à chaque minute, vous brûle à petit feu, vous mange avec délices ! Et quand mourir ? Quand finira ce supplice, cette agonie, ce râle qui dure des siècles ?

Et il se mit a rire de pitié pour ses anciennes croyances, et puisque le ciel n'avait pas voulu le sauver, il appela l'enfer ; l'enfer vint à son secours et lui donna l'athéisme, le désespoir et les blasphèmes.

D'abord, il douta de Dieu, puis il le nia, puis il en rit, puis il insulta ce mot : "Bah ! se disait-il en riant d'un rire forcé, où est-il le créateur des misères ? ou est-il ? qu'il vienne me délivrer s'il existe !… Je te nie, mot inventé par les heureux ; je te nie, tu n'es qu'une puissance fatale et stupide, comme la foudre qui tombe et qui brûle."

Et il s'arrachait les cheveux et se déchirait le visage avec les ongles : "Tu crois que j'irai te prier à mon heure dernière ? Oh ! je suis trop fier et trop malheureux, je n'irai pas t'implorer, je t'abhorre ! L'éternité ? je la nie ! Ton paradis ? chimère ! Ton bonheur céleste ? je le méprise ! Ton enfer ? je le brave ! l'éternité ? c'est une tête de mort qu'on trouvera dans quelques mois, ici, à ma place." ·

Le rire était sur son front et les larmes étouffaient sa voix : « Moi, bénir la main qui me frappe ! embrasser le bourreau ! Oh ! si tu peux prendre la forme humaine, viens dans ma tombe avec moi, que je t'emporte aussi vers l'éternité qui te dévorera un jour, que je te livre au néant qui te donne son nom. Viens ! viens ! que je te broie, que je t'écrase entre ma tombe et moi, que je mange ta chair ! Fais-toi quelque chose de palpable pour que je puisse te déchirer en riant !". Ses dents claquaient, comme celles du démon quand il fut vaincu par le Christ ; il était furieux, bondissant, se roulant dans sa tombe en maudissant Dieu avec des cris à la bouche et le désespoir dans l'âme : "Où es-tu ? Dieu du ciel, viens, si tu existes ! Pourquoi ne me délivres-tu pas ? Si tu existes, pourquoi m'as-tu fait malheureux ? quel plaisir as-tu à me voir souffrir ? Si je ne croyais pas en toi, c'est que j'étais malheureux. rends-moi la vie, je t'aimerai... si cela ne dépend pas de toi, en bien, fais-le, puisque tu es tout-puissant ; fais-le, donne-moi la foi !... pourquoi veux-tu que je ne croie pas en toi ? tu vois que je souffre, que je pleure ; abrège mes souffrances, taris mes larmes !".

Puis il s'arrêta, effrayé de ses blasphèmes, il eut peur et trembla. Il avait peur, et de quoi ? la terre pouvait s'effacer, les révolutions pouvaient remuer la poussière du globe, peu lui importait ! il aurait toujours assez d'air pour respirer, même pendant quelques minutes, dans sa tombe, air corrompu, humide, échauffé et qui sentait le cadavre.

Mais il avait peur de l’éternité qu’il bravait, de ce mot dont il se moquait en riant, couché sur le dos, accroupi, la face vers le ciel, qui était pour lui les deux planches d’un cercueil. Pour son malheur, il doutait encore ; il n’était sur de rien.

Ne croyez pas les gens qui se disent athées, ils ne sont que sceptiques et nient par vanité. Eh bien, lorsqu’on doute et qu’on a des souffrances, on veut effacer toute probabilité, avoir la réalité vide et nue ; mais le doute augmente et vous ronge l’âme.

Il n’entendait que les aboiements de son chien, qui pleurait sa mort ou devinait son malheur. “Pauvre ami !” dit-il, et il versa une larme de tendresse, la seule, qui le soulagea.

Il était fatigué, avait les membres brisés, il avait faim, faim et rien sous la dent ! Enfin il se tourna sur le dos, se raccroupit en se pelotonnant, s’efforça de briser son cercueil : “Je sortirai d’ici malgré toi, se disait-il avec fureur, je vivrai malgré ta volonté !”.

Et, tourné sur le ventre, il s’efforça avec des soubresauts et des secousses convulsives, de faire ployer cette planche dure comme du fer.

Enfin, par un dernier effort de rage et de désespoir, il la brisa.

A la vue de cette tombe entr’ouverte, ou plutôt sentant craquer son cercueil sur son dos, un rire vainqueur éclata sur sa bouche, il se crut libre. Mais la terre était là, haute de six pieds, la terre qui allait l’écraser s’il faisait le moindre mouvement, car, soutenue jusque-là par le cercueil, elle ne pouvait plus rester dans la position première et, au moindre dérangement des planches, elle allait tomber.

M. Ohmlin s’en aperçut, il pâlit et faillit s’évanouir ; il resta longtemps immobile, n’osant faire le moindre geste ; enfin il voulut tenter un dernier effort qui devait le tuer ou le sauver : la terre fraîchement remuée ne lui offrirait point une forte résistance, il voulait se lever brusquement et la fendre avec sa tête.

Le désespoir rend fou.

Il se leva, mais la planche du cercueil s’abaissa sur sa tête, il la vit, elle tomba.

Les gens les plus patients s’ennuient de tout ; c’est un vieux proverbe, il est vrai, car notre bon fossoyeur, ennuyé des aboiements de ce chien mélancolique, dont nous avons déjà parlé, s’avisa de savoir ce qu’il y avait donc la de si intéressant ; il creusa la terre dans l’espoir d’y trouver quelque chose, un trésor, peut-être, qui sait ?

Ce qui l’étonna fort, c’est que le coffre était brisé “Diable ! voilà qui est drôle ! il y a la-dessous quelquechose”, et il leva la planche. Voici ce qu’il vit et ce qu’il racontait plus tard, lorsqu’il voulait se faire passer pour brave :

Le cadavre était tourné sur le ventre, son linceul était déchiré, sa tête et son bras droit étaient sous sa poitrine : “Quand je l’ai retourné avec ma pelle, je vis qu’il avait des cheveux dans la main gauche, il s’était dévoré l’avant-bras ; sa figure faisait une grimace qui me fit peur, il y avait de quoi ; ses yeux, tout grands ouverts, sortaient à fleur de tète ; les nerfs de son cou étaient raides et tirés, on voyait ses dents blanches comme de l’ivoire, car ses lèvres ouvertes, relevées par les coins, découvraient ses gencives comme s’il eût ri en mourant.”

Quant à Fox, il quitta le cimetière, alla courir dans les montagnes et fut un jour tué par des chasseurs qui n’avaient rien tiré et qui lui lâchèrent un coup de fusil pour passe-temps.

Pour Berthe, elle quitta le coin de son feu, et fut désignée par les enfants du village sous le nom de Berthe la folle. Les sous, quand la lune était belle, quand le vent hurlait sur la montagne, quand la neige blanchissait la terre, on voyait une vieil le femme qui parcourait le chemin du cimetière en pleurant. Un jour, elle se jeta dans le torrent qui est au pied de la colline où s’élèvent les tombes et les cyprès.

MORALITÉ (CYNIQUE)

POUR INDIQUER LA CONDUITE QUE L’ON DOIT TENIR

À SON HEURE DERNIÈRE.

Maître Michel de Montaigne, honnête gas, prud’homme et de bonace nature, a souvent dit en ses écrits : que sais-je ? et maître François Rabelais, tourangeau chinonais, curé de Meudon, docteur en médecine, bon viveur, grand suceur du piot, chiffonneur de filles et joyeux sceptique, a encore plus souvent dit en les siens : peut-être !

Eh bien, aimable et courageux lecteur, et vous bénévolente et peu dormeuse lectrice, que pensez-vous qu’eût répondu notre homme du cercueil, si quelque maladroit lui eût demandé son avis sur la bonté de Dieu ? Eût-il répondu : peut-être ? existe-t-elle ? que sais-je ?

Pour moi, je pense qu’il eût dit : j’en doute ou je la nie.

Et si le même malotru eut continué ses sottes questions, en lui représentant la bonté de ce même Dieu miséricordieux, il aurait envoyé au Diable l’escogriffe en lui répondant : Bran, comme dit Pantagruel festoyant et troublé par l’arrivée de Panurge ; et notre homme eût bien fait, car lorsqu’on crève ainsi, écorché d’âme, autant encore jurer après l’équarrisseur.

Or, de ceci je conclus provisoirement : qu’il ne faut point troubler les mourants dans leur agonie, les morts dans leur sommeil, les amants au lit, les suceurs du piot devant Dame-Jeanne, et le Père éternel dans ses bêtises.

J’engage aussi, et voilà toute la moralité de cette sotte œuvre, j’engage donc, ayant trouvé la conduite du sus-écrit docteur louable et bonne, j’engage tous les marmots à jeter la galette à la tête du pâtissier lorsqu’elle n’est point sucrée, les suceurs du piot leur vin quand il est mauvais, les mourants leurs âmes quand ils crèvent, et les hommes leur existence à la face de Dieu lorsqu’elle est amère.

REVE D’ENFER

Dans cette nouvelle fantastique, le Créateur promet un nouvel homme, dépourvu d’âme. Le duc Arthur d’Almaroës, alchimiste dépourvu d’âme, est tenté par Satan. Ce dernier rend la jeune Juiletta éperduement amoureuse du Duc, qui la repousse. La jeune femme est désespérée, et par le poids de cette culpabilité, Satan pense pouvoir se saisir de l’âme d’Arthur, vainement puisqu’il en est dépourvu. De son côté, Juiletta hante les falaises, attendant que vienne à elle Arthur.

RÊVE D’ENFER

I

La terre dormait d’un sommeil léthargique, point de bruit à sa surface, et l’on n’entendait que les eaux de l’océan qui se brisaient en écumant sur les rochers. La chouette faisait entendre son cri dans les cyprès, le lézard baveux se traînait sur les tombes, et le vautour venait s’abattre sur les ossements pourris du champ de bataille.

Une pluie lourde et abondante obscurcissait la lumière douteuse de la lune, sur laquelle roulaient, roulaient et roulaient encore les nuages gris qui passaient sur l’azur.

Le vent de la tempête agitait les vagues et faisait trembler les feuilles de la forêt ; il sifflait dans les airs tantôt fort, tantôt faible, comme un cri aigu domine les murmures.

Et une voix sortit de la terre et dit :

— Fini le monde ! que ce soit aujourd’hui sa dernière heure !

— Non, non, il faut que toutes les heures sonnent.

— Hâte-les, dit la première voix. Extermine l’homme dans un septième chaos et ne crée pas d’autres mondes.

— Il y en a encore un, supérieur à celui-ci.

— Tu veux dire plus misérable, répondit la voix de la terre. Oh ! finis, pour le bien de tes créatures ; puisque tu as manqué jusqu’à présent toutes tes oeuvres, au moins ne fais rien désormais.

— Si, si, répondit la voix du ciel, les autres hommes se sont plaints de leur faiblesse et de leurs passions ; celui-là sera fort et sans passions.

Quant à son âme...

Ici la voix de la terre se mit à rire d’un rire éclatant, qui remplit l’abîme de son immense dédain.

II

Le duc Arthur d’Almaroës était alchimiste, ou du moins il passait pour tel, quoique ses valets eussent remarqué qu’il travaillait rarement ; que ses fourneaux étaient toujours cendre et jamais brasier, que ses livres entrouverts ne changeaient jamais de feuillet ; néanmoins il restait des jours, des nuits et des mois entiers sans sortir de son laboratoire, plongé dans de profondes méditations, comme un homme qui travaille, qui médite. On croyait qu’il cherchait l’or, l’élixir de longue vie, la pierre philosophale. C’était donc un homme bien froid au-dehors, bien trompeur d’apparence : jamais sur ses lèvres ni un sourire de bonheur ni un mot d’angoisse, jamais de cris à sa bouche, point de nuits fiévreuses et ardentes comme en ont les hommes qui rêvent quelque chose de grand ; on eût dit, à le voir ainsi sérieux et froid, un automate qui pensait comme un homme.

Le peuple (car il faut le citer partout, lui qui est devenu maintenant le plus fort des pouvoirs et la plus sainte des choses, deux mots qui semblent incompatibles si ce n’est à Dieu : la sainteté et la puissance), le peuple donc était persuadé que c’était un sorcier, un démon, Satan incarné. C’était lui qui riait, le soir, au détour du cimetière, qui se traînait lentement sur la falaise en poussant des cris de hibou ; c’était lui que l’on voyait danser dans les champs avec les feux follets ; c’était lui dont on voyait, pendant les nuits d’hiver, la figure sombre et lugubre planant sur le vieux donjon féodal, comme une vieille légende de sang sur les ruines d’une tombe.

Souvent, le soir, lorsque les paysans assis devant leurs portes se reposaient de leur journée en chantant quelque vieux chant du pays, quelque vieil air national que les vieillards avaient appris de leurs grands-pères et qu’ils avaient transmis à leurs enfants, qu’on leur avait appris dans leur jeunesse et que jeunes ils avaient chanté sur le haut de la montagne où ils menaient paître leurs chèvres, alors, à cette heure de repos où la lune commence à paraître, où la chauve-souris voltige autour du clocher de son vol inégal, où le corbeau s’abat sur la grève, aux pâles rayons d’un soleil qui se meurt, à ce moment, dis-je, on voyait paraître quelquefois le duc Arthur.

Et puis on se taisait quand on entendait le bruit de ses pas, les enfants se pressaient sur leurs mères et les hommes le regardaient avec étonnement ; on était effrayé de ce regard de plomb, de ce froid sourire, de cette pâle figure, et si quelqu’un effleurait ses mains, il les trouvait glaciales comme la peau d’un reptile.

Il passait vite au milieu des paysans silencieux à son approche, disparaissait promptement et se perdait à la vue, rapide comme une gazelle, subtil comme un rêve fantastique, comme une ombre, et peu à peu le bruit de ses pas sur la poussière diminuait et aucune trace de son passage ne restait derrière lui, si ce n’est la crainte et la terreur, comme la pâleur après l’orage.

Si quelqu’un eût été assez hardi pour le suivre dans sa course ailée, pour regarder où tendait cette course, il l’eût vu rentrer dans le vieux donjon en ruines, autour duquel nul n’osait approcher le soir, car on entendait des bruits étranges qui se perdaient dans les meurtrières des tours, et, la nuit, il s’y promenait régulièrement un grand fantôme noir, qui étendait ses larges bras vers les nues et qui de ses mains osseuses faisait trembler les pierres du château, avec un bruit de chaînes et le râle d’un mourant.

Eh bien, cet homme qui paraissait si infernal et si terrible, qui semblait être un enfant de l’enfer, la pensée d’un démon, l’oeuvre d’un alchimiste damné, lui dont les lèvres gercées semblaient ne se dilater qu’au toucher frais du sang, lui dont les dents blanches exhalaient une odeur de chair humaine, eh bien, cet être infernal, ce vampire funeste n’était qu’un esprit pur et intact, froid et parfait, infini et régulier, comme une statue de marbre qui penserait, qui agirait, qui aurait une volonté, une puissance, une âme, enfin, mais dont le sang ne battrait point chaleureusement dans les veines, qui comprendrait sans sentir, qui aurait un bras sans une pensée, des yeux sans passion, un coeur sans amour.

Arrière aussi tout besoin de la vie, toute réalité matérielle ! tout pour la pensée, pour l’extase, mais une extase vague et indéfinie, qui se baigne dans les nuages, qui se mire dans la lune et qui tient de l’instinct et de la constitution, comme le parfum à la fleur.

Sa tête était belle, son regard était beau, ses cheveux étaient longs et s’ondulaient merveilleusement sur ses épaules en longs flots d’azur, lorsqu’il se penchait et se repliait lui-même sur son dos aux formes allongées, et dont la peau argentée d’un reflet de neige était douce comme le satin, blanche comme la lune.

Les autres créatures avaient eu avant lui des passions, un corps, une âme, et ils avaient agi tous pêle-mêle dans un tourbillon quelconque, se ruant les uns sur les autres, se poussant, se traînant ; il y en avait eu d’élevés, d’autres de foulés aux pieds ; tous les autres hommes enfin s’étaient pressés, entassés et remués dans cette immense cohue, dans ce long cri d’angoisse, dans ce prodigieux bourbier qu’on nomme la vie.

Mais lui, lui, esprit céleste, jeté sur la terre comme le dernier mot de la création, être étranger et singulier, arrivé au milieu des hommes sans être homme comme eux, ayant leur corps à volonté, leurs formes, leur parole, leur regard, mais d’une nature supérieure, d’un coeur plus élevé et qui ne demandait que des passions pour se nourrir, et qui, les cherchant sur la terre d’après son instinct, n’avait trouvé que des hommes, que venait-il donc faire ? il était rétréci, usé, froissé par nos coutumes et par nos instincts.

Aurait-il compris nos plaisirs charnels, lui qui n’avait de la chair que l’apparence ? les chauds embrassements d’une femme, ses bras humides de sueur, ses larmes d’amour, sa gorge nue, tout cela l’aurait-il fait palpiter un matin, lui qui trouvait au fond de son coeur une science infinie, un monde immense ?

Nos pauvres voluptés, notre mesquine poésie, notre encens, toute la terre avec ses joies et ses délices, que lui faisait tout cela, à lui qui avait quelque chose des anges ? Aussi il s’ennuyait sur cette terre, mais de cet ennui qui ronge comme un cancer, qui vous brûle, qui vous déchire, et qui finit chez l’homme par le suicide. Mais lui ! le suicide ? Oh ! que de fois on le surprit, monté sur la haute falaise, regardant d’un rire amer la mort qui était là devant, lui riant en face et le narguant avec le vide de l’espace qui se refusait à l’engloutir !

Que de fois il contempla longtemps la gueule d’un pistolet, et puis, comme il le jetait avec rage, ne pouvant s’en servir, car il était condamné à vivre ! Oh ! que de fois il passa des nuits entières à se promener dans les bois, à entendre le bruit des flots sur la plage, à sentir l’odeur des varechs qui noircissent les rochers ! Que de nuits il passa appuyé sur un roc et promenant dans l’immensité sa pensée qui volait vers les nues !

Mais toute cette nature, la mer, les bois, le ciel, tout cela était petit et misérable ; les fleurs ne sentaient rien sur ses lèvres ; nue, la femme était pour lui sans beauté, le chant sans mélodie, la mer sans terreur.

Il n’avait point assez d’air pour sa poitrine, point assez de lumière pour ses yeux et d’amour pour son coeur.

L’ambition ? un trône ? de la gloire ? jamais il n’y pensa. La science ? les temps passés ? mais il savait l’avenir, et dans cet avenir il n’avait trouvé qu’une chose qui le faisait sourire de temps en temps, en passant devant un cimetière.

Aurait-il craint Dieu, lui qui se sentait presque son égal et qui savait qu’un jour viendrait aussi, où le néant emporterait ce Dieu comme ce Dieu l’emportera un jour. L’aurait-il aimé, lui qui avait passé tant de siècles à le maudire ?

Pauvre coeur ! comme tu souffrais, gêné, déplacé de ta sphère et rétréci dans un monde comme l’âme dans le corps.

Souvent un instinct moqueur de lui-même lui portait une coupe à ses lèvres, le vin les effleurait sans qu’un sourire vînt les dilater, et puis il s’apercevait qu’il avait fait quelque chose de fade et d’inutile ; il prenait une rose et la retirait bien vite comme une épine. Un jour il voulut être musicien, il avait une idée sublime, étrange, fantastique, que n’auraient peut-être pas comprise les hommes, mais pour laquelle se serait damné Mozart, une idée de génie, une idée d’enfer, quelque chose qui rend malade, qui irrite et qui tue.

Il commença, la foule éperdue trépignait, et criait d’enthousiasme, puis, muette et tremblante, elle se prosterna sur le pavé des dalles et écouta. Des sons purs et plaintifs s’élevaient dans la nef et se perdaient sous les voûtes, c’était sublime ; ce n’était qu’un prélude. Il voulut continuer, mais il brisa l’orgue entre ses mains.

Rien pour lui désormais ! tout était vide et creux ; rien, qu’un immense ennui, qu’une terrible solitude, et puis des siècles encore à vivre, à maudire l’existence, lui qui n’avait pourtant ni besoins, ni passions, ni désirs ! Mais il avait le désespoir !

III

Il se résigna, et sa nature supérieure lui en donna les moyens ; il alla vivre seul et isolé dans un village d’Allemagne, loin du séjour des hommes qui lui étaient à charge.

Un château en ruines, situé sur une haute colline, lui parut un séjour conforme à sa pensée, et dès le soir il l’habita.

Il vivait donc ainsi seul, sans suite, sans équipages, presque sans valets, et renfermé en lui-même, bornant sa société à lui-même ; son nom n’en acquérait ainsi chaque jour qu’une existence de plus en plus problématique ; les gens qui le servaient ignoraient le son de sa voix, ils ne connaissaient de son regard qu’un oeil terne et à demi fermé qui se tournait froidement sur eux en les faisant frémir ; du reste, ils étaient entièrement libres, c’est-à-dire que leur maître ne leur faisait aucun reproche, à peine s’il leur donnait des ordres.

Le château qu’habitait le comte avait pris à la longue quelque chose de la tristesse de ses hôtes ; les murailles noircies, les pierres sans ciment, les ronces qui l’entouraient, cet aspect silencieux qui planait sur ses tours, tout cela avait quelque chose de féerique et d’étrange. C’était pire au-dedans : de longs corridors obscurs, des portes qui claquaient la nuit violemment et qui tremblaient dans leur châssis, des fenêtres hautes et étroites, des lambris enfumés, et puis de place en place, dans les galeries, quelque ornement antique, l’armure d’un ancien baron, le portrait en pied d’une princesse, un bois de cerf, un couteau de chasse, un poignard rouillé, et souvent, dans quelques recoins sans lumière, des décombres, des plâtras qui tombaient du plafond du vieux salon lorsque le vent, par quelque soirée d’hiver, s’entonnait dans les longues galeries avec plus de fureur que de coutume, avec des mugissements plus prolongés.

Le concierge (c’était un vieillard aussi décrépi que le château) faisait sa tournée tous les jours dans l’après-midi ; il commençait par le grand escalier de pierre dont la rampe était ôtée depuis que le dernier possesseur l'avait vendue pour un arpent de terre ; il le montait lentement, et, arrivé dans la galerie principale, il ouvrait toutes les chambres, toutes portant leurs anciens numéros, toutes vides et délabrées, après avoir eu pourtant leur destination et leur emploi. Là, c'était le vieux salon, immense appartement carré dont on distinguait encore quelques lambeaux du velours cramoisi qui, dans le dernier siècle, en avait fait le somptueux ornement, la fraîche beauté ; d'abord, ce fut la salle du plaid, puis la chapelle, puis le salon. Alors il était encombré par une centaine de bottes de foin, déposées en cet endroit depuis vingt ans environ, et qui se pourrissaient à la pluie qui pénétrait facilement par les carreaux, chassée par le vent du soir ; le reste du salon était occupé par des vieux fauteuils, des harnais usés, quelques selles mangées par les vers et une grande quantité de fagots et de bois sec. Le concierge ne l'ouvrait jamais, si ce n'est pour y pousser quelque chose de vieux et de cassé, qu'il jetait négligemment et qui allait tomber sur un vieux tableau, sur une statue de jardin ou sur les fauteuils dépaillés. Il reprenait sa course lente et paisible au milieu du corridor et faisait retentir du bruit de ses souliers ferrés les larges dalles de pierre, qui en gardaient l'empreinte ; puis il revenait sur ses pas, regardant les nids d'hirondelles, s'établissant de jour en jour dans le château, comme dans leur domaine, et qui volaient et repassaient par les fenêtres du corridor dont toutes les vitres étaient étendues par terre, cassées et pêle-mêle, avec leurs encadrements en lames de plomb.

De grands peupliers bordaient le château ; ils se courbaient souvent au souffle de l'océan, dont le bruit des vagues se mêlait à celui de leurs feuilles, et dont l'air âpre et dur avait brûlé l'écorce. Une percée pratiquée dans le feuillage laissait voir, des plus hautes fenêtres, la mer qui s'étendait immense et terrible, devant ce château sinistre qui n'en semblait qu'un lugubre apanage.

Là, c'était le pont-levis, maintenant on y passe sur une terrasse ; ici les créneaux, mais ils tremblent sous la main, et au moindre choc les pierres tombent ; plus haut, le donjon, jamais le concierge n'y alla, car il l'avait abandonné, ainsi que les étages supérieurs, aux chauves-souris et aux hiboux qui voltigeaient le soir sur les toits, avec leurs cris lugubres et leurs longs battements d'ailes.

Les murs du château étaient lézardés et couverts de mousse, il y avait à leur contact quelque chose d'humide et de gras, qui pressait sur la poitrine et qui faisait frissonner ; on eût dit la trace gluante d'un reptile.

C'était là qu'il vivait. Il aimait les longues voûtes prolongées, où l'on n'entendait que les oiseaux de nuit et le vent de la mer ; il aimait ces débris soutenus par le lierre, ces sombres corridors et toute cette apparence de mort et de ruine ; lui, qui était tombé de si haut pour descendre si bas, il aimait quelque chose de tombé aussi ; lui, qui était désillusionné, il voulait des ruines, il avait trouvé le néant dans l’éternité, il voulait la destruction dans le temps. Il était seul au milieu des hommes ! il voulut s’en écarter tout à fait et vivre au moins de cette vie qui pouvait ressembler à ce qu’il rêvait, à ce qu’il aurait dû être.

IV

Le duc Arthur était assis dans un large fauteuil en maroquin noir, le coude appuyé sur sa table, la tête dans ses mains. La chambre qu’il habitait était grande et spacieuse, son plafond noirci par la fumée du charbon ; quant aux lambris, ils étaient cachés par une immense quantité de pots de terre, d’alambics, de vases, d’équerres et d’instruments rangés sur des tablettes.

Dans un coin était le fourneau, avec le creuset pour les magiques opérations ; puis, çà et là, sur des cendres encore chaudes, quelques livres entrouverts, dont quelques feuillets étaient arrachés à moitié et qui semblaient avoir été touchés par une main fiévreuse et brûlante, parcourus avec un regard avide et qui n’y avait rien lu.

Aucune lumière n’éclairait l’appartement, et quelques charbons qui se mouraient dans le fourneau jetaient seuls quelque lueur au plafond en décrivant un cercle lumineux et vacillant.

L’alchimiste restait depuis longtemps dans son immobile position : enfin il se leva, alla vers son creuset et le considéra quelque temps. La lueur rougeâtre des charbons illumina tout d’un coup son visage en le colorant d’un éclat fantastique. C’était bien là un de ces fronts pâles d’alchimistes d’enfer, ses yeux creux et rougis, sa peau blanche et tirée, ses mains maigres et allongées, tout cela indiquait bien les nuits sans sommeil, les rêves brûlants, les pensées du génie.

Et vous croyez que ce sourire d’amertume est un sourire de vanité ? vous croyez que ces joues creuses se sont amaigries sur les livres, que son teint s’est blanchi à la chaleur du charbon, et que celui-là maintenant qui pleurerait de rage si c’était un jeune homme, cherche un nom, une immortalité ? vous croyez que ces livres jetés avec colère, ces feuillets déchirés, et que cette main qui se crispe et qui se déchire, vous croyez qu’il se désespère ainsi pour n’avoir point trouvé une parcelle d’or, un poison qui fait vivre ?

Il allait retourner à sa place quand il aperçut, sur la muraille noircie, des lignes brillantes qui se dessinaient fortement et qui formèrent bientôt un monstre hideux et singulier, semblable à ces animaux que nous voyons sur le portique de nos cathédrales, affamé, les flancs creux, avec une tête de chien, des mamelles nos cathédrales, affamé, les flancs creux, avec une tête de chien, des mamelles qui pendent jusqu’à terre, un poil rouge, des yeux qui flamboient et des ergots de coq.

Il se détacha de la muraille tout à coup et vint sauter sur le fourneau ; on entendit le bruit de ses pattes grêles et fines sur les pavés du creuset.

— Que me veux-tu ? dit-il à Arthur.

— Moi ? rien ! Mais, n’es-tu point l’esprit damné qui perd les hommes, qui torture leur âme ?

— Eh bien, oui, repartit le monstre avec un cri de joie, oui, je suis Satan.

— Que me veux-tu ? que viens-tu faire ici ?

— T’aider.

— Et à quoi ?

— À trouver ce que tu cherches, l’or, l’élixir.

— Vraiment oui ! Tu ne sais donc pas que je peux vivre des mondes, qu’une pensée de ma tête peut faire rouler l’or à mes pieds ? Non, Satan, si tu n’as de pouvoir que sur cela, quitte-moi, fuis, car tu ne peux me servir.

— Non, non, je resterai, dit Satan avec un singulier sourire, je resterai !

La vanité est ma fille aînée, elle me donne les âmes de tous ceux qui la prennent, pensa-t-il en lui-même, j’aurai son âme !

En ce moment, les charbons qui s’éteignaient jetèrent encore quelques nappes de lumière, qui passèrent sur la figure d’Arthur ; elle apparut à Satan plus belle et plus terrible que celle des damnés, et même des plus beaux.

— Tiens, sortons d’ici, lui dit Arthur, le vent agite les arbres, la mer gronde et le rivage est dévasté. Viens ! nous parlerons mieux de l’éternité et du néant au bruit de la tempête, devant la colère de l’océan.

Ils sortirent. Le chemin qui conduisait au rivage était pierreux et ombragé par les grands arbres noirs qui entouraient le château. Il faisait froid, la terre était sèche et dure ; il faisait sombre, pas une étoile au ciel, pas un rayon de la lune.

Arthur marchait, la tête nue et le visage découvert, il allait lentement, et prenait plaisir à se sentir le visage effleuré par sa chevelure bleue et soyeuse. Il aimait le fracas du vent et le bruit sinistre des arbres qui se penchaient avec violence. Satan était derrière ; il sautillait légèrement sur les pierres, sa tête était baissée et il hurlait plaintivement.

Enfin ils arrivèrent à la plage, le sable en était frais, mouillé, couvert de coquilles et de varechs, qui roulaient vers la mer avec les galets entraînés par le reflux. Ils s’arrêtèrent tous les deux.

Arthur riait sauvagement au bruit des flots.

— Voici ce que j’aime, dit-il, ou plutôt ce que je hais le moins, mais cette colère n’est pas assez brutale, assez divine. Pourquoi le flot s’arrête-t-il et cesse-t-il de monter ? Oh ! si la mer s'étendait au-delà du rivage et des rochers, comme elle irait loin, comme elle courrait, comme elle bondirait ! ce serait plaisir de la voir, mais cela...

— Tu veux donc la mort, dit Satan, la mort dans tout ?

— C'est le néant que j'implore.

— Et pourquoi ? tu crois donc que rien ne subsiste après le corps ? que l'oeil fermé ne voit plus et que la tête froide et pâle n'a point de pensée ?

— Oui, je crois cela, pour moi du moins.

— Et que veux-tu enfin ? que désires-tu ?

— Le bonheur !

— Le bonheur ? y penses-tu ? le bonheur !... tu l'auras dans la science, tu l'auras dans la gloire, tu l'auras dans l'amour.

— Oh ! nulle part ! Je l'ai cherché longtemps, je ne l'ai jamais trouvé ; cette science était trop bornée, cette gloire trop étroite, cet amour trop mesquin.

— Tu te crois donc supérieur aux autres hommes ? tu crois que ton âme...

— Oh ! mon âme !... mon âme !...

— Tu n'en as donc pas ? tu ne crois à rien... pas même à Dieu ? Oh ! tu succomberas, homme faible et vaniteux, tu succomberas, car tu as refusé mes offres ; tu succomberas comme le premier homme. Que son regard était fier, comme il était insolent et fort de son bonheur, lorsque, se promenant dans l'Éden, il contemplait d'un oeil béant et surpris ma défaite et mes larmes ! et lui aussi je le vis succomber, je le vis ramper à mes pieds, je le vis pleurer comme moi, maudire et blasphémer comme moi ; nos cris de désespoir se mêlèrent ensemble et nous fûmes dès lors des compagnons de torture et de supplice. Oh ! oui, tu tomberas comme lui, tu aimeras quelque chose.

— Et tu me prends donc pour un homme, Satan ? pour un de ces êtres communs et vulgaires qui croupissent sur ce monde où un vent de malheur m'a jeté dans sa démence et où je me meurs faute d'air à respirer, faute de choses à sentir, à comprendre et à aimer ? Tu crois que cette bouche mange, que ces dents broient, que je suis asservi à la vie comme un visage dans un masque ? Si je découvrais cette peau qui me recouvre, tu verrais que moi aussi, Satan, je suis un de ces êtres damnés comme toi, que je suis ton égal et peut-être ton maître. Satan, peux-tu arrêter une vague ? peux-tu pétrir une pierre entre tes mains ?

— Oui.

— Satan, si je voulais, je te broierais aussi entre mes mains. Satan, qu'as-tu qui te rende supérieur à tout ? qu'as-tu ? est-ce ton corps ? mets ta tête au niveau de mon genou et de mon pied, je l'écraserai sur le sol. Qu'as-tu qui fasse ta gloire et ton orgueil, l'orgueil, cette essence des esprits supérieurs ? Qu'as-tu ?

réponds !

— Mon âme.

— Et combien de minutes dans l’éternité peux-tu compter où cette âme t’ait donné le bonheur ?

— Cependant, quand je vois les âmes des hommes souffrir comme la mienne, c’est alors une consolation pour mes douleurs, un bonheur pour mon désespoir ; mais toi, qu’as-tu donc de si divin ? est-ce ton âme ?

— Non ! c’est parce que je n’en ai pas.

— Pas d’âme ? eh quoi ! c’est donc un automate vivifié par un éclair de génie ?

— Le génie ! oh ! le génie ! dérision et pitié ! À moi le génie ? ah !

— Pas d’âme ? et qui te l’a dit ?

— Qui me l’a dit ? je l’ai deviné... Écoute, et tu verras. Lorsque je vins sur cette terre, il faisait nuit, une nuit comme celle-ci, froide et terrible. Je me souviens d’avoir été apporté par les vagues sur le rivage... Je me suis levé et j’ai marché. Je me sentais heureux alors, la poitrine libre ; j’avais au fond de moi quelque chose de pur et d’intact, qui me faisait rêver et songer à des idées confuses, vagues, indéterminées, j’avais comme un ressouvenir lointain d’une autre position, d’un état plus tranquille et plus doux ; il me semblait, lorsque je fermais les yeux et que j’écoutais la mer, retourner vers ces régions supérieures où tout était poésie, silence et amour, et je crus avoir continuellement dormi. Ce sommeil était lourd et stupide, mais qu’il était doux et profond ! en effet, je me souviens qu’il fut un instant où tout passait derrière moi et s’évaporait comme un songe. Je revins d’un état d’ivresse et de bonheur pour la vie et pour l’ennui ; peu à peu ces rêves que je croyais retrouver sur la terre disparurent comme ce songe ; ce coeur se rétrécit, et la nature me parut avortée, usée, vieillie, comme un enfant contrefait et bossu qui porte les rides du vieillard.

Je tâchai d’imiter les hommes, d’avoir leurs passions, leur intérêt, d’agir comme eux, ce fut en vain, c’est comme l’aigle qui veut se blottir dans le nid du pivert. Alors tout s’assombrit à ma vue, tout ne fut plus qu’un long voile noir, l’existence une longue agonie, et la terre un sépulcre où l’on enterrait tout vif, et puis quand, après bien des siècles, bien des âges, quand, après avoir vu passer devant moi des races d’hommes et des empires, je ne sentis rien palpiter en moi, quand tout fut mort et paralysé à mon esprit, je me dis : “Insensé, qui veux le bonheur et n’as point d’âme ! insensé, qui as l’esprit trop haut, le coeur trop élevé, qui comprends ton néant, qui comprends tout, qui n’aimes rien, qui crois que le corps rend heureux et que la matière donne le bonheur ! Cet esprit, il est vrai, était élevé, ce corps était beau, cette matière était sublime, mais pas d’âme ! pas de croyance ! pas d’espoir !”

— Et tu te plains ! lui dit Satan, en traînant ses mamelles sur le sable et s’étendant de toute sa longueur, tu te plains ! Heureux, bénis le ciel au contraire, tu mourras ! Tu ne désires rien, Arthur, tu n’aimes rien, tu vis heureux, car tu ressembles à la pierre, tu ressembles au néant. Oh ! de quoi te plains-tu ? qui te chagrine ? qui t’accable ?

— Je m’ennuie.

— Ton corps, pourtant, ne peut-il point te procurer les plaisirs des hommes ?

— Les voluptés humaines, n’est-ce pas ? leurs grands baisers, leurs tièdes étreintes ? Oh ! je n’en ai jamais goûté, je les dédaigne et les méprise.

— Mais une femme ?

— Une femme ? Ah ! je l’étoufferais dans mes bras, je la broierais de mes baisers, je la tuerais de mon haleine.

Oh ! je n’ai rien, tu as raison, je ne veux rien, je n’aime rien, je ne désire rien... Et toi, Satan, tu voudrais mon corps, n’est-ce pas ?

— Un corps ? Oh ! oui, quelque chose de palpable, qui sente, qui se voie, car je n’ai qu’une forme, un souffle, une apparence. Oh ! si j’étais un homme, si j’avais sa large poitrine et ses fortes cuisses... aussi je l’envie, je le hais, j’en suis jaloux... Oh ! mais je n’ai que l’âme, l’âme, souffle brûlant et stérile, qui se dévore et se déchire lui-même ; l’âme ! mais je ne peux rien, je ne fais qu’effleurer les baisers, sentir, voir, et je ne peux pas toucher, je ne peux pas prendre ; je n’ai rien, rien, je n’ai que l’âme. Oh ! que de fois je me suis traîné sur les cadavres de jeunes filles encore tièdes et chauds ! que de fois je m’en suis retourné désespéré et blasphémant ! Que ne suis-je la brute, l’animal, le reptile ! au moins il a ses joies, son bonheur, sa famille ; ses désirs sont accomplis, ses passions sont calmées. Tu veux une âme, Arthur ? Une âme ! mais y songes-tu bien ? Veux-tu être comme les hommes ? veux-tu pleurer pour la mort d’une femme, pour une fortune perdue ? veux-tu maigrir de désespoir, tomber des illusions à la réalité ? Une âme ! mais veux-tu les cris de désespoir stupide, la folie, l’idiotisme ? une âme ! tu veux donc croire ? tu t’abaisserais jusqu’à l’espoir ? Une âme ! tu veux donc être un homme, un peu plus qu’un arbre, un peu moins qu’un chien ?

— Eh bien non, dit Arthur en s’avançant dans la mer, non, je ne veux rien !

Puis il se tut, et Satan le vit bientôt courir sur les flots, sa course était légère et rapide et les vagues scintillaient sous ses pas.

— Oh ! dit Satan, dans sa haine jalouse, heureux, heureux... tu as l’ennui sur la terre, mais tu dormiras plus tard, et moi, moi, j’aurai le désespoir dans l’éternité, et quand je contemplerai ton cadavre...

— Mon cadavre ? dit Arthur, qui t’a dit que je mourrai ? Ne te l’ai-je pas dit ? je n’espère rien, pas même la mort.

— Les moyens les plus terribles...

— Essaie, dit Arthur qui s’était arrêté un instant sur la vague qui le ballottait doucement, comme s’il se fût tenu debout sur une planche.

Satan se tut longtemps et pensa à l’alchimiste : “Je l’ai trompé, se dit-il, il ne croit pas à son âme. Oh ! tu aimeras, tu aimeras une femme, mais, à celle-là je lui donnerai tant de grâce, tant de beauté, tant d’amour, qu’il l’aimera... car c’est un homme, malgré son orgueil et sa science.”

— Écoute, Arthur, lui dit-il, demain tu verras une fille de tes montagnes, tu l’aimeras.

Arthur se mit à rire.

— Pauvre sot, lui dit-il, je veux bien essayer, ou plutôt essaie de me tuer, si tu l’oses !

— Non, dit Satan, je n’ai de pouvoir que sur les âmes. Et il le quitta.

Arthur était resté sur les rochers, et quand la lune commença à paraître, il ouvrit ses immenses ailes vertes, déploya son corps blanc comme la neige, et s’envola vers les nues.

V

Il faisait soir et le soleil rougeâtre et mourant éclairait à peine la vallée et les montagnes. C’était à cette heure du crépuscule où l’on voit, dans les prés, des fils blancs qui s’attachent à la chevelure des femmes et à leurs vêtements de dentelles et de soyeuses étoffes ; c’était à cette heure où la cigale chante de son cri aigu, dans l’herbe et sous les blés. Alors on entend dans les champs des voix mystérieuses, des concerts étranges, et puis, bien loin, le bruit d’une sonnette qui s’apaise et diminue, avec les troupeaux qui disparaissent et qui descendent. À cette heure, celle qui garde les chèvres et les vaches hâte son pas, court sans regarder derrière elle, et puis s’arrête de temps en temps, essoufflée et tremblante, car la nuit va venir et l’on rencontre dans le chemin quelques hommes et des jeunes gens, et puis elle a seize ans, la pauvre enfant, et elle a peur.

Julietta rassemble ses vaches et se dirige vers le village, dont on distinguait quelques cabanes, mais, ce jour-là, elle était triste, elle ne courait plus pour cueillir des fleurs et pour les mettre dans ses cheveux. Non ! plus de sauts enfantins à la vue d’une belle marguerite que son pied allait écraser, plus de chants joyeux, ce jour-là, plus de ces notes perlées, de ces longues roulades ; non ! plus de joie ni d’ivresse, plus ce joli cou blanc qui se courbait en arrière, et d’où sortait en dansant une musique légère et toute chaude d’harmonie, mais, au contraire, des soupirs répétés, un air rêveur, des larmes dans les yeux, et une longue promenade, bien rêveuse et bien lente, au milieu des herbes, sans faire attention qu’elle marche dans la rosée et que ses vaches ont disparu, tant la jeune fille est nonchalante et toute mélancolique.

Que de fois, dans ce jour, elle courut après son troupeau ; que de fois elle revint se rasseoir, lasse et ennuyée, et là, penser, ou plutôt ne penser à rien ! Elle était oppressée, son coeur brûlait, il désirait quelque chose de vague, d’indéterminé, il s’attachait à tout, quittait tout, il avait l’ennui, le désir, l’incertitude ; ennui, rêve du passé, songe sur l’avenir, tout cela passait dans la tête de l’enfant, couchée sur l’herbe et qui regardait le ciel les mains sur son front. Elle avait peur d’être ainsi seule au milieu des champs, et pourtant elle y avait passé son enfance, se jouant dans les bois et courant dans les moissons ; le bruit du feuillage la faisait trembler, elle n’osait se retourner, il lui semblait toujours voir derrière sa tête la figure de quelque démon grimaçant avec un rire horrible.

Elle regarda longtemps les rayons rougeâtres du soleil qui diminuait de plus en plus, et qui décrivait, de place en place, des cercles lumineux qui s’agrandissaient, disparaissaient, puis revenaient bientôt ; elle attendit que la cloche de l’église eût fini de sonner et quand ses dernières vibrations furent perdues dans le lointain, alors elle se leva péniblement, courut après son troupeau, et se mit en marche pour retourner chez son père.

Tout à coup elle vit, à une cinquantaine de pas, une vingtaine de petites flammes qui s’élevaient de la terre ; les flammes disparurent, mais au bout de quelques minutes, Julietta les revit encore ; elles se rapprochèrent peu à peu, et puis une disparaissait, puis une autre, une troisième, et enfin la dernière qui sautillait, s’allongeait et dansait avec vivacité et folie. Les vaches s’arrêtèrent tout à coup, comme si un instinct naturel leur prescrivait de ne plus avancer, et firent entendre un beuglement plaintif qui se traîna longtemps, monotone, et puis mourut lentement.

Les flammes redoublèrent, et l’on entendait distinctement des rires éclatants et des voix d’enfants. Julietta pâlit et s’appuya sur la corne d’une génisse, immobile et muette de terreur ; elle entendit des pas derrière sa tête, elle sentit ses joues effleurées par un souffle brûlant et un homme vint se placer debout devant elle.

Il était richement vêtu, ses habits étaient de soie noire, sa main gantée reluisait de diamants ; au moindre de ses gestes on entendait un bruit de sonnettes argentines, comme mêlées à des pièces d'or ; sa figure était laide, ses moustaches étaient rouges, ses joues étaient creuses, mais ses yeux brillaient comme deux charbons, ils étincelaient sous une prunelle épaisse et touffue comme une poignée de cheveux ; son front était pâle, ridé, osseux, et la partie supérieure en était soigneusement cachée par une toque de velours rouge. On eût dit qu'il craignait de montrer sa tête.

— Enfant, dit-il à Julietta, belle enfant !

Et il l'attira vers lui d'une main puissante, avec un sourire qu'il tâchait de faire doux et qui n'était qu'horrible.

— Aimes-tu quelqu'un ?

— Oh ! laissez-moi, dit la jeune fille, je me meurs entre vos bras ! vous m'écrasez !

— Eh quoi ! personne ? continua le chevalier. Oh ! tu aimeras quelqu'un, car je suis puissant, moi, je donne la haine et l'amour. Tiens, asseyons-nous ici, continua-t-il, sur le dos de ta vache blanche.

Celle-ci se coucha sur le côté et prêta le flanc, l'inconnu s'assit sur son cou, il tenait d'une main une de ses cornes et de l'autre la taille de Julietta.

Les feux follets avaient cessé, le soleil n'éclairait plus, il faisait presque nuit et la lune, pâle et faible, luttait avec le jour.

Julietta regardait l'étranger avec terreur ; son regard était terrible.

— Laissez-moi ! dit-elle, oh ! laissez-moi, au nom de Dieu !

— Dieu ? reprit-il amèrement, et il se mit à rire. Julietta, continua-t-il, connais-tu le duc Arthur d'Almaroës ?

— Je l'ai vu quelquefois, mais c'est comme de vous, j'en ai peur... Oh ! laisse-moi, laisse-moi ; il faut que je m'en aille... mon père ! oh ! s'il savait...

— Ton père ! eh bien ?

— S'il savait, vous dis-je, que vous me retenez ainsi, le soir... oh ! mais il vous tuerait !

— Je te laisse libre, Julietta, pars !

Et il laissa tomber son bras qui la tenait vivement étreinte.

Elle ne put se lever, quelque chose l'attachait au ventre de l'animal qui geignait tristement et humectait l'herbe de sa langue baveuse ; il râlait et remuait sa tête sur le sol comme s'il se mourait de douleur.

— Eh bien, Julietta, pars ; qui t'empêche ?

Elle s'efforça encore, mais rien ne put lui faire faire un mouvement, sa volonté de fer se brisait devant la fascination de cet homme et son pouvoir magique.

magique.

— Qu’êtes-vous donc ? lui dit-elle, quel mal vous ai-je fait ?

— Aucun... mais parlons du duc Arthur d’Almaroës. N’est-ce pas qu’il est riche, qu’il est beau ?

Ici il se tut, se frappa le front de ses deux mains : “Oh ! qu’il vienne ! qu’il vienne donc !”

Et puis ils restèrent ainsi tous deux longtemps, bien longtemps, la jeune fille tremblante, et lui l’oeil fixé sur elle et la contemplant avidement.

— Es-tu heureuse ? lui demanda-t-il.

— Heureuse ? Oh, non !

— Que te faut-il ?

— Je ne sais, mais je n’aime rien, rien ne me plaît, surtout aujourd’hui, je suis bien triste, et ce soir encore... votre air méchant... Oh ! j’en deviendrai folle !

— N’est-ce pas, Julietta, que tu voudrais être reine ?

— Non !

— N’est-ce pas, Julietta, que tu aimes l’église et son encens, sa haute nef, ses murailles noircies et ses chants mystiques ?

— Non.

— Tu aimes la mer, les coquilles au rivage, la lune au ciel et des rêves dans tes nuits ?

— Oh ! oui ! j’aime tout cela.

— Et qu’y rêves-tu dans tes nuits, Julietta ?

— Que sais-je ?

Et elle devint toute pensive.

— N’est-ce pas que tu souhaites une autre vie, des voyages lointains ? n’est-ce pas que tu voudrais être la feuille de rose pour rouler dans l’air, être l’oiseau qui vole, le chant qui se perd, le cri qui s’élance ? n’est-ce pas que le duc Arthur est beau, riche et puissant ! Et lui aussi, il aime les rêves, les sublimes extases.

“Oh ! qu’il vienne ! qu’il vienne ! continua-t-il tout bas, qu’il vienne ! elle l’aimera et d’un amour chaud, brûlant, entier, ils se perdront tous deux.”

La lune roulait sous les nuages, elle éclairait la montagne, la vallée et le vieux château gothique, dont la sombre silhouette se dessinait au clair de lune comme un fantôme sur le mur du cimetière.

— Levons-nous, dit l’inconnu, et marchons !

L’étranger prit Julietta et l’entraîna sur ses pas, les vaches bondissaient, galopaient dans les champs, elles couraient, éperdues, les unes après les autres, puis revenaient autour de Julietta en sautant et en dansant ; on n’entendait que le bruit de leurs pas sur la terre et la voix du cavalier aux éperons d’or qui parlait et parlait toujours d’un son singulier comme un orgue. Il y avait longtemps qu’ils marchaient ainsi, le chemin était facile, et ils marchaient rapidement sur l'herbe fraîche, glissante sous les pieds comme une glace polie. Julietta était fatiguée, ses jambes s'affaissaient sous son corps.

— Quand arriverai-je ? demandait-elle souvent.

Et son regard mélancolique s'élançait dans l'horizon qui ne lui offrait qu'une obscurité profonde. Enfin elle reconnut, après bien longtemps, la masure de son père. L'étranger était toujours à ses côtés, il ne disait plus rien, seulement son visage était gai et il souriait comme un homme heureux ; quelques mots d'une langue inconnue s'échappaient de ses lèvres, et puis il prêtait l'oreille attentivement, silencieux et la bouche béante.

— Aimes-tu le duc Arthur ? demanda-t-il encore une fois.

— Je le connais à peine, et puis, que vous importe ?

— Tiens, le voilà ! lui dit-il.

En effet, un homme passa devant eux, il était nu jusqu'à la ceinture, son corps était blanc comme la neige, ses cheveux étaient bleus et ses yeux avaient un éclat céleste.

L'inconnu disparut aussitôt.

Julietta se mit à courir, puis, arrivée à une porte en bois entourée d'une haie, elle se cramponna au marteau de fer et sonna à coups redoublés. Un vieillard vint ouvrir, c'était son père.

— Pauvre enfant, lui dit-il, d'où viens-tu ? entre !

Et la jeune fille aussitôt se précipita dans la maison, où sa famille l'attendait depuis plusieurs heures avec angoisse ; chacun aussitôt poussa des cris de joie, on l'embrassa, on la questionna, et l'on se mit à table autour d'un énorme pot en fer d'où s'exhalait une vapeur épaisse.

— As-tu ramené les vaches ? lui demanda sa mère.

Et sur sa réponse affirmative, elle lui prescrivit d'aller les traire. Julietta sortit et revint au bout de quelques minutes, apportant un énorme seau de fer-blanc qu'elle déposa avec peine sur la table... mais c'était du sang.

— Ciel ! du sang ! s'écria Julietta - elle devint pâle et tomba sur les genoux de sa mère - oh ! c'est lui !

— Qui ?

— Lui enfin, lui qui m'a retardée.

— Qu'est-ce ?

— Je ne sais !

— C'est moi, s'écria une voix qui partait du fond de l'appartement, avec un rire perçant.

En effet l'étranger et le duc Arthur étaient collés contre la muraille.

Le vieillard sauta sur son fusil accroché dans sa cheminée, et les ajusta

Le vieillard sauta sur son fusil accroché dans sa cheminée, et les ajusta.

— Grâce pour lui ! s’écria Julietta en se jetant violemment autour de son cou.

Mais la balle était partie, on n’entendait plus rien, les deux fantômes disparurent ; seulement, au bout de quelques instants, une vitre se cassa et une balle vint rouler sur les pavés.

C’était celle que Satan renvoyait.

VI

Tout cela était étrange, il y avait là-dessous quelque sorcellerie, quelque piège magique ; et puis, ce lait changé en sang, cette apparition bizarre, le retard de Julietta, son regard effaré, sa voix chevrotante, et cette balle qui venait rebondir autour d’eux, avec leur rire sinistre échappé du mur, tout cela fit pâlir et trembler la famille ; on se serra les uns contre les autres et l’on se tut aussitôt. Julietta s’appuya la tête dans la main gauche, posa le coude sur la table, et défaisant le ruban qui retenait ses cheveux, elle les laissa tomber sur ses épaules, puis, ouvrant les lèvres, elle se mit à chanter entre ses dents, bien bas il est vrai ; elle murmurait un vieux refrain, aigre et monotone, qui sortait en sifflant ; elle se balançait légèrement sur la chaise et paraissait vouloir s’endormir au son de sa voix, son regard était insignifiant et à demi fermé, sa tenue était nonchalante et rêveuse.

On l’écoutait avec étonnement, et c’était toujours les mêmes sons, aigus et faibles, le même bourdonnement ; puis peu à peu il s’apaisa, et il devint si faible et si grêle qu’il mourut entre ses dents.

La nuit se passa ainsi, triste et longue, car chacun n’osait remuer de sa place, n’osait dire une parole ni regarder derrière soi. Le vieillard s’assoupit profondément dans son fauteuil de bois, sa femme ferma bientôt les yeux de crainte et d’ennui ; quant à ses deux fils, ils baissèrent la tête dans leurs mains et cherchèrent un sommeil qui ne vint que bien tard, mais troublé par des rêves sinistres.

Il eût fallu voir toutes ces têtes sommeillantes et abattues, réunies autour d’une lumière mourante qui éclairait leur front soucieux d’une teinte pâle et lugubre : celle du vieillard était grave, sa bouche était entrouverte, son front était couvert de ses cheveux blancs, et ses mains décharnées reposaient sur ses cuisses ; la vieille femme, qui était posée devant lui, tournait de temps en temps la tête de côté et d’autre, son visage était ridé par une singulière expression de malheur et d’amertume ; et puis il y avait la figure pâle et paisible de Julietta, avec ses longs cheveux blonds qui balayaient la table, sa chanson monotone qui sifflait entre ses dents blanches, et son regard doux et enivré.

Elle ne dormit pas, mais elle passa les heures de la nuit à écouter le beuglement plaintif de sa vache blanche qui, renfermée dans son étable, souffrait aussi, la pauvre bête, et se tordait peut-être d'agonie sur sa litière humide de sueur.

En effet, quand le jour fut venu et que Julietta sortit pour l'aller faire paître dans les champs, elle portait sur le cou l'empreinte d'une griffe.

Elle sortit, monta la colline d'un pas rapide ; arrivée au haut, elle s'assit, mais le bas de ses vêtements et ses pieds ruisselaient, elle avait marché dans la rosée, tant, ce jour, elle était folle et dormeuse tout à la fois ; elle courait, puis s'arrêtait tout à coup, portait sa main à son front, et regardait de tous côtés s'il n'allait pas venir.

Il ! car elle aimait, la pauvre enfant ! elle aimait un grand seigneur, riche, puissant, qui était beau cavalier, avait des yeux fiers et un sourire hautain ; elle aimait un homme étrange, inconnu, un démon incarné, une créature, pensait-elle, bien élevée et bien poétique.

Non ! rien de tout cela, car elle aimait le duc Arthur d'Almaroës.

D'autres fois, elle retombait dans ses rêveries et souriait amèrement, comme doutant de l'avenir, et puis elle pensait à lui, elle se le créait là, assis sur l'herbe perlée, à côté d'elle ; il était là, là, lui disant de douces paroles, la regardant fixement de son regard puissant ; et sa voix était douce, était pure, était vibrante d'amour, c'était une musique toute nouvelle et toute sublime. Elle resta ainsi longtemps, les yeux fixés sur l'horizon qui lui apparaissait toujours aussi morne, aussi vide de sens, aussi stupide.

Le soir arriva enfin, après ce long jour d'angoisses, aussi long que la nuit qui l'avait précédé. Julietta resta encore longtemps après le coucher du soleil, et puis elle revint, elle descendit lentement la montagne, s'arrêtant à chaque pas et écoutant derrière elle, et elle n'entendait que la cigale qui sifflait sous l'herbe, et l'épervier qui rentrait dans son nid en volant à tire-d'aile.

Elle s'en allait donc ainsi triste et désespérée, la tête baissée sur son sein tout gonflé de soupirs, tenant de sa main gauche la corde tout humide qui tenait sa pauvre vache blanche qui boitait de l'épaule droite. C'était sur celle-là que Satan s'était assis.

Arrivée à l'endroit où l'inconnu l'avait quittée, la veille, et où le duc Arthur lui était apparu, elle s'arrêta instinctivement, retint fortement sa génisse qui, luttant naturellement contre elle, l'entraîna de quelques pas.

Arthur se présenta aussitôt, elle lâcha la corde, et la vache se mit à bondir et à galoper vers son étable.

Julietta le regarda avec amour, avec envie, avec jalousie ; il passa en la regardant comme il regardait les bois, le ciel, les champs.

Elle l'appela par son nom ; il fut sourd à ses cris comme au bêlement du mouton, au chant de l'oiseau, aux aboiements du chien.

— Arthur, lui dit-elle avec désespoir, Arthur, oh ! Arthur, écoute !

Et elle courut sur ses pas, et se traîna à ses vêtements, et elle balbutiait en sanglotant ; son coeur battait avec violence, elle pleurait d'amour et de rage. Il y avait tant de passion dans ces cris, dans ces larmes, dans cette poitrine qui se soulevait avec fracas, dans cet être faible et aérien qui se traînait les genoux sur le sol, tout cela était si éloigné des cris d'une femme pour une porcelaine brisée, du bêlement du mouton, du chant de l'oiseau, de l'aboiement du chien, qu'Arthur s'arrêta, la regarda un instant... et puis il continua sa route.

— Oh ! Arthur, écoute de grâce un instant ! car je t'aime, je t'aime ! Oh ! viens avec moi, nous irons vivre ensemble sur la mer, loin d'ici, ou bien, tiens ! nous nous tuerons ensemble.

Arthur marchait toujours.

— Écoute, Arthur ! mais regarde-moi ! je suis donc bien hideuse, bien laide ? tu n'es donc pas un homme, toi, que ton coeur est froid comme le marbre et dur comme la pierre !

Elle tomba à genoux à ses pieds, en se renversant sur le dos comme si elle allait mourir. Elle mourait, en effet, d'épuisement et de fatigue, elle se tordait de désespoir, et voulait s'arracher les cheveux, et puis elle sanglotait avec un rire forcé, des larmes qui étouffaient sa voix ; ses genoux étaient déchirés et couverts de sang à se traîner ainsi sur les cailloux ; car elle aimait d'un amour déchirant, entier, satanique ; cet amour la dévorait toujours, il était furieux, bondissant, exalté.

C'était bien un amour inspiré par l'enfer, avec ces cris désordonnés, ce feu brûlant qui déchire l'âme, use le coeur ; une passion satanique, toute convulsive et toute forcée, si étrange qu'elle paraît bizarre, si forte qu'elle rend fou.

— À demain, n'est-ce pas, oh, Arthur ! Une grâce ! une grâce ! et je te donnerai tout après, mon sang, ma vie, mon âme, l'éternité si je l'avais ! tu me tueras si tu veux, mais à demain ! à demain sur la falaise... Oh ! n'est-ce pas ? au clair de lune... la belle chose qu'une nuit d'amour sur les rochers, au bruit des flots, n'est-ce pas, Arthur ?... à demain ?

Et il laissa tomber nonchalamment de ses lèvres dédaigneuses deux mots :

— À demain !

VII

À demain ! Oh ! demain ! et elle courut comme une folle vers la falaise, on ne la revit plus dans le village, elle avait disparu du pays.

Satan l’avait emportée.

VIII

Il faisait nuit, la lune brillait pure et blanche, et, dégagée de ses nuages, sa lumière éclairait le cabinet d’Arthur, dont il avait laissé la fenêtre ouverte ; il se penchait sur la rampe de fer et humait avec délices l’air frais de la nuit. Il entendit ce même bruit de pattes fines et légères sur les carreaux de son fourneau, il se retourna. C’était Satan, mais, cette fois, plus hideux et plus pâle encore ; ses flancs étaient amaigris, et sa gueule béante laissait voir des dents verdâtres comme l’herbe des tombeaux.

— Eh bien, Satan, lui dit Arthur, eh bien, est-il vrai maintenant que j’aime quelqu’un ? crois-tu que j’aie été ému par ces cris, par ces larmes et par ces convulsions forcées ?

— Vraiment, lui répondit le démon en frémissant sur ses quatre pattes, vraiment tu es donc bien insensible ! et tu l’as laissée mourir ?

— Elle est morte ? dit Arthur en le regardant froidement.

— Non ; mais elle t’attend.

— Elle m’attend ?

— Oui, sur la falaise. Ne lui avais-tu pas promis ? il y a longtemps qu’elle y est, elle t’attend.

— Eh bien, j’irai.

— Tu iras ? eh bien, Arthur, je ne te demande que cette dernière grâce ; après, tu feras de moi tout ce qu’il te plaira, je t’appartiens.

— Et que veux-tu que je fasse ?

— Crois-tu que je tienne beaucoup à ton âme, moi ? tu l’aimeras, te dis-je...

Arthur, ne m’as-tu pas dit que tu voudrais avoir des passions, un amour fort et brûlant, étranger des autres amours ? eh bien, tu l’aurais, cet amour... mais moi, à mon tour, n’est-ce pas ? tu me donneras ton âme ?

— Je n’en ai pas.

— Tu le crois, mais tu en as une, car tu es un homme puisque tu aimeras.

Satan était habitué à voir tant d'orgueil et de vanité qu'il ne croyait qu'à cela ; le malheur ne voit que le vice, l'affamé ne sent que la faim.

— Un homme ? Satan ! dis, en as-tu vu des hommes qui puissent s'étendre dans les airs jusqu'aux nuages ? - et il déploya ses ailes vertes - en as-tu vu des cheveux comme ceux-là ? - et il montra sa chevelure bleue. - As-tu vu chez aucun d'eux un corps blanc comme la neige, une main aussi forte que celle-là, Satan - et il lui serrait fortement la peau entre ses ongles - enfin, y en a-t-il qui ose jamais t'insulter ainsi ? Puisque tu désires mon âme, tue-moi de suite, écrase ma tête dans tes dents, déchire-moi de tes griffes, essaie et vois si je suis un homme.

Et Satan bondissait sur le pavé, il écumait de rage et, dans ses sauts convulsifs, il allait se frapper les reins sur le plafond ; Arthur était paisible.

— Satan, lui dit-il, tu es fort en effet, tu es puissant, je sens que tu peux m'anéantir d'un seul coup, essaie, essaie, ah ! de grâce, tue-moi !... Oui, j'ai une âme, je te la donne, mon âme ; tue-moi, cela t'est facile, car je ne suis qu'un homme.

Le démon sauta sur sa gorge avec un cri infernal qui partait de ses entrailles ; il voulut le saisir, la peau lui glissa sous les dents. Arthur se dégagea la poitrine ; Satan s'élança d'un bond furieux, les griffes en avant, il retomba sans pouvoir effleurer l'épiderme qui était intact et poli ; il bondissait, furieux, éperdu, un aboiement rauque courait sur ses lèvres ensanglantées, ses yeux flamboyaient, il trépignait ; Arthur se coucha sur le sol, étendit ses ailes. Satan glissait dessus, il s'y traînait, y rampait, ouvrait la gueule pour le déchirer, ses griffes s'usaient comme à déchirer un roc ; il bavait, haletant, rouge de colère : pour la première fois il se trouvait vaincu. Et puis l'autre... l'autre riait mollement, et ce rire paisible était éclatant, sonore et comme mêlé à un bruit de fer ; le souffle bruyant qui s'exhalait de sa gorge repoussait Satan, comme la furieuse vibration d'une cloche d'alarme qui bondit dans la nef, rugit, ébranle les piliers et fait tomber la voûte.

Il fallait voir aux prises ces deux créatures toutes bizarres, toutes d'exception, l'une toute spirituelle, l'autre charnelle et divine dans sa matière ; il fallait voir en lutte l'âme et le corps et cette âme, cet esprit pur et aérien, rampant, impuissant et faible devant la morgue hautaine de la matière brute et stupide.

Ces deux monstres de la création se trouvaient en présence comme pour se haïr et se combattre, c'était une guerre acharnée, à mort, une guerre terrible... et qui devait finir entre eux, comme chez l'homme... par le doute et l'ennui.

C'était deux principes incohérents qui se combattaient en face ; l'esprit tomba d'épuisement et de lassitude devant la patience du corps.

Et qu’ils étaient grands et sublimes, ces deux êtres qui, réunis ensemble, auraient fait un Dieu, l’esprit du mal et la force du pouvoir ! Que cette lutte était terrible et puissante, avec ces cris d’enfer, ces rires furieux, et puis tout l’édifice en ruines qui tremblait sous les pas, et dont les pierres remuaient comme dans un rêve !

Enfin, quand Satan eut bien des fois sauté et retombé sur le sol, haletant et fatigué, l’oeil terne, la peau humide d’une sueur glaciale, les griffes cassées ; quand Arthur l’eut contemplé longtemps, épuisé de rage et de colère, rampant tristement à ses pieds ; quand il eut savouré longtemps le râle qui s’échappait de sa poitrine, quand il eut compté les soupirs d’agonie qu’il ne pouvait retenir et qui lui brisaient le coeur, enfin, quand, revenu de sa cruelle défaite, Satan leva la tête défaillante vers son vainqueur, il trouva encore ce regard d’automate froid, et impassible, qui semblait rire dans son dédain.

— Et toi aussi, lui dit Arthur, tu t’es laissé vaincre comme un homme... et par orgueil encore ! Crois-tu maintenant que j’aie dit vrai ?

— Tu n’es peut-être pas un homme, dit Satan... mais tu as une âme...

— Eh bien, Satan, j’irai demain sur la falaise.

Et le lendemain, quand le concierge fit sa tournée dans les corridors, il trouva que les dalles étaient dérangées et usées toutes, de place en place, comme par une griffe de fer. Le brave homme en devint fou.

IX

Julietta attendait le duc, elle l’attendait jour et nuit, courant sur les rochers, elle l’attendait en pleurant, elle l’attendait depuis quatre années.

Car les ans passent vite dans un récit, dans la pensée ; ils coulent vite dans le souvenir, mais ils sont lents et boiteux dans l’espérance.

Le jour, elle se promenait sur la plage, écoutait la mer et regardait de tous côtés s’il n’allait pas venir ; et puis quand le soleil avait échauffé les roches, quand, épuisée, elle tombait de fatigue, alors elle s’endormait sur le sable, et puis se relevait pour aller cueillir des fruits, chercher le pain que des âmes charitables déposaient dans une fente de rochers.

La nuit elle se promenait sur les falaises, errante ainsi avec ses longs vêtements blancs, sa chevelure en désordre, et des cris de douleur ; et elle restait assise des heures entières sur un roc aigu, à contempler, au clair de lune, les vagues brisées qui venaient mourir sur la grève et mousser en blanches écumes entre les rochers et les galets.

Pauvre folle ! disait-on, si jeune et si belle ! vingt ans à peine... et plus d'espoir !... Dame ! c'est sa faute aussi, elle est folle d'amour, d'amour pour un prince ; c'est l'orgueil qui l'a perdue, elle s'est donnée à Satan.

Oui, bien folle, en effet, d'aimer le duc Arthur, bien folle de ne point étouffer son amour, bien folle de ne point se tuer de désespoir ; mais elle croyait à Dieu et elle ne se tua pas.

Il est vrai que souvent elle contemplait la mer et la falaise, haute de cent pieds, et puis qu'elle se mettait à sourire tout bas, avec une grimace des lèvres qui faisait peur aux enfants ; bien folle de s'arrêter devant une idée de croire à Dieu, de le respecter, de souffrir pour son plaisir, de pleurer pour ses délices. Croire à Dieu, Julietta, c'est être heureuse ; tu crois à Dieu et tu souffres ! Oh ! tu es bien folle en effet ! Voilà ce que te diront les hommes.

Mais non, au désespoir avait succédé l'abattement, aux cris furieux les larmes ; plus d'éclairs de voix, de profonds soupirs, mais des sons dits tout bas et retenus sur les lèvres, de peur de mourir en les criant.

Ses cheveux étaient blancs, car le malheur vieillit ; il est comme le temps, il court vite, il pèse lourd et il frappe fort ; mais, plus encore, il faut moins de larmes au désespoir pour amaigrir un homme que de gouttes d'eau à la tempête pour creuser la pierre d'une tombe ; les cheveux se blanchissent en une nuit.

Ses cheveux étaient blancs, ses habits déchirés, mais ses pieds s'étaient durcis à marcher sur la terre, à s'écorcher aux ronces et aux chardons ; ses mains étaient crevassées par le froid et par l'air âpre de l'océan, qui dessèche et qui brûle comme les gelées du Nord ; et puis elle était pâle, amaigrie, avait les yeux creux et ternes, que vivifiait encore un rayon d'amour, qu'éclairait une étincelle d'enfer ; sa bouche était entrouverte et comme contractée par un mouvement des lèvres involontaire et convulsif. Mais elle avait toujours le teint doré et brûlé du soleil, elle avait toujours ce regard étrange qui séduit et qui attire, c'était toujours cette âme sublime et passionnée, que Satan avait choisie pour tenter la matière endormie, le corps dénué de sens, la chair sans volupté.

Quand elle voyait un homme, elle courait vers lui, se jetait à ses pieds, l'appelait Arthur, et puis s'en retournait triste, désespérée, en disant : “Ce n'est pas lui ! il ne vient pas !”

Et l'on disait : Oh ! la pauvre folle, si jeune et si belle, vingt ans à peine... et plus d'espoir !

C'était par une nuit belle, radieuse d'étoiles, toute blanche, toute azurée, toute calme comme la mer, qui était tranquille et douce, qui venait battre légèrement les rochers de la falaise.

Julietta était là, toujours rêveuse et solitaire, et puis, je ne sais si c'est un songe, mais Arthur lui apparut.

Arthur ! oh ! mais toujours froid, toujours calme.

— Je t’attends, lui dit Julietta, il y a longtemps que je suis au rendez-vous !

Sa voix tremblait.

— Assieds-toi avec moi, sur cette roche, ô mon Arthur, assieds-toi. Que te faut-il ? la lune est belle, les étoiles brillent, la mer est calme, il fait beau ici, Arthur... oh ! assieds-toi et causons.

Arthur s’étendit à côté d’elle.

— Que me veux-tu, Julietta, lui dit-il, pourquoi es-tu plus triste que les autres femmes ? pourquoi m’as-tu demandé à venir ici ?

— Pourquoi ?... ô Arthur... mais je t’aime !

— Qu’est-ce ?

— Eh quoi ? quand je te regarde ainsi, tiens, avec ce sourire - et elle passa son bras autour de sa taille - quand tu sens mon haleine, quand de mes cheveux j’effleure ta bouche, eh bien, dis, est-ce que tu ne sens pas là, sur la poitrine, quelque chose qui bat et qui respire ?

— Non ! non ! mais tu es une femme, toi, tu as une âme, oui, je comprends ; moi, je n’en ai pas d’âme - il la regarda avec fierté - et qu’est-ce que l’âme, Julietta ?

— Que sais-je ?... mais je t’aime ! Oh ! l’amour ! l’amour, Arthur, tiens, vous blanchit les cheveux, les miens.

Elle le contempla, elle se traîna sur sa poitrine, elle l’accabla de ses baisers et de ses caresses ; et lui, il restait toujours calme sous les embrassements, froid sous les baisers.

Il fallait voir cette femme, s’épuisant d’ardeur, prodiguant tout ce qu’elle avait de passion, d’amour, de poésie, de feu dévorant et intime, pour vivifier le corps léthargique d’Arthur, qui restait insensible à ces lèvres brûlantes, à ces bras convulsifs, comme l’attouchement du lézard au contact de la brute. Julietta était bondissante d’amour, comme Satan l’était de rage et de colère.

Elle passa bien des heures sur les joues d’Arthur, qui regardait le ciel azuré, qui pensait sans doute aussi à des rêves sublimes, à des amours, sans penser qu’il avait là, devant lui, dans ses bras, une réalité céleste, un amour d’exception, tout brûlant et tout exalté.

Julietta ! il la laissa tomber épuisée ; puis elle tenta un dernier effort... et courut vers les rochers les plus élevés et s’élança d’un seul bond ; il se fit un silence de quelques secondes, et Arthur entendit le bruit d’un corps lourd qui tombe dans l’eau.

Et la nuit était belle, toute calme, toute azurée comme la mer, elle était douce, tranquille, et ses vagues venaient mourir mollement sur la plage, et puis les vagues roulaient, tombaient et apportaient sur le rivage des coquilles, de la mousse et des débris de navires.

Une vint rouler longtemps, elle s’étendit au loin, puis se recula, puis revint ; elle déposa quelque chose de lourd et de grand.

C’était un cadavre de femme.

— Eh bien ? dit Arthur, en regardant Satan.

Et quand celui-ci eut vu que son front était toujours pâle et uni, que son oeil était sec et sans larmes :

— Non ! non ! tu n’as pas d’âme, je me suis trompé, continua-t-il en le regardant avec envie, mais j’aurai celle-là.

Et il enfonça son pied crochu dans la gorge du cadavre.

X

Et plusieurs siècles se passèrent.

La terre dormait d’un sommeil léthargique, point de bruit à sa surface et l’on n’entendait que les eaux de l’océan qui se brisaient en écumant ; elles étaient furieuses, montaient dans l’air en tourbillonnant, et le rivage remuait à leurs secousses comme entre les mains d’un géant. Une pluie fine et abondante obscurcissait la lumière douteuse de la lune, le vent cassait la forêt, et les cieux pliaient sous leur souffle comme le roseau à la brise du lac.

Il y avait dans l’air comme un bruit étrange de larmes et de sanglots, on eût dit le râle d’un monde.

Et une voix s’éleva de la terre et dit :

— Assez ! assez ! j’ai trop longtemps souffert et ployé les reins, assez ! Oh ! grâce ! ne crée point d’autre monde !

Et une voix douce, pure, mélodieuse comme la voix des anges s’abattit sur la terre et dit :

— Non ! non ! c’est pour l’éternité, il n’y aura plus d’autre monde !

1837

MOEURS ROUENNAISES - UNE LEÇON D’HISTOIRE NATURELLE GENRE COMMIS

Depuis Aristote jusqu’à Cuvier, depuis Pline jusqu’à M. de Blainville, on a fait des pas immenses dans la science de la nature. Chaque savant est venu apporter à cette science son contingent d’observations et d’études ; on a voyagé, fait des découvertes importantes, tenté de périlleuses excursions d’où l’on n’a rapporté le plus souvent que de petites fourrures noires, jaunes ou tricolores ; et puis l’on était bien aise de savoir que l’ours mangeait du miel, et qu’il avait un faible pour les tartes à la crème.

Ce sont de bien grandes découvertes, je l’avoue : mais aucun homme n’a songé encore à parler du commis, l’animal le plus intéressant de notre époque.

Aucun sans doute n’a fait des études assez spéciales, n’a assez médité, assez vu, assez voyagé, pour pouvoir parler du commis avec ample connaissance de cause.

Un autre obstacle se présentait ; comment classer cet animal ? À quelle famille le rattacher ?... Car on a hésité longtemps entre le bradype, le hurleur et le chacal. Bref, la question resta indécise, et on laissa à l’avenir le soin de résoudre ce problème avec celui de découvrir le principe du genre chien.

En effet, il était difficile de classer un animal si peu logique dans sa complexion. Sa casquette de loutre faisait opiner pour une vie aquatique ainsi que sa redingote à longs poils bruns, tandis que son gilet de laine épais de quatre pouces prouvait certainement que c’était un animal des pays septentrionaux ; ses ongles crochus l’auraient fait prendre pour un carnivore, s’il eût eu des dents.

Enfin l’académie des sciences avait statué pour un digitigrade ; malheureusement on reconnut bientôt qu’il avait une canne en bois de fer, et que parfois il faisait ses visites du jour de l’an en fiacre et allait dîner à la campagne en coucou.

Pour moi, que ma longue expérience a mis à même d’instruire le genre humain, je puis parler avec la confiance modeste d’un savant zoologue. Mes fréquents voyages dans les bureaux m’ont laissé assez de souvenirs pour décrire les animaux qui les peuplent, leur anatomie, leurs moeurs. J’ai vu toutes les espèces de commis, depuis le commis de barrière jusqu’au commis d’enregistrement. Ces voyages m’ont entièrement ruiné, et je prie mes lecteurs de faire une souscription pour un homme qui s’est dévoué à la science et a usé pour elle deux parapluies, douze chapeaux (avec leurs coiffes en toile cirée) et six ressemelages de bottes six ressemelages de bottes.

Le commis a depuis trente-six ans jusqu’à soixante, il est petit, replet, gras et frais ; il a une tabatière dite queue de rat, une perruque rousse, des lunettes en argent pour le bureau et un mouchoir de rouenneries. Il crache souvent, et lorsque vous éternuez, il vous dit : “Dieu vous bénisse”. Il subit des variations de pelage selon le changement des saisons. En été, il porte un chapeau de paille, un pantalon de nankin qu’il a soin de préserver des taches d’encre en étalant dessus son mouchoir. Ses souliers sont en castor et son gilet en coutil. Il a invariablement un faux col de velours. Pour l’hiver, c’est un pantalon bleu avec une énorme redingote qui le préserve du froid. La redingote est l’élément du commis, comme l’eau celui des poissons.

Originaire de l’ancien continent, il est malheureusement fort répandu dans nos pays. Ses moeurs sont douces ; il se défend quand on l’attaque.

Il reste le plus souvent célibataire, et mène alors la vie de garçon.

La vie de garçon !

C’est-à-dire qu’au café il dit mademoiselle à la dame du comptoir, prend le sucre qui lui reste sur son plateau et se permet parfois le fin cigare de trois sous. Oh ! mais alors le Commis est infernal ! Le jour qu’il a fumé, il se sent belliqueux, taille quatre plumes avant d’en trouver une bonne, rudoie le garçon de bureau, laisse tomber ses lunettes et fait des pâtés sur ses registres, ce qui le désole considérablement.

D’autres fois le commis est marié. Alors il est citoyen paisible et vertueux, et n’a plus la tête chaude de sa jeunesse. Il monte sa garde, se couche à neuf heures, ne sort pas sans parapluie. Il prend son café au lait tous les dimanches matin, et lit le Constitutionnel, l’Écho, les Débats ou quelqu’autre journal de cette force.

Il est chaud partisan de la charte de 1830 et des libertés de juillet. Il a du respect pour les lois de son pays, crie vive le roi ! devant un feu d’artifice, et blanchit son baudrier tous les samedis soir. Le commis est enthousiaste de la garde nationale ; son coeur s’allume au son du tambour, et il court à la place d’armes, sanglé et étranglé dans son col en fredonnant : “Ah quel plaisir d’être soldat !”

Quant à sa femme, elle garde la maison tout le long du jour, raccommode les bas, fait des manchettes en toile pour son époux, lit les mélodrames de l’Ambigu et trempe la soupe : c’est là sa spécialité.

Quoique chaste, le commis a pourtant l’esprit licencieux et enjoué ; car il dit ma belle enfant aux jeunes personnes qui entrent dans le bureau. De plus, il est abonné aux romans de Paul de Kock, dont il fait ses lectures favorites, le soir, auprès de son poêle, les pieds dans ses pantoufles et le bonnet de soie noire sur la tête.

Il faut voir cet intéressant bipède au bureau, copiant des contrôles. Il a ôté sa redingote et son col, et travaille en chemise, c’est-à-dire en gilet de laine.

Il est penché sur son pupitre, la plume sur l’oreille gauche : il écrit lentement en savourant l’odeur de l’encre qu’il voit avec plaisir s’étendre sur un immense papier : il chante entre ses dents ce qu’il écrit, et fait une musique perpétuelle avec son nez ; mais lorsqu’il est pressé, il jette avec ardeur les points, les virgules, les barres, les fions et les paraphes. Ceci est le comble du talent. Il s’entretient avec ses collègues du dégel, des limaces, du repavage du port, du pont de fer et du gaz. S’il voit, à travers les épais rideaux qui lui bouchent le jour, que le temps est pluvieux, il s’écrie subitement : “Diable, va y avoir du bouillon” Puis il se remet à la besogne.

Le commis aime la chaleur, il vit dans une étuve perpétuelle. Son plus grand plaisir est de faire rougir le poêle du comptoir. Alors il rit du rire de l’heureux : la sueur de la joie inonde son visage qu’il essuie avec son mouchoir et en soufflant régulièrement ; mais bientôt, étouffant sous le poids du bonheur, il ne peut retenir cette exclamation : “Qu’il fait bon ici !”

Et quand il est au plus fort de cette béatitude, il copie avec une nouvelle ardeur : sa plume va plus vite que de coutume, ses yeux s’allument, il oublie de remettre le couvercle de sa tabatière, et, emporté par l’ivresse, il se lève tout à coup de sa place et revient bientôt dans le sanctuaire, apportant dans ses bras une énorme bûche ; il s’approche du poêle, s’en écarte à diverses reprises, en ouvre la porte avec une règle, puis jette le morceau de bois en s’écriant : “Encore une allumette !” Et il reste quelques moments, debout, la bouche béante, à écouter avec délices la flamme qui fait trembler le tuyau en rendant un bruit sourd et agréable.

Si par malheur vous laissez la porte ouverte en entrant dans le bureau, le commis devient furieux, ses ongles se redressent, il gratte sa perruque, frappe du pied, jure, et vous entendez sortir d’entre les registres, les contrôles, les nombreux cahiers d’additions et de divisions, vous entendez sortir une voix glapissante qui crie : “Fermez la porte, corbleu ! vous ne savez donc pas lire ? Regardez l’avis qui est à la porte du comptoir. La chaleur va s’en aller, mâtin !”

Ne vous avisez pas de l’appeler commis ; dites au contraire : Monsieur l’employé.

L’employé a de longs ongles, et c’est un de ses plus doux passe-temps que de les gratter avec son grattoir.

L’employé apporte le matin son petit pain dans sa poche, ouvre son pupitre, prend sa casquette à larges bords verts et attend que le garçon lui ait apporté son déjeuner de beurre salé ou son fromage quotidien.

Lorsque le jour commence à baisser, l’employé se réjouit fort de voir la porte du comptoir s’entr’ouvrir et de voir entrer la personne qui doit allumer les quinquets.

Car le quinquet est pour le bureaucrate un long sujet de conversation, de discussion et une cause de disputes entre lui et ses semblables. À peine est-il allumé, qu’il regarde si la mèche est bonne, s’il ne file pas, et puis quand il a haussé le bouton à une hauteur démesurée, lorsqu’il a cassé cinq ou six verres, alors il se plaint amèrement de son sort, et dit souvent, avec l’accent de la plus profonde tristesse, que la lumière lui blesse la vue, et c’est pour s’en préserver qu’il a cette énorme casquette qui étend son ombre sur le papier de son voisin. Le voisin déclare qu’il est impossible d’écrire sans y voir, et veut lui faire ôter sa casquette ; mais le rusé commis l’enfonce davantage sur ses oreilles et il a même soin de mettre la gorgette.

Il va tous les dimanches au spectacle, se place aux secondes, ou au parterre : il siffle le lever du rideau et applaudit le vaudeville. Quand il est jeune, il va faire sa partie de dominos entre les entractes. Quelquefois il perd, alors il rentre chez lui, casse deux assiettes, n’appelle plus sa femme mon épouse, oublie Azor, mange avidement le bouilli réchauffé de la veille, sale avec fureur les haricots, et puis s’endort dans des rêves de contrôle, de dégels, de repavages et de soustractions.

J’ai dit, je crois, tout ce qu’il y avait à dire sur le commis en général, ou du moins je sens que la patience du lecteur commence à se lasser. J’ai encore dans mes cartons de nombreuses observations sur les diverses espèces de ce genre, telles que le commis de barrière, le commis de rouenneries, le commis douanier, qui s’élève quelquefois jusqu’au rang de maître d’études, se lance dans la littérature et rédige des affiches et des feuilletons ; le commis-voyageur, l’employé de mairie et mille autres encore.

Tel est le fruit ingrat des veilles de ma vie studieuse. Mais si des temps meilleurs se font plus tard sentir, si les orages politiques qui tendent à augmenter diminuent, eh bien ! je pourrai alors reparaître sur la scène et publier la suite de ce cours de zoologie, immense échelon social qui s’étend depuis le commis de barrière jusqu’au caissier de l’agent de change.

F.

QUIDQUID VOLUERIS - ETUDES PSYCHOLOGIQUES

septembre 1837
Gve Flaubert

I

À moi donc mes souvenirs d’insomnie, à moi mes rêves de pauvre fou. Venez tous, venez tous, mes bons amis les diablotins, vous qui la nuit sautez sur mes pieds, courez sur mes vitres, montez au plafond et puis violets, verts, jaunes, noirs, blancs, avec de grandes ailes, de longues barbes, remuez les cloisons de la chambre, les ferrures de ma porte et de votre souffle faites vaciller la lampe qui pâlit sous vos lèvres verdâtres.

Je vous vois bien souvent dans les pâles nuits d’hiver venir tous paisiblement, couverts de grands manteaux bruns qui tranchent bien sur la neige des toits, avec vos petits crânes osseux comme des têtes de morts, - vous arrivez tous par le trou de ma serrure - et chacun va réchauffer ses longs ongles à la barre de ma cheminée qui jette encore une tiède chaleur.

Venez tous enfants de mon cerveau, donnez-moi pour le moment quelques-unes de vos folies, de vos rires étranges, et vous m’aurez épargné une préface comme les Modernes et une invocation à la muse comme les Anciens.

II

— Contez-nous votre voyage au Brésil, mon cher ami, disait par une belle soirée du mois d’août Mme de Lansac à son [neveu] Paul. - Cela amusera Adèle.

Or Adèle était une jolie blonde bien nonchalante qui se pendait à son bras, dans les allées sablées du parc.

M. Paul répondit : - mais ma tante j’ai fait un excellent voyage, je vous assure.

— Vous me l’avez déjà dit

— Ah, fit-il, et il se tut.

Le silence des promeneurs dura longtemps, et chacun marchait sans penser à son voisin, l’un effeuillant une rose, l’autre remuant de ses pieds le sable des allées, un troisième regardant la lune à travers les grands ormes que leurs branches entr’écartées laissaient apparaître limpide et calme.

Encore... la lune, mais elle doit nécessairement jouer un grand rôle. C’est le sine qua non de toute oeuvre lugubre, comme les claquements de dents et les cheveux hérissés. Mais enfin ce jour-là il y avait une lune.

Pourquoi me l’ôter ma pauvre lune ? Ô ma lune je t’aime. Tu reluis bien sur le toit escarpé du château, tu fais du lac une large bande d’argent et à ta pâle lueur chaque goutte d’eau de la pluie qui vient de tomber, chaque goutte d’eau dis-je, suspendue au bout d’une feuille de rose semble une perle sur un beau sein de femme. Ceci est bien vieux. Mais coupons là et revenons à nos moutons, comme dit Panurge.

Cependant dans cette nonchalance affectée, dans cet abandon rêveur de cette grande fille dont la taille se penche si gracieusement sur le bras de son cousin il y a je ne sais quoi de langoureux et de roucoulant, dans ces belles dents blanches qui se montrent pour sourire, dans ces cheveux blonds qui encadrent en larges boucles ce visage pâle et mignon - il y a dans tout cela un parfum d’amour qui porte à l’âme une sensation délicieuse.

Ce n’était point une beauté méridionale et ardente, - une de ces filles du Midi, à l’oeil brûlant comme un volcan, aux passions brûlantes aussi, - son oeil n’était pas noir, sa peau n’avait point un velouté d’Andalouse, mais c’était quelque chose d’une forme vaporeuse et mystique comme ces fées scandinaves, au cou d’albâtre, aux pieds nus sur la neige des montagnes, et qui apparaissent dans une belle nuit étoilée, sur le bord d’un torrent, légères et fugitives au barde qui chante ses chants d’amour.

Son regard était bleu et humide - son teint était pâle, c’était une de ces pauvres jeunes filles qui ont des gastrites de naissance, boivent de l’eau, tapotent sur un piano bruyant la musique de Liszt, aiment la poésie, les tristes rêveries, les amours mélancoliques, et ont des maux d’estomac.

Elle aimait - qui donc ? ses cygnes qui glissaient sur l’étang, - ses singes qui croquaient des noix que sa jolie main blanche leur passait à travers les barreaux de leurs cages, - et puis encore ses oiseaux, son écureuil, les fleurs du parc, ses beaux livres dorés sur tranche et... son cousin, son ami d’enfance M. Paul qui avait de gros favoris noirs, qui était grand et fort, qui [devait] l’épouser dans quinze jours.

Soyez sûr qu’elle sera heureuse avec un tel mari, c’est un homme sensé par excellence et je comprends dans cette catégorie tous ceux qui n'aiment point la poésie, qui ont un bon estomac et un coeur sec, qualités indispensables pour vivre jusqu'à cent ans et faire sa fortune. L'homme sensé est celui qui sait vivre sans payer ses dettes, sait goûter un bon verre de vin, profite de l'amour d'une femme [comme] d'un habit dont on se couvre pendant quelque temps et puis qui le jette avec toute la friperie des vieux sentiments qui sont passés de mode.

En effet, - vous répondra-t-il, qu'est-ce que l'amour ? - une sottise - j'en profite.

Et la tendresse ?

Une niaiserie, disent les géomètres, or je n'en ai point.

Et la poésie ?

Qu'est-ce que ça prouve ? aussi je m'en garde.

Et la religion ? - la patrie ? l'art ?

Fariboles et fadaises.

Pour l'âme, il y a longtemps que Cabanis et Bichat nous ont prouvé que les veines donnent au coeur et voilà tout -

Voilà l'homme sensé, celui qu'on respecte et qu'on honore, car il monte sa garde nationale, s'habille comme tout le monde, parle morale et philanthropie, vote pour les chemins de fer - et l'abolition des maisons de jeu.

Il a un château, une femme, un fils qui sera notaire, une fille qui se mariera à un chimiste. Si vous le rencontrez à l'Opéra, - il a des lunettes d'or, un habit noir, une canne et prend des pastilles de menthe pour chasser l'odeur du cigare car la pipe lui fait horreur, cela est si mauvais ton.

Paul n'avait point encore de femme mais il allait en prendre une - sans amour et par la raison que ce mariage-là doublerait sa fortune, et il n'avait eu besoin que de faire une simple addition pour voir qu'il serait riche alors de 50 mille livres de rente.

Au collège il était fort en mathématiques.

Quant à la littérature il avait toujours trouvé ça bête.

La promenade dura longtemps, silencieuse et toute contemplative de la belle nuit bleue qui enveloppait les arbres, le bosquet, l'étang, dans un brouillard d'azur que perçaient les rayons de la lune comme si l'atmosphère eût été couverte d'un voile de gaze.

On ne rentra dans le salon que vers onze heures. Les bougies pétillaient et quelques roses tombées de la jardinière d'acajou étaient étendues sur le parquet ciré, pêle-mêle, effeuillées et foulées aux pieds.

— Qu'importe, il y en avait tant d'autres.

Adèle sentait ses souliers de satin humectés par la rosée. Elle avait mal à la tête et s'endormit sur le sofa - un bras pendant à terre.

Mme de Lansac était partie donner quelques ordres pour le lendemain et fermer toutes les portes, tous les verrous, il ne restait que Paul et Djalioh. Le premier regardait les candélabres dorés, la pendule de bronze dont le son argentin sonna minuit - le piano de Pape, - les tableaux, les fauteuils - la table de marbre blanc, le sofa tapissé - puis allant à la fenêtre et regardant vers le plus fourré du parc : Demain à 4 heures il y aura du lapin.

Quant à Djalioh il regardait la jeune fille endormie. - Il voulut dire un mot - mais il fut dit si bas, si craintif, qu'on le prit pour un soupir.

Si c'était un mot ou un soupir peu importe. Mais il y avait là dedans toute une âme.

III

Le lendemain en effet, par un beau lever de soleil, - le chasseur partit accompagné de sa grande levrette favorite, - de ses deux chiens bassets et du garde qui portait dans une large carnassière la poudre, les balles, le plomb, tous les ustensiles de chasse et un énorme pâté de canards que notre fiancé avait commandé lui-même depuis deux jours. Le piqueur sur son ordre donna du cor et ils s'avancèrent à grands pas vers la plaine.

Aussitôt à une fenêtre du second étage un contrevent vert s'ouvrit et une tête entourée de longs cheveux blonds apparut à travers le jasmin qui montait le long du mur et dont le feuillage tapissait les briques rouges et blanches du château.

Elle était en négligé - ou du moins vous l'auriez présumé d'après l'abandon de ses cheveux, le laisser-aller de sa pose et l'entre-bâillement de sa chemise garnie de mousseline, décolletée jusqu'aux épaules, et dont les manches ne venaient que jusqu'aux coudes. - Son bras était blanc, rond, charnu mais par malheur il s'égratigna quelque peu contre la muraille en ouvrant précipitamment la fenêtre pour voir partir Paul. Elle lui fit un signe de main et lui envoya un baiser.

Paul se détourna et après avoir regardé longtemps cette tête d'enfant fraîche et pure au milieu des fleurs, après avoir réfléchi que tout cela serait bientôt à lui et les fleurs et la jeune fille et l'amour qu'il y avait dans tout cela - il dit... Elle est gentille.

Alors une main blanche ferma l'auvent, - l'horloge sonna 4 heures, le coq se mit à chanter et un rayon de soleil passant à travers la charmille vint darder sur les ardoises du toit.

Tout redevint silencieux et calme

Tout redevint silencieux et calme.

À dix heures, - M. Paul n’était pas de retour. On sonna le déjeuner - et l’on [se] mit à table.

La salle était haute et spacieuse, meublée à la Louis XV. - Sur les dessus de la cheminée, on voyait à demi effacée par la poussière une scène pastorale. C’était une bergère bien poudrée, couverte de mouches, avec des paniers au milieu de ses blancs moutons, l’amour volait au-dessus d’elle et un joli carlin était étendu à ses pieds assis sur un tapis brodé où l’on voyait un bouquet de roses lié par un fil d’or. Aux corniches étaient suspendus des oeufs de pigeon enfilés les uns aux autres et peints en blanc, avec des taches vertes.

Les lambris étaient d’un blanc pâle et terni, décorés çà et là de quelques portraits de famille et puis des paysages coloriés - représentant des vues de Norvège ou de Russie, des montagnes de neige - des moissons ou bien des vendanges. - Plus loin des gravures encadrées en noir. Ici c’est le portrait en pied de quelque président au parlement avec ses peaux d’hermine et sa perruque à trois marteaux, plus loin un cavalier allemand qui fait caracoler son cheval dont la queue longue et fournie se replie dans l’air et ondule comme les anneaux d’un serpent. Enfin quelques tableaux de l’école flamande avec ses scènes de cabaret, ses gaillardes figures toutes bouffies de bière et son atmosphère de fumée de tabac, sa joie, ses gros seins nus, ses gros rires sur de grosses lèvres et ce franc matérialisme qui règne depuis l’enfant dont la tête frisée se plonge dans un pot de vin jusqu’aux formes charnues de la bonne Vierge assise dans sa niche noircie et enfumée.

Du reste les fenêtres hautes et larges répandaient une vive lumière dans l’appartement qui malgré la vétusté de ces meubles ne manquait pas d’un certain air de jeunesse, - si vous aviez vu les deux fontaines de marbre aux deux bouts de la salle - et les dalles noires et blanches qui la pavaient. Mais le meuble principal, celui qui donnait le plus à penser et à sentir était un immense canapé bien vieux, bien doux, bien mollet, tout chamarré de vives couleurs, de vert, de jaune, d’oiseaux de paradis, de bouquets de fleurs, le tout parsemé richement sur un fond de satin blanc et moelleux. Là sans doute, bien des fois après que les domestiques avaient enlevé les débris du souper, - la châtelaine s’y rendait et assise sur ces frais coussins de satin, la pauvre femme attendait M. le Chevalier qui arrivait sans vouloir déranger personne pour prendre un rafraîchissement. Car par hasard il avait soif. Oui là sans doute plus d’une jolie marquise, plus d’une grande comtesse au court jupon, au teint rose, à la jolie main, au corsage étroit entendit de doux propos que maint gentil abbé philosophe et athée glissait au milieu d’une conversation sur les sensations et les besoins de l’âme. Oui il y eut là peut-être bien des petits soupirs, des larmes et des baisers furtifs.

....

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Et tout cela avait passé, les marquises, les abbés, les chevaliers, - les propos des gentilshommes, - tout s’était évanoui, tout avait coulé, fui - les baisers, les amours, les tendres épanchements, les séductions des talons rouges, - le canapé était resté à sa place sur ses quatre pieds d’acajou mais son bois était vermoulu, et sa garniture en or s’était ternie et effilée.

Djalioh était assis à côté d’Adèle. Celle-ci fit la moue en s’asseyant, - et recula sa chaise, rougit et se versa précipitamment du vin. Son voisin en effet n’avait rien d’agréable car depuis un mois qu’il était avec M. Paul dans le château, il n’avait pas encore parlé, il était fantasque selon les uns, mélancolique disaient les autres, stupide, fou - enfin muet ajoutaient les plus sages.

Il passait chez Mme de Lansac pour l’ami de M. Paul - un drôle d’ami, pensaient tous les gens qui le voyaient.

Il était petit, maigre et chétif. Il n’y avait que ses mains qui annonçassent quelque force dans sa personne. Ses doigts étaient courts, écrasés, munis d’ongles robustes et à moitié crochus. Quant au reste de son corps il était si faible et si débile, il était couvert d’une couleur si triste et si languissante que vous auriez gémi sur cet homme jeune encore et qui semblait né pour la tombe comme ces jeunes arbres qui vivent cassés et sans feuilles.

Son vêtement complètement noir rehaussait encore la couleur livide de son teint, car il était d’un jaune cuivré. Ses lèvres étaient grosses et laissaient voir deux rangées de longues dents blanches - comme celles des singes et des nègres.

Quant à sa tête elle était étroite et comprimée sur le devant mais par derrière elle prenait un développement prodigieux. Ceci s’observait sans peine car la rareté de ses cheveux laissait voir un crâne nu et ridé.

Il y avait sur tout cela un air de sauvagerie et de bestialité étrange et bizarre qui le faisait ressembler plutôt à quel[que] animal fantastique qu’à un être humain.

Ses yeux étaient ronds, grands, d’une teinte terne et fausse et quand le regard plombé de cet homme s’abaissait sur vous on se sentait sous le poids d’une étrange fascination. Et pourtant - il n’avait point sur les traits un air dur ni féroce, il souriait à tous les regards - mais ce [rire] était stupide et froid.

S’il eût ouvert la chemise qui touchait à cette peau épaisse et noire vous eussiez contemplé une large poitrine qui semblait celle d’un athlète tant les vastes poumons qu’elle contenait respiraient tout à l’aise sous cette poitrine velue.

Ô son coeur aussi était vaste et immense - mais vaste comme la mer, immense et vide comme sa solitude.

Souvent, en présence des forêts, des hautes montagnes, de l’Océan - son front plissé se déridait tout à coup - ses narines s’écartaient avec violence et toute son âme se dilatait devant la nature comme une rose qui s'épanouit au soleil et il tremblait de tous ses membres, sous le poids d'une volupté intérieure - et la tête entre ses deux mains il tombait dans une léthargique mélancolie. Alors dis-je, son âme brillait à travers son corps comme les beaux yeux d'une femme derrière un voile noir.

Car ces formes si laides, si hideuses, ce teint jaune et maladif, ce crâne rétréci, ces membres rachitiques, tout cela prenait un tel air de bonheur et d'enthousiasme, - il y avait tant de feu et de poésie dans ces vilains yeux de singe, qu'il semblait alors comme remué violemment par un galvanisme de l'âme.

La passion chez lui devait être rage et l'amour une frénésie.

Les fibres de son coeur étaient plus molles et plus sonores que celles des autres. La douleur se convertissait en des spasmes convulsifs et les jouissances en voluptés inouïes.

Sa jeunesse était fraîche et pure. Il avait 17 ans ou plutôt soixante, cent et des siècles entiers, tant il était vieux et cassé, usé et battu par tous les vents du coeur, par tous les orages de l'âme.

Demandez à l'océan combien il porte de rides au front, comptez les vagues de la tempête.

Il avait vécu longtemps, bien longtemps, non point par la pensée. Les méditations du savant ni les rêves n'avaient point occupé un instant dans toute sa vie. Mais il avait vécu et grandi de l'âme - et il était déjà vieux par le coeur.

Pourtant ses affections ne s'étaient tournées sur personne, car il avait en lui un chaos des sentiments les plus étranges, des sensations les plus étranges. La poésie avait remplacé la logique et les passions avaient pris la place de la science. Parfois il lui semblait entendre des voix qui lui parlaient derrière un buisson de roses et des mélodies qui tombaient des cieux.

La nature le possédait sous toutes ces forces, volupté de l'âme, passions brûlantes, appétits gloutons.

C'était le résumé d'une grande faiblesse morale et physique avec toute la véhémence du coeur mais d'un fragile et qui se brisait d'elle-même à chaque obstacle comme la foudre insensée qui renverse les palais, brûle les diadèmes, abat les chaumières et va se perdre dans une flaque d'eau.

Voilà le monstre de la nature qui était en contact avec M. Paul, cet autre monstre ou plutôt cette merveille de la civilisation et qui en portait tous les symboles, - grandeur de l'esprit, sécheresse du coeur. Autant l'un avait d'amour pour les épanchements de l'âme - les douces causeries du coeur - autant Djalioh aimait les rêveries de la nuit et les songes de sa pensée.

Son âme se prenait à ce qui était beau et sublime comme le lierre aux débris, les fleurs au printemps, la tombe au cadavre, le malheur à l’homme, s’y cramponnait et mourait avec lui.

Où l’intelligence finissait - le coeur prenait son empire. Il était vaste et infini, car il comprenait le monde dans son amour. Aussi il aimait Adèle, mais d’abord comme la nature entière, d’une sympathie douce et universelle, puis peu à peu cet amour augment(a], à mesure que sa tendresse sur les autres êtres diminuait.

En effet nous naissons tous avec une certaine somme de tendresse et d’amour que nous jetons gaiement sur les premières choses venues, des chevaux, des places, des honneurs, des trônes, des femmes, des voluptés, quoi, enfin ? à tous les vents, à tous les courants rapides.

— Mais réunissons-la et nous aurons un trésor immense.

Jetez des tonnes d’or à la surface du désert - le sable les engloutira bientôt mais réunissez-les en un monceau et vous formerez des pyramides.

Eh bien il concentra bientôt toute son âme sur une seule pensée, et il vécut de cette pensée.

IV

La fatale quinzaine s’était expirée et évanouie dans une longue attente pour la jeune fille, dans une froide indifférence pour son futur époux.

La première voyait dans le mariage un mari - des cachemires, une loge à l’Opéra - des courses au Bois de Boulogne - des bals tout l’hiver - Ô tant qu’elle voudra et puis encore tout ce qu’une fillette de 18 ans rêve dans ses songes dorés et dans son alcôve fermée.

Le mari au contraire voyait dans le mariage - une femme, des cachemires à payer - une petite poupée à habiller - et puis encore tout ce qu’un pauvre mari rêve lorsqu’il mène sa femme au bal. Celui-là pourtant était assez fat pour croire toutes les femmes amoureuses de lui-même.

C’est une question qu’il s’adressait [toutes les fois] qu’il se regardait dans sa glace et lorsqu’il avait bien peigné ses favoris noirs.

Il avait pris une femme parce qu’il s’ennuyait d’être seul chez lui et qu’il ne voulait plus avoir de maîtresse depuis qu’il avait découvert que son domestique en avait une. - En outre le mariage le forcera à rester chez lui et sa santé ne s’en trouvera que mieux. Il aura une excuse pour ne plus aller à la chasse et la chasse l’ennuie. Enfin la meilleure de toutes les raisons, il aura - de l’amour, du dévouement - du bonheur domestique, de la tranquillité, des enfants... bah bien mieux que tranquillité, bonheur, amour, 50 mille livres de rente en bonnes mieux que tranquillité, bonheur, amour, 30 mille livres de rente en bonnes fermes, en jolis billets de banque qu'il placera sur les fonds d'Espagne.

Il avait été à Paris, avait acheté une corbeille de 10 mille francs, avait fait cent 20 invitations pour le bal et était revenu au château de sa belle-mère, le tout en 8 jours. C'était un homme prodigieux.

C'était donc par un dimanche de septembre que la noce eut lieu. Ce jour-là il faisait humide et froid, un brouillard épais pesait sur la vallée, le sable du jardin s'attachait aux frais souliers des dames.

La messe se dit à dix heures, peu de monde y assista. Djalioh s'y laissa pousser par le flot des villageois et entra.

L'encens brûlait sur l'autel, on respirait à l'entour un air chaud et parfumé.

L'église était basse, ancienne, petite, barbouillée de blanc. Le conservateur intelligent en avait ménagé les vitraux. Tout autour du choeur il y avait les conviés, le maire, son conseil municipal, des amis, le notaire, un médecin et les chantres en surplis blancs.

Tout cela avait des gants blancs, un air serein, chacun tirait de sa bourse une pièce de 5 francs dont le son argentin tombant sur le plateau interrompait la monotonie des chants d'église. La cloche sonnait.

Djalioh se ressouvint de l'avoir entendue un jour chanter aussi sur un cercueil, il avait vu également des gens vêtus de noir prier sur un cadavre et puis portant ses regards sur la fiancée en robe blanche courbée à l'autel avec des fleurs au front, et un triple collier de perles sur sa gorge nue et ondulante, une horrible pensée le glaça tout à coup.

— Il chancela et s'appuy[a] dans une niche de saint vide en grande partie, une figure seule restait, elle était grotesque et horrible à faire peur.

À côté d'elle il était là lui - son bien-aimé, celui qu'elle regardait si complaisamment avec ses yeux bleus et ses grands sourcils noirs comme deux diamants enchâssés dans l'ébène.

Il avait un lorgnon en écaille incrusté d'or et il lorgnait toutes les femmes en se dandinant sur son fauteuil de velours cramoisi.

Djalioh était là, debout, immobile et muet, sans qu'on remarquât ni la pâleur de sa face, ni l'amertume de son sourire, car on le croyait indifférent et froid comme le monstre de pierre qui grimaçait sur sa tête, et pourtant la tempête régnait en son âme et la colère couvait dans son coeur comme les volcans d'Islande sous leurs têtes blanchies par les neiges. Ce n'était point une frénésie brutale et expansive, mais l'action se passait intimement, sans cris, sans sanglots, sans blasphèmes, sans efforts. Il était muet et son regard ne parlait pas plus que ses lèvres, son oeil était de plomb et sa figure était stupide.

De jeunes et jolies femmes vivent longtemps avec un teint frais, une peau douce, blanche, satinée, - puis elles languissent, leurs yeux s'éteignent, s’affaiblissent, se closent enfin - et puis cette femme gracieuse et légère qui courait les salons avec des fleurs dans les cheveux, dont les mains étaient si blanches, exhalaient une odeur de musc et de rose, eh bien un beau jour, un de vos amis s’il est médecin vous apprend que deux pouces plus bas que l’endroit où elle était décolletée elle avait un cancer et qu’elle est morte, la fraîcheur de sa peau était celle du cadavre, c’est là l’histoire de toutes les passions intimes, de tous ces sourires glacés.

Le rire de la malédiction est horrible, c’est un supplice de plus que de comprimer la douleur.

Ne croyez donc plus alors ni aux sourires, ni à la joie, à la gaieté. À quoi faut-il donc croire ?...

Croyez à la tombe.

Son asile est inviolable et son sommeil est profond.

Quel gouffre s’élargit sous nous à ce mot : éternité. Pensons un instant à ce que veulent dire ces mots, vie, mort, désespoir, joie, bonheur, demandez-vous un jour que vous pleurerez sur quelque tête chère, et que vous gémirez la nuit sur un grabat d’insomnie, demandez-vous pourquoi nous vivons, pourquoi nous mourrons, et dans quel but, à quel souffle de malheur, à quel vent du désespoir, grains de sable que nous sommes, nous roulons ainsi dans l’ouragan ? Quelle est cette hydre qui s’abreuve de nos pleurs et se complaît à nos sanglots ? pourquoi tout cela... et alors le vertige vous prend et l’on se sent entraîné vers un gouffre incommensurable au fond duquel on entend vibrer un gigantesque rire de damné.

Il est des choses dans la vie et des idées dans l’âme qui vous attirent fatalement vers les régions sataniques comme si votre tête était de fer et qu’un aimant de malheur vous y entraînât. Ô une tête de mort ! ses yeux caves et fixes, la teinte jaune de sa surface, sa mâchoire ébréchée, sera-ce donc là la réalité, et le Vrai serait-il le Néant ?

C’est dans cet abîme sans fond du doute le plus cuisant, de la plus amère douleur que se perdait Djalioh. En voyant cet air de fêtes, ces visages riants, en contemplant Adèle, son amour, sa vie, le charme de ses traits, la suavité de ses regards - il se demanda pourquoi tout cela lui était refusé, semblable à un condamné qu’on fait mourir de faim devant des vivres et que quelques barreaux de fer séparent de l’existence.

Il ignorait aussi pourquoi ce sentiment-là était distinct des autres. Car autrefois si quelqu’un dans la chaude Amérique venait lui demander une place à l’ombre de ses palmiers, un fruit de ses jardins, il l’offrait, pourquoi donc, se demandait-il, l’amour que j’ai pour elle est-il si exclusif et si entier ?

C’est que l’amour est un monde, l’unité est indivisible.

Et puis il baissa la tête sur sa poitrine et pleura longtemps en silence comme un enfant.

Une fois seulement il laissa échapper un cri rauque et perçant comme celui d'un hibou mais il alla se confondre avec la voix douce et mélodieuse de l'orgue qui chantait un Te Deum.

Les sons étaient purs et nourris, ils s'élevèrent en vibrant dans la nef et se mêlèrent avec l'encens...

Il s'aperçut ensuite qu'il y avait une grande rumeur dans la foule, que les chaises remuaient et qu'on sortait, un rayon de soleil pénétrait à travers les vitraux de l'église, il fit reluire le peigne en or de la fiancée et brilla pour quelques instants sur les barres dorées du cimetière, seule distance qui séparât la mairie de l'église.

L'herbe des cimetières est verte, haute, épaisse et bien nourrie. Les conviés eurent les pieds mouillés, leurs bas blancs et leurs escarpins reluisants furent salis. Ils jurèrent après les morts.

Le maire se trouvait à son poste, debout au haut d'une table carrée couverte d'un tapis vert.

Quand on en vint à prononcer le Oui fatal, M. Paul sourit, Adèle pâlit, et Mme de Lansac sortit son flacon de sels.

Adèle alors réfléchit. La pauvre fille n'en revenait pas d'étonnement, elle qui quelque temps auparavant, était si folle, si pensive, qui courait dans les prairies, qui lisait les romans, les vers, les contes, qui galopait sur sa jument grise à travers les allées de la forêt, qui aimait tant à entendre le bruissement des feuilles, le murmure des ruisseaux - elle se trouvait tout à coup une dame.

C'est-à-dire quelque chose qui a un grand châle, - et qui va seule dans les rues.

Tous ces vagues pressentiments, ces commotions intimes du coeur, ce besoin de poésie et de sensations qui la faisaient rêver sur l'avenir, sur elle-même, tout cela allait se trouver expliqué, pensait-elle. Comme si elle allait se réveiller d'un songe.

Hélas, tous ces pauvres enfants du coeur et de l'imagination allaient se trouver étouffés au berceau entre les soins du ménage et les caresses qu'il faudra prodiguer à un être hargneux qui a des rhumatismes et des cors aux pieds et qu'on appelle : - un mari.

Quand la foule s'écarta pour laisser passer le cortège, Adèle se sentit la main piquée comme par une griffe de fer. C'était Djalioh qui en passant l'avait égratignée avec ses ongles. Son gant déchiré devint rouge de sang. Elle s'entoura de son mouchoir de batiste. En se retournant pour monter en calèche elle vit encore Djalioh appuyé sur le marchepied - un frisson la saisit et elle s'élança dans la voiture.

Il était pâle [comme] la robe de la mariée. Ses grosses lèvres crevassées par la fièvre et couvertes de boutons se remuaient vivement comme quelqu’un qui parle vite, - ses paupières clignotaient et sa prunelle roulait lentement dans son orbite, comme les idiots -

V

Le soir il y eut un bal au château et des lampions à toutes les fenêtres.

Il y avait [de] nombreux cortèges d’équipages, de chevaux et de valets.

De temps en temps on voyait une lumière apparaître à travers les ormes. Elle s’approchait de plus en plus en suivant mille détours, dans les tortueuses allées, enfin elle s’arrêtait devant le perron, avec une calèche tirée par des chevaux ruisselants de sueur. Alors la portière s’ouvrait et une femme descendait, - elle était jeune ou vieille, laide ou belle, en rose ou en blanc, comme vous voudrez, et puis après avoir rétabli l’économie de sa coiffure par quelques coups de main donnés à la hâte, dans le vestibule à la lueur des quinquets et au milieu des arbres verts et des fleurs et du gazon qui tapissaient les murs, elle abandonnait son manteau et son boa aux laquais, elle entrait. On ouvre les portes à deux battants, on l’annonce, il se fait un grand bruit de chaises et de pieds. On se lève, on fait un salut et puis il s’ensuit ces mille et une causeries, ces petits riens, ces charmantes futilités qui bourdonnent dans les salons et qui voltigent de côtés et d’autres comme des brouillards légers dans une serre chaude.

La danse commença à dix heures.

Et au dedans on entendait le glissement des souliers sur le parquet, le frôlement des robes, le bruit de la musique, les sons de la danse.

Et au dehors, le bruissement des feuilles, les voitures qui roulaient au loin sur la terre mouillée, les cygnes qui battaient de l’aile sur l’étang, les aboiements de quelque chien du village après les sons qui partaient du château et puis quelques causeries naïves et railleuses de paysans dont les têtes apparaissaient à travers les vitres du salon.

Dans un coin était un groupe de jeunes gens, les amis de Paul, ses anciens compagnons de plaisir, en gants jaunes ou azurés, avec des lorgnons, des fracs en queue de morue, des têtes moyen âge et des barbes comme Rembrandt et toute l’école Flamande n’en vit et n’en rêva jamais.

— Dis-moi donc de grâce, disait l’un d’eux, membre du Jockey-Club, quelle est cette mine renfrognée et plissée comme une vieille, celle qui est là derrière la causeuse où est ta femme ?

— Ça ? - C’est Djalioh.

— Qui est-ce Djalioh ?

— Oh ceci, c’est toute une histoire.

— Contenous-la, dit un des jeunes gens qui avait des cheveux aplatis sur les deux oreilles et la vue basse, puisque nous n’avons rien pour nous amuser.

— Au moins du punch, repartit vivement un monsieur, grand, maigre, pâle et aux pommettes saillantes.

— Quant à moi je n’en prendrai pas et pour cause, c’est trop fort. Des cigares, dit le membre du Jockey-Club.

— Fi des cigares, y penses-tu Ernest, devant des femmes.

— Elles en sont folles au contraire, j’ai dix maîtresses qui fument comme des dragons, dont deux ont culotté à elles seules toutes mes pipes.

— Moi j’en ai une qui boit du kirsch à ravir.

— Buvons, dit un des amis qui n’aimait ni les cigares, ni le punch, ni la danse, ni la musique.

— Non, que Paul nous conte son histoire.

— Mes chers amis, elle n’est pas longue, la voilà tout entière. C’est que j’ai parié avec M. Petterwell, un de mes amis qui est planteur au Brésil, un ballot de Virginie contre Mirsa, une de ses esclaves, que les singes... Oui, qu’on peut élever un singe, c’est-à-dire qu’il m’a défié de faire passer un singe pour un homme.

— Eh bien Djalioh est un singe ?

— Imbécile, pour ça non.

— Mais enfin...

— C’est qu’il faut vous expliquer que dans mon voyage au Brésil je me suis singulièrement amusé. Petterwell avait une esclave noire nouvellement débarquée du vieux canal de Bahama, diable m’emporte si je me rappelle son nom. - Enfin, cette femme-là n’avait pas de mari. Le ridicule ne devait tomber sur personne. - Elle était bien jolie. Je l’achetai à Petterwell, jamais la sotte ne voulait de moi, elle me trouvait probablement plus laid qu’un sauvage.

Tous se mirent à rire, Paul rougit.

— Enfin un beau jour, comme je m’ennuyais, j’achetai à un nègre le plus bel orang-outang qu’on eût jamais vu. - Depuis longtemps l’Académie des sciences s’occupait de la solution d’un problème : savoir s’il pouvait y avoir un métis de singe et d’homme.

Moi j’avais à me venger d’une petite sotte de négresse et voilà qu’un jour après mon retour de la chasse, je trouve mon singe, que j’avais enfermé dans ma chambre avec l’esclave, évadé et parti, l’esclave en pleurs et toute ensanglantée chambre avec l'esclave, évadé et parti, l'esclave en pleurs et toute ensanglantée des griffes de Bell. Quelques semaines [après] elle sentit des douleurs de ventre et des maux de coeur. Bien, enfin cinq mois après, elle vomit pendant plusieurs jours consécutifs. J'étais pour le coup presque sûr de mon affaire. Une fois elle eut une attaque de nerfs si violente qu'on la saigna des quatre membres car j'aurais été au désespoir de la voir mourir. - Bref au bout de sept mois un beau jour elle accoucha sur le fumier, elle en mourut quelques heures après mais le poupon se portait à ravir. J'étais ma foi bien content, la question était résolue.

J'ai envoyé de suite le procès-verbal à l'Institut et le ministre à sa requête m'envoya la croix d'honneur.

— Tant pis, mon cher Paul, c'est bien canaille maintenant.

— Raison d'écolier. Ça plaît aux femmes, elles regardent ça en souriant pendant qu'on leur parle. Enfin j'élevai l'enfant, je l'aimai comme un père.

— Ah ah, fit un monsieur qui avait des dents blanches et qui riait toujours, pourquoi ne l'avez-vous pas amené en France dans vos autres voyages ?

— J'ai préféré le faire rester dans sa patrie jusqu'à mon départ définitif, d'autant plus que l'âge fixé par le pari était seize ans car il fut conclu la première année de mon arrivée à Janeiro. Bref, j'ai gagné Mirsa, j'ai eu la croix à vingt ans, et de plus j'ai fait un enfant par des moyens inusités.

— Infernal, dantesque, dit un ami pâle.

— Risible, cocasse, dit un autre qui avait de grosses joues et un teint rouge.

— Bravo, dit le cavalier.

— À faire crever de rire, dit en se tordant de plaisir sur une causeuse élastique un homme sautant et frétillant comme une carpe, petit, court, au front plat, aux yeux petits, le nez épaté, les lèvres minces, rond comme une pomme et bourgeonné comme un cantaloup.

Le coup était fameux et partait d'un maître, jamais un homme ordinaire n'aurait fait cela.

— Eh bien que fait-il Djalioh ? aime-t-il les cigares ? dit le fumeur en en présentant plein les deux mains et en les laissant tomber avec intention sur les genoux d'une dame.

— Du tout mon cher, il les a en horreur.

— Chasse-t-il ?

— Encore moins, les coups de fusil lui font peur.

— Sûrement il travaille, il lit, il écrit tout le jour.

— Il faudrait pour cela qu'il sache lire et écrire.

— Aime-t-il les chevaux ? demanda le convalescent.

— Du tout.

— C’est donc un animal inerte et sans intelligence. Aime-t-il le sexe ?

— Un jour je l’ai mené chez les filles et il s’est enfui emportant une rose et un miroir.

— Décidément c’est un idiot, fit tout le monde.

Et le groupe se sépara pour aller grimacer et faire des courbettes devant les dames qui de leur côté, bâillaient et minaudaient en l’absence des danseurs. L’heure avançait rapidement au son de la musique qui bondissait sur le tapis entre la danse et les femmes. Minuit sonna pendant qu’on galopait.

Djalioh était assis depuis le commencement du bal sur un fauteuil à côté des musiciens. De temps en temps il quittait sa place et changeait de côté. - Si quelqu’un de la fête, gai et insouciant, heureux du bruit, content des vins, enivré enfin de toute cette chaîne de femmes aux seins nus, aux lèvres souriantes, aux doux regards, l’apercevait, - aussitôt il devenait pâle et triste.

Voilà pourquoi sa présence gênait et qu’il paraissait là comme un fantôme ou un démon. - Une fois les danseurs fatigués s’assirent.

Tout alors devint plus calme, on passa de l’orgeat et le bruit seul des verres sur les plateaux interrompait le bourdonnement de toutes les voix qui parlaient.

Le piano était ouvert, un violon était dessus, un archet à côté.

Djalioh saisit l’instrument, il le tourna plusieurs fois entre ses mains comme un enfant qui manie un jouet. Il toucha à l’archet et le plia si fort qu’il faillit le briser plusieurs fois.

Enfin il approcha le violon de son menton. Tout le monde se mit à rire, tant la musique était fausse, bizarre, incohérente. Il regarda tous ces hommes, toutes ces femmes, assis, courbés, pliés, étalés sur des banquettes, des chaises, des fauteuils, avec de grands yeux ébahis.

Il ne comprenait pas tous ces rires et cette joie subite.

Il continua :

Les sons étaient d’abord lents, mols, l’archet effleurait les cordes et les parcourait depuis le chevalet jusqu’aux chevilles sans rendre presque aucun son, puis, peu à peu sa tête s’anima, s’abaissant graduellement sur le bois du violon, son front se plissa, ses yeux se fermèrent et l’archet sautillait sur les cordes comme une balle élastique à bonds précipités.

La musique était saccadée, remplie de notes aiguës, de cris déchirants. On se sentait en l’entendant sous le poids d’une oppression terrible comme si toutes ces notes eussent été de plomb et qu’elles eussent pesé sur la poitrine.

Et puis c’était des arpèges hardis, des octaves qui montaient - comme une flèche gothique - des notes qui couraient en masse et puis qui s’envolaient - des sauts précipités - des accords chargés.

Et tous ces sons, tout ce bruit de cordes et de notes qui sifflent, sans mesure, sans chant, sans rythme - une mélodie nulle, - des pensées vagues et coureuses qui se succédaient comme une ronde de démons, - ou des rêves qui passent et s’enfuient poussés par d’autres dans un tourbillon sans repos, dans une course sans relâche.

Djalioh tenait avec force le manche de l’instrument et chaque fois qu’un de ses doigts se relevait de la touche, son ongle faisait vibrer la corde qui sifflait en mourant.

Quelquefois il s’arrêtait, effrayé du bruit, - souriait bêtement et reprenait avec plus d’amour le cours de sa rêverie, - enfin fatigué il s’arrêta, écouta longtemps pour voir si tout cela allait revenir - mais rien, la dernière vibration de la dernière note était morte d’épuisement. Chacun se regarda, étonné d’avoir laissé durer si longtemps un si étrange vacarme. - La danse recommença. - Comme il était près de trois heures on dansa un cotillon. Les jeunes femmes seules restaient. Les vieilles étaient parties ainsi que les hommes mariés et poitrinaires.

On ouvrit donc pour faciliter la valse la porte du salon, celles du billard et de la salle à manger, qui se succédaient immédiatement. Chacun prit sa valseuse, on entendit le son fêlé de l’archet qui frappait le pupitre et l’on se mit en train.

Djalioh était debout, appuyé sur un battant de la porte. La valse passait devant lui tournoyante, bruyante, avec des rires et de la joie.

Chaque fois il voyait Adèle tournoyer devant lui et puis disparaître - revenir - et disparaître - encore.

Chaque fois il la voyait s’appuyer sur un bras qui soutenait sa taille, fatiguée qu’elle était de la danse et des plaisirs - et chaque fois il sentait en lui un démon qui frémissait et un instinct sauvage qui rugissait dans son âme, comme un lion dans sa cage.

Chaque fois, à la même mesure répétée, - au même coup d’archet, à la même note, au bout d’un même temps, il voyait passer devant [lui] le bas d’une robe blanche à fleurs roses et deux souliers de satin qui s’entrebâillaient, et cela dura longtemps.

Vingt minutes environ. La danse s’arrêta, oppressée elle essuya son front et puis elle repartit plus légère, plus sauteuse, plus folle et plus rose que jamais.

C’était un supplice infernal, une douleur de damné. Quoi, sentir dans sa poitrine, toutes les forces qu’il faut pour aimer, et avoir l’âme navrée d’un feu brûlant et puis ne pouvoir éteindre le volcan qui vous consume et ni briser ce lien qui vous attache. - Être là attaché à un roc aride, la soif à la gorge, comme Prométhée, voir sur son ventre un vautour qui vous dévore - et ne pouvoir dans sa colère le saisir de ses deux mains et l’écraser.

Ô pourquoi, se demandait Djalioh dans son amère douleur, la tête baissée pendant que la valse courait et tourbillonnait folle de plaisir et que les femmes dansaient et que la musique vibrait en chantant, pourquoi donc ne suis-je pas comme tout cela, heureux, dansant - pourquoi suis-je laid comme cela et pourquoi ces femmes ne le sont-elles [pas], pourquoi fuient-elles quand je souris, pourquoi donc je souffre ainsi et je m'ennuie et je me hais moi-même ? Ô si je pouvais la prendre - elle - et puis déchirer tous les habits qui la couvrent, mettre en pièces et en morceaux, les voiles qui la cachent, et puis la prendre dans mes deux bras, fuir avec elle bien loin à travers les bois, les prés, les prairies, traverser les mers - et enfin arriver enfin à l'ombre d'un palmier et puis là la regarder bien longtemps et faire qu'elle me regarde aussi - qu'elle me saisisse de ses deux bras nus - et puis... ah... et il pleurait de rage.

Les lampes s'éteignaient,... la pendule sonna cinq heures. - On entendit quelques voitures qui s'arrêtaient, et puis danseurs et danseuses prirent leurs vêtements et partirent.

Les valets fermèrent les auvents et sortirent.

Djalioh était resté à sa place et quand il releva la tête - tout avait disparu, les femmes, - la danse et les sons, tout s'était envolé et la dernière lampe pétillait encore dans quelques gouttes d'huile qui lui restaient à vivre.

En ce moment-là l'aube apparut à l'horizon derrière les tilleuls.

VI

Il prit une bougie et monta dans sa chambre.

Après avoir ôté son habit et ses souliers il sauta sur son lit, abaissa sa tête sur son oreiller et voulut dormir.

Mais impossible.

Il entendait dans sa tête un bourdonnement prolongé, un fracas singulier, une musique bizarre. - La fièvre battait dans ses artères et les veines de son front étaient vertes et gonflées. Son sang bouillonnait dans ses veines, lui montait au cerveau et l'étouffait.

Il se leva et ouvrit sa fenêtre. L'air frais du matin calma ses sens. Le jour commençait, - et les nuages fuyaient avec la lune aux premiers rayons de la clarté. La nuit il regarda longtemps les mille formes fantastiques que dessinent les nuages, puis il tourna sa vue sur sa bougie dont le disque lumineux éclairait ses rideaux de soie verte.

Enfin au bout d'une heure il sortit.

La nuit durait presque encore, et la rosée était suspendue à chaque feuille des arbres. Il avait plu longtemps, les allées foulées par les roues des voitures étaient arbres. Il avait plu longtemps, les allées foulées par les roues des voitures étaient grasses et boueuses. Djalioh s’enfonça dans les plus tortueuses et les plus obscures.

Il se promena longtemps dans le parc, foulant à ses pieds les premières feuilles d’automne, jaunies et emportées par les vents. Marchant sur l’herbe mouillée, à travers la charmille au bruit de la brise qui agitait les arbres, il entendait dans le lointain les premiers sons de la nature qui s’éveille.

Qu’il est doux de rêver ainsi en écoutant avec délices le bruit de ses pas sur les feuilles sèches et sur le bois mort que le pied brise, de [se] laisser aller dans des chemins sans barrière, comme le courant de la rêverie qui emporte votre âme, et puis une pensée triste et poignante souvent vous saisit longtemps en contemplant ces feuilles qui tombent, ces arbres qui gémissent et cette nature entière qui chante tristement à son réveil comme au sortir du tombeau. Et alors quelque tête chérie vous apparaît dans l’ombre, une mère, une amie, et les fantômes qui passent le long du mur noir, tous graves et dans des surplis blancs. - Et puis le passé revient aussi comme un autre fantôme, le passé avec ses peines, ses douleurs, ses larmes et ses quelques rires - enfin l’avenir qui se montre à son tour - plus varié, plus indéfini, entouré d’une gaze légère comme ces sylphides longtemps rêvées qui s’élèvent d’un buisson et qui s’envolent avec les oiseaux.

On aime à entendre le vent qui passe à travers les arbres en faisant plier leur tête et qui chante comme un convoi des morts, - et dont le souffle agite vos cheveux et rafraîchit votre front brûlant.

C’était dans des pensers plus terribles - qu’était perdu Djalioh.

Une mélancolie rêveuse pleine de caprice et de fantaisie - provient d’une douleur tiède et longue. Mais le désespoir est matériel et palpable.

C’était au contraire la réalité qui l’écrasait.

Ô la réalité, fantôme lourd comme un cauchemar et qui pourtant n’est qu’une durée comme l’esprit.

Pour lui, que lui faisait le passé qui était perdu et l’avenir qui se résumait dans un mot insignifiant : la mort ? Mais c’était le présent qu’il avait, la minute, l’instant qui l’obsédait.

C’était ce présent même qu’il voulait anéantir, le briser du pied, l’égorger de ses mains. Lorsqu’il pensait à lui, pauvre et désespéré, les bras vides, le bal et ses fleurs et ces femmes, Adèle et ses seins nus et son épaule et sa main blanche, lorsqu’il pensait à tout cela un rire sauvage éclatait sur sa bouche et retentissait dans ses dents comme un tigre qui a faim et qui se meurt. Il voyait dans son esprit le sourire de Paul, les baisers de sa femme. - Il les voyait tous deux étendus sur une couche soyeuse s’entrelaçant de leurs bras avec des soupirs et des cris de volupté, il voyait jusqu’aux draps qu’ils tordaient dans leurs étreintes.

jusqu’aux fleurs qui étaient sur les tables et les tapis et les meubles et tout enfin qui était là, et quand il reportait la vue sur lui entouré des arbres, marchant sur l’herbe seul et les branches cassées, il tremblait. Il comprenait aussi la distance immense qui l’en séparait et quand il en venait à se demander pourquoi tout cela était ainsi, alors une barrière infranchissable se présentait devant lui - et un voile noir obscurcissait sa pensée.

Pourquoi Adèle n’était-elle pas à lui ? Ô s’il l’avait, comme il serait heureux de la tenir dans ses bras, de reposer sa tête sur sa poitrine et de la couvrir de ses baisers brûlants - et il pleurait en sanglotant.

Ô s’il avait su comme nous autres hommes comment la vie quand elle vous obsède s’en va et part vite avec la gâchette d’un pistolet - s’il avait su que pour six sols un homme est heureux - et que la rivière engloutit bien les morts !... mais non, - le malheur est dans l’ordre de la nature. - Elle nous a donné le sentiment de l’existence pour le garder plus longtemps.

Il arriva bientôt aux bords de l’étang. Les cygnes s’y jouaient avec leurs petits, ils glissaient sur le cristal les ailes ouvertes et le cou replié sur le dos. Les plus gros, le mâle et la femelle, nageaient ensemble au courant rapide de la petite rivière qui traversait l’étang, de temps en temps, ils tournaient l’un vers l’autre leur long cou blanc et se regardaient en nageant, puis ils revenaient derrière eux, se plongeaient dans l’eau et battaient de l’aile sur la surface de l’eau qui se trouvait agitée de leurs jeux lorsque leur poitrine s’avançait comme la proue d’une nacelle.

Djalioh contempla la grâce de leurs mouvements et la beauté de leurs formes. - Et il se demanda pourquoi il n’était pas cygne et beau comme ces animaux. Lorsqu’il s’approchait de quelqu’un on s’enfuyait, on le méprisait parmi les hommes. Que n’était-il donc beau comme eux, - pourquoi le ciel ne l’avait-il pas fait cygne, oiseau, quelque chose de léger, qui chante et qu’on aime ? - ou plutôt que n’était-il le néant ? Pourquoi, disait-il en faisant courir une pierre du bout de son pied, - pourquoi ne suis-je pas comme cela, je [la] frappe, [elle] court, et ne souffre pas. Alors il sauta dans la barque, détacha la chaîne, prit les rames et alla aborder de l’autre côté dans la prairie qui commençait à se parsemer de bestiaux.

Après quelques instants, il revint vers le château. Les domestiques avaient déjà ouvert les fenêtres et rangé le salon.

La table était mise car il était près de neuf [heures], tant la promenade de Djalioh avait été lente et longue.

Le temps passe vite dans la joie, vite aussi dans les larmes et ce vieillard court toujours sans perdre haleine.

Cours vite, marche sans relâche, fauche et abats sans pitié, - Vieille Chose à cheveux blancs. Marche, et cours toujours, traîne ta misère, toi qui es condamné à vivre et mène-nous bien vite dans la fosse commune, où tu jettes ainsi tout ce qui barre ton chemin.

VII

Après le déjeuner, la promenade, car le soleil perçant les nuages commençait à se montrer. -

Les dames voulurent se promener en barque. La fraîcheur de l’eau les délasserait de leurs fatigues de la nuit. -

La société se divisa en trois bandes. Dans la même étaient Paul, Djalioh et Adèle. Elle avait l’air fatigué et le teint pâle. Sa robe était de mousseline bleue avec des fleurs blanches. Elle était plus belle que jamais.

Adèle accompagna son époux, par sentiment des convenances.

Djalioh ne comprit pas cela. Autant son âme embrassait tout ce qui était de sympathie et d’amour, autant son esprit résistait à tout ce que nous appelons : - délicatesse, usage, honneur, pudeur et convenance. Il se mit sur le devant et rama.

Au milieu de l’étang était une petite île formée à dessein pour servir de refuge aux cygnes, elle était plantée de rosiers dont les branches pliées se miraient dans l’eau en y laissant quelques fleurs fanées. La jeune femme émietta un morceau de pain, puis le jeta sur l’eau et aussitôt les cygnes accoururent, allongeant leur cou pour saisir les miettes qui couraient emportées par la rivière.

Chaque fois qu’elle se penchait et que la main blanche s’allongeait, Djalioh sentait son haleine passer dans ses cheveux et ses joues effleurer sa tête, - qui était brûlante.

L’eau du lac était limpide et calme mais la tempête était dans son coeur, plusieurs fois il crut devenir fou - et il portait les mains à son front, comme un homme en délire ou qui croit rêver.

Il ramait vite et cependant la barque avançait moins que les autres tant ses mouvements étaient saccadés et convulsifs. De temps en temps son oeil terne et gris se tournait lentement sur Adèle et se reportait sur [Paul]. Il paraissait calme, - mais comme le calme de la cendre qui couvre un brasier et puis l’on [n’]entendait que la rame qui tombait dans l’eau, l’eau qui clapotait lentement sur les flancs de la nacelle et quelques mots échangés entre les époux - et puis ils se regardaient en souriant - et les cygnes couraient en nageant sur l’étang. - Le vent faisait tomber quelques feuilles sur les promeneurs et le soleil brillait au loin sur les vertes prairies où serpentait la rivière et la barque glissait entre tout loin sur les vertes prairies où serpentait la rivière, et la barque glissait entre tout cela rapide et silencieuse.

Djalioh, une fois, se ralentit, porta sa main à ses yeux et [la] retira quelques instants après toute chaude et toute humide. Il reprit ses rames et les pleurs qui coulaient sur ses mains se perdirent dans le ruisseau. M. Paul, voyant qu'il était éloigné de la compagnie, prit la main d'Adèle et déposa sur son gant satiné un long baiser de bonheur qui retentit aux oreilles de Djalioh.

VIII

Madame de Lansac avait une quantité de singes. C'est une passion de vieille femme, seules créatures qui avec les chiens ne repoussent pas leur amour.

Ceci est dit sans maligne intention et s'il y en avait une ce serait plutôt pour plaire aux jeunes qui les haïssent mortellement. Lord Byron disait qu'il ne pouvait voir sans dégoût manger une jolie femme, il n'a peut-être jamais pensé à la société de cette femme, quelque 40 ans plus tard et qui se résumera [en] son carlin et sa guenon. Toutes les femmes que vous voyez si jeunes et si fraîches, eh bien si elles ne meurent pas avant la soixantaine, auront donc un jour la manie des chiens au lieu de celle des hommes et vivront avec un singe au lieu d'un amant.

Hélas c'est triste mais c'est vrai et puis après avoir ainsi jauni pendant une douzaine d'années et racorni comme un vieux parchemin au coin de son feu en compagnie d'un chat, d'un roman, - de son dîner et de sa bonne, cet ange de beauté mourra et deviendra un cadavre, c'est-à-dire une charogne qui pue et puis un peu de poussière, le néant... de l'air fétide emprisonné dans une tombe.

Il y a des gens que je vois toujours à l'état de squelette et dont le teint jaune me semble bien pétri de la terre qui va les contenir.

Je n'aime guère les singes et pourtant j'ai tort, car ils me semblent une imitation parfaite de la nature humaine. Quand je vois un de ces animaux (je ne parle pas ici des hommes) il me semble me voir dans les miroirs grossissants, mêmes sentiments, - mêmes appétits brutaux, - un peu moins d'orgueil et voilà tout.

Djalioh se sentait attiré vers eux par sympathie étrange. Il restait souvent des heures entières à les contempler, plongé dans une méditation profonde ou dans une observation des plus minutieuses.

Adèle s'approcha de leurs cages communes (car les jeunes femmes aiment quelquefois les singes probablement comme symboles de leurs époux) et leur jeta des noisettes et des gâteaux. - Aussi⌊tôt⌋ ils s’élancèrent dessus, se chamaillant, s’arrachant les morceaux, comme des députés les miettes qui tombent du fauteuil ministériel et poussant des cris comme des avocats.

Un surtout s’empara du plus gros gâteau, le mangea bien vite, prit la plus belle noisette, la cassa avec ses ongles, l’éplucha et jeta les coquilles à ses compagnons d’un air de libéralité. Il avait tout autour de la tête une couronne de poils clairsemés sur son crâne rétréci, qui le faisait ressembler passablement à un roi.

Un second était humblement assis dans un coin, les yeux baissés d’un air modeste comme un prêtre et prenant par-derrière tout ce qu’il ne pouvait pas voler en face.

Un troisième enfin - c’était une femelle - avait les chairs flasques, le poil long, les yeux bouffis, il allait et venait de tous côtés avec des gestes lubriques qui faisaient rougir les demoiselles, - mordant les mâles, les pinçant et sifflant à leurs oreilles, celui-là ressemblait à mainte fille de joie de ma connaissance.

Tout le monde riait de leurs gentillesses et de leurs manières, c’était si drôle. Djalioh seul ne riait pas, assis par terre, les genoux à la hauteur de la tête, les bras sur les jambes et les yeux à demi morts tournés vers un seul point.

L’après-midi on partit pour Paris. Djalioh était encore placé en face d’Adèle, comme si la fatalité se plaisait perpétuellement à rire de ses douleurs.

Chacun fatigué s’endormait au doux balancement des soupentes et au bruit des roues qui allaient lentement dans les grandes ornières creusées par la pluie et les pieds des chevaux enfonçaient en glissant dans la boue.

Une glace ouverte derrière Djalioh donnait de l’air dans la voiture et le vent soufflait sur ses épaules et dans son cou.

Tous laissaient aller leurs têtes sommeillantes au mouvement de la calèche.

Djalioh seul ne dormait pas et la tenait baissée sur sa poitrine.

IX

On était aux premiers jours du mois de mai. Il était alors je crois sept heures du matin. - Le soleil se levait et illuminait de sa splendeur tout Paris qui s’éveillait par un beau jour de printemps.

Mme Paul de Monville s’était levée de bonne heure et s’était retirée dans un salon pour y terminer bien vite avant l’heure du bain, du déjeuner et de la promenade, un roman de Balzac.

La rue qu’habitaient les mariés était dans le faubourg Saint-Germain, déserte, large et toute couverte de l’ombre que jetaient les grands murs, les hôtels hauts et élevés et les jardins qui se prolongeaient avec leurs acacias, leurs tilleuls dont les touffes épaisses et frémissantes retombaient par-dessus les murs où les brins d’herbe perçaient entre les pierres.

Rarement on entendait du bruit si ce n’est celui de quelque équipage roulant sur le pavé avec ses deux chevaux blancs, ou bien encore la nuit celui de la jeunesse revenant d’une orgie ou d’un spectacle avec quelques ribaudes aux seins nus, aux yeux rougis, aux vêtements déchirés.

C’était dans un de ces hôtels qu’habitait Djalioh, avec M. Paul et sa femme.

Et depuis bientôt deux ans il s’était passé bien des choses dans son âme, et les larmes contenues y avaient creusé une fosse profonde.

Un matin, c’était ce jour-là dont je vous parle, il se leva, - et sortit dans le jardin où un enfant d’un an environ, entouré de mousseline, de gaze, de broderies, d’écharpes coloriées, - dormait dans un berceau en nacelle dont la flèche était dorée aux rayons du soleil.

Sa bonne était absente, il regarda de tous côtés, s’approcha près, bien près du berceau, ôta vivement la couverture, et puis il resta quelque temps, à contempler cette pauvre créature sommeillante et endormie avec ses mains potelées, ses formes arrondies, - son cou blanc, ses petits ongles. Enfin il le prit dans ses deux mains, le fit tourner en l’air sur sa tête - et le lança de toutes ses forces sur le gazon - qui retentit du coup. L’enfant poussa un cri et sa cervelle alla jaillir à dix pas auprès d’une giroflée.

Djalioh ouvrit ses lèvres pâles et poussa un rire forcé qui était froid et terrible comme le regard des morts. Aussitôt il s’avança vers la maison, monta l’escalier, ouvrit la porte de la salle à manger, la referma, prit la clef, celle du corridor également, et arrivé au vestibule du salon, il les jeta par la fenêtre dans la rue. Enfin il entra dans le salon, doucement sur la pointe des pieds et une fois entré il ferma à double tour.

Un demi-jour l’éclairait à peine tant les persiennes soigneusement fermées laissaient entrer peu de lumière.

Djalioh s’arrêta et il n’entendit que le bruit des feuillets que retournait la jolie main blanche d’Adèle, étendue mollement sur son sofa de velours rouge et le gazouillement des oiseaux de la volière qui étaient sur la terrasse et dont on entendait à travers les jalousies vertes les battements d’ailes sur le treillage en fer.

Dans un coin du salon à côté de la cheminée était une jardinière en acajou toute remplie de fleurs embaumantes, roses, blanches, bleues, hautes ou touffues avec un feuillage vert, une tige polie et qui se miraient par-derrière dans une grande glace.

Enfin il s’approcha de la jeune fille et s’assit à côté d’elle. Elle tressaillit subitement et porta sur lui ses yeux bleus égarés. Sa robe de chambre de mousseline blanche était flottante, ouverte sur le devant et ses deux jambes croisées dessinaient malgré ses vêtements la forme de ses cuisses.

Il y avait tout autour d’elle un parfum enivrant, ses gants blancs jetés sur le fauteuil avec sa ceinture, son mouchoir, son fichu, tout cela avait une odeur [si] délicieuse et [si] particulière que les grosses narines de Djalioh s’écartèrent pour en aspirer la saveur.

Ô il y a à côté de la femme qu’on aime une atmosphère embaumée qui vous enivre.

— Que me voulez-vous ? dit-elle avec effroi aussitôt qu’elle l’eut reconnu.

Et il s’ensuivit un long silence. Il ne répondit pas et fixa sur elle un regard dévorant, - puis se rapprochant de plus en plus, il prit sa taille de ses deux mains et déposa sur son cou un baiser brûlant qui sembla pincer Adèle comme la morsure d’un serpent. - Il vit sa chair rougir et palpiter.

— Ô je vais appeler au secours, s’écria-t-elle avec effroi. Au secours ! au secours ! Ô le monstre, ajouta-t-elle en le regardant.

Djalioh ne répondit pas. - Seulement il bégaya et frappa sa tête avec colère.

Quoi, ne pouvoir lui dire un mot, - ne pouvoir énumérer ses tortures et ses douleurs et n’avoir à lui offrir que les larmes d’un animal et les soupirs d’un monstre.

Et puis être repoussé comme un reptile - être haï de ce qu’on aime et sentir devant soi l’impossibilité de rien dire, - être maudit et ne pouvoir blasphémer.

— Laissez-moi de grâce, laissez-moi, est-ce que vous ne voyez pas que vous me faites horreur et dégoût ? Je vais appeler Paul, et [il] va vous tuer.

Djalioh lui montra la clef qu’il tenait dans sa main et il s’arrêta. Huit heures sonnèrent à la pendule - et les oiseaux gazouillaient dans la volière. On entendit le roulement d’une charrette qui passait puis elle s’écarta.

— Eh bien allez-vous sortir ? laissez-moi au nom du ciel. Et elle voulut se lever mais Djalioh la retint par le pan de sa robe, qui se déchira sous ses ongles.

— J’ai besoin de sortir, il faut que je sorte... il faut que je voie mon enfant. Vous me laisserez voir mon enfant - Une idée atroce la fit frémir de tous ses membres. Elle pâlit et ajouta :

— Oui mon enfant, il faut que je le voie et tout de suite, à l’instant.

Elle se retourna et vit grimacer en face d’elle une figure de démon. Il se mit à rire si longtemps, si fort, et tout cela d’un seul éclat, qu’Adèle pétrifiée d’horreur tomba à ses pieds, à genoux.

Djalioh aussi se mit à genoux puis il la prit, la fit asseoir de force sur ses genoux, et de ses deux mains il lui déchira tous les vêtements, il mit en pièces les voiles qui la couvraient - et quand il la vit tremblante comme la feuille sans sa chemise et croisant ses deux bras sur ses seins nus en pleurant, les joues rouges et les lèvres bleuâtres, il se sentit sous le poids d’une oppression étrange. - Puis il prit les fleurs, les éparpilla sur le sol. Il tira les rideaux de soie rose et, lui, ôta ses vêtements.

Adèle le vit nu, elle trembla d’horreur et détourna la tête. Djalioh s’approcha et la tint longtemps serrée contre sa poitrine. Elle sentit alors sur sa peau chaude et satinée la chair froide et velue du monstre.

Il sauta sur le canapé, jeta les coussins et se balança longtemps sur le dossier avec un mouvement machinal et régulier de ses flexibles vertèbres. Il poussait de temps en temps un cri guttural et il souriait entre ses dents.

Qu’avait-[il] de mieux à désirer, - une femme devant lui, - des fleurs à ses pieds, un jour rose qui l’éclairait, le bruit d’une volière pour musique et quelque pâle rayon de soleil pour l’éclairer.

Il cessa bientôt son exercice, courut sur Adèle, lui enfonça ses griffes dans la chair et l’attira vers lui, il lui ôta sa chemise.

En se voyant toute nue dans la glace entre les bras de Djalioh elle poussa un cri d’horreur et pria Dieu. - Elle voulait appeler au secours, mais impossible d’articuler une seule parole.

Djalioh en la voyant ainsi nue et les cheveux épars sur ses épaules s’arrêta immobile de stupeur, comme le premier homme qui vit une femme, il la respecta pendant quelque temps, lui arracha ses cheveux blonds, les mit dans sa bouche, les mordit, les baisa, puis il se roula par terre sur les fleurs, entre les coussins, sur les vêtements d’Adèle, content, fou - ivre d’amour.

Adèle pleurait et une trace de sang coulait sur ses seins d’albâtre.

Enfin sa féroce brutalité ne connut plus de bornes. - Il sauta sur elle d’un bond - écarta ses deux mains, l’étendit par terre et l’y roula échevelée...

Souvent il poussait des cris féroces et étendait les deux bras, stupide. - Et immobile. Puis il râlait de volupté - comme un homme qui se meurt.

Tout à coup il sentit sous lui les convulsions d’Adèle. Ses muscles se raidirent comme le fer. - Elle poussa un cri et un soupir plaintif qui furent étouffés par des baisers.

Puis il la sentit froide, - ses yeux se fermèrent, elle se roula sur elle-même - et sa bouche s’ouvrit.

Quand il l’eut bien longtemps sentie immobile et glacée, il se leva, la retourna sur tous les sens, embrassa ses pieds, ses mains, sa bouche, et courut en bondissant sur les murailles.

Plusieurs fois il reprit sa course, une fois cependant il s’élança la tête la première sur la cheminée de marbre et tomba immobile et ensanglanté, sur le corps d’Adèle.

X

Quand on vint à trouver Adèle, elle avait sur le corps des traces de griffes larges, profondes. Pour Djalioh, il avait le crâne horriblement fracassé. On crut que la jeune femme en défendant son honneur l’avait tué avec un couteau.

Tout cela fut dans les journaux. Et vous pensez s’il y en eut pour huit jours à faire des Ah et des Oh.

Le lendemain on enterra les morts. Le convoi était superbe, deux cercueils, celui de la mère et de l’enfant et tout cela avec des panaches noirs, des cierges, des prêtres qui chantent, de la foule qui se presse et des hommes noirs en gants blancs.

XI

— C’est bien horrible, s’écriait quelques jours après toute une famille d’épiciers réunis patriarcalement autour d’un énorme gigot dont le fumet chatouillait l’odorat.

— Pauvre enfant, dit la femme de l’épicier, aller tuer un enfant, qu’est-ce qu’il lui avait fait ?

— Comment, disait l’épicier, indigné dans sa vertu, homme éminemment moral, décoré de la croix d’honneur pour bonne tenue dans la garde nationale, et abonné au Constitutionnel, comment aller tuer ct’eu povre ptite femme, c’est indigne.

— Mais aussi, je crois que c’est l’effet de la passion, dit un gros garçon joufflu, le fils de la maison qui venait d’achever sa quatrième à 17 ans parce que son père était d’avis qu’on donnât de l’inducation à la jeunesse.

— Ô faut-il que des gens aient peu de retenue, dit le garçon épicier en redemandant pour la troisième fois des haricots.

On sonna à la boutique et il alla vendre pour deux sous de chandelles.

XII

Vous voulez une fin à toute force n’est-ce pas ? et vous trouvez que je suis bien [long] à la donner, eh bien soit.

Pour Adèle elle fut enterrée. Mais au bout de deux ans elle avait bien perdu de sa beauté. Car on l’exhuma pour la mettre au Père-Lachaise et elle puait si fort qu’un fossoyeur s’en trouva mal.

— Et Djalioh ?

Ô il est superbe, verni, poli, soigné, magnifique. Car vous savez que le cabinet de zoologie s’en est emparé et en a fait un superbe squelette.

— Et M. Paul ?

— Tiens je l’oubliais. Il s’est remarié. Tantôt je l’ai vu au Bois de Boulogne et ce soir vous le rencontrerez aux Italiens.

8 octobre 1837

Gve Flaubert

PASSION ET VERTU

CONTE PHILOSOPHIQUE.

Peux-tu parler de ce que tu ne sens point.
Shakespeare, *Roméo et Juliette*, acte III, scène V.

I

Elle l'avait déjà vu, je crois, deux fois ; la première, dans un bal chez le ministre, la seconde au Français, et, quoiqu'il ne fût ni un homme supérieur ni un bel homme, elle pensait souvent à lui, lorsque, le soir, après avoir soufflé sa lampe, elle restait souvent quelques instants rêveuse, les cheveux épars sur ses seins nus, la tête tournée vers la fenêtre où la nuit jetait une clarté blafarde, les bras hors de sa couche, et l'âme flottant entre des émotions hideuses et vagues, comme ces sons confus qui s'élèvent dans les champs par les soirées d'automne.

Loin d'être une de ces âmes d'exception comme il y en a dans les livres et dans les drames, c'était un cœur sec, un esprit juste, et, par-dessus tout cela, un chimiste. Mais il possédait à fond cette théorie de séductions, ces principes, ces règles, le chic enfin, pour employer le mot vrai et vulgaire, par lesquels un habile homme en arrive à ses fins.

Ce n'est plus cette méthode pastorale à la Louis XV, dont la première leçon commence par les soupirs, la seconde par les billets doux et continue ainsi jusqu'au dénouement, science si bien exposée dans Faubas, les comédies du second ordre et les contes moraux de Marmontel. Mais maintenant un homme s'avance vers une femme, il la lorgne, il la trouve bien, il en fait le pari avec ses amis ; est-elle mariée, la farce n'en sera ne meilleure.

Alors il s'introduit chez elle, il lui prête des romans, la mène au spectacle, il a surtout soin de faire quelque chose d'étonnant, de ridicule, enfin d'étrange ; et puis, de jour en jour, il va chez elle avec plus de liberté, il se fait l'ami de la maison, du mari, des enfants, des domestiques ; enfin la pauvre femme s'aperçoit du piège, elle veut le chasser comme un laquais, mais celui-ci s'indigne à son tour, il la menace de publier quelque lettre bien courte, mais qu'il interprétera d'une façon infame, n'importe à qui fût-elle adressée ; il répétera lui-même à son époux quelque mot arraché peut-être dans un moment de vanité, de coquetterie ou de désir ; c’est une cruauté d’anatomiste, mais on a fait des progrès dans les sciences et il y a des gens qui dissèquent un cœur comme un cadavre.

Alors cette pauvre femme, éperdue, pleure et supplie ; point de pardon pour elle, point de pardon pour ses enfants, son mari, sa mère. inflexible, car c’est un homme, il peut user de force, de violence, il peut dire partout qu’elle est sa maîtresse, le publier dans les journaux, l’écrire tout au long dans un mémoire, et le prouver même au besoin.

Elle se livre donc à lui, à demi morte ; il peut même alors la faire passer devant ses laquais qui, tout bas, sous leurs livrées, ricanent en la voyant venir si matin chez leur maître, et puis quand il l’a rendue brisée et abattue, seule avec ses regrets, ses pensées sur le passé, ses déceptions d’amour, il la quitte, la reconnaît à peine, l’abandonne à son infortune ; il la hait même quelquefois, mais enfin il a gagné son pari ; et c’est un homme à bonnes fortunes.

C’est donc non un *Lovelace*, comme on l’aurait dit il y a soixante ans, mais bien un *Don Juan*, ce qui est plus beau.

L’homme qui possède à fond cette science, qui en connaît les détours et les replis cachés, n’est pas rare maintenant, cela est si facile, en effet, de séduire une femme qui vous aime et puis de la laisser là avec toutes les autres, quand on n’a pas d’âme ni de pitié dans le cœur ! Il y a tant de moyens de s’en faire aimer, soit par la jalousie, la vanité, le mérite, les talents, l’orgueil, l’horreur, la crainte même, ou bien encore par la fatuité de vos manières, le négligé d’une cravate, la prétention à être désespéré, quelquefois par la coupe de votre habit, ou la finesse de vos bottes ! Car combien de gens n’ont dû leurs conquêtes qu’à l’habileté de leur tailleur ou de leur cordonnier ?

Ernest s’était aperçu que Mazza souriait à ses regards. Partout il la poursuivait. Au bal, par exemple, elle s’ennuyait s’il n’était pas la. Et n’allez pas croire qu’il fût assez novice pour louer la blancheur de sa main ni la beauté de ses bagues, comme l’aurait pu faire un écolier de rhétorique, mais, devant elle, il déchirait toutes les autres femmes qui dansaient, il avait sur chacune les aventures les plus inconnues et les plus étranges, et tout cela la faisait rire et la flattait secrètement, quand elle pensait que sur elle on n’avait rien à dire. Sur le penchant du gouffre, elle prenait de belles résolutions de l’abandonner, de ne plus jamais le revoir, mais la vertu s’évapore bien vite au sourire d’une bouche qu’on aime.

Il avait vu aussi qu’elle aimait la poésie, la mer, le théâtre, Byron, et puis, résumant toutes ces observations en une seule, il avait dit : “C’est une sotte, je l’aurai”, et elle, souvent aussi, avait dit en le voyant partir et quand la porte du salon tournait rapidement sur ses pas : “Oh ! je t’aime !”.

Ajoutez à cela qu’Ernest lui fit croire à la phrénologie, au magnétisme et que Mazza avait trente ans, et qu’elle était toujours pure et fidèle à son mari, repoussant tous les désirs qui naissaient chaque jour en son âme et qui mouraient le lendemain ; qu’elle était mariée à un banquier, et que la passion dans les bras de cet homme-là était un devoir pour elle, rien de plus, comme de surveiller ses domestiques et habiller ses enfants.

II

Longtemps elle se complut dans cet état de service amoureux et à demi mystique, la nouveauté du plaisir lui plaisait, et elle joua longtemps avec cet amour, plus longtemps qu’avec les autres, et elle finit par s’y prendre fortement, d’abord d’habitude, puis de besoin. Il est dangereux de rire et de jouer avec le cœur, car la passion est une arme à feu qui part et vous tue lorsqu’on la croyait sans péril.

Un jour Ernest vint de bonne heure chez M^{me} Willer ; son mari était à la Bourse, ses enfants étaient sortis, il se trouva seul avec elle. Tout le jour, il resta chez elle, et le soir, vers les cinq heures, quand il en sortit, Mazza fut triste, rêveuse, et de toute la nuit elle ne dormit pas.

Ils étaient restés longtemps, bien des heures, à causer, à se dire qu’ils s’aimaient, à parler de poésie, à s’entretenir d’amour large et fort comme on en voit dans Byron, et puis à se plaindre des exigences sociales qui les attachaient l’un à l’autre et qui les séparaient pour la vie ; et puis ils avaient causé des peines du cœur, de la vie et de la mort, de la nature, de l’océan qui mugissait dans les nuits ; enfin ils avaient compris le monde, leur passion, et leurs regards s’étaient même plus parlé que leurs lèvres qui se touchèrent si souvent.

C’était un jour du mois de mars, une de ces longues journées sombres et moroses qui portent à l’âme une vague amertume, leurs paroles avaient été tristes, celles de Mazza, surtout, avaient une mélancolie harmonieuse. Chaque l’ois qu’Ernest allait dire qu’il l’aimait pour la vie, chaque fois qu’il lui échappait un sourire, un regard, un cri d’amour, Mazza ne répondait pas, elle le regardait silencieuse, avec ses deux grands yeux noirs, son front pâle, sa bouche béante.

Ce jour elle se sentit oppressée, comme si une main invisible lui eût pesé sur la poitrine ; elle craignait, mais elle ne savait quel était l’objet de ses craintes, et se complaisait dans cette appréhension mêlée d’une étrange sensation d’amour, de rêverie, de mysticisme. Une fois elle recula son fauteuil, effrayée du sourire d’Ernest, qui était bestial et sauvage à faire peur, mais celui-ci se rapprocha d’elle aussitôt, lui prit les mains et les porta à ses lèvres ; elle rougit et lui dit d’un ton de calme affecté :

— Est-ce que vous auriez envie de me faire la cour ?

— Vous Faire la cour ? Mazza ! à vous ?

Cette réponse-là voulait tout dire.

— Est-ce que vous m’aimeriez ?

Il la regarda en souriant.

— Ernest, vous auriez tort.

— Pourquoi ?

— Mon mari ! y pensez-vous ?

— Eh bien, votre mari ! qu’est-ce que cela veut dire ?

— Il faut que je l’aime.

— Cela est plus facile à dire qu’à faire, c’est-à-dire que si la loi vous dit : “Vous l’aimerez”, votre cœur s’y pliera comme un régiment qu’on fait manœuvrer ou une barre d’acier qu’on ploie des deux mains, et si moi je vous aime…

— Taisez-vous, Ernest, pensez à ce que vous devez à une femme qui vous reçoit comme moi, dès le matin, sans que son mari y soit, seule, abandonnée à votre délicatesse.

— Oui, si je vous aime à mon tour, il faudra que je ne vous aime plus parce qu’il le faudra, et rien de plus ; mais cela est-il sensé et juste ?

— Ah ! vous raisonnez à merveille, mon cher ami, dit Mazza en penchant sa tête sur son épaule gauche et en faisant tourner dans ses doigts un étui d’ivoire.

Une mèche de ses cheveux se dénoua et tomba sur ses joues, elle la rejeta par derrière avec un geste de la tête plein de grâce et de brusquerie. Plusieurs fois Ernest se leva, prit son chapeau comme s’il allait sortir, puis il se rasseyait et reprenait ses causeries.

Souvent ils s’interrompaient tous deux et se regardaient longtemps en silence, respirant à peine, ivres et contents de leurs regards et de leurs soupirs, puis ils souriaient.

Un moment, quand Mazza vit Ernest à ses pieds, affaissé sur le tapis de sa chambre, quand elle vit sa tête posée sur ses genoux, les cheveux en arrière, ses yeux tout près de sa poitrine, et son front blanc et sans ride qui était là devant sa bouche, elle crut qu’elle allait défaillir de bonheur et d’amour, elle crut qu’elle allait prendre sa tête dans ses bras, la presser sur son cœur et la couvrir de ses baisers.

baisers.

— Demain, je vous écrirai, lui dit Ernest.

— Adieu !

Et il sortit.

Mazza resta l'âme indécise et toute flottante entre des oppressions étranges, des ressentiments vagues, des rêveries indicibles ; la nuit elle se réveilla, la lampe brûlait et jetait au plafond un disque lumineux qui tremblait en vacillant sur lui-même, comme l'œil d'un damné qui vous regarde ; elle resta longtemps, jusqu'au jour, à écouter les heures qui sonnaient à toutes les cloches, à entendre tous les bruits de la nuit, la pluie qui tombe et bat les murs, et les vents qui soufflent et tourbillonnent dans les ténèbres, les vitres qui tremblent, le bois du lit qui criait à tous les mouvements qu'elle lui donnait en se retournant sur ses matelas, agitée qu'elle était par des pensées accablantes et des images terribles, qui l'enveloppaient tout entière en la roulant dans ses draps.

Qui n'a ressenti, dans des heures de fièvre et de délire, ces mouvements intimes du cœur ? ces convulsions d'une âme qui s'agite et se tord sans cesse sous des pensées indéfinissables, tant elles sont pleines tout à la fois de tourments et de voluptés, vagues d'abord et indécises comme un fantôme ? cette pensée bientôt se consolide et s'arrête, prend une forme et un corps, elle devient une image, et une image qui vous fait pleurer et gémir. Qui n'a donc jamais vu, dans des nuits chaudes et ardentes, quand la peau brûle et que l'insomnie vous ronge, assise aux pieds de votre couche une figure pâle et rêveuse, et qui vous regarde tristement ? ou bien elle apparaît dans des habits de fête, si vous l'avez vue danser dans un bal, ou entourée de voiles noirs, pleurante ; et vous vous rappelez ses paroles, le son de sa voix, la langueur de ses yeux.

Pauvre Mazza ! pour la première fois elle sentit qu'elle aimait, que cela allait devenir un besoin, puis un délire du cœur, une rage ; mais dans sa naïveté et son ignorance, elle se traça bien vite un avenir heureux, une existence paisible où la passion lui donnerait la joie, et la volupté le bonheur.

En effet, ne pourra-t-elle vivre contente dans les bras de celui qu'elle aime et tromper son mari ? “Qu'est-ce que tout cela ? se disait-elle auprès de l'amour” ; elle souhaitait cependant de ce délire du cœur et s'y plongeait de plus en plus, comme ceux qui s'enivrent avec plaisir et que les boissons brûlent. Oh ! qu'elles sont poignantes et amères, il est vrai, ces palpitations du cœur, les angoisses de l'âme, entre un monde de vertu qui s'en va et un avenir d'amour qui arrive. Le lendemain, Mazza reçut une lettre ; elle était en papier satiné, toute embaumante de rose et de musc, elle était signée d'un E entouré d'un paraphe ; je ne sais ce qu'il y avait, mais Mazza relut la lettre plusieurs fois, elle en retourna les deux feuillets, en considéra les plis, elle s'enivra de son odeur embaumée, puis la roula en boulette et la jeta au feu ; le papier consumé s’envola (pendant quelque temps, et revint enfin se reposer doucement sur les chenets comme une gaze blanche et plissée.

Ernest l’aime ! il le lui a dit ! Oh ! elle est heureuse, le premier pas est fait, les autres ne lui coûteront plus ; elle pourra maintenant le regarder sans rougir, elle n’aura plus besoin de tant de ménagements, de petites mines de femme pour se faire aimer ; il vient lui-même, il se donne à elle, sa pudeur est ménagée, et c’est cette pudeur qui reste toujours aux femmes, ce qu’elles gardent même au fond de leur amour le plus brûlant, des plus ardentes voluptés, comme un dernier sanctuaire d’amour et de passion, où elles cachent comme sous un voile tout ce qu’elles ont de brutal et d’efféminé.

Quelques jours après, une femme voilée passait presque en courant le pont des Arts ; il était sept heures du matin.

Après avoir longtemps marché, elle s’arrêta à une porte cochère et elle demanda M. Ernest ; il n’était pas sorti, elle monta. L’escalier lui semblait d’une interminable longueur, et, quand elle fut parvenue au second étage, elle s’appuya sur la rampe et se sentit défaillir ; elle crut alors que tout tournait autour d’elle et que des voix basses chuchotaient à ses oreilles en sifflant ; enfin elle posa une main tremblante sur la sonnette. Quand elle entendit son battement perçant et répété, il y eut un écho qui résonna dans son cœur, comme par une répercussion galvanique.

Enfin la porte s ouvrit, c’était Ernest lui-même. — Ah ! c’est vous, Mazza ?

Celle-ci ne répondit pas, elle était pâle et toute couverte de sueur ; Ernest la regardait froidement, en faisant tourner en l’air la corde de soie de sa robe de chambre, il avait peur de se compromettre.

— Entrez, dit-il enfin.

Il la prit par le bras et la fit asseoir de force sur un fauteuil. Après un moment de silence :

— Je suis venue, Ernest, lui dit-elle, pour vous dire une chose : c’est la dernière fois que je vous parle, il faut que vous me quittiez, que je ne vous revoie plus.

— Parce que ?

— Parce que vous m’êtes à charge, que vous m’accablez, que vous me feriez mourir !

— Moi ! comment cela, Mazza ?

Il se leva, tira ses rideaux et ferma sa porte.

— Que faites-vous ? s’écria-t-elle avec horreur.

— Ce que je fais ?

— Oui.

— Vous êtes ici, Mazza, vous êtes venue chez moi. Oh ! ne niez pas, je connais les femmes, dit-il en souriant.

— Continuez, ajouta-t-elle avec dépit.

— Eh bien, Mazza, c’est assez.

— Et vous avez assez d’insolence pour me dire cela en face, à une femme que vous dites aimer ?

— Pardon ! oh ! pardon !

Il se mit à genoux et la regarda longtemps.

— Eh bien, oui, moi aussi je t’aime, plus que ma vie ; tiens, je me donne à toi.

Et puis là, entre les quatre parois d’une muraille, sous les rideaux de soie, sur un fauteuil, il y eut plus d’amour, de baisers, de caresses enivrantes, de voluptés qui brûlent, qu’il n’en faudrait pour rendre fou ou pour faire mourir. Et puis quand il l’eut bien flétrie, usée, abîmée dans ses étreintes, quand il l’eut rendue lasse, brisée, haletante, quand, bien des fois, il eut serré sa poitrine contre la sienne et qu’il la vit mourante dans ses bras, il la laissa seule et partit.

Le soir, chez Véfour, il fit un excellent souper où le champagne frappé circulait en abondance ; on l’entendit dire tout haut, vers le dessert : “Mes chers amis, j’en ai encore une !”

Celle-la était rentrée chez elle, l’âme triste, les yeux en pleurs, non de son honneur qui était perdu, car cette pensée-là ne la torturait nullement ; s’étant d’abord demandé ce que c’était que l’honneur et n’y ayant vu au fond qu’un mot, elle avait passé outre, mais elle pensait aux sensations qu’elle avait éprouvées, et ne trouvait en y pensant, rien que déception et amertume. “Oh ! ce n’est pas là ce que j’avais révé !” disait-elle.

Car il lui sembla, lorsqu’elle fut dégagée des bras de son amant, qu’il y avait en elle quelque chose de froissé comme ses vêtements, de fatigué et d’abattu comme son regard, et qu’elle était tombée de bien haut, que l’amour ne se bornait pas là ; se demandant enfin si, derrière la volupté, il n’y en avait pas une plus grande encore, ni après le plaisir une plus vaste jouissance, car elle avait une soif inépuisable d’amours infinis, de passions sans bornes. Mais quand elle vit que l’amour n’était qu’un baiser, une caresse, un moment de délices où se roulent entrelacés, avec des cris de joie, l’amant et sa maîtresse, et puis que tout finit ainsi, que l’homme se relève, la femme s’en va, et que leur passion a besoin d’un peu de chair et d’une convulsion pour se satisfaire et s’enivrer, l’ennui lui prit à l’âme, comme ces affamés qui ne peuvent se nourrir.

Mais elle quitta bientôt tout retour sur le passé pour ne songer qu’au présent qui souriait, elle ferma les yeux sur ce qui n’était plus, secoua comme un songe les anciens rêves sans bornes, ses oppressions vagues et indécises, pour se donner tout entière au torrent qui l'entraînait, et elle arriva bientôt à cet état de langueur et de nonchalance, à ce demi-sommeil ou l'on sent que l'on s'endort, qu'on s'enivre, que le monde s'en va loin de nous, tandis que l'on reste seul sur la nacelle où vous berce la vague et qu'entraîne l'océan ; elle ne pensa plus ni à son mari ni à ses enfants, encore moins à sa réputation, que les autres femmes déchiraient à belles dents dans les salons, et que les jeunes gens, amis d'Ernest, vautraient et vilipendaient à plaisir dans les cafés et les estaminets.

Mais il y eut tout à coup pour elle une mélodie jusqu'alors inconnue dans la nature et dans son âme, et elle découvrit dans l'une et dans l'autre des mondes nouveaux, des espaces immenses, des horizons sans bornes ; il sembla que tout était né pour l'amour, que les hommes étaient des créatures d'un ordre supérieur, susceptibles de passions et de sentiments, qu'ils n'étaient bons qu'à cela et qu'ils ne devaient vivre que pour le cœur. Quant à son mari, elle l'aimait toujours et l'estimait encore plus ; ses enfants lui semblaient gracieux, mais elle les aimait comme on aime ceux d'un autre.

Chaque jour, cependant, elle sentait qu'elle aimait plus que la veille, que cela devenait un besoin de son existence, qu'elle n'aurait pu vivre sans cela ; mais cette passion, avec laquelle elle avait d'abord joué en riant, finit par devenir sérieuse et terrible, une fois entrée dans son cœur, elle devint un amour violent, puis une frénésie, une rage. Il y avait chez elle tant de feu et de chaleur, tant de désirs immenses, une telle soif de délices et de voluptés qui étaient dans son sang, dans ses veines, sous sa peau, jusque sous ses ongles, qu'elle était devenue folle, ivre, éperdue, et qu'elle aurait voulu faire sortir son amour des bornes de la nature ; il lui semblait qu'en prodiguant les caresses et les voluptés, en brûlant sa vie dans des nuits pleines de fièvre, d'ardeur, en se roulant dans tout ce que la passion a de plus frénétique, de plus sublime, il allait s'ouvrir devant elle une suite continue de voluptés, de plaisirs.

Souvent, dans les transports du délire, elle s'écriait que la vie n'était que la passion, que l'amour était tout pour elle ; et puis, les cheveux épars, l'œil en feu, la poitrine haletante de sanglots, elle demandait à son amant s'il n'aurait pas souhaité, comme elle, de vivre des siècles ensemble, seuls sur une haute montagne, sur un roc aigu, au bas duquel viendraient se briser les vagues, de se confondre tous deux avec la nature et le ciel, et de mêler leurs soupirs aux bruits de la tempête ; et puis elle le regardait longtemps, lui demandant encore de nouveaux baisers, de nouvelles étreintes, et elle tombait entre ses bras, muette et évanouie.

Et quand, le soir, son époux, l'âme tranquille, le front calme, rentrait chez lui, lui disant qu'il avait gagné aujourd'hui, qu'il avait fait le matin une bonne spéculation, acheté une ferme, vendu une rente, et qu’il pouvait ajouter un laquais de plus à ses équipages, acheter deux chevaux de plus pour ses écuries, et qu’avec ces mots et ces pensées il venait à l’embrasser, à l’appeler son amour et sa vie, oh ! la rage lui prenait à l’âme, elle le maudissait, repoussant avec horreur ses caresses et ses baisers, qui étaient froids et horribles comme ceux d’un singe.

Il y avait donc dans son amour une douleur et une amertume, comme la lie du vin, qui le rend plus âcre et plus brûlant.

Et quand, après avoir quitté sa maison, son ménage, ses laquais, elle se retrouvait avec Ernest, seule, assise à ses côtés, alors elle lui contait qu’elle eût voulu mourir de sa main, se sentir étouffée par ses bras, et puis elle ajoutait qu’elle n’aimait plus rien, qu’elle méprisait tout, qu’elle n’aimait que lui ; pour lui elle avait abandonné Dieu et le sacrifiait à son amour, pour lui elle laissait son mari et le donnait à l’ironie, pour lui elle abandonnait ses enfants ; elle crachait sur tout cela à plaisir ; religion, vertu, elle foulait tout cela aux pieds, elle vendait sa réputation pour ses caresses, et c’était avec bonheur et délices qu’elle immolait tout cela pour lui plaire, qu’elle détruisait toutes ses croyances, toutes ses illusions, toute sa vertu, tout ce qu’elle aimait enfin, pour obtenir de lui un regard ou un baiser. Et il lui semblait qu’elle serait plus belle en sortant de ses bras, après avoir reposé sur ses lèvres, comme les violettes fanées qui répandent un parfum plus doux.

Oh ! qui pourrait savoir combien il y a parfois de délices et de frénésie sous les deux seins palpitants d’une femme !

Ernest, cependant, commençait à l’aimer un peu plus qu’une grisette ou une figurante, il alla même jusqu’à faire des vers pour elle, qu’il lui donna ; en outre, un jour, je le vis avec les yeux rouges, d’où l’on pouvait conclure qu’il avait pleuré... ou mal dormi.

III

Un matin, en réfléchissant sur Mazza, assis dans un grand fauteuil élastique, ses pieds sur ses deux chenets, le nez enfoncé sous sa robe de chambre, tout en regardant la flamme de son feu qui pétillait et montait sur la plaque en langues de feu, il lui vint une idée qui le surprit d’une manière étrange ; il eut peur.

En se rappelant qu’il était aimé par une femme comme Mazza, qui lui sacrifiait, avec tant de prodigalité et d’effusion, sa beauté, son amour, il eut peur et trembla devant la passion de cette femme, comme ces enfants qui s’enfuient loin de la mer en disant qu'elle est trop grande, et une idée morale lui vint en tête, car c'était une habitude qu'il venait de prendre depuis qu'il s'était fait collaborateur au *Journal des connaissances utiles* et au *Musée des familles* ; il pensa, dis-je, qu'il était peu moral de séduire ainsi une femme mariée, de la détourner de ses devoirs d'épouse, de l'amour de ses enfants, et qu'il était mal à lui de recevoir toutes ces offrandes qu'elle brûlait à ses pieds comme un holocauste. Enfin il était ennuyé et fatigué de cette femme, qui prenait le plaisir au sérieux, qui ne concevait qu'un amour entier et sans partage, et avec laquelle on ne pouvait parler ni de romans, ni de modes, ni d'opéra.

Il voulut d'abord s'en séparer, la laisser là et la rejeter au milieu de la société, avec les autres femmes flétries comme elle ; Mazza s'aperçut de son indifférence et de sa tiédeur, l'attribua à de la délicatesse, et ne l'en aima que davantage. Souvent Ernest l'évitait, s'échappait d'elle, mais elle savait le rencontrer partout, au bal, à la promenade, dans les jardins publics, aux musées ; elle savait l'attendre dans la foule, lui dire deux mots et lui faire monter la rougeur au front, devant tous ces gens qui la regardaient.

D'autre fois, c'était lui qui venait chez elle, il entrait avec un front sévère, un air grave ; la jeune femme, naïve et amoureuse, lui sautait au cou et le couvrait de baisers, mais celui-ci la repoussait avec froideur, et puis il lui disait qu'ils ne devaient plus s'aimer, que, le moment de délire et de folie une fois passé, tout devait être fini entre eux, qu'il fallait respecter son mari, chérir ses enfants et veiller à son ménage, et il ajoutait qu'il avait beaucoup vu et étudié, et qu'au reste la Providence était juste, que la nature était un chef-d'œuvre et la société une admirable création, et puis que la philanthropie, après tout, était une belle chose et qu'il fallait aimer les hommes.

Et celle-ci alors pleurait de rage, d'orgueil et d'amour ; elle lui demandait, le rire sur les lèvres mais l'amertume dans le cœur, si elle n'était plus belle et ce qu'il fallait faire pour lui plaire, et puis elle lui souriait, lui étalant à la vue son front pâle, ses cheveux noirs, sa gorge, son épaule, ses seins nus. Ernest restait insensible à tant de séductions, car il ne l'aimait plus, et s'il sortait de chez elle avec quelque émotion dans l'âme, c'était comme les gens qui viennent de voir des fous ; et si quelque vestige de passion, quelque rayon d'amour venait à se rallumer chez lui, il s'éteignait bien vite avec une raison ou un argument.

Heureux donc les gens qui peuvent combattre leur cœur avec des mots et détruire la passion, qui est enracinée dans l'âme, avec la moralité, qui n'est collée que sur les livres comme le vernis du libraire et le frontispice du graveur.

Un jour, dans un transport de fureur et de délire, Mazza le mordit à la poitrine et lui enfonça ses ongles dans la gorge. En voyant couler du sang dans leurs amours, Ernest comprit que la passion de cette femme était féroce et terrible, qu’il régnait autour d’elle une atmosphère empoisonnée qui finirait par l’étouffer et le faire mourir, que cet amour était un volcan à qui il fallait jeter toujours quelque chose à mâcher et à broyer dans ses convulsions, et que ses voluptés, enfin, étaient une lave ardente qui brûlait le cœur. Il fallait donc partir, la quitter pour toujours, ou bien se jeter avec elle dans ce tourbillon qui vous entraîne comme un vertige dans cette route immense de la passion, qui commence avec un sourire et qui ne finit que sur une tombe.

Il préféra partir.

Un soir, à dix heures, Mazza reçut une lettre, elle y comprit ces mots :

“Adieu, Mazza ! je ne vous reverrai plus ; le ministre de l’intérieur m’a enrôlé d’une commission savante qui doit analyser les produits et le sol même du Mexique. Adieu ! je m’embarque au Havre. Si vous voulez être heureuse, ne m’aimez plus, aimez au contraire la vertu et vos devoirs ; c’est un dernier conseil. Encore une fois adieu ! je vous embrasse.

“Ernest.”

Elle la relut plusieurs fois, accablée par ce mot adieu ; elle restait les yeux fixes et immobiles sur cette lettre qui contenait tout son malheur et son désespoir, où elle voyait s’enfuir et couler tout son bonheur et sa vie ; elle ne versa pas une larme, ne poussa pas un cri, mais elle sonna un domestique, lui ordonna d’aller chercher des chevaux de poste et de préparer sa chaise. Son mari voyageait en Allemagne, personne ne pouvait donc l’arrêter dans sa volonté.

A minuit elle partit, elle allait rapidement en courant de toute la vitesse des chevaux. Dans un village, elle s’arrêta pour demander un verre d’eau et repartit, croyant après chaque côte, chaque colline, chaque détour de la route, voir apparaître la mer, but de ses désirs et de sa jalousie, puisqu’elle allait lui enlever quelqu’un de cher à son cœur. Enfin, vers trois heures d’après-midi, elle arriva au Havre.

A peine descendue, elle courut au bout de la jetée et regarda sur la mer… une voile blanche s’enfonçait sous l’horizon.

IV

Il était parti ! parti pour toujours, et quand elle releva sa figure toute couverte de larmes, elle ne vit plus rien que l’immensité de l’océan.

C’était une de ces brûlantes journées d’été, où la terre exhale de chaudes vapeurs comme l’air embrasé d’une fournaise. Quand Mazza fut arrivée sur la jetée, la fraîcheur salée de l’eau la ranima quelque peu, car une brise du sud enflait les vagues, qui venaient mollement mourir sur la grève et râlaient sur le galet. Les nuages noirs et épais s’amoncelaient à sa gauche, vers le soleil couchant, qui était rouge et lumineux sur la mer ; on eût dit qu’ils allaient éclater en sanglots. La mer, sans être furieuse, roulait sur elle-même en chantant lugubrement, et quand elle venait à se briser sur les pierres de la jetée, les vagues sautaient en l’air et retombaient en poudre d’argent.

Il y avait dans cela une sauvage harmonie, Mazza l’écouta longtemps, fascinée par sa puissance ; le bruit de ces flots avait pour elle un langage, une voix ; comme elle, la mer était triste et pleine d’angoisses ; comme elle, ses vagues venaient mourir en se brisant sur les pierres et ne laisser sur le sable mouillé que la trace de leur passage. Une herbe, qui avait pris naissance entre deux fentes de la pierre, penchait sa tête toute pleine de la rosée, chaque coup de vague venait la tirer de sa racine, et chaque fois elle se détachait de plus en plus ; enfin elle disparut sous la lame, on ne la revit plus ; et pourtant elle était jeune et portait des fleurs ? Mazza sourit amèrement, la fleur était, comme elle, enlevée par la vague dans la fraîcheur du printemps.

Il y avait des marins qui rentraient, couchés dans leur barque ; en tirant derrière eux la corde de leurs filets, leur voix vibrait au loin, avec le cri des oiseaux de nuit, qui planaient en volant de leurs ailes noires sur la tête de Mazza et qui allaient tous s’abattre vers la grève, sur les débris qu’apportait la marée. Elle entendait alors une voix qui l’appelait au fond du gouffre, et, la tête penchée vers l’abîme, elle calculait combien il lui faudrait de minutes et de secondes pour râler et mourir. Tout était triste comme elle dans la nature, et il lui sembla que les vagues avaient des soupirs et que la mer pleurait.

Je ne sais cependant quel misérable sentiment de l’existence lui dit de vivre, et qu’il y avait encore sur la terre du bonheur et de l’amour, qu’elle n’avait qu’à attendre et espérer, et qu’elle le reverra plus tard ; mais, quand la nuit fut venue et que la lune vint à paraître au milieu de ses compagnes, comme une sultane au harem entre ses femmes, et qu’on ne vit plus que la mousse des flots, qui brillait sur les vagues comme l’écume à la bouche d’un coursier, alors que le bruit de la ville commença à s’évanouir dans le brouillard, avec ses lumières qui s’éteignaient, Mazza repartit.

La nuit — il était peut-être deux heures — elle ouvrit ses glaces et regarda dehors. On était dans une plaine et la route était bordée d’arbres, les clartés de la nuit passant à travers leurs branches les faisaient ressembler à des fantômes aux formes gigantesques, qui couraient tous devant Mazza et remuaient au gré du vent, qui sifflait à travers leurs feuilles, leur chevelure en désordre. Une fois la voiture s’arrêta au milieu de la campagne, un trait se trouvait cassé, il faisait nuit, on n’entendait que le bruit des arbres, l’haleine des chevaux haletant de sueur, et les sanglots d’une femme qui pleurait seule.

Vers le matin, elle vit des gens qui allaient vers la ville la plus voisine, portant au marché des fruits tout couverts de mousse et de feuillage vert ; ils chantaient aussi, et comme la route montait et qu’on allait au pas, elle les écouta longuement. “Oh ! comme il y a des gens heureux !” dit-elle.

Il faisait grand jour, c’était un dimanche ; dans un village à quelques heures de Paris, sur la place de l’église, à l’heure où tout le monde en sortait, il y avait un grand soleil qui brillait sur le coq de l’église, et illuminait sa modeste rosace. Les portes, qui étaient ouvertes, laissaient voir à Mazza, du fond de sa voiture, l’intérieur de la nef et les cierges qui brillaient dans l’ombre sur l’autel ; elle regarda la voûte de bois, peinte de couleur bleue, et les vieux piliers de pierre nus et blanchis, et puis toute la suite des bancs où s’étalait une population entière, bigarrée de vêtements de couleur ; elle entendit l’orgue qui chantait, et il se fit alors un grand flot dans le peuple et l’on sortit. Plusieurs avaient des bouquets de fausses fleurs et des bas blancs ; elle vit que c’était une noce, on tira des coups de fusil sur la place, et les mariés sortirent.

La bru avait un bonnet blanc et souriait en regardant le bout des pattes de sa ceinture, qui étaient de dentelle brodée ; le marié s’avançait à côté d’elle, il voyait la foule d’un air heureux et donnait des poignées de main à plusieurs. C’était le maire du pays, qui était aubergiste et qui mariait sa fille à son adjoint, le maître d’école. ·

Un groupe d’enfants et de femmes s’arrêta devant Mazza pour regarder la belle calèche et le manteau rouge qui pendait de la portière, tout cela souriait et parlait haut. Quand elle eut relayé, elle rencontra, au bout du pays, le cortège qui entrait à la mairie, et le sourire vint sur sa bouche quand elle vit l’écume de ses chevaux qui tombait sur les mariés et la poussière de leurs pas qui salissait leurs vêtements blancs ; elle avança la tête et leur lança un regard de pitié et d’envie, car de misérable elle était devenue méchante et jalouse. Le peuple alors, en haine des riches, lui répondit par des injures et l’insulta, en lui jetant des pierres sur les armoiries de sa voiture.

Longtemps, dans la route, à moitié endormie par le mouvement des ressorts, le son des grelots et la poussière qui tombait sur ses cheveux noirs, elle pensa à la noce du village, et le bruit du violon qui précédait le cortège, le son de l’or et les voix des enfants qui avaient parlé autour d’elle, tout cela tintait a ses oreilles comme l’abeille qui bourdonne ou le serpent qui siffle.

Elle était fatiguée, la chaleur l’accablait sous les cuirs de sa calèche, le soleil dardait en face, elle baissa la tête sur ses coussins de drap blanc et s’endormit. Elle se réveilla aux portes de Paris.

Quand on a quitté la campagne et les champs et qu'on se retrouve dans les rues, le jour semble sombre et baissé, comme dans ces théâtres de foire qui sont lugubres et mal éclairés. Mazza se plongea avec délices dans les rues les plus tortueuses ; elle s'enivra du bruit et de la rumeur qui venait la tirer d'elle-même et la reporter dans le monde, elle voyait rapidement, et comme des ombres chinoises, toutes les têtes qui passaient devant sa portière, toutes lui semblaient froides, impassibles et pâles ; elle regarda avec étonnement, pour la première fois, la misère qui va pieds nus sur les quais, la haine dans le cœur et un sourire sur la bouche, comme pour cacher les trous de ses haillons ; elle regarda la foule qui s'engouffrait dans les spectacles et les cafés, et tout ce monde de laquais et de grands seigneurs qui s'étale comme un manteau de couleur au jour de parade.

Tout cela lui parut un immense spectacle, un vaste théâtre, avec ses palais de pierre, ses magasins allumés, ses habits de parade, ses ridicules, ses sceptres de carton et ses royautés d'un jour. Là, le carrosse de la danseuse éclabousse le peuple, et là l'homme se meurt de faim, en voyant des tas d'or derrière les vitres ; partout le rire et les larmes, partout la richesse et la misère, partout le vice qui insulte la vertu et lui crache à la face, comme le châle usé de la fille de joie qui effleure en passant la robe noire du prêtre. Oh ! il y a dans les grandes cités une atmosphère corrompue et empoisonnée, qui vous étourdit et vous enivre, quelque chose de lourd et de malsain, comme ces sombres brouillards du soir qui planent sur les toits.

Mazza aspira cet air de corruption à pleine poitrine, elle le sentit comme un parfum, et la première fois, alors, elle comprit tout ce qu'il y avait de large et d'immense dans le vice, et de voluptueux dans le crime.

En se retrouvant chez elle, il lui sembla qu'il y avait longtemps qu'elle était partie, tant elle avait souffert et vécu en peu d'heures. Elle passa la nuit à pleurer, à rappeler sans cesse son départ, son retour ; elle voyait de là les villages qu'elle avait traversés, toute la route qu'elle avait parcourue ; il lui semblait encore être sur la jetée, à regarder la mer et la voile qui s'en va ; elle se rappelait aussi la noce avec ses habits de fête, ses sourires de bonheur ; elle entendait de là le bruit de sa voiture sur les pavés, elle entendait aussi les vagues qui mugissaient et bondissaient sous elle ; et puis elle fut effrayée de la longueur du temps, elle crut avoir vécu un siècle et être devenue vieille, avoir les cheveux blancs, tant la douleur vous affaisse, tant le chagrin vous ronge, car il est des jours qui vous vieillissent comme des années, des pensées qui font bien des rides.

Elle se rappela aussi, en souriant avec regret, les jours de son bonheur, ses vacances paisibles sur les bords de la Loire, où elle courait dans les allées des bois, se jouant avec les fleurs, et pleurant en voyant passer les mendiants ; elle se rappela ses premiers bals, où elle dansait si bien, où elle aimait tant les sourires gracieux et les paroles aimables ; et puis encore ses heures de fièvre et de délire, dans les bras de son amant, ses moments de transport et de rage, où elle eût voulu que chaque regard durât des siècles et que l'éternité fût un baiser elle se demanda alors si tout cela était parti et effacé pour toujours, comme la poussière de la route et le sillon du navire sur les vagues de la mer.

V

Enfin la voilà revenue, mais seule ! plus personne pour la soutenir, plus rien à aimer. Que faire ? quel parti prendre ? oh ! la mort, la tombe cent fois, si, malgré son départ et son ennui, elle n'avait eu au cœur un peu d'espérance.

Qu'espérait-elle donc ?

Elle l'ignorait elle-même, seulement elle avait encore foi à la vie ; elle crut encore qu'Ernest l'aimait, lorsqu'un jour elle reçut une de ses lettres ; mais ce fut une désillusion de plus.

La lettre était longue, bien écrite, toute remplie de riches métaphores et de grands mots ; Ernest lui disait qu'il ne fallait plus l'aimer, qu'il fallait penser à ses devoirs et à Dieu, et puis il lui donnait en outre d'excellents conseils sur la famille, l'amour maternel, et il terminait par un peu de sentiment, comme M. de Bouilly ou M^me^ Cottin.

Pauvre Mazza ! tant d'amour, de cœur et de tendresse pour une indifférence si froide, un calme si raisonné ! Elle tomba dans l'affaissement et le dégoût. “Je croyais, dit-elle un jour, qu'on pouvait mourir de chagrin !”. Du dégoût elle passa à l'amertume et à l'envie.

C'est alors que le bruit du monde lui parut une musique discordante et infernale, et la nature une raillerie de Dieu ; elle n'aimait rien et portait de la haine à tout ; à mesure que chaque sentiment sortait de son cœur, la haine y entrait si bien qu'elle n'aimait plus rien au monde, sauf un homme. Souvent, quand elle voyait dans les jardins publics, des mères avec leurs enfants, qui jouaient avec eux et souriaient à leurs caresses, et puis des femmes avec leurs époux, des amants avec leurs maîtresses, et que tous ces gens-là étaient heureux, souriaient, aimaient la vie, elle les enviait et les maudissait à la fois ; elle eût voulu pouvoir les écraser tous du pied, et sa lèvre ironique leur jetait en passant quelque mot de dédain, quelque sourire d'orgueil.

D'autres fois, quand on lui disait qu'elle devait être heureuse dans la vie, avec sa fortune, son rang, que sa santé était bonne, que ses joues étaient fraîches et qu'on voyait qu'elle était heureuse, que rien ne lui manquait, elle souriait cependant, la rage dans l'âme : “Ah ! les imbéciles, disait-elle, qui ne voient que le bonheur sur un front calme et qui ne savent pas que la torture arrache des rires.”

Elle prit la vie, dés lors, comme un long cri de douleur. Si elle voyait des femmes qui se paraient de leur vertu, d'autres de leur amour, elle raillait leur vertu et leurs amours ; quand elle trouvait des gens heureux et confiants en Dieu, elle les tourmentait par un rire ou par un sarcasme ; les prêtres ? elle les faisait rougir, en passant devant eux, par un regard lascif, et riait à leurs oreilles ; les jeunes filles et les vierges ? elle les faisait pâlir par ses contes d'amour et ses histoires passionnées. Et puis l'on se demandait quelle était cette femme pâle et amaigrie, ce fantôme errant, avec ses yeux de feu et sa tête de damnée ; et si on venait à vouloir la connaître, on ne trouvait au fond de son existence qu'une douleur et dans sa conduite que des larmes.

Oh ! les femmes ! les femmes ! elle les haïssait dans l'âme, les jeunes et les belles surtout, et quand elle les voyait dans un spectacle ou dans un ball, à la lueur des lustres et des bougies, étalant leur gorge ondulante, ornées de dentelles et de diamants, et que les hommes empressés souriaient à leurs sourires, qu'on les flattait et les vantait, elle eût voulu froisser ces vêtements et ces gazes brodées, cracher sur ces figures chéries, et traîner dans la boue ces fronts si calmes et si fiers de leur froideur. Elle ne croyait plus à rien, qu'au malheur et à la mort.

La vertu pour elle était un mot, la religion un fantôme, la réputation un masque imposteur comme un voile qui cache les rides. Elle trouvait alors des joies dans l'orgueil, des délices dans le dédain, et elle crachait en passant sur le seuil des églises.

Quand elle pensait à Ernest, à sa voix, à ses paroles, à ses bras qui l'avaient tenue si longtemps palpitante et éperdue d'amour, et qu'elle se trouvait sous les baisers de son mari, ah ! elle se tordait de douleur et d'angoisse et se roulait sur elle-même, comme un homme qui râle et agonise, en criant après un nom, en pleurant sur un souvenir. Elle avait des enfants de cet homme, ces enfants ressemblaient à leur père, une fille de trois ans, un garçon de cinq, et souvent, dans leurs jeux, leurs rires pénétraient jusqu'à elle ; le matin, ils venaient l'embrasser en riant, quand elle, elle leur mère, avait veillé toute la nuit dans des tourments inouïs et que ses joues étaient encore fraiches de ses larmes.

Souvent, quand elle pensait à lui, errant sur les mers, ballotté peut-être par la tempête, à lui qui se perdait peut-être dans les flots, seul et voulant se rattacher à la vie, et qu'elle voyait de la un cadavre bercé sur la vague, ou vient s'abattre le vautour, alors elle entendait des cris de joie, des voix enfantines qui accouraient pour lui montrer un arbre en fleurs, ou le soleil qui faisait reluire la rosée des herbes. C'était pour elle comme la douleur de l'homme qui tombe sur le pavé et qui voit la foule rire et battre des mains.

Alors que pensait Ernest, loin d'elle ? Parfois, il est vrai, quand il n'avait rien à faire, dans ses moments de loisir et de désœuvrement, en pensant à elle, à ses étreintes brûlantes, à sa croupe charnue, à ses seins blancs, à ses longs cheveux noirs, il la regrettait, mais il s'empressait d'aller éteindre dans les bras d'une esclave le feu allumé dans l'amour le plus fort et le plus sacré ; d'ailleurs, il se consolait de cette perte avec facilité, en pensant qu'il avait fait une bonne action, que cela était agir en citoyen, que Franklin ou Lafayette n'auraient pas mieux fait, car il était alors sur la terre nationale du patriotisme, de l'esclavage, du café et de la tempérance, je veux dire l'Amérique.

C'était un de ces gens chez qui le jugement et la raison occupent une si grande place qu'ils ont mangé le cœur comme un voisin incommode ; un monde les séparait, car Mazza, au contraire, était plongée dans le délire et l'angoisse, et tandis que son amant se vautrait à plaisir dans les bras des négresses et des mulâtresses, elle se mourait d'ennui, croyant aussi qu'Ernest ne vivait que pour elle et ressentait un mal dont il se moquait dans son rire bestial et sauvage ; il se donnait à une autre. Tandis que cette pauvre femme pleurait et maudissait Dieu, qu'elle appelait l'enfer à son secours et se roulait en demandant si Satan enfin n'arriverait pas, Ernest, peut-être, au même moment où elle embrassait avec frénésie un médaillon de ses cheveux, au même moment peut-être, il se promenait gravement sur la place publique d'une ville des États-Unis, en veste et en pantalon blanc comme un planteur, et allait au marché acheter quelque esclave noire qui eût des bras forts et musclés, de pendantes mamelles et de la volupté pour de l'or.

Du reste, il s'occupait de travaux chimiques, il y avait plein deux immenses cartons de notes sur les couches de silex et les analyses minéralogiques, et d'ailleurs le climat lui convenait beaucoup, il se portait à ravir dans cette atmosphère embaumée d'académies savantes, de chemins de Fer, de bateaux à vapeur, de cannes à sucre et d'indigo.

Dans quelle atmosphère vivait Mazza ? Le cercle de sa vie ni était pas si étendu, mais c'était un monde à part, qui tournait dans les larmes et le désespoir, et qui enfin se perdait dans l'abîme d'un crime.

VI

Un drap noir était tendu sur la porte cochère de l’hôtel, il était relevé par le milieu et formait une espèce d’ogive brisée, qui laissait voir une tombe et deux flambeaux, dont les lumières tremblaient, comme la voix d’un mourant, au souffle froid de l’hiver qui passait sur ces draps noirs tout étoilés de larmes d’argent. De temps en temps, les deux fossoyeurs qui avaient soin de la fête se rangeaient de côté pour faire place aux conviés arrivant l’un après l’autre, tous vêtus de noir avec des cravates blanches, un jabot plissé et des cheveux frisés ; ils se découvraient en passant preès du mort, et trempaient dans l’eau bénite le bout de leur gant noir.

C’était dans l’hiver, la neige tombait ; après que le cortège fut parti, une jeune femme, entourée d’une mante noire, descendit dans la cour, marcha sur la pointe des pieds à travers la couche de neige qui couvrait les pavés, et elle avança sa tête pâle entre ses voiles noirs pour voir le char funèbre qui s’éloignait ; puis elle éteignit les deux bougies qui brûlaient encore, elle remonta, défit son manteau, réchauffa ses sandales blanches au feu de sa cheminée, détourna la tête encore une fois, mais elle ne vit plus que le dos noir du dernier des assistants qui tournait à l’angle de la rue.

Quand elle n’entendit plus le ferraillement monotone des roues du char sur le pavé, et que tout fut passé et parti, les chants des prêtres, le convoi du mort, elle se jeta sur le lit mortuaire, s’y roula à plaisir, en criant dans les accès de sa joie convulsive : “Arrive maintenant ! à toi, à toi tout cela ! Je t’attends ! viens donc ! A toi, mon bien-aimé, la couche nuptiale et ses délices ! à toi, à toi seul, à nous deux un monde d’amour et de voluptés ! Viens ici, je m’y étendrai sous tes caresses, je m’y roulerai sous tes baisers”. Elle vit sur sa commode une petite boîte en palissandre que lui avait donnée Ernest. C était comme ce jour-la, un jour d’hiver, il arriva, entouré de son manteau, son chapeau avait de la neige, et quand il l’embrassa, sa peau avait une fraîcheur et un parfum de jeunesse qui rendait les baisers doux comme l’aspiration d’une rose. Cette boîte avait, au milieu, leurs chiffres entrelacés M et E, son bois était odoriférant, elle y porta ses narines et y resta longtemps contemplative et rêveuse.

Bientôt on lui amena ses enfants, ils pleuraient et demandaient leur père ; ils voulurent embrasser Mazza et se consoler avec elle, celle-ci les renvoya avec sa femme de chambre, sans un mot, sans un sourire. Elle pensait à lui, qui était bien loin et qui ne revenait pas.

VII

Elle vécut ainsi plusieurs mois, seule avec son avenir qui avançait, se sentant chaque jour plus heureuse et plus libre, à mesure que tout ce qui était dans son cœur s'en allait pour faire place à l'amour ; toutes les passions, tous les sentiments, tout ce qui trouve place dans une âme était parti, comme les scrupules de l'enfance, la pudeur d'abord, la religion ensuite, la vertu après, et enfin les débris de tout cela qu'elle avait jetés comme les éclats d'un verre brisé. Elle n'avait plus rien d'une femme, si ce n'est l'amour, mais un amour entier et terrible, qui se torturait lui-même et brûlait les autres, comme le Vésuve qui se déchire dans ses éruptions et répand sa lave bouillante sur les fleurs de la vallée.

Elle avait des enfants, ses enfants moururent comme leur père ; chaque jour ils pâlissaient de plus en plus, s'amaigrissaient, et la nuit ils se réveillaient dans le délire, se tordant sur leur couche d'agonie en disant qu'un serpent leur mangeait la poitrine, car il y avait là quelque chose qui les déchirait et les brûlait sans cesse, et Mazza contemplait leur agonie avec un rire sur les lèvres, qui était rempli de colère et de vengeance.

Ils moururent tous deux le même jour. Quand elle vit clouer leurs bières, ses yeux n'eurent point de larmes, son cœur pas de soupir ; elle les vit d'un œil sec et froid enveloppés dans leurs cercueils, et lorsqu'elle fut seule enfin, elle passa la nuit, heureuse et confiante, l'âme calme et la joie dans le cœur. Pas un remords ni un cri de douleur, car elle allait partir le lendemain, quitter la France après s'être vengée de l'amour profané, de tout ce qu'il y avait eu de fatal et de terrible dans sa destinée, après s'être raillée de Dieu, des hommes, de la vie, de la fatalité qui s'était jouée d'elle un moment, après s'être amusée à son tour de la vie et de la mort, des larmes et des chagrins, et avoir rendu au ciel des crimes pour ses douleurs.

Adieu, terre d'Europe, pleine de brouillards et de glaciers, où les cœurs sont tièdes comme l'atmosphère et les amours aussi flasques, aussi mous que ses nuages gris ; à moi l'Amérique et sa terre de lieu, son soleil ardent, son ciel pur, ses belles nuits dans les bosquets de palmiers et de platanes. Adieu le monde, merci de vous ; je pars, je me jette sur un navire. Va, mon beau navire, cours vite ! que tes voiles s'enflent au souffle du vent, que ta proue brise les vagues, bondis sur la tempête, saute sur les flots, et dusses-tu te briser enfin, jette-moi avec tes débris sur la terre où il respire !

Cette nuit-là fut passée dans le délire et l'agitation, mais c'était le délire de la joie et de l'espérance. Lorsqu'elle pensait à lui, qu'elle allait l'embrasser et vivre pour toujours avec lui, elle souriait et pleurait de bonheur.

La terre du cimetière, où reposaient ses enfants, était encore fraîche et mouillée d'eau bénite.

VIII

On lui apporta, le matin, une lettre ; elle avait sept mois de date. C’était d’Ernest. Elle en brisa le cachet en tremblant, la parcourut avidement ; quand elle l’eut terminée, elle recommença sa lecture, pâle d’effroi et pouvant a peine lire. Voici ce qu’il y avait :

“Pourquoi, madame, vos lettres sont-elles toujours aussi peu honnêtes ? la dernière surtout ? Je l’ai brûlée, j’aurais rougi que quelqu’un y jetât les yeux. Ne pourriez-vous enfin avoir plus de bornes dans vos passions ? Pourquoi venez-vous sans cesse, avec votre souvenir, me troubler dans mes travaux, m’arracher à mes occupations ? que vous ai-je fait pour m’aimer tant ?

“Encore une fois, madame, je veux qu’un amour soit sage ; j’ai quitté la France, oubliez-moi donc comme je vous ai oubliée, aimez votre mari ; le bonheur se trouve dans les routes battues par la foule, les sentiers de la montagne sont pleins de ronces et de cailloux, ils déchirent et vous usent vite.

“Maintenant je vis heureux, j’ai une petite maison charmante, sur le bord d’un fleuve, et, dans la plaine qu’il traverse, je fais la chasse aux insectes, j’herborise, et quand je rentre chez moi, je suis salué par mon nègre qui se courbe jusqu’à terre, et embrasse mes souliers quand il veut obtenir quelque faveur ; je me suis donc créé une existence heureuse, calme et paisible, au milieu de la nature et de la science, que n’en faites-vous autant ? qui vous en empêche ? on peut ce qu’on veut.

“Pour vous, pour votre bonheur même, je vous conseille de ne plus penser à moi, de ne plus m’écrire. A quoi bon cette correspondance ? à quoi cela nous avancera-t-il, quand vous direz cent fois que vous m’aimez et que vous écrirez encore sur les marges, tout autant de fois : je t’aime ?

“Il faut donc oublier tout, madame, et ne plus penser à ce que nous avons été l’un vis-à-vis de l’autre ; n’avons-nous pas eu chacun ce que nous désirions ?

“Ma position est à peu près faite, je suis directeur principal de la commission des essais pour les mines, la fille du directeur de première classe est une charmante personne de 17 ans, son père a soixante mille livres de rentes, elle est fille unique, elle est douce et bonne, elle a beaucoup de jugement et s’entendra à merveille à diriger un ménage, à surveiller une maison.

“Dans un mois, je me marie ; si vous m’aimez comme vous le dites toujours, cela doit vous faire plaisir, puisque je le fais pour mon bonheur.

“Adieu, madame Willers, ne pensez plus à un homme qui à la délicatesse de ne plus vous aimer, et si vous voulez me rendre un dernier service, c’est de me faire passer au plus vite un demi-litre d’acide prussique, que vous donnera très bien, sur ma recommandation, le secrétaire de l’Académie des sciences ; c’est un chimiste fort habile.

“Adieu, je compte sur vous, n’oubliez pas mon acide.

“Ernest VAUMONT.”

Quand Mazza eut lu cette lettre, elle poussa un cri inarticulé, comme si on l’eût brûlée avec des tenailles rouges.

Elle resta longtemps dans la consternation et la surprise. “Ah ! le lâche ! dit-elle enfin, il m’a séduite et il m’abandonne pour une autre ! Avoir tout donné pour lui et n’avoir plus rien ! jeter tout à la mer et s’appuyer sur une planche, et la planche vous glisse des mains, et l’on sent qu’on s’enfonce sous les flots !”

Elle l’aimait tant, cette pauvre femme ! elle lui avait donné sa vertu, elle lui avait prodigué son amour, elle avait renié Dieu, et puis encore — oh ! bien pis encore — son mari, ses enfants qu’elle avait vus râler, mourir, en souriant, car elle pensait à lui. Que l’aire ? que devenir ? Une autre, une autre femme à qui il va dire : je t’aime ! à qui il va baiser les yeux, les seins, en l’appelant sa vie et sa passion ; une autre ! et elle ? en avait-elle eu d’autre que lui ? pour lui n’avait elle pas repoussé son mari dans la couche nuptiale ? ne l’avait-elle pas trompé de ses lèvres adultères ? ne l’avait-elle pas empoisonné en versant des larmes de joie ?

C’était son Dieu et sa vie, il l’abandonne après s’être servi d’elle, après en avoir assez joui, assez usé ; voilà qu’il la repousse au loin, et la jette à l’abîme sans fond, celui du crime et du désespoir !

D’autres fois, elle ne pouvait en croire ses yeux, elle relisait cette lettre fatale et la couvrait de ses pleurs.

Oh ! comment ! disait-elle après que l’abattement eut fait place à la rage, à la fureur, oh ! comment, tu me quittes ? mais je suis au monde, seule, sans famille, sans parents, car je t’ai donné et famille et parents ; seule, sans honneur, car je l’ai immolé pour toi ; seule, sans réputation, car je l’ai sacrifiée sous tes baisers, à la vue du monde entier qui m’appelait ta maîtresse. Ta maîtresse ! dont tu rougis maintenant, lâche !

Et les morts, où sont-ils ?

Que Faire ? que devenir ? J’avais une seule idée, une seule chose au çœur, elle me manque ; irai-je te trouver ? mais tu me chasseras comme une esclave ; si je me jette au milieu des autres femmes, elles m’abandonneront en riant, me montreront du doigt avec fierté, car elles n’ont aimé personne, elles, elles ne connaissent pas les larmes. Oh ! tiens ! puisque je veux encore de l’amour, de la passion et de la vie, ils me diront sans doute d'aller quelque part où l'on vend à prix fixe de la volupté et des étreintes, et le soir, avec mes compagnes de luxure, j'appellerai les passants à travers les vitres, et il faudra, quand ils seront venus, que je les fasse jouir bien fort, que je leur en donne pour leur argent, qu'ils s'en aillent contents, et que je ne me plaigne pas encore, que je me trouve heureuse, que je rie à tout venant, car j'aurai mérité mon sort !

Et qu'ai-je fait ? je t'ai aimé plus qu'un autre. Oh ! grâce ! Ernest ; si tu entendais mes cris, tu aurais peut-être pitié de moi, moi qui n'ai pas eu de pitié pour eux, car je me maudis maintenant, je me roule ici dans l'angoisse et mes vêtements sont mouillés de mes larmes.

Et elle courait éperdue, puis elle tombait, se roulant par terre en maudissant Dieu, les hommes, la vie elle-même, tout ce qui vivait, tout ce qui pensait au monde ; elle arrachait de sa tête des poignées de cheveux noirs, et ses ongles étaient rouges de sang.

Oh ! ne pouvoir supporter la vie ! en être venue à se jeter dans les bras de la mort comme dans ceux d'une mère ! mais douter encore, au dernier moment, si la tombe n'a pas des supplices et le néant des douleurs ! être dégoutée de tout ! n'avoir plus de foi à rien, pas même à l'amour, la première religion du cœur, et ne pouvoir quitter ce malaise continuel, comme un homme qui serait ivre et qu'on forcerait à boire encore !

Pourquoi donc es-tu venu dans ma solitude m'arracher a mon bonheur ? J'étais si confiante et si pure, et tu es venu pour m'aimer, et je t'ai aimé !

Les hommes, cela est si beau quand ils vous regardent ! Tu m'as donné de l'amour, tu m'en refuses maintenant, et moi je l'ai nourri par des crimes, voilà qu'il me tue aussi ! J'étais bonne alors, quand tu me vis, et maintenant je suis féroce et cruelle, je voudrais avoir quelque chose à broyer, à déchirer, à flétrir, et puis après à jeter au loin comme moi. Oh ! je hais tout, les hommes, Dieu ; et toi aussi je te hais, et pourtant je sens encore que pour toi je donnerais ma vie !

Plus je t'aimais, plus je t'aimais encore, comme ceux qui se désaltèrent avec l'eau salée de la mer et que la soif brûle toujours. Et maintenant je vais mourir !… la mort ! plus rien, quoi ! des ténèbres, une tombe, et puis… l'immensité du néant. Oh ! je sens que je voudrais pourtant vivre et faire souffrir comme j'ai souffert. Oh ! le bonheur ! où est-il ? mais c'est un rêve ; la vertu ? un mot ; l'amour ? une déception ; la tombe ? que sais-je ?

Je le saurai.

IX

Elle se leva, essuya ses larmes, tâcha d’apaiser les sanglots qui lui brisaient la poitrine et l’étouffaient ; elle regarda dans une glace si ses yeux étaient encore bien rouges de pleurs, renoua ses cheveux et sortit s’acquitter du dernier désir d’Ernest.

Mazza arriva chez le chimiste ; il allait venir. On la fit attendre dans un petit salon au premier, dont les meubles étaient couverts de drap rouge et de drap vert ; une table ronde en acajou au milieu, des lithographies représentant les batailles de Napoléon sur les lambris, et, sur la cheminée de marbre gris, une pendule en or où le cadran servait d’appui à *un Amour* qui se reposait de l’autre main sur ses flèches. La porte s’ouvrit comme la pendule sonnait deux heures, le chimiste entra. C’était un homme petit et mince, l’air sec et des manières polies ; il avait des lunettes, des lèvres minces, de petits yeux renfoncés. Quand Mazza lui eut expliqué le motif de sa visite, il se mit à l’aire l’éloge de Ernest Vaumont, son caractère, son cœur, ses dispositions ; enfin il lui remit le flacon d’ acide, la mena par la main au bas de l’escalier, il se mouilla même les pieds dans la cour en la reconduisant jusqu’à la porte de la rue.

Mazza ne pouvait marcher dans les rues tant sa tête était brûlante ; ses joues étaient pourpres et il lui sembla plusieurs fois que le sang allait lui sortir par les pores. Elle passa par des rues où la misère était affichée sur les maisons, comme ces filets de couleur qui tombent des murs blanchis, et en voyant la misère elle disait : je vais me guérir de votre malheur ; elle passa devant le palais des rois et dit, en serrant le poison dans ses deux mains : Adieu, l’existence, je vais me guérir de vos soucis ; en rentrant chez elle, avant de fermer sa porte, elle jeta un regard sur le monde qu’elle quittait, et sur la cité pleine de bruit, de rumeurs et de cris : Adieu, vous tous ! dit-elle.

X

Elle ouvrit son secrétaire, cacheta le flacon d’acide, y mit l’adresse, et écrivit un autre billet ; il était adressé au commissaire central.

Elle sonna et le donna alun domestique.

Elle écrivit sur une troisième Feuille : “J’aimais un homme ; pour lui j’ai tué mon mari, pour lui j’ai tué mes enfants, je meurs sans remords, sans espoir, mais avec des regrets”. Elle la plaça sur sa cheminée.

“Encore une demi-heure, dit-elle, bientôt il va venir et m’emmènera au cimetière.”

cimetière.

Elle ôta ses vêtements, et resta quelques minutes à regarder son beau corps que rien ne couvrait, à penser à toutes les voluptés qu’il avait données et aux jouissances immenses qu’elle avait prodiguées à son amant.

Quel trésor que l’amour d’une telle femme !

Enfin, après avoir pleuré, pensant à ses jours qui s’étaient enfuis, à son bonheur, à ses rêves, à ses caprices de jeunesse, et puis encore à lui, bien longtemps ; après s’être demandé ce que c’était que la mort, et s’être perdue dans ce gouffre sans fond de la pensée qui se ronge et se déchire de rage et d’impuissance, elle se releva tout à coup comme d’un rêve, elle prit quelques gouttes du poison, qu’elle avait versées dans une tasse de vermeil, but avidement, et s’étendit, pour la dernière fois, sur ce sofa où si souvent elle s’était roulée dans les bras d’Ernest, dans les transports de l’amour.

XI

Quand le commissaire entra, Mazza râlait encore ; elle fit quelques bonds par terre, se tordit plusieurs fois, tous ses membres se raidirent ensemble, elle poussa un cri déchirant.

Quand il approcha d’elle, elle était morte.

AGONIES .

PENSÉES SCEPTIQUES.

À MON AMI

ALFRED LE POITTEVIN

CES PAUVRES FEUILLES SONT DÉDIÉES
PAR L'AUTEUR.
BIZARRES COMME SES PENSÉES, INCORRECTES COMME L'ÂME,
ELLES SONT L'EXPRESSION
DE SON CŒUR ET DE SON CERVEAU.

Tu les a vues éclore, mon cher Alfred, les voilà réunies sur un tas de papier. Que le vent disperse les feuilles, que la mémoire les oublie, ce méchant cadeau te rappellera nos vieilles causeries de l'an passé.

Sans doute ton cœur se dilatera en te ressouvenant de ce suave parfum de jeunesse qui embaumait tant de pensées désespérantes, et si tu ne peux lire les caractères qu'aura tracés ma main tu verras couramment dans le cœur qui les a versés.

Maintenant je te les envoie comme un soupir, comme un signe de la main à un ami qu'on espère revoir.

Peut-être riras-tu plus tard, quand tu seras un homme marié, rangé et moral, en rejetant les yeux sur les pensées d'un pauvre enfant de seize ans qui t'aimait par-dessus toute chose et qui déjà avait l'âme tourmentée de tant de sottises.

20 avril 1838.
G^{ve} Flaubert.

Titre singulier, n'est-ce pas ? et à voir ainsi cet arrangement de lettres insignifiant et banal, jamais on ne se serait douté qu'il pût renfermer une pensée sérieuse.

Agonies ! eh bien, c'est quelque roman bien hideux et bien noir, je présume ;

vous vous trompez, c’est plus, c’est tout un immense résumé d’une vie morale bien hideuse et bien noire.

C’est quelque chose de vague, d’irrésolu, qui tient du cauchemar, du rire de dédain, des pleurs et d’une longue rêverie de poète. Poète ? puis-je donner ce nom à celui qui blasphème froidement avec un sarcasme cruel et ironique et qui, parlant de l’âme, se met à rire ? Non, c’est moins que de la poésie, c’est de la prose ; moins que de la prose, des cris ; mais il y en a de faux, d’aigus, de perçants, de sourds, toujours de vrais, rarement d’heureux. C’est une œuvre bizarre et indéfinissable comme ces masques grotesques qui vous font peur.

Il y aura bientôt un an que l’auteur en a écrit la première page, et depuis, ce pénible travail fut bien des fois rejeté, bien des fois repris. Il a écrit ces feuilles dans ses jours de doute, dans ses moments d’ennui, quelquefois dans des nuits fiévreuses, d’autres fois au milieu d’un bal, sous les lauriers d’un jardin ou sur les rochers de la mer.

Chaque fois qu’une mort s’opérait dans son âme, chaque fois qu’il tombait de quelque chose de haut, chaque fois qu’une illusion se défaisait et s’abattait comme un château de cartes, chaque fois enfin que quelque chose de pénible et d’agité se passait sous sa vie extérieure calme et tranquille, alors, dis-je, il jetait quelques cris et versait quelques larmes. Il a écrit sans prétention de style, sans désirs de gloire, comme on pleure sans apprêt, comme on souffre sans art.

Jamais il n’a fait ceci avec l’intention de le publier plus tard ; il a mis trop de vérité et trop de bonne foi dans sa croyance à rien, pour la dire aux hommes.

Il l’a fait pour le montrer à un, à deux tout au plus, qui lui serreront la main après l’avoir entendu et qui ne lui diront pas : c’est bien, mais qui diront : c’est vrai.

Enfin, si par hasard quelque main malheureuse venait à découvrir ces lignes, qu’elle se garde d’y toucher ! car elles brûlent et dessèchent la main qui les touche, usent les yeux qui les lisent, assassinent l’âme qui les comprend.

Non ! si quelqu’un vient à découvrir ceci, qu’il se garde de le lire ; ou bien, si son malheur l’y pousse, qu’il ne dise pas après : c’est l’œuvre d’un insensé, d’un fou, mais qu’il dise : il a souffert quoique son front fût calme, quoique le sourire fût sur ses lèvres et le bonheur dans ses yeux. Qu’il lui sache gré — c’est un de ses proches de lui avoir caché tout cela — de ne point s’être tué de désespoir avant d’écrire, et enfin d’avoir réuni dans quelques pages tout un abîme immense de scepticisme et de désespoir.

I

Je reprends donc ce travail commencé il y a deux ans, travail triste et long, symbole de la vie : la tristesse et la longueur.

Pourquoi l’ai-je interrompu si longtemps ? pourquoi ai-je tant de dégoût à le faire ? qu’en sais-je ?

II

Pourquoi donc tout m’ennuie-t-il sur cette terre ? pourquoi le jour, la nuit, la pluie, le beau temps, tout cela me semble-t-il toujours un crépuscule triste, où un soleil rouge se couche derrière un océan sans limites ?

Oh ! la pensée, autre océan sans limites ; c’est le déluge d’Ovide, une mer sans bornes, où la tempête est la vie de l’existence.

III

Souvent je me suis demandé pourquoi je vivais, ce que j’étais venu faire au monde, et je n’ai trouvé là dedans qu’un abîme derrière moi, un abîme devant ; à droite, à gauche, en haut, en bas, partout des ténèbres.

IV

La vie de l’homme est comme une malédiction partie de la poitrine d’un géant, et qui va se briser de rochers en rochers en mourant à chaque vibration qui retentit dans les airs.

V

On a souvent parlé de la Providence et de la bonté céleste ; je ne vois guère de raisons d’y croire. Le Dieu qui s’amuserait à tenter les hommes pour voir jusqu’où ils peuvent souffrir, ne serait-il pas aussi cruellement stupide qu’un enfant qui, sachant que le hanneton va mourir, lui arrache d’abord les ailes, puis les pattes, puis la tête ?

VI

La vanité, selon moi, est le fond de toutes les actions des hommes. Quand j’avais parlé, agi, fait n’importe quel acte de ma vie, et que j’analysais mes paroles ou mes actions, je trouvais toujours cette vieille folle nichée dans mon cœur ou dans mon esprit. Bien des hommes sont comme moi, peu ont la même franchise.

Cette dernière réflexion peut être vraie, la vanité me l’a fait écrire, la vanité de ne pas paraître vain me la ferait peut-être ôter.

La gloire même, après qui je cours, n’est qu’un mensonge.

Sotte espèce que la nôtre ! je suis comme un homme qui, trouvant une femme laide, en serait amoureux.

VII

Quelle chose grandement niaise et cruellement bouffonne que ce mot qu’on appelle Dieu !

VIII

Pour moi, le dernier mot du sublime dans l’art sera la pensée, c’est-à-dire la manifestation de la pensée, aussi rapide et spirituelle que la pensée.

Quel est l’homme qui n’a pas senti son esprit accablé de sensations et d’idées incohérentes, terrifiantes et brûlantes ? L'analyse ne saurait les décrire, mais un livre ainsi fait serait la nature. Car qu'est-ce que la poésie, si ce n'est la nature exquise, le cœur et la pensée réunis ?

Oh ! si j'étais poète, comme je ferais des choses qui seraient belles !

Je me sens dans le cœur une force intime que personne ne peut voir. Serai-je condamné toute ma vie à être comme un muet qui veut parler et écume de rage ?

Il y a peu de positions aussi atroces.

IX

Je m'ennuie, je voudrais être crevé, être ivre, ou être Dieu pour faire des farces.

Et m....

ANGOISSES.

I

À quoi bon faire ceci ? à rien. Car à quoi bon apprendre la vérité quand elle est triste ? à quoi bon venir pleurer au milieu des rires, gémir dans un banquet joyeux, et jeter le suaire des morts sur la robe de la fiancée

II

Oh ! oui, pourtant, laissez-moi vous dire combien mon âme a de blessures saignantes ; laissez-moi vous dire combien mes larmes ont creusé mes joues.

III

— Eh quoi ? tu ne crois à rien ?

— Non.

— Pas à la Gloire ?

— Regarde l'envie.

— Pas à la générosité ?

— Et l'avarice ?

— Pas à la liberté ?

— Tu ne t'aperçois donc pas du despotisme qui fait courber le cou du peuple ?

— Pas à l'amour ?

— Et la prostitution ?

— Pas à l'immortalité ?

— En moins d'un an les vers déchirent un cadavre, puis c'est la poussière, puis le néant ; après le néant… le néant, et c'est tout ce qu'il en reste.

IV

L’autre jour, on exhumait un cadavre, on transportait les morceaux d’un homme illustre dans un autre coin de la terre ; c’était une cérémonie comme une autre, aussi belle, aussi pompeuse, aussi fardée qu’un enterrement à l’exception près que dans un enterrement la viande est fraîche, dans la seconde elle est pourrie. Tout le monde attendait le fossoyeur, lorsque, enfin, au bout de dix minutes, il arriva en chantant. C’était un bien brave homme que cet homme, indifférent pour le présent, insoucieux pour l’avenir ; il avait un chapeau de cuir ciré, et une pipe à la bouche.

L’opération commença. Après quelques pelletées de terre, nous vîmes le cercueil ; Le bois en était de chêne et à demi consumé, car un seul coup le rompit maladroitement. Alors nous vîmes l’homme, l’homme dans toute son affreuse horreur. Pourtant une vapeur épaisse qui s’éleva aussitôt nous empêcha pendant quelque temps de bien distinguer : son ventre était rongé, sa poitrine et ses cuisses étaient d’une blancheur mate ; en s’approchant de plus près, il était facile de reconnaître que cette blancheur était une infinité de vers qui rongeaient avec avidité.

Ce spectacle nous fit mal, un jeune homme s’évanouit.

Le fossoyeur n’hésita pas ; il prit cette chair infecte entre ses bras et l’alla porter dans le char qui était à quelques pas plus loin. Comme il allait vite, la cuisse gauche tomba par terre ; il la releva avec force et la mit sur son dos, puis il vint recouvrir le trou. Alors il s’aperçut qu’il avait oublié quelque chose, c’était la tête. Il la tira par les cheveux. C’était quelque chose de hideux à voir que ces yeux ternes et à moitié fermés, ce visage gluant, froid, dont on voyait les pommettes et dont les mouches lui dévoraient les yeux.

Où était donc alors cet homme illustre ? où était sa gloire, ses vertus, son nom ?

L’homme illustre, c’était quelque chose d’infect, d’*indécis,* de hideux, quelque chose qui répandait une odeur fétide, quelque chose dont la vue faisait mal.

Sa gloire ? vous voyez, on le traite comme un chien de basse qualité, car tous ces hommes étaient venus là par curiosité — oui, par curiosité — poussés par ce sentiment qui fait rire l’homme à la vue des tortures de l’homme, poussés par ce sentiment qui excite les femmes à montrer leurs belles têtes blondes aux fenêtres, un jour d’exécution. C’est ce même sentiment naturel qui porte l’homme à se passionner pour ce qu’il y a de hideux et d’amèrement grotesque.

Quant à ses vertus ? on ne s’en souvenait plus, car il avait laissé des dettes après sa mort, et ses héritiers avaient été obligés de payer pour lui.

Son nom ? il était éteint, car il n’avait point laissé d’enfants, mais beaucoup de neveux qui soupiraient depuis longtemps après sa mort.

Dire qu'il y a un an, cet homme-là était riche, heureux, puissant, qu'on l'appelait monseigneur, qu'il habitait dans un palais, et que maintenant il n'est rien, qu'on l'appelle un cadavre et qu'il pourrit dans un cercueil ! ah ! l'horrible idée ! Et dire que nous serons comme cela, nous autres qui vivons maintenant, qui respirons la brise du soir, qui sentons le parfum des fleurs ! ah ! c'est à en devenir fou. Dire qu'après ce moment il n'y a rien ! rien ! et toujours le néant ! toujours ! Voilà encore qui passe l'esprit de l'homme. Oh ! vraiment, est-ce qu'après la vie tout est fini et fini pour l'éternité ? dites, est-ce qu'il ne subsiste rien ?

Imbécile regarde une tête de mort !

V

Mais l'âme ?

Ah ! oui, l'âme ! Si tu avais vu l'autre jour le fossoyeur avec un chapeau de cuir ciré sur le coin de l'oreille, avec son brûle-gueule bien culotté ; si tu avais vu comment il a ramassé cette cuisse en pourriture, et comme tout cela ne l'empêchait pas de siffler en ricanant : jeunes filles, voulez-vous danser ? tu aurais ri de pitié, et tu aurais dit : L'âme, c'est peut-être cette exhalaison fétide qui sort d'un cadavre.

Il ne faut pas être philosophe pour deviner cela.

VI

Pourtant il est si triste de penser qu'après la mort tout s'en va ! Oh ! non ! vite un prêtre ! un prêtre qui me dise, qui me prouve, qui me persuade que l'âme existe dans le corps de l'homme.

Un prêtre ! mais lequel ira-t-on chercher ? celui-là dîne chez l'archevêque ; un autre fait le catéchisme ; un troisième n'a pas le temps.

Eh quoi donc ? ils me laisseront mourir ! moi qui me tords les bras de désespoir, qui appelle la haine ou l'amour, Dieu ou Satan ? Ah ! Satan va venir, je le sens.

Au secours ! Hélas ! personne ne me répond.

Cherchons encore.

J'ai cherché, et je n'ai pas trouvé ; j'ai frappé à la porte, personne ne m'a ouvert et on m'y a fait languir de froid et de misère, si bien que j'ai failli en mourir.

En passant dans une rue sombre, tortueuse et étroite, j'ai entendu des paroles mielleuses et lascives, j'ai entendu des mots de volupté et j'ai vu un prêtre et une prostituée qui blasphémaient Dieu et qui dansaient des danses impudiques ; j'ai détourné la vue et j'ai pleuré. Mon pied heurte quelque chose, c'était un christ en bronze, un christ dans la boue !

VII

Il appartenait probablement au prêtre, qui l’avait jeté avant d’entrer, comme un masque de théâtre ou un habit d’arlequin.

Dites-moi maintenant que la vie n’est pas une ignoble farce, puisque le prêtre jette son Dieu pour entrer chez la fille de joie ! Bravo ! Satan rit, vous voyez bien ; bravo ! il triomphe. Allons j’ai raison ; la vertu c’est le masque, le vice c’est la vérité. Voilà pourquoi peu de gens la disent, c’est qu’elle est trop hideuse à dire. Bravo ! la maison de l’honnête homme c’est le masque, le lupanar c’est la vérité, la couche nuptiale c’est le masque, l’adultère qui s’y consomme c’est la vérité ; la vie c’est le masque, la mort c’est la vérité ; la religieuse c’est le masque, la fille de joie c’est la vérité ; le bien c’est faux, la mort c’est vrai.

VIII

Ah ! criez bien fort, faiseurs de vertu aux gants jaunes ; criez bien fort, vous qui parlez de morale et entretenez des danseuses ; criez fort, vous qui faites plus pour votre chien que pour votre laquais ; criez fort, vous qui condamnez à mort l’homme qui tue par besoin, vous qui tuez par mépris ; criez fort, juges dont la robe est rouge de sang ; criez fort, vous qui montez chaque jour à votre tribunal sur les têtes que vous y avez abattues ; criez fort, ministres aux mains crochues, vous qui vous vantez des places accordées à l’époux et payées par sa femme par sa pauvre femme qui vous demande pardon, grâce, pitié, merci, qui embrassait vos genoux, qui se cramponnait au drap bleu de votre bureau aux pieds d’or, qui se cachait les yeux dans les draps rouges de vos fenêtres, vous qui avez brisé son honneur, vous dont la noire bouche a dit : cet homme sera directeur des postes, et qui en même temps avez craché sur le visage de sa femme !

IX

Enfin on m’indiqua un prêtre.

J’allai chez lui, je l’attendis quelques instants et je m’assis dans sa cuisine devant un grand feu ; sur ce feu pétillait dans une large poêle une énorme quantité de pommes de terre.

Mon homme arriva bientôt ; c’était un vieillard à cheveux blancs, au maintien plein de douceur et de bonté. “Mon père, lui dis-je en l’abordant, je désirerais avoir un moment d’entretien avec vous.”

Il m’introduisit dans une salle voisine ; mais à peine avais-je commencé, qu’entendant du bruit dans la cuisine : “Rose, s’écria-t-il, prenez donc garde aux pommes de terre.”

Et en me détournant, je vis, grâce à la clarté de la chandelle, que l’amateur de pommes de terre avait le nez de travers et tout bourgeonné.

Je partis d’un éclat de rire, et la porte se referma aussitôt sur mes pas.

Dites maintenant, à qui la faute ? Je suis venu là pour m’éclairer dans mes doutes, eh bien, l’homme qui devait m’instruire, je l’ai trouvé ridicule. Est-ce ma faute, à moi, si cet homme a le nez crochu et couvert de boutons ? est-ce ma faute si sa voix avide m’a semblé d’un timbre glouton et bestial ? Non certes, car j’étais entré là avec des sentiments pieux.

Ce n’est pourtant point non plus la faute de ce pauvre homme si son nez est mal fait et s’il aime les pommes ; du tout, la faute est à celui qui fait les nez crochus et les pommes de terre.

X

Du nord au sud, de l’est à l’ouest, partout où vous irez, vous ne pouvez faire un pas sans que la tyrannie, l’injustice, l’avarice, la cupidité ne vous repoussent avec égoïsme ; partout, vous dis-je, vous trouverez des hommes qui vous diront : Retire-toi de devant mon soleil ; retire-toi, tu marches sur le sable que j’ai étalé sur la terre ; retire-toi, tu marches sur mon bien ; retire-toi, tu aspires l’air qui m’appartient. Oh ! oui, l’homme est un voyageur qui a soif ; il demande de l’eau pour boire, on la lui refuse, et il meurt.

XI

Oui, la tyrannie pèse sur les peuples et je sens qu’il est beau de les en affranchir ; je sens mon cœur se soulever d’aise au mot liberté comme celui d’un enfant bat de terreur au mot fantôme, et ni l’un ni l’autre ne sont vrais. Encore une illusion détruite, encore une fleur fanée.

XII

Bien des gens sans doute essaieront de la conquérir, cette belle liberté, fille de leurs rêves, idole des peuples ; beaucoup tenteront, et ils succomberont sous le poids de leur fardeau.

XIII

Jadis il y avait un voyageur qui marchait dans les grands déserts d’Afrique ; il osa s’avancer par un chemin qui abrégeait sa route de quinze milles, mais qui était dangereux, rempli de serpents, de bêtes féroces et de rochers difficiles à franchir.

Et il se faisait tard, il avait faim, il était fatigué, malade, et il pressait le pas pour arriver plus tôt ; mais à chaque pas il rencontrait des obstacles ; pourtant il était courageux et marchait la tête haute.

Et au milieu de son chemin, voilà que se présente tout à coup à ses yeux une énorme pierre. Or c’était dans un sentier escarpé, couvert de ronces et d’épines.

Il fallait donc ou rouler cette pierre jusqu’au haut de la montagne, ou tâcher d’escalader cette roche, ou bien encore attendre jusqu’au matin pour voir s’il n’arriverait pas d’autres voyageurs qui voulussent l’aider.

Mais il avait tellement faim, la soif le tourmentait si cruellement qu’il résolut de faire tous ses efforts pour faire en sorte d’arriver à la hutte la plus voisine, qui était encore à quatre milles de là ; il se mit donc à s'aider des pieds et des mains pour monter en haut de la roche.

Il suait à grosses gouttes, ses bras se contractaient avec vigueur et ses mains saisissaient convulsivement chaque brin d'herbe qui s'offrait à lui ; mais l'herbe manquait et il retombait découragé. Plusieurs fois il renouvela ses efforts, ce fut en vain.

Et toujours il retombait plus faible, plus harassé, plus désespéré ; il maudissait Dieu et blasphémait ; enfin il tenta une dernière fois. Cette fois il réunit toutes les forces dont il était capable ; après une prière à Dieu, il monta.

Oh ! quelle était humble, sublime, tendre, cette courte prière ! N'allez pas croire qu'il récita quelque chose qu'une nourrice lui ait apprise dans son enfance ; du tout, ses paroles, c'était des larmes, et ses signes de croix ses soupirs. Il monta donc, bien résolu à se laisser mourir de faim s'il ne réussissait pas.

Le voilà en route, il monte, il avance, il lui semble qu'une main protectrice l'attire vers le sommet, il lui semble voir sourire la face de quelque ange qui l'appelle à lui, puis tout à coup tout change ; c'est comme une vision effroyable qui s'empare de ses sens, il entend le sifflement d'un serpent qui glisse sur la pierre et qui va l'atteindre, ses genoux plient sous lui, ses ongles qui s'accrochaient aux sinuosités de la roche se retournèrent en dehors… Il tomba à la renverse. Que faire maintenant ?

Il a faim, il a froid, il a soif, le vent siffle dans l'immense désert rouge, et la lune s'obscurcit dans les nuages.

Il se mit à pleurer et à avoir peur comme un enfant ; il pleura sur ses parents qui mourront de douleur, et il eut peur des bêtes féroces.

“Car, se disait-il, il fait nuit, je suis malade, les tigres vont venir me déchirer.”

Il attendit longtemps quelqu'un qui voulût le secourir, mais les tigres vinrent, le déchirèrent et burent son sang.

Eh bien, je vous le dis, il en est de même de vous autres qui voulez conquérir la liberté ; découragés de vos efforts, vous attendrez quelqu'un pour vous aider.

Mais quelqu'un ne viendra pas… oh ! non.

Et les tigres viendront, vous déchireront et boiront votre sang comme celui du pauvre voyageur.

XIV

Oh ! oui, la misère et le malheur règnent sur l'homme !

Oh ! la misère ! la misère ! vous ne l'avez peut-être jamais ressentie, vous qui parlez sur les vices des pauvres. C'est quelque chose qui vous prend un homme, vous l'amaigrit, vous l'égorge, l'étrangle, le dissèque et puis après elle jette ses os à la voirie ; quelque chose de hideux, de jaune, de fétide, qui se cache dans un taudis, dans un bouge, sous l’habit d’un poète, sous les haillons du mendiant. La misère ? c’est l’homme aux longues dents blanches, qui vient vous dire avec sa voix sépulcrale, le soir, dans l’hiver, au coin d’une rue : “Monsieur, du pain” ! et qui vous montre un pistolet ; la misère ? c’est l’espion qui se glisse derrière votre paravent, écoute vos paroles et va dire au ministre : “Ici, il y a une conspiration ; là, on fait de la poudre”. La misère ? c’est la femme qui siffle sur les boulevards entre les arbres ; vous vous approchez d’elle, et cette femme a un vieux manteau usé ; elle ouvre son manteau, elle a une robe blanche, mais cette robe blanche a des trous ; elle ouvre sa robe et vous voyez sa poitrine, mais sa poitrine est amaigrie, et dans cette poitrine il y a la faim. Ah ! la faim ! la faim ! oui, partout la faim, jusque dans son manteau dont elle a vendu les agrafes d’argent, jusque dans sa robe dont elle a vendu la garniture de dentelles, jusque dans les mots dits avec souffrance : “viens ! viens” ! Oui, la faim jusque dans ses seins où elle a vendu des baisers !

Ah ! la faim ! la faim ! ce mot-là, ou plutôt cette chose-là a fait les révolutions ; elle en fera bien d’autres !

XV

Le malheur, lui, avec sa figure aux yeux caves, va plus loin ; il pose sa griffe de fer jusque sur la tête du roi, et pour percer son crâne brise sa couronne. Le malheur ? il assomme un ministre, il siège au chevet d’un grand, il va chez l’enfant, le brûle, le dévore, blanchit ses cheveux, creuse ses joues et le tue ; il se tord, il rampe comme un serpent, et il tord les autres et les fait ramper aussi. Oh ! oui, le malheur est impitoyable, insatiable ; sa soif est continuelle, c’est comme le tonneau des Danaïdes qui était sans fond ; lui, son avidité est sans fin. Aucun homme ne peut se vanter d’avoir échappé à ses coups, il s’attache aux jeunes, il les embrasse, les caresse, mais ses caresses sont comme celles du lion, elles laissent des marques saignantes ; il vient tout à coup au milieu de la fête, des rires, de la joie et du vin.

Il aime surtout à frapper les têtes couronnées. Jadis il y avait dans une salle basse du Louvre un homme, non, je me trompe, un fou, et ce fou montrait sa figure livide à travers les barreaux de ses fenêtres dont les vitres étaient brisées et par lesquelles entraient les oiseaux de nuit, il étaient couvert de haillons dorés. De l’or sur des haillons ! songez à cela et vous rirez. Ses mains se crispaient avec rage, sa bouche écumait, ses pieds tout nus frappaient les dalles humides. Oh ! c’est que, voyez-vous, lui, lui l’homme aux haillons dorés, il entendait au-dessus de sa tête le bruit du bal, le retentissement des verres, le bourdonnement de l’orgue. Et il mourut ensuite, le pauvre fou ; on l’enterra sans honneurs, sans discours, sans larmes, sans pompes, sans fanfares ; rien de tout cela. Et c’était le roi Charles VI.

Plus tard il y en eut un autre qui éprouva encore un sort plus affreux et plus cruel. Qui eût dit, à ses beaux jours de jeunesse, qui eût dit que cette belle tête de jeune homme tomberait avant l'âge, et par la main du bourreau ? Un jour il y avait dans une salle du Temple une famille qui se désolait et qui pleurait à chaudes larmes, parce qu'un de ses membres allait périr ; et c'était un père de famille qui embrassait ses enfants et sa femme, et lorsqu'ils eurent bien pleuré, après que le cachot eut retenti des cris de leur désespoir, la porte s'ouvrit, un homme entra ; c'était le geôlier. Après le geôlier, ce fut le bourreau, qui d'un coup de guillotine décapita toute la vieille monarchie ; et le peuple hurlait de joie autour de la sanglante estrade et vengeait sur cette tête tous ces supplices passés. Cet homme, c'était Louis XVI.

Non loin de là, un autre roi tomba encore ; mais, comme celle d'un colosse, sa chute fit trembler la terre. Pauvre grand homme, tué à coup d'épingles comme un lion par les mouches ! Ah ! que cette haute figure était belle, quoique posée sur ses genoux ! Ah ! que ce géant était grand à son lit de mort ! qu'il était grand sur son trône ! qu'il est grand chez le peuple !

Et qu'est-ce que tout cela, un lit de mort, une tombe, un trône, un peuple ? Quelque chose qui fait rire Satan. Rien ! Rien ! toujours le néant ! Et pourtant c'était Napoléon, le plus malheureux des rois, le plus grand des hommes. Eh bien oui, c'est cela, que l'habit aille à la taille de chacun : la misère aux peuples, le malheur aux rois.

XVI

Ah ! le malheur ! le malheur ! voilà un mot qui règne sur l'homme, comme la fatalité sur les siècles et les révolutions sur la civilisation.

XVII

Et qu'est-ce que c'est qu'une révolution ? un souffle d'air qui ride l'océan, s'en va et laisse la mer agitée.

XVIII

Et qu'est-ce que c'est qu'un siècle ? une minute dans la nuit.

XIX

Et qu'est-ce que le malheur ? la vie.

XX

Qu'est-ce qu'un mot ? rien ; c'est comme la réalité, une durée.

XXI

Qu'est-ce que l'homme ? ah ! qu'est-ce que l'homme ? qu'en sais-je, moi ? Allez demander à un fantôme ce qu'il est ; il vous répondra, s'il vous répond : je suis l'ombre d'un tel. Eh bien, l'homme c'est l'image du Dieu. Duquel ? c'est de celui qui gouverne. Est-il fils du Bien, du Mal ou du Néant ? choisissez des trois, c'est une trinité.

XXII

Et dans le temps que j’étais jeune et pur, que je croyais à Dieu, à l’amour, au bonheur, à l’avenir, à la patrie ; dans le temps que mon cœur bondissait au mot : liberté ! alors — oh ! que Dieu soit maudit par ses créatures ! — alors Satan m’apparut et me dit : viens, viens à moi ; tu as de l’ambition au cœur et de la poésie dans l’âme, viens, je te montrerai mon monde, mon royaume à moi.

Et il m’emmena avec lui et je planais dans les airs comme l’aigle qui se berce dans les nuages.

Et voilà que nous arrivâmes en Europe.

Là, il me montra des savants, des hommes de lettres, des femmes, des fats, des bourreaux, des rois, des prêtres, des peuples et des sages ; ceux-là étaient les plus fous.

Et je vis un frère qui tuait son frère, une mère qui prostituait sa fille, des écrivains qui trompaient le peuple, des prêtres qui trahissaient les fidèles, la peste qui mange les nations, et la guerre qui moissonne les hommes ; là, c’était un intrigant qui rampait dans la boue, arrivait jusqu’aux pieds des grands, leur mordait le talon ; ils tombaient, et alors il tressaillait de joie de la chute qu’avait faite cette tête en tombant dans la boue.

Là, un roi savourait ses sales débauches dans la couche d’infamie où de père en fils ils reçoivent des leçons d’adultère.

IVRE ET MORT .

I

C’était dans quelque bon gros bourg de Touraine ou de Champagne, le long de ces fleuves qui arrosent tant de vignobles, par une pluvieuse et froide soirée, alors que toutes les lumières s’étaient éteintes, et le cabaret du *Grand-Vainqueur* resplendissait seul de clarté au milieu du silence et du brouillard. Ceux qui passaient dans la route voyaient, à travers les vitres et les rideaux rouges, se dessiner des formes vagues et chancelantes. Parfois, si l’on ouvrait les portes et que la petite sonnette fit entendre ses cris répétés, on entendait des chansons folles et endormies, des cris, des bravos, des paroles bruyantes comme l’éclat des verres, et une exhalaison de chaleur, de fumée et d’eau-de-vie s’élançait au dehors en épaisses rafales.

Dites-moi un plus beau lieu d’asile qu’un tel lieu, en hiver contre le froid, en été contre le chaud, les uns pour s’y réchauffer, les autres pour s’y rafraîchir, et presque tous finissant par s’échauffer en se rafraîchissant.

Non un élégant café, avec ses clartés d’or, ses lustres, ses glaces, ses fleurs, ce rendez-vous du stupide banquier, du marchand d’asphalte, du bon ton et des pantalons à guêtres, et où il n’est permis que de s’y griser pour 400 francs. Loin de moi ce lieu musqué et décent, où la mère peut conduire sa fille et où le badaud de province s’extasie sur les bonnes manières de Paris, en se faisant voler sa montre. Fuyez ce bureau de cristal, ces lambris écrasés de dorures, cette femme de 50 ans, à la mise simple, à la tenue modeste et qui semble la statue de l’ennui, occupée dans ses moments de loisir à casser du sucre ; fuyez le vacillement flamboyant du gaz, ces grands journaux gisants ou repliés sur des tables de marbre, et ces hommes gonflés de suffisance et bouffis de rien, avec leur or se dessinant en relief dans les poches d’un gilet à fleurs ; fuyez enfin ces cris de l’opulence ennuyeuse et tout ce tapage d’argent.

Oh ! que j’aime bien mieux un simple cabaret comme celui-ci, avec sa joie libre, ses allures franches, ses têtes dormeuses et rouges s’appuyant, avec un gros rire sur les lèvres, contre la simple peinture couleur lie de vin qui décore les lambris ! que j’aime son atmosphère chaude, grise, odorante, son plafond noirci de tabac, ses quinquets modestes qui filent, ses banquettes en velours rouge usées, où pendant bien des ans tant de passions se sont assouvies, tant d’ardents désirs se sont apaisés ; ses glaces tachées de mouches et fêlées, ses tables de marbre noir aux pieds vermoulus, ses tabourets d’une paille grise, et surtout cela un bourdonnement d’ivresse, une clameur épaisse et gaie, des poitrines, nues et des mains nerveuses étreignant des verres, des lèvres épaisses et rougies de vin baisant délicatement le tuyau d’une pipe aimée.

Quelle plus belle chose ! Est-il un plus beau point de vue sous lequel on puisse envisager la nature humaine, un qui soit plus chrétien et plus doux, plus digne d’un philanthrope d’Amérique ou d’un banquier de Londres ami des hommes ? En effet, depuis l’empereur jusqu’au mendiant, depuis la princesse et la grande dame jusqu’à la fille des rues, est-il une créature ayant un palais et une âme faite à l’image de Dieu qui ne connaisse la douceur d’un petit verre ? Or le cabaret du *Grand-Vainqueur* était le plus aimable cabaret qu’on puisse aimer.

Chacun le retrouvait toujours dans ses jours de peines ou de bonheur, dans l’adversité ou la Fortune, offrant à tous ses présents qui, comme ceux de la nature, font évanouir tous les soucis et engourdissent toutes les pénibles réalités.

On y voyait en permanence la maîtresse du lieu, invariablement posée sur un banc rembourré de velours d’Utrecht rouge avec des clous d’or, entre la statue bronzée de Napoléon derrière elle, et devant, sur le comptoir, une longue file de pots d’étain échelonnés par rang de taille.

C’était une lemme dont on ne datait plus l’âge qu’aux replis de la peau de son cou, qui semblait celle d’un canard incuit, et aux poils gris et rudes qui se hérissaient sur son triple menton ;un bonnet blanc, mais dont les tuyaux élevés et empesés formaient un soleil, encadrait une figure dormeuse et rouge, aux lourdes paupières, au nez aplati et relevé, à la lèvre noircie jusqu’aux gencives d’un sillon de tabac.

Sa taille, tapissée de paquets de graisse, était enfermée dans une robe bleue avec des taches blanches, et dont on voyait le lacet serpenter le long du dos.

Tout le jour elle était accoudée sur le vieux comptoir, dont les pieds jadis dorés étaient couverts de taches, d’écorchures grises et d’empreintes de doigts épais, raccommodant des chaussettes ou un vieux pantalon bleu avec du fil blanc.

Ainsi on la trouvait toujours bonne et douce, calme au milieu du bruit, et parant seulement sans murmurer ses carafons menacés, d’un revers de main ou d’un geste conservateur.

Le petit poêle en tôle, placé au milieu de l’appartement, était rouge et bourdonnait en faisant trembler son tuyau ; autour de lui se trouvaient rangés des mariniers, avec leurs chemises rouges, leurs longues barbes droites et leurs joues enflammées ; des laboureurs avec leurs cheveux longs, leur dos voûté, le front calme et réfléchi, leurs gamaches blanches qui leur montent jusqu’aux genoux et leur gilet rouge rayé ; puis encore de joyeux garçons de la campagne, aux grands yeux clairs, avec leurs cheveux ras et droits, une blouse bleue, un col raide et empesé jusqu'aux oreilles et serré par une cravate de couleur, roulée en cordon.

Au milieu d'eux se trouvaient deux hommes qu'on ne pouvait ranger dans aucune de ces classes ; tout le cercle semblait les respecter et les regarder avec admiration, comme des gloires illustres et avérées.

Taciturnes et sombres, ils étaient là comme deux ennemis, jaloux réciproquement de leurs forces et de leurs renommées, ils échangeaient des regards de pitié et des sourires d'un insultant dédain. Le plus grand des deux était sec et mince, un nez épais et allongé, une barbe et des cheveux noirs, quelque chose dans toute sa personne de nerveux et de rusé ; l'autre au contraire était petit, carré, aux membres forts et trapus, la barbe rouge, de grands yeux à fleur de tête, de la force et de la stupidité.

C'étaient les deux plus intrépides buveurs de vingt lieues à la ronde, capables chacun de rester des nuits au combat et d'en sortir victorieux, le premier toujours sur la défensive, usant d'une tactique sage et modérée, le second plein d'impétuosité et de colère, faisant ruisseler sur son palais des bouteilles entières qui s'engloutissaient dans cet estomac gigantesque.

Fiers tous deux de leur gloire, ils passaient dans le village aussi impassibles et aussi contents d'eux-mêmes qu'un Dieu au milieu de ses adorateurs ; jamais, en effet, aucune défaite n'avait souillé leurs gloires, et quand leurs compagnons d`orgie étaient étendus sur le pavé de la salle, ils sortaient en haussant les épaules de pitié pour cette pauvre nature humaine, qui s'enivre si facilement d'une bouteille de vin, d'un peu de gloire, d'un peu de bonheur, toutes choses lus ou moins vides et qui s'épuisent.

En effet, leur gloire en valait bien une autre. Gloire du génie, gloire des richesses, gloire de roi, gloire d'ivrogne, chacune a ses délices, ses haines, ses déceptions. Celle-ci faisait envie à toute la jeunesse du pays, et au jeune maitre du château qui faisait venir de Paris du vin et des femmes et des amis, qui usait de tout cela, s'en lassait vite, et qu'une bouteille de champagne faisait tomber sur son sofa de damas, que l'opulence s'efforçait de rendre crapuleux et qui n'était que bêtement ridicule.

C'était pour eux une mission dont ils s'acquittaient largement. Comme tous les grands hommes appelés sur cette terre qui les méconnait, eux aussi étaient méconnus des classes supérieures qui ne comprennent seulement, il est vrai, que les passions qui avilissent, mais non celles qui dégradent.

Une femme de bon ton eût passé de l'autre côté du trottoir, s'ils se fussent hasardés de venir apporter dans Paris leur force de géant ; elle eût rougi, se fût écriée : horreur !... et peut-être elle allait faire la cour à son amie la baronne, dont le mari d'abord avait été commis, puis chef de bureau, puis banquier, baron, marquis et pair de France, qui n'avait eu d'autre mérite que d'avoir peu de conscience, un bon tailleur, une belle chaîne à sa montre, et une femme habile dont il s’était servi comme les mendiants de leurs plaies, en vivant d’un mépris qui était pour lui un revenu, une ferme, un loyer.

L’homme d’État, tiré pompeusement par son attelage de chevaux blancs et s’étalant complaisamment sur des coussins de velours bleu, au milieu de ses livrées, eût éclaboussé sans scrupule et renversé avec la flèche de son carrosse ces deux rustres en chemises rouges, vacillant dans la rue comme un navire sur la mer ; il se serait regardé dans une glace spacieuse, aurait dit bien des fois *moi*, se serait découvert beau et eût trouvé du génie jusque dans le moindre pli de sa robe de chambre bigarrée et retombant majestueusement sur son parquet ciré. Et cet homme ne dort pas, ne mange pas, ne boit pas ; il n’a jamais eu d’autre ciel que celui de son lit, d’autres hommes que ceux qui le servent et sur qui il marche ; il est ambitieux comme Alexandre et rampant comme un serpent sans vigueur ; ce n’est qu’un laquais du ministre qui lui paie ses pages par des places, des croix, des honneurs, des dîners auxquels il ne mange pas tant il est content d’y être. Et un jour viendra, où le ministre ou le roi qu’il sert viendront à s’éteindre, comme une chandelle qui a brûlé quelque temps, qui meurt et qu’on remplace par une autre ; et tout cela s’évanouira ; l’ivresse de la gloire et de l’ambition sera partie, il se réveillera de ce songe, et quel réveil !

Le philanthrope, cet homme qui aime les autres comme un naturaliste aime un musée d’animaux, qui porte un chapeau bas, des habits noirs, des souliers larges, eût sans doute pleuré de douleur en voyant ces deux hommes entrant joyeusement au cabaret, lui qui est membre de la Société de tempérance et qui a des maux d’estomac ; et ce même homme, après avoir pendant quarante ans versé tout son argent aux pauvres, avoir fait mettre son nom dans les journaux, avoir pris des actions aux chemins de fer, correspondu avec toutes les académies savantes dont il se fait beaucoup d’honneur d’être membre, arrive un jour à voir que tout l’a trompé, que les actions du chemin de fer ont baissé, que les journaux ont menti, que les académies sont sottes, que les hommes sont faux et que lui-même est un niais ; il se réveille de ce songe, et quel réveil !

Alors il se nourrit de réflexions et de pensées amères, il décoche des sarcasmes sur la nature humaine et sur la nature de Dieu, sur les saisons, sur le froid, sur le chaud ; mais tout cela ne lui donne ni un manteau, ni une paire de bottes... ni son bonheur qu’il a perdu.

Et tous vous diront qu’ils sont supérieurs ; ils diront qu’il vaut mieux vendre sa conscience et son corps pour servir aux intrigues, aux crimes, pour qu’on vous foule la tête comme un marchepied, que cela enfin est plus noble que de s’endormir ivre de vin sur le plancher d’un cabaret, un lieu, disent-ils, où le premier entré est acheté. Comme si le monde aussi n’était pas qu’un lieu vénal, où tout se vend, où ceux qui ont, de l’or entrent et puisent à flots : amours, voluptés, richesses, honneurs, empires, gloires, triomphes.

Sans doute la fille de joie, parée tout le jour sur le seuil de sa porte, comme un morceau de viande à l’étal du boucher ; sans doute le ministre maigre de soucis, ce chien de cour dansant, gambadant et se pliant pour amuser son maître, le banquier couché sur des tas d’or comme Job sur son fumier de corruption, le philanthrope froid comme la pierre d’un hôpital, le poète si creux d’idées, si rempli de vanité et d’une folie orgueilleuse qu’on appelle le génie ; sans doute la vénalité, la richesse, la prostitution, la débauche, tout ce qu’on appelle le monde enfin, vous dira qu’il est noble ; tous vous diront qu’ils ont une âme, une âme pure, âme qui glisse sur les parquets, qui filtre sur les lambris dorés des palais, qui nage dans l’atmosphère des grandes villes, âme sur laquelle on marche, âme qu’on foule aux pieds, qu’on vend aux boutiques, âme à tant pour l’acheteur, âme de femme et de poète qui se vend pour la vanité, âme de roi pour la tyrannie, âme de ministre pour l’ambition, âme de pauvre pour l’or — l’or est noble, sa noblesse est vieille comme le monde ; — sans doute il faut mieux détruire des populations entières que les caves d’un cabaret, il faut mieux s’enivrer de sang que de vin et arriver enfin soûls de la vie que soûls d’une bouteille.

Eh bien, non !

Honneur à la passion la plus douce, la plus noble, la plus vertueuse, la plus philosophique de toutes les passions, passion des sages et des Dieux, car ceux d’Homère s’enivrent comme des laquais, et l’Olympe va danser à la barrière, le dimanche, et se met en goguette une fois la semaine. Celle-là, au moins, est sans déception et sans lendemain, passion qu’on peut toujours satisfaire.

Vraiment, est-ce que la plus belle classification psychologique vaudra pour vous les rangs symétriques d’une cave bien montée ? est — il une passion, un caprice qui dure aussi longtemps qu’une gorgée de bon vin ?

Je demande aux gens qui ont vécu si jamais le souvenir de quelque amour de jeunesse a valu pour eux la trace humide d’une liqueur sur le palais ; votre maîtresse ou votre Femme vieillit ; pour peu que vous soyez vertueux, vous n’en changez pas, vous la gardez, n’est-ce pas ? chaque jour elle s’épuise, vous n’avez plus que la lie de vos anciennes délices. Mais le vin, au contraire, s’améliore chaque jour ; c’est une saveur de plus, une volupté à une volupté, un anneau de plus à ce chaînon de bonheur, de tendres extases, de savoureuses sensations.

O bouteille silencieuse, si j’avais autant de génie que d’amour, je voudrais te faire un poème ou te bâtir une statue !

Mais hélas ! douce ivresse si méprisée et si commune, tu es comme la vertu, tu trouves ta satisfaction en toi-même.

Cependant, on t’élève des autels, où tes adorateurs viennent te puiser au fond des verres, comme la vérité au fond du puits ; et malheur au joyeux philosophe qui la fait sortir dans la rue ! La Foule des enfants crie après l’homme soûl.

La Foule des hommes s’acharne après la vérité, qu’ils mettent en pièces.

II

Eh bien, un jour que ces deux hommes se trouvèrent en présence, poussés par la vanité et la gloire, ils se portèrent le plus sanglant et le plus terrible défi que jamais paladin aux jours de tournoi eût jeté à son adversaire, mais un duel à mort, à outrance, une bataille à deux en champ clos, à armes égales, où le vaincu devait rester sur place pour proclamer le triomphe de son vainqueur ; c’était un défi inspiré par la rage, la lutte serait acharnée, longue, pleine de tumulte, de cris, sans trêve, sans repos ; on devait plutôt mourir sur place, et l’honneur et le plaisir de la victoire serait tout, car le triomphe à lui seul devrait couvrir d’honneur celui qui l’aurait remporté et l’illustrer d’une gloire immortelle.

Car il s’agissait de qui des deux boirait le plus !

III

C’était chez Hugues.

Dans une chambre basse au rez-de-chaussée, ouverte sur une cour plantée d’arbres ; au Fond, une haute cheminée avec des chenets de fer rouillés et une grande plaque de fonte, où les araignées tendaient leurs toiles agitées de temps en temps par le vent qui s’engouffrait sur elles et les déchirait en lambeaux ; une solive noircie et couverte de clous qui portaient un fusil, quelques bâtons et un pistolet ; puis, sur les murailles blanchies avec la chaux, se dressait un buffet de bois blanc, portant dans ses rangées des piles de vaisselle de couleur, c’était là l’appartement. En outre, un châssis carré de vitres vertes et épaisses, qui se glissait sur une vis en bois, jetait sur tout cela une teinte verdâtre de crépuscule et de mélancolie.

A côté de cette fenêtre à moitié baissée, se trouvait une petite table noire avec deux chaises de paille, où sir Hugues venait de déposer deux verres et une quantité de bouteilles de toutes les dimensions ; derrière, dans un coin, s’étendait encore une foule de bouts de bouteilles, avec leurs têtes blanches de liège.

Il les débouchait quand Rymbault arriva ; il était temps, la nuit allait venir, et cela durerait jusqu’au matin.

Les voilà donc réunis, ils s'asseyent tous deux en silence et sombres, ils se mettent à boire, à boire de longues heures.

De temps à autre, on voyait sortir de dessous leurs joues des bouffées grises, qu'ils aspiraient à pleine poitrine de leurs longues pipes en terre, elles partaient en s'élargissant, se repliant mollement sur elles — mêmes, et montaient vers le plafond en nuages vaporeux.

On entendait aussi le bruit de la bouteille froissant le verre en y faisant tomber son vin, et celui des verres frappant sur leurs dents déjà crispées par l'ivresse. Et au dehors une nuit d'été calme et silencieuse ; à l'horizon, derrière la colline couverte de taillis, s'élevait de terre comme un reflet de lumière qui illuminait la campagne et venait jeter ses rayons blafards et azurés à travers les grosses vitres vertes des fenêtres.

On n'entendait plus que ce murmure confus des nuits qui s'élève des champs, comme si la nature dormait et qu'elle laissât échapper des soupirs dans ses rêves : un cri lointain qui court, un pas éloigné et furtif, la haie d'épines qui tremble, une voix confuse qui appelle, le battement d'ailes des oiseaux sous la verdure, les aboiements répétés d'un chien pleurant au clair de lune, et puis les vaches dormant pesamment au pied des arbres sur l'herbe de la cour ou se retournant sur la litière de leurs étables.

Il y avait aussi comme un vent plein de fraîcheur qui passait sur les feuilles à travers la haie entre les pommiers, et qui apportait dans ses replis invisibles comme un parfum de foin coupé et de fleurs des bois.

Cependant l'orgueil sinistre des deux buveurs s'était abattu et avait fait place à une gaieté douce et paisible ; peu à peu leur front s'était déridé, leurs bouches s'étaient pliées pour un sourire ; ils se parlaient gaiement, les yeux à demi clos et la tête lourde et joyeuse, tout prêts à se laisser endormir dans des rêves d'ivresse.

Un flambeau en cuivre, placé au milieu d'eux, éclairait leur figure d'une clarté douce, et dessinait sur le plafond noirci des cercles lumineux et vacillants. Ils allaient donc s'endormir ; déjà leurs mains avaient abandonné les verres et étaient retombées sur leurs cuisses, leurs têtes s'étaient appuyées sur la muraille, le cou en avant ; ils avaient fermé les yeux.

Quelque chose de suave et tendre planait sur eux ; on voyait sur leurs visages épanouis transpirer une sensation voluptueuse et intime qui sortait de l'âme, le monde avait fui avec ses douleurs et ses amertumes, tout tournait devant eux en images fugitives et errantes, sans suite, comme une ronde de fées vêtues de toutes les couleurs et qui passaient en tourbillonnant devant eux, montaient vers le ciel en spirales, en cercles qui s'agrandissaient, se perdaient et s'évanouissaient, comme une poudre d'or qu'on jette aux vents.

Des clartés inconnues, des lueurs, des jours apparaissaient tout à coup sur les murailles, s’élargissaient sur la suie de la cheminée, montaient en réseaux et en gerbes de feu ; c’étaient des extases infinies, des sensations délicieuses par tous les sens, un sommeil qui se sentait des rêves confus qui commençaient et se nouaient à d’autres rêves interminables, comme le balancement d’un hamac quand on s’endort, comme des essences de roses qui vous font songer d’amour, comme une longue suite de paroles douces, enivrantes, embaumantes, comme des bonheurs renaissants, comme une campagne étoilée de toutes les fleurs, dont chacune aurait des parfums à elle et qui toutes vous enivreraient d`un même sommeil, d’un même bonheur.

Sentir qu’on quitte la vie avec un sourire, qu’on meurt sous des baisers, qu’on s’endort délicieusement en entrant dans le monde sans bornes de l’infini et des rêves, c’est là le bonheur, désir de tout, vague et confus, désir de la mort, désir du sommeil, désir des songes ; bonheur de la feuille roulant dans l’air, des nuages courant dans le vide, s’étalant et s’évanouissant dans l’espace, bonheur de l’oiseau volant jusqu’aux cieux et planant sur le monde, bonheur des fleurs jetant leurs parfums aux vents, bonheur du poète dans son délire, dont l’âme s’exhale avec la voix, et qui répand aussi comme la fleur ses parfums aux vents, à l’oubli, pour être emportés et évanouis.

Mais Hugues tout à coup s’est relevé d’un saut pour remplir les verres ; ses yeux brillent comme le feu, ses mains se crispent, il rit comme un fou, il veut boire, il a soif, il a du feu dans la gorge, et ce qu’il boit le brûle encore.

— Tu recules ? dit-il à Rymbaud, plein de colère.

Cette injure-là fut lavée par une bouteille de rhum.

Et puis voilà la colère qui les prend, ils s’animent de nouveau, se rapprochent de la table, se posent pour se voir ; et ils boivent avec délices, ils s’enivrent à longs flots ; les verres ne suffisent plus, chacun prend une bouteille de ses deux mains, étreint son cou sous ses lèvres, et ne s’arrête que pour se regarder l’un l’autre, pâles, muets, les yeux fixés l’un sur l’autre avec un regard stupide et étonné. On dirait que Satan les pousse et que le vice leur prodigue des forces plus qu’humaines ; puis le délire les prend ; après la passion, la frénésie, une frénésie cruelle, effrayante d’atrocité et de cynisme.

Les voilà rapprochés l’un de l’autre, s’échangeant des regards de défi et buvant des yeux ce qui leur reste à boire.

C’est une orgie, une orgie sombre, sans cris, sans femmes, sans clartés ; le vin y ruisselle à flots et l’ivresse s’y étale toute nue, ils s’y plongent jusqu’au cou.

Ainsi, dans un délire sans repos, ils boivent, poussés par un instinct infernal ; tout a disparu, l’ivresse dolente et ses demi-sommeils et ses prismes enchanteurs ; quelque chose de machinal les pousse par une force invincible.

Leur poitrine haletait pleine de feu, leur peau rougie semblait couverte de sang, leurs muscles de fer eussent broyé d'un coup la table qui les soutenait, une sueur froide coulait sur leurs cheveux, sur la peau livide du visage, sur leurs paupières de plomb, qu'ils soulevaient avec peine.

Maintenant c'est la rage, ils s'arrachent de Force les dernières bouteilles qui leur restent, et, rapprochées l'une de l'autre, les deux figures monstrueuses se lancent des grincements de dents, des grimaces, des regards de tigre, ivres, de la salive pleine de vin, des injures, des cris, des râles d'ivresse.

C'était quelque chose de terrible à voir que ces deux hommes, à la lueur mourante d'un flambeau, au clair de lune si limpide, par une nuit si douce et si pure, s'étreindre dans tous les sens, se déchirer avec les ongles, mettre en pièces leurs vêtements, voir leurs larges doigts s'entrelacer avec des peines inouïes, et tout cela pour s'arracher le dernier lambeau de l'orgie.

Enfin la bouteille se déchira dans leurs mains.

Hugues en tira une de derrière lui, c'était du kirschenwaser ; il la but d'un trait, puis se leva de toute sa hauteur, brisa la table d'un coup de pied, et jetant la carafe à la tête de Rymbaud :

— Mange, dit-il avec orgueil.

Le sang sortit et coula sur leurs vêtements comme le vin. Rymbaud tomba par terre avec des râles horribles, il se mourait.

— Bois, maintenant, continua Hugues.

Il s'approcha de lui, lui mit un genou sur la poitrine, et il lui desserrait les mâchoires avec les mains ; il força le moribond de boire encore, il se roula plusieurs fois par terre sur les verres brisés, au milieu du vin et du sang ; son corps se plia plusieurs fois comme un serpent ; puis tout à coup ses muscles se tendirent, il se releva encore une fois, chancela et tomba, poussa indistinctement quelques cris et retomba de nouveau dans son agonie, ivre et désespérée.

Hugues dormait.

Puis les râles plaintifs cessèrent, la lune s'évanouit sous les nuages, et quand l'aube vint à blanchir l'horizon, ses derniers rayons mourants éclairaient encore ces deux hommes qui dormaient tous deux, mais dont l'un avait passé de l'ivresse au sommeil et l'autre de l'ivresse à la tombe, autre sommeil aussi, mais plus tranquille et plus profond.

IV

Le lendemain, vers les quatre heures du soir, une pluie fine et serrée tombait sur la grande route et mouillait les feuilles poudreuses des arbres qui l'entouraient.

La maison de Hugues était une dernière du village ; elle était séparée de la grande route par une petite cour bordée d'une baie d'arbres qui laissait voir, à travers ses plis pleins d'ombrages, une maison blanche avec des auvents verts, une vigne tapissant la muraille de plâtre. C'était dans cette cour que dormait Hugues, transporté, par les soins de sa femme, sous un arbre touffu ou il continua son rêve, tandis que les gens d'église étaient venus chercher le mort, l'avaient transporté tout couvert de ses haillons jusqu'au presbytère, l'avaient lavé, soigné, et bref lui avaient donné en dernier lieu un court office, afin qu'il pût passer légalement dans l'autre monde et être mort comme on doit mourir.

Cet homme avait des amis, on le suivit jusqu'à son lit de pierre.

Dans les villages il n'y a ni char ni chevaux, on porte la bière sur un brancard. Rymbaud fut porté sous un simple drap noir, qui cache toujours le corps qu'on porte, sa laideur, sa beauté, ce sourire qu'on achetait aux laquais et toutes les souillures enfin qui l'ornèrent.

Derrière, suivaient les hommes du pays, sur plusieurs rangs ; les premiers avaient la tête découverte parce qu'il faisait chaud, et les autres leurs chapeaux parce qu'ils n'avaient plus de cheveux, tous parlant à voix basse de leurs affaires, de leurs bestiaux, de leurs moissons, concluant des marchés, et le plus petit nombre était recueilli parce qu'il n'avait rien à dire.

Des deux côtés du cercueil, deux vieilles femmes en capuchon noir, avec des vêtements de deuil, portant sous un bras un gros pain et de l'autre main un cierge qui brûlait.

Devant marchait le prêtre, répétant les derniers adieux pour les morts, le sacristain en robe noire, avec sa latte de baleine aux bouts d'argent, chantant plus bas que son maître, puis quelques enfants de chœur avec leurs gros souliers, leurs bas rouges, leurs robes blanches, des cheveux blonds s'échappant de dessous leur calotte rouge.

Le plus grand d'eux portait un crucifix d'argent au bout d'un bâton teint en pourpre, et chantant à plaisir, tout fier de porter le bon Dieu et de marcher en tête. La pluie s'était apaisée et le convoi s'avançait doucement sur la poussière imbibée d'eau.

Quand une charrette passait, on baissait les chants, le paysan faisait prendre le débord à ses chevaux, se signait dévotement ; les enfants s'arrêtaient étonnés et regardaient, en se mettant à genoux, le cercueil et les cierges blancs qui brûlaient, les femmes noires, les couleurs de la fête ; ils écoutaient les chants monotones qui passaient dans la route et s'affaiblissaient avec le bruit des pas. Le cimetière était loin, le convoi marcha longtemps, on s'était arrêté deux fois, car les hommes sont si faibles qu'ils peuvent à peine mener un mort en terre.

Déjà on avait quitté la route, tourné à droite, passé derrière des haies fleuries, foulé bien des sentiers dans les champs ; on montait doucement, et les cailloux du chemin roulaient sous les pieds et allaient tomber dans le ravin et s'amortir sur les bruyères des fossés.

Tout à coup on entendit des cris, on s'arrêta, un homme courait ; c'était Hugues.

Réveillé quand on avait passé devant lui, il s'était levé. Comme il eut froid alors, il trembla, ses jambes fléchirent sous lui quand il voulut marcher, il sentait ses forces éteintes, sa vigueur partie avec le bouchon des bouteilles.

Ô raison humaine, immuable, constante, toi à qui on a dressé des temples, car c'était la seule divinité qu'on n'eût pas adorée, raison qui s'envole avec le bouchon d'une cruche, sans laisser même, comme celle-ci, une saveur au fond de toi-même !

L'ivresse l'avait tué ; pas de plaisir sans épuisement, ou a passé le feu sont les cendres.

Il s'était levé, il avait vu le cercueil, il entendit le nom de Rymbaud qu'un des assistants prononça. Il marcha sans savoir pourquoi, machinalement comme nous faisons tous, poursuivant vaguement des formes confuses qui allaient devant lui, sentant seulement qu'il sortait d'un rêve pénible, qu'il rêvait cependant encore et qu'il souffrait toujours.

Puis des sons vinrent sur ses lèvres, il balbutia et il appela avec des cris et des injures. Longtemps ainsi on vit cet homme presque nu, la chemise déchirée et rouge de vin, poursuivant le cercueil de ses sarcasmes cyniques, et chancelant dans la route où avaient passé tous ceux qui étaient morts.

On entendait la voix faible du prêtre qui montait la route pierreuse, et au fond, plus bas, le refrain joyeux d'une chanson de table et de débauche, un air sourd avec un rythme bruyant, des paroles indistinctes, mais d'un timbre qui faisait peur, comme si le mort se fût relevé et s'était mis a chanter aussi.

Après bien des efforts Hugues atteignit le convoi, il le fit arrêter encore une fois ; il avait fait fuir les enfants, s'était approché du cercueil.

— Dors-tu ? lui avait-il dit, dors-tu ?

Puis tâtant le drap noir qui le couvrait :

— Tu as froid, lâche ! et moi, continuait-il en frappant de grands coups sur sa poitrine nue, regarde !

Déjà il l'avait découvert et voulait casser le cercueil ; il répandait l'injure, le blasphème, le sarcasme sur le mort, sur le prêtre, sur la croix ; il crachait sur tout cela, il voulait se coucher à sa place dans la bière et continuer son sommeil.

Puis il tomba encore une fois épuisé et s'endormit sur une banque de gazon.

La procession se rallia et parvint enfin au cimetière entouré d'un mur blanc, avec ses jeunes cyprès verts et ses treillages noirs qui entouraient des pierres couvertes d’herbe.

On creusa la Fosse de Rymbaud près de celle du dernier maître d’école, et tandis qu’on l’y descendait et qu’on jetait sur lui l’eau bénite, on vit grimacer, à travers les barreaux noirs de la grille du cimetière, la figure de Hugues, pâle et effrayante sous ses cheveux rouges.

Il insultait encore le cadavre et accompagnait chaque pelletée de terre qu’on rejetait sur lui d’une injure et d’une Sombre raillerie ; il y resta longtemps et redescendit avec le cortège.

Rymbaud, comme vous voyez, fut enseveli en terre sainte, et Hugues, qui vécut encore de longues années, passa dès lors pour un démon et un Sorcier.

LES ARTS

ET LE COMMERCE .

La futilité des arts et l’utilité du commerce sont devenus mots banals dans le monde. Bien des gens n’estiment, en effet, une étoffe qu’à la longueur, une chose qu’à son poids et une couleur qu’à son éclat, et font plus de cas en eux-mêmes d’une balle de coton que de toutes les tragédies possibles ; ils diraient bien comme Malebranche en voyant *Athalie :* “Qu’est-ce que cela prouve ?”

Ceux-là ne voient, en effet, dans l’art qu’un passe-temps après dîner, une récréation qui égaie, un jeu qui délasse, et considèrent les spectacles comme la meilleure invention de la police pour pincer les masses en lieu sûr ; ces gens-là, sans doute, regardent la marchandise, la denrée, le bois, le cuivre comme les premières choses d’ici-bas, et quant à la pensée pure, libre, indépendante, quant au génie créateur et grandiose, quant à la poésie, à la morale, aux beaux-arts, chimères ! fantaisies ! futilité ! diront-ils. Honneur, selon eux, à la machine qui crie, au rouleau qui tourne, à la vapeur qui remue ! honneur à l’indigo, au savon, au sucre, au navire qui transporte tout cela, à celui qui l’exploite et calcule, s’enrichit, à celui qui achète et qui vend ! Mais Homère, mais Virgile, mais Shakespeare, qu’est-ce que cela prouve ? Corneille, Racine, qu’est-ce que cela prouve ? Se nourrit-on avec des vers, s’habille-t-on avec des peintures, mange-t-on des statues ? Raphaël et Michel-Ange, qu’est-ce que cela prouve ? Citez-moi des noms qui ont servi au genre humain, ceux de Pitt et de Jacquart, mais vos poètes, vos artistes, rêveurs vaniteux qui meurent de faim et demandent des statues !

Ah ! insensés ! est-ce que l’âme aussi n’a pas ses besoins et ses appétits ? et si vous ne sentez pas en vous-mêmes cet instinct, qui demande à se nourrir non pas de vos denrées, à se réchauffer non pas de vos forêts, à se vêtir non pas de vos étoffes soyeuses, mais à faire quelque chose de grand et à satisfaire cette âme qui a une soif immense de l’infini et à qui il faut des rêveries, des vers, des mélodies, des extases, qui a besoin de se réchauffer au feu du génie, et de s’entourer de mysticisme, de poésie, eh bien, si vous ne sentez pas cela en vous, de quel droit venez-vous me parler d’intelligence et de pensée ? il n’y a rien de commun entre vous et moi.

Pour un esprit qui bâtit et détruit, qui marchande et qui trompe, je vous l’accorde, mais pour une âme, je vous la refuse ; vous n’en avez point.

C’est vous qui ne voyez dans les lettres que la comédie qui vous fait rire malgré vous, comme les farces de la foire, dans un tableau que des couleurs broyées et étalées sur des toiles, et dans l'architecture quelque chose qui peut vous bâtir des douanes et des entrepôts.

Je vous abandonne de grand cœur le luxe, le commerce, l'industrie, les ports et les manufactures, les étoffes et les métaux, mais laissez-moi pleurer au théâtre, laissez-moi écouter Mozart, regarder Raphaël, contempler tout un jour les vagues de l'Océan ! laissez-moi mes rêveries, ma futilité, mes idées creuses ; votre bon sens m'assomme, votre positif me fait horreur.

Ce qu'on regarde maintenant comme d'une utilité fort secondaire passait autrefois pour de la plus urgente nécessité ; les arts semblaient si nobles à l'antiquité qu'ils en firent remonter l'origine aux Dieux, la poésie chez les Grecs était une hymne, les tragédies se jouaient dans les fêtes religieuses, et ce public de trente mille spectateurs écoutait à la fois ce qu'il y a de plus grand dans l'homme, la poésie, glorifiait ce qu'il y a de plus grand dans la nature, la divinité.

C'étaient alors les beaux temps de l'art, ceux où les prêtres de la pensée étaient rangés au même niveau que les prêtres de Dieu ; la poésie était une religion et le génie avait ses autels.

Quand la Grèce fut vaincue, n'imposa-t-elle pas son joug à Rome, sa maîtresse, par ses orateurs et ses artistes ? Caton prévoyait bien cette victoire des vaincus sur les vainqueurs, mais il ne put là prévenir, et lui-même, sur ses vieux jours, se mit à apprendre la langue de ses esclaves.

Athènes entra donc dans Rome, comme l'Étrurie déjà y était venue, avec ses mimes et ses bouffons. Cette ville, maîtresse du monde, était condamnée à redevenir successivement le germe de toutes les civilisations qu'elle avait combattues et qu'elle devait absorber. En effet, le conquérant peut détruire des ports, brûler des flottes, démolir les manufactures, détourner les fleuves, boucher les canaux et enchainer les populations, mais l'esprit ? Où trouverez-vous des chaînes pour arrêter ce Protée qui parle avec les sons, qui se dresse avec la pierre, s'exprime et pense avec des mots ? Quelle sera la digue pour arrêter ce torrent ? Où sera la prison pour enfermer ce soleil ?

L'Italie n'a-t-elle pas été cent fois vaincue, et par tous les peuples : les Hérules, les Huns, les Goths, Les Franks, les Allemands, les Normands, les Espagnols, les Sarrazins ? Le monde entier est venu marcher sur elle et la fouler aux pieds ; mais comme chacun de ces peuples y est resté peu de temps ! comme ils mouraient vite sous ce soleil du Midi, sur cette terre libre et féconde que tant de grandes choses ont illustrée et qui montre avec plus d'orgueil les ruines de ses cités mortes que nos nations modernes ne montrent leurs cités vivantes ! Car sa poussière est grande, car ses cendres ont de la gloire ; tout ce qui a une âme de poète, de peintre, ne désire-t-il pas aller vers cette terre sainte de l'art, où les pierres ont de l'immortalité, où les débris ont de l'avenir encore ?

On cite toujours Carthage et Venise comme s'étant rendues puissantes par leur commerce ; ce furent, il est vrai, de grandes cités, et leurs richesses nous apparaissent maintenant à travers l'histoire comme quelque chose de colossal et de superbe. Mais ne sent-on pas dans de pareils gouvernements, en même temps qu'une vigueur et une force peu communes, quelque chose de monstrueux et de féroce ? Y a-t-il dans les temps modernes un trône plus triste, une gloire plus lugubre et plus sanglante que cette ville de Venise avec son peuple d'espions et de bourreaux, et le nom de Carthage n'est-il pas pour nous plein d'horreur et de cynisme ?

La Hollande aussi s'est élevée par son commerce, et ce petit peuple de marins et de commerçants, qui a d'abord eu à lutter contre l'Océan puis contre l'Europe entière, et qui s'est fait puissant en domptant les dangers du premier et en acquérant les richesses de la seconde, n'a-t-il pas maintenant une physionomie mesquine et rapetissée entre la noble France et la mystique Allemagne, ces deux pays qui ont le plus d'avenir ? Cette France, légère, folle, gaie, qui avait déjà conquis l'Europe par ses lettres avant que Napoléon la vainquît de son épée, et que reste-t-il de l'épée de notre empereur ? Chaque État en a pris un éclat, chaque roi a divisé la pourpre et l'a mise sur son trône. L'empereur et l'empire sont morts, mais nos poètes vivent, Corneille vit, Racine vit,Voltaire domine toujours, et sa langue, cette langue si pure et si limpide, telle qu'il l'a faite, on La parle dans toutes les cours. Ne sont-ce pas nos pièces traduites qu'on joue à Londres, à Vienne, à Berlin, à Saint-Pétersbourg ? Et cette Italie, patrie du Dante et de Virgile, si pauvre et si triste, ne nous parait-elle pas plus grande et plus majestueuse que l'Angleterre, même avec ses flottes, ses Indes, ses millions d'hommes et son orgueil ? Et puis, que reste-t-il maintenant de Carthage ? Et de Venise ? où sont donc ses navires, ses trésors, sa puissance, ses richesses enviées du monde ?

Ne me demandez pas ce qui reste d'Athènes et de Rome, leur souvenir occupe le monde.

Certes, les relations de commerce furent un grand bien pour les nations modernes, et c'est un merveilleux fait de la Providence de faire servir l'intérêt des hommes à leur union ; l'industrie donne aux nations une source inépuisable de richesses que les sociétés anciennes, dans leur noble orgueil, ignorèrent ; chez nous les relations de commerce nouent les relations politiques, mais avant tout cela, il y a les rapports d'idées. N'a-t-il pas fallu deux siècles de combats entre l'Europe et l'Asie, entre le christianisme et L'islamisme, avant que l'Orient et l'Occident échangeassent leurs produits ? Il a fallu tout le XVI^e^ et le XVII^e^

siècle, la guerre de Trente ans et mille batailles, pour que le Nord et le Sud, les protestants et les catholiques s'alliassent ensemble. Et puis Shakespeare et Byron passent chez nous, tandis qu'on arrête les épingles et les étoffes d'Angleterre ; il n'y a point de contrôle pour le génie, parce qu'il est libre et immortel.

Les poètes sont comme ces statues qu'on retrouve dans les ruines ; on les oublie parfois longtemps, mais on les retrouve intactes au milieu d'une poussière qui n'a plus de nom ; tout a péri, eux seuls durent.

Et cependant n'entendez-vous pas dire : Ceci, c'est un poète, esprit creux ! cela, ce sont des vers, niaiseries ! Eh bien, ce poète et ces vers sont plus immortels que votre palais dont les pierres se disjoignent, que votre empire qui se démembre, que vos trésors qui se dispersent, et ce blasphème vient de ce que l'intérêt a tari le cœur, puis l'esprit. D'abord on a menti, maintenant bien des hommes croient qu'ils ont raison, et que l'industrie est plus utile que la poésie, que le corps vaut mieux que l'âme. Mais c'est l'âme qui fait agir le corps ; sans les arts, où serions-nous ? Allez ! Corneille et Racine ont plus fait pour la France que Colbert et Louis XIV.

N'y a-t-il pas quelque chose d'ignoble et d'absurde à prétendre sans cesse qu'un ballot vaut mieux qu'un chef-d'œuvre, qu'un morceau de drap a plus de valeur qu'un poème ?

Que vous disent donc vos ballots et vos draps ? ils s'épuisent et s'usent ; Homére est-il vieux ?

Vos magasins regorgent de marchandises, mais faites-moi à la commande *Tartufe, Othello, Cinna* ?

La France, en un an, peut donner des milliards ; en un siècle, elle ne fait pas dix vers de Corneille.

Qu'on me mette donc face à face le duc de Northumberland, qui a 17 millions de rentes, ou l'homme qui possède le monopole de toutes les exploitations avec le baladin William Shakespeare. Que fera le premier ? Il me montrera ses palais de marbre, ses coupes d'or, ses tapis d'émeraude, ses terres, ses moissons, ses fabriques, ses valets qu'il paie, ses chiens, ses voitures ; que me fait cela ? Et le second me lit des vers, c'est-à-dire qu'il parle à mon âme, qu'il remue la corde de la lyre, en tire des mélodies, des extases ; c'est-à-dire qu'il me touche, qu'il me fait pleurer, qu'il me rend grand et fier, que je trépigne malgré moi, que l'enthousiasme m'enveloppe et que je suis heureux de l'avoir entendue, cette œuvre, que je l'envie, que je l'adore dans mon cœur, que je lui dresse des temples !

Je mangeais, il est vrai, les moissons du premier ; ses navires m'apportaient le sucre, ses bestiaux me donnaient la laine, ses fabriques le drap ; mais le poète ! Béni soit ton nom, fils du ciel ! car tu m'as fait goûter des joies que ne donnent ni le commerce, ni la puissance, ni les richesses, des joies que les rois ne peuvent donner ; tu as éveillé en moi toutes les voluptés de l'âme, tu m'as donné toutes les délices du cœur, tu m'as fait pleurer ; l'autre était mon tailleur et mon bottier ; toi, tu es mon ange et mon amour, merci, car tu es poète !

Ainsi donc rappelons-nous que l'esprit, dans l'histoire comme dans la vie, a toujours dirigé le corps.

Ce qu'il faut à l'enfant, n'est-ce pas les images, les tableaux, les rires, les contes de sa nourrice ? Ce n'est que plus tard, lorsque la chair parle en lui, que le corps souffre, qu'il devient gourmand, jaloux, sensuel, qu'il ruse et qu'il trompe ; son esprit jusqu'alors regardait et contemplait, mais maintenant il le fait servir, il tend des pièges et médite des larcins.

Il en est de même des peuples : ils sont d'abord poètes et prêtres, guerriers et législateurs, commerçants et industriels ; c'est à l'avenir qu'il appartient maintenant de féconder ces germes pour les civilisations futures.

Le commerce est donc le dispensateur des richesses, comme l'industrie est la lutte de l'homme contre la nature, la machine devenue intelligente et créatrice ; il y a là dedans la sève du bien-être matériel pour tout un peuple, c'est quelque chose. Nourrissez, habillez un homme, que son estomac soit chargé de vin, son corps couvert de diamants, il mourra triste, dégradé, avili, car il faut une pâture à l'âme, invisible comme Dieu, mais forte sur nous comme il l'est sur sa création. L'art est donc la manifestation la plus haute de l'âme, c'est là son œuvre.

Qu'on ne l'insulte pas, ce serait un blasphème !

SMARH

Indigesta moles.

Ovide.

Cette œuvre, inédite jusqu’à ce jour, n’a pas obtenu le prix Montyon.

Le curieux, le malheureux, qui ouvrira ceci, pourra s’en étonner, car sa bêtise semblerait devoir le lui décerner de droit.

SMARH .

L’archange Michel avait vaincu Satan lors de la venue du Christ.

Le Christ était venu sur la terre, comme une oasis dans le désert, comme une lueur dans l’ombre, et l’oasis s’était tarie, et la lueur n’était plus, et tout n’était que ténèbres.

L’humanité, qui, un moment, avait levé la tête vers le ciel, l’avait reportée sur la terre ; elle avait recommencé sa vieille vie, et les empires allaient toujours, avec leurs ruines qui tombent, troublant le silence du temps, dans le calme du néant et de l’éternité.

Les races s’étaient prises d’une lèpre à l’âme, tout s’était fait vil.

On riait, mais ce rire avait de l’angoisse, les hommes étaient faibles et méchants, le monde était fou, il bavait, il écumait, il courait comme un enfant dans les champs, il suait de fatigue, il allait se mourir.

Mais avant de rentrer dans le vide, il voulait vivre bien sa dernière minute ; il fallait finir l’orgie et tomber ensuite ivre, ignoble, désespéré, l’estomac plein, le cœur vide.

Satan n’avait plus qu’à donner un dernier coup, et cette roue du mal qui broyait les hommes depuis la création allait s’arrêter enfin, usée comme sa pâture.

Et voilà qu’une fois on entendit dans les airs comme un cri de triomphe, la bouche rouge de l’enfer semblait s’ouvrir et chanter ses victoires.

Le ciel en tressaillit. La terre demandai-elle un nouveau Messie ? tournait-elle, dans ses agonies, ses dernières espérances vers le Christ ? Non, la voix répéta plusieurs fois : “Michel à moi ! réponds ici !” Cette voix était triomphante, pleine de colère et de joie.

LA VOIX.

Ton pied me terrassa jadis, et je sentis ton talon me broyer la poitrine, car alors le Christ avait affermi cette terre où tu me foulais, elle était jeune et pure ; maintenant elle est vieille, usée, ton pied y entrerait dans les cendres.

Mon orgueil me dévora le cœur, mais le sang de ce cœur ulcéré je l’ai versé sur la terre, et cette rosée de malédiction a porté ses fruits.

Maintenant, pas une vertu que je n’aie sapée par le doute, pas une croyance que je n’aie terrassée par le rire, pas une idée usée qui ne soit un axiome, pas un fruit qui ne soit amer. La belle œuvre !

Oh ! Cette terre, terre d’amour et de bonheur, faite pour la félicité de l’homme, comme je l’ai maniée et pétrie, comme je l’ai battue, fatiguée, comme j’ai remué dans sa bouche le mors des douleurs !

Tout le sang que j’ai fait répandre (si la terre ne l’avait pas bu) ferait un Océan plus large que toutes les mers du Créateur. Toutes les malédictions sorties du cœur feraient un beau concert à la louange de Dieu.

Et puis je leur ai donné des chimères qu’ils n’avaient pas ; j’ai jeté en l’air des mots, ils ont pris cela pour des idées, ils ont couru, ils se sont évertués à les comprendre, ils ont creusé leurs petits cerveaux, ils ont voulu voir le fond de l’abîme sans fin, ils se sont approchés du bord et je les ai poussés dedans.

Merci, vous tous qui m’avez secondé ! Honneur à l’amitié qui s’appelle grandeur et qui m’a livré les poètes, les femmes, les rois ! Honneur à la colère ivre qui casse et qui tue ! Honneur à la jalousie, à la ruse, à la luxure qui s’appelle amour, à la chair qui s’appelle âme ! Honneur à cette belle chose qui tient un homme par ses organes et le fait pâmer d’aise, grandeur humaine !

Vive l’enfer ! À moi le monde jusqu’à sa dernière heure ! je l’ai élevé, j’ai été sa nourrice et sa mère, je l’ai bercé dans ses jeunes ans ; j’ai été sa compagne et son épouse. Comme il m’a aimé ! Comme il m’a pris !

Et moi, de quel ardent amour je lui ai imposé mes baisers de feu !

Je veillerai jusqu’à sa dernière heure sur ses jours chéris, je lui fermerai les yeux, je me pencherai sur sa bouche pour recueillir son dernier râle et pour voir si sa dernière pensée te bénira, Créateur.

Et maintenant, Archange, je t’ai vaincu à mon tour, chaque jour je t’insulte, chaque jour je prends l’empire du Christ, chaque jour des âmes entières se donnent à moi.

Et je sais un homme saint entre les saints, qui vit comme une relique ; cet homme-là, tu verras comme je vais le plonger dans le mal en peu d’heures, et puis tu me diras si la vertu est encore sur la terre, et si mon enfer n’a pas fondu depuis longtemps ce vieux glaçon qui la refroidissait.

Tu verras que de telles œuvres me rendraient bien digne de créer un monde et si elles ne me font pas l’égal de celui qui les enfante !

Le soir, en Orient, dans l’Asie Mineure, un vallon avec une cabane d’ermite ; non loin, une petite chapelle.

UN ERMITE.

Allez, mes chers enfants, rentrez chez vous avec la paix du seigneur ; l’homme de Dieu vient de vous bénir et de vous purifier, puisse sa bénédiction être éternelle et sa purification ne jamais s’effacer ! Allez, ne m’oubliez pas dans vos prières, je penserai à vous dans les miennes. (après avoir congédié ses fidèles.) je les aime tous, ces hommes, et mon cœur s’épanouit quand je leur parle de Dieu ; ces femmes me semblent des sœurs et des anges, et ces petits enfants, comme je les embrasse avec plaisir !

Oh ! Merci, mon Dieu, de m’avoir fait une âme douce comme la vôtre et capable d’aimer ! Heureux ceux qui aiment ! Quand j’ai jeûné longtemps, quand j’ai orné de fleurs cueillies sur les vallées ton autel, quand j’ai longtemps prié à genoux, longtemps regardé le ciel en pensant au paradis, que j’ai consolé ceux qui viennent à moi, il me semble que mon cœur est large, que cet amour est une force et qu’il créerait quelque chose.

Je suis content dans cette retraite, j’aime à voir la rivière serpenter au bas de la vallée, à voir l’oiseau étendre ses ailes et le soleil se coucher lentement avec ses teintes roses. Cette nuit sera belle, les étoiles sont de diamant, la lune resplendit sur l’azur ; j’admire cela avec amour, et quand je pense aux biens de l’autre vie, mon âme se fond en extases et en rêveries.

Merci, merci mon Dieu ! Je suis heureux, vous m’avez donné l’amour, que faut-il de plus ? Quand vous m’appellerez à vous, je mourrai en vous bénissant et je passerai de ce monde dans un autre meilleur encore. Bonheur, joie, amour, extases, tout est en vous ! (il s’agenouille et prie.)

SATAN, en costume de docteur.

Pardon, maître, de vous interrompre dans vos pieuses pensées.

SMARH.

L’homme de Dieu se doit à tous.

SATAN.

Maître, je suis un docteur grec, qui ai traversé les déserts pour venir recueillir les paroles de votre bouche et converser avec vous sur nos hautes destinées. Un homme comme vous en sait long ; nous sommes savants, nous autres, n’est-ce pas ?

SMARH.

Quelle est cette science ?

SATAN.

Plus grande que vous ne croyez. Cependant, frère, à force d’avoir réfléchi et creusé en nous-mêmes, nous sommes arrivés à résoudre d’étranges problèmes ; pour moi, rien n’est obscur. (à part.) tout est noir. Une femme mariée entre pour parler à Smarh.

YUK.

Que voulez-vous, douce mie ?

LA FEMME.

Consulter notre père en religion.

Yuk.

Il est maintenant occupé à réfléchir, à causer, à disserter, à savantiser avec ce saint homme que vous voyez là, en habit de docteur, et on ne peut l'approcher.

LA FEMME.

Un docteur ! Est-ce un nonce du pape ? Ou quelque théologien de Grèce ?

Yuk.

C'est l'un et l'autre ; il est fort lié avec la papauté et les moines, auxquels il a conseillé d'excellents tours pour se divertir. Pour la théologie, il la connaît. Vous connaissez votre ménage, et, comme vous, il y jette de l'eau trouble et y fait pousser des cornes.

LA FEMME.

Que voulez-vous dire là ?

Yuk.

Que vous êtes bien gentille, ravissante, avec une gorgette à faire pâmer toute une classe d'écoliers.

LA FEMME.

Fi ! Les propos déshonnêtes ! Laissez-moi, je veux parler à l'ermite.

Yuk.

Ne craignez rien, vous dis-je, je suis un vieux sans vigueur dans les reins. Autrefois j'étais bon et j'aurais peuplé tout un désert, maintenant je me suis consacré au service de la religion et je suis en tout lieu mon saint maître, qui me laisse faire le gros de la besogne, comme d'allumer les cierges, d'apprêter le dîner, de confesser, de préparer les hosties, de nettoyer, de gratter, d'écurer ; je suis, en un mot, son serviteur indigne, vous voyez qu'il ne faut pas avoir peur de moi, je suis bien diable et gai en mes discours, mais sage comme une pierre en mes actions. Et vous, qui êtes-vous, la mère ? Vous m'avez l'air d'une bonne femme. Vous êtes mariée, j'en suis sûr, je vois ça à certaines choses, mariée à un brave homme. Oh ! Un bon, excellent homme, mais un peu benêt, entre nous soit dit ; je le connais, et la nuit de vos noces vous fûtes même obligée de lui apprendre certaines choses que les femmes ordinairement savent trop bien, mais qu'elles font semblant d'ignorer ; j'en ai connu qui se pâmaient ainsi de pudeur, et qui, tout en disant : “ que faites-vous là ? “, connaissaient le métier depuis l'âge de neuf ans. Mais vous, tout en étant mariée, vous êtes demeurée sage comme la vierge ; vous avez des enfants… charmants, qui ressemblent à leur mère.

LA FEMME.

Vous êtes donc du pays pour savoir cela ? Oui, je les aime bien, ces pauvres enfants !

Yuk.

Et vous êtes heureuse ainsi ?

LA FEMME.

Bien heureuse, mon seigneur, que me faut-il de plus ?

SMARH *répond au docteur*

À vous dire vrai, je n'ai jamais cherché le bonheur dans la science, je n'ai point travaillé, lu, compulsé.

SATAN.

Ni moi non plus, il y a là dedans plus de vanité que d'autre chose ; mais ce n'est point la science des livres dont je parle, maître, c'est celle du cœur et de la nature.

SMARH.

Sans doute ! Alors j'ai mûrement réfléchi, et bien des ans de ma vie.

SATAN.

J'avais donc raison de dire que vous étiez savant. Ce mot-là doit-il s'appliquer à un homme qui possède beaucoup de livres, comme à une bibliothèque, plutôt qu'à un autre qui est saint, qui possède Dieu, car la vraie science, c'est Dieu.

SMARH.

Oui, Dieu est l'unique objet de mon étude.

SATAN.

Vous êtes donc plus que savant, vous êtes un saint. Heureuse vie ! être ainsi au milieu de cette belle nature, prier Dieu tout le jour, être entouré du respect de la contrée, car à toute heure on vient vous consulter sur toute matière, sur la religion et sur la vie, sur la mort et l'éternité ; hommes, femmes, enfants, tout le monde accourt à vous ; vous êtes comme le bon ange du pays, pas une larme que vous n'essuyiez, pas une peine, pas un chagrin qui ne soit soulagé ; vous raccommodez les familles, vous mettez la paix dans les ménages, saint homme !

SMARH, humilié.

Oh ! Vous me flattez, frère !

SATAN.

Non, non, je me complais dans ce ravissant tableau. Vous dites aux femmes libertines : “ allez, rentrez dans vos ménages, aimez Dieu et vos enfants “ ; aux enfants, de pratiquer la religion ; aux valets : “ aimez, servez vos maîtres “ ; aux voleurs : “ soyez honnêtes gens “ ; quand un pauvre vient vous demander l'aumône, vous dites pour lui des prières.

SMARH, étonné.

Qu’ai-je donc ?

SATAN.

Et jamais, car vous êtes trop saint pour cela, en confessant dans votre cellule des jeunes femmes, quand vous êtes là seuls, enfermés tous les deux, et qu’on ne pourrait pas vous voir, jamais il ne vous est venu à l’idée de soulever un peu le voile qui cache des contours indécis et de retrousser doucement avec la main ce jupon qui cache un bas de jambe sur lequel la pensée monte toujours ? … et quand vous dites à ces femmes d’aimer leurs maris, ne pensez-vous point qu’elles en aiment d’autres et que leurs maris vont forniquer avec les filles du démon ? Quand vous dites à ces hommes d’aimer leurs enfants, il ne vous vient pas à la pensée que ces enfants ne sont pas à eux, et que, lorsqu’ils voudront se coucher dans leur lit, la place sera prise et le trou bouché ?

SMARH.

Non, jamais ! Mais qui même vous a appris de telles choses ? Il me semble que ce n’est point ainsi que je pensais ; vous m’ouvrez un monde nouveau.

SATAN.

Vous ne pensez pas encore (car à quoi pensez-vous ?) que le voleur à qui vous conseillez l’honnêteté, perdrait son état en devenant honnête homme ; que les femmes perdues se sécheraient sur pied avec la vertu ; qu’un valet qui ne haïrait point son maître ne serait plus un valet, et que le maître qui ne battrait plus un valet ne serait plus son maître. Il est des choses plus surprenantes encore, car chaque jour vous dites sans scrupule : “ faites le bien, évitez le mal, aimez Dieu, nous avons une âme immortelle “ sans savoir ce que c’est que le bien et le mal, sans jamais avoir vu Dieu, sans savoir s’il existe, et vous en rapportant à la foi d’un vieux prêtre radoteur qui, comme vous, n’en savait rien ; pour l’âme, vous en êtes sûr, convaincu, persuadé, vous donneriez votre sang pour elle, et qui vous l’a démontrée ? Est-ce que vous sentez votre âme, comme votre estomac qui crie : j’ai faim, comme vos yeux qui, fatigués, demandent à être fermés, comme votre ventre qui vous chante : accouve-toi ou bien je vais faire quelque saleté ? Dis, ton âme a-t-elle faim, dort-elle, marche-t-elle, la sens-tu en toi ?

SMARH.

Questions embarrassantes ! Je n’y avais jamais songé.

SATAN.

Embarrassé pour si peu de chose ! Cela est clair comme le jour, car tu dépeins à tout le monde la nature de cette âme, ses besoins, ses douleurs, ses destinées, ses châtiments ; et tu te sens embarrassé pour si peu de choses ! Comment ? Mon ami, je te croyais plus d’intelligence pour un homme du seigneur. Heureux homme ! Tu es donc sans conscience, puisque tu enseignes et démontres des choses que tu ne sais pas.

YUK à la femme.

Heureuse avec un pareil homme ?

LA FEMME.

Mon dieu, oui, il le faut bien.

YUK.

Oui, il faut bien se résigner, n'est-ce pas ? Mais pour cela le cœur est lourd, tout en faisant le ménage on est triste, et de grosses larmes vous remplissent les yeux : " si le sort avait voulu pourtant, je serais autre, mon mari serait beau, grand, joli cavalier, aux sourcils noirs et aux dents blanches, à la bouche fraîche ; pourquoi donc n'ai-je pas eu ce bonheur ? ", et l'on rêve longtemps, on s'ennuie, le mari revient, il sent le vin, l'ivrogne ! Quel homme ! Vous vous demandez si cela sera toujours ainsi, on se sent seule, isolée dans le monde, sans amour ; il fait bon en avoir pour vivre ! Jadis vous avez vu un beau jeune homme qui vous baisait la main, et souvent les soldats passent sous vos fenêtres ; aux bains vous avez aperçu (et vous avez rougi aussitôt) des hommes nus, la drôle de chose ! Et vous rêvez de tout cela, ma petite. Le soir, en vous couchant, vous vous trouvez bien malheureuse et vous vous endormez en pensant aux hommes des bains publics, à votre jeune amant, aux soldats, que sais-je ? Vous avez un bataillon de cuisses charnues dans la tête : " si j'en avais seulement deux sur les miennes ", dites-vous, et vous faites les plus beaux rêves du monde.

LA FEMME.

Oh ! Le méchant homme !

YUK.

Longtemps vous vous êtes bornée aux rêveries, aux rêves, aux démangeaisons, mais l'aiguillon de la chair vous tient depuis longtemps, et chaque jour vous dites : " quand cela arrivera-t-il ? Est-ce bientôt ? "

LA FEMME.

Hélas ! Il faut bien vous le dire ; mais je résiste, je combats, etje venais consulter même… que vous êtes simple ! Avez-vous besoin d'un ermite pour vous enseigner ce que vous avez à faire ? Si la vertu existe, chaque créature doit pouvoir d'elle-même la discerner et la mettre en pratique.

LA FEMME, à part.

Je n'y avais point songé. (haut.) oui, vous avez raison, je résisterai bien seule, d'ailleurs, je chasserai bien seule ces idées qui m'obsèdent.

YUK.

Vous obsèdent, dites-vous ? Au contraire, elles vous sont agréables. Qu'il est doux de penser à cela tout le jour, de se figurer ainsi quelque chose de beau qui vous accompagne et vous entoure de ses deux bras !

LA FEMME.

Chaque jour je me reproche ces pensées comme un crime, j’embrasse mes enfants pour me ramener à quelque chose de plus saint, mais hélas ! Je vois toujours passer devant moi cette image tendre, confuse, voilée.

YUK.

Et lorsque le soir vient, n’est-ce pas ? Et que les rayons du soleil meurent sur les dalles, que les fleurs d’oranger laissent passer leurs parfums, que les roses se referment, que tout s’endort, que la lune se lève dans ses nuages blancs, alors cette forme revient, elle entre, et cette bouche dit : “ aime-moi ! Aime-moi ! Viens ! Si tu savais toutes les délices d’une nuit d’amour ! Si tu savais comme l’âme s’y élargit, comme au grand jour heureux, nos deux corps nus sur un tapis, nous embrassant, si tu savais comme je prendrai tes hanches, comme j’embrasserai tes seins, comme je reposerai ma tête sur ton cœur et comme nous serons heureux, comme nous nous étendrons dans nos voluptés ! “ n’est-ce pas ? C’est à cela qu’on pense, c’est cela qu’on souhaite, c’est pour cela qu’on brûle de désir ?

LA FEMME.

Assez ! Vous me rappelez tout ce que je sens en traits de feu, ces pensées-là me font rougir, j’en ai honte.

YUK.

Pourquoi ? Ne sont-elles pas belles et douces et riantes comme les roses ? C’est une soif qu’on a, n’est-ce pas ? On a quelque chose au fond du cœur de vif et d’impétueux comme une force qui vous pousse ?

LA FEMME.

Je ne sais comment résister à cette force.

YUK.

Souvent, n’est-ce pas ? Vous aimez à vous regarder nue, vous vous trouvez jolie ? “ quelle jolie cuisse ! Quel beau corps ! Quelle gorge ronde ! Et quel dommage ! “ dites-vous.

LA FEMME.

Oh ! Oui, souvent j’ai vu des yeux d’hommes s’arrêter longtemps sur les miens ; il y en a qui semblaient lancer des jets de flamme, d’autres laissaient découler une douceur amoureuse qui m’entrait jusqu’au cœur.

SATAN, à Smarh.

C’est la science, mon maître, qui nous enseignera tout cela.

SMARH.

Quelle science ?

SATAN.

La science que je sais.

SMARH.

Laquelle ?

SATAN.

La science du monde.

SMARH.

Et vous me montreriez tout cela ? Qu’êtes-vous ? Un ange ou un démon ?

SATAN.

L’un et l’autre !

SMARH.

Et comment acquiert-on cette science ?

SATAN.

Tu le sauras ! Il disparaît.

YUK.

Eh bien, le premier de ces hommes que vous verrez, que ce soit un jeune homme de 16 ans environ, blond et rose, et qui rougira sous vos regards, prenez-le, cet enfant, amenez-le dans votre chambre, et là, dans la nuit, vous verrez comme il vous aimera et comme vous jouirez et vous vous repaîtrez de cet amour ; oui ce sera cette voix de vos songes et ce corps d’ange qui passait dans vos nuits.

LA FEMME, égarée.

Qu’il vienne donc ! Qu’il vienne ! J’aurai pour lui des baisers de feu et des voluptés sans nombre. J’étais bien folle, en effet, de vieillir sans amour. à moi, maintenant, les délices des nuits les plus ardentes ; que je m’abreuve de toutes mes passions, que je me rassasie de tous mes désirs ! De longues nuits et de longs jours passés dans les baisers ! Ah ! Toute ma vie passée à un soupir, tout ce que je rêvais à moi ! Oh ! Comme je vais être heureuse ! Je tremble cependant, et je sens que c’est là mon bonheur.

YUK.

Quel plaisir, n’est-ce pas ? De se créer ainsi, par la pensée, toutes ces jouissances désirées, et de se dire : “ si je l’avais là, si je le tenais dans mes bras, si je voyais ses yeux sur les miens et sa bouche sur mes lèvres ! “

LA FEMME.

Assez ! Assez ! J’ai quelque chose qui me brûle le cœur depuis que vous me parlez, j’ai du feu sous la poitrine, j’étouffe, je désire ardemment tout cela, je m’en vais, oh ! Oui, je m’en vais. (elle s’arrête et dit avec profondeur :) oh ! Les belles choses ! Elle sort.

YUK, riant.

Voilà une commère qui, avant demain matin, se sera donnée à tous les gamins de la ville et à tous les valets de ferme.

La nuit ; la lune et les étoiles brillent ; silence des champs.

SMARH, seul. Il sort de sa cellule et marche.

Quelle est donc cette science qu'on m'a promise ? Où la trouve-t-on ? De qui la recevrai-je ? Par quels chemins vient-elle et où mène-t-elle ? Et au terme de la route, où est-on ? Tout cela, hélas ! Est un chaos pour moi et je n'y vois rien que des ténèbres.

Où vais-je ? Je ne sais, mais j'ai un désir d'apprendre, d'aller, de voir. Tout ce que je sais me semble petit et mesquin ; des besoins inaccoutumés s'élèvent dans mon cœur. Si j'allais apprendre l'infini, si j'allais vous connaître, ô monde sur lequel je marche ! Si j'allais vous voir, ô Dieu que j'adore ! Qu'est-ce donc ? Ma pensée se perd dans cet abîme. Est-ce que je n'étais pas heureux à vivre ainsi saintement, à prier Dieu, à secourir les hommes ? Pourquoi me faut-il quelque chose de plus ? L'homme est donc fait pour apprendre, puisqu'il en a le désir ?

Je n'ai que faire de ce que tous les hommes savent, je méprise leurs livres, témoignage de leurs erreurs. C'est une science divine qu'il me faut, quelque chose qui m'élève au-dessus des hommes et me rapproche de Dieu.

Oh ! Mon cœur se gonfle, mon âme s'ouvre, ma tête se perd ; je sens que je vais changer ; je vais peut-être mourir, c'est peut-être là le commencement d'éternité bienheureuse promise aux saints.

Un siècle s'est écoulé depuis que je pense, et déjà, depuis que cet inconnu m'a parlé, je me sens plus grand ; mon âme s'élargit peu à peu, comme l'horizon quand on marche, je sens que la création entière peut y entrer.

Autrefois je dormais de longues nuits pleines de sommeil et de repos, je me livrais aux songes vagues et dorés ; souvent je m'endormais en rêvant aux extases célestes, les saints venaient m'encourager à continuer ma vie et me montraient de loin l'avenir bienheureux et le chemin par lequel on y monte ; mais à peine ai-je fermé l'œil que des ardeurs m'ont tourmenté, je me suis levé et je suis venu. Autrefois l'air des nuits me faisait du bien, je me plaisais à cette molle langueur des sens qu'il procure, je me plongeais dans l'harmonie dont elle se compose, j'écoutais avec ravissement le bruit des feuilles des arbres que le vent agitait, l'eau qui coulait dans les vallées, j'aimais la mousse des bois que les rayons de la lune argentaient ; ma tête se levait avec amour vers ce ciel si bleu, avec ses étoiles aux mille clartés, et je me disais que l'éternité devait être aussi quelque chose de suave, de doux, de silencieux et d'immense, et tout cela sans vallée, sans arbre, sans feuilles, quelque chose de plus beau même que cet infini où je perdais mon regard ; aussi loin que la pensée de l'homme pouvait aller j'y perdais la mienne, et je sentais bien que cette harmonie du ciel et de la terre était faite pour l'âme.

Mais, pourtant, cette nuit est aussi belle que toutes les autres, ces fleurs sont aussi fraîches, l’azur du ciel est aussi bleu, les étoiles sont bien d’argent ; c’est bien cette lune dont mon regard rencontrait les rayons se jouant sur les fleurs. Pourquoi mon âme ne s’ouvre-t-elle plus au parfum de toutes ces choses ? Je suis pris de pitié pour tout cela, j’ai pour elles une envie jalouse.

Me voilà monté à ce je ne sais quel point pour me lancer dans l’infini. Oh ! Qui viendra me retirer de cette angoisse et me dire ce que je ferai dans une heure, où je serai, ce que j’aurai appris !

Où est donc l’être inconnu qui m’a bouleversé l’âme ?

Satan paraît.

SATAN, SMARH.

SATAN.

Me voilà ! J’avais promis de revenir, et je reviens.

SMARH.

Pourquoi faire ?

SATAN.

Pour vous, mon maître !

SMARH.

Pour moi ! Et que voulez-vous faire de moi ?

SATAN.

Ne vouliez-vous pas connaître la science ?

SMARH.

Quelle science ?

SATAN.

Mais il n’y en a qu’une, c’est la science, la vraie science.

SMARH.

Comment l’appelle-t-on donc ?

SATAN.

C’est la science.

SMARH.

Je ne la connais pas ; où la trouve-t-on ?

SATAN.

Dans l’infini.

SMARH.

L’infini, c’est donc elle ?

SATAN.

Et celui qui le connaît sait tout.

SMARH.

Mais il n’y a que Dieu.

SATAN.

Dieu ? Qu’est-ce ?

SMARH.

Dieu, c’est Dieu.

SATAN.

Non, Dieu, c’est cet infini, c’est cette science.

SMARH.

Dieu, c’est donc tout ?

SATAN.

Arrête, tu déraisonnes, ton esprit encore borné ne peut monter plus haut ; tu es comme les autres hommes, le monde est plus haut que ton intelligence ; c’est ton front trop élevé pour ton bras d’enfant ; tu te tuerais en voulant l’atteindre, il te faut quelqu’un qui te monte à la hauteur de toutes ces choses, ce sera moi.

SMARH.

Et que m’enseigneras-tu donc ?

SATAN.

Tout !

SMARH.

Viens donc !

SATAN.

Dans les airs. Satan et Smarh planent dans l’infini.

SMARH.

Depuis longtemps nous montons, ma tête tourne, il me semble que je vais tomber.

SATAN.

Tu as donc peur ?

SMARH.

Aucun homme n’arriva jamais si haut ; mon corps n’en peut plus, le vertige me prend, soutiens-moi.

SATAN.

Rapproche-toi plus près de moi, viens, cramponne-toi à mes pieds, si tu as peur.

SMARH.

étrange spectacle ! Voilà le globe qui est là, devant moi, et je l’embrasse d’un coup d’œil ; la terre me p27

semble entourée d’une auréole bleue et les étoiles fixées sur un fond noir.

SATAN.

Avais-tu donc rêvé quelquefois quelque chose d’aussi vaste ?

SMARH.

Oh ! Non, je ne croyais pas l’infini si grand !

SATAN.

Et tu prétendais cependant l’embrasser dans ta pensée, car chaque jour tu disais : Dieu ! éternité ! Et tu te perdais dans la grandeur de l’un, dans l’immensité de l’autre.

SMARH.

Cela est vrai. Une telle vue surpasse les bornes de l’âme, il faudrait être un dieu pour se le figurer. Comme cela est grand ! Comme les océans noirs paraissent petits ! (ils montent toujours.) eh quoi ? Nous montons toujours ? Mais où allons-nous ?

SATAN.

Pourquoi cette question d’enfant ? As-tu besoin de savoir où tu vas pour aller ? Est-ce que tu agis pour une cause quelconque ? Pourquoi le monde marche-t-il, lui ? Pourquoi vois-tu ce petit globe tourner toujours sur lui-même, si vite, avec ses habitants étourdis ?

SMARH.

Comme la création est vaste ! Je vois les planètes monter, et les étoiles courir, emportées, avec leurs feux. Quelle est donc la main qui les pousse ? La voûte s’élargit à mesure que je monte avec elle, les mondes roulent autour de moi, je suis donc le centre de cette création qui s’agite ! p28

Oh ! Comme mon cœur est large ! Je me sens supérieur à ce misérable monde perdu à des distances incommensurables sous mes pieds ; les planètes jouent autour de moi, les comètes passent en lançant leur chevelure de feux, et dans des siècles elles reviendront en courant toujours comme des cavales dans le champ de l’espace. Comme je me berce dans cette immensité ! Oui, cela est bien fait pour moi, l’infini m’entoure de toutes parts, je le dévore à mon aise. Ils montent toujours.

SATAN.

Es-tu content de mes promesses ?

SMARH.

Elles surpassent les bornes de tout ; ma poitrine étouffe, l’air siffle autour de moi et m’étourdit, je suis perdu, je roule.

SATAN.

Tu te plains donc ?

SMARH.

Je ne sais si c’est de la douleur ou de la joie.

SATAN.

Regarde donc comme tout est beau ! Mais pourquoi cela est-il fait ?

SMARH.

N’est-ce pas pour moi ?

SATAN.

Pour toi seul, n’est-ce pas ?

SMARH.

L’éternité, l’infini, c’est donc tout cela ?

SATAN.

Monte encore. p29

SMARH.

ô Dieu ! Et où m’arrêterai-je ?

SATAN.

Jamais ! Monte toujours !

SMARH.

Grâce !

SATAN.

Grâce ? Et pourquoi ? N’es-tu pas le roi de cette création ? Cette éternité qui t’entoure a été créée pour ton âme.

SMARH.

Mais cette création roule sur moi et m’écrase, cette éternité m’étourdit et me tue.

SATAN.

Qui t’a donc troublé ainsi ?

SMARH.

Ma tête est faible.

SATAN.

Vraiment ? Grandeur de l’homme ! Si je voulais pourtant, je la lâcherais, et tu tomberais, et ton corps serait dissous avant de s’être brisé au coin de quelque monde, pauvre carcasse humaine !

SMARH.

Quand donc, maître, nous arrêterons-nous ? Je vais mourir, cette immensité me fatigue. Tu es donc déjà las de l’éternité, toi ? Si tu étais comme moi, tu verrais ! p30

SMARH.

Oh ! L’éternité ! C’est donc cela, c’est donc le bonheur promis ?

SATAN.

Grand bonheur, n’est-ce pas ? De durer toujours ! Et c’est là ce que tu souhaites ! Tu veux l’éternité, toi, et tu es déjà las de tout cela ! Tu veux l’éternité, et la vie te fatigue ? Est-ce que cent fois déjà tu n’as pas souhaité d’être néant, de rester tranquille dans le vide, d’être même quelque chose de moins que la poussière d’un tombeau, car le souffle d’un enfant peut la remuer. Orgueil de la nature, trop fatiguée de vivre quelques minutes, et qui voudrait durer toujours !

C’est pour nous, vois-tu, que l’éternité est faite, pour nous autres, pour ces planètes qui brillent, pour ces étoiles d’or, pour cette lune d’argent, pour tout cela qui remue, qui gémit, qui roule, pour moi qui mange et qui dévore toujours.

Oh ! Si tu étais assez grand pour tout voir, tu verrais que tout n’est qu’une larme ! Si tu pouvais tout entendre, tu n’entendrais qu’un seul cri de douleur : c’est la voix de la création qui bénit son dieu.

SMARH.

Qui donc a fait cela ? Est-ce lui qui mourait aux Oliviers ? Est-ce lui qui parlait aux armées d’Israël dans le désert, quand, le soir, les vents amenaient les bruits vagues de l’horizon avec les paroles du seigneur ? Quel est celui dont tout cela est sorti ? Et tous ces mondes sont-ils partis dans les vents, comme le sable de la mer quand on ouvre les mains ? Est-ce cette voix qui gronde dans la tempête, qui chante dans les feuilles ? Sont-ce des rayons de soleil qui dorent les nuages ? Et où est-il ? Dans quel coin de l’espace ?

SATAN.

Et si tu le voyais, que dirais-tu ? Qu’as-tu besoin p31

de le connaître ? Quelle est cette démence qui te ronge ?

Il faut donc que tu connaisses tout ! Et si tu arrivais à ne voir dans l’infini qu’un vaste néant ? Va, laisse celui qui a fait tous les grains de poussière brillants, il a maintenant pitié de son œuvre, il s’inquiète peu si le vermisseau mange et s’il meurt ; il est là-haut, bien haut sur nous tous, il s’étend sur l’immensité, il la couvre de sa robe comme un linceul de mort, et il regarde les mondes rouler dans le vide ; il est seul dans cette immobile éternité ; il était grand, il a créé, et sa création est le malheur.

SMARH.

Eh quoi ! Est-ce qu’il ne s’inquiète pas de sa création ? Est-ce qu’il ne travaille pas cette éternité ?

SATAN.

Oui, pour la troubler, comme un pied de géant qui se remue dans le sable.

SMARH.

Je croyais que sa volonté faisait marcher tout cela, et que les mondes allaient à sa parole, et que les astres s’abaissaient devant son regard.

SATAN.

Non ! Cela est, vois-tu, cela existe par des lois qui furent posées irrévocablement le jour maudit où tout fut créé, et le destin pèse et manie l’éternité, comme il manie et ploie l’existence des hommes ; lui-même ne saurait se soustraire à la fatalité de son œuvre.

SMARH.

Cependant, il fut un temps où tout cela n'était pas ! Qu'était-ce donc alors ?

SATAN.

Le vide ! p32

SMARH.

Le vide était donc plus vide encore ! Cet infini, dans lequel nous roulons, était plus large encore ! Cela était plus grand et plus beau, n'est-ce pas ?

SATAN.

Bien plus beau, car nous dormions, nous tous, dans la mort d'où nous devions naître.

SMARH.

Et ses bornes étaient encore plus loin ?

SATAN.

Je t'ai déjà dit qu'il n'y avait point de bornes à cela.

SMARH.

Mais le chaos qui existait, qui l'avait fait ? Il avait fallu un dieu pour le faire.

SATAN.

Il s'était fait de lui-même.

SMARH.

Quand donc ? Oh ! L'abîme ! Oh ! L'abîme ! J'aurais bien voulu vivre alors ! Comme j'aurais alors nagé là dedans, comme mon âme se serait déployée dans cette immense nuit éternelle !

SATAN.

Hélas ! Depuis, la machine est faite, elle roule, elle broie, elle tourne toujours.

SMARH.

Ne se lassera-t-elle jamais ?

SATAN.

Je l'espère, car l'éternité… p33

SMARH.

Oh ! Oui, ce mot-là est effrayant, n'est-ce pas ? Et il ferait trembler, quand même il ne serait que du vide.

SATAN.

Oh ! Oui, tous ces mondes se lasseront de tourner et de briller, et ils tomberont en poussière, usés comme des ossements ; oui, ce soleil, un soir, s'éteindra dans la nuit du néant ; oh ! Oui, alors les larmes seront taries, tout sera vieux, tout croulera, et lui peut-être…

SMARH.

Lui, l'être suprême, mourir comme son œuvre ?

SATAN.

Pourquoi non ?

SMARH.

Eh quoi ! L’éternité aurait une borne ?

SATAN.

Oh ! Quelle suprême joie de se dire que lui aussi périra et qu’un jour cette essence du mal, le souffle de vie et de mort, sera passé comme les autres ! De penser que cette voix qui fait trembler se taira ! Que cette lumière qui éblouit ne sera plus ! Oh ! Tu roulerais donc aussi comme nous, toi, comme de la poussière, et une parcelle de ma cendre rencontrerait la tienne à cette place où fument les débris de ton œuvre ! Tu serais notre égal dans le néant, toi qui nous en fais sortir ! Esprit puissant, né pour créer et pour tuer, pour faire naître, pour anéantir, tu serais anéanti aussi ! Quoi ! Ce nom qui agitait les océans, le monde, les astres, l’infini, néant aussi ! ô béatitude de la mort, quand viendras-tu donc ? ô délices de la poussière et du sépulcre, que je vous envie ! p34

SMARH.

Lui aussi est soumis à quelque chose ? Je croyais qu’il était maître.

SATAN.

Non, il n’est pas maître, car je le maudis tout à mon aise ; non, il n’est pas maître, car il ne pourrait se détruire.

SMARH.

Et nous sommes donc libres.

SATAN.

Tu penses que la liberté est pour nous ? Qu’est-ce que cette liberté ?

SMARH.

Oui, nous sommes libres, n’est-ce pas ? Car sur la terre je me sentais enchaîné à mille chaînes, retenu par mille entraves, tout m’arrêtait ; et tandis que mon esprit volait jusqu’à ces régions, mon corps ne pouvait s’élever à un pouce de cette terre que je foulais. Mais maintenant je me sens plus grand, plus libre ; je me sens respirer plus à l’aise, mon esprit s’ouvre à tous les mystères, nous voilà sur les limites de la création, je vais les franchir peut-être. Quelle grandeur autour de nous ! Tout cela brille et nous éclaire. Est-ce que nous ne pouvons errer à loisir dans cet infini ? Est-ce que nous ne marchons pas à plaisir sur cette éternité qui contient tout le passé et l’avenir, les germes et les débris ? Vois donc comme ces nuages se déploient mollement sous nos pieds, comme leurs replis sont moelleux et larges ! Vois comme ce firmament est bleu et profond, comme ces étoiles roulent et brillent, comme la lune est blanche et comme le soleil a des gerbes d’or sous nos pieds ! Et il me semble que cela est fait pour p35

moi, car pourquoi donc seraient-ils alors ? La création doit avoir un autre but que sa vie même.

SATAN.

Tu es libre ? Tu es grand ? Vraiment non, la liberté n'est ni pour ces astres qui roulent dans le sentier tracé dans l'espace et qu'ils gravissent chaque jour, ni pour toi qui es né et qui mourras, ni pour moi qui suis né un jour et qui ne mourrai jamais, peut-être. Quelle grandeur d'errer ainsi dans ce vide, d'être de la poussière au vent, du néant dans du néant, un homme dans l'infini !

SMARH.

Mais notre course s'avance, combien de choses nous avons déjà passées ! Si je redescends sur le monde, il me sera trop étroit, je serai gêné dans son atmosphère d'insectes, moi qui vis dans l'infini. Mais où allons-nous ? Qui nous emporte toujours vers là-haut sans que rien n'apparaisse ?

SATAN.

Eh bien, tu irais toujours ainsi des siècles, des éternités, et toujours ce vide s'élargirait devant toi. Oui, le néant est plus grand que l'esprit de l'homme, que la création tout entière ; il l'entoure de toutes parts, il le dévore, il s'avance devant lui ; le néant a l'infini, l'homme n'a que la vie d'un jour.

SMARH.

Hélas ! Tout n'est donc qu'abîme sans fin !

SATAN.

Et des dieux y perdraient leur existence à le sonder.

SMARH.

Jamais, c'est donc le seul mot qui soit vrai ? p36

SATAN.

Oui, le seul qui existe, jeté comme un défi éternel à la face de tout ce qui a vie ; oui, tu vois ces gouffres ouverts sous tes pieds, cette immensité pendue sous nous, celle qui nous entoure, celle qui s'élargit sur nos têtes, eh bien, entre dans ton cœur et tu y verras des abîmes plus profonds encore, des gouffres plus terribles.

SMARH.

Comment ? Dans mon propre cœur à moi ? Je n'y avais jamais songé. Je sais qu'il est des hommes que leur pensée a effrayés et qui ont eu peur d'eux-mêmes, comme j'ai peur de ces incommensurables précipices.

SATAN.

Oui, sonde ta pensée, chaque pensée te montrera des horizons qu'elle ne pourra atteindre, des hauteurs où elle ne pourra monter, et, plus que tout cela, des gouffres dont tu auras peur et que tu voudrais combler. Tu fuiras, mais en vain ; à chaque instant tu te sentiras le pied glisser et tu rouleras dans ton âme, brisé !

SMARH.

Hélas ! L'âme de l'homme et la nature de Dieu sont donc également obscures ?

SATAN.

Incomplètes et mauvaises l’une et l’autre.

SMARH.

Je les croyais toutes deux grandes et vraies.

SATAN.

Tu pensais donc que tu étais bien sur la terre ? p37

SMARH.

Oui !

SATAN.

En effet, tu étais un saint.

SMARH.

Qui plaçait tout en Dieu.

SATAN.

Ah ! Cela est vrai, je me rappelle ! Tu étais donc heureux, toi, tu jouissais d’une béatitude pure et éternelle, tandis que, tout autour de toi, tout ce qui vivait se tordait dans une angoisse infinie, éternelle. Quoi ! Tu n’avais jamais senti tout ce qu’il y avait de faux dans la vie, d’étroit, de mesquin, de manqué dans l’existence ; la nature te paraissait belle avec ses rides et ses blessures, ses mensonges ; le monde te semblait plein d’harmonie, de vérité, de grâce, lui, avec ses cris, son sang qui coule, sa bave de fou, ses entrailles pourries ; tout cela était grand, ce monceau de cendres ! Ce mensonge était vrai ! Cette dérision te semblait bonne !

SMARH.

Mais depuis que vous êtes avec moi, tout est changé, maître, je ne sais combien de choses sont sorties de moi, combien de choses y sont entrées ; il me semble, depuis, que l’infini s’est élargi, mais est devenu plus obscur.

SATAN.

C’est cela, vois-tu ; à mesure qu’on avance, l’horizon s’agrandit ; on marche, on avance, mais le désert court devant vous, le gouffre s’élargit. La vérité est une ombre, l’homme tend les bras pour la saisir, elle le fuit, il court toujours. p38

SMARH.

Je croyais l’avoir en entier, je croyais qu’il n’y avait que Dieu.

SATAN.

Tu n’avais donc jamais entendu parler du diable ?

SMARH.

Oui, par les pécheurs qui venaient vers moi, mais il s’était toujours écarté de mon cœur, tant j’étais pur.

SATAN.

Pur ? Mais il n’y a rien que le souffle du démon ne puisse flétrir. Tu ne savais pas qu'il remue tout dans ses mains armées de griffes, et que tout ce qu'il remuait il le déchirait, les âmes et les corps, l'infini et la terre ? Partout est la puissance du mal, elle s'étend sur tout cela, et l'homme s'y jette, avide de pâture et d'erreurs.

SMARH.

Le péché seul est pouvoir du démon, c'est lui qui l'enfante ; mais le bien ?

SATAN.

Où est-il ? Dis-moi donc quelque chose qui soit bien ? Pourquoi cela est bien ? Qui donc a établi les lois du bien et du mal ? Montre-moi dans la création quelque chose fait pour ton bonheur, quelque chose de vrai, de saint, d'heureux ? Dis-moi, n'as-tu jamais senti ta volonté s'arrêter à de certaines limites et ne pouvoir les franchir, tes larmes couler, la tristesse inonder ton âme, le mystère apparaître et t'envelopper ? N'as-tu jamais contemplé le regard creux d'une tête de mort et tout ce qu'il y avait d'inculte et de néant dans ces os vides ? Pourquoi donc les fleurs que tu portes à tes narines se flétrissent-elles le soir ? Pourquoi, quand p39

tu prends un serpent, il te pique ? Pourquoi, quand tu aimes un homme, te trahit-il ? Pourquoi, quand tu veux marcher, la terre s'abaisse-t-elle sous ton pied ? Pourquoi, quand tu veux marcher sur les flots, s'abaissent-ils sous toi pour t'engloutir ? Pourquoi faut-il te vêtir, te nourrir toi-même, avoir besoin de quelque chose, dormir, marcher, manger ? Pourquoi sens-tu le poignard entrer dans tes chairs ? Pourquoi tout ce qui est autour de toi s'est-il conjuré pour te faire souffrir ? Pourquoi vis-tu enfin pour mourir ?

SMARH.

Oui, le repos est dans la tombe.

SATAN.

Non ! Je trouble la paix des tombes, moi ! Non ! La mort donne la vie, et la création serait de la corruption, le fumier fertilise et le bourbier féconde.

SMARH.

N'est-ce pas la perpétuité de l'existence, l'immortalité des choses ?

SATAN.

Oui, l'immortalité des vers de la tombe et des pourritures. Il faut que tout vive, que tout renaisse et souffre encore.

SMARH.

Pourquoi, comme tu le dis, cela est-il manqué ? Pourquoi le souffle du mal féconde-t-il la terre ? Pourquoi n'est-ce pas comme je le pensais ? Pourquoi es-tu venu me troubler dans ma béatitude, me réveiller de ce songe ? Placé sur cet infini, je sens mon âme défaillir de tristesse et d'amertume.

SATAN.

C’est le mystère du mensonge et de la vie ; le p40

vrai n’est que le vautour que tu as en toi et qui te ronge.

SMARH.

Dieu est donc méchant ? Moi qui le bénissais !

SATAN.

Tu ne peux savoir si son œuvre est bonne ou mauvaise, car tu n’as pas vécu, tu es à peine un enfant sorti de ses langes et de sa crédulité. Oui, celui qui a fait tout cela est peut-être le démon de quelque enfer perdu, plus grand que celui qui hurle maintenant, et la création elle-même n’est peut-être qu’un vaste enfer dont il est le dieu, et où tout est puni de vivre.

SMARH.

Oh ! Mon Dieu ! Mon Dieu ! J’aimais à croire, à rêver à ton paradis, aux joies promises ; j’aimais à te prier, j’aimais à t’aimer ; cette foi me remplissait l’âme, et maintenant j’ai l’âme vide, plus vide et plus déserte que les gouffres perdus dans l’immensité qui m’enveloppe. J’aimais à voir les roses où ta rosée déposait des larmes qui tombaient avec les parfums qu’elles contiennent, j’aimais à les cueillir, à me plonger dans le nuage d’encens… à répandre des fleurs sur ton autel.

SATAN.

Va, les fleurs les plus belles sont celles qui croissent sur les tombes ; elles rendent hommage à la majesté du néant, elles parfument les charognes sous les couvercles de leurs pierres.

SMARH.

Je pensais que tout était grand, insensé que j’étais ! Sot que j’étais dans mon cœur ! Ce bonheur était celui de la brute. Le bonheur est donc pour l’ignorance ; maintenant que je sais, je vois qu’il n’y a rien, et p41

cependant j’ai peur. C’est donc le mal qui a créé toutes ces beautés, c’est l’enfer qui a fait toutes ces choses ? Oh ! Non, non, j’aime encore, j’ai en moi l’amour qui gonfle ma poitrine. Cependant celui qui me conduit jusqu’ici est fort et vrai, sans cela l’aurait-il pu ?

SATAN.

Oui, celui qui te mène ici, celui qui se joue avec toi et qui fait trembler le monde, est fort car il brave tout, et vrai car il souffre. Ils montent encore.

SMARH.

Oh ! Grâce ! Grâce ! Assez ! Assez ! Je tremble, j’ai peur, il me semble que cette voûte va s’écrouler sur moi, que l’infini va me manger, que je vais m’anéantir aussitôt !

SATAN.

Et tout à l’heure tu te sentais grand ! à la stupeur première avait succédé l'enivrement de la science, tu te regardais déjà comme un dieu pour être monté si haut dans l'infini, et tu as peur de ce qui faisait ta gloire !

SMARH.

Plus on avance dans l'infini, plus on avance dans la terreur.

SATAN.

Quelle terreur peut assaillir la créature de Dieu ? Tu étais si grand, si haut, si heureux ! Et maintenant tu es si bas, si tremblant, si petit ! C'est donc cela, un homme ? De la grandeur et de la petitesse, de l'insolence et de la bêtise ! Orgueil et néant, c'est là ton existence.

SMARH.

Non ! Non ! Je ne sais rien, et c'est cela qui me fait mal ; je ne sais rien, l'angoisse me ronge, et tu sais, toi ! Mais pourquoi donc ces mondes ? … pourquoi p42

tout ? … pourquoi suis-je là ? … oh ! Il y a deux infinis qui me perdent : l'un dans mon âme, il me ronge ; l'autre autour de moi, il va m'écraser.

SATAN.

Ah ! Ton ignorance te pèse et les ténèbres te font horreur ? Tu l'as voulu !

SMARH.

Qu'ai-je voulu ?

SATAN.

La science. Eh bien, la science, c'est le doute, c'est le néant, c'est le mensonge, c'est la vanité.

SMARH.

Mieux vaudrait le néant !

SATAN.

Il existe, le néant, car la science n'est pas. Veux-tu monter encore ? Veux-tu avancer toujours ? Oh ! L'horrible mystère de tout cela, si tu le connaissais ! Ta peau deviendrait froide, et tes cheveux se dresseraient, et tu mourrais, épouvanté de tes pensées.

SMARH.

Oh ! Non, non, j'ai peur ! Cet infini me mange, me dévore ; je brûle, je tremble de m'y perdre, de rouler comme ces planches emportées par les vents et de brûler comme elles par des feux qui éclairent ; assez ! Grâce !

SATAN.

Cependant je t'aurais poussé bien loin dans le sombre infini.

SMARH.

Mais toujours dans le néant. Non, non, fais-moi redescendre sur ma terre, rends-moi ma cellule, ma p43

croix de bois, rends-moi ma vallée pleine de fleurs, rends-moi la paix, l’ignorance. (ils descendent.) merci ! Ou plutôt fais-moi connaître le monde, mène-moi dans la vie ; tu m’as montré Dieu, montre-moi les hommes.

SATAN.

Oui, viens, suis-moi, je te montrerai le monde et tu reculeras peut-être aussi épouvanté ; viens, viens, je vais te montrer l’enfer de la vie ; tu vois les tortures, les larmes, les cris, viens, je vais déployer le linceul, en secouer la poussière, je vais étendre la nappe de l’orgie pour le festin ; viens à moi, créature de Dieu, viens dans les bras du démon, qui te berce et t’endort. La mer, des prairies, de hautes falaises ; temps calme ; le soleil se couche sous les flots.

SMARH.

Me voilà enfin sur la terre ! L’homme naturellement s’y sent bien, il y est né.

SATAN.

Pourquoi la maudit-il toujours ?

SMARH.

Moi, je suis fait pour y vivre ; comme cette nature est belle !

SATAN.

Et comme tu la comprends bien, n’est-ce pas ? Comme ses mystères te sont dévoilés ?

SMARH.

Tu as beau m’entourer de tes subterfuges et de tes sophismes, je ne suis plus ici dans les régions du ciel, où tous ces mondes errants m’effrayaient ; p44

non, j’étais fait pour celui-ci, c’est sur lui qu’il faut vivre.

SATAN.

Et mourir aussi, n’est-ce pas ? Il y a longtemps que tu y respires, que tu y souffres, créature humaine ; explique-moi donc le mystère d’un de ces grains de sable que tu foules à tes pieds ou celui d’une goutte d’eau de l’océan ?

SMARH.

Mais regarde toi-même comme la mer est douce et comme les rayons du soleil lui donnent des teintes roses sous ces ondes vertes ! Sens-tu le parfum de la vague qui mouille le sable, comme les flots sont longs et forts, comme ils roulent, comme ils s’étendent ? Vois donc cette bande d’écume qui festonne le rivage avec des coquilles et des herbes ; regarde comme cela est loin et large, quelle beauté ! Nieras-tu que mon âme ne s’ouvre pas à un pareil spectacle, quand j’entends cette mer qui roule et meurt à mes pieds, quand je vois cette immensité que j’embrasse de l’œil ?

SATAN.

Aussi loin que ton œil peut voir, oui ; tu vois l’infini, jusqu’à l’endroit où ton esprit s’arrête, et tu crois l’avoir saisi quand tu as glissé dessus.

SMARH.

Mais non, tout cela est trop beau pour n’être pas fait pour l’homme, pour son bonheur, pour sa joie. Vois donc aussi ces hautes falaises blanches sur lesquelles plane la mouette aux cris sauvages, aux ailes noires ; vois plus loin ce pâturage touffu avec ses herbes tassées et ses fleurs ouvertes.

SATAN.

Et regarde aussi comme tu es petit au pied des p45

rochers, comme tu es petit même auprès des brins d’herbe que foulent les bœufs et qui se redressent après. Oui, tu es plus faible que ces cailloux que la mer roule en criant, comme si elle avait des chaînes dans le ventre.

SMARH.

Mais le caillou est immobile et mon pied le pousse.

SATAN.

Et toi donc ? N’y a-t-il pas un pied aussi qui t’écrase sous son talon invisible ? écrase donc un grain de sable, homme fort !

SMARH.

Mais je marche sur l’océan, je me dirige sans sentier et sans chemin.

SATAN.

Traces-en un qui dure une seconde, avec la quille de mille flottes.

SMARH.

J’évite sa colère.

SATAN.

Fais-en une semblable.

SMARH.

J’échappe à ses coups.

SATAN.

Quand ils ne sont plus. Tout cela, te dis-je, m’a été donné par Dieu. N’ai-je pas une intelligence qui m’a fait le roi de la création, qui m’a placé au premier rang, qui dompte la nature, la maîtrise et la bâillonne ? N’est-ce pas moi qui remue p46

la terre, bâtis des villes, dirige le cours des fleuves ? Dis, nieras-tu la puissance de l’homme ?

SATAN.

Non ! Honneur à l’homme qui bâtit, bouleverse, remue, qui s’agite, qui construit, qui meurt ! Honneur aussi à la mort qui fait les poussières et les ruines, qui dévore le passé, qui abat les palais construits ! Honneur à la nature qui fait naître l’homme, qui le conduit avec des guides de bronze, qui le maîtrise par tous les sens, qui le tourmente sous toutes les formes, qui le fait mourir, le dissout et le reprend dans son sein ! Puissance et éternité pour l’homme qui vit et qui souffre, pour ses œuvres indestructibles, pour ses ouvrages sans fin, pour sa poussière immortelle !

SMARH.

Le peu de durée de nos œuvres n’en prouve pas moins la puissance.

SATAN.

C’est-à-dire que ta force prouve ta faiblesse ; tu es éternel et tu meurs, tu es fort et tout te dompte, tes œuvres sont durables et elles périssent ; le palais que tu as habité dure moins que la tombe qui renferme ta poussière, et l’un et l’autre deviennent poussière aussi ; puis rien, comme toi.

SMARH.

Les œuvres de l’homme ont changé la face du globe.

SATAN.

Oui, la terre avait des forêts et tu les as coupées, les prairies avaient de l’herbe et tes troupeaux l’ont mangée, elle renfermait un principe de création et tu l’as épuisée par la culture. Tu crois que tes moyens artificiels et le misérable fumier que tu répands feront p47

une création quelconque, une fécondité, non, non, te dis-je ; jeté sur le monde, tu as voulu, dans ton orgueil immense, dompter cette nature qui t’environne, tu as voulu être grand auprès de cette grandeur, tu as cru être immortel auprès de la vie, et tu n’as que la faiblesse et le néant.

SMARH.

Oh ! Tu mens ! Je me sens fort.

SATAN.

Vraiment ! Comment donc ?

SMARH.

Sur tout ; sur les animaux d’abord.

SATAN.

Par ta ruse, c’est-à-dire que tu as pris la pierre et tu l’as élevée unie, mais la pierre tombe et roule, et les champs sont maintenant où il y avait des tours, et les pyramides sont moins hautes que les herbes, sous la terre ; tu as resserré les fleuves, mais les fleuves se sont répandus dans tes campagnes ; tu as voulu arrêter la mer dans des quais, et tu t’es cru grand parce que chaque jour elle venait battre à la même place, mais peu à peu elle a mangé lentement la terre, chaque jour elle la dévore.

SMARH.

Est-ce que tout, au contraire, dans la création n’est pas ordonné sur une échelle de forces et d’intelligences successives ?

SATAN.

Oui, et de misères. Continue.

SMARH.

Est-ce que je ne suis pas supérieur au cheval, et le cheval à la fourmi, et la fourmi au caillou ? p48

SATAN.

Oui, puisque tu es sur le cheval et que tu l'accables, et que le cheval écrase la fourmi, et que la fourmi creuse la terre.

SMARH.

Est-ce que je n'ai pas une âme, une âme qui entend, qui sent, qui voit ?

SATAN.

Qui souffre aussi ! Oui, tu es plus grand par tes malheurs que tout ce qui t'entoure, grandeur digne d'envie ! Le géant souffre plus que les insectes ! Tu te crois le maître de l'océan, de la terre, tu fonds les métaux, tu cisèles la pierre, tu fends l'onde, eh bien, quand la fournaise bout et que l'airain ruisselle à flots rouges, quand la pierre crie sous ton marteau, quand la terre gémit sous tes coups, quand les vagues murmurent en battant la proue de tes navires, oui, tout cela souffre moins que toi seul, ici, sans travail, sans rien qui te déchire la peau, ni t'arrache les entrailles, ni te lime la chair, mais seulement les yeux levés vers le ciel, l'abîme, et demandant pourquoi cela ? Pourquoi ceci ?

SMARH.

C'est vrai, comment donc ?

SATAN.

C'est que le ciel te montre ses feux, mais ses feux te brûlent ; que la mer s'étend devant toi, ouvre sa surface, mais elle t'engloutit ; c'est que ton intelligence te sert, mais te trahit et te fait souffrir ; c'est que l'infini est ouvert devant toi, mais sans bornes et sans fin, et qu'il te perd. Les oiseaux de nuit, des vautours, des mouettes sortent des rochers et viennent planer alentour. De temps en temps ils s'abattent sur le rivage en troupes et vont tirer des varechs ou des débris dans la mer. Les vagues bondissent, et leur bruit retentit dans les cavernes. p49

SMARH.

Cette nature est sombre.

SATAN.

Tout à l'heure tu la trouvais si riante.

SMARH.

Il en est ainsi quand le soleil n'éclaire plus et que les ténèbres enveloppent la terre.

SATAN.

Comme des langes qui la couvrent. L'écume saute sur les rochers à fleur d'eau et, quand le flot s'est retiré, un silence se fait et l'on n'entend plus que le clapotement, toujours diminuant, des derniers battements de la vague entre les grosses pierres, puis, au loin, un bruit sourd. Les oiseaux de proie redoublent leurs cris déchirants.

SMARH.

ô puissance de Dieu, que vous êtes grande !

SATAN.

Et terrible, n’est-ce pas ? Ne sens-tu rien dans ton cœur qui fléchisse et qui te crie que tu es faible, humble et petit devant tout cela ?

SMARH.

Oui, la nature fait peur ; ici tout n’est donc que crainte, appréhension ?

SATAN.

Quand l’homme marche, son pied glisse, il tombe ; quand sa pensée travaille, il glisse aussi, il tombe encore, il roule toujours, tu sais. Les étoiles disparaissent au ciel, de gros nuages passent sur la lune, la lueur blanche de celle-ci perce à travers ; bientôt les ténèbres couvrent le ciel, et l’obscurité n’est interrompue que par les lignes blanches que font les vagues sur les brisants. On entend des cris sauvages, les vagues sont furieuses. p50

SMARH.

Comme la mer mugit ! Sa colère est terrible.

SATAN.

Ce sont les œuvres de Dieu, elles frappent, elles déracinent, elles dévorent. Vois comme les rochers sont frappés ; entends-tu l’océan qui les ébranle et qui voudrait les déraciner pour les rouler dans son sein avec les grains de sable ?

SMARH.

Comme les vagues sont hautes ! (il se rapproche de lui.) celle-ci monte, elle va me prendre dans son vaste filet d’écume pour me rouler avec elle… ah ! Elle tombe, elle meurt… au secours ! Au secours ! Il veut fuir. Satan l’arrête.

SATAN.

Que crains-tu donc, homme fort ? Tâche de donner un coup de pied à l’océan, ta colère ne fera pas seulement jaillir un peu d’eau. Smarh veut courir, il trébuche, il tombe sur les pierres ; Satan le traîne pour le relever. Les vautours battent des ailes contre les rochers et ne peuvent monter plus haut. De grosses vagues noires se gonflent en silence et s’abaissent, la mer semble lassée.

SMARH.

Grâce ! Grâce ! Satan le traîne sur les genoux. Debout ! Debout ! Homme fort, la tête haute devant la tempête ! Est-ce de cela que tu as peur ? Une vague, qu’est-ce donc ? N’as-tu pas une âme immortelle ? Que te fait la vie ?

SMARH.

Pitié ! Pitié ! p51

SATAN.

Allons donc, image de Dieu, sois aussi grand que la pierre qui résiste.

SMARH.

Tout me manque. Si cette mer allait avancer encore ! Si ces rochers allaient marcher vers le rivage ! … la mer va m’entraîner ! Quels horribles cris ! Les herbes marines, déracinées, flottent sur la mousse des flots ; les vagues sont fortes et cadencées ; un bruit rauque se fait entendre quand le flot se retire. On dirait que la mer veut arracher le rivage, elle se cramponne aux galets, mais elle glisse dessus.

SMARH.

Comme la création est méchante ! Est-ce qu’il y a eu toujours autant de fureur dans l’existence, autant de cruauté dans ce qui est fort ? Pitié, mon maître ! Dis-moi donc si cela dure toujours, si cette colère est éternelle.

SATAN.

Voyons ! Toujours ! Smarh, ne t’ai-je pas dit que le mal était l’infini ?

SMARH.

Non, l’homme n’est point cela. Son corps tombe sous les coups, son cœur se ploie sous la douleur.

SATAN.

Car son corps n’est point d’acier, mais son cœur est de bronze au dehors et de boue au dedans. Oh ! Pauvre homme ! Tu es bien pétri de terre, l’eau et le soleil te soulagent et te nuisent.

SMARH.

Pourquoi donc tant de maux ? Pourquoi la vie est-elle ainsi pleine de douleurs ? p52

SATAN.

Pourquoi la vie elle-même ? Pourquoi la tempête ? Si ce n’est pour faire et pour briser l’une et l’autre.

SMARH.

Et cela est depuis des siècles, et la terre n’est pas usée !

SATAN.

Non, mais chaque pied qui a marché sur elle a creusé son pas ineffaçable ; celui du mal l’a percée jusque dans ses entrailles.

SMARH.

L’océan est ce qu’il y a de plus grand.

SATAN.

Oui, c’est ce qu’il y a de plus vide. Quelle colère, n’est-ce pas ? Il est jaloux de cette terre, depuis ce jour où il fut refoulé sur son lit de sable où il se tord, et comprimé dans ses abîmes qui engloutissent les flottes et les armées, car, avant, il allait, il battait sans rivages, et le choc de ses flots n’avait point de termes, les vagues ne couraient point vers la terre, elles ne mouraient jamais, et la même pouvait rouler, rouler, pendant des siècles sur la surface unie de l’onde ; un immense calme régnait sur cette immensité.

SMARH.

Ne parles-tu pas de ces époques inconnues aux mortels, où la création s’agitait dans ses germes, où la mer roulait des vallées, et où la terre avait des océans sur elle ?

SATAN.

Oui, alors que les vagues remuaient dans leurs plis la fange sur laquelle on a bâti des empires. p53

SMARH.

Il y avait donc du repos alors… est-ce que le chaos était bon ?

SATAN.

C’était l’autre éternité, une éternité qui dort et sans rien qu’elle broie.

SMARH.

Et pas un cri sur tant de surface ? Pas une torture dans toutes ces entrailles ?

SATAN.

Non, la terre et la mer étaient de plomb et semblaient mêlées l’une à l’autre, comme de la salive sur de la poussière.

SMARH.

Et quand la création apparut, la terre fut retirée, et l’océan refoulé dans ses fureurs ; depuis, il s’y roule toujours. Un jour cependant il en sortit.

SMARH.

Au déluge, on me l’a dit, quand tous les hommes furent maudits et que la corruption eut gagné tous les cœurs.

SATAN.

Alors les fleuves versaient leurs eaux dans les campagnes ; leur lit, ce fut les plaines ; la mer tira d’elle-même des océans entiers, elle monta d’abord plus haut que de coutume, elle gagna les cités et entra dans les palais, elle battit le pied des trônes et en enleva le velours. Le trône croyait qu’elle s’arrêterait là, et elle monta plus haut, elle gagna les déserts et vint aux pyramides ; les pyramides croyaient qu’elle mourrait p54

à leurs pieds, et ses plus petites vagues surpassèrent leur sommet ; elle gagna les montagnes, et elle s’élevait toujours comme un voyageur qui monte, elle entraînait avec elle les villes et les tours, et les hommes pleurant. Alors on entendit des bruits étranges et des cris à bouleverser des mondes. Tu les eusses vus se cramponner à l’existence qui leur échappait ; ils gravissaient les montagnes, mais la mer montait derrière eux, les entraînait et les roulait avec la poussière des choses éteintes. Alors quand les pyramides, les forêts, les montagnes furent arrachées comme l’herbe, et qu’une grande plaine verte, avec des débris de tombeaux et de trônes, s’étendit de tous côtés, les vagues vinrent à battre, la tempête se fit, et l’immense joie de la mort s’étendit sur cette solitude.

SMARH.

Et cela, hélas ! Ne dura pas toujours ; la création n’est donc faite que pour renaître de sa propre mort et souffrir de sa propre vie. Horreur que ce déluge ! Pourquoi tant de malheurs ?

SATAN.

Mais le déluge dure encore.

SMARH.

Comment cela ?

SATAN.

L’océan des iniquités a baigné tous les cœurs, et l’immensité du mal ne s’étendit-elle pas sur la terre ? D’abord il emporta quelques hommes, puis il vint dans les villes, il monta sur les trônes, il emporta les palais, à lui les cités ! Il gagna les campagnes, les forêts, et chaque jour il s’étend comme un nouveau déluge, comme une mer qui monte. p55

SMARH.

Cet océan dont tu parles est donc aussi fort que celui-ci ?

SATAN.

Plus vaste encore, et ses tempêtes font plus de ravages.

SMARH.

Et où donc chercher un refuge si tout n’est que néant, corruption, abîme sans fond ?

SATAN.

Ah ! Où donc ? Que sais-je ?

SMARH.

Le bonheur n’est donc qu’un mensonge ?

SATAN.

Non, il existe.

SMARH.

N’est-ce pas dans la joie, dans le bruit, dans l’ambition, dans les passions qui remuent le cœur et le font vivre ?

SATAN.

Oui, dans tout cela, joies ou peines, voluptés ou supplices, le cœur se gonfle et s’agite.

SMARH.

Mais je voudrais voir le monde, car je ne sais rien de la vie.

SATAN.

Il est facile de tout t’apprendre, je vais t’y conduire. Il appelle : “Yuk ! Yuk !” Yuk paraît.

YUK.

Quoi, mon maître ? p56

SATAN.

On te demande ce que c’est que la vie.

YUK.

Qui cela ? Qui fait une pareille question ? (Satan lui désigne Smarh.) vraiment ! (riant.) la vie ? Ah ! Par Dieu ou par le diable, c’est fort drôle, fort amusant, fort réjouissant, fort vrai ; la farce est bonne, mais la comédie est longue. La vie, c’est un linceul taché de vin, c’est une orgie où chacun se soûle, chante et a des nausées ; c’est un verre brisé, c’est un tonneau de vin âcre, et celui qui le remue trop avant y trouve souvent bien de la lie et de la boue.

Tu veux connaître cela ? Pardieu ! C’est facile ; mais tu auras le mal de mer avant cinq minutes et une envie de dormir, car tout cela te fatiguera vite, car l’existence te paraîtra une mauvaise ratatouille d’auberge, qu’on jette à chacun et que chacun repousse, repu aux premières cuillerées ; car les femmes te paraîtront de maigres mauviettes, les hommes de singuliers moineaux, le trône une gelée bien tremblante, le pouvoir une crème peu faite, et les voluptés de tristes entremets.

Un digne cuisinier, c’est vous, mon maître, qui nous servez toujours ce qu’il y a de plus beau sous le ciel ; vous, qui donnez les jolies pécheresses, laissant aux anges du ciel les dévotes jaunies. à nous, dont la nappe est faite avec les linceuls des rois, qui nous asseyons au large festin de la mort sur les trônes et les pyramides, qui buvons le meilleur sang des batailles, qui rongeons les plus hautes têtes de rois et qui, bien repus des empires, des dynasties, des peuples, des passions, des larges crimes, revenons chaque jour regarder le monde se mouvoir, les marionnettes gesticuler aux fils que nous tenons dans la main, qui voyons passer, en riant, les siècles amoncelés, et p57

l’histoire avec ses haillons fougueux et sa figure triste, et le temps, vieux faucheur glouton, aux talons de fer et à la dent éternelle, tout cela, pour nous, tourne, remue, marche, s’agite et meurt ; nous voyons la farce commencer, les chandelles brûler et s’éteindre, et tout rentrer dans le repos et dans le vide, dans lequel nous courons comme des perdus, riant, nous mordant, hurlant, pleurant.

Ah ! Mon novice a la tête forte, tant mieux ! Nous avons beaucoup de choses à lui montrer. D’abord un peu d’histoire, puis un peu d’anatomie, et nous finirons par la gastronomie et la géographie. Que faut-il faire ? Monter sur la montagne pour voir la plaine et la cité ? Eh bien, oui, nous allons gravir sur quelque hauteur d’où nous aurons un beau coup d’œil. Je puis, pardieu ! Vous accompagner, car le dieu du grotesque est un bon interprète pour expliquer le monde. Sur la montagne, les forêts, le sauvage et sa famille. à l’horizon, une immense plaine, couverte de pyramides, arrosée par des fleuves. Au fond, une ville avec ses toits de marbre et d’or, un éclatant soleil. — la femme et l’homme sont entièrement nus, leurs enfants se jouent sur des nattes, le cheval est à côté ; le sauvage est triste, il regarde sa femme avec amour.

LE SAUVAGE.

Oh ! Que j’aime la mousse des bois, le bruissement des feuilles, le battement d’ailes des oiseaux, le galop de ma cavale, les rayons du soleil, et ton regard, ô Haïta ! Et tes cheveux noirs qui tombent jusqu’à ta croupe, et ton dos blanc, et ton cou qui se penche et se replie quand mes lèvres y impriment de longs baisers, je t’aime plein mon cœur. Quand ma bonne bête court et saute, je laisse aller ses crins qui bruissent, j’écoute le vent qui siffle et parle, j’écoute le bruit des branches que son pied casse, et je regarde la poussière p58

voler sur ses flancs et l’écume sauter alentour ; son jarret se tend et se replie, je prends mon arc et je le tends ; je le tends si fort que le bois se plie, prêt à rompre, que la corde en tremble, et, lorsque la flèche part et fend l’air, mon cheval hennit, son cou s’allonge, il s’étend sur l’herbe, et ses jambes frappent la terre et se jettent en avant.

La corde vibre en chantant et dit à la flèche : pars, ma longue fille, et déjà elle a frappé le léopard ou le lion, qui se débat sur le sable et répand son sang sur la poussière. J’aime à l’embrasser corps à corps, à l’étouffer, à sentir ses os craquer dans mes mains, et j’enlève sa belle peau, son corps fume et cette vapeur de sang me rend fier.

Il en est parmi mes frères qui mettent des écorces à la bouche de leurs juments pour les diriger, mais moi, je la laisse aller, elle bondit sur l’herbe, saute les fleuves, gravit les rochers, passe les torrents, l’eau mouille ses pieds, et les cailloux roulent sous ses pas.

Haïta.

Je me rappelle, moi, que, le jour où je t’ai vu, j’aimai tes grands yeux où le feu brillait, tes bras velus aux muscles durs, ta large poitrine où un duvet noir cache des veines bleues, et tes fortes cuisses qui se tendent comme du fer, et ta tête et ta belle chevelure, ton sourire, tes dents blanches. Tu es venu vers moi ; dès que j’ai senti tes lèvres sur mon épaule, un frisson s’est glissé dans ma chair, et j’ai senti mon cœur s’inonder d’un parfum inconnu. Et ce n’était point le plaisir de rester endormie sur des fleurs, auprès d’un ruisseau qui murmure, ni celui de voir dans les bois, la nuit, quelque étoile au ciel, avec la lune entourée des nuages blancs, et toute la robe bleue du ciel avec ses diamants parsemés, ni de danser en rond sur une pelouse, vêtue avec des chaînes de roses autour du corps, non ! C’était… je ne puis le dire. p59

Et puis sentir dans mon ventre s’agiter quelque chose, et j’avais un espoir infini d’être heureuse, je rêvais, je ne sais à quoi. Et puis deux enfants sont venus, j’aimais à les porter à ma mamelle, et quand je les regardais dormir, couchés dans notre hamac de roseau, je pleurais, et pourtant j’étais heureuse.

LE SAUVAGE.

Mon cœur est triste pourtant, je le sens lourd en moi-même, comme une nacelle pesamment chargée qui traverse un lac, les vagues montent et le pont chancelle. Depuis longtemps déjà (car la douleur vieillit et blanchit les cheveux) un ennui m’a pris, je ne sais quelle flèche empoisonnée m’a percé l’âme et je me meurs.

Hier encore j’errais comme de coutume, mais je ne pressais point de mes genoux les flancs de ma cavale, je ne tendais pas la corde de mon arc ; je m’assis au milieu des bois et j’entendais vaguement la pluie tomber sur le feuillage.

à quoi pensais-je alors ? Je regardais les herbes avec leurs perles de rosée. En vain le tigre passait près de moi et venait boire au ruisseau, en vain l’aigle s’abattait sur le tronc des vieux chênes, je baissais la tête, et des larmes coulaient sur mes joues. Quand ce fut le milieu du jour et que les rayons de l’astre d’or percèrent en les branches, je vis cette lumière sans un seul sourire. Oh ! Non, j’étais triste. Et pourtant Haïta est belle, je n’aime point d’autre femme, mes enfants sont beaux, mon cheval court bien, mon arc lance la flèche, ma hutte est bonne et, quand j’y reviens, il y a toujours pour moi des fruits nouvellement cueillis et du lait tiré à la mamelle de ma vache blanche. Hélas ! J’ai pensé à des choses inconnues, je crois que des fées sont venues danser devant moi et m’ont montré des palais d’or dont p60

j’étais le maître ; elles étaient là avec des pieds d’argent qui foulaient le gazon, leur figure m’a souri, mais ce sourire était triste et leurs yeux pleuraient. Que m’ont-elles dit ? J’ai oublié toutes ces choses, qui m’ont ravi jusqu’au fond de l’âme ; et puis, quand la nuit est venue, et qu’on entendit les vautours sortir avec leurs cris féroces des antres de rocher, et que les chacals et les loups traînaient leurs pas sous les feuilles, et que les oiseaux avaient cessé de chanter sur les branches, tout fut noir ; les feuilles blanches du peuplier tremblaient au clair de lune. Alors j’eus peur, je me suis mis à trembler comme si j’allais mourir ou si la nuit allait m’ensevelir dans un monde de ténèbres, et pourtant mon carquois était garni, pourtant mon bras est fort, et ma cavale était là, marchant sur les feuilles sèches, elle qui fait des bonds comme une flèche sur un lac. Et cette nuit, quand je ne dormais pas et que ma femme tenait encore ma main sur son cœur, et que les enfants dormaient comme elle, des désirs immodérés sont venus m’assaillir ; j’ai souhaité des bonheurs inconnus, des ivresses qui ne sont pas, j'aurais voulu dormir et rêver en paradis ! Il m'a semblé que mon cœur était étroit, et pourtant Haïta m'aime, elle a de l'amour pour moi plein toute son âme ! Un jour, je ne sais si c'est un songe ou si c'est vrai, les feuilles des arbres se sont enveloppées tout à coup, et j'ai vu une immense plaine rouge. Au fond, il y avait des tas d'or, des hommes marchaient dessus, ils étaient couverts de vêtements ; mon corps est nu, je me sens faible, la neige est tombée sur moi, j'ai froid, je pourrais, en mettant sur moi quelque chose, avoir toujours chaud. Quand je me regarde, je rougis ; pourquoi cela ?

D'autres femmes m'aimeraient peut-être davantage que Haïta… comment peut-on mieux aimer qu'elle ? Elle m'embrasse toujours avec le même amour ! … p61

mais pourquoi n'y aurait-il d'autres amours dans l'amour même ?

Et puis les bois, les lacs, les montagnes, les torrents, toutes ces voix qui me parlaient et me formaient une si vaste harmonie, me semblent maintenant déserts, vides. J'étouffe sous les nuages, mon cœur est étroit, il se gonfle, plein de larmes et prêt à crever d'angoisse. Pourquoi donc n'y aurait-il pas des huttes plus belles que la mienne, des bois plus larges encore, avec des ombrages plus frais ? Je veux d'autres boissons, d'autres viandes, d'autres amours. Et puis j'ai envie de quitter ce qui m'entoure et de marcher en avant, de suivre la course du soleil, d'aller toujours et de gagner les grandes cités d'où tant de bruit s'échappe, d'où nous voyons d'ici sortir des armées, des chars, des peuples ; il y a chez elles quelque chose de magique et de surnaturel ; au seuil, il me semble que j'aurais peur d'y entrer, et pourtant quelque chose m'y pousse. Une main invisible me fait aller en avant, comme le sable du désert emporté par les vents ; en voyant les feuilles jaunies de l'automne rouler dans l'air, j'ai souhaité d'être feuille comme elles, pour courir dans l'espace. J'ai lutté avec une d'elles, j'ai pressé les bonds de mon cheval, mais elles se sont perdues dans les nuages, et les autres sont tombées dans le torrent. Longtemps encore j'ai regardé le gouffre où elles s'étaient englouties et la mousse tourbillonner alentour, longtemps encore j'ai regardé les nuages avec lesquels elles montaient, et puis je ne les ai plus revues.

Est-ce que je serai comme la poussière du désert et comme les feuilles d'automne ? Si j'allais m'engloutir dans un gouffre où je tournerais toujours ! Si j'allais aller dans un ciel où je monterais toujours ! Pourquoi donc ai-je en moi des voix qui m'appellent ? Quand je prête l'oreille, il me semble que j'entends au loin quelqu'un qui me dit : viens, viens ! p62

Est-ce qu'il va y avoir une bataille, et que la plaine va être couverte de mille guerriers avec leurs chevaux à la crinière flottante, avec l'arc tendu, et la mort au bout de chaque flèche ? Oh ! Comme il y aura des cris et des flots de sang !

Non ! C'est peut-être un long voyage, comme celui des oiseaux qui passent par bandes et traversent les océans ; et moi il faut partir seul ! … mais où irai-je ? Je n'ai pas des ailes comme eux. Je dirai donc adieu à ma femme, à mes enfants, à ma hutte, à mon hamac, à mon chien, au foyer plein de bois pétillant, au lac où je me mirais souvent, aux bois où je respirais plein d'orgueil ; adieu à ces étoiles, car je vais voir d'autres cieux… et ma cavale ? Faudra-t-il la laisser ? Mais, si elle mourait en chemin, les vautours viendraient donc manger ses yeux ? … et puis, quand mes enfants seront plus grands, ils monteront dessus comme moi et ils iront à la chasse pour leur vieille mère… mais la pauvre bête sera morte, la hutte sera détruite par l'ouragan, l'herbe sera flétrie, tout ce qui m'entoure ne sera plus et sera parti dans la mort !

Allons donc ! La nuit vient, la brise du soir me pousse, il faut partir, je pars. Adieu mes enfants, adieu Haïta, adieu ma cavale, adieu le vieux banc de gazon où ma mère m'étendait au soleil, adieu, je ne reviendrai plus.

SATAN.

Vite ! Vite donc ! N'entends-tu point dans l'air des voix qui te disent de partir ? Pars donc ! Tu crains de quitter Haïta ? Je te donnerai d'autres femmes ; tu crains de quitter ton cheval ? Je te donnerai des chars ; au lieu de la hutte tu auras des palais, au lieu des bois tu auras des villes… des villes, du bruit, de l'or, des bataillons entiers, une fournaise ardente, une frénésie, une ivresse folle ! p63

Oh ! Tu ne sais pas des joies, des voluptés, des raffinements de plaisir ! Ton âme sera élargie et sera doublée, des mondes y entreront et tourneront en toi. Entends-tu la danse des femmes nues qui sourient, qui t'appellent ? Oh ! Si tu savais comme elles sont belles, comme leurs corps ont de l'amour ! Elles te prendront, te berceront sur leur poitrine haletante. Entends-tu le bruit des armées, et les chars d'airain qui roulent sur le marbre des villes ? Entends-tu la longue clameur des peuples civilisés ? Le sang ruisselle, viens donc à la guerre !

Et ils t'élèveront sur un trône, c'est-à-dire que tu étais libre et tu seras roi ; tu verras sous toi, à tes pieds, des armées et des nations, et quand tu frapperas du pied tu broieras des hommes. Tu auras de larges festins, où l'ivresse s'étendra sur ton âme ; ce sera des nouveaux mets, des nouveaux vins, des frénésies inconnues.

Allons donc ! Entends-tu les coupes d'or qui bondissent, et les dents qui claquent sur le cristal ? Entends-tu la volupté, la puissance, l'ambition, toutes les délices du corps et de l'âme qui te parlent, qui t'attendent, qui te pressent, qui t'entourent ? La nuit vient, les étoiles montent au ciel, le vent s'élève, les feuilles roulent sur l'herbe, marche ! Et tu iras en avant, toujours, jusqu'à ce que tu tombes à la porte d'un palais d'or.

LE SAUVAGE.

Adieu donc, adieu ! Je pars pour le désert, le vent me pousse avec le sable.

Je vois déjà l'oasis, j'entends les chants du festin. Adieu Haïta, adieu mes enfants, adieu ma cavale, adieu les bois, adieu les torrents !

Une voix m'a dit : marche ! Et il y avait en elle quelque chose qui m'attirait et me charmait, adieu ! Adieu ! p64

Le Génie Du Sauvage.

Arrête ! Arrête !

Non ! Non ! Reste à te balancer dans le hamac de jonc, à courir sur ta jument, à dépouiller le léopard de sa robe ensanglantée. Eh quoi ! L'eau du lac est pure, les chênes sont hauts, et ta femme n'est-elle pas blanche ? Ne te rappelles-tu plus ces nuits de délices sur le gazon plein de fleurs, quand les arbres avaient des feuilles, que la lune éclairait le ruisseau, et que les vents de la nuit, pleins de parfums et de mystères, séchaient les sueurs de vos membres fatigués ? Eh quoi ! Vois donc le même soleil qui se couche dans l'horizon, il est plus rouge que de coutume, il y a du sang derrière, il y a du malheur dans l'avenir… comme la mousse est fraîche et verte, comme le torrent mugit, plein d'écume ! Te faut-il donc d'autres fleurs que celles des bois, d'autre musique que la cascade qui tombe, d'autre amour que les baisers d'Haïta, d'autre bonheur que ta vie ? Non ! Tu as en toi du plomb fondu qui te brûle, ton cœur est un incendie, prends garde ! Avant qu'il ne soit cendres ton corps tombera de pourriture et d'orgueil.

D'autres comme toi sont partis, hélas ! Vers la cité des hommes. Un soir ils ont dit un éternel adieu à leur femme, à leur foyer ; ils ont quitté la vallée et la montagne, le rivage que la vague chaque jour venait baiser de sa lèvre écumeuse ; leurs femmes pleuraient, le foyer ne brûlait plus, le chien aboyait sur le seuil et regardait la lune, la cavale hennissait sur l'herbe.

Et on ne les a plus revus ! Car un démon les a pris et les a perdus dans l'espoir qu'ils avaient, comme ces feux qui font tomber dans les fleuves. Ils sont allés longtemps. Mais qui pourra dire toute la terre qu'ils ont foulée ! Successivement ils ont passé à travers tout, et tout a passé derrière eux ; la route p65

s'allongeait toujours, le désert s'étendait comme l'infini, le bonheur fuyait devant eux comme une ombre. En vain ils regardaient souvent derrière, mais ils ne voyaient que la poussière remuée par les ouragans, et ils arrivèrent ainsi dans une satiété pleine d'amertume, dans une agonie lente, dans une mort désespérée.

Non ! Non ! Ne quitte ni les bois où bondit le tigre sous ta flèche acérée, ni le murmure du lac où les cerfs viennent boire la nuit et troublent avec leurs pieds les rayons d'argent de la lune, ni le torrent qui bondit sur les rocs, ni tes enfants qui dorment, ni ta femme qui te regarde les yeux pleins de larmes, le cœur gonflé d'angoisses. Mieux vaut la hutte de roseaux que leur palais de porphyre, ta liberté que leur pouvoir, ton innocence que leurs voluptés, car ils mentent, car leur bonheur est un rire, leur ivresse une grimace d’idiot, leur grandeur est orgueil et leur bonheur est mensonge.

Le sauvage n’écouta point la voix de l’ange, il partit ; et Satan se mit à rire en voyant l’humanité suivre sa marche fatale et la civilisation s’étendre sur les prairies.

— mais ce n’est pas tout, dit Yuk, entrons maintenant dans la ville, et ne nous amusons pas aux bagatelles de la porte.

Il était nuit, aucun bruit ne sortait de la cité endormie, on n’entendait qu’un vague bourdonnement comme des chants qui finissent ; ils entrèrent. Les rues étaient désertes, les navires se remuaient et battaient du flanc les quais de pierre, la brise se jouait dans les cordages, les eaux coulaient sous les ponts, la lune brillait sur les dômes des palais, les étoiles scintillaient. Les carrefours, les rues, longues promenades, places ouvertes, tout était vide, et de blanches lueurs éclairaient tout cela et faisaient remuer des ombres. Pas un nuage. p66

Yuk était avec eux.

Il faisait chaud, l’air était emprisonné entre les maisons, et souvent des vents chauds semblaient s’élancer des dômes de plomb et courir dans l’air comme une cendre invisible. Des hommes étendus, ivres, dormaient par terre, d’autres étaient morts ou semblaient dormir aussi. Il y avait quelque chose de sombre et d’amer jusque dans le sommeil de la ville. Yuk marchait devant eux, il guidait Smarh dans ce dédale impur, et, chemin faisant, il tirait de sa poche une certaine poudre, il la lançait en l’air ; on la voyait s’allonger en spirale, puis tomber par les cheminées, et bientôt on voyait les murailles se disjoindre et de volumineuses cornes s’étendre, comme l’envergure d’une aile, pendant qu’une femme tournait le dos à un homme et donnait son devant à un autre. Quand Yuk ouvrait la bouche, c’étaient des calomnies, des mensonges, des poésies, des chimères, des religions, des parodies qui sortaient, partaient, s’allongeaient, s’amalgamaient, s’enchevêtraient, se frisaient, ruisselaient, finissant toujours par entrer dans quelque oreille, par se planter sur quelque terrain pour germer dans quelque cerveau, par bâtir quelque chose, par en détruire une autre, enfouir ou déterrer, élever ou abattre.

Chacun des mouvements de sa figure était une grimace, grimace devant l’église, grimace devant le palais, grimace devant le cabaret, devant le bougre, devant le pauvre, devant le roi. S’il allongeait le pied, il faisait rouler une couronne, une croyance, une âme candide, une vertu, une conviction.

Et il riait, après cela, d’un rire de damné, mais un rire long, homérique, inextinguible, un rire indestructible comme le temps, un rire cruel comme la mort, un rire large comme l’infini, long comme l’éternité, car c’était l’éternité elle-même. Et dans ce rire-là p67

flottaient, par une nuit obscure sur un océan sans bornes, soulevés par une tempête éternelle, empires, peuples, mondes, âmes et corps, squelettes et cadavres vivants, ossements et chair, mensonge et vérité, grandeur et crapule, boue et or ; tout était là, oscillant dans la vague mobile et éternelle de l'infini. Il sembla alors à Smarh que le monde était dépouillé de son écorce et restait saignant et palpitant, sans vêtements et sans peau. Son œil plongea plus loin dans les ténèbres, il crut un moment y voir des astres, les ténèbres étaient encore là.
— entrons ici, dit Yuk.

Et la porte d'un palais s'ouvrit devant eux. Ils montèrent par un escalier de marbre, qui avait des taches de sang à chaque marche, le pied broyait des coupes d'or et des têtes humaines, et à chaque pas on sentait qu'on marchait sur de la chair, que quelque chose s'enfonçait sous vous et que des soupirs montaient.

Ils se trouvèrent dans une salle où il y avait un trône. Au pied de ce trône, un homme pâle, maigre, dans un manteau de pourpre. Il avait des nuits sans sommeil, celui-là, sa vie était une angoisse, passée à tenir un misérable morceau de bois doré qu'il avait dans les mains, et il marchait soucieux auprès de son trône, et, quand il le voyait prêt à pencher, il le soulevait et mettait dessous pour le soutenir de la corruption et de l'or, des têtes humaines qu'il allait chercher dans la foule.

Et tous les vices se traînaient à genoux à ses pieds, toutes les vertus s'inclinaient à son passage, toutes les convictions se fondaient comme du plomb devant son sourire, et tous les péchés capitaux le harcelaient et le tiraient par son linceul de pourpre, dont ils arrachaient quelques lambeaux.

Et l'ambition lui disait : “tiens, voilà des empires, voilà des hommes, des lauriers, de la gloire, de la poudre, des combats, des cités ; la poudre des combats
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tourbillonne déjà ; en route, à la guerre !” et il sautait sur un cheval nu et le frappait à deux mains, il courait sur les hommes, brûlait les villes, le pied de son coursier cassait des crânes et des couronnes, le sang de la guerre fumait devant lui, il avait des vêtements pleins de sang et des mains rouges, et il appelait cela de la gloire.

Et la luxure lui disait : “tiens, voilà des femmes et des voluptés, tout est à toi, à toi, le roi. En est-il une qui résistera au maître ? Et si elle résistait tu pourrais l'étouffer dans tes bras et tu aurais son cadavre tout chaud et tout palpitant. N'as-tu pas des femmes qui s'épuisent en inventions pour te plaire ? N'as-tu pas des poètes qui cherchent pour toi les raffinements les plus inouïs ? Tiens, voilà des parfums qui fument, des femmes nues et étendues sur des roses, il est nuit, elles t'appellent de leurs voix douces comme des sons de la flûte. “ et il se ruait, comme une bête fauve, sur les gorges et sur les ventres des courtisanes et des dames de haut parage ; il rugissait de plaisir, il se traînait comme un porc dans sa fange ; avec toutes ses richesses il n'était qu'ignoble, avec toute sa gloire il était vil. Les nuits, les jours, les crépuscules et les aurores, tandis que les esclaves nues dansaient en chantant, que la fanfare retentissait sous les voûtes dorées, il était entouré d'une troupe de beautés ; toujours il avait quelque belle tête sur ses lèvres, de beaux bras blancs sur son cou ; et en foule venaient les pères, les époux, les frères, les fils, vendre leur fille, leurs femmes, leurs sœurs, leur mère. Des brunes, des blondes, andalouses à la peau cuivrée et aux cheveux noirs, femmes d'Asie aux mamelles pendantes, bondissantes et nues, filles de Grèce aux formes pures et aux yeux bleus, et celles du nord, blondes comme les soleils d'automne, blanches comme le lait des montagnes, toutes pour lui étaient là, prêtes, parées ou nues ; pour lui p69

toutes les fleurs, tous les parfums, toutes les voluptés, toutes les amours.

Il y nageait, il s'y plongeait, il en prenait tant que son cœur pouvait en contenir, il les jetait et en prenait d'autres. Il aimait la femme aux mots d'amour, et la bouche aux dents fraîches, et les épaules blanches, couvertes d'une onde de cheveux noirs, et, quand il sentait des genoux presser ses flancs et des bras le serrer sur des seins nus, il se pâmait, il se mourait. Il était fou, idiot, stupide ; il sentait avec un enivrement machinalement une sueur de femme couler sur son corps, il tombait en fermant les yeux et rêvant d'autres voluptés, d'autres fanges dans son sommeil.

Et l'avarice lui disait : “de l'or ! De l'or !” et il était pris d'une cupidité insatiable. De l'or ! Il y avait dans ce mot-là une frénésie satanique, et il amassait, il en amassait jusqu'au ciel, il en tirait de tout, des hommes et des choses ; il pressait tout dans ses mains et ses mains suaient l'or, il avait des machines qui lui en faisaient, et il en avait de quoi combler des océans, il s'y roulait dessus et disait qu'il était riche. D'autres fois, il était jaloux, par caprice, d'un haillon et il le volait ; s'il voyait une parcelle de quelque chose, il avait une soif de l'avoir, il avait du poison dans les veines. L'orgueil lui disait : “vois donc ! Regarde tes flottes, tes océans, tes empires, tes peuples esclaves ; tout à toi, à toi !” et il se trouvait grand, fort, beau, il se faisait dresser des autels, il était plein d'orgueil, et son orgueil l'étouffait de plus en plus, comme s'il avait eu une tempête dans l'âme, qui se fût gonflée toujours.

Il courait donc de ses trésors à ses maîtresses, de ses esclaves à ses maîtresses, esclave lui-même, captif de ses vices, esclave et gêné d'un pli de rose sous lui. Mais quelqu'un vint qu'on n'attendait pas, il frappa à la porte à grands coups de pieds et il l'enfonça. Tout p70

tomba, les lumières s'éteignirent, le trône fut emporté par le vent, le palais fut fauché, le roi et ses empires, ses voluptés, ses crimes, tout cela dans son linceul, tout cela poussière et néant. Oh ! Yuk se mit à rire, à rire toujours et longtemps ; Satan dit que cela l'ennuyait et qu'il en avait vu assez.

— de l'érotique, du burlesque, du pastoral, du sentimental, de l'élégiaque ! Voyons, Yuk, une littérature au lait pour un poitrinaire !

YUK.

Que voulez-vous que nous montrions au novice ? Des fiancés, des mariés ou des morts ? Un mensonge ou un serment ?

SATAN.

Oui.

YUK.

Ensemble, n'est-ce pas ? Car serment et mensonge sont synonymes, ainsi que mariés et cocus, ainsi que fiancés et morts.

Petite comédie bourgeoise.

Scène première.

Un salon confortable, une maman qui tricote avec des mitaines, une lampe avec un abat-jour, un jeune homme et une jeune fille s'entreregardent.

LE JEUNE HOMME.

Eh bien ?

LA JEUNE FILLE.

Eh bien ?

LE JEUNE HOMME.

Mademoiselle ! p71

LA JEUNE FILLE.

Monsieur !

LE JEUNE HOMME.

Chère amie, je vous aime (ici un baiser), je vous aime de tout mon cœur ; si vous saviez…

la jeune fille lève un regard, le jeune homme pousse un soupir, la maman les regarde avec complaisance. La conversation continue, on parle des projets de mariage, d'une tenue de maison ; la jeune fille fait grande parade d'économie, le jeune homme grand étalage de magnificence.

On s'enhardit. Chaque matin le jeune homme arrive avec un gros bouquet, et en sortant de chez sa fiancée il va chez son médecin, qui finit de le purger d'une incommodité gênante un jour de noces et dangereuse pour l'épousée.

C'était un bon garçon, il avait fait son droit et avait fort bien usé de ses trois ans d'étudiant ; il avait débauché un régiment de modistes et les avait toutes laissées en disant : “tant pis ! Des femmes comme ça !” il ne savait plus que faire, il lui avait pris envie de se ranger, de payer ses dettes, de s'établir et de se marier.

Sa femme était gentille, une grande fille blonde de dix-huit ans, élevée sous l’aile d’une bonne mère, chaste, blanche, timide.

Il l’aimait, il le croyait, il avait fini par se le persuader, il en était convaincu. S’il avait eu plus d’imagination, il se serait posé comme un amoureux de drame ; cela lui semblait drôle tout de même. Mais le jour des noces arriva, la mariée était jolie comme un ange, le jeune homme était beau comme un gendarme ; l’une rêvait à mille instincts confus, pauvre colombe enfermée dans la cage et qui n’avait p72

entrevu, entre les barreaux de l’honnêteté et le voile obscur des convenances, qu’un coin de ce grand ciel qu’on appelle amour ; l’autre pensait en termes plus précis et en images plus distinctes à la nuit qui allait venir : “une vierge, se disait-il, une femme comme cela !” et il n’en revenait pas d’étonnement. Scène ii.

Une église, des conviés, des mendiants ; les prêtres rayonnent, les pièces d’argent tombent goutte à goutte dans l’offerte, beaucoup de cierges. Les mariés sont à genoux, la jeune fille frémit, palpitante d’une joie pure ; le jeune homme est frisé et a des gants blancs, il a été une heure à se laver les mains avec différents savons d’or, il embaume.

à l’hôtel de ville on prononce le “ oui “ d’une voix claire, tout est fini.

Yuk alors se met à rire, à rire de ce fameux rire que vous savez ; il a raison, car il a devant lui au moins un demi-siècle de ménage.

Nous sommes trop moraux pour nous appesantir sur la nuit de noces et dire tout ce qui s’y fit, ce serait cependant curieux, mais la décence, cette maquerelle impuissante, nous en empêche. Passons à la scène iii.

Lune de miel (voyez la physiologie du mariage, du sire De Balzac, pour les phases successives de la vie matrimoniale).

La femme s’aperçoit que son mari est beaucoup plus bête qu’elle ne le croyait ; il lui avait paru si spirituel, quand il n’était encore qu’un fiancé (suivant l’expression poétique), un parti (suivant l’expression sociale), un bon ami (comme disent les cuisinières), et une p… dans l’horizon (suivant nous) !

De plus elle aimait la poésie, les rêves, les pensées capricieuses, brumeuses et vagabondes ; et son mari p73

commence par lui dire que Lamartine est incompréhensible, que les rêveurs sont des fous, qu’il n’y a de vrai que l’argent et la géométrie. Elle avait dans le cœur toute une couronne de fleurs parfumées, fleurs de poésie, fleurs d’amour, elle avait, plein son âme, une joie sereine, pure et religieuse ; et feuille à feuille, jour à jour, il marche sur ses illusions, sur ses pensées d’enfant, avec le gros rire brute de l’homme qui triomphe, de la raison écrasant la poésie. Il fallait dire adieu à toutes ces diaphanes rêveries, où son esprit se berçait si mollement dans un ciel sans limites, dans un océan de délices et d'extases sans bord, sans rivage ! Quitter ses auteurs favoris qu'elle lisait les jours d'été, assise à l'ombre des ormes, ses chers poètes aux vaporeuses poésies, traités d'imbéciles par un homme de beaucoup d'esprit, disait-on !

Elle eut du dépit d'abord, puis elle finit par se persuader qu'elle avait tort, elle commença à aimer le monde, à vouloir aller au bal. Son mari y consentit, il était fier de faire briller sa femme et de montrer ses diamants ; il pouvait se dire, en regardant les hommes lui presser la taille demi-nue, en faisant le plus gracieux sourire qu'il leur était possible : “cette femme est à moi ; vous avez le sourire, moi j'ai le baiser ; vous avez la main gantée, le pied chaussé, le sein voilé, et moi j'ai la main nue, le pied nu, le sein découvert. à moi ces voluptés que vous rêvez sur elle, à moi cette beauté qui brille, ces yeux qui regardent, ces diamants qui reluisent ; à moi tous les trésors que vous convoitez ! Ainsi l'orgueil s'était placé dans cet amour et le remplissait tout entier.

Scène iv.

Elle eut un enfant, le plus joli du monde ; elle l'aimait, le caressait, le baisait à toute heure du jour ; c'était des joies sans fin, car c'était toute sa joie et son amour que cet enfant-là. p74

Son mari trouvait que ses couches l'avaient rendue laide, les cris de son fils l'ennuyaient, il ne l'aima que plus tard, lorsque la réputation du fils eut rejailli sur le père.

Cependant il retourna chez les filles et recommença sa vie de garçon. Sa femme restait le soir auprès du berceau, à prier Dieu et à pleurer. De temps en temps l'enfant ouvrait les bras et bégayait, ses petites mains potelées flattaient les joues de sa mère, rougies par de grosses larmes.

Scène v.

Ce fut donc, d'une part, une vie de dévouement, de sacrifices, de combats ; et, de l'autre, une vie d'orgueil, d'argent, de vice, une vie froide et dorée comme un vieil habit de valet tout galonné ; et ils restèrent ainsi étrangers l'un à l'autre, habitant sous le même toit, unis par la loi, désunis par le cœur.

Il y eut d'un côté des larmes, des nuits pleines d'ennui, d'angoisses, des veilles, des inquiétudes, de l'amour ; et de l'autre, des soucis, des sueurs, de l'envie, de la haine, des remords, des insomnies, des mensonges, une vie misérable et riche.

Tous deux allèrent où tout va, dans la mort. La femme mourut d'abord, seule avec un prêtre et son fils ; on vint dire à monsieur que madame était morte ; il s'habilla de noir et fit commander le cercueil. La scène vi est toute remplie par un rire de Yuk, qui termina ici la comédie bourgeoise, en ajoutant qu'on eut beaucoup de peine à enterrer le mari, à cause de deux cornes effroyables qui s’élevaient en spirales. Comment diable les avait-il gagnées, avec une petite femme si vertueuse ?

Ils continuèrent ainsi à marcher de droite et de gauche, furetant dans chaque ruisseau pour y trouver p75

une vertu, dans chaque tas de boue pour y découvrir de l’or ; ils regardaient dans toutes les maisons, il en sortait des cris de deuil, des chants de joie, là c’était une bière, ici un tonneau défoncé.

Le jour vint et la ville commença à s’éveiller ; les hommes allaient par les rues, les uns revenaient d’une orgie, d’autres pleuraient, affamés ; il y en avait qui tombaient d’épuisement et d’autres, pleins de vin, qu’écrasaient les roues des chars.

On entendit le cheval qui piaffait sur les pavés, et les pas d’hommes pressés qui couraient sur les dalles ; déjà l’or roulait sur les tables, le fouet claquait sur les épaules de l’esclave, la prostitution ouvrait sa porte vénale, le vice se réveillait, le crime aiguisait son poignard et montait ses machines, la journée allait recommencer.

Il y avait un homme en haillons ; le souffle du matin refroidissait sa peau, et quand le soleil vint à paraître il grelotta de plaisir, remua les épaules et sourit bêtement, on eût dit qu’il eût voulu faire entrer en lui la chaleur du soleil. Son teint était jaune, ses cheveux et sa barbe noire étaient couverts de poussière et de brins de paille, son grand œil bleu était vide et avait faim, sa bouche, entr’ouverte, avait un froid rire de bête fauve affamée. Yuk, Satan, Smarh, en ouvriers.

YUK.

Qu’as-tu, mon camarade ?

LE PAUVRE.

Ce que j’ai ? Mais qu’êtes-vous, vous-même ? Personne jusqu’ici ne m’avait adressé une pareille question, ils passaient tous en me regardant. Mais n’êtes-vous p76

pas du pays ? Oui, je le vois à vos vêtements. Oh ! Si vous venez du beau pays d’Allemagne, dites-moi si le Rhin coule toujours, si la cathédrale de Cologne, avec ses saints de pierre, est toujours debout ; dites-moi si les arbres ont toujours des feuilles, car, pour moi, je crois que la nature est changée depuis que je suis dans cette ville hideuse.

YUK.

Voyons, contez-nous cela, à des compagnons de votre état, de votre pays.

LE PAUVRE.

Mon état ? Je n’en ai pas. Mon pays ? Je n’en ai plus. Est-ce qu’il y en a pour le malheureux ? Celui qui a un pays, c’est celui qui est heureux, mais le malheureux n’a pour patrie que son cœur plein d’angoisse. Que voulez-vous que je vous dise ? Je ne sais rien, si ce n’est que je hais les riches et que j’ai faim. Je suis parti de mon pays parce qu’on m’en a chassé avec des huées et des pierres, car mes guenilles étaient sanglantes, il y avait une infamie dans notre famille. Ah ! L’infamie, c’est de vivre comme je vis. J’ai donc été sans savoir où, à l’aventure, marchant dans les routes et les campagnes, vivant en volant une pomme, un fruit, un morceau de pain ; on me repoussait toujours, on disait que j’étais laid.

Yuk, riant.

Ah ! Ah ! Ah !

LE PAUVRE.

Je n’avais appris aucun métier, je ne savais que manger et je n’avais rien à manger ; parfois, j’étais pris d’une fureur immense, et il me semblait que j’aurais broyé le monde d’un coup de pied. Il me fallait, le soir, aller disputer aux chiens les immondices du coin de la borne et les haillons jetés dans la p77

boue ; il y en avait pourtant qui sont heureux, qui font de larges repas, et quand je me demande pourquoi cela, il y a là un abîme que je ne peux combler.

Yuk, riant.

Ah ! Ah ! Ah !

LE PAUVRE.

Ne ris pas, par dieu ! Mais écoute donc. Personne ne m’a aimé, ni homme, ni femme, ni chien, car, un jour, il y en a un qui est venu vers moi, mais, comme je ne pouvais le nourrir, il m’a mordu, et s’en est allé. Cependant, une fois, je ne sais dans quel village, j’étais parvenu à ramasser un sac d’argent en travaillant à la charpente de l’église, j’allais me marier, Marthe m’aimait ; elle vint deux fois seule, le soir, sur le rivage, me dire qu’elle m’aimerait toujours, elle avait des fleurs dans ses cheveux, elle chantait ; puis, je ne sais comment, elle n’a plus voulu de moi, un plus riche l’a prise.

YUK.

C’est ça, compère, les jeunes filles aiment les beaux cavaliers riches et les pourpoints de velours.

LE PAUVRE.

Ne me parlez pas des riches, encore une fois, -je les hais ! Moi qui meurs de faim à la porte de leurs palais, j’ai dans le cœur des trésors de haine pour eux, et quand il fait froid, que j’ai faim, que je suis malheureux et misérable, je me nourris de cette haine, et cela me fait du bien.

Satan, se logeant dans l’oreille du pauvre. Celui-là (désignant Yuk) a une bourse sur lui ; — tue-le, tu l’auras ; on ne te verra pas, et, d’ailleurs, quand on te verrait… tue-le, c’est un homme méchant. p78

Pourquoi, quand tu lui contais tes maux, s’est-il mis à rire ? C’est un riche au cœur dur. Yuk se découvre et laisse voir un magnifique costume ; une bourse garnie de diamants pend à sa ceinture. Le Pauvre, en lui-même.

ô mon dieu ! Voilà des pensées que je n’avais jamais eues. En effet, si j’allais être riche à mon tour, heureux, avoir des laquais, des chevaux, des tables somptueuses, me faire servir comme un prince ? … mais tuer un homme !

Satan, en lui-même.

Bah ! Un homme ! On ne le saura pas. Dépêche-toi, personne ne passe dans la rue maintenant. Il lui glisse un poignard dans la main ; le pauvre, fasciné, se rue sur Yuk qui tombe par terre percé de coups.

SATAN.

Voilà la police ! … un homme d’assassiné ! Prenez-moi ce gueux-là !

Le corps de l’ouvrier reste par terre, percé de coups, mais Yuk se relève.

YUK.

Vous croyiez vraiment que j’étais mort ? Oh ! Par dieu, il n’y aurait plus de monde, ni de création, du jour où je cesserais de vivre. Moi, mourir ! Ce serait drôle. Est-ce que je ne suis pas aussi éternel que l’éternité ? Moi, mourir ! Mais je renais de la mort même, je renais avec la vie, car je vis même dans les tombeaux, dans la poussière ; cela est impossible. Celui qui dira que je ne suis plus mentira comme l’évangile. Mourir ? Mais il n’y aurait plus ni gouvernement, ni religion, ni vertu, ni morale, ni lois. Qui donc alors tiendrait la couronne, l’épée, revêtirait la robe ? Qui donc serait médecin, poète, avocat, prêtre ? Est-ce qu’il y aurait quelque chose à faire ? La vie deviendrait p79

ennuyeuse et bête comme une vieille femme. Mourir ? Mais où en seraient les ménages qui sont garants de la foi conjugale ?

Ah ! Je me fâche à cette horrible idée d’anarchie sociale, la morale publique ; la morale publique, les mœurs, les institutions philanthropiques, les vertus, les systèmes, les théories, songez-y, si je mourais, tout cela mourrait aussi. Comment serait-on alors ? Comment concevez-vous l’idée d’un monde sans moi, sans que j’en occupe les trois quarts, sans que je le fasse vivre en entier ?

Les gens du guet prennent le pauvre.

SATAN.

Tant mieux ! Ce drôle-là m’assommait. Mais, au reste, il serait fâcheux de le faire mourir sitôt, réservons-le. Il faudra qu’il brûle sa prison, viole six religieuses et massacre une trentaine de personnes avant de rendre l’âme.

Le pauvre s’échappe des mains des soldats. Yuk se frotte les mains, s’étend au soleil, crache au nez d’un magistrat, et pisse sur l’église. C’était une haute église, avec son porche noirci, ses aiguilles et ses pyramides de pierre. Elle était vénérable tant elle était vieille ; ils y entrèrent. La nef était haute, vide, solitaire ;

les minces et sveltes colonnes projetaient leurs ombres sur les dalles usées. Le jour se mourait, et cependant le soleil, passant à travers les vitraux rouges, jetait une lueur qui semblait s'étendre comme celle des lampes suspendues. Il y avait quelque chose de grand et de triste dans cette église ; elle était haute, si haute que les hommes paraissaient petits en bas, il n'y avait plus ni encens aux pieds de la vierge ni fleurs sur l'autel, l'orgue avait tu sa grande voix ; — seulement, tout au fond, un drap noir, un cercueil, la messe des morts. p80

Celui qui était étendu dans la bière n'avait jamais tué, ni pillé, ni violé ; il n'avait point été aux galères, ni repris de justice ; c'était un honnête homme. Quand il sortit de l'église et qu'il passa, traîné dans les rues, chacun se découvrit, -on salua la charogne.

Mais le prêtre s'était dépêché, il a vite renvoyé le mort en terre. Pauvre prêtre ! Il avait déjà, dans la journée, béni six unions, fait trois baptêmes, enterré quatre chrétiens, et, quant aux communions, elles sont innombrables. Il se dépêcha, sa concubine l'attendait, elle était dans le bain chaud depuis longtemps, elle s'ennuyait. Il partit, il jeta vite la robe blanche, et rêva l'adultère.

L'église vide… oh ! Vide comme vous savez ; il n'y avait plus ni chants du peuple, ni voix du prêtre, ni prière de l'orgue.

Qu'elle devait être belle, pourtant, les jours d'hiver, avec ses mille cierges allumés, son peuple chantant en se promenant dans les galeries, quand tout chantait et vibrait d'amour, quand, depuis la voûte jusqu'aux tombeaux, depuis le vitrail jusqu'à la pierre, tout ne formait qu'un chant, qu'une allégresse ! Qu'elle était belle, pourtant, les jours d'été, quand les moissonneurs couverts de sueur entraient et faisaient bénir les gerbes de blé ; quand les dames de haut parage, avec leurs cours de pages, de chevaliers, rois, empereurs et papes, quand tous venaient là prier, pleurer, aimer ; quand les chevaliers, avant de partir pour le pays de Palestine, venaient prendre leur épée et qu'ils disaient un éternel adieu au grand portique noir où le soleil rayonne, au clocher d'ardoises où la voix d'airain chante, et prie dans sa cage de pierre ! … plus rien ! Vide comme un squelette ! Quand des pas d'homme se font entendre, il semble que l'on entend un gémissement, comme un soupir. On y voit, assis sur leurs tombeaux de pierre, les évêques, les cardinaux, les ducs drapés dans leurs p81

manteaux de granit, étendus la bouche béante ; ils semblent dormir comme des morts. Au bas de l'église circule une pluie ruisselante, froide et grasse, une pluie verte qui suinte des murs ; le sol usé est bourré de cadavres, la terre résonne, les morts sont tassés, et la génération vivante marche sur les générations éteintes. à mesure qu'elle avance, elle s'enfonce dans la terre des tombeaux, et la suivante lui marche sur la tête.

Tout est usé, flétri, fatigué ; le plâtre est tombé d'entre les pierres, les figures de saints sont grises et mangées par le temps ; la rosace, avec ses gerbes, se décolore ; la voûte elle-même s’éventre, surchargée et effrayée de l’abîme qu’elle a sous elle. Alors Smarh se mit à pleurer amèrement et il dit : — hélas ! Hélas ! Est-ce qu’il est venu quelque conquérant qui a emporté les vases d’or pour en ferrer ses chevaux ? Est-ce qu’on a enlevé les reliques des saints ! Les hosties sacrées ? Pourquoi donc les chants ont-ils cessé ? Pourquoi l’encensoir est-il vide ? Pourquoi y a-t-il tant de vers qui se traînent sur les tombeaux ? Pourquoi tant d’herbes et de mousses sur les murs ? Les cierges sont éteints, les fleurs sont fanées.

Autrefois, les dimanches, les enfants venaient tout joyeux s’agenouiller aux pieds de la vierge, et ils chantaient en regardant la flamme remuer sur la robe étoilée de Marie ; mais il n’y a plus d’enfants ici, j’en ai vu qui détournaient la tête en passant. Quand la neige couvrait la terre, quand la pluie tombait, quand la grêle battait les vitraux, tous venaient se réfugier sous la voûte, qui s’étendait sur eux comme l’aile d’une colombe. Quand le malheur avait frappé quelqu’un, il venait là, auprès du drap de l’autel, sécher ses pleurs, guérir ses maux. J’en ai vu qui frappaient la terre de leur front et qui mouillaient de leurs larmes les pavés de marbre, et quand ils se p82

relevaient, il y avait un sourire d’espérance dans leurs âmes ! Ils avaient entrevu le ciel dans le malheur, le bonheur dans la foi !

L’église.

On ne veut plus de moi ; demain, les maçons m’attaqueront par ma base, me renverseront, me démoliront pierre à pierre.

Le Bénitier.

Ils sont venus prendre mon eau, ils se sont lavé les mains. En vain j’ai écumé, bouillonné, ils ont craché dans mon onde et se sont amusés à voir les cercles que cela faisait.

La Nef.

Tout a passé sous moi : noces, funérailles, morts et vivants. J’étais l’écho des chants, je renvoyais les soupirs et les cris de douleurs ; c’était vers moi que volait l’encens, que montaient le parfum des fleurs, et la voix des prières, la fumée des cierges. Que de fois j’ai resplendi, j’ai vibré ! Mais je suis triste, j’ai envie de me coucher sur les dalles qui sont à mes pieds.

Les Colonnes.

Autrefois on nous entourait de guirlandes, maintenant nous sommes nues. Nous sommes, depuis six cents ans, séparées les unes des autres, nous nous enfonçons sous terre ; je crois que l’église tout entière s’affaisse dans un bourbier, on dirait d’un démon qui pèse sur son toit et l’écrase.

Les Vitraux.

Que de fois le soleil a illuminé nos couleurs, maintenant nos reflets n’éclairent plus rien. Les pierres de la rue viennent nous casser chaque jour, les vents nous p83

jettent par terre ; il faudra remporter toutes nos fleurs, toutes nos couleurs aux pieds du bon Dieu.

Les Dalles.

On nous a usées, nous sommes trouées en maints endroits, nous sommes lasses d’être foulées par des pieds impurs, les morts qui sont sous nous semblent nous repousser de dessus eux. Pourquoi nous a-t-on tirées des flancs de la montagne, où nous étions si paisibles, au sein de la terre ?

La Cloche.

Depuis longtemps je suis muette, personne ne vient plus prendre mon bourdon et faire aller ma bascule ; est-ce que les hommes sont tous morts ? Autrefois ma voix d’airain chantait à tue-tête, je faisais trembler mon clocher tout frêle, la tour remuait, ivre, et frémissait sous mon poids. Je chantais bien haut dans les airs, et je voyais arriver des campagnes hommes, femmes, vieillards et enfants, accourant, accourant vite et se pressant sous mon portail. Du jour où on me monta ici, j’ai toujours été fêtée, honorée comme la reine de l’édifice, comme la tête de la cathédrale. N’était-ce pas moi, en effet, qui portais la prière de tous dans mes spirales d’harmonie ? Aujourd’hui seulement je me tais, je m’ennuie toute seule, et, si haut, le vertige me prend ; je crois que je vais m’écrouler avec mon clocher, j’ai plutôt envie de me faire fondre en boulets et de courir dans la plaine.

Les Gargouilles.

Voilà assez longtemps que nous sommes là, droites, hérissées, suspendues ; on nous regarde en bas sans terreur. Autrefois nous crachions l’eau de l’orage, en grimaçant si bien qu’on avait peur ; maintenant ils nous regardent d’en bas en ricanant. Oh ! J’ai envie p84

de m’en aller, de me détacher de la pierre et de sauter ; je m’allonge tant que je peux, mais j’ai les pieds pris dans la cathédrale. En nous efforçant toutes à la fois, nous pourrons peut-être nous en déraciner, ou l’entraîner derrière nous ; faisons tous nos efforts, poussons en avant, tendons nos jarrets de granit, hérissons nos crinières de pierre. Nous avons envie de nous mettre à marcher sur la terre avec les serpents et de sauter par bonds, au lieu de rester suspendues dans l’infini, à regarder la foule s’agiter en bas et les hiboux battre des ailes autour de nos flancs. Et Satan aussitôt dit à l’église : — non, je ne veux plus de toi ! Il y a longtemps que tu me gênes dans ma marche et que tes aiguilles embarrassent mes pas ; je t’abattrai, car tu es belle quoique vieille, et je te hais de ma haine éternelle ; je t’abattrai, car tu obstrues mes rues, et les chars courront mieux quand tu n’y seras plus.

Tu n’as plus pour te défendre ni l’amour du croyant ni celui de l’artiste, mon esprit s’est infiltré dans tes veines depuis la base de ton plus profond pilier jusqu’à l’air qui surmonte ta plus haute aiguille, le vice suinte de tes pierres, et le doute te ronge à la face et te mange la figure. Que veux-tu faire ? Tu vas retomber sur la terre, où l’herbe te couvrira pour toujours.

Ainsi, mon bénitier, comme tu es de marbre blanc et solide, tu seras ma coupe où je bois du sang, ton eau servira à laver les pieds de quelque cheval de guerre. La nef va tomber par terre, la voûte va s’éventrer comme un ventre trop plein et qui crève.

Les colonnes frêles vont se casser comme un roseau sous le poids de leur cathédrale, qui s’abaissera tout à l’heure comme un flot de la mer qui s’est monté bien haut, et qui tombe ensuite sur la surface unie et vide. p85

Et vous, mes dalles, comme vous êtes vieilles, on pavera les rues avec vos faces plates et carrées ; et le pied de la courtisane, le pas du mulet, les roues des chars vous useront si bien que vous ne serez plus que de la poussière qu’enlèveront les vents. Et toi, ma grosse cloche, on va encore te fondre et te ronger ; tu vas hurler et bondir dans la plaine ; chaque fois que tu chanteras, ta voix tuera des hommes sur son passage.

Et mes vitraux bigarrés, vous allez tous vous casser, vous aurez le plaisir de vous voir sauter et rebondir, en vous brisant de nouveau sur la terre. Les gargouilles vont tomber pierre à pierre, vous assommerez toutes quelqu’un dans votre chute ; mais on vous ramassera avec soin, on vous grattera, on vous blanchira pour en bâtir quelque entrepôt, quelque lupanar immonde où je vous reverrai souvent. Il dit, et aussitôt l’église s’écroula tout entière, depuis son sommet jusqu’à sa base ; elle s’écroula d’un seul coup, ce fut un fracas horrible. Mais il y eut un immense rire qui accueillit cette chute, les philosophes battaient des mains ; mais un autre rire les domina tellement qu’ils disparurent tout à fait. Celui-là, vous le connaissez, c’était celui de Yuk. Et Smarh se trouva seul dans une plaine aride, avec de la cendre jusqu’au ventre ; il s’y enfonçait à mesure qu’il tâchait de s’élever. Tout était morne, mort et détruit autour de lui.

Il disait :

— où suis-je ? Où suis-je ? J’ai monté dans l’infini, et j’ai eu vite un dégoût de l’infini ; je suis redescendu sur la terre, et j’ai assez de la terre. Aussi que faire ? La nature et les hommes me sont odieux. Oh ! Quelle pitoyable création ! p86

Et il se mettait à rire aussi. — je suis las de tout ; il faut donc mourir. Quels sont ces esprits qui m’ont conduit où j’ai été ? Satan se présente à lui et lui dit : — c’est moi, c’est moi, je suis le diable ! Smarh fut tout épouvanté et faillit mourir.

SATAN.

D’où te vient cette horreur ? Pourquoi me craindre ? Si je voulais, je t’emmènerais déjà dans mon enfer, où ta chair repousserait toujours pour brûler toujours, car tu t’es donné à moi depuis longtemps. N’as-tu pas maudit la vie ? N’as-tu pas ri de la création ? N’es-tu pas plein de doute et d’ennui ? Il n’y a de bonheur que pour ceux qui espèrent dans la joie de leur foi. As-tu compris une seule des choses que tu as vues ? As-tu senti tout ce dont tu dis que tu as dégoût ? Que sais-tu de la vie ?

SMARH.

Je croyais l’avoir connue et, en effet, je vois qu’à peine je l’ai vue ; je crois toujours voir la lumière, et puis tu me replonges dans l’ombre. Non ! Je ne vois plus qu’un horizon noir, obscur et vague.

Tiens, regarde ! La cendre me vient jusqu’au ventre, le soleil s’est couché, il n’y a plus sur la plaine qu’une teinte morne et rouge, comme le reflet d’un incendie éteint. Dis-moi donc si l’horizon ne s’éclairera pas et si le soleil dormira toujours dans les ténèbres ? Où veux-tu que j’aille ? Et pour quoi faire ? Me donneras-tu des prairies pures, des océans sans tempête, une vie sans amertume et sans vanité ?

SATAN.

Non ! Je veux au contraire que les tempêtes et les vanités soufflent dans ton existence comme le vent dans la voile, t’entraînent vers quelque chose d’immense, d’inconnu, et que moi seul je sais. p87

SMARH.

Mais ne suis-je pas déjà assez ployé comme un roseau ? Tu veux donc que l’orage aille toujours jusqu’à ce qu’il m’ait brisé tout à fait ?

SATAN.

Oui ! Pour te laisser sur quelque grève déserte, où le désespoir, comme un vautour, viendra manger ton âme.

SMARH.

J’irai donc ainsi de dégoûts en dégoûts, repu et toujours traîné aux festins ! Tu vas me conduire ainsi par les mondes ! Oh ! J’en ai assez. Grâce ! Toujours de l’ennui morne et sombre ! Toujours le doute aux entrailles ! Pitié ! Pitié !

SATAN.

Non ! Non ! Je veux que tu n’aies plus de doute, et que ta pensée s’arrête et ne tournoie plus sur elle-même comme la terre dans sa course ivre et chancelante.

SMARH.

Et que vas-tu me faire ? Vas-tu me changer, me donner un autre corps ? Car le mien est déjà vieux ; j'ai en moi le souvenir de dix existences passées, et déjà je me suis heurté à tant de choses que si je vais ainsi je tomberai en poussière.

SATAN.

Ton sang est vieux, dis-tu ? J'y ferai couler du poison dedans, qui nourrira ta chair flétrie ; je te soutiendrai jusqu'au jour où tu pourras aller seul, jusqu'au jour où je te lâcherai de ma griffe. Maintenant va, cours, bondis dans les vices, les crimes et les passions. Oh ! Je vais animer ton existence, je vais te gonfler le cœur jusqu'à ce qu'il crève p88

percé ; je vais t'en donner, t'en donner jusqu'à ce que tu n'en puisses plus ; tu vas courir sous un soleil de plomb, tu vas traverser des mares de sang et des océans de boue, tu vas vivre. N'as-tu pas un but ? N'es-tu pas destiné à accomplir une mission ? Mission de souffrance et d'angoisses ! Quand tes membres seront usés, que tes pieds eux-mêmes seront réduits en poudre, je te pousserai toujours, et tu iras ainsi dans cet infini des douleurs jusqu'à ce que tu ne sois plus rien, rien. Entends-tu cela ?

Tu croyais donc que tu pouvais regarder la vie, t'approcher du bord et puis t'en éloigner pour toujours ? Non ! Non ! Je vais t'y plonger longtemps, et tu vas en sonder toutes les fanges, en boire toute l'amertume.

Dis-moi, que veux-tu ? Forme un rêve, creuse une idée, désire quelque chose, et ton rêve aussitôt va devenir une réalité que tu palperas des mains ; je te ferai descendre jusqu'au fond du gouffre de ta pensée, j'accomplirai ton désir.

SMARH.

Que sais-je ? Car j'ai mille passions sans but, mille instincts confus ; j'ai comme, dans mon âme, les débris de vingt mondes, et je ne sens pas un souffle qui puisse ranimer toutes ces fleurs flétries de croyance et d'amour, d'illusions perdues ; mon cœur est sec comme un roc brûlé du soleil et battu de la tempête, je suis lassé comme si j'avais marché depuis des siècles sur une route de fer.

Et pourtant j'ai encore besoin de vivre ! Je sens, tout au fond de mon âme, quelque chose qui remue encore, et qui palpite, et qui veut vivre, quelque chose qui demande et qui appelle comme une voix d'enfant dans la nuit, cherchant sa mère. Parfois mon sang bouillonne comme si mes veines étaient d'airain rouge. p89

Oh ! Si quelque rosée du ciel, toute humide et toute fumeuse de parfums, venait baigner mon cœur et l'endormir ! Si le vent frais des nuits d'été pouvait ranimer mes yeux usés et fatigués de veilles et de fatigues !

SATAN.

Viens, viens, mon maître, ta course n'est pas finie ; tu te plaindras quand tu seras vieux ; sois ferme, aie le cœur dur pour vivre longtemps et ne désespère pas de l'avenir, si tu veux être heureux. Regarde le monde, il y a bien quelque six mille ans qu’il sue et qu’il travaille dans le cercle de l’infini, et il croit avancer parce qu’il tourne.

Allons ! Allons ! Tout est à toi, l’enfer va te servir ; le monde, pour te plaire, s’étale comme une nappe. Que veux-tu manger ? De quoi veux-tu te nourrir ? De gloire ? Des voluptés ? Des crimes ? Tout, tout est à toi !

Satan siffla, et deux chevaux ailés se présentèrent, leur dos était long et se pliait comme un serpent, leur large queue noire battait la terre, leur crinière flottait et sifflait au vent, leurs ailes se déployaient comme des ailes de chauves-souris, et, quand ils furent emportés par eux, on n’entendait que le bruit des vagues d’air que remuait leur vol, et celui de leurs naseaux qui lançaient la fumée. Ils couraient à pas de géant sur le monde ; sous eux étaient perdus les villes, les campagnes, les tours, les clochers, les mers ; ils allaient traversant les empires, et ce vol de l’enfer passait aussi vite que la poudre, ils semblaient eux-mêmes emportés par la tempête avec le sable du rivage. Satan se tenait immobile, droit, plein de majesté et d’orgueil, il regardait tout disparaître derrière lui, tout apparaître devant ; Smarh se tenait couché sur la crinière, à laquelle il se cramponnait pour se soutenir. Ils allaient côte à côte, dans cette course effrénée p90

du monde. Emportés par leurs chevaux, tout passait devant eux : pyramides, armées, tombeaux, ruisseaux, manteaux de pourpre, empires, tout cela passait comme l’espace qu’ils franchissaient. Leurs coursiers faisaient battre leurs ailes et baissaient la tête pour mieux bondir, mais Satan les pressait du flanc : — allons, disait-il, allons plus vite, ou je vous attacherai à la queue de quelque comète qui, dans sa course éternelle, vous fera mourir de fatigue. Plus vite ! Mangez donc l’air ! êtes-vous fatigués déjà pour quelques mille lieues que vous avez été toute une heure à faire ? Allons ! Plus vite, ou je vous casse la tête d’un coup de pied. Les nuages roulent, la neige tombe sur les montagnes, la mer se tord et mugit, l’air siffle, étendez-vous plus long, d’un bond franchissez-moi cette montagne, d’un coup d’aile passez-moi cet océan. Quand vous serez fatigués, vous irez vous reposer sur le coin de quelque nuée, et quand vous aurez faim, je vous donnerai à manger le marbre de quelque sépulcre.

Et la course recommençait, plus vive, plus longue, plus silencieuse, plus terrible. On les voyait de loin, dans les airs, marcher sur le vide et courir dans l’infini.

Quand les chevaux furent bien las, que leur crinière eut bien battu leur croupe, et que leurs flancs pressés furent couverts d’écume et de sang, ils finirent par tournoyer en planant dans les airs et s’abattirent sur la terre.

C’était le soir, le soleil se couchait, et ses teintes cuivrées illuminaient les coteaux ; c’était dans un cimetière de village, parmi les tombes grasses et les herbes. Les coursiers se traînaient sur le sol jonché de pierres brisées étendues, et leurs ailes raclaient sur la terre ; ils étaient haletants et se traînaient comme des lézards, couchés sur le ventre. p91

L'église était vieille, toute ridée, toute grise ; on voyait, à travers ses vitraux, quelques lampes s'allumer et s'éteindre ; des paysans jouaient et couraient devant le porche.

Smarh et Satan s'étaient assis au pied de l'if dont les rameaux allaient tout alentour, comme une large rose verte. Il se fit un silence, les hommes se turent, le vent cessa de souffler ; la nuit vint, Satan et Smarh se regardèrent longtemps l'un l'autre sans rien dire.

Satan était étendu sur l'herbe, il promenait son regard fauve sur l'horizon, et sa griffe entrait machinalement dans une fente de tombeau et remuait sa cendre. Smarh le regardait, plein d'effroi, il tremblait comme la feuille, jamais il ne s'était senti si faible.

La nuit vint, une nuit toute splendide, pleine de clartés ; les feux rouges et bleus sortaient et rentraient de terre, la terre remuait et semblait s'agiter comme les vagues ; les hommes se mirent à fuir, mais la terre du cimetière montait sur les corps et les engloutissait. Les vitraux de l'église parurent s'agiter eux-mêmes et prendre vie, les lampes, allumées et vacillantes, les frappaient par derrière et semblaient les faire remuer, comme si les fleurs peintes eussent été des fleurs vertes et que quelque vent d'enfer les eût agitées.

Les personnages se mirent à marcher d'eux-mêmes, et Smarh vit le Christ dans le désert. Il était seul. Tout à coup le diable se présentait à lui, il avait une tête monstrueuse et ricanait horriblement, le Christ avait peur, Satan ouvrait la bouche, étendait les mains et faisait claquer ses ongles.

Smarh se détourna vivement vers lui, il lui semblait le voir ainsi, mais plus horrible ; il marchait dans le feu, et une sueur de sang coulait sur son corps. Les tombeaux semblaient s'agiter comme des débris de navire, sur les vagues vertes du gazon, qui ondulait mollement et laissait voir des quartiers de squelettes et
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de cadavres, qu'allaient déterrer les coursiers ailés, et ils les mâchaient lentement.

Puis tout disparut, les ténèbres reparurent et l'on n'entendit qu'une pluie éternelle d'un sang bouillant et plein d'écume, qui brûlait la terre en tombant. Smarh tout à coup vit Yuk se berçant, en riant et en se tordant dans les convulsions d'un rire immense, à une longue corde qui partait du ciel et descendait jusqu'à l'enfer.

Ils reprirent leur route, et ils allaient par la nuit obscure, si loin qu'ils changèrent de monde et qu'ils arrivèrent au bord d'un beau fleuve.

On entendait le bruit de l’eau dans les bambous, dont les têtes ployaient sous le souffle du vent ; les ondes bleues roulaient, éclairées par la lune qui se reflétait sur elles ; au ciel les nuages l’entouraient et roulaient emportés en se déployant, et les eaux du fleuve aussi s’en allaient lentement, entre les prairies toutes pleines de silence, de fleurs. Les flots étaient si calmes qu’on eût pris le courant pour quelque serpent monstrueux qui s’allongeait lentement sur les herbes pour aller mordre au loin l’océan. Cependant on voyait glisser dessus les ombres scintillantes des étoiles et les masses noires des nuages ; souvent aussi les deux ailes blanches des cygnes disparaissaient dans les joncs verts. La nuit était chaude, limpide, toute vaporeuse de parfums, toute humide de la rosée des fleurs ; elle était transparente et bleue, comme si un grand feu d’étoiles l’eût éclairée par derrière. C’était un horizon large et grand, qui baisait au loin le ciel d’un baiser d’amour et de volupté.

Smarh se sentit revivre ; je ne sais quelle perception, jusque-là inconnue, de la nature entra dans son âme comme une faculté nouvelle, comme une jouissance
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intime et transparente, au dedans de laquelle il voyait se mouvoir confusément des pensées riantes, des images tendres, vagues, indécises. Il resta longtemps plongé dans la béatitude de l’extase et se laissant enivrer par tout cela, laissant son âme humer par tous ses pores l’harmonie et les délices de ce ciel diaphane, si large et si pur ; de cette campagne, avec ses herbes courbées par la brise embaumante, avec les fleurs balançant leurs calices et laissant échapper le parfum qui s’envole ; de cette onde de lait murmurante et douce dans les roseaux, avec ces cygnes dont le pied bat mollement les flots endormis, qui viennent mouiller d’un baiser tout fumant le sable doré et jonché de coquilles blanches.

Son âme se déployait et nageait à l’aise, elle étendait ses ailes et planait au milieu de cette création, toute ivre de parfums, toute dormeuse et nonchalante, comme une sultane sur des lits de roses. On sentait que la terre toute tiède grandissait en beauté dans son sommeil.

Voilà que les ondes s’arrêtent et semblent une lame d’argent qui est demeurée sur l’herbe, les joncs se taisent, les fleurs s’ouvrent, la nuit devient encore plus transparente, plus longue, plus voluptueuse ; et tandis que Smarh restait là, on voit s’élever, sortir, apparaître et s’enfuir, parmi la clarté douteuse, comme des ombres qui passent. De vagues formes de femmes nues, blanches, venaient autour de lui, marchant avec leurs pieds nus sur le tapis vert et frais ; elles l’entouraient, le regardaient, l’appelaient, puis elles s’en allaient bien vite, bien vite, en courant ; les unes se courbaient jusqu’à terre, et l’on voyait leur dos blanc, tout couvert de cheveux noirs, se plier avec un mouvement de fleur sous la brise ; les autres s'étendaient sur ses genoux, et leur tête retombait par terre et laissait voir leur gorge palpitante et brune ; elles étaient vives, folâtres, errantes, douteuses p94

comme une suite d'images dans un songe d'amour. Elles venaient lui jeter des fleurs à la figure, en dansant autour de lui ; elles s'entrelaçaient avec leurs bras ronds et blancs sur leurs hanches de marbre, on voyait leur cou de cygne se ployer en arrière et leur gorge remuer comme si elles eussent chanté. Car elles chantaient, mais si bas, si confusément que Smarh n'entendait que des sons doux et faibles, comme ceux d'une flûte au dernier soupir d'une vibration mourante. Elles allaient dans le fleuve, et en ressortaient avec leurs beaux corps tout humides et leurs cheveux mouillés sur leurs seins ; souvent le flot d'azur les apportait devant lui, comme dans des bras invisibles et embaumés.

Smarh alors sentit en lui quelque chose qui montait comme une vague géante ; il avait devant lui je ne sais quelles illusions, qui éclairaient son cœur et le menaient déjà dans un avenir tout plein de délices, il voulait courir après, mais il lui échappait toujours et il courait toujours.

Elles étaient si belles ! Il y en avait qui descendaient de la nue grise, d'autres qu'apportaient les flots, d'autres qui sortaient de dessous terre, d'entre les herbes, les fleurs, et qui semblaient venir soit d'un rayon de la lune, soit du parfum d'une rose, oh ! Belles ! Belles ! Et si fines, si transparentes, qu'on les aurait prises pour les plus beaux rêves d'un poète ! Il y en avait de blanches avec des cheveux d'or, d'autres qui étaient brunes, ardentes, et qui avaient des yeux noirs qui semblaient lancer des jets de flammes.

C'était si beau de voir cette guirlande de femmes nues, entrelacées et remuant toutes, que Smarh courait dévoré par la rage. Elles lui échappaient des mains, et puis elles revenaient devant lui. Il avait un désir, un désir immense ; son âme était une chaudière rouge où se brûlait, toute torturée, une passion gigantesque ; p95

il y avait un démon en lui, qui le poussait en avant, lui disait cent choses infinies et lui chantait des chants sans mots, sans phrases, sans idées, mais quelque chose d'ardent, de dévorant, de large et de plein de colère, de frénésie, de plus rapide que la poudre, plus brûlant que le feu. Il allait, courait, venait ; tout son sang bouillonnait ; sa chair remuait et semblait se repétrir dans cette passion, ses os étaient broyés, sa pensée malade courait dans un cercle de fer et se brisait la tête en voulant le franchir.

Enfin Satan en eut pitié, il frappa la terre avec son pied et il en sortit un palais.

Smarh se trouva dans une large salle, assis à une table toute couverte de mets ignorés ; il se précipitait dessus en savourant avec délices les premières bouchées, et buvait quelques gouttes des liqueurs les plus parfumées. Les lambris de marbre blanc, les pavés d’or étaient sculptés, ciselés ; il y avait de place en place des femmes nues et belles comme des statues, elles se confondaient avec elles ; des clartés ruisselantes illuminaient tout cela. C’étaient des chants sans fin, doux et purs comme celui de l’alouette dans les blés, comme la voix qui dit : je t’aime, dans un baiser ; c’était partout formes de rose, seins d’albâtre, beautés sans nombre, ivresses infinies.

Enfin, imaginez quelque chose de plus suave qu’un regard, de plus embaumant que les roses, de plus beau, de plus resplendissant que la nuit étoilée, la volupté sous toutes ses formes, sous toutes ses faces, avec ses ravissements, ses transports, ses battements de cœur, ses ivresses, son délire ; rêvez tout ce que vous voudrez de plus beau, de plus délirant ; songez aux formes les plus belles, aux mots les plus amoureux ; formez-vous dans votre esprit, avec l’imagination la plus délirante d’un poète et les souvenirs les p96 plus superbes et les plus titaniques de Rome, une fête de nuit, une orgie toute pleine de femmes nues, belles comme les Vénus, avec des chœurs de voix, avec des coupes d’or, avec les mets les plus exquis, les boissons les plus fumeuses ; dites-vous, si vous voulez : il y avait un palais fait avec du marbre et de l’or, des clartés sortaient des murs, les arbres portaient un feuillage rose, la mer roulait des flots de lait d’où sortaient des nymphes avec des couronnes et des guirlandes, il y avait des danses et des voluptés sans fin, des frénésies, des femmes sur des piédestaux, dans les poses les plus lubriques, les plus exquises ; croyez-vous donc qu’avec vos misérables mots, votre style qui boite et votre imagination qui bégaie, vous parviendrez à rendre une parcelle de ce qui arriva cette nuit-là ?

Avec votre langue châtrée par les grammairiens et déjà si pauvre, si châtrée d’elle-même, pouvez-vous exprimer tout le parfum d’une fleur, tout le verdoyant d’un pré d’herbe ? Me peindrez-vous seulement un tas de fumier ou une goutte d’eau ? Est-ce que le mot rend la pensée entière ? Est-ce que l’expression ne l’étreint pas dans elle-même ? Auparavant elle était libre, immense, impalpable, et vous la fixez, vous la collez, vous la clouez sur une misérable feuille de papier avec un mot bien pâle et bien sec. Voyons donc ! Avec des mots, des phrases et du style, faites-moi la description bien exacte d’un de vos souvenirs, d’un paysage, d’une masure quelconque !

C’est là ce qui me désole. Savez-vous que j’ai rêvé longtemps à cette superbe orgie, et que je suis lassé de voir que je n’ai avancé à rien, et que je ne peux pas vous dire le moindre mot de cette pensée ou de cette chose qu’on nomme volupté, chose si transparente, si fine, si légère, une vapeur insaisissable et rose dans laquelle flottille l’âme toute oppressée et toute confuse. p97

Un jour que j’aurai de l’imagination, que j’aurai été penser à Néron sur les ruines de Rome, ou aux bayadères sur les bords du Gange, j’intercalerai la plus belle page qu’on ait faite ; mais je vous avertis d’avance qu’elle sera superbe, monstrueuse, épouvantablement impudique, qu’elle fera sur vous l’effet d’une tartine de cantharides, et que, si vous êtes vierge, vous apprendrez de drôles de choses, et que, si vous êtes vieillard, elle vous fera redevenir jeune ; ce sera une page qui passera en prodigalité la poésie de M Delille, en intérêt les tragédies de M Delavigne, en exubérance le style de J Janin, et en fioritures celles de P De Kock ; une page enfin, qui, si elle était affichée sur les murs, mettrait les murs en chaleur eux-mêmes, et ferait courir les populations dans les lupanars devenus désormais trop petits, et forcerait hommes et femmes à s’accoupler dans la rue, à la façon des chiens, des porcs, race fort inférieure à la race humaine, j’en conviens, qui est la plus douce et la plus inoffensive de toutes. En attendant, je m’arrête, car tout ce que j’ai de plus poétique à vous dire est de ne rien dire. Mais voilà Smarh qui s’est levé de dessus son lit de rose, les roses le fatiguaient, et il s’est assis par terre, sur le pavé de marbre blanc incrusté de diamant ; il est essoufflé, la sueur coule de son front, son grand œil, morne et vide, tout sec de larmes, se promène lentement et va se fermer ; sa paupière est de plomb, ses membres sont brisés de fatigue, son âme est navrée d’amertume et de dégoût. Pourquoi donc ? Les femmes viennent devant lui, elles l’appellent, elles retournent leurs croupes vermeilles et blanches, leurs hanches de satin se présentent à lui, leurs cheveux ondoient sur leurs épaules d’albâtre, leur sein palpite, leurs dents de perles laissent passer le sourire, leurs yeux, d’où découle une expression toute p98

tendre, toute ardente, noyés dans une amoureuse langueur, le regardent en face.

Tout à l’heure il courait après, il sautait, il bondissait, il rugissait de plaisir, il se pâmait, il se mourait ; et voilà qu’il les repousse, qu’il n’en veut plus, qu’il détourne la tête et veut dormir. On lui apporte, dans des plats d’or, un mets pour lequel ont travaillé pendant trois jours vingt esclaves ; des flottes sont parties dans tous les sens pour en rapporter ce qu’il faut ; ce n’est ni un fruit, ni une viande, ni un poisson, c’est de l’inouï, de l’inventé, quelque chose à mourir de plaisir ; à peine s’il l’a mis sous son palais qu’il l’a recraché. On lui présente, dans une coupe de diamant ciselé, un vin d’azur pilé avec des grappes du raisin d’Asie, tout embaumé des parfums les plus doux, un vin si délicieux qu’on n’en boira jamais de pareil ; à peine s’il en a mouillé sa lèvre que la nausée lui est venue et qu’il l’a jeté par terre.

Tout à l’heure il aimait les mots d’amour, l’alcôve fermée, la femme frémissante et évanouie la gorge étendue ; il aimait les soupirs, les baisers, les longues pâmoisons, les yeux noyés de larmes ; il aimait la danse ivre, folâtre, longue chaîne amoureuse ; il aimait les resplendissantes clartés, la lune argentant les pelouses vertes, il aimait le mystère des bois, le parfum des fleurs ; il aimait toutes ces choses qui navrent l'âme et la font fondre en délices. Qu'a-t-il donc ?

Tout cela était pourtant bien beau ! Et avec quelle ardeur il l'avait convoité ! Que de fois il avait appelé dans ses rêves ce quelque chose de surhumain et d'impossible !

Il s'ennuie, il a l'âme pleine et vide comme un ballon rempli d'air.

Non ! Tout cela, toutes ces beautés sans nombre, toutes ces délices inventées, il n'en veut plus ; il reste p99

là sur le flanc, ivre mort, le dégoût plein le cœur, le corps fatigué, l'œil morne et béant ; la volupté le lasse, elle l'a remué, chatouillé, irrité, puis elle l'a pris, l'a brisé comme un roseau, et l'a jeté ensuite dans la satiété et l'ennui, l'ennui brut et mort comme une chape de plomb qui couvre l'âme et l'écrase.

Et Yuk est encore là avec son ignoble figure ; il bave sur la pourpre, il casse le marbre et fond l'or ; il brise les statues, il boit les vins et crache sur les mets ; il prend les femmes, les épuise depuis la tête jusqu'aux pieds, depuis les larmes jusqu'au rire, le corps et l'âme ; il fait tout vil et laid, il vieillit la jeunesse, enlaidit la beauté, abaisse ce qui est grand, rend amer ce qui est doux, il dégrade la noblesse ; le voilà qui s'établit comme un roi dans la volupté et qui la rend vénale, ignoble, crapuleuse et vraie.

Smarh se met à rire lui-même et à mépriser la chair ; il se relève, dresse la tête et s'écrie : — Satan ! Satan ! Je ne veux pas de tes joies ; autre chose ! Allons, un cheval ! Une armée ! Des batailles ! Du sang ! J'en veux à y noyer des peuples ! Crois-tu donc que je suis fait pour m'endormir dans la mollesse et m'abrutir dans les voluptés ? Arrière tout cela ! Te dis-je, je veux être grand, immense ; je veux être un des souvenirs du monde, et le manier dans mes deux mains, et le battre longtemps avec les quatre pieds de mon cheval.

Et le voilà parti comme la flèche que l'arc tendu a lancée en avant, il traîne derrière lui toute une armée qui court pour le suivre, il passe les Alpes, l'Hymalaya, traverse les océans, les déserts, il va. Un vautour plane sur sa tête et étend ses ailes noires ; quelquefois il vient s'abattre sur sa couronne et pousse des cris rauques, en voyant le sang rejaillir et la plaine, toute couverte d'hommes, se couvrir de cadavres comme des épis fauchés ; il va toujours. p100

Il va, et partout derrière lui il se fait une grande ruine, la terre est calcinée, l'herbe ne repousse plus, la cendre vole aux vents, les fleuves sont encombrés de morts, le sang rougit la neige des montagnes.

Les hommes meurent à ses côtés et tendent des bras suppliants vers lui, mais le poitrail de son cheval renverse les pyramides, et ses pas broient les villes ; il va.

Et l’on n’entend plus derrière lui qu’un grand soupir, qu’un dernier râle, on palpite encore, l’incendie n’a plus que sa fumée, les cadavres pourrissent, les os sont blanchis par les pluies d’orage ; il va. En vain il a rencontré le hameau où il naquit, la cabane où sa mère le mit au jour ; il a brûlé la moisson, il a renversé le toit de son père ; il a passé et l’on n’a plus vu qu’une longue trace de sang. Il a mis des chaînes aux peuples qu’il a vaincus ! Puis il a dit : “je reviendrai “, et il est parti, et ils sont tous morts dans la servitude, voilà les fers qui sont rouillés et les squelettes qui craquent aux vents.

Il a tout détruit, est-ce qu’il ne veut faire de la terre qu’un vaste tombeau pour y enfermer son nom ? Ne s’arrêtera-t-il jamais ? Il a usé vingt générations à le suivre, et il va toujours, il va si vite que les aigles ne le peuvent suivre et que les vautours n’ont pas le temps de finir leur large festin ; son manteau flotte au vent, son épée est cassée, il bat son cheval avec son sceptre, et il lui enfonce les talons dans le ventre ; la crinière de son coursier est hérissée, l’écume blanchit sa bouche, son sabot est tout usé, il lève la tête pour humer la vapeur du sang. Jamais il ne s’arrête, jamais un regard vers le passé, car la tête en avant et fronçant le sourcil, son œil dévore l’horizon, il marche à grands pas dans l’avenir et rêve les conquêtes d’un autre monde ; il a un démon ailé qui vole devant lui et lui crie, avec la voix des armes qui s’entrechoquent : “encore, encore p101

cela ! Il y a un océan que tu n’as pas traversé, un empire de plus ! Est-ce assez ? Marche donc !” il se sent poussé lui-même avec le vent qui remue ses drapeaux, il désire que le monde soit plus grand pour que sa conquête soit plus grande, il voudrait courir avec le canon pour porter plus vite la mort et le néant.

Son lit de lauriers est trop petit, il jette des flottes sur les océans et des armées sur les empires, il va toujours cassant, broyant, emportant dans ses deux bras les peuples éplorés et traînant le monde esclave à la croupe de son cheval.

Quand son navire fend les ondes, la carène remue les cadavres balancés par la vague et les débris des flottes. Quand son cheval galope, souvent le sang lui vient jusqu’au poitrail, souvent son pied entre dans le ventre des morts. S’il lève la tête, il voit un ciel rougi par la lueur de l’incendie.

Il marcha ainsi longtemps, si longtemps que la terre était déserte du sud au nord. Il passa par l’Asie et l’Europe, l’ancien et le nouveau monde ; il traversa les océans de la glace et les mers du sud où l’eau brûle et fume sur un sable de feu ; les déserts, les forêts, tout garda l’empreinte sanglante du talon du vainqueur qui avait broyé quelque chose à chacun de ses pas.

Il alla toujours. Il vit bien des frais ruisseaux, bien des bois pleins de mousse, de larges feuillages et des belles roses, et il ne désaltéra pas au ruisseau sa gorge séchée par la poussière, il n’y lava pas ses mains, il ne s’assit pas sous les feuilles vertes pour regarder les nues s'en aller et venir dans le ciel. Il n'aimait rien ; son âme était vide comme le désert et insatiable comme lui. à mesure qu'il avançait, son ambition se grossissait aussi, la montagne montait toujours plus vite que le voyageur. Enfin il arriva que tout fut fini, et qu'un jour son p102

cheval s'abattit au bout du monde, devant l'infini océan que l'homme ne peut franchir, au bord duquel il reste toujours, regardant s'il ne verra pas apparaître quelque cavale pour partir, quelque étoile pour l'éclairer ; il est là, s'amusant à ramasser des débris de coquilles et parcelles de grains de sable. Il avait donc tout fini. Que faire ? Où aller ? La terre était déserte, vide d'esclaves et d'armées. Il leva les yeux vers le ciel et fut pris d'une ardeur sans bornes :

— qu'est-ce que le monde ? Qu'il est petit ! J'y étouffe, s'écria-t-il, élargis-moi cette terre ! étends ses océans, recule-moi ces bornes-là, élargis-moi l'atmosphère où je vis. Est-ce tout ? Est-ce que la vie se bornera là ? J'ai dévoré le monde, je veux autre chose : l'éternité ! L'éternité !

Et il tâcha de faire un grand tas de toute la poussière qu'il avait faite, il fit une pyramide de têtes de morts séchées par les vents, il balaya avec des drapeaux déchirés tout le sang versé, et il le mit dans une fosse et répéta : gloire ! Gloire ! Mais tout croula vite, la poussière même s'envola, les ossements l'engloutirent, la terre but le sang, et il sentit une voix qui disait derrière lui :

— l'éternité, la gloire, l'immortalité, c'est moi ! Mais il se leva lentement, comme une ombre qui sort d'un tombeau, avec un long linceul tout pourri, qui enveloppait un squelette avec des lambeaux de chair aussi verts que l'herbe des cimetières. Il avait une tête toute jaunie, avec un vieux sourire froid de courtisane ; son bâton, c'était un sceptre doré qui portait un soc de charrue.

Il se leva plein de colère :

— qui ose dire qu'il y a de l'immortalité ?

YUK.

C'est moi qui l'ose.

— sais-tu qui je suis ? Vois donc mes pieds tout pleins de poussière des empires, et la frange de mon manteau toute mouillée par les larmes des générations.

Il secoua son linceul et il en tomba de la poussière rougie.

— C'est l'histoire, ajouta le spectre ; ose dire qu'il y a immortalité sinon pour moi ?

YUK.

Pour moi.

— Qui donc es-tu ?

YUK.

Et toi ?

LA MORT.

La mort ! et toi ?

YUK.

Vois donc ! Ma tête va jusqu'aux nues, mes pieds remuent la cendre des tombeaux ; quand je parle, c'est le monde qui dit quelque chose, c'est le créateur qui crée, c'est la création qui agit ; je suis le passé, le présent, le futur, le monde et l'éternité, cette vie et l'autre, le corps et l'âme ; tu peux abattre des pyramides et faire mourir des insectes, mais tu ne m'arracheras pas la moindre parcelle de quelque chose.

Je me moque de ton linceul et de tes joies de sépulcre, je me ris de ta face qui a toujours glissé sur moi comme l'eau sur le marbre. Ta tête jaune, ton ventre en lambeaux, toute la poussière qui t'entoure, les pleurs de sang, les sanglots, tout ce magnifique cortège dont tu te fais gloire, les ruines, le passé, l'histoire, tous ces grains de sable qui forment ton trône, le monde qui est la roue sur qui tu tournes dans le temps, tout cela, te dis-je, depuis les océans les plus larges jusqu'aux larmes d'un chien, l'Atlas jusqu'à un tas de fumier, depuis un tronc jusqu'à un brin d'herbe, tout cela qui est ton domaine, ta gloire, ton royaume,

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que sais-je enfin ? Tout ce que tu manges, tout ce que tu dévores, tout ce qui vit et qui meurt, tout ce qui est commencé pour finir, tout cela me fait pitié, tu entends ? Tout cela me fait rire, moi, et d'un rire plus fort que le bruit de ton pied quand il broiera le monde d'un seul coup !

LA MORT.

Qui donc es-tu ?

YUK.

Eh quoi ! Ne m'as-tu donc jamais vu ? Aux funérailles des empereurs, n'était-ce pas moi qui étais couché sur le drap noir, qui conduisais les chevaux ? N'est-ce pas moi qui ai creusé les fosses, qui ai fait pourrir ensemble les cadavres des héros dans leurs mausolées de marbre et les charognes de loups sous les feuilles des bois ?

Quand tu es entrée dans l'église, et que tu t'es mise à faucher comme ailleurs, vieille vorace que tu es, toi qui manges de la terre et du bronze, n'as-tu pas vu ma main éternelle qui cassait le christ et souillait l'autel ?

Eh quoi ! Quand l'aurore blanchit les vitres au sortir de quelque orgie, quand tu viens boire le vin dans les coupes d'or et essuyer ta bouche aux dents usées avec la nappe de pourpre, n'as-tu pas entendu ma chanson, qui bourdonnait avec les verres qui se brisaient et les mouches à viande qui voltigeaient sur les lèvres bleues des morts ?

Quand tu te baisses jusqu'à terre et que tu te penches pour mieux faucher, n'as-tu rien entrevu à travers l'écroulement des monarchies ? Au milieu des ruines qui tombent, n'as-tu pas entendu le fracas des pyramides qui s'écroulent, une autre ruine au milieu de ces ruines, une voix au milieu de ces voix, une grimace parmi ces figures ?

N'as-tu pas vu quelque chose de plus fort que le p105

temps, quelque chose qui le mène, qui le pousse, le remplit et qui le soûle ? N'as-tu pas vu une autre éternité dans l'éternité ?

Tu crois que tout est fini quand tu as passé ? Tu te crois l'infini, et que tu donnes des bornes où ton pied se met ? Partout où ta charrue laboure, tu crois y semer le néant ? Comme si, après l'incendie, il n'y avait pas les cendres ! Après le cadavre, n'y a-t-il pas la pourriture ? Après le temps, n'y a-t-il pas l'éternité ?

LA MORT.

Qui donc es-tu ? Parle ! Parle !

YUK.

Ah ! Qui je suis ? Je suis le vrai, je suis l'éternel, je suis le bouffon, le grotesque, le laid, te dis-je ; je suis ce qui est, ce qui a été, ce qui sera ; je suis toute l'éternité à moi seul. Pardieu ! Tu me connais bien, plus d'une fois je t'ai baisée au visage et j'ai mordu tes os, nous avons eu de bonnes nuits, enveloppés tous deux dans ton linceul troué.

LA MORT.

C'est vrai ! Je t'avais oublié, ou du moins je voulais t'oublier, car tu me gênes, tu me tirailles, tu m'épuises, tu m'accables, tu veux avoir, à toi seul, tout ce que j'ai, et je crois qu'il ne me resterait plus qu'un seul fil de mon manteau que tu me l'arracherais.

YUK.

C'est vrai, je suis un époux quelque peu tyrannique, mais je t'apporte chaque jour tant de choses que tu ne devrais pas te plaindre.

LA MORT.

C'est vrai ! Faisons bon ménage, car nous ne pouvons vivre l'un sans l'autre. Après tout, tu manges encore p106

les miettes qui tombent de ma bouche et la poussière que font mes pieds.

Alors tout le passé de sa vie apparut à Smarh, rapidement, d'un seul jet, comme dans un éclair. Il revit passer d'abord sa chaumière d'ermite, avec son crucifix de bois, avec sa vie sainte, avec ses jours purs, avec ses nuits tranquilles ; il se rappela que quelqu'un était venu lui parler, qu'il y avait eu alors dans son âme une immense confusion, tout un chaos de pensées ; et qu'il était parti avec cet être, qu'il était monté, monté, il ne savait où ni comment, mais à des hauteurs si hautes, si immenses, que la pensée même ne peut y atteindre ; et il avait une grande peur, son âme s'était pliée comme un roseau et s'était brisée sous l'ouragan de l'infini.

Puis il y avait eu une tempête, et il avait été, devant la nature, plus faible que l'aile d'une mouche ; il avait encore là senti quelque chose qui pesait sur lui, comme si on avait mis un plomb sur cette aile, et il était resté, tombé, attaché à cette lourde chaîne invisible.

Il avait vu aussi la vie barbare s'acheminant vers les cités, et les cités elles-mêmes, mais en dedans, avec toutes ces choses qui tombent, le roi, l'église, la vertu, tout cela se fanant et se pourrissant. Il y avait là un vide dans son souvenir. Puis tout à coup il vit repasser, comme par une illumination magique, toutes les femmes l'appelant, lui souriant ; il se rappela ses voluptés et ses dégoûts, toute la vie ! Et ses courses effrénées à cheval, tout écumeuses et toutes sanglantes du sang des morts, des cris, des bruits d'armes ; et puis une grande plaine toute vide, avec de la cendre, et il tomba mourant, abîmé par ces souvenirs, comme s'il était dans une arène et que sa pensée fût sortie de lui et qu'elle fût là le combattant avec des griffes de fer, secouant son p107

corps, le déchirant, le faisant tourner, courir ; elle le harcèle, le poursuit sans qu'il puisse l'éviter. Cela dura jusqu'à ce qu'il fût tombé, étourdi, épuisé de fatigue.

Cette agonie-là dura longtemps, et plus longue et plus cruelle que celle du Christ, car elle était sans espoir, sans aucun horizon qui apparût au bout de ce long chemin vide et plein de douleurs, sans soleil qui perçât les nuages, sans aurore après cette nuit. Lui aussi sua une sueur de sang et de larmes, et on les entendait tomber sur la terre.

Ah ! Ce fut pire, car sa croix, c'était son âme qu'il avait peine à porter et qui le brisait. Il l'avait portée dans la vie, et arrivé au haut du calvaire, il la laissa tomber de lassitude.

Le séjour du tombeau pour lui ne fut pas de trois jours, et son tombeau n'était point un couvercle de pierre, mais c'était le cadavre vivant de la pensée qui se remuait et se tordait sous le sépulcre de la vie et du fini.

Mais dans sa lassitude, au milieu de ses larmes silencieuses, quand tout pesait si durement sur lui, il s'éleva cependant comme un dernier soupir, un dernier baiser, quelque chose d'immense, d'amoureux, d'impalpable. Il se ranima, ouvrit les yeux, chercha ce qu'il n'avait jamais vu, désira ce qui n'existait pas ; il tendit les bras vers un infini sans bornes, et il se prit à rêver de belles choses inconnues. Son âme, toute usée, comme une vieille voile que les ouragans ont crevée et qui est retombée sans souffle, commença à palpiter, comme si une brise du soir, courant sur une mer du sud et apportant des parfums et de doux et vagues échos, l'eût enflée ; il reprit à la vie, et son cœur se rouvrit à l'espérance comme les fleurs au soleil.

Quelle journée devait l’attendre ? Quel ouragan allait la casser sur sa tige ? Pauvre fleur ! Pauvre âme ! p108

C’était un enfant, tout jeune, tout rose encore, l’âme imprégnée d’amour, de rêveries, d’extases. Le matin, il partait, mais il n’allait ni vers les champs où son père labourait, ni sur le rivage où la barque de ses frères aînés était attachée, car il aimait à contempler les nues fugitives, les moissons qui se ploient et s’ondulent aux vents comme une mer ; il allait dans les bois et il écoutait la pluie tomber sur le feuillage, les oiseaux qui roucoulent sur la haie fleurie, et les insectes qui bourdonnent dans les airs et qui se jouent dans les rayons du soleil ; il regardait la neige tomber, il écoutait le vent mugir. Il allait toujours vers la mer, c’étaient là tous ses amours. Il courait jusqu’à ce que ses pieds eussent touché le sable et que le vent des vagues vînt sécher ses cheveux blonds tout mouillés de sueur. Le soleil brûlait sa peau blanche, les rochers déchiraient ses pieds ; que lui faisait cela ? Lui qui écoutait les flots mourir sur la grève et qui regardait le soleil qui se baigne sous l’écume.

Il se mettait dans un antre de rocher, comme l’aigle dans son aire, et là, comme lui, il contemplait le soleil et l’océan. Il regardait au loin toute la verte plaine sillonnée d’écume et parsemée des écorchures de la brise, il suivait l’ombre des rochers, qui s’allongeait et diminuait sur le rivage ; immobile, il contemplait la même vague pendant longtemps, le même brin d’herbe, le même rocher avec son varech d’où l’eau ruisselle en perles, le même flocon d’écume que roulait le vent sur le rivage.

Souvent il prenait du sable plein ses mains, il ouvrait les doigts, et il prenait plaisir à voir les rayons de sable partir de différents côtés et disparaître en tourbillonnant, en s’élevant. Le soir, il regardait le soleil s’abaisser dans l’horizon, et ses gerbes de feu s’élancer des vagues et former un immense réseau lumineux ; les mouettes rasaient les flots, le sable, emporté par p109

la brise qui s’élève, roulait et courait sur le rivage. La nuit, c’étaient les étoiles, la lune, les rayons argentés sur les vagues vertes.

Et toujours ainsi il vécut ses plus belles années, il grandit sans faire autre chose que de mener une vie contemplative, une vie de pleurs, d’extases, de rêveries, une vie molle et paresseuse ; il vécut comme les fleurs elles-mêmes, vivant au soleil et regardant le ciel. Tout ce qui chantait, volait, palpitait, rayonnait, les oiseaux dans les bois, les feuilles qui tremblent au vent, les fleuves qui coulent dans les prairies émaillées, rochers arides, tempêtes, orages, vagues écumeuses, sable embaumant, feuilles d’automne qui tombent, neiges sur les tombeaux, rayons de soleil, clairs de lune, tous les chants, toutes les voix, tous les parfums, toutes ces choses qui forment la vaste harmonie qu’on nomme nature, poésie, Dieu, résonnaient dans son âme, y vibraient en longs chants intérieurs qui s'exhalaient par des mots épars, arrachés. Mais ce qu'il y a de plus sublime, de meilleur, de plus beau, ne s'en échappe jamais ; cela, au fond, c'est la musique intérieure, celle des pensées ; les vers mêmes ne sont que l'écho affaibli qui vient de l'autre monde. Un soir, en revenant, c'était un crépuscule d'été, le soleil était rouge, et des fils blancs s'attachaient aux cheveux ; et ce jour-là il avait regardé, comme les autres jours, la mer se rouler sur son sable, les herbes frémir au vent, les nuages se déployer, partir et s'en aller, comme des pensées, dans l'infini du ciel bleu. Mais il avait regardé tout cela sans le voir, il y avait dans son âme bien d'autres tempêtes que celles de l'océan, bien d'autres nuages que ceux du ciel.

Pourquoi donc s'ennuyait-il déjà, le pauvre enfant ? Il avait voulu un horizon plus vaste que celui qui s'étendait sous ses yeux, quelque chose de plus resplendissant p110

que le soleil. Lorsqu'il voyait, dans les belles nuits d'été, les bouquets de roses et les jasmins secouer aux souffles des vents leurs têtes fleuries, que la brise agitait les feuilles vertes et qu'elle remuait, dans ses plis invisibles, des échos lointains d'amour et des parfums de fleur, que la lune brillait toute pure et toute sereine, avec ses lumières qui montent et brillent et coulent silencieusement là-haut, avec les nuages qui s'étendent comme des montagnes mouvantes ou les vagues géantes d'un autre océan, il avait senti qu'il y avait encore dans son âme quelque chose de plus doux que tous ces parfums, de plus suave que toutes ces clartés, comme s'il y avait en lui des sources intarissables de volupté et des mondes de lumières qui rayonnaient au dedans.

Ce n'était plus assez de rester dans le fond de la vieille barque grêle, de se laisser bercer par la marée montante, couché sur les filets aux mailles rompues, alors que le soleil brillait sur les flots et que la quille venait battre le sable et les cailloux qui erraient sous elle, ni de voir au crépuscule les flots s'avancer et les sauterelles de mer rebondir comme la pluie sur le rivage, ni de sentir dans ses cheveux le vent de l'automne qui roule les feuilles jaunies et les plumes de la colombe, et qui semble murmurer des pleurs dans les rameaux morts ; rien de tout cela ! Eh quoi ! Ni les baisers de cette belle fille brune, qui l'attend chaque soir à la chapelle de la vierge et qui est là chaque nuit dans les bruyères, regardant à travers la brume si elle ne verra pas apparaître son ombre, si elle n'entendra pas le souffle de sa voix ? Ni sa pauvre chaumière, avec son toit de paille pourri, couvert de neige dans l'hiver, mais tout blanc de fleurs dans l'été ? Sa mère file sous l'âtre de la cheminée, un banc de gazon est là devant ; tout jeune, il y dormait au soleil ; enfant, c'est sur le sabre de son grand-père qu'il montait à cheval, c'est son vieux casque p111 qu’il roulait sur l’herbe, c’est dans son bouclier qu’il dormait ; c’est dans ce vieux lit-là qu’il naquit.

De la fenêtre on ne voit point la mer, elle est là, derrière cette colline ; mais on entend le bruit des flots et, dans l’hiver, elle déborde à droite dans le marais.

Il s’en retournait ainsi, bercé par sa marche et écoutant lui-même le bruit de ses pas dans les herbes, regardant le soleil qui se retirait à l’horizon, et les bœufs couchés à l’ombre et remuant la tête pour chasser les moucherons.

Et tout à coup il sentit une forme passer près de lui, comme si une bouche eût effleuré sa joue ; et une fée lui apparut avec un diadème d’or, elle répandit devant lui des fleurs, des diamants, et je ne sais quels lauriers que les vents emportèrent. Elle-même disparut dans un tourbillon de poussière.

Il était venu dans la ville, le cœur tout gonflé d’espérance, joyeux, ivre de lui-même, marchant à grands pas dans la vie future qu’il comblait de félicités sans bornes et d’enthousiasmes immenses. Agité epuis longtemps par son âme, remué par toutes les choses qui y bourdonnaient, il avait voulu être poète.

Poète, c’est-à-dire avoir des cheveux blancs avant l’âge, marcher de dégoût en dégoût, s’avancer dans le monde et voir l’illusion vers laquelle on avance, fuir toujours sans la saisir, être là comme ce géant de la fable, avec une soif infinie, une faim qui ronge, et sentir échapper toujours ces fruits qu’on a rêvés, qu’on a sentis, et dont la saveur prématurée est venue jusqu’à nous. être là, présent, avec sa jalousie, sa rage, son amour, son âme, devant ce monde si froid, si railleur ; s’épuiser, donner son sang, ce qui est plus que son sang, son cœur ; le verser à plein bord dans des vers qu’on a ciselés comme du marbre, et tout cela pour être mis sous les pieds de la foule, pour qu’on le casse, pour qu’on le broie, pour qu’on le pétrisse p112

dans le dédain, pour qu’on jette de la boue sur les ailes blanches de ces pauvres anges qui sont partis de votre cœur.

Poète, s’était-il dit, oh ! Poète ! Poète ! Il répétait ce mot-là comme une mélodie aimée qu’on a dans le souvenir et qui chante toujours dans notre oreille ses notes amoureuses.

Oh ! Poète ! Se sentir plus grand que les autres, avoir une âme si vaste qu’on y fait tout entrer, tout tourner, tout parler, comme la créature dans la main de Dieu ; exprimer toute l’échelle immense et continue qui va depuis le brin d’herbe jusqu’à l’éternité, depuis le grain de sable jusqu’au cœur de l’homme ; avoir tout ce qu’il y a de plus beau, de plus doux, de plus suave, les plus larges amours, les plus longs baisers, les longues rêveries la nuit, les triomphes, les bravos, l’or, le monde, l’immortalité ! N’est-ce pas pour lui, la mousse des bois fleuris, le battement d’ailes de la colombe, le sable embaumant de la rive, la brise toute parfumée des mers du sud, tous les concerts de l’âme, toutes les voix de la nature, les paroles de Dieu, à lui, le poète ?

Fais-moi des vers, dis-moi quelque chose, chante-moi un rayon de soleil ou un soupir de femme, mais que ta voix soit douce, qu'elle m'endorme comme sous des roses, qu'elle me navre, qu'elle me fasse mourir de volupté, d'extases.

Quand je te verrai, ô poète, quand tu m'auras dit toutes les choses de l'âme, que j'aurai recouvré tes accents, je me mettrai à tes genoux, tu seras mon dieu, je n'en ai point ; j'étalerai tous les manteaux royaux sous tes pieds, je fondrai toutes les couronnes pour te faire un marchepied.

Et il s'était mis un jour à prendre une plume, il l'avait saisie avec frénésie, il l'avait écrasée, en pleurant de joie et d'orgueil, sur un morceau de papier ; il était là, haletant, l'œil en feu, saisissant au vol les p113

idées qui passaient dans son âme, épiant chaque chose de son cœur pour l'attirer au dehors, pour la déshabiller, pour la donner toute nue à la foule. Son âme tournait en lui comme un gouffre vivant, il voulait l'arrêter, mais ce gouffre-là l'entraînait lui-même ; il commençait à se sentir faiblir et il se disait :

— malheur ! Malheur ! Qu'ai-je donc ? Le feu brûle mon âme, mais ma tête est de glace ; autrefois j'avais des pensées, plus une seule ! Je sens seulement des passions sans but, qui roulent en moi, comme des vagues qui s'entrechoquent par une nuit sombre. Que dire ? Que faire ? Cela même.

Oh ! La misère ! Je ne pourrai donc pas pousser un seul soupir que tout craque, s'écroule, se brise en moi ! Mon âme se gonfle, elle m'étouffe, elle va crever le corps qui la recouvre comme une main gonflée qui déchire le gant. Pourquoi donc ? Quelle malédiction ! écris, écris donc, malheureux, puisque le démon t'y pousse !

Oui ! La pensée est en moi, je la sens qui se meut comme un immense serpent, je la vois comme un large horizon qui se déploie à l'aurore, le soleil brille, la brume s'envole, la voilà qui monte, elle grandit, elle approche, je la tiens… tu es à moi, à moi ! Comme cela est beau, sublime ! J'ai donc du génie, moi ? Non, non, hélas !

Voilà que tu t'envoles donc, chère illusion ? Et toi aussi, orgueil, tu me quittes ? Qu'aurai-je ? Et cependant… tout n'a pas été dit ! Voyons, creusons, remuons mon âme, dût-elle ensuite me tomber en poussière dans les mains.

L'amour ! L'amour ! Eh bien ? Ah ! Quelle misérable vanité ! Est-ce que jamais des vers diront tous les miracles d'un sourire ou toutes les voluptés d'un regard ? L'amour ! Quand j'aurai bien répété cela des fois, est-ce que j'aurai dit quelque chose de plus ? Non ! p114

La gloire, par exemple ? Voyons : des conquérants, Alexandre, César, Napoléon… eh bien ! Des chars, de la poudre, du sang. Ah ! Quelle stupidité ! De la gloire ? La convoitise me brûle, et je ne peux pas dire la meilleure partie de la rage que j'ai dans le cœur.

Si je parlais de la mort plutôt ? C'est du néant, cela, c'est du vrai ; mais ma pensée s'y perd, et plus je pense moins je parle. Si j'étais un cadavre ressuscité, je dirais bien quelque chose, et si les vers qui nous déchirent le ventre c'est une joie ou un supplice ; et si la tombe est si noire qu'on le dit. Mais que dire ? Est-ce que c'est là la limite de l'art ? Est-ce que la poésie est un monde tout aussi mensonger que l'autre ? N'ira-t-on jamais plus loin ?

Et cependant j'ai du génie, je le sens, j'en suis plein, il me semble qu'il déborde… non, c'est de l'orgueil ! L'orgueil, le sang des poètes !

Rien dire, rester là, muet, en présence de ce monde idiot qui vous regarde avec sa mine béante, paillasse déguenillé qui pleure et qui veut rire, et qui demande encore quelque chose de beau pour l'amuser ! Mais l'amour, la gloire, la mort, l'orgueil, tous ces néants-là qui m'entourent et m'assiègent, pas une lettre de tout cela à écrire !

Dieu ? Autrefois j'y croyais. Que je me reporte par la pensée au temps où je priais la vierge à genoux, et où ma mère m'apprenait des prières. Si j'allais redevenir dévot, j'aurais au moins quelque chaleur, quelque conviction, je pourrais remuer les autres ; mais je suis trop fier pour mentir, et puis je ne le pourrais pas, moi qui rit en passant devant l'église et qui ai craché sur la croix, un jour où j'avais faim. Mais comment aimer quelque chose, espérer, croire, puisque tout est si horrible ici, puisque le doute est là, à chaque mot, puisque chaque croyance est tombée sous le coup de dent du malheur et du désespoir ? Dans ce monde et dans la poésie, dans le fini et dans p115

l'infini, en dehors, dans mon âme, tout me ment, tout me trompe, tout fuit et tout se met à rire, et voilà que je suis resté dans un océan de fange où je tournoie, où je m'engloutis. Je ferais mieux de rire de tout cela, et d'aller me soûler à la taverne ou bien de courir chez la fille de joie me vautrer dans quelque ignoble et vénale volupté.

Tant mieux ! Je n'ai plus à descendre. Il y a encore peu, je craignais que mon malheur n'augmentât, que ma chute ne fût plus profonde, mais me voilà au fond du gouffre…, à moins qu'il n'y ait des enfers sous l'enfer et un désespoir encore après le désespoir. Et cependant, est-ce que je puis rester ainsi toujours ? Mais je ne suffirais pas aux malheurs qui me dévorent, et il faudrait que mon cœur se double pour que tout le dégoût que j'ai pût y contenir longtemps.

Et quand je pense, hélas ! Qu'autrefois je me contentais d'un rayon de soleil, d'une moisson dorée, d'un beau clair de lune dans les bois, et que j'en avais assez, et que cela m'emplissait, et que j'étais heureux quand j'avais mis tous ces échos dans mes strophes sonores et arrondies ! Oh ! Qu'il y a loin déjà de ce temps-là à maintenant ! J'étais si jeune ! Si enfant ! Si heureux !

Mais, après avoir pris la nature, j’ai voulu prendre le cœur, après le monde, l’infini, et je me suis perdu dans ces abîmes sans fond, voilà que j’y roule. J’ai voulu sonder les passions, les disséquer, en faire de superbes squelettes, mais c’est mon âme que la mort a prise, et ces passions, que je voudrais courber sous mon genou et les montrer façonnées de mes mains, ce sont elles qui m’ont entraîné dans leurs courants, dans leurs tempêtes. J’ai cru que rien n’était trop haut pour moi, rien de trop fort, et je suis au fond du néant, plus faible qu’un roseau brisé. Adieu donc, tous ces beaux rêves, ces belles journées que l’aurore menteur m’annonçait si resplendissantes et si pures ; j’aurai donc entrevu un monde d’enthousiasme, p116

de transports ; l’éclair aura brillé devant mes yeux et m’a laissé ensuite dans les ténèbres, sous ce paradis de pensées dont le large glaive froid de la réalité me sépare pour l’éternité.

Ah ! Prison de chair, je te maudis ! Pourquoi es-tu là ? Voyons ! Que fais-tu, misérable charogne vivante, qui traînes ta pourriture par les rues, qui bois, qui manges, qui dors et qui jouis ? Pourquoi suis-je attaché à ce cadavre qui me traîne sur la terre, moi qui veux voler dans les cieux et partir dans l’infini ? Qu’avais-tu donc fait, pauvre âme, pour venir là, dans la prison de ce corps, où tu bats en vain des ailes que tu brises aux parois qui t’entourent ? Je sens bien que tu veux partir, que tu y pleures, et lorsque je vois les étoiles tu t’élances vers elles, quand la mer est devant moi tu veux courir dessus plus vite que le regard ; et quand je vois les tombes, n’est-ce pas toi qui tends les bras vers elles tandis que le corps veut vivre ?

Tu es un chant, une note, un soupir… non, non, rien de tout cela ! Tu es le cœur gonflé, tu es cette voix qui parle et qui prie, qui sanglote et se tord en moi, tandis que mes lèvres sourient.

ô pauvre aigle, tu es là dans une cage ; à travers tes barreaux tu vois encore les hautes cimes perdues dans les nuages où tu naquis, tu vois le large ciel où tu planais ; mais tes barreaux te resserrent, tu n’as plus qu’à mettre ta tête sous ton aile et à mourir ; tu étouffes déjà, et bientôt tu ne seras plus qu’un cadavre encore tiède qu’on appelle désespoir. Alors Smarh s’éloigna, il sortit de la ville à l’heure où tout brille et crie, c’était le soir, la brume l’emplissait, il faisait froid, il marchait pieds nus dans la boue, tandis que derrière lui, à ses côtés, la matière resplendissait dans sa force, qu’elle agissait, qu’elle siégeait sur des trônes, qu’elle avait ses philosophes, p117

ses sectateurs. Aussi le poète sortit, chassé, méprisé, honni ; on ne voulait pas de lui, on le renvoya. Il partit donc, mais derrière lui tout s’écroula et il y eut un grand rire.

Il arriva dans les champs. Seul dans la campagne, au milieu des ténèbres, il se prit à pleurer ; un désespoir immense vint s’abattre sur lui comme un vautour sur un cadavre, il étendit ses larges ailes noires, se mit à manger et poussa des cris féroces. Il pleura amèrement pendant longtemps, et chacune de ses larmes était une malédiction pour la terre, c’était quelque chose du cœur qui tombait et s’en allait dans le néant ; c’était l’agonie de l’espérance, de la foi, de l’amour, du beau, tout cela mourait, fuyait, s’envolait pour l’éternité ; toute la sève, toute la vie, toutes les fraîcheurs, tous les parfums, toutes les lumières, tout ce qui navre, ce qui enchante, tout ce qui est volupté, croyances, ardeurs, avait été arraché par le vent d’éternité qui venait de la terre, rasait le sol, emportait les fleurs.

Tout allait donc finir ; le monde, épuisé, craquait en dedans, il se mourait, et l’âme, rendue folle par tant de douleurs, tournait encore, dans son agonie, au milieu d’un cercle de feu qu’elle ne pouvait franchir.

La nuit allait commencer, une nuit éternelle, sans astres, sans clarté ; Satan déjà s’étendait sur le monde palpitant, pour lui arracher son dernier mot. Smarh était resté enseveli dans son malheur, sa tête était dans ses mains, sa chevelure, couverte de poussière, venait battre sur ses yeux en pleurs. On n’entendait rien que le bruit de l’immense tempête du temps qui allait finir et jetait alors ses plus horribles sanglots. La terre déviait de sa course circulaire ; elle oscillait, ivre de fatigue et d’ennui, comme si un ouragan l’avait poussée pour la faire tomber. Le soleil s’était abaissé lentement et avait dit p118

un éternel adieu, un dernier et long baiser, à ce qu’il avait éclairé, aux bois, aux prairies, aux forêts, aux vallons déserts, à l’océan sur lequel il courait dans les longues journées ; il était parti, les astres n’étaient point venus, et ils étaient allés éclairer d’autres mondes, plus haut.

Pourquoi donc Smarh lève-t-il la tête ? Voilà une femme à ses côtés… non, c’est un ange, elle lui a essuyé ses larmes, avec le bout de ses ailes blanches ; elle l’a relevé, l’a porté sur son cœur, elle pleure aussi, elle a les pieds en sang, elle lui dit : “ô mon bien-aimé, viens à moi, ils m’ont chassée, ils m’ont bannie, aime-moi, je suis si belle. “ et Smarh poussa un cri de joie, il se rattachait à la branche de salut d’où l’ouragan l’avait entraîné. Il s’écria tout à coup :

— oui, je t’aime ! Je t’aime ! Tu vois bien que je renais, que je vis, tu vois que le soleil reparaît, que l’herbe pousse sur les coteaux, que les fleuves coulent encore ; oui, je t’aime ! ô mon Dieu, mon Dieu, j’avais douté, j’avais pleuré, j’avais maudit, j’avais vu le monde passer comme une chaîne de squelettes dans une danse de l’enfer, et je n’avais pas compris ! Mais la providence se déroule à mes yeux, voilà l’aurore qui vient, l’horizon se déroule, s’avance, et laisse voir au fond quelque chose de resplendissant et d’éternel ; oui, je t’aime ! Si tu savais ! écoute donc ! Est-ce que c’est moi qui ai vécu si longtemps, qui ai marché sur tant de poussières, heurté tant de ruines ? Non, voilà la poussière qui monte au ciel, voilà les ruines qui se lèvent et se placent. Qu'étais-je donc ? Poète ? Oh ! Oui ! Je chanterai toujours, je chanterai encore. Oh ! Je t'aime !

Tout à l'heure j'étais dans le tombeau, je sentais un marbre lourd sur ma tête, et je me heurtais aux planches du cercueil, mais je suis au ciel ! Oh ! Je t'aime pour l'éternité ; pour l'éternité tu es à moi ! p119

Il allait étendre les bras vers elle, il allait la saisir, déjà leurs regards s'étaient confondus, leurs larmes s'étaient séchées, il y avait eu un immense espoir dans la création. Le monde s'était retourné sur son vieux lit de douleurs, il avait entr'ouvert son œil morne pour voir la dernière étoile, il avait aspiré la brise du ciel ; mais il se rendormit bientôt dans ses cendres.

Un éclair parut, Satan était là.

— arrête, dit-il, elle est à moi ! Smarh ! Arrête, te dis-je !

SMARH.

à toi ? Esprit de ténèbres, arrière !

SATAN.

Je te brise du pied, vermisseau plein d'orgueil, bulle de savon que mon souffle seul soutient.

SMARH.

Car tu es à moi ? à toi mon cœur !

SATAN.

Non ! à toi tout. La terre, usant ses dernières forces, s'écria : “aime-le, aime-le”.

L'enfer, se levant sur ses charbons, s'écria plein de rage : “aime-le, aime-le”.

Mais un rire perça l'air, Yuk parut et lui dit : — c'est pour moi, à toi l'éternité !

L'éternité en effet répéta : “c'est lui, c'est lui !” Smarh tournoya dans le néant, il y roule encore. Satan versa une larme.

Yuk se mit à rire et sauta sur elle, et l'étreignit d'un baiser si fort, si terrible, qu'elle étouffa dans les bras du monstre éternel. G F. p120

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réflexion d'un homme désintéressé à l'affaire et qui a relu ça après un an de façon.

il est permis de faire des choses pitoyables, mais pas de cette trempe. Ce que tu admirais il y a un an est aujourd'hui fort mauvais ; j'en suis bien fâché, car je t'avais décerné le nom de grand homme futur, et tu te regardais comme un petit Goethe. L'illusion n'est pas mince, il faut commencer par avoir des idées, et ton fameux mystère en est veuf. Pauvre ami ! Tu iras ainsi enthousiasmé de ce que tu rêves, dégoûté de ce que tu as fait. Tout est ainsi, il ne faut pas s'en plaindre. Sais-tu ce qui me semble le mieux de ton œuvre ? C'est cette page qui, dans un an, me paraîtra aussi bête que le reste et qui suggérera encore une suite d’amères réflexions. Dans un an peut-être serai-je crevé, tant mieux ! Et pourtant tu as peur, pauvre brute, mon ami. Adieu, le meilleur conseil que je puisse te donner, c’est de ne plus écrire. Jasmin.

LES FUNÉRAILLES DU DOCTEUR MATHURIN

.

Pourquoi ne t’offrirais-je pas encore ces nouvelles pages, cher Alfred ?

De tels cadeaux sont plus chers à celui qui les fait qu’à celui qui les reçoit, quoique ton amitié leur donne un prix qu’ils n’ont pas. Prends-les donc comme venant de deux choses qui sont à toi, et l’esprit qui les a conçues et la main qui les a écrites.

Se sentant vieux, Mathurin voulut mourir, pensant bien que la grappe trop mûre n’a plus de saveur ! Mais pourquoi et comment cela ?

Il avait bien 70 ans environ et solide encore malgré ses cheveux blancs, son dos voûté et son nez rouge, en somme c’était une belle tête de vieillard. Son œil bleu était singulièrement pur et limpide et des dents blanches et fines sous de petites lèvres minces et bien ciselées annonçaient une vigueur gastronomique rare à cet âge où l’on pense plus souvent à dire des prières et à avoir peur qu’à bien vivre.

Le vrai motif de sa résolution c’est qu’il était malade et que tôt ou tard il fallait sortir d’ici-bas. Il aima mieux prévenir la mort que de se sentir arraché par elle. Ayant bien connu sa position, il n’en fut ni étonné ni effrayé, il ne pleura pas, il ne cria pas, il ne fit ni humbles prières ni exclamations ampoulées. — Il ne se montra ni stoïcien, ni catholique, ni psychologue, c’est-à-dire qu’il n’eut ni orgueil, ni crédulité, ni bêtise. Il fut grand dans sa mort et son héroïsme surpassa celui d’Epaminondas, d’Annibal, de Caton, de tous les Capitaines de l’antiquité et de tous les martyrs chrétiens, celui du chevalier d’Assas, celui de Louis XVI, celui de saint Louis, celui de M. de Talleyrand mourant dans sa robe de chambre verte, et même celui de Fieschi qui disait des pointes encore quand on lui coupa le cou, tous ceux enfin qui moururent par une conviction quelconque, par un dévouement quel qu’il soit et ceux qui se fardèrent à leur dernière heure encore pour être plus beaux, se drapant dans leur linceul comme dans un manteau de théâtre, capitaines sublimes ! républicains stupides ! martyrs héroïques et entêtés ! rois détrônés, héros du bagne, oui tous ces courages-là furent surpassés par un seul courage, ces morts-là furent éclipsés par un seul mort, par le docteur Mathurin qui ne mourut ni par conviction, ni par orgueil, ni pour jouer un rôle, ni par religion, ni par patriotisme mais qui mourut d’une pleurésie qu’il avait depuis huit jours et d’une indigestion qu’il se donna la veille, — la première de sa vie, car il savait manger.

Il se résigna donc, comme un héros, à franchir de plain-pied le seuil de la vie, à entrer dans le cercueil la tête haute. Je me trompe car il fut enterré dans un baril. Il ne dit pas comme Caton : Vertu, tu n’es qu’un nom, ni comme Grégoire VII : J’ai fait le bien et fui l’iniquité, voilà pourquoi je meurs en exil, ni comme Jésus-Christ : Mon père, pourquoi m’avez-vous délaissé. Il mourut en disant tout bonnement : Adieu amusez-vous bien.

Un poète romantique aurait acheté un banneau de charbon de terre et serait mort au bout d’une heure en faisant de mauvais vers et en avalant de la fumée ; un autre se serait donné l’onglée en se noyant dans la Seine au mois de janvier, les uns auraient bu une détestable liqueur qui les aurait fait vomir avant de se rendormir — pleurant déjà sur cette bêtise. — Un martyr se serait amusé à se faire couler du plomb dans la bouche et à gâter ainsi son palais, un républicain aurait tenté d’assassiner le roi, l’aurait manqué et se serait fait couper la tête. Voilà de singulières gens. Mathurin ne mourut pas ainsi. Sa philosophie lui défendait de se faire souffrir.

Vous me demanderez pourquoi on l’appelait Docteur. — Vous le saurez un jour car je peux bien vous le faire connaître plus au long, ceci n’étant que le dernier chapitre d’une longue œuvre qui doit me rendre immortel comme toutes celles qui sont inédites. Je vous raconterai ses voyages, j’analyserai tous les livres qu’il a faits, je ferai un volume de notes sur ses commentaires et un appendice de papier blanc et de

points d’exclamation à ses ouvrages de science. Car c’était un savant des plus savants, en toutes les sciences possibles, sa modestie surpassait encore toutes ses connaissances. On ne croyait même pas qu’il sût lire, il faisait des fautes de français il est vrai, mais il savait l’hébreu… et bien d’autres choses.

Il connaissait la vie surtout, il savait à fond le cœur des hommes, et il n’y avait pas moyen d’échapper au critérium de son œil pénétrant et sagace, quand il levait la tête, abaissait sa paupière, et vous regardait de côté en souriant, vous sentiez qu’une sonde magnétique entrait dans votre âme et en fouillait tous les recoins.

Cette lunette des contes arabes avec laquelle l’œil perçait les murailles, je crois qu’il l’avait dans sa tête, c’est-à-dire qu’il vous dépouillait de vos vêtements et de vos grimaces, de tout le fard de vertu qu’on met sur ses rides, de toutes les béquilles qui vous soutiennent, de tous les talons qui vous haussent, il arrachait aux hommes leur présomption, aux femmes leur pudeur, aux héros leur grandeur, au poète son enflure, aux mains sales leurs gants blancs. Quand un homme avait passé devant lui, avait dit deux mots, avancé deux pas, fait un moindre geste, il vous le rendait nu, déshabillé, et grelottant au vent.

Avez-vous quelquefois dans un spectacle à la lueur du lustre aux mille feux, quand le public s’agite tout palpitant, que les femmes parées battent des mains et qu’on voit partout sourires sur des lèvres rouges, diamants qui brillent, vêtements blancs, richesses, joie, éclat, vous êtes-vous figuré toute cette lumière changée en ombre, ce bruit devenu silence et toute cette vie rentrée au néant et à la place de tous ces êtres décolletés, aux poitrines palpitantes, aux cheveux noirs nattés sur des peaux blanches, mis de suite, des squelettes creux, jaunis, des squelettes qui seront longtemps sous la terre où ils ont marché et réunis ainsi tous dans un spectacle pour s’admirer encore, pour voir une comédie qui n’a pas de nom, qu’ils jouent eux-mêmes, dont ils sont les acteurs éternels et immobiles.

Mathurin faisait à peu près de même, car à travers le vêtement il voyait la peau, la chair sous l’épiderme, la moelle sous l’os et il exhumait de tout cela lambeaux sanglants, pourriture du cœur, et souvent sur des corps sains vous découvrait une horrible gangrène.

Cette perspicacité qui a fait les grands politiques, les grands moralistes, les grands poètes, n’avait servi qu’à le rendre heureux, c’est quelque chose quand on sait que Richelieu, Molière et Shakespeare ne le furent pas. — Il avait vécu poussé mollement par ses sens, sans malheur ni bonheur, sans effort, sans passion et sans vertu, ces deux meules qui usent la lame des tranchants. Son cœur était une cuve où rien de trop ardent n’avait fermenté et dès qu’il l’avait crue assez plein, il l’avait vite fermée laissant encore de la place pour du vide, pour la paix. Il n’était donc ni poète ni prêtre, il ne s’était pas marié, il avait le bonheur d’être bâtard, — ses amis étaient en petit nombre, et sa cave était bien garnie. Il n’avait ni maîtresses qui lui cherchaient querelle ni chien qui le mordît. Il avait une excellente santé et un palais extrêmement délicat. Mais je dois vous parler de sa mort.

Il fit donc venir ses disciples (il en avait deux) et il leur dit qu’il allait mourir, qu’il était las d’être malade et d’avoir été tout un jour à la diète.

C’était la saison dorée, où les blés sont mûrs, le jasmin déjà blanc embaume le feuillage de la tonnelle, on commence à courber la vigne, les raisins pendent en grappes sur les échalas, le rossignol chante sur la haie, on entend des rires d’enfants dans les bois, les foins sont enlevés. Oh jadis les nymphes venaient danser sur la prairie et se formaient des guirlandes avec les fleurs des prés, la fontaine murmurait un roucoulement frais et amoureux, les colombes allaient voler sur les tilleuls, le matin encore quand le soleil se lève l’horizon est toujours d’un bleu vaporeux et la vallée répand sur les coteaux un frais parfum humide des baisers de la nuit et de la rosée des fleurs.

Mathurin couché depuis plusieurs jours dormait sur sa couche. Quels étaient ses songes ? Sans doute comme sa vie, calmes et purs. La fenêtre ouverte laissait entrer à travers sa jalousie des rayons de soleil. La treille grimpant le long de la muraille grise nouait ses fruits mûrs aux branches mêlées de la clématite. Le coq chantait dans la basse-cour, les faneurs reposaient à l’ombre sous les grands noyers aux troncs tapissés de mousses. Non loin et sous les ormeaux il y avait un rond de gazon où ils allaient souvent faire la méridienne et dont la verdure touffue n’était seulement tachée que d’iris et de coquelicots. C’est là que couchés sur le ventre ou assis et causant ils buvaient ensemble pendant que la cigale chantait, que les insectes bourdonnaient dans les rayons du soleil. Les feuilles remuaient sous le souffle chaud des nuits d’été.

Tout était paix, calme et joie tranquille. C’est là que dans un oubli complet du monde, dans un égoïsme divin ils vivaient — inactifs, inutiles, heureux — Ainsi pendant que les hommes travaillaient, que la société vivait avec ses lois, avec son organisation multiple, tandis que les soldats se faisaient tuer, et que les intrigants s’agitaient, eux ils buvaient, ils dormaient. Accusez-les d’égoïsme, parlez de devoir, de morale, de dévouement. Dites encore une fois qu’on se doit au pays, à la société, rabâchez bien l’idée d’une œuvre

commune, chantez toujours cette magnifique trouvaille du plan de l’univers, vous n’empêcherez pas qu’il y ait des gens sages et des égoïstes qui ont plus de bon sens avec leur ignoble vice que vous autres avec vos sublimes vertus.

Ô hommes, vous qui marchez dans les villes, faites les révolutions, abattez les trônes, remuez le monde, et qui pour faire regarder vos petits fronts, faites bien de la poussière sur la route battue du genre humain, je vous demande un peu si votre bruit, vos chars de triomphe et vos fers, si vos machines et votre charlatanisme et vos vertus, si tout cela vaut une vie calme et tranquille où l’on ne casse rien que des bouteilles vides, où il n’y a d’autre fumée que celle d’une pipe, d’autre dégoût que celui d’avoir trop mangé.

Ainsi vivaient-ils et pendant que le sang coulait dans les guerres civiles, que le gouvernail de l’état était disputé entre des pirates et des ineptes et qu’il se brisait dans la tempête, pendant que les empires s’écroulaient, qu’on s’assassinait et qu’on vivait, qu’on faisait des livres sur la vertu et que l’État ne vivait que de vices splendides, qu’on donnait des prix de morale et qu’il n’y avait de beau que les grands crimes, le soleil pour eux faisait toujours mûrir leurs raisins, les arbres avaient tout autant de feuilles vertes, ils dormaient toujours sur la mousse des bois, et faisaient rafraîchir leur vin dans l’eau des lacs.

Le monde vivait loin d’eux et le bruit même de ses cris n’arrivait pas jusqu’à leurs pieds, une parole rapportée des villes aurait troublé le calme de leurs cœurs. Aucune bouche profane ne venait boire à cette coupe de bonheur exceptionnel. Ils ne recevaient ni livres, ni journaux, ni lettres, la bibliothèque commune se composait d’Horace, de Rabelais. Ai-je besoin de dire qu’il y avait toutes les éditions de Brillat-Savarin et du Cuisinier ? Pas un bout de politique, pas un fragment de controverse, de philosophie ou d'histoire. Aucun des hochets sérieux dont s'amusent les hommes, n'avaient-ils pas toujours devant eux la nature et le vin, que fallait-il de plus ? Indiquez-moi donc quelque chose qui surpasse la beauté d'une belle campagne illuminée de soleil et la volupté d'une amphore pleine d'un vin limpide et pétillant, et d'abord, quelle qu'elle soit, la réponse que vous allez faire les aurait fait rire de pitié, je vous en préviens.

Cependant Mathurin se réveilla, ils étaient là au bout de son lit, il leur dit :

— À boire pour vous et pour moi, trois verres et plusieurs bouteilles. — Je suis malade, il n'y a plus de remède — Je veux mourir mais avant j'ai soif et très soif. Je n'ai aucune soif des secours de la religion ni aucune faim d'hostie. Buvons donc pour nous dire adieu.

On apporta des bouteilles, de toutes les espèces et des meilleures, le vin ruissela à flots pendant vingt heures et avant l'aurore ils étaient gris.

D'abord ce fut une ivresse calme et logique, une ivresse douce et prolongée à loisir. Mathurin sentait sa vie s'en aller et comme Sénèque qui se fit ouvrir les veines et mettre dans un bain il se plongea avant de mourir dans un bain d'excellent vin, baigna son cœur dans une béatitude qui n'a pas de nom et son âme s'en alla droit au Seigneur comme une outre pleine de bonheur et de liqueur.

Quand le soleil se fut baissé ils avaient déjà bu à trois, 15 bouteilles de Beaune (1re qualité 4) et fait tout un cours de théodicée et de métaphysique.

Car il résuma toute sa science dans ce dernier entretien.

Il vit l'astre s'abaisser pour toujours et fuir derrière les collines. Alors se levant et tournant les yeux vers le couchant il regarda la campagne s'endormir au crépuscule, les troupeaux descendaient, et les clochettes des vaches sonnaient dans les clairières, les fleurs allaient fermer leur corolle, et des rayons du soleil

couchant dessinaient sur la terre des cercles lumineux et mobiles. La brise des nuits s'éleva et les feuilles des vignes à son souffle battirent sur leur treillage, elle pénétra jusqu'à eux et rafraîchit leurs joues enflammées.

— Adieu, dit Mathurin, adieu, demain je ne verrai plus ce soleil, dont les rayons éclaireront mon tombeau, éclaireront ses ruines, et sans jamais venir à moi.

Les ondes couleront toujours et je n'entendrai pas leur murmure. Après tout j'ai vécu pourquoi ne pas mourir ? La vie est un fleuve, — la mienne a coulé entre des prairies pleines de fleurs sous un ciel pur, loin des tempêtes et des nuages, je suis à l'embouchure ! je me jette dans l'océan, dans l'infini, tout à l'heure mêlé à tout, immense et sans borne, je n'aurai plus la conscience de mon néant. Est-ce que l'homme est quelque chose de plus qu'une simple goutte d'eau de l'océan ou qu'une bulle de mousse sur le tonneau de l'électeur ?

Adieu donc vents du soir qui soufflez sur les roses penchées, sur les feuilles palpitantes des bois endormis, quand les ténèbres viennent, elles palpiteront longtemps encore, les feuilles des orties qui croîtront sur les débris cassés de ma tombe. Naguère, quand je passais riant près des cimetières et qu'on entendait ma voix chanter le long du mur, quand le hibou battait de l'aile

sur les clochers, que les cyprès murmuraient les soupirs des morts, je jetais un œil calme sur ces pierres qui recélaient l'éternité tout entière avec leurs débris de cadavres, c'était pour moi un autre monde, où ma pensée même pouvait à peine m'y transporter dans l'infini d'une vague rêverie.

Maintenant mes doigts tremblants y touchent aux portes de cet autre monde et elles vont s'ouvrir car j'en remue le marteau d'un bras de colère, d'un bras désespéré.

Que la mort vienne, qu'elle vienne, elle me prendra tout endormi dans son linceul et j'irai continuer le songe éternel sous l'herbe douce du printemps ou sous la neige des hivers qu'importe, qu'elle vienne et mon dernier sourire sera pour elle, je lui donnerai des baisers pleins de vin, un cœur plein de la vie et qui n'en veut plus. — Un cœur ivre et qui ne bat pas.

La souveraine beauté, le souverain bonheur, n'est-ce pas le sommeil, et je vais dormir — dormir sans réveil, longtemps, toujours. Les morts, à cette belle phrase graduée il s'interrompit pour boire et continua :

— La vie est un festin. Il y en a qui meurent gorgés de suite et qui tombent sous la table. D'autres rougissent la nappe de sang et de souillures sans nombre. Heureux ceux qui n'y versent que des taches de vin et pas de larmes. D'autres sont étourdis des lumières, du bruit, dégoûtés du fumet des mets, gênés par la cohue, qui baissent la tête et se mettent à pleurer. Heureux les sages qui mangent longuement, écartent leurs convives avides, les valets impudents qui les tiraillent et qui peuvent le dernier jour, au dessert quand les uns dorment, que les autres sont ivres dès le premier service, qu'un grand nombre sont partis malades, boire enfin les vins [les] plus exquis, savourer les fruits les plus mûrs, succulents, jouir lentement des dernières fins de l'orgie, vider le reste d'un grand coup, éteindre les flambeaux et mourir.

Comme l'eau limpide que la nymphe de marbre laisse tomber murmurante de sa conque d'albâtre il continua ainsi longtemps à parler d'une voix grave et voluptueuse à la fois, pleine de cette mélancolie gaie qu'on a dans les suprêmes moments et son âme s'épanchait de ses lèvres comme l'eau limpide.

La nuit était venue, pure, amoureuse, une nuit bleue éclairée d'étoiles, — pas un bruit que celui de la voix de Mathurin qui parla longtemps à ses amis. Ils l'écoutaient en le contemplant. Assis sur sa couche, son œil commençait à se fermer. La flamme blanche des bougies remuait au vent, l'ombre qu'elle rayait tremblait sur le lambris, le vin pétillait dans les verres et l'ivresse sur leurs figures. Assis sur le bord de la tombe Mathurin y avait posé sa gourde, elle ne se fermera que quand il l'aura bue.

Vienne donc cette molle langueur des sens qui enivre jusqu'à l'âme, qu'elle le balance dans une mollesse infinie, qu'il s'endorme en rêvant de joies sans nombre, en disant aussi nunc pulsanda tenus, que les nymphes antiques jettent leurs roses embaumées sur les draps rougis dont il fait son linceul, viennent danser devant lui dans une ronde gracieuse et pour adieu toutes [les] beautés que le cœur rêve, et le charme des premières amours, la volupté des plus longs baisers et des plus suaves regards, que le ciel se fasse plus étoilé et ait une nuit plus limpide, que les clartés d'azur viennent éclairer les joies de cette agonie, fassent le vent plus frais, plus embaumant, que des voix s'élèvent de dessous l'herbe et chantent pendant qu'il boit les dernières gouttes de la vie, les yeux fermés tressaillent comme sous le plus tendre embrass[ement], que tout soit pour cet homme bonheur jusqu'à la mort, paix jusqu'au néant, que l'éternité ne soit qu'un lit pour le bercer dans les siècles.

Mais regardez-les. Jacques s'est levé et a fermé la fenêtre. Le vent venait sur Mathurin, il commençait à claquer des dents. — Ils ont rapproché de plus près la table ronde du lit, la fumée de leurs pipes monte au plafond et se répand en nuages bleus qui montent, on entend leurs verres s'entrechoquer et leurs paroles, le vin tombe par terre, — ils jurent — ils ricanent, cela va devenir horrible, ils vont se mordre.

Ne craignez rien, ils mordent une poularde grasse et les truffes qui s'échappent de leurs lèvres rouges roulent sur le plancher.

Mathurin parle politique.

— La démocratie est une bonne chose pour gens pauvres et de mauvaise compagnie. On parviendra peut-être un jour hélas à ce que tous les hommes puissent boire de la piquette, de ce jour-là on ne boira plus de constance. Si les nobles dont la tyrannie (ils avaient de si bons cuisiniers), j'en étais donc à la Révolution, pauvres moines, ils cultivaient si bien la vigne. Ainsi Robespierre. Oh le drôle de corps qui mangeait de la vache chez un menuisier et qui est resté pur au pouvoir et qui a la plus exécrable réputation bien méritée. S'il avait eu un peu plus d'esprit, qu'il eût ruiné l'état, entretenu dix maîtresses sur les fonds publics, bu du vin au lieu de répandre du sang, ce serait un homme justement, dignement vertueux, je disais donc que Fourier… un bien beau morceau sur l'art culinaire… Ce qui n'empêche que Washington ne fût un grand homme et Montyon quelque chose de surhumain, de divin, presque de sur-stupide. Il s'agirait de définir la vertu avant d'en décerner les prix. Celui qui en aurait donné une bonne classification, qui auparavant l'aurait bien établie avec des caractères tranchés, nettement exprimés, positifs en un mot, celui-là aurait mérité un prix extraordinaire, j'en conviens, il lui aurait fallu déterminer jusqu'à quel point l'orgueil entre dans la grandeur, la niaiserie dans la bienfaisance, marquer la limite précise de l'intérêt et de la vanité. Il aurait fallu citer des exemples et faire comprendre trois mots incompréhensibles : moralité, liberté, devoir — et montrer, ç'aurait été le sublime de la proposition et on aurait pu enfermer ça dans une période savante, comme les hommes sont libres tout en ayant des devoirs, comment ils peuvent avoir des devoirs puisqu'ils sont libres, s'étendre longuement aussi, par manière de hors-d'œuvre et de digression favorable sur la vertu récompensée et le vice puni, on soutiendrait historiquement que Nabuchodonosor, Alexandre, Sésostris, César, Tibère, Louis XI, Rabelais, Byron, Napoléon et le marquis de Sade étaient des imbéciles, et que Mardochée, Caton, Brutus, Vespasien, Edouard le Confesseur, Louis XII, Lafayette, Montyon l'homme au manteau bleu, et Parmentier, et Poivre, étaient des grands hommes, des grands génies, des dieux, des êtres… Mathurin se mit à rire en éternuant, sa face se dilatait, tous ses traits étaient plissés par un sourire diabolique, l'éclair jaillissait de ses yeux, le spasme saccadait ses épaules, il continua :

— Vive la philanthropie, un verre de frappé. — L'histoire est une science morale par-dessus tout à peu près comme la vue d'une maison de filles, et celle d'un échafaud plein de sang, les faits prouvent pourtant que tout est pour le mieux. Ainsi les Hébreux assassinés par leurs vainqueurs chantaient des psaumes que nous admirons comme poésie lyrique, les chrétiens qu'on égorgeait ne se doutaient pas qu'ils fondaient une poésie aussi, une société pure et sans tache. Jésus-Christ mort et descendant de sa croix fournit au bout de 16 siècles le sujet d'un beau tableau, les Croisades, la Réforme, 93, la philosophie, la philanthropie philanthropie qui nourrit les hommes avec des pommes de terre, et les vaches avec des betteraves, tout cela a été de mieux en mieux, la poudre à canon, la guillotine, les bateaux à vapeur et les tartes à la crème sont des inventions utiles vous l'avouerez à peu près comme le tonnerre, il y a des hommes réduits à l'état de terreneuviens et qui sont chargés de donner la vie à ceux qui veulent la perdre. Ils vous coupent la plante des pieds pour vous faire ouvrir les yeux et vous abîment de coups de poing pour vous rendre heureux. Ne pouvant plus marcher on vous conduit à l'hôpital, où vous mourez de faim et votre cadavre sert encore après vous à faire dire des bêtises sur chaque fibre de votre corps et à nourrir de jeunes chiens qu'on élève pour des expériences. Ayez la ferme conviction d'une providence éternelle, et du sens commun des nations. Combien y a-t-il d'hommes qui

en aient ? Le bordeaux se chauffe toujours, l'ordre des comestibles est des plus substantiels aux plus légers, celui des boissons des plus tempérées aux plus fumeuses et aux plus parfumées. Si vous voulez qu'une alouette soit bonne, coupez par le milieu.

— Et la Providence maître ?

— Oui je crois que le soleil fait mûrir le raisin et qu'un gigot de chevreuil mariné est une bonne chose. Tout n'est pas fini et il y a deux sciences éternelles, la philosophie et la gastronomie. Il s'agit de savoir si l'âme va se réunir à l'essence universelle ou si elle reste à part comme individu et où elle va, dans quel pays et comment on peut conserver longtemps du Bourgogne. Je crois qu'il y a encore une meilleure manière d'arranger le homard et un plan nouveau d'éducation, mais l'éducation ne perfectionne guère que les chiens quant au côté moral. J'ai cru longtemps à l'eau de Seltz et à la perfectibilité humaine, je suis convaincu maintenant de l'absinthe. Elle est comme la vie, ceux qui ne savent pas la prendre, font la grimace. — Nierez-vous donc l'immortalité de l'âme ?

— Un verre de vin.

— La récompense et le châtiment ?

— Quelle saveur, dit Mathurin après avoir bu et contractant ses lèvres sur ses dents.

— Le plan de l'univers ? Qu'en pensez-vous ?

— Et toi que penses-tu de l'étoile de Sirius ? penses-tu mieux connaître les hommes que les habitants de la lune ? l'histoire même est un mensonge réel.

— Qu'est-ce que cela veut dire ?

— Cela veut dire que les faits mentent, qu'ils sont et qu'ils ne sont plus, que les hommes vivent et meurent, que l'être et le néant sont deux faussetés qui n'en font qu'une, qui est le toujours

— Je [ne] comprends pas maître.

— Et moi encore moins, répondit Mathurin.

— Cela est bien profond, dit Jacques aux trois quarts ivre, et il y a sous ce dernier mot une grande finesse.

— N'y a-t-il pas entre moi et vous deux, entre un homme et un grain de sable, entre aujourd'hui et hier, cette heure-ci et celle qui va venir, des espaces que la pensée ne peut mesurer et des mondes, des néants entiers qui les remplissent ? La pensée même peut-elle se résumer ? Te sens-tu dormir et lorsque ton esprit s'élève et s'en va de son enveloppe — ne crois-tu pas quelquefois, que tu n'es plus, que ton corps est tombé, que tu marches dans l'infini comme le soleil, que tu roules dans un gouffre comme l'Océan sur son lit de sable et ton corps n'est pas ton corps, que cette chose tourmentée qui est sur toi n'est qu'un voile rempli d'une tempête qui bat ? t'es-tu pris à douter de la matière, de la sensation elle-même ? Prends un grain de sable, il y a là un abîme à creuser pendant des siècles, palpe-toi bien pour voir si tu existes — et quand tu sauras que tu existes, il y là un infini que tu ne sonderas pas. Ils étaient gris, ils ne comprenaient guère une tartine métaphysique aussi plate.

— Cela veut dire que l’homme voit aussi clair en lui et autour de lui que si tu étais tombé ivre mort au fond d’une barrique de vin plus grande que l’Atlantique.

Soutenir ensuite qu’il y a quelque chose de beau dans la création, vouloir faire un concert de louanges avec tous les cris de malédiction qui retentissent, de sanglots qui éclatent, de ruines qui croulent, c’est là la philosophie de l’histoire, disent-ils, quelle philosophie ! Élevez-moi une pyramide de têtes de morts et vantez la vie, chantez la beauté des fleurs assis sur un fumier, le calme et le murmure des ondes quand l’eau salée entre par les sabords et que le navire sombre et que les nations — ce que l’œil peut saisir c’est un horrible fracas d’une agonie éternelle. Regardez un peu la cataracte qui tombe de la montagne, comme son onde bouillonnante entraîne avec elle les débris de la prairie, le feuillage encore vert de la forêt cassé par les vents, la boue des ruisseaux, le sang répandu, les chars qui

allaient, — cela est beau et superbe. Approchez, écoutez donc l’horrible râle de cette agonie sans nom, levez les yeux — quelle beauté, quelle horreur, quel abîme.

Allez encore, fouillez, déblayez les ruines sans nom, sous ces ruines-là d’autres encore et toujours, passez vingt générations de morts entassés les uns sur les autres, cherchez des empires perdus sous le sable du désert et des palais d’avant le déluge sous l’Océan, vous trouverez peut-être encore des temps inconnus, une autre histoire, un autre monde, d’autres siècles titaniques, d’autres calamités, d’autres désastres, des ruines fumantes, du sang figé sur la terre, des ossements broyés sous les pas.

Il s’arrêta essoufflé — et ôta son bonnet de coton, ses cheveux mouillés de sueur étaient collés en longues mèches sur son front pâle. Il se lève et regarde autour de lui. Son œil bleu est terne comme le plomb, aucun sentiment humain ne scintille de sa prunelle, c’est déjà quelque chose de l’impassibilité du tombeau. Ainsi placé sur son lit de mort et dans l’orgie jusqu’au cou, calme entre le tombeau et la débauche il semblait être la statue de la dérision, ayant pour piédestal une cuve et regardant la mort face à face.

Tout s’agite maintenant, tout tourne et vacille dans cette ivresse dernière — le monde danse au chevet de mort de Mathurin. Au calme heureux des premières

libations succèdent la fièvre et ses chauds battements, elle va augmentant toujours, on la voit qui palpite sous leur peau, dans leurs veines bleues gonflées, leurs cœurs battent, — ils soufflent eux-mêmes — on entend le bruit de leur haleine et les craquements du lit qui ploie sous les soubresauts du mourant.

Il y a dans leur cœur une force qui vit, une colère qu'ils sentent monter graduellement du cœur à la tête, leurs mouvements sont saccadés, leur voix est stridente, leurs dents claquent sur les verres, ils boivent — ils boivent toujours, dissertant, philosophant, cherchant la vérité au fond du verre, le bonheur dans l'ivresse et l'éternité dans la mort. Mathurin seul trouva la dernière.

Cette dernière nuit-là — entre ces trois hommes, il se passa quelque chose de monstrueux et de magnifique. Si vous les aviez vus ainsi épuiser tout, tarir tout, exprimer les saveurs des plus pures voluptés, les parfums de la vertu et l'enivrement de toutes les chimères du cœur, et la politique, et la morale, la religion, tout passa devant eux et fut salué d'un rire grotesque et d'une grimace qui leur fit peur. La métaphysique fut traitée à fond dans l'intervalle d'un quart d'heure et la morale en se soûlant d'un douzième petit verre. Et pourquoi pas ? si cela vous scandalise n'allez pas plus loin. Je rapporte les faits, je continue, je vais aller vite, dans le dénombrement épique de toutes les bouteilles bues. C'est le punch maintenant qui flamboie et qui bout. Comme la main qui le remue est tremblante, les flammes qui s'échappent de la cuillère tombent sur les draps, sur la table, par terre, et font autant de feux follets qui s'éteignent et qui se rallument. Il n'y eut pas de sang avec le punch comme il arrive dans les romans de dernier ordre et dans les cabarets où l'on ne vend que de mauvais vin et où le bon peuple va s'enivrer avec de l'eau-de-vie de cidre.

Elle fut bruyante — car ils vocifèrent horriblement, ils ne chantent pas, ils causent –, ils parlent haut, ils crient fort, ils rient sans savoir pourquoi, le vin les fait rire et leur âme cède à l'excitation des nerfs excités. Voilà le tourbillon qui l'enlève, l'orgie écume, les flambeaux sont éteints, le punch brûle partout. Mathurin bondit haletant sur sa couche tachée de vin.

— Allons, poussons toujours, encore oui encore cela, du kirsch, du rhum, de l'eau et du kirsch encore — Faites brûler, que cela flambe et que cela soit chaud, bouillant. Casse la bouteille, buvons à même.

Et quand il eut fini, il releva la tête tout fier et regarda les deux autres, les yeux fixes, le cou [tendu], la bouche souriante. Sa chemise était trempée d'eau-de-vie. Il suait à grosses gouttes, l'agonie venait, une fumée lourde montait sur le plafond, une heure sonna, — le temps était beau, la lune luisait au ciel entre le brouillard, la colline verte, argentée par ses clartés, était calme et dormeuse, tout dormait — Ils se remirent à boire et ce fut pis encore, c'était de la frénésie, c'était une fureur de démons ivres.

Plus de verres — ni de coupes larges — à même, maintenant — leurs doigts pressent la bouteille à la casser sous leurs efforts — étendus sur leurs chaises, les jambes raides et dans une raideur convulsive, la tête arrière, le cou penché, les yeux au ciel, le goulot sur la [bouche], le [vin] coule toujours et passe sur leur palais, l’ivresse vient à plein courant, ils y boivent à même, elle les emplit, le vin entre dans leur sang et le fait battre à pleine veine. Ils en sont immobiles, ils se regardent avec des yeux ouverts et ne se voient pas. Mathurin veut se retourner et soupire, les draps ployés sous lui lui entrent dans la chair, il a les jambes lourdes et les reins fatigués — il se meurt, il boit encore — il ne perd pas un instant, pas une minute. Entré dans le cynisme il y marche de toute sa force il s’y plonge — et il y meurt dans le dernier spasme de son orgie [deux mots ill.] sublime.

Sa tête est penchée de côté — son corps alangui — il remue les lèvres machinalement et vivement sans articuler aucune parole. S’il avait les yeux fermés on le croirait mort. Il ne distingue rien, on entend le râle de sa poitrine et il se met [à] frapper dessus avec les deux poings — et prend encore un carafon et veut le boire.

Le prêtre entre, il le lui jette à la tête, salit le surplis blanc, renverse le calice, effraie l’enfant de chœur, en prend un autre et se le verse dans la bouche en poussant un hurlement de bête fauve, il tord son corps comme un serpent, il se remue, il crie, il mord ses draps, ses ongles s’accrochent sur le bois de son lit, puis tout s’apaise, il s’étend encore, parle bas à l’oreille de ses disciples et il meurt doucement heureux après leur avoir fait connaître ses suprêmes volontés et ses caprices de par delà le tombeau.

Ils obéirent. Dès le lendemain soir ils le prennent à eux. Ils le retirent de son lit, le roulent dans ses draps rouges, le prennent à eux deux, à Jacques la tête, à André les deux pieds et ils s’en vont.

Ils descendent l’escalier, traversent la cour, la masure plantée de pommiers et les voilà sur la grande route portant leur ami à un cimetière désigné.

C’était un dimanche soir, un jour de fête, une belle soirée, tout le monde était sorti, les femmes en rubans roses et bleus, les hommes en pantalon blanc, il fallut se garer aux approches de la ville des charrettes qui allaient, des voitures, des chevaux, de la foule, de la cohue de canailles et d’honnêtes gens qui formaient le convoi de Mathurin — car aucun roi n’eut jamais tant de monde à ses funérailles. On se pressait sur les pieds, on se coudoyait et on jurait, on voulait voir, voir à toutes forces… bien peu savaient quoi. — Les uns par curiosité, d’autres poussés par leurs voisins — les uns étaient scandalisés, rouges de colère, furieux, il y en avait aussi qui riaient.

Un moment — et on ne sut pourquoi, la foule s’arrêta. — Comme vous la voyez dans les processions lorsque le prêtre stationne à un reposoir. Ils venaient d’entrer dans un cabaret. Est-ce que le mort par hasard venait de ressusciter et qu’on lui faisait prendre un verre d’eau sucrée ? Les philosophes buvaient un petit verre, et un troisième fut répandu sur la tête de Mathurin. Il sembla alors ouvrir les yeux, — non il était mort. Ce fut pis une fois entré dans le faubourg. À tous les bouchons, cabarets, cafés, ils entrent. La foule s’ameute. Les voitures ne peuvent plus circuler, on marche sur les pieds des chiens qui mordent et sur les cors des citoyens qui font la moue. On se porte, on se soulève vous dis-je, on court de cabaret en cabaret, on fait place à Mathurin porté par ses deux disciples, on l’admire, pourquoi pas ? On les voit ouvrir ses lèvres et passer du liquide dans sa bouche. Sa mâchoire se referme, les dents tombent les unes sur les autres et claquent à vide, le gosier avale et ils continuent.

Avait-il été écrasé ? s’était-il suicidé ? était-ce un martyr du gouvernement ? la victime d’un assassinat ? s’était-il noyé ? asphyxié ? était-il mort d’amour ou d’indigestion ? Un homme tendre ouvrit de suite une souscription, et garda l’argent. Un mora[liste) fit une dissertation sur les funérailles et prouva qu’on devait s’enterrer puisque les taupes elles-mêmes s’enterraient. Il parla au nom de la morale outragée, on l’avait d’abord écouté car son discours commençait par des injures, on lui tourna bientôt le dos, un seul homme le regardait attentivement, c’était un sourd. Même un républicain proposa d’ameuter le peuple contre le roi, parce que le pain était trop cher et que cet homme venait de mourir de faim, il le proposa si bas que personne ne l’entendit.

Dans la ville ce fut pis et la cohue fut telle qu’ils entrèrent dans un café pour se dérober à l’enthousiasme populaire. Grand fut l’étonnement des amateurs de voir arriver un mort au milieu d’eux. On le coucha sur une table de marbre, avec des dominos. Jacques et André s’assirent à une autre et remplirent les intentions du bon docteur. On se presse autour d’eux et on les interroge : d’où viennent-ils ? qu’est-ce donc ? pourquoi ? point de réponse.

Alors c’est un pari — Ce sont des prêtres indiens et c’est comme cela qu’ils enterrent leurs gens. — Vous

vous trompez ce sont des Turcs. Mais ils boivent du vin. — Quel est donc ce rite-là ? dit un historien.

— Mais c’est abominable, c’est horrible, cria-t-on, hurla-t-on, quelle profanation, quelle horreur, dit un athée. — Un valet de bourreau trouva que c’était dégoûtant et un voleur soutint que c’était immoral.

Le jeu de billard fut interrompu et la politique de café en fut interrompue. Un cordonnier interrompit sa dissertation sur l’éducation et un poète élégiaque abîmé de vin blanc et plein d’huîtres osa hasarder le mot ignoble.

Ce fut un brouhaha — un oh d’indignation, beaucoup furent furieux car les garçons tardaient à apporter leurs plateaux, les hommes de lettres qui lisaient leurs œuvres dans les revues levèrent la tête et jurèrent sans même parler français. Et les journalistes, quelle colère, quelle sainte indignation que celle de ces paillasses littéraires. Vingt journaux s’en emparèrent et chacun fit là-dessus quinze articles à 8 colonnes avec des suppléments. On en placarda sur les murs, ils les applaudissaient, ils les critiquaient, faisaient la critique de leur critique et des louanges de leur louange. On en revint à l’Évangile, à la morale et à la religion, sans voir lu le premier, pratiqué la seconde ni cru à la dernière. Ce fut pour eux une bonne fortune car ils avaient eu le courage de dire à douze des sottises à deux et un d’eux

même alla jusqu’à donner un soufflet à un mort. Quel dithyrambe sur la littérature, sur la corruption des romans, la décadence du goût, l’immoralité des pauvres poètes qui ont du succès. Quel bonheur pour tout le monde qu’une aventure pareille, puisqu’on en tira tant de belles choses, et de plus un vaudeville et un mélodrame, un conte moral et un roman fantastique.

Cependant ils étaient sortis et avaient bientôt traversé la ville au milieu de la foule scandalisée et réjouie. À la nuit venue, ils étaient hors barrière. Ils s’endormirent tous les trois au pied d’un mulon de foin dans la campagne.

Les nuits sont courtes en été. Le jour vint et ses premières blancheurs saillirent à l’horizon de place en place. La lune devint toute pâle et disparut dans le brouillard gris. Cette fraîcheur du matin pleine de rosée et du parfum des foins les réveilla. Ils se remirent en route, car ils avaient bien encore une bonne lieue à faire le long de la rivière, dans les herbes par un sentier serpentant comme l’eau. À gauche il y avait le bois, dont les feuilles toutes mouillées brillaient sous les rayons du soleil qui passaient entre les pieds des arbres, sur la mousse, dans les bouleaux. Le tremble agitait son feuillage d’argent, les peupliers remuaient lentement leur tête droite. Les oiseaux gazouillaient déjà, chantaient, laissaient s’envoler leurs notes perlées. Le

fleuve [coulait] de l’autre côté au pied des masures de chaume, le long des murailles, et on voyait les arbres laisser tomber les massifs de leurs feuilles et leurs fruits mûrs de celui-ci.

C’était la prairie et le bois. On entendait un vague bruit de chariot dans les chemins creux, et celui que les pas faisaient faire aux herbes foulées.

Et çà et là comme des corbeilles de verdure, des îles jetées dans le courant, leurs bords tapissés de vignobles descendaient jusqu’au rivage que les flots verts venaient baiser avec cette lenteur harmonieuse des ondes qui coulent !

Ah c’est bien là que Mathurin voulut dormir entre la forêt et le courant, dans la prairie. Ils l’y portèrent et lui creusèrent là son lit sous l’herbe non loin de la treille qui jaunissait au soleil et de l’onde qui murmurait sur le sable caillouteux de la rive.

Des pêcheurs s’en allaient avec leurs filets et penchés sur leurs rames ils tiraient la barque qui glissait vite. Ils chantaient et leur voix allait portée le long de l’eau et l’écho en frappait les coteaux boisés. Eux aussi quand tout fut prêt ils se mirent à chanter un hymne aux sons harmonieux et lents qui s’en alla comme le chant des pêcheurs, comme le courant de la rivière se perdre à l’horizon, un hymne au vin, à la nature, au bonheur, à la mort. Le vent emportait leurs paroles, les feuilles venaient tomber sur le cadavre de Mathurin, ou sur les cheveux de ses amis. La fosse ne fut pas creuse et le gazon le recouvrit sans pierre ciselée, sans marbre doré. Quelques planches d’une barrique cassée qui se trouvaient là par hasard furent mises sur son corps afin que les pas ne l’écrasent pas.

Et alors ils tirèrent chacun deux bouteilles, en burent deux et cassèrent les deux autres, le vin tomba en bouillons rouges sur la terre, la terre le but vite et alla porter jusqu’à Mathurin le souvenir des dernières saveurs de son existence et réchauffer sa tête couchée sur la terre !

On ne vit plus que les restes de deux bouteilles, ruines comme les autres ; elles rappelaient des joies, et montraient un vide.

Vendredi, 30 août 1839.

RABELAIS.

Jamais nom ne fut plus généralement cité que celui de Rabelais, et jamais peut-être avec plus d’injustice et d’ignorance. Ainsi, aux uns il apparaît comme un moine ivre et cynique, esprit désordonné et fantastique, aussi obscène qu’ingénieux, dangereux par l’idée, révoltant par l’expression. Pour les autres, c’est toute une philosophie pratique, douce, modérée, sceptique il est vrai, mais qui conduit après tout à bien vivre et à être honnête homme. Tour à tour il a donc été aimé, méprisé, méconnu, réhabilité ; et depuis que son prodigieux génie a jeté à la face du monde sa satire mordante et universelle qui s’échappe si franchement par le rire colossal de ses géants, chaque siècle a tourné sous tous les sens, interprété de mille façons cette longue énigme si triviale, si grossière, si joyeuse, mais au fond peut-être si profonde et si vraie.

Son œuvre est un fait historique ; elle a par elle-même une telle importance qu’elle se lie à chaque âge et en explique la pensée. Ainsi, d’abord au XVIe siècle, lorsqu’elle apparaît, c’est une révolte ouverte, c’est un pamphlet moral. Elle a toute l’importance de l’actualité, elle est dans le sens du mouvement, elle le dirige. Rabelais alors est un Luther dans son genre. Sa sphère, c’est le rire. Mais il le pousse si fort, qu’avec ce rire il démolit tout autant de choses que la colère du bonhomme de Witternberg. Il le manie si bien, il Je cisèle tellement dans sa vaste épopée, que ce rire-là est devenu terrible. C’est la statue du grotesque. Elle est éternelle comme Je monde.

Au xviie siècle, Rabelais est le père de cette litté. rature naïve et franche de Molière et de LafontaineTous trois immortels et bons génies, les plus vraiment français que nous ayons, jetant sur 1a pauvre nature humaine un demi-sourire de bonhomie et d’analyse, francs, libres, dégagés d’allures, hommes s’il en fut dans tout le sens du mnot, tous trois insouciants des philosophes, des sectes, des religions, ils sont de la religion de l’homme, et celle-là, ils la connaissent. Ils l’ont retournée et analysée, disséquée, l’un dans des romans, avec de grosses obscénités, des rires, des blasphèmes ; l’autre au théâtre, dans ce dialogue si habilement coupé, si savamment vrai, si naïvement sublime, plus philosophe avec son simple nrc de Mascarille, avec Je bon sens de Philinte ou la bilc d’Alceste, que tous les philosophes depuis qu’il y en a ; et l’autre, enfin, avec ses fabLes pour les enfants, sa morale pour Les hommes, avec son vers tout bonhomme et qui retombe sur l’autre vers, avec son mot, sa phrase, ce je ne sais quoi qui est le sublime, avec son sonnet cristallin, avec toutes ces perles de poésie qui lui fint un si large et si resplendissant collier.

Mais déjà Rabelais est devenu le sujet d’étude, l’auteur favori de quelques rares esprits en dehors du mouvement général. Outre ceux que nous avons cités, La Bruyère le goûte et l’apprécie avec impartialité. Il n’est pas assez correct pour le goût scrupuleux de Boileau, pour la réserve et la pureté de Racine. Ce siècle prude, gouverné par de Maintenon et si bien représenté dans l’angtileux et plat jardin de Versailles, avait déjà honte de cette littérature débraillée, bruyant*, nue. Ce géant-là lui faisait peur. Il sentait bien qu’il se trouvait entre deux choses terribles pour lui : le xvr siècle, qui avait donné Luther et Rabelais, et la Révolution, qui devait donner Mirabeau et Robespierre. Les démolisseurs de croyances avant, les démolisseurs de têtes après, deux abîmes au milieu desquels il se tenait guindé dans L’adoration de luimême.

Au xviii^{e} siècle c’est encore pis. Les philosophes sont de bon ton et ils ne veulent pas de Rabelais. Le pauvre curé de Meudon se serait trouvé déplacé dans le salon des marquises belles esprits et dans les bureaux d’esprit de M du Deffand ou de M Geofl’rin. On ne comprenait pas cette verve de saillies, cet entrain, ce tourbillon, cette veine poétique palpitante d’inventions, d’aventures, de voyages, d’extravagances. Le petit goût musqué, réglé et froid du siècle avait horreur de ce qu’il nommait le dévergondage d’esprit. Il aimait mieux celui des mœurs. Voltaire, en effet,, n’excuse Rabelais que parce qu’il s’est moqué de l’Eglise. Quant à son style, quant au roman, il ne l’entend guère, quoiqu’il prétende cependant en donner une clef. En résumé, il appelle son livre : “Un amas des plus grossières ordires qu’un moine ivre puisse vomir.”

II devait en être ainsi. La gloire de Rabelais, sa valeur même, comme celle de tous les grands hommes, de tous les noms illustres, a été vivement et pendant longtemps disputée. Son génie est unique, exceptionnel, c’est peut-être Je seul dans l’histoire des Littératures du monde. Où lui trouverons-nous un rival ? Et d’abord, dans l’antiquité, est-ce Pétrone, Apulée, avec Leur art prémédité, mesuré, leurs contours purs, leur savante conception ? Dans tout Je moyen age, sera-ce dans les cycles épiques du xzr’ siècle, dans les soties, les moralités, les farces ? Non, certes ! et quoique cependant toute la partie matériellement comique de Rabelais appartienne à l’élément grotesque du moyen age, nous ne lui trouvons de prédécesseur dans aucun document littéraire ; et dans les temps modernes son imitateur le plus exact, Béroald de Verville, l’auteur de l’Art de parvenir, en est si loin, qu’on ne peut le comparer à son modèle. Sterne a voulu le reproduire, mais l’affectation qui perce si souvent et la sensibilité raffinée détruisent tout parallèle.

Non, Rahelais est unique parce qu’il est à lui seul l’expression d’un siècle, d’une époque. II a tout à la fois La signification littéraire, politique, morale et religieuse. Ces génies-là, qui créent des littératures ou qui en ferment de vieilles, apparaissent de loin en loin, ils disent chacun leur mot, le mot de leur temps et puis s’en vont. Homére chante La vie guerrière, la jeunesse vaillante et belliqueuse du monde, la verte saison où les arbres poussent. A Virgile la civilisation est déjà vieille ; il est plein de Larmes, de nuances, de sentiment, de délicatesses. Dante est sombre et rayonnant tout à la fois ; c’est Le poète chrétien, Je poète de la mort et de l’enfer, plein de mélancolie et d’espérances. Ailleurs, dans Les sociétés vieillies, quand la satiété est venue à tous, que le doute a gagné tous les cœurs et que toutes les belles choses rêvées, toutes les illusions, toutes les utopies sont tombées feuille à feuille, arrachées par la réalité, la science, le raisonnement, l’analyse, que fait le poète ? Il se recueille en luimême ; il a de sublimes élans d’orgueil et des moments de poignant désespoir ; il chante toutes les agonies du cœur et tous les néants de la pensée. Alors, toutes les douleurs qui l’entourent, tous Jes sanglots qui éclatent, toutes les malédictions qui hurlent résonnent dans son âme que Dieu a faite vaste, sonore, immense, et en sortent par la voix du génie pour marquer éternellement dans l’histoire la place d’une société, d’une époque, pour écrire ses larmes, pour ciseler la mémoire de ses infortunes (de nos jours c’est Byron). C’est pour cela que le vrai poétique est plus vrai que Je vrai historique et que les poètes enfin mentent moins que les historiens. Les grands écrivains sont donc dans le cercle des idées comme les capitales dans les royaumes. Ils reçoivent l’esprit de chaque province, de chaque individualité, y mêlent ce qui leur est personnel, original ; ils l’amalgament, ils l’arrangent, puis ils le rendent transformé dans l’art.

Quand Rabelais vint à naître, c’était l’année 1483, l’année de la mort de Louis XI. Luther allait venir. Le roi avait abattu la féodalité, le moine allait abattre la papauté, c’est-à-dire tout Je moyen âge, Je guerrier et le prêtre. Mais le peuple lassé de l’un et de l’autre n’en voulait plus. Il s’était aperçu que l’homme d’armes le mangeait, que Je prêtre l’exploitait et le trompait de son c6té. Longtemps il s’était contenté d’inscrire ses railleries sur la pierre des cathédrales, de faire des chansons contre le seigneur, de lâcher, comme dans Je Roman de ta Rose, quelque mot mordant sur Le pouvoir ou la noblesse. Mais iI fallait quelque chose de plus : une révolte, une réforme. Le symbole était vieux, et même dans le symbole le mystère, la poésie ; et c’était -un besoin général de sortir des entraves, d’entrer dans une autre voie. Besoin de la science, même besoin dans la poésie, dans ,la philosophie. Dès 1473, une caricature représentant I’Eglise avec un corps de fèmme, des jambes de poule, des griffes de vautour, une queue de serpent, avait couru l’Europe entière. C’était l’époque de Commines, de Machiavel, de l’Arétin. La papauté avait eu Alexandre VI, elle avait Léon X qui ne valait guère mieux. L’orgie intellectuelle allait venir. Elle sera longue et finira avec du sang. Au xviii8 siècle elle s'est renouvelée et a fini de même.

C'était donc au milieu de tels événements, dans une telle époque que vivait Rabelais. Ne nous étonnons plus alors si en présence de cette société toute chancelante sur ses bases, toute haletante de ses débauches, devant tant de choses démolies et devant tant de ruines, il se soit élevé un immense sarcasme sur ce passé hideux du moyen âge qui palpitait encore au XVI8 siècle, et dont le xvi8 siècle avait horreur luimême.

Qu'est-ce donc que Rabelais ? (1)

Essayons de le dire.

La mère de Gargantua Le met au monde dans une indigestion qu'elle eut pour avoir mangé trop de fouace, car les héros sont de terribles mangeurs ; ils mangent, ils mangent si bien qu'ils affament le monde ; provinces, duchés, royaumes sont ravagés par leur vorace appétit. Voilà donc Gargantua qui vient au monde, et dès qu'il voit le jour il demande : ((A boire ! à boire !)) Son enfance est robuste, une enfance de géant. A un an, il chante des rondeaux, ses gouvernantes Le corrompent, il est tout couvert d'habits de cour, c'est un vrai gentilhomme. On lui apprend la philosophie, il controverse avec Les sophistes, lit Pline, Athénée, Dioscoride, Galien, Aristote, Ehen ; il apprend La géométrie, la musique, La médecine ; il joue à tous les jeux, s'amuse de toutes les façons, boit vigoureusement. Après La guerre qu'il soutint pour son père Grangousier contre PicrochoLe, quand il vint à se peigner iI faisait tomber de ses cheveux des boulets d'artillerie, et il avala dans une salade six pèlerins qu'il retira avec son cure-dents.

Mais ce qu'il y a de plus beau dans le roman, ce ne sont point les inventions, les aventures, ni ce style si naïf, à l'expression si pittoresque, àla phrase si bien ciselée en relief, c'est le dialogue, le comique des caractères, les longues causeries philosophiques de Gargantua et du moine, qui lui explique pourquoi les moines sont exclus du monde, pourquoi les demoiselles ont les cuisses fraîches, pourquoi les uns ont le nez plus plat que les autres, *etc.* Après tout, Gargantua est un bon

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diable, il fait grâce à ces ennemis, et sur ses vieux jours il se retire dans le manoir des Thélémites.

Dans Je roman de Gargantua le caractère du héros domine presque exclusivement, les autres sont accessoires et vaguement définis. C'est surtout la force et la vigueur qui prédominent : ce sont de joyeux buveurs aux propos libertins, à la saiLlie franche, avec moins de malice sceptique et de satire mordante que dans Pantagruel ; Gargantua, c'est tout entier l'homme de guerre tel qu’il pouvait L’être vers 1520, il commence à abandonner l’épée pour la plume, la cuirasse pour Le bonnet.

Pantagruel a une généaLogie avouée, inscrite, iL est fils de tous les rois : tous les géants, tous les grands hommes mèdes, persans, juifs, romains, grecs, héros antiques, paladins du moyen âge, tous sont ses pères ; son propre père, Gargantua, avait, lors de sa naissance, quatre cent quatre-vingt-quatre et quarantequatre ans. Sa femme mourut en mal d’enfant ; pour baptiser Pantagruel on employa l’eau de tout le pays, qui fut 36 mois 7 semaines 4. jours 13 heures et queLque peu davantage sans pluie.

Gargantua ne sait s’il doit se réjouir de la naissance de son fils ou se désoLer de la mort de sa femme ; tour à tour il rit, il pleure, il s’écrie : “Ah pauvre Panta “gruel ! tu as perdu ta bonne mère, ta douce nour “rice, ta dame très aimée. Ha faulse mort ! tant tu “me es malivole, tant tu me es outrageuse de me “tolLir celle à laquelle immortalité appartenait de “droit” ; et ce disant pleurait comme une vache, mais tout souldain riait comme ung veau quand Pantagruel lui venait en mémoyre. “Oh ! mon petit-fils, disait-il, “mon couillon, mon peton, que tu es joly, tant je suis “tenu à Dieu de ce qu’il m’a donné ong si beau fils ((tant joyeux, tant riant, tant joly ! Ho ! ho ! ho ! que “je suis ayse, buvons, ho ! laissons toute méLancholye, “apporte du meilleur, rince Les verres, boutte la “nappe, chasse Les chiens, souffle ce feu, allume La “chandelle, ferme cette porte, taille ces soupes, envoie “ces pauvres, baille-leur ce qu’ils demandent ; tiens “ma robe, que je me mette en pourpoint pour mieux “festoyer les commères.)) Puis il ajoute : ((Ma femme “est morte, je ne la ressusciterai pas par mes pleurs, “il faut mieux pleurer moins et boire davantage.))

Pantagruel, dans son enfance, humait chaque jour le lait de 4,600 vaches ; on lui donnait sa bouillie dans un poeslon auqueL furent occupés tous les pesliers de Saulmur en Anjou, Villedieu en Normandie, Bramont en Lorraine ; il le brisa avec ses dents et mangea du cuivre.

Il part à Paris, lit tous Les livres de l’abbaye de Saint-Victor, devient docteur ; il prononce des jugements, se lie d’amitié avec Panurge, Lequel “estait malfaisant, pipeur, buveur, batteur de pavé, riMeur s’il en estait à Paris”. Au demeurant le meilleur fils du monde.

“Et toujours machinait quelque chose contre les sergents et contre le guet”. Il obtient des pardons, marie les vieilles femmes, guérit les vaches ; il aime les grandes dames et fait le haut seigneur ; il accompagne Pantagruel et Lui dit mille choses inconnues, il tromphe pour lui sur un clerc d’Angleterre venu exprès de son pays pour arguer. Panurge va à la guerre contre les Dipsodes ; après la victoire on lui accorde un éveché, mais il s’y conduit en laïque, mange son bled en herbe, puis il veut se remarier, mais il a peur. Il se conseilLe à Pantagruel, il interprète Les songes, les vers de Virgile, va consulter la Sibylle de Panzout, PUis Un poète nommé Raminagrobis, se consulte à tous ceux qui l'entourent, ses amis, les passants, tout le monde ; il rencontre frère Jean des Entommeures qui J'en détourne, il demande des avis Lt Hippotadée, théologien, à Rondibihis, médecin, à un philosophe platonicien, à un philosophe pyrrhonien, il finit par en demander à TribouLet, et, ne sachant que faire, il s'embarque pour aller consulter l'oracle de la Dive Bouteille. Il se munit de force provisions de bouche et part ; mais survient une tempête et il a peur, il se rccommandc à Dieu et à tous les saints, il pleure, sanglote, gémit, fait des vœux ; les nauchiers euxmêmes se démontent et abandonnent Je navire au fort de la tempête. Après l'ouragan Panurge fait le bon compagnon et soutient qu'il n'a pas eu peur, il se raille de Dieu et se moque de L'Océan.

Ils visitent toutes les nations, et nulle part ils ne rencontrent ce qui est bon. D'abord ils voient le pays de Chicanous, de là celui dc Quaresme prenant, puis ils arrivent dans la contrée des Ar1douilles commandées par Riflandouille et Tailleboudin, ensuite ils vont dans l'ue des Papefigues, puis dans celle des Papimanes ; ils vont toujours et jamais ils ne s'arrêtent.

Pantagruel descend au manoir de Messire Guaster, premier maître ès arts du monde ; celui-là est Je tyran universel, et nos héros lui obéissent encore plus qu'à d'autres

Ils passent successivement dans l'ue Sonante, où lusage du carême deplait souverainement à Panurge et où les Papigots règnent absolument. Ils restent quelque temps, mais comme à toute heure, jour et nuit, on venait les réveiller pour boire, Pantagruel luimême en est ennuyé. Ils s'enfuient des terres dc Rome, arrivent dans le pays de Quinte essence, et ce n'est enfin qu'après avoir passé dans he pays de Satin, où ils virent Ouïdire, qu'ils arrivent enfin à la Dive Bouteille, terme du voyage.

Et dans toute cette longue course effrénée à travers Je monde, ce qui domine, ce qui brille, ce qui retentit, c'est un éternel rire, immense, confus, un rire de géant, qui assourdit les oreilles et donne Je vertige ; moines, soldats, capitaines, évêques, empereurs, papes, nobles et manants, prêtres et laïques, tous passent devant ce sarcasme colossal de Rabelais, qui les flagelle et les stigmatise, et ils ressortent de dessous sa plume tous mutilés et tous saignants.

Il y avait derrière Rabelais tout un moyen âge sombre et terrible ; les longues douleurs du peuple, ses haines contre le seigneur et contre le prêtre étaient vieilles, depuis longtemps les croyances et les servitudes pesaient également ; mais La vieille société vivait encore avec ses tyrannies pour Le corps, ses entraves pour la pensée, le seigneur était encore dans son donjon, le prêtre dans sa riche et grasse abbaye, le pape dans sa monstrueuse ville de Rome. Mais tout à coup il survient un homme (et pour que la raillerie soit plus forte, un moine !) qui se met à écrire un livre, un livre sans suite, sans formes, à la pensée vague, peut-être sans plan prémédité, sans idée fixe, mais plein de railleries mordantes et cruelles contre le seigneur malgré son armée, contre le prêtre malgré sa sainteté, contre le pape malgré ses bulles ; la vieille cathédrale gothique est toute dègradée, toute salie, toute souillée ; tout ce qu’on a jusqu’alors respecté depuis des siècles, philosophie, science, magie, gloire, renommée, pouvoir, idées, croyances, tout cela est abattu de son piédestal, l’humanité est dépouillée de ses robes de parade et de ses galons mensongers ; elle frémit toute nue sous le souffle impur du grotesque qui la serre depuis longtemps, elle est laide et repoussante, Panurge lui jette à la tête ses brocs de vin, et se met à rire. Et au milieu de tout cela, Les aperçus les plus fins sur la nature de l’homme, les nuances les plus délicates du cœur, les analyses les plus vraies, des scènes qu’eût avouées MoLière et qui ont fait pâmer de rire nos aïeux, qui avaient plus d’esprit que nous et qui lisaient les bons auteurs du bon vieux temps. Ce n’est ni la pointe acérée et aiguisée de Voltaire, avec son rire perçant, sa bile recuite, sa morsure envenimée, ni la colère naïve et déclamatoire de Jean-Jacques, ni les sanglots étouffés de Byron, ni la douleur réfléchie de Goethe, c’est le rire vrai, fort, brutal, le rire qui brise et qui casse, ce rire-là qui, avec Luther et 93, a abattu le moyen âge.

Ceux qui ont prétendu donner de Rabelais des clefs, voire des allégories à chaque mot, et traduire chaque lazzi, n’ont point, selon moi, compris Je livre. La satire est générale, universelle, et non point personnelle ni Locale. Une attention suivie dément vite cette vaine tentative.

Citerai-je tout ce que Je xvi0 siècle a fait dans ce sens-là et toute la boue qu’il a jetée sur le moyen âge dont il était sorti ? Ainsi, sans même parler de l’Arioste, Falstaff, Sancho, Gargantua ne forment-ils pas une trilogie grotesque qui couronne amèrement la vieille société ?

Falstaff est à lui seul l’homme de l’Angleterre, le John Bull bouffi de bière forte et de jambon, gros, sensuel, se relevant d’entre les cadavres, tirant de sa gibecière un flacon de vieux vin d’Espagne. Ce n’est point le grotesque terrible d’lago, ni l’immoralité raisonnée du Maure Hassan de Schiller. Sa seule passion c’est de s’aimer. Il la porte au plus haut degré ; elle est sublime. C’est l’égoïsme personnifié avec un certain fonds d’analyse et de scepticisme qu’il fait tourner à son profit.

Quant au pacifique Sancho Pança, monté sur son baudet, avec sa figure basanée et paresseuse, soufflant la nuit, dormant le jour, l’homme poltron, l’homme qui ne conçoit pas l’héroïsme, l’homme des proverbes, l’homme prosaïque par excellence, n’est-ce pas la raison criant de toutes ses forces à don

Quichotte d’arrêter et de ne pas courir après les moulins à vent qu’il prend pour des géants ? Le gentilhomme y court, mais il s’y casse Je bras, s’y meurtrit la tête. Son casque est un plat à barbe, son cheval, Rossinante. Et l’âne du laboureur se met à braire devant son blason. Placée entre ces deux figures, celle de Gargantua est plus vague, moins précise. Les formes en sont plus amples, plus lâchées, plus grandioses. Gargantua est moins glouton, moins sensuel que Falstaff, moins paresseux que Sancho, mais il est plus buveur, plus rieur, plus criard. Il est terrible et monstrueux dans sa gaieté.

(‘)Au reste, Rabelais est une longue étude à faire, il faut Je connattre tout en entier pour l’apprécier, des analyses et des extraits Le mutilent et le gâtent ; c’est en l’approfondissant que l’on verra tout ce qu’il y a de sève, de vigueur, d’imagination, de génie sous cette forme triviale et grossière, on s’étonnera de tant de diamants ensevelis, des forces de l’Hercule sous l’habit du bouffon.

Une dernière réflexion qui termine. Rabelais n’a sondé que La société telle qu’elIe pouvait être de son temps. Il a dénoncé des abus, des ridicules, des crimes, et, que sais-je, entrevu peut-être un monde politique meilleur, une société tout autre. Ce qui existait de lui faisait pitié, et, pour employer une expression triviale, le monde était farce. Et il l’a tourné en farce.

Depuis lui, qu’est-ce qu’on a fait ? Tout est changé. La réfirme est venue. Indépendance de la pensée. La Révolution est venue. Indépendance matérielle.

Et encore ?

Mille questions ont été retournées, sciences, arts, philosophies, théories, que de cho….s seulement depuis vingt ans ! Quel tourbillon ! Où nous mènera-t-il ?

Voyez donc : où êtes-vous ? Est-ce le crépuscule ? est-ce l’aurore ? Vous n’avez plus de christianisme. Qu’avez vous donc ? des chemins de fer, des fabriques, des chimistes, des mathématiciens. Oui, le corps est mieux, la chair souffre moins, mais le cœur saigne toujours. L’âme, h’àme, la sentez-vous se déchirer, quoique l’enveloppe qui la renferme soit calme et bienheureuse ? Voyez comme elle s’abtme dans le septicisme universel, dans cet ennui morne qui a pris notre race au berceau, tandis que la politique bégaye, que les poètes à peine ont le temps de cadencer leur pensée et qu’ils la jettent à demi écrite sur une feuille éphémère, et que la balle homicide éclate dans chaque grenier ou dans chaque palais qu’habitent la misère, l’orgueil, la satiété !

Les questions matérielles sont résolues. Les autres le sont-elles ? Je vous Je demande. Dites-Je-moi. Et tant que vous n’aurez pas comblé cet éternel gouffre béant que l’homme a en lui, je me moque de vos efforts, et je ris à mon aise de vos misérabLes sciences qui ne valent pas un brin d’herbe.

Vienne donc maintenant un homme comme Rabelais ! Qu’il pUiSSe SC dépouiller de toute colère, de toute haine, de toute douleur ! De quoi rira-t-il ?

Ce ne sera ni des rois, il n’y en a plus ; ni de Dieu, quoiqu’on n’y croie pas, cela fait peur ; ni des jésuites, c’est déjà vieux.

Mais de quoi donc ?

Le monde matériel est pour le mieux, ou du moins il est sur la voie.

Mais L’autre ? Il aurait beau jeu. Et si le poète pouvait cacher ses larmes et se mettre à rire, je vous assure que son Livre serait Je plus terrible et le plus sublime qu’on ait fait.

NOTE.

Cette étude sur RaMais a paru pour la première fois dans Pox tes Champs et pox les Grèves, Paris, Charpentier, éditeur, i886.

Le manuscrit n’est pas daté, mais une allusion y est faite dans la Correspondance en 1839.

MADEMOISELLE RACHEL.

M$^{\text{lle}}$ Rachel, hélas ! a pris congé de nous, hier soir. L’adieu que nous lui avons donné (est-ce bien vraiment le dernier adieu ? espérons que non et qu’elle consentira à reparaître au moins dans Bajazet, où nous avons encore tant envie de l’applaudir), cet adieu, triste pour nous, était plein d’enthousiasme et de regrets. On l’a rappelée comme de coutume, on lui a jeté des couronnes, Les plus rustres se sont sentis émus, les plus grossiers étaient touchés, les femmes applaudissaient dans les loges, le parterre battait de ses mains sans gants, la salle trépignait ; et à l’heure où j’écris ceci à la hâte j’en suis encore tout troublé, tout ravi, j’ai encore la voix de la grande tragédienne dans les oreilles et son geste devant les yeux.

Je me la rappellerai longtemps, ainsi qu’une statue grecque largement drapée qui eût ouvert les lèvres et dit des vers d’Euripide, car c’est là de l’art grec, et du plus pur et du plus simple ; en l’écoutant on se prend à rêver à je ne sais quel profil idéal et classique, c’est en effet ce qui d’abord saillit dans son jeu. Mais il n’y a pas seulement la pose forte de la Muse antique, le geste accablant, le mot bien dit, il n’y a pas seulement profil pur et ligne découpée, il y a avant tout Je cœur qui anime chaque mot, fait part bis d’un vers toute une scène, toutes les qualités de diction et de jeu, en un mot, également et habilement menées, sous une inspiration toujours conduite et retenue, inspiration intime et qui palpite bien plus dans le cœur de l’artiste qu’elle ne s’étale complaisamment aux yeux du spectateur ; et de ce jeu si varié, si nuancé, où tant de qualités éclatantes font trait, saillissent à l’œil et nous prennent d’admiration, de cette poésie dramatique où chaque hémistiche a son accent particulier, il en résulte néanmoins quelque chose d’harmonieux, de complexe et d’exquis ; on se laisse aller à un étonnement mêlé d’extase, qui va droit au cœur, sans fracas et sans éblouissement, et vous êtes captivé, charmé, même aux gestes les plus simples, même aux mots les plus ordinaires.

C’est que M$^{\text{lle}}$ Rachel, quoi qu’on en dise, étudie son rôle comme une création à elle, en synthèse d’abord, puis chez le poète, dans chaque vers, et qu’elle en est pénétrée et nourrie ; elle a cette Large vue de l’ensemble qui seule fait le grand artiste et qui manque quelquefois aux natures les plus inspirées et les plus remarquables. Il ne suffit pas en effet d’avoir certains vers bien dits, du pathétique pour le cinquième acte, de la mélancolie à telle place, de la terreur à telle autre ; si vous n’avez pas cette intuition pratique qui saisit à la fois l’ensemble et les détails, ce sentiment délicat et vivace de l’unité et de la correction continue, vous aurez de beaux éclats, des situations heureuses, des étincelles, c’est possible, mais jamais ce feu sacré qui brûle, cette correction exquise qui à elle seule est déjà du génie, et qui pour M^{lle} Rachel est bien ce qu’en disait Vauvenargues, *le Vernis des maîtres*.

L’avons-nous vue, dans tous les rôles qu’elle nous a joués, descendre un seul instant de sa majesté poétique ? l’avons-nous vue quelquefois se rabaisser à la vie commune et quitter sa sphère idéale ? Jamais ! jamais ! parce qu’elle ne joue pas pour nous, mais parce qu’elle vit réellement, parce que son cœur souffre vraiment et que la colère fait trembler ses membres, et que les pleurs emplissent ses yeux, et que l’inspiration la torture et la fait parler, comme la Pythonisse possédée !

On a beaucoup plaint les gladiateurs qui donnaient leur sang pour amuser le peuple ; est-ce donc beaucoup moins que de dépenser chaque jour tant de forces et de sève, de verser à flots sur la multitude tous les riches trésors de poésie que recèle un grand cœur d’artiste, et de rester ensuite brisé, épuisé de cette lutte sans nom, n’ayant pour tout salaire que les fleurs des enthousiastes, des vaniteux et l’or des riches ? tandis que vous, vous rentrez abreuvé de poésie pour tout un lendemain, l’âme pleine de hautes pensées et brûlante de sentiments généreux (car l’art fait bon et grand parce qu’il transporte et ravit). Oh ! non, Rachel, votre salaire à vous c’est de vous faire aimer comme on aime les esprits, c’est de transporter et de navrer le cœur de cette foule qui trépigne et qui bat des mains, c’est de réjouir délicieusement quelque artiste caché dans la foule, quelque frêle génie ignoré, assez grand seulement pour vous comprendre ; vous avez une vie à rendre jaloux les rois, et qui fait votre couronne de carton plus solide que la leur, votre royauté plus durable. Quel est celui d’entre eux qui n’échangerait sa vie contre une heure de la vôtre, de votre vie éblouissante et adorée, alors que vous entrez chaque soir au bruit des applaudissements et ressortez accompagnée des mêmes triomphes, pour rentrer dans votre solitude, avec vos poètes chéris, comme ces dieux indiens qui se cachent à la foule quand ils en ont reçu les offrandes et l’encens, pour communiquer avec les esprits supérieurs ? Ô fille des grands poètes, ta voix leur eût réjoui l’âme à tous. Corneille fût resté stupéfait devant son Émilie, qu’il n’avait pas taillée plus haute ; Racine eût aimé d’amour cette Hermione, qu’il n’avait pas rêvée plus superbe ; Voltaire eût fait bien des vers à cette Amenaïde que vous lui rendez plus belle.

Dites-moi s’il n’a pas fallu quelque chose d’un peu plus que ce que vous appelez du talent pour rendre de la verdeur à ces vieilles et bonnes choses, plus admirées qu’aimées, plus respectées que lues, et pour faire de Corneille et de Racine des génies contemporains et pleins d’actualité ? Manie-t-on ainsi les réputations de cette taille sans être quelquefois soi-même de leur famille ? les nains ou les médiocres tracent-ils dans le cœur des hommes des sillons aussi longs ? et quand, à 19 ans, sans tradition et spontanément, vous occupez ainsi le monde littéraire, que votre nom égale les plus beaux et en surpasse tant d'illustres, c'est qu'à coup sûr cela vaut bien la peine qu'on fasse diversion pour un jour à la politique et aux indigos, et qu'on aille un peu se désaltérer à cette large source de poésie, d'où découle ce quelque chose d'exquis et d'infiniment grand que vous savez ; cela rafraîchit, soutient, et console de la vie, et fait rêver au beau.

Autrefois, les peuples de la Grèce barbare attendaient, l'hiver, sous leurs cabanes de roseaux, que la saison des pluies fût passée, et quand la colombe apparaissait dans les orangers et que le passereau sifflait dans les champs verts, ils voyaient revenir, accourant, le vieux rapsode qui leur chantait les chants d'Homère, et ils lui tendaient les bras, ils allaient à sa rencontre avec des fleurs et des fruits, et quand il les quittait c'était une douleur pour tous les cœurs, on le reconduisait jusqu'à la fontaine, on bénissait sa lyre, son voyage et son retour surtout, que l'on souhaitait si prochain. Et toi ! fille du plus pur rayon de poésie grecque, toi qui nous as fait entendre la large voix des temps antiques, que tes heures soient sacrées, et que ton retour soit prompt ! Songe de là-bas à nous autres, qui songeons à toi, veufs que nous sommes de toutes les joies de la poésie que tu emmènes avec toi, loin de nous ! Sculpteur, je te ferais une statue ; poète, je te ferais des vers, mais indigne, hélas ! je te loue dans cette langue des cochers et des banquiers, que tu dédaignes de parler tant elle est molle, pâle et vile auprès des vers que tu dis.

NOVEMBRE

Flaubert écrit *Novembre* à Paris durant l’automne 1842. Un jeune homme tourmenté est initié à l’amour par Marie, une prostituée qui vit dans une maison isolée. Malgré la passion qui naît entre eux, il n’a pas le courage de partager sa vie et la fuit.

NOVEMBRE

FRAGMENTS DE STYLE QUELCONQUE.

“Pour… niaiser et fantastiquer.”
Montaigne.

J’aime l’automne, cette triste saison va bien aux souvenirs. Quand les arbres n’ont plus de feuilles, quand le ciel conserve encore au crépuscule la teinte rousse qui dore l’herbe fanée, il est doux de regarder s’éteindre tout ce qui naguère encore brûlait en vous.

Je viens de rentrer de ma promenade dans les prairies vides, au bord des fossés froids où les saules se mirent ; le vent faisait siffler leurs branches dépouillées, quelquefois il se taisait, et puis recommençait tout à coup ; alors les petites feuilles qui restent attachées aux broussailles tremblaient de nouveau, l’herbe frissonnait en se penchant sur terre, tout semblait devenir plus pâle et plus glacé ; à l’horizon le disque du soleil se perdait dans la couleur blanche du ciel, et le pénétrait alentour d’un peu de vie expirante. J’avais froid et presque peur.

Je me suis mis à l’abri derrière un monticule de gazon, le vent avait cessé. Je ne sais pourquoi, comme j’étais là, assis par terre, ne pensant à rien et regardant au loin la fumée qui sortait des chaumes, ma vie entière s’est placée devant moi comme un fantôme, et l’amer parfum des jours qui ne sont plus m’est revenu avec l’odeur de l’herbe séchée et des bois morts ; mes pauvres années ont repassé devant moi, comme emportées par l’hiver dans une tourmente lamentable ; quelque chose de terrible les roulait dans mon souvenir, avec plus de furie que la brise ne faisait courir les feuilles dans les sentiers paisibles ; une ironie étrange les frôlait et les retournait pour mon spectacle, et puis toutes s’envolaient ensemble et se perdaient dans un ciel morne.

Elle est triste, la saison où nous sommes : on dirait que la vie va s’en aller avec le soleil, le frisson vous court dans le cœur comme sur la peau, tous les bruits s’éteignent, les horizons pâlissent, tout va dormir ou mourir. Je voyais tantôt les vaches rentrer, elles beuglaient en se tournant vers le couchant, le petit garçon qui les chassait devant lui avec une ronce grelottait sous ses habits de toile, elles glissaient sur la boue en redescendant la côte, et écrasaient quelques pommes restées dans l’herbe. Le soleil jetait un dernier adieu derrière les collines confondues, les lumières des maisons s’allumaient dans la vallée, et la lune, l’astre de la rosée, l’astre des pleurs, commençait à se découvrir dans les nuages et à montrer sa pâle figure.

J’ai savouré longuement ma vie perdue ; je me suis dit avec joie que ma jeunesse était passée, car c’est une joie de sentir le froid vous venir au cœur, et de pouvoir dire, le tâtant de la main comme un foyer qui fume encore : il ne brûle plus. J’ai repassé lentement dans toutes les choses de ma vie, idées, passions, jours d’emportement, jours de deuil, battements d’espoir, déchirements d’angoisse. J’ai tout revu, comme un homme qui visite les catacombes et qui regarde lentement, des deux côtés, des morts rangés après des morts. À compter les années cependant, il n’y a pas longtemps que je suis né, mais j’ai à moi des souvenirs nombreux dont je me sens accablé, comme le sont les vieillards de tous les jours qu’ils ont vécus ; il me semble quelquefois que j’ai duré pendant des siècles et que mon être renferme les débris de mille existences passées. Pourquoi cela ? Ai-je aimé ? ai-je haï ? ai-je cherché quelque chose ? j’en doute encore ; j’ai vécu en dehors de tout mouvement, de toute action, sans me remuer, ni pour la gloire, ni pour le plaisir, ni pour la science, ni pour l’argent.

De tout ce qui va suivre personne n’a rien su, et ceux qui me voyaient chaque jour, pas plus que les autres ; ils étaient, par rapport à moi, comme le lit sur lequel je dors et qui ne sait rien de mes songes. Et d’ailleurs, le cœur de l’homme n’est-il pas une énorme solitude où nul ne pénètre ? les passions qui y viennent sont comme les voyageurs dans le désert du Sahara, elles y meurent étouffées, et leurs cris ne sont point entendus au-delà.

Dès le collège, j’étais triste, je m’y ennuyais, je m’y cuisais de désirs, j’avais d’ardentes aspirations vers une existence insensée et agitée, je rêvais les passions, j’aurais voulu toutes les avoir. Derrière la vingtième année, il y avait pour moi tout un monde de lumières, de parfums ; la vie m’apparaissait de loin avec des splendeurs et des bruits triomphaux ; c’étaient, comme dans les contes de fées, des galeries les unes après les autres, où les diamants ruissellent sous le feu des lustres d’or ; un nom magique fait rouler sur leurs gonds les portes enchantées, et à mesure qu’on avance, l’œil plonge dans des perspectives magnifiques dont l’éblouissement fait sourire et fermer les yeux.

Vaguement je convoitais quelque chose de splendide que je n’aurais su formuler par aucun mot, ni préciser dans ma pensée sous aucune forme, mais dont j’avais néanmoins le désir positif, incessant. J’ai toujours aimé les choses brillantes. Enfant, je me poussais dans la foule, à la portière des charlatans, pour voir les galons rouges de leurs domestiques et les rubans de la bride de leurs chevaux ; je restais longtemps devant la tente des bateleurs, à regarder leurs pantalons bouffants et leurs collerettes brodées. Oh ! comme j’aimais surtout la danseuse de corde, avec ses longs pendants d’oreilles qui allaient et venaient autour de sa tête, son gros collier de pierres qui battait sur sa poitrine ! avec quelle avidité inquiète je la contemplais, quand elle s’élançait jusqu’à la hauteur des lampes suspendues entre les arbres, et que sa robe, bordée de paillettes d’or, claquait en sautant et se bouffait dans l’air ! ce sont là les premières femmes que j’ai aimées. Mon esprit se tourmentait en songeant à ces cuisses de formes étranges, si bien serrées dans des pantalons roses, à ces bras souples, entourés d’anneaux qu’elles faisaient craquer sur leur dos en se renversant en arrière, quand elles touchaient jusqu’à terre avec les plumes de leur turban. La femme, que je tâchais déjà de deviner (il n’est pas d’âge où l’on n’y songe : enfant, nous palpons avec une sensualité naïve la gorge des grandes filles qui nous embrassent et qui nous tiennent dans leurs bras ; à dix ans, on rêve à l’amour ; à quinze, il vous arrive ; à soixante, on le garde encore, et si les morts songent à quelque chose dans leur tombeau, c’est à gagner sous terre la tombe qui est proche, pour soulever le suaire de la trépassée et se mêler à son sommeil) ; la femme était donc pour moi un mystère attrayant, qui troublait ma pauvre tête d’enfant. À ce que j’éprouvais, lorsqu’une de celles-ci venait à fixer ses yeux sur moi, je sentais déjà qu’il y avait quelque chose de fatal dans ce regard émouvant, qui fait fondre les volontés humaines, et j’en étais à la fois charmé et épouvanté.

À quoi rêvais-je durant les longues soirées d’études, quand je restais, le coude appuyé sur mon pupitre, à regarder la mèche du quinquet s’allonger dans la flamme et chaque goutte d’huile tomber dans le godet, pendant que mes camarades faisaient crier leurs plumes sur le papier et qu’on entendait, de temps à autre, le bruit d’un livre qu’on feuilletait ou qu’on refermait ? Je me dépêchais bien vite de faire mes devoirs, pour pouvoir me livrer à l’aise à ces pensées chéries. En effet, je me le promettais d’avance avec tout l’attrait d’un plaisir réel, je commençais par me forcer à y songer, comme un poète qui veut créer quelque chose et provoquer l’inspiration ; j’entrais le plus avant possible dans ma pensée, je la retournais sous toutes ses faces, j’allais jusqu’au fond, je revenais et je recommençais ; bientôt c’était une course effrénée de l’imagination, un élan prodigieux hors du réel, je me faisais des aventures, je m’arrangeais des histoires, je me bâtissais des palais, je m’y logeais comme un empereur, je creusais toutes les mines de diamant et je me les jetais à seaux sur le chemin que je devais parcourir.

Et quand le soir était venu, que nous étions tous couchés dans nos lits blancs, avec nos rideaux blancs, et que le maître d’étude seul se promenait de long en large dans le dortoir, comme je me renfermais bien plus en moi-même, cachant avec délices dans mon sein cet oiseau qui battait des ailes et dont je sentais la chaleur ! J’étais toujours longtemps à m’endormir, j’écoutais les heures sonner, plus elles étaient longues plus j’étais heureux ; il me semblaient qu’elles me poussaient dans le monde en chantant, et saluaient chaque moment de ma vie en me disant : Aux autres ! aux autres ! à venir ! adieu ! adieu ! Et quand la dernière vibration s'était éteinte, quand mon oreille ne bourdonnait plus à l'entendre, je me disais : "À demain, la même heure sonnera, mais demain ce sera un jour de moins, un jour de plus vers là-bas, vers ce but qui brille, vers mon avenir, vers ce soleil dont les rayons m'inondent et que je toucherai alors des mains", et je me disais que c'était bien long à venir, et je m'endormais presque en pleurant.

Certains mots me bouleversaient, celui de *femme,* de *maîtresse* surtout ; je cherchais l'explication du premier dans les livres, dans les gravures, dans les tableaux, dont j'aurais voulu pouvoir arracher les draperies pour y découvrir quelque chose. Le jour enfin que je devinai tout, cela m'étourdit d'abord avec délices, comme une harmonie suprême, mais bientôt je devins calme et vécus dès lors avec plus de joie, je sentis un mouvement d'orgueil à me dire que j'étais un homme, un être organisé pour avoir un jour une femme à moi ; le mot de la vie m'était connu, c'était presque y entrer et déjà en goûter quelque chose, mon désir n'alla pas plus loin, et je demeurai satisfait de savoir ce que je savais. Quant à une maîtresse, c'était pour moi un être satanique, dont la magie du nom seul me jetait en de longues extases : c'était pour leurs maîtresses que les rois ruinaient et gagnaient des provinces ; pour elles on tissait les tapis de l'Inde, on tournait l'or, on ciselait le marbre, on remuait le monde ; une maîtresse a des esclaves, avec des éventails de plume pour chasser les moucherons, quand elle dort sur des sofas de satin ; des éléphants chargés de présents attendent qu'elle s'éveille, des palanquins la portent mollement au bord des fontaines, elle siège sur des trônes, dans une atmosphère rayonnante et embaumée, bien loin de la foule, dont elle est l'exécration et l'idole.

Ce mystère de la femme en dehors du mariage, et plus femme encore à cause de cela même, m'irritait et me tentait du double appât de l'amour et de la richesse. Je n'aimais rien tant que le théâtre, j'en aimais jusqu'aux bourdonnements des entractes, jusqu'aux couloirs, que je parcourais le cœur ému pour trouver une place. Quand la représentation était déjà commencée, je montais l'escalier en courant, j'entendais le bruit des instruments, des voix, des bravos, et quand j'entrais, que je m'asseyais, tout l'air était embaumé d'une chaude odeur de femme bien habillée, quelque chose qui sentait le bouquet de violettes, les gants blancs, le mouchoir brodé ; les galeries couvertes de monde, comme autant de couronnes de fleurs et de diamants, semblaient se tenir suspendues à entendre chanter ; l'actrice seule était sur le devant de la scène, et sa poitrine, d'où sortait des notes précipitées, se baissait et montait en palpitant, le rythme poussait sa voix au galop et l'emportait dans un tourbillon mélodieux, les roulades faisaient onduler son cou gonflé, comme celui d'un cygne, sous le poids de baisers aériens ; elle tendait les bras, criait, pleurait, lançait des éclairs, appelait quelque chose avec un inconcevable amour, et, quand elle reprenait le motif, il me semblait qu'elle arrachait mon cœur avec le son de sa voix pour le mêler à elle dans une vibration amoureuse.

On l'applaudissait, on lui jetait des fleurs, et, dans mon transport, je savourais sur sa tête les adorations de la foule, l'amour de tous ces hommes et le désir de chacun d'eux. C'est de celle-là que j'aurais voulu être aimé, aimé d'un amour dévorant et qui fait peur, un amour de princesse ou d'actrice, qui nous remplit d'orgueil et vous fait de suite l'égal des riches et des puissants ! Qu'elle est belle la femme que tous applaudissent et que tous envient, celle qui donne à la foule, pour les rêves de chaque nuit, la fièvre du désir, celle qui n'apparaît jamais qu'aux flambeaux, brillante et chantante, et marchant dans l'idéal d'un poète comme dans une vie faite pour elle ! elle doit avoir pour celui qu'elle aime un autre amour, bien plus beau encore que celui qu'elle verse à flot sur tous les cœurs béants qui s'en abreuvent, des chants bien plus doux, des notes bien plus basses, plus amoureuses, plus tremblantes ! Si j'avais pu être près de ces lèvres d'où elles sortaient si pures, toucher à ces cheveux luisants qui brillaient sous des perles ! Mais la rampe du théâtre me semblait la barrière de l'illusion ; au-delà il y avait pour moi l'univers de l'amour et de la poésie, les passions y étaient plus belles et plus sonores, les forêts et les palais s'y dissipaient comme de la fumée, les sylphides descendait des cieux, tout chantait, tout aimait. C'est à tout cela que je songeais seul, le soir, quand le vent sifflait dans les corridors, ou dans les récréations, pendant qu'on jouait aux barres ou à la balle, et que je me promenais le long du mur, marchant sur les feuilles tombées des tilleuls pour m'amuser à entendre le bruit de mes pieds qui les soulevaient et les poussaient.

Je fus bientôt pris du désir d'aimer, je souhaitai l'amour avec une convoitise infinie, j'en rêvais les tourments, je m'attendais chaque instant à un déchirement qui m'eût comblé de joie. Plusieurs fois je crus y être, je prenais dans ma pensée la première femme venue qui m'avait semblé belle, et je me disais : “C'est celle-là que j'aime”, mais le souvenir que j'aurais voulu en garder s'appâlissait et s'effaçait au lieu de grandir ; je sentais, d'ailleurs, que je me forçais à aimer, que je jouais, vis-à-vis de mon cœur, une comédie qui ne le dupait point, et cette chute me donnait une longue tristesse ; je regrettais presque des amours que je n'avais pas eues, et puis j'en rêvais d'autres dont j'aurais voulu pouvoir me combler l'âme.

C'était surtout le lendemain de bal ou de comédie, à la rentrée d'une vacance de deux ou trois jours, que je me rêvais une passion. Je me représentais celle que j'avais choisie, telle que je l'avais vue, en robe blanche, enlevée dans une valse aux bras d'un cavalier qui la soutient et qui lui sourit, ou appuyée sur la rampe de velours d’une loge et montrant tranquillement un profil royal ; le bruit des contredanses, l’éclat des lumières résonnait et m’éblouissait quelques temps encore, puis tout finissait par se fondre dans la monotonie d’une rêverie douloureuse. J’ai eu ainsi mille petits amours, qui ont duré huit jours ou un mois et que j’ai souhaité prolonger des siècles ; je ne sais en quoi je les faisais consister, ni quel était le but où ces vagues désirs convergeaient ; c’était, je crois, le besoin d’un sentiment nouveau et comme une aspiration vers quelque chose d’élevé dont je ne voyais pas le faîte. La puberté du cœur précède celle du corps ; or j’avais plus besoin d’aimer que de jouir, plus envie de l’amour que de la volupté. Je n’ai même plus maintenant l’idée de cet amour de la première adolescence, où les sens ne sont rien et que l’infini seul remplit ; placé entre l’enfance et la jeunesse, il en est la transition et passe si vite qu’on l’oublie.

J’avais tant lu chez les poètes le mot amour, et si souvent je me le redisais pour me charmer de sa douceur, qu’à chaque étoile qui brillait dans un ciel bleu par une nuit douce, qu’à chaque murmure du flot sur la rive, qu’à chaque rayon de soleil dans les gouttes de la rosée, je me disais : “J’aime ! oh ! j’aime !” et j’en étais heureux, j’en étais fier, déjà prêt aux dévouements les plus beaux, et surtout quand une femme m’effleurait en passant ou me regardait en face, j’aurais voulu l’aimer mille fois plus, pâtir encore davantage, et que mon petit battement de cœur pût me casser la poitrine.

Il y a un âge, vous le rappelez-vous, lecteur, où l’on sourit vaguement, comme s’il y avait des baisers dans l’air ; on a le cœur tout gonflé d’une brise odorante, le sang bat chaudement dans les veines, il y pétille, comme le vin bouillonnant dans la coupe de cristal. Vous vous réveillez plus heureux et plus riche que la veille, plus palpitant, plus ému ; de doux fluides montent et descendent en vous et vous parcourent divinement de leur chaleur enivrante, les arbres tordent leur tête sous le vent en de molles courbures, les feuilles frémissent les unes sur les autres, comme si elles se parlaient, les nuages glissent et ouvrent le ciel, où la lune sourit et se mire d’en haut sur la rivière. Quand vous marchez le soir, respirant l’odeur des foins coupés, écoutant le coucou dans les bois, regardant les étoiles qui filent, votre cœur, n’est-ce-pas, votre cœur est plus pur, plus pénétré d’air, de lumière et d’azur que l’horizon paisible, où la terre touche le ciel dans un calme baiser. Oh ! comme les cheveux de femmes embaument ! comme la peau de leurs mains est douce, comme leurs regards nous pénètrent !

Mais déjà ce n’était plus les premiers éblouissements de l’enfance, souvenirs agitants des rêves de la nuit passée ; j’entrais, au contraire, dans une vie réelle où j’avais ma place, dans une harmonie immense où mon cœur chantait un hymne et vibrait magnifiquement ; je goûtais avec joie cet épanouissement charmant, et mes sens s’éveillant ajoutaient à mon orgueil. Comme le premier homme crée, je me réveillais enfin d’un long sommeil, et je voyais près de moi un être semblable à moi, mais muni des différences qui plaçaient entre nous deux une attraction vertigineuse, et en même temps je sentais pour cette forme nouvelle un sentiment nouveau dont ma tête était fière, tandis que le soleil brillait plus pur, que les fleurs embaumaient mieux que jamais, que l’ombre était plus douce et plus aimante.

Simultanément à cela, je sentais chaque jour le développement de mon intelligence, elle vivait avec mon cœur d’une vie commune. Je ne sais pas si mes idées étaient des sentiments, car elles avaient toutes la chaleur des passions, la joie intime que j’avais dans le profond de mon être débordait sur le monde et l’embaumait pour moi du surplus de mon bonheur, j’allais toucher à la connaissance des voluptés suprêmes, et, comme un homme à la porte de sa maîtresse, je restais longtemps à me faire languir exprès, pour savourer un espoir certain et me dire : tout à l’heure je vais la tenir dans mes bras, elle sera à moi, bien à moi, ce n’est pas un rêve.

Étrange contradiction ! je fuyais la société des femmes, et j’éprouvais devant elles un plaisir délicieux ; je prétendais ne point les aimer, tandis que je vivais dans toutes et que j’aurais voulu pénétrer l’essence de chacune pour me mêler à sa beauté. Leurs lèvres déjà m’invitaient à d’autres baisers que ceux des mères, par la pensée je m’enveloppais de leurs cheveux, et je me plaçais entre leurs seins pour m’y écraser sous un étouffement divin ; j’aurais voulu être le collier qui baisait leur cou, l’agraphe qui mordait leur épaule, le vêtement qui couvrait de tout le reste du corps. Au-delà du vêtement je ne voyais plus rien, sous lui était un infini d’amour, je m’y perdais à y penser.

Ces passions que j’aurais voulu avoir, je les étudiais dans les livres. La vie humaine roulait, pour moi, sur deux ou trois idées, sur deux ou trois mots, autour desquels tout le reste tournait comme des satellites autour de leur astre. J’avais ainsi peuplé mon infini d’une quantité de soleils d’or, les contes d’amour se plaçaient dans ma tête à côté des belles révolutions, les belles passions face à face des grands crimes ; je songeais à la fois aux nuits étoilés des pays chauds et à l’embrasement des villes incendiées, aux lianes des forêts vierges et à la pompe des monarchies perdues, aux tombeaux et aux berceaux ; murmure du flot dans les joncs, roucoulement des tourterelles sur les colombiers, bois de myrte et senteur d’aloës, cliquetis des épées contre les cuirasses, chevaux qui piaffent, or qui reluit, étincellements de la vie, agonies des désespérés, je contemplais tout du même regard béant, comme une fourmilière qui se fût agitée à mes pieds. Mais, par-dessus cette vie si mouvante à la surface, si résonnante de tant de cris différents, surgissait une immense amertume qui en était la synthèse et l’ironie.

Le soir, dans l’hiver, je m’arrêtais devant les maisons éclairées où l’on dansait, et je regardais des ombres passer derrière des rideaux rouges, j’entendais des bruits chargés de luxe, des verres qui claquaient sur des plateaux, de l’argenterie qui tintait dans des plats, et je me disais qu’il ne dépendait que de moi de prendre part à cette fête où l’on se ruait, à ce banquet où tous mangeaient ; un orgueil sauvage m’en écartait, car je trouvais que ma solitude me faisait beau, et que mon cœur était plus large à le tenir éloigné de tout ce qui faisait la joie des hommes. Alors je continuais ma route à travers les rues désertes, où les réverbères se balançaient tristement en faisant crier leurs poulies.

Je rêvais la douleur des poètes, je pleurais avec eux leurs larmes les plus belles, je les sentais jusqu’au fond du cœur, j’en étais pénétré, navré, il me semblait parfois que l’enthousiasme qu’ils me donnaient me faisait leur égal et me montait jusqu’à eux ; des pages, où d’autres restaient froids, me transportaient, me donnaient une fureur de pythonisse, je m’en ravageais l’esprit à plaisir, je me les récitais au bord de la mer, ou bien j’allais, la tête baissée, marchant dans l’herbe, me les disant de la voix la plus amoureuse et la plus tendre.

Malheur à qui n’a pas désiré des colères de tragédie, à qui ne sait pas par cœur des strophes amoureuses pour se les répéter au clair de lune ! il est beau de vivre ainsi dans la beauté éternelle, de se draper avec les rois, d’avoir les passions à leur expression la plus haute, d’aimer les amours que le génie à rendus immortels.

Dès lors, je ne vécus plus que dans un idéal sans bornes, où, libre et volant à l’aise, j’allais comme une abeille cueillir sur toutes choses de quoi me nourrir et vivre ; je tâchais de découvrir, dans les bruits des forêts et des flots, des mots que les autres hommes n’entendaient point, et j’ouvrais l’oreille pour écouter la révélation de leur harmonie ; je composais avec les nuages et le soleil des tableaux énormes, que nul langage n’eût pu rendre, et, dans les actions humaines également, j’y percevais tout à coup des rapports et des antithèses dont la précision lumineuse m’éblouissait moi-même. Quelquefois l’art et la poésie semblaient ouvrir leurs horizons infinis et s’illuminer l’un l’autre de leur propre éclat, je bâtissais des palais de cuivre rouge, je montais éternellement dans un ciel radieux, sur un escalier de nuages plus mous que des édredons.

L’aigle est un oiseau fier, qui perche sur les hautes cimes ; sous lui il voit les nuages qui roulent dans les vallées, emportant avec eux les hirondelles ; il voit la pluie tomber sur les sapins, les pierres de marbre rouler dans le gave, le pâtre qui siffle ses chèvres, les chamois qui sautent les précipices. En vain la pluie ruisselle, l’orage casse les arbres, les torrents roulent avec des sanglots, la cascade fume et bondit, le tonnerre éclate et brise la cime des monts, paisible il vole au-dessus et bat des ailes ; le bruit de la montagne l'amuse, il pousse des cris de joie, lutte avec les nuées qui courent vite, et monte encore plus haut dans son ciel immense.

Moi aussi, je me suis amusé du bruit des tempêtes et du bourdonnement vague des hommes qui montait jusqu'à moi ; j'ai vécu dans une aire élevée, où mon cœur se gonflait d'air pur, où je poussais des cris de triomphe pour me désennuyer de ma solitude.

Il me vint bien vite un invincible dégoût pour les choses d'ici-bas. Un matin, je me sentis vieux et plein d'expériences sur mille choses inéprouvées, j'avais de l'indifférence pour les plus tentantes et du dédain pour les plus belles ; tout ce qui faisait l'envie des autres me faisait pitié, je ne voyais rien qui valût même la peine d'un désir, peut-être ma vanité faisait-elle que j'étais au-dessus de la vanité commune et mon désintéressement n'était-il que l'excès d'une cupidité sans bornes. J'étais comme ces édifices neufs, sur lesquels la mousse se met déjà à pousser avant qu'ils ne soient achevés d'être bâtis ; les joies turbulentes de mes camarades m'ennuyaient, et je haussais les épaules à leurs niaiseries sentimentales : les uns gardaient tout un an un vieux gant blanc, ou un camélia fané, pour le couvrir de baisers et de soupirs ; d'autres écrivaient à des modistes, donnaient rendez-vous à des cuisinières ; les premiers me semblaient sots, les seconds grotesques. Et puis la bonne et la mauvaise société m'ennuyaient également, j'étais cynique avec les dévots et mystique avec les libertins, de sorte que tous ne m'aimaient guère.

À cette époque où j'étais vierge, je prenais plaisir à contempler les prostituées, je passais dans les rues qu'elles habitent, je hantais les lieux où elles se promènent ; quelquefois je leur parlais pour me tenter moi-même, je suivais leurs pas, je les touchais, j'entrais dans l'air qu'elles jettent autour d'elles ; et comme j'avais de l'impudence, je croyais être calme ; je me sentais le cœur vide, mais ce vide-là était un gouffre.

J'aimais à me perdre dans le tourbillon des rues ; souvent je prenais des distractions stupides, comme de regarder fixement chaque passant pour découvrir sur sa figure un vice ou une passion saillante. Toutes ces têtes passaient vite devant moi : les unes souriaient, sifflaient en partant, les cheveux au vent ; d'autres étaient pâles, d'autres rouges, d'autres livides ; elles disparaissaient rapidement à mes côtés, elles glissaient les unes après les autres comme les enseignes lorsqu'on est en voiture. Ou bien je ne regardais seulement que les pieds qui allaient dans tous les sens, et je tâchais de rattacher chaque pied à un corps, un corps à une idée, tous ces mouvements à des buts, et je me demandais où tous ces pas allaient, et pourquoi marchaient tous ces gens. Je regardais les équipages s'enfoncer sous les péristyles sonores et le lourd marchepied se déployer avec fracas ; la foule s'engouffrait à la porte des théâtres, je regardais les lumières briller dans le brouillard et, au-dessus, le ciel tout noir sans étoiles ; au coin d'une rue, un joueur d'orgue jouait, des enfants en guenilles chantaient, un marchant de fruits poussait sa charrette, éclairée d'un falot rouge ; les cafés étaient pleins de bruit, les glaces étincelaient sous le feu des becs de gaz, les couteaux retentissaient sur les tables de marbre ; à la porte les pauvres, en grelottant, se haussaient pour voir les riches manger, je me mêlais à eux et, d'un regard pareil, je contemplais les heureux de la vie ; je jalousais leur joies banales, car il y a des jours où l'on est si triste qu'on voudrait se faire plus triste encore, on s'enfonce à plaisir dans le désespoir comme dans une route facile, on a le cœur tout gonflé de larmes et l'on s'excite à pleurer. J'ai souvent souhaité d'être misérable et de porter des haillons, d'être tourmenté de la faim, de sentir le sang couler d'une blessure, d'avoir une haine et de chercher à me venger.

Quelle est donc cette douleur inquiète, dont on est fier comme du génie et que l'on cache comme un amour ? vous ne la dites à personne, vous la gardez pour vous seul, vous l'étreignez sur votre poitrine avec des baisers pleins de larmes. De quoi se plaindre pourtant ? et qui vous rend si sombre à l'âge où tout sourit ? n'avez-vous pas des amis tout dévoués ? une famille dont vous faites l'orgueil, des bottes vernies, un paletot ouaté, etc ? Rhapsodies poétiques, souvenirs de mauvaises lectures, hyperboles de rhétorique, que toutes ces grandes douleurs sans nom, mais le bonheur aussi ne serait-il pas une métaphore inventée un jour d'ennui ? J'en ai longtemps douté, aujourd'hui je n'en doute plus.

Je n'ai rien aimé et j'aurais voulu tant aimer ! il me faudra mourir sans avoir rien goûté de bon. À l'heure qu'il est, même la vie humaine m'offre encore mille aspects que j'ai à peine entrevus : jamais, seulement, au bord d'une source vive et sur un cheval haletant, je n'ai entendu le son du cor au fond des bois ; jamais non plus, par une nuit douce et respirant l'odeur des roses, je n'ai senti une main frémir dans la mienne et la saisir en silence. Ah ! je suis plus vide, plus creux, plus triste qu'un tonneau défoncé dont on a tout bu, et où les araignées jettent leurs toiles dans l'ombre.

Ce n'était point la douleur de René ni l'immensité céleste de ses ennuis, plus beaux et plus argentés que les rayons de la lune ; je n'étais point chaste comme Werther ni débauché comme Don Juan ; je n'étais, pour tout, ni assez pur, ni assez fort.

J'étais donc, ce que vous êtes tous, un certain homme, qui vit, qui dort, qui mange, qui boit, qui pleure, qui rit, bien renfermé en lui-même, et retrouvant en lui, partout où il se transporte, les mêmes ruines d'espérances sitôt abattues qu'élevées, la même poussière de choses broyées, les mêmes sentiers mille fois parcourus, les mêmes profondeurs inexplorées, épouvantables et ennuyeuses. N’êtes-vous pas las comme moi de vous réveiller tous les matins et de revoir le soleil ? las de vivre de la même vie et de souffrir la même douleur ? las de désirer et las d’être dégoûté ? las d’attendre et las d’avoir ?

À quoi bon écrire ceci ? pourquoi continuer, de la même voix dolente, le même récit funèbre ? Quand je l’ai commencé, je le savais beau, mais à mesure que j’avance, mes larmes me tombent sur le cœur et m’éteignent la voix.

Oh ! le pâle soleil d’hiver ! il est triste comme un souvenir heureux. Nous sommes entourés d’ombre, regardons notre foyer brûler ; les chardons étalés sont couverts de grandes lignes noires entrecroisées, qui semblent battre comme des veines animées d’une autre vie ; attendons la nuit venir.

Rappelons-nous nos beaux jours, les jours où nous étions gais, où nous étions plusieurs, où le soleil brillait, où les oiseaux cachés chantaient après la pluie, les jours où nous nous étions promenés dans le jardin ; le sable des allées était mouillé, les corolles des roses étaient tombées dans les plates-bandes, l’air embaumait. Pourquoi n’avons-nous pas assez senti notre bonheur quand il nous a passé par les mains ? il eût fallu, ces jours-là, ne penser qu’à le goûter et savourer longuement chaque minute, afin qu’elle s’écoulât plus lente ; il y même des jours qui ont passé comme d’autres, et dont je me ressouviens délicieusement. Une fois, par exemple, c’était l’hiver, il faisait très froid, nous sommes rentrés de promenade, et comme nous étions peu, on nous a laissés nous mettre à l’aise autour du poële ; nous nous sommes chauffés à l’aise, nous faisions rôtir nos morceaux de pain avec nos règles, le tuyau bourdonnait ; nous causions de mille choses : des pièces que nous avions vues, des femmes que nous aimions, de notre sortie du collège, de ce que nous ferions quand nous serions grands, *etc.* Une autre fois, j’ai passé tout l’après-midi couché sur le dos, dans un champ où il y avait des petites marguerites qui sortaient de l’herbe ; elles étaient, jaunes, rouges, elles disparaissaient dans la verdeur du pré, c’était un tapis de nuances infinies ; le ciel pur étaient couvert de petits nuages blancs qui ondulaient comme des vagues rondes ; j’ai regardé le soleil à travers mes mains appuyées sur ma figure, il dorait le bord de mes doigts et rendait ma chair rose, je fermais exprès les yeux pour voir sous mes paupières de grandes taches vertes avec des franges d’or. Et un soir, je ne sais plus quand, je m’étais endormi au pied d’un mulon ; quand je me suis réveillé, il faisait nuit, les étoiles brillaient, palpitaient, les meules de foin avançaient leur ombre derrière elles, la lune avait une belle figure d’argent.

Comme tout cela est bien loin ! est-ce que je vivais dans ce temps-là ? était-ce bien moi ? est-ce moi maintenant ? Chaque minute de ma vie se trouve tout à coup séparée de l’autre par un abîme, entre hier et aujourd’hui il y a pour moi une éternité qui m’épouvante, chaque jour il me semble que je n’étais pas si misérable la veille et, sans pouvoir dire ce que j’avais de plus, je sens bien que je m’appauvris et que l’heure qui arrive m’emporte quelque chose, étonné seulement d’avoir encore dans le cœur place pour la souffrance ; mais le cœur de l’homme est inépuisable pour la tristesse : un ou deux bonheurs le remplissent, toutes les misères de l’humanité peuvent s’y donner rendez-vous et vivre comme des hôtes.

Si vous m’aviez demandé ce qu’il me fallait, je n’aurais su que répondre, mes désirs n’avaient point d’objet, ma tristesse n’avait pas de cause immédiate ; ou plutôt, il y avait tant de buts et tant de causes que je n’aurais su en dire aucun. Toutes les passions entraient en moi et ne pouvaient en sortir, s’y trouvaient à l’étroit ; elles s’enflammaient les unes les autres, comme par des miroirs concentriques : modeste, j’étais plein d’orgueil ; vivant dans la solitude, je rêvais la gloire ; retiré du monde, je brûlais d’y paraître, d’y briller ; chaste, je m’abandonnais, dans mes rêves du jour et de la nuit, aux luxures les plus effrénées, aux voluptés les plus féroces. La vie que je refoulais en moi-même se contractait au cœur et le serrait à l’étouffer.

Quelquefois, n’en pouvant plus, dévoré de passions sans bornes, plein de la lave ardente qui coulait de mon âme, aimant d’un amour furieux des choses sans nom, regrettant des rêves magnifiques, tenté par toutes les voluptés de la pensée, aspirant à moi toutes les poésies, toutes les harmonies, et écrasé sous le poids de mon cœur et de mon orgueil, je tombais anéanti dans un abîme de douleurs, le sang me fouettait la figure, mes artères s’étourdissaient, ma poitrine semblait rompre, je ne voyais plus rien, je ne sentais plus rien, j’étais ivre, j’étais fou, je m’imaginais être grand, je m’imaginais contenir une incarnation suprême, dont la révélation eût émerveillé le monde, et ses déchirements, c’était la vie même du dieu que je portais dans mes entrailles. À ce dieu magnifique j’ai immolé toutes les heures de ma jeunesse ; j’avais fait de moi-même un temple pour contenir quelque chose de divin, le temple est resté vide, l’ortie a poussé entre les pierres, les piliers s’écroulent, voilà les hiboux qui y font leur nids. N’usant pas de l’existence, l’existence m’usait, mes rêves me fatiguaient encore plus que de grands travaux ; une création entière, immobile, irrévélée à elle-même, vivait sourdement sous ma vie ; j’étais un chaos dormant de mille précipices féconds qui ne savaient comment se manifester ni que faire d’eux-mêmes, ils cherchaient leurs formes et attendaient leur moule.

J’étais, dans la variété de mon être, comme une immense forêt de l’Inde, où la vie palpite dans chaque atome et apparaît, monstrueuse ou adorable, sous chaque rayon de soleil ; l’azur est rempli de parfums et de poisons, les tigres bondissent, les éléphants marchent fièrement comme des pagodes vivantes, les dieux, mystérieux et difformes, sont cachés dans le creux des cavernes parmi de grands monceaux d'or ; et au milieu, coule le large fleuve, avec des crocodiles béants qui font claquer leurs écailles dans le lotus du rivage, et ses îles de fleurs que le courant entraîne avec des troncs d'arbre et des cadavres verdis par la peste. J'aimais pourtant la vie, mais la vie expansive, radieuse, rayonnante ; je l'aimais dans le galop furieux des coursiers, dans le scintillement des étoiles, dans le mouvement des vagues qui courent vers le rivage ; je l'aimais dans le battement des belles poitrines nues, dans le tremblement des regards amoureux, dans la vibration des cordes du violon, dans le frémissement des chênes, dans le soleil couchant, qui dore les vitres et fait penser aux balcons de Babylone où les reines se tenaient accoudées en regardant l'Asie.

Et au milieu de tout je restais sans mouvement ; entre tant d'actions que je voyais, que j'excitais même, je restais inactif, aussi inerte qu'une statue entourée d'un essaim de mouches qui bourdonnent à ses oreilles et qui courent sur son marbre.

Oh ! comme j'aurais aimé si j'avais aimé, si j'avais pu concentrer sur un seul point toutes ces forces divergentes qui retombaient sur moi ! Quelquefois, à tout prix je voulais trouver une femme, je voulais l'aimer, elle contenait tout pour moi, j'attendais tout d'elle, c'était mon soleil de poésie, qui devait faire éclore toute fleur et resplendir toute beauté ; je me promettais un amour divin, je lui donnais d'avance une auréole à m'éblouir, et la première qui venait à ma rencontre, au hasard, dans la foule, je lui vouais mon âme, et je la regardais de manière à ce qu'elle me comprît bien, à ce qu'elle pût lire dans ce seul regard tout ce que j'étais, et m'aimer. Je plaçais ma destinée dans ce hasard, mais elle passait comme les autres, comme les précédentes, comme les suivantes, et ensuite je retombais, plus délabré qu'une voile déchirée trempée par l'orage.

Après de tels accès, la vie se rouvrait pour moi dans l'éternelle mélancolie de ses heures qui coulent et de ses jours qui reviennent, j'attendais le soir avec impatience, je comptais combien il m'en restait encore pour atteindre la fin du mois, je souhaitais d'être à la saison prochaine, j'y voyais sourire une existence plus douce. Quelquefois, pour secouer ce manteau de plomb qui me pesait sur les épaules, je voulais travailler, lire ; j'ouvrais un livre, et puis deux, et puis dix, et, sans avoir lu deux lignes d'un seul, je les rejetais avec dégoût et je me remettais à dormir dans le même ennui.

Que faire ici-bas ? qu'y rêver ? qu'y bâtir ? dites-le moi donc, vous que la vie amuse, qui marchez vers un but et vous tourmentez pour quelque chose !

Je ne trouvais rien qui fût digne de moi, je me trouvais également propre à rien. Travailler, tout sacrifier à une idée, à une ambition, ambition misérable et triviale, avoir une place, un nom ? après ? à quoi bon ? Et puis je n'aimais pas la gloire, la plus retentissante ne m'eût point satisfait parce qu'elle n'eût jamais atteint à l'unisson de mon cœur.

Je suis né avec le désir de mourir. Rien ne me paraissait plus sot que la vie et plus honteux que d'y tenir. Elevé sans religion, comme les hommes de mon âge, je n'avais pas le bonheur sec des athées ni l'insouciance ironique des sceptiques. Par caprice sans doute, si je suis entré quelquefois dans une église, c'était pour écouter l'orgue, pour admirer les statuettes de pierre dans leurs niches ; mais quand au dogme, je n'allais pas jusqu'à lui ; je me sentais bien le fils de Voltaire.

Je voyais les autres gens vivre, mais d'une autre vie que la mienne : les uns croyaient, les autres niaient, d'autres doutaient, d'autres enfin ne s'occupaient pas du tout de tout ça et faisaient leurs affaires, c'est-à-dire vendaient dans leurs boutiques, écrivaient leurs livres ou criaient dans leur chaire ; c'était là ce qu'on appelle l'humanité, surface mouvante des méchants, de lâches, d'idiots et de laids. Et moi j'étais dans la foule, comme une algue arrachée sur l'Océan, perdue au milieu des flots sans nombre qui roulaient, qui m'entouraient et qui bruissaient.

J'aurais voulu être empereur pour la puissance absolue, pour le nombre des esclaves, pour les armées éperdues d'enthousiasme ; j'aurais voulu être femme pour la beauté, pour pouvoir m'admirer moi-même, me mettre nue, laisser retomber ma chevelure sur mes talons et me mirer dans les ruisseaux. Je me perdais à plaisir dans des songeries sans limites, je m'imaginais assister à de belles fêtes antiques, être roi des Indes et aller à la chasse sur un éléphant blanc, voir des danses ioniennes, écouter le flot grec sur les marches d'un temple, entendre les brises des nuits dans les lauriers-roses de mes jardins, fuir avec Cléopâtre sur ma galère antique. Ah ! folies que tout cela ! malheur à la glaneuse qui laisse là sa besogne et lève la tête pour voir les berlines passer sur la grand route ! En se remettant à l'ouvrage, elle rêvera de cachemires et d'amours de princes, ne trouvera plus d'épis et rentrera sans avoir fait sa gerbe.

Il eût mieux valu faire comme tout le monde, ne prendre la vie ni trop au sérieux ni trop au grotesque, choisir un métier et l'exercer, saisir sa part du gâteau commun et le manger en disant qu'il est bon, que de suivre le triste chemin où j'ai marché tout seul ; je ne serais pas à écrire ceci ou c'eût été une autre histoire. À mesure que j'avance, elle se confond même pour moi, comme les perspectives que l'on voit de trop loin, car tout passe, même le souvenir de nos larmes les plus brûlantes, de nos rires les plus sonores ; bien vite l'oeil se sèche et la bouche reprend son pli ; je n'ai plus maintenant que la réminiscence d'un long ennui qui a duré plusieurs hivers, passés à bailler, à désirer ne plus vivre.

C'est peut-être pour tout cela que je me suis cru poète ; aucune des misères ne m’a manqué, hélas ! comme vous voyez. Oui, il m’a semblé autrefois que j’avais du génie, je marchais le front rempli de pensées magnifiques, le style coulait sous ma plume comme le sang dans mes veines ; au moindre froissement du beau, une mélodie pure montait en moi, ainsi que ces voix aériennes, sons formés par le vent, qui sortent des montagnes ; les passions humaines auraient vibré merveilleusement si je les avais touchées, j’avais dans la tête des drames tout faits, remplis de scènes furieuses et d’angoisses non révélées ; depuis l’enfant dans son berceau jusqu’au mort dans sa bière, l’humanité résonnait en moi avec tous ses échos ; parfois des idées gigantesques me traversaient tout à coup l’esprit, comme, l’été, ces grands éclairs muets qui illuminent une ville entière, avec tous les détails de ses édifices et les carrefours de ses rues. J’en étais ébranlé, ébloui ; mais quand je retrouvais chez d’autres les pensées et jusqu’aux formes mêmes que j’avais conçues, je tombais, sans transition, dans un découragement sans fond ; je m’étais cru leur égal et je n’étais plus que leur copiste ! Je passais alors de l’enivrement du génie au sentiment désolant de la médiocrité, avec toute la rage des rois détrônés et tous les supplices de la honte. Dans de certains jours, j’aurais juré être né pour la Muse, d’autres fois je me trouvais presque idiot ; et toujours passant ainsi de tant de grandeur à tant de bassesse, j’ai fini, comme les gens souvent riches et souvent pauvres dans leur vie, par être et rester misérable.

Dans ce temps-là, chaque matin en m’éveillant, il me semblait qu’il allait s’accomplir, ce jour-là, quelque grand événement ; j’avais le cœur gonflé d’espérance, comme si j’eusse attendu d’un pays lointain une cargaison de bonheur ; mais, la journée avançant, je perdais tout courage ; au crépuscule surtout, je voyais bien qu’il ne viendrait rien. Enfin la nuit arrivait et je me couchais.

De lamentables harmonies s’établissaient entre la nature physique et moi. Comme mon cœur se serrait quand le vent sifflait dans les serrures, quand les réverbères jetaient leur lueur sur la neige, quand j’entendais les chiens aboyer après la lune !

Je ne voyais rien à quoi me raccrocher, ni le monde, ni la solitude, ni la poésie, ni la science, ni l’impiété, ni la religion ; j’errais en tout cela comme les âmes dont l’enfer ne veut pas et que le paradis repousse. Alors je me croisais les bras, me regardant comme un homme mort, je n’étais plus qu’une momie embaumée dans ma douleur ; la fatalité, qui m’avait courbé dès ma jeunesse, s’étendait pour moi sur le monde entier, je la regardais se manifester dans toutes les actions des hommes aussi universellement que le soleil sur la surface de la terre, elle me devint une atroce divinité, que j’adorais comme les Indiens adorent le colosse ambulant qui leur passe sur le ventre ; je me complaisais dans mon chagrin, je ne faisais plus d’effort pour en sortir, je le savourais même, avec la joie désespérée du malade qui gratte sa plaie et se met à rire quand il a du sang aux ongles.

Il me prit contre la vie, contre les hommes, contre tout, une rage sans nom. J’avais dans le cœur des trésors de tendresse, et je devins plus féroce que les tigres ; j’aurais voulu anéantir la création et m’endormir avec elle dans l’infini du néant ; que ne me réveillais-je à la lueur des villes incendiées ! J’aurais voulu entendre le frémissement des ossements que la flamme fait pétiller, traverser des fleuves chargés de cadavres, galoper sur des peuples courbés et les écraser des quatre fers de mon cheval, être Genghis Khan, Tamerlan, Néron, effrayer le monde au froncement de mes sourcils.

Autant j’avais eu d’exaltations et de rayonnements, autant je me renfermai et roulai sur moi-même. Depuis longtemps déjà j’ai séché mon cœur, rien de nouveau n’y entre plus, il est vide comme les tombeaux où les morts sont pourris. J’avais pris le soleil en haine, j’étais excédé du bruit des fleuves, de la vue des bois, rien ne me semblait sot comme la campagne ; tout s’assombrit et se rapetissa, je vécus dans un crépuscule perpétuel.

Quelquefois je me demandais si je ne me trompais pas ; j’alignais ma jeunesse, mon avenir, mais quelle pitoyable jeunesse, quel avenir vide !

Quand je voulais sortir du spectacle de ma misère et regarder le monde, ce que j’en pouvais voir, c’étaient des hurlements, des cris, des larmes, des convulsions, la même comédie revenant perpétuellement avec les mêmes acteurs ; et il y a des gens, me disais-je, qui étudient tout cela et se remettent à la tâche tous les matins ! Il n’y avait plus qu’un grand amour qui eût pu me tirer de là, mais je regardais cela comme quelque chose qui n’est pas de ce monde, et je regrettai amèrement tout le bonheur que j’avais rêvé.

Alors, la mort m’apparut belle. Je l’ai toujours aimée ; enfant, je la désirais seulement pour la connaître, pour savoir qu’est-ce qu’il y a dans le tombeau et quels songes a ce sommeil ; je me souviens avoir souvent gratté le vert-de-gris de vieux sous pour m’empoisonner, essayé d’avaler des épingles, m’être approché de la lucarne d’un grenier pour me jeter dans la rue… Quand je pense que presque tous les enfants font de même, qu’ils cherchent à se suicider dans leurs jeux, ne dois-je pas conclure que l’homme, quoi qu’il en dise, aime la mort d’un amour dévorant ? Il lui donne tout ce qu’il crée, il en sort et il y retourne, il ne fait qu’y songer tant qu’il vit, il en a le germe dans le corps, le désir dans le cœur.

Il est si doux de se figurer qu’on n’est plus ! il fait calme dans tous les cimetières ! là, tout étendu et roulé dans le linceul et les bras en croix sur la poitrine, les siècles passent sans plus vous éveiller que le vent qui passe sur l’herbe. Que de fois j’ai contemplé, dans les chapelles des cathédrales, ces longues statues de pierre couchées sur les tombeaux ! leur calme est si profond que la vie ici-bas n’offre rien de pareil ; ils ont, sur leur lèvre froide, comme un sourire monté du fond du tombeau, on dirait qu’ils dorment, qu’ils savourent la mort. N’avoir plus besoin de pleurer, ne plus sentir de ces défaillances où il semble que tout se rompt, comme des échafaudages pourris, c’est là le bonheur au-dessus de tous les bonheurs, la joie sans lendemain, le rêve sans éveil. Et puis on va peut-être dans un monde plus beau, par delà les étoiles, où l’on vit de la vie de la lumière et des parfums ; l’on est peut-être quelque chose de l’odeur des roses et de la fraîcheur des prés ! Oh, non, non, j’aime mieux croire que l’on est bien mort tout à fait, que rien ne sort du cercueil ; et s’il faut encore sentir quelque chose, que ce soit son propre néant, que la mort se repaisse d’elle-même et s’admire ; assez de vie juste pour sentir que l’on n’est plus.

Et je montais au haut des tours, je me penchais sur l’abîme, j’attendais le vertige venir, j’avais une inconcevable envie de m’élancer, de voler dans l’air, de me dissiper avec les vents ; je regardais la pointe des poignards, la gueule des pistolets, je les appuyais sur mon front, je m’habituais au contact de leur froid et de leur pointe ; d’autres fois, je regardais les rouliers tournant à l’angle des rues et l’énorme largeur de leurs roues broyer la poussière sur le pavé ; je pensais que ma tête serait ainsi bien écrasée, pendant que les chevaux iraient au pas. Mais je n’aurais pas voulu être enterré, la bière m’épouvante ; j’aimerais plutôt être déposé sur un lit de feuilles sèches, au fond des bois, et que mon corps s’en allât petit à petit au bec des oiseaux et aux pluies d’orage.

Un jour, à Paris, je me suis arrêté longtemps sur le Pont-Neuf ; c’était l’hiver, la Seine charriait, de gros glaçons ronds descendaient lentement le courant et se fracassaient sous les arches, le fleuve était verdâtre ; j’ai songé à tous ceux qui étaient venus là pour en finir. Combien de gens avaient passé à la place où je me tenais alors, courant la tête levée à leurs amours ou à leurs affaires, et qui y étaient revenus, un jour, marchant à petits pas, palpitant à l’approche de mourir ! Ils se sont approché du parapet, ils ont monté dessus, ils ont sauté. Oh ! que de misères ont fini là, que de bonheurs y ont commencé ! Quel tombeau froid et humide ! comme il s’élargit pour nous ! comme il y en a dedans ! ils sont tous là, au fond, roulant lentement avec leurs faces crispées et leurs membres bleus, chacun de ces flots glacés les emporte dans leur sommeil et les traîne doucement à la mer.

Quelquefois les vieillards me regardaient avec envie, ils me disaient que j’étais heureux d’être jeune, que c’était là le bel âge, leurs yeux caves admiraient mon front blanc, ils se rappelaient leurs amours et me les contaient ; mais je me suis souvent demandé si, dans leur temps, la vie était plus belle, et comme je ne voyais rien en moi que l'on pût envier, j'étais jaloux de leurs regrets, parce qu'ils cachaient des bonheurs que je n'avais pas eus. Et puis c'étaient des faiblesses d'hommes en enfance à faire pitié ! je riais doucement et pour presque rien comme les convalescents. Quelquefois je me sentais pris de tendresse pour mon chien, et je l'embrassais avec ardeur ; ou bien j'allais dans une armoire revoir quelque vieil habit de collège, et je songeais à la journée où je l'avais étrenné, aux lieux où il avait été avec moi, et je me perdais en souvenirs sur tous mes jours vécus. Car les souvenirs sont doux, tristes ou gais, n'importe ! et les plus tristes sont encore les plus délectables pour nous, ne résument-ils pas l'infini ? l'on épuise quelquefois des siècles à songer à une certaine heure qui ne reviendra plus, qui a passé, qui est au néant pour toujours, et que l'on rachèterait par tout l'avenir.

Mais ces souvenirs-là sont des flambeaux clairsemés dans une grande salle obscure, ils brillent au milieu des ténèbres ; il n'y a que dans leur rayonnement que l'on y voit, ce qui est plus près d'eux resplendit, tandis que tout le reste est plus noir, plus couvert d'ombres et d'ennui.

Avant d'aller plus loin, il faut que je vous raconte ceci :

Je ne me rappelle plus bien l'année, c'était pendant une vacance, je me suis réveillé de bonne humeur et j'ai regardé par la fenêtre. Le jour venait, la lune toute blanche remontait dans le ciel ; entre les gorges des collines, des vapeurs grises et rosées fumaient doucement et se perdaient dans l'air ; les poules de la basse-cour chantaient. J'ai entendu derrière la maison, dans le chemin qui conduit aux champs, une charrette passer, dont les roues claquaient dans les ornières, les faneurs allaient à l'ouvrage ; il y avait de la rosée sur la haie, le soleil brillait dessus, on sentait l'eau et l'herbe.

Je suis sorti et je m'en suis allé à X… ; j'avais trois lieues à faire, je me suis mis en route, seul, sans bâton, sans chien. J'ai d'abord marché dans les sentiers qui serpentent entre les blés, j'ai passé sous des pommiers, au bord des haies ; je ne songeais plus à rien, j'écoutais le bruit de mes pas, la cadence de mes mouvements me berçait la pensée. J'étais libre, silencieux et calme, il faisait chaud ; de temps à autre je m'arrêtais, mes tempes battaient, le cri-cri chantait dans les chaumes, et je me remettais à marcher. J'ai passé dans un hameau où il n'y avait personne, les cours étaient silencieuses, c'était, je crois, un dimanche ; les vaches, assises dans l'herbe, à l'ombre des arbres, ruminaient tranquillement, remuant leurs oreilles pour chasser les moucherons. Je me souviens que j'ai marché dans un chemin où un ruisseau coulait sur les cailloux, des lézards verts et des insectes aux ailes d'or montaient lentement le long des rebords de la route, qui était enfoncée et toute couverte par le feuillage.

Puis je me suis trouvé sur un plateau, dans un champ fauché ; j'avais la mer devant moi, elle était toute bleue, le soleil répandait dessus une profusion de perles lumineuses, des sillons de feu s'étendaient sur les flots ; entre le ciel azuré et la mer plus foncée, l'horizon rayonnait, flamboyait ; la voûte commençait sur ma tête et s'abaissait derrière les flots, qui remontaient vers elle, faisant comme le cercle d'un infini invisible. Je me suis couché dans un sillon et j'ai regardé le ciel, perdu dans la contemplation de sa beauté.

Le champ où j'étais était un champ de blé, j'entendais les cailles, qui voltigeaient autour de moi et venaient s'abattre sur des mottes de terre ; la mer était douce, et murmurait plutôt comme un soupir que comme une voix ; le soleil lui-même semblait avoir son bruit, il inondait tout, ses rayons me brûlaient les membres, la terre me renvoyait sa chaleur, j'étais noyé dans sa lumière, je fermais les yeux et je la voyais encore. L'odeur des vagues montait jusqu'à moi, avec la senteur du varech et des plantes marines ; quelquefois elles paraissaient s'arrêter ou venaient mourir sans bruit sur le rivage festonné d'écume, comme une lèvre dont le baiser ne sonne point. Alors, dans le silence de deux vagues, pendant que l'Océan gonflé se taisait, j'écoutais le chant des cailles, et après, celui des oiseaux.

Je suis descendu en courant au bord de la mer, à travers les terrains éboulés que je sautais d'un pied sûr, je levais la tête avec orgueil, je respirais fièrement la brise fraîche, qui séchait mes cheveux en sueur ; l'esprit de Dieu me remplissait, je me sentais le cœur grand, j'adorais quelque chose d'un étrange mouvement, j'aurais voulu m'absorber dans la lumière du soleil et me perdre dans cette immensité d'azur, avec l'odeur qui s'élevait de la surface des flots ; et je fus pris alors d'une joie insensée, et je me mis à marcher comme si tout le bonheur des cieux m'était entré dans l'âme. Comme la falaise s'avançait en cet endroit là, toute la côte disparut et je ne vis plus rien que la mer : les lames montaient sur le galet jusqu'à mes pieds, elles écumaient sur les rochers à fleur d'eau, les battaient en cadence, les enlaçaient comme des bras liquides et des nappes limpides, en retombant illuminées d'une couleur bleue ; le vent soulevait les mousses autour de moi et ridait les flaques d'eau restées dans le creux des pierres, les varechs pleuraient et se berçaient, encore agités du mouvement de la vague qui les avait quittés ; de temps à autre une mouette passait avec de grands battements d'ailes, et montait jusqu'au haut de la falaise. À mesure que la mer se retirait, et que son bruit s'éloignait ainsi qu'un refrain qui expire, le rivage s'avançait vers moi, laissant à découvert sur le sable les sillons que la vague avait tracés. Et je compris alors tout le bonheur de la création et toute la joie que Dieu y a placée pour l'homme ; la nature m'apparut belle comme une harmonie complète, que l'extase seule doit entendre ; quelque chose de tendre comme un amour et de pur comme la prière s'éleva pour moi du fond de l'horizon, s'abattit de la cime des rocs déchirés, du haut des cieux ; il se forma, du bruit de l’Océan, de la lumière du jour, quelque chose d’exquis que je m’appropriai comme d’un domaine céleste, je m’y sentis vivre heureux et grand, comme l’aigle qui regarde le soleil et monte dans ses rayons.

Alors tout me sembla beau sur la terre, je n’y vis plus de disparate ni de mauvais ; j’aimai tout, jusqu’aux pierres qui me fatiguaient les pieds, jusqu’aux rochers durs où j’appuyais les mains, jusqu’à cette nature insensible que je supposais m’entendre et m’aimer, et je songeai alors combien il était doux de chanter, le soir, à genoux, des cantiques au pied d’une madone qui brille aux candélabres, et d’aimer la Vierge Marie, qui apparaît aux marins, dans un coin du ciel, tenant le doux Enfant Jésus dans ses bras.

Puis ce fut tout ; bien vite je me rappelai que je vivais, je revins à moi, je me mis en marche, sentant que la malédiction me reprenait, que je rentrais dans l’humanité ; la vie m’était revenue, comme aux membres gelés, par le sentiment de la souffrance, et de même que j’avais un inconcevable bonheur, je tombai dans un découragement sans nom, et j’allai à X…

Je revins le soir chez nous, je repassai par les mêmes chemins, je revis sur le sable la trace de mes pieds et dans l’herbe la place où je m’étais couché, il me sembla que j’avais rêvé. Il y a des jours où l’on a vécu deux existences, la seconde n’est déjà plus que le souvenir de la première, et je m’arrêtais souvent dans mon chemin devant un buisson, devant un arbre, au coin d’une route, comme si là, le matin, il s’était passé quelque événement de ma vie.

Quand j’arrivais à la maison, il faisait presque nuit, on avait fermé les portes, et les chiens se mirent à aboyer.

Les idées de volupté et d’amour qui m’avaient assailli à 15 ans vinrent me retrouver à 18. Si vous avez compris quelque chose à ce qui précède, vous devez vous rappeler qu’à cet âge-là j’étais encore vierge et n’avais point aimé : pour ce qui était de la beauté des passions et de leurs bruits sonores, les poètes me fournissaient des thèmes à ma rêverie ; quant au plaisir des sens, à ces joies du corps que les adolescents convoitent, j’en entretenais dans mon cœur le désir incessant, par toutes les excitations volontaires de l’esprit ; de même que les amoureux envient de venir au bout de leur amour en s’y livrant sans cesse, et de s’en débarrasser à force d’y songer, il me semblait que ma pensée seule finirait par tarir ce sujet-là, d’elle-même, et par vider la tentation à force d’y boire. Mais, revenant toujours au point d’où j’étais parti, je tournais dans un cercle infranchissable, je m’y heurtais en vain la tête, désireux d’être plus au large ; la nuit, sans doute, je rêvais des plus belles choses qu’on rêve, car, le matin, j’avais le cœur plein de sourires et de serrements délicieux, le réveil me chagrinait et j’attendais avec impatience le retour du sommeil pour qu’il me donnât de nouveau ces frémissements auxquels je pensais toute la journée, qu'il n'eût tenu qu'à moi d'avoir à l'instant, et dont j'éprouvais comme une épouvante religieuse.

C'est alors que je sentis bien le démon de la chair vivre dans tous les muscles de mon corps, courir dans tout mon sang ; je pris en pitié l'époque ingénue où je tremblais sous le regard des femmes, où je me pâmais devant des tableaux ou des statues ; je voulais vivre, jouir, aimer, je sentais vaguement ma saison chaude arriver, de même qu'aux premiers jours de soleil une ardeur d'été vous est apportée par les vents tièdes, quoiqu'il n'y ait encore ni herbes, ni feuilles, ni roses. Comment faire ? qui aimer ? qui vous aimera ? quelle sera la grande dame qui voudra de vous ? la beauté surhumaine qui vous tendra les bras ? Qui dira toutes les promenades tristes que l'on fait seul au bord des ruisseaux, tous les soupirs des cœurs gonflés partis vers les étoiles, pendant les chaudes nuits où la poitrine étouffe !

Rêver l'amour, c'est tout rêver, c'est l'infini dans le bonheur, c'est le mystère dans la joie. Avec quelle ardeur le regard vous dévore, avec quelle intensité il se darde sur vos têtes, ô belles femmes triomphantes ! La grâce et la corruption respirent dans chacun de vos mouvements, les plis de vos robes ont des bruits qui nous remuent jusqu'au fond de nous, et il émane de la surface de tout votre corps quelque chose qui nous tue et qui nous enchante.

Il y eut dès lors pour moi un mot qui sembla beau entre les mots humains : adultère, une douceur exquise plane vaguement sur lui, une magie singulière l'embaume ; toutes les histoires qu'on raconte, tous les livres qu'on lit, tous les gestes qu'on fait nous le disent et le commentent éternellement pour le cœur du jeune homme, il s'en abreuve à plaisir, il y trouve une poésie suprême, mêlée de malédiction et de volupté.

C'était surtout aux approches du printemps, quand les lilas commencent à fleurir et les oiseaux à chanter sous les premières feuilles, que je me sentais pris du besoin d'aimer, de se fondre tout entier dans l'amour, de s'absorber dans quelque doux et grand sentiment, et comme de se recréer même dans la lumière et les parfums. Chaque année encore, pendant quelques heures, je me retrouve ainsi dans une virginité qui me pousse avec les bourgeons ; mais les joies ne refleurissent pas avec les roses, et il n'y a pas maintenant plus de verdure dans mon cœur que sur la grande route, où le hâle fatigue les yeux, où la poussière s'élève en tourbillons.

Cependant, prêt à vous raconter ce qui va suivre, au moment de descendre dans ce souvenir, je tremble et j'hésite ; c'est comme si j'allais revoir une maîtresse d'autrefois : le cœur oppressé, on s'arrête à chaque marche de son escalier, on craint de la retrouver, et on a peur qu'elle soit absente. Il en est de même de certaines idées avec lesquelles on a trop vécu ; on voudrait s’en débarrasser pour toujours, et pourtant elles coulent dans vous comme la vie même, le cœur y respire dans son atmosphère naturelle.

Je vous ai dit que j’aimais le soleil ; dans les jours où il brille, mon âme naguère avait quelque chose de la sérénité des horizons rayonnants et de la hauteur du ciel. C’était donc l’été… ah ! la plume ne devrait pas écrire tout cela… il faisait chaud, je sortis, personne chez moi ne s’aperçut que je sortais ; il y avait peu de monde dans les rues, le pavé était sec, de temps à autre des bouffées chaudes s’exhalaient de dessous terre et vous montaient à la tête, les murs des maisons envoyaient des réflexions embrasées, l’ombre elle-même semblait plus brûlante que la lumière. Au coin des rues, près des tas d’ordures, des essaims de mouche bourdonnaient dans les rayons du soleil, en tournoyant comme une grande roue d’or ; l’angle des toits se détachait vivement en ligne droite sur le bleu du ciel, les pierres étaient noires, il n’y avait pas d’oiseaux autour des clochers.

Je marchais, cherchant du repos, désirant une brise, quelque chose qui pût m’enlever de dessus terre, m’emporter dans un tourbillon. Je sortis des faubourgs, je me trouvais derrière des jardins, dans des chemins moitié rue moitié sentier ; des jours vifs sortaient çà et là à travers les feuilles des arbres, dans les masses d’ombre les brins d’herbe se tenaient droits, la pointe des cailloux envoyait des rayons, la poussière craquait sous les pieds, toute la nature mordait et enfin le soleil se cacha ; il parut un gros nuage, comme si orage allait venir ; la tourmente, que j’avais sentie jusque-là, changea de nature, je n’étais plus si irrité, mais enlacé ; ce n’était plus une déchirure, mais un étouffement.

Je me couchai à terre, sur le ventre, à l’endroit où il me semblait qu’il devait y avoir le plus d’ombre, de silence et de nuit, à l’endroit qui devait me cacher le mieux, et, haletant, je m’y abîmais le cœur dans un désir effréné. Les nuées étaient chargées de mollesse, elles pesaient sur moi et m’écrasaient comme une poitrine sur une autre poitrine ; je sentais un besoin de volupté, plus chargé d’odeurs que le parfum des clématites et plus cuisant que le soleil sur le mur des jardins. Oh ! que ne pouvais-je presser quelque chose dans mes bras, l’y étouffer sous ma chaleur, ou bien me dédoubler moi-même, aimer cet autre être et nous fondre ensemble. Ce n’était plus le désir d’un vague idéal ni la convoitise d’un beau rêve évanoui, mais, comme aux fleuves sans lit, ma passion débordait de tous côtés en ravins furieux, elle m’inondait le cœur et le faisait retentir partout de plus de tumultes et de vertiges que les torrents dans les montagnes.

J’allai au bord de la rivière, j’ai toujours aimé l’eau et le doux mouvement des vagues qui se poussent ; elle était paisible, les nénuphars blancs tremblaient au bruit du courant, les flots se déroulaient lentement, se déployant les uns sur les autres ; au milieu, les îles laissaient retomber dans l'eau leurs touffes de verdure, la rive semblait sourire, on n'entendait rien que la voix des ondes. En cet endroit-là il y avait quelques grands arbres, la fraîcheur du voisinage de l'eau et celle de l'ombre me délecta, je me sentis sourire. De même que la Muse qui est en nous, quand elle écoute l'harmonie, ouvre les narines et aspire les beaux sons, je ne sais quoi se dilata en moi-même pour aspirer une joie universelle ; regardant les nuages qui roulaient au ciel, la pelouse de la rive veloutée et jaunie par les rayons du soleil, écoutant le bruit de l'eau et le frémissement de la cime des arbres, qui remuait quoiqu'il n'y eût pas de vent, seul, agité et calme à la fois, je me sentis défaillir de volupté sous le poids de cette nature aimante, et j'appelai l'amour ! mes lèvres tremblaient, s'avançaient comme si j'eusse senti l'haleine d'une autre bouche, mes mains cherchaient quelque chose à palper, mes regards tâchaient de découvrir, dans le pli de chaque vague, dans le contour des nuages enflés, une forme quelconque, une jouissance, une révélation ; le désir sortait de tous mes pores, mon cœur était tendre et rempli d'une harmonie contenue, et je remuais les cheveux autour de ma tête, je m'en caressais le visage, j'avais du plaisir à en respirer l'odeur, je m'étalais sur la mousse, au pied des arbres, je souhaitais des langueurs plus grandes ; j'aurais voulu être brisé sous les baisers, être la fleur que le vent secoue, la rive que le fleuve humecte, la terre que le soleil féconde.

L'herbe était douce à marcher, je marchai ; chaque pas me procurait un plaisir nouveau, et je jouissais par la plante des pieds de la douceur du gazon. Les prairies, au loin, étaient couvertes d'animaux, de chevaux, de poulains ; l'horizon retentissait du bruit des hennissements et de galops, les terrains s'abaissaient et s'élevaient doucement en de larges ondulations qui dérivaient des collines, le fleuve serpentait, disparaissait derrière les îles, apparaissait ensuite entre les herbes et les roseaux. Tout cela était beau, semblait heureux, suivait sa loi, son cours ; moi seul j'étais malade et j'agonisais, plein de désir.

Tout à coup je me mis à fuir, je rentrai dans la ville, je traversai les ponts ; j'allais dans les rues, sur les places ; les femmes passaient près de moi, il y en avait beaucoup, elles marchaient vite, elles étaient toutes merveilleusement belles ; jamais je n'avais tant regardé en face leurs yeux qui brillent, ni leur démarche légère comme celle des chèvres ; les duchesses, penchées sur les portières blasonnées, semblaient me sourire, m'inviter à des amours sur la soie ; du haut de leur balcons, les dames en écharpe s'avançaient pour me voir et me regardaient en disant : aimenous ! aimenous ! Toutes m'aimaient dans leur pose, dans leurs yeux, dans leur immobilité même, je le voyais bien. Et puis la femme était partout, je la coudoyais, je l'effleurais, je la respirais, l'air était plein de son odeur ; je voyais son cou en sueur entre le châle qui les entourait, et les plumes du chapeau ondulant à son pas ; son talon relevait sa robe en marchant devant moi. Quand je passais près d’elle, sa main gantée remuait. Ni celle-ci, ni celle-là, pas plus l’une que l’autre, mais toutes, mais chacune, dans la variété infinie de leurs formes et du désir qui y correspondait, elles avaient beau être vêtues, je les décorais sur-le-champ d’une nudité magnifique, que je m’étalais sous les yeux, et, bien vite, en passant aussi près d’elles, j’emportais le plus que je pouvais d’idées voluptueuses, d’odeurs qui font tout aimer, de frôlements qui irritent, de formes qui attirent.

Je savais bien où j’allais, c’était à une maison, dans une rue où souvent j’avais passé pour sentir mon cœur battre ; elle avait des jalousies vertes, on montait trois marches, oh ! je savais cela par cœur, je l’avais regardée bien souvent, m’étant détourné de ma route rien que pour voir les fenêtres fermées. Enfin, après une course qui dura un siècle, j’entrai dans cette rue, je crus suffoquer ; personne ne passait, je m’avançai, je m’avançai ; je sens encore le contact de la porte que je poussai de mon épaule, elle céda ; j’avais eu peur qu’elle ne fût scellée dans la muraille, mais non, elle tourna sur un gond, doucement, sans faire de bruit.

Je montai un escalier, l’escalier était noir, les marches usées, elles s’agitaient sous mes pieds ; je montais toujours, on n’y voyait pas, j’étais étourdi, personne ne me parlait, je ne respirais plus. Enfin j’entrai dans une chambre, elle me parut grande, cela tenait à l’obscurité qu’il y faisait ; les fenêtres étaient ouvertes, mais de grands rideaux jaunes, tombant jusqu’à terre, arrêtaient le jour, l’appartement était coloré d’un reflet d’or blafard ; au fond et à côté de la fenêtre de droite, une femme était assise. Il fallait qu’elle ne m’eût pas entendu, car elle ne se détourna pas quand j’entrai ; je restai debout sans avancer, occupé à la regarder.

Elle avait une robe blanche, à manches courtes, elle se tenait le coude appuyé sur le rebord de la fenêtre, une main près de la bouche, et semblait regarder par terre quelque chose de vague et d’indécis ; ses cheveux noirs, lissés et nattés sur les tempes, reluisaient comme l’aile d’un corbeau, sa tête était un peu penchée, quelques petits cheveux de derrière s’échappaient des autres et frisottaient sur son cou, son grand peigne d’or recourbé était couronné de grains de corail rouge.

Elle jeta un cri quand elle m’aperçut et se leva par un bond. Je me sentis d’abord frappé du regard brillant de ses deux grands yeux ; quand je pus relever mon front, affaissé sous le poids de ce regard, je vis une figure d’une adorable beauté : une même ligne droite partait du sommet de sa tête dans la raie de ses cheveux, passait entre ses grands sourcils arqués, sur son nez aquilin, aux narines palpitantes et relevées comme celles des camées antiques, fendait par le milieu sa lèvre chaude, ombragée d’un duvet bleu, et puis là, le cou, le cou gras, blanc, rond ; à travers son vêtement mince, je voyais la forme de ses seins aller et venir au mouvement de sa respiration, elle se tenait ainsi debout, en face de moi, entourée de la lumière du soleil qui passait à travers le rideau jaune et faisait ressortir davantage ce vêtement blanc et cette tête brune.

À la fin elle se mit à sourire, presque de pitié et de douceur, et je m'approchai. Je ne sais ce qu'elle s'était mis aux cheveux, mais elle embaumait, et je me sentis le cœur plus mou et plus faible qu'une pêche qui se fond sous la langue. Elle me dit :

— Qu'avez-vous donc ? venez !

Et elle alla s'asseoir sur un long canapé recouvert de toile grise, adossé à la muraille ; je m'assis près d'elle, elle me prit la main, la sienne était chaude, nous restâmes longtemps nous regardant sans rien dire.

Jamais je n'avais vu une femme de si près, toute sa beauté m'entourait, son bras touchait le mien, les plis de sa robe retombaient sur mes jambes, la chaleur de sa hanche m'embrasait, je sentais par ce contact les ondulations de son corps, je contemplais la rondeur de ses épaules et les veines bleues de ses tempes. Elle me dit :

— Eh bien ?

— Eh bien, repris-je d'un air gai, voulant secouer cette fascination qui m'endormait.

Mais je m'arrêtai là, j'étais tout entier à la parcourir des yeux. Sans rien dire, elle me passa un bras autour du corps et m'attira sur elle, dans une muette étreinte. Alors je l'entourai de mes deux bras et je collai ma bouche sur son épaule, j'y bus avec délices mon premier baiser d'amour, j'y savourais le long désir de ma jeunesse et la volupté trouvée de tous mes rêves, et puis je me renversais le cou en arrière, pour mieux voir sa figure ; ses yeux brillaient, m'enflammaient, son regard m'enveloppait plus que ses bras, j'étais perdu dans son oeil, et nos doigts se mêlèrent ensemble ; les siens étaient longs, délicats, ils se tournaient dans ma main avec des mouvements vifs et subtils, j'aurais pu les broyer au moindre effort, je les serrais exprès pour les sentir davantage.

Je ne me souviens plus maintenant de ce qu'elle me dit ni de ce que je lui répondis, je suis resté ainsi longtemps, perdu, suspendu, balancé dans ce battement de mon cœur ; chaque minute augmentait mon ivresse, à chaque moment quelque chose de plus m'entrait dans l'âme, tout mon corps frissonnait d'impatience, de désir, de joie ; j'étais grave, pourtant, plutôt sombre que gai, sérieux, absorbé comme dans quelque chose de divin et de suprême. Avec sa main elle me serrait la tête sur son cœur, mais légèrement, comme si elle eût eu peur de me l'écraser sur elle.

Elle ôta sa manche par un mouvement d'épaules, sa robe se décrocha ; elle n'avait pas de corset, sa chemise baillait. C'était une de ces gorges splendides où l’on voudrait mourir étouffé dans l’amour. Assise sur mes genoux, elle avait une pose naïve d’enfant qui rêve, son beau profil se découpait en lignes pures ; un pli d’une courbe adorable, sous l’aisselle, faisait comme le sourire de son épaule ; son dos blanc se courbait un peu, d’une manière fatiguée, et sa robe affaissée retombait par le bas en larges plis sur le plancher ; elle levait les yeux au ciel et chantonnait dans ses dents un refrain triste et langoureux.

Je touchai à son peigne, je l’ôtai, ses cheveux se déroulèrent comme une onde, et les longues mèches noires tressaillirent en tombant sur ses hanches. Je passai d’abord ma main dessus, et dedans, et dessous ; j’y plongeais le bras, je m’y baignais le visage, j’étais navré. Quelquefois, je prenais plaisir à les séparer en deux par derrière, et à les ramener par devant de manière à lui cacher les seins ; d’autres fois je les réunissais tous en réseau et je les tirais, pour voir sa tête renversée en arrière et son cou tendre en avant, elle se laissait faire comme une morte.

Tout à coup elle se dégagea de moi, dépassa ses pieds de dedans sa robe, et sauta sur le lit avec la prestesse d’une chatte, le matelas s’enfonça sous ses pieds, le lit craqua, elle rejeta brusquement en arrière les rideaux et se coucha, elle me tendit les bras, elle me prit. Oh ! les draps même semblaient tout échauffés encore des caresses qui avaient passé là.

Sa main douce et humide me parcourait le corps, elle me donnait des baisers sur la figure, sur la bouche, sur les yeux, chacune de ces caresses précipitées me faisait pâmer, elle s’étendait sur le dos et soupirait ; tantôt elle fermait les yeux à demi et me regardait avec une ironie voluptueuse, puis, s’appuyant sur le coude, se tournant sur le ventre, relevant ses talons en l’air, elle était pleine de mignardises charmantes, de mouvements raffinés et ingénus ; enfin, se livrant à moi avec abandon, elle leva les yeux au ciel et poussa un grand soupir qui lui souleva tout le corps… Sa peau chaude, frémissante, s’étendait sous moi et frissonnait ; des pieds à la tête je me sentais tout recouvert de volupté ; ma bouche collée à la sienne, nos doigts mêlés ensemble, bercés dans le même frisson, enlacés dans la même étreinte, respirant l’odeur de sa chevelure et le souffle de ses lèvres, je me sentis délicieusement mourir. Quelque temps encore je restai, béant, à savourer le battement de mon cœur et le dernier tressaillement de mes nerfs agités, puis il me sembla que tout s’éteignait et disparaissait.

Mais elle, elle ne disait rien non plus ; immobile comme une statue de chair, ses cheveux noirs et abondants entouraient sa tête pâle, et ses bras dénoués reposaient étendus avec mollesse ; de temps à autre un mouvement compulsif lui secouait les genoux et les hanches ; sur sa poitrine, la place de mes baisers était rouge encore, un son rauque et lamentable sortait de sa gorge, comme lorsqu’on s’endort après avoir longtemps pleuré et sangloté. Tout à coup je l’entendis qui disait ceci : “Dans l’oubli de tes sens, si tu devenais mère”, et puis je ne me souviens plus de ce qui suivit, elle croisa les jambes les unes sur les autres et se berça de côté et d’autre, comme si elle eût été dans un hamac.

Elle ma passa sa main dans les cheveux, en se jouant, comme avec un enfant, et me demanda si j’avais eu une maîtresse ; je lui répondis que oui, et comme elle continuait, j’ajoutai qu’elle était belle et mariée. Elle me fit encore d’autres questions sur mon nom, sur ma vie, sur ma famille.

— Et toi, lui dis-je, as tu aimé ?

— Aimer ! non !

Et elle fit un éclat de rire forcé qui me décontenança.

Elle me demanda encore si la maîtresse que j’avais était belle, et après un silence, elle reprit :

— Oh ! comme elle doit t’aimer ! Dis-moi ton nom, hein ! ton nom.

À mon tour je voulus savoir le sien.

— Marie, répondit-elle, mais j’en avais un autre, ce n’est pas comme cela qu’on m’appelait chez nous.

Et puis, je ne sais plus, tout cela est parti c’est déjà si vieux ! Cependant, il y a certaines choses que je revois comme si c’était hier, sa chambre par exemple ; je revois le tapis du lit, usé au milieu, la couche d’acajou avec des ornements en cuivre et des rideaux de soie rouge moirés ; ils craquaient sous les doigts, les franges en étaient usées. Sur la cheminée, deux vases de fleurs artificielles ; au milieu, la pendule, dont le cadran était suspendu entre quatre colonnes d’albâtre. Ça et là, accrochée à la muraille, une vieille gravure entourée d’un cadre de bois noir et représentant des femmes au bain, des vendangeurs, des pêcheurs.

Et elle ! elle ! quelquefois son souvenir me revient, si vif, si précis que tous les détails de sa figure m’apparaissent de nouveau, avec cette étonnante fidélité de mémoire que les rêves seuls nous donnent, quand nous revoyons avec leurs mêmes habits, leur même son de voix, nos vieux amis morts depuis des années, et que nous nous en épouvantons. Je me souviens bien qu’elle avait sur la lèvre inférieure, du côté gauche, un grain de beauté, qui paraissait dans un pli de la peau quand elle souriait ; elle n’était plus fraîche même, et le coin de sa bouche était serré d’une façon amère et fatiguée.

Quand je fus prêt à m’en aller, elle me dit adieu.

— Adieu !

— Vous reverra-t-on ?

— Peut-être !

Et je sortis, l’air me ranima, je me trouvais tout changé, il me semblait qu’on devait s’apercevoir, sur mon visage, que je n’étais plus le même homme, je marchais légèrement, fièrement, content, libre, je n’avais plus rien à apprendre, plus rien à sentir, rien à désirer dans la vie. Je rentrai chez moi, une éternité était passée depuis que j’en étais sorti ; je montai à ma chambre et je m’assis sur mon lit, accablé de toute ma journée, qui pesait sur moi avec un poids incroyable. Il était peut-être 7 heures du soir, le soleil se couchait, le ciel était en feu, et l’horizon tout rouge flamboyait par-dessus les toits des maisons ; le jardin, déjà dans l’ombre, était plein de tristesse, des cercles jaunes et oranges tournaient dans le coin des murs, s’abaissaient et montaient dans les buissons, la terre était sèche et grise ; dans la rue quelques gens du peuple, aux bras de leurs femmes, chantaient en passant et allaient aux barrières. Je repensais toujours à ce que j’avais fait, et je fus pris d’une indéfinissable tristesse, j’étais plein de dégoût, j’étais repu, j’étais las. “Mais ce matin même, me disais-je, ce n’était pas comme cela, j’étais plus frais, plus heureux, à quoi cela tient-il ?” et par l’esprit je repassais dans toutes les rues où j’avais marché, je revis les femmes que j’avais rencontrées, tous les sentiers que j’avais parcourus, je retournai chez Marie et je m’arrêtai sur chaque détail de mon souvenir, je pressurai ma mémoire pour qu’elle m’en fournît le plus possible. Toute ma soirée se passa à cela ; la nuit vint et je demeurai fixé comme un vieillard à cette pensée charmante, je sentais que je n’en ressaisirais rien, que d’autres amours pourraient venir, mais qu’ils ne ressembleraient plus à celui-là, ce premier parfum était senti, ce son était envolé, je désirais mon désir et je regrettais ma joie.

Quand je considérais ma vie passée et ma vie présente, c’est-à-dire l’attente des jours écoulés et la lassitude qui m’accablait, alors je ne savais plus dans quel coin de mon existence mon cœur se trouvait placé, si je rêvais ou si j’agissais, si j’étais plein de dégoût ou plein de désir, car j’avais à la fois les nausées de la satiété et l’ardeur des espérances.

Ce n’était donc que cela, aimer ! ce n’était donc que cela, une femme ! Pourquoi, ô mon Dieu, avons-nous encore faim alors que nous sommes repus ? pourquoi tant d’aspirations et tant de déceptions ? pourquoi le cœur de l’homme est-il si grand, et la vie si petite ? il y a des jours où l’amour des anges même ne lui suffirait pas, et il se fatigue en une heure de toutes les caresses de la terre.

Mais l’illusion évanouie laisse en nous son odeur de fée, et nous en cherchons la trace par tous les sentiers où elle a fui ; on se plaît à dire que tout n’est pas finit de sitôt, que la vie ne fait que commencer, qu’un monde s’ouvre devant nous. Aura-t-on, en effet, dépensé tant de rêves sublimes, tant de désirs bouillants pour aboutir là ? Or je ne voulais pas renoncer à toutes les belles choses que je m’étais forgées, j’avais créé pour moi, en deçà de ma virginité perdue, d’autres formes plus vagues, mais plus belles, d’autres voluptés moins précises comme le désir que j’en avais, mais célestes et infinies. Aux imaginations que je m’étais faites naguère, et que je m’efforçais d’évoquer, se mêlait le souvenir intense de mes dernières sensations, et le tout se confondant, fantôme et corps, rêve et réalité, la femme que je venais de quitter prit pour moi une proportion synthétique, où tout se résuma dans le passé et d’où tout s’élança pour l’avenir. Seul et pensant à elle, je la retournai encore en tous sens, pour y découvrir quelque chose de plus ; quelque chose d’inaperçu, d’inexploré la première fois ; l’envie de la revoir me prit, m’obséda, c’était comme une fatalité qui m’attirait, une pente où je glissais.

Oh ! la belle nuit ! il faisait chaud ! j’arrivais à sa porte tout en sueur, il y avait de la lumière à sa fenêtre ; elle veillait sans doute ; je m’arrêtai, j’eus peur, je restais longtemps ne sachant que faire, plein de mille angoisses confuses. Encore une fois j’entrai, ma main, une seconde fois, glissa sur la rampe de son escalier et tourna la clef.

Elle était seule, comme le matin ; elle se tenait à la même place, dans la même posture, mais elle avait changé de robe ; celle-ci était noire, la garniture de dentelle, qui en bordait le haut, frissonnait d’elle-même sur sa gorge blanche, sa chair brillait, sa figure avait cette pâleur lascive que donnent les flambeaux ; la bouche mi-ouverte, les cheveux tout débouclés et pendants sur les épaules, les yeux levés au ciel, elle avait l’air de chercher du regard quelque étoile disparue.

Bien vite, d’un bond joyeux, elle sauta jusqu’à moi et me serra dans ses bras. Ce fut là pour nous une de ces étreintes frissonnantes, telles que les amants, la nuit, doivent en avoir dans leurs rendez-vous, quand, après avoir longtemps, l’oeil tendu dans les ténèbres, guetté chaque foulement des feuilles, chaque forme vague qui passait dans la clairière, ils se rencontrent enfin et viennent à s’embrasser.

Elle me dit, d’une voix précipitée et douce tout ensemble :

— Ah ! tu m’aimes donc, que tu reviens me voir ? dis, dis, ô mon cœur, m’aimes-tu ?

Ses paroles avaient un son aigu et moelleux, comme les intonations les plus élevées de la flûte.

À demi affaissée sur les jarrets et me tenant dans ses bras, elle me regardait avec une ivresse sombre ; pour moi, quelque étonné que je fusse de cette passion si subitement venue, j’en étais charmé, j’en étais fier.

Sa robe de satin craquait sous mes doigts avec un bruit d’étincelles ; quelquefois, après avoir senti le velouté de l’étoffe, je venais à sentir la douceur chaude de son bras nu, son vêtement semblait participer d’elle-même, il exhalait la séduction des plus luxuriantes nudités.

Elle voulut à toutes forces s’asseoir sur mes genoux, et elle recommença sa caresse accoutumée, qui était de me passer la main dans les cheveux tandis qu’elle me regardait fixement, face à face, les yeux dardés contre les miens. Dans cette pose immobile, sa prunelle parut se dilater, il en sortit un fluide que je sentais me couler sur le cœur ; chaque effluve de ce regard béant, semblable aux cercles successifs que décrit l’orfraie, m’attachait de plus en plus à cette magie terrible.

— Ah ! tu m’aimes donc, reprit-elle, tu m’aimes donc que te voilà venu encore chez moi, pour moi ! Mais qu’as-tu ? tu ne dis rien, tu es triste ! ne veux-tu plus de moi ? Elle fit une pause et reprit :

— Comme tu es beau, mon ange ! tu es beau comme le jour ! embrasse-moi donc, aime-moi ! un baiser, un baiser, vite !

Elle se suspendit à ma bouche et, roucoulant comme une colombe, elle se gonflait la poitrine du soupir qu’elle y puisait.

— Ah ! mais pour la nuit, n’est-ce pas, pour la nuit, toute la nuit à nous deux ? C’est comme toi que je voudrais avoir un amant, un amant jeune et frais qui m’aimât bien, qui ne pensât qu’à moi. Oh ! comme je l’aimerais !

Et elle fit une de ces inspirations de désir où il semble que Dieu devrait descendre des cieux.

— Mais n’en as-tu pas un ? lui dis-je.

— Qui ? moi ? est-ce que nous sommes aimées, nous autres ? est-ce qu’on pense à nous ? Qui veut de nous ? toi-même, demain, te souviendras-tu de moi ? tu te diras peut-être seulement : “Tiens, hier, j’ai couché avec une fille”, mais brrr ! la ! la ! la ! (et elle se mit à danser, les poings sur la taille, avec des allures immondes). C’est que je danse bien ! tiens, regarde mon costume.

Elle ouvrit son armoire, et je vis sur une planche un masque noir et des rubans bleus avec un domino ; il y avait aussi un pantalon de velours noir à galons d’or, accroché à un clou, restes flétris du carnaval passé.

— Mon pauvre costume, dit-elle, comme j’ai été souvent au bal avec lui ! c’est moi qui ai dansé, cet hiver !

La fenêtre était ouverte et le vent faisait trembler la lumière de la bougie, elle l’alla prendre de dessus la cheminée et la mit sur la table de nuit. Arrivée près du lit, elle s’assit dessus et se prit à réfléchir profondément, la tête baissée sur la poitrine. Je ne lui parlais pas non plus, j’attendais, l’odeur chaude des nuits d’août montait jusqu’à nous, nous entendions, de là, les arbres du boulevard remuer, le rideau de la fenêtre tremblait ; toute la nuit il fit de l’orage ; souvent, à la lueur des éclairs, j’apercevais sa blême figure, crispée dans une expression de tristesse ardente ; les nuages couraient vite, la lune, à demi cachée par eux, apparaissait par moments dans un coin de ciel pur entouré de nuées sombres.

Elle se déshabilla lentement, avec les mouvements réguliers d’une machine.

Quand elle fut en chemise, elle vint à moi, pieds nus sur le pavé, me prit par la main et me conduisit à son lit ; elle ne me regardait pas, elle pensait à autre chose ; elle avait la lèvre rose et humide, les narines ouvertes, l'oeil en feu, et semblait vibrer sous le frottement de sa pensée comme, alors même que l'artiste n'est plus là, l'instrument sonore laisse s'évaporer un secret parfum de notes endormies.

C'est quand elle se fut couchée près de moi qu'elle m'étala, avec un orgueil de courtisane, toutes les splendeurs de sa chair. Je vis à nu sa gorge dure et toujours gonflée comme d'un murmure orageux, son ventre de nacre, au nombril creusé, son ventre élastique et convulsif, doux pour s'y plonger la tête comme sur un oreiller de satin chaud ; elle avait des hanches superbes, de ces vraies hanches de femme, dont les lignes, dégradantes sur une cuisse ronde, rappellent toujours, de profil, je ne sais quelle forme souple et corrompue de serpent et de démon ; la sueur qui mouillait sa peau la lui rendait fraîche et collante, dans la nuit ses yeux brillaient d'une manière terrible, et le bracelet d'ambre qu'elle portait au bras droit sonnait quand elle s'attrapait au lambris de l'alcôve. Ce fut dans ces heures-là qu'elle me disait, tenant ma tête serrée sur son cœur :

— Ange d'amour, de délices, de volupté, d'où viens-tu ? ou est ta mère ? à quoi songeait-elle quand elle t'a conçu ? rêvait-elle la force des lions d'Afrique ou le parfum de ces arbres lointains, si embaumants qu'on meurt à les sentir ? Tu ne dis rien ; regarde-moi avec tes grands yeux, regarde-moi, regarde-moi ! ta bouche ! ta bouche ! tiens, tiens, voilà la mienne !

Et puis ses dents claquaient comme par un grand froid, et ses lèvres écartées tremblaient et envoyaient dans l'air des paroles folles :

— Ah ! je serais jalouse de toi, vois-tu, si nous nous aimions ; la moindre femme qui te regarderait…

Et elle achevait sa phrase dans un cri. D'autres fois elle m'arrêtait avec des bras raidis et disait tout bas qu'elle allait mourir.

— Oh ! que c'est beau, un homme, quand il est jeune ! Si j'étais homme, moi, toutes les femmes m'aimeraient, mes yeux brilleraient si bien ! je serais si bien mis, si joli ! Ta maîtresse t'aime, n'est-ce pas ? je voudrais la connaître . Comment vous voyez-vous ? est-ce chez toi ou chez elle ? est-ce à la promenade, quand tu passes à cheval ? tu dois être si bien à cheval ! au théâtre, quand on sort et qu'on lui donne son manteau ? ou bien la nuit dans son jardin ? Les belles heures que vous passez, n'est-ce pas, à causer ensemble, assis sous la tonnelle !

Je la laissais dire, il me semblait qu'avec ces mots elle me faisait une maîtresse idéale, et j'aimais ce fantôme qui venait d'arriver dans mon esprit et qui y brillait plus rapide qu'un feu follet, le soir, dans la campagne.

— Y a-t-il longtemps que vous vous connaissez ? conte-moi ça un peu. Que lui dis-tu pour lui plaire ? est-elle grande ou petite ? chante-t-elle ?

Je ne pus m'empêcher de lui dire qu'elle se trompait, je lui parlai même de mes appréhensions à la venir trouver, du remords, ou mieux de l'étrange peur que j'en avais eue ensuite, et du retour soudain qui m'avait poussé vers elle. Quand je lui eus bien dit que je n'avais jamais eu de maîtresse, que j'en avais cherché partout, que j'en avais rêvé longtemps, et qu'enfin elle était la première qui eût accepté mes caresses, elle se rapprocha de moi avec étonnement et, me prenant par le bras, comme si j'étais une illusion qu'elle voulût saisir :

— Vrai ? me dit-elle, oh ! ne me mens pas. Tu es donc vierge, et c'est moi qui t'ai défloré, pauvre ange ? Tes baisers, en effet, avaient je ne sais quoi de naïf, tel que les enfants seuls en auraient s'ils faisaient l'amour. Mais tu m'étonnes ! tu es charmant ; à mesure que je te regarde, je t'aime de plus en plus, ta joue est douce comme une pêche, ta peau, en effet, est toute blanche, tes beaux cheveux sont forts et nombreux. Ah ! comme je t'aimerais si tu voulais ! car je n'ai vu que toi comme ça ; on dirait que tu me regardes avec bonté, et pourtant tes yeux me brûlent, j'ai toujours envie de me rapprocher de toi et de te serrer sur moi.

C'étaient les premières paroles d'amour que j'entendisse de ma vie. Parties n'importe d'où, notre cœur les reçoit avec un tressaillement bien heureux ? Rappelez-vous cela ! Je m'en abreuvais à plaisir. Oh ! comme je m'élançais vite dans le ciel nouveau.

— Oui, oui, embrasse-moi bien, embrasse-moi bien ! tes baisers me rajeunissent, disait-elle, j'aime à sentir ton odeur comme celle de mon chèvrefeuille au mois de juin, c'est frais et sucré tout à la fois ; tes dents, voyons-les, elles sont plus blanches que les miennes, je ne suis pas si belle que toi… Ah ! comme il fait bon, là !

Et elle s'appuya la bouche sur mon cou, y fouillant avec d'âpres baisers, comme une bête fauve au ventre de sa victime.

— Qu'ai-je donc, ce soir ? tu m'as mise toute en feu, j'ai envie de boire et de danser en chantant. As-tu quelquefois voulu être petit oiseau ? nous volerions ensemble, ça doit être si doux de faire l'amour dans l'air, les vents vous poussent, les nuages vous entourent… Non, tais-toi que je te regarde, que je te regarde longtemps, afin que je me souvienne de toi toujours !

— Pourquoi cela ?

— Pourquoi cela ? reprit-elle, mais pour m'en souvenir, pour penser à toi ; j'y penserai la nuit, quand je ne dors pas, le matin, quand je m'éveille, j'y penserai toute la journée, appuyée à ma fenêtre pour regarder les passants, mais surtout le soir quand on n'y voit plus et qu'on n'a pas encore allumé les bougies ; je me rappellerai ta figure, ton corps, ton beau corps, où la volupté respire, et ta voix ! Oh ! écoute, je t'en prie, mon amour, laisse-moi couper de tes cheveux, je les mettrai dans ce bracelet-là, ils ne me quitteront jamais.

Elle se leva de suite, alla chercher ses ciseaux et me coupa, derrière la tête, une mèche de cheveux. C'étaient de petits ciseaux pointus, qui crièrent en jouant sur leur vis ; je sens encore sur la nuque le froid de l'acier et la main de Marie.

C'est une des plus belles choses des amants que les cheveux donnés et échangés. Que de belles mains, depuis qu'il y a des nuits, ont passé à travers les balcons et donné des tresses noires ! Arrière les chaînes de montres tordues en huit, les bagues où ils sont collés dessus, les médaillons où ils sont disposés en trèfles, et tous ceux qu'a pollués la main banale du coiffeur ; je les veux tout simples et noués, aux deux bouts, d'un fil, de peur d'en perdre un seul ; on les a coupés soi-même à la tête chérie, dans quelque suprême moment, au plus fort d'un premier amour, la veille du départ. Une chevelure ! manteau magnifique de la femme aux jours primitifs, quand il lui descendait jusqu'aux talons et lui couvrait les bras, alors qu'elle s'en allait avec l'homme, marchant au bord des grands fleuves, et que les premières brises de la création faisaient tressaillir à la fois la cime des palmiers, la crinière des lions, la chevelure des femmes ! J'aime les cheveux. Que de fois, dans des cimetières qu'on remuait ou dans les vieilles églises qu'on abattait, j'en ai contemplé qui apparaissaient dans la terre remuée, entre des ossements jaunes et des morceaux de bois pourri ! Souvent le soleil jetait dessus un pâle rayon et les faisait briller comme un filon d'or ; j'aimais à songer aux jours où, réunis ensemble sur un cuir blanc et graissés de parfum liquide, quelque main, sèche maintenant, passait dessus et les étendait sur l'oreiller, quelque bouche, sans gencives maintenant, les baisait au milieu et en mordait le bout avec des sanglots heureux.

Je me laissai couper les miens avec une vanité niaise, j'eus la honte de n'en pas demander à mon tour, et à cette heure que je n'ai rien, pas un gant, pas une ceinture, pas même trois corolles de rose desséchées et gardées dans un livre, rien que le souvenir de l'amour d'une fille publique, je les regrette.

Quand elle eut finit, elle vint se recoucher près de moi, elle entra dans les draps toute frissonnante de volupté, elle grelottait, et se ratatinait sur moi, comme un enfant ; enfin elle s'endormit, laissant sa tête sur ma poitrine.

Chaque fois que je respirais, je sentais le poids de cette tête endormie se soulever sur mon cœur. Dans quelle communion intime me trouvais-je donc avec cet être inconnu ? Ignorés jusqu'à ce jour l'un à l'autre, le hasard nous avait unis, nous étions là dans la même couche, liés par une force sans nom ; nous allions nous quitter et ne plus nous revoir, les atomes qui roulent et volent dans l'air ont entre eux des rencontres plus longues que n'en ont sur la terre les cœurs qui s’aiment ; la nuit, sans doute, les désirs solitaires s’élèvent et les songes se mettent à la recherche les uns des autres ; celui-là soupire peut-être après l’âme inconnue qui soupire après lui dans un autre hémisphère, sous d’autres cieux.

Quels étaient, maintenant, les rêves qui se passaient dans cette tête-là ? songeait-elle à sa famille, à son premier amant, au monde, aux hommes, à quelque vie riche, éclairée d’opulence, à quelque amour désiré, à moi peut-être ! L’oeil fixé sur son front pâle, j’épiais son sommeil, et je tâchais de découvrir un sens au son rauque qui sortait de ses narines.

Il pleuvait, j’écoutais le bruit de la pluie et Marie dormir ; les lumières, près de s’éteindre, pétillaient dans les bobèches de cristal. L’aube parut, une ligne jaune saillit dans le ciel, s’allongea horizontalement et, prenant de plus en plus des teintes dorées et vineuses, envoya dans l’appartement une faible lumière blanchâtre ; irisée de violet, qui se jouait encore avec la nuit et avec l’éclat des bougies expirantes, reflétées dans la glace.

Marie, étendue sur moi, avait ainsi certaines parties du corps dans la lumière, d’autres dans l’ombre ; elle s’était dérangée un peu, sa tête était plus basse que ses seins ; le bras droit, le bras du bracelet, pendait hors du lit et touchait presque le plancher ; il y avait sur la table de nuit un bouquet de violettes dans un verre d’eau, j’étendis la main, je le pris, je cassai le fil avec mes dents et je les respirai. La chaleur de la veille, sans doute, ou bien le long temps depuis qu’elles étaient cueillies les avait fanées, je leur trouvai une odeur exquise et toute particulière, je humai une à une leur parfum ; comme elles étaient humides, je me les appliquai sur les yeux pour me refroidir, car mon sang bouillait, et mes membres fatigués ressentaient comme une brûlure au contact des draps. Alors, ne sachant que faire et ne voulant pas l’éveiller, car j’éprouvais un étrange plaisir à la voir dormir, je mis doucement toutes les violettes sur la gorge de Marie, bientôt elle en fut toute couverte, et ces belles fleurs fanées, sous lesquelles elle dormait, la symbolisèrent à mon esprit. Comme elles, en effet, malgré leur fraîcheur enlevée, à cause de cela peut-être, elle m’envoyait un parfum plus âcre et plus irritant ; le malheur, qui avait dû passer dessus, la rendait belle de l’amertume que sa bouche conservait, même en dormant, belle des deux rides qu’elle avait derrière le cou, et que le jour, sans doute, elle cachait sous ses cheveux. À voir cette femme si triste dans la volupté et dont les étreintes même avaient une joie lugubre, je devinais mille passions terribles qui l’avaient dû sillonner comme la foudre, à en juger par les traces restées, et puis sa vie devrait me faire plaisir à entendre raconter, moi qui cherchais dans l’existence humaine le côté sonore et vibrant, le monde des grandes passions et des belles larmes.

À ce moment-là, elle s’éveilla, toutes les violettes tombèrent, elle sourit, les yeux encore à demi fermés, en même temps qu’elle étendait ses bras autour de mon cou et m’embrassait d’un long baiser du matin, d’un baiser de colombe qui s’éveille.

Quand je l’ai priée de me raconter son histoire, elle me dit :

— À toi je le peux bien. Les autres mentiraient et commenceraient par te dire qu’elles n’ont pas toujours été ce qu’elles sont, elles te feraient des contes sur leur famille et sur leurs amours, mais je ne veux pas te tromper ni me faire passer pour une princesse ; écoute, tu vas voir si j’ai été heureuse ! Sais-tu que souvent j’ai eu envie de me tuer ? une fois on est arrivé dans ma chambre, j’étais à moitié asphyxiée. Oh ! si je n’avais pas peur de l’enfer, il y longtemps que ça serait fait. J’ai aussi peur de mourir, ce moment-là à passer m’effraie, et pourtant j’ai envie d’être morte ! Je suis de la campagne, notre père était fermier. Jusqu’à ma première communion, on m’envoyait tous les matins garder les vaches dans les champs ; toute la journée je restais seule, je m’asseyais au bord d’un fossé, à dormir, ou bien j’allais dans le bois dénicher des nids ; je montais aux arbres comme un garçon, mes habits étaient toujours déchirés ; souvent on m’a battue pour avoir volé des pommes, ou laissé aller les bestiaux chez les voisins. Quand c’était la moisson et que, le soir venu, on dansait en rond dans la cour, j’entendais chanter des chansons où il y avait des choses que je ne comprenais pas, les garçons embrassaient les filles, on riait aux éclats ; cela m’attristait et me faisait rêver. Quelquefois, sur la route, en m’en retournant à la maison, je demandais à monter dans une voiture de foin, l’homme me prenait avec lui et me plaçait sur les bottes de luzerne ; croirais-tu que je finis par goûter un indicible plaisir à me sentir soulever de terre par les mains fortes et robustes d’un gars solide, qui avait la figure brûlée par le soleil et la poitrine toute en sueur ? D’ordinaire ses bras étaient retroussés jusqu’aux aisselles, j’aimais à toucher ses muscles, qui faisaient des bosses et des creux à chaque mouvement de sa main, et à me faire embrasser par lui, pour me sentir râper la joue par sa barbe. Au bas de la prairie où j’allais tous les jours, il y avait un petit ruisseau entre deux rangées de peupliers, au bord duquel toutes sortes de fleurs poussaient ; j’en faisais des bouquets, des couronnes, des chaînes ; avec des grains de sorbier, je me faisais des colliers, cela devint une manie, j’en avais toujours mon tablier plein, mon père me grondait et disait que je ne serais jamais qu’une coquette. Dans ma petite chambre j’en avais mis aussi ; quelquefois cette quantité d’odeurs-là m’enivrait, et je m’assoupissais, étourdie, mais jouissant de ce malaise. L’odeur du foin coupé, par exemple, du foin chaud et fermenté, m’a toujours semblé délicieuse, si bien que, tous les dimanches, je m’enfermais dans la grange, y passant tout mon après-midi à regarder les araignées filer leur toile aux sommiers, et à entendre les mouches bourdonner. Je vivais comme une fainéante, mais je devenais une belle fille, j’étais toute pleine de santé. Souvent une espèce de folie me prenait, et je courais jusqu’à tomber ou bien je chantais à tue-tête, ou je parlais seule et longtemps ; d’étranges désirs me possédaient, je regardais toujours les pigeons, sur leur colombier, qui se faisaient l’amour, quelques-uns venaient jusque sous ma fenêtre s’ébattre au soleil et se jouer dans la vigne. La nuit, j’entendais encore le battement de leurs ailes et leur roucoulement, qui me semblait si doux, si suave, que j’aurais voulu être un pigeon comme eux et me tordre ainsi le cou, comme ils faisaient pour s’embrasser. “Que se disent-ils donc, pensais-je, qu’ils ont l’air si heureux ?”, et je me rappelais aussi de quel air superbe j’avais vu courir les chevaux après les juments, et comment leurs naseaux étaient ouverts ; je me rappelais la joie qui faisait frissonner la laine des brebis aux approches du bélier, et le murmure des abeilles quand elles se suspendent en grappes aux arbres des vergers. Dans l’étable, souvent, je me glissais entre les animaux pour sentir l’émanation de leurs membres, vapeurs de vie que j’aspirais à pleine poitrine, pour contempler furtivement leur nudité, où le vertige attirait toujours mes yeux troublés. D’autres fois, au détour d’un bois, au crépuscule surtout, les arbres eux-mêmes prenaient des formes singulières : c’étaient tantôt des bras qui s’élevaient vers le ciel, ou bien le tronc qui se tordait comme un corps sous les coups du vent. La nuit, quand je m’éveillais et qu’il y avait de la lune et des nuages, je voyais dans le ciel des choses qui m’épouvantaient et qui me faisaient envie. Je me souviens qu’une fois, la veille de Noël, j’ai vu une grande femme nue, debout, avec des yeux qui roulaient ; elle avait bien cent pieds de haut, mais elle alla, s’allongeant toujours en s’amincissant, et finit par se couper, chaque membre resta séparé, la tête s’envola la première, tout le reste s’agitait encore. Ou bien je rêvais ; à dix ans déjà, j’avais des nuits fiévreuses, des nuits pleines de luxure. N’était-ce pas la luxure qui brillait dans mes yeux, coulait dans mon sang, et me faisait bondir le cœur au frôlement de mes membres entre eux ? elle chantait éternellement dans mon oreille des cantiques de volupté ; dans mes visions, les chairs brillaient comme de l’or, des formes inconnues remuaient, comme du vif-argent répandu.

À l’église je regardais l’homme nu étalé sur la croix, et je redressais la tête, je remplissais ses flancs, je colorais tous ses membres, je levais ses paupières ; je me faisais devant moi une homme beau, avec un regard de feu ; je le détachais de la croix et je le faisais descendre vers moi, sur l’autel, l’encens l’entourait, il s’avançait dans la fumée et de sensuels frémissements me couraient sur la peau.

Quand un homme me parlait, j’examinais son oeil et le jet qui en sort, j’aimais surtout ceux dont les paupières remuent toujours, qui cachent leurs prunelles et qui les montrent, mouvement semblable au battement d’ailes d’un papillon de nuit ; à travers leurs vêtements, je tâchais de surprendre le secret de leur sexe, et là-dessus j’interrogeais mes jeunes amies, j’épiais les baisers de mon père et de ma mère, et la nuit le bruit de leur couche.

À douze ans, je fis ma première communion, on m'avait fait venir de la ville une belle robe blanche, nous avions toutes des ceintures bleues ; j'avais voulu qu'on me mît les cheveux en papillotes comme à une dame. Avant de partir, je me regardais dans la glace, j'étais belle comme un amour, je fus presque amoureuse de moi, j'aurais voulu pouvoir l'être. C'était aux environs de la Fête-Dieu, les bonnes sœurs avaient rempli l'église de fleurs, on embaumait ; moi-même, depuis trois jours, j'avais travaillé avec les autres à orner de jasmin la petite table sur laquelle on prononce les vœux, l'autel était couvert d'hyacintes, les marches du chœur étaient couvertes de tapis, nous avions tous des gants blancs et un cierge dans la main ; j'étais bien heureuse, je me sentais faite pour cela ; pendant toute la messe, je remuais mes pieds sur le tapis, car il n'y en avait pas chez mon père ; j'aurais voulu me coucher dessus avec ma belle robe, et demeurer toute seule dans l'église, au milieu des cierges allumés ; mon cœur battait d'une espérance nouvelle, j'attendais l'hostie avec anxiété, j'avais entendu dire que la première communion changeait, et je croyais que, le sacrement passé, tous mes désirs seraient calmés. Mais non ! rassise à ma place, je me retrouvai dans ma fournaise ; j'avais remarqué que l'on m'avait regardée en allant vers le prêtre, et qu'on m'avait admirée ; je me rengorgeai, je me trouvai belle, m'enorgueillissant vaguement de toutes les délices cachés en moi et que j'ignorais moi-même.

À la sortie de la messe, nous défilâmes toutes en rang, dans le cimetière ; les parents et les curieux étaient des deux côtés, dans l'herbe, pour nous voir passer ; je marchais la première, j'étais la plus grande. Pendant le dîner, je ne mangeai pas, j'avais le cœur tout oppressé ; ma mère, qui avait pleuré pendant l'office, avait encore les yeux rouges ; quelques voisins vinrent pour me féliciter et m'embrassèrent, avec effusion, leurs caresses me répugnaient. Le soir, aux vêpres, il y avait encore plus de monde que le matin. En face de nous, on avait disposé les garçons, ils nous regardaient avidement, moi surtout ; même lorsque j'avais les yeux baissés, je sentais encore leurs regards. On les avait frisés, ils étaient en toilette comme nous. Quand, après avoir chanté le premier couplet d'un cantique, ils reprenaient à leur tour, leur voix me soulevait l'âme, et quand elle s'éteignait, ma jouissance expirait avec elle, et puis s'élançait de nouveau quand ils recommençaient. Je prononçai les vœux ; tout ce que je me rappelle, c'est que je parlais de robe blanche et d'innocence.

Marie s'arrêta ici, perdue sans doute dans l'émouvant souvenir par lequel elle avait peur d'être vaincue, puis elle reprit en riant d'une manière désespérée :

— Ah ! la robe blanche ! il y a bien longtemps qu'elle est usée ! et l'innocence avec elle ! Où sont les autres maintenant ? il y en a qui sont mortes, d’autres qui sont mariées et ont des enfants ; je n’en vois plus aucune, je ne connais personne. Tous les jours de l’an encore, je veux écrire à ma mère, mais je n’ose pas, et puis bah ! c’est bête tous ces sentiments-là !

Se raidissant contre son émotion, elle continua :

— Le lendemain, qui était encore un jour de fête, un camarade vint pour jouer avec moi ; ma mère me dit : “Maintenant que tu es une grande fille, tu ne devrais plus aller avec les garçons”, et elle nous sépara. Il n’en fallut pas plus pour me rendre amoureuse de celui-là, je le recherchais, je lui fis la cour, j’avais envie de m’enfuir avec lui de mon pays, il devait m’épouser quand je serais grande, je l’appelais mon mari, mon amant, il n’osait pas. Un jour que nous étions seuls, et que nous revenions ensemble du bois où nous avions été cueillir des fraises, en passant près d’un mulon, je me ruai sur lui, et le couvrant de tout mon corps en l’embrassant à la bouche, je me mis à crier : “Aime-moi donc, marions-nous, marions-nous !” Il se dégagea de moi et s’enfuit.

Depuis ce temps-là, je m’écartais de tout le monde et ne sortis plus de la ferme, je vivais solitairement dans mes désirs, comme d’autres dans leurs jouissances. Disait-on qu’un tel avait enlevé une fille qu’on lui refusait, je m’imaginais être sa maîtresse, fuir avec lui en croupe, à travers champs, et le serrer dans mes bras ; si l’on parlait d’une noce, je me couchais vite dans le lit blanc, comme la mariée je tremblais de crainte et de volupté ; j’enviais jusqu’aux beuglements plaintifs des vaches lorsqu’elles mettent bas ; en rêvant la cause, je jalousais leurs douleurs.

À cette époque-là, mon père mourut, ma mère m’emmena à la ville avec elle, mon frère partit pour l’armée, où il est devenu capitaine. J’avais seize ans quand nous partîmes de la maison ; je dis adieu pour toujours au bois, à la prairie où était mon ruisseau, adieu au portail de l’église, où j’avais passé de si bonnes heures à jouer au soleil, adieu aussi à ma pauvre petite chambre ; je n’ai plus revu tout cela. Des grisettes du quartier, qui devinrent mes amies, me montrèrent leurs amoureux, j’allais avec elles en partie, je les regardais s’aimer, et je me repaissais à loisir de ce spectacle. Tous les jours c’était un nouveau prétexte pour m’absenter, ma mère s’en aperçut bien, elle m’en fit d’abord des reproches, puis finit par me laisser tranquille.

Un jour enfin une vieille femme que je connaissais depuis quelques temps, me proposa de faire ma fortune, me disant qu’elle m’avait trouvé un amant fort riche, que le lendemain soir je n’avais qu’à sortir, comme pour porter de l’ouvrage dans un faubourg, et qu’elle m’y mènerait.

Pendant les vingt-quatre qui suivirent, je crus souvent que j’allais devenir folle ; à mesure que l’heure approchait, le moment s’éloignait, je n’avais que ce mot-là dans ma tête : un amant ! un amant ! j’allais avoir un amant, j’allais être aimée, j’allais donc aimer ! Je mis d’abord mes souliers les plus minces, puis m’apercevant que mon pied s’évasait dedans, je pris des bottines ; j’arrangeai également mes cheveux de cent manières, en torsades, puis en bandeaux, en papillotes, en nattes ; à mesure que je me regardais dans la glace, je devenais plus belle, mais je ne l’étais pas assez, mes habits étaient communs, j’en rougis de honte. Que n’étais-je une de ces femmes qui sont blanches au milieu de leurs velours, toute chargé de dentelles, sentant l’ambre et la rose, avec de la soie qui craque, et des domestiques tout cousus d’or ! Je maudis ma mère, ma vie passée, et je m’enfuis, poussée par toutes les tentations du diable, et d’avance les savourant toutes.

Au détour d’une rue, un fiacre nous attendait, nous montâmes dedans ; une heure après il nous arrêta à la grille d’un parc. Après nous y être promenées quelque temps, je m’aperçus que la vieille m’avait quittée, et je restai seule à marcher dans les allées. Les arbres étaient grands, tout couverts de feuilles, des bandes de gazon entouraient des plates-bandes de fleurs, jamais je n’avais vu de si beau jardin ; une rivière passait au milieu, des pierres, disposées habilement çà et là, formaient des cascades, des cygnes jouaient sur l’eau et, les ailes enflées, se laissaient pousser par le courant. Je m’amusai aussi à voir la volière, où des oiseaux de toutes sortes criaient et se balançaient sur leurs anneaux ; ils étalaient leurs queues panachées et passaient les uns devant les autres, c’était un éblouissement. Deux statues de marbre blanc, au bas du perron, se regardaient dans des poses charmantes ; le grand bassin d’en face était doré par le soleil couchant et donnait envie de s’y baigner. Je pensai à l’amant inconnu qui demeurait là, à chaque instant je m’attendais à voir sortir d’un bosquet d’arbres quelque homme beau et marchant fièrement comme un Apollon. Après le dîner, et quand le bruit du château, que j’entendais depuis longtemps, se fût apaisé, mon maître parut. C’était un vieillard tout blanc et maigre, serré dans des habits trop justes, avec une croix d’honneur sur son habit, et des dessous du pied qui l’empêchaient de remuer les genoux ; il avait un grand nez, et des petits yeux verts qui avaient l’air méchant. Il m’aborda en souriant, il n’avait plus de dents. Quand on sourit il faut avoir une petit lèvre rose comme la tienne, avec un peu de moustache aux deux bouts, n’est-ce pas cher ange ?

Nous nous assîmes ensemble sur un banc, il me prit les mains, il me les trouva si jolies qu’il en baisait chaque doigt ; il me dit que si je voulais être sa maîtresse, rester sage et demeurer avec lui, je serais bien riche, j’aurais des domestiques pour me servir, et tous les jours de belles robes, je monterais à cheval, je me promènerais en voiture ; mais pour cela, disait-il, il fallait l’aimer. Je lui promis que je l’aimerais.

Et cependant aucune de ces flammes intérieures qui naguère me brûlaient les entrailles, à l’approche des hommes, ne m’arrivait ; à force d’être à côté de lui et de me dire intérieurement que c’était celui-là dont j’allais être la maîtresse, je finis par en avoir envie. Quand il me dit de rentrer, je me levai vivement, il était ravi, il tremblait de joie, le bonhomme ! Après avoir traversé un beau salon où les meubles étaient tout dorés, il me mena dans ma chambre et voulut me déshabiller lui-même ; il commença par m’ôter mon bonnet, mais voulant ensuite me déchausser, il eut du mal à se baisser et il me dit : “C’est que je suis vieux, mon enfant” ; il était à genoux, il me suppliait du regard, il ajouta, en joignant les deux mains ; “Tu es si jolie !”, j’avais peur de ce qui allait suivre.

Un énorme lit était au fond de l’alcôve, il m’y traîna en criant ; je me sentis noyée dans les édredons et dans les matelas, son corps pesait sur moi, avec un horrible supplice, ses lèvres molles me couvraient de baisers froids, le plafond de la chambre m’écrasait. Comme il était heureux ! comme il se pâmait ! Tâchant, à mon tour, de trouver des jouissances, j’excitais les siennes à ce qu’il paraît ; mais que m’importait son plaisir à lui ! c’était le mien qu’il me fallait, j’en aspirais de sa bouche creuse et de ses membres débiles, j’en évoquais de tout ce vieillard, et réunissant dans un incroyable effort tout ce que j’avais en moi de lubricité contenue, je ne parvins qu’au dégoût dans ma première nuit de débauche.

À peine fut-il sorti que je me levai, j’allai à la fenêtre, je l’ouvris et je laissai l’air me refroidir la peau ; j’aurais voulu que l’Océan pût me laver de lui, je refis mon lit, effaçant avec soin toutes les places où ce cadavre m’avait fatiguée de ses convulsion. Toute la nuit se passa à pleurer ; désespérée, je rugissais comme un tigre qu’on a châtré. Ah ! si tu étais venu alors ! si nous nous étions connu dans ce temps-là ! tu avais été du même âge que moi, c’est alors que nous nous serions aimés, quand j’avais seize ans, que mon cœur était neuf ! toute notre vie se fût passée à cela, mes bras se seraient usés à t’étreindre sur moi, mes yeux à plonger dans les tiens.

Elle continua :

— Grande dame, je me levais à midi, j’avais une livrée qui me suivait partout, et une calèche où je m’étendais sur les coussins ; ma bête de race sautait merveilleusement par-dessus le tronc des arbres, et la plume noire de mon chapeau d’amazone remuait avec grâce ; mais devenue riche du jour au lendemain, tout ce luxe m’excitait au lieu de m’apaiser. Bientôt on me connut, ce fut à celui qui m’aurait, mes amants faisaient des folies pour me plaire, tous les soirs je lisais les billets doux de la journée, pour y trouver l’expression nouvelle de quelque cœur autrement moulé que les autres et fait pour moi. Mais tous se ressemblaient, je savais d’avance la fin de leurs phrases et la manière dont ils allaient tomber à genoux ; il y en a deux que j’ai repoussés par caprice et qui se sont tués, leur mort ne m’a point touchée, pourquoi mourir ? que n’ont-ils plutôt tout franchi pour m’avoir ? Si j’aimais un homme, moi, il n’y aurait pas de mers assez larges ni de murs assez hauts pour m’empêcher d’arriver jusqu’à lui. Comme je me serais bien entendue, si j’avais été homme, à corrompre les gardiens, à monter la nuit aux fenêtres, et à étouffer sous ma bouche les cris de ma victime, trompée chaque matin de l’espoir que j’avais eu la veille !

Je les chassais avec colère et j’en prenais d’autres, l’uniformité du plaisir me désespérait, et je courais à sa poursuite avec frénésie, toujours altérée de jouissances nouvelles et magnifiquement rêvées, semblable aux marins en détresse, qui boivent de l’eau de mer et ne peuvent s’empêcher d’en boire, tant la soif les brûle !

Dandys et rustauds, j’ai voulu voir si tous étaient de même ; j’ai goûté la passion des hommes, aux mains blanches et grasses, aux cheveux teints collés sur les tempes ; j’ai eu de pâles adolescents, blonds, efféminés comme des filles, qui se mouraient sur moi ; les vieillards aussi m’ont salie de leurs joies décrépites, et j’ai contemplé au réveil leur poitrine oppressée et leurs yeux éteints. Sur un banc de bois, dans un cabaret de village, entre un pot de vin et une pipe de tabac, l’homme du peuple aussi m’a embrassée avec violence ; je me suis fait comme lui une joie épaisse et des allures faciles ; mais la canaille ne fait pas mieux l’amour que la noblesse, et la botte de paille n’est pas plus chaude que les sofas. Je me suis dévouée à quelques-uns comme une esclave, et ils ne m’en aimaient pas davantage ; j’ai eu, pour des sots, des bassesses infâmes, et en échange ils me haïssaient et me méprisaient, alors que j’aurais voulu centupler mes caresses et les inonder de bonheur. Espérant enfin que les gens difformes pouvaient mieux aimer que les autres, et que les natures rachitiques se raccrochaient à la vie par la volupté, je me suis donnée à des bossus, à des nègres, à des nains, je leurs fis des nuits à rendre jaloux des millionnaires, mais je les épouvantais peut-être, car ils me quittaient vite. Ni les pauvres, ni les riches, ni les laids n’ont pu assouvir l’amour que je leur demandais à remplir ; tous, faibles, languissants, conçus dans l’ennui, avortons faits par des paralytiques que le vin enivre, que la femme tue, craignant de mourir dans les draps comme on meurt à la guerre, il n’en est pas un que je n’aie vu lassé dès la première heure. Il n’y a donc plus, sur terre, de ces jeunesses divines comme autrefois ! plus de Bacchus, plus d’Apollons, plus de ces héros qui marchaient nus, couronnés de pampres et de lauriers ! J’étais faite pour être la maîtresse d’un empereur, moi ; il me fallait l’amour d’un bandit, sur un roc dur, par un soleil d’Afrique ; j’ai souhaité les enlacements des serpents, et les baisers rugissants que donnent les lions.

À cette époque, je lisais beaucoup ; il y a deux livres que j’ai relu cent fois : *Paul et Virginie* et un autre qui s’appelait *Les Crimes des Reines*. On voyait les portraits de Messaline, de Théodora, de Marguerite de Bourgogne, de Marie Stuart et de Catherine II. “Etre reine, me disais-je, et rendre la foule amoureuse de toi !” Eh bien, j’ai été reine, reine comme on peut l’être maintenant ; en entrant dans ma loge je promenais sur le public un regard triomphant et provocateur, mille têtes suivaient le mouvement de mes sourcils, je dominais tout par l’insolence de ma beauté.

Fatiguée cependant de toujours poursuivre un amant, et plus que jamais en voulant à tout prix, ayant d’ailleurs fait du vice un supplice qui m’était cher, je suis accourue ici, le cœur enflammé comme si j’avais encore une virginité à vendre ; raffinée, je me résignais à vivre mal ; opulente, à m’endormir dans la misère, car à force de descendre si bas je n’aspirais peut-être plus à monter éternellement, à mesure que mes organes s’useraient, mes désirs s’apaiseraient sans doute, je voulais par là en finir d’un seul coup et me dégoûter pour toujours de ce que j’enviais avec tant de ferveur. Oui, moi qui ai pris des bains de fraises et de lait, je suis venue ici, m’étendre sur le grabat commun où la foule passe ; au lieu d’être la maîtresse d’un seul, je me suis fait la servante de tous, et quel rude maître j’ai pris là ! Plus de feu l’hiver, plus de vin fin à mes repas, il y a un an que j’ai la même robe, mais qu’importe ! mon métier n’est-il pas d’être nue ? Mais ma dernière pensée, mon dernier espoir, le sais-tu ? Oh ! j’y comptais, c’était de trouver un jour ce que je n’avais jamais rencontré, l’homme qui m’a toujours fui, que j’ai poursuivi dans le lit des élégants, au balcon des théâtres ; chimère qui n’est que dans mon cœur et que je veux tenir dans mes mains ; un beau jour, espérais-je, quelqu’un viendra sans doute — dans le nombre cela doit être — plus grand, plus noble, plus fort ; ses yeux seront fendus comme ceux des sultanes, sa voix se modulera dans une mélodie lascive, ses membres auront la souplesse terrible et voluptueuse des léopards, il sentira des odeurs à faire pâmer, et ses dents mordront avec délices ce sein qui se gonfle pour lui. À chaque arrivant, je me disais : “est-ce lui ? qu’il m’aime ! qu’il m’aime ! qu’il me batte ! qu’il me brise ! à moi seule je lui ferai un sérail, je connais quelles fleurs excitent, quelles boissons vous exaltent, et comment la fatigue même se transforme en délicieuse extase ; coquette quand il le voudra, pour irriter sa vanité ou amuser son esprit, tout à coup il me trouvera langoureuse, pliante comme un roseau, exhalant des mots doux et des soupirs tendres ; pour lui je me tordrai dans des mouvements de couleuvre, la nuit j’aurai des soubresauts furieux et des crispations qui déchirent. Dans un pays chaud, en buvant du vin dans du cristal, je lui danserai, avec des castagnettes, des danses espagnoles, ou je bondirai en hurlant un hymne de guerre, comme les femmes des sauvages ; s’il est amoureux des statues et des tableaux, je me ferai des poses de grand maître devant lesquelles il tombera à genoux ; s’il aime mieux que je sois son ami, je m’habillerai en homme et j’irai à la chasse avec lui, je l’aiderai dans ses vengeances ; s’il veut assassiner quelqu’un, je ferai le guet pour lui ; s’il est voleur, nous volerons ensemble ; j’aimerai ses habits et le manteau qui l’enveloppe. Mais non ! jamais ! jamais ! le temps a beau s’écouler et les matins revenir, on a en vain usé chaque place de mon corps, par toutes les voluptés dont se régalent les hommes, je suis resté comme j’étais à dix ans, vierge, si une vierge est celle qui n’a pas de mari, pas d’amant, qui n’a pas connu le plaisir et qui le rêve sans cesse, qui se fait des fantômes charmants et qui les voit dans ses songes, qui en entend la voix dans le bruit des vents, qui en cherche les traits dans la figure de la lune. Je suis vierge ! cela te fait rire ? mais n’en ai-je pas les vagues pressentiments, les ardentes langueurs ? j’en ai tout, sauf la virginité elle-même.

Regarde au chevet de mon lit toutes ces lignes entrecroisées sur l’acajou, ce sont les marques d’ongle de tout ceux qui s’y sont débattus, de tous ceux dont les têtes ont frotté là ; je n’ai jamais eu rien de commun avec eux ; unis ensemble aussi étroitement que les bras humains peuvent le permettre, je ne sais quel abîme m’en a toujours séparée. Oh ! que de fois, tandis qu’égarés ils auraient voulu s’abîmer tout entiers dans la jouissance, mentalement je m’écartais à mille lieues de là, pour partager la natte d’un sauvage ou l’antre garni de peaux de mouton de quelque berger des Abruzzes ! Aucun, en effet ne vient pour moi, aucun ne me connait, ils cherchent peut-être en moi une certaine femme comme je cherche en eux un certain homme ; n’y a-t-il pas, dans les rues, plus d’un chien qui s’en va flairant dans l’ordure pour trouver des os de poulet et des morceaux de viande ? de même, qui saura tous les amours exaltés qui s’abattent sur une fille publique, toutes les belles élégies qui finissent dans le bonjour qu’on lui adresse ? Combien j’en ai vu arriver ici le cœur gros de dépit et les yeux pleins de larmes ! les uns, au sortir d’un bal, pour résumer sur une seule femme toutes celles qu’ils venaient de quitter ; les autres, après un mariage, exaltés à l’idée de l’innocence ; et puis des jeunes gens, pour toucher à loisir leurs maîtresses à qui ils n’osent parler, fermant les yeux et la voyant ainsi dans leurs cœurs ; des maris pour se refaire jeunes et savourer les plaisirs faciles de leur bon temps, des prêtres poussés par le démon et ne voulant pas d’une femme, mais d’une courtisane, mais du péché incarné, ils me maudissent, ils ont peur de moi et ils m’adorent ; pour que la tentation soit plus forte et l’effroi plus grand, ils voudraient que j’eusse le pied fourchu et que ma robe étincelât de pierreries. Tous passent tristement, uniformément, comme des ombres qui se succèdent, comme une foule dont on ne garde plus que le souvenir du bruit qu’elle faisait, du piétinement de ces mille pieds, des clameurs confuses qui en sortaient. Sais-je, en effet, le nom d’un seul ? ils viennent et ils me quittent, jamais une caresse désintéressée, et ils en demandent, ils demanderaient de l’amour, s’ils l’osaient ! il faut les appeler beaux, les supposer riches, et ils sourient. Et puis ils aiment à rire, quelquefois il faut chanter, ou se taire ou parler. Dans cette femme si connue, personne ne s’est douté qu’il y avait un cœur ; imbéciles qui louaient l’arc de mes sourcils et l’éclat de mes épaules, tout heureux d’avoir à bon marché un morceau de roi, et qui ne prenaient pas cet amour inextinguible qui courait au-devant d’eux et se jetait à leurs genoux !

J’en vois pourtant qui ont des amants, même ici, de vrais amants qui les aiment ; elles leur font une place à part, dans leur lit comme dans leur âme, et quand ils viennent elles sont heureuses . C’est pour eux, vois-tu, qu’elles se peignent si longuement les cheveux, qu’elles arrosent les pots de fleurs qui sont à leurs fenêtres ; mais moi, personne, personne ; pas même l’affection paisible d’un pauvre enfant, car on la leur montre du doigt, la prostituée, et ils passent devant elle sans lever la tête. Qu’il y a longtemps, mon Dieu que je ne suis sortie dans les champs et que je n’ai vu la campagne ! que de dimanches j’ai passés à entendre le son de ces tristes cloches, qui appellent tout le monde aux offices où je ne vais pas ! qu’il y a longtemps que je n’ai entendu le grelot des vaches dans le taillis ! Ah ! je veux m’en aller d’ici, je m’ennuie, je m’ennuie, je retournerai au pays, j’irai chez ma nourrice, c’est une brave femme qui me recevra bien. Quand j’étais toute petite, j’allais chez elle, et elle me donnait du lait ; je l’aiderai à élever ses enfants et à faire le ménage, j’irai ramasser du bois mort dans la forêt, nous nous chaufferons, le soir, au coin du feu quand il neigera, voilà bientôt l’hiver ; aux rois nous tirerons le gâteau. Oh ! elle m’aimera bien, je bercerai les enfants pour les endormir, comme je serai heureuse !

Elle se tut, puis releva sur moi un regard étincelant à travers ses larmes, comme pour me dire : Est-ce toi ?

Je l’avais écoutée avec avidité, j’avais regardé tous les mots sortir de sa bouche ; tâchant de m’identifier à la vie qu’ils exprimaient. Agrandie tout à coup à des proportions que je lui prêtais, sans doute, elle me parut une femme nouvelle, pleine de mystères ignorés et, malgré mes rapports avec elle, toute tentante d’un charme irritant et d’attraits nouveaux. Les hommes en effet, qui l’avaient possédée avaient laissé sur elle comme une odeur de parfum éteint, trace de passions disparues, qui lui faisaient une majesté voluptueuse ; la débauche la décorait d’une beauté infernale. Sans les orgies passées, aurait-elle eu ce sourire de suicide, qui la faisait ressembler à une morte se réveillant dans l’amour ? sa joue en était plus appâlie, ses cheveux plus élastiques et plus odorants, ses membres plus souples, plus mous et plus chauds ; comme moi, aussi, elle avait marché de joies en chagrins, couru d’espérances en dégoûts, des abattements sans nom avaient succédé à des spasmes fous ; sans nous connaître, elle dans sa prostitution et moi dans ma chasteté, nous avions suivi le même chemin, aboutissant au même gouffre ; pendant que je me cherchais une maîtresse, elle s'était cherché un amant, elle dans le monde, moi dans mon cœur, l'un et l'autre nous avaient fuis.

— Pauvre femme, lui dis-je, en le serrant sur moi, comme tu as du souffrir !

— Tu as donc souffert quelque chose de semblable ? me répondit-elle, est-ce que tu es comme moi ? est-ce que souvent tu as trempé ton oreiller de larmes ? est-ce que, pour toi, les jours de soleil en hiver sont aussi tristes ? Quand il fait du brouillard, le soir, et que je marche seule, il me semble que la pluie traverse mon cœur et la fait tomber en débris.

— Je doute pourtant que tu te sois jamais aussi ennuyée que moi dans le monde, tu as eu des jours de plaisir, mais moi c'est comme si j'étais né en prison, j'ai mille choses qui n'ont pas vu la lumière.

— Tu es si jeune cependant ! Au fait, tous les hommes sont vieux maintenant, les enfants se trouvent dégoûtés comme les vieillards, nos mères s' ennuyaient quand elles nous ont conçus, on n'était pas comme cela autrefois, n'est-ce pas vrai ?

— C'est vrai, repris-je, les maisons où nous habitons sont toutes pareilles, blanches et mornes comme des tombes dans des cimetières ; dans les vieilles baraques noires qu'on démolit la vie devait être plus chaude, on y chantait fort, on y brisait les brocs sur les tables, on y cassait les lits en faisant l'amour.

— Mais qui te rend si triste ? tu as donc bien aimé ?

— Si j'ai aimé, mon Dieu ! assez pour envier ta vie.

— Envier ma vie ! dit-elle.

— Oui, l'envier ! car, à ta place, j'aurais peut-être été heureux, car, si un homme comme tu le désires n'existe pas, une femme comme j'en veux doit vivre quelque part ; parmi tant de cœurs qui battent, il doit s'en trouver un pour moi.

— Cherche-le ! cherche-le !

— Oh ! si, j'ai aimé ! si bien que je suis saturé de désirs rentrés. Non, tu ne sauras jamais toutes celles qui m'ont égaré et que dans le fond de mon cœur j'abritais d'un amour angélique. Ecoute, quand j'avais vécu un jour avec une femme, je me disais : “Que ne l'ai-je connue depuis dix ans ! tous ses jours qui ont fui m'appartenaient, son premier sourire devait être pour moi, sa première pensée au monde, pour moi. Des gens viennent et lui parlent, elle leur répond, elle y pense, les livres qu'elle admire, j'aurais dû les lire. Que ne me suis-je promené avec elle, sous tous les ombrages qui l'ont abritée ! il y a bien des robes qu'elle a usées et que je n'ai pas vues, elle a entendu, dans sa vie, les plus beaux opéras, et je n'étais pas là ; d'autres lui ont déjà fait sentir les fleurs que je n'ai pas cueillies, je ne pourrai rien faire, elle m’oubliera, je suis pour elle comme un passant dans la rue”, et quand j’en étais séparé, je me disais : “Où est-elle ? que fait-elle, toute la journée, loin de moi ? à quoi son temps se passe-t-il ?”. Qu’une femme aime un homme, qu’elle lui fasse signe, et il tombe à genoux. Mais nous, quel hasard qu’elle vienne à nous regarder, et encore !… il faut être riche, avoir des chevaux qui vous emportent, avoir une maison ornée de statues, donner des fêtes, jeter l’or, faire du bruit ; mais vivre dans la foule, sans pouvoir la dominer par le génie ou par l’argent, et demeurer aussi inconnu que le plus lâche et le plus sot de tous, quand on aspire à des amours du ciel, quand on mourrait avec joie sous le regard d’une femme aimée, j’ai connu ce supplice.

— Tu es timide, n’est-ce pas ? elles te font peur .

— Plus maintenant. Autrefois le bruit de leurs pas seulement me faisait tressaillir, je restais devant la boutique d’un coiffeur, à regarder les belles figures de cire avec des fleurs et des diamants dans les cheveux, roses, blanches et décolletées, j’ai été amoureux de quelques-unes ; l’étalage d’un cordonnier me tenait aussi en extase : dans ces petits souliers de satin, que l’on allait emporter pour le bal du soir, je plaçais un pied nu, un pied charmant avec des ongles fins, un pied d’albâtre vivant, tel que celui d’une princesse qui entre au bain ; les corsets suspendus devant les magasins de modes, et que le vent fait remuer, me donnaient également de bizarres envies ; j’ai offert des bouquets de fleurs à des femmes que je n’aimais pas, espérant que l’amour viendrait par là, je l’avais entendu dire ; j’ai écrit des lettres adressées à n’importe qui, pour m’attendrir avec la plume, et j’ai pleuré ; le moindre sourire d’une bouche de femme me faisait fondre le cœur en délices, et puis c’était tout ! Tant de bonheur n’était pas fait pour moi, qu’est-ce qui pouvait m’aimer ?

— Attends ! attends encore un an, six mois ! demain peut-être, espère ! — J’ai trop espéré pour obtenir.

— Tu parles comme un enfant, me dit-elle.

— Non, je ne vois même pas d’amour dont je ne serais rassasié au bout de vingt-quatre heures, j’ai tant rêvé le sentiment que j’en suis fatigué, comme ceux que l’on a trop fortement chéris.

— Il n’y a pourtant que cela de beau dans le monde.

— À qui le dis-tu ? je donnerais tout pour passer une seule nuit avec une femme qui m’aimerait.

— Oh ! si au lieu de cacher ton cœur, tu laissais voir tout ce qui bat dedans de généreux et de bon, toutes les femmes voudraient de toi, il n’en est pas une qui ne tâcherait d’être ta maîtresse ; mais tu as été plus fou que moi encore ! Fait-on cas des trésors enfouis ? les coquettes seules devinent les gens comme toi, et les torturent, mais les autres ne les voient pas. Tu valais pourtant la peine qu'on t'aimât ! Eh bien, tant mieux ! c'est moi qui t'aimerai, c'est moi qui serai ta maîtresse.

— Ma maîtresse ?

— Oh ! je t'en prie ! je te suivrai où tu voudras, je partirai d'ici, j'irai louer une chambre en face de toi, je te regarderai toute la journée. Comme je t'aimerai ! être avec toi, le soir, le matin, la nuit dormir ensemble, les bras passés autour du corps, manger à la même table, vis-à-vis l'un de l'autre, nous habiller dans la même chambre, sortir ensemble et te sentir près de moi ! Ne sommes-nous pas faits l'un pour l'autre ? tes espérances ne vont-elles pas bien avec mes dégoûts ? ta vie et la mienne, n'est-ce pas la même ? Tu me raconteras tous les ennuis de ta solitude, je te redirai les supplices que j'ai endurés ; il faudra vivre comme si nous ne devions rester ensemble qu'une heure, épuiser tout ce qu'il y a en nous de volupté et de tendresse, et puis recommencer, mourir ensemble. Embrasse-moi, embrasse-moi encore ! mets là ta tête sur ma poitrine, que j'en sente bien le poids, que tes cheveux me caressent le cou, que mes mains parcourent tes épaules, ton regard est si tendre.

La couverture défaite, qui pendait à terre, laissait nos pieds à nu ; elle se releva sur les genoux et la repoussa sous le matelas, je vis son dos blanc se courber comme un roseau ; les insomnies de la nuit m'avaient brisé, mon front était lourd, les yeux me brûlaient les paupières, elle me les baisa doucement du bout des lèvres, ce qui me les rafraîchit comme si on me les eût humectés avec de l'eau froide. Elle aussi se réveillait de plus en plus de la torpeur où elle s'était laissée aller un instant ; irritée par la fatigue, enflammée par le goût des caresses précédentes, elle m'étreignit avec une volupté désespérée, en me disant : “Aimons-nous, puisque personne ne nous a aimés, tu es à moi !”

Elle haletait, la bouche ouverte, et m'embrassait furieusement, puis tout à coup, se reprenant et passant sa main sur ses bandeaux dérangés, elle ajouta :

— Ecoute, comme notre vie serait belle si c'était ainsi, si nous pouvions demeurer dans un pays où le soleil fait pousser des fleurs jaunes et mûrit les oranges, sur un rivage comme il y en a, à ce qu'il paraît, où les hommes portent des turbans, où les femmes ont des robes de gaze ; nous demeurerions couchés sous quelque grand arbre à larges feuilles, nous écouterions le bruit des golfes, nous marcherions ensemble au bord des flots pour ramasser des coquilles, je ferais des paniers avec des roseaux, tu irais les vendre ; c'est moi qui t'habillerais, je friserais tes cheveux dans mes doigts, je te mettrais un collier autour du cou, oh ! comme je t'aimerais ! comme je t'aime ! laisse-moi donc m'assouvir de toi !

Me collant à sa couche, d'un mouvement impétueux, elle s'abattit sur tout mon corps et s’y étendit avec une joie obscène, pâle, frissonnante, les dents serrées avec une force enragée ; je me sentis entraîné comme dans un ouragan d’amour, des sanglots éclataient, et puis des cris aigus ; ma lèvre, humide de sa salive, pétillait et me démangeait ; nos muscles, tordus dans les mêmes nœuds, se serraient et entraient les uns dans les autres, la volupté se tournait en délire, la jouissance en supplice.

Ouvrant tout à coup les yeux ébahis et épouvantés, elle dit :

— Si j’allais avoir un enfant !

Et passant, au contraire, à une câlinerie suppliante :

— Oui, oui, un enfant ! un enfant de toi !… Tu me quittes ? nous ne nous reverrons plus, jamais tu ne reviendras ? penseras-tu à moi quelquefois ? j’aurai toujours tes cheveux là, adieu !… Attends, il fait à peine jour.

Pourquoi donc avais-je hâte de la fuir ? est-ce que déjà je l’aimais ?

Marie ne me parla plus, quoique je restasse bien encore une demi-heure chez elle ; elle songeait peut-être à l’amant absent. Il y a un instant, dans le départ où, par anticipation de tristesse, la personne aimée n’est déjà plus avec vous.

Nous ne nous fîmes pas d’adieux, je lui pris la main, elle y répondit, mais la force pour la serrer était restée dans son cœur.

Je ne l’ai plus revue.

J’ai pensé à elle depuis, pas un jour ne s’est écoulé sans perdre à y rêver le plus d’heures possibles, quelquefois je m’enferme exprès et seul, je tâche de revivre dans ce souvenir ; souvent je m’efforce à y penser avant de m’endormir, pour la rêver la nuit, mais ce bonheur ne m’est pas arrivé.

Je l’ai cherchée partout, dans les promenades, au théâtre, au coin des rues, sans savoir pourquoi j’ai cru qu’elle m’écrirait ; quand j’entendais une voiture s’arrêter à ma porte, je m’imaginais qu’elle allait en descendre. Avec quelle angoisse j’ai suivi certaines femmes ! avec quel battement de cœur je détournais la tête pour voir si c’était elle !

La maison a été démolie, personne n’a pu me dire ce qu’elle était devenue.

Le désir d’une femme que l’on a obtenue est quelque chose d’atroce et de mille fois pire que l’autre ; de terribles images vous poursuivent comme des remords. Je ne suis pas jaloux des hommes qui l’ont eue avant moi, mais je suis jaloux de ceux qui l’ont eue depuis ; une convention tacite faisait, il me semble, que nous devions nous être fidèles, j’ai été plus d’un an à lui garder cette parole, et puis le hasard, l’ennui, la lassitude du même sentiment peut-être, on fait que j’y ai manqué. Mais c’était elle que je poursuivais partout ; dans le lit des autres, je rêvais à ses caresses.

On a beau, par-dessus les passions anciennes, vouloir en semer de nouvelles, elles reparaissent toujours, il n’y a pas de force au monde pour en arracher les racines. Les voies romaines, où roulaient les chars consulaires, ne servent plus depuis longtemps, mille nouveaux sentiers les traversent, les champs se sont élevés dessus, le blé y pousse, mais on en aperçoit encore la trace, et leurs grosses pierres ébrèchent les charrues quand on laboure.

Le type dont presque tous les hommes sont en quête n'est peut-être que le souvenir d'un amour conçu dans le ciel ou dès les premiers jours de la vie ; nous sommes en quête de tout ce qui s'y rapporte, la seconde femme qui vous plaît ressemble presque toujours à la première, il faut un grand degré de corruption ou un cœur bien vaste pour tout aimer. Voyez aussi comme ce sont éternellement les mêmes dont vous parlent les gens qui écrivent, et qu'ils décrivent cent fois sans jamais s'en lasser. J'ai connu un ami qui avait adoré, à 15 ans, une jeune mère qu'il avait vue nourrissant son enfant ; de longtemps il n'estima que les tailles de poissarde, la beauté des femmes sveltes lui était odieuse.

À mesure que le temps s'éloignait, je l'en aimais de plus en plus ; avec la rage que l'on a pour les choses impossibles, j'inventais des aventures pour la retrouver, j'imaginais notre rencontre, j'ai revu ses yeux dans les globules bleus des fleuves, et la couleur de sa figure dans les feuilles du tremble, quand l'automne les colore. Une fois, je marchais vite dans un pré, les herbes sifflaient autour de mes pieds en m'avançant, elle était derrière moi ; je me suis retourné, il n'y avait personne. Un autre jour, une voiture a passé devant mes yeux, j'ai levé la tête, un grand voile blanc sortait de la portière et s'agitait au vent, les roues tournait, il se tordait, il m'appelait, il a disparu, et je suis retombé seul, abîmé, plus abandonné qu'au fond d'un précipice.

Oh ! si l'on pouvait extraire de soi tout ce qui y est et faire un être avec la pensée seule ! si l'on pouvait tenir son fantôme dans les mains et le toucher au front, au lieu de perdre dans l'air tant de caresses et de soupirs ! Loin de là, la mémoire oublie et l'image s'efface, tandis que l'acharnement de la douleur reste en vous. C'est pour me la rappeler que j'ai écrit ce qui précède, espérant que les mots me la feraient revivre ; j'y ai échoué, j'en sais bien plus que je n'en ai dit.

C'est, d'ailleurs, une confidence que je n'ai faite à personne, on se serait moqué de moi. Ne se raille-t-on pas de ceux qui aiment, car c'est une honte parmi les hommes ; chacun, par pudeur ou par égoïsme, cache ce qu'il possède dans l'âme de meilleur et de plus délicat ; pour se faire estimer, il ne faut montrer que les côtés les plus laids, c'est le moyen d'être au niveau commun. Aimer une telle femme ? m'aurait-on dit, et d'abord personne ne l'eût compris ; à quoi bon, dès lors, en ouvrir la bouche ?

Ils auraient eu raison, elle n'était peut-être ni plus belle ni plus ardente qu'une autre, j'ai peur de n'aimer qu'une conception de mon esprit et de ne chérir en elle que l'amour qu'elle m'avait fait rêver.

Longtemps, je me suis débattu sous cette pensée, j’avais placé l’amour trop haut pour espérer qu’il descendrait jusqu’à moi ; mais, à la persistance de cette idée, il a bien fallu reconnaître que c’était quelque chose d’analogue. Ce n’est que plusieurs mois après l’avoir quittée que je l’ai ressenti ; dans les premiers temps, au contraire, j’ai vécu dans un grand calme.

Comme le monde est vide à celui qui y marche seul ! Qu’allais-je faire ? Comment passer le temps ? à quoi employer mon cerveau ? comme les journées sont longues ! Où est donc l’homme qui se plaint de la brièveté des jours de la vie ? qu’on me le montre, ce doit être un mortel heureux.

Distrayez-vous, disent-ils, mais à quoi ? c’est me dire : tâchez d’être heureux ; mais comment ? et à quoi bon tant de mouvement ? Tout est bien dans la nature, les arbres poussent, les fleuves coulent, les oiseaux chantent, les étoiles brillent ; mais l’homme tourmenté remue, s’agite, abat les forêts, bouleverse la terre, s’élance sur la mer, voyage, court, tue les animaux, se tue lui-même, et pleure, et rugit, et pense à l’enfer, comme si Dieu lui avait donné un esprit pour concevoir encore plus de maux qu’il n’en endure !

Autrefois, avant Marie, mon ennui avait quelque chose de beau, de grand ; mais maintenant il est stupide, c’est l’ennui d’un homme plein de mauvaise eau-de-vie, sommeil d’ivre mort.

Ceux qui ont beaucoup vécu ne sont pas de même. À 50 ans, ils sont plus frais que moi à vingt, tout leur est encore neuf et attrayant. Serai-je comme ces mauvais chevaux, qui sont fatigués à peine sortis de l’écurie, et qui ne trottent à l’aise qu’après un long bout de route, fait en boitant et en souffrant ? Trop de spectacles me font mal, trop aussi me font pitié, ou plutôt tout cela se confond dans le même dégoût.

Celui qui est assez bien né pour ne pas vouloir de maîtresse parce qu’il ne pourrait la couvrir de diamants ni la loger dans un palais, et qui assiste à des amours vulgaires, qui contemple, d’un oeil calme, la laideur bête de ces deux animaux en rut que l’on appelle un amant et une maîtresse, n’est pas tenté de se ravaler si bas, il se défend d’aimer comme une faiblesse, et il terrasse sous ses genoux tous les désirs qui viennent ; cette lutte l’épuise. L’égoïsme cynique des hommes m’écarte d’eux, de même que l’esprit borné des femmes me dégoûte de leur commerce ; j’ai tort, après tout, car deux belles lèvres valent mieux que toute l’éloquence du monde.

La feuille tombée s’agite et vole aux vents, de même, moi, je voudrais voler, m’en aller, partir pour ne plus revenir, n’importe où, mais quitter mon pays ; ma maison me pèse sur les épaules, je suis tant de fois entré et sorti par la même porte ! j’ai tant de fois levé les yeux à la même place, au plafond de ma chambre, qu’il devrait en être usé.

Oh ! se sentir plier sur le dos des chameaux ! devant soi un ciel tout rouge, un sable tout brun, l’horizon flamboyant qui s’allonge, les terrains qui ondulent, l’aigle qui pointe sur votre tête ; dans un coin, une troupe de cigognes aux pattes roses, qui passent et s’en vont vers les citernes ; le vaisseau mobile du désert vous berce, le soleil vous fait fermer les yeux, vous baigne dans ses rayons, on n’entend que le bruit étouffé du pas des montures, le conducteur vient de finir sa chanson, on va, on va. Le soir, on plante les pieux, on dresse la tente, on fait boire les dromadaires, on se couche sur une peau de lion, on fume, on allume des feux pour éloigner les chacals, que l’on entend glapir au fond du désert, des étoiles inconnues et quatre fois grandes comme les nôtres palpitent aux cieux ; le matin, on remplit les outres à l’oasis, on repart, on est seul, le vent siffle, le sable s’élève en tourbillons.

Et puis, dans quelque plaine où l’on galope tout le jour, des palmiers s’élèvent entre les colonnes et agitent doucement leur ombrage, à côté de l’ombre immobile des temples détruits ; des chèvres grimpent sur des frontispices renversés et mordent les plantes qui ont poussé dans les ciselures du marbre, elles fuient en bondissant quand vous approchez. Au-delà, après avoir traversé des forêts où les arbres sont liés ensemble par des lianes gigantesques, et des fleuves dont on n’aperçoit pas l’autre rive du bord, c’est le Soudan, le pays des nègres, le pays de l’or ; mais plus loin, oh ! allons toujours plus loin, je veux voir le Malabar furieux et ses danses où l’on se tue ; les vins donnent la mort comme les poisons, les poisons sont doux comme les vins ; la mer, une mer bleue remplie de corail et de perles, retentit du bruit des orgies sacrées qui se font dans les antres des montagnes, il n’y a plus de vagues, l’atmosphère est vermeille, le ciel sans nuage se mire dans le tiède Océan, les câbles fument quand on les retire de l’eau, les requins suivent le navire et mangent les morts.

Oh ! l’Inde ! l’Inde surtout ! Des montagnes blanches, remplies de pagodes et d’idoles, au milieu de bois remplis de tigres et d’éléphants, des hommes jaunes avec des vêtements blancs, des femmes couvertes d’étain avec des anneaux aux pieds et aux mains, des robes de gaze qui les enveloppent comme une vapeur, des yeux dont on ne voit que les paupières noircies avec du henné ; elles chantent ensemble un hymne à quelque dieu, elles dansent… Danse, danse, bayadère, fille du Gange, tournoie bien tes pieds dans ma tête ! Comme une couleuvre, elle se replie, dénoue ses bras, sa tête remue, ses hanches se balancent, ses narines s’enflent, ses cheveux se dénouent, l’encens qui fume entoure l’idole stupide et dorée, qui a quatre têtes et vingt bras.

Dans un canot de bois de cèdre, un canot allongé, dont les avirons minces ont l’air de plumes, sous une voile faite de bambous tressés, au bruit des tam-tams et des tambourins, j’irai dans le pays jaune que l’on appelle la Chine ; les pieds des femmes se prennent dans la main, leur tête est petite, leurs sourcils minces, relevés aux coins, elles vivent dans des tonnelles de roseau vert, et mangent des fruits à la peau de velours, dans de la porcelaine peinte. Moustache aiguë, tombant sur la poitrine, tête rase, avec une houppe qui lui descend sur le dos, le mandarin, un éventail rond dans les doigts, se promène dans la galerie, où des trépieds brûlent, et marche lentement sur les nattes de riz ; une petit pipe est passée dans son bonnet pointu, et des écritures noires sont empreintes sur ses vêtements de soie rouge. Oh ! que les boîtes à thé m’ont fait faire des voyages !

Emportez-moi, tempêtes du Nouveau Monde, qui déracinez les chênes séculaires et tourmentez les lacs où les serpents se jouent dans les flots ! Que les torrents de Norvège me couvrent de leur mousse ! que la neige de Sibérie, qui tombe tassée efface mon chemin ! Oh ! voyager, voyager, ne jamais s’arrêter, et, dans cette valse immense, tout voir apparaître et passer, jusqu’à ce que la peau vous crève et que le sang jaillisse !

Que les vallées succèdent aux montagnes, les champs aux villes, les plaines aux mers. Descendons et montons les côtes, que les aiguilles des cathédrales disparaissent, après les mâts de vaisseaux pressés dans les ports ; écoutons les cascades tomber sur les rochers, le vent dans les forêts, les glaciers se fondre au soleil ; que je voie les cavaliers arabes courir, des femmes portées en palanquin, et puis des coupoles s’arrondir, des pyramides s’élever dans les cieux, des souterrains étouffés, où les momies dorment, des défilés étroits, où le brigand arme son fusil, des joncs où se cache le serpent à sonnettes, des zèbres bariolés courant dans les grandes herbes, des kangourous dressés sur leurs pattes de derrière, des singes se balançant au bout des branches des cocotiers, des tigres bondissant sur leur proie, des gazelles leur échappant…

Allons, allons ! passons les océans larges, où les baleines et les cachalots se font la guerre. Voici venir comme un grand oiseau de mer, qui bat des deux ailes, sur la surface des flots, la pirogue des sauvages ; des chevelures sanglantes pendent à la proue, ils se sont peints les côtes en rouge ; les lèvres fendues, le visage barbouillé, des anneaux dans le nez, ils chantent en hurlant le chant de la mort, leur grand arc est tendu, leurs flèches à la pointe verte sont empoisonnées et font mourir dans les tourments ; leurs femmes nues, seins et mains tatoués, élèvent de grands bûchers pour les victimes de leurs époux, qui leur ont promis de la chair de blanc, si moelleuse sous la dent.

Où irai-je ? la terre est grande, j’épuiserai tous les chemins, je viderai tous les horizons ; puissé-je périr en doublant Le Cap, mourir du choléra à Calcutta ou de la peste à Constantinople !

Si j’étais seulement muletier en Andalousie ! et trotter tout le jour, dans les gorges des sierras, voir couler le Guadalquivir, sur lequel il y a des îles de lauriers-roses, entendre, le soir, les guitares et les voix chanter sous les balcons, regarder la lune se mirer dans le bassin de marbre de l’Alhambra, où autrefois se baignaient les sultanes.

Que ne suis-je gondolier à Venise ou conducteur d’une de ces carrioles, qui, dans la belle saison, vous mènent de Nice à Rome ! il y a pourtant des gens qui vivent à Rome, des gens qui y demeurent toujours. Heureux le mendiant de Naples, qui dort au grand soleil, couché sur le rivage, et qui, en fumant son cigare, voit aussi la fumée du Vésuve monter dans le ciel ! Je lui envie son lit de galets et les songes qu’il y peut faire ; la mer, toujours belle, lui apporte le parfum de ses flots et le murmure lointain qui vient de Caprée.

Quelquefois je me figure arriver en Sicile, dans un petit village de pêcheurs, où toutes les barques ont des voiles latines. C’est le matin ; là, entre des corbeilles et des filets étendus, une fille du peuple est assise, elle a ses pieds nus, à son corset est un cordon d’or, comme les femmes des colonies grecques ; ses cheveux noirs, séparés en deux tresses, lui tombent jusqu’aux talons, elle se lève, secoue son tablier ; elle marche, et sa taille est robuste et souple à la fois, comme celle de la nymphe antique. Si j’étais aimé d’une telle femme ! une pauvre enfant ignorante qui ne saurait seulement pas lire, mais dont la voix serait si douce, quand elle me dirait, avec son accent sicilien : “Je t’aime ! reste ici !”

Le manuscrit s’arrête ici, mais j’en ai connu l’auteur, et si quelqu’un, ayant passé, pour arriver jusqu’à cette page, à travers toutes les métaphores, hyperboles et autres figures qui remplissent les précédentes, désire y trouver une fin, qu’il continue ; nous allons la lui donner.

Il faut que les sentiments aient peu de mots à leur service, sans cela le livre se fût achevé à la première personne. Sans doute que notre homme n’aura plus rien trouvé à dire ; il se trouve un point où l’on n’écrit plus et où l’on pense davantage, c’est à ce point qu’il s’arrêta, tant pis pour le lecteur !

J’admire le hasard, qui a voulu que le livre en demeurât là, au moment où il serait devenu meilleur ; l’auteur allait entrer dans le monde, il aurait eu mille choses à nous apprendre, mais il s’est, au contraire, livré de plus en plus à une solitude austère, d’où rien ne sortait. Or il jugea convenable de ne plus se plaindre, preuve peut-être qu’il commença réellement à souffrir. Ni dans sa conversation, ni dans ses lettres, ni dans les papiers que j’ai fouillés après sa mort, et où ceci se trouvait, je n’ai saisi rien qui dévoilât l’état de son âme, à partir de l’époque où il cessa d’écrire ses confessions.

Son grand regret était de ne pas être peintre, il disait avoir de très beaux tableaux dans l’imagination. Il se désolait également de n’être pas musicien ; par les matinées de printemps, quand il se promenait le long des avenues de peupliers, des symphonies sans fin lui résonnaient dans la tête. Du reste, il n’entendait rien à la peinture ni à la musique, je l’ai vu admirer des galettes authentiques et avoir la migraine en sortant de l’Opéra. Avec un peu plus de temps, de patience, de travail, et surtout avec un goût plus délicat de la plastique des arts, il fût arrivé à faire des vers médiocres, bons à mettre dans l’album d’une dame, ce qui est toujours galant, quoi qu’on en dise.

Dans sa première jeunesse, il s’était nourri de très mauvais auteurs, comme on l’a pu voir à son style ; en vieillissant, il s’en dégoûta, mais les excellents ne lui donnèrent plus le même enthousiasme.

Passionné pour ce qui est beau, la laideur lui répugnait comme le crime ; c’est, en effet, quelque chose d’atroce qu’un être laid, de loin il épouvante, de près il dégoûte ; quand il parle, on souffre ; s’il pleure, ses larmes vous agacent ; on voudrait le battre quand il rit et, dans le silence, sa figure immobile vous semble le siège de tous les vices et de tous les bas instincts. Aussi il ne pardonna jamais à un homme qui lui avait déplu dès le premier abord ; en revanche, il était très dévoué à des gens qui ne lui avaient jamais adressé quatre mots, mais dont il aimait la démarche ou la coupe du crâne. Il fuyait les assemblées, les spectacles, les bals, les concerts, car, à peine y était-il entré, qu’il se sentait glacé de tristesse et qu’il avait froid dans les cheveux. Quand la foule le coudoyait, une haine toute jeune lui montait au cœur, il lui portait, à cette foule, un cœur de loup, un cœur de bête fauve traquée dans son terrier.

Il avait la vanité de croire que les hommes ne l’aimaient pas, que les hommes ne le connaissaient pas.

Les malheurs publics et les douleurs collectives l’attristaient médiocrement, je dirai même qu’il s’apitoyait plus sur les serins en cage, battant des ailes quand il fait du soleil, que sur les peuples en esclavage, c’est ainsi qu’il était fait. Il était plein de scrupules délicats et de vraie pudeur, il ne pouvait, par exemple, rester chez un pâtissier et voir un pauvre le regarder manger sans rougir jusqu’aux oreilles ; en sortant, il lui donnait tout ce qu’il avait d’argent dans la main et s’enfuyait bien vite. Mais on le trouvait cynique, parce qu’il se servait de mots propres et disait tout haut ce que l’on pense tout bas.

L’amour des femmes entretenues (idéal des jeunes gens qui n’ont pas le moyen d’en entretenir) lui était odieux, le dégoûtait ; il pensait que l’homme qui paie est le maître, le seigneur, le roi. Quoiqu’il fût pauvre, il respectait la richesse et non les gens riches ; être gratis l’amant d’une femme qu’un autre loge, habille et nourrit, lui semblait quelque chose d’aussi spirituel que de voler une bouteille de vin dans la cave d’autrui ; il ajoutait que s’en vanter était le propre des domestiques fripons et des petites gens.

Vouloir une femme mariée, et pour cela se rendre l’ami du mari, lui serrer affectueusement les mains, rire à ses calembours, s’attrister de ses mauvaises affaires, faire ses commissions, lire le même journal que lui, en un mot exécuter, dans un seul jour, plus de bassesses et de platitudes que dix galériens n’en ont fait en toute leur vie, c’était quelque chose de trop humiliant pour son orgueil, et il aima cependant plusieurs femmes mariées ; quelquefois, il se mit en beau chemin mais la répugnance le prenait tout à coup, quand déjà la belle dame commençait à lui faire les yeux doux, comme les gelées du mois de mai qui brûlent les abricotiers en fleurs.

Et les grisettes, me direz-vous ? Eh bien, non ! il ne pouvait se résigner à monter dans une mansarde, pour embrasser une bouche qui vient de déjeuner avec du fromage, et prendre une main qui a des engelures.

Quant à séduire une jeune fille, il se serait cru moins coupable s’il l’avait violée, attacher quelqu’un à soi était pour lui pire que de l’assassiner. Il pensait sérieusement qu’il y a moins de mal à tuer un homme qu’à faire un enfant ; au premier vous ôtez la vie, non pas la vie entière, mais la moitié ou le quart ou la centième partie de cette existence qui va finir, qui finirait sans vous ; mais envers le second, disait-il, n’êtes-vous pas responsable de toutes les larmes qu’il versera depuis son berceau jusqu’à sa tombe ? sans vous, il ne serait pas né, et s’il naît, pourquoi cela ? pour votre amusement, non pour le sien, à coup sûr ; pour porter votre nom, le nom d’un sot, je parie ? autant vaudrait l’écrire sur un mur ; à quoi bon un homme pour supporter le fardeau de trois ou quatre lettres ?

À ses yeux, celui qui, appuyé sur le Code civil, entre de force dans le lit de la vierge qu’on lui a donnée le matin, exerçant ainsi un viol légal que l’autorité protège, n’avait pas d’analogue chez les singes, les hippopotames et les crapauds, qui, mâle et femelle, s’accouplent lorsque des désirs communs les font se chercher et s’unir, où il n’y a ni épouvante et dégoût d’un côté, ni brutalité et despotisme obscène de l’autre ; et il exposait là-dessus de longues théories immorales, qu’il est inutile de rapporter.

Voilà pourquoi il ne se maria point et n’eut pour maîtresse ni fille entretenue, ni femme mariée, ni grisette, ni jeune fille ; restaient les veuves, il n’y pensa pas.

Quand il fallut choisir un état, il hésita entre mille répugnances. Pour se mettre philanthrope, il n’était pas assez malin, et son bon naturel l’écartait de la médecine ; — quant au commerce, il était incapable de calculer, la vue seule d’une banque lui agaçait les nerfs. Malgré ses folies, il avait trop de sens pour prendre au sérieux la noble profession d’avocat ; d’ailleurs sa justice ne se fût pas accommodée aux lois. Il avait aussi trop de goût pour se lancer dans la critique, il était trop poète, peut-être, pour réussir dans les lettres. Et puis, sont-ce là des états ? *Il faut s’établir, avoir une position dans le monde, on s’ennuie à rester oisif, il faut se rendre utile, l’homme est né pour travailler* : maximes difficiles à comprendre et qu’on avait soin de souvent lui répéter.

Résigné à s’ennuyer partout et à s’ennuyer de tout, il déclara vouloir faire son droit et il alla habiter Paris. Beaucoup de gens l’envièrent dans son village, et lui dirent qu’il allait être heureux de fréquenter les cafés, les spectacles, les restaurants, de voir les belles femmes ; il les laissa dire, et il sourit comme lorsqu’on a envie de pleurer. Que de fois, cependant, il avait désiré quitter pour toujours sa chambre, où il avait tant baillé, et dérangé ses coudes de dessus le vieux bureau d’acajou où il avait composé ses drames à quinze ans ! et il se sépara de tout cela avec peine ; ce sont peut-être les endroits qu’on a le plus maudits que l’on préfère aux autres, les prisonniers ne regrettent-ils pas leur prison ? C’est que, dans cette prison, ils espéraient et que, sortis, ils n’espèrent plus ; à travers les murs de leur cachot, ils voyaient la campagne émaillée de marguerites, sillonnée de ruisseaux, couverte de blés jaunes, avec des routes bordées d’arbres, — mais rendus à la liberté, à la misère, ils revoient la vie telle qu’elle est, ornée de gardes champêtres pour les empêcher de prendre les fruits s’ils ont soif, fournie en gardes forestiers, s’ils veulent tuer du gibier et qu’ils aient faim, couverte de gendarmes, s’ils ont envie de se promener et qu’ils n’aient pas de passeport.

Il alla se loger dans une chambre garnie, où les meubles avaient été achetés pour d’autres, usés par d’autres que lui ; il lui sembla habiter dans des ruines. Il passait la journée à travailler, à écouter le bruit sourd de la rue, à regarder la pluie tomber sur les toits.

Quand il faisait du soleil, il allait se promener au Luxembourg, il marchait sur les feuilles tombées, se rappelant qu’au collège il faisait de même ; mais il ne se serait pas douté que, dix ans plus tard, il en serait là. Ou bien il s’asseyait sur un banc et songeait à mille choses tendres et tristes, il regardait l’eau froide et noire des bassins, puis il s’en retournait le cœur serré. Deux ou trois fois, ne sachant que faire, il alla dans les églises à l’heure du salut, il tâchait de prier ; comme ses amis auraient ri, s’ils l’avaient vu tremper ses doigts dans le bénitier et faire le signe de la croix.

Un soir qu’il errait dans un faubourg et qu’irrité sans cause il eût voulu sauter sur des épées nues et se battre à outrance, il entendit des voix chanter et le son doux d’un orgue y répondre par bouffées. Il entra. Sous le portique, une vieille femme, accroupie par terre, demandait la charité en secouant des sous dans un gobelet de fer-blanc ; la porte tapissée allait et venait à chaque personne qui entrait ou qui sortait, on entendait des bruits de sabots, des chaises qui remuaient sur des dalles ; au fond, le chœur était illuminé, le tabernacle brillait aux flambeaux, le prêtre chantait des prières, les lampes, suspendues dans la nef, se balançaient à leurs longues cordes, le haut des ogives et les bas-côtés étaient dans l’ombre, la pluie fouettait sur les vitraux et en faisait craquer les fils de plomb, l’orgue allait, et les voix reprenaient, comme le jour où il avait entendu sur les falaises la mer et les oiseaux se parler. Il fut pris d’envie d’être prêtre, pour dire des oraisons sur le corps des morts, pour porter un cilice et se prosterner ébloui dans l’amour de Dieu… Tout à coup un ricanement de pitre lui vint au fond du cœur, il enfonça son chapeau sur ses oreilles, et sortit en haussant les épaules.

Plus que jamais il devint triste, plus que jamais les jours furent longs pour lui ; les orgues de Barbarie qu’il entendait jouer sous sa fenêtre lui arrachaient l’âme, il trouvait à ces instruments une mélancolie invincible, il disait que ces boîtes-là étaient pleines de larmes. Ou plutôt il ne disait rien, car il ne faisait pas le blasé, l’ennuyé, l’homme qui est désillusionné de tout ; sur la fin, même, on trouva qu’il était devenu d’un caractère plus gai. C’était, le plus souvent, quelque pauvre homme du Midi, un Piémontais, un Génois, qui tournait la manivelle. Pourquoi celui-là avait-il quitté sa corniche, et sa cabane couronnée de maïs à la moisson ? il le regardait jouer longtemps, sa grosse tête carrée, sa barbe noire et ses mains brunes, un petit singe habillé de rose sautait sur son épaule et grimaçait, l’homme tendait sa casquette, il lui jetait son aumône dedans et le suivait jusqu’à ce qu’il l’eût perdu de vue.

En face de lui on bâtissait une maison, cela dura trois mois ; il vit les murs s’élever, les étages monter les uns sur les autres, on mit des carreaux aux fenêtres, on la crépit, on la peignit, puis on ferma les portes ; des ménages vinrent l’habiter et commencèrent à y vivre, il fut fâché d’avoir des voisins, il aimait mieux la vue des pierres.

Il se promenait dans les musées, il contemplait tous ces personnages factices, immobiles et toujours jeunes dans leur vie idéale, que l’on va voir, et qui voient passer devant eux la foule, sans déranger leur tête, sans ôter la main de dessus leurs épées, et dont les yeux brilleront encore quand nos petits-fils seront ensevelis. Il se perdait en contemplations devant les statues antiques, surtout celles qui étaient mutilées.

Une chose pitoyable lui arriva. Un jour, dans la rue, il crut reconnaître quelqu’un en passant près de lui, l’étranger avait fait le même mouvement, ils s’arrêtèrent et s’abordèrent. C’était lui ! son ancien ami, son meilleur ami, son frère, celui à côté de qui il était au collège, en classe, à l’étude, au dortoir ; ils faisaient leurs pensums et leurs devoirs ensemble ; dans la cour et en promenade, ils se promenaient bras dessus bras dessous, ils avaient juré autrefois de vivre en commun et d’être *amis jusqu’à la mort*. D’abord ils se donnèrent une poignée de main, en s’appelant par leur nom, puis se regardèrent des pieds à la tête sans rien dire, ils étaient changés tous les deux et déjà un peu vieillis. Après s’être demandé ce qu’ils faisaient, ils s’arrêtèrent tout court et ne surent aller plus loin ;

ils ne s’étaient pas vus depuis six ans et ne purent trouver quatre mots à échanger. Ennuyés, à la fin, de s’être regardés l’un et l’autre dans le blanc des yeux, ils se séparèrent.

Comme il n’avait d’énergie pour rien et que le temps, contrairement à l’avis des philosophes, lui semblait la richesse la moins prêteuse du monde, il se mit à boire de l’eau-de-vie et à fumer de l’opium ; il passait souvent ses journées tout couché et à moitié ivre, dans un état qui tenait le milieu entre l’apathie et le cauchemar.

D’autres fois la force lui revenait, et il se redressait tout à coup comme un ressort. Alors le travail lui apparaissait plein de charmes, et le rayonnement de la pensée le faisait sourire, de ce sourire placide et profond des sages ; il se mettait vite à l’ouvrage, il avait des plans superbes, il voulait faire apparaître certaines époques sous un jour tout nouveau, lier l’art à l’histoire, commenter les grands poètes comme les grands peintres, pour cela apprendre les langues, remonter à l’antiquité, entrer dans l’Orient ; il se voyait déjà lisant des inscriptions et déchiffrant des obélisques ; puis il se trouvait fou et recroisait les bras.

Il ne lisait plus, ou bien c’étaient des livres qu’il trouvait mauvais et qui, néanmoins, lui causaient un certain plaisir par leur médiocrité même. La nuit il ne dormait pas, des insomnies le retournaient sur son lit, il rêvait et il s’éveillait, si bien que, le matin, il était plus fatigué que s’il eût veillé.

Usé par l’ennui, habitude terrible, et trouvant même un certain plaisir à l’abrutissement qui en est la suite, il était comme les gens qui se voient mourir, il n’ouvrait plus sa fenêtre pour respirer l’air, il ne se lavait plus les mains, il vivait même dans une saleté de pauvre, la même chemise lui servait une semaine, il ne se faisait plus la barbe et ne se peignait plus les cheveux. Quoique frileux, s’il était sorti dans la matinée et qu’il eût les pieds mouillés, il restait toute la journée sans changer de chaussures et sans faire de feu, ou bien il se jetait tout habillé sur son lit et tâchait de s’endormir ; il regardait les mouches courir sur le plafond, il fumait et suivait de l’oeil les petites spirales bleues qui sortaient de ses lèvres.

On concevra sans peine qu’il n’avait pas de but, et c’est là le malheur. Qui eût pu l’animer, l’émouvoir ? l’amour ? il s’en écartait ; l’ambition le faisait rire ; pour l’argent, sa cupidité était fort grande, mais sa paresse avait le dessus, et puis un million ne valait pas pour lui la peine de le conquérir ; c’est à l’homme né dans l’opulence que le luxe va bien ; celui qui a gagné sa fortune, presque jamais ne la sait manger ; son orgueil était tel qu’il n’aurait pas voulu d’un trône. Vous me demanderez : Que voulait-il ? je n’en sais rien, mais, à coup sûr, il ne songeait point à se faire plus tard élire député ; il eût même refusé une place de préfet, y compris l’habit brodé, la croix d’honneur passée autour du cou, la culotte de peau et les bottes écuyères les jours de cérémonie. Il aimait mieux lire André Chénier que d'être ministre, il aurait préféré être Talma que Napoléon.

C'était un homme qui donnait dans le faux, dans l'amphigourique et faisait grand abus d'épithètes.

Du haut de ces sommets, la terre disparaît, et tout ce qu'on y arrache. Il y a également des douleurs du haut desquelles on n'est plus rien et l'on méprise tout ; quand elles ne vous tuent pas, le suicide seul vous en délivre. Il ne se tua pas, il vécut encore.

Le carnaval arriva, il ne s'y divertit point. Il faisait tout à contretemps, les enterrements excitaient presque sa gaieté, et les spectacles lui donnaient de la tristesse ; toujours il se figurait une foule de squelettes habillés, avec des gants, des manchettes et des chapeaux à plumes, se penchant au bord des loges, se lorgnant, minaudant, s'envoyant des regards vides ; au parterre il voyait étinceler, sous le feu du lustre, une foule de crânes blancs serrés les uns près des autres. Il entendit des gens descendre en courant l'escalier, ils riaient, ils s'en allaient avec des femmes.

Un souvenir de jeunesse lui repassa dans l'esprit, il pensa à X…, ce village où il avait été un jour à pied, et dont il a parlé lui-même dans ce que vous avez lu ; il voulut le revoir avant de mourir, il se sentait s'éteindre. Il mit de l'argent dans sa poche, prit son manteau et partit tout de suite. Les jours gras, cette année-là, étaient tombés dès le commencement de février, il faisait encore très froid, les routes étaient gelées, la voiture roulait au grand galop, il était dans le coupé, il ne dormait pas, mais se sentait traîné avec plaisir vers cette mer qu'il allait encore revoir ; il regardait les guides du postillon, éclairés par la lanterne de l'impériale, se remuer en l'air et sauter sur la croupe fumante des chevaux, le ciel était pur et les étoiles brillaient comme dans les plus belles nuits d'été.

Vers dix heures du matin, il descendit à Y… et de là fit la route à pied jusqu'à X… ; il alla vite, cette fois, d'ailleurs il courait pour se réchauffer. Les fossés étaient pleins de glace, les arbres, dépouillés, avaient le bout de leurs branches rouge, les feuilles tombées, pourries par les pluies, formaient une grande couche noire et gris de fer, qui couvrait le pied de la forêt, le ciel était tout blanc sans soleil. Il remarqua que les poteaux qui indiquent le chemin avaient été renversés ; à un endroit on avait fait une coupe de bois depuis qu'il était passé par là. Il se dépêchait, il avait hâte d'arriver. Enfin le terrain vint à descendre, là il prit, à travers champs, un sentier qu'il connaissait, et bientôt il vit, dans le loin, la mer. Il s'arrêta, il l'entendait battre sur le rivage et gronder au fond de l'horizon, in altum ; une odeur salée lui arriva, portée par la brise froide d'hiver, son cœur battait.

On avait bâti une nouvelle maison à l'entrée du village, deux ou trois autres avaient été abattues.

Les barques étaient à la mer, le quai était désert, chacun se tenait enfermé dans sa maison ; de longs morceaux de glace, que les enfants appellent chandelles des rois, pendaient au bord des toits et au bout des gouttières, les enseignes de l'épicier et de l'aubergiste criaient aigrement sur leur tringle de fer, la marée montait et s'avançait sur les galets, avec un bruit de chaînes et de sanglots.

Après qu'il eût déjeuné, et il fut tout étonné de n'avoir pas faim, il s'alla promener sur la grève. Le vent chantait dans l'air, les joncs minces, qui poussent dans les dunes, sifflaient et se courbaient avec furie, la mousse s'envolait du rivage et courait sur le sable, quelquefois une rafale l'emportait vers le rivage.

La nuit vint, ou mieux ce long crépuscule qui la précède dans les plus tristes jours de l'année ; de gros flocons de neige tombèrent du ciel, ils se fondaient sur les flots, mais ils restaient longtemps sur la plage, qu'ils tachetaient de grandes larmes d'argent.

Il vit, à une place, une vieille barque à demi enfouie dans le sable, échouée là peut-être depuis vingt ans, de la christe marine avait poussé dedans, des polypes et des moules s'étaient attachés à ses planches verdies ; il aima cette barque, il tourna tout autour, il la toucha à différentes places, il la regarda singulièrement, comme on regarde un cadavre.

À cent pas de là, il y avait un petit endroit dans la gorge d'un rocher, ou souvent il avait été s'asseoir et avait passé de bonnes heures à ne rien faire, — il emportait un livre et ne lisait pas, il s'y installait tout seul, le dos par terre, pour regarder le bleu du ciel entre les murs blancs des rochers à pic ; c'était là qu'il avait le mieux entendu le cri des mouettes, et que les fucus suspendus avaient secoué sous lui les perles de leur chevelure ; c'était là qu'il voyait la voile des vaisseaux s'enfoncer sous l'horizon, et que le soleil, pour lui, avait été plus chaud que partout ailleurs sur le reste de la terre.

Il y retourna, il le retrouva ; mais d'autres en avaient pris possession, car, en fouillant le sol, machinalement, avec son pied, il fit trouvaille d'un cul de bouteille et d'un couteau. Des gens y avaient fait une partie, sans doute, on était venu là avec des dames, on y avait déjeuné, on avait rit, on avait fait des plaisanteries. “O mon Dieu, se dit-il, est-ce qu'il n'y a pas sur la terre des lieux que nous avons assez aimés, où nous avons assez vécu pour qu'ils nous appartiennent jusqu'à la mort, et que d'autres que nous-mêmes n'y mettent jamais les yeux !”

Il remonta donc par le ravin, où si souvent il avait fait dérouler des pierres sous ses pieds ; souvent même il en avait lancé exprès, avec force, pour les entendre se frapper contre les parois des rochers et l'écho solitaire y répondre.

Sur le plateau qui domine la falaise, l’air devint plus vif, il vit la lune s’élever en face, dans une portion du ciel bleu sombre ; sous la lune, à gauche, il y avait une petite étoile.

Il pleurait, était-ce de froid ou de tristesse ? son cœur crevait, il avait besoin de parler à quelqu’un. Il entra dans un cabaret, où quelquefois il avait été boire de la bière, il demanda un cigare, et il ne put s’empêcher de dire à la bonne femme qui le servait : “Je suis déjà venu ici.” Elle lui répondit : “Ah ! mais, c’est pas la belle saison, m’sieu, c’est pas la belle saison”, et elle lui rendit de la monnaie.

Le soir il voulut encore sortir, il alla se coucher dans un trou qui sert aux chasseurs pour tirer les canards sauvages, il vit un instant l’image de la lune rouler sur les flots et remuer dans la mer, comme un grand serpent, puis de tous les côtés du ciel des nuages s’amoncelèrent de nouveau, et tout fut noir. Dans les ténèbres, des flots ténébreux se balançaient, montaient les uns sur les autres et détonaient comme des canons, une sorte de rythme faisait de ce bruit une mélodie terrible, le rivage, vibrant sous le coup de vagues, répondait à la haute mer retentissante.

Il songea un instant s’il ne devait pas en finir, personne ne le verrait, pas de secours à espérer, en trois minutes il serait mort ; mais de suite, par une antithèse ordinaire dans ces moments-là, l’existence vint à lui sourire, il revit sa bonne chambre de travail, et tous les jours tranquilles qu’il pourrait y passer encore. Et cependant les voix de l’abîme l’appelaient, les flots s’ouvraient comme un tombeau, prêts de suite à se refermer sur lui et à l’envelopper dans leurs plis liquides…

Il eut peur, il rentra, toute la nuit il entendit le vent siffler dans la terreur ; il fit un énorme feu et se chauffa de façon à se rôtir les jambes.

Son voyage était fini. Rentré chez lui, il trouva ses vitres blanches couvertes de givre, dans la cheminée les charbons étaient éteints, ses vêtements étaient restés sur son lit comme il les avait laissés, l’encre avait séché dans l’encrier ; les murailles étaient froides et suintaient.

Il se dit : “Pourquoi ne suis-je pas resté là-bas ?” et il pensa avec amertume à la joie de son départ.

L’été revint, il n’en fut pas plus joyeux. Quelquefois seulement il allait sur le pont des Arts, et il regardait remuer les arbres des Tuileries, et les rayons du soleil couchant qui empourprent le ciel passer, comme une pluie lumineuse, sous l’Arc de l’Étoile.

Enfin, au mois de décembre dernier, il mourut, mais lentement, petit à petit, par le seule force de la pensée, sans qu’aucun organe fût malade, comme on meurt de tristesse, ce qui paraîtra difficile aux gens qui ont beaucoup souffert, mais ce qu’il faut bien tolérer dans un roman, par amour du merveilleux.

Il recommanda qu’on l’ouvrît, de peur d’être enterré vif, mais il défendit bien qu’on l’embaumât.

25 octobre 1842.

CHRONIQUE NORMANDE DU DIXIÈME SIÈCLE.

N’ayant pas été renseigné en temps opportun sur leur existence, nous plaçons à la fin du second volume des Œuvres inédites *ces quelques essais qui, chronologiquement, appartiennent, sauf le dernier, au tome I.*

Connaissez-vous la Normandie, cette vieille terre classique du moyen âge, où chaque champ a eu sa bataille, chaque pierre garde son nom et chaque débris un souvenir ? Vous figurez-vous Rouen, la métropole, au temps des assauts, des guerres, des famines, au temps où les preux venaient se battre sous ses murs, où les chevaux faisaient étinceler le pavé des quais, tout chauds encore du sang des Anglais ?

Ce jour-là, je veux dire le 28 août de l’an 952, toutes les cloches y étaient en branle ; les habitants, parés de leurs vêtements de fête, se montraient partout, sur les toits, aux lucarnes, aux fenêtres, dans les rues ; tout le peuple se pressait sur la route de Paris en criant de joie et en jetant des fleurs.

Le roi arriva à la porte Beauvoisine à huit heures du soir, on l’attendait depuis le matin. Dès qu’il parut, ce furent des trépignements, des bravos, des cris de joie, des hurlements d’enthousiasme, et l’on vit même des mains qui laissaient tomber des Lis et des roses à travers Les meurtrières des tours.

Le jeune Richard, fils du duc Guillaume assassiné en Flandre, alla au-devant de lui. 11 était âgé de 12 ans, et c’était un bel enfant aux cheveux blonds, aux yeux tendres, au teint pâle ; pourtant il montait habilement sa. jument noire, et sa main portait fort bien une grande épée, qu’il abaissa devant le roi, comme vassal et sujet.

— Pauvre enfant ! dit Louis IV en L’embrassant et en versant une larme que chacun vit couler sur sa joue, je viens ici pour vous venger de la mort de Guillaume.

Le peuple sautait de joie, il bondissait, il dansait, et ses bras tatoués jetaient des couronnes qui tombaient sur Le casque du monarque. N’est-ce pas que tout ce peuple, suspendu à chaque sculpture, à chaque pignon de maison, à chaque proéminence d’église, de rue, de muraille, n’est-ce pas que toute cette multitude enfin, bénissant un seul homme, avait quelque chose d’auguste et de solennel ?

Le ciel était pur, éclairé, quelques étoiles commençaient à y brilLer, l’air embaumait des fleurs que l’on avait jetées aux pieds des chevaux, et Les eaux de la Seine étaient calmes et paisibles ; Le peuple chantait toujours des cris d’allégresse. Oh ! c’était un beau jour ! La lune vint reluire sur Les armes des chevaliers tout couverts de poussière, ce qui les fit parattre d’argent, et le roi entra à l’bêtel de ville.

— Vous coucherez avec nous, dit-il au jeune duc en entrant sous le portique de la salle basse ; veillez, messire bailli, à ce que tout soit prêt dans notre appartoment commun.

Minuit arriva, et Richard dormait d’un sommeil paisible auprès de Louis ; celui-ci, appuyé sur Le balcon, regardait attentivement les dernières lumières de La ville, qui s’éteignaient Les unes après les autres ; bientêt tout rentra dans le silence, et Rouen s’endormit avec calme et bonheur, comme l’enfant qui penchah gracieusement hors de sa couche sa belle chevelure blonde.

La main appuyée sur son front, Le roi aspirait avec volupté Le vent frais de la nuit, car il est de si beaux moments dans la vie d’un homme, où la nature émane un parfum si suave et si doux à l’âme, qu’on se sentirait coupable de ne pas jouir de ces délices.

Un page, qui ouvrit La porte en faisant un grand salut, le tira de sa rêverie.

— Que veux-tu ? Lui dit-il.

— Sire, un homme entouré d’un large manteau, ayant une toque de velours rouge sur la tête, demande audience sur-le-champ ; il prétend avoir de grands secrets à vous communiquer.

— Dis-lui d’entrer… Ah ! c’est toi, dit-il à l’inconnu, qui 6ta son manteau et laissa voir un homme d’une stature élevée, Le corps maigre, le front ridé, et le visage couvert de balafres, c’est toi, Arnould. Quelles nouvelles de Flandre ?

— Vous savez la grande d’abord ?

— Oui, et qu’a dit le peuple ?

— Lui ? rien du tout, il suffit qu’on lui mette un bâillon et iL ne dit plus rien.

— Qu’a-t-il été, ce bâillon ?

— Une distribution de blé aux pauvres.

— Fort bien. Mais que veux-tu faire de cet enfant ?

Et il montrait Richard.

— Ne vous l’ai-je pas dit ? le garder, annoncer qu’il est malade, qu’il tombe en Langueur, et puis, une nuit, on fait venir dans sa chambre un prêtre et un bourreau, Le prêtre sort d’abord, le bourreau ensuite, Le jeune prince est mort ; Le lendemain on fait dire douze messes pour le repos de son âme, et tout est fini. Vous comprenez, sire ? — Oui, je te fais mon premier ministre et je te donne La Normandie que je vais avoir… Ah ! ah ! je l’aurai, dit-iI comme machinalement et en Lui-même, je l’aurai donc ce beau fleuron de ma couronne, je serai roi chez moi… Et puis pourquoi n’aurais-je pas la Bourgogne, la Champagne, la Bretagne ?… Encore une fois, Arnould, je te fais mon premier ministre.

Et il Le congédia en L’embrassant

Et il Le congédia en L'embrassant.

— En ce moment le vent devint plus fort, et son souffle dans l'air souleva quelques fleurs que le soleil avait fanées et qui vinrent voltiger devant la fenêtre du roi. “Les fleurs du peuple”, se dit-il en riant amèrement, et un remords lui tortura l'âme.

Le lendemain, Osmond, tuteur du duc, vint redemander son pupille au roi.

— Pourquoi ? répondit celui-ci.

— Sire, j'étais un des plus vaillants capitaines de la Normandie lorsqu'elle était sous Guillaume, j'ai Laissé bien des Larges gouttes de sang dans des champs de bataille, Le duc m'aimait comme son fils, et lorsqu'il partit pour son entrevue en Flandre, où il fut si lâchement assassiné…

— Qu'y-a-il besoin de revenir sans cesse sur cette affaire ? dit Le roi en rougissant, nous la connaissons, continuez.

— Je vous disais, sire, qu'avant de partir pour la Flandre, il se méfiait de quelque chose et il craignait Arnould, ce seigneur assassin.

— Je vous ax averti, messire Osmond, insulter le nom d'un de nos vassaux c'est m'insulter moi-même. Vous croyez donc, parce que vous êtes tuteur de cet enfant, que vous êtes maItre de la Normandie ? que le roi est ici par hospitalité ? que vous pouvez gouverner Rouen sans que personne, excepté vous, ait le droit de vie ou de mort ? Vous vous trompez, car si je faisais dresser une potence et mettre un grand seigneur au haut, que diriez-vous alors ? — Pardon, sire.

— Continuez.

— Eh bien, sire, il me dit, Les larmes aux yeux, en mettant le pied dans l'étrier : “Veillez sur mon fils, ne Le quittez pas d'un instant, d'une minute, et si je ne reviens pas dans quinze jours, un mois, brûlez huit cierges à Notre-Dame de Bon-Secours pour le repos de votre ami ; vous entendez ? prenez garde à mon fils ! Adieu, et, si c'est pour toujours, encore adieu !)) II me semble Le revoir encore, sire, me serrant la main en me disant ces mots d'adieu, et des Larmes restèrent Longtemps sur sa barbe blanche ; il embrassa son fils, et nous vîmes bientét son cheval disparaître dans un tourbiLlon de poussière. Nous l'attendîmes quinze jours, un mois, personne ! Alors toute la ville prit le deuil, et l'on fit plus, car on versa des larmes !

— Vous êtes un brave homme, dit le roi en soupirant, vos paroles m'ont touché. Eh bien, craignez-vous quelque chose pour cet enfant ? Eh, mon Dieu, nous avons assez de richesses pour le contenter ; pourquoi vouIez-vous le reprendre ? Soyez tranquille, Osmond, un roi sait garder quelque chose de précieux, et la preuve c'est que Lorsqu'on lui prend sa couronne on lui arrache quelquefois ta tête avec, tellement il y tient.

Osmond sortit sans rien dire.

— Qu’ai-je appris, dit Osmond en entrant chez Le roi, Le lendemain matin, Richard est malade ?

— Mais oui.

— Qu’a-t-il ?

— Rien… Tenez, je vais vous te dire, je veux garder le duc auprès de moi, je l’aurai. II est temps de cesser cet inutile carnaval ; dans une heure huit mille hommes sont aux portes de Rouen, j’ai envoyé Arnould vers Bernard, général des troupes de Normandie. Quant à vous, messire Osmond. qui voulez faire La leçon à l’homme roi comme au duc enfant, vous êtes libre maintenant, mais ce soir, au clair de lune, ies vautours auront un cadavre de plus aux chasses du gibet… Allez maintenant, le masque est jeté, montrez-le au peupLe.

Suivons un instant le vieux guerrier insulté, qui descend en courant Le grand escalier. Il s’enfonça dans les rues tortueuses de la basse vieille tour. Sur la place Saint-Marc il rencontra Jehan de Montivilliers.

— Bien, dit-ii, je te cherchais, j’ai de grandes nouvelles à t’annoncer. Eh bien, mes seigneurs, savezvous une chose ?

— Laquelle ? dirent-ils avec empressement.

— Nous sommes dans une ville assiégée.

— Gare ! cria un homme monté sur un cheval et qui traversait la place à bride abattue.

C’était Arnould, duc de Flandre et sbire du roi.

— Parlez plus bas, dit le comte de Rochepeaux lorsqu’il Le vit passer.

— Oui, messieurs, continua Osmond, et par le roi encore ;’ce même homme que vous avez accueilli avec des bravos est un assassin, et le vengeur de Guillaume est son meurtrier !

— Mais, voyons, comment le savezvous ?

— Il a voulu garder Richard avec lui, et tout à l’heure, lorsque j’ai été Lui redemander mon cher enfnt, il m’a dit… oh ! non, vous ne le croirez pas !… il m’a dit, L’infâme ! sans pudeur et sans honte, que tout ce qu’il avait fait était une comédie, une mascarade, et qu’iL se moquait du peuple comme d’un enfant qu’on trompe ; il a ajouté que dans une heure huit mille hommes assiégeraient Rouen. Vive Dieu ! mes seigneurs, il n’en sera pas ainsi, dussions-nous, tous nous faire ass2.ssiner comme Guillaume Longue-Epée ! non, non, te peuple ne se Laissera pas tromper de la sorte, il va prendre les armes. Toi, Jehan de Montivilliers, va à la porte Beauvoisine ; Arthur de Rochepeaux, va au parvis Notre-Dame, c’est L’heure de la grève, tu y trouveras Le peuple ; va, dis-lui qu’on Lui a pris son duc, son enfant bien-aimé, excite-le, mets-lui les armes dans les mains. Toi, Henry d’Harcourt, vole à Saint-Gervais, L’égLise est pleine de peuple, on y chante un Te Deum pour Le roi ; va, dis-lui que Louis IV L’a trompé, dirige sur l’h6tel de ville nos amis. Hardi ! allez !

Deux heures après la multitude assiégeait le palais du roi avec des cris, des huées, des menaces, et les yeux tout rouges de colère ; elle avait déjà massacré Les sentinelles qui veillaient à la porte, et elle promettait avec rage d’en fbncer les portes si Le roi ne se présentait.

C’était pourtant le même peuple qui était venu avec des fleurs et des cris d’amour ! Maintenant il trépignait d’impatience et de rage, comme un homme en délire, il demandait à grands cris : le roi ! le roi ! et mille bras agitaient dans l’air des piques, des haches, des hallebardes, des poignards, des lances et des poings fermés.

Le roi était resté dans sa chambre, seul, assis sur son lit ; il attendait ArnouLd avec impatience, et les hurlements effrénés du peuple, qui allaient toujours croissant, étaient pour lui l’heure qui précède le moment où la tête du condamné doit rouler sur l’échafaud. Un instant il eut Le courage de s’approcher du balcon et de regarder par la fenêtre, mais lorsqu’il vit toute cette mer de tetes qui s’agitat dans les rues tortueuses et qui montait vers le palais comme la tempête, iL trembla, il faillit s’évanouir, ses jambes pliaient sous lui, ses dents claquaient, et ses mains humides d’une sueur moite et maladive touchaient instinctivement un crucifix de bois qu’il avait sur La poitrine.

Pourtant il entend des pas précipités dans Le corridor, son cœur bat avec violence. Arnould entra, il était pâle et défiguré, il avait du sang sur le visage. — Eh nien ? dit Je roi vivement, et Les troupes ?L

— Tout est perdu, sire ! J’arrive chez Bernard, je lui demande des troupes, je dis qu’il y va pour vous de la vie ou de la mort, il refuse ; je Le supplie, j’embrasse ses genoux, ses mains, je te prie comme on prie Dieu : “Non, dit-il en me repoussant du pied avec mépris et dédain ; moi ! j’irais porter du secours à ton maItre ! si j’avais des assassins, je lui en enverrais ; mais il en a un, c’est toi ! Tu as bien assassiné Guillaume, assassine Le peuple, assassine-le donc, ce seigneur-là !… Moi ! des troupes au roi de France ! je ne dois donner du secours qu’au duc de Normandie. Que le roi rende son prisonnier et qu’il Laisse cette province !)) “Va-t’en, a-t-il ajouté en me donnant un coup de cravache sur la figure, va-t’en, assassin, dire ces mots à celui qui t’envoie !”

En ce moment-Là le peuple avait brisé les portes, il était di’xs tes escaliers, ses pas retentissaient sous les voutes.

— Le roi ! le roi ! criait-il.

La fenêtre s’ouvrit et laissa voir Louis IV, portant dans ses bras le duc de Normandie.

Les piques et les armes tombèrent des mains.

— Noël ! Noël ! vive Le roi ! vive le duc ! criait le peuple.

Et cette immense acclamation se répandait dans toutes Les rues, et trouvait un écho dans tous les cœurs.

LA DERNIERE HEURE .

(CONTE PHILOSOPHIQUE.)

Le moyne dit “Que pensez-vous en vostre entendement estre par cet enigme designé et signifié ?”

Rabelais, *Gargantua*.

J’ai regardé à ma montre et j’ai calculé combien de temps il me restait à vivre ; j’ai vu que j’avais encore une heure à peine. Il me reste assez de papier sur ma table pour retracer à la hâte tous les souvenirs de ma vie et toutes les circonstances qui ont influé sur cet enchaînement stupide et logique de jours et de nuits, de larmes et de rires, qu’on a coutume d’appeler l’existence d’un homme.

Ma chambre est basse et étroite, mes fenêtres sont bien fermées, j’ai eu soin de boucher la serrure avec de la mie de pain, mon charbon commence à s’enflammer, la mort va donc venir ; je puis l’attendre calme et tranquille, voyant à chaque minute la vie qui s’éloigne et l’éternité qui s’avance.

I

On a coutume d’appeler heureux un homme qui a vingt-cinq mille livres de rente, qui est beau, grand, bien fait, vit au milieu de sa famille, va tous les soirs au spectacle, rit, boit, dort, mange, et digère bien. L’adage est vieux, mais il n’en est pas moins faux. Pour moi, j’ai eu plus de vingt-cinq mille livres de rente, ma famille était bonne pour moi ; j’ai vu presque tous les théâtres de l’Europe, j’ai bu, j’ai dormi, je n’ai jamais eu une seule indigestion depuis le jour de ma naissance, je ne suis ni borgne, ni boiteux, ni bossu,… et je suis si heureux qu’aujourd’hui, à 19 ans, je me suicide !

II

Un jour, je m’en souviens, j’avais dix ans à cette époque, ma mère m’embrassa en pleurant et me dit d’aller jouer sous les marronniers qui bordaient la pelouse du château… (Oh ! comme ils doivent avoir grandi depuis !). Je m’y rendis, mais comme ma Lélia ne vint pas m’y trouver, j’eus peur qu’elle ne fût malade, je revins à la maison. Tout était désert, un grand drap noir était étendu sur la grille d’entrée ; je montai à la chambre de ma sœur, je me souvins alors qu’il y avait plus de huit jours qu’elle n’était venue jouer avec moi.

Je montai donc à sa chambre. Il y avait deux femmes qui venaient d’ordinaire demander l’aumône à La porte du château, elles tenaient quelque chose de lourd dans leurs bras, qu’elles entouraient d’un drap blanc… C’était elle !

On m’a souvent demandé depuis pourquoi j’étais triste.

III

C’était elle ! ma sœur ! morte ! sans souffle !

La nuit arriva bientôt, oh ! qu’elle fut longue et amère !

Les deux femmes, vêtues de noir, remirent le corps dans le lit de ma sœur, elles jetèrent dessus des fleurs et de l’eau bénite, puis, lorsque le soleil eut fini de jeter dans l’appartement sa lueur rougeâtre et terne comme le regard d’un cadavre, quand le jour eut disparu de dessus les vitres, elles allumèrent deux petites bougies qui étaient sur la table de nuit, s’agenouillèrent et me dirent de prier comme elles.

Je priai, oh ! bien fort, le plus qu’il m’était possible ! mais rien… Lélia ne remuait pas !

Je fus longtemps ainsi agenouillé, la tête sur les draps du lit froids et humides, je pleurais, mais bas et sans angoisses ; il me semblait qu’en pensant, en pleurant, en me déchirant l’âme avec des prières et des vœux, j’obtiendrais un souffle, un regard, un geste de ce corps aux formes indécises et dont on ne distinguait rien si ce n’est, à une place, une forme ronde qui devait être La tête, et plus bas une autre qui semblait être les pieds. Je croyais, moi, pauvre naïf enfant, je croyais que la prière pouvait rendre la vie à un cadavre, tant j’avais de foi et de candeur !

Oh ! on ne sait ce qu’a d’amer et de sombre une nuit ainsi passée à prier sur un cadavre, à pleurer, à vouloir faire renaître le néant ! On ne sait tout ce qu’il y a de hideux et d’horrible dans une nuit de larmes et de sanglots, à la lueur de deux cierges mortuaires, entouré de deux femmes aux chants monotones, aux larmes vénales, aux grotesques psalmodies ! On ne sait enfin tout ce que cette scène de désespoir et de deuil vous remplit le cœur : enfant, de tristesse et d'amertume ; jeune homme, de scepticisme ; vieillard, de désespoir !

Le jour arriva.

Mais quand le jour commença à paraître, lorsque les deux cierges mortuaires commençaient à mourir aussi, alors ces deux femmes partirent et me laissèrent seul. Je courus après elles, et me traînant à leurs pieds, m'attachant à leurs vêtements :

— Ma sœur ! leur dis-je, eh bien, ma sœur ! oui, Lélia ! où est-elle ? Elles me regardèrent étonnées.

— Ma sœur ! vous m'avez dit de prier, j'ai prié pour qu'elle revienne, vous m'avez trompé !

— Mais c'était pour son âme !

Son âme ? Qu'est-ce que cela signifiait ? On m'avait souvent parlé de Dieu, jamais de l'âme.

Dieu, je comprenais cela au moins, car si l'on m'eût demandé ce qu'il était, eh bien, j'aurais pris La linotte de Lélia, et, lui brisant la tête entre mes mains, j'aurais dit : “Et moi aussi, je suis Dieu !” Mais l'âme ? l'âme ? qu'est-ce cela ?

J'eus la hardiesse de le leur demander, mais elles s'en allèrent sans me répondre.

Son âme ! eh bien, elles m'ont trompé, ces femmes. Pour moi, ce que je voulais, c'était Lélia, Lélia qui jouait avec moi sur le gazon, dans les bois, qui se couchait sur la mousse, qui cueillait des fleurs et puis qui les jetait au vent ; c'était Lelia, ma belle petite sœur aux grands yeux bleus, Lélia qui m'embrassait le soir après sa poupée, après son mouton chéri, après sa linotte. Pauvre sœur ! c'était toi que je demandais à grands cris, en pleurant, et ces gens barbares et inhumains me répondaient : “Non, tu ne la reverras pas, tu as prié non pour elle, mais tu as prié pour son âme ! quelque chose d'inconnu, de vague comme un mot d'une langue étrangère ; tu as prié pour un souffle, pour un mot, pour le néant, pour son âme enfin !”

Son âme, son âme, je la méprise, son âme, je la regrette, je n'y pense plus. Qu'est-ce que ça me fait à moi, son âme ? savez-vous ce que c'est que son âme ? Mais c'est son corps que je veux ! c'est son regard, sa vie, c'est elle enfin ! et vous ne m'avez rien rendu de tout cela.

Ces femmes m'ont trompé, eh bien, je les ai maudites.

Cette malédiction est retombée sur moi, philosophe imbécile qui ne sais pas comprendre un mot sans L'épeler, croire à une âme sans la sentir, et craindre un Dieu dont, semblable au Prométhée d'Eschyle, je brave les coups et que je méprise trop pour blasphémer.

IV

Souvent, en regardant le soleil, je me suis dit “Pourquoi viens-tu chaque jour éclairer tant de souffrances, découvrir tant de douleurs, présider à tant de sottes misères ?”

Souvent, en me regardant moi-même, je me suis dit : “Pourquoi existes-tu ? pourquoi, puisque tu pleures, ne taris-tu pas tes larmes d’un seul coup qui serait sûr et infaillible, et dont Dieu lui-même ne pourrait empêcher la fatale conséquence ?”

Souvent, en regardant tous ces hommes qui marchent, qui courent les uns après un nom, d’autres après un trône, d’autres après un type idéal de vertu, toutes choses plus ou moins creuses et vides de sens, en voyant ce tourbillon, cette fournaise ardente, cet immonde chaos de joie, de vices, de faits, de sentiments, de matière et de passions : “Où tend tout cela ? sur qui va tomber toute cette fétide poussière ? et puisqu’un vent l’emporte toujours, dans le sein de quel néant va-t-il l’enfermer ?”

Plus souvent encore je me suis dit en regardant les bois, la nature si vantée, ce beau soleil qui se couche chaque soir, se lève chaque matin, qui brille aussi bien un jour de larmes qu’un jour de bonheur, en regardant les arbres, la mer, le ciel toujours étincelant de ses étoiles, que de fois je me suis dit alors, dans mon amer désespoir : “Pourquoi tout cela existe-t-il ?”

V

Une pensée m’est venue, et c’est le seul remords qui soit venu me troubler, car jamais je n’ai eu de remords, croyant que les hommes n’étaient ni bons, ni mauvais, ni coupables, ni innocents, sachant que j’agissais non par ma volonté, mais par instinct, par puissance d’organisation, par une fatalité plus forte que moi — je ne m’affligerai jamais des sottises que mon ennemi aurait pu faire, — je trouve donc que j’aurais dû vivre comme je meurs, gai et tranquilLe ; qu’au lieu de pleurer et de maudire Dieu, j aurais dû en rire et le braver ; j’aurais dû éteindre mes pleurs sous un rire, oublier la réalité, et puisque je n’avais pu trouver l’amour, prendre la volupté !

VI

J’ai éprouvé de bonne heure un profond dégoût des hommes, dès que j’ai été mis en contact avec eux.

Dès douze ans on me plaça dans un collège : là, j’y vis le raccourci du monde, ses vices en miniature, ses germes de ridicules, ses petites passions, ses petites coteries, sa petite cruauté ; j’y vis le triomphe de la force, mystérieux emblème de la puissance de Dieu ; je vis des défauts qui devaient plus tard être des vices, des vices qui seraient des crimes, et des enfants qui seraient des hommes.

VII

(*Inachevé*.)

LA MAIN DE FER.

(CONTE PHILOSOPHIQUE.)

Maintenant j’éprouve que les hommes sont esclaves du destin et obéissent aux décrets des fées qui président à leur naissance.

(*Chant de mort de Raghenard Lodbrog*.)

I

C’était dans Saragosse, la ville espagnole aux souvenirs d’Orient, Saragosse, l’antique cité des califes, jadis si forte et si pleine de vie, et qui maintenant reste plongée dans ses rêves du passé et dort d’ennui et de lassitude sous son beau soleil du Midi. Où est-il le temps où les cavaliers arabes faisaient piaffer leurs chevaux sur les dalles de tes quais ? où les fraîches odalisques erraient la nuit dans tes jardins ? et où l’encens de la mosquée du prophète se mêlait aux parfums des roses qui couvrent tes terrasses ? Non, tout est morne et désert ; à peine si, lorsque la lourde cloche d’airain vibre sous les aiguilles gothiques, à peine, dis-je, si quelque fidèle vient s’agenouiller sur la pierre de tes cathédrales ; quelques femmes, il est vrai, de temps en temps, des jeunes filles, et puis des enfants et des vieillards, mais des hommes ? oh ! jamais.

Pourtant il se trouve parfois un cœur jeune et vierge qui vient se nourrir de la foi, et plus souvent encore quelque âme blasée et flétrie qui vient se rajeunir dans l’amour céleste, se vivifier dans les croyances, se sanctifier dans la prière. Celui-là qui prend Dieu comme un amour de jeunesse et la foi comme une passion, celui-là s’y livre tout entier, il s’agenouille avec délices, il prie avec ardeur, il croit par instinct ; la messe des morts n’est plus pour lui une grotesque psalmodie, le chant des prêtres cesse d’être vénal, l’église est quelque chose de saint, l’espérance est pour lui palpable et positive, il est heureux, car il croit. Que faut-il de plus pour le bonheur ? une croyance, il y a tant de gens qui n’en ont pas !

II

Tel était Manoello. Il était beau, riche, grand seigneur et religieux ; la chose est bizarre, mais c'est possible. Il était triste, mais sans avoir rien de sombre ni de fantasque ; sa mélancolie avait quelque chose d'évangélique et de doux, sans ce chagrin âpre et brutal qu'impriment chez les poètes le désespoir et le malheur. Il y avait de la noblesse dans ses paroles, de la fierté dans ses gestes et de la poésie dans son regard, car il était né poète sans le savoir ; enfant, il aimait à cueillir des roses, à écouter la mer qui se brise sur les rochers, et couché sur la plage, il s'endormait avec bonheur au bruit des vagues qui le berçaient mollement comme un chant de nourrice.

Plus tard il aima une belle enfant de 15 ans, mais cet amour passa bientôt comme celui de la mer, des coquilles et des roses.

Un jour, il avait 19 ans alors, il entra dans une église, il prêta l'oreille. C'étaient des sons graves et sonores qui s'élevaient dans la nef, sublimes et majestueux ; c'était l'orgue, et puis des cris purs et plaintifs, et, au loin, la voix gracieuse et frêle d'un enfant, qui se mariait avec l'encens, comme deux parfums ! Le soleil, pénétrant à travers les vitraux dorés, jetait sur tout cela un jour mystique et azuré qui lui remplit l'me d'une douce rêverie de foi et d'amour. Cette rêverie fut sa jeunesse, il prit dès lors Dieu comme une autre passion ; elle passa comme les autres !

De ce jour on vit Manoello dans la cathédrale ; il y venait le matin, n'en sortait que le soir et passait ses jours dans la méditation et la prière. On savait peu de choses sur sa personne et sur son genre de vie : il vivait retiré avec ses parents, il était riche, et voilà tout. Il paraissait sans désirs, sans passions de jeunesse, sans amours de femmes ; son indifférence pour elles les excitait davantage à lui faire des avances, et jamais pour aucune d'elles un regard aimable, une douce parole. Plus d'une pourtant vint souvent, au sortir de la messe, lui offrir l'eau bénite, avec un sourire apprêté et qui renfermait toute une pensée de jalousie et de désirs, et jamais pour ces pauvres jeunes filles un tendre soupir, un pressement de main langoureux ! son regard de plomb leur faisait baisser les yeux, et son front pâle les intimidait comme celui d'un vieillard.

Aussi on Je haïssait, en revanche, on déchirait sa réputation dans les salons et dans les cercles de la haute société, sa tristesse passait pour des remords et son indifférence pour un dédain vaniteux ; le peuple le haïssait aussi, son laconisme et ses hauteurs semblaient l'insulter. S'il faisait l'aumône à un pauvre, il accompagnait cela d'un regard si froid et si paisible que le mendiant voyait sans peine que la pièce d'or sortait de la bourse mais non du cœur, de l'habitude mais non de l'âme.

Jamais la jeunesse de Saragosse ne l'avait vu s'enivrer avec elle, dans une splendide orgie : jamais on ne l'avait vu faire blanchir d'écume sa cavale andalouse aux courses du Prado, ni applaudir au théâtre à une danse de volupté. Il aimait, à la vérité, sa famille, son Dieu, sa patrie ; eh ! qu'est-ce que tout cela fait au peuple, en vérité, lui qui maintenant n'a plus ni Dieu, ni famille, ni patrie ?

(*Inachevé.*)

ROME ET LES CÉSARS .

Vu à travers le prisme que jette toujours une société évanouie, l’Empire romain nous apparaît encore comme Le plus monstrueux phénomène de la puissance des hommes. Après avoir, dans l’antiquité, conquis matériellement Le monde, après l’avoir dominé par ses croyances au moyen âge, nous le retrouvons encore enseveli sous sa vieille poussière et murmurant son éternelle douleur. Il n’a plus à craindre pourtant La torche d’Alaric, ou le coup de pied du cheval barbare d’Attila ; on ne peut plus Lui arracher ses provinces dispersées, et il n’a plus d’empereur qui réunisse dans sa main les nations assemblées sous le joug, car le moyen âge l’a battu en brèche, il lui a arraché sa gloire pierre à pierre, lui a substitué La sienne, a chassé Jupiter de Rome et y a fait entrer Jésus-Christ, les martyrs du christianisme ont remplacé ses héros.

Sacerdotale et liturgique sous les Étrusques, matérialiste et guerrière sous les Romains, spiritualiste et artistique sous les papes, que va-t-elle maintenant devenir ? et depuis le XVI^e^ siècle qu’a-t-elle fait ? Après avoir été la ruine des choses passées, sera-t-elle aussi éternellement la ruine de toute croyance, de toute foi, de tout amour ? restera-t-elle gisante au milieu des deux océans, entre l’Orient et l’Occident, reniée de sa mère, oubliée de sa fille ?

Hélas ! malgré sa sainteté, ses martyrs, ses papes, toute sa gloire chrétienne et toutes les splendeurs de son pompeux catholicieme, elle demeurera toujours romaine et impériale avant tout ; ce sera la terre du matérialisme ou plutôt du sensualisme artistique, car le sol ici est plus poète que tous les poètes du monde, et sa poussière porte les pas de l’histoire tout entière. Mais à travers la grande voix du moyen âge, qui retentit encore sur les marches du Vatican, j’entends toujours le dernier murmure de l’orgie impériale, les temples me font penser au paganisme, et le Tibre, qui murmure son onde dans ses joncs flétris, ne roule-t-il pas encore la cendre toute chaude de l’Empire ?

La nuit, quand la lune éclaire ces débris d’un autre monde, que le renard des marais pontins pousse son cri rauque dans Les rues silencieuses, que la grenouille coasse dans les thermes de Titus, ne doit-il pas s’élever souvent un long soupir du monde païen évanoui ? ne monte-t-il pas quelquefois jusqu’à nous un dernier écho des voluptés impériales ? le cirque est-il vide ? les lions ne rugissent-ils plus au bruit de la clameur du peuple en délire, qui s’en va jusqu’à Ostie ? les coupes d’or ne retentissent-elles plus, entrechoquées par les belles mains ivres ? Néron ne vient-il jamais reprendre les rênes de son char splendide, qui vole sur le sable d’or et dont les roues broient des hommes ? ses orgies titaniques, aux flambeaux humains, sont-elles bien finies ? et l’amoureuse Naples a-t-elle cessé de soupirer comme une femme endormie, dans les eaux bleues de son golfe d’Ischia, et sa terre chaude n’a-t-elle plus au crépuscule des parfums de fleur ?

Oh ! non, vous avez beau faire, le monde romain n’est pas mort ! il vit en vous, il vous obsède de ses souvenirs et de sa gloire éternelle ; ses empereurs vous font oublier ses papes, ses artistes ses fidèles ; l’art a plus de pouvoir que la foi, car la foi elle-même ici a quelque chose d’artiste, de théâtral et de superbe ; Michel-Ange efface Mino da Fiesole, et Raphaël Cimabué. C’est que l’époque des Césars est en effet Le plus bel acte, le plus somptueux, le plus sanglant de cette longue tragédie que Rome a jouée au monde ; il y a là deux ou trois hommes qui sont venus pour épuiser les dernières voluptés, pour vider le vin des coupes, pour chasser la vertu des cœurs et faire place, après, à des voluptés plus mâles, au vin du calice et aux vertus chrétiennes.

L’œuvre de Rome, c’est la conquête du monde. Quand le monde fut conquis, elle n’eut plus qu’à s’enivrer et à s’endormir ; gorgée de sang chaud, de vin, de voluptés, elle roule sur son or, elle chancelle et elle tombe épuisée. Vous ne rêverez rien de si terrible et de si monstrueux que les dernières heures de l’Empire, c’est là le règne du crime, c’est son apogée, sa gloire ; il est monté sur le trône, il s’y étale à l’aise, en souverain ; il se farde encore pour être plus beau, à aucune époque vous le verrez pareil ; Alexandre VI est un nain à côté de Tibère, et les imaginations de dix grands poètes ne créeraient pas quelque chose qui vaudrait cinq minutes de la vie de Néron. Nous remarquerons d’abord le crime grand, politique et froid, dans la personne de Sylla : il accomplit sa mission fatalement, comme une hache, puis il abdique la dictature et s’en va au milieu du peuple ; c’est là un orgueil plein de grandeur, ce sont là les crimes d’un homme de génie. J’aime encore Marius pleurant sur les ruines de Carthage ; mais Pompée, mais Caton, mais Brunis, que leurs têtes républicaines sont étroites à côté de ce large front de César, rendu chauve avant l’âge par les débauches de Rome et par ses pensées de géant ! II avilit le Sénat, tue en Gaule des populations entières, fait entrer des Gaulois dans le Sénat, et est aimé des peuples vaincus attelés à son char de triomphe. On conspire contre lui et il pardonne, il voulait rétablir Corinthe et Carthage, il voulait conquérir l’Asie… mais il mourut… comme un homme, et l’Empire après lui agonisa dans un festin de cinq siècles.

Auguste l’imite dans ses crimes et dans sa clémence, et il demandait tout fier en mourant : “Ai-je bien joué mon rêle ?” En effet, il n’y a plus de foi, les augures ne peuvent se regarder sans rire ; L’empereur se fait appeler Dieu par ses poètes, qui n’ont, eux, pour toute religion que L’intime conviction de Leur talent et du néant de la vie. Nous n’en sommes qu’au sentiment de Virgile et à La grâce ciselée d’Horace, ils sentent bien que La volupté ne va pas plus loin, et ils s’arrêtent à un pOiflt difficile à préciser, qui n’est nile spiritualisme ni le matérialisme, ni Le dogme ni La dialectique, mais qui est e point artistique humain par excellence ; ils s’arretent aux pensées morales, au sentiment de L’homme, à la satisfaction des sens, aux douces choses, au simple courant de La vie qui coule entre le rire et les pleurs pour arriver à la tombe, un soir d’été, aprts que la treille n’a plus de fruits, Le cœur plus d’amour. Bientêt va venir le sensualisme excité ,ja débauche savante de Pétrone, L’inspiration fiévreuse d’Apulée, Les soupirs amoureux de Tibulle, tandis que, de l’autre cêté, Tacite écrit avec un style de bronze et que Juvénal fait retentir son hexamètre ronflant de colère. Attendez.

L’Orient et L’Occident ont lutté ensemble avec Auguste et Antoine, et l’Orient a été vaincu, Antoine s’est enfui sur sa galère pour rejoindre Cléopâtre, le vent a soufflé dans ses voiles de pourpre, les rames d’argent ont battu l’onde, la reine d’Egypte est

tournée dans son palais ; une dernière fois elle veut essayer sur Octave les charmes de sa beauté orientale et la cocjuetterie de son désespoir, mais c’est en vain ; un matin on la trouve morte dans ses vêtements royaux, car elle avait craint d’être l’esclave d’Octave et de servir à son triomphe. Son empire est mort avec elle, Octave n’a que le cadavre de l’un et de l’autre. Avec Tibère commence l’ère nouvelle voluptueuse ; le premier, il est atteint du malaise intime qui torture Les entrailles de la société à ses vieux jours ; il se retire à Caprée, malade, fatigué de la vie et craignant La mort ; il convoite Le bonheur, il aspire aux voluptés, mais le bonheur fuit devant lui et la volupté glisse dans ses mains.

Le pouvoir est alors si élevé que le vertige monte à la tête de ceux qui s’en emparent, et ils sont pris d’une manie insensée ; le monde étant à un seul homme, comme un esclave, il pouvait le torturer pour son plaisir, et il fut torturé en effet jusqu’à la dernière fibre.

Après qu’il avait arraché au monde romain sa gloire passée pour se l’attribuer, ses dieux pour se mettre à leur place, ses richesses pour les manger, ses sénateurs pour en faire des laquais, ses prêtres pour en faire des bouffons, et la capitale de l’empire pour l’honorer du spectacle de ses débauches, étonné alors que cela fut si superbe, et surpris Lui-même, L’empereur eût pu s’écrier, dans l’étonnement d’un sensualisme atroce et regardant la patrie esclave à ses pieds :

“Je ne savais pas que ma mère fût si belle !”

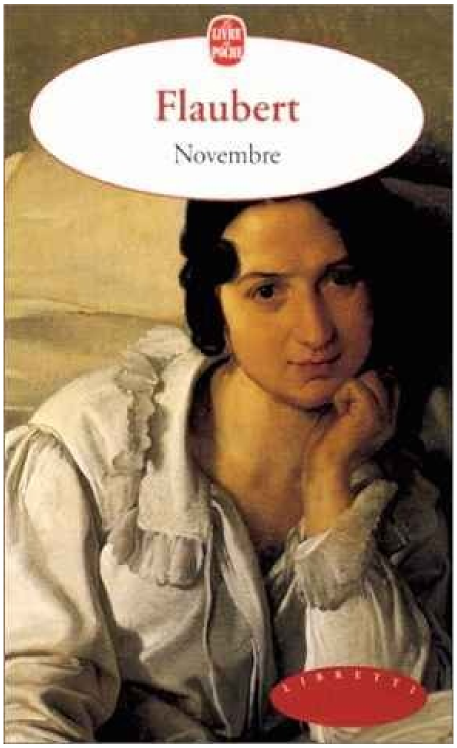
Ils s’appelaient Caligula, Néron, Domitien ; des millions se mangent à leur table, on égorge des hommes pendant qu’ils s’enivrent, et la vapeur du sang e mêle à celle des mets. Le crime est une volupté comme Les autres, on entendait les cris des victimes égorgées dans Le cirque pendant que la fanfare résonnait, que les esclaves chantaient. Néron disait aux bourreaux : “Faites en sorte qu’ils se sentent mourir”, et, penché en avant sur Les poitrines ouvertes des victimes, il regardait Le sang battre dans Les cœurs, et il trouvait, dans ces derniers gémissements d’un être qui quitte fa vie, des délices inconnues, des voluptés suprêmes, comme lorsqu’une femme, éperdue sous l’œil de l’empereur, tombait dans ses bras et se mourait sous ses baisers. Oh ! les cœurs atroces ! oh ! les âmes sublimes dans Le crime ! Chaque jour ils redoublent, chaque jour ils inventent, leur esprit est un enfer qui fournit des tortures au monde, ils insultent à La nature dans leurs débauches ; bêtes fauves, ils se déguisent en bêtes fauves, ils assassinent leurs mères, ils épousent leurs vaLets, ils se font applaudir au théâtre.

La société se modèle sur L’empereur, les patriciens s’efforcent de l’imiter ; l’âme des hommes, en effet, n’est qu’une prostituée qui se donne à tous les vices, à tous les crimes. Quelque chose de ceLa palpite encore dans Les pages de Suétone, dans Les vers de Juvénal. Vous rappelez-vous la Longue Maura, qui épuisa tant d’hommes en un jour ? Hamiltus qui corrompt les enfants ? et la noblesse entière, et la famille de l’empereur, et l’empereur Lui-même, et sa femme, et ses sœurs, et son affranchi ? L’histoire aLors est une orgie sangLante, dans laquelle il nous faut entrer, sa vue même enivre et fait venir la nausée au cœur.

CeLa dure longtemps, trop longtemps pour le monde, quoique les empereurs s’usent vite sur ce tr6ne de fu et que leur âme se fatigue vite à contenir tant de choses monstrueuses.

Comme la mort les emporte tous ! Après Néron, Galba ; après Lui, Othon qui a au moins Je cœur de mourir, “et alors Le secret de l’Empire est divulgué”, dit Tacite ; et après Othon, Vitellius dont le règne ne fut qu’un long repas qui commença avec des applaudissements et qui finit avec du sang ; puis Vespasien et Titus. Mais Commode ranime la fête ; Pertinax et Didius Julianus, Sévère, Caracalla, Macrin, et nous voici à Héliogabale, le dernier de cette famille. L’Orient avait débordé dans Rome, in Tiberim defiuxit orantes ; depuis longtemps les bouffons d’Antoine avaient chassé les bouffons italiens ; les prêtres de CybèLe arrivent, toutes Les religions s’accumulent dans la Ville éternelle, avec tous les vices inventés ; la philosophie se débat mieux, la rhétorique pérore dans ses écoles, la société agonise au milieu de tous ces bruits. Elle voudrait bien se cacher la ruine qu’elle a dans le cœur, et farder ses rides avec le parfüm de quelque croyance, c’est en vain, eLle ne sait laquelle adopter. Son empereur veut introduire le culte des juifs et des chrétiens, il se fait juif lui-même, il est, comme la nature, tourmenté d’une grande douleur, et, comme le monde romain, il reste haletant de débauches et d’anoisses sur ses lits de fleurs, fanées moitis vite que son ame.

Tout craquait donc au cœur du vieux monde : pouvoir civil, croyance religieuse, et I’me et le corps ; tout tombait délabré, abîmé dans un immense dégoût. Il faudra, pour ranimer cette chair flétrie, pour remettre de la force dans Les muscles de ce grand corps, le long ascétisme du moyen âge et les douleurs du inonde chrétien. Alors reparaîtra, au xvIc siècle, cette force, cette sève, ce nouveL empire invisible substitué à L’autre, et qui s’étale splendi4emcnt.ur les toiles de Raphael et se courbe sur Je-èndè avèc La coupole de Saint-Pierre.


LIVRE DE POCHE
Flaubert
Novembre
LIBRETTI

Couverture de la réédition de 1992 au format de poche

THREE TALES

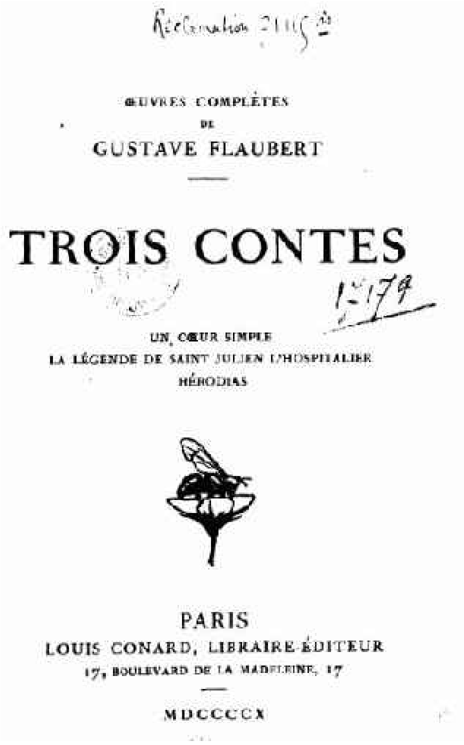
Translated by M. Walter Dunne

This is a collection of three short stories, first published in France in 1877.

A Simple Soul concerns a servant girl named Felicité. After her one and only love Théodore is reported to have married a well-to-do woman to avoid conscription, Felicité quits the farm she works on and heads for Pont-l'Évèque where she immediately picks up work in a widow's house as a servant. She is very loyal, and easily lends her affections to the two children of her mistress, Mme Aubain. She gives entirely to others, and although many take advantage of her she is unaffected. She is the epitome of a selfless character, and Flaubert shows how true altruism – the reality of being truly selfless – is the reward in itself. Whatever comes her way she is able to deal with it.

The Legend of Saint Julian the Hospitalier tells the story of Julian, who is predicted at birth to do great things. His father is told that he will marry into the family of a great emperor, while his mother is told he will be a saint. They dote on him. After Julian kills a mouse who interrupted his concentration in church, his cruelty towards animals grows and culminates into his massacre of an entire valley of deer. A stag curses him to kill his own parents. He almost brings the curse to fruition twice: he drops a sword while standing on a ladder near his father, and he pins his mother's white shawl against a wall with a javelin because it looked like a bird's wings.

Herodias is the retelling of the Biblical story of the beheading of John the Baptist. The narrative opens just before the arrival of the Syrian governor, Vitellius. Herodias holds a huge birthday celebration for her second husband, Herod Antipas. Unknown to him, she has concocted a plan to behead John. According to Flaubert, this plan entails making her husband fall in love with her daughter, Salomé, leading to him promising her whatever she wants. Salomé, obviously in line with the instructions of her mother, will ask for John's head. Everything goes as planned. John has been repeatedly insulting the royals, so the king does not think long before granting Salomé's wish. The crowd gathered for the party waits anxiously while the executioner, Mannaeus, kills John. The story ends with some of John's disciples awaiting the Messiah.



Réclamation 2115

ŒUVRES COMPLÈTES
DE
GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

TROIS CONTES

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UN CŒUR SIMPLE
LA LÉGENDE DE SAINT JULIEN L'HOSPITALIER
HÉRODIAS

PARIS
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17, BOULEVARD DE LA MADELEINE, 17

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An early French edition

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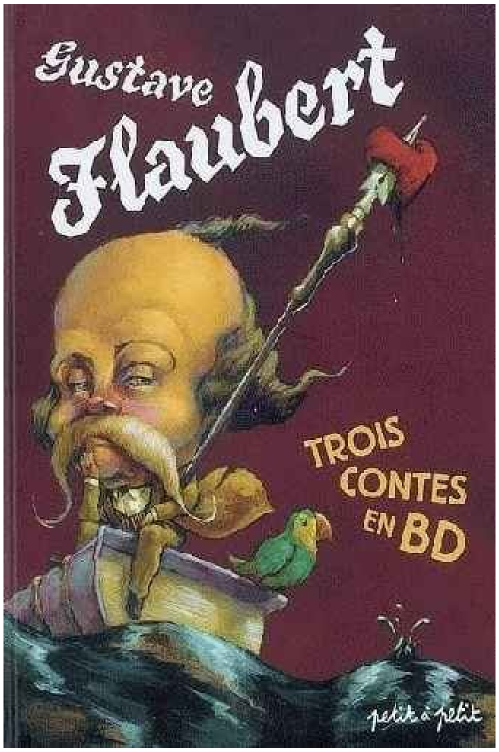

Gustave Flaubert
TROIS CONTES EN BD
petit à petit

A 2007 comic book adaptation of the tales

A SIMPLE SOUL

CHAPTER I

For half a century the housewives of Pont-l’Eveque had envied Madame Aubain her servant Felicite.

For a hundred francs a year, she cooked and did the housework, washed, ironed, mended, harnessed the horse, fattened the poultry, made the butter and remained faithful to her mistress — although the latter was by no means an agreeable person.

Madame Aubain had married a comely youth without any money, who died in the beginning of 1809, leaving her with two young children and a number of debts. She sold all her property excepting the farm of Toucques and the farm of Geffosses, the income of which barely amounted to 5,000 francs; then she left her house in Saint-Melaine, and moved into a less pretentious one which had belonged to her ancestors and stood back of the market-place. This house, with its slate-covered roof, was built between a passage-way and a narrow street that led to the river. The interior was so unevenly graded that it caused people to stumble. A narrow hall separated the kitchen from the parlour, where Madame Aubain sat all day in a straw armchair near the window. Eight mahogany chairs stood in a row against the white wainscoting. An old piano, standing beneath a barometer, was covered with a pyramid of old books and boxes. On either side of the yellow marble mantelpiece, in Louis XV. style, stood a tapestry armchair. The clock represented a temple of Vesta; and the whole room smelled musty, as it was on a lower level than the garden.

On the first floor was Madame’s bed-chamber, a large room papered in a flowered design and containing the portrait of Monsieur dressed in the costume of a dandy. It communicated with a smaller room, in which there were two little cribs, without any mattresses. Next, came the parlour (always closed), filled with furniture covered with sheets. Then a hall, which led to the study, where books and papers were piled on the shelves of a book-case that enclosed three quarters of the big black desk. Two panels were entirely hidden under pen-and-ink sketches, Gouache landscapes and Audran engravings, relics of better times and vanished luxury. On the second floor, a garret-window lighted Felicite’s room, which looked out upon the meadows.

She arose at daybreak, in order to attend mass, and she worked without interruption until night; then, when dinner was over, the dishes cleared away and the door securely locked, she would bury the log under the ashes and fall asleep in front of the hearth with a rosary in her hand. Nobody could bargain with greater obstinacy, and as for cleanliness, the lustre on her brass sauce-pans was the envy and despair of other servants. She was most economical, and when she ate she would gather up crumbs with the tip of her finger, so that nothing should be wasted of the loaf of bread weighing twelve pounds which was baked especially for her and lasted three weeks.

Summer and winter she wore a dimity kerchief fastened in the back with a pin, a cap which concealed her hair, a red skirt, grey stockings, and an apron with a bib like those worn by hospital nurses.

Her face was thin and her voice shrill. When she was twenty-five, she looked forty. After she had passed fifty, nobody could tell her age; erect and silent always, she resembled a wooden figure working automatically.

CHAPTER II

Like every other woman, she had had an affair of the heart. Her father, who was a mason, was killed by falling from a scaffolding. Then her mother died and her sisters went their different ways; a farmer took her in, and while she was quite small, let her keep cows in the fields. She was clad in miserable rags, beaten for the slightest offence and finally dismissed for a theft of thirty sous which she did not commit. She took service on another farm where she tended the poultry; and as she was well thought of by her master, her fellow-workers soon grew jealous.

One evening in August (she was then eighteen years old), they persuaded her to accompany them to the fair at Colleville. She was immediately dazzled by the noise, the lights in the trees, the brightness of the dresses, the laces and gold crosses, and the crowd of people all hopping at the same time. She was standing modestly at a distance, when presently a young man of well-to-do appearance, who had been leaning on the pole of a wagon and smoking his pipe, approached her, and asked her for a dance. He treated her to cider and cake, bought her a silk shawl, and then, thinking she had guessed his purpose, offered to see her home. When they came to the end of a field he threw her down brutally. But she grew frightened and screamed, and he walked off.

One evening, on the road leading to Beaumont, she came upon a wagon loaded with hay, and when she overtook it, she recognised Theodore. He greeted her calmly, and asked her to forget what had happened between them, as it “was all the fault of the drink.”

She did not know what to reply and wished to run away.

Presently he began to speak of the harvest and of the notables of the village; his father had left Colleville and bought the farm of Les Ecots, so that now they would be neighbours. “Ah!” she exclaimed. He then added that his parents were looking around for a wife for him, but that he, himself, was not so anxious and preferred to wait for a girl who suited him. She hung her head. He then asked her whether she had ever thought of marrying. She replied, smilingly, that it was wrong of him to make fun of her. “Oh! no, I am in earnest,” he said, and put his left arm around her waist while they sauntered along. The air was soft, the stars were bright, and the huge load of hay oscillated in front of them, drawn by four horses whose ponderous hoofs raised clouds of dust. Without a word from their driver they turned to the right. He kissed her again and she went home. The following week, Theodore obtained meetings.

They met in yards, behind walls or under isolated trees. She was not ignorant, as girls of well-to-do families are — for the animals had instructed her; — but her reason and her instinct of honour kept her from falling. Her resistance exasperated Theodore’s love and so in order to satisfy it (or perchance ingenuously), he offered to marry her. She would not believe him at first, so he made solemn promises. But, in a short time he mentioned a difficulty; the previous year, his parents had purchased a substitute for him; but any day he might be drafted and the prospect of serving in the army alarmed him greatly. To Felicite his cowardice appeared a proof of his love for her, and her devotion to him grew stronger. When she met him, he would torture her with his fears and his entreaties. At last, he announced that he was going to the prefect himself for information, and would let her know everything on the following Sunday, between eleven o’clock and midnight.

When the time grew near, she ran to meet her lover.

But instead of Theodore, one of his friends was at the meeting-place.

He informed her that she would never see her sweetheart again; for, in order to escape the conscription, he had married a rich old woman, Madame Lehoussais, of Toucques.

The poor girl’s sorrow was frightful. She threw herself on the ground, she cried and called on the Lord, and wandered around desolately until sunrise. Then she went back to the farm, declared her intention of leaving, and at the end of the month, after she had received her wages, she packed all her belongings in a handkerchief and started for Pont-l’Eveque.

In front of the inn, she met a woman wearing widow’s weeds, and upon questioning her, learned that she was looking for a cook. The girl did not know very much, but appeared so willing and so modest in her requirements, that Madame Aubain finally said:

“Very well, I will give you a trial.”

And half an hour later Felicite was installed in her house.

At first she lived in a constant anxiety that was caused by “the style of the household” and the memory of “Monsieur,” that hovered over everything. Paul and Virginia, the one aged seven, and the other barely four, seemed made of some precious material; she carried them pig-a-back, and was greatly mortified when Madame Aubain forbade her to kiss them every other minute.

But in spite of all this, she was happy. The comfort of her new surroundings had obliterated her sadness.

Every Thursday, friends of Madame Aubain dropped in for a game of cards, and it was Felicite’s duty to prepare the table and heat the foot-warmers. They arrived at exactly eight o’clock and departed before eleven.

Every Monday morning, the dealer in second-hand goods, who lived under the alley-way, spread out his wares on the sidewalk. Then the city would be filled with a buzzing of voices in which the neighing of horses, the bleating of lambs, the grunting of pigs, could be distinguished, mingled with the sharp sound of wheels on the cobble-stones. About twelve o'clock, when the market was in full swing, there appeared at the front door a tall, middle-aged peasant, with a hooked nose and a cap on the back of his head; it was Robelin, the farmer of Geffosses. Shortly afterwards came Liebard, the farmer of Toucques, short, rotund and ruddy, wearing a grey jacket and spurred boots.

Both men brought their landlady either chickens or cheese. Felicite would invariably thwart their ruses and they held her in great respect.

At various times, Madame Aubain received a visit from the Marquis de Gremanville, one of her uncles, who was ruined and lived at Falaise on the remainder of his estates. He always came at dinner-time and brought an ugly poodle with him, whose paws soiled their furniture. In spite of his efforts to appear a man of breeding (he even went so far as to raise his hat every time he said "My deceased father"), his habits got the better of him, and he would fill his glass a little too often and relate broad stories. Felicite would show him out very politely and say: "You have had enough for this time, Monsieur de Gremanville! Hoping to see you again!" and would close the door.

She opened it gladly for Monsieur Bourais, a retired lawyer. His bald head and white cravat, the ruffling of his shirt, his flowing brown coat, the manner in which he took snuff, his whole person, in fact, produced in her the kind of awe which we feel when we see extraordinary persons. As he managed Madame's estates, he spent hours with her in Monsieur's study; he was in constant fear of being compromised, had a great regard for the magistracy and some pretensions to learning.

In order to facilitate the children's studies, he presented them with an engraved geography which represented various scenes of the world; cannibals with feather head-dresses, a gorilla kidnapping a young girl, Arabs in the desert, a whale being harpooned, *etc.*

Paul explained the pictures to Felicite. And, in fact, this was her only literary education.

The children's studies were under the direction of a poor devil employed at the town-hall, who sharpened his pocket-knife on his boots and was famous for his penmanship.

When the weather was fine, they went to Geffosses. The house was built in the centre of the sloping yard; and the sea looked like a grey spot in the distance. Felicite would take slices of cold meat from the lunch basket and they would sit down and eat in a room next to the dairy. This room was all that remained of a cottage that had been torn down. The dilapidated wall-paper trembled in the drafts. Madame Aubain, overwhelmed by recollections, would hang her head, while the children were afraid to open their mouths. Then, “Why don’t you go and play?” their mother would say; and they would scamper off.

Paul would go to the old barn, catch birds, throw stones into the pond, or pound the trunks of the trees with a stick till they resounded like drums. Virginia would feed the rabbits and run to pick the wild flowers in the fields, and her flying legs would disclose her little embroidered pantalettes. One autumn evening, they struck out for home through the meadows. The new moon illumined part of the sky and a mist hovered like a veil over the sinuosities of the river. Oxen, lying in the pastures, gazed mildly at the passing persons. In the third field, however, several of them got up and surrounded them. “Don’t be afraid,” cried Felicite; and murmuring a sort of lament she passed her hand over the back of the nearest ox; he turned away and the others followed. But when they came to the next pasture, they heard frightful bellowing.

It was a bull which was hidden from them by the fog. He advanced towards the two women, and Madame Aubain prepared to flee for her life. “No, no! not so fast,” warned Felicite. Still they hurried on, for they could hear the noisy breathing of the bull behind them. His hoofs pounded the grass like hammers, and presently he began to gallop! Felicite turned around and threw patches of grass in his eyes. He hung his head, shook his horns and bellowed with fury. Madame Aubain and the children, huddled at the end of the field, were trying to jump over the ditch. Felicite continued to back before the bull, blinding him with dirt, while she shouted to them to make haste.

Madame Aubain finally slid into the ditch, after shoving first Virginia and then Paul into it, and though she stumbled several times she managed, by dint of courage, to climb the other side of it.

The bull had driven Felicite up against a fence; the foam from his muzzle flew in her face and in another minute he would have disembowelled her. She had just time to slip between two bars and the huge animal, thwarted, paused.

For years, this occurrence was a topic of conversation in Pont-l’Eveque. But Felicite took no credit to herself, and probably never knew that she had been heroic.

Virginia occupied her thoughts solely, for the shock she had sustained gave her a nervous affection, and the physician, M. Poupart, prescribed the salt-water bathing at Trouville. In those days, Trouville was not greatly patronised. Madame Aubain gathered information, consulted Bourais, and made preparations as if they were going on an extended trip.

The baggage was sent the day before on Liebard’s cart. On the following morning, he brought around two horses, one of which had a woman´s saddle with a velveteen back to it, while on the crupper of the other was a rolled shawl that was to be used for a seat. Madame Aubain mounted the second horse, behind Liebard. Felicite took charge of the little girl, and Paul rode M. Lechaptois’ donkey, which had been lent for the occasion on the condition that they should be careful of it.

The road was so bad that it took two hours to cover the eight miles. The two horses sank knee-deep into the mud and stumbled into ditches; sometimes they had to jump over them. In certain places, Liebard’s mare stopped abruptly. He waited patiently till she started again, and talked of the people whose estates bordered the road, adding his own moral reflections to the outline of their histories. Thus, when they were passing through Toucques, and came to some windows draped with nasturtiums, he shrugged his shoulders and said: “There’s a woman, Madame Lehoussais, who, instead of taking a young man — ” Felicite could not catch what followed; the horses began to trot, the donkey to gallop, and they turned into a lane; then a gate swung open, two farm-hands appeared and they all dismounted at the very threshold of the farm-house.

Mother Liebard, when she caught sight of her mistress, was lavish with joyful demonstrations. She got up a lunch which comprised a leg of mutton, tripe, sausages, a chicken fricassee, sweet cider, a fruit tart and some preserved prunes; then to all this the good woman added polite remarks about Madame, who appeared to be in better health, Mademoiselle, who had grown to be “superb,” and Paul, who had become singularly sturdy; she spoke also of their deceased grandparents, whom the Liebards had known, for they had been in the service of the family for several generations.

Like its owners, the farm had an ancient appearance. The beams of the ceiling were mouldy, the walls black with smoke and the windows grey with dust. The oak sideboard was filled with all sorts of utensils, plates, pitchers, tin bowls, wolf-traps. The children laughed when they saw a huge syringe. There was not a tree in the yard that did not have mushrooms growing around its foot, or a bunch of mistletoe hanging in its branches. Several of the trees had been blown down, but they had started to grow in the middle and all were laden with quantities of apples. The thatched roofs, which were of unequal thickness, looked like brown velvet and could resist the fiercest gales. But the wagon-shed was fast crumbling to ruins. Madame Aubain said that she would attend to it, and then gave orders to have the horses saddled.

It took another thirty minutes to reach Trouville. The little caravan dismounted in order to pass Les Ecores, a cliff that overhangs the bay, and a few minutes later, at the end of the dock, they entered the yard of the Golden Lamb, an inn kept by Mother David.

an inn kept by Mother David.

During the first few days, Virginia felt stronger, owing to the change of air and the action of the sea-baths. She took them in her little chemise, as she had no bathing suit, and afterwards her nurse dressed her in the cabin of a customs officer, which was used for that purpose by other bathers.

In the afternoon, they would take the donkey and go to the Roches-Noires, near Hennequeville. The path led at first through undulating grounds, and thence to a plateau, where pastures and tilled fields alternated. At the edge of the road, mingling with the brambles, grew holly bushes, and here and there stood large dead trees whose branches traced zigzags upon the blue sky.

Ordinarily, they rested in a field facing the ocean, with Deauville on their left, and Havre on their right. The sea glittered brightly in the sun and was as smooth as a mirror, and so calm that they could scarcely distinguish its murmur; sparrows chirped joyfully and the immense canopy of heaven spread over it all. Madame Aubain brought out her sewing, and Virginia amused herself by braiding reeds; Felicite wove lavender blossoms, while Paul was bored and wished to go home.

Sometimes they crossed the Toucques in a boat, and started to hunt for sea-shells. The outgoing tide exposed star-fish and sea-urchins, and the children tried to catch the flakes of foam which the wind blew away. The sleepy waves lapping the sand unfurled themselves along the shore that extended as far as the eye could see, but where land began, it was limited by the downs which separated it from the “Swamp,” a large meadow shaped like a hippodrome. When they went home that way, Trouville, on the slope of a hill below, grew larger and larger as they advanced, and, with all its houses of unequal height, seemed to spread out before them in a sort of giddy confusion.

When the heat was too oppressive, they remained in their rooms. The dazzling sunlight cast bars of light between the shutters. Not a sound in the village, not a soul on the sidewalk. This silence intensified the tranquility of everything. In the distance, the hammers of some calkers pounded the hull of a ship, and the sultry breeze brought them an odour of tar.

The principal diversion consisted in watching the return of the fishing-smacks. As soon as they passed the beacons, they began to ply to windward. The sails were lowered to one third of the masts, and with their fore-sails swelled up like balloons they glided over the waves and anchored in the middle of the harbour. Then they crept up alongside of the dock and the sailors threw the quivering fish over the side of the boat; a line of carts was waiting for them, and women with white caps sprang forward to receive the baskets and embrace their men-folk.

One day, one of them spoke to Felicite, who, after a little while, returned to

One day, one of them spoke to Felicite, who, after a little while, returned to the house gleefully. She had found one of her sisters, and presently Nastasie Barette, wife of Leroux, made her appearance, holding an infant in her arms, another child by the hand, while on her left was a little cabin-boy with his hands in his pockets and his cap on his ear.

At the end of fifteen minutes, Madame Aubain bade her go.

They always hung around the kitchen, or approached Felicite when she and the children were out walking. The husband, however, did not show himself.

Felicite developed a great fondness for them; she bought them a stove, some shirts and a blanket; it was evident that they exploited her. Her foolishness annoyed Madame Aubain, who, moreover did not like the nephew’s familiarity, for he called her son “thou”; — and, as Virginia began to cough and the season was over, she decided to return to Pont-l’Eveque.

Monsieur Bourais assisted her in the choice of a college. The one at Caen was considered the best. So Paul was sent away and bravely said good-bye to them all, for he was glad to go to live in a house where he would have boy companions.

Madame Aubain resigned herself to the separation from her son because it was unavoidable. Virginia brooded less and less over it. Felicite regretted the noise he made, but soon a new occupation diverted her mind; beginning from Christmas, she accompanied the little girl to her catechism lesson every day.

CHAPTER III

After she had made a curtsey at the threshold, she would walk up the aisle between the double lines of chairs, open Madame Aubain’s pew, sit down and look around.

Girls and boys, the former on the right, the latter on the left-hand side of the church, filled the stalls of the choir; the priest stood beside the reading-desk; on one stained window of the side-aisle the Holy Ghost hovered over the Virgin; on another one, Mary knelt before the Child Jesus, and behind the alter, a wooden group represented Saint Michael felling the dragon.

The priest first read a condensed lesson of sacred history. Felicite evoked Paradise, the Flood, the Tower of Babel, the blazing cities, the dying nations, the shattered idols; and out of this she developed a great respect for the Almighty and a great fear of His wrath. Then, when she had listened to the Passion, she wept. Why had they crucified Him who loved little children, nourished the people, made the blind see, and who, out of humility, had wished to be born among the poor, in a stable? The sowings, the harvests, the wine-presses, all those familiar things which the Scriptures mention, formed a part of her life; the word of God sanctified them; and she loved the lambs with increased tenderness for the sake of the Lamb, and the doves because of the Holy Ghost.

She found it hard, however, to think of the latter as a person, for was it not a bird, a flame, and sometimes only a breath? Perhaps it is its light that at night hovers over swamps, its breath that propels the clouds, its voice that renders church-bells harmonious. And Felicite worshipped devoutly, while enjoying the coolness and the stillness of the church.

As for the dogma, she could not understand it and did not even try. The priest discoursed, the children recited, and she went to sleep, only to awaken with a start when they were leaving the church and their wooden shoes clattered on the stone pavement.

In this way, she learned her catechism, her religious education having been neglected in her youth; and thenceforth she imitated all Virginia’s religious practices, fasted when she did, and went to confession with her. At the Corpus-Christi Day they both decorated an altar.

She worried in advance over Virginia’s first communion. She fussed about the shoes, the rosary, the book and the gloves. With what nervousness she helped the mother dress the child!

During the entire ceremony, she felt anguished. Monsieur Bourais hid part of the choir from view, but directly in front of her, the flock of maidens, wearing white wreaths over their lowered veils, formed a snow-white field, and she recognised her darling by the slenderness of her neck and her devout attitude. The bell tinkled. All the heads bent and there was a silence. Then, at the peals of the organ the singers and the worshippers struck up the Agnes Dei; the boys' procession began; behind them came the girls. With clasped hands, they advanced step by step to the lighted altar, knelt at the first step, received one by one the Host, and returned to their seats in the same order. When Virginia's turn came, Felicite leaned forward to watch her, and through that imagination which springs from true affection, she at once became the child, whose face and dress became hers, whose heart beat in her bosom, and when Virginia opened her mouth and closed her lids, she did likewise and came very near fainting.

The following day, she presented herself early at the church so as to receive communion from the cure. She took it with the proper feeling, but did not experience the same delight as on the previous day.

Madame Aubain wished to make an accomplished girl of her daughter; and as Guyot could not teach English or music, she decided to send her to the Ursulines at Honfleur.

The child made no objection, but Felicite sighed and thought Madame was heartless. Then, she thought that perhaps her mistress was right, as these things were beyond her sphere. Finally, one day, an old fiacre stopped in front of the door and a nun stepped out. Felicite put Virginia's luggage on top of the carriage, gave the coachman some instructions, and smuggled six jars of jam, a dozen pears and a bunch of violets under the seat.

At the last minute, Virginia had a fit of sobbing; she embraced her mother again and again, while the latter kissed her on the forehead, and said: “Now, be brave, be brave!” The step was pulled up and the fiacre rumbled off.

Then Madame Aubain had a fainting spell, and that evening all her friends, including the two Lormeaus, Madame Lechaptois, the ladies Rochefeuille, Messieurs de Houppeville and Bourais, called on her and tendered their sympathy.

At first the separation proved very painful to her. But her daughter wrote her three times a week and the other days she, herself, wrote to Virginia. Then she walked in the garden, read a little, and in this way managed to fill out the emptiness of the hours.

Each morning, out of habit, Felicite entered Virginia's room and gazed at the walls. She missed combing her hair, lacing her shoes, tucking her in her bed, and the bright face and little hand when they used to go out for a walk. In order to occupy herself she tried to make lace. But her clumsy fingers broke the threads; she had no heart for anything, lost her sleep and “wasted away,” as she put it.

In order to have some distraction, she asked leave to receive the visits of her nephew Victor.

He would come on Sunday, after church, with ruddy cheeks and bared chest, bringing with him the scent of the country. She would set the table and they would sit down opposite each other, and eat their dinner; she ate as little as possible, herself, to avoid any extra expense, but would stuff him so with food that he would finally go to sleep. At the first stroke of vespers, she would wake him up, brush his trousers, tie his cravat and walk to church with him, leaning on his arm with maternal pride.

His parents always told him to get something out of her, either a package of brown sugar, or soap, or brandy, and sometimes even money. He brought her his clothes to mend, and she accepted the task gladly, because it meant another visit from him.

In August, his father took him on a coasting-vessel.

It was vacation time and the arrival of the children consoled Felicite. But Paul was capricious, and Virginia was growing too old to be thee-and-thou'd, a fact which seemed to produce a sort of embarrassment in their relations.

Victor went successively to Morlaix, to Dunkirk, and to Brighton; whenever he returned from a trip he would bring her a present. The first time it was a box of shells; the second, a coffee-cup; the third, a big doll of ginger-bread. He was growing handsome, had a good figure, a tiny moustache, kind eyes, and a little leather cap that sat jauntily on the back of his head. He amused his aunt by telling her stories mingled with nautical expressions.

One Monday, the 14th of July, 1819 (she never forgot the date), Victor announced that he had been engaged on a merchant-vessel and that in two days he would take the steamer at Honfleur and join his sailer, which was going to start from Havre very soon. Perhaps he might be away two years.

The prospect of his departure filled Felicite with despair, and in order to bid him farewell, on Wednesday night, after Madame's dinner, she put on her pattens and trudged the four miles that separated Pont-l'Eveque from Honfleur.

When she reached the Calvary, instead of turning to the right, she turned to the left and lost herself in coal-yards; she had to retrace her steps; some people she spoke to advised her to hasten. She walked helplessly around the harbour filled with vessels, and knocked against hawsers. Presently the ground sloped abruptly, lights flitted to and fro, and she thought all at once that she had gone mad when she saw some horses in the sky.

Others, on the edge of the dock, neighed at the sight of the ocean. A derrick pulled them up in the air, and dumped them into a boat, where passengers were bustling about among barrels of cider, baskets of cheese and bags of meal;

chickens cackled, the captain swore and a cabin-boy rested on the railing, apparently indifferent to his surroundings. Felicite, who did not recognise him, kept shouting: “Victor!” He suddenly raised his eyes, but while she was preparing to rush up to him, they withdrew the gangplank.

The packet, towed by singing women, glided out of the harbour. Her hull squeaked and the heavy waves beat up against her sides. The sail had turned and nobody was visible; — and on the ocean, silvered by the light of the moon, the vessel formed a black spot that grew dimmer and dimmer, and finally disappeared.

When Felicite passed the Calvary again, she felt as if she must entrust that which was dearest to her to the Lord; and for a long while she prayed, with uplifted eyes and a face wet with tears. The city was sleeping; some customs officials were taking the air; and the water kept pouring through the holes of the dam with a deafening roar. The town clock struck two.

The parlour of the convent would not open until morning, and surely a delay would annoy Madame, so, in spite of her desire to see the other child, she went home. The maids of the inn were just arising when she reached Pont-l’Eveque.

So the poor boy would be on the ocean for months! His previous trips had not alarmed her. One can come back from England and Brittany; but America, the colonies, the islands, were all lost in an uncertain region at the very end of the world.

From that time on, Felicite thought solely of her nephew. On warm days she feared he would suffer from thirst, and when it stormed, she was afraid he would be struck by lightning. When she harkened to the wind that rattled in the chimney and dislodged the tiles on the roof, she imagined that he was being buffeted by the same storm, perched on top of a shattered mast, with his whole body bend backward and covered with sea-foam; or, — these were recollections of the engraved geography — he was being devoured by savages, or captured in a forest by apes, or dying on some lonely coast. She never mentioned her anxieties, however.

Madame Aubain worried about her daughter.

The sisters thought that Virginia was affectionate but delicate. The slightest emotion enervated her. She had to give up her piano lessons. Her mother insisted upon regular letters from the convent. One morning, when the postman failed to come, she grew impatient and began to pace to and fro, from her chair to the window. It was really extraordinary! No news since four days!

In order to console her mistress by her own example, Felicite said:

“Why, Madame, I haven’t had any news since six months! — ”

“From whom? — ”

The servant replied gently:

“Why — from my nephew.”

“Oh, yes, your nephew!” And shrugging her shoulders, Madame Aubain continued to pace the floor as if to say: “I did not think of it. — Besides, I do not care, a cabin-boy, a pauper! — but my daughter — what a difference! just think of it! — ”

Felicite, although she had been reared roughly, was very indignant. Then she forgot about it.

It appeared quite natural to her that one should lose one’s head about Virginia.

The two children were of equal importance; they were united in her heart and their fate was to be the same.

The chemist informed her that Victor’s vessel had reached Havana. He had read the information in a newspaper.

Felicite imagined that Havana was a place where people did nothing but smoke, and that Victor walked around among negroes in a cloud of tobacco. Could a person, in case of need, return by land? How far was it from Pont-l’Eveque? In order to learn these things, she questioned Monsieur Bourais. He reached for his map and began some explanations concerning longitudes, and smiled with superiority at Felicite’s bewilderment. At last, he took a pencil and pointed out an imperceptible black point in the scallops of an oval blotch, adding: “There it is.” She bent over the map; the maze of coloured lines hurt her eyes without enlightening her; and when Bourais asked her what puzzled her, she requested him to show her the house Victor lived in. Bourais threw up his hands, sneezed, and then laughed uproariously; such ignorance delighted his soul; but Felicite failed to understand the cause of his mirth, she whose intelligence was so limited that she perhaps expected to see even the picture of her nephew!

It was two weeks later that Liebard came into the kitchen at market-time, and handed her a letter from her brother-in-law. As neither of them could read, she called upon her mistress.

Madame Aubain, who was counting the stitches of her knitting, laid her work down beside her, opened the letter, started, and in a low tone and with a searching look said: “They tell you of a — misfortune. Your nephew — ”

He had died. The letter told nothing more.

Felicite dropped on a chair, leaned her head against the back, and closed her lids; presently they grew pink. Then, with drooping head, inert hands and staring eyes she repeated at intervals:

“Poor little chap! poor little chap!”

Liebard watched her and sighed. Madame Aubain was trembling

Liebard watched her and sighed. Madame Aubain was trembling.

She proposed to the girl to go to see her sister in Trouville.

With a single motion, Felicite replied that it was not necessary.

There was a silence. Old Liebard thought it about time for him to take leave.

Then Felicite uttered:

“They have no sympathy, they do not care!”

Her head fell forward again, and from time to time, mechanically, she toyed with the long knitting-needles on the work-table.

Some women passed through the yard with a basket of wet clothes.

When she saw them through the window, she suddenly remembered her own wash; as she had soaked it the day before, she must go and rinse it now. So she arose and left the room.

Her tub and her board were on the bank of the Toucques. She threw a heap of clothes on the ground, rolled up her sleeves and grasped her bat; and her loud pounding could be heard in the neighbouring gardens. The meadows were empty, the breeze wrinkled the stream, at the bottom of which were long grasses that looked like the hair of corpses floating in the water. She restrained her sorrow and was very brave until night; but, when she had gone to her own room, she gave way to it, burying her face in the pillow and pressing her two fists against her temples.

A long while afterward, she learned through Victor’s captain, the circumstances which surrounded his death. At the hospital they had bled him too much, treating him for yellow fever. Four doctors held him at one time. He died almost instantly, and the chief surgeon had said:

“Here goes another one!”

His parents had always treated him barbarously; she preferred not to see them again, and they made no advances, either from forgetfulness or out of innate hardness.

Virginia was growing weaker.

A cough, continual fever, oppressive breathing and spots on her cheeks indicated some serious trouble. Monsieur Popart had advised a sojourn in Provence. Madame Aubain decided that they would go, and she would have had her daughter come home at once, had it not been for the climate of Pont-l’Eveque.

She made an arrangement with a livery-stable man who drove her over to the convent every Tuesday. In the garden there was a terrace, from which the view extends to the Seine. Virginia walked in it, leaning on her mother’s arm and treading the dead vine leaves. Sometimes the sun, shining through the clouds, made her blink her lids, when she gazed at the sails in the distance, and let her eyes roam over the horizon from the chateau of Tancarville to the lighthouses of eyes roam over the horizon from the chateau of Tancarville to the lighthouses of Havre. Then they rested on the arbour. Her mother had bought a little cask of fine Malaga wine, and Virginia, laughing at the idea of becoming intoxicated, would drink a few drops of it, but never more.

Her strength returned. Autumn passed. Felicite began to reassure Madame Aubain. But, one evening, when she returned home after an errand, she met M. Boupart's coach in front of the door; M. Boupart himself was standing in the vestibule and Madame Aubain was tying the strings of her bonnet. “Give me my foot-warmer, my purse and my gloves; and be quick about it,” she said.

Virginia had congestion of the lungs; perhaps it was desperate.

“Not yet,” said the physician, and both got into the carriage, while the snow fell in thick flakes. It was almost night and very cold.

Felicite rushed to the church to light a candle. Then she ran after the coach which she overtook after an hour's chase, sprang up behind and held on to the straps. But suddenly a thought crossed her mind: “The yard had been left open; supposing that burglars got in!” And down she jumped.

The next morning, at daybreak, she called at the doctor's. He had been home, but had left again. Then she waited at the inn, thinking that strangers might bring her a letter. At last, at daylight she took the diligence for Lisieux.

The convent was at the end of a steep and narrow street. When she arrived about at the middle of it, she heard strange noises, a funeral knell. “It must be for some one else,” thought she; and she pulled the knocker violently.

After several minutes had elapsed, she heard footsteps, the door was half opened and a nun appeared. The good sister, with an air of compunction, told her that “she had just passed away.” And at the same time the tolling of Saint-Leonard's increased.

Felicite reached the second floor. Already at the threshold, she caught sight of Virginia lying on her back, with clasped hands, her mouth open and her head thrown back, beneath a black crucifix inclined toward her, and stiff curtains which were less white than her face. Madame Aubain lay at the foot of the couch, clasping it with her arms and uttering groans of agony. The Mother Superior was standing on the right side of the bed. The three candles on the bureau made red blurs, and the windows were dimmed by the fog outside. The nuns carried Madame Aubain from the room.

For two nights, Felicite never left the corpse. She would repeat the same prayers, sprinkle holy water over the sheets, get up, come back to the bed and contemplate the body. At the end of the first vigil, she noticed that the face had taken on a yellow tinge, the lips grew blue, the nose grew pinched, the eyes were sunken. She kissed them several times and would not have been greatly astonished had Virginia opened them; to souls like this the supernatural is astonished had Virginia opened them, to souls like this the supernatural is always quite simple. She washed her, wrapped her in a shroud, put her into the casket, laid a wreath of flowers on her head and arranged her curls. They were blond and of an extraordinary length for her age. Felicite cut off a big lock and put half of it into her bosom, resolving never to part with it.

The body was taken to Pont-l’Eveque, according to Madame Aubain’s wishes; she followed the hearse in a closed carriage.

After the ceremony it took three quarters of an hour to reach the cemetery. Paul, sobbing, headed the procession; Monsieur Bourais followed, and then came the principle inhabitants of the town, the women covered with black capes, and Felicite. The memory of her nephew, and the thought that she had not been able to render him these honours, made her doubly unhappy, and she felt as if he were being buried with Virginia.

Madame Aubain’s grief was uncontrollable. At first she rebelled against God, thinking that he was unjust to have taken away her child — she who had never done anything wrong, and whose conscience was so pure! But no! she ought to have taken her South. Other doctors would have saved her. She accused herself, prayed to be able to join her child, and cried in the midst of her dreams. Of the latter, one more especially haunted her. Her husband, dressed like a sailor, had come back from a long voyage, and with tears in his eyes told her that he had received the order to take Virginia away. Then they both consulted about a hiding-place.

Once she came in from the garden, all upset. A moment before (and she showed the place), the father and daughter had appeared to her, one after the other; they did nothing but look at her.

During several months she remained inert in her room. Felicite scolded her gently; she must keep up for her son and also for the other one, for “her memory.”

“Her memory!” replied Madame Aubain, as if she were just awakening, “Oh! yes, yes, you do not forget her!” This was an allusion to the cemetery where she had been expressly forbidden to go.

But Felicite went there every day. At four o’clock exactly, she would go through the town, climb the hill, open the gate and arrive at Virginia’s tomb. It was a small column of pink marble with a flat stone at its base, and it was surrounded by a little plot enclosed by chains. The flower-beds were bright with blossoms. Felicite watered their leaves, renewed the gravel, and knelt on the ground in order to till the earth properly. When Madame Aubain was able to visit the cemetery she felt very much relieved and consoled.

Years passed, all alike and marked by no other events than the return of the great church holidays: Easter, Assumption, All Saints’ Day. Household happenings constituted the only data to which in later years they often referred. Thus, in 1825, workmen painted the vestibule; in 1827, a portion of the roof almost killed a man by falling into the yard. In the summer of 1828, it was Madame's turn to offer the hallowed bread; at that time, Bourais disappeared mysteriously; and the old acquaintances, Guyot, Liebard, Madame Lechaptois, Robelin, old Gremanville, paralysed since a long time, passed away one by one. One night, the driver of the mail in Pont-l'Eveque announced the Revolution of July. A few days afterward a new sub-prefect was nominated, the Baron de Larsonniere, ex-consul in America, who, besides his wife, had his sister-in-law and her three grown daughters with him. They were often seen on their lawn, dressed in loose blouses, and they had a parrot and a negro servant. Madame Aubain received a call, which she returned promptly. As soon as she caught sight of them, Felicite would run and notify her mistress. But only one thing was capable of arousing her: a letter from her son.

He could not follow any profession as he was absorbed in drinking. His mother paid his debts and he made fresh ones; and the sighs that she heaved while she knitted at the window reached the ears of Felicite who was spinning in the kitchen.

They walked in the garden together, always speaking of Virginia, and asking each other if such and such a thing would have pleased her, and what she would probably have said on this or that occasion.

All her little belongings were put away in a closet of the room which held the two little beds. But Madame Aubain looked them over as little as possible. One summer day, however, she resigned herself to the task and when she opened the closet the moths flew out.

Virginia's frocks were hung under a shelf where there were three dolls, some hoops, a doll-house, and a basic which she had used. Felicite and Madame Aubain also took out the skirts, the handkerchiefs, and the stockings and spread them on the beds, before putting them away again. The sun fell on the piteous things, disclosing their spots and the creases formed by the motions of the body. The atmosphere was warm and blue, and a blackbird trilled in the garden; everything seemed to live in happiness. They found a little hat of soft brown plush, but it was entirely moth-eaten. Felicite asked for it. Their eyes met and filled with tears; at last the mistress opened her arms and the servant threw herself against her breast and they hugged each other and giving vent to their grief in a kiss which equalised them for a moment.

It was the first time that this had ever happened, for Madame Aubain was not of an expansive nature. Felicite was as grateful for it as if it had been some favour, and thenceforth loved her with animal-like devotion and a religious veneration.

Her kind-heartedness developed. When she heard the drums of a marching regiment passing through the street, she would stand in the doorway with a jug of cider and give the soldiers a drink. She nursed cholera victims. She protected Polish refugees, and one of them even declared that he wished to marry her. But they quarrelled, for one morning when she returned from the Angelus she found him in the kitchen coolly eating a dish which he had prepared for himself during her absence.

After the Polish refugees, came Colmiche, an old man who was credited with having committed frightful misdeeds in ‘93. He lived near the river in the ruins of a pig-sty. The urchins peeped at him through the cracks in the walls and threw stones that fell on his miserable bed, where he lay gasping with catarrh, with long hair, inflamed eyelids, and a tumour as big as his head on one arm.

She got him some linen, tried to clean his hovel and dreamed of installing him in the bake-house without his being in Madame’s way. When the cancer broke, she dressed it every day; sometimes she brought him some cake and placed him in the sun on a bundle of hay; and the poor old creature, trembling and drooling, would thank her in his broken voice, and put out his hands whenever she left him. Finally he died; and she had a mass said for the repose of his soul.

That day a great joy came to her: at dinner-time, Madame de Larsonniere’s servant called with the parrot, the cage, and the perch and chain and lock. A note from the baroness told Madame Aubain that as her husband had been promoted to a prefecture, they were leaving that night, and she begged her to accept the bird as a remembrance and a token of her esteem.

Since a long time the parrot had been on Felicite’s mind, because he came from America, which reminded her of Victor, and she had approached the negro on the subject.

Once even, she had said:

“How glad Madame would be to have him!”

The man had repeated this remark to his mistress who, not being able to keep the bird, took this means of getting rid of it.

CHAPTER IV

He was called Loulou. His body was green, his head blue, the tips of his wings were pink and his breast was golden.

But he had the tiresome tricks of biting his perch, pulling his feathers out, scattering refuse and spilling the water of his bath. Madame Aubain grew tired of him and gave him to Felicite for good.

She undertook his education, and soon he was able to repeat: “Pretty boy! Your servant, sir! I salute you, Marie!” His perch was placed near the door and several persons were astonished that he did not answer to the name of “Jacquot,” for every parrot is called Jacquot. They called him a goose and a log, and these taunts were like so many dagger thrusts to Felicite. Strange stubbornness of the bird which would not talk when people watched him!

Nevertheless, he sought society; for on Sunday, when the ladies Rochefeuille, Monsieur de Houppeville and the new habitues, Onfroy, the chemist, Monsieur Varin and Captain Mathieu, dropped in for their game of cards, he struck the window-panes with his wings and made such a racket that it was impossible to talk.

Bourais’ face must have appeared very funny to Loulou. As soon as he saw him he would begin to roar. His voice re-echoed in the yard, and the neighbours would come to the windows and begin to laugh, too; and in order that the parrot might not see him, Monsieur Bourais edged along the wall, pushed his hat over his eyes to hide his profile, and entered by the garden door, and the looks he gave the bird lacked affection. Loulou, having thrust his head into the butcher-boy’s basket, received a slap, and from that time he always tried to nip his enemy. Fabu threatened to ring his neck, although he was not cruelly inclined, notwithstanding his big whiskers and tattooings. On the contrary, he rather liked the bird, and, out of devilry, tried to teach him oaths. Felicite, whom his manner alarmed, put Loulou in the kitchen, took off his chain and let him walk all over the house.

When he went downstairs, he rested his beak on the steps, lifted his right foot and then his left one; but his mistress feared that such feats would give him vertigo. He became ill and was unable to eat. There was a small growth under his tongue like those chickens are sometimes afflicted with. Felicite pulled it off with her nails and cured him. One day, Paul was imprudent enough to blow the smoke of his cigar in his face; another time, Madame Lormeau was teasing him with the tip of her umbrella and he swallowed the tip. Finally he got lost.

She had put him on the grass to cool him and went away only for a second;

when she returned, she found no parrot! She hunted among the bushes, on the bank of the river, and on the roofs, without paying any attention to Madame Aubain who screamed at her: “Take care! you must be insane!” Then she searched every garden in Pont-l’Eveque and stopped the passers-by to inquire of them: “Haven’t you perhaps seen my parrot?” To those who had never seen the parrot, she described him minutely. Suddenly she thought she saw something green fluttering behind the mills at the foot of the hill. But when she was at the top of the hill she could not see it. A hod-carrier told her that he had just seen the bird in Saint-Melaine, in Mother Simon’s store. She rushed to the place. The people did not know what she was talking about. At last she came home, exhausted, with her slippers worn to shreds, and despair in her heart. She sat down on the bench near Madame and was telling of her search when presently a light weight dropped on her shoulder — Loulou! What the deuce had he been doing? Perhaps he had just taken a little walk around the town!

She did not easily forget her scare; in fact, she never got over it. In consequence of a cold, she caught a sore throat; and some time later she had an earache. Three years later she was stone deaf, and spoke in a very loud voice even in church. Although her sins might have been proclaimed throughout the diocese without any shame to herself, or ill effects to the community, the cure thought it advisable to receive her confession in the vestry-room.

Imaginary buzzings also added to her bewilderment. Her mistress often said to her: “My goodness, how stupid you are!” and she would answer: “Yes, Madame,” and look for something.

The narrow circle of her ideas grew more restricted than it already was; the bellowing of the oxen, the chime of the bells no longer reached her intelligence. All things moved silently, like ghosts. Only one noise penetrated her ears; the parrot’s voice.

As if to divert her mind, he reproduced for her the tick-tack of the spit in the kitchen, the shrill cry of the fish-vendors, the saw of the carpenter who had a shop opposite, and when the door-bell rang, he would imitate Madame Aubain: “Felicite! go to the front door.”

They held conversations together, Loulou repeating the three phrases of his repertory over and over, Felicite replying by words that had no greater meaning, but in which she poured out her feelings. In her isolation, the parrot was almost a son, a love. He climbed upon her fingers, pecked at her lips, clung to her shawl, and when she rocked her head to and fro like a nurse, the big wings of her cap and the wings of the bird flapped in unison. When clouds gathered on the horizon and the thunder rumbled, Loulou would scream, perhaps because he remembered the storms in his native forests. The dripping of the rain would excite him to frenzy; he flapped around, struck the ceiling with his wings, upset everything, and would finally fly into the garden to play. Then he would come back into the room, light on one of the andirons, and hop around in order to get dry.

One morning during the terrible winter of 1837, when she had put him in front of the fire-place on account of the cold, she found him dead in his cage, hanging to the wire bars with his head down. He had probably died of congestion. But she believed that he had been poisoned, and although she had no proofs whatever, her suspicion rested on Fabu.

She wept so sorely that her mistress said: “Why don’t you have him stuffed?”

She asked the advice of the chemist, who had always been kind to the bird.

He wrote to Havre for her. A certain man named Fellacher consented to do the work. But, as the diligence driver often lost parcels entrusted to him, Felicite resolved to take her pet to Honfleur herself.

Leafless apple-trees lined the edges of the road. The ditches were covered with ice. The dogs on the neighbouring farms barked; and Felicite, with her hands beneath her cape, her little black sabots and her basket, trotted along nimbly in the middle of the sidewalk. She crossed the forest, passed by the Haut-Chene, and reached Saint-Gatien.

Behind her, in a cloud of dust and impelled by the steep incline, a mail-coach drawn by galloping horses advanced like a whirlwind. When he saw a woman in the middle of the road, who did not get out of the way, the driver stood up in his seat and shouted to her and so did the postilion, while the four horses, which he could not hold back, accelerated their pace; the two leaders were almost upon her; with a jerk of the reins he threw them to one side, but, furious at the incident, he lifted his big whip and lashed her from her head to her feet with such violence that she fell to the ground unconscious.

Her first thought, when she recovered her senses, was to open the basket. Loulou was unharmed. She felt a sting on her right cheek; when she took her hand away it was red, for the blood was flowing.

She sat down on a pile of stones, and sopped her cheek with her handkerchief; then she ate a crust of bread she had put in her basket, and consoled herself by looking at the bird.

Arriving at the top of Ecquemanville, she saw the lights of Honfleur shining in the distance like so many stars; further on, the ocean spread out in a confused mass. Then a weakness came over her; the misery of her childhood, the disappointment of her first love, the departure of her nephew, the death of Virginia; all these things came back to her at once, and, rising like a swelling tide in her throat, almost choked her.

Then she wished to speak to the captain of the vessel, and without stating what she was sending, she gave him some instructions.

Fellacher kept the parrot a long time. He always promised that it would be ready for the following week; after six months he announced the shipment of a case, and that was the end of it. Really, it seemed as if Loulou would never come back to his home. “They have stolen him,” thought Felicite.

Finally he arrived, sitting bold upright on a branch which could be screwed into a mahogany pedestal, with his foot in the air, his head on one side, and in his beak a nut which the naturalist, from love of the sumptuous, had gilded. She put him in her room.

This place, to which only a chosen few were admitted, looked like a chapel and a second-hand shop, so filled was it with devotional and heterogeneous things. The door could not be opened easily on account of the presence of a large wardrobe. Opposite the window that looked out into the garden, a bull’s-eye opened on the yard; a table was placed by the cot and held a wash-basin, two combs, and a piece of blue soap in a broken saucer. On the walls were rosaries, medals, a number of Holy Virgins, and a holy-water basin made out of a cocoanut; on the bureau, which was covered with a napkin like an altar, stood the box of shells that Victor had given her; also a watering-can and a balloon, writing-books, the engraved geography and a pair of shoes; on the nail which held the mirror, hung Virginia’s little plush hat! Felicite carried this sort of respect so far that she even kept one of Monsieur’s old coats. All the things which Madame Aubain discarded, Felicite begged for her own room. Thus, she had artificial flowers on the edge of the bureau, and the picture of the Comte d’Artois in the recess of the window. By means of a board, Loulou was set on a portion of the chimney which advanced into the room. Every morning when she awoke, she saw him in the dim light of dawn and recalled bygone days and the smallest details of insignificant actions, without any sense of bitterness or grief.

As she was unable to communicate with people, she lived in a sort of somnambulistic torpor. The processions of Corpus-Christi Day seemed to wake her up. She visited the neighbours to beg for candlesticks and mats so as to adorn the temporary altars in the street.

In church, she always gazed at the Holy Ghost, and noticed that there was something about it that resembled a parrot. The likenesses appeared even more striking on a coloured picture by Espinal, representing the baptism of our Saviour. With his scarlet wings and emerald body, it was really the image of Loulou. Having bought the picture, she hung it near the one of the Comte d’Artois so that she could take them in at one glance.

They associated in her mind, the parrot becoming sanctified through the neighbourhood of the Holy Ghost, and the latter becoming more lifelike in her eyes, and more comprehensible. In all probability the Father had never chosen as messenger a dove, as the latter has no voice, but rather one of Loulou's ancestors. And Felicite said her prayers in front of the coloured picture, though from time to time she turned slightly towards the bird.

She desired very much to enter in the ranks of the "Daughters of the Virgin." But Madame Aubain dissuaded her from it.

A most important event occurred: Paul's marriage.

After being first a notary's clerk, then in business, then in the customs, and a tax collector, and having even applied for a position in the administration of woods and forests, he had at last, when he was thirty-six years old, by a divine inspiration, found his vocation: registrature! and he displayed such a high ability that an inspector had offered him his daughter and his influence.

Paul, who had become quite settled, brought his bride to visit his mother.

But she looked down upon the customs of Pont-l'Eveque, put on airs, and hurt Felicite's feelings. Madame Aubain felt relieved when she left.

The following week they learned of Monsieur Bourais' death in an inn. There were rumours of suicide, which were confirmed; doubts concerning his integrity arose. Madame Aubain looked over her accounts and soon discovered his numerous embezzlements; sales of wood which had been concealed from her, false receipts, *etc.* Furthermore, he had an illegitimate child, and entertained a friendship for "a person in Dozule."

These base actions affected her very much. In March, 1853, she developed a pain in her chest; her tongue looked as if it were coated with smoke, and the leeches they applied did not relieve her oppression; and on the ninth evening she died, being just seventy-two years old.

People thought that she was younger, because her hair, which she wore in bands framing her pale face, was brown. Few friends regretted her loss, for her manner was so haughty that she did not attract them. Felicite mourned for her as servants seldom mourn for their masters. The fact that Madame should die before herself perplexed her mind and seemed contrary to the order of things, and absolutely monstrous and inadmissible. Ten days later (the time to journey from Besancon), the heirs arrived. Her daughter-in-law ransacked the drawers, kept some of the furniture, and sold the rest; then they went back to their own home.

Madame's armchair, foot-warmer, work-table, the eight chairs, everything was gone! The places occupied by the pictures formed yellow squares on the walls. They had taken the two little beds, and the wardrobe had been emptied of Virginia's belongings! Felicite went upstairs, overcome with grief.

The following day a sign was posted on the door; the chemist screamed in her

The following day a sign was posted on the door; the chemist screamed in her ear that the house was for sale.

For a moment she tottered, and had to sit down.

What hurt her most was to give up her room, — so nice for poor Loulou! She looked at him in despair and implored the Holy Ghost, and it was this way that she contracted the idolatrous habit of saying her prayers kneeling in front of the bird. Sometimes the sun fell through the window on his glass eye, and lighted a spark in it which sent Felicite into ecstasy.

Her mistress had left her an income of three hundred and eighty francs. The garden supplied her with vegetables. As for clothes, she had enough to last her till the end of her days, and she economised on the light by going to bed at dusk.

She rarely went out, in order to avoid passing in front of the second-hand dealer’s shop where there was some of the old furniture. Since her fainting spell, she dragged her leg, and as her strength was failing rapidly, old Mother Simon, who had lost her money in the grocery business, came very morning to chop the wood and pump the water.

Her eyesight grew dim. She did not open the shutters after that. Many years passed. But the house did not sell or rent. Fearing that she would be put out, Felicite did not ask for repairs. The laths of the roof were rotting away, and during one whole winter her bolster was wet. After Easter she spit blood.

Then Mother Simon went for a doctor. Felicite wished to know what her complaint was. But, being too deaf to hear, she caught only one word: “Pneumonia.” She was familiar with it and gently answered: — ”Ah! like Madame,” thinking it quite natural that she should follow her mistress.

The time for the altars in the street drew near.

The first one was always erected at the foot of the hill, the second in front of the post-office, and the third in the middle of the street. This position occasioned some rivalry among the women and they finally decided upon Madame Aubain’s yard.

Felicite’s fever grew worse. She was sorry that she could not do anything for the altar. If she could, at least, have contributed something towards it! Then she thought of the parrot. Her neighbours objected that it would not be proper. But the cure gave his consent and she was so grateful for it that she begged him to accept after her death, her only treasure, Loulou. From Tuesday until Saturday, the day before the event, she coughed more frequently. In the evening her face was contracted, her lips stuck to her gums and she began to vomit; and on the following day, she felt so low that she called for a priest.

Three neighbours surrounded her when the dominie administered the Extreme Unction. Afterwards she said that she wished to speak to Fabu.

He arrived in his Sunday clothes, very ill at ease among the funereal

He arrived in his Sunday clothes, very ill at ease among the funereal surroundings.

“Forgive me,” she said, making an effort to extend her arm, “I believed it was you who killed him!”

What did such accusations mean? Suspect a man like him of murder! And Fabu became excited and was about to make trouble.

“Don’t you see she is not in her right mind?”

From time to time Felicite spoke to shadows. The women left her and Mother Simon sat down to breakfast.

A little later, she took Loulou and holding him up to Felicite:

“Say good-bye to him, now!” she commanded.

Although he was not a corpse, he was eaten up by worms; one of his wings was broken and the wadding was coming out of his body. But Felicite was blind now, and she took him and laid him against her cheek. Then Mother Simon removed him in order to set him on the altar.

CHAPTER V

The grass exhaled an odour of summer; flies buzzed in the air, the sun shone on the river and warmed the slated roof. Old Mother Simon had returned to Felicite and was peacefully falling asleep.

The ringing of bells woke her; the people were coming out of church. Felicite's delirium subsided. By thinking of the procession, she was able to see it as if she had taken part in it. All the school-children, the singers and the firemen walked on the sidewalks, while in the middle of the street came first the custodian of the church with his halberd, then the beadle with a large cross, the teacher in charge of the boys and a sister escorting the little girls; three of the smallest ones, with curly heads, threw rose leaves into the air; the deacon with outstretched arms conducted the music; and two incense-bearers turned with each step they took toward the Holy Sacrament, which was carried by M. le Cure, attired in his handsome chasuble and walking under a canopy of red velvet supported by four men. A crowd of people followed, jammed between the walls of the houses hung with white sheets; at last the procession arrived at the foot of the hill.

A cold sweat broke out on Felicite's forehead. Mother Simon wiped it away with a cloth, saying inwardly that some day she would have to go through the same thing herself.

The murmur of the crowd grew louder, was very distinct for a moment and then died away. A volley of musketry shook the window-panes. It was the postilions saluting the Sacrament. Felicite rolled her eyes, and said as loudly as she could:

"Is he all right?" meaning the parrot.

Her death agony began. A rattle that grew more and more rapid shook her body. Froth appeared at the corners of her mouth, and her whole frame trembled. In a little while could be heard the music of the bass horns, the clear voices of the children and the men's deeper notes. At intervals all was still, and their shoes sounded like a herd of cattle passing over the grass.

The clergy appeared in the yard. Mother Simon climbed on a chair to reach the bull's-eye, and in this manner could see the altar. It was covered with a lace cloth and draped with green wreaths. In the middle stood a little frame containing relics; at the corners were two little orange-trees, and all along the edge were silver candlesticks, porcelain vases containing sun-flowers, lilies, peonies, and tufts of hydrangeas. This mount of bright colours descended diagonally from the first floor to the carpet that covered the sidewalk. Rare objects arrested one’s eye. A golden sugar-bowl was crowned with violets, earrings set with Alencon stones were displayed on green moss, and two Chinese screens with their bright landscapes were near by. Loulou, hidden beneath roses, showed nothing but his blue head which looked like a piece of lapis-lazuli.

The singers, the canopy-bearers and the children lined up against the sides of the yard. Slowly the priest ascended the steps and placed his shining sun on the lace cloth. Everybody knelt. There was deep silence; and the censers slipping on their chains were swung high in the air. A blue vapour rose in Felicite’s room. She opened her nostrils and inhaled with a mystic sensuousness; then she closed her lids. Her lips smiled. The beats of her heart grew fainter and fainter, and vaguer, like a fountain giving out, like an echo dying away; — and when she exhaled her last breath, she thought she saw in the half-opened heavens a gigantic parrot hovering above her head.

THE LEGEND OF SAINT JULIAN THE HOSPITALLER

CHAPTER I

THE CURSE

Julian’s father and mother dwelt in a castle built on the slope of a hill, in the heart of the woods.

The towers at its four corners had pointed roofs covered with leaden tiles, and the foundation rested upon solid rocks, which descended abruptly to the bottom of the moat.

In the courtyard, the stone flagging was as immaculate as the floor of a church. Long rain-spouts, representing dragons with yawning jaws, directed the water towards the cistern, and on each window-sill of the castle a basil or a heliotrope bush bloomed, in painted flower-pots.

A second enclosure, surrounded by a fence, comprised a fruit-orchard, a garden decorated with figures wrought in bright-hued flowers, an arbour with several bowers, and a mall for the diversion of the pages. On the other side were the kennel, the stables, the bakery, the wine-press and the barns. Around these spread a pasture, also enclosed by a strong hedge.

Peace had reigned so long that the portcullis was never lowered; the moats were filled with water; swallows built their nests in the cracks of the battlements, and as soon as the sun shone too strongly, the archer who all day long paced to and fro on the curtain, withdrew to the watch-tower and slept soundly.

Inside the castle, the locks on the doors shone brightly; costly tapestries hung in the apartments to keep out the cold; the closets overflowed with linen, the cellar was filled with casks of wine, and the oak chests fairly groaned under the weight of money-bags.

In the armoury could be seen, between banners and the heads of wild beasts, weapons of all nations and of all ages, from the slings of the Amalekites and the javelins of the Garamantes, to the broad-swords of the Saracens and the coats of mail of the Normans.

The largest spit in the kitchen could hold an ox; the chapel was as gorgeous as a king’s oratory. There was even a Roman bath in a secluded part of the castle, though the good lord of the manor refrained from using it, as he deemed it a heathenish practice.

Wrapped always in a cape made of fox-skins, he wandered about the castle, rendered justice among his vassals and settled his neighbours' quarrels. In the winter, he gazed dreamily at the falling snow, or had stories read aloud to him. But as soon as the fine weather returned, he would mount his mule and sally forth into the country roads, edged with ripening wheat, to talk with the peasants, to whom he distributed advice. After a number of adventures he took unto himself a wife of high lineage.

She was pale and serious, and a trifle haughty. The horns of her head-dress touched the top of the doors and the hem of her gown trailed far behind her. She conducted her household like a cloister. Every morning she distributed work to the maids, supervised the making of preserves and unguents, and afterwards passed her time in spinning, or in embroidering altar-cloths. In response to her fervent prayers, God granted her a son!

Then there was great rejoicing; and they gave a feast which lasted three days and four nights, with illuminations and soft music. Chickens as large as sheep, and the rarest spices were served; for the entertainment of the guests, a dwarf crept out of a pie; and when the bowls were too few, for the crowd swelled continuously, the wine was drunk from helmets and hunting-horns.

The young mother did not appear at the feast. She was quietly resting in bed. One night she awoke, and beheld in a moonbeam that crept through the window something that looked like a moving shadow. It was an old man clad in sackcloth, who resembled a hermit. A rosary dangled at his side and he carried a beggar's sack on his shoulder. He approached the foot of the bed, and without opening his lips said: “Rejoice, O mother! Thy son shall be a saint.”

She would have cried out, but the old man, gliding along the moonbeam, rose through the air and disappeared. The songs of the banqueters grew louder. She could hear angels' voices, and her head sank back on the pillow, which was surmounted by the bone of a martyr, framed in precious stones.

The following day, the servants, upon being questioned, declared, to a man, that they had seen no hermit. Then, whether dream or fact, this must certainly have been a communication from heaven; but she took care not to speak of it, lest she should be accused of presumption.

The guests departed at daybreak, and Julian's father stood at the castle gate, where he had just bidden farewell to the last one, when a beggar suddenly emerged from the mist and confronted him. He was a gipsy — for he had a braided beard and wore silver bracelets on each arm. His eyes burned and, in an inspired way, he muttered some disconnected words: “Ah! Ah! thy son! — great bloodshed — great glory — happy always — an emperor's family.”

Then he stooped to pick up the alms thrown to him, and disappeared in the tall grass.

The lord of the manor looked up and down the road and called as loudly as he could. But no one answered him! The wind only howled and the morning mists were fast dissolving.

He attributed his vision to a dullness of the brain resulting from too much sleep. "If I should speak of it," quoth he, "people would laugh at me." Still, the glory that was to be his son's dazzled him, albeit the meaning of the prophecy was not clear to him, and he even doubted that he had heard it.

The parents kept their secret from each other. But both cherished the child with equal devotion, and as they considered him marked by God, they had great regard for his person. His cradle was lined with the softest feathers, and lamp representing a dove burned continually over it; three nurses rocked him night and day, and with his pink cheeks and blue eyes, brocaded cloak and embroidered cap he looked like a little Jesus. He cut all his teeth without even a whimper.

When he was seven years old his mother taught him to sing, and his father lifted him upon a tall horse, to inspire him with courage. The child smiled with delight, and soon became familiar with everything pertaining to chargers. An old and very learned monk taught him the Gospel, the Arabic numerals, the Latin letters, and the art of painting delicate designs on vellum. They worked in the top of a tower, away from all noise and disturbance.

When the lesson was over, they would go down into the garden and study the flowers.

Sometimes a herd of cattle passed through the valley below, in charge of a man in Oriental dress. The lord of the manor, recognising him as a merchant, would despatch a servant after him. The stranger, becoming confident, would stop on his way and after being ushered into the castle-hall, would display pieces of velvet and silk, trinkets and strange objects whose use was unknown in those parts. Then, in due time, he would take leave, without having been molested and with a handsome profit.

At other times, a band of pilgrims would knock at the door. Their wet garments would be hung in front of the hearth and after they had been refreshed by food they would relate their travels, and discuss the uncertainty of vessels on the high seas, their long journeys across burning sands, the ferocity of the infidels, the caves of Syria, the Manger and the Holy Sepulchre. They made presents to the young heir of beautiful shells, which they carried in their cloaks.

The lord of the manor very often feasted his brothers-at-arms, and over the wine the old warriors would talk of battles and attacks, of war-machines and of the frightful wounds they had received, so that Julian, who was a listener, would scream with excitement; then his father felt convinced that some day he would be a conqueror. But in the evening, after the Angelus, when he passed through the crowd of beggars who clustered about the church-door, he distributed his alms with so much modesty and nobility that his mother fully expected to see him become an archbishop in time.

His seat in the chapel was next to his parents, and no matter how long the services lasted, he remained kneeling on his *prie-dieu,* with folded hands and his velvet cap lying close beside him on the floor.

One day, during mass, he raised his head and beheld a little white mouse crawling out of a hole in the wall. It scrambled to the first altar-step and then, after a few gambols, ran back in the same direction. On the following Sunday, the idea of seeing the mouse again worried him. It returned; and every Sunday after that he watched for it; and it annoyed him so much that he grew to hate it and resolved to do away with it.

So, having closed the door and strewn some crumbs on the steps of the altar, he placed himself in front of the hole with a stick. After a long while a pink snout appeared, and then whole mouse crept out. He struck it lightly with his stick and stood stunned at the sight of the little, lifeless body. A drop of blood stained the floor. He wiped it away hastily with his sleeve, and picking up the mouse, threw it away, without saying a word about it to anyone.

All sorts of birds pecked at the seeds in the garden. He put some peas in a hollow reed, and when he heard birds chirping in a tree, he would approach cautiously, lift the tube and swell his cheeks; then, when the little creatures dropped about him in multitudes, he could not refrain from laughing and being delighted with his own cleverness.

One morning, as he was returning by way of the curtain, he beheld a fat pigeon sunning itself on the top of the wall. He paused to gaze at it; where he stood the rampart was cracked and a piece of stone was near at hand; he gave his arm a jerk and the well-aimed missile struck the bird squarely, sending it straight into the moat below.

He sprang after it, unmindful of the brambles, and ferreted around the bushes with the litheness of a young dog.

The pigeon hung with broken wings in the branches of a privet hedge.

The persistence of its life irritated the boy. He began to strangle it, and its convulsions made his heart beat quicker, and filled him with a wild, tumultuous voluptuousness, the last throb of its heart making him feel like fainting.

At supper that night, his father declared that at his age a boy should begin to hunt; and he arose and brought forth an old writing-book which contained, in questions and answers, everything pertaining to the pastime. In it, a master showed a supposed pupil how to train dogs and falcons, lay traps, recognise a stag by its fumets, and a fox or a wolf by footprints. He also taught the best way of discovering their tracks, how to start them, where their refuges are usually to be found, what winds are the most favourable, and further enumerated the various cries, and the rules of the quarry.

When Julian was able to recite all these things by heart, his father made up a pack of hounds for him. There were twenty-four greyhounds of Barbary, speedier than gazelles, but liable to get out of temper; seventeen couples of Breton dogs, great barkers, with broad chests and russet coats flecked with white. For wild-boar hunting and perilous doublings, there were forty boarhounds as hairy as bears.

The red mastiffs of Tartary, almost as large as donkeys, with broad backs and straight legs, were destined for the pursuit of the wild bull. The black coats of the spaniels shone like satin; the barking of the setters equalled that of the beagles. In a special enclosure were eight growling bloodhounds that tugged at their chains and rolled their eyes, and these dogs leaped at men’s throats and were not afraid even of lions.

All ate wheat bread, drank from marble troughs, and had high-sounding names.

Perhaps the falconry surpassed the pack; for the master of the castle, by paying great sums of money, had secured Caucasian hawks, Babylonian sakers, German gerfalcons, and pilgrim falcons captured on the cliffs edging the cold seas, in distant lands. They were housed in a thatched shed and were chained to the perch in the order of size. In front of them was a little grass-plot where, from time to time, they were allowed to disport themselves.

Bag-nets, baits, traps and all sorts of snares were manufactured.

Often they would take out pointers who would set almost immediately; then the whippers-in, advancing step by step, would cautiously spread a huge net over their motionless bodies. At the command, the dogs would bark and arouse the quails; and the ladies of the neighbourhood, with their husbands, children and hand-maids, would fall upon them and capture them with ease.

At other times they used a drum to start hares; and frequently foxes fell into the ditches prepared for them, while wolves caught their paws in the traps.

But Julian scorned these convenient contrivances; he preferred to hunt away from the crowd, alone with his steed and his falcon. It was almost always a large, snow-white, Scythian bird. His leather hood was ornamented with a plume, and on his blue feet were bells; and he perched firmly on his master’s arm while they galloped across the plains. Then Julian would suddenly untie his tether and let him fly, and the bold bird would dart through the air like an arrow, One might perceive two spots circle around, unite, and then disappear in the blue heights. Presently the falcon would return with a mutilated bird, and perch again on his master's gauntlet with trembling wings.

Julian loved to sound his trumpet and follow his dogs over hills and streams, into the woods; and when the stag began to moan under their teeth, he would kill it deftly, and delight in the fury of the brutes, which would devour the pieces spread out on the warm hide.

On foggy days, he would hide in the marshes to watch for wild geese, otters and wild ducks.

At daybreak, three equerries waited for him at the foot of the steps; and though the old monk leaned out of the dormer-window and made signs to him to return, Julian would not look around.

He heeded neither the broiling sun, the rain nor the storm; he drank spring water and ate wild berries, and when he was tired, he lay down under a tree; and he would come home at night covered with earth and blood, with thistles in his hair and smelling of wild beasts. He grew to be like them. And when his mother kissed him, he responded coldly to her caress and seemed to be thinking of deep and serious things.

He killed bears with a knife, bulls with a hatchet, and wild boars with a spear; and once, with nothing but a stick, he defended himself against some wolves, which were gnawing corpses at the foot of a gibbet.

*

One winter morning he set out before daybreak, with a bow slung across his shoulder and a quiver of arrows attached to the pummel of his saddle. The hoofs of his steed beat the ground with regularity and his two beagles trotted close behind. The wind was blowing hard and icicles clung to his cloak. A part of the horizon cleared, and he beheld some rabbits playing around their burrows. In an instant, the two dogs were upon them, and seizing as many as they could, they broke their backs in the twinkling of an eye.

Soon he came to a forest. A woodcock, paralysed by the cold, perched on a branch, with its head hidden under its wing. Julian, with a lunge of his sword, cut off its feet, and without stopping to pick it up, rode away.

Three hours later he found himself on the top of a mountain so high that the sky seemed almost black. In front of him, a long, flat rock hung over a precipice, and at the end two wild goats stood gazing down into the abyss. As he had no arrows (for he had left his steed behind), he thought he would climb down to where they stood; and with bare feet and bent back he at last reached the first goat and thrust his dagger below its ribs. But the second animal, in its terror, leaped into the precipice. Julian threw himself forward to strike it, but his right foot slipped, and he fell, face downward and with outstretched arms, over the foot slipped, and he fell, face downward and with outstretched arms, over the body of the first goat.

After he returned to the plains, he followed a stream bordered by willows. From time to time, some cranes, flying low, passed over his head. He killed them with his whip, never missing a bird. He beheld in the distance the gleam of a lake which appeared to be of lead, and in the middle of it was an animal he had never seen before, a beaver with a black muzzle. Notwithstanding the distance that separated them, an arrow ended its life and Julian only regretted that he was not able to carry the skin home with him.

Then he entered an avenue of tall trees, the tops of which formed a triumphal arch to the entrance of a forest. A deer sprang out of the thicket and a badger crawled out of its hole, a stag appeared in the road, and a peacock spread its fan-shaped tail on the grass — and after he had slain them all, other deer, other stags, other badgers, other peacocks, and jays, blackbirds, foxes, porcupines, polecats, and lynxes, appeared; in fact, a host of beasts that grew more and more numerous with every step he took. Trembling, and with a look of appeal in their eyes, they gathered around Julian, but he did not stop slaying them; and so intent was he on stretching his bow, drawing his sword and whipping out his knife, that he had little thought for aught else. He knew that he was hunting in some country since an indefinite time, through the very fact of his existence, as everything seemed to occur with the ease one experiences in dreams. But presently an extraordinary sight made him pause.

He beheld a valley shaped like a circus and filled with stags which, huddled together, were warming one another with the vapour of their breaths that mingled with the early mist.

For a few minutes, he almost choked with pleasure at the prospect of so great a carnage. Then he sprang from his horse, rolled up his sleeves, and began to aim.

When the first arrow whizzed through the air, the stags turned their heads simultaneously. They huddled closer, uttered plaintive cries, and a great agitation seized the whole herd. The edge of the valley was too high to admit of flight; and the animals ran around the enclosure in their efforts to escape. Julian aimed, stretched his bow and his arrows fell as fast and thick as raindrops in a shower.

Maddened with terror, the stags fought and reared and climbed on top of one another; their antlers and bodies formed a moving mountain which tumbled to pieces whenever it displaced itself. Finally the last one expired. Their bodies lay stretched out on the sand with foam gushing from the nostrils and the bowels protruding. The heaving of their bellies grew less and less noticeable, and presently all was still presently all was still.

Night came, and behind the trees, through the branches, the sky appeared like a sheet of blood.

Julian leaned against a tree and gazed with dilated eyes at the enormous slaughter. He was now unable to comprehend how he had accomplished it.

On the opposite side of the valley, he suddenly beheld a large stag, with a doe and their fawn. The buck was black and of enormous size; he had a white beard and carried sixteen antlers. His mate was the color of dead leaves, and she browsed upon the grass, while the fawn, clinging to her udder, followed her step by step.

Again the bow was stretched, and instantly the fawn dropped dead, and seeing this, its mother raised her head and uttered a poignant, almost human wail of agony. Exasperated, Julian thrust his knife into her chest, and felled her to the ground.

The great stag had watched everything and suddenly he sprang forward. Julian aimed his last arrow at the beast. It struck him between his antlers and stuck there.

The stag did not appear to notice it; leaping over the bodies, he was coming nearer and nearer with the intention, Julian thought, of charging at him and ripping him open, and he recoiled with inexpressible horror. But presently the huge animal halted, and, with eyes aflame and the solemn air of a patriarch and a judge, repeated thrice, while a bell tolled in the distance: “Accursed! Accursed! Accursed! some day, ferocious soul, thou wilt murder thy father and thy mother!”

Then he sank on his knees, gently closed his lids and expired.

At first Julian was stunned, and then a sudden lassitude and an immense sadness came over him. Holding his head between his hands, he wept for a long time.

His steed had wandered away; his dogs had forsaken him; the solitude seemed to threaten him with unknown perils. Impelled by a sense of sickening terror, he ran across the fields, and choosing a path at random, found himself almost immediately at the gates of the castle.

That night he could not rest, for, by the flickering light of the hanging lamp, he beheld again the huge black stag. He fought against the obsession of the prediction and kept repeating: “No! No! No! I cannot slay them!” and then he thought: “Still, supposing I desired to? — ” and he feared that the devil might inspire him with this desire.

During three months, his distracted mother prayed at his bedside, and his father paced the halls of the castle in anguish. He consulted the most celebrated physicians, who prescribed quantities of medicine. Julian’s illness, they declared, was due to some injurious wind or to amorous desire. But in reply to their questions, the young man only shook his head. After a time, his strength returned, and he was able to take a walk in the courtyard, supported by his father and the old monk.

But after he had completely recovered, he refused to hunt.

His father, hoping to please him, presented him with a large Saracen sabre. It was placed on a panoply that hung on a pillar, and a ladder was required to reach it. Julian climbed up to it one day, but the heavy weapon slipped from his grasp, and in falling grazed his father and tore his cloak. Julian, believing he had killed him, fell in a swoon.

After that, he carefully avoided weapons. The sight of a naked sword made him grow pale, and this weakness caused great distress to his family.

In the end, the old monk ordered him in the name of God, and of his forefathers, once more to indulge in the sport's of a nobleman.

The equerries diverted themselves every day with javelins and Julian soon excelled in the practice.

He was able to send a javelin into bottles, to break the teeth of the weather-cocks on the castle and to strike door-nails at a distance of one hundred feet.

One summer evening, at the hour when dusk renders objects indistinct, he was in the arbour in the garden, and thought he saw two white wings in the background hovering around the espalier. Not for a moment did he doubt that it was a stork, and so he threw his javelin at it.

A heart-rending scream pierced the air.

He had struck his mother, whose cap and long streams remained nailed to the wall.

Julian fled from home and never returned.

CHAPTER II

THE CRIME

He joined a horde of adventurers who were passing through the place.

He learned what it was to suffer hunger, thirst, sickness and filth. He grew accustomed to the din of battles and to the sight of dying men. The wind tanned his skin. His limbs became hardened through contact with armour, and as he was very strong and brave, temperate and of good counsel, he easily obtained command of a company.

At the outset of a battle, he would electrify his soldiers by a motion of his sword. He would climb the walls of a citadel with a knotted rope, at night, rocked by the storm, while sparks of fire clung to his cuirass, and molten lead and boiling tar poured from the battlements.

Often a stone would break his shield. Bridges crowded with men gave way under him. Once, by turning his mace, he rid himself of fourteen horsemen. He defeated all those who came forward to fight him on the field of honour, and more than a score of times it was believed that he had been killed.

However, thanks to Divine protection, he always escaped, for he shielded orphans, widows, and aged men. When he caught sight of one of the latter walking ahead of him, he would call to him to show his face, as if he feared that he might kill him by mistake.

All sorts of intrepid men gathered under his leadership, fugitive slaves, peasant rebels, and penniless bastards; he then organized an army which increased so much that he became famous and was in great demand.

He succoured in turn the Dauphin of France, the King of England, the Templars of Jerusalem, the General of the Parths, the Negus of Abyssinia and the Emperor of Calicut. He fought against Scandinavians covered with fish-scales, against negroes mounted on red asses and armed with shields made of hippopotamus hide, against gold-coloured Indians who wielded great, shining swords above their heads. He conquered the Troglodytes and the cannibals. He travelled through regions so torrid that the heat of the sun would set fire to the hair on one's head; he journeyed through countries so glacial that one's arms would fall from the body; and he passed through places where the fogs were so dense that it seemed like being surrounded by phantoms.

Republics in trouble consulted him; when he conferred with ambassadors, he always obtained unexpected concessions. Also, if a monarch behaved badly, he would arrive on the scene and rebuke him. He freed nations. He rescued queens would arrive on the scene and rebuke him. He freed nations. He rescued queens sequestered in towers. It was he and no other that killed the serpent of Milan and the dragon of Oberbirbach.

Now, the Emperor of Occitania, having triumphed over the Spanish Mussulmans, had taken the sister of the Caliph of Cordova as a concubine, and had had one daughter by her, whom he brought up in the teachings of Christ. But the Caliph, feigning that he wished to become converted, made him a visit, and brought with him a numerous escort. He slaughtered the entire garrison and threw the Emperor into a dungeon, and treated him with great cruelty in order to obtain possession of his treasures.

Julian went to his assistance, destroyed the army of infidels, laid siege to the city, slew the Caliph, chopped off his head and threw it over the fortifications like a cannon-ball.

As a reward for so great a service, the Emperor presented him with a large sum of money in baskets; but Julian declined it. Then the Emperor, thinking that the amount was not sufficiently large, offered him three quarters of his fortune, and on meeting a second refusal, proposed to share his kingdom with his benefactor. But Julian only thanked him for it, and the Emperor felt like weeping with vexation at not being able to show his gratitude, when he suddenly tapped his forehead and whispered a few words in the ear of one of his courtiers; the tapestry curtains parted and a young girl appeared.

Her large black eyes shone like two soft lights. A charming smile parted her lips. Her curls were caught in the jewels of her half-opened bodice, and the grace of her youthful body could be divined under the transparency of her tunic.

She was small and quite plump, but her waist was slender.

Julian was absolutely dazzled, all the more since he had always led a chaste life.

So he married the Emperor’s daughter, and received at the same time a castle she had inherited from her mother; and when the rejoicings were over, he departed with his bride, after many courtesies had been exchanged on both sides.

The castle was of Moorish design, in white marble, erected on a promontory and surrounded by orange-trees.

Terraces of flowers extended to the shell-strewn shores of a beautiful bay. Behind the castle spread a fan-shaped forest. The sky was always blue, and the trees were swayed in turn by the ocean-breeze and by the winds that blew from the mountains that closed the horizon.

Light entered the apartments through the incrustations of the walls. High, reed-like columns supported the ceiling of the cupolas, decorated in imitation of stalactites.

Fountains played in the spacious halls; the courts were inlaid with mosaic;

there were festooned partitions and a great profusion of architectural fancies; and everywhere reigned a silence so deep that the swish of a sash or the echo of a sigh could be distinctly heard.

Julian now had renounced war. Surrounded by a peaceful people, he remained idle, receiving every day a throng of subjects who came and knelt before him and kissed his hand in Oriental fashion.

Clad in sumptuous garments, he would gaze out of the window and think of his past exploits; and wish that he might again run in the desert in pursuit of ostriches and gazelles, hide among the bamboos to watch for leopards, ride through forests filled with rhinoceroses, climb the most inaccessible peaks in order to have a better aim at the eagles, and fight the polar bears on the icebergs of the northern sea.

Sometimes, in his dreams, he fancied himself like Adam in the midst of Paradise, surrounded by all the beasts; by merely extending his arm, he was able to kill them; or else they filed past him, in pairs, by order of size, from the lions and the elephants to the ermines and the ducks, as on the day they entered Noah's Ark.

Hidden in the shadow of a cave, he aimed unerring arrows at them; then came others and still others, until he awoke, wild-eyed.

Princes, friends of his, invited him to their meets, but he always refused their invitations, because he thought that by this kind of penance he might possibly avert the threatened misfortune; it seemed to him that the fate of his parents depended on his refusal to slaughter animals. He suffered because he could not see them, and his other desire was growing well-nigh unbearable.

In order to divert his mind, his wife had dancers and jugglers come to the castle.

She went abroad with him in an open litter; at other times, stretched out on the edge of a boat, they watched for hours the fish disport themselves in the water, which was as clear as the sky. Often she playfully threw flowers at him or nestling at his feet, she played melodies on an old mandolin; then, clasping her hands on his shoulder, she would inquire tremulously: "What troubles thee, my dear lord?"

He would not reply, or else he would burst into tears; but at last, one day, he confessed his fearful dread.

His wife scorned the idea and reasoned wisely with him: probably his father and mother were dead; and even if he should ever see them again, through what chance, to what end, would he arrive at this abomination? Therefore, his fears were groundless, and he should hunt again.

Julian listened to her and smiled, but he could not bring himself to yield to his desire.

One August evening when they were in their bed-chamber, she having just retired and he being about to kneel in prayer, he heard the yelping of a fox and light footsteps under the window; and he thought he saw things in the dark that looked like animals. The temptation was too strong. He seized his quiver.

His wife appeared astonished.

“I am obeying you,” quoth he, “and I shall be back at sunrise.”

However, she feared that some calamity would happen. But he reassured her and departed, surprised at her illogical moods.

A short time afterwards, a page came to announce that two strangers desired, in the absence of the lord of the castle, to see its mistress at once.

Soon a stooping old man and an aged woman entered the room; their coarse garments were covered with dust and each leaned on a stick.

They grew bold enough to say that they brought Julian news of his parents. She leaned out of the bed to listen to them. But after glancing at each other, the old people asked her whether he ever referred to them and if he still loved them.

“Oh! yes!” she said.

Then they exclaimed:

“We are his parents!” and they sat themselves down, for they were very tired.

But there was nothing to show the young wife that her husband was their son.

They proved it by describing to her the birthmarks he had on his body. Then she jumped out of bed, called a page, and ordered that a repast be served to them.

But although they were very hungry, they could scarcely eat, and she observed surreptitiously how their lean fingers trembled whenever they lifted their cups.

They asked a hundred questions about their son, and she answered each one of them, but she was careful not to refer to the terrible idea that concerned them.

When he failed to return, they had left their château; and had wandered for several years, following vague indications but without losing hope.

So much money had been spent at the tolls of the rivers and in inns, to satisfy the rights of princes and the demands of highwaymen, that now their purse was quite empty and they were obliged to beg. But what did it matter, since they were about to clasp again their son in their arms? They lauded his happiness in having such a beautiful wife, and did not tire of looking at her and kissing her.

The luxuriousness of the apartment astonished them; and the old man, after examining the walls, inquired why they bore the coat-of-arms of the Emperor of Occitania.

“He is my father,” she replied.

And he marvelled and remembered the prediction of the gipsy, while his wife meditated upon the words the hermit had spoken to her. The glory of their son was undoubtedly only the dawn of eternal splendours, and the old people remained awed while the light from the candelabra on the table fell on them.

In the heyday of youth, both had been extremely handsome. The mother had not lost her hair, and bands of snowy whiteness framed her cheeks; and the father, with his stalwart figure and long beard, looked like a carved image.

Julian's wife prevailed upon them not to wait for him. She put them in her bed and closed the curtains; and they both fell asleep. The day broke and outdoors the little birds began to chirp.

Meanwhile, Julian had left the castle grounds and walked nervously through the forest, enjoying the velvety softness of the grass and the balminess of the air.

The shadow of the trees fell on the earth. Here and there, the moonlight flecked the glades and Julian feared to advance, because he mistook the silvery light for water and the tranquil surface of the pools for grass. A great stillness reigned everywhere, and he failed to see any of the beasts that only a moment ago were prowling around the castle. As he walked on, the woods grew thicker, and the darkness more impenetrable. Warm winds, filled with enervating perfumes, caressed him; he sank into masses of dead leaves, and after a while he leaned against an oak-tree to rest and catch his breath.

Suddenly a body blacker than the surrounding darkness sprang from behind the tree. It was a wild boar. Julian did not have time to stretch his bow, and he bewailed the fact as if it were some great misfortune. Presently, having left the woods, he beheld a wolf slinking along a hedge.

He aimed an arrow at him. The wolf paused, turned his head and quietly continued on his way. He trotted along, always keeping at the same distance, pausing now and then to look around and resuming his flight as soon as an arrow was aimed in his direction.

In this way Julian traversed an apparently endless plain, then sand-hills, and at last found himself on a plateau, that dominated a great stretch of land. Large flat stones were interspersed among crumbling vaults; bones and skeletons covered the ground, and here and there some mouldy crosses stood desolate. But presently, shapes moved in the darkness of the tombs, and from them came panting, wild-eyed hyenas. They approached him and smelled him, grinning hideously and disclosing their gums. He whipped out his sword, but they scattered in every direction and continuing their swift, limping gallop, disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Some time afterwards, in a ravine, he encountered a wild bull, with threatening horns, pawing the sand with his hoofs. Julian thrust his lance between his dewlaps. But his weapon snapped as if the beast were made of bronze; then he closed his eyes in anticipation of his death. When he opened them again, the bull had vanished.

Then his soul collapsed with shame. Some supernatural power destroyed his strength, and he set out for home through the forest. The woods were a tangle of creeping plants that he had to cut with his sword, and while he was thus engaged, a weasel slid between his feet, a panther jumped over his shoulder, and a serpent wound itself around the ash-tree.

Among its leaves was a monstrous jackdaw that watched Julian intently, and here and there, between the branches, appeared great, fiery sparks as if the sky were raining all its stars upon the forest. But the sparks were the eyes of wild-cats, owls, squirrels, monkeys and parrots.

Julian aimed his arrows at them, but the feathered weapons lighted on the leaves of the trees and looked like white butterflies. He threw stones at them; but the missiles did not strike, and fell to the ground. Then he cursed himself, and howled imprecations, and in his rage he could have struck himself.

Then all the beasts he had pursued appeared, and formed a narrow circle around him. Some sat on their hindquarters, while others stood at full height. And Julian remained among them, transfixed with terror and absolutely unable to move. By a supreme effort of his will-power, he took a step forward; those that perched in the trees opened their wings, those that trod the earth moved their limbs, and all accompanied him.

The hyenas strode in front of him, the wolf and the wild boar brought up the rear. On his right, the bull swung its head and on his left the serpent crawled through the grass; while the panther, arching its back, advanced with velvety footfalls and long strides. Julian walked as slowly as possible, so as not to irritate them, while in the depth of bushes he could distinguish porcupines, foxes, vipers, jackals, and bears.

He began to run; the brutes followed him. The serpent hissed, the malodorous beasts frothed at the mouth, the wild boar rubbed his tusks against his heels, and the wolf scratched the palms of his hands with the hairs of his snout. The monkeys pinched him and made faces, the weasel tolled over his feet. A bear knocked his cap off with its huge paw, and the panther disdainfully dropped an arrow it was about to put in its mouth.

Irony seemed to incite their sly actions. As they watched him out of the corners of their eyes, they seemed to meditate a plan of revenge, and Julian, who was deafened by the buzzing of the insects, bruised by the wings and tails of the birds, choked by the stench of animal breaths, walked with outstretched arms and closed lids, like a blind man, without even the strength to beg for mercy.

The crowing of a cock vibrated in the air. Other cocks responded; it was day; and Julian recognised the top of his palace rising above the orange-trees.

Then, on the edge of a field, he beheld some red partridges fluttering around a stubble-field. He unfastened his cloak and threw it over them like a net. When he lifted it, he found only a bird that had been dead a long time and was decaying.

This disappointment irritated him more than all the others. The thirst for carnage stirred afresh within him; animals failing him, he desired to slaughter men.

He climbed the three terraces and opened the door with a blow of his fist; but at the foot of the staircase, the memory of his beloved wife softened his heart. No doubt she was asleep, and he would go up and surprise her. Having removed his sandals, he unlocked the door softly and entered.

The stained windows dimmed the pale light of dawn. Julian stumbled over some garment’s lying on the floor and a little further on, he knocked against a table covered with dishes. “She must have eaten,” he thought; so he advanced cautiously towards the bed which was concealed by the darkness in the back of the room. When he reached the edge, he leaned over the pillow where the two heads were resting close together and stooped to kiss his wife. His mouth encountered a man’s beard.

He fell back, thinking he had become crazed; then he approached the bed again and his searching fingers discovered some hair which seemed to be very long. In order to convince himself that he was mistaken, he once more passed his hand slowly over the pillow. But this time he was sure that it was a beard and that a man was there! a man lying beside his wife!

Flying into an ungovernable passion, he sprang upon them with his drawn dagger, foaming, stamping and howling like a wild beast. After a while he stopped.

The corpses, pierced through the heart, had not even moved. He listened attentively to the two death-rattles, they were almost alike, and as they grew fainter, another voice, coming from far away, seemed to continue them. Uncertain at first, this plaintive voice came nearer and nearer, grew louder and louder and presently he recognised, with a feeling of abject terror, the bellowing of the great black stag.

And as he turned around, he thought he saw the spectre of his wife standing at the threshold with a light in her hand.

The sound of the murder had aroused her. In one glance she understood what had happened and fled in horror, letting the candle drop from her hand. Julian picked it up.

His father and mother lay before him, stretched on their backs, with gaping wounds in their breasts; and their faces, the expression of which was full of wounds in their breasts; and their faces, the expression of which was full of tender dignity, seemed to hide what might be an eternal secret.

Splashes and blotches of blood were on their white skin, on the bed-clothes, on the floor, and on an ivory Christ which hung in the alcove. The scarlet reflection of the stained window, which just then was struck by the sun, lighted up the bloody spots and appeared to scatter them around the whole room. Julian walked toward the corpses, repeating to himself and trying to believe that he was mistaken, that it was not possible, that there are often inexplicable likenesses.

At last he bent over to look closely at the old man and he saw, between the half-closed lids, a dead pupil that scorched him like fire. Then he went over to the other side of the bed, where the other corpse lay, but the face was partly hidden by bands of white hair. Julian slipped his finger beneath them and raised the head, holding it at arm’s length to study its features, while, with his other hand he lifted the torch. Drops of blood oozed from the mattress and fell one by one upon the floor.

At the close of the day, he appeared before his wife, and in a changed voice commanded her first not to answer him, not to approach him, not even to look at him, and to obey, under the penalty of eternal damnation, every one of his orders, which were irrevocable.

The funeral was to be held in accordance with the written instructions he had left on a chair in the death-chamber.

He left her his castle, his vassals, all his worldly goods, without keeping even his clothes or his sandals, which would be found at the top of the stairs.

She had obeyed the will of God in bringing about his crime, and accordingly she must pray for his soul, since henceforth he should cease to exist.

The dead were buried sumptuously in the chapel of a monastery which it took three days to reach from the castle. A monk wearing a hood that covered his head followed the procession alone, for nobody dared to speak to him. And during the mass, he lay flat on the floor with his face downward and his arms stretched out at his sides.

After the burial, he was seen to take the road leading into the mountains. He looked back several times, and finally passed out of sight.

CHAPTER III

THE REPARATION

He left the country and begged his daily bread on his way.

He stretched out his hand to the horsemen he met in the roads, and humbly approached the harvesters in the fields; or else remained motionless in front of the gates of castles; and his face was so sad that he was never turned away.

Obeying a spirit of humility, he related his history to all men, and they would flee from him and cross themselves. In villages through which he had passed before, the good people bolted the doors, threatened him, and threw stones at him as soon as they recognised him. The more charitable ones placed a bowl on the window-sill and closed the shutters in order to avoid seeing him.

Repelled and shunned by everyone, he avoided his fellow-men and nourished himself with roots and plants, stray fruits and shells which he gathered along the shores.

Often, at the bend of a hill, he could perceive a mass of crowded roofs, stone spires, bridges, towers and narrow streets, from which arose a continual murmur of activity.

The desire to mingle with men impelled him to enter the city. But the gross and beastly expression of their faces, the noise of their industries and the indifference of their remarks, chilled his very heart. On holidays, when the cathedral bells rang out at daybreak and filled the people’s hearts with gladness, he watched the inhabitants coming out of their dwellings, the dancers in the public squares, the fountains of ale, the damask hangings spread before the houses of princes; and then, when night came, he would peer through the windows at the long tables where families gathered and where grandparents held little children on their knees; then sobs would rise in his throat and he would turn away and go back to his haunts.

He gazed with yearning at the colts in the pastures, the birds in their nests, the insects on the flowers; but they all fled from him at his approach and hid or flew away. So he sought solitude. But the wind brought to his ears sounds resembling death-rattles; the tears of the dew reminded him of heavier drops, and every evening, the sun would spread blood in the sky, and every night, in his dreams, he lived over his parricide.

He made himself a hair-cloth lined with iron spikes. On his knees, he ascended every hill that was crowned with a chapel. But the unrelenting thought spoiled the splendour of the tabernacles and tortured him in the midst of his spoiled the splendour of the tabernacles and tortured him in the midst of his penances.

He did not rebel against God, who had inflicted his action, but he despaired at the thought that he had committed it.

He had such a horror of himself that he took all sorts of risks. He rescued paralytics from fire and children from waves. But the ocean scorned him and the flames spared him. Time did not allay his torment, which became so intolerable that he resolved to die.

One day, while he was stooping over a fountain to judge of its depth, an old man appeared on the other side. He wore a white beard and his appearance was so lamentable that Julian could not keep back his tears. The old man also was weeping. Without recognising him, Julian remembered confusedly a face that resembled his. He uttered a cry; for it was his father who stood before him; and he gave up all thought of taking his own life.

Thus weighted down by his recollections, he travelled through many countries and arrived at a river which was dangerous, because of its violence and the slime that covered its shores. Since a long time nobody had ventured to cross it.

The bow of an old boat, whose stern was buried in the mud, showed among the reeds. Julian, on examining it closely, found a pair of oars and hit upon the idea of devoting his life to the service of his fellow-men.

He began by establishing on the bank of the river a sort of road which would enable people to approach the edge of the stream; he broke his nails in his efforts to lift enormous stones which he pressed against the pit of his stomach in order to transport them from one point to another; he slipped in the mud, he sank into it, and several times was on the very brink of death.

Then he took to repairing the boat with debris of vessels, and afterwards built himself a hut with putty and trunks of trees.

When it became known that a ferry had been established, passengers flocked to it. They hailed him from the opposite side by waving flags, and Julian would jump into the boat and row over. The craft was very heavy, and the people loaded it with all sorts of baggage, and beasts of burden, who reared with fright, thereby adding greatly to the confusion. He asked nothing for his trouble; some gave him left-over victuals which they took from their sacks or worn-out garments which they could no longer use.

The brutal ones hurled curses at him, and when he rebuked them gently they replied with insults, and he was content to bless them.

A little table, a stool, a bed made of dead leaves and three earthen bowls were all he possessed. Two holes in the wall served as windows. On one side, as far as the eye could see, stretched barren wastes studded here and there with pools of water; and in front of him flowed the greenish waters of the wide river. In the spring, a putrid odour arose from the damp sod. Then fierce gales lifted clouds of dust that blew everywhere, even settling in the water and in one's mouth. A little later swarms of mosquitoes appeared, whose buzzing and stinging continued night and day. After that, came frightful frosts which communicated a stone-like rigidity to everything and inspired one with an insane desire for meat. Months passed when Julian never saw a human being. He often closed his lids and endeavored to recall his youth; — he beheld the courtyard of a castle, with greyhounds stretched out on a terrace, an armoury filled with valets, and under a bower of vines a youth with blond curls, sitting between an old man wrapped in furs and a lady with a high cap; presently the corpses rose before him, and then he would throw himself face downward on his cot and sob:

"Oh! poor father! poor mother! poor mother!" and would drop into a fitful slumber in which the terrible visions recurred.

One night he thought that some one was calling to him in his sleep. He listened intently, but could hear nothing save the roaring of the waters.

But the same voice repeated: "Julian!"

It proceeded from the opposite shore, fact which appeared extraordinary to him, considering the breadth of the river.

The voice called a third time: "Julian!"

And the high-pitched tones sounded like the ringing of a church-bell.

Having lighted his lantern, he stepped out of his cabin. A frightful storm raged. The darkness was complete and was illuminated here and there only by the white waves leaping and tumbling.

After a moment's hesitation, he untied the rope. The water presently grew smooth and the boat glided easily to the opposite shore, where a man was waiting.

He was wrapped in a torn piece of linen; his face was like a chalk mask, and his eyes were redder than glowing coals. When Julian held up his lantern he noticed that the stranger was covered with hideous sores; but notwithstanding this, there was in his attitude something like the majesty of a king.

As soon as he stepped into the boat, it sank deep into the water, borne downward by his weight; then it rose again and Julian began to row.

With each stroke of the oars, the force of the waves raised the bow of the boat. The water, which was blacker than ink, ran furiously along the sides. It formed abysses and then mountains, over which the boat glided, then it fell into yawning depths where, buffeted by the wind, it whirled around and around.

Julian leaned far forward and, bracing himself with his feet, bent backwards so as to bring his whole strength into play. Hail-stones cut his hands, the rain ran down his back, the velocity of the wind suffocated him. He stopped rowing and let the boat drift with the tide. But realising that an important matter was at stake, a command which could not be disregarded, he picked up the oars again; and the rattling of the tholes mingled with the clamourings of the storm.

The little lantern burned in front of him. Sometimes birds fluttered past it and obscured the light. But he could distinguish the eyes of the leper who stood at the stern, as motionless as a column.

And the trip lasted a long, long time.

When they reached the hut, Julian closed the door and saw the man sit down on the stool. The species of shroud that was wrapped around him had fallen below his loins, and his shoulders and chest and lean arms were hidden under blotches of scaly pustules. Enormous wrinkles crossed his forehead. Like a skeleton, he had a hole instead of a nose, and from his bluish lips came breath which was fetid and as thick as mist.

“I am hungry,” he said.

Julian set before him what he had, a piece of pork and some crusts of coarse bread.

After he had devoured them, the table, the bowl, and the handle of the knife bore the same scales that covered his body.

Then he said: “I thirst!”

Julian fetched his jug of water and when he lifted it, he smelled an aroma that dilated his nostrils and filled his heart with gladness. It was wine; what a boon! but the leper stretched out his arm and emptied the jug at one draught.

Then he said: “I am cold!”

Julian ignited a bundle of ferns that lay in the middle of the hut. The leper approached the fire and, resting on his heels, began to warm himself; his whole frame shook and he was failing visibly; his eyes grew dull, his sores began to break, and in a faint voice he whispered:

“Thy bed!”

Julian helped him gently to it, and even laid the sail of his boat over him to keep him warm.

The leper tossed and moaned. The corners of his mouth were drawn up over his teeth; an accelerated death-rattle shook his chest and with each one of his aspirations, his stomach touched his spine. At last, he closed his eyes.

“I feel as if ice were in my bones! Lay thyself beside me!” he commanded. Julian took off his garments; and then, as naked as on the day he was born, he got into the bed; against his thigh he could feel the skin of the leper, and it was colder than a serpent and as rough as a file.

He tried to encourage the leper, but he only whispered:

“Oh! I am about to die! Come closer to me and warm me! Not with thy hands! No! with thy whole body.”

So Julian stretched himself out upon the leper, lay on him, lips to lips, chest to chest.

Then the leper clasped him close and presently his eyes shone like stars; his hair lengthened into sunbeams; the breath of his nostrils had the scent of roses; a cloud of incense rose from the hearth, and the waters began to murmur harmoniously; an abundance of bliss, a superhuman joy, filled the soul of the swooning Julian, while he who clasped him to his breast grew and grew until his head and his feet touched the opposite walls of the cabin. The roof flew up in the air, disclosing the heavens, and Julian ascended into infinity face to face with our Lord Jesus Christ, who bore him straight to heaven.

And this is the story of Saint Julian the Hospitaller, as it is given on the stained-glass window of a church in my birthplace.

HERODIAS

CHAPTER I

In the eastern side of the Dead Sea rose the citadel of Machaerus. It was built upon a conical peak of basalt, and was surrounded by four deep valleys, one on each side, another in front, and the fourth in the rear. At the base of the citadel, crowding against one another, a group of houses stood within the circle of a wall, whose outlines undulated with the unevenness of the soil. A zigzag road, cutting through the rocks, joined the city to the fortress, the walls of which were about one hundred and twenty cubits high, having numerous angles and ornamental towers that stood out like jewels in this crown of stone overhanging an abyss.

Within the high walls stood a palace, adorned with many richly carved arches, and surrounded by a terrace that on one side of the building spread out below a wide balcony made of sycamore wood, upon which tall poles had been erected to support an awning.

One morning, just before sunrise, the tetrarch, Herod-Antipas, came out alone upon the balcony. He leaned against one of the columns and looked about him.

The crests of the hill-tops in the valley below the palace were just discernible in the light of the false dawn, although their bases, extending to the abyss, were still plunged in darkness. A light mist floated in the air; presently it lifted, and the shores of the Dead Sea became visible. The sun, rising behind Machaerus, spread a rosy flush over the sky, lighting up the stony shores, the hills, and the desert, and illuming the distant mountains of Judea, rugged and grey in the early dawn. En-gedi, the central point of the group, threw a deep black shadow; Hebron, in the background, was round-topped like a dome; Eschol had her pomegranates, Sorek her vineyards, Carmel her fields of sesame; and the tower of Antonia, with its enormous cube, dominated Jerusalem. The tetrarch turned his gaze from it to contemplate the palms of Jericho on his right; and his thoughts dwelt upon other cities of his beloved Galilee, — Capernaum, Endor, Nazareth, Tiberias — whither it might be he would never return.

The Jordan wound its way through the arid plains that met his gaze; white and glittering under the clear sky, it dazzled the eye like snow in the rays of the sun.

The Dead Sea now looked like a sheet of lapis-lazuli; and at its southern extremity, on the coast of Yemen, Antipas recognised clearly what at first he had been able only dimly to perceive. Several tents could now be plainly seen; men carrying spears were moving about among a group of horses; and dying camp-fires shone faintly in the beams of the rising sun.

This was a troop belonging to the sheikh of the Arabs, the daughter of whom the tetrarch had repudiated in order to wed Herodias, already married to one of his brothers, who lived in Italy but who had no pretensions to power.

Antipas was waiting for assistance and reinforcements from the Romans, but as Vitellius, the Governor of Syria, had not yet arrived, he was consumed with impatience and anxiety. Perhaps Agrippa had ruined his cause with the Emperor, he thought. Philip, his third brother, sovereign of Batania, was arming himself clandestinely. The Jews were becoming intolerant of the tetrarch’s idolatries; he knew that many were weary of his rule; and he hesitated now between adopting one of two projects: to conciliate the Arabs and win back their allegiance, or to conclude an alliance with the Parthians. Under the pretext of celebrating his birthday, he had planned to bring together, at a grand banquet, the chiefs of his troops, the stewards of his domains, and the most important men from the region about Galilee.

Antipas threw a keen glance along all the roads leading to Machaerus. They were deserted. Eagles were sweeping through the air high above his head; the soldiers of the guard, placed at intervals along the ramparts, slept or dozed, leaning against the walls; all was silent within the castle.

Suddenly he heard the sound of a distant voice, seeming to come from the very depths of the earth. His cheek paled. After an instant’s hesitation, he leaned far over the balcony railing, listening intently, but the voice had died away. Presently it rose again upon the quiet air; Antipas clapped his hands together loudly, crying: “Mannaeus! Mannaeus!”

Instantly a man appeared, naked to the waist, after the fashion of a masseur at the bath. Although emaciated, and somewhat advanced in years, he was a giant in stature, and on his hip he wore a cutlass in a bronze scabbard. His bushy hair, gathered up and held in place by a kind of comb, exaggerated the apparent size of his massive head. His eyes were heavy with sleep, but his white teeth shone, his step was light on the flagstones, and his body had the suppleness of an ape, although his countenance was as impassive as that of a mummy.

“Where is he?” demanded the tetrarch of this strange being.

Mannaeus made a movement over his shoulder with his thumb, saying:

“Over there — still there!”

“I thought I heard him cry out.”

And Antipas, after drawing a deep breath, asked for news of Iaokanann, afterwards known as St. John the Baptist. Had he been allowed to see the two men who had asked permission to visit his dungeon a few days before, and since that time, had any one discovered for what purpose the men desired to see him?

“They exchanged some strange words with him,” Mannaeus replied, “with the mysterious air of robbers conspiring at the cross-roads. Then they departed towards Upper Galilee, saying that they were the bearers of great tidings.”

Antipas bent his head for a moment; then raising it quickly, said in a tone full of alarm:

“Guard him! watch him well! Do not allow any one else to see him. Keep the gates shut and the entrance to the dungeon closed fast. It must not even be suspected that he still lives!”

Mannaeus had already attended to all these details, because Iaokanann was a Jew, and, like all the Samaritans, Mannaeus hated the Jews.

Their temple on the Mount of Gerizim, which Moses had designed to be the centre of Israel, had been destroyed since the reign of King Hyrcanus; and the temple at Jerusalem made the Samaritans furious; they regarded its presence as an outrage against themselves, and a permanent injustice. Mannaeus, indeed, had forcibly entered it, for the purpose of defiling its altar with the bones of corpses. Several of his companions, less agile than he, had been caught and beheaded.

From the tetrarch’s balcony, the temple was visible through an opening between two hills. The sun, now fully risen, shed a dazzling splendour on its walls of snowy marble and the plates of purest gold that formed its roof. The structure shone like a luminous mountain, and its radiant purity indicated something almost superhuman, eclipsing even its suggestion of opulence and pride.

Mannaeus stretched out his powerful arm towards Zion, and, with clenched fist and his great body drawn to its full height, he launched a bitter anathema at the city, with perfect faith that eventually his curse must be effective.

Antipas listened, without appearing to be shocked at the strength of the invectives.

When the Samaritan had become somewhat calmer, he returned to the subject of the prisoner.

“Sometimes he grows excited,” said he, “then he longs to escape or talks about a speedy deliverance. At other times he is as quiet as a sick animal, although I often find him pacing to and fro in his gloomy dungeon, murmuring, ‘In order that His glory may increase, mine must diminish.’“

Antipas and Mannaeus looked at each other a moment in silence. But the tetrarch was weary of pondering on this troublesome matter.

The mountain peaks surrounding the palace, looking like great petrified waves, the black depths among the cliffs, the immensity of the blue sky, the rising sun, and the gloomy valley of the abyss, filled the soul of Antipas with a vague unrest; he felt an overwhelming sense of oppression at the sight of the desert, whose uneven piles of sand suggested crumbling amphitheaters or ruined palaces. The hot wind brought an odour of sulphur, as if it had rolled up from cities accursed and buried deeper than the river-bed of the slow-running Jordan.

These aspects of nature, which seemed to his troubled fancy signs of the wrath of the gods, terrified him, and he leaned heavily against the balcony railing, his eyes fixed, his head resting upon his hands.

Presently he felt a light touch upon his shoulder. He turned, and saw Herodias standing beside him. A purple robe enveloped her, falling to her sandaled feet. Having left her chamber hurriedly, she wore no jewels nor other ornaments. A thick tress of rippling black hair hung over her shoulder and hid itself in her bosom; her nostrils, a little too large for beauty, quivered with triumph, and her face was alight with joy. She gently shook the tetrarch's shoulder, and exclaimed exultantly:

"Caesar is our friend! Agrippa has been imprisoned!"

"Who told thee that?"

"I know it!" she replied, adding: "It was because he coveted the crown of Caligula."

While living upon the charity of Antipas and Herodias, Agrippa had intrigued to become king, a title for which the tetrarch was as eager as he. But if this news were true, no more was to be feared from Agrippa's scheming.

"The dungeons of Tiberias are hard to open, and sometimes life itself is uncertain within their depths," said Herodias, with grim significance.

Antipas understood her; and, although she was Agrippa's sister, her atrocious insinuation seemed entirely justifiable to the tetrarch. Murder and outrage were to be expected in the management of political intrigues; they were a part of the fatal inheritance of royal houses; and in the family of Herodias nothing was more common.

Then she rapidly unfolded to the tetrarch the secrets of her recent undertakings, telling him how many men had been bribed, what letters had been intercepted, and the number of spies stationed at the city gates. She did not hesitate even to tell him of her success in an attempt to befool and seduce Eutyches the denunciator.

"And why should I not?" she said; "it cost me nothing. For thee, my lord, have I not done more than that? Did I not even abandon my child?"

After her divorce from Philip, she had indeed left her daughter in Rome, hoping that, as the wife of the tetrarch, she might bear other children. Until that moment she had never spoken to Antipas of her daughter. He asked himself the reason for this sudden display of tenderness.

During their brief conversation several attendants had come out upon the balcony; one slave brought a quantity of large, soft cushions, and arranged them in a kind of temporary couch upon the floor behind his mistress. Herodias sank upon them, and turning her face away from Antipas, seemed to be weeping silently. After a few moments she dried her eyes, declared that she would dream no more, and that she was, in reality, perfectly happy. She reminded Antipas of their former long delightful interviews in the atrium; their meetings at the baths; their walks along the Sacred Way, and the sweet evening rendezvous at the villa, among the flowery groves, listening to the murmur of splashing fountains, within sight of the Roman Campagna. Her glances were as tender as in former days; she drew near to him, leaned against his breast and caressed him fondly.

But he repelled her soft advances. The love she sought to rekindle had died long ago. He thought instead of all his misfortunes, and of the twelve long years during which the war had continued. Protracted anxiety had visibly aged the tetrarch. His shoulders were bent beneath his violet-bordered toga; his whitening locks were long and mingled with his beard, and the sunlight revealed many lines upon his brow, as well as upon that of Herodias. After the tetrarch’s repulse of his wife’s tender overtures, the pair gazed morosely at each other.

The mountain paths began to show signs of life. Shepherds were driving their flocks to pasture; children urged heavy-laden donkeys along the roads; while grooms belonging to the palace led the horses to the river to drink. The wayfarers descending from the heights on the farther side of Machaerus disappeared behind the castle; others ascended from the valleys, and after arriving at the palace deposited their burdens in the courtyard. Many of these were purveyors to the tetrarch; others were the servants of his expected guests, arriving in advance of their masters.

Suddenly, at the foot of the terrace on the left, an Essene appeared; he wore a white robe, his feet were bare, and his demeanour indicated that he was a follower of the Stoics. Mannaeus instantly rushed towards the stranger, drawing the cutlass that he wore upon his hip.

“Kill him!” cried Herodias.

“Do not touch him!” the tetrarch commanded.

The two men stood motionless for an instant, then they descended the terrace, both taking a different direction, although they kept their eyes fixed upon each other.

“I know that man,” said Herodias, after they had disappeared. “His name is Phanuel, and he will try to seek out Iaokanann, since thou wert so foolish as to allow him to live.”

Antipas said that the man might some day be useful to them. His attacks upon Jerusalem would gain them the allegiance of the rest of the Jews.

“No,” said Herodias, “the Jews will accept any master, and are incapable of feeling any true patriotism.” She added that, as for the man who was trying to influence the people with hopes cherished since the days of Nehemiah, the best policy was to suppress him.

The tetrarch replied that there was no haste about the matter, and expressed his doubt that any real danger was to be feared from Iaokanann even affecting to laugh at the idea.

“Do not deceive thyself!” exclaimed Herodias. And she retold the story of her humiliation one day when she was travelling towards Gilead, in order to purchase some of the balm for which that region was famous.

“A multitude was standing on the banks of the stream, my lord; many of the people were putting on their raiment. Standing on a hillock, a strange man was speaking to the gathering. A camel’s-skin was wrapped about his loins, and his head was like that of a lion. As soon as he saw me, he launched in my direction all the maledictions of the prophets. His eyes flamed, his voice shook, he raised his arms as if he would draw down lightning upon my head. I could not fly from him; the wheels of my chariot sank in the sand up to the middle; and I could only crawl along, hiding my head with my mantle, and frozen with terror at the curses that poured upon me like a storm from heaven!”

Continuing her harangue, she declared that the knowledge that this man still existed poisoned her very life. When he had been seized and bound with cords, the soldiers were prepared to stab him if he resisted, but he had been quite gentle and obedient. After he had been thrown into prison some one had put venomous serpents into his dungeon, but strange to say, after a time they had died, leaving him uninjured. The inanity of such tricks exasperated Herodias. Besides, she inquired, why did this man make war upon her? What interest moved him to such actions? His injurious words to her, uttered before a throng of listeners, had been repeated and widely circulated; she heard them whispered everywhere. Against a legion of soldiers she would have been brave; but this mysterious influence, more pernicious and powerful than the sword, but impossible to grasp, was maddening! Herodias strode to and fro upon the terrace, white with rage, unable to find words to express the emotions that choked her.

She had a haunting fear that the tetrarch might listen to public opinion after a time, and persuade himself it was his duty to repudiate her. Then, indeed, all would be lost! Since early youth she had cherished a dream that some day she would rule over a great empire. As an important step towards attaining this ambition, she had deserted Philip, her first husband, and married the tetrarch, who now she thought had duped her.

who now she thought had duped her.

“Ah! I found a powerful support, indeed, when I entered thy family!” she sneered.

“It is at least the equal of thine,” Antipas replied.

Herodias felt the blood of the kings and priests, her ancestors, boiling in her veins.

“Thy grandfather was a servile attendant upon the temple of Ascalon!” she went on, with fury. “Thy other ancestors were shepherds, bandits, conductors of caravans, a horde of slaves offered as tribute to King David! My forefathers were the conquerors of thine! The first of the Maccabees drove thy people out of Hebron; Hyrcanus forced them to be circumcised!” Then, with all the contempt of the patrician for the plebeian, the hatred of Jacob for Esau, she reproached him for his indifference towards palpable outrages to his dignity, his weakness regarding the Phoenicians, who had been false to him, and his cowardly attitude towards the people who detested and insulted herself.

“But thou art like them!” she cried; “Dost regret the loss of the Arab girl who danced upon these very pavements? Take her back! Go and live with her — in her tent! Eat her bread, baked in the ashes! Drink curdled sheep’s-milk! Kiss her dark cheeks — and forget me!”

The tetrarch had already forgotten her presence, it appeared. He paid no further heed to her anger, but looked intently at a young girl who had just stepped out upon the balcony of a house not far away. At her side stood an elderly female slave, who held over the girl’s head a kind of parasol with a handle made of long, slender reeds. In the middle of the rug spread upon the floor of the balcony stood a large open travelling-hamper or basket, and girdles, veils, head-dresses, and gold and silver ornaments were scattered about in confusion. At intervals the young girl took one object or another in her hands, and held it up admiringly. She was dressed in the costume of the Roman ladies, with a flowing tunic and a peplum ornamented with tassels of emeralds; and blue silken bands confined her hair, which seemed almost too luxuriant, since from time to time she raised a small hand to push back the heavy masses. The parasol half hid the maiden from the gaze of Antipas, but now and then he caught a glimpse of her delicate neck, her large eyes, or a fleeting smile upon her small mouth. He noted that her figure swayed about with a singularly elastic grace and elegance. He leaned forward, his eyes kindled, his breath quickened. All this was not lost upon Herodias, who watched him narrowly.

“Who is that maiden?” the tetrarch asked at last.

Herodias replied that she did not know, and her fierce demeanour suddenly changed to one of gentleness and amiability.

At the entrance to the castle the tetrarch was awaited by several Galileans, the

At the entrance to the castle the tetrarch was awaited by several Galileans, the master of the scribes, the chief of the land stewards, the manager of the salt mines, and a Jew from Babylon, commanding his troops of horse. As the tetrarch approached the group, he was greeted with respectful enthusiasm. Acknowledging the acclamations with a grave salute, he entered the castle.

As he proceeded along one of the corridors, Phanuel suddenly sprang from a corner and intercepted him.

“What! Art thou still here?” said the tetrarch in displeasure. “Thou seekest Iaokanann, no doubt.”

“And thyself, my lord. I have something of great importance to tell thee.”

At a sign from Antipas, the Essene followed him into a somewhat dark and gloomy room.

The daylight came faintly through a grated window. The walls were of a deep shade of crimson, so dark as to look almost black. At one end of the room stood an ebony bed, ornamented with bands of leather. A shield of gold, hanging at the head of the bed, shone like a sun in the obscurity of the apartment. Antipas crossed over to the couch and threw himself upon it in a half-reclining attitude, while Phanuel remained standing before him. Suddenly he raised one hand, and striking a commanding attitude said:

“At times, my lord, the Most High sends a message to the people through one of His sons. Iaokanann is one of these. If thou oppress him, thou shalt be punished!”

“But it is he that persecutes me!” exclaimed Antipas. “He asked me to do a thing that was impossible. Since then he has done nothing but revile me. And I was not severe with him when he began his abuse of me. But he had the hardihood to send various men from Machaerus to spread dissension and discontent throughout my domain. A curse upon him! Since he attacks me, I shall defend myself.”

“Without doubt, he has expressed his anger with too much violence,” Phanuel replied calmly. “But do not heed that further. He must be set free.”

“One does not let loose a furious animal,” said the tetrarch.

“Have no fear of him now,” was the quick reply. “He will go straight to the Arabs, the Gauls, and the Scythians. His work must be extended to the uttermost ends of the earth.”

For a moment Antipas appeared lost in thought, as one who sees a vision. Then he said:

“His power over men is indeed great. In spite of myself, I admire him!”

“Then set him free!”

But the tetrarch shook his head. He feared Herodias, Mannaeus, and unknown dangers.

dangers.

Phanuel tried to persuade him, promising, as a guaranty of the honesty of his projects, the submission of the Essenians to the King. These poor people, clad only in linen, untameable in spite of severe treatment, endowed with the power to divine the future by reading the stars, had succeeded in commanding a certain degree of respect.

“What is the important matter thou wouldst communicate to me?” Antipas inquired, with sudden recollection.

Before Phanuel could reply, a Negro entered the room in great haste. He was covered with dust, and panted so violently that he could scarcely utter the single word:

“Vitellus!”

“Has he arrived?” asked the tetrarch.

“I have seen him, my lord. Within three hours he will be here.”

Throughout the palace, doors were opening and closing and portieres were swaying as if in a high wind, with the coming and going of many persons; there was a murmur of voices; sounds of the moving of heavy furniture could be heard, and the rattle of silver plates and dishes. From the highest tower a loud blast upon a conch summoned from far and near all the slaves belonging to the castle.

CHAPTER II

The ramparts were thronged with people when at last Vitellius entered the castle gates, leaning on the arm of his interpreter. Behind them came an imposing red litter, decorated with plumes and mirrors. The proconsul wore a toga ornamented with the laticlave, a broad purple band extending down the front of the garment, indicating his rank; and his feet were encased in the kind of buskins worn by consuls. A guard of lictors surrounded him. Against the wall they placed their twelve fasces — a bundle of sticks with an axe in the centre. And the populace trembled before the insignia of Roman majesty.

The gorgeous litter, borne by eight men, came to a halt. From it descended a youth. He wore many pearls upon his fingers, but he had a protruding abdomen and his face was covered with pimples. A cup of aromatic wine was offered to him. He drank it, and asked for a second draught.

The tetrarch had fallen upon his knees before the proconsul, saying that he was grieved beyond words not to have known sooner of the favour of his presence within those domains; had he been aware of the approach of his distinguished guest, he would have issued a command that every person along the route should place himself at the proconsul's orders. Of a surety, the proconsul's family was descended direct from the goddess Vitellia. A highway, leading from the Janiculum to the sea, still bore their name. Questors and consuls were innumerable in that great family; and as for the noble Lucius, now his honoured guest, it was the duty of the whole people to thank him, as the conqueror of the Cliti and the father of the young Aulus, now returning to his own domain, since the East was the country of the gods. These hyperboles were expressed in Latin, and Vitellius accepted them impassively.

He replied that the great Herod was the honour and glory of the nation; that the Athenians had chosen him to direct the Olympian games; that he had built temples in the honour of Augustus; had been patient, ingenious, terrible; and was faithful to all the Caesars.

Between the two marble columns, with bronze capitals, Herodias could now be seen advancing with the air of an empress, in the midst of a group of women and eunuchs carrying perfumed torches set in sockets of silver-gilt.

The proconsul advanced three steps to meet her. She saluted him with an inclination of her head.

"How fortunate," she exclaimed, "that henceforth Agrippa, the enemy of Tiberius, can work harm no longer!"

Vitellius did not understand her allusion, but he thought her a dangerous woman. Antipas immediately declared that he was ready to do anything for the emperor.

“Even to the injury of others?” Vitellius asked, significantly.

He had taken hostages from the king of the Parthians, but the emperor had given no further thought to the matter, because Antipas, who had been present at the conference, had, in order to gain favour, sent off despatches bearing the news. From that time he had borne a profound hatred towards the emperor and had delayed in sending assistance to him.

The tetrarch stammered in attempting to reply to the query of the proconsul. But Aulus laughed and said: “Do not be disturbed. I will protect thee!”

The proconsul feigned not to hear this remark. The fortune of the father depended, in a way, on the corrupt influence of the son; and through him it was possible that Antipas might be able to procure for the proconsul very substantial benefits, although the glances that he cast about him were defiant, and even venomous.

But now a new tumult arose just within the gates. A file of white mules entered the courtyard, mounted by men in priestly garb. These were the Sadducees and the Pharisees, who were drawn to Machaerus by the same ambition: the one party hoping to be appointed public sacrificers, the other determined to retain those offices. Their faces were dark, particularly those of the Pharisees, who were enemies of Rome and of the tetrarch. The flowing skirts of their tunics embarrassed their movements as they attempted to pass through the throng; and their tiaras sat unsteadily upon their brows, around which were bound small bands of parchment, showing lines of writing.

Almost at the same moment, the soldiers of the advance guard arrived. Cloth coverings had been drawn over their glittering shields to protect them from the dust. Behind them came Marcellus, the proconsul’s lieutenant, followed by the publicans, carrying their tablets of wood under their arms.

Antipas named to Vitellius the principle personages surrounding them: Tolmai, Kanthera, Schon, Ammonius of Alexandria, who brought asphalt for Antipas; Naaman, captain of his troops of skirmishers, and Jacim, the Babylonian.

Vitellius had noticed Mannaeus.

“Who is that man?” he inquired.

The tetrarch by a significant gesture indicated that Mannaeus was the executioner. He then presented the Sadducees to the proconsul’s notice.

Jonathas, a man of low stature, who spoke Greek, advanced with a firm step and begged that the great lord would honour Jerusalem with a visit. Vitellius replied that he should probably go to Jerusalem soon.

Eleazar, who had a crooked nose and a long beard, put forth a claim, in behalf of the Pharisees, for the mantle of the high priest, held in the tower of Antonia by the civil authorities.

Then the Galileans came forward and denounced Pontius Pilate. On one occasion, they said, a mad-man went seeking in a cave near Samaria for the golden vases that had belonged to King David, and Pontius Pilate had caused several inhabitants of that region to be executed. In their excitement all the Galileans spoke at once, Mannaeus’s voice being heard above all others. Vitellius promised that the guilty ones should be punished.

Fresh vociferations now broke out in front of the great gates, where the soldiers had hung their shields. Their coverings having now been removed, on each shield a carving of the head of Caesar could be seen on the umbo, or central knob. To the Jews, this seemed an evidence of nothing short of idolatry. Antipas harangued them, while Vitellius, who occupied a raised seat within the shadow of the colonnade, was astonished at their fury. Tiberius had done well, he thought, to exile four hundred of these people to Sardinia. Presently the Jews became so violent that he ordered the shields to be removed.

Then the multitude surrounded the proconsul, imploring him to abolish certain unjust laws, asking for privileges, or begging for alms. They rent their clothing and jostled one another; and at last, in order to drive them back, several slaves, armed with long staves, charged upon them, striking right and left. Those nearest the gates made their escape and descended to the road; others rushed in to take their place, so that two streams of human beings flowed in and out, compressed within the limits of the gateway.

Vitellius demanded the reason for the assembling of so great a throng. Antipas explained that they had been invited to come to a feast in celebration of his birthday; and he pointed to several men who, leaning against the battlements, were hauling up immense basket-loads of food, fruits, vegetables, antelopes, and storks; large fish, of a brilliant shade of blue; grapes, melons, and pyramids of pomegranates. At this sight, Aulus left the courtyard and hastened to the kitchens, led by his taste for gormandizing, which later became the amazement of the world.

As they passed the opening to a small cellar, Vitellius perceived some objects resembling breast-plates hanging on a wall. He looked at them with interest, and then demanded that the subterranean chambers of the fortress be thrown open for his inspection. These chambers were cut into the rocky foundation of the castle, and had been formed into vaults, with pillars set at regular distances. The first vault opened contained old armour; the second was full of pikes, with long points emerging from tufts of feathers. The walls of the third chamber were hung with a kind of tapestry made of slender reeds, laid in perpendicular rows. Those of the fourth were covered with scimitars. In the middle of the fifth cell, rows of helmets were seen, the crests of which looked like a battalion of fiery serpents. The sixth cell contained nothing but empty quivers; the seventh, greaves for protecting the legs in battle; the eighth vault was filled with bracelets and armlets; and an examination of the remaining vaults disclosed forks, grappling-irons, ladders, cords, even catapults, and bells for the necks of camels; and as they descended deeper into the rocky foundation, it became evident that the whole mass was a veritable honeycomb of cells, and that below those already seen were many others.

Vitellius, Phineas, his interpreter, and Sisenna, chief of the publicans, walked among these gloomy cells, attended by three eunuchs bearing torches.

In the deep shadows hideous instruments, invented by barbarians, could be seen: tomahawks studded with nails; poisoned javelins; pincers resembling the jaws of crocodiles; in short, the tetrarch possessed in his castle munitions of war sufficient for forty thousand men.

He had accumulated these weapons in anticipation of an alliance against him among his enemies. But he bethought him that the proconsul might believe, or assert, that he had collected this armoury in order to attack the Romans; so he hastened to offer explanations of all that Vitellius had observed.

Some of these things did not belong to him at all, he said: many of them were necessary to defend the place against brigands and marauders, especially the Arabs. Many of the objects in the vault had been the property of his father, and he had allowed them to remain untouched. As he spoke, he managed to get in advance of the proconsul and preceded him along the corridors with rapid steps. Presently he halted and stood close against the wall as the party came up; he spoke quickly, standing with his hands on his hips, so that his voluminous mantle covered a wide space of the wall behind him. But just above his head the top of a door was visible. Vitellius remarked it instantly, and demanded to know what it concealed.

The tetrarch explained that the door was fastened, and that none could open it save the Babylonian, Jacim.

“Summon him, then!” was the command.

A slave was sent to find Jacim, while the group awaited his coming.

The father of Jacim had come from the banks of the Euphrates to offer his services, as well as those of five hundred horsemen, in the defence of the eastern frontier. After the division of the kingdom, Jacim had lived for a time with Philip, and was now in the service of Antipas.

Presently he appeared among the vaults, carrying an archer’s bow on his shoulder and a whip in his hand. Cords of many colours were lashed tightly about his knotted legs; his massive arms were thrust through a sleeveless tunic, and a fur cap shaded his face. His chin was covered with a heavy, curling beard.

He appeared not to comprehend what the interpreter said to him at first. But Vitellius threw a meaning glance at Antipas, who quickly made the Babylonian understand the command of the proconsul. Jacim immediately laid both his hands against the door, giving it a powerful shove; whereupon it quietly slid out of sight into the wall.

A wave of hot air surged from the depths of the cavern. A winding path descended and turned abruptly. The group followed it, and soon arrived at the threshold of a kind of grotto, somewhat larger than the other subterranean cells.

An arched window at the back of this chamber gave directly upon a precipice, which formed a defence for one side of the castle. A honeysuckle vine, cramped by the low-studded ceiling, blossomed bravely. The sound of a running stream could be heard distinctly. In this place was a great number of beautiful white horses, perhaps a hundred. They were eating barley from a plank placed on a level with their mouths. Their manes had been coloured a deep blue; their hoofs were wrapped in coverings of woven grass, and the hair between their ears was puffed out like a peruke. As they stood quietly eating, they switched their tails gently to and fro. The proconsul regarded them in silent admiration.

They were indeed wonderful animals; supple as serpents, light as birds. They were trained to gallop rapidly, following the arrow of the rider, and dash into the midst of a group of the enemy, overturning men and biting them savagely as they fell. They were sure-footed among rocky passes, and would jump fearlessly over yawning chasms; and, while ready to gallop across the plains a whole day without tiring, they would stop instantly at the command of the rider.

As soon as Jacim entered their quarters, they trotted up to him, as sheep crowd around the shepherd; and, thrusting forward their sleek necks, they looked at him with a gaze like that of inquiring children. From force of habit, he emitted a raucous cry, which excited them; they pranced about, impatient at their confinement and longing to run.

Antipas, fearing that if Vitellius knew of the existence of these creatures, he would take them away, had shut them up in this place, made especially to accommodate animals in case of siege.

“This close confinement cannot be good for them,” said Vitellius, “and there is a risk of losing them by keeping them here. Make an inventory of their number, Sisenna.”

The publican drew a writing-tablet from the folds of his robe, counted the horses, and recorded the number carefully.

It was the habit of the agents of the fiscal companies to corrupt the governors

It was the habit of the agents of the fiscal companies to corrupt the governors in order to pillage the provinces. Sisenna was among the most flourishing of these agents, and was seen everywhere with his claw-like fingers and his eyelids continually blinking.

After a time the party returned to the court. Heavy, round bronze lids, sunk in the stones of the pavement, covered the cisterns of the palace. Vitellius noticed that one of these was larger than the others, and that when struck by his foot it had not their sonority. He struck them all, one after another; then stamped upon the ground and shouted:

“I have found it! I have found the buried treasure of Herod!”

Searching for buried treasure was a veritable mania among the Romans.

The tetrarch swore that no treasure was hidden in that spot.

“What is concealed there, then?” the proconsul demanded.

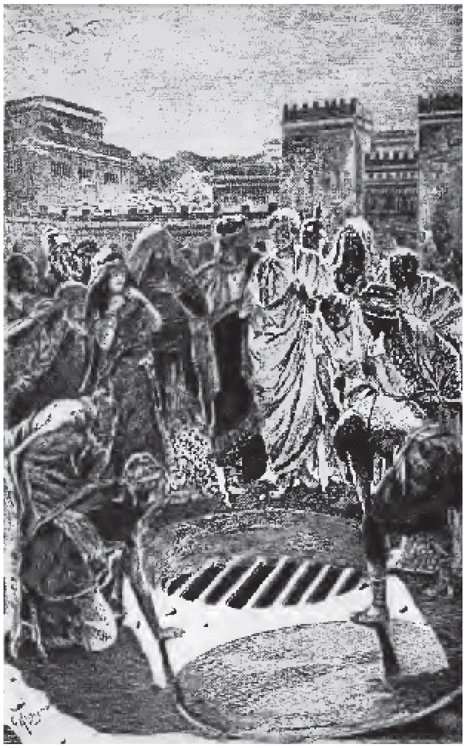
“Nothing — that is, only a man — a prisoner.”

“Show him to me!”

The tetrarch hesitated to obey, fearing that the Jews would discover his secret. His reluctance to lift the cover made Vitellius impatient.

“Break it in!” he cried to his lictors. Mannaeus heard the command, and, seeing a lictor step forward armed with a hatchet, he feared that the man intended to behead Iaokanann. He stayed the hand of the lictor after the first blow, and then slipped between the heavy lid and the pavement a kind of hook. He braced his long, lean arms, raised the cover slowly, and in a moment it lay flat upon the stones. The bystanders admired the strength of the old man.

Under the bronze lid was a wooden trap-door of the same size. At a blow of the fist it folded back, allowing a wide hole to be seen, the mouth of an immense pit, with a flight of winding steps leading down into the darkness. Those that bent over to peer into the cavern beheld a vague and terrifying shape in its depths.



This proved to be a human being, lying on the ground. His long locks hung over a camel’s-hair robe that covered his shoulders. Slowly he rose to his feet. His head touched a grating embedded in the wall; and as he moved about he disappeared, from time to time, in the shadows of his dungeon.

The rich tiaras of the Romans sparkled brilliantly in the sunlight, and their glittering sword-hilts threw out glancing golden rays. The doves, flying from their cotes, circled above the heads of the multitude. It was the hour when Mannaeus was accustomed to feed them. But now he crouched beside the tetrarch, who stood near Vitellius. The Galileans, the priests, and the soldiers formed a group behind them; all were silent, waiting with painful anticipation for what might happen.

A deep groan, hollow and startling, rose from the pit.

Herodias heard it from the farther end of the palace. Drawn by an irresistible though terrible fascination, she made her way through the throng, and, reaching Mannaeus, she leant one hand on his shoulder and bent over to listen.

The hollow voice rose again from the depths of the earth.

“Woe to thee, Sadducees and Pharisees! Thy voices are like the tinkling of cymbals! O race of vipers, bursting with pride!”

The voice of Iaokanann was recognised. His name was whispered about. Spectators from a distance pressed closer to the open pit.

“Woe to thee, O people! Woe to the traitors of Judah, and to the drunkards of Ephraim, who dwelt in the fertile valleys and stagger with the fumes of wine!

“May they disappear like running water; like the slug that sinks into the sand

“May they disappear like running water; like the slug that sinks into the sand as it moves; like an abortion that never sees the light!

“And thou too, Moab! hide thyself in the midst of the cypress, like the sparrow; in caverns, like the wild hare! The gates of the fortress shall be crushed more easily than nut-shells; the walls shall crumble; cities shall burn; and the scourge of God shall not cease! He shall cause your bodies to be bathed in your own blood, like wool in the dyer’s vat. He shall rend you, as with a harrow; He shall scatter the remains of your bodies from the tops of the mountains!”

Of which conqueror was he speaking? Was it Vitellius? Only the Romans could bring about such an extermination. The people began to cry out: “Enough! enough! let him speak no more!”

But the prisoner continued in louder tones:

“Beside the corpses of their mothers, thy little ones shall drag themselves over the ashes of the burned cities. At night men will creep from their hiding-places to seek a bit of food among the ruins, even at the risk of being cut down with the sword. Jackals shall pick thy bones in the public places, where at eventide the fathers were wont to gather. At the bidding of Gentiles, thy maidens shall be forced to cease their lamentations and to make music upon the zither, and the bravest of thy sons shall learn to bend their backs, chafed with heavy burdens.”

The listeners remembered the days of exile, and all the misfortunes and catastrophes of the past. These words were like the anathemas of the ancient prophets. The captive thundered them forth like bolts from heaven.

Presently his voice became almost as sweet and harmonious as if he were uttering a chant. He spoke of the world’s redemption from sin and sorrow; of the glories of heaven; of gold in place of clay; of the desert blossoming like the rose. “That which is now worth sixty pieces of silver will not cost a single obol. Fountains of milk shall spring from the rocks; men shall sleep, well satisfied, among the wine-presses. The people shall prostrate themselves before Thee, and Thy reign shall be eternal, O Son of David!”

The tetrarch suddenly recoiled from the opening of the pit; the mention of the existence of a son of David seemed to him like a menace to himself.

Iaokanann then poured forth invectives against him for presuming to aspire to royalty.

“There is no other king than the Eternal God!” he cried; and he cursed Antipas for his luxurious gardens, his statues, his furniture of carved ivory and precious woods, comparing him to the impious Ahab.

Antipas broke the slender cord attached to the royal seal that he wore around his neck, and throwing the seal into the pit, he commanded his prisoner to be silent

silent.

But Iaokanann replied: “I shall cry aloud like a savage bear, like the wild ass, like a woman in travail! The punishment of heaven has already visited itself upon thy incest! May God inflict thee with the sterility of mules!”

At these words, a sound of suppressed laughter arose here and there among the listeners.

Vitellius had remained close to the opening of the dungeon while Iaokanann was speaking. His interpreter, in impassive tones, translated into the Roman tongue all the threats and invectives that rolled up from the depths of the gloomy prison. The tetrarch and Herodias felt compelled to remain near at hand. Antipas listened, breathing heavily; while the woman, with parted lips, gazed into the darkness of the pit, her face drawn with an expression of fear and hatred.

The terrible man now turned towards her. He grasped the bars of his prison, pressed against them his bearded face, in which his eyes glowed like burning coals, and cried:

“Ah! Is it thou, Jezebel? Thou hast captured thy lord’s heart with the tinkling of thy feet. Thou didst neigh to him like a mare. Thou didst prepare thy bed on the mountain top, in order to accomplish thy sacrifices!

“The Lord shall take from thee thy sparkling jewels, thy purple robes and fine linen; the bracelets from thine arms, the anklets from thy feet; the golden ornaments that dangle upon thy brow, thy mirrors of polished silver, thy fans of ostrich plumes, thy shoes with their heels of mother-of-pearl, that serve to increase thy stature; thy glittering diamonds, the scent of thy hair, the tint of thy nails, — all the artifices of thy coquetry shall disappear, and missiles shall be found wherewith to stone the adulteress!”

Herodias looked around for some one to defend her. The Pharisees lowered their eyes hypocritically. The Sadducees turned away their heads, fearing to offend the proconsul should they appear to sympathise with her. Antipas was almost in a swoon.

Louder still rose the voice from the dungeon; the neighbouring hills gave back an echo with startling effect, and Machaerus seemed actually surrounded and showered with curses.

“Prostrate thyself in the dust, daughter of Babylon, and scourge thyself! Remove thy girdle and thy shoes, gather up thy garments and walk through the flowing stream; thy shame shall follow thee, thy disgrace shall be known to all men, thy bosom shall be rent with sobs. God execrates the stench of thy crimes! Accursed one! die like a dog!”

At that instant the trap-door was suddenly shut down and secured by Mannaeus, who would have liked to strangle Iaokanann then and there.

Herodias glided away and disappeared within the palace. The Pharisees were

Herodias glided away and disappeared within the palace. The Pharisees were scandalised at what they had heard. Antipas, standing among them, attempted to justify his past conduct and to excuse his present situation.

“Without doubt,” said Eleazar, “it was necessary for him to marry his brother’s wife; but Herodias was not a widow, and besides, she had a child, which she abandoned; and that was an abomination.”

“You are wrong,” objected Jonathas the Sadducee; “the law condemns such marriages but does not actually forbid them.”

“What matters it? All the world shows me injustice,” said Antipas, bitterly; “and why? Did not Absalom lie with his father’s wives, Judah with his daughter-in-law, Ammon with his sister, and Lot with his daughters?”

Aulus, who had been reposing within the palace, now reappeared in the court. After he had heard how matters stood, he approved of the attitude of the tetrarch. “A man should never allow himself to be annoyed,” said he, “by such foolish criticism.” And he laughed at the censure of the priests and the fury of Iaokanann, saying that his words were of little importance.

Herodias, who also had reappeared, and now stood at the top of a flight of steps, called loudly:

“You are wrong, my lord! He ordered the people to refuse to pay the tax!”

“Is that true?” he demanded. The general response was affirmative, Antipas adding his word to the declaration of the others.

Vitellius had a misgiving that the prisoner might be able to escape; and as the conduct of Antipas appeared to him rather suspicious, he established his own sentinels at the gates, at intervals along the walls, and in the courtyard itself.

At last he retired to the apartments assigned to him, accompanied by the priests. Without touching directly upon the question of the coveted offices of public sacrificers, each one laid his own grievances before the proconsul. They fairly beset him with complaints and requests, but he soon dismissed them from his presence.

As Jonathas left the proconsul’s apartments he perceived Antipas standing under an arch, talking to an Essene, who wore a long white robe and flowing locks. Jonathas regretted that he had raised his voice in defence of the tetrarch.

One thought now consoled Herod-Antipas. He was no longer personally responsible for the fate of Iaokanann. The Romans had assumed that charge. What a relief! He had noticed Phanuel pacing slowly through the court, and calling him to his side, he pointed put the guards established by Vitellius, saying:

“They are stronger than I! I cannot now set the prisoner free! It is not my fault if he remains in his dungeon.”

The courtyard was empty. The slaves were sleeping. The day was drawing to a close, and the sunset spread a deep rosy glow over the horizon, against which the smallest objects stood out like silhouettes. Antipas was able to distinguish the excavations of the salt-mines at the farther end of the Dead Sea, but the tents of the Arabs were no longer visible. As the moon rose, the effect of the day’s excitement passed away, and a feeling of peace entered his heart.

Phanuel, also wearied by the recent agitating scenes, remained beside the tetrarch. He sat in silence for some time, his chin resting on his breast. At last he spoke in confidence to Antipas, and revealed what he had wished to say.

From the beginning of the month, he said, he had been studying the heavens every morning before daybreak, when the constellation of Perseus was at the zenith; Agalah was scarcely visible; Algol was even less bright; Mira-Cetus had disappeared entirely; from all of which he augured the death of some man of great importance, to occur that very night in Machaerus.

Who was the man? Vitellius was too closely guarded to be reached. No one would kill Iaokanann.

“It is I!” thought the tetrarch.

It might be that the Arabs would return and make a successful attack upon him. Perhaps the proconsul would discover his relations with the Parthians. Several men whom Antipas had recognised as hired assassins from Jerusalem, had escorted the priests in the train of the proconsul; they all carried daggers concealed beneath their robes. The tetrarch had no doubt whatever of the exactness of Phanuel’s skill in astrology.

Suddenly he bethought him of Herodias. He would consult her. He hated her, certainly, but she might give him courage; and besides, in spite of his dislike, not all the bonds were yet broken of that sorcery which once she had woven about him.

When he entered her chamber, he was met by the pungent odour of cinnamon burning in a porphyry vase and the perfume of powders, unguents, cloud-like gauzes and embroideries light as feathers, filled the air with fragrance.

He did not speak of Phanuel’s prophecy, nor of his own fear of the Jews and the Arabs. Herodias had already accused him of cowardice. He spoke only of the Romans, and complained that Vitellius had not confided to him any of his military projects. He said he supposed the proconsul was the friend of Caligula, who often visited Agrippa; and expressed a surmise that he himself might be exiled, or that perhaps his throat would be cut.

Herodias, who now treated him with a kind of disdainful indulgence, tried to reassure him. At last she took from a small casket a curious medallion, ornamented with a profile of Tiberius. The sight of it, she said, as she gave it to Antipas, would make the lictors turn pale and silence all accusing voices.

Antipas, filled with gratitude, asked her how the medallion had come into her possession.

“It was given to me,” was her only answer.

At that moment Antipas beheld a bare arm slipping through a portiere hanging in front of him. It was the arm of a youthful woman, as graceful in outline as if carved from ivory by Polyclitus. With a movement a little awkward and at the same time charming, it felt about the wall an instant, as if seeking something, then took down a tunic hanging upon a hook near the doorway, and disappeared.

An elderly female attendant passed quietly through the room, lifted the portiere, and went out. A sudden recollection pierced the memory of the tetrarch.

“Is that woman one of thy slaves?” he asked.

“What matters that to thee?” was the disdainful reply.

CHAPTER III

The great banqueting-hall was filled with guests. This apartment had three naves, like a basilica, which were separated by columns of sandalwood, whose capitals were of sculptured bonze. On each side of the apartment was a gallery for spectators, and a third, with a facade of gold filigree, was at one end, opposite an immense arch at the other.

The candelabra burning on the tables, which were spread the whole length of the banqueting-hall, glowed like clusters of flaming flowers among the painted cups, the plates of shining copper, the cubes of snow and heaps of luscious grapes. Through the large windows the guests could see lighted torches on the terraces of the neighbouring houses; for this night Antipas was giving a feast to his friends, his own people, and to anyone that presented himself at the castle.

The slaves, alert as dogs, glided about noiselessly in felt sandals, carrying dishes to and fro.

The table of the proconsul was placed beneath the gilded balcony upon a platform of sycamore wood. Rich tapestries from Babylon were hung about the pavilion, giving a certain effect of seclusion.

Upon three ivory couches, one facing the great hall, and the other two placed one on either side of the pavilion, reclined Vitellius, his son Aulus, and Antipas; the proconsul being near the door, at the left, Aulus on the right, the tetrarch occupying the middle couch.

Antipas wore a heavy black mantle, the texture of which was almost hidden by coloured embroideries and glittering decorations; his beard was spread out like a fan; blue powder had been scattered over his hair, and on his head rested a diadem covered with precious stones. Vitellius still wore the purple band, the emblem of his rank, crossed diagonally over a linen toga.

Aulus had tied behind his back the sleeves of his violet robe, embroidered with silver. His clustering curls were laid in carefully arranged rows; a necklace of sapphires gleamed against his throat, plump and white as that of a woman. Crouched upon a rug near him, with legs crossed was a pretty white boy, upon whose face shone a perpetual smile. Aulus had found him somewhere among the kitchens and had taken a violent fancy to him. He had made the child one of his suite, but as he never could remember his protege’s Chaldean name, called him simply “the Asiatic.” From time to time the little fellow sprang up and played about the dining-table, and his antics appeared to amuse the guests.

At one side of the tetrarch’s pavilion were the tables at which were seated his priests and officers; also a number of persons from Jerusalem, and the more important men from the Grecian cities. At the table on the left of the proconsul sat Marcellus with the publicans, several friends of the tetrarch, and various representatives from Cana, Ptolemais, and Jericho. Seated at other tables were mountaineers from Liban and many of the old soldiers of Herod’s army; a dozen Thracians, a Greek and two Germans; besides huntsmen and herdsmen, the Sultan of Palmyra, and sailors from Eziongaber. Before each guest was placed a roll of soft bread, upon which to wipe the fingers. As soon as they were seated, hands were stretched out with the eagerness of a vulture’s claws, seizing upon olives, pistachios, and almonds. Every face was joyous, every head was crowned with flowers, except those of the Pharisees, who refused to wear the wreaths, regarding them as a symbol of Roman voluptuousness and vice. They shuddered when the attendants sprinkled them with galburnum and incense, the use of which the Pharisees reserved strictly for services in the Temple.

Antipas observed that Aulus rubbed himself under the arms, as if annoyed by heat or chafing; and promised to give him three flasks of the same kind of precious balm that had been used by Cleopatra.

A captain from the garrison of Tiberias who had just arrived, placed himself behind the tetrarch as protection in case any unexpected trouble should arise. But his attention was divided between observing the movements of the proconsul and listening to the conversation of his neighbours.

There was, naturally, much talk of Iaokanann, and other men of his stamp.

“It is said,” remarked one of the guests, “that Simon of Gitta washed away his sins in fire. And a certain man called Jesus — ”

“He is the worst of them all!” interrupted Eleazar. “A miserable imposter!”

At this a man sprang up from a table near the tetrarch’s pavilion, and made his way towards the place where Eleazar sat. His face was almost as pale as his linen robe, but he addressed the Pharisees boldly, saying: “That is a lie! Jesus has performed miracles!”

Antipas expressed a long-cherished desire to see the man Jesus perform some of his so-called miracles. “You should have brought him with you,” he said to the last speaker, who was still standing. “Tell us what you know about him,” he commanded.

Then the stranger said that he himself, whose name was Jacob, having a daughter who was very ill, had gone to Capernaum to implore the Master to heal his child. The Master had answered him, saying: “Return to thy home: she is healed!” And he had found his daughter standing at the threshold of his house, having risen from her couch when the gnomon had marked the third hour, the same moment when he had made his supplication to Jesus.

The Pharisees admitted that certain mysterious arts and powerful herbs existed that would heal the sick. It was said that the marvellous plant known as “baaras” grew even in Machaerus, the power of which rendered its consumer invulnerable against all attacks; but to cure disease without seeing or touching the afflicted person was clearly impossible, unless, indeed, the man Jesus called in the assistance of evil spirits.

The friends of Antipas and the men from Galilee nodded wisely, saying: “It is evident that he is aided by demons of some sort!”

Jacob, standing between their table and that of the priests, maintained a silence at once lofty and respectful.

Several voices exclaimed: “Prove his power to us!”

Jacob leaned over the priests’ table, and said slowly, in a half-suppressed tone, as if awe-struck by his own words:

“Know ye not, then, that He is the Messiah?”

The priests stared at one another, and Vitellius demanded the meaning of the word. His interpreter paused a moment before translating it. Then he said that Messiah was the name to be given to one who was to come, bringing the enjoyment of all blessings, and giving them domination over all the peoples of the earth. Certain persons believed that there were to be two Messiahs; one would be vanquished by Gog and Magog, the demons of the North; but the other would exterminate the Prince of Evil; and for centuries the coming of this Saviour of mankind had been expected at any moment.

At this, the priests began to talk in low tones among themselves. Eleazar addressed Jacob, saying that it had always been understood that the Messiah would be a son of David, not of a carpenter; and that he would confirm the law, whereas this Nazarene attacked it. Furthermore, as a still stronger argument against the pretender, it had been promised that the Messiah should be preceded by Elias.

“But Elias has come!” Jacob answered.

“Elias! Elias!” was repeated from one end of the banqueting-hall to the other.

In imagination, all fancied that they could see an old man, a flight of ravens above his head, standing before an altar, which a flash of lightning illumined, revealing the idolatrous priests that were thrown into the torrent; and the women, sitting in the galleries, thought of the widow of Sarepta.

Jacob then declared that he knew Elias; that he had seen him, and that many of the guests there assembled had seen him!

“His name!” was the cry from all lips.

“Iaokanann!”

Antipas fell back in his chair as if a heavy blow had struck him on the breast. The Sadducees rose from their seats and rushed towards Jacob. Eleazar raised his voice to a shout in order to make himself heard. When order was finally restored, he draped his mantle about his shoulders, and, with the air of a judge, proceeded to put questions to Jacob.

“Since the prophet is dead — ” he began.

Murmurs interrupted him. Many persons believed that Elias was not dead, but had only disappeared.

Eleazar rebuked those who had interrupted him; and continuing, asked:

“And dost thou believe that he has indeed come to life again?”

“Why should I not believe it?” Jacob replied.

The Sadducees shrugged their shoulders. Jonathas, opening wide his little eyes, gave a forced, buffoon-like laugh. Nothing could be more absurd, said he, than the idea that a human body could have eternal life; and he declaimed, for the benefit of the proconsul, this line from a contemporaneous poet:

Nec crescit, nec post mortem durare videtur.

By this time Aulus was leaning over the side of the pavilion, with pale face, a perspiring brow, and both hands outspread on his stomach.

The Sadducees pretended to be deeply moved at the sight of his suffering, thinking that perhaps the next day the offices of sacrificers would be theirs. Antipas appeared to be in despair at his guest’s agony. Vitellius preserved a calm demeanour, although he felt some anxiety, for the loss of his son would mean the loss of his fortune.

But Aulus, quickly recovering after he had relieved his over-burdened stomach, was as eager to eat as before.

“Let some one bring me marble-dust,” he commanded, “or clay of Naxos, sea-water — anything! Perhaps it would do me good to bathe.”

He swallowed a quantity of snow; then hesitated between a ragout and a dish of blackbirds; and finally decided in favour of gourds served in honey. The little Asiatic gazed at his master in astonishment and admiration; to him this exhibition of gluttony denoted a wonderful being belonging to a superior race.

The feast went on. Slaves served the guests with kidneys, dormice, nightingales, mince-meat dressed with vine-leaves. The priests discoursed among themselves regarding the supposed resurrection. Ammonius, pupil of Philon, the Platonist, pronounced them stupid, and told the Greeks that he laughed at their oracles.

Marcellus and Jacob were seated side by side. Marcellus described the happiness he had felt under the baptism of Mithra, and Jacob made him promise to become a follower of Jesus.

The wines of the palm and the tamarisk, those of Safed and of Byblos, ran from the amphoras into the crateras, from the crateras into the cups, and from the cups down the guests’ throats. Every one talked, all hearts expanding under the good cheer. Jacim, although a Jew, did not hesitate to express his admiration of the planets. A merchant from Aphaka amazed the nomads with his description of the marvels in the temple of Hierapolis; and they wished to know the cost of a pilgrimage to that place. Others held fast to the principles of their native religion. A German, who was nearly blind, sang a hymn celebrating that promontory in Scandinavia where the gods were wont to appear with halos around their heads. The people from Sichem declined to eat turtles, out of deference to the dove Azima.

Several groups stood talking near the middle of the banqueting-hall, and the vapour of their breath, mingled with the smoke from the candles, formed a light mist. Presently Phanuel slipped quietly into the room, keeping close to the wall. He had been out in the open courtyard, to make another survey of the heavens. He stopped when he reached the pavilion of the tetrarch, fearing he would be splashed with drops of oil if he approached the other tables, which, to an Essene, would be a great defilement.

Suddenly violent blows resounded upon the castle gates. The news of the imprisonment of Iaokanann had spread rapidly, and now it appeared that the whole surrounding population was flocking to the castle. Men with torches were hastening along the roads in all directions; a black mass of people swarmed in the ravine; and from all throats came the cry: “Iaokanann! Iaokanann!”

“That man will ruin everything,” said Jonathas.

“We shall have no more money if this continues,” said the Pharisees.

Accusations, recriminations, and pleadings were heard on all sides.

“Protect us!”

“Compel them to cease!”

“Thou didst abandon thy religion!”

“Impious as all the Herods!”

“Less impious than thou!” Antipas retorted. “Was it not my father that erected thy Temple?”

Then the Pharisees, children of the proscribed tribes, partisans of Mattathias, accused the tetrarch of all the crimes committed by his family.

The Pharisees had pointed skulls, bristling beards, feeble hands, snub noses, great round eyes, and their countenances bore a resemblance to that of a bull-dog. A dozen of these people, scribes and attendants upon the priests, who picked up their living from the refuse of holocausts, rushed to the foot of the pavilion and threatened Antipas with their knives. He attempted to speak to them, being only slightly protected by some of the Sadducees. Suddenly he perceived Mannaeus at a distance and made him a sign to approach. The expression on the face of Vitellius indicated that he regarded all this turmoil as expression on the face of Vitellius indicated that he regarded all this turmoil as no concern of his.

The Pharisees, leaning against the pavilion, were now beside themselves with demoniac fury. They broke plates and dashed them upon the floor. The attendants had served them with a ragout composed of the flesh of the wild ass, an unclean animal, and their anger knew no bounds. Aulus rallied them jeeringly apropos of the ass’s head, which he declared they honoured. He flung other sarcasms at them, regarding their antipathy to the flesh of swine, intimating that no doubt their hatred arose from the fact that that beast had killed their beloved Bacchus, and saying it was to be feared they were too fond of wine, since a golden vine had been discovered in the Temple.

The priests did not understand his sneers, and Phineas, of Galilean origin, refused to translate them. Aulus suddenly became angry, the more so because the little Asiatic, frightened at the tumult, had disappeared. The feast no longer pleased the noble glutton; the dishes were vulgar, and not sufficiently disguised with delicate flavourings. After a time his displeasure abated, as he caught sight of a dish of Syrian lambs’ tails, dressed with spices, a favourite dainty.

To Vitellius the character of the Jews seemed frightful. Their God was like Moloch, several altars to whom he had passed upon his route; and he recalled the stories he had heard of the mysterious Jew who fattened small children and offered them as a sacrifice. His Latin nature was filled with disgust at their intolerance, their iconoclastic rage, their brutal, stumbling bearing. The proconsul wished to depart, but Aulus refused to accompany him.

The exaltation of the people increased. They abandoned themselves to dreams of independence. They recalled the glory of Israel, and a Syrian spoke of all the great conquerors they had vanquished, — Antigone, Crassus, Varus.

“Miserable creatures!” cried the enraged proconsul, who had overheard the Syrian’s words.

In the midst of the uproar Antipas remembered the medallion of the emperor that Herodias had given to him; he drew it forth and looked at it a moment, trembling, then held it up with its face turned towards the throng.

At the same moment, the panels of the gold-railed balcony were folded back, and, accompanied by slaves bearing wax tapers, Herodias appeared, her coiffure crowned with an Assyrian mitre, which was held in place by a band passing under the chin. Her dark hair fell in ringlets over a scarlet peplum with slashed sleeves. On either side of the door through which one stepped into the gallery, stood a huge stone monster, like those of Atrides; and as Herodias appeared between them, she looked like Cybele supported by her lions. In her hands she carried a patera, a shallow vessel of silver used by the Romans in pouring libations; and, advancing to the front of the balcony and pausing just above the libations, and, advancing to the front of the balcony and pausing just above the tetrarch’s chair, she cried:

“Long live Caesar!”

This homage was repeated by Vitellius, Antipas, and the priests.

But now, beginning at the farthest end of the banqueting-hall, a murmur of surprise and admiration swept through the multitude. A beautiful young girl had just entered the apartment, and stood motionless for an instant, while all eyes were turned upon her.

Through a drapery of filmy blue gauze that veiled her head and throat, her arched eyebrows, tiny ears, and ivory-white skin could be distinguished. A scarf of shot-silk fell from her shoulders, and was caught up at the waist by a girdle of fretted silver. Her full trousers, of black silk, were embroidered in a pattern of silver mandragoras, and as she moved forward with indolent grace, her little feet were seen to be shod with slippers made of the feathers of humming-birds.

When she arrived in front of the pavilion she removed her veil. Behold! she seemed to be Herodias herself, as she had appeared in the days of her blooming youth.

Immediately the damsel began to dance before the tetrarch. Her slender feet took dainty steps to the rhythm of a flute and a pair of Indian bells. Her round white arms seemed ever beckoning and striving to entice to her side some youth who was fleeing from her allurements. She appeared to pursue him, with movements light as a butterfly; her whole mien was like that of an inquisitive Psyche, or a floating spirit that might at any moment dissolve and disappear.

Presently the plaintive notes of the gingras, a small flute of Phoenician origin, replaced the tinkling bells. The attitudes of the dancing nymph now denoted overpowering lassitude. Her bosom heaved with sighs, and her whole being expressed profound languor, although it was not clear whether she sighed for an absent swain or was expiring of love in his embrace. With half-closed eyes and quivering form, she caused mysterious undulations to flow downward over her whole body, like rippling waves, while her face remained impassive and her twinkling feet still moved in their intricate steps.

Vitellius compared her to Mnester, the famous pantomimist. Aulus was overcome with faintness. The tetrarch watched her, lost in a voluptuous reverie, and thought no more of the real Herodias. In fancy he saw her again as she appeared when she had dwelt among the Sadducees. Then the vision faded.

But this beautiful thing before him was no vision. The dancer was Salome, the daughter of Herodias, who for many months her mother had caused to be instructed in dancing, and other arts of pleasing, with the sole idea of bringing her to Machaerus and presenting her to the tetrarch, so that he should fall in love with her fresh young beauty and feminine wiles. The plan had proved successful.

it seemed; he was evidently fascinated, and Herodias felt that at last she was sure of retaining her power over him!

And now the graceful dancer appeared transported with the very delirium of love and passion. She danced like the priestesses of India, like the Nubians of the cataracts, or like the Bacchantes of Lydia. She whirled about like a flower blown by the tempest. The jewels in her ears sparkled, her swift movements made the colours of her draperies appear to run into one another. Her arms, her feet, her clothing even, seemed to emit streams of magnetism, that set the spectators’ blood on fire.

Suddenly the thrilling chords of a harp rang through the hall, and the throng burst into loud acclamations. All eyes were fixed on Salome, who paused in her rhythmic dance, placed her feet wide apart, and without bending the knees, suddenly swayed her lithe body downward, so that her chin touched the floor; and her whole audience, — the nomads, accustomed to a life of privation and abstinence, the Roman soldiers, expert in debaucheries, the avaricious publicans, and even the crabbed, elderly priests — gazed upon her with dilated nostrils.

Next she began to whirl frantically around the table where Antipas the tetrarch was seated. He leaned towards the flying figure, and in a voice half choked with the voluptuous sighs of a mad desire, he sighed: “Come to me! Come!” But she whirled on, while the music of dulcimers swelled louder and the excited spectators roared their applause.

The tetrarch called again, louder than before: “Come to me! Come! Thou shalt have Capernaum, the plains of Tiberias! my citadels! yea, the half of my kingdom!”

Again the dancer paused; then, like a flash, she threw herself upon the palms of her hands, while her feet rose straight up into the air. In this bizarre pose she moved about upon the floor like a gigantic beetle; then stood motionless.

The nape of her neck formed a right angle with her vertebrae. The full silken skirts of pale hues that enveloped her limbs when she stood erect, now fell to her shoulders and surrounded her face like a rainbow. Her lips were tinted a deep crimson, her arched eyebrows were black as jet, her glowing eyes had an almost terrible radiance; and the tiny drops of perspiration on her forehead looked like dew upon white marble.

She made no sound; and the burning gaze of that multitude of men was concentrated upon her.

A sound like the snapping of fingers came from the gallery over the pavilion. Instantly, with one of her movements of bird-like swiftness, Salome stood erect. The next moment she rapidly passed up a flight of steps leading to the gallery, and coming to the front of it she leaned over, smiled upon the tetrarch, and, with an air of almost childlike naivete, pronounced these words:

“I ask my lord to give me, placed upon a charger, the head of — ” She hesitated, as if not certain of the name; then said: “The head of Iaokanann!”

The tetrarch sank back in his chair as if stunned.

He had bound himself by his promise to her; and the people awaited his next movement. But the death that night of some conspicuous man that had been predicted to him by Phanuel, — what if, by bringing it upon another, he could avert it from himself, thought Antipas. If Iaokanann was in very truth the Elias so much talked of, he would have power to protect himself; and if he were only an ordinary man, his murder was of no importance.

Mannaeus stood beside his chair, and read his master’s thoughts. Vitellius beckoned him to his side and gave him an order for the execution, to be transmitted to the soldiers placed on guard over the dungeon. This execution would be a relief, he thought. In a few moments all would be over!

But for once Mannaeus did not perform a commission satisfactorily. He left the hall but soon returned, in a state of great perturbation.

During forty years he had exercised the functions of the public executioner. It was he that had drowned Aristobulus, strangled Alexander, burned Mattathias alive, beheaded Zozimus, Pappus, Josephus, and Antipater; but he dared not kill Iaokanann! His teeth chattered and his whole body trembled.

He declared that he had seen, standing before the dungeon, the Angel of the Samaritans, covered with eyes and brandishing a great sword, glowing and quivering like a flame. He appealed to two of the guards, who had entered the hall with him, to corroborate his words. But they said they had seen nothing except a Jewish captain who had attacked them, and whom they had killed.

The fury of Herodias poured forth in a torrent of invective against the populace. She clenched the railing of the balcony so fiercely as to break her nails; the two stone lions at her back seemed to bite her shoulders and join their voices to hers.

Antipas followed her example; and priests, soldiers, and Pharisees cried aloud together for vengeance, echoed by the rest of the gathering, who were indignant that a mere slave should dare to delay their pleasures.

Again Mannaeus left the hall, covering his face with his hands.

The guests found the second delay longer than the first. It seemed tedious to every one.

Presently a sound of footsteps was heard in the corridor without; then silence fell again. The suspense was becoming intolerable.

Suddenly the door was flung open and Mannaeus entered, holding at arm’s length, grasping it by the hair, the head of Iaokanann. His appearance was greeted with a burst of applause, which filled him with pride and revived his courage.

He placed the head upon a charger and offered it to Salome, who had descended the steps to receive it. She remounted to the balcony, with a light step; and in another moment the charger was carried about from one table to another by the elderly female slave whom the tetrarch had observed in the morning on the balcony of a neighbouring house, and later in the chamber of Herodias.

When she approached him with her ghastly burden, he turned away his head to avoid looking at it. Vitellius threw upon it an indifferent glance.

Mannaeus descended from the pavilion, took the charger from the woman, and exhibited the head to the Roman captains, then to all the guests on that side of the hall.

They looked at it curiously.

The sharp blade of the sword had cut into the jaw with a swift downward stroke. The corners of the mouth were drawn, as if by a convulsion. Clots of blood besprinkled the beard. The closed eyelids had a shell-like transparency, and the candelabra on every side lighted up the gruesome object with terrible distinctness.

Mannaeus arrived at the table where the priests were seated. One of them turned the charger about curiously, to look at the head from all sides. Then Mannaeus, having entirely regained his courage, placed the charger before Aulus, who had just awakened from a short doze; and finally he brought it again to Antipas and set it down upon the table beside him. Tears were running down the cheeks of the tetrarch.

The lights began to flicker and die out. The guests departed, and at last no one remained in the great hall save Antipas, who sat leaning his head upon his hands, gazing at the head of Iaokanann; and Phanuel, who stood in the centre of the largest nave and prayed aloud, with uplifted arms.

At sunrise the two men who had been sent on a mission by Iaokanann some time before, returned to the castle, bringing the answer so long awaited and hoped for.

They whispered the message to Phanuel, who received it with rapture.

Then he showed them the lugubrious object, still resting on the charger amid the ruins of the feast. One of the men said:

“Be comforted! He has descended among the dead in order to announce the coming of the Christ!”

And in that moment the Essene comprehended the words of Iaokanann: “In order that His glory may increase, mine must diminish!”

Then the three, taking with them the head of John the Baptist, set out upon the road to Galilee; and as the burden was heavy, each man bore it awhile in turn.

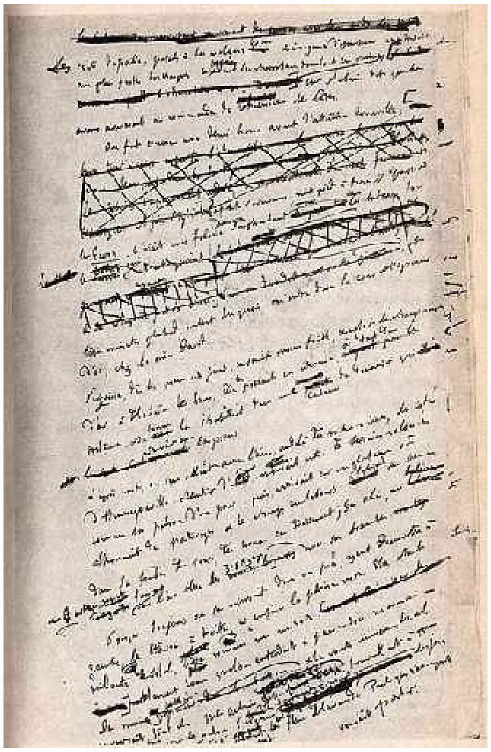
TROIS CONTES

TABLE DES MATIÈRES

UN COEUR SIMPLE
LA LEGENDE DE SAINT-JULIEN L’HOSPITALIER
HERODIAS

UN COEUR SIMPLE

Après une enfance miséreuse où elle fut placée comme simple fille de ferme dans la campagne normande suite à la mort de ses parents, Félicité fait la rencontre au bal d’un jeune homme qui lui plait et la demande en mariage. Le moment dit, l’amoureux n’est pas au rendez-vous, et elle apprend que celui-ci s’est marié avec une riche vieille fille afin de payer un “homme” pour assurer sa conscription à sa place. Trahie, Félicité, quitte la ferme et part pour Pont-L’Evêque à la recherche d’une place de bonne. Ses gages étant très bas, elle est employée par M^{me} Aubain, une jeune veuve mère de deux enfants, Paul et Virginie, qui vit de ses rentes. Félicité occupe sa tâche avec efficacité et parcimonie, et se prend d’affection pour les petits qu’elle choie de tout son cœur.



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GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Un cœur simple

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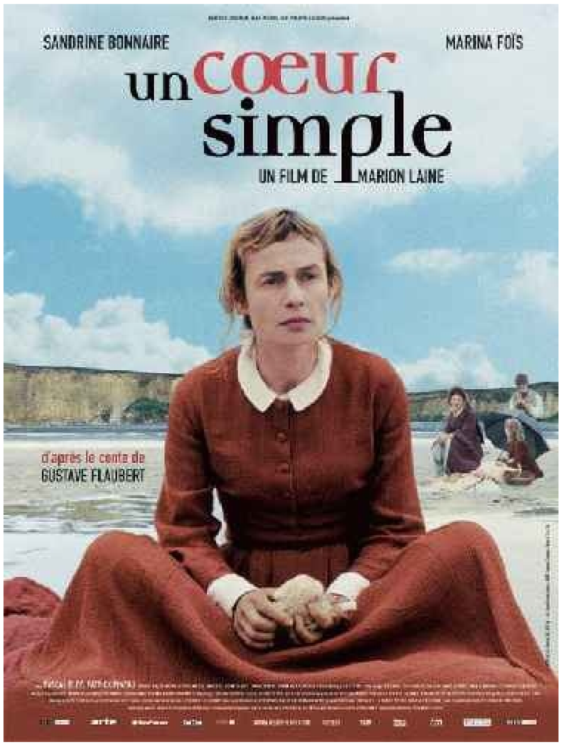

SANDRINE BONNAIRE
MARINA FOÏS
un coeur simple
UN FILM DE MARION LAINE
d'après le conte de
GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

L'adaptation cinématographique de 2008

UN COEUR SIMPLE

I

Pendant un demi-siècle, les bourgeoises de Pont-l’Évêque envièrent à Mme Aubain sa servante Félicité.

Pour cent francs par an, elle faisait la cuisine et le ménage, cousait, lavait, repassait, savait brider un cheval, engraisser les volailles, battre le beurre, et resta fidèle à sa maîtresse, — qui cependant n’était pas une personne agréable.

Elle avait épousé un beau garçon sans fortune, mort au commencement de 1809, en lui laissant deux enfants très-jeunes avec une quantité de dettes. Alors elle vendit ses immeubles, sauf la ferme de Toucques et la ferme de Geffosses, dont les rentes montaient à 8,000 francs tout au plus, et elle quitta sa maison de Saint-Melaine pour en habiter une autre moins dispendieuse, ayant appartenu à ses ancêtres et placée derrière les halles.

Cette maison, revêtue d’ardoises, se trouvait entre un passage et une ruelle aboutissant à la rivière. Elle avait intérieurement des différences de niveau qui faisaient trébucher. Un vestibule étroit séparait la cuisine de la *salle* où Mme Aubain se tenait tout le long du jour, assise près de la croisée dans un fauteuil de paille. Contre le lambris, peint en blanc, s’alignaient huit chaises d’acajou. Un vieux piano supportait, sous un baromètre, un tas pyramidal de boîtes et de cartons. Deux bergères de tapisserie flanquaient la cheminée en marbre jaune et de style Louis XV. La pendule, au milieu, représentait un temple de Vesta ; — et tout l’appartement sentait un peu le moisi, car le plancher était plus bas que le jardin.

Au premier étage, il y avait d’abord la chambre de « Madame », très-grande, tendue d’un papier à fleurs pâles, et contenant le portrait de « Monsieur » en costume de muscadin. Elle communiquait avec une chambre plus petite, où l’on voyait deux couchettes d’enfants, sans matelas. Puis venait le salon, toujours fermé, et rempli de meubles recouverts d’un drap. Ensuite un corridor menait à un cabinet d’étude ; des livres et des paperasses garnissaient les rayons d’une bibliothèque entourant de ses trois côtés un large bureau de bois noir. Les deux panneaux en retour disparaissaient sous des dessins à la plume, des paysages à la gouache et des gravures d’Audran, souvenirs d’un temps meilleur et d’un luxe évanoui. Une lucarne au second étage éclairait la chambre de Félicité, ayant vue sur les prairies.

Elle se levait dès l’aube, pour ne pas manquer la messe, et travaillait jusqu’au soir sans interruption ; puis, le dîner étant fini, la vaisselle en ordre et la porte bien close, elle enfouissait la bûche sous les cendres et s’endormait devant l’âtre, son rosaire à la main. Personne, dans les marchandages, ne montrait plus d’entêtement. Quant à la propreté, le poli de ses casseroles faisait le désespoir des autres servantes. Économe, elle mangeait avec lenteur, et recueillait du doigt sur la table les miettes de son pain, — un pain de douze livres, cuit exprès pour elle, et qui durait vingt jours.

En toute saison elle portait un mouchoir d’indienne fixé dans le dos par une épingle, un bonnet lui cachant les cheveux, des bas gris, un jupon rouge, et par-dessus sa camisole un tablier à bavette, comme les infirmières d’hôpital.

Son visage était maigre et sa voix aiguë. A vingt-cinq ans, on lui en donnait quarante. Dès la cinquantaine, elle ne marqua plus aucun âge ; — et, toujours silencieuse, la taille droite et les gestes mesurés, semblait une femme en bois, fonctionnant d’une manière automatique.

II

Elle avait eu, comme une autre, son histoire d’amour.

Son père, un maçon, s’était tué en tombant d’un échafaudage. Puis sa mère mourut, ses soeurs se dispersèrent, un fermier la recueillit, et l’employa toute petite à garder les vaches dans la campagne. Elle grelottait sous des haillons, buvait à plat ventre l’eau des mares, à propos de rien était battue, et finalement fut chassée pour un vol de trente sols, qu’elle n’avait pas commis. Elle entra dans une autre ferme, y devint fille de basse-cour, et, comme elle plaisait aux patrons, ses camarades la jalousaient.

Un soir du mois d’août (elle avait alors dix-huit ans), ils l’entraînèrent à l’assemblée de Colleville. Tout de suite elle fut étourdie, stupéfaite par le tapage des ménétriers, les lumières dans les arbres, la bigarrure des costumes, les dentelles, les croix d’or, cette masse de monde sautant à la fois. Elle se tenait à l’écart modestement, quand un jeune homme d’apparence cossue, et qui fumait sa pipe les deux coudes sur le timon d’un banneau, vint l’inviter à la danse. Il lui paya du cidre, du café, de la galette, un foulard, et, s’imaginant qu’elle le devinait, offrit de la reconduire. Au bord d’un champ d’avoine, il la renversa brutalement. Elle eut peur et se mit à crier. Il s’éloigna.

Un autre soir, sur la route de Beaumont, elle voulut dépasser un grand chariot de foin qui avançait lentement, et en frôlant les roues elle reconnut Théodore de foin qui avançait lentement, et en frôlant les roues elle reconnut Théodore.

Il l’aborda d’un air tranquille, disant qu’il fallait tout pardonner, puisque c’était « la faute de la boisson ».

Elle ne sut que répondre et avait envie de s’enfuir.

Aussitôt il parla des récoltes et des notables de la commune, car son père avait abandonné Colleville pour la ferme des Écots, de sorte que maintenant ils se trouvaient voisins. — « Ah ! » dit-elle. Il ajouta qu’on désirait l’établir. Du reste, il n’était pas pressé, et attendait une femme à son goût. Elle baissa la tête. Alors il lui demanda si elle pensait au mariage. Elle reprit, en souriant, que c’était mal de se moquer. — « Mais non, je vous jure ! » et du bras gauche il lui entoura la taille ; elle marchait soutenue par son étreinte ; ils se ralentirent. Le vent était mou, les étoiles brillaient, l’énorme charretée de foin oscillait devant eux ; et les quatre chevaux, en traînant leurs pas, soulevaient de la poussière. Puis, sans commandement, ils tournèrent à droite. Il l’embrassa encore une fois. Elle disparut dans l’ombre.

Théodore, la semaine suivante, en obtint des rendez-vous.

Ils se rencontraient au fond des cours, derrière un mur, sous un arbre isolé. Elle n’était pas innocente à la manière des demoiselles, — les animaux l’avaient instruite ; — mais la raison et l’instinct de l’honneur l’empêchèrent de faillir. Cette résistance exaspéra l’amour de Théodore, si bien que pour le satisfaire (ou naïvement peut-être) il proposa de l’épouser. Elle hésitait à le croire. Il fit de grands serments.

Bientôt il avoua quelque chose de fâcheux : ses parents, l’année dernière, lui avaient acheté un homme ; mais d’un jour à l’autre on pourrait le reprendre ; l’idée de servir l’effrayait. Cette couardise fut pour Félicité une preuve de tendresse ; la sienne en redoubla. Elle s’échappait la nuit, et, parvenue au rendez-vous, Théodore la torturait avec ses inquiétudes et ses instances.

Enfin, il annonça qu’il irait lui-même à la Préfecture prendre des informations, et les apporterait dimanche prochain, entre onze heures et minuit.

Le moment arrivé, elle courut vers l’amoureux.

A sa place, elle trouva un de ses amis.

Il lui apprit qu’elle ne devait plus le revoir. Pour se garantir de la conscription, Théodore avait épousé une vieille femme très-riche, Mme Lehoussais, de Toucques.

Ce fut un chagrin désordonné. Elle se jeta par terre, poussa des cris, appela le bon Dieu, et gémit toute seule dans la campagne jusqu’au soleil levant. Puis elle revint à la ferme, déclara son intention d’en partir ; et, au bout du mois, ayant reçu ses comptes, elle enferma tout son petit bagage dans un mouchoir, et se rendit à Pont-l’Évêque.

Devant l’auberge, elle questionna une bourgeoise en capeline de veuve, et qui précisément cherchait une cuisinière. La jeune fille ne savait pas grand’chose, mais paraissait avoir tant de bonne volonté et si peu d’exigences, que Mme Aubain finit par dire :

« — Soit, je vous accepte ! »

Félicité, un quart d’heure après, était installée chez elle.

D’abord elle y vécut dans une sorte de tremblement que lui causaient « le genre de la maison » et le souvenir de « Monsieur », planant sur tout ! Paul et Virginie, l’un âgé de sept ans, l’autre de quatre à peine, lui semblaient formés d’une matière précieuse ; elle les portait sur son dos comme un cheval, et Mme Aubain lui défendit de les baiser à chaque minute, ce qui la mortifia. Cependant elle se trouvait heureuse. La douceur du milieu avait fondu sa tristesse.

Tous les jeudis, des habitués venaient faire une partie de boston. Félicité préparait d’avance les cartes et les chaufferettes. Ils arrivaient à huit heures bien juste, et se retiraient avant le coup de onze.

Chaque lundi matin, le brocanteur qui logeait sous l’allée étalait par terre ses ferrailles. Puis la ville se remplissait d’un bourdonnement de voix, où se mêlaient des hennissements de chevaux, des bêlements d’agneaux, des grognements de cochons, avec le bruit sec des carrioles dans la rue. Vers midi, au plus fort du marché, on voyait paraître sur le seuil un vieux paysan de haute taille, la casquette en arrière, le nez crochu, et qui était Robelin, le fermier de Geffosses. Peu de temps après, — c’était Liébard, le fermier de Toucques, petit, rouge, obèse, portant une veste grise et des houseaux armés d’éperons.

Tous deux offraient à leur propriétaire des poules ou des fromages. Félicité invariablement déjouait leurs astuces ; et ils s’en allaient pleins de considération pour elle.

A des époques indéterminées, Mme Aubain recevait la visite du marquis de Gremanville, un de ses oncles, ruiné par la crapule et qui vivait à Falaise sur le dernier lopin de ses terres. Il se présentait toujours à l’heure du déjeuner, avec un affreux caniche dont les pattes salissaient tous les meubles. Malgré ses efforts pour paraître gentilhomme jusqu’à soulever son chapeau chaque fois qu’il disait : « Feu mon père, » l’habitude l’entraînant, il se versait à boire coup sur coup, et lâchait des gaillardises. Félicité le poussait dehors poliment : « Vous en avez assez, Monsieur de Gremanville ! A une autre fois ! » Et elle refermait la porte.

Elle l’ouvrait avec plaisir devant M. Bourais, ancien avoué. Sa cravate blanche et sa calvitie, le jabot de sa chemise, son ample redingote brune, sa façon de priser en arrondissant le bras, tout son individu lui produisait ce trouble où nous jette le spectacle des hommes extraordinaires.

Comme il gérait les propriétés de « Madame », il s’enfermait avec elle pendant des heures dans le cabinet de « Monsieur », et craignait toujours de se compromettre, respectait infiniment la magistrature, avait des prétentions au latin.

Pour instruire les enfants d’une manière agréable, il leur fit cadeau d’une géographie en estampes. Elles représentaient différentes scènes du monde, des anthropophages coiffés de plumes, un singe enlevant une demoiselle, des Bédouins dans le désert, une baleine qu’on harponnait, *etc.*

Paul donna l’explication de ces gravures à Félicité. Ce fut même toute son éducation littéraire.

Celle des enfants était faite par Guyot, un pauvre diable employé à la Mairie, fameux pour sa belle main, et qui repassait son canif sur sa botte.

Quand le temps était clair, on s’en allait de bonne heure à la ferme de Geffosses.

La cour est en pente, la maison dans le milieu ; et la mer, au loin, apparaît comme une tache grise.

Félicité retirait de son cabas des tranches de viande froide, et on déjeunait dans un appartement faisant suite à la laiterie. Il était le seul reste d’une habitation de plaisance, maintenant disparue. Le papier de la muraille en lambeaux tremblait aux courants d’air. Mme Aubain penchait son front, accablée de souvenirs ; les enfants n’osaient plus parler. « Mais jouez donc ! » disait-elle ; ils décampaient.

Paul montait dans la grange, attrapait des oiseaux, faisait des ricochets sur la mare, ou tapait avec un bâton les grosses futailles qui résonnaient comme des tambours.

Virginie donnait à manger aux lapins, se précipitait pour cueillir des bleuets, et la rapidité de ses jambes découvrait ses petits pantalons brodés.

Un soir d’automne, on s’en retourna par les herbages.

La lune à son premier quartier éclairait une partie du ciel, et un brouillard flottait comme une écharpe sur les sinuosités de la Toucques. Des boeufs, étendus au milieu du gazon, regardaient tranquillement ces quatre personnes passer. Dans la troisième pâture quelques-uns se levèrent, puis se mirent en rond devant elles. — -« Ne craignez rien ! » dit Félicité ; et, murmurant une sorte de complainte, elle flatta sur l’échine celui qui se trouvait le plus près ; il fit volte-face, les autres l’imitèrent. Mais, quand l’herbage suivant fut traversé, un beuglement formidable s’éleva. C’était un taureau, que cachait le brouillard. Il avança vers les deux femmes. Mme Aubain allait courir. — « Non ! non ! moins vite ! » Elles pressaient le pas cependant, et entendaient par derrière un souffle sonore qui se rapprochait. Ses sabots, comme des marteaux, battaient l’herbe de la prairie ; voilà qu'il galopait maintenant ! Félicité se retourna, et elle arrachait à deux mains des plaques de terre qu'elle lui jetait dans les yeux. Il baissait le mufle, secouait les cornes et tremblait de fureur en beuglant horriblement. Mme Aubain, au bout de l'herbage avec ses deux petits, cherchait éperdue comment franchir le haut bord. Félicité reculait toujours devant le taureau, et continuellement lançait des mottes de gazon qui l'aveuglaient, tandis qu'elle criait : — « Dépêchez-vous ! dépêchez-vous ! » Mme Aubain descendit le fossé, poussa Virginie, Paul ensuite, tomba plusieurs fois en tâchant de gravir le talus, et à force de courage y parvint.

Le taureau avait acculé Félicité contre une claire-voie ; sa bave lui rejaillissait à la figure, une seconde de plus il l'éventrait. Elle eut le temps de se couler entre deux barreaux, et la grosse bête, toute surprise, s'arrêta.

Cet événement, pendant bien des années, fut un sujet de conversation à Pont-l'Évêque. Félicité n'en tira aucun orgueil, ne se doutant même pas qu'elle eût rien fait d'héroïque.

Virginie l'occupait exclusivement ; — -car elle eut, à la suite de son effroi, une affection nerveuse, et M. Poupart, le docteur, conseilla les bains de mer de Trouville.

Dans ce temps-là, ils n'étaient pas fréquentés. Mme Aubain prit des renseignements, consulta Bourais, fit des préparatifs comme pour un long voyage.

Ses colis partirent la veille, dans la charrette de Liébard. Le lendemain, il amena deux chevaux dont l'un avait une selle de femme, munie d'un dossier de velours ; et sur la croupe du second un manteau roulé formait une manière de siège. Mme Aubain y monta, derrière lui. Félicité se chargea de Virginie, et Paul enfourcha l'âne de M. Lechaptois, prêté sous la condition d'en avoir grand soin.

La route était si mauvaise que ses huit kilomètres exigèrent deux heures. Les chevaux enfonçaient jusqu'aux paturons dans la boue, et faisaient pour en sortir de brusques mouvements des hanches ; ou bien ils buttaient contre les ornières ; d'autres fois, il leur fallait sauter. La jument de Liébard, à de certains endroits, s'arrêtait tout à coup. Il attendait patiemment qu'elle se remît en marche ; et il parlait des personnes dont les propriétés bordaient la route, ajoutant à leur histoire des réflexions morales. Ainsi, au milieu de Toucques, comme on passait sous des fenêtres entourées de capucines, il dit, avec un haussement d'épaules : — « En voilà une Mme Lehoussais, qui au lieu de prendre un jeune homme... » Félicité n'entendit pas le reste ; les chevaux trottaient, l'âne galopait ; tous enfilèrent un sentier, une barrière tourna, deux garçons parurent, et l'on descendit devant le purin, sur le seuil même de la porte.

La mère Liébard, en apercevant sa maîtresse, prodigua les démonstrations de joie. Elle lui servit un déjeuner où il y avait un aloyau, des tripes, du boudin, une fricassée de poulet, du cidre mousseux, une tarte aux compotes et des prunes à l’eau-de-vie, accompagnant le tout de politesses à Madame qui paraissait en meilleure santé, à Mademoiselle devenue « magnifique », à M. Paul singulièrement « forci », sans oublier leurs grands-parents défunts que les Liébard avaient connus, étant au service de la famille depuis plusieurs générations. La ferme avait, comme eux, un caractère d’ancienneté. Les poutrelles du plafond étaient vermoulues, les murailles noires de fumée, les carreaux gris de poussière. Un dressoir en chêne supportait toutes sortes d’ustensiles, des brocs, des assiettes, des écuelles d’étain, des pièges à loup, des forces pour les moutons ; une seringue énorme fit rire les enfants. Pas un arbre des trois cours qui n’eût des champignons à sa base, ou dans ses rameaux une touffe de gui. Le vent en avait jeté bas plusieurs. Ils avaient repris par le milieu ; et tous fléchissaient sous la quantité de leurs pommes. Les toits de paille, pareils à du velours brun et inégaux d’épaisseur, résistaient aux plus fortes bourrasques. Cependant la charreterie tombait en ruines. Mme Aubain dit qu’elle aviserait, et commanda de reharnacher les bêtes.

On fut encore une demi-heure avant d’atteindre Trouville. La petite caravane mit pied à terre pour passer les *Écores* ; c’était une falaise surplombant des bateaux ; et trois minutes plus tard, au bout du quai, on entra dans la cour de l’*Agneau d’or*, chez la mère David.

Virginie, dès les premiers jours, se sentit moins faible, résultat du changement d’air et de l’action des bains. Elle les prenait en chemise, à défaut d’un costume ; et sa bonne la rhabillait dans une cabane de douanier qui servait aux baigneurs.

L’après-midi, on s’en allait avec l’âne au-delà des Roches-Noires, du côté d’Hennequeville. Le sentier, d’abord, montait entre des terrains vallonnés comme la pelouse d’un parc, puis arrivait sur un plateau où alternaient des pâturages et des champs en labour. A la lisière du chemin, dans le fouillis des ronces, des houx se dressaient ; çà et là, un grand arbre mort faisait sur l’air bleu des zigzags avec ses branches.

Presque toujours on se reposait dans un pré, ayant Deauville à gauche, le Havre à droite et en face la pleine mer. Elle était brillante de soleil, lisse comme un miroir, tellement douce qu’on entendait à peine son murmure ; des moineaux cachés pépiaient et la voûte immense du ciel recouvrait tout cela. Mme Aubain, assise, travaillait à son ouvrage de couture ; Virginie près d’elle tressait des joncs ; Félicité sarclait des fleurs de lavande ; Paul, qui s’ennuyait, voulait partir.

D’autres fois, ayant passé la Toucques en bateau, ils cherchaient des coquilles. La marée basse laissait à découvert des oursins, des godefiches, des méduses ; et les enfants couraient, pour saisir des flocons d’écume que le vent emportait. Les flots endormis, en tombant sur le sable, se déroulaient le long de la grève ; elle s'étendait à perte de vue, mais du côté de la terre avait pour limite les dunes la séparant du *Marais*, large prairie en forme d'hippodrome. Quand ils revenaient par là, Trouville, au fond sur la pente du coteau, à chaque pas grandissait, et avec toutes ses maisons inégales semblait s'épanouir dans un désordre gai.

Les jours qu'il faisait trop chaud, ils ne sortaient pas de leur chambre. L'éblouissante clarté du dehors plaquait des barres de lumière entre les lames des jalousies. Aucun bruit dans le village. En bas, sur le trottoir, personne. Ce silence épandu augmentait la tranquillité des choses. Au loin, les marteaux des calfats tamponnaient des carènes, et une brise lourde apportait la senteur du goudron.

Le principal divertissement était le retour des barques. Dès qu'elles avaient dépassé les balises, elles commençaient à louvoyer. Leurs voiles descendaient aux deux tiers des mâts ; et, la misaine gonflée comme un ballon, elles avançaient, glissaient dans le clapotement des vagues, jusqu'au milieu du port, où l'ancre tout à coup tombait. Ensuite le bateau se plaçait contre le quai. Les matelots jetaient par-dessus le bordage des poissons palpitants ; une file de charrettes les attendait, et des femmes en bonnet de coton s'élançaient pour prendre les corbeilles et embrasser leurs hommes.

Une d'elles, un jour, aborda Félicité, qui peu de temps après entra dans la chambre, toute joyeuse. Elle avait retrouvé une soeur ; et Nastasie Barette, femme Leroux, apparut, tenant un nourrisson à sa poitrine, de la main droite un autre enfant, et à sa gauche un petit mousse les poings sur les hanches et le béret sur l'oreille.

Au bout d'un quart d'heure, Mme Aubain la congédia.

On les rencontrait toujours aux abords de la cuisine, ou dans les promenades que l'on faisait. Le mari ne se montrait pas.

Félicité se prit d'affection pour eux. Elle leur acheta une couverture, des chemises, un fourneau ; évidemment ils l'exploitaient. Cette faiblesse agaçait Mme Aubain, qui d'ailleurs n'aimait pas les familiarités du neveu, — car il tutoyait son fils ; — et, comme Virginie toussait et que la saison n'était plus bonne, elle revint à Pont-l'Évêque.

M. Bourais l'éclaira sur le choix d'un collège. Celui de Caen passait pour le meilleur. Paul y fut envoyé ; et fit bravement ses adieux, satisfait d'aller vivre dans une maison où il aurait des camarades.

Mme Aubain se résigna à l'éloignement de son fils, parce qu'il était indispensable. Virginie y songea de moins en moins. Félicité regrettait son tapage. Mais une occupation vint la distraire ; à partir de Noël, elle mena tous les jours la petite fille au catéchisme.

III

Quand elle avait fait à la porte une génuflexion, elle s’avançait sous la haute nef entre la double ligne des chaises, ouvrait le banc de Mme Aubain, s’asseyait, et promenait ses yeux autour d’elle.

Les garçons à droite, les filles à gauche, emplissaient les stalles du choeur ; le curé se tenait debout près du lutrin ; sur un vitrail de l’abside, le Saint-Esprit dominait la Vierge ; un autre la montrait à genoux devant l’Enfant-Jésus, et, derrière le tabernacle, un groupe en bois représentait Saint-Michel terrassant le dragon.

Le prêtre fit d’abord un abrégé de l’Histoire-Sainte. Elle croyait voir le paradis, le déluge, la tour de Babel, des villes tout en flammes, des peuples qui mouraient, des idoles renversées ; et elle garda de cet éblouissement le respect du Très-Haut et la crainte de sa colère. Puis, elle pleura en écoutant la Passion. Pourquoi l’avaient-ils crucifié, lui qui chérissait les enfants, nourrissait les foules, guérissait les aveugles, et avait voulu, par douceur, naître au milieu des pauvres, sur le fumier d’une étable ? Les semailles, les moissons, les pressoirs, toutes ces choses familières dont parle l’Évangile, se trouvaient dans sa vie ; le passage de Dieu les avait sanctifiées ; et elle aima plus tendrement les agneaux par amour de l’Agneau, les colombes à cause du Saint-Esprit.

Elle avait peine à imaginer sa personne ; car il n’était pas seulement oiseau, mais encore un feu, et d’autres fois un souffle. C’est peut-être sa lumière qui voltige la nuit aux bords des marécages, son haleine qui pousse les nuées, sa voix qui rend les cloches harmonieuses ; et elle demeurait dans une adoration, jouissant de la fraîcheur des murs et de la tranquillité de l’église.

Quant aux dogmes, elle n’y comprenait rien, ne tâcha même pas de comprendre. Le curé discourait, les enfants récitaient, elle finissait par s’endormir ; et se réveillait tout à coup, quand ils faisaient en s’en allant claquer leurs sabots sur les dalles.

Ce fut de cette manière, à force de l’entendre, qu’elle apprit le catéchisme, son éducation religieuse ayant été négligée dans sa jeunesse ; et dès lors elle imita toutes les pratiques de Virginie, jeûnait comme elle, se confessait avec elle. A la Fête-Dieu, elles firent ensemble un reposoir.

La première communion la tourmentait d’avance. Elle s’agita pour les souliers, pour le chapelet, pour le livre, pour les gants. Avec quel tremblement elle aida sa mère à l’habiller !

Pendant toute la messe, elle éprouva une angoisse. M. Bourais lui cachait un côté du choeur ; mais juste en face, le troupeau des vierges portant des couronnes blanches par-dessus leurs voiles abaissés formait comme un champ de neige ; et elle reconnaissait de loin la chère petite à son cou plus mignon et son attitude recueillie. La cloche tinta. Les têtes se courbèrent ; il y eut un silence. Aux éclats de l'orgue, les chantres et la foule entonnèrent l'*Agnus Dei* ; puis le défilé des garçons commença ; et, après eux, les filles se levèrent. Pas à pas, et les mains jointes, elles allaient vers l'autel tout illuminé, s'agenouillaient sur la première marche, recevaient l'hostie successivement, et dans le même ordre revenaient à leurs prie-Dieu. Quand ce fut le tour de Virginie, Félicité se pencha pour la voir ; et, avec l'imagination que donnent les vraies tendresses, il lui sembla qu'elle était elle-même cette enfant ; sa figure devenait la sienne, sa robe l'habillait, son coeur lui battait dans la poitrine ; au moment d'ouvrir la bouche, en fermant les paupières, elle manqua s'évanouir.

Le lendemain, de bonne heure, elle se présenta dans la sacristie, pour que M. le curé lui donnât la communion. Elle la reçut dévotement, mais n'y goûta pas les mêmes délices.

Mme Aubain voulait faire de sa fille une personne accomplie ; et, comme Guyot ne pouvait lui montrer ni l'anglais ni la musique, elle résolut de la mettre en pension chez les Ursulines d'Honfleur.

L'enfant n'objecta rien. Félicité soupirait, trouvant Madame insensible. Puis elle songea que sa maîtresse, peut-être, avait raison. Ces choses dépassaient sa compétence.

Enfin, un jour, une vieille tapissière s'arrêta devant la porte ; et il en descendit une religieuse qui venait chercher Mademoiselle. Félicité monta les bagages sur l'impériale, fit des recommandations au cocher, et plaça dans le coffre six pots de confitures et une douzaine de poires, avec un bouquet de violettes.

Virginie, au dernier moment, fut prise d'un grand sanglot ; elle embrassait sa mère qui la baisait au front en répétant — : « Allons ! du courage ! du courage ! » Le marchepied se releva, la voiture partit.

Alors Mme Aubain eut une défaillance ; et le soir tous ses amis, le ménage Lormeau, Mme Lechaptois, ces demoiselles Rochefeuille, M. de Houppeville et Bourais se présentèrent pour la consoler.

La privation de sa fille lui fut d'abord très-douloureuse. Mais trois fois la semaine elle en recevait une lettre, les autres jours lui écrivait, se promenait dans son jardin, lisait un peu, et de cette façon comblait le vide des heures.

Le matin, par habitude, Félicité entrait dans la chambre de Virginie, et regardait les murailles. Elle s'ennuyait de n'avoir plus à peigner ses cheveux, à lui lacer ses bottines, à la border dans son lit, — et de ne plus voir continuellement sa gentille figure, de ne plus la tenir par la main quand elles sortaient ensemble. Dans son désoeuvrement, elle essaya de faire de la dentelle. Ses doigts trop lourds cassaient les fils ; elle n’entendait à rien, avait perdu le sommeil, suivant son mot, était « minée ».

Pour « se dissiper », elle demanda la permission de recevoir son neveu Victor.

Il arrivait le dimanche après la messe, les joues roses, la poitrine nue, et sentant l’odeur de la campagne qu’il avait traversée. Tout de suite, elle dressait son couvert. Ils déjeunaient l’un en face de l’autre ; et, mangeant elle-même le moins possible pour épargner la dépense, elle le bourrait tellement de nourriture qu’il finissait par s’endormir. Au premier coup des vêpres, elle le réveillait, brossait son pantalon, nouait sa cravate, et se rendait à l’église, appuyée sur son bras dans un orgueil maternel.

Ses parents le chargeaient toujours d’en tirer quelque chose, soit un paquet de cassonade, du savon, de l’eau-de-vie, parfois même de l’argent. Il apportait ses nippes à raccommoder ; et elle acceptait cette besogne, heureuse d’une occasion qui le forçait à revenir.

Au mois d’août, son père l’emmena au cabotage.

C’était l’époque des vacances. L’arrivée des enfants la consola. Mais Paul devenait capricieux, et Virginie n’avait plus l’âge d’être tutoyée, ce qui mettait une gêne, une barrière entre elles.

Victor alla successivement à Morlaix, à Dunkerque et à Brighton ; au retour de chaque voyage, il lui offrait un cadeau. La première fois, ce fut une boîte en coquilles ; la seconde, une tasse à café ; la troisième, un grand bonhomme en pain d’épices. Il embellissait, avait la taille bien prise, un peu de moustache, de bons yeux francs, et un petit chapeau de cuir, placé en arrière comme un pilote. Il l’amusait en lui racontant des histoires mêlées de termes marins.

Un lundi, 14 juillet 1819 (elle n’oublia pas la date), Victor annonça qu’il était engagé au long cours, et, dans la nuit du surlendemain, par le paquebot de Honfleur, irait rejoindre sa goëlette, qui devait démarrer du Havre prochainement. Il serait, peut-être, deux ans parti.

La perspective d’une telle absence désola Félicité ; et pour lui dire encore adieu, le mercredi soir, après le dîner de Madame, elle chaussa des galoches, et avala les quatre lieues qui séparent Pont-l’Évêque de Honfleur.

Quand elle fut devant le Calvaire, au lieu de prendre à gauche, elle prit à droite, se perdit dans des chantiers, revint sur ses pas ; des gens qu’elle accosta l’engagèrent à se hâter. Elle fit le tour du bassin rempli de navires, se heurtait contre des amarres ; puis le terrain s’abaissa, des lumières s’entre-croisèrent, et elle se crut folle, en apercevant des chevaux dans le ciel.

Au bord du quai, d’autres hennissaient, effrayés par la mer. Un palan qui les enlevait les descendait dans un bateau, où des voyageurs se bousculaient entre les barriques de cidre, les paniers de fromage, les sacs de grain ; on entendait chanter des poules, le capitaine jurait ; et un mousse restait accoudé sur le bossoir, indifférent à tout cela. Félicité, qui ne l'avait pas reconnu, criait : « Victor ! » il leva la tête ; elle s'élançait, quand on retira l'échelle tout à coup.

Le paquebot, que des femmes halaient en chantant, sortit du port. Sa membrure craquait, les vagues pesantes fouettaient sa proue. La voile avait tourné, on ne vit plus personne ; — -et, sur la mer argentée par la lune, il faisait une tache noire qui pâlissait toujours, s'enfonça, disparut.

Félicité, en passant près du Calvaire, voulut recommander à Dieu ce qu'elle chérissait le plus ; et elle pria pendant longtemps, debout, la face baignée de pleurs, les yeux vers les nuages. La ville dormait, des douaniers se promenaient ; et de l'eau tombait sans discontinuer par les trous de l'écluse, avec un bruit de torrent. Deux heures sonnèrent.

Le parloir n'ouvrirait pas avant le jour. Un retard, bien sûr, contrarierait Madame ; et, malgré son désir d'embrasser l'autre enfant, elle s'en retourna. Les filles de l'auberge s'éveillaient, comme elle entrait dans Pont-l'Évêque.

Le pauvre gamin durant des mois allait donc rouler sur les flots ! Ses précédents voyages ne l'avaient pas effrayée. De l'Angleterre et de la Bretagne, on revenait ; mais l'Amérique, les Colonies, les Iles, cela était perdu dans une région incertaine, à l'autre bout du monde.

Dès lors, Félicité pensa exclusivement à son neveu. Les jours de soleil, elle se tourmentait de la soif ; quand il faisait de l'orage, craignait pour lui la foudre. En écoutant le vent qui grondait dans la cheminée et emportait les ardoises, elle le voyait battu par cette même tempête, au sommet d'un mât fracassé, tout le corps en arrière, sous une nappe d'écume ; ou bien, — souvenirs de la géographie en estampes, — il était mangé par les sauvages, pris dans un bois par des singes, se mourait le long d'une plage déserte. Et jamais elle ne parlait de ses inquiétudes.

Mme Aubain en avait d'autres sur sa fille.

Les bonnes soeurs trouvaient qu'elle était affectueuse, mais délicate. La moindre émotion l'énervait. Il fallut abandonner le piano.

Sa mère exigeait du couvent une correspondance réglée. Un matin que le facteur n'était pas venu, elle s'impatienta ; et elle marchait dans la salle, de son fauteuil à la fenêtre. C'était vraiment extraordinaire ! depuis quatre jours, pas de nouvelles !

Pour qu'elle se consolât par son exemple, Félicité lui dit :

— « Moi, madame, voilà six mois que je n'en ai reçu !... »

— « De qui donc ?... »

La servante répliqua doucement :

— « Mais... de mon neveu ! »

— « Ah ! votre neveu ! » Et, haussant les épaules, Mme Aubain reprit sa promenade, ce qui voulait dire : « Je n'y pensais pas !... Au surplus, je m'en moque ! un mousse, un gueux, belle affaire !... tandis que ma fille... Songez donc !... »

Félicité, bien que nourrie dans la rudesse, fut indignée contre Madame, puis oublia.

Il lui paraissait tout simple de perdre la tête à l'occasion de la petite.

Les deux enfants avaient une importance égale ; un lien de son coeur les unissait, et leurs destinées devaient être la même.

Le pharmacien lui apprit que le bateau de Victor était arrivé à la Havane. Il avait lu ce renseignement dans une gazette.

A cause des cigares, elle imaginait la Havane un pays où l'on ne fait pas autre chose que de fumer, et Victor circulait parmi des nègres dans un nuage de tabac. Pouvait-on « en cas de besoin » s'en retourner par terre ? A quelle distance était-ce de Pont-l'Évêque ? Pour le savoir, elle interrogea M. Bourais.

Il atteignit son atlas, puis commença des explications sur les longitudes ; et il avait un beau sourire de cuistre devant l'ahurissement de Félicité. Enfin, avec son porte-crayon, il indiqua dans les découpures d'une tache ovale un point noir, imperceptible, en ajoutant ; « Voici. » Elle se pencha sur la carte ; ce réseau de lignes coloriées fatiguait sa vue, sans lui rien apprendre ; et Bourais, l'invitant à dire ce qui l'embarrassait, elle le pria de lui montrer la maison où demeurait Victor. Bourais leva les bras, il éternua, rit énormément ; une candeur pareille excitait sa joie ; et Félicité n'en comprenait pas le motif, — elle qui s'attendait peut-être à voir jusqu'au portrait de son neveu, tant son intelligence était bornée !

Ce fut quinze jours après que Liébard, à l'heure du marché comme d'habitude, entra dans la cuisine, et lui remit une lettre qu'envoyait son beau-frère. Ne sachant lire aucun des deux, elle eut recours à sa maîtresse.

Mme Aubain, qui comptait les mailles d'un tricot, le posa près d'elle, décacheta la lettre, tressaillit, et, d'une voix basse, avec un regard profond :

— « C'est un malheur... qu'on vous annonce. Votre neveu... »

Il était mort. On n'en disait pas davantage.

Félicité tomba sur une chaise, en s'appuyant la tête à la cloison, et ferma ses paupières, qui devinrent roses tout à coup. Puis, le front baissé, les mains pendantes, l'oeil fixe, elle répétait par intervalles :

— « Pauvre petit gars ! pauvre petit gars ! »

Liébard la considérait en exhalant des soupirs. Mme Aubain tremblait un peu.

Elle lui proposa d'aller voir sa soeur, à Trouville.

Félicité répondit, par un geste, qu’elle n’en avait pas besoin.

Il y eut un silence. Le bonhomme Liébard jugea convenable de se retirer.

Alors elle dit :

— « Ça ne leur fait rien, à eux ! »

Sa tête retomba ; et machinalement elle soulevait, de temps à autre, les longues aiguilles sur la table à ouvrage.

Des femmes passèrent dans la cour avec un bard d’où dégouttelait du linge.

En les apercevant par les carreaux, elle se rappela sa lessive ; l’ayant coulée la veille, il fallait aujourd’hui la rincer ; et elle sortit de l’appartement.

Sa planche et son tonneau étaient au bord de la Toucques. Elle jeta sur la berge un tas de chemises, retroussa ses manches, prit son battoir ; et les coups forts qu’elle donnait s’entendaient dans les autres jardins à côté. Les prairies étaient vides, le vent agitait la rivière ; au fond, de grandes herbes s’y penchaient, comme des chevelures de cadavres flottant dans l’eau. Elle retenait sa douleur, jusqu’au soir fut très-brave ; mais, dans sa chambre, elle s’y abandonna, à plat ventre sur son matelas, le visage dans l’oreiller, et les deux poings contre les tempes.

Beaucoup plus tard, par le capitaine de Victor lui-même, elle connut les circonstances de sa fin. On l’avait trop saigné à l’hôpital, pour la fièvre jaune. Quatre médecins le tenaient à la fois. Il était mort immédiatement, et le chef avait dit :

— « Bon ! encore un ! »

Ses parents l’avaient toujours traité avec barbarie. Elle aima mieux ne pas les revoir ; et ils ne firent aucune avance, par oubli, ou endurcissement de misérables.

Virginie s’affaiblissait.

Des oppressions, de la toux, une fièvre continuelle et des marbrures aux pommettes décelaient quelque affection profonde. M. Poupart avait conseillé un séjour en Provence. Mme Aubain s’y décida, et eût tout de suite repris sa fille à la maison, sans le climat de Pont-l’Évêque.

Elle fit un arrangement avec un loueur de voitures, qui la menait au couvent chaque mardi. Il y a dans le jardin une terrasse d’où l’on découvre la Seine. Virginie s’y promenait à son bras, sur les feuilles de pampre tombées. Quelquefois le soleil traversant les nuages la forçait à cligner ses paupières, pendant qu’elle regardait les voiles au loin et tout l’horizon, depuis le château de Tancarville jusqu’aux phares du Havre. Ensuite on se reposait sous la tonnelle. Sa mère s’était procuré un petit fût d’excellent vin de Malaga ; et, riant à l’idée d’être grise, elle en buvait deux doigts, pas davantage.

Ses forces reparurent. L’automne s’écoula doucement. Félicité rassurait Mme

Aubain. Mais, un soir qu'elle avait été aux environs faire une course, elle rencontra devant la porte le cabriolet de M. Poupart ; et il était dans le vestibule. Mme Aubain nouait son chapeau.

— « Donnez-moi ma chaufferette, ma bourse, mes gants ; plus vite donc ! »

Virginie avait une fluxion de poitrine ; c'était peut-être désespéré.

— « Pas encore ! » dit le médecin ; et tous deux montèrent dans la voiture, sous des flocons de neige qui tourbillonnaient. La nuit allait venir. Il faisait très-froid.

Félicité se précipita dans l'église, pour allumer un cierge. Puis elle courut après le cabriolet, qu'elle rejoignit une heure plus tard, sauta légèrement par derrière, où elle se tenait aux torsades, quand une réflexion lui vint : « La cour n'était pas fermée ! si des voleurs s'introduisaient ? » Et elle descendit.

Le lendemain, dès l'aube, elle se présenta chez le docteur. Il était rentré, et reparti à la campagne. Puis elle resta dans l'auberge, croyant que des inconnus apporteraient une lettre. Enfin, au petit jour, elle prit la diligence de Lisieux.

Le couvent se trouvait au fond d'une ruelle escarpée. Vers le milieu, elle entendit des sons étranges, un glas de mort. « C'est pour d'autres, » pensa-t-elle ; et Félicité tira violemment le marteau.

Au bout de plusieurs minutes, des savates se traînèrent, la porte s'entre-bâilla, et une religieuse parut.

La bonne soeur avec un air de componction dit qu'« elle venait de passer ». En même temps, le glas de Saint-Léonard redoublait.

Félicité parvint au second étage.

Dès le seuil de la chambre, elle aperçut Virginie étalée sur le dos, les mains jointes, la bouche ouverte, et la tête en arrière sous une croix noire s'inclinant vers elle, entre les rideaux immobiles, moins pâles que sa figure. Mme Aubain, au pied de la couche qu'elle tenait dans ses bras, poussait des hoquets d'agonie. La supérieure était debout, à droite. Trois chandeliers sur la commode faisaient des taches rouges, et le brouillard blanchissait les fenêtres. Des religieuses emportèrent Mme Aubain.

Pendant deux nuits, Félicité ne quitta pas la morte. Elle répétait les mêmes prières, jetait de l'eau bénite sur les draps, revenait s'asseoir, et la contemplait. A la fin de la première veille, elle remarqua que la figure avait jauni, les lèvres bleuirent, le nez se pinçait, les yeux s'enfonçaient. Elle les baisa plusieurs fois ; et n'eût pas éprouvé un immense étonnement si Virginie les eût rouverts ; pour de pareilles âmes le surnaturel est tout simple. Elle fit sa toilette, l'enveloppa de son linceul, la descendit dans sa bière, lui posa une couronne, étala ses cheveux. Ils étaient blonds, et extraordinaires de longueur à son âge. Félicité en coupa une grosse mèche, dont elle glissa la moitié dans sa poitrine, résolue à ne jamais s'en dessaisir.

Le corps fut ramené à Pont-l’Évêque, suivant les intentions de Mme Aubain, qui suivait le corbillard, dans une voiture fermée.

Après la messe, il fallut encore trois quarts d’heure pour atteindre le cimetière. Paul marchait en tête et sanglotait. M. Bourais était derrière, ensuite les principaux habitants, les femmes, couvertes de mantes noires, et Félicité. Elle songeait à son neveu, et, n’ayant pu lui rendre ces honneurs, avait un surcroît de tristesse, comme si on l’eût enterré avec l’autre.

Le désespoir de Mme Aubain fut illimité.

D’abord elle se révolta contre Dieu, le trouvant injuste de lui avoir pris sa fille, — elle qui n’avait jamais fait de mal, et dont la conscience était si pure ! Mais non ! elle aurait dû l’emporter dans le Midi. D’autres docteurs l’auraient sauvée ! Elle s’accusait, voulait la rejoindre, criait en détresse au milieu de ses rêves. Un, surtout, l’obsédait. Son mari, costumé comme un matelot, revenait d’un long voyage, et lui disait en pleurant qu’il avait reçu l’ordre d’emmener Virginie. Alors ils se concertaient pour découvrir une cachette quelque part.

Une fois, elle rentra du jardin, bouleversée. Tout à l’heure (elle montrait l’endroit) le père et la fille lui étaient apparus l’un auprès de l’autre, et ils ne faisaient rien ; ils la regardaient.

Pendant plusieurs mois, elle resta dans sa chambre, inerte. Félicité la sermonnait doucement ; il fallait se conserver pour son fils, et pour l’autre, en souvenir « d’elle ».

— « Elle ? » reprenait Mme Aubain, comme se réveillant. « Ah ! oui !... oui !... Vous ne l’oubliez pas ! » Allusion au cimetière, qu’on lui avait scrupuleusement défendu.

Félicité tous les jours s’y rendait.

A quatre heures précises, elle passait au bord des maisons, montait la côte, ouvrait la barrière, et arrivait devant la tombe de Virginie. C’était une petite colonne de marbre rose, avec une dalle dans le bas, et des chaînes autour enfermant un jardinet. Les plates-bandes disparaissaient sous une couverture de fleurs. Elle arrosait leurs feuilles, renouvelait le sable, se mettait à genoux pour mieux labourer la terre. Mme Aubain, quand elle put y venir, en éprouva un soulagement, une espèce de consolation.

Puis des années s’écoulèrent, toutes pareilles et sans autres épisodes que le retour des grandes fêtes : Pâques, l’Assomption, la Toussaint. Des événements intérieurs faisaient une date, où l’on se reportait plus tard. Ainsi, en 1825, deux vitriers badigeonnèrent le vestibule ; en 1827, une portion du toit, tombant dans la cour, faillit tuer un homme. L’été de 1828, ce fut à Madame d’offrir le pain bénit ; Bourais, vers cette époque, s’absenta mystérieusement ; et les anciennes connaissances peu à peu s'en allèrent : Guyot, Liébard, Mme Lechaptois, Robelin, l'oncle Gremanville, paralysé depuis longtemps.

Une nuit, le conducteur de la malle-poste annonça dans Pont-l'Évêque la Révolution de Juillet. Un sous-préfet nouveau, peu de jours après, fut nommé : le baron de Larsonnière, ex-consul en Amérique, et qui avait chez lui, outre sa femme, sa belle-soeur avec trois demoiselles, assez grandes déjà. On les apercevait sur leur gazon, habillées de blouses flottantes ; elles possédaient un nègre et un perroquet. Mme Aubain eut leur visite, et ne manqua pas de la rendre. Du plus loin qu'elles paraissaient, Félicité accourait pour la prévenir. Mais une chose était seule capable de l'émouvoir, les lettres de son fils.

Il ne pouvait suivre aucune carrière, étant absorbé dans les estaminets. Elle lui payait ses dettes ; il en refaisait d'autres ; et les soupirs que poussait Mme Aubain, en tricotant près de la fenêtre, arrivaient à Félicité, qui tournait son rouet dans la cuisine.

Elles se promenaient ensemble le long de l'espalier ; et causaient toujours de Virginie, se demandant si telle chose lui aurait plu, en telle occasion ce qu'elle eût dit probablement.

Toutes ses petites affaires occupaient un placard dans la chambre à deux lits. Mme Aubain les inspectait le moins souvent possible. Un jour d'été, elle se résigna ; et des papillons s'envolèrent de l'armoire.

Ses robes étaient en ligne sous une planche où il y avait trois poupées, des cerceaux, un ménage, la cuvette qui lui servait. Elles retirèrent également les jupons, les bas, les mouchoirs, et les étendirent sur les deux couches, avant de les replier. Le soleil éclairait ces pauvres objets, en faisait voir les taches, et des plis formés par les mouvements du corps. L'air était chaud et bleu, un merle gazouillait, tout semblait vivre dans une douceur profonde. Elles retrouvèrent un petit chapeau de peluche, à longs poils, couleur marron ; mais il était tout mangé de vermine. Félicité le réclama pour elle-même. Leurs yeux se fixèrent l'une sur l'autre, s'emplirent de larmes ; enfin la maîtresse ouvrit ses bras, la servante s'y jeta ; et elles s'étreignirent, satisfaisant leur douleur dans un baiser qui les égalisait.

C'était la première fois de leur vie, Mme Aubain n'étant pas d'une nature expansive. Félicité lui en fut reconnaissante comme d'un bienfait, et désormais la chérit avec un dévouement bestial et une vénération religieuse.

La bonté de son coeur se développa.

Quand elle entendait dans la rue les tambours d'un régiment en marche, elle se mettait devant la porte avec une cruche de cidre, et offrait à boire aux soldats. Elle soigna des cholériques. Elle protégeait les Polonais ; et même il y en eut un qui déclarait la vouloir épouser. Mais ils se fâchèrent ; car un matin, en rentrant de l’angélus, elle le trouva dans sa cuisine, où il s’était introduit, et accommodé une vinaigrette qu’il mangeait tranquillement.

Après les Polonais, ce fut le père Colmiche, un vieillard passant pour avoir fait des horreurs en 93. Il vivait au bord de la rivière, dans les décombres d’une porcherie. Les gamins le regardaient par les fentes du mur, et lui jetaient des cailloux qui tombaient sur son grabat, où il gisait, continuellement secoué par un catarrhe, avec des cheveux très-longs, les paupières enflammées, et au bras une tumeur plus grosse que sa tête. Elle lui procura du linge, tâcha de nettoyer son bouge, rêvait à l’établir dans le fournil, sans qu’il gênât Madame. Quand le cancer eut crevé, elle le pansa tous les jours, quelquefois lui apportait de la galette, le plaçait au soleil sur une botte de paille ; et le pauvre vieux, en bavant et en tremblant, la remerciait de sa voix éteinte, craignait de la perdre, allongeait les mains dès qu’il la voyait s’éloigner. Il mourut ; elle fit dire une messe pour le repos de son âme.

Ce jour-là, il lui advint un grand bonheur : au moment du dîner, le nègre de Mme de Larsonnière se présenta, tenant le perroquet dans sa cage, avec le bâton, la chaîne et le cadenas. Un billet de la baronne annonçait à Mme Aubain que, son mari étant élevé à une préfecture, ils partaient le soir ; et elle la priait d’accepter cet oiseau, comme un souvenir, et en témoignage de ses respects.

Il occupait depuis longtemps l’imagination de Félicité, car il venait d’Amérique ; et ce mot lui rappelait Victor, si bien qu’elle s’en informait auprès du nègre. Une fois même elle avait dit : — « C’est Madame qui serait heureuse de l’avoir ! »

Le nègre avait redit le propos à sa maîtresse, qui, ne pouvant l’emmener, s’en débarrassait de cette façon.

IV

Il s’appelait Loulou. Son corps était vert, le bout de ses ailes rose, son front bleu, et sa gorge dorée.

Mais il avait la fatigante manie de mordre son bâton, s’arrachait les plumes, éparpillait ses ordures, répandait l’eau de sa baignoire ; Mme Aubain, qu’il ennuyait, le donna pour toujours à Félicité.

Elle entreprit de l’instruire ; bientôt il répéta : « Charmant garçon ! Serviteur, monsieur ! Je vous salue, Marie ! » Il était placé auprès de la porte, et plusieurs s’étonnaient qu’il ne répondît pas au nom de Jacquot, puisque tous les perroquets s’appellent Jacquot. On le comparait à une dinde, à une bûche : autant de coups de poignard pour Félicité ! Étrange obstination de Loulou, ne parlant plus du moment qu'on le regardait !

Néanmoins il recherchait la compagnie ; car le dimanche, pendant que ces demoiselles Rochefeuille, monsieur de Houppeville et de nouveaux habitués : Onfroy l'apothicaire, monsieur Varin et le capitaine Mathieu, faisaient leur partie de cartes, il cognait les vitres avec ses ailes, et se démenait si furieusement qu'il était impossible de s'entendre.

La figure de Bourais, sans doute, lui paraissait très-drôle. Dès qu'il l'apercevait, il commençait à rire, à rire de toutes ses forces. Les éclats de sa voix bondissaient dans la cour, l'écho les répétait, les voisins se mettaient à leurs fenêtres, riaient aussi ; et, pour n'être pas vu du perroquet, M. Bourais se coulait le long du mur, en dissimulant son profil avec son chapeau, atteignait la rivière, puis entrait par la porte du jardin ; et les regards qu'il envoyait à l'oiseau manquaient de tendresse.

Loulou avait reçu du garçon boucher une chiquenaude, s'étant permis d'enfoncer la tête dans sa corbeille ; et depuis lors il tâchait toujours de le pincer à travers sa chemise. Fabu menaçait de lui tordre le cou, bien qu'il ne fût pas cruel, malgré le tatouage de ses bras et ses gros favoris. Au contraire ! il avait plutôt du penchant pour le perroquet, jusqu'à vouloir, par humeur joviale, lui apprendre des jurons. Félicité, que ces manières effrayaient, le plaça dans la cuisine. Sa chaînette fut retirée, et il circulait par la maison.

Quand il descendait l'escalier, il appuyait sur les marches la courbe de son bec, levait la patte droite, puis la gauche ; et elle avait peur qu'une telle gymnastique ne lui causât des étourdissements. Il devint malade, ne pouvait plus parler ni manger. C'était sous sa langue une épaisseur, comme en ont les poules quelquefois. Elle le guérit, en arrachant cette pellicule avec ses ongles. M. Paul, un jour, eut l'imprudence de lui souffler aux narines la fumée d'un cigare ; une autre fois que Mme Lormeau l'agaçait du bout de son ombrelle, il en happa la virole ; enfin, il se perdit.

Elle l'avait posé sur l'herbe pour le rafraîchir, s'absenta une minute ; et, quand elle revint, plus de perroquet ! D'abord elle le chercha dans les buissons, au bord de l'eau et sur les toits, sans écouter sa maîtresse qui lui criait : — « Prenez donc garde ! vous êtes folle ! » Ensuite elle inspecta tous les jardins de Pont-l'Évêque ; et elle arrêtait les passants. — « Vous n'auriez pas vu, quelquefois, par hasard, mon perroquet ? » A ceux qui ne connaissaient pas le perroquet, elle en faisait la description. Tout à coup, elle crut distinguer derrière les moulins, au bas de la côte, une chose verte qui voltigeait. Mais au haut de la côte, rien ! Un porte-balle lui affirma qu'il l'avait rencontré tout à l'heure, à Saint-Melaine, dans la boutique de la mère Simon. Elle y courut. On ne savait pas ce qu'elle voulait dire. Enfin elle rentra, épuisée, les savates en lambeaux, la mort dans l’âme ; et, assise au milieu du banc, près de Madame, elle racontait toutes ses démarches, quand un poids léger lui tomba sur l’épaule, Loulou ! Que diable avait-il fait ? Peut-être qu’il s’était promené aux environs !

Elle eut du mal à s’en remettre, ou plutôt ne s’en remit jamais.

Par suite d’un refroidissement, il lui vint une angine ; peu de temps après, un mal d’oreilles. Trois ans plus tard, elle était sourde ; et elle parlait très-haut, même à l’église. Bien que ses péchés auraient pu sans déshonneur pour elle, ni inconvénient pour le monde, se répandre à tous les coins du diocèse, M. le curé jugea convenable de ne plus recevoir sa confession que dans la sacristie.

Des bourdonnements illusoires achevaient de la troubler. Souvent sa maîtresse lui disait : — « Mon Dieu ! comme vous êtes bête ! » elle répliquait : — « Oui, Madame, » en cherchant quelque chose autour d’elle.

Le petit cercle de ses idées se rétrécit encore, et le carillon des cloches, le mugissement des boeufs, n’existaient plus. Tous les êtres fonctionnaient avec le silence des fantômes. Un seul bruit arrivait maintenant à ses oreilles, la voix du perroquet.

Comme pour la distraire, il reproduisait le tic tac du tournebroche, l’appel aigu d’un vendeur de poisson, la scie du menuisier qui logeait en face ; et, aux coups de la sonnette, imitait Mme Aubain, — « Félicité ! la porte ! la porte ! »

Ils avaient des dialogues, lui, débitant à satiété les trois phrases de son répertoire, et elle, y répondant par des mots sans plus de suite, mais où son coeur s’épanchait. Loulou, dans son isolement, était presque un fils, un amoureux. Il escaladait ses doigts, mordillait ses lèvres, se cramponnait à son fichu ; et, comme elle penchait son front en branlant la tête à la manière des nourrices, les grandes ailes du bonnet et les ailes de l’oiseau frémissaient ensemble.

Quand des nuages s’amoncelaient et que le tonnerre grondait, il poussait des cris, se rappelant peut-être les ondées de ses forêts natales. Le ruissellement de l’eau excitait son délire ; il voletait éperdu, montait au plafond, renversait tout, et par la fenêtre allait barboter dans le jardin ; mais revenait vite sur un des chenets, et, sautillant pour sécher ses plumes, montrait tantôt sa queue, tantôt son bec.

Un matin du terrible hiver de 1837, qu’elle l’avait mis devant la cheminée, à cause du froid, elle le trouva mort, au milieu de sa cage, la tête en bas, et les ongles dans les fils de fer. Une congestion l’avait tué, sans doute ? Elle crut à un empoisonnement par le persil ; et, malgré l’absence de toutes preuves, ses soupçons portèrent sur Fabu. Elle pleura tellement que sa maîtresse lui dit : « Eh bien ! faites-le empailler ! »

Elle demanda conseil au pharmacien, qui avait toujours été bon pour le perroquet.

Il écrivit au Havre. Un certain Fellacher se chargea de cette besogne. Mais, comme la diligence égarait parfois les colis, elle résolut de le porter elle-même jusqu’à Honfleur.

Les pommiers sans feuilles se succédaient aux bords de la route. De la glace couvrait les fossés. Des chiens aboyaient autour des fermes ; et les mains sous son mantelet, avec ses petits sabots noirs et son cabas, elle marchait prestement, sur le milieu du pavé.

Elle traversa la forêt, dépassa le Haut-Chêne, atteignit Saint-Gatien.

Derrière elle, dans un nuage de poussière et emportée par la descente, une malle-poste au grand galop se précipitait comme une trombe. En voyant cette femme qui ne se dérangeait pas, le conducteur se dressa par-dessus la capote, et le postillon criait aussi, pendant que ses quatre chevaux qu’il ne pouvait retenir accéléraient leur train ; les deux premiers la frôlaient ; d’une secousse de ses guides, il les jeta dans le débord, mais furieux releva le bras, et à pleine volée, avec son grand fouet, lui cingla du ventre au chignon un tel coup qu’elle tomba sur le dos.

Son premier geste, quand elle reprit connaissance, fut d’ouvrir son panier. Loulou n’avait rien, heureusement. Elle sentit une brûlure à la joue droite ; ses mains qu’elle y porta étaient rouges. Le sang coulait.

Elle s’assit sur un mètre de cailloux, se tamponna le visage avec son mouchoir, puis elle mangea une croûte de pain, mise dans son panier par précaution, et se consolait de sa blessure en regardant l’oiseau.

Arrivée au sommet d’Équemauville, elle aperçut les lumières de Honfleur qui scintillaient dans la nuit comme une quantité d’étoiles ; la mer, plus loin, s’étalait confusément. Alors une faiblesse l’arrêta ; et la misère de son enfance, la déception du premier amour, le départ de son neveu, la mort de Virginie, comme les flots d’une marée, revinrent à la fois, et, lui montant à la gorge, l’étouffaient.

Puis elle voulut parler au capitaine du bateau ; et, sans dire ce qu’elle envoyait, lui fit des recommandations.

Fellacher garda longtemps le perroquet. Il le promettait toujours pour la semaine prochaine ; au bout de six mois, il annonça le départ d’une caisse ; et il n’en fut plus question. C’était à croire que jamais Loulou ne reviendrait. « Ils me l’auront volé ! » pensait-elle. Enfin il arriva, — et splendide, droit sur une branche d’arbre, qui se vissait dans un socle d’acajou, une patte en l’air, la tête oblique, et mordant une noix, que l’empailleur par amour du grandiose avait dorée.

Elle l’enferma dans sa chambre.

Cet endroit, où elle admettait peu de monde, avait l’air tout à la fois d’une chapelle et d’un bazar, tant il contenait d’objets religieux et de choses hétéroclites

hétéroclites.

Une grande armoire gênait pour ouvrir la porte. En face de la fenêtre surplombant le jardin, un oeil de boeuf regardait la cour ; une table, près du lit de sangle, supportait un pot à l'eau, deux peignes et un cube de savon bleu dans une assiette ébréchée. On voyait contre les murs : des chapelets, des médailles, plusieurs bonnes Vierges, un bénitier en noix de coco ; sur la commode, couverte d'un drap comme un autel, la boîte en coquillages que lui avait donnée Victor ; puis un arrosoir et un ballon, des cahiers d'écriture, la géographie en estampes, une paire de bottines ; et au clou du miroir, accroché par ses rubans, le petit chapeau de peluche ! Félicité poussait même ce genre de respect si loin, qu'elle conservait une des redingotes de Monsieur. Toutes les vieilleries dont ne voulait plus Mme Aubain, elle les prenait pour sa chambre. C'est ainsi qu'il y avait des fleurs artificielles au bord de la commode, et le portrait du comte d'Artois dans l'enfoncement de la lucarne.

Au moyen d'une planchette, Loulou fut établi sur un corps de cheminée qui avançait dans l'appartement. Chaque matin, en s'éveillant, elle l'apercevait à la clarté de l'aube ; et se rappelait alors les jours disparus, et d'insignifiantes actions jusqu'en leurs moindres détails, sans douleur, pleine de tranquillité.

Ne communiquant avec personne, elle vivait dans une torpeur de somnambule. Les processions de la Fête-Dieu la ranimaient. Elle allait quêter chez les voisines des flambeaux et des paillassons, afin d'embellir le reposoir que l'on dressait dans la rue.

A l'église, elle contemplait toujours le Saint-Esprit, et observa qu'il avait quelque chose du perroquet. Sa ressemblance lui parut encore plus manifeste sur une image d'Épinal, représentant le baptême de Notre-Seigneur. Avec ses ailes de pourpre et son corps d'émeraude, c'était vraiment le portrait de Loulou.

L'ayant acheté, elle le suspendit à la place du comte d'Artois, — de sorte que, du même coup d'oeil, elle les voyait ensemble. Ils s'associèrent dans sa pensée, le perroquet se trouvant sanctifié par ce rapport avec le Saint-Esprit, qui devenait plus vivant à ses yeux et intelligible. Le Père, pour s'énoncer, n'avait pu choisir une colombe, puisque ces bêtes-là n'ont pas de voix, mais plutôt un des ancêtres de Loulou. Et Félicité priait en regardant l'image, mais de temps à autre se tournait un peu vers l'oiseau.

Elle eut envie de se mettre dans les demoiselles de la Vierge. Mme Aubain l'en dissuada.

Un événement considérable surgit : le mariage de Paul.

Après avoir été d'abord clerc de notaire, puis dans le commerce, dans la douane, dans les contributions, et même avoir commencé des démarches pour les eaux et forêts, à trente-six ans, tout à coup, par une inspiration du ciel, il avait découvert sa voie : l'enregistrement ! et y montrait de si hautes facultés qu'un vérificateur lui avait offert sa fille, en lui promettant sa protection.

Paul, devenu sérieux, l'amena chez sa mère.

Elle dénigra les usages de Pont-l'Évêque, fit la princesse, blessa Félicité. Mme Aubain, à son départ, sentit un allégement.

La semaine suivante, on apprit la mort de M. Bourais, en basse Bretagne, dans une auberge. La rumeur d'un suicide se confirma ; des doutes s'élevèrent sur sa probité. Mme Aubain étudia ses comptes, et ne tarda pas à connaître la kyrielle de ses noirceurs : détournements d'arrérages, ventes de bois dissimulées, fausses quittances, *etc.* De plus, il avait un enfant naturel, et « des relations avec une personne de Dozulé ».

Ces turpitudes l'affligèrent beaucoup. Au mois de mars 1853, elle fut prise d'une douleur dans la poitrine ; sa langue paraissait couverte de fumée, les sangsues ne calmèrent pas l'oppression ; et le neuvième soir elle expira, ayant juste soixante-douze ans.

On la croyait moins vieille, à cause de ses cheveux bruns, dont les bandeaux entouraient sa figure blême, marquée de petite vérole. Peu d'amis la regrettèrent, ses façons étant d'une hauteur qui éloignait.

Félicité la pleura, comme on ne pleure pas les maîtres. Que Madame mourût avant elle, cela troublait ses idées, lui semblait contraire à l'ordre des choses, inadmissible et monstrueux.

Dix jours après (le temps d'accourir de Besançon), les héritiers survinrent. La bru fouilla les tiroirs, choisit des meubles, vendit les autres, puis ils regagnèrent l'enregistrement.

Le fauteuil de Madame, son guéridon, sa chaufferette, les huit chaises, étaient partis ! La place des gravures se dessinait en carrés jaunes au milieu des cloisons. Ils avaient emporté les deux couchettes, avec leurs matelas, et dans le placard on ne voyait plus rien de toutes les affaires de Virginie ! Félicité remonta les étages, ivre de tristesse.

Le lendemain il y avait sur la porte une affiche ; l'apothicaire lui cria dans l'oreille que la maison était à vendre.

Elle chancela, et fut obligée de s'asseoir. Ce qui la désolait principalement, c'était d'abandonner sa chambre, — si commode pour le pauvre Loulou. En l'enveloppant d'un regard d'angoisse, elle implorait le Saint-Esprit, et contracta l'habitude idolâtre de dire ses oraisons agenouillée devant le perroquet. Quelquefois, le soleil entrant par la lucarne frappait son oeil de verre, et en faisait jaillir un grand rayon lumineux qui la mettait en extase.

Elle avait une rente de trois cent quatre-vingts francs, léguée par sa maîtresse. Le jardin lui fournissait des légumes. Quant aux habits, elle possédait de quoi se vêtir jusqu’à la fin de ses jours, et épargnait l’éclairage en se couchant dès le crépuscule.

Elle ne sortait guère, afin d’éviter la boutique du brocanteur, où s’étalaient quelques-uns des anciens meubles. Depuis son étourdissement, elle traînait une jambe ; et, ses forces diminuant, la mère Simon, ruinée dans l’épicerie, venait tous les matins fendre son bois et pomper de l’eau.

Ses yeux s’affaiblirent. Les persiennes n’ouvraient plus. Bien des années se passèrent. Et la maison ne se louait pas, et ne se vendait pas.

Dans la crainte qu’on ne la renvoyât, Félicité ne demandait aucune réparation. Les lattes du toit pourrissaient ; pendant tout un hiver son traversin fut mouillé. Après Pâques, elle cracha du sang.

Alors la mère Simon eut recours à un docteur. Félicité voulut savoir ce qu’elle avait. Mais, trop sourde pour entendre, un seul mot lui parvint : « Pneumonie. » Il lui était connu, et elle répliqua doucement :

— « Ah ! comme Madame, » trouvant naturel de suivre sa maîtresse.

Le moment des reposoirs approchait.

Le premier était toujours au bas de la côte, le second devant la poste, le troisième vers le milieu de la rue. Il y eut des rivalités à propos de celui-là ; et les paroissiennes choisirent finalement la cour de Mme Aubain.

Les oppressions et la fièvre augmentaient. Félicité se chagrinait de ne rien faire pour le reposoir. Au moins, si elle avait pu y mettre quelque chose ! Alors elle songea au perroquet. Ce n’était pas convenable, objectèrent les voisines. Mais le curé accorda cette permission ; elle en fut tellement heureuse qu’elle le pria d’accepter, quand elle serait morte, Loulou, sa seule richesse.

Du mardi au samedi, veille de la Fête-Dieu, elle toussa plus fréquemment. Le soir son visage était grippé, ses lèvres se collaient à ses gencives, des vomissements parurent ; et le lendemain, au petit jour, se sentant très-bas, elle fit appeler un prêtre.

Trois bonnes femmes l’entouraient pendant l’extrême onction. Puis elle déclara qu’elle avait besoin de parler à Fabu.

Il arriva en toilette des dimanches, mal à son aise dans cette atmosphère lugubre.

— « Pardonnez-moi », dit-elle avec un effort pour étendre le bras, « je croyais que c’était vous qui l’aviez tué ! »

Que signifiaient des potins pareils ? L’avoir soupçonné d’un meurtre, un homme comme lui ! et il s’indignait, allait faire du tapage. — « Elle n’a plus sa tête, vous voyez bien ! »

Félicité de temps à autre parlait à des ombres. Les bonnes femmes s’éloignèrent. La Simonne déjeuna.

Un peu plus tard, elle prit Loulou, et, l’approchant de Félicité :

— « Allons ! dites-lui adieu ! »

Bien qu’il ne fût pas un cadavre, les vers le dévoraient ; une de ses ailes était cassée, l’étoupe lui sortait du ventre. Mais, aveugle à présent, elle le baisa au front, et le gardait contre sa joue. La Simonne le reprit, pour le mettre sur le reposoir.

V

Les herbages envoyaient l’odeur de l’été ; des mouches bourdonnaient ; le soleil faisait luire la rivière, chauffait les ardoises.

La mère Simon, revenue dans la chambre, s’endormait doucement.

Des coups de cloche la réveillèrent ; on sortait des vêpres. Le délire de Félicité tomba. En songeant à la procession, elle la voyait, comme si elle l’eût suivie.

Tous les enfants des écoles, les chantres et les pompiers marchaient sur les trottoirs, tandis qu’au milieu de la rue, s’avançaient premièrement : le suisse armé de sa hallebarde, le bedeau avec une grande croix, l’instituteur surveillant les gamins, la religieuse inquiète de ses petites filles ; trois des plus mignonnes, frisées comme des anges, jetaient dans l’air des pétales de roses ; le diacre, les bras écartés, modérait la musique ; et deux encenseurs se retournaient à chaque pas vers le Saint-Sacrement, que portait, sous un dais de velours ponceau tenu par quatre fabriciens, M. le curé, dans sa belle chasuble. Un flot de monde se poussait derrière, entre les nappes blanches couvrant le mur des maisons ; et l’on arriva au bas de la côte.

Une sueur froide mouillait les tempes de Félicité. La Simonne l’épongeait avec un linge, en se disant qu’un jour il lui faudrait passer par là.

Le murmure de la foule grossit, fut un moment très-fort, s’éloignait.

Une fusillade ébranla les carreaux. C’était les postillons saluant l’ostensoir. Félicité roula ses prunelles, et elle dit, le moins bas qu’elle put :

— « Est-il bien ? » tourmentée du perroquet.

Son agonie commença. Un râle, de plus en plus précipité, lui soulevait les côtes. Des bouillons d’écume venaient aux coins de sa bouche, et tout son corps tremblait.

Bientôt, on distingua le ronflement des ophicléides, les voix claires des enfants, la voix profonde des hommes. Tout se taisait par intervalles, et le battement des pas, que des fleurs amortissaient, faisait le bruit d’un troupeau sur du gazon.

Le clergé parut dans la cour. La Simonne grimpa sur une chaise pour

Le clergé parut dans la cour. La Simonne grimpa sur une chaise pour atteindre à l’oeil-de-boeuf, et de cette manière dominait le reposoir.

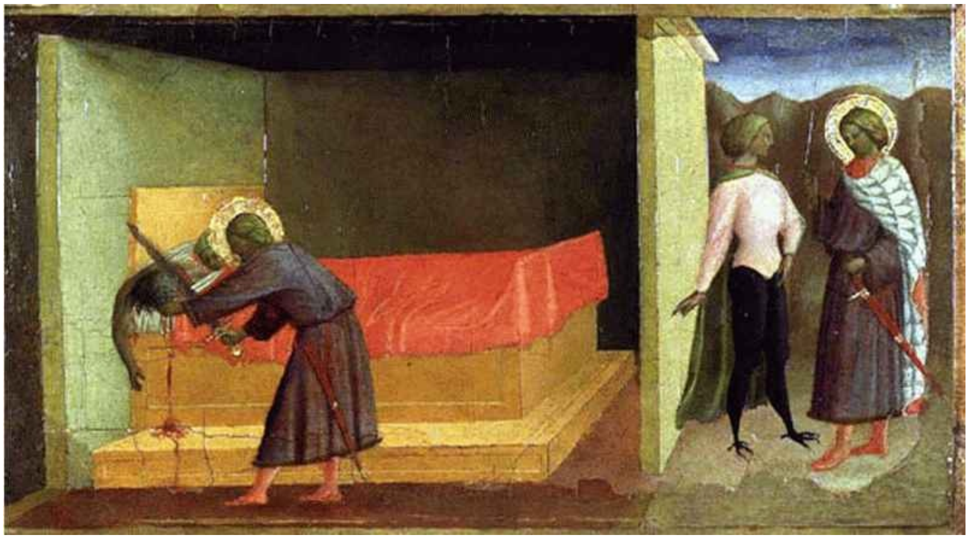
Des guirlandes vertes pendaient sur l’autel, orné d’un falbala en point d’Angleterre, Il y avait au milieu un petit cadre enfermant des reliques, deux orangers dans les angles, et, tout le long, des flambeaux d’argent et des vases en porcelaine, d’où s’élançaient des tournesols, des lis, des pivoines, des digitales, des touffes d’hortensias. Ce monceau de couleurs éclatantes descendait obliquement, du premier étage jusqu’au tapis se prolongeant sur les pavés ; et des choses rares tiraient les yeux. Un sucrier de vermeil avait une couronne de violettes, des pendeloques en pierres d’Alençon brillaient sur de la mousse, deux écrans chinois montraient leurs paysages. Loulou, caché sous des roses, ne laissait voir que son front bleu, pareil à une plaque de lapis.

Les fabriciens, les chantres, les enfants se rangèrent sur les trois côtés de la cour. Le prêtre gravit lentement les marches, et posa sur la dentelle son grand soleil d’or qui rayonnait. Tous s’agenouillèrent. Il se fit un grand silence. Et les encensoirs, allant à pleine volée, glissaient sur leurs chaînettes.

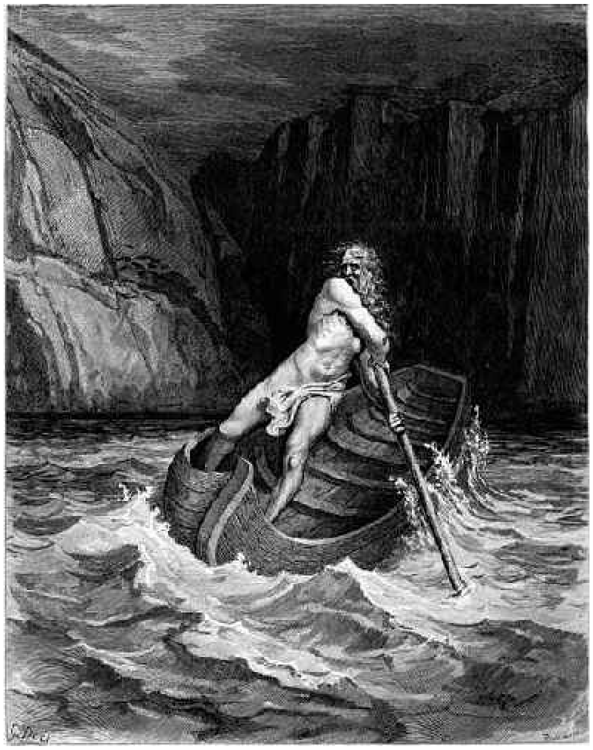
Une vapeur d’azur monta dans la chambre de Félicité. Elle avança les narines, en la humant avec une sensualité mystique ; puis ferma les paupières. Ses lèvres souriaient. Les mouvements de son coeur se ralentirent un peu, plus vagues chaque fois, plus doux, comme une fontaine s’épuise, comme un écho disparaît ; et, quand elle exhala son dernier souffle, elle crut voir, dans les cieux entr’ouverts, un perroquet gigantesque, planant au-dessus de sa tête.

LA LEGENDE DE SAINT-JULIEN L’HOSPITALIER

Julien est le fils d’un petit seigneur local. À sa naissance, deux messagers surnaturels rendent visite indépendamment à ses géniteurs pour leur annoncer que leur fils est promis à un destin extraordinaire de conquérant et de saint. L’un et l’autre, enthousiasmés par la divination, se taisent cependant et se dévouent entièrement à l’éducation et la liberté de leur fils. Julien grandit au milieu de la nature et se découvre un goût enivrant pour la chasse. Ne pouvant plus contrôler son appétit de prédateur, il réalise de véritables tueries dans les forêts environnantes, décimant tout animal qui passe à sa portée sans le moindre discernement ou la moindre pitié. Alors qu’il massacre un cerf, sa biche, et leur faon, il se trouve soudainement défait de ses armes. Le cerf blessé se tourne face à lui pour l’encorner mais s’arrête mystérieusement et lui lance une malédiction : “Maudit ! maudit ! maudit ! un jour, cœur féroce, tu assassineras ton père et ta mère.”



Julien L'Hospitalier tuant ses parents, Masolino de Panicale, XVème siècle



Julien traversant le Styx, illustration de Gustave Doré

LA LÉGENDE DE SAINT JULIEN L'HOSPITALIER

I

Le père et la mère de Julien habitaient un château, au milieu des bois, sur la pente d'une colline.

Les quatre tours aux angles avaient des toits pointus recouverts d'écailles de plomb, et la base des murs s'appuyait sur les quartiers de rocs, qui dévalaient abruptement jusqu'au fond des douves.

Les pavés de la cour étaient nets comme le dallage d'une église. De longues gouttières, figurant des dragons la gueule en bas, crachaient l'eau des pluies vers la citerne ; et sur le bord des fenêtres, à tous les étages, dans un pot d'argile peinte, un basilic ou un héliotrope s'épanouissait.

Une seconde enceinte, faite de pieux, comprenait d'abord un verger d'arbres à fruits, ensuite un parterre où des combinaisons de fleurs dessinaient des chiffres, puis une treille avec des berceaux pour prendre le frais, et un jeu de mail qui servait au divertissement des pages. De l'autre côté se trouvaient le chenil, les écuries, la boulangerie, le pressoir et les granges. Un pâturage de gazon vert se développait tout autour, enclos lui-même d'une forte haie d'épines.

On vivait en paix depuis si longtemps que la herse ne s'abaissait plus ; les fossés étaient pleins d'eau ; des hirondelles faisaient leur nid dans la fente des créneaux ; et l'archer qui tout le long du jour se promenait sur la courtine, dès que le soleil brillait trop fort rentrait dans l'échauguette, et s'endormait comme un moine.

A l'intérieur, les ferrures partout reluisaient ; des tapisseries dans les chambres protégeaient du froid ; et les armoires regorgeaient de linge, les tonnes de vin s'empilaient dans les celliers, les coffres de chêne craquaient sous le poids des sacs d'argent.

On voyait dans la salle d'armes, entre des étendards et des mufles de bêtes fauves, des armes de tous les temps et de toutes les nations, depuis les frondes des Amalécites et les javelots des Garamantes jusqu'aux braquemarts des Sarrasins et aux cottes de mailles des Normands.

La maîtresse broche de la cuisine pouvait faire tourner un boeuf ; la chapelle était somptueuse comme l'oratoire d'un roi. Il y avait même, dans un endroit écarté, une étuve à la romaine ; mais le bon seigneur s'en privait, estimant que c'est un usage des idolâtres.

Toujours enveloppé d'une pelisse de renard, il se promenait dans sa maison

Toujours enveloppé d’une pelisse de renard, il se promenait dans sa maison, rendait la justice à ses vassaux, apaisait les querelles de ses voisins. Pendant l’hiver, il regardait les flocons de neige tomber, ou se faisait lire des histoires. Dès les premiers beaux jours, il s’en allait sur sa mule le long des petits chemins, au bord des blés qui verdoyaient, et causait avec les manants, auxquels il donnait des conseils. Après beaucoup d’aventures, il avait pris pour femme une demoiselle de haut lignage.

Elle était très-blanche, un peu fière et sérieuse. Les cornes de son hennin frôlaient le linteau des portes ; la queue de sa robe de drap traînait de trois pas derrière elle. Son domestique était réglé comme l’intérieur d’un monastère ; chaque matin elle distribuait la besogne à ses servantes, surveillait les confitures et les onguents, filait à la quenouille ou brodait des nappes d’autel. A force de prier Dieu, il lui vint un fils.

Alors il y eut de grandes réjouissances, et un repas qui dura trois jours et quatre nuits, dans l’illumination des flambeaux, au son des harpes, sur des jonchées de feuillages. On y mangea les plus rares épices, avec des poules grosses comme des moutons ; par divertissement, un nain sortit d’un pâté ; et, les écuelles ne suffisant plus, car la foule augmentait toujours, on fut obligé de boire dans les oliphants et dans les casques.

La nouvelle accouchée n’assista pas à ces fêtes. Elle se tenait dans son lit, tranquillement. Un soir, elle se réveilla, et elle aperçut, sous un rayon de la lune qui entrait par la fenêtre, comme une ombre mouvante. C’était un vieillard en froc de bure, avec un chapelet au côté, une besace sur l’épaule, toute l’apparence d’un ermite. Il s’approcha de son chevet et lui dit, sans desserrer les lèvres :

— « Réjouis-toi, ô mère ! ton fils sera un saint ! »

Elle allait crier ; mais, glissant sur le rais de la lune, il s’éleva dans l’air doucement, puis disparut. Les chants du banquet éclatèrent plus fort. Elle entendit les voix des anges ; et sa tête retomba sur l’oreiller, que dominait un os de martyr dans un cadre d’escarboucles.

Le lendemain, tous les serviteurs interrogés déclarèrent qu’ils n’avaient pas vu d’ermite. Songe ou réalité, cela devait être une communication du ciel ; mais elle eut soin de n’en rien dire, ayant peur qu’on ne l’accusât d’orgueil.

Les convives s’en allèrent au petit jour ; et le père de Julien se trouvait en dehors de la poterne, où il venait de reconduire le dernier, quand tout à coup un mendiant se dressa devant lui, dans le brouillard. C’était un Bohême à barbe tressée, avec des anneaux d’argent aux deux bras et les prunelles flamboyantes. Il bégaya d’un air inspiré ces mots sans suite :

— « Ah ! ah ! ton fils !... beaucoup de sang !... beaucoup de gloire !... toujours heureux ! la famille d’un empereur. »

Et se baissant pour ramasser son aumône il se perdit dans l’herbe

Et, se baissant pour ramasser son aumône, il se perdit dans l'herbe, s'évanouit.

Le bon châtelain regarda de droite et de gauche, appela tant qu'il put. Personne ! Le vent sifflait, les brumes du matin s'envolaient.

Il attribua cette vision à la fatigue de sa tête pour avoir trop peu dormi. « Si j'en parle, on se moquera de moi, » se dit-il. Cependant les splendeurs destinées à son fils l'éblouissaient, bien que la promesse n'en fût pas claire et qu'il doutât même de l'avoir entendue.

Les époux se cachèrent leur secret. Mais tous deux chérissaient l'enfant d'un pareil amour ; et, le respectant comme marqué de Dieu, ils eurent pour sa personne des égards infinis. Sa couchette était rembourrée du plus fin duvet ; une lampe en forme de colombe brûlait dessus, continuellement ; trois nourrices le berçaient ; et, bien serré dans ses langes, la mine rose et les yeux bleus, avec son manteau de brocart et son béguin chargé de perles, il ressemblait à un petit Jésus. Les dents lui poussèrent sans qu'il pleurât une seule fois.

Quand il eut sept ans, sa mère lui apprit à chanter. Pour le rendre courageux, son père le hissa sur un gros cheval. L'enfant souriait d'aise, et ne tarda pas à savoir tout ce qui concerne les destriers.

Un vieux moine très-savant lui enseigna l'Écriture sainte, la numération des Arabes, les lettres latines, et à faire sur le vélin des peintures mignonnes. Ils travaillaient ensemble, tout en haut d'une tourelle, à l'écart du bruit.

La leçon terminée, ils descendaient dans le jardin, où, se promenant pas à pas, ils étudiaient les fleurs.

Quelquefois on apercevait, cheminant au fond de la vallée, une file de bêtes de somme, conduites par un piéton, accoutré à l'orientale. Le châtelain, qui l'avait reconnu pour un marchand, expédiait vers lui un valet. L'étranger, prenant confiance, se détournait de sa route ; et, introduit dans le parloir, il retirait de ses coffres des pièces de velours et de soie, des orfèvreries, des aromates, des choses singulières d'un usage inconnu ; à la fin le bonhomme s'en allait, avec un gros profit, sans avoir enduré aucune violence. D'autres fois, une troupe de pèlerins frappait à la porte. Leurs habits mouillés fumaient devant l'âtre ; et, quand ils étaient repus, ils racontaient leurs voyages : les erreurs des nefs sur la mer écumeuse, les marches à pied dans les sables brûlants, la férocité des païens, les cavernes de la Syrie, la Crèche et le Sépulcre. Puis ils donnaient au jeune seigneur des coquilles de leur manteau.

Souvent le châtelain festoyait ses vieux compagnons d'armes. Tout en buvant, ils se rappelaient leurs guerres, les assauts des forteresses avec le battement des machines et les prodigieuses blessures. Julien, qui les écoutait, en poussait des cris ; alors son père ne doutait pas qu'il ne fût plus tard un conquérant. Mais le soir, au sortir de l’angélus, quand il passait entre les pauvres inclinés, il puisait dans son escarcelle avec tant de modestie et d’un air si noble, que sa mère comptait bien le voir par la suite archevêque.

Sa place dans la chapelle était aux côtés de ses parents ; et, si longs que fussent les offices, il restait à genoux sur son prie-Dieu, la toque par terre et les mains jointes.

Un jour, pendant la messe, il aperçut, en relevant la tête, une petite souris blanche qui sortait d’un trou, dans la muraille. Elle trottina sur la première marche de l’autel, et, après deux ou trois tours de droite et de gauche, s’enfuit du même côté. Le dimanche suivant, l’idée qu’il pourrait la revoir le troubla. Elle revint ; et, chaque dimanche il l’attendait, en était importuné, fut pris de haine contre elle, et résolut de s’en défaire.

Ayant donc fermé la porte, et semé sur les marches les miettes d’un gâteau, il se posta devant le trou, une baguette à la main.

Au bout de très-longtemps un museau rose parut, puis la souris tout entière. Il frappa un coup léger, et demeura stupéfait devant ce petit corps qui ne bougeait plus. Une goutte de sang tachait la dalle. Il l’essuya bien vite avec sa manche, jeta la souris dehors, et n’en dit rien à personne.

Toutes sortes d’oisillons picoraient les graines du jardin. Il imagina de mettre des pois dans un roseau creux. Quand il entendait gazouiller dans un arbre, il en approchait avec douceur, puis levait son tube, enflait ses joues ; et les bestioles lui pleuvaient sur les épaules si abondamment qu’il ne pouvait s’empêcher de rire, heureux de sa malice.

Un matin, comme il s’en retournait par la courtine, il vit sur la crête du rempart un gros pigeon qui se rengorgeait au soleil. Julien s’arrêta pour le regarder ; le mur en cet endroit ayant une brèche, un éclat de pierre se rencontra sous ses doigts. Il tourna son bras, et la pierre abattit l’oiseau qui tomba d’un bloc dans le fossé.

Il se précipita vers le fond, se déchirant aux broussailles, furetant partout, plus leste qu’un jeune chien.

Le pigeon, les ailes cassées, palpitait, suspendu dans les branches d’un troëne.

La persistance de sa vie irrita l’enfant. Il se mit à l’étrangler ; et les convulsions de l’oiseau faisaient battre son coeur, l’emplissaient d’une volupté sauvage et tumultueuse. Au dernier roidissement, il se sentit défaillir.

Le soir, pendant le souper, son père déclara que l’on devait à son âge apprendre la vénerie ; et il alla chercher un vieux cahier d’écriture contenant, par demandes et réponses, tout le déduit des chasses. Un maître y démontrait à son élève l’art de dresser les chiens et d’affaiter les faucons, de tendre les pièges, comment reconnaître le cerf à ses fumées, le renard à ses empreintes, le loup à ses déchaussures, le bon moyen de discerner leurs voies, de quelle manière on les lance, où se trouvent ordinairement leurs refuges, quels sont les vents les plus propices, avec l’énumération des cris et les règles de la curée.

Quand Julien put réciter par coeur toutes ces choses, son père lui composa une meute.

D’abord on y distinguait vingt-quatre lévriers barbaresques, plus véloces que des gazelles, mais sujets à s’emporter ; puis dix-sept couples de chiens bretons, tachetés de blanc sur fond rouge, inébranlables dans leur créance, forts de poitrine et grands hurleurs. Pour l’attaque du sanglier et les refuites périlleuses, il y avait quarante griffons, poilus comme des ours. Des mâtins de Tartarie, presque aussi hauts que des ânes, couleur de feu, l’échine large et le jarret droit, étaient destinés à poursuivre les aurochs. La robe noire des épagneuls luisait comme du satin ; le jappement des talbots valait celui des bigles chanteurs. Dans une cour à part, grondaient, en secouant leur chaîne et roulant leurs prunelles, huit dogues alains, bêtes formidables qui sautent au ventre des cavaliers et n’ont pas peur des lions.

Tous mangeaient du pain de froment, buvaient dans des auges de pierre, et portaient un nom sonore.

La fauconnerie, peut-être, dépassait la meute ; le bon seigneur, à force d’argent, s’était procuré des tiercelets du Caucase, des sacres de Babylone, des gerfauts d’Allemagne, et des faucons-pèlerins, capturés sur les falaises, au bord des mers froides, en de lointains pays. Ils logeaient dans un hangar couvert de chaume, et, attachés par rang de taille sur le perchoir, avaient devant eux une motte de gazon, où de temps à autre on les posait afin de les dégourdir.

Des bourses, des hameçons, des chausse-trapes, toute sorte d’engins, furent confectionnés.

Souvent on menait dans la campagne des chiens d’oysel, qui tombaient bien vite en arrêt. Alors des piqueurs, s’avançant pas à pas, étendaient avec précaution sur leurs corps impassibles un immense filet. Un commandement les faisait aboyer ; des cailles s’envolaient ; et les dames des alentours conviées avec leurs maris, les enfants, les camérières, tout le monde se jetait dessus, et les prenait facilement.

D’autres fois, pour débûcher les lièvres, on battait du tambour ; des renards tombaient dans des fosses, ou bien un ressort, se débandant, attrapait un loup par le pied.

Mais Julien méprisa ces commodes artifices ; il préférait chasser loin du monde, avec son cheval et son faucon. C’était presque toujours un grand tartaret de Scythie, blanc comme la neige. Son capuchon de cuir était surmonté d’un panache, des grelots d’or tremblaient à ses pieds bleus ; et il se tenait ferme sur le bras de son maître pendant que le cheval galopait, et que les plaines se déroulaient. Julien, dénouant ses longes, le lâchait tout à coup ; la bête hardie montait droit dans l'air comme une flèche ; et l'on voyait deux taches inégales tourner, se joindre, puis disparaître dans les hauteurs de l'azur. Le faucon ne tardait pas à descendre en déchirant quelque oiseau, et revenait se poser sur le gantelet, les deux ailes frémissantes.

Julien vola de cette manière le héron, le milan, la corneille et le vautour.

Il aimait, en sonnant de la trompe, à suivre ses chiens qui couraient sur le versant des collines, sautaient les ruisseaux, remontaient vers le bois ; et, quand le cerf commençait à gémir sous les morsures, il l'abattait prestement, puis se délectait à la furie des mâtins qui le dévoraient, coupé en pièces sur sa peau fumante.

Les jours de brume, il s'enfonçait dans un marais pour guetter les oies, les loutres et les halbrans.

Trois écuyers, dès l'aube, l'attendaient au bas du perron ; et le vieux moine, se penchant à sa lucarne, avait beau faire des signes pour le rappeler, Julien ne se retournait pas. Il allait à l'ardeur du soleil, sous la pluie, par la tempête, buvait l'eau des sources dans sa main, mangeait en trottant des pommes sauvages, s'il était fatigué se reposait sous un chêne ; et il rentrait au milieu de la nuit, couvert de sang et de boue, avec des épines dans les cheveux et sentant l'odeur des bêtes farouches. Il devint comme elles. Quand sa mère l'embrassait, il acceptait froidement son étreinte, paraissant rêver à des choses profondes.

Il tua des ours à coups de couteau, des taureaux avec la hache, des sangliers avec l'épieu ; et même une fois, n'ayant plus qu'un bâton, se défendit contre des loups qui rongeaient des cadavres au pied d'un gibet.

Un matin d'hiver, il partit avant le jour, bien équipé, une arbalète sur l'épaule et un trousseau de flèches à l'arçon de la selle.

Son genet danois, suivi de deux bassets, en marchant d'un pas égal faisait résonner la terre. Des gouttes de verglas se collaient à son manteau, une brise violente soufflait. Un côté de l'horizon s'éclaircit ; et, dans la blancheur du crépuscule, il aperçut des lapins sautillant au bord de leurs terriers. Les deux bassets, tout de suite, se précipitèrent sur eux ; et, çà et là, vivement, leurs cassaient l'échine.

Bientôt, il entra dans un bois. Au bout d'une branche, un coq de bruyère engourdi par le froid dormait la tête sous l'aile. Julien, d'un revers d'épée, lui faucha les deux pattes, et sans le ramasser continua sa route.

Trois heures après, il se trouva sur la pointe d'une montagne tellement haute que le ciel semblait presque noir. Devant lui, un rocher pareil à un long mur s'abaissait, en surplombant un précipice ; et, à l'extrémité, deux boucs sauvages regardaient l’abîme. Comme il n’avait pas ses flèches (car son cheval était resté en arrière), il imagina de descendre jusqu’à eux ; à demi courbé, pieds nus, il arriva enfin au premier des boucs, et lui enfonça un poignard sous les côtes. Le second, pris de terreur, sauta dans le vide. Julien s’élança pour le frapper, et, glissant du pied droit, tomba sur le cadavre de l’autre, la face au-dessus de l’abîme et les deux bras écartés.

Redescendu dans la plaine, il suivit des saules qui bordaient une rivière. Des grues, volant très-bas, de temps à autre passaient au-dessus de sa tête. Julien les assommait avec son fouet, et n’en manqua pas une.

Cependant l’air plus tiède avait fondu le givre, de larges vapeurs flottaient, et le soleil se montra. Il vit reluire tout au loin un lac figé, qui ressemblait à du plomb. Au milieu du lac, il y avait une bête que Julien ne connaissait pas, un castor à museau noir. Malgré la distance, une flèche l’abattit ; et il fut chagrin de ne pouvoir emporter la peau.

Puis il s’avança dans une avenue de grands arbres, formant avec leurs cimes comme un arc de triomphe, à l’entrée d’une forêt. Un chevreuil bondit hors d’un fourré, un daim parut dans un carrefour, un blaireau sortit d’un trou, un paon sur le gazon déploya sa queue ; — et quand il les eut tous occis, d’autres chevreuils se présentèrent, d’autres daims, d’autres blaireaux, d’autres paons, et des merles, des geais, des putois, des renards, des hérissons, des lynx, une infinité de bêtes, à chaque pas plus nombreuses. Elles tournaient autour de lui, tremblantes, avec un regard plein de douceur et de supplication. Mais Julien ne se fatiguait pas de tuer, tour à tour bandant son arbalète, dégainant l’épée, pointant du coutelas, et ne pensait à rien, n’avait souvenir de quoi que ce fût. Il était en chasse dans un pays quelconque, depuis un temps indéterminé, par le fait seul de sa propre existence, tout s’accomplissant avec la facilité que l’on éprouve dans les rêves. Un spectacle extraordinaire l’arrêta. Des cerfs emplissaient un vallon ayant la forme d’un cirque ; et tassés, les uns près des autres, ils se réchauffaient avec leurs haleines que l’on voyait fumer dans le brouillard.

L’espoir d’un pareil carnage, pendant quelques minutes, le suffoqua de plaisir. Puis il descendit de cheval, retroussa ses manches, et se mit à tirer.

Au sifflement de la première flèche, tous les cerfs à la fois tournèrent la tête. Il se fit des enfonçures dans leur masse ; des voix plaintives s’élevaient, et un grand mouvement agita le troupeau.

Le rebord du vallon était trop haut pour le franchir. Ils bondissaient dans l’enceinte, cherchant à s’échapper. Julien visait, tirait ; et les flèches tombaient comme les rayons d’une pluie d’orage. Les cerfs rendus furieux se battirent, se cabraient, montaient les uns par-dessus les autres ; et leurs corps avec leurs ramures emmêlées faisaient un large monticule, qui s’écroulait, en se déplaçant.

Enfin ils moururent, couchés sur le sable, la bave aux naseaux, les entrailles sorties, et l’ondulation de leurs ventres s’abaissant par degrés. Puis tout fut immobile.

La nuit allait venir ; et derrière le bois, dans les intervalles des branches, le ciel était rouge comme une nappe de sang.

Julien s’adossa contre un arbre. Il contemplait d’un oeil béant l’énormité du massacre, ne comprenant pas comment il avait pu le faire.

De l’autre côté du vallon, sur le bord de la forêt, il aperçut un cerf, une biche et son faon.

Le cerf, qui était noir et monstrueux de taille, portait seize andouillers avec une barbe blanche. La biche, blonde comme les feuilles mortes, broutait le gazon ; et le faon tacheté, sans l’interrompre dans sa marche, lui tétait la mamelle.

L’arbalète encore une fois ronfla. Le faon, tout de suite, fut tué. Alors sa mère, en regardant le ciel, brama d’une voix profonde, déchirante, humaine. Julien exaspéré, d’un coup en plein poitrail, l’étendit par terre.

Le grand cerf l’avait vu, fit un bond. Julien lui envoya sa dernière flèche. Elle l’atteignit au front, et y resta plantée.

Le grand cerf n’eut pas l’air de la sentir ; en enjambant par-dessus les morts, il avançait toujours, allait fondre sur lui, l’éventrer ; et Julien reculait dans une épouvante indicible. Le prodigieux animal s’arrêta ; et les yeux flamboyants, solennel comme un patriarche et comme un justicier, pendant qu’une cloche au loin tintait, il répéta trois fois :

— « Maudit ! maudit ! maudit ! Un jour, coeur féroce, tu assassineras ton père et ta mère ! »

Il plia les genoux, ferma doucement ses paupières, et mourut.

Julien fut stupéfait, puis accablé d’une fatigue soudaine ; et un dégoût, une tristesse immense l’envahit. Le front dans les deux mains, il pleura pendant longtemps.

Son cheval était perdu ; ses chiens l’avaient abandonné ; la solitude qui l’enveloppait lui sembla toute menaçante de périls indéfinis. Alors, poussé par un effroi, il prit sa course à travers la campagne, choisit au hasard un sentier, et se trouva presque immédiatement à la porte du château.

La nuit, il ne dormit pas. Sous le vacillement de la lampe suspendue, il revoyait toujours le grand cerf noir. Sa prédiction l’obsédait ; il se débattait contre elle. « Non ! non ! non ! je ne peux pas les tuer ! » puis, il songeait : « Si je le voulais, pourtant ?... » et il avait peur que le Diable ne lui en inspirât l’envie.

Durant trois mois, sa mère en angoisse pria au chevet de son lit, et son père, en gémissant, marchait continuellement dans les couloirs. Il manda les maîtres mires les plus fameux, lesquels ordonnèrent des quantités de drogues. Le mal de Julien, disaient-ils, avait pour cause un vent funeste, ou un désir d'amour. Mais le jeune homme, à toutes les questions, secouait la tête.

Les forces lui revinrent ; et on le promenait dans la cour, le vieux moine et le bon seigneur le soutenant chacun par un bras.

Quand il fut rétabli complètement, il s'obstina à ne point chasser.

Son père, le voulant réjouir, lui fit cadeau d'une grande épée sarrasine.

Elle était au haut d'un pilier, dans une panoplie. Pour l'atteindre, il fallut une échelle. Julien y monta. L'épée trop lourde lui échappa des doigts, et en tombant frôla le bon seigneur de si près que sa houppelande en fut coupée ; Julien crut avoir tué son père, et s'évanouit.

Dès lors, il redouta les armes. L'aspect d'un fer nu le faisait pâlir. Cette faiblesse était une désolation pour sa famille.

Enfin le vieux moine, au nom de Dieu, de l'honneur et des ancêtres, lui commanda de reprendre ses exercices de gentilhomme.

Les écuyers, tous les jours, s'amusaient au maniement de la javeline. Julien y excella bien vite. Il envoyait la sienne dans le goulot des bouteilles, cassait les dents des girouettes, frappait à cent pas les clous des portes.

Un soir d'été, à l'heure où la brume rend les choses indistinctes, étant sous la treille du jardin, il aperçut tout au fond deux ailes blanches qui voletaient à la hauteur de l'espalier. Il ne douta pas que ce ne fût une cigogne ; et il lança son javelot.

Un cri déchirant partit.

C'était sa mère, dont le bonnet à longues barbes restait cloué contre le mur.

Julien s'enfuit du château, et ne reparut plus.

II

Il s'engagea dans une troupe d'aventuriers qui passaient.

Il connut la faim, la soif, les fièvres et la vermine. Il s'accoutuma au fracas des mêlées, à l'aspect des moribonds. Le vent tanna sa peau. Ses membres se durcirent par le contact des armures ; et comme il était très-fort, courageux, tempérant, avisé, il obtint sans peine le commandement d'une compagnie.

Au début des batailles, il enlevait ses soldats d'un grand geste de son épée. Avec une corde à noeuds, il grimpait aux murs des citadelles, la nuit, balancé par l'ouragan, pendant que les flammèches du feu grégeois se collaient à sa cuirasse, et que la résine bouillante et le plomb fondu ruisselaient des créneaux. Souvent le heurt d'une pierre fracassa son bouclier. Des ponts trop chargés d'hommes croulèrent sous lui. En tournant sa masse d'armes, il se débarrassa de quatorze cavaliers. Il défit, en champ clos, tous ceux qui se proposèrent. Plus de vingt fois, on le crut mort.

Grâce à la faveur divine, il en réchappa toujours ; car il protégeait les gens d'église, les orphelins, les veuves, et principalement les vieillards. Quand il en voyait un marchant devant lui, il criait pour connaître sa figure, comme s'il avait eu peur de le tuer par méprise.

Des esclaves en fuite, des manants révoltés, des bâtards sans fortune, toutes sortes d'intrépides affluèrent sous son drapeau, et il se composa une armée.

Elle grossit. Il devint fameux. On le recherchait.

Tour à tour, il secourut le Dauphin de France et le roi d'Angleterre, les templiers de Jérusalem, le suréna des Parthes, le négud d'Abyssinie, et l'empereur de Calicut. Il combattit des Scandinaves recouverts d'écailles de poisson, des Nègres munis de rondaches en cuir d'hippopotame et montés sur des ânes rouges, des Indiens couleur d'or et brandissant par-dessus leurs diadèmes de larges sabres, plus clairs que des miroirs. Il vainquit les Troglodytes et les Anthropophages. Il traversa des régions si torrides que sous l'ardeur du soleil les chevelures s'allumaient d'elles-mêmes, comme des flambeaux ; et d'autres qui étaient si glaciales, que les bras, se détachant du corps, tombaient par terre ; et des pays où il y avait tant de brouillards que l'on marchait environné de fantômes.

Des républiques en embarras le consultèrent. Aux entrevues d'ambassadeurs, il obtenait des conditions inespérées. Si un monarque se conduisait trop mal, il arrivait tout à coup, et lui faisait des remontrances. Il affranchit des peuples. Il délivra des reines enfermées dans des tours. C'est lui, et pas un autre, qui assomma la guivre de Milan et le dragon d'Oberbirbach.

Or l'empereur d'Occitanie, ayant triomphé des Musulmans espagnols, s'était joint par concubinage à la soeur du calife de Cordoue ; et il en conservait une fille, qu'il avait élevée chrétiennement. Mais le calife, faisant mine de vouloir se convertir, vint lui rendre visite, accompagné d'une escorte nombreuse, massacra toute sa garnison, et le plongea dans un cul de basse-fosse, où il le traitait durement, afin d'en extirper des trésors.

Julien accourut à son aide, détruisit l'armée des infidèles, assiégea la ville, tua le calife, coupa sa tête, et la jeta comme une boule par-dessus les remparts. Puis il tira l'empereur de sa prison, et le fit remonter sur son trône, en présence de toute sa cour.

L'empereur, pour prix d'un tel service, lui présenta dans des corbeilles beaucoup d'argent ; Julien n'en voulut pas. Croyant qu'il en désirait davantage, il lui offrit les trois quarts de ses richesses ; nouveau refus ; puis de partager son royaume ; Julien le remercia ; et l’empereur en pleurait de dépit, ne sachant de quelle manière témoigner sa reconnaissance, quand il se frappa le front, dit un mot à l’oreille d’un courtisan ; les rideaux d’une tapisserie se relevèrent, et une jeune fille parut.

Ses grands yeux noirs brillaient comme deux lampes très-douces. Un sourire charmant écartait ses lèvres. Les anneaux de sa chevelure s’accrochaient aux pierreries de sa robe entr’ouverte ; et, sous la transparence de sa tunique, on devinait la jeunesse de son corps. Elle était toute mignonne et potelée, avec la taille fine.

Julien fut ébloui d’amour, d’autant plus qu’il avait mené jusqu’alors une vie très-chaste.

Donc il reçut en mariage la fille de l’empereur, avec un château qu’elle tenait de sa mère ; et, les noces étant terminées, on se quitta, après des politesses infinies de part et d’autre.

C’était un palais de marbre blanc, bâti à la moresque, sur un promontoire, dans un bois d’orangers. Des terrasses de fleurs descendaient jusqu’au bord d’un golfe, où des coquilles roses craquaient sous les pas. Derrière le château, s’étendait une forêt ayant le dessin d’un éventail. Le ciel continuellement était bleu, et les arbres se penchaient tour à tour sous la brise de la mer et le vent des montagnes, qui fermaient au loin l’horizon.

Les chambres, pleines de crépuscule, se trouvaient éclairées par les incrustations des murailles. De hautes colonnettes, minces comme des roseaux, supportaient la voûte des coupoles, décorées de reliefs imitant les stalactites des grottes.

Il y avait des jets d’eau dans les salles, des mosaïques dans les cours, des cloisons festonnées, mille délicatesses d’architecture, et partout un tel silence que l’on entendait le frôlement d’une écharpe ou l’écho d’un soupir.

Julien ne faisait plus la guerre. Il se reposait, entouré d’un peuple tranquille ; et chaque jour, une foule passait devant lui, avec des génuflexions et des baise-mains à l’orientale.

Vêtu de pourpre, il restait accoudé dans l’embrasure d’une fenêtre, en se rappelant ses chasses d’autrefois ; et il aurait voulu courir sur le désert après les gazelles et les autruches, être caché dans les bambous à l’affût des léopards, traverser des forêts pleines de rhinocéros, atteindre au sommet des monts les plus inaccessibles pour viser mieux les aigles, et sur les glaçons de la mer combattre les ours blancs.

Quelquefois, dans un rêve, il se voyait comme notre père Adam au milieu du Paradis, entre toutes les bêtes ; en allongeant le bras, il les faisait mourir ; ou bien, elles défilaient, deux à deux, par rang de taille, depuis les éléphants et les lions jusqu’aux hermines et aux canards, comme le jour qu’elles entrèrent dans l’arche de Noé. A l’ombre d’une caverne, il dardait sur elles des javelots infaillibles ; il en survenait d’autres ; cela n’en finissait pas ; et il se réveillait en roulant des yeux farouches.

Des princes de ses amis l’invitèrent à chasser. Il s’y refusa toujours, croyant, par cette sorte de pénitence, détourner son malheur ; car il lui semblait que du meurtre des animaux dépendait le sort de ses parents. Mais il souffrait de ne pas les voir, et son autre envie devenait insupportable.

Sa femme, pour le récréer, fit venir des jongleurs et des danseuses.

Elle se promenait avec lui, en litière ouverte, dans la campagne ; d’autres fois, étendus sur le bord d’une chaloupe, ils regardaient les poissons vagabonder dans l’eau, claire comme le ciel. Souvent elle lui jetait des fleurs au visage ; accroupie devant ses pieds, elle tirait des airs d’une mandoline à trois cordes ; puis, lui posant sur l’épaule ses deux mains jointes, disait d’une voix timide : — « Qu’avez-vous donc, cher seigneur ? »

Il ne répondait pas, ou éclatait en sanglots ; enfin, un jour, il avoua son horrible pensée.

Elle la combattit, en raisonnant très-bien : son père et sa mère, probablement, étaient morts ; si jamais il les revoyait, par quel hasard, dans quel but, arriverait-il à cette abomination ? Donc, sa crainte n’avait pas de cause, et il devait se remettre à chasser.

Julien souriait en l’écoutant, mais ne se décidait pas à satisfaire son désir.

Un soir du mois d’août qu’ils étaient dans leur chambre, elle venait de se coucher et il s’agenouillait pour sa prière quand il entendit le jappement d’un renard, puis des pas légers sous la fenêtre ; et il entrevit dans l’ombre comme des apparences d’animaux. La tentation était trop forte. Il décrocha son carquois.

Elle parut surprise.

— « C’est pour t’obéir ! » dit-il, « au lever du soleil, je serai revenu. »

Cependant elle redoutait une aventure funeste.

Il la rassura, puis sortit, étonné de l’inconséquence de son humeur.

Peu de temps après, un page vint annoncer que deux inconnus, à défaut du seigneur absent, réclamaient tout de suite la seigneuresse.

Et bientôt entrèrent dans la chambre un vieil homme et une vieille femme, courbés, poudreux, en habits de toile, et s’appuyant chacun sur un bâton.

Ils s’enhardirent et déclarèrent qu’ils apportaient à Julien des nouvelles de ses parents.

Elle se pencha pour les entendre.

Mais, s’étant concertés du regard, ils lui demandèrent s’il les aimait toujours, s’il parlait d’eux quelquefois.

— « Oh ! oui ! » dit-elle.

Alors, ils s’écrièrent :

— « Eh bien ! c’est nous ! » et ils s’assirent, étant fort las et recrus de fatigue.

Rien n’assurait à la jeune femme que son époux fût leur fils.

Ils en donnèrent la preuve, en décrivant des signes particuliers qu’il avait sur la peau.

Elle sauta hors sa couche, appela son page, et on leur servit un repas.

Bien qu’ils eussent grand’faim, ils ne pouvaient guère manger ; et elle observait à l’écart le tremblement de leurs mains osseuses, en prenant les gobelets.

Ils firent mille questions sur Julien. Elle répondait a chacune, mais eut soin de taire l’idée funèbre qui les concernait.

Ne le voyant pas revenir, ils étaient partis de leur château ; et ils marchaient depuis plusieurs années, sur de vagues indications, sans perdre l’espoir. Il avait fallu tant d’argent au péage des fleuves et dans les hôtelleries, pour les droits des princes et les exigences des voleurs, que le fond de leur bourse était vide, et qu’ils mendiaient maintenant. Qu’importe, puisque bientôt ils embrasseraient leur fils ? Ils exaltaient son bonheur d’avoir une femme aussi gentille, et ne se lassaient point de la contempler et de la baiser.

La richesse de l’appartement les étonnait beaucoup ; et le vieux, ayant examiné les murs, demanda pourquoi s’y trouvait le blason de l’empereur d’Occitanie.

Elle répliqua :

— « C’est mon père ! »

Alors il tressaillit, se rappelant la prédiction du Bohême ; et la vieille songeait à la parole de l’Ermite. Sans doute la gloire de son fils n’était que l’aurore des splendeurs éternelles ; et tous les deux restaient béants, sous la lumière du candélabre qui éclairait la table.

Ils avaient dû être très-beaux dans leur jeunesse. La mère avait encore tous ses cheveux, dont les bandeaux fins, pareils à des plaques de neige, pendaient jusqu’au bas de ses joues ; et le père, avec sa taille haute et sa grande barbe, ressemblait à une statue d’église.

La femme de Julien les engagea à ne pas l’attendre. Elle les coucha elle-même dans son lit, puis ferma la croisée ; ils s’endormirent. Le jour allait paraître, et, derrière le vitrail, les petits oiseaux commençaient à chanter.

Julien avait traversé le parc ; et il marchait dans la forêt d’un pas nerveux, jouissant de la mollesse du gazon et de la douceur de l’air.

Les ombres des arbres s’étendaient sur la mousse. Quelquefois la lune faisait des taches blanches dans les clairières, et il hésitait à s’avancer, croyant apercevoir une flaque d’eau, ou bien la surface des mares tranquilles se confondait avec la couleur de l’herbe. C’était partout un grand silence ; et il ne découvrait aucune des bêtes qui, peu de minutes auparavant, erraient à l’entour de son château.

Le bois s’épaissit, l’obscurité devint profonde. Des bouffées de vent chaud passaient, pleines de senteurs amollissantes. Il enfonçait dans des tas de feuilles mortes, et il s’appuya contre un chêne pour haleter un peu.

Tout à coup, derrière son dos, bondit une masse plus noire, un sanglier. Julien n’eut pas le temps de saisir son arc, et il s’en affligea comme d’un malheur.

Puis, étant sorti du bois, il aperçut un loup qui filait le long d’une haie.

Julien lui envoya une flèche. Le loup s’arrêta, tourna la tête pour le voir et reprit sa course. Il trottait en gardant toujours la même distance, s’arrêtait de temps à autre, et, sitôt qu’il était visé, recommençait à fuir.

Julien parcourut de cette manière une plaine interminable, puis des monticules de sable, et enfin il se trouva sur un plateau dominant un grand espace de pays. Des pierres plates étaient clair-semées entre des caveaux en ruines. On trébuchait sur des ossements de morts ; de place en place, des croix vermoulues se penchaient d’un air lamentable. Mais des formes remuèrent dans l’ombre indécise des tombeaux ; et il en surgit des hyènes, tout effarées, pantelantes. En faisant claquer leurs ongles sur les dalles, elles vinrent à lui et le flairaient avec un bâillement qui découvrait leurs gencives. Il dégaina son sabre. Elles partirent à la fois dans toutes les directions, et, continuant leur galop boiteux et précipité, se perdirent au loin sous un flot de poussière.

Une heure après, il rencontra dans un ravin un taureau furieux, les cornes en avant, et qui grattait le sable avec son pied. Julien lui pointa sa lance sous les fanons. Elle éclata, comme si l’animal eût été de bronze ; il ferma les yeux, attendant sa mort. Quand il les rouvrit, le taureau avait disparu.

Alors son âme s’affaissa de honte. Un pouvoir supérieur détruisait sa force ; et, pour s’en retourner chez lui, il rentra dans la forêt.

Elle était embarrassée de lianes ; et il les coupait avec son sabre quand une fouine glissa brusquement entre ses jambes, une panthère fit un bond par-dessus son épaule, un serpent monta en spirale autour d’un frêne.

Il y avait dans son feuillage un choucas monstrueux, qui regardait Julien ; et, çà et là, parurent entre les branches quantité de larges étincelles, comme si le firmament eût fait pleuvoir dans la forêt toutes ses étoiles. C’étaient des yeux d’animaux, des chats sauvages, des écureuils, des hiboux, des perroquets, des singes.

Julien darda contre eux ses flèches ; les flèches, avec leurs plumes, se posaient sur les feuilles comme des papillons blancs. Il leur jeta des pierres ; les pierres, sans rien toucher, retombaient. Il se maudit, aurait voulu se battre, hurla des imprécations, étouffait de rage.

Et tous les animaux qu'il avait poursuivis se représentèrent, faisant autour de lui un cercle étroit. Les uns étaient assis sur leur croupe, les autres dressés de toute leur taille. Il restait au milieu, glacé de terreur, incapable du moindre mouvement. Par un effort suprême de sa volonté, il fit un pas ; ceux qui perchaient sur les arbres ouvrirent leurs ailes, ceux qui foulaient le sol déplacèrent leurs membres ; et tous l'accompagnaient.

Les hyènes marchaient devant lui, le loup et le sanglier par derrière. Le taureau, à sa droite, balançait la tête ; et, à sa gauche, le serpent ondulait dans les herbes, tandis que la panthère, bombant son dos, avançait à pas de velours et à grandes enjambées. Il allait le plus lentement possible pour ne pas les irriter ; et il voyait sortir de la profondeur des buissons des porcs-épics, des renards, des vipères, des chacals et des ours.

Julien se mit à courir ; ils coururent. Le serpent sifflait, les bêtes puantes bavaient. Le sanglier lui frottait les talons avec ses défenses, le loup l'intérieur des mains avec les poils de son museau. Les singes le pinçaient en grimaçant, la fouine se roulait sur ses pieds. Un ours, d'un revers de patte, lui enleva son chapeau ; et la panthère, dédaigneusement, laissa tomber une flèche qu'elle portait à sa gueule.

Une ironie perçait dans leurs allures sournoises. Tout en l'observant du coin de leurs prunelles, ils semblaient méditer un plan de vengeance ; et, assourdi par le bourdonnement des insectes, battu par des queues d'oiseau, suffoqué par des haleines, il marchait les bras tendus et les paupières closes comme un aveugle, sans même avoir la force de crier « grâce ! »

Le chant d'un coq vibra dans l'air. D'autres y répondirent ; c'était le jour ; et il reconnut, au-delà des orangers, le faîte de son palais.

Puis, au bord d'un champ, il vit, à trois pas d'intervalle, des perdrix rouges qui voletaient dans les chaumes. Il dégrafa son manteau, et l'abattit sur elles comme un filet. Quand il les eut découvertes, il n'en trouva qu'une seule, et morte depuis longtemps, pourrie.

Cette déception l'exaspéra plus que toutes les autres. Sa soif de carnage le reprenait ; les bêtes manquant, il aurait voulu massacrer des hommes.

Il gravit les trois terrasses, enfonça la porte d'un coup de poing ; mais, au bas de l'escalier, le souvenir de sa chère femme détendit son coeur. Elle dormait sans doute, et il allait la surprendre.

Ayant retiré ses sandales, il tourna doucement la serrure, et entra.

Les vitraux garnis de plomb obscurcissaient la pâleur de l'aube. Julien se prit les pieds dans des vêtements, par terre ; un peu plus loin, il heurta une crédence encore chargée de vaisselle. « Sans doute, elle aura mangé, » se dit-il ; et il avançait vers le lit, perdu dans les ténèbres au fond de la chambre. Quand il fut au bord, afin d'embrasser sa femme, il se pencha sur l'oreiller où les deux têtes reposaient l'une près de l'autre. Alors, il sentit contre sa bouche l'impression d'une barbe.

Il se recula, croyant devenir fou ; mais il revint près du lit, et ses doigts, en palpant, rencontrèrent des cheveux qui étaient très-longs. Pour se convaincre de son erreur, il repassa lentement sa main sur l'oreiller. C'était bien une barbe, cette fois, et un homme ! un homme couché avec sa femme !

Éclatant d'une colère démesurée, il bondit sur eux à coups de poignard ; et il trépignait, écumait, avec des hurlements de bête fauve. Puis il s'arrêta. Les morts, percés au coeur, n'avaient pas même bougé. Il écoutait attentivement leurs deux râles presque égaux, et, à mesure qu'ils s'affaiblissaient, un autre, tout au loin, les continuait. Incertaine d'abord, cette voix plaintive longuement poussée, se rapprochait, s'enfla, devint cruelle ; et il reconnut, terrifié, le bramement du grand cerf noir.

Et comme il se retournait, il crut voir dans l'encadrure de la porte, le fantôme de sa femme, une lumière à la main.

Le tapage du meurtre l'avait attirée. D'un large coup d'oeil, elle comprit tout, et s'enfuyant d'horreur laissa tomber son flambeau.

Il le ramassa.

Son père et sa mère étaient devant lui, étendus sur le dos avec un trou dans la poitrine ; et leurs visages, d'une majestueuse douceur, avaient l'air de garder comme un secret éternel. Des éclaboussures et des flaques de sang s'étalaient au milieu de leur peau blanche, sur les draps du lit, par terre, le long d'un christ d'ivoire suspendu dans l'alcôve. Le reflet écarlate du vitrail, alors frappé par le soleil, éclairait ces taches rouges, et en jetait de plus nombreuses dans tout l'appartement. Julien marcha vers les deux morts en se disant, en voulant croire, que cela n'était pas possible, qu'il s'était trompé, qu'il y a parfois des ressemblances inexplicables. Enfin, il se baissa légèrement pour voir de tout près le vieillard ; et il aperçut, entre ses paupières mal fermées, une prunelle éteinte qui le brûla comme du feu. Puis il se porta de l'autre côté de la couche, occupé par l'autre corps, dont les cheveux blancs masquaient une partie de la figure. Julien lui passa les doigts sous ses bandeaux, leva sa tête ; — et il la regardait, en la tenant au bout de son bras roidi, pendant que de l'autre main il s'éclairait avec le flambeau. Des gouttes, suintant du matelas, tombaient une à une sur le plancher.

A la fin du jour, il se présenta devant sa femme ; et, d'une voix différente de la sienne, il lui commanda premièrement de ne pas lui répondre, de ne pas l’approcher, de ne plus même le regarder, et qu’elle eût à suivre, sous peine de damnation, tous ses ordres qui étaient irrévocables.

Les funérailles seraient faites selon les instructions qu’il avait laissées par écrit, sur un prie-Dieu, dans la chambre des morts. Il lui abandonnait son palais, ses vassaux, tous ses biens, sans même retenir les vêtements de son corps, et ses sandales, que l’on trouverait au haut de l’escalier.

Elle avait obéi à la volonté de Dieu, en occasionnant son crime, et devait prier pour son âme, puisque désormais il n’existait plus.

On enterra les morts avec magnificence, dans l’église d’un monastère à trois journées du château. Un moine en cagoule rabattue suivit le cortège, loin de tous les autres, sans que personne osât lui parler.

Il resta pendant la messe, à plat ventre au milieu du portail, les bras en croix, et le front dans la poussière.

Après l’ensevelissement, on le vit prendre le chemin qui menait aux montagnes. Il se retourna plusieurs fois, et finit par disparaître.

III

Il s’en alla, mendiant sa vie par le monde.

Il tendait sa main aux cavaliers sur les routes, avec des génuflexions s’approchait des moissonneurs, ou restait immobile devant la barrière des cours ; et son visage était si triste que jamais on ne lui refusait l’aumône.

Par esprit d’humilité, il racontait son histoire ; alors tous s’enfuyaient, en faisant des signes de croix. Dans les villages où il avait déjà passé, sitôt qu’il était reconnu, on fermait les portes, on lui criait des menaces, on lui jetait des pierres. Les plus charitables posaient une écuelle sur le bord de leur fenêtre, puis fermaient l’auvent pour ne pas l’apercevoir.

Repoussé de partout, il évita les hommes ; et il se nourrit de racines, de plantes, de fruits perdus, et de coquillages qu’il cherchait le long des grèves.

Quelquefois, au tournant d’une côte, il voyait sous ses yeux une confusion de toits pressés, avec des flèches de pierre, des ponts, des tours, des rues noires s’entre-croisant, et d’où montait jusqu’à lui un bourdonnement continuel.

Le besoin de se mêler à l’existence des autres le faisait descendre dans la ville. Mais l’air bestial des figures, le tapage des métiers, l’indifférence des propos glaçaient son coeur. Les jours de fête, quand le bourdon des cathédrales mettait en joie dès l’aurore le peuple entier, il regardait les habitants sortir de leurs maisons, puis les danses sur les places, les fontaines de cervoise dans les carrefours, les tentures de damas devant le logis des princes, et le soir venu, par le vitrage des rez-de-chaussée, les longues tables de famille où des aïeux tenaient des petits enfants sur leurs genoux ; des sanglots l’étouffaient, et il s’en retournait vers la campagne.

Il contemplait avec des élancements d’amour les poulains dans les herbages, les oiseaux dans leurs nids, les insectes sur les fleurs ; tous, à son approche, couraient plus loin, se cachaient effarés, s’envolaient bien vite.

Il rechercha les solitudes. Mais le vent apportait à son oreille comme des râles d’agonie ; les larmes de la rosée tombant par terre lui rappelaient d’autres gouttes d’un poids plus lourd. Le soleil, tous les soirs, étalait du sang dans les nuages ; et chaque nuit, en rêve, son parricide recommençait.

Il se fit un cilice avec des pointes de fer. Il monta sur les deux genoux toutes les collines ayant une chapelle à leur sommet. Mais l’impitoyable pensée obscurcissait la splendeur des tabernacles, le torturait à travers les macérations de la pénitence.

Il ne se révoltait pas contre Dieu qui lui avait infligé cette action, et pourtant se désespérait de l’avoir pu commettre.

Sa propre personne lui faisait tellement horreur qu’espérant s’en délivrer il l’aventura dans des périls. Il sauva des paralytiques des incendies, des enfants du fond des gouffres. L’abîme le rejetait, les flammes l’épargnaient.

Le temps n’apaisa pas sa souffrance. Elle devenait intolérable. Il résolut de mourir.

Et un jour qu’il se trouvait au bord d’une fontaine, comme il se penchait dessus pour juger de la profondeur de l’eau, il vit paraître en face de lui un vieillard tout décharné, à barbe blanche et d’un aspect si lamentable qu’il lui fut impossible de retenir ses pleurs. L’autre, aussi, pleurait. Sans reconnaître son image, Julien se rappelait confusément une figure ressemblant à celle-là. Il poussa un cri ; c’était son père ; et il ne pensa plus à se tuer.

Ainsi, portant le poids de son souvenir, il parcourut beaucoup de pays ; et il arriva près d’un fleuve dont la traversée était dangereuse, à cause de sa violence et parce qu’il y avait sur les rives une grande étendue de vase. Personne depuis longtemps n’osait plus le passer.

Une vieille barque, enfouie à l’arrière, dressait sa proue dans les roseaux. Julien en l’examinant découvrit une paire d’avirons ; et l’idée lui vint d’employer son existence au service des autres.

Il commença par établir sur la berge une manière de chaussée qui permettrait de descendre jusqu’au chenal ; et il se brisait les ongles à remuer les pierres énormes, les appuyait contre son ventre pour les transporter, glissait dans la vase, y enfonçait, manqua périr plusieurs fois.

Ensuite, il répara le bateau avec des épaves de navires, et il se fit une cahute avec de la terre glaise et des troncs d’arbres.

Le passage étant connu, les voyageurs se présentèrent. Ils l’appelaient de l’autre bord, en agitant des drapeaux ; Julien bien vite sautait dans sa barque. Elle était très-lourde ; et on la surchargeait par toutes sortes de bagages et de fardeaux, sans compter les bêtes de somme, qui, ruant de peur, augmentaient l’encombrement. Il ne demandait rien pour sa peine ; quelques-uns lui donnaient des restes de victuailles qu’ils tiraient de leur bissac ou les habits trop usés dont ils ne voulaient plus. Des brutaux vociféraient des blasphèmes. Julien les reprenait avec douceur ; et ils ripostaient par des injures. Il se contentait de les bénir.

Une petite table, un escabeau, un lit de feuilles mortes et trois coupes d’argile, voilà tout ce qu’était son mobilier. Deux trous dans la muraille servaient de fenêtres. D’un côté, s’étendaient à perte de vue des plaines stériles ayant sur leur surface de pâles étangs, çà et là ; et le grand fleuve, devant lui, roulait ses flots verdâtres. Au printemps, la terre humide avait une odeur de pourriture. Puis, un vent désordonné soulevait la poussière en tourbillons. Elle entrait partout, embourbait l’eau, craquait sous les gencives. Un peu plus tard, c’était des nuages de moustiques, dont la susurration et les piqûres ne s’arrêtaient ni jour ni nuit. Ensuite, survenaient d’atroces gelées qui donnaient aux choses la rigidité de la pierre, et inspiraient un besoin fou de manger de la viande.

Des mois s’écoulaient sans que Julien vît personne. Souvent il fermait les yeux, tâchant, par la mémoire, de revenir dans sa jeunesse ; — et la cour d’un château apparaissait, avec des lévriers sur un perron, des valets dans la salle d’armes, et, sous un berceau de pampres, un adolescent à cheveux blonds entre un vieillard couvert de fourrures et une dame à grand hennin ; tout à coup, les deux cadavres étaient là. Il se jetait à plat ventre sur son lit, et répétait en pleurant :

— « Ah ! pauvre père ! pauvre mère ! pauvre mère ! » Et tombait dans un assoupissement où les visions funèbres continuaient.

Une nuit qu’il dormait, il crut entendre quelqu’un l’appeler. Il tendit l’oreille et ne distingua que le mugissement des flots.

Mais la même voix reprit :

— « Julien ! »

Elle venait de l’autre bord, ce qui lui parut extraordinaire, vu la largeur du fleuve.

Une troisième fois on appela :

— « Julien ! »

Et cette voix haute avait l’intonation d’une cloche d’église.

Ayant allumé sa lanterne, il sortit de la cahute. Un ouragan furieux emplissait la nuit. Les ténèbres étaient profondes, et çà et là déchirées par la blancheur des vagues qui bondissaient.

Après une minute d'hésitation, Julien dénoua l'amarre. L'eau, tout de suite, devint tranquille, la barque glissa dessus et toucha l'autre berge, où un homme attendait.

Il était enveloppé d'une toile en lambeaux, la figure pareille à un masque de plâtre et les deux yeux plus rouges que des charbons. En approchant de lui la lanterne, Julien s'aperçut qu'une lèpre hideuse le recouvrait ; cependant, il avait dans son attitude comme une majesté de roi.

Dès qu'il entra dans la barque, elle enfonça prodigieusement, écrasée par son poids ; une secousse la remonta ; et Julien se mit à ramer.

A chaque coup d'aviron, le ressac des flots la soulevait par l'avant. L'eau, plus noire que de l'encre, courait avec furie des deux côtés du bordage. Elle creusait des abîmes, elle faisait des montagnes, et la chaloupe sautait dessus, puis redescendait dans des profondeurs où elle tournoyait, ballottée par le vent.

Julien penchait son corps, dépliait les bras, et, s'arc-boutant des pieds, se renversait avec une torsion de la taille, pour avoir plus de force. La grêle cinglait ses mains, la pluie coulait dans son dos, la violence de l'air l'étouffait, il s'arrêta. Alors le bateau fut emporté à la dérive. Mais, comprenant qu'il s'agissait d'une chose considérable, d'un ordre auquel il ne fallait pas désobéir, il reprit ses avirons ; et le claquement des tolets coupait la clameur de la tempête.

La petite lanterne brûlait devant lui. Des oiseaux, en voletant, la cachaient par intervalles. Mais toujours il apercevait les prunelles du Lépreux qui se tenait debout à l'arrière, immobile comme une colonne.

Et cela dura longtemps, très-longtemps !

Quand ils furent arrivés dans la cahute, Julien ferma la porte ; et il le vit siégeant sur l'escabeau. L'espèce de linceul qui le recouvrait était tombé jusqu'à ses hanches ; et ses épaules, sa poitrine, ses bras maigres disparaissaient sous des plaques de pustules écailleuses. Des rides énormes labouraient son front. Tel qu'un squelette, il avait un trou à la place du nez ; et ses lèvres bleuâtres dégageaient une haleine épaisse comme un brouillard, et nauséabonde.

— « J'ai faim ! » dit-il.

Julien lui donna ce qu'il possédait, un vieux quartier de lard et les croûtes d'un pain noir.

Quand il les eut dévorés, la table, l'écuelle et le manche du couteau portaient les mêmes taches que l'on voyait sur son corps.

Ensuite, il dit : — « J'ai soif ! »

Julien alla chercher sa cruche ; et, comme il la prenait, il en sortit un arôme qui dilata son coeur et ses narines. C'était du vin ; quelle trouvaille ! mais le

Lépreux avança le bras, et d'un trait vida toute la cruche.

Puis il dit : — « J'ai froid ! »

Julien, avec sa chandelle, enflamma un paquet de fougères, au milieu de la cabane.

Le Lépreux vint s'y chauffer ; et, accroupi sur les talons, il tremblait de tous ses membres, s'affaiblissait ; ses yeux ne brillaient plus, ses ulcères coulaient, et d'une voix presque éteinte, il murmura :

— « Ton lit ! »

Julien l'aida doucement à s'y traîner, et même étendit sur lui, pour le couvrir, la toile de son bateau.

Le Lépreux gémissait. Les coins de sa bouche découvraient ses dents, un râle accéléré lui secouait la poitrine, et son ventre, à chacune de ses aspirations, se creusait jusqu'aux vertèbres.

Puis il ferma les paupières.

— « C'est comme de la glace dans mes os ! Viens près de moi ! »

Et Julien, écartant la toile, se coucha sur les feuilles mortes, près de lui, côte à côte.

Le Lépreux tourna la tête.

— « Déshabille-toi, pour que j'aie la chaleur de ton corps ! »

Julien ôta ses vêtements ; puis, nu comme au jour de sa naissance, se replaça dans le lit ; et il sentait contre sa cuisse la peau du Lépreux, plus froide qu'un serpent et rude comme une lime.

Il tâchait de l'encourager ; et l'autre répondait, en haletant :

— « Ah ! je vais mourir !... Rapproche-toi, réchauffe-moi ! Pas avec les mains ! non ! toute ta personne. »

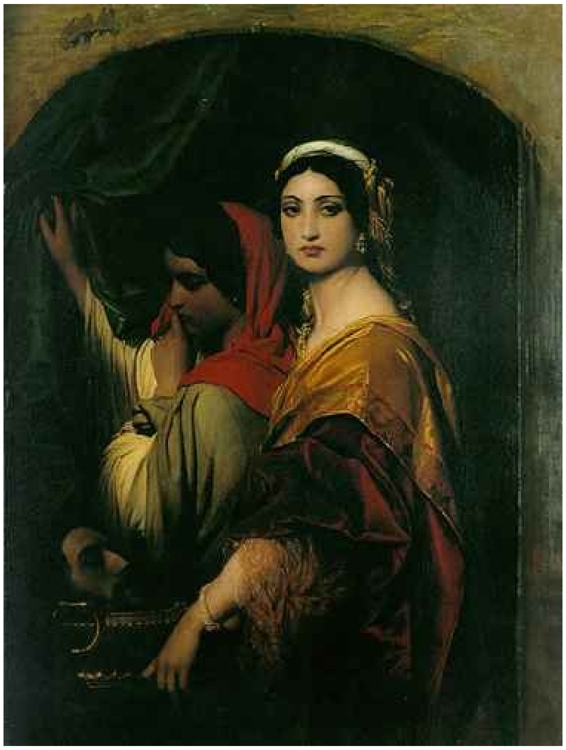
Julien s'étala dessus complètement, bouche contre bouche, poitrine sur poitrine.

Alors le Lépreux l'étreignit ; et ses yeux tout à coup prirent une clarté d'étoiles ; ses cheveux s'allongèrent comme les rais du soleil ; le souffle de ses narines avait la douceur des roses ; un nuage d'encens s'éleva du foyer, les flots chantaient. Cependant une abondance de délices, une joie surhumaine descendait comme une inondation dans l'âme de Julien pâmé ; et celui dont les bras le serraient toujours grandissait, grandissait, touchant de sa tête et de ses pieds les deux murs de la cabane. Le toit s'envola, le firmament se déployait ; — et Julien monta vers les espaces bleus, face à face avec Notre-Seigneur Jésus, qui l'emportait dans le ciel.

Et voilà l'histoire de saint Julien l'Hospitalier, telle à peu près qu'on la trouve, sur un vitrail d'église, dans mon pays.

HERODIAS

Dans sa citadelle de Machearous, au bord de la Mer Morte, Antipas retient prisonnier Iaokannan (Jean le Baptiste), qui condamne publiquement son union incestueuse avec Hérodias, sa nièce qui fut de plus précédemment la femme de son frère qu’elle a quitté. Celle-ci, qui n’était poussée que par l’intérêt, craint d’être répudiée.



Hérodias, Paul Delaroche, 1843

HÉRODIAS

I

La citadelle de Machaerous se dressait à l’orient de la mer Morte, sur un pic de basalte ayant la forme d’un cône. Quatre vallées profondes l’entouraient, deux vers les flancs, une en face, la quatrième au delà. Des maisons se tassaient contre sa base, dans le cercle d’un mur qui ondulait suivant les inégalités du terrain ; et, par un chemin en zigzag tailladant le rocher, la ville se reliait à la forteresse, dont les murailles étaient hautes de cent vingt coudées, avec des angles nombreux, des créneaux sur le bord, et, çà et là, des tours qui faisaient comme des fleurons à cette couronne de pierres, suspendue au-dessus de l’abîme.

Il y avait dans l’intérieur un palais orné de portiques, et couvert d’une terrasse que fermait une balustrade en bois de sycomore, où des mâts étaient disposés pour tendre un vélarium.

Un matin, avant le jour, le Tétrarque Hérode-Antipas vint s’y accouder, et regarda.

Les montagnes, immédiatement sous lui, commençaient à découvrir leurs crêtes, pendant que leur masse, jusqu’au fond des abîmes, était encore dans l’ombre. Un brouillard flottait, il se déchira, et les contours de la mer Morte apparurent. L’aube, qui se levait derrière Machaerous, épandait une rougeur. Elle illumina bientôt les sables de la grève, les collines, le désert, et, plus loin, tous les monts de la Judée, inclinant leurs surfaces raboteuses et grises, Engeddi, au milieu, traçait une barre noire ; Hébron, dans l’enfoncement, s’arrondissait en dôme ; Esquol avait des grenadiers, Sorek des vignes, karmel des champs de sésame ; et la tour Antonia, de son cube monstrueux, dominait Jérusalem. Le Tétrarque en détourna la vue pour contempler, à droite, les palmiers de Jéricho ; et il songea aux autres villes de sa Galilée : Capharnaüm, Endor, Nazareth, Tibérias où peut-être il ne reviendrait plus. Cependant le Jourdain coulait sur la plaine aride. Toute blanche, elle éblouissait comme une nappe de neige. Le lac, maintenant, semblait en lapis-lazuli ; et à sa pointe méridionale, du côté de l’Yémen, Antipas reconnut ce qu’il craignait d’apercevoir. Des tentes brunes étaient dispersées ; des hommes avec des lances circulaient entre les chevaux, et des feux s’éteignant brillaient comme des étincelles à ras du sol.

C’étaient les troupes du roi des Arabes, dont il avait répudié la fille pour prendre Hérodias, mariée à l’un de ses frères, qui vivait en Italie, sans prendre Hérodias, mariée à l’un de ses frères, qui vivait en Italie, sans prétentions au pouvoir.

Antipas attendait les secours des Romains ; et Vitellius, gouverneur de la Syrie, tardant à paraître, il se rongeait d’inquiétudes.

Agrippa, sans doute, l’avait ruiné chez l’Empereur ? Philippe, son troisième frère, souverain de la Batanée, s’armait clandestinement. Les Juifs ne voulaient plus de ses moeurs idolâtres, tous les autres de sa domination ; si bien qu’il hésitait entre deux projets : adoucir les Arabes ou conclure une alliance avec les Parthes ; et, sous le prétexte de fêter son anniversaire, il avait convié, pour ce jour même, à un grand festin, les chefs de ses troupes, les régisseurs de ses campagnes et les principaux de la Galilée.

Il fouilla d’un regard aigu toutes les routes. Elles étaient vides. Des aigles volaient au-dessus de sa tête ; les soldats, le long du rempart, donnaient contre les murs ; rien ne bougeait dans le château.

Tout à coup, une voix lointaine, comme échappée des profondeurs de la terre, fit pâlir le Tétrarque. Il se pencha pour écouter ; elle avait disparu. Elle reprit ; et en claquant dans ses mains, il cria — « Mannaëi ! Mannaëi ! »

Un homme se présenta, nu jusqu’à la ceinture, comme les masseurs des bains. Il était très-grand, vieux, décharné, et portait sur la cuisse un coutelas dans une gaine de bronze. Sa chevelure, relevée par un peigne, exagérait la longueur de son front. Une somnolence décolorait ses yeux, mais ses dents brillaient, et ses orteils posaient légèrement sur les dalles, tout son corps ayant la souplesse d’un singe, et sa figure l’impassibilité d’une momie.

— « Où est-il ? » demanda le Tétrarque.

Mannaëi répondit, en indiquant avec son pouce un objet derrière eux :

— « Là ! toujours ! »

— « J’avais cru l’entendre ! »

Et Antipas, quand il eut respiré largement, s’informa de Iaokanann, le même que les Latins appellent saint Jean-Baptiste. Avait-on revu ces deux hommes, admis par indulgence, l’autre mois, dans son cachot, et savait-on, depuis lors, ce qu’ils étaient venus faire ?

Mannaëi répliqua :

— « Ils ont échangé avec lui des paroles mystérieuses, comme les voleurs, le soir, aux carrefours des routes. Ensuite ils sont partis vers la Haute Galilée, en annonçant qu’ils apporteraient une grande nouvelle. »

Antipas baissa la tête, puis d’un air d’épouvante :

« Garde-le ! garde-le ! Et ne laisse entrer personne ! Ferme bien la porte ! Couvre la fosse ! On ne doit pas même soupçonner qu’il vit ! »

Sans avoir reçu ces ordres, Mannaëi les accomplissait ; car Iaokanann était

Juif, et il exécrait les Juifs comme tous les Samaritains.

Leur temple de Garizim, désigné par Moïse pour être le centre d'Israël, n'existait plus depuis le roi Hyrcan ; et celui de Jérusalem les mettait dans la fureur d'un outrage, et d'une injustice permanente. Mannaëi s'y était introduit, afin d'en souiller l'autel avec des os de morts. Ses compagnons, moins rapides, avaient été décapités.

Il l'aperçut dans l'écartement de deux collines. Le soleil faisait resplendir ses murailles de marbre blanc et les lames d'or de sa toiture. C'était comme une montagne lumineuse, quelque chose de surhumain, écrasant tout de son opulence et de son orgueil.

Alors il étendit les bras du côté de Sion ; et, la taille droite, le visage en arrière, les poings fermés, lui jeta un anathème, croyant que les mots avaient un pouvoir effectif.

Antipas écoutait, sans paraître scandalisé.

Le Samaritain dit encore :

— « Par moments il s'agite, il voudrait fuir, il espère une délivrance. D'autres fois, il a l'air tranquille d'une bête malade ; ou bien je le vois qui marche dans les ténèbres, en répétant : « Qu'importe ? Pour qu'il grandisse, il faut que je diminue ! » Antipas et Mannaëi se regardèrent. Mais le Tétrarque était las de réfléchir.

Tous ces monts autour de lui, comme des étages de grands flots pétrifiés, les gouffres noirs sur le flanc des falaises, l'immensité du ciel bleu, l'éclat violent du jour, la profondeur des abîmes le troublaient ; et une désolation l'envahissait au spectacle du désert, qui figure, dans le bouleversement de ses terrains, des amphithéâtres et des palais abattus. Le vent chaud apportait, avec l'odeur du soufre, comme l'exhalaison des villes maudites, ensevelies plus bas que le rivage sous les eaux pesantes. Ces marques d'une colère immortelle effrayaient sa pensée ; et il restait les deux coudes sur la balustrade, les yeux fixes et les tempes dans les mains. Quelqu'un l'avait touché. Il se retourna. Hérodias était devant lui.

Une simarre de pourpre légère l'enveloppait jusqu'aux sandales. Sortie précipitamment de sa chambre, elle n'avait ni colliers ni pendants d'oreilles ; une tresse de ses cheveux noirs lui tombait sur un bras, et s'enfonçait, par le bout, dans l'intervalle de ses deux seins. Ses narines, trop remontées, palpitaient ; la joie d'un triomphe éclairait sa figure ; et, d'une voix forte, secouant le Tétrarque :

— « César nous aime ! Agrippa est en prison ! »

— « Qui te l'a dit ? »

— « Je le sais ! »

Elle ajouta :

— « C’est pour avoir souhaité l’empire à Caïus ! »

Tout en vivant de leurs aumônes, il avait brigué le titre de roi, qu’ils ambitionnaient comme lui. Mais dans l’avenir, plus de craintes ! — « Les cachots de Tibère s’ouvrent difficilement, et quelquefois l’existence n’y est pas sûre ! »

Antipas la comprit ; et, bien qu’elle fût la soeur d’Agrippa, son intention atroce lui sembla justifiée. Ces meurtres étaient une conséquence des choses, une fatalité des maisons royales. Dans celle d’Hérode, on ne les comptait plus.

Puis elle étala son entreprise : les clients achetés, les lettres découvertes, des espions à toutes les portes, et comment elle était parvenue à séduire Eutychès le dénonciateur. — « Rien ne me coûtait ! Pour toi, n’ai-je pas fait plus ?... J’ai abandonné ma fille ! »

Après son divorce, elle avait laissé dans Rome cette enfant, espérant bien en avoir d’autres du Tétrarque. Jamais elle n’en parlait. Il se demanda pourquoi son accès de tendresse.

On avait déplié le vélarium et apporté vivement de larges coussins auprès d’eux. Hérodias s’y affaissa, et pleurait, en tournant le dos. Puis elle se passa la main sur les paupières, dit qu’elle n’y voulait plus songer, qu’elle se trouvait heureuse ; et elle lui rappela leurs causeries là-bas, dans l’atrium, les rencontres aux étuves, leurs promenades le long de la voie Sacrée, et les soirs, dans les grandes villas, au murmure des jets d’eau, sous des arcs de fleurs, devant la campagne romaine. Elle le regardait comme autrefois, en se frôlant contre sa poitrine, avec des gestes câlins. — Il la repoussa. L’amour qu’elle tâchait de ranimer était si loin, maintenant ! Et tous ses malheurs en découlaient ; car, depuis douze ans bientôt, la guerre continuait. Elle avait vieilli le Tétrarque. Ses épaules se voûtaient dans une toge sombre, à bordure violette ; ses cheveux blancs se mêlaient à sa barbe, et le soleil, qui traversait la voile, baignait de lumière son front chagrin. Celui d’Hérodias également avait des plis ; et, l’un en face de l’autre, ils se considéraient d’une manière farouche.

Les chemins dans la montagne commencèrent à se peupler. Des pasteurs piquaient des boeufs, des enfants tiraient des ânes, des palefreniers conduisaient des chevaux. Ceux qui descendaient les hauteurs au-delà de Machaerous disparaissaient derrière le château ; d’autres montaient le ravin en face, et, parvenus à la ville, déchargeaient leurs bagages dans les cours. C’étaient les pourvoyeurs du Tétrarque, et des valets, précédant ses convives.

Mais au fond de la terrasse, à gauche, un Essénien parut, en robe blanche, nu-pieds, l’air stoïque. Mannaëi, du côté droit, se précipitait en levant son coutelas, Hérodias lui cria : — « Tue-le ! »

— « Arrête ! » dit le Tétrarque.

Il devint immobile ; l’autre aussi.

Puis ils se retirèrent, chacun par un escalier différent, à reculons, sans se perdre des yeux.

— « Je le connais ! » dit Hérodias, « il se nomme Phanuel, et cherche à voir Iaokanann, puisque tu as l’aveuglement de le conserver ! »

Antipas objecta qu’il pouvait un jour servir. Ses attaques contre Jérusalem gagnaient à eux le reste des Juifs.

— « Non ! » reprit-elle, « ils acceptent tous les maîtres, et ne sont pas capables de faire une patrie ! » Quant à celui qui remuait le peuple avec des espérances conservées depuis Néhémias, la meilleure politique était de le supprimer.

Rien ne pressait, selon le Tétrarque. Iaokanann dangereux ! Allons donc ! Il affectait d’en rire.

— « Tais-toi ! » Et elle redit son humiliation, un jour qu’elle allait vers Galaad, pour la récolte du baume. Des gens, au bord du fleuve, remettaient leurs habits. Sur un monticule, à côté, un homme parlait. Il avait une peau de chameau autour des reins, et sa tête ressemblait à celle d’un lion. Dès qu’il m’aperçut, il cracha sur moi toutes les malédictions des prophètes. Ses prunelles flamboyaient ; sa voix rugissait ; il levait les bras, comme pour arracher le tonnerre. Impossible de fuir ! les roues de mon char avaient du sable jusqu’aux essieux ; et je m’éloignais lentement, m’abritant sous mon manteau, glacée par ces injures qui tombaient comme une pluie d’orage. »

Iaokanann l’empêchait de vivre. Quand on l’avait pris et lié avec des cordes, les soldats devaient le poignarder s’il résistait ; il s’était montré doux. On avait mis des serpents dans sa prison ; ils étaient morts.

L’inanité de ces embûches exaspérait Hérodias. D’ailleurs, pourquoi sa guerre contre elle ? Quel intérêt le poussait ? Ses discours, criés à des foules, s’étaient répandus, circulaient ; elle les entendait partout, ils emplissaient l’air. Contre des légions elle aurait eu de la bravoure. Mais cette force plus pernicieuse que les glaives, et qu’on ne pouvait saisir, était stupéfiante ; et elle parcourait la terrasse, blêmie par sa colère, manquant de mots pour exprimer ce qui l’étouffait.

Elle songeait aussi que le Tétrarque, cédant à l’opinion, s’aviserait peut-être de la répudier. Alors tout serait perdu ! Depuis son enfance, elle nourrissait le rêve d’un grand empire. C’était pour y atteindre que, délaissant son premier époux, elle s’était jointe à celui-là, qui l’avait dupée, pensait-elle.

— « J’ai pris un bon soutien, en entrant dans ta famille ! »

— « Elle vaut la tienne ! » dit simplement le Tétrarque.

Hérodias sentit bouillonner dans ses veines le sang des prêtres et des rois ses aïeux.

— « Mais ton grand-père balayait le temple d’Ascalon ! Les autres étaient bergers, bandits, conducteurs de caravanes, une horde, tributaire de Juda depuis le roi David ! Tous mes ancêtres ont battu les tiens ! Le premier des Makkabi vous a chassés d’Hébron, Hyrcan forcés à vous circoncire ! » Et, exhalant le mépris de la patricienne pour le plébéien, la haine de Jacob contre Édom, elle lui reprocha son indifférence aux outrages, sa mollesse envers les Pharisiens qui le trahissaient, sa lâcheté pour le peuple qui la détestait. « Tu es comme lui, avoue-le ! et tu regrettes la fille arabe qui danse autour des pierres. Reprends-la ! Va-t’en vivre avec elle, dans sa maison de toile ! dévore son pain cuit sous la cendre ! avale le lait caillé de ses brebis ! baise ses joues bleues ! et oublie-moi ! »

Le Tétrarque n’écoutait plus. Il regardait la plate-forme d’une maison, où il y avait une jeune fille, et une vieille femme tenant un parasol à manche de roseau, long comme la ligne d’un pêcheur. Au milieu du tapis, un grand panier de voyage restait ouvert. Des ceintures, des voiles, des pendeloques d’orfèvrerie en débordaient confusément. La jeune fille, par intervalles, se penchait vers ces choses, et les secouait à l’air. Elle était vêtue comme les Romaines, d’une tunique calamistrée avec un péplum à glands d’émeraude ; et des lanières bleues enfermaient sa chevelure, trop lourde, sans doute, car, de temps à autre, elle y portait la main. L’ombre du parasol se promenait au-dessus d’elle, en la cachant à demi. Antipas aperçut deux ou trois fois son col délicat, l’angle d’un oeil, le coin d’une petite bouche. Mais il voyait, des hanches à la nuque, toute sa taille qui s’inclinait pour se redresser d’une manière élastique. Il épiait le retour de ce mouvement, et sa respiration devenait plus forte ; des flammes s’allumaient dans ses yeux. Hérodias l’observait.

Il demanda : « — Qui est-ce ? »

Elle répondit n’en rien savoir, et s’en alla soudainement apaisée.

Le Tétrarque était attendu sous les portiques par des Galiléens, le maître des écritures, le chef des pâturages, l’administrateur des salines et un Juif de Babylone, commandant ses cavaliers. Tous le saluèrent d’une acclamation. Puis, il disparut vers les chambres intérieures.

Phanuel surgit à l’angle d’un couloir.

— « Ah ! encore ? Tu viens pour Iaokanann, sans doute ?

— « Et pour toi ! j’ai à t’apprendre une chose considérable. »

Et, sans quitter Antipas, il pénétra, derrière lui, dans un appartement obscur.

Le jour tombait par un grillage, se développant tout du long sous la corniche. Les murailles étaient peintes d’une couleur grenat, presque noir. Dans le fond s’étalait un lit d’ébène, avec des sangles en peau de boeuf. Un bouclier d’or, au dessus, luisait comme un soleil.

Antipas traversa toute la salle, se coucha sur le lit.

Phanuel était debout. Il leva son bras, et dans une attitude inspirée :

— « Le Très-Haut envoie par moments un de ses fils. Iaokanann en est un. Si tu l'opprimes, tu seras châtié.

— « C'est lui qui me persécute ! » s'écria Antipas. « Il a voulu de moi une action impossible. Depuis ce temps-là, il me déchire. Et je n'étais pas dur, au commencement ! Il a même dépêché de Machaerous des hommes qui bouleversent mes provinces. Malheur à sa vie ! Puisqu'il m'attaque, je me défends !

— « Ses colères ont trop de violence, » répliqua Phanuel. « N'importe ! Il faut le délivrer. »

— « On ne relâche pas les bêtes furieuses ! » dit le Tétrarque.

L'Essénien répondit :

— « Ne t'inquiète plus ! Il ira chez les Arabes, les Gaulois, les Scythes. Son oeuvre doit s'étendre jusqu'au bout de la terre ! »

Antipas semblait perdu dans une vision.

— « Sa puissance est forte !... Malgré moi, je l'aime ! »

— « Alors, qu'il soit libre ? »

Le Tétrarque hocha la tête. Il craignait Hérodias, Mannaëi, et l'inconnu.

Phanuel tâcha de le persuader, en alléguant, pour garantie de ses projets, la soumission des Esséniens aux rois. On respectait ces hommes pauvres, indomptables par les supplices, vêtus de lin, et qui lisaient l'avenir dans les étoiles.

Antipas se rappela un mot de lui, tout à l'heure.

— « Quelle est cette chose, que tu m'annonçais comme importante ? »

Un nègre survint. Son corps était blanc de poussière. Il râlait et ne put que dire :

— « Vitellius ! »

— « Comment ? il arrive ? »

— « Je l'ai vu. Avant trois heures, il est ici ! »

Les portières des corridors furent agitées comme par le vent. Une rumeur emplit le château, un vacarme de gens qui couraient, de meubles qu'on traînait, d'argenteries s'écroulant ; et, du haut des tours, des buccins sonnaient, pour avertir les esclaves dispersés.

II

Les remparts étaient couverts de monde quand Vitellius entra dans la cour. Il s'appuyait sur le bras de son interprète, suivi d'une grande litière rouge ornée de panaches et de miroirs, ayant la toge, le laticlave, les brodequins d'un consul et des licteurs autour de sa personne.

Ils plantèrent contre la porte leurs douze faisceaux, des baguettes reliées par une courroie avec une hache dans le milieu. Alors, tous frémirent devant la majesté du peuple romain.

La litière, que huit hommes manoeuvraient, s'arrêta. Il en sortit un adolescent, le ventre gros, la face bourgeonnée, des perles le long des doigts. On lui offrit une coupe pleine de vin et d'aromates. Il la but, et en réclama une seconde.

Le Tétrarque était tombé aux genoux du Proconsul, chagrin, disait-il, de n'avoir pas connu plus tôt la faveur de sa présence. Autrement, il eût ordonné sur les routes tout ce qu'il fallait pour les Vitellius. Ils descendaient de la déesse Vitellia. Une voie, menant du Janicule à la mer, portait encore leur nom. Les questures, les consulats étaient innombrables dans la famille ; et quant à Lucius, maintenant son hôte, on devait le remercier comme vainqueur des Clites et père de ce jeune Aulus, qui semblait revenir dans son domaine, puisque l'Orient était la patrie des dieux. Ces hyperboles furent exprimées en latin. Vitellius les accepta impassiblement.

Il répondit que le grand Hérode suffisait à la gloire d'une nation. Les Athéniens lui avaient donné la surintendance des jeux Olympiques. Il avait bâti des temples en l'honneur d'Auguste, été patient, ingénieux, terrible, et fidèle toujours aux Césars.

Entre les colonnes à chapiteaux d'airain, on aperçut Hérodias qui s'avançait d'un air d'impératrice, au milieu de femmes et d'eunuques tenant sur des plateaux de vermeil des parfums allumés.

Le Proconsul fit trois pas à sa rencontre ; et, l'ayant saluée d'une inclinaison de tête :

— « Quel bonheur ! » s'écria-t-elle, que désormais Agrippa, l'ennemi de Tibère, fût dans l'impossibilité de nuire !

Il ignorait l'événement, elle lui parut dangereuse ; et comme Antipas jurait qu'il ferait tout pour l'Empereur, Vitellius ajouta : — « Même au détriment des autres ? »

Il avait tiré des otages du roi des Parthes, et l'Empereur n'y songeait plus ; car Antipas, présent à la conférence, pour se faire valoir, en avait tout de suite expédié la nouvelle. De là, une haine profonde, et les retards à fournir des secours.

Le Tétrarque balbutia. Mais Aulus dit en riant :

— « Calme-toi, je te protège ! »

Le Proconsul feignit de n'avoir pas entendu. La fortune du père dépendait de la souillure du fils ; et cette fleur des fanges de Caprée lui procurait des bénéfices tellement considérables, qu'il l'entourait d'égards, tout en se méfiant, parce qu'elle était vénéneuse.

Un tumulte s'éleva sous la porte. On introduisait une file de mules blanches, montées par des personnages en costume de prêtres. C'étaient des Sadducéens et des Pharisiens, que la même ambition poussait à Machaerous, les premiers voulant obtenir la sacrificature, et les autres la conserver. Leurs visages étaient sombres, ceux des Pharisiens surtout, ennemis de Rome et du Tétrarque. Les pans de leur tunique les embarrassaient dans la cohue ; et leur tiare chancelait à leur front par-dessus des bandelettes de parchemin, où des écritures étaient tracées.

Presque en même temps, arrivèrent des soldats de l'avant-garde. Ils avaient mis leurs boucliers dans des sacs, par précaution contre la poussière ; et derrière eux était Marcellus, lieutenant du Proconsul, avec des publicains, serrant sous leurs aisselles des tablettes de bois.

Antipas nomma les principaux de son entourage : Tolmaï, Kanthera, Séhon, Ammonius d'Alexandrie, qui lui achetait de l'asphalte, Naâmann, capitaine de ses vélites, Iaçim le Babylonien.

Vitellius avait remarqué Mannaeï.

— « Celui-là, qu'est-ce donc ? »

Le Tétrarque fit comprendre, d'un geste, que c'était le bourreau.

Puis, il présenta les Sadducéens.

Jonathas, un petit homme libre d'allures et parlant grec, supplia le maître de les honorer d'une visite à Jérusalem. Il s'y rendrait probablement.

Éléazar, le nez crochu et la barbe longue, réclama pour les Pharisiens le manteau du grand prêtre détenu dans la tour Antonia par l'autorité civile.

Ensuite, les Galiléens dénoncèrent Ponce-Pilate. A l'occasion d'un fou qui cherchait les vases d'or de David dans une caverne, près de Samarie, il avait tué des habitants ; et tous parlaient à la fois, Mannaëi plus violemment que les autres. Vitellius affirma que les criminels seraient punis.

Des vociférations éclatèrent en face d'un portique, où les soldats avaient suspendu leurs boucliers. Les housses étant défaites, on voyait sur les *umbo* la figure de César. C'était pour les Juifs une idolâtrie. Antipas les harangua, pendant que Vitellius, dans la colonnade, sur un siège élevé, s'étonnait de leur fureur. Tibère avait eu raison d'en exiler quatre cents en Sardaigne. Mais chez eux ils étaient forts ; et il commanda de retirer les boucliers.

Alors, ils entourèrent le Proconsul, en implorant des réparations d'injustice, des privilèges, des aumônes. Les vêtements étaient déchirés, on s'écrasait ; et, pour faire de la place, des esclaves avec des bâtons frappaient de droite et de gauche. Les plus voisins de la porte descendirent sur le sentier, d’autres le montaient ; ils refluèrent ; deux courants se croisaient dans cette masse d’hommes qui oscillait, comprimée par l’enceinte des murs.

Vitellius demanda pourquoi tant de monde. Antipas en dit la cause : le festin de son anniversaire ; et il montra plusieurs de ses gens, qui, penchés sur les créneaux, halaient d’immenses corbeilles de viandes, de fruits, de légumes, des antilopes et des cigognes, de larges poissons couleur d’azur, des raisins, des pastèques, des grenades élevées en pyramides. Aulus n’y tint pas. Il se précipita vers les cuisines, emporté par cette goinfrerie qui devait surprendre l’univers.

En passant près d’un caveau, il aperçut des marmites pareilles à des cuirasses. Vitellius vint les regarder ; et exigea qu’on lui ouvrît les chambres souterraines de la forteresse.

Elles étaient taillées dans le roc en hautes voûtes, avec des piliers de distance en distance. La première contenait de vieilles armures ; mais la seconde regorgeait de piques, et qui allongeaient toutes leurs pointes, émergeant d’un bouquet de plumes. La troisième semblait tapissée en nattes de roseaux, tant les flèches minces étaient perpendiculairement les unes à côté des autres. Des lames de cimeterres couvraient les parois de la quatrième. Au milieu de la cinquième, des rangs de casques faisaient, avec leurs crêtes, comme un bataillon de serpents rouges. On ne voyait dans la sixième que des carquois ; dans la septième, que des cnémides ; dans la huitième, que des brassards ; dans les suivantes, des fourches, des grappins, des échelles, des cordages, jusqu’à des mâts pour les catapultes, jusqu’à des grelots pour le poitrail des dromadaires ! et comme la montagne allait en s’élargissant vers sa base, évidée à l’intérieur telle qu’une ruche d’abeilles, au-dessous de ces chambres il y en avait de plus nombreuses, et d’encore plus profondes.

Vitellius, Phinéas son interprète, et Sisenna le chef des publicains, les parcouraient à la lumière des flambeaux, que portaient trois eunuques.

On distinguait dans l’ombre des choses hideuses inventées par les barbares ; casse-têtes garnis de clous, javelots empoisonnant les blessures, tenailles qui ressemblaient à des mâchoires de crocodiles ; enfin le Tétrarque possédait dans Machaerous des munitions de guerre pour quarante mille hommes.

Il les avait rassemblées en prévision d’une alliance de ses ennemis. Mais le Proconsul pouvait croire, ou dire, que c’était pour combattre les Romains, et il cherchait des explications.

Elles n’étaient pas à lui ; beaucoup servaient à se défendre des brigands ; d’ailleurs il en fallait contre les Arabes ; ou bien, tout cela avait appartenu à son père. Et, au lieu de marcher derrière le Proconsul, il allait devant, à pas rapides. Puis il se rangea le long du mur, qu’il masquait de sa toge, avec, ses deux coudes écartés ; mais le haut d’une porte dépassait sa tête. Vitellius la remarqua, et voulut savoir ce qu’elle enfermait.

Le Babylonien pouvait seul l’ouvrir.

— « Appelle le Babylonien ! »

On l’attendit.

Son père était venu des bords de l’Euphrate s’offrir au grand Hérode, avec cinq cents cavaliers, pour défendre les frontières orientales. Après le partage du royaume, Iaçim était demeuré chez Philippe, et maintenant servait Antipas.

Il se présenta, un arc sur l’épaule, un fouet à la main. Des cordons multicolores serraient étroitement ses jambes torses. Ses gros bras sortaient d’une tunique sans manches, et un bonnet de fourrure ombrageait sa mine, dont la barbe était frisée en anneaux.

D’abord, il eut l’air de ne pas comprendre l’interprète. Mais Vitellius lança un coup d’oeil à Antipas, qui répéta tout de suite son commandement. Alors Iaçim appliqua ses deux mains contre la porte. Elle glissa dans le mur.

Un souffle d’air chaud s’exhala des ténèbres. Une allée descendait en tournant ; ils la prirent et arrivèrent au seuil d’une grotte, plus étendue que les autres souterrains.

Une arcade s’ouvrait au fond sur le précipice, qui de ce côté-là défendait la citadelle. Un chèvrefeuille, se cramponnant à la voûte, laissait retomber ses fleurs en pleine lumière. A ras du sol, un filet d’eau murmurait.

Des chevaux blancs étaient là, une centaine peut-être, et qui mangeaient de l’orge sur une planche au niveau de leur bouche. Ils avaient tous la crinière peinte en bleu, les sabots dans des mitaines de sparterie, et les poils d’entre les oreilles bouffant sur le frontal, comme une perruque. Avec leur queue très-longue, ils se battaient mollement les jarrets. Le Proconsul en resta muet d’admiration.

C’étaient de merveilleuses bêtes, souples comme des serpents, légères comme des oiseaux. Elles partaient avec la flèche du cavalier, renversaient les hommes en les mordant au ventre, se tiraient de l’embarras des rochers, sautaient par-dessus des abîmes, et pendant tout un jour continuaient dans les plaines leur galop frénétique ; un mot les arrêtait. Dès que Iaçim entra, elles vinrent à lui, comme des moutons quand paraît le berger ; et, avançant leur encolure, elles le regardaient inquiètes avec leurs yeux d’enfant. Par habitude, il lança du fond de sa gorge un cri rauque qui les mit en gaieté ; et elles se cabraient, affamées d’espace, demandant à courir.

Antipas, de peur que Vitellius ne les enlevât, les avait emprisonnées dans cet endroit, spécial pour les animaux, en cas de siège.

— « L’écurie est mauvaise, » dit le Proconsul, « et tu risques de les perdre !

Fais l’inventaire, Sisenna ! »

Le publicain retira une tablette de sa ceinture, compta les chevaux et les inscrivit.

Les agents des compagnies fiscales corrompaient les gouverneurs, pour piller les provinces. Celui-là flairait partout, avec sa mâchoire de fouine et ses paupières clignotantes.

Enfin, on remonta dans la cour.

Des rondelles de bronze au milieu des pavés, çà et là, couvraient les citernes. Il en observa une, plus grande que les autres, et qui n’avait pas sous les talons leur sonorité. Il les frappa toutes alternativement, puis hurla, en piétinant :

— « Je l’ai ! je l’ai ! C’est ici le trésor d’Hérode ! »

La recherche de ses trésors était une folie des Romains.

Ils n’existaient pas, jura le Tétrarque.

Cependant, qu’y avait-il là-dessous ?

— « Rien ! un homme, un prisonnier.

— « Montre-le ! » dit Vitellius.

Le Tétrarque n’obéit pas ; les Juifs auraient connu son secret. Sa répugnance à ouvrir la rondelle impatientait Vitellius.

— « Enfoncez-la ! » cria-t-il aux licteurs.

Mannaëi avait deviné ce qui les occupait. Il crut, en voyant une hache, qu’on allait décapiter Iaokanann ; et il arrêta le licteur au premier coup sur la plaque, insinua entre elle et les pavés une manière de crochet, puis, roidissant ses longs bras maigres, la souleva doucement, elle s’abattit ; tous admirèrent la force de ce vieillard. Sous le couvercle doublé de bois, s’étendait une trappe de même dimension. D’un coup de poing, elle se replia en deux panneaux ; on vit alors un trou, une fosse énorme que contournait un escalier sans rampe ; et ceux qui se penchèrent sur le bord aperçurent au fond quelque chose de vague et d’effrayant.

Un être humain était couché par terre, sous de longs cheveux se confondant avec les poils de bête qui garnissaient son dos. Il se leva. Son front touchait à une grille horizontalement scellée ; et, de temps à autre, il disparaissait dans les profondeurs de son antre.

Le soleil faisait briller la pointe des tiares, le pommeau des glaives, chauffait à outrance les dalles ; et des colombes, s’envolant des frises, tournoyaient au-dessus de la cour. C’était l’heure où Mannaëi, ordinairement, leur jetait du grain. Il se tenait accroupi devant le Tétrarque, qui était debout près de Vitellius. Les Galiléens, les prêtres, les soldats, formaient un cercle par derrière ; tous se taisaient, dans l’angoisse de ce qui allait arriver.

Ce fut d’abord un grand soupir, poussé d’une voix caverneuse.

Hérodias l’entendit à l’autre bout du palais. Vaincue par une fascination, elle traversa la foule ; et elle écoutait, une main sur l'épaule de Mannaëi, le corps incliné.

La voix s'éleva :

— « Malheur à vous, Pharisiens et Sadducéens, race de vipères, outres gonflées, cymbales retentissantes ! »

On avait reconnu Iaokanann. Son nom circulait. D'autres accoururent.

« Malheur à toi, ô peuple ! et aux traîtres de Juda, aux ivrognes d'Éphraïm, à ceux qui habitent la vallée grasse, et que les vapeurs du vin font chanceler !

« Qu'ils se dissipent comme l'eau qui s'écoule, comme la limace qui se fond en marchant, comme l'avorton d'une femme qui ne voit pas le soleil.

« Il faudra, Moab, te réfugier dans les cyprès comme les passereaux, dans les cavernes comme les gerboises. Les portes des forteresses seront plus vite brisées que des écailles de noix, les murs crouleront, les villes brûleront ; et le fléau de l'Éternel ne s'arrêtera pas. Il retournera vos membres dans votre sang, comme de la laine dans la cuve d'un teinturier. Il vous déchirera comme une herse neuve ; il répandra sur les montagnes tous les morceaux de votre chair ! »

De quel conquérant parlait-il ? Était-ce de Vitellius ? Les Romains seuls pouvaient produire cette extermination. Des plaintes s'échappaient : — « Assez ! assez ! qu'il finisse ! »

Il continua, plus haut :

— « Auprès du cadavre de leurs mères, les petits enfants se traîneront sur les cendres. On ira, la nuit, chercher son pain à travers les décombres, au hasard des épées. Les chacals s'arracheront des ossements sur les places publiques, où le soir les vieillards causaient. Tes vierges, en avalant leurs pleurs, joueront de la cithare dans les festins de l'étranger, et tes fils les plus braves baisseront leur échine, écorchée par des fardeaux trop lourds ! »

Le peuple revoyait les jours de son exil, toutes les catastrophes de son histoire. C'étaient les paroles des anciens prophètes. Iaokanann les envoyait, comme de grands coups, l'une après l'autre.

Mais la voix se fit douce, harmonieuse, chantante. Il annonçait un affranchissement, des splendeurs au ciel, le nouveau-né un bras dans la caverne du dragon, l'or à la place de l'argile, le désert s'épanouissant comme une rose :
— « Ce qui maintenant vaut soixante kiccars ne coûtera pas une obole. Des fontaines de lait jailliront des rochers ; on s'endormira dans les pressoirs le ventre plein ! Quand viendras-tu, toi que j'espère ? D'avance, tous les peuples s'agenouillent, et ta domination sera éternelle, Fils de David ! »

Le Tétrarque se rejeta en arrière, l'existence d'un Fils de David l'outrageant comme une menace.

Iaokanann l'invectiva pour sa royauté.

— « Il n’y a pas d’autre roi que l’Éternel ! » et pour ses jardins, pour ses statues, pour ses meubles d’ivoire, comme l’impie Achab !

Antipas brisa la cordelette du cachet suspendu à sa poitrine, et le lança dans la fosse, en lui commandant de se taire.

La voix répondit :

— « Je crierai comme un ours, comme un âne sauvage, comme une femme qui enfante !

« Le châtiment est déjà dans ton inceste, Dieu t’afflige de la stérilité du mulet ! »

Et des rires s’élevèrent, pareils au clapotement des flots.

Vitellius s’obstinait à rester. L’interprète, d’un ton impassible, redisait, dans la langue des Romains, toutes les injures que Iaokanann rugissait dans la sienne. Le Tétrarque et Hérodias étaient forcés de les subir deux fois. Il haletait, pendant qu’elle observait béante le fond du puits.

L’homme effroyable se renversa la tête ; et, empoignant les barreaux, y colla son visage, qui avait l’air d’une broussaille, où étincelaient deux charbons :

— « Ah ! c’est toi, Iézabel !

« Tu as pris son coeur avec le craquement de ta chaussure. Tu hennissais comme une cavale. Tu as dressé ta couche sur les monts, pour accomplir tes sacrifices !

« Le Seigneur arrachera tes pendants d’oreilles, tes robes de pourpre, tes voiles de lin, les anneaux de tes bras, les bagues de tes pieds, et les petits croissants d’or qui tremblent sur ton front, tes miroirs d’argent, tes éventails en plumes d’autruche, les patins de nacre qui haussent ta taille, l’orgueil de tes diamants, les senteurs de tes cheveux, la peinture de tes ongles, tous les artifices de ta mollesse ; et les cailloux manqueront pour lapider l’adultère ! »

Elle chercha du regard une défense autour d’elle. Les Pharisiens baissaient hypocritement leurs yeux. Les Sadducéens tournaient la tête, craignant d’offenser le Proconsul. Antipas paraissait mourir.

La voix grossissait, se développait, roulait avec des déchirements de tonnerre, et, l’écho dans la montagne la répétant, elle foudroyait Machaerous d’éclats multipliés.

— « Étale-toi dans la poussière, fille de Babylone ! Fais moudre la farine ! Ote ta ceinture, détache ton soulier, trousse-toi, passe les fleuves ! ta honte sera découverte, ton opprobre sera vu ! tes sanglots te briseront les dents ! L’Éternel exècre la puanteur de tes crimes ! Maudite ! maudite ! Crève comme une chienne ! »

La trappe se ferma, le couvercle se rabattit. Mannaëi voulait étrangler Iaokanann.

Hérodias disparut. Les Pharisiens étaient scandalisés. Antipas, au milieu d’eux, se justifiait.

— « Sans doute, » reprit Éléazar, « il faut épouser la femme de son frère, mais Hérodias n’était pas veuve, et de plus elle avait un enfant, ce qui constituait l’abomination. »

— « Erreur ! erreur ! » objecta le Sadducéen Jonathas. « La Loi condamne ces mariages, sans les proscrire absolument. »

— « N’importe ! On est pour moi bien injuste ! » disait Antipas, « car, enfin, Absalom a couché avec les femmes de son père, Juda avec sa bru, Ammon avec sa soeur, Lot avec ses filles. »

Aulus, qui venait de dormir, reparut à ce moment-là. Quand il fut instruit de l’affaire, il approuva le Tétrarque. On ne devait point se gêner pour de pareilles sottises ; et il riait beaucoup du blâme des prêtres, et de la fureur de Iaokanann.

Hérodias, au milieu du perron, se retourna vers lui.

— « Tu as tort, mon maître ! Il ordonne au peuple de refuser l’impôt. »

— « Est-ce vrai ? » demanda tout de suite le Publicain.

Les réponses furent généralement affirmatives. Le Tétrarque les renforçait.

Vitellius songea que le prisonnier pouvait s’enfuir ; et comme la conduite d’Antipas lui semblait douteuse, il établit des sentinelles aux portes, le long des murs et dans la cour.

Ensuite, il alla vers son appartement. Les députations des prêtres l’accompagnèrent.

Sans aborder la question de la sacrificature, chacune émettait ses griefs.

Tous l’obsédaient. Il les congédia.

Jonathas le quittait, quand il aperçut, dans un créneau, Antipas causant avec un homme à longs cheveux et en robe blanche, un Essénien ; et il regretta de l’avoir soutenu.

Une réflexion avait consolé le Tétrarque. Iaokanann ne dépendait plus de lui ; les Romains s’en chargeaient. Quel soulagement ! Phanuel se promenait alors sur le chemin de ronde.

Il l’appela, et, désignant les soldats :

— « Ils sont les plus forts ! je ne peux le délivrer ! ce n’est pas ma faute ! »

La cour était vide. Les esclaves se reposaient. Sur la rougeur du ciel, qui enflammait l’horizon, les moindres objets perpendiculaires se détachaient en noir. Antipas distingua les salines à l’autre bout de la mer Morte, et ne voyait plus les tentes des Arabes. Sans doute ils étaient partis ? La lune se levait ; un apaisement descendait dans son coeur.

Phanuel, accablé, restait le menton sur la poitrine. Enfin, il révéla ce qu’il avait à dire.

Depuis le commencement du mois, il étudiait le ciel avant l'aube, la constellation de Persée se trouvant au zénith. Agalah se montrait à peine, Algol brillait moins, Mira-Coeti avait disparu ; d'où il augurait la mort d'un homme considérable, cette nuit même, dans Machaërous.

Lequel ? Vitellius était trop bien entouré. On n'exécuterait pas Iaokanann. « C'est donc moi ! » pensa le Tétrarque.

Peut-être que les Arabes allaient revenir ? Le Proconsul découvrirait ses relations avec les Parthes ! Des sicaires de Jérusalem escortaient les prêtres ; ils avaient sous leurs vêtements des poignards ; et le Tétrarque ne doutait pas de la science de Phanuel.

Il eut l'idée de recourir à Hérodias. Il la haïssait pourtant. Mais elle lui donnerait du courage ; et tous les liens n'étaient pas rompus de l'ensorcellement qu'il avait autrefois subi.

Quand il entra dans sa chambre, du cinnamome fumait sur une vasque de porphyre ; et des poudres, des onguents, des étoffes pareilles à des nuages, des broderies plus légères que des plumes, étaient dispersées.

Il ne dit pas la prédiction de Phanuel, ni sa peur des Juifs et des Arabes ; elle l'eût accusé d'être lâche. Il parla seulement des Romains ; Vitellius ne lui avait rien confié de ses projets militaires. Il le supposait ami de Caïus, que fréquentait Agrippa ; et il serait envoyé en exil, ou peut-être on l'égorgerait.

Hérodias, avec une indulgence dédaigneuse, tâcha de le rassurer. Enfin, elle tira d'un petit coffre une médaille bizarre, ornée du profil de Tibère. Cela suffisait à faire pâlir les licteurs et fondre les accusations.

Antipas, ému de reconnaissance, lui demanda comment elle l'avait.

— « On me l'a donnée, » reprit-elle.

Sous une portière en face, un bras nu s'avança, un bras jeune, charmant et comme tourné dans l'ivoire par Polyclète. D'une façon un peu gauche, et cependant gracieuse, il ramait dans l'air, pour saisir une tunique oubliée sur une escabelle près de la muraille.

Une vieille femme la passa doucement, en écartant le rideau.

Le Tétrarque eut un souvenir, qu'il ne pouvait préciser.

— « Cette esclave est-elle à toi ? »

— « Que t'importe ? » répondit Hérodias.

III

Les convives emplissaient la salle du festin.

Elle avait trois nefs, comme une basilique, et que séparaient des colonnes en bois d’algumim, avec des chapiteaux de bronze couverts de sculptures. Deux galeries à claire-voie s’appuyaient dessus ; et une troisième en filigrane d’or se bombait au fond, vis-à-vis d’un cintre énorme, qui s’ouvrait à l’autre bout.

Des candélabres, brûlant sur les tables alignées dans toute la longueur du vaisseau, faisaient des buissons de feux, entre les coupes de terre peinte et les plats de cuivre, les cubes de neige, les monceaux de raisin ; mais ces clartés rouges se perdaient progressivement, à cause de la hauteur du plafond, et des points lumineux brillaient, comme des étoiles, la nuit, à travers des branches. Par l’ouverture de la grande baie, on apercevait des flambeaux sur les terrasses des maisons ; car Antipas fêtait ses amis, son peuple, et tous ceux qui s’étaient présentés.

Des esclaves, alertes comme des chiens et les orteils dans des sandales de feutre, circulaient, en portant des plateaux.

La table proconsulaire occupait, sous la tribune dorée, une estrade en planches de sycomore. Des tapis de Babylone l’enfermaient dans une espèce de pavillon.

Trois lits d’ivoire, un en face et deux sur les flancs, contenaient Vitellius, son fils et Antipas ; le Proconsul étant près de la porte, à gauche, Aulus à droite, le Tétrarque au milieu.

Il avait un lourd manteau noir, dont la trame disparaissait sous des applications de couleur, du fard aux pommettes, la barbe en éventail, et de la poudre d’azur dans ses cheveux, serrés par un diadème de pierreries. Vitellius gardait son baudrier de pourpre, qui descendait en diagonale sur une toge de lin. Aulus s’était fait nouer dans le dos les manches de sa robe en soie violette, lamée d’argent. Les boudins de sa chevelure formaient des étages, et un collier de saphirs étincelait à sa poitrine, grasse et blanche comme celle d’une femme. Près de lui, sur une natte et jambes croisées, se tenait un enfant très-beau, qui souriait toujours. Il l’avait vu dans les cuisines, ne pouvait plus s’en passer, et, ayant peine à retenir son nom chaldéen, l’appelait simplement : « l’Asiatique. » De temps à autre, il s’étalait sur le triclinium. Alors, ses pieds nus dominaient l’assemblée.

De ce côté-là, il y avait les prêtres et les officiers d’Antipas, des habitants de Jérusalem, les principaux des villes grecques ; et, sous le Proconsul : Marcellus avec les publicains, des amis du Tétrarque, les personnages de Kana, Ptolémaïde, Jéricho ; puis, pêle-mêle, des montagnards du Liban, et les vieux soldats d’Hérode : douze Thraces, un Gaulois, deux Germains, des chasseurs de gazelles, des pâtres de l’Idumée, le sultan de Palmyre, des marins d’Éziongaber. Chacun avait devant soi une galette de pâte molle, pour s’essuyer les doigts ; et les bras, s’allongeant comme des cous de vautour, prenaient des olives, des pistaches, des amandes. Toutes les figures étaient joyeuses, sous des couronnes de fleurs.

Les Pharisiens les avaient repoussées comme indécence romaine. Ils frissonnèrent quand on les aspergea de galbanum et d'encens, composition réservée aux usages du Temple.

Aulus en frotta son aisselle ; et Antipas lui en promit tout un chargement, avec trois couffes de ce véritable baume, qui avait fait convoiter la Palestine à Cléopâtre.

Un capitaine de sa garnison de Tibériade, survenu tout à l'heure, s'était placé derrière lui, pour l'entretenir d'événements extraordinaires. Mais son attention était partagée entre le Proconsul et ce qu'on disait aux tables voisines.

On y causait de Iaokanann et des gens de son espèce ; Simon de Gittoï lavait les péchés avec du feu. Un certain Jésus...

— « Le pire de tous, » s'écria Éléazar. « Quel infâme bateleur ! »

Derrière le Tétrarque, un homme se leva, pâle comme la bordure de sa chlamyde. Il descendit l'estrade, et, interpellant les Pharisiens :

— « Mensonge ! Jésus fait des miracles ! »

Antipas désirait en voir.

— « Tu aurais dû l'amener ! Renseigne-nous ! »

Alors il conta que lui, Jacob, ayant une fille malade, s'était rendu à Capharnaüm, pour supplier le Maître de vouloir la guérir. Le Maître avait répondu : « Retourne chez toi, elle est guérie ! » Et il l'avait trouvée sur le seuil, étant sortie de sa couche quand le gnomon du palais marquait la troisième heure, l'instant même où il abordait Jésus.

Certainement, objectèrent les Pharisiens, il existait des pratiques, des herbes puissantes ! Ici même, à Machaerous, quelquefois on trouvait le baaras qui rend invulnérable ; mais guérir sans voir ni toucher était une chose impossible, à moins que Jésus n'employât les démons.

Et les amis d'Antipas, les principaux de la Galilée, reprirent, en hochant la tête :

— « Les démons, évidemment. »

Jacob, debout entre leur table et celle des prêtres, se taisait d'une manière hautaine et douce.

Ils le sommaient de parler : — « Justifie son pouvoir ! »

Il courba les épaules, et à voix basse, lentement, comme effrayé de lui-même :

— « Vous ne savez donc pas que c'est le Messie ? »

Tous les prêtres se regardèrent ; et Vitellius demanda l'explication du mot. Son interprète fut une minute avant de répondre.

Ils appelaient ainsi un libérateur qui leur apporterait la jouissance de tous les biens et la domination de tous les peuples. Quelques-uns même soutenaient qu'il fallait compter sur deux. Le premier serait vaincu par Gog et Magog, des démons du Nord ; mais l'autre exterminerait le Prince du Mal ; et, depuis des siècles, ils l'attendaient à chaque minute.

Les prêtres s'étant concertés, Éléazar prit la parole.

D'abord le Messie serait enfant de David, et non d'un charpentier ; il confirmerait la Loi. Ce Nazaréen l'attaquait ; et, argument plus fort, il devait être précédé de la venue d'Élie.

Jacob répliqua :

« Mais il est venu, Élie !

— « Élie ! Élie ! » répéta la foule, jusqu'à l'autre bout de la salle.

Tous, par l'imagination, apercevaient un vieillard sous un vol de corbeaux, la foudre allumant un autel, des pontifes idolâtres jetés aux torrents ; et les femmes, dans les tribunes, songeaient à la veuve de Sarepta.

Jacob s'épuisait à redire qu'il le connaissait ! Il l'avait vu ! et le peuple aussi !

— « Son nom ? »

Alors, il cria de toutes ses forces :

— « Iaokanann ! »

Antipas se renversa comme frappé en pleine poitrine. Les Sadducéens avaient bondi sur Jacob. Éléazar pérorait, pour se faire écouter.

Quand le silence fut établi, il drapa son manteau, et comme un juge posa des questions.

— « Puisque le prophète est mort... »

Des murmures l'interrompirent. On croyait Élie disparu seulement.

Il s'emporta contre la foule, et, continuant son enquête :

— « Tu penses qu'il est ressuscité ?

— « Pourquoi pas ? » dit Jacob.

Les Sadducéens haussèrent les épaules ; Jonathas, écarquillant ses petits yeux, s'efforçait de rire comme un bouffon. Rien de plus sot que la prétention du corps à la vie éternelle ; et il déclama, pour le Proconsul, ce vers d'un poëte contemporain :

Nec crescit, nec post mortem durare videtur.

Mais Aulus était penché au bord du triclinium, le front en sueur, le visage vert, les poings sur l'estomac.

Les Sadducéens feignirent un grand émoi ; — le lendemain, la sacrificature leur fut rendue ; — Antipas étalait du désespoir ; Vitellius demeurait impassible. Ses angoisses étaient pourtant violentes ; avec son fils il perdait sa fortune.

Aulus n'avait pas fini de se faire vomir, qu'il voulut remanger.

— « Qu’on me donne de la râpure de marbre, du schiste de Naxos, de l’eau de mer, n’importe quoi ! Si je prenais un bain ? »

Il croqua de la neige, puis, ayant balancé entre une terrine de Commagène et des merles roses, se décida pour des courges au miel. L’Asiatique le contemplait, cette faculté d’engloutissement dénotant un être prodigieux et d’une race supérieure.

On servit des rognons de taureau, des loirs, des rossignols, des hachis dans des feuilles de pampre ; et les prêtres discutaient sur la résurrection. Ammonius, élève de Philon le Platonicien, les jugeait stupides, et le disait à des Grecs qui se moquaient des oracles. Marcellus et Jacob s’étaient joints. Le premier narrait au second le bonheur qu’il avait ressenti sous le baptême de Mithra, et Jacob l’engageait à suivre Jésus. Les vins de palme et de tamaris, ceux de Safet et de Byblos, coulaient des amphores dans les cratères, des cratères dans les coupes, des coupes dans les gosiers ; on bavardait, les coeurs s’épanchaient. Iaçim, bien que Juif, ne cachait plus son adoration des planètes. Un marchand d’Aphaka ébahissait des nomades, en détaillant les merveilles du temple d’Hiérapolis ; et ils demandaient combien coûterait le pèlerinage. D’autres tenaient à leur religion natale. Un Germain presque aveugle chantait un hymne célébrant ce promontoire de la Scandinavie, où les dieux apparaissent avec les rayons de leurs figures ; et des gens de Sichem ne mangèrent pas de tourterelles, par déférence pour la colombe Azima.

Plusieurs causaient debout, au milieu de la salle ; et la vapeur des haleines avec les fumées des candélabres faisait un brouillard dans l’air. Phanuel passa le long des murs.

Il venait encore d’étudier le firmament, mais n’avançait pas jusqu’au Tétrarque, redoutant les taches d’huile qui, pour les Esséniens, étaient une grande souillure.

Des coups retentirent contre la porte du château.

On savait maintenant que Iaokanann s’y trouvait détenu. Des hommes avec des torches grimpaient le sentier ; une masse noire fourmillait dans le ravin ; et ils hurlaient de temps à autre : — « Iaokanann ! Iaokanann ! »

— « Il dérange tout ! » dit Jonathas.

— « On n’aura plus d’argent, s’il continue ! » ajoutèrent les Pharisiens.

Et des récriminations partaient :

— « Protège-nous !

— « Qu’on en finisse !

— « Tu abandonnes la religion !

— « Impie comme les Hérode !

— « Moins que vous ! » répliqua Antipas. « C’est mon père qui a édifié votre temple ! »

Alors les Pharisiens, les fils des proscrits, les partisans des Matathias, accusèrent le Tétrarque des crimes de sa famille.

Ils avaient des crânes pointus, la barbe hérissée, des mains faibles et méchantes, ou la face camuse, de gros yeux ronds, l'air de bouledogues. Une douzaine, scribes et valets des prêtres, nourris par le rebut des holocaustes, s'élancèrent jusqu'au bas de l'estrade ; et avec des couteaux ils menaçaient Antipas, qui les haranguait pendant que les Sadducéens le défendaient mollement. Il aperçut Mannaëi, et lui fit signe de s'en aller, Vitellius indiquant par sa contenance que ces choses ne le regardaient pas.

Les Pharisiens, restés sur leur triclinium, se mirent dans une fureur démoniaque. Ils brisèrent les plats devant eux. On leur avait servi le ragoût chéri de Mécène : de l'âne sauvage, une viande immonde.

Aulus les railla à propos de la tête d'âne, qu'ils honoraient, disait-on, et débita d'autres sarcasmes sur leur antipathie du pourceau. C'était sans doute parce que cette grosse bête avait tué leur Bacchus ; et ils aimaient trop le vin, puisqu'on avait découvert dans le Temple une vigne d'or.

Les prêtres ne comprenaient pas ses paroles. Phinées, Galiléen d'origine, refusa de les traduire. Alors sa colère fut démesurée, d'autant plus que l'Asiatique, pris de peur, avait disparu ; et le repas lui déplaisait, les mets étant vulgaires point déguisés suffisamment ! Il se calma, en voyant des queues de brebis syriennes, qui sont des paquets de graisse.

Le caractère des Juifs semblait hideux à Vitellius. Leur dieu pouvait bien être Moloch, dont il avait rencontré des autels sur la route ; et les sacrifices d'enfants lui revinrent à l'esprit, avec l'histoire de l'homme qu'ils engraissaient mystérieusement. Son coeur de Latin était soulevé de dégoût par leur intolérance, leur rage iconoclaste, leur achoppement de brute. Le Proconsul voulait partir. Aulus s'y refusa.

La robe abaissée jusqu'aux hanches, il gisait derrière un monceau de victuailles, trop repu pour en prendre, mais s'obstinant à ne point les quitter.

L'exaltation du peuple grandit. Ils s'abandonnèrent à des projets d'indépendance. On rappelait la gloire d'Israël. Tous les conquérants avaient été châtiés : Antigone, Crassus, Varus...

— « Misérables ! » dit le Proconsul ; car il entendait le syriaque. Son interprète ne servait qu'à lui donner du loisir pour répondre.

Antipas, bien vite, tira la médaille de l'Empereur, et, l'observant avec tremblement il la présentait du côté de l'image.

Les panneaux de la tribune d'or se déployèrent tout à coup ; et à la splendeur des cierges, entre ses esclaves et des festons d'anémones, Hérodias apparut, —

coiffée d’une mitre assyrienne qu’une mentonnière attachait à son front ; ses cheveux en spirales s’épandaient sur un péplos d’écarlate, fendu dans la longueur des manches. Deux monstres en pierre, pareils à ceux du trésor des Atrides se dressant contre la porte, elle ressemblait à Cybèle accotée de ses lions ; et du haut de la balustrade qui dominait Antipas, avec une patère à la main, elle cria :

— « Longue vie à César ! »

Cet hommage fut répété par Vitellius, Antipas et les prêtres.

Mais il arriva du fond de la salle un bourdonnement de surprise et d’admiration. Une jeune fille venait d’entrer.

Sous un voile bleuâtre lui cachant la poitrine et la tête, on distinguait les arcs de ses yeux, les calcédoines de ses oreilles, la blancheur de sa peau. Un carré de soie gorge-de-pigeon, en couvrant les épaules, tenait aux reins par une ceinture d’orfèvrerie. Ses caleçons noirs étaient semés de mandragores, et d’une manière indolente elle faisait claquer de petites pantoufles en duvet de colibri.

Sur le haut de l’estrade, elle retira son voile. C’était Hérodias, comme autrefois dans sa jeunesse. Puis elle se mit à danser.

Ses pieds passaient l’un devant l’autre, au rythme de la flûte et d’une paire de crotales. Ses bras arrondis appelaient quelqu’un, qui s’enfuyait toujours. Elle le poursuivait, plus légère qu’un papillon, comme une Psyché curieuse, comme une âme vagabonde et semblait prête à s’envoler.

Les sons funèbres de la gingras remplacèrent les crotales. L’accablement avait suivi l’espoir. Ses attitudes exprimaient des soupirs, et toute sa personne une telle langueur qu’on ne savait pas si elle pleurait un dieu, ou se mourait dans sa caresse. Les paupières entre-closes, elle se tordait la taille, balançait son ventre avec des ondulations de houle, faisait trembler ses deux seins, et son visage demeurait immobile, et ses pieds n’arrêtaient pas.

Vitellius la compara à Mnester, le pantomime. Aulus vomissait encore. Le Tétrarque se perdait dans un rêve, et ne songeait plus à Hérodias. Il crut la voir près des Sadducéens. La vision s’éloigna.

Ce n’était pas une vision. Elle avait fait instruire, loin de Machaerous, Salomé sa fille, que le Tétrarque aimerait ; et l’idée était bonne. Elle en était sûre, maintenant.

Puis ce fut l’emportement de l’amour qui veut être assouvi. Elle dansa comme les prêtresses des Indes, comme les Nubiennes des cataractes, comme les Bacchantes de Lydie. Elle se renversait de tous les côtés, pareille à une fleur que la tempête agite. Les brillants de ses oreilles sautaient, l’étoffe de son dos chatoyait ; de ses bras, de ses pieds, de ses vêtements jaillissaient d’invisibles étincelles qui enflammaient les hommes. Une harpe chanta ; la multitude y répondit par des acclamations. Sans fléchir ses genoux en écartant les jambes, elle se courba si bien que son menton frôlait le plancher ; et les nomades habitués à l'abstinence, les soldats de Rome experts en débauches, les avares publicains, les vieux prêtres aigris par les disputes, tous, dilatant leurs narines, palpitaient de convoitise.

Ensuite elle tourna autour de la table d'Antipas, frénétiquement, comme le rhombe des sorcières ; et d'une voix que des sanglots de volupté entrecoupaient, il lui disait — « Viens ! viens ! » — Elle tournait toujours ; les tympanons sonnaient à éclater, la foule hurlait. Mais le Tétrarque criait plus fort « Viens ! viens ! Tu auras Capharnaüm ! la plaine de Tibérias ! mes citadelles ! la moitié de mon royaume ! »

Elle se jeta sur les mains, les talons en l'air, parcourut ainsi l'estrade comme un grand scarabée ; et s'arrêta brusquement.

Sa nuque et ses vertèbres faisaient un angle droit. Les fourreaux de couleur qui enveloppaient ses jambes, lui passant par-dessus l'épaule, comme des arcs-en-ciel, accompagnaient sa figure, à une coudée du sol. Ses lèvres étaient peintes, ses sourcils très noirs, ses yeux presque terribles, et des gouttelettes à son front semblaient une vapeur sur du marbre blanc.

Elle ne parlait pas. Ils se regardaient.

Un claquement de doigts se fit dans la tribune. Elle y monta, reparut ; et, en zézayant un peu, prononça ces mots, d'un air enfantin.

— « Je veux que tu me donnes dans un plat... la tête... » Elle avait oublié le nom, mais reprit en souriant : « La tête de Iaokanann ! »

Le Tétrarque s'affaissa sur lui-même, écrasé.

Il était contraint par sa parole, et le peuple attendait. Mais la mort qu'on lui avait prédite, en s'appliquant à un autre, peut-être détournerait la sienne ? Si Iaokanann était véritablement Elie, il pourrait s'y soustraire ; s'il ne l'était pas, le meurtre n'avait plus d'importance.

Mannaëi était à ses côtés, et comprit son intention.

Vitelius le rappela pour lui confier le mot d'ordre des sentinelles gardant la fosse.

Ce fut un soulagement. Dans une minute, tout serait fini !

Cependant, Mannaëi n'était guère prompt en besogne.

Il rentra, mais bouleversé.

Depuis quarante ans il exerçait la fonction de bourreau. C'était lui qui avait noyé Aristobule, étranglé Alexandre, brûlé vif Matathias, décapité Zosime, Pappus, Joseph et Antipater, et il n'osait tuer Iaokanann ! Ses dents claquaient, tout son corps tremblait.

Il avait aperçu devant la fosse le Grand Ange des Samaritains, tout couvert d’yeux et brandissant un immense glaive, rouge et dentelé comme une flamme. Deux soldats amenés en témoignage pouvaient le dire.

Ils n’avaient rien vu, sauf un capitaine juif, qui s’était précipité sur eux et qui n’existait plus.

La fureur d’Hérodias dégorgea en un torrent d’injures populacières et sanglantes. Elle se cassa les ongles au grillage de la tribune, et les deux lions sculptés semblaient mordre ses épaules et rugir comme elle.

Antipas l’imita, les prêtres, les soldats, les Pharisiens, tous réclamant une vengeance, et les autres, indignés qu’on retardât leur plaisir.

Mannaéi sortit, en se cachant la face.

Les convives trouvèrent le temps encore plus long que la première fois. On s’ennuyait.

Tout à coup, un bruit de pas se répercuta dans les couloirs. Le malaise devenait intolérable.

La tête entra ; — et Mannaëi la tenait par les cheveux, au bout de son bras, fier des applaudissements.

Quand il l’eut mise sur un plat, il l’offrit à Salomé.

Elle monta lestement dans la tribune : plusieurs minutes après, la tête fut rapportée par cette vieille femme que le Tétrarque avait distinguée le matin sur la plate-forme d’une maison, et tantôt dans la chambre d’Hérodias.

Il se reculait pour ne pas la voir. Vitellius y jeta un regard indifférent.

Mannaëi descendit l’estrade, et l’exhiba aux capitaines romains, puis à tous ceux qui mangeaient de ce côté.

Ils l’examinèrent.

La lame aiguë de l’instrument, glissant du haut en bas, avait entamé la mâchoire. Une convulsion tirait les coins de la bouche. Du sang, caillé déjà, parsemait la barbe. Les paupières closes étaient blêmes comme des coquilles ; et des candélabres à l’entour envoyaient des rayons.

Elle arriva à la table des prêtres. Un Pharisien la retourna curieusement ; et Mannaëi, l’ayant remise d’aplomb, la posa devant Aulus, qui en fut réveillé. Par l’ouverture de leurs cils, les prunelles mortes et les prunelles éteintes semblaient se dire quelque chose.

Ensuite Mannaëi la présenta à Antipas. Des pleurs coulèrent sur les joues du Tétrarque.

Les flambeaux s’éteignaient. Les convives partirent ; et il ne resta plus dans la salle qu’Antipas, les mains contre ses tempes, et regardant toujours la tête coupée, tandis que Phanuel, debout au milieu de la grande nef, murmurait des prières, les bras étendus.

A l’instant où se levait le Soleil, deux hommes, expédiés autrefois par

Iaokanann, survinrent, avec la réponse si longtemps espérée.

Ils la confièrent à Phanuel, qui en eut un ravissement.

Puis il leur montra l'objet lugubre, sur le plateau, entre les débris du festin. Un des hommes lui dit :

— « Console-toi ! il est descendu chez les morts annoncer le Christ ! »

L'Essénien comprenait maintenant ces paroles : « Pour qu'il croisse, il faut que je diminue. »

Et tous les trois, ayant pris la tête de Iaokanann, s'en allèrent du côté de la Galilée.

Comme elle était très lourde, ils la portaient alternativement.

FIN

THE DANCE OF DEATH

(1838)

*

“Many words for few things!”
“Death ends all; judgment comes to all.”

*

[This work may be called a prose poem. It is impregnated with the spirit of romanticism, which at the time of writing had a temporary but powerful hold on the mind of Gustave Flaubert.]

*

DEATH SPEAKS

At night, in winter, when the snow-flakes fall slowly from heaven like great white tears, I raise my voice; its resonance thrills the cypress trees and makes them bud anew.

I pause an instant in my swift course over earth; throw myself down among cold tombs; and, while dark-plumaged birds rise suddenly in terror from my side, while the dead slumber peacefully, while cypress branches droop low o’er my head, while all around me weeps or lies in deep repose, my burning eyes rest on the great white clouds, gigantic winding-sheets, unrolling their slow length across the face of heaven.

How many nights, and years, and ages have I journeyed thus! A witness of the universal birth and of a like decay; Innumerable are the generations I have garnered with my scythe. Like God, I am eternal! The nurse of Earth, I cradle it each night upon a bed both soft and warm. The same recurring feasts; the same unending toil! Each morning I depart, each evening I return, bearing within my mantle’s ample folds all that my scythe has gathered. And then I scatter them to the four winds of Heaven!

*

When the high billows run, when the heavens weep, and shrieking winds lash ocean into madness, then in the turmoil and the tumult do I fling myself upon the surging waves, and lo! the tempest softly cradles me, as in her hammock sways a queen. The foaming waters cool my weary feet, burning from bathing in the falling tears of countless generations that have clung to them in vain endeavour to arrest my steps.

Then, when the storm has ceased, after its roar has calmed me like a lullaby, I bow my head: the hurricane, raging in fury but a moment earlier dies instantly. No longer does it live, but neither do the men, the ships, the navies that lately sailed upon the bosom of the waters.

‘Mid all that I have seen and known, — peoples and thrones, loves, glories, sorrows, virtues — what have I ever loved? Nothing — except the mantling shroud that covers me!

My horse! ah, yes! my horse! I love thee too! How thou rushest o’er the world! thy hoofs of steel resounding on the heads bruised by thy speeding feet. Thy tail is straight and crisp, thine eyes dart flames, the mane upon thy neck flies in the wind, as on we dash upon our maddened course. Never art thou weary! Never do we rest! Never do we sleep! Thy neighing portends war; thy smoking nostrils spread a pestilence that, mist-like, hovers over earth. Where’er my arrows fly, thou overturnest pyramids and empires, trampling crowns beneath thy hoofs; All men respect thee; nay, adore thee! To invoke thy favour, popes offer thee their triple crowns, and kings their sceptres; peoples, their secret sorrows; poets, their renown. All cringe and kneel before thee, yet thou rushest on over their prostrate forms.

Ah, noble steed! Sole gift from heaven! Thy tendons are of iron, thy head is of bronze. Thou canst pursue thy course for centuries as swiftly as if borne up by eagle’s wings; and when, once in a thousand years, resistless hunger comes, thy food is human flesh, thy drink, men’s tears. My steed! I love thee as Pale Death alone can love!

*

Ah! I have lived so long! How many things I know! How many mysteries of the universe are shut within my breast!

Sometimes, after I have hurled a myriad of darts, and, after coursing o’er the world on my pale horse, have gathered many lives, a weariness assails me, and I long to rest.

But on my work must go; my path I must pursue; it leads through infinite space and all the worlds. I sweep away men’s plans together with their triumphs, their loves together with their crimes, their very all.

I rend my winding-sheet; a frightful craving tortures me incessantly, as if some serpent stung continually within.

I throw a backward glance, and see the smoke of fiery ruins left behind; the darkness of the night; the agony of the world. I see the graves that are the work of these, my hands; I see the background of the past — ’tis nothingness! My weary body, heavy head, and tired feet, sink, seeking rest. My eyes turn towards a glowing horizon, boundless, immense, seeming to grow increasingly in height and depth. I shall devour it, as I have devoured all else.

When, O God! shall I sleep in my turn? When wilt Thou cease creating? When may I, digging my own grave, stretch myself out within my tomb, and, swinging thus upon the world, list the last breath, the death-gasp, of expiring nature?

When that time comes, away my darts and shroud I’ll hurl. Then shall I free my horse, and he shall graze upon the grass that grows upon the Pyramids, sleep in the palaces of emperors, drink the last drop of water from the sea, and snuff the odour of the last slow drop of blood! By day, by night, through the countless ages, he shall roam through fields eternal as the fancy takes him; shall leap with one great bound from Atlas to the Himalayas; shall course, in his insolent pride, from heaven to earth; disport himself by caracoling in the dust of crumbled empires; shall speed across the beds of dried-up oceans; shall bound o’er ruins of enormous cities; inhale the void with swelling chest, and roll and stretch at ease.

Then haply, faithful one, weary as I, thou finally shalt seek some precipice from which to cast thyself; shalt halt, panting before the mysterious ocean of infinity; and then, with foaming mouth, dilated nostrils, and extended neck turned towards the horizon, thou shalt, as I, pray for eternal sleep; for repose for thy fiery feet; for a bed of green leaves, whereon reclining thou canst close thy burning eyes forever. There, waiting motionless upon the brink, thou shalt desire a power stronger than thyself to kill thee at a single blow — shalt pray for union with the dying storm, the faded flower, the shrunken corpse. Thou shalt seek sleep, because eternal life is torture, and the tomb is peace.

Why are we here? What hurricane has hurled us into this abyss? What tempest soon shall bear us away towards the forgotten planets whence we came?

Till then, my glorious steed, thou shalt run thy course; thou mayst please thine ear with the crunching of the heads crushed under thy feet. Thy course is long, but courage! Long time hast thou carried me: but longer time still must elapse, and yet we shall not age.

Stars may be quenched, the mountains crumble, the earth finally wear away its diamond axis; but we two, we alone are immortal, for the impalpable lives forever!

But to-day them canst lie at my feet, and polish thy teeth against the moss-grown tombs, for Satan has abandoned me, and a power unknown compels me to obey his will. Lo! the dead seek to rise from their graves.

*

Satan, I love thee! Thou alone canst comprehend my joys and my deliriums. But, more fortunate than I, thou wilt some day, when earth shall be no more, recline and sleep within the realms of space.

But I, who have lived so long, have worked so ceaselessly, with only virtuous loves and solemn thoughts, — I must endure immortality. Man has his tomb, and glory its oblivion; the day dies into night but I — !

And I am doomed to lasting solitude upon my way, strewn with the bones of men and marked by ruins. Angels have fellow-angels; demons their companions of darkness; but I hear only sounds of a clanking scythe, my whistling arrows, and my speeding horse. Always the echo of the surging billows that sweep over and engulf mankind!

SATAN.

Dost thou complain, — thou, the most fortunate creature under heaven? The only, splendid, great, unchangeable, eternal one — like God, who is the only Being that equals thee! Dost thou repine, who some day in thy turn shalt disappear forever, after thou hast crushed the universe beneath thy horse’s feet?

When God’s work of creating has ceased; when the heavens have disappeared and the stars are quenched; when spirits rise from their retreats and wander in the depths with sighs and groans; then, what unpicturable delight for thee! Then shalt thou sit on the eternal thrones of heaven and of hell — shalt overthrow the planets, stars, and worlds — shalt loose thy steed in fields of emeralds and diamonds — shalt make his litter of the wings torn from the angels, — shalt cover him with the robe of righteousness! Thy saddle shall be broidered with the stars of the empyrean, — and then thou wilt destroy it! After thou hast annihilated everything, — when naught remains but empty space, — thy coffin shattered and thine arrows broken, then make thyself a crown of stone from heaven’s highest mount, and cast thyself into the abyss of oblivion. Thy fall may last a million aeons, but thou shalt die at last. Because the world must end; all, all must die, — except Satan! Immortal more than God! I live to bring chaos into other worlds!

DEATH.

But thou hast not, as I, this vista of eternal nothingness before thee; thou dost not suffer with this death-like cold, as I.

SATAN.

Nay, but I quiver under fierce and unrelaxing hearts of molten lava, which burn the doomed and which e’en I cannot escape.

For thou, at least, hast only to destroy. But I bring birth and I give life. I direct empires and govern the affairs of States and of hearts empires and govern the affairs of States and of hearts.

I must be everywhere. The precious metals flow, the diamonds glitter, and men’s names resound at my command. I whisper in the ears of women, of poets, and of statesmen, words of love, of glory, of ambition. With Messalina and Nero, at Paris and at Babylon, within the self-same moment do I dwell. Let a new island be discovered, I fly to it ere man can set foot there; though it be but a rock encircled by the sea, I am there in advance of men who will dispute for its possession. I lounge, at the same instant, on a courtesan’s couch and on the perfumed beds of emperors. Hatred and envy, pride and wrath, pour from my lips in simultaneous utterance. By night and day I work. While men ate burning Christians, I luxuriate voluptuously in baths perfumed with roses; I race in chariots; yield to deep despair; or boast aloud in pride.

At times I have believed that I embodied the whole world, and all that I have seen took place, in verity, within my being.

Sometimes I weary, lose my reason, and indulge in such mad follies that the most worthless of my minions ridicule me while they pity me.

No creature cares for me; nowhere am I loved, — neither in heaven, of which I am a son, nor yet in hell, where I am lord, nor upon earth, where men deem me a god. Naught do I see but paroxysms of rage, rivers of blood, or maddened frenzy. Ne’er shall my eyelids close in slumber, never my spirit find repose, whilst thou, at least, canst rest thy head upon the cool, green freshness of the grave. Yea, I must ever dwell amid the glare of palaces, must listen to the curses of the starving, or inhale the stench of crimes that cry aloud to heaven.

God, whom I hate, has punished me indeed! But my soul is greater even than His wrath; in one deep sigh I could the whole world draw into my breast, where it would burn eternally, even as I.

When, Lord, shall thy great trumpet sound? Then a great harmony shall hover over sea and hill. Ah! would that I could suffer with humanity; their cries and sobs should drown the sound of mine!

[*Innumerable skeletons, riding in chariots, advance at a rapid pace, with cries of joy and triumph. They drag broken branches and crowns of laurel, from which the dried and yellow leaves fall continually in the wind and the dust.*]

Lo, a triumphal throng from Rome, the Eternal City! Her Coliseum and her Capitol are now two grains of sands that served once as a pedestal; but Death has swung his scythe: the monuments have fallen. Behold! At their head comes Nero, pride of my heart, the greatest poet earth has known!

[*Nero advances in a chariot drawn by twelve skeleton horses. With the sceptre in his hand, he strikes the bony backs of his steeds. He stands erect, his shroud flapping behind him in billowy folds. He turns, as if upon a racecourse;*

his eyes are flaming and he cries loudly:]

NERO.

Quick! Quick! And faster still, until your feet dash fire from the flinty stones and your nostrils fleck your breasts with foam. What! do not the wheels smoke yet? Hear ye the fanfares, whose sound reached even to Ostia; the clapping of the hands, the cries of joy? See how the populace shower saffron on my head! See how my pathway is already damp with sprayed perfume! My chariot whirls on; the pace is swifter than the wind as I shake the golden reins! Faster and faster! The dust clouds rise; my mantle floats upon the breeze, which in my ears sings "Triumph! triumph!" Faster and faster! Hearken to the shouts of joy, list to the stamping feet and the plaudits of the multitude. Jupiter himself looks down on us from heaven. Faster! yea, faster still!

[*Nero's chariot now seems to be drawn by demons: a black cloud of dust and smoke envelops him; in his erratic course he crashes into tombs, and the re-awakened corpses are crushed under the wheels of the chariot, which now turns, comes forward, and stops.*]

NERO.

Now, let six hundred of my women dance the Grecian Dances silently before me, the while I lave myself with roses in a bath of porphyry. Then let them circle me, with interlacing arms, that I may see on all sides alabaster forms in graceful evolution, swaying like tall reeds bending over an amorous pool.

And I will give the empire and the sea, the Senate, the Olympus, the Capitol, to her who shall embrace me the most ardently; to her whose heart shall throb beneath my own; to her who shall enmesh me in her flowing hair, smile on me sweetest, and enfold me in the warmest clasp; to her who soothing me with songs of love shall waken me to joy and heights of rapture! Rome shall be still this night; no barque shall cleave the waters of the Tiber, since 'tis my wish to see the mirrored moon on its untroubled face and hear the voice of woman floating over it. Let perfumed breezes pass through all my draperies! Ah, I would die, voluptuously intoxicated.

Then, while I eat of some rare meat, that only I may taste, let some one sing, while damsels, lightly draped, serve me from plates of gold and watch my rest. One slave shall cut her sister's throat, because it is my pleasure — a favourite with the gods — to mingle the perfume of blood with that of food, and cries of victims soothe my nerves.

This night I shall burn Rome. The flames shall light up heaven, and Tiber shall roll in waves of fire!

Then, I shall build of aloes wood a stage to float upon the Italian sea, and the Roman populace shall throng thereto chanting my praise. Its draperies shall be of purple, and on it I shall have a bed of eagles’ plumage. There I shall sit, and at my side shall be the loveliest woman in the empire, while all the universe applauds the achievements of a god! And though the tempest roar round me, its rage shall be extinguished ‘neath my feet, and sounds of music shall o’ercome the clamor of the waves!

*

What didst thou say? Vindex revolts, my legions fly, my women flee in terror? Silence and tears alone remain, and I hear naught but the rolling of thunder. Must I die, now?

DEATH.

Instantly!

NERO.

Must I give up my days of feasting and delight, my spectacles, my triumphs, my chariots and the applause of multitudes?

DEATH.

All! All!

SATAN.

Haste, Master of the World! One comes — One who will put thee to the sword. An emperor knows how to die!

NERO.

Die! I have scarce begun to live! Oh, what great deeds I should accomplish — deeds that should make Olympus tremble! I would fill up the bed of hoary ocean and speed across it in a triumphal car. I would still live — would see the sun once more, the Tiber, the Campagna, the Circus on the golden sands. Ah! let me live!

DEATH.

I will give thee a mantle for the tomb, and an eternal bed that shall be softer and more peaceful than the Imperial couch.

NERO.

Yet, I am loth to die.

DEATH.

Die, then!

[*He gathers up the shroud, lying beside him on the ground, and bears away Nero — wrapped in its folds.*]

NOVEMBRE

This little sketch, not longer than an ordinary short story, originally appeared in pamphlet form, and is written in autobiographical style.

NOVEMBRE

A Fantastic Trifle

I.

ANON, in desperation, devoured by burning passions, the wine of life pulsating madly in my veins, and frenzied by the sweet, the secret mysteries of love, sighing after magnificent but vanished dreams, tempted by the voluptuous aspirations of an ardent mind, seeking to comprehend all poetry, all harmony and art, yet staggering 'neath the crushing weight of a heavy heart and an unbounded pride, I fell bewildered into grief's abyss, the rushing blood suffused my face, my veins throbbed, and my bosom swelled with sighs. I saw no more; I felt no more; I was intoxicated, mad. Illusion made me great and told me I contained supreme within myself an incarnation which, revealed, would dazzle men; and even assumed my very dreams to be the emanations of the god that dwelt within me.

To this self-deification all the hours of youth were given. I dreamed my body was a fane in which to worship the divine. The shrine is empty; nettles spring between the stones; its columns now have crumbled, and in its desolation owls have made their nests.

At last no longer did I fret away my life; existence now consumed me. My dreams fatigued me more than the severest labour; a whole creation, immobile, unknown, even to itself, formed a secret undercurrent of the life within me. My soul was chaos, wherein whirled a thousand impulses that knew not how to manifest themselves, yet always sought new ways to mould themselves into some powerful force.

The varying phases of my character were akin to Indian jungles where nature palpitates in every growth, monstrous or adorable, wherever revealed by the sun. A jungle where the air is filled at once with perfumes and with poisons; where tigers bound and through the shadows elephants pace proudly on, like living black pagodas; where sinuous serpents glide through bamboo thickets and mysterious and misshapen gods hide in hollow caverns among heaps of gold. Through this strange region runs a broad stream, where yawning crocodiles at gruesome play disport themselves and drag their scales among the lotus flowers growing near the banks, and over flowery islets often strewn with rotting corpses of the victims of the plague.

Nevertheless, I loved my life, but asked that it expand and radiate. I loved it in the enjoyment of mad gallops on a fiery steed; I loved it in the scintillation of the stars, and in the lulling movement of the waves. I loved it in the throbbing of those fair, smooth bosoms, palpitating under amorous eyes; in the vibrations of the violins; in quivering oak-leaves; in the setting sun, gilding the window panes, and bringing dreams of terraced balconies in Babylon, whereon queens leaned fair arms and gazed out upon Asia.

II.

It rained. I listened to the sound of falling drops and to the breathing of my Marie sleeping.

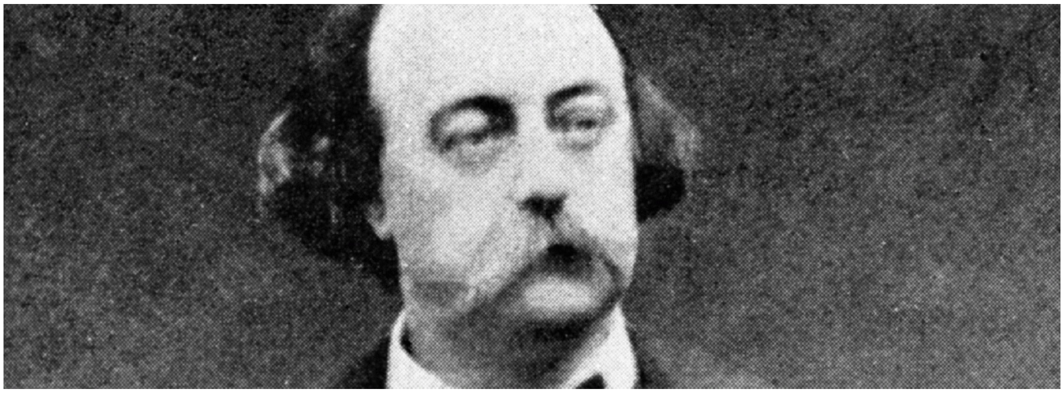
The candles, nigh exhausted, flickered in their crystal sconces. Dawn now appeared, a yellow line that crept along the horizon’s rim, then swiftly upward spread, growing each instant more like glints of golden wine. It threw faint light into the room, tinting the shadows with its purple hues, and mingling in the mirror with the rays of the dying lights.

And Marie lay supine, — parts of her body in the light and others in the shade. Her attitude was careless; her head lay lower than her breast; the right arm, with a bracelet on drooped o’er the side of the bed and almost touched the floor. On the small table near her stood a vase containing violets. I reached out, took the flowers, and broke the cord that tied them; then inhaled their fragrance. They were a little withered; perhaps the room was warm, or possibly some time had fled since they were plucked. I found their odour exquisitely sweet and penetrating. I drank their fragrance, one by one, and as they still were damp, I laid them on my aching eyelids, for my blood was burning and my weary limbs recoiled from touch of draperies as if from fire.

Then, not knowing what to do, not wishing to awaken Marie — for it gave me a strange joy to watch her slumbering — I laid the violets softly, one by one, upon her round, white throat, until they covered it. Somehow, the fading blossoms, under which she slept, brought Marie’s self to mind. Like them, in spite of vanished youth — perhaps because of it — she seemed to shed a keener, more provocative aroma. The sorrows she had tasted lent her mouth a certain bitterness, not without beauty, which remained upon her lips even while she slept. There were two wrinkles on her neck, which day no doubt would hide beneath her hair. Gazing upon this girl, so sad amid caresses, whose very claspings had in them a kind of melancholy joy, I knew that myriad passions must have seared her past, consuming her like levin-belts.

Just then she shivered slightly; all the violets dropped from her fair throat. She smiled, with half-closed eyes; clasping her arms around my neck she pressed upon my lips a long, long kiss of morning greeting, like the kiss of an awakening dove.

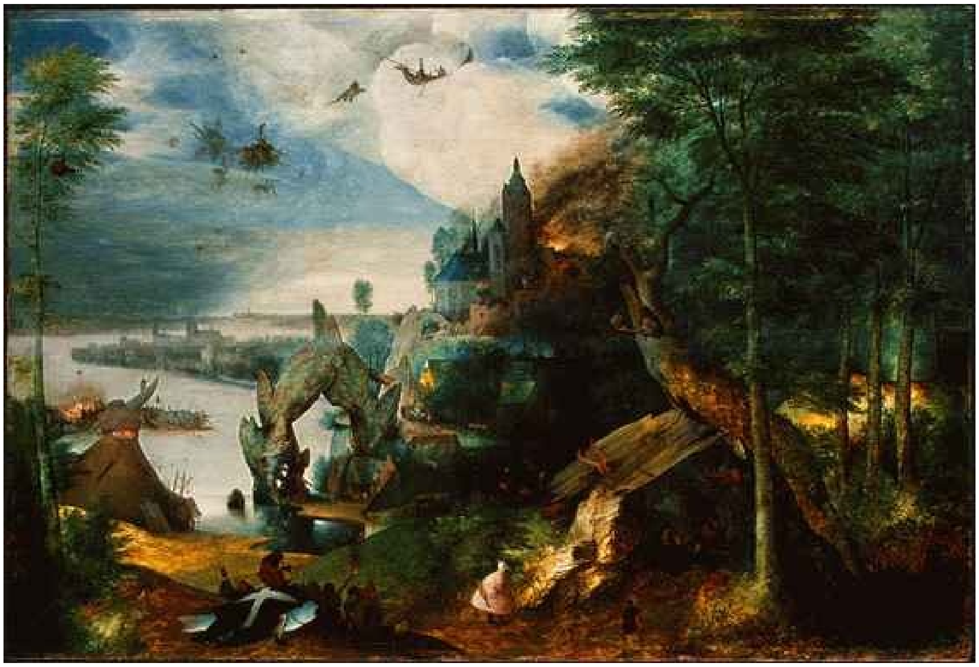
The Poetry



THE TEMPTATION OF SAINT ANTOINE

Translated by M. Walter Dunne

Finally published in 1874, this is a prose poem that Flaubert spent almost his whole life working on. It concerns the famous temptation faced by Saint Anthony the Great in the Egyptian desert, a theme often repeated in medieval and modern art. Written in the form of a play script, it details one night in the life of Anthony the Great, when the saint is faced with great temptations.



Le tableau de Bruegel

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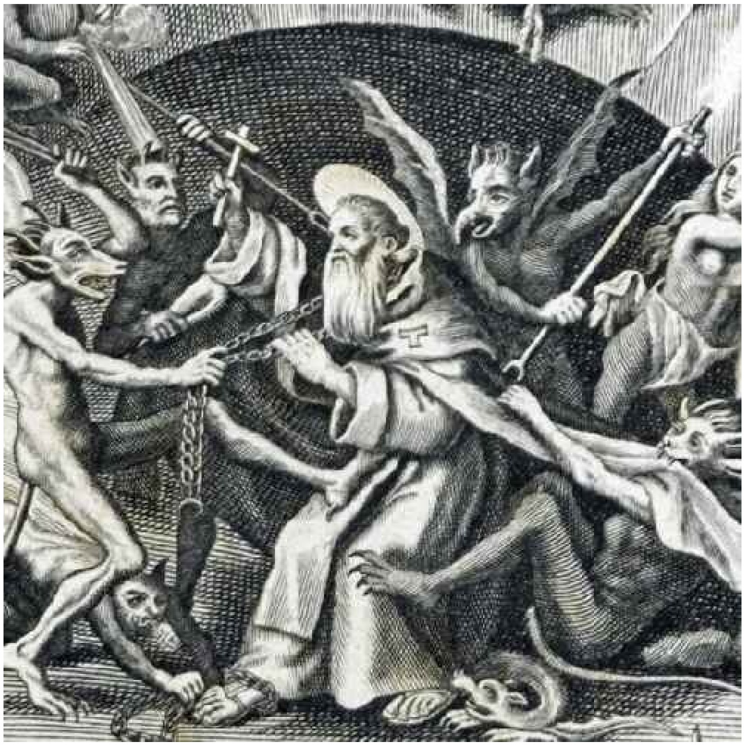
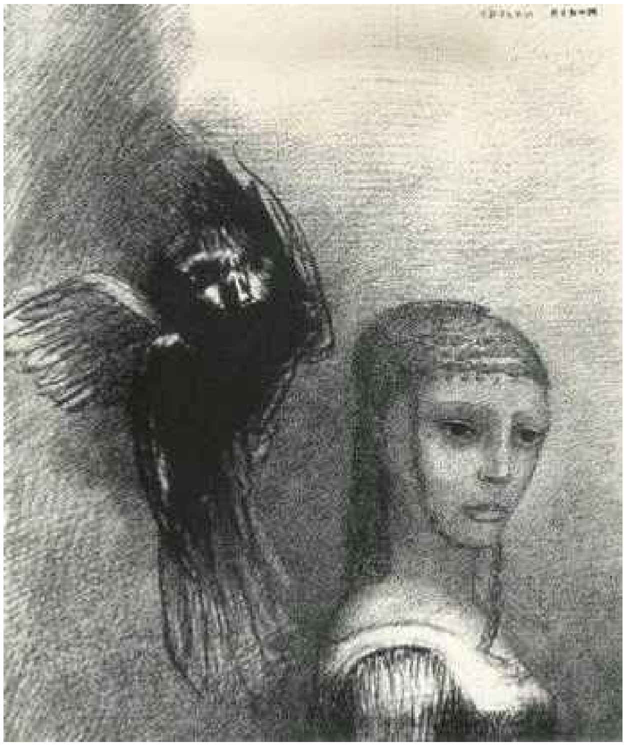


La Tentation de Saint-Antoine by Jacques Callot (détail)


ODILON REDON

An original illustartion for the prose poem

CHAPTER I.

A Holy Saint.

IT is in the Thebaïd, on the heights of a mountain, where a platform, shaped like a crescent, is surrounded by huge stones.

The Hermit's cell occupies the background. It is built of mud and reeds, flat-roofed and doorless. Inside are seen a pitcher and a loaf of black bread; in the centre, on a wooden support, a large book; on the ground, here and there, bits of rush-work, a mat or two, a basket and a knife.

Some ten paces or so from the cell a tall cross is planted in the ground; and, at the other end of the platform, a gnarled old palm-tree leans over the abyss, for the side of the mountain is scarped; and at the bottom of the cliff the Nile swells, as it were, into a lake.

To right and left, the view is bounded by the enclosing rocks; but, on the side of the desert, immense undulations of a yellowish ash-colour rise, one above and one beyond the other, like the lines of a sea-coast; while, far off, beyond the sands, the mountains of the Libyan range form a wall of chalk-like whiteness faintly shaded with violet haze. In front, the sun is going down. Towards the north, the sky has a pearl-grey tint; while, at the zenith, purple clouds, like the tufts of a gigantic mane, stretch over the blue vault. These purple streaks grow browner; the patches of blue assume the paleness of mother-of-pearl. The bushes, the pebbles, the earth, now wear the hard colour of bronze, and through space floats a golden dust so fine that it is scarcely distinguishable from the vibrations of light.

Saint Antony, who has a long beard, unshorn locks, and a tunic of goatskin, is seated, cross-legged, engaged in making mats. No sooner has the sun disappeared than he heaves a deep sigh, and gazing towards the horizon:

"Another day! Another day gone! I was not so miserable in former times as I am now! Before the night was over, I used to begin my prayers; then I would go down to the river to fetch water, and would reascend the rough mountain pathway, singing a hymn, with the water-bottle on my shoulder. After that, I used to amuse myself by arranging everything in my cell. I used to take up my tools, and examine the mats, to see whether they were evenly cut, and the baskets, to see whether they were light; for it seemed to me then that even my most trifling acts were duties which I performed with ease. At regulated hours I left off my work and prayed, with my two arms extended. I felt as if a fountain left off my work and prayed, with my two arms extended. I felt as if a fountain of mercy were flowing from Heaven above into my heart. But now it is dried up. Why is this? ...”

He proceeds slowly into the rocky enclosure.

“When I left home, everyone found fault with me. My mother sank into a dying state; my sister, from a distance, made signs to me to come back; and the other one wept, Ammonaria, that child whom I used to meet every evening, beside the cistern, as she was leading away her cattle. She ran after me. The rings on her feet glittered in the dust, and her tunic, open at the hips, fluttered in the wind. The old ascetic who hurried me from the spot addressed her, as we fled, in loud and menacing tones. Then our two camels kept galloping continuously, till at length every familiar object had vanished from my sight.

“At first, I selected for my abode the tomb of one of the Pharaohs. But some enchantment surrounds those subterranean palaces, amid whose gloom the air is stifled with the decayed odour of aromatics. From the depths of the sarcophagi I heard a mournful voice arise, that called me by name — or rather, as it seemed to me, all the fearful pictures on the walls started into hideous life. Then I fled to the borders of the Red Sea into a citadel in ruins. There I had for companions the scorpions that crawled amongst the stones, and, overhead, the eagles who were continually whirling across the azure sky. At night, I was torn by talons, bitten by beaks, or brushed with light wings; and horrible demons, yelling in my ears, hurled me to the earth. At last, the drivers of a caravan, which was journeying towards Alexandria, rescued me, and carried me along with them.

“After this, I became a pupil of the venerable Didymus. Though he was blind, no one equalled him in knowledge of the Scriptures. When our lesson was ended, he used to take my arm, and, with my aid, ascend the Panium, from whose summit could be seen the Pharos and the open sea. Then we would return home, passing along the quays, where we brushed against men of every nation, including the Cimmerians, clad in bearskin, and the Gymnosophists of the Ganges, who smear their bodies with cow-dung. There were continual conflicts in the streets, some of which were caused by the Jews’ refusal to pay taxes, and others by the attempts of the seditious to drive out the Romans. Besides, the city is filled with heretics, the followers of Manes, of Valentinus, of Basilides, and of Arius, all of them eagerly striving to discuss with you points of doctrine and to convert you to their views.

“Their discourses sometimes come back to my memory; and, though I try not to dwell upon them, they haunt my thoughts.

“I next took refuge in Colzin, and, when I had undergone a severe penance, I no longer feared the wrath of God. Many persons gathered around me, offering to become anchorites. I imposed on them a rule of life in antagonism to the vagaries of Gnosticism and the sophistries of the philosophers. Communications now reached me from every quarter, and people came a great distance to see me.

“Meanwhile, the populace continued to torture the confessors; and I was led back to Alexandria by an ardent thirst for martyrdom. I found on my arrival that the persecution had ceased three days before. Just as I was returning, my path was blocked by a great crowd in front of the Temple of Serapis. I was told that the Governor was about to make one final example. In the centre of the portico, in the broad light of day, a naked woman was fastened to a pillar, while two soldiers were scourging her. At each stroke her entire frame writhed. Suddenly, she cast a wild look around, her trembling lips parted; and, above the heads of the multitude, her figure wrapped, as it were, in her flowing hair, methought I recognised Ammonaria. ... Yet this one was taller — and beautiful, exceedingly!”

He draws his hand across his brow.

“No! no! I must not think upon it!

“On another occasion, Athanasius asked me to assist him against the Arians. At that time, they had confined themselves to attacking him with invectives and ridicule. Since then, however, he has been calumniated, deprived of his see, and banished. Where is he now? I know not! People concern themselves so little about bringing me any news! All my disciples have abandoned me, Hilarion like the rest.

“He was, perhaps, fifteen years of age when he came to me, and his mind was so much filled with curiosity that every moment he was asking me questions. Then he would listen with a pensive air; and, without a murmur, he would run to fetch whatever I wanted — more nimble than a kid, and gay enough, moreover, to make even a patriarch laugh. He was a son to me!”

The sky is red; the earth completely dark. Agitated by the wind, clouds of sand rise, like winding-sheets, and then fall again. All at once, in a clear space in the heavens, a flock of birds flits by, forming a kind of triangular battalion, resembling a piece of metal with its edges alone vibrating.

Antony glances at them.

“Ah! how I should like to follow them! How often, too, have I not wistfully gazed at the long boats with their sails resembling wings, especially when they bore away those who had been my guests! What happy times I used to have with them! What outpourings! None of them interested me more than Ammon. He described to me his journey to Rome, the Catacombs, the Coliseum, the piety of illustrious women, and a thousand other things. And yet I was unwilling to go away with him! How came I to be so obstinate in clinging to this solitary life? It might have been better for me had I stayed with the monks of Nitria when they besought me to do so. They occupy separate cells, and yet communicate with one another. On Sunday the trumpet calls them to the church, where you may see three whips hung up, which are reserved for the punishment of thieves and intruders, for they maintain very severe discipline.

"Nevertheless, they do not stand in need of gifts, for the faithful bring them eggs, fruit, and even instruments for removing thorns from their feet. There are vineyards around Pisperi, and those of Pabenum have a raft, in which they go forth to seek provisions.

"But I should have served my brethren more effectually by being a simple priest. I might succour the poor, administer the sacraments, and guard the purity of domestic life. Besides, all the laity are not lost, and there was nothing to prevent me from being, for example, a grammarian or a philosopher. I should have had in my room a sphere made of reeds, tablets always in my hand, young people around me, and a crown of laurel suspended as an emblem over my door.

"But there is too much pride in such triumphs! Better be a soldier. I was strong and courageous enough to manage engines of war, to traverse gloomy forests, or, with helmet on head, to enter smoking cities. More than this, there would be nothing to hinder me from purchasing with my earnings the office of toll-keeper of some bridge, and travellers would relate to me their histories, pointing out to me heaps of curious objects which they had stowed away in their baggage.

"On festival days the merchants of Alexandria sail along the Canopic branch of the Nile and drink wine from cups of lotus, to the sound of tambourines, which make all the taverns near the river shake. Beyond, trees, cut cone-fashion, protect the peaceful farmsteads against the south wind. The roof of each house rests on slender columns running close to one another, like the framework of a lattice, and, through these spaces, the owner, stretched on a long seat, can gaze out upon his grounds and watch his servants thrashing corn or gathering in the vintage, and the cattle trampling on the straw. His children play along the grass; his wife bends forward to kiss him."

Through the deepening shadows of the night pointed snouts reveal themselves here and there with ears erect and glittering eyes. Antony advances towards them. Scattering the wind in their wild rush, the animals take flight. It was a troop of jackals.

One of them remains behind, and, resting on two paws, with his body bent and his head on one side, he places himself in an attitude of defiance.

"How pretty he looks! I should like to pass my hand softly over his back."

Antony whistles to make him come near. The jackal disappears.

"Ah! he is gone to join his fellows. Oh! this solitude! this weariness!"

Laughing bitterly:

“This is such a delightful life — to twist palm branches in the fire to make shepherds’ crooks, to turn out baskets and fasten mats together, and then to exchange all this handiwork with the Nomads for bread that breaks your teeth! Ah! wretched me! will there never be an end of this? But, indeed, death would be better! I can bear it no longer! Enough! Enough!”

He stamps his foot, and makes his way through the rocks with rapid step, then stops, out of breath, bursts into sobs, and flings himself upon the ground.

The night is calm; millions of stars are trembling in the sky. No sound is heard save the chattering of the tarantula.

The two arms of the cross cast a shadow on the sand. Antony, who is weeping, perceives it.

“Am I so weak, my God? Courage! Let us arise!”

He enters his cell, finds there the embers of a fire, lights a torch, and places it on the wooden stand, so as to illumine the big book.

“Suppose I take — the ‘Acts of the Apostles’ — yes, no matter where!

“‘*He saw the sky opened with a great linen sheet which was let down by its four corners, wherein were all kinds of terrestrial animals and wild beasts, reptiles and birds. And a voice said to him: Arise, Peter! Kill and eat!*’

“So, then, the Lord wished that His apostle should eat every kind of food? ... whilst I ...”

Antony lets his chin sink on his breast. The rustling of the pages, which the wind scatters, causes him to lift his head, and he reads:

“‘*The Jews slew all their enemies with swords, and made a great carnage of them, so that they disposed at will of those whom they hated.*’

“There follows the enumeration of the people slain by them — seventy-five thousand. They had endured so much! Besides, their enemies were the enemies of the true God. And how they must have enjoyed their vengeance, completely slaughtering the idolaters! No doubt the city was gorged with the dead! They must have been at the garden gates, on the staircases, and packed so closely together in the various rooms that the doors could not be closed! But here am I plunging into thoughts of murder and bloodshed!”

He opens the book at another passage.

“‘*Nebuchadnezzar prostrated himself with his face on the ground and adored Daniel.*’

“Ah! that is good! The Most High exalts His prophets above kings. This monarch spent his life in feasting, always intoxicated with sensuality and pride. But God, to punish him, changed him into a beast, and he walked on four paws!”

Antony begins to laugh; and, while stretching out his arms, disarranges the leaves of the book with the tips of his fingers. Then his eyes fall on these words:

“‘*Ezechias felt great joy in coming to them. He showed them his perfumes, his gold and silver, all his aromatics, his sweet-smelling oils, all his precious vases, and the things that were in his treasures.*’

“I can imagine how they beheld, heaped up to the very ceiling, gems, diamonds, darics. A man who possesses such an accumulation of these things is not the same as others. While handling them, he assumes that he holds the result of innumerable exertions, and that he has absorbed, and can again diffuse, the very life of the people. This is a useful precaution for kings. The wisest of them all was not wanting in it. His fleets brought him ivory — and apes. Where is this? It is — — ”

He rapidly turns over the leaves.

“Ah! this is the place:

“‘*The Queen of Sheba, being aware of the glory of Solomon, came to tempt him, propounding enigmas.*’

“How did she hope to tempt him? The Devil was very desirous to tempt Jesus. But Jesus triumphed because He was God, and Solomon owing, perhaps, to his magical science. It is sublime, this science; for — as a philosopher has explained to me — the world forms a whole, all whose parts have an influence on one another, like the different organs of a single body. It is interesting to understand the affinities and antipathies implanted in everything by Nature, and then to put them into play. In this way one might be able to modify laws that appear to be unchangeable.”

At this point the two shadows traced behind him by the arms of the cross project themselves in front of him. They form, as it were, two great horns. Antony exclaims:

“Help, my God!”

The shadows resume their former position.

“Ah! it was an illusion — nothing more. It is useless for me to torment my soul, I have no need to do so — absolutely no need!”

He sits down and crosses his arms.

“And yet methought I felt the approach ... But why should *he* come? Besides, do I not know his artifices? I have repelled the monstrous anchorite who, with a laugh, offered me little hot loaves; the centaur who tried to take me on his back; and that vision of a beautiful dusky maid amid the sands, which revealed itself to me as the spirit of voluptuousness.”

Antony walks up and down rapidly.

“It is by my direction that all these holy retreats have been built, full of monks wearing hair-cloths beneath their goatskins, and numerous enough to monks wearing hair-cloths beneath their goatskins, and numerous enough to furnish forth an army. I have healed diseases at a distance. I have banished demons. I have waded through the river in the midst of crocodiles. The Emperor Constantine has written me three letters; and Balacius, who treated with contempt the letter I sent him, has been torn by his own horses. The people of Alexandria, whenever I reappeared amongst them, fought to get a glimpse of me; and Athanasius was my guide when I took my departure. But what toils, too, I have had to undergo! Here, for more than thirty years, have I been constantly groaning in the desert! I have carried on my loins eighty pounds of bronze, like Eusebius; I have exposed my body to the stings of insects, like Macarius; I have remained fifty-three nights without closing an eye, like Pachomius; and those who are decapitated, torn with pincers, or burnt, possess less virtue, perhaps, inasmuch as my life is a continual martyrdom!”

Antony slackens his pace.

“Certainly there is no one who undergoes so much mortification. Charitable hearts are growing fewer, and people never give me anything now. My cloak is worn out, and I have no sandals, nor even a porringer; for I gave all my goods and chattels to the poor and my own family, without keeping a single obolus for myself. Should I not need a little money to get the tools that are indispensable for my work? Oh! not much — a little sum! ... I would husband it.

“The Fathers of Nicæa were ranged in purple robes on thrones along the wall, like the Magi; and they were entertained at a banquet, while honours were heaped upon them, especially on Paphnutius, merely because he has lost an eye and is lame since Dioclesian’s persecution! Many a time the Emperor has kissed his injured eye. What folly! Moreover, the Council had such worthless members! Theophilus, a bishop of Scythia; John, another, in Persia; Spiridion, a cattle-drover. Alexander was too old. Athanasius ought to have made himself more agreeable to the Arians in order to get concessions from them!

“How is it they dealt with me? They would not even give me a hearing! He who spoke against me — a tall young man with a curling beard — coolly launched out captious objections; and while I was trying to find words to reply to him, they kept looking at me with malignant glances, barking at me like hyenas. Ah! if I could only get them all sent into exile by the Emperor, or rather smite them, crush them, behold them suffering. I have much to suffer myself!”

He sinks swooning against the wall of his cell.

“This is what it is to have fasted overmuch! My strength is going. If I had eaten, only once, a morsel of meat!”

He half-closes his eyes languidly.

“Ah! for some red flesh ... a bunch of grapes to nibble, some curds that would quiver on a plate!

“But what ails me now? What ails me now? I feel my heart dilating like the sea when it swells before the storm. An overwhelming weakness bows me down, and the warm atmosphere seems to waft towards me the odour of hair. Still, there is no trace of a woman here.”

He turns towards the little pathway amid the rocks.

“This is the way they come, poised in their litters on the black arms of eunuchs. They descend, and, joining together their hands, laden with rings, they kneel down. They tell me their troubles. The need of a superhuman voluptuousness tortures them. They would like to die; in their dreams they have seen gods who called them by name; and the edges of their robes fall round my feet. I repel them. ‘Oh! no,’ they say to me, ‘not yet! What must I do?’ Any penance will appear easy to them. They ask me for the most severe: to share in my own, to live with me.

“It is a long time now since I have seen any of them! Perhaps, though, this is what is about to happen? And why not? If suddenly I were to hear the mule-bells ringing in the mountains. It seems to me ...”

Antony climbs upon a rock, at the entrance of the path, and bends forward, darting his eyes into the darkness.

“Yes! down there, at the very end, there is a moving mass, like people who are trying to pick their way. Here it is! They are making a mistake.”

Calling out:

“On this side! Come! Come!”

The echo repeats:

“Come! Come!”

He lets his arms fall down, quite dazed.

“What a shame! Ah! poor Antony!”

And immediately he hears a whisper:

“Poor Antony.”

“Is that anyone? Answer!”

It is the wind passing through the spaces between the rocks that causes these intonations, and in their confused sonorities he distinguishes voices, as if the air were speaking. They are low and insinuating, a kind of sibilant utterance:

The first — ”Do you wish for women?”

The second — ”Nay; rather great piles of money.”

The third — ”A shining sword.”

The others — ”All the people admire you.”

“Go to sleep.”

“You will cut their throats. Yes! you will cut their throats.”

At the same time, visible objects undergo a transformation. On the edge of the cliff, the old palm-tree, with its cluster of yellow leaves, becomes the torso of a woman leaning over the abyss, and poised by her mass of hair.

Antony re-enters his cell, and the stool which sustains the big book, with its pages filled with black letters, seems to him a bush covered with swallows.

“Without doubt, it is the torch that is making this play of light. Let us put it out!”

He puts it out, and finds himself in profound darkness.

And, suddenly, through the midst of the air, passes first, a pool of water, then a prostitute, the corner of a temple, a figure of a soldier, and a chariot with two white horses prancing.

These images make their appearance abruptly, in successive shocks, standing out from the darkness like pictures of scarlet above a background of ebony.

Their motion becomes more rapid; they pass in a dizzy fashion. At other times they stop, and, growing pale by degrees, dissolve — or, rather, they fly away, and instantly others arrive in their stead.

Antony droops his eyelids.

They multiply, surround, besiege him. An unspeakable terror seizes hold of him, and he no longer has any sensation but that of a burning contraction in the epigastrium. In spite of the confusion of his brain, he is conscious of a tremendous silence which separates him from all the world. He tries to speak; impossible! It is as if the link that bound him to existence was snapped; and, making no further resistance, Antony falls upon the mat.

CHAPTER II.

The Temptation of Love and Power.

THEN, a great shadow — more subtle than an ordinary shadow, from whose borders other shadows hang in festoons — traces itself upon the ground.

It is the Devil, resting against the roof of the cell and carrying under his wings — like a gigantic bat that is suckling its young — the Seven Deadly Sins, whose grinning heads disclose themselves confusedly.

Antony, his eyes still closed, remains languidly passive, and stretches his limbs upon the mat, which seems to him to grow softer every moment, until it swells out and becomes a bed; then the bed becomes a shallop, with water rippling against its sides.

To right and left rise up two necks of black soil that tower above the cultivated plains, with a sycamore here and there. A noise of bells, drums, and singers resounds at a distance. These are caused by people who are going down from Canopus to sleep at the Temple of Serapis. Antony is aware of this, and he glides, driven by the wind, between the two banks of the canal. The leaves of the papyrus and the red blossoms of the water-lilies, larger than a man, bend over him. He lies extended at the bottom of the vessel. An oar from behind drags through the water. From time to time rises a hot breath of air that shakes the thin reeds. The murmur of the tiny waves grows fainter. A drowsiness takes possession of him. He dreams that he is an Egyptian Solitary.

Then he starts up all of a sudden.

“Have I been dreaming? It was so pleasant that I doubted its reality. My tongue is burning! I am thirsty!”

He enters his cell and searches about everywhere at random.

“The ground is wet! Has it been raining? Stop! Scraps of food! My pitcher broken! But the water-bottle?”

He finds it.

“Empty, completely empty! In order to get down to the river, I should need three hours at least, and the night is so dark I could not see well enough to find my way there. My entrails are writhing. Where is the bread?”

After searching for some time he picks up a crust smaller than an egg.

“How is this? The jackals must have taken it, curse them!”

And he flings the bread furiously upon the ground.

This movement is scarcely completed when a table presents itself to view

This movement is scarcely completed when a table presents itself to view, covered with all kinds of dainties. The table-cloth of byssus, striated like the fillets of sphinxes, seems to unfold itself in luminous undulations. Upon it there are enormous quarters of flesh-meat, huge fishes, birds with their feathers, quadrupeds with their hair, fruits with an almost natural colouring; and pieces of white ice and flagons of violet crystal shed glowing reflections. In the middle of the table Antony observes a wild boar smoking from all its pores, its paws beneath its belly, its eyes half-closed — and the idea of being able to eat this formidable animal rejoices his heart exceedingly. Then, there are things he had never seen before — black hashes, jellies of the colour of gold, ragoûts, in which mushrooms float like water-lilies on the surface of a pool, whipped creams, so light that they resemble clouds.

And the aroma of all this brings to him the odour of the ocean, the coolness of fountains, the mighty perfume of woods. He dilates his nostrils as much as possible; he drivels, saying to himself that there is enough there to last for a year, for ten years, for his whole life!

In proportion as he fixes his wide-opened eyes upon the dishes, others accumulate, forming a pyramid, whose angles turn downwards. The wines begin to flow, the fishes to palpitate; the blood in the dishes bubbles up; the pulp of the fruits draws nearer, like amorous lips; and the table rises to his breast, to his very chin — with only one seat and one cover, which are exactly in front of him.

He is about to seize the loaf of bread. Other loaves make their appearance.

“For me! ... all! but — — ”

Antony draws back.

“In the place of the one which was there, here are others! It is a miracle, then, exactly like that the Lord performed! ... With what object? Nay, all the rest of it is not less incomprehensible! Ah! demon, begone! begone!”

He gives a kick to the table. It disappears.

“Nothing more? No!”

He draws a long breath.

“Ah! the temptation was strong. But what an escape I have had!”

He raises up his head, and stumbles against an object which emits a sound.

“What can this be?”

Antony stoops down.

“Hold! A cup! Someone must have lost it while travelling — nothing extraordinary! — --”

He wets his finger and rubs.

“It glitters! Precious metal! However, I cannot distinguish — — ”

He lights his torch and examines the cup.

“It is made of silver. adorned with ovolos at its rim. with a medal at the bottom.”

He makes the medal resound with a touch of his finger-nail.

“It is a piece of money which is worth from seven to eight drachmas — not more. No matter! I can easily with that sum get myself a sheepskin.”

The torch’s reflection lights up the cup.

“It is not possible! Gold! yes, all gold!”

He finds another piece, larger than the first, at the bottom, and, underneath that many others.

“Why, here’s a sum large enough to buy three cows — a little field!”

The cup is now filled with gold pieces.

“Come, then! a hundred slaves, soldiers, a heap wherewith to buy — — ”

Here the granulations of the cup’s rim, detaching themselves, form a pearl necklace.

“With this jewel here, one might even win the Emperor’s wife!”

With a shake Antony makes the necklace slip over his wrist. He holds the cup in his left hand, and with his right arm raises the torch to shed more light upon it. Like water trickling down from a basin, it pours itself out in continuous waves, so as to make a hillock on the sand — diamonds, carbuncles, and sapphires mingled with huge pieces of gold bearing the effigies of kings.

“What? What? Staters, shekels, darics, aryandics! Alexander, Demetrius, the Ptolemies, Cæsar! But each of them had not as much! Nothing impossible in it! More to come! And those rays which dazzle me! Ah! my heart overflows! How good this is! Yes! ... Yes! ... more! Never enough! It did not matter even if I kept flinging it into the sea; more would remain. Why lose any of it? I will keep it all, without telling anyone about it. I will dig myself a chamber in the rock, the interior of which will be lined with strips of bronze; and thither will I come to feel the piles of gold sinking under my heels. I will plunge my arms into it as if into sacks of corn. I would like to anoint my face with it — to sleep on top of it!”

He lets go the torch in order to embrace the heap, and falls to the ground on his breast. He gets up again. The place is perfectly empty!

“What have I done? If I died during that brief space of time, the result would have been Hell — irrevocable Hell!”

A shudder runs through his frame.

“So, then, I am accursed? Ah! no, this is all my own fault! I let myself be caught in every trap. There is no one more idiotic or more infamous. I would like to beat myself, or, rather, to tear myself out of my body. I have restrained myself too long. I need to avenge myself, to strike, to kill! It is as if I had a troop of wild beasts in my soul. I would like, with a stroke of a hatchet in the midst of a crowd

— — Ah! a dagger! ...”

He flings himself upon his knife, which he has just seen. The knife slips from his hand, and Antony remains propped against the wall of his cell, his mouth wide open, motionless — like one in a trance.

All the surroundings have disappeared.

He finds himself in Alexandria on the Panium — an artificial mound raised in the centre of the city, with corkscrew stairs on the outside.

In front of it stretches Lake Mareotis, with the sea to the right and the open plain to the left, and, directly under his eyes, an irregular succession of flat roofs, traversed from north to south and from east to west by two streets, which cross each other, and which form, in their entire length, a row of porticoes with Corinthian capitals. The houses overhanging this double colonnade have stained-glass windows. Some have enormous wooden cages outside of them, in which the air from without is swallowed up.

Monuments in various styles of architecture are piled close to one another. Egyptian pylons rise above Greek temples. Obelisks exhibit themselves like spears between battlements of red brick. In the centres of squares there are statues of Hermes with pointed ears, and of Anubis with dogs’ heads. Antony notices the mosaics in the court-yards, and the tapestries hung from the cross-beams of the ceiling.

With a single glance he takes in the two ports (the Grand Port and the Eunostus), both round like two circles, and separated by a mole joining Alexandria to the rocky island, on which stands the tower of the Pharos, quadrangular, five hundred cubits high and in nine storys, with a heap of black charcoal flaming on its summit.

Small ports nearer to the shore intersect the principal ports. The mole is terminated at each end by a bridge built on marble columns fixed in the sea. Vessels pass beneath, and pleasure-boats inlaid with ivory, gondolas covered with awnings, triremes and biremes, all kinds of shipping, move up and down or remain at anchor along the quays.

Around the Grand Port there is an uninterrupted succession of Royal structures: the palace of the Ptolemies, the Museum, the Posideion, the Cæsarium, the Timonium where Mark Antony took refuge, and the Soma which contains the tomb of Alexander; while at the other extremity of the city, close to the Eunostus, might be seen glass, perfume, and paper factories.

Itinerant vendors, porters, and ass-drivers rush to and fro, jostling against one another. Here and there a priest of Osiris with a panther’s skin on his shoulders, a Roman soldier, or a group of negroes, may be observed. Women stop in front of stalls where artisans are at work, and the grinding of chariot-wheels frightens away some birds who are picking up from the ground the sweepings of the shambles and the remnants of fish. Over the uniformity of white houses the plan of the streets casts, as it were, a black network. The markets, filled with herbage, exhibit green bouquets, the drying-sheds of the dyers, plates of colours, and the gold ornaments on the pediments of temples, luminous points — all this contained within the oval enclosure of the greyish walls, under the vault of the blue heavens, hard by the motionless sea. But the crowd stops and looks towards the eastern side, from which enormous whirlwinds of dust are advancing.

It is the monks of the Thebaïd who are coming, clad in goats' skins, armed with clubs, and howling forth a canticle of war and of religion with this refrain:

"Where are they? Where are they?"

Antony comprehends that they have come to kill the Arians.

All at once, the streets are deserted, and one sees no longer anything but running feet.

And now the Solitaries are in the city. Their formidable cudgels, studded with nails, whirl around like monstrances of steel. One can hear the crash of things being broken in the houses. Intervals of silence follow, and then the loud cries burst forth again. From one end of the streets to the other there is a continuous eddying of people in a state of terror. Several are armed with pikes. Sometimes two groups meet and form into one; and this multitude, after rushing along the pavements, separates, and those composing it proceed to knock one another down. But the men with long hair always reappear.

Thin wreaths of smoke escape from the corners of buildings. The leaves of the doors burst asunder; the skirts of the walls fall in; the architraves topple over.

Antony meets all his enemies one after another. He recognises people whom he had forgotten. Before killing them, he outrages them. He rips them open, cuts their throats, knocks them down, drags the old men by their beards, runs over children, and beats those who are wounded. People revenge themselves on luxury. Those who cannot read, tear the books to pieces; others smash and destroy the statues, the paintings, the furniture, the cabinets — a thousand dainty objects whose use they are ignorant of, and which, for that very reason, exasperate them. From time to time they stop, out of breath, and then begin again. The inhabitants, taking refuge in the court-yards, utter lamentations. The women lift their eyes to Heaven, weeping, with their arms bare. In order to move the Solitaries they embrace their knees; but the latter only dash them aside, and the blood gushes up to the ceiling, falls back on the linen clothes that line the walls, streams from the trunks of decapitated corpses, fills the aqueducts, and rolls in great red pools along the ground.

Antony is steeped in it up to his middle. He steps into it, sucks it up with his lips, and quivers with joy at feeling it on his limbs and under his hair, which is quite wet with it.

The night falls. The terrible clamour abates.

The Solitaries have disappeared.

Suddenly, on the outer galleries lining the nine stages of the Pharos, Antony perceives thick black lines, as if a flock of crows had alighted there. He hastens thither, and soon finds himself on the summit.

A huge copper mirror turned towards the sea reflects the ships in the offing.

Antony amuses himself by looking at them; and as he continues looking at them, their number increases.

They are gathered in a gulf formed like a crescent. Behind, upon a promontory, stretches a new city built in the Roman style of architecture, with cupolas of stone, conical roofs, marble work in red and blue, and a profusion of bronze attached to the volutes of capitals, to the tops of houses, and to the angles of cornices. A wood, formed of cypress-trees, overhangs it. The colour of the sea is greener; the air is colder. On the mountains at the horizon there is snow.

Antony is about to pursue his way when a man accosts him, and says:

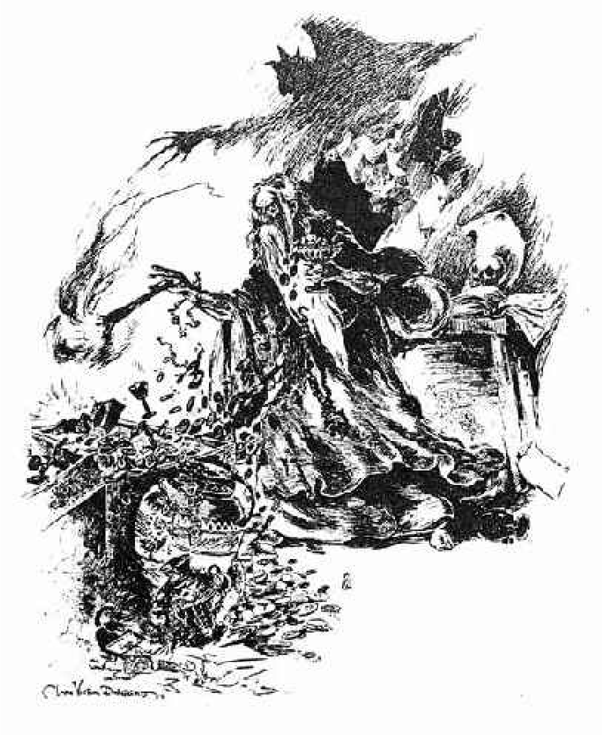
“Come! they are waiting for you!”

He traverses a forum, enters a court-yard, stoops under a gate, and he arrives before the front of the palace, adorned with a group in wax representing the Emperor Constantine hurling the dragon to the earth. A porphyry basin supports in its centre a golden conch filled with pistachio-nuts. His guide informs him that he may take some of them. He does so.

Then he loses himself, as it were, in a succession of apartments.

Along the walls may be seen, in mosaic, generals offering conquered cities to the Emperor on the palms of their hands. And on every side are columns of basalt, gratings of silver filigree, seats of ivory, and tapestries embroidered with pearls. The light falls from the vaulted roof, and Antony proceeds on his way. Tepid exhalations spread around; occasionally he hears the modest patter of a sandal. Posted in the ante-chambers, the custodians — who resemble automatons — bear on their shoulders vermilion-coloured truncheons.

At last, he finds himself in the lower part of a hall with hyacinth curtains at its extreme end. They divide, and reveal the Emperor seated upon a throne, attired in a violet tunic and red buskins with black bands.



A diadem of pearls is wreathed around his hair, which is arranged in symmetrical rolls. He has drooping eyelids, a straight nose, and a heavy and cunning expression of countenance. At the corners of the daïs, extended above his head, are placed four golden doves, and, at the foot of the throne, two enamelled lions are squatted. The doves begin to coo, the lions to roar. The Emperor rolls his eyes; Antony steps forward; and directly, without preamble, they proceed with a narrative of events.

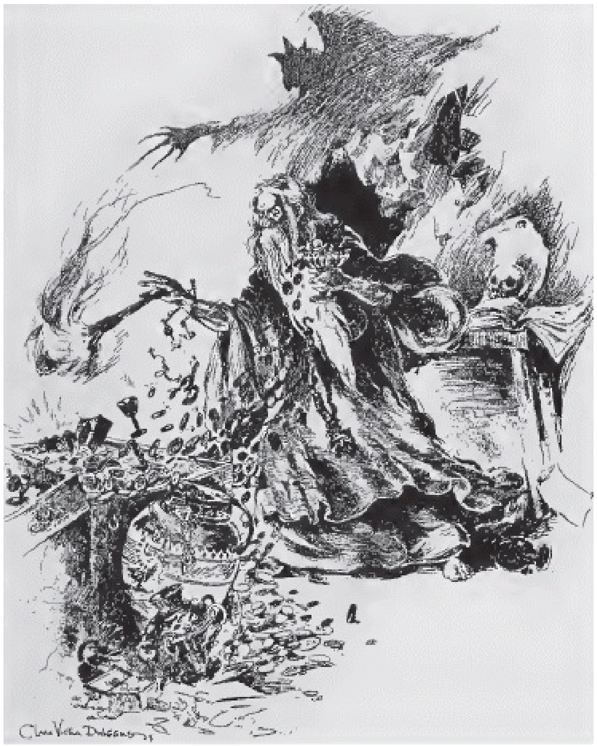
“In the cities of Antioch, Ephesus, and Alexandria, the temples have been pillaged, and the statues of the gods converted into pots and porridge-pans.”

The Emperor laughs heartily at this. Antony reproaches him for his tolerance towards the Novatians. But the Emperor flies into a passion. “Novatians, Arians, Meletians — he is sick of them all!” However, he admires the episcopacy, for the Christians create bishops, who depend on five or six personages, and it is his interest to gain over the latter in order to have the rest on his side. Moreover, he has not failed to furnish them with considerable sums. But he detests the fathers of the Council of Nicæa. “Come, let us have a look at them.”

Antony follows him. And they are found on the same floor under a terrace which commands a view of a hippodrome full of people, and surmounted by porticoes wherein the rest of the crowd are walking to and fro. In the centre of the course there is a narrow platform on which stands a miniature temple of Mercury, a statue of Constantine, and three bronze serpents intertwined with each other; while at one end there are three huge wooden eggs, and at the other seven dolphins with their tails in the air.

seven dolphins with their tails in the air.

Behind the Imperial pavilion, the prefects of the chambers, the lords of the household, and the Patricians are placed at intervals as far as the first story of a church, all whose windows are lined with women. At the right is the gallery of the Blue faction, at the left that of the Green, while below there is a picket of soldiers, and, on a level with the arena, a row of Corinthian pillars, forming the entrance to the stalls.



The races are about to begin; the horses fall into line. Tall plumes fixed between their ears sway in the wind like trees; and in their leaps they shake the chariots in the form of shells, driven by coachmen wearing a kind of many-coloured cuirass with sleeves narrow at the wrists and wide in the arms, with legs uncovered, full beard, and hair shaven above the forehead after the fashion of the Huns.

Antony is deafened by the murmuring of voices. Above and below he perceives nothing but painted faces, motley garments, and plates of worked gold; and the sand of the arena, perfectly white, shines like a mirror.

The Emperor converses with him, confides to him some important secrets, informs him of the assassination of his own son Crispus, and goes so far as to consult Antony about his health.

Meanwhile, Antony perceives slaves at the end of the stalls. They are the fathers of the Council of Nicæa, in rags, abject. The martyr Paphnutius is brushing a horse’s mane; Theophilus is scrubbing the legs of another; John is painting the hoofs of a third; while Alexander is picking up their droppings in a basket.

Antony passes among them. They salaam to him, beg of him to intercede for them, and kiss his hands. The entire crowd hoots at them; and he rejoices in their degradation immeasurably. And now he has become one of the great ones of the Court, the Emperor’s confidant, first minister! Constantine places the diadem on his forehead, and Antony keeps it, as if this honour were quite natural to him.

And presently is disclosed, beneath the darkness, an immense hall, lighted up by candelabra of gold.

Columns, half lost in shadow so tall are they, run in a row behind the tables, which stretch to the horizon, where appear, in a luminous haze, staircases placed one above another, successions of archways, colossi, towers; and, in the background, an unoccupied wing of the palace, which cedars overtop, making blacker masses above the darkness.

The guests, crowned with violets, lean upon their elbows on low-lying couches. Beside each one are placed amphorae, from which they pour out wine; and, at the very end, by himself, adorned with the tiara and covered with carbuncles, King Nebuchadnezzar is eating and drinking. To right and left of him, two theories of priests, with peaked caps, are swinging censers. Upon the ground are crawling captive kings, without feet or hands, to whom he flings bones to pick. Further down stand his brothers, with shades over their eyes, for they are perfectly blind.

A constant lamentation ascends from the depths of the ergastula. The soft and monotonous sounds of a hydraulic organ alternate with the chorus of voices; and one feels as if all around the hall there was an immense city, an ocean of humanity, whose waves were beating against the walls.

The slaves rush forward carrying plates. Women run about offering drink to the guests. The baskets groan under the load of bread, and a dromedary, laden with leathern bottles, passes to and fro, letting vervain trickle over the floor in order to cool it.

Belluarii lead forth lions; dancing-girls, with their hair in ringlets, turn somersaults, while squirting fire through their nostrils; negro-jugglers perform tricks; naked children fling snowballs, which, in falling, crash against the shining silver plate. The clamour is so dreadful that it might be described as a tempest, and the steam of the viands, as well as the respirations of the guests, spreads, as it were, a cloud over the feast. Now and then, flakes from the huge torches, snatched away by the wind, traverse the night like flying stars.

The King wipes off the perfumes from his visage with his hand. He eats from the sacred vessels, and then breaks them, and he enumerates, mentally, his fleets, his armies, his peoples. Presently, through a whim, he will burn his palace, along with his guests. He calculates on rebuilding the Tower of Babel, and dethroning God.

Antony reads, at a distance, on his forehead, all his thoughts. They take possession of himself — and he becomes Nebuchadnezzar.

Immediately, he is satiated with conquests and exterminations; and a longing seizes him to plunge into every kind of vileness. Moreover, the degradation wherewith men are terrified is an outrage done to their souls, a means still more of stupefying them; and, as nothing is lower than a brute beast, Antony falls upon four paws on the table, and bellows like a bull.

He feels a pain in his hand — a pebble, as it happened, has hurt him — and he again finds himself in his cell.

The rocky enclosure is empty. The stars are shining. All is silence.

“Once more I have been deceived. Why these things? They arise from the revolts of the flesh! Ah! miserable man that I am!”

He dashes into his cell, takes out of it a bundle of cords, with iron nails at the ends of them, strips himself to the waist, and raising his eyes towards Heaven:

“Accept my penance, O my God! Do not despise it on account of its insufficiency. Make it sharp, prolonged, excessive. It is time! To work!”

He proceeds to lash himself vigorously.

“Ah! no! no! No pity!”

He begins again.

“Oh! Oh! Oh! Each stroke tears my skin, cuts my limbs. This smarts horribly! Ah! it is not so terrible! One gets used to it. It seems to me even ...”

Antony stops.

“Come on, then, coward! Come on, then! Good! good! On the arms, on the back, on the breast, against the belly, everywhere! Hiss, thongs! bite me! tear me! I would like the drops of my blood to gush forth to the stars, to break my back, to strip my nerves bare! Pincers! wooden horses! molten lead! The martyrs bore more than that! Is that not so, Ammonaria?”

The shadows of the Devil’s horns reappear.

“I might have been fastened to the pillar next to yours, face to face with you, under your very eyes, responding to your shrieks with my sighs, and our griefs would blend into one, and our souls would commingle.”

He flogs himself furiously.

“Hold! hold! for your sake! once more! ... But this is a mere tickling that passes through my frame. What torture! What delight! Those are like kisses. My marrow is melting! I am dying!”

And in front of him he sees three cavaliers, mounted on wild asses, clad in green garments, holding lilies in their hands, and all resembling one another in figure.

Antony turns back, and sees three other cavaliers of the same kind, mounted on similar wild asses, in the same attitude.

He draws back. Then the wild asses, all at the same time, step forward a pace or two, and rub their snouts against him, trying to bite his garment. Voices exclaim, “This way! this way! Here is the place!” And banners appear between the clefts of the mountain, with camels’ heads in halters of red silk, mules laden with baggage, and women covered with yellow veils, mounted astride on piebald horses.

The panting animals lie down; the slaves fling themselves on the bales of goods, roll out the variegated carpets, and strew the ground with glittering objects.

A white elephant, caparisoned with a fillet of gold, runs along, shaking the bouquet of ostrich feathers attached to his head-band.

On his back, lying on cushions of blue wool, cross-legged, with eyelids half-closed and well-poised head, is a woman so magnificently attired that she emits rays around her. The attendants prostrate themselves, the elephant bends his knees, and the Queen of Sheba, gliding down by his shoulder, steps lightly on the carpet and advances towards Antony. Her robe of gold brocade, regularly divided by furbelows of pearls, jet and sapphires, is drawn tightly round her waist by a close-fitting corsage, set off with a variety of colours representing the twelve signs of the Zodiac. She wears high-heeled pattens, one of which is black and strewn with silver stars and a crescent, whilst the other is white and is covered with drops of gold, with a sun in their midst.

Her loose sleeves, garnished with emeralds and birds’ plumes, exposes to view her little, rounded arms, adorned at the wrists with bracelets of ebony; and her hands, covered with rings, are terminated by nails so pointed that the ends of her fingers are almost like needles.

A chain of plate gold, passing under her chin, runs along her cheeks till it twists itself in spiral fashion around her head, over which blue powder is scattered; then, descending, it slips over her shoulders and is fastened above her bosom by a diamond scorpion, which stretches out its tongue between her breasts. From her ears hang two great white pearls. The edges of her eyelids are painted black. On her left cheek-bone she has a natural brown spot, and when she opens her mouth she breathes with difficulty, as if her bodice distressed her.

As she comes forward, she swings a green parasol with an ivory handle surrounded by vermilion bells; and twelve curly negro boys carry the long train of her robe, the end of which is held by an ape, who raises it every now and then.

She says:

“Ah! handsome hermit! handsome hermit! My heart is faint! By dint of stamping with impatience my heels have grown hard, and I have split one of my toe-nails. I sent out shepherds, who posted themselves on the mountains, with their bands stretched over their eyes, and searchers, who cried out your name in the woods, and scouts, who ran along the different roads, saying to each passer-by: ‘Have you seen him?’

“At night I shed tears with my face turned to the wall. My tears, in the long run, made two little holes in the mosaic-work — like pools of water in rocks — for I love you! Oh! yes; very much!”

She catches his beard.

“Smile on me, then, handsome hermit! Smile on me, then! You will find I am very gay! I play on the lyre, I dance like a bee, and I can tell many stories, each one more diverting than the last.

“You cannot imagine what a long journey we have made. Look at the wild asses of the green-clad couriers — dead through fatigue!”

The wild asses are stretched motionless on the ground.

“For three great moons they have journeyed at an even pace, with pebbles in their teeth to cut the wind, their tails always erect, their hams always bent, and always in full gallop. You will not find their equals. They came to me from my maternal grandfather, the Emperor Saharil, son of Jakhschab, son of Jaarab, son of Kastan. Ah! if they were still living, we would put them under a litter in order to get home quickly. But ... how now? ... What are you thinking of?”

She inspects him.

“Ah! when you are my husband, I will clothe you, I will fling perfumes over you, I will pick out your hairs.”

Antony remains motionless, stiffer than a stake, pale as a corpse.

“You have a melancholy air: is it at quitting your cell? Why, I have given up everything for your sake — even King Solomon, who has, no doubt, much wisdom, twenty thousand war-chariots, and a lovely beard! I have brought you my wedding presents. Choose.”

She walks up and down between the row of slaves and the merchandise.

“Here is balsam of Genesareth, incense from Cape Gardefan, ladanum, cinnamon and silphium, a good thing to put into sauces. There are within Assyrian embroideries, ivories from the Ganges, and the purple cloth of Elissa; and this case of snow contains a bottle of Chalybon, a wine reserved for the Kings of Assyria, which is drunk pure out of the horn of a unicorn. Here are collars, clasps, fillets, parasols, gold dust from Baasa, tin from Tartessus, blue wood from Pandion, white furs from Issidonia, carbuncles from the island of Palæsimundum, and tooth-picks made with the hair of the tachas — an extinct animal found under the earth. These cushions are from Emathia, and these mantle-fringes from Palmyra. Under this Babylonian carpet there are ... but come, then! Come, then!”

She pulls Saint Antony along by the beard. He resists. She goes on:

“This light tissue, which crackles under the fingers with the noise of sparks, is the famous yellow linen brought by the merchants from Bactriana. They required no less than forty-three interpreters during their voyage. I will make garments of it for you, which you will put on at home.

“Press the fastenings of that sycamore box, and give me the ivory casket in my elephant’s packing-case!”

They draw out of a box some round objects covered with a veil, and bring her a little case covered with carvings.

“Would you like the buckler of Dgian-ben-Dgian, the builder of the Pyramids? Here it is! It is composed of seven dragons’ skins placed one above another, joined by diamond screws, and tanned in the bile of a parricide. It represents, on one side, all the wars which have taken place since the invention of arms, and, on the other, all the wars that will take place till the end of the world. Above, the thunderbolt rebounds like a ball of cork. I am going to put it on your arm, and you will carry it to the chase.

“But if you knew what I have in my little case! Try to open it! Nobody has succeeded in doing that. Embrace me, and I will tell you.”

She takes Saint Antony by the two cheeks. He repels her with outstretched arms.

“It was one night when King Solomon had lost his head. At length, we had concluded a bargain. He arose, and, going out with the stride of a wolf ...”

She dances a pirouette.

“Ah! ah! handsome hermit! you shall not know it! you shall not know it!”

She shakes her parasol, and all the little bells begin to ring.

“I have many other things besides — there, now! I have treasures shut up in galleries, where they are lost as in a wood. I have summer palaces of lattice-reeds, and winter palaces of black marble. In the midst of great lakes, like seas, I have islands round as pieces of silver all covered with mother-of-pearl, whose shores make music with the beating of the liquid waves that roll over the sand. The slaves of my kitchen catch birds in my aviaries, and angle for fish in my ponds. I have engravers continually sitting to stamp my likeness on hard stones, panting workers in bronze who cast my statues, and perfumers who mix the juice of plants with vinegar and beat up pastes. I have dressmakers who cut out stuffs for me, goldsmiths who make jewels for me, women whose duty it is to select head-dresses for me, and attentive house-painters pouring over my panellings boiling resin, which they cool with fans. I have attendants for my harem boiling resin, which they cool with fans. I have attendants for my harem, eunuchs enough to make an army. And then I have armies, subjects! I have in my vestibule a guard of dwarfs, carrying on their backs ivory trumpets."

Antony sighs.

"I have teams of gazelles, quadrigæ of elephants, hundreds of camels, and mares with such long manes that their feet get entangled with them when they are galloping, and flocks with such huge horns that the woods are torn down in front of them when they are pasturing. I have giraffes who walk in my gardens, and who raise their heads over the edge of my roof when I am taking the air after dinner. Seated in a shell, and drawn by dolphins, I go up and down the grottoes, listening to the water flowing from the stalactites. I journey to the diamond country, where my friends the magicians allow me to choose the most beautiful; then I ascend to earth once more, and return home."

She gives a piercing whistle, and a large bird, descending from the sky, alights on the top of her head-dress, from which he scatters the blue powder. His plumage, of orange colour, seems composed of metallic scales. His dainty head, adorned with a silver tuft, exhibits a human visage. He has four wings, a vulture's claws, and an immense peacock's tail, which he displays in a ring behind him. He seizes in his beak the Queen's parasol, staggers a little before he finds his equilibrium, then erects all his feathers, and remains motionless.

"Thanks, fair Simorg-anka! You who have brought me to the place where the lover is concealed! Thanks! thanks! messenger of my heart! He flies like desire. He travels all over the world. In the evening he returns; he lies down at the foot of my couch; he tells me what he has seen, the seas he has flown over, with their fishes and their ships, the great empty deserts which he has looked down upon from his airy height in the skies, all the harvests bending in the fields, and the plants that shoot up on the walls of abandoned cities."

She twists her arms with a languishing air.

"Oh! if you were willing! if you were only willing! ... I have a pavilion on a promontory, in the midst of an isthmus between two oceans. It is wainscotted with plates of glass, floored with tortoise-shells, and is open to the four winds of Heaven. From above, I watch the return of my fleets and the people who ascend the hill with loads on their shoulders. We should sleep on down softer than clouds; we should drink cool draughts out of the rinds of fruit, and we gaze at the sun through a canopy of emeralds. Come!"

Antony recoils. She draws close to him, and, in a tone of irritation:

"How so? Rich, coquettish, and in love? — is not that enough for you, eh? But must she be lascivious, gross, with a hoarse voice, a head of hair like fire, and rebounding flesh? Do you prefer a body cold as a serpent's skin, or, perchance, great black eyes more sombre than mysterious caverns? Look at these perchance, great black eyes more sombre than mysterious caverns? Look at these eyes of mine, then!”

Antony gazes at them, in spite of himself.

“All the women you ever have met, from the daughter of the cross-roads singing beneath her lantern to the fair patrician scattering leaves from the top of her litter, all the forms you have caught a glimpse of, all the imaginings of your desire, ask for them! I am not a woman — I am a world. My garments have but to fall, and you shall discover upon my person a succession of mysteries.”

Antony’s teeth chattered.

“If you placed your finger on my shoulder, it would be like a stream of fire in your veins. The possession of the least part of my body will fill you with a joy more vehement than the conquest of an empire. Bring your lips near! My kisses have the taste of fruit which would melt in your heart. Ah! how you will lose yourself in my tresses, caress my breasts, marvel at my limbs, and be scorched by my eyes, between my arms, in a whirlwind — — ”

Antony makes the sign of the Cross.

“So, then, you disdain me! Farewell!”

She turns away weeping; then she returns.

“Are you quite sure? So lovely a woman?”

She laughs, and the ape who holds the end of her robe lifts it up.

“You will repent, my fine hermit! you will groan; you will be sick of life! but I will mock at you! la! la! la! oh! oh! oh!”

She goes off with her hands on her waist, skipping on one foot.

The slaves file off before Saint Antony’s face, together with the horses, the dromedaries, the elephant, the attendants, the mules, once more covered with their loads, the negro boys, the ape, and the green-clad couriers holding their broken lilies in their hands — and the Queen of Sheba departs, with a spasmodic utterance which might be either a sob or a chuckle.

CHAPTER III.

The Disciple, Hilarion.

WHEN she has disappeared, Antony perceives a child on the threshold of his cell.

“It is one of the Queen’s servants,” he thinks.

This child is small, like a dwarf, and yet thickset, like one of the Cabiri, distorted, and with a miserable aspect. White hair covers his prodigiously large head, and he shivers under a sorry tunic, while he grasps in his hand a roll of papyrus. The light of the moon, across which a cloud is passing, falls upon him.

Antony observes him from a distance, and is afraid of him.

“Who are you?”

The child replies:

“Your former disciple, Hilarion.”

Antony — ”You lie! Hilarion has been living for many years in Palestine.”

Hilarion — ”I have returned from it! It is I, in good sooth!”

Antony, draws closer and inspects him — ”Why, his figure was bright as the dawn, open, joyous. This one is quite sombre, and has an aged look.”

Hilarion — ”I am worn out with constant toiling.”

Antony — ”The voice, too, is different. It has a tone that chills you.”

Hilarion — ”That is because I nourish myself on bitter fare.”

Antony — ”And those white locks?”

Hilarion — ”I have had so many griefs.”

Antony, aside — ”Can it be possible? ...”

Hilarion — ”I was not so far away as you imagined. The hermit, Paul, paid you a visit this year during the month of Schebar. It is just twenty days since the nomads brought you bread. You told a sailor the day before yesterday to send you three bodkins.”

Antony — ”He knows everything!”

Hilarion — ”Learn, too, that I have never left you. But you spend long intervals without perceiving me.”

Antony — ”How is that? No doubt my head is troubled! To-night especially ...”

Hilarion — ”All the deadly sins have arrived. But their miserable snares are of no avail against a saint like you!”

Antony — ”Oh! no! no! Every minute I give way! Would that I were one of those whose souls are always intrepid and their minds firm — like the great Athanasius, for example!”

Hilarion — ”He was unlawfully ordained by seven bishops!”

Antony — ”What does it matter? If his virtue ...”

Hilarion — ”Come, now! A haughty, cruel man, always mixed up in intrigues, and finally exiled for being a monopolist.”

Antony — ”Calumny!”

Hilarion — ”You will not deny that he tried to corrupt Eustatius, the treasurer of the bounties?”

Antony — ”So it is stated, and I admit it.”

Hilarion — ”He burned, for revenge, the house of Arsenius.”

Antony — ”Alas!”

Hilarion — ”At the Council of Nicæa, he said, speaking of Jesus, ‘The man of the Lord.’“

Antony — ”Ah! that is a blasphemy!”

Hilarion — ”So limited is he, too, that he acknowledges he knows nothing as to the nature of the Word.”

Antony, smiling with pleasure — ”In fact, he has not a very lofty intellect.”

Hilarion — ”If they had put you in his place, it would have been a great satisfaction for your brethren, as well as yourself. This life, apart from others, is a bad thing.”

Antony — ”On the contrary! Man, being a spirit, should withdraw himself from perishable things. All action degrades him. I would like not to cling to the earth — even with the soles of my feet.”

Hilarion — ”Hypocrite! who plunges himself into solitude to free himself the better from the outbreaks of his lusts! You deprive yourself of meat, of wine, of stoves, of slaves, and of honours; but how you let your imagination offer you banquets, perfumes, naked women, and applauding crowds! Your chastity is but a more subtle kind of corruption, and your contempt for the world is but the impotence of your hatred against it! This is the reason that persons like you are so lugubrious, or perhaps it is because they lack faith. The possession of the truth gives joy. Was Jesus sad? He used to go about surrounded by friends; He rested under the shade of the olive, entered the house of the publican, multiplied the cups, pardoned the fallen woman, healing all sorrows. As for you, you have no pity, save for your own wretchedness. You are so much swayed by a kind of remorse, and by a ferocious insanity, that you would repel the caress of a dog or the smile of a child.”

Antony, bursts out sobbing — ”Enough! Enough! You move my heart too much.”

Hilarion — ”Shake off the vermin from your rags! Get rid of your filth! Your God is not a Moloch who requires flesh as a sacrifice!”

Antony — ”Still, suffering is blessed. The cherubim bend down to receive the blood of confessors.”

Hilarion — ”Then admire the Montanists! They surpass all the rest.”

Antony — ”But it is the truth of the doctrine that makes the martyr.”

Hilarion — ”How can he prove its excellence, seeing that he testifies equally on behalf of error?”

Antony — ”Be silent, viper!”

Hilarion — ”It is not perhaps so difficult. The exhortations of friends, the pleasure of outraging popular feeling, the oath they take, a certain giddy excitement — a thousand things, in fact, go to help them.”

Antony draws away from Hilarion. Hilarion follows him — ”Besides, this style of dying introduces great disorders. Dionysius, Cyprian, and Gregory avoided it. Peter of Alexandria has disapproved of it; and the Council of Elvira ...”

Antony, stops his ears — ”I will listen to no more!”

Hilarion, raising his voice — ”Here you are again falling into your habitual sin — laziness. Ignorance is the froth of pride. You say, ‘My conviction is formed; why discuss the matter?’ and you despise the doctors, the philosophers, tradition, and even the text of the law, of which you know nothing. Do you think you hold wisdom in your hand?”

Antony — ”I am always hearing him! His noisy words fill my head.”

Hilarion — ”The endeavours to comprehend God are better than your mortifications for the purpose of moving him. We have no merit save our thirst for truth. Religion alone does not explain everything; and the solution of the problems which you have ignored might render it more unassailable and more sublime. Therefore, it is essential for each man’s salvation that he should hold intercourse with his brethren — otherwise the Church, the assembly of the faithful, would be only a word — and that he should listen to every argument, and not disdain anything, or anyone. Balaam the soothsayer, Æschylus the poet, and the sybil of Cumæ, announced the Saviour. Dionysius the Alexandrian received from Heaven a command to read every book. Saint Clement enjoins us to study Greek literature. Hermas was converted by the illusion of a woman that he loved!”

Antony — ”What an air of authority! It appears to me that you are growing taller ...”

In fact, Hilarion’s height has progressively increased; and, in order not to see

In fact, Hilarion's height has progressively increased, and, in order not to see him, Antony closes his eyes.

Hilarion — ”Make your mind easy, good hermit. Let us sit down here, on this big stone, as of yore, when, at the break of day, I used to salute you, addressing you as ‘Bright morning star’; and you at once began to give me instruction. It is not finished yet. The moon affords us sufficient light. I am all attention.”

He has drawn forth a calamus from his girdle, and, cross-legged on the ground, with his roll of papyrus in his hand, he raises his head towards Antony, who, seated beside him, keeps his forehead bent.

“Is not the word of God confirmed for us by the miracles? And yet the sorcerers of Pharaoh worked miracles. Other impostors could do the same; so here we may be deceived. What, then, is a miracle? An occurrence which seems to us outside the limits of Nature. But do we know all Nature’s powers? And, from the mere fact that a thing ordinarily does not astonish us, does it follow that we comprehend it?”

Antony — ”It matters little; we must believe in the Scripture.”

Hilarion — ”Saint Paul, Origen, and some others did not interpret it literally; but, if we explain it allegorically, it becomes the heritage of a limited number of people, and the evidence of its truth vanishes. What are we to do, then?”

Antony — ”Leave it to the Church.”

Hilarion — ”Then the Scripture is useless?”

Antony — ”Not at all. Although the Old Testament, I admit, has — well, obscurities ... But the New shines forth with a pure light.”

Hilarion — ”And yet the Angel of the Annunciation, in Matthew, appears to Joseph, whilst in Luke it is to Mary. The anointing of Jesus by a woman comes to pass, according to the First Gospel, at the beginning of his public life, but according to the three others, a few days before his death. The drink which they offer him on the Cross is, in Matthew, vinegar and gall, in Mark, wine and myrrh. If we follow Luke and Matthew, the Apostles ought to take neither money nor bag — in fact, not even sandals or a staff; while in Mark, on the contrary, Jesus forbids them to carry with them anything except sandals and a staff. Here is where I get lost ...”

Antony, in amazement — ”In fact ... in fact ...”

Hilarion — ”At the contact of the woman with the issue of blood, Jesus turned round, and said, ‘Who has touched me?’ So, then, He did not know who touched Him? That is opposed to the omniscience of Jesus. If the tomb was watched by guards, the women had not to worry themselves about an assistant to lift up the stone from the tomb. Therefore, there were no guards there — or rather, the holy women were not there at all. At Emmaüs, He eats with His disciples, and makes them feel His wounds. It is a human body, a material object, which can be weighed, and which, nevertheless, passes through stone walls. Is this possible?”

Antony — ”It would take a good deal of time to answer you.”

Hilarion — ”Why did He receive the Holy Ghost, although He was the Son? What need had He of baptism, if He were the Word? How could the Devil tempt Him — God?

“Have these thoughts never occurred to you?”

Antony — ”Yes! often! Torpid or frantic, they dwell in my conscience. I crush them out; they spring up again, they stifle me; and sometimes I believe that I am accursed.”

Hilarion — ”Then you have nothing to do but to serve God?”

Antony — ”I have always need to adore Him.”

After a prolonged silence, Hilarion resumes:

“But apart from dogma, entire liberty of research is permitted us. Do you wish to become acquainted with the hierarchy of Angels, the virtue of Numbers, the explanation of germs and metamorphoses?”

Antony — ”Yes! yes! My mind is struggling to escape from its prison. It seems to me that, by gathering my forces, I shall be able to effect this. Sometimes — even for an interval brief as a lightning-flash — I feel myself, as it were, suspended in mid-air; then I fall back again!”

Hilarion — ”The secret which you are anxious to possess is guarded by sages. They live in a distant country, sitting under gigantic trees, robed in white, and calm as gods. A warm atmosphere nourishes them. All around leopards stride through the plains. The murmuring of fountains mingles with the neighing of unicorns. You shall hear them; and the face of the Unknown shall be unveiled!”

Antony, sighing — ”The road is long and I am old!”

Hilarion — ”Oh! oh! men of learning are not rare! There are some of them even very close to you here! Let us enter!”

CHAPTER IV.

The Fiery Trial.

AND Antony sees in front of him an immense basilica. The light projects itself from the lower end with the magical effect of a many-coloured sun. It lights up the innumerable heads of the multitude which fills the nave and surges between the columns towards the side-aisles, where one can distinguish in the wooden compartments altars, beds, chainlets of little blue stones, and constellations painted on the walls.

In the midst of the crowd groups are stationed here and there; men standing on stools are discoursing with lifted fingers; others are praying with arms crossed, or lying down on the ground, or singing hymns, or drinking wine. Around a table the faithful are carrying on the love-feasts; martyrs are unswathing their limbs to show their wounds; old men, leaning on their staffs, are relating their travels.

Amongst them are people from the country of the Germans, from Thrace, Gaul, Scythia and the Indies — with snow on their beards, feathers in their hair, thorns in the fringes of their garments, sandals covered with dust, and skins burnt by the sun. All costumes are mingled — mantles of purple and robes of linen, embroidered dalmatics, woollen jackets, sailors’ caps and bishops’ mitres. Their eyes gleam strangely. They have the appearance of executioners or of eunuchs.

Hilarion advances among them. Antony, pressing against his shoulder, observes them. He notices a great many women. Several of them are dressed like men, with their hair cut short. He is afraid of them.

Hilarion — ”These are the Christian women who have converted their husbands. Besides, the women are always for Jesus — even the idolaters — as witness Procula, the wife of Pilate, and Poppæa, the concubine of Nero. Don’t tremble any more! Come on!”

There are fresh arrivals every moment.

They multiply; they separate, swift as shadows, all the time making a great uproar, or intermingling yells of rage, exclamations of love, canticles, and upbraidings.

Antony, in a low tone — ”What do they want?”

Hilarion — ”The Lord said, ‘I may still have to speak to you about many things.’ They possess those things.”

And he pushes him towards a throne of gold, five paces off, where, surrounded by ninety-five disciples, all anointed with oil, pale and emaciated, sits the prophet Manes — beautiful as an archangel, motionless as a statue — wearing an Indian robe, with carbuncles in his plaited hair, a book of coloured pictures in his left hand, and a globe under his right. The pictures represent the creatures who are slumbering in chaos. Antony bends forward to see him. Then Manes makes his globe revolve, and, attuning his words to the music of a lyre, from which bursts forth crystalline sounds, he says: “The celestial earth is at the upper extremity, the mortal earth at the lower. It is supported by two angels, the Splenditenens and the Omophorus, with six faces.

“At the summit of Heaven, the Impassible Divinity occupies the highest seat; underneath, face to face, are the Son of God and the Prince of Darkness.

“The darkness having made its way into His kingdom, God extracted from His essence a virtue which produced the first man; and He surrounded him with five elements. But the demons of darkness deprived him of one part, and that part is the soul.

“There is but one soul, spread through the universe, like the water of a stream divided into many channels. This it is that sighs in the wind, grinds in the marble which is sawn, howls in the voice of the sea; and it sheds milky tears when the leaves are torn off the fig-tree.

“The souls that leave this world emigrate towards the stars, which are animated beings.”

Antony begins to laugh:

“Ah! ah! what an absurd hallucination!”

A man, beardless, and of austere aspect — ”Why?”

Antony is about to reply. But Hilarion tells him in an undertone, that this man is the mighty Origen; and Manes resumes: “At first, they stay in the moon, where they are purified. After that, they ascend to the sun.”

Antony, slowly — ”I know nothing to prevent us from believing it.”

Manes — ”The end of every creature is the liberation of the celestial ray shut up in matter. It makes its escape more easily through perfumes, spices, the aroma of old wine, the light substances that resemble thought. But the actions of daily life withhold it. The murderer will be born again in the body of a eunuch; he who slays an animal will become that animal. If you plant a vine-tree, you will be fastened in its branches. Food absorbs those who use it. Therefore, mortify yourselves! fast!”

Hilarion — ”They are temperate, as you see!”

Manes — ”There is a great deal of it in flesh-meats, less in herbs. Besides, the Pure, by the force of their merits, despoil vegetables of that luminous spark, and it flies towards its source. The animals, by generation, imprison it in the flesh. Therefore, avoid women!”

Hilarion — ”Admire their countenance!”

Manes — ”Or, rather, act so well that they may not be prolific. It is better for the soul to sink on the earth than to languish in carnal fetters.”

Antony — ”Ah! abomination!”

Hilarion — ”What matters the hierarchy of iniquities? The Church has done well to make marriage a sacrament!”

Saturninus, in Syrian costume — ”He propagates a dismal order of things! The Father, in order to punish the rebel angels, commanded them to create the world. Christ came in order that the God of the Jews, who was one of those angels — — ”

Antony — ”An angel? He! the Creator?”

Gerdon — ”Did He not desire to kill Moses and deceive the prophets? and did He not lead the people astray, spreading lying and idolatry?”

Marcion — ”Certainly, the Creator is not the true God!”

Saint Clement of Alexandria — ”Matter is eternal!”

Bardesanes, as one of the Babylonian Magi — ”It was formed by the seven planetary spirits.”

The Hernians — ”The angels have made the souls!”

The Priscillianists — ”The world was made by the Devil.”

Antony, falls backward — ”Horror!”

Hilarion, holding him up — ”You drive yourself to despair too quickly! You don’t rightly comprehend their doctrine. Here is one who has received his from Theodas, the friend of Saint Paul. Hearken to him!”

And, at a signal from Hilarion, Valentinus, in a tunic of silver cloth, with a hissing voice and a pointed skull, cries: “The world is the work of a delirious God!”

Antony, hangs down his head — ”The work of a delirious God!”

After a long silence:

“How is that?”

Valentinus — ”The most perfect of the Æons, the Abysm, reposed on the bosom of Profundity together with Thought. From their union sprang Intelligence, who had for his consort Truth.

“Intelligence and Truth engendered the Word and Life, which in their turn engendered Man and the Church; and this makes eight Æons.”

He reckons on his fingers:

He reckons on his fingers:

“The Word and Truth produced ten other Æons, that is to say, five couples. Man and the Church produced twelve others, amongst whom were the Paraclete and Faith, Hope and Charity, Perfection and Wisdom, Sophia.

“The entire of those thirty Æons constitutes the Pleroma, or Universality of God. Thus, like the echoes of a voice that is dying away, like the exhalations of a perfume that is evaporating, like the fires of a sun that is setting, the Powers that have emanated from the Highest Powers are always growing feeble.

“But Sophia, desirous of knowing the Father, rushed out of the Pleroma; and the Word then made another pair, Christ and the Holy Ghost, who bound together all the Æons, and all together they formed Jesus, the flower of the Pleroma. Meanwhile, the effort of Sophia to escape had left in the void an image of her, an evil substance, Acharamoth. The Saviour took pity on her, and delivered her from her passions; and from the smile of Acharamoth on being set free Light was born; her tears made the waters, and her sadness engendered gloomy Matter. From Acharamoth sprang the Demiurge, the fabricator of the worlds, the heavens, and the Devil. He dwells much lower down than the Pleroma, without even beholding it, so that he imagines he is the true God, and repeats through the mouths of his prophets: ‘Besides me there is no God.’ Then he made man, and cast into his soul the immaterial seed, which was the Church, the reflection of the other Church placed in the Pleroma.

“Acharamoth, one day, having reached the highest region, shall unite with the Saviour; the fire hidden in the world shall annihilate all matter, shall then consume itself, and men, having become pure spirits, shall espouse the angels!”

Origen — ”Then the Demon shall be conquered, and the reign of God shall begin!”

Antony represses an exclamation, and immediately Basilides, catching him by the elbow:

“The Supreme Being, with his infinite emanations, is called Abraxas, and the Saviour with all his virtues, Kaulakau, otherwise rank-upon-rank, rectitude-upon-rectitude. The power of Kaulakau is obtained by the aid of certain words inscribed on this calcedony to facilitate memory.”

And he shows on his neck a little stone on which fantastic lines are engraved.

“Then you shall be transported into the invisible; and, unfettered by law, you shall despise everything, including virtue itself. As for us, the Pure, we must avoid sorrow, after the example of Kaulakau.”

Antony — ”What! and the Cross?”

The Elkhesaites, in hyacinthine robes, reply to him:

“The sadness, the vileness, the condemnation, and the oppression of my fathers are effaced, thanks to the new Gospel. We may deny the inferior Christ fathers are effaced, thanks to the new Gospel. We may deny the inferior Christ, the man-Jesus; but we must adore the other Christ generated in his person under the wing of the Dove. Honour marriage! The Holy Spirit is feminine!"

Hilarion has disappeared; and Antony, pressed forward by the crowd, finds himself facing the Carpocratians, stretched with women upon scarlet cushions: "Before re-entering the centre of unity, you will have to pass through a series of conditions and actions. In order to free yourself from the Powers of Darkness, do their works for the present! The husband goes to his wife and says, 'Act with charity towards your brother,' and she will kiss you."

The Nicolaites, assembled around a smoking dish:

"This is meat offered to idols; let us take it! Apostacy is permitted when the heart is pure. Glut your flesh with what it asks for. Try to destroy it by means of debaucheries. Prounikos, the mother of Heaven, wallows in iniquity."

The Marcosians, with rings of gold and dripping with balsam:

"Come to us, in order to be united with the Spirit! Come to us, in order to drink immortality!"

And one of them points out to him, behind some tapestry, the body of a man with an ass's head. This represents Sabaoth, the father of the Devil. As a mark of hatred he spits upon it.

Another discloses a very low bed strewn with flowers, saying as he does so:

"The spiritual nuptials are about to be consummated."

A third holds forth a goblet of glass while he utters an invocation. Blood appears in it:

"Ah! there it is! there it is! the blood of Christ!"

Antony turns aside; but he is splashed by the water, which leaps out of a tub.

The Helvidians cast themselves into it head foremost, muttering:

"Man regenerated by baptism is incapable of sin!"

Then he passes close to a great fire, where the Adamites are warming themselves completely naked to imitate the purity of Paradise; and he jostles up against the Messalians wallowing on the stone floor half-asleep, stupid: "Oh! run over us, if you like; we shall not budge! Work is a sin; all occupation is evil!"

Behind those, the abject Paternians, men, women, and children, pell-mell, on a heap of filth, lift up their hideous faces, besmeared with wine: "The inferior parts of the body, having been made by the Devil, belong to him. Let us eat, drink, and enjoy!"

Ætius — "Crimes come from the need here below of the love of God!"

But all at once a man, clad in a Carthaginian mantle, jumps among them, with a bundle of thongs in his hand; and striking at random to right and left of him violently: "Ah! imposters, brigands, simoniacs, heretics, and demons! the vermin of the schools! the dregs of Hell! This fellow here, Marcion, is a sailor from of the schools! the dregs of Hell! This fellow here, Marcion, is a sailor from Sinope excommunicated for incest. Carpocras has been banished as a magician; Ætius has stolen his concubine; Nicolas prostituted his own wife; and Manes, who describes himself as the Buddha, and whose name is Cubricus, was flayed with the sharp end of a cane, so that his tanned skin swings at the gates of Ctesiphon.”

Antony has recognised Tertullian, and rushes forward to meet him.

“Help, master! help!”

Tertullian, continuing — ”Break the images! Veil the virgins! Pray, fast, weep, mortify yourselves! No philosophy! no books! After Jesus, science is useless!”

All have fled; and Antony sees, instead of Tertullian, a woman seated on a stone bench. She sobs, her head resting against a pillar, her hair hanging down, and her body wrapped in a long brown simar.

Then they find themselves close to each other far from the crowd; and a silence, an extraordinary peacefulness, ensues, such as one feels in a wood when the wind ceases and the leaves flutter no longer. This woman is very beautiful, though faded and pale as death. They stare at each other, and their eyes mutually exchange a flood of thoughts, as it were, a thousand memories of the past, bewildering and profound. At last Priscilla begins to speak: “I was in the lowest chamber of the baths, and I was lulled to sleep by the confused murmurs that reached me from the streets. All at once I heard loud exclamations. The people cried, ‘It is a magician! it is the Devil!’ And the crowd stopped in front of our house opposite to the Temple of Æsculapius. I raised myself with my wrists to the height of the air-hole. On the peristyle of the temple was a man with an iron collar around his neck. He placed lighted coals on a chafing-dish, and with them made large furrows on his breast, calling out, ‘Jesus! Jesus!’ The people said, ‘That is not lawful! let us stone him!’ But he did not desist. The things that were occurring were unheard of, astounding. Flowers, large as the sun, turned around before my eyes, and I heard a harp of gold vibrating in mid-air. The day sank to its close. My arms let go the iron bars; my strength was exhausted; and when he bore me away to his house — ”

Antony — ”Whom are you talking about?”

Priscilla — ”Why, of Montanus!”

Antony — ”But Montanus is dead.”

Priscilla — ”That is not true.”

A voice — ”No, Montanus is not dead!”

Antony comes back; and near him, on the other side upon a bench, a second woman is seated — this one being fair, and paler still, with swellings under her eyelids, as if she had been a long time weeping. Without waiting for him to question her, she says: *Maximilla* — "We were returning from Tarsus by the mountains, when, at a turn of the road, we saw a man under a fig-tree. He cried from a distance, 'Stop!' and he sprang forward, pouring out abuse on us. The slaves rushed up to protect us. He burst out laughing. The horses pranced. The mastiffs all began to howl. He was standing up. The perspiration fell down his face. The wind made his cloak flap.

"While addressing us by name, he reproached us for the vanity of our actions, the impurity of our bodies; and he raised his fist towards the dromedaries on account of the silver bells which they wore under their jaws. His fury filled my very entrails with terror; nevertheless, it was a voluptuous sensation, which soothed, intoxicated me. At first, the slaves drew near. 'Master,' said they, 'our beasts are fatigued'; then there were the women: 'We are frightened'; and the slaves ran away. After that, the children began to cry, 'We are hungry.' And, as no answer was given to the women, they disappeared. And now he began to speak. I perceived that there was some one close beside me. It was my husband: I listened to the other. The first crawled between the stones, exclaiming, 'Do you abandon me?' and I replied, 'Yes! begone!' in order to accompany Montanus."

Antony — "A eunuch!"

Priscilla — "Ah! coarse heart, you are astonished at this! Yet Magdalen, Jane, Martha and Susanna did not enter the couch of the Saviour. Souls can be madly embraced more easily than bodies. In order to retain Eustolia with impunity, the Bishop Leontius mutilated himself — cherishing his love more than his virility. And, then, it is not my own fault. A spirit compels me to do it; Eotas cannot cure me. Nevertheless, he is cruel. What does it matter? I am the last of the prophetesses; and, after me, the end of the world will come."

Maximilla — "He has loaded me with his gifts. None of the others loved me so much, nor is any of them better loved."

Priscilla — "You lie! I am the person he loves!"

Maximilla — "No: it is I!"

They fight.

Between their shoulders appears a negro's head.

Montanus, covered with a black cloak, fastened by two dead men's bones:

"Be quiet, my doves! Incapable of terrestrial happiness, we by this union attain to spiritual plenitude. After the age of the Father, the age of the Son; and I inaugurate the third, that of the Paraclete. His light came to me during the forty nights when the heavenly Jerusalem shone in the firmament above my house at Pepuza.

"Ah! how you cry out with anguish when the thongs flagellate you! How your aching limbs offer themselves to my burning caresses! How you languish upon my breast with an inconceivable love! It is so strong that it has revealed new worlds to you, and you can now behold spirits with your mortal eyes.”

Antony makes a gesture of astonishment.

Tertullian, coming up close to Montanus — ”No doubt, since the soul has a body, that which has no body exists not.”

Montanus — ”In order to render it less material I have introduced numerous mortifications — three Lents every year, and, for each night, prayers, in saying which the mouth is kept closed, for fear the breath, in escaping, should sully the mental act. It is necessary to abstain from second marriages — or, rather, from marriage altogether! The angels sinned with women.”

The Archontics, in hair-shirts:

“The Saviour said, ‘I came to destroy the work of the woman.’“

The Tatianists, in hair-cloths of rushes:

“She is the tree of evil! Our bodies are the garments of skin.”

And, ever advancing on the same side, Antony encounters the Valesians, stretched on the ground, with red plates below their stomachs, beneath their tunics.

They present to him a knife.

“Do like Origen and like us! Is it the pain you fear, coward? Is it the love of your flesh that restrains you, hypocrite?”

And while he watches them struggling, extended on their backs swimming in their own blood, the Cainites, with their hair fastened by vipers, pass close to him, shouting in his ears: “Glory to Cain! Glory to Sodom! Glory to Judas!

“Cain begot the race of the strong; Sodom terrified the earth with its chastisement, and it is through Judas that God saved the world! Yes, Judas! without him no death and no Redemption!”

They pass out through the band of Circoncellions, clad in wolf-skin, crowned with thorns, and carrying iron clubs.

“Crush the fruit! Attack the fountain-head! Drown the child! Plunder the rich man who is happy, and who eats overmuch! Strike down the poor man who casts an envious glance at the ass’s saddle-cloth, the dog’s meal, the bird’s nest, and who is grieved at not seeing others as miserable as himself.

“As for us — the Saints — in order to hasten the end of the world, we poison, burn, massacre. The only salvation is in martyrdom. We give ourselves up to martyrdom. We take off with pincers the skin of our heads; we spread our limbs under the ploughs; we cast ourselves into the mouths of furnaces. Shame on baptism! Shame on the Eucharist! Shame on marriage! Universal damnation!”

Then, throughout the basilica, there is a fresh accession of frenzy. The

Audians draw arrows against the Devil; the Collyridians fling blue veils to the ceiling; the Ascitians prostrate themselves before a wineskin; the Marcionites baptise a corpse with oil. Close beside Appelles, a woman, the better to explain her idea, shows a round loaf of bread in a bottle; another, surrounded by the Sampsians, distributes like a host the dust of her sandals. On the bed of the Marcosians, strewn with roses, two lovers embrace each other. The Circoncellions cut one another’s throats; the Velesians make a rattling sound; Bardesanes sings; Carpocras dances; Maximilla and Priscilla utter loud groans; and the false prophetess of Cappadocia, quite naked, resting on a lion and brandishing three torches, yells forth the Terrible Invocation.

The pillars are poised like trunks of trees; the amulets round the necks of the Heresiarchs have lines of flame crossing each other; the constellations in the chapels move to and fro, and the walls recede under the alternate motion of the crowd, in which every head is a wave which leaps and roars.

Meanwhile, from the very depths of the uproar rises a song with bursts of laughter, in which the name of Jesus recurs. These outbursts come from the common people, who all clap their hands in order to keep time with the music. In the midst of them is Arius, in the dress of a deacon: “The fools who declaim against me pretend to explain the absurd; and, in order to destroy them entirely, I have composed little poems so comical that they are known by heart in the mills, the taverns, and the ports.

“A thousand times no! the Son is not co-eternal with the Father, nor of the same substance. Otherwise He would not have said, ‘Father, remove from Me this chalice! Why do ye call Me good? God alone is good! I go to my God, to your God!’ and other expressions, proving that He was a created being. It is demonstrated to us besides by all His names: lamb, shepherd, fountain, wisdom, Son of Man, prophet, good way, corner-stone.”

Sabellius — ”As for me, I maintain that both are identical.”

Arius — ”The Council of Antioch has decided the other way.”

Antony — ”Who, then, is the Word? Who was Jesus?”

The Valentinians — ”He was the husband of Acharamoth when she had repented!”

The Sethianians — ”He was Sem, son of Noah!”

The Theodotians — ”He was Melchisidech!”

The Merinthians — ”He was nothing but a man!”

The Apollonarists — ”He assumed the appearance of one! He simulated the Passion!”

Marcellus of Ancyra — ”He is a development of the Father!”

Pope Calixtus — ”Father and Son are the two forms of a single God!”

Methadius — ”He was first in Adam, and then in man!”

Cerinthus — ”And He will come back to life again!”

Valentinus — ”Impossible — His body is celestial.”

Paul of Samosta — ”He is God only since His baptism.”

Hermogenes — ”He dwells in the sun.”

And all the heresiarchs form a circle around Antony, who weeps, with his head in his hands.

A Jew, with red beard, and his skin spotted with leprosy, advances close to him, and chuckling horribly:

“His soul was the soul of Esau. He suffered from the disease of Bellerophon; and his mother, the woman who sold perfumes, surrendered herself to Pantherus, a Roman soldier, under the corn-sheaves, one harvest evening.”

Antony eagerly lifts up his head, and gazes at them without uttering a word; then, treading right over them: “Doctors, magicians, bishops and deacons, men and phantoms, back! back! Ye are all lies!”

The Heresiarchs — ”We have martyrs, more martyrs than yours, prayers more difficult, higher outbursts of love, and ecstasies quite as protracted.”

Antony — ”But no revelation. No proofs.”

Then all brandish in the air rolls of papyrus, tablets of wood, pieces of leather; and strips of cloth; and pushing them one before the other: *The Corinthians* — ”Here is the Gospel of the Hebrews!”

The Marcionites — ”The Gospel of the Lord! The Gospel of Eve!”

The Encratites — ”The Gospel of Thomas!”

The Cainites — ”The Gospel of Judas!”

Basilides — ”The treatise of the spirit that has come!”

Manes — ”The prophecy of Barcouf!”

Antony makes a struggle and escapes them, and he perceives, in a corner filled with shadows, the old Ebionites, dried up like mummies, their glances dull, their eyebrows white.

They speak in a quavering tone:

“We have known, we ourselves have known, the carpenter’s son. We were of his own age; we lived in his street. He used to amuse himself by modelling little birds with mud; without being afraid of cutting the benches, he assisted his father in his work, or rolled up, for his mother, balls of dyed wool. Then he made a journey into Egypt, whence he brought back wonderful secrets. We were in Jericho when he discovered the eater of grasshoppers. They talked together in a low tone, without anyone being able to hear them. But it was since that occurrence that he made a noise in Galilee and that many stories have been occurrence that he made a noise in Galilee and that many stories have been circulated concerning him.”

They repeat, tremulously:

“We have known, we ourselves; we have known him.”

Antony — ”One moment! Tell me! pray tell me, what was his face like?”

Tertullian — ”Fierce and repulsive in its aspect; for he was laden with all the crimes, all the sorrows, and all the deformities of the world.”

Antony — ”Oh! no! no! I imagine, on the contrary, that there was about his entire person a superhuman beauty.”

Eusebius of Cæsarea — ”There is at Paneadæ, close to an old ruin, in the midst of a rank growth of weeds, a statue of stone, raised, as it is pretended, by the woman with the issue of blood. But time has gnawed away the face, and the rain has obliterated the inscription.”

A woman comes forth from the group of Carpocratians.

Marcellina — ”I was formerly a deaconess in a little church at Rome, where I used to show the faithful images, in silver, of St. Paul, Homer, Pythagoras and Jesus Christ.

“I have kept only his.”

She draws aside the folds of her cloak.

“Do you wish it?”

A voice — ”He reappears himself when we invoke him. It is the hour. Come!”

And Antony feels a brutal hand laid on him, which drags him along.

He ascends a staircase in complete darkness, and, after proceeding for some time, arrives in front of a door. Then his guide (is it Hilarion? he cannot tell) says in the ear of a third person, “The Lord is about to come,” — and they are introduced into an apartment with a low ceiling and no furniture. What strikes him at first is, opposite him, a long chrysalis of the colour of blood, with a man’s head, from which rays escape, and the word *Knouphis* written in Greek all around. It rises above a shaft of a column placed in the midst of a pedestal. On the other walls of the apartment, medallions of polished brass represent heads of animals — that of an ox, of a lion, of an eagle, of a dog, and again, an ass’s head! The argil lamps, suspended below these images, shed a flickering light. Antony, through a hole in the wall, perceives the moon, which shines far away on the waves, and he can even distinguish their monotonous ripple, with the dull sound of a ship’s keel striking against the stones of a pier.

Men, squatting on the ground, their faces hidden beneath their cloaks, give vent at intervals to a kind of stifled barking. Women are sleeping, with their foreheads clasped by both arms, which are supported by their knees, so completely shrouded by their veils that one would say they were heaps of clothes arranged along the wall. Beside them, children, half-naked, and half devoured with vermin, watch the lamps burning, with an idiotic air; — and they are doing nothing; they are awaiting something.

They speak in low voices about their families, or communicate to one another remedies for their diseases. Many of them are going to embark at the end of the day, the persecution having become too severe. The Pagans, however, are not hard to deceive. “They believe, the fools, that we adore Knouphis!”

But one of the brethren, suddenly inspired, places himself in front of the column, where they have laid a loaf of bread, which is on the top of a basket full of fennel and hartwort.

The others have taken their places, forming, as they stand, three parallel lines.

The inspired one unrolls a paper covered with cylinders joined together, and then begins:

“Upon the darkness the ray of the Word descended, and a violent cry burst forth, which seemed like the voice of light.”

All responding, while they sway their bodies to and fro:

“Kyrie eleison!”

The inspired one — ”Man, then, was created by the infamous God of Israel, with the assistance of those here,” — pointing towards the medallions — ”Aristophaios, Oraios, Sabaoth, Adonai, Eloi and Iaô!

“And he lay on the mud, hideous, feeble, shapeless, without the power of thought.”

All, in a plaintive tone:

“Kyrie eleison!”

The inspired one — ”But Sophia, taking pity on him, quickened him with a portion of her spirit. Then, seeing man so beautiful, God was seized with anger, and imprisoned him in His kingdom, interdicting him from the tree of knowledge. Still, once more, the other one came to his aid. She sent the serpent, who, with its sinuous advances, prevailed on him to disobey this law of hate. And man, when he had tasted knowledge, understood heavenly matters.”

All, with energy:

“Kyrie eleison!”

The inspired one — ”But Jaldalaoth, in order to be revenged, plunged man into matter, and the serpent along with him!”

All, in very low tones:

“Kyrie eleison!”

They close their mouths and then become silent.

The odours of the harbour mingle in the warm air with the smoke of the lamps. Their wicks, spluttering, are on the point of being extinguished, and long mosquitoes flutter around them. Antony gasps with anguish. He has the feeling that some monstrosity is floating around him — the horror of a crime about to be perpetrated.

But the inspired one, stamping with his feet, snapping his fingers, tossing his head, sings a psalm, with a wild refrain, to the sound of cymbals and of a shrill flute: “Come! come! come! come forth from thy cavern!

“Swift One, that runs without feet, captor that takes without hands! Sinuous as the waves, round as the sun, darkened with spots of gold; like the firmament, strewn with stars! like the twistings of the vine-tree and the windings of entrails!

“Unbegotten! earth-devourer! ever young! perspicacious! honoured at Epidaurus! good for men! who cured King Ptolemy, the soldiers of Moses, and Glaucus, son of Minos!

“Come! come! come! come forth from thy cavern!”

All repeat:

“Come! come! come! come forth from thy cavern!”

However, there is no manifestation.

“Why, what is the matter with him?”

They proceed to deliberate, and to make suggestions. One old man offers a clump of grass. Then there is a rising in the basket. The green herbs are agitated; the flowers fall, and the head of a python appears.

He passes slowly over the edge of the loaf, like a circle turning round a motionless disc; then he develops, lengthens; he becomes of enormous weight. To prevent him from grazing the ground, the men support him with their breasts, the women with their heads, and the children with the tips of their fingers; and his tail, emerging through the hole in the wall, stretches out indefinitely, even to the depths of the sea. His rings unfold themselves, and fill the apartment. They wind themselves round Antony.

The Faithful, pressing their mouths against his skin, snatch the bread which he has nibbled.

“It is thou! it is thou!

“Raised at first by Moses, crushed by Ezechias, re-established by the Messiah. He drank thee in the waters of baptism; but thou didst quit him in the Garden of Olives, and then he felt all his weakness.

“Writhing on the bar of the Cross, and higher than his head, slavering above the crown of thorns, thou didst behold him dying; for thou art Jesus! yes, thou art the Word! thou art the Christ!”

Antony swoons in horror, and falls in his cell, upon the splinters of wood, where the torch, which had slipped from his hand, is burning mildly. This commotion causes him to half-open his eyes; and he perceives the Nile, undulating and clear, under the light of the moon, like a great serpent in the undulating and clear, under the light of the moon, like a great serpent in the midst of the sands — so much so that the hallucination again takes possession of him. He has not quitted the Ophites; they surround him, address him by name, carry off baggages, and descend towards the port. He embarks along with them.

A brief period of time flows by. Then the vault of a prison encircles him. In front of him, iron bars make black lines upon a background of blue; and at its sides, in the shade, are people weeping and praying, surrounded by others who are exhorting and consoling them.

Without, one is attracted by the murmuring of a crowd, as well as by the splendour of a summer’s day. Shrill voices are crying out watermelons, water, iced drinks, and cushions of grass to sit down on. From time to time, shouts of applause burst forth. He observes people walking on their heads.

Suddenly, comes a continuous roaring, strong and cavernous, like the noise of water in an aqueduct: and, opposite him, he perceives, behind the bars of another cage, a lion, who is walking up and down; then a row of sandals, of naked legs, and of purple fringes.

Overhead, groups of people, ranged symmetrically, widen out from the lowest circle, which encloses the arena, to the highest, where masts have been raised to support a veil of hyacinth hung in the air on ropes. Staircases, which radiate towards the centre, intersect, at equal distances, those great circles of stone. Their steps disappear from view, owing to the vast audience seated there — knights, senators, soldiers, common people, vestals and courtesans, in woollen hoods, in silk maniples, in tawny tunics with aigrettes of precious stones, tufts of feathers and lictors’ rods; and all this assemblage, muttering, exclaiming, tumultuous and frantic, stuns him like an immense tub boiling over. In the midst of the arena, upon an altar, smokes a vessel of incense.

The people who surround him are Christians, delivered up to the wild beasts. The men wear the red cloak of the high-priests of Saturn, the women the fillets of Ceres. Their friends distribute fragments of their garments and rings. In order to gain admittance into the prison, they require, they say, a great deal of money; but what does it matter? They will remain till the end.

Amongst these consolers Antony observes a bald man in a black tunic, a portion of whose face is plainly visible. He discourses with them on the nothingness of the world, and the happiness of the Elect. Antony is filled with transports of Divine love. He longs for the opportunity of sacrificing his life for the Saviour, not knowing whether he is himself one of these martyrs. But, save a Phrygian, with long hair, who keeps his arms raised, they all have a melancholy aspect. An old man is sobbing on a bench, and a young man, who is standing, is musing with downcast eyes.

The old man has refused to pay tribute at the angle of a cross-road, before a

The old man has refused to pay tribute at the angle of a cross-road, before a statue of Minerva; and he regards his companions with a look which signifies: “You ought to succour me! Communities sometimes make arrangements by which they might be left in peace. Many amongst you have even obtained letters falsely declaring that you have offered sacrifice to idols.”

He asks:

“Is it not Peter of Alexandria who has regulated what one ought to do when one is overcome by tortures?”

Then, to himself:

“Ah! this is very hard at my age! my infirmities render me so feeble! Perchance, I might have lived to another winter!”

The recollection of his little garden moves him to tears; and he contemplates the side of the altar.

The young man, who had disturbed by violence a feast of Apollo, murmurs:

“My only chance was to fly to the mountains!”

“The soldiers would have caught you,” says one of the brethren.

“Oh! I could have done like Cyprian; I should have come back; and the second time I should have had more strength, you may be sure!”

Then he thinks of the countless days he should have lived, with all the pleasures which he will not have known; — and he, likewise, contemplates the side of the altar.

But the man in the black tunic rushes up to him:

“How scandalous! What? You a victim of election? Think of all these women who are looking at you! And then, God sometimes performs a miracle. Pionius benumbed the hands of his executioners; and the blood of Polycarp extinguished the flames of his funeral-pile.”

He turns towards the old man. “Father, father! You ought to edify us by your death. By deferring it, you will, without doubt, commit some bad action which will destroy the fruit of your good deeds. Besides, the power of God is infinite. Perhaps your example will convert the entire people.”

And, in the den opposite, the lions stride up and down, without stopping, rapidly, with a continuous movement. The largest of them all at once fixes his eyes on Antony and emits a roar, and a mass of vapour issues from his jaws.

The women are jammed up against the men.

The consoler goes from one to another:

“What would ye say — what would any of you say — if they burned you with plates of iron; if horses tore you asunder; if your body, coated with honey, was devoured by insects? You will have only the death of a hunter who is surprised in a wood.”

Antony would much prefer all this than the horrible wild beasts; he imagines

Antony would much prefer all this than the horrible wild beasts, he imagines he feels their teeth and their talons, and that he hears his back cracking under their jaws.

A belluarius enters the dungeon; the martyrs tremble. One alone amongst them is unmoved — the Phrygian, who has gone into a corner to pray. He had burned three temples. He now advances with lifted arms, open mouth, and his head towards Heaven, without seeing anything, like a somnambulist.

The consoler exclaims:

“Keep back! Keep back! The Spirit of Montanus will destroy ye!”

All fall back, vociferating:

“Damnation to the Montanist!”

They insult him, spit upon him, would like to strike him. The lions, prancing, bite one another’s manes. The people yell: “To the beasts! To the beasts!”

The martyrs, bursting into sobs, catch hold of one another. A cup of narcotic wine is offered to them. They quickly pass it from hand to hand.

Near the door of the den another belluarius awaits the signal. It opens; a lion comes out.

He crosses the arena with great irregular strides. Behind him in a row appear the other lions, then a bear, three panthers, and leopards. They scatter like a flock in a prairie.

The cracking of a whip is heard. The Christians stagger, and, in order to make an end of it, their brethren push them forward.

Antony closes his eyes.

He opens them again. But darkness envelops him. Ere long, it grows bright once more; and he is able to trace the outlines of a plain, arid and covered with knolls, such as may be seen around a deserted quarry. Here and there a clump of shrubs lifts itself in the midst of the slabs, which are on a level with the soil, and above which white forms are bending, more undefined than clouds. Others rapidly make their appearance. Eyes shine through the openings of long veils. By their indolent gait and the perfumes which exhale from them, Antony knows they are ladies of patrician rank. There are also men, but of inferior condition, for they have visages at the same time simple and coarse.

One of the women, with a long breath:

“Ah! how pleasant is the air of the chilly night in the midst of sepulchres! I am so fatigued with the softness of couches, the noise of day, and the oppressiveness of the sun!”

A woman, panting — ”Ah! at last, here I am! But how irksome to have wedded an idolater!”

Another — ”The visits to the prisons, the conversations with our brethren, all excite the suspicions of our husbands! And we must even hide ourselves from them when making the sign of the Cross; they would take it for a magical conjuration.”

Another — ”With mine, there was nothing but quarrelling all day long. I did not like to submit to the abuses to which he subjected my person; and, for revenge, he had me persecuted as a Christian.”

Another — ”Recall to your memory that young man of such striking beauty who was dragged by the heels behind a chariot, like Hector, from the Esquiline Gate to the Mountains of Tibur; and his blood stained the bushes on both sides of the road. I collected the drops — here they are!”

She draws from her bosom a sponge perfectly black, covers it with kisses, and then flings herself upon the slab, crying: “Ah! my friend! my friend!”

A man — ”It is just three years to-day since Domitilla’s death. She was stoned at the bottom of the Wood of Proserpine. I gathered her bones, which shone like glow-worms in the grass. The earth now covers them.”

He flings himself upon a tombstone.

“O my betrothed! my betrothed!”

And all the others, scattered through the plain:

“O my sister!” “O my brother!” “O my daughter!” “O my mother!”

They are on their knees, their foreheads clasped with their hands, or their bodies lying flat with both arms extended; and the sobs which they repress make their bosoms swell almost to bursting. They gaze up at the sky, saying: “Have pity on her soul, O my God! She is languishing in the abode of shadows. Deign to admit her into the Resurrection, so that she may rejoice in Thy light!”

Or, with eyes fixed on the flagstones, they murmur:

“Be at rest — suffer no more! I have brought thee wine and meat!”

A widow — ”Here is pudding, made by me, according to his taste, with many eggs, and a double measure of flour. We are going to eat together as of yore, is not that so?”

She puts a little of it on her lips, and suddenly begins to laugh in an extravagant fashion, frantically.

The others, like her, nibble a morsel and drink a mouthful; they tell one another the history of their martyrs; their sorrow becomes vehement; their libations increase; their eyes, swimming with tears, are fixed on one another; they stammer with inebriety and desolation. Gradually their hands touch; their lips meet; their veils are torn away, and they embrace one another upon the tombs in the midst of the cups and the torches.

The sky begins to brighten. The mist soaks their garments; and, as if they were strangers to one another, they take their departure by different roads into the country.

The sun shines forth. The grass has grown taller; the plain has become transformed. Across the bamboos, Antony sees a forest of columns of a bluish-grey colour. Those are trunks of trees springing from a single trunk. From each of its branches descend other branches which penetrate into the soil; and the whole of those horizontal and perpendicular lines, indefinitely multiplied, might be compared to a gigantic framework were it not that here and there appears a little fig-tree with a dark foliage like that of a sycamore. Between the branches he distinguishes bunches of yellow flowers and violets, and ferns as large as birds' feathers. Under the lowest branches may be seen at different points the horns of a buffalo, or the glittering eyes of an antelope. Parrots sit perched, butterflies flutter, lizards crawl upon the ground, flies buzz; and one can hear, as it were, in the midst of the silence, the palpitation of an all-permeating life.

At the entrance of the wood, on a kind of pile, is a strange sight — a man coated over with cows' dung, completely naked, more dried-up than a mummy. His joints form knots at the extremities of his bones, which are like sticks. He has clusters of shells in his ears, his face is very long, and his nose is like a vulture's beak. His left arm is held erect in the air, crooked, and stiff as a stake; and he has remained there so long that birds have made a nest in his hair.

At the four corners of his pile four fires are blazing. The sun is right in his face. He gazes at it with great open eyes, and without looking at Antony.

"Brahmin of the banks of the Nile, what sayest thou?"

Flames start out on every side through the partings of the beams; and the gymnosophist resumes:

"Like a rhinoceros, I am plunged in solitude. I dwelt in the tree that was behind me."

In fact, the large fig-tree presents in its flutings a natural excavation of the shape of a man.

"And I fed myself on flowers and fruits with such an observance of precepts that not even a dog has seen me eat.

"As existence proceeds from corruption, corruption from desire, desire from sensation, and sensation from contact, I have avoided every kind of action, every kind of contact, and — without stirring any more than the pillar of a tombstone — exhaling my breath through my two nostrils, fixing my glances upon my nose; and, observing the ether in my spirit, the world in my limbs, the moon in my heart, I pondered on the essence of the great soul, whence continually escape, like sparks of fire, the principles of life. I have, at last, grasped the supreme soul in all beings, all beings in the supreme soul; and I have succeeded in making my soul penetrate the place into which my senses used to penetrate.

"I receive knowledge directly from Heaven, like the bird Tchataka, who quenches his thirst only in the droppings of the rain. From the very fact of my having knowledge of things, things no longer exist. For me now there is no hope and no anguish, no goodness, no virtue, neither day nor night, neither thou nor I — absolutely nothing.

"My frightful austerities have made me superior to the Powers. A contraction of my brain can kill a hundred kings' sons, dethrone gods, overrun the world."

He utters all this in a monotonous voice. The leaves all around him are withered. The rats fly over the ground.

He slowly lowers his eyes towards the flames, which are rising, then adds:

"I have become disgusted with form, disgusted with perception, disgusted even with knowledge itself — for thought does not outlive the transitory fact that gives rise to it; and the spirit, like the rest, is but an illusion.

"Everything that is born will perish; everything that is dead will come to life again. The beings that have actually disappeared will sojourn in wombs not yet formed, and will come back to earth to serve with sorrow other creatures. But, as I have resolved through an infinite number of existences, under the guise of gods, men, and animals, I give up travelling, and no longer wish for this fatigue. I abandon the dirty inn of my body, walled in with flesh, reddened with blood, covered with hideous skin, full of uncleanness; and, for my reward, I shall, finally, sleep in the very depths of the absolute, in annihilation."

The flames rise to his breast, then envelop him. His head stretches across as if through the hole of a wall. His eyes are perpetually fixed in a vacant stare.

Antony gets up again. The torch on the ground has set fire to the splinters of wood, and the flames have singed his beard. Bursting into an exclamation, Antony tramples on the fire; and, when only a heap of cinders is left: "Where, then, is Hilarion? He was here just now. I saw him! Ah! no; it is impossible! I am mistaken! How is this? My cell, those stones, the sand, have not, perhaps, any more reality. I must be going mad. Stay! where was I? What was happening here?

"Ah! the gymnosophist! This death is common amongst the Indian sages. Kalanos burned himself before Alexander; another did the same in the time of Augustus. What hatred of life they must have had! — unless, indeed, pride drove them to it. No matter, it is the intrepidity of martyrs! As to the others, I now believe all that has been told me of the excesses they have occasioned.

"And before this? Yes, I recollect! the crowd of heresiarchs ... What shrieks! what eyes! But why so many outbreaks of the flesh and wanderings of the spirit?

"It is towards God they pretend to direct their thoughts in all these different ways. What right have I to curse them, I who stumble in my own path? When they have disappeared, I shall, perhaps, learn more. This one rushed away too quickly; I had not time to reply to him. Just now it is as if I had in my intellect more space and more light. I am tranquil. I feel myself capable ... But what is this now? I thought I had extinguished the fire.”

A flame flutters between the rocks; and, speedily, a jerky voice makes itself heard from the mountains in the distance.

“Are those the barkings of a hyena, or the lamentations of some lost traveller?”

Antony listens. The flame draws nearer.

And he sees approaching a woman who is weeping, resting on the shoulder of a man with a white beard. She is covered with a purple garment all in rags. He, like her, is bare-headed, with a tunic of the same colour, and carries a bronze vase, whence arises a small blue flame.

Antony is filled with fear, — and yet he would fain know who this woman is.

The stranger (*Simon*) — ”This is a young girl, a poor child, whom I take everywhere with me.”

He raises the bronze vase. Antony inspects her by the light of this flickering flame. She has on her face marks of bites, and traces of blows along her arms. Her scattered hair is entangled in the rents of her rags; her eyes appear insensible to the light.

Simon — ”Sometimes she remains thus a long time without speaking or eating, and utters marvellous things.”

Antony — ”Really?”

Simon — ”Eunoia! Eunoia! relate what you have to say!”

She turns around her eyeballs, as if awakening from a dream, passes her fingers slowly across her two lids, and in a mournful voice: *Helena* (*Eunoia*) — ”I have a recollection of a distant region, of the colour of emerald. There is only a single tree there.”

Antony gives a start.

“At each step of its huge branches a pair of spirits stand. The branches around them cross each other, like the veins of a body, and they watch the eternal life circulating from the roots, where it is lost in shadow up to the summit, which reaches beyond the sun. I, on the second branch, illumined with my face the summer nights.”

Antony, touching his forehead — ”Ah! ah! I understand! the head!”

Simon, with his finger on his lips — ”Hush! Hush!”

Helena — ”The vessel remained convex: her keel clave the foam. He said to me, ‘What does it matter if I disturb my country, if I lose my kingdom! You will be mine, in my own house!’

“How pleasant was the upper chamber of his palace! He would lie down upon the ivory bed, and, smoothing my hair, would sing in an amorous strain. At the end of the day, I could see the two camps and the lanterns which they were lighting; Ulysses at the edge of his tent; Achilles, armed from head to foot, driving a chariot along the seashore.”

Antony — ”Why, she is quite mad! Wherefore? ...”

Simon — ”Hush! Hush!”

Helena — ”They rubbed me with unguents, and sold me to the people to amuse them. One evening, standing with the sistrum in my hand, I was coaxing Greek sailors to dance. The rain, like a cataract, fell upon the tavern, and the cups of hot wine were smoking. A man entered without the door having been opened.”

Simon — ”It was I! I found you. Here she is, Antony; she who is called Sigeh, Eunoia, Barbelo, Prounikos! The Spirits who govern the world were jealous of her, and they bound her in the body of a woman. She was the Helen of the Trojans, whose memory the poet Stesichorus had rendered infamous. She has been Lucretia, the patrician lady violated by the kings. She was Delilah, who cut off the hair of Samson. She was that daughter of Israel who surrendered herself to he-goats. She has loved adultery, idolatry, lying and folly. She was prostituted by every nation. She has sung in all the cross-ways. She has kissed every face. At Tyre, she, the Syrian, was the mistress of thieves. She drank with them during the nights, and she concealed assassins amid the vermin of her tepid bed.”

Antony — ”Ah! what is coming over me?”

Simon, with a furious air —

“I have redeemed her, I tell you, and re-established her in all her splendour, such as Caius Cæsar Agricola became enamoured of when he desired to sleep with the Moon!”

Antony — -”Well! well!”

Simon — ”But she really is the Moon! Has not Pope Clement written that she was imprisoned in a tower? Three hundred persons came to surround the tower; and on each of the murderers, at the same time, the moon was seen to appear, — though there are not many moons in the world, or many Eunoias!”

Antony — ”Yes! ... I think I recollect ...”

And he falls into a reverie.

Simon — ”Innocent as Christ, who died for men, she has devoted herself to women. For the powerlessness of Jehovah is demonstrated by the transgression of Adam, and we must shake off the old law, opposed, as it is, to the order of things. I have preached the new Gospel in Ephraim and in Issachar, along the torrent of Bizor, behind the lake of Houleh, in the valley of Mageddo, and beyond the mountains, at Bostra and at Damas. Let those who are covered with wine-dregs, those who are covered with dirt, those who are covered with blood, come to me; and I will wash out their defilement with the Holy Spirit, called by the Greeks, Minerva. She is Minerva! She is the Holy Spirit! I am Jupiter Apollo, the Christ, the Paraclete, the great power of God incarnated in the person of Simon!"

Antony — "Ah! it is you! ... it is you! But I know your crimes! You were born at Gittha on the borders of Samaria. Dositheus, your first master, dismissed you! You execrate Saint Paul for having converted one of your women; and, vanquished by Saint Peter, in your rage and terror, you flung into the waves the bag which contained your magical instruments!"

Simon — "Do you desire them?"

Antony looks at him, and an inner voice murmurs in his breast, "Why not?"

Simon resumes:

"He who understands the powers of Nature and the substance of spirits ought to perform miracles. It is the dream of all sages — and the desire of which gnaws you; confess it!

"Amongst the Romans I flew so high in the circus that they saw me no more. Nero ordered me to be decapitated; but it was a sheep's head that fell to the ground instead of mine. Finally, they buried me alive; but I came back to life on the third day. The proof of it is that I am here!"

He gives him his hands to smell. They have the odour of a corpse. Antony recoils.

"I can make bronze serpents move, marble statues laugh, and dogs speak. I will show you an immense quantity of gold, I will set up kings, you shall see nations adoring me. I can walk on the clouds and on the waves; pass through mountains; assume the appearance of a young man, or of an old man; of a tiger, or of an ant; take your face, give you mine; and drive the thunderbolt. Do you hear?"

The thunder rolls, followed by flashes of lightning.

"It is the voice of the Most High, 'for the Eternal, thy God, is a fire,' and all creations operate by the emanations of this central fire. You are about to receive the baptism of it — that second baptism, announced by Jesus, which fell on the Apostles one stormy day when the window was open!"

And all the while stirring the flame with his hand, slowly, as if to sprinkle

Antony with it:

“Mother of Mercies, thou who discoverest secrets in order that we may have rest in the eighth house ...”

Antony exclaims:

“Ah! if I had holy water!”

The flame goes out, producing much smoke.

Eunoia and Simon have disappeared.

An extremely cold fog, opaque and f[oe]tid, fills the atmosphere.

Antony, extending his arms like a blind man —

“Where am I? ... I am afraid of falling into the abyss. And the cross, no doubt, is too far away from me. Ah! what a night! what a night!”

A sudden gust of wind cleaves the fog asunder; and he perceives two men covered with long white tunics. The first is of tall stature, with a sweet expression of countenance and grave deportment. His white hair, parted like that of Christ, descends regularly over his shoulders. He has thrown down a wand which he was carrying in his hand, and which his companion has taken up, making a respectful bow after the fashion of Orientals. The other is small, coarse-looking, flat-nosed, with a thick neck, curly hair, and an air of simplicity. Both of them are bare-footed, bare-headed, and covered with dust, like people who have come on a long journey.

Antony, with a start — ”What do ye seek? Speak! Go on!”

Damis — He is the little man —

“La, la! ... worthy hermit! what do you say? I know nothing about it. Here is the Master!”

He sits down; the other remains standing. Silence.

Antony, resumes — ”Ye come in this fashion? ...”

Damis — ”Oh! a great distance — a very great distance!”

Antony — ”And ye are going? ...”

Damis, pointing at his companion — ”Wherever he wishes.”

Antony — ”Who, then, is he?”

Damis — ”Look at him.”

Antony — ”He has the appearance of a saint. If I dared ...”

The fog by this time is quite gone. The atmosphere has become perfectly clear. The moon shines out.

Damis — ”What are you thinking of now that you say nothing more?”

Antony — ”I am thinking of — — Oh! nothing.”

Damis draws close to Apollonius, makes many turns round him, with his figure bent, and without moving his head.

figure bent, and without moving his head.

“Master, this is a Galilean hermit who wishes to know the sources of your wisdom.”

Apollonius — ”Let him approach.”

Antony hesitates.

Damis — ”Approach!”

Apollonius, in a voice of thunder —

“Approach! You would like to know who I am, what I have done, what I am thinking of? Is that not so, child?”

Antony — ” ... If at the same time those things contribute to my salvation.”

Apollonius — ”Rejoice! I am about to tell them to you!”

Damis, in a low tone to Antony —

“Is it possible? He must have, at the first glance, recognised your extraordinary inclinations for philosophy! I shall profit by it also myself.”

Apollonius — ”I will first describe to you the long road I travelled to gain doctrine; and, if you find in all my life one bad action, you will stop me — for he must scandalise by his words who has offended by his actions.”

Damis to Antony:

“What a just man! eh?”

Antony — ”Decidedly, I believe he is sincere.”

Apollonius — ”The night of my birth, my mother thought she saw herself gathering flowers on the border of a lake. A flash of lightning appeared; and she brought me into the world amid the cries of swans who were singing in her dream. Up to my fifteenth year, they plunged me three times a day into the fountain Asbadeus, whose waters render perjurers dropsical; and they rubbed my body with leaves of cnyza, to make me chaste. A princess from Palmyra sought me out, one evening, and offered me treasures, which she knew were hidden in tombs. A priest of the temple of Diana cut his throat in despair with the sacrificial knife; and the Governor of Cilicia, after repeated promises, declared before my family that he would put me to death; but it was he who died three days after, assassinated by the Romans.”

Damis, to Antony, striking him on the elbow — ”Eh? Just as I told you! What a man!”

Apollonius — ”I have for four years in succession observed the complete silence of the Pythagoreans. The most unforeseen calamity did not draw one sigh from me; and, at the theatre, when I entered, they turned aside from me as from a phantom.”

Damis — ”Would you have done that — you?”

Apollonius — ”The time of my ordeal ended, I undertook to instruct the priests who had lost the tradition.”

Antony — ”What tradition?”

Damis — ”Let him continue. Be silent!”

Apollonius — ”I have conversed with the Samaneans of the Ganges, with the astrologers of Chaldea, with the magi of Babylon, with the Gaulish druids, with the priests of the negroes. I have climbed the fourteen Olympi; I have sounded the Lakes of Sythia; I have measured the vastness of the desert!”

Damis — ”All this is undoubtedly true. I was there myself!”

Apollonius — ”At first, I went as far as the Hyrcanian Sea. I have gone all round it, and through the country of the Baraomatæ, where Bucephalus is buried. I have gone down to Nineveh. At the gates of the city a man came up to me.”

Damis — ”I! I! my good Master! I loved you from the very beginning. You were sweeter than a girl, and more beautiful than a god!”

Appollonius, without listening to him — ”He wished to accompany me, in order to act as an interpreter for me.”

Damis — ”But you replied that you understood every language, and that you divined all thoughts. Then I kissed the end of your mantle, and I walked behind you.”

Apollonius — ”After Ctesiphon, we entered into the land of Babylon.”

Damis — ”And the satrap uttered an exclamation on seeing a man so pale.”

Antony, to himself — ”Which signifies — — ?”

Apollonius — ”The King received me standing near a throne of silver, in a circular hall studded with stars, and from a cupola hung, from unseen threads, four great golden birds, with both wings extended.”

Antony, musing — ”Are there such things on the earth?”

Damis — ”That is, indeed, a city — Babylon! Everyone is rich there! The houses, painted blue, have gates of bronze, with staircases that lead down to the river.”

Making a sketch with his stick on the ground:

“Like that, do you see? And then there are temples, squares, baths, aqueducts! The palaces are covered with copper! and then the interior, if you only saw it!”

Apollonius — ”On the northern wall rises a tower, which supports a second, a third, a fourth, a fifth; and there are three others besides! The eighth is a chapel with a bed in it. Nobody enters there but the woman chosen by the priests for the God Belus. The King of Babylon made me take up my quarters in it.”

Damis — ”They scarcely paid any heed to me. I was left, too, to walk about the streets by myself. I enquired into the customs of the people; I visited the workshops; I examined the huge machines which bring water into the gardens.

But it annoyed me to be separated from the Master.”

Apollonius — ”At last, we left Babylon; and, by the light of the moon, we suddenly saw a wild mare.”

Damis — ”Yes, indeed! she sprang forth on her iron hoofs; she neighed like an ass; she galloped amongst the rocks. He burst into angry abuse of her; and she disappeared.”

Antony, aside — ”Where can they have come from?”

Apollonius — ”At Taxilla, capital of five thousand fortresses, Phraortes, King of the Ganges, showed us his guard of tall black men, five cubits high, and in the gardens of his palace, under a pavilion of green brocade, an enormous elephant, whom the queens used to amuse themselves in perfuming. This was the elephant of Porus, who fled after the death of Alexander.”

Damis — ”And which was found again in a forest.”

Antony — ”They talk a great deal, like drunken people.”

Apollonius — ”Phraortes made us sit down at his table.”

Damis — ”What an odd country! The noblemen, while drinking, amuse themselves by flinging arrows under the feet of a child who is dancing. But I do not approve ...”

Apollonius — ”When I was ready to depart, the King gave me a parasol, and said to me: ‘I have, on the Indus, a stud of white camels. When you do not want them any longer, blow into their ears, and they will return.’ We proceeded along the river, walking in the night by the gleaming of the glow-worms, who emitted their radiance through the bamboos. The slave whistled an air to keep off the serpents; and our camels bent the reins while passing under the trees, as if under doors that were too low. One day, a black child, who held in his hand a caduceus of gold, conducted us to the College of Sages. Iarchas, their chief, spoke to me of my ancestors, of all my thoughts, of all my actions, and all my existences. He had been the river Indus, and he recalled to my mind that I had conducted the boats on the Nile in the time of King Sesostris.”

Damis — ”As for me, they told me nothing, so that I do not know what I was.”

Antony — ”They have the unsubstantial air of shadows.”

Apollonius — ”We met on the seashore the cynocephali, glutted with milk, who were returning from their expedition in the Island of Taprobane. The tepid waves pushed white pearls before us. The amber cracked under our footsteps. Whales’ skeletons were bleaching in the crevices of the cliffs. In short, the earth grew more contracted than a sandal; — and, after casting towards the sun drops from the ocean, we turned to the right to go back. We returned through the region of the Aromatæ, through the country of the Gangaridæ, the promontory of Comaria, the land of the Sachalitæ, of the Aramitæ, and the Homeritæ; then across the Cassanian mountains, the Red Sea, and the Island of Topazes, we penetrated into Ethiopia, through the kingdom of the Pygmæi."

Antony, aside — "How large the earth is!"

Damis — "And when we got home again, all those whom we had known in former days were dead."

Antony hangs his head. Silence.

Apollonius goes on:

"Then they began talking about me in the world. The plague ravaged Ephesus; I made them stone an old mendicant."

Damis — "And the plague was gone!"

Antony — "What! He banishes diseases?"

Apollonius — "At Cnidus, I cured the lover of Venus."

Damis — "Yes, a madman, who had even promised to marry her. To love a woman is bad enough; but a statue — what idiocy! The Master placed his hand on this man's heart, and immediately the love was extinguished."

Antony — "What! He drives out demons?"

Apollonius — "At Tarentum, they brought to the stake a young girl who was dead."

Damis — "The Master touched her lips; and she arose, calling on her mother."

Antony — "Can it be? He brings the dead back to life?"

Apollonius — "I foretold that Vespasian would be Emperor."

Antony — "What! He divines the future?"

Damis — "There was at Corinth — — "

Apollonius — "While I was supping with him at the waters of Baia — — "

Antony — "Excuse me, strangers; it is late!"

Damis — " — — A young man named Menippus."

Antony — "No! no! go away!"

Apollonius — " — — A dog entered, carrying in its mouth a hand that had been cut off."

Damis — " — — One evening, in one of the suburbs, he met a woman."

Antony — "You do not hear me. Take yourselves off!"

Damis — " — — He prowled vacantly around the couches."

Antony — "Enough!"

Apollonius — " — — They wanted to drive him away."

Damis — " — — Menippus, then, surrendered himself to her; and they became lovers.”

Apollonius — ” — — And, beating the mosaic floor with his tail, he deposited this hand on the knees of Flavius.”

Damis — ” — — But, in the morning, at the school-lectures, Menippus was pale.”

Antony, with a bound — ”Still at it! Well, let them go on, since there is not ...”

Damis — ”The Master said to him: ‘O beautiful young man, you are caressing a serpent; and a serpent is caressing you. For how long are these nuptials?’ Every one of us went to the wedding.”

Antony — ”I am doing wrong, surely, in listening to this!”

Damis — ”Servants were busily engaged at the vestibule; the doors flew open; nevertheless, one could hear neither the noise of footsteps, nor the sound of opening doors. The Master seated himself beside Menippus. Immediately, the bride was seized with anger against the philosophers. But the vessels of gold, the cup-bearers, the cooks, the attendants, disappeared; the roof flew away; the walls fell in; and Apollonius remained alone, standing with this woman all in tears at his feet. It was a vampire, who satisfied the handsome young men in order to devour their flesh — because nothing is better for phantoms of this kind than the blood of lovers.”

Apollonius — ”If you wish to know the art — — ”

Antony — ”I wish to know nothing.”

Apollonius — ”On the evening of our arrival at the gates of Rome — — ”

Antony — ”Oh! yes, tell me about the City of the Popes.”

Apollonius — ” — — A drunken man accosted us who sang with a sweet voice. It was an epithalamium of Nero; and he had the power of causing the death of anyone who heard him with indifference. He carried on his back in a box a string taken from the cithara of the Emperor. I shrugged my shoulders. He threw mud in our faces. Then I unfastened my girdle and placed it in his hands.”

Damis — ”In this instance you were quite wrong!”

Apollonius — ”The Emperor, during the night, made me call at his residence. He played at ossicles with Sporus, leaning with his left arm on a table of agate. He turned round, and, knitting his fair brows: ‘Why are you not afraid of me?’ he asked. ‘Because the God who made you terrible has made me intrepid,’ I replied.”

Antony, to himself — ”Something unaccountable fills me with fear.”

Silence.

Damis resumes, in a shrill voice — ”All Asia, moreover, could tell you ...”

Antony, starting up — ”I am sick. Leave me!”

Damis — ”Listen now. At Ephesus, he witnessed the death of Domitian, who was at Rome.”

Antony making an effort to laugh — ”Is this possible?”

Damis — ”Yes, at the theatre, in broad daylight, on the fourteenth of the Kalends of October, he suddenly exclaimed: ‘They are murdering Cæsar!’ and he added, every now and then, ‘He rolls on the ground! Oh! how he struggles! He gets up again; he attempts to fly; the gates are shut. Ah! it is finished. He is dead!’ And that very day, in fact, Titus Flavius Domitianus was assassinated, as you are aware.”

Antony — ”Without the aid of the Devil ... No doubt ...”

Apollonius — ”He wished to put me to death, this Domitian. Damis fled by my direction, and I remained alone in my prison.”

Damis — ”It was a terrible bit of daring, I must confess!”

Apollonius — ”About the fifth hour, the soldiers led me to the tribunal. I had my speech quite ready, which I kept under my cloak.”

Damis — ”The rest of us were on the bank of Puzzoli! We saw you die; we wept; when, towards the sixth hour, all at once, you appeared, and said to us, ‘It is I.’“

Antony, aside — ”Just like Him!”

Damis, very loudly — ”Absolutely!”

Antony — ”Oh, no! you are lying, are you not? You are lying!”

Apollonius — ”He came down from Heaven — I ascend there, thanks to my virtue, which has raised me even to the height of the Most High!”

Damis — ”Tyana, his native city, has erected a temple with priests in his honour!”

Apollonius draws close to Antony, and, bending towards his ear, says:

“The truth is, I know all the gods, all the rites, all the prayers, all the oracles. I have penetrated into the cavern of Trophonius, the son of Apollo. I have moulded for the Syracusans the cakes which they use on the mountains. I have undergone the eighty tests of Mithra. I have pressed against my heart the serpent of Sabacius. I have received the scarf of the Cabiri. I have bathed Cybele in the waves of the Campanian Gulf; and I have passed three moons in the caverns of Samothrace!”

Damis, laughing stupidly — ”Ah! ah! ah! at the mysteries of the Bona Dea!”

Apollonius — ”And now we are renewing our pilgrimage. We are going to the North, the side of the swans and the snows. On the white plain the blind hippopodes break with the ends of their feet the ultramarine plant.”

Damis — ”Come! it is morning! The cock has crowed; the horse has neighed; the ship is ready.”

Antony — ”The cock has not crowed. I hear the cricket in the sands, and I see the moon, which remains in its place.”

Apollonius — ”We are going to the South, behind the mountains and the huge waves, to seek in the perfumes for the cause of love. You shall inhale the odour of myrrhodion, which makes the weak die. You shall bathe your body in the lake of pink oil of the Island of Juno. You shall see sleeping under the primroses the lizard who awakens all the centuries when at his maturity the carbuncle falls from his forehead. The stars glitter like eyes, the cascades sing like lyres, an intoxicating fragrance arises from the opening flowers. Your spirit shall expand in this atmosphere, and it will show itself in your heart as well as in your face.”

Damis — ”Master, it is time! The wind is about to rise; the swallows are awakening; the myrtle-leaf is shed.”

Apollonius — ”Yes, let us go!”

Antony — ”No — not I! I remain!”

Apollonius — ”Do you wish me to show you the plant Balis, which resuscitates the dead?”

Damis — ”Ask him rather for the bloodstone, which attracts silver, iron and bronze!”

Antony — ”Oh! how sick I feel! how sick I feel!”

Damis — ”You shall understand the voices of all creatures, the roarings, the cooings!”

Apollonius — ”I will make you mount the unicorns, the dragons, and the dolphins!”

Antony, weeps — ”Oh! oh! oh!”

Apollonius — ”You shall know the demons who dwell in the caverns, those who speak in the woods, those who move about in the waves, those who drive the clouds.”

Damis — ”Fasten your girdle! tie your sandals!”

Apollonius — ”I will explain to you the reasons for the shapes of divinities; why it is that Apollo is upright, Jupiter sitting down, Venus black at Corinth, square at Athens, conical at Paphos.”

Antony, clasping his hands — ”I wish they would go away! I wish they would go away!”

Apollonius — ”I will snatch off before your eyes the armour of the Gods; we shall force the sanctuaries; I will make you violate the pythoness!”

Antony — ”Help, Lord!”

He flings himself against the cross.

Apollonius — ”What is your desire? your dream? There’s barely time to think of it ...”

Antony — ”Jesus, Jesus, come to my aid!”

Apollonius — ”Do you wish me to make Jesus appear?”

Antony — ”What? How?”

Apollonius — ”It shall be He — and no other! He shall cast off His crown, and we shall speak together face to face!”

Damis, in a low tone — ”Say what you wish for most! Say what you wish for most!”

Antony, at the foot of the cross, murmurs prayers. Damis continues to run around him with wheedling gestures.

“See, worthy hermit, dear Saint Antony! pure man, illustrious man! man who cannot be sufficiently praised! Do not be alarmed; this is an exaggerated style of speaking, borrowed from the Orientals. It in no way prevents — ”

Apollonius — ”Let him alone, Damis! He believes, like a brute, in the reality of things. The fear which he has of the gods prevents him from comprehending them; and he eats his own words, just like a jealous king! But you, my son, quit me not!”

He steps back to the verge of the cliffs, passes over it and remains there, hanging in mid-air:

“Above all forms, farther than the earth, beyond the skies, dwells the World of Ideas, entirely filled with the Word. With one bound we leap across Space, and you shall grasp in its infinity the Eternal, the Absolute Being! Come! give me your hand. Let us go!”

The pair, side by side, rise softly into the air.

Antony, embracing the cross, watches them ascending.

They disappear.

CHAPTER V.

All Gods, All Religions.

ANTONY, walking slowly — ”That was really Hell!

“Nebuchadnezzar did not dazzle me so much. The Queen of Sheba did not bewitch me so thoroughly. The way in which he spoke about the gods filled me with a longing to know them.

“I recollect having seen hundreds of them at a time, in the Island of Elephantinum, in the reign of Dioclesian. The Emperor had given up to the nomads a large territory, on condition that they should protect the frontiers; and the treaty was concluded in the name of the invisible Powers. For the gods of every people were ignorant about other people. The Barbarians had brought forward theirs. They occupied the hillocks of sand which line the river. One could see them holding their idols between their arms, like great paralytic children, or else, sailing amid cataracts on trunks of palm-trees, they pointed out from a distance the amulets on their necks and the tattooings on their breasts; and that is not more criminal than the religion of the Greeks, the Asiatics, and the Romans.

“When I dwelt in the Temple of Heliopolis, I used often to contemplate all the objects on the walls: vultures carrying sceptres, crocodiles playing on lyres, men’s faces joined to serpents’ bodies, women with cows’ heads prostrated before the ithyphallic deities; and their supernatural forms carried me away into other worlds. I wished to know what those calm eyes were gazing at. In order that matter should have so much power, it should contain a spirit. The souls of the gods are attached to their images. Those who possess external beauty may fascinate us; but the others, who are abject or terrible ... how to believe in them? ...”

And he sees moving past, close to the ground, leaves, stones, shells, branches of trees, vague representations of animals, then a species of dropsical dwarfs. These are gods. He bursts out laughing.

Behind him, he hears another outburst of laughter; and Hilarion presents himself, dressed like a hermit, much bigger than before — in fact, colossal.

Antony is not surprised at seeing him again.

“What a brute one must be to adore a thing like that!”

Hilarion — ”Oh! yes; very much of a brute!”

Then advance before them, one by one, idols of all nations and all ages, in

Then advance before them, one by one, idols of all nations and all ages, in wood, in metal, in granite, in feathers, and in skins sewn together. The oldest of them, anterior to the Deluge, are lost to view beneath the seaweed which hangs from them like hair. Some, too long for their lower portions, crack in their joints and break their loins while walking. Others allow sand to flow out through holes in their bellies.

Antony and Hilarion are prodigiously amused. They hold their sides from sheer laughter.

After this, idols pass with faces like sheep. They stagger on their bandy legs, open wide their eyelids, and bleat out, like dumb animals: “Ba! ba! ba!”

In proportion as they approach the human type, they irritate Antony the more. He strikes them with his fist, kicks them, rushes madly upon them. They begin to present a horrible aspect, with high tufts, eyes like bulls, arms terminated with claws, and the jaws of a shark. And, before these gods, men are slaughtered on altars of stone, while others are pounded in vats, crushed under chariot-wheels, or nailed to trees. There is one of them, all in red-hot iron, with the horns of a bull, who devours children.

Antony — ”Horror!”

Hilarion — ”But the gods always demand sufferings. Your own, even, has wished — ”

Antony, weeping — ”Say no more — hold your tongue!”

The enclosure of rocks changes into a valley. A herd of oxen pastures there on the shorn grass. The shepherd who has charge of them perceives a cloud; and in a sharp voice pierces the air with words of urgent entreaty.

Hilarion — ”As he wants rain, he tries, by his strains, to coerce the King of Heaven to open the fruitful cloud.”

Antony, laughing — ”This is too silly a form of presumption!”

Hilarion — ”Why, then, do you perform exorcisms?”

The valley becomes a sea of milk, motionless and illimitable.

In the midst of it floats a long cradle, formed by the coils of a serpent, all whose heads, bending forward at the same time, overshadow a god who lies there asleep. He is young, beardless, more beautiful than a girl, and covered with diaphanous veils. The pearls of his tiara shine softly, like moons; a chaplet of stars winds itself many times above his breast, and, with one hand under his head and the other arm extended, he reposes with a dreamy and intoxicated air. A woman squatted before his feet awaits his awakening.

Hilarion — ”This is the primordial duality of the Brahmans — the absolute not expressing itself by any form.”

Upon the navel of the god a stalk of lotus has grown; and in its calyx appears another god with three faces.

another god with three faces.

Antony — ”Hold! what an invention!”

Hilarion — ”Father, Son and Holy Ghost, in the same way make only one person!”

The three heads are turned aside, and three immense gods appear. The first, who is of a rosy hue, bites the end of his toe. The second, who is blue, tosses four arms about. The third, who is green, weaves a necklace of human skulls. Immediately in front of them rise three goddesses, one wrapped in a net, another offering a cup, and the third brandishing a bow.

And these gods, these goddesses multiply, become tenfold. On their shoulders rise arms, and at the ends of their arms are hands holding banners, axes, bucklers, swords, parasols and drums. Fountains spring from their heads, grass hangs from their nostrils.

Riding on birds, cradled on palanquins, throned on seats of gold, standing in niches of ivory, they dream, travel, command, drink wine and inhale flowers. Dancing-girls whirl around; giants pursue monsters; at the entrances to the grottoes, solitaries meditate. Myriads of stars and clouds of streamers mingle in an indistinguishable throng. Peacocks drink from the streams of golden dust. The embroidery of the pavilions blends with the spots of the leopards. Coloured rays cross one another in the blue air, amid the flying of arrows and the swinging of censers. And all this unfolds itself, like a lofty frieze, leaning with its base on the rocks and mounting to the very sky.

Antony, dazzled — ”What a number of them there are! What do they wish?”

Hilarion — ”The one who is scratching his abdomen with his elephant’s trunk is the solar god, the inspirer of wisdom. That other, whose six heads carry towers and fourteen handles of javelins, is the prince of armies, the fire-devourer. The old man riding on a crocodile is going to bathe the souls of the dead on the seashore. They will be tormented by this black woman with rotten teeth, the governess of hell. The chariot drawn by red mares, which a legless coachman is driving, is carrying about in broad daylight the master of the sun. The moon-god accompanies him in a litter drawn by three gazelles. On her knees, on the back of a parrot, the goddess of beauty is presenting her round breast to Love, her son. Here she is farther on; she leaps with joy in the prairies. Look! look! With a radiant mitre on her head, she runs over the cornfields, over the waves, mounts into the air, and exhibits herself everywhere. Between these gods sit the genii of the winds, of the planets, of the months, of the days, and a hundred thousand others! And their aspects are multiplied, their transformations rapid. Here is one who from a fish has become a tortoise, he assumes the head of a wild boar, the stature of a dwarf!”

Antony — ”For what purpose?”

Hilarion — ”To establish equilibrium, to combat evil. Life is exhausted, its forms are used up; and it is necessary to progress by metamorphoses of them.”

Suddenly a naked man appears, seated in the middle of the sand with his legs crossed. A large circle vibrates, suspended behind him. The little curls of his black hair, deepening into an azure tint, twist symmetrically around a protuberance at the top of his head. His arms, of great length, fall straight down his sides. His two hands, with open palms, rest evenly on his thighs. The lower portions of his feet present the figures of two suns; and he remains completely motionless in front of Antony and Hilarion, with all the gods around him placed at intervals upon the rocks, as if on the seats of a circus. His lips open, and in a deep voice he says:

“I am the master of the great charity, the help of creatures, and I expound the law to believers and to the profane alike. To save the world I wished to be born amongst men; the gods wept when I went away. At first, I sought a woman suitable for the purpose — of warlike race, the spouse of a king, exceedingly virtuous and beautiful, with a deep navel, a body firm as a diamond; and at the time of the full moon, without the intervention of any male, I entered her womb. I came out through her right side. Then the stars stopped in their motions.”

Hilarion murmurs between his teeth:

“‘And when they saw the stars stop, they conceived a great joy!’“

Antony looks more attentively at the Buddha, who resumes:

“From the bottom of the Himalaya, a religious centenarian set forth to see me.”

Hilarion — ”‘A man called Simeon, who was not to die before he had seen the Christ!’“

The Buddha — ”They brought me to the schools. I knew more than the doctors.”

Hilarion — ” ... ‘In the midst of the doctors; and all those who heard him were ravished by his wisdom.’“

Antony makes a sign to Hilarion to keep silent.

The Buddha — ”I went continually to meditate in the gardens. The shadows of the trees used to move; but the shadow of the one that sheltered me did not move. No one could equal me in the knowledge of the Sacred Writings, the enumeration of atoms, the management of elephants, waxworks, astronomy, poetry, boxing, all exercises and all arts. In compliance with custom, I took a wife; and I passed the days in my royal palace, arrayed in pearls, under a shower of perfumes, fanned by the fly-flappers of thirty-three thousand women, and gazing at my people from the tops of my terraces adorned with resounding bells. But the sight of the world’s miseries made me turn aside from pleasures. I fled. I went a-begging on high-ways, covered with rags collected in the sepulchres; and, as there was a very learned hermit, I offered myself as his servant. I guarded his door; I washed his feet. All sensation, all joy, all languor, were annihilated. Then, concentrating my thoughts on a larger field of meditation, I came to know the essence of things, the illusion of forms. I speedily abandoned the science of the Brakhmans. They are eaten up with lusts beneath their austere exterior; they anoint themselves with filth, and sleep upon thorns, believing that they arrive at happiness through the path of death!”

Hilarion — ”Pharisees, hypocrites, whited sepulchres, race of vipers!”

The Buddha — ”I, too, have done astonishing things — eating for a day only a single grain of rice — and at that time grains of rice were not bigger than they are now — my hair fell off; my body became black; my eyes, sunken in their sockets, seemed like stars seen at the bottom of a well. For six years I never moved, remaining exposed to flies, to lions, and to serpents; and I subjected myself to burning suns, heavy showers, snow, lightning, hail, and tempest, without even shielding myself with my hand. The travellers who passed, assuming that I was dead, flung clods of earth at me from a distance.

“There only remained for me to be tempted by the Devil.

“I invoked him.

“His sons came — hideous, covered with scales, nauseous as charcoal, howling, hissing, bellowing, flinging at each other armour and dead men’s bones. Some of them spirted out flames through their nostrils; others spread around darkness with their wings; others carried chaplets of fingers that had been cut off; others drank the venom of serpents out of the hollows of their hands. They have the heads of pigs, rhinoceroses, or toads — all kinds of figures calculated to inspire respect or terror.”

Antony, aside — ”I endured that myself in former times.”

The Buddha — ”Then he sent me his daughters — beautiful, well-attired with golden girdles, teeth white as the jasmine, and limbs round as an elephant’s trunk. Some of them stretched up their arms when they yawned to display the dimples in their elbows; others blinked their eyes; others began to laugh and others unfastened one another’s garments. Amongst them were blushing virgins, matrons full of pride, and queens with great trains of baggage and attendants.”

Antony, aside — ”Ah! that also!”

The Buddha — ”Having vanquished the demon. I passed twelve years in nourishing myself exclusively on perfumes, — and, as I had acquired the five virtues, the five faculties, the ten forces, the eighteen substances and penetrated into the four spheres of the invisible world, the Intelligence was mine, and I became the Buddha!”

All the gods bow down, those who have many heads lower them all at the same time. He raises his hand on high in the air, and resumes:

“In view of the deliverance of beings, I have made hundreds of thousands of sacrifices; I have given to the poor robes of silk, beds, chariots, houses, heaps of gold and diamonds. I have given my hands to the one-handed, my legs to the lame, my eyes to the blind; I have cut off my head for the decapitated. At the time when I was king, I distributed the provinces; at the time when I was Brakhman, I despised nobody. When I was a solitary I spoke words of tenderness to the thief who tried to cut my throat. When I was a tiger, I let myself die of hunger. And in this final stage of existence, having preached the law, I have nothing more to do. The great period is accomplished. The men, the animals, the gods, the bamboos, the oceans, the mountains, the grains of sand of the Ganges, with the myriads of myriads of stars, everything, must perish; and, until the new births, a flame will dance on the ruins of a world’s overthrow.”

Then a vertigo seizes the gods. They stagger, fall into convulsions, and vomit forth their existences. Their crowns break to pieces; their standards fly away. They get rid of their attributes and their sexes, fling over their shoulders the cups from which they drink immortality, strangle themselves with their serpents, and vanish in smoke; and, when they have all disappeared:

Hilarion, slowly — ”You have just seen the creed of many hundreds of millions of men!”

Antony is on the earth, his face in his hands. Standing close to him, and turning his back to the cross, Hilarion watches him.

A rather lengthened period elapses.

Then a singular being appears, with the head of a man and the body of a fish. He advances straight through the air, tossing the sand with his tail; and his patriarchal face and his little arms make Antony laugh.

Oannes, in a plaintive voice — ”Treat me with respect! I am the contemporary of the beginning of things.

“I have dwelt in the shapeless world, where slumbered hermaphrodite animals, under the weight of an opaque atmosphere, in the depths of gloomy waves — when the fingers, the fins, and the wings were confounded, and eyes without heads floated like molluscs amongst human-faced bulls and dog-footed serpents.

“Over the whole of those beings Omoroca, bent like a hoop, stretched her woman’s body. But Belus cut her clean in two halves, made the earth with one, and the heavens with another; and the two worlds alike mutually contemplate each other. I, the first consciousness of chaos, I have arisen from the abyss to harden matter, to regulate forms; and I have taught men fishing, the sowing of seed, the scripture, and the history of the gods. Since then, I live in the ponds that remained after the Deluge. But the desert grows larger around them; the wind flings sand into them; the sun consumes them; and I expire on my bed of lemon while gazing across the water at the stars. Thither am I returning.”

He makes a plunge and disappears in the Nile.

Hilarion — ”This is an ancient god of the Chaldeans!”

Antony, ironically — ”Who, then, were the gods of Babylon?”

Hilarion — ”You can see them!”

And they find themselves upon the platform of a quadrangular tower rising above other towers, which, growing narrower in proportion as they rise, form a monstrous pyramid. You may distinguish below a great, black mass — the city, without doubt — stretching along the plain. The air is cold; the sky is of a sombre blue; the multitudinous stars palpitate.

In the middle of the platform stands a column of white stone. Priests in linen robes pass and return all round, so as to describe in their evolutions a moving circle, and, with heads raised, they contemplate the stars.

Hilarion points out several of them to Saint Antony:

“There are thirty chief priests. Fifteen gaze upon the region above the earth, and fifteen on the region below it. At regular intervals one of them rushes from the upper regions to the lower, whilst another abandons the lower to mount towards the empyrean.

“Of the seven planets, two are benevolent, two malevolent, and three ambiguous; everything in the world depends on these eternal fires. According to their position and their movements, one may draw prognostications, and you are now treading on the most sacred spot on earth. There Pythagoras and Zoroaster may be met. Two thousand years have these men been observing the sky, the better to comprehend the gods.”

Antony — ”The stars are not gods!”

Hilarion — ”Yes! say they; for, while things are continually passing around us, the sky, like eternity, remains unchangeable!”

Antony — ”Nevertheless, it has a master.”

Hilarion, pointing at the column — ”That is Belus, the first ray, the sun, the male! — the other, which is fruitful, is under him!”

Antony observes a garden lighted up with lamps. He is in the midst of the crowd in an avenue of cypress-trees. To right and left little paths lead towards huts erected in a wood of pomegranate-trees, which protect lattices of reeds. The men, for the most part, have pointed caps with laced robes, like the plumage of peacocks. There are people from the North clad in bearskins; nomads in brown woollen cloaks; pale Gangarides with long ear-rings; and the classes, like the nationalities, appear to be confused, for sailors and stone-cutters jostle against princes wearing tiaras of carbuncles and carrying large walking-sticks with carved heads. All hurry forward with dilated nostrils, filled with the same desire.

From time to time they got out of the way, in order to allow a long, covered chariot, drawn by oxen, to pass, or perhaps it is an ass jolting on his back a woman closely veiled, who also disappears in the direction of the huts.

Antony is frightened. He desires to turn back. However, an inexpressible curiosity leads him on.

Beneath the cypress-trees women are squatted in rows upon deerskins, each of them having for a diadem a plait of cords. Some of them, magnificently attired, address the passers-by in loud tones. The more timid keep their features hidden between their hands, whilst, from behind, a matron — no doubt, their mother — encourages them. Others, with heads enveloped in black shawls, and the rest of their bodies quite nude, seem, at a distance, like statues of flesh. As soon as a man flings money on their knees, they rise. And one can hear kisses amid the foliage, and sometimes a great, bitter cry.

Hilarion — ”Those are the virgins of Babylon who prostitute themselves to the goddess.”

Antony — ”What goddess?”

Hilarion — ”There she is!”

And he shows Antony, at the very end of the avenue, on the threshold of an illuminated grotto, a block of stone representing a woman.

Antony — ”Infamy! What an abomination to give a sex to God!”

Hilarion — ”You conceive Him, surely, as a living person!”

Once more Antony finds himself in darkness.

He perceives in the air a luminous circle placed on horizontal wings. This species of ring surrounds, like a girdle that is too loose, the figure of a small man with a mitre on his head and a crown in his hand, the lower part of whose body is shut out from view by the huge feathers exhibited in his kilt.

This is Ormuz, the God of the Persians. He flutters while he exclaims:

“I am terrified! I catch a glimpse of his mouth. I have vanquished thee, Ahriman! But thou art beginning again!

“At first, revolting against me, thou didst destroy the eldest of creatures, Kaiomortz, the man-bull. Then, thou didst seduce the first human pair, Meschia and Meschiana, and didst fill their hearts with darkness, and press forward thy battalions towards Heaven.

"I had my own, the inhabitants of the stars, and I gazed down from my throne on all the planets in their different spheres.

"Mithra, my son, dwelt in an inaccessible spot. There he received souls, and sent them forth, and, each morning he arose to pour out his riches.

"The splendour of the firmament was reflected by the earth. The fire shone on the mountains — image of the other fire with which I have created all beings. To secure it from defilement, they did not burn the dead, who were transported to Heaven on the beaks of birds.

"I have regulated pasturages, labours, the wood of sacrifice, the forms of cups, the words that must be uttered in insomnia; and my priests prayed continually in order that their worship should correspond to the eternity of God. They purified themselves with water; they offered up loaves on the altars; they confessed their sins in loud tones.

"Homa gave himself to men to drink in order to communicate his strength to them.

"While the genii of Heaven were fighting the demons, the children of Iran chased the serpents. The King, whom a countless train of courtiers served on bended knees, was attired so as to resemble me in person, and wore my head-dress. His gardens had the magnificence of a celestial earth; and his tomb represented him slaying a monster — emblem of the good which exterminates evil. For, one day, it came to pass — thanks to the endless course of time — that I triumphed over Ahriman. But the interval that separates us is disappearing; the night is rising! Help, Amschaspands, Irzeds, Ferouers! Come to my assistance, Mithra! take thy sword! Caosyac, who must come back to save the world, defend me! How is this? ... No one!

"Ah! I am dying! Ahriman, thou art the master!"

Hilarion, behind Antony, restrains an exclamation of joy, and Ormuz plunges into the darkness.

Then appears the great Diana of Ephesus, black, with enamelled eyes, elbows at her sides, forearms turned out, and hands open.

Lions crouch upon her shoulders; fruits, flowers and stars cross one another upon her chest; further down three rows of breasts exhibit themselves, and from the belly to the feet she is caught in a close sheath, from which sprout forth, in the centre of her body, bulls, stags, griffins and bees. She is seen in the white gleaming caused by a disc of silver, round as the full moon, placed behind her head.

"Where is my temple? Where are my amazons? How is it with me — me, the incorruptible — that I find myself so impotent?"

Her flowers wither; her fruits, over-ripe, hang loose; the lions and the bulls bow down their necks; the stags, exhausted, begin to pant; the bees, with a faint buzzing, fall dying upon the ground. She presses her breasts one after the other. They are empty! But, yielding to a desperate pressure, her sheath bursts open. She clutches the end of it, like the skirt of a dress, flings into it her animals and her flower-wreaths, then goes back into the darkness; and in the distance voices murmur, grumble, roar, cry, or bellow. The density of the night is increased by the winds. A warm shower begins to fall in heavy drops.

Antony — ”How pleasant is this odour of palm-trees, this rustling of green leaves, this transparency of fountains! I would like to lie down flat upon the ground, in order to feel it close to my heart, and my life would be renewed in eternal youth!”

He hears the sound of castanets and cymbals, and, in the midst of a rustic crowd, men clad in white tunics, with red bands, lead out an ass, richly harnessed, his tail adorned with ribands and his hoofs painted. A box, covered with a saddle-cloth of yellow linen, sways to and fro upon his back, between two baskets, one of which receives the offerings deposited there — eggs, grapes, pears, cheeses, poultry, and small coins — while the second is full of roses, which the drivers of the ass scatter before him as they move along. The latter wear pendants in their ears, large cloaks, plaited tresses, and have their cheeks painted. Each of them has an olive crown fastened around his forehead by a figured medallion. They carry daggers in their girdles, and flourish whips with ebony handles, each having three thongs mounted with ossicles. The last in the procession fix in the ground erect, as a chandelier, a huge pine-tree, whose summit is on fire, and the lowest branches of which overshadow a little sheep.

The ass stops. The saddle-cloth is removed; and underneath appears a second covering of black felt. Then one of the men in a white tunic begins to dance, while playing upon castanets; while another, on his knees before the box, beats a tambourine; and the oldest of the band commences:

“Here is the Bona Dea, the divinity of the mountains, the great mother of Syria! Draw hither, honest people! She procures joy, heals the sick, bestows fortunes, and satisfies lovers. It is we who bring her out to walk in the country in fine weather and bad weather. We often sleep in the open air, and we have not a well-served table every day. The thieves dwell in the woods. The beasts rush forth from their dens. Slippery paths line the precipices. Look here! look here!”

They raise the coverlet and disclose a box incrusted with little pebbles.

“Higher than the cedar-trees she hovers in the blue ether. More circumambient than the winds, she surrounds the world. Her respiration is exhaled through the nostrils of tigers; her voice growls beneath the volcanoes; her anger is the storm; and the pallor of her face has made the moon white. She ripens the harvests; she swells out the rinds; she makes the beard grow. Give her something, for she hates the avaricious!”

The box flies open; and beneath an awning of blue silk is seen a little image of Cybele, glittering with spangles, crowned with towers, and seated on a chariot of red stone, drawn by two lions with raised paws.

The crowd presses forward to see.

The archi-gallus continues:

“She loves the sounds of dulcimers, the stamping of feet, the howling of wolves, the echoing mountains and the deep gorges, the flower of the almond-tree, the pomegranate and the green figs, the whirling dance, the high-sounding flute, the sweet sap, the salt tear, — blood! Help! help! Mother of mountains!”

They flagellate themselves with their whips, and the strokes resound on their breasts. The skins of the tambourines vibrate till they almost burst. They seize their knives and inflict gashes on their arms:

“She is sad: let us be sad! He who is doomed to suffer must weep! In that way your sins will be remitted. Blood washes out everything: shed drops of it around, then, like flowers. She demands that of another — of one who is pure!”

The archi-gallus raises his knife above the sheep,

Antony, seized with horror — ”Don’t slaughter the lamb!”

A purple flood gushes forth. The priests sprinkle the crowd with it; and all — including Antony and Hilarion — ranged around the burning tree, silently watch the last palpitations of the victim. From the midst of the priests comes a woman, exactly like the image enclosed in the little box. She stops on seeing a young man in a Phrygian cap.

His thighs are covered with tight-fitting breeches opened here and there by lozenges which are fastened with coloured bows. He rests his elbows against one of the branches of the tree, holding a flute in his hand, in a languishing attitude.

Cybele, encircling his figure with her arms —

“To rejoin thee I have travelled through every region — and famine ravaged the fields. Thou hast deceived me! No matter, — I love thee! Warm my body! Let us unite!”

Atys — ”The spring-time will return no more, O eternal Mother! Despite my love, it is not possible to penetrate thy essence. I should like to cover myself with a coloured robe like thine. I envy thy breasts, swollen with milk, the length of thy tresses, thy mighty sides from which spring living creatures. Would that I were like thee! Would that I were woman! But no! that can never be! My virility fills me with horror!”

With a sharp stone he mutilates himself; then he begins to run madly around.

The priests imitate the god; the faithful, the priests. Men and women exchange their garments and embrace one another; and this whirlwind of blood-stained flesh hurries away, whilst the voices, ever continuing, become more clamorous and shrill, like those one hears at funerals.

A great catafalque hung with purple carries on its summit a bed of ebony, surrounded by torches and baskets of silver filigree, in which are contained green lettuces, mallows, and fennel. Upon the seats, above and below, are seated women, all attired in black, with girdles undone and naked feet, and holding with a melancholy air huge bouquets of flowers.

On the ground, at the corners of the platform, alabaster urns filled with myrrh are sending up light wreaths of smoke. On the bed may be seen the corpse of a man. Blood trickles from his thigh. His arm is hanging down, and a dog, who is howling, licks his nails. The line of torches placed too close to one another prevents his figure from being completely visible. Antony is seized with anguish. He is afraid of seeing the face of some one he knew.

The women cease their sobbing; and, after an interval of silence, all, at the same time, burst into a psalm:

"Beautiful! beautiful! he is beautiful! Enough of sleep — raise his head! Up! Inhale our bouquets! These are narcissi and anemones gathered in thy gardens to please thee. Return to life! thou fillest us with fear!

"Speak! What dost thou require? Dost thou wish to drink wine? Dost thou wish to sleep in our beds? Dost thou wish to eat the honey-cakes which have the form of little birds?

"Let us press close to his hips! let us kiss his breast! Hold! hold! feel thou our fingers covered with rings which are stealing over thy body, and our lips which are seeking thy mouth, and our hair which is sweeping thy legs, insensible god, deaf to our prayers!"

They burst into shrieks, tearing their faces with their nails, then become silent; and only the howling of the dog is heard.

"Alas! alas! The dark blood rushes over his snowy flesh. See how his knees writhe, how his sides give way! The flowers upon his face have soaked the gore. He is dead! Let us weep! let us lament!"

They come all in a row to fling down between the torches their flowing locks, resembling at a distance black or yellow serpents; and the catafalque is softly lowered to the level of a cave — a gloomy sepulchre, which is yawning in the background.

Then a woman bends over the corpse. Her hair, which never has been cut, covers her from head to foot. She sheds so many tears that her grief does not seem to be like that of others, but superhuman, infinite.

Antony thinks of the mother of Jesus.

She says:

“Thou didst escape from the East, and thou didst press me in thy arms all quivering with dew, O sun! Doves fluttered above the azure of thy mantle, our kisses caused breezes amid the foliage, and I abandoned myself to thy love, delighting in the exquisite sensation of my own weakness.

“Alas! alas! Why art thou about to rush away over the mountains? At the autumnal equinox a wild boar wounded thee! Thou art dead, and the fountains weep and the trees droop, and the winter wind is whistling through the leafless branches.

“My eyes are about to close, seeing that darkness is covering thee. By this time thou art dwelling on the other side of the world, near my more powerful rival.

“O Persephone, all that is beautiful goes down to thee and returns no more!”

While she has been speaking, her companions have taken the dead body to lower it into the sepulchre. It remains in their hands. It was only a corpse of wax!

Antony experiences a kind of relief. The whole scene vanishes, and the cell, the rocks, and the cross reappear! And now he distinguishes on the other side of the Nile a woman standing in the middle of the desert. She holds with her hand the end of a long black veil, which conceals her figure; while she carries on her left arm a little child, which she is suckling. At her side a huge ape is squatted on the sand. She lifts her head towards the sky, and, in spite of the distance, her voice can be heard.

Isis — ”O Neith, beginning of things! Ammon, lord of eternity! Ptha, demiurgus! Thoth, his intelligence! Gods of Amenthi! Special Triads of the Nomes! Sparrow-hawks in the azure! Sphinxes on the outsides of temples! Ibises standing between the horns of oxen! Planets! Constellations! River-banks! Murmurs of wind! Reflections of light! Tell me where to find Osiris!

“I have sought for him through all the water-courses and all the lakes, and, farther still, in the Ph[oe]nician Byblos. Anubis, with ears erect, jumped round me, barking, and with his nose scenting out the clumps of tamarind. Thanks, good Cynocephalus, thanks!”

She gives the ape two or three friendly little slaps on the head.

“The hideous red-haired Typhon killed him and tore him to pieces. We have found all his members. But I have not got that which made me fruitful!”

She utters bitter lamentations.

Antony is seized with rage. He casts pebbles at her insultingly:

“Impure one! begone, begone!”

Hilarion — ”Respect her! This is the religion of your ancestors! You have worn her amulets in your cradle!”

Isis — ”In former times, when the summer returned, the inundation drove to the desert the impure beasts. The dykes flew open; the boats dashed against one another; the panting earth drank the stream till it was glutted. O god! with horns of bull, thou didst stretch thyself upon my breast, and the lowing of the eternal cow was heard!

“The new-sown crops, the harvests, the thrashing of corn, and the vintages succeeded each other regularly in unison with the changes of the seasons. In the nights, ever clear, the great stars shed forth their beams. The days were steeped in an unchanging splendour. The sun and the moon were seen like a royal pair on either side of the horizon.

“We were enthroned in a world more sublime — twin monarchs, spouses from the bosom of eternity; he holding a sceptre with the head of a conchoupha, and I a sceptre with a lotus-flower, we stood with hands joined; — and the crash of empires did not change our attitude.

“Egypt lay stretched beneath us, monumental and solemn, long, like the corridor of a temple, with obelisks at the right, pyramids at the left, its labyrinth in the middle; and everywhere avenues of monsters, forests of columns, massive archways flanking gates which have for their summit the earth’s sphere between two wings.

“The animals of her zodiac found their counterparts in her plains, and with their forms and colours filled her mysterious writings. Divided into twelve regions, as the year is into twelve months — each month, each day, having its god — she reproduced the immutable order of the heavens; and man, though he died, did not lose his lineaments, but, saturated with perfumes and becoming imperishable, he went to sleep for three thousand years in a silent Egypt.

“The latter, greater than the other, spread out beneath the earth. Thither one descended by means of staircases leading to halls where were reproduced the joys of the good, the tortures of the wicked, everything that takes place in the third invisible world. Ranged along the walls, the dead, in painted coffins, awaited each their turn; and the soul, free from migrations, continued its sleep till it awakened in another life.

“Meanwhile, Osiris sometimes came back to see me. His shade made me the mother of Harpocrates.”

She gazes on the child:

“It is he! Those are his eyes; those are his tresses, curling like a ram’s horns. Thou shalt begin his works over again. We shall bloom afresh, like the lotus. I am always the great Isis! Nobody has ever yet lifted my veil! My offspring is the sun!

“Sun of spring, let the clouds obscure thy face! The breath of Typhon devours the pyramids. Just now I have seen the Sphinx fly away. He galloped off like a jackal.

“I am seeking for my priests — my priests in their linen robes, with great harps, carrying along a mystic skiff ornamented with pateræ of silver. No more feasts on the lakes! no more illuminations in my Delta! no more cups of milk at Philæ! For a long time Apis has not reappeared.

“Egypt! Egypt! Thy great immovable gods have their shoulders whitened by the dung of birds, and the wind, as it passes along the desert, carries with it the ashes of the dead! — Anubis, protector of shadows, do not leave me!”

The Cynocephalus vanishes.

She gives her child a shaking.

“But what aileth thee? ... thy hands are cold, thy head fallen back!”

Harpocrates has just died. Then she utters a cry so bitter, mournful, and heartrending, that Antony replies to it by another cry, while he opens his arms to support her.

She is no longer there. He hangs his head, overwhelmed with shame.

All that he has just seen becomes confused in his mind. It is like the stunning effect of a voyage, the uncomfortable sensation of drunkenness. Fain would he hate; and yet a vague pity softens his heart. He begins to weep abundantly.

Hilarion — ”What is it now that makes you sad?”

Antony, after questioning himself for a long time — ”I am thinking of all the souls lost through these false gods!”

Hilarion — ”Do you not find that they have — in some respects — resemblances to the true?”

Antony — ”This is a trick of the Devil the better to seduce the faithful. He attacks the strong through the spirit, and the others through the flesh.”

Hilarion — ”But lust, in its furies, possesses the disinterestedness of penitence. The frantic love of the body accelerates its destruction — and by its weakness proclaims the extent of the impossible.”

Antony — ”How is it that this affects me? My heart revolts with disgust against those brutish gods, always occupied with carnage and incest.”

Hilarion — ”Recall to yourself in the Scriptures all the things that scandalise you because you cannot understand them. In the same way, these gods, under the outward form of criminals, may contain the truth. There are some of them left to see. Turn aside!”

Antony — ”No! no! it is a peril!”

Hilarion — ”A moment ago you wished to make their acquaintance. Do falsehoods make your faith totter? What do you fear?”

The rocks in front of Antony have become a mountain.

A range of clouds intersects it half-way from the top; and overhead appears another mountain, enormous, quite green, which hollows out the valley unevenly, having on its summit, in a wood of laurels, a palace of bronze, with tiles of gold and ivory capitals.

In the midst of the peristyle, upon a throne, Jupiter, colossal, and with a naked torso, holds victory in one hand, and the thunderbolt in the other; and his eagle, between his legs, erects its head.

Juno, close to him, rolls her great eyes, surmounted by a diadem, from which escapes, like a vapour, a veil floating in the wind.

Behind, Minerva, standing on a pedestal, leans upon her spear. The Gorgon's skin covers her breast, and a linen peplum descends in regular folds even to her toe-nails. Her grey eyes, which shine beneath her vizor, gaze intently into the distance.

At the right of the palace the aged Neptune is riding on a dolphin beating with its fins a vast expanse of azure, which is the sky or the sea, for the perspective of the ocean prolongs the blue ether; the two elements become mingled in one.

On the other side, Pluto, fierce, in a mantle black as night, with a tiara of diamonds and a sceptre of ebony, is in the midst of an isle enclosed by the windings of the Styx; — and this ghostly stream rushes into the darkness, which forms under the cliff a great black gap, a shapeless abyss.

Mars, clad in bronze, brandishes, with an air of fury, his huge sword and shield.

Hercules, standing lower, gazes up at him, leaning on his club.

Apollo, with radiant face, is driving, with his right arm extended, four white horses at a gallop; and Ceres, in a chariot drawn by oxen, is advancing towards him with a sickle in her hand.

Bacchus goes before her on a very low car slowly drawn along by lynxes. Erect, beardless, with vine-branches over his forehead, he passes, holding a goblet from which wine is flowing. Silenus, at his side, is dangling upon an ass. Pan, with pointed ears, is blowing his pipe; the Mimallones beat drums; Mænads scatter flowers; the Bacchantes throw back their heads with hair dishevelled.

Diana, with her tunic tucked up, sets out from the wood with her nymphs.

At the bottom of a cavern, Vulcan is hammering the iron between the Cabiri; here and there, the old river-gods, resting upon green stones, water their urns; and the Muses, standing up, are singing in the dales.

The Hours, of equal height, hold each other by the hand; and Mercury is placed in a slanting posture, upon a rainbow, with his magic wand, his winged sandals and his broad-brimmed hat.

But at the top of the staircase of the gods, amid clouds soft as feathers, whose folds as they wind around let fall roses, Venus Anadyomene is gazing at her image in a mirror; her pupils cast languishing glances underneath her rather heavy eyelashes. She has long, fair tresses, which spread out over her shoulders, her dainty breasts, her slender figure, her hips widening like the curves of a lyre, her two rounded thighs, the dimples around her knees, and her delicate feet. Not far from her mouth a butterfly is fluttering. The splendour of her body sheds around her a halo of brilliant mother-of-pearl; and all the rest of Olympus is bathed in a rosy dawn, which, by insensible degrees, reaches the heights of the azure sky.

Antony — ”Ah! my bosom dilates. A joy, which I cannot analyse, descends into the depths of my soul. How beautiful it is! how beautiful it is!”

Hilarion — ”They stooped down from the height of the clouds to direct the swords. You might meet them on the roadsides. You kept them in your home; and this familiarity made life divine.

“Her only aim was to be free and beautiful. Her ample robes rendered her movements more graceful. The orator’s voice, exercised beside the sea, struck the marble porticoes in unison with the sonorous waves. The stripling, rubbed with oil, wrestled, quite naked, in the full light of day. The most religious action was to expose pure forms.

“Those men, too, respected spouses, the aged and suppliants. Behind the Temple of Hercules, an altar was raised to Pity.

“They used to immolate victims with flowers around their fingers. Memory was not even troubled by the decay of the dead, for there remained of them only a handful of ashes. The soul, mingled with the boundless ether, ascended to the gods!”

Bending towards Antony’s ear:

“And they live for ever! The Emperor Constantine adores Apollo. You will find the Trinity in the mysteries of Samothrace, baptism in the case of Isis, the redemption in that of Mithra, the martyrdom of a god in the feasts of Bacchus. Proserpine is the Virgin; Aristæus, Jesus!”

Antony keeps his eyes cast down; then all at once he repeats the creed of Jerusalem — as he recollects it — emitting, after each phrase, a long sigh:

“‘I believe in one only God, the Father; — and in one only Lord, Jesus Christ, first-born son of God, who became incarnate and was made man; who was crucified and buried; who ascended into Heaven; who will come to judge the living and the dead; whose kingdom will have no end; — and in one only Holy Ghost; — and in one only baptism of repentance; — and in one holy Catholic Church; — and in the resurrection of the flesh; — and in the life everlasting!’“

Immediately the cross becomes larger, and, piercing the clouds, it casts a shadow over the heaven of the gods.

They all grow dim. Olympus vanishes.

Antony distinguishes near its base, half lost in the caverns, or supporting the stones on their shoulders, huge bodies chained. These are the Titans, the Giants, the Hecatonchires, and the Cyclops.

A voice rises, indistinct and formidable, — like the murmur of the waves, like the sound heard in woods during a storm, like the roaring of the wind down a precipice:

“We knew it, we of all others! The gods were doomed to die. Uranus was mutilated by Saturn, and Saturn by Jupiter. He will be himself annihilated. Each in its turn. It is destiny!”

And, by degrees, they plunge into the mountain, and disappear.

Meanwhile, the roof of the palace of gold flies away.

Jupiter descends from his throne. The thunder at his feet smokes like a brand that is almost extinguished; and the eagle, stretching its neck, gathers with its beak its falling plumes.

“So, then, I am no longer the master of things, all-good, all-powerful, god of the phratriæ and of the Greek peoples, ancestor of all the kings, the Agamemnon of Heaven!

“Eagle of the apotheoses, what breath of Erebus has driven thee to me? or, flying from the Campus Martius, dost thou bring to me the soul of the last of the Emperors?

“I no longer desire those of men! Let the earth guard them, and let them be moved on a level with its baseness. They now have hearts of slaves; they forget injuries, ancestors, oaths; and everywhere the folly of mobs, the mediocrity of the individual, and the hideousness of races reign supreme!”

His respiration makes his sides swell even to bursting, and he writhes with his hands. Hebe in tears presents a cup to him. He seizes it:

“No! no! As long as there will be, no matter where, a head enclosing thought which hates disorder and realises the idea of Law, the spirit of Jupiter will live!”

But the cup is empty. He turns it around slowly on his finger-nail.

“Not a drop! When ambrosia fails, there is an end of the Immortals!”

It slips out of his hand, and he leans against a pillar, feeling that he is dying.

Juno — ”There was no need of so many loves! Eagle, bull, swan, golden shower, cloud and flame, thou hast assumed every form, scattered thy light in every element, hidden thy head on every couch! This time the divorce is irrevocable — and our sway, our very existence, is dissolved!”

She rushes away into the air!

Minerva no longer has her spear; and the ravens, which nestled in the sculptures of the frieze, whirl round her, and bite at her helmet.

“Let me see whether my vessels, cleaving the shining sea, have returned into my three ports, wherefore the fields are deserted, and what the daughters of Athens are now doing.

“In the month of Hecatombæon, all my people came to me led by their magistrates and priests. Then, in white robes, with chitons of gold, the long files of virgins advanced, holding cups, baskets, and parasols; then, the three hundred oxen for the sacrifice, old men shaking green boughs, soldiers clashing their armour against each other, youths singing hymns, players on the flute and on the lyre, rhapsodists and dancing-girls — and finally, on the mast of a trireme, supported by coils of rope, my great veil embroidered by virgins, who, for the space of a year, had been nourished in a particular fashion; and, when it had been shown in every street, in every square, and before every temple, in the midst of a procession continually chanting, it ascended to the Acropolis, brushed passed the Propylæum, and entered the Parthenon.

“But a difficulty faces me — me, the ingenious one! What! what! not a single idea! Here am I more terrified than a woman.”

She perceives behind her a ruin, utters a cry, and, struck on the forehead, falls backward to the ground.

Hercules has cast off his lion’s skin, and, resting on his feet, bending his back, and biting his lips, he makes desperate efforts to sustain Olympus, which is toppling down.

“I have vanquished the Cercopes, the Amazons, and the Centaurs. I have slain many kings, I have broken the horn of Achelous, a great river. I have cut through mountains; I have brought oceans together. I have liberated enslaved nations; I have peopled uninhabited countries. I have travelled over Gaul. I have traversed the desert where one feels thirst. I have defended the gods, and I have freed myself from Omphale. But Olympus is too heavy. My arms are growing feeble. I am dying!”

He is crushed beneath the ruins.

Pluto — ”It is thine own fault, Amphitrionades! Why didst thou descend into my realms? The vulture who devours the entrails of Tityus has raised its head; Tantalus has had his lips moistened; and Ixion’s wheel is stopped.

“Meanwhile, the Keres stretch forth their nails to detain the souls; the Furies in despair twist the serpents in their locks; and Cerberus, fastened by thee with a chain, has a rattling in the throat, while he slavers from his three mouths.

“Thou didst leave the gate ajar. Others have come. The light of human day has penetrated Tartarus!”

He sinks into the darkness.

Neptune — ”My trident no longer raises tempests. The monsters who caused terror have rotted at the bottom of the sea.

“Amphitrite, whose white feet rushed over the foam; the green nereids, who could be seen on the horizon; the scaly sirens, who used to stop the ships to tell stories; and the old tritons, who used to blow into shells, all are dead! The gaiety of the sea has vanished!

“I will not survive it! Let the vast ocean cover me.”

He disappears into the azure.

Diana, attired in black, among her dogs, who have become wolves —

“The freedom of great woods intoxicated me with its odour of deer and exhalations of swamps. The women, over whose pregnancy I watched, bring dead children into the world. The moon trembles under the incantations of sorcerers. I am filled with violent and boundless desires. I long to drink poisons, to lose myself in vapours or in dreams! ...”

And a passing cloud bears her away.

Mars, bare-headed and blood-stained —

“At first, I fought single-handed, provoking by insults an entire army, indifferent to countries, and for the pleasure of carnage. Then, I had companions. They marched to the sound of flutes, in good order, with even step, breathing upon their bucklers, with lofty plume and slanting spear. We flung ourselves into the battle with loud cries like those of eagles. War was as joyous as a feast. Three hundred men withstood all Asia.

“But they returned, those barbarians! and in tens of thousands, nay, in millions! Since numbers, war-engines, and strategy are more powerful, it is better to make an end of it, like a brave man!”

He kills himself.

Vulcan, wiping the sweat from his limbs with a sponge —

“The world is getting cold. It is necessary to heat the springs, the volcanoes, and the rivers, which run from metals under the earth! — Strike harder! with vigorous arm! with all your strength!”

The Cabiri hurt themselves with their hammers, blind themselves with the sparks, and, groping their way along, are lost in the shadow.

Ceres, standing in her chariot which is drawn by wheels having wings in their naves — ”Stop! Stop!

“They had good reason to exclude the strangers, the atheists, the epicureans, and the Christians! The mystery of the basket is unveiled, the sanctuary profaned — all is lost!”

She descends with a rapid fall — bursting into exclamation of despair, and dragging back the horses.

"Ah! falsehood! Daira is not given up to me. The brazen bell calls me to the dead. It is another kind of Tartarus. There is no returning from it. Horror!"

The abyss swallows her up.

Bacchus, laughing frantically:

"What does it matter! The wife of Archontes is my spouse! Even the law goes down before drunkenness. For me the new song and the multiplied forms!

"The fire which consumed my mother runs in my veins. Let it burn the stronger, even though I perish!

"Male and female, good for both, I deliver myself to ye, Bacchantes! I deliver myself to ye, Bacchantes! and the vine will twist around the trunks of trees! Howl! dance! writhe! Unbind the tiger and the slave! bite the flesh with ferocious teeth!"

And Pan, Silenus, the Satyrs, the Bacchantes, the Mimallones, and the Mænades, with their serpents, their torches, and their black masks, scatter flowers, then shake their dulcimers, strike their thyrsi, pelt each other with shells, crunch grapes, strangle a he-goat, and rend Bacchus.

Apollo, lashing his coursers, whose glistening hairs fly off —

"I have left behind me Delos the stony, so empty that everything there now seems dead; and I am striving to reach the Delphian oracle before its inspiring vapour should be completely lost. The mules browse on its laurel. The pythoness, gone astray, is found there no longer.

"By a stronger concentration, I will have sublime poems, eternal monuments; and all matter will be penetrated with the vibrations of my cithara."

He fingers its chords. They break and snap against his face. He flings down the instrument, and driving his four-horse chariot furiously:

"No! enough of forms! Farther still — to the very summit — to the world of pure thought!"

But the horses, falling back, begin to prance so that the chariot is smashed; and, entangled in the fragments of the pole and the knottings of the horses, he falls head-foremost into the abyss.

The sky is darkened. Venus, blue as a violet from the cold, shivers.

"I covered with my girdle the entire horizon of Hellas. Its fields shone with the roses of my cheeks; its shores were cut according to the form of my lips; and its mountains, whiter than my doves, palpitated under the hands of the sculptors. My spirit showed itself in the order of festivities, the arrangements of head-dresses, the dialogues of philosophers, and the constitution of republics. But I have loved men too much. It is Love that has dishonoured me!"

She falls back in tears.

"The world is abominable. My bosom feels the lack of air.

“O Mercury, inventor of the lyre, and conductor of souls, bear me away!”

She places a finger upon her mouth, and, describing an immense parabola, topples over into the abyss.

And now nothing can be seen. The darkness is complete.

In the meantime two red arrows seem to escape from the pupils of Hilarion.

Antony at length notices his high stature:

“Many times already, while you were speaking, you appeared to me to be growing tall; and it was not an illusion. How is this? Explain it to me. Your appearance appals me!”

Steps draw nigh.

“What is this now?”

Hilarion stretches forth his arms:

“Look!”

Then, under a pale ray of the moon, Antony distinguishes an interminable caravan which defiles over the crest of the rocks; and each passenger, one after another, falls from the cliff into the gulf.

First, there are the three great gods of Samothrace — Axieros, Axiokeros, and Axiokersa — joined in a cluster, with purple masks, and their hands raised.

Æsculapius advances with a melancholy air, without even seeing Samos and Telesphorus, who question him with anguish. Sosipolis, the Elean, with the form of a python, rolls out his rings towards the abyss. Doesp[oe]na, through vertigo, flings herself in there of her own accord. Britomartis, shrieking with fear, clasps the folds of her fillet. The Centaurs arrive with a great galloping, and dash, pell-mell, into the black hole.

Limping behind them come the sad group of nymphs. Those of the meadows are covered with dust; those of the woods groan and bleed, wounded by the woodcutters’ axes.

The Gelludæ, the Stryges, the Empusæ, all the infernal goddesses intermingling their hooks, their torches, and their snakes, form a pyramid; and at the summit, upon a vulture’s skin, Eurynomus, bluish like flesh-flies, devours his own arms.

Then in a whirlwind disappears at the same time, Orthia the sanguinary, Hymnia of Orchomena, the Saphria of the Patræans, Aphia of Ægina, Bendis of Thrace, and Stymphalia with the leg of a bird. Triopas, in place of three eyeballs, has nothing more than three orbits. Erichthonius, with spindle-shanks, crawls like a cripple on his wrists.

Hilarion — ”What happiness, is it not, to see all of them in a state of abjectness and agony? Mount with me on this stone, and you will be like Xerxes reviewing his army.

“Yonder, at a great distance, in the midst of fogs, do you perceive that giant with yellow beard who lets fall a sword red with blood? He is the Scythian Zalmoxis between two planets — Artimpasa, Venus; and Orsiloche, the Moon.

“Farther off, emerging out of the pale clouds, are the gods who are adored by the Cimmerians, beyond even Thule!

“Their great halls were warm, and by the light of the naked swords that covered the vault they drank hydromel in horns of ivory. They ate the liver of the whale in copper plates forged by the demons, or else they listened to the captive sorcerers sweeping their hands across the harps of stone. They are weary! they are cold! The snow wears down their bearskins, and their feet are exposed through the rents in their sandals.

“They mourn for the meadows where, upon hillocks of grass, they used to recover breath in the battle, the long ships whose prows cut through the mountains of ice, and the skates they used in order to follow the orbit of the poles while carrying on the extremities of their arms the firmament, which turned around with them.”

A shower of hoar-frost pours down upon them. Antony lowers his glance to the opposite side, and he perceives — outlining themselves in black upon a red background — strange personages with chin-pieces and gauntlets, who throw balls at one another, leap one on top of the other, make grimaces, and dance frantically.

Hilarion — ”These are the gods of Etruria, the innumerable Æsars. Here is Tages, the inventor of auguries. He attempts with one hand to increase the divisions of the heavens, while with the other he leans upon the earth. Let him come back to it!

“Nortia is contemplating the wall into which she drove nails to mark the number of the years. Its surface is covered and its last period accomplished. Like two travellers driven about by a tempest, Kastur and Polutuk take shelter under the same mantle.”

Antony, closes his eyes — ”Enough! Enough!”

But now through the air with a great noise of wings pass all the Victories of the Capitol, hiding their foreheads in their hands, and losing the trophies suspended from their arms.

Janus, master of the twilight, flies away upon a black ram, and of his two faces one is already putrefied, while the other is benumbed with fatigue.

Summanus — god of the gloomy sky, who no longer has a head — presses against his heart an old cake in the form of a wheel.

Vesta, under a ruined cupola, tries to rekindle her extinguished lamp.

Bellona gashes her cheeks without causing the blood, which used to purify her devotees, to flow out.

Antony — ”Pardon! They weary me!”

Hilarion — ”Formerly they used to be entertaining!”

And he points out to Antony, in a grove of beech-trees a woman perfectly naked — with four paws like a beast — bestridden by a black man holding in each hand a torch.

“This is the goddess Aricia with the demon Virbius. Her priest, the monarch of the woods, happened to be an assassin; and the fugitive slaves, the despoilers of corpses, the brigands of the Salarian road, the cripples of the Sublician bridge, all the vermin of the garrets of the Suburra, had not dearer devotion!

“The patrician ladies of Mark Antony’s time preferred Libitina.”

And he shows him under the cypresses and rose-trees another woman clothed in gauze. She smiles, though she is surrounded by pickaxes, litters, black hangings, and all the utensils of funerals. Her diamonds glitter from afar among cobwebs. The Larvæ, like skeletons, display their bones amid the branches, and the Lemures, who are phantoms, spread out their bats’ wings.

On the side of a field the god Terma is bent down, torn asunder, and covered with filth.

In the midst of a ridge the huge corpse of Vertumnus is being devoured by red dogs. The rustic gods depart weeping, Sartor, Sarrator, Vervactor, Eollina, Vallona, and Hostilenus — all covered with little hooded cloaks, and each bearing a mattock, a fork, a hurdle, and a boar-spear.

Hilarion — ”It was their spirits that made the villa prosper with its dove-cotes, its park for dormice, its poultry-yards protected by snares, and its hot stables embalmed with cedar.

“They protected all the wretched people who dragged the fetters with their legs over the pebbles of the Sabina, those who called the hogs with the sound of the trumpet, those who gathered the grapes on the tops of the elm-trees, those who drove through the by-roads the asses laden with dung. The husbandman, while he panted over the handle of his plough, prayed to them to strengthen his arms; and the cow-herds, in the shadow of the lime-trees, beside gourds of milk, chanted their eulogies by turns upon flutes of reeds.”

Antony sighs.

And in the middle of a chamber, upon a platform, a bed of ivory is revealed, surrounded by persons lifting up pine-torches.

“Those are the gods of marriage. They are awaiting the bride.

“Domiduca has to lead her in, Virgo to undo her girdle, Subigo to stretch her upon the bed, and Præma to keep back her arms, whispering sweet words in her ear.

“But she will not come! and they dismiss the others — Nona and Decima, the nurses; the three Nixii, who are to deliver her; the two wet-nurses, Educa and Potina; and Carna, the cradle-rocker, whose bunch of hawthorns drives away bad dreams from the infant. Later, Ossipago will have strengthened its knees, Barbatus will have given the beard, Stimula the first desires, and Volupia the first enjoyment; Fabulinus will have taught it how to speak, Numera how to count, Cam[oe]na how to sing, and Consus how to think.”

The chamber is empty, and there remains no longer at the side of the bed anyone but Nænia — a hundred years old — muttering to herself the lament which she poured forth on the death of old men.

But soon her voice is lost amid bitter cries, which come from the domestic lares, squatted at the end of the atrium, clad in dogs’ skins, with flowers around their bodies, holding their closed hands up to their cheeks, and weeping as much as they can.

“Where is the portion of food which is given to us at each meal, the good attentions of maid-servant, the smile of the matron, and the gaiety of the little boys playing with huckle-bones on the mosaic of the courtyard? Then, when they have grown big, they hang over our breasts their gold or leather bullæ.

“What happiness, when, on the evening of a triumph, the master, returning home, turned towards us his humid eyes! He told the story of his contests, and the narrow house was more stately than a palace, and more sacred than a temple.

“How pleasant were the repasts of the family, especially the day after the Feralia! The feeling of tenderness towards the dead dispelled all discords; and people embraced one another, drinking to the glories of the past, and to the hopes of the future.

“But the ancestors in painted wax, shut up behind us, became gradually covered with mouldiness. The new races, to punish us for their own deceptions, have broken our jaws; and under the rats’ teeth our bodies of wood have crumbled away.”

And the innumerable gods, watching at the doors, in the kitchen, in the cellar, and in the stoves, disperse on all sides, under the appearance of enormous ants running away, or huge butterflies on the wing.

Then a thunderclap.

A voice — ”I was the God of armies, the Lord, the Lord God!

“I have unfolded on the hills the tents of Jacob, and nourished in the sands my fugitive people. It was I who burned Sodom! It was I who engulfed the earth beneath the Deluge! It was I who drowned Pharaoh, with the royal princes, the war-chariots, and the charioteers. A jealous God, I execrated the other gods. I crushed the impure; I overthrew the proud; and my desolation rushed to right and left, like a dromedary let loose in a field of maize.

“To set Israel free, I chose the simple. Angels, with wings of flame, spoke to them in the bushes.

“Perfumed with spikenard, cinnamon, and myrrh, with transparent robes and high-heeled shoes, women of intrepid heart went forth to slay the captains. The passing wind bore away the prophets.

“I engraved my law on tablets of stone. It shut in my people as in a citadel. They were my people. I was their God! The earth was mine, and men were mine, with their thoughts, their works, the implements with which they tilled the soil, and their posterity.

“My ark rested in a triple sanctuary, behind purple curtains and flaming lamps. For my ministry I had an entire tribe, who swung the censers, and the high-priest in a robe of hyacinth, and wearing precious stones upon his breast arranged in regular order.

“Woe! woe! The Holy of Holies is flung open; the veil is rent; the odours of the holocaust are scattered to all the winds. The jackals whine in the sepulchres; my temple is destroyed; my people are dispersed!

“They have strangled the priests with the cords of their vestments. The women are captives; the sacred vessels are all melted down!”

The voice, dying away:

“I was the God of armies, the Lord, the Lord God!” Then comes an appalling silence, a profound darkness.

Antony — ”They are all gone!”

“I remain!” says some one.

And, face to face with him stands Hilarion, but transfigured — beautiful as an archangel, luminous as a sun, and so tall that, in order to see him, Antony lifts up his head — ”Who, then, are you?”

Hilarion — ”My kingdom is as wide as the universe, and my desire has no limits. I am always going about enfranchising the mind and weighing the worlds, without hate, without fear, without love, and without God. I am called Science.”

Antony, recoiling backwards — ”You must be, rather, the Devil!”

Hilarion, fixing his eyes upon him — ”Do you wish to see him?”

Antony no longer avoids his glance. He is seized with curiosity concerning the Devil. His terror increases; his longing becomes measureless.

“If I saw him, however — if I saw him?” ... Then, in a spasm of rage:

“The horror that I have of him will rid me of him forever. Yes!”

A cloven foot reveals itself. Antony is filled with regret. But the Devil overshadows him with his horns, and carries him off.

CHAPTER VI.

The Mystery of Space.

HE flies under Antony’s body, extended like a swimmer; his two great wings, outspread, entirely concealing him, resemble a cloud.

Antony — ”Where am I going? Just now I caught a glimpse of the form of the Accursèd One. No! a cloud is carrying me away. Perhaps I am dead, and am mounting up to God? ...

“Ah! how well I breathe! The untainted air inflates my soul. No more heaviness! no more suffering!

“Beneath me, the thunderbolt darts forth, the horizon widens, rivers cross one another. That light spot is the desert; that pool of water the ocean. And other oceans appear — immense regions of which I had no knowledge. There are black lands that smoke like live embers, a belt of snow ever obscured by the mists. I am trying to discover the mountains where each evening the sun goes to sleep.”

The Devil — ”The sun never goes to sleep!”

Antony is not startled by this voice. It appears to him an echo of his thought — a response of his memory.

Meanwhile, the earth takes the form of a ball, and he perceives it in the midst of the azure turning on its poles while it winds around the sun.

The Devil — ”So, then, it is not the centre of the world? Pride of man, humble thyself!”

Antony — ”I can scarcely distinguish it now. It is intermingled with the other fires. The firmament is but a tissue of stars.”

They continue to ascend.

“No noise! not even the crying of the eagles! Nothing! ... and I bend down to listen to the music of the spheres.”

The Devil — ”You cannot hear them! No longer will you see the antichthon of Plato, the focus of Philolaüs, the spheres of Aristotle, or the seven heavens of the Jews with the great waters above the vault of crystal!”

Antony — ”From below it appeared as solid as a wall. But now, on the contrary, I am penetrating it; I am plunging into it!”

And he arrives in front of the moon — which is like a piece of ice, quite round, filled with a motionless light.

The Devil — ”This was formerly the abode of souls. The good Pythagoras had even supplied it with birds and magnificent flowers.”

Antony — ”I see nothing there save desolate plains, with extinct craters, under a black sky.

“Come towards those stars with a softer radiance, so that we may gaze upon the angels who hold them with the ends of their arms, like torches!”

The Devil carries him into the midst of the stars.

“They attract one another at the same time that they repel one another. The action of each has an effect on the others, and helps to produce their movements — and all this without the medium of an auxiliary, by the force of a law, by the virtue simply of order.”

Antony — ”Yes ... yes! my intelligence grasps it! It is a joy greater than the sweetness of affection! I pant with stupefaction before the immensity of God!”

The Devil — ”Like the firmament, which rises in proportion as you ascend, He will become greater according as your imagination mounts higher; and you will feel your joy increase in proportion to the unfolding of the universe, in this enlargement of the Infinite.”

Antony — ”Ah! higher! ever higher!”

The stars multiply and shed around their scintillations. The Milky Way at the zenith spreads out like an immense belt, with gaps here and there; in these clefts, amid its brightness, dark tracts reveal themselves. There are showers of stars, trains of golden dust, luminous vapours which float and then dissolve.

Sometimes a comet sweeps by suddenly; then the tranquillity of the countless lights is renewed.

Antony, with open arms, leans on the Devil’s two horns, thus occupying the entire space covered by his wings. He recalls with disdain the ignorance of former days, the limitation of his ideas. Here, then, close beside him, were those luminous globes which he used to gaze at from below. He traces the crossing of their paths, the complexity of their directions. He sees them coming from afar, and, suspended like stones in a sling, describing their orbits and pushing forward their parabolas.

He perceives, with a single glance, the Southern Cross and the Great Bear, the Lynx and the Centaur, the nebulæ of the Gold-fish, the six suns in the constellation of Orion, Jupiter with his four satellites, and the triple ring of the monstrous Saturn! all the planets, all the stars which men should, in future days, discover! He fills his eyes with their light; he overloads his mind with a calculation of their distances; — then he lets his head fall once more.

“What is the object of all this?”

The Devil — ”There is no object!

“How could God have had an object? What experience could have enlightened Him, what reflection enabled Him to judge? Before the beginning of things, it would not have operated, and now it would be useless.”

Antony — ”Nevertheless, He created the world, at one period of time, by His mere word!”

The Devil — ”But the beings who inhabit the earth came there successively. In the same way, in the sky, new stars arise — different effects from various causes.”

Antony — ”The variety of causes is the will of God!”

The Devil — ”But to admit in God several acts of will is to admit several causes, and thus to destroy His unity!

“His will is not separable from His essence. He cannot have a second will, inasmuch as He cannot have a second essence — and, since He exists eternally, He acts eternally.

“Look at the sun! From its borders escape great flames emitting sparks which scatter themselves to become new worlds; and, further than the last, beyond those depths where only night is visible, other suns whirl round, and behind these others again, and others still, to infinity ...”

Antony — ”Enough! enough! I am terrified! I am about to fall into the abyss.”

The Devil stops, and gently balancing himself —

“There is no such thing as nothingness! There is no vacuum! Everywhere there are bodies moving over the unchangeable realms of space — and, as if it had any bounds it would not be space but a body, it consequently has no limits!”

Antony, open-mouthed — ”No limits!”

The Devil — ”Ascend into the sky forever and ever, and you will never reach the top! Descend beneath the earth for millions upon millions of centuries, and you will never get to the bottom — inasmuch as there is no bottom, no top, no end, above or below; and space is, in fact, comprised in God, who is not a part of space, of a magnitude that can be measured, but immensity!”

Antony, slowly — ”Matter, in that case, would be part of God?”

The Devil — ”Why not? Can you tell where He comes to an end?”

Antony — ”On the contrary, I prostrate myself, I efface myself before His power!”

The Devil — ”And you pretend to move Him! You speak to Him, you even adorn Him with virtues — goodness, justice, clemency, — in place of recognising the fact that He possesses all perfections!

“To conceive anything beyond is to conceive God outside of God. Being outside of Being. But then He is the only Being, the only Substance.

outside of Being. But then He is the only Being, the only Substance.

“If substance could be divided, it would lose its nature — it would not be itself; God would no longer exist. He is, therefore, indivisible as well as infinite, and if He had a body, He would be made up of parts. He would no longer be one; He would no longer be infinite. Therefore, He is not a person!”

Antony — ”What? My prayers, my sobs, the sufferings of my flesh, the transports of my zeal, all these things would be no better than a lie ... in space ... uselessly — like a bird’s cry, like a whirlwind of dead leaves!”

He weeps.

“Oh! no! There is above everything some One, a Great Spirit, a Lord, a Father, whom my heart adores, and who must love me!”

The Devil — ”You desire that God should not be God; for, if He experienced love, anger, or pity, He would pass from His perfection to a greater or less perfection. He cannot descend to a sentiment, or be contained under a form.”

Antony — ”One day, however, I shall see Him!”

The Devil — ”With the Blessèd, is it not? When the finite shall enjoy the Infinite, enclosing the Absolute in a limited space!”

Antony — ”No matter! There must be a Paradise for the good, as well as a Hell for the wicked!”

The Devil — ”Does the exigency of your reason constitute the law of things? Without doubt, evil is a matter of indifference to God, seeing that the earth is covered with it!

“Is it from impotence that He endures it, or from cruelty that He preserves it?

“Do you think that He can be continually putting the world in order like an imperfect work, and that He watches over all the movements of all beings, from the flight of the butterfly to the thought of man?

“If He created the universe His providence is superfluous. If Providence exists, creation is defective.

“But good and evil only concern you — like day and night, pleasure and pain, death and birth, which have relationship merely to a corner of space, to a special medium, to a particular interest. Inasmuch as what is infinite alone is permanent, the Infinite exists; and that is all!”

The Devil has gradually extended his huge wings, and now they cover space.

Antony can no longer see. He is on the point of fainting:

“A horrible chill freezes me to the bottom of my soul. This exceeds the utmost pitch of pain. It is, as it were, a death more profound than death. I wheel through the immensity of darkness. It enters into me. My consciousness is shivered to atoms under this expansion of nothingness.”

The Devil — ”But things happen only through the medium of your mind.

Like a concave mirror, it distorts objects, and you need every resource in order to verify facts.

"Never shall you understand the universe in its full extent; consequently you cannot form an idea as to its cause, so as to have a just notion of God, or even say that the universe is infinite, for you should first comprehend the Infinite!

"Form is perhaps an error of your senses, substance an illusion of your intellect. Unless it be that the world, being a perpetual flux of things, appearances, by a sort of contradiction, would not be a test of truth, and illusion would be the only reality.

"But are you sure that you see? Are you sure that you live? Perhaps nothing at all exists!"

The Devil has seized Antony, and, holding him by the extremities of his arms, stares at him with open jaws ready to swallow him up.

"Come, adore me! and curse the phantom that you call God!"

Antony raises his eyes with a last movement of lingering hope.

The Devil quits him.

CHAPTER VII.

The Chimera and the Sphinx.

ANTONY finds himself stretched on his back at the edge of the cliff. The sky is beginning to grow white.

“Is this the brightness of dawn? or is it the reflection of the moon?” He tries to rise, then sinks back, and with chattering teeth:

“I feel fatigued ... as if all my bones were broken!

“Why?

“Ah! it is the Devil! I remember; and he even repeated to me all I had learned from old Didymus concerning the opinions of Xenophanes, of Heraclitus, of Melissus, and of Anaxagoras, as well as concerning the Infinite, the creation, and the impossibility of knowing anything!

“And I imagined that I could unite myself to God!”

Laughing bitterly:

“Ah! madness! madness! Is it my fault? Prayer is intolerable to me! My heart is drier than a rock! Formerly it overflowed with love! ...

“The sand, in the morning, used to send forth exhalations on the horizon, like the fumes of a censer. At the setting of the sun blossoms of fire burst forth from the cross, and, in the middle of the night, it often seemed to me that all creatures and all things, gathered in the same silence, were with me adoring the Lord. Oh! charm of prayer, bliss of ecstasy, gifts of Heaven, what has become of you?

“I remember a journey I made with Ammon in search of a solitude in which we might establish monasteries. It was the last evening, and we quickened our steps, murmuring hymns, side by side, without uttering a word. In proportion as the sun went down, the shadows of our bodies lengthened, like two obelisks, always enlarging and marching on in front of us. With the pieces of our staffs we planted the cross here and there to mark the site of a cell. The night came on slowly, and black waves spread over the earth, while an immense sheet of red still occupied the sky.

“When I was a child, I used to amuse myself in constructing hermitages with pebbles. My mother, close beside me, used to watch what I was doing.

“She was going to curse me for abandoning her, tearing her white locks. And her corpse remained stretched in the middle of the cell, beneath the roof of reeds, between the tottering walls. Through a hole, a hyena, sniffing, thrusts forward his jaws! ... Horror! horror!”

He sobs

He sobs.

“No: Ammonaria would not have left her!

“Where is Ammonaria now?

“Perhaps, in a hot bath she is drawing off her garments one by one, first her cloak, then her girdle, then her outer tunic, then her inner one, then the wrappings round her neck; and the vapour of cinnamon envelops her naked limbs. At last she sinks to sleep on the tepid floor. Her hair, falling around her hips, looks like a black fleece — and, almost suffocating in the overheated atmosphere, she draws breath, with her body bent forward and her breasts projecting. Hold! here is my flesh breaking into revolt. In the midst of anguish, I am tortured by voluptuousness. Two punishments at the same time — it is too much! I can no longer endure my own body!”

He stoops down and gazes over the precipice.

“The man who falls over that will be killed. Nothing easier, by simply rolling over on the left side: it is necessary to take only one step! only one!”

Then appears an old woman.

Antony rises with a start of error. He imagines that he sees his mother risen from the dead.

But this one is much older and excessively emaciated. A winding-sheet, fastened round her head, hangs with her white hair down to the very extremities of her legs, thin as sticks. The brilliancy of her teeth, which are like ivory, makes her clayey skin look darker. The sockets of her eyes are full of gloom, and in their depths flicker two flames, like lamps in a sepulchre.

“Come forward,” she says; “what keeps you back?”

Antony, stammering — ”I am afraid of committing a sin!”

She resumes:

“But King Saul was slain! Razias, a just man, was slain! Saint Pelagius of Antioch was slain! Dominius of Aleppo and his two daughters, three more saints, were slain; — and recall to your mind all the confessors who, in their eagerness to die, rushed to meet their executioners. In order to taste death the more speedily, the virgins of Miletus strangled themselves with their cords. The philosopher, Hegesias, at Syracuse preached so well on the subject, that people deserted the brothels to hang themselves in the fields. The Roman patricians sought for death as if it were a debauch.”

Antony — ”Yes, it is a powerful passion! Many an anchorite has yielded to it.”

The old woman — ”To do a thing which makes you equal to God — think of that! He created you; you are about to destroy His work, you, by your courage, freely. The enjoyment of Erostrates was not greater. And then, your body is thus mocked by your soul in order that you may avenge yourself in the end. You will have no pain. It will soon be over. What are you afraid of? A large black hole! It is empty, perhaps!”

Antony listens without saying anything in reply; — and, on the other side, appears another woman, marvellously young and beautiful. At first, he takes her for Ammonaria. But she is taller, fair as honey, rather plump, with paint on her cheeks, and roses on her head. Her long robe, covered with spangles, is studded with metallic mirrors. Her fleshly lips have a look of blood, and her somewhat heavy eyelashes are so much bathed in languor that one would imagine she was blind. She murmurs:

“Come, then, and enjoy yourself. Solomon recommends pleasure. Go where your heart leads you, and according to the desire of your eyes.”

Antony — ”To find what pleasure? My heart is sick; my eyes are dim!”

She replies:

“Hasten to the suburb of Racotis; push open a door painted blue; and, when you are in the atrium, where a jet of water is gurgling, a woman will present herself — in a peplum of white silk edged with gold, her hair dishevelled, and her laugh like sounds made by rattlesnakes. She is clever. In her caress you will taste the pride of an initiation, and the satisfaction of a want. Have you pressed against your bosom a maiden who loved you? Recall to your mind her remorse, which vanished under a flood of sweet tears. You can imagine yourself — can you not? — walking through the woods beneath the light of the moon. At the pressure of your hands joined with hers a shudder runs through both of you; your eyes, brought close together, overflow from one to the other like immaterial waves, and your heart is full; it is bursting; it is a delicious whirlwind, an overpowering intoxication.”

The old woman — ”You need not experience joys to feel their bitterness! You need only see them from afar, and disgust takes possession of you. You must needs be wearied with the monotony of the same actions, the duration of the days, the ugliness of the world, and the stupidity of the sun!”

Antony — ”Oh! yes; all that it shines upon is displeasing to me.”

The young woman — ”Hermit! hermit! you shall find diamonds among the pebbles, fountains beneath the sand, a delight in the dangers which you despise; and there are even places on the earth so beautiful that you are filled with a longing to embrace them.”

The old woman — ”Every evening when you lie down to sleep on the earth, you hope that it may soon cover you.”

The young woman — ”Nevertheless, you believe in the resurrection of the flesh, which is the transport of life into eternity.”

The old woman, while speaking, has been growing more emaciated, and, above her skull, which has no hair upon it, a bat has been making circles in the air.

The young woman has become plumper. Her robe changes colour; her nostrils swell; her eyes roll softly.

The first says, opening her arms:

“Come! I am consolation, rest, oblivion, eternal peace!”

And the second offering her breast:

“I am the soother, the joy, the life, the happiness inexhaustible!”

Antony turns on his heel to fly. Each of them places a hand upon his shoulder.

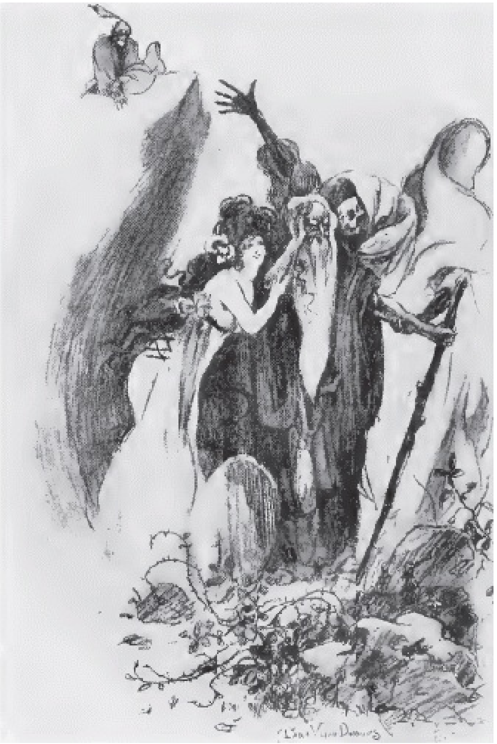
The winding-sheet flies open, and reveals the skeleton of Death. The robe bursts open, and presents to view the entire body of Lust, which has a slender figure, with an enormous development behind, and great, undulating masses of hair, disappearing towards the end.

Antony remains motionless between the pair, contemplating them.

Death says to him —

“This moment, or a little later — what does it matter? You belong to me, like the suns, the nations, the cities, the kings, the snow on the mountains, and the grass in the fields. I fly higher than the sparrow-hawk, I run more quickly than the gazelle; I keep pace even with hope; I have conquered God!”

Lust — ”Do not resist; I am omnipotent. The forests echo with my sighs; the waves are stirred by my agitations. Virtue, courage, piety, are dissolved in the perfume of my breath. I accompany man at every step he takes; and on the threshold of the tomb he comes back to me.”



Death — ”I will reveal to you what you tried to grasp by the light of torches on the features of the dead — or when you rambled beyond the Pyramids in those vast sand-heaps composed of human remains. From time to time, a piece of skull rolled under your sandal. You took it out of the dust; you made it slip between your fingers; and your mind, becoming absorbed in it, was plunged into nothingness.”

Lust — ”Mine is a deeper gulf! Marble slabs have inspired impure loves. People rush towards meetings that terrify them, and rivet the very chains which they curse. Whence comes the witchery of courtesans, the extravagance of dreams, the immensity of my sadness?”

Death — ”My irony surpasses that of all other things. There are convulsions of joy at the funerals of kings and at the extermination of peoples; and they make war with music, plumes, flags, golden harnesses, and a display of ceremony to pay me the greater homage.”

Lust — ”My anger is as strong as yours. I howl, I bite, I have sweats of agony, and corpse-like appearances.”

Death — ”It is I who make you serious; let us embrace each other!”

Death chuckles; Lust roars. They seize each other’s figures, and sing together:

“I hasten the dissolution of matter.”

“I facilitate the scattering of germs!”

“Thou destroyest that I may renew!”

“Thou engenderest that I may destroy!”

“Active my power!”

“Fruitful my decay!”

And their voices, whose echoes, rolling forth, fill the horizon, become so powerful that Antony falls backward.

A shock, from time to time, causes him to half open his eyes; and he perceives, in the midst of the darkness, a kind of monster before him.

It is a death’s-head with a crown of roses. It rises above the torso of a woman white as mother-of-pearl. Beneath, a winding-sheet, starred with points of gold, makes a kind of train; — and the entire body undulates, like a gigantic worm holding itself erect.

The vision grows fainter, and then fades away.

Antony, rises again — ”This time, once more, it was the Devil, and under his two-fold aspect — the spirit of voluptuousness and the spirit of destruction. Neither terrifies me. I thrust happiness aside, and feel that I am eternal.

“Thus, death is only an illusion, a veil, masking at certain points the continuity of life. But substance, being one, why is there a variety of forms? There must be somewhere primordial figures, whose bodies are only images. If one could see, one would know the bond between mind and matter, wherein Being consists!

“There are those figures which were painted at Babylon on the wall of the temple of Belus, and they covered a mosaic in the port of Carthage. I, myself, have sometimes seen in the sky what seemed like forms of spirits. Those who traverse the desert meet animals passing all conception ...”

And, opposite him, on the other side of the Nile, lo! the Sphinx appears.

It stretches out its feet, shakes the fillets on its forehead, and lies down upon its belly.

Jumping, flying, spirting fire through its nostrils, and striking its wings with its dragon’s tail, the Chimera with its green eyes, winds round, and barks. The curls of its head, thrown back on one side, intermingle with the hair on its haunches; and on the other side they hang over the sand, and move to and fro with the swaying of its entire body.

The Sphinx is motionless, and gazes at the Chimera:

“Here, Chimera; stop!”

The Chimera — ”No, never!”

The Sphinx — ”Do not run so quickly; do not fly so high; do not bark so loud!”

The Chimera — ”Do not address me, do not address me any more, since you remain forever silent!”

The Sphinx — ”Cease casting your flames in my face and flinging your yells in my ears; you shall not melt my granite!”

The Chimera — ”You will not get hold of me, terrible Sphinx!”

The Sphinx — ”You are too foolish to live with me!”

The Chimera — ”You are too clumsy to follow me!”

The Sphinx — ”And where are you going that you run so quickly?”

The Chimera — ”I gallop into the corridors of the labyrinth; I hover over the mountains; I skim along the waves; I yelp at the bottoms of precipices; I hang by my jaws on the skirts of the clouds. With my trailing tail I scratch the coasts, and the hills have taken their curb according to the form of my shoulders. But as for you, I find you perpetually motionless; or, rather, with the end of your claw tracing letters on the sand.”

The Sphinx — ”That is because I keep my secret! I reflect and I calculate. The sea returns to its bed; the blades of corn balance themselves in the wind; the caravans pass; the dust flies off; the cities crumble; — but my glance, which nothing can turn aside, remains concentrated on the objects which cover an inaccessible horizon.”

The Chimera — ”As for me, I am light and joyous! I discover in men dazzling perspectives, with Paradises in the clouds and distant felicities. I pour into their souls the eternal insanities, projects of happiness, plans for the future, dreams of glory, and oaths of love, as well as virtuous resolutions. I drive them on perilous voyages and on mighty enterprises. I have carved with my claws the marvels of architecture. It is I that hung the little bells on the tomb of Porsenna, and surrounded with a wall of Corinthian brass the quays of the Atlantides.

“I seek fresh perfumes, larger flowers, pleasures hitherto unknown. If anywhere I find a man whose soul reposes in wisdom, I fall upon him and strangle him.”

The Sphinx — ”All those whom the desire of God torments, I have devoured.

“The strongest, in order to climb to my royal forehead, mount upon the stripes of my fillets as on the steps of a staircase. Weariness takes possession of them, and they fall back of their own accord.”

Antony begins to tremble. He is not before his cell, but in the desert, having at either side of him those two monstrous animals, whose jaws graze his shoulders.

The Sphinx — ”O Fantasy, bear me on thy wings to enliven thy sadness!”

The Chimera — ”O Unknown One, I am in love with thine eyes! I turn round thee, soliciting allayment of that which devours me!”

The Sphinx — ”My feet cannot raise themselves. The lichen, like a ringworm, has grown over my mouth. By dint of thinking, I have no longer anything to say.”

The Chimera — ”You lie, hypocritical Sphinx! How is it that you are always addressing me and abjuring me?”

The Sphinx — ”It is you, unmanageable caprice, who pass and whirl about.”

The Chimera — ”Is that my fault? Come, now, just let me be!”

It barks.

The Sphinx — ”You move away; you avoid me!”

The Sphinx grumbles.

The Chimera — ”Let us make the attempt! You crush me!”

The Sphinx — ”No; impossible!”

And sinking, little by little, it disappears in the sand, while the Chimera, crawling, with its tongue out, departs with a winding movement.

The breath issuing from its mouth has produced a fog.

In this fog Antony traces masses of clouds and imperfect curves. Finally, he distinguishes what appear to be human bodies.

And first advances the group of Astomi, like air-balls passing across the sun.

“Don’t puff too strongly! The drops of rain bruise us; the false sounds excoriate us; the darkness blinds us. Composed of breezes and of perfumes, we roll, we float — a little more than dreams, not entirely beings.”

The Nisnas have but one eye, one cheek, one hand, one leg, half a body, and half a heart. And they say, in a very loud tone:

“We live quite at our ease in our halves of houses with our halves of wives and our halves of children.”

The Blemmyes, absolutely bereft of heads —

“Our shoulders are the largest; — and there is not an ox, a rhinoceros, or an elephant that is capable of carrying what we carry.

“Arrows, and a sort of vague outline are imprinted on our breasts — that is all! We reduce digestion to thought; we subtilise secretions. For us God floats peacefully in the internal chyle.

“We proceed straight on our way, passing through every mire, running along the verge of every abyss; and we are the most industrious, happy, and virtuous people.”

The Pygmies — ”Little good-fellows, we swarm over the world, like vermin on the hump of a dromedary.

“We are burnt, drowned, or run over; but we always reappear more full of life and more numerous — terrible from the multitude of us that exists!”

The Sciapodes — ”Kept on the ground by our flowing locks, long as creeping plants, we vegetate under the shelter of our feet, which are as large as parasols;

and the light reaches us through the spaces between our wide heels. No disorder and no toil! To keep the head as low as possible — that is the secret of happiness!”

Their lifted thighs, resembling trunks of trees, increase in number. And now a forest appears in which huge apes rush along on four paws. They are men with dogs’ heads.

The Cynocephali — ”We leap from branch to branch to suck the eggs, and we pluck the little birds; then we put their nests upon our heads after the fashion of caps.

“We do not fail to snatch away the worst of the cows, and we destroy the lynxes’ eyes. Tearing the flowers, crushing the fruits, agitating the springs, we are the masters — by the strength of our arms and the fierceness of our hearts.

“Be bold, comrades, and snap your jaws!”

Blood and milk flow from their lips. The rain streams over their hairy backs.

Antony inhales the freshness of green leaves which are agitated as the branches of the trees dash against each other. All at once appears a large black stag with a bull’s head, carrying between his two ears a mass of white horns.

The Sadhuzag — ”My seventy-four antlers are hollow like flutes. When I turn myself towards the south wind, sounds go forth from them that draw around me the ravished beasts. The serpents come winding to my feet; the wasps stick in my nostrils; and the parrots, the doves, and the ibises alight upon my branches. Listen!”

He bends back his horns, from which issues an unutterably sweet music.

Antony presses both his hands above his heart. It seems to him as if this melody were about to carry off his soul.

The Sadhuzag — ”But, when I turn towards the north wind, my horns, more bushy than a battalion of spears, emit a howling noise. The forests thrill; the rivers swell; the husks of the fruit burst, and blades of grass stand erect like a coward’s hair. Listen!”

He bows down his branches, from which now come forth discordant cries. Antony feels as if he were torn asunder, and his horror is increased on seeing the Mantichor, a gigantic red lion with a human figure and three rows of teeth:

“The silky texture of my scarlet hair mingles with the yellowness of the sands. I breathe through my nostrils the terror of solitudes. I spit forth the plague. I devour armies when they venture into the desert. My nails are twisted like gimlets; my teeth are cut like a saw; and my hair, wriggled out of shape, bristles with darts which I scatter, right and left, behind me. Hold! hold!”

The Mantichor casts thorns from his tail, which radiate, like arrows, in all directions. Drops of blood flow, spattering over the foliage.

The Catoblepas appears, a black buffalo, with a pig’s head hanging to the earth, and connected with his shoulders by a slender neck, long and flabby as an empty gut. He is wallowing on the ground; and his feet disappear under the enormous mane of hard hairs that descend over his face:

“Fat, melancholy, savage, I remain continually feeling the mire under my stomach. My skull is so heavy that it is impossible for me to carry it. I roll it around slowly; and, opening my jaws, I snatch with my tongue the poisonous herbs that are moistened with my breath. I once devoured my paws without noticing it.

“No one, Antony, has ever seen my eyes, or those who have seen them are dead. If I but raised my eyelids — my eyelids red and swollen — that instant you would die.”

Antony — ”Oh! that thing! ... Well! well! As if I had any such longing! Its stupidity attracts me. No! no! I will not!” He looks fixedly on the ground. But the grass lights up, and, in the twistings of the flames, stands erect the Basilisk, a huge, violet serpent, with a trilobate crest and two teeth — one above, the other below:

“Take care! You are about to fall into my jaws! I drink fire. I am fire myself; and from every quarter I suck it in — from clouds, from pebbles, from dead trees, from the hair of animals, and from the surface of marshes. My temperature supports the volcanoes. I cause the lustre of precious stones and the colour of metals.”

The Griffin, a lion with a vulture’s beak, white wings, red paws, and blue neck — ”I am the master of the profound splendours. I know the secret of the tombs where the old kings sleep. A chain, which issues from the wall, keeps their heads erect. Near them, in basins of porphyry, women whom they have loved float upon black liquids. Their treasures are ranged in halls, in lozenges, in hillocks, and in pyramids; and, lower, far below the tombs, after long journeys in the midst of suffocating darkness, are rivers of gold with forests of diamonds, meadows of carbuncles, and lakes of quicksilver. With my back against the door of the vault, and my claws in the air, I watch with my flaming eyes those who may think fit to come there. The immense plain, even to the furthest point of the horizon, is quite bare and whitened with travellers’ bones. For you the bronze doors will open, and you will inhale the vapour of the mines; you will descend into the caverns ... Quick! quick!”

He digs the earth with his claws, crowing like a cock.

A thousand voices reply to him. The forest trembles.

And all sorts of horrible beasts arise: the Tragelaphus, half-stag, half-ox; the Myrmecoleo, a lion in front, an ant behind, whose genitals are turned backwards;

the python, Aksar, of sixty cubits, who frightened Moses; the great weasel, Pastinaca, which kills trees by its odour; the Presteros, which renders idiotic those who touch it; the Mirag, a horned hare dwelling in the islands of the sea. The Copard Phalmant bursts his belly by dint of howling; the Senad, a bear with three heads, tears its little ones with its mouth; the dog, Cepus, scatters on the rocks the blue milk of its dugs. Mosquitoes begin to buzz, toads to jump, and serpents to hiss. Lightnings flash; down comes the hail.

Then there are squalls, which reveal anatomical marvels. There are alligators' heads with roebucks' feet, owls with serpents' tails, swine with tigers' muzzles, goats with asses' rumps, frogs covered with hair like bears, chameleons large as hippopotami, calves with two heads, one of which weeps while the other bellows, four f[oe]tuses holding each other by the navel and spinning like tops, and winged bellies which flutter like gnats.

They rain down from the sky; they spring out of the ground; they glide from the rocks. Everywhere eyes flash, mouths roar; the breasts bulge out; the claws lengthen; the teeth gnash; the flesh quivers. Some of them bring forth their young; others with a single bite, devour one another.

Suffocating from their very numbers, multiplying by their contact, they climb on top of one another; and they all keep stirring about Antony with a regular swaying motion, as if the soil were the deck of a vessel.

He feels close to his calves the trailing of slugs, and on his hands the cold touch of vipers; and spiders spinning their webs enclose him in their network.

But the circle of monsters begins to open; the sky suddenly becomes blue, and the unicorn makes its appearance:

"Off I gallop! Off I gallop!

"I have hoofs of ivory, teeth of steel, a head coloured purple, a body like snow, and the horn on my forehead has the varied hues of the rainbow.

"I travel from Chaldea to the Tartar desert, on the banks of the Ganges, and into Mesopotamia. I outstrip the ostriches. I run so rapidly that I draw the wind along with me. I rub my back against the palm-trees; I roll myself in the bamboos. With one bound I jump across the rivers. Doves fly above my head. Only a virgin can bridle me.

"Off I gallop! Off I gallop!"

Antony watches him flying away.

And, keeping his eyes still raised, he perceives all the birds that are nourished by the wind: the Gouith, the Ahuti, the Alphalim, the Jukneth from the mountains of Caff, and the Homaï of the Arabs, which are the souls of murdered men. He hears the parrots utter human speech, then the great web-footed Pelasgians, who sob like children or chuckle like old women.

A briny breath of air strikes his nostrils. A seashore is now before him.

At a distance rise waterspouts, lashed up by the whales; and at the extremity of the horizon the beasts of the sea, round, like leather bottles, flat, like strips of metal, or indented, like saws, advance, crawling over the sand:

“You are about to come with us into our unfathomable depths, never penetrated by man before. Different races dwell in the country of the ocean. Some are in the abode of the tempests; others swim openly in the transparency of the cold waves, browse like oxen over the coral plains, sniff in with their nostrils the ebbing tide, or carry on their shoulders the weight of the ocean-springs.”

Phosphorescences flash from the hairs of the seals and from the scales of the fishes. Sea-hedgehogs turn around like wheels; Ammon’s horns unroll themselves like cables; oysters make sounds with the fastenings of their shells; polypi spread out their tentacles; medusæ quiver like crystal balls; sponges float; anemones squirt out water; and mosses and seaweed shoot up.

And all kinds of plants spread out into branches, twist themselves into tendrils, lengthen into points, and grow round like fans. Pumpkins present the appearance of bosoms, and creeping plants entwine themselves like serpents.

The Dedaims of Babylon, which are trees, have as their fruits human heads; mandrakes sing; and the root Baaras runs into the grass.

And now the plants can no longer be distinguished from the animals. Polyparies, which have the appearance of sycamores, carry arms on their branches. Antony fancies he can trace a caterpillar between two leaves; it is a butterfly which flits away. He is on the point of walking over some shingle when up springs a grey grasshopper. Insects, like petals of roses, garnish a bush; the remains of ephemera make a bed of snow upon the soil.

And, next, the plants are indistinguishable from the stones.

Pebbles bear a resemblance to brains, stalactites to udders, and iron-dust to tapestries adorned with figures. In pieces of ice he can trace efflorescences, impressions of bushes and shells — so that one cannot tell whether they are the impressions of those objects or the objects themselves. Diamonds glisten like eyes, and minerals palpitate.

And he is no longer afraid! He lies down flat on his face, resting on his two elbows, and, holding in his breath, he gazes around.

Insects without stomachs keep eating; dried-up ferns begin to bloom afresh; and limbs which were wanting sprout forth again.

Finally, he perceives little globular bodies as large as pins’ heads, and garnished all round with eyelashes. A vibration agitates them.

Antony, in ecstasy —

“Oh bliss! bliss! I have seen the birth of life. I have seen the beginning of

"O bliss! bliss! I have seen the birth of life; I have seen the beginning of motion. The blood beats so strongly in my veins that it seems about to burst them. I feel a longing to fly, to swim, to bark, to bellow, to howl. I would like to have wings, a tortoise-shell, a rind, to blow out smoke, to wear a trunk, to twist my body, to spread myself everywhere, to be in everything, to emanate with odours, to grow like plants, to flow like water, to vibrate like sound, to shine like light, to be outlined on every form, to penetrate every atom, to descend to the very depths of matter — to be matter!"

The dawn appears at last; and, like the uplifted curtains of a tabernacle, golden clouds, wreathing themselves into large volutes, reveal the sky.

In the very middle of it, and in the disc of the sun itself, shines the face of Jesus Christ.

Antony makes the sign of the Cross, and resumes his prayers.

LA TENTATION DE SAINT ANTOINE

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A LA MÉMOIRE DE MON AMI ALFRED LEPOITTEVIN
DÉCÉDÉ A LA NEUVILLE CHANT-D’OISEL
Le 3 avril 1848

I.

C’est dans la Thébaïde, au haut d’une montagne, sur une plate-forme arrondie en demi-lune, et qu’enferment de grosses pierres.

La cabane de l’Ermite occupe le fond. Elle est faite de boue et de roseaux, à toit plat, sans porte. On distingue dans l’intérieur une cruche avec un pain noir ; au milieu, sur une stèle de bois, un gros livre ; par terre, çà et là, des filaments de sparterie, deux ou trois nattes, une corbeille, un couteau.

A dix pas de la cabane, il y a une longue croix plantée dans le sol ; et, à l’autre bout de la plate-forme, un vieux palmier tordu se penche sur l’abîme, car la montagne est taillée à pic, et le Nil semble faire un lac au bas de la falaise.

La vue est bornée à droite et à gauche par l’enceinte des roches. Mais du côté du désert, comme des plages qui se succéderaient, d’immenses ondulations parallèles d’un blond cendré s’étirent les unes derrière les autres, en montant toujours ; — puis au delà des sables, tout au loin, la chaîne libyque forme un mur couleur de craie, estompé légèrement par des vapeurs violettes. En face, le soleil s’abaisse. Le ciel, dans le nord, est d’une teinte gris-perle, tandis qu’au zénith des nuages de pourpre, disposés comme les flocons d’une crinière gigantesque, s’allongent sur la voûte bleue. Ces rais de flamme se rembrunissent, les parties d’azur prennent une pâleur nacrée ; les buissons, les cailloux, la terre, tout maintenant paraît dur comme du bronze ; et dans l’espace flotte une poudre d’or tellement menue qu’elle se confond avec la vibration de la lumière.

SAINT-ANTOINE

qui a une longue barbe, de longs cheveux, et une tunique de peau de chèvre, est assis, jambes croisées, entrain de faire des nattes. Dès que le soleil disparaît, il pousse un grand soupir, et regardant l’horizon :

Encore un jour ! un jour de passé !

Autrefois pourtant, je n’étais pas si misérable ! Avant la fin de la nuit, je commençais mes oraisons ; puis, je descendais vers le fleuve chercher de l’eau, et je remontais par le sentier rude avec l’outre sur mon épaule, en chantant des hymnes. Ensuite, je m’amusais à ranger tout dans ma cabane. Je prenais mes outils ; je tâchais que les nattes fussent bien égales et les corbeilles légères ; car mes moindres actions me semblaient alors des devoirs qui n’avaient rien de pénible.

A des heures réglées je quittais mon ouvrage ; et priant les deux bras étendus je sentais comme une fontaine de miséricorde qui s’épanchait du haut du ciel dans mon coeur. Elle est tarie, maintenant. Pourquoi ?…

Il marche dans l’enceinte des roches, lentement.

Tous me blâmaient lorsque j'ai quitté la maison. Ma mère s'affaissa mourante, ma soeur de loin me faisait des signes pour revenir ; et l'autre pleurait, Ammonaria, cette enfant que je rencontrais chaque soir au bord de la citerne, quand elle amenait ses buffles. Elle a couru après moi. Les anneaux de ses pieds brillaient dans la poussière, et sa tunique ouverte sur les hanches flottait au vent. Le vieil ascète qui m'emmenait lui a crié des injures. Nos deux chameaux galopaient toujours ; et je n'ai plus revu personne.

D'abord, j'ai choisi pour demeure le tombeau d'un Pharaon. Mais un enchantement circule dans ces palais souterrains, où les ténèbres ont l'air épaissies par l'ancienne fumée des aromates. Du fond des sarcophages j'ai entendu s'élever une voix dolente qui m'appelait ; ou bien, je voyais vivre, tout à coup, les choses abominables peintes sur les murs ; et j'ai fui jusqu'au bord de la mer Rouge dans une citadelle en ruines. Là, j'avais pour compagnie des scorpions se traînant parmi les pierres, et au-dessus de ma tête, continuellement des aigles qui tournoyaient sur le ciel bleu. La nuit, j'étais déchiré par des griffes, mordu par des becs, frôlé par des ailes molles ; et d'épouvantables démons, hurlant dans mes oreilles, me renversaient par terre. Une fois même, les gens d'une caravane qui s'on allait vers Alexandrie m'ont secouru, puis emmené avec eux.

Alors, j'ai voulu m'instruire près du bon vieillard Didyme. Bien qu'il fût aveugle, aucun ne l'égalait dans la connaissance des Écritures. Quand la leçon était finie, il réclamait mon bras pour se promener. Je le conduisais sur le Paneum, d'où l'on découvre le Phare et la haute mer. Nous revenions ensuite par le port, en coudoyant des hommes de toutes les nations, jusqu'à des Cimmériens vêtus de peaux d'ours, et des Gymnosophistes du Gange frottés de bouse de vache. Mais sans cesse, il y avait quelque bataille dans les rues, à cause des Juifs refusant de payer l'impôt, ou des séditieux qui voulaient chasser les Romains. D'ailleurs la ville est pleine d'hérétiques, des sectateurs de Manès, de Valentin, de Basilide, d'Arius, — tous vous accaparant pour discuter et vous convaincre.

Leurs discours me reviennent quelquefois dans la mémoire. On a beau n'y pas faire attention, cela trouble.

Je me suis réfugié à Colzim ; et ma pénitence fut si haute que je n'avais plus peur de Dieu. Quelques uns s'assemblèrent autour de moi pour devenir des anachorètes. Je leur ai imposé une règle pratique, en haine des extravagances de la Gnose et des assertions des philosophes. On m'envoyait de partout des messages. On venait me voir de très-loin.

Cependant le peuple torturait les confesseurs, et la soif du martyre m'entraîna dans Alexandrie. La persécution avait cessé depuis trois jours.

Comme je m'en retournais, un flot de monde m'arrêta devant le temple de

Sérapis. C’était, me dit-on, un dernier exemple que le gouverneur voulait faire. Au milieu du portique, en plein soleil, une femme nue était attachée contre une colonne, deux soldats la fouettant avec des lanières ; à chacun des coups son corps entier se tordait. Elle s’est retournée, la bouche ouverte ; — et pardessus la foule, à travers ses longs cheveux qui lui couvraient la figure, j’ai cru reconnaître Ammonaria …

Cependant … celle-là était plus grande …, et belle …, prodigieusement !

Il se passe les mains sur le front.

Non ! non ! je ne veux pas y penser !

Une autre fois, Athanase m’appela pour le soutenir contre les Ariens. Tout s’est borné à des invectives et à des risées. Mais, depuis lors, il a été calomnié, dépossédé de son siège, mis en fuite. Où est-il, maintenant ? je n’en sais rien ! On s’inquiète si peu de me donner des nouvelles. Tous mes disciples m’ont quitté, Hilarion comme les autres !

Il avait peut-être quinze ans quand il est venu ; et son intelligence était si curieuse qu’il m’adressait à chaque moment des questions. Puis, il écoutait d’un air pensif ; — et les choses dont j’avais besoin, il me les apportait sans murmure, plus leste qu’un chevreau, gai d’ailleurs à faire rire les patriarches. C’était un fils pour moi !

Le ciel est rouge, la terre complètement noire. Sous les rafales du vent des traînées de sable se lèvent comme de grands linceuls, puis retombent. Dans une éclaircie, tout à coup, passent des oiseaux formant un bataillon triangulaire, pareil à un morceau de métal, et dont les bords seuls frémissent.

Antoine les regarde.

Ah ! que je voudrais les suivre !

Combien de fois, aussi, n’ai-je pas contemplé avec envie les longs bateaux, dont les voiles ressemblent à des ailes, et surtout quand ils emmenaient au loin ceux que j’avais reçus chez moi ! Quelles bonnes heures nous avions ! quels épanchements ! Aucun ne m’a plus intéressé qu’Ammon ; il me racontait son voyage à Rome, les Catacombes, le Colisée, la piété des femmes illustres, mille choses encore !… et je n’ai pas voulu partir avec lui ! D’où vient mon obstination à continuer une vie pareille ? J’aurais bien fait de rester chez les moines de Nitrie, puisqu’ils m’en suppliaient. Ils habitent des cellules à part, et cependant communiquent entre eux. Le dimanche, la trompette les assemble à l’église, où l’on voit accrochés trois martinets qui servent à punir les délinquants, les voleurs et les intrus, car leur discipline est sévère.

Ils ne manquent pas de certaines douceurs, néanmoins. Des fidèles leur apportent des oeufs, des fruits, et même des instruments propres à ôter les épines des pieds. Il y a des vignobles autour de Pisperi, ceux de Pabène ont un radeau pour aller chercher les provisions.

Mais j’aurais mieux servi mes frères en étant tout simplement un prêtre. On secourt les pauvres, on distribue les sacrements, on a de l’autorité dans les familles.

D’ailleurs les laïques ne sont pas tous damnés, et il ne tenait qu’à moi d’être … par exemple … grammairien, philosophe. J’aurais dans ma chambre une sphère de roseaux, toujours des tablettes à la main, des jeunes gens autour de moi, et à ma porte, comme enseigne, une couronne de laurier suspendue.

Mais il y a trop d’orgueil à ces triomphes ! Soldat valait mieux. J’étais robuste et hardi, — assez pour tendre le câble des machines, traverser les forêts sombres, entrer casque en tête dans les villes fumantes !… Rien ne m’empêchait, non plus, d’acheter avec mon argent une charge de publicain au péage de quelque pont ; et les voyageurs m’auraient appris des histoires, en me montrant dans leurs bagages des quantités d’objets curieux …

Les marchands d’Alexandrie naviguent les jours de fête sur la rivière de Canope, et boivent du vin dans des calices de lotus, au bruit des tambourins qui font trembler les tavernes le long du bord ! Au delà, des arbres taillés en cône protégent contre le vent du sud les fermes tranquilles. Le toit de la haute maison s’appuie sur de minces colonnettes, rapprochées comme les bâtons d’une claire-voie ; et par ces intervalles le maître, étendu sur un long siège, aperçoit toutes ses plaines autour de lui, avec les chasseurs entre les blés, le pressoir où l’on vendange, les boeufs qui battent la paille. Ses enfants jouent par terre, sa femme se penche pour l’embrasser.

Dans l’obscurité blanchâtre de la nuit, apparaissent çà et là des museaux pointus, avec des oreilles toutes droites et des yeux brillants. Antoine marche vers eux. Des graviers déroulent, les bêtes s’enfuient. C’était un troupeau de chacals.

Un seul est resté, et qui se tient sur deux pattes, le corps en demi-cercle et la tête oblique, dans une pose pleine de défiance.

Comme il est joli ! je voudrais passer ma main sur son dos, doucement.

Antoine siffle pour le faire venir. Le chacal disparaît.

Ah ! il s’en va rejoindre les autres ! Quelle solitude ! Quel ennui !

Riant amèrement :

C’est une si belle existence que de tordre au feu des bâtons de palmier pour faire des houlettes, et de façonner des corbeilles, de coudre des nattes, puis d’échanger tout cela avec les Nomades contre du pain qui vous brise les dents ! Ah ! misère de moi ! est-ce que ça ne finira pas ! Mais la mort vaudrait mieux ! Je n’en peux plus ! Assez ! assez !

Il frappe du pied, et tourne au milieu des roches d’un pas rapide, puis s’arrête hors d’haleine, éclate en sanglots et se couche par terre, sur le flanc.

La nuit est calme ; des étoiles nombreuses palpitent ; on n’entend que le claquement des tarentules.

Les deux bras de la croix font une ombre sur le sable ; Antoine, qui pleure, l’aperçoit.

Suis-je assez faible, mon Dieu ! Du courage, relevons-nous !

Il entre dans sa cabane, découvre un charbon enfoui, allume une torche et la plante sur le stèle de bois, de façon à éclairer le gros livre.

Si je prenais … la Vie des Apôtres ?… oui !… n’importe où !

« *Il vit le ciel ouvert avec une grande nappe qui descendait par les quatre coins, dans laquelle il y avait toutes sortes d’animaux terrestres et de bêtes sauvages, de reptiles et d’oiseaux ; et une voix lui dit : Pierre, lève-toi ! tue, et mange !* »

Donc le Seigneur voulait que son apôtre mangeât de tout ?… tandis que moi …

Antoine reste le menton sur la poitrine. Le frémissement des pages, que le vent agite, lui fait relever la tête, et il lit :

« *Les Juifs tuèrent tous leurs ennemis avec des glaives et ils en firent un grand carnage, de sorte qu’ils disposèrent à volonté de ceux qu’ils haïssaient.* »

Suit le dénombrement des gens tués par eux : soixante-quinze mille. Ils avaient tant souffert ! D’ailleurs, leurs ennemis étaient les ennemis du vrai Dieu. Et comme ils devaient jouir à se venger, tout en massacrant des idolâtres ! La ville sans doute regorgeait de morts ! Il y en avait au seuil des jardins, sur les escaliers, à une telle hauteur dans les chambres que les portes ne pouvaient plus tourner !… — Mais voilà que je plonge dans des idées de meurtre et de sang !

Il ouvre le livre à un autre endroit.

« *Nabuchodonosor se prosterna le visage contre terre et adora Daniel.* »

Ah ! c’est bien ! Le Très-Haut exalte ses prophètes au-dessus des rois ; celui-là pourtant vivait dans les festins, ivre continuellement de délices et d’orgueil. Mais Dieu, par punition, l’a changé en bête. Il marchait à quatre pattes !

Antoine se met à rire ; et en écartant les bras, du bout de sa main, dérange les feuilles du livre. Ses yeux tombent sur cette phrase :

« *Ezéchias eut une grande joie de leur arrivée. Il leur montra ses parfums, son or et son argent, tous ses aromates, ses huiles de senteur, tous ses vases précieux, et ce qu’il y avait dans ses trésors.* »

Je me figure … qu’on voyait entassés jusqu’au plafond des pierres fines, des diamants, des dariques. Un homme qui en possède une accumulation si grande n’est plus pareil aux autres. Il songe, tout en les maniant, qu’il tient le résultat d’une quantité innombrable d’efforts, et comme la vie des peuples qu’il aurait pompée et qu’il peut répandre. C’est une précaution utile aux rois. Le plus sage de tous n’y a pas manqué. Ses flottes lui apportaient de l’ivoire, des singes … Où est-ce donc ?

Il feuillette vivement.

Ah ! voici !

« *La Reine de Saba, connaissant la gloire de Salomon, vint le tenter, en lui proposant des énigmes*. »

Comment espérait-elle le tenter ? Le Diable a bien voulu tenter Jésus ! Mais Jésus a triomphé parce qu’il était Dieu, et Salomon grâce peut-être à sa science de magicien. Elle est sublime, cette science-là ! Car le monde, — ainsi qu’un philosophe me l’a expliqué, — forme un ensemble dont toutes les parties influent les unes sur les autres, comme les organes d’un seul corps. Il s’agit de connaître les amours et les répulsions naturelles des choses, puis de les mettre en jeu ?… On pourrait donc modifier ce qui paraît être l’ordre immuable ?

Alors les deux ombres dessinées derrière lui par les bras de la croix se projettent en avant. Elles font comme deux grandes cornes ; Antoine s’écrie :

Au secours, mon Dieu !

L’ombre est revenue à sa place.

Ah !… c’était une illusion ! pas autre chose ! — Il est inutile que je me tourmente l’esprit ! Je n’ai rien à faire !… absolument rien à faire !

Il s’assoit, et se croise les bras.

Cependant … j’avais cru sentir l’approche … Mais pourquoi viendrait-*Il* ? D’ailleurs, est-ce que je ne connais pas ses artifices ? J’ai repoussé le monstrueux anachorète qui m’offrait, en riant, des petits pains chauds, le centaure qui tâchait de me prendre sur sa croupe, — et cet enfant noir apparu au milieu des sables, qui était très-beau, et qui m’a dit s’appeler l’esprit de fornication.

Antoine marche de droite et de gauche, vivement.

C’est par mon ordre qu’on a bâti cette foule de retraites saintes, pleines de moines portant des cilices sous leurs peaux de chèvres, et nombreux à pouvoir faire une armée ! J’ai guéri de loin des malades ; j’ai chassé des démons ; j’ai passé le fleuve au milieu des crocodiles ; l’empereur Constantin m’a écrit trois lettres ; Balacius, qui avait craché sur les miennes, a été déchiré par ses chevaux ; le peuple d’Alexandrie, quand j’ai reparu, se battait pour me voir, et Athanase m’a reconduit sur la route. Mais aussi quelles oeuvres ! Voilà plus de trente ans que je suis dans le désert à gémir toujours ! J’ai porté sur mes reins quatre-vingts livres de bronze comme Eusèbe, j’ai exposé mon corps à la piqûre des insectes comme Macaire, je suis resté cinquante-trois nuits sans fermer l’oeil comme Pacôme ; et ceux qu’on décapite, qu’on tenaille ou qu’on brûle ont moins de vertu, peut-être, puisque ma vie est un continuel martyre !

Antoine se ralentit.

Certainement, il n’y a personne dans une détresse aussi profonde ! Les coeurs charitables diminuent. On ne me donne plus rien. Mon manteau est usé. Je n’ai pas de sandales, pas même une écuelle ! — car, j’ai distribué aux pauvres et à ma famille tout mon bien, sans retenir une obole. Ne serait ce que pour avoir des outils indispensables à mon travail, il me faudrait un peu d’argent. Oh ! pas beaucoup ! une petite somme !… je la ménagerais.

Les Pères de Nicée, en robes de pourpre, se tenaient comme des mages, sur des trônes, le long du mur ; et on les a régalés dans un banquet, en les comblant d’honneurs, surtout Paphnuce, parce qu’il est borgne et boiteux depuis la persécution de Dioclétien ! L’Empereur lui a baisé plusieurs fois son oeil crevé ; quelle sottise ! Du reste, le Concile avait des membres si infâmes ! Un évêque de Scythie, Théophile ; un autre de Perse, Jean ; un gardeur de bestiaux, Spiridion ! Alexandre était trop vieux. Athanase aurait dû montrer plus de douceur aux Ariens, pour en obtenir des concessions !

Est-ce qu’ils en auraient fait ! Ils n’ont pas voulu m’entendre ! Celui qui parlait contre moi, — un grand jeune homme à barbe frisée, — me lançait, d’un air tranquille, des objections captieuses ; et, pendant que je cherchais mes paroles, ils étaient à me regarder avec leurs figures méchantes, en aboyant comme des hyènes. Ah ! que ne puis-je les faire exiler tous par l’Empereur, ou plutôt les battre, les écraser, les voir souffrir ! Je souffre bien, moi !

Il s’appuie en défaillant contre sa cabane.

C’est d’avoir trop jeûné ! mes forces s’en vont. Si je mangeais … une fois seulement, un morceau de viande.

Il entreferme les yeux, avec langueur.

Ah ! de la chair rouge … une grappe de raisin qu’on mord !… du lait caillé qui tremble sur un plat !…

Mais qu’ai-je donc !… Qu’ai-je donc !… Je sens mon coeur grossir comme la mer, quand elle se gonfle avant l’orage. Une mollesse infinie m’accable, et l’air chaud me semble rouler le parfum d’une chevelure. Aucune femme n’est venue, cependant ?…

Il se tourne vers le petit chemin entre les roches.

C’est par là qu’elles arrivent, balancées dans leurs litières aux bras noirs des eunuques. Elles descendent, et joignant leurs mains chargées d’anneaux, elles s’agenouillent. Elles me racontent leurs inquiétudes. Le besoin d’une volupté surhumaine les torture ; elles voudraient mourir, elles ont vu dans leurs songes des Dieux qui les appelaient ; — et le bas de leur robe tombe sur mes pieds. Je les repousse. « Oh ! non, disent-elles, pas encore ! Que dois-je faire ! » Toutes les pénitences leur seraient bonnes. Elles demandent les plus rudes, à partager la mienne, à vivre avec moi.

Voilà longtemps que je n’en ai vu ! Peut-être qu’il en va venir ? pourquoi pas ? Si tout à coup … j’allais entendre tinter des clochettes de mulet dans la montagne. Il me semble …

Antoine grimpe sur une roche, à l’entrée du sentier ; et il se penche, en dardant ses yeux dans les ténèbres.

Oui ! là-bas, tout au fond, une masse remue, comme des gens qui cherchent leur chemin. Elle est là ! Ils se trompent.

Appelant :

De ce côté ! viens ! viens !

L’écho répète : Viens ! viens !

Il laisse tomber ses bras, stupéfait.

Quelle honte ! Ah ! pauvre Antoine !

Et tout de suite, il entend chuchoter : « Pauvre Antoine ! »

Quelqu’un ? répondez !

Le vent qui passe dans les intervalles des roches fait des modulations ; et dans leurs sonorités confuses, il distingue DES VOIX comme si l’air parlait. Elles sont basses, et insinuantes, sifflantes.

LA PREMIÈRE

Veux-tu des femmes ?

LA SECONDE

De grands tas d’argent, plutôt !

LA TROISIÈME

Une épée qui reluit ?

et LES AUTRES

— Le Peuple entier t’admire !

— Endors-toi !

— Tu les égorgeras, va, tu les égorgeras !

En même temps, les objets se transforment. Au bord de la falaise, le vieux palmier, avec sa touffe de feuilles jaunes, devient le torse d’une femme penchée sur l’abîme, et dont les grands cheveux se balançant.

ANTOINE

se tourne vers sa cabane ; et l’escabeau soutenant le gros livre, avec ses pages chargées de lettres noires, lui semble un arbuste tout couvert d’hirondelles.

C’est la torche, sans doute, qui faisant un jeu de lumière … Éteignons-la !

Il l’éteint, l’obscurité est profonde.

Et, tout à coup, passent au milieu de l’air, d’abord une flaque d’eau, ensuite une prostituée, le coin d’un temple, une figure de soldat, un char avec deux chevaux blancs, qui se cabrent.

Ces images arrivent brusquement, par secousses, se détachant sur la nuit comme des peintures d’écarlate sur de l’ébène.

Leur mouvement s’accélère. Elles défilent d’une façon vertigineuse. D’autres fois, elles s’arrêtent et pâlissent par degrés, se fondent ; ou bien, elles s’envolent, et immédiatement d’autres arrivent.

Antoine ferme ses paupières.

Elles se multiplient, l’entourent, l’assiègent. Une épouvante indicible l’envahit ; et il ne sent plus rien qu’une contraction brûlante à l’épigastre. Malgré le vacarme de sa tête, il perçoit un silence énorme qui le sépare du monde. Il tâche de parler ; impossible ! C’est comme si le lien général de son être se dissolvait ; et, ne résistant plus, Antoine tombe sur la natte.

II.

Alors une grande ombre, plus subtile qu'une ombre naturelle, et que d'autres ombres festonnent le long de ses bords, se marque sur la terre.

C'est le Diable, accoudé contre le toit de la cabane et portant sous ses deux ailes, — comme une chauve-souris gigantesque qui allaiterait ses petits, — les Sept Péchés Capitaux, dont les têtes grimaçantes se laissent entrevoir confusément.

Antoine, les yeux toujours fermés, jouit de son inaction ; et il étale ses membres sur la natte.

Elle lui semble douce, de plus en plus, — si bien qu'elle se rembourre, elle se hausse, elle devient un lit, le lit une chaloupe ; de l'eau clapote contre ses flancs.

A droite et à gauche, s'élèvent deux langues de terre noire, que dominent des champs cultivés, avec un sycomore, de place en place. Un bruit de grelots, de tambours et de chanteurs retentit au loin. Ce sont des gens qui s'en vont à Canope dormir sur le temple de Sérapis pour avoir des songes. Antoine sait cela ; — et il glisse, poussé par le vent, entre les deux berges du canal. Les feuilles des papyrus et les fleurs rouges des nymphaeas, plus grandes qu'un homme, se penchent sur lui. Il est étendu au fond de la barque ; un aviron, à l'arrière, traîne dans l'eau. De temps en temps un souffle tiède arrive, et les roseaux minces s'entre-choquent. Le murmure des petites vagues diminue. Un assoupissement le prend. Il songe qu'il est un solitaire d'Égypte.

Alors il se relève en sursaut.

Ai-je rêvé ?… c'était si net que j'en doute. La langue me brûle ! J'ai soif !

Il entre dans sa cabane, et tâte au hasard, partout.

Le sol est humide !… Est-ce qu'il a plu ? Tiens ! des morceaux ! ma cruche brisée !… mais l'outre ?

Il la trouve.

Vide ! complètement vide !

Pour descendre jusqu'au fleuve, il me faudrait trois heures au moins, et la nuit est si profonde que je n'y verrais pas à me conduire. Mes entrailles se tordent. Où est le pain ?

Après avoir cherché longtemps, il ramasse une croûte moins grosse qu'un oeuf.

Comment ? Les chacals l'auront pris ? Ah, malédiction !

Et, de fureur, il jette le pain par terre.

A peine ce geste est-il fait qu'une table est là, couverte de toutes les choses bonnes à manger.

La nappe de byssus, striée comme les bandelettes des sphinx, produit d’elle-même des ondulations lumineuses. Il y a dessus d’énormes quartiers de viandes rouges, de grands poissons, des oiseaux avec leurs plumes, des quadrupèdes avec leurs poils, des fruits d’une coloration presque humaine ; et des morceaux de glace blanche et des buires de cristal violet se renvoient des feux. Antoine distingue au milieu de la table un sanglier fumant par tous ses pores, les pattes sous le ventre, les yeux à demi clos ; — et l’idée de pouvoir manger cette bête formidable le réjouit extrêmement. Puis, ce sont des choses qu’il n’a jamais vues, des hachis noirs, des gelées couleur d’or, des ragoûts où flottent des champignons comme des nénuphars sur des étangs, des mousses si légères qu’elles ressemblent à des nuages.

Et l’arôme de tout cela lui apports l’odeur salée de l’Océan, la fraîcheur des fontaines, le grand parfum des bois. Il dilate ses narines tant qu’il peut ; il en bave ; il se dit qu’il en a pour un an, pour dix ans, pour sa vie entière !

A mesure qu’il promène sur les mets ses yeux écarquillés, d’autres s’accumulent, formant une pyramide, dont les angles s’écroulent. Les vins se mettent à couler, les poissons à palpiter, le sang dans les plats bouillonne, la pulpe des fruits s’avance comme des lèvres amoureuses ; et la table monte jusqu’à sa poitrine, jusqu’à son menton, — ne portant qu’une seule assiette et qu’un seul pain, qui se trouvent juste en face de lui.

Il va saisir le pain. D’autres pains se présentent.

Pour moi !… tous ! mais …

Antoine recule.

Au lieu d’un qu’il y avait, en voilà !… C’est un miracle, alors, le même que fit le Seigneur !…

Dans quel but ? Eh ! tout le reste n’est pas moins incompréhensibles ! Ah ! démon, va-t’en ! va-t’en !

Il donne un coup de pied dans la table. Elle disparaît.

Plus rien ? — non !

Il respire largement.

Ah ! la tentation était forte. Mais comme je m’en suis délivré !

Il relève la tête, et trébuche contre un objet sonore.

Qu’est-ce donc ?

Antoine se baisse.

Tiens ! une coupe ! quelqu’un, en voyageant, l’aura perdue. Rien d’extraordinaire …

Il mouille son doigt, et frotte.

Ça reluit ! du métal ! Cependant, je ne distingue pas …

Il allume sa torche, et examine la coupe.

Elle est en argent, ornée d’ovules sur le bord, avec une médaille au fond.

Il fait sauter la médaille d’un coup d’ongle.

C’est une pièce de monnaie qui vaut … de sept à huit drachmes ; pas davantage ! N’importe ! je pourrais bien, avec cela, me procurer une peau de brebis.

Un reflet de la torche éclaire la coupe.

Pas possible ! en or ! oui !… tout en or !

Une autre pièce, plus grande, se trouve au fond. Sous celle-ci, il en découvre plusieurs autres.

Mais cela fait une somme … assez forte pour avoir trois boeufs … un petit champ !

La coupe est maintenant remplie de pièces d’or.

Allons donc ! cent esclaves, des soldats, une foule, de quoi acheter …

Les granulations de la bordure, se détachant, forment un collier de perles.

Avec ce joyau-là, on gagnerait même la femme de l’Empereur !

D’une secousse, Antoine fait glisser le collier sur son poignet. Il tient la coupe de sa main gauche, et de son autre bras lève la torche pour mieux l’éclairer. Comme l’eau qui ruisselle d’une vasque, il s’en épanche à flots continus, — de manière à faire un monticule sur le sable, — des diamants, des escarboucles et des saphirs mêlés à de grandes pièces d’or, portant des effigies de rois.

Comment ? comment ? des staters, des cycles, des dariques, des aryandiques ! Alexandre, Démétrius, les Ptolémées, César ! mais chacun d’eux n’en avait pas autant ! Rien d’impossible ! plus de souffrance ! et ces rayons qui m’éblouissent ! Ah ! mon coeur déborde ! comme c’est bon ! oui !… oui !… encore ! jamais assez ! J’aurais beau en jeter à la mer continuellement, il m’en restera. Pourquoi en perdre ? Je garderai tout ; sans le dire à personne ; je me ferai creuser dans le roc une chambre qui sera couverte à l’intérieur de lames de bronze — et je viendrai là, pour sentir les piles d’or s’enfoncer sous mes talons ; j’y plongerai mes bras comme dans des sacs de grain. Je veux m’en frotter le visage, me coucher dessus !

Il lâche la torche pour embrasser le tas ; et tombe par terre sur la poitrine.

Il se relève. La place est entièrement vide.

Qu’ai-je fait ?

Si j’étais mort pendant ce temps-là, c’était l’enfer ! l’enfer irrévocable !

Il tremble de tous ses membres.

Je suis donc maudit ? Eh non ! c’est ma faute ! je me laisse prendre à tous les piéges ! On n’est pas plus imbécile et plus infâme. Je voudrais me battre, ou plutôt m’arracher de mon corps ! Il y a trop longtemps que je me contiens ! J’ai besoin de me venger, de frapper, de tuer ! c’est comme si j’avais dans l’âme un troupeau de bêtes féroces. Je voudrais, à coups de hache, au milieu d’une foule … Ah ! un poignard !…

Il se jette sur son couteau, qu’il aperçoit. Le couteau glisse de sa main, et Antoine reste accoté contre le mur de sa cabane, la bouche grande ouverte, immobile, — cataleptique.

Tout l’entourage a disparu.

Il se croit à Alexandrie sur le Paneum, montagne artificielle qu’entoure un escalier en limaçon et dressée au centre de la ville.

En face de lui s’étend le lac Mareotis, à droite la mer, à gauche la campagne, — et, immédiatement sous ses yeux, une confusion de toits plats, traversée du sud au nord et de l’est à l’ouest par deux rues qui s’entre-croisent et forment, dans toute leur longueur, une file de portiques à chapiteaux corinthiens. Les maisons surplombant cette double colonnade ont des fenêtres à vitres coloriées. Quelques-unes portent extérieurement d’énormes cages en bois, où l’air du dehors s’engouffre.

Des monuments d’architecture différente se tassent les uns près des autres. Des pylônes égyptiens dominent des temples grecs. Des obélisques apparaissent comme des lances entre des créneaux de briques rouges. Au milieu des places, il y a des Hermès à oreilles pointues et des Anubis à tête de chien. Antoine distingue des mosaïques dans les cours, et aux poutrelles des plafonds des tapis accrochés.

Il embrasse, d’un seul coup d’oeil, les deux ports (le Grand-Port et l’Eunoste), ronds tous les deux comme deux cirques, et que sépare un môle joignant Alexandrie à l’îlot escarpé sur lequel se lève la tour du Phare, quadrangulaire, haute de cinq cents coudées et à neuf étages, — avec un amas de charbons nons fumant à son sommet.

De petits ports intérieurs découpent les ports principaux. Le môle, à chaque bout, est terminé par un pont établi sur des colonnes de marbre plantées dans la mer. Des voiles passent dessous ; et de lourdes gabares débordantes de marchandises, des barques thalamèges à incrustations d’ivoire, des gondoles couvertes d’un tendelet, des trirèmes et des birèmes, toutes sortes de bateaux, circulent ou stationnent contre les quais.

Autour du Grand-Port, c’est une suite ininterrompue de constructions royales : le palais des Ptolémées, le Muséum, le Posidium, le Cesareum, le Timonium où se réfugia Marc-Antoine, le Soma qui contient le tombeau d’Alexandre ; — tandis qu’a l’autre extrémité de la ville, après l’Eunoste, on aperçoit dans un faubourg des fabriques de verre, de parfums et de papyrus.

Des vendeurs ambulants, des portefaix, des âniers, courent, se heurtent. Çà et là, un prêtre d’Osiris avec une peau de panthère sur l’épaule, un soldat romain à casque de bronze, beaucoup de nègres. Au seuil des boutiques des femmes s’arrêtent, des artisans travaillent ; et le grincement des chars fait envoler des oiseaux qui mangent par terre les détritus des boucheries et des restes de poisson.

Sur l’uniformité des maisons blanches, le dessin des rues jette comme un réseau noir. Les marchés pleins d’herbes y font des bouquets verts, les sécheries des teinturiers des plaques de couleurs, les ornements d’or au fronton des temples des points lumineux, — tout cela compris dans l’enceinte ovale des murs grisâtres, sous la voûte du ciel bleu, près de la mer immobile.

Mais la foule s’arrête, et regarde du côté de l’occident, d’où s’avancent d’énormes tourbillons de poussière.

Ce sont les moines de la Thébaïde, vêtus de peaux de chèvre, armés de gourdins, et hurlant un cantique de guerre et de religion avec ce refrain : « Où sont-ils ? où sont-ils ? »

Antoine comprend qu’ils viennent pour tuer les Ariens.

Tout à coup les rues se vident, — et l’on ne voit plus que des pieds levés.

Les Solitaires maintenant sont dans la ville. Leurs formidables bâtons, garnis de clous, tournent comme des soleils d’acier. On entend le fracas des choses brisées dans les maisons. Il y a des intervalles de silence. Puis de grands cris s’élèvent.

D’un bout à l’autre des rues, c’est un remous continuel de peuple effaré.

Plusieurs tiennent des piques. Quelquefois, deux groupes se rencontrent, n’en font qu’un ; et cette masse glisse sur les dalles, se disjoint, s’abat. Mais toujours les hommes à longs cheveux reparaissent.

Des filets de fumée s’échappent du coin des édifices. Les battants des portes éclatent. Des pans de murs s’écroulent. Des architraves tombent.

Antoine retrouve tous ses ennemis l’un après l’autre. Il en reconnaît qu’il avait oubliés ; avant de les tuer, il les outrage. Il éventre, égorge, assomme, traîne les vieillards par la barbe, écrase les enfants, frappe les blessés. Et on se venge du luxe ; ceux qui ne savent pas lire déchirent les livres ; d’autres cassent, abîment les statues, les peintures, les meubles, les coffrets, mille délicatesses dont ils ignorent l’usage et qui, à cause de cela, les exaspèrent. De temps à autre, ils s’arrêtent tout hors d’haleine, puis recommencent.

Les habitants, réfugiés dans les cours, gémissent. Les femmes lèvent au ciel leurs yeux en pleurs et leurs bras nus. Pour fléchir les Solitaires, elles embrassent leurs genoux ; ils les renversent ; et le sang jaillit jusqu’aux plafonds, retombe en nappes le long des murs, ruisselle du tronc des cadavres décapités, emplit les aqueducs, fait par terre de larges flaques rouges.

Antoine en a jusqu’aux jarrets. Il marche dedans ; il en hume les gouttelettes sur ses lèvres, et tressaille de joie à le sentir contre ses membres, sous sa tunique de poils, qui en est trempée.

La nuit vient. L’immense clameur s’apaise.

Les Solitaires ont disparu.

Tout à coup, sur les galeries extérieures bordant les neuf étages du Phare, Antoine aperçoit de grosses lignes noires comme seraient des corbeaux arrêtés. Il y court, et il se trouve au sommet.

Un grand miroir de cuivre, tourné vers la haute mer, reflète les navires qui sont au large.

Antoine s’amuse à les regarder ; et à mesure qu’il les regarde, leur nombre augmente.

Ils sont tassés dans un golfe ayant la forme d’un croissant. Par derrière, sur un promontoire, s’étale une ville neuve d’architecture romaine, avec des coupoles de pierre, des toits coniques, des marbres roses et bleus, et une profusion d’airain appliquée aux volutes des chapiteaux, à la crête des maisons, aux angles des corniches. Un bois de cyprès la domine. La couleur de la mer est plus verte, l’air plus froid. Sur les montagnes à l’horizon, il y a de la neige.

Antoine cherche sa route, quand un homme l’aborde et lui dit : « Venez ! on vous attend ! »

Il traverse un forum, entre dans une cour, se baisse sous une porte ; et il arrive devant la façade du palais, décoré par un groupe en cire qui représente l’empereur Constantin terrassant un dragon. Une vasque de porphyre porte à son milieu une conque en or pleine de pistaches. Son guide lui dit qu’il peut en prendre. Il en prend.

Puis il est comme perdu dans une succession d’appartements.

On voit le long des murs en mosaïque, des généraux offrant à l’Empereur sur le plat de la main des villes conquises. Et partout, ce sont des colonnes de basalte, des grilles en filigrane d’argent, des sièges d’ivoire, des tapisseries brodées de perles. La lumière tombe des voûtes, Antoine continue à marcher. De tièdes exhalaisons circulent ; il entend, quelquefois, le claquement discret d’une sandale. Postés dans les antichambres, des gardiens, — qui ressemblent à des automates, — tiennent sur leurs épaules des bâtons de vermeil.

Enfin, il se trouve au bas d’une salle terminée au fond par des rideaux d’hyacinthe. Ils s’écartent, et découvrent l’Empereur, assis sur un trône, en tunique violette, et chaussé de brodequins rouges à bandes noires.

Un diadème de perles contourne sa chevelure disposée en rouleaux symétriques. Il a les paupières tombantes, le nez droit, la physionomie lourde et sournoise. Aux coins du dais étendu sur sa tête quatre colombes d’or sont posées, et au pied du trône deux lions d’émail accroupis. Les colombes se mettent à chanter, les lions à rugir, l’Empereur roule des yeux, Antoine s’avance ; et tout de suite, sans préambule, ils se racontent des événements. Dans les villes d’Antioche, d’Éphèse et d’Alexandrie, on a saccagé les temples et fait avec les statues des dieux, des pots et des marmites ; l’Empereur en rit beaucoup. Antoine lui reproche sa tolérance envers les Novatiens. Mais l’Empereur s’emporte ; Novatiens, Ariens, Meléciens, tous l’ennuient. Cependant il admire l’épiscopat, car les chrétiens relevant des évêques, qui dépendent de cinq ou six personnages, il s’agit de gagner ceux-là pour avoir à soi tous les autres. Aussi n’a-t-il pas manqué de leur fournir des sommes considérables. Mais il déteste les pères du Concile de Nicée. — « Allons-les voir ! » Antoine le suit.

Et ils se trouvent, de plain-pied, sur une terrasse.

Elle domine un hippodrome, rempli de monde et que surmontent des portiques, où le reste de la foule se promène. Au centre du champ de course s’étend une plate-forme étroite, portant sur sa longueur un petit temple de Mercure, la statue de Constantin, trois serpents de bronze entrelacés, à un bout de gros oeufs en bois, et à l’autre sept dauphins la queue en l’air.

Derrière le pavillon impérial, les Préfets des chambres, les Comtes des domestiques et les Patrices s’échelonnent jusqu’au premier étage d’une église, dont toutes les fenêtres sont garnies de femmes. A droite est la tribune de la faction bleue, à gauche celle de la verte, en dessous un piquet de soldats, et, au niveau de l’arène un rang d’arcs corinthiens ; formant l’entrée des loges.

Les courses vont commencer, les chevaux s’alignent. De hauts panaches, plantés entre leurs oreilles, se balancent au vent comme des arbres ; et ils secouent, dans leurs bonds, des chars en forme de coquille, conduits par des cochers revêtus d’une sorte de cuirasse multicolore, avec des manches étroites du poignet et larges du bras, les jambes nues, toute la barbe, les cheveux rasés sur le front à la mode des Huns.

Antoine est d’abord assourdi par le clapotement des voix. Du haut en bas, il n’aperçoit que des visages fardés, des vêtements bigarrés, des plaques d’orfévrerie ; et le sable de l’arène, tout blanc, brille comme un miroir.

L’Empereur l’entretient. Il lui confie des choses importantes, secrètes, lui avoue l’assassinat de son fils Crispus, lui demande même des conseils pour sa santé.

Cependant Antoine remarque des esclaves au fond des loges. Ce sont les pères du Concile de Nicée, en haillons, abjects. Le martyr Paphnuce brosse la crinière d’un cheval, Théophile lave les jambes d’un autre, Jean peint les sabots d’un troisième, Alexandre ramasse du crottin dans une corbeille.

Antoine passe au milieu d’eux. Ils font la haie, le prient d’intercéder, lui baisent les mains. La foule entière les hue ; et il jouit de leur dégradation, démesurément. Le voilà devenu un des grands de la Cour, confident de l’Empereur, premier ministre ! Constantin lui pose son diadème sur le front. Antoine le garde, trouvant cet honneur tout simple.

Et bientôt se découvre sous les ténèbres une salle immense, éclairée par des candélabres d’or.

Des colonnes, à demi perdues dans l’ombre tant elles sont hautes, vont s’alignant à la file en dehors des tables qui se prolongent jusqu’à l’horizon, — où apparaissent dans une vapeur lumineuse des superpositions d’escaliers, des suites d’arcades, des colosses, des tours, et par derrière une vague bordure de palais que dépassent des cèdres, faisant des masses plus noires sur l’obscurité.

Les convives, couronnés de violettes, s’appuient du coude contre des lits très-bas. Le long de ces deux rangs des amphores qu’on incline versent du vin ; — et tout au fond, seul, coiffé de la tiare et couvert d’escarboucles, mange et boit le roi Nabuchodonosor.

A sa droite et à sa gauche, deux théories de prêtres en bonnets pointus balancent des encensoirs. Par terre, sous lui, rampent les rois captifs, sans pieds ni mains, auxquels il jette des os à ronger ; plus bas se tiennent ses frères, avec un bandeau sur les yeux, — étant tous aveugles.

Une plainte continue monte du fond des ergastules. Les sons doux et lents d’un orgue hydraulique alternent avec les choeurs de voix ; et on sent qu’il y a tout autour de la salle une ville démesurée, un océan d’hommes dont les flots battent les murs.

Les esclaves courent portant des plats. Des femmes circulent offrant à boire, les corbeilles crient sous le poids des pains ; et un dromadaire, chargé d’outres percées, passe et revient, laissant couler de la verveine pour rafraîchir les dalles.

Des belluaires amènent des lions. Des danseuses, les cheveux pris dans des filets, tournent sur les mains en crachant du feu par les narines ; des bateleurs nègres jonglent, des enfants nus se lancent des pelotes de neige, qui s’écrasent en tombant contre les claires argenteries. La clameur est si formidable qu’on dirait une tempête, et un nuage flotte sur le festin, tant il y a de viandes et d’haleines. Quelquefois une flammèche des grands flambeaux, arrachée par le vent, traverse la nuit comme une étoile qui file.

Le Roi essuie avec son bras les parfums de son visage. Il mange dans les vases sacrés, puis les brise ; et il énumère intérieurement ses flottes, ses armées, ses peuples. Tout à l’heure, par caprice, il brûlera son palais avec ses convives. Il compte rebâtir la tour de Babel et détrôner Dieu.

Antoine lit, de loin, sur son front, toutes ses pensées. Elles le pénètrent, — et il devient Nabuchodonosor.

Aussitôt il est repu de débordements et d’exterminations ; et l’envie le prend de se rouler dans la bassesse. D’ailleurs, la dégradation de ce qui épouvante les hommes est un outrage fait à leur esprit, une manière encore de les stupéfier ; et comme rien n’est plus vil qu’une bête brute, Antoine se met à quatre pattes sur la table, et beugle comme un taureau.

Il sent une douleur à la main, — un caillou, par hasard, l’a blessé, — et il se retrouve devant sa cabane.

L’enceinte des roches est vide. Les étoiles rayonnent. Tout se tait.

Une fois de plus je me suis trompé ! Pourquoi ces choses ? Elles viennent des soulèvements de la chair. Ah ! misérable !

Il s’élance dans sa cabane, y prend un paquet de cordes, terminé par des ongles métalliques, se dénude jusqu’à la ceinture, et levant la tête vers le ciel :

Accepte ma pénitence, ô mon Dieu ! ne la dédaigne pas pour sa faiblesse. Rends-la aiguë, prolongée, excessive ! Il est temps ! à l’oeuvre !

Il s’applique un cinglon vigoureux.

Aie ! non ! non ! pas de pitié !

Il recommence.

Oh ! oh ! oh ! chaque coup me déchire la peau, me tranche les membres. Cela me brûle horriblement !

Eh ! ce n’est pas terrible ! on s’y fait. Il me semble même …

Antoine s’arrête.

Va donc, lâche ! va donc ! Bien ! bien ! sur les bras, dans le dos, sur la poitrine, contre le ventre, partout ! Sifflez, lanières, mordez-moi, arrachez-moi ! Je voudrais que les gouttes de mon sang jaillissent jusqu’aux étoiles, fissent craquer mes os, découvrir mes nerfs ! Des tenailles, des chevalets, du plomb fondu ! Les martyrs en ont subi bien d’autres ! n’est-ce pas, Ammonaria ?

L’ombre des cornes du Diable reparaît.

J’aurais pu être attaché à la colonne près de la tienne, face à face, sous tes yeux, répondant à tes cris par mes soupirs ; et nos douleurs se seraient confondues, nos âmes se seraient mêlées.

Il se flagelle avec furie.

Tiens, tiens ! pour toi ! encore !… Mais voilà qu’un chatouillement me parcourt. Quel supplice ! quels délices ! ce sont comme des baisers. Ma moelle se fond ! je meurs !

Et il voit en face de lui trois cavaliers montés sur des onagres, vêtus de robes vertes, tenant des lis à la main et se ressemblant tous de figure.

Antoine se retourne, et il voit trois autres cavaliers semblables, sur de pareils onagres, dans la même attitude.

Il recule. Alors les onagres, tous à la fois, font un pas et frottent leur museau contre lui, en essayant de mordre son vêtement. Des vois crient : « Par ici, par ici, c’est là ! » Et des étendards paraissent entre les fentes de la montagne avec des têtes de chameau en licol de soie rouge, des mulets chargés de bagages, et des femmes couvertes de voiles jaunes, montées à califourchon sur des chevaux-pies.

Les bêtes haletantes se couchent, Ses esclaves se précipitent sur les ballots, on déroule des tapis bariolés, on étale par terre des choses qui brillent.

Un éléphant blanc, caparaçonné d'un filet d'or, accourt, en secouant le bouquet de plumes d'autruche attaché à son frontal.

Sur son dos, parmi des coussins de laine bleue, jambes croisées, paupières à demi closes et se balançant la tête, il y a une femme si splendidement vêtue qu'elle envoie des rayons autour d'elle. La foule se prosterne, l'éléphant plie les genoux, et

LA REINE DE SABA

se laissant glisser le long de son épaule, descend sur les tapis et s'avance vers saint Antoine.

Sa robe en brocart d'or, divisée régulièrement par des falbalas de perles, de jais et de saphirs, lui serre la taille dans un corsage étroit, rehaussé d'applications de couleur, qui représentent les douze signes du Zodiaque. Elle a des patins très-hauts, dont l'un est noir et semé d'étoiles d'argent, avec un croissant de lune, — et l'autre, qui est blanc, est couvert de gouttelettes d'or avec un soleil au milieu.

Ses larges manches, garnies d'émeraudes et de plumes d'oiseau, laissent voir à nu son petit bras rond, orné au poignet d'un bracelet d'ébène, et ses mains chargées de bagues se terminent par des ongles si pointus que le bout de ses doigts ressemble presque à des aiguilles.

Une chaîne d'or plate, lui passant sous le menton, monte le long de ses joues, s'enroule en spirale autour de sa coiffure, poudrée de poudre bleue ; puis, redescendant, lui effleure les épaules et vient s'attacher sur sa poitrine à un scorpion de diamant, qui allonge la langue entre ses seins. Deux grosses perles blondes tirent ses oreilles. Le bord de ses paupières est peint en noir. Elle a sur la pommette gauche une tache brune naturelle ; et elle respire en ouvrant la bouche, comme si son corset la gênait.

Elle secoue, tout en marchant, un parasol vert à manche d'ivoire, entouré de sonnettes vermeilles ; — et douze négrillons crépus portent la longue-queue de sa robe, dont un singe tient l'extrémité qu'il soulève de temps à autre.

Elle dit :

Ah ! bel ermite ! bel ermite ! mon coeur défaille !

A force de piétiner d'impatience il m'est venu des calus au talon, et j'ai cassé un de mes ongles ! J’envoyais des bergers qui restaient sur les montagnes la main étendue devant les yeux, et des chasseurs qui criaient ton nom dans les bois, et des espions qui parcouraient toutes les routes en disant à chaque passant : « L’avez-vous vu ? »

La nuit, je pleurais, le visage tourné vers le muraille. Mes larmes, à la longue, ont fait deux petits trous dans la mosaïque, comme des flaques d’eau de mer dans les rochers, car, je t’aime ! Oh ! oui ! beaucoup !

Elle lui prend la barbe.

Ris donc, bel ermite ! ris donc ! Je suis très-gaie, tu verras ! Je pince de la lyre, je danse comme une abeille, et je sais une foule d’histoires à raconter toutes plus divertissantes les unes que les autres.

Tu n’imagines pas la longue route que nous avons faite. Voilà les onagres des courriers verts qui sont morts de fatigue !

Les onagres sont étendus par terre, sans mouvement.

Depuis trois grandes lunes, ils ont couru d’un train égal, avec un caillou dans les dents pour couper le vent, la queue toujours droite, le jarret toujours plié, et galopant toujours. On n’en retrouvera pas de pareils ! Ils me venaient de mon grand-père maternel, l’empereur Saharil, fils d’Iakhschab, fils d’Iaarab, fils de Kastan. Ah ! s’ils vivaient encore nous les attellerions à une litière pour nous en retourner vite à la maison ! Mais … comment ?… à quoi songes-tu ?

Elle l’examine.

Ah ! quand tu seras mon mari, je t’habillerai, je te parfumerai, je t’épilerai.

Antoine reste immobile, plus roide qu’un pieu, pâle comme un mort.

Tu as l’air triste ; est-ce de quitter ta cabane ? Moi, j’ai tout quitté pour toi, — jusqu’au roi Salomon, qui a cependant beaucoup de sagesse, vingt mille chariots de guerre, et une belle barbe ! Je t’ai apporté mes cadeaux de noces. Choisis.

Elle se promène entre les rangées d’esclaves et les marchandises.

Voici du baume de Génézareth, de l’encens du cap Gardefan, du ladanon, du cinnamone, et du silphium, bon à mettre dans les sauces. Il y a là-dedans des broderies d’Assur, des ivoires du Gange, de la pourpre d’Élisa ; et cette boîte de neige contient une outre de chalibon, vin réservé pour les rois d’Assyrie, — et qui se boit pur dans une corne de licorne. Voilà des colliers, des agrafes, des filets, des parasols, de la poudre d’or de Baasa, du cassiteros de Tartessus, du bois bleu de Pandio, des fourrures blanches d’Issedonie, des escarboucles de l’île Palaesimonde, et des cure-dents faits avec les poils du tachas, — animal perdu qui se trouve sous la terre. Ces coussins sont d’Émath, et ces franges à manteau de Palmyre. Sur ce tapis de Babylone, il y a … mais viens donc ! Viens donc !

Elle tire saint Antoine par la manche. Il résiste. Elle continue :

Ce tissu mince, qui craque sous les doigts avec un bruit d’étincelles, est la fameuse toile jaune apportée par les marchands de la Bactriane. Il leur faut quarante-trois interprètes dans leur voyage. Je t’en ferai faire des robes, que tu mettras à la maison.

Poussez les crochets de l’étui en sycomore, et donnez-moi la cassette d’ivoire qui est au garrot de mon éléphant !

On retire d’une boîte quelque chose de rond couvert d’un voile, et l’on apporte un petit coffret chargé de ciselures.

Veux-tu le bouclier de Dgian-ben-Dgian, celui qui a bâti les Pyramides ? le voilà ! Il est composé de sept peaux de dragon mises l’une sur l’autre, jointes par des vis de diamant, et qui ont été tannées dans de la bile de parricide. Il représente, d’un côté, toutes les guerres qui ont eu lieu depuis l’invention des armes, et, de l’autre, toutes les guerres qui auront lieu jusqu’à la fin du monde. La foudre rebondit dessus, comme une balle de liége. Je vais le passer à ton bras, et tu le porteras à la chasse.

Mais si tu savais ce que j’ai dans ma petite boîte ! Retourne-la, tâche de l’ouvrir ! Personne n’y parviendrait ; embrasse-moi ; je te le dirai.

Elle prend saint Antoine par les deux joues ; il la repousse à bras tendus.

C’était une nuit que le roi Salomon perdait la tête. Enfin nous conclûmes un marché. Il se leva, et sortant à pas de loup …

Elle fait une pirouette.

Ah ! ah ! bel ermite ! tu ne le sauras pas ! tu ne le sauras pas !

Elle secoue son parasol, dont toutes les clochettes tintent.

Et j’ai bien d’autres choses encore, va ! J’ai des trésors enfermés dans des galeries où l’on se perd comme dans un bois. J’ai des palais d’été en treillage de roseaux, et des palais d’hiver en marbre noir. Au milieu de lacs grands comme des mers, j’ai des îles rondes comme des pièces d’argent, toutes couvertes de nacre, et dont les rivages font de la musique, au battement des flots tièdes qui se roulent sur le sable. Les esclaves de mes cuisines prennent des oiseaux dans mes volières, et pêchent le poisson dans mes viviers. J’ai des graveurs continuellement assis pour creuser mon portrait sur des pierres dures, des fondeurs haletants qui coulent mes statues, des parfumeurs qui mêlent le suc des plantes à des vinaigres et battent des pâtes. J’ai des couturières qui me coupent des étoffes, des orfèvres qui me travaillent des bijoux, des coiffeuses qui sont à me chercher des coiffures, et des peintres attentifs, versant sur mes lambris des résines bouillantes, qu’ils refroidissent avec des éventails. J’ai des suivantes de quoi faire un harem, des eunuques de quoi faire une armée. J’ai des armées, j’ai des peuples ! J’ai dans mon vestibule une garde de nains portant sur le dos des trompes d’ivoire.

Antoine soupire.

J’ai des attelages de gazelles, des quadriges d’éléphants, des couples de chameaux par centaines, et des cavales à crinière si longue que leurs pieds y entrent quand elles galopent, et des troupeaux à cornes si larges que l’on abat les bois devant eux quand ils pâturent. J’ai des girafes qui se promènent dans mes jardins, et qui avancent leur tête sur le bord de mon toit, quand je prends l’air après dîner.

Assise dans une coquille, et traînée par les dauphins, je me promène dans les grottes écoutant tomber l’eau des stalactites. Je vais au pays des diamants, où les magiciens mes amis me laissent choisir les plus beaux ; puis je remonte sur la terre, et je rentre chez moi.

Elle pousse un sifflement aigu ; — et un grand oiseau, qui descend du ciel, vient s’abattre sur le sommet de sa chevelure, dont il fait tomber la poudre bleue.

Son plumage, de couleur orange, semble composé d’écaillés métalliques. Sa petite tête, garnie d’une huppe d’argent, représente un visage humain. Il a quatre ailes, des pattes de vautour, et une immense queue de paon, qu’il étale en rond derrière lui.

Il saisit dans son bec le parasol de la Reine, chancelle un peu avant de prendre son aplomb, puis hérisse toutes ses plumes, et demeure immobile.

Merci, beau Simorg-anka ! toi qui m’as appris où se cachait l’amoureux ! Merci ! merci ! messager de mon coeur !

Il vole comme le désir. Il fait le tour du monde dans sa journée. Le soir, il revient ; il se pose au pied de ma couche ; il me raconte ce qu’il a vu, les mers qui ont passé sous lui avec les poissons et les navires, les grands déserts vides qu’il a contemplés du haut des cieux, et toutes les moissons qui se courbaient dans la campagne, et les plantes qui poussaient sur le mur des villes abandonnées.

Elle tord ses bras, langoureusement.

Oh ! si tu voulais, si tu voulais !… J’ai un pavillon sur un promontoire au milieu d’un isthme, entre deux océans. Il est lambrissé de plaques de verre, parqueté d’écailles de tortue, et s’ouvre aux quatre vents du ciel. D’en haut, je vois revenir mes flottes et les peuples qui montent la colline avec des fardeaux sur l’épaule. Nous dormirions sur des duvets plus mous que des nuées, nous boirions des boissons froides dans des écorces de fruits, et nous regarderions le soleil à travers des émeraudes ! Viens !…

Antoine se recule. Elle se rapproche ; et d’un ton irrité :

Comment ? ni riche, ni coquette, ni amoureuse ? ce n’est pas tout cela qu’il te faut, hein ? mais lascive, grasse, avec une voix rauque, la chevelure couleur de feu et des chairs rebondissantes. Préfères-tu un corps froid comme la peau des serpents, ou bien de grands yeux noirs, plus sombres que les cavernes mystiques ? regarde-les, mes yeux !

Antoine, malgré lui, les regarde.

Toutes celles que tu as rencontrées, depuis la fille des carrefours chantant sous sa lanterne jusqu'à la patricienne effeuillant des roses du haut de sa litière, toutes les formes entrevues, toutes les imaginations de ton désir, demande-les ! Je ne suis pas une femme, je suis un monde. Mes vêtements n'ont qu'à tomber, et tu découvriras sur ma personne une succession de mystères !

Antoine claque des dents.

Si tu posais ton doigt sur mon épaule, ce serait comme une traînée de feu dans tes veines. La possession de la moindre place de mon corps t'emplira d'une joie plus véhémente que la conquête d'un empire. Avance tes lèvres ! mes baisers ont le goût d'un fruit qui se fondrait dans ton coeur ! Ah ! comme tu vas te perdre sous mes cheveux, humer ma poitrine, t'ébahir de mes membres, et brûlé par mes prunelles, entre mes bras, dans un tourbillon …

Antoine fait un signe de croix.

Tu me dédaignes ! adieu !

Elle s'éloigne en pleurant, puis se retourne :

Bien sûr ? une femme si belle !

Elle rit, et le singe qui tient le bas de sa robe, la soulève.

Tu te repentiras, bel ermite, tu gémiras ! tu t'ennuieras ! mais je m'en moque ! la ! la ! la ! oh ! oh ! oh !

Elle s'en va la figure dans les mains, en sautillant à cloche-pied.

Les esclaves défilent devant saint Antoine, les chevaux, les dromadaires, l'éléphant, les suivantes, les mulets qu'on a rechargés, les négrillons, le singe, les courriers verts, tenant à la main leur lis cassé ; — et la Reine de Saba s'éloigne, en poussant une sorte de hoquet convulsif, qui ressemble à des sanglots ou à un ricanement.

III.

Quand elle a disparu, Antoine aperçoit un enfant sur le seuil de sa cabane.

C'est quelqu'un des serviteurs de la Reine, pense-t-il.

Cet enfant est petit comme un nain, et pourtant trapu comme un Cabire, contourné, d'aspect misérable. Des cheveux blancs couvrent sa tête prodigieusement grosse ; et il grelotte sous une méchante tunique, tout en gardant à sa main un rouleau de papyrus.

La lumière de la lune, que traverse un nuage, tombe sur lui.

ANTOINE

l'observe de loin et en a peur.

Qui es tu ?

L'ENFANT répond :

Ton ancien disciple Hilarion !

ANTOINE

Tu mens ! Hilarion habite depuis longues années la Palestine.

HILARION

J'en suis revenu ! c'est bien moi !

ANTOINE

se rapproche, et il le considère.

Cependant sa figure était brillante comme l'aurore, candide, joyeuse. Celle-là est toute sombre et vieille.

HILARION

De longs travaux m'ont fatigué !

ANTOINE

La voix aussi est différente. Elle a un timbre qui vous glace.

HILARION

C’est que je me nourris de choses amères !

ANTOINE

Et ces cheveux blancs ?

HILARION

J’ai eu tant de chagrins !

ANTOINE

à part :
Serait-ce possible ?…

HILARION

Je n’étais pas si loin que tu le supposes. L’ermite Paul t’a rendu visite cette année, pendant le mois de schebar. Il y a juste vingt jours que les Nomades t’ont apporté du pain. Tu as dit, avant-hier, à un matelot de te faire parvenir trois poinçons.

ANTOINE

Il sait tout !

HILARION

Apprends même que je ne t’ai jamais quitté. Mais tu passes de longues périodes sans m'apercevoir.

ANTOINE

Comment cela ? Il est vrai que j'ai la tête si troublée ! Cette nuit particulièrement …

HILARION

Tous les Péchés Capitaux sont venus. Mais leurs piètres embûches se brisent contre un Saint tel que toi !

ANTOINE

Oh ! non !… non ! A chaque minute, je défaille ! Que ne suis-je un de ceux dont l'âme est toujours intrépide et l'esprit ferme, — comme le grand Athanase, par exemple.

HILARION

Il a été ordonné illégalement par sept évêques !

ANTOINE

Qu'importe ! si sa vertu …

HILARION

Allons donc ! un homme orgueilleux, cruel, toujours dans les intrigues, et finalement exilé comme accapareur.

ANTOINE

Calomnie !

HILARION

Tu ne nieras pas qu'il ait voulu corrompre Eustates, le trésorier des largesses ?

ANTOINE

On l'affirme ; j'en conviens.

HILARION

Il a brûlé, par vengeance, la maison d'Arsène !

ANTOINE

Hélas !

HILARION

Au concile de Nicée, il a dit en parlant de Jésus : « L'homme du Seigneur. »

ANTOINE

Ah ! cela c'est un blasphème !

HILARION

Tellement borné du reste, qu'il avoue ne rien comprendre à la nature du Verbe.

ANTOINE

souriant de plaisir :
En effet, il n'a pas l'intelligence très … élevée.

HILARION

Si l’on t’avait mis à sa place, c’eût été un grand bonheur pour tes frères comme pour toi. Cette vie à l’écart des autres est mauvaise.

ANTOINE

Au contraire ! L’homme, étant esprit, doit se retirer des choses mortelles. Toute action le dégrade. Je voudrais ne pas tenir à la terre, — même par la plante de mes pieds !

HILARION

Hypocrite qui s’enfonce dans la solitude pour se livrer mieux au débordement de ses convoitises ! Tu te prives de viandes, de vin, d’étuves, d’esclaves et d’honneurs ; mais comme tu laisses ton imagination t’offrir des banquets, des parfums, des femmes nues et des des foules applaudissantes ! Ta chasteté n’est qu’une corruption plus subtile, et ce mépris du monde l’impuissance de ta haine contre lui ! C’est là ce qui rend tes pareils si lugubres, ou peut-être parce qu’ils doutent. La possession de la vérité donne la joie. Est-ce que Jésus était triste ? Il allait entouré d’amis, se reposait à l’ombre de l’olivier, entrait chez le publicain, multipliait les coupes, pardonnant à la pécheresse, guérissant toutes les douleurs. Toi, tu n’as de pitié que pour ta misère. C’est comme un remords qui t’agite et une démence farouche, jusqu’à repousser la caresse d’un chien ou le sourire d’un enfant.

ANTOINE

éclate en sanglots.

Assez ! assez ! tu remues trop mon coeur !

HILARION

Secoue la vermine de tes haillons ! Relève-toi de ton ordure ! Ton Dieu n’est pas un Moloch qui demande de la chair en sacrifice !

ANTOINE

Cependant la souffrance est bénie. Les chérubins s’inclinent pour recevoir le sang des confesseurs.

HILARION

Admire donc les Montanistes ! ils dépassent tous les autres.

ANTOINE

Mais c’est la vérité de la doctrine qui fait le martyre !

HILARION

Comment peut-il en prouver l’excellence, puisqu’il témoigne également pour l’erreur ?

ANTOINE

Te tairas-tu, vipère !

HILARION

Cela n’est peut-être pas si difficile. Les exhortations des amis, le plaisir d’insulter le peuple, le serment qu’on a fait, un certain vertige, mille circonstances les aident.

Antoine s’éloigne d’Hilarion. Hilarion le suit.

D’ailleurs, cette manière de mourir amène de grands désordres. Denys, Cyprien et Grégoire s’y sont soustraits. Pierre d’Alexandrie l’a blâmée, et le concile d’Elvire …

ANTOINE

se bouche les oreilles.

Je n’écoute plus !

HILARION

élevant la voix :
Voilà que tu retombes dans ton péché d’habitude, la paresse. L’ignorance est l’écume de l’orgueil. On dit : « Ma conviction est faite, pourquoi discuter ? » et on méprise les docteurs, les philosophes, la tradition, et jusqu’au texte de la Loi qu’on ignore. Crois-tu tenir la sagesse dans ta main ?

ANTOINE

Je l’entends toujours ! Ses paroles bruyantes emplissent ma tête.

HILARION

Les efforts pour comprendre Dieu sont supérieurs à tes mortifications pour le fléchir. Nous n’avons de mérite que par notre soif du Vrai. La Religion seule n’explique pas tout ; et la solution des problèmes que tu méconnais peut la rendre plus inattaquable et plus haute. Donc il faut, pour son salut, communiquer avec ses frères, — ou bien l’Église, l’assemblée des fidèles, ne serait qu’un mot, — et écouter toutes les raisons, ne dédaigner rien, ni personne. Le sorcier Balaam, le poëte Eschyle et la sibylle de Cumes avaient annoncé le Sauveur. Denys l’Alexandrin reçut du Ciel l’ordre de lire tous les livres. Saint Clément nous ordonne la culture des lettres grecques. Hermas a été converti par l’illusion d’une femme qu’il avait aimée.

ANTOINE

Quel air d’autorité ! Il me semble que tu grandis …
En effet, la taille d’Hilarion s’est progressivement élevée ; et Antoine, pour ne plus le voir, ferme les yeux.

HILARION

Rassure-toi, bon ermite !

Asseyons-nous là, sur cette grosse pierre, — comme autrefois, quand à la première lueur du jour je te saluais, en t'appelant « claire étoile du matin » ; et tu commençais tout de suite mes instructions. Elles ne sont pas finies. La lune nous éclaire suffisamment. Je t'écoute.

Il a tiré un calame de sa ceinture ; et, par terre, jambes croisées, avec son rouleau de papyrus à la main, il lève la tête vers saint Antoine, qui, assis près de lui, reste le front penché.

Après un moment de silence, Hilarion reprend : La parole de Dieu, n'est-ce pas, nous est confirmée par les miracles ? Cependant les sorciers de Pharaon en faisaient ; d'autres imposteurs peuvent en faire ; on s'y trompe. Qu'est-ce donc qu'un miracle ? Un événement qui nous semble en dehors de la nature. Mais connaissons-nous toute sa puissance ? et de ce qu'une chose ordinairement ne nous étonne pas, s'ensuit-il que nous la comprenions ?

ANTOINE

Peu importe ! il faut croire l'Écriture !

HILARION

Saint Paul, Origène et bien d'autres ne l'entendaient pas littéralement ; mais si on l'explique par des allégories, elle devient le partage d'un petit nombre et l'évidence de la vérité disparaît. Que faire ?

ANTOINE

S'en remettre a l'Église !

HILARION

Donc l'Écriture est inutile ?

ANTOINE

Non pas ! quoique l'Ancien Testament, je l'avoue, ait … des obscurités … Mais le Nouveau resplendit d'une lumière pure.

HILARION

Cependant l’ange annonciateur, dans Matthieu, apparaît à Joseph, tandis que dans Luc, c’est à Marie. L’onction de Jésus par une femme se passe, d’après le premier Évangile, au commencement de sa vie publique, et, selon les trois autres, peu de jours avant sa mort. Le breuvage qu’on lui offre sur la croix, c’est, dans Matthieu, du vinaigre avec du fiel, dans Marc du vin et de la myrrhe. Suivant Luc et Matthieu, les apôtres ne doivent prendre ni argent ni sac, pas même de sandales et de bâton, dans Marc, au contraire, Jésus leur défend de rien emporter si ce n’est des sandales et un bâton. Je m’y perds !…

ANTOINE

avec ébahissement :
En effet … en effet …

HILARION

Au contact de l’hémorroïdesse, Jésus se retourna en disant : « Qui m’a touché ? » Il ne savait donc pas qui le touchait ? Cela contredit l’omniscience de Jésus. Si le tombeau était surveillé par des gardes, les femmes n’avaient pas à s’inquiéter d’un aide pour soulever la pierre de ce tombeau. Donc, il n’y avait pas de gardes, ou bien les saintes femmes n’étaient pas là. A Emmaüs, il mange avec ses disciples et leur fait tâter ses plaies. C’est un corps humain, un objet matériel, pondérable, et cependant qui traverse les murailles. Est-ce possible ?

ANTOINE

Il faudrait beaucoup de temps pour te répondre !

HILARION

Pourquoi reçut-il le Saint-Esprit, bien qu’étant le Fils ? Qu’avait-il besoin du baptême s’il était le Verbe ? Comment le Diable pouvait-il le tenter, lui, Dieu ?

Est-ce que ces pensées-là ne te sont jamais venues ?

ANTOINE

Oui !… souvent ! Engourdies ou furieuses, elles demeurent dans ma conscience. Je les écrase, elles renaissent, m'étouffent ; et je crois parfois que je suis maudit.

HILARION

Alors, tu n'as que faire de servir Dieu ?

ANTOINE

J'ai toujours besoin de l'adorer !

Après un long silence :

HILARION

reprend :

Mais en dehors du dogme, toute liberté de recherches nous est permise. Désires-tu connaître la hiérarchie des Anges, la vertu des Nombres, la raison des germes et des métamorphoses ?

ANTOINE

Oui ! oui ! ma pensée se débat pour sortir de sa prison. Il me semble qu'en ramassant mes forces j'y parviendrai. Quelquefois même, pendant la durée d'un éclair, je me trouve comme suspendu ; puis je retombe !

HILARION

Le secret que tu voudrais tenir est gardé par des sages. Ils vivent dans un pays lointain, assis sous des arbres gigantesques, vêtus de blanc et calmes comme des Dieux. Un air chaud les nourrit. Des léopards tout à l'entour marchent sur des gazons. Le murmure des sources avec le hennissement des licornes se mêlent à leurs voix. Tu les écouteras ; et la face de l'Inconnu se dévoilera !

ANTOINE

soupirant :
La route est longue, et je suis vieux !

HILARION

Oh ! oh ! les hommes savants ne sont pas rares ! Il y en a même tout près de toi ; ici ! — Entrons !

IV

Et Antoine voit devant lui une basilique immense.

La lumière se projette du fond, merveilleuse comme serait un soleil multicolore. Elle éclaire les têtes innombrables de la foule qui emplit la nef et reflue entre les colonnes, vers les bas côtés, — où l’on distingue dans des compartiments de bois, des autels, des lits, des chaînettes de petites pierres bleues, et des constellations peintes sur les murs.

Au milieu de la foule, des groupes, çà et là, stationnent. Des hommes, debout sur des escabeaux, haranguent le doigt levé ; d’autres prient les bras en croix, sont couchés par terre, chantent des hymnes, ou boivent du vin ; autour d’une table, des fidèles font les agapes ; des martyrs démaillotent leurs membres pour montrer leurs blessures ; des vieillards, appuyés sur des bâtons, racontant leurs voyages.

Il y en a du pays des Germains, de la Thrace et des Gaules, de la Scythie et des Indes, — avec de la neige sur la barbe, des plumes dans la chevelure, des épines aux franges de leur vêtement, les sandales noires de poussière, la peau brûlée par le soleil. Tous les costumes se confondent, les manteaux de pourpre et les robes de lin, des dalmatiques brodées, des sayons de poil, des bonnets de matelots, des mitres d’évêques. Leurs yeux fulgurent extraordinairement. Ils ont l’air de bourreaux ou l’air d’eunuques.

Hilarion s’avance au milieu d’eux. Tous le saluent. Antoine, en se serrant contre son épaule, les observe. Il remarque beaucoup de femmes. Plusieurs sont habillées en hommes, avec les cheveux ras ; il en a peur.

HILARION

Ce sont des chrétiennes qui ont converti leurs maris. D’ailleurs les femmes sont toujours pour Jésus, même les idolâtres, témoin Procula l’épouse de Pilate et Poppée la concubine de Néron. Ne tremble plus ! avance !

Et il en arrive d’autres, continuellement.

Ils se multiplient, se dédoublent, légers comme des ombres, tout en faisant une grande clameur où se mêlent des hurlements de rage, des cris d’amour, des cantiques et des objurgations.

ANTOINE

à voix basse :

Que veulent-ils ?

HILARION

Le Seigneur a dit « j’aurais encore à vous parler de bien des choses. »

Ils possèdent ces choses.

Et il le pousse vers un trône d'or à cinq marches où, entouré de quatre-vingt-quinze disciples, tous frottés d'huile, maigres et très-pâles, siège le prophète Manès, — beau comme un archange, immobile comme une statue, portant une robe indienne, des escarboucles dans ses cheveux nattés, à sa main gauche un livre d'images peintes, et sous sa droite un globe. Les images représentent les créatures qui sommeillaient dans le chaos. Antoine se penche pour les voir. Puis,

MANÈS

fait tourner son globe ; et réglant ses paroles sur une lyre d'où s'échappent des sons cristallins :

La terre céleste est à l'extrémité supérieure, la terre mortelle à l'extrémité inférieure. Elle est soutenue par deux anges, le Splenditenens et l'Omophore à six visages.

Au sommet du ciel le plus haut se tient la Divinité impassible ; en dessous, face à face, sont le Fils de Dieu et le Prince des ténèbres.

Les ténèbres s'étant avancées jusqu'à son royaume, Dieu tira de son essence une vertu qui produisit le premier homme ; et il l'environna des cinq éléments. Mais les démons des ténèbres lui en dérobèrent une partie, et cette partie est l'âme.

Il n'y a qu'une seule âme — universellement épandue, comme l'eau d'un fleuve divisé en plusieurs bras. C'est elle qui soupire dans le vent, grince dans le marbre qu'on scie, hurle par la voix de la mer ; et elle pleure des larmes de lait quand on arrache les feuilles du figuier.

Les âmes sorties de ce monde émigrent vers les astres, qui sont des êtres animés.

ANTOINE

se met à rire.

Ah ! ah ! quelle absurde imagination !

UN HOMME

sans barbe, et d'apparence austère :

En quoi ?

Antoine va répondre. Mais Hilarion lui dit tout bas que cet homme est l'immense Origène ; et

MANÈS

reprend :

D'abord elles s'arrêtent dans la lune, où elles se purifient. Ensuite elles montent dans le soleil.

ANTOINE

lentement :

Je ne connais rien … qui nous empêche … de le croire.

MANÈS

Le but de toute créature est la délivrance du rayon céleste enfermé dans la matière. Il s’en échappe plus facilement par les parfums, les épices, l’arôme du vin cuit, les choses légères qui ressemblent à des pensées. Mais les actes de la vie l’y retiennent. Le meurtrier renaîtra dans le corps d’un celèphe, celui qui tue un animal deviendra cet animal ; si tu plantes une vigne, tu seras lié dans ses rameaux. La nourriture en absorbe. Donc, privez-vous ! jeûnez !

HILARION

Ils sont tempérants, comme tu vois !

MANÈS

Il y en a beaucoup dans les viandes, moins dans les herbes. D’ailleurs les Purs, grâce à leurs mérites, dépouillent les végétaux de cette partie lumineuse et elle remonte à son foyer. Les animaux, par la génération, l’emprisonnent dans la chair. Donc, fuyez les femmes !

HILARION

Admire leur continence !

MANÈS

Ou plutôt, faites si bien qu’elles ne soient pas fécondes. — Mieux vaut pour l’âme tomber sur la terre que de languir dans des entraves charnelles !

ANTOINE

Ah ! l’abomination !

HILARION

Qu’importe la hiérarchie des turpitudes ? l’Église a bien fait du mariage un sacrement !

SATURNIN

en costume de Syrie :

Il propage un ordre de choses funestes ! Le Père, pour punir les anges révoltés, leur ordonna de créer le monde. Le Christ est venu, afin que le Dieu des Juifs qui était un de ces anges …

ANTOINE

Un ange ? lui ! le Créateur !

CERDON

N’a-t-il pas voulu tuer Moïse, tromper ses prophètes, séduit les peuples, répandu le mensonge et l’idolâtrie ?

MARCION

Certainement, le Créateur n’est pas le vrai Dieu !

SAINT CLÉMENT D'ALEXANDRIE

La matière est éternelle !

BARDESANES en mage de Babylone :

Elle a été formée par les Sept Esprits planétaires.

LES HERNIENS

Les anges ont fait les âmes !

LES PRISCILLIANIENS

C'est le Diable qui a fait le monde !

ANTOINE

se rejette en arrière :

Horreur !

HILARION

le soutenant :

Tu te désespères trop vite ! tu comprends mal leur doctrine ! En voici un qui a reçu la sienne de Théodas, l'ami de saint Paul. Écoute-le !

Et, sur un signe d'Hilarion,

VALENTIN

en tunique de toile d'argent, la voix sifflante et le crâne pointu :

Le monde est l'oeuvre d'un Dieu en délire.

ANTOINE

baisse la tête.

L'oeuvre d'un Dieu en délire !…

Après un long silence :

Comment cela ?

VALENTIN

Le plus parfait des êtres, des Éons, l'Abîme, reposait au sein de la Profondeur avec la Pensée. De leur union sortit l'Intelligence, qui eut pour compagne la Vérité.

L'Intelligence et la Vérité engendrèrent le Verbe et la Vie, qui à leur tour, engendrèrent l'Homme ; et l'Église ; — et cela fait huit Éons !

Il compte sur ses doigts.

Le Verbe et la Vérité produisirent dix autres Éons, c'est-à-dire cinq couples. L'Homme et l'Église en avaient produit douze autres, parmi lesquels le Paraclet et la Foi, l'Espérance et la Charité, le Parfait et la Sagesse, Sophia.

L'ensemble de ces trente Éons constitue le Plérôme, ou Universalité de Dieu. Ainsi, comme les échos d'une voix qui s'éloigne, comme les effluves d'un parfum qui s'évapore, comme les feux du soleil qui se couche, les Puissances émanées du Principe vont toujours s'affaiblissant.

Mais Sophia, désireuse de connaître le Père, s’élança hors du Plérôme ; — et le Verbe fit alors un autre couple, le Christ et le Saint-Esprit, qui avait relié entre eux tous les Éons ; et tous ensemble ils formèrent Jésus, la fleur du Plérôme.

Cependant, l’effort de Sophia pour s’enfuir avait laissé dans le vide une image d’elle, une substance mauvaise, Acharamoth. Le Sauveur en eut pitié, la délivra des passions ; — et du sourire d’Acharamoth délivrée la lumière naquit ; ses larmes firent les eaux, sa tristesse engendra la matière noire.

D’Acharamoth sortit le Démiurge, fabricateur des mondes, des cieux et du Diable. Il habite bien plus bas que le Plérôme, sans même l’apercevoir, tellement qu’il se croit le vrai Dieu, et répète par la bouche de ses prophètes : « Il n’y a d’autre Dieu que moi ! » Puis il fit l’homme, et lui jeta dans l’âme la semence immatérielle, qui était l’Église, reflet de l’autre Église placée dans le Plérôme.

Acharamoth, un jour, parvenant à la région la plus haute, se joindra au Sauveur ; le feu caché dans le monde anéantira toute matière, se dévorera lui-même, et les hommes, devenus de purs esprits, épouseront des anges !

ORIGÈNE

Alors le Démon sera vaincu, et le règne de Dieu commencera !

Antoine retient un cri ; et aussitôt,

BASILIDE

le prenant par le coude :

L’Être suprême avec les émanations infinies s’appelle Abraxas, et le Sauveur avec toutes ses vertus Kaulakau, autrement ligne-sur-ligne, rectitude-sur-rectitude.

On obtient la force de Kaulakau par le secours de certains mots, inscrits sur cette calcédoine pour faciliter la mémoire.

Et il montre à son cou une petite pierre où sont gravées des lignes bizarres.

Alors tu seras transporté dans l’Invisible ; et supérieur à la loi, tu mépriseras tout, même la vertu !

Nous autres, les Purs, nous devons fuir la douleur, d’après l’exemple de Kaulakau.

ANTOINE

Comment ! et la croix ?

LES ELKHESAÏTES

en robe d’hyacinthe, lui répondent :

La tristesse, la bassesse, la condamnation et l’oppression de mes pères sont effacées, grâce à la mission qui est venue !

On peut renier le Christ inférieur, l’homme-Jésus ; mais il faut adorer l’autre Christ, éclos dans sa personne sous l’aile de la Colombe.

Honorez le mariage ! Le Saint-Esprit est féminin !

Hilarion a disparu ; et Antoine poussé par la foule arrive devant

LES CARPOCRATIENS

étendus avec des femmes sur des coussins d'écarlate :

Avant de rentrer dans l'Unique, tu passeras par une série de conditions et d'actions. Pour t'affranchir des ténèbres, accomplis, dès maintenant, leurs oeuvres ! L'époux va dire à l'épouse : « Fais la charité à ton frère », et elle te baisera.

LES NICOLAÏTES

assemblés autour d'un mets qui fume :

C'est de la viande offerte aux idoles ; prends-en ! L'apostasie est permise quand le coeur est pur. Gorge ta chair de ce qu'elle demande. Tâche de l'exterminer à force de débauches ! Prounikos, la mère du Ciel, s'est vautrée dans les ignominies.

LES MARCOSIENS

avec des anneaux d'or, et ruisselants de baume :

Entre chez nous pour t'unir à l'Esprit ! Entre chez nous pour boire l'immortalité !

Et l'un d'eux lui montre, derrière une tapisserie, le corps d'un homme terminé par une tête d'âne. Cela représente Sabaoth, père du Diable. En marque de haine, il crache dessus.

Un autre découvre un lit très-bas, jonché de fleurs, en disant que

Les noces spirituelles vont s'accomplir.

Un troisième tient une coupe de verre, fait une invocation ; du sang y paraît :

Ah ! le voilà ! le voilà ! le sang du Christ !

Antoine s'écarte. Mais il est éclaboussé par l'eau qui saute d'une cuve.

LES HELVIDIENS

s'y jettent la tête en bas, en marmottant :

L'homme régénéré par le baptême est impeccable !

Puis il passe près d'un grand feu, où se chauffent les Adamites, complètement nus pour imiter la pureté du paradis ; et il se heurte aux

MESSALIENS

vautrés sur les dalles, à moitié endormis, stupides :

Oh ! écrase-nous si tu veux, nous ne bougerons pas ! Le travail est un péché, toute occupation mauvaise !

Derrière ceux-là, les abjects

PATERNIENS

hommes, femmes et enfants, pêle-mêle sur un tas d'ordures, relèvent leurs faces hideuses barbouillées de vin :

Les parties inférieures du corps faites par le Diable lui appartiennent. Buvons, mangeons, forniquons !

AETIUS

Les crimes sont des besoins au-dessous du regard de Dieu !

Mais tout à coup

UN HOMME

vêtu d’un manteau carthaginois, bondit au milieu d’eux, avec un paquet de lanières à la main ; et frappant au hasard de droite et de gauche, violemment :

Ah ! imposteurs, brigands, simoniaques, hérétiques et démons ! la vermine des écoles, la lie de l’enfer ! Celui-là, Marcion, c’est un matelot de Sinope excommunié pour inceste ; on a banni Carpocras comme magicien ; Aetius a volé sa concubine, Nicolas prostitué sa femme ; et Manès, qui se fait appeler le Bouddha et qui se nomme Cubricus, fut écorché vif avec une pointe de roseau, si bien que sa peau tannée se balance aux portes de Clésiphon !

ANTOINE

a reconnu Tertullien, et s’élance pour le rejoindre :

Maître ! à moi ! à moi !

TERTULLIEN

continuant :

Brisez les images ! voilez les vierges ! Priez, jeûnez, pleurez, mortifiez-vous ! Pas de philosophie ! pas de livres ! après Jésus, la science est inutile !

Tous ont fui ; et Antoine voit, à la place de Tertullien, une femme assise sur un banc de pierre.

Elle sanglote, la tête appuyée contre une colonne, les cheveux pendants, le corps affaissé dans une longue simarre brune.

Puis, ils se trouvent l’un près de l’autre, loin de la foule ; — et un silence, un apaisement extraordinaire s’est fait, comme dans les bois, quand le vent s’arrête et que les feuilles tout à coup ne remuent plus.

Cette femme est très-belle, flétrie pourtant et d’une pâleur de sépulcre. Ils se regardent ; et leurs yeux s’envoient comme un flot de pensées, mille choses anciennes, confuses et profondes. Enfin,

PRISCILLA

se met à dire :

J’étais dans la dernière chambre des bains, et je m’endormais au bourdonnement des rues.

Tout à coup j’entendis des clameurs. On criait : « C’est un magicien ! c’est le Diable ! » Et la foule s’arrêta devant notre maison, en face du temple d’Esculape. Je me haussai avec les poignets jusqu’à la hauteur du soupirail.

Sur le péristyle du temple, il y avait un homme qui portait un carcan de fer à son cou. Il prenait des charbons dans un réchaud, et il s’en faisait sur la poitrine de larges traînées, en appelant « Jésus, Jésus ! » Le peuple disait : « Cela n’est pas permis ! lapidons-le ! » Lui, il continuait. C’étaient des choses inouïes, transportantes. Des fleurs larges comme le soleil tournaient devant mes yeux, et j’entendais dans les espaces une harpe d’or vibrer. Le jour tomba. Mes bras lâchèrent les barreaux, mon corps défaillit, et quand il m’eut emmenée à sa maison …

ANTOINE

De qui donc parles-tu ?

PRISCILLA

Mais, de Montanus !

ANTOINE

Il est mort, Montanus.

PRISCILLA

Ce n’est pas vrai !

UNE VOIX

Non, Montanus n’est pas mort !

Antoine se retourne ; et près de lui, de l’autre côté, sur le banc, une seconde femme est assise, — blonde celle-là, et encore plus pâle, avec des bouffissures sous les paupières comme si elle avait longtemps pleuré. Sans qu’il l’interroge, elle dit :

MAXIMILLA

Nous revenions de Tarse par les montagnes, lorsqu’à un détour du chemin, nous vîmes un homme sous un figuier.

Il cria de loin : « Arrêtez-vous ! » et il se précipita en nous injuriant.
Les esclaves accoururent. Il éclata de rire. Les chevaux se cabrèrent.
Les molosses hurlaient tous.

Il était debout. La sueur coulait sur son visage. Le vent faisait claquer son manteau.

En nous appelant par nos noms, il nous reprochait la vanité de nos oeuvres, l’infamie de nos corps ; — et il levait le poing du côté des dromadaires, à cause des clochettes d’argent qu’ils portent sous la mâchoire.

Sa fureur me versait l’épouvante dans les entrailles ; c’était pourtant comme une volupté qui me berçait, m’enivrait.

D’abord, les esclaves s’approchèrent. « Maître, dirent-ils, nos bêtes sont fatiguées » ; puis ce furent les femmes : « Nous avons peur », et les esclaves s’en allèrent. Puis, les enfants se mirent à pleurer : « Nous avons faim ! » Et comme on n’avait pas répondu aux femmes, elles disparurent.

Lui, il parlait. Je sentis quelqu’un près de moi. C’était l’époux ; j’écoutais l’autre. Il se traîna parmi les pierres en s’écriant « Tu m’abandonnes ? » et je répondis : « Oui ! va-t’en ! » — afin d’accompagner Montanus.

ANTOINE

Un eunuque !

PRISCILLA

Ah ! cela t’étonne, coeur grossier ! Cependant Madeleine, Jeanne, Marthe et Suzanne n’entraient pas dans la couche du Sauveur. Les âmes, mieux que les corps, peuvent s’étreindre avec délire. Pour conserver impunément Eustolie, Léonce l’évêque se mutila, — aimant mieux son amour que sa virilité. Et puis, ce n’est pas ma faute ; un esprit m’y contraint ; Sotas n’a pu me guérir. Il est cruel, pourtant ! Qu’importe ! Je suis la dernière des prophétesses ; et après moi, la fin du monde viendra.

MAXIMILLA

Il m’a comblé de ses dons. Aucune d’ailleurs ne l’aime autant, — et n’en est plus aimée !

PRISCILLA

Tu mens ! c’est moi !

MAXIMILLA

Non, c’est moi !

Elles se battent.

Entre leurs épaules paraît la tête d’un nègre.

MONTANUS

couvert d’un manteau noir, fermé par deux os de mort :

Apaisez-vous, mes colombes ! Incapables du bonheur terrestre, nous sommes par cette union dans la plénitude spirituelle. Après l’âge du Père, l’âge du Fils ; et j’inaugure le troisième, celui du Paraclet. Sa lumière m’est venue durant les quarante nuits que la Jérusalem céleste a brillé dans le firmament, au-dessus de ma maison, à Pepuza.

Ah ! comme vous criez d’angoisse quand les lanières vous flagellent ! comme vos membres endoloris se présentent à mes ardeurs ! comme vous languissez sur ma poitrine, d’un irréalisable amour ! Il est si fort qu’il vous a découvert des mondes, et vous pouvez maintenant apercevoir les âmes avec vos yeux.

Antoine fait un geste d’étonnement.

TERTULLIEN

revenu près de Montanus :

Sans doute, puisque l’âme a un corps, — ce qui n’a point de corps n’existant pas.

MONTANUS

Pour la rendre plus subtile, j’ai institué des mortifications nombreuses, trois carêmes par an, et pour chaque nuit des prières où l’on ferme la bouche, — de peur que l’haleine en s’échappant ne ternisse la pensée. Il faut s’abstenir des secondes noces, ou plutôt de tout mariage ! Les anges ont péché avec les femmes.

LES ARCONTIQUES

en cilices de crins :

Le Sauveur a dit : « Je suis venu pour détruire l’oeuvre de la Femme. »

LES TATIANIENS

en cilices de joncs :

L’arbre du mal c’est elle ! Les habits de peau sont notre corps.

Et, avançant toujours du même côté, Antoine rencontre

LES VALÉSIENS

étendus par terre, avec des plaques rouges au bas du ventre, sous leur tunique.

Ils lui présentent un couteau :

Fais comme Origène et comme nous ! Est-ce la douleur que tu crains, lâche ? Est-ce l’amour de ta chair qui te retient, hypocrite ?

Et pendant qu’il est à les regarder se débattre, étendus sur le dos dans les mares de leur sang,

LES CAÏNITES

les cheveux, noués par une vipère, passent près de lui, en vociférant à son oreille :

Gloire à Caïn ! gloire à Sodome ! gloire à Judas !

Caïn fit la race des forts. Sodome épouvanta la terre avec son châtiment ; et c’est par Judas que Dieu sauva le monde ! — Oui, Judas ! sans lui pas de mort et pas de rédemption !

Ils disparaissent sous la horde des

CIRCONCELLIONS

vêtus de peaux de loup, couronnés d’épines, et portant des masques de fer :

Écrasez le fruit ! troublez la source ! noyez l’enfant ! Pillez le riche qui se trouve heureux, qui mange beaucoup ! Battez le pauvre qui envie la housse de l’âne, le repas du chien, le nid de l’oiseau, et qui se désole parce que les autres ne sont pas des misérables comme lui.

Nous, les Saints, pour hâter la fin du monde, nous empoisonnons, brûlons, massacrons !

Le salut n’est que dans le martyre. Nous nous donnons le martyre. Nous enlevons avec des tenailles la peau de nos têtes, nous étalons nos membres sous les charrues, nous nous jetons dans la gueule des fours !

Honni le baptême ! honnie l'eucharistie ! honni le mariage ! damnation universelle !

Alors, dans toute la basilique, c'est un redoublement de fureurs.

Les Audiens tirent des flèches contre le Diable ; les Collyridiens lancent au plafond des voiles bleus ; les Ascites se prosternent devant une outre ; les Marcionites baptisent un mort avec de l'huile. Auprès d'Appelles, une femme, pour expliquer mieux son idée, fait voir un pain rond dans une bouteille ; une autre, au milieu des Sampséens, distribue, comme une hostie, la poussière de ses sandales. Sur le lit des Marcosiens jonché de roses, deux amants s'embrassent. Les Circoncellions s'entr'égorgent, les Valésiens râlent, Bardesane chante, Carpocras danse, Maximilla et Priscilla poussent des gémissements sonores ; — et la fausse prophétesse de Cappadoce, toute nue, accoudée sur un lion et secouant trois flambeaux, hurle l'Invocation-Terrible.

Les colonnes se balancent comme des troncs d'arbres, les amulettes aux cous des Hérésiarques entre-croisent des lignes de feux, les constellations dans les chapelles s'agitent, et les murs reculent sous le va-et-vient de la foule, dont chaque tête est un flot qui saute et rugit.

Cependant, — du fond même de la clameur, une chanson s'élève avec des éclats de rire, où le nom de Jésus revient.

Ce sont des gens de la plèbe, tous frappant dans leurs mains pour marquer la cadence. Au milieu d'eux est

ARIUS

en costume de diacre.

Les fous qui déclament contre moi prétendent expliquer l'absurde ; et pour les perdre tout à fait, j'ai composé des petits poëmes tellement drôles, qu'on les sait par coeur dans les moulins, les tavernes et les ports.

Mille fois non ! le Fils n'est pas coéternel au Père, ni de même substance ! Autrement il n'aurait pas dit : « Père, éloigne de moi ce calice ! — Pourquoi m'appelez-vous bon ? Dieu seul est bon ! — Je vais à mon Dieu, à votre Dieu ! » et d'autres paroles attestant sa qualité de créature. Elle nous est démontrée, de plus, par tous ses noms : agneau, pasteur, fontaine, sagesse, fils de l'homme, prophète, bonne voie, pierre angulaire !

SABELLIUS

Moi, je soutiens que tous deux sont identiques.

ARIUS

Le concile d'Antioche a décidé le contraire.

ANTOINE

Qu’est-ce donc que le Verbe ?… Qu’était Jésus ?

LES VALENTINIENS

C’était l’époux d’Acharamoth repentie !

LES SETHIANIENS

C’était Sem, fils de Noé !

LES THÉODOTIENS

C’était Melchisédech !

LES MÉRINTHIENS

Ce n’était rien qu’un homme !

LES APOLLINARISTES

Il en a pris l’apparence ! il a simulé la Passion.

MARCEL D’ANCYRE

C’est un développement du Père !

LE PAPE CALIXTE

Père et Fils sont les deux modes d’un seul Dieu !

MÉTHODIUS

Il fut d’abord dans Adam, puis dans l’homme !

CÉRINTHE

Et il ressuscitera !

VALENTIN

Impossible, — son corps étant céleste !

PAUL DE SAMOSATE

Il n’est Dieu que depuis son baptême !

HERMOGÈNE

Il habite le soleil !

Et tous les hérésiarques font un cercle autour d’Antoine, qui pleure, la tête dans ses mains.

UN JUIF

à barbe rouge, et la peau maculée de lèpre, s’avance tout près de lui ; — et ricanant horriblement :

Son âme était l’âme d’Esaü ! Il souffrait de la maladie bellérophontienne ; et sa mère, la parfumeuse, s’est livrée à Pantherus, un soldat romain, sur des gerbes de maïs, un soir de moisson.

ANTOINE

vivement, relève sa tête, les regarde sans parler ; puis marchant droit sur eux :

Docteurs, magiciens, évêques et diacres, hommes, arrière ! arrière ! Vous êtes tous des mensonges !

LES HÉRÉSIARQUES

Nous avons des martyrs plus martyrs que les tiens, des prières plus difficiles, des élans d’amour supérieurs, des extases aussi longues.

ANTOINE

Mais pas de révélation ! pas de preuves !

Alors tous brandissent dans l’air des rouleaux de papyrus, des tablettes de bois, des morceaux de cuir, des bandes d’étoffes ; — et se poussant les uns les autres :

LES CÉRINTHIENS

Voilà l’Évangile des Hébreux !

LES MARCIONITES

L’Évangile du Seigneur !

LES MARCOSIENS

L’Évangile d’Ève !

LES ENCRATITES

L’Évangile de Thomas !

LES CAÏNITES

L’Évangile de Judas !

BASILIDE

Le traité de l’âme advenue !

MANÈS

La prophétie de Barcouf !

Antoine se débat, leur échappe ; — et il aperçoit dans un coin, plein d’ombre,

LES VIEUX ÉBIONITES

desséchés comme des momies, le regard éteint, les sourcils blancs.

Ils disent, d’une voix chevrotante :

Nous l’avons connu, nous autres, nous l’avons connu le fils du charpentier ! Nous étions de son âge, nous habitions dans sa rue. Il s’amusait avec de la boue à modeler des petits oiseaux, sans avoir peur du coupant des tailloirs, aidait son père dans son travail, ou assemblait pour sa mère des pelotons de laine teinte. Puis, il fit un voyage en Égypte, d’où il rapporta de grands secrets. Nous étions à Jéricho, quand il vint trouver le mangeur de sauterelles. Ils causèrent à voix basse, sans que personne pût les entendre. Mais c’est à partir de ce moment qu’il fit du bruit en Galilée et qu’on a débité sur son compte beaucoup de fables.

Ils répètent, en tremblotant :

Nous l’avons connu, nous autres ! nous l’avons connu !

ANTOINE

Ah ! encore, parlez ! parlez ! Comment était son visage ?

TERTULLIEN

D’un aspect farouche et repoussant ; — car il s’était chargé de tous les crimes, toutes les douleurs, et toutes les difformités du monde.

ANTOINE

Oh ! non ! non ! Je me figure, au contraire, que toute sa personne avait une beauté plus qu’humaine.

EUSÈBE DE CÉSARÉE

Il y a bien à Paneades, contre une vieille masure, dans un fouillis d’herbes, une statue de pierre, élevée, à ce qu’on prétend, par l’hémorroïdesse. Mais le temps lui a rongé la face, et les pluies ont gâté l’inscription.

Une femme sort du groupe des Carpocratiens.

MARCELLINA

Autrefois, j’étais diaconesse à Rome dans une petite église, où je faisais voir aux fidèles les images en argent de saint Paul, d’Homère, de Pythagore et de Jésus-Christ.

Je n’ai gardé que la sienne.

Elle entr’ouvre son manteau.

La veux-tu ?

UNE VOIX

Il reparaît, lui-même, quand nous l’appelons ! c’est l’heure ! Viens !

Et Antoine sent tomber sur son bras une main brutale, qui l’entraîne.

Il monte un escalier complètement obscur ; — et après bien des marches, il arrive devant une porte.

Alors, celui qui le mène (est-ce Hilarion ? il n’en sait rien) dit à l’oreille d’un autre : « Le Seigneur va venir », — et ils sont introduits dans une chambre, basse de plafond, sans meubles.

Ce qui le frappe d’abord, c’est en face de lui une longue chrysalide couleur de sang, avec une tête d’homme d’où s’échappent des rayons, et le mot *Knouphis,* écrit en grec tout autour. Elle domine un fût de colonne, posé au milieu d’un piédestal. Sur les autres parois de la chambre, des médaillons en fer poli représentent des têtes d’animaux, celle d’un boeuf, d’un lion, d’un aigle, d’un chien, et la tête d’âne — encore !

Les lampes d’argile, suspendues au bas de ces images, font une lumière vacillante. Antoine, par un trou de la muraille, aperçoit la lune qui brille au loin sur les flots, et même il distingue leur petit clapotement régulier, avec le bruit sourd d’une carène de navire tapant contre les pierres d’un môle.

Des hommes accroupis, la figure sous leurs manteaux, lancent, par intervalles, comme un aboiement étouffé. Des femmes sommeillent, le front sur leurs deux bras que soutiennent leurs genoux, tellement perdues dans leurs voiles qu’on dirait des tas de hardes le long du mur. Auprès d’elles, des enfants demi-nus, tout dévorés de vermine, regardent d’un air idiot les lampes brûler ; — et on ne fait rien ; on attend quelque chose.

Ils parlent à voix basse de leurs familles, ou se communiquent des remèdes pour leurs maladies. Plusieurs vont s’embarquer au point du jour, la persécution devenant trop forte. Les païens pourtant ne sont pas difficiles à tromper. « Ils croient, les sots, que nous adorons Knouphis ! »

Mais un des frères, inspiré tout à coup, se pose devant la colonne, où l’on a mis un pain qui surmonte une corbeille, pleine de fenouil et d’aristoloches.

Les autres ont pris leurs places, formant debout trois lignes parallèles.

L’INSPIRÉ

déroulé une pancarte couverte de cylindres entremêlés, puis commence :

Sur les ténèbres, le rayon du Verbe descendit et un cri violent s’échappa, qui semblait la voix de la lumière.

TOUS

répondent, en balançant leurs corps :

Kyrie eleïson !

L’INSPIRÉ

L’homme, ensuite, fut créé par l’infâme Dieu d’Israël, avec l’auxiliaire de ceux-là :

En désignant les médaillons,

Astophaios, Oraïos, Sabaoth, Adonaï, Eloï, Iaô !

Et il gisait sur la boue, hideux, débile, informe, sans pensée.

TOUS

d’un ton plaintif :

Kyrie eleïson !

L’INSPIRÉ

Mais Sophia, compatissante, le vivifia d’une parcelle de son âme.

Alors, voyant l’homme si beau, Dieu fut pris de colère. Il l’emprisonna dans son royaume, en lui interdisant l’arbre de la science.

L’autre, encore une fois, le secourut ! Elle envoya le serpent, qui, par de longs détours, le fit désobéir à cette loi de haine.

Et l’homme, quand il eut goûté de la science, comprit les choses célestes.

TOUS

avec force :

Kyrie eleïson !

L’INSPIRÉ

Mais Iabdalaoth, pour se venger, précipita l’homme dans la matière, et le serpent avec lui !

TOUS très-bas :

Kyrie eleïson !

Ils ferment la bouche, puis se taisent.

Les senteurs du port se mêlent dans l’air chaud à la fumée des lampes. Leurs mèches, en crépitant, vont s’éteindre ; de longs moustiques tournoient. Et Antoine râle d’angoisse ; c’est comme le sentiment d’une monstruosité flottant autour de lui, l’effroi d’un crime près de s’accomplir.

Mais

L’INSPIRÉ

frappant du talon, claquant des doigts, hochant la tête, psalmodie sur un rhythme furieux, au son des cymbales et d’une flûte aiguë :

Viens ! viens ! viens ! sors de ta caverne !

Véloce qui cours sans pieds, capteur qui prends sans mains !

Sinueux comme les fleuves, orbiculaire comme le soleil, noir avec des taches d’or, comme le firmament semé d’étoiles ! Pareil aux enroulements de la vigne et aux circonvolutions des entrailles !

Inengendré ! mangeur de terre ! toujours jeune ! perspicace ! honoré à Épidaure ! Bon pour les hommes ! qui as guéri le roi Ptolémée, les soldats de Moïse, et Glaucus fils de Minos !

Viens ! viens ! viens ! sors de ta caverne !

TOUS

répètent :

Viens ! viens ! viens ! sors de ta caverne !

Cependant, rien ne se montre.

Pourquoi ? qu’a-t-il ?

Et on se concerte, on propose des moyens.

Un vieillard offre une motte de gazon. Alors un soulèvement se fait dans la corbeille. La verdure s’agite, des fleurs tombent, — et la tête d’un python paraît.

Il passe lentement sur le bord du pain, comme un cercle qui tournerait autour d’un disque immobile, puis se développe, s’allonge ; il est énorme et d’un poids considérable. Pour empêcher qu’il ne frôle la terre, les hommes le tiennent contre leur poitrine, les femmes sur leur tête, les enfants au bout de leurs bras ; — et sa queue, sortant par le trou de la muraille, s’en va indéfiniment jusqu’au fond de la mer. Ses anneaux se dédoublent, emplissent la chambre ; ils enferment Antoine.

LES FIDÈLES

collant leur bouche contre sa peau, s’arrachent le pain qu’il a mordu.

C’est toi ! c’est toi !

Élevé d’abord par Moïse, brisé par Ézéchias, rétabli par le Messie. Il t’avait bu dans les ondes du baptême ; mais tu l’as quitté au jardin des Olives, et il sentit alors toute sa faiblesse.

Tordu à la barre de la croix, et plus haut que sa tête, en bavant sur la couronne d’épines, tu le regardais mourir. — Car tu n’es pas Jésus, toi, tu es le Verbe ! tu es le Christ !

Antoine s’évanouit d’horreur, et il tombe devant sa cabane sur les éclats de bois, où brûle doucement la torche qui a glissé de sa main.

Cette commotion lui fait entr’ouvrir les yeux ; et il aperçoit le Nil, onduleux et clair sous la blancheur de la lune, comme un grand serpent au milieu des sables ; — si bien que l’hallucination le reprenant, il n’a pas quitté les Ophites ; ils l’entourent, l’appellent, charrient des bagages, descendent vers le port. Il s’embarque avec eux.

Un temps inappréciable s’écoule.

Puis, la voûte d’une prison l’environne. Des barreaux, devant lui, font des lignes noires sur un fond bleu ; — et à ses côtés, dans l’ombre, des gens pleurent et prient entourés d’autres qui les exhortent et les consolent.

Au dehors, on dirait le bourdonnement d’une foule, et la splendeur d’un jour d’été.

Des voix aiguës crient des pastèques, de l’eau, des boissons à la glace, des coussins d’herbes pour s’asseoir. De temps à autre, des applaudissements éclatent. Il entend marcher sur sa tête.

Tout à coup, part un long mugissement, fort et caverneux comme le bruit de l’eau dans un aqueduc.

Et il aperçoit en face, derrière les barreaux d’une autre loge, un lion qui se promène, — puis une ligne de sandales, de jambes nues et de franges de pourpre. Au delà, des couronnes de monde étagées symétriquement vont en s’élargissant depuis la plus basse qui enferme l’arène jusqu’à la plus haute, où se dressent des mâts pour soutenir un voile d’hyacinthe, tendu dans l’air, sur des cordages. Des escaliers qui rayonnent vers le centre, coupent, à intervalles égaux, ces grands cercles de pierre. Leurs gradins disparaissent sous un peuple assis, chevaliers, sénateurs, soldats, plébéiens, vestales et courtisanes, — en capuchons de laine, en manipules de soie, en tuniques fauves, avec des aigrettes de pierreries, des panaches de plumes, des faisceaux de licteurs ; et tout cela grouillant, criant, tumultueux et furieux l’étourdit, comme une immense cuve bouillonnante. Au milieu de l’arène, sur un autel, fume un vase d’encens.

Ainsi, les gens qui l’entourent sont des chrétiens condamnés aux bêtes. Les hommes portent le manteau rouge des pontifes de Saturne, les femmes les bandelettes de Cérès. Leurs amis se partagent des bribes de leurs vêtements, des anneaux. Pour s’introduire dans la prison, il a fallu, disent-ils, donner beaucoup d’argent. Qu’importe ! ils resteront jusqu’à la fin.

Parmi ces consolateurs, Antoine remarque un homme chauve, en tunique noire, dont la figure s’est déjà montrée quelque part ; il les entretient du néant du monde et de la félicité des élus. Antoine est transporté d’amour. Il souhaite l’occasion de répandre sa vie pour le Sauveur, ne sachant pas s’il n’est point lui-même un de ces martyrs.

Mais, sauf un Phrygien à longs cheveux, qui reste les bras levés, tous ont l’air triste. Un vieillard sanglote sur un banc, et un jeune homme rêve, debout, la tête basse.

LE VIEILLARD

n'a pas voulu payer, à l'angle d'un carrefour, devant une statue de Minerve ; et il considère ses compagnons avec un regard qui signifie :

Vous auriez du me secourir ! Des communautés s'arrangent quelquefois pour qu'on les laisse tranquilles. Plusieurs d'entre vous ont même obtenu de ces lettres déclarant faussement qu'on a sacrifié aux idoles.

Il demande :

N'est-ce pas Pétrus d'Alexandrie qui a réglé ce qu'on doit faire quand on a fléchi dans les tourments ?

Puis, en lui-même :

Ah ! cela est bien dur à mon âge ! mes infirmités me rendent si faible ! Cependant, j'aurais pu vivre jusqu'à l'autre hiver, encore !

Le souvenir de son petit jardin l'attendrit ; — et il regarde du côté de l'autel.

LE JEUNE HOMME

qui a troublé, par des coups, une fête d'Apollon, murmure :

Il ne tenait qu'à moi, pourtant, de m'enfuir dans les montagnes !

— Les soldats t'auraient pris, dit un des frères.

— Oh ! j'aurais fait comme Cyprien ; je serais revenu ; et, la seconde fois, j'aurais eu plus de force, bien sûr !

Ensuite, il pense aux jours innombrables qu'il devait vivre, à toutes les joies qu'il n'aura pas connues ; — et il regarde du côté de l'autel.

Mais

L’HOMME EN TUNIQUE NOIRE

accourt sur lui :

Quel scandale ! Comment, toi, une victime d’élection ? Toutes ces femmes qui te regardent, songe donc ! Et puis Dieu, quelquefois, fait un miracle. Pionius engourdit la main de ses bourreaux, le sang de Polycarpe éteignait les flammes de son bûcher.

Il se tourne vers le vieillard :

Père, père ! tu dois nous édifier par ta mort. En la retardant, tu commettrais sans doute quelque action mauvaise qui perdrait le fruit des bonnes. D’ailleurs la puissance de Dieu est infinie. Peut-être que ton exemple va convertir le peuple entier.

Et dans la loge en face, les lions passent et reviennent sans s’arrêter, d’un mouvement continu, rapide. Le plus grand tout à coup regarde Antoine, se met à rugir — et une vapeur sort de sa gueule.

Les femmes sont tassées contre les hommes.

LE CONSOLATEUR

va de l’un à l’autre.

Que diriez-vous, que dirais-tu, si on te brûlait avec des plaques de fer, si des chevaux t’écarteraient, si ton corps enduit de miel était dévoré par les mouches ! Tu n’auras que la mort d’un chasseur qui est surpris dans un bois.

Antoine aimerait mieux tout cela que les horribles bêtes féroces ; il croit sentir leurs dents, leurs griffes, entendre ses os craquer dans leurs mâchoires.

Un belluaire entre dans le cachot ; les martyrs tremblent.

Un seul est impassible, le Phrygien, qui priait à l’écart. Il a brûlé trois temples ; et il s’avance les bras levés, la bouche ouverte, la tête au ciel, sans rien voir, comme un somnambule.

LE CONSOLATEUR

s’écrie :

Arrière ! arrière ! L’esprit de Montanus vous prendrait.

TOUS

reculent, en vociférant :

Damnation au Montaniste !

Ils l’injurient, crachent dessus, voudraient le battre.

Les lions cabrés se mordent à la crinière. Le peuple hurle : « Aux bêtes ! aux bêtes ! »

Les martyrs éclatant en sanglots, s’étreignent. Une coupe de vin narcotique leur est offerte. Ils se la passent de main en main, vivement.

Contre la porte de la loge, un autre belluaire attend le signal. Elle s'ouvre ; un lion sort.

Il traverse l'arène, à grands pas obliques. Derrière lui, à la file, paraissent les autres lions, puis un ours, trois panthères, des léopards. Ils se dispersent comme un troupeau dans une prairie.

Le claquement d'un fouet retentit. Les chrétiens chancellent, — et, pour en finir, leurs frères les poussent. Antoine ferme les yeux.

Ils les ouvre. Mais des ténèbres l'enveloppent.

Bientôt elles s'éclairassent ; et il distingue une plaine aride et mamelonneuse, comme on en voit autour des carrières abandonnées.

Çà et là, un bouquet d'arbustes se lève parmi des dalles à ras du sol ; et des formes blanches, plus indécises que des nuages, sont penchées sur elles.

Il en arrive d'autres, légèrement. Des yeux brillent dans la fente des longs voiles. A la nonchalance de leurs pas et aux parfums qui s'exhalent, Antoine reconnaît des patriciennes. Il y a aussi des hommes, mais de condition inférieure, car ils ont des visages à la fois naïfs et grossiers.

UNE D'ELLES

en respirant largement :

Ah ! comme c'est bon l'air de la nuit froide, au milieu des sépulcres ! Je suis si fatiguée de la mollesse des lits, du fracas des jours, de la pesanteur du soleil !

Sa servante retire d'un sac en toile une torche qu'elle enflamme. Les fidèles y allument d'autres torches, et vont les planter sur les tombeaux.

UNE FEMME

haletante :

Ah ! enfin, me voilà ! Mais quel ennui que d'avoir épousé un idolâtre !

UNE AUTRE

Les visites dans les prisons, les entretiens avec nos frères, tout est suspect à nos maris ! — et même il faut nous cacher quand nous faisons le signe de la croix ; ils prendraient cela pour une conjuration magique.

UNE AUTRE

Avec le mien, c'était tous les jours des querelles ; je ne voulais pas me soumettre aux abus qu'il exigeait de mon corps ; — et afin de se venger, il m'a fait poursuivre comme chrétienne.

UNE AUTRE

Vous rappelez-vous, Lucius, ce jeune homme si beau, qu'on a traîné par les talons derrière un char, comme Hector, depuis la porte Esquiléenne jusqu'aux montagnes de Tibur ; — et des deux côtés du chemin le sang tachetait les buissons ! J'en ai recueilli les gouttes. Le voilà !

Elle tire de sa poitrine une éponge toute noire, la couvre de baisers, puis se jette sur les dalles, en criant :

Ah ! mon ami ! mon ami !

UN HOMME

Il y a juste aujourd’hui trois ans qu’est morte Domitilla. Elle fut lapidée au fond du bois de Proserpine. J’ai recueilli ses os qui brillaient comme des lucioles dans les herbes. La terre maintenant les recouvre !

Il se jette sur un tombeau.

O ma fiancée ! ma fiancée !

ET TOUS LES AUTRES

par la plaine :

O ma soeur ! ô mon frère ! ô ma fille ! ô ma mère !

Ils sont à genoux, le front dans les mains, ou le corps tout à plat, les deux bras étendus ; — et les sanglots qu’ils retiennent soulèvent leur poitrine à la briser. Ils regardent le ciel en disant :

Aie pitié de son âme, ô mon Dieu ! Elle languit au séjour des ombres ; daigne l’admettre dans la Résurrection, pour qu’elle jouisse de ta lumière !

Ou, l’oeil fixé sur les dalles, ils murmurent :

Apaise-toi, ne souffre plus ! Je t’ai apporté du vin, des viandes !

UNE VEUVE

Voici du pultis, fait par moi, selon son goût, avec beaucoup d’oeufs et double mesure de farine ! Nous allons le manger ensemble, comme autrefois, n’est-ce pas ?

Elle en porte un peu à ses lèvres ; et, tout à coup, se met à rire d’une façon extravagante, frénétique.

Les autres, comme elle, grignotent quelque morceau, boivent une gorgée.

Ils se racontent les histoires de leurs martyres ; la douleur s’exalte, les libations redoublent. Leurs yeux noyés de larmes se fixent les uns sur les autres. Ils balbutient d’ivresse et de désolation ; peu à peu, leurs mains se touchent, leurs lèvres s’unissent, les voiles s’entr’ouvrent, et ils se mêlent sur les tombes entre les coupes et les flambeaux.

Le ciel commence à blanchir. Le brouillard mouille leurs vêtements ; — et, sans avoir l’air de se connaître, ils s’éloignent les uns des autres par des chemins différents, dans la campagne.

Le soleil brille ; les herbes ont grandi, la plaine s’est transformée.

Et Antoine voit nettement à travers des bambous une forêt de colonnes, d’un gris bleuâtre. Ce sont des troncs d’arbres provenant d’un seul tronc. De chacune de ses branches descendent d’autres branches qui s’enfoncent dans le sol ; et l’ensemble de toutes ces lignes horizontales et perpendiculaires, indéfiniment multipliées, ressemblerait à une charpente monstrueuse, si elles n'avaient une petite figue de place en place, avec un feuillage noirâtre, comme celui du sycomore.

Il distingue dans leurs enfourchures des grappes de fleurs jaunes, des fleurs violettes et des fougères, pareilles à des plumes d'oiseaux.

Sous les rameaux les plus bas, se montrent çà et là les cornes d'un bubal, ou les yeux brillants d'une antilope ; des perroquets sont juchés, des papillons voltigent, des lézards se traînent, des mouches bourdonnent ; et on entend, au milieu du silence, comme la palpitation d'une vie profonde.

A l'entrée du bois, sur une manière de bûcher, est une chose étrange — un homme — enduit de bouse de vache, complètement nu, plus sec qu'une momie ; ses articulations forment des noeuds à l'extrémité de ses os qui semblent des bâtons. Il a des paquets de coquilles aux oreilles, la figure très-longue, le nez en bec de vautour. Son bras gauche reste droit en l'air, ankylosé, raide comme un pieu ; — et il se tient là depuis si longtemps que des oiseaux ont fait un nid dans sa chevelure.

Aux quatre coins de son bûcher flambent quatre feux. Le soleil est juste en face. Il le contemple les yeux grands ouverts ; — et sans regarder Antoine :

Brachmane des bords du Nil, qu'en dis-tu ?

Des flammes sortent de tous les côtés par les intervalles des poutres ; et

LE GYMNOSOPHISTE

reprend :

Pareil au rhinocéros, je me suis enfoncé dans la solitude. J'habitais l'arbre derrière moi.

En effet, le gros figuier présente, dans ses cannelures, une excavation naturelle de la taille d'un homme.

Et je me nourrissais de fleurs et de fruits, avec une telle observance des préceptes, que pas même un chien ne m'a vu manger.

Comme l'existence provient de la corruption, la corruption du désir, le désir de la sensation, la sensation du contact, j'ai fui toute action, tout contact ; et — sans plus bouger que la stèle d'un tombeau, exhalant mon haleine par mes deux narines, fixant mon regard sur mon nez, et considérant l'éther dans mon esprit, le monde dans mes membres, la lune dans mon coeur, — je songeais à l'essence de la grande Ame d'où s'échappent continuellement, comme des étincelles de feu, les principes de la vie.

J'ai saisi enfin l'Ame suprême dans tous les êtres, tous les êtres dans l'Ame suprême ; — et je suis parvenu à y faire entrer mon âme, dans laquelle j'avais fait rentrer mes sens.

Je reçois la science, directement du ciel, comme l'oiseau Tchataka qui ne se désaltère que dans les rayons de la pluie.

Par cela même que je connais les choses, les choses n'existent plus.

Pour moi, maintenant, il n'y a pas d'espoir et pas d'angoisse, pas de bonheur, pas de vertu, ni jour ni nuit, ni toi ni moi, absolument rien.

Mes austérités effroyables m'ont fait supérieur aux Puissances. Une contraction de ma pensée peut tuer cent fils de rois, détrôner les dieux, bouleverser le monde.

Il a dit tout cela d'une voix monotone.

Les feuilles à l'entour se recroquerillent. Des rats, par terre, s'enfuient.

Il abaisse lentement ses yeux vers les flammes qui montent, puis ajoute :

J'ai pris en dégoût la forme, en dégoût la perception, en dégoût jusqu'à la connaissance elle-même, — car la pensée ne survit pas au fait transitoire qui la cause, et l'esprit n'est qu'une illusion comme le reste.

Tout ce qui est engendré périra, tout ce qui est mort doit revivre ; les êtres actuellement disparus séjourneront dans des matrices non encore formées, et reviendront sur la terre pour servir avec douleur d'autres créatures.

Mais, comme j'ai roulé dans une multitude infinie d'existences, sous des enveloppes de dieux, d'hommes et d'animaux, je renonce au voyage, je ne veux plus de cette fatigue ! J'abandonne la sale auberge de mon corps, maçonnée de chair, rougie de sang, couverte d'une peau hideuse, pleine d'immondices ; — et, pour ma récompense, je vais enfin dormir au plus profond de l'absolu, dans l'Anéantissement.

Les flammes s'élèvent jusqu'à sa poitrine, — puis l'enveloppent. Sa tête passe à travers comme par le trou d'un mur. Ses yeux béants regardent toujours.

ANTOINE

se relève.

La torche, par terre, a incendié les éclats de bois ; et les flammes ont roussi sa barbe.

Tout en criant, Antoine trépigne sur le feu ; — et quand il ne reste plus qu'un amas de cendres :

Où est donc Hilarion ? Il était là tout à l'heure.

Je l'ai vu !

Eh ! non, c'est impossible ! je me trompe !

Pourquoi ?… Ma cabane, ces pierres, le sable, n'ont peut-être pas plus de réalité. Je deviens fou. Du calme ! où étais-je ? qu'y avait-il ?

Ah ! le gymnosophiste !… Cette mort est commune parmi les sages indiens. Kalanos se brûla devant Alexandre ; un autre a fait de même du temps d'Auguste. Quelle haine de la vie il faut avoir ! A moins que l'orgueil ne les pousse ?… N'importe, c'est une intrépidité de martyrs !… Quant à ceux-là, je crois maintenant tout ce qu’on m’avait dit sur les débauches qu’ils occasionnent.

Et auparavant ? Oui, je me souviens ! la foule des hérésiarques … Quels cris ! quels yeux ! Mais pourquoi tant de débordements de la chair et d’égarements de l’esprit ?

C’est vers Dieu qu’ils prétendent se diriger par toutes ces voies ! De quel droit les maudire, moi qui trébuche dans la mienne ? Quand ils ont disparu, j’allais peut-être en apprendre davantage. Cela tourbillonnait trop vite ; je n’avais pas le temps de répondre. A présent, c’est comme s’il y avait dans mon intelligence plus d’espace et plus de lumière. Je suis tranquille. Je me sens capable … Qu’est-ce donc ? je croyais avoir éteint le feu !

Une flamme voltige entre les roches ; et bientôt une voix saccadée se fait entendre, au loin, dans la montagne.

Est-ce l’aboiement d’une hyène, ou les sanglots de quelque voyageur perdu ?

Antoine écoute. La flamme se rapproche.

Et il voit venir une femme qui pleure, appuyée sur l’épaule d’un homme à barbe blanche.

Elle est couverte d’une robe de pourpre en lambeaux. Il est nu-tête comme elle, avec une tunique de même couleur, et porte un vase de bronze, d’où s’élève une petite flamme bleue.

Antoine a peur — et voudrait savoir qui est cette femme.

L’ÉTRANGER (SIMON)

C’est une jeune fille, une pauvre enfant, que je mène partout avec moi.

Il hausse le vase d’airain.

Antoine la considère, à la lueur de cette flamme qui vacille.

Elle a sur le visage des marques de morsures, le long des bras des traces de coups ; ses cheveux épars s’accrochent dans les déchirures de ses haillons ; ses yeux paraissent insensibles à la lumière.

SIMON

Quelquefois, elle reste ainsi, pendant fort longtemps, sans parler, sans manger ; puis elle se réveille, — et débite des choses merveilleuses.

ANTOINE

Vraiment ?

SIMON

Ennoia ! Ennoia ! Ennoia ! raconte ce que tu as à dire !

Elle tourne ses prunelles comme sortant d’un songe, passe lentement ses doigts sur ses deux sourcils, et d’une voix dolente :

HÉLÈNE (ENNOIA)

J’ai souvenir d’une région lointaine, couleur d’émeraude. Un seul arbre l’occupe.

Antoine tressaille.

A chaque degré de ses larges rameaux se tient dans l'air un couple d'Esprits. Les branches autour d'eux s'entre-croisent, comme les veines d'un corps, et ils regardent la vie éternelle circuler depuis les racines plongeant dans l'ombre jusqu'au faîte qui dépasse le soleil. Moi, sur la deuxième branche, j'éclairais avec ma figure les nuits d'été.

ANTOINE

se touchant le front.

Ah ! ah ! je comprends ! la tête !

SIMON

le doigt sur la bouche :

Chut !…

HÉLÈNE

La voile restait bombée, la carène fendait l'écume. Il me disait : « Que m'importe si je trouble ma patrie, si je perds mon royaume ! Tu m'appartiendras, dans ma maison ! »

Qu'elle était douce la haute chambre de son palais ! Il se couchait sur le lit d'ivoire, et, caressant ma chevelure, chantait amoureusement.

A la fin du jour, j'apercevais les deux camps, les fanaux qu'on allumait, Ulysse au bord de sa tente, Achille tout armé conduisant un char le long du rivage de la mer.

ANTOINE

Mais elle est folle entièrement ! Pourquoi ?…

SIMON

Chut !… chut !

HÉLÈNE

Ils m'ont graissée avec des onguents, et ils m'ont vendue au peuple pour que je l'amuse.

Un soir, debout, et le cistre en main, je faisais danser des matelots grecs. La pluie, comme une cataracte, tombait sur la taverne, et tes coupes de vin chaud fumaient. Un homme entra, sans que la porte fût ouverte.

SIMON

C'était moi ! je t'ai retrouvée !

La voici, Antoine, celle qu'on nomme Sigeh, Ennoia, Barbelo, Prounikos ! Les Esprits gouverneurs du monde furent jaloux d'elle, et ils l'attachèrent dans un corps de femme.

Elle a été l'Hélène des Troyens, dont le poëte Stesichore a maudit la mémoire. Elle a été Lucrèce, la patricienne violée par les rois. Elle a été Dalila, qui coupait les cheveux de Samson. Elle a été cette fille d'Israël qui s’abandonnait aux boucs. Elle a aimé l’adultère, l’idolâtrie, le mensonge et la sottise. Elle s’est prostituée à tous les peuples. Elle a chanté dans tous les carrefours. Elle a baisé tous les visages.

A Tyr, la Syrienne, elle était la maîtresse des voleurs. Elle buvait avec eux pendant les nuits, et elle cachait les assassins dans la vermine de son lit tiède.

ANTOINE

Eh ! que me fait !…

SIMON

d’un air furieux :

Je l’ai rachetée, te dis-je, — et rétablie en sa splendeur ; tellement que Caïus César Caligula en est devenu amoureux, puisqu’il voulait coucher avec la Lune !

ANTOINE

Eh bien ?…

SIMON

Mais c’est elle qui est la Lune ! Le pape Clément n’a-t-il pas écrit qu’elle fut emprisonnée dans une tour ? Trois cents personnes vinrent cerner la tour ; et à chacune des meurtrières en même temps, on vit paraître la lune, — bien qu’il n’y ait pas dans le monde plusieurs lunes, ni plusieurs Ennoia !

ANTOINE

Oui … je crois me rappeler …

Et il tombe dans une rêverie.

SIMON

Innocente comme le Christ, qui est mort pour les hommes, elle s’est dévouée pour les femmes. Car l’impuissance de Jéhovah se démontre par la transgression d’Adam, et il faut secouer la vieille loi, antipathique à l’ordre des choses.

J’ai prêché le renouvellement dans Éphraïm et dans Issachar, le long du torrent de Bizor, derrière le lac d’Houleh, dans la vallée de Mageddo, plus loin que les montagnes, à Bostra et à Damas ! Viennent à moi ceux qui sont couverts de vin, ceux qui sont couverts de boue, ceux qui sont couverts de sang ; et j’effacerai leurs souillures avec le Saint-Esprit, appelé Minerve par les Grecs ! Elle est Minerve ! elle est le Saint-Esprit ! Je suis Jupiter, Apollon, le Christ, le Paraclet, la grande puissance de Dieu, incarnée en la personne de Simon !

ANTOINE

Ah ! c’est toi !… c’est donc toi ? Mais je sais tes crimes !

Tu es né à Gittoï, près de Samarie. Dosithéus, ton premier maître, t’a renvoyé ! Tu exècres saint Paul pour avoir converti une de tes femmes ; et, vaincu par saint Pierre, — de rage et de terreur tu as jeté dans les flots le sac qui contenait tes artifices !

SIMON

Les veux-tu ?

Antoine le regarde ; — et une voix intérieure murmure dans sa poitrine. « Pourquoi pas ? »

Simon reprend :

Celui qui connaît les forces de la Nature et la substance des Esprits doit opérer des miracles. C’est le rêve de tous les sages — et le désir qui te ronge ; avoue-le !

Au milieu des Romains, j’ai volé dans le cirque tellement haut qu’on ne m’a plus revu. Néron ordonna de me décapiter ; mais ce fut la tête d’une brebis qui tomba par terre, au lieu de la mienne. Enfin on m’a enseveli tout vivant ; mais j’ai ressuscité le troisième jour. La preuve, c’est que me voilà !

Il lui donne ses mains à flairer. Elles sentent le cadavre. Antoine se recule.

Je peux faire se mouvoir des serpents de bronze, rire des statues de marbre, parler des chiens. Je te montrerai une immense quantité d’or ; j’établirai des rois ; tu verras des peuples m’adorant ! Je peux marcher sur les nuages et sur les flots, passer à travers les montagnes, apparaître en jeune homme, en vieillard, en tigre et en fourmi, prendre ton visage, te donner le mien, conduire la foudre. L’entends-tu ?

Le tonnerre gronde, des éclairs se succèdent.

C’est la voix du Très-Haut ! « car l’Éternel ton Dieu est un feu, » et toutes les créations s’opèrent par des jaillissements de ce foyer.

Tu vas en recevoir le baptême, — ce second baptême annoncé par Jésus, et qui tomba sur les apôtres, un jour d’orage que la fenêtre était ouverte !

Et tout en remuant la flamme avec sa main, lentement, comme pour en asperger Antoine :

Mère des miséricordes, toi qui découvres les secrets, afin que le repos nous arrive dans la huitième maison …

ANTOINE

s’écrie :

Ah ! si j’avais de l’eau bénite !

La flamme s’éteint, en produisant beaucoup de fumée.

Ennoia et Simon ont disparu.

Un brouillard extrêmement froid, opaque et fétide emplit l’atmosphère.

ANTOINE

étendant ses bras, comme un aveugle :

Où suis-je ?… J’ai peur de tomber dans l’abîme. Et la croix, bien sûr, est trop loin de moi … Ah ! quelle nuit ! quelle nuit !

Sous un coup de vent, le brouillard s’entr’ouvre ; — et il aperçoit deux hommes, couverts de longues tuniques blanches.

Le premier est de haute taille, de figure douce, de maintien grave. Ses cheveux blonds, séparés comme ceux du Christ, descendent régulièrement sur ses épaules. Il a jeté une baguette qu'il portait à la main, et que son compagnon a reçue en faisant une révérence à la manière des Orientaux.

Ce dernier est petit, gros, camard, d'encolure ramassée, les cheveux crépus, une mine naïve.

Ils sont tous les deux nu-pieds, nu-tête, et poudreux comme des gens qui arrivent de voyage.

ANTOINE

en sursaut :

Que voulez-vous ? Parlez ! Allez-vous-en !

DAMIS

— C'est le petit homme. —

Là, là !…bon ermite ! ce que je veux ? je n'en sais rien ! Voici le maître.

Il s'assoit, l'autre reste debout. Silence.

ANTOINE

reprend :

Vous venez ainsi ?…

DAMIS

Oh ! de loin, — de très-loin !

ANTOINE

Et vous allez ?…

DAMIS

désignant l'autre :

Où il voudra !

ANTOINE

Qui est-il donc ?

DAMIS

Regarde-le !

ANTOINE

à part :

Il a l'air d'un saint ! Si j'osais …

La fumée est partie. Le temps est très-clair. La lune brille.

DAMIS

A quoi songez-vous donc, que vous ne parlez plus ?

ANTOINE

Je songe … Oh ! rien.

DAMIS

s’avance vers Apollonius, et fait plusieurs tours autour de lui, la taille courbée, sans lever la tête.

Maître ! c’est un ermite galiléen qui demande à savoir les origines de la sagesse.

APOLLONIUS

Qu’il approche !

Antoine hésite.

DAMIS

Approchez !

APOLLONIUS

d’une voix tonnante :

Approche ! Tu voudrais connaître qui je suis, ce que j’ai fait, ce que je pense ? n’est-ce pas cela, enfant ?

ANTOINE

…Si ces choses, toutefois, peuvent contribuer à mon salut.

APOLLONIUS

Réjouis-toi, je vais te les dire !

DAMIS

bas à Antoine :

Est-ce possible ! Il faut qu’il vous ait, du premier coup d’oeil, reconnu des inclinations extraordinaires pour la philosophie ! Je vais en profiter aussi, moi !

APOLLONIUS

Je te raconterai d’abord la longue route que j’ai parcourue pour obtenir la doctrine ; et si tu trouves dans toute ma vie une action mauvaise, tu m’arrêteras, — car celui-là doit scandaliser par ses paroles qui a méfait par ses oeuvres.

DAMIS

à Antoine :

Quel homme juste ! hein ?

ANTOINE

Décidément, je crois qu’il est sincère.

APOLLONIUS

La nuit de ma naissance, ma mère crut se voir cueillant des fleurs sur le bord d’un lac. Un éclair parut, et elle me mit au monde à la voix des cygnes qui chantaient dans son rêve.

Jusqu’à quinze ans, on m’a plongé, trois fois par jour, dans la fontaine Asbadée, dont l’eau rend les parjures hydropiques ; et l’on me frottait le corps avec les feuilles du cnyza pour me faire chaste.

Une princesse palmyrienne vint un soir me trouver, m’offrant des trésors qu’elle savait être dans des tombeaux. Une hiérodoule du temple de Diane s’égorgea, désespérée, avec le couteau des sacrifices ; et le gouverneur de Cilicie, à la fin de ses promesses, s’écria devant ma famille qu’il me ferait mourir ; mais c’est lui qui mourut trois jours après, assassiné par les Romains.

DAMIS

à Antoine, en le frappant du coude :

Hein ? quand je vous disais ! quel homme !

APOLLONIUS

J’ai, pendant quatre ans de suite, gardé le silence complet des pythagoriciens. La douleur la plus imprévue ne m’arrachait pas un soupir ; et au théâtre, quand j’entrais, on s’écartait de moi comme d’un fantôme.

DAMIS

Auriez-vous fait cela, vous ?

APOLLONIUS

Le temps de mon épreuve terminé, j’entrepris d’instruire les prêtres qui avaient perdu la tradition.

ANTOINE

Quelle tradition ?

DAMIS

Laissez-le poursuivre ! Taisez-vous !

APOLLONIUS

J’ai devisé avec les Samanéens du Gange, avec les astrologues de Chaldée, avec les mages de Babylone, avec les Druides gaulois, avec les sacerdoces des nègres ! J’ai gravi les quatorze Olympes, j’ai sondé les lacs de Scythie, j’ai mesuré la grandeur du Désert !

DAMIS

C’est pourtant vrai, tout cela ! J’y étais, moi !

APOLLONIUS

J’ai d’abord été jusqu’à la mer d’Hyrcanie. J’en ai fait le tour ; et par le pays des Baraomates, où est enterré Bucéphale, je suis descendu vers Ninive. Aux portes de la ville, un homme s’approcha.

DAMIS

Moi ! moi ! mon bon maître ! Je vous aimai, tout de suite ! Vous étiez plus doux qu’une fille et plus beau qu’un Dieu !

APOLLONIUS

sans l’entendre :

Il voulait m’accompagner, pour me servir d’interprète.

DAMIS

Mais vous répondîtes que vous compreniez tous les langages et que vous deviniez toutes les pensées. Alors j’ai baisé le bas de votre manteau, et je me suis mis à marcher derrière vous.

APOLLONIUS

Après Ctésiphon, nous entrâmes sur les terres de Babylone.

DAMIS

Et le satrape poussa un cri, en voyant un homme si pâle.

ANTOINE

à part :

Que signifie …

APOLLONIUS

Le Roi m’a reçu debout, près d’un trône d’argent, dans une salle ronde, constellée d’étoiles ; — et de la coupole pendaient, à des fils que l’on n’apercevait pas, quatre grands oiseaux d’or, les deux ailes étendues.

ANTOINE

rêvant :

Est-ce qu’il y a sur la terre des choses pareilles ?

DAMIS

C’est là une ville, cette Babylone ! tout le monde y est riche ! Les maisons, peintes en bleu, ont des portes de bronze, avec un escalier qui descend vers le fleuve ;

Dessinant par terre, avec son bâton,

Comme cela, voyez-vous ? Et puis, ce sont des temples, des places, des bains, des aqueducs ! Les palais sont couverts de cuivre rouge ! et l’intérieur donc, si vous saviez !

APOLLONIUS

Sur la muraille du septentrion, s’élève une tour qui en supporte une seconde, une troisième, une quatrième, une cinquième — et il y en a trois autres encore ! La huitième est une chapelle avec un lit. Personne n’y entre que la femme choisie par les prêtres pour le Dieu Bélus. Le roi de Babylone m’y fit loger.

DAMIS

A peine si l’on me regardait, moi ! Aussi, je restais seul à me promener par les rues. Je m’informais des usages ; je visitais les ateliers ; j’examinais les grandes machines qui portent l’eau dans les jardins. Mais il m’ennuyait d’être séparé du Maître.

APOLLONIUS

Enfin, nous sortîmes de Babylone ; et au clair de la lune, nous vîmes tout à coup une empuse.

DAMIS

Oui-da ! Elle sautait sur son sabot de fer ; elle hennissait comme un âne ; elle galopait dans les rochers. Il lui cria des injures ; elle disparut.

ANTOINE

à part :

Où veulent-ils en venir ?

APOLLONIUS

A Taxilla, capitale de cinq mille forteresses, Phraortes, roi du Gange, nous a montré sa garde d'hommes noirs hauts de cinq coudées, et dans les jardins de son palais, sous un pavillon de brocart vert, un éléphant énorme, que les reines s'amusaient à parfumer. C'était l'éléphant de Porus, qui s'était enfui après la mort d'Alexandre.

DAMIS

Et qu'on avait retrouvé dans une forêt.

ANTOINE

Ils parlent abondamment comme des gens ivres.

APOLLONIUS

Phraortes nous fit asseoir à sa table.

DAMIS

Quel drôle de pays ! Les seigneurs, tout en buvant, se divertissent à lancer des flèches sous les pieds d'un enfant qui danse. Mais je n'approuve pas …

APOLLONIUS

Quand je fus prêt à partir, le Roi me donna un parasol, et il me dit : « J'ai sur l'Indus un haras de chameaux blancs. Quand tu n'en voudras plus, souffle dans leurs oreilles. Ils reviendront. »

Nous descendîmes le long du fleuve, marchant la nuit à la lueur des lucioles qui brillaient dans les bambous. L'esclave sifflait un air pour écarter les serpents ; et nos chameaux se courbaient les reins en passant sous les arbres, comme sous des portes trop basses.

Un jour, un enfant noir qui tenait un caducée d'or à la main, nous conduisit au collège des sages. Iarchas, leur chef, me parla de mes ancêtres, de toutes mes pensées, de toutes mes actions, de toutes mes existences. Il avait été le fleuve Indus, et il me rappela que j'avais conduit des barques sur le Nil, au temps du roi Sésostris.

DAMIS

Moi, on ne me dit rien, de sorte que je ne sais pas qui j'ai été.

ANTOINE

Ils ont l'air vague comme des ombres

ils ont l'air vague comme des ombres.

APOLLONIUS

Nous avons rencontré, sur le bord de la mer, les Cynocéphales gorgés de lait, qui s'en revenaient de leur expédition dans l'île Taprobane. Les flots tièdes poussaient devant nous des perles blondes. L'ambre craquait sous nos pas. Des squelettes de baleine blanchissaient dans la crevasse des falaises. La terre, à la fin, se fit plus étroite qu'une sandale ; — et après avoir jeté vers le soleil des gouttes de l'Océan, nous tournâmes à droite, pour revenir.

Nous sommes revenus par la Région des Aromates, par le pays des Gangarides, le promontoire de Comaria, la contrée des Sachalites, des Adramites et des Homérites ; — puis, à travers les monts Cassaniens, la mer Rouge et l'île Topazos, nous avons pénétré en Éthiopie par le royaume des Pygmées.

ANTOINE

à part :

Comme la terre est grande !

DAMIS

Et quand nous sommes rentrés chez nous, tous ceux que nous avions connus jadis étaient morts.

Antoine baisse la tête. Silence.

APOLLONIUS

reprend :

Alors on commença dans le monde à parler de moi.

La peste ravageait Ephèse ; j'ai fait lapider un vieux mendiant ;

DAMIS

Et la peste s'en est allée !

ANTOINE

Comment ! il chasse les maladies ?

APOLLONIUS

A Cnide, j'ai guéri l'amoureux de la Vénus.

DAMIS

Oui, un fou, qui même avait promis de l'épouser. — Aimer une femme passe encore ; mais une statue, quelle sottise ! — Le Maître lui posa la main sur le coeur ; et l'amour aussitôt s'éteignit.

ANTOINE

Quoi ! il délivre des démons ?

APOLLONIUS

A Tarente, on portait au bûcher une jeune fille morte.

DAMIS

Le Maître lui toucha les lèvres, et elle s'est relevée en appelant sa mère.

ANTOINE

Comment ! il ressuscite les morts ?

APOLLONIUS

J'ai prédit le pouvoir à Vespasien.

ANTOINE

Quoi ! il devine l'avenir ?

DAMIS

Il y avait à Corinthe,

APOLLONIUS

Étant à table avec lui, aux eaux de Baïa …

ANTOINE

Excusez-moi, étrangers, il est tard !

DAMIS

Un jeune homme qu'on appelait Ménippe.

ANTOINE

Non ! non ! allez-vous-en !

APOLLONIUS

Un chien entra, portant à la gueule une main coupée.

DAMIS

Un soir, dans un faubourg, il rencontra une femme.

ANTOINE

Vous ne m'entendez pas ? retirez-vous !

APOLLONIUS

Il rôdait vaguement autour des lits.

ANTOINE

Assez !

APOLLONIUS

On voulait le chasser.

DAMIS

Ménippe donc se rendit chez elle ; ils s'aimèrent.

APOLLONIUS

Et battant la mosaïque avec sa queue, il déposa cette main sur les genoux de Flavius.

DAMIS

Mais le matin, aux leçons de l'école, Ménippe était pâle.

ANTOINE

bondissant :

Encore ! Ah ! qu'ils continuent, puisqu'il n'y a pas …

DAMIS

Le Maître lui dit : « O beau jeune homme, tu caresses un serpent ; un serpent te caresse ! à quand les noces ? » Nous allâmes tous à la noce.

ANTOINE

J’ai tort, bien sûr, d’écouter cela !

DAMIS

Dès le vestibule, des serviteurs se remuaient, les portes s’ouvraient ; on n’entendait cependant ni le bruit des pas, ni le bruit des portes. Le Maître se plaça près de Ménippe. Aussitôt la fiancée fut prise de colère contre les philosophes. Mais la vaisselle d’or, les échansons, les cuisiniers, les pannetiers disparurent ; le toit s’envola, les murs s’écroulèrent ; et Apollonius resta seul, debout, ayant à ses pieds cette femme tout en pleurs. C’était une vampire qui satisfaisait les beaux jeunes hommes, afin de manger leur chair, — parce que rien n’est meilleur pour ces sortes de fantômes que le sang des amoureux.

APOLLONIUS

Si tu veux savoir l’art …

ANTOINE

Je ne veux rien savoir !

APOLLONIUS

Le soir de notre arrivée aux portes de Rome,

ANTOINE

Oh ! oui, parlez-moi de la ville des papes !

APOLLONIUS

Un homme ivre nous accosta, qui chantait d’une voix douce. C’était un épithalame de Néron ; et il avait le pouvoir de faire mourir quiconque l’écoutait négligemment. Il portait à son dos, dans une boîte, une corde prise à la cythare de l’Empereur. J’ai haussé les épaules. Il nous a jeté de la boue au visage. Alors, j’ai défait ma ceinture, et je la lui ai placée dans la main.

DAMIS

Vous avez eu bien tort, par exemple !

APOLLONIUS

L’Empereur, pendant la nuit, me fit appeler à sa maison. Il jouait aux osselets avec Sporus, accoudé du bras gauche, sur une table d’agate. Il se détourna, et fronçant ses sourcils blonds : « Pourquoi ne me crains-tu pas ? me demanda-t-il ? — Parce que le Dieu qui t’a fait terrible m’a fait intrépide », répondis-je.

ANTOINE

à part :

Quelque chose d’inexplicable m’épouvante.

Silence

Silence.

DAMIS

reprend d’une voix aiguë :

Toute l’Asie, d’ailleurs, pourra vous dire …

ANTOINE

en sursaut :

Je suis malade ! Laissez-moi !

DAMIS

Écoutez donc. Il a vu, d’Ephèse, tuer Domitien, qui était à Rome.

ANTOINE

s’efforçant de rire :

Est-ce possible !

DAMIS

Oui, au théâtre, en plein jour, le quatorzième des calendes d’octobre, tout à coup il s’écria : « On égorge César ! » et il ajoutait de temps à autre : « Il roule par terre ; oh ! comme il se débat ! Il se relève ; il essaye de fuir ; les portes sont fermées ; ah ! c’est fini ! le voilà mort ! » Et ce jour-là, en effet, Titus Flavius Domitianus fut assassiné, comme vous savez.

ANTOINE

Sans le secours du Diable … certainement …

APOLLONIUS

Il avait voulu me faire mourir, ce Domitien ! Damis s’était enfui par mon ordre, et je restais seul dans ma prison.

DAMIS

C’était une terrible hardiesse, il faut avouer !

APOLLONIUS

Vers la cinquième heure, les soldats m’amenèrent au tribunal. J’avais ma harangue toute prête que je tenais sous mon manteau.

DAMIS

Nous étions sur le rivage de Pouzzoles, nous autres ! Nous vous croyions mort ; nous pleurions. Quand, vers la sixième heure, tout à coup vous apparûtes, et vous nous dites : « C’est moi ! »

ANTOINE

à part :

Comme Lui !

DAMIS

très-haut :

Absolument !

ANTOINE

Oh ! non ! vous mentez, n’est-ce pas ? vous mentez !

APOLLONIUS

Il est descendu du Ciel. Moi, j’y monte, — grâce à ma vertu qui m’a élevé jusqu’à la hauteur du Principe !

DAMIS

Thyane, sa ville natale, a institué en son honneur un temple avec des prêtres !

APOLLONIUS

se rapproche d’Antoine et lui crie aux oreilles :

C’est que je connais tous les dieux, tous les rites, toutes les prières, tous les oracles ! J’ai pénétré dans l’antre de Trophonius, fils d’Apollon ! J’ai pétri pour les Syracusaines les gâteaux qu’elles portent sur les montagnes ! j’ai subi les quatre-vingts épreuves de Mithra ! j’ai serré contre mon coeur le serpent de Sabasius ! j’ai reçu l’écharpe des Cabires ! j’ai lavé Cybèle aux flots des golfes campaniens, et j’ai passé trois lunes dans les cavernes de Samothrace !

DAMIS

riant bêtement :

Ah ! ah ! ah ! aux mystères de la Bonne Déesse !

APOLLONIUS

Et maintenant nous recommençons le pèlerinage !

Nous allons au Nord, du côté des cygnes et des neiges. Sur la plaine blanche, les hippopodes aveugles cassent du bout de leurs pieds la plante d’outre-mer.

DAMIS

Viens ! c’est l’aurore. Le coq a chanté, le cheval a henni, la voile est prête.

ANTOINE

Le coq n’a pas chanté ! J’entends le grillon dans les sables, et je vois la lune qui reste en place.

APOLLONIUS

Nous allons au Sud, derrière les montagnes et les grands flots, chercher dans les parfums la raison de l’amour. Tu humeras l’odeur du myrrhodion qui fait mourir les faibles. Tu baigneras ton corps dans le lac d’huile rose de l’île Junonia. Tu verras, dormant sur les primevères, le lézard qui se réveille tous les siècles quand tombe à sa maturité l’escarboucle de son front. Les étoiles palpitent comme des yeux, les cascades chantent comme des lyres, des enivrements s’exhalent des fleurs écloses ; ton esprit s’élargira parmi les airs, et dans ton coeur comme sur ta face.

DAMIS

Maître ! il est temps ! Le vent va se lever, les hirondelles s’éveillent, la feuille du myrte est envolée !

APOLLONIUS

Oui ! partons !

ANTOINE

Non ! moi, je reste !

APOLLONIUS

Veux-tu que je t’enseigne où pousse la plante Balis, qui ressuscite les morts ?

DAMIS

Demande-lui plutôt l’androdamas qui attire l’argent, le fer et l’airain !

ANTOINE

Oh ! que je souffre ! que je souffre !

DAMIS

Tu comprendras la voix de tous les êtres, les rugissements, les roucoulements !

APOLLONIUS

Je te ferai monter sur les licornes, sur les dragons, sur les hippocentaures et les dauphins !

ANTOINE

pleure.

Oh ! oh ! oh !

APOLLONIUS

Tu connaîtras les démons qui habitent les cavernes, ceux qui parlent dans les bois, ceux qui remuent les flots, ceux qui poussent les nuages.

DAMIS

Serre ta ceinture ! noue tes sandales !

APOLLONIUS

Je t’expliquerai la raison des formes divines, pourquoi Apollon est debout, Jupiter assis, Vénus noire à Corinthe, carrée dans Athènes, conique à Paphos.

ANTOINE

joignant les mains :

Qu’ils s’en aillent ! qu’ils s’en aillent !

APOLLONIUS

J’arracherai devant toi les armures des Dieux, nous forcerons les sanctuaires, je te ferai violer la Pythie !

ANTOINE

Au secours, Seigneur !

Il se précipite vers la croix.

APOLLONIUS

Quel est ton désir ? ton rêve ? Le temps seulement d’y songer …

ANTOINE

Jésus, Jésus, à mon aide !

APOLLONIUS

Veux-tu que je le fasse apparaître, Jésus ?

ANTOINE

Quoi ? Comment ?

APOLLONIUS

Ce sera lui ! pas un autre ! Il jettera sa couronne, et nous causerons face à face !

DAMIS

bas :

Dis que tu veux bien ! Dis que tu veux bien !

Antoine au pied de la croix, murmure des oraisons. Damis tourne autour de lui, avec des gestes patelins.

Voyons, bon ermite, cher saint Antoine ! homme pur, homme illustre ! homme qu'on ne saurait assez louer ! Ne vous effrayez pas ; c'est une façon de dire exagérée, prise aux Orientaux. Cela n'empêche nullement …

APOLLONIUS

Laisse-le, Damis !

Il croit, comme une brute, à la réalité des choses. La terreur qu'il a des Dieux l'empêche de les comprendre ; et il ravale le sien au niveau d'un roi jaloux !

Toi, mon fils, ne me quitte pas !

Il s'approche à reculons du bord de la falaise, la dépasse, et reste suspendu.

Par-dessus toutes les formes, plus loin que la terre, au delà des cieux, réside le monde des Idées, tout plein du Verbe ! D'un bond, nous franchirons l'autre espace ; et tu saisiras dans son infinité l'Éternel, l'Absolu, l'Être ! — Allons ! donne-moi la main ! En marche !

Tous les deux, côte à côte, s'élèvent dans l'air, doucement.

Antoine embrassant la croix, les regarde monter.

Ils disparaissent.

V.

ANTOINE

marchant lentement :

Celui-là vaut tout l’enfer !

Nabuchodonosor ne m’avait pas tant ébloui. La reine de Saba ne m’a pas si profondément charmé.

Sa manière de parler des Dieux inspire l’envie de les connaître.

Je me rappelle en avoir vu des centaines à la fois, dans l’île d’Éléphantine, du temps de Dioclétien. L’Empereur avait cédé aux Nomades un grand pays, à condition qu’ils garderaient les frontières ; et le traité fut conclu au nom des « Puissances invisibles. » Car les Dieux de chaque peuple étaient ignorés de l’autre peuple.

Les Barbares avaient amené les leurs. Ils occupaient les collines de sable qui bordent le fleuve. On les apercevait tenant leurs idoles entre leurs bras comme de grands enfants paralytiques ; ou bien naviguant au milieu des cataractes sur un tronc de palmier, ils montraient de loin les amulettes de leurs cous, les tatouages de leurs poitrines ; — et cela n’est pas plus criminel que la religion des Grecs, des Asiatiques et des Romains !

Quand j’habitais le temple d’Héliopolis, j’ai souvent considéré tout ce qu’il y a sur les murailles : vautours portant des sceptres, crocodiles pinçant des lyres, figures d’hommes avec des corps de serpent, femmes à tête de vache prosternées devant des dieux ithyphalliques ; et leurs formes surnaturelles m’entraînaient vers d’autres mondes. J’aurais voulu savoir ce que regardent ces yeux tranquilles.

Pour que de la matière ait tant de pouvoir, il faut qu’elle contienne un esprit. L’âme des Dieux est attachée à ses images …

Ceux qui ont la beauté des apparences peuvent séduire. Mais les autres … qui sont abjects ou terribles, comment y croire ?…

Et il voit passer à ras du sol des feuilles, des pierres, des coquilles, des branches d’arbres, de vagues représentations d’animaux, puis des espèces de nains hydropiques ; ce sont des Dieux. Il éclate de rire.

Un autre rire part derrière lui ; et Hilarion se présente — habillé en ermite, beaucoup plus grand que tout à l’heure, colossal.

ANTOINE

n’est pas surpris de le revoir.

Qu’il faut être bête pour adorer cela !

HILARION

Oh ! oui, extrêmement bête !

Alors défilent devant eux, des idoles de toutes les nations et de tous les âges, en bois, en métal, en granit, en plumes, en peaux cousues.

Les plus vieilles, antérieures au Déluge, disparaissent sous des goëmons qui pondent comme des crinières. Quelques-unes, trop longues pour leur base, craquent dans leurs jointures et se cassent les reins en marchant.

D’autres laissent couler du sable par les trous de leurs ventres.

Antoine et Hilarion s’amusent énormément. Ils se tiennent les côtes à force de rire.

Ensuite, passent des idoles à profil de mouton. Elles titubent sur leurs jambes cagneuses, entr’ouvrent leurs paupières et bégayent comme des muets : « Bâ ! bâ ! bâ ! »

A mesure qu’elles se rapprochent du type humain, elles irritent Antoine davantage. Il les frappe à coups de poing, à coups de pied, s’acharne dessus.

Elles deviennent effroyables — avec de hauts panaches, des yeux en boules, les bras terminés par des griffes, des mâchoires de requin.

Et devant ces Dieux, on égorge des hommes sur des autels de pierre ; d’autres sont broyés dans des cuves, écrasés sous des chariots, cloués dans des arbres. Il y en a un, tout en fer rougi et à cornes de taureau, qui dévore des enfants.

ANTOINE

Horreur !

HILARION

Mais les Dieux réclament toujours des supplices. Le tien même a voulu …

ANTOINE

pleurant :

Oh ! n’achève pas, tais-toi !

L’enceinte des roches se change en une vallée. Un troupeau de boeufs y pâture l’herbe rase.

Le pasteur qui les conduit observe un nuage ; — et jette dans l’air, d’une voix aiguë, des paroles impératives.

HILARION

Comme il a besoin de pluie, il tâche, par des chants, de contraindre le roi du ciel à ouvrir la nuée féconde.

ANTOINE

en riant :

Voilà un orgueil trop niais !

HILARION

Pourquoi fais-tu des exorcismes ?

La vallée devient une mer de lait, immobile et sans bornes.

Au milieu flotte un long berceau, composé par les enroulements d’un serpent dont toutes les têtes, s’inclinant à la fois, ombragent un dieu endormi sur son corps.

Il est jeune, imberbe, plus beau qu’une fille et couvert de voiles diaphanes. Les perles de sa tiare brillent doucement comme des lunes, un chapelet d’étoiles fait plusieurs tours sur sa poitrine ; — et une main sous la tête, l’autre bras étendu, il repose, d’un air songeur et enivré.

Une femme accroupie devant ses pieds attend qu’il se réveille.

HILARION

C’est la dualité primordiale des Brakhmanes, — l’Absolu ne s’exprimant par aucune forme.

Sur le nombril du Dieu une tige de lotus a poussé ; et, dans son calice, paraît un autre Dieu à trois visages.

ANTOINE

Tiens, quelle invention !

HILARION

Père, Fils et Saint-Esprit ne font de même qu’une seule personne !

Les trois têtes s’écartent, et trois grands Dieux paraissent.

Le premier, qui est rose, mord le bout de son orteil.

Le second, qui est bleu, agite quatre bras.

Le troisième, qui est vert, porte un collier de crânes humains.

En face d’eux, immédiatement surgissent trois Déesses, l’une enveloppée d’un réseau, l’autre offrant une coupe, la dernière brandissant un arc.

Et ces Dieux, ces Déesses se décuplent, se multiplient. Sur leurs épaules poussent des bras, au bout de leurs bras des mains tenant des étendards, des haches, des boucliers, des épées, des parasols et des tambours. Des fontaines jaillissent de leurs têtes, des herbes descendent de leurs narines.

A cheval sur des oiseaux, bercés dans des palanquins, trônant sur des sièges d’or, debout dans des niches d’ivoire, ils songent, voyagent, commandent, boivent du vin, respirent des fleurs. Des danseuses tournoient, des géants poursuivent des monstres ; à l’entrée des grottes des solitaires méditent. On ne distingue pas les prunelles des étoiles, les nuages des banderoles ; des paons s’abreuvent à des ruisseaux de poudre d’or, la broderie des pavillons se mêle aux taches des léopards, des rayons colorés s’entre-croisent sur l’air bleu, avec des flèches qui volent et des encensoirs qu’on balance.

Et tout cela se développe comme une haute frise — appuyant sa base sur les rochers, et montant jusque dans le ciel.

ANTOINE

ébloui :

Quelle quantité ! que veulent-ils ?

HILARION

Celui qui gratte son abdomen avec sa trompe d’éléphant, c’est le Dieu solaire, l’inspirateur de la sagesse.

Cet autre, dont les six têtes portent des tours et les quatorze bras des javelots, c’est le prince des armées, le Feu-dévorateur.

Le vieillard chevauchant un crocodile va laver sur le rivage les âmes des morts. Elles seront tourmentées par cette femme noire aux dents pourries, dominatrice des enfers.

Le chariot tiré par des cavales rouges, que conduit un cocher qui n’a pas de jambes, promène en plein azur le maître du soleil. Le Dieu-lune l’accompagne, dans une litière attelée de trois gazelles.

A genoux sur le dos d’un perroquet, la déesse de la Beauté présente à l’Amour, son fils, sa mamelle ronde. La voici plus loin, qui saute de joie dans les prairies. Regarde ! regarde ! Coiffée d’une mitre éblouissante, elle court sur les blés, sur les flots, monte dans l’air, s’étale partout !

Entre ces Dieux siègent les Génies des vents, des planètes, des mois, des jours, cent mille autres ! et leurs aspects sont multiples, leurs transformations rapides. En voilà un qui de poisson devient tortue ; il prend la hure d’un sanglier, la taille d’un nain.

ANTOINE

Pour quoi faire ?

HILARION

Pour rétablir l’équilibre, pour combattre le mal. Mais la vie s’épuise, les formes s’usent ; et il leur faut progresser dans les métamorphoses.

Tout à coup paraît

UN HOMME NU

assis au milieu du sable, les jambes croisées.

Un large halo vibre, suspendu derrière lui. Les petites boucles de ses cheveux noirs, et à reflets d’azur, contournent symétriquement une protubérance au haut de son crâne. Ses bras, très-longs, descendent droits contre ses flancs. Ses deux mains, les paumes ouvertes, reposent à plat sur ses cuisses. Le dessous de ses pieds offre l’image de deux soleils ; et il reste complètement immobile — en face d’Antoine et d’Hilarion, — avec tous les Dieux à l’entour, échelonnés sur les roches comme sur les gradins d’un cirque.

Ses lèvres s’entrouvrent ; et d’une voix profonde :

Je suis le maître de la grande aumône, le secours des créatures, et aux croyants comme aux profanes j’expose la loi.

Pour délivrer le monde, j’ai voulu naître parmi les hommes. Les Dieux pleuraient quand je suis parti.

J’ai d’abord cherché une femme comme il convient : de race militaire, épouse d’un roi, très-bonne, extrêmement belle, le nombril profond, le corps ferme comme du diamant ; et au temps de la pleine lune, sans l’auxiliaire d’aucun mâle, je suis entré dans son ventre.

J’en suis sorti par le flanc droit. Des étoiles s’arrêtèrent.

HILARION

murmure entre ses dents :

« Et quand ils virent l’étoile s’arrêter, ils conçurent un grande joie ! »

Antoine regarde plus attentivement

LE BUDDHA

qui reprend :

Du fond de l’Himalaya, un religieux centenaire accourut pour me voir.

HILARION

« Un homme appelé Siméon, qui ne devait pas mourir avant d’avoir vu le Christ ! »

LE BUDDHA

On m’a mené dans les écoles. J’en savais plus que les docteurs.

HILARION

“…Au milieu des docteurs ; et tous ceux qui l’entendaient étaient ravis de sa sagesse. »

Antoine fait signe à Hilarion de se taire.

LE BUDDHA

Continuellement, j’étais à méditer dans les jardins. Les ombres des arbres tournaient ; mais l’ombre de celui qui m’abritait ne tournait pas.

Aucun ne pouvait m’égaler dans la connaissance des écritures, l’énumération des atomes, la conduite des éléphants, les ouvrages de cire, l’astronomie, la poésie, le pugilat, tous les exercices et tous les arts !

Pour me conformer à l’usage, j’ai pris une épouse ; — et je passais les jours dans mon palais de roi, vêtu de perles, sous la pluie des parfums, éventé par les chasse-mouches de trente-trois mille femmes, regardant mes peuples du haut de mes terrasses, ornées de clochettes retentissantes.

Mais la vue des misères du monde me détournait des plaisirs. J’ai fui.

J’ai mendié sur les routes, couvert de haillons ramassés dans les sépulcres ; et comme il y avait un ermite très-savant, j’ai voulu devenir son esclave ; je gardais sa porte, je lavais ses pieds.

Toute sensation fut anéantie, toute joie, toute langueur.

Puis, concentrant ma pensée dans une méditation plus large, je connus l’essence des choses, l’illusion des formes.

J’ai vidé promptement la science des Brahkmanes. Ils sont rongés de convoitises sous leurs apparences austères, se frottent d’ordures, couchent sur des épines, croyant arriver au bonheur par la voie de la mort !

HILARION

« Pharisiens, hypocrites, sépulcres blanchis, race de vipères ! »

LE BUDDHA

Moi aussi, j’ai fait des choses étonnantes — ne mangeant par jour qu’un seul grain de riz, et les grains de riz dans ce temps-là n’étaient pas plus gros qu’à présent ; — mes poils tombèrent, mon corps devint noir ; mes yeux rentrés dans les orbites semblaient des étoiles aperçues au fond d’un puits.

Pendant six ans, je me suis tenu immobile, exposé aux mouches, aux lions et aux serpents ; et les grands soleils, les grandes ondées, la neige, la foudre, la grêle et la tempête, je recevais tout cela, sans m’abriter même avec la main.

Les voyageurs qui passaient, me croyant mort, me jetaient de loin des mottes de terre !

La tentation du Diable me manquait

La tentation du Diable me manquait.

Je l’ai appelé.

Ses fils sont venus, — hideux, couverts d’écaillés, nauséabonds comme des charniers, hurlant, sifflant, beuglant, entrechoquant des armures et des os de mort. Quelques-uns crachent des flammes par les naseaux, quelques-uns font des ténèbres avec leurs ailes, quelques-uns portent des chapelets de doigts coupés, quelques-uns boivent du venin de serpent dans le creux de leurs mains ; ils ont des têtes de porc, de rhinocéros ou de crapaud, toutes sortes de figures inspirant le dégoût ou la terreur.

ANTOINE

à part :

J’ai enduré cela, autrefois !

LE BUDDHA

Puis il m’envoya ses filles — belles, bien fardées, avec des ceintures d’or, les dents blanches comme le jasmin, les cuisses rondes comme la trompe de l’éléphant. Quelques-unes étendent les bras en bâillant, pour montrer les fossettes de leurs coudes ; quelques-unes clignent les yeux, quelques-unes se mettent à rire, quelques-unes entr’ouvrent leurs vêtements. Il y a des vierges rougissantes, des matrones pleines d’orgueil, des reines avec une grande suite de bagages et d’esclaves.

ANTOINE

à part :

Ah ! lui aussi ?

LE BUDDHA

Ayant vaincu le démon, j’ai passé douze ans à me nourrir exclusivement de parfums ; — et comme j’avais acquis les cinq vertus, les cinq facultés, les dix forces, les dix-huit substances, et pénétré dans les quatre sphères du monde invisible, l’Intelligence fut à moi ! Je devins le Buddha !

Tous les Dieux s’inclinent ; ceux qui ont plusieurs têtes les baissent à la fois.

Il lève dans l'air sa haute main et reprend :

En vue de la délivrance des êtres, j'ai fait des centaines de mille de sacrifices ! J'ai donné aux pauvres des robes de soie, des lits, des chars, des maisons, des tas d'or et des diamants. J'ai donné mes mains aux manchots, mes jambes aux boiteux, mes prunelles aux aveugles ; j'ai coupé ma tête pour les décapités. Au temps que j'étais roi, j'ai distribué des provinces ; au temps que j'étais brahkmane, je n'ai méprisé personne. Quand j'étais un solitaire, j'ai dit des paroles tendres au voleur qui m'égorgea. Quand j'étais un tigre, je me suis laissé mourir de faim.

Et dans cette dernière existence, ayant prêché la loi, je n'ai plus rien à faire. La grande période est accomplie ! Les hommes, les animaux, les Dieux, les bambous, les océans, les montagnes, les grains de sable des Ganges avec les myriades de myriades d'étoiles, tout va mourir ; — et, jusqu'à des naissances nouvelles, une flamme dansera sur les ruines des mondes détruits !

Alors un vertige prend les Dieux. Ils chancellent, tombent en convulsions, et vomissent leurs existences. Leurs couronnes éclatent, leurs étendards s'envolent. Ils arrachent leurs attributs, leurs sexes, lancent par dessus l'épaule les coupes où ils buvaient l'immortalité, s'étranglent avec leurs serpents, s'évanouissent en fumée ; — et quand tout a disparu …

HILARION

lentement :

Tu viens de voir la croyance de plusieurs centaines de millions d'hommes !

Antoine est par terre, la figure dans ses mains. Debout près de lui, et tournant le dos à la croix, Hilarion le regarde.

Un assez long temps s'écoule.

Ensuite, paraît un être singulier, ayant une tête d'homme sur un corps de poisson. Il s'avance droit dans l'air, en battant le sable de sa queue ; — et cette figure de patriarche avec de petits bras fait rire Antoine.

OANNÈS

d'une voix plaintive :

Respecte-moi ! Je suis le contemporain des origines.

J'ai habité le monde informe où sommeillaient des bêtes hermaphrodites, sous le poids d'une atmosphère opaque, dans la profondeur des ondes ténébreuses, — quand les doigts, les nageoires et les ailes étaient confondus, et que des yeux sans tête flottaient comme des mollusques, parmi des taureaux à face humaine et des serpents à pattes de chien.

Sur l’ensemble de ces êtres, Omorôca, pliée comme un cerceau, étendait son corps de femme. Mais Bélus la coupa net en deux moitiés, fit la terre avec l’une, le ciel avec l’autre ; et les deux mondes pareils se contemplent mutuellement.

Moi, la première conscience du Chaos, j’ai surgi de l’abîme pour durcir la matière, pour régler les formes ; et j’ai appris aux humains la pêche, les semailles, l’écriture et l’histoire des Dieux.

Depuis lors, je vis dans les étangs qui restent du Déluge. Mais le désert s’agrandit autour d’eux, le vent y jette du sable, le soleil les dévore ; — et je meurs sur ma couche de limon, en regardant les étoiles à travers l’eau. J’y retourne.

Il saute, et disparaît dans le Nil.

HILARION

C’est un ancien Dieu des Chaldéens !

ANTOINE

ironiquement :

Qu’étaient donc ceux de Babylone ?

HILARION

Tu peux les voir !

Et ils se trouvent sur la plate-forme d’une tour quadrangulaire dominant six autres tours qui, plus étroites à mesure qu’elles s’élèvent, forment une monstrueuse pyramide. On distingue en bas une grande masse noire, — la ville sans doute, — étalée dans les plaines. L’air est froid, le ciel d’un bleu sombre ; des étoiles en quantité palpitent.

Au milieu de la plate-forme, se dresse une colonne de pierre blanche. Des prêtres en robes de lin passent et reviennent tout autour, de manière à décrire par leurs évolutions un cercle en mouvement ; et, la tête levée, ils contemplent les astres.

HILARION

en désigne plusieurs à saint Antoine.

Il y en a trente principaux. Quinze regardent le dessus de la terre, quinze le dessous. A des intervalles réguliers, un d'eux s'élance des régions supérieures vers celles d'en bas, tandis qu'un autre abandonne les inférieures pour monter vers les sublimes.

Des sept planètes, deux sont bienfaisantes, deux mauvaises, trois ambiguës ; tout dépend, dans le monde, de ces feux éternels. D'après leur position et leur mouvement on peut tirer des présages ; — et tu foules l'endroit le plus respectable de la terre. Pythagore et Zoroastre s'y sont rencontrés. Voilà douze mille ans que ces hommes observent le ciel, pour mieux connaître les Dieux.

ANTOINE

Les astres ne sont pas Dieux.

HILARION

Oui ! disent-ils ; car les choses passent autour de nous ; le ciel, comme l'éternité, reste immuable !

ANTOINE

Il a un maître, pourtant.

HILARION

montrant la colonne :

Celui-là, Bélus, le premier rayon, le Soleil, le Mâle ! — L'Autre, qu'il féconde, est sous lui !

Antoine aperçoit un jardin, éclairé par des lampes.

Il est au milieu de la foule, dans une avenue de cyprès. A droite et à gauche, des petits chemins conduisent vers des cabanes établies dans un bois de grenadiers, que défendent des treillages de roseaux.

Les hommes, pour la plupart, ont des bonnets pointus avec des robes chamarrées comme le plumage des paons. Il y a des gens du nord vêtus de peaux d'ours, des nomades en manteau de laine brune, de pâles Gangarides à longues boucles d'oreilles ; et les rangs comme les nations paraissent confondus, car des matelots et des tailleurs de pierres coudoient des princes portant des tiares d’escarboucles avec de hautes cannes à pomme ciselée. Tous marchent en dilutant les narines, recueillis dans le même désir.

De temps à autre, ils se dérangent pour donner passage à un long chariot couvert, traîné par des boeufs ; ou bien c’est un âne, secouant sur son dos une femme empaquetée de voiles, et qui disparaît aussi vers les cabanes.

Antoine a peur ; il voudrait revenir en arrière. Cependant une curiosité inexprimable l’entraîne.

Au pied des cyprès, des femmes sont accroupies en ligne sur des peaux de cerf, toutes ayant pour diadème une tresse de cordes. Quelques-unes, magnifiquement habillées, appellent à haute voix les passants. De plus timides cachent leur figure sous leur bras, tandis que par derrière, une matrone, leur mère sans doute, les exhorte. D’autres, la tête enveloppée d’un châle noir et le corps entièrement nu, semblent de loin des statues de chair. Dès qu’un homme leur a jeté de l’argent sur les genoux, elles se lèvent.

Et on entend des baisers sous les feuillages, — quelquefois un grand cri aigu.

HILARION

Ce sont les vierges de Babylone qui se prostituent à la Déesse.

ANTOINE

Quelle déesse ?

HILARION

La voilà !

Et il lui fait voir, tout au fond de l’avenue, sur le seuil d’une grotte illuminée, un bloc de pierre représentant l’organe sexuel d’une femme.

ANTOINE

Ignominie ! quelle abomination de donner un sexe à Dieu !

HILARION

Tu l’imagines bien comme une personne vivante !

Antoine se retrouve dans les ténèbres.

Il aperçoit, en l’air, un cercle lumineux, posé sur des ailes horizontales.

Cette espèce d’anneau entoure, comme une ceinture trop lâche, la taille d’un petit homme coiffé d’une mitre, portant une couronne à sa main, et tout la partie inférieure du corps disparaît sous de grandes plumes étalées en jupon.

C’est

ORMUZ

le dieu des Perses.

Il voltige en criant :

J’ai peur ! J’entrevois sa gueule.

Je t’avais vaincu, Ahriman ! Mais tu recommences !

D’abord, te révoltant contre moi, tu as fait périr l’aîné des créatures Kaiomortz, l’homme-Taureau. Puis tu as séduit le premier couple humain, Meschia et Meschiané ; et tu as répandu les ténèbres dans les coeurs, tu as poussé vers le ciel tes bataillons.

J’avais les miens, le peuple des étoiles ; et je contemplais au-dessous de mon trône tous les astres échelonnés.

Mithra, mon fils, habitait un lieu inaccessible. Il y recevait les âmes, les en faisait sortir, et se levait chaque matin pour épandre sa richesse.

La splendeur du firmament était reflétée par la terre. Le feu brillait sur les montagnes, — image de l’autre feu dont j’avais créé tous les êtres. Pour le garantir des souillures, on ne brûlait pas les morts. Le bec des oiseaux les emportait vers le ciel.

J’avais réglé les pâturages, les labours, le bois du sacrifice, la forme des coupes, les paroles qu’il faut dire dans l’insomnie ; — et mes prêtres étaient continuellement en prières, afin que l’hommage eût l’éternité du Dieu. On se purifiait avec de l’eau, on offrait des pains sur les autels, on confessait à haute voix ses crimes.

Homa se donnait à boire aux hommes, pour leur communiquer sa force.

Pendant que les génies du ciel combattaient les démons, les enfants d’Iran poursuivaient les serpents. Le Roi, qu’une cour innombrable servait à genoux, figurait ma personne, portait ma coiffure. Ses jardins avaient la magnificence d’une terre céleste ; et son tombeau le représentait égorgeant un monstre, — emblème du Bien qui extermine le Mal.

Car je devais un jour, grâce au temps sans bornes, vaincre définitivement Ahriman

Mais l’intervalle entre nous deux disparaît ; la nuit monte ! A moi, les Amschaspands, les Izeds, les Ferouers ! Au secours Mithra ! prends ton épée ! Caosyac, qui doit revenir, pour la délivrance universelle, défends-moi ! Comment ?… Personne !

Ah ! je meurs ! Abriman, tu es le maître !

Hilarion, derrière Antoine, retient un cri de joie — et Ormuz plonge dans les ténèbres.

Alors paraît

LA GRANDE DIANE D’ÉPHÈSE

noire avec des yeux d’émail, les coudes aux flancs, les avant-bras écartés, les mains ouvertes.

Des lions rampent sur ses épaules ; des fruits, des fleurs et des étoiles s’entre-croisent sur sa poitrine ; plus bas se développent trois rangées de mamelles ; et depuis le ventre jusqu’aux pieds, elle est prise dans une gaine étroite d’où s’élancent à mi-corps des taureaux, des cerfs, des griffons et des abeilles. — On l’aperçoit à la blanche lueur que fait un disque d’argent, rond comme la pleine lune, posé derrière sa tête.

Où est mon temple ?

Où sont mes amazones ?

Qu’ai-je donc … moi l’incorruptible, voilà qu’une défaillance me prend !

Ses fleurs se fanent. Ses fruits trop mûrs se détachent. Les lions, les taureaux penchent leur cou ; les cerfs bavent épuisés ; les abeilles, en bourdonnant, meurent par terre.

Elle presse, l’une après l’autre, ses mamelles. Toutes sont vides ! Mais sous un effort désespéré sa gaine éclate. Elle la saisit par le bas, comme le pan d’une robe, y jette ses animaux, ses floraisons, — puis rentre dans l’obscurité.

Et au loin, des voix murmurent, grondent, rugissent, brament et beuglent. L’épaisseur de la nuit est augmentée par des haleines. Les gouttes d’une pluie chaude tombent.

ANTOINE

Comme c’est bon, le parfum des palmiers, le frémissement des feuilles vertes, la transparence des sources ! Je voudrais me coucher tout à plat sur la terre pour la sentir contre mon coeur ; et ma vie se retremperait dans sa jeunesse éternelle !

Il entend un bruit de castagnettes et de cymbales ; — et, au milieu d’une foule rustique, des hommes, vêtus de tuniques blanches à bandes rouges, amènent un âne, enharnaché richement, la queue ornée de rubans, les sabots peints.

Une boîte, couverte d’une housse en toile jaune, ballotte sur son dos entre deux corbeilles ; l’une reçoit les offrandes qu’on y place : oeufs, raisins, poires et fromages, volailles, petites monnaies ; et la seconde est pleine de roses, que les conducteurs de l’âne effeuillent devant lui, tout en marchant.

Ils ont des pendants d’oreilles, de grands manteaux, les cheveux nattés, les joues fardées ; une couronne d’olivier se ferme sur leur front par un médaillon à figurine ; des poignards sont passés dans leur ceinture ; et ils secouent des fouets à manche d’ébène, ayant trois lanières garnies d’osselets.

Les derniers du cortège posent sur le sol, droit comme un candélabre, un grand pin qui brûle par le sommet, et dont les rameaux les plus bas ombragent un petit mouton.

L’âne s’est arrêté. On retire la housse. Il y a, en dessous, une seconde enveloppe de feutre noir. Alors, un des hommes à tunique blanche se met à danser, en jouant des crotales ; un autre à genoux devant la boîte bat du tambourin, et

LE PLUS VIEUX DE LA TROUPE

commence :

Voici la Bonne-Déesse, l’idéenne des montagnes, la grande-mère de Syrie ! Approchez, braves gens !

Elle procure la joie, guérit les malades, envoie des héritages, et satisfait les amoureux.

C’est nous qui la promenons dans les campagnes par beau et mauvais temps.

Souvent nous couchons en plein air, et nous n’avons pas tous les jours de table bien servie. Les voleurs habitent les bois. Les bêtes s’élancent de leurs cavernes. Des chemins glissants bordent les précipices. La voilà ! la voilà !

Ils enlèvent la couverture ; et on voit une boîte, incrustée de petits cailloux.

Plus haute que les cèdres, elle plane dans l’éther bleu. Plus vaste que le vent elle entoure le monde. Sa respiration s’exhale par les naseaux des tigres ; sa voix gronde sous les volcans, sa colère est la tempête ; la pâleur de sa figure a blanchi la lune.

Elle mûrit les moissons, elle gonfle les écorces, elle fait pousser la barbe. Donnez-lui quelque chose, car elle déteste les avares !

La boîte s’entr’ouvre ; et on distingue, sous un pavillon de soie bleue, une petite image de Cybèle — étincelante de paillettes, couronnée de tours et assise dans un char de pierre rouge, traîné par deux lions la patte levée.

La foule se pousse pour voir.

L’ARCHI-GALLE

continue :

Elle aime le retentissement des tympanons, le trépignement des pieds, le hurlement des loups, les montagnes sonores et les gorges profondes, la fleur de l’amandier, la grenade et les figues vertes, la danse qui tourne, les flûtes qui ronflent, la sève sucrée, la larme salée, — du sang ! A toi ! à toi, Mère des montagnes !

Ils se flagellent avec leurs fouets, et les coups résonnent sur leur poitrine ; la peau des tambourins vibre à éclater. Ils prennent leurs couteaux, se tailladent les bras.

Elle est triste ; soyons tristes ! C’est pour lui plaire qu’il faut souffrir ! Par là, vos péchés vous seront remis. Le sang lave tout ; jetez-en les gouttes, comme des fleurs ! Elle demande celui d’un autre — d’un pur !

L’archi-galle lève son couteau sur le mouton.

ANTOINE

pris d’horreur :

N’égorgez pas l’agneau !

Un flot de pourpre jaillit.

Le prêtre en asperge la foule ; et tous, — y compris Antoine et Hilarion, — rangés autour de l’arbre qui brûle, observent en silence les dernières palpitations de la victime.

Du milieu des prêtres sort Une Femme, — exactement pareille à l’image enfermée dans la petite boite.

Elle s’arrête, en apercevant Un Jeune Homme coiffé d’un bonnet phrygien.

Ses cuisses sont revêtues d’un pantalon étroit, ouvert çà et là par des losanges réguliers que ferment des noeuds de couleur. Il s’appuie du coude contre une des branches de l’arbre, en tenant une flûte à la main, dans une pose langoureuse.

CYBÈLE

lui entourant la taille de ses deux bras :

Pour te rejoindre, j’ai parcouru toutes les régions — et la famine ravageait les campagnes. Tu m’as trompée ! N’importe, je t’aime ! Réchauffe mon corps ! unissons-nous !

ATYS

Le printemps ne reviendra plus, ô Mère éternelle ! Malgré mon amour, il ne m’est pas possible de pénétrer ton essence. Je voudrais me couvrir d’une robe peinte, comme la tienne. J’envie tes seins gonflés de lait, la longueur de tes cheveux, tes vastes flancs d’où sortent les êtres. Que ne suis-je toi ! que ne suis-je femme ! — Non, jamais ! va-t’en ! Ma virilité me fait horreur !

Avec une pierre tranchante il s’émascule, puis se met à courir furieux, en levant dans l’air son membre coupé.

Les prêtres font comme le dieu, les fidèles comme les prêtres. Hommes et femmes échangent leurs vêtements, s’embrassent ; — et ce tourbillon de chairs ensanglantées s’éloigne, tandis que les voix, durant toujours, deviennent plus criardes et stridentes comme celles qu’on entend aux funérailles.

Un grand catafalque tendu de pourpre, porte à son sommet un lit d’ébène, qu’entourent des flambeaux et des corbeilles en filigranes d’argent, où verdoient des laitues, des mauves et du fenouil. Sur les gradins, du haut en bas, des femmes sont assises, toutes habillées de noir, la ceinture défaite, les pieds nus, en tenant d’un air mélancolique de gros bouquets de fleurs.

Par terre, aux coins de l’estrade, des urnes en albâtre pleines de myrrhe fument, lentement.

On distingue sur le lit le cadavre d’un homme. Du sang coule de sa cuisse. Il laisse pendre son bras ; — et un chien, qui hurle, lèche ses ongles.

La ligne des flambeaux trop pressés empêche de voir sa figure ; et Antoine est saisi par une angoisse. Il a peur de reconnaître quelqu’un.

Les sanglots des femmes s’arrêtent ; et après un intervalle de silence,

TOUTES

à la fois psalmodient :

Beau ! beau ! il est beau ! Assez dormi, lève la tête ! Debout !

Respire nos bouquets ! ce sont des narcisses et des anémones, cueillis dans tes jardins pour te plaire. Ranime-toi, tu nous fais peur !

Parle ! Que te faut-il ? Veux-tu boire du vin ? veux-tu coucher dans nos lits ? veux-tu manger des pains de miel qui ont la forme de petits oiseaux ?

Pressons ses hanches, baisons sa poitrine ! Tiens ! tiens ! les sens-tu nos doigts chargés de bagues qui courent sur ton corps, et nos lèvres qui cherchent ta bouche, et nos cheveux qui balayent tes cuisses, Dieu pâmé, sourd à nos prières !

Elles lancent des cris, en se déchirant le visage avec les ongles, puis se taisent ; — et on entend toujours les hurlements du chien.

Hélas ! hélas ! Le sang noir coule sur sa chair neigeuse ! Voilà ses genoux qui se tordent ; ses côtes s’enfoncent. Les fleurs de son visage ont mouillé la pourpre. Il est mort ! Pleurons ! Désolons-nous !

Elles viennent, toutes à la file, déposer entre les flambeaux leurs longues chevelures, pareilles de loin à des serpents noirs ou blonds ; — et le catafalque s’abaisse doucement jusqu’au niveau d’une grotte, un sépulcre ténébreux qui bâille par derrière.

Alors

UNE FEMME

s’incline sur le cadavre.

Ses cheveux, qu’elle n’a pas coupés, l’enveloppent de la tête aux talons. Elle verse tant de larmes que sa douleur ne doit pas être comme celle des autres, mais plus qu’humaine, infinie.

Antoine songe à la mère de Jésus.

Elle dit :

Tu t’échappais de l’Orient ; et tu me prenais dans tes bras toute frémissante de rosée, ô Soleil ! Des colombes voletaient sur l’azur de ton manteau, nos baisers faisaient des brises dans les feuillages ; et je m’abandonnais à ton amour, en jouissant du plaisir de ma faiblesse.

Hélas ! hélas ! Pourquoi allais-tu courir sur les montagnes ?

A l’équinoxe d’automne un sanglier t’a blessé !

Tu es mort ; et les fontaines pleurent, les arbres se penchent. Le vent d’hiver siffle dans les broussailles nues.

Mes yeux vont se clore, puisque les ténèbres te couvrent. Maintenant, tu habites l’autre côté du monde, près de ma rivale plus puissante.

O Perséphone, tout ce qui est beau descend vers toi, et n’en revient plus !

Pendant qu’elle parlait, ses compagnes ont pris le mort pour le descendre au sépulcre. Il leur reste dans les mains. Ce n’était qu’un cadavre de cire.

Antoine en éprouve comme un soulagement.

Tout s’évanouit ; — et la cabane, les rochers, la croix sont reparus.

Cependant il distingue de l’autre côté du Nil, Une Femme — debout au milieu du désert.

Elle garde dans sa main le bas d’un long voile noir qui lui cache la figure, tout en portant sur le bras gauche un petit enfant qu’elle allaite. A son côté, un grand singe est accroupi sur le sable.

Elle lève la tête vers le ciel, — et malgré la distance on entend sa voix.

ISIS

O Neith, commencement des choses ! Ammon, seigneur de l’éternité, Ptha, démiurge, Thoth son intelligence, dieux de l’Amenthi, triades particulières des

Nomes, éperviers dans l'azur, sphinx au bord des temples, ibis debout entre les cornes des boeufs, planètes, constellations, rivages, murmures du vent, reflets de la lumière, apprenez-moi où se trouve Osiris !

Je l'ai cherché par tous les canaux et tous les lacs, — plus loin encore, jusqu'à Byblos la phénicienne. Anubis, les oreilles droites, bondissait autour de moi, jappant, et fouillant de son museau les touffes des tamarins. Merci, bon Cynocéphale, merci !

Elle donne au singe, amicalement, deux ou trois petites claques sur la tête.

Le hideux Typhon au poil roux l'avait tué, mis en pièces ! Nous avons retrouvé tous ses membres. Mais je n'ai pas celui qui me rendait féconde !

Elle pousse des lamentations aiguës.

ANTOINE

est pris de foreur. Il lui jette des cailloux, en l'injuriant.

Impudique ! va-t'en, va-t'en !

HILARION

Respecte-la ! C'était la religion de tes aïeux ! tu as porté ses amulettes dans ton berceau.

ISIS

Autrefois, quand revenait l'été, l'inondation chassait vers le désert les bêtes impures. Les digues s'ouvraient, les barques s'entre-choquaient, la terre haletante buvait le fleuve avec ivresse. Dieu à cornes de taureau tu t'étalais sur ma poitrine — et on entendait le mugissement de la vache éternelle !

Les semailles, les récoltes, le battage des grains et les vendanges se succédaient régulièrement, d'après l'alternance des saisons. Dans les nuits toujours pures, de larges étoiles rayonnaient. Les jours étaient baignés d'une invariable splendeur. On voyait, comme un couple royal, le Soleil et la Lune à chaque côté de l'horizon.

Nous trônions tous les deux dans un monde plus sublime, monarques-jumeaux, époux dès le sein de l'éternité, — lui, tenant un sceptre à tête de concoupha, moi un sceptre à fleur de lotus, debout l'un et l'autre, les mains jointes ; — et les écroulements d'empire ne changeaient pas notre attitude.

L'Égypte s'étalait sous nous, monumentale et sérieuse, longue comme le

L'Égypte s'étalait sous nous, monumentale et sérieuse, longue comme le corridor d'un temple, avec des obélisques à droite, des pyramides à gauche, son labyrinthe au milieu, — et partout des avenues de monstres, des forêts de colonnes, de lourds pylônes flanquant des portes qui ont à leur sommet le globe de la terre entre deux ailes.

Les animaux de son zodiaque se retrouvaient dans ses pâturages, emplissaient de leurs formes et de leurs couleurs son écriture mystérieuse. Divisée en douze régions comme l'année l'est en douze mois, — chaque mois, chaque jour ayant son dieu, — elle reproduisait l'ordre immuable du ciel ; et l'homme en expirant ne perdait pas sa figure ; mais, saturé de parfums, devenu indestructible, il allait dormir pendant trois mille ans dans une Égypte silencieuse.

Celle-là, plus grande que l'autre, s'étendait sous la terre.

On y descendait par des escaliers conduisant à des salles où étaient reproduites les joies des bons, les tortures des méchants, tout ce qui a lieu dans le troisième monde invisible. Rangés le long des murs, les morts dans des cercueils peints attendaient leur tour ; et l'âme exempte des migrations continuait son assoupissement jusqu'au réveil d'une autre vie.

Osiris, cependant, revenait me voir quelquefois. Son ombre m'a rendu mère d'Harpocrate.

Elle contemple l'enfant.

C'est lui ! Ce sont ses yeux ; ce sont ses cheveux, tressés en cornes de bélier ! Tu recommenceras ses oeuvres. Nous refleurirons comme des lotus. Je suis toujours la grande Isis ! nul encore n'a soulevé mon voile ! Mon fruit est le soleil !

Soleil du printemps, des nuages obscurcissent ta face ! L'haleine de Typhon dévore les pyramides. J'ai vu, tout à l'heure, le sphinx s'enfuir. Il galopait comme un chacal.

Je cherche mes prêtres, — mes prêtres en manteau de lin, avec de grandes harpes, et qui portaient une nacelle mystique, ornée de patères d'argent. Plus de fêtes sur les lacs ! plus d'illuminations dans mon delta ! plus de coupes de lait à Philae ! Apis, depuis longtemps, n'a pas reparu.

Égypte ! Égypte ! tes grands Dieux immobiles ont les épaules blanchies par la fiente des oiseaux, et le vent qui passe sur le désert roule la cendre de tes morts ! — Anubis, gardien des ombres, ne me quitte pas !

Le cynocéphale s'est évanoui.

Elle secoue son enfant.

Mais … qu'as-tu ?… tes mains sont froides, ta tête retombe !

Harpocrate vient de mourir.

Alors elle pousse dans l'air un cri tellement aigu, funèbre et déchirant, qu'Antoine y répond par un autre cri, en ouvrant ses bras pour la soutenir.

Elle n’est plus là. Il baisse la figure, écrasé de honte.

Tout ce qu’il vient de voir se confond dans son esprit. C’est comme l’étourdissement d’un voyage, le malaise d’une ivresse. Il voudrait haïr, et cependant une pitié vague amollit sou coeur. Il se met à pleurer abondamment.

HILARION

Qui donc le rend triste ?

ANTOINE

après avoir cherché en lui-même, longtemps :

Je pense à toutes les âmes perdues par ces faux Dieux !

HILARION

Ne trouves-tu pas qu’ils ont … quelquefois … comme des ressemblances avec le vrai ?

ANTOINE

C’est une ruse du Diable pour séduire mieux les fidèles. Il attaque les forts par le moyen de l’esprit, les autres avec la chair.

HILARION

Mais la luxure, dans ses fureurs, a le désintéressement de la pénitence. L’amour frénétique du corps en accélère la destruction, — et proclame par sa faiblesse l’étendue de l’impossible.

ANTOINE

Qu’est-ce que cela me fait à moi ! Mon coeur se soulève de dégoût devant ces Dieux bestiaux, occupés toujours de carnages et d’incestes !

HILARION

Rappelle-toi dans l’Écriture toutes les choses qui te scandalisent, parce que tu ne sais pas les comprendre. De même, ces Dieux, sous leurs formes criminelles, peuvent contenir la vérité.

Il en reste à voir. Détourne-toi !

ANTOINE

Non ! non ! c’est un péril !

HILARION

Tu voulais tout à l’heure les connaître. Est-ce que ta foi vacillerait sous des mensonges ? Que crains-tu ?

Les rochers en face d’Antoine sont devenus une montagne.

Une ligne de nuages la coupe à mi-hauteur ; et au-dessus apparaît une autre montagne, énorme, toute verte, que creusent inégalement des vallons et portant au sommet, dans un bois de lauriers, un palais de bronze à tuiles d’or avec des chapiteaux d’ivoire.

Au milieu du péristyle, sur un trône, JUPITER, colossal et le torse nu, tient la victoire d’une main, la foudre dans l’autre ; et son aigle, entre ses jambes, dresse la tête.

JUNON, auprès de lui, roule ses gros yeux, surmontés d’un diadème d’où s’échappe comme une vapeur un voile flottant au vent.

Par derrière, MINERVE, debout sur un piédestal, s’appuie contre sa lance. La peau de la gorgone lui couvre la poitrine ; et un péplos de lin descend à plis réguliers jusqu’aux ongles de ses orteils. Ses yeux glauques, qui brillent sous sa visière, regardent au loin, attentivement.

A la droite du palais, le vieillard NEPTUNE chevauche un dauphin battant de ses nageoires un grand azur qui est le ciel ou la mer, car la perspective de l’Océan continue l’éther bleu ; les deux éléments se confondent.

De l’autre côté, PLUTON farouche, en manteau couleur de la nuit, avec une tiare de diamants et un sceptre d’ébène, est au milieu d’une île entourée par les circonvolutions du Styx ; — et ce fleuve d’ombre va se jeter dans les ténèbres, qui font sous la falaise un grand trou noir, un abîme sans formes.

MARS, vêtu d’airain, brandit d’un air furieux son bouclier lame et son épée.

HERCULE, plus bas, le contemple, appuyé sur sa massue

HERCULE, plus bas, le contemple, appuyé sur sa massue.

APOLLON, la face rayonnante, conduit, le bras droit allongé, quatre chevaux blancs qui galopent ; et CÉRÈS, dans un chariot que traînent des boeufs, s’avance vers lui une faucille à la main.

BACCHUS vient derrière elle, sur un char très-bas, mollement tiré par des lynx. Gras, imberbe et des pampres au front, il passe en tenant un cratère d’où déborde du vin. Silène, à ses côtés, chancelle sur un âne. Pan aux oreilles pointues souffle dans la syrinx ; les Mimallonéides frappent des tambours, les Ménades jettent des fleurs, les Bacchantes tournoient la tête en arrière, les cheveux répandus.

DIANE, la tunique retroussée, sort du bois avec ses nymphes.

Au fond d’une caverne, VULCAIN bat le fer entre les Cabires ; çà et là les vieux Fleuves, accoudés sur des pierres vertes, épanchent leurs urnes ; les Muses debout chantent dans les vallons.

Les Heures, de taille égale, se tiennent par la main ; et MERCURE est posé obliquement sur un arc-en-ciel, avec son caducée, ses talonnières et son pétase.

Mais en haut de l’escalier des Dieux, parmi des nuages doux comme des plumes et dont les volutes en tournant laissent tomber des roses, VÉNUS-ANADYOMÈNE se regarde dans un miroir ; ses prunelles glissent langoureusement sous ses paupières un peu lourdes.

Elle a de grands cheveux blonds qui se déroulent sur ses épaules, les seins petits, la taille mince, les hanches évasées comme le galbe des lyres, les deux cuisses toutes rondes, des fossettes autour des genoux et les pieds délicats ; non loin de sa bouche un papillon voltige. La splendeur de son corps fait autour d’elle un halo de nacre brillante ; et tout le reste de l’Olympe est baigné dans une aube vermeille, qui gagne insensiblement les hauteurs du ciel bleu.

ANTOINE

Ah ! ma poitrine se dilate. Une joie que je ne connaissais pas me descend jusqu’au fond de l’âme ! Comme c’est beau ! comme c’est beau !

HILARION

Ils se penchaient du haut des nuages pour conduire les épées ; on les rencontrait au bord des chemins, on les possédait dans sa maison ; — et cette familiarité divinisait la vie.

Elle n’avait pour but que d’être libre et belle. Les vêtements larges facilitaient la noblesse des attitudes. La voix de l’orateur, exercée par la mer, battait à flots sonores les portiques de marbre. L’éphèbe, frotté d’huile, luttait tout nu en plein soleil. L’action la plus religieuse était d’exposer des formes pures.

Et ces hommes respectaient les épouses, les vieillards, les suppliants. Derrière le temple d’Hercule, il y avait un autel à la Pitié.

On immolait des victimes avec des fleurs autour des doigts. Le souvenir même se trouvait exempt de la pourriture des morts. Il n’en restait qu’un peu de cendres. L’âme, mêlée à l’éther sans bornes, était partie vers les Dieux !

Se penchant à l’oreille d’Antoine :

Et ils vivent toujours ! L’empereur Constantin adore Apollon. Tu retrouveras la Trinité dans les mystères de Samothrace, le baptême chez Isis, la rédemption chez Mithra, le martyr d’un Dieu aux fêtes de Bacchus. Proserpine est la Vierge !… Aristée, Jésus !

ANTOINE

reste les yeux baissés ; puis tout à coup il répète le symbole de Jérusalem, — comme il s’en souvient, — en poussant à chaque phrase un long soupir :

Je crois en un seul Dieu, le Père, — et en un seul Seigneur, Jésus-Christ, — fils premier-né de Dieu, — qui s’est incarné et fait homme, — qui a été crucifié — et enseveli, — qui est monté au ciel, — qui viendra pour juger les vivants et les morts — dont le royaume n’aura pas de fin ; — et à un seul Saint-Esprit, — et à un seul baptême de repentance, — et à une seule sainte Église catholique, — et à la résurrection de la chair, — et à la vie éternelle !

Aussitôt la crois grandit, et perçant les nuages elle projette une ombre sur le ciel des Dieux.

Tous pâlissent. L’Olympe a remué.

Antoine distingue contre sa base, à demi perdus dans les cavernes, ou soutenant les pierres de leurs épaules, de vastes corps enchaînés. Ce sont les Titans, les Géants, les Hécatonchires, les Cyclopes.

UNE VOIX

s’élève, indistincte et formidable, — comme la rameur des flots, comme le bruit des bois sous la tempête, comme le mugissement du vent dans les précipices :

Nous savions cela, nous autres ! Les Dieux doivent finir. Uranus fut mutilé par Saturne, Saturne par Jupiter. Il sera lui-même anéanti. Chacun son tour ; c’est le destin !

et, peu à peu, ils s’enfoncent dans la montagne, disparaissent.

Cependant les tuiles du palais d’or s’envolent.

JUPITER

est descendu de son trône. Le tonnerre, à ses pieds, fume comme un tison près de s’éteindre ; — et l’aigle, allongeant le cou, ramasse avec son bec ses plumes qui tombent.

Je ne suis donc plus le maître des choses, très-bon, très-grand, dieu des phratries et des peuples grecs, aïeul de tous les rois, Agamemnon du ciel !

Aigle des apothéoses, quel souffle de l’Erèbe t’a repoussé jusqu’à moi ? ou, t’envolant du champ de Mars, m’apportes-tu l’âme du dernier des empereurs ?

Je ne veux plus de celles des hommes ! Que la Terre les garde, et qu’ils s’agitent au niveau de sa bassesse. Ils ont maintenant des coeurs d’esclaves, oublient les injures, les ancêtres, le serment ; et partout triomphent la sottise des foules, la médiocrité de l’individu, la hideur des races !

Sa respiration lui soulève les côtes à les briser, et il tord ses poings. Hébé en pleurs lui présente une coupe. Il la saisit.

Non ! non ! Tant qu’il y aura, n’importe où, une tête enfermant la pensée, qui haïsse le désordre et conçoive la Loi, l’esprit de Jupiter vivra !

Mais la coupe est vide.

Il la penche lentement sur l’ongle de son doigt.

Plus une goutte ! Quand l’ambroisie défaille, les Immortels s’en vont !

Elle glisse de ses mains ; et il s’appuie contre une colonne, se sentant mourir.

JUNON

Il ne fallait pas avoir tant d’amours ! Aigle, taureau, cygne, pluie d’or, nuage et flamme, tu as pris toutes les formes, égaré ta lumière dans tous les éléments, perdu tes cheveux sur tous les lits ! Le divorce est irrévocable cette fois, — et notre domination, notre existence dissoute !

Elle s’éloigne dans l’air.

MINERVE

n’a plus sa lance ; et des corbeaux, qui nichaient dans les sculptures de la frise, tournent autour d’elle, mordent son casque.

Laissez-moi voir si mes vaisseaux, fendant la mer brillante, sont revenus dans mes trois ports, pourquoi les campagnes se trouvent désertes, et ce que font maintenant les filles d’Athènes.

Au mois d’Hécatombéon, mon peuple entier se portait vers moi, conduit par ses magistrats et par ses prêtres. Puis s’avançaient en robes blanches avec des chitons d’or, les longues files des vierges tenant des coupes, des corbeilles, des parasols ; puis, les trois cents boeufs du sacrifice, des vieillards agitant des rameaux verts, des soldats entrechoquant leurs armures, des éphèbes chantant des hymnes, des joueurs de flûte, des joueurs de lyre, des rhapsodes, des danseuses ; — enfin, au mât d’une trirème marchant sur des roues, mon grand voile brodé par des vierges, qu’on avait nourries pendant un an d’une façon particulière ; et quand il s’était montré dans toutes les rues, toutes les places et devant tous les temples, au milieu du cortège psalmodiant toujours, il montait pas à pas la colline de l’Acropole, frôlait les Propylées, et entrait au Parthénon.

Mais un trouble me saisit, moi, l’industrieuse ! Comment, comment, pas une idée ! Voilà que je tremble plus qu’une femme.

Elle aperçoit une ruine derrière elle, pousse un cri, et frappée au front, tombe par terre à la renverse.

HERCULE

a rejeté sa peau de lion ; et s’appuyant des pieds, bombant son dos, mordant ses lèvres, il fait des efforts démesurés pour soutenir l’Olympe qui s’écroule.

j’ai vaincu les Cercopes, les Amazones et les Centaures. J’ai tué beaucoup de rois. J’ai cassé la corne d’Achéloüs, un grand fleuve. J’ai coupé des montagnes, j’ai réuni des océans. Les pays esclaves, je les délivrais ; les pays vides, je les peuplais. J’ai parcouru les Gaules. J’ai traversé le désert où l’on a soif. J’ai défendu les Dieux, et je me suis dégagé d’Omphale. Mais l’Olympe est trop lourd. Mes bras faiblissent. Je meurs !

Il est écrasé sous les décombres.

PLUTON

C’est ta faute, Amphytrionade ! Pourquoi es-tu descendu dans mon empire ?

Le vautour qui mange les entrailles de Tityos releva la tête, Tantale eut la lèvre mouillée, la roue d’Ixion s’arrêta.

Cependant, les Kères étendaient leurs ongles pour retenir les âmes ; les Furies en désespoir tordaient les serpents de leurs chevelures ; et

Cerbère, attaché par toi avec une chaîne, râlait, en bavant de ses trois gueules.

Tu avais laissé la porte entr'ouverte. D'autres sont venus. Le jour des hommes a pénétré le Tartare !

Il sombre dans les ténèbres.

NEPTUNE

Mon trident ne soulève plus de tempêtes. Les monstres qui faisaient peur sont pourris au fond des eaux.

Amphitrite, dont les pieds blancs couraient sur l'écume, les vertes Néréides qu'on distinguait à l'horizon, les Sirènes écailleuses arrêtant les navires pour conter des histoires, et les vieux Tritons qui soufflaient dans les coquillages, tout est mort ! La gaieté de la mer a disparu !

Je n'y survivrai pas ! Que le vaste Océan me recouvre !

Il s'évanouit dans l'azur.

DIANE

habillée de noir, et au milieu de ses chiens devenus des loups :

L'indépendance des grands bois m'a grisée, avec la senteur des fauves et l'exhalaison des marécages. Les femmes, dont je protégeais les grossesses, mettent au monde des enfants morts. La lune tremble sous l'incantation des sorcières. J'ai des désirs de violence et d'immensité. Je veux boire des poisons, me perdre dans les vapeurs, dans les rêves !…

Et un nuage qui passe l'emporte.

MARS

tête nue, ensanglanté :

D'abord j'ai combattu seul, provoquant par des injures toute une armée, indifférent aux patries et pour le plaisir du carnage.

Puis, j'ai eu des compagnons. Ils marchaient au son des flûtes, en bon ordre, d'un pas égal, respirant par-dessus leurs boucliers, l'aigrette haute, la lance oblique. On se jetait dans la bataille avec de grands cris d'aigle. La guerre était joyeuse comme un festin. Trois cents hommes s'opposèrent à toute l'Asie.

Mais ils reviennent, les Barbares ! et par myriades, par millions ! Puisque le nombre, les machines et la ruse sont plus forts, mieux vaut finir comme un brave !

Il se tue.

VULCAIN

essuyant avec une éponge ses membres en sueur :

Le monde se refroidit. Il faut chauffer les sources, les volcans et les fleuves qui roulent des métaux sous la terre ! — Battez plus dur ! à pleins bras ! de toutes vos forces !

Les Cabires se blessent avec leurs marteaux, s’aveuglent avec les étincelles, et, marchant à tâtons, s’égarent dans l’ombre.

CÉRÈS

debout dans son char, qui est emporté par des roues ayant des ailes à leur moyen :

Arrête ! arrête !

On avait bien raison d’exclure les étrangers, les athées, les épicuriens et les chrétiens ! Le mystère de la corbeille est dévoilé, le sanctuaire profané, tout est perdu !

Elle descend sur une pente rapide, — désespérée, criant, s’arrachant les cheveux.

Ah ! mensonge ! Daïra ne m’est pas rendue ! L’airain m’appelle vers les morts. C’est un autre Tartare ! On n’en revient pas. Horreur !

L’abîme l’engouffre.

BACCHUS

riant, frénétiquement :

Qu’importe ! la femme de l’Archonte est mon épouse ! La loi même tombe en ivresse. A moi le chaut nouveau et les formes multiples !

Le feu qui dévora ma mère coule dans mes veines. Qu’il brûle plus fort, dussé-je périr !

Mâle et femelle, bon pour tous, je me livre à vous, Bacchantes ! je me livre à vous, Bacchants ! et la vigne s’enroulera au tronc des arbres ! Hurlez, dansez, tordez-vous ! Déliez-le tigre et l’esclave ! à dents féroces, mordez la chair !

Et Pan, Silène, les Satyres, les Bacchantes, les Mimallonéides et les Ménades, avec leurs serpents, leurs flambeaux, leurs masques noirs, se jettent des fleurs, découvrent un phallus, la baisent, — secouent les tympanons, frappent leurs tyrses, se lapident avec des coquillages, croquent des raisins, étranglent un bouc, et déchirent Bacchus.

APOLLON

fouettant ses coursiers, et dont les cheveux blanchis s'envolent :

J'ai laissé derrière moi Délos la pierreuse, tellement pure que tout maintenant y semble mort ; et je tâche de joindre Delphes avant que sa vapeur inspiratrice ne soit complètement perdue. Les mulets broutent son laurier. La Pythie égarée ne se retrouve pas.

Par une concentration plus forte, j'aurai des poëmes sublimes, des monuments éternels ; et toute la matière sera pénétrée des vibrations de ma cithare !

Il en pince les cordes. Elles éclatent, lui cinglent la figure. Il la rejette ; et battant son quadrige avec fureur :

Non ! assez des formes ! Plus loin encore ! Tout au sommet ! Dans l'idée pure !

Mais les chevaux, reculant, se cabrent, brisent le char ; et empêtré par les morceaux du timon, l'emmêlement des harnais, il tombe vers l'abîme, la tête en bas.

Le ciel s'est obscurci.

VÉNUS

violacée par le froid, grelotte.

Je faisais avec ma ceinture tout l'horizon de l'Hellénie.

Ses champs brillaient des roses de mes joues, ses rivages étaient découpés d'après la forme de mes lèvres ; et ses montagnes, plus blanches que mes colombes, palpitaient sous la main des statuaires. On retrouvait mon âme dans l'ordonnance des fêtes, l'arrangement des coiffures, le dialogue des philosophes, la constitution des républiques. Mais j'ai trop chéri les hommes ! C'est l'Amour qui m'a déshonorée !

Elle se renverse en pleurant.

Le monde est abominable. L'air manque à ma poitrine !

O Mercure, inventeur de la lyre et conducteur des âmes, emporte-moi !

Elle met un doigt sur sa bouche, et décrivant une immense parabole, tombe dans l'abîme.

On n'y voit plus. Les ténèbres sont complètes.

Cependant il s'échappe des prunelles d'Hilarion comme deux flèches rouges.

ANTOINE

remarque enfin sa haute taille.

Plusieurs fois déjà, pendant que tu parlais, tu m’as semblé grandir ; — et ce n’était pas une illusion. Comment ? explique-moi … Ta personne m’épouvante !

Des pas se rapprochent.

Qu’est-ce donc ?

HILARION

étend son bras.

Regarde !

Alors, sous un pâle rayon de lune, Antoine distingue une interminable caravane qui défile sur la crête des roches ; — et chaque voyageur, l’un après l’autre, tombe de la falaise dans le gouffre.

Ce sont d’abord les trois grands Dieux de Samothrace, Axieros, Axiokeros, Axiokersa, réunis en faisceau, masqués de pourpre et levant leurs mains.

Esculape s’avance d’un air mélancolique, sans même voir Samos et Télesphore, qui le questionnent avec angoisse. Sosipolis éléen, à forme de python, roule ses anneaux vers l’abîme. Doespoené, par vertige, s’y lance elle-même. Britomartis, hurlant de peur, se cramponne aux mailles de son filet. Les Centaures arrivent au grand galop, et déboulent pêle-mêle dans le trou noir.

Derrière eux, marche en boitant la troupe lamentable des Nymphes. Celles des prairies sont couvertes de poussière, celles des bois gémissent et saignent, blessées par la hache des bûcherons.

Les Gelludes, les Stryges, les Empuses, toutes les déesses infernales, en confondant leurs crocs, leurs torches, leurs vipères, forment une pyramide ; — et au sommet, sur une peau de vautour, Eurynome, bleuâtre comme les mouches à viande, se dévore les bras.

Puis, dans un tourbillon disparaissent à la fois : Orthia la sanguinaire, Hymnïe d’Orchomène, la Laphria des Patréens, Aphia d’Égine, Bendis de Thrace, Stymphalia à cuisse d’oiseau, Triopas, au lieu de trois prunelles, n’a plus que trois orbites, Erichtonius, les jambes molles, rampe comme un cul-de-jatte sur ses poignets.

HILARION

Quel bonheur, n'est-ce pas, de les voir tous dans l'abjection et l'agonie ! Monte avec moi sur cette pierre ; et tu seras comme Xerxès, passant en revue son armée.

Là-bas, très-loin, au milieu des brouillards, aperçois-tu ce géant à barbe blonde qui laisse tomber un glaive rouge de sang ? c'est le Scythe Zalmoxis, entre deux planètes : Artimpasa — Vénus, et Orsiloché — la Lune.

Plus loin, émergeant des nuages pâles, sont les Dieux qu'on adorait chez les Cimmériens, au delà même de Thulé !

Leurs grandes salles étaient chaudes ; et à la lueur des épées nues tapissant la voûte, ils buvaient de l'hydromel dans des cornes d'ivoire. Ils mangeaient le foie de la baleine dans des plats de cuivre battus par des démons ; ou bien, ils écoutaient les sorciers captifs faisant aller leurs mains sur les harpes de pierre.

Ils sont las ! ils ont froid ! La neige alourdit leurs peaux d'ours, et leurs pieds se montrent par les déchirures de leurs sandales.

Ils pleurent les prairies, où sur des tertres de gazon ils reprenaient haleine dans la bataille, les longs navires dont la proue coupait les monts de glace, et les patins qu'ils avaient pour suivre l'orbe des pôles, en portant au bout de leurs bras tout le firmament qui tournait avec eux.

Une rafale de givre les enveloppe.

Antoine abaisse son regard d'un autre côté.

Et il aperçoit, — se détachant en noir sur un fond rouge, — d'étranges personnages, avec des mentonnières et des gantelets, qui se renvoient des balles, sautent les uns par-dessus les autres, font des grimaces, dansent frénétiquement.

HILARION

Ce sont les Dieux de l'Étrurie, les innombrables Aesars.

Voici Tagès, l'inventeur des augures. Il essaye avec une main d'augmenter les divisions du ciel, et de l'autre, il s'appuie sur la terre. Qu'il y rentre !

Nortia considère la muraille où elle enfonçait des clous pour marquer le nombre des années. La surface en est couverte, et la dernière période accomplie.

Comme deux voyageurs battus par un orage, Kastur et Pulutuk s'abritent en tremblant sous le même manteau.

ANTOINE

ferme les yeux.

Assez ! assez !

Mais passent dans l’air avec un grand bruit d’ailes, toutes les Victoires du Capitole, — cachant leur front de leurs mains, et perdant les trophées suspendus à leurs bras.

Janus, — maître des crépuscules, s’enfuit sur un bélier noir ; et, de ses deux visages, l’un est déjà putréfié, l’autre s’endort de fatigue.

Summanus, — dieu du ciel obscur et qui n’a plus de tête, presse contre son coeur un vieux gâteau en forme de roue.

Vesta, — sous une coupole en ruine, tâche de ranimer sa lampe éteinte.

Bellone — se taillade les joues, sans faire jaillir le sang qui purifiait ses dévots.

ANTOINE

Grâce ! ils me fatiguent !

HILARION

Autrefois, ils amusaient !

Et il lui montre dans un bosquet d’aliziers, Une Femme toute nue, — à quatre pattes comme une bête, et saillie par un homme noir, tenant dans chaque main un flambeau.

C’est la déesse d’Aricia, avec le démon Virbius. Son sacerdote, le roi du bois, devait être un assassin ; — et les esclaves en fuite, les dépouilleurs de cadavres, les brigands de la voie Salaria, les éclopés du pont Sublicius, toute la vermine des galetas de Suburre n’avait pas de dévotion plus chère !

Les patriciennes du temps de Marc-Antoine préféraient Libitina.

Et il lui montre, sous des cyprès et des rosiers, Une autre Femme — vêtue de gaze. Elle sourit, ayant autour d’elle des pioches, des brancards ; des tentures noires, tous les ustensiles des funérailles. Ses diamants brillent de loin sous des toiles d’araignées. Les Larves comme des squelettes montrent leurs os entre les branches, et les Lémures, qui sont des fantômes, étendent leurs ailes de chauve-souris.

Sur le bord d’un champ, le dieu Terme, déraciné, penche, tout couvert d’ordures.

Au milieu d’un sillon, le grand cadavre de Vertumne est dévoré par des chiens rouges.

Les Dieux rustiques s’en éloignent en pleurant, Sartor, Sarrator, Vervactor, Collina, Vallona, Hostilinus, — tous couverts de petite manteaux à capuchon, et chacun portant, soit un hoyau, une fourche, une claie, un épieu.

HILARION

C’était leur âme qui faisait prospérer la villa, avec ses colombiers, ses parcs de loirs et d’escargots, ses basses-cours défendues par des filets, ses chaudes écuries embaumées de cèdre.

Ils protégeaient tout le peuple misérable qui traînait les fers de ses jambes sur les cailloux de la Sabine, ceux qui appelaient les porcs au son de la trompe, ceux qui cueillaient les grappes au haut des ormes, ceux qui poussaient par les petits chemins les ânes chargés de fumier. Le laboureur, en haletant sur le manche de sa charrue, les priait de fortifier ses bras ; et les vachers à l’ombre des tilleuls, près des calebasses de lait, alternaient leurs éloges sur des flûtes de roseau.

Antoine soupire.

Et au milieu d’une chambre, sur une estrade, se découvre un lit d’ivoire, environné par des gens qui tiennent des torches de sapin.

Ce sont les Dieux du mariage. Ils attendent l’épousée !

Domiduca devait l’amener, Virgo défaire sa ceinture, Subigo l’étendre sur le lit, — et Praema écarter ses bras, en lui disant à l’oreille des paroles douces.

Mais elle ne viendra pas ! et ils congédient les autres : Nona et Decima gardes-malades, les trois Nixii accoucheurs, les deux nourrices Educa et Potina, — et Carna berceuse, dont le bouquet d’aubépines éloigne de l’enfant les mauvais rêves.

Plus tard, Ossipago lui aurait affermi les genoux, Barbatus donné la barbe, Stimula les premiers désirs, Volupia la première jouissance, Fabulinus appris à parler, Numera à compter, Camoena à chanter, Consus à réfléchir.

La chambre est vide ; et il ne reste plus au bord du lit que Naenia — centenaire, — marmottant pour elle-même la complainte qu’elle hurlait à la mort des vieillards.

Mais bientôt sa voix est dominée par des cris aigus. Ce sont :

LES LARES DOMESTIQUES

accroupis au fond de l’atrium, vêtus de peaux de chien, avec des fleurs autour du corps, tenant leurs mains fermées contre leurs joues, et pleurant tant qu’ils peuvent.

Où est la portion de nourriture qu’on nous donnait à chaque repas, les bons soins de la servante, le sourire de la matrone, et la gaieté des petits garçons jouant aux osselets sur les mosaïques de la cour ? Puis, devenus grands ils suspendaient à notre poitrine leur bulle d'or ou de cuir.

Quel bonheur, quand, le soir d'un triomphe, le maître en rentrant tournait vers nous ses yeux humides ! Il racontait ses combats ; et l'étroite maison était plus fière qu'un palais et sacrée comme un temple.

Qu'ils étaient doux les repas de famille, surtout le lendemain des Feralia ! Dans la tendresse pour les morts, toutes les discordes s'apaisaient ; et on s'embrassait, en buvant aux gloires du passé et aux espérances de l'avenir.

Mais les aïeux de cire peinte, enfermés derrière nous, se couvrent lentement de moisissure. Les races nouvelles, pour nous punir de leurs déceptions, nous ont brisé la mâchoire ; sous la dent des rats nos corps de bois s'émiettent.

Et les innombrables Dieux veillant aux portes, à la cuisine, au cellier, aux étuves, se dispersent de tous les côtés, — sous l'apparence d'énormes fourmis qui trottent ou de grands papillons qui s'envolent.

CRÉPITUS

se fait entendre.

Moi aussi l'on m'honora jadis. On me faisait des libations. Je fus un Dieu !

L'Athénien me saluait comme un présage de fortune, tandis que le Romain dévot me maudissait les poings levés et que le pontife d'Égypte, s'abstenant de fèves, tremblait à ma voix et pâlissait à mon odeur.

Quand le vinaigre militaire coulait sur les barbes non rasées, qu'on se régalait de glands, de pois et d'oignons crus et que le bouc en morceaux cuisait dans le beurre rance des pasteurs, sans souci du voisin, personne alors ne se gênait. Les nourritures solides faisaient les digestions retentissantes. Au soleil de la campagne, les hommes se soulageaient avec lenteur.

Ainsi, je passais sans scandale, comme les autres besoins de la vie, comme Mena tourment des vierges, et la douce Rumina qui protège le sein de la nourrice, gonflé de veines bleuâtres. J'étais joyeux. Je faisais rire ! Et se dilatant d'aise à cause de moi, le convive exhalait toute sa gaieté par les ouvertures de son corps.

J'ai eu mes jours d'orgueil. Le bon Aristophane me promena sur la scène, et l'empereur Claudius Drusus me fit asseoir à sa table. Dans les laticlaves des patriciens j'ai circulé majestueusement ! Les vases d'or, comme des tympanons, résonnaient sous moi ; — et quand plein de murènes, de truffes et de pâtés, l'intestin du maître se dégageait avec fracas, l'univers attentif apprenait que César avait dîné !

Mais à présent, je suis confiné dans la populace, — et l'on se récrie, même à mon nom !

Et Crépitus s'éloigne, en poussant un gémissement.

Puis un coup de tonnerre ;

UNE VOIX

J'étais le Dieu des armées, le Seigneur, le Seigneur Dieu !

J'ai déplié sur les collines les tentes de Jacob, et nourri dans les sables mon peuple qui s'enfuyait.

C'est moi qui ai brûlé Sodome ! C'est moi qui ai englouti la terre sous le Déluge ! C'est moi qui ai noyé Pharaon, avec les princes fils de rois, les chariots de guerre et les cochers.

Dieux jaloux, j'exécrais les autres Dieux. J'ai broyé les impurs ; j'ai abattu les superbes ; — et ma désolation courait de droite et de gauche, comme un dromadaire qui est lâché dans un champ de maïs.

Pour délivrer Israël, je choisissais les simples. Des anges aux ailes de flamme leur parlaient dans les buissons.

Parfumées de nard, de cinnamome et de myrrhe, avec des robes transparentes et des chaussures à talon haut, des femmes d'un coeur intrépide allaient égorger les capitaines. Le vent qui passait emportait les prophètes.

J'avais gravé ma loi sur des tables de pierre. Elle enfermait mon peuple comme dans une citadelle. C'était mon peuple. J'étais son Dieu ! La terre était à moi, les hommes à moi, avec leurs pensées, leurs oeuvres, leurs outils de labourage et leur postérité.

Mon arche reposait dans un triple sanctuaire, derrière des courtines de pourpre et des candélabres allumés. J'avais, pour me servir, toute une tribu qui balançait des encensoirs, et le grand prêtre en robe d'hyacinthe, portant sur sa poitrine des pierres précieuses, disposées dans un ordre symétrique.

Malheur ! malheur ! Le Saint-des-Saints s'est ouvert, le voile s'est déchiré, les parfums de l'holocauste se sont perdus à tous les vents. Le chacal piaule dans les sépulcres ; mon temple est détruit, mon peuple est dispersé !

On a étranglé les prêtres avec les cordons de leurs habits. Les femmes sont captives, les vases sont tous fondus !

La voix s'éloignant :

J'étais le Dieu des armées, le Seigneur, le Seigneur Dieu !

Alors il se fait un silence énorme, une nuit profonde.

ANTOINE

Tous sont passés.

Il reste moi !

dit QUELQU’UN.

Et Hilarion est devant lui, — mais transfiguré, beau comme un archange, lumineux comme un soleil, — et tellement grand, que pour le voir

ANTOINE

se renverse la tête.

Qui donc es-tu ?

HILARION

Mon royaume est de la dimension de l’univers ; et mon désir n’a pas de bornes. Je vais toujours, affranchissant l’esprit et pesant les mondes, sans haine, sans peur, sans pitié, sans amour, et sans Dieu. On m’appelle la Science.

ANTOINE

se rejette en arrière :

Tu dois être plutôt … le Diable !

HILARION

en fixant sur lui ses prunelles :

Veux-tu le voir ?

ANTOINE

ne se détache plus de ce regard ; il est saisi par la curiosité du Diable. Sa terreur augmente, son envie devient démesurée.

Si je le voyais pourtant … si je le voyais ?…

Puis dans un spasme de colère :

L’horreur que j’en ai m’en débarrassera pour toujours. — Oui !

Un pied fourchu se montre.

Antoine a regret.

Mais le Diable l’a jeté sur ses cornes, et l’enlève.

VI.

Il vole sous lui, étendu comme un nageur ; — ses deux ailes grandes ouvertes, en le cachant tout entier, semblent un nuage.

ANTOINE

Où vais-je ?

Tout à l'heure j'ai entrevu la forme du Maudit. Non ! une nuée m'emporte. Peut-être que je suis mort, et que je monte vers Dieu ?…

Ah ! comme je respire bien ! L'air immaculé me gonfle l'âme. Plus de pesanteur ! plus de souffrance !

En bas, sous moi, la foudre éclate, l'horizon s'élargit, des fleuves s'entre-croisent. Cette tache blonde c'est le désert, cette flaque d'eau l'Océan.

Et d'autres océans paraissent, d'immenses régions que je ne connaissais pas. Voici les pays noirs qui fument comme des brasiers, la zone des neiges obscurcie toujours par des brouillards. Je tâche de découvrir les montagnes où le soleil, chaque soir, va se coucher.

LE DIABLE

Jamais le soleil ne se couche !

Antoine n'est pas surpris de cette voix. Elle lui semble un écho de sa pensée, — une réponse de sa mémoire.

Cependant la terre prend la forme d'une boule ; et il l'aperçoit au milieu de l'azur qui tourne sur ses pôles, en tournant autour du soleil.

LE DIABLE

Elle ne fait donc pas le centre du monde ? Orgueil de l'homme, humilie-toi !

ANTOINE

A peine maintenant si je la distingue. Elle se confond avec les autres feux.

Le firmament n'est qu'un tissu d'étoiles.

Ils montent toujours.

Aucun bruit ! pas même le croassement des aigles ! Rien !… et je me penche pour écouter l’harmonie des planètes.

LE DIABLE

Tu ne les entendras pas ! Tu ne verras pas, non plus, l’antichtone de Platon, le foyer de Philolaüs, les sphères d’Aristote, ni les sept cieux des Juifs avec les grandes eaux par-dessus la voûte de cristal !

ANTOINE

D’en bas elle paraissait solide comme un mur. Je la pénètre, au contraire, je m’y enfonce !

Et il arrive devant la lune, — qui ressemble à un morceau de glace tout rond, plein d’une lumière immobile.

LE DIABLE

C’était autrefois le séjour des âmes. Le bon Pythagore l’avait même garnie d’oiseaux et de fleurs magnifiques.

ANTOINE

Je n’y vois que des plaines désolées, avec des cratères éteints, sous un ciel tout noir.

Allons vers ces astres d’un rayonnement plus doux, afin de contempler les anges qui les tiennent au bout de leurs bras, comme des flambeaux !

LE DIABLE

l’emporte au milieu des étoiles.

Elles s’attirent en même temps qu’elles se repoussent. L’action de chacune résulte des autres et y contribue, — sans le moyen d’un auxiliaire, par la force d’une loi, la seule vertu de l’ordre.

ANTOINE

Oui … oui ! mon intelligence l’embrasse ! C’est une joie supérieure aux plaisirs de la tendresse ! Je halète stupéfait devant l’énormité de Dieu !

LE DIABLE

Comme le firmament qui s’élève à mesure que tu montes et grandira sous l’ascension de ta pensée ; — et tu sentiras augmenter ta joie, d’après cette découverte du monde, dans cet élargissement de l’infini.

ANTOINE

Ah ! plus haut ! plus haut ! toujours !

Les astres se multiplient, scintillent. La Voie lactée au zénith se développe comme une immense ceinture, ayant des trous par intervalles ; dans ces fentes de sa clarté, s’allongent des espaces de ténèbres. Il y a des pluies d’étoiles, des traînées de poussière d’or, des vapeurs lumineuses qui flottent et se dissolvent.

Quelquefois une comète passe tout à coup ; — puis la tranquillité des lumières innombrables recommence.

Antoine, les bras ouverts, s’appuie sur les deux cornes du Diable, en occupant ainsi toute l’envergure.

Il se rappelle avec dédain l’ignorance des anciens jours, la médiocrité de ses rêves. Les voilà donc près de lui ces globes lumineux qu’il contemplait d’en bas ! Il distingue l’entre-croisement de leurs lignes, la complexité de leurs directions. Il les voit venir de loin, — et suspendus comme des pierres dans une fronde, décrire leurs orbites, pousser leurs hyperboles.

Il aperçoit d’un seul regard la Croix du sud et la Grande Ourse, le Lynx et le Centaure, la nébuleuse de la Dorade, les six soleils dans la constellation d’Orion, Jupiter avec ses quatre satellites, et le triple anneau du monstrueux Saturne ! toutes les planètes, tous les astres que les hommes plus tard découvriront ! Il emplit ses yeux de leurs lumières, il surcharge sa pensée du calcul de leurs distances ; — puis sa tête retombe.

Quel est le but de tout cela ?

LE DIABLE

Il n’y a pas de but !

Comment Dieu aurait-il un but ? Quelle expérience a pu l’instruire, quelle réflexion le déterminer ?

Avant le commencement il n’aurait pas agi, et maintenant il serait inutile.

ANTOINE

Il a créé le monde pourtant, d’une seule fois, par sa parole !

LE DIABLE

Mais les êtres qui peuplent la terre y viennent successivement. De même, au ciel, des astres nouveaux surgissent, — effets différents de causes variées.

ANTOINE

La variété des causes est la volonté de Dieu !

LE DIABLE

Mais admettre en Dieu plusieurs actes de volonté, c’est admettre plusieurs causes et détruire son unité !

Sa volonté n’est pas séparable de son essence. Il n’a pu avoir une autre volonté, ne pouvant avoir une autre essence ; — et puisqu’il existe éternellement, il agit éternellement.

Contemple le soleil ! De ses bords s’échappent de hautes flammes lançant des étincelles, qui se disposent pour devenir des mondes ; — et plus loin que la dernière, au delà de ces profondeurs où tu n’aperçois que la nuit, d’autres soleils tourbillonnent, derrière ceux-là d’autres, et encore d’autres, indéfiniment …

ANTOINE

Assez ! assez ! J’ai peur ! je vais tomber dans l’abîme.

LE DIABLE

s’arrête ; et en le balançant mollement :

Le néant n’est pas ! le vide n’est pas ! Partout il y a des corps qui se meuvent sur le fond immuable de l’Étendue ; — et comme si elle était bornée par quelque chose, ce ne serait plus l’étendue, mais un corps, elle n’a pas de limites !

ANTOINE

béant :
Pas de limites !

LE DIABLE

Monte dans le ciel toujours et toujours ; jamais tu n’atteindras le sommet ! Descends au-dessous de la terre pendant des milliards de milliards de siècles, jamais tu n’arriveras au fond, — puisqu’il n’y a pas de fond, pas de sommet, ni haut, ni bas, aucun terme ; et l’Étendue se trouve comprise dans Dieu qui n’est point une portion de l’espace, telle ou telle grandeur, mais l’immensité !

ANTOINE

lentement :
La matière … alors … ferait partie de Dieu ?

LE DIABLE

Pourquoi non ? Peux-tu savoir où il finit ?

ANTOINE

Je me prosterne au contraire, je m’écrase, devant sa puissance !

LE DIABLE

Et tu prétends le fléchir ! Tu lui parles, tu le décores même de vertus, bonté, justice, clémence, au lieu de reconnaître qu’il possède toutes les perfections !

Concevoir quelque chose au delà, c’est concevoir Dieu au delà de Dieu, l’être par-dessus l’être. Il est donc le seul Être, la seule substance.

Si la Substance pouvait se diviser, elle perdrait sa nature, elle ne serait pas elle, Dieu n’existerait plus. Il est donc indivisible comme infini ; — et s’il avait un corps, il serait composé de parties, il ne serait plus un, il ne serait plus infini. Ce n’est donc pas une personne !

ANTOINE

Comment ? mes oraisons, mes sanglots, les souffrances de ma chair, les transports de mon ardeur, tout cela se serait en allé vers un mensonge … dans l’espace … inutilement, — comme un cri d’oiseau, comme un tourbillon de feuilles mortes !

Il pleure.

Oh ! non ! Il y a par-dessus tout quelqu’un, une grande âme, un Seigneur, un père, que mon coeur adore et qui doit m’aimer !

LE DIABLE

Tu désires que Dieu ne soit pas Dieu ; — car s’il éprouvait de l’amour, de la colère ou de la pitié, il passerait de sa perfection à une perfection plus grande, ou plus petite. Il ne peut descendre à un sentiment, ni se contenir dans une forme.

ANTOINE

Un jour, pourtant, je le verrai !

LE DIABLE

Avec les bienheureux, n’est-ce pas ? — quand le fini jouira de l’infini, dans un endroit restreint enfermant l’absolu !

ANTOINE

N’importe, il faut qu’il y ait un paradis pour le bien, comme un enfer pour le mal !

LE DIABLE

L’exigence de ta raison fait-elle la loi des choses ? Sans doute le mal est indifférent à Dieu puisque la terre en est couverte !

Est-ce par impuissance qu’il le supporte, ou par cruauté qu’il le conserve ?

Penses-tu qu’il soit continuellement à rajuster le monde comme une oeuvre imparfaite, et qu’il surveille tous les mouvements de tous les êtres depuis le vol du papillon jusqu’à la pensée de l’homme ?

S’il a créé l’univers, sa providence est superflue. Si la Providence existe, la création est défectueuse.

Mais le mal et le bien ne concernent que toi, — comme le jour et la nuit, le plaisir et la peine, la mort et la naissance, qui sont relatifs à un coin de l’étendue, à un milieu spécial, à un intérêt particulier. Puisque l’infini seul est permanent, il y a l’Infini ; — et c’est tout !

Le Diable a progressivement étiré ses longues ailes ; maintenant elles couvrent l’espace.

ANTOINE

n’y voit plus. Il défaille.

Un froid horrible me glace jusqu’au fond de l’âme. Cela excède la portée de la douleur ! C’est comme une mort plus profonde que la mort. Je roule dans l’immensité des ténèbres. Elles entrent en moi. Ma conscience éclate sous cette dilatation du néant !

LE DIABLE

Mais les choses ne t’arrivent que par l’intermédiaire de ton esprit. Tel qu’un miroir concave il déforme les objets ; — et tout moyen te manque pour en vérifier l’exactitude.

Jamais tu ne connaîtras l’univers dans sa pleine étendue ; par conséquent tu ne peux te faire une idée de sa cause, avoir une notion juste de Dieu, ni même dire que l’univers est infini, — car il faudrait d’abord connaître l’Infini !

La Forme est peut-être une erreur de tes sens, la Substance une imagination de ta pensée.

A moins que le monde étant un flux perpétuel des choses, l’apparence au contraire ne soit tout ce qu’il y a de plus vrai, l’illusion la seule réalité.

Mais es-tu sûr de voir ? es-tu même sûr de vivre ? Peut-être qu’il n’y a rien !

Le Diable a pris Antoine ; et le tenant au bout de ses bras, il le regarde la gueule ouverte, prêt à le dévorer.

Adore-moi donc ! et maudis le fantôme que tu nommes Dieu !

Antoine lève les yeux, par un dernier mouvement d’espoir.

Le Diable l’abandonne.

*

ANTOINE

se retrouve étendu sur le dos, au bord de la falaise.

Le ciel commence à blanchir.

Est-ce la clarté de l’aube, ou bien un reflet de la lune ?

Il tâche de se soulever, puis retombe ; et en claquant des dents :

J’éprouve une fatigue … comme si tous mes os étaient brisés !

Pourquoi ?

Ah ! c’est le Diable ! je me souviens, — et même il me redisait tout ce que j’ai appris chez le vieux Didyme des opinions de Xénophane, d’Héraclite, de Mélisse, d’Anaxagore, sur l’infini, la création, l’impossibilité de rien connaître !

Et j’avais cru pouvoir m’unir à Dieu !

Riant amèrement :

Ah ! démence ! démence ! Est-ce ma faute ? La prière m’est intolérable ! J’ai le coeur plus sec qu’un rocher ! Autrefois il débordait d’amour !…

Le sable, le matin, fumait à l’horizon comme la poussière d’un encensoir ; au coucher du soleil, des fleurs de feu s’épanouissaient sur la croix ; — et au milieu de la nuit, souvent il m’a semblé que tous les êtres et toutes les choses, recueillis dans le même silence, adoraient avec moi le Seigneur. O charme des oraisons, félicités de l’extase, présents du ciel, qu’êtes-vous devenus !

Je me rappelle un voyage que j’ai fait avec Ammon, à la recherche d’une solitude pour établir des monastères. C’était le dernier soir ; et nous pressions nos pas, en murmurant des hymnes, côte à côte, sans parler. A mesure que le soleil s’abaissait, les deux ombres de nos corps s’allongeaient comme deux obélisques grandissant toujours et qui auraient marché devant nous. Avec les morceaux de nos bâtons, çà et là nous plantions des croix pour marquer la place d’une cellule. La nuit fut lente à venir ; et des ondes noires se répandaient sur la terre qu’une immense couleur rose occupait encore le ciel.

Quand j’étais un enfant, je m’amusais avec des cailloux à construire des ermitages. Ma mère, près de moi, me regardait.

Elle m’aura maudit pour mon abandon, en arrachant à pleines mains ses cheveux blancs. Et son cadavre est resté étendu au milieu de la cabane, sous le toit de roseaux, entre les murs qui tombent. Par un trou, une hyène en reniflant, avance la gueule !… Horreur ! horreur !

Il sanglote.

Non, Ammonaria ne l’aura pas quittée !

Où est-elle maintenant, Ammonaria ?

Peut-être qu’au fond d’une étuve elle retire ses vêtements l’un après l’autre, d’abord le manteau, puis la ceinture, la première tunique, la seconde plus légère, tous ses colliers ; et la vapeur du cinnamome enveloppe ses membres nus. Elle se couche enfin sur la tiède mosaïque. Sa chevelure à l’entour de ses hanches fait comme une toison noire, — et suffoquant un peu dans l’atmosphère trop chaude, elle respire, la taille cambrée, les deux seins en avant. Tiens !… voilà ma chair qui se révolte ! Au milieu du chagrin la concupiscence me torture. Deux supplices à la fois, c’est trop ! Je ne peux plus endurer ma personne !

Il se penche, et regarde le précipice.

L’homme qui tomberait serait tué. Rien de plus facile, en se roulant sur le côté gauche ; c’est un mouvement à faire ! un seul.

Alors apparaît

UNE VIEILLE FEMME

Antoine se relève dans un sursaut d’épouvanté. — Il croit voir sa mère ressuscitée.

Mais celle-ci est beaucoup plus vieille, et d’une prodigieuse maigreur.

Un linceul noué autour de sa tête, pend avec ses cheveux blancs jusqu’au bas de ses doux jambes, minces comme des béquilles. L’éclat de ses dents, couleur d’ivoire, rend plus sombre sa peau terreuse. Les orbites de ses yeux sont pleins de ténèbres, et au fond deux flammes vacillent, comme des lampes de sépulcre.

Avance, dit-elle. Qui te retient ?

ANTOINE

balbutiant :

J’ai peur de commettre un péché !

ELLE

reprend :

Mais le roi Saül s’est tué ! Razias, un juste, s’est tué ! Sainte Pélagie d'Antioche s'est tuée ! Dommine d'Alep et ses deux filles, trois autres saintes, se sont tuées ; — et rappelle-toi tous les confesseurs qui couraient au-devant des bourreaux, par impatience de la mort. Afin d'en jouir plus vite, les vierges de Milet s'étranglaient avec leurs cordons. Le philosophe Hégésias, à Syracuse, la prêchait si bien qu'on désertait les lupanars pour s'aller pendre dans les champs. Les patriciens de Rome se la procurent comme débauche.

ANTOINE

Oui, c'est un amour qui est fort ! Beaucoup d'anachorètes y succombent.

LA VIEILLE

Faire une chose qui vous égale à Dieu, pense donc ! Il t'a créé, tu vas détruire son oeuvre, toi, par ton courage, librement ! La jouissance d'Érostrate n'était pas supérieure. Et puis, ton corps s'est assez moqué de ton âme pour que tu t'en venges à la fin. Tu ne souffriras pas. Ce sera vite terminé. Que crains-tu ? un large trou noir ! Il est vide, peut-être ?

Antoine écoute sans répondre ; — et de l'autre côté paraît :

UNE AUTRE FEMME

jeune et belle, merveilleusement. — Il la prend d'abord pour Ammonaria.

Mais elle est plus grande, blonde comme le miel, très-grasse, avec du fard sur les joues et des roses sur la tête. Sa longue robe chargée de paillettes a des miroitements métalliques ; ses lèvres charnues paraissent sanguinolentes, et ses paupières un peu lourdes sont tellement noyées de langueur qu'on la dirait aveugle.

Elle murmure :

Vis donc, jouis donc ! Salomon recommande la joie ! Va comme ton coeur te mène et selon le désir de tes yeux !

ANTOINE

Quelle joie trouver ? mon coeur est las, mes yeux sont troubles !

ELLE

reprend :

Gagne le faubourg de Racotis, pousse une porte peinte en bleu ; et quand tu seras dans l’atrium où murmure un jet d’eau, une femme se présentera — en péplos de soie blanche lamé d’or, les cheveux dénoués, le rire pareil au claquement des crotales. Elle est habile. Tu goûteras dans sa caresse l’orgueil d’une initiation et l’apaisement d’un besoin.

Tu ne connais pas, non plus, le trouble des adultères, les escalades, les enlèvements, la joie de voir toute nue celle qu’on respectait habillée.

As-tu serré contre ta poitrine une vierge qui t’aimait ? Te rappelles-tu les abandons de sa pudeur, et ses remords qui s’en allaient sous un flux de larmes douces !

Tu peux, n’est-ce pas, vous apercevoir marchant dans les bois sous la lumière de la lune ? A la pression de vos mains jointes un frémissement vous parcourt ; vos yeux rapprochés épanchent de l’un à l’autre comme des ondes immatérielles, et votre coeur s’emplit ; il éclate ; c’est un suave tourbillon, une ivresse débordante …

LA VIEILLE

On n’a pas besoin de posséder les joies pour en sentir l’amertume ! Rien qu’à les voir de loin, le dégoût vous en prend. Tu dois être fatigué par la monotonie des mêmes actions, la durée des jours, la laideur du monde, la bêtise du soleil !

ANTOINE

Oh ! oui, tout ce qu’il éclaire me déplaît !

LA JEUNE

Ermite ! ermite ! tu trouveras des diamants entre les cailloux, des fontaines sous le sable, une délectation dans les hasards que tu méprises ; et même il y a des endroits de la terre si beaux qu’on a envie de la serrer contre son coeur.

LA VIEILLE

Chaque soir, en t'endormant sur elle, tu espères que bientôt elle te recouvrira !

LA JEUNE

Cependant, tu crois à la résurrection de la chair, qui est le transport de la vie dans l'éternité !

La Vieille, pendant qu'elle parlait, s'est encore décharnée ; et au-dessus de son crâne, qui n'a plus de cheveux, une chauve-souris fait des cercles dans l'air.

La Jeune est devenue plus grasse. Sa robe chatoie, ses narines battent, ses yeux roulent moelleusement.

LA PREMIÈRE

dit, en ouvrant les bras :

Viens, je suis la consolation, le repos, l'oubli, l'éternelle sérénité !

et

LA SECONDE

en offrant ses seins :

Je suis l'endormeuse, la joie, la vie, le bonheur inépuisable !

Antoine tourne les talons pour s'enfuir. Chacune lui met la main sur l'épaule.

Le linceul s'écarte, et découvre le squelette de La Mort.

La robe se fend, et laisse voir le corps entier de La Luxure, qui a la taille mince avec la croupe énorme et de grands cheveux ondés s'envolant par le bout.

Antoine reste immobile entre les deux, les considérant.

LA MORT

lui dit :

Tout de suite ou tout à l'heure, qu'importe ! Tu m'appartiens, comme les soleils, les peuples, les villes, les rois, la neige des monts, l'herbe des champs. Je vole plus haut que l'épervier, je cours plus vite que la gazelle, j'atteins même l'espérance, j'ai vaincu le fils de Dieu !

LA LUXURE

Ne résiste pas ; je suis l'omnipotente ! Les forêts retentissent de mes soupirs, les flots sont remués par mes agitations. La vertu, le courage, la piété se dissolvent au parfum de ma bouche. J'accompagne l'homme pendant tous les pas qu'il fait ; — et au seuil du tombeau il se retourne vers moi !

LA MORT

Je te découvrirai ce que tu tâchais de saisir, à la lueur des flambeaux, sur la face des morts, — ou quand tu vagabondais au delà des Pyramides, dans ces grands sables composés de débris humains. De temps à autre, un fragment de crâne roulait sous ta sandale. Tu prenais de la poussière, tu la faisais couler entre tes doigts ; et ta pensée, confondue avec elle, s'abîmait dans le néant.

LA LUXURE

Mon gouffre est plus profond ! Des marbres ont inspiré d'obscènes amours. On se précipite à des rencontres qui effrayent. On rive des chaînes que l'on maudit. D'où vient l'ensorcellement des courtisanes, l'extravagance des rêves, l'immensité de ma tristesse ?

LA MORT

Mon ironie dépasse toutes les autres ! Il y a des convulsions de plaisir aux funérailles des rois, à l'extermination d'un peuple ; — et on fait la guerre avec de la musique, des panaches, des drapeaux, des harnais d'or, un déploiement de cérémonie pour me rendre plus d'hommages.

LA LUXURE

Ma colère vaut la tienne. Je hurle, je mords. J'ai des sueurs d'agonisant et des aspects de cadavre.

LA MORT

C'est moi qui te rends sérieuse ; enlaçons-nous !

La Mort ricane, la Luxure rugit. Elles se prennent par la taille, et chantent ensemble :

— Je hâte la dissolution de la matière !

— Je facilite l’éparpillement des germes !

— Tu détruis, pour mes renouvellements !

— Tu engendres, pour mes destructions !

— Active ma puissance !

— Féconde ma pourriture !

Et leur voix, dont les échos se déroulant emplissent l’horizon, devient tellement forte qu’Antoine en tombe à la renverse.

Une secousse, de temps à autre, lui fait entr’ouvrir les yeux ; et il aperçoit au milieu des ténèbres une manière de monstre devant lui.

C’est une tête de mort, avec une couronne de roses. Elle domine un torse de femme d’une blancheur nacrée. En dessous, un linceul étoile de points d’or fait comme une queue ; — et tout le corps ondule, à la manière d’un ver gigantesque qui se tiendrait debout.

La vision s’atténue, disparaît.

ANTOINE

se relève.

Encore une fois c’était le Diable, et sous son double aspect : l’esprit de fornication et l’esprit de destruction.

Aucun des deux ne m’épouvante. Je repousse le bonheur, et je me sens éternel.

Ainsi la mort n’est qu’une illusion, un voile, masquant par endroits la continuité de la vie.

Mais la Substance étant unique, pourquoi les Formes sont-elles variées ?

Il doit y avoir, quelque part, des figures primordiales, dont les corps ne sont que les images. Si on pouvait les voir on connaîtrait le lien de la matière et de la pensée, en quoi l’Être consiste !

Ce sont ces figures-là qui étaient peintes à Babylone sur la muraille du temple de Bélus, et elles couvraient une mosaïque dans le port de Carthage. Moi-même, j’ai quelquefois aperçu dans le ciel comme des formes d’esprits. Ceux qui traversent le désert rencontrent des animaux dépassant toute conception …

Et en face, de l’autre côté du Nil, voilà que le Sphinx apparaît.

Il allonge ses pattes, secoue les bandelettes de son front, et se couche sur le ventre.

Sautant, volant, crachant du feu par ses narines, et de sa queue de dragon se frappant les ailes, la Chimère aux yeux verts, tournoie, aboie.

Les anneaux de sa chevelure, rejetés d’un côté, s’entremêlent aux poils de ses

Les anneaux de sa chevelure, rejetés d'un côté, s'entremêlent aux poils de ses reins, et de l'autre ils pendent jusque sur le sable et remuent au balancement de tout son corps.

LE SPHINX

est immobile, et regarde la Chimère :

Ici, Chimère ; arrête-toi !

LA CHIMÈRE

Non, jamais !

LE SPHINX

Ne cours pas si vite, ne vole pas si haut, n'aboie pas si fort !

LA CHIMÈRE

Ne m'appelle plus, ne m'appelle plus, puisque tu restes toujours muet !

LE SPHINX

Cesse de me jeter tes flammes au visage et de pousser tes hurlements dans mon oreille ; tu ne fondras pas mon granit !

LA CHIMÈRE

Tu ne me saisiras pas, sphinx terrible !

LE SPHINX

Pour demeurer avec moi, tu es trop folle !

LA CHIMÈRE

Pour me suivre, tu es trop lourd !

LE SPHINX

Ou vas-tu donc, que tu cours si vite ?

LA CHIMÈRE

Je galope dans les corridors du labyrinthe, je plane sur les monts, je rase les flots, je jappe au fond des précipices, je m'accroche par la gueule au pan des nuées ; avec ma queue traînante, je raye les plages, et les collines ont pris leur courbe selon la forme de mes épaules. Mais toi, je te retrouve perpétuellement immobile, ou bien du bout de ta griffe dessinant des alphabets sur le sable.

LE SPHINX

C’est que je garde mon secret ! Je songe et je calcule.

La mer se retourne dans son lit, les blés se balancent sous le vent, les caravanes passent, la poussière s’envole, les cités s’écroulent ; — et mon regard, que rien ne peut dévier, demeure tendu à travers les choses sur un horizon inaccessible.

LA CHIMÈRE

Moi, je suis légère et joyeuse ! Je découvre aux hommes des perspectives éblouissantes avec des paradis dans les nuages et des félicités lointaines. Je leur verse à l’âme les éternelles démences, projets de bonheur, plans d’avenir, rêves de gloire, et les serments d’amour et les résolutions vertueuses.

Je pousse aux périlleux voyages et aux grandes entreprises. J’ai ciselé avec mes pattes les merveilles des architectures. C’est moi qui ai suspendu les clochettes au tombeau de Porsenna, et entouré d’un mur d’orichalque les quais de l’Atlantide.

Je cherche des parfums nouveaux, des fleurs plus larges, des plaisirs inéprouvés. Si j’aperçois quelque part un homme dont l’esprit repose dans la sagesse, je tombe dessus, et je l’étrangle.

LE SPHINX

Tous ceux que le désir de Dieu tourmente, je les ai dévorés.

Les plus forts, pour gravir jusqu’à mon front royal, montent aux stries de mes bandelettes comme sur les marches d’un escalier. La lassitude les prend ; et ils tombent d’eux-mêmes à la renverse.

Antoine commence à trembler.

Il n’est plus devant sa cabane, mais dans le désert, — ayant à ces côtés deux bêtes monstrueuses, dont la gueule lui effleura l’épaule.

LE SPHINX

O Fantaisie, emporte-moi sur tes ailes pour désennuyer ma tristesse !

LA CHIMÈRE

O Inconnu, je suis amoureuse de tes yeux ! Comme une hyène en chaleur je tourne autour de toi, sollicitant les fécondations dont le besoin me dévore.

Ouvre la gueule, lève tes pieds, monte sur mon dos !

LE SPHINX

Mes pieds, depuis qu'ils sont à plat, ne peuvent plus se relever. Le lichen, comme une dartre, a poussé sur ma gueule. A force de songer, je n'ai plus rien à dire.

LÀ CHIMÈRE

Tu mens, sphinx hypocrite ! D'où vient toujours que tu m'appelles et me renies ?

LE SPHINX

C'est toi, caprice indomptable, qui passe et tourbillonne !

LA CHIMÈRE

Est-ce ma faute ? Comment ? laisse-moi !

Elle aboie.

LE SPHINX

Tu remues, tu m'échappes !

Il grogne.

LA CHIMÈRE

Essayons ! — tu m'écrases !

LE SPHINX

Non ! impossible !

Et en s'enfonçant peu à peu, il disparaît dans le sable, — tandis que la Chimère, qui rampe la langue tirée, s'éloigne en décrivant des cercles.

L'haleine de sa bouche a produit un brouillard.

Dans cette brume, Antoine aperçoit des enroulements de nuages, des courbes indécises.

Enfin, il distingue comme des apparences de corps humains ;

Et d'abord s'avance

LE GROUPE DES ASTOMI

pareils à des bulles d’air que traverse le soleil.

Ne souffle pas trop fort ! Les gouttes de pluie nous meurtrissent, les sons faux nous écorchent, les ténèbres nous aveuglent. Composés de brises et de parfums, nous roulons, nous flottons — un peu plus que des rêves, pas des êtres tout à fait …

LES NISNAS

n’ont qu’un oeil, qu’une joue, qu’une main, qu’une jambe, qu’une moitié du corps, qu’une moitié du coeur. Et ils disent, très-haut :

Nous vivons fort à notre aise dans nos moitiés de maisons, avec nos moitiés de femmes et nos moitiés d’enfants.

LES BLEMMYES

absolument privés de tête :

Nos épaules en sont plus larges ; — et il n’y a pas de boeuf, de rhinocéros ni d’éléphant qui soit capable de porter ce que nous portons.

Des espèces de traits, et comme une vague figure empreinte sur nos poitrines, voilà tout ! Nous pensons des digestions, nous subtilisons des sécrétions. Dieu, pour nous, flotte en paix dans des chyles intérieurs.

Nous marchons droit notre chemin, traversant toutes les fanges, côtoyant tous les abîmes ; — et nous sommes les gens les plus laborieux, les plus heureux, les plus vertueux.

LES PYGMÉES

Petits bonshommes, nous grouillons sur le monde comme de la vermine sur la bosse d’un dromadaire.

On nous brûle, on nous noie, ou nous écrase ; et toujours, nous reparaissons, plus vivaces et plus nombreux, — terribles par la quantité !

LES SCIAPODES

Retenus à la terre par nos chevelures, longues comme des lianes, nous végétons à l’abri de nos pieds, larges comme des parasols ; et la lumière nous arrive à travers l’épaisseur de nos talons. Point de dérangement et point de travail ! — La tête le puis bas possible, c’est le secret du bonheur !

Leurs cuisses levées ressemblant à des troncs d’arbres, se multiplient.

Et une forêt paraît. De grands singes y courent à quatre pattes ; ce sont des hommes à tête de chien.

LES CYNOCÉPHALES

Nous sautons de branche en branche pour sucer les oeufs, et nous plumons les oisillons ; puis nous mettons leurs nids sur nos têtes, en guise de bonnets.

Nous ne manquons pas d’arracher les pis des vaches ; et nous crevons les yeux des lynx, nous fientons du haut des arbres, nous étalons notre turpitude en plein soleil.

Lacérant les fleurs, broyant les fruits, troublant les sources, violant les femmes, nous sommes les maîtres, — par la force de nos bras et la férocité de notre coeur.

Hardi, compagnons ! Faites claquer vos mâchoires !

Du sang et du lait coulent de leurs babines. La pluie ruisselle sur leurs dos velus.

Antoine hume la fraîcheur des feuilles vertes.

Elles s’agitent, les branches s’entre-choquent ; et tout à coup paraît un grand cerf noir, à tête de taureau, qui porte entre les oreilles un buisson de cornes blanches.

LE SADHUZAG

Mes soixante-quatorze andouillers sont creux comme des flûtes.

Quand je me tourne vers le vent du sud, il en part des sons qui attirent à moi les bêtes ravies. Les serpents s’enroulent à mes jambes, les guêpes se collent dans mes narines, et les perroquets, les colombes et les ibis s’abattent dans mes rameaux. — Écoute !

Il renverse son bois, d’où s’échappe une musique ineffablement douce.

Antoine presse son coeur à deux mains. Il lui semble que cette mélodie va emporter son âme.

LE SADHUZAG

Mais quand je me tourne vers le vent du nord, mon bois plus touffu qu’un bataillon de lances, exhale un hurlement ; les forêts tressaillent, les fleuves remontent, la gousse des fruits éclate, et les herbes se dressent comme la chevelure d’un lâche.

— Écoute !

Il penche ses rameaux, d’où sortent des cris discordants ; Antoine est comme déchiré.

Et son horreur augmente en voyant :

LE MARTICHORAS

gigantesque lion rouge, à figure humaine, avec trois rangées de dents.

Les moires de mon pelage écarlate se mêlent au miroitement des grands sables. Je souffle par mes narines l’épouvante des solitudes. Je crache la peste. Je mange les armées, quand elles s’aventurent dans le désert.

Mes ongles sont tordus en vrilles, mes dents sont taillées en scie ; et ma queue, qui se contourne, est hérissée de dards que je lance à droite, à gauche, en avant, en arrière. — Tiens ! tiens !

Le Martichoras jette les épines de sa queue ; qui s’irradient comme des flèches dans toutes les directions. Des gouttes de sang pleuvent, en claquant sur le feuillage.

LE CATOBLEPAS

buffle noir, avec une tête de porc tombant jusqu’à terre, et rattachée à ses épaules par un cou mince, long et flasque comme un boyau vidé.

Il est vautré tout à plat ; et ses pieds disparaissent sous l’énorme crinière à poils durs qui lui couvre le visage.

Gras, mélancolique, farouche, je reste continuellement à sentir sous mon ventre la chaleur de la boue. Mon crâne est tellement lourd qu’il m’est impossible de le porter. Je le roule autour de moi, lentement ; — et la mâchoire entr’ouverte, j’arrache avec ma langue les herbes vénéneuses arrosées de mon haleine. Une fois, je me suis dévoré les pattes sans m’en apercevoir.

Personne, Antoine, n’a jamais vu mes yeux, ou ceux qui les ont vus sont morts. Si je relevais mes paupières, — mes paupières roses et gonflées, — tout de suite, tu mourrais.

ANTOINE

Oh ! celui-là !… a … a … Si j’allais avoir envie ?… Sa stupidité m’attire. Non ! non ! je ne veux pas !

Il regarde par terre fixement

Il regarde par terre fixement.

Mais les herbes s’allument, et dans les torsions des flammes se dresse

LE BASILIC

grand serpent violet à crête trilobée, avec deux dents, une en haut, une en bas.

Prends garde, tu vas tomber dans ma gueule ! Je bois du feu. Le feu, c’est moi ; — et de partout j’en aspire : des nuées, des cailloux, des arbres morts, du poil des animaux, de la surface des marécages. Ma température entretient les volcans ; je fais l’éclat des pierreries et la couleur des métaux.

LE GRIFFON

lion à bec de vautour avec des ailes blanches, les pattes rouges et le cou bleu.

Je suis le maître des splendeurs profondes. Je connais le secret des tombeaux où dorment les vieux rois.

Une chaîne, qui sort du mur, leur tient la tête droite. Près d’eux, dans des bassins de porphyre, des femmes qu’ils ont aimées flottent sur des liquides noirs. Leurs trésors sont rangés dans des salles, par losanges, par monticules, par pyramides ; — et plus bas, bien au-dessous des tombeaux, après de longs voyages au milieu des ténèbres étouffantes, il y a des fleuves d’or avec des forêts de diamant, des prairies d’escarboucles, des lacs de mercure.

Adossé contre la porte du souterrain et la griffe en l’air, j’épie de mes prunelles flamboyantes ceux qui voudraient venir. La plaine immense, jusqu’au fond de l’horizon est toute nue et blanchie par les ossements des voyageurs. Pour toi les battants de bronze s’ouvriront, et tu humeras la vapeur des mines, tu descendras dans les cavernes … Vite ! vite !

Il creuse la terre avec ses pattes, en criant comme un coq.

Mille voix lui répondent. La forêt tremble.

Et toutes sortes de bêtes effroyables surgissent : le Tragelaphus, moitié cerf et moitié boeuf ; le Myrmecoleo, lion par devant, fourmi par derrière, et dont les génitoires sont à rebours ; le python Aksar, de soixante coudées, qui épouvanta Moïse ; la grande belette Pastinaca, qui tue les arbres par son odeur ; le Presteros, qui rend imbécile par son contact ; le Mirag, lièvre cornu, habitant des îles de la mer. Le léopard Phalmant crève son ventre à force de hurler ; le Senad, ours à trois têtes, déchire ses petits avec sa langue ; le chien Cépus répand sur les rochers le lait bleu de ses mamelles. Des moustiques se mettent à bourdonner, des crapauds à sauter, des serpents à siffler. Des éclairs brillent. La grêle tombe.

Il arrive des rafales, pleines d’anatomies merveilleuses. Ce sont des têtes d’alligators sur des pieds de chevreuil, des hiboux à queue de serpent, des pourceaux à mufle de tigre, des chèvres à croupe d’âne, des grenouilles velues comme des ours, des caméléons grands comme des hippopotames, des veaux à deux têtes dont l’une pleure et l’autre beugle, des foetus quadruples se tenant par le nombril et valsant comme des toupies, des ventres ailés qui voltigent comme des moucherons.

Il en pleut du ciel, il en sort de terre, il en coule des roches. Partout des prunelles flamboient, des gueules rugissent ; les poitrines se bombent, les griffes s’allongent, les dents grincent, les chairs clapotent. Il y en a qui accouchent, d’autres copulent, ou d’une seule bouchée s’entre-dévorent.

S’étouffant sous leur nombre, se multipliant par leur contact, ils grimpent les uns sur les autres ; — et tous remuent autour d’Antoine avec un balancement régulier, comme si le sol était le pont d’un navire. Il sent contre ses mollets la traînée des limaces, sur ses mains le froid des vipères ; et des araignées filant leur toile l’enferment dans leur réseau.

Mais le cercle des monstres s’entr’ouvre, le ciel tout à coup devient bleu, et

LA LICORNE

se présente.

Au galop ! au galop !

J’ai des sabots d’ivoire, des dents d’acier, la tête couleur de pourpre, le corps couleur de neige, et la corne de mon front porte les bariolures de l’arc-en-ciel.

Je voyage de la Chaldée au désert tartare, sur les bords du Gange et dans la Mésopotamie. Je dépasse les autruches. Je cours si vite que je traîne le vent. Je frotte mon dos contre les palmiers. Je me roule dans les bambous. D’un bond je saute les fleuves. Des colombes volent au-dessus de moi. Une vierge seule peut me brider.

Au galop ! au galop !

Antoine la regarde s’enfuir.

Et ses yeux restant levés, il aperçoit tous les oiseaux qui se nourrissent de vent : le Gouith, l’Ahuti, l’Alphalim, le Iukneth des montagnes de Caff, les Homaï des Arabes qui sont les âmes d’hommes assassinés. Il entend les perroquets proférer des paroles humaines, puis les grands palmipèdes pélasgiens qui sanglotent comme des enfants ou ricanent comme de vieilles femmes.

Un air salin le frappe aux narines. Une plage maintenant est devant lui.

Au loin des jets d’eau s’élèvent, lancés par des baleines ; et du fond de l’horizon rondes comme des outres, plates comme des lames, dentelées comme des scies, s’avancent en se traînant sur le sable.

Tu vas venir avec nous, dans nos immensités où personne encore n’est descendu !

Des peuples divers habitent les pays de l’Océan. Les uns sont au séjour des tempêtes ; d’autres nagent en plein dans la transparence des ondes froides, broutent comme des boeufs les plaines de corail, aspirent par leur trompe le reflux des marées, ou portent sur leurs épaules le poids des sources de la mer.

Des phosphorescences brillent à la moustache des phoques, aux écailles des poissons. Des oursins tournent comme des roues, des cornes d’Ammon se déroulent comme des câbles, des huîtres font crier leurs charnières, des polypes déploient leurs tentacules, des méduses frémissent pareilles à des boules de cristal, des éponges flottent, des anémones crachent de l’eau ; des mousses, des varechs ont poussé.

Et toutes sortes de plantes s’étendent en rameaux, se tordent en vrilles, s’allongent en pointes, s’arrondissent en éventail. Des courges ont l’air de seins, des lianes s’enlacent comme des serpents.

Les Dedaïms de Babylone, qui sont des arbres, ont pour fruits des têtes humaines ; des Mandragores chantent, la racine Baaras court dans l’herbe.

Les végétaux maintenant ne se distinguent plus des animaux. Des polypiers, qui ont l’air de sycomores, portent des bras sur leurs branches. Antoine croit voir une chenille entre deux feuilles ; c’est un papillon qui s’envole. Il va pour marcher sur un galet ; une sauterelle grise bondit. Des insectes pareils à des pétales de roses, garnissent un arbuste ; des débris d’éphémères font sur le sol une couche neigeuse.

Et puis les plantes se confondent avec les pierres.

Des cailloux ressemblent à des cerveaux, des stalactites à des mamelles, des fleurs de fer à des tapisseries ornées de figures.

Dans des fragments de glace, il distingue des efflorescences, des empreintes de buissons et de coquilles — à ne savoir si ce sont les empreintes de ces choses-là, ou ces choses elles-mêmes. Des diamants brillent comme des yeux, des minéraux palpitent.

Et il n’a plus peur !

Il se couche à plat ventre, s’appuie sur les deux coudes ; et retenant son haleine, il regarde.

Des insectes n’ayant plus d’estomac continuent à manger ; des fougères desséchées se remettent à fleurir ; des membres qui manquaient repoussent.

Enfin, il aperçoit de petites masses globuleuses, grosses comme des têtes d’épingles et garnies de cils tout autour. Une vibration les agite.

ANTOINE

délirant :

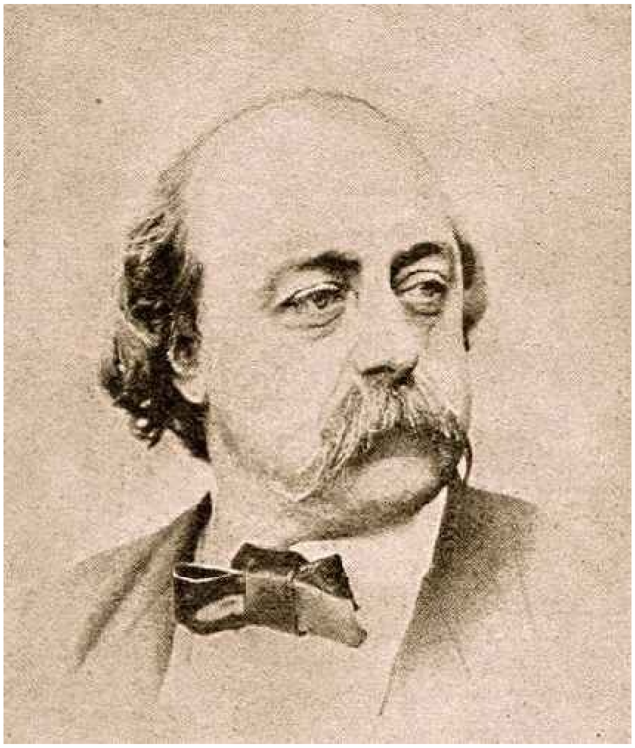
O bonheur ! bonheur ! j’ai vu naître la vie, j’ai vu le mouvement commencer. Le sang de mes veines bat si fort qu’il vas les rompre, j’ai envie de voler, de nager, d’aboyer, de beugler, de hurler. Je voudrais avoir des ailes, une carapace, une écorce, souffler de la fumée, porter une trompe, tordre mon corps, me diviser partout, être en tout, m’émaner avec les odeurs, me développer comme les plantes, couler comme l’eau, vibrer comme le son, briller comme la lumière, me blottir sur toutes les formes, pénétrer chaque atome, descendre jusqu’au fond de la matière, — être la matière !

Le jour enfin paraît ; et comme les rideaux d’un tabernacle qu’on relève, des nuages d’or en s’enroulant à larges volutes découvrent le ciel.

Tout au milieu, et dans le disque même du soleil, rayonne la face de Jésus-Christ.

Antoine fait le signe de la croix et se remet en prières.

The Plays



THE CANDIDATE

Trasnlated by M. Walter Dunne

Written in 1873, this play was first performed in 1874 at the Théâtre du Vaudeville. The drama was a failure, resulting in Flaubert withdrawing it after the fourth performance, amongst the jeers of the press.

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DRAMATIS PERSONNE

ROUSSELIN, aged 56.
MUREL, aged 34.
GRUCHBT, aged 60.
JULIEN DUPRAT, aged *24.*
COUNT DE BOUVIGNY, aged 65.
ONÉSJME, his son, aged 20.
DODART, a notary, aged 60.
PIERRE, servant to M. Rousselin.
MADAME ROUSSELIN, aged 38.
LOUISE, her daughter, aged 18.
Miss ARABELLA, an English governess, aged 30.
FELICITE, servant to Gruchet.
MARCHAIS.
HEURTELOT.
LEDRU.
HOMBOURO.
VOINCHET.
BEAUMESNIL.
A VILLAGE POLICEMAN.
PRESIDENT OF THE ELECTORAL UNION.
A WAITER.
A BEGGAR.
Peasants, Workmen, *etc.*

SCENE: The action takes place in a village.

ACT I.

Scene: *A garden before the house of* M. Rousselin. *A pavilion,* R. *An iron gate,* L.

SCENE I.

(Murel, Pierre, *and a servant* Pierre *stands,* C., *unfolding a newspaper. Enter* M. Murel, L., *carrying a large bouquet, which he hands to* Pierre.)

MUREL: Pierre, where is Monsieur Rousselin?

PIERRE: In his study, Monsieur Murel. The ladies are in the park, I believe, with Monsieur Onésime de Bouvigny and the English governess.

MUREL: Monsieur Onésime de Bouvigny — that half-cracked idiot! I will wait here until he has gone, because I detest the very sight of him.

PIERRE: And I also, Monsieur.

MUREL: YOU? And why?

PIERRE: Because he is a snake, besides being a braggart and a boaster. And then, too, I have an idea that he comes here on account of *[mysteriously] Mademoiselle!*

MUREL *[in a half whisper]*: What! Mademoiselle Louise?

PIERRE: Yes, Monsieur. Unless I am greatly mistaken, these Bouvignys, father and son, being noblemen, would not come bowing and scraping before a mere *bourgeois* like Monsieur Rousselin, except for the reason I have just mentioned.

MUREL *[aside]:* The deuce! I must look into this. *[Aloud]* Listen, Pierre. Some gentlemen will arrive at the house soon to have an interview with your master, Monsieur Rousselin. Do not fail to let me know the moment they come. I will wait here.

PIERRE: Several gentlemen, did you say, Monsieur Murel? And — do they bring news regarding the election? They say that —

MUREL: Enough! Listen to me! You will do me the favour to go immediately to Heurtelot, the bootmaker, and beg him for my sake —

PIERRE: *Beg* him — for *your* sake, Monsieur Murel!

MUREL: Pay attention, I tell you! Say to him that he must forget nothing.

PIERRE: Oh, I begin to understand!

MUREL: And that he must be exact in every particular of the instructions he has received, as he is a leader of his class.

PIERRE: I understand perfectly, Monsieur. I will go at once. *[Exit.*

SCENE II.

MUREL *[to M. Gruchet, who enters, L.]*: Ah! it is Monsieur Gruchet, if I am not mistaken.

GRUCHET: Yes, in person — Pierre-Antoine Gruchet, at your service, Monsieur.

MUREL: Your visits at this house have become very infrequent of late, it appears to me.

GRUCHET: That is not to be wondered at, considering the change we find in our old friends, the Rousselins. Since they have become so very intimate with these De Bouvignys — and a pretty pair they are! — they put on too many airs to please me.

MUREL: TOO many airs? What do you mean?

GRUCHET *[after a slight pause]*: Haven't you noticed that their servants now wear buckskins, and that Madame never drives out without two horses? And at dinner — at least, so my maid Félicité informs me — they have all the knives, forks, and spoons changed at each course.

MUREL: But all this does not alter the fact that Monsieur is just the same kindly, generous fellow he always was.

GRUCHET: Certainly not — he is more foolish than blamable. But it is surely a crowning piece of folly for him to show so wild a desire to obtain a deputyship. They say he is forever declaiming and gesticulating before a mirror, and that he even murmurs parliamentary expressions in his sleep!

MUREL *[laughs]*: Really?

GRUCHET: The title of deputy sounds extremely well, you know. When your name is announced: "Monsieur the Deputy So-and-So" — what a fine effect is produced! Every one salutes you. On one's visiting card, the word "Deputy" produced! Every one salutes you. On one's visiting card, the word "Deputy" comes after the name — how agreeable to the eye! And in travelling, or at the theatre — anywhere, in fact — if any trouble arises, if some person should be insolent to you, or even if a policeman should lay his hand upon your shoulder, you draw yourself up and say, with an air, "Monsieur, you evidently do not know that I am a deputy!"

MUREL: Ha! ha! ha! *[Aside]* You wouldn't mind being one yourself, my good friend!

GRUCHET: After all, we must not laugh too much at our friend Rousselin's aspirations. If a man has a comfortable house, a few good friends, and a fair amount of tact, he is sure to get on well.

MUREL: Ah, if Monsieur Rousselin succeeds in getting the nomination —

GRUCHET: Well, if he should, what then? He will be the candidate only of the middle class.

MUREL *[aside]:* Who knows?

GRUCHET: We ought not to be expected to support him, you and I. You see, we are Liberals, and your position, naturally, gives you an influence over the working classes. To be sure, I think you show them rather more consideration than is necessary. I, too, am a friend of the people, but not quite so enthusiastic a friend as you.

MUREL: Well, let us suppose that Rousselin should present his own name —

GRUCHET: I should vote against him.

MUREL *[aside]:* I was right to be discreet! *[Aloud]* But, holding such views regarding Monsieur Rousselin, how is it that you care to come to his house?

GRUCHET: I have come here to-day simply to do a slight service for young Julien — you know him.

MUREL: The editor of *The Impartial?* And how does it happen that you have become the friend of a poet?

GRUCHET: We are not exactly friends. I meet him occasionally at the club, and he has asked me to introduce him to Monsieur Rousselin and his family.

MUREL: He asked *you* to do this, instead of addressing himself to me, one of the stockholders of *The Impartial?* What could have been his reason?

GRUCHET: I'm sure I don't know.

MUREL *[aside]:* That is very strange! *[Aloud]* Well, my friend, I fear that this idea of presenting Monsieur Julien is not a very happy one for you.

GRUCHET: Why do you say that?

MUREL *[looks off, L., paces to and fro, then aside]:* Confound that rascal Pierre! he has not yet returned. *[Aloud]* I said it simply because I know that Monsieur detests Bohemians.

GRUCHET: But this particular one —

MUREL: That particular one above all others, I assure you. Only a week ago — *[Draws out his watch and looks at it anxiously]*

GRUCHET: What is troubling you? You appear very restless.

MUREL: I am, indeed.

GRUCHET: Business affairs, perhaps.

MUREL: Yes, — my own affairs.

GRUCHET: Ah, I thought so! I am not at all surprised.

MUREL: NOW I shall have the pleasure of listening to a moral lecture, I suppose!

GRUCHET: Oh, I know all about the saddle-horses, the cabs, the hunting-parties, picnics, and all the rest of it. Good heavens, man! when a young fellow is simply a representative of a company, he cannot live as if he kept the cash-box in his pocket.

MUREL: Nonsense! I intend to pay all that I owe.

GRUCHET: Meanwhile, if you find yourself embarrassed, why not borrow of our friend Rousselin?

MUREL: Impossible!

GRUCHET: YOU have borrowed of me, you know, and I am not so rich as he.

MUREL: Yes, I know, but Monsieur Rousselin — that is quite a different matter.

GRUCHET: How is it different? — with a man so generous as he, so ready to serve his friends! *[Short pause]* There is something under all this. You have a reason, my fine fellow, for not wishing to injure your credit in this house.

MUREL: What do you mean?

GRUCHET: YOU are trying to make yourself agreeable to Mademoiselle Rousselin, hoping that a good marriage will —

MUREL: Oh, the devil! Hold your tongue! Yes, I adore her! Hush! here comes Madame Rousselin. For heaven's sake, not a hint of this!

GRUCHET *[aside]:* Oh, ho! you adore her, eh? My opinion is that your adoration is directed chiefly towards her *dot I*

SCENE III.

(The same. Enter Madame Rousselin, *through the gate, leaning on the arm of* Onésime de Bouvigny; *followed by* Louise Rousselin *and* Miss Arabella; *the latter carries a book)*

MUREL *[presents his bouquet to Mme. Rousselin]*: Permit me, Madame, to offer you —

MME. ROUSSELIN *[takes bouquet and tosses it upon a round table standing L.]*: Thank you, Monsieur.

ARABELLA: Oh, what splendid gardenias! Where do you find such beautiful flowers, Monsieur Murel?

MUREL: At my home, Miss Arabella, in my conservatory.

ONÉSIME *[with an impertinent air]:* Have you a conservatory, Monsieur?

MUREL: Yes, Monsieur, — a hot-house.

LOUISE: And it costs him nothing to make himself agreeable to his friends.

MME. R.: If one could only forget his political preferences!

MUREL *[aside to Louise]*: Your mamma is rather cold to me to-day.

LOUISE *[aside to Murel]*: Oh, never mind!

MME. R. *[sits, R., beside a small table]:* Come and sit beside me, my dear Vicomte. Won't you join us, Monsieur Gruchet? *[The gentlemen indicated sit near her]* Well, have they found a satisfactory candidate at last? Tell me all the news.

GRUCHET: A great many things have happened, Madame. The most important —

ONÉSIME *[interrupts]:* My father declares that Monsieur has only to allow his own name to be presented —

MME. R.: Indeed! Is that really his opinion?

ONÉSIME: Without a doubt. And all our peasants, who know well that their interests are in accord with his ideas —

GRUCHET: Which differ a little, however, from the principles of 'eighty-nine.

ONÉSIME *[laughs loudly]*: Hal ha! ha! the immortal principles of 'eighty-nine!

GRUCHET: May I ask what you are laughing at, Monsieur?

ONÉSIME: Why — why — my father always laughs when he hears that expression.

GRUCHET: Well, I assure you, without 'eighty-nine and its immortal principles, we should have had no deputies at all.

ARABELLA: YOU are quite right, Monsieur Gruchet, to defend the parliament. When a gentleman becomes a member of that body, it is in his power to do a great deal of good.

GRUCHET *[to Mme. R.]*: One of the greatest advantages is that one may live in Paris during the winter.

MME. R.: And that is certainly an important consideration. Louise, my dear, come and sit near us. A long sojourn in the country becomes very tiresome, does it not, Monsieur Murel?

MUREL *[with animation]*: Yes, indeed, Madame. *[Aside to Louise]* It is quite possible, however, to be very happy in the country sometimes!

GRUCHET: One would think that this simple rural spot was agreeable to no one but persons of little sense!

ARABELLA: Oh, no, no, Monsieur! A person of true sentiment must feel his heart throb with pleasure when he finds himself in the deep shadow of these ancient forests; sweet thoughts must possess him when he gazes across these wide fields; and perhaps — who knows? — in some obscure corner of this village a bright intellect is hidden, — some one whose genius will one day dazzle the world! *[Sits, and assumes a pose of sentimental reverie]*

MME. R. *[satirically]:* What a romantic tirade, my dear! Really, you are in a more poetic mood than usual to-day.

ONÉSIME: I think Mademoiselle has just favoured us with a quotation — in admirable fashion, except for a very slight accent — from *The Lake*, by Monsieur de Lamartine.

MME. R.: Indeed. Do you know the work well?

ONÉSIME: No, Madame. I was never allowed to read the works of that author.

MME. R.: Ah, yes, of course. Your education was of a more serious nature. *[Takes a skein of wool from the table and indicates to Onésime that he is to hold up his hands in order that she may pass the skein over them. He obeys, and she begins to wind the wool into a ball]* Will you have the kindness to assist me, my dear Vicomte? Please keep your arms well extended — there, that will do perfectly.

ONÉSIME: Oh, I know how to perform this delightful office, Madame. *[Slight pause, as Mme. Rousselin winds the wool]* We were speaking of rural scenery just now, — do you know, 1 admire exceedingly that little landscape framed in pearls that my sister Elizabeth sent to you.

MME. R.: It is, indeed, a charming work of art. It is now hanging in my boudoir. *[Sharply, looking at Louise]* Louise, when you have *quite* finished looking at that magazine, I wish to speak to you.

MUREL *[aside]:* She certainly suspects me!

MME. R.: I greatly admired the delightful talents of your other sisters also, Vicomte, the last time that we had the pleasure of visiting the Château de Bouvigny

Bouvigny.

ONÉSIME: You are very kind, Madame. My mother expects to receive very soon a visit from my great-uncle, the Bishop of Saint-Giraud.

MME. R.: IS the Bishop of Saint-Giraud your uncle, Monsieur?

ONÉSIME: Yes, Madame, and he is also my father's godfather.

MME. R,: Ah, I fear the dear Count, your father, has quite forgotten us by this time — naughty man!

ONÉSIME: Not at all, I assure you, Madame. In fact, I know that he intends very soon to ask Monsieur Rousselin to grant him an interview.

MME. R. *[pleased]:* Ah!

ONÉSIME: He wishes to consult Monsieur Rousselin about a certain undertaking. *[Looks off]* Is not that Monsieur Dodart approaching the house?

MUREL *[aside, looking off]:* The notary! Can it be possible that —

ARABELLA: Yes, it is he. And look! there come Marchais, the grocer, Monsieur Boudois, Monsieur Liégeard, and several other persons.

MUREL *[aside]:* The devil! What can this mean?

SCENE IV.

(The same. Enter M. Rousselin.)

LOUISE *[jumps up and runs to M. Rousseiin]*: Ah! it is papa!

ROUSSELIN *[with a complacent smile]:* Look well at him, my child. You may now indeed be proud of him! *[Embraces Mme. R.]* Good-morning, my dearest!

MME. R.: What has happened? You look absolutely radiant.

ROUSSELIN *[sees Murel]*: You here, my good Murel? You have heard the news, I suppose, — and you wished to be the first to greet me.

MUREL: I confess I do not understand you, Monsieur.

ROUSSELIN *[sees Gruchet]*: And Gruchet, too. Ah, my friends, I am delighted as well as touched. *[Strikes attitude]* Indeed, my fellow-citizens —

GRUCHET: But we don't know what you are talking about.

MUREL: We have heard nothing, I assure you.

ROUSSELIN: Why, they have asked me — in fact, urged me —

ALL: They? Who?

ROUSSELIN *[with dignity]*: The ministerial committee, which has proposed me as a candidate for this district.

MUREL *[aside]*: Hang it! Some one has got ahead of me, after all!

MME. R.: Oh, how delightful!

GRUCHET: And shall you accept the nomination?

ROUSSELIN: Why not? I am a conservative, as everyone knows

ROUSSELIN: Why not? I am a conservative, as everyone knows.

MME R.: Have you given your answer?

ROUSSELIN: Not yet, my dear. I wished to consult you.

MME. R.: I say, accept!

LOUISE: Oh, of course!

MME. R: You see no reason why I should not do so?

LOUISE: Certainly not! Quite the contrary! Accept, by all means.

ROUSSELIN: Frankly, now, — you think it would be a wise action on my part?

MME. R.: Yes, yes!

ROUSSELIN: Very well, then. At least, I can always say that you urged me to take this step. *[About to go]*

MUREL *[detains him]:* Just a word of warning. Be a little prudent about this matter. Don't act too hastily.

ROUSSELIN *[astonished]:* Why, what do you mean?

MUREL: Well, you know, such a candidacy is not, after all, a very serious matter.

ROUSSELIN: And why not, pray?

SCENE V.

(The same, including M. Marchais*, followed by* M. Dodart)

MARCHAIS: I salute the company! Ladies, pray pardon my intrusion. I was instructed to come here to learn Monsieur Rousselin's intentions. It is necessary that he should give us a speedy reply, and we hope for a favourable one.

ROUSSELIN: Certainly.

MARCHAIS: Because we believe that you are a practical man, and would make a good deputy.

ROUSSELIN: A deputy! *[Delighted.]*
(Enter M. Dodart)

DODART: Well, Monsieur Rousselin, everyone outside is very impatient to know your decision.

GRUCHET *[aside, grumbling]*: That Dodart! A regular hypocrite!

DODART *[to Onésime]*: Monsieur, your noble father, who is at present in the court outside, requested me to tell you that he desires to speak to you.

MUREL *[to Gruchet]*: Ah! his papa has arrived, it appears.

GRUCHET *[to Murel]*: He arrived immediately after these men entered the grounds. He means to keep his eye on our friend Rousselin,, you may be sure.

MUREL: Pardon my interruption, Monsieur Dodart. *[To Rousselin]* Invent some pretext to gain time before replying — only a little delay. *[To Marchais]* Say to Monsieur Rousselin's friends that he begs for a, little delay, as he is not feeling quite well, but that as soon as he recovers he will give them his answer. Go and tell them that immediately. *[Exit Marchais]*

ROUSSELIN: I say, Murel, what the deuce did you do that for? Rather cool proceeding on your part I should say!

proceeding on your part, I should say!

MUREL: My dear friend, I assure you it is not the proper thing to accept a candidacy in that fashion — on the spur of the moment.

ROUSSELIN: But for the last three years I have thought of nothing else than the possibility of obtaining it!

MUREL: To speak frankly, I think that you are making a blunder in this affair. Ask Monsieur Dodart, a man of common-sense who has had plenty of experience and knows this district well, whether he thinks your chance of election is good — a sure thing, in short.

DODART: I will not say it is sure, of course. But I believe he stands a very good chance of being elected. No one can be sure of the result of an election, especially as we do not know whether our adversaries —

GRUCHET *[interrupts]*: And they are very numerous!

ROUSSELIN *[astonished]*: Numerous, did you say?

MUREL: Certainly they are. *[To Dodart]* You will have the kindness, then, to excuse our friend here, who wishes to have a little time for reflection. *[To Rousselin]* Ah, if you will risk everything, prepare for the consequences!

ROUSSELIN: Perhaps you are right. *[To Dodart]* Yes, Monsieur Dodart, pray ask them to allow me a brief delay in order that I may consider the matter.

DODART *[bows]:* Very well. Monsieur Onésime, shall we go?

MUREL: By all means. It will not do to keep his papa waiting!

ROUSSELIN *[to Murel, who has taken Onésime by the arm, about to go]:* What, are you going too? Why do you leave me?

MUREL: That is my secret! Now, don't worry! Wait and see!
[Exit with Onésime and Dodart.

SCENE VI.

(Robsselin, Mme. Rousselin, Louise, Miss Arabella, and Gruchet)

ROUSSELIN: What can he be going to do?

GRUCHET: I know nothing at all about it.

MME. R.: What an absurd fellow he is!

GRUCHET: YOU may be sure it is some boyish joke of his. *[Laughs]* Oh, Monsieur Rousselin, I came here to-day to ask permission to present to you a young man — a friend of mine — who desires the honour of your acquaintance.

ROUSSELIN: Very well, bring him along.

GRUCHET: But I do not wish to do anything that might be disagreeable to you. Sometimes, you know, you have your little — prejudices. In short, the young man I wish to introduce is Monsieur Julien Duprat.

ROUSSELIN: NO, no! Not that man!

GRUCHET: Will you tell me why you forbid it?

ROUSSELIN: Don't speak to me of him, I say! *[Sees newspaper lying on the round table; picks it up]* I have said several times that this sheet should not be brought into my house. *[Examines the journal]* But it appears that I am not master here. Look! here are some of Duprat's verses!

GRUCHET: Very likely, I should think, since he is a poet.

ROUSSELIN: I don't like poets — they are all blackguards and rascals!

ARABELLA *[somewhat breathlessly]*: I assure you, Monsieur, that I once had a short conversation with Monsieur Duprat in the public park, and he is — very charming indeed!

GRUCHET *[to Rousselin]*: If you would only receive him!

ROUSSELIN: I am less inclined than ever to do so — *[to Louise]* less than ever, I tell you, Louise.

LOUISE: Oh, I am not defending him, papa.

ROUSSELIN: I should hope not — a fellow like that!

ARABELLA *[with strong emotion]*: AH!

GRUCHET: But, my dear Rousselin, why are you so bitter against Monsieur Duprat?

ROUSSELIN: Because — pardon me, Miss Arabella! *[To Mme. R.]* Will you ladies oblige me by going into the house, my dear? I wish to explain something to Monsieur Gruchet.

[Exit Mme. R., Louise, and Miss Arabella]

SCENE VII.

GRUCHET: Well, I am ready to hear you. *[Sits on bench, L.]*

ROUSSELIN *[takes up journal]*: The poem I noticed in this sheet is entitled "Again to Her!" *[Reads]*
"Under the bright Egyptian sky, The stony, crouching sphinxes sigh When torments harsh their breasts assail, Because of" —
I have a pretty shrewd idea in my head as to this sphinx business, my friend!

GRUCHET: And I, too, although I don't quite understand all the allusions.

ROUSSELIN *[taps the journal in his hand]:* This is the continuation of a clandestine correspondence, that's what it is!

GRUCHET: Explain yourself more clearly, I beg.

ROUSSELIN: Well, I will tell you, in confidence, that a week ago last Tuesday, while I was walking in my garden very early in the morning — I am so much upset nowadays that I don't sleep well — I perceived, between the trellis and the fruit-wall —

GRUCHET: A man?

ROUSSELIN: NO, a letter. The envelope was rather large, and looked as if it might enclose some sort of petition, but it was addressed simply "To Her!" Of course I opened it, as you may imagine, and found inside a declaration of love in verse. And such stanzas, my friend K I assure you, they were passionate and inflammatory to a degree!

GRUCHET: I suppose the lines were not signed, of course. Was there any clue to the identity of the sender?

ROUSSELIN: Listen! I said to myself that the first thing to do was to discover who was the lady that had inspired these glowing lines; and as they speak of dark hair, my suspicion fell at first upon Miss Arabella, our governess dark hair, my suspicion fell at first upon Miss Arabella, our governess.

GRUCHET: But she is a blonde!

ROUSSELIN: What does that matter? Poets often use one word instead of another, for the sake of the rhyme. However, purely as a matter of delicacy — you know what English women are — I have not ventured to ask her any questions.

GRUCHET: But what did your wife say?

ROUSSELIN: She only gave a shrug, and advised me not to bother my head about it.

GRUCHET: But why do you suspect Julien of being, the author of the stanzas?

ROUSSELIN: I will explain. First, I must tell you that the poem I found in the garden began with these words.
“I behold thy robe among the orange-trees.”
Now, I possess two orangeries, one on each side of the house, and there are no others in this neighbourhood. What does this show? That the declaration was addressed to some member of my household. To whom? Evidently to my daughter, Louise. And by whom? By the only person in this part of the country that writes verses — Julien Duprat I (Gruchet *makes a movement of dissent*] Moreover, when 1 compared the handwriting of the verses found by the wall with that which I see every day on the wrappers of the journal, I saw at once that they were exactly similar.

GRUCHET *[aside]:* Clumsy Julien!

ROUSSELIN: So that is your protégé, Gruchet. What does he propose to do in this house — seduce Mademoiselle Rousselin?

GRUCHET: Oh, what an idea!

ROUSSELIN: To marry her, perhaps.

GRUCHET: Well, he might wish to do that.

ROUSSELIN *[drily]:* I think it very likely! Upon my soul! these fellows have no respect for anyone. What insolence! Do 1 ask anything of him? Do 1 mix myself up in his affairs? Let him write his newspaper articles! Let him try to stir up the people against me! Let him then make apologies to mud-slingers like himself! If I should see him this moment, I would say: Get away from here, you miserable little hanger-on of newspaper offices, and hunt elsewhere for an heiress!

GRUCHET: Humph! as to that, my friend, there are others besides journalists who seek your daughter for the sake of her money.

ROUSSELIN: What are you saying?

GRUCHET: Why, the thing is plain enough to be seen! A certain person, we will say, lives in the country, where he cultivates, with his own hands, the soil owned by his ancestors. He does it very badly, to be sure, but is forced to it by reasons of economy. The land is now poor, besides being heavily mortgaged. This person has eight children, five of whom are girls, one of them a humpback. One never sees the other daughters on week-days, because of déficiences in their toilets. The eldest of the sons speculated in stocks for a time, but is now making a beast of himself with absinthe, and his' need of money is frequent. The second son, fortunately, is to be a priest. The youngest son — you know him, he is very much in evidence just now. Existence cannot be very gay in the ancestral castle, where the rain falls on the head through the holes in the roof. But our gentleman lays his plans, and one fine day he packs them all into the rickety old family carriage, which he drives himself, and they come to refresh themselves at the excellent table of that good Monsieur Rousselin, who is only too happy to be thus honoured!

ROUSSELIN: See here, my friend, you carry your obstinate resentment against that family rather too far.

GRUCHET: Well, I don't understand why you should have so much respect for the Bouvignys, unless it is a survival of the deference your class was once compelled to pay to the aristocrats who were in former days your masters.

ROUSSELIN *[pained]:* Gruchet, not a word of that, my friend, not a word! That thought is —

GRUCHET: Oh, don't be afraid! They will never say anything about it, and for good reasons.

ROUSSELIN: What reasons?

GRUCHET: Don't you see that these aristocrats despise us because we are plebeians — parvenus? That they are jealous of you because you are rich? The proffer of the candidacy to you — due, I have no doubt, to the management of Bouvigny, and of which he will probably boast — is merely a bait to catch your daughter's fortune. But, although it is quite possible that you will not be elected —

ROUSSELIN: Not be elected?

GRUCHET: Certainly — I said it was quite possible. Nevertheless, your daughter will probably become the wife of a young idiot who will blush to acknowledge his father-in-law.

ROUSSELIN: Oh, but I believe they have some sentiment in the matter.

GRUCHET: YOU think so, do you? But suppose I tell you that already they speak as if they owned you!

ROUSSELIN: Who told you that?

GRUCHET: Félicité, my maid. You know how servants talk over, among themselves, all the affairs of their masters.

ROUSSELIN: But what have they said? Tell me that.

GRUCHET: Their cook heard them talking mysteriously of this possible marriage of their son to Mademoiselle Louise, and when the Countess expressed some doubt about being able to bring it to pass, the Count, alluding to you, said, "Bah! he will feel himself only too much honoured!"

ROUSSELIN: Ah, they think they honour me, eh? 1

GRUCHET: They believe the affair is as good as settled.

ROUSSELIN: It is not, however, — thank heaven!

GRUCHET: They are so confident that just now, before the ladies, Onésime took on a little air of proprietorship.

ROUSSELIN: Did he, indeed?

GRUCHET: A little more, and I think he would have said "thee" and "thou" to them!

PIERRE *[announcing]:* Monsieur the Count de Bouvigny! *[Exit.*

GRUCHET: The Count! I will go. Good-bye, Rousselin. Don't forget what I have said to you. *[Enter Bouvigny. Gruchet passes in front of him, keeping his hat on his head; the two exchange disdainful glances. At the door Gruchet turns and shakes his fist at Bouvigny's back]* I think I've settled your business, my fine gentleman! *[Exit.*

SCENE VIII.

(Rousselin, the Count de Bouvigny)

BOUVIGNY *[In a tone of easy familiarity]*: I asked for a private interview, my dear fellow, with the intention of —

ROUSSELIN *[interrupts with ceremonious dignity, inviting the Count, with a gesture, to be seated]:* Monsieur de Bouvigny!

BOUVIGNY *[sighs]*: Oh, ceremony is not necessary between us, is it? I wish to say, in a few words — flattering myself in advance that you will grant the request I am about to make — that I have the honour to ask the hand in marriage of your daughter, Mademoiselle Louise, for my son, the Vicomte Onésime-Gaspard-Oliver de Bouvigny. *[of pause]* Well, your answer, Monsieur?

ROUSSELIN: I can say nothing just at present.

BOUVIGNY: Ah, I forgot! Mademoiselle has great expectations, of course, and — as a *dot* — a settlement — well, in short, Monsieur Dodart, who holds the titles to certain mortgages *[lowers his voice]*, will not fail to do the right thing, *[all pause]* I await your answer, Monsieur.

ROUSSELIN: Monsieur de Bouvigny, your proposition does me very great honour, but —

BOUVIGNY *[annoyed]:* Eh, Monsieur? But what?

ROUSSELIN: I fear that some one must have greatly exaggerated to you the amount of my fortune.

BOUVIGNY: And do you think we consider a thing like that? Do you imagine that the house of Bouvigny —

ROUSSELIN *[drily]:* Far be it from me to impute to you any mercenary motives! .Nevertheless, it is only right to tell you that I am not so rich as many persons believe.

BOUVIGNY *[graciously]:* The disproportion in other respects would only be less marked!

ROUSSELIN: However, in spite of the modest amount of my revenues, we manage to live with a certain degree of comfort. My wife has rather expensive tastes, and I am fond of entertaining, and of making happy everyone around me. I repaved, at my own expense, the road from Bugueux to Faverville. I have established a school, and have endowed at the hospital four beds which bear my name.

BOUVIGNY: These facts are very well known, my dear sir.

ROUSSELIN: I have rehearsed them only to convince you that, although the son of a banker, and once in that business myself, I am comfortably well off, but not what is generally considered a man of great wealth. As to Monsieur 'Onésime, his rank would not in itself be an obstacle, but there is a serious drawback, nevertheless. Your son has rio occupation.

BOUVIGNY *[proudly]*: Sir, a gentleman of my son's rank can take up no profession but that of arms!

ROUSSELIN: But he is not a soldier.

BOUVIGNY: He is waiting, in order to serve his country, until the government is changed.

ROUSSELIN: And while waiting?

BOUVIGNY: He will live in his own domains, as I live, Monsieur.

ROUSSELIN: TO wear out his shoes in hunting — very good! But, Monsieur, I prefer to give my daughter to some one whose fortune — pardon me for using the word! — is even less than your son's.

BOUVIGNY: But your daughter's fortune is assured, is it not?

ROUSSELIN: Yes! But I prefer to give her to a man who has nothing at all.

BOUVIGNY: Nothing at all!

ROUSSELIN *[rises]:* Yes, Monsieur, a simple workman, a person without breeding or culture!

BOUVIGNY *[rises]:* Is it your intention to express scorn of rank and aristocratic breeding?

ROUSSELIN: Yes, Monsieur. I am a son of the Revolution!

BOUVIGNY: Your manners show it, believe me!

ROUSSELIN: And I do not allow myself to be dazzled by the glitter of brilliant titles.

BOUVIGNY: Nor I by that of gold!

ROUSSELIN: We no longer cringe low before the nobility, thank heaven!

BOUVIGNY: True! I remember that your grandfather was a servant in our household!

ROUSSELIN: Ah, you wish to insult me! Go, Monsieur! The consideration of one's reputation is to-day a privilege belonging to everyone. Mine is above your sneers and calumnies. Has not a group of worthy citizens just waited upon me in order to offer me the candidacy?

BOUVIGNY: Let me tell you that they wished to offer it first to me, and I declined it in your favour! But in the face of such indelicacy on your part, after the declaration of your principles, and since you have practically announced yourself a democrat, a supporter of anarchy —

ROUSSELIN: Of anarchy! Not at all!

BOUVIGNY: An organ of disorder, I say — I have resolved to take back my refusal. I shall declare myself a candidate — a conservative candidate, you understand — and we shall see which will win! I am the friend of the prefect who has just been nominated. I shall tell hip everything, and he will support me.

Good evening, Monsieur!
[Exit.

SCENE IX.

ROUSSELIN: Now he is so furious now that he is quite capable of doing all he can to ruin me in public opinion — even of representing me as a Jacobite! Perhaps 1 did wrong to hurt his feelings. But to be expected to hand over a large part of my fortune to set up the Bouvignys — that was a little too much! Well, it can't be helped now, but it is a pity to break with him. Murel and Gruchet already appear to me to be less certain of my election than they were, and we must find some means to persuade the Conservatives that 1 am in reality the most conservative of men! Ha! what does this mean?

SCENE X.

(Enter Murel, followed by a crowd of Electors, then by Heurtelot, Beaumesnil, Voinchet, Hombourg, Ledru, then Gruchet)

MUREL: My dear fellow-citizen, the electors here present have come to offer you, through me, the candidacy of the Liberal party of this district.

ROUSSELIN: But, gentlemen —

MUREL: YOU will have the majority of votes in the communes of Faverville, Harolle, Lahoussaye, Sannevas, Bonneval, Hautot, Saint-Mathieu —

ROUSSELIN [delighted]: Ah, indeed!

MUREL: Randau, Manerville, and La Coudrette. In short, we count on a majority of more than fifteen hundred votes, and your election is practically assured.

ROUSSELIN: Ah, my fellow-citizens — *[Aside to Murel]* I don't know what to say!

MUREL: Allow me to present to you some of your political friends. Here is the most enthusiastic of all, a true patriot — Monsieur Heurtelot, a manufacturer —

HEURTELOT: Oh, say shoemaker — it is all the same to me!

MUREL: Monsieur Hombourg, proprietor of the Golden Lion, and also of a livery stable. Monsieur Voinchet, nurseryman; Monsieur Beaumesnil, without a profession; and the brave Captain Ledru, retired.

ROUSSELIN *[with enthusiasm]*: Ah, the military!

MUREL: And we are all convinced that you will fill this high office in the most satisfactory manner. *[Aside to Rousselin]* Say something.

ROUSSELIN: Gentlemen — no, citizens! My principles are yours — and —

ROUSSELIN: Gentlemen — no, citizens! My principles are yours — and — certainly — I am a son of this soil — like yourselves. No one has ever heard me say anything against the cause of liberty. Quite the contrary! You will find in me a servant devoted to your interests — a defender — a barrier against the encroachments of Power!

MUREL *[presses Rousselin's hand]:* Good! my friend, very good! Have no doubt as to the result of your nomination! First of all, you will be sustained and upheld by that well-known journal, *The Impartial.*

ROUSSELIN: *The Impartial* will support me, you say?

GRUCHET *[coming forward from the midst of the group]:* Absolutely, I assure you. I have just come from the editor's office. Julien Duprat is most enthusiastic. *[Surprised at seeing Murel; then aside to him]* He has given me his reasons — I will explain to you later. *[To the Electors]* You will permit me, gentlemen. *[Makes his way to Rousselin; then aside to him]* Now, then, my friend, don't you think you would do well to follow my advice?

ROUSSELIN: TO follow *your* advice? Pardon me! I have a head of my own, you know.

GRUCHET: I mean — to let me present Julien to you? He is very desirous to meet you.

ROUSSELIN: IS it — absolutely necessary?

GRUCHET: Oh, indispensable!

ROUSSELIN: Well, then — yes, — as you please.
[Exit Gruchet.

HEURTELOT *[takes Rousselin by the elbow and turns him squarely around]:* That is not all, by any means, Monsieur. One of the first things you must do after you are elected is to abolish the tax on liquors.

ROUSSELIN: Abolish the tax on liquors — oh, yes, certainly!

HEURTELOT: The other candidates have made fine promises, but after election they tell you to go and take a walk! But I believe you are an honest man — give me your hand on it! *[Extends his own hand]*

ROUSSELIN *[with a slight hesitation]:* Willingly, sir, willingly!

HEURTELOT: That's all right, then. It is high time that some of these public abuses should stop. We have suffered from them quite long enough.

HOMBOURG: I believe you! A man can make nothing now in the livery business. The price of hay is beyond all reason.

ROUSSELIN: That is quite true. The occupation of agriculture —

HOMBOURG: I am not talking about agriculture, but about the livery business.

MUREL: And a most important business it is! But now, thanks to our friend here, the government will —

LEDRU: Bah! the government! It decorates a lot of good-for-nothing puppies!

VOINCHET: I wish to say that the laying out of the railway so that it shall run through Saint-Mathieu, is a piece of imbecile folly.

BEAUMESNIL: A man cannot educate his children properly in these days.

ROUSSELIN: I promise you all —

HOMBOURG: First of all, the rights of liverymen.

ROUSSELIN: Yes, yes!

LEDRU: That is, when they are in the interest of discipline.

ROUSSELIN: Of course!

VOINCHET: You must persuade the railway company to lay the road by way of Bonneval.

ROUSSELIN: Certainly, certainly!

BEAUMESNIL: AS for me, I have only the best intentions —

ROUSSELIN: I believe you, Monsieur.

HOMBOURG: Thus, in order to rent a carriage —

LEDRU: I ask nothing for myself, but —

VOINCHET: My property will be greatly injured if —

BEAUMESNIL: Really, you know, since there are colleges —

MUREL *[loudly]*. My fellow-citizens, pardon me! One word! Gentlemen, on this occasion, when our beloved fellow-citizen here has so well expressed himself, — in language which I might almost call classic in its simplicity — and has so well confirmed our hopes, I am very happy to have been your spokesman. In order to celebrate this event — the influence of which will spread over all the district, and perhaps over France — permit me to invite you to partake, next Monday, of a punch of my own brewing!

ELECTORS *[together]*: Bravo! Agreed! Next Monday be it!

MUREL: And now, I believe, nothing remains for us to do but to retire.

ELECTORS *[together]:* Good morning, Monsieur Rousselin I Good luck! All will go well! You will see!

ROUSSELIN *[shakes hands with several of the Electors]:* My friends, I am indeed touched! Good morning! I am your servant, gentlemen! *[Electors retire slowly up stage, talking together]*

MUREL *[aside to Rousselin]*: You must cultivate Heurtelot a little; he is a leader among them. *[Follows Electors up stage and delays their exit]*

ROUSSELIN *[calls]:* Oh, Monsieur Heurtelot, one moment!

HEURTELOT *[returns]:* Yes, Monsieur.

ROUSSELIN *[speaks confidentially]*: Could you not make me fifteen pairs of boots?

HEURTELOT: Fifteen pairs, Monsieur!

ROUSSELIN: Yes, and as many pairs of shoes. I am not going on a long journey, but I think it wise to provide myself with a good supply of foot-wear.

HEURTELOT: They shall be begun at once, Monsieur. At your service! *[Bows low, and rejoins the Electors]*

HOMBOURG *[approaches Rousselin, speaking confidentially]*: Monsieur Rousselin, I have recently bought a pair of beautiful chestnut horses, and they would look superb harnessed to your carriage. Would you like to see them?

ROUSSELIN: Yes, yes! One of these days. *[Hombourg rejoins Electors]*

VOINCHET *[approaches Rousselin]*: I will send you a little memorandum about the laying out of that new railroad, showing that by running it through my property —

ROUSSELIN: Very well, very well! *[Voinchet rejoins Electors]*

BEAUMESNIL: I mean to bring my son to call on you, and you will be convinced that it would be deplorable to allow so promising a boy to grow up without a proper education.

ROUSSELIN: He shall be permitted to re-enter his classes, I promise it.

HEURTELOT: That's something like a candidate! Hurrah for Rousselin!

ALL: Hurrah for Rousselin! *[Exit Electors.*

SCENE XI.

(Rousselin, Murel)

ROUSSELIN *[rushes to Murel and embraces him]:* Ah, my friend, my dear, good friend!

MUREL: Well, do you think I managed that part of the business satisfactorily?

ROUSSELIN: I never can find words to express my gratitude and appreciation.

MUREL: YOU are very desirous to obtain this nomination, aren't you?

ROUSSELIN: Well, I don't mind telling you that I am very anxious to get it. You see, after I retired from active business life, and had spent about a year or two out here in the country, I began to feel a certain lassitude creeping over me. I became dull and heavy. I used to go to sleep every evening after dinner; and finally the doctor told my wife it was absolutely necessary for me to find something to occupy myself with. So I cast about in my mind to decide upon some agreeable occupation.

MUREL: And you thought you would like to become a deputy, eh?

ROUSSELIN: Naturally. Besides, I have arrived at an age when a man owes something to himself. I have bought a library and I have subscribed to *The (Monitor.*

MUREL: You have laid out some pretty stiff work for yourself, I should say!

ROUSSELIN: Then I joined the Archaelogical Society, and I have already received, through the mails, several pamphlets on archaeology. After awhile I was chosen as a member of the municipal council; next, of the district council; and finally, of the general council; and when any important questions came up in the affairs of these councils, I never compromised myself by making any statements or remarks — I only smiled discreetly! Ah, the non-committal smile is a great resource sometimes, my boy!

MUREL: But in doing that, you see, you never allow the public to become acquainted with your real ideas and sympathies; and now it is time to declare yourself. Perhaps you do not know —

ROUSSELIN: Oh, yes! I know that I owe everything to you alone.

MUREL: NO, no! You don't understand at all.

ROUSSELIN: Perhaps not! That's your modesty. What a diplomat you are, my dear fellow!

MUREL *[aside]:* He's trying to pique me! *[Aloud]* Frankly, the workmen in my factory were against you when your name was first proposed, and they are redoubtable men, I assure you. But now they are all in your favour.

ROUSSELIN: YOU are worth your weight in gold!

MUREL *[aside]:* I don't ask quite so much as that!

ROUSSELIN *[looks at Murel admiringly]*: You are dearer to me than a brother! You are like my own son!

MUREL *[significantly]:* Well, I might be — that!

ROUSSELIN: No doubt *[sudden movement from Murel]*, if I were only a trifle older.

MUREL *[with a forced laugh]:* Or if — I — should become your — son-in-law! How would you like that?

ROUSSELIN *[also with a forced laugh]:* You're a great joker! You know you wouldn't like it yourself.

MUREL *[earnestly]:* But indeed I should!

ROUSSELIN: Nonsense! Marry, with your Parisian habits?

MUREL: I should live in the countrv.

ROUSSELIN: Oh, pshaw! Men of your age don't marry.

MUREL: Thirty-four years — it is just the right age.

ROUSSELIN: Especially when they have before them such a future as yours.

MUREL: My future prospects would be greatly improved if —

ROUSSELIN: Now let us reason a little. Here you are, simply the manager of the Bugneaux spinning-mills, representing the Flemish company, and you have a salary of twenty thousand francs.

MUREL: And a considerable sum coming to me besides, in perquisites and privileges.

ROUSSELIN: But how about the years when business is bad? And then, of course, you might lose your place at any time.

MUREL: Then I should go somewhere else, where I could find —

ROUSSELIN: But you have debts and dishonoured bills — you are harassed by your creditors.

MUREL: I have some means of my own, nevertheless, to say nothing of my expectations.

ROUSSELIN: Ah, you mean you expect to inherit something from your aunt. You do not really count upon that, do you? Your aunt lives two hundred leagues away from this place, and besides you are not on good terms with her.

MUREL *[aside]:* The old brute! He finds out everything!

ROUSSELIN: In short, my dear Murel, although I doubt neither your intelligence nor your industry, I prefer to give my daughter to a man who —

MUREL: Who has nothing at all, and is a fool into the bargain, I suppose!

ROUSSELIN: NO, but whose fortune, though small, would be certain.

MUREL *[scornfully]:* Ah, indeed!

ROUSSELIN: Yes, Monsieur, to a gentleman possessing a modest income, or to a small landed proprietor living in this part of the country.

MUREL: Apparently, you have not a very high opinion of a man that works.

ROUSSELIN: Listen to me, my good fellow! Industry is very commendable, but it is not to be depended upon — its results are not sure — and a good father must look carefully after the interests of his child.

MUREL: Then you refuse to give me your daughter?

ROUSSELIN *[very good-naturedly, taking Murel's hand]:* I am forced to do so, but really it is not my fault, and I speak entirely without rancour. *[Calls]* Pierre! Bring my writing-case and an inkstand. *[To Murel]* Sit down here. You must now prepare my declaration of policy for the electors.
(Enter Pierre, *with writing materials; puts them on small table,* R. *Exit)*

MUREL: I must prepare it, you say?

ROUSSELIN: Yes, and afterward we will look it over together. But you begin it, there's a good fellow! With your spirit and imagination, you will be sure to do it well, — better than I could, although you did praise me for my speech to the electors. It *was* good, wasn't it? Now I will leave you for a short time, as I have to look after some rather pressing matters. Give them something lively — something fiery — wake them up! *[Exit*

SCENE XII.

MUREL: Fool! I've advanced my interests beautifully, I must say! *[Looks after Rousselin]* You old idiot! You'll never find anyone that will be so useful to you as I. How shall I pay him back, or rather, how can I frighten him? He would sacrifice anything for the sake of being elected. I shall have to threaten him with a dangerous political rival. But whom? *[Enter Gruchet]* Ah, Gruchet!

GRUCHET: YOU look disturbed. What is the matter with you?

MUREL: Remorse! I have just done a stupid thing — and you, too.

GRUCHET: In what way?

MUREL: YOU were here just now, with the men that promised to support Rousselin's candidacy. You saw and heard him.

GRUCHET: Yes, and then I went to find Julien — he is coming here directly.

MUREL: It is not a question of Julien, but of Rousselin. That man is an ass! He doesn't know how to say four words properly. We shall have a fine deputy!

GRUCHET: Well, I did not take the initiative step!

MUREL: He has shown himself to be possessed of scarcely mediocre intelligence.

GRUCHET: Quite true!

MUREL: But that doesn't prevent him from, being regarded with great consideration in this neighbourhood, — even more than you yourself receive.

GRUCHET *[vexed]:* More than I!

MUREL: I don't wish to offend you, but of course I know you do not enjoy, in this town, the distinction that belongs to the Rousselins.

this town, the distinction that belongs to the Rousselins.

GRUCHET: Oh, if I wished it — *[Short pause]*

MUREL *[looks Gruchet full in the eyes]:* Gruchet, would you be willing to raise yourself in the world, even if it should put you to a rather heavy expense?

GRUCHET: Heavy expense? That sort of thing is not very much to my taste, but what do you mean?

MUREL: Suppose some one said to you: For a consideration of several thousand francs, you may take Rousselin's place — you shall become deputy?

GRUCHET: I? Deputy?

MUREL: Just think what a glorious time you would have in Paris, where you would be in the very midst of great affairs! You would meet hundreds of delightful people — even the ministers. You would know all about everything — society gossip, news about important public works, the latest thing on the Bourse — everything! What influence you might have, my friend, and what an experience!

GRUCHET: But how can all this possibly come about? Rousselin is almost elected.

MUREL: Not yet! He failed to mention his ideas on the rights of franchise when he made the declaration of his policy; and then — a little — manipulation — is easy! Several electors were not in favour of his nomination in the first place. Heurtelot, in particular grumbled at it.

GRUCHET: The shoemaker? I have a seizure against him for the day after tomorrow.

MUREL: Put it off! He is looked up to by his fellows. With regard to the others, we shall see. I shall arrange matters so that the dissatisfaction with Rousselin shall begin among the workmen in our mills; then, if it becomes necessary for me to declare myself outright for you, I shall do so.
As Monsieur Rousselin has not shown a sufficiently patriotic spirit, I feel compelled to withdraw from his support! More than that, I know him now for what he is — a blockhead!

what he is — a blockhead!

GRUCHET: Gently! gently! *[Falls into a reverie]*

MUREL: Who can stop you? You are on the "left" side, aren't you? Your name can be brought up by that faction, as a member of the Chamber; but even if you fail of election, the votes cast for you will take away from Rousselin any chance he might have of being elected.

GRUCHET: That would make him furious!

MUREL: It will not cost much to try it — perhaps a few hundred francs in the wine-shops.

GRUCHET *[with interest]*: No more than that, you think?

MUREL: NOW I am going to stir up the district! Soon you will be nominated, and Rousselin will be buried — out of sight! You will have the satisfaction of seeing that some persons that appear not to know you now, will then bow very low and say, "Monsieur the deputy, I have the honour to offer you my respects!"

SCENE XIII.

(The same. Enter Julien Duprat; *looks about him right and left)*

MUREL: My young friend Duprat, you cannot see Monsieur Rousselin.
JULIEN: I cannot see him, you say?

MUREL: Precisely. He and I have had some disagreement over politics.

JULIEN: But I do not understand. Just now you came to my house to tell me that I must support Monsieur Rousselin, and gave me a mass of reasons — which I repeated to Monsieur Gruchet. He accepted them immediately, all the sooner since he desires —

GRUCHET *[hastily]*: That matter is entirely between you and me, Julien. This is another affair altogether — something that does not concern Rousselin.

JULIEN: Then what is the trouble regarding him?

MUREL: I will tell you in a few words — he is not the right man for our party.

GRUCHET *[complacently]*: Another candidate must be found!

MUREL: YOU shall know soon the name of the next candidate. But let us get out of here. We mustn't conspire on the very grounds of the enemy.

JULIEN: The enemy! Rousselin?

MUREL: Certainly! And you will please oblige us by attacking him vigorously in *The Impartial.*

JULIEN: But why? I don't know of anything bad to say about him.

GRUCHET: With a little exercise of the imagination, it should be easy to find something.

JULIEN: I am not in the habit of doing that sort of thing, Monsieur!

GRUCHET: NOW listen! You came to me first to offer me your services, and, knowing that I was a friend of Rousselin, you begged me — yes, that's the word — to introduce you here.

JULIEN: And no sooner do I arrive than you take back your promise to present me.

GRUCHET: It is not my fault if political affairs have taken a turn in the other direction.

JULIEN: And is it mine?

GRUCHET: YOU will remember, it was distinctly understood between us that you should publish some slashing articles against the Society of the Turf of Grumesnil-les-Arbois — the president of which is the Count de Bouvigny — demonstrating the financial incapacity of its leader. A fine affair, that Society! from which that scoundrelly Dodart has excluded me!

MUREL *[aside]:* Oh! So this is the secret of the alliance between Gruchet and our young friend!

GRUCHET: Up to the present, however, you have done nothing whatever, which is a very good reason why you should now do something effective. Besides, what we wish you to do is not at all difficult.

JULIEN: I don't care what it is! I refuse!

MUREL: Julien, you appear to forget the terms of your engagement with our journal.

JULIEN: Oh, I remember them well enough! You engaged me to make extracts from other publications; to write bright little stories about lost dogs, floods, fires, and accidents, and to write up, with plenty of clever hits, the daily happenings of life in Paris! I must seek interviews, listen to explanations, receive all visitors, work like a galley-slave, lead a regular dog's life, and never, under any conditions, be my own master in anything! Well, for once I ask to be excused.

MUREL: All the worse for you!

GRUCHET: I conclude that it was not necessary for you to accept this engagement with *The Impartial!*

JULIEN: Not necessary! Ah! if only I could have found another!

GRUCHET: Oh, indeed! Well, when a man has no means to fall back upon, I should think it would be rather pleasant to have a good comfortable berth like this.

JULIEN *[walks slowly up stage]:* Ah, the misery of poverty!

MUREL: Let him pout! We might as well sit down here a few moments, long enough for me to write out your declaration of policy.

GRUCHET: Willingly! *[They sit; Murel draws out paper and pencil and begins to write; Gruchet looks over his shoulder]*

JULIEN *[stands up stage; looks up at Rousselin's house]:* How gladly would I rid myself of my wretched existence, were it not for thee, my love! Oh, I cannot allow the slightest grief or anxiety on my account to come to thee — herein thine own home! May the walls that shelter thee be blessed! *[Looks off]* It appears to me that I can distinguish a white robe out there — among the acacias. Now it has disappeared! Farewell! *[About to go]*

GRUCHET *[looks around at Julien]*: Wait a moment, we have something to show you.

JULIEN: Ah! I have had enough of your dirty work!
[Exit.

MUREL [holds up sheet of paper]: There! What do you think of it?

GRUCHET: It is very well done! Thank you! But —

MUREL: Well, what is it?.

GRUCHET: The thought of Rousselin disturbs me a little.

MUREL: Pooh! He is a person of very little consequence.

GRUCHET: You don't know what he is capable of doing. Young Duprat appeared extremely angry just now, didn't he?

MUREL: My opinion is, he must have some strong reason for wishing to become acquainted with the Rousselins.

GRUCHET: To be sure he has! He is in love with Louise.

MUREL: Who told you so?

GRUCHET: Rousselin himself.

MUREL *[aside]:* Another rival! Bah! I have knocked over more formidable ones than he! *[Aloud]* I am going to find Julien again, and catechise him. In the meantime, you must get this declaration of policy set up at the printer's; then go around and see as many of your friends as you can, and meet me here again in two hours.

GRUCHET: Agreed! *[Exit.*

MUREL: And now, Monsieur Rousselin, I think the time will come when you will be glad to offer me your daughter!

ACT II.

Scene: A promenade in a public square. A café, L. 2 E.; the walls and the iron gates leading to the grounds belonging to Rousselin's house, R. 2 E. As the curtain rises, a bill-poster is discovered affixing a placard to Rousselin's wall.

SCENE I.

(Heurtelot, Marchais, a Village Policeman, and a crowd of citizens)

POLICEMAN: Move on, there! Get away from the wall, so that everyone can read the proclamation. CITIZENS: That's right! Stand back! [Crowd moves back]

HEURTELOT: Ah, it is De Bouvigny's declaration of policy!

MARCHAIS: What! Is *he* nominated?

HEURTELOT: NO, no! It is Gruchet who will get the . nomination now. Read what is on the placard.

MARCHAIS: I — read it?

HEURTELOT: Yes.

MARCHAIS: YOU read the first part of it. *[Aside]* He does not know his alphabet! *[Aloud]* Well?

HEURTELOT: But why don't you read it?

MARCHAIS: I?

HEURTELOT *[aside]:* He doesn't know how to spell! *[Aloud]* Well — ahem!

POLICEMAN: And these ignoramuses vote! Wait — I'll read it for you. First, I'll read Bouvigny's: "My friends! Yielding to your urgent request, I believe it my duty to present myself as a candidate for your votes — "

HEURTELOT *[interrupts]:* Oh, we know all about him I Read another — read Gruchet's.

POLICEMAN: "Fellow-citizens! In obedience to the wishes of my friends, I present myself — "

MARCHAIS *[interrupts]:* What a farce! That's enough about him!

POLICEMAN: Now I will read Monsieur Rousselin's announcement: "My dear fellow-patriots! So many of you have solicited me to accept the nomination that I dare not — ”

HEURTELOT: The old rascal! He thinks he is going to fool us! Let's tear down his placard!

MARCHAIS: Yes, because he is a traitor!

POLICEMAN *[stops their approach to the wall]:* You have no right to do that.

MARCHAIS: Not when it is in the interest of law and order?

HEURTELOT: And liberty!

POLICEMAN: YOU let those placards alone, or I will throw you both into jail! '

HEURTELOT: A fine government this is! It is carried on only to torment us and cheat us!

MARCHAIS: We can do nothing to defend ourselves!

SCENE II.

(The same, including Murel *and* Gruchet)

MUREL *[to Heurtelot]*: Faithful at your post! That's good! Now take all this crowd over there *[points to café],* and give them a drink.

HEURTELOT: Oh, but —

MUREL: Take them along, I say, and go in without ceremony. I have given them their orders over there, but it is Gruchet who stands treat!

GRUCHET: Up to a certain amount — don't forget that!

MUREL: Well, go along with them, then.

CITIZENS: Hurrah for Gruchet! A good fellow! A solid citizen! A patriot!
[Exit all except Murel.

SCENE III.

MUREL [approaches Rousselin's gates]: I must try to see Louise for a moment.

ARABELLA *[enters through the gates]:* I wish to speak to you, Monsieur.

MUREL: Delighted, Miss Arabella! But — tell me — Louise, is she not —

ARABELLA: Was not some one here with you a moment ago?

MUREL: Yes.

ARABELLA: Monsieur Duprat, I believe.

MUREL: NO, it was Gruchet.

ARABELLA: Gruchet! He is a very bad man! It is a shame to make him a candidate!

MUREL: And why, may I ask?

ARABELLA: Some time ago Monsieur Rousselin lent him quite a large sum of money, which he has never repaid. I have seen the memorandum of it.

MUREL *[aside]*: This explains the reason why Gruchet was so afraid of him!

ARABELLA: But Monsieur Rousselin had too much delicacy and kindly feeling to press him for payment. He is so good, although a little odd at times! For instance, his prejudice against Monsieur Julien —

MUREL: And Louise, Miss Arabella — how is she?

ARABELLA: Oh, when they told her it was impossible that she should be allowed to marry you, she wept sadly.

MUREL: My sweet Louise!

MUREL: My sweet Louise!

ARABELLA: Poor little thing! Madame Rousselin is very hard upon her.

MUREL: And her father — what does he say about me?

ARABELLA: He is very much worried and vexed.

MUREL: Does he regret his words to me?

ARABELLA: NO. But he is afraid of you.

MUREL: I am glad to hear it!

ARABELLA: He fears your workmen will oppose him, and he dreads the editorials in *The Impartial,* of which he says you are the real master.

MUREL: Ha! ha! ha!

ARABELLA: But that is not true, is it? Has not Monsieur Julien more influence there than you?

MUREL *[still laughing]*: Go on, I beg, Miss Arabella!

ARABELLA: Oh! I am very sad about this whole affair. I wish that matters could be settled amicably.

MUREL: It would be rather difficult to do that now, it seems to me.

ARABELLA: Not at all! I know that Monsieur Rousselin strongly desires a friendly understanding. But hush! Do not mention what I have just said, I entreat you.

MUREL *[aside]**. What a queer creature!

ARABELLA: A reconciliation would be to your interest with regard to Louise, believe me! Everyone should be reconciled and made happy — she, you, myself, and Monsieur Julien.

MUREL *[aside]:* Always Julien! How stupid I have been! I believe I have discovered a romance — the poet and his muse! How very funny! *[Aloud]* I will do whatever I can to bring about a reconciliation. Au revoir, Mademoiselle.

ARABELLA *[curtseys]:* Good afternoon, sir! *[Sees an old woman, who stands up stage, C., beckoning J Ah, Félicité! [Joins the woman; they go out]*

SCENE IV.

(Enter Rousselin*, hastily, through the gates)*

ROUSSELIN: Upon my word, this is a most unheard—
of thing! MUREL *[aside]:* Now for it!

ROUSSELIN: Gruchet! — it is that man Gruchet who is trying to cut the ground from under my feet! A miserable fellow, whom I have protected and helped! And he boasts that he is upheld by you!

MUREL: But —

ROUSSELIN: HOW the devil did this idea of putting himself forward as a candidate ever get into his head?

MUREL: I really do not know. He came tearing into my rooms like a madman, saying that I must abjure all my former political opinions at once.

ROUSSELIN: I have been too moderate. Nevertheless, I protested with equal vigour against the preposterous demagogy, of which this rascally Gruchet is the representative, and the yoke of absolutism that the aristocrats would like to hang upon our necks, of which the Count de Bouvigny is the abominable supporter, the Gothic symbol, I may say! In a word, faithful to the traditions of the old French spirit, I demand, before all, the reign of law, the government of the people by the people, with a due regard for the rights of property. On that point-

MUREL: Precisely! It is on that very point that the people judge you as not being sufficiently republican in your ideas.

ROUSSELIN: I am more so than Gruchet, however, and I have recommended — but perhaps I ought to announce it in the public prints — the lowering of customs duties and of town taxes.

MUREL: Bravo!

ROUSSELIN: I ask frankly of the municipal powers for a better organising of juries; for the liberty of the press; and for the abolishing of all sinecure offices, and also of all titles of nobility.

MUREL: Very fine!

ROUSSELIN: I have also been urgent in the cause of universal suffrage. Does that surprise you? Nevertheless, that is my policy. To our new prefect, who supports the other side, I have written three letters, as a warning. I have, indeed! And I am ready to meet him face to face — even to insult him, if necessary. Tell that to your workmen!

MUREL *[aside]*: Can he be speaking seriously?

ROUSSELIN: YOU see, then, that in preferring Gruchet to me — because, I repeat, he boasts that he has your support — he has told it all over town!

MUREL: How do you know that I shall vote for him?

ROUSSELIN: Eh?

MUREL: In politics I hold fast to my own opinions. Now, his views seem to my mind not quite so progressive as yours. We must wait a bit. All is not over yet.

ROUSSELIN: Indeed, it is not all over, but I don't know what more I can do to please the electors. And I am greatly surprised to find that I have been so misunderstood by a man of your intelligence.

MUREL: YOU overwhelm me!

ROUSSELIN: I have no doubt as to the success of your career in the future.

MUREL: Indeed! Well, in that case —

ROUSSELIN: Proceed!

MUREL: Well, then, to meet confidence with confidence, I have a little confession to make to you. I did agree to help Gruchet after you had refused my request for your daughter's hand, and I own that I acted under the influence of anger.

ROUSSELIN *[pats Murel on the shoulder]*: ALL the better! That proves you have spirit.

MUREL: I cursed you as much as I adored your daughter.

ROUSSELIN: YOU dear boy! *[Takes Murel's hand]* Ah, your leaving me hurt me deeply!

MUREL: Seriously, Monsieur, if I cannot have Louise I shall die of grief!

ROUSSELIN: NO, no! you must not die.

MUREL: YOU will give me some hope?

ROUSSELIN: After examination and mature reflection, your personal standing appears rather more advantageous than I thought when you first mentioned the matter to me.

MUREL: More advantageous?

ROUSSELIN: Yes, for besides your thirty thousand francs of salary —

MUREL *[timidly]*: Twenty thousand.

ROUSSELIN: Thirty thousand! — and a share in the stock of the company — there is your aunt to be considered, since you are her heir.

MUREL: Yes — with another nephew, a soldier.

ROUSSELIN: A soldier, eh? Well, there are always chances of — *[Makes gesture as if firing a gun]* The Bedouins! *[Laughs]*

MUREL *[laughs]:* Yes, yes, you are right! All women, even when they are old, change their minds very quickly, and my aunt is certainly capricious. But seriously, I have recently heard that she speaks very kindly of me sometimes.

ROUSSELIN *[aside]:* If that were only true! *[Aloud]* Well, dear boy, come around here this evening after dinner, and stand near my house, but don't appear as if you were looking for me. *[Exit]*

SCENE V.

MUREL: Come here this evening! That is rather encouraging — it is almost a consent. Arabella was right. *[Enter Gruchet]*

GRUCHET: Here I am! I have not lost time. What news? Tell me quickly.

MUREL: Gruchet, have you reflected seriously upon the matter you are considering?

GRUCHET: Why do you ask that?

MUREL: It is no light responsibility to be a deputy.

GRUCHET: I believe you!

MUREL: YOU will bring down upon yourself all sorts of scheming rascals and beggars.

GRUCHET: Oh, my good fellow, I am well accustomed to refusing people.

MUREL: It will seriously upset all your private affairs.

GRUCHET: Never! Don't you believe it!

MUREL: Besides, it would be necessary to live in Paris, and that would entail great expense.

GRUCHET: Very well, I will live in Paris, and hang the expense!

MUREL: Frankly, I don't see any particular advantage for you even if you should obtain the deputyship.

GRUCHET: YOU may think what you please. I see the advantage, myself.

MUREL: And you may fail of election, you know

MUREL: And you may fail of election, you know.

GRUCHET: Have you any reason to think that?

MUREL: Nothing very serious. But there is no denying that Rousselin has a firm hold on the public favour.

GRUCHET: Only a short time ago, you said he was an imbecile!

MUREL: That may not prevent him from succeeding.

GRUCHET: Then you advise me to give up the whole thing?

MUREL: Not absolutely. But it is always bad to have for an adversary a man of Rousselin's importance.

GRUCHET: His importance! Ha! ha!

MUREL: Remember, he has many friends; his manners are cordial and pleasing; and, while he manages the Conservatives very cleverly, he poses as a Republican.

GRUCHET: Everyone knows that.

MUREL: Oh, if you count on the good sense of the public —

GRUCHET: But why do you discourage me now, when everything is running as smoothly as if on wheels? Listen to me! No one suspects it, but through Félicité, my maid, I know all that goes on in Rousselin's household.

MUREL: Your method of gaining information is not particularly delicate!

GRUCHET: Why not?

MUREL: Nor even prudent; because they say that once you borrowed a considerable sum of money from Rousselin.

GRUCHET: They say that? Well?

MUREL: YOU ought first to repay him.

MUREL: YOU ought first to repay him.

GRUCHET: For that matter, you ought to repay me the money I lent you a long time ago. Be just!

MUREL: In spite of my proofs of devoted friendship, and the good advice I have just given you, you speak to me like that! Please remember that without my influence you never can be elected!
Here I have been wearing myself out for you, although I have no personal interest in the matter.

GRUCHET: Who knows? I don't understand this business at all. First you push me ahead, then you pull me back. The money I owe to Rousselin! Let some one else pay it! I am not inexhaustible! And the bill at the café is going to be something terrible, because those lively fellows drink and drink, without knowing when to stop. Perhaps you think I am not worrying about that! This electioneering is a whirlpool that sucks down all one's money. *[Enter Hombourg]* Hombourg, here again?

HOMBOURG: IS Monsieur Rousselin at home?

GRUCHET: I know nothing about him.

HOMBOURG: One word! I own a little Normandy horse — not an expensive animal — which would be very useful to you in driving about the country on your electioneering business.

GRUCHET: I make all my trips on foot, thank you!

HOMBOURG: A rare chance, Monsieur Gruchet!

GRUCHET: Chances like that will be sure to turn up again.

HOMBOURG: I do not believe it.

GRUCHET: It is quite impossible for me to buy it at present.

HOMBOURG *[bows]:* At your service, Monsieur! *[Enters Rousselin's house]*

MUREL: Do you think Rousselin would have done that? That man keeps an inn.

and he will try to turn all his customers against you. You may lose fifty votes through him. I am tired of trying to support your cause!

GRUCHET: Keep cool! I own I did wrong. It was because you had just been worrying me with your remarks about Rousselin. And perhaps what you told me is not true, after all. From whom did you get the information? Only from Rousselin, I'LL wager! Or possibly you are playing one of your own little jokes, just to test me. *[Noise without]*

MUREL: Listen!

GRUCHET: I hear.

MUREL: The noise is coming nearer.

VOICES *[without]*: Gruchet! Gruchet I *(Enter* Félicité, L.)

FELICITE: Monsieur Gruchet, some one wishes to see you.

GRUCHET: ME?

FELICITE: Yes; come quickly!

GRUCHET: TO see me? *[Exit hastily, with Félicité. Noise increases]*

MUREL *[about to go, L.]*S What a racket! What can be the matter? *[Exit.*

SCENE VI.

ROUSSELIN *[enters from the house]:* The people are becoming quite excited, apparently. Good! — that is, provided they are not getting excited against me!

VOICES *[from the café]:* Down with the *bourgeoisie* ROUSSELIN: Ha! I don't like that much!

(Gruchet *passes across the back of stage, trying to evade a crowd of men, who demand a speech from him)*

GRUCHET: Leave me, my friends! Let me alone! No, no! I tell you, I cannot make a speech!

ALL: Gruchet! Long live Gruchet, our deputy!

ROUSSELIN: What do they say — deputy?

HOMBOURG *[who has entered from Rousselin's house]:* And why not, since Bouvigny has withdrawn?

[Gruchet and the crowd exit C.

ROUSSELIN: It is not possible!

HOMBOURG: Certainly it is — the ministry has changed, Monsieur! The prefect has handed in his resignation, and he has just written to Bouvigny to advise him to do the same with regard to his own candidacy. *[Exit C.*

ROUSSELIN: Then — no one remains in the field as a candidate except — *[points to his breast]* myself! No, no — there is Gruchet! Gruchet! *[Reflects. Slight pause. Enter Dodart]* What do you wish from me?

SCENE VII.

DODART: I am here to render you a service, Monsieur.

ROUSSELIN: Coming from a faithful follower of the Count de Bouvigny, that astonishes me!

DODART: YOU will appreciate my action later. As the Count de Bouvigny has retired from the candidacy —

ROUSSELIN *[brusquely]:* It is true, then? He has retired?

DODART: Yes, for certain reasons.

ROUSSELIN: Personal reasons.

DODART: Monsieur —

ROUSSELIN: I say he had strong personal reasons, that's all!

DODART: Very likely. Now, permit me to warn you of something very important. Those persons who are interested in your success — and I am one of them, I assure you! — are beginning to fear the violence of your adversaries.

ROUSSELIN: Well? What of that?

DODART: Perhaps you have not heard the insurrectionary cries that Gruchet's followers have been uttering. This village Catiline —

ROUSSELIN *[aside]:* Village Catiline! What a good phrase! I must remember that.

DODART: He is capable of anything, Monsieur. And perhaps, thanks to the present crazy mood of the people, he will become one of our tribunes!

ROUSSELIN *[aside]:* By Jove! I am beginning to be afraid he will!

DODART: But the Conservatives have not given up the fight, by any means. First of all, they wish to vote for an honest man, who will guarantee — *[Rousselin makes a movement]* — Oh! they will not ask him to go back on any of his principles; they will require only a few simple concessions.

ROUSSELIN: And that devil of a Murel has spoiled my chances!

DODART: Unfortunately, that seems to be the case!

ROUSSELIN *[thoughtfully]:* Alas! yes!

DODART: AS notary and as citizen, I deplore it! Ah! it was a fine dream — the idea of an alliance between the *bourgeoisie* and the nobility, cemented by the marriage of your daughter to a son of the house of Bouvigny! The Count himself said to me an hour ago — will you believe what I am about to say?

ROUSSELIN: I have the utmost confidence in your word, Monsieur!

DODART: The Count said, with the chivalric air so characteristic of him: "I am not at all angry with Monsieur Rousselin — "

ROUSSELIN: Neither have I any resentment against him, upon my honour!

DODART: And he added: "I should like nothing better, if Monsieur Rousselin does not find it unsuitable — "

ROUSSELIN: Find what unsuitable?

DODART: "Than to join forces with him, in the interest of our canton and of the public morals."

ROUSSELIN: Indeed! I will join him in that with pleasure.

DODART: Here comes the Count now! *[Makes signal; Bouvigny comes forward]*

BOUVIGNY *[bows']:* Monsieur!

ROUSSELIN *[glances around]*: I am just observing whether any one —

BOUVIGNY: NO one saw me enter here — do not be disturbed! Monsieur Rousselin, I beg you to accept the assurance of my regrets regarding the matter of —

ROUSSELIN: Oh, there is no harm in —

DODART: In acknowledging one's errors, eh?

BOUVIGNY: I admit it; but pray consider that my affection may have exaggerated the importance of certain principles.

ROUSSELIN: Ah, Monsieur, I honour high principles!

BOUVIGNY: Consider also the malady from which my poor son suffers.

ROUSSELIN: He did not appear ill when he was here a few hours ago.

DODART: Oh, yes! Monsieur Onésime is very much indisposed. But he has the courage to hide his suffering. Poor fellow! his nerves are so sensitive!

ROUSSELIN *[aside]*: Aha! I see your game! Well, you shall help me in mine! *[Aloud]* I understand. You mean that Monsieur Onésime, having conceived certain hopes —

BOUVIGNY: Exactly!

ROUSSELIN: It must pain him very much —

BOUVIGNY: It breaks his heart, Monsieur!

ROUSSELIN: To see you abandon your candidacy so suddenly!

DODART *[aside]:* He is laughing at us!

ROUSSELIN: When you had already a number of votes!

BOUVIGNY *[with dignity]:* I had a great many, I assure you!

ROUSSELIN *[smiles]:* Not all, however!

DODART: Perhaps not so many among the working classes in the town, an immense number but in the country!

ROUSSEUN: Ah, if you count on —

BOUVIGNY: Allow me! First, the commune of Bouvigny, where I live, is in my favor, naturally. Then there are the villages of Saint-Leonard, Valencourt, and La Coudrette.

ROUSSELIN *[quickly]:* No, not that!

BOUVIGNY: And why not that?

ROUSSELIN *[embarrassed]*: Why, I believe — *[Aside]* Murel must have deceived me about that.

BOUVIGNY: I am equally certain to carry Grumesnil, Ypremesnil, and Les Arbois.

DODART *[reads from list which he takes from his pocket-book]*: Châtillon, Colange, Heurtaux, Lenneval, Bahurs, Saint-Filleul, Grand-Chêne, Roche-Aubert, Fortinet!

ROUSSELIN *[aside]:* This is alarming!

DODART *[reads]:* Monicamp, Dehaut, Lampérière, Saint-Nicaise, Vieville, Sirvin, Château-Regnier, La Chapelle, Lebarrois, Mont-Suleau.

ROUSSELIN *[aside]:* 1 begin to think I don't know the geography of this district!

BOUVIGNY: All these, to say nothing of the fact that 1 have many friends in the various communes who —

ROUSSELIN *[overcome]:* Oh, I believe you, Monsieur!

BOUVIGNY: These good people hardly know what to do now. They are, of course, very desirous to please me, and will do whatever I wish, obeying me as one man; and if I should instruct them to vote for — no matter whom — you, for instance —

ROUSSELIN: Good heavens! I am not so strongly opposed as —

BOUVIGNY: Opposition is sometimes very useful.

ROUSSELIN: AS an instrument of war, let us say. But it need not be a matter of counteraction; why should we not consolidate?

DODART: By all means, let us consolidate.

ROUSSELIN: I have a horror of new-fangled Utopian ideas, and of subversive doctrines. There is talk of re-establishing the divorce courts — that must be looked after. And the press demands recognition in anything it may choose to do, no matter how great the license.

DODART: Abominable!

BOUVIGNY: The country is infested with quantities of worthless books.

ROUSSELIN: Unfortunately, it has not the proper persons in authority to conduct its affairs. Ah! there is so much high-mindedness to be found among the nobility! On that point I fully agree with some of the most prominent public men in England.

BOUVIGNY: Your words are as welcome as a refreshing breeze, and if we might hope —

ROUSSELIN *[mysteriously]:* To tell the truth, Monsieur, the democracy really terrifies me. I do not know what madmen my seize upon me, what malicious impulse —

BOUVIGNY *[suppresses a smile]:* Oh, come! I think you go rather too far.

ROUSSELIN: NO, no, I was guilty of — you see, I am really a staunch Conservative, but perhaps I have not fully understood certain shades of meaning —

DODART: All honest men understand one another!

ROUSSELIN *[shakes hands with Bouvigny]*: Certainly, my dear Count, certainly! Monsieur Dodart is quite right!

SCENE VIII.

(Enter Murel, Ledru, Onésime, *and several* Workmen)

MUREL: Thank heaven! I find you without your electors, my dear Rousselin!

BOUVIGNY *[aside]:* I thought they were at swords' points!

MUREL: Here are a few more voters. I have shown them that the ideas of Gruchet do not meet the requirements of our time; and now that I have explained to them what you said to me this morning, they understand you better. These worthy citizens are not only republicans, but socialists!

BOUVIGNY *[jumps]:* What! Socialists!

ROUSSELIN: He brings me socialists!

DODART: Socialists! I think my presence is no longer required here! *[Slips away noiselessly]*

LEDRU: Yes, citizen! We are socialists!

ROUSSELIN: Well — ahem! — I see no harm in that.

BOUVIGNY: And just now you were declaiming against this sort of rabble!

ROUSSELIN: Pardon me! There are several ways of looking at these matters.

ONESIME *[springing from a chair]:* No doubt — several ways!

BOUVIGNY *[scandalised]:* What! even my son?

MUREL *[to Onésime]*: What are you doing here?

ONESIME: I heard that something of a political nature was going on at Monsieur Rousselin's house, and I wished to show him that my sentiments were in sympathy with his own in sympathy with his own.

MUREL *[aside]:* Intriguing little puppy!

BOUVIGNY: I never expected, my son, to see you, in the presence of the author of your being, renounce the faith of your ancestors!

ROUSSELIN: Very fine!

LEDRU: And why "very fine"? This gentleman is the Count de Bouvigny *[to Murel, indicating Rousselin]*, and you would have us believe that Monsieur Rousselin demands the abolition of all titles.

ROUSSELIN: Certainly!

BOUVIGNY: What! He demands that?

LEDRU: Yes, indeed! So he says!

BOUVIGNY: Ah, this is too much! *[About to go]*

ROUSSELIN *[tries to hold Bouvigny]*: I do not wish to destroy our mutual understanding so abruptly. Listen to me! Many of these men are simplv mistaken in judgment. Let us manage them together.

BOUVIGNY *[loudly]:* No more of your management for me, Monsieur! A man of honour does not ally himself with, the advôcates of disorder, and I tell you, fairly and squarely, that 1 will have no more to do with you or your election. Come, Onésime! *[Exit the Bouvignys.*

LEDRU: SO he was in favor of your election, was he? We all know what that would mean for us! I wish you good-day, Monsieur!

ROUSSELIN: In order to stand by my convictions, I have sacrificed a friend of thirty years' acquaintance!

LEDRU: We demand no sacrifices! But you blow first hot and then cold, and I think you are a regular old humbug! Come along, friends! Let us go back to Gruchet. Are you coming, Murel?

MUREL: I will be with you in a moment.
[Exit Ledru and Workmen.

SCENE IX.

MUREL: You must see, my dear friend, that you have put me in a very embarrassing situation.

ROUSSELIN: Perhaps you do not think that I am in one also.

MUREL: See here! you must settle on some decided line of action at once. Be on one side or the other. But decide quickly — let us have an end of this dilly-dallying.

ROUSSELIN: But why be so radical, one way or the other? Is there not something worth having in all parties?

MUREL: Yes! Their votes!

ROUSSELIN: YOU are very witty, upon my word! Your humour is delicate, yet always irresistible. I am not surprised that a certain person loves you!

MUREL: Some one loves me! Who is it?

ROUSSELIN: Innocent! A little lady named Louise!

MUREL: Oh, what happiness! Thank you, thank you a thousand times! Now I shall do some lively work in your behalf. I will convince those fellows that they did not understand you — that it was all a mistake. As to The Impartial —

ROUSSELIN: There, at least, you are master.

MUREL: Not altogether. We depend upon Paris, which gives the word of command. You must be very much fatigued.

ROUSSELIN: Oh, hang the fatigue!

MUREL: SO much the better! But now, tell me, how shall I make Julien understand the reason why we wish him to do exactly the contrary thing from the understand the reason why we wish him to do exactly the contrary thing from the orders he received this morning?

ROUSSELIN: I don't know. What shall we do?

MUREL: Wait a moment! In your house there is a person that has a certain influence over him.

ROUSSELIN: Who is it?

MUREL: Miss Arabella. From something she said to me, I have reason to believe that she is interested in the young poet!

ROUSSELIN: Ha! ha! The romantic verses were addressed to the English girl, after all, eh?

MUREL: I cannot answer for the verses, but I believe they are in love with each other.

ROUSSELIN: I was sure of it! Never in my life have I been deceived in matters of that sort! Well, so long as my daughter is not concerned, there is no danger, and I should have a good laugh if — but I must speak to my wife about it. I must tell her everything.

MUREL: Meanwhile, I will try to warm up those voters who were rather chilled by your lukewarm philosophy.

ROUSSELIN: Don't go too far, for fear Bouvigny —

MUREL: Have no fear! I will re-paint your patriotism in glowing colors! [Exit.

ROUSSELIN *[alone]:* We must be shrewd, quick, and subtle!

SCENE X.

(Enter Mme. Rousselin *and* Miss Arabella)

ROUSSELIN *[to Arabella]*: My dear child, — my almost fatherly affection for you allows me to address you thus — I am about to ask a great favour of you. Will you meet Monsieur Julien Duprat and take a short walk with him?

ARABELLA *[joyfully]:* You wish me to do that!

MME. R. *[haughtily]:* What an extraordinary request!

ARABELLA: Monsieur Duprat strolls along this promenade every evening, smoking his cigar. It would be very easy to meet him.

MME. R.: It would be highly unconventional! It seems to me that I am the proper person to meet this gentleman.

ROUSSELIN: Well, yes, I suppose it would be rather more suitable for a married woman to have the interview with him.

ARABELLA: But I should like very much to meet him!

MME. R.: I forbid you to do so, Mademoiselle!

ARABELLA: I obey, Madame! *[Aside, as she goes up stage]* Why should she wish to prevent me from seeing him? I will try to find out! *[Exit.*

MME. R.: My dear, you have very singular ideas sometimes! Fancy your asking a young woman, our daughter's governess, to do a thing like that! Did you wish her to see him with regard to something concerning your election?

ROUSSELIN: Yes, of course! And it struck me that Arabella, because of the evident fancy she has for the young man, was the very person to have an interview with him.

MME. R.: Ah, you do not know her! She is both sly and violent, and under her

MME. R.: Ah, you do not know her! She is both sly and violent, and under her romantic airs she hides a small, mean nature. I think we should do well to keep a close watch of her.

ROUSSELIN: Perhaps you are right. Here comes Julien. You know, of course, the general import of what I wish to have said to him, with regard to the course his journal is to take.

MME. R.: Leave him to me! I shall know how to manage him.

ROUSSELIN: Very well. I trust everything to you. *[Enter Julien. Rousselin bows to him and goes out. Twilight comes on]*

SCENE XI.

(Madame Rousselin, Julien)

JULIEN *[sees Mme. R.]*: She! *[Throws away his cigar]* Alone! What shall I say? *[Bows]* Madame!

MME. R.: Monsieur Julien Duprat, I believe.

JULIEN: Alas! yes, Madame.

MME. R.: And why "alas"?

JULIEN: I have the misfortune to be connected with a journal the sentiments of which must be displeasing to you.

MME. R.: Well — yes, so far as its political tone is concerned.

JULIEN: If you only knew how distasteful are the affairs that occupy my time!

MME. R.: But a bright intellect may apply its efforts to almost anything without being lowered in the least. Your disdain of your occupation is not surprising. When a man can write such remarkable verses as you have produced —

JULIEN: Ah, now you are unkind, Madame! Why do you laugh at me?

MME. R.: I do not, I assure you. I make no profession of being a literary critic, but it seems to me that you have a brilliant future, Monsieur.

JULIEN: No, such possibilities are closed to me, by reason of my enforced environment. Art does not flourish in the provinces. A poet who finds himself compelled to remain there, and is obliged by poverty to perform uncongenial work, is like a man trying to run in a muddy field. A weight attaches itself to his feet,- dragging him down, and the faster he tries to run, the deeper he sinks. And something within him continually protests and complains. Then, to console himself for his hard fate, he dreams of what might have been, and time slips away, until finally he forces himself to be satisfied with his own mediocrity, and feels only resignation — the calmer phase of despair!

MME. R.: I understand you, and I pity you!

JUUEN: Ah, Madame! your compassion is sweet, although it only augments my sadness!

MME. R.: Have courage! Success will surely come to you some day!

JULIEN: Here, in my isolation, is it possible?

MME. R.: But, instead of flying from the world, approach it! Its language is not like your own — but learn it! Submit to its demands. Reputation and power are gained only by coming in contact with people; and, since society is naturally a state of war, range yourself on the side of the strong, the rich, the happy. Of your inmost thoughts and feelings I will not speak, for reasons of — prudence! When you go to Paris to live, as we intend to do —

JULIEN: But, Madame, I have not the means to live in Paris.

MME. R.: Who knows? To a man with your versatility of talent nothing is difficult; and you must use it in such a way as to make the right persons show their gratitude for it. But it is growing late! I hope for the pleasure of seeing you again, Monsieur! *[Curtseys, and goes up stage]*

JULIEN: Oh, do not leave me, in heaven's name! I have waited so long for this moment! I have vainly tried so many devices in order to approach you! Besides, I did not fully understand your last words. You appear to expect me to perform some service. Do you wish to give me a command? Give it, then — I will obey!

MME. R.: What devotion! *Darkness increases]*

JULIEN: I tell you, Madame, you occupy my whole life! Many a time, as twilight comes on, do I climb one of these hills to breathe a freer air; and when I turn my gaze in the direction of the town, my eyes wander, in spite of myself, towards the dwelling that shelters you — this house, that gleams like a pearl in a green setting. The sight of a royal palace would not give me so deep a feeling of covetousness! Sometimes I see you in the street — a dazzling vision! I stop! I try to walk near you, unobserved, following your dainty, airy veil, that floats about your head like a blue cloud. Often I have stood outside your garden gate, only to catch a glimpse of you and hear the rustle of your skirt as you walked among the violet-beds. Your slightest word, your most ordinary phrase, possesses a value quite unintelligible to anyone but me; and I treasure every utterance like a prize! Do not drive me away! Pardon me! I dared to send you some verses. They were lost, like the flowers that I gather in the country without being able to offer them to you; lost, like the words I murmur to you at night — words that you never hear! You are my inspiration, my muse, the embodiment of my ideal, my delight, my torment!

MME. R.: Calm yourself, Monsieur! This exaggeration —

JULIEN: Ah, I belong to the days of 1830! I learned to read by studying *Hernani* and often have I wished I could have been the romantic Lara! I execrate my dull contemporaries, the commonplaces of modern life, the ignominy of matter-of-fact happiness! The grand passion that caused the lyres of the great masters to vibrate, swells my own breast! In my thoughts you are inextricably entwined with all that is beautiful in the universe! Everything in the world is influenced by your personality! These trees were made only to shade your face; the night comes only to shelter you and to soothe your spirit; the stars, that beam as softly as your eyes, were made to shed their light upon you!

MME. R.: The reading of romantic literature has made you over-enthusiastic, I fear! What confidence can a woman have in a man that cannot control his language or his passion? I believe you are sincere. But you are young, and you ignore certain necessary restraints. Some women in my place would have taken offence at the freedom of your language. You must promise me —

JULIEN: But you tremble, too, Madame! I knew it! No woman could repel such love as mine!

MME. R.: My courage in listening to you surprises even myself. The people hereabouts have malicious tongues, Monsieur. The slightest suspicion of scandal would ruin us.

JULIEN: Fear nothing! My lips shall be sealed, my eyes closed, my manner indifferent; and if I should present myself at your house —

MME. R.: But, Monsieur, my husband —

JULIEN: Do.not speak to me of that man! .

MME. R.: I must defend him.

JULIEN: I have done that — for love of you!

MME. R.: He will hear of your defense of him, and you never will have reason to regret your generosity.

JULIEN: Let me kneel before you, that I may look at you more closely. I will do all that you wish, and boldly, too, for I have gained new strength. I wish to become a part of your life, to enjoy with you all the intoxications that life affords; all the enchantments of art, all the blessings of heaven!

ARABELLA *[enters softly, and slips behind a tree]:* Aha! I was sure of it!

MME. R.: I expect from you an immediate proof of confidence and love.

JULIEN: Only tell me what you wish!

SCENE XII.

(The same, then Murel *and* Gruchet, *followed by* Rousselin)

MME R.: Some one approaches! I must go into the house.

JULIEN: Not yet! *[Enter Murel, L. 3. E., walking leisurely across back of stage]*

GRUCHET *[enters L. 3. E., running after Murel]*: Give me back my money!

MUREL *[still walks slowly]:* Go away! You annoy me!

GRUCHET: Rascal!

MUREL *[turns suddenly and strikes Gruchet]*: Thief!

ROUSSELIN *[enters just as the blow is struck]*: Why, who is here? What is the matter? JULIEN: Grant me only this favour, Madame! *[Kisses her hand audibly]*

ARABELLA *[recognises Julien]*: Ah! it is he! *[Runs off]*

ROUSSELIN: What is going on here? *[Sees Arabella running]* Arabella! I will put her out of the house to-morrow!

ACT III.

Scene: *A public ball-room in the Salon de Flore. At the back, facing the audience, a platform for an orchestra. A bass-viol stands in a corner,* L. *Several musical instruments hang on the walls; also a stand of tri-colored flags. In the middle of the platform are a table and chairs; two other tables stand* R. *and* L. *on the stage proper. Lower platform is placed directly in front of the orchestra platform. Many chairs stand* R. *and* L. *At the rear is a practicable balcony.*

SCENE I.

ROUSSELIN *[standing C.]*: I think it would sound well if I should compare Anarchy to a serpent — and a hydra-headed one at that! And Power — I might call that a vampire. No, that word is a little too pretentious. I must find some effective phrase that will arouse enthusiasm, such as: We must close the era of revolutions! — comrades! — indefeasible rights! — and some words ending in "ism," — parliamentarism, and things like that!
I must be perfectly calm and collected. The electors will arrive soon. Everything is ready; the committee was organized last night. *[Points to various places on the stage]* Here the committee will sit. There is the place for the President. *[Points to table in the middle of the platform]* His two secretaries will sit one on each side of him. *[Steps up on the lower platform]* I shall stand here, facing the company. But what shall I lean upon? I must have something to lean upon — to represent a tribune. Wait! I have it! *[Steps down and takes a chair from the stage, remounts lower platform and places chair before him]* Good! And I must have a glass of water, because I begin to feel very thirsty already. *[Takes a glass of water which he finds on the president's table, and puts it on his own chair]* Let it stand there! Shall I have enough sugar! *[Peeps into the sugar-bowl on the president's table]* Oh, yes!
Now! — everyone is seated. The president opens the meeting, and some one begins to speak. He appeals to me, to ask me, for instance — But first, who is it that calls on me? Where is the person? I will suppose him to be on my right. I turn my head quickly. He must not be too far away. *[Steps down to arrange a*

chair R.; remounts platform] I preserve my calm and dignified air, with one hand thrust in the front of my waistcoat. I wonder whether I should not have looked better in my frock-coat. This coat is easier for the arms. But I rather think the frock-coat would be the proper thing, for they say the common people like to have a speaker pay them the compliment of wearing good clothes.

Let me see, how is my cravat? *[Takes small mirror from pocket and examines his appearance; then puts it back in pocket]* I think my collar should be a little lower. *[Settles collar]* Not too low, however. I don't want to look like a romantic tenor! I feel sure all will go well, with a word from Murel now and then, to encourage me. Oh, it will be all right! Only — I do feel a bit. nervous, and a slight indigestion — *[Drinks from glass of water]* There! It is nothing serious. All great orators have had to begin some time. Come, come, Rousselin! no more weakness! One man is as good as another, and I am better than a great many! This excitement is going to my head like a hot drink. I must put on a bold face! *[Strikes attitude]*

And do you address yourself to me, Monsieur? — This speaker must be in front of me. *[Steps down and places chair C. of stage; remounts platform]* — Do you address yourself to me? — I must put both hands on my breast and bow slightly. *[Does so]* — To me, who, during forty years — to me, whose patriotism — to me, who — to me, for whom — then, suddenly: Ah, you cannot really believe it, Monsieur! — Then he will sit staring at me, and not moving. *[Holds his head very high, his right forefinger pointing upward]* He says: "Your proofs, then! Give us your proofs! Ah, take care! You cannot juggle with the public faith!" I say nothing. "You are silent!" he cries; "Your silence condemns you! I will take action upon it!" Now I give him a little irony. I must say something cutting and assume a laugh of superiority. — Ha! ha! ha! I acknowledge myself completely vanquished, Monsieur! — But two other men, over there — *[places two chairs]* — I recognize them — they cry out that I have urged the people to Insurrection against our institutions — no matter what! Then I say in a furious tone, — What! You would obstruct the march of progress? — Development of the word ' progress " — from the astronomer, with his telescope, who, to aid the hardy mariner — and so on, and so on, — To the humble village workman, gaining his living by the sweat of his brow; the proletarian of our cities; the artist, whose inspiration — and so on. I'll keep talking until I find just the right phrase to introduce the word *bourgeoisie.* Then follows praise of the *bourgeoisie;* the third estate; the instructions of the electors to the deputies; 'eighty-nine; our commerce; the wealth of the nation; the development of the public welfare by the rise and progress of the middle classes. Then a workman calls out: "And the people, — what will you do for them?" I reply: — Ah! the people — the great people! And I give him a great deal of palaver on that subject. I exalt the character of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who was once a servant; Jacquard, the weaver; Marceau, the tailor, — and all the servants and all the tailors will feel flattered! Then I will thunder against the corruption and heartlessness of the rich. — For what reason do they reproach you, — the people? For being poor! — Bravos! — Ah! to the man who knows all your virtues, how sweet is the duty of becoming your defender! 1 always feel a noble pride when I press the calloused hand of an honest working-man, because his grasp, though perhaps a little rough, betokens genuineness and sincerity; because all differences of rank, title, and fortune are now — thank God! — things of the past; and nothing can compare with the sterling merit and true heart of a man of the people! — I tap myself on the breast. "Bravo! Bravo! Bravo!" *[Claps his hands, turning a little, L.]*

WAITER *[Enters, L.]*: Monsieur Rousselin, the gentlemen have arrived.

ROUSSELIN: Let us retire, so that I shall not appear to have been — Shall I have time to get my other coat? I think so — if I run!
[Exit Rousselin and Waiter.

SCENE II.

(Enter all the Electors; the President, Voinchet, Marchais, Hombourg, Heurtelot, Onésime, the Village Policeman, Beaumesnil, Ledru, and others)

VOINCHET: Quite a crowd of us! I have an idea that this is going to be rather amusing.

LEDRU: For a political meeting, I should think a more suitable place could have been chosen than the Salon de Flore.

BEAUMESNIL: Since there is no other public hall in the neighbourhood, I don't see how we could do any better. Which man are you going to nominate, Monsieur Marchais?

MARCHAIS: Oh, Lord! Rousselin, of course. It seems we must settle on him, after all.

LEDRU: I don't see why! I'm going to stir up some kind of row at this meeting!

VOINCHET: Look! There is the son of Bouvigny!

BEAUMESNIL: The father will not come here — he is too shrewd.

THE PRESIDENT: Order!

POLICEMAN: Order!

PRESIDENT: Gentlemen, it has been decided that meetings shall be held in order to discuss the merits of the candidates for the impending election. Tonight we shall speak of the honourable Monsieur Rousselin; to-morrow night of the honourable Monsieur Gruchet. The meeting is open.

(Enter Rousselin, in a frock-coat, from a small door behind the president's chair. Salutes the company, and takes his place behind the chair on the lower platform)

VOINCHET: I demand that the candidate shall speak to us first about the railways.

ROUSSELIN *[coughs, and takes a sip of water]:* If any person had said, in the days of Charlemagne, or even in the time of Louis the Fourteenth, that a day would come when, in three hours, it would be possible to go —

VOINCHET: Oh, I don't mean that! Are you of the opinion that we should approve of a grant to a railway that shall run through Saint-Mathieu, or to one that will take in Bonneval? — which would be a hundred times better.

AN ELECTOR: Saint-Mathieu is more convenient for the larger part of the public. Declare yourself in favour of that, Monsieur Rousselin!

ROUSSELIN: Why should I not speak in favour of the general development of these gigantic enterprises, that change the situation of capitals, prove the genius of man, and carry prosperity into the midst of all communities?

HOMBOURO: That is not true; they often ruin them!

ROUSSELIN: What, Monsieur! Would you oppose the march of progress? Progress, which, from the astronomer —

HOMBOURG: But the railway passengers —

ROUSSEUN: With his telescope —

HOMBOURG: Ah, if you try to shut me up —

PRESIDENT: Monsieur Hombourg has the floor!

HOMBOURG: Travellers will never stop in our part of the country.

VOINCHET: He is an inn-keeper — that is the reason why he complains!

HOMBOURG: And a very good inn it is, too!

ELECTORS: Enough! enough! Sit down! *[Hombourg is forced to sit down]*
PRESIDENT: NO violence, gentlemen!

POLICEMAN: Silence!

HOMBOURG *[to Rousselin]*: That's the way you defend our interests!

ROUSSELIN: I declare —

AN ELECTOR: He must uphold free trade!

ROUSSELIN: Certainly! By means of the untaxed transmission of merchandise, a day of universal brotherhood among all mankind will dawn —

AN ELECTOR: We must admit English woollens, and proclaim the freedom of the hosiery trade!

ROUSSELIN: And the exemption of everything!

SEVERAL ELECTORS: Yes! yes!

OTHER ELECTORS: NO! no!

ROUSSELIN: May heaven grant us abundance of grain and cattle!
A FARMER *[wearing a peasants blouse]*: You are a pretty chap to talk about agriculture.

ROUSSELIN: I will speak to you immediately on that subject. *[Drinks. A pause]*

HEURTELOT *[speaks from the balcony, to which he has mounted unobserved]:* What is your opinion on the subject of blind beetles, Monsieur?

ALL *[laugh loudly]:* Ha! ha! ha!

PRESIDENT: A little less levity, gentlemen!

POLICEMAN: NO disorder! In the name of the law, sit down! *[Electors that have sprung up re-seat themselves, and quiet is gradually restored]*

MARCHAIS *[pushed forward by his neighbors]:* Monsieur Rousselin, we should like to know your ideas about taxes.

ROUSSELIN: Taxes! *[Aside]* Great heavens! *[Aloud]* Oh, certainly! Taxes are disagreeable but — necessary! They may be compared to a pump, which sucks up from the earth a fertilizing element that expands under the sun's rays. It remains to be seen whether the means justify the end; — and if — as an illustration — one should happen to exhaust it —

PRESIDENT *[leans toward Rousselin]*: Charming comparison!

VOINCHET: All land-owners are over-taxed.

HEURTELOT: And we have to pay more than thirty sous' tax on a litre of cognac.

LEDRU: The navy devours our earnings!

BEAUMESNIL: Does the country really need the Botanical Gardens, I ask?

ROUSSELIN: There is no doubt that we should begin at once to practise great economy!

ALL: Good! Good!

ROUSSELIN: And the parsimonious government, whereas it ought to —

BEAUMESNIL: Bring up all our children at its own expense!

MARCHAIS: Protect commerce!

FARMER: Encourage agriculture!

ROUSSELIN: Certainly, certainly! You are all quite right!

BEAUMESNIL: Furnish water and gas free in every house!

ROUSSELIN: UM! Possibly — yes!

HOMBOURG: YOU are forgetting all about the livery business.

ROUSSELIN: Oh, not at all, not at all! But permit me to resume the thread of my discourse, and to group —

LEDRU: We know your way of getting around everybody! But if you had Gruchet before you —

ROUSSELIN: And do you compare me to Gruchet? — me, who have seen during the past forty years, — me, whose patriotism — ah! how little you know me, Monsieur!

LEDRU: Yes, I do compare him to you, I tell you!

ROUSSELIN: That village Catiline!

HEURTELOT *[From the balcony*]: Who the deuce was Catiline, eh?

ROUSSELIN: He was a celebrated conspirator, who, in Rome —

LEDRU: But Gruchet is not a conspirator.

HEURTELOT: And do you belong to the police, Monsieur?

ALL *[speaking confusedly]*: He is! He is! No, he is not! *[Great disorder]*

ROUSSELIN: Citizens! For heaven's sake! I beg of you, listen to me!

MARCHAIS: Well, we are listening. *[All become suddenly quiet. Rousselin tries to speak, but remains silent. Roars of laughter from the crowd]*

POLICEMAN: Silence!

HEURTELOT: He must explain his views as to the right to work.

ALL: Yes! yes! what about a man's right to work?

ROUSSELIN: Masses of books have been written on that subject. *[Murmurs]*

Ah, you know that, do you? Well, have you read them?

HEURTELOT: No!

ROUSSELIN: I know them by heart! And if, like me, you had passed many nights in the solitude of your apartment, studying —

HEURTELOT: There! that's enough about you! What about the right to work?

ROUSSELIN: Oh! Ah! Without doubt, everyone ought to work.

HEURTELOT: And to demand work!

MARCHAIS: But suppose one has no need to work?

ROUSSELIN: Oh, never mind that point!

MARCHAIS: What! Would you attack property-owners?

ROUSSELIN: Absurd! When did I do that?

MARCHAIS *[jumps up on the stage]:* Ah, you force me to put myself forward!

ELECTORS *[from the right]:* Come down!

ELECTORS *[from the left]:* No; let him stay!

ROUSSELIN: Yes, let him remain. I admit the contradiction. I am in favour of liberty before all!
[Applause from the right, murmurs from the left. Marchais turns towards Rousselin]

Does the word "liberty" choke you, Monsieur? It is because you do not in the least understand the meaning of economy — the value of humanitarianism. The press has elucidated the matter somewhat; and the press — mark it well, fellow-citizens — is a torch, a sentinel that —

BEAUMESNIL: Get back to the question!

MARCHAIS: Yes, the question of property.

ROUSSELIN: Well, like you, I love it! I am a property-owner myself! You see, therefore, that we are agreed upon that point.

MARCHAIS *[embarrassed]:* Well! — hum! — well!

LEDRU *[mockingly]:* Ah, the poor grocer! *[Laughter]*

ROUSSELIN: One word more! *[To Marchais]* I am about to convince you. Isn't it true that we ought, as much as possible, to democratize silver and republicanize the circulating medium? The more it circulates, the more of it falls into the pockets of the people, and consequently into yours. Now let us consider the matter of credit.

MARCHAIS: There should not be any credit!

ROUSSELIN: Oh, really —

LECRU: What! No credit?

ROUSSELIN: YOU are right to protest, Monsieur Ledru, because if credit is withdrawn there is no more money; and, on the other hand, it is money that forms the basis of credit. The two terms are correlative. *[Shakes Marchais gently by the arm]* Do you understand that the terms are correlative? You do not answer. Your silençe çondemns you, I shall take action upon it!

ALL: NO! No! Enough! Enough! *[Marchais returns to his place]*

ROUSSELIN: Thus, my fellow-citizens, is the great question of labour settled! To sum up, — no property, no work! A man creates labour because he is rich, and without work there will be no riches. You work, not to become property-owners, because you are that already. Your trade is your capital, and you are all capitalists!

FARMER: Queer kind of capitalists!

MARCHAIS: YOU mix everything up very strangely, Monsieur!

LEDRU: He makes fun of everyone!

ALL: Yes! Yes! He laughs at us! Let us adjourn! Open the doors! Adjourn!

PRESIDENT: This is intolerable! One cannot —

POLICEMAN: I shall clear the way. *[Enter Murel]*

ROUSSELIN *[aside]*: Murel! At last!

LEDRU: Let the candidate explain the eulogies of the opinions of the Count de Bouvigny, which he made in your presence. *[To the Workmen]* You were there, some of you.

ROUSSELIN: But — I — I —

LEDRU: He is lost!

HEURTELOT: Catch him with a boat-hook! *[Laughter]*

VOINCHET: Call a doctor! *[Louder laughter]*

MUREL: I, too, was present, gentlemen! The honourable Monsieur Rousselin appeared to condescend to agree with the sentiments of the Count de Bouvigny. He does not seek to hide the fact; he even boasts of it!

ROUSSELIN *[proudly]*: Ah!

MUREL: And it was precisely because of the electors who surrounded him that, in order to strengthen their convictions and to make them see how far certain persons would go in —

ROUSSELIN: Obscurantism!

MUREL: Exactly! It was, I say, a bit of parliamentary tactics, a ruse, quite legitimate, to — pardon the expression! — catch them in a net!

HEURTELOT: That's all too deep for us!

HEURTELOT: That's all too deep for us!

LEDRU: YOU are right! it was the conduct of a mountebank MUREL: But I —

HEURTELOT: Do not defend him!

LEDRU: And this is the man that promised to box the prefect's ears! ROUSSELIN: And why not?

POLICEMAN *[taps Rousselin lightly on the shoulder]* Gently, Monsieur Rousselin, gently!

ALL: Enough! Enough! Adjourn! Adjourn! *[All rise. Rousselin makes a despairing gesture; then turns to the president, who is about to go]*

PRESIDENT: A rather unfavourable meeting, my dear sir! Let us hope that some other time —

ROUSSELIN *[observes Murel about to go]:* Murel is going, too! *[To Marchais, who passes near him]* Marchais! Oh, it is too bad! too bad! MARCHAIS: What can you expect, holding such opinions as yours?

[Exit all the Electors, leaving Rousselin, Onésime and a Waiter.

SCENE III.

ROUSSELIN *[descends from platform]:* Farewell, my dreams! Nothing is left for me now but to fly, or to throw myself in the water! They will demolish me! *[Looks at the chairs]* They sat there, — but instead of the delighted crowd, whose applause I heard in imagination — ah! *[The Waiter begins to arrange the chairs in orderly rows]* Ah, fatal ambition! as ruinous to kings as to men of lower rank! And I did not get a chance to make my speech — they cut me off every time! Ah, I suffer! *[To the Waiter]* Take away all those chairs — I have no more need of them. *[Aside]* The sight of them gets on my nerves!

WAITER *[addresses Onésime, whom he discovers sitting in the corner, behind the bass-viol]:* Do you intend to remain there, Monsieur?

ONESIME *[comes forward timidly]:* Monsieur Rousselin!

ROUSSELIN: Ah, is it you, Onésime?

ONESIME: I wish I could find something consoling to say to you, because you have my entire sympathy.

ROUSSELIN: Thank you! Everyone else has abandoned me — even Murel.

ONESIME: He has just gone out with Monsieur Dodart's clerk.

ROUSSELIN: I might run and catch him! *[Looks out of the window]* There is still a crowd in the street, and they are capable of committing any outrage upon me if I should go out.

ONESIME: I hardly think that, Monsieur.

ROUSSELIN: Hasn't it been proved within the walls of this room? They would insult me still worse if I should show myself to them now. Oh, the villainous populace! I can understand Nero's feelings!

ONESIME: When my father received from the prefect a letter telling him he had no chance of election, he was very much disappointed and cast down, as you are. But his philosophy soon enabled him to get over it.

ROUSSELIN: Tell me — you, whom I always thought a good fellow — you will not deceive me?

ONESIME: Oh, Monsieur!

ROUSSELIN: Has your father — *[Turns to the Waiter, who is carrying out chairs]* He irritates me, that waiter! Go! leave us in peace! *[Exit Waiter]* Has your father still any adherents who would support him with their votes? He showed me a long list of names of communes —

ONESIME: He is absolutely certain of the votes of sixty-four labourers.' I have seen their names.

ROUSSELIN *[aside]:* Not an alarming number!

ONESIME: But I have something to give you, Monsieur. An old woman stopped me as I was about to enter this house, and said, "Do me the favour to hand this note to Monsieur Rousselin." *[Hands a note]*

ROUSSELIN: An odd-looking letter! Let us see what it says. *[Opens and reads the note]* "A person who is interested in you believes it his duty to warn you that Madame Rousselin — " *[stops, astounded]*

ONESIME: Do you wish to send back any answer to that?

ROUSSELIN *[sneering]*: An answer?

ONESIME: Yes.

ROUSSELIN *[furiously]:* My answer would be a kick for the fool who executes such a commission! *[Exit Onésime hastily]* Pooh! only an anonymous letter! I am an idiot to let it disturb me!
[Crushes thé note and throws it on the floor] Apparently, the hatred of my enemies knows no bounds. This is a dirty trick, surpassing all the others. It was

written to draw my attention away from political matters; and to spoil the chances of my election, the wretches do not hesitate to attack my honour! I am sure this is some of Gruchet's work. His servant is always nosing about my place. *[Picks up letter and reads]* "Your wife has a lover." My wife has no lover! What man is there who could be her lover? What a stupid accusation! *[Pause]* I remember hearing, the other evening, out in the park, a box on the ear, followed by a kiss! And then immediately after that I saw Miss Arabella going towards the house; but surely she was not alone, for I am positive I heard a loud slap. Can it be that some insolent puppy presumed to approach my wife? Impossible! She would have told me of it. And in that case, the kiss would have come before the blow, whereas I remember distinctly that the blow came first and the kiss afterwards! Bah! I shall worry no more about it; I have other things to think of. And now to work! *[About to go. Enter Gruchet]*

SCENE IV.

GRUCHET: Monsieur Murel is not here, it appears.

ROUSSELIN: You have come to mock me, I suppose, — to enjoy my chagrin, and to give me some *of* your sneers.

GRUCHET: Not at all!

ROUSSELIN: At least, you might have used fair means, Monsieur.

GRUCHET: The right is on my side.

ROUSSELIN: Oh, I understand that in politics —

GRUCHET: It is not the love of politics that has prompted me, but a more humble interest. Monsieur Murel —

ROUSSELIN: Murel! I don't care a button for him!

GRUCHET: He has avoided me for a week, in spite of all his fine promises. He has behaved in an abominable manner. He was not content with making me a party to his revengeful actions, — I tell you, I could betray him to the authorities, but I have not done so out of respect to everyone concerned, and for the sake of his working-people.

ROUSSELIN: Say quickly whatever you have to say.

GRUCHET: When Murel came here, he was interested in speculations on the Bourse, which at the beginning were very fortunate. In fact, he did so well that — for the first time — I lent him ten thousand francs. He paid them back, to be sure, and with interest. Two months later he borrowed five thousand of me. But his luck had changed. A third time —

ROUSSELIN: I really don't see that this concerns me at all!

GRUCHET: In short, he actually owes me to-day thirty thousand two hundred and twenty-six francs and fifteen centimes!

ROUSSELIN *[aside]*: This bit of information may be useful!

GRUCHET: That young man has abused my confidence! He deluded me by saying that he had a prospect of making a rich marriage.

ROUSSEUR: The rascal!

GRUCHET: Thanks to him, I now find myself without money. For several days, following his advice, I have been spending a great deal! *[S&As]* And since you are his friend, will you not ask him to give me back the money that belongs to me?

ROUSSELIN: YOU, my rival, ask me that?

GRUCHET: I have not taken an oath to remain your rival. I have a heart, Monsieur Rousselin, and I know how to appreciate kindness.

ROUSSELIN: Do you, indeed? Perhaps you remember that I hold a receipt from you for six thousand francs, lent some time ago to help you set yourself up in business, which — counting the interest — now amounts to more than twenty thousand . francs.

GRUCHET: I wished to speak to you about that very matter. But I am compelled to be always giving and giving.

ROUSSELIN: I rather think that I do more of that sort of thing than anyone else!

GRUCHET: Remember how many persons I have depending upon me, and that I have — although you may not believe it — a certain amount of influence. If you would give me back that paper you just mentioned, we might come to an understanding.

ROUSSELIN: An understanding? On what point?

GRUCHET: Well, — I would — cut loose from the electors — give up my chances.

ROUSSELIN: And if I should not be elected, — then I should lose the deputyship and the money too!

GRUCHET: Oh, you are too modest!

ROUSSELIN: What do you mean by that?

GRUCHET: Have your own way, then! There would be time to change matters, even at the last moment. I tell you once more, you are making a mistake. *[Turns to the left]* ROUSSELIN: Where are you going by that door?

GRUCHET: TO a private room just outside, where I think Julien is writing out his report of the meeting. You are making a blunder, I assure you.
[Exit, L.

SCENE V.

ROUSSELIN: Was that a ruse or was he speaking the truth? As to Murel — he is an idiot, to allow himself to be drawn into stock speculations. I always suspected him of it. But I shall not bother my head about him; he has lost his credit with the people, and by Jove! —

MUREL *[enters joyously]*: Pardon me, my dear Rousselin, for leaving you so abruptly! I have just come from Dodart's office. What an event, my dear friend! Such a fortunate —

ROUSSELIN: Ha! You're a nice fellow! I have been obliged to receive your creditors. Gruchet demands thirty thousand francs!

MUREL: He shall have them next week!

ROUSSELIN: Still boasting, are you? You never have a doubt about anything! Not even about my election. Not everyone is as clever as you; and now I suppose you intend to —

MUREL: TO support Gruchet, were you about to say?

ROUSSELIN: Yes, I was! For a whole week now *The Impartial* has done nothing to help my cause.

MUREL: I was away on a journey, and no sooner did I arrive home than I rushed to the office.

ROUSSELIN: That's a slim excuse!

MUREL: Gruchet's demand for payment at this time is simply an act of revenge. I have ruined myself for you. But fortunately —

ROUSSELIN: What is fortunate?

MUREL: Well — you have, in a way, promised me your daughters hand

MUREL: Well — you have, in a way, promised me your daughter's hand.

ROUSSELIN: Oh, listen to him!

MUREL: But you do not know that I have just fallen heir to a fortune.

ROUSSELIN: Your aunt's, perhaps!

MUREL: Precisely!

ROUSSELIN: That joke is rather stale.

MUREL: I swear to you that my aunt is dead!

ROUSSELIN: All right! Bury her, then, but don't try to fool me with your story of inheritance.

MUREL: But it is absolutely true, I tell you! Only, as the poor woman died after I left her, her executors are trying to discover whether she left any later will.

ROUSSELIN: Ah, there is a doubt! Well, for my part, I like people that are sure of what they say and do.

MUREL: Monsieur Rousselin, you forget what I am able to do for you.

ROUSSELIN: NO great things, I fancy! Your own workmen won't listen to you any more.

MUREL: Indeed! You really believe that? Just because five or six brawling fellows, who I had discharged from the factory, turned against me! But there are others!

ROUSSELIN: Why didn't they come to the meeting, then?

MUREL: HOW could I bring them here when I was absent on a journey?

ROUSSELIN *[aside]:* That's a fine reason!

MUREL: YOU do not know their humour, but I will wager that between now and next Sunday, I could — but no, I will not mix myself up in any more of your and next Sunday, I could — but no, I will not mix myself up in any more of your affairs. I will work for Gruchet.

ROUSSELIN *[aside]:* He threatens me! I wonder whether there is still a hope! *[Aloud]* So you believe that the effect of a reunion would not be altogether bad?

MUREL: Well, I don't know. You see, you have hurt the feelings of the people.

ROUSSELIN: But I myself am one of the people! My father was a humble workman. We must impress that upon them, my good Murel! Say that I have suffered much for them, because the government has laid its hand upon me, only just now. Go back to the factory quickly and speak to them again.

MUREL: But listen — wait! I must show you the certificate of my aunt's death.

ROUSSELIN: GO! GO! Make them understand —

MUREL: First, she* left a farm —

SCENE VI.

(The same, including Mme. Rousselin *and* Louise)

MME. R. *[to Louise, speaking off stage]:* Follow me, Louise! What are you looking at out there? *[Enter Mme. R. and Louise]* Ah! I have found you at last! *[To Rousselin]* I was so anxious about you. If you only had a little sense!

ROUSSELIN: I could not get away before, my dear.

LOUISE *[sees Murel]*: Ah! my friend!

MUREL: Louise!

MME. R. *[scandalised]:* What does this mean? Louise, is this proper behaviour for a young girl? And you, Monsieur, why do you presume to be so familiar?

MUREL: My dear Madame, Monsieur Rousselin will explain to you —

MME. R.: I am decidedly curious to know *[draws Rousselin aside]* for what possible reason my daughter —

ROUSSELIN: My dear, first of all, you must understand — *[They talk aside]*

LOUISE *[to Murel]*: It was I who made mamma come. I knew you were here, and it was the only way I could manage to see you.

MUREL: We must not seem to be too much interested in each other; I will tell you later the reason why. *[Approaches M. and Mme. Rousselin]* Madame, although I know it is the custom to ask a friend to act as an intermediary in these matters, I am forced by circumstances to act for myself; and I beg you now to give me the hand of Mademoiselle Louise in marriage.

MME. R.: But, Monsieur, persons of our station in life do not wish —

MUREL *[hastily]:* The change in my fortunes warrants my making this request.

ROUSSELIN: We must first be fully satisfied on that point.

MME. R.: But this is entirely contrary to ordinary etiquette! LOUISE *[smiles]*: Oh, mamma! MME. R.: And such an unconventional proposal in a public place! — it is really — really —

SCENE VII.

JULIEN *[enters]:* I have come, Monsieur *[to Rousselin],* to place myself wholly at your disposal.

ROUSSELIN: YOU?

JULIEN: Yes, certainly!

MUREL *[aside]*: Who brought him here?

JULIEN: As the journal that I represent has the authority of seniority over any other publication in this part of the country, I can be of great service to you, Monsieur.

ROUSSELIN *[astonished]:* But how about Murel?

JULIEN *[looks at Mme R.]*: Through that door I heard all that passed at the meeting; and it will be perfectly easy for me to make a favourable report of it — of course *[indicates Murel],* with the permission of my chief.

ROUSSELIN: I do not know how to express my gratitude to you!

MME. R. *[aside to Rousselin]*:. Now you see how successful I have been! *[Aside to Julien]* I thank you, Monsieur!

JULIEN *[aside to Mme R.]*: Your eyes have inspired me, believe it, Madame!

ROUSSELIN *[to Mme. R.]*: He is really charming! Protected by you, he is sure of a staunch supporter!

MUREL: He has wonderful talent, and a remarkably clever and picturesque style of writing!

ROUSSELIN: I can easily believe it.

MUREL: He has plenty of strength, too, when he takes the trouble to use it. *[Aside to Julien]* You will oblige me by saying that this idea was mine!

JULIEN: Well, I own, Monsieur Rousselin, that in spite of the former arguments of our friend Murel — who always praised you with the greatest enthusiasm — I was rather obstinate and hard to convince. *[Looks at Mme. R.]* But now, with the suddenness of a flash of light, I understand everything, and I will obey your wishes!

ROUSSELIN: Ah, my dear Monsieur, I am filled with gratitude!

JULIEN *[aside to Mme. R.]*: When shall we meet again?

MME. R. *[aside to Julien]*: I will send you word!

ROUSSELIN: I do not exactly know how you will succeed in winning the favour of Madame Rousselin, my dear Monsieur Duprat! *[Smiles]*

JULIEN *[gaily]:* I shall try my best to do so, I assure you, Monsieur!

ROUSSELIN *[to Mme. R.]*: Ask Monsieur Julien to dine with us this evening, quite *en famille.*

MME. R. *[curtseys low]:* Certainly, with the greatest pleasure!

JULIEN *[bows]:* Madame!

ACT IV.

Scene: Rousselin's *study. Large window at the back, showing view of the country. Several doors* R. *and* L. *A desk stands* L, *with a clock on its top shelf*

SCENE I.

PIERRE *[stands at half-open door, speaking loudly to some person off the stage]*: François! see that carriages are sent at once to take eight gentlemen to Saint-Léonard, and do not close the driveway gates. Elizabeth must open the bulletins as they arrive. Don't forget to stop at the stationer's on your way back, and bring home the visiting-cards! *[Enter a Messenger, who pants under a load of newspapers]* That's heavy, isn't it, my good man? Put it down there — that's right! *[The Messenger deposits his bundle, then goes outside the door, and returns with a much larger package, which he puts down beside the first]* Now go down to the kitchen and get something to brace you up! They are drinking champagne out of preserve-pots down there! Everything goes just now, you see! *[Exit Mes senger]* This is election day, and next week — Paris! How long have I dreamed of living there, and longed for it — principally on account of the oysters and the Opera Ball! *[Looks at the two bundles on the floor]* There are more copies of that article written by Monsieur Duprat! Where shall I distribute them? Every one in the town has, without exaggeration, at least three copies of it already! And here are all these extra copies on our hands! Never mind! I'll get to work on them. *[Begins to, divide the papers into small parcels. Enter the Policeman]* Ah! Father Morin! You are rather late to-day.

POLICEMAN: It is because some kind of row has been going on at Monsieur Murel's house; his workmen have all turned their backs on him now! Everything is going wrong, I fear. *[Helps Pierre to sort papers. Enter Félicité]*

PIERRE: HOW are you, Félicité? Good morning, Madame Gruchet! Ha! ha!

FELICITE: YOU are very rude, Pierre!

PIERRE: I thought you were all off with us, since your master set himself up in opposition to mine.

FELICITE *[drily]:* That was none of *my* business, was it? I have a message for your master.

PIERRE: He has gone out.

FELICITE: Will he return for luncheon?

PIERRE: For luncheon? Do you suppose he has time for luncheon? Why, he is rushing about from morning till night! Madame carries his meals to his room when he is at home, and Mademoiselle Louise goes about distributing food to the poor!

FELICITE: And the governess?

PIERRE: Oh, she is more sentimental than ever! *[To the Policeman]* No, not that way! *[Folds a paper carefully]* Monsieur Rousselin himself showed me how to fold these journals, so that this article shall catch the eye at first glance.

POLICEMAN: He is making lively times in this district.

PIERRE: I believe you, my boy!

FELICITE: While I am waiting, may I say a word to the English lady?

PIERRE *[points to a door, L.]*: Her room is out there, down the corridor, last door at the right.

FELICITE: Oh, I know! *[Crosses to door, L.]*

PIERRE: Here comes our good master! *[Félicité slips behind the door and remains unobserved in the corner. Enter Rousselin]*

SCENE II.

ROUSSELIN *[clasps Pierre's hand warmly]*: My dear friend!

PIERRE *[astonished]:* Why, master!

ROUSSELIN *[recovers himself]*: Oh! Ah! — a slight absence of mind! I have become so accustomed to shaking hands with my political friends! The palm of my right hand is almost inflamed! *[To the Policeman]* Ah! very good! *[Hands him money quietly]* Thank you very much, my good friend, for your assistance. Do not be afraid to call upon me — if — if — ever you need anything!

POLICEMAN *[with a deprecating gesture]:* Oh, that's all right, Monsieur! *[Exit, with Pierre, helping to carry away the bundles.*

ROUSSELIN: That newspaper article of Julien's does away with all possible objections that remained against me! It shows how absurd it was for the electors to form their opinions so hastily, and demonstrates that my conduct has been most wise and loyal! He praises my administrative ability, and even says that, should I be elected, I shall gain only what is my right! And he says it all with such style — so much elegance! Ah! I owe a great deal to the cleverness of my wife in managing this affair!

FELICITE *[comes from the corner, extending a note]:* From Monsieur Gruchet!

ROUSSELIN *[takes note, opens it and reads]:* "Send me that receipt, and I will withdraw all opposition. You may entrust it to my servant." The devil! This might be called putting a knife to a man's throat! But — if he should withdraw and make no more trouble, and I should be nominated! That's worth considering. It is a large sum, and the interest increases it all the time. If he should be elected, I could get it all back. But — six thousand francs! — not so great a sum, after all — I had almost forgotten about it. What good would they do me? A man gains nothing without some sacrifice! *[Opens writing-desk]* Wait! *[Opens drawer in desk and takes out paper; gives it to Félicité]* Take that, and hasten home! Your master is waiting for it.

FELICITE: Thank you, Monsieur! *[Exit.*

ROUSSELIN: His resignation comes rather late in the day! Pshaw! the voting is only just about to begin, and even if I should lose a few votes —

SCENE III.

(The same, including Murel and Dodart)

MUREL *[enters with Dodart]*: Now, perhaps you will believe me, Monsieur Rousselin. I have brought the notary, who will show you all the papers proving my inheritance.

DODART *[shows documents]*: Here are the legal papers, also the inventory, establishing the rights and qualities of my client as heir to the property of his aunt, Madame Murel, widow, late of Montélimart.

ROUSSELIN: I congratulate you!

MUREL: NOW there will be no further opposition, I hope, to — to —

ROUSSELIN: TO what, Monsieur Murel?

MUREL: Why, to my marriage!

ROUSSELIN: YOU cannot expect me to talk about that on such a day as this!

MUREL: Of course I know you are very much occupied. But, without saying anything decisive, you might give me a little encouragement.

ROUSSELIN: Have you heard the news? Hasnt anyone told you that Gruchet —

MUREL: Monsieur Rousselin, it seems to me you might listen to my request!

ROUSSELIN: NO! no! Don't worry me now! You would do better to go and look after your workmen. Even in the short time that remains, they might —

MUREL: But I brought Dodart here expressly that he might explain my affairs to you!

ROUSSELIN: GO to your workmen now, I say! We can talk of your affairs later.

MUREL: YOU consent, then — it is certain?

ROUSSELIN: Yes, but don't lose any more time!

MUREL *[joyfully]:* Ah! you may count on me! Why, I ought to give them an increase in wages out of my own pocket! *[Exit.*

SCENE IV.

ROUSSELIN: A good lad, that Murel!

DODART: Nevertheless, he deceives himself. The factory hands laugh at him now. As to his fortune —

(Enter Marchais)

MARCHAIS: Your servant, gentlemen! *[To Rousselin]* Monsieur de Bouvigny sent me here to receive your reply.

ROUSSELIN: Reply to what?

MARCHAIS: TO the matter that Monsieur Dodart had just laid before you.

DODART *[slaps his own forehead]:* What a piece of thoughtlessness! The first that I have been guilty of in my career as a notary!

MARCHAIS: And he would like your answer in writing!

ROUSSELIN: But —

DODART: Let me explain. *[To Marchais]* Go out in the courtyard and wait a few moments. *[Exit Marchais]* Three days ago, Monsieur Rousselin. the Count de Bouvigny informed me again that he still wishes to form an alliance with your family.

ROUSSELIN: I knew that well enough!

DODART: And he said that if you wish — hang it! you know one must use what means he can! They may not always be the most desirable, but —

ROUSSELIN: YOU have a very roundabout way of getting at this matter.

DODART: Had it not been for Murel, who rushed into my study and took up my

DODART: Had it not been for Murel, who rushed into my study and took up my time, I should have been here much sooner.

ROUSSELIN: Well, well! what *is* the business, for heaven's sake?

DODART: If you will allow your daughter to marry Monsieur Onésime, the Count says he is sure — positively sure, you understand — of your election, because he will send sixty-four of his own labourers to the polls to vote for you.

ROUSSELIN: This message by Marchais is a sort of final word?

DODART: Absolutely!

ROUSSELIN: Well, — but Murel?

DODART: YOU have just given him a promise.

ROUSSELIN: Was it really a promise?

DODART: Oh, rather!

ROUSSELIN: That is to say, not altogether! But — what do you advise me to do?

DODART: The situation is rather serious. Certain ties of friendship, and many other interests, attach me to Monsieur de Bouvigny, and I should be delighted to see an alliance made between his family and yours. On the other hand, I will not hide from you the fact that Monsieur Murel is now — *[aside]* party to a contract! *[Aloud]* You ought to reflect, to look on all sides, to weigh every consideration. On one side, there is family, on the other, fortune! For Monsieur Murel is now a good match. However, young Onésime —

ROUSSELIN: What shall I do? Oh, my wife! I had forgotten her! I cannot do anything without consulting her. *[Rings. A pause]* Everyone is dead or asleep today! *[Calls]* Pierre! Pierre! *[Enter Pierre]* Say to Madame Rousselin that I wish to speak to her here.

PIERRE: Madame is not in the house, Monsieur.

ROUSSELIN: Look for her in the garden. *[Exit Pierre]* She will discover some way — she has so much tact.

DODART: In certain circumstances, I, too, consult my wife, and to do her justice — *[Re-enter Pierre]*

PIERRE: Monsieur, I cannot find Madame in the garden.

ROUSSELIN: Well, search elsewhere, then! Find her!

PIERRE: The cook thinks that Madame went out some time ago.

ROUSSELIN: Where was she going?

PIERRE: She did not say.

ROUSSELIN: Are you sure of that?

PIERRE: Quite sure, Monsieur. *[Pause. Exit Pierre.*

ROUSSELIN: This is very extraordinary! Never in her life has she —

ARABELLA *[enters hastily, with much excitement]*: Monsieur! Monsieur! I must speak to you! Hear me! It is something very important, — oh, very serious, Monsieur!

DODART: Shall I retire, Mademoiselle? *[Arabella nods]*
[Exit Dodart.

SCENE V.

ROUSSELIN: What is the matter with you, Mademoiselle? Tell me quickly.

ARABELLA: Good heavens! Monsieur, pardon me if I dare — it is in your interest! Madame's absence seems very strange to you, and I believe I can —

ROUSSELIN: Is it, by chance —

ARABELLA: Ah, Monsieur! by chance! Listen! Your wife is now with Monsieur Julien!

ROUSSELIN [stunned]: What! *[Suddenly, after a pause]* Of course! Something to do with my election!

ARABELLA: I do not believe it, because I met them at the Blue Cross, and watched them; they went into the little pavilion — you know, the hunters' rendezvous — and I — I — overheard these words from Monsieur 'Julien — without comprehending them altogether, in spite of the explanation that Monsieur Gruchet gave me just now, seeming to understand them better than I. Monsieur Julien said: "I will go out before you, and in order to make you understand that you may come out also without fear, I will shake my handkerchief behind me!"

ROUSSALIN: Impossible! Proofs, Miss Arabella, proofs!

SCENE VI.

DODART *[enters quickly]*: Marchais would not wait! From your summer-house in the park, he fancied he saw the Count de Bouvigny coming down the hill surrounded by a great crowd.

ROUSSELIN: The sixty-four labourers!

DODART: The Count may make them vote for Gruchet!

ROUSSELIN: Oh, no! Gruchet has promised — but, after all — that miserable fellow — who knows what he will do?

DODART: Or the Count may make them put blank papers in the box.

ROUSSELIN: And perhaps that would be enough to spoil my chances!

DODART: But the hour is growing late!

ROUSSELIN: It will be some time before they can reach the city hall, fortunately. Tell Marchais to go to the count, and beg him to grant me at least — Where is Louise? Miss Arabella call Louise! *[Exit Arabella]* How shall I persuade the girl?

DODART: If you think anything I can say —

ROUSSELIN: NO, that might hurt her feelings. Wait here, and as soon as I have her consent — But Bouvigny demands a written reply! Can I ever —

DODART: Your word of honour will suffice. Then I will return at once to tell you —

ROUSSELIN: But you will not have time! The polls close at four o'clock! Run! Hasten!

DODART: I will go at once to the city hall

DODART: I will go at once to the city hall.

ROUSSELIN: HOW I wish I could be there, so that I could know the sooner how affairs are going!

DODART: YOU will soon know.

ROUSSELIN: I hardly think so! You are not very quick!

DODART: If you win, I will wave my handkerchief as a signal to you. You will be able to see it from your window.

ROUSSELIN: A good idea! *[Enter Louise]*

LOUISE: Did you send for me, papa?

ROUSSELIN: Yes, my child. *[To Dodart]* Now go quickly, my dear friend!
DODART: But I must wait outside to learn Mademoiselle's decision.
ROUSSELIN: Oh, — true! *[Exit Dodart.*

SCENE VII.

ROUSSELIN: Louise, you love your father, do you not?

LOUISE: Oh, papa! what a question!

ROUSSELIN: And for him you would do —

LOUISE: Anything he wishes!

ROUSSELIN: Good! Now listen to me! It often happens that catastrophes come into the quietest lives. A perfectly honest man sometimes allows himself to be led astray by blandishments, or his own folly. Suppose, for instance — it is only a supposition, nothing more! — I had committed some reprehensible action, and that, in order to help me out of my trouble —

LOUISE: Oh, papa! You frighten me!

ROUSSELIN: DO not be alarmed, darling! The matter is not so serious as that. But, — suppose I should ask a certain sacrifice of you, would you resign yourself? I do not ask a sacrifice, however, — only a concession. It would not be difficult for you — the acquaintance has been so short. Briefly, then, my poor little girl, I ask you to think no more of Monsieur Murel!

LOUISE: But I love him!

ROUSSELIN: What! Nonsense! You have only allowed yourself to be taken with his manners and his dashing way of talking.

LOUISE: I find him very charming indeed!

ROUSSELIN: But, my child, — I cannot tell you the details, but I will just hint to you that his morals are far from good!

LOUISE: That is not true!

ROUSSELIN: Then, he is overwhelmed with debts! We shall probably see him running away from them at no very distant day!

LOUISE: But why? He is rich now.

ROUSSELIN: Ah! you are thinking of his fortune, are you? I had not spoken of it. I thought your sentiments were higher, more noble than that!

LOUISE: But I did love him for himself, from the very first day I saw him

ROUSSELIN: And you cherish your own little interests, too, — own up to it! You do not disdain little frivolities and pretty things; you like titles; and you would be very happy in Paris — after I become deputy — to take your place in fashionable society; to be invited to the houses of the Faubourg Saint-Germain. Wouldn't you like to be a countess?

LOUISE: A countess — I?

ROUSSELIN: Yes, — by marrying Onésime!

LOUISE: Never — so long as I live! Marry an idiot who does nothing but gaze at the tips of his boots — who hasn't brains enough to get an engagement as valet de chambre! He is incapable of speaking two sensible words! And what charming sisters-in-law I should have! They don't know how to spell! And a pretty fatherin-law — who looks like a farmer! And such pride and arrogance, and such a style of dressing themselves! Why, they wear gloves made of floss silk!

ROUSSELIN: YOU are very unjust. Onésime has been much better educated than you think. He was brought up under the tutorship of an eminent churchman; and the family dates from the twelfth century. You can see their genealogical tree in the grand hall of the castle. The ladies — they are not models of fashion, it is true, but what of that? And as for the Count de Bouvigny — there is no more loyal friend —

LOUISE: But you have been very bitter against him since you became a candidate, and the Count has shown just as great an enmity towards you! He is not like Murel, who has stood by you faithfully. And he stands by you still! Yet you ask me to forget him! I do not understand all this. What does it mean?

ROUSSELIN: I cannot explain it to you, my child, but surely you do not think I wish to make you unhappy. You do not doubt my tenderness, my judgment, my good sense? I know the world well. I know what is best for you. You would never be compelled to leave us — we should always be together. Nothing would be changed. I entreat you, my dear Louise — try to please me!

LOUISE: Ah, you torture me!

ROUSSELIN: I do not command — I supplicate you! *[Kneels]* Save me!

LOUISE *[her hand on her heart]:* No! I cannot!

ROUSSELIN *[despairingly]:* You will be compelled to reproach yourself for having killed your father!

LOUISE *[starts up]:* Ah, my God! Do what you will, then! *[Exit.*

ROUSSELIN *[runs to door, up stage; opens it and speaks loudly]:* Dodart! Give the Count my word of honour! Quick! *[Comes down G]* That was a painful scene! Poor little girl! But, after all, why shouldn't she love Onésime just as well as Murel? He is as good as any one else. And he will be much easier to manage than Murel! No, I have not done badly; everyone will be pleased, particularly my wife. *[Starts]* My wife! Ah! That serpent of an Arabella, with her lies and insinuations! In spite of myself, I — *[Enter Voinchet]* What! Do you not intend to vote?

SCENE VIII.

VOINCHET: Yes, immediately. There are fifteen of us from Bonneval; the others are waiting for me in the Café Français, and we shall all go to the city hall together.

ROUSSELIN *[very graciously]:* And how can I be of service to you, Monsieur?

VOINCHET: One of the engineers of the new railway has just told me that .the road will certainly be laid by way of Saint-Mathieu, although at first, it was thought that it would run through Bonneval. Considering that probability, I had bought a piece of ground, and, in order to be able to claim a larger indemnity, I had even started a nursery upon it! So now I find myself very much embarrassed. I wish to change my business, but how shall I dispose of about five hundred bergamot pear-trees, eight hundred peach-trees, three hundred Emperors of China, and more than a hundred and sixty pigeons?

ROUSSELIN: I do not see that I can do anything to help you in the matter.

VOINCHET: Pardon me! You have at the rear end of your park an excellent soil for raising fruit-trees — fine and rich! — and at the rate of thirty sous apiece, I will gladly turn over to you all my shrubs!

ROUSSELIN *[walks towards the door with Voinchet]*: Well, well! I will decide about it later.

VOINCHET: YOU will take them, of course? You shall receive the first load tomorrow. Now I will go to join my friends! *[Exit.*

HOMBOURG [enters, L.]: I have only come to say, Monsieur, that you must take my —

ROUSSELIN: But I have your chestnut horses already, man! They have been in my stable three days!

HOMBOURG: And that's the right place for them! But listen for rough

HOMBOURG: And that's the right place for them! But listen — for rough cartage and heavy work, Monsieur de Bouvigny (oh! you will beat that man, without fail!) has refused to buy from me a fine, strong mare, and the price was a mere trifle — only forty pistoles!

ROUSSELIN: And do you wish me to buy it?

HOMBOURG: That would give me a great deal of pleasure, Monsieur!

ROUSSELIN: Very well, I will take it.

HOMBOURG: Excuse me, Monsieur Rousselin, but — is it too much to ask — a small sum on account — for the chestnuts, you know? The remainder at your leisure, of course!

ROUSSELIN: Oh, certainly! *[Goes to desk and opens drawer]* How are things going at the city hall?

HOMBOURG: All goes well.

ROUSSELIN: Have you been there?

HOMBOURG: Yes, indeed.

ROUSSELIN *[aside, pushes back the drawer]*: There is no great hurry!

HOMBOURG *[sees Rousselin's movement]*: That is to say, I went there, of course, to get my ballot. I have now just time to go and vote. *[Rousselin opens drawer and hands money to Hombourg]* Thanks for your kindness! *[About to go]* You ought to cut a dash, Monsieur Rousselin! Now, there is that pretty little Normandy nag I told you about —

ROUSSELIN: Oh, enough! Enough!

HOMBOURG: If it were freshened up a bit and well groomed, it would make a fine pony for Mademoiselle!

ROUSSELIN *[aside]*: Poor Louise!

HOMBOURG: It would be such a great distinction for her

HOMBOURG: It would be a pleasant distraction for her.

ROUSSELIN *[sighs]:* Well, I will take the pony!
[Exit Hombourg.

BEAUMESNIL [standing at threshold of door, R.]: Only two words with you, Monsieur! I have brought my son to you!

ROUSSELIN: And why have you done that?

BEAUMESNIL: He is out in the courtyard now, playing with the dog. Will you see him? It is he of whom I spoke to you regarding his education. We hope for a little help from you.

ROUSSELIN: I will do what I can, certainly.

BEAUMESNIL: These children cost so much! And I have seven, Monsieur, all as strong as young Turks!

ROUSSELIN *[aside]:* That's encouraging!

BEAUMESNIL: His schoolmaster has sent me a bill for two quarters, and though it humiliates me to ask you, — still, if you could advance me the money —

ROUSSELIN *[opens drawer of the desk]*: How much is it a quarter?

BEAUMESNIL *[shows a long bill]:* There are some extras besides. *[Rousselin gives him money]* i will run home and tell the good news! Frankly, I came here on purpose to see you!

ROUSSELIN: What! did you not come to vote? How about my election?

BEAUMESNIL: I thought that was to come off tomorrow! I live so quietly at home, Monsieur, in my own little circle! But I will go at once and do my duty — at once, Monsieur! *[Exit.LEDRU [(enters, C.]*: Ah, famous! You are as good as elected!

ROUSSELIN *[joyfully]:* Ah!

LEDRU: Gruchet has withdrawn. Everyone has known it for the last two hours. He was right — it was the prudent thing for him to do. To tell the truth, I helped to spoil his chances, and you ought to recognise my friendly services by trying to obtain for me — *[Shows the buttonhole of his coat]*

ROUSSELIN *[speaks low]:* The ribbon!

LEDRU *[loudly]:* If I did not deserve it I would not ask for it, but — You appear very cold, Monsieur Rousselin!

ROUSSELIN: But, my dear friend, how can I do this for you? I am not yet a minister!

LEDRU: Oh, well! never mind! Only — I have behind me twenty-five men — good, lively fellows, Heurtelot at the head of them, with some of Murel's mill-hands — and they are waiting for me at the market. I told them I was coming here to make you a proposition, and they will wait until I tell them how it was received. Now, I warn you, if you don't swear that you will try to obtain for me the cross of honour —

ROUSSELIN: Oh, very well! I will try! And I will buy a few foreign orders also for you!

LEDRU: ALL in good time! *[Exit quickly.*

SCENE IX.

ROUSSELIN [looks out of wide window at the back of stage]: He will have just time — there are still five minutes! In five minutes the polls will close, and then! — I do not dream! It is true! A brilliant future opens before me! Oh, to take my place among distinguished men! To call myself a member of some committee; to be chosen sometimes to make a report; to talk of budgets, amendments, sub-amendments; and to take part in many affairs, all of the greatest importance! Every morning I shall* see my name printed in the journals, even in those of which I do ncft know the language!

The theatres! the hunt! the women! Isn't all that well worth having? *[Pause]* But, in order to obtain it, I am compelled to give my money, my own flesh and blood — everything! Yes, I have sacrificed my daughter — my poor daughter! *[Weeps]* I feel the deepest remorse, and I do not even know whether Bouvigny will keep his word. One does not sign votes. *[The clock strikes four]* Four o'clock! It is all over! They will count the vote at once — that will not take long. How shall I pass the time until I hear the result? Some intimate friend — even if it were only Murel — ought to come here soon, to give me the first news. Oh, men! men! One may ruin himself for them without finding any gratitude! If they do not elect me — Ah, well! so much the worse for them! Where can they find another candidate like me? I should do my duty! *[Stamps his foot]* Oh, come! hasten, some one! They are all against me, the wretches! This is killing me! My head reels! I don't know what I am about! If this suspense keeps on, I shall smash the furniture!

SCENE X.

(Enter a Beggar, pretending to be blind)

ROUSSELIN: This is not an elector! Why didn't some one hustle him off the premises? Who allowed you to enter my doors?

BEGGAR: The house was open, and some one told me I should find in here a man who was kind to everyone — the good Monsieur Rousselin! No one talks of anything but you, Monsieur. Give me something, — it will bring you good luck!

ROUSSELIN *[speaks to himself]*: It will bring me good luck! *[Puts two fingers in his waistcoat pocket; pauses; reflects]* They say that alms given in critical circumstances possess a power for bringing good fortune that no one can explain. I ought to have gone to church this morning —

BEGGAR *[whines]*. Charity, if you please!

ROUSSELIN *[feels in all his pockets]*: I have no more money about me.

BEGGAR *[whines]:* Something, Monsieur!

ROUSSELIN *[rummages in the drawers of his desk]:* No, not a sou! I have been giving away money all day long! This creature annoys me! Ah, I shall soon find that money flies!

BEGGAR: Charity, if you please! You, who are so rich! I want bread! Ah, how weak I am! *[Appears about to fall; leans against the door]*

ROUSSELIN *[discouraged]:* I cannot beat a blind man!

BEGGAR: Only the least thing — and I will pray to the good God for you!

ROUSSELIN *[tears his watch from its pocket and hands it to the Beggar]*: There! take that! and heaven will, without doubt, have pity on *me! [Exit Beggar quickly. Rousselin looks at the clock]* No one has come yet! Something bad has happened, and no one dares to tell me! I would go myself, but my legs — ah! it is too much! Everything seems to turn around! I am about to faint! *[Sinks on a couch near the window]*

SCENE XI.

ARABELLA *[enters softly, and touches Rousselin on the shoulder]:* Look! *[Points out of the window; Rousselin leans over to follow the direction of her finger]* Just below the road — in front of the schoolhouse — on the top of the hedge — do you see?

ROUSSELIN: I see something white waving over the hedge.

ARABELLA: The handkerchief!

ROUSSELIN: But I do not understand — *[Suddenly cries]* Ah! how stupid of me! *[Springs up]* It is Dodart waving his handkerchief! Victory! Victory! Yes, my good Arabella, it is certain! Look! some one is running this way!

ARABELLA *[leans out of the window]*: A crowd is coming through the gates — men with guns! *[Gun-shots heard]*

ROUSSELIN: That is to celebrate my victory! Good! *[A shot]* Again! Keep it up! Pif! Paf! *[Silence]* Listen to that! *[Steps heard running rapidly. Enter Gruchet. Rousselin rushes at him]* Gruchet! What is it? Speak! Am I elected? Is it done?

GRUCHET *[looks at Rousselin from head to foot; then bursts into rude laughter]* I think there's no doubt whatever about that, Monsieur!

(Enter a great crowd from all sides, shouting): Our deputy! Long live our deputy!

Curtain

LE CANDIDAT

TABLE DES MATIÈRES

PERSONNAGES
ACTE UN
ACTE DEUX
ACTE TROIS
ACTE QUATRE

PERSONNAGES

Rousselin, 56 ans Murel, 34 ans
Gruchet, 60 ans Julien Duprat, 24 ans Le Comte de Bouvigny, 65 ans Onésime, son fils, 20 ans Dodart, notaire, 60 ans Pierre, domestique de M. Rousselin Mme Rousselin, 38 ans Louise, sa fille, 18 ans Miss Arabelle, institutrice, 30 ans Félicité, bonne de Gruchet Marchais

Heurtelot

Ledru

Hombourg

Voinchet

Beaumesnil
un garde champêtre le président de la réunion électorale un garçon de café un mendiant

paysans
ouvriers *etc.*

L'action se passe en province.

[Les mots entre crochets ont été supprimés par la Censure.]

LE CANDIDAT

ACTE UN

Chez M. Rousselin. Un jardin. Pavillon à droite. Une grille occupant le côté gauche.

Scène I : Murel, Pierre, domestique

Pierre est debout, en train de lire un journal. - Murel, entre, tenant un gros bouquet qu'il donne à Pierre.

MUREL : Pierre, où est donc M. Rousselin ?

PIERRE : Dans son cabinet, monsieur Murel ; ces dames sont dans le parc avec leur Anglaise et M.Onésime... de Bouvigny !

MUREL : Ah cette espèce de cagot [séminariste] à moitié gandin ? J'attendrai qu'il soit parti, car sa vue seule me déplaît tellement !...

PIERRE : Et à moi donc !

MUREL : A toi aussi ! Pourquoi ?

PIERRE : Un gringalet ! fiérot ! pingre ! Et puis, j'ai idée qu'il vient chez nous... (*Mystérieusement*) C'est pour Mademoiselle.

MUREL, *à demi-voix* : Louise ?

PIERRE : Parbleu ! sans cela les Bouvigny, qui sont des nobles ne feraient pas tant de salamalecs à nos bourgeois !

MUREL, *à part* : Ah ! ah ! attention. (*Haut*) N'oublie pas de m'avertir lorsque des messieurs, tout à l'heure, viendront pour parler à ton maître.

PIERRE : Plusieurs ensemble ? Est-ce que ce serait... par rapport aux élections ? ... On en cause...

MUREL : Assez ! Ecoute-moi ! Tu vas me faire le plaisir d'aller chez Heurtelot le cordonnier, et prie-le de ma part...

PIERRE : Vous, le prier, monsieur Murel !

MUREL : N'importe ! Dis-lui qu'il n'oublie rien !

PIERRE : Entendu !

MUREL : Et qu'il soit exact ! qu'il amène tout le monde !

PIERRE : Suffit, Monsieur ! j'y cours (*il sort*)

Scène II : Murel, Gruchet

MUREL : Eh, c'est monsieur Gruchet, si je ne me trompe ?

GRUCHET : En personne ! Pierre-Antoine pour vous servir.

MUREL : Vous êtes devenu si rare dans la maison !

GRUCHET : Que voulez-vous ? avec le nouveau genre des Rousselin ! Depuis qu'ils fréquentent Bouvigny, - un joli coco encore, celui-là, - ils font des embarras !...

MUREL : Comment ?

GRUCHET : Vous n'avez donc pas remarqué que leur domestique maintenant porte des guêtres ! Madame ne sort plus qu'avec deux chevaux, et dans les dîners qu'ils donnent - du moins, c'est Félicité, ma servante, qui me l'a dit, - on change de couvert à chaque assiette.

MUREL : Tout cela n'empêche pas Rousselin d'être généreux, serviable !

GRUCHET : Oh ! d'accord ! plus bête que méchant ! Et pour surcroît de ridicule, le voilà qui ambitionne la députation ! Il déclame tout seul devant son armoire à glace, et la nuit, il prononce en rêve des mots parlementaires.

MUREL, *riant* : En effet !

GRUCHET : Ah ! c'est que ce titre-là sonne bien, député ! ! ! Quand on vous annonce : "Monsieur un tel, député," alors on s'incline ! Sur une carte de visite, après le nom, "député", ça flatte l'oeil. Et en voyage, dans un théâtre, n'importe où, si une contestation s'élève, qu'un individu soit insolent, ou même qu'un agent de police vous pose la main sur le collet : "Vous ne savez donc pas que je suis député, Monsieur !"

MUREL, *à part* : Tu ne serais pas fâché de l'être, non plus, mon bonhomme !

GRUCHET : Avec ça, comme c’est malin ! pourvu qu’on ait une maison bien montée, quelques amis, de l’entregent !

MUREL : Eh ! mon Dieu ! quand Rousselin serait nommé !

GRUCHET : Un moment ! S’il se porte, ce ne peut être que candidat juste-milieu ?

MUREL, *à part* : Qui sait ?

GRUCHET : Et alors, mon cher, nous ne devons pas... Car enfin nous sommes des libéraux ; votre position, naturellement, vous donne sur les ouvriers une influence !... Oh ! vous poussez même à leur égard les bons offices très loin ! Je suis pour le peuple, moi, mais pas tant que vous ! Non... non !

MUREL : Bref, en admettant que Rousselin se présente ?...

GRUCHET : Je vote contre lui, c’est réglé !

MUREL, *à part* : Ah ! j’ai eu raison d’être discret ! *(Haut)* Mais avec de pareils sentiments, que venez-vous faire chez lui ?

GRUCHET : C’est pour rendre service... à ce petit Julien.

MUREL : Le rédacteur de *l’Impartial* ?... Vous, l’ami d’un poète ?

GRUCHET : Nous ne sommes pas amis ! Seulement, comme je le vois de temps à autre au cercle, il m’a prié de l’introduire chez Rousselin.

MUREL : Au lieu de s’adresser à moi, un des actionnaires du journal ! Pourquoi ?

GRUCHET : Je l’ignore !

MUREL, *à part* : Voilà qui est drôle. (*Haut*) Eh bien, mon cher, vous êtes mal tombé.

GRUCHET : La raison ?

MUREL, *à part* : Ce Pierre qui ne revient pas ! J’ai toujours peur... *(Haut)* La raison ? c’est que Rousselin déteste les bohèmes.

GRUCHET : Celui-là, cependant...

MUREL : Celui-là surtout ! et même depuis huit jours... *(il tire sa montre)*
GRUCHET : Ah ça ! qui vous démange ? Vous paraissez tout inquiet.

MUREL : Certainement !

GRUCHET : Les affaires, hein ?

MUREL : Oui, mes affaires !

GRUCHET : Ah ! je vous l'avais bien dit ! ça ne m'étonne pas ! ...

MUREL : De la morale maintenant !

GRUCHET : Dame, écoutez-donc, chevaux de selle et de cabriolet, pique-niques, est-ce que je sais moi ! Quand on est simplement le représentant d'une compagnie, on ne vit pas comme si on avait la caisse dans sa poche.

MUREL : Eh ! mon Dieu, je paierai tout !

GRUCHET : En attendant, puisque vous êtes gêné, pourquoi n'empruntez-vous pas à Rousselin ?

MUREL : Impossible !

GRUCHET : Vous m'avez bien emprunté à moi, et je suis moins riche.

MUREL : Oh ! lui ! c'est autre chose.

GRUCHET : Comment, autre chose ? un homme si généreux, si serviable ! Vous avez un intérêt, mon gaillard, à ne pas vous déprécier dans la maison.

MUREL : Pourquoi ?

GRUCHET : Vous faites la cour à la jeune fille, espérant qu'un bon mariage...

MUREL : Diable d'homme, va ! ... Oui, je l'adore... Mme Rousselin ! Au nom du ciel, pas d'allusion !

GRUCHET, *à part* : Oh ! oh ! tu l'adores. Je crois que tu adores surtout sa dot !

Scène III : Murel, Gruchet, Mme Rousselin, Onésime, Louise, Miss Arabelle, un livre à la main MUREL, *présentant son bouquet à Mme Rousselin* : Permettez-moi, Madame de vous offrir...

MME ROUSSELIN, *jetant le bouquet sur le guéridon à gauche* : Merci, Monsieur !

MISS ARABELLE : Oh ! les splendides gardénias !... et où peut-on trouver des fleurs aussi rares ?

MUREL : Chez moi, miss Arabelle, dans ma serre !

ONESIME, ***avec impertinence*** : Monsieur possède une serre ?

MUREL : Chaude ! oui, Monsieur !

LOUISE : Et rien ne lui coûte pour être agréable à ses amis.

MME ROUSSELIN : Si ce n'est, peut-être, d'oublier ses préférences politiques.

MUREL, ***à Louise, à demi-voix*** **:** Votre mère aujourd'hui est d'une froideur !

LOUISE, ***de même, comme pour l'apaiser*** **:** Oh !

MME ROUSSELIN, ***à droite, assise devant une petite table*** **:** Ici, près de moi, cher Vicomte. Approchez, monsieur Gruchet ! Eh bien, a-t-on fini par découvrir un candidat ? Que dit-on ?

GRUCHET : Une foule de choses, Madame. Les uns...

ONESIME, ***lui coupant la parole*** **:** Mon père affirme que M. Rousselin n'aurait qu'à se présenter...

MME ROUSSELIN, ***vivement*** **:** Vraiment, c'est son avis ?

ONESIME : Sans doute ! et tous nos paysans, qui savent que leur intérêt bien entendu s'accorde avec ses idées...

GRUCHET : Cependant, elles diffèrent un peu des principes de 89 !

ONESIME, ***riant aux éclats*** **:** Ah ! ah ! ah ! les immortels principes de 89 !

GRUCHET : De quoi riez-vous ?

ONESIME : Mon père rit toujours quand il entend ce mot-là.

GRUCHET : Eh ! sans 89, il n'y aurait pas de députés !

MISS ARABELLE : Vous avez raison, monsieur Gruchet, de défendre le parlement. Lorsqu'un gentleman est là, il peut faire beaucoup de bien !

GRUCHET : D'abord on habite Paris pendant l'hiver.

MME ROUSSELIN : Et c'est quelque chose !... Louise, rapproche-toi donc !... Car le séjour de la province, n'est-ce pas, monsieur Murel, à la longue fatigue ?

MUREL, ***vivement*** **:** Oui, madame ! *(Bas à Louise).* On y peut cependant trouver le bonheur !

GRUCHET : Comme si cette pauvre province ne contenait que des sots !

MISS ARABELLE, *avec exaltation* : Oh ! non ! non ! Des coeurs nobles palpitent à l'ombre de nos vieux bois ; la rêverie se déroule plus largement sur les plaines ; dans des coins obscurs, peut-être, il y a des talents ignorés, un génie qui rayonnera ! *(Elle s'assied)* **MME ROUSSELIN :** Quelle tirade, ma chère ! Vous êtes plus que jamais en veine poétique !

ONESIME : Mademoiselle, en effet, sauf un léger accent, nous a détaillé tout à l'heure, le *Lac* de M. de Lamartine... d'une façon...

MME ROUSSELIN : Mais vous connaissez la pièce ?

ONESIME : On ne m'a pas encore permis de lire cet auteur.

MME ROUSSELIN : Je comprends ! une éducation... sérieuse ! *(Lui passant sur les poignets un écheveau de laine à dévider)* Auriez-vous l'obligeance ?... Les bras toujours étendus ! fort bien !

ONESIME : Oh ! je sais Et même, je suis pour quelque chose dans ce paysage en perles que vous a donné ma soeur Elisabeth !

MME ROUSSELIN : Un ouvrage charmant ; il est suspendu dans ma chambre ! Louise, quand tu auras fini de regarder l'*Illustration*...

MUREL, *à part* : On se méfie de moi, c'est clair.

MME ROUSSELIN : J'ai admiré, du reste, les talents de vos autres soeurs, la dernière fois que nous avons été au château de Bouvigny.

ONESIME : [Ma mère y recevra prochainement la visite de mon grand-oncle, l'évêque de Saint-Giraud.

MME ROUSSELIN : Monseigneur de Saint-Giraud votre oncle !

ONESIME : Oui ! le parrain de mon père.

MME ROUSSELIN : Il nous oublie, le cher Comte, c'est un ingrat !]

ONESIME : Oh ! non ! car il a demandé pour tantôt un rendez-vous à M. Rousselin.

MME ROUSSELIN, *l'air satisfait* : Ah !

ONESIME : Il veut l'entretenir d'une chose... Et je crois même que j'ai vu entrer tout à l'heure Maître Dodart.

MUREL, *à part* : Le notaire ! Est-ce que déjà ?

MISS ARABELLE : En effet ! Et après est venu Marchais, l'épicier, puis M. Bondois, M. Liégeard, d'autres encore.

MUREL, *à part* : Diable, qu'est-ce que cela veut dire ?

Scène IV : les mêmes, Rousselin

LOUISE : Ah ! papa !

ROUSSELIN, *le sourire aux lèvres* : Regarde-le mon enfant ! Tu peux en être fière ! *(Embrassant sa femme)* Bonjour, ma chérie !

MME ROUSSELIN : Que se passe-t-il ? cet air rayonnant...

ROUSSELIN, *apercevant Murel* : Vous ici, mon bon Murel ! Vous savez déjà... et vous avez voulu être le premier !

MUREL : Quoi donc ?

ROUSSELIN, *apercevant Gruchet* : Gruchet aussi ! ah ! mes amis ! C'est bien ! Je suis touché ! Vraiment, tous mes concitoyens...

GRUCHET : Nous ne savons rien !

MUREL : Nous ignorons complètement...

ROUSSELIN : Mais ils sont là !... ils me pressent !

TOUS : Qui donc ?

ROUSSELIN : [Tout un comité] qui me propose la candidature de l'arrondissement.

MUREL, *à part* : Sapristi ! on m'a devancé !

MME ROUSSELIN : Quel bonheur !

GRUCHET : Et vous allez accepter peut-être ?

ROUSSELIN : Pourquoi pas ? Je suis conservateur, moi !

MME ROUSSELIN : Tu leur as répondu ?

ROUSSELIN : Rien encore, Je voulais avoir ton avis.

MME ROUSSELIN : Accepte !

LOUISE : Sans doute !

ROUSSELIN : Ainsi, vous ne voyez pas d’inconvénient ?

TOUS : Aucun - Au contraire - Va donc !

ROUSSELIN : Franchement, vous pensez que je ferais bien ?

MME ROUSSELIN : Oui ! oui !

ROUSSELIN : Au moins, je pourrai dire que vous m’avez forcé. *(Fausse sortie)* **MUREL, *l’arrêtant* :** Doucement ! un peu de prudence.

ROUSSELIN, *stupéfait* : Pourquoi ?

MUREL : Une pareille candidature n’est pas sérieuse !

ROUSSELIN : Comment cela ?

Scène V : les mêmes, puis Marchais, Maître Dodart.

MARCHAIS : Serviteur à la compagnie ! Mesdames, faites excuse ! Les messieurs qui sont là m’ont dit d’aller voir ce que faisait Rousselin, et qu’il faut qu’il vienne ! et qu’il réponde oui !

ROUSSELIN : Certainement !

MARCHAIS : Parce que vous êtes une bonne pratique, et que vous ferez un bon député !

ROUSSELIN, *avec enivrement* : Député !

DODART, *entrant* : Eh ! mon cher, on s’impatiente, à la fin !

MUREL, *à part* : Dodart ! encore un tartuffe, celui-là !

DODART, *à Onésime* : Monsieur votre père, qui est dans la cour, désire vous parler.

MUREL : Ah ! son père est là ?

GRUCHET, *à Murel* : Il vient avec les autres. L’oeil au guet, Murel !

MUREL : Pardon, maître Dodart. *(A Rousselin)* Imaginez un prétexte... *(A Marchais)* Dites que M. Rousselin se trouve indisposé et qu’il donnera sa réponse... tantôt. Vivement ! *(Marchais sort)* **ROUSSELIN :** Voilà qui est trop fort, par exemple !

MUREL : Eh ! on n’accepte pas une candidature, comme cela, à l’improviste !

ROUSSELIN : Depuis trois ans je ne fais qu'y penser !

MUREL : Mais vous allez commettre une bévue ! Demandez à Me Dodart, homme plein de sagesse, et qui connaît la localité, s'il peut répondre de votre élection.

DODART : En répondre, non ! J'y crois, cependant ! Dans ces affaires-là, après tout, on n'est jamais sûr de rien. D'autant plus que nous ne savons pas si nos adversaires...

GRUCHET : Et ils sont nombreux, les adversaires !

ROUSSELIN : Ils sont nombreux ?

MUREL : Immensément ! *(A Dodart)* Vous excuserez donc notre ami qui désire un peu de réflexion. *(A Rousselin)* Ah ! si vous voulez risquer tout !

ROUSSELIN : Il n'a peut-être pas tort ! *(A Dodart)* Oui, priez-les...

DODART : Eh bien, monsieur Onésime ? Allons !

MUREL : Il faut obéir à papa.

ROUSSELIN, *à Murel* : Comment, vous partez aussi ? Pourquoi ?

MUREL : Cela est mon secret ! Tenez-vous tranquille ! vous verrez !

Scène VI : Rousselin, Mme Rousselin, Louise, Miss Arabelle, Gruchet

ROUSSELIN : Que va-t-il faire ?

GRUCHET : Je n'en sais rien.

MME ROUSSELIN : Quelque extravagance !

GRUCHET : Oui ; c'est un drôle de jeune homme ! J'étais venu pour avoir la permission de vous en présenter un autre.

ROUSSELIN : Amenez-le !

GRUCHET : Oh ! il peut fort bien ne pas vous convenir. Vous avez quelquefois des préventions ! En un mot, il se nomme M. Julien Duprat.

ROUSSELIN : Ah ! non ! non !

GRUCHET : Quelle idée !

ROUSSELIN : Qu'on ne m'en parle pas, entendez-vous *(Apercevant, sur le* *guéridon, un journal)* J'avais pourtant défendu chez moi l'admission de ce papier ! Mais je ne suis pas le maître, apparemment ! *(Examinant la feuille)* Oui, encore des vers !

GRUCHET : Parbleu, puisque c'est un poète !

ROUSSELIN : Je n'aime pas les poètes ! de pareils galopins...

MISS ARABELLE : Je vous assure, Monsieur, que je lui ai parlé, une fois, à la promenade, sous les quinconces ; et il est... très bien !

GRUCHET : Quand vous le recevriez !

ROUSSELIN : Moins que jamais ! *(A Louise)* moins que jamais, ma fille !

LOUISE : Oh ! je ne le défends pas !

ROUSSELIN : Je l'espère bien... un misérable !

MISS ARABELLE, *violemment* : Ah !

GRUCHET : Mais pourquoi ?

ROUSSELIN : Parce que... Pardon, miss Arabelle ! *(A sa femme, montrant Louise)* Oui, emmène-là ! J'ai besoin de m'expliquer avec Gruchet.

Scène VII : Rousselin, Gruchet

GRUCHET, *assis sur le banc à gauche* : Je vous écoute.

ROUSSELIN, *prenant le journal :* Le feuilleton est intitulé : "Encore à Elle !"

"Les vieux sphinx accroupis, qui sont de pierre dure, "Gémiraient sous la peine horrible qu'on endure "Lorsque..."

Eh ! je me fiche bien de tes sphinx !

GRUCHET : Moi aussi, mais je ne comprends pas.

ROUSSELIN : C'est la suite de la correspondance... indirecte.

GRUCHET : Si vous vouliez vous expliquer plus clairement ?

ROUSSELIN : Figurez-vous donc qu'il y a eu mardi huit jours, en me promenant dans mon jardin, le matin, de très bonne heure - je suis agité maintenant, je ne dors plus, - voilà que je distingue, contre le mur de l'espalier, sur le treillage...

GRUCHET : Un homme ?

ROUSSELIN : Non, une lettre, une grande enveloppe, ça avait l'air d'une pétition, et qui portait pour adresse simplement : “A Elle !” Je l'ai ouverte, comme vous pensez ; et j'ai lu... une déclaration d'amour en vers, mon ami !... quelque chose de brûlant... tout ce que la passion...

GRUCHET : Et pas de signature, naturellement ? Aucun indice ?

ROUSSELIN : Permettez ! La première chose à faire était de connaître la personne qui inspirait ce délire, et, comme elle se trouvait décrite dans cette poésie même, car on y parlait de cheveux noirs, mon soupçon d'abord s'est porté sur Arabelle, notre institutrice, d'autant plus...

GRUCHET : Mais elle est blonde !

ROUSSELIN : Qu'est-ce que ça fait ? en vers, quelquefois, à cause de la rime, on met un mot pour un autre. Cependant, par délicatesse, vous comprenez, les Anglaises... je n'ai pas osé lui faire de questions.

GRUCHET : Mais votre femme ?

ROUSSELIN : Elle a haussé les épaules en me disant : “Ne t'occupe donc pas de tout ça !”

GRUCHET : Et Julien, là-dedans ?

ROUSSELIN : Nous y voici ! Je vous prie de noter que la susdite poésie commençait par ces mots : “Quand j'aperçois ta robe entre les orangers !” et que je possède deux orangers, un de chaque côté de ma grille ; - il n'y en a pas d'autres aux environs ; - c'est donc bien à quelqu'un de chez moi que la déclaration en vers est faite. A qui ? A ma fille, évidemment, à à Louise ! et par qui ? par le seul homme du pays qui compose des vers, Julien ! De plus, si on compare l'écriture de la poésie avec l'écriture qui se trouve tous les jours sur la bande du journal, on reconnaît facilement que c'est la même.

GRUCHET, *à part* : Maladroit, va !

ROUSSELIN : Le voilà, votre protégé ! que voulait-il ? séduire Mlle Rousselin ?

GRUCHET : Oh !

ROUSSELIN : L'épouser, peut-être ?

GRUCHET : Ça vaudrait mieux.

ROUSSELIN : Je crois bien ! Maintenant, ma parole d'honneur, on ne respecte plus personne ! L'insolent ! Est-ce que je lui demande quelque chose, moi ? Est-ce que je me mêle de ses affaires ? Qu'il écrivaille ses articles ! qu'il ameute le peuple contre nous ! qu'il fasse l'apologie des bousingots de son espèce ! Va, va, mon petit journaliste, cours après les héritières !

GRUCHET : Il y en a d'autres qui ne sont pas journalistes et qui recherchent votre fille pour son argent !

ROUSSELIN : Hein ?

GRUCHET : Cela saute aux yeux ! - On vit à la campagne, où l'on cultive les terres de ses ancêtres soi-même, par économie et fort mal. Du reste, elles sont mauvaises et grevées d'hypothèques. Huit enfants, dont cinq filles, une bossue ; impossible de voir les autres pendant les semaines, à cause de leurs toilettes. L'aîné des garçons, qui a voulu spéculer sur le bois, s'abrutit à Mostaganem avec de l'absinthe. Ses besoins d'argent sont fréquents. Le cadet, Dieu merci [sera prêtre] ; le dernier, vous le connaissez, il tapisse. Si bien que l'existence n'est pas drôle dans le castel, où la pluie vous tombe sur la nuque par les trous du plafond. Mais on fait des projets, et de temps à autre, - les beaux jours, ceux-là, - on s'encaque de temps à autre dans la petite voiture de famille disloquée que le papa conduit lui-même, pour venir se refaire à l'excellente table de ce bon M. Rousselin, trop heureux de la fréquentation.

ROUSSELIN : Ah ! vous allez loin ; cet acharnement...

GRUCHET : C'est que je ne comprends pas tant de respect pour eux, à moins que, par suite de votre ancienne dépendance...

ROUSSELIN, *avec douleur* : Gruchet, pas un mot de cela, mon ami ! pas un mot, ce souvenir...

GRUCHET : Soyez sans crainte ; ils ne divulgueront rien, et pour cause !

ROUSSELIN : Alors ?

GRUCHET : Mais vous ne voyez donc pas que ces gens nous méprisent parce que nous sommes des plébéiens, des parvenus ! et qu'ils vous jalousent, vous, parce que vous êtes riche ! L'offre de la candidature qu'on vient de vous faire, - due, je n'en doute pas, aux manoeuvres de Bouvigny, et dont il se targuera, est une amorce pour happer la fortune de votre fille. Mais comme vous pouvez très bien ne pas être élu...

ROUSSELIN : Pas élu ?

GRUCHET : Certainement ! Et elle n’en sera pas moins la femme d’un idiot, qui rougira de son beau-père.

ROUSSELIN : Oh ! je leur crois des sentiments...

GRUCHET : Si je vous apprenais qu’ils en font déjà des gorges chaudes ?

ROUSSELIN : Qui vous l’a dit ?

GRUCHET : Félicité, ma bonne. Les domestiques entre eux, vous savez, se racontent les propos de leurs maîtres.

ROUSSELIN : Quel propos ? lequel ?

GRUCHET : Leur cuisinière les a entendus qui causaient de ce mariage, mystérieusement ; et, comme la comtesse avait des craintes, le comte a répondu, en parlant de vous : “Bah ! il en sera trop honoré !”

ROUSSELIN : Ah ! ils m’honorent !

GRUCHET : Ils croient la chose presque arrangée !

ROUSSELIN : Ah ! non, Dieu merci !

GRUCHET : Ils sont même tellement sûrs de leur fait, que tout à l’heure, devant ces dames, Onésime prenait un petit air fat !

ROUSSELIN : Voyez-vous !

GRUCHET : Un peu plus, j’ai cru qu’il allait me tutoyer !

PIERRE, *annonçant* : M. le comte de Bouvigny !

GRUCHET : Ah ! - Je me retire ! Adieu, Rousselin ! N’oubliez pas ce que je vous ai dit ! *(Il passe devant Bouvigny, le chapeau sur la tête, puis lui montre le point par derrière.)* Je te réserve un plat de mon métier, à toi **(2)**

Scène VIII : Rousselin, le comte de Bouvigny

BOUVIGNY, *d’un air dégagé :* L’entretien que j’ai réclamé de vous, cher Monsieur, avait pour but...

ROUSSELIN, *d’un geste, l’invite à s’asseoir* : Monsieur le conte...

BOUVIGNY, *s’asseyant* : Entre nous, n’est-ce pas, la cérémonie est inutile ? Je viens donc, presque certain d’avance du succès, vous demander la main de mademoiselle votre fille Louise, pour mon fils le vicomte Onésime-Gaspard-Olivier de Bouvigny. *(Silence de Rousselin)* Hein ! vous dites ?

ROUSSELIN : Rien jusqu'à présent, Monsieur :

BOUVIGNY, *vivement* : J'oubliais ! Il y a de grandes espérances, pas directes, à la vérité !... et comme dot... une pension ; ... du reste Me Dodart, détenteur des titres *(baissant la voix)* ne manquera pas... *(Même silence)* J'attends.

ROUSSELIN : Monsieur, ... c'est beaucoup d'honneur pour moi, mais...

BOUVIGNY : Comment ? mais !...

ROUSSELIN : On a pu, Monsieur le conte, vous exagérer ma fortune ?

BOUVIGNY : Croyez-vous qu'un pareil calcul ?... et que les Bouvigny !...

ROUSSELIN : Loin de moi cette idée ! Mais je ne suis pas aussi riche qu'on se l'imagine !

BOUVIGNY, *gracieux* : La disproportion en sera moins grande !

ROUSSELIN : Cependant, malgré des revenus... raisonnables, c'est vrai, nous vivons, sans nous gêner. Ma femme a des goûts... élégants. J'aime à recevoir, à répandre le bien-être autour de moi. J'ai réparé, à mes frais, la route de Bugueux à Faverville. J'ai établi une école, et fondé, à l'hospice, une salle de quatre lits qui portera mon nom.

BOUVIGNY : On le sait, Monsieur, on le sait !

ROUSSELIN : Tout cela pour vous convaincre que je ne suis pas - bien que fils de banquier et l'ayant été moi-même - ce qu'on appelle un homme d'argent. Et la position de M. Onésime ne saurait être un obstacle, mais il y en a un autre. Votre fils n'a pas de métier ?

BOUVIGNY, *fièrement* : Monsieur, un gentilhomme ne connaît que celui des armes !

ROUSSELIN : Mais il n'est pas soldat ?

BOUVIGNY : Il attend, pour servir son pays, que le gouvernement ait changé...

ROUSSELIN : Et en attendant ?

BOUVIGNY : Il vivra dans son domaine, comme moi, Monsieur !

ROUSSELIN : A user des souliers de chasse, fort bien ! Mais moi, Monsieur, j'aimerais mieux donner ma fille à quelqu'un dont la fortune - pardon du mot- serait encore moindre.

BOUVIGNY : La sienne est assurée !

ROUSSELIN : A un homme qui n’aurait même rien du tout, pourvu...

BOUVIGNY : Oh ! rien du tout !...

ROUSSELIN, *se levant* : Oui, Monsieur, à un simple travailleur, à un prolétaire.

BOUVIGNY, *se levant* : C’est mépriser la naissance !

ROUSSELIN : Soit ! je sis un enfant de la Révolution, moi !

BOUVIGNY : Vos manières le prouvent, Monsieur !

ROUSSELIN : Et je ne me laisse pas éblouir par l’éclat des titres !

BOUVIGNY : Ni moi par celui de l’or... croyez-le !

ROUSSELIN : Dieu merci, on ne se courbe plus devant les seigneurs comme autrefois !

BOUVIGNY : En effet, votre grand-père a été domestique dans ma maison !

ROUSSELIN : Ah ! vous voulez me déshonorer ? Sortez, Monsieur ! La considération est aujourd’hui un privilège tout personnel ! La mienne se trouve au dessus de vos calomnies ! Ne serait-ce que ces notables qui sont venus tout à l’heure m’offrir la candidature...

BOUVIGNY : On aurait pu me l’offrir aussi, à moi ! et je l’ai, je l’aurais refusée par égard pour vous. Mais devant une pareille indélicatesse, après la déclaration de vos principes, et du moment que vous êtes un démocrate, un suppôt de l’anarchie...

ROUSSELIN : Pas du tout !

BOUVIGNY : Un organe du désordre, moi aussi, je me déclare candidat ! Candidat conservateur, entendez-vous ! et nous verrons bien lequel des deux... je suis même le camarade du préfet qui vient d’être nommé. Je ne m’en cache pas ! et il me soutiendra ! Bonsoir ! *(il sort)*

Scène IX : Rousselin, seul

ROUSSELIN : Mais ce furieux-là est capable de me démolir dans l’opinion et de me faire passer pour un jacobin ! J’ai peut-être eu tort de le blesser. Cependant, vu la fortune de Bouvigny, il m’était bien impossible... N’importe, c’est fâcheux ! Murel et Gruchet déjà n’avaient pas l’air si rassurés ; et il faudrait découvrir un moyen de persuader aux conservateurs... que je suis... le plus conservateur des hommes... Hein ? qu’est-ce donc ?

Scène X : Rousselin, Murel, avec une foule d’électeurs Heurtelot, Beaumesnil, Voinchet, Hombourg, Ledru, puis Gruchet MUREL : Mon cher concitoyen, les électeurs ici présents viennent vous offrir, par ma voix, la candidature du parti libéral de l’arrondissement.

ROUSSELIN : Mais..., Messieurs...

MUREL : Vous aurez entièrement pour vous les communes de Faverville, Harolle, Lahoussaye, Bonneval, Hautot, Saint-Mathieu.

ROUSSELIN : Ah ! Ah !

MUREL : Randou, Manerville, La Coudrette ! Enfin nous comptons sur une majorité qui dépassera quinze cents voix, et votre élection est certaine.

ROUSSELIN : Ah ! citoyens ! *(Bas à Murel)* Je ne sais que dire.

MUREL : Permettez-moi de vous présenter quelques-uns de vos amis politiques : d’abord le plus ardent de tous, un véritable patriote, M. Heurtelot... fabricant...

HEURTELOT : Oh ! dites cordonnier, ça ne me fait rien !

MUREL : M. Hombourg, maître de l’*Hôtel du Lion d’or* et entrepreneur de roulage ; M. Voinchet, pépiniériste ; M. Beaumesnil, sans profession ; le brave capitaine Ledru, retraité.

ROUSSELIN, *avec enthousiasme* : Ah ! les militaires !

MUREL : Et tous nous sommes convaincus que vous remplirez hautement cette noble mission *(Bas à Rousselin)* Parlez donc !

ROUSSELIN : Messieurs... non, citoyens ! Mes principes sont les vôtres ! et... certainement que... je suis l’enfant du pays, comme vous ! On ne m’a jamais vu dire du mal de la liberté, au contraire ! Vous trouverez en moi... un interprète... dévoué à vos intérêts, le défenseur... une digue contre les envahissements du Pouvoir.

MUREL, l*ui prenant la main :* Très bien mon ami, très bien ! Et n’ayez aucun doute sur le résultat de votre candidature ! D’abord, elle sera soutenue par *l’Impartial* !

ROUSSELIN : *L'Impartial* pour moi ?

GRUCHET, *sortant de la foule* : Mais tout à fait pour vous ! J'arrive de la rédaction. Julien est d'une ardeur ! *(Bas à Murel, étonné de le voir)* Il m'a donné des raisons. Je vous expliquerai *(Aux électeurs)* Vous permettez, n'est-ce pas ? *(A Rousselin)* Maintenant, c'est bien le moins que je vous l'amène ?

ROUSSELIN : Qui ? pardon ! car j'ai la tête...

GRUCHET : Que je vous amène Julien ; il a envie de venir.

ROUSSELIN : Est-ce... vraiment nécessaire ?

GRUCHET : Oh ! indispensable !

ROUSSELIN : Eh bien alors... oui, comme vous voudrez *(Gruchet sort)*

HEURTELOT : Ce n'est pas tout ça, citoyen ; mais la première chose, quand vous serez là-bas, c'est d'abolir l'impôt des boissons !

ROUSSELIN : Les boissons ? sans doute !

HEURTELOT : Les autres font toujours des promesses ; et puis, va te promener ! Moi, je vous crois un brave ; et tapez là-dedans ! *(Il lui tend la main)*
ROUSSELIN, *avec hésitation* : Volontiers, citoyen, volontiers !

HEURTELOT : A la bonne heure ! et il faut que ça finisse ! Voilà trop longtemps que nous souffrons !

HOMBOURG : Parbleu, on ne fait rien pour le roulage ! l'avoine est hors de prix !

ROUSSELIN : C'est vrai ! l'agriculture !

HOMBOURG : Je ne parle pas de l'agriculture, je dis le roulage !

MUREL : Il n'y a que cela ! mais, grâce à lui, le Gouvernement...

LEDRU : Ah ! le Gouvernement ! il décore un tas de freluquets !

VOINCHET : Et leur tracé du chemin de fer, qui passera par Saint-Mathieu, est d'une bêtise !...

BEAUMESNIL : On ne peut plus élever ses enfants !

ROUSSELIN : Je vous promets...

HOMBOURG : D'abord, les droits de la poste !

ROUSSELIN : Oh ! oui !

LEDRU : Quand ce ne serait que dans l'intérêt de la discipline !...

ROUSSELIN : Parbleu !

VOINCHET : Au lieu que si on avait pris par Bonneval...

ROUSSELIN : Assurément !

BEAUMESNIL : Moi, j'en ai un qui a des dispositions...

ROUSSELIN : Je vous crois !

HOMBOURG, LEDRU, VOINCHET, BEAUMESNIL*, tous à la fois* :

(HOMBOURG) : Ainsi, pour louer un cabriolet...

(LEDRU) : Je ne demande rien ; cependant...

(VOINCHET) : Ma propriété qui se trouve...

(BEAUMESNIL) : Car enfin, puisqu'il y a des collèges...

MUREL*, élevant la voix plus haut* : Citoyens, pardon, un mot ! Citoyens, dans cette circonstance où notre cher compatriote, avec une simplicité de langage que j'ose dire antique, a si bien confirmé notre espoir, je suis heureux d'avoir été votre intermédiaire.. ; et afin de célébrer cet événement, d'où sortiront pour le canton, - et peut-être pour la France, - de nouvelles destinées, permettez-moi de vous offrir, lundi prochain, un punch, à ma fabrique.

LES ELECTEURS : Lundi, oui, lundi !

MUREL : Nous n'avons plus qu'à nous retirez, je crois ?

TOUS*, en s'en allant* : Adieu, monsieur Rousselin ! A bientôt ! ça ira ! vous verrez !

ROUSSELIN*, donnant des poignées de main* : Mes amis ! Ah ! je suis touché, je vous assure ! Adieu ! Tout à vous ! *(Les électeurs s'éloignent)* **MUREL*, à Rousselin* :** Soignez Heurtelot, c'est un meneur ! *(Il va retrouver au fond les électeurs)* **ROUSSELIN*, appelant* :** Heurtelot !

HEURTELOT : De quoi ?

ROUSSELIN : Vous ne pourriez pas me faire quinze paires de bottes ?

HEURTELOT : Quinze paires ?

ROUSSELIN : Oui, et autant de souliers. Ce n’est pas que j’aille en voyage, mais je tiens à avoir une forte provision de chaussures.

HEURTELOT : On va s’y mettre tout de suite, Monsieur ! A vos ordres ! *(Il va rejoindre les électeurs)* **HOMBOURG :** Monsieur Rousselin, il m’est arrivé dernièrement une paire d’alezans, qui seraient des bijoux à votre calèche ! Voulez-vous les voir ?

ROUSSELIN : Oui, un de ces jours !

VOINCHET : Je vous donnerai une petite note, vous savez, sur le tracé du nouveau chemin de fier, de façon à ce que, prenant mon terrain par le milieu...

ROUSSELIN : Très bien !

BEAUMESNIL : Je vous amènerai mon fils ; et vous conviendrez qu’il serait déplorable de laisser un pareil enfant sans éducation.

ROUSSELIN : A la rentrée des classes, soyez sûr !...

HEURTELOT : Voilà un homme celui-là ! Vive Rousselin !

TOUS : Vive Rousselin ! *(Tous les électeurs sortent)*

Scène XI : Rousselin, Murel

ROUSSELIN, *se précipite sur Murel, et l’embrassant* : Ah ! mon ami ! mon ami ! mon ami !

MUREL : Trouvez-vous la chose bien conduite ?

ROUSSELIN : C’est-à-dire que je ne peux pas vous exprimer...

MUREL : Vous en aviez envie, avouez-le ?

ROUSSELIN : J’en serais mort ! Au bout d’un an que je m’étais retiré ici, à la campagne, j’ai senti peu à peu comme de la langueur.. Je devenais lourd. Je m’endormais le soir, après le dîner ; et le médecin a dit à ma femme : “Il faut que votre mari s’occupe !” Alors j’ai cherché en moi-même ce que je pourrais bien faire.

MUREL : Et vous avez pensé à la députation ?

ROUSSELIN : Naturellement ! Du reste, j’arrivais à l’âge où l’on se doit ça. J’ai donc acheté une bibliothèque. J’ai pris un abonnement au *Moniteur*

MUREL : Vous vous êtes mis à travailler, enfin !

ROUSSELIN : Je me suis fait, premièrement, admettre dans une société d'archéologie, et j'ai commencé à recevoir, par la poste, des brochures. Puis, j'ai été du conseil municipal, du conseil d'arrondissement, enfin du conseil général ; et dans toutes les questions importantes, de peur de me compromettre... je souriais. Oh ! le sourire, quelquefois, est d'une ressource !

MUREL : Mais le public n'était pas fixé sur vos opinions, et il a fallu - vous ne savez peut-être pas...

ROUSSELIN : Oui ! je sais... c'est vous, vous seul !

MUREL : Non, vous ne savez pas !

ROUSSELIN : Si fait ! ah ! quel diplomate !

MUREL, *à part* : Il y mord. *(Haut)* Les ouvriers de ma fabrique étaient hostiles au début. Des hommes redoutables, mon ami ! A présent, tous dans votre main !

ROUSSELIN : Vous valez votre pesant d'or !

MUREL, *à part* : Je n'en demande pas tant !

ROUSSELIN, *le contemplant* : Tenez ! vous êtes pour moi... plus qu'un frère ! ... comme mon enfant !

MUREL, *avec lenteur* : Mais... je pourrais... l'être.

ROUSSELIN : Sans doute ! en admettant que je sois plus vieux.

MUREL, *avec un rire forcé* : Ou moi... en devenant votre gendre. Voudriez-vous ?

ROUSSELIN, *avec le même rire* : Farceur !... vous ne voudriez pas vous-même !

MUREL : Parbleu ! oui !

ROUSSELIN : Allons donc ! avec vos habitudes parisiennes !

MUREL : Je vis en province !

ROUSSELIN : Eh ! on ne se marie pas à votre âge !

MUREL : Trente-quatre ans, c'est l'époque !

ROUSSELIN : Quand on a, devant soi, un avenir comme le vôtre !

MUREL : Eh ! mon avenir s’en trouverait singulièrement...

ROUSSELIN : Raisonnons ; vous êtes tout simplement le directeur de la filature de Bugnaux, représentant de la compagnie flamande.. Appointements : vingt mille.

MUREL : Plus une part considérable dans les bénéfices !

ROUSSELIN : Mais l’année où on n’en fait pas ? Et puis, on peut très bien vous mettre à la porte.

MUREL : J’irai ailleurs, où je trouverai...

ROUSSELIN : Mais vous avez des dettes ! des billets en souffrance ! on vous harcèle !

MUREL : Et ma fortune, à moi ! sans compter que plus tard...

ROUSSELIN : Vous allez me parler de l’héritage de votre tante ? Vous n’y comptez pas vous-même. Elle habite à deux cents lieues d’ici, et vous êtes fâchés !

MUREL, *à part* : Il sait tout, cet animal-là !

ROUSSELIN : Bref, mon cher, et quoique je ne doute nullement de votre intelligence, ni de votre activité, j’aimerais mieux donner ma fille... à un homme...

MUREL : Qui n’aurait rien du tout, et qui serait bête !

ROUSSELIN : Non ! mais dont la fortune, quoique minime, serait certaine !

MUREL : Ah ! par exemple !

ROUSSELIN : Oui, Monsieur, à un modeste rentier, à un petit propriétaire de campagne.

MUREL : Voilà le cas que vous faites du travail !

ROUSSELIN : Ecoutez donc ! l’industrie, ça n’est pas sûr ; et un bon père de famille doit y regarder à deux fois.

MUREL : Enfin, vous me refusez votre fille ?

ROUSSELIN : Forcément ! et en bonne conscience, ce n’est pas ma faute ! sans rancune, n’est-ce pas ? *(Appelant)* Pierre ! mon buvard, et un encrier ! Asseyez-vous là ! Vous allez préparer ma profession de foi aux électeurs. *(Pierre apporte* *ce que Rousselin a demandé, et le dépose sur la petite table à droite)* **MUREL :** Moi ! que je...

ROUSSELIN : Nous la reverrons ensemble ! Mais commencez d'abord. Avec votre verve, je ne suis pas inquiet ! Ah ! vous m'avez donné tout à l'heure un bon coup d'épaule, pour mon discours ! Je ne vous tiens pas quitte ! Est-il gentil ! - Je vous laisse ! Moi, je vais à mes petites affaires ! Quelque chose d'enlevé, n'est-ce pas ? - du feu ? *(Il sort)*

Scène XII : Murel, seul

MUREL : Imbécile ! Me voilà bien avancé, maintenant ! *(A la cantonade)* Mais, vieille bête, tu ne trouveras jamais quelqu'un pour la chérir comme moi ! De quelle façon me venger ? ou plutôt si je lui faisais peur ? C'est un homme à sacrifier tout pour être élu ! Donc, il faudrait lui découvrir un concurrent ! Mais lequel ? *(Entre Gruchet)* Ah !

Scène XIII : Murel, Gruchet

GRUCHET : Qu'est-ce qui vous prend ?

MUREL : Un remords ! J'ai commis une sottise, et vous aussi.

GRUCHET : En quoi ?

MUREL : Vous étiez tout à l'heure avec ceux qui portent Rousselin à la candidature ! Vous l'avez vu !

GRUCHET : Et même que j'ai été chercher Julien ; il va venir.

MUREL : Il ne s'agit pas de lui, mais de Rousselin ! Ce Rousselin, c'est un âne ! Il ne sait pas dire quatre mots ! et nous aurons le plus pitoyable député !

GRUCHET : L'initiative n'est pas de moi !

MUREL : Il s'est toujours montré on ne peut plus médiocre.

GRUCHET : Certainement !

MUREL : Ce qui ne l'empêche pas d'avoir une considération !... tandis que vous...

GRUCHET, *vexé* : Moi, eh bien ?

MUREL : Je ne veux pas vous offenser, mais vous ne jouissez pas, dans le pays, de l’espèce d’éclat qui entoure la maison Rousselin.

GRUCHET : Oh ! si je voulais ! *(Silence)*

MUREL, *le regardant en face* : Gruchet, seriez-vous capable de vous livrer à une assez forte dépense ?

GRUCHET : Ce n’est pas trop dans mon caractère ; cependant...

MUREL : Si on vous disait : “Moyennant quelques mille francs, tu prendras sa place, tu seras député !”

GRUCHET : Moi, dé...

MUREL : Mais songez donc que là-bas, à Paris, on est à la source des affaires ! on connaît un tas de monde ! on va soi-même chez les ministres ! Les adjudications de fournitures, les primes sur les sociétés nouvelles, les grands travaux, la Bourse, on a tout ! Quelle influence ! mon ami, que d’occasions !

GRUCHET : Comment voulez-vous que ça m’arrive ? Rousselin est presque élu !

MUREL : Pas encore ! Il a manqué de franchise dans la déclaration de ses principes ; et là-dessus la chicane est facile ! Quelques électeurs n’étaient pas contents. Heurtelot grommelait.

GRUCHET : Le cordonnier ? J’ai contre lui une saisie pour après-demain !

MUREL : Epargnez-le ; il est fort ! Quant aux autres, on verra. Je m’arrangerai pour que la chose commence par les ouvriers de la fabrique..., puis, s’il faut se déclarer pour vous, je me déclarerai, M. Rousselin n’ayant pas le patriotisme nécessaire ; je serai forcé de le reconnaître ; d’ailleurs, je le reconnais, c’est une ganache ?

GRUCHET, *rêvant* : Tiens ! tiens !

MUREL : Qui vous arrête ? Vous êtes pour la Gauche ? Eh bien, on vous pousse à la Chambre de ce côté-là ; et quand bien même vous n’iriez pas, votre candidature seule, en ôtant des voix à Rousselin, l’empêche d’y parvenir.

GRUCHET : Comme ça le ferait bisquer !

MUREL : Un essai ne coûte rien ; peut-être quelques centaines de francs dans les cabarets.

GRUCHET, *vivement* : Pas plus, vous croyez ?

MUREL : Et je vais remuer tout l’arrondissement, et vous serez nommé, et Rousselin sera enfoncé ! Et beaucoup de ceux qui font semblant de ne pas vous connaître s’inclineront très bas en vous disant : “Monsieur le député, j’ai bien l’honneur de vous offrir mes hommages.”

Scène XIV : les mêmes, Julien

MUREL : Mon petit Duprat, vous ne verrez pas M. Rousselin !

JULIEN : Je ne pourrai pas voir...

MUREL : Non ! Nous sommes brouillés... sur la politique.

JULIEN : Je ne comprends pas ! Tantôt vous êtes venu chez moi me démontrer qu’il fallait soutenir M. Rousselin, en me donnant une foule de raisons... que j’ai été redire à M. Gruchet. Il les a, de suite, acceptées, d’autant plus qu’il désire...

GRUCHET : Ceci entre nous, on cher ! C’est une autre question, qui ne concerne pas Rousselin.

JULIEN : Pourquoi n’en veut-on plus ?

MUREL : Je vous le répète, ce n’est pas l’homme de notre parti.

GRUCHET, *avec fatuité* : Et on en trouvera un autre !

MUREL : Vous saurez lequel. Allons-nous en ! On ne conspire pas chez l’ennemi.

JULIEN : L’ennemi ? Rousselin !

MUREL : Sans doute ; et vous aurez l’obligeance de l’attaquer, dans *l’Impartial*, vigoureusement !

JULIEN : Pourquoi cela ? Je ne vois pas de mal à en dire.

GRUCHET : Avec de l’imagination, on en trouve.

JULIEN : Je ne suis pas fait pour ce métier.

GRUCHET : Ecoutez-donc ! Vous êtes venu à moi le premier m’offrir vos services, et sachant que j’étais l’ami de Rousselin, vous m’avez prié, - c’est le mot, - de vous introduire chez lui.

JULIEN : A peine y suis-je que vous m’en arrachez !

GRUCHET : Ce n'est pas ma faute si les choses ont pris, tout à coup, une autre direction.

JULIEN : Est-ce la mienne ?

GRUCHET : Mais comme il était bien convenu entre nous deux que vous entameriez une polémique contre la Société des Tourbières de Grumesnil-les-Arbis, président le comte de Bouvigny, en démontrant l'incapacité financière dudit sieur, - une affaire superbe dont ce gredin de Dodart m'a exclu !...

MUREL, *à part :* Ah ! voilà le motif de leur alliance !

GRUCHET : Jusqu'à présent, vous n'en avez rien fait ; donc, c'est bien le moins, cette fois, que vous vous exécutiez ! Ce qu'on vous demande, d'ailleurs, n'est pas tellement difficile...

JULIEN : N'importe ! Je refuse.

MUREL : Julien, vous oubliez qu'aux termes de notre engagement...

JULIEN : Oui, je sais ! Vous m'avez pris pour faire des découpures dans les autres feuilles, écrire toutes les histoires de chiens perdus, noyades, incendies, accidents quelconques, et rapetisser à la mesure de l'esprit local les articles des confrères parisiens, en style plat ; c'est une exigence, chaque métaphore enlève un abonnement. Je dois aller aux informations, écouter les réclamations, recevoir toutes les visites, exécuter un travail de forçat, mener une vie d'idiot, et n'avoir, en quoi que ce soit, jamais d'initiative ! Eh bien, une fois par hasard, je demande grâce !

MUREL : Tant pis pour vous !

GRUCHET : Alors il ne fallait pas prendre cette place !

JULIEN : Si j'en avais une autre !

GRUCHET : Quand on n'a pas de quoi vivre, c'est pourtant bien joli !

JULIEN, *s'éloignant* : Ah ! la misère !

MUREL : Laissons-le bouder ! Asseyons-nous, pour que j'écrive votre profession de foi.

GRUCHET : Très volontiers *(Ils s'assoient)*

JULIEN, *un peu remonté au fond* : Comme je m'enfuirais à la grâce de Dieu, n'importe où, si tu n'étais pas là, mon pauvre amour. (*Regardant la maison de*

Rousselin) Oh ! je ne veux pas que dans ta maison, aucune douleur, fût-ce la moindre, survienne à cause de moi ! Que les murs qui t'abritent soient bénis ! Mais... sous les acacias, il me semble.. qu'une robe ?... Disparue ! Plus rien ! Adieu ! *(Il s'éloigne)* **GRUCHET,** ***le rappelant*** **:** Restez donc ; nous avons quelque chose à vous montrer !

JULIEN : Ah ! j'en ai assez de vos sales besognes ! *(Il sort)*

MUREL, ***tendant le papier à Gruchet*** **:** Qu'en pensez-vous ?

GRUCHET : C'est très bien ; merci !... Cependant...

MUREL : Qu'avez-vous ?

GRUCHET : Rousselin m'inquiète !

MUREL : Un homme sans conséquence !

GRUCHET : Eh ! vous ne savez pas de quoi il est capable - au fond ! Et puis, le jeune Duprat ne m'a pas l'air extrêmement chaud.

MUREL : Son entêtement à ménager Rousselin doit avoir une cause.

GRUCHET : Eh ! il est amoureux de Louise !

MUREL : Qui vous l'a dit ?

GRUCHET : Rousselin lui-même !

MUREL, ***à part*** **:** Un autre rival ! Bah ! j'en ai roulé des plus solides ! (Haut) Ecoutez-moi ; je vais le rejoindre pour le catéchiser ; vous, pendant ce temps-là, faites imprimer la profession de foi ; voyez tous nos amis, et trouvez-vous ici dans deux heures.

GRUCHET : Convenu ! *(Il sort)*

MUREL : Et maintenant, M. Rousselin, c'est vous qui m'offrirez votre fille. *(Il sort* **(3)**

ACTE DEUX

Le théâtre représente une promenade sous les quinconces A gauche, au deuxième plan, le Café Français ; A droite, la grille de la maison de Rousselin. Au lever du rideau, un colleur est en train de coller trois affiches sur les murs de la maison de Rousselin.

Scène I : Heurtelot, Marchais, le garde champêtre, la foule.

LE GARDE CHAMPETRE, *à la foule* : Circulez ! circulez ! laissez toute la place aux proclamations !

LA FOULE : Trop juste !

HEURTELOT : Ah ! la profession de foi de Bouvigny !

MARCHAIS : Parbleu, puisqu'il sera nommé !

HEURTELOT : C'est Gruchet qui sera nommé ! Lisez plutôt son affiche !

MARCHAIS : Que je la lise !

HEURTELOT : Oui !

MARCHAIS : Commencez vous-même ! *(A part)* Il ne connait pas ses lettres ! *(Haut)* Eh bien ?

HEURTELOT : Mais vous ?

MARCHAIS : Moi ?

HEURTELOT, *à part* : Il ne sait pas épeler ! *(Haut)* Allons...

LE GARDE CHAMPETRE : Et ça vote ! - Tenez, je vais m'y mettre pour vous ! D'abord, celle du comte de Bouvigny : “Mes amis, cédant à de vives instances, j'ai cru devoir me présenter à vos suffrages...”

HEURTELOT : Connu ! A l'autre ! Celle de Gruchet !

LE GARDE CHAMPETRE : “Citoyens, c'est pour obéir à la volonté de quelques amis que je me présente...”

MARCHAIS : Quel farceur ! assez !

LE GARDE CHAMPETRE : Alors je passe à celle de M. Rousselin ! “Mes chers compatriotes, si plusieurs d’entre vous ne m’en avaient vivement sollicité, je n’oserais...”

HEURTELOT : Il nous embête ! je vais déchirer son affiche !

MARCHAIS : Moi aussi, car c’est une trahison !

LE GARDE CHAMPETRE, *s’interposant* : Vous n’en avez pas le droit !

MARCHAIS : Comment, pour soutenir l’ordre !

HEURTELOT : Eh bien, et la liberté ?

LE GARDE CHAMPETRE : Laissez les papiers tranquilles, ou je vous flanque au violon tous les deux !

HEURTELOT : Voilà bien le Gouvernement ! Il est à nous vexer, toujours !

MARCHAIS : On ne peut rien faire !

Scène II : les mêmes, Murel, Gruchet

MUREL, *à Heurtelot* : Fidèle au poste ! c’est bien ! Prenez-les tous ; faites les boire !

HEURTELOT : Oh ! là-dessus !...

MUREL, *aux électeurs* : Entrez ! et pas de cérémonie ! J’ai donné des ordres ; c’est Gruchet qui régale !

GRUCHET : Jusqu’à un certain point, cependant !

MUREL, *à Gruchet* :Allez donc !

LES ELECTEURS : Ah ! Gruchet ! un bon ! un solide ! un patriote ! *(Ils entrent tous dans le café)*

Scène III : Murel, Miss Arabelle

MUREL, *se dirigeant vers la grille de la maison Rousselin* : Il faut pourtant que je tâche de voir Louise !

MISS ARABELLE, *sortant de la grille* : Je voudrais vous parler, Monsieur.

MUREL : Tant mieux, miss Arabelle ! Et Louise, dites-moi, n’est-elle pas ?...

MISS ARABELLE : Mais vous étiez avec quelqu’un ?

MUREL : Oui.

MISS ARABELLE : M. Julien, je crois ?

MUREL : Non, Gruchet.

MISS ARABELLE : Gruchet ! Ah, un bien mauvais homme ! C'est vilain, sa candidature !

MUREL : En quoi, miss Arabelle ?

MISS ARABELLE : M. Rousselin lui a prêté, autrefois, une somme qui n'est pas rendue. J'ai vu le papier.

MUREL, *à part* : C'est donc pour cela que Gruchet a peur !

MISS ARABELLE : Mais M. Rousselin, par délicatesse, gentlemanry, ne voudra pas poursuivre ! Il est bien bon ! seulement bizarre quelquefois ! Ainsi sa colère contre M. Julien...

MUREL : Et Louise, miss Arabelle ?

MISS ARABELLE : Oh ! quand elle a su votre mariage impossible, elle a pleuré, beaucoup.

MUREL, *joyeux* : Vraiment ?

MISS ARABELLE : Oui ; et, pauvre petite ! Mme Rousselin est bien dure pour elle !

MUREL : Et son père ?

MISS ARABELLE : Il a été très fâché !

MUREL : Est-ce qu'il regrette ?

MISS ARABELLE : Oh non ! Mais il a peur de vous.

MUREL : Je l'espère bien !

MISS ARABELLE : A cause des ouvriers et de *l'Impartial*, où il dit que vous êtes le maître !

MUREL, *riant* : Ah ! ah !

MISS ARABELLE : Mais non, n'est-ce pas, c'est M. Julien ?

MUREL : Continuez, miss Arabelle.

MISS ARABELLE : Oh ! moi, je suis bien triste, bien triste ! et je voudrais un raccommodement.

MUREL : Cela me parait maintenant difficile !

MISS ARABELLE : Oh ! non ! M. Rousselin en a envie, j'en suis sûre ! Tâchez ! Je vous en prie !

MUREL, *à part* : Est-elle drôle !

MISS ARABELLE : C'est dans votre intérêt, à cause de Louise ! Il faut que tout le monde soit content : elle, vous, moi, M. Julien !

MUREL, *à part* : Encore Julien ! Ah ! que je suis bête ; c'était pour l'institutrice ; une muse et un poète, parfait ! *(Haut)* je ferai ce qui dépendra de moi. Au revoir, Mademoiselle !

MISS ARABELLE, saluant : Good Afternoon, sir ! *(Apercevant une vieille femme qui lui fait signe de venir)* Ah ! Félicité ! *(Elle sort avec elle)*

Scène IV : Murel, Rousselin

ROUSSELIN, *entrant* : C'est inouï, ma parole d'honneur !

MUREL, *à part* : Rousselin, à nous deux !

ROUSSELIN : Gruchet ! un Gruchet, qui veut me couper l'herbe sous le pied ! un misérable que j'ai défendu, nourri ; et il se vante d'être soutenu par vous ?

MUREL : Mais...

ROUSSELIN : D'où diable lui est venue cette idée de candidature ?

MUREL : Je n'en sais rien. Il est tombé chez moi comme un furieux, en disant que j'allais abjurer mes opinions.

ROUSSELIN : C'est parce que je suis modéré ! Je proteste également contre les tempêtes de la démagogie que souhaite ce polisson de Gruchet, et le joug de l'absolutisme, dont M. Bouvigny est l'abominable soutien, le gothique symbole ! en un mot, - fidèle aux traditions du vieil esprit français, - je demande, avant tout, le règne des lois, le gouvernement du pays par le pays, avec le respect de la propriété Oh ! là-dessus, par exemple !...

MUREL : Justement ! on ne vous trouve pas assez républicain !

ROUSSELIN : Je le suis plus que Gruchet, encore une fois ! car je me prononce, - voulez-vous que l'imprime ? - pour la suppression des douanes et de l'octroi.

MUREL : Bravo !

ROUSSELIN : Je demande l’affranchissement des pouvoirs municipaux, une meilleure composition du jury, la liberté de la presse, l’abolition de toutes les sinécures et titres nobiliaires !

MUREL : Très bien !

ROUSSELIN : Et l’application sérieuse du suffrage universel ! Cela vous étonne ? Je suis comme ça, moi ! Notre nouveau préfet qui soutient la réaction, je lui ai écrit trois lettres, en manière d’avertissement ! Oui, Monsieur ! E je suis capable de le braver en face, de l’insulter ! Vous pouvez dire ça aux ouvriers !

MUREL, *à part* : Est-ce qu’il parlerait sérieusement ?

ROUSSELIN : Vous voyez donc qu’en me préférant Gruchet... car, je vous le répète, il se vante d’être soutenu par vous. Il le crie dans toute la ville.

MUREL : Que savez-vous si je vote pour lui ?

ROUSSELIN : Comment ?

MUREL : Moi, en politique, je ne tiens qu’aux idées ; or, les siennes ne m’ont pas l’air d’être aussi progressives que les vôtres. Un moment ! Tout n’est pas fini !

ROUSSELIN : Non ! tout n’est pas fini ! et on ne sait pas jusqu’où je peux aller, pour plaire aux électeurs. Aussi, je m’étonne d’avoir été méconnu par une intelligence comme la vôtre.

MUREL : Vous me comblez !

ROUSSELIN : Je ne doute pas de votre avenir !

MUREL : Eh bien, alors, dans ce cas-là...

ROUSSELIN : Quoi ?

MUREL : Pour répondre à votre confiance, - j’ai un petit aveu à vous faire : - en écoutant Gruchet, c’était après ce refus, et j’ai cédé à un mouvement de rancune.

ROUSSELIN : Tant mieux ! ça prouve du coeur.

MUREL : Comme j’adore votre fille, je vous maudissais.

ROUSSELIN : Ce cher ami ! Ah ! votre défection m’a fait une peine !

MUREL : Sérieusement, si je ne l’ai pas, j’en mourrai.

ROUSSELIN : Il ne faut pas mourir !

MUREL : Vous me donnez de l'espoir ?

ROUSSELIN : Eh ! eh ! Après mûr examen, votre position personnelle me paraît plus avantageuse...

MUREL, *étonné* : Plus avantageuse ?

ROUSSELIN : Oui, car sans compter trente mille francs d'appointements...

MUREL, *timidement* : Vingt mille !

ROUSSELIN : Trente mille ! en plus, une part dans les bénéfices de la Compagnie ; et puis vous avez votre tante...

MUREL : Madame veuve Murel, de Montélimar.

ROUSSELIN : Puisque vous êtes son héritier.

MUREL : Avec un autre neveu, militaire !

ROUSSELIN : Alors, il y a des chances... *(Faisant le geste de tirer un coup de fusil)* Les Bédouins ! *(Il rit)* **MUREL, *riant* :** Oui, oui, vous avez raison ! Les femmes, même les vieilles, changent d'idée facilement ; celle-là est capricieuse. Bref ! cher monsieur Rousselin, j'ai tout lieu de croire que ma bonne tante songe à moi, quelquefois.

ROUSSELIN, *à part* : Si c'était vrai, cependant ? *(Haut)* Enfin, mon cher, trouvez-vous ce soir, après dîner, là, devant ma porte, sans avoir l'air de me chercher. *(Il sort)*

Scène V : Murel, seul

MUREL : Un rendez-vous pour ce soir ! Mais c'est une avance, une espèce de consentement ; Arabelle disait vrai.

Scène VI : Murel, Gruchet, puis Hombourg, puis Félicité

GRUCHET : Me voilà ! je n'ai pas perdu de temps ! Quoi de neuf ? - Répondez-moi.

MUREL : Gruchet, avez-vous réfléchi à l'affaire dans laquelle vous vous embarquez ?

GRUCHET : Hein ?

MUREL : Ce n’est pas une petite besogne que d’être député.

GRUCHET : Je le crois bien !

MUREL : Vous allez avoir sur le dos tous les quémandeurs.

GRUCHET : Oh ! moi, mon bon, je suis habitué à éconduire les gens.

MUREL : N’importe, ils vous dérangeront de vos affaires énormément.

GRUCHET : Jamais de la vie !

MUREL : Et puis, il va falloir habiter Paris. C’est une dépense.

GRUCHET : Eh bien, j’habiterai Paris ! ce sera une dépense, voilà !

MUREL : Franchement, je n’y vois pas de grands avantages.

GRUCHET : Libre à vous !... moi j’en vois.

MUREL : Vous pouvez d’ailleurs échouer.

GRUCHET : Comment ? vous savez quelque chose ?

MUREL : Rien de grave ! Cependant Rousselin, eh ! eh ! il gagne dans l’opinion.

GRUCHET : Tantôt vous disiez que c’est un imbécile.

MUREL : Ça n’empêche pas de réussir.

GRUCHET : Alors, vous me conseillez de me démettre ?

MUREL : Non ! Mais il est toujours fâcheux d’avoir contre soi un homme de l’importance de Rousselin.

GRUCHET : Son im-por-tan-ce !

MUREL : Il a beaucoup d’amis, ses manières sont cordiales, enfin, il plaît ; et tout en ménageant les conservateurs, il pose pour le républicain ; **GRUCHET :** On le connaît !

MUREL : Ah ! si vous comptez sur le bon sens du public...

GRUCHET : Mais pourquoi tenez-vous à me décourager, quand tout marche comme sur des roulettes ? Ecoutez-moi : Primo, sans qu’on s’en doute le moins du monde, je saurai par Félicité, ma bonne, tout ce qui se passe chez lui.

MUREL : Ce n’est peut-être pas trop délicat, ce que vous faites.

GRUCHET : Pourquoi ?

MUREL : Ni même prudent ; car on dit que vous lui avez autrefois emprunté...

GRUCHET : On le dit ? eh bien...

MUREL : Il faudrait d'abord lui rendre la somme.

GRUCHET : Pour cela, il faudrait d'abord que vous me rendiez ce qui m'est dû, vous ! Soyons justes !

MUREL : Ah ! devant les preuves de mon dévouement, et à l'instant même où je vous gratifie d'un excellent conseil, voilà ce que vous imaginez ! Mais, sans moi, mon bonhomme, jamais de la vie vous ne seriez élu ; je m'éreinte, bien que je n'aie aucun intérêt...

GRUCHET : Qui sait ? Ou plutôt je n'y comprends goutte ; tout à tour, vous me poussez, vous m'arrêtez ! Ce que je dois à Rousselin ? Les autres aussi feront des réclamations ! On n'est pas inépuisables. Il faudrait pourtant que je rentre dans mes avances ! Et la note du café, qui va être terrible, - car ces farceurs-là boivent, boivent ! - Si vous croyez que je n'y pense pas ! C'est un gouffre qu'une candidature ! *(A Hombourg, qui entre)* Hombourg ! quoi encore !

HOMBOURG : Le bourgeois est il là ?

GRUCHET : Je n'en sais rien !

HOMBOURG : Un mot ! je possède un petit bidet cauchois, pas cher, et qui vous serait bien utile pour vos tournées électorales.

GRUCHET : Je les ferai à pied ; merci !

HOMBOURG : Une occasion, monsieur Gruchet !

GRUCHET : Des occasions comme celle-là, on les retrouve !

HOMBOURG : Je ne crois pas !

GRUCHET : Il m'est à présent, impossible...

HOMBOURG : A votre service ! *(Il entre chez Rousselin)*

MUREL : Pensez-vous que Rousselin eût fait cela ? Cet homme, qui tient une auberge, va vous déchirer près de ses pratiques. Vous venez de perdre, peut-être, cinquante voix. Je suis fatigué de vous soutenir.

GRUCHET : Du calme ! j'ai eu tort ! Admettons que je n'aie rien dit. C'est que vous veniez de m’agacer avec votre histoire de Rousselin, qui, d’abord, n’est peut-être pas vraie. De qui la tenez-vous ? A moins que lui-même... Ah ! c’est plutôt une farce de votre invention pour m’éprouver. *(Rumeur dans la coulisse)* **MUREL :** Ecoutez donc !

GRUCHET : J’entends bien !

MUREL : Le bruit se rapproche.

DES VOIX, *dans la coulisse* : Gruchet ! Gruchet !

FELICITE, *apparaissant à gauche* : Monsieur, on vous cherche !

GRUCHET : Moi ?

FELICITE : Oui, venez tout de suite !

GRUCHET : Me voilà ! *(Il sort précipitamment avec elle. - le bruit augmente)* **MUREL, *en s’en allant par la gauche* :** Tout ce tapage ! Qu’est-ce donc ? *(Il sort)*

Scène VII : Rousselin, puis Hombourg

ROUSSELIN, *sortant de chez lui :* Ah ! le peuple à la fin s’agite ! pourvu que ce ne soit pas contre moi !

TOUS, *criant dans le café* : Enfoncés, les bourgeois !

ROUSSELIN : Voilà qui devient inquiétant !

GRUCHET, *passant au fond, et tâchant de se soustraire aux ovations* : Mes amis, laissez-moi ! non ! vraiment !

TOUS : Gruchet ! Vive Gruchet ! notre député !

ROUSSELIN : Comment, député ?

HOMBOURG, *sortant de chez Rousselin* : Parbleu, puisque Bouvigny se retire. *(La bande s’éloigne)* **ROUSSELIN :** Pas possible !

HOMBOURG : Mais oui, le ministère est changé. Le préfet donne sa démission ; et il vient d’écrire à Bouvigny, pour l’engager à faire comme lui, à se démettre ! *(Il sort par où est sortie la bande)* **ROUSSELIN :** Eh bien, alors, il ne reste plus... *(La main sur la poitrine pour dire : moi)* Mais non ! il y a encore Gruchet ! *(Rêvant)* Gruchet ! (*Apercevant Dodart qui entre)* Que me voulez-vous ?

Scène VIII : Rousselin, Dodart

DODART : Je viens pour vous rendre un service.

ROUSSELIN : De la part d’un féal de M. le comte, cela m’étonne !

DODART : Vous apprécierez ma conduite, plus tard... M. de Bouvigny ayant retiré sa candidature...

ROUSSELIN, *brusquement* : Il l’a retirée ? c’est vrai ?

DODART : Oui... pour des raisons...

ROUSSELIN : Personnelles.

DODART : Comment ?

ROUSSELIN : Je dis : il a eu des raisons, voilà tout.

DODART : En effet ; et permettez moi de vous avertir d’une chose... capitale. Tous ceux qui s’intéressent à vous - je suis du nombre, n’en doutez pas - commencent à s’effrayer de la violence de vos adversaires !

ROUSSELIN : En quoi ?

DODART : Vous n’avez donc pas entendu les cris insurrectionnels que poussait la bande Gruchet ! Ce Catalina de village ! ...

ROUSSELIN, *à part* : Catalina de village... Jolie expression ! A noter !

DODART : Il est capable, Monsieur, de... capable de tout) et d’abord, grâce à la démence du peuple, il deviendra peut-être un de nos tribuns.

ROUSSELIN, *à part* : C’est à craindre !

DODART : Mais les conservateurs n’ont pas renoncé à la lutte, croyez-le ! D’avance, leurs voix appartiennent à l’honnête homme qui offrirait des garanties. *(Mouvement de Rousselin)*. Oh ! on ne lui demande pas de se poser en rétrograde ; seulement quelques concessions... bien simples.

ROUSSELIN : Eh ! c’est ce diable de Murel ! ...

DODART : Malheureusement, la chose est faite

ROUSSELIN, *rêvant* : Oui !

DODART : Comme notaire et comme citoyen, je gémis sur tout cela ! Ah !

c’était un beau rêve que cette alliance de la bourgeoisie et de la noblesse cimentée en vos deux familles ; et le comte me disait tout à l’heure, - vous n’allez pas me croire ? ..

ROUSSELIN : Pardon ! ... Je suis plein de confiance.

DODART : Il me disait, avec ce ton chevaleresque qui le caractérise : “Je n’en veux pas du tout à M. Rousselin...”

ROUSSELIN : Ni moi non plus, mon Dieu !

DODART : “Et je ne demande pas mieux, s’il n’y trouve point d’inconvénient...”

ROUSSELIN : Mais quel inconvénient ?

DODART : “Je ne demande pas mieux que de m’aboucher avec lui, dans l’intérêt du canton, et de la moralité publique.”

ROUSSELIN : Comment donc ? je le verrai avec plaisir !

DODART : Il est là ! *(A la cantonade)* Psitt ! Avancez !

Scène IX : les mêmes, le comte de Bouvigny

BOUVIGNY, *saluant* : Monsieur !

ROUSSELIN, *regardant autour de lui* : Je regarde si quelquefois...

BOUVIGNY : Personne ne m’a vu ! soyez sans crainte ! Et acceptez mes regrets sur...

ROUSSELIN : Il n’y a pas de mal...

DODART : A reconnaître ses fautes, n’est-ce pas ?

BOUVIGNY : Que voulez-vous, l’amour peut-être exagéré de certains principes....

ROUSSELIN : Mois aussi, Monsieur, j’honore les principes !

BOUVIGNY : Et puis la maladie de mon fils !

ROUSSELIN : Il n’est pas malade ; tantôt, ici même...

DODART : Oh ! fortement indisposé ! Mais il a l’énergie de cacher sa douleur. Pauvre enfant ! les nerfs ! tellement sensible !

ROUSSELIN, à part : Ah ! je devine ton jeu, à toi ; tu vas faire le mien ! *(Haut)* En effet, après avoir conçu des espérances...

BOUVIGNY : Oh ! certes !

ROUSSELIN : Il a dû être peiné...

BOUVIGNY : Désolé, Monsieur !

ROUSSELIN : De vous voir abandonner subitement cette candidature.

DODART, *à part* : Il se moque de nous !

ROUSSELIN : Lorsque vous aviez déjà un nombre de voix.

BOUVIGNY : J'en avais beaucoup !

ROUSSELIN, *souriant* : Pas toutes, cependant !

DODART : Parmi les ouvrier, peut-être, mais dans les campagnes, énormément !

ROUSSELIN : Ah ! si on comptait ! ...

BOUVIGNY : Permettez ! D'abord la commune de Bouvigny, où je réside, m'appartient, n'est-ce pas ? Ainsi que les villages de Saint Léonard, Valencourt, la Coudrette.

ROUSSELIN, *vivement* : Celui-là, non !

BOUVIGNY : Pourquoi ?

ROUSSELIN, *embarrassé* : Je croyais !... *(A part)* Murel m'avait donc trompé ?

BOUVIGNY : Je suis également certain de Grumesnil, Ypremesnil, les Arbois.

DODART, *lisant une liste qu'il tire de son portefeuille* : Châtillon, Colange, Heurtaux, Lenneval, Bahurs, Saint Filleul, Le Grand-Chêne, la Roche-Aubert, Fortinet !

ROUSSELIN, *à part* : C'est effroyable !

DODART : Manicamp, Dehaut, Lampérière, Saint-Nicaise, Vieville, Sirvin, Château-Régnier, la Chapelle, Lebarrois, Mont-Suleau.

ROUSSELIN, *à part* : Je ne savais donc pas la géographie de l'arrondissement !

BOUVIGNY : Sans compter que j'ai des amis nombreux dans les communes de...

ROUSSELIN, *accablé* : Oh ! je vous crois, Monsieur !

BOUVIGNY : Ces braves gens ne savent plus que faire ! Ils sont toujours à ma disposition, du reste, m'obéissant comme un seul homme ; - et si je leur disais... de voter pour... n'importe qui... pour vous, par exemple...

ROUSSELIN : Mon Dieu ! je ne suis pas d'une opposition tellement avancée...

BOUVIGNY : Eh ! eh ! l'Opposition est quelquefois utile !

ROUSSELIN : Comme instrument de guerre, soit ! Mais il ne s'agit pas de détruire, il faut fonder !

DODART : Incontestablement, nous devons fonder !

ROUSSELIN : Aussi ai-je en horreur toutes ces utopies, ces doctrines subversives !... N'a-t-on pas l'idée de rétablir le divorce, je vous demande un peu ! Et la presse, il faut le reconnaître, se permet des excès...

DODART : Affreux !

BOUVIGNY : Nos campagnes sont infestées par un tas de livres !

ROUSSELIN : Elles n'ont plus personne pour les conduire ! Ah ! il y avait du bon dans la noblesse ; et là-dessus je partage les idées de quelques publicistes de l'Angleterre.

BOUVIGNY : Vos paroles me font l'effet d'une brise rafraîchissante ; et si nous pouvions espérer...

ROUSSELIN : Enfin, Monsieur le comte, *(Mystérieusement)* la Démocratie m'effraye ! Je ne sais par quel vertige, quel entraînement coupable...

BOUVIGNY : Vous allez trop loin ! ...

ROUSSELIN : Non ! j'étais coupable ; car je suis conservateur, croyez-le, et peut-être quelques nuances seulement...

DODART : Tous les honnêtes gens sont faits pour s'entendre.

ROUSSELIN, *serrant la main de Bouvigny* : Bien sûr, Monsieur le comte, bien sûr.

Scène X : les mêmes, Murel, Ledru, Onésime, des ouvriers.

MUREL : Dieu merci, je vous trouve sans vos électeurs, mon cher Rousselin !

BOUVIGNY, *à part :* Je les croyais fâchés !

MUREL : En voici d'autres ! Je leur ai démontré que les idées de Gruchet ne répondent plus aux besoins de notre époque ; et, d'après ce que vous m'avez dit ce matin, vous serez de ceux-ci mieux compris ; ce sont non seulement des républicains, mais des socialistes !

BOUVIGNY, *faisant un bond :* Comment, des socialistes !

ROUSSELIN : Il m'amène des socialistes !

DODART : Des socialistes ! Il ne faut pas que ma personnalité... *(Il s'esquive)*
ROUSSELIN, *balbutiant* : Mais...

LEDRU : Oui, citoyen ! Nous le sommes !

ROUSSELIN : Je n'y vois pas de mal !

BOUVIGNY : Et tout à l'heure vous déclamiez contre ces infamies !

ROUSSELIN : Permettez ! Il y a plusieurs manières d'envisager...

ONESIME, *surgissant* : Sans doute, plusieurs manières...

BOUVIGNY, *scandalisé* : Jusqu'à mon fils...

MUREL : Que venez-vous faire ici, vous ?

ONESIME : J'ai entendu dire que l'on se portait chez M. Rousselin, et je voudrais lui affirmer que je partage, à peu près... son système.

MUREL, *à demi-voix* : Petit intriguant !

BOUVIGNY : Je ne m'attendais pas, mon fils, à vous voir, devant l'auteur de vos jours, renier la foi de vos aïeux !

ROUSSELIN : Très bien !

LEDRU : Pourquoi très bien ? Parce que Monsieur est M. le comte ! *(à Murel, désignant Rousselin)* et à vous croire, il demandait l'abolition de tous les titres !...

ROUSSELIN : Certainement !

BOUVIGNY : Comment ? il demandait...

LEDRU : Mais oui !

BOUVIGNY : Ah ! c’est assez !

ROUSSELIN, *voulant le retenir* : Je ne peux pas rompre en visière brusquement. Beaucoup ne sont qu’égarés. Ménageons-les !

BOUVIGNY, *très haut* : Pas de ménagements, Monsieur ! On ne pactise point avec le désordre ; et je vous déclare net que je ne suis plus pour vous ! - Onésime ! *(Il sort, son fils le suit)* **LEDRU :** Il était pour vous ? Nous savons à quoi nous en tenir ! Serviteur !

ROUSSELIN : Pour soutenir mes convictions, je vous sacrifie un ami de trente ans !

LEDRU : On n’a pas besoin de sacrifices ! Mais vous dites tantôt blanc, tantôt noir ; et vous m’avez l’air d’un véritable... blagueur ! Allons, nous autres, retournons chez Gruchet ! Venez-vous, Murel ?

MUREL : Dans une minute, je vous rejoins !

Scène XI : Rousselin, Murel

MUREL : Il faut convenir, mon cher, que vous me mettez dans une situation embarrassante !

ROUSSELIN : Si vous croyez que je n’y suis pas ?

MUREL : Saperlotte, il faudrait cependant vous résoudre ! Soyez d’un côté ou de l’autre ! Mais décidez-vous ! finissons-en !

ROUSSELIN : Pourquoi toujours ce besoin d’être emporte-pièce, exagéré ! Est-ce qu’il n’y a pas dans tous les partis quelque chose de bon à prendre ?

MUREL : Sans doute, leurs voix !

ROUSSELIN : Vous avez un esprit, ma parole d’honneur ! une délicatesse ! ... Ah ! je ne m’étonne pas qu’on vous aime !

MUREL : Moi ? et qui donc ?

ROUSSELIN : Innocent ! une demoiselle, du nom de Louise.

MUREL : Quel bonheur ! merci ! merci ! Maintenant, je vais m’occuper de vous, gaillardement ! J’affirmerai qu’on ne vous a pas compris. Une dispute de mots, une erreur. Quant à *l’Impartial*...

ROUSSELIN : Là, vous êtes le maître !

MUREL : Pas tout à fait ! Nous dépendons de Paris, qui donne le mot d'ordre. Vous deviez même être éreinté !

ROUSSELIN : Décommandez l'éreintement !

MUREL : Sans doute. Mais, comment, tout de suite, prêcher à Julien le contraire de ce qu'on lui a dit ?

ROUSSELIN : Que faire ?

MUREL : Attendons donc ! Il y a chez vous quelqu'un dont peut-être l'influence...

ROUSSELIN : Qui cela ?

MUREL : Miss Arabelle ! D'après certaines paroles qu'elle m'a dites, j'ai tout lieu de croire que ce jeune poète l'intéresse...

ROUSSELIN, *riant* : La pièce de vers serait-elle pour l'Anglaise ?

MUREL : Je ne connais pas les vers, mais je crois qu'ils s'aiment.

ROUSSELIN : J'en étais sûr ! Jamais de la vie je ne me trompe ! Du moment que ma fille n'est pas en jeu, je ne risque rien ; et je me moque pas mal, après tout, si... Il faut que j'en parle à ma femme. Elle doit être là, précisément.

MUREL : Moi, pendant ce temps-là, je vais essayer de ramener ceux que votre tiédeur philosophique a un peu refroidis.

ROUSSELIN : N'allez pas trop loin, cependant, de peur que Bouvigny, de son côté...

MUREL : Ah ! il faut bien que je rebadigeonne votre patriotisme ! *(Il sort)*
ROUSSELIN, *seul* : Tâchons d'être fin, habile, profond !

Scène XII : Rousselin, Mme Rousselin, Miss Arabelle

ROUSSELIN, *à Arabelle* : Ma chère enfant, - car mon affection toute paternelle me permet de vous appeler ainsi, - j'attends de vous un grand service ; il s'agirait d'une démarche auprès de M. Julien !

ARABELLE, *vivement* : Je peux la faire !

MME ROUSSELIN, *avec hauteur* : Ah ! comment cela ?

ARABELLE : Il fume son cigare tous les soirs sur cette promenade. Rien de plus facile que de l'aborder.

MME ROUSSELIN : Vu les convenances, ce serait plutôt à moi...

ROUSSELIN : En effet, c'est plutôt à une femme mariée..

ARABELLE : Mais je veux bien !

MME ROUSSELIN : Je vous le défends, Mademoiselle !

ARABELLE : J'obéis, Madame ! *(A part, en remontant)* Qu'a-t-elle donc à vouloir m'empêcher ? ... Attendons ! *(Elle disparaît)* **MME ROUSSELIN :** Tu as parfois, mon ami, des idées singulières ; charger l'institutrice d'une chose pareille ! car c'est pour ta candidature, j'imagine ?

ROUSSELIN : Sans doute ! Et moi, je trouvais que miss Arabelle, précisément à cause de son petit amour, dont je ne doute plus, pouvait fort bien...

MME ROUSSELIN : Ah ! tu ne la connais pas. C'est une personne à la fois violente et dissimulée, cachant sous des airs romanesques une âme qui l'est fort peu ; et je sens qu'il faut se méfier d'elle...

ROUSSELIN : Tu as peut-être raison ? Voici Julien ! Tu comprends, n'est-ce pas, tout ce qu'il faut lui dire ?

MME ROUSSELIN : Oh ! je saurai m'y prendre !

ROUSSELIN : Je me fie à toi ! *(Rousselin s'éloigne, après avoir salué Julien. La nuit est venue)*

Scène XIII : **Mme Rousselin, Julien**

JULIEN, *apercevant Mme Rousselin* : Elle ! *(Il jette son cigare)* Seule ! Comment faire ? *(Saluant)* Madame !

MME ROUSSELIN : M. Duprat, je crois ?

JULIEN : Hélas oui, Madame.

MME ROUSSELIN : Pourquoi hélas ?

JULIEN : J'ai le malheur d'écrire dans un journal qui doit vous déplaire.

MME ROUSSELIN : Par sa couleur politique, seulement.

JULIEN : Si vous saviez combien je méprise les intérêts qui m'occupent !

MME ROUSSELIN : Mais les intelligences d'élite peuvent s'appliquer à tout sans déchoir. Votre dédain, il est vrai, n'a rien de surprenant. Quand on écrit des vers aussi... remarquables...

JULIEN : Ce n'est pas bien ce que vous faites là, Madame ! Pourquoi railler ?

MME ROUSSELIN : Nullement ! Malgré mon insuffisance, peut-être, je vous crois un avenir...

JULIEN : Il est fermé par le milieu où je me débats. L'art pousse mal sur le terroir de la province. Le poète qui s'y trouve et que la misère oblige à certains travaux est comme un homme qui voudrait courir dans un bourbier. Un ignoble poids, toujours collé à ses talons, le retient ; plus il s'agite, plus il enfonce. Et cependant, quelque chose d'indomptable proteste et rugit au dedans de vous ! Pour se consoler de ce que l'on fait, on rêve orgueilleusement à ce que l'on fera ; puis les mois s'écoulent, la médiocrité ambiante vous pénètre, et on arrive doucement à la résignation, cette forme tranquille du désespoir.

MME ROUSSELIN : Je comprends, et je vous plains !

JULIEN : Ah ! Madame, que votre pitié est douce, bien qu'elle augmente ma tristesse !

MME ROUSSELIN : Courage ! le succès, plus tard, viendra.

JULIEN : Dans mon isolement, est-ce possible ?

MME ROUSSELIN : Au lieu de fuir le monde, allez vers lui ! Son langage n'est pas le vôtre, apprenez-le ! Soumettez-vous à ses exigences. La réputation et le pouvoir se gagnent par le contact ; et, puisque la société est naturellement à l'état de guerre, rangez-vous dans le bataillon des forts, du côté des riches, des heureux ! Quant à vos pensées intimes, n'en dites jamais rien, par dignité et par prudence. Dans quelques temps, lorsque vous habiterez Paris, comme nous...

JULIEN : Mais je n'ai pas le moyen d'y vivre, Madame !

MME ROUSSELIN : Qui sait ? avec la souplesse de votre talent, rien n'est difficile ; et vous l'utiliserez pour des personnes qui en marqueront leur gratitude. Mais il est tard ; au plaisir de vous revoir, Monsieur. *(Elle remonte)*

JULIEN : Oh ! restez ! au nom du ciel, je vous en conjure ! Voilà si longtemps que je l'espère, cette occasion. Je cherchais des ruses, inutilement, pour arriver jusqu'à vous ! D'ailleurs, je n'ai pas bien compris vos dernières paroles. Vous attendez quelque chose de moi, il me semble ? Est-ce un ordre ? Dites-le ! J'obéirai.

MME ROUSSELIN : Quel dévouement !

JULIEN : Mais vous occupez ma vie ! Quand, pour respirer plus à l'aise, je monte sur la colline, malgré moi, tout de suite mes yeux découvrent parmi les autres votre chère maison, blanche dans le verdure de son jardin ; et le spectacle d'un palais ne me donnerait pas autant de convoitise ! Quelquefois vous apparaissez dans la rue, c'est un éblouissement, je m'arrête ; et puis je cours après votre voile, qui flotte derrière vous comme un petit nuage bleu ! Bien souvent je suis venu devant cette grille, pour vous apercevoir et entendre passer au bord des violettes le murmure de votre robe. Si votre voix s'élevait, le moindre mot, la phrase la plus ordinaire, me semblait d'une valeur inintelligible pour les autres ; et j'emportais cela, joyeusement, comme une acquisition ! - Ne me chassez pas ! Pardonnez-moi ! J'ai eu l'audace de vous envoyer des vers. Ils sont perdus, comme les fleurs que je cueille dans la campagne, sans pouvoir vous les offrir, comme les paroles que je vous adresse la nuit, et que vous n'entendez pas, car vous êtes mon inspiration, ma muse, le portrait de mon idéal, mes délices, mon tourment !

MME ROUSSELIN : Calmez-vous, Monsieur ! Cette exagération...

JULIEN : Ah ! c'est que je suis de 1830, moi ! J'ai appris à lire dans *Hernani*, et j'aurais voulu être Lara ! J'exècre toutes les lâchetés contemporaines, l'ordinaire de l'existence, et l'ignominie des bonheurs faciles ! L'amour qui a fait vibrer la grande lyre des maîtres gonfle mon coeur. Je ne vous sépare pas dans ma pensée de tout ce qu'il y a de plus beau ; et le reste du monde, au loin, me parait une dépendance de votre personne. Ces arbres sont faits pour se balancer sur votre tête, la nuit pour vous recouvrir, les étoiles qui rayonnent doucement, comme vos yeux, pour vous regarder !

MME ROUSSELIN : La littérature vous emporte, Monsieur ! Quelle confiance une femme peut-elle accorder à un homme qui ne sait pas retenir ses métaphores, ou sa passion ? Je crois la vôtre sincère, pourtant. Mais vous êtes jeune, et vous ignorez trop ce qui est l'indispensable. D'autres, à ma place, auraient pris pour une injure la vivacité de vos sentiments. Il faudrait au moins promettre...

JULIEN : Voilà que vous tremblez aussi. Je le savais bien ! On ne repousse pas un tel amour !

MME ROUSSELIN : Ma hardiesse à vous écouter m'étonne moi-même. Les gens d'ici sont méchants, Monsieur. La moindre étourderie peut nous perdre !... le scandale...

JULIEN : Ne craignez rien ! Ma bouche se taira, mes yeux se détourneront, j'aurai l'air indifférent ; et si je me présente chez vous...

MME ROUSSELIN : Mais, mon mari... Monsieur.

JULIEN : Ne me parlez pas de cet homme !

MME ROUSSELIN : Je dois le défendre.

JULIEN : C'est ce que j'ai fait, - par amour pour vous !

MME ROUSSELIN : Il l'apprendra ; et vous n'aurez pas à vous repentir de votre générosité.

JULIEN : Laissez-moi me mettre à vos genoux, afin que je vous contemple de plus près. J'exécuterai, Madame, tout ce qu'il vous plaira ! et valeureusement, n'en doutez pas ; me voilà devenu fort ! Je voudrais épandre sur vous, avec les ivresses de la terre, tous les enchantements de l'Art, toutes les bénédictions du Ciel...

MISS ARABELLE, *cachée derrière un arbre* : J'en étais sûre !

MME ROUSSELIN : J'attends de vous une preuve immédiate de complaisance, d'affection...

JULIEN : Oui, oui !

Scène XIV : les mêmes, Miss Arabelle, puis Murel et Gruchet, à la fin Rousselin MME ROUSSELIN, *remontant* : On vient ! il faut que je rentre.

JULIEN : Pas encore !

GRUCHET, *au fond, poursuivant Murel :* Alors, rendez-moi mon argent !

MUREL, *continuant à marcher* : Vous m'ennuyez !

GRUCHET : Polisson !

MUREL, *lui donnant un soufflet* : Voleur !

ROUSSELIN, *en entrant, qui a entendu le bruit du soufflet* : Qu'est-ce donc ?

JULIEN, *à Mme Rousselin* : Oh ! cela, seulement ! *(Il lui applique sur la main un baiser sonore)* **MISS ARABELLE *reconnaît Julien* :** Ah !

ROUSSELIN : Que se passe-t-il ? *(Apercevant miss Arabelle qui s'enfuit)*

Arabelle ! Demain, je la flanque à la porte !

ACTE TROIS

Au salon de Flore. *L'intérieur d'un bastringue. En face, et occupant tout le fond, une estrade pour l'orchestre. Il y a dans le coin de gauche une contrebasse. Attachés au mur, des instruments de musique ; au milieu du mur, un trophée de drapeaux tricolores. Sur l'estrade, une table avec une chaise ; deux autres tables des deux côtés. Une petite estrade plus basse est au milieu, devant l'autre. Toute la scène est remplie de chaises. A une certaine hauteur, un balcon, où l'on peut circuler.*

Scène I : Rousselin, seul, à l'avant-scène, puis un garçon de café

ROUSSELIN *:* Si je comparais l'Anarchie à un serpent, pour ne pas dire hydre ? Et le pouvoir... à un Vampire ? Non, c'est prétentieux ! Il faudrait cependant intercaler quelque phrase à effet, de ces traits qui enlèvent... comme : "fermer l'ère des révolutions, camarilla, droits imprescriptibles, virtuellement ;" et beaucoup de mots en *isme* : "parlementarisme, obscurantisme !..." Calmons-nous ! un peu d'ordre. Les électeurs vont venir, tout est prêt ; on a constitué le bureau, hier au soir. Le voilà, le bureau ! Ici la place du Président *(il montre la table, au milieu)* ; des deux côtés les deux secrétaires, et moi, au milieu, en face du public !... Mais sur quoi m'appuierai-je ? Il me faudrait un tribune ! Oh ! je l'aurai, la tribune ! En attendant... *(Il va prendre une chaise et la pose devant lui, sur la petite estrade)* Bien ! et je placerai le verre d'eau, - car je commence à avoir une soif abominable - je placerai le verre d'eau là ! *(Il prend le verre d'eau qui se trouve sur la table du Président, et le met sur sa chaise).* Aurai-je assez de sucre ? *(Regardant le bocal qui en est plein)* Oui ! Tout le monde est assis. Le Président ouvre la séance, et quelqu'un prend la parole. Il m'interpelle pour me demander... par exemple... Mais d'abord qui m'interpelle ? Où est l'individu ? A ma droite, je suppose ! Alors, je tourne la tête brusquement !... Il doit être moins loin ? *(Il va déranger une chaise, puis remonte).* Je conserve mon air tranquille, et tout en enfonçant la main dans mon gilet... Si j'avais pris mon habit ? C'est plus commode pour le bras ! Une redingote vaut mieux, à cause de la simplicité. Cependant, le peuple, on a beau dire, aime la tenue, le luxe. Voyons ma cravate ? *(Il se regarde dans une petite glace à main qu'il tire de sa poche.)* Le col un peu plus bas. Pas trop, cependant ; on ressemble à un chanteur de romances. Oh ! ça ira - avec un mot de Murel, de temps à autre, pour me soutenir ! C’est égal ! Voilà une peur qui m’empoigne, et j’éprouve à l’épigastre... *(Il boit)* Ce n’est rien. Tous les grands orateurs ont cela à leurs débuts ! Allons, pas de faiblesses, ventrebleu ! un homme en vaut un autre, et j’en vaux plusieurs ! Il me monte à la tête... comme des bouillons ! et je me sens, ma parole, un toupet infernal ! “Et c’est à moi que ceci s’adresse, Monsieur !” Celui-là est en face ; marquons-le ! *(Il dérange une chaise et la pose au milieu.)* “A moi que ceci s’adresse à moi !” Avec les deux mains sur la poitrine, en me baissant un peu. “A moi, qui, pendant quarante ans... à moi, dont le patriotisme... à moi que... à moi pour lequel...” puis, tout à coup : “Ah ! vous ne le croyez pas vous-même, monsieur !” Et on reste sans bouger ! Il réplique : “Vos preuves alors ! donnez vos preuves ! Ah ! prenez garde ! On ne se joue pas de la crédulité publique !” Il ne trouve rien. “Vous vous taisez ! ce silence vous condamne ! J’en prends acte !” Un peu d’ironie maintenant ! On lui lance quelque chose de caustique, avec un rire de supériorité. “Ah ! ah !” Essayons le rire de supériorité. “Ah ! ah ! ah ! je m’avoue vaincu, effectivement ! Parfait !” Mais deux autres qui sont là ! - je les reconnaîtrai, - s’écrient que je m’insurge contre nos institutions, ou n’importe quoi. Alors, d’un ton furieux : “Mais vous niez le progrès !” Développement du mot progrès : “Depuis l’astronome avec son télescope qui pour le hardi nautonnier... jusqu’au modeste villageois baignant de ses sueurs... le prolétaire de nos villes... l’artiste dont l’inspiration...” Et je continue jusqu’à une phrase, où je trouve le moyen d’introduire le mot “bourgeoisie”. Tout de suite, éloge de la bourgeoisie, le tiers Etat, les cahiers, 89, notre commerce, richesse nationale, développement du bien-être par l’ascension progressive des classes moyennes. Mais un ouvrier : “Eh bien ! et le peuple, qu’en faites-vous ?” Je pars : “Ah ! le peuple, il est grand !” ; et je le flagorne, je lui en fourre par-dessus les oreilles ! J’exalte Jean-Jacques Rousseau qui avait été domestique, Jacquart tisserand, Marceau tailleur ; tous les tisserands, tous les domestiques et tous les tailleurs seront flattés. Et, après que j’ai tonné contre la corruption des riches : “Que lui reproche-t-on, au peuple ? c’est d’être pauvre !” Tableau enragé de sa misère ; bravos ! “Ah ! pour qui connaît ses vertus, combien est douce la mission de celui qui peut devenir son mandataire ! Et ce sera toujours avec un noble orgueil que je sentirai dans ma main la main calleuse de l’ouvrier ! parce que son étreinte, pour être un peu rude, n’en est que plus sympathique ! parce que toutes les différences de rang, de titre et de fortune sont, Dieu merci ! surannés, et que rien n’est comparable à l’affection d’un homme de coeur !...” Et je me tape sur le coeur ! bravo ! bravo ! bravo !

UN GARÇON DE CAFE : M. Rousselin, ils arrivent !

ROUSSELIN : Retirons-nous, que je n'aie pas l'air... Aurai-je le temps d'aller chercher mon habit ? Oui ! - en courant *(Il sort)*

Scène II : tous les électeurs, Voinchet, Marchais, Hombourg, Heurtelot, Onésime, le garde champêtre, Beaumesnil, Ledru, Le Président, puis Rousselin, puis Murel VOINCHET : Ah ! nous sommes nombreux . Ce sera drôle, à ce qu'il paraît.

LEDRU : Pour une réunion politique, on aurait dû choisir un endroit plus convenable que le *Salon de Flore*.

BEAUMESNIL : Puisqu'il n'y en a pas d'autres dans la localité ! Qui est-ce que vous nommerez, M. Marchais ?

MARCHAIS : Mon Dieu, Rousselin ! C'est encore lui, après tout...

LEDRU : Moi, j'ai résolu de faire un vacarme...

VOINCHET : Tiens ! le fils de Bouvigny.

BEAUMESNIL : Le père est plus finaud, il ne vient pas.

LE PRESIDENT : En séance !

LE GARDE CHAMPETRE : En séance !

LE PRESIDENT : Messieurs ! nous avons à discuter les mérites de nos deux candidats pour les élections de dimanche. Aujourd'hui, vous vous occuperez de l'honorable M. Rousselin, et demain soir, de l'honorable M. Gruchet. La séance est ouverte.

Rousselin, en habit noir, sort d'une petite porte derrière le président, fait des salutations, et reste debout au milieu de l'estrade.

VOINCHET : Je demande que le candidat nous parle des chemins de fer.

ROUSSELIN, ***après avoir toussé et pris un verre d'eau :*** Si on avait dit du temps de Charlemagne, ou même de Louis XIV, qu'un jour viendrait, où, en trois heures il serait possible d'aller...

VOINCHET : Ce n'est pas ça ! Etes vous d'avis qu'on donne une allocation au chemin de fer qui doit passer par Saint-Mathieu, ou bien à un autre qui couperait Bonneval - idée cent fois meilleure ?

UN ELECTEUR : Saint-Mathieu est plus à l'avantage des habitants ! Déclarez-vous pour celui-là, monsieur Rousselin !

ROUSSELIN : Comment ne serais-je pas pour le développement de ces gigantesques entreprises qui remuent des capitaux, prouvent le génie de l'homme, apportent le bien-être au sein des populations !...

HOMBOURG : Pas vrai, elles les ruinent !

ROUSSELIN : Vous niez donc le progrès, Monsieur ! le progrès, qui depuis l'astronomie...

HOMBOURG : Mais les voyageurs ?...

ROUSSELIN : Avec son télescope...

HOMBOURG : Ah ! si vous m'empêchez !...

LE PRESIDENT : La parole est à l'interpellant.

HOMBOURG : Les voyageurs ne s'arrêteront plus dans nos pays.

VOINCHET : C'est parce qu'il tient une auberge !

HOMBOURG : Elle est bonne, mon auberge !

TOUS : Assez ! assez !

LE PRESIDENT : Pas de violence, Messieurs !

LE GARDE CHAMPETRE : Silence !

HOMBOURG : Voilà comme vous défendez nos intérêts !

ROUSSELIN : J'affirme...

HOMBOURG : Mais vous perdez le roulage !

UN ELECTEUR : Il soutiendra le libre échange !

ROUSSELIN : Sans doute ! Par la transmission des marchandises, un jour la fraternité des peuples...

UN ELECTEUR : Il faut admettre les laines anglaises ! Proclamez l'affranchissement de la bonneterie !

ROUSSELIN : Et tous les affranchissements !

LES ELECTEURS : *(Côté droit)* Oui ! oui ! *(Côté gauche)* Non ! non ! à bas !

ROUSSELIN : Plût au ciel que nous puissions recevoir en abondance les céréales, les bestiaux !

UN AGRICULTEUR*, en blouse* : Eh bien, vous êtes gentils pour l'agriculture !

ROUSSELIN : Tout à l'heure, je répondrai sur le chapitre de l'agriculture. *(Il se verse un verre d'eau. Silence)* **HEURTELOT*, apparaissant en haut, au balcon :*** Qu'est-ce que vous pensez des hannetons ?

TOUS*, riant :* Ah ! ah ! ah !

LE PRESIDENT : Un peu de gravité, Messieurs !

LE GARDE CHAMPETRE : Silence ! Pas de désordre ! Au nom de la Loi, assis !

MARCHAIS : M. Rousselin, nous voudrions savoir votre idée sur les impôts.

ROUSSELIN : Les impôts, mon Dieu... certainement sont pénibles, mais indispensables... C'est une pompe, - si je puis m'exprimer ainsi, - qui aspire du sein de la terre un élément fertilisateur pour le répandre sur le sol. Reste à savoir si les moyens répondent au but... et si, en exagérant... on n'arriverait pas quelquefois à tarir...

LE PRESIDENT*, se penchant vers lui :* Charmante comparaison !

VOINCHET : La propriété foncière est surchargée !

HEURTELOT : On paie plus de trente sous de droits pour un litre de cognac !

LEDRU : La flotte nous dévore !

BEAUMESNIL : Est-ce qu'on a besoin d'un Jardin des Plantes !

ROUSSELIN : Sans doute ! sans doute ! sans doute ! Il faudrait apporter d'immenses, d'immenses économies...

TOUS : Très bien !

ROUSSELIN : D'autre part, le Gouvernement lésine, tandis qu'il devrait...

BEAUMESNIL : Elever les enfants pour rien !

MARCHAIS : Protéger le commerce !

L'AGRICULTEUR : Encourager l'agriculture !

ROUSSELIN : Bien sûr !

BEAUMESNIL : Fournir l'eau et la lumière gratuitement dans chaque maison !

ROUSSELIN : Peut-être, oui !

HOMBOURG : Vous oubliez le roulage dans tout ça !

ROUSSELIN : Oh ! non, non pas ! Et permettez-moi de résumer en un seul corps de doctrine, de prendre en faisceau...

LEDRU : On connaît votre manière d'enguirlander le monde ! Mais si vous aviez devant vous Gruchet...

ROUSSELIN : C'est à moi que vous comparez Gruchet ! à moi !... qu'on a vu pendant quarante ans... à moi dont le patriotisme... - Ah ! vous ne le croyez pas vous-même, Monsieur !

LEDRU : Oui, je le compare à vous !

ROUSSELIN : Ce Catalina de village !

HEURTELOT, *au balcon* : Qu'est-ce que c'est, Catalina ?

ROUSSELIN : C'est un célèbre conspirateur qui, à Rome...

LEDRU : Mais Gruchet ne conspire pas !

HEURTELOT : Etes-vous de la police ?

TOUS, *à droite, ensemble, confusément* : Il en est ! il en est !

TOUS, *à gauche, de même* : Non, il n'en est pas ! *(Vacarme)* **ROUSSELIN :** Citoyens ! de grâce ! Citoyens ! Je vous en prie ! de grâce ! écoutez-moi !

MARCHAIS : Nous écoutons !

Rousselin cherche à dire quelque chose, et reste muet. Rires de la foule.

TOUS, riant : Ah ! ah ! ah !

LE GARDE CHAMPETRE : Silence !

HEURTELOT : Il faut qu'il s'explique sur le droit au travail .

TOUS : Oui ! oui ! le droit au travail !

ROUSSELIN : On a écrit là-dessus des masses de livres. *(Murmures)* Ah ! vous m'accorderez qu'on a écrit, à ce propos, énormément de livres. Les avez-vous lus ?

HEURTELOT : Non !

ROUSSELIN : Je les sais par coeur ! Et si, comme moi, cous aviez passé vos nuits dans le silence du cabinet, à...

HEURTELOT : Assez causé de vous ! Le droit au travail !

TOUS : Oui, oui, le droit au travail !

ROUSSELIN : Sans doute on droit travailler !

HEURTELOT : Et commander de l'ouvrage !

MARCHAIS : Mais si on n'en a pas besoin ?

ROUSSELIN : N'importe !

MARCHAIS : Vous attaquez la propriété !

ROUSSELIN : Et quand même ?

MARCHAIS, *se précipitant sur l'estrade* : Ah ! vous me faites sortir de mon caractère !

ELECTEURS, *de droite :* Descendez ! descendez !

ELECTEURS, *de gauche* : Non ! qu'il y reste !

ROUSSELIN : Oui ! qu'il demeure ! J'admets toutes les contradictions ! Je suis pour la liberté ! *(Applaudissements à droite. Murmures à gauche ; il se retourne vers Marchais)* Le mot vous choque, Monsieur ? c'est que vous n'en comprenez point le sens économique, la valeur... humanitaire ! La presse l'a élucidée, pourtant ! et la presse, - rappelons-le, citoyens, - est un flambeau, une sentinelle qui...

BEAUMESNIL : A la question !

MARCHAIS : Oui, la propriété !

ROUSSELIN : Eh bien ! je l'aime comme vous ; je suis propriétaire. Vous voyez donc que nous sommes d'accord.

MARCHAIS, *embarrassé* : Cependant... hum !... cependant !

LEDRU : Ah ! l'épicier ! *(Tout le monde rit)*

ROUSSELIN : Encore un mot ! je vais le convaincre ! *(A Marchais)* On doit, - n'est-il pas vrai, - on doit, autant que possible, démocratiser l'argent, républicaniser le numéraire. Plus il circule, plus il en tombe dans la poche du peuple, et par conséquent dans la vôtre. Pour cela, on a imaginé le crédit.

MARCHAIS : Il ne faut pas trop de crédit !

ROUSSELIN : Parfait ! Oh ! très bien !

LEDRU : Comment ! pas de crédit !

ROUSSELIN, *à Ledru* : Vous avez raison ; car si on ôte le crédit, plus d'argent ! et d'autre part, c'est l'argent qui fait la base du crédit ; les deux termes sont corrélatifs ! *(Secouant fortement Marchais)* Comprenez-vous que les deux termes soient corrélatifs ? Vous vous taisez ? ce silence vous condamne, j'en prends acte !

TOUS : Assez ! assez !

Marchais regagne sa place.

ROUSSELIN : Ainsi se trouve résolue, citoyens, l'immense question du travail ! En effet, sas propriété, pas de travail ! Vous faites travailler parce que vous êtes riche, et sans travail, pas de propriété. Vous travaillez, non seulement pour devenir propriétaires, mais parce que vous l'êtes ! Vos oeuvres font du capital, vous êtes capitalistes.

L'AGRICULTEUR : Drôles de capitalistes !

MARCHAIS : Vous embrouillez tout !

LEDRU : C'est se ficher du monde !

TOUS : Oui, la clôture ! à la porte ! la clôture !

LE PRESIDENT : Cela devient intolérable ! on ne peut plus...

LE GARDE CHAMPETRE : Je vais faire évacuer la salle !

ROUSSELIN *à part, apercevant Murel qui entre* : Murel !

LEDRU : Que le candidat justifie les éloges qu'il a donnés devant moi aux opinions du sieur Bouvigny ! *(Aux ouvriers)* Vous y étiez, vous autres !

ROUSSELIN : Mais... je... je...

LEDRU : Il est perdu !

HEURTELOT : Tendez la gaffe !

VOINCHET : Un médecin ! *(Rire général)*

MUREL : J'étais là aussi, moi ! L'honorable M.Rousselin a paru condescendre aux idées de Bouvigny. Il ne s’en cache pas, il s’en vante !

ROUSSELIN, *fièrement* : Ah !

MUREL : Et c’était précisément à cause des électeurs qui l’entouraient, pour affermir leurs convictions, en leur faisant voir jusqu’à quel point peut aller dans la tête de certaines personnes...

ROUSSELIN : l’obscurantisme !

MUREL : Effectivement ! C’était, dis-je un procédé de tactique parlementaire, une ruse... bien légitime, passez-moi l’expression, pour le faire tomber dans le panneau.

HEURTELOT : Oh ! oh ! trop malin !

LEDRU : Alors, il s’est conduit en saltimbanque.

MUREL : Mais je...

HEURTELOT : Ne le défendez plus !

LEDRU : Et voilà l’homme qui avait promis d’aller calotter le préfet !

ROUSSELIN : Pourquoi pas ?

LE GARDE CHAMPETRE, *le frappant légèrement sur l’épaule :* Doucement, monsieur Rousselin !

TOUS : Assez ! assez ! la clôture ! la clôture !

Tout le monde se lève. Rousselin fait un geste désespéré, puis se retourne vers le président qui sort.

LE PRESIDENT : Une séance peu favorable, cher Monsieur ; espérons qu’une autre fois...

ROUSSELIN, *observant Murel* : Murel qui s’en va ! *(A Marchais qui passe devant lui)* Marchais ! ah ! c’est mal ! c’est mal !

MARCHAIS : Que voulez-vous, avec vos opinions !...

Scène III : Rousselin, Onésime, le garçon de café

ROUSSELIN, *redescendant* : Oh ! mes rêves !... - je n’ai plus qu’à m’enfuir, ou a me jeter à l’eau, maintenant. On va faire des gorges chaudes, me blaguer !

(Considérant les chaises) Ils étaient là... oui ! et au lieu de cettefoule en délire dont j'écoutais d'avance les trépignements... *(Le garçon de café entre, pour ranger les chaises)* Ah ! fatale ambition, pernicieuse aux rois comme aux particuliers !... et pas moyen de faire un discours ! tous mes mots ont raté ! Comme je souffre ! comme je souffre ! *(Au garçon de café)* Ah ! vous pouvez les prendre ! je n'en ai plus besoin ! *(A part)* Leur vue me tape sur les nerfs, maintenant !

LE GARCON DE CAFE, *à Onésime, sur l'estrade, et qui se trouve caché par la contrebasse :* Restez-vous là ?

ONESIME, *timidement* : Monsieur Rousselin !

ROUSSELIN : Ah ! Onésime !

ONESIME, *s'avançant* : Je voudrais trouver quelque chose de convenable... pour vous dire que je participe aux désagréments...

ROUSSELIN : Merci ! merci ! Car tout le monde m'abandonne !... jusqu'à Murel !

ONESIME : Il vient de sortir avec le clerc de Me Dodart !

ROUSSELIN : Si j'allais le trouver ? *(Regardant dehors)* Il y a encore trop de monde sur la place ; et le peuple est capable de se porter sur moi à des excès !...

ONESIME : Je ne crois pas !

ROUSSELIN : Cela s'est vu ! On peut être outragé, déchiré ! Ah ! la populace ! je comprends Néron !

ONESIME : Quand mon père a reçu cette lettre du préfet qui lui enlevait tout espoir, il a été comme vous, bien triste ! Cependant il a repris le dessus, à force de philosophie !

ROUSSELIN : Dites-moi, vous qui êtes excellent, vous n'allez pas me tromper ?

ONESIME : Oh !

ROUSSELIN : Est-ce que Monsieur votre père... *(Se retournant vers le garçon qui remue les chaises)* Il est irritant, ce garçon-là ! Laissez-nous tranquilles ! *(Le garçon sort)* Est-ce que votre père avait autant de voix qu'on le soutient ? Il m'a défilé une liste de communes !

ONESIME : Il est toujours sûr de soixante-quatre laboureurs. J'ai vu leurs noms.

ROUSSELIN, *à part* : C’est un chiffre, cela !

ONESIME : Mais... j’ai quelque chose pour vous. Une vieille femme, que je ne connais pas, m’a dit comme j’entrais à la séance : “Faites-moi le plaisir de remettre ce billet à M. Rousselin” *(Il le lui donne)* **ROUSSELIN :** Une drôle de lettre ! Voyons un peu ! *(Lisant)* “Une personne qui s’intéresse à vous croit de son devoir de vous prévenir que Mme Rousselin...” *(Il s’arrête bouleversé)* **ONESIME :** Dois-je porter la réponse ?

ROUSSELIN, *ricanant convulsivement* : La... la... la réponse ?

ONESIME : Oui, laquelle ?

ROUSSELIN, *furieux* : C’est un coup de pied pour l’imbécile qui fait de pareilles commissions ! *(Onésime s’enfuit)* Une lettre anonyme, après tout ! je suis bien sot de m’en tourmenter. *(Il la froisse et la jette)* La haine de mes ennemis n’aura donc pas de bornes ! Voilà une machination qui dépasse toutes les autres ! C’est pour me distraire de la vie politique, pour me gêner dans ma candidature ! et on m’attaque jusqu’au fond de l’honneur ! Cette infamie-là doit venir de Gruchet... Sa bonne est sans cesse à rôder autour de la maison... *(Il ramasse la lettre, et lisant)* “Que votre femme a un amant !” On n’est pas l’amant de ma femme ! - Quels sont les hommes qui peuvent être son amant ? Est-ce assez bête !... Cependant, l’autre soir, sous les quinconces, j’ai entendu un soufflet, presque aussitôt un baiser ! J’ai bien vu miss Arabelle, mais sûrement elle n’était pas seule, puisque d’autre part, un soufflet ? Est-ce qu’un insolent se serait permis envers Mme Rousselin ?... Oh ! elle me l’aurait dit ? Et puis, le baiser, dans ce cas-là, eût précédé le soufflet, tandis que j’ai fort bien entendu un soufflet d’abord, et un baiser, ensuite ! Bah ! n’y pensons plus ! j’ai bien d’autres choses ! Non ! non ! tout à mon affaire ! *(Il va pour sortir)*

Scène IV : Rousselin, Gruchet.

GRUCHET : Il n’est pas là, M. Murel ?

ROUSSELIN : Vous venez me narguer, sans doute, jouir de ma défaite, ajouter vos persiflages...

GRUCHET : Pas du tout !

ROUSSELIN : Au moins, faut-il se servir d’armes loyales, Monsieur !

GRUCHET : Le droit est de mon côté !

ROUSSELIN : Je sais bien qu’en politique...

GRUCHET : Ce n’est pas la politique qui me fait agir, mais des intérêts plus humbles... M. Murel ...

ROUSSELIN : Eh ! je me moque de Murel !

GRUCHET : Voilà huit jours qu’il m’échappe, malgré ses promesses. Et il se conduit d’une manière abominable ! Non content de s’être livré sur moi à des violences, - je pouvais le traduire en justice ; je n’ai pas voulu, par respect du monde et considération pour l’industrie...

ROUSSELIN : Plus vite, je vous prie !

GRUCHET : M. Murel s’est engagé, en arrivant ici, dans des opérations de bourse qui furent d’abord heureuses ; et il a si bien fait... que... une première fois, je lui ai prêté dix mille francs. Oh ! il me les a rendus, et même avec des bénéfices ! Deux mois plus tard, autre prêt de cinq mille ! Mais la chance avait tourné. Une troisième fois...

ROUSSELIN : Est-ce que ça me regarde ?

GRUCHET : Bref, il me doit actuellement trente mille deux cent vingt-six francs et quinze centimes !

ROUSSELIN, *à part* : Ah ! c’est bon à savoir !

GRUCHET : Ce jeune homme a abusé de ma candeur ! Il me leurrait avec la perspective d’une belle affaire, un riche mariage.

ROUSSELIN, *à part* : Coquin !

GRUCHET : Par sa faute, je me trouve sans argent. Depuis quelque temps, j’en ai tellement dépensé ! *(Il soupire)* Et, puisque vous êtes son ami, arrangez-vous, priez-le, pour qu’il me rende ce qui m’appartient.

ROUSSELIN : Me demander cela, vous, mon rival

GRUCHET : Je n’ai pas fait le serment de l’être toujours ! J’ai du coeur, monsieur Rousselin ; je sais reconnaître les bons offices.

ROUSSELIN : Comment ! lorsque je possède une reconnaissance de six mille francs, prêtés autrefois pour commencer vos affaires, et dont les intérêts, depuis l’époque, montent à plus de vingt mille !

GRUCHET : C’est même là où je voulais en venir. Donnant, donnant !

ROUSSELIN : Je n’y suis plus du tout !

GRUCHET : Songez donc que beaucoup de personnes dépendent de moi, et que j’ai, sans qu’il y paraisse, pas mal d’influence ! Si vous me remettiez le papier en question, on pourrait s’entendre.

ROUSSELIN : Sur quoi ?

GRUCHET : Je lâcherais les électeurs.

ROUSSELIN : Et si je ne suis pas nommé ? Je perds mon argent !

GRUCHET : Vous êtes trop modeste !

ROUSSELIN : Hein ?

GRUCHET : A votre guise ! Jusquà la dernière minute, il sera temps ! Mais je vous répète que vous avez tort ! *(Il se dirige vers la gauche)* **ROUSSELIN :** Où allez-vous donc par là ?

GRUCHET : Dans ce cabinet, où mon ami Julien doit être à travailler sur le procès-verbal de la séance. Je vous assure que vous avez tort !

(5)

Scène V : Rousselin, puis Murel

ROUSSELIN *:* Est-ce un piège, ou serait-ce la vérité ? Quant à Murel, c’est un sauteur qui faisait tout bonnement une spéculation. Oh ! je m’en doutais un peu ! Mais à présent, je ne vous pas pourquoi je me gênerais ; il a perdu son crédit sur le peuple, et ma foi ... *(Il sort)* **MUREL, *entre joyeux* :** Pardon de vous avoir quitté si vite ! Je viens de chez Dodart. Quel événement, mon cher ! Un bonheur !...

ROUSSELIN : Ah ! vous en faites de belles ! Je suis obligé de recevoir vos créanciers. Gruchet exige trente mille francs !

MUREL : La semaine prochaine, il les aura !

ROUSSELIN : Encore vos forfanteries ! Jamais vous ne doutez de rien !... De même pour ma candidature ! On n’est pas en vérité moins habile ; et vous auriez dû plutôt...

MUREL : Soutenir Gruchet, n’est-ce pas ?

ROUSSELIN : C’est tout comme ! L’*Impartial*, depuis huit jours, n’a rien fait.

MUREL : J’étais en voyage ; et je suis revenu sans même attendre...

ROUSSELIN : Mauvaise excuse !

MUREL : La réclamation de Gruchet est une vengeance. Je me perds à cause de vous ; heureusement que...

ROUSSELIN : Quoi donc !

MUREL : Vous m’avez, en quelque sorte, promis la main de votre fille...

ROUSSELIN : Oh ! oh ! Entendons-nous !

MUREL : Mais vous ne savez peut-être pas que je viens d’hériter !

ROUSSELIN : De votre tante, peut-être ?

MUREL : Certainement !

ROUSSELIN : La plaisanterie est rebattue.

MUREL : Je vous jure que ma tante est morte !

ROUSSELIN : Eh bien, enterrez-la et ne me bernez pas avec vos histoires d’héritage.

MUREL : Rien de plus vrai ! Seulement, comme la pauvre femme a trépassé depuis mon départ, on cherche si quelquefois un autre testament...

ROUSSELIN : Ah ! il y a des *si* ! Eh bien, mon cher, moi, j’aime les gens sûrs des choses qu’ils disent et entreprennent.

MUREL : Monsieur Rousselin, vous oubliez trop ce que je peux faire pour vous !

ROUSSELIN : Pas grand’chose ! Les ouvriers ne vous écoutent plus !

MUREL : Vraiment ! Parce qu’il y a cinq ou six braillards, peut-être... des hommes que j’avais renvoyés de ma fabriques. Mais tous les autres !

ROUSSELIN : Pourquoi ne sont-ils pas venus ?

MUREL : Comment les amener, étant absent ?

ROUSSELIN, *à part* : Cela, c’est une raison.

MUREL : Vous ne connaissez pas leur humeur ; et je parie que d’ici à dimanche prochain, si je voulais, j’aurais le temps... Mais non, je ne m’en même plus... et... je recommanderai Gruchet.

ROUSSELIN, *à part* : Il me fait des menaces !... Est-ce que j’aurais encore des chances ? *(Haut)* Ainsi, vous croyez... que l’effet de la réunion... n’a pas été absolument mauvais ?

MUREL : Ah ! vous avez blessé le peuple !

ROUSSELIN : Mais j’en suis, du peuple ! Mon père était un modeste travailleur ! Voilà ce qu’il faut leur dire, mon bon Murel, et j’ai souffert pour eux, car le Gouvernement a mis la main sur moi, là, tout à l’heure ! Retournez à la filature.

MUREL : Mais écoutez !... j’apporte... - on n’attend plus que le certificat de décès de mon cousin...-

ROUSSELIN : Faites-leur comprendre !...

MUREL : Premièrement, une ferme !

Scène VI : les mêmes, Mme Rousselin, Louise

MADAME ROUSSELIN, à la cantonade : Louise, suis-moi donc ! Qu’as-tu à regarder partout ? *(A son mari)* Ah ! je te trouve enfin ; j’étais inquiète. S’il y a du bon sens !

ROUSSELIN : Je ne pouvais pas...

LOUISE, *apercevant Murel* : Mon ami !

MUREL : Louise !

MADAME ROUSSELIN, *scandalisée* : Que signifie ? Est-ce une tenue pour une jeune personne ? Et vous-même, Monsieur, une pareille familiarité !...

MUREL : Mon Dieu, Madame, M. Rousselin pourra vous dire :

MADAME ROUSSELIN : Je suis curieuse, en effet, de voir pour quelles raisons, ma fille...

ROUSSELIN : Ma chérie, d’abord tu comprendras...

LOUISE, *à Murel, à part* : C’est moi qui ai poussé ma mère à venir ; je ne vous savais pas ici ; pas d’autre moyen !...

MUREL, *de même* : Il faut brusquer tout ; je vous dirai pourquoi. *(S’avançant vers M. et Mme Rousselin)* Madame, bien qu’on ait l’habitude d’employer pour de telles démarches des intermédiaires, je m’en passe forcément, et je vous prie de m’accorder en mariage Mlle Louise.

MADAME ROUSSELIN : Monsieur, mais Monsieur ! on ne prend pas les gens...

MUREL, *vite* : Ma nouvelle position de fortune me permet...

ROUSSELIN : Ah ! il faut voir !

MADAME ROUSSELIN : Cela est si en dehors des procédés ordinaires...

LOUISE, *souriant* : Oh ! maman !

MADAME ROUSSELIN : Et cette inconvenance, dans un endroit public !

Julien entre par la porte de gauche.

Scène VII : les mêmes, Julien.

JULIEN, *à Rousselin* : Je viens, Monsieur, me mettre à votre disposition.

ROUSSELIN : Vous ?

JULIEN : Oui, moi, absolument !

MUREL, *à part* : Qui l’amène ?

JULIEN : Mon journal ayant une autorité de vieille date dans le pays, je peux vous être utile.

ROUSSELIN, *ébahi* : Mais Murel ?

JULIEN : J’ai entendu à travers cette cloison tout ce qui s’est passé à la séance ; et il m’est facile d’en faire un compte-rendu favorable *(désignant Murel)*, avec la permission, toutefois, de mon chef.

MUREL : Parbleu ! depuis assez longtemps...

ROUSSELIN : Comment vous exprimer...

MADAME ROUSSELIN, *bas à son mari* : Tu vois que j’ai réussi, hein ? *(Bas à Julien)* Je vous remercie.

JULIEN, *de même* : Vos yeux me soutenaient ! c'est fait !

ROUSSELIN, *à sa femme* : Il est charmant ! - Défendu par vous, qui êtes un polémiste !...

MUREL : Un talent flexible, clair, pittoresque !

ROUSSELIN : Je crois bien !

MUREL : Et d'une violence quand il veut s'en donner la peine. *(Bas à Julien)* Dites que l'idée vient de moi, vous m'obligerez.

JULIEN : Malgré les arguments de notre ami Murel, - car il vous prône avec une ardeur !... - je demeurais dans mon obstination *(regardant Mme Rousselin)* mais tout à coup, comme éclairé par une lumière, et obéissant à une voix, j'ai vu, j'ai compris.

ROUSSELIN : Ah ! cher Monsieur, je suis pénétré de reconnaissance !

JULIEN, *bas à Mme Rousselin* : Quand vous reverrai-je ?

MADAME ROUSSELIN, *de même* : Je vous le ferai savoir.

ROUSSELIN, *à Julien* : Par exemple, je ne sais pas comment vous vous y prendrez !

JULIEN, *gaiement* : Ceci est mon affaire !

ROUSSELIN, *à sa femme* : Prie donc M. Julien de venir ce soir dîner chez nous, en famille.

MADAME ROUSSELIN, *faisant une révérence* : Mais certainement, avec le plus grand plaisir.

JULIEN, *saluant* : Madame !

ACTE QUATRE

Le cabinet de Rousselin. Au fond, une large ouverture avec la campagne à l'horizon. Plusieurs portes. A gauche, un bureau sur lequel se trouve une pendule.

Scène I : Pierre, puis le garde champêtre, puis Félicité.

PIERRE, *à la cantonade, d'une voix très haute* : François, allez prendre dans le char à bancs huit messieurs à Saint-Léonard, et vous ne refermerez pas la grille ! - Il faut qu'Elisabeth porte encore des bulletins. - Vous n'oublierez pas, en revenant, le papetier pour les cartes de visite. *Entre un commissionnaire qui halète sous un ballot de journaux.*

C'est lourd, hein ? mon brave... Mettez cela ici ; bon ! *(L'homme dépose son ballot par terre, près d'un autre beaucoup plus grand)* Et descendez vous rafraîchir à la cuisine. On y boit du champagne dans des pots à confiture ; rien ne coûte, vu la circonstance ! Ce soir, l'élection, et la semaine prochaine, Paris ! Voilà assez longtemps que j'en rêve le séjour, principalement pour les huîtres et le bal de l'Opéra ! *(Considérant les deux tas de journaux)* L'article de M. Julien, encore ! A qui en distribuer ? Tout le monde en a, sans exagération, au moins trois exemplaires ! Et il nous en reste !... N'importe, à l'ouvrage ! *Il commence à diviser le tas par petits paquets. Entre le garde champêtre.*

Ah ! père Morin, aujourd'hui vous êtes en retard !

LE GARDE CHAMPETRE : C'est qu'il y a eu, chez M. Murel, une espèce d'émeute ; les ouvriers maintenant, sont contre lui [on parle même de faire venir la troupe]. Ah ! ça ne va pas ! ça ne va pas ! *(Il se met à aider Pierre. Entre Félicité)* **PIERRE :** Tiens, Félicité ! Bonjour, madame Gruchet.

FELICITE : Malhonnête !

PIERRE : Je vous croyais fâchée depuis que votre maître nous fait concurrence ?

FELICITE, *sèchement* : Ça ne me regarde pas !... J'ai une commission pour le vôtre.

PIERRE : Il est sorti.

FELICITE : Mais il rentrera pour déjeuner ?

PIERRE : Est-ce qu’on déjeune ? Est-ce qu’on a le temps ! Monsieur, du matin au soir, n’arrête pas, Madame porte des secours à domicile, et Mademoiselle, avec un grand tablier, distribue des potages aux pauvres !

FELICITE : Et l’institutrice ?

PIERRE : Oh ! plus gnian-gnian que jamais ! (Au garde champêtre) Non ! comme cela ! (Pliant un journal) C’est Monsieur qui m’a appris, de manière à ce que l’on voie, du premier coup d’oeil, l’article.

LE GARDE CHAMPETRE : Il cause dans l’arrondissement une agitation !...

PIERRE : Pour être tapé, il l’est.

FELICITE : En attendant, n’y aurait-il pas moyen de lui dire un mot, à votre Anglaise ?

PIERRE, *désignant la porte de gauche* : Sa chambre est par là, au fond du corridor, à droite.

FELICITE : Oh ! je sais. *(Elle se dirige vers la porte)*

PIERRE : Notre patron !

Scène II : les mêmes, Rousselin

ROUSSELIN, *en entrant, presse chaleureusement la main de Pierre* : Mon cher ami...

PIERRE, *étonné* : Mais, Monsieur ?...

ROUSSELIN : Une distraction, c’est vrai. L’habitude de donner au premier venu des poignées de main est plus forte que moi... J’en ai la paume enflée *(Au garde champêtre)* Ah ! très bien ! *(Lui glissant de l’argent de manière discrète)* Merci !... et... ne craignez pas... si jamais vous aviez besoin...

LE GARDE CHAMPETRE, *avec un geste pour le rassurer* : Oh ! *(Il sort avec Pierre qui l’aide à porter les journaux)* **ROUSSELIN :** Il enfonce toutes les objections, l’article ! - démontrant, fort bien qu’il est absurde d’avoir des opinions arrêtées d’avance, et que ma conduite est par là plus sage et plus loyale. Il vante mes lumières administratives ; il dit même que j’ai fait mon droit. - J’ai poussé jusqu’au premier examen. - Et avec des tournures de style !... - C’est pourtant à ma femme que je dois cela !

FELICITE, *s'avançant, et lui remettant une lettre* : De la part de M. Gruchet !

ROUSSELIN : Ah ! *(Lisant)* "La quittance, et je me désiste. Vous pouvez la confier à ma bonne." Diable ! Voilà ce qu'on appelle vous mettre le couteau sous la gorge. Mais, s'il se retire, pas d'autre concurrent, et je suis nommé ! Mon Dieu, oui ! C'est bien clair ! La somme est lourde, cependant, et je n'aurai plus contre lui aucun moyen... Eh ! quand il sera élu, la belle avance ! Pour six mille francs, dont je ne parlais pas, que j'avais oubliés... A quoi me serviraient-ils ? Bah ! on n'a rien sans sacrifice ! *(Il ouvre son bureau)* Tenez ! *(Donnant un petit papier à Félicité)* Dépéchez-vous ! votre maître attend !

FELICITE : Merci, Monsieur ! *(Elle sort)*

ROUSSELIN : La démission est tardive ! Bah ! le scrutin ne fait que d'ouvrir, et quand j'y perdrais quelques voix...

Scène III : Rousselin, Murel, Dodart

MUREL : Ah ! maintenant vous me croirez. Je vous amène le notaire avec toutes ses preuves.

DODART : Voici les actes de l'état civil, et l'extrait d'inventaire établissant les droits et qualités de mon client la succession de Mme veuve Murel de Montélimart, sa tante.

ROUSSELIN : Mes compliments !

MUREL : Ainsi, rien ne s'oppose plus à ce que...

ROUSSELIN : Quoi ? Qu'est-ce que vous dites ?

MUREL : Mon mariage ?

ROUSSELIN : Et comment voulez-vous que dans un jour pareil ?

MUREL : Sans doute ! Cependant, sans rien décider, on pourrait convenir...

ROUSSELIN, *à Dodart* : Savez-vous quelque chose de nouveau ? On ne vous a pas dit, par hasard, que Gruchet...

MUREL : Mon cher, il me semble que vous pourriez accorder plus d'attention...

ROUSSELIN : Non ! pas de bavardage ! Vous feriez mieux de ne pas quitter vos hommes ; le bruit court même qu’ils se disposent...

MUREL : Mais j’ai amené exprès Dodart !

ROUSSELIN : Allez-vous en ! Nous causerons ensemble de votre affaire !

MUREL : Vous consentez, alors ? c’est bien sûr ?

ROUSSELIN : Oui, mais ne perdez pas votre temps !

MUREL, *sortant vivement* : Ah ! comptez sur moi ! Quand je devrais leur donner de ma bourse une augmentation !... *(Il sort)*

Scène IV : Rousselin, Dodart, puis Marchais, puis Pierre, puis Arabelle

ROUSSELIN : Un bon enfant, ce Murel !

DODART : Néanmoins, il se trompe ! Les ouvriers maintenant se moquent de lui ! Quant à sa fortune, par exemple...

MARCHAIS : Serviteur ! M. de Bouvigny m’envoie chercher votre réponse.

ROUSSELIN : Comment ?

MARCHAIS : La réponse à la chose que M. Dodart vous a communiquée ?

DODART, *se frappant le front* : Quelle étourderie ! la première peut-être, qui m’arrive dans la carrière du notariat !

MARCHAIS, *à Rousselin* : Et il demande un mot d’écrit.

ROUSSELIN : Mais ?...

DODART, *à Rousselin* : Je vais vous dire. *(A Marchais)* Patientez quelques minutes dans la cour, n’est-ce pas ? *(Marchais sort)* M. de Bouvigny est donc venu, il y a trois jours, m’affirmer encore une fois qu’il tenant à votre alliance...

ROUSSELIN : Je le sais.

DODART : Et que si vous vouliez, - dame ! on se sert des moyens que l’on a, on utilise les armes que l’on possède ! Ce n’est peut-être pas toujours extrêmement bien... mais...

ROUSSELIN : Ah ! vous avez une façon de parler !

DODART : Sans l’affaire de Murel, qui est tombée dans mon étude, et qui a pris tous mes instants, je serais vite accouru.

ROUSSELIN : Au fait, je vous prie !

DODART : Si vous accordez votre fille à son fils, il est sûr, entendez-vous, le comte m’a dit qu’il était sûr de vous faire élire, ne serait-ce qu’en amenant aux urnes soixante-quatre laboureurs.

ROUSSELIN : Cet envoi de Marchais est une sommation ?

DODART : Absolument.

ROUSSELIN : Eh bien ?... et Murel !

DODART : En effet, vous venez de lui promettre.

ROUSSELIN : Lui ai-je promis ?

DODART : Oh ! légèrement !

ROUSSELIN : Pour ainsi dire, presque pas !... Cependant... Enfin, que me conseillez-vous ?

DODART : C’est grave ! très grave ! Des liens d’amitiés, des rapports d’intérêt même m’attachent à M. de Bouvigny, et je serais enchanté pour moi... D’autre part, je ne vous cache pas que M. Murel, maintenant... *(A part)* Un contrat ! *(Haut)* C’est à vous de réfléchir, de voir, de peser les considérations ! D’un côté le nom, de l’autre, la fortune. Certainement, Murel devient un parti. Cependant, le jeune Onésime...

ROUSSELIN : Que faire ? Eh ! ma femme, que j’oubliais ! D’ailleurs, je ne peux pas agir sans sa volonté. *(Il sonne)* Tout le monde est donc mort, aujourd’hui ! *(Il crie)* Ma femme ! Pierre ! *(A Pierre qui accourt)* Dites à Madame que j’ai besoin d’elle !

PIERRE : Madame n’est pas dans la maison !

ROUSSELIN : Voyez au jardin ! (Pierre sort) Elle découvrira un expédient ; elle est quelquefois d’un tact...

DODART : En de certaines circonstances, je consulte, comme vous, mon épouse, et je dois lui rendre cette justice...

PIERRE *rentre* : Monsieur, je n’ai pas vu Madame !

ROUSSELIN : N’importe ! trouvez-là !

PIERRE : La cuisinière suppose que Madame est sortie depuis longtemps.

ROUSSELIN : Pour où aller ?

PIERRE : Elle ne l’a pas dit !

ROUSSELIN : Vous en êtes sûr ?

PIERRE : Oh ! *(il sort)*

ROUSSELIN : C’est extraordinaire ! jamais de sa vie !...

ARABELLE, *entrant fort émue* : Monsieur ! Monsieur ! Il faut que je vous parle ! écoutez-moi ! une chose importante ! oh ! très sérieuse, Monsieur !

DODART : Dois-je me retirer, Mademoiselle ? (Signe affirmatif d’Arabelle ; il sort)

Scène V : Rousselin, Miss Arabelle

ROUSSELIN : Que me voulez-vous ? dépéchons !

MISS ARABELLE : Mon Dieu, Monsieur, pardonnez-moi si j’ose... c’est dans votre intére^t ! L’absence de Madame paraît vous... contrarier ? et je crois pouvoir...

ROUSSELIN : Est-ce que par hasard ?...

MISS ARABELLE : Oui, Monsieur, le hasard précisément ! - Votre femme est avec M. Julien !

ROUSSELIN, *abasourdi* : Comment ?... *(Puis tout à coup)* Sans doute ! pour mon élection !

MISS ARABELLE : Je ne crois pas ! car je les ai rencontrés à la Croix bleue, entrant dans le petit pavillon, - vous savez, le rendez-vous de chasse, - et j’ai entendu cette phrase de M. Julien, - sans la comprendre peut-être, malgré l’explication que cherchait à m’en donner M. Gruchet, à qui j’en parlais tout à l’heure, et qui, lui, avait l’air de comprendre mieux que moi : “J’en sortirai avant vous, et pour vous faire connaître si vous pouvez rentrer sans crainte, j’agiterai, derrière moi, mon mouchoir !”

ROUSSELIN : Impossible ! !... des preuves, miss Arabelle ! J’exige des preuves !

Scène VI : les mêmes, Dodart, puis Louise

DODART, *entre vivement* : Marchais ne veut plus attendre ! Du haut de votre vignot dans le parc, il croit même apercevoir M. de Bouvigny qui descent la côte, au milieu d'une grande foule !

ROUSSELIN : Les soixante-quatre laboureurs !

DODART : Le comte peut les faire voter pour Gruchet !

ROUSSELIN : Eh ! non ! puisque Gruchet... après tout, ce misérable-là... on ne sait pas !

DODART : Ou mettre des bulletins blancs !

ROUSSELIN : C'est assez pour me perdre !

DODART : Et l'heure avance !

ROUSSELIN, *regardant la pendule* : D'un quart sur la Mairie, heureusement ! Que Marchais retourne vers le comte, le supplier, pour qu'il m'accorde au moins... Où est Louise ? Miss Arabelle, appelez Louise ! *(Arabelle sort)* Comment la convaincre ?

DODART : Si vous pensez que mon intervention...

ROUSSELIN : Non, ça la blesserait ! Tenez-vous en bas, et dès que j'aurai son consentement... Mais Bouvigny demande une lettre ! Est-ce que je pourrai jamais...

DODART : La parole d'honneur suffira. Et puis, je reviendrai vous dire...

ROUSSELIN : Eh ! vous n'aurez pas le temps ! A 4 heures, le scrutin ferme. Courez vite !

DODART : Alors, j'irai tout de suite à la Mairie...

ROUSSELIN : Que je voudrais y être, pour savoir plus tôt...

DODART : Ce sera vite fait !

ROUSSELIN : Eh ! avec votre lenteur...

DODART : En cas de succès, je vous ferai de loin un signal.

ROUSSELIN : Convenu !

LOUISE, *entrant* : Tu m'as fait demander ?

ROUSSELIN : Oui, mon enfant *(A Dodart)* Allez vite, cher ami !

DODART, *indiquant Louise* : Il faut bien que j'attende la décision de Mademoiselle !

ROUSSELIN : Ah ! c’est vrai ! *(Dodart sort)*

Scène VII : Rousselin, Louise

ROUSSELIN : Louise ! tu aimes ton père, n’est-ce pas ?

LOUISE : Oh, cette question !

ROUSSELIN : Et tu ferais tout pour lui...

LOUISE : Tout ce qu’on voudrait !

ROUSSELIN : Eh bien, écoute-moi. Dans les existences les plus tranquilles, des catastrophes surviennent. Un honnête homme, quelquefois, se laisse aller à des égarements. Supposons, par exemple, - c’est une supposition, pas autre chose, - que j’aie commis une de ces actions, et que pour me tirer de là...

LOUISE : Mais vous me faites peur !

ROUSSELIN : N’aie pas peur, ma mignonne ! C’est moins grave ! Enfin, si on te demandait un sacrifice, tu te résignerais !... ce n’est pas un sacrifice que je te demande, une concession seulement ! Elle te sera facile. Les rapports entre vous sont nouveaux ! Il faudrait donc, ma pauvre chérie, ne plus songer à Murel !

LOUISE : Mais je l’aime !

ROUSSELIN : Comment ! Tu t’es laissé prendre à ses manières, à tous les embarras qu’il fait ?

LOUISE : Moi, je lui trouve très bon genre !

ROUSSELIN : Et puis, je ne peux pas donner des détails, mais entre nous, il a des moeurs...

LOUISE : Ce n’est pas vrai !

ROUSSELIN : Cousu de dettes ! Au premier jour, on le verra décamper !

LOUISE : Pourquoi ? Maintenant il est riche !

ROUSSELIN : Ah ! si tu tiens à la fortune, je n’ai rien à dire. Je te croyais des sentiments plus nobles !

LOUISE : Mais le premier jour, je l’ai aimé !

ROUSSELIN : Tu as ton petit amour-propre aussi, toi ! avoue-le ! Tu ne dédaignes pas le flafla, tout ce qui brille, les titres ; et tu serais bien aise, à Paris,

- quand je vais être député, - de faire partie du grand monde, de fréquenter le faubourg Saint-Germain... Veux-tu être comtesse ?

LOUISE : Moi ?

ROUSSELIN : Oui, en épousant Onésime.

LOUISE : Jamais de la vie ! un sot qui ne fait que regarder la pointe de ses bottines, [dont on ne voudrait pas pour valet de chambre], incapable de dire deux mots ! Et j'aurais de charmantes belles-soeurs ! [Elles ne savent pas l'orthographe !] et un joli beau-père ! qui ressemble à un fermier. Avec tout cela un orgueil, et une manière de s'habiller ! Elles portent des gants de bourre de soie !

ROUSSELIN : Tu es bien injuste ! Onésime, au fond, a beaucoup plus d'instruction que tu ne penses. Il a été elevé par un ecclésiastique éminent, et la famille remonte au XIIe siècle. Tu peux voir dans le vestibule un arbre généalogique. Pour ces dames, parbleu, ce ne sont pas des lionnes... mais enfin !... et quant à M. Bouvigny, on n'a pas plus de loyauté, de...

LOUISE : Mais vous le déchiriez depuis la candidature ; et il vous le rendait. Ce n'est pas comme Murel, qui vous a défendu, celui-là ! Il vous défend encore ! Et c'est lui que vous me dites d'oublier ! Je n'y comprends rien ! Qu'est-ce qu'il y a ?

ROUSSELIN : Je ne peux pas t'expliquer ; mais pourquoi voudrais-je ton malheur ? Doutes-tu de ma tendresse, de mon bon sens, de mon esprit ? Je connais le monde, va ! Je sais ce qui te convient ! Tu ne nous quitteras pas ! Vous vivrez chez nous ! Rien ne sera changé ! Je t'en prie, ma Louise chérie, tâche !

LOUISE : Ah ! vous me torturez !

ROUSSELIN : Ce n'est pas un ordre, mais une supplication ! *(Il se met à genoux)* Sauve-moi !

LOUISE*, la main sur son coeur* : Non !je ne peux pas !

ROUSSELIN*, avec désespoir* : Tu te reprocheras, bientôt, d'avoir tué ton père !

LOUISE*, se levant* : Ah ! faites comme vous voudrez, mon Dieu ! *(Elle sort)*
ROUSSELIN*, courant au fond* : Dodart, ma parole d'honneur, vivement ! *(Il redescend)* - Voilà de ces choses qui sont pénibles ! Pauvre petite ! Après tout, pourquoi n'aimerait-elle pas ce mari-là ? Il est aussi bien qu'un autre ! Il sera

même plus facile à conduire que Murel. Non, je n’ai pas mal fait, tout le monde sera content, car il plait à ma femme !... Ma femme !... Ah ! encore ! C’est ce serpent d’Arabelle avec ses inventions !... Malgré moi... je...

Scène VIII : Rousselin, et successivement Voinchet, Hombourg, Beaumesnil, Ledru ROUSSELIN, apercevant Voinchet : Vous n’êtes pas à voter, vous ?

VOINCHET : Tout à l’heure ! Nous sommes quinze de Bonneval qui s’attendent au Café Français, pour aller de là tous ensemble à la Mairie !

ROUSSELIN, *d’un air gracieux* : En quoi puis-je vous être utile ?

VOINCHET : L’ingénieur vient de m’apprendre que le chemin de fer passera décidément par Saint-Mathieu ! J’avais donc acheté, tout exprès, un terrain ; et pour en avoir une indemnité plus forte, j’avais même créé une pépinière ! Si bien que me voilà dans l’embarras. Je veux changer d’industtrie ; et comment me défaire, tout de suite, d’environ cinq cents bergamottes, huit cents passe-colmar, trois cents empereurs de la Chine, plus de cent soixante pigeons ?

ROUSSELIN : Je n’y peux rien !

VOINCHET : Pardon ! Comme vous avez derrière votre parc un sol excellent, - rien d’autre que du terreau, - à raison de trente sous l’un dans l’autre, je vous céderais avec facilité...

ROUSSELIN, *le reconduisant* : Bien ! bien ! Nous verrons plus tard !

VOINCHET : Le marché est fait, n’est-ce pas ? Vous recevrez demain la première voiture ! Oh ! ça ira ! Je vais rejoindre les amis ! *(Il sort par le fond)*
HOMBOURG, *entrant par la gauche* : Il n’y a pas à dire, monsieur Rousselin, il faut que vous me preniez...

ROUSSELIN : Mais je les ai, vos alezans ! Depuis trois jours ils sont dans mon écurie !

HOMBOURG : C’est leur place ! Mais pour les charrois, les gros ouvrages, M. Bouvigny (vous le battrez toujours, celui-là) m’avait refusé une forte jument ! qui n’est pas une affaire, - quarante pistoles !

ROUSSELIN : Vous voulez que je l’achète !

HOMBOURG : Ça me ferait plaisir !

ROUSSELIN : Eh bien, soit !

HOMBOURG : Faites excuse, Monsieur Rousselin, mais... est-ce trop vous demander que... un petit acompte sur les alezans, ou le reste, à votre idée ?...

ROUSSELIN : Non ! *(Il ouvre son bureau, et en tirant à lui un des tiroirs)* A la Mairie, où en sommes-nous ?

HOMBOURG : Oh ! ça va bien !

ROUSSELIN : Vous y avez été ?

HOMBOURG : Parbleu !

ROUSSELIN, *à part, en repoussant le tiroir* : Alors, rien ne presse !

HOMBOURG, *qui a vu le mouvement* : C'est-à-dire que j'y ai été... pour prendre ma carte. J'ai même le temps tout juste ! *(Rousselin ouvre de nouveau son tiroir et donne de l'argent)* Merci de votre obligeance ! *(Fausse sortie)* Vous devriez faire un coup, monsieur Rousselin ; j'ai un bidet cauchois...

ROUSSELIN : Oh ! assez !

HOMBOURG : Etant un peu rafraichi, ça ferait un poney pour Mademoiselle.

ROUSSELIN, *à part* : Pauvre Louise !

HOMBOURG : Quelque chose de coquet, enfin, une distraction !

ROUSSELIN, *soupirant* : Oui je prendrai le poney ! *(Hombourg sort par la gauche)* **BEAUMESNIL, *sur le seuil de la porte, à droite* :** Deux mots seulement ; je vous amène mon fils.

ROUSSELIN : Pourquoi faire ?

BEAUMESNIL : Il est dans la cour, où il s'amuse avec le chien. Voulez-vous le voir ? C'est celui dont je vous avais parlé, relativement à une bourse. Nous l'espérons, d'ici à peu.

ROUSSELIN : Je ferai tout mon possible, certainement !

BEAUMESNIL : Ces marmots-là coûtent si cher ! Et j'en ai sept, Monsieur, forts comme des Turcs !

ROUSSELIN, *à part :* Oh !

BEAUMESNIL : A preuve que son maître de pension me réclame deux trimestres ; ... et bien que la démarche... soit humiliante, si vous pouviez m’avancer...

ROUSSELIN, *ouvrant le tiroir* : Combien les trimestres ?

BEAUMESNIL *exhibe un long papier* : Voilà ! *(Il en donne un autre)* Il y a, de plus, quelques fournitures ! *(Rousselin donne de l’argent)* Je cours vite rapporter chez moi cette bonne nouvelle. Franchement, j’étais venu exprès.

ROUSSELIN : Comment ! et mon élection ?

BEAUMESNIL : Je croyais que c’était pour demain. Je vis tellement renfermé dans ma famille, dans mon petit cercle ! Mais je me rends à mes devoirs, tout de suite ! tout de suite ! *(Il sort par la droite)* **LEDRU, *entrant par le fond* :** Fameux ! C’est comme si vous étiez nommé !

ROUSSELIN : Ah !

LEDRU : Gruchet se retire. On le sait depuis deux heures. Il a raison, c’est prudent ! Pour dire le vrai, je l’ai, en dessous, pas mal démoli ; et vous devriez reconnaître mon amitié, en tâchant de me faire avoir... *(Il montre sa boutonnière)* **ROUSSELIN, *bas* :** Le ruban ?

LEDRU, *très haut* : Si je ne le méritais pas, je ne dirais rien ! mais nom d’un nom !... Ah ! je vous trouve assez froid, monsieur Rousselin !

ROUSSELIN : Mais, cher ami, je ne suis pas encore ministre !

LEDRU : N’importe ! J’ai derrière moi vingt-cinq hommes, des gaillards, - Heurtelot en tête, avec des ouvriers de Murel, - qui sont maintenant sous les halles à faire une partie de bouchon. Je leur ai dit que j’allais vous proposer un accommodement, et ils m’attendent pour se décider. Or, je vous préviens que si vous ne me jurez pas de m’obtenir la croix d’honneur !...

ROUSSELIN : Eh ! je vous en achéterai quatre d’étrangères !

LEDRU : AU pas de course, alors ! *(Il sort vivement)*

Scène IX : Rousselin, seul, regardant au fond

ROUSSELIN : Il aura le temps ! on a encore cinq minutes ! Dans cinq minutes le scrutin ferme, et alors ?... Je ne rêve donc pas ! C’est bien vrai ! je pourrais le devenir ! Oh ! circuler dans les bureaux, se dire membre d’une commission, être choisi quelquefois comme rapporteur, ne parler toujours que budget, amendements, sous-amendements, et participer à un tas de choses... d’une conséquence infinie ! Et chaque matin, je verrai mon nom imprimé dans tous les journaux, même dans ceux dont je ne connais pas la langue ! Le jeu ! la chasse ! les femmes ! est-ce qu'on aime quelque chose comme ça ? Mais pour l'obtenir, je donnerais ma fortune, mon sang, tout ! Oui ! j'ai bien donné ma fille ! ma pauvre fille ! *(Il pleure)* J'ai des remords maintenant ; car je ne saurai jamais si Bouvigny a tenu parole. On ne signe pas les votes ! *Quatre heures sonnent.* C'est fait ! On dépouille le scrutin ; ce sera vite fini ! A quoi vais-je m'occuper pendant ce temps-là ? Quelques intimes, quand ce ne serait que Murel qui est si actif, devraient être ici pour m'apprendre les premiers bulletins ! Oh ! les hommes ! dévouez-vous donc pour eux ! Si le pays ne me nomme pas... Eh bien, tant pis ! qu'il en trouve d'autres ! J'aurais fait mon devoir ! *(Il trépigne)* Mais arrivez donc ! arrivez donc ! Ils sont tous contre moi, les misérables ! C'est à en mourir ! Ma tête se prend, je n'y tiens plus ! J'ai envie de casser mes meubles !

Scène X : Rousselin, un mendiant aveugle, qui joue de la vielle.

ROUSSELIN : Ah ! ce n'est pas un électeur, celui-là ? On peut le bousculer ! Qui vous a permis...

LE MENDIANT : La maison est ouverte ; et des camarades m'ont dit qu'on y faisait du bien à tout le monde, mon cher monsieur Rousselin du bon Dieu ! On ne parle que de vous ! Donnez-moi quelque chose ? Ça vous portera bonheur !

ROUSSELIN, *à lui-même :* Ça me portera bonheur ! *(Il met deux doigts dans la poche de son gilet, rêvant)* L'aumône, faite en des circonstances suprêmes, a peut-être une puissance que l'on ne sait pas ? et j'aurais dû, ce matin, entrer dans une église...

LE MENDIANT, *faisant aller la vielle :* La charité, s'il vous plait !

ROUSSELIN, *ayant palpé ses poches :* Eh ! je n'ai plus d'argent sur moi !

LE MENDIANT, *jouant toujours :* Quelque chose, s'il vous plait !

ROUSSELIN, *fouillant les tiroirs de son bureau :* Non ! pas un sou ! pas un liard ! J'ai tant donné depuis ce matin ! Cet instrument m'agace ! Ah ! je trouverai bien un peu de monnaie qui traîne.

LE MENDIANT : La charité, s'il vous plait ! Vous qu'on dit si riche ! C'est pour avoir du pain ! Ah ! que je suis si faible ! *(Près de tomber, il se soutient à la porte)* **ROUSSELIN, *découragé :*** Je ne peux pas battre un aveugle !

LE MENDIANT : La moindre des choses ! je prierai le bon Dieu pour vous !

ROUSSELIN, *arrachant sa montre de son gousset :* Eh bien, prenez ça ! et le ciel sans doute aura pitié de moi ! *(Le mendiant décampe vite, Rousselin regarde la pendule)* On ne vient pas ! Il y a quelque malheur ! personne n'ose me le dire ! J'irais bien, mais les jambes... Ah ! c'est trop... tout me semble tourner ! Je vais m'évanouir ! *(Il s'affaisse sur le canapé)*

Scène X : Rousselin, Miss Arabelle.

MISS ARABELLE, le touchant à l'épaule : Regardez ! *(Du doigt, elle indique l'horizon ; Rousselin se penche pour voir)* Au bas du sentier, en face l'école, au-dessus de la haie.

ROUSSELIN : Quelque chose de blanc qui s'agite ?

MISS ARABELLE : Le mouchoir !...

ROUSSELIN : Mais... je ne distingue pas... *(Puis, tout à coup, poussant un cri)* Ah ! que je suis bête ! c'est Dodart ! Victoire ! Oui, ma bonne Arabelle. Bien sûr ! tenez ! on accourd par ici !

MISS ARABELLE : Du monde sur les portes ! des hommes avec des fusils ! *(Coups de feu)* **ROUSSELIN :** C'est pour me célébrer ! Bon ! encore ! toujours ! Pif ! Paf ! *(Silence)* Ecoutez-donc, mon Dieu ! *(Bruits de pas rapides)*

Scène XI : les mêmes, Gruchet, puis tout le monde.

ROUSSELIN, *se précipitant vers Gruchet* : Gruchet ! quoi ? parlez ! Eh bien ? - Je le suis ?

GRUCHET, *le regarde des pieds à la tête, puis éclate de rire :* Ah ! je vous en réponds !

TOUS, *entrant à la fois, par tous les côtés :* Vive notre député ! Vive notre député !

FIN

THE CASTLE OF HEARTS

A COMEDY OF FAIRYLAND

IN TEN TABLEAUX

in collaboration with

LOUIS BOUILHET CHARLES D’OSMOY

Trasnlated by M. Walter Dunne

This play never was produced on any stage. Flaubert worked on the piece for some time in collaboration with his friends, Louis Bouilhet and Charles d'Osmoy, but several years later he entirely recast and rewrote it. He did not decide to publish it until a few months before his death. After Flaubert's revisions had been made, it appeared in a review, *La Vie Moderne*, with the names of the three collaborators.

The Castle of Hearts is classed as being a *féerie*, which is a French genre of opera ballet based on fairy tales, often including elements of magic in the story.

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DRAMATIS PERSONNE

PAUL DE DAMVILLIERS
ALFRED DE CISY
MONSIEUR KLOEKHER
DOCTOR COLOMBEL
MONSIEUR LETOURNEUX
ONÉSIME
DUBOIS
MONSIEUR BOUVIGNARD
FATHER THOMAS
DOMINIQUE
INNKEEPER
KING OF THE GNOMES
MADAME KLOEKHER
MOTHER
THOMAS
JEANNE

QUEEN OF THE FAIRIES
Ladies, Gentlemen, Servants; Gnomes and Fairies (in various disguises.)

FIRST TABLEAU. THE FAIRIES' PERIL.

Scene: *A cleared spot in a forest, by moonlight. Trees and shrubs here and there can be distinguished) with white figures dimly seen gliding among them. At the back of the stage, a little to the right, is a small pool. After the curtain rises there is a brief silence, then a sound of pattering footsteps is heard.*

SCENE I.

(From the rear and from both sides of the stage groups of Fairies *enter each holding a finger to her lips. Some are crowned with field-flowers; others with sea-weed and mosses; a few with gladioli and ears of corn. All represent in their costumes some attribute of the places whence they come — the woods, the streams, the mountains. They advance, looking over their shoulders as if fearing something, and call to one another in whispers)*

FIRST FAIRY: Pstt! pstt! SECOND FAIRY: Here I am! THIRD FAIRY: Wait for me; my foot is caught in a ray of light. I "must get it out. *[Springs up]* There! it is out. Here I am.

FOURTH FAIRY: Are we all here?

ALL: Yes, we are all here!

FIFTH FAIRY: It is night; the earth sleeps. It is the hour that belongs to us. Come, let us dance and make merry.
(.Enormous moths with luminous wings appear among the branches of the trees, and begin to fly through the air. The Fairies *dance, with a slow, rhythmic movement, to the music of a flute)*

CHORUS: Since man drives us from his dwelling by day, let us play by night in the forest! Men are wicked, but nature is good. The stones of the street are hard, but the grassy fields are soft! We will soil our feet no more in the mud of the street, we will break our hearts no more against men's stony breasts.

A draught of euphorbia is less treacherous than their caresses; the withered leaf, blown by the autumn wind, is more constant than their vows.
Enough of weariness! All the worse for meri! Free from all human cares, we shall be always happy! We shall never leave our native haunts, the freedom of the air, the streams, and the forest.

Let us dance along the vines that cling to the trees, wet with the dews of the summer night; let us glide over the surface of the blue lakes, clinging to the fair shoulder of a pretty maid; let us fly towards the sun in the glittering dust of the rays that come through the cellar windows. Come! let us be gay! let us dance! Roses, shake your sweet petals! Waves, murmur your soft melody! Moon, rise and smile upon us!

(During the Chorus *the moon has risen. At the end of the* Chorus, *it shines upon the pool and the* Fairies *dance with ecstatic fervour, when suddenly, from the midst of a large cluster of heather, in the centre of the stage, the* Fairy Queen *springs out. General surprise. The* Fairies *stop dancing)*

ALL: The Queen!

SCENE II.

(The Queen, *the* Fairies)

QUEEN *[in an angry tone]:* What! Is this the way that you care for men?

FAIRIES *[together]:* We can do nothing for them! We have all tried!

QUEEN *[vehemently]:* Remember! only a few minutes must elapse before we fall again, for a thousand years, under the domination of the Gnomes, since this is the last night that remains to us in which to restore to mankind their stolen hearts.

A FAIRY: But they do not complain of the lack of hearts, O Queen. No man, up to this moment, has asked for the return of his heart. On the contrary, there are many parents, who teach their little ones —

QUEEN: What matter? Do you not know that the Gnomes cannot exist without the hearts of men? It is to nourish themselves that they steal these hearts, putting in their places *[points to her breast]* I know not what contrivance of their own invention, which imitates perfectly the movement of the human organ.
A FAIRY *[laughs]*: Truly, they deceive them well!

QUEEN: And the poor human beings allow the exchange to be made without repugnance. Some of them even find pleasure in it. Little by little, by mutual accord, the wicked Gnomes draw men's hearts away from them; and this is the reason why the whole human race — or almost the whole of it — has no kind sentiments nor generous thoughts!

A FAIRY: And you wish that we should vanquish the Gnomes?

QUEEN: Yes! Take up the battle again! A superior order of beings has divided between them and you the empire of the world. In former times we have been able to vanquish them, but for a thousand years they have been triumphant. Mankind, under their tyranny, has abandoned itself to material things; the spirit of the Gnomes has passed into the very marrow of their bones; it envelops them, prevents them from recognising us, and, like a fog, hides from them the splendour of truth, the sun of the ideal!

A FAIRY: The Gnomes can do nothing to injure us, however.

QUEEN: But in proportion to the increase of their power, your own becomes less. They laugh at our hopes, they foil our attempts at consolation, they even deny our existence; and after they have conquered the whole world, they will covet purer regions. Then they will throw themselves upon you with a force strengthened a thousandfold; and your hearts, like those of the unfortunate humans, will be devoured! *[Fairies utter a cry of fear]* But reassure yourselves! listen to me! *[Fairies gather around the Queen]* In order to save the human race first, and yourselves afterwards, you must attack the power of your enemies in their most secret retreat, — that is to say, in the hitherto inaccessible place where they hold in reserve the hearts of men —

FAIRIES *[tumultously]:* Let us go there!

QUEEN: Wait! The enterprise cannot succeed except through the perfect union of two lovers.

FAIRIES: Oh, it is not difficult to find lovers, and as to the number —

QUEEN: I mean two lovers of an ardour and a purity more than human, either of whom would be willing to die for the other, without even the hope of having the loved one left behind shed a tear upon the tomb of the one that dies.

FAIRIES *[loudly]:* Oh! oh! And where can such lovers be found?

QUEEN: I do not know. They may be here, quite near us, or at the other end of the earth; wearing rags and tatters, or seated upon a throne. Search everywhere, — in cities, in deserts, in forests, by the sea-shore and on mountain summits. Neglect nothing! go! *[Sound of footsteps heard]* Some one comes; let us conceal ourselves! Mortal eyes must not behold us!
(The sun begins to rise, and at the right a cabin can be seen through the fog, standing under the shade of a large tree. As the sound of footsteps comes nearer, the Fairies *disappear; some rush into the trunks of neighbouring trees; others plunge into the pool; others vanish in the rapidly clearing fog)*

SCENE III.

(Father Thomas, Mother Thomas, *peasants living in a suburb of Paris;* Dominique, *their son, wearing a shabby livery;* Monsieur Paul de Damvilliers, *in a worn travelling costume, with a band of crape on his hat. He seems overcome with melancholy)*

FATHER T.: Have courage, my dear Monsieur Paul.

MOTHER T.: You know you must start soon for Paris, and should not neglect your business affairs. Why, it is only a few leagues away, — not such a terrible distance!

PAUL: Yes! I will be strong! I will go at once.

FATHER T.: Oh, there is no such great haste!

FATHER T.: Oh, there is no such great haste!

MOTHER T. *[aside to Father T.]*: Imbecile! Shut up!

PAUL: Thank you, my good friends, but I cannot trespass longer upon your hospitality.

FATHER T. *[aside to Mother T.]*: There, you see he understands the situation perfectly!

DOMINIQUE: Our hospitality was scarcely worthy of you, Monsieur, and I am surprised that you condescended to accept it. Since that rascally former steward of yours had not the decency or the courtesy to offer you an apartment in the castle, it was hardly worth while to come here only to listen to a string of his cursed accounts. I am sure, Monsieur, that you. have been unhappy for some time.

PAUL *[in a reverie]*: Yes! All that has happened seems like the result of a conjurer's magic; like the wrath of an implacable Fate: the sudden death of my father, the old debts that came to light, followed by my total ruin, without my being able to discover the cause or to accuse anyone.

DOMINIQUE *[affected]:* What bad luck! We used to lead such a happy life together, travelling about.

PAUL: Calm yourself, my good Dominique, and speak no more of that time, so recent and yet so remote, when we journeyed only for pleasure through the Indies and the Orient. Let us have no more regrets! I must start afresh in the world to seek my fortune. *[Appears lost in thought]*

FATHER T.: The difficulty will be to catch it!

PAUL: It can be done, however, — with courage! *[Turns to Dominique]* And then, *you* have not abandoned me.

DOMINIQUE: NO, no! I have the utmost confidence in you, Monsieur; I have seen you work. Wouldn't it be a fine thing if we had at our command some of those good genii that interested you so much when we were in the East?
You remember, you consulted magicians who wore robes of all colours —

green, yellow, blue — to say nothing of those who wore no shirts! And really, to look at you then, one would have thought you believed their idle tales.

PAUL: Perhaps I did. Why not? But I have delayed here too long. Adieu!

SCENE IV.

(Enter Jeanne)

MOTHER T.: What are you doing here, lazy girl?

PAUL *[shocked]:* Oh, how harsh you are!

MOTHER T.: And do you try to take her part against me, Monsieur Paul? Well, you were right just now — you'd better go away at once. She has. talked quite enough about you while you were abroad on your travels.

PAUL: What, little one, you did not forget me? You thought of me?

MOTHER T.: Thought of you, good heavens! For five years she has been continually talking about you. "Where is he? When will he come home?" She would ask for news of you from all the passing wagoners, and when the wind blew hard, she trembled for the safety of your ship.

FATHER T. *[tries to drive Jeanne away]*: Get along with you! This is none of your business. Go to your work!

PAUL *[to Jeanne]*: How you have grown! You have become quite a pretty girl. Will you allow me to kiss you? *[Jeanne hangs her head]*

DOMINIQUE: Come here, simpleton!

JEANNE *[presents her forehead timidly; speaks in an agitated tone]:* Are you going away?

PAUL: Yes, little one. I must. *[Kisses her forehead]*

JEANNE *[approaches Dominique]*: Good-bye, brother! *[Turns to Father and Mother T.]* He is going with Monsieur. He promised me he would go.

MOTHER T. *[aside to Dominique]*: And do you wish to go with him, now that he is ruined?

DOMINIQUE *[aside]:* Oh, we'll wait for some inheritance to turn up! And besides —

MOTHER T. *[aside]:* Well, I warn you, be careful!

DOMINIQUE *[aside]:* Besides, I say, I can come back again, if he does not succeed. Every one will be sure to speak of me as a model servitor, and that will sound very well! And if there should be a word or two about me in the newspapers — the sporting papers especially — so much the better. I have friends among the journalists!

FATHER T.: Well, at least, you will send us, from time to time —

DOMINIQUE: Impossible! my capital is — or will be — engaged. We know certain persons connected with the Bourse!

MOTHER T. *[admiringly]:* What a dashing fellow he is!

DOMINIQUE: But as soon as I obtain a responsible place —

FATHER T. *[smilingly]:* AH!

DOMINIQUE: I will let you know!

MOTHER T.: Well, take good care of yourself, at least.

DOMINIQUE: Never fear! Myself before all! That's one of my principles.

FATHER T.: And don't spend all your money in buying furbelows.

DOMINIQUE: Nonsense! I don't do that sort of thing any more. You may be sure I know too much for that.

MOTHER T.: Isn't he a clever boy?

DOMINIQUE: And now, old folks, good-night! Good appetite to you, and good health! You first. *[Embraces his father]* Now you. *[Embraces his mother]* That's done! Now let us be off!

PAUL: YOU see! In spite of my misfortune and distress he wishes to accompany me.

DOMINIQUE: SO long as you are willing, I am content.
“You could not get along without a valet, you know — it wouldn't be decent! I will have my livery turned and freshened up, put a new band on my hat, and we shall cut a great figure. Monsieur, at your service!

JEANNE *[throws her arms around Dominique's neck]:* Oh, my dear, good brother!

FATHER T. *[to Dominique]*: Be careful!

DOMINIQUE: Yes! yes!

MOTHER T.: Listen to me!

DOMINIQUE: Don't worry on my account. *[Moves away]*

FATHER T.: Come back to us again.

DOMINIQUE: Oh, we shall see each other, never fear.

MOTHER T.: My poor boy!

DOMINIQUE *[runs off]:* I will write to you.

PAUL *[to Father and Mother T.]*: I cannot prevent him from going. Farewell! farewell! Be comforted! We go to make our fortunes! *[Exit.*

SCENE V.

FATHER T. *[in a reverie]*: To make their fortunes! To become a gentleman, sleek and well-fed; to own property, fields, woods, a mill; to put on a bold face to everyone — ah, that would be fine!

MOTHER T.: That it would! *[To Jeanne]* As for you, you can get out and go to digging, instead of spending hours staring at the sky.

JEANNE: But ever since daylight —

MOTHER T.: Bah! I've had enough of your laziness!

FATHER T.: Listen! I have an idea.

MOTHER T.: Well, has it anything to do with us?

FATHER T.: Perhaps. Suppose we send Jeanne to Paris?

JEANNE: Send me to Paris — all alone — in the great city! Oh!

MOTHER T.: Bless me! More than one girl has gone away from here in wooden shoes, and has come back wearing fine clothes. Who knows? *[Looks sharply at Jeanne]* She's not so ugly, after all. *[Pause]* Well, why not? I have decided. You shall start to-morrow morning.

JEANNE: Oh, I beg you —

MOTHER T.: We shall spare nothing to start you off well. Your father and I know how to make sacrifices, don't we, Thomas? First, you shall have my red cape, and with one of my old caps to go with it, you will look very well. You see, my Jeannette, you must learn how to use a little coquetry, but in the right way — so as to make the grass grow, you understand! — and so that you can help take care of your parents, your good, kind parents!

JEANNE: But what will become of me all alone in Paris? I shall not know how to find my way about in the streets.

MOTHER T.: Pshaw! There are plenty of people who will be kind enough to show you the way.

JEANNE: But I don't know any one there.

MOTHER T.: Isn't Dominique there? And he has many fine acquaintances — bankers, military men, all the government people.

JEANNE: No, no! I should never dare to go.

MOTHER T.: To say nothing of Monsieur Paul, who would be delighted to see you.

JEANNE: HE! Delighted to see a poor girl like me!

FATHER T.: But, you little idiot —

MOTHER T. *[aside]*: Shut up, will you! You don't know how to manage her! *[To Jeanne]* Take your choice: Paris, and my beautiful gold buckle, or stay at home and *[makes gesture signifying a box on the ear]*

JEANNE *[resigned]:* Very well! I will go.

MOTHER T.: That's right! But you needn't think you've nothing to do to-day but fold your hands. Go back to your work, and be quick about it. .

JEANNE: At once.

FATHER T.: Come this way.

MOTHER T.: No, go that way.

JEANNE *[bewildered]:* I don't know where you wish me to go!

MOTHER T. *[gives Jeanne a slap]*: There, that'll show you! *[Jeanne weeps]*
FATHER T.: That's right! Whine, cry, bawl! *[Exeunt, Father and Mother T. pushing Jeanne before them]*

SCENE VI.

(The Fairies *run lightly upon the stage)*

A FAIRY: Ah, the cruel old man! Happily, the young are more kind and gentle, and among them we have discovered two pure hearts.

A FAIRY: That is true. But how will the youth ever learn to care for a little maid so simple, so poor, so ragged?

QUEEN: TO US is given the work of creating this love, and our fate depends upon our efforts. But how shall we give the key of the secret to only one of these two hearts? Hasten, my sisters! Let us decide. Which shall it be?

FAIRIES *[together, confusedly]*: He! She! No, no! She! He! He! She!

QUEEN: Silence! It shall be the youth, because Jeanne has her ignorance and her humble condition as a safeguard. Paul, on the contrary, is exposed every day to all the snares of the wicked Gnomes. It is he we should warn, at the proper time, and do our utmost to protect within the limit permitted to us. *[Moves about among the Fairies, giving them instructions; then all sing]* Sisters fair, be prudent, Our plan shall then succeed)

GNOMES *(their voices come from under the stage]:* Ha! ha! ha!

FAIRIES *[pause suddenly]:* What was that? An echo, without doubt. *[All sing.]* Sisters dear, be prudent, Our plan shall then succeed!

(The subterranean laughter increases to a burst of wild gaiety. Through a trap-door appears a throng of Gnomes, *strange and ugly little men, with enormous heads. They laugh louder and dance around the* Fairies, *who flee from them in terror)*

SECOND TABLEAU. THE MAGIC PUNCH-BOWL.

Scene: *A wine shop in a suburb of Parts. Early morning.*

SCENE I.

(The Innkeeper, Paul Dominique, weary and covered with dust, sit beside a table, on which stand a bottle of wine, two glasses, an inkstand and a packet of sealed letters. Several farmers are just leaving the room)

ARMERS: Good-bye, Father Michel!

INNKEEPER: Good luck, boys! *[To Paul and Dominique.]* And now, as you are served, gentlemen, and as it is still very early in the morning, you will excuse me if I leave you for awhile and try to catch another little nap. *[Goes behind the counter, mounts a low platform and sits in a chair, leans his head on his arms and falls asleep]*

PAUL *[shows the packet of letters to Dominique]*: You understand? As soon as we arrive in Paris, you are to distribute these letters.

DOMINIQUE *[takes packet]:* I understand. *[Reads the superscriptions]* "To Monsieur the Vicomte Alfred de Cisy." Good! There's a man whose debts you have often paid for him. But what is his address?

PAUL: YOU must inquire at his club.

DOMINIQUE *[reads]:* "To Monsieur Onésime Dubois, artist, Rue de l'Abbaye." Many a time have you bought bad pictures of him! *[Reads]* "To Professor Letourneux, member of several religious and philanthropic societies." I know him! It was your father who introduced him everywhere in Paris. *[Reads]* "To Doctor Colombel."

PAUL: He was our family physician, you remember.

DOMINIQUE *[reads]:* "To Monsieur Bou — Bou — Bouvignard."

PAUL: Yes, the amateur collector of faïence.

DOMINIQUE: TO be sure! That little man who always dropped in at breakfast time — I remember! *[Reads]* "To Monsieur Macaret, at his factory." Ha! that gentleman was very glad to be accommodated with the loan of a certain sum when he wanted to set himself up in business! *[Shuffles the letters through his hands, muttering]* Very well, very well! I know all those streets; I have been there. How many friends you have! Peers of France, bankers, professors, artists — all Paris!

PAUL *[sighs]*. After my five years' absence perhaps they have forgotten me. But there are some good fellows, I know, that will remember me. Here! *[Points to letters]* Divide them into two packets. Deliver these first, then the others.

INNKEEPER *[suddenly awakes and falls off his chair]:* Coming, gentlemen!

DOMINIQUE: NO one called you.

INNKEEPER *[Jyawns]:* A-h-h-h! *(Returns to his chair and sleeps]*

PAUL: Note especially any signs of apartments to let, and engage for me a small room that will not be too dear.

DOMINIQUE: Is it important which floor it may be on, Monsieur?

PAUL: NO. I do not care.

INNKEEPER *[awakes and falls off his chair again]:* Coming! coming!

DOMINIQUE *[jumps up startled]:* Our host has very busy dreams, evidently! *[Sits]* Oh, it's good to rest a bit! My knees feel as if they were broken and my head seems hollow.

PAUL *[stands]*: That is because we walked all night. Poor boy! Come, finish the bottle. *[Dominique drinks]* Drink to me, too, for my heart almost fails me. Just as I am about to enter upon a new life, I feel a vague trouble in my mind; it is as powerful as the malady that overcomes us when we set out on a long voyage. Come, let us go. Get up!

SCENE II.

(A Stranger *enters very quietly; he wears the long frock-coat of a prosperous bourgeois, and a cap with the brim turned up. He wears a beard also, and carries a stick with a leather thong. Sits at one of the tables, observing* Paul *and* Dominique *with flaming eyes. Rain is heard falling without)*

DOMINIQUE: There! it rains! We shall have to wait here now, since our equipage has not arrived in time to take us to Paris.

PAUL: DO you remember that the last time we drove together we were in a post-chaise with four horses?

DOMINIQUE: Yes, and I was on the box; I paid the postilions! And to-day we have to wait for an omnibus!

STRANGER *[rises, with a polite salutation]*: The omnibus from the suburbs does not start until half-past eight every morning, Monsieur. *[Paul and Dominique turn and look at the Stranger]* You are strangers, gentlemen, I think. Monsieur is travelling for pleasure, undoubtedly. If you require anyone to show you about the city, I could recommend to you some of my relatives. *[Paul and Dominique continue to look at him without speaking]* B-r-r-r! *[Shivers]* How cold it is! I should be glad to have something hot to drink. Hey, garçon! Bring me some punch! *[Innkeeper springs up clumsily, as before, and exit R. The Stranger calls after him]* Plenty of sugar, lemon, and cognac, and be quick about it! If you gentlemen would do me the honour to join me —
(Enter Maid-servant *carrying a bowl)*

DOMINIQUE: With pleasure, Monsieur, — you are too kind! *[The Maid has scarcely placed the bowl upon the table when a small flame springs up from its interior]* But there was nothing in that bowl a moment ago! That's very queer!

[To the Stranger] Aha! tell me, Monsieur, didn't you have it in your pocket all the time? You are a conjurer, a magician. This is great sport! Here's a chap that comes to an inn with ready-made punch in his pocket!

STRANGER: I do not understand a word you are saying, my dear fellow. *[Gives money to Maid]* Go and get me some cigars from the little shop in the second street from here; turn to the right as you enter the door and get them from the third shelf. I have a favourite box there, and the people of the shop know me. *[Exit Maid]* Now, Monsieur, to your good health!
(Paul *has reseated himself; leans on his elbow, deep in thought)*

STRANGER *[points to the punch-bowl]*: Well, Monsieur, is it because I have not the pleasure of your acquaintance that you will not drink?

DOMINIQUE *[conciliatingly]*: You see, my poor master is troubled; it is not that he is too proud —

PAUL *[starts up]:* No! Heaven knows I have nothing to boast of now! *[Crosses to table where Dominique and the Stranger sit and sits beside them]*

STRANGER: And so you have come to seek your fortune in the great city?

PAUL: Who told you that? .

STRANGER: YOU yourself, Monsieur.

PAUL: In what way?

STRANGER: Just now, when you were speaking to your servant.

PAUL: Well, really, it seems to me —

STRANGER: Pardon me, Monsieur, but — I know all! And as it is my business to keep a kind of bureau of general information, and to seek for customers in all classes of society, I thought it might be to my interest if I offered my services to you.

DOMINIQUE: You're refreshingly frank, at any rate!

STRANGER: Possibly Monsieur purposes to seek some employment under government?

PAUL *[roughly]*: No!

STRANGER: Or to interest himself in finance, diplomacy, or in railways?

PAUL: HOW do I know what I shall do?

STRANGER: In commerce, perhaps, or in art.

DOMINIQUE: That's it! My master is one of those men that can paint a picture in two hours, as large as that! *[Makes gesture]*

STRANGER *[bows ironically]*: Ah, Monsieur is an artist? And he expects to make his fortune! Let us respect his ambition!

PAUL *[irritated]:* Well, why not? When I think of the wretched daubers that are admired and applauded, the devil is in it if I cannot do as well! Besides, I have had the advantage of much study; and if I use all the skill I possess, I shall certainly win fame and perhaps wealth.

STRANGER: Very good, young man! But I hope you will not neglect the many things that are necessary to do in order to make your way as an artist. Steal some ideas from the old masters; disparage the moderns; exalt petty geniuses and show a sovereign contempt for great ones. That must be your first pose. Then you must paint shopkeepers as military heroes, on splendid chargers, and ladies of easy morals as Venus, engaged in the performance of some virtuous deed! Don't trouble about accurate drawing or colour, — they will say you lack ideas if you do that, so take care! Make a specialty of some particular style — Greek or Gothic, Pompadour or Chinese, immorality or virtue — never mind what, so long as it is the fad. But don't fail to court the dear public most assiduously, even servilely; and don't give them anything that is beyond their comprehension, too costly for their purses, or too large for their walls. Then you will see your works reproduced without end over all Europe! You will become the favourite of your generation. You will be hailed as a master, a glory, almost a religion. The despotism of your mediocrity shall stultify a whole people; it shall extend even to nature itself, because you, O master! shall cause it to be despised, since it will suggest your own daubs!

PAUL *[indignant]*: Never!

STRANGER: You are right! It is better and safer to get some kind of place first, some fixed appointment. First, I would recommend you to use the utmost exactness, not in your own work, but in criticising that of your fellow-workers. Just a word of disparagement here and there, you know — not a formal denunciation, for the interest of the. brotherhood! Then circulate a clever bit of calumny — oh, don't be afraid of that! Show a certain arrogance towards humbler persons, but a becoming modesty before your chiefs; wear a starched cravat, but let your backbone be supple! Keep a cool head and give your conscience plenty of room. Give heed to abuse; promise much but fulfil little; bend your back to the storm, and in very difficult circumstances pretend to be dead! But, above all, try to discover the secret vice of your superior; if he takes snuff, present him with a handsome snuff-box; or if he likes pretty women, marry one!

PAUL: Horror!

STRANGER: AS to gaining an independence — I approve of that ambition. But fortunes are not made any more, Monsieur, except in trade. We have nowadays a system of honourable bankruptcies, and certain secrets regarding false weights and artificial colourings; but really, the quickest way for a young man to advance himself in a good house, is to make love to the wife of a wealthy *bourgeois!*

PAUL: Silence, villain!

STRANGER *[calmly]:* To be sure, it would be better to take his daughter, because then he would be compelled to give her to you in marriage. *[Paul recoils in horror]*

DOMINIQUE: There's some sense in what he says, after all.

STRANGER *[still calmly]:* Then, no. matter what you may be, all obstacles will be removed; everyone will smile upon you; your health will be good; you will dine well; your face will be as rosy as that of a young girl. *[His beard suddenly disappears; Paul is amazed]* By degrees you will become rich, respected, happy.

As you stroll along the boulevards, you will hear the creaking of your varnished shoes, as you twirl your gold-headed cane in your white-gloved hands. *[As he speaks he is changed into the representation of such a figure as he describes. Paul utters a cry]* You will be feared as well as loved; you can indulge all your caprices; wear a new coat every day, rings on all your fingers, watch-chains, trinkets, and fine linen. *[His appearance now is that of a young "swell;" Paul and Dominique approach each other in terror]* You will buy a country house, statuary, a city mansion, have friends, race-horses, everything that is most expensive. And in order to pull the wool over the eyes of future generations, you will found a hospital, and grow old gracefully, attended by a throng of servants, surrounded by your family, loaded with honours, with a fat paunch and the guise of an honest man! *[His appearance changes to that oj a substantial elderly bourgeois, with gold spectacles and a velvet waistcoat]* PAUL *[hides his face with his hands]:* Is this an illusion? I hear a noise in my head like the rolling of cart-wheels! I see leaping flames!

(The punch-bowl, from which flames have been leaping during the dialogue, is now multiplied into several punch-bowls, placed on the various small tables. Tongues of flame dart here and there, like will-o'-the-wisps)

DOMINIQUE *[walks around the Stranger in admiration]:* What a wonderful man! What an extraordinary experience!

PAUL *[resolutely]:* No, I will not be tempted! Away! It is weakness even to listen to you. Away with you!

STRANGER: Just as you please! Play the virtuous, my fine fellow, and hug your empty stomach! Every door of fortune will be shut in your face. At first, of course, you will try to keep up appearances, but soon you will slip out at nine o'clock in the evening to get a bottle of milk and a roll of bread, which you will eat as you go along the street. Then you will become familiar with all the makeshifts of poverty — paper collars, inked seams, tight trouser-straps to hold on your old shoes, and a black coat buttoned up to the chin to hide the absence of linen. *[He appears in the costume just described]* But you will not weaken! You will struggle along. No one will care a rap about you, however. No one will seek you out — who bothers his head over a poor chap? And as a first fall is the forerunner of a second, you will find yourself sinking lower, little by little, my fine fellow! Your misery will increase until it becomes irremediable and constitutional. "Click! clack! get out of the way, stupid!" the coachmen will cry. And from the gutter, in the freezing nights of winter, you will raise your eyes and behold behind lace curtains at the windows the gay world whirling about in the light of the blazing lamps; you will see all that your heart now covets! *[The right wall half opens, showing a scene representing a splendid ball-room full of dancers; the scene closes in]* Then will begin for you those long wanderings of the poor about Paris, along the quays and the boulevards. More uncertain and fatalistic than a Bedouin in the desert, you will watch your chance to seize upon a lost umbrella, a dropped purse; and at midnight you will sleep side by side with old convicts, on a bench, your feet in the straw and your arms resting on a rope. *[The left wall half opens, revealing a miserable lodging-house, filled with tramps, sleeping; the scene closes in]* And even your shabby coat will then be gone. *[His coat disappears]* Instead of a hat you will wear an old cap without a brim. *[His hat disappears]* No waistcoat, and only a single suspender, and not even shoes and stockings. *[Assumes a servile attitude]* Shall I call a cab for you, Monsieur?

PAUL *[wrings his hands]:* Horrible! Horrible!

DOMINIQUE: Not a very inviting prospect, that's sure

PAUL *[discouraged, falls on a stool and leans his elbows on the table]:* What shall I do?

(At the close of the Stranger's last speech the Maid re-enters with a packet of cigars, which she puts on the table. The Stranger stands near Paul, R.; he takes a backward step, with a gesture of triumph, but at the same moment the Maid-Servant, who stands behind Dominique, facing the Stranger, changes into a Fairy, and extends her arm with an imperative gesture towards the Stranger, who changes into a Gnome. Dominique, astounded, utters a cry. Paul looks up, and he, too, cries out on perceiving the Fairy, who then disappears into the wall, L., while the Gnome vanishes into the wall, R.)

THIRD TABLEAU. SLAVES OF THE GNOMES.

Scene: *Apartment in the house of the banker,* Monsieur Kloekher; *a boudoir, with doors* R. *and* L. *and* C. *During the action of the first scene, footmen and maids cross the stage, carrying jardinieres, as final preparations for an evening reception.*

SCENE I.

(Alfred de Cisy, Paul)

PAUL: My dear Alfred, have you brought me to Monsieur Kloekher's house on the night that he is giving a ball?

ALFRED: What does that matter?, Do you not feel yourself quite at home here? And then *[with emphasis]*, as the ball has not begun yet, you may find an opportunity to havè a private chat with the illustrious financier!

PAUL: Ah, it is a real service that you have done me, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart, because without you I do not know what would have happened. Wherever I have called during the last month, the doors were closed upon me. Ah! one's friends! And the temptations I have had, the efforts I have made! *[Bows his head]*

ALFRED: Come, cheer up! You must not give way to these melancholy, romantic and poetic ideas. *[Slaps Paul on the shoulder]* Good old Paul! he hasn't changed a bit; ready to take fire at sight of a pretty woman, and to be dazzled by all sorts of illusions. I'm thinking of the little adventure in the wine-shop, of which you told me. *[.Laughs]*

PAUL: But when I tell you that I really saw-

ALFRED: Nonsense! you were the dupe of some hallucination, or of some clever trickster. As if one ever saw celestial beings disappear through the walls of a dirty little road-house! It is of no use for you to protest that she was as beautiful as a fairy, and that she was dressed like one. Fairies do not dwell in the Chaussée d'Antin, dear boy! But very soon I am going to present you to one who is called in society Madame Kloekher, — and she is a fairy who is rather kind to me!

PAUL: Ah! *[Bows]*

ALFRED: Why — yes, — that is the situation! I find it very interesting.

PAUL: And the husband?

ALFRED: Oh, he is an old fellow from Auvergnat. He entertains himself With plenty of others! Besides, he is a miserly old boor.

PAUL: Really! My father told me quite the contrary.

ALFRED: Did your father know him?

PAUL: Very well indeed. And he often spoke to me of his disinterestedness. I never met Monsieur Kloekher because —

ALFRED *[quickly]*: But if your father knew him well, what need had you of my services? You could have introduced yourself.

PAUL *[humbly]*: Ah, my friend, when one is poor, he is timid!

ALFRED *[aside]*: Poor! I did not know that he was poor. That's bad!

SCENE II.

(Enter M. Kloekher)

KLOEKHER: Vicomte, I am glad to see you.

ALFRED: Good evening to the great financier! Permit me to present to you one of my intimate friends, Monsieur Paul de Damvilliers.

KLOEKHER *[aside]: His* son!

ALFRED: He wants something or other — I don't know exactly what. He wishes to talk to you about himself. He is a good fellow — oh, excellent! And I have another favour to ask. May I be permitted to pay my respects to Madame — that is, if she is disengaged?

KLOEKHER: Certainly. I think you will find her in that room. *[Exit Alfred]* I knew your father very well, Monsieur, and as I had great esteem for him, the suddenness of his death affected me more than it might have affected those persons who did not know him so well. And have you not been able, up to the present, to discover or to guess the cause of the catastrophe?

PAUL: Alas! no, Monsieur. I have at last even given up trying to discover the cause.

KLOEKHER *[sighs deeply]*: I think you act wisely. It would be only a loss of time to make further research. *[Coolly]* And you wish — ?

PAUL: To work, Monsieur! My expectations would be very modest.

KLOEKHER: How old are you, if you please?

PAUL: Twenty-five years old, Monsieur.

KLOEKHER: UM! Rather young! And what do you know of the accounting and banking business?

PAUL: Very little, it is true, but I should learn quickly.

KLOEKHER: Ah, you think so? And what have you done heretofore?

PAUL: I have travelled.

KLOEKHER: Where? And with what purpose?

PAUL: In the north of Africa and as far as China, to inform myself.

KLOEKHER: Or to amuse yourself more freely — come! own up to it! It is a very pretty way to spend one's fortune; you assume the polished air of a serious man, stare at the idlers as they stroll along, bring home long pipes for your friends and Turkish slippers for — the girls! Ah, young men! young men! They are very amusing, my word of honour!

PAUL *[irritated]*: Monsieur!

KLOEKHER: Say no more! I know all about that kind of study. I'll wager you can't tell me even the name of the principal banking-house of Macao, nor the rate of discount at Calcutta.

PAUL: But there are other things worth knowing!

KLOEKHER: That is possible. But why are you here? What do you wish?

PAUL: I desire a place, Monsieur, any kind of place. I can translate your correspondence, and make out your bills. One man is as good as another, if ' only he has strength and courage. I beg you to consider the situation, difficult as I find it to do so; and I venture, in order to strengthen my request, to remind you that my father was your friend.

KLOEKHER: Ah, your father, Monsieur, was a fine man, and if he had only followed my advice he would not have ended his career so disastrously. Instead of playing the grand seigneur and trying to dazzle beholders with ill-considered liberality, he would have guarded his capital, increased his fortune, made himself useful, in short. *[In a tone of affected good fellowship]* I have suffered enough from the affection that I bore him without your coming here, you his son, to give me the trouble of refusing you. A place, indeed! Do you think that I have one for you? My clerkships are all filled — I can't help that, can I? I am extremely sorry! *[Sits. Paul goes up stage, about to exit C. Kloekher springs up]* Oh, no! Wait! Come back!

PAUL *[proudly]:* Why, may I ask?

KLOEKHER: I wish to do something for you if I can. *[Looks intently into Paul's face]* If I am any judge of men, I think I can read you. Now, I trust that your intelligence will enable you to understand me; and, in case you refuse what I am about to propose, that you will keep silent regarding it PAUL: Be assured —

KLOEKHER: Until now I have always conducted my affairs on the Bourse in a strictly business-like and open manner; but after to-day — because of circumstances that would take too long to explain now, and which you would not understand — I shall be compelled to manage certain matters in a different way, — that is, through the hands of another person. *[Silence]*

PAUL *[tries to comprehend]*: That is to say —

KLOEKHER: That I need a trustworthy man — you understand! I should advise him about everything, of course, but I want a reliable young man, who will represent me absolutely, follow my orders, and act for me.

PAUL:. Well?

KLOEKHER: But he must appear to the public as if he were acting only for himself, in his own name.

PAUL: But — the responsibility —

KLOEKHER: There is no chance of loss, I assure you. There will be little to do, and I shall give you ten per cent, of the profits. Now, as the profits in this kind of operations amount to at least a million francs annually, you will have a hundred thousand francs a year. An income of a hundred thousand francs, young man!

PAUL: A hundred thousand francs' income! *[Ponders deeply; then aside]* Impossible! There must be something mysterious under all this.

KLOEKHER *[aside]*: He hesitates! Is it from ignorance or from scruples?

PAUL: HOW can you tell beforehand that you will not lose in this scheme?

KLOEKHER: By a series of calculations, — of infallible combinations. I will explain to you —

PAUL: And why, then, do you need my name?

KLOEKHER: Why? *[They looked fixedly at each other]* I don't care to explain that now. But you understand me perfectly well. The affair is pressing.

PAUL: Enough, Monsieur, enough! I will spare you, through shame, from using the word to be found in the penal code that describes your "infallible combinations." You would borrow my name to use in your nefarious schemes, but as I do not wish to be either your accomplice or your victim, I will leave you!

KLOEKHER *[turns his head]:* Fool! Get out!

(As Paul *is about to leave by door* C. *enter* Monsieur Letourneux; *they meet)*

SCENE III.

LETOURNEUX *[joyfully surprised]:* Paul! What a pleasure!

KLOEKHER *[aside]:* They know each other!

LETOURNEUX: Let me embrace you, my dear boy! As soon as I knew you were in Paris, I came as quickly as possible from Guyenne, where I had gone to study agriculture a bit — and to have a little lark! Well, this is a lucky chance, indeed! *[Aside, shakes his fist at Kloekher's back]* I've caught you, you old rascal! *[Aloud]* We actually believed you were dead, do you know that? Isn't that so, Kloekher? Your enemies — because you have enemies, everyone has them — flattered themselves they never should see you again!

PAUL: And who can wish harm to me? I never have injured any one.

LETOURNEUX: What an interesting young man you are! The living image of that good Damvilliers, whose memory we cherish.

PAUL: I do not know how to thank you —

LETOURNEUX: This may certainly be called a lucky day; first I find the son of an old friend; then I intend to relieve some unfortunate persons, — and I shall owe that pleasure to you, Kloekher.

KLOEKHER: What?

LETOURNEUX: Yes, of course; haven't I come here to thank you for the twenty-five thousand francs you gave me for the poor of my parish?

KLOEKHER: Oh, indeed!

LETOURNEUX: That's the way with him; he likes to hide his charities. What a man! *[Contemplates Paul]* It is a pleasure to meet again, is it not? I hope you will tell me all about your travels. In running about the world you must have seen many strange characters and queer manners; and, as your observations are without doubt those of a serious mind, perceiving the moral of everything, I wish to ask you this: which do you believe to be the more common, trickery or ingratitude, rascality or stupidity?

PAUL: Why, really — these questions require deliberation.

LETOURNEUX: And you, Kloekher, — what is your opinion?

KLOEKHER: I do not understand you.

LETOURNEUX *[approaches Kloekher and looks steadily in his face]:* Ah, you do not understand. Are you quite sure? We will talk about that again. I wish to say now that I forgot to tell you that I desire to have immediately, in order to open a model farm, the one hundred and seventy-two shares of Mediterranean that I sold you the day before yesterday.

KLOEKHER: Is this one of your little jokes?

LETOURNEUX: Not at all, my dear fellow; no more so than is the little story I am about to relate. *[To Paul]* Do you know Cochin China?

PAUL: A little.

LETOURNEUX: Very well. Once, in that country — this occurred five years ago — lived two friends, a good Chinaman and a bad Chinaman. Now, the good

Chinaman was so innocent that he trusted the bad one —

KLOEKHER *[angrily]:* I don't care about hearing your story!

LETOURNEUX: It is a true tale, however, and,I — can furnish the proofs! *[Silence]*

KLOEKHER *[astonished]*: Proofs?

LETOURNEUX *[takes Kloekher by the elbow and speaks in his ear]:* They are all in my hands — without exception. Do you understand?

KLOEKHER *[aside]:* Well, well, we can arrange all that. Keep quiet! *[Turns to Paul and breaks into a hearty laugh]* Ha! ha! Letourneux, the joke worked all right. He really believed I had no place for him! Ha! ha! Just imagine! I gave him a yarn about some private service that I required of him — a funny idea that I proposed — and he believed it! Ha! ha! He is a good fellow!

PAUL: I don't understand.

KLOEKHER: What I said was only to try you, dear boy! *[Laughs; then seriously]* I wished to learn, by that means, your real nature. Now I am satisfied with you, young man. Everything is all right. You have so much delicacy — such fine principles!

LETOURNEUX: And that means everything — to have good principles. It is the foundation of a good character. As soon as we know a man has sound principles, we trust him. I will guarantee Paul's principles to you, Monsieur.

KLOEKHER: The son of our best friend, — I should think so indeed! *[Enter Madame Kloekher in ball costume]* My wife! You must allow me to present you. Permit me! *[Approaches Mme. Kloekher and speaks to her aside, quickly]* Listen! This is something that affects the fate of both of us! That man there can ruin me, if he chooses. Be gracious to him; be wary — it is absolutely necessary. *[Aloud]* Madame Kloekher, Monsieur Paul de Damvilliers.

MME. KLOEKHER: Oh, I have known you by name a very long time, Monsieur.

PAUL *[aside]:* How beautiful she is!

MME. KLOEKHER: My husband and I have so often talked together of your poor father.

LETOURNEUX: Yes, we have all spoken of him.

PAUL *[aside]:* What eyes!

KLOEKHER: Poor boy! to come back after five years' absence and find his home gone! But I mean that mine shall take the place of it. Do not be troubled! Make use of me as a friend. Treat me with confidence.

PAUL: Oh, thank you, Monsieur! But as I fear I cannot altogether control my emotion, pray allow me to retire. *[About to go]* KLOEKHER: NO, no! stay here! You are one of us now. Besides, you have only just arrived. Go on talking to Madame. Come, Letourneux, we'll take a turn through the large drawing-room; I wish to speak to you about one or two important matters. *(Exit* Kloekher *and* Letourneux.

SCENE IV.

MME. KLOEKHER: There is no need of my repeating the intentions of my husband, Monsieur, but you will permit me to say that I share his feelings too much not to desire to be friendly to you, and even — pardon the word! — useful to you, if I can.

PAUL: Oh, Madame, you embarrass me!

MME. KLOEKHER: It would give us great pleasure to be able to make you forget your griefs, or at least to soften the memory of them.

PAUL: YOU have done that already, Madame, by your unexpected kindness.

MME. KLOEKHER: YOU must have suffered cruelly, Monsieur.

PAUL: Alas, yes!

MME. KLOEKHER: Why did you not come to us sooner?

PAUL: Ah, Madame, my excuse, though sincere, is a very bad one, but —

MME. KLOEKHER: But what?

PAUL: Pardon me! I dared not!

MME. KLOEKHER: Foolish boy! But there! you are to make up for all that — I insist upon it. We receive our friends every Thursday at seven o'clock, don't forget! I will introduce you to some of my friends, clever women who will please you. I hope you will often drop into my box at the opera for a little chat. And if you find time hangs heavy on your hands in the afternoons, I shall be glad to offer you a seat in my carriage, and we can take a turn through the Bois and around the lake. It is a dreadful bore to be compelled to go alone every day around that same old lake. But where else can one go? Since you draw, it would be charming if you would bring me your sketches of travel, and I will show you my own drawings, only I must first beg your indulgence before you examine my poor little water-colours. And we shall read together and have nice long talks, and be the best of friends. That is, I hope we shall!

PAUL: Oh, thank you, Madame! You are as kind as an angel. This is the first sympathy I have found since my misfortune came upon me. What have I done to merit such goodness? To whom do I owe it?

MME. KLOEKHER: TO the memory of your father, to the wish of my husband, to your position, and — a little — to yourself! *[Extends her hand; Paul seizes and kisses it; she withdraws it quickly]* Monsieur!

PAUL: Pardon me! I was too bold, I know. My impulsive gratitude seemed an impertinence to you, I fear.

MME. KLOEKHER: We will not speak of it again. Let us go to the ball-room. Come! PAUL: Before you have pardoned me? For heaven's sake, Madame, don't be vexed with me! Excuse my fault! One must have a little indulgence for a man who had been abandoned by all his former friends, who is weary of deceptions, embittered by unhappiness. MME. KLOEKHER *[softly]:* Unhappiness! Ah, there is one more bond of sympathy between us! *[Paul shows surprise]* Yes, alas! I have my own sufferings, and perhaps they are as deep as your own.

PAUL: You! How can that be? MME. KLOEKHER: Ah, Monsieur de Damvilliers, surely a man of your birth does not share the idea of the common people that one must be contented and have nothing more to ask of heaven simply because one is rich! No, no! you do not think that.

PAUL: Explain to me —

MME. KLOEKHER: I will later — my friend!
(The side scenes and back drop enclosing the boudoir slide out of sight, showing the full depth and breadth of the stage, arranged as a ball-room)

MME. KLOEKHER: Your arm, if you please.

PAUL *[aside]:* Her friend! She called me her friend!

(On each side of the stage are columns reaching to the flies, and ornamented with gilded caryatides; between the columns stand jardinières filled with flowers, leaving a space also for candelabra to stand between the columns. Three arches at the back reveal another apartment, where a buffet stands, covered with glass and silver)

SCENE V.

(Paul, *Mme.* Kloekher, Onésime Dubois, Macaret, Bouvignard, Alfred de Cisy, Doctor Colombel, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, *Servants, etc*. *Mme.* Kloekher *walks up stage leaning on* Paul's *arm; several guests approach them)*

GUESTS *[.salutes Mme. Kloekher]*: What a delightful reception! Charming! Superb, indeed!
A LADY *[to another lady]:* Who is.that young man? He is very pleasing.

SECOND LADY: I should not regard him as very pleasing, if I were the

Vicomte Alfred de Cisy!

ONE OF KLOEKHER'S CLERKS *[to a fellow-employé]:* Just look at her mincing along! What grimaces! But there's no danger that we poor clerks shall be honoured by even a glance.

MME. KLOEKHER *[admires the frock of a young lady]:* Oh, ravishing! Who is your modiste, my dear? *[To another lady]* What, are you not dancing? *[To an elderly gentleman]* Good evening, General! *[To Dr. Colombel.]* It is very kind of you, Doctor Colombel, to leave your patients to come to us.

COLOMBEL: If my patients could only see our charming hostess, they would soon recover their health at the sight of so much grace and freshness! *[A servant speaks to Mme. Kloekher]*

MME. KLOEKHER: I will go directly. *[Alfred de Cisy, who has been trying for some minutes to get to Mme. Kloekher, now approaches her, just as she reaches R. I. E. She smiles at Paul]* I thank you, Monsieur. I will return immediately. *[Exit R.*

ALFRED *[aside]:* I've done a fine thing in introducing him here! I must act with prudence and shrewdness. *[Exit after Mme. Kloekher]*

SCENE VI.

ONESIME *[approaches Paul and shakes both his hands cordially]:* What a pleasure it is to see you! I hope we shall meet often. Where are you staying? I don't intend to lose sight of you.

PAUL: Thank you, old comrade. And how about that great picture? I hope you are still enthusiastic over it, and that you still cherish your high ideals, as well as your dislike of the *bourgeois* in art.

ONESIME: Oh, of course! But just at present I am painting small pictures, domestic subjects — there is a better market for them. Pray accept my congratulations. I am so glad to see you now on the road to prosperity. *[Guests gather around Paul]*

MACARET: My dear Monsieur de Damvilliers, I was quite sure I should meet you here, otherwise I should —

COLOMBEL *[interrupts]:* Thanks to the inconceivable stupidity of my valet, your two visiting-cards were thrown away, and only last night I —

BOUVIGNARD *[interrupts]:* I don't know how it was, but every day, just as I had made up my mind to go to see you, a crowd of visitors would come and prevent me from leaving the house; one wanted one thing; another demanded something else. I am simply harassed to death, and pulled this way and that by everybody. MACARET: Well, we all look to you for everything, you know, Monsieur. *[Aside]* He has the ear of the minister! COLOMBEL: You must name what day you will come to dine with me regularly once a week. BOUVIGNARD: And don't fail to tell me, my dear fellow, in what way 1 can be useful to you. *[Guests clap Paul heartily on the shoulders]* PAUL: Ah, my friends, you quite overcome me! *[Aside]* How kind-hearted they are, and how unjustly mankind has been calumniated.

SCENE VII.

(Enter Letourneux; *crosses to* Onésime, *who stands near* Paul)

LETOURNEUX: I am not pleased with you, Onésime.

ONESIME: Indeed! And why?

LETOURNEUX *[hesitates]*: Well — between intimate friends one need not mince matters. Every one here, except Paul, knows of your approaching marriage. It was I that arranged the matter for you, and presented you to an excellent family, pious, highly esteemed and wealthy; and here you run the risk of raising a scandal by allowing yourself to be seen in full daylight, with a decidedly shady young person on your arm!

ONESIME: I?

ONESIME: I?

LETOURNEUX: Yes, you! I saw you myself, although you assured me that you had done with the young woman.

ONESIME: Wait a moment, Monsieur Letourneux. When you saw me with that little girl, I was making arrangements to send her away on a journey.

COLOMBEL: Oh, tell us about it! I like a good spicy story! *[The men surround Onésime and Letourneux]*

ONESIME: Well, you see, I had a letter sent to her from Marseilles — which is her home — urging her to go there immediately to attend to some important business. She has gone, and that gives me time to be married, besides making me quite easy in my mind, because Clémence has very little money, and in order to return here — *[All laugh, with expressions of approval]*

LETOURNEUX: Good! Now that's what I call a highly moral action, and at the same time very clever.

PAUL: What! Is this Clémence your old flame, the girl you took from her family when she was very young, — the one who, as you told me once, worked for you, after a fashion?

ONESIME: Yes, it is she. But — other times, other women! *[To Letourneux]* Where did you see me with her?

LETOURNEUX: In the Luxembourg, as I was passing through it on my way to help a very interesting family: three sons out of work, and their father and mother almost in the last stage of starvation. You ought to do something for them, Doctor.

COLOMBEL: Really? I ought to go and visit them perhaps?

LETOURNEUX: YOU are rich enough to allow yourself such a luxury, surely.

COLOMBEL: And you, the millionaire — what are you doing for them?

LETOURNEUX: I? Why, I do a few things. I console them and moralise to them — no more than that — and wherever I go I try to interest people in them, even Monsieur Macaret. *[Turns to Macaret]* You, Monsieur, are one of our great captains of industry, you might employ the sons; three more workmen would not matter to you.

MACARET: Impossible! I have no work to give them. You do not expect me to ruin myself, I suppose. *[Colombel smiles, Letourneux joins his hands with a sanctimonious expression; Paul makes a gesture of indignation]*

BOUVIGNARD *[laughs bitterly]:* Ha! ha! He is quite right. All the talk, all the assistance, and all the Utopian ideas in the world, do no good. The social machinery runs itself, and those that fall under the wheels — all the worse for them! We cannot help it, so let us resign ourselves. The only really serious thing in the world, the only thing that appeals to the higher intelligence, is the study of the fine arts.

ONESIME: YOU are right, Monsieur Bouvignard.

BOUVIGNARD: AS for me, my favourite diversion is the study of faience.

COLOMBEL: A charming taste! And the ladies —

BOUVIGNARD: Oh! we understand one another! My special fad is for old Nevers; and in order to obtain an authentic specimen of it I spare neither time, pains, nor money.

ONESIME *[aside]:* He would do much better if he would set aside a *dot* for his daughter!

BOUVIGNARD: Ah, yes, I economise; I deny myself; I bleed myself! And the anxieties I have! Just think! a slight awkwardness might reduce my whole collection to a thousand pieces. And it is unique, I assure you. It represents my whole fortune, and in order that it may remain intact, I have left it in my will to my native city.

PAUL *[aside, stands a little apart]:* What a sad sort of world is this!

SCENE VIII.

(Enter Kloekher)

KLOEKHER *[to Letourneux]*: Will you come along? Come, you serious ones! the green table is waiting for you. Who wishes to play whist? *[All move up stage and exit R. and L., leaving Paul alone. As soon as the stage is clear of Guests, the King of the Gnomes appears between two of the caryatides; he is dressed like a Bourgeois, as in the wine-shop in Tableau II. With meaning gestures, he points out to Paul the beauty of the surroundings and the splendour of the ball. Mme. Kloekher passes slowly across the stage from R. to L., under the arches at the rear. The Gnome points at her and claps his hands together silently, with the gesture of one applauding; then slowly goes up stage. Mme. Kloekher disappears]* PAUL *[follows Gnome a few steps up stage]:* Why, that is the mysterious being of the wine-shop I *[Stares at him. Queen of the Fairies, in full fairy costume, glides upon the stage from L., and fixes her eyes upon the Gnome]* And there is the other! *[Queen and King vanish]* Am I mad? My former illusion has returned; it is very strange. No doubt it is the result of — of trouble, and — and the enchantment that lovely woman has thrown around me. Ah, what eyes! What a smile! Is she only playing with me? Just now I felt her hand tremble upon my arm; her glance seemed to caress me; I could see that her heart throbbed! She — she loves me! *[The lights in the candelabra near him suddenly go out]* What is that? Is it midnight? Oh, no, nothing of the sort. *[Paces to and fro]* And it is I whom she distinguishes among all these men, illustrious, rich, and handsome! I am stronger than all of them; I dominate them; I am almost the king of the world, when only yesterday I was lost, struggling against fate. Ah, what happiness! How sweet these flowers are! *[Bends over a jardiniere; the flowers fade and droop]* What! Dead? *[Two more candelabra are suddenly extinguished]* The darkness increases! *[Instead of the tinkle of the bell that has been audible without, marking the measure oj a quadrille, a sound like a passing-bell is heard]* . That sound — a funeral knell! I am alarmed! *[Peers into the shadows and looks off up stage]* But the lamps are burning and the dance is going on. That was only the bell that marks the quadrille. What is the matter with me? Ah, she is coming back! Yes, there she is. I must not appear to be different from any other guest at the ball; I must affect to listen indifferently to her charming voice murmuring in my ear. Everything belonging to her seems to me to radiate happiness; it is as if her spirit floated near me. Where is she? I long to see her again — to speak to her! *[Paces to and fro]*

SCENE IX.

(Enter Mme. Kloekher *and* Alfred, R.; *she leans on his arm)*

PAUL *[aside]*: Still with her! *[Observes them]*

MME. KLOEKHER: IS that a threat, then?

ALFRED: Just as you choose to understand it, my dear.

MME. KLOEKHER *[disdainfully]*: Do it, then! Do it!

ALFRED: Very well, since that is your decision. All is over between us. But — suppose I blow my brains out here — at your ball?

MME. KLOEKHER *[laughs loudly]:* OH! ha! ha! ha! That would be too absurd!

ALFRED *[aside, puts on his hat]:* Indeed! Well, we'll try another way! *[Exit. Dance music stops; attendants begin to serve supper upon small round tables back of the arches C.]*

SCENE X.

PAUL: So — that man loves you!

MME. KLOEKHPR: He? Never!

PAUL: But —

MME. KLOEKHER: What I Reproaches already?

PAUL: Oh, I was wrong, — I know it. Pardon me! It is not my fault if —

MME. KLOEKHER: Speak lower. Some one may hear you.

PAUL *[looks up stage]:* No, until supper is over no one will come in here. Listen to me, Madame! In heaven's name, stay here with me!

MME. KLOEKHER: Well, I am here. What do you wish?

PAUL: I cannot tell you now; my head is in a whirl. I am so happy only to be able to look at you, face to face. Just now, when we were with the others and every one was pressing near you, I was delighted to observe the glances of admiration and homage that were cast upon you, and to listen to the murmurs of approval and envy. But soon it began to displease me — I hated it! Yes, because you gave back your smiles, your sweet words, which seem almost a part of yourself, of your very heart. These surroundings, the gilding on the walls, the silver ornaments, the servants, the music, even your diamonds, seem only so many things to disguise you the more, to hold you farther from me, to separate your heart from mine!

MME. KLOEKHER: What an impetuous boy you are! But you must know only too well — *[Silence]*

PAUL: What? Speak! speak!

MME. KLOEKHER: That — that one cannot help liking you!

PAUL *[approaches her and takes her hand]:* Is that true? Ah, speak the dear word I long to hear! I am not accustomed to happiness, Madame, and how do you think I can believe that if I do not hear the sweet assurance from your own lips? But no, — do not say it! If you really love me — which is the same as to say that heaven itself is about to open for me — make me only one little sign, give me one smile!
(Mme. Kloekher *looks at* Paul *smilingly and makes a gentle inclination of her head*. Paul *seizes her hand, kisses it, and sinks on one knee before her)*

MME. KLOEKHER: Take care! Some one will see us! *[Aside]* What fire! What passion! *[Paul rises]*

PAUL: Oh, this is torture! You do not realise that I love you to madness! I would destroy everything that keeps us from each other. What would it cost you to grant me, wherever you choose, one hour, where I might carry out my delusion and imagine you and myself the only beings in the world? Would it be too much for you to grant me this — tell me? MME. KLOEKHER: Some one comes! Retire for a moment. *[Paul disappears R. between two caryatides]*

SCENE XI.

(Enter Letourneux *hastily)*

LETOURNEUX: Well, Madame, your husband has given me a fine specimen of friendship!

MME. KLOEKHER: What is the matter with him?

LETOURNEUX: I am indignant!

MME. KLOEKHER: There! there! Calm yourself, I beg.

LETOURNEUX: But I shall be avenged! Oh, yes!

MME. KLOEKHER: What has he done to you?

LETOURNEUX: YOU ask me that? She asks me that! Ha! Well, Madame, we had agreed — your charming husband and I — upon a transaction regarding two hundred shares of Hanover, at the latest price quoted, the profit of which he was to give me and I was to pocket it. Is that clear? Now, when I bring him the papers of agreement and ask him to settle, he reluctantly hands over only half of what he ought to give me! But he cannot play that sort of trick on me. Where is Paul? I intend to tell him everything.

MME. KLOEKHER: Good heavens! what?

LETOURNEUX: I shall tell him what you know as well as I, Madame. I mean

LETOURNEUX: I shall tell him what you know as well as I, Madame. I mean the fact that your husband has robbed him of his inheritance. And a lawsuit will make the affair talked of over all Europe.

MME. KLOEKHER: And you count upon Paul — as if it were possible!

LETOURNEUX: And why not, pray?

MME. KLOEKHER: YOU are too curious, my dear sir! However, to save you trouble, I will tell you that Paul is only a simple youth, a mere child, and that — he is in love with me!

LETOURNEUX: A fine reason!

MME. KLOEKHER: Excellent, I assure you. It is our family, it is I whom he will believe, and not you, important man though you are. Go elsewhere to find aid in your turpitude and your revenge. As to Paul, I repeat, he belongs to me. He is my thing, my slave, and at a sign from me he would gladly throw himself into a pit!

LETOURNEUX: We shall see, Madame, we shall see!
[Exit C.

SCENE XII.

PAUL *[re-enters slowly from behind the caryatid]*: You are right, Madame; I am a mere child, your thing and your slave!

MME. KLOEKHER: Heavens! Do not believe —

PAUL: I have heard all! I was behind that statue, where I hid in order to listen to the confidences of perhaps another lover. Chance has punished me for my jealousy in cruelly undeceiving me.

MME. KLOEKHER: Oh, Paul, I swear to you —

PAUL: No vows, I beg of you! Fear nothing! Never shall I injure by the scandal of a lawsuit, the woman, whatever she may be, whom I have — *honoured* with my love! So calm yourself and permit me to retire.

MME. KLOEKHER: But you have not understood — I am not to blame — it is an odious plot — I will explain to you! Paul, I entreat you! Paul, I love you! (Paul *is about to go,* L. *with bent head and heavy step. At the door he pauses. Enter* Letourneux *hastily; he approaches* Paul)

SCENE XIII.

(During the following dialogue the other guests enter in small groups, and listen to the conversation)

LETOURNEUX: At last I have found you again. Listen to me! *[Paul stands motionless, lost in thought]* Paul! *[Taps Paul on the shoulder]* My friend! Paul, my dear boy!

PAUL *[turns his head slowly]:* What do you wish?

LETOURNEUX *[raises his voice]:* I wish to inform you, as well as everyone present — in your own interest as well as for the sake of public morality, in order to bring about at the same time a reparation and a just punishment — I wish, I say, to reveal to you an infamous plot of which you are the victim. I possess authentic proofs — written documents! You have been shamefully cheated by that man — Kloekher, the banker! *[Sensation; murmurs of surprise and indignation]*

PAUL *[tears off his white glove]:* Monsieur, you are an impudent liar!

LETOURNEUX: I!

PAUL: Yes, you, villain! and as an emphasis to what I have said, I insult you to your face! *[Throws his glove in Letoumeux' face]*

LETOURNEUX: Ah!

PAUL *[bows]:* I am at your service, Monsieur!

GUESTS: Separate them! They will fight!

LETOURNEUX: A duel! A man of my character is not ruled by such means. True strength lies rather in enduring physical injury and in seeking revenge by a legal process. I have plenty of civil courage! *[Exit proudly.*

PAUL [in suppressed rage]: Infamous rascal!

KLOEKHER *[tries to take Paul's hand]:* Ah, my dear .fellow, how wisely you have acted! You have shown yourself a true friend. My gratitude —

PAUL: DO not speak to me again, Monsieur! *[Exit.*

KLOEKHER: What is the matter with him?

GUESTS: What a queer fellow! Did you see him?

GUESTS: Such a scandal to happen at a ball! Dear! dear! one never knows what will happen!

(Guests depart. After they have gone and the stage is clear, the lights burn brighter, with pink, green, and blue tints. The flowers in the jardinières revive and bloom anew. The caryatides R.and L. move and express pleasure in gestures. They are the Fairies, who rejoice at the evidence of Paul's virtue)

FOURTH TABLEAU. PAUL THE DELIVERER.

Scene: A miserably furnished apartment. Small windows R. and L. At the back, C. a chimney with a dying charcoal fire. A door L. of chimney. On the mantelpiece is a box containing pistols. Near L. I. E. is a rough table and two cane-seated chairs. Near R. I. E. a pair of varnished boots on a boot-tree. Close beside these is a bed, and at L. I. E. there is a small closet. Day is breaking; a dim light comes through the curtainless windows.

SCENE I.

(Enter Dominique; he is dressed in shirt and trousers, without a waistcoat, and has a Madras handkerchief bound around his head. Approaches the fireplace; his teeth chatter)

OMINIQUE: Heavens! how cold it is! When Monsieur Paul returns he will be half frozen. [Laughs ironically] Ah, Monsieur! Well, and how about me? Am I not frozen? Don't I suffer? What kind of life is this miserable existence? Let him do as he pleases, if it amuses him, but as for me — a man born to shine in the ante-chambers of ambassadors, at the very least — this sort of life is a humiliation. *[Searches about the room]* And not a stick of wood in this infernal garret, full of draughts! *[Still searching]* No, not one! It is four months now that I have been cooped up here, trying to pass away the time while he was making his applications. First, he was after a place in the diplomatic service; then a scientific mission; next an inspectorship of I don't know what; and this evening he said he would surely return from the house of the banker Kloekher with full hands and his future provided for. I begin to have some doubts of our future myself! I have wished to separate mine from his and to present him squarely with my bill. Monsieur is a fine young man, that's certain. But *[taps his forehead]* a little bit touched! The devil! my hands are numb with cold! *[Looks at pistols on the mantelpiece]* There is a box that tempts me very much. But no! our means do not allow us to indulge in a mahogany case! No, indeed! *[In backing away from the chimney he stumbles upon a straw mat]* Stupid! what am I about? Wait a bit! *[Picks up the mat, throws it on the fire and watches it burn]*

To be reduced to this! But our bad luck cannot last much longer — it is tpo wretched. However, if it doesn't change within a week I shall say goodbye! *[The fire fiames up; he rubs his hands over it]* Ah, that feels good! That was decidedly a bright idea of mine. What's the use of bothering oneself to keep things? Pity we haven't a good substantial sofa to toast our toes by while poking the fire. What a miserable little chair that is! Since my master is out all day running about, I don't see why I shouldn't — *[Throws a small chair into the fire]* There you go! Any one would say that I am a simpleton to devote myself to him. There never was such a valet as I. Great heavens! how cold it is! That chair burns like a match. And, after all his promises, what do I get? How am I benefited? He will only laugh at me in the end, and while I stay here, dancing attendance on him and freezing to death, he is playing the gallant in the drawing-rooms of charming ladies! Suppose I break up the table to keep the fire going? No, it would soon be gone. *[Sees boots]* Ah, the boots! *[Pulls them off the boot-tree]* Why not? *[Throws them in the fire]* Burn, then! Perhaps he'll be angry. Ah, well, so much the worse!

SCENE II.

(Enter Paul, *in evening dress, without an overcoat; his clothes are damp; there is a little snow on his shoulders; he carries his hands tucked under his arms)*

PAUL: What are you doing there? I did not tell you to wait for me. Go to bed!

DOMINIQUE: But —

PAUL *[brutally]*: Get along with you! Get out! Leave me!

DOMINIQUE: Oho! He is very proud and touchy. a Something good must have happened at last.
[Exit.

SCENE III.

PAUL *[remains for some time with his head resting in his hands, then sighs deeply]*: Ah! *[Throws his hat on the Bed]* What a night! *[Looks slowly around the room]* And what a place! *[Glances at window]* Why, day is breaking, and it is still snowing. But nothing will fall from heaven to blot out all my misery. *[Weeps]* Ah, how weary I am! *[Stands in front of the fireplace, his arm leaning on the mantelpiece]* They are all cowards, egoists, cruel, ingrates and hypocrites! And with what smiles, sweet words, affectionate embraces, and even, O sacrilege! professions of love! And I hoped to find in this arid desert something to quench the thirst of my heart! In how many countries have I dreamed my dreams? And everywhere, among masks and brazen vice, have I met the same ignominious deceptions. And now they seek me out; they attack me. Enough, enough! I'll have no more of it. Why should I continue to' live, since I cannot change the world? If I could only find one single soul that would really love me! *[Walks about]* Come! no more weakness! I will leave all at once, before my resolution weakens, before I feel the first blush of shame, in all the integrity of my pride and honour, like the Ancient Oriental kings, who killed themselves in the midst of their riches. It needs only strong resolution for a moment. That should not be difficult. Everything urges me to it. *[Sees the box of pistols]* Ah, even chance itself! *[Takes pistols from box and examines them]* The man that sold them to me laid particular stress upon the length of their range. But at the distance I shall require, they need not be anything out of the common! That would be quite superfluous. Let us try. *[Snaps the hammer]* Good! Where is my powder? *[Takes box of powder and pours a little into his hand, then puts it into the pistol, throwing the rest into the fire, which springs up into bright flames. He continues to load the pistol]* Now the bullet, next the cap; and now I have only to give myself a sign, to make a single gesture, to be free! *[Six o'clock strikes from a neighbouring clock]* Six o'clock! At the first stroke of the half hour, all will be over! *[Looks around the room and sees a box full of letters on the table]* Oh — those! I had forgotten them. Nothing of myself or of my past must remain. All letters must be burned. *[Throws letters into the fire and sinks into a chair]* Ah, the flames warm me again. I do not suffer now. No, quite the contrary. To think that perhaps those ashes will still be warm after my body is cold in death! Then, — everything belonging to me will be scattered, dispersed. My life will have passed, like the fading figures that trace themselves in the coals. *[Stares at the fire]* It seems to me I can see among the embers purple shores along a lake of fire. Beyond that are shadowy buildings, the spires of a cathedral, the masts of vessels. They fade — then reappear, like my former dreams. I fancy I hear the

wind among the sails, and the walls of my cabin creaking in the night watches! Ha! that is strange! There is one letter that refuses to burn. It even grows whiter in the flames. What is that? *[Picks the letter from the fire]* It is not even hot! What is the meaning of this? *[The fireplace, little by little, is enlarged, growing higher and wider, and back of the flames appear the scenes of which Paul has just spoken. At last a castle of strange architecture is visible, having small windows, like those of a fort]* Is that a fortress? I never saw it before. *[The letter glows with a soft radiance. Paul reads]* "Behold the castle wherein the wicked Gnomes hold captive the hearts of men. We depend upon thee to deliver them. Thy reward shall be a love surpassing all thy dreams. Thou wilt meet often the one whom we have chosen for thee; try to recognise her, else thou wilt be irrevocably lost. Art thou ready? The Queen of the Fairies." I? But how am I to know?
(Chorus of Fairies *encourages him)*

PAUL *[remains for some moments a prey to terrible anxiety; then with a gesture of heroic resolution]:* I accept! I will go! *[Two knocks on the door are heard]*

VOICE *[without]:* Open, Dominique! *[Knock]*

PAUL: Who is there? *[Opens the door]*

SCENE IV.

(Enter Jeanne, *carrying a large basket on each arm)*

JEANNE *[surprised]:* Monsieur Paul!

PAUL: Jeannette! What does this mean? *[Jeanne puts her baskets on the table with an air of fatigue]* What has brought you to Paris? *[Silence]*

JEANNE: TO — to sell milk, Monsieur!

PAUL: Milk! With those two baskets — and at my rooms? *[Jeanne hangs her head]* You are hiding something from me, Jeannette.

JEANNE *[shields with her arm the basket near her]:* No, Monsieur, I declare to you —

PAUL *[observes her gesture]:* There is something inside of that basket. *[Lifts the lid]* My silk handkerchiefs, my shirts — all my linen! *[Looks sternly at Jeanne]*

JEANNE *[quickly]:* Oh, don't, be angry! If they are not well done, I will do them all over again. *[Silence. Jeanne hangs her head]*

PAUL: SO! — it is Mademoiselle Jeannette who is my laundress! Why did you not let me know of this before?

JEANNE *[embarrassed]:* Because — because —

PAUL: Well? *[Silence; aside]* How is this? Dominique told me — *[Aloud]* Let me see the other basket.

JEANNE *[seizes his hand]:* Take care! You will break them!

PAUL: Break what?

JEANNE: The eggs.

PAUL *[looks into second basket]*: Fruit, rolls, — yes, even a little pot of cream! And it was for me? *[Looks at Jeanne; she nods]* Well, to tell the truth, my child, just at present I cannot pay you for these things. *[Silence]* Ah, I see! The friendship of my servant has reduced me to receiving charity from a peasant! *[Roughly]* Take away all that stuff, Jeanne! I won't have it! Go away!

JEANNE *[weeps]*: If I had known you would be angry, I should not have done it!

PAUL *[aside]:* She weeps! And in my idiotic pride and vanity I have wounded her. Where else have I ever found such devotion? *[Aloud]* No, remain here! Pardon me. I have not been well for some time. Tell me — how long have you been coming here like this every day?

JEANNE: Almost a month.

PAUL: And you never boasted of it! You did it simply, kindly, in the candour and naïveté of your sweet soul! *[Takes her hands]* I can see that your little heart is throbbing fast! You have lovely eyes, my Jeannette. *[Aside]* I never looked at them before, blind fool that I was! *[Aloud]* And these poor little hands! Do you know, if they were covered with fine gloves, more than one fashionable lady would envy you their grace and smallness?

JEANNE: YOU are very kind, Monsieur!

PAUL *[moves away from Jeanne; regards her attentively; aside]:* I must find something to give her. She is charming! Aside from her simple garb, there is something about her — I know not what — of distinction, purity, refinement, that I never have seen equalled. And the modest grace of her attitude, the brightness of her glance! Can she be — why not? *[Aloud]* Jeannette!

JEANNE: Monsieur!

PAUL: YOU must be weary of your present lot. Have you never had thoughts and ideas that surprised yourself? Have you never heard in your inmost soul something that whispered to you of a higher destiny? Have you not had a desire to flee — somewhere — far away?

JEANNE: I! Run away! But where? I do not know the way.

PAUL *[makes gesture of annoyance; then aside]:* It is my language that she does not understand. *[Aloud]* Tell me, when you are all by yourself in the fields, what do you think about?

JEANNE: Why — nothing, Monsieur!

PAUL: Try to remember.

JEANNE: Ah, if — ! Well, I think of the cows, — most of all of the black one, which follows me like a dog. Then I notice how the grass is growing, and count how many apples there are on the trees.

PAUL: But — at night? Of what do you dream?

JEANNE *[laughs]*: Dream! I don't dream. I sleep too sound.

PAUL: What books have you read?

JEANNE: I don't know how to read — when have I had time to learn? — and I cannot write either. And oh! how sorry I am that I cannot! It would be so useful to me in keeping the accounts.

PAUL *[aside]:* That is enough! This is the end of my fancy! She does not lack in grace and sweetness, but it would take a long time to cultivate her mind. I must give it up. *[Laughs bitterly]* I, who for a moment believed that — *[Stands lost in thought]*

JEANNE: What is the matter, Monsieur Paul? Why do you not speak to me? Just now your voice was as sweet as music. I did not understand what you said, but it pleased me.

PAUL *[brusquely]:* Well, well! *[Calls]* Dominique! I thank you, Jeannette! Later — as soon as I am able — I will show you how grateful I am for your kindness; and when you marry —

SCENE V.

(Enter Dominique)

DOMINIQUE: What do you wish, Monsieur?

PAUL *[indicates Jeanne]*: Say goodbye to her, for we are going away.

DOMINIQUE: TO travel again?

PAUL: Yes, we are going on a long journey.

DOMINIQUE: But, Monsieur, you seem to forget the state of our wardrobe.

PAUL *[looks about anxiously]:* True! *[Sees a superb fur coat lying on the bed]* But look! Heaven has had a hand in this! This is a warning, a command!

DOMINIQUE: What splendid fur! *[Takes coat on his arm and examines it]* You never told me you had such a coat. With that on your back you can laugh at the thermometer! If I only had one like it! *[About to lay the coat on the bed, he perceives a second similar garment]* What, another!

PAUL: It is for you! Take it!

DOMINIQUE *[puts on the coat quickly, turns up the collar, and crosses his hands inside the sleeves]:* I shall be warm enough in this. Ha! I look like a Russian ambassador!

PAUL *[taps his foot impatiently]*: Come, come, hasten! I wish to start at once, to follow my purpose until it is attained! Come!

DOMINIQUE: Oh, it won't take me long to get our things together. Just watch me! Goodbye, little sister!

JEANNE *[stifling a sob]:* Goodbye!

PAUL *[with hat on his head and fur coat over his arm, stops at the door on hearing Jeanne sob]:* Ah, she has more feeling and sensibility than I thought. Well, — of course, it is on her brother's account! *[Exit Paul and Dominique.*

SCENE VI.

JEANNE: They have gone, and this time I don't know where. Very far away, no doubt! I thought for a moment that he was going to offer to take me with them. But no, since he leaves me like this, he must look down upon me. It is because I am not a fine lady, brought up in the city; because I have no trailing gowns, no laces, nor cashmeres, nor jewels, because I am a stupid little peasant, and don't know how to do anything to please him! I cannot dance nor play on the piano; I have no manners and no pretty clothes! Oh, if I only had all those things! *[Goes to fireplace and leans on the mantelpiece]* If I had them perhaps he would love me! How shall I manage to get a pretty gown — only a pretty gown? *[King of the Gnomes glides from the half open closet]*

KING: Good! She begins by making a most stupid wish! All the better! It is impossible to stop it, but we can arrange matters so that we never shall be recognised! Begin!

(The scenery changes slowly in semi-darkness)

FIFTH TABLEAU. THE ISLAND OF THE TOILETTE.

Scene: *At the back of the stage are small hillocks, covered with strips of different-coloured cloths. At* R. *beside a stream composed of milk of almonds, grow, like reeds, slender sticks of cosmetic. A little in front of these a fountain of* eau de Cologne *springs out of a rock made of toilette rouge. In the centre of the stage is a grass-plot, with spangles on the blades of grass; here and there are bushes made of brushes, and stones are represented by cakes of soap of various colours. A tree resembling a tamarisk stands* L. *with clusters of marabout feathers growing on it; another tree, shaped like a palm, bears open fans. There is a small patch of razors; a little in the rear is a tree full of mirrors, another of wigs, a third of powder-puffs, a fourth of combs, and costumes of different styles hang from the branches of larger trees. Bright-coloured flies dart about, and fly in the faces of the women.*
Jeanne [discovered in the same attitude as when the last scene changed; her head is bent, and one arm rests upon the rock of rouge. After a moment’s silence she lifts her head and looks around with amazement]: Why, how pretty it is here! And how sweet the air is! It smells exactly like *eau de Cologne!* Where does it come from? From this fountain, I do believe! How nice it would be to wash my hands in it! *[Plunges in her arms up to the elbows]* One isn't afraid of spilling this. I will put some on my head, too. *[Sprinkles some drops on the top of her head; they change to diamonds without her perceiving it. She washes her face, and as she leans over the fountain, a branch from the comb-bearing tree behind her bends down and gently arranges her hair in a graceful knot. She rises, surprised, with her hand on her right cheek]* Who touched my head? Go on, go on! I liked that very much! *[The powder-puff tree lowers one of its branches and lightly powders her face]* Oh, how soft and nice that feels! *[Turns her left cheek to the puff]* Again! Oh, but that tickles! That's enough; it makes me want to laugh! Ha! ha! ha! *[The branch returns to its position]* Is that done? I thank you very much! *[Jumps up]* What! No one here? *[Looks at all the strange objects about her and walks to and fro]* What a queer country this is! Combs growing on trees! And there's a tree with wigs on it! And just see all those clothes and things on the ground, lying there like dead leaves! Oh, what pretty grass, with great dew-drops! No, they are silver spangles! *[Sees herself in one of*

the mirrors hanging on the tree] And there — that is I! With diamonds in my hair! I shine like the sun! *[Her gown suddenly loosens itself and flies away in the air]* The wind! Ah! *[Cries out in terror at seeing herself in chemise and petticoat; crosses her hands on her breast]* What is going to happen? I am ashamed! *[A band of drapery wound around one of the hillocks in the rear, now undulates towards Jeanne and drapes itself around her in a sort of tunic]* Well, well! I am all dressed now! *[A tree full of bracelets catches her by the arm]* What am I caught upon? What holds me? Ah! let me — *[Draws a bracelet off the tree and clasps it on her arm]* How well that looks against my skin! *[A tree like a mountain ash drops a coral necklace around her neck]* What is this? A necklace! Oh, how pretty I look! How happy I am! I love myself! I should like to kiss myself! But of course this is only a dream. Such things cannot possibly happen. I shall wake up in a minute. But where am I really? What country is this?

CHORUS *[without]:*

Tis the country of toilettes,
'Tis the land of gay coquettes;
Little packets,
Little rackets!

With us, to charm is all our duty;
E'en the ugly seek for beauty!

JEANNE: I do not comprehend!

CHORUS *[without]:*
Tis the land of La Toilette! We triumph, and we never fret! All is sweet; All is neat; Our perfumes are of violet; Our sighings do not mean regret!

(Noise of tambourines, flutes, and Chinese music heard)

JEANNE *[goes up stage and looks off]:* What a crowd of people! CHORUS *[without]:*
Silence! Silence! Silence! Make way for the King's advance) Like the stars, to which we sing, Comes Couturin, our Fashion's king; The only being here who can Rule th' inconstant taste of man!

JEANNE: Oh, they are coming this way! I am afraid! Where shall I hide? *[Runs behind the tree of mirrors]*

SCENE II.

(Enter King Couturin, Queen Couturine, Graissed'Ours, Prime Minister, and Ladies and Gentlemen of the Court. *The* King *and* Queen *are dressed in the latest fashion, greatly exaggerated.* Graissed'Ours *wears a round jacket and a large apron; he has a bristling beard and an uncouth aspect. All the personages of the Court wear emblems of their various Occupations. The* King, *carried by four men, is seated on a sort of portable throne, which has plumes waving over his head and mirrors set in the back. The* Queen *occupies a lower seat,* R. *The* Prime Minister *has a similar seat,* L. *The porters gently lower the* King's *throne to the ground,* C.)

KING C.: That will do! Hold! Now, since we are installed in the place three times chosen for royal conclaves, with our dear spouse, the lovely Couturine —

QUEEN C. *[looks fondly at King; takes his hand and kisses it]:* Always my tender Couturin!

KING C.: And having at our left our Prime Minister, the indispensable Graissed'Ours —

GRAISSED'OURS: Your Majesty is too kind!

KING C.: And near us also the high dignitaries of our crown: the arch-tailor, the arch-bootmaker, the Prince of Coldcream, the Duke of Caoutchouc, and others —

DIGNITARIES *[bow low]:* At your service, O sovereign!

KING C.: Also the ladies of our Court, of which they are the brightest ornament —

LADIES: Ah, delicious!

KING C.: And having behind us the imbecile people —

CROWD: Long live the King!

KING C.: It is necessary, according to custom, that we now proceed to establish the modes for the season.

ALL *[gesticulate excitedly]:* Yes, yes! Tell us! What colours? How many yards?

KING C.: One moment! First, I must recall to you the great principles.

GRAISSED'OURS: Recall them!

KING C. *[to the ladies]*: It is a well-recognised truth, my doves, that naturally you are all hideous!

LADIES *[scandalised]*: Ah! Oh! How abominable!

KING C.: Certainly, — very ugly indeed! You do not doubt for a moment, I hope, the superiority of the artificial over the real. It is art alone, my goddesses, that furnishes you with all your charms. Oh, fear nothing! I am discreet! But you know it is the robe we fall in love with, not the woman; the shoe, not the foot; and if you do not possess silks, laces, velvets, patchouli, kid gloves, sparkling jewels, and colours wherewith to paint your faces, even the wild savages would have nothing to do with you, since they like their women tattooed! *[Sits]*

LADIES: That is a little hard! Rather too severe!

GRAISSED'OURS *[rises]:* Besides, dress is a sign of chastity, forms a part of virtue, and may even be considered virtue itself. *[Sits]*

KING C. *[rises]:* Then, the more extraordinary a costume is — that is, the more unnatural, inconvenient, and ugly — the more striking and desirable it is! *[Sits]*

GRAISSED'OURS *[rises]:* And *distingué* besides. *[Sits]*

ALL: Ah, *distingué!* That is the principal thing!

KING C.: Tis well! Now to work!

ALL: We will look! We will search! *[Silence; then a sound of broken glass]*

KING C.: What is that? *[Looks off R.; makes a sign to an Official to seek the cause of the noise. Exit Official]* Ah, the mirror-tree is broken! The mirrors were too ripe, no doubt, and some marauder has shaken the tree.

OFFICIAL *[re-enters]*: We found behind the mirror-tree a strange monster.

KING C.: A monster?

OFFICIAL: Yes, your Majesty, a being green and unfashionable in appearance.

KING C.: Bring her hither! ALL: What courage!

SCENE III.

(Enter Jeanne, *wearing green empire gloves reaching to her elbows and lying in deep wrinkles on her arms; her hair is dressed very high; she wears a yellow shawl over her tunic and carries a reticule in her hand. As she enters* King Couturin *utters a sharp cry and staggers back;* Graissed'Ours *supports him. The* Queen, *with a gesture of terror, falls upon her throne; the* Ladies *snatch fans off the fan-tree and hide their faces behind them. General excitement)*

MEN:
Back!
Go away!
Hide yourself!

WOMEN:
What a horror!
Such boldness!
How old-fashioned!

KING C. *[extends his sceptre — a stick covered with curl-papers — to command silence]*: Keep cool your heads, excited by too much curling! Approach, young girl — because you have the appearance of being one, although you possess no graces. Explain yourself, and justify, if you can, the wearing of that extraordinary costume.

JEANNE: I found it lying there on the ground, by chance, and picked it up — I thought I must; and in rising I broke the mirrors —

KING C.: Never mind them — that is not the important question. *[Rapidly]* But to have disobeyed the laws of our empire, to have shown disregard of the cult of the shoes, the delicacy of the *lingerie,* and the elegance of the coiffure; to muffle yourself up in such frightful old clothes, which carry one back to the days of Corinne and the fashion of egg cameos, — all this deserves torture!

ALL: Yes! Yes! the most terrible!

KING C.: You should be condemned to wear shoes too tight, combs too hard, unlaceable corsets!

ALL: Bravo!

KING C.: To carry a work-bag!

JEANNE: Mercy!

KING C.: And to wear a turban, with bunches of feathers on it!

JEANNE: But I did not know the fashion! I was not able to follow it. Is that a crime?

KING C.: There is none greater, woman! for the fashion, mark you, is the law, fancy, tradition, and progress. It is nothing unless it governs, produces, and overthrows. Colossal idol set up by all the world, it drapes the cradle of the newly-born and ornaments the tomb of the dead; it raises its head to heaven above all philosophies, and penetrates, with the tip of its dainty foot, to eternity itself! Take off those green gloves!

JEANNE *[humbly]:* I ask nothing better. I will do whatever you wish.

QUEEN C.: Ah, have pity on her, great Kingl

KING C.: Be it so! I pardon you, in consideration of your ignorance. *[To the Officers]* And you, — I desire you to set about attiring her in the very latest mode.

JEANNE *[Jumps about joyfully]:* Oh, thanks, thanks! your Majesty! What happiness! Then shall I be pretty and well dressed?

KING C: We hope so!

(At a sign from King C. *the Officers of his Court move quickly to* R. *and* L.; *some among the larger trees bearing costumes, others towards the stuffs on the hillocks in the rear; a few among the trees with the marabout flumes, and some towards the comb-tree. They crowd around* Jeanne, *putting various articles of dress upon her. Meanwhile the back drop and side scenes change so that the entire stage represents a large dry-goods and costume shop, full of clerks serving fashionable ladies*. King C. *is seated* R. I. E. *on a small couch; he assumes a meditative pose, and has an open book ready to take notes. The clerks try cloaks, shawls, hats, etc., upon the ladies. Several of them address* King C., *who replies three times)*
Leave me! I am composing!
(Queen C. *serves tea from a small tea-table placed near* King C. *At times the action stops, and there is a general silence. Then the* King, *with a monocle in his eye, passes all the women in review, readjusts details of their costume, lowers or pulls up the fronts of their corsages with an abrupt gesture; then shrugs his shoulders and cries):*
No, not that! That is too old! Something else! Quick!
(Jeanne *is in the centre of every group as it forms. Finally all the* Ladies, *including the* Queen, *who has followed the successive changes, are dressed like* Jeanne *in an extremely rich and extravagant fashion)*

KING C.: Remain where you are half an hour. That effect is very fine!
(General satisfaction expressed by sighs from all the Ladies; *but suddenly* King C. *considers* Jeanne *attentively, then quickly removing some of her costume, he*

cries):
No, that does not please me at all — nor that either! Bring something else. Come! Be quick!

(At last Jeanne *is attired in a costume of simple and exquisite taste)*

KING C.: Now, my lords and ladies, perfumers and embroiderers, shirt-makers and dressmakers, retire to your respective cabinets; we desire to be alone. Remain here, my Couturine! *[Exit all except King and Queen and Jeanne]*

KING C.: Well, young woman, the elegant and luxurious toilette you longed for so much — behold yourself in it!

JEANNE: It is true, then. I am not dreaming?

KING C.: Not a doubt of it. No one, thanks to our efforts, will be more fascinating than yourself.

JEANNE: Oh, thanks, thanks again, your Majesty! Perhaps he will love me now!

KING C.: Perhaps! In order to attain to the dignity of the modern woman (a thing difficult to comprehend!), and to become that charming, incomprehensible, and fateful being, begun by God and finished by the poets and the hair-dressers, who took sixty centuries to appear in the form of the perfect Parisienne, — there are many things that you must learn, little girl, of which at present you are ignorant.

JEANNE: What are they?

KING C.: What are they? You do not know how to bow, to smile, to purse up your lips, to give a saucy wink, nor to babble about your trials while taking a melancholy pose on a sofa, like a flower broken in the wind. What would you do, now, if your lover sighed his passion in your ear? What would you say if he should ask, Dost thou love me?

JEANNE: I should answer yes, your Majesty!

KING C.: But one does not say that sort of thing, girl! That word is natural, popular, and therefore indecent.

JEANNE: Alas! What should I say? Teach me!

KING C.: Ah, behold approaching us two types of perfect taste! Come hither!

SCENE IV.

(Enter two clerks, carrying two life-size manikins, a man and a woman. Both are dressed in the latest fashion. The man has a distinct farting made in the back of the hair on his head, which continues through the fur collar of his coat and extends down the back of the rough cloth of the coat itself,as far as the waist-line. His trousers are carefully creased, and he wears an English monocle)

KING C.: Consider these two virtuous manikins, which resemble human beings perfectly. Try to reproduce their movements, if you wish to have fine manners. Remember their discourse, and hereafter, no matter where you may find yourself, — in the country, making a call, at an evening reception, at dinner or at the play, — you may chatter freely about nature, literature, blond-haired children, the ideal life, the turf, and other things. The key, Couturine. *[Winds up the two figures in their chests]* Let us begin. By listening to this one, you will learn what is necessary to say in the country, if there is fine scenery. *[Takes the male manikin and shakes it to the right and the left, as one shakes a clock that has run down. The Queen does the same to the other figure]* Go!

THE MAN *[makes little rapid gestures with the right handy with a brisk lively manner]*: Good-day, my dear!

THE WOMAN *[with the same manner]*: Good-day, my friend! *[They approach each other from opposite sides of the stage, rolling on little wheels. When they meet they shake hands stiffly and sneer at each other]*

THE MAN *[looks around with jerky movements of the head]:* Well! well! Where are we now?

THE WOMAN *[mincingly, and speaking in detached phrases]:* Ah! the delicious country! A most picturesque situation! Pretty little flowers! So poetic — and useless! Poetic because they are useless — useless because they are poetic!

THE MAN *[peevishly]:* For my part, I find it as commonplace as a cabbage, your beautiful country! As for sentiment, away with it! And elegies, ha! ha! ha! And poetry — ha! ha! ha! — I have gone a long way beyond that sort of thing. Ha! ha! ha!

THE WOMAN *[with many gestures]*: But really, permit me to say, that if one grouped a number of these trees, putting those large ones in the background, and bringing forward that fine old oak, and had some picturesquely dressed peasants in the foreground, and a railway running along at one side, it would be, you must allow, a very attractive subject for one to make a drawing of.

THE MAN *[gallantly]:* As for attractions, I prefer yours, dear lady!

THE WOMAN: Where did you learn to talk like that? At the houses of some of your gay young friends, I have no doubt. Do you know, I should like — if I could do it without anyone being the wiser — to go to one of their houses, — just to see their furniture and how they live!

MAN: I am at your service! *[Aside]* What an imagination! She positively sparkles! *[Aloud]* But, allow me a word of advice with regard to your investments. I will take charge of them.

WOMAN *[quickly]:* And of the reports also?

MAN *[quickly]:* Certainly! I have my note-books.

WOMAN *[quickly]:* Let us not say, then —

QUEEN C. *[stops the machinery]:* That is enough. They will never stop if we let them go on like that.

JEANNE: I was getting rather tired of it.

KING C.: Oh, they were doing very well. But now let us hear them talk about the news of the day. *[Winds springs in another place on the manikins]*

WOMAN *[slowly, with a sad tone]:* Dearl dear! it appears that they have massacred twelve thousand of those poor wretches!

MAN *[sings]:* Broum! broum! broum! What does that matter to us? I don't give a — thought to trouble! Life is short; let us amuse ourselves! Tourlarou! tourlarou!

WOMAN *[gaily]:* You belong to the days of the Regency — when they wore red heels!

MAN *[hand within his waistcoat, speaks gravely]:* Yes, but with liberal ideas! A mingling of the old French aristocracy and American industrialism. What is that?

WOMAN *[speaks quickly in a supplicating tone, offering a handful of small papers]:* They are lottery tickets for my poor!

MAN: Only too happy, Madame! *[Aside]* Pinched! *[Lightly]* And the newest novel — have you read it?

WOMAN *[gushingly]:* Oh, yes! Is it not fine? The author is indeed a great man.

MAN *[naturally]:* Not at all; he is quite an idiot, or so they say.

WOMAN: DO they? Well, of course it must be true, then. I believe you.

MAN *[looks at her tenderly and sighs]:* If you would only believe *all* that I — *[Stops abruptly]*

KING C.: Oh, I forgot to give them the two half-turns.

JEANNE: But those two do not really like each other at all, do they?

KING C. *[winds up the manikins again]*: Yes, that is the way these affairs begin; and after he has said enough impertinent things to her to make her weep, there will be so good an understanding between them that they will be invited to all the best houses.

[During this speech, the manikins have been making tender demonstrations, growing more and more expressive] No! No! not that! Waltz, now! waltz! *[Starts them off in a waltz, and as they dance Jeanne tries to imitate their movements]* That's right! See, his chin is up and his elbow is in the air, while she is as straight as a reed and keeps her face lowered; both cutting angles in space, like a true geometrical figure in a fine humour! Enough! Let them be taken away. And Couturine, see that the attendants put them in the right boxes.
[Servants carry away the manikins. Exit Queen Couturine]

SCENE V.

KING C.: There! Now you know enough of society manners to enable you to appear in the polite world.

JEANNE: Ah, it is not the world that troubles me — it is he! Where is he? I long so much to see him.

KING C.: It might be possible for me to grant your wish.

JEANNE *[delighted]:* Oh!

KING C.: On one condition, however.

JEANNE: Name it! Whatever it is, I yield to it. Tell me!

KING C.: It is that you will not allow either himself or his companion to recognise you.

JEANNE: But why?

KING C.: Because he repelled you when you were a peasant — have you forgotten that? Now, listen to me well. You cannot doubt my power, for have I not given you more robes than you ever had pins, and more beautiful pearls than you ever put grains of bran into the hog-trough? Well, I swear to you by that same power that if you betray your name to him, at that very instant, as suddenly as if by a stroke of lightning, you shall die!

as if by a stroke of lightning, you shall die!

JEANNE *[hangs her head, while King C. observes her closely; then slowly]*: It matters not under what name or what disguise I meet him, if he will only love me; that is all I wish. Shall we go?

KING C.: That is not necessary. Here he comes now, to make purchases for his long journey. *[Dominique's voice heard without]*

SCENE VI.

(During the preceding dialogue the scene has gradually changed to an immense shop, filled with articles for travelling: trunks, bags, etc. The back of the stage is occupied by tailors and dressmakers)
(Enter Paul *and* Dominique)

DOMINIQUE: Make way there! We must have two night valises, an alms-bag, and some rugs.

FIRST CLERK: At your service, Monsieur!

SECOND CLERK: Immediately, Monsieur!

THIRD CLERK: Eighth floor, fifteenth shelf!

FOURTH CLERK: No, here!

DOMINIQUE: Ah, I shall lose my head! *[Paul and Dominique stand C.]*

JEANNE *[R., hand on her heart]:* It is he!

PAUL *[sees Jeanne]*: What a beautiful girl!

DOMINIQUE: It seems to me she has a look — *[Laughs]* I am "a fool! As if it were possible —

PAUL: But I have certainly seen her somewhere. Where? Ah — in my dreams

PAUL: But I have certainly seen her somewhere. Where? Ah — in my dreams, no doubt!

JEANNE *[quickly]:* He does not know me! Good! It is because this toilette disguises me so well.

KING C.: YOU certainly have a better chance of pleasing him in it. But do not forget my instructions.

JEANNE: No, no! Oh, I feel myself quite equal to appearing well before him. You shall see.

PAUL *[bows to Jeanne]*: Madame! *[Speaks low]* That so lovely a being should be here, where I may meet her, is no doubt the will of heaven! Can it be, by chance —

JEANNE *[imitates the lady manikin]:* Good-day, good day, my friend!

PAUL *[aside]:* What familiarity! Perhaps it is a sign, an indication —

JEANNE *[approaches Paul]*: Of sadness, it seems to me. And the cause?

PAUL: I am just about to set out on a long voyage, but a moment ago I asked myself whether I should not do better to —

JEANNE: A journey! That would suit me! The madder one is, the more one laughs! Ha! ha! ha! Give me your arm. Now let us see! Presto!

PAUL: She is mad!

JEANNE: Listen! I have ninety-two boxes full of frocks, head-ornaments by the dozen, quantities of embroidered handkerchiefs, the finest laces, gloves with twenty-six buttons, and such loves of little shoes! *[Shows her feet]* See my beautiful little shoes!

PAUL: Enough! Enough!

JEANNE: My little châlet of mahogany can, in the twinkling of an eye, transport itself to the most picturesque situations, and with a piano *[Paul makes a gesture* *of disgust],* a good piano, I play polkas on the mountains. I know how to give excellent imitations — listen!

PAUL: In heaven's name, stop!

JEANNE *[vivaciously]*: The reflection of our elegance will embellish the whole world. We shall give routs in our pagodas; we shall dress up the savages; our face powder shall be wafted on every breeze! I am for *chic — chic* forever! From morning till night we shall make jokes. We shall write our names on all the monuments; we shall visit all the ruins and tell great stories about them! We shall lean over steep precipices. You will not be bored. Thanks to the post nowadays, the newspapers can reach us everywhere. If an occasion should arise for an affair — you know! — a lake of burning petroleum —

PAUL *[recoils]:* Horror!

JEANNE: Come, let us love!

PAUL: Not in that fashion! *[Going]*

JEANNE: Come back!

PAUL: Never! *[Exit.*

DOMINIQUE [looks about R. and L.]: What! Gone? But she seems to be a very amiable young person!
[Exit.

SCENE VII.

JEANNE *[throws herself upon the Queen's chair]:* Oh, dear! Oh, dear!

KING C: What is the matter?

JEANNE *[sobs and leans upon King C.]*: Oh, I am horribly unhappy!

(Chorus of tailors and dressmakers offer consolation as they pursue their occupations)

JEANNE *[listens to them awhile without seeming to understand; then suddenly]:* Miserable people! you are the cause of my unhappiness, with your foolish tricks. Get away from me, liars and cheats! with your hypocrisies, false sentiment, false hair, padded bosoms, narrow souls! I hate you all! No, no, I will have no more of it! *[Pulls off her fine clothes]* Where is he? I must see him and tell him how I have deceived him. Paul! Paul! *[Runs this way and that, frightened, breathless, upsetting everything in her way. Tailors and dressmakers exit hastily]* Paul! Wait for me! Answer! I am coming! Do you see me? Paul! *[Comes to front of stage, stands near Couturin, who is in reality the King of the Gnomes.]* Ah, I have lost him forever!

KING C.: It is your own fault. You did not manage right.

JEANNE: That is true. I should have told him who I am.

KING C.: But then you would have been killed — have you forgotten that?

JEANNE: What should I have done, then? It was I that drove him away. Instead of trying to display myself by those artificial manners that stifle the heart, I should have told him simply who I am, and not have tried to dazzle him with my awkward attempts at elegance. If I had appeared different perhaps I might have pleased him. He would like some one with less rouge on her cheeks, less folly on her lips, and less affectation in her manners; a woman who would win him by modesty and tenderness — a good wife — a simple *bourgeoise.*

KING C.: And do you wish to be a simple *bourgeoise?*

JEANNE: Do you think he would love me then?

KING C.: I think so.

JEANNE: How shall I become one?

KING C.: That is very easy.

JEANNE: Make me one, then!

JEANNE: Make, me one, then!

KING C.: You really wish it?

JEANNE: Yes! Yes! Where shall I find him?

KING C. *[takes her hand with authority, leads her away]:* Come with me! This way! Follow me!

SIXTH TABLEAU. THE KINGDOM OF THE STOCK-POT.

Scene: *The scene represents a public place in the form of a half circle. Several streets lead away from the centre, in such a way that the whole town can be seen at a glance. The houses, all alike, are of a poor and commonplace aspect, painted brown, set off with white. In the middle of the stage, placed upon a tripod over burning coals, is an enormous Stock-Pot, with its contents boiling furiously.*

Around the Stock-Pot, arranged in a semi-circle, are large mohogany armchairs, in which sit several grocers and other tradesmen, wearing frock-coats and otter caps. Behind them, on each side of the stage, stand representatives of the different occupations of the town, carrying banners, on which appear the words “Bureaucracy,” “Sciences,” “Literature," *etc. The professors wear caps and green shades over their eyes; the literary men carry pipes and have inkstands slung upon their hips; the clerks wear great sleeves of black percale and have pens stuck over their ears. All the men wear their beards in collar-like form, and have long coats like tradesmen, and wear tall hats.*

The Grand Pontiff *stands* C. *behind the Stock-Pot; he faces the audience, mounted on a stool so that he can look over the heads of the people. Groups of collegians stand* R. *and* L. *down front; they wear mortar-board caps; and several play upon accordions. At the windows of the houses sit women in brown gowns and wearing funnel-shaped caps. Cats are sitting on the red-tiled roofs. A dull grey sky.*

SCENE I.

(The curtain rises to the plaintive sound of accordions played by the collegians; the music lasts a moment or two after the curtain is up. Then silence. The boiling of the Pot is audible. The Grand Pontiff *addresses the people)*

PONTIFF *[holds a skimmer in his hand]:* Citizens and *bourgeois!* On this solemn day, when we have assembled to adore the thrice-blessèd Saint Stock-

Pot, emblem of material interests — the dearest of all, so much so that, thanks to you, it has become almost a divinity! — it is my office, as Grand Pontiff of this wise cult, to remind you of your duties and to bring you together, by a common act, to join in the veneration, the love, and the frenzy of adoration we owe to the Stock-Pot!
Your duties, O *Bourgeoisie!* I declare it, have never been neglected; never have you transgressed! You have remained within your houses thinking of nothing but your own affairs, and you have been careful not to go star-gazing, knowing that that would cause you to fall into a pit! Continue on your safe and narrow path, which eventually will lead you to repose, to riches, and to high consideration. Do not fail to despise whatever seems extraordinary or heroic; above all, have no enthusiasm! Change nothing from its present type, neither your ideas nor your garments, since personal happiness, as well as public safety, is found only in a moderate amount of brains, immutability of customs, and the bubbling of the Stock-Pot! *[Accordions play]* And, now, pillars of the nation, exemplars to all trades, foundation of morality, protectors of the arts — the grocers! *[Grocers rise and come forward]* Do you swear that you will always put chiccory in the coffee?

GROCERS: Yes!

PONTIFF: And that you will never leave your counters, except, of course, to go to the door to drive away idlers; and that, finally, you will mingle your ideas with those of everyone else, by all sorts of means, alliances, and propaganda, so that your principles shall prevail, and that you may remain, as you are now, the kings of humanity, and dominators of the world?

GROCERS *[with hands extended towards the Stock-Pot]:* We swear it!

PONTIFF: NOW you, O clerks!

CLERKS: Present!

PONTIFF: Do you resolve to work as little as possible, and to think of nothing but your own promotion?

CLERKS: We do!

PONTIFF: DO you swear always to burn as much fuel as you can in your offices, to be uncivil, to curse your chiefs and to complain of your lot; to spend a hundred crowns' worth of writing on business worth only twenty-five centimes, of which you will delay the settlement fifteen years?

CLERKS: We swear it!

PONTIFF: Messieurs the Professors, light of the country! your turn! *[Professors advance, with stooping shoulders and senile trembling]*

PONTIFF *[in a familiar tone]:* You bind yourselves, do you not, as in the past, to make only innocent and harmless researches, that will trouble no one's peace of mind?

PROFESSORS *[raise their hands]:* Yes! yes! Have no fear! We swear it!

PONTIFF: That is sufficient! Come forward, you, with your charming talents that give us happy evenings at home. As art was made to amuse, you shall make us laugh. Advance!

(The Comic Poets *extend their arms towards the Stock-Pot, crying):* Cocorico! *[Sneering laughter from the spectators]*

PONTIFF *[smiles upon the Grocers, who surround him]:* A little eccentric in manner, but their intentions are pure! *[Knocks on the Stock-Pot to obtain silence]* A last word to our youth, to those in the springtime of life! *[Makes a sign to the Collegians, who approach with accordions under their arms]* Approach, sweet youths! Young men, hope of our people, you are about to enter upon the age of the passions. Take care! it is as if you played with gunpowder; the least spark falling upon your heads may blow them off. True, we have been careful to remove all torches from your pathway, but what matters that? It is none the less necessary to guard against the ardour of the blood and of the imagination. They produce only crime and folly. I should say, rather, utilise your vices; employ your bad instincts to advantage. For instance, let those who know how to win at play bring home their gains and invest them wisely. Amuse yourselves discreetly — and economically! Choose a good profession, and do not stay out later than ten o'clock at night! That is the whole secret of success. Do you swear to observe it?

COLLEGIANS: We swear it! *(Return to their places]*

PONTIFF: I am moved, gentlemen! So much good sense in these days touches me deeply, and if the festival were not ended I should succumb to my emotion. It is ended, however, for it is not necessary to exact vows from *you [Speaks to the women at the windows],* cause and guardians of our felicity, our spouses, housewives, and little mistresses of the Stock-Pot! It is because of your care that the Pot simmers! Persevere, then, in your two cherished occupations, first: mend your husbands' stockings, and, second, be always on your guard against the temptation to indulge in broad jokes. Fix your minds on those two rules, continually, exclusively. In short, do not forget that the most becoming attitude for a woman, her ideal position, if I may dare thus to express it, is a half-kneeling pose, holding a skimmer in one hand, and having a woolen stocking slipped upon her left arm; her back turned upon Cupid, and her head half lost in the steam of the Stock-Pot!
And you, O cats, inconstant quadrupeds, Bohemians of the roofs! If you employed not your time and the strength of your jaws in catching mice, we should muzzle you and impale you on a rod; but nature has created you to be useful to us. However, if you will stay at home and serve us zealously, we will leave some drops of soup for you in the bottom of the plate!
And thou, O Sun! Mayst thou, shining with gentle moderation, transform thyself into a gigantic mass of candles, in order to economise light; and may thy rays cause to fall into the depths of the sea a shower of fat, which shall heat itself to a pleasant tepidity, so that the waters of the entire globe shall be turned into an immense Stock-Pot! ALL: Long live the Stock-Pot! *[As they remove their hats, their heads are seen to be shaped like pieces of loaf sugar]*

WOMEN *[at the windows]*: How handsome our husbands are!

(Representatives of the various occupations that have not been named now crowd around the Stock-Pot, and the Grand Pontiff, *describing a mysterious circle in the air, sprinkles them with his skimmer. Then the meeting breaks up informally; the men leave their places and walk abouty and all talk animatedly)*

THE BOURGEOIS: A delightful occasion! A remarkable discourse! And what charming music! We have certainly made great progress in the fine arts, — there's no denying it!

(The confusion gradually grows less, and the men stand with their eyes fixed upon clocks placed over the door of each house. All the hands point to 5.55. The men wait in silence, their heads raised, and the instant six o'clock strikes, all cry):
Six o'clock! Time for dinner!
[Exeunt into houses.

SCENE II.

(The stage is clear. After a moment a sound of loud kisses is heard; then the shoving of chairs; then a clattering of knives and forks and dishes)

VOICES: Ah, that is good! *[Clatter of knives and forks]*

VOICES: This is better than one finds it at a restaurant. *[Popping of corks heard]*

VOICES: We are between the dessert and the cheese! *[Laughter]*

MAN: Give us a glass of liqueur, will you? WOMAN: But you will make yourself ill, my darling! MAN: Just a little for my stomach's sake, and besides, is it not the custom?
(Sound of moving chairs heard; then all the Bourgeois *appear at their windows; they hold out their hands and say):*
It is very warm!

WOMEN *[appear at windows]*: Yes, but there is a cool breeze.

BOURGEOIS: True! *[They lean out of windows and tap barometers that are nailed up outside of each house]* How is the weather now? *[After a moment]* Yes it will be safe to sit out of doors.
(The windows close, and all the Bourgeois come out of their houses and sit in chairs before their doors; each family has one small boy, dressed like a Turk, and a little girl in Swiss costume)

BOURGEOIS: It is very pleasant out here.

(Women come out and sit, with knitting. Men read newspapers. Jeanne *appears, dressed in an exaggerated bourgeoise costume. She sits in front of a house* R. I. E.)

SCENE III.

(As soon as Jeanne *is seated, the* King of the Gnomes, *having removed some parts of his costume as the* Grand Pontiff, *appears behind her and leans over her shoulder)*

KING: YOU see! Everything yields to me, everything serves me! I had only to show myself here to be elected burgomaster of the town and pontiff of their religion. *[Aside]* Nothing easier! It is in mediocrity that the spirit of evil triumphs!

JEANNE *[sighs]:* But think how many days I have been seeking him, how long I have waited! Do you think he will come?

KING: I am quite sure of it. Be patient! MOTHERS: There, run along, my angels! This is the hour for children to play and amuse themselves!
(Girls and boys jump down from the doorways and run to C., *join hands and dance around the Stock-Pot, singing a stanza in imitation of the Song of the Spartans):*

My grandfather was a beast;
My father still more wild!
I am worse than they,
And worse will be my child!

(Some of the children lose their hats in dancing, and their heads are seen to be pointed)

JEANNE: They are very pretty, those children. Happy mothers!

FIRST WOMAN *[sitting near Jeanne]*: No doubt! You are very frank, Mademoiselle; but my child, although younger than they, is most promising. *[Calls]* Nurse!

SECOND WOMAN: And my two angels also! *[Calls]* Nurse!
(Several nurses appear, dandling plump babies in their arms. Mothers crowd around them, each trying to show off her own child!)

FIRST WOMAN: Throw a kiss to the pretty young lady and the nice gentleman!
SECOND WOMAN *[pulls up baby's clothes]:* Just look at those legs!

THIRD WOMAN *[takes cap off baby' s head]:* Look at his head!

ALL THE MOTHERS: Mine is far more beautiful! the most beautiful in the world! *[They full caps off all the babies' heads which are seen to be extraordinarily pointed]*

KING *[examines the heads']:* Very fine! Better than their fathers'. This generation distinguishes itself phrenologically!

ALL THE MOTHERS: Recite your little fable! Sing your pretty song! Smile for the lady! Ah, how sweet she is! He shall have some candy!

(The children throw kisses to Jeanne *and recite little verses in a rapid mumble, while the Mothers all talk at once, the babies cry, and the nurses sing to them. Outside a murmur of men's voices grows louder each moment. Paul and Dominique affear C. D. The children, alarmed, run into the houses, followed by nurses carrying the babies. Many of the Bourgeois and their wives go into their houses; others remain, crying):*
Go away, rascals! Brigands! Strange beings!

SCENE IV.

(Paul *and* Dominique, *in disordered travelling costumes, come down,* C.)

DOMINIQUE: What ails you, idiots? Are you making all this fuss about our appearance? *[Exit all the Bourgeois, making signs of mutual intelligence]* JEANNE *[rushes to Paul]*: Paul! At last! KING *[aside to Jeanne]*: Dissimulate! Remember to assume the utmost simplicity!

DOMINIQUE: It seems to me these folks have a very inhospitable way with them.

PAUL: Never mind! Perhaps I shall find here the well-beloved, still unknown to me!

DOMINIQUE: Ah, talking about her again! Now, really, what do you wish? What are you seeking? What object have you in view? Ever since we began this crazy journey you have talked of nothing but "the unknown."

PAUL: Why, the object is easily understood. Somewhere I am to meet a young girl with a pure soul and of absolute disinterestedness. I shall recognise her; we shall love, and, strong in her love, I shall take possession of the Castle of Hearts!

DOMINIQUE: Very fine! A girl who doesn't exist and an imaginary castle! Come, now, what is supposed to be in this wonderful castle? Treasures?

PAUL: NO, but a fortune so extraordinary that you could not even conceive of it!

DOMINIQUE: Oho! that remains to be seen. Now, Monsieur, I have a good idea. Let us go back to Paris —

PAUL: Leave me here for awhile, Dominique. I am overcome with weariness and discouragement. And besides, I find in this village, in spite of its common and vulgar appearance, something indescribably interesting.

JEANNE *[offers Paul a chair near her]:* Yes, Monsieur, remain here! *[Paul hesitates]* Will you not sit down?

PAUL *[aside]:* She is very graceful, upon my word! *[Looks at Jeanne, who lowers her eyes]* What charming modesty! *[Silence. They look at each other]*

JEANNE: It is easy to see that you are a stranger here, Monsieur. That eccentric costume — *[With slight disdain]*

PAUL: Good heavens! Mademoiselle,, in travelling surely one need not dress with the most extreme care!

JEANNE *[drily]:* All the same, one ought to .follow the custom.

DOMINIQUE *[aside]:* What a bore she is! It must be great fun to talk to her! I should like to get out and see whether I can find anything more amusing. *[Aloud]* Will you excuse me for a short time, Monsieur?

PAUL: Yes. But return soon.

SCENE V.

(The King of the Gnomes *hides behind the* Pontiffs *throne, which has been wheeled down to* R. I. E. *near* Jeanne)

JEANNE: YOU do not wish to go with him? All the better!

PAUL *[aside]*: She softens a little!

JEANNE: TO remain with us — *[Silence]*

PAUL: Well?

JEANNE *[timidly]*: You must — oh, do not be angry! — do nothing, say nothing, and even think nothing, that differs from the actions, the words, and the ideas of everyone else.

PAUL: Indeed! And why? Where is the harm in obeying the voice of the heart, if one is sure that its promptings are worthy? As for myself, whatever comes, I despise evil. I shun that which is ugly and reverence that which is good!

JEANNE: Ah, that is right!

KING *[behind Jeanne]*: Beware!

JEANNE: But for a man weary of the world, it would be pleasant and restful to live in one of these houses. *[Paul looks around with an expression of disgust]* Oh, they are much nicer inside! And if you only knew how each wife loves her husband! She surrounds him with tender care, cooks for him, embroiders his slippers, nurses him, pets him, helps him to dress, and even puts on his coat for him. *[Offers Paul a coat like those worn by the Bourgeois]* Put this on!

PAUL *[surprised]*: What for?

JEANNE: YOU will be so comfortable in it. I beg you!

PAUL *[puts on the coat; speaks aside]:* She is rather stupid, although charming in a way. *[Aloud]* No doubt this quiet life has its advantages. But do you not believe — you, whose voice is as sweet as the song of a bird, and whose glance is as cordial as the clasp of a hand! — do you not feel that it is possible to find a more complete union than any you have seen, — a felicity of such warmth and power that its effect would spread like the sun's rays? The enchantment that one being possesses for another in such a love, amid all the gloom and sadness of the world, makes life a continual poem; the more one loves the better it makes him; the mere habit of tenderness enables him to understand all persons better; and that which appears to be virtue is only a proof of the purest happiness!

JEANNE: Yes, yes! I understand you!

KING *[behind her]:* Unhappy one! You are lost!

JEANNE *[troubled]:* That is — I comprehend your meaning, but — without banishing a certain ideal, one might find a way to live a quiet, peaceful life and yet not concern oneself too much with the affairs of others. Why should we waste the best of ourselves in sympathy, tender emotions, and taking trouble for other persons, instead of keeping all these fine sentiments for ourselves?

KING *[aside]:* Bravo!

JEANNE: If others are stronger than we, let us submit to them, so that they will respect us and serve us. Oh, it is very easy, — with certain exterior concessions, and provided one shows nothing extravagant in his person or his speech!

and provided one shows nothing extravagant in his person or his speech.
(Enter a Barber, *carrying the utensils of his trade)*

PAUL *[surprised]:* What do you wish here?

BARBER *[in a hollow voice]:* To cut your beard in the form of a collar, as everyone else wears his.

PAUL: Well, that is a cool proposition!

JEANNE: Oh, let him do it — to please me! *[Fastens a towel around his neck. Barber cuts Paul's beard]* A little patience! it's almost finished. One more cut! Ah, how well that becomes you, and what delightful evenings we shall have this winter, in the little parlour, with the Persian curtains and the family photographs! We shall sit beside the fire, near my piano! In the faubourg there are pretty gardens with little arbours made of green sticks. We will go there on Sundays, and, walking arm-in-arm, we will talk of our happiness and look over the wall at the vegetables growing!
(The Barber *finishes his work and departs)*

PAUL *[aside]:* Perhaps she is right. There is good sense, after all, in what she says. Besides, if she were once my wife, I should educate her.

JEANNE: NOW turn your head about so that I can see you. Ah, charming! Thank you! I am very much pleased! And you will never leave me now? *[Takes his hand]*

PAUL: Ah, my little dear! No, no! I swear it!

JEANNE *[delighted, looks at him]:* Can it be possible? But yes! You lack nothing now!

KING *[holds a high hat towards Paul]*: Except this!

JEANNE *[puts the hat on Paul's head]:* Oh, yes, that! Now! Come! Come! everyone! It is finished!

(The Bourgeois *rush on, followed by* Dominique)

SCENE VI.

BOURGEOIS *[applaud and embrace Paul]*: Good! Good! Very becoming! Our congratulations! My dear fellow-citizen, I am delighted!

PAUL: One moment! Permit me! What does this mean? A short time ago you wished to stone me, and now —

BOURGEOIS: Well, you see, you have now become one of us.

KING *[presents a mirror]*: There! Look at yourself!

PAUL *[looks at himself for some moments in the mirror; then, as if awakening from a dream]:* What! The collar-like beard, the ugly tall hat of a *bourgeois* on *me! [Throws the hat on the ground. Cries of indignation from the Bourgeois]* And a coat like that! *[Tears off the coat]* I never shall wear such garments — clothes for Idiots! Never! never! *[Tramples on the hat and coat]*

JEANNE: Unhappy one! Cease!

BOURGEOIS: He is mad! Beware of him!

JEANNE *[distractedly]:* Calm him! Soothe him! Oh!
what shall I do?

A VOICE: Seize him, some one! The soup! Put him to the test of the soup!

JEANNE: Bring him here, quick! There! that's right! Take it, my friend!

(Bourgeois *surround* Paul, *take him up by the arms and legs and bring him to the Stock-Pot. Some one hands a cup of soup to* Jeanne; *she presents it at Paul's lips.)*

JEANNE: Drink this slowly!

PAUL *[dashes away the cup with the back of his hand]:*
I will have none of your stuff!

ALL: Sacrilege! sacrilege! To jail with him! Put him into the strongest cell!
[Men rush at Paul and strike him with their fists]

PAUL: Yes, beat me, if you like. I like your blows better than your applause, and your cruelty more than your favours! I despise you, with your hearts of slaves, heads like sugar-loaves, grotesque costume, hideous houses, your mean occupations and your beast-like ferocity —

ALL: He is mad! He raves!

PAUL *[raises his hands, which have been chained]:* Ah, if I could only summon a bolt from heaven to exterminate you!

MEN: He becomes dangerous! Bring a gag! *[They gag Paul]*
A MAN: And his servant!

ALL: Yes, yes! his servant!

DOMINIQUE *[comes forward with the coat and hat, which he has picked up]:* But I have the coat and I have the hat, and I ask nothing better than to be allowed to wear them.

BOURGEOIS: That will do no good. As a matter of principle —

DOMINIQUE: I will take the soup!

BOURGEOIS: Silence!

DOMINIQUE: In fact, I need it!

BOURGEOIS: Insolent! *[They gag Dominique, and drag him and Paul to a prison R. I. E. and throw them in. They can be seen through the barred windows]*

ALL *[with sighs of relief]:* Now the proper thing to do is to moralise with them and catechise them a little!
(Enter the Grand Pontiff)

PONTIFF: That is *my* business! That is a part of my sacerdotal duty. Let us begin. Unfortunate man! you are accused of scorning the frock-coat and the Stock-Pot!

BOURGEOIS *[sneering]:* These fine gentlemen did not like them!

PONTIFF: Of harbouring disdain for trade, of having unusual sentiments, ideas, words, manners and customs, — in one word, of eccentricity! A VOICE: The guillotine!

PONTIFF: No, gentlemen! thank heaven, our ways are not so severe! We demand, wretched men! only that you be chastened by confinement, purified by remorse, and perhaps later, by good conduct, you will re-establish yourselves in our esteem. The soup you rejected, you shall be forced to swallow, only it will be stronger; the walls of your cell shall be embellished by moral inscriptions, and will form, instead of the study of spiders, your sole distraction! *[Paul and Dominique become excited and try to thrust their arms through the bars]* I have not finished! The just anger of the people wills, since at present you can do no more harm, that I should lecture you on many points. Then they will make certain experiments upon you!

(A slight rattling sound is heard, and then the clocks strike eight. At the first stroke all the Bourgeois *draw cotton night-caps from their pockets and put them on their heads. The* Pontiff *does the same)*

PONTIFF: It is now time to go to bed! Until tomorrow! *[Exit Bourgeois into various houses.*

SCENE VII.

JEANNE *[to King of the Gnomes, as the Pontiff]*: Save him! save him! or I shall go myself — KING: Beware!

JEANNE: But it is your fault that he is there and that I have lost him again.

KING: NO, it is your own fault.

JEANNE: Not content with having deceived me you —

KING: I did not deceive you! I gave you all that you asked, but it is impossible for me to grant his wishes as well as yours: you must choose more wisely. At your first request, I gave you worldly luxuries and the foolish fripperies that belong to the gay world; at the second, I granted you the simplicity of the *bourgeois*, with its accompaniment of ugly commonplaces. Now, of what do you complain? What do you really wish?

JEANNE *[after a silence]*: I will tell you! I could see, when he was surrounded by those men that put chains upon him, that the desire of his heart was revealed in his proud words. You ask what I wish! Listen! I would possess a power so great that it shall dazzle him. I ask for a palace of basalt with steps of crystal, where he shall sit beside me upon a throne of gold, so that he may look out over the heads of all the people, my slaves, who shall prostrate themselves in the dust before him!

KING: Very good! Excellent! But not so loud, my princess, for fear of disturbing these worthy people! *[Draws a cotton cap from his pocket and puts it on his head, and takes off his blue spectacles. His face is very ugly; he has yellow teeth and great eyes which run back almost to his ears, and his red side-whiskers look like wings. A button on top of the cap glows like fire. He disappears with Jeanne]*

SCENE VIII.

(The Stock-Pot, the handles of which have been transformed into wings, rises into the air and turns itself over, and while it increases in size so that it appears to hover over the whole town, the vegetables, — carrots, turnips, and leeks — that come out of it, remain suspended in the air and turn into luminous constellations. As soon as the darkness is complete, a sound of loud snoring is heard issuing from the houses. There is a noise of something breaking; then from the prison steal two figures, pressing close to the wall and walking softly. Paul *appears first, then* Dominique, *with the tall hat and frock-coat, and carrying his*

shoes under his arm. He is terrified at sight of the vegetable-constellations. The snoring continues as the curtain slowly falls)

SEVENTH TABLEAU. THE KINGDOM OF PIPEMPOHE.

Scene: *A vast hall, of Indo-Moorish architecture, having a practicable gallery across the back, and three arches beneath it, sustained by columns. The middle arch, used as an entrance, shows a low flight of steps, which entrance is made upon the scene. The ceiling has beams of blue-and-gold enamel. The columns are of ebony incrusted with mother-of-pearl, and the two side arches have hanging blinds of gilded bamboo.*
In the plinth that supports the gallery, as well as the walls, blue and red lozenges are set.
A large cashmere portière hangs R. At L., *seated on a throne ornamented with gold and surmounted by a baldaquin with waving plumes, sits* Jeanne, *dressed as a queen and sparkling with jewels. She assumes an imperious attitude.*
Near her stands her Prime Minister (the King of the Gnomes). *Behind her stand negro slaves, waving fans made of peacock feathers, and in front of her bearded dwarfs, attired in red, are squatting upon their heels on the steps of the throne. The two at the foot of the throne blow perfume out of bottles larger than themselves.*

In the centre of the stage Bayaderes are performing a dance as the curtain rises. At the back, two giants, robed in black, stand in front of the gilded bamboo blinds.
The murmur of a languorous melody is heard, clouds of perfume rise slowly; the sunlight falling through the windows, sheds an amber light upon the scene.

SCENE I.

King *[whispers to Jeanne]*: And now are you happy?

JEANNE *[smiles]*: I hope to be so soon.
(Bayadères finish their dance, and before beginning another, they bow before the throne)

KING: You see, all goes well. Everyone takes you for the Queen. She died last night, and the error of the people will continue. You have only to hold him when he comes, but do not let him recognise you; remember the terrible consequences!
JEANNE: I know!Thanks, good Fairy, for having pity on my love; and as you are now my Prime Minister, of course you will not leave me any more.

KING: If sometimes I am compelled to do so, a blast upon this will recall me. *[Hands Jeanne a golden whistle on a cord, which he takes from his neck. She puts it around her own neck. The cashmere portière opposite the throne half opens, and a hideous Dwarf enters. He wears an aigrette in his turban, long moustaches, and carries an ivory bâton in his hand. He leads a procession of six Giants, loaded with arms. As the Dwarf advances to bow before the throne, the Giants form a line against the wall and stand motionless]*

SCENE II.

DWARF *[bows to Jeanne and returns to the Giants]* Higher, stupids, higher! Chin raised! Who ever saw such drilling? *[Giants tremble with fear before him]* Make way for the messenger of the sovereign! *[The Giants make way R. and L. Enter an Officer in a pink turban, with trousers of white muslin, a blue waistcoat, and a large sword hanging at his side]*

OFFICER *[salutes profoundly]* Acting upon the command of your Sublime Majesty, we have just cut into small pieces the twelve wretches who failed to prostrate themselves quickly enough last night, when your Majesty passed the silk-bazaar upon your Majesty's white elephant.

JEANNE: My orders! Cut into pieces — my elephants!

OFFICER *[smiles]:* I do not speak of your thrice divine white elephant, your Majesty, — only of the men.

JEANNE: Wretch! *[Officer stares at Jeanne astonished]*

KING *[aside]*: You will betray yourself by showing this indignation. Think only of him you love, and reward this good servitor for his faithfulness.

JEANNE: I never could do it!

KING: But you must!

JEANNE *[hesitates]:* Very well. We are satisfied. Go! *[Exit Officer]* Ah, heavens! who would hare thought that I should have had the courage?

KING *[aside]:* She begins well!

(Enter the Chancellor, *dressed in a long robe bordered with fur, and an astrachan cap; he carries an inkstand in his girdle and long strips of paper in his left hand)*

CHANCELLOR: I venture to come within your powerful rays, light of the stars! to call attention to the fact that this document lacks your Majesty's august seal.

JEANNE: What is it?

CHANCELLOR: NO doubt your Majesty recalls the insolence of the man who dared to weep in your presence, under the pretext that he was dying of hunger?

JEANNE: No — I do not remember!

KING *[aside]:* On the contrary, you do remember quite well!

CHANCELLOR: This is an order for his immediate execution.

JEANNE: Horror! Give me that paper!

KING *[to Chancellor]*: Give it rather to me, — I will take charge of the matter. Go, all of you! JEANNE: Yes, go! go!

(Exit Dwarf, *followed by the six Giants, whose heads touch the top of the gallery arches; also the Bayadères, and the Dwarfs from the steps of the throne, except one who remains half hidden)*

KING *[points to the two Giants standing in front of the arches]*: They may remain, being mutes.

SCENE III.

JEANNE *[descends from throne]*: For what reason do you demand this man's death?

KING: I? Oh, I haven't the least notion!

JEANNE: Then, as I have the right to pardon him —

KING: Pardon him! If you do that the people will not believe that you are the Queen.

JEANNE: TO be killed because he wept — what a crime! The former Queen was very cruel, then?

KING: She was strong. Imitate her!

JEANNE: But it is impossible for me —

KING: Will you ruin yourself for a mere scruple, then, and lose this power so long hoped for, when you should show yourself stronger than ever?

JEANNE: What do you mean?

KING: I mean that soon — almost immediately, perhaps — you will be called upon to save from mortal peril your brother and your lover!

JEANNE *[after a silence]*: And do you believe that the signing of this paper —

KING: It is only a matter of blowing upon that whistle and pressing your thumb upon this red seal. *[Presents the paper]*

JEANNE: Oh, no! It is too horrible!

JEANNE: Oh, no! It is too horrible!

KING: But suppose the people revolt and drive you away? I have no power over the multitude. They are accustomed to witnessing tortures every day. You will deprive them of their amusement and they will doubt their Queen. *[Cries without]* Do you hear that?

JEANNE *[listens]:* It is true!

VOICES *[without]:* Vengeance! Death!

KING *[to the Giants]:* Raise the blinds!

(The Giants push up the bamboo blinds, disclosing a view of a city of Oriental aspect, with minarets and cupolas)

JEANNE *[slowly mounts the steps and leans out to look]:* What a crowd! And they all have picks, hatchets, and swords! They are beating upon the gates of the palace!

KING: Hasten, then, unhappy one! to save those you love!

JEANNE: Give it to me! *[Thrusts away the paper]* No! No!

KING: At least reserve the power to have him executed some time, if it be only one day hence, and let this torture show —

JEANNE *[overcome]:* Let it take place, then, when I shall be no more!

KING *[servilely]:* To-morrow, if you wish. Your wishes are our commands, your Majesty! Here it is!

JEANNE *[presses the seal quickly]:* Yes, to-morrow!

KING *[hands paper to Dwarf]:* Run! *[Dwarf runs off R. laughing]* He is in a mad mood, that buffoon!

JEANNE *[wrings her hands]:* Heaven have mercy on me! If I had only known that —

KING *[aside]:* She is ours! First she was coquettish, then stupid, now cruel! *[Cries of joy without]* Your people thank you, O Queen!

JEANNE: I hear a sound of many footsteps.

VOICES *[nearer]:* Death! Death!

KING *[mounts steps and looks out from the balcony]:* They are coming here, to assist at the execution, and to bask in your thrice-blessed presence! *[They come down stage]*
(From the gallery enters, first, the Chief Dwarf; *behind him come several negroes bearing on their shoulders an enormous chain, which binds* Paul *and* Dominique *together. A throng follows them. They descend the steps and scatter* R. *and* L. *leaving* Paul *and* Dominique *at* R. L E. *They are pale and haggard. The* King of the Gnomes *stands at the foot of the lowest step looking at* Paul *and* Dominique, *and the Giants resume their former position)*

SCENE IV.

JEANNE *[sees Paul]*: He! *[Strives to command herself; mounts the throne, and when Paul is before her, she addresses the Dwarf]* These prisoners are in chains. Why?

DWARF: They crossed the borders and entered your kingdom, your Majesty.

JEANNE: Well?

KING *[approaches Jeanne from L.]*: Is not that the greatest of crimes, O light of the stars?

JEANNE *[comprehends]:* Of course — certainly! You have done well, General, and your blacks also, — and you, my people! But because of their excessive audacity, we desire to interrogate the two guilty ones — alone *[to the King]*, without even our Prime Minister! *[King bows]* If we need you *[shows whistle]* we will call you, you understand. *[King disappears suddenly inside of the throne, through a trap-door at the Back]* What! Is he gone already? I did not see him go. All the better — he would have importuned us.

SCENE V.

JEANNE *[after the multitude has departed]*: Although I am Queen, I am compelled to submit to the laws of the country. It was in obedience to those laws that my people arrested you. I am obliged to give them a reason for what I do, but — I pardon you! You are free!

DOMINIQUE: What a good woman!

JEANNE: I wish first to remove your chains, but no one must know it except my Prime Minister. Where is he? Ah, the whistle! *[Blows whistle; instantly the King appears beside her]*

DOMINIQUE *[aside]:* Where did he come from? I don't like this abrupt style of entering. Just when our affairs were going on so well, too!

PAUL *[looks at the King]*: This is strange! I have already seen this man somewhere. At the ball? No, is it not the man of the wine-shop? There is some trap here!

SCENE VI.

JEANNE *[to King]*: Take away those chains! *[Aside]* I need the secret — you will excuse me!

KING: Without doubt! *[Aloud]* Immediately, your Majesty! *[Advances gravely towards the prisoners, and without effort, by merely touching the chains, he breaks them, ring by ring, with his fingers. The links fall to the floor with a* *crash]*

DOMINIQUE: Ye gods! What a fist!

PAUL: It *is* he! *[Leans over to study the King's face; the King disappears]*

JEANNE *[aside]:* He is as discreet as he is devoted, that good Fairy! *[Aloud]* Now, you are free; the gates are open to you. Have you nothing to say to me?

PAUL *[coldly]:* We offer our thanks!

JEANNE *[piqued]:* Is that all?

PAUL *[slowly]:* What more do you wish? How do I know what motive —

DOMINIQUE *[aside]:* What imprudence! *[Aloud]* Ah, your Majesty, Queen, goddess, reflection of the moon! our hearts swell with gratitude!

JEANNE: Good! Would it not be better, rather than to continue on your dangerous way, to remain here in my kingdom?

DOMINIQUE: Certainly! For my part, I am willing.

JEANNE *[aside]:* He does not reply! *[Aloud]* I tell you, that in this city, at my Court, I will give you some high function.

PAUL *[brusquely]:* I refuse!

JEANNE: Even that of Prime Minister?

PAUL: Yes!

JEANNE *[aside]:* What does he wish, then? *[Points to the middle arch at the back]* Behold the capital of my kingdom, the great city of Pipempohé. It is twenty-five leagues in circumference, has three million inhabitants, six rivers, palaces of gold, houses of silver, and shops so numerous that a guide is necessary to conduct one through their maze of columns. I give it to you!

PAUL: I do not need it!

PAUL: I do not need it.

JEANNE: Ah, what pride! *[To the Giant standing at blind R.]* Raise the curtain!
(The Giant raises the gilt blind; a bay filled with vessels is seen in the distance, and in the rear a forest)

JEANNE: You shall have my port, my navy, my vessels, the whole sea, with its islands and its yet undiscovered countries.

PAUL: TO what purpose?

JEANNE: YOU will accept this, I hope! *[To the Giant at L. arch]* Raise the curtain!
(The Giant raises the blind and discloses a view of forbidding rocks, in the midst of which is a large block of dazzling whiteness)

JEANNE: That mountain is filled with diamonds. The magicians at my service shall procure them, and I will give you elephants with which to bring them away.

PAUL: That would be somewhat too heavy a burden, your Majesty!

JEANNE: IS it my throne that you desire? I can give you the right to occupy it beside me! *[Tenderly]* I would even descend from it, that you might occupy it alone, if you wish.

PAUL: My place is far distant from here. I have a great task to perform.

JEANNE: Ah! And what if I prevent you?

PAUL: It is something quite above your power to control.

JEANNE: But if I force you to remain here?

PAUL: I should still have the liberty to hate you!

JEANNE: Hate me! And you refuse my throne? What is this extraordinary mission?

PAUL: NO one may know that.

JEANNE: But I!

PAUL: YOU less than any other.

JEANNE: What audacity!

DOMINIQUE *[aside]:* Master! master! No more of such folly! With a single word she can order our heads off! If you do not want her throne, at least refuse it politely! Be calm! Be astute!

PAUL:" I fear nothing! The nearer I approach to the end of my quest, the clearer my mind becomes. And you, who now appear to me as a queen, surrounded by awe-inspiring grandeur, you are the same woman that tried to attract me with absurd affectations of elegance, and later attempted to win me with the charms of a vulgar happiness! I know you!

JEANNE *[aside]:* Unhappy that I am! Now he execrates me!

PAUL: Woman, you are — admit it! — only the instrument of evil spirits. But I shall not succumb to your power any more than I have been vanquished by other temptations. Accumulate obstacles, if you wish! My will is stronger than your citadel, and prouder than your armies!

JEANNE: Insensate fool! *[Calls]* Send my negro slaves! *[Enter four negroes, armed with daggers. Jeanne addresses the first two]* Approach, you two! Draw your daggers! *[They draw their daggers and approach Paul and Dominique. Paul is perfectly cool, but Dominique is almost fainting with terror. Jeanne speaks coldly]* Kill yourselves! *[The two negroes tremble and hesitate]* Did you hear? *[They plunge their daggers into their breasts and fall dead]* Carry them out! *[Exit the two remaining negroes, carrying the corpses]* Now do you doubt my power?

DOMINIQUE *[kneels]:* No! No! But I didn't say anything, your Majesty!

JEANNE: Think you that with such a people I should lack for means to compel you to do my will? I have an iron tower built on a rock of brass in a lake of sulphur, and above it, in order to prevent prisoners from escaping, four griffins continually hover. Beneath it is a marble pit, narrower than a coffin, where the continually hover. Beneath it is a marble pit, narrower than a coffin, where the stones crush the captives and they can do nothing but die! I can, if I please, have you thrown under the wheels of my chariot, burned in my porcelain ovens, devoured by my tigers, or forced to drink a poison that will cause you to disappear from the earth, leaving not so much as a drop of blood behind! Well — go! You are free!

PAUL *[crosses his arms]:* In what way?

JEANNE: YOU are free to leave my kingdom. *[Paul makes a gesture of doubt]* Yes, — without any one to stop you.

PAUL: HOW can I be sure of that?

JEANNE *[tears a bit off her scarf and impresses her seal upon it]:* My seal on this scrap of satin will be sufficient to take you safely to the frontier; and perhaps some day, if you keep it, you will reproach yourself for having replied with ingratitude and insult to the most tender and magnificent offers ever received by a man from a queen! *[Gives the satin to Dominique]* Here, take it! Go! *[They go out by way of_ the gallery. Jeanne follows them with her eyes]*

SCENE VII.

JEANNE: What have I done that he should always fly from me? It was impossible to dazzle him with my power, and my generosity did not touch him. *[Paces to and fro; looks about her]* What need have I now of all this, since he refuses me? I will abandon this kingdom and follow him — everywhere — far away! *[Sinks on the steps of the throne]* Oh, I was happier formerly when I was only a poor milkmaid. I remember one day, when I went to the garret, he praised my pretty face and my hands, which he almost kissed. And now he has not only forgotten all that, but he hates me! By what ill luck has this come about? And why is he so bitter against these good fairies, when they are only working for our happiness? *[A burst of sneering laughter comes from behind the throne]* That must be my buffoons in the great saloon, who are amusing themselves. *[Sounds of laughter]* What gaiety!

SCENE VIII.

(Enter the King of the Gnomes *in his Gnome costume)*

JEANNE *[alarmed]:* What is this?

KING: Nothing! We are amusing ourselves very well — you have said it.

JEANNE: Those voices I heard — this strange appearance — what does it mean?

KING: Those who are laughing within there are genii who are infuriated at losing you, as well as your lover. I, who guided you everywhere, counselled you, and seemed to serve you, am their master, the King of the Gnomes!

JEANNE *[terrified]:* The King of the Gnomes!

KING: It is. my will that he shall never love you, and as soon as he sets foot on our grounds he is lost!

JEANNE: Impossible! I will run after him!

KING: TOO late! And even should he return, I am sure of his undoing.

JEANNE *[impatiently]:* No! No! No! I shall give orders —

KING: Oh, as many as you please!

JEANNE: You will oppose them, perhaps.

KING: On the contrary, you shall be punctually obeyed. Try it!

(Exit King, *laughing; noise of laughter increases without)*

SCENE IX.

JEANNE: Why are they so opposed to him, and with what object? What matters it? A peril threatens him. Perhaps he will fall! He may be lost! Ah, he must return! What shall I do? I do not know! Shall we fly? *[Calls]* General! *[Enter the Chief Dwarf]* Oh, not you! I want some one else. Call the others — the chief of my guard, the Chancellor, soldiers, some one! Quick! Quick!

SCENE X.

(Enter an Officer, *with soldiers, and the* Chancellor)

JEANNE: Do you know why I called you? You must have in your possession the order for the torture of that man — you know, the man who wept the other day.

CHANCELLOR *[produces paper with a deep bow]*: Behold it, gracious Majesty!

JEANNE: Give it to me! *[Tears paper into bits]* I pardon him! *[Chancellor looks at her amazed]* Yes, a full pardon. Go and free him yourself, and see that he receives, so that he shall not suffer want in the future, three tons of silver and four camel-loads of corn. *[Chancellor is about to go]* Wait! There must be many slaves in my garden. Break their chains and send them all away in ships to their native country. Then you will search throughout the palace for all the vestments and draperies that are kept here: fur dolmans, coats brocaded with gold, robes of tissue embroidered with pearls; and you will distribute these among the inhabitants of my city, beginning with the poorest. Wait! I have not finished. Remove all the arms from the arsenals, and plant there instead flowering shrubs that will cheer the hearts of the widows. As I have too many perfumes, throw them out of the windows that they may wash the streets! I order the abolishing of all laws except those that I make this day. It is my will that there shall not be a single sorrowful soul in my kingdom, but that a universal smile shall shine on all faces! I will have no tears save those of joy, and blessings shall fall upon my head! *[Re-enter Paul and Dominique R. with the Officer and soldiers]* Ah! *[To Officer]* It is well! Leave us!
[Exit Officer and soldiers.

SCENE XI.

PAUL *[ironically]*: I suspected the sincerity of your clemency, O Queen!

JEANNE: Unhappy man, do you calumniate me still? Listen! this is a matter that concerns your welfare.

DOMINIQUE: And not mine? Have mercy!

JEANNE: Yes, even your life.

PAUL: What matters it? *[Silence]*

JEANNE: And you ask me that, — you, Paul de Damvilliers!

PAUL: Who told you my name?

JEANNE *[proudly]:* Ah! What matters that to *you?*

PAUL: Oh, I understand. You are assisted by the magic of the Gnomes; but I have the protection of the Fairies, and I defy you!

JEANNE: Ah, yes! insult me, despise me, execrate me! But, in the name of that which you hold most sacred, by the souls of those most dear to you, have pity on me, I implore you, and remain here!

PAUL: I shall go at once!

JEANNE: Why do you persist in doubting me?

PAUL: Because you have already deceived me under so many guises. A short time ago you overwhelmed me with offers and protestations, and then, for no reason whatever, you deprive me of that liberty which you were so reluctant to grant.

JEANNE: But you did not know that you were going to meet certain death

JEANNE: But you did not know that you were going to meet certain death, because I did not know it myself. Until now I have been the victim of evil spirits whose designs I did not suspect.

PAUL: Ah, is this another trick?

JEANNE: NO! NO! I swear it! Do not go!

PAUL: Any risk is less perilous than your vows!

JEANNE: Look at me! Have I the appearance of a liar?

PAUL: This is only a new snare. I say this because the more I look at you and study your face, the more it calls up memories of the past, and reminds me of another — a young girl! —

JEANNE: Go on!

PAUL: She was worth all the queens in the world; and I Should have done well to turn backward in my life, rather than press forward to discover the future.

JEANNE: Ah, heaven! What punishment!

PAUL: Nothing but justice.

JEANNE: But this is terrible! You do not recognise me, then, when I tell you — when you know —

KING *[suddenly appears]*: Beware!

PAUL *[aside]:* Again that man!

JEANNE: I did not summon you.

KING *[salutes]:* All the more reason that I should come, O Queen!

JEANNE: GO! Leave me! I will save him alone.

KING: But do you not see that the wretch does not wish your aid?

JEANNE *[to Paul, who has gone up stage]:* In heaven's name, return!

PAUL: Never! *[Drags Dominique with him up C.]*

JEANNE: In the name of the memory of which you spoke just now! Ah, must I give my life in order to convince you?

PAUL: I want none of your gifts!

JEANNE: Listen! I am — *[Exit Paul and Dominique. The King extends his hand towards Jeanne, who cries in a half-choked voice]* Jeanne, the milkmaid! *[She falls as if by a stroke. Enter Gnomes and Dwarfs; they rush on and dance around her, singing]:*

GNOMES: She is dead! She is dead! At last we triumph! None shall thwart us henceforth. Ha! ha! ha! ha! ha! ha!

QUEEN OF THE FAIRIES *[appears upon the throne]:* No, she is not dead! *[Descends the steps of the throne slowly and spreads her mantle over Jeanne as if to defend her]* Her self-sacrifice has saved her!

(The Gnomes, *recoiling, form a circle around* Jeanne *and the* Queen)

EIGHTH TABLEAU. THE ENCHANTED WOOD.

SCENE I.

DOMINIQUE *[enters R.; takes short steps and looks about]*: Lost! Just because I left my master one minute! Where is he, then? *[Calls]* Monsieur! Monsieur! Not here! Well, then, it's his own fault. What the devil put it into his head to bother himself with the Gnomes and the Castle of Hearts? I must look for him, however. Monsieur! Oh, that's right — run after him! I can see eyes shining among the leaves! No, it's only the way the sun strikes them. Curious effects one sees in the woods! I will go on. Forward! March! There's a bird flying away! Am I an idiot? That's what he'd do, in order to get away from here. I will try. *[A branch touches him]* Ah! *[Turns]* No one there. Heaven be praised! Rascally thorns, get out! Devilish branches, the thicker you grow, the faster I shall break you! *[Trees strike him with their branches]* But — but — it seems that I have the whole forest on my shoulders. Never mind! I shall get out. I say that I *will* get out! *[Thrusts away a branch with each hand and breaks them. At that moment the forest opens before him, like the parting of curtains, forming a pretty green lane, with symmetrical rows of trees on each side. At the back, standing black and distinct against a rosy sunset sky, is the Castle of Hearts, so placed that only the - upper stories can be seen; its three slender towers have small windows, through which shines a red light. Dominique remains for some time silent and motionless with surprise]*

A castle! The Castle of Hearts! It must be! It looks exactly as it was described. No, no, I am dreaming! It is impossible! *[Pinches himself]* No, I am awake! That black roof, those red lights — they suggest a monster staring at one. I must be calm. There is nothing to be afraid of — on the contrary, it is a great chance. I am the first to discover it. What joy it will be to Monsieur to know of it! But — since I am first to get here, the glory belongs to me! Why not? *[Laughs wildly]* The reward, the lady, the beautiful woman! The mansion appears seigneurial, and the land surrounding it makes quite a domain. This forest belongs to it, no doubt. How I shall cut into it! What swinging blows my men shall make — because I shall have servants. *[Walks about, growing enthusiastic]* I am a servant no longer! Good! I will have footmen like those of Sardanapalus; they shall have a red and gold livery with snug stockings, by Jove! and feathers on their hats and buttons as large as plates; and in the vestibule, at the foot of the stairs, they will play all kinds of games with cards and dominoes; they will put on great style, and if they do not drive well — *[Makes a gesture as if kicking some one]*

Well, no one comes! That's bad luck. I've done all I can. However, I'll try once more. *[Cries feebly]* Monsieur! Monsieur! He cannot say I haven't called him! I'm done! Since he goes and hides himself in this way! — But I wish I had some witnesses here to testify how long I have been calling him. *[All the trees on the side where he called feebly, bend their branches low; those on the other side shake their leaves in sign of denial]* Ha! that's very odd! They move, although there is no wind; they move, like human beings! You do not comprehend me, surely? *[Trees bend their branches, in a movement of assent]* Horror! My marrow freezes in my bones! I am going mad! Am I about to die? Decidedly, there are things above human knowledge, and I have been wrong always to deny it. *[Sits on the ground, appearing faint]* I wish Monsieur would come now. I will wait for him. It was not a delicate thing that I meant to do — to rob him of his glory, poor fellow! after all that he has gone through. It is true that I have endured hardships with him, and until now I could always get out of any scrapes. Why should I fear that this may be any worse? That was only a little giddiness I felt just now — nothing more!

[Looks at the Castle] That Castle seems very much like any other castle, I think; it looks rather rugged at this distance, but it has an air! It is not deserted, evidently. There is movement within. I can smell the odours of the kitchen; yes, and I can hear the rattling of dishes. They are expecting their master, no doubt. But I am their master! *[Looks at the trees apprehensively]* No, they do not move! Courage, Dominique! Forward! One gains nothing without assurance. *[Springs up, but his legs are turned into the trunk of a tree, covered with bark, which spreads upward over his body]* Ah! Oh! *[Arriving at his arms, the bark covers them also and they turn into branches, covered with leaves; the head remains intact]* Master! My master! Come to me, master! I — *[He is completely metamorphosed into a tree]*

SCENE II.

THE TREES: He is caught! Another one!

DOMINIQUE *[changed into a plum-tree]:* Help! help!

TREES: Impossible!

DOMINIQUE: Who spoke?

TREES: An oak — an elm — a linden — a spruce — an ebony-tree!

DOMINIQUE: This is a joke!

TREES: YOU speak very well yourself. We were all men once!

TREES: All! All!

A LINDEN: We have had adventures like yours, and now our only amusement is to talk among ourselves. But when a being of a superior order arrives, we become as silent as ordinary trees.

DOMINIQUE: Who is speaking to me at present?

A LINDEN: A linden.

DOMINIQUE: And I — what am I, then?

A LINDEN: You are too far away; I cannot see you distinctly.

DOMINIQUE: I feel myself — stupid! I should not be surprised if I were a plum-tree!

TREES: You are right! You are a wild plum-tree!

DOMINIQUE: What a shame that I am forced to stand here all by myself, like an exile; I can't even give you a shake of the branch!

AN ELM: Imitate us! resign yourself!

DOMINIQUE: But I shall be bored to death here, — I, who set out in search of a wife! When spring comes and I find myself full of nests, I shall be in a frightful position! It will be as bad as the tortures of Tantalus! You haven't any nice climbing plant that would come and cling to me awhile, have you?

TREES: NO!

DOMINIQUE: Not even a pretty little weed, or a vine — some wild vine? That would suit me! Come, now! I would give her back to you!

TREES: Plum-tree, you are most immoral!
(Chorus of Breezes among the Trees)

Awake, woodland trees!
Tremble in the breeze!
And, hidden from the night,
Take kisses soft and light!
Give us love!
Give us song,
O pines and holly!

Let us glide,
Let us dance
In sport and folly!
Now with joyous sighs,
We come from azure skies;
A leafy tree we capture,
Embracing it with rapture!

Tender songs
Of pretty birds
Fill the air;
Within the nests,
Each fond pair rests,
Free from care!

(Towards the end of the chorus the Trees lower their voices more and more, and leaning against each other, whisper):

TREES: A man! A man! A man! DOMINIQUE: It is my master, my friends, my —

SCENE III.

PAUL *[enters, overcome with fatigue]*: I shall never find it, then, this infernal castle of the Gnomes! And Dominique has disappeared! There never was such an idiot as that boy! I should have forbidden him to stir a step away from me, since I have lost two hours in searching for him. *[Stops in front of the green lane, amazed]* Ah, at last! *[Dominique shakes his branches to attract Paul's attention]* Here I am at last at the end of all my wanderings and all my fatigues! Thanks, good Fairy, for sustaining my courage through so many perils, where others before me have faltered! *[A burst of laughter çomes from the Castle]* That was surely laughter. But all the windows are closed — what was it, then? Pshaw! the emotion of finding myself here has made me tremble like a woman at the cry of some bird or a wild beast. But where can Dominique be? *[Dominique shakes his leaves]*,I have done more than my duty in seeking him throughout this forest. He has been a regular nuisance, besides, on this journey, and I am too good to him! I have no doubt he has fallen into some trap, where, in spite of my warnings, his curiosity or his folly has led him. *[Dominique shakes his branches harder]* Well, forward! In such an enterprise, the existence of one man is nothing, since the welfare of all mankind is concerned!

(Suddenly there is a great burst of laughter and a sound of many voices. All the doors and windows of the Castle are opened violently. Twelve windows are seen, and in each sits a Gnome. *On a balcony sits the* King, *crowned, with a sceptre in his hand. From each door springs a* Gnome, *laughing, shouting, and jumping about. The trees lean over, trembling violently*. Paul, *astonished, stands facing the Castle)*

SCENE IV.

KlNG *[speaks from the balcony, in a high and nasal tone]:* Ah, my sensible young master! O heart exempt from all corruption! You, who abandon your servant and yet believe yourself called upon to save the human race, — you have tripped twice in two minutes, through egoism and through pride! Now you belong to us!

PAUL *[disdainfully]:* I?

KING: Behold that tree! It is your servant himself! PAUL: Ye gods!

KING: Beneath the bark that hides him he still has his human feelings and his memory. You are about to become like him! PAUL *[in a terrible tone, addressing the Gnomes that press around him]:* Not while this sword —

KING: Draw it, then!
(Paul, *who has his hand on his sword, is suddenly paralysed. His arms and legs preserve the attitude he took when last speaking. He becomes rigid and white, like a statue, and a ring shines on his marble hand)*

KING *[from the balcony, waves a golden sceptre]:* Now we have made your shoulders solid enough to bear the destiny of the world! What do you say to it? Keep, as a spur to remorse, the memory of the past. Remain forever in your attitude of impotent menace. Your lidless eyes shall have the gift of seeing us, and your ears of hearing us, after you have been carried to our festal hall! Under your appearance of insensibility you shall live to suffer an eternal torture!

(All the Gnomes, *joining hands, with great bursts of laughter and to the sound of infernal music, dance around the motionless statue)*

NINTH TABLEAU. THE GREAT BANQUET.

Scene: *An immense dining-hall. Many lamps are suspended from the ceiling by long chains, as in a church. At each side of the stage, at regular distances, are iron columns with Corinthian capitals, with heavy chains swinging between them, to which are suspended red hearts, as if for decoration. At the back, occupying the full width of the stage, a staircase with black steps leading to a gallery above, where the same arrangement of columns is repeated. These columns have no chains nor hearts, but have palm-leaves made of amethysts in their decorations, glimpses of the evening sky can be seen between them. table stands* C., *covered with golden dishes. The cloth is of purple, with a gold fringe. Twelve* Gnomes *of the first rank sit at the table,* 0» *each side. The* King, a *somewhat higher than those of the others, facing the audience, wears a crown ornamented with little diamond hearts. At* R. I. E. Paul, *as a marble statue, wearing the same costume as in the Eighth Tableau, preserves absolute immobility.*

(Chorus of Gnomes *celebrate their victory in a song, while little pages come forward on the gallery hearing dishes in their hands. They descend the steps and hand the dishes to the servants attending on the* Gnomes. *These servants place the dishes on the table, and as they pass before the statue, each makes an ironical salutation)*

SCENE I.

FIRST GNOME *[R. of King, looks at Paul]*: Well, my heroic simpleton, how do you like your position now?

SECOND GNOME: Behold! now you are indeed above us!

THIRD GNOME: But always despising the little Gnomes!

ALL: Ha! Ha! Ha!

FOURTH GNOME: YOU wished to change the world, did you?

FOURTH GNOME: YOU wished to change the world, did you?

FIFTH GNOME: Change your attitude instead.

ALL: Ha! Ha! Ha!

SIXTH GNOME: Insult us to revenge yourself!

SEVENTH GNOME: Just to make us laugh!

ALL: Ha! Ha! Ha!

KING: Good! Amuse yourselves, worthy Gnomes, my faithful subjects! Let us feast royally to celebrate our victory over mankind! At present their hearts belong to us, and we have no need to be sparing of them. Our caves, our walls, our palaces, are bursting with them. Look around you! We procure them from every part of the world; there are some from Timbuctoo and many from Paris. We have the hearts of negroes and the hearts of duchesses; some that have palpitated from the effects of opium, under the Great Wall of China, and others that have grown a little rancid from being kept too long behind a London shop-counter!
(A long branch from a tree projects itself from the right and leans close to the statue)
Six GNOMES *[L.]*S Look! Look there!

KING: Ah, it is only that idiot who was changed into a plum-tree standing near the wall of the Castle. *[A second branch appears]*

FIRST GNOME: NOW there, are two branches! They surround the statue, they embrace it!

KING: Pure sentimentality! It bores me! Cut them off! *[A servant cuts off the two branches with a single blow of the knife to each. A terrible cry is heard. The branches bleed against the base of the pedestal]*

SECOND GNOME: Delicate and sensitive to a degree! For a plum-tree, it is rather funny!

GNOMES: Ha! Ha! Ha!

FIRST GNOME *[looks at the statue]:* He is not at all moved, the wretch!

SECOND GNOME: Defend yourself, then! Animate yourself!

THIRD GNOME: YOU, too, wished to take your little share of hearts, eh?

FOURTH GNOME: Did you think that we must give them to you?

FIFTH GNOME: I should like to throw one in your face!

SIXTH GNOME: I should like to make him eat them all!

KING: Yes, and drink their blood! *[Throws the contents of his cup at the statue. The red liquid dries and clings here and there to its face and its draperies]*

SEVENTH GNOME: Answer us, coward!

EIGHTH GNOME: DO you hear? We scoff at your folly, your illusions, your courage!

NINTH GNOME: And that immaculate heart, where is it?

TENTH GNOME: You met some other nice hearts, did you not?

ELEVENTH GNOME: And some that loved you well!

TWELFTH GNOME: All the way from queens to the wives of bankers!

PAUL *[immovable, repeats slowly]*: Jeanne! Jeanne! Jeanne!

(The Gnomes, *startled, spring from their chairs)*

KING: Ah! Curse him!
(Jeanne *appears, in the dress of a milkmaid, beside the pedestal of the statue. She climbs up and clasps* Paul *in her arms)*

GNOMES: Look! Look!

KING: Hither! my grooms, soldiers, executioners, everyone! Come hither! Help! (Gnomes *rush on from all sides. The statue has gradually changed to lifelike hues, while the pedestal is lowered until* Paul *and* Jeanne *are on a level with the stage)*

PAUL *[holds Jeanne on his left arm and draws his sword]:* Wretches, you are vanquished!

(A broad flash of lightning pierces the sky at the hack; thunder rolls; the Gnomes *utter a loud cry, and they and the table disappear through a trap-door. Lights go down. The suspended hearts glow like little red lamps; the columns at the rear turn half' way around, and the staircase appears as a heap of ruins)*

SCENE II.

PAUL: IS it you? Is it indeed you? And have you pardoned me?

JEANNE: Monsieur Paul!

PAUL: Oh, do not speak to me like that any more! Lift your head, you who I have come to my aid before and have now delivered me, sweet angel of my life, my poor misunderstood love! And I, like a blind fool, sought others! How ungrateful I was for the past, how blind towards the future! I allowed myself to be led away by vain illusions, all the more irresistible because I found that each one of these unexpected monsters, in order to confuse me, assumed something of your ways, your image. But you, all the time, were far away!

JEANNE: Not so far as you think!

PAUL: What!

JEANNE: I, too, was blind.

PAUL: What do you mean?

JEANNE: DO you remember that Parisian coquette who disgusted you with her silly ways and her foolish talk?

PAUL *[laughs]:* Yes!

JEANNE *[naively]:* That was I!

PAUL: But —

JEANNE: DO you remember the stupid little *bourgeoise* in that hideous village?

PAUL: Don't speak to me of that little idiot!

JEANNE *[piteously]:* That was I!

PAUL: Impossible!

JEANNE: Have you forgotten that queen of infinite splendour, who, with a single gesture, caused men to die?

PAUL: Enough! Do not go on!

JEANNE *[hides her face in her hands]:* That, too, was I!

PAUL *[recoils]:* You!

JEANNE *[throws her arms around his neck]:* Yes, I! I did all that to find you again, to please you, to make you love me! I dare say it to you now! My love was so strong that, in order to reach you, I have passed through all the madness and the cruelty of the world. And as you never have understood this love, as you never have even perceived it — although it only increased at every repulse — to-day, in order to save you, I have descended from heaven!

PAUL: From heaven!

JEANNE: Ah, yes, you did not know? Listen! I died! Yes, the Gnomes deceived me! The Fairies have brought me to life only to save you. You must follow me now. Your hour has struck! Come! Come!

PAUL: Oh, yes, I believe you! I knew well what destiny was promised to me. In spite of all obstacles, I never have doubted it. And just now, while enclosed within the marble, I suffered untold impatience and anguish. Let us go! Lead me! The Gnomes are vanquished, let us leave the earth!

JEANNE: I shall take you to a land where the sky is always blue, where the flowers, like love, are eternal and immeasurable. There, my beloved, the storms never come; we shall have all space to hold our hearts; and our eyes, ever gazing upon each other, will have the brightness and steadfastness of the stars!

PAUL *[embraces Jeanne]*: Ah, delight of my soul, already the eternity of our happiness begins!

SCENE III.

(The Queen of the Fairies, *who, during the latter fart of this dialogue, has descended at the back, now comes forward and steps between* Paul *and* Jeanne)

QUEEN: NO, not yet!

PAUL *[indignant]*: Thou, the Queen of the Fairies!
But thou didst promise me —

QUEEN: Hast thou forgotten our agreement? Thou hast accomplished only half of thy duty. The second half is more difficult, perhaps. *[Points to Jeanne]* Before attaining to the felicity of your perpetual union, you must give back to mankind the hearts liberated by your bravery.

PAUL: But how can I do it by myself?

QUEEN *[smiles]*: Oh, we shall be there! The Fairies shall aid thee. Thou hast to concern thyself only with those persons that are known to thee.
Try to convince them! Make them take back their hearts! In order that thou mayst become immortal, first perform the act of a god!

[Paul hides his face in his hands. Chorus of joyous voices is heard without]

PAUL *[raises his face]:* Those voices?

QUEEN: They come from the trees of the enchanted forest — the liberated beings who are now returning to their human forms.

SCENE IV.

(Enter Dominique R. *with a bird's nest on his head. Instead of arms he has two branches covered with fruit. His arms stand out horizontally)*

JEANNE *[moved]:* My brother! To see him like that!

DOMINIQUE *[weeps]:* My poor master! At last I find you again. My tears fall like rain along my trunk — my body, I mean! I cannot clasp you in my arms — they even cut off some of my branches! I should like so much to embrace you! Cursed gluttony! you are to blame for all this! *[Bends his head and bites off a plum near his face; weeps again]* Ah, great heavens, what unhappiness!

JEANNE: Have pity on him, good fairy!

QUEEN *[to Paul]*: Since thou lovest him, be it so!

(The branches drop off Dominique *and his arms appear. At a movement of his head the nest falls off, and eggs roll out of it; one of them breaks, and a bird flies out and disappears)*

QUEEN *[to Dominique]*: But thou wilt go —

DOMINIQUE: Oh, anywhere, everywhere! Since I have pulled up the roots, I ask nothing better than to do something to take off the numbness!

QUEEN *[points to columns]:* Thou wilt go with thy master in order to help him return the hearts to those that lack them.

DOMINIQUE: Willingly! *[Looks at the suspended hearts and scratches his ear]*

But — see what a quantity there is! I shall have a pretty heavy cargo!

QUEEN: NO. Look! *[The hearts diminish to the size of nuts and assume a golden hue]* DOMINIQUE: Oh, that is odd! that is certainly very queer! They won't be very heavy now. Let's try them! *[Attempts to climb the column L. E.]*

QUEEN: No; get down! *[The capitals of the columns at R. and L. half open, letting fall a shower of hearts]*

DOMINIQUE *[gathers them up]:* One would think they were only sugared bonbons.

QUEEN: They will be all the easier to take. *[To Paul, who has remained motionless beside the column R.]* What dost thou there? Why dost thou remain silent?

PAUL *[aside]:* I lose her at the very moment of victory, when all seemed finished, and I thought she was mine forever!

JEANNE *[entreatingly]:* Oh, do not despair! Go! Go! if you love me! You know not what destiny awaits you! Do as she commands, at once!

DOMINIQUE: Come, my poor master! We must make one more journey — the last! *[Paul extends his mantle to receive some of the hearts, while Dominique puts others in his pockets]*

QUEEN *[points to horizon]*: Go, now!

PAUL *[turns to Jeanne and embraces her]:* Jeanne!

QUEEN *[waves him away]:* No! to thy duty! Hers is already accomplished on the earth. I will transport her back to the happy regions where she will await thee, where thou shalt find her when thy virtue has made thee worthy of her love!
(Paul *and* Dominique *go up stage and begin to climb the ruined staircase, stumbling among the stones)*

JEANNE: Farewell!

PAUL *[from a distance]:* Farewell!

(Dominique turns to throw a kiss. The capitals of all the columns half open and allow a stream of little golden hearts to fall. At the same moment the Fairies glide upon the stage and begin to gather up the hearts in their robes. Jeanne stands, much moved, R. I, E. near the Queen, who holds her hand. Paul and Dominique can be seen far off on the horizon)

TENTH TABLEAU. THE VILLAGE FETE.

Scene: *A fine park near Paris, the property of the banker,* Kloekher. *At each side of the stage are large trees and flowering shrubs. A low wall runs across the back, with steps* C., *forming an entrance. On each side of the steps are tall vases full of flowers. Other vases are placed at regular distances along the wall. Beyond, the open country can be seen, with a view of Paris in the distance. In the centre of the stage is a small grass-plot.*

SCENE I.

(Monsieur *and* Madame Kloekher, Letourneux, Alfred de Cisy, Onésime Dubois, Macaret, Dr. Colombel, Bouvignard, *Guests, etc., all in fashionable summer attire. It is evening. As the curtain rises, Guests are arriving from* L. *and scattering about in various directions. Mme.* Kloekher *leans on the arm of* Alfred de Cisy. Bouvignard *hastens on alone, stands still,* R., *and draws a flask of faience from his pocket, wrapped in a handkerchief. Unfolds it carefully and contemplates it with delight)*

MME. KLOEKHER *[draws a deep breath]* At last we can find a little relief out here, from the village festival, with its noises of horns and drums — most annoying while we were dining!

KLOEKHER: You are right. So tiresome that the very day one chooses to receive his friends, the common people must take that time to have one of their noisy festivals!

LETOURNEUX: Ah, if in their diversions they would only respect morality!

MACARET: Pshaw! They would only come to our doors and cry about their miseries.

COLOMBEL: And we should have to receive them into the hospitals, where we spend altogether too much time on them as it is. *[Exit LETOURNEUX [gaily]:*

To think. that two such good friends as we should ever have been so near a falling-out, my good Kloekher!

KLOEKHER: SO near it! Why we were furious at each other! *[Laughs]*

LETOURNEUX *[laughs]:* And what about, I ask? All on account of that little Monsieur Payl!

KLOEKHER *[angrily]:* That rascally intriguer!

ALFRED *[shrugs his shoulders]:* A lunatic!

MME. KLOEKHER: A very queer fellow! *[sits on a bench L. Alfred sits beside her]*

KLOEKHER: DO you know what has become of him?

ALFRED: No. Awfully sorry!

MME. KLOEKHER: YOU are not weeping over it, are you, Onésime, — you who were his friend?

ONESIME: I, Madame? Never in the world, I assure you!

MME. KLOEKHER *[laughs]*: Wouldn't it be amusing if he could only be here next week, to be one of the ushers at your marriage?

KLOEKHER: Good heavens! don't let us talk any more about that fellow! Suppose we discuss the first plan of action in that new operation of ours, Letourneux?

LETOURNEUX: With pleasure. *[They talk together as they pace slowly to and fro up stage]*

MME. KLOEKHER *[to Onésime]*: They say your fiancée is a very sweet girl.

ONESIME: Well, she is certainly not remarkably beautiful! But — there are other advantages!

MACARET: What's the matter with Bouvignard? He seems to be very much engrossed with that thing he's looking at. *[Macaret and Onésime approach Bouvignard]*

BOUVIGNARD *[to Onésime]*: You are an artist — look at that! What a design! What an enamel! *[Onésime puts out his hand to take the vase]* Take care! No, I will point out its beauties to you myself. *[Shows it to them from every point of view]*

MME. KLOEKHER *[in low tones]:* Is it all understood, then? I shall receive for next Saturday my invitation to go to the house of Madame the Countess de Trémanville?

ALFRED: And for all the following Saturdays. *[Kloekher and Letourneux pass before them, talking and gesticulating]* My aunt begs that you will come.
You will find a great difference in the people and the surroundings, I assure you. *[Aside]* Caught, my little *bourgeoise!*

MME. KLOEKHER: Oh, thank you! And I shall run no risk of being alarmed as I was the other day, shall I?

ALFRED: NO, no! be sure of that! The fact is, I lost my head, all about nothing; but everything is perfectly arranged now. I adore you, Ernestine! *[Indicates Kloekher]* You must speak to him of me as a man entirely devoted to his interests, ready to follow his lead, to whom he may safely entrust his most confidential affairs.

MME. KLOEKHER: Oh, certainly, my friend!

ALFRED *[aside]:* If she doesn't do that, I shall have to fly to Belgium in a week!

MACARET: And have you bought it?

BOUVIGNARD: Yes, for eighty francs — not a sou more — in a wine-shop not far from here.
(Noise of horns and firing of guns heard without)

MME. KLOEKHER *[rises]*. More noise! This is intolerable! Really, we must complain to the authorities!
(Noise increases; cries of enthusiasm and the movement of a large crowd are heard)

SCENE II.

COLOMBEL *[re-enters]*: Do you know that out there in the square, among the shops, something very original, extraordinary, and amusing is going on? I have seen many mountebanks in my day, but never one like that! A man out there is selling hearts for a sou apiece.

ALFRED: That is not dear!

A LADY: NO, but very curious!

A GENTLEMAN: It might be worth while to see him. What say you?

ANOTHER GUEST: We should only be compelled to listen to his impertinences.

MACARET: Sometimes these rascals are very amusing, however. *[Guests surround Mme. Kloekher]*

MME. KLOEKHER: I don't know whether I ought or not — Is he a person one could ask to come in here, Doctor?

COLOMBEL: Oh, for yourself — certainly not, fair lady! You have no need of him. But *[To the other Ladies]* as for us, from whom you have stolen all our hearts —

KLOEKHER *[about to go]*: Bah! A truce to your flattery! I am going to call him.

GUESTS: Bravo! Good! Capital idea!

COLOMBEL *[goes up stage, makes a sign off R.]*: Come here! I shall take the liberty, in my character of a physician, to give you a little surprise, ladies!

SCENE III.

(Enter Paul, *wearing long white hair and beard and a large velvet cloak that covers his figure completely.* Dominique *follows him, dressed as a Chinaman, carrying on his back a large box and a red leather bag, and in his hand a small folding-chair.*
They halt upon the grass-plot C. Dominique *puts the bag upon the chair)*

A LADY: Oh, this is going to be very nice! It amuses me already. I love conjurers.

MME. KLOEKHER: DO you need a table to assist you in performing your tricks?

PAUL: Thank you, Madame. I do not perform tricks. My mission is a higher one. It is to bring about your moral health and amelioration that I am here. I am charged by the Fairies to give you back your stolen hearts!

MEN: What! Our hearts!

ALFRED: He is very polite, your Nostradamus!

PAUL: It is not a matter of politeness. I speak seriously, believe me!

MEN: How funny! How very amusing! *[Laughter]*

COLOMBEL *[to Mme. Kloekher]*: Did I not tell you his manner was perfect?

DOMINIQUE *[pours a quantity of gilded bonbons from the bag upon the folding-chair]* Now, gentlemen, who forbids you? Come, ladies, a little courage! They are pretty, sweet as sugar, and very wholesome!

COLOMBEL: He expresses himself well, this Chinaman from Paris!

DOMINIQUE: NO, Monsieur, we have just arrived from Pipempohé *[strokes his moustache]*, where the Sultan made us the most flattering offers!

GUESTS *[laugh]:* Pipempohé! The Sultan!

PAUL: And after that I captured them in the fortress of the Gnomes!

GUESTS: The Gnomes! How seriously he speaks!

ONESIME: Let him go on.

PAUL: But I have finished. I tell you once more that, acting upon the commands of the Fairies, I must return to you your hearts.

DOMINIQUE *[taps the box on his back]:* Hearts! hearts! hearts I Come and get your hearts!

PAUL *[checks him]:* Be quiet! *[Clasps his hands entreatingly]* Ah, it is for your sakes that I come! Take them! Hasten, I beg of you!
A LADY: Does one eat them?

MME. KLOEKHER: DO not touch the things! Perhaps they are drugged.

ONESIME: All the same, I am going to risk it! Come on, Bouvignard, I'll buy one for you. Do as I do! *[Hands a piece of money to Paul, and begins to crunch a bonbon heart. Bouvignard does the same]*

A LADY *[speaks low]:* Very singular people, these artists!

COLOMBEL *[gives money to Paul and takes a bonbon]:* Well, of course I must follow Onésime's example, seeing that I brought this funny fellow here.

ONESIME *[suddenly strikes his forehead with his hand]:* Unhappy that I am! Where is she?

MME. KLOEKHER: Of whom are you speaking?

ONESIME: Clémence!

MME. KLOEKHER *[aside]:* What are you thinking of, to say that before every one? Remember your approaching marriage!

ONESIME: Never mind my marriage! *[Exit calling loudly]* Clémence! Clémence!

BOUVIGNARD *[raises his voice]*: What stupidity to waste money on such trifles as that! *[Throws his vase on the floor; it breaks]* That's a good thing! Now I will sell my whole collection to obtain a dowry for my poor daughter.

COLOMBEL *[.speaks to himself pacing to and fro]*: To buy the land, say, a million francs! I'll do it! As to the rest, what with private subscriptions and an appeal to the government, I shall be able to found my great hospital! *[Sees that the others are observing him]* Yes, gentlemen, I intend to consecrate my future, my time, my science, and all my efforts, to this great work! The practice shall be directed by noted specialists; the halls shall be hung with tapestry; the beds shall be of mahogany. Devil take me if I don't do it!

GUESTS *[surprised]*: What does this mean?

LETOURNEUX: That stuff contains something that affects the brain.

PAUL: Take one! I do not sell them; I give them freely.

MACARET: Well, at that price — Besides, I don't see what interest he would have in doing any harm! *[Eats a bonbon]*

PAUL *[to Alfred]*: And you, Monsieur, surely you are not afraid to try one, when so many others have tasted them?

ALFRED:I! Afraid! The idea! I will take two of them. *[Takes two bonbons and eats one]*

MME. KLOEKHER: YOU, too?

ALFRED *[aside to Mme. Kloekher]*: But,it is really excellent — sweeter than honey and soft as a kiss! Share with me the passion that tortures me! Although I have said before that I loved you, what I feel now is a new love. Let us quit this horrible existence! Let us fly far away to some unknown shore, to the depths of a forest or to a desert! It matters not where if we are only together, that I may have the bliss of cherishing you forever! *[Puts a bonbon to the lips of Mme. Kloekher; she eats it]*

MME. KLOEKHER *[drops her veil and takes her husband' s arm affectionately]*: Alphonse, my dear!

KLOEKHER: Hey? What?

MME. KLOEKHER: These people bore me! We used to be so cosy together in our pretty home! I love thee!

KLOEKHER *[aside]:* Now my wife says she loves me!
She has lost her head!

MACARET *[sobs in a corner, R.]*: Oh! oh! Good heavens! Oh!

KLOEKHER: What is the matter with you?

MACARET *[takes no notice of him]:* Oh! oh! So many precious days lost! Oh! I am like Titus!
(The Guests, who have all taken the bonbons, now press near Paul)

DOMINIQUE *[aside to Paul]*: This is going well!

PAUL *[aside]:* No, we still have some left. Dominique! *[Dominique knocks on the box]*

PAUL *[impatiently]:* Come! Come, then!

KLOEKHER *[irritated]:* This farce is played out! Every one has had enough of it. Get out, now!

PAUL: You have not had one, — you, Alphonse-Jean-Baptiste-Isidore Kloekher!

Kloekher!

KLOEKHER: Insolent! Who told you my names?

PAUL: I know them!

KLOEKHER *and* LETOURNEUX: Get out! Be off!

PAUL: Not until you have taken this heart!

KLOEKHER: I?

PAUL: I conjure you!

KLOEKHER: But this is an outrage!

PAUL: I command you!

KLOEKHER *[remains silent with anger a moment, then takes a majestic pose]:* By what right? *[Paul, without replying, takes off with a single movement, his wig and beard and the velvet robe. Kloekher raises his hands, amazed and shocked as if at the sight of a spectre]* He!

MME. KLOEKHER *[takes his arm gently, points to Paul, and speaks softly]:* Monsieur Paul!

LETOURNEUX *[bites his thumb and turns his back]:* Paul de Damvilliers!
A LADY: What a delightful surprise!

COLOMBEL: That excellent young man!

ALFRED *[presses Paul's hand]:* Dear friend! *[Guests surround Paul and shake hands with him]*

KLOEKHER: Good heavens! is every one his friend? Suppose he should tell! *[Suddenly extends his hand]* I will have one! *[Eats a bonbon]*

DOMINIQUE *[aside]:* That's what we wanted!

KLOEKHER *[in a half choked voice]:* AH! Wait! Oh, what have I done? I forgot! Those poor men that I caused to be sent away to the prison at Clichy the day before yesterday! *[Addresses a Lady]* Call François! *[To a Gentleman]* Pierre! Set them free! Send some one to their assistance!

LETOURNEUX *[approaches Kloekher anxiously]:* My friend!

KLOEKHER: And that worthy fellow, the inventor, to whom I refused twenty thousand francs. I must see about him! Where is my strong-box?

LETOURNEUX: But you are not serious, Kloekher?

KLOEKHER: Leave me, you! *[Letourneux recoilsf with a gesture of astonishment and pity]* I am happy! Yes! Do you hear, all of you? Happy that you are here to witness an act of — of — justice, — no.
an act of confidence. It is a matter of restitution — what did I say? — rather, of a sacred trust! *[Strikes his breast with both hands]* Fool that I am! Yes, I repeat, a sacred trust!

PAUL *[proudly]:* I did not come here for that, Monsieur!

KLOEKHER: That does not matter, young man! I shall profit by the occasion. I feel a great burden lifted from my heart, and not later than this very night I shall make restitution. *[Presses Paul's hand. Sound heard of villagers rejoicing]* How pleasant it is to hear the gaiety of the people! It doubles our own happiness to know that they are happy too. Poor people! they have none too many holidays throughout the long year. *[Calls loudly]* Open the champagne! Call them all in! Open the gates! Ah, what a glorious day! *[Posy light thrown on the stage]* I see life through rose-coloured spectacles to-day!

SCENE IV.

(Enter a throng of Villagers, also Father *and* Mother Thomas *and the proprietor of the wine-shop)*

THE PEOPLE: Long live Kloekher! Long live Monsieur Kloekher!

KLOEKHER: My heart swells!

MACARET *[sobs in his corner]:* Ah, how touching! DOMINIQUE *[taps his box]:* Hasten, hasten! Follow the crowd! Come, take the rest of the hearts! *(The people surround* Paul *and* Dominique. *Three servants in livery carry around baskets filled with bottles of champagne*. *Kloekher pulls out the corks, and, followed by a servant, mingles with the people and presses them to drink)*

KLOEKHER: Drink it down! Toss it off, boys! *(The rosy light deepens gradually until the end of the Tableau. Luminous tulips and sunflowers bloom among the trees. The grapes on a vine clinging around an oak-tree are turned into garnets; the leaves change to silver; and the leaves on all the other trees and shrubs turn to precious stones. The People embrace one another and dance about with joy*. Father *and* Mother Thomas *throw kisses to their son)*

DOMINIQUE *[to Paul]*: Well, all is finished, my good master! there is nothing more in the bag. Let us amuse ourselves like the rest.

PAUL *[takes a bonbon from the chair, holds it between his fingers and speaks slowly]:* There is still one left!

DOMINIQUE *[takes bonbon quickly]*: Well, there won't be long! I'll fix that! *[To a Gentleman]* You, Monsieur?

GENTLEMAN: I have had one.

DOMINIQUE *[to a Lady]:* You, Madame.

LADY: I, too, have had one.

DOMINIQUE: Here it is! The last one!

LADIES: We have all had one!

ALL: All! All!

PAUL *[speaks low]:* But that would be terrible! It is impossible!

DOMINIQUE *[speaks low, terrified, still holding the heart, which grows larger each moment]:* Master! Look! It grows! It swells!

LETOURNEUX *[comes up behind Paul and slaps his shoulder]:* You would like very much to have me swallow that, wouldn't you?

PAUL: Yes! Yes! Pardon me for that which I did to you! *[Shows the heart]* Take it! It will bring you peace of mind, the power to do good, appreciation of all that is beautiful, the ability to comprehend, simultaneously, humanity, nature and God! *[Letourneux smiles ironically, without moving]* But who are you, then, to remain insensible in the face of the happiness of all? From what stone were you quarried? Have you never loved anything, any one? Have you never dreamed of possessing happiness, or grieved to lose it? Ah, if it is necessary, in order to convince you, let me pour out my blood, go to the ends of the earth, serve you as a slave! Have pity! I beseech you! Yield to my entreaties! Take the heart!

LETOURNEUX: Thanks! It would bore me too much!

PAUL: Farewell, then, Jeanne! I am accursed! I have lost thee!
(The low wall at the back rises in height, and the flight of steps, now turned to silver, is lengthened. From each of the large vases of flowers emerges a woman. Each extends her arms so that they rest on the shoulders of her next neighbour, forming a long file. They are in white garments, decorated with pearls. Among the clouds above them at the back, the lower part of the Palace of the Pairies can be seen, with moonlight shining upon it, making it look like mother-of-pearl. Jeanne *is seen standing in front of it at the top of the flight of steps.* Paul, *turning to*
follow the glance of Letourneux, *perceives her and calls her name loudly. He runs up the steps. As he goes his dress changes to a costume appropriate to an apotheosis, — white with a flowing mantle. At every step he takes, a melodious strain issues from the stairs, following all the notes of the scale. When he reaches* Jeanne *he opens his arms to embrace her; at that instant the* Queen of the Fairies *appears at* Jeanne's *side while the other* Fairies *group themselves in the rear and at* R. *and* L. *On the peristyle of the Palace, which now shines clear and white* Paul *stops and draws back)*

PAUL: I dare not advance, O Queen! My mission is not finished. I have left evil still upon the earth!

QUEEN: There must always be evil upon earth! Thou hast not the less merited thy reward! Be happy in immortality!

DOMINIQUE *[with one foot on the lowest step, and holding the heart in his hand]:* And I, O Queen! What must I do with this heart?

QUEEN: Be thou the Guardian of Hearts! Keep a watch over those that cheat; console those that lose!

(Dominique *is changed into the* Guardian of Hearts. *The heart in his hand flies into the air at his left and rests upon a white square, which is of a proper size to hold it and serves as a foundation for it. A long narrow banner unfolds itself in the air, displaying in luminous letters these words):*

VIRTUE BEING REWARDED, THERE IS NOTHING MORE TO SAY!

Curtain

LE CHATEAU DES CŒURS

TABLE DES MATIÈRES

PREMIER TABLEAU
DEUXIÈME TABLEAU
TROISIÈME TABLEAU
QUATRIÈME TABLEAU
CINQUIEME TABLEAU
SIXIÈME TABLEAU
SEPTIÈME TABLEAU
HUITIÈME TABLEAU
NEUVIÈME TABLEAU
DIXIÈME TABLEAU

LE CHATEAU DES COEURS

PREMIER TABLEAU

Une clairière dans les bois. Il fait nuit complète. A la lueur exagérée des vers luisants, on distingue çà et là de grandes masses de verdure et parmi elles des blancheurs qui circulent. Au fond, à droite, un petit lac. Le rideau se lève. Silence. On n’entend qu’un bruit de pas.

SCÈNE PREMIÈRE

Du fond et des deux côtes de la scène débouchent des Fées, un doigt sur les lèvres. Elles sont coiffées de fleurs rustiques et de fleurs marines avec des roseaux, des épis de blé et des glaïeuls sur la tète, avec toutes les couleurs et tous les attributs des milieux où elles vivent : fées des bois, des fleuves, des montagnes. Elles se détournent pour regarder derrière elles, comme si elles avaient peur de quelque chose, se cherchent et s’appellent à voix basse dans les ténèbres.

PREMIERE FEE.

Pstt ! pstt !

DEUXIEME FEE.

Par ici !

TROISIEME FEE. Attendez-moi : mon pied s’est pris dans un rayon de lumière. Un effort ! Elle bondit. Et me voilà !

QUATRIEME FEE. Sommes-nous toutes réunies ?

TOUTES LN CHOEUR. Oui. Toutes, toutes !

CINQUIEME FEE. Il Tait nuit, la terre dort ! C’est notre heure ! Allons, sautez, papillons !

D’énormes phalènes lumineuses, s’élançant des arbres, se mettent a voleter dans l’air en même temps que’ les Fées à danser, sur un rythme lent, avec un bourdonnement de fuie.

CHOEUR DES FEES. Puisqu’on nous chasse de partout, dans le jour*

chez les hommes, prenons nos ébats en liberté, pendant la nuit, dans les bois.

Les hommes sont méchant-, mais la nature est bonne. Le pavé des villes est dur, mais l’herbe des prairies est douce.

Ne souillons plus nos pieds dans leur fange, ne brisons plus nos coeurs contre leur poitrine.

Le suc de l’euphorbe est moins perfide que leurs tendresses, la feuille desséchée qui roule au vent d’automne plus constante que leurs serments...

Assez de fatigue ! Tant pis pour eux ! Débarrasses de tout soin humain, nous n’en serons que plus heureuses.

Nous ne quitterons plus nos régions natales, la liberté de l’air, dis eaux et des bois.

Balançons-nous, suspendues aux lianes des arbres avec la roîée des nuits d’été ; courons sur la surface des lacs bleus, cramponnées au dos des demoiselles ; remontons ver= le soleil, dans les rayons poussiéreux qui passent par le soupirail des celliers ! Allons ! vive la joie ! en avant ! Pétales des roses, palpitez ! Ondes, murmurez ! Lune, lève-toi !

La lune peu à peu s’est levée pendant le choeur des Fées. Elle brille maintenant sur le lac, et les Fées se livrent à une joie extravagante, quand tout à coup, au milieu d’elles, et du sein d’une grosse touffe de bruyères sauvages, occupant le milieu de la scène, apparaît la Reine des Fces. Stupcui générale. Toutes s’ecrient : “La Reine !” et s’arrêtent.

SCÈNE II

LA REINE, LES FÉES.

LA REINE, d’un ton courroucé.

Comment ! voilà le soin que vous prenez des hommes !

LES FEES, se récriant.

Eh ! nous n’y pouvons rien. Nous avons tout essayé.

LA REINE, avec véhémence.

Mais quelques minutes encore, songez-y ! et nous retombons pendant mille ans sous la domination des Gnomes, puisque cette nuit est la dernière qui nous reste pour rendre aux hommes leurs cœurs volés.

UNE FEE.

Ils ne se plaignent pas d’en manquer, ô Reine ! Personne, jusqu’à présent, n’a redemandé le sien. Au contraire, il y a des parents qui enseignent à leurs petits...

LA REINE.

Qu’importe ! Ignorez-vous donc que les Gnomes ne peuvent vivre sans les cœurs des hommes, car c’est pour s’en nourrir qu’ils les dérobent en leur mettant à la place, là, Elle désigne sa poitrine.

je ne sais quel rouage de leur invention, lequel imite parfaitement bien les mouvements de la nature.

UNE FEE, riant.

En vérité, on s’y trompe !

LA REINE.

Et les pauvres humains se laissent faire sans répugnance. Quelques-uns même y trouvent du plaisir. Petit à petit, et par l’effet d’un accord mutuel, pendant que le cœur sort du dedans, les génies du mal le tirent du dehors ; et c’est ainsi que leur race entière, ou presque entière, est vide de bons sentiments et de pensées généreuses.

UNE FEE.

Et tu veux que nous vainquions les Gnomes ?

LA REINE.

Oui, recommencez la lutte. Un ordre supérieur a partagé entre eux et vous l’empire du monde. Nous les avons vaincus autrefois ; mais, depuis mille ans, ils triomphent. Les hommes, tyrannisés par eux, s’abandonnent aux exigences de la matière. L’esprit des Gnomes a pa ;sé dans la moelle de leurs os ; il les enveloppe, les empêche de nous reconnaître et leur cache comme un brouillard la splendeur de la vérité, le soleil de l’idéal.

LES FEES.

Eh ! tant pis, les Gnomes ne peuvent rien contre nous.

LA REINE.

Mais à mesure qu’ils étendent leur pouvoir, le vôtre se rétrécit. On repousse vos consolations, on se moque de nos espoirs, on nie même notre existence, et quand ils auront conquis toute la terre, ils convoiteront des régions plus pures ; ils se jetteront sur vous avec mille forces accrues, et vos cœurs, comme ceiK des autres, seront dévorés !

Les Fées poussent un cri d’épouvante.

Rassurez-vous, écoutez-moi !

Elles se rassemblent autour d’elle.

Tour sauver le genre humain d’abord, et vous ensuite, il faut attaquer la puissance de vos ennemis dans son repaire, c’est-à-dire dans l’endroit inaccessible où ils tiennent en réserve les cœurs des hommes.

LES FEES, tumultueusement.

Allons-y !

LA REINE.

Restez ! L’entreprise ne peut réussir que par le complet accord de deux amants.

LES FEES.

Oh ! ce n’est pas rare, cela ; et sur la quantité...

LA REINE.

Je veux dire deux amants d’une ardeur et d’une pureté plus qu’humaine, et dont l’un soit capable de mourir pour l’autre, sans avoir même l’espérance d’une larme sur sa tombe.

LES FEES, se récriant. Oh ! oh ! oh ! Ht où les trouver ?

LA REINE.

Je l’ignore. Ils peuvent être là, tout près, comme à l’autre bout du monde, sous des haillons ou sur un trône. Fouillez partout, dans les villes, les déserts et les bois, et, du bord des plages au sommet des monts, ne négligez rien ; allez !

Bruit de pas dans la coulisse.

On vient, cachons-nous ! Des yeux mortels ne doivent pas nous voir.

Le soleil peu à peu s’est levé et, à travers le brouillard, il laisse voir à droite une cabane, au fond d’un massif d’arbres. Au bruit des pas qui se rapprochent, les Fées disparaissent, les unes dans les troncs des arbres voisins, d’autres plongent da-is le laci d’autres s’évanouissent dans le brouillards *SCÈNE* ///

LE PÈRE THOMAS, LA MÈRE THOMAS, *paysans des environs de Paris ;* DOMINIQ.UE, *leur fils, avec vue vieille livrée ;* M. PAUL, *en costume de voyage fané, un crêpe à son chapeau ; il a l’air fort accablé.*

LE PERE THOMAS. Du courage, mon bon monsieur Paul !

LA MERE THOMAS. Allons, il faut vous mettre en route pour Paris et ne pas négliger vos affaires ; quelques lieues de marche, ce n’est pas le diable !

PAUL.

Oui, je serai fort, je vais partir.

LE PERE THOMAS. Oh ! rien ne presse.

LA MERE THOMAS, à part, désignant son mari. Imbécile, va !

PAUL.

Merci, mes braves gens ; mais quant à abuser plus longtemps de votre hospitalité...

LE PERE THOMAS, à part.

Ah ! enfin, il comprend !

DOMINIQUE.

Elle n’était pas digne de vous, c’est vrai ! et je m’étonne que Monsieur ait consenti à la subir. Puisque l’ancien régisseur de Monsieur, ce misérable, n’a pas eu le cœur de vous offrir un appartement dans le château, c’était bien la peine de venir ici pour écouter la kyrielle de ces maudits comptes. En vérité, Monsieur n’est pas heureux depuis quelque temps.

PAUL, rêvant.

Oui, c’a été comme une conjuration... un acharnement du hasard ; la mort subite de mon père, des dettes anciennes qui se présentent, une ruine complète enfin, sans qu’on puisse en saisir la cause ni accuser personne.

DOMINIQUE.

Quel guignon ! Nous menions une si belle vie à voyager ensemble tous les deux !

PAUL.

Calme-toi, bon Dominique, et 11e parle plus du temps récent et déjà loin où nous vagabondions pour mon plaisir à travers les Indes et l’Orient. Plus de regrets ! Il va encore falloir se lancer dans le monde, mais pour y chercher fortune.

Il rêve.

LE PERE THOMAS.

Le difficile, c’est de l’attraper.

PAUL.

Bah ! avec du courage !

Se tournant vers Dominique.

Et puis, tu uc m’abandonnes pas.

DOMINIQUE.

Oh ! non, non ! J’ai confiance en Monsieur ; je l’ai vu à l’œuvre. N’importe ! Ce serait le cas, si Monsieur veut le permettre, d’avoir à notre service quelques-uns de ces génies bienfaisants dont vous étiez si curieux là-bas ! En avez vous consulté de CvS magiciens de toutes les couleurs, en robe verte, en robe jaune, en robe bleue, en manteau bariolé, sans compter ceux qui n’avaient pas de chemine ! Et on aurait dit, vraiment, que vous croyiez à toutes leur fariboles.

PAUL.

Peut-être ! pourquoi pas ?... Mais je n’ai que trop tardé, adieu !...

SCÈ^CE IV

LES PRECEDEXTS, JEANNE ;

LA MERE THOMAS.

Qu’est-ce que tu viens faire ici, toi, fainéante ?

PAUL, affligé.

Oh ! comme vous la traitez !

LA MÈRE THOMAS.

N’allez-vous pas la défendre, monsieur Paul ? Après tout, vous avez raison, allez : elle a assez parlé de vous pendant votre voyage.

PAUL.

Comment, ma mignonne, tu ne m’avais pas oublié ! Tu pensais a moi ?

LA MÈRE THOMAS.

Si elle y pensait, bonté divine ! Figurez-vous que depuis cinq ans elle parlait de vous continuellement : “Où est-il ? Quand reviendra-t-il ?” Elle demandait de vos nouvelles à tous les rou-liers qui passaient, et quand le vent soufflait sur le lac, elle avait peur pour votre navire.

LE PÈRE THOMAS, voulant chasser Jeanne qui s’est rapprochée.

Ça ne te regarde pas. A l’ouvrage !...

PAUL.

Comme tu as grandi ! Te voilà une belle fille, maintenant ! Veux-tu que je t’embrasse ?

Elle baisse la tète.

DOMINIQUE.

Avance donc, nigaude !

JEANNE, présentant son front timidement, et d’une voix émue.

Vous allez partir ?

PAUL.

Oui, chère petite. Il le faut !

Il l’embrasse.

JEANNE, s’avançant vers son frère.

Adieu aussi, toi !

Se tournant vers le père et la mère.

Car il suit Monsieur ! Il me l’a promis !

LA MÈRE THOMAS, à part, à Dominique.

Tout ruiné qu’il est ?

DOMINIQUE, à part.

Nous attendons des héritages !... Et puis... et puis...

LA MÈRE THOMAS, à part.

Défie-toi !

DOMINIQUE, à part.

D’ailleurs, il sera toujours temps de le planter là, s’il ne réussit pas. On parlera de moi comme d’un serviteur modèle. Ça pose !... Et avec une ou deux réclames dans les journaux... de sport... J’ai pour amis des auteurs !

LE PÈRE THOMAS. Au moins, envoie-nous de temps en temps...

DOMINIQUE.

Impossible ! Mes capitaux sont... seront engagés. Nous connaissons des gens de Bourse !

LA MÈRE THOMAS, avec admiration. Quel gaillard !

DOMINIQUE. Mais dès que j'aurai une position sérieuse...

LE PÈRE THOMAS, s'épanouissant.

Ah !

DOMINIQUE.

Je vous donnerai de mes nouvelles !

LA MÈRE THOMAS. Soigne-toi bien, au moins !

DOMINIQUE. Moi avant tout ! C'est un principe !

LE PÈRE THOMAS.

Et ne te ruine pas le tempérament avec les particulières en falbalas.

DOMINIQUE.

Allons donc ! On est revenu de ces folichonne-ries. Le positif ! Je ne sors pas de là !

LA MÈRE THOMAS.

A-t-il de l'esprit !

DOMINIQUE.

Et maintenant, les anciens, bonsoir, bon appétit et bonne santé !

Jl embrasse le père.

Et d'une !

Jl embrasse la mère.

Et de deux ! C'est fini ! Embarqué !

PAUL.

Malgré ma détres-e, il veut me suivre : vous le voyez !

DOMINIQUE.

Oh ! tant qu’il y en aura pour vous, je me contente ! Vous ne pouvez pas vivre sans valet de chambre ! C’est indécent !’Je ferai retourner ma livrée, mettre un galon neuf à mon chapeau, et nous ferons encore belle figure, saperlotte ! Monsieur, à vos ordres !

JEANNE, sautant au cou de son frère.

Oh ! mon bon frère !

LE PERE THOMAS, a Dominique. Prends garde !

DOMINIQUE.

Oui ! oui !

LA MÈRE THOMAS. Écoute donc !

DOMINIQUE, s’éloignant. N’ayez pas peur.

LE PÈRE THOMAS.

Reviens !

DOMINIQUE.

On se reverra !

LA MÈRE THOMAS. Mon pauvre fils !

DOMINIQUE. Je vous écrirai !

lia disparu.

PAUL, au père et à la mère.

Je ne puis le retenir. Adieu ! Adieu ! Rassurez-vous. Nous allons faire fortune.

Il sort.

SCÈPCE V

LE PÈRE THOMAS, LA MÈRE THOMAS, JEANNE.

LE PÈRE THOMAS, rêvant.

Faire fortune !... devenir un gros monsieur... avoir de bons morceaux de terre... des prés... des bois... un moulin... et marcher sur le ventre à tout le monde... c’est ça qui est beau !

LA MÈRE THOMAS.

Je crois bien !

A Jeanne.

Aussi, tu entends, toi, tu vas piocher, je t'en réponds, au lieu de passer des heures entières à regarder comme tu fais dans le blanc des nuages.

JEANNE.

Cependant, dès le petit matin...

LA MÈRE THOMAS.

Bah ! tout ça c'est de la paresse...

LE PÈRE THOMAS.

Écoute, il me vient une idée.

LA MÈRE THOMAS.

Ça rapportera-t-il ?

LE PÈRE THOMAS.

Peut-être. Si nous envoyions Jeannette à Paris ?

JEANNE.

Aller toute seule... là-bas... dans la grande ville...

LA MÈRE THOMAS.

Dame ! il y en a plus d'une qui est partie en sabots de son village... et qu'on a vue revenir... Qui sait !

Regardant Jeanne.

Pas déjà si chiffonnée, la Jeannette !... Eh ! pourquoi pas ? C'est décidé. A partir de demain...

JEANNE.

Je vous en supplie...

LA MÈRE THOMAS.

Oh ! nous n'épargnerons rien. Ton père et moi nous saurons faire des sacrifices. N'est-ce pas, Thomas ? Et pour commencer, je te donne ma capeline rouge... Avec mes vieilles coiffes nous trouverons bien moyen... Seras-tu assez gentille !... Ah ! vois-tu, Jeannette, il faut de la coquetterie... mais de la bonne, de la vraie... de celle qui fait pousser des gros sous... et assure l'existence des parents... des bons parents.

JEANNE.

Que devenir à Paris, toute seule ?... Je ne saurai seulement pas me retrouver dans les rues...

LA MÈRE THOMAS.

Bah ! il y a des gens polis... qui vous enseignent...

JEANNE.

Je n’y connais personne.

LA MÈRE THOMAS.

Eh bien ! et Dominique ? Il a de si belles connaissances ! Des banquiers, des militaires... tout le gouvernement, quoi !

JEANNE.

Non, je n’oserai jamais !

LA MÈRE THOMAS.

Sans compter monsieur Paul qui se fera un plaisir...

JEANNE.

Lui !... Une pauvre fille comme moi !

LE PÈRE THOMAS.

Mais saperlipopette !...

LA MÈRE THOMAS, au père.

Tais-toi. Tu ne sais pas la prendre.

A Jeanne.

Paris et ma belle agrafe d’or... ou bien la maison et...

Elle fait signe de lui donner des giffies. JEANNE, avec résignation.

Eh bien ! j’irai.

LA MERE THOMAS.

Enfin ! Mai ; d’ici là tu ne vas pas te croiser les bras. A l’ouvrage, et vivement !

JEANNE.

Tout de suite.

LE PÈRE THOMAS.

Par ici.

LA MÈRE THOMAS.

Par là.

JEANNE.

Je ne sais plus...

LA MÈRE THOMAS, lui donnant un soufflet. Voilà pour t’apprendre.

LE PERE THOMAS. Piaule, sanglote, file !

Ils sortent en poussant Jeanne devant eux.

SCÈ&CE VI

LES FÉES *reparaissent.*

TOUTES LES FÉES.

Ah ! les sales vieux ! Heureusement les jeunes sont meilleurs, ce qui nous fait déjà deux cœurs purs.

UNE DES FÉES.

Sans doute. Mais lui, comment pourra-t-il jamais s’éprendre d’une fillette aussi simple, aussi pauvre, aussi sale ?

LA REINE.

Ah ! il faudra bien que nous fassions naître cet amour, puisque notre succès en dépend. Mais comme nous ne pouvons avertir que l’un des deux, voyons, mes sœurs, décidez-vous, hâtez-vous !

LES FÉES, tumultueusement.

— Lui !

— Elle !

— Non ! non !

— Elle ! lui !

— Lui !

— Elle !

LA REINE

LA REINE.

Allons ! c’cst le jeune homme, car Jeanne a pour sauvegarde son ignorance et l’humilité de sa condition. Paul, au contraire, est exposé chaque jour à toutes les embûches des Gnomes. Donc c’est lui que nous devons avertir quand il en sera temps, seulement, et protéger dans les limites permises.

Conseils et exhortations de la Reine aux Fées pour protéger Paul.

Allons, mes sœurs, de la prudence Et notre plan réussira.

On entend des voix souterraines répéter : Ah ! ah ! ah !

LES FÉES s’arrêtent. Qu’est-ce donc ? L’écho, sans doute.

Elles reprennent le chant.

Allons, mes sœurs, de la prudence Et notre plan réussira.

Les voix souterraines vont crescendo de force et de gaieté, et l’on voit sortir de dessous terre des petits êtres avec des tètes énormes, les Gnomes ; ils crient plus fort et tournent autour des Fées, qui s’enfuient prises de terreur.

DEUXIÈME TABLEAU

Un cabaret aux environs de Paris. Il fait petit jour.

SCÈNE PREMIMÈRE

LE CABARETIER ; PAUL, DOMINIQUE, *couverts de poussière, fatigues et assis devant une table où sont une bouteille de vin, deux verres, un encrier et un paquet de lettres cachetées.*

DES MARAICHERS, pariant pour la halle.

Adieu, père Michel !

LE CABARETIER. Bonne chance, les enfants !

A Paul et à Dominique. Et à présent que vous êtes servis, Messieurs, vous excuserez, mais comme il est encore grand matin et que je n’attends plus de monde, je reprends mon somme.

Il monte dans son comptoir, appuie sa tète sur ses deux mains et s’endort.

PAUL, montrant à Dominique le paquet de lettres.

Ainsi, tu comprends : à peine arrivé, tu les distribueras !

DOMINIQUE, prenant les lettres.

Entendu !

// lit au fur et à mesure.

A monsieur le vicomte Alfred de Cisy !... Bon ! en voilà un dont vous avez souvent payé les dettes ! Mais son adresse ?

PAUL.

Tu la demanderas au Club !

DOMINIQUE, continuant.

A monsieur Onésime Dubois, peintre, rue de l’Abbaye ! Lui en avez-vous acheté de ces croûtes, à celui-là !... Au professeur Letoumeux, membre de plusieurs sociétés religieuses et philanthropiques. Connu ! c’est votre père qui l’a présenté partout à Paris !... Au docteur... Colombel.

PAUL.

Le médecin de la famille, tu sais !

DOMINIQUE.

A monsieur Bou... Bou... Bouvignard...

PAUL.

Eh ! oui ! l'amateur de vieilles faïences !

DOMINIQUE.

Ah ! ce petit maigre qui venait toujours à l'heure du déjeuner, suffit !... A monsieur Maca-ret, en son usine ; il a été bien heureux de trouver certains écus, quand il s'est établi !

Il feuillette le paquet en marmottant.

Bien ! bien ! je connais les rues, je vois ça !... Ah ! comme vous en avez de ces amis, des pairs de France, des banquiers, des savants, des artistes, Paris entier !

PAUL, soupirant.

Après cinq ans d'absence, ils m'auront oublié peut-être !... Heureusement qu'il y a des bons !... Aussi...

Désignant les lettres. fais-en deux parts. Celles-là d'abord, les autres ensuite !

LE CABARETIER, se réveillant en sursaut.

Voilà, Messieurs !

DOMINIQUE.

Ou ne vous demande rien.

LE CABARETIER.

Ah !

Il bâille et reprend sa position.

PAUL.

Et tu auras sjin de lire les écriteaux des appartements à louer ; tu ma prendras un cabinet qui ne soit pas cher !

DOMINIQUE.

L'étage est indifférent à Monsieur ?

PAUL.

Oui, indifférent !

LE C ABARETI ER, eveillant en sursaut.

Voilà !

Paul lui fait un signe de tète négatif.

DOMINIQUE, qui s’est levé d’effroi’tout à coup.

Ah ! il a le sommeil occupé, décidément.

Il se rassoit.

Ouf ! on est bien !... J’ai les genoux rompus de fatigue, avec la tète d’un crcux...

PAUL, debout.

C’est d’avoir marché toute la nuit ! Pauvre garçon ! finis la bouteille, va !

Dominique boit.

Et à moi aussi, le cœur défaille ! Au moment de me jeter dans une existence nouvelle, je ne sais quel trouble m’envahit ; c’e. t comme le malaise qui nous survient quand on va partir pour les longs voyages ! Allons, lève-toi !

SCÈNEII

PAUL, DOMINIQUE ; UN BOURGEOIS, *vêtu d’une longue redingote, chapeau à bords retroussés, favoris, canne à lanière de cuir, entre tout doucement, et s’assoit à une des tables, observant Paul et Dominique avec des yeux flamboyants. La pluie se met à tomber au dehors.*

DOMINIQUE. Bon ! la pluie ! Il nous faut attendra, puisqu’un équipage nous manque pour faire notre entrée à Paris.

PAUL.

Quand nous en sommes sortis, la dernière fois, c’était dans une chaise de poste à quatre chevaux.

DOMINIQUE. Moi, j’étais ^ur le siège ; je payais les postillons ! et, aujourd’hui, nous voila à guetter l’omnibus.

L’INCONNU, je levant poliment* Les omnibus de la banlieue, Monsieur, ne se mettent en marche qu’à huic heures et demie du matin.

Faul et Dominique te retournent et examinent l’inconnu.

L’INCONNU.

Ces Messieurs sont étrangers ?... Monsieur voyage pour son plaisir, sans doute ? Si Monsieur avait besoin de quelques renseignements dans la capitale, je pourrais... vu mes relations nombreuses...

Faul et Dominique ne répondint pas.

Brounn... brounn... il fait un froid !... Je prendrais volontiers quelque chose de chaud ! Hé ! garçon, un punch !

Le cabaretier se lève en sursaut et sort par la droite.

Du sucre, un citron, du cognac ! vivement !... et si ces Messieurs veulent me faire l’honneur...

Une serrante, arrivant par la gauche, apporte un bol.

DOMINIQUE.

Avec plaisir, Monsieur ; vous êtes trop bon !

La servante n’a eu que le temps de poser le bol sur la table ; une flamme paraît dessus.

Mais il n’y avait rien là-dedans tout à l’heure... voilà qui est drôle !

A l’inconnu.

Ah ! ça, dites donc, vous l’aviez dans votre poche, celui-là... vous êtes un physicien, un grec !... Ah ! elle est forte ! il vient au cabaret avec des punchs bi/eautés !

L’INCONNU.

Je ne comprends pas un mot, cher Monsieur, de ce que vous dites.

A la servante, en lui remettant de l’argent.

Faites-moi le plaisir d’aller me chercher des panntellas dans la boutique de la deuxième rue, à droite, le troisième casier en haut ; j’ai ma boîte, on me connaît !

Elle sort.

A nous deux, maintenant !

SCÈNE111

PAUL, DOMINIQUE, L’INCONNU.

(Paul est resté accoudé, rêvant.)

L’INCONNU, montrant le punch.

Vraiment, Monsieur, est-ce que je n’aurai point l’avantage...

DOMINIQUE, d’un ton engageant.

Voyons, mon pauvre maître... pas de fierté !...

PAUL se lève.

Il n’en faut plus avoir, c’est vrai ! Il s’assoit à la petite table prés de l’inconnu et de Dominique.

L’INCONNU.

Ainsi, vous venez chercher forlune dans la grande ville ?...

PAUL.

Qui vous l’a dît ?

L’INCONNU.

Vous-même !

PAUL.

Comment cela ?

L’INCONNU.

Tout à l’heure, quand vous causiez avec votre domestique !...

PAUL.

Il me semblait cependant...

L’INCONNU.

Pardonnez ! je sais tout !... et comme mon industrie, Monsieur, consiste à tenir un bureau de renseignements universels et à faire un vaste courtage dans les différentes classes de la société, il y va de mon intérêt de vous servir.

DOMINIQUE.

Voilà de la franchise au moins !

L’INCONNU.

Monsieur se propose de chercher un emploi dan ? une administration quelconque ?...

PAUL, brutalement.

Non !

L’INCONNU.

De prendre les finances, la diplomatie ou les chemins de fer ?

PAUL.

Eh ! qu’en sais-je moi-même ?

L’INCONNU.

Le commerce, peut-être ?

DOMINIQUE.

Ah ! bien oui ! un homme qui en deux heures de temps vous couvre de peinture une toile plus haute que ça !

L’INCONNU, saluant ironiquement.

Ah ! Monsieur est artiste !... ah ! et il compte faire fortune ; respectons-le !

PAUL, irrité.

Eh bien ! pourquoi pas ? Quand je vois tant de barbouilleurs que l’on applaudit, ce serait bien le diable... D’ailleurs j’ai de. longues études derrière moi et en employant toutes mes forces, la gloire viendra... peut-être, la richesse ensuite.

L’INCONNU.

Très bien, jeune homme ! Mais j’espère que vous allez, pour parvenir, ne rien négliger de tout ce qu’il vous faut : pille/-moi les anciens, dénigre/ les modernes, exaltez les petits génies et conspuez les grands ; ça pose, premier pas ! Vous peindrez ensuite les boutiquiers en artilleurs et les lorcttes en Vénus, avec les chevaux célèbres et les actions vertueuses, sans nul souci du dessin ni de la couleur ; ou dirait que vous manquez d’idées, prenez garde ! Il faudra ensuite adopter le grec ou le gothique, le pompadour ou le chinois, l’obscénité ou la vertu, la chose à la mode, peu importe ! Mais agenouillez-vous devant le public, servilement, et ne lui donnez rien qui dépasse la force de son esprit, les facultés de sa bourse, la largeur de son mur ! Alors vos œuvres, reproduites à l’infini, couvriront l’Europe. Vous entrerez dans la cervelle de votre siècle. Vous serez un maître, une gloire, presque une religion. Le despotisme de votre médiocrité pourra abêtir toute une race ; il s’étendra même sur la Nature, car vous la ferez haïr, ô grand homme, car elle rappellera de loin vos barbouillages.

PAUL, indigne.

Jamais !

L’INCONNU.

Vous avez raison ! une place, des appointements fixes, c’est plus sur. Je vous recommande avant tout l’exactitude, non pour travailler, mais pour surveiller vos confrères. D’abord une petite médisance çà et là, puis une dénonciation formel’.e — dans l’intérêt du service ; enfin une bonne calomnie, n’ayez pag peur ! De l’arrogance envers les humbles, de la bassesse devant les chefs, cravate empesée et souple échine, morbleu ! cervelle étroite et conscience large ; respectez les abus, promettez beaucoup, tenez rarement, courbez-vous sous l’orage et, dans les circonstances difficiles, faites le mort ! Mais tâchez de connaître le vice de votre supérieur ; s’il prise, achetez une tabatière, et s’il aime les jolies femmes, mariez-vous !

PAUL.

Horreur !

L’INCONNU.

De l’indépendance !... j’aime ça ! On ne la trouve plus, Monsieur, que dans une fortune acquise par le commerce. Nous avons le système des faillites honorables, les secrets des faux poids et du bon teint ; mais rappelez-vous que le moyen d’avancement le plus rapide pour un jeune homme, dans une grande maison, c’est de séduire la femme du bourgeois.

PAUL.

Tais-toi donc, misérable !

L’INCONNU.

Oui, la fille vaut mieux, parce qu’il est forcé de vous la donner en mariage !

Paul recule tpouva-ité.

DOMINIQUE.

Il y a au Fond de bonnes idées dans ce qu’il dit.

L’INCONNU, toujours impassible.

Et alors, quoi que vous soyez, les obstacles s’aplaniront, chacun vous sourira ; la santé sera bonne, vous dînerez bien, vous aurez la face rose comme une jeune fille.

Sa barbe disparaît j surprise de Paul.

Peu à peu vous deviendrez riche, considéré, heureux, vous ferez craquer sur l'asphalte vos bottes vernies, en roulant dans vos gants blancs le pommeau d'or de votre bambou.

Ce qu'il dit s'exécute ; Paul pousse un cri.

On vous craindra, on vous aimera ; vous vous repasserez vos caprices : habits neufs tous les jours, bagues à tous les doigts, chaînes de montre, breloques et linge fin.

Il apparaît vêtu en dandy ; Paul et Dominique se rapprochent.

Vous achèterez une maison de campagne, des statues, des hôtels, des amis, et des chevaux de race, ce qui est plus cher. Pour duper les générations futures, vous pourrez môme fonder un hôpital ; et vous vieillirez tout doucement, servi par un peuple de valets, entouré de famille, lourd d'honneurs, avec une grosse bedaine et l'aspect d'un honnête homme.

Il apparaît en vieux bourgeois cossu, lunettes d'or, gilet de velours, *etc.*

PAUL, se passant les mains sur la figure.

Est-ce une illusion ? J'ai dans la tête comme des chars cjui roulent, et des flammes qui voltigent.

Le punch, qui a continué de brûler, se multiplie sur les autres tables, et les flammes sautillent çà et là dans l'air comme des feux follets.

DOMINIQUE tourne avec admiration autour de l'inconnu.

Quel particulier ! quelle expérience !

PAUL, résolument.

Non ! je ne veux pas ! arrière ! C'est même une faiblesse de t'écouter. Va-t'en !

L'INCONNU.

A votre aise ! Faites le vertueux, mon gaillard, et serrez-vous le ventre ! Toutes les portes de la fortune, on les refermera sur vous, en vous écrasant la face ! D'abord, cela va sans dire. Monsieur gardera les apparences. Vous irez jusqu'à neuf heures du soir avec deux sous de lait et un petit pain rond qu'on mange dans la poche de sa redingote, tout en trottinant sur le pavé ! Ah ! vous les connaître/, les mystères de la toilette, les faux-cols de papier, l'encre que l'on repasse sur les coutures blanchies, les sous-pieds tendus pour retenir 1ns semelles trop vieilles, et l'habit noir boutonné jusqu'au menton, pour cacher l'absence du linge.

Il apparaît dans le costume décrit.

Vous ne faiblirez pas ! vous lutterez ! Mais personne ne voudra de vous !... On ne va pas chercher ceux qui se cachent ! qui donc s’inquiète des pauvres ? et comme une première chute est la cause naturelle d’une seconde, peu à peu vous dégringolerez, mon bon homme ; la misère augmentera, elle deviendra irrémédiable et constitutionnelle ! a Clic ! clac ! clac ! gare-toi de là, manant !...” et du fond de votre ruisseau, par un temps de verglas, en plein hiver, vous distinguerez à des hauteurs vertigineuses, derrière la mousseline des larges croisées, tournoyer sous des lustres, dans le flamboiement des festins, toutes les convoitises de votre cœur.

Le cote droit de la muraille s’entr’ouvre et laisse voir un bal splendide, puis se referme.

Alors commenceront pour vous, dans Paris, ces longues promenades du pauvre le long des quais et des boulevards. Plus vague et funeste que le Bédouin dans le désert, vous chercherez quelque bonne occasion, un parapluie perdu, une bourse tombée, en marchant jusqu’au milieu de la nuit, où vous irez dormir côte à côte avec des forçats, les pieds dans la paille, assis sur un banc, et les deux bras contre une corde !

Le côté gauche de la muraille s’entr’ouvre it laisse voir l’intérieur abject d’un logeur, rempli de monde, puis se referme.

Et l’habit râp.-, depuis longtemps, sera parti.

Son habit disparait.

A la place du chapeau, une casquette sans visière.

Même jeu.

Plus de gilet, une seule bretelle ! et pas même de souliers... des chaussons !

Avec une pose ignoble.

Faut-il un fiacre, mon bourgeois ?

PAUL, se tordant les mains.

Horrible ! horrible !

DOMINIQUE. Mais ce n’est pas gai du tout, cet avenir-là !

PAUL, découragé, to.nbe sur un tabount, le coude sur la table.

Que faire ?

A lajin de la tirade de l’Inconnu, la servante est rentrée avec un paquet de cigares, qu’elle a déposé sur la table. L’Inconnu, qui est près de Paul, debout à droite, fait un pas à reculons avec un geste d’espoir ; mais aussitôt, en face de lui et derrière Dominique, la servante, se transmuant en fée, allonge le bras impérativement vers l’Inconnu qui se change en gnome.

Dominique, stupéfait, pousse un cri. Paul relève-la tète et en pousse un autre, en apercevant la Fée, qui disparait dans la muraille à droite en même temps que le Gnome disparaît à gauche.

TROISIÈME TABLEAU

Chez le banquier Kloekher : un boudoir, portes des deux côtés et au fond. Pendant la première scène, des valets traversent le théâtre, portant des jardinières et des meubles, pour les derniers préparatifs d’un bal.

SCÈNE PREMIMÈRE

ALFRED, PAUL. PAUL.

Comment, mon cher Alfred, vous m’amenez chez monsieur Kloekher, le soir même d’un bal ?

ALFRED.

Qu’importe ! n’êtes-vous pas en tenue ? Et puisque

Emphatiquement.

la *fête* n’est pas encore commencée, vous aurez bien le temps de dire un mot à notre illu>ire financier.

PAUL.

C’est là un vrai service que vous me rendez ! Merci du fond de l’âme, car sans vous je ne savais que devenir. Partout où je me suis présenté, depuis un mois bientôt, porte close ! Ah ! les amis ! Et que de tentatives, d’efforts !

Il b.iisse la tète.

ALFRED.

Allons, bien ! vous voilà retombé dans vos idées mélancoliques, romantiques et poétiques !

Lui tapant sur l’épaule.

Ce bon Paul ! il n’a pas changé : prompt à s’enflammer toujours pour toutes les femmes et à donner dans toutes les illusions. C’est comme votre histoire du cabare :.

Il rit.

Ah ! ah ! ah !

PAUL.

Mais quand je vous dis que j’ai vu...

ALFRED.

Bah ! vous aurez été la dupe de quelque hallucination ou d'un faiseur de tours ! Comme si l'on rencontrait dans les bouges de la banlieue des créatures célestes disparaissant à travers les murailles ! Vous avez beau soutenir qu'elle est belle comme une fée, et même qu'elle en portait le costume, les fées, mon cher, ne sortent plus de la Chaussée d'Antin ; et je compte, tout à l'heure, vous eu faire voir une. qu'on appelle dans le monde madame Kloekher... et qui a pour nous quelque indulgence.

PAUL, saluant.

Ah !

ALFRED.

Mais oui ! on est posé. Moi, je m'amuse énormément.

PAUL.

Et le mari ?

ALFRED.

Un ancien Auvergnat ! Il en a porté bien d'autres ! Un rustre, d'ailleurs, un avare.

PAUL.

Comment !... Mon père, au contraire, m'avait dit...

ALFRED.

Votre père le connaissait ?

PAUL.

Beaucoup ! Et il m'avait vanté toujours son dé. sintéressement. Moi, je ne l'ai jamais vu, car...

ALFRED, vivement.

Mais si votre père le connaissait, qu'aviez-vous besoin de moi alors ? Vous pouviez vous recommander tout seul.

PAUL, humblement.

Ah ! mon ami, on est timide quand on est pauvre !

ALFRED, à part.

Pauvre ! pauvre ! Moi, je ne savais pas qu’il fût pauvre !... sans cela !...

SCÈNE 11 KLOEKHER, PAUL, ALFRED.

KLOEKHER.

Salut, vicomte !

ALFRED.

Bonjour, grand financier ! Permettez que je vous présente un de mes intimes, monsieur Paul de Damvillie :s.

KLOEKHER, à part.

Son fils !

ALFRED.

11 a besoin de je ne sais quoi ; il va vous expliquer son histoire. Oh ! bon garçon ! excellent ! Et j’ai une autre grâce à réclamer : puis-je présenter mes respects à Madame, si toutefois... ?

KLOEKHER.

Certes ; comment donc !

SCÈNE 111 KLOEKHER, PAUL.

KLOEKHER.

J’ai beaucoup connu monsieur votre père, Monsieur, et, comme je l’estimais infiniment, la soudaineté de sa catastrophe m’a affligé plus qu’un autre. Et vous n’avez pas, jusqu’à présent, trouvé, deviné de quelle manière elle a pu survenir ?

PAUL.

Hélas ! non, Monsieur ! J’ai même renoncé à en chercher la cause.

KLOEKHER, après avoir soupiré largement.

C’est plus sage ! Ne perdez pas votre temps à cela, croyez-moi !

Avec hauteur.

Et vous demandez... ?

PAUL.

Du travail, iMonsieur ! Oh ! mes exigences seront modestes !

KLOEKHER.

Quel âge avez-vous, s’il vous plaît ?

PAUL.

Vingt-cinq ans.

KLOEKHER.

Euh ! euh ! un peu jeune ! Et, en fait de comptabilité, de banque, que savez-vous ?

PAUL.

Peu de choses, c’est vrai ; mais j’apprendrai vite !

KLOEKHER.

Ah ! vous croyez ?... Et qu’avez-vous fait jusqu’à présent ?

PAUL.

J’ai voyagé.

KLOEKHER.

Où cela ?... Dans quel but ?

PAUL.

Dans le nord de l’Afrique, et jusqu’en Chine, pour m’instruire.

KLOEKHER.

Ou vous amuser plus librement, avouez-le J C’est une jolie manière de manger sa fortune ; on se donne par-là le vernis d’un homme sérieux ; et l’on se fait regarder des badauds en rapportant de longues pipes pour les amis et des babouches pour les petites dames. Ah ! ces bons jeunes gens ! ils sont drôles, parole d’honneur !

PAUL, i.ritè.

Monsieur !...

KLOEKHER.

Laissez donc ! je les connais, vos études ! Parions que vous ne sauriez pas seulement me dire le nom des principaux comptoirs de Macao, ni le taux de l’escompte à Calcutta.

PAUL.

Et il y a d’autres choses !

KLOEKHER.

C’est possible ! Mais alors que venez-vous faire ici ? Que voulez-vous ?

PAUL.

Une place, Monsieur, une place ! Je puis traduire vos correspondances, rédiger vos mé - moires ! Un homme en vaut un autre, avec de la force et du courage. Je vous prie de considérer la situation... pénible où je me trouve ; et j’ose, pour appuyer ma requête, vous faire souvenir que mon père fut votre ami.

KLOEKHER.

Eh ! votre père, Monsieur, était un fort galant homme ; mais, s’il avait suivi mes conseils, il n’aurait pas fini d’une façon désastreuse ! Au lieu de singer le grand seigneur et de vouloir éblouir par une libéralité intempestive, il aurait dù surveiller ses capitaux, augmenter sa fortune, se rendre utile enfin.

D’un ton de fausse bonhomie.

Il m’a bien assez fait souffrir par l’affection que je lui portais, sans que vous veniez ici, vous, son fils, me donner la peine de vous désobliger ! Une place ! Est-ce que j’en ai, moi ? Tous mes emplois sont pris ; ce n’est pas ma faute. Mille excuses !

Paul est remonte au haut de la scène et va pour sortir par le fond. Kloekher se lève.

Eh bien, non !... Revenez !.

PAUL, fièrement.

Pourquoi, je vous prie ?

KLOEKHER.

Je peux, je veux vous faire du bien.

Le regardant en face.

Si je sais me connaître en hommes, je crois vous avoir deviné. Or, je me fie à votre intelligence pour me comprendre, et, en cas de refus, à votre discrétion, pour vous taire !

PAUL.

Soyez convaincu...

KLOEKHER.

Jusqu’à présent, j’ai fait toutes mes affaires à la Bourse d’une façon officielle ; mais, à partir d’aujourd’hui, des circonstances trop longues à vous expliquer, au-dessus de votre compétence, cher Monsieur, me forcent à opérer d’une façon détournée... par les mains d’un autre...

Si h nce.

PAUL, cherchant à comprendre.

C’est-à-dire... ?

KLOEKHER.

Qu’il me faut un homme sur... Je le conseillerai ; je serai là... Un garçon solide qui me représente complètement, surveille mes ordres, agisse pour moi !

PAUL.

Bien !

KLOEKHER.

Et qui passe près du public pour n’agir que par lui-même, en son nom.

PAUL.

Cependant... la responsabilité... ?

KLOEKHER.

Aucune chance de pertes, rassurez-vous ! Peu de choses à faire, et je vous donne dix pour cent. Or, comme les bénéfices de ce genre d’opérations doivent s’élever annuellement à un million, pour le moins, c’est cent mille francs que vous toucherez par an, cent mille francs de rente, jeune homme !

PAUL.

Cent mille francs de rente.

Il tombe en rêverie. Bas.

Impossible ! Il faut qu’il y ait là-dessous...

KLOEKHER, à part.

Il hésite ! Est-ce ignorance ou scrupule ?

PAUL.

Mais comment êtes vous sûr d’avance de ne jamais perdre ?

KLOEKHER.

Par une série de calculs... des combinaisons infaillibles. Je vous expliquerai...

PAUL.

Et pourquoi alors avez-vous besoin de mon nom ?

KLOEKHER.

Pourquoi ?...

Silence. Ils se considèrent ; puis, brusquement.

Mais ça ne se dit pas ! Vous comprenez bien... C’est impatientant !

PAUL.

Assez, Monsieur, assez ! Je vous épargne, par pudeur, le mot propre dont on appelle, dans le code pénal, vos combinaisons infaillibles. Vous prêter mon nom pour elles serait y participer ; et comme je ne veux pas être votre complice ni votre victime, je me retire.

KLOEKHER, détournant la tète, à part.

Imbécile, va !

Au moment où Paul est sur le seuil de la porte, au fond, entre M. Letourneux ; ils se trouvent face à face.

SCÈU^E IV

PAUL, KLOEKHER, LETOURNEUX.

LETOURNEUX, avec stupéfaction et joie.

Paul ! Ah ! quel bonheur !

KLOEKHER, à part.

Ils se connaissent !

LETOURNEUX.

Que je l’embrasse, ce cher garçon ! Quand j’ai su que vous étiez à Paris, je suis vite accouru du fond de la Guyenne, où j’étais parti pour inspecter un peu l’agriculture et les bonnes mœurs ! Ah ! voilà une chance ! une chance !...

A part, montrant le poing à Kloekher, qui tourne le dos.

Je te tiens, vieux drôle !

Haut.

On vous avait cru mort, savez-vous ?... N’est-ce pas, Kloekher, vos ennemis, — car vous en avez, chacun en a, — vos ennemis se flattaient même qu’on ne vous reverrait plus !

PAUL.

Qui donc peut m’en vouloir à moi ? Je ne gêne personne.

LETOURNEUX.

Quel intéressant jeune homme, hein ? Tout le portrait de ce bon Damvilliers, que nous chérissions.

PAUL.

Je ne sais comment reconnaître...

LETOURNEUX.

Voilà ce qui s’appelle une bonne journée : d’abord, je retrouve le fils d’un vieil ami : puis, je soulage bien des infortunes, et cela, grâce à vous, Kloekher.

KLOEKHER.

Hein ?

LETOURNEUX.

Mais oui, puisque je venais vous remercier des vingt-cinq mille francs que vous m’avez donnés pour les pauvres de ma paroisse.

KLOEKHER.

Ah ! par exemple !...

LETOURNEUX.

Allons ! il cache ses bienfaits. Quel homme !

Contemplant Paul.

Cela fait plaisir de le revoir, n’est-ce pas ?... J’espère que vous me conterez vos voyages. Vous avez dû rencontrer, en courant le monde, des mœurs bizarres, des caractères vraiment particuliers ; et comme vos observations, sans doute, ainsi qu’il convient à un esprit sérieux, se sont dirigées sur la morale, que croyez-vous qui soit plus commun de la ruse ou de l’ingratitude, de la scélératesse ou de la sottise ?

PAUL.

Ces questions... demanderaient...

LETOURNEUX.

Et vous, Kloekher, votre opinion ?

KLOEKHER.

Je ne comprends pas...

LETOURNEUX, se rapprochant de lui et le regardant en face.

Ah ! vous ne comprenez pas ! Bien sur ?... Nous en recauserons. J’ai oublié de vous dire que je désirais toucher immédiatement, pour la formation d’une ferme modèle, les cent soixante-douze Méditerranée que je vous ai vendus avant-hier.

KLOEKHER.

Quand donc aurez-vous fini cette plaisanterie ?

LETOURNEUX.

Ce n’est pas une plaisanterie, mon cher, pas plus que l’histoire suivante...

A Paul.

Connaissez-vous la Cochinchine ?

PAUL.

Un peu.

LETOURNEUX.

LE11 bien, il y avait là, une fois, — l’anecdote remonte à cinq ans, — deux amis : un bon Chinois et un mauvais Chinois. Or, le bon était si bon, qu’il confia au mauvais...

KLOEKHER, avec emportement.

Oh ! je ne me moque pas mal de vos histoires. .. !

LETOURNEUX. Elles sont vraies cependant ; j’en peux fournir les preuves.

Silenie.

KLOEKHER, étonne. Des preuves ?

LETOURNEUX, lui saisissant le bras, à V oreille. Dans mes mains, d’irrécusables, songez-y !...

KLOEKHER, bas. Nous nous arrangerons. Taisez vous !...

Il se tourne vers Paul, en éclatant de rire.

Eh bien, Letourneux, il y est tombé ! Il a cru que je n’avais pas de place pour lui !... Hé ! hé ! Imaginez-vous une histoire inventée à plaisir ! Ah ! ah ! Une chose un peu légère que je lui proposais ! Ah ! ah ! ce bon garçon !

PAUL.

Comment ?

KLOEKHER.

Mais oui, pour vous éprouver, mon cher. Ah ! ah ! ah !...

D’un ton sérieux. J’ai voulu voir, par là, le fond de votre nature. Maintenant je suis content de vous, jeune homme ! C’est très bien ! très bien !... De la délicatesse, des principes.

LETOURNEUX.

Il n’y a que ça, voyez-vous, les principes !... c’est une base ! Du moment qu’un homme a des principes, on peut compter dessus ! Or, je vous réponds de celui-là, moi !

KLOEKHER.

Le fils de notre meilleur ami, je crois bien !

Madame Kloekher entre en toilette de bal.

Ma femme ! Il faut que je vous présente. Permettez

Il remonte la scène vivement jusqu’à elle.

SCÈ^CE V

PAUL, LETOURNEUX, MONSIEUR ET MADAME KLOEKHER.

KLOEKHER, bas à sa femme.

Écoutez bien, il y va de ma fortune, de la vôtre : cet homme peut nous perdre. Soyez adroite ! il le faut !

Vaut.

Madame Kloekher, monsieur Paul de Damvilliers.

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Oh ! je vous connais de nom, depuis longtemps, Monsieur !

PAUL, à part.

Qu'elle est belle !

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Nous avons si souvent causé de votre père ensemble...

LETOURNEUX.

Nous trois.

PAUL, à part.

Quel regard !...

KLOEKHER.

Pauvre garçon ! Au retour, après cinq ans d'absence, plus de foyer ! Mais j'entends que le mien remplace le vôtre ! Ne vous gênez pas ! Usez de moi... De la franchise !...

PAUL.

Oh ! merci !... Mais comme j'ai peur d'être indiscret...

Il va pour sortir.

KLOEKHER.

Restez donc, vous êtes des nôtres, parbleu ! On arrive à peine, continuez votre visite près de Madame. Allons, Letourneux, un petit tour dans le grand salon ; nous penserons ensuite aux choses sérieuses.

SCÈ&CE VI PAUL, MADAME KLOEKHER.

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Soyez convaincu, Monsieur, que les intentions de mon mari n'avaient pas besoin d'être exprimées. Je partage trop tous ses sentiments pour ne pas désirer comme lui vous être agréable, et même, pardon du mot... utile, si nous le pouvons.

PAUL.

Oh ! je suis confus, vraiment !...

MADAME KLOEKHER.

II nous sera bien doux de faire en sorte que vos chagrins soient sinon oubliés... du moins adoucis.

PAUL.

Mais ils le sont déjà, Madame, par cette manière inattendue... !

MADAME KLOEKHER. Comme vous avez dû souffrir, n’est-ce pas ?

PAUL.

Oui, oui !

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Pourquoi n’ètes-vous pas venu à nous, d’abord ?

PAUL.

Eh ! mon Dieu, Madame, mon excuse, quoique sincère, est mauvaise, mais...

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Mais quoi ?

PAUL.

Pardon ! je n’osais...

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Enfant ! Allons, vous réparerez cela, je l’exige !... Nous recevons nos intimes tous les mercredis à sept heures, n’oubliez pas ! Je vous ferai connaître quelques-unes de mes amies, des femmes intelligentes qui vous plairont. J’espère que vous viendrez de temps à autre bavarder dans ma loge aux Italiens. Si vos après-midi vous pèsent trop, il y a une place en face de moi dans ma voiture pour faire le tour du lac, au Bois. C’est si ennuyeux d’être seule à revoir tous les jours cette éternelle pièce d’eau ! Mais où aller ? Puisque vous dessinez, il faudra m’apporter, la prochaine fois, vos albums de voyage. Je vous montrerai les miens ; d’avance, je réclame un peu d’indulgence pour mes pauvres aquarelles. Enfin, nous lirons, nous causerons. Nous deviendrons de vrais amis. J’y compte, du moins.

PAUL.

Oh ! merci. Vous êtes bonne comme un ange. Voilà les premières marques de sympathie que l’on m’adresse. Qu’ai-je donc fait pour en mériter une si gracieuse ?... A qui la dois-je ?

MADAME KLOEKHER

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Mais à la mémoire de votre père, au désir de mon mari, à votre position, et un peu... à vous-même.

Elle lui tend la main ; Paul la saisit et la baise.

MADAME KLOEKHER, la retirant vivement.

Monsieur !...

PAUL.

Pardon ! c’est une faute, je.conçois ! L’élan irréfléchi de ma gratitude vous semble une grossièreté.

MADAME KLOEKHER.

N’en parlons plus. Entrons dans le bal. Sortons.

PAUL.

Sans m’avoir pardonné ? Au nom du ciel, ne m’en voulez pas ! Excusez-moi ! il faut bien avoir un peu d’indulgence pour un homme abandonné de tous, fatigué par les déceptions, aigri par le malheur.

MADAME KLOEKHER, à demi-voix. C’est une sympathie de plus entre nous deux !

Geste de Paul.

Oui, j’ai mes souffrances, et aussi profondes que les vôtres, peut-être !

PAUL.

Vous ! Comment ?

MADAME KLOEKHER. Ah ! monsieur de Damvilliers, un homme de votre condition peut-il avoir des préjugés du peuple et s’imaginer comme lui que le cœur soit content et qu’on n’ait plus rien à demander au ciel, du moment qu’on est riche ! Oh ! non, non !

PAUL.

Expliquez-moi...

MADAME KLOEKHER. Plus tard, mon ami

Les panneaux qui fermaient le boudoir à droite, à gauche et au fond s’enlèvent et laissent \oir le bal.

Voire bras, s’il vous plaît ?

PAUL, à part.

Son ami... son ami !...

De chaque côté de la scène, il y a des cariatides dorées contre des piliers qui montent jusqu’au plafond j entre les caria-

3a

tides, des jardiniéies remplies de fleurs, espacées par des candélabres. Au fond, trois arcades ouvertes laissent voir d’autres salons, avec des buffets chargés d’argenteries et de flacons.

SCÈC^E VU

PAUL, MADAME KLOEKHER, ONÉSIME DUBOIS, MACARET, BOUVIGNARD, ALFRED DE CISY, LE DR COLOMBEL, INVITES, MESSIEURS ET DAMES, DOMESTIQUES.

(Madame Kloekher remonte la scène au bras de Paul, eu même temps qu’on s’avance vers elle,) LES INVITÉS, saluant. Une fête splendide, éblouissante, délicieuse !

UNE DAME, à une autre. Quel est donc ce jeune homme ? Il est fort bien.

LA DEUXIÈME DAME. Je le trouverais même trop bien, si j’étais le Vicomte Alfred de Cisy.

UN EMPLOYÉ DE LA MAISON, *à* son voisin. Regarde/, donc comme elle minaude ! Que de grimaces ! Mais pour nous, pauvres commis, il n’y a pas de danger qu’elle nous honore seulement d’un coup d’œil.

MADAME KLOEKHER, à une jeune femme, lui désignant sa robe.

Oh ! ravissant ! Où donc vous habillez-vous, ma chérie ?

A une autre. Comment, on ne danse pas ?...

A un vieux Monsieur.

Bonjour, général.

Au docteur Colombet.

Ah ! c’est fort aimable à vous, docteur Colombel, d’avoir abandonné vos malades.

DOCTEUR COLOMBEL.

Ils recouvreraient la santé en vous voyant, belle dame : l’aspect de tant de fraîcheur, de grâces... Un domestique vient parler bas à Madame Kloekher.

MADAME KLOEKHER.

J’y vais !

Alfred, depuis le commencement de la scène, s’est rapproché d’elle. Quand elle est arrivée au bas, à droite, elle salue Paul.

Je vous remercie. A tout à l’heure !

ALFRED, *à* part. J’ai fait une jolie affaire en l’introduisant ici. Soyons prudent et vif.

Il sort précipitamment derrière elle.

SCÈVCE VIII

LES PRECEDENTS, *moins* MADAME KLOEKHER ET ALFRED.

ONÉSIME s’avance vers Paul en lui secouant Us deux mains fortement.

Ali ! quel plaisir !... on va donc se revoir ! Où loges-tu ? Je ne te quitte pas !

PAUL.

Merci, vieux camarade... Et “cette peinture, toujours enthousiaste d’elle, j’espère, et portant haut l’amour du grand art avec la haine du bourgeois ?

ONÊSIME.

Sans doute. Cependant je fais à présent de petits tableaux, des sujets domestiques ; c’est d’un débit plus facile. Mais reçois mes félicitations, te voilà en joli chemin, diable !

Tous s’empressent autour de Paul.Eh ! cher monsieur de Damvilliers, j’étais bien sûr de vous rencontrer ici ; sans cela...

LE DOCTEUR COLOMBEL, lui coupant la parole.

Grâce à la bêtise inconcevable de mon valet de chambre, vos deux cartes de visite ont été égarées, et hier au soir seulement...

BOUVIGNARD, l’interrompant.

Comment se fait-il, je vous le demande, que tous les matins je veux aller vous voir ? Mais on vient chez moi pour un tas de choses, pour ceci, pour cela ; je suis harcelé, tiraillé...

MACARET.

Tout à vos ordres, vous savez !...

Bat.

On a l'oreille du ministre !

LE DOCTEUR COLOMBEL.

Il faut que vous preniez un jour par semaine pour venir dîner chez moi régu'ièrement.

BOUVIGNARD.

Dites donc, cher Monsieur, de quelle façon je puis vous être utile !

Tout lui donnent des poignées de mains énergiques.

PAUL.

Ah ! mes amis ! je suis attendri vraiment...

A part.

Quels cœurs excellents, et comme on calomnie les hommes !

SCÈ^CE IX

LES PRECEDENTS, LETOURNEUX.

LETOURNEUX marche droit à Onésime, qui est le plus près de Paul.

Je ne suis pas content de vous !

ONÉSIME.

Pourquoi ?

LETOURNEUX.

Parbleu, entre intimes on ne se gêne pas. Or, chacun ici, excepté Paul, connaît votre prochain mariage. C'est moi qui vous procure cette affaire, une famille excellente, pieuse, considérée, riche, et vous vous exposez au scandale d'être rencontré en plein jour, donnant le bras à une créature !

ONÉSIME.

Moi ?

LETOURNEUX.

Je vous ai vu, et pourtant vous m’aviez juré que tout était fini !

ONÉSIME.

Ah ! monsieur Letourneux, un moment ! Si je me trouvais avec cette fillette, c’est que je lui préparais un petit tour.

LE DOCTEUR COLOMBEL.

Voyons, voyons, j’adore ce genre d’anecdotes.

Tous se rapprochent.

ONÉSIME.

Je lui ait fait écrire de iMarseille, son pays, une lettre qui l’appelle pour les affaires les plus pressées. Elle est partie ; j’ai donc tout le temps de me marier, et ça ma débarrasse d’autant mieux, que Clémence a la bourse légère, et que pour revenir...

Hilarité générale et approbation.

LETOURNEUX.

Très bien ! voilà ce que j’appelle un acte à la fois d’adresse et de haute moralité.

PAUL.

Comment, Clémence, ta vieille passion, celle que tu avais prise toute jeune à sa famille, et qui, disais-tu toi-même, te faisait travailler d’une façon... ?

ONÉSIME.

C’esl comme ça ! Autre temps, autres femmes !

A Letourneux.

Où donc m’avcz-vous rencontré, vous ?

LETOURNEUX.

Dans le Luxembourg, comme je le traversais pour aller secourir une famille bien intéressante : trois fils sans ouvrage, le père et la mère presque à l’agonie. Vous devriez même, docteur, faire quelque chose pour eux.

LE DOCTEUR COLOMBEL.

Que j’aille les voir, peut-être !

LETOURNEUX.

Vous êtes assez riche pour vous passer ce luxe !

LE DOCTEUR COLOMBEL.

Et vous donc, le millionnaire, que faites-vous pour eux ?

LETOURNEUX.

Oh ! peu de choses, je les console et les moralise, rien que cela ! et partout, comme maintenant, je fais de la propagande à leur profit, jusqu’auprès de monsieur Macaret.

S’adrestant à M. Macaret.

Voyons, vous êtes un de nos grands industriels, et trois ouvriers de plus ne vous importent guère.

MACARET.

Impossible ! je n’ai pas d’ouvrage à leur donner. Vous n’exigerez pas que je me ruine...

Colombel sourit ; Letourneux joint les mains d’un air beat.

Mouvement de Paul indigne.

BOUVIGNARD, avec un petit rire aigrelet.

Hé ! hé ! il a raison. Les discours, les secours et les utopies ne servent à rien. La machine est ainsi réglée. Tant pis pour ceux qu’elle écrase ! résignons-nous ! Il n’y a de sérieux au monde que les choses de l’intelligence, les beaux-arts !

ONÉSIME.

Vous êtes dans le vrai, monsieur Bouvignard.

BOUVIGNARD.

Aussi moi, je ne m’occupe que des vieilles faïences.

LE DOCTEUR COLOMBEL.

Un joli goût ! Et toutes nos dame ? ?

BOUVIGNARD.

Entendons-nous ! Permettez ! je ne prise que les vieux Nevers, et, pour en posséder un authentique, je n’épargne ni temps, ni soins, ni argent.

ONÉSIME, à part.

II ferait mieux de doter sa fille.

BOUVIGNARD.

Ah ! j’économise, je me prive, je me sangle ! Et combien d’inquiétudes ! Songer qu’une maladresse peut tout réduire en mille morceaux. Aussi ma collection est-elle unique. C’est ma fortune entière, et, afin qu’elle demeure éternellement intacte, je la lègue par testament à ma ville natale.

PAUL, à part, mélancoliquement.

Quel triste monde !

SCÈU^E X LES PRECEDENTS, KLOEKHER.

KLOEKHER, à Letourneux. Venez-vous ? Allons, les hommes sérieux, il y a là des tapis verts qui vous réclament ! Un whist ?

Tout disparaissent par le fond.

SCÈ&CE XI

PAUL, *seul.*

Dès que Paul est reste seul, du côté droit, entre les cariatides, débouche le Roi des Gnomes, dans le costume du bourgeois cossu du cabaret. Avec un geste emphatique, il lui montre le bal et toutes les splendeurs qui l’entourent.

Il je penche sur une des jardinières, les jleurs se fanent.

Mortes !

Deux candélabres s’éteignent. Et l’obscurité redouble !

Au lieu d’un bruit de clochette qui accentuait la mesure dans la contredanse, on entend une cloche funèbre.

Ces sons ! le glas d’un enterrement. J’ai peur !

Il regarde au fond. Cependant les flambeaux resplendissent, les danses tourbillonnent. Eh ! c’est la clochette qui tinte dans les quadrilles. Qu’avais-je donc ? Elle va revenir !... oui !... là !... et, fendant pas à pas les flots du bal, j’écouterai d’un air indifférent ses paroles charmantes murmurées à mon oreille. Toutes ces choses qui lui appartiennent ont l’air de sourire, c’est comme si son âme flottait autour de moi. Où est-elle ? Je veux la retrouver, la revoir.

Il remonte la scène.

SCÈC^E Xll

PAUL, MADAME KLOEKHER, ALFRED.

(Madame Kloekher entre par le côté droit au bras d'Alfred).

PAUL, à part.

Encore lui !

Il s'arrête et l'observe.

MADAME KLOEKHER, à demi-voix. Est-ce une menace ?

ALFRED.

Comme il vous plaira de le comprendre, ma chère !

MADAME KLOEKHER, dédaigneusement.

Faites donc ! faites donc !

ALFRED.

Ainsi, vous êtes bien décidée ?... Tout est rompu. Mais si je m2 brûlais la cervelle au milieu de votre bal ?

MADAME KLOEKHER, éclatant de rire. Ah ! ah !

ALFRED, àpart, remettant son chapeau sur sa tète.

Allons, tournons-nous d'un autre côté.

Les danses ont fini ; on sert le souper au fond, sur des petites tables rondes.

SCÈJCE XIII

PAUL, MADAME KLOEKHER.

PAUL. Cet homme vous aime ?

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Lui, jamais !

PAUL.

Cependant !...

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Des reproches, déjà ?

PAUL.

Oh ! j’ai tort, je le sais, pardonnez-moi ! Ce n’est pas ma faute, si...

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Plus bas !... on peut nous entendre !

PAUL, regardant au fond.

Non, jusqu’à la fin du souper, personne ici ne viendra ! Nous sommes libres ! Écoutez-moi : au nom du ciel, restez !

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Mais je reste ! Que voulez-vous ?

PAUL.

Ah ! je ne me rappelle plus ! ma tête s’égare ! Je suis si heureux de vous contempler ainsi, face à face ! Tout à l’heure, quand nous étions avec les autres et que l’on s’empressait autour de vous, je me délectais à saisir ces regards, ces hommages, cette rumeur d’admiration et d’envie ; et puis, voilà qu’à présent la même foule me déplaît ! je la hais ! Vous lui donnez en passant un coup d’œil, des sourires, des paroles, presque une partie de votre personne, de votre cœur. 11 me semble que la dorure de ces murailles, les argenteries, les valets, la musique, vos diamants même, sont autant de choses qui vous déguisent, vous reculent plus loin, vous séparent de moi.

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Enfant que vous êtes ! Vous savez bien, pourtant...

Silence.

PAUL.

Quoi ?... Parlez !... parlez !...

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Mais... que l’on vous préfère !

PAUL, se rapprochant et lui prenant la main.

Est-ce vrai ? Dites-le donc, ce mot que j’attends. Ah ! je ne suis pas accoutumé au bonheur, moi ! Et comment voulez-vous que je croie à celui-là, si je ne le vois moi-même tomber de vos lèvres ? Ou plutôt non... ne parlez pas... et pour savoir si vous m'aimez, si les cieux vont s'ouvrir... rien qu'un signe... un regard...

Elle le regarde, et lui répond oui par un signe de tète très lent et très doux. Il lui prend la main et la porte à ses lèvres en pliant le genou.

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Prenez garde ! on peut nous voir !

A part.

Du feu... de la passion !...

Paul se relève.

PAUL.

Ali ! quel supplice ! Vous ne comprenez donc pas que je vous aime éperdûment ! Je voudrais que tout ce qui nous écarte l'un de l'autre disparût ! Qu'est-ce que cela vous coûterait de m'accorder où il vous plaira, quelquefois, pour me faire illusion, pour m'imaginer que nous sommes seuls sur la terre ? Est-ce que cela vous chagrine, dites, de me donner... ?

MADAME KLOEKHER.

On vient ! Retirez-vous !

Paul disparaît à droite.

SCÈ^CE XIV MADAME KLOEKHER, LETOURNEUX.

LETOURNEUX, entrant rapidement.

Ah ! votre mari est un fier drôle !

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Qu'y a-t-il ?

LETOURNEUX.

Je suis indigné !

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Là ! là ! calmez-vous !

LETOURNEUX.

Mais je me vengerai ! Oh !...

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Que vous a-t-il fait ?

LETOURNEUX.

Vous le demandez ! Elle le demande ! Eh bien, nous étions convenus, votre charmant époux et moi, de deux cents Hanovre au dernier courant qu'il devait, lui, me donner et que je devais, moi, palper : est-ce clair ? Or, quand j'apporte les papiers convenus, il ne m'en livre que la moitié à grand'peine. Mais ça ne se passera pas comme ça ! Où est Paul ? Je vais tout lui dire !

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Quoi donc !

LETOURNEUX.

Lui apprendre ce que vous savez aussi bien que moi, parbleu ! la manière dont votre mari a volé son héritage ! Et un bon procès fera savoir à toute l'Europe...

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Et vous comptez sur Paul, comme si c'était possible !...

LETOURNEUX.

Pourquoi non ?

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Vous êtes trop curieux, mon cher. Cependant, pour épargner vos démarches, apprenez que Paul est un simple enfant, et qu'il m'aime !

LETOURNEUX.

Beau motif !

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Excellent, au contraire ! C'est nous, c'est moi qu'il croira et non pas vous, l'homme de bien. Allez chercher ailleurs des auxiliaires à vos turpitudes et à vos vengeances ! Quant à celui-là, je vous le répète, il m'appartient ! C'est ma chose, mon esclave ! et je pourrais, sur un signe, le faire se jeter dans un puits qu'il m'en remercierait.

LETOURNEUX, sortant par le fond. Nous verrons ! nous verrons !

SCÈVCE XV PAUL, MADAME KLOEKHER.

PAUL, entre lentement à droite, de derrière une cariatide.

PAUL entre lentement à droite, de derrière une cariatide.

Vous avez raison. Madame : je suis un enfant, votre chose et votre esclave.

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Ciel ! ne croyez pas !...

PAUL.

J’ai tout entendu, j’étais là derrière cette statue, où je m’étais mis pour épier les confidences d’un autre. Le hasard m’a puni de ma jalousie, en me détrompant amèrement.

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Oh ! Paul !... je vous jure...

PAUL.

Pas de serments, ne craignez rien ; jamais je ne salirai par le scandale d’un procès la femme, quelle qu’elle soit, que j’ai... honorée de mon amour. Donc soyez ti r.nquille, je me retire !

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Mais vous n’avez pu comprendre, je n’y suis pour rien, c’est une trame odieuse. Je vous expliquerai... Paul ! je vous en supplie !... Paul ! Paul ! je t’aime !

Paul s’en va par la gauche, la tète basse et lentement ; arrivé sur le seuil, il s’arrête. Letourneux sort du fond et marche vers lui.

SCÈC^CE XVI

MADAME KLOEKHER, PAUL, LETOURNEUX, *puis Ions les personnages précédents.*

LETOURNEUX. Ah ! enfin ! je vous trouve ! Écoutez-moi !

Paul, absorbé, reste immobile.

Paul ! Eh bien !

Il lui tape sur l’épaule.

Mon ami ! mon cher ami ! ‘

PAUL, tournant la tète lentement. .

Que voulez-vous ?

LETOURNEUX, élevant la voix. Je veux vous apprendre, à vous et à tout le monde ici, dans votre intérêt personnel comme dans celui de la moralité publique, et afin qu'il en résulte à la fois une réparation et un châtiment ; je veux, dis-je, vous dénoncer une infâme machination. J'en possède les témoignages authentiques, écrits ! Vous avez été indignement spolié par l'homme que voici : le banquier Kloekher !

Murmures. Marques de surprise et d'indignation.

PAUL, arrachant son gant blanc.

Vous mentez impudemment, Monsieur !

LETOURNEUX.

Moi ?

PAUL.

Oui, vous misérable ! et comme gage de ce que j'affirme, je vous soufflète à la face !

Il lui jette son gant à la face.

LETOURNEUX.

Ah !

PAUL.

Je îuij à vos ordres, Monsieur !

LES INVITÉS.

Sépare/-lcs ! Ils vont se battre !

LETOURNEUX, dignement.

Un duel, non ! Un homme de mon caractère n'obéit pas à de pareils préjugés. La vraie force consiste plutôt à supporter les injures et à s'en venger par les voies légales. J'ai le courage civil, moi !

Il sort fièrement.

PAUL, à demi-voix.

Infâme coquin !

KLOEKHER, essayant de prendre la main de Paul.

Ah ! c'est très bien ce que vous avez fait ! Voilà qui est d'un bon ami !... Ma reconnaissance... !

PAUL, fièrement.

Ne me parlez plus, Monsieur !

Il sort.

KLOEKHER.

Ou’est-ce qu’il a donc ?

LES INVITÉS.

Quel original ! — Avez-vous vu ? — Un scandale pareil pour finir une si belle fête !... — Ah ! mon Dieu ! à quoi se trouve-t-on exposé !...

Qyand les invités sont partis, les lustres, les girandoles et les candélabres se mettent à brûler plus fort, donnant une lumière rose, verte et bleue ; les bouquets, tombés par terre, se relèvent d’eux-mêmes et vont se placer dans les jardinières. Les fleurs fanées s’entr’ouvrent, les meubles çà et là se replacent en ordre. Les cariatides des deux côtés de la scène se meuvent et s’avancent. Ce sont les fées elles-mêmes qui se réjouissent de la vertu de Paul.

QUATRIÈME TABLEAU

Une chambre d’aspect misérable. A droite et à gauche, une fenêtre en tabatière. Au fond, une cheminée de plâtre, où brûlent quelques charbons à demi éteints. A côté de la cheminée, une porte. Sur la cheminée, une boite de pistolets. A gauche, au premier plan, une table et une chaise de paille. A droite, une paire de bottes vernies dans leurs embouchoirs. Auprès des bottes, contre le mur, un lit de sangle, et, sur le premier plan, à côté, un placard. — Le jour commence à paraître par les vitres sans rideaux.

SCÈNE PREMIMÈRE

DOMINIQUE, seul.

Il arrive sur la scène en manches de chemise, en pantalon avec un madras autour de la tète, et il s’avance vers la cheminée en grelottant.

Quel froid, miséricorde ! Quand Monsieur va revenir, il est capable de geler.

Riant ironiquement. Ah I Monsieur !... Eh bien, et moi ? Est-ce que je ne gèle pas ? Est-ce que je ne souffre pas ? Est-ce une existence que de traîner une misère pareille ! Qu’il s’en arrange, puisque ça l’amuse ; mais moi, un homme fait tout au moins pour l’antichambre des ambassadeurs, quelle humiliation !

Il cherche de droite et de gauche dans l’appartement.

Et pas un cotret dans cette infernale mansarde, où il vous tombe des vents coulis...

Il regarde encore.

Non !... — Et voilà quatre mois que j’attends ! et qu’il est à me lanterner avec toutes ses démarches ! — D’abord, c’a été une place dans la diplomatie, puis une mission scientifique, puis un poste d’inspecteur de je ne sais quoi, puis un emploi dans une colonisation, je ne sais où ; et ce soir, enfin, il doit revenir de chez le banquier Kloekher les mains pleines, ou l’avenir assuré. — Je commence à n’y plus croire, à notre avenir ! J’ai bien envie de séparer le mien du sien et de lui donner mon compte, carrément. Monsieur est un brave jeune homme, c’est vrai ! Mais Se touchant le front.

toqué ! toqué ! — Sapcrlotte ! j’ai l’onglée !

Ses yeux rencontrent la botte de pistolets sur la cheminée.

Tiens !... voilà une boîte qui me donne une tentation !... Ah ! doucement !... nos moyens ne nous permettent pas une flambée en acajou. Oh ! non !

En se reculant, il trébuché contre le paillasson.

— Eh ! tu m'embêtes, toi ! — Attends un peu...

Il jette le paillasson dans le feu ; puis, le regardant brûler — En être réduit là ! Mais ça ne peut pas durer plus longtemps ! c'est trop bête ! Et si notre sort ne change pas avant huit jours, bonsoir !

Le feu flambe. Il se chauffe.

Ah ! ça fait du bien ! C'est une bonne idée que j'ai eue, décidément ! Comme on a tort de se gêner ! — Et pas un bon fauteuil pour se rôtir les tibias en tisonnant. Cest honteux, un aussi piètre escabeau ! — Et puisque mon maître est en courses toute la journée, je ne vois pas pourquoi...

Il jette dans le feu la petite chaise.

Allons donc !

Tout en remuant les charbons.

Il faut convenir que je suis un véritable nigaud, avec mon dévouement ! On n'a jamais vu un domestique commme moi ! Nom d'un chien ! quelle gelée ! Ça disparaît comme une allumette ! — Car, enfin, de toutes ses promesses, qu'ai-je attrapé, moi ? Qu'est-ce que je gagne ? Il se moque de moi, à la fin ! Car, pendant que je suis là, à me morfondre en l'attendant, il fait le joli coco, dans les salons, près les belles dames. — Si je flanquais la table pour soutenir l'attisée ? — Non ! Ça ne durerait pas !

Il aperçoit une paire de bottes dans leurs embouchoirs Ah ! les bottes !

Il les retire des embouchoirs.

Pourquoi pas ?

Les lançant dans le feu.

Aïe donc ! — Et s'il se fâche, tant pis !

SCÈJ^E II

DOMINIQUE, PAUL, *en habit noir, sans paletot, mouillé, les mains sous les aisselles, avec un peu de tteigc sur ses vêtements.*

PAUL.

Que fais-tu là, toi ? Je ne t’avais pas dit de m’attendre ! Va te coucher !

DOMINIQUE.

Mais...

PAUL, brutalement.

Va-t’en donc ! Va-t’en ! Laisse-moi !

DOMINIQUE, à part.

Oh ! oh ! il est bien fier ! — Y aurait-il pas quelque chose de bon, enfin ?

SCÈCh£E III

PAUL, *seul.*

Apres être resté longtemps les bras croisés, avec un grand soupir.

Ah !...

Il jette son chapeau sur le lit de sangle.

Quelle nuit !...

Il regarde les murs lentement.

et quelle chambre !...

Puis la fenêtre.

Tiens ! le jour qui se lève ; et la neige, encore !... iMais il ne tombera donc pas du ciel quelque chose pour les écraser tous !

Il pleure.

Ah ! comme je suis fatigué !...

Il s’assoit près de la cheminée, un bras sur le chambranle.

Sont-ils assez lâches, égoïstes, ingrats, hypocrites et cruels !... Par-dessus tout cela, des sourires, des phrases, des étreintes affectueuses, et même, ô sacrilège, des offres d’amour !... Et je prétendais trouver dans ce néant quelque chose qui désaltérât mon cœur ! — Dans combien de pays n’ai-je pas traîné mes rêves !... Partout, avec des masques et cles impudeurs différentes, j’ai rencontré les mêmes ignominies ! A présent, voilà qu’elles viennent jusqu’à moi, elles m’attaquent. Assez, assez ! je n’en veux plus ! — Pourquoi vivre alors, puisque je ne peux pas changer le monde ? Ah ! si j’avais eu pourtant quelqu’un qui m’eût aimé !...

Il se lève.

Allons, pas de faiblesse ! Disparaissons tout de suite, pour prévenir peut-être les défaillances, avant la première rougeur de honte et dans l'intégrité de mon orgueil, comme ces vieux rois d'Orient qui se faisaient mourir avec toutes leurs richesses !... Il ne faut que la résolution d'une minute. Ce ne doit pas être difficile ? D'ailleurs, tout m'y engage, tout m'y pousse...

Apercevant la boîte de pistolets ouverte.

Ah !... et jusqu'au hasard lui-même !

Il retire les pistolets et les manie.

L'armurier qui me les a vendus me faisait valoir, pour ma sécurité personnelle, la longueur de leur portée. A cette distance, je n'ai pas besoin qu'ils soient si merveilleux ! C'est une superfluité. Essayons.

Il fait jouer la batterie.

Bien !... Ma poudrière, où est-elle ?

Il verse de la poudre dans le fond de sa main, puis dans le pistolet, et jette le reste dans la cheminée. Le feu je ranime, et flambe extraordinainment. Paul continue à charger son pistolet.

La balle, une capsule, maintenant ; et je n'ai plus qu'un geste, presque un signe pour être libre !...

Six heures sonnent à une horloge voisine.

Au premier coup de la demie, tout sera dit !

U promène ses yeux tout à l'entour, tt aperçoit la table où sont des papiers et une cassette pleine de lettres.

Ah ! ceci que j'oubliais ! Non ! que rien de moi, ni de mon passé, ne subsiste ! Au feu, au feu, toutes mes lettres !

Il les jette dans la cheminée. Il se rassoit.

Ah ! que cette flamme me réchauffe ! Je ne souffre plus. Non, au contraire ! Et penser que ces cendres peut-être seront encore tièdes quand mon cadavre sera froid ! et puis tout se confondra, dispersé ! Ma vie aura passé comme ces formes fugaces, qui se dessinent sur les charbons. Tiens ! il me semble voir dans la braise des plages de pourpre s'étalant près d'un lac de feu. On dirait, à présent, de vagues édifices, des aiguilles de cathédrale, un navire. Il s'enfonce et reparaît, comme le mien autrefois. J'entends encore le vent dans les manœuvres, et les bois de ma cabine qui craquent au milieu de la nuit. — Tiens !... c'est étrange, voilà une lettre qui s'obstine à ne pas brûler ! Elle blanchit même dans la flamme. — Pourquoi ?...

Paul la reprend.

Elle est froide !... Comment se fait-il ?

La cheminée, peu à peu, s'est haussée et élargie, laissant voir, au milieu des flammes, les choses mêmes que Paul rêvait, Le bord supérieur, montant toujours, a presque disparu dans les frises ; et l'on aperçoit un château tout noir, d'une architecture farouche, avec des meurtrières embrasées.

Une forteresse ! Laquelle donc ? Je ne l'ai jamais vue.

Le château disparaît. La lettre qu'il tient devient lumineuse. Paul lit : "C'est l'endroit où les Gnomes détiennent captifs les coeurs des hommes. Nous comptons sur toi pour les délivrer. — Ta récompense sera un amour au-dessus même de tes rêves. Tu rencontreras souvent celle que nous te destinons ; tâche de la reconnaître, ou sinon tu es irrévocablement perdu. — Es-lu prêt ? — LA REINE DES FEES." — Moi !... Mais comment me guider ?

Choeur des Fées l'encourageant.

PAUL reste pendant quelques minutes en proie à une anxiété terrible ; puis, avec un geste de résolution héroïque.

J'accepte ! partons !

Deux coups frappés à la porte, l'un après l'autre.

UNE VOIX, du dehors. Ouvre, Dominique !

Troisième coup.

PAUL.

Qui est-ce ?

Il va ouvrir.

SCÈ^CE IV

PAUL, JEANNETTE *portant à chaque bras un gros panier.*

JEANNETTE, toute surprise. Monsieur Paul !...

PAUL.

Jeannette !... Comment se fait-il ?

Elle dépose sur la table ses deux paniers, d’un air accablé. Que viens-tu faire à Paris ?

JEANNETTE, après un silence. Mais... vendre mon lait, Monsieur.

PAUL.

Avec ces deux paniers-là !... et chez moi !

Elle baisse la tète sans répondre.

Tu me caches quelque chose, Jeannette ?

JEANNETTE, de/endant de la main u’i des paniers près d’elle.

Non, Monsieur, je vous jure !...

PAUL, éclairé par le geste de Jeannette.

C’est là-dedans, alors ? Qu’y a-t-il ?

Il relève la toile couvrant le panier.

Des foulards, mes chemises, tout mon linge !

Il la regarde d’une façon sévère.

JEANNETTE, vivement. Oh ! ne vous fâchez pas !... Si vous le trouvez trop mal, je recommencerai. Silence. Elle baisse la tète.

PAUL.

Ainsi, c’est Mademoiselle Jeannette qui était ma blanchisseuse !... Pourquoi ne pas l’avouer ?

JEANNETTE, embarrassée. C’est que...

PAUL.

Eh bien ?

Même silence. A part. Comment ?... Quand Dominique m’avait dit... Voyons l’autre ?

JEANNETTE, l’arrêtant par le bras. Prenez garde de les casser !

PAUL.

Quoi donc ?

JEANNETTE

JEANNETTE.

Les œufs !

PAUL, examinant l’intérieur du panier.

Des fruits... une galette... jusqu’à des petits pots de crème !... Et c’était...

Il l’interroge du regard ; elle lui répond par un signe de tête ajffîrmatif.

pour moi ! Jusqu’à présent, en effet, je n’ai rien payé de ces choses ! — Ah ! je devine !... l’amitié de mon domestique me réduit aux charités d’une paysanne !

Brutalement.

Remporte tout cela, Jeannette ! Je n’en veux plus ! Va-t’en !

JEANNETTE, pleurant.

Si j’avais su vous fâcher, je ne l’aurais pas fait !

PAUL, à part.

Elle pleure !... Et dans ma vanité imbécile, je la repousse !... Combien donc y en a-t-il d’un dévouement pareil ? Haut.

Non, reste ! Pardonne-moi ! C’est que je suis malade, quelquefois !... Et il y a longtemps que IU viens ainsi tous les jours ?

JEANNETTE.

Depuis un mois, bientôt !

PAUL.

Et tu ne t’en vantes pas, toi !... Tu faisais le bien naïvement, dans la candeur de ton âme !

Il lui prend les mains.

Mais comme ta poitrine bat vite ! Tu as de beaux yeux, ma Jeannette !...

A part.

Je ne l’avais pas seulement regardée, sot que j’étais ! Et ces pauvres petites mains, sais-tu qu’enfermées dans des gants de peau fine, plus d’une belle dame les envierait !

JEANNETTE.

Vous êtes bien bon, Monsieur.

PAUL, s’écartant d’elle. A part.

Il faut pourtant que je trouve quelque chose à lui donner.

La contemplant de loin.

Mais elle est charmante !... Il y a sous ces simples vêtements une distinction, je ne sais quoi de pur, de fin... que je n’ai jamais vu !... Et cette douceur des attitudes, ce rayonnement dans leregard ! Serait-ce... ? Pourquoi pas ?... Jeannette ?

JEANNETTE.

Monsieur ?

PAUL.

Tu dois être lasse de ta condition ? N’arrive-t-il jamais dans ton esprit des pensées qui te surprennent ? iNe sens-tu pas au fond de toi-même comme une sollicitation vers des destinées plus hautes ? une envie de t’enfuir... quelque part... bien loin ?

JEANNETTE.

M enfuir !... Et où ça ?... Je ne connais pas les routes.

PAUL, avec un geste de dépit. A part.

Eh ! c’est mon langage qu’elle n’entend pas !

Haut.

Dis-moi, quand tu es toute seule, dans les champs, à quoi penses-tu ?

JEANNETTE.

Dame ! à rien.

PAUL.

Cherche un peu.

JEANNETTE.

Ah ! si... Je pense aux vaches !... à la noire, surtout, qui me suit comme un caniche. Et puis je regarde si les avoines poussent, et combien il y aura de boisseaux de pommes aux arbres.

PAUL.

Mais... la nuit... dans tes rêves ?...

JEANNETTE, riant.

JEANNETTE, riant.

Mes rêves ?... Ah ! bien oui. Je dors trop fort !

PAUL.

Quels livres as-tu donc lus jusqu'à présent ?

JEANNETTE.

Je ne sais pas lire !... est-ce que j'ai eu le temps d'apprendre !... ni écrire non plus. Et je le regrette, allez ! Ça me serait si utile pour tenir les comptes !

PAUL, à part.

Voilà tout !... c'est le fond. Certes, il ne manque pas de gentillesse ; mais ce serait si long à cultiver, que j'y renonce.

Riant amèrement.

Moi, qui avais cru un instant...

Il reste perdu dans des réflexions.

JEANNETTE.

Qu'avez-vous donc, monsieur Paul, que vous ne dites plus rien ? Tout à l'heure vous parliez comme une musique. Je ne comprenais pas ; mais c'e ;t égal, ça me plaisait, ça me plaisait...

PAUL, brusquement.

Bien, bien !

Appelant.

Dominique !... Je te remercie, Jeannette... Plus tard, dès que je pourrai, je reconnaîtrai tes bons oflices... et quand tu te marieras...

SCE^CE V Les PRECEDENTS, DOMINIQUE.

DOMINIQUE. Que désire Monsieur ?

PAUL, montrant Jeanne. Fais-lui tes adieux. Nous partons.

DOMINIQUE. En voyage encore ?

PAUL.

Oui, pour un long voyage.

DOMINIQUE. Mais Monsieur, sans doute, n'a pas réfléchi que notre garde-robe

robe...

PAUL, tournant autoui de lui des yeux inquiets.

En effet !

Il aperçoit sur le lit une superbe pelisse de fourrure. Ah ! mais non ! Tu vois bien ! le riel ïVnmèlc. C’est un avertissement, un ordre !

DOMINIQUE.

La belle fourrure !

Il lève la fourrure d’un bras, et l’examine.

Vous ne m’en aviez pas parlé. Avec ça sur le dos, on doit se moquer joliment du thermomètre ! Si j’en avais une pareille !

Il la remet sur le lit, et en voit une seconde à côte.

Une autre !...

PAUL.

C’est pour toi alors ?... Prends-la !

DOMINIQUE endosse vivement sa pelisse, en relève le collet et croise ses mains sous les manches. A part.

Je serai un peu calé là-dedans ! Hein ? on aura l’air d’un ambassadeur russe !

PAUL, frappant du pied.

Allons, hâte-toi ! Je veux m’élancer par le monde, courir au but, l’atteindre. Viens ! viens !

DOMINIQUE.

Oh ! nos paquets ne sont pas longs à faire. Me voilà !... Adieu, petite sœur !

JEANNETTE, d’une voix entrecoupée par un sanglot.

Adieu !

PAUL, qui a mis son chapeau sur sa tète et sa pelisse *SUT* son bras, s’arrête sur le seuil, au bruit d’un grand sanglot de Jeannette.

Ah ! de la sensibilité, plus que je ne croyais. Eh ! c’est pour son frère.

Ils sortent.

SCÈ^CE VI JEANNETTE, *seule.*

Partis !... Et je ne sais plus où, cette fois !... Très loin !... Il me semble pourtant que, pendant un moment, il m’a offert d’aller avec lui, là-bas ! Mais non, puisqu’il m’abandonne, qu’il me dédaigne !... Ah ! c’est parce que je ne suis pas une belle dame de la ville !... parce que je n’ai pas de robes à volants... de la dentelle, des cachemires et des bijoux. !... parce que je suis une bête de paysanne ! parce que je ne sais rien de ce qui lui plairait : la danse, les bonnes manières, la parure et le piano !... Oh ! si j’avais tout cela !...

Elle se rapproche de la cheminée et se met à rêver, tout debout, le coude appuyé sur le chambranle.

Voilà ce qu’il lui faut, sans doute ! Alors il m’aimerait. Mais comment faire pour avoir une belle toilette... une belle toilette...

Le Roi des Gnomes sort du placard resté entr ouvert.

LE ROI.

Très bien !... elle débute par un souhait des plus stupides. Tant mieux !... Il nous est impossible de l’arrêter ; mais nous allons nous arranger si bien, que jamais il ne la reconnaîtra. — Commençons...

Changement de décor à vue.

CINQUIEME TABLEAU

L’ILE DE LA TOILETTE

Les collines du fond, figurant des carrés de culture différente, sont couvertes par de longues bandes d’étoffes. A droite, au bord d’un ruisseau de lait d’amandes, poussent, comme des roseaux, des bâtons de cosmétique. Un peu plus en avant, une fontaine d’eau de Cologne sort d’un gros rocher de fard rouge. Au milieu, sur le gazon, des paillettes brillent ; les buissons, çà et là, se trouvent représentés par des brosses de chiendent, et les cailloux par des savons de toutes couleurs. A gauche, un arbre, semblable à un tamaris, porte des marabouts, et un autre, pareil à un palmier, offre des éventails. Il y a un champ de rasoirs ; plus loin, l’arbre à miroirs, l’arbre à perruques, l’arbre â houppes, l’arbre à peignes, et des costumes bariolés pendent à de grands champignons. Des mouches voltigeant dans l’air iront se coller d’elles-mêmes sur le visage des femmes : la mouche assassine, la capricieuse, la provocante, *etc.*

SCÈNE PREMIÈRE

JEANNE, *seule.*

Dans la même attitude qu’elle avait à lajin du tableau précédent : la tète baissée et le coude gauche appuyé contre le rocher de fard, au bord de la fontaine. Après un instant de silence, elle lève les yeux et regarde autour d’elle avec ébahis sentent.

Comme c’e^ joli !... et comme ça sent bon !... Mais on dirait l’odeur de l’eau de Cologne ?... D’où vient-elle ?... De celte fontaine !... Ah ! si je me lavais les mains.

Elle y plonge ses bras jusqu’au coude.

On n’a pas peur d’en perdre !... Je puis bien m’en mettre dans les cheveux !

Elle s’en jette sur la tète quelques gouttes, qui deviennent aussitôt des diamants, sans qu’elle s’en aperçoive< Puis elle se lave le visage avec les mains ; et, pendant qu’elle est ainsi penchée sur la fontaine, une branche de l’arbre à peignes, derrière elle, s’abaisse tout douctment pour dé* mêler ses cheveux au chignon. Elle se retourne, surprise, en tendant la joue droite.

Qui donc me prend là, par derrière ?... Con* tinuez ! vous ne me faites pas mal.

L’arbre à houppes abaisse un de ses rameaux et la caresse de ta poudre de riz.

Oh ! comme c’est doux !... comme c’est doux !...

Elle tend la joue gauche. Même jeu de l’arbre à houppes.

Encore !... Mais ça me chatouille !... Assez !... J’ai envie de rire !... Ah ! ah ! ah ! L’arbre s’arrête.

C’est fini ?... Je vous remercie bien !...

Elle se lève.

Comment ?... Personne !...

Elle considère tous les objets autour d’elle, en marchant lentement.

La drôle de campagne !... Des peignes qui tiennent aux arbres ! En voilà un où poussent des perruques, et tous ces vêtements par terre, comme des feuilles mortes !... Ah ! la belle herbe, avec ces grosses gouttes de rosée. Mais non, ce sont des paillettes d’argent.

S’apercevant dans une des glaces de l’arbre à miroirs.

Et cela ?... C’est moi !... en diamants !... JV l’air d’un soleil !

Sa robe, arrachée, disparait dans l’air.

Le vent !... Ah !...

Elle pousse un cri de terreur en s’apercevant en chemise et en jupon, et croise ses bras sur sa poitrine.

Que devenir !... J’ai honte !...

Aussitôt, une des bandes d’étoffe, posées sur les collines du fond, arrive en ondoyant comme une rivière, et, se drapant autour d’elle, lui fait une sorte de tunique.

Eh bien ! eh bien !... me voilà tout habillée maintenant.

Un arbre à bracelets d’or l’accroche par le bras.

Qu’est-ce qui me retient ? Pourquoi ? Laissez-moi !...

Elle tire à elle : le’braceht viitit.

Ah ! cela fait bien sur ma peau.

D’une espèce de sorbier tombe un collier de corail autour de son cou.

Qu’e ;t-cc ?... Un collier !... Ah ! comme je suis belle !... Quel bonheur !... Je m’aime ! Je voudrais m’embrasser. Mais je rêve sans doute ?... Ce n’est pas possible ! Je vais me réveiller tout à l'heure. — Où suis-je donc ?... dans quel pays ?

CHOEUR, dans la coulisse.

C'est le pays de la toilette, C'est l'empire des affiquets, Des paquets 1 Des caquets 1 Chez nous la beauté se complète, La laideur prend des airs coquets.

JEANNE. Jâ ne comprends pas !...

C H OE U R.

C'est le pays de la toilette, C'est le triomphe, sans un pli, Du poli, Du joli. Nos fleurs sont à la violette, Et nos soupirs au patchouli.

Rasoirs, il faut en découdre ! Allons ! peignes nouveau-nés, Cascade aux flots safranés, Tombe ici comme la foudre ! Poudre les airs, arbre à poudre ; Savonnette, savonnez !

Un grand, bruit de tambours, dejlùtes et de chapeau chinois JEANNE remonte la scène. Quelle quantité de monde !...

CHOEUR.

Silence ! silence ! silence ! C'est le monarque qui s'avance ! Pareil aux astres éclatants, C'est Couturin, roi de la mode, Le seul qui sache, avec méthode, Diriger nos goûts inconstants.

JEANNE.

Mais ils viennent par ici !... J'ai peur. Où me cacher ?... Ah !...

Elle s'enfonce sous l'arbre à miroirs. Toute la cour de Couturin, en arrivant, chante : Mortels, que sa faveur inonde De l'un à l'autre bout du monde, Marchez où sa main vous conduit. Tous ses ordres sont chose grave ; On est perdu quand on les brave, On est sauvé dès qu'on les suit.

SCÈNE II

LE ROI COUTURIN, LA REINE COUTURINE, *avec toute la cour (hommes et femmes) ;* GRAISSED'OURS, *premier ministre.*

Couturin et Couturine sont habilles à la dernière mode du jour, exagérée. Graissed'Ours, en veste, toute la barbe hérissée, l'air farouche, un tablier. — Tous les personnages de la cour représentent les divers métiers relatifs à la toilette. — Le Roi arrive au milieu d'une estrade portée à bras, et assis dans une sorte de fauteuil ayant des compartiments sur les côtés, deux plumes d'autruche au haut des montants et un miroir dans le dossier. A droite et sur un siège plus bas, la Reine ; à sa gauche, sur un autre siège, le premier ministre. — Les porteurs abaissent le trône-estrade, tout doucement, jusqu’à terre.

LE ROI COUTURIN.

C’est bien ! Arrêtez-vous ! Et puisque nous voilà installés dans l’endroit trois fois coquet des séances royales, ayant à notre droite notre clière épouse, la sémillante Couturine...

COUTURINE, iitec u-i regard langoureux, lui prend la main et la baise.

Toujours tendre, Couturin !

LE ROI COUTURIN. A notre gauche, notre premier ministre, l’indispensable Graissed’Ours.

GRAISSED’OURS. Vous êtes trop bon, Majesté !

COUTURIN. Autour de nous, les hauts dignitaires de notre bonnet : l’archi-tailleur, l’archi-bottier, le prince du Cold-Cream, le duc du Caoutchouc, et autres.

LES GRANDS DIGNITAIRES, /’inclinant. Pour vous servir, ô Souverain î COUTURIN.

Avec les dames de notre cour, Il salue.

lesquelles en font l’ornement.

LES DAME3.

Ah ! délicieux !

COUTURIN. Ei derrière nous, le peuple imbécile !

LA FOULE.

Vive le Roi !

COUTURIN. Il nous faut, suivant l’usage, établir les modes de la saison.

TOUS, avec vivacité et se démenant.

Voyons ! quelles couleurs ? combien de mètres ?

COUTURIN. Un instant ! 11 est d’abord indispensable de rappeler les principes.

CRAISSED’OURS.

Rappelez !

COUTURIN. Or, c’est une vérité reconnue, mes colombes, que vous êtes naturellement hideuses !.

LES DAMES, scandalisées. Ah ! ah ! l’abomination !

COUTURIN. Oui, fort laides !... Silence ! Vous ne mettrez pas en doute, j’imagine, la supériorité du factice sur le réel ? C’est l’Art seul, déesses, qui vous fournittous vos charmes. — Ne craigne/ rien, je suis discret. — Mais vou> conviendrez que l’on est amoureux d2 la robî et non de la femme, de la bottine et non du pied ; et si vous ne possédiez pas la soie, la dentelle et le velour. », le patchouli et le chevreau, des pierres qui brillent et des couleurs pour vous peindre, les Sauvages mêmes ne voudraient pas de vous, puisqu’ils ont des épouses tatouées !

Il se rassoit.

LES DAMES.

C’est un peu dur ! un peu vif !

GRAISSED’OURS se lève.

D’ailleurs, le vêtement, éLant le signe manifeste de la chasteté, fait partie de la vertu et est une vertu lui-même !

Il se rassoit.

COUTURIN.

Donc, plus le cosLurne sera costumant, c’e^t-à-dire antinaturel, incommode et laid, plus il sera beau !

Il se ras :oit.

GRAISSED’OURS se lire.

Et distingué surtcut !

Il se rassoit.

TOUS.

Ah ! distingué ! le distingué, c’est le principal.

COUTURIN se lève.

Eh bien ! travaillez maintenant. Il se rassoit.

TOUS. Voyons ! cherchons !

Un moment de silence, puis on entend tout à coup un grand fracas de miroirs

Un moment de silence, puis on entend tout à coup un grand fracas de miroirs cassés.

COUTURIN.

Qu’est-ce ?

Il fait à un officier signe de sortir ; après avoir regarde à droite.

Ah ! l’arbre aux miroirs, cassé ! Ils étaient trop mûrs sans doute, et quelque maraudeur en l’ébranlant...

L’OFFICIER, rentrant. Nous avons trouvé dessous un monstre !

COUTURIN »

Un monstre ?

L’OFFICIER. Oui, 6 Souverain, un être vert et démodé.

COUTURIN.

Qu’on l’amène !

TOUS.

Quelle bravoure !

SCÈNE III

LF.S PRECEDENTS, JEANNE.

Elle entre avec des gants verts Empire qui lui montent jusqu’aux coudes, et faisant beaucoup de plis sur les bras ; uue coiffure à la girafe, un châle jaune par-dessus sa tunique et un ridicule à la main. A son aspect, Couturine pousse un cri aigu et tombe à la renverse. Graissed’Ours se léte indigne ; Couturin, avec un petit mouvement d’effroi, se recule sur son trône ; les dames arrachent vivement les feuilles de l’arbre à éventails et se cachent le visage dessous. Brouhaha général.

LES HOMMES s’ecrient :

— Arrière !

— Va-t’en !

— Cache-toi !

LES DAMES.

— C’est une horreur î

— Une turpitude !

— Une antiquité... !

COUTURIN, pour commander le silence, étend son sceptre, un fer à papillotes.

Du calme, têtes exallées par la frisure ! Approche, jeune fille, — car tu as l’air d’en être une, à tes attributs naturels, bien que tu n’en possèdes point les grâces. Explique-nous, justifie ton accoutrement !

JEANNE.

Je l’ai pris là, par terre, au hasard... croyant qu’il le fallait ; et, en me relevant, tous les miroirs...

COUTURIN.

Assez ! Ce n’est pas d’eux qu’il s’agit.

Rapidement.

Mais, pour avoir désobéi aux lois de notre Empire, pour avoir méprisé le culte de la chaussure, les délicatesses de la lingerie et l’élégance du cheveu ; pour t’étre affublée d’une aussi infâme défroque, qui fait remonter l’imagination jusqu’au temps de Corinne et du cirage à l’œuf, tu mériterais les supplices...

TOUS.

Oui, oui ! les plus terribles !

COUTURIN.

D’être condamnée à des bottines trop étroites, à des peignes trop durs, à des corsets indéla-çables !

TOUS.

Bravo !

COUTUR1N.

A porter un cabas !

JEANNE.

Grâce !

COUTURIN.

Et un turban., avec panaches !

JEANNE

JEANNE.

Mais je ne connaissais pas la mode ! Je n’ai pu la suivre. Est-ce un crime ?

COUTURIN.

Il n’y en a pa5 de plus grand, élre femelle ! car la Mode, sais-tu bien, c’est la loi, la fantaisie, la tradition et le progrès ; il n’est rien qu’elle ne gouverne, ne produise et ne renverse. Colosse folâtre établi >ur le monde, elle drape la couche des nouveau-nés, tandis qu’elle ornemente des tombeaux, levant -a têle au ciel ver> les philosophie » et pénétrant ainsi, du bout de son pied mignon, jusque dans l’éternité. Retire tes gants verts !

JEANNE, humblement.

Je ae demande pas mieux, nui. Je ferai ce qui vous plaira.

COUTURINE.

Ah ! pitié pour elle, grand roi !

COUTURIN.

Soit ! je te pardonne, en considération de ton ignorance.

Aux grands officiers.

Et vous autres, occupez-vous de la façonner congrûment, de la vêtir dans le dernier genre.

JEANNE, sautant dejoié.

Oh ! merci. Quel bonheur ! Je serai donc jolie, bien habillée !

COUTURIN.

Espérons-le !

‘BALLET

Sur un signe que fait Couturin, les officiers de sa cour se précipitent de droite et de gauche : les uns vers les champignons qui portent des costumes, les autres vers les étoffes du fond, ceux-ci vers les marabouts, ceux-là vers l’arbre à peignes, etc. ; et ils s’empressent d’habiller Jeanne et de la maquiller. Cependant le fond et les deux côtés du theâtre changent, et représentent du haut en bas les rayons d’un gigantesque magasin de nouveautés, plein de garçons servant des dames. Couturin est placé au premier plan à droite, étalé, seul, sur une petite causeuse dans une pose méditative et en train de prendre des notes. Les garçons de magasin habillent des dames du monde. Quelques-unes viennent s’adresser à Couturin, qui leur repond, par trois fois : Laissez-moi ! je compose !

Couturine leur sert du thé, sur un petit guéridon, place près de Couturin.

A de certains moments, le mouvement s’arrête et il se fait un grand silence. Alors Ccwturin, un lorgnon dans l’œil, passe toutes les femmes en revue et les rajuste, abaisse ou rehausse leur decolletage d’un geste brusque, puis lève les épaules et crie : Non, pas ça, c’est vieux ; autre chose ! vivement !

Jeanne doit toujours former le centre du groupe principal. A la fin, toutes les dames, y compris la Heine, qui ont suivi progressivement les mêmes changements, se trouvent ha~ billées comme elle, d’une façon riche et extravagante.

COUTURIN.

Restons-y au moins une demi-heure ! C’est très beau !

Satisfaction générale exprimée par des soupirs / mais tout à coup Couturin considère Jeanne, et, défaisant avec rapidité sa toilette : Oui ! décidément, ceci me déplaît, et cela aussi !... Autre chose... Allons ! vite !

Jear.ne se trouve dans un costume d’un goût simple et exquis.

Maintenant, seigneurs et seigneure-ses, parfumeurs et brodeuses, chemisiers et couturières, retirez-vous dans vos cabinets artistiques, nous souhaitons être seuls ! Demeurez, Couturine !

SCÈ^CE IV JEANNE, COUTURIN, COUTURINE.

COUTURIN.

Eh bien ! jeune fille, ce luxe de la toilette que tu désirais si fort, le voilà !

JEANNE.

C’est donc vrai ! Je ne rêve pas !

COUTURIN.

« Non, les génies supérieurs te protègent.

JEANNE.

Moi !

COUTURIN.

N’en doute plus ! Aucune, grâce à nous, ne sera aussi séduisante.

JEANNE.

Oh ! merci. Il va donc m’aimer.

COUTURIN.

Peut-être ? Pour atteindre à la moderne dignité de femme, — tâche de comprendre. — pour devenir tout à fait cet être charmant, inextricable et funeste commencé par Dieu et achevé par les poètes et les coiffeurs, si bien qu’il a fallu soixante siècles au monde avant de produire la Parisienne, il le manque enrore, o petite fille, bien des choses.

JEANNE.

Lesquelles ?

COUTURIN.

Eh ! tu ne .sais pas saluer, sourire, pincer la bouche, cligner des yeux, ni débiter des mélancolies en prenant sur un sopha des poses de fleur battue par la brise. Comment ferais-tu, voyons, en l’entendant soupirer ? et quelle serait ta réponse s’il te demandait : “M’aimes-tu ?”

JEANNE.

Eh bien, je répondrais : Oui.

COUTURINE, impérieusement.

Ça ne se dit pas, jeune fille ! C’est un mot indécent, naturel et populaire !

JEANNE.

Mais comment parler ? Enseigne moi !

COUTURIN. Holà ! les deux types du bon goût ! Arrive/ !

SCÈVCE V

LES PRECEDENTS, DEUX MANNEQUINS.

Monsieur et dame que l’on apporte. La dame est vêtue à la dernière mode. Le monsieur a une raie derrière la tête qui se continue, par les poils de son paletot systématiquement divisés, jusqu’au bas des reins ; elle se reproduit sur chaque jambe du pantalon ; lorgnon dans l’ail, chic anglais, *etc.*

COUTURIN.

Considère ces deux honnêtes mannequins qui ressemblent à des humains : tâche de reproduire leurs mouvements, si tu veux avoir de belles manières. Rappelle-toi leurs discours, et, en quelque lieu que tu te trouves, à la campagne, en visite, en soirée, dans un dîner ou au spectacle, tu pourras jacasser hardiment sur la nature, la littérature, les enfants aux têtes blondes, l'idéal, le turf, et autres choses. La clef, Couturine ?

Il remonte les deux automates à la poitrine.

Commençons. En appuyant ici, on obtient ce qu'il faut dire devant un beau paysage.

En prenant le monsieur sous les aisselles, il le penche de droite et de gauche, comme on fait à une pendule dont le balancier est arrêté, Couturine fait de même à la dame, Partez !

LE MONSIEUR, atec de petits gestes rapides de la main droite et l'air guilleret.

Bonjour, chère !

LA DAME, même jeu.

Bonjour, bonjour, mon bon !

Ils se rapprochent ainsi des deux côtés de la scène, en roulant sur leurs roulettes, et quand ils sont arrives face à face, ils se secouent les mains pendant une minute avec violence, en ricanant.

LE MONSIEUR, regardant autour de lui, avec des mouvements de tète saccadés.

Tiens ! tiens ! tiens ! où sommes-nous donc ?

LA DAME, minaudant et en détachant ses phrases.

Ah ! la délicieuse campagne !... un site pittoresque !... et des petites fleurs ! — si poétiques ! — et inutiles !... poétiques parce qu'elles sont inutiles. — inutiles parce qu'elles sont poétiques !

LE MONSIEUR, d'un ton bourru.

Moi... je la trouve bête comme chou... votre campagne ! — Du sentiment, allons donc ! — de l'élégie, ha ! ha ! ha ! — la poésie, ha ! ha ! ha ! — Je suis revenu de tout ça... ha ! ha ! ha !

LA DAME, avec beaucoup de gestes.

Mais cependant, permettez, si l'on taillait ces arbres... si l'on reculait ces massifs, en faisant avancer le vieux chêne, avec quelques mines, des paysans bien habillés et un chemin de fer pour être à proximité, on aurait là, avouez-le, un beau sujet artistique, de quoi faire une jolie mine de plomb.

LE MONSIEUR, gaillardement.

En fait de mine, je préfère la vôtre.

LA DAME.

Où donc prenez-vous ce ton-là ? Chez vos petites dames ? Je voudrais bien, sans qu'on le sache, y aller un peu... pour voir leur mobilier.

LE MONSIEUR.

A vos ordres !

A part.

Une imagination !... elle pétille !

Haut.

Mais, permettez, un conseil : pour vos placements, je m'en chargerais.

LA DAME, vite.

Et des reports aussi ?

LE MONSIEUR, vite.

Ça va ! J'ai mon carnet.

LA DAME, vite.

Nous disons donc... ?

COUTURINE, arrêtait ressort.

Assez ! assez ! ils n^ s'arrêteraient plu ?.

JEANNE.

J'aurai bien du mal à retenir...

COUTURIN.

Ah bah ! avec de la bonne volonté ! Écoute-les plutôt sur les nouvelles du jour.

// touche un ressort des mannequins à une autre place.

LA DAME, lentement et d'un air affligé.

Eh bien, — à ce qu'il paraît, — on a encore massacré, là-bas, douze mille de ces pauvres diables pauvres diables.

LE MONSIEUR, chantonnant.

Broum ! broum ! broum ! Qu’est-ce que ça nous fait ? Je ne donne plus là-dedans ! La vie est courte, turlurette ! Amusons-nous !

LA DAME, d’un ton gai.

Vous avez le genre Régence, tout à fait talon rouge.

LE MONSIEUR, gravement, la main dans son gilet.

Oui, avec des idées libérales. Un mélange de l’ancienne aristocratie française et de l’industrialisme américain Qu’est-ce que ça ?

LA DAME, vite, et d’un ton suppliant, en lui offrau une liasse de petits papiers.

Des billets de loterie, peur mes pauvres !

LE MONSIEUR, avec un grand salut. Trop heureux, Madame ! A part.

Pincé !

Légèrement.

Et le nouveau livre de chose, l’avez-vous lu ?

LA DAME, admirativement.

Oh ! très beau ! Vrai ! c’est un grand homme !

LE MONSIEUR, naturellement. Eh ! non, un crétin. Du moins on le dit. LA DAME.

On le dit. Ah ! alors ça se peut. Je vous crois.

LE MONSIEUR, avec un regard amoureux et soupirant. Si vous pouviez croire tout ce que je vous...

Il s’arrête brusquement.

COUTURIN. Ah ! j’ai oublié deux demi-tours !

JEANNE.

Mqis ils ne s’aiment pas du tout, ceux-lq !

COUTURIN, en remontant les mannequins.

C’est ainsi que cela commence ; et quand il lui aura dit, en face, assez d’impertinences pour la faire pleurer, ce sera une union si intime et tellement reconnue, que l’on ne manquera pas dans les meilleures maisons de les inviter ensemble.

Les deux mannequins, pendant qu’il les remontait, ont échangé des gestes tendres qui deviennent de plus en plus expressifs.

Non ! non ! à la valse ! à la valse !

Ils se mettent à valser, et, pendant qu’ils valsent, Jeanne répété du mieux qu’elle peut tous leurs mouvements.

C’est cela ! lui, menton levé et coude e.i l’air ; — elle, droite comme un I et nez baissé ; tous deux piquant leurs angles dans l’espace, une vraie figure de géométrie en belle humeur. Assez : qu’on les remmène ! Et vous, Couturine, veillez bien à ce qu’on les remette dans leurs boîtes.

On les emporte.

SCÈ^CE VI

COUTURIN, JEANNE.

COUTURIN. Voilà ! Tu en sais suffisamment pour te produire dans le monde.

JEANNE.

Eh ! ce n’est pas le monde qui m’inquiète, mais Lui. Où est-il ? Je veux le voir.

COUTURIN, lentement.

11 me serait possible de satisfaire ton désir.

JEANNE, ravie.

Oh !...

COUTURIN.

A une condition, cependant.

JEANNE.

Dis-la ! et quelle qu’elle soit, d’avance... Réponds donc...

COUTURIN.

C’est que jamais tu ne te feras reconnaître, ni à lui, ni à son compagnon.

JEANNE.

Pourquoi ?

COUTURIN.

Parce qu’il t’a déjà repoussée quand tu étais une paysanne : l’oublies-tu ? Et, surtout, écoute bien, tu ne doutes pas de mon pouvoir : n’est-ce pas moi qui t’ai donné plus de robes que tu ne possédais d’épingles et plus de perles fines qu’il n’y avait de grains de son dans l’auge de tes pourceaux ? Eh bien, je te jure, par celte même puissance, que si tu viens à lui dire ton nom, à l’instant même, et comme d’un coup de foudre, tu mourras.

JEANNE baisse la te te, tandis que Couturi.i l’obsene avec anxiite ; puis lentement : N’importe sous quel nom et sous quelle figure : pourvu qu’il m’aime, c’e^t tout ce que je veux ! Partons-nous ?

COUTURIN.

Oh ! inutile ! Le voilà qui vient pour des emplettes indispensables à son voyage !

On entend la voix de Dominique dans la coulisse.

SCÈ^dE VU

LES PRECEDENTS, PAUL, DOMIXIQ.UE,

COMMIS.

Dans la scène précédente, le dicor peu à peu s’est changé en un ba^ar immense oit il y a beaucoup d’articles de voyage. Le fond de la scene se trouve occupé par les couturiers et les modistes.

DOMINIQUE, criant. Place ! place ! Il nous faut deux sacs de nuit, une aumônière, des couvertures.

PREMIER COMMIS. A vos ordres !

DEUXIÈME COMMIS. Tout de suite, Monsieur !

TROISIÈME COMMIS. Huitième étage ! quinzième rayon !

QUATRIÈME COMMIS. Non ! par ici !

DOMINIQUE. Ah ! j’en perds la boule !

Paul et Dominique sont arrives au milieu de la scène. JEANNE, la main sur son caur.

C’est lui !

PAUL » apercevant Jeanne » Quelle beauté !

DOMINIQUE. Je trouve qu’elle a un faux air. Riant.

Suls-je bête !... Comme si c’était possible !... PAUL.

Mais je l’ai déjà vue !... Où donc ? Ah !... dans mes rêves, sans doute...

JEANNE, vivement.

Il ne me reconnaît pas ? Bien ! D’autant plus que déguisée par celte toilette...

COUTURIN.

Tu as meilleure chance de lui plaire, certainement ! Mais n’oublie pas mes leçons !

JEANNE.

Non ! non ! Oh ! je me ^cns de l’esprit ! tu vas voir.

PAUL, saluant.

Madame !...

A part.

Pour qu’un être tellement merveilleux se rencontre ici, avec moi, c’est que le ciel, sans doute, l’a voulu ? Serait-ce par hasard... ?

JEANNE, imitant les gestes du mannequin.

Bonjour ! bonjour, mon bon !

PAUL.

Quelle familiarité ! C’est un indice, un signe, peut-être ?...

JEANNE, se rapprochant de lui.

De la tristesse, il me semble ? Et la cause ?

PAUL.

Prêt à partir pour un long voyage, je me demandais, tout à l’heure, si je ne ferais pas mieux ..

JEANNE.

Un voyage ? ça me va ! Plus on e*t de fous, plus on rit ! Votre bra*, voyons ! Presto !

PAUL.

Elle est folle !

JEANNE

JEANNE.

Mais regarde/ ! J’ai trois cent quatre-vingt-douze caisses pleines de robes, des coiffures par douzaine, des serviettes brodées, des torchons à dentelles, des gants à vingt-six boutons et des amours de petites bottes. Oh ! mes petites bottes !

Elle montre son pied.

Bottes ! bottes ! bottes !

PAUL.

Assez ! assez !

JEANNE.

Mon chalet d’acajou peut, en un clin d’œil, se poser sur les sites les plus pittoresques, et avec un piano...

Geste de dégoût de Paul.

un bon piano pour jouer des polkas sur les montagnes... Je sais faire des imitations. Écoute !

PAUL.

Grâce !

JEANNE, vivement.

Le reflet de nos élégances embellira le monde entier. Nous donnerons des raouts dans les pagodes, nous friserons les sauvages ; notre poudre de riz se mêlera à tous les vents ! Tout pour le chic ! chic *for ever !* Du matin au soir nous ferons des mots ! — Nous écrirons noire nom sur tous ks monuments ! nous blaguerons toutes les ruines, nous cracherons dans tous les précipices ! Tu ne t’ennuieras pas ! Grâce à la poste, maintenant, on reçoit n’importe où les journaux. Si l’occasion se présente de faire une affaire, un lac de pélro’e, quelque gisement de houille...

PAUL, s’enfuyant.

Horreur :

JEANNE.

Aimons-nous.

PAUL.

Pas de cette façon-là !

JEANNE.

Reviens !

PAUL.

Jamais !

Il disparaît.

DOMINIQUE, regardant de droite et de gauche.

Comment ? décampé ! File était bien aimable pourtant !

Il sort.

SCÉ&CE Vlll

JEANNE, COUTURIN.

JEANNE, atterrée et considérant Couturin. Eli bien ? eh bien ?

COUTURIN. Qu’as-tu donc ?

JEANNE éclate e i sanglots, et s’appuyant sur l’épaule de Couturin : Ah ! je suis horriblement malheureuse !

CHOEUR DE COUTURIERS ET MODISTES

offrant les consolations puisées dans les douceurs de leur art.

JEANNE les regarde quelque temps sans comprendre ; puis tout à coup : Misérables ! c’est vous qui en êtes cause avec vos fadeurs imbéciles. Allez-vous-en, mensonges du cœur et de la joue, hypocrisies, maquillages, faux sentiments, faux chignons, poitrines débraillées, âmes étroites ! Je liais tout cela ! Non ! non ! plus de tout cela !

EU ; déchiré ses vèiinum

Ou est-il ?... Je veux lui dire que je le trompais !... Paul ! Pau » !

Elle court de cote et d’autre, tperdue. haletante, reniersiint tout devant elle. — Les couturiers et les modistes s’enfuient.

Attends-moi ! réponds ! Je vais venir ! Me vois-tu ? Écoute ! Paul !

Elle revient sir le devant de la scene, près de Couturin, qui est le Hci des Gnomes.

Ah ! je l’ai perdu pour toujours !

LE ROI.

Par ta faute ! Tu t’y es mal prise !

JEANNE.

N’est-ce pas ? j’aurais dû me nommer ! LÈ ROI.

Tu en serais morte, l’oublies-tu ?

J eanNE.

Ah ! mais que fallait-il donc faire ? Et c’est moi-même qui l’ai chassé ! Plutôt que de me contraindre dans tout ce factice qui m’étouffait le coeur, j’aurais dû lui parler simplement et ne pas l’étourdir par le caquet de mes élégances ineptes. Si j’avais été une autre, je lui aurais plu peut-être ? Il lui faudrait quelqu’un avec moins de fard aux pommettes, de sottises aux lèvres, de singeries dans les manières ; une femme... qui le gagnerait par la modestie de sa tendresse... une bonne épouse... une simple bourgeoise.

LE ROI.

Tu veux en être une ?

JEANNE.

Est-ce qu’il m’aimerait alors ?

LE ROI.

Je le pense !

JEANNE.

Comment le devenir ?

LE ROI.

Oli ! cela est facile !

JEANNE.

Fais donc !

LE ROI.

Tu l’exiges !

JEAN N E. Oui î oui ! Ou Jonc le trou\er ?

LE ROI, *Venir dînant p.ir la iii.u’i, .née autorité.*

Viens ! Par là ! Suis-moi !

SIXIÈME TABLEAU

LE ROYAUME DU POT-AU-FEU

Le théâtre représente la place de ville, en hémicycle. Toutes les rues y aboutissent, de façon que l’on peut apercevoir d’un seul coup d’œil la ville entière. Les maisons, toutes pareilles et d’une architecture pitoyable, à façade nue, sont peintes en couleur chocolat, avec des réchampis blancs. Au milieu de la place, porté par un trépied et sur les charbons embrasés, bouillonne un gigantesque pot-au-feu.

Autour du pot-au »feu, il y a, rangés en demi-cercle, des fauteuils de bureau en acajou, dans lesquels se tiennent assis les épiciers, tous en serpillière et en casquette de loutre. Derrière eux, des deux côtés de la scène, debout, les différentes corporations de la ville, portant des bannières, où l’on voit écrit : BUREAUCRATIE, SCIENCES, LITTERATURE, *etc.* Les savants ont des toques et des abat-jour verts ; les littérateurs, un mirliton et un encrier passés en bandoulière sur la hanche ; les bureaucrates, des bouts do manche de percale noire avec une plume de ter à l’oreille. Tous les citoyens portent la barbe en collier et ont (à l’exception des épiciers) des redingotes à la propriétaire et des cliapeaux-tromblons sur la téte.

Le grand pontife, au milieu de la scène, derrière le pot-au-feu, faisant face au spectateur et monté sur un escabeau, dépasse la multitude. Des deux côtés, sur le devant, un groupe de collégiens, coiffés de képis, joue de l’accordéon. Aux fenêtres des maisons, il y a des femmes à bonnets tuyautés et en robe de laine brune ; sur les toits à tuiles rouges, des chats. Au-delà, un ciel gris.

SCÈNE PREMIMÈRE

La toile se lève aux sous nulancoliques des accordéons joués par les collégiens, et qui se prolongent quelque temps encore après quelle est entièrement levée. Puis il se fait un silence. On entend bouillonner le pot-au-feu tout doucement, et enfin le grand pontife commence.

LE GRAND PONTIFE, une écumoire à la main.

Citoyens, bourgeois, croûtons ! En ce jour solennel, où nous sommes réunis pour adorer le trois fois saint Pot-au-Feu, emblème des intérêts matériels, autrement dit des plus chers ! si bien que, grâce à vous, le voilà maintenant presque un2 divinité !... C’est à moi, le grand pontife de ce culte sage, qu’il incombe de vous remémorer vo= ; devoirs et do vous relier tous, par un act »‘ commun, à la vénération, à l’amour, à la frénésie du Pot-au-Feu !

Vos devoirs, ô Bourgeois, nul d’entre vous, je le déclare, n’y a transgressé ! Vous vous êtes tenus philosophiquement dans vos maisons, ne pensant qu’à vos affaires, à vous-mêmes seulement ; et vous vous êtes bien gardés de lever jamais les yeux vers les étoiles, sachant que c’est le moyen de tomber dans les puits. Continuez votre petit bonhomme de chemin, qui vous mènera au repos, à la richesse et à la considération ! Ne manquez point de haïr ce qui est exorbitant ou héroïque, — pas d’enthousiasme surtout ! — et ne changez rien à quoi que ce soit, ni à vos idées, ni à vos redingotes ; car le bonheur particulier, comme le public, ne se trouve que dans la tempérance de l’esprit, l’immutabilité des usages et le glouglou du pot-au-feu !

Accordéons.

A vous d’abord, colonnes de la patrie, exemples du commerce, base de la moralité, protecteurs des arts, Épiciers !

Les épiciers se lèvent.

Jurez-vous de toujours mettre de la chicorée dans le café ?

LES ÉPICIERS, en chaur.

Oui !

LE GRAND PONTIFE.

Et de ne pas quitter le comptai.-, sauf, bien entendu, pour venir sur votre seuil indiquer aux badauds la route qu’il faut suivre ; enfin, de vous infusionner dans le inonde par toutes sortes de moyen®, alliances et propagande, de manière à faire prévaloir vos principes et à demeurer, ce que vous êtes, les rois de l’humanité, les dominateurs universels ?

TOUS LES ÉPICIERS, debout, la main étendue vers le pot-au-feu.

Nous le jurons !

LE GRAND PONTIFE.

Ft vous, Bureaucrates !

LES BUREAUCRATES.

Présents !

LE GRAND PONTIFE.

ÈtCi-vous bien résolus à travailler toujours le moins possible, en ne songeant toujours qu’à votre avancement ?

LES BUREAUCRATES.

Oh ! oui !

LE GRAND PONTIFE.

Jurez-vous de toujours brûler effroyablement de bois flans vos po »-| ?s, d ? vous montrer incivils, de maudire vos chefs en vous plaignant de l’existence, et de dépenser pour cent écus d’écritures dans une affaire de vingt-cinq centimes, dont vous ferez attendre la solution pendant quinze ans ?

LES BUREAUCRATES. Nous le jurons !

LE GRAND PONTIFE. Messieurs les Savants, lumières du pays, à votre tour !

Les Savants se présentent à di mi courbés, avec un tremblement sénile.

LE GRAND PONTIFE, d’un ton familier. Vous vous engagez, n’est-ce pas, comme par le passé, à ne faire que des petites recherches innocentes, qui ne troublent rien ?

TOUS LES SAVANTS, levant les mains. Oui ! oui ! N’ayez pas peur ! Nous le jurons.

LE GRAND PONTIFE. Cela suffit ! — Venez maintenant, vous, talents honnêtes qui charmez nos soirées de famille. L’Art étant fait pour récréer, vous nous récréez. Allons !

LES POÈTES COMIQUES étendent tous la main vers le pot-au-feu, en faisant : Cocorico !

Ricanements dans l’assemblée.

LE GRAND PONTIFE, souriant aux épiciers qui l’entourent.

Encore un peu d’excentricité dans la forme ; mais les intentions sont si pure ; !

Il frappe atec son éeirr.oire sur le pot-au-feu pour réclamer Vattentio n.

Un dernier mot, Messieurs, à la Jcune.se, au printemps de la vie.

Sur un signe qu’il leur fait, les coll<gi ;ns s’approchent avec leurs accordéons sous le bras.

Approchez, Ëphèbes, approchez ! Jeunes gens, notre espoir, vous allez entrer dans l’âge des passions ! Prenez garde, c’est comme si vous pénétriez dans une poudrière ; la moindre étincelle, tombant sur vos cerveaux, peut faire sauter l’édifice ! On a eu soin d’écarter de vous toutes les torches, je le sais : n’importe ! Il n’en faut pas moins se défier des ardeurs du sang et de l’imagination ; elles ne produisent que des crimes et des folies ! ou plutôt, utilisez vos vices ! employez profitablemcnt vos mauvais instincts ! Que ceux, pa~ exemple, cjui savent gagner au jeu rapportent leur argent à la maison, et qu’ils le placent ! Amusez-vous en cachette, économiquement ; prenez un bon état, et ne rentrez, jamais passé dix heures du soir. Voila le secret. Jurez-vous de l’observer ?

LES COLLEGIENS.

Nous le jurons !

Ils retournent à leur place«

LÊ CHATEAU DÉS COEURS.

LE GRAND PONTIFE.

Je suL ému, Mes ;icurs ! Tant de raison dans cet âge m’a touché, et si la fête n’était pas terminée, je succomberais à mon émotion. Elle est terminée, car il n’est pas besoin de vous demander de serment, à vous...

Il s’adresse aux feumus qui sont aux fmètres.

gardiennes et cause de notre félicité, épouses, ménagères, petites-mamans pot-au-feu ! C’est par vos soins qu’il mijote ! Donc, persévérez dans vos deux préoccupations chéries : i° raccommoder les chaussettes de vos légitimes, et *2*° être toujours en garde contre les séductions de la gaudriole. Ne songez même qu’à cela, incessamment, exclusivement. Bref, n’oubliez pas que l’attitude la plus belle p.uir une femme, sa position idéale, si j’ose m’exprimer ainsi, est de se tenir quelque peu agenouillée, avec une écumoire à la main, un bas de laine passé dans le bras gauche, tournant dos à Cupidon, et la tête perdue dans h vapeur du pjt-au-feu !

Et vous, Chats, inconstants quadrupèdes, bohémiens des toits ! Si vous n’employez pas tout votre temps et la force de votre gueule à nous prendre des souris, on vous mettra des muselières et l’on vous empalera avec la broche, puisque la Nature vous a créés pour nous être utile ». Mais, que si vous devenez sédentaires et zélés à nous servir, on vous laissera au fond de l’as ;ictte quelques gouttes froides du pot-au-feu !

Et toi, Soleil, puisses-tu, biil’ant toujours modérément, te transformer en un vaste paquet de chandelles, pour nous économiser l’éclairage ! et que tes rayons fassent tomber dans le creux des mers une pluie de graisse, afin que, se chauffant à la tiédeur, tout le globe entier ne soit pUi-qu’un immense pot-au-feu !

TOUS crient : Vive le pot-au-feu !

En retirant leurs chapeaux, ce qui laisse voir distinctement leur crânes étroits et trcs allongés, en forme de pain de sucre.

LES FEMMES, aux fenêtres.

Comme nos maris sont bien !

Les autres corporations qui n’ont pas < té nomnu e ; s’empressent autour du pot-au-feu, et le grand pontife, décrivant mystiquement un cercle dans l’air, les asperge tous avec son écumoire. Après quoi, la séance étant leite, on retire les sieges, on se cherche et l’on s’aborde avec une certaine animation.

LES BOURGEOIS.

Ah ! une belle fête ! un remarquable discours ! Et quelle musique ! On a fait des progrès dans les arts ! C’est incontestable !...

La confusion et la rumeur peu à peu s’apaisent, et tous se mettent à obsener les horloges qvi sont au-dessus de la porte, devant chaque maison. L’aiguille marque cinq heures cinquante-cinq minutes. Ils attendent le nez en l’air, et quand six heures sonnent, ils disent tous en même temps : Allons dîner !...

Ils entrent dans les maisons.

SCÈNE U

La scène reste complètement vide. D’abord, on entend dans les maisons un bruit de gros baisers, ensuite un bruit de chaises ; presque aussitôt après, un bruit de cuillères sur les assiettes, et quelque temps après DES VOIX s’élèvent et disent : Ah ! ça fait bien !...

Un petit silence, puis cliquetis de couteaux et de fourchettes.

LES MÊMES VOIX.

Voilà ce qu’on ne trouve pas au restaurant !...

Le bruit des couteaux et des fourchettes continue. On entend déboucher des bouteilles de vin, puis LES MÊMES VOIX. Nous sommes entre la poire et le fromage. Alors quelques petits rires de satisfaction.

LES VOIX DES HOMMES, seulement. Donne-nous un verro de liqueurs, hein ?

LES VOIX DES FEMMES. Mais tu vas te faire mal !

LES VOIX DES HOMMES. C’est pour mon estomac, une fois n’est pas coutume !...

Ensuite un fort remaniement de chaises, et

TOUS LES BOURGEOIS apparaissent à leurs fenêtres, étendent la main et disent : Il fait chaud !

UNE FEMME arrive à chaque fenêtre. Oui ! mais le fond de l’air est froid.

TOUS LES BOURGEOIS. C’est vrai !

Ils se détournent un peu et tapent sur le baromètre accroché en dehors de la fenêtre.

Ça va-t-il se maintenir ?...

Après quelque réflexion.

Oui !... oui... on peut prendre le frais !

Les croistes se referment, et bientôt tous les bourgeois rentrent en scène et s’installent devant leurs portes sur des chaises, chaque ménage étant flanqué d’un petit garçon habille en turco et d’une petite file habillee en Suissesse.

Ah ! on est bien ici !

Les femmes prennent leur tricot, les hommes leur journal. Jeanne, en costume extra-bourgeois, s’assoit sur le seuil (i’unt maison au premier plan, à droite.

SCÈ&CE ///

LES BOURGEOIS, LES BOURGEOISES, JEANNE, LE ROI DES GNOMES.

Dès que Jeanne est assise,

LE ROI DES GNOMES, ayant retiré quelques-uns de ses attributs de Pontife du Pot-au Feu, parait derrière elle, et se penchant sur son épaule : Tu le vois ! tout me cède ! tout nous sert ! Je n’ai eu qu’à me montrer pour être élu bourgmestre de la ville et pontife de la religion. A part.

Rien de plus facile : c’est dans la médiocrité que l’esprit du mal triomphe !•

JEANNE, soupirant.

Mais voilà tant de jours que je le cherche, que je l’attends... Et il va venir, tu crois ?

LE ROI DES GNOMES. J’en suis sûr ! Patiente !

JEANNE. Oh ! merci. Protège-moi toujours !

LES MERES.

Allons, mes anges ! Voici l’heure où les enfants doivent s’amuser !

Les petits lurcos et les petites suissesses s’tlancent du seuil des maisons en courant, se prennent par la main et dansent en rond autour du pot-au-feu en chantant quatre \ers imités de ta chanson des Spartiates : Nos grands-pères étaient betes,

Nos pères l’ont été plus !

Nous le sommes davantage,

Nos enfants le seront encore bien plus.

Quelques-uns de leurs bonnets tombent dans leur danse, et l’on voit leurs crânes extra-pointus.

JEANNE, *les contemplant.* Ils sont jolis, ces enfants. Heureuses mères !

UNE DAME, à côte d\ lie, sur une chaise.

Sans doute ! Vous êtes bien honnête, Mademoiselle, et le mien, quoique plus jeune, promet beaucoup !

Elle appelle.

Nourrice !...

DEUXIÈME DAME. Et le mien aussi. — Nourrice !.

TROISIÈME DAME.

Et les deux miens donc ! — Nourrice !...

Alors paraît une légion de nourrices dandinant des poupons dans leurs bras. Les mères s’empressent autour d’eux, pour les montrer.

PREMIÈRE DAME.

Envoyez un bécot à la jolie demoiselle et au bon monsieur.

UNE MÈRE DE POUPARD, lui retirant ses langes. Regardez-moi ces membres.

UNE AUTRE MÈRE.

Et sa tête !

Elle lui retire son béguin.

Voyez !...

TOUTES LES MÈRES DE POUPARDS. La sienne est bien plus belle ! la plus belle !

Elles retirent toutes les béguins de leurs marmots, qui ont des crânes fantastiquement pointus.

LE ROI, piisant.

Encore mieux que leurs pères ! La génération s’annonce crânement !

TOUTES LES MÈRES ET DAMES, parlant à la fois.

Récitez votre fable !... Une risette !,,. Ah ! qu’il çst gentil ! Il aura du nanan !

Tous les enfants envoient des baisers à Jeanne et commencent à marmotter nés vite, pendant que les mères parlent à la fois, que les poupons pleurent et que les nourrices chantonnent. Mais il s’eléve dans la coulisse un grand murmure, comme serait iirritation contenue d’une foule lointaine. Paul et Dominique paraissent. Tous les enfants, effrayes, s’enfuient, les nourrices remmenent leurs nourrissons, et beaucoup de bourgeois et de bourgeoises s’éloignent avec dts regards farouches. D’autres vocifèrent : A bas ! canailles, brigands, originaux !

Sifflets, huecs.

SCÈU^E IV

LE ROI DES GNOMES, JEANNE, PAUL *et* DOMINIQUE, *en costume de voyage très négligé.*

Ils arrivent par le fond du théâtre.

DOMINIQUE. Eh bien, quoi ?... Imbéciles ! Est-ce notre costume qui nous vaut tout cela ?

Les bourgeois sortent, en se faisant des signes d’intelligence. JEANNE, s’élançant vers Paul. Paul !... Ah ! enfin !

LE ROI.

Dissimule ! Tu sais qu’il faut de la simplicité !

DOMINIQUE.

Ils ont l’air assez rébarbatif, ces particuliers-là.

PAUL.

N’importe ! C’est peut-être ici que se trouve... la bien-aimée inconnue...

DOMINIQUE.

Ah ! nous y revoilà ! Décidément, que voulez-vous ? que cherchez-vous ? Où est le but ? Depuis le temps que nous vagabondons dans toutes sortes de pays... car c’est la bouteille à l’encre que votre histoire !

PAUL.

Rien de plus simple ! Je dois rencontrer quelque part une jeune fille à l’âme pure, au désintéressement absolu, la reconnaître, en être aimé, et, fort de son amour, m’emparer du château des Cœurs.

DOMINIQUE.

Ah ! très bien ! Une femme qui n’existe guère, un château qui n’existe pas. Car, enfin, qu’y a-t-il donc clans ce savoyard de château ? Des trésors ?

PAUL.

Non ! mais une fortune tellement extraordinaire que tu ne peux l’imaginer.

DOMINIQUE.

Oh ! oh ! reste à -avoir ! Allons, Monsieur, un bon momement ! Revenons à Paris !...

PAUL.

Oh ! laisse-moi, Dominique ! Je suis si plein de lassitude, de découragement ! Ft puis il y a dans cette ville, malgré sa vulgarité, je ne sais quel charme !

JEANNE, lui offrant une chaise prés d’elle.

Oui ! reste/, Monsieur ! Paul hésite.

Asseyez-vous !

PAUL.

A part.

On n’est pas plus gracieuse, ma parole !

Il la considéré. Elle baisse les yeux.

Diable ! quelle pudeur !

Silence. Ils se regardent face à face.

JEANNE.

On voit que vous êtes complètement étranger à la localité, Monsieur !

Avec dédain.

Et ce costume... excentrique !...

4J

PAUL.

Mon Dieu ! Mademoiselle, je ne pensais pas qu'en voyage... !

JEANNE, sèchement. N'importe ! Il faut suivre la coutume !

DOMINIQUE. Mais elle est assommante, celle-là !

A part, haussant les épaules et montrant Faut. Quel plaisir que de s'entêter !... J'ai envie de voir aux alentours s'il n'y a rien do plus drôle ! Vous permettez, n'est-ce-pas ?...

PAUL.

Oui ! Reviens vite !

SCÈ^CE V

JEANNE, PAUL *et* LE ROI DES GNOMES, *cache par le trône du Pontife, qu'on a roulé au premier plan, à droite.*

JEANNE.

Vous ne faites pas comme lui ? Tant mieux ! PAUL, *à part.*

Ah ! elle s'humanise !

JEAN N t.

Pour demeurer avec nous...

Silence.

PAUL.

Eh bie 1 ?

JEANNE, timidement.

Il faudra... oh ! r.e m’en voulez pas... r.e rien faire, ne rien dire et même ne rien penser qui sorte des actions, dos paroles et des idées de tout le monde !

PAUL.

Eh ! pourquoi ? Où est le mal d’obéir à son cœur quand on sent qu’il est honnête ? Moi, quoi qu’il advienne, je soufïlète les infamies, je m’écarte des laideurs, et, devant ce qui est grand, je m’agenouille !

JEANNE.

Ah ! c’est bien, cela ! c’est bien !

LE ROI DES GNOMES, derrière Jeanie.

Prends garde !

JEANNE.

Pour un homme fatigué du inonde, il s^ii. doux, cependant, d’habiter une de ces rn£iiso :”S.

Paul je détourné avec degout.

Oh ! l’intérieur vaut mieux ! Si vous saviez comme chaque femme soigne son petit mari !

Elle l’entoure de prévenances, fait les confitures, lui brode des pantoufles, le dorlote, le bécote, l’aide à s’habiller, et même lui présente... sa redingote !

Jeanne offre à Paul une des redingotes locales.

Passez-la !

PAUL, ébahi.

Pourquoi ?

JEANNE.

On est si bien dedans ! Je vous en prie !

PAUL, mettant la redingote.

A part.

Elle est stupide, quoique charmante !

Haut.

Sans doute, cette vie-là possède des avantages. Mais ne croyez-vous pas, vous dont la voix est pure comme un chant d’oiseau et le regard cordial comme une bonne poignée de main, ne sentez-vous pas, dites, qu’il peut se rencontrer parfois des unions plus complètes, une félicité d’une telle ardeur qu’elle envoie ses rayons tout autour d’elle ? L’enchantement qu’on a l’un de l’autre fait, au milieu des fanges de la terre, comme une poésie permanente : plus on s’aime, plus on devient bon ; l’habitude seule de la tendresse conduit à l’intelligence de tout ; et ce qui paraît de la vertu n’est que l’excès du bonheur !

JEANNE.

Ah ! je vous comprends ! Oui ! oui !

LE ROI DES GNOMES.

Mais tu te perd.-, malheureuse !

JEANNE, *oppresser.*

En effet, assurément ! et, sans bannir un certain idéal, il y a moyen de s’organiser une petite existence bien tranquille. Pourquoi perdre le meilleur de soi-même en sympathies, en émotions, en démarches, au lieu de réserver tout cela pour son propre individu ?

LE ROI DES GNOMES.

Bravo !

JEANNE.

Comme les autres sont les plus forts, soumettons-nous, afin qu’ils nous respectent et qu’il.-, nous servent ! Oh ! c’ert facile, avec des concessions extérieures, et pourvu qu’on n’ait dans ses discours et sur sa personne rien d’t xtravagant !

Parait un barbier arec les ustensiles de sa profeision.

PAUL, surprit.

Que voulez -vous ?

LE BARBIER, d’une voix caverneuse.

Tailler votre barbe en collier comme à tout le monde !

PAUL.

Voilà, par exemple, une exigence !

JEANNE.

Oh ! pour me plaire !

Elle lui attache la serviette autour du ccu.

PAUL.

Je suis d’un ridicule achevé, n’importe ! Mais d’où vient qu’elle me fascine, et que j’obéis comme un enfant !

JEANNE, pendant que le barbier travaille.

Un peu de patience ! C’est presque fini ! Encore un coup ! Ah ! que vous serez bien ! et quels bons soirs, cet hiver, dans le salon à rideaux de perse, décoré par des photographies de famille, au coin du feu, près de mon piano ! Il y a, dans le faubourg, de petits jardins avec des tonnelles de bâtons verts. Nous viendrons là, tous les deux, le dimanche ; et, nous promenant bras dessus bras dessous, nous parlerons sans cesse de notre bonheur, à côté des légumes, en regardant l’espalier.

PAUL, le barbier ayant fini, se lève. — A part.

Elle a raison peut-être. Un fond de jugement se découvre dans ce qu’elle dit. D’ailleurs, une fois ma femme, je l’éduquerai !

JEANNE.

Mais tournez-vous donc pour que je vous voie ! Ah ! bravo ! Merci ! Je suis contente. Vous ne me quitterez plus.

Elle lui prend les maint.

PAUL.

Ah ! chère mignonne ! Non ! non ! je te le jure !

JEANNE, ravie et le contemplant. Est-ce possible ? Mais oui I Rien ne lui manque !

LE ROI DES GNOMES, tendant vivement à Jeanne un tromblon.

Et cela ?

JEANNE, posant le tromblon sur la tète de Paul, Oui, cela !

Appelant. Tous ! tous ! venez ! c’e^t fini. Dis trois côtes, un Jlot de bourgeois se précipite sur la scér.r.

SCE^E VI

LES PRECEDENTS, BOURGEOIS, *puis* DOMINIQUE.

LES BOURGEOIS, applaudissant et embrassant Taul.

— Ah ! très bien, très bien !

— Excessivement convenable !

— Nos félicitations !

— Mon cher compatriote, je suis heureux... !

PAUL.

Permettez... Que signifie ? Tout à l'heure on a failli me lapider, et maintenant...

UN BOURGEOIS. C'est que vous êtes un des nôtres !

LE ROI DES GNOMES, lui pimentant un miroir. Tiens ! regarde !

PAUL, après s'être considéré quelque temps dans le miroir, et comme un homme qui sort d'un songe.

Comment ! le collier ! l'odieux tromblon du bourgeois !

Il jette par terre le chapeau. Cris d'indignation de la foule. Et la redingote à la propriétaire !

Il se l'arrache du corps.

Moi, j'ai pu me déshonorer avec ces deux couvre-idiots, sous ces infâmes symboles ! Jamais ! jamais !

Il trépigne sur le chapeau et sur la redingote avec rage.

JEANNE. Le malheureux ! Grâce !

LES BOURGEOIS.

Il est fou ! Prenez garde !

JEANNE, éperdue.

Calmez-le ! Voyons ! que faire ?

VOIX DE LA FOULE.

Qu'on le saisisse ! Un bouillon ! L'epreuve du bouillon JEANNE.

Apportez-le, vite !... Là ! C'est bien ! Prenez, mon ami !

Paul est entouré, tenu par les pieds et par les mains. Jeanne lui tend une tasse de bouillon, qu'on lient de lui remettre et l'approche de ses lèvres bouillon, qu'on vient de lui remettre et l'approche de ses lèvres.

Buvez-moi cela, lentement.

PAUL renverse la tasse d’un revers de tnain.

Je ne me moque pas mal de votre bouillon !

TOUS.

Sacrilège ! — Au cachot ! au cachot ! — Dans un cul de basse-fosse !

La foule s’est ruée sur lui et on le garrotte aux poignets.

PAUL.

Oui ! battez-moi ! J’aime mieux vos injures que vos applaudissements et vos supplices que vos bienfaits ! Avec vos cœurs d’esclaves et vos têtes en pain de sucre, vos grotesques costumes, vos hideux ameublements, vos occupations abjectes et vos férocités d’anthropophages...

LA FOULE.

C’est du délire !

PAUL, levant au ciel ses mains enchaînées.

Ah ! que n’ai je, pour vous exterminer, la foudre du ciel !

LES BOURGEOIS. U devient dangereux ! Un bâillon !...

On le bâillonne.

UN BOURGEOIS. Et à son domestique !...

TOUS LES BOURGEOIS. Oui ! oui !

DOMINIQUE reparaît avec la. redingote et le tromblon, et se débattant.

Mais j’ai la redingote, moi ! J’ai le tromblort ! Je ne demande pas mieux !

UN BOURGEOIS. Ça n’y fait rien ! En vertu de la solidarité... !

DOMINIQUE. Je boirai lé bouillon !

LES BOURGEOIS.

Silence !

DOMINIQUE. J’en ai même besoin !

LES BOURGEOIS.

Insolent !

On le bâillonne, et on les enferme tous les deux, eu reç-de- ckaussee, dans la prison qui est à droite, au second plan. — On les aperçoit à travers les barreaux.

LA FOULE pousse un grand soupir de satisfaction.

Ah ! il s’agit maintenant de les moraliser un peu, de les catéchiser !

SCÈ^CE VU

LES MEMES, LE GRAND PONTIFE.

LE GRAND PONTIFE. Ça me regarde ! C’est mon devoir, mon sacerdoce ! Je commence !

Infortunés ! vous êtes convaincus d’attentat contre la redingote et le pot-au-feu !

LES BOURGEOIS, ricanant. Ah ! ah ! ces Messieurs n’en voulaient pas !

LE GRAND PONTIFE. De dédain pour l’Épicerie, de sentiment, id ‘-cs, paroles, manières et costumes bizarres, en un mot d’excentricité !

UNE VOIX.

La guillotine !

LE GRAND PONTIFE, Non, Messieurs ! Grâce au ciel, nos moeurs sont plus douces ! Nous ne demandons, misérables ! qu’à vous lessiver par le châtiment, à vous purifier par le remords, et même nous voudrions que plus tard, si c’est possible, à force de bonne conduite, vous vous réhabilitassiez ! Le bouillon que vous avez rejeté, on vous l’ingurgitera de force, mais plus clair ; les murs de votre appartement seront embellis par des inscriptions morales, et ce sera, au lieu d’apprivoiser des araignées, votre distraction unique !

Les prisonniers s’agitent en remuant leurs bras à traver les barreaux.

Je n’ai pas fini ! La juste fureur du peuple veut, puisque vous ne pouvez à présent nous faire aucun mal, que je vous assomme ainsi en vous disant un tas de choses ! Donc on tentera sur vous des expériences !...

Un petit râle se fait entendre à toutes les horloges au-dessus des portes, et huit heures sonnent. Au premier coup, tous les bourgeois tirent leur bonnet de coton de leur poche et le mettent sur leur tète. Le grand pontife s’interrompt subitement et se coiffe du sien en même temps.

L’heure de se coucher ! A demain ! Tous les bourgeois rentrent che eux.

SCE^CE Vlll

J H A X XI :, LE ROI DI ; S GXOMES.

JEANNE, *avec emportement.*

Délivre-le ! Délivre-le donc, ou je vais moi-même.. .

LE ROI.

Prends garde !

JEAN N E.

Mais c’est par ta faute qu’il se trouve la. et que je l’ai perdu encore une fois !

LE ROI.

Par la tienne !

JEANNE.

Ah ! non content de m’avoir trompée... !

LE ROI.

Je ne t’ai pas trompée ! Je puis te donner tout ce que tu demandes, mais il m’est impossible d’agir sur tes sentiments comme sur les siens ; choisis mieux ! A ta première réquisition, je t’ai accordé les élégances d’i monde et les niaiseries qu’elles comportent ; à la seconde, la simplicité bourgeoise avec son cortège de laideurs. De quoi te plains-tu ? que te faut-il ?

JEANNE, après un long silence.

Eh bien ! je vais te le dire ; car je l’ai devine enfin, lorsqu’au milieu de la populace qui l’enchaînait, le rêve de son cœur a jailli dans une explosion d’orgueil ! Ce que je veux ? Écoute : C’est un pouvoir tellement démesuré qu’il l’é-blouisse ! Je demande des palais de basalte avec des escaliers de diamant, et à le faire asseoir auprès de moi sur un trône d’or, pour qu’il contemple de plus haut toutes les têtes de mes peuples esclaves prosternés dans la poussière !

LE ROI.

Bien ! bien ! Mais pas si fort, ma princesse, de peur de réveiller ces honnêtes populations.

Il tire de sa poche un bonnet de coton démesuré, se l’enfonce sur le chef et relève ses lunettes bleues. Son visage est effroyable, avec des dents jaunes, des yeux cernés jusqu’aux oreilles, tandis que son collier de barbe rouge, se développant sur les deux cotés, ressemble à deux gros plumets. La mèche de son bonnet de coton flamboie. Il disparaît avec Jeanne.

SCÈ^CE IX

Aussitôt te pot-au-feu, dont les anses se transforment en deux ailes, monte dans les airs et, arrivé en haut, il se retourne entièrement. Tandis que les flancs du pot-au-feu vont s’élargissant toujours, de manière à couvrir la cité endormie, des légumes lumineux, carottes, navets, poireaux, s’echappent de sa cavité et restent suspendus à la toute noire comme des constelL-.ticns.

Dés que l’obscurité est complété, on entend s’eleter dans toutes les maisons un ronflement général.

Mais il se fait un bruit sec comme d’un barreau qu on brise ; puis de la prison sortent deux ombres huma ne.<, frôlant les murs et marchant sur la pointe des pieds. A :u/ appara t d abord, ensuite Dominique atec le tromblon et la redingote a la propriétaire, et portant sous ses bras ses deux bottes pour ne point faire de bruit. Il contemple un instant aiec effroi les constellations-legumts.

Le ronflement général repart.

La toile tombe lentement.

SEPTIÈME TABLEAU

LES ÉTATS DE PIPEMPOHÉ

Le théâtre représente une vaste salle d’une architecture indo-moresque, ayant dans le fond une galerie (praticable) à doubles arcs correspondants, soutenus par des colonnettes géminées. Il y en a trois, et celui du milieu, faisant porte, s’ouvre sur l’escalier à trois marches par où l’on descend dans la salle.

Le salon a des poutrelles or et bleu, successivement. Les colonnettes sont en ébène avec des incrustations de nacre, et les arcades du côté extérieur de la galerie closes par des stores en petits bambous dorés.

Sur la plinthe qui supporte la galerie, comme sur toutes les murailles, des losanges vermillon et azur alternent dans la couleur noire.

A droite, une grande portière de cachemire. A gauche, sur un trône flanqué de chimères, à fond d’or mat et que surmonte un baldaquin de plumes blanches, Jeanne, en costume royal et éblouissante de pierreries, est assise dans une attitude impérieuse.

Près d’elle, debout, se tient son premier ministre (le Roi des Gnomes). Par derrière, des négresses agitent des éventails en plumes de paon ; et devant elle, des nains barbus, habillés de rouge et accroupis sur leurs talons, occupent symétriquement tous les degrés du trône. Les deux derniers, en bas, soufflent à pleine poitrine sur deux cassolettes un peu plus hautes qu’eux.

Au milieu de la scène danse un groupe de bayadères, — tandis qu’au fond, devant chaque arcade et tranchant ainsi sur la couleur dorée des stores, il y a un géant, habillé d’une longue robe noire, et qui reste immobile.

Une musique langoureuse bourdonne. Les tourbillons des parfums montent lentement ; et la lumière du soleil, passant par les intervalles des roseaux, enveloppe tout d’une atmosphère ambrée.

SCÈNE PREMIMÈRE

JEANNE, LE ROI DES GNOMES, *en*

premier ministre, LES NAINS, LES DANSEUSES.

LE ROI DES GNOMES, bas, a l’oreille de Jeanne. Es-tu heureuse, maintenant ?

JEANNE, souriant. J’espère l’être bientôt !

Les bayadères, après un de leurs pas et avant d’en recommencer un autre, s’inclinent devant le trône.

LE ROI DES GNOMES.

Oui, c’est cela ! Tous te prennent pour la reine, morte la nuit passée, et l’erreur du peuple va durer. Tu n’as plus qu’à le retenir quand il viendra, mais sans te faire connaître, car n’oublie pas quelles conséquences terribles...

JEANNE.

Je sais ! Merci, bon génie, qui as eu pitié de ma tendresse, et puisque tu es mon premier ministre, ne me quitte plus.

LE ROI DES GNOMES.

Si parfois je m’écarte, ce sifflet d’or m’appellera.

Il lui donne un sifflet d’or, qu’il avait à son cou et qu’elle passe au sien.

La portière de cachemire faisant face au trône s’entr’ouvre, et il entre un nain d’aspect farouche, avec une aigrette à son turban, de très longues moustaches, et un bâton d’ivoire à la main. Il conduit, marchant au pas et effroyablement armés, une escouade de six géants. Tandis qu’il s’avance jusqu’aux pieds du trône pour se prosterner, les géants s’alignent en hait contre la muraille et y restent immobiles, *SCÈNE II*

LES MEMES, LE NAIN, *général des géants, puis* UN OFFICIER, *puis* LE CHANCELIER.

LE NAIN, après sa prosternation, se retourne vers les géants.

Plus haut, drôles ! plus haut ! Le menton levé ! Qu’est-ce qu’une tenue pareilie !...

Tous les géants tremblent d’effroi devant lui.

Place au messager des désirs de la souveraine !

En gardant le dos toujours collé contre la muraille, ils s’écartent de droite et de gauche ; et alors parait un officier en turban rose, avec des gants de mousseline claire, une veste Oleue et un large sabre suspendu contre sa hanch : par un baudrier.

L’OFFICIER, ayant fait un long salut.

D’après les ordres de Votre Majesté sublime, nous venons de haclu r en petits morceaux les douze misérables qui ne se sont pns pr<>.-ternés assez vite, hier, quand vous passiez dan.- le bazar des soierie-sur votre éléphant blanc.

JEANNE.

D’après mes ordres... par morceaux... mon éléphant... ?

L’OFFICIER, souriant. Il ne s’agit pas de votre trois fois divin éléphant blanc, Majesté ; ce ne sont que des hommes.

JEANNE, indignée.

Malheureux !

L’officier la regarde, ébahi.

LE ROI DES GNOMES, bas. Tu te compromets par cette indignation. Pense donc à lui, à ton but, et récompense ce bon serviteur pour son exactitude.

JEANNE. Jamais je ne pourrai !

LE ROI DES GNOMES. Il le faut cependant !

JEANNE, d’une voix hésitante.

C’est bien, nous sommes contente, va !

L’officier sort. — A part.

Ah ! mon Dieu ! qui m’aurait dit que j’aurais le courage... ?

LE ROI, à part. Allons ! elle commence bien !

Entre le Chancelier, vêtu d’une grande pelisse bordée de fourrures par-dessus sa robe verte, avec un bonnet d’astrakan, un encrier dans sa ceinture noire, et à la main gauche, entre les doigts, plusieurs longues bandes de papier.

LE CHANCELIER. Je me hasarde sous vos puissants rayons, lumière des étoiles, pour \ous faire observer qu’il manque à cette place votre auguste sceau !

JEANNE.

Qu’est-ce ?

LE CHANCELIER. Votre Majesté, sans doute, se rappelle l’insolence de cet homme qui osa pleurer en sa présence, avant-hier, sous le prétexte qu’il mourait de faim ?

JEANNE. Je... ne me souviens pas.

LE ROI, bas. Tu te souviens, au contraire.

LE CHANCELIER. C’est l’ordre pour son exécution immédiate !

JEAN N E.

Horreur ! Retirez-moi cela !

LE ROI, au chancelier.

Donne, je m’en charge ! Sortez, vous tou> ! JEAN N E.

Oui, sortez !

Le nain sort, suivi des six géants, dont les têtes touchent aux voussures des arcadei dans la galerie. Les bayadères s’en vont ensuite, et les nains, accroupis sur les marches du trône, sauf un seul qui demeure à demi caché.

LE ROI, désignant les deux géants du fond près des stores.

Ceux-là peuvent rester, étant muets.

SCÈC^E III LE ROI DES GNOMES, JEANNE.

JEANNE, descendant du trône.

Qu’as-tu donc pour exiger cette mort ? LE ROI.

Moi ? Oh ! pas le moindre motif !

JEANNE.

Eh bien, comme j’ai le droit de pardonner... LE ROI.

Pardonner ? Mais ils ne croiront jamais que tu sois la reine !

JEANNE.

Pour avoir pleuré ! quel crime ! E !ie était donc bien cruelle, l’autre !...

LE ROI.

Elle était forte. Imite-la !

JEAN N E.

Il m’est impossible cependant...

LE ROI.

Tu veux donc te perdre, et pour un scrupule indigne de ce pouvoir tant rêvé, quand il te le faudrait plus fort que jamais...

JEANNE.

Que dis-tu ?...

LE ROI.

Car bientôt, tout à l’heure peut-être, tu auras à tirer d’un péril mortel ton frère et ton amant.

JEANNE, après un long silence.

Et tu crois que ce papier...

LE ROI.

Il ne s’agit que de retourner dans tes mains ton sifflet d’or et d’en appuyer le pommeau sur cette cire rouge.

JEANNE.

Oh ! non ! c’est trop horrible !

LE ROI.

Mais si le peuple se révolte, .-’il te chassait ? Je ne peux rien sur les multitudes, moi ! Il est accoutumé chaque jour à des supplices. Tu !e prives de sa joie, il va douter de ta reine.

De grands cris s’t lèvent au dehors.

J/entends-lu ?

JEANNE, prêtant l’oreille.

En effet !

VOIX LOINTAINES. Vengeance ! La mort ! la mort !

LE ROI DES GNOMES, à un des géants près des stores. Relève !

Le géant, sans monter sur les marches, allonge le bras et il relève d’un seul coup jusqu’en haut le store de bambous dorés qui ferme l’arcade extérieure du milieu de la galerie. On aperçoit une ville orientale, minarets, coupoles.

JEANNE gravit vivement les trois marches et se penche pour voir.

Quelle foule ! et avec des piques, des haches, des épées ! La voilà qui bat contre les portes du palais !

LE ROI.

Hâte-toi donc, malheureuse ! pour sauver ceux que tu aimes !

JEANNE.

Donne !

Elle repousse le papier.

Non ! non !

LE ROI DES GNOMES. Garde au moins le pouvoir quelque temps, ne fût-ce qu’un jour, une heure, et que ce supplice montre...

JEANNE, emporter. Eh bien ! qu’il ait lieu quand je n’y ser.ii plus !

LE ROI, servilement.

Demain, si tu veux ; tes désirs sont des ordres, Majesté. Voilà.

JEANNE, apposant vite le cachet.

Oui, demain !

LE ROI remet le papier au nain resté prés du trône. Cours !

Le nain se précipite à droite par la portière, en riant à gorge deployte.

Eh ! eh ! il est d’humeur folâtre, ce bouffon !

JEANNE, se tordant les mains.

iMiséricorde de Dieu ! si j’avais su tout cela... !

LE ROI DES GNOMES, à part.

Nous la tenons ! Elle a été coquette, puis stu-pide ; elle devient cruelle ! C’est complet !

Cris de joie et applaudissements au dehors.

Ton peuple te remercie, ô reine !

JEANNE.

Mais un grand bruit de pas se rapproche !...

LES VOIX, *de plut près.* La mort ! la mort !

LE ROI, tout en remontant jusqu’au fond, au delà des trois marches, contre la grande baie du milieu.

C’est qu’il vient lui-même jusqu’ici, pour aider à tes bourreaux et jouir de ton aspect trois fois saint. Entrez !

Alors s’avance par la galerie d’abord le nain général, puis derrière lui des nègres portant sur leur épaule le bout d’une énorme chaîne qui attache Paul et Dominique. Un flot de peuple les accompagne. Tout ce cortège, avec le nain en tète, descend les marches de l’escalier et se déploie au fond contre le petit mur de la galerie, laissant au premier plan Paul et Dominique en haillons, très pâles, les yeux hagards, tandis que le Roi des Gnomes reste sous l’arcade du milieu et que les géants en robe noire, dominant par derrière la multitude, se tiennent toujours immobiles devant les stores dorés.

SCÈU^E IV

JEANNE, LE ROI DES GNOMES, PAUL, DOMINIQ_UE, LE NAIN GÉNÉRAL, NEGRES, FOULE, *etc.*

JEANNE, apercevant Paul.

Lui !...

Puis elle s’est contenue, et quand il se trouve en face d’elle, au nain :

Enchaînés ! Pourquoi ?

LE NAIN’, GÉNÉRAL DES GÉANTS.

Ils ont franchi les limites de vos États, Majesté !

JEANNE.

Eh bien ?...

LE ROI DES GNOMES, descendant vers elle par le cote gauche.

N’est-ce pas le plus grand des crimes, ù lumière des étoiles ?

JEANNE, comprenant.

Ah !... en effet... certainement ! Vous avez bien agi, général ! et vous aussi, les noirs !... et vous aussi, mon peuple !... Mais... en raison même de cet excès d’audace, nous desirons interroger 1 s deux coupables, seule !

Au roi des Gnomes.

Sans notre premier ministre !

Il s’incline.

S’il est besoin de vous...

Lui montrant le sifflet.

Lui montrant le sifflet.

on vous appellera, vou-savez !

Il disparait brusquement par une trappe, dans le trô’.e.

Comment ? disparu déjà ?... Je ne l’ai pas vu sortir !

A demi-voix.

Ah ! tant mieux, il nous importunerait !...

SCÈ^CE V

JEANNE, PAUL, DOMINIQUE, puis LE ROI DES GNOMES.

JEANNE, après que la foule s’est écoulée.

Bien que je sois la reine, il me faut subir pourtant les lois de ce pays. C’est en verlu d’elles que, mon peuple vous a tout à l’heure arrêtés. J’ai du, quand il était là, lui donner raison. A présent je vous pardonne, vous êtes libres !

DOMINIQUE, à part

Quelle bonne femme !

JEANNE.

Je veux d’abord vous retirer ces chaînes, sans que personne le sache toutefois, excepté le premier ministre. — Où est-il ? — Ah ! le sifflet !

Elle siffle. Le Roi des Gnomes, à l’instant, se trouve prés d’elle.

DOMINIQUE, à part.

D’où sort-il donc, celui-là ? Je n’aime pas ces manières d’entrer ! Quand nos affaires allaient si bien !

\

PAUL, conudirant le Roi des Gnomes. C’est étrange ! Je l’ai déjà vu... mais oui Dans ce bal... ou plutôt... ne serait-ce pas l’homme du cabaret ? Il y a là-des>ous... quelque piège...

JEANNE, a u Roi des Gncmei. Faites tomber leurs chaîne ? ! Bas.

J’avais besoin du secret... tu m’excuses ? LE ROI.

Sans doute ! Haut.

Oh ! immédiatement, Majesté !...

Il s’avance gravement vers les deux prisonniers, et sans effort, rien qu’en les touchant, il brise leur chaîne, anneau par anneau, avec ses doigts. Les tronçons tombent sur le sol, avec un grand bruit de fer.

DOMINIQUE. Tudieu ! quel poignet !

PAUL.

C’est lui !

Il se penche pour l’examiner ; le Roi des G .ornes a di’psra.

JEANNE, a part. Aussi discret que dévoué, ce bon gén ;e ! Haut à Paul.

Mais qui vous gène encore ? Cependant, voyez vos mains, elles sont délivrées ; toutes ces portes, elles sont ouvertes. N’avez-vous rien à nous dire ?...

PAUL, froidement.

Des remercîments, il est vrai !

JEANNE, piquée.

Ali 1... c’est tout ?...

PAUL, lentement.

Que demandez-vous de plus ? Sais-je d’ailleurs quel motif... ?

DOMINIQUE, à part.

L’imprudent !

Haut.

Ah ! Majesté, reine, déesse, reflet de la lune, nos cœurs débordent de reconnaissance !...

JEANNE.

Bien ! — Plutôt que de continuer vos courses périlleuses, il serait meilleur pour vous de rester dans ce royaume.

DOMINIQUE.

Certainement ; moi, j’accepte !

JEANNE, a part.

Il ne répond pas !...

Haut.

Je dis dans cette ville, à ma cour, où je veus offrirais quelque fonction.

PAUL, brièvement.

Je refuse !

JEANNE.

Même celle de premier ministre.

PAUL.

Oui !

JEANNE, à part.

Que veut-il donc ?...

Elle etend son bras vers l’arcade du milieu ouverte.

Regarde ! Voici la capitale de mes Liât ?, ma grande ville de Pipempohé. Elle a vingt-quatre lieues de tour, trois million-d’habitant ?, six fleuves qui la traversent, des palais d’or, de » maisons d’argent, et des bazars tellement interminables qu’il faut un guide pour vous conduire dan^ la forêt de leur piliers de cèdre. Je te la donne.

PAUL.

Je n’en ai pas besoin !

JEANNE. Ali ! quel orgueil !

Au géant qui est au fond, à droite.

Relève !

Le géant relève, comme a fait Vautre, le store de bambous dorés. On aperçoit un golfe semé de navires, — une foret plus loin.

Ët tu auras mon port, mes marins, mes vaisseaux, toute la mer, avec les îles et les contrées que l’on découvrira.

PAUL.

A quoi bon ?

JEANNE. Tu accepteras ceci, j’espère ! Au secoid géant.

Relève !

Le géant relève le store de gauche et Von aperçoit, entre des rochers noirs et d’aspect horrible, un grand bloc éclatant de blancheur d’aspect horrible, un grand bloc éclatant de blancheur.

Cette montagne est tout en diamant. Les magiciens qui sont à mon service la couperont, et je te fournirai des éléphants pour en emporter les morceaux.

PAUL.

C’est un bagage trop lourd, Majesté ! Est-ce mon trône que tu désire ? ?... Je puis t’y faire asseoir près de moi !... Avec tendresse.

et même en descendre, pour que tu y rentes seul ?

PAUL.

Ma place est plus loin ; j’ai une tâche à exécuter.

JEANNE.

Ah ! Et si je t’en empêche ?

PAUL.

Elle se trouve au-dessus de tous les pouvoirs !

JEAN N E. Mais si je te retenais ?

PAUL.

J’aurais encore la liberté de vous haïr ! JEANNE.

Me haïr ! — Lt tu refuses mon trône ? Qu’e^t-el !e donc, cette mission si ex’ranrdinaire ?...

PAUL.

Personne, je vous le di-, n’en doit rien .-avoir. JEANNE.

Mais moi ?

PAUL.

Vous surtout !...

JEANNE.

Quelle audace !

DOMINIQUE, bas.

Monsieur ! Monsieur ! pas de folies ! D’un mot elle peut faire sauter nos têtes comme deux volants ; si vous ne voulez pas, refusez avec politesse ! Du calme ! de l’astuce !

PAUL.

PAUL.

Eh ! je ne crains rien ! A mesure que je me rapproche du but, il se fait des lumières dans mon esprit. Et vous qui m’apparaissez maintenant sous la figure d’une reine au milieu d’épouvantes et de somptuosités, vous n’êtes rien autre chose que cette même femme qui a déjà voulu m’arrêter par d’absurdes élégances, et qui plus tard a tâché de me séduire avec les charmes d’un bonheur vulgaire. Ah ! je vous connais.

JEANNE, à part.

Malheureuse ! A moitié seulement, et pour m’exécrer davantage.

PAUL.

Car vous n’êtes, avouez-le donc ! que l’instrument des génies funestes ! Mais je ne succomberai pas plus sous votre puissance que je n’ai rte vaincu par les autres tentations ! Accumule/ !e.-ohstarl-’ï ! Ma volonté est plus solide que vis citadelles et plus fiers que vos armées.

JEAN N E.

Insensé 1

Appelant.

Les nègres ! les nègres !

Arrivent quatre nègres a ec des poignards. — Aux deux premiers.

Approchez, vous deux !... Tire/ vos poignards.

Ils marchent sur Paul et Dominique en levant leurs longt coutelas. Paul reste impassible ; Dominique est presque évanoui de terreur. — froidement.

Tuez-vous !

Les d :ux negres trembl.-nt et hesitent.

Avez-vous entendu ?

Ils se percent de leurs poignards et tombent moits. — Aux deux autres.

Emportez cela !

Les deux negres survivants emportent les deux cadavtei. — A Paul.

Doutes-tu encore de ma puissance ?

DOMINIQUE, a genoux, les maint jointes. Non ! non ! Moi, d’ailleurs, je n’ai rien dit JEANNE.

Penses-tu qu’avec un peuple pareil je manque de moyens pour te contraindre ? J’ai ma tour de fer, bâtie sur un roc d’airain, dans un lac de soufre ; et au-dessus d’elle, pour empêcher de fuir par les airs, il y a continuellement quatre griffons tenant des nuages dans leur gueule et qui tourbillonnent en regardant sous eux. J’ai au fond d’un puits de marbre, après des centaines d’escaliers, un cachot plus étroit qu’un cercueil, dont les pierres vous dévorent, et où les captifs ne peuvent pas mourir ! Mais je te ferais, s’il me plaisait, écraser sous mes chariots, brûler dans mes fours à porcelaine, dévorer par mes tigres, ou boire d’un tel poison qu’immédiatement tu disparaîtrais et qu’il ne resterait de toi sur la terre, pas plus que d’une goutte d’eau évaporée ! Eh bien... va-t’en !... tu es libre.

PAUL, croisant Us bras.

De quelle façon ?

JEANNE.

Tu peux sortir de mon royaume.

Paul fait un geste de doute.

Oui, sans que personne t’en empêche.

PAUL.

Qui me l’affirme ?

JEANNE *déchire son écharpe au-desius de* I’,I/M’*ige, et y imprime so’i cachit.*

Mon nom sur cette bribe île satin suffira jiour vous mener jusqu’aux frontië ; es... et peut-être, un jour, si tu la conserves, tu t’ace^eras d’avoir répondu par des outrage.- aux offre.- les plus magnifiques et les plus tendres que jamais un homme ait reçues d’une reine !

A Dominique, lui tendant le sauf-, o .dui,.

Tiens, prends !

Avec u’i geste d’.iut.lité.

Sortez !

Ils s’en vont par la galerie. Jeanne h s suit du i. ^ .’. ! j e : !. : it lo-.gicwps.

SCÈC^E VI

JHAXXl :, seule.

Que lui ai-je donc fait, p >ur qu’il me fuie toujours ? Il m’a été impo ?sil >‘e de l’éb’ouir avec mon pouvoir, et ma générosité ne l’a pa-ému !

Elle marche lentement en regaida’.t les murs.

Qu’ai-je besoin dr> tout cela maintenant, puisqu’il le refuïe !... Je vais abandonner ce royaume... et le suivre... partout... de loin...

Elle s’affaisse sur les degres du trôr.e.

Ah ! j’avais plus de bonheur autrefois, quand

je n’étais qu’une pauvre laitière. Un jour... je me rappelle... je suis venue dans sa mansarde, il me vanta ma jolie figure... mes mains qu’il a presque portées à ses lèvres... Et aujourd’hui non seulement il ne me reconnaît plus, mais il me hait. Par quelle fatalité ? Et pourquoi se trompe-t-il sur ces bons génies, quand ils ne travaillent au contraire qu’à notre félicité commune.

Des éclats de rire stridents éclatent au dehors, à gauchet derrière le trône.

Ah ! ce sont mes petits bouffons, dans la salle à côté, qui s’amusent !

Un bruit de voix joyeuses s’élève.

Quelle gaieté !

SCÈNE Vil

JEANNE, LE ROI DES GNOMES, *entrant de côté, dans son costume de gnome.*

JEANNE, à sa vue, pousse un cri d’effroi.

Qu’est-ce donc ?

LE ROI.

Rien ! Nous nous amusons beaucoup ! tu l’as dit !

JEANNE.

Ces voix tout à l’heure, cette apparence... que signifie... ?

LI. ROI.

Ceux qui rient ! i, a < 1 \ rc suit les,<‘““, acharnés a ta p<ile, connue a < elle iî« ■ t■.m amant. Moi, c|ui L’ai con.iuiv ; a”t ut. o ■ 11 - “■ i 1 ! “et fait semblant tic te ser\ir, j<* leur maître, le II i de ? Gnomes.

JEANNE, ;. . .

Le Roi des Gninn^ !... d — s Gno :r.< -

LE ROI.

En vertu de ma wlonte, jamais il ne t'aunt-ra, et, à peine arrivé sur no-terre-, il e^ perdu.

JEANNE.

Impossible ! Je cours après...

LE ROI.

Il est trop ta : d I et quand même il i « .viendrait, je suis tùr de sa défaite.

JEANNE, *dvd ■ mpaiif n f.*

Non ! non ! non ! Je \ais donner d'.s -mires.

LE ROI.

Oh ! tant qu'il te plaira !

JEANNE.

Tu vas t'y opposer, n'est-ce pas ?

LE ROI.

Au contraire ! Tu seras obéie ponctuellement. Essaye.

Le Roi des Gnomes sort en riant ; et les rires, dans la coulisse, redoublent.

SCÈ^CE VIII

JEANNE, *seule.*

Que veulent-ils donc contre lui ? et dans quel but ? Qu'importe ! un périt le menace. Il y tombe, peut-être ? 11 est perdu. Ah ! qu'il revienne ! Que faire ensuite ? Je n'en sais rien. Nous fuirons.

Appelant.

Général !

Le nain, gênerai des géants, parait.

Oh ! non pas lui ! C'e^t un des leurs ! D'autres ! le chef de ma garde, le chancelier, des soldats, quelqu'un ! Venez donc ! venez donc !

SCÈ^CE IX

JEANNE, UN OFFICIER *avec des soldats,* LE CHANCELIER.

JEANNE, à Vofficier.

Ces deux étrangers partis tout à l’heure, cours

après ! Maigre notre sauT-coulnit royal, quoi qu’ils fassent, tu m’entends, je le-veux ! ramène-les ! Tu m’en réponds sur ta tête !... Plus \i :e. *L’officier ei lei soldais sortait pat la duite. — Au chancelier.*

Pourquoi don t’ai je appelé, t >i ?... Ali ! tu dois avoir encore entre te> main-l’ordre de supplice de cet homme... tu sais... qui a pleure l’autre jour.

LE CHANCELIER, avec une grande rén rc.ce, le lui montrant.

Le voici, gracieuse Majt-té.

JEAN N E.

Donne !

Elle le déchire en morceaux.

Je lui fais grâce !...

Le chancelier la regarde, stupifait.

Oui ! entièrement grâce !... N’a le délivrer toi-même, et tu auras soin qu’on lui porte, pour qu’il n’ait plus faim a l’avenir, trois tonnes d’a gent et la charge eu ble de quatre dromadaire.-.

Fausse sortie du chancelier.

Ecoute donc ! Il duit y avoir beaucoup d’e>< laves dans mes jardins ? Qu’on brise leurs chaînes et qu’on les renvoie, sur de ? vaisseaux, dans leur patrie ! Ensuite, tu prendras aux magasins du palais tous les vêtements qui s’y trouvent : les dolimans de fourrures, les vestes eu brocart d’ur, les robes tissues de perles, et tu les distribueras aux habitants de ma ville, en commençant par les plus pauvres !... Reviens ! Je n’ai pas fini ! On tirera des arsenaux toutes les armes, et l’on en fera sur les places de grands bûchers qui réjouiront les veuves ! Comme j’ai trop de parfums, qu’on les jette par les fenêtres pour laver les rues ! J’ordonne qu’il n’existe rien des commandements portés jusqu’à ce jour en mon nom ! Je veux qu’il n’y ait plus dans mon royaume une seule douleur, mais un même sourire de joie sur la face de tout mon peuple ! Rien, maintenant, que des larmes d’allégresse et des bénédictions pour moi !

Paul et Dominique rentrent à droite, par la portière, avec l’officier et les soldats,

Ah !

A l’officier.

C’est bien ! Laissez-nous !

SCÈC^E X

JHANNI-, PAUL, DOMINTQ.UE.

PAUL, ironiquement.

Je me doutais de cette clémence, ô Reine ! Malheureux qui me calomnie encoiv ! écoute, il y va de ton salut.

DOMINIQUE. Peut-être du mien 1 Mi-éricorde !

JEANNE.

De ta vie !

PAUL. Que vous importe ? Un long silence.

JEANNE.

C’est à moi que tu le demandes, toi !... toi, Paul de Damvilliers !

PAUL.

Qui vous a dit mon nom ?

JEANNE, feremevt.

Fh ! que t’importe a ton tour ? Silence.

PA UI.

Ah ! je comprends. I n effet, von-aw p ur vous la science de.- Cnoin”*- ; moi, j’ai h p >- tection des Fées. Je vous délie.

JEANNE.

Ah ! oui, insulte-moi, méprisç-moi. exècre-moi

bien ! Mais au nom de tout ce qu’il y a de plus sacré, par les âmes de ceux qui te sont les plus chers, par pitié pour toi-même, je t’en supplie, reste, reste ici !

PAUL.

Je partirai, cependant !

JEANNE.

Pourquoi donc t’obstines-tu à ne jamais me croire ?

PAUL.

C’est que vous m’avez déjà trompé sous tant de formes ! Tout à l’heure encore, vous m’accabliez d’offres et de protestations, et puis à propos de rien, subitement, voilà que vous reprenez avec violence cette liberté que vous aviez eu tant de mal à fournir !

JEANNE.

Mais tu ne sais pas que tu te précipites à une mort certaine, puisque je ne le savais, pas moi-môme. Jusqu’à présent, j’étais la victime d’esprits infernaux dont je ne soupçonnais pas les desseins.

PAUL.

Ah ! c’est un autre artifice maintenant ?

JEANNE.

Non, je te jure. Ne t’en va pas !

PAUL.

Eh ! tous les hasards sont moins périlleux que vos serments.

JEANNE.

Regarde-moi donc ! Est-ce que j’ai l’air de mentir ?

PAUL.

Un nouveau piège ! Car plus je vous considère, et plus votre visage, évoquant pour moi tics souvenirs lointains, m’en représente un autre... relui d’une jeune fille.

JEANNE.

Achève !

PAUL.

Elle valait mieux que toute ? le ? reine ? ; et j’aurais bien fait peut-être de retourner en arrière dan ? ma vie, plutôt que de toujours poursuivre en avant !

JEANNE.

Giandeur de Dic.-u ! que’le punition !

PAUL.

Rien qu’une jus’io- !

JEANNE.

Mais c’est affreux ! Tu ne me reconnais donc pas, quand tu sauras... quand je te dis... !

LE ROI DES GNOMES, apparaissant tout à coup. Prends garde !

PAUL, à part.

Encore lui !

JEANNE. Je ne t’ai pas appelé, toi ?

LE ROI DES GNOMES, avec un grand salut. Raison de plus pour venir, ô Reine !

JEANNE.

Va-t’en, va-t’en ! Je le sauverai seule !

LE ROI DES GNOMES. Mais tu vois bien que le misérable lui-même ne veut pas de ton secours.

JEANNE, à Paul, qui est déjà remonté au milieu de la scène.

Grâce ! Reviens !

PAUL.

Jamais !

// entraîne Dominique immobile de terreur, et s’en va par le fond.

JEANNE.

Au nom du souvenir dont tu parlais tout à l’heure ! Dussé-je pour te convaincre donner ma vie... !

PAUL.

Je n’en ai que faire de vos dons !

JEANNE.

Écoute, je su ;-...

Paul et Dominique ont disparu. Le Roi des Gnomei étend sa main sur Jeanne qui balbutie d’une voix mourante : Jeanne la laitière !

Elle tombe comme foudroyee sous la mai i du Roi des Gnomes... Alors, toutes la marches du trône l’enii’outrent ; et les Nains, avec les tètes de gnomes qu’ih avaient au premier tableau, s’elancent autour d’elle, dansant et chantant.

Elle est mort0, elle est morte ! Personne désormais ne nous contrariera. Enlin ! nou> triomphons I Haha ! haha 1 halia 1

LA REINE DES FÉES apparaît d-’bout sur le troue. Non, elle n’est pas morte !

Elle descend gravement les marches du trône et etend son manteau sur Jeanne pour la dtfendre.

Son abnégation l’a,-auvée !

Les Gnomes, recula-,t, font un cercle au milieu duquel se trouve Jeanne et la Heine des Fees.

HUITIÈME TABLEAU

LA FORÊT PÉRILLEUSE

SCÈNE PREMIMÈRE

DOMINIQUE, *seul.*

Il arrive par la droite, ù petits pas, en regardant de tous les côtés.

Perdu ! pour avoir quitté mon maître une minute ! Où est-il donc ?

Il crie.

Monsieur ! Monsieur !... Absent ! Eh, c’est sa faute... Quelle diable d’idée a-t-il avec ses gnomes et son château des Cœurs ! Cherchons-le cependant ! Monsieur !... Ah bien oui ! cours après. Mais des yeux brillent dans les feuilles... Eh non ! c’est le soleil sur la mousse ! 11 y a de ces effets-là dans les bois ! Continuons !... On marche ! Un oiseau qui s’envole. Suis-je bête ! Il nïn fauJiait pis moins sortir d’ici ! F-savons !

Unt branche le cingle.

Ah !

Il se détourné.

Personne. Dieu soit loué ! Scélérates d’épines, va ! Gueuses de branches ! Plus j’avance, plus je m’empêtre !

Les arbres le frappent arec leurs branches.

Mais... iMais... J’ai toute la forêt sur les épaules ! Aïe ! N’importe ! je passerai !... Quand je vous dis que je passerai !

Il empoigne vigoureusement un arbre de chaque main, et i1 les écarte d’un seul mouvement. Aussitôt toute la foret se divise devant lui, comme une toile que ion déchiré, et forme une belle allée de verdure, avec deux rangs d’arbres symétriques.

Au fond, et détache en noir sur le ciel rose que fait le soleil couchant, se dresse le Château des Carurj, tel qu’il a tte vu dans la mansarde ; ses trois tourelles sont reltres par des courtines percées de petites ouvertures d’où s’échappe une lumière rouge.

Dominique reste longtemps immobile et muet de surprise.

Un château ! Le château des Cu-urs ! C’e ?t donc vrai ! Le voilà exactement comme d’après ses paroles. Eh non ! je rêve ! Impossible. Il se palpe.

Cependant... je ne dors pas !... Ce toit noir, ces lumières rouges, 011 dirait un monstre qui vous regarde. Voyons ! voyons ! calmons-nous ! Pas de raison d’avoir peur ! au contraire c’est une fière chance ! Je l’ai découvert le premier tout de même ! Quelle joie ce sera pour Monsieur !

Mais... puisque je suis le premier ici... c’est à moi que revient la gloire ! Et pourquoi pas ?

Il est pris d’un rire frénétique.

La récompense, la dame, la belle femme ! La maison paraît seigneuriale, et les terres à l’entour vous composent un domaine... La forêt en dépend sans doute ? Comme je vais la couper rasibus ! C’est par là que je commence ! Quel abatis feront mes gens ! car j’ai des gens.

Il se promène de droite et de gauche, enthousiasmé.

Je ne suis plus domestique ! Allons donc ! Ah ! mais oui ! une valetaille de Sardanapale ! une livrée rouge et or, avec des bas tirés, sapristi ! des plumets au chapeau, des boutons larges comme des assiettes, et dans le vestibule, au bas de l’escalier, toutes sortes de jeux de cartes et de dominos ; c’est grand genre !... et s’ils ne charrient pas droit...

Il fait le geste de dônner des coups de pied.

Eh bien ! pas de bourgeois ? Ma foi, tant pis ! J’ai fait tout ce que j’ai pu !.,. Gependant, une dernière complaisance.

Il crie. mais très faiblement »

Monsieur ! Monsieur !... Il ne pourra pas dire que je ne l’ai pas appelé !... Je suis quitte car enfin... puisqu’il se cache... je voudrais même qu’il y eût ici des témoin-pour affirmer que j<* l’ai bien appelé.

Tous les arbres du cote ou il a crie à voix basse s’inclinent, tandis que ceux de l’autre côté secouent leur feuillage en signe de dénégation.

Ah ! voilà qui est drôle ! Ils remuent, sans qu’il y ait du vent, d’eux-mêmes, comme des personnes ! Vous ne me comprenez pas cependant !

Tous les arbres des deux cotés s’inclinent à la fois, en manière d’assentiment.

Horreur ! Ma moelle se glace dans mes os, je deviens fou ! Si j’allais mourir ! Il y a des choses au-dessus de notre intelligence, décidément, et j’avais bien tort de nier !...

Il s’as>oit par terre, prés de défaillir.

Je voudrais que Monsieur fut arrivé maintenant. Attendons-le ! Ce n’était pas très délicat ce que j’allais faire ! lui dérober sa gloire, pauvre garçon ! après tant de travers ! Il est vrai que je les ni subis comme lui ! Jusqu’à présent je m’en suis tiré. Pourquoi la suite serait-elle pire ? Tout à l’heure, c’est un petit étourdissement que j’ai eu, rien de plus !

Il regarde le château.

Et ce château-là ressemble à bien d’autres châteaux, parbleu ! seulement un peu rébarbatif de loin, mais d’un chic !... 11 n’est pas désert.

toujours. On s’y remue. La fumée des cuisines m’arrivej j’entends de grands bruits de vaisselle. Sans doute, on attend le maître ? Mais c’est moi le maître.

Il regarde les arbres avec indécision. Non, immobiles. Du courage, Dominique ! en avant ! on n’a rien sans toupet !

Il s’élance, mais ses jambes se trouvent vivement prises dans Vécorce qui monte le long de son corps.

Ah ! Ah !

Parvenue à la hauteur des bras, Vécorce se déploie en branches chargées de feuilles, la tète reste intacte.

Mon maître ! à moi, mon bon maître, je...

Il est complètement métamorphosé en arbre.

SCÈNE II

DOMINIQUE, LES ARBRES.

TOUS LES ARBRES a la fois. 11 est pris !... Encore un ! encore un !...

DOMINIQUE, changé en prunier.

Au secours ! à mon sccours !

LES ARBRES.

Impossible.

DOMINIQUE.

Qui a par’é ?

LES ARBRES.

Un chêne, — un orme, — un tilleul, — un sapin, — des ébënieis.

DOMINIQUE.

Quelle plaisanterie !...

UN CHÊNE.

Tu parles bien toi-même. Nous étions tous des hommes autrefois !

LES ARBRES.

Tous ! Tous !

UN TILLEUL.

Nous avons subi ton aventure. Notre seule distraction est de causer entre nous. Mais quand arrive quelqu’un d’un ordre supérieur, nous devenons muets comme les arbres ordinaires.

DOMINIQUE.

Qu’est-ce qui me parle à présent ?

UN TILLEUL.

Un tilleul !

DOMINIQUE.

Et moi, que suis-je donc ?

LE TILLEUL.

Tu te trouves trop loin... Nous t’apercevons confusément...

DOMINIQUE.

Je me sens... stupide... Je ne serais pas surpris d’être un prunier.

LES ARBRES.

Oui, en effet... un prunier.

DOMINIQUE.

Et dire que me voilà tout seul, à l’écart... comme un proscrit, sans pouvoir seulement vous donner une poignée de branche...

UN ORME.

Imite-nous ! Résigne-toi !

DOMINIQUE.

Mais je vais m’ennuyer à périr, moi qui venais pour épouser. Au printemps, quand j’aurai des nids, ça me mettra dans une position” affreuse. Ce sera un nid de Tantale ! Vous n’auriez pas quelque plante grimpante qui pourrait venir jusqu’à moi ?

LES ARBRES.

Non !

DOMINIQUE.

Pas un petit liseron ? pas une vigne ? une vigne folle ? Ça ferait mon ullaire. N’oyons 1 Je vous L< rendrai.

LES ARBRES. Prunier, vous êtes obscène ! >ilence ! A !i ! voila la brise, heureusement, qui va chanter dans nos feuilles !

CHOEUR DES BRISES DANS LES ARBRES.

Réveillez-vous, arbres des bois ; Tressaillez toutes à la fois, Forets profondes, Et, loin des rayons embrasés, A la fraîcheur de nos baisers Mêlez vos ondes.

Aimez-nous, Chantez tous, Pins et houx,

Fougères ! Nous passons, Nous glissons, Nous valsons Légères !

Oh ! comme avec un bruit joyeux Nos ailes battent sous les cieux Grandes ouvertes ! Oh 1 le délire et la douceur De se rouler dans l’épaisseur De feuilles vertes !

Quels doux sons Les chansons Des pinsons, Des merles ! Bois bénis, Tous vos nids Sont garnis De perles 1

Quand nous aurons, quelques instants, Joué sous les berceaux flottants De vos ramures, Nous reviendrons dans les cités Mêler un peu de vos gaîtés A leurs murmures.

Ouvrez-vous Devant nous, Pins et houx,

Fougères 1 Nous passons, Nous glissons, Nous valsons, Légères !

A lajtn, les Arbres baissent déplus enplus la voix et, se penchant les uns vers les autres, s’avertissent.

Un homme ! Un homme ! Un homme !

DOMINIQUE. C’est mon maitre, mes amis, c’est mon... Paul paraît par la gauche.

SCE^E lit LES ARBRES, DOMINIQUE, PAUL.

PAUL, accablé.

Je ne le trouverai donc jamais, cet infernal château des Gnomes ! et Dominique disparu ! Ou n’est pas idiot comme ce garçon ! J’ai beau lui prescrire de ne pas me quitter d’une semelle, depuis plus de deux heures il faut que je perde mon temps...

Il est arrivé au milieu de l’allee, et s’arrête stupt/ait.

Ah ! Enfin !...

Dominique secoue ses branches, pour attirer l’attention de son maître.

Me voilà donc au terme de toutes mes recherches et de toutes mes fatigues ! Merci, bonne fée, d’avoir soutenu mon coeur à travers des périls où tant d’autres avant moi se sont perdus !

Un éclat de rire part de l’intérieur du château.

On dirait un éclat de rire venant du château. Cependant toutes ses fenêtres sont fermées. . Qu’est-ce encore ? Allons ! c’est bien la peine d’être arrivé jusqu’ici pour m’effrayer, comme une femme, du cri de quelque oiseau ou d’une bête fauve ?... Mais où est donc Dominique ?

Dominique s’agite.

S ?

J’ai fait plus que mon devoir en le cherchant derrière tous les arbres de cette forêt... M’a-t-il assez ennuyé, du reste, pendant le voyage ! et je suis bon de tant l’aimer, vraiment ! Il sera tombé sans doute dans quelque embûche, où, malgré mes recommandations, sa curiosité ou sa sottise l’aura conduit.

Dominique s’agite de plus en plut. En avant ! Dans une entreprise pareille, l’existence d’un seul homme n’est rien, puisqu’il s’agit de tous les autres.

Alors retentit un immense éclat de rire, un bruit de foule. Toutes les fenêtres et toutes les portes du château s’ouvrent avec violence. Il y a dou^efenêtres j à chacune d’elles paraît un Gnome. Sur le balcon du milieu se tient le Roi avec une couronne en tète et le sceptre à la main. De chaque porte s’élance un Gnome (garde du corps ou laquais), riant, criant, sautant autour de Paul, à quelque distance. Tous les arbres s’inclinent avec un grand frémissement. Paul, ébloui, reste debout en face du château.

SCÈ&CE IV

LES PRECEDENTS, LE ROI DES GNOMES*

LE ROI DES GNOMES, à son balcon, d’une voix haute et ironique.

Ah ! maître sensible ! Ah ! cœur exempt de souillures ! Toi qui abandonnes ton serviteur et qui te crois appele à sauver le genre humain, tu as failli deux fois en deux minutes, par égoi’sme et par orgueil ! Tu es à nous, mainienant.

PAUL, dédaigneusement.

Moi ?

LE ROI DES GNOMES. Contemple cet arbre, c’est ton domestique lui-même.

PAUL.

Grands dieux !

LE ROI DES GNOMES. Sous l’écorce où le voilà caché, il conserve le sentiment et la mémoire. Tu vas être comme lui.

PAUL, d’un ton terrible, aux Gnomes qui se sont resserre t autour de lui.

Pas encore, tant que cette épée...

LE ROI DES GNOMES. Tire-la donc !

Paul, déjà la main sur la garde de son epee, en *paralyie* tout à coup. Ses bras et ses jambes conurvent l’attitude qu’il avait prise dans ce mouvement. Il devient rigide et blanc comme une statue, pendant que le Uoi, du haut de son balcon, prend son sceptre d’or. La bague reluit a sa main de marbre.

LE ROI DES GNOMES. Nous t’avons fait des épaules assez solides pour porter les destinées du monde. Qu’en dis-tu ?

Garde comme un remords le souvenir du passé. Demeure perpétuellement dans l’impuissance de ta menace. Tes yeux sans prunelles auront le don de nous voir et tes oreilles celui de nous entendre, quand tu seras transporté dans la salle de nos festins ; car sous ton apparence insensible tu vivras, pour souffrir ton supplice éternel.

Tous les Gnomes, se prenant par la main avec des éclats de rire et aux sons d’une musique infernale, font une grande ronde autour de la statue immobile.

NEUVIÈME TABLEAU

LE GRAND BANQUET

Une salle à manger monumentale. Des lampes brillent, tenues à de très longues cordes, comme dans les églises. Sur les deux côtés, de distance en distance, il y a des colonnes de fer à chapiteau corinthien reliées entre elles par de grosses chaînes où sont suspendus des cœurs tout rouges. Au fond et occupant la largeur entière de la scène, un escalier à marches noires monte vers une galerie où se répète le même alignement de colonnes ; mais celles-là sans chaînes ni cœurs, avec des pal-mettes d'améthyste dans leurs chapiteaux et laissant voir la nuit par les intervalles de l'une ù l'autre. Au milieu, à une table couverte de vaisselle d'or, et dont la nappe est de pourpre à franges d'or, siègent douze Gnomes de premier rang, six d'un côté, six de l'autre, tous portant au front des couronnes d'or. Le Roi, sur un trône plus élevé et faisant face au spectateur, est au haut bout de 1J table avec une couronne plus haute et ornée tout autour de petits cœurs en diamants. — Sur le premier plan, à gauche, Paul, changé en statue de marbre blanc et dans le costume qu'il portait à l'avant-dernier tableau, garde son attitude immobile.

CHOEUR DES GNOMES célébrant leur victoire.

Pendant qu'ils chantent, les marmitons circulent dans la galerie du fond pour apporter les plats et descendent quelques marches de l'escalier où les valets servant les Gnomes viennent prendre les plats pour les poser sur la table. En passant devant la statue, chaque valet lui fait une salutation ironique.

SCÈNE PREMIMÈRE

LES GNOMES, LE ROI DES GNOMES, PAUL, *en statue.*

PREMIER GNOME à la droite du Roi, regardant la statue.

Eh bien, héroïque nigaud, comment trouves-tu ta position ?

DEUXIÈME GNOME.

Te voilà maintenant au-dessus de nous.

TROISIÈME GNOME.

Et méprisant toujours les petits gnomes

Et méprisant toujours les petits gnomes.

TOUS, *riant a la foi t.*

Ha ! ha ! ha ! ha !

QUATRIEME C.NOM E.

Tu voulais changer le momie, toi !

CINQUIEME GNOME.

Change donc d’attitude.

TOUS, *riant* .t *la fou.*

Ha ! ha ! ha ! ha !

SIXIEME GNOME.

Insulte-nous, pour te venger.

SEPTIEME GNOME.

Pour nous faire rire.

TOUS, riant a la/■m.

Ha ! ha ! ha : lia !

LE ROI DES GNOMES.

Bien ! amuse/-vou.-. Gnomes, mes sujets. Peton-royalement notre victoire .sur le-hommes. Leurs cœurs à présent nous appartiennent, et il n’est pas besoin de ménager la marchandise. Les ca\eaux. les murailles, notre palais, tout en regorge. Contemple/ ! Et chaque partie du monde nous eu procure : il y en a de Tombouctou et il y en a de Paris. Des cœur » de nègres <-t des cœurs de duchesses ! les uns qui ont palpité pour de l’opium sous la grande muraille en Chine, et d’autres un peu rancis déjà par trop de séjour au fond d’un comptoir, dans Londres !

Une longue branche d’arbre paraît à droite et s’étend contre la statue.

LES SIX GNOMES, en face, à gauche. Tiens ! regardez donc !

LE ROI.

Eh ! c’est cet imbécile changé en prunier contre le mur du château.

Une seconde branche parait.

UN GNOME. Mais voilà deux branches ; elles l’entourent, elles vont l’embrasser.

LE ROI.

Du sentiment ! Ça m’ennuiè. Coupez-les !

Un valet,’avec un couteau, abat d’un seul coup deux branches d’arbre. On entend deux cris terribles. Les rameaux saignent contre le piédestal.

UN GNOME. Délicat comme une sensitive. Pour un prunier, c’est comique !

TOUS LES GNOMES, riant. Ha ! ha ! ha ! ha !

PREMIER GNOME, regardant la statue. Il ne s’en émei.t pas, le misérable !

DEUXIEME GNOME. Défends-le donc ! Anime-toi !

TROISIEME GNOME.

Veux-tu prendre, avec nous, ta petite portion de cœurs ?

QUATRIEME GNOME. Faut-il qu’on t’en serve ?

CINQUIÈME GNOME. J’ai envie de t’en barbouiller le visage !

SIXIEME GNOME. Moi, de te les faire manger tous !

LE ROI. Tiens, bois leur sang !

Il lui jette le contenu de la coupe. Le liquide rouge l’ecla-bousie, et reste figé çà et la par plaques inégales sur sa face et ses vètemeats.

SEPTIEME GNOME. Réponds-nous donc, lâche !

HUITIEME GNOME. Entends-tu, nous bafouons ta sottise, tes illusions, ton courage !

NEUVIÈME GNOME. Et ce cœur immaculé, où est-il ?

DIXIÈME GNOME. Tu en as rencontré de jolis cependant.

ONZIÈME GNOME. Et qui t’aimaient.

DOUZIÈME GNOME. Depuis des reines jusqu’à des femmes de banquier.

PAUL, toujours immobile, répète trois fois lentement. Jeanne ! Jeanne ! Jeanne !

Tous les Gnomes épouvantés se lèvent sur leurs sièges. LE ROI.

Ah ! malédiction !

A et moment, Jeanne, en laitière, se trouve debout sur le piédestal, dans les bras de Paul et Vétreignant étroitement de Paul et l'étreignant étroitement.

LES GNOMES. Regardez ! regardez !

LE ROI.

A moi, mes valets, mes soldats, mes bourreaux ! tout le monde ! à moi, au secours !

Une foule de Gnomes apparaît de tous côtés, se précipitant dans (a salle, La statue, peu à peu, a changé de couleur, et le piédestal 1 est *abaitit,* si bnn que le grctipe est maintenant au niveau du plancher.

PAUL, tenant Jeanne sur son iras gauche, tire son epre.

Vous êtes vaincus, misérable- !

Un large éclair sillonne le ciel au fond ; et dans un éclat de tonnerre, avec un cri immmse de la foule, la table et les Gnomes, tout s'abime sous le sol et disparait. Les lampes s'éteignent. Les cœurs suspendus se mettent à flamboyer, les colonnes du fond s'ecroulent J demi, et l'escalier ne fait plus qu'un monceau de ruines.

SCÈNE II PAUL, JEANNE.

PAUL.

C'est toi ? c'est bien toi ? M'as-tu pardonné ? JEANNE.

Monsieur Paul...

PAUL.

Oh ! plus de ces mots-la ! Lève la tète ! toi qui as secouru ma détresse autrefois et qui maintenant me délivres, chère providence de ma vie, pauvre amour méconnu ! 11 j'ai pu en chercher d'autres ! Ah ! comme j'étais ingrat pour le passé, aveugle pour l'avenir ! Je me suis lai-sé prendre, t)ut le long de ma route, par des illusions funestes, d'autant plus irrésistibles que je retrouvais dans chacun de ces monstres survenant pour me perdre quelque chose de toi, ton image. — Et tu étais, au contraire, si loin !

JEANNE.

Oh ! pas si loin !

PAUL.

Comment ?

JEANNE.

Moi aussi, j’étais aveugle !

PAUL.

Que veux tu dire ?

JEANNE.

Vous rappelez-vous cette coquette Parisienne qui vous étourdissait avec son embarras de bagages et de sottises ?

PAUL, riant.

Oui ! oui !

JEANNE, naïvement.

C’était moi !

PAUL.

Mais. Vous rappelez-vous cette lourde petite bourgeoise, dans cette contrée hideuse ?

PAUL.

Ah ! ne me parle pas de cette imbécile !

JEANNE, piteusement. C’était moi !

PAUL.

Impossible !

JEANNE.

Et cette reine aux splendeurs infinies qui d’un geste faisait mourir les hommes...

PAUL. Assez ! N’achève pas 1

JEANNE, se cachant la tète dam les mains.

C’était moi î

PAUL recule d’un pai.

Vous !

JEANNE, lui sautant au cou.

Oui, moi ! Pour te retrouver, pour te plaire, pour que tu m’aimes ! J’ose te le dire maintenant. Mon amour était si fort que j’ai traversé, afin d<*

venir jusqu’à toi, toutes les démences et toutes les cruautés du monde. Et comme tu ne l’as pas compris, cet amour, comme tu ne l’as pas même aperçu, — il redoublait pourtant à chacun de tes dédains, — aujourd’hui, pour te sauver, je descends du ciel.

PAUL.

Du ciel ?

JEANNE.

Ah ! tu ne sais pas, écoute ! J’étais morte ; les Gnomes me trompaient. Les Fées m’ont rendue à la vie ! Tu vas me suivre ! l’heure a sonné. Viens ! viens !

PAUL.

Oh ! oui, oui, je te crois ! Je savais bien quelle destinée m’était promise. Malgré tous les obstacles, je n’en ai jamais douté... Et tout à l’heure sous le marbre qui m’enfermait, j’en avais l’espoir, l’impatience et l’angoisse ! Partons ! Emmène-moi ! Les Gnomes sont vaincus, laissons la terre !

JEANNE.

Je vais te conduire dans un pays tout bleu, où les fleurs, comme les amours, sont éternelles et démesurées. Là, mon bien-aimé, les orages ne soufflent pas ; l’immensité tiendra dans nos cœurs, et nos yeux, toujours se contemplant, auront la lumière et la durée des étoiles !

NEUVlfc.MF T A B 1 EAU, SCÏNE III. 40-PAUL, etrcignant Jeanne.

Ah ! delices de mon âme. el’e commence deja l’éternité de notre ivre ?se !

SCÈNE 111 PAUL, JEANNE, LA REINE DES FIÏES.

LA REINE DES FÉES, qui depuis le milieu de la scène précédente est descendue lentement du fond, survenant entre eux deux.

Non ! pas encore !

PAUL, indigne.

Toi, la Reine des Fées ! Mais tu m’avais promis...

LA REINE.

As-tu donc oublié notre convention ? Tu n’as accompli que la moitié de ton devoir. La seconde est plus difficile peut-être.

Montrant Jeanne.

Avant d’obtenir la félicité de votre union perpétuelle, il faut remettre aux hommes ce-co-urs délivrés par ta bravoure !

PAUL.

Comment pourrai-je, à moi seul.

LA REINE, souriant.

Oh ! nous sommes là : les Fées t’aideront ! Tu n’as à t’occuper que de ceux exclusivement qui te sont connus ! Tâche de les convaincre ! qu’ils reprennent leur cœur ! Pour devenir immortel, exécute d’abord l’œuvre d’un dieu !

Paul baisse la tète dans ses mains. On entend au dehors un choeur de voix joyeuses.

PAUL, levant son visage baigné de larmes.

Ces voix ?...

LA REINE.

Ce sont les arbres de la forêt, les hommes délivrés qui s’en retournent !

SCÈ^CE IV

LES PRECEDENTS ; DOMINIQUE *entre par le côté droit, avec un nid sur la tète ; en guise de bras, il a deux rameaux chargés de fruits qu’il tient horizontalement.*

JEANNE, émue. Mon frère ! Comme le voilà !

DOMINIQUE, pleurant.

Mon pauvre maître ! Enfin je vous retrouve. Les larmes m’en coulent comme la pluie le long du tronc, du corf ;S c’est-à-dire. Je 11e peux vous serrer dans mes bras. On a beau me couper les rameaux, ça repousse. Je voudrais tant vous embrasser ! Maudite gourmandise, c’est elle qui a tout fait !

En baissant le menton, il mange une prune sur son épaule, et se remet à pleurer.

Ah ! mon Dieu, mon Dieu !

PAUL et JEANNE, ensemble. Grâce pour lui, bonne Fée !

LA REINE, .1 raul.

Puisque tu l’aimes, soit !

Aussitôt les deux branches disparaissent. Dominique a dei bras. Dans le mouvement de sa chevelure qui frissonne, le nid tombe de sa tete, des oeufs s’écrasent par terre et UM oiseau s’envole.

LA REINE DES FEES, a Dominique. Mais tu iras...

DOMINIQUE.

Oh ! partout. Depuis que j’ai pris racine, je ne demande qu’à me dégourdir.

LA REINE, montrant les colonnes.

Tu irasavecton maître, pour donner ces c<rurs à tous ceux qui en manquent.

DOMINIQUE.

Volontiers !

Il considère les coeurs suspendus et se gratte l’oreille.

Mais... vu la quantité, nous allons avoir une cargaison d’une lourdeur... !

LA REINE.

Non ! regarde.

Les caurs se rapetissent à la dimension d’une noix. Une surface dorée les enveloppe.

DOMINIQUE. Oh ! que c’est drôle ! comme c’est drôle ! Pas de paresse ! grimpons-y !

Il va pour monter à la colonne de gauche au premier plan LA REINE. Non ! baisse-toi 1

Le chapiteau de la colonne à gauche et celui de la colonne à droite, entr’ouvrant, laissent tomber une pluie de caurs.

DOMINIQUE, les ramassant. On dirait, vraiment, des bonbons de sucre !

LA REINE. Il n’en seront que plus faciles à prendre.

A Paul, qui reste immobile au pied de la colonne de droite.

Que fais-tu donc ? Tu restes là !

PAUL, j part, murmurant.

Et je la perds au moment de ma victoire. quand tout semblait fini et que je croyais enfin la tenir !

JEANNE, suppliant.

Oh ! ne sois pas desespéré... Va-t’en, si tu m’aimes. Tu ne connais pa> le destin. Fais ce qu’elle ordonne, tout de suite, tout de suite !

DOMINIQUE.

Allons ! mon pauvre maître, encore un petit voyage, le dernier !

Paul étend son manteau, et reçoit des coeurs pendant que Dominique en bourre tes poches.

LA REINE, montrant l’horizon.

Va ! maintenant.

PAUL, se tournant vers Jeanne pour l’embrasser.

Jeanne !

LA REINE, l’, cariant d’un geste.

Non ! à ton devoir ! le sien e.-t accompli sur la terre. Je la transporte dans des répions où elle attendra, pour vous retrouver, que ta vrtu t’ait fait digne de son amour.

Paul et Dominique remontent teri ‘e fond et gratinent l’escalier en ruines en trébuchant parmi lei pierret.

JEANNF,

Adieu !

PAUL, de loin.

Adieu !

Dominique se retourne pour envoyer un baiser. Tous les chapiteaux de toutes les colonnes s’entr’ouvrent et laissent tomber un ruisseau de caurs d’or. En même temps, des deux cotés, les Fées envahissent la scène en tourbillonnant et recueillent les caurs dans le pan de leurs robes. — Au premier plan, Jeanne, émue, est restée avec la Reine qui lui tient la main. — On aperçoit Paul et Dominique à l’extrême horizon.

DIXIÈME TABLEAU

LA FÊTE DU PAYS

Un beau parc dans les environs de Paris, chez le banquier Kloekher. Des deux cotés de la scène il y a de grands arbres. — Au fond un petit mur soutenant une terrasse, avec un escalier de pierre au milieu. Sur chaque marche de l’escalier, aux deux bouts, un vase de fleurs. D’autres vases sont alignés sur la dalle du mur. Au delà, on aperçoit la campagne avec Paris dans l’éloignement. Le milieu de la scène se trouve occupé par une pelouse de gazon.

SCÈNE PREMIMÈRE

MONSIEUR *et* MADAME KLOEKHER, LETOURNEUX, ALFRED DE C1SY.

ONËSIME DUBOIS, MACARET, COLOMBEL, BOUVIGNARD, INVITÉS, MESSIEURS *et* DAMES, *tous en élégants costumes d’été.*

C’est le soir. Au lever du rideau les invites arrivent par la gauche et se répandent sur la scène, Madame Kloekher donnant le bras à Alfred. Bouvignard se précipite à droite, seul, à l’écart, et tire de sa poche une petite cruche de faïence, enveloppée dans son mouchoir, qu’il découvre et se met à contempler.

MADAME KLOEKHER, respirant largement.

Enfin, ici, on respire ! car cette fête du pays, avec ses trompettes et sa grosse caisse, nous a ennuyé si fort durant le dîner...

MONSIEUR KLOEKHER.

Ah ! voilà ! Le jour qu’on choisit pour recevoir ses amis, Messieurs les gens du peuple s’amusent !

LETOURNEUX.

Si au moins dans leurs divertissements ils respectaient la morale !

MACARET.

Puis, ils viendront crier misère à la porte de notre usine...

COLOMBEL.

Ht il faudra les recevoir dans les hôpitaux, où l’on perd a les soigner un temps... *Il sort.*

LETOURNEUX, gaiement.

Et dire que de vieux camarades comme nous ont été sur le point de se fâcher, mon pauvre Kloekher !

KLOEKHER. Comment sur le point ? Nous étions furieux !

Il rit. Ha ! ha !

LETOURNEUX, *riant.*

A propos de quoi, je vous le demande ? Pour ce petit monsieur Paul.

KLOEKH ER, avec une colere concentrée.

L’intrigant !

ALFRED, haussant les >paulet.

Un fou !...

MADAME KLOEKHER. Un véritable drôle !

Elle s’assoit sur le banc à gauche. Alfred se m-1 ptes St’lt.

KLOEKHER. Sait-on au moins ce qu’il est devenu ?

ALFRED.

Non ! Sombré.

MADAME KLOEKHER. Vous ne pleurez pas, Onésime, vous, son ami ?

ONÉSIME.

iMoi, Madame ! jamais de la vie, je vous jure.

MADAME KLOEKHER, *riait.*

C’eût été fort beau, cependant, que de le voir, la semaine prochaine, à vos côtés, comme témoin de votre mariage.

KLOEKHER. Eh ! mon Dieu, ne causons plus de ce misérable ! Si nous faisions quelques pas, Letourneux, hein, pour régler les bases de notre opération !...

LETOURNEUX.

Avec plaisir !

Letourneux et Kloekher se mettent à se promener du haut en bas de la scène

Letourneux et Kloekher se mettent à se promener du haut en bas de la scène.

MADAME KLOEKHER, à Onésime.

On la dit une excellente personne, votre fiancée ?

ONÉSIME.

Elle n’est point d’une beautc... extraordinaire. Mais... il y a d’autres avantages.

MACARET, à Onesime.

Qu’a-t-il donc, Bouvignard ? Il semble absorbé dans une contemplation...

Ils vont à lui.

BOUVIGNARD, a Onésime. Vous qui été ; artiste, examinez-moi cela ! Quels filets ! quel émail !

Onésime veut prendre le pot.

Prenez garde ! Non ! je vais vous le démontrer moi-même.

Bouvignard, Oiesime et Macaret restent debout a examiner le pot que Bouvignard leur montre sur toutes les faces. Mm* Kloekher est assise sur le banc, a gauche, avec Alfred. Letourneux et kloekher se promenent de haut en bas.

MADAME KLOEKHER, a demi-voix. Ainsi c’est convenu ? je recevrai pour samedi mon invitation chez madame la comtesse de Trc-manville ?

ALFRED. Et pour tous ses autres samedis.

Kloekher et Letourneux passent en gesticulant.

Ma tante s’est fait prier, je vous l’av ne La différence des mondes, des quartiers, je veux dire...

A part.

Attrape, ma petite bourgeoise !

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Oh ! merci ! et il ne faudra plus me faire des terreurs, comme l’autre jour.

ALFRED.

Non ! non ! bien sur ! C’est que j’avais perdu la tête, à propos de rien ; tout s’est arrangé. Je vous adore, Ernestine !

Montrant Kloekher qui repasse.

Vous lui parlerez de moi, n’est-ce pas, comme d’un homme entièrement à lui, prêt à toutes les démarches, et auquel il pourrait, dans son intérêt même, confier ses affaires... les plus capitales.

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Sans doute, mon ami !

ALFRED, à part.

Si elle ne s’y met pas, dans huit jours la Bel* gique !

MACARET

Et vous avez acheté cela... ?

BOU VIGNARD.

Quatre-vingts francs ! — pas un sou de plu-, — ici dans un cabaret, a roté !

On entend UT bruit de trompettes et de çroite caitie.

MADAME KLOEKHER, levant.

Encore ! mais c’est intolérable, monsieur Kloskher ; il faudrait se plaindre a l’autorité.

Le bruit redouble ; il t’y mêle des cm d’ent\outi.ttme et comme le brouhaha d’une foule.

SCÈ^E II

L r s PRÉciiDrNTS, COLOMBEL *rentrant.*

COLOMBEL.

Savez-vous qu’il y a là sur la place, au milieu des boutiques, quelque chose de fort original, d’extraordinaire, une chose très amusante, ma parole ! J’ai vu bien de ? saltimbanques, mais aucun de pareil à celui-là. Un homme qui vend des coeurs pour un sou !

ALFRED.

Ce n’est pas cher !

UNE DAME. Oh ! non, mais curieux.

UN INVITÉ. On ferait peut-être bien de voir... Qui sait ?

UN AUTRE. Quand ce ne serait que pour entendre le boniment.

MACARET

MACARET.

Ces gaillards-là, quelquefois, vous ont une verve !...

Les invités entourent Madame Kloekher.

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Je ne sais si je dois ?... Est-ce un homme que l’on puisse faire venir, docteur ?

COLOMBEL.

Oh ! pour vous, certainement non, belle dame ; il n’en est nul besoin. Mais, quanta nous autres, à qui vous avez pris tous nos cœurs...

KLOEKHER, se disposant à sortir. Bah !... à la campagne !... Je vais l’appeler !

LES INVITÉS. Bien !... Bravo !... c’est une idée !

COLOMBEL remonte de quelques pas, en faisant un signe à droite.

Entrez ! — Je me suis permis, en qualité de médecin, de vous donner celte petite su-prise, Mesdames.

SCÈNE111

*L*ES *P*RECEDENTS, *PAUL, avec de longs cheveux-blancs, une barbe blanche cl mie vaste robe de velours noir qui l’enveloppe complètement.* I) O M I N I Q.U I : *le suit, habille en Chinois, et portant sur son dos une grosse caisse et un sac de peau rouge, à la main titi petit pliant.*

Ils s’arrêtent, au militu, sur le ga^on. Dominique place le sac sur le pliant.

LES DAMES.

OI> ! ça va être gentil ! Ça m’amuse déjà, moi i j’aime les escamoteurs.

MADAME KLOEKHER. Vous ffiut-il une table “pour exécuter vos tours ?

PAUL.

Merci, Madame, je ne fais pas île tours. Ma mission est plus haute. C’est votre amélioration morale, votre salut que je demande. Je £uis chargé par les Fée :- de vous remettre vos cœurs.

LES INVITÉS. Comment, nos cœurs ?

ALFRED. Il est poli, le Nostradamus !

PAU L.

Eh ! il ne s’agit pas de politesse ; je parle sérieusement, croyez-moi.

LES INVITÉS, riant. Très drôle ! très drôle !

COLOMBEL, à Madame Kloekher. Quand je vous disais qu’il est parfait !

DOMINIQUE, après avoir vidé sur le pliant le sac plein de bonbons dorés.

Eh bien ! Messieurs, qui vous empêche... ? Voyons, Mesdames, un peu de courage !... C’est joli, sucré, hygiénique !

COLOMBEL. Il s’exprime en bon termes, ce Chinois, qui vient de Paris.

DOMINIQUE. Non, Monsieur, nous arrivons de Pipempohé...

Caressant sa moustache.

où la sultane nous a fait les offres les plus avantageuses !

LES INVITES,,,am. Pipempohe !... la sultane !...

PAUL.

Oui ! et c’est ensuite que je les ai conquis moi-même dans la forteresse des Gnomes.

LES INVITES. Les Gnomes !... Il est d’un sérieux !...

ONESIME. Laissez-le donc contii uer.

PAUL.

Mais j’ai fini !... Je vous répète encore une fois queje dois, d’après l’ordre des Fées, vous remettre vos cœurs !

DOMI NIQUE, tapant sur la grotte came à tour de brat.

Des cœurs ! des cœurs ! des cœurs ! prenez des cœurs !#

PAUL, l’arrêtant.

Tais-toi !

Joignant les mains d’un air suppliant.

Ah ! c’est dans votre intérêt, je vous le jure. Prenez ! Hàtez-vous !

UNE DAME, s’tançant Gela se mange ?

MADAME KLOEKHER. N’y touchez pas ! Quelque drogue, sans doute.

ONÉSIME.

Tant pis ! Je me risque !... Allons, père Bouvignard, je vous en paye un ! — Faites comme moi !

Il donne une pièce de monnaie et se met à croquer un bonbon, comme Bouvignard.

UNE DAME, à demi-voix. Ces artistes !... toujours singuliers !

COLOMBEL, tout en payant et prenant un cœur.

U faut bien que je donne l’exemple aussi, moi qui l’ai amené, ce farceur-là.

ONÉSIME, se frappant le front. Malheureux ! Où est-elle ? .

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Qui donc ?

ONÉSIME.

Clémence !

MADAME KLOEKHER, bas.

Y pensez-vous ? devant le monde !... Votre mariage !...

D I X I fc M fc I ABIFAU, S C c N E III.

O N F S I M F.

Plus de mariage !

Il sort en criant.

Clémence ! Clémence !

BOUVIGNARD, élevant la voix.

Mais quelle stupidité que de prodiru ?r « ■on argent à de pareils bibelots !

Il j’tte son pot, qui se brise par terre.

Ah ! ça soulage 1... et je vais vendre touie 111a collection pour doter ma pauvre fille !

COLOMBEL, se parlant à lui-même en se promenant.

Pour l’achat du terrain, un million, je II » donne ! — Et, quant au reste, avec des souscriptions particulières et en s’adressant au gouvernement, j’arriverai à fonder mon hôpital !

Voyant qu’on le regarde.

Oui, Messieurs, j’y consacrerai ma formne, mon temps, ma science, tous me-efforts. Les ser\ Léseront dirigés par de véritable.- savants ; les sal es tapissées en aubusson, les lits en acajou. Je veux, fliable m’emporte !...

LES INVITÉS, surpris

42S

Eh bien ! eh bien !...

LETOURNEUX.

Il y a là-dedans quelque chose qui monte au cerveau.

PAUL.

Prenez donc !... Je ne les vends plus, je les donne !

MACARET.

A ce prix-là... D’ailleurs je ne vois pas l’intérêt qu’il aurait...

Il avale un bonbon.

PAUL, à Alfred.

Et vous, Monsieur, auriez-vous peur, quand les autres... ?

ALFRED.

Moi ! peur !... Allons donc ! J’en demande deux !

Il en prend deux et en mange un.

MADAME KLOEKHER.

Vous aussi ?...

ALFRED, d voix basse.

Mais c’est excellent ! plus sucré que du miel et suave comme un baiser ! Partagez enfin la passion qui me torture ! Quoi que j’aie pu dire, elle est nouvelle. Quittons cette horrible existence ! Fuyons bien loin sur quelque plage inconnue, au fond des bois, dans un désert ! n’importe où, pourvu que nous soyons seuls tous les deux n savourer le bonheur de vous chérir.

Il porte le bonbon aux letres de Madame hloekher, qui l’avale.

MADAME KLOEKHER aussitôt baine ton toile, et t.e .i prendre le bras de son mari, affectueusement.

Alphonse, mon ami ?

KLOEKHER.

Hein ? Quoi ?

MADAME KLOEKHER. Ce monde m’ennuie... nous sommes si bien dans notre petite intimité... Je t’aime !

KLOEKHER, j pan. Ma femme qui m’aime, maintenant !... Elle a perdu la tête !

MACARET, dans le coin de droite, sanglotant.

Oh ! oh ! mon Dieu !... Oh ! oh ! mon Dieu !... Oh ! oh !...

KLOEKHER. Ou’avez-vous donc, vous ?

MACARET, sans lui repondie.

Oh ! oh !... tant de jours perdus !... Oh ! oh !... comme Titus !

Les invités, qui peu a peu ont pris dei cerurs, *l*’empreiient autour de Paul de plus en plut.

DOMINIQUE, bas à Paul. Ça va bien !

PAUL, bas.

Non !... Comme il en reste ! Dominique !

Dominique frappe sur sa caisse.

PAUL, avec impatience.

Allons ! Allons donc !

KLOEKHER, irrité.

Eh ! la farce est trop longue !... le monde en a assez... Laissez-nous !

PAUL.

Vous n’en avez pas, vous, Alphonse-Jean- Baptiste-Isidore Kloekher !

KLOEKHE R. Insolent ! Qui t’a dit mes noms ?

PAUL.

Je les sais !

KLOEKHER et LETOURNEUX. A la porte ! A la porte !

PAUL.

Pas avant que tu n’aies pris ce cœur.

DIXIÈME TABLEAU, SCÈNE III. 429 KLOEKHER.

Moi !

PAUL. Je vous en conjure !

KLOEKHER. Mais c’est une indignité !

PAUL.

Je te l’ordonne !

KLOEKHER reste quelque temps abasourdi, pâle de colère ; puis, avec une pose majestueuse.

De quel droit ?

Paul, sans lui répondre, arrache d’un seul mouvement sa barbe et ses cheveux blancs, ainsi que sa longue robe de velours noir. Kloekher lève les bras, épouvante, comme à la vue d’un spectre, en s’écriant : Lui !

MADAME KLOEKHER, pressant délicatement le bras de son mari, et le lui montrant, avec une voix douce.

Monsieur Paul !

LETOURNEUX, se mordant le pouce et détournant la tète.

Paul de Damvilliers !...

UNE DAME. Ali ! la bonne surprise !

COLOMBEL. Cet excellent jeune homme 1

ALFRED, venant lui presser la main. Cher ami !

Tous les invites viennent ou lui serrer la main ou l’entourer.

KLOEKHER, àpart.

Mon Dieu !... tout le monde pour lui !... S’il allait parler !...

Étendant la main.

Je veux bien.

Il avale un coeur.

DOMINIQUE, à part. Allons donc !

KLOEKHER, d’une voix entrecoupée

KLOEKHER, d'une voix entrecoupée.

Tiens ! tiens !... Mais... qu'est-ce que j'ai donc ?... Ah ! j'oubliais ! Ces pauvres gens que j'ai fait avant hier enfermer à Clichy. S'adressant à une dame.

François...

A un monsieur.

Pierre, délivrez-les. Qu'on y coure !

LETOURNEUX, s'approchant avec inquiétude. Mon ami |

KLOEKHER.

Et ce brave inventeur à qui j'ai refusé... vingt mille francs tout de suite ! Nous verrons après ! mon caissier !

LETOURNEUX.

Mais vous n'y pense ? pas, Kloekher.

KLOEKHER.

Laissez-moi, vou.- !

Letourneux fait un geste de stupéfaction et de pitié.

Je suis heure ix... oui, — écoutez tous ! — heureux de vous avoir là, réuni-, pour être témoins d'un acte de... haute justice... non !...

Bas.

de confiance ! Il s'agit d'une restitution ! — qu'est-ce que je dis donc là ? — ■ d'un dépôt sacré !...

Sefiappant la poitrine a deux poings.

Imbécile !... oui, tant pis !... je dis bien !... sa... sa... sacré !

PAUL, feremeni.

Je ne suis pas venu pour cela, Monsieur !

KLOEKHER. N'importe, jeune homme ! Je profite de l'occasion. C'est un fardeau qu'on m'enlève, et, dès ce soir...

Lui serrant la main.

pas plus tard !

Le bruit de la fête villageoise redouble au dehors.

Ah ! comme ça fait plaisir d’entendre cette gaieté populaire ! Eh ! ce serait doubler notre bonheur que de le partager avec eux. Les pauvres gens ! ils n’ont pas déjà tant de joie tout le long de l’année !...

Criant.

Débouchez le Champagne ! Qu’on les fasse entrer ! Ouvrez tout !... Ah ! le beau jour !,..

Tout le décor s’e’claire en rose.

Je vois la vie en rose !... Quel beau jour !

SCÈ^CE IV

LES PRECEDENTS, *un flot de peuple oh se trouve le cabaretier,* LE PÈRE *et* LA MÈRE THOMAS.

LA FOULE, criant.

Vive monsieur Kloekher ! Vive monsieur Kloekher !

KLOEKHER, j part. Mon cœur déborde !

MACARET, dans son coin, sanglotant. Ab J ah ! bien touchant ! bien touchant !

DOMINIQUE, tapant sur la caisse.

Dépèchez-vous ! Suivez la foule ! Enlevez le reste !

La multitude tourbillonne autour de Paul et de Dominique. — Trois valets, en grande livrée, apportent des paniers pleins de vin de Champagne. — Kloekher en fait sauter le bouchon, et, suivi par un Domestique, il se précipite de groupe en groupe et verse à boire.

KLOEKHER.

Sablez ! sablez ! sablez 1

Le décor, tout rose maintenant, s’éclaire de plus en plus, jusqu’à la fin du tableau. Des fleurs lumineuses, pareilles à de grandes tulipes et à des tournesols, s’epanouissent dans les arbres. Les raisins d’une vigne, serpentant autour d’un chêne, deviennent des grenats ; les feuilles d’un tremble se changent en argent ; et tous les arbres et tous les arbustes, selon leur essence particulière, prennent différents feuillages en pierres précieuses. — Tout le monde s’embrasse, saute de joie, applaudit. Le père et la mère Thomas envoient des baisers à leur fils.

DOMINIQUE, à Paul. Eh bien ! Tout est fini, mon bon maître, plus rien dans le sac ! Amusons-nous, comme les autres.

5S

PAUL, lentement et bas, en prenant sur le pliant un coeur et le tenant entre ses doigts.

Mais il y en a encore un, Dominique !

DOMINIQUE, le lui prenant vivement.

Ah ! ce ne sera pas long ! ça me connaît !

A un monsieur. Vous, là-bas, Monsieur ?

LE MONSIEUR.

J'en ai pris !

DOMINIQUE, à une dame. Et vous, Madame ?

LA DAME.

Moi aussi !

DOMINIQUE. Voyons I... le dernier 1

UNE PERSONNE. Nous en avons tous.

LA FOULE.

Tous ! tous !

PAUL, à demi-voix. Mais ce serait épouvantable ! C'est impossible !

DOMINIQUE, bas et d'une \oi\ e_ffrjy,t, rn *tncnirni* Ir coeur, qui peu .2 peu grosm demeiurerirnt.

Maître ! maître ! comme il grandit '.. . comme il s'enile !

L ETO U RN E U X, survena it u *t* a .oip demere /'J*LI* et lui frappant tut ïrpjuie.

Vous voudriez bien me le faire gober, eelui-ld .'

PAUL.

Oui, oui !... Pardon pour . c que je vu. » ai fait.

Montrant le caur.

Prenez-le 1 C'est la paix de la conscience, le pouvoir du bien, l'intelligence de tout ce qui est beau ; le moyen de comprendre a la foi » l'humanité, la nature et

Dieu !

Letourneux sourit ironiquement, sans bouger.

Mais qui étes-vous donc, pour rester in »en »ible dans l'allégre-se de tous ? Dans quelle pierre étes-vous taillé ? Vous n'avez donc jamais aune quelque chose, quelqu'un ? Vous n'av<*/donc rêve jamais au bonheur de la posséder, au désespoir de le perdre ? Ah ! s'il ne fallait, pour vou » convaincre, que verser mon sang, retournera l'autre bout du monde, vous servir en esclave ! Un peu de pitié ! grâce ! attendri-se/-vous !... Prenc/-1<- !

LETOURNEUX.

Merci, ça gène trop !

PAUL.

Adieu, Jeanne !... Oh ! je suis maudit !... Je t'ai perdue !...

Le petit mur de la terrasse s'est levé, et l'escalier, devenu d'argent, a grandi. De chacun des vases de fleurs poses sur les marches est sortie une femme. Elles étendent leurs bras sur les épaules les unes des autres, de sorte que l'escalier semble avoir pour rampe une longue fie de femmes vêtues de perles. On distingue en haut, enveloppée dans les nuages et sous les teintes laiteuses d'un clair de lune, la base du palais des Fées, couleur de nacre. Jeanne est en avant, sur la plateforme, au sommet de l'escalier. — Paul, en se retournant pour suivre du regard Letourneux qui s'éloigne, l'aperçoit, s'écrie : Jeanne !...

et escalade, en courant l'escalier. — Pendant qu'il monte, son habillement disparaît pour un costume d'apothéose, tout en blanc, long manteau. Chaque marche, h mesure qu'il monte, exhale un son d'harmonica : succession de toutes les notes de la gamme. — Au moment où il va ouvrir les bras pour serrer Jeanne, la Reine des Fées apparaît auprès d'elle, avec toutes les Fées, qui sont un peu en arrière, à sa droite et à sa gauche ; sur le péristyle du temple, lequel est maintenant plus éclairé, Paul s'arrête et recule.

Je n'ose avancer, ô Reine ! ma mission n'est pas finie. J'ai laissé le mal sur la terre.

LA REINE.

Il lui en faut toujours un peu ! Tu n'en as pas moins mérité la récompense. Soyez heureux dans l'immortalité !

DOMINIQUE, tenant le c^rur dans ses maint et lt pied sur la première marche de Vetcalier.

Et bien, et moi ? et moi ? quV-t-^c que je v.vs devenir avec cette char^c-Ià ?

LA REINE.

Valet <li.’ cœur, •surveille <« .’U\ qui trichoni, console ceux qui perdent !

Dominique est change en \alet de coeur. — Le r.rur se place dans l’air, à sa gauche, sur un carre blanc, fait à sa tulle, et qui lui sert de fond, tandis qu’uie longue banierole te déploie dans les airs, portant, écrits en lettres lumineuiei, ces mots : LA VERTU ÉTANT RÉCOMPENSÉE, ON N’A RIEN A DIRE !

FIN.

LE SEXE FAIBLE

A COMEDY IN FIVE ACTS

After the resounding failure of *The Candidate* in 1874, Flaubert penned this light-hearted comedy about the ‘weaker sex’, which was much more successful than its predecessor. Unfortunately, there are no translations of the play available, which has only very recently been translated for the first time in English. The original French text has been provided instead for our readers.

Flaubert, close to the time of publication

LE SEXE FAIBLE

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PERSONNAGES

Paul DUVERNIER
Amédée PEYRONNEAU
Le Général VARIN DES ILOTS
M. DES ORBIÈRES
M. DE GRÉMONVILLE
M. Népomucène ROCH, professeur de déclamation M. CASIMIR, professeur de gymnastique M. le Vicomte DE RUMPIGNY
Valentine DE GRÉMONVILLE
Thérèse, sœur de Valentine Mme de GRÉMONVILLE

Mme DUVERNIER
La Vicomtesse DE MÉRILHAC

Victoire
Une domestique de Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Un domestique de Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
Une fille de basse-cour Une nourrice

Le spectacle a été créé à la Comédie de Genève, le 20 mars 1984
Mise en scène : Benno Besson Décor et costumes : Ezio Toffolutti Avec : Jacques Amiryan, Carlo Brandt, Evelyne Buyle, Franck Colini, Danièle Devillers, Catherine Eger, Hélène Friedli, Dominique Gay, William Jacques, Laurence Montandon, Roland Sassi, Ma thé Souverbie.
Assistants de mise en scène : Sima Dakkus et Dominique Serreau.

ACTE I

Scène 1

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Amédée !

AMÉDÉE
Ma tante ?

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
As-tu fini d'écrire les noms de nos invités pour ce soir ?

AMÉDÉE
Oui, et de ma plus belle main ! en ronde superbe ! Brard et Saint-Omer auprès de moi...

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Tu es capable d'avoir commis encore quelque bévue !
Voyons.

AMÉDÉE
Voyez ! *(Il se lève tendant un des billets.)* Et d'abord notre nouveau ministre, Monsieur des Orbières...
Fallait-il mettre Son Excellence ?

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Certainement !

AMÉDÉE
En toutes lettres ?

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Non ! un S et un E, puis ministre : Son Excellence le ministre de...
(Pendant qu'Amédée, qui s'est rassis, écrit à part.) Il l'est enfin ! il l'est...

AMÉDÉE
(donnant les autres billets au fur et à mesure) Maintenant, voici les autres : Madame de Grémonville, Mademoiselle Valentine de Grémonville, Mademoiselle Thérèse de Grémonville, la considérable Madame Duvernier, son fils Monsieur Paul, et l'oncle, le vieux de la vieille, l'excellent général Varin des

Ilots !

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Parfait !

AMÉDÉE (*ironiquement)*
Vous croyez ? mais il manque quelqu'un.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Qui donc ?

AMÉDÉE
Et Gertrude ? Mademoiselle Gertrude ! est-ce que notre général peut s'en passer ? Ne faut-il pas qu'elle soit là pour le garantir du vent, de la pluie et du soleil, le forcer de mettre sa calotte de peur des rhumes et lui faire avaler son bouillon dès cinq heures, juste ? Il la mène, ou plutôt elle l'escorte partout, si bien qu'au jour de l'an je l'ai rencontré sur le boulevard en train de faire ses visites, côte à côte dans un cabriolet mylord avec sa bonne ; rien de plus folichon que leurs deux profils !

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Faiblesse de vieillard ! N'importe ! Il nous a rendu service, un vrai service ; sans lui, Monsieur des Orbières ne serait pas maintenant au pouvoir ; c'est par son influence dans le comité de la Madeleine et les voix de ses vieux compagnons d'armes dont il dispose.

AMÉDÉE
Et où faut-il le placer, notre grand homme ? en face de vous n'est-ce pas ?

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Pourquoi cela, en face ?

AMÉDÉE
Mais... Chère tante, sa longue habitude de venir ici tous les jours... l'autorité qu'il y possède... enfin, c'est comme le maître de la maison !

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Je n'aime pas ce genre de plaisanteries, tu sais !

AMÉDÉE
Cela va de soi-même, pourtant ! et le rapport de vos deux personnes n’a rien que de naturel. Lui, c’est un homme de tribune et de gouvernement ; vous, vous êtes une femme...
académique, diplomatique et politique. Oh ! ne niez pas !
Plus d’une motion importante est sortie du boudoir de la rue Bellechasse !... Et quels raouts, miséricorde ! Des messieurs, convenables comme des domestiques du GrandHôtel, et qui dissertent sur la fusion des Centres, l’esprit du dernier cabinet, ou la meilleure assiette des impôts !
Le tout, bien entendu, d’après la direction du célèbre orateur, publiciste et homme d’Etat, Monsieur des Orbières...
et on appelle la comtesse de Mérilhac *(il salue)* son Egérie...
ce qui est un grand honneur pour vous, ou plutôt pour lui, chère tante.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Tu auras soin de te placer auprès de Valentine.

AMÉDÉE
Moi ? je veux bien.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Et tu tâcheras, n’est-ce pas, de surveiller un peu tes manières ? je tiens à ce que tu plaises.

AMÉDÉE
Je plais toujours ! Dans quel but, ce soir, tout particulièrement...

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Je trouve qu’il faudrait quitter enfin la vie de garçon ; à cinquante ans, il n’est pas trop tôt de s’établir, de se marier.

AMÉDÉE
Moi ! me marier ! allons donc ! Un mariage, des enfants !
D’abord, je déteste les enfants, et quant à subir le joug d’une femme...

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Fais ce que je te dis... Et tu mettras ton ami Paul près de Thérèse.

AMÉDÉE
Auriez-vous également, à son endroit, des intentions d’hyménée ?

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Pourquoi pas ?

AMÉDÉE
Celui-là, je l’avoue, est de naissance prédestiné au mariage ; sa mère le gouverne comme un marmot, jusqu’à régler la longueur de sa barbe, interdiction de la cigarette, défense du bal masqué et privation de sortie après minuit ! Et, comme elle le contrecarre dans tous ses goûts, sans qu’il regimbe ! Avec Thérèse ce sera bien pire, car je la trouve, moi, une petite personne désagréable ; elle tient cela peutêtre de son père que l’on dit fou ? Ce bonhomme Grémonville ne vit pas avec sa femme.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Tu ferais mieux de ne pas répéter des cancans., pareils !
Du reste, je partage ton opinion sur Valentine (*geste d’étonnement d’Amédée)*, elle est charmante, tandis que Thérèse, entre nous, me semble un peu nigaude, sans compter un caractère boudeur, avec un entêtement !

AMÉDÉE
Eh bien ! au lieu d’un maître, le pauvre garçon en aura deux ! Sera-t-il assez inspecté, et grondé, tiraillé, surmené !
Avant six mois il est fourbu, je parie ! *(riant)* Très drôle !
très drôle !

Scène 2

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Exact comme un simple mortel !
M. DES ORBIÊRES (*lui baisant la main)* C’est bien le moins, chère Madame. Depuis longtemps déjà j’aurais dû...

AMÉDÉE
Croyez, Monsieur le Ministre, que, pour ma part, je m’estime fort heureux...

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Bien, bien, mon jeune ami ! mais entre nous...

AMÉDÉE (*prenant son chapeau de paille pour sortir)* On se comprend, Monsieur le Ministre, et comme je sais le prix de vos instants, j’aurais peur...

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Non !... pas le moins du monde !

AMÉDÉE
Si fait ! permettez ! D’ailleurs, il faut que j’aille pour ma tante...

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Oh ! alors...

AMÉDÉE *(à part, en se retirant)* Que j’aie de très mauvaises manières, c’est possible ! mais je ne manque pas d’une certaine délicatesse ! *(sur le seuil, au fond)* Bénissez-moi, donc, vieux tourtereaux !

Scène 3

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Eh bien ?

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Ah !... la transition est jugée... un peu brusque ! on m’appelle renégat, on crie.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Laissez crier.

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Us ne veulent pas comprendre que mon entrée au pouvoir ne change en rien mes convictions, et que je suis toujours aussi libéral qu’auparavant.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
C’est ce qu’il faut dire.

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Et même encore plus, peut-être.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Sans doute !... aussi je m’applaudis de vous avoir montré indirectement le chemin, et enlevé des scrupules qui prenaient leur cause, non pas dans l’insuffisance de votre coup d’oeil, grâce au ciel, mais dans l’exagération d’une probité...

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Une fois de plus, je m’incline. Et d’ailleurs, n’ai-je pas d’innombrables motifs pour admirer l’excellence de vos conseils ? Vous avez été pour moi un secours, une lumière, un dévouement continu, si bien qu’à chaque pas dans ma carrière, à chaque échelon de ma fortune j’ai senti se développer ma reconnaissance et grandir... ma tendresse.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Eh ! j’ai soixante-trois ans, mon ami !

M. DES ORBIÈRES

Pour moi, vous êtes toujours à la trentaine.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Flatteur !

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Non pas ! et vous calomniez votre âge ; c’est à cause de lui que je vous adore. Il faut que les caprices de la jeunesse soient disparus si nous voulons trouver dans une femme le plus fidèle, et le plus intelligent des amis !

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Je ne suis qu’un reflet, le vôtre, vous le savez ; avocat, journaliste, député, j’ai suivi, j’ai partagé orgueilleusement tous vos triomphes, et à présent que vous êtes le Pouvoir, ce ne sont plus des paroles et des écrits que j’attends, mais des œuvres, de grandes choses ! Vous les ferez (*geste de des Orbières),* oh ! j’en suis sûre ! Pardon, une misère, j’oubliais ! avez-vous pensé à cette place d’inspecteur des Beaux-Arts pour le jeune Duvernier ?

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Toutes, malheureusement, sont prises.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Faites-en une autre !

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Il n’y a pas d’argent au budget !

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Trouvez-en !

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Je vous répète que c’est impossible !

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Ah ! n’importe, il me la faut !

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Mais, chère amie, quel est là-dedans votre intérêt ?

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
C’est que je marie mon neveu Amédée Peyronneau à Valentine de Grémonville.

M. DES ORBIÈRES (*d’un air maussade)* Tiens ! pourquoi ?

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Cela vous choque ? cependant la fortune de Valentine...

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Sans doute ! mais ce qui s’est passé autrefois à Toulouse ?
Madame de Grémonville, malgré ses grands airs de vertu...
(Geste de Mme de Mérilhac comme pour dire : je m’en moque.’) Permettez, je connais parfaitement l’histoire, et même, comme avocat, j’ai donné à Monsieur de Grémonville une consultation.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Alors, vous savez que Valentine a été avantagée par son père ?

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Oui ! je le sais ; mais quel rapport entre les demoiselles de Grémonville et une place pour Monsieur Duvernier ?

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
C’est afin de reconnaître dans la personne du neveu les services rendus par l’oncle.

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Eh ! le général n’est pas homme...

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Pardon ! le général Varin des Ilots, soit embarras ou délicatesse, n’a pas osé vous la demander lui-même, mais il en a envie, j’en suis sûre, il me l’a dit. *(à part*) De cette façon-là, mon maître, vous serez bien forcé...

M. DES ORBIÈRES *(se grattant l’oreille)* Diable ! diable !...

Mme DE MÉRILHAC

Cette place n’est pas considérable, la dot de Thérèse non plus, mais la place et la dot réunies donneront aux jeunes époux Duvernier un revenu fort honnête ; c’est un moyen d’équilibrer les choses, de rendre la position des deux sœurs égale, et, puisque je marie mon neveu à Valentine, de faire entrer Paul dans ma famille. D’ailleurs, cet exemple moralisera Amédée, et je ne vois pas, mon cher Ministre, que le Gouvernement serait bien malade quand vous dénicheriez dans les Beaux-Arts...

M. DES ORBIÈRES (*avec empressement)* Il s’y connaît ?

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Eh ! tout le monde s’y connaît !

M. DES ORBIÈRES
D’accord, mais...

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Savez-vous ce qui vous retient ? la peur des journaux ! Ah !
quelle faiblesse !

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Il n’y a pas de faiblesse à respecter la loi. Est-ce que je peux, moi...

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Ce que vous pouvez ? vraiment ! et vous êtes un homme !
Il faut avoir l’audace de sa faiblesse, mon ami, et le dédain brutal de l’opinion est parfois de l’habileté... Moi, quand je me suis vu des cheveux gris, j’ai poudré à blanc tout le reste, hardiment, ce qui m’a rendue plus jeune. Osez tout, et on vous trouvera fort... Ah ! vous êtes loin des grands modèles ! Le Cardinal de Richelieu, Monsieur de Talleyrand, et même Mirabeau, n’y auraient pas tant regardé !

M. DES ORBIÈRES *(à part)* Quelle femme !

Mme DE MÉRILHAC *(remontant)* Ce sera fait bientôt, n’est-ce pas ? On peut compter...

M. DES ORBIÈRES *(derrière elle)* Ah ! je ne promets rien.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Allons donc ! vous vous moquez !

Scène 4

Mme DUVERNIER (*minaudant)*
Ah ! comtesse, quelle délicieuse résidence vous avez là !
Des fleurs, une pelouse, un étang, qui est un lac !... A
chaque détour d'allée un site nouveau, jusqu'à la façade de la maison !... Comme on reconnaît aux moindres choses...
(à Paul) Tu pourrais bien, par convenance, renforcer ce que je dis d'agréable,
(haut) Non ! véritablement tout a un cachet !...

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Vous me comblez ! *(à M. des Orbières)* Madame Duvernier, une de mes bonnes amies... Son fils, Monsieur Paul... *(à Mme Duvernier)* Permettez-moi de vous présenter notre ministre, Monsieur des Orbières.

MME DUVERNIER

Lui ! le ministre ! Ah ! Monsieur, quel immense honneur pour moi que de me trouver face à face avec un homme...
de votre capacité ! *(à M"" de Mérilhac, de manière à être entendue)* un génie, et si simple !

M. DES ORBIÈRES *(s'inclinant)*
Madame !

Mme DUVERNIER *(à Paul)*
Trouve donc un compliment pour Son Excellence... l'occasion !

PAUL

Mais tout de suite, ce serait...

Mme DE MÉRILHAC *(désignant Paul)*
L'ami de mon neveu, le jeune homme dont...

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Ah ! fort bien ! Vous n’êtes pas un inconnu pour moi, Monsieur, et soyez persuadé...
(Il le prend par le coude et remonte avec lui doucement vers le fond ; les femmes restent au premier plan.)

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Dépêchons-nous, pendant qu’ils causent plus loin ! Et d’abord, notre grand projet, que devient-il ?

Mme DUVERNIER

Le général a promis de tâter le terrain, j’aurai sa réponse prochainement, peut-être même aujourd’hui.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Monsieur votre fils doit être d’une impatience !

Mme DUVERNIER

Pourquoi ?

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Amoureux comme il est !

Mme DUVERNIER

Mais non ! Je ne lui ai encore rien dit !

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Alors que savez-vous si Thérèse...

Mme DUVERNIER

Oh ! il ne refusera pas une femme de ma main !

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Voilà un fils modèle, chère Madame, recevez-en mes compliments.

Mme DUVERNIER

Pour être dans le vrai, certains indices, de ces petits détails peu importants par eux-mêmes, mais qui, réunis, ont leur signification, me donnent à croire que la jeune personne ne lui est pas indifférente. Pendant les visites que nous faisons aux dames de Grémonville, j'ai remarqué qu'il avait de la pâleur, avec des yeux !... Ah ! comtesse ! Quels yeux !
Ça me rappelle son pauvre père quand il était dans la même position, et je vous avoue que, à sa place, moi aussi c'est bien Thérèse que je choisirais... un agneau, du bon sens, pas évaporée, pas artiste, avec le goût naturel de l'économie, enfin une vraie femme d'intérieur, tout ce qu'il faut pour gagner la confiance d'une mère de famille, en être une elle-même !

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Je la crois, comme vous, une jeune fille pleine de... qualités sérieuses, ce qui ne l'empêche pas, sans doute, d'en avoir au fond de plus brillantes, et que monsieur votre fils ne manquera pas de développer, tout naturellement, par sa place...

Mme DUVERNIER

Elle est donnée ?

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Oh ! à peu près.

MME DUVERNIER

Si j’allais remercier Son Excellence ? qu’en dites-vous ?

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Mais... oui ! ce sera une manière de l’engager. *(Elles remontent vers la véranda ; les hommes, pendant qu’elles parlaient, ont descendu la scène jusqu’au milieu.)* Et puis la nomination de Paul va devenir pour son mariage un argument décisif, je me fais un plaisir de l’apprendre, pendant le dîner, à Madame de Grémonville.

PAUL *(se retourne vivement)*
Ces dames de Grémonville dînent ici ?

Mme DUVERNIER *(à Mme de Mérilhac)*
Son secret lui échappe, vous voyez bien !

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Le cri de la passion, en effet ! *(à Paul, ironiquement)* Oui, Monsieur, elles dînent ici, et je n’ai pas attendu que vous me dénonciez vos sentiments pour faire mes invitations.
(Les deux femmes, en riant légèrement, continuent à s’avancer vers M. des Orbières, Paul va pour les suivre.)

AMÉDÉE *(l’arrêtant)*
Eh ! laissez-les tripoter ensemble ! nous en aurons assez tout à l’heure pendant le festin ! J’imagine qu’il sera peu drôle, et je serai de même. D’abord, je me méfie toujours de ma tante dès qu’il y a des vierges aspirant au sacrement ; elle a voulu me placer à côté de Valentine.

PAUL (*vivement)*
Tu seras à côté d’elle, toi ?

AMÉDÉE
Oui ! et que le diable m’emporte si je trouve de quoi alimenter la conversation ! je n’ai rien à dire aux femmes honnêtes, moi ! Oh ! pas n’est besoin de surveillance ! Mais toi, pendant ce temps-là, mon gaillard, tu nageras en plein azur ?

PAUL

Comment ?

AMÉDÉE
Tu vas faire ta cour à la cadette, à Mademoiselle Thérèse.

PAUL

A Thérèse *(il s’assombrit).*

AMÉDÉE
Malin ! ne cache donc pas ton jeu ! tu l’aimes.

PAUL

Ah ! par exemple !

AMÉDÉE
Ta ta ta.

PAUL

Mais je te jure...

AMÉDÉE
Je te souhaite infiniment de plaisir !

PAUL

Oh ! ce n’est pas...

AMÉDÉE
Après tout, tu es libre, ça te regarde ! *(Il pirouette sur ses talons et remonte la*

scène.)

PAUL (*resté seul sur le devant)*
Ah ! maudite timidité qui me rend toujours si malheureux !
Est-ce que jamais je ne me ferai connaître ! Pourquoi rougir de mon amour comme d'un crime ? il faudra bien pourtant que je prenne une résolution, et que ça finisse !

Scène 5

LE GÉNÉRAL
(Il est entré par la porte latérale, à droite, et après avoir regardé quelque temps avec inquiétude.) Paul ! ah ! je te cherchais... Un mot ! Tu devrais prier ton ami Amédée d'avertir son domestique qu'il viendra peutêtre, ce soir, une dame me demander... en secret.

PAUL *(étonné)* Mon oncle !

LE GÉNÉRAL
C'est tout bonnement Gertrude ! je n'ai pas voulu la faire manger à la cuisine, tu comprends ; elle est restée chez le traiteur du village, là, à côté, et si par hasard, pour une chose, ou pour une autre...

PAUL

Bien ! Bien !

LE GÉNÉRAL
Ainsi, je peux être tranquille, n'est-ce pas ?

Mme DUVERNIER *(descendant précipitamment)* Mais c'est la voix du général ! je brûle...

LE GÉNÉRAL *(saluant)* Madame... Comtesse, je dépose mes hommages... *(vite)* Bonjour, Monsieur Peyronneau !... *(donnant une poignée de main)* Monseigneur, je vous salue.

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Le monseigneur doit bien des excuses à son général, d'abord de n'avoir pas répondu à sa lettre si flatteuse *(l'entraînant un peu)*, puis, relativement à cette place pour Monsieur Paul Duvernier...

LE GÉNÉRAL
Une place ?

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Oui ! l’inspection !

LE GÉNÉRAL
Quelle inspection ?

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Celle enfin que vous avez demandée.

LE GÉNÉRAL
Moi ? demandée... à qui ?

M. DES ORBIÈRES
A Madame de Mérilhac.

LE GÉNÉRAL
Jamais de la vie !

M. DES ORBIÈRES (*étonné, regardant Mme de Mérilhac)* Comment ?

Mme DE MÉRILHAC (*bas à des Orbières)* Maladroit, vous le blessez. *(Des Orbières remonte.)*
LE GÉNÉRAL *(s’avançant vers elle)* N’est-ce pas, comtesse, que je n’ai point...

Mme DUVERNIER *(au général, l’arrêtant)* Mais, depuis deux heures, j’attends ! *(Elle l’entraîne.)* Eh bien, voyons, Madame de Grémonville, qu’a-t-elle dit ?

LE GÉNÉRAL
Je n’y vais pas par quatre chemins, vous savez ! je mène les choses rondement, à la hussarde ! j’ai donc fait la demande.

Mme DUVERNIER

Et ?

LE GÉNÉRAL
Madame de Grémonville l’a accueillie avec une satisfaction que j’ose dire visible, malgré un petit air de modestie ; la vérité même est qu’elle se rengorgeait !

Mme DUVERNIER

Ah ! le ciel soit loué !

LE GÉNÉRAL
Du reste, vous pouvez vous en assurer par vous-même, ces dames arrivent tout à l’heure, elles doivent être maintenant au bout du parc.

Mme DUVERNIER *(à MME de Mérilhac)* Allons au-devant d’elles, ce serait plus poli, qu’en ditesvous ?

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Volontiers. (*appelant)* Amédée ! tu nous accompagnes, c’est bien le moins qu’il y ait un homme pour offrir son bras à Madame de Grémonville.

AMÉDÉE
Oui ! je vous rejoins.

PAUL (*,à part)* Si j’y allais aussi, moi ! Pourquoi pas ? en plein air, on est plus brave ; le bon vent d’été, le ciel bleu, les roses, les oiseaux, la nature immense autour de moi me soutiendra.
Quelque chose me dit même : en avant ! Je risque tout !
(Il sort très vite.)

Scène 6

AMÉDÉE

(regardant Paul s'éloigner, et haussant les épaules) Encore un qui se précipite à l'abîme ! Pauvre garçon !

LE GÉNÉRAL

De quoi le plaignez-vous ?

AMÉDÉE

Eh ! de se marier ! il va se marier !

M. DES ORBIÈRES

C'est s'y prendre un peu jeune !

LE GÉNÉRAL

Certainement ! j'ai même fait là-dessus des représentations à Madame Duvernier : mais les femmes, vous savez, l'amour, le mariage !... et puis le mariage, l'amour ! elles ne sortent pas de là !

M. DES ORBIÈRES

Il y a d'autres buts cependant, et pour les atteindre il vaut mieux rester garçon.

AMÉDÉE

D'abord avec les femmes on n'est jamais indépendant.

LE GÉNÉRAL

Ni tranquille.

M. DES ORBIÈRES

Ni sûr de quoi que ce soit.

LE GÉNÉRAL

Croyez-vous, par exemple, qu'un militaire marié aura le même courage...

M. DES ORBIÈRES

Et qu'on puisse, au milieu de tracas pareils, mener, je suppose, une vie d'études, de cabinet ?

AMÉDÉE
Effectivement, il me semble que je ne posséderais pas toutes mes facultés si j'avais une épouse.

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Le mal de notre temps, le voilà, Messieurs, la femme ! son influence nous étouffe, on la sent partout épandue, c'est le grand filet où se prennent les âmes ! L'homme libre y laisse sa force, et le penseur sa conscience !

LE GÉNÉRAL
Que je voudrais que Gertrude l'entendît !

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Eve, Circé, Dalilah, Hélène, Cléopâtre, Dubarry et bien d'autres prouvent assez que, depuis le commencement du monde, elles sont faites pour combattre l'idéal, humilier l'homme et perdre les empires !

LE GÉNÉRAL
Dans toutes les affaires criminelles, on trouve, au fond, une femme !

AMÉDÉE
Il est de fait qu'elles vous mènent souvent très loin.

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Aussi, moi, Messieurs, pour me conserver plus ferme dans la lutte, ardent au travail et sourd aux complaisances, j'ai poussé, comment dirais-je ? la circonspection... oui, c'est le mot... jusqu'à me priver d'une maîtresse !

LE GÉNÉRAL
Moi, en qualité de militaire, j'ai parcouru bien des pays, et j'ai eu... je peux maintenant le dire sans fatuité... pas mal de relations ! mais jamais, nom d'un petit bonhomme ! la moindre attache sérieuse.
(Il rit. On rit.)

AMÉDÉE
De la brune à la blonde ! libre comme l'air ! tout est là !

LE GÉNÉRAL

Et elles avaient beau, pour m'attendrir, employer leurs giries... *(Il se détourne.)* Hein ? vous dites ?

UN DOMESTIQUE

(entré timidement depuis quelque temps, s'approche du général et lui présentant une regindote-pardessus) C'est une dame qui veut que Monsieur le général mette sa redingote, à cause du frais.

LE GÉNÉRAL
(en lui faisant signe de se retirer, prend la redingote) ...Ça ne produisait aucun effet ! *(Il passe une manche.)* Je vous les envoyais bouler !... *(Il a du mal à passer l'autre manche.)*
AMÉDÉE *(l'aidant)*
Moi, comme enfant de Paris, je ne suis pas, vous pensez bien, sans avoir rencontré quelques bonnes fortunes... Des personnes ! oh ! j'en ai connu qui m'ont aimé beaucoup, et qui rêvaient un tas de choses... qui entreprenaient de me faire changer mes habitudes ! mais pas si bête ! un moment ! Aucune encore n'a pu aplatir cette boule-là, voyez-vous *(montrant sa tête),* pas même ma tante ! et Dieu sait qu'elle est forte, la comtesse.

M. DES ORBIÈRES *(à part)*
Après tout, rien ne m'empêche de commander un rapport sur son affaire ?... Une idée, notons-la. *(Il tire un calepin de sa poche et écrit debout.)*
AMÉDÉE *(se frappant le front)* Ah ! saperlotte ! j'oubliais les dames de Grémonville !...
Quelle semonce ! *(Il se précipite pour sortir.)*
LE GÉNÉRAL *(regardant au loin)* Inutile ! je crois que les voilà.

AMÉDÉE *(même jeu)*
Oui ! toutes les trois... et ma tante, et Madame Duvernier...
Cinq femmes ! comme ça tient de la place !

LE GÉNÉRAL
Avec la toilette qu'elles ont aujourd'hui, parbleu ! Et même je ne sais comment un homme peut y suffire !

D’autant plus que la simplicité, mon Dieu, un joli petit bonnet !...

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Autre signe des temps, général ; toute la valeur d’un siècle se reconnaît à la façon dont les femmes s’habillent. Aux époques viriles, pas d’étalage, nulle pompe ; vous les voyez glisser entre les événements, minces et fluettes, dans des sarraux ou des gaines. Mais que l’homme s’endorme et que les cœurs se relâchent, tout à coup leur coiffure se dresse à leur front comme une menace, leurs hanches s’élargissent dans des proportions formidables, elles débordent les voitures, elles font craquer les murailles ; on dirait qu’elles veulent toucher le ciel de leur front et abriter le monde avec leur jupe.

AMÉDÉE
Très bien !

LE GÉNÉRAL (*serrant la main de M. des Orbières)* Vous me faites plaisir, quand vous parlez, vous ! non, là, sérieusement, vous me faites plaisir !

Scène 7

THÉRÈSE
(Elle entre par la droite avec des sanglots, une main sur le cœur, et s’appuyant aux lambris.) Moi qui l’aimais tant ! Oh ! mon Dieu ! mon Dieu !

Mme DUVERNIER *(entre par la gauche, ébouriffée, furieuse)* Le misérable ! manquer à toutes les convenances ! sans égard pour sa pauvre mère !

THÉRÈSE
Faut-il que j’aie cru jusqu’à présent !...

Mme DUVERNIER

S’il m’avait prévenue, au moins ! mais non, là, tout à coup...

THÉRÈSE
C’est à en mourir de chagrin ! *(Elle s’affaisse sur la causeuse.)*

Mme DUVERNIER

Ah ! j’étouffe de rage ! *(Elle tombe de l’autre côté, dans un fauteuil.)*
LE GÉNÉRAL
Eh ! bon Dieu, chère Madame, si je pouvais...

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Mademoiselle, du calme, je vous en prie, du calme !

AMÉDÉE
Mais qu’y a-t-il ?

Scène 8

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Rien ! une petite sotte !

PAUL

Un événement heureux.

VALENTINE

Oh ! bien heureux !

THÉRÈSE (*redoublant de sanglots)* Pas pour moi toujours ! pas pour moi !

Mme DUVERNIER *(à son fils)* Un procédé de ta part que je n’attendais guère, par exemple !

THÉRÈSE
Oh ! allons-nous-en.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Veux-tu bien ne pas pleurer !

THÉRÈSE
Je veux pleurer, moi ! je veux m’en aller !... non ! qu’on me laisse tranquille !... dans un couvent !

LE GÉNÉRAL
Mais elle va se faire du mal !

Mme DUVERNIER

Et moi ! j’en aurai bien sûr une fluxion de poitrine ! et rien que pour la mémoire de ton père...

Scène 9

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Tout ce bruit, ces cris, je voudrais savoir...
(Paul se penche à l'oreille du général et lui parle bas sans qu'on l'entende.)
LE GÉNÉRAL *(fait un bond en arrière)* Comment ! mais ce n'était pas ça ? voilà qui dérange tout !
ah ! fichtre !

M. DES ORBIÈRES *(au général)*
Quoi donc ?

LE GÉNÉRAL
(parle bas à l'oreille de M. des Orbières, puis désignant Mme de Mérilhac) Je n'ose pas lui dire, mais dites-le, vous.

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Ah ! diable, c'est fort embarassant !

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Mais, mon ami, pourquoi, dans ma maison, tous ces mystères ?

AMÉDÉE
(un peu auparavant, s'est rapproché de Paul qui lui a parlé à l'oreille, et sur le dernier mot de Mme de Mérilhac, gaiement) Le mystère est bien simple, Paul a demandé et obtenu la main de Mademoiselle Valentine.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC *(pousse un cri)* Valentine ! *(se contraignant)* J'en suis ravie... enchantée, certainement, *(à Mme Duvernier)* Vous aurez là, Madame, une belle-fille on ne peut mieux. (*à Paul)* Je vous félicite, Monsieur ! (*tâchant de se remettre)* La nouvelle de ces événements, quand on s'y intéresse, a toujours quelque chose qui impressionne.

UNE FILLE DE BASSE-COUR *(entre, essoufflée)* Il y a là une dame qui veut à toute force parler au général.

LE GÉNÉRAL
On y va, sacrr... *(Embarras général.)*

AMÉDÉE
Qu’est-ce que vous avez donc à vous regarder tous sans rien dire ? Moi, par principe et caractère, je ne suis pas pour le mariage, assurément ; mais quand c’est plus fort que vous, je trouve cela très bien et permets qu’on en use. Allons dîner ! *(On se met en mouvement pour passer dans la salle à manger, d’une façon contrainte. Mme de Mérilhac, seule, en tête ; Mme de Grémonville au bras de Paul, Mme Duvernier au bras du général, Valentine au bras de M. des Orbières ; Thérèse, seule, après tous les autres ; enfin Amédée.*
Il regarde les convives, et au public.) Pas de femme ! moi !
jamais de femme !

ACTE II

Scène 1

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
(fermant avec violence un secrétaire plein de papiers, registres de comptes, etc.)
Une pareille dépense pour quinze jours à Nice, c’est affreux !

VALENTINE

Il est vrai de dire qu’il ne m’a rien refusé !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Je crois bien !

VALENTINE

Les premiers temps du mariage...

THÉRÈSE (*ironiquement)* La lune de miel !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Du miel qui coûte cher !

VALENTINE

Mais, petite maman adorée, tu ne songes pas que bientôt sa place...

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Toi et lui, vois-tu, vous n’êtes que deux enfants sans aucune idée de la vie, et il est réellement fort heureux que je vous aie tout sacrifié : goûts, repos, habitudes... sacrifié est le mot, car si j’habite, avec vous, cette maison, c’est grâce aux instances de ton mari.
Bien sûr !

VALENTINE

Aussi notre reconnaissance...

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Sans moi, pauvre fille, il t'aurait dominée, tu es trop bonne.
Dieu merci, j'étais là ; mon expérience m'avait appris qu'il fallait d'abord lui tenir tête et se poser dès le premier jour carrément. C'est pour son bien, après tout ; il a été singulièrement élevé, ce garçon.

THÉRÈSE
Oh ! oui !

VALENTINE (*vivement)* Quand tu ne seras pas sans cesse à renforcer les accusations...
Mrae DE GRÉMONVILLE
Elle a raison ; rappelle-toi les premiers temps de votre mariage ! comme il était pliant, respectueux, empressé !
Depuis son retour de Nice, il manifeste en toutes choses je ne sais quel esprit d'indépendance ; vendredi, c'était une grimace devant le dîner maigre, tu l'as vu ; l'autre jour, il a refusé de m'accompagner au sermon. A chaque instant, on dirait qu'il prend à tâche de combattre mes principes ; mais sois tranquille, une mère se doit au bonheur de ses enfants. Il y a ici un besoin urgent de réformes, d'abord votre train de maison.

VALENTINE

Mais, petite mère, puisqu'il va avoir cette place, aujourd'hui peut-être ? il est même descendu...

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Tant mieux ! Quoi qu'il en soit, je vous sauverai, et comme premier point j'exige... *(Bruit de pas précipités dans la coulisse.)*

VALENTINE

Ecoute donc ! mais oui, c’est lui !

Scène 2

PAUL

Le journal ! le journal ! il y est, le décret ! j’ai respecté la bande, je n’ai pas voulu lire ma nomination tout seul.
(Valentine lui saute au cou.)

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Etes-vous sûr au moins ?

PAUL (*montrant le journal)* Parbleu ! tenez, là ! regardez !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE (*prenant les mains de Paul)* Cette excellente dame de Mérilhac ! quel noble caractère !
et une influence...

VALENTINE

Oh ! la bonne comtesse ! il faut aller la remercier, maman.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Tout de suite ! (*prenant la main de Paul qui va déployer le journal)* Vous aussi !
[à Valentine) Mets ton chapeau.
(Valentine sort.) Tu nous accompagnes, Thérèse ?

THÉRÈSE (*avec humeur)*
Moi ?

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
(iaprès avoir sonné, revenant vers Paul et l’arrêtant dans sa lecture commencée) Oui, l’expression de notre reconnaissance doit avoir un caractère de spontanéité.

PAUL

Sans doute.

VALENTINE (*revenant avec son châle et son chapeau)* Me voilà ! (*Victoire entre.)*

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Faites atteler, Victoire, et donnez-nous d'abord à moi et à Mademoiselle tout ce qu'il faut pour sortir. (*Victoire sort.)*
PAUL (*feuilletant avec anxiété)* Mais... mais... ah ! l'autre page...

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE *(pendant qu'il lit)* Une place pareille ! et pour un début ! c'est splendide !...
Oh la protection des femmes ! Vous avez maintenant le pied à l'étrier, mon ami !

PAUL (*balbutiant et parcourant fiévreusement le journal)* Comment ?

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Eh bien, qu'arrive-t-il ? (*Paul s'affaisse dans un fauteuil.)* Vous pâlissez.

VALENTINE (*courant à lui)* Paul ! Paul !

PAUL (*d'une voix faible et laissant tomber le journal)* Je ne suis pas nommé !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE (*ramassant le journal)* C'est impossible !

VALENTINE *(bas à Paul)*
Du courage, mon ami !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE *(froissant le journal)* Non ! rien !

THÉRÈSE *(avec amertume)*
Ah ! ah ! cette excellente dame de Mérilhac !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE *(éclatant)* Mais c'est une trahison, mais c'est une infamie ! mais on ne se moque pas ainsi des personnes de notre rang ! *(Victoire*

revient avec deux chapeaux et deux manteaux.)
VICTOIRE *(à part)*
Oh ! oh ! tempête !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE *(à Victoire)* Allez-vous rester plantée comme ça une heure devant moi ?
Mettez tout ici, laissez-nous ! Ah ! Madame de Mérilhac !

THÉRÈSE (*allant à sa mère)* Chère maman, ne te fais donc pas tant de mal pour une...
intrigante de cette espèce.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Embrasse-moi, Thérèse ; tu as vu clair, toi ! tu es la seule tête forte de la maison. (*désignant Paul et Valentine avec dédain)* On n'arrive à rien avec des caractères comme ceux-là.

PAUL (*se relevant)*
Madame !

VALENTINE *(à sa mère)*
Mais, ce n'est pas sa faute.

MME DE GRÉMONVILLE
Qu'en sais-tu ? que veux-tu que je te dise, moi ? Monsieur a ses idées, Monsieur a ses allures... Monsieur est un libre penseur ! tout cela peut fort bien ne pas convenir à tout îe monde ! et si Madame de Mérilhac est inexcusable d'avoir agi de cette façon-là à mon égard, je suis bien forcée de reconnaître qu'elle n'a peut-être pas complètement tort envers Monsieur.

PAUL

J'excuse votre injustice en considération de votre désappointement.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Une place sans laquelle, certainement, je n'aurais pas consenti...

PAUL

A quoi ?

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE (*détournant la tête)* Car enfin, la dot que Madame Duvernier vous a donnée...

PAUL

Oh ! Madame, il me semble que vous-même vous n'avez pas été d'une générosité...

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE (*fondant en larmes)* Des reproches ! Mon Dieu ! c'est le dernier coup ! *[Elle tombe dans un fauteuil.)*
THÉRÈSE
Ma pauvre maman !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE *(gémissant)* Me faire un crime, à moi, de l'exiguïté de mes ressources présentes ! me reprocher les immenses sacrifices que m'impose la malheureuse santé de mon mari.

VALENTINE

Il n'a pas voulu dire cela, je t'assure.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Ce n'était pas la peine de m'attirer chez lui, à mon âge, s'il n'avait que des insultes...

VALENTINE *(bas à Paul)*
Demande-lui pardon, Paul.

PAUL

Moi ?

VALENTINE

Je t’en supplie...

PAUL

Jamais !

VALENTINE *(s’agenouillant)* Tiens, comme cela, près de moi !

PAUL

Tu le veux ?

VALENTINE

Oui, je t’en prie.

PAUL *(s’avançant gravement vers Mmede Grémonville)* Je vous fais mes excuses, Madame.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Ah ! Monsieur, la vie en commun n’était qu’un beau rêve !
Je vois bien maintenant qu’il vaut mieux nous séparer...
dans notre intérêt réciproque.

VALENTINE

Oh ! chère maman, ne nous quitte jamais, jamais !

PAUL

Je vais joindre ma prière à la sienne, Madame.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
(,laissant prendre sa main par Valentine, qui la met dans celle de Paul) Ah ! Monsieur, vous ne connaissez pas le cœur d’une mère !

THÉRÈSE
Quoi qu’il en soit, je pense que notre visite à Madame de Mérilhac est toute faite ?

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE (*se relevant convulsivement)* Non pas ! j’ai des compliments à lui adresser. Allons, mes filles (*Elle se coiffe ainsi que Thérèse.)* nous avons dit que nous irions, nous irons, *(à Paul)* Vous n’avez pas besoin de vous déranger pour elle, Monsieur Paul. (*Elle sort avec Valentine et Thérèse.)*

Scène 3

PAUL *[seul, regardant la porte du fond)*

Tu peux bien compter que j’ai fait cela pour toi, Valentine.

Me rendre responsable des boutades de Madame de Mérilhac !... Voyons ! il s’agit désormais de régler un peu ses affaires. Il est impossible qu’avec mes rentes... Mais pouvais-je soupçonner qu’une femme comme la comtesse !... Allons, un peu de courage ! Puisque ce n’est pas ma faute, je peux bien exposer à ma mère... *(Il réfléchit.)* Oh ! je n’oserai jamais lui avouer en face, écrivons. *(Il s’assoit pour écrire.)*

Scène 4

AMÉDÉE (*entrant avec hésitation)* Seul ?

PAUL *(se retournant)* Amédée !

AMÉDÉE
Maison du bon Dieu, porte ouverte.

PAUL (*regardant, à part)* Elles auront oublié de la fermer.

AMÉDÉE
Ma visite de noces est légèrement en retard ; mille compliments, d’ailleurs ; femme adorable, mère charmante, belle petite sœur en sucre, bonne affaire. Moi, voilà bien huit jours que je n’ai pas salué mes pénates, ma tante doit être furieuse ; j’ai passé la nuit, je meurs de faim.

PAUL

Tu vas manger, parbleu !

AMÉDÉE
Sans refus.

PAUL *(tire une des sonnettes de la cheminée)* Ce cher Amédée ! toujours gai.

AMÉDÉE
Mais oui ; pourquoi pas ? Et toi ?

PAUL *(re-sonne)*
Moi aussi !

AMÉDÉE
Et le mariage ? est-ce aussi bon qu’on le prétend ?

PAUL

Délicieux.
(Il sonne plus fort.)

AMÉDÉE
Cette fois, on a entendu, ne t’inquiète pas, on va venir.
(Il s’assoit.) Ce doit être bien agréable, en effet, d’avoir une petite femme toujours là, auprès de soi, pour vous dorloter.

PAUL

Sans doute, *(à la cantonade)* Dominique !

AMÉDÉE
Un garçon, on a beau dire, n’est jamais aussi bien servi.

PAUL

Certainement. (*à la cantonade)* Joséphine !

AMÉDÉE
Du reste, tout le monde n’est pas comme toi ; au lieu d’une femme, tu en as deux.

PAUL *(à la cantonade)* Victoire !

AMÉDÉE
C’est un double avantage, car une belle-mère doit avoir toutes sortes d’attentions.

PAUL

Mais... (*appelant)* Victoire !

AMÉDÉE

L’intérêt de sa famille, naturellement, lui fait soigner le bonheur de son gendre.

Scène 5

PAUL

Ah ! enfin ! où étiez-vous donc ?

AMÉDÉE (*à part)*
Eh ! elle est appétissante, cette esclave !

VICTOIRE

Monsieur, c’est que ces dames...

PAUL

Oui... Quand ces dames ne sont pas là, les domestiques ne se gênent guère ! Vous allez dire à la cuisine qu’on fasse à déjeuner pour Monsieur.

VICTOIRE *(embarrassée)* C’est que...

PAUL

Eh bien, quoi ?

VICTOIRE

Entre les repas, Madame a expressément défendu...

PAUL

Quelle madame ?

VICTOIRE

Madame de Grémonville a expressément défendu qu'on fasse jamais...

PAUL

Eh bien, moi j'ordonne !...

AMÉDÉE *(voulant s'en aller)* Non ! j'ai regret, vois-tu, j'aime mieux...

PAUL

Vous avez compris, n'est-ce pas ? allons ! vite !

VICTOIRE *(s'en allant)* Bien, Monsieur, bien !

AMÉDÉE
Oh ! la moindre des choses ! Je ne suis pas difficile.
(à Paul)
Véritablement, mon bonhomme, je te cause un embarras.

VICTOIRE *(revenant)*
Monsieur... mais, pour le vin ?
Quoi, encore ?

VICTOIRE

C'est que Madame serre toujours la clef de la cave.

PAUL (*exaspéré)*

Ah ! qu’on prenne un serrurier... ou qu’on enfonce la porte !

VICTOIRE

Cependant... Madame... (*coup de cloche d’antichambre)* Tenez ! c’est elle qui rentre. (*Elle sort.)*
AMÉDÉE
Dans ce cas, mon bon, je m’éclipse.

PAUL

Au contraire, je tiens à ce que tu restes. Parbleu ! ce serait trop fort si un vieil ami ne pouvait pas, chez moi...

VICTOIRE *(rentrant)*
Monsieur, Madame la comtesse de Mérilhac !

AMÉDÉE
Ma tante ! je me dérobe à son courroux... dans la salle à manger, *(à Victoire)* Vous me tiendrez compagnie, jeune fille ! *(sur le seuil de la porte)* Après vous, s’il vous plaît.
(Victoire passe la première, Amédée lui pince la taille.)

PAUL

Il faut se montrer, à la fin ! et il n’est pas dit que les femmes me gouverneront toujours !

Scène 6

PAUL *(d’un air contraint)*
Madame !

MME DE MÉRILHAC
Vous ne m’attendiez pas aujourd’hui, n’est<e pas ?
J’avoue...
Etes-vous seul ?

PAUL

Ces dames, précisément, sont sorties pour aller vous voir *(il pousse un siège devant elle),* mais faites-moi l’honneur...

Mme DE MÉRILHAC *(s’asseyant)* Merci ! *(Silence ; elle le considère.)* Vous m’avez battue, l’autre jour.

PAUL

Comment cela ?

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Mais oui ! c’est une histoire piquante, on s’en amuse. Moi qui ai une réputation d’habileté, je passe pour une dupe ; les petits journaux ont raconté votre demande de mariage d’une manière très drôle, sans omettre les initiales ; la chose a pris les proportions d’un événement, c’est pour le Pouvoir presque un échec, en tous cas un ridicule.

PAUL

Et votre vengeance est retombée sur moi.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC

Parfaitement !

PAUL

Pour quelle raison ?

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Je voulais marier Amédée à Valentine.

PAUL

Lui ? Amédée ? Avec ses opinions...

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
On change d’opinion tous les jours. Fausse honte, vous dis-je ; je suis sûre de ses sentiments, il a été peiné de votre mariage.

PAUL

Ah ! par exemple !

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Je vous l’affirme ; il plaisait à la belle-mère, il regardait même Thérèse.

PAUL

Eh ! qu’il l’épouse ! elle est libre.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC *(comme réfléchissant)* Thérèse ! tiens, voilà une idée *(silence),* malheureusement impraticable.

PAUL

Vous pensiez bien à Valentine.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Oh ! Valentine, c’est autre chose.

PAUL

Que voulez-vous dire ?

Mme DE MÉRILHAC *(haussant les épaules)* Vous le savez.

PAUL

Pas le moins du monde.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Valentine, votre femme, sera beaucoup plus riche que sa sœur.

PAUL

Comment cela ?

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Madame de Grémonville ne vous a rien dit ?

PAUL

Pas un mot.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC

(réfléchissant et comme se parlant à elle-même) C'est possible après tout, de peur des explications ; mais le père ayant dénaturé ses biens...

PAUL

Je marche absolument dans les ténèbres.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Monsieur de Grémonville a juré de laisser toute sa fortune à Valentine, au détriment de sa sœur.

PAUL

Monsieur de Grémonville ? mais il n'a pas sa tête ! c'est un impotent, un malade !

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Un homme séparé de sa femme, rien de plus... oui... à l'amiable, par incompatibilité d'humeur.

PAUL

Je comprends cela.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC (*baissant la voix avec malice)* Certains bruits ont couru... qu'il est inutile de vous dire puisque vous n'en avez pas eu connaissance.

PAUL

Ah ! ah ! la belle-mère...

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Qu'il vous suffise d'apprendre que Monsieur de Grémonville n'a jamais voulu voir Thérèse.

PAUL

Pourquoi ?
Mrae DE MÉRILHAC
De cette naissance date sa séparation, encore une fois !

PAUL (*soupirant largement)* Oh ! oh !

Mme DE MÉRILHAC *(souriant)* Tout s'efface, le temps met sur les choses une brume...
commode. On a dit à propos de cet événement « maladie » ; Madame de Grémonville, sans l'affirmer, a laissé murmurer tout bas « démence » ; c'est une fiction désormais inattaquable, et qui s'est durcie aux années jusqu'à la consistance d'un fait. (*regardant Paul qui réfléchit)* Eh bien, qu'avez-vous donc ?... une histoire des plus ordinaires, il n'y a pas le moindre drame à chercher là-dessous, je vous en préviens, et si cette révélation vous affecte, je regretterai vivement d'avoir été entraînée à vous la faire.

PAUL (*revenant à lui)*
Non, non, au contraire.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Vous comprenez maintenant combien la situation de Thérèse...

PAUL

Pauvre enfant !

MME DE MÉRILHAC
Oui, pauvre !

PAUL

Mais que faire ? il faudrait que Valentine renonçât...

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Prenez garde ! vous parlez contre vos intérêts.

PAUL

Il ne s’agit pas de mes intérêts, mais de justice ; elle finira peut-être par consentir.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
C’est une éventualité douteuse.

PAUL (*réfléchissant)*
En effet !... Mais Monsieur de Grémonville lui-même pourrait bien...

MME DE MÉRILHAC (*à part)*
Oh ! l’y voilà !

PAUL

Pourquoi pas ? j’irai le trouver, ce père invisible ; c’est bien le moins qu’il fasse connaissance avec son gendre ; je lui parlerai, Madame.
Vraiment ?

PAUL

Mais oui ! je partirai dès ce soir pour Toulouse.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Réfléchissez bien ! on se repent quelquefois de ces mouvements de générosité.

PAUL

Eh ! quand j’ai épousé Valentine, je n’ai rien vu derrière sa dot que la couleur de ses yeux et la qualité de son âme.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Vous êtes simplement sublime, cher Monsieur.

PAUL

Je ne commets rien de sublime en me refusant à jouir de la fortune de ma belle-sœur, je voudrais même par là affaiblir un peu la peine que lui a causée mon mariage, et je déplore, croyez-le, celle qu’il a pu indirectement vous faire.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Ma peine, à moi, est oubliée... (*appuyant*) bien que j’en regrette les conséquences.

PAUL

N’en parlons plus !

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Du reste, elles ne sont pas irréparables ; tous les jours des nominations se trouvent retardées, empêchées même, pour une raison ou pour une autre, puis elles ont lieu, plus tard.
Monsieur des Orbières me le disait encore ce matin : tout n’est pas perdu. (*Elle lui tend la main pour partir.)* Ainsi, à bientôt ! sans rancune ! Et puisque vous allez voir Monsieur de Grémonville, n’oubliez pas de lui représenter, pour mieux le fléchir, que c’est un parti fort avantageux. La position d’Amédée...

PAUL

Vous croyez donc absolument qu’il veut se marier ?
Je m’en charge.

PAUL

La conversion, quoi que vous dites, me semble...

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Bah ! dès que je le verrai...

PAUL *(à la cantonade)*
Amédée !

Scène 7

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Amédée !

AMÉDÉE *(jetant son cigare)* Ma tante !

PAUL

Il se mourait de faim, je l’ai fait déjeuner.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Vous vous plaisez donc partout mieux que chez vous, mon pauvre neveu ! *(le regardant)* Ce teint, ces yeux rouges !
vous avez encore joué toute la nuit, je parierais.

AMÉDÉE
Il faut que jeunesse se passe, chère tante.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Au train dont vous allez, prenez garde, elle ne se passe pas, elle se précipite, *(le considérant avec anxiété)* Mais vous êtes malade, Amédée ! Dites-moi, ne souffrez-vous pas ? vous vieillirez tout à fait, et j’ai véritablement peur...

AMÉDÉE
Moi ? Je me porte comme un régiment de cuirassiers.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Voyez donc sa figure, monsieur Paul !

PAUL

Un peu fatiguée, sans doute...

Mme DE MÉRILHAC (*à mi-voix, à Paul)* J’étais aveugle de vouloir le marier, il est trop tard !

PAUL

Trop tard ?

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Oh ! certainement.

AMÉDÉE *(piqué)*
Un point de gagné, au moins !

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Comme vous le dites. Je vous conseillerai seulement de vous ménager un peu plus.

AMÉDÉE
Ah ça, vous me trouvez donc bien changé depuis quelques semaines ?

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Je n’ai pas dit cela pour vous affecter, mon ami, n’en parlons plus ; j’aurais été heureuse, j’en conviens, de voir autour de vous les soins d’une épouse, le dévouement d’une famille, mais de deux choses l’une : ou je m’abusais étrangement l’autre jour, ou bien...

AMÉDÉE
Ou bien quoi ?

MME DE MÉRILHAC
Vous êtes à cette période de l’existence qui ne connaît plus la lenteur des transitions.

AMÉDÉE
Mais ne dirait-on pas à vous entendre que je suis un véritable octogénaire... quarante-neuf ans !

Mme DE MÉRILHAC

Cinquante.

AMÉDÉE
Quarante-neuf, ma tante.
Mrae DE MÉRILHAC
Cinquante, mon neveu.

AMÉDÉE
Et quand même, on se sent bien, je suppose ! Six mois de gymnastique et d'hydrothérapie, un peu d'équitation, plus de sommeil, et je vous garantis, moi, Amédée Peyronneau, de cinquante ans, que je serais encore homme à épouser, haut la main, qui bon me semble.

PAUL *(à part)*
Il se noie !

MME DE MÉRILHAC
Pourvu que ce ne soit pas une fille de vingt ans, comme j'avais la sottise de vous le proposer.

AMÉDÉE
Pourquoi donc ? en connaissez-vous de plus jeunes, ma tante ?

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Vous n'avez pas la prétention, j'imagine, de descendre jusqu'à l'âge, par exemple, de Mademoiselle Thérèse de Grémonville ?

PAUL

Elle est pourtant fort bien.

AMÉDÉE
J'ai été accueilli par elle avec une sécheresse...

Mme DE MÉRILHAC *(à Paul)* Et il prétend connaître les femmes !

AMÉDÉE

Hein ?

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Rien. Vous avez peut-être raison, après tout ; Thérèse ne sera pas gênée, vous n’êtes plus guère, pour elle, dans la catégorie des hommes possibles.

AMÉDÉE
J’ai dit sécheresse... pour froideur.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
C’est la même chose.

AMÉDÉE
Voulez-vous parier que si je me donnais la peine de lui faire la cour, sérieusement...

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
N’allez pas vous permettre une aussi sotte plaisanterie.

AMÉDÉE
Comment, plaisanterie ? j’ai bien le droit de me diriger tout seul, je suis d’un âge...

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Oh oui !

AMÉDÉE (*exaspéré)*
Mais vous feriez damner un saint, ma parole d’honneur !
Voilà bien les femmes ! pendant trente ans, vous me poussez vers la mairie, j’arrive au seuil et tout à coup vous m’arrêtez sans même savoir si je veux y entrer.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Il n’y a vraiment aucune raison à tirer de lui !

AMÉDÉE
Ce n’est pas répondre.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
M’en voulez-vous assez, monsieur mon neveu, pour me refuser l’honneur de votre compagnie jusque chez moi ?

AMÉDÉE
Je suis toujours à vos ordres, chère tante, mais c’est bien convenu, n’est-ce pas, j’entends me conduire absolument à ma guise.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC (*à Paul)* Priez pour lui, monsieur Paul. Allons, beau Clitandre, être effervescent ! *(bas, à Paul)* Je le tiens !

PAUL *(à part, les regardant s’éloigner)* On m’avait toujours assuré que le diable portait deux cornes et une queue !

Scène 8

PAUL

Victoire, ma petite malle et mon nécessaire de voyage !

VICTOIRE *(du dehors)* Oui, Monsieur.

PAUL

Il y viendra, Amédée ; quelles lâchetés les femmes vous font commettre !
(s'asseyant) J'en ai appris de bonnes aujourd'hui, et maintenant que je connais à fond ma belle-mère, si elle bronche... gare la première mouche qui va piquer ! Ce voyage-là, c'est l'affaire d'une semaine... à peu près *(calculant)* oui, pas davantage. *(Victoire entre, portant la malle et le nécessaire.)*

PAUL

Ouvrez cela, Victoire, et voyez s'il ne manque rien.

VICTOIRE

Non, Monsieur... *(elle ouvre)* les deux limes, les ciseaux...
(criant) Aïe !

PAUL *(se retournant)* Qu'avez-vous ?

VICTOIRE *(pressant son doigt sur ses lèvres)* Je me suis déchiré le doigt à une machine pointue !

PAUL

Est-ce que vous saignez ?

VICTOIRE

Un peu.

PAUL

(prenant les ciseaux et du taffetas dans le nécessaire) Attendez ! avec un morceau de taffetas d'Angleterre...

VICTOIRE

(minaudant et tenant toujours son doigt sur ses lèvres) Mais, Monsieur...

PAUL *(lui tendant le morceau de taffetas)* Montrez-moi...

VICTOIRE *(se détournant avec coquetterie)* Ça guérira tout seul.

PAUL *(impatienté)*
Donnez donc !

VICTOIRE *(rapprochant sa main avec lenteur et timidité)* C'est que je n'osais pas, Monsieur !

PAUL *(collant le taffetas sur la déchirure)* Voilà tout. *(On sonne.)*

VICTOIRE *(s'échappant comme effrayée)* Ces dames !

PAUL

Eh bien, allez ouvrir, et prévenez François de ne pas dételer.

VICTOIRE

Oui, Monsieur. (*Elle se dirige vers le fond.)*
PAUL *(la rappelant)*
Ah ! vous n’avez pas besoin de dire que j’ai reçu la visite de cette dame.

VICTOIRE *(mystérieusement)* Non, Monsieur.

PAUL *(la regardant s’éloigner)* C’est qu’elle n’est pas mal, pour une servante ; j’avais une envie de la complimenter sur sa main.

Scène 9

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Ah ! une jolie journée ! c’est comme un fait exprès, une conjuration ! D’abord, chez Madame de Mérilhac, personne !
elle était sortie, ou bien elle se cachait, n’importe !... et l’huissier du ministre, car j’ai tenu à le voir, ce monsieur-là, s’est mis le dos contre les deux battants pour m’empêcher...
et on ne sait pas ce qui s’y passait, chez votre ministre.

PAUL

Ce n’est pas le mien, malheureusement.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Ni le mien, je vous assure.

THÉRÈSE
Moi, d’abord, je n’ai jamais pu le sentir.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
La couturière, non plus, n’était pas chez elle, ni la veuve Lehérissé où j’allais pour prendre des renseignements, ni le vicaire que je voulais... Au moins, quand on n’est pas chez soi, on devrait le dire ! *(apercevant la malle et le nécessaire de voyage*) Tiens ! pourquoi cela ?

PAUL

Je suis forcé d’entreprendre un voyage.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Vous ?

PAUL

Pour mes affaires.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Quelles affaires ?

PAUL

Vous comprenez bien, Madame, que cette place qui m’échappe et la nouvelle situation qui m’est faite exigent le plus tôt des mesures...

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Peut-on savoir au moins où vous allez ?
Assez loin.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
En Chine ?

PAUL

Cela se peut.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Voilà une plaisanterie d’un goût...

THÉRÈSE
Il faut convenir, Paul, que vous n’êtes guère poli.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Ainsi, vous refusez positivement de me dire...

PAUL

Eh bien, Madame, je vais dans le Midi.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Le Midi ? quelle idée ! pourquoi faire dans le Midi ? à Bordeaux ! sans doute, Marseille, Carpentras ?

PAUL

Mon Dieu, Madame, cette insistance...

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Là, calmez-vous ! gardez vos secrets ! je n'ai pas l'habitude de contrarier les gens. Amusez-vous ! voyagez ! continuez vos fredaines !

PAUL

Mes fredaines !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE (*éclatant d'indignation)* Croyez-vous que je n'aie pas vu ce qu'il y a dans la salle à manger ? les restes d'un repas, Monsieur, d'une orgie !
jusqu'à trois carafons sur la table, avec deux tasses de café...
du café au milieu de la journée, je vous demande un peu !

THÉRÈSE
Et une odeur de pipe !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Vraiment, je ne me figurais pas que dans ma maison...

PAUL

Votre maison ? ah ! permettez.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Et comme pour me narguer... en dépit de mes ordres...

PAUL

Les miens diffèrent.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Moi qui ai commandé toute ma vie, je ne changerai pas mes habitudes, je vous en préviens.

PAUL

Et moi qui n’ai jamais eu cet avantage, je désire en prendre d’autres.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
C’est votre dernier mot, Monsieur ?

PAUL

Oui, Madame.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Mets ton manteau, Thérèse, nous ne coucherons pas une nuit de plus dans *sa* maison.

PAUL

C’est prendre bien vivement les choses.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Peut-être m’accordez-vous le droit de régler ma conduite personnelle comme

bon me semble ?

PAUL

Je m’incline.

VALENTINE

Demain ! attends à demain ! où vas-tu aller ce soir ?

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
A Neuilly.
Permettez au moins...

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Merci de vos attentions... Adieu, ma fille, mes facultés baissent, je me fais vieille, tâche d’être plus heureuse que moi, mon enfant (*plus bas)* à moins que l’inutilité de tes complaisances ne te montre à quels abîmes peut nous entraîner notre faiblesse ! (*Elle sort majestueusement avec Thérèse.)*

Scène 10

VALENTINE

Mais elle ne reviendra pas !... Qu'as-tu fait ?

PAUL

Je te prie instamment de rester ici, Valentine.

VALENTINE (*sanglotant)*
Mon Dieu ! que je suis malheureuse !

PAUL

Auprès de moi, ma femme ? Quand nous sommes ensemble, ne sommes-nous pas tout un monde ? Tiens, je n'ai jamais respiré si librement. Par la plus déplorable des sottises, je n'avais fui la discipline maternelle que pour subir la domination d'une belle-mère ! A partir d'aujourd'hui, j'ai ma volonté, je suis un homme. Au revoir, Valentine, quelques jours seulement, aie confiance ! la démarche que je vais faire, tu me l'aurais conseillée toi-même, c'est un sentiment de justice et de délicatesse qui m'y pousse ; j'obtiendrai ma place, tu verras. Mais si Madame de Mérilhac nous oublie, si ma mère se confine dans la froideur qu'elle nous montre, ne trouverons-nous pas toujours mon brave parrain, cet excellent Monsieur Varin des Ilots, qui nous adore et dont nous sommes les héritiers probables ? Adieu encore, petite femme ! (*Il l'embrasse.)*
Essuyez-moi ces grands yeux-là, tout de suite.
Quand on s'aime comme nous, Valentine, c'est le bonheur suprême de se blottir tout seuls dans son nid. Adieu *(lui envoyant de loin un baiser)* Adieu ! *(Il sort par le fond.)*

ACTE III

(Salon chez Paul, un berceau à gauche)

Scène 1

PAUL *(seul)*
(Il berce avec un air d'ennui et de résignation, tout en chantonnant, puis il regarde la pendule.) Trois heures ! et ma commission au Ministère ! Sans compter mon rendez-vous avec Amédée !... Ma femme a perdu la tête et cette maison est de plus en plus intolérable, *(appelant)* Victoire !

VICTOIRE

Monsieur ?

PAUL

Madame n'est pas rentrée, par hasard ?

VICTOIRE

Non, Monsieur.

PAUL *(décontenancé)* C'est bien !

VICTOIRE *(à part)* Voilà la troisième fois qu'il m'appelle. *(Elle pousse plus loin les objets qui sont sur la cheminée ou l'étagère.)*

PAUL

Que faites-vous donc ?

VICTOIRE

Une précaution ! c'est l'heure où Monsieur Amédée Peyronneau vient vous voir.

Eh bien, quel rapport ?

VICTOIRE (*levant alternativement ses deux bras)* Il fait des mouvements comme ci, comme ça, de droite, de gauche.

PAUL

Ah ! oui, sa gymnastique ! *(Il congédie Victoire d'un geste.)* Amédée se dispose à épouser Thérèse, parfait ! le ciel le protège, et qu'il soit plus heureux que moi !

Scène 2

PAUL

Qu’avez-vous donc, mon cher parrain ? votre figure... ce deuil...

LE GÉNÉRAL *(la voix entrecoupée par les larmes)*
Gertrude ! *(étonnement de Paul)* Oui ! défunte !

PAUL

Comment ? Ah ! je ne m’attendais pas...

LE GÉNÉRAL
Ni moi... et c’est une rude secousse, va ! *(Il s’assoit et après un long silence.)* Dimanche, mon Dieu, nous sommes rentrés ensemble, elle a mangé comme à son habitude ; seulement, au dessert, elle s’est mise à dire tout à coup : « Tiens ! c’est drôle ! je ne me sens pas bien ! » et trois heures après, elle a passé, sans douleur, tranquillement, comme une sainte.

PAUL

Ah ! mon pauvre oncle, que je vous plains !

LE GÉNÉRAL
Depuis bientôt quarante ans... que nous étions ensemble !
Pense donc ! une fille si dévouée, si attentionnée, si propre !
elle me lisait mon journal tous les matins ; le soir, elle me donnait son bras si je voulais sortir ; la nuit, dès qu’elle m’entendait tousser...

PAUL

Ah ! c’est une perte, je comprends.

LE GÉNÉRAL
Quand il faisait beau, nous allions nous promener aux environs : elle s’asseyait sur l’herbe avec son panier et ses tapisseries, elle m’écoutait lui raconter des histoires... et comme elle aimait le jardinage, j’avais même le projet d’acheter quelque part, en Touraine... Ah ! je ne pourrai pas m’y accoutumer, je ne pourrai pas vivre seul ! *(Il pleure.)*

PAUL

Voyons ! mon oncle, du courage ! un vieux de la Bérésina, comme vous ! Est-ce qu’on n’est plus un homme, saperlotte !

LE GÉNÉRAL
Tu as raison, je suis bête ! il faut être plus raide sur la discipline. Parlons d’autres choses, de toi plutôt ; c’est même pour toi que j’étais venu. On m’a dit que Madame de Grémonville vous avait quittés ?

PAUL

Dieu merci, oui !

LE GÉNÉRAL
Pourquoi ?

PAUL

Parce que j’ai voulu voir son mari. J’ai donc été à Toulouse et j’ai trouvé un homme très convenable, très raisonnable, et qui n’est pas fou le moins du monde.

LE GÉNÉRAL
Tu m’étonnes ! Eh bien, alors ?...

PAUL

Seulement, il a eu avec sa femme des brouilles trop longues à vous expliquer ; mais ce que j'ai appris me donne le moyen de faire chanter la belle-mère, et d'être le maître chez moi.

LE GÉNÉRAL
Oh !... est-ce qu'il y aurait ?... après tout, ça ne me regarde pas, et tu es assez grand garçon pour te conduire ; mais j'ai un avertissement à te communiquer : on se plaint de toi ! et ne serait-ce que par égard pour Madame de Mérilhac et pour Monsieur des Orbières, qui ont été, dans cette affaire-là, charmants...

PAUL

Quelle est ma faute ?

LE GÉNÉRAL (*avec solennité)*
« Inspecteur du degré d'avancement des commandes faites aux artistes par la Direction des Beaux-Arts », le titre est long et la besogne, tu en conviendras, facile.

PAUL

Il n'y a rien à faire !

LE GÉNÉRAL
Raison de plus pour donner l'exemple ! et quand, une fois par semaine, tu te présenterais dans ton bureau...

PAUL

Eh ! c'est la faute de ma femme, elle m'empêche de sortir, il faut que je l'accompagne dans ses visites, elle me donne des courses... un tas de choses, est-ce que je sais, moi ?

LE GÉNÉRAL
Comment ! tu n’es pas heureux avec Valentine ?

PAUL

Elle a un cœur excellent, sans doute, mais...

LE GÉNÉRAL
Mais quoi ?

PAUL (*après un long silence, éclatant)*
Sa mère a déteint sur elle !

LE GÉNÉRAL
Cependant, puisque Madame de Grémonville n’est plus avec vous...
N’importe ! elle lui écrit, et l’excite contre moi, j’en suis sûr.
Je ne puis expliquer autrement ses exagérations de principes, qui sont devenues intolérables... Et puis, sa maternité, comme un vin nouveau trop fort pour sa cervelle, l’a complètement grisée ; et chaque jour, à propos de rien, elle récrimine, se fâche.

LE GÉNÉRAL
C’est que tu ne sais pas t’y prendre. Les femmes ? mais avec un peu d’adresse, on en fait ce qu’on veut, tout ce qu’on veut.

Scène 3

(Valentine entre avec un paquet d'une main, et de l'autre une boîte de bois blanc qu'elle dépose sur le pied du berceau.)

PAUL

J'ai un grand malheur à t'annoncer, ma chère amie, le général vient de perdre Mademoiselle Gertrude.

VALENTINE

Mon Dieu ! (*embrassant tout à coup le général)* Ah ! notre pauvre oncle !

LE GÉNÉRAL
Que vous êtes gentille, mon enfant ! *(la repoussant doucement)* Assez ! assez !
je recommencerais à m'attendrir.

PAUL

Oui, laisse-le, mais puisque le cher parrain, maintenant, se trouve seul, tu devrais le prier de venir s'installer chez nous.

VALENTINE

Oui ! c'est une bonne idée ; faites cela.

LE GÉNÉRAL
Je vous dérangerais, mes enfants.

VALENTINE

Pas du tout ! pas du tout ! rien n’empêche...

LE GÉNÉRAL
Qu’est-ce que je viendrais faire ici ? Moi, une vieille ganache, me mettre en tiers au milieu de votre bonheur ?

VALENTINE

Vous le partagerez ! Vous aurez du monde à qui causer, quelqu’un, le soir, pour faire la partie de cartes ; et on vous aimera, on vous soignera. Oh ! je connais vos petites habitudes !... et comme c’est l’heure... attendez un peu. (*Elle sort vivement.)*

LE GÉNÉRAL
Que va-t-elle chercher ?

PAUL

Quelque chose pour vous, sans doute.

LE GÉNÉRAL
Tu as là un trésor, sais-tu bien ?

PAUL

Vous croyez ?

LE GÉNÉRAL
Mais oui.

PAUL

Oh ! il faut la voir, seule avec moi, à de certains moments.

VALENTINE

(rentrant avec Victoire qui porte un bol sur un plateau)
Le voilà ! prenez-le *(figure étonnée du général)* Votre bouillon !

LE GÉNÉRAL (*prenant la tasse)*
Ah ! ah ! véritablement, je suis touché... Eh bien, ma foi, puisque vous le voulez... *(après avoir bu une gorgée, à Victoire)* C’est vous qui le faites ?

VICTOIRE

Non, mon général, mais je sais en faire. *(Il boit.)*
Si c’est comme celui-là, vous êtes un cordon-bleu. (*remettant la tasse sur le plateau)* Merci, Mademoiselle. (*pendant que Victoire s’éloigne)* Une jolie tournure, votre femme de chambre !... quelque chose de... fin ! et son consommé avait un bouquet !...

VALENTINE

Ici, vous en prendrez tous les jours de pareils... Chez vous, au moins, avez-vous tout ce qu’il vous faut ? et peut-on se permettre d’aller faire une revue ?

LE GÉNÉRAL
(sortant d’une rêverie qui vient de le prendre tout à coup)
Non, je n’ai besoin de rien, mais quand je considère votre intérieur, je pense que j’ai gâché mon existence, et je t’envie, mon garçon !... Enfin, je ne suis plus jeune ! Soyons sage !...
Adieu, chère belle nièce, *(bas à Paul)* Tu es un sot, je te répète qu’elle est charmante ; embrasse-la. *(haut)* Au revoir, mes enfants ! Bonne santé !

Scène 4

PAUL

Maintenant que nous sommes seuls, Valentine, tu me permettras de te dire que c’est se moquer de moi. Ce matin, je t’ai attendue...

VALENTINE

Il faut bien que je sorte pour les affaires de la maison.

PAUL

Je perdrai ma place.

VALENTINE (*gravement)*
La place d’un père est près de son enfant, Paul.

PAUL

Pourrais-tu m’expliquer dans quel but on paye, ici, une nourrice ?

VALENTINE

Il faut bien qu’elle prenne un peu l’air, cette femme !

PAUL

Et moi, donc ?

VALENTINE

Tu te plains ?

PAUL

Nullement, mais je réclame pour ton bonhomme de mari ce que tu accordes de récréation à une berceuse.

VALENTINE

Ah ! Paul ! tu ne connais pas encore le cœur d’une mère !

PAUL

Valentine, cette phrase-là n’est pas de toi : elle est de ta mère.

VALENTINE

De toutes les mères, mon ami.

PAUL

Eh bien, elle n’est pas amusante.

VALENTINE

Tu deviens grossier, prends garde.

PAUL

Allons ! bon ! je suis grossier maintenant !... c’est que ta nourrice commence à m’agacer terriblement, elle ne remplit pas ses devoirs.

VALENTINE

La nourrice est une seconde mère.

PAUL

(en se tournant vivement, fait tomber la boîte déposée sur le berceau, et les joujoux qu’elle contenait se répandent par terre)
Qu’est-ce que tout cela ?

VALENTINE

Le ménage de ma fille !
Achève donc !

VALENTINE

De la faire manger tous les jours à notre table.

PAUL

Ah ! non, par exemple ! il suffit pour sa gloire qu’elle m’ait chassé de ton appartement, en s’établissant la nuit à ton chevet.

VALENTINE

Et moi, je considère comme un devoir de surveiller par moi-même la façon dont se nourrit cette bonne femme, si rien ne lui manque, si elle n’aurait pas quelque envie.

PAUL

Tout ce que tu voudras, je m’y oppose.

VALENTINE

Mais ce n’est pas elle qui mange, c’est votre fille ! N’admettriez-vous pas votre fille à votre table ?

PAUL

Pas encore ! et en voilà assez sur la nourrice, n’est-ce pas ?

VALENTINE

Non, Monsieur, car je tiens absolument à mon idée ; cela se fait bien chez Madame de Vorigny, et je ne veux pas passer dans le monde pour une moins bonne mère que Madame de Vorigny.

PAUL *(riant)*
Allons donc ! voilà le post-scriptum ! je savais bien qu’il y avait de la vanité là-dessous. Pour moi, je ne céderai pas à ces caprices, et quant à me priver du spectacle...

VALENTINE

Le plus doux spectacle pour un père...

PAUL *(il remonte)*
Je connais cela.
66

VALENTINE *(le suivant)*
Et vous osez me reprocher le peu que je donne à ma fille quand vous trouvez naturel de jeter l’argent à pleines mains dans des dissipations frivoles ?

PAUL

C’est à en devenir fou, ma parole d’honneur ! oh ! (*Comme il se trouve près du berceau, il se remet à bercer l’enfant avec force.)*

VALENTINE

Un moment ! un moment ! parce que vous êtes fatigué de votre fille, ce n’est pas une raison pour la jeter par terre, comme un chien ! cédez-moi la place, Monsieur !

PAUL *(s’écartant)*
En effet, c’est la vôtre.

VALENTINE

Oui, c’est la mienne ! je la revendique, je la garde, c’est là seulement que je me sens forte !

PAUL

Oh ! restez-y !

VALENTINE

Ah ! pauvre petite innocente ! il n’aurait pas seulement le cœur de te bercer.

PAUL *(exaspéré)*
Eh bien, oui ! j’en ai le cœur. *(Il revient au berceau, s’assoit et berce en chantant.)* Do do do.

VALENTINE

Mais vous allez réveiller l’enfant, Monsieur !

PAUL

C’est vrai, Madame, d’autant que j’ai pris l’air un peu haut.
Do do do, tra la la la !

VALENTINE

Il se moque ! il se raille ! et je n’ai plus ma mère pour me défendre ! et je suis seule contre lui, maintenant !

PAUL (*toujours berçant)*
Do do do.
(Valentine est debout à gauche, au fond ; Paul, assis à droite, près du berceau.)

Scène 5

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
(à Thérèse, en lui montrant du regard les deux époux qui se tournent le dos) On se boude ici.

THÉRÈSE *(bas, à sa mère)* Monsieur Amédée n'y est pas !
Mrae DE GRÉMONVILLE *(bas, à Thérèse)* Compte sur moi. *(haut)* Eh bien, ces chers enfants, ce bon petit ménage va toujours ?

VALENTINE *(se jetant à son cou)* Oh ! maman.

PAUL *(saluant)* Madame !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Pardonnez-moi d'être entrée comme cela, sans cérémonie.

PAUL

Comment donc, chère Madame, vous aviez bien le droit...

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Aucun droit, aucun motif même que l'intérêt que je vous porte, le désir de savoir... si vous n'êtes pas trop fatigué de votre voyage.

PAUL

Aucunement.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Et tout s'est passé... comme vous le souhaitiez ?

PAUL

On ne peut mieux, Madame, on ne peut mieux.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
J’en suis fort aise, Monsieur ! (*allant au berceau)* Et cette bichonnette ? que je baise un peu sa petite menotte ! *(se penchant*) Oh ! je ne veux pas la réveiller... Comme elle dort ! *(se retournant*) Mais vous avez donc perdu la langue, tous les deux ? *(à Valentine*) Qu’as-tu, toi ?

VALENTINE

Rien, maman.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Tu as pleuré.

VALENTINE

Je te jure !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Tu pleures encore.

VALENTINE *(sanglotant)* Mais non ! mais non !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE *(avec douceur)* Si ce n’est pas une indiscrétion de demander à Monsieur pour quelle cause ?

PAUL

Je ne sais pas, Madame.

VALENTINE *(éclatant)* Ah ! vous ne savez pas ! il ne sait pas ! eh bien, c’est un père...

MME DE GRÉMONVILLE

Arrête-toi ! cela ne me regarde pas, ma fille.

VALENTINE

Un père...

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Eh bien ?

VALENTINE

Un père qui ne veut pas bercer son enfant.

PAUL

Comment ? je ne fais que ça !

VALENTINE (*pleurant toujours)* Oui, mais d’une façon...

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Monsieur a sans doute des motifs, un système...

VALENTINE

Lui ?

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Les hommes se dirigent d’après des considérations supérieures... dont l’importance nous échappe. Oh ! l’expérience m’a instruite, et si j’ai un regret aujourd’hui, c’est d’avoir cru naïvement autrefois qu’il suffisait du cœur d’une mère pour assurer le bonheur de ses enfants... Ah ! voilà qu’on s’éveille ! (*à Paul, avec humilité)* Voulez-vous me permettre de bercer ma petite-fille,

Monsieur ?

PAUL

Tant qu’il vous plaira, Madame.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE (*penchée sur le berceau)* Pauvre charmant petit ange, je ne te parlerais pas, va, si tu étais seulement un peu plus grande, de peur de t’inculquer, malgré moi, des idées fausses.

PAUL

Douce comme du miel... où tous les aiguillons sont restés !

Scène 6

VICTOIRE (*annonçant)*
Monsieur Amédée Peyronneau !

AMÉDÉE
(porte un bouquet de la main gauche, sur le bras un paletot, dans la main droite un haltère, et, le ‘fêtant par terre, en entrant) Ah ! ça commençait à me gêner, depuis le Bazar du Voyage que je porte ça ! *(Il salue.)* Madame, Mademoiselle ! *(à part)* C’est un ange ! *(à Paul)* Tu es joliment venu à ma leçon de gymnastique, toi ?

PAUL

Une occupation des plus graves...

AMÉDÉE
Tu t’y serais mis, rien qu’à me voir ! Sans me vanter, je ne suis pas mal du tout au trapèze ; ces exercices-là vous font des muscles ! *(Il soulève une chaise à bras tendu.)*

PAUL

Bravo !

AMÉDÉE
Pardon, Mesdames, je me suis oublié, l’habitude...

THÉRÈSE
Comment donc !

AMÉDÉE
C’est que j’ai un grand besoin de rattraper le temps perdu ; une leçon par jour, c’est peu, et je veux à la maison tenir mon système dans une activité incessante. J’avais des haltères du poids de cinquante livres, maintenant j’en porte de cent trente, témoin celui-là. *(Il se baisse pour le soulever.)*

PAUL

Assez, mon ami, ces dames sont convaincues.

THÉRÈSE
Vous appelez cela ?

AMÉDÉE
Des haltères, Mademoiselle ; ce sont des instruments qui servaient aux athlètes dans l’antiquité.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE (*à part)* Il est instruit !

AMÉDÉE
J’en lèverais quatre à la fois !

THÉRÈSE (,*à part)*
Je le trouve beau !

AMÉDÉE
Voilà mon caractère, Madame, quand une chose me plaît, je m’y livre corps et âme... *(à Thérèse, amoureusement)* Oui, corps et âme !

PAUL

Et cela te réussit, tu m’as l’air d’avoir maintenant une santé...

AMÉDÉE *(avec)****oie)***
N’est-ce pas ? aussi je me suis condamné à une hygiène impitoyable. J’aimais le sucre, plus de sucre ! j’adorais les légumes, les primeurs ; rien que des viandes rouges ! le vin... ne me déplaisait pas, je m’en gorge et je n’y mets jamais d’eau, c’est le régime. Quant au sommeil, six heures de lit, bonne mesure, et tous les matins, sur la nuque, un plein baquet qu’on a été remplir à la pompe !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE *(frissonnant)* Brrrr !

AMÉDÉE
Mes cheveux repoussent... il y a mieux : ils repoussent tout noirs, *(à Paul, en penchant sa tête vers lui)* Vois toi-même !

PAUL *(riant)*
C’est ma foi vrai !

AMÉDÉE
Le régime ! *(à Mme de Grémonville)* Et il ne m’empêche pas d’avoir des préoccupations... plus charmantes ; je me suis présenté tout à l’heure à votre hôtel, dans l’intention *(Il prend son bouquet.)* d’offrir à Mademoiselle ces modestes fleurs.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Monsieur Peyronneau ! Monsieur Peyronneau ! nous n’en sommes pas encore aux cadeaux ! Dans une honnête quantité de semaines, tout au plus ! Il faut bien que nous atteignions à la dignité de dix-huit ans.

AMÉDÉE
C’est bien long.

THÉRÈSE
En attendant, Monsieur, voulez-vous porter, en souvenir de moi, cette médaille ? (*Elle tire de sa bourse une petite médaille avec un cordon noir.)* J’ai toujours peur pour vous dans vos exercices violents, *(à sa mère)* Tu permets ? (*Amédée recule.)*
Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Ma pauvre enfant, la plupart des hommes regardent comme une faiblesse de porter sur eux...

THÉRÈSE (*à Amédée, le suppliant du regard)* Vraiment ?

AMÉDÉE (*obéissant au regard de Thérèse)* Pas moi, Madame, voilà comme je la porterai, moi ! *(Il saisit la médaille et la place sur son gilet, ostensiblement.)*
Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Par le temps qui court, c’est tout bonnement de l’héroïsme, Monsieur.

PAUL *(à part)*

Il va bien !

VALENTINE *(à Amédée lui montrant le couvre-pied)* Vous qui avez tant de délicatesse dans le choix des choses, que pensez-vous de cela ?

AMÉDÉE
Ravissant !

VALENTINE *(regardant Paul)* Ce n’est pas l’avis de tout le monde !
Est-ce possible ?

AMÉDÉE (*à part)*
Je lui en donnerai un tout pareil. (*Tout à coup il se précipite vers Mme de Grémonville qui berce l’enfant.)* Mais, Madame, vous allez vous fatiguer, permettez ! *(Il s’assoit près d’elle.)*

VALENTINE

Comment, Monsieur Peyronneau, vous consentiriez ?...

AMÉDÉE
Pourquoi pas ? *(Il berce.)*

PAUL

Tous les talents.

THÉRÈSE *(effrayée de la manière violente dont il berce)* Prenez garde !

PAUL *(avec gravité)*
Il n’est pas maître de sa force !

THÉRÈSE *(prenant en riant la place d’Amédée)* Un peu plus de modération !

AMÉDÉE *(bas à l’oreille de Thérèse)* J’apprendrai.

PAUL *(à part)*
Peut-on ainsi se fourrer, la tête la première...

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Allons, mignonne, nous avons quelques courses à faire !
(montrant le berceau) C'est une grande privation pour toi qui aimes tant les enfants !

AMÉDÉE
Oh ! pas plus que moi.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Mais il faut que la vraie mère ait sa part. Adieu, Monsieur Peyronneau.
Adieu, Valentine.

AMÉDÉE *(à Paul)*
On a un peu réussi, j'espère ! et mon honorable tante qui doute encore ! Si elle me voyait, hein ?

VALENTINE

(amèrement, et de façon à n'être entendue que de Paul) Ce gendre-là ne se séparera pas de sa belle-mère, lui !

PAUL

Grand bien lui fasse ! il m'en dira des nouvelles.

AMÉDÉE *(offrant son bras à Mme de Grémonville)* Madame, permettez...

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Comment donc ! Au revoir, mes agneaux ! *(bas, à Valentine)* De la fermeté toujours... souviens-toi !

Scène 7

PAUL

Valentine !

VALENTINE

Eh bien ?

PAUL

Il serait temps de se mettre à table si nous ne voulons pas manquer le spectacle.

VALENTINE

Je n’irai pas.

PAUL

Et pourquoi ?

VALENTINE *(montrant le berceau)*
Mais... l’enfant !

PAUL

Valentine, je te préviens que tu joues à la maman comme une pensionnaire et que tu réussis à faire, de ce qu’il y a de plus saint au monde, quelque chose de ridicule et de niais.

VALENTINE

C’est aimable.

PAUL

Laisse donc une bonne fois tes exagérations de commande, sois vraie un peu, sois bonne fille ! (*lui montrant le billet de loge qu’il tire de son gilet*) La pièce d’un ami, une première ! ça ne se refuse pas. (*avec gaieté)* Sais-tu comment tu te conduirais, si tu voulais être bien charmante ?
tu mettrais ton chapeau, tu te ferais toute gentille et, bras dessus bras dessous, comme deux amoureux en bonne fortune, dès que la fameuse nourrice sera rentrée, nous irions nous abattre avant le spectacle dans le premier restaurant venu.

VALENTINE (*froidement)*
Je n’irai pas.

PAUL

Alors, j’irai tout seul.

VALENTINE

Oh ! vous ne ferez pas cela !

PAUL

Mais parfaitement !

VALENTINE

Vous n’abandonnerez pas votre femme... auprès de votre fille en bas âge !

PAUL

Sans le moindre remords.

VALENTINE

Malheureuse mère !

PAUL (*à part)*
Est-ce que ma femme serait bête, par hasard ? (*tirant sa montre*) L’heure marche, tu n’as que le temps de t’habiller, décide-toi !

VALENTINE

Je suis toute décidée, Monsieur. Puisque vous rougissez de voir en face de vous celle qui donne la vie et la santé à votre enfant, je dînerai avec elle, dans ma chambre.

PAUL

Et moi au cabaret, c’est plus simple !

VALENTINE (*ouvrant la porte de gauche, à la cantonade)*
Victoire, vous ferez servir chez moi deux couverts ; commencez par débarrasser ma chambre.

VICTOIRE *(du dehors)*
Oui, Madame.

Scène 8

PAUL

(Il se dirige vers le berceau, comme pour embrasser l’enfant.)

Ce n’est pas ta faute à toi, belle petite !

Scène 9

VALENTINE
(paraît à la porte de droite, au moment où Victoire ouvre la porte de gauche)
Ah ! Victoire, vous apporterez le berceau.

PAUL *(à part)*
C'est qu'elle l'oubliait complètement !

VALENTINE
Allons ! dépêchez-vous !

VICTOIRE *(emportant le berceau)*
Bien ! bien !

Scène 10

PAUL *(seul)*
Ah ! je pars, je m'habille, il faut ici un exemple ; ce serait à mourir d'ennui que cette vie-là ! Entêtement ou sottise, je veux savoir dès demain à quoi m'en tenir sur ma femme...
Voilà donc le charmant intérieur que j'avais rêvé !
(Au moment où il sort par un des côtés, Victoire entre par l'autre, tenant un châle sur son bras et à la main un chapeau avec une robe.)

Scène 11

VICTOIRE *(seule)* Monsieur est parti ? Il a joliment bien fait ! Quel bon garçon ! On n’est pas grimacière comme cette femme-là !

VALENTINE *(dans la coulisse)* Prenez le couvre-pied !

VICTOIRE *(haut)* Voilà, Madame, je l’apporte ! *(à elle-même)* Mais je n’ai pas quatre bras ! un moment ! *(Elle met sur sa tête le chapeau qu’elle tenait à la main.)*
VALENTINE *(dans la coulisse)* Apportez aussi le ménage !

VICTOIRE

On y va ! *(Elle jette le châle sur ses épaules.)*

VALENTINE

Plus vite donc !

VICTOIRE

J’arrive !

VALENTINE

Mon Dieu ! êtes-vous lente !

VICTOIRE

Là ! là !

Scène 12

(Victoire, Paul, chapeau sur la tête, gants. Quand il arrive, Victoire lui tourne le dos.)
PAUL *(s'élançant vers Victoire)* Valentine ! habillée ? voilà qui est ravissant ! *(l'embrassant par derrière)* Dans mes bras ! je t'adore !

VICTOIRE *(confuse)*
Monsieur !

PAUL *(stupéfait et reculant)* Victoire ! moi qui croyais que c'était ma femme !

VICTOIRE

Ne sachant qu'en faire, j'avais mis le chapeau... et votre baiser...

PAUL

Eh bien, il est à une bonne place, qu'il y reste !

VICTOIRE

Il le faut bien ! je ne peux pas le rendre à Monsieur !

PAUL

Pourquoi donc ?

VICTOIRE

Mais... Madame ?

PAUL

Elle n’a que ce qu’elle mérite ! c’est sa faute ! *(à part)* Et dire que je n’avais pas encore admiré cette tête-là ! Ce que c’est, pourtant, qu’un peu de toilette ! *(Il veut la retenir.)* Laissez-moi !

PAUL *(prenant sa main)*
Quant à cette main mignonne, je l’ai déjà remarquée.

VICTOIRE *(bas, souriant)*
Je le sais.

PAUL

Qui vous l’a dit ?

VICTOIRE *(montrant son doigt)* Ce petit-là !

PAUL *(lui baisant la main)* Attendez ! Attendez ! je vais donner de quoi jaser à tous les autres !

VICTOIRE

Monsieur ! Monsieur ! est-ce possible ?

PAUL

Mais c’est très bien ! (*Victoire veut retirer le châle et le chapeau.)* Restez donc ainsi ! Vous êtes charmante.

VICTOIRE *(joignant ses mains)* Aurait-on deviné cela à voir Monsieur ?

PAUL *(lui fermant la bouche avec sa main)* C’est que je vous trouve tout bonnement jolie à croquer, et si...

VALENTINE *(dans la coulisse)* Mais venez donc, Victoire !

VICTOIRE

Je ramasse les joujoux ! *(Elle se baisse pour les ramasser.*
Au fond, apparaît la nourrice, en Cauchoise.)
PAUL *(à part)*
La nourrice ! l’éternelle nourrice !

Scène 13

PAUL (*saluant profondément)*
Donnez-vous la peine d’entrer... Madame aurait-elle, par hasard ! quelque velléité d’appétit ?

VICTOIRE *(riant aux éclats)*
Ho ! ho ! ho ! ho !

PAUL

Ouvrez les appartements, Victoire ! *(Victoire va ouvrir la porte de droite, Paul tire de sa poche un mouchoir blanc, le met sur son bras comme une serviette, puis s’inclinant devant la nourrice.)* Madame est servie !

VICTOIRE

Oh ! oh ! oh ! oh !
(La nourrice regarde Paul avec terreur et Victoire avec indignation, puis elle sort par la porte de droite. Paul, derrière son dos, fait un signe d’adieu à Victoire et disparaît par le fond.)

Scène 14

VICTOIRE *(seule)*
J’ai dans l’idée que je ne serai pas longtemps la servante de Monsieur !

ACTE IV

(Chez Mme de Saint-Laurent (Victoire) - Une salle à manger, table dressée dans le fond, porte au fond, à droite et à gauche, une console à droite, ameublement élégant)

Scène 1

UN DOMESTIQUE

(En livrée toute neuve, un écrin à la main.
Il traverse la scène de gauche à droite, en regardant ses beaux habits.) Si Madame de Saint-Laurent n’est pas contente de ma tenue !
(Il frappe d’abord faiblement à la porte de droite, puis s’admirant encore et prenant une pose.) C’est un peu ça !
(Il frappe plus fort.) Est-elle morte ? *(entrebâillant la porte)* Madame !... *(Il la referme aussitôt.)*

Scène 2

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
(en peignoir, elle entre en parlant à la cantonade) Tenez votre fer bien chaud, Marie ! *(au domestique)* Qu’avez-vous donc à me dire, pour me déranger de la sorte ?
(Elle regarde le domestique qui se pose, sans répondre, dans tous les avantages de son costume.)

LE DOMESTIQUE

On vient de l’apporter... je voulais faire voir à Madame...

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
Pas assez d’aiguillettes ! J’avais cependant recommandé...
Tournez-vous ! là... bien... Ce ne serait pas trop mal, avec un peu plus d’aiguillettes. (*apercevant l’écrin)* Cet écrin ?

LE DOMESTIQUE

De la part de Monsieur Gaston de Rumpigny.

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
(iouvre l’écrin et en tire un bracelet)) Ah ! ah ! très joli ! ravissant !... Et il n’a rien fait dire pour les courses ? vous ne savez pas qui a gagné ?

LE DOMESTIQUE

Non, Madame.
Mnie DE SAINT-LAURENT
Bien ! posez-le ici, je vais le prendre. (*Elle sort par la droite, tandis que le domestique met le bracelet sur la console.)*

Scène 3

LE DOMESTIQUE

(seul ; il revient devant la glace et se mirant)
Eh bien, non ! je porte assez d'aiguillettes pour être tout à fait dans le bon genre ! C'est elle qui se trompe, c'est jeune, ça commence... D'où sort-elle ? fière avec le monde, peu de relations, et pas de piano... petite origine ! Et cependant un certain chic naturel, du cheveu, de l'œil... Oh ! elle a de l'œil ! il y a peut-être là-dessous un avenir, et si ça voulait m'écouter...

Scène 4

PAUL (*avec stupéfaction, en regardant le domestique)* Comment ! un pareil costume !

LE DOMESTIQUE (« *ouvrant les bras)* C’est Madame...

PAUL

Parbleu ! je le pense bien... Elle aura quelques personnes à souper, vous savez ?

LE DOMESTIQUE (*montrant le fond)* Tout est prêt.

PAUL

(En se dirigeant vers la porte de droite pour aller trouver M”“ de Saint-Laurent, aperçoit l’écrin au milieu de la console, bondit dessus et rappelle le domestique qui allait sortir à gauche.) D’où vient ce bracelet ?

LE DOMESTIQUE *(embarrassé)* Quel bracelet ?

PAUL

Celui-là que je tiens, et qui était sur la console.

LE DOMESTIQUE

C’est moi qui l’ai apporté, Monsieur.

PAUL *(furieux)*
Pas de mensonges ! Voyons !

LE DOMESTIQUE

C’est-à-dire que je l’ai apporté dans cette salle...

PAUL *(vivement)*
De la part de qui ?

LE DOMESTIQUE

Autant que je crois me rappeler...

PAUL

Dites le nom !

LE DOMESTIQUE *(avec mystère)* Ça doit venir... de son professeur, Monsieur Népomucène Roch.

PAUL (*exaspéré)*
Impudent ! *(Le domestique sort précipitamment.)*

Scène 5

PAUL *(seul)*
J’ai des démangeaisons de remercier Monsieur Roch sur la joue de Monsieur de Rumpigny ! *(Il rejette violemment le bracelet, puis montrant la porte de droite.)* Moi, jaloux de cette créature-là ? Dieu m’en garde !... seulement je mériterais des oreilles d’âne, si je ne m’étais couvert de dettes depuis sept mois *(Il tire des papiers de sa poche et les froisse convulsivement*.) que pour servir de cible aux impertinences d’un sot ! *(Il remet vivement ses paperasses dans sa poche en entendant ouvrir la porte de droite.)*

Scène 6

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(en costume somptueux)* Vous m'attendiez, mon ami ?

PAUL

Voilà déjà deux fois que je viens ; dix femmes du monde s'habilleraient dans le temps que tu passes à mettre tes gants.

MME DE SAINT-LAURENT
Quoi ! je fais des frais pour vous plaire, et c'est tout ce que vous avez à me dire ?

PAUL

Ce n'est pas tout, *(montrant la porte de gauche)* Cette livrée !

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(éludant la question)* Allez-vous aussi me reprocher ma robe neuve ?

PAUL

J'adore les choses simples...

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
Vous ne disiez pas cela, il y a sept mois ! rien ne coûtait trop cher, vous m'admiriez, en toilette... je portais ces choses-là comme une duchesse ! Oh ! je connais vos goûts, vous avez beau vous débattre, je ne vais pas me négliger comme Madame, pour qu'un de ces quatre matins vous me traitiez de la même façon.

PAUL *(en colère)*
Je t'ai déjà défendu de prononcer, ici, le nom de ma femme.

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
Quelle humeur !

PAUL

J’y tiens !

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
A propos d’une malheureuse livrée...

PAUL

Laissons cela, je ne suis pas encore assez absurde pour te faire un crime de mes sottises ; si tu as des gens, une voiture, si, malgré le danger des rencontres, et au détriment de mes occupations, je t’accompagne à la promenade, au théâtre, partout où m’entraînent tes fantaisies, tu n’es pas coupable, c’est ma faute. Mais ce qu’en retour j’ai le droit d’exiger formellement, c’est que le nom de ma femme soit, ici, à couvert de toute insulte et le mien de tout ridicule.
(Il montre le bracelet qui est tombé sous la console.)
Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
(suivant des yeux la direction de son doigt, à part) Le bracelet !... je l’avais oublié ! *(haut)* Je ne vous comprends pas, mon ami.

PAUL

De qui, cela ?

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(avec innocence)* Mais... de vous... probablement ?...

PAUL (*avec rage)*
Ou de Monsieur Gaétan de Rumpigny !

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(avec calme)* Ah ! vous croyez ?... c’est possible...

PAUL

Comment ? possible ?

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
D’ailleurs, on peut interroger le domestique.

PAUL

Je le renverrai, le domestique. La maison entière est d’accord pour me tromper !

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(haussant les épaules)* Dans quel but ? tous les jours une femme reçoit des bracelets.

PAUL

Cela dépend !

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
Mais quand il viendrait de la personne que vous dites, ce n’est pas une raison pour le mépriser. *(Elle le ramasse.)*

PAUL

Tu oserais...

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
(mettant le bracelet à son bras) Je le dois dans l’intérêt de votre honneur, mon ami ! vous devenez vraiment d’une jalousie...

PAUL *(se défendant)*
Moi ?

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(avec sentiment)* Comme si je pouvais en aimer un autre, maintenant ! *(à part, tandis qu'il se retourne au moment où elle veut l'embrasser)* Ça le tient en haleine, cette peur-là !

PAUL *(serrant les poings)* Une histoire qui aura une fin, je le jure !

MME DE SAINT-LAURENT
Vous voilà dans des dispositions charmantes pour le souper de garçon de ce pauvre Monsieur Amédée.

PAUL

Je voudrais qu'il fût au diable, son souper !

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT (*joignant les mains)* Un intime, le seul de vos amis qui connaisse le secret de notre bonheur ! *(Elle l'embrasse.)*
PAUL (*radouci)*
Amène-t-il quelqu'un avec lui ?

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
Je l'ignore ; aussi, pour ne pas nous trouver tous les trois en tête à tête, j'ai invité mon professeur de déclamation.

PAUL

Riche idée !... un imbécile !...
Mrae DE SAINT-LAURENT
Oh ! je sais bien que vous le détestez ; vous allez recommencer vos attaques contre mes idées de théâtre, n'est-ce pas ?

PAUL *(impatienté)*
Parbleu ! si j'avais voulu une actrice, je n'aurais pas choisi une femme de

chambre.

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(piquée)* Les femmes de chambre de ma sorte sont du goût des personnes les plus distinguées ; je connais des gens qui vous valent, et qui auraient la délicatesse de ne pas me rappeler...

PAUL *(l'interrompant)*
Ces gens-là viennent-ils ce soir ?

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
Pourquoi pas ?

PAUL *(prenant son chapeau)* Si la chose a lieu, je décampe.

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(lui barrant le chemin)* Vous ne ferez pas à votre ami Amédée un pareil affront, un tel jour...

PAUL *(croisant ses bras)* Ainsi, tu as invité Monsieur de Rumpigny ?

MME DE SAINT-LAURENT
Amédée le connaît...

PAUL (*même jeu)*
Et je vais me voir condamné...

MME DE SAINT-LAURENT *(l'interrompant)* Vous êtes bien injuste à son égard.

PAUL

C'est le moyen de ne pas être autre chose.

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
Ah ! mon Dieu ! *(Elle feint de s'évanouir. On sonne.)*
PAUL *(embarrassé)*
Allons pas de bêtises !

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
Vous me tuerez !

PAUL

Remets-toi !

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
Vous ne partirez pas ?

PAUL

Non, je reste ! j’aime autant rester après tout, et si ce faquin vient me braver impunément... *(On sonne de nouveau.)*

MME DE SAINT-LAURENT
(à Paul, d’une voix languissante) Les domestiques sont peut-être sortis, mon ami ?
(Paul, après un instant d’hésitation, va ouvrir la porte.)

Scène 7

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
Ah ! cet excellent monsieur Roch ! Soyez le bienvenu, monsieur Roch.

M. ROCH

(s'incline académiquement devant Paul, puis s'avançant, à pas mesurés, vers Mme de Saint-Laurent) Me permettrez-vous une légère observation, Madame ! (*geste de Mme de Saint-Laurent)* Votre ah ! manque absolument de justesse. Votre ah ! peint l'étonnement, la surprise, comme si vous disiez, en ouvrant votre fenêtre : « Ah ! il pleut ! » tandis que dans la circonstance présente, où j'ai l'honneur d'être attendu de vous, votre ah ! ne peut être qu'un ah ! de contentement, de joie même : « Ah !... enfin !... cet excellent monsieur Roch ! » Bien, étalez « excellent ». « Soyez le bienvenu, monsieur Roch. »
(se retournant vers Paul)
Pardon, mille fois, Monsieur, mais ce sont ces nuances-là qui font la perfection !...
(à Mme de Saint-Laurent, avec emphase)
Bienvenu, le bienvenu monsieur Roch !... tous mots de valeur...

PAUL *(à part)*
Quel idiot !

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(subjuguée)*
Sans flatterie, Monsieur, espérez-vous tirer quelque chose de votre élève ?

M. ROCH

(appuyé sur la jambe gauche, avançant un peu la droite, avec des gestes du bras et des inflexions savantes) J'en ai plus que l'espérance, Madame, j'en ai la certitude !
(avec un aimable sourire) ne possédez-vous pas déjà la meilleure garantie de réussite... *(se penchant vers elle)* la beauté ?

MME DE SAINT-LAURENT *(flattée)*

Ah !

M. ROCH (*vivement)*
Très bien, ce ah ! là, très bien ! *(s'approchant d'elle)* Avezvous observé, Madame, comme je me suis posé, en vous parlant d'une façon vraie et agréable tout à la fois ? Point d'appui, la jambe gauche ; la droite un peu avancée, attitude favorable à la liberté du bras, à la bonne assiette de l'abdomen, et qui laisse aux poumons un développement plus facile... car il faut bien se pénétrer de ce principe, que la voix est le son produit par l'air quand il est chassé des poumons.

PAUL *(avec une admiration ironique)* Vous croyez ?

M. ROCH *(se retournant vers Paul, avec énergie)* Pas autre chose, Monsieur, pas autre chose ! (*revenant à Mme de Saint-Laurent)* Et avez-vous noté, vers la fin, cette légère inclination de la partie supérieure de mon corps, comme pour vous faire toucher du doigt la délicatesse du compliment ?

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(avec admiration)* C'est vrai, tout cela !

M. ROCH *(à Paul)*
Avec la permission de Monsieur, Madame peut nous donner un petit échantillon...

PAUL *(vivement)*
Pas ce soir ! nous sommes en vacances, monsieur Roch !
vous voyez que je connais aussi les mots de valeur.

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
(bas à Paul, en lui faisant de gros yeux) De grâce, soyez raisonnable, taisez-vous !

LE DOMESTIQUE

Monsieur le vicomte de Rumpigny. *(Il sort.)*

Scène 8

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT (*à part, avec rêverie)* Vicomte !

M. DE RUMPIGNY

(tenue complète de gandin ; il parle tout en marchant et en s'inclinant) De deux longueurs ! j'avais parié pour Giselle, une affaire certaine, un coup d'or ! et figurez-vous, Madame, que nous avons perdu de deux longueurs, *(bas)* Ravissante ! *(se tournant vers Paul, avec un léger salut)* Monsieur, j'ai l'honneur d'être...

PAUL *(assez sèchement)* Moi de même !

M. DE RUMPIGNY

(pirouettant sur ses talons et se trouvant nez à nez avec M. Roch) Deux longueurs !

M. ROCH *(gravement)* C'est énorme !

M. DE RUMPIGNY *(piqué)* Plaît-il, Monsieur ?

M. ROCH *(souriant avec supériorité)* Permettez ! moi, je ne juge des choses que d'après la façon dont elles sont dites, et *(se tournant vers Mme de SaintLaurent)* je suis bien aise de le faire remarquer à Madame, vos deux longueurs peuvent aller d'ici à la lune, *(allongeant le mot en imitant M. de Rumpigny)* Deux longueurs !

M. DE RUMPIGNY *(indigné)* Mais Monsieur !...

M. ROCH (*imperturbable)* Que si, légèrement, sans peser, vous eussiez dit : deux longueurs... *(se retournant vers Mme de SaintLaurent, avec une grande vitesse de prononciation)* de deux longueurs, oh ! alors il n'y aurait pas une personne, ici présente, qui ne fût émue, qui ne fût saisie, si j'ose le dire, révoltée, en comparant cette grande trahison de la fortune avec l'exiguïté de la différence. (*à demi-voix, à Mme de SaintLaurent)* Et toujours, pour point d'appui, le pied gauche.

M. DE RUMPIGNY *(bas, à Mme de SaintLaurent)* Quelle est cette brute ?

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(bas, d'un air suppliant)* Mon professeur de déclamation.
M. DE RUMPIGNY *(souriant)*
Ah ! très bien !

PAUL *(à part, avec inquiétude)* Que peuvent-ils se dire ainsi tous les deux ?

Scène 9

AMÉDÉE
(du dehors, donnant de grands coups de pied dans la porte) Ouvrez ! ouvrez !

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(à Paul)*
Monsieur Amédée.
M. ROCH
(Il se précipite avant Paul pour ouvrir la porte du fond, et se heurte avec le domestique qui vient de la porte de gauche) Doucement donc ! *(Le domestique ouvre la porte et sort.)*
AMÉDÉE
(Il entre suivi de M. Casimir, il est chargé de deux énormes ananas.) Je n'ai pas voulu taper trop ; avec ma force, j'aurais défoncé les deux battants !
M. CASIMIR *(à part, boutonné jusqu'au cou)* Il y a eu du feu, ici, on étouffe.

AMÉDÉE
(à Mme de Saint-Laurent, en inclinant sa tête entre les deux ananas) Salut, belle dame ! *(bas)* Tu n'as pas voulu, cruelle ! *(haut, en se retournant)* Monsieur de Rumpigny ! *(Il salue.)* Mon cher Paul, je ne tends pas la main, je n'ai que des branches !
(bas, à Mme de Saint-Laurent, en lui désignant M. Roch) Peut-on compter sur cette redingote marron ?

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(bas, en riant)* Comme sur moi-même !

AMÉDÉE *(haut, avec joie, en soulevant les deux ananas)* Very well !

MME DE SAINT-LAURENT *(à Paul)*
Sonnez le domestique, mon ami, Monsieur Peyronneau est plus chargé qu'une table de noce. *(Paul appuie sur un timbre.)*
AMÉDÉE *(réclamant)*
Moi ? vous plaisantez ! je les porte, à bras tendu, depuis la voiture *(se tournant vers M. Casimir)* n'est-ce pas, Casimir ? *(le présentant à Mme de Saint-Laurent)* Mon professeur de gymnastique, belle dame !
M. CASIMIR *(saluant militairement)*
Pour vous servir ! *(à part)* On étouffe !

PAUL *(à part)*
Quel monde ! quel monde ! c'est pour trouver cela que j'ai déserté ma maison ! *(Le domestique a pris les deux ananas, et les place au bout de la table, qu'il tire au milieu de l'appartement.)*
AMÉDÉE *(regardant la pendule)*
Tiens ! une pendule qui retarde sur mon estomac d'une bonne heure ! (*regardant la table toute servie)* Quand nous serons prêts...

MME DE SAINT-LAURENT
Nous le sommes.

AMÉDÉE (*,prenant la main de Mme de Saint-Laurent)* A table ! vive la joie ! c'est ma dernière nuit, soyons fous !
(se retournant vers les convives) car vous saurez, Messieurs, que je me marie demain.
M. DE RUMPIGNY *(tout en allant vers la table)* Pas possible !

AMÉDÉE *(se redressant)*
Pourquoi donc ?

PAUL *(avec énergie)*
Tu as bien raison, mon ami ! *(Il lui serre la main.)*
M. ROCH *(se posant avec grâce)* Le mariage ! mais c'est la loi, c'est la base, c'est la sécurité *(avec sentiment)* le bonheur !

M. DE RUMPIGNY

(voyant que Mme de Saint-Laurent est furieuse) A la condition cependant de savoir se créer *(montrant Paul)* comme Monsieur *(montrant Mme de Saint-Laurent)* une charmante compensation !

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(à part)*
Qu'il a de l'esprit ! *(lui montrant un siège, avec un sourire gracieux)* Près de moi !
(M. de Rumpigny s'assoit à gauche de Mme de Saint-Laurent, Amédée à sa droite.)

PAUL

(à part, se plaçant en face d’eux, le dos tourné au public) Si je les perds de vue un seul instant !
M. CASIMIR *(à part, déboutonnant sa redingote)* Pouh ! on peut bien se mettre un peu à l’aise, pour officier...

AMÉDÉE
(au moment où M. Casimir prend place à la gauche de Paul) Complet, l’omnibus ! Dinck ! *(On sonne à la porte d’une façon formidable.)*

Scène 10

(M. Varin des îlots s'avance, raide et sévère, au milieu de la stupéfaction générale. Amédée se retourne vivement du côté de la muraille, M. de Rumpigny se lève comme pour protéger Mme de Saint-Laurent, M. Roch et M. Casimir, toujours assis, écartent simultanément leurs chaises de la table ; Mme de Saint-Laurent reste comme pétrifiée à sa place.)

PAUL (*reculant sur le devant de la scène)*
Mon parrain !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

(iallant droit à lui, sans regarder personne)
Vous n'êtes pas facile à trouver, Monsieur !

PAUL (*balbutiant)*
Mais...

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

On vous a vu hier, au bois...

PAUL *(se retournant vers Mme de Saint-Laurent)*
J'en étais sûr !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

Votre femme sait tout !

AMÉDÉE *(prenant son chapeau)*
Ma belle-sœur ! *(Il se sauve derrière la porte et regarde dans la salle, en passant seulement la tête.)*

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

Et vos irrégularités sont devenues si scandaleuses, qu'aujourd'hui même vous avez perdu votre place.

PAUL (*abasourdi)*
Ma place ?

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

(se retourne et parcourt la salle du regard, Amédée disparaît définitivement)
Peut-on vous parler en particulier dans cette maison ?

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(bas à M. de Rumpigny)*
Partez, je vous en supplie ! *(M. de Rumpigny se dirige vers la porte en lui envoyant un baiser.)*

M. ROCH (*regardant M. Varin des Ilots, à part)*
C'est peut-être un pick-pocket, un faux parrain, cela s'est vu. *(Il se retire vers la porte, avec lenteur, déclamant à demi-voix ces deux vers :)*
Replions-nous sans bruit, et que le ciel prospère Ecarte de nos jours le poids de sa colère !
(Casimir a boutonné fièrement sa redingote jusque sous le menton, mis son chapeau sur sa tête et fait un pas vers M. Varin des Ilots, comme pour protester.)

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

(mettant aussi son chapeau, et marchant vers M. Casimir)
Auriez-vous quelque chose à me dire, Monsieur ?

PAUL *(se précipitant vers lui)*
Général !
(M. Casimir, au nom du général, et devant la fière attitude du vieillard, ôte involontairement son chapeau, et sort à reculons, sans mot dire.)

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

(se retournant vers Mme de Saint-Laurent)
Vous pouvez vous retirer, Victoire !
(Mme de Saint-Laurent, subjuguée, obéit à l'ordre, et sort lentement par la droite.)

LE DOMESTIQUE

(fait un grand geste d'étonnement dans le fond de la salle, à part)
Victoire ?

Scène 11

(M. Varin des Ilots prend majestueusement un fauteuil et s’y installe ; puis, d’un geste solennel, il indique un siège à Paul. A ce moment on entend un roulement léger, c’est la table poussée par le domestique ; le général se retourne vivement, aperçoit le domestique, et, d’un mouvement muet et impérieux, lui ordonne de sortir.)

Scène 12

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

Savez-vous ce que je représente ici, Monsieur ?... la famille !

PAUL

Mon cher parrain, vous ne me tutoyez donc plus ?

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

Pas encore !

PAUL

Si j’avais commis un crime...

M. VARIN DES ILOTS (*l’interrompant)* Ç’en est un, une pareille conduite !

PAUL

Vous êtes bien dur !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

J’en ai le droit ! Vous cherchiez, sans doute, à faciliter vos désordres en me proposant chez vous un logement ? Tenir compagnie à Madame, pour favoriser les escapades de Monsieur, joli rôle !

PAUL *(avec énergie)* Pouvez-vous croire !...

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

Pourquoi pas ? un homme capable d'une telle faiblesse !...
(haussant les épaules) Je comprends une amourette, parbleu ! un caprice ; je ne suis pas une vierge, mais on devrait mourir de honte quand on se laisse subjuguer par une donzelle, au point de lui sacrifier l'estime publique et les devoirs de sa position... Moi qui vous parle, Monsieur, durant ma longue carrière...

PAUL (*l'interrompant)* Oh ! tous les blâmes possibles sont moins forts, pour me ramener chez moi, que mes propres dégoûts et la lassitude où je suis.

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

Mais ces dégoûts, Monsieur, vous les promenez en carrosse.

PAUL (*exaspéré)* Le carrosse ! c'est ce qui m'a perdu, le carrosse !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

Que voulez-vous dire ?

PAUL

Que je quitterais cette femme dès ce soir, si je n'étais pas enchaîné ici par mes dettes... (*montrant la porte de droite)* et le remords secret de l'avoir poussée dans cette voie.

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

Ah ! le remords secret ! vous êtes bon ! Un remords, ça se guérit ; malheureusement, les dettes, ça se paye... Combien dois-tu ?

PAUL (*étonné d'abord, puis hésitant)* Beaucoup !... et je n'ai plus ma place, *(avec rage)* Comme si l'on montrait de pareilles sévérités pour les autres !... Mais Madame de Mérilhac s'est liguée contre moi, avec ma bellemère, depuis qu'elle tripote le mariage de son neveu.

M. VARIN DES ILOTS *(appuyant sur chaque mot)* Combien dois-tu ?

PAUL

(tirant de sa poche une liasse de notes et de protêts) Tout est là.

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

Donne !

PAUL *(hésitant)* Si vous saviez !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

(tendant la main avec impatience) Dépêche-toi !... (*prenant les papiers et tâtant toutes ses poches*) J'ai oublié ma loupe, je lirai tout cela à la maison, ça me regarde.

PAUL *(se levant)* Comment ?

M. VARIN DES ILOTS *(mettant tout dans sa poche)* Ça me regarde ! comprends-tu le français ?

PAUL *(lui saisissant la main)* Cher parrain !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

Si tu as l’audace de répliquer un mot... *(lui faisant un geste terrible)* Sors d’ici ! Va-t’en te jeter au cou de ta femme.

PAUL

Ce soir ?

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

Tout de suite !

PAUL

Oh ! demain, pas ce soir ! le temps seulement...

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

(roulant son fauteuil devant la porte de droite) Halte-là !

PAUL *(avec un grand geste de dénégation)* Je n’ai aucunement le dessein...

M. VARIN DES ILOTS *(froidement)* Espérons-le !

PAUL

Quant à revoir ma femme, sans préparation, face à face...

après tout ce qui s’est passé aujourd’hui... c’est impossible !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS *(toujours en sentinelle)* Eh ! ça m’est bien égal !... va chez toi, va au diable ! mais va-t’en !

PAUL (*timidement)* Vous restez ici ?

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

Un peu !

PAUL

Vous allez tout rompre ?

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

Je le suppose !

PAUL (*revenant à lui)* Dites-moi au moins que vous m’avez pardonné !...

M. VARIN DES ILOTS (*lui montrant la porte)* Qu’est-ce que ça te fait ? *(Paul sort tout rêveur.)*

Scène 13

M. VARIN DES ILOTS *(seul)*
A l’autre ! *(Il se lève avec peine.)* Je n’en peux plus *(Il va à la porte de droite.)* je n’en ai jamais tant brassé... depuis vingt ans ! *(Il frappe à la porte.)*

Scène 14

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

(à Mme de SaintLaurent qui arrive dans un déshabillé des plus élégants) Deux mots seulement à vous dire.

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(inquiète et très humble)* Si Monsieur le général veut bien me faire l'honneur de passer dans une pièce plus convenable...

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

Nous sommes parfaitement ici.

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(s'inclinant)*
A vos ordres !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

(s'installe dans un grand fauteuil et laisse Mme de SaintLaurent s'asseoir sur une chaise, en face de lui) J'ai soixante-cinq ans sur la tête, un âge qui n'attend guère, et où il faut mener les choses rondement.

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
(allant chercher deux coussinets et voulant les placer sous les bras de M. Varin des Ilots) Le fauteuil est d'un dur ! Ces deux coussins...

M. VARIN DES ILOTS (*froidement)*
Inutile ! un peu d'attention, s'il vous plaît !

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
(les plaçant malgré lui sur chaque bras du fauteuil) Ah ! tout ce qu'il vous plaira !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS *(sévèrement)*
Honorée de la confiance de Madame Duvernier, mêlée par vos fonctions au plus intéressant des ménages, vous avez compromis sciemment l'avenir d'un homme, et la sécurité d'une famille.

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(très humble et très interdite)* Monsieur... mais... Monsieur *(lui apportant un petit tabouret)* seulement cela...

M. VARIN DES ILOTS *(refusant du geste)* Vous détournez la question !

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
(se courbant et plaçant le tabouret à portée de ses pieds) J'écoute ! c'est un honneur pour moi d'écouter...

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

Sans parler, ici, de vos dettes, ces promenades ensemble, ces rendez-vous au théâtre, ce mépris pour le monde, et cette impudeur dans le désordre...
(Il laisse tomber son mouchoir, elle se précipite pour le ramasser et le lui donner en saluant.) Bien obligé !

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(avec humilité)* Mais ces mains-là sont faites pour vous servir *(minaudant)* comme autrefois.

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

(regardant la main de Victoire, et cherchant à ressaisir l'ordre de ses idées) Ce désordre, dis-je, dans l'impudeur... et... le mépris du monde... ou plutôt... ce monde du mépris... dans le désordre de l'impudeur...

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(se levant)*
Si Monsieur le général veut permettre... il me semble que c'est l'heure de son bouillon. *(Elle va au fond, vers la table.)*
M. VARIN DES ILOTS *(étonné)*

Vous croyez ?

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
(revenant avec un verre sur un plateau)
Oui ! et un verre de madère plutôt. *(Il hésite.)* Allons buvez !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS *(prenant le verre)* Merci !

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
Me remercier ! quand c'est moi au contraire...

M. VARIN DES ILOTS *(remettant le verre sur le plateau)* Bref, sans nous perdre encore dans des récriminations inutiles... et mettant de côté les épithètes dont je pourrais qualifier votre conduite...

MME DE SAINT-LAURENT
Monsieur le général est si bon.

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

Non, je ne suis pas bon ! et je vous suppose assez d'intelligence pour comprendre qu'entre vous et Paul, tout est fini désormais. *(Il se lève pour sortir.)*
Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT (*fondant en larmes)* Oui... oui... tout est fini, pour moi ! je comprends !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS *(se retourne et la regarde, à part)* Allons ! les pleurnicheries commencent ! *(haut)* Calmezvous !

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(sanglotant)*
Pardon ! j'avais tort... Vous ai-je manqué ?... Je serai calme.

M. VARIN DES ILOTS *(à demi-voix, serrant les poings)* Si elle pouvait se mettre un peu en colère !... J'aurais moins de mal à m'en débarrasser.

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(qui a saisi la phrase, à part)* Ah ! non, par exemple ! *(haut)* Est-ce que je pleure encore trop haut, Monsieur ?

M. VARIN DES ILOTS *(commençant à être ému)* Vous aimez donc bien mon filleul ?

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(vivement)*
Moi ? *(Elle éclate en sanglots.)* Si j'avais su, si j'avais su !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

Que voulez-vous dire ?

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(à part)*
Il fléchit.

M. VARIN DES ILOTS *(insistant avec bonté)* Parlez franchement.

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(d'un air désespéré)* A quoi bon ? il y a des hommes qui n'ont pas de cœur !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS *(vivement)*
Est-ce que Paul ?

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
(l'interrompant, et la voix coupée de sanglots) Ne craignez rien, Monsieur, je n'accuse personne, c'est l'usage !... On prend une pauvre fille à son travail, à sa joie, à son ignorance des choses... on est jeune, séduisant... on se met à ses pieds, on l'adore... la malheureuse succombe... tout va bien, la famille n'est pas encore en danger ; mais si, par un reste de pudeur, ou mieux, pour faire de la victime une esclave, on lui jette une robe sur les épaules, et l'abri d'un toit sur la tête... horreur et scandale ! tout est perdu, tout s'écroule... les mères se désolent, les vieillards se lèvent, comme des juges, et tandis qu'il y a, dans le monde, des cous qui ploient, sans crainte, sous la charge de leurs diamants, une perle à notre oreille fait pencher la société vers sa ruine ! (*Elle sanglote, et, à part, en se détournant pour cacher sa douleur.)* Monsieur Roch serait content de moi, cette fois !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS (*cherchant à l'apaiser)* Paix là ! paix là ! *(à part)* Où va-t-elle donc chercher ce qu’elle dit ?

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
(d’une voix creuse et frémissante)
Que la société se rassure ! *(mettant la main sur sa poitrine)* Je le sens ici... j’ai mon compte... je ne troublerai pas longtemps les familles !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

Un peu de courage, allons !

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(arrachant ses bracelets)* Ce bracelet vient de lui *(le jetant à terre),* le voilà ! je n’en veux plus ! Ah ! ses bagues, tenez ! le collier... voilà son peigne, oui, oui, tout ! *(Elle a successivement tout retiré, arraché, et, se posant, échevelée, devant M. Varin des Ilots.)* Suis-je maintenant assez nue pour que la société dorme tranquille ? *(Elle est prise d’un spasme nerveux, chancelle tout à coup, et tombe, pâmée, sur la chaise, en face de M. Varin des Ilots.)*

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

(très embarrassé et la soutenant)
Quelqu’un !... *(cherchant partout des yeux)* La sonnette ?...
(regardant Mme de SaintLaurent) Elle se trouve mal !
(appelant) Au secours ! (*cherchant encore du regard)* Où diable a-t-on pendu cette sonnette ?... Si je pouvais la laisser seulement une seconde...
(Il la pose, avec mille précautions, sur une chaise, et court ouvrir la porte de droite.) Holà ! (*d’une voix désespérée)* Personne ! *(Il court à gauche, après s’être retourné vers Mme de SaintLaurent.)* A l’aide !... si tout le monde est parti, me voilà bien ! *(revenant et cherchant à détacher sa ceinture)* Elle étouffe... *(ne pouvant y parvenir)* Victoire ! *(le fichu tombe)* Elle a des épaules charmantes, cette fille-là !...
(lui frottant les tempes) Ma toute belle ! *(Mme de SaintLaurent lui jette un regard languissant, devant lequel il demeure saisi.)* Madame ! *(à part)* Quels yeux ! *(la soulevant à moitié)* Mettez-vous, au moins, dans le fauteuil, Madame !

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(refusant d'une voix faible)* Quand vous êtes là ?

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

(la soutenant et la plaçant amoureusement dans le fauteuil, dont il arrange les coussins) Je l'exige ! *(Il lui met le tabouret sous les pieds.)* De cette façon, vous serez mieux.
(apercevant au fond la table servie)
Attendez ! attendez ! *(Il remplit un verre et remue le sucre avec une cuillère, puis revient.)*
MME DE SAINT-LAURENT
Vous, Monsieur le général, me servir !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

(lui tendant le verre qu'elle finit par accepter) Pourquoi pas ?

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(hésitant à boire)* Je serais trop confuse !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

Allons ! buvez ! *(Elle boit.)* Servir la beauté, n'est-ce pas le rôle d'un soldat ? *(Il reprend le verre, et va le poser sur la table.)*
Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
Vous vous moquez... c'est cruel !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS (*éclatant)*
Je ne me moque pas, mille tonnerres ! et il faut que Paul soit un fier dindon, s'il n'a pu oublier devant de pareils charmes...

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(jouant la surprise)* Que dites-vous ?

M. VARIN DES ILOTS *(embarrassé)*

Je... moi ?... je ne dis rien... *(courant vers la table)* Encore un peu d’eau sucrée, peut-être ?

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT (*faisant signe que non)* Mille grâces !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

(s’asseyant sur une chaise en face d’elle) Vous vous trouvez tout à fait bien maintenant ?

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
(cachant son visage dans ses deux mains)
Ah ! Monsieur le général, que je suis donc malheureuse de vous avoir vu !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS *(abasourdi)*
Comment cela ?

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
Cette rupture... elle devait éclater... un de ces jours... fatalement... je la sentais venir aux dédains de Paul, à ses colères ; mais, alors, j’aurais quitté la vie sans un regret, avec tout mon désespoir... et toute ma haine... je ne me serais pas souvenue, au départ, qu’on trouve des cœurs d’hommes faits autrement que le sien !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

Pauvre enfant !

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
(jetant sur lui un regard d’admiration)
Que vous ne lui ressemblez guère ! vous avez pleuré votre bonne Gertrude, vous !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS *(très ému)*
Je la pleure encore.

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
Ce n’était pas une servante, c’était une véritable amie...
une compagne...

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

C’est vrai, c’est vrai.

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(avec émotion)* Ah ! si l’on recommençait son existence, s’il n’était pas si tard ! si je me sentais assez pure ! avec quelle joie et quelle affection de toutes les heures... j’aurais pu continuer près de vous, moi plus jeune, plus forte, et aussi dévouée...
peut-être... (*changeant de ton)* Mais il n’y faut pas songer, c’est un rêve ! le malheur a son châtiment, comme le crime, et quelle que soit la cause qui nous perd, le monde ne voit que notre flétrissure, lui !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS *(rêveur et frémissant)* Oh ! la jolie petite Gertrude !
Mrae DE SAINT-LAURENT *(d’une voix brisée)*
Au lieu de cette félicité... de cet honneur... je n’ai plus, devant moi, qu’une mort prochaine... ou qu’un avenir misérable !...

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

Qui dit cela ?

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
(désignant les objets d’un bras découragé) Il faudra vendre, à l’enchère, mes meubles, mes tapis, tous ces riens élégants dont j’ignorais jusqu’au nom, mais auxquels on finit par s’attacher... malgré soi...

M. VARIN DES ILOTS *(l’interrompant)* Laissez donc !

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(énergiquement)* A moins que je ne les abandonne avec mépris... *(regardant à terre)* comme ces bracelets d’or qui sont à terre !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

(les ramassant avec peine, ainsi que le peigne et le collier) Vous les garderez, Madame !

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(les repoussant de la main)* Que je les garde ! pour qu'ils me rappellent encore qui me les a donnés !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

Ils vous rappelleront celui qui les paie...

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
(feignant de ne pas comprendre)
Comment ?

M. VARIN DES ILOTS *(les lui tendant toujours)* ...et qui vous les offre...

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
Mais...

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

... à la condition de les rattacher, lui-même, à vos beaux bras ! *(Il lui remet les bracelets, en embrassant les deux mains tour à tour.)*
Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(comme dans un songe)* Est-ce possible ?

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

Voici le collier. *(Il le lui passe au cou.)* Voici le peigne !

(Il le lui met dans la main.)

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
Ah ! Monsieur ! Monsieur ! qu’ai-je besoin de tout cela ?
je ne suis pas assez grande dame pour qu’on m’enterre avec mes bijoux.

M. VARIN DES ILOTS *(se récriant)*
Vous enterrer !
Mrae DE SAINT-LAURENT
(ouvrant les bras, d’un air accablé)
Seule au monde !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS (*lui prenant la main)* Mais moi...

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
Maudite !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

Que dites-vous ?

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
Méprisée !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

Jamais ! pauvre innocente ! un piège tendu !... je comprends tout !

MME DE SAINT-LAURENT
Mais qui me défendra ? qui me défendra ?

M. VARIN DES ILOTS *(avec force)*
Je ne suis donc pas là, mille bombes !

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT *(avec un grand cri)* Vous !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS

Moi ! *(bas)* sans compter ma maison qui sera la tienne...
Il faut bien que je répare les torts de mon filleul !

Mme DE SAINT-LAURENT
(se précipitant à ses pieds, et posant sa tête échevelée sur les mains de M. Varin des Ilots) Merci ! merci !

M. VARIN DES ILOTS *(à part)*
Oh ! la jolie petite Gertrude !
(La toile tombe.)

ACTE V

Scène 1

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Il n’est pas rentré ?

VALENTINE

Non, maman, je l’attends.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Et moi aussi ! (*à part*) Sans en compter un autre ! mais celui-là ! (*comme pour dire : je m’en moque !)*

MME DUVERNIER

Une bien triste fête, Mesdames.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Manquer au mariage de son ami intime et de sa belle-sœur !

Mme DUVERNIER

Et son pauvre parrain qu’on n’a pas revu !

MME DE GRÉMONVILLE
Jugez donc ! un coup de cette force à son âge ! lui qui aimait Paul comme son fils ! Il y a de quoi le tuer.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Surtout s’il n’a pas pu encore l’arracher aux séductions de cette... misérable !

MME DE GRÉMONVILLE *(à Mme Duvernier)* Un vieillard qui succombe, une femme délaissée, une orpheline, voilà l’œuvre de Monsieur Paul, Madame !

Mme DUVERNIER

J’en souffre plus que vous, moi, sa mère !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Je suis mère aussi, permettez !

Mme DUVERNIER

Sans doute ! et quand j’aurais des excuses à apporter...

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Lesquelles, s’il vous plaît ?

Mme DUVERNIER

Car enfin, vous l’avez abandonné un peu vite, comtesse ?

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Dites qu’il s’est abandonné lui-même ! Devant un scandale qui arrive à ces proportions...

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
C’est juste ! et peut-être Madame Duvernier comprend-elle maintenant où mène une éducation... trop... libérale.

Mme DUVERNIER

Parfaitement ! surtout quand elle vient se heurter à une cohabitation imprudente !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Oh ! il avait déjà ses petits projets.

MME DUVERNIER

Tout le monde ne peut avoir votre perspicacité, Madame !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Elle n’a pas suffi toutefois à défendre ma fille chérie !
Cette pauvre enfant, la première victime, qu’a-t-elle fait, je vous le demande ?

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Rien, à coup sûr ! et au lieu de vous accuser mutuellement d’un malheur dont vous êtes innocentes l’une et l’autre, mieux vaudrait nous unir pour en empêcher le retour.

Mme DUVERNIER

Volontiers.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Tout de suite.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Mais si nous consultions Monsieur des Orbières ? Il reviendra tout à l’heure. (*à Mme de Grémonville*) Son petit cadeau de noces ! vous savez ? (*Mme de Grémonville lui répond par un signe d’intelligence.)* Mrae DUVERNIER N’importe ! nous pourrions, dès maintenant, commencer.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
(ià part, regardant la pendule, et agitée) Un retard inexplicable... pas de lettres ! rien !

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Je crois donc que la première chose à faire serait...

VALENTINE *(en sursaut)*
Lui !

Scène 2

PAUL *(sur le seuil)* Tout le monde au mariage ! je m’en doutais ! Valentine !... *(Il fait un pas vers elle.)*
Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
(lui barrant le passage, sévèrement) Vous vous trompez, Monsieur !

PAUL *(interdit)* Vous, Madame !

Mme DE MÉRILHAC *(s’approchant, dédaigneusement)* Vous vous trompez !

PAUL (*éperdu)*
Comtesse !

Mme DUVERNIER *(s’avançant, d’un ton solennel)* Vous vous trompez !

PAUL *(avec épouvante)* Ma mère ! *(cherchant avec anxiété)* Où est Amédée ? où est le général ? *(à part, avec terreur)* Pas un homme ! pas un pan d’habit où me raccrocher !... et toutes ces crinolines amoncelées autour de moi comme des vagues !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Vous auriez trouvé plus commode qu’elle fût abandonnée, n’est-ce pas ?

PAUL

J’avoue qu’une explication pareille, en public...
Mrae DE MÉRILHAC
Si ma présence vous gêne ?

Mme DUVERNIER

Restez, comtesse ! vous avez ici des droits, le fils a pu se jouer de vos bontés, la mère se fait un devoir de s’en souvenir.

PAUL *(allant vers sa femme)* Valentine !

VALENTINE *(détourne la tête en sanglotant)* Mon Dieu ! mon Dieu !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
(se précipite entre lui et Valentine, et croisant les bras) Vous ne comprenez donc pas qu'elle sait tout ?

Scène 3

(La nourrice portant l'enfant et entrant par la gauche.)
PAUL *(va pour embrasser sa fille)*
Celle-là, au moins !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
[relève vivement le voile du maillot de manière à le couvrir tout entier) C'est ma fille ! vos lèvres ne sont plus celles d'un père !
elle m'appartient plus qu'à vous, maintenant ! Peut-être sa petite âme comprend-elle déjà son malheur, et si sa faible bouche pouvait parler, elle vous jetterait votre condamnation à la face !

PAUL ***[saluant profondément le maillot)***
Oui ! vous avez raison, c'est une femme aussi, je m'incline.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE *(à la nourrice)*
Emportez l'enfant, nourrice ! *(La nourrice sort par la gauche.)*

PAUL

Je vous prie instamment de la suivre, Mesdames, j'ai à parler à ma femme.
Mrae DE GRÉMONVILLE
Bien, Monsieur ! nous allons réfléchir sur le parti qu'il faut prendre.
(Valentine fait un mouvement pour suivre les trois dames, Paul l'arrête par le bras.)

Scène 4

VALENTINE

Laissez-moi, Monsieur, laissez-moi !

PAUL

Seulement deux mots !

VALENTINE

Impossible ! on m’attend.

PAUL

Ecoute-moi !

VALENTINE

Après toutes les choses qui se sont passées !

PAUL

Continue ! je ne me défendrai pas ! tes torts, si tu en as eu, sont absorbés dans ma faute. Te rappelles-tu ce soir où tu refusas de m’accompagner au théâtre ? j’en ai honte :
tout vient de là... Que veux-tu ? l’amour-propre blessé, un moment de dépit... j’étais fou !

VALENTINE

Cette femme ! cette femme !

PAUL

N’en sois pas jalouse, j’ai trouvé mon premier châtiment dans la vulgarité de son âme... et peut-être me fallait-il cette épreuve pour comprendre moi-même jusqu’à quel point je t’adore.

VALENTINE

Une épreuve terrible où l’on a brisé mon cœur sans retour.

PAUL

Ne dis jamais de ces mots-là, Valentine ! rien n’est brisé, rien n’est mort ! Me voilà sorti de ma folie comme d’un mauvais rêve, je me sens désormais assez de dévouement et de tendresse pour effacer dans ton âme jusqu’au souvenir de mon erreur.

VALENTINE *(les yeux au ciel)*
Comme s’il m’était possible de le croire, maintenant !

PAUL *(avec désespoir)*
Que faut-il faire ? est-ce un éclat que tu demandes ? une séparation ? un scandale ? ou supposes-tu que notre raccommodement sera mieux cimenté par les autres que par nousmêmes ? Non, n’est-ce pas ?... Détourne-toi ! réponds-moi !
nos mains pour s’étreindre n’ont pas besoin qu’on les pousse, et le pardon que j’attends de ma femme ne veut pas d’autre intermédiaire qu’un baiser.

VALENTINE *(émue)*
Mon Dieu !

PAUL *(s’agenouillant)*
Valentine ! aimes-tu mieux que je meure, Valentine ?

VALENTINE *(le regardant)*
Paul ! *(Paul couvre sa main de baisers.)*

Scène 5

THÉRÈSE
Malheureuse ! le regarder ! lui parler ! (se *tournant avec un rire dépité)* Et moi qui accourais ici pour la plaindre !

PAUL *(dignement)*
Ici, Madame ?

THÉRÈSE
Oh ! ne craignez rien, je me retire ; ouvrez la porte, Amédée !

VALENTINE

(court vers Thérèse, Amédée reste la main sur la porte) Il voulait mourir, Thérèse !

THÉRÈSE *(haussant les épaules et regardant Amédée)* Pauvre tête ! *(à Valentine, bas)* Mais tu ne comprends pas que c’est donner tort à ma mère et déshonorer tout ton sexe ?... Votre bras Amédée ! *(à Valentine, haut)* Tu devrais rougir, te dis-je ! tu es plus coupable que lui ! *(à Paul)* Adieu, Monsieur !

PAUL

Est-ce pour toujours, Thérèse ?

THÉRÈSE
Mais rester plus longtemps, il me semble, ce serait encourager votre conduite...

PAUL

Ah ! vous oubliez un peu le service que je vous ai rendu ?
Quel service ?

AMÉDÉE *(s'avançant)* Oui, lequel ?

PAUL (*après un long silence)* Il est considérable, je vous jure ; je dis bien considérable.
(voyant que Valentine va sortir) Valentine ! *(à Thérèse, lui montrant la porte de droite par où vient de s'en aller Valentine)* Ne sortez pas, Madame, on délibère ici contre moi, c'est votre place.

THÉRÈSE *(s'arrêtant)* Ces dames, peut-être ? Allons voir ! *(à part)* Je ne suis pas fâchée de donner cet exemple à mon mari, *(à Amédée)* A tout à l'heure, Amédée, je vous ménage une surprise...
il y a là quelqu'un...

AMÉDÉE
Qui donc ?

THÉRÈSE
Vous verrez ! vous verrez !

Scène 6

AMÉDÉE
De qui veut-elle parler ?

PAUL

Je ne sais ! mais n’importe ! Ecoute-moi, je suis un misérable, un enfant ! Veux-tu que je te demande pardon à genoux, Amédée ?

AMÉDÉE
A moi ?

PAUL

Tu étais joyeux, tu étais libre ; à chacun de tes pas sur ta route on entendait sonner hardiment tes écus dans ta poche et tes fantaisies dans ta tête. Et moi, pour m’assurer une protection qui m’échappe, en vue d’un intérêt tout personnel, sais-tu ce que j’ai fait, Amédée ? je me suis embusqué sur ton chemin comme un traître, j’ai pris ta liberté dans une trappe, j’ai tendu un piège à loups sous ta joie.

AMÉDÉE
Un piège à loups !

PAUL

Ce complot d’où est résulté ton mariage...

AMÉDÉE
Il y avait... un complot ?

PAUL

Mais sans doute !

AMÉDÉE
Et tu en étais ?

PAUL (*baissant la tête)*
Oui !

AMÉDÉE
Ah ! ce cher Paul !... ma reconnaissance... *(Il lui saute au cou.)*

PAUL (*s’en débarrassant)*
C’est de la générosité, je te remercie.

AMÉDÉE
Pourquoi donc ?

PAUL

Après ce qui m’arrive ? quand tu as dans ma personne un échantillon des aménités qu’on te réserve ?

AMÉDÉE
Ah ! distinguons !

PAUL

Distinguons quoi ?
Ah ! tu m’entends, j’ai beau être ton ami, il y a véritablement des choses...

PAUL

Quelles choses ?

AMÉDÉE
Voyons, en bonne conscience, peux-tu espérer que je donne mon approbation à ta... comment dirais-je ? je ne veux pas être amer... à ta conduite ?

PAUL

Tu me fais de la morale, toi ! quand hier, cette nuit même...

AMÉDÉE (*regardant autour de lui)*
Chut ! on pourrait t’entendre ! j’étais encore garçon, cette nuit.

PAUL

Et ce matin ?

AMÉDÉE
Mon Dieu, oui ! je me sens métamorphosé, je l’avoue ; cet acte solennel, la cérémonie, nos serments, l’orgue... Mes yeux se sont ouverts, j’ai dépouillé le vieil homme... Certaines positions exigent de nous certaines idées ; ce qui ne semblait la veille qu’une plaisanterie, peut prendre le lendemain des proportions colossales, et sans vouloir me poser en Don Quichotte de la vertu, je trouve franchement qu’il y a des bornes.

PAUL (*avec force)*
Je crois bien ! *(à Amédée)* Est-ce que tu me salueras encore dans la rue, Amédée ?

AMÉDÉE
Es-tu bête ! certainement, mon vieux, ce n’est pas parce qu’un ami a eu le malheur de s’égarer... (*lui serrant la main)*
certainement !

PAUL

Que tu es bon ! (*à part, avec amertume)* Lui aussi ! (*apercevant les dames qui entrent)* La cour !

Scène 7

(Paul, Amédée, Mme de Grémonville, Mme Duvernier, Mme ie Mérilhac, Thérèse, Valentine. - Elles arrivent processionnellement, s’assoient en demi-cercle et après un long silence, Paul restant debout, seul, au milieu de la scène, et Amédée derrière le siège de sa femme.)

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE *(à Mme de Mérilhac)*
Vous avez la parole, Madame.

MME DE MÉRILHAC
Madame Duvernier plutôt.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE *(à Mme Duvernier)*
Madame !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE *(à Mme de Mérilhac)*
Non, vous !

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Non !

Mme DUVERNIER *(à Mme de Grémonville)*
Vous.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Soit ! *(à Paul)* Toute faute, Monsieur, doit être suivie d’une expiation, et malgré les objections que vous pourrez faire...

PAUL

Je n’en ferai aucune, Madame !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Après les événements déplorables que je ne veux pas rappeler...

AMÉDÉE *(à part)*

Très bien !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
...et avant que ma fille ne recommence d'enchaîner sa destinée à la vôtre, il faudrait nous prouver, c'est le moins>
la sincérité de votre repentir par une conduite à la fois morale et régulière.

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Morale.

Mme DUVERNIER

Régulière.

AMÉDÉE *(à part)*
Il y a, vraiment, dans cette juridiction de la famille, quelque chose qui empoigne.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Nous vous exposerons d'abord le seul plan de vie qui puisse vous mener à l'accomplissement de nos vœux.

Mme DUVERNIER

C'est cela. Continuez.

MME DE GRÉMONVILLE
J'ignore vos dettes, mais vos ressources personnelles sont insuffisantes désormais à vous faire tenir dans le monde un rang convenable ; vos deux familles y pourvoiront, Monsieur. Non pas, veuillez le croire, par des prodigalités dangereuses, source de tentations nouvelles, mais en mêlant leur existence à la vôtre, et sous la protection de deux mères.
Oh ! vous serez bien entouré, cette fois !

PAUL

Comment, entouré ?

Mme DUVERNIER

Sans doute ! dès demain, je m’établis chez vous (*montrant Mme de Grémonville)* avec Madame, car je ne laisserai pas souiller mon nom, le nom de votre père !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Je n’abandonnerai point à la mobilité de vos passions le bonheur de mon enfant, et l’avenir de ma petite-fille.

Mme DUVERNIER

Je n’en ai pas le droit.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Ce serait de ma part un crime !

Mme DE MÉRILHAC *(aux dames)*
Et moi, qui n’ai dans la famille qu’une autorité indirecte, je vous promets de veiller au dehors, et généralement, à toutes les phases de son existence.

THÉRÈSE
L’abondance de précautions ne peut nuire.

AMÉDÉE *(avec un geste violent)*
Bravo !

THÉRÈSE *(se retournant)*
Tenez-vous donc tranquille ! on dirait que j’ai épousé un saltimbanque !

AMÉDÉE
Un reste d’habitude, pardon, mon ange ! c’était pour montrer seulement que je me soumets d’avance à toutes les volontés de ma belle petite femme.

PAUL *(après avoir regardé Amédée, et baissant la tête)*
Oh ! sexe faible !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Enfin, Monsieur, comme vous avez découragé par votre inexactitude *(montrant Mme de Mérilhac)* le plus bienveillant des patronages, et perdu sans retour un poste éminent, ce n’est plus dans ce genre d’occupations qu’il vous est permis de chercher une place ; mais comme, d’autre part, vous devez fuir l’oisiveté, cette mère de tous les vices... Voulez-vous prendre la parole, comtesse, puisqu’aussi bien c’est vous...

MME DE MÉRILHAC
Nous avons donc pensé à des fonctions... obligatoires, sérieuses ; et j’espère que l’on trouvera, pour vous, quelque emploi dans un bureau.

PAUL

Un bureau ? jamais de la vie !

Scène 8

M. DES ORBIÈRES *(à Mme de Mérilhac)* Voici, chère Madame, ce que vous avez désiré. *(Il lui tend une grande enveloppe ministérielle.)*
Mme DE MÉRILHAC *(à Amédée)* Cela vous regarde, mon ami. Lisez-le.

AMÉDÉE
Quel cachet ! *(Il ouvre et parcourt des yeux.)* « Inspecteur du degré d'avancement des commandes faites aux artistes par la Direction des Beaux-Arts : Monsieur Amédée Peyronneau »... Moi ? oui ! moi ! inspecteur !

PAUL *(à M. des Orbières)* Comment ? après m'avoir destitué !

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Eh ! que voulez-vous, cher Monsieur ? Des convenances, un peu exagérées peut-être, mais impérieuses, l'opposition qui est toujours là, à nous guetter, et puis... un homme qui vit dans le désordre, après tout ! bref, il nous a fallu, bien malgré moi, vous retirer cette place.

PAUL *(désignant Amédée)* Et pour la donner à...

M. DES ORBIÈRES
Du moment qu'elle était libre, mieux valait Monsieur Peyronneau, votre ami, que le premier venu, convenez-en.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
D'autant plus qu'il est aussi capable.

THÉRÈSE
Il a même la vocation !

AMÉDÉE (*obéissant au geste de Thérèse)* Parbleu !

Mme DE MÉRILHAC *(mielleusement)* Et cela ne sort pas de la famille !

M. DES ORBIÈRES
De cette façon, vous voyez, je satisfais tout à la fois aux exigences de l'amitié et... pardon du mot... à celles de la morale.

PAUL

La morale ? mais je l’ai servie ; le mariage de Thérèse ne se serait pas fait sans moi, et puisqu’on me force à parler de mon désintéressement, je m’exécute.
(à Mme de Grémonville)
Oh ! vous avez beau me regarder, Madame, je ne suis pas plus fou qu’un autre, et monsieur votre mari, si on l’interroge, donnera là-dessus des renseignements.

MME DE GRÉMONVILLE
Vous pouvez vous-même lui parler, le voilà !

Scène 9

M. DE GRÉMONVILLE
Je m'excuse auprès de mon nouveau gendre d'avoir manqué la cérémonie ; j'avais pris dans la gare un train pour un autre, et je me suis réveillé à Mont-de-Marsan. Alors, forcément, j'ai été obligé de repasser par Toulouse.

PAUL

Qu'ai-je fait, moi, Monsieur, en venant vous voir à Toulouse ?

M. DE GRÉMONVILLE
Une chose très bien.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Vous n'allez pas ennuyer la compagnie par des détails !

M. DE GRÉMONVILLE
Des détails ? non.

PAUL

Dites au moins...

M. DE GRÉMONVILLE
Monsieur Duvernier m'a engagé à une chose... une chose...

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Que vous auriez faite de vous-même, mon Dieu !

M. DE GRÉMONVILLE
Que j'allais faire, moi-même... oui.

PAUL

Et qui est... Voyons ! précisez !

M. DE GRÉMONVILLE
(obéissant toujours au regard de Mme de Grémonville) Qui est très bien... très bien... et cela m’étonne !

PAUL

De moi ?

M. DE GRÉMONVILLE
Oui, car tout à l’heure je viens d’apprendre par ma femme vos coupables égarements.

PAUL *(croisant les bras)* Vous la croyez ?

M. DE GRÉMONVILLE
Pourquoi pas ? et je vous blâme, je vous blâme, tout à fait !... On aurait dû me laisser à Toulouse plutôt que de me faire assister à de pareils... tableaux.

PAUL

Ah ! vous aussi ! tout le monde contre moi ! Eh bien, puisqu’on est à me marchander un pardon que j’implore et jusqu’à un amour qui m’appartient, je repousse net toutes les conditions qu’on m’impose. Assez de prières ! *(à Mme de Mérilhac)* Je ne descendrai pas pour vivre au modeste emploi que vos bontés me destinaient, Madame... *(à M. des Orbières)* Et j’espère pouvoir me passer de vous, Monsieur le Ministre !... Si deux maisons me sont fermées et la mienne devenue impossible, une autre va s’ouvrir : celle du général Varin des Ilots. Vous parliez de mes dettes ? rassurez-vous, il les paye.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Lui ?

Mme DUVERNIER

Comment ?

THÉRÈSE
Quel exemple !

Mme DE MÉRILHAC
Une aberration !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Un scandale !

PAUL (*à Mme de Grémonville)* Il n’a pas d’autre héritier que moi, Madame, je suis désespéré de vous l’apprendre. C’est un esprit juste, un bon cœur, sachant distinguer une faiblesse d’une infamie, assez sûr de lui-même pour être indulgent aux autres, et dont la fortune, je regrette mille fois de vous le dire, échappe complètement à l’influence salutaire du sexe le plus aimable et le plus infaillible. (*prenant son chapeau)* J’ai bien l’honneur de vous saluer !

Scène 10

LE GÉNÉRAL
Tout est réparé ! j’ai tout réparé !

PAUL *(se jetant à son cou)* Cher Parrain !

Mme DUVERNIER

Vous n’avez pas été indisposé ?

LE GÉNÉRAL
Pas le moins du monde !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Votre absence au mariage...
Toutes ces affaires...

Mme DUVERNIER

Je n’étais pas sans inquiétudes !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Effectivement, si on savait le général bien entouré d’une famille...

PAUL *(à part)*
Oh ! le serpent, qui veut l’attirer dans sa maison !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Tandis qu’une personne, seule, d’un certain âge... livrée exclusivement à des domestiques mâles... sans ces mille petits soins qu’on ne peut espérer que des femmes...

LE GÉNÉRAL

C’est incontestable ! incontestable !

PAUL (*avec anxiété)* Que dit-il ?

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
D’autant plus que vous êtes accoutumé à ces douceurs-là, et que la perte irréparable de cette bonne Gertrude...

PAUL

Allons, Madame, vous exagérez singulièrement les choses ; on peut trouver ailleurs quelqu’un de dévoué.

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE
Allons donc !

LE GÉNÉRAL
J’en ai une autre !

Mme DUVERNIER

Une autre !

PAUL *(à part)*
Ah ! très fort, il a flairé le piège, je suis sauvé, *[haut, avec feu)* Et quand vous n’en auriez pas une autre, cher parrain, quand il serait impossible de rencontrer dans le monde connu une femme assez... phénoménale pour diriger convenablement votre maison, sachez que vous trouverez en moi non seulement un filleul, mais un fils. Jour et nuit, à toute heure, je serai fier de vous témoigner par mes soins l’éternelle reconnaissance que je vous dois.

LE GÉNÉRAL
Je te remercie.

PAUL

A compter d’aujourd’hui, plus d’obligations qui m’enchaînaient ! je vous suis de ce pas, je vous appartiens corps et âme !

LE GÉNÉRAL *(étonné)* Que dis-tu ?

PAUL

J’habiterai chez vous, nous vivrons seuls, tous les deux !

LE GÉNÉRAL *(stupéfait)* Tu rêves !

PAUL

Ah, sans doute ! vous ne savez pas, j’oubliais !... Malgré cette noble indulgence dont vous avez enveloppé toute ma folie, quand les autres ont pu connaître par votre exemple le chemin de la miséricorde et du pardon, ma femme me maudit, mes deux familles me repoussent ou du moins ne m’admettent qu’à des conditions trop basses pour qu’il me soit permis de les accepter. Vous voyez donc bien que je peux vous suivre.

LE GÉNÉRAL
Sacrebleu ! mon garçon, nous ne nous entendons pas du tout !... Donne-moi un fauteuil. *(Il s’assoit.)* J’ai absolument tout réparé ! comprends-tu ?

PAUL

Eh bien ?

LE GÉNÉRAL
Mais, mille tonnerres ! tu ne peux pas demeurer chez moi !
fais ta paix !

PAUL (*interdit)*
Que je...

LE GÉNÉRAL (*avec résolution)* C’est impossible ! j’en suis bien fâché... Fais ta paix !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE (*triomphante)* A la bonne heure ! voilà qui est parlé, général.

PAUL (*désespéré)*
Ainsi, vous me refusez votre porte ?

LE GÉNÉRAL *(avec impatience)* Quand je te dis que j’ai trouvé une personne !

PAUL

Et... cette personne serait un obstacle ?

LE GÉNÉRAL *(avec force)* Je t’en réponds !

Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE *(se frottant les mains)* Parfait !

PAUL *(abasourdi)*
D’où vient cela ?

LE GÉNÉRAL
C’est Victoire !

TOUS

Ah !
(Thérèse jette un regard courroucé à Amédée, qui a joint à son cri un soubresaut gymnastique, et qui retombe aussitôt dans son immobilité.)
Mme DE GRÉMONVILLE *(avec dégoût)* Cette fille ?

LE GÉNÉRAL
Cette pauvre fille, Madame, cette innocente... abusée...

PAUL *(avec violence)* Comment ?

LE GÉNÉRAL *(sévèrement)* Serais-tu assez hardi pour soutenir le contraire ? et t’imagines-tu qu’en soldant tes notes, j’aurai payé toute ta dette ?

PAUL

Quelle dette ?

LE GÉNÉRAL *(croisant ses bras)* As-tu, toi, homme marié, les moyens de réparer le tort que tu lui as fait ?

PAUL *(hors de lui)*
Moi ?

LE GÉNÉRAL
Oui, toi, qui l’as arrachée à une existence honnête, et précipitée dans la honte, si l’on arrive à temps pour la sauver !

PAUL *(avec un rire amer)* Il faut que votre religion ait été étrangement surprise par cette fille !

LE GÉNÉRAL (je *levant tout à coup)* Plus de ces mots-là... je l’épouse !

TOUS *(dans des attitudes accablées)* Ah !

AMÉDÉE *(à part, regardant le général)* Encore un de pincé ! et la succession avec ! il était temps !
(très haut, et avec un geste extravagant) Ah !

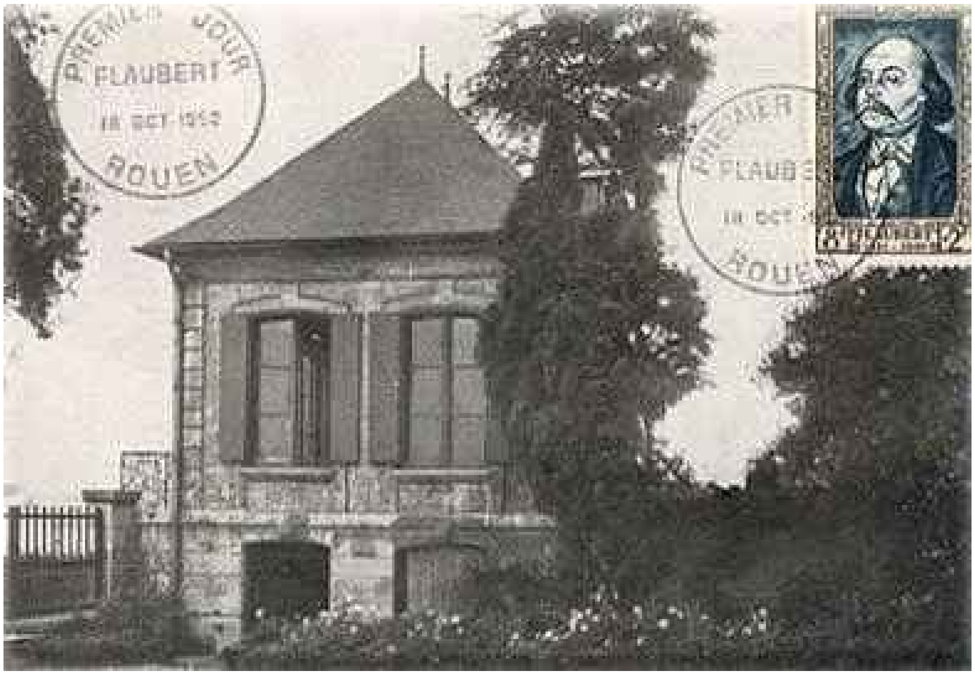
THÉRÈSE *(lui jetant un regard terrible)* Qu’est-ce qui vous prend donc ?

AMÉDÉE *(avec un sourire)* Ma chérie ?

PAUL

(sortant tout à coup de son anéantissement et s'avançant le chapeau à la main vers Mme de Mérilhac) Voulez-vous bien me dire où est ce bureau, Madame ?

Selected Non-Fiction


PREMIER JOUR
FLAUBERT
18 OCT 1952
ROUEN

Commemorative postcard of Flaubert's hometown

ABOARD THE CANGE

Flaubert published several travel books during his writing career, recounting his various journeys across the world. This extract concerns his adventures along the River Nile.

ABOARD THE CANGE

MAXIME DUCAMP passed part of the night in writing letters. Bouilhet slept on a black bear-skin. This morning I accompanied him to the railway station of Rouen. We embraced, both of us pale and agitated, and he finally left me. I turned on my heel and departed. Heaven be praised! that is over! There will be no more parting with any one. My heart s relieved of a heavy burden.

At Maxime’s house there s great confusion. They are packing up his furniture. His friends are there to bid him farewell. Cormenin, sitting on a table, is bathed in tears!

Here I shall interpolate a few pages I wrote while on the Nile, aboard the “Cange.” I had intended to write the whole account of my travels in this way, in paragraphs, or in the form of brief chapters, as I might find the time and opportunity. But I found that plan impossible, and I was obliged to give it up as soon as the Ramazan had passed, and we were able to go about freely once more. I entitled this record “The ‘Cange.’“

I.

February 6, 1850.

Aboard the “Cange.”

The date on which I began this record was, I believe, the twelfth of November, 1840. I was eighteen years old. 1 had recently returned from Corsica — my first experience of travel. I had lust finished a written description of my journeyings, and idly regarded, without really perceiving them, forty-five sheets of paper spread out upon my table that I did not know what to do with. According to my recollection, it was ordinary, ruled, blue-tinted letter-paper, which I had kept tied up η my travelling portfolio. I had bought it in Toulon on one of those fine mornings when my appetite for literature was so keen that I was ready to write without limit on any subject whatever. I cast a last glance upon the blotted sheets, then, pushing them away, I shoved back my chair and arose. I paced to and fro in my room, with my hands in my pockets, my feet in low slippers; with bent head and sadness in my heart.

My former mode of “life was now ended forever, I had left college. What should I do? I had many plans and projects, already a hundred hopes and a thousand tastes. I wished to learn Greek. I regretted the fact that I was not a thousand tastes. I wished to learn Greek. I regretted the fact that I was not a Corsair. I was tempted to become a renegade, a muleteer, or a camelherd! I longed to get away from home, from myself. Oh! to go all over the world — to be carried no matter where, like the smoke from my chimney or the leaves of the acacia!

Finally, drawing a deep sigh, 1 sat down again at the table and sealed up the sheets of paper with a quadruple seal, writing on the outside: “Paper to be used in recording the events of my next journey,” followed by a large interrogation-point. Then I put the packet in a drawer and turned the key.

Sleep in peace under thy coverlet, little white sheets, which should contain ebullitions of enthusiasm and the joyous outpourings of a free fancy! Thy *format* is too slight and thy colour is too soft. Perhaps some day, when I am older, I shall break thy crumbling seals. And what shall I inscribe upon thee then?

II.

Ten years have passed since that time. To-day I find myself on the Nile, and we have just passed Memphis.

We set out from Cairo with a strong north wind. Our two sails, crossing each other, swelled out in all their glory; the “Cange” leaned slightly to one side, her keel cutting through the water, which I could hear softly splashing, Our captain, Ibralvm, was seated forward, cross-legged a la Turk, looking straight ahead and uttering from time to time, without turning his head, cries of command to the sailors. Sitting erect on the poop, which formed the roof of our quarters, was the mate, holding the tiller, while he smoked his chibouk of black wood. The sun was bright and the sky was of a deep blue. With our field-glasses we had been able to see, at long intervals along the banks, flocks of herons and storks.

The water of the Nile is yellow, as it contains a great deal of earth. It moves languidly, as if wearied with the long journeys it has made through many lands; it murmurs incessantly in a mysterious, plaintive monotone. If the Niger and the Nile are really the same river, whence come these waves, and what have they seen? This stream, like the ocean, awakens the profoundest reflection. One thinks of the eternal reverie of Cleopatra, and remembers that the same golden sunlight fell upon the Pharaohs. At the close of day the sky became red on the right of the stream and pink on the left. Γ he pyramids of Sakkara stood out in a grey silhouette against the crimson background of the horizon. A kind of incandescence spread over the sky, steeping it in a golden light. On the opposite side of the river the clouds were a pale rose-colour, deepening in tint towards the horizon. Presently the rosy glow faded a little; then it became yellow, changing horizon. Presently the rosy glow faded a little, then it became yellow, changing to green. At last the green hue melted almost imperceptibly into white, which blended with the deep blue of the vault above our heads,

III.

Far away, on the banks of another river, quieter and less ancient, I own a white house, of which the shutters are closed, now that I am no longer there. The leafless poplars tremble in the cold mists, and the floating blocks of ice in the river grind against the frozen banks. The cows are in their stable, the fruit-trees are covered with straw, the smoke from the farm-house chimney floats slowly up towards the grey clouds.

I left the long, Louis XIV. terrace, bordered with lindens, where I used to walk in summer, clad only in a white dressing-gown. In six weeks the trees will bud again. Each branch will be tipped with little red buttons; then the primroses will bloom, — yellow, green, pink, and variegated — brightening the lawn in the courtyard. O my pretty little primroses! do not lose your seeds, because I wish to see you bloom again another spring!

I left the high wall, covered with a tapestry of roses, and the pavilion beside the water. A honeysuckle climbs upon the iron balcony. In the early hour before dawn, in July, while the moon is still shining, it is pleasant to stand there and watch the humming-birds darting in and out among the blossoms.

IV.

You know all that one feels at the moment of departure from a loved spot, and how the heart aches at the sundering of all the tender ties of place. My notes would be too long should I say more on this subject, so I will pass over all that I might have said.

*

Between us, in the coupe, sat a silent lady, about fifty years old. Her face was half smothered in veils, and she wore a long silk pelisse. A young lady and a gentleman had accompanied her to the station. After we had turned the corner of the Rue Saint-Honore, she began to weep, She traveled with us for several hours, weeping all the way. But I did not weep, — I, who was bound on a longer journey and who had probably left much more behind. Why was I indignant at her? Why did she make me pity her? Why did I have a desire to say something unkind to this good woman? Was it because we think our own joy the only legitimate joy, our own love the only true love, our own griefs the most poignant of all griefs?

*

On my right was a thin gentleman in a white hat; on my left were two diligence conductors who had slipped their blue blouses over their coats. One of these, slightly marked with smallpox and wearing a large black *mazagran* instead of a beard, was our own conductor. His companion, a fat rascal with a jolly face, came here some days before, to hand in his resignation, as he intended to take a pleasure trip to Lyons and to enjoy the excitement of the hunt. What a pleasing medley of ideas this conductor’s personality afforded me! Do you not, like me, possess cherished memories of the time when you were seventeen and the rapturous joy of the holiday vacations and delightful wanderings? Do you not recall your reveries in the fresh air, with five horses galloping before you on a good road, the open country spreading to the horizon, the odour of new-mown hay in your nostrils, the breeze blowing in your face, the ready chat, the soaring dreams, the interminable pipes that were continually going out and having to be relighted, and that freedom which one permits himself in the fraternal ceremony of “having a little glass”; to say nothing of those mysterious and unexpected baskets of game that came to you in your warm dining-room on New Year’s day, about ten o’clock in the morning, while you were at breakfast? Have you never overwhelmed With questions this patient man, who always listened to you as he drove along the road? In some corner of your memory is there not still a yearning recollection of some towering height that dominated all the landscape?

*

I remember a hill we climbed during our first night of travel. It was in the depths of a forest. The moon, shining through the trees here and there, lighted up the road. On our left was a deep valley. The lantern on the seat occupied by the postilion, threw its rays on the backs of the first pair of horses. My neighbour, who had fallen asleep with her mouth open, snored upon my shoulder. “No one spoke, and the coach rolled along.

At ten o’clock we stopped at Nangis-la-France for supper. The men smoked in the kitchen around the great fireplace. A few commercial travellers chatted among themselves. One of them pretended to recognise another, who denied any acquaintance. “Nevertheless,” said the persistent one, “I remember seeing you at Goyer’s, in Clermont, — , it must be at least eighteen years ago. I even recollect you made a great row because they gave you a bed that was too short. How angry you were! You made a tremendous fuss.”

“It is possible, monsieur,” was the reply, “but I have no recollection of it.”

*

V.

Among the passengers on the Saone boat we noticed with interest a young and graceful woman who wore a long green veil upon her bonnet of Italian straw.

*

As for myself, tormented by my bump of causality, I walked to and fro on the bridge of the vessel, trying to decide in what social category to place all these people; and from time to time, in order to aid my diagnoses, I threw a glance, as if I were a thief, at the addresses on the cases, trunks and boxes piled up pell-mell at the foot of the smoke-stack.

I have a mania for weaving romances about the persons I meet by chance. An unconquerable curiosity prompts me in spite of myself to mental queries as to the life of the stranger whom I have just encountered. I wish to know his business, whence he comes, his name, what he is doing, what are his regrets and his hopes, his forgotten amours, his present dreams, — everything about him, even to the kind of binding on his flannel undershirt! And if the stranger be a woman (especially if she is of middle age), my curiosity is even more ardent. How I should like to see her *au naturel,* yes, to the very heart! How I should like to know whence she comes, where she is going, why she is here and net elsewhere. As my eyes dwell upon her, I fancy her the heroine of all sorts of adventures. I credit her with possessing certain sentiments. I speculate upon the probable appearance of her bedchamber, and upon a thousand other things, — even imagining the half-worn slippers into which she thrusts her feet when she gets out of bed!

*

A passing diligence stops here by chance. We swallow a bad dinner, jump into the coach, and in fifteen minutes we are rolling along the road to Marseilles.

Already we feel that we have left the north. A soft blue haze lies on the mountains in the rays of the setting sun. The road stretches straight ahead between borders of olive-trees. The air seems more transparent, and is filled with a golden light.

*

VI.

The first time I visited Marseilles was on a morning in November. The sun shone upon the sea, which was as smooth as a mirror, blue and sparkling. We were at the summit of the hill on the coast of Aix that commands a view of the city. I had just awakened, and I got out of the coach to breathe a little fresh air and to stretch my limbs. I walked along the road, feeling such a sensation of virile well-being as I have never experienced since. How charmed I was with the Mediterranean, that ancient sea of which I had so often dreamed! I admired the tartanes, with their lateen sails, the immense trousers of the Greek sailors, and the stockings, of the colour of Spanish tobacco, worn by the women of the people. The warm air. circulating through the shadowy streets between the tall houses, overwhelmed my mind with soft oriental fancies, and the large paving-stones from Canabiere that heated the soles of my shoes, made me think of the glowing country where I longed to be.

One evening I was alone at the swimming-school at Lausac, on the shore of the bay of Oursins, where there were great nets for catching the tunny-fish that abound in those waters. I swam about in the blue waves; below me I could distinguish the pebbles at the bottom of the sea, all covered with weeds. With a sensation of placid joy, I extended my body in the caressing waters where perhaps the naiads glided. There were no waves: only a swelling, murmuring undulation that rocked me gently to and fro.

I returned to the hotel in a four-seated cabriolet, in company with the manager of the baths and a young blonde person whose damp hair was caught up loosely under her hat. She held upon her lap a little Havana pug dog which she had taken into the bath with her. The animal shivered, and she rubbed it with her hands to warm it. The driver of the coach wore a large grey felt hat, and sat between the shafts of the vehicle.

Ah, heaven! what a long time it is since that happy day!

OVER STRAND AND FIELD

A RECORD OF TRAVEL THROUGH BRITTANY

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CHAPTER I.

CHÂTEAU DE CHAMBORD.

We walked through the empty galleries and deserted rooms where spiders spin their cobwebs over the salamanders of Francis the First. One is overcome by a feeling of distress at the sight of this poverty which has no grandeur. It is not absolute ruin, with the luxury of blackened and mouldy débris, the delicate embroidery of flowers, and the drapery of waving vines undulating in the breeze, like pieces of damask. It is a conscious poverty, for it brushes its threadbare coat and endeavours to appear respectable. The floor has been repaired in one room, while in the next it has been allowed to rot. It shows the futile effort to preserve that which is dying and to bring back that which has fled. Strange to say, it is all very melancholy, but not at all imposing.

And then it seems as if everything had contributed to injure poor Chambord, designed by Le Primatice and chiselled and sculptured by Germain Pilon and Jean Cousin. Upreared by Francis the First, on his return from Spain, after the humiliating treaty of Madrid (1526), it is the monument of a pride that sought to dazzle itself in order to forget defeat. It first harbours Gaston d’Orléans, a crushed pretender, who is exiled within its walls; then it is Louis XIV, who, out of one floor, builds three, thus ruining the beautiful double staircase which extended without interruption from the top to the bottom. Then one day, on the second floor, facing the front, under the magnificent ceiling covered with salamanders and painted ornaments which are now crumbling away, Molière produced for the first time *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*. Then it was given to the Maréchal de Saxe; then to the Polignacs, and finally to a plain soldier, Berthier. It was afterwards bought back by subscription and presented to the Duc de Bordeaux. It has been given to everybody, as if nobody cared to have it or desired to keep it. It looks as if it had hardly ever been used, and as if it had always been too spacious. It is like a deserted hostelry where transient guests have not left even their names on the walls.

When we walked through an outside gallery to the Orléans staircase, in order to examine the caryatids which are supposed to represent Francis the First, M. de Chateaubriand, and Madame d’Étampes, and turned around the celebrated lantern that terminates the big staircase, we stuck our heads several times through the railing to look down. In the courtyard was a little donkey nursing its mother, rubbing up against her, shaking its long ears and playfully jumping around. This is what we found in the court of honour of the Château de around. This is what we found in the court of honour of the Château de Chambord; these are its present hosts: a dog rolling in the grass, and a nursing, braying donkey frolicking on the threshold of kings!

CHÂTEAU D’AMBOISE.

The Château d’Amboise, which dominates the whole city that appears to be thrown at its feet like a mass of pebbles at the foot of a rock, looks like an imposing fortress, with its large towers pierced by long, narrow windows; its arched gallery that extends from the one to the other, and the brownish tint of its walls, darkened by the contrast of the flowers, which droop over them like a nodding plume on the bronzed forehead of an old soldier. We spent fully a quarter of an hour admiring the tower on the left; it is superb, imbrowned and yellowish in some places and coated with soot in others; it has charming charlocks hanging from its battlements, and is, in a word, one of those speaking monuments that seem to breathe and hold one spellbound and pensive under their gaze, like those paintings, the originals of which are unknown to us, but whom we love without knowing why.

The Château is reached by a slight incline which leads to a garden elevated like a terrace, from which the view extends on the whole surrounding country. It was of a delicate green; poplar trees lined the banks of the river; the meadows advanced to its edge, mingling their grey border with the bluish and vapourous horizon, vaguely enclosed by indistinct hills. The Loire flowed in the middle, bathing its islands, wetting the edge of the meadows, turning the wheels of the mills and letting the big boats glide peacefully, two by two, over its silvery surface, lulled to sleep by the creaking of the heavy rudders; and in the distance two big white sails gleamed in the sun.

Birds flew from the tops of the towers and the edge of the machicolations to some other spot, described circles in the air, chirped, and soon passed out of sight. About a hundred feet below us were the pointed roofs of the city, the empty courtyards of the old mansions, and the black holes of the smoky chimneys. Leaning in the niche of a battlement, we gazed and listened, and breathed it all in, enjoying the beautiful sunshine and balmy air impregnated with the pungent odour of the ruins. And there, without thinking of anything in particular, without even phrasing inwardly about something, I dreamed of coats of mail as pliable as gloves, of shields of buffalo hide soaked with sweat, of closed visors through which shot bloodthirsty glances, of wild and desperate night attacks with torches that set fire to the walls, and hatchets that mutilated the bodies; and of Louis XI, of the lover’s war, of D’Aubigné and of the charlocks, the birds, the polished ivy, the denuded brambles, tasting in my pensive and idle occupation — what is greatest in men, their memory; — and pensive and idle occupation what is greatest in men, their memory, and what is most beautiful in nature, her ironical encroachments and eternal youth.

In the garden, among the lilac-bushes and the shrubs that droop over the alleys, rises the chapel, a work of the sixteenth century, chiselled at every angle, a perfect jewel, even more intricately decorated inside than out, cut out like the paper covering of a *bonbonnière*, and cunningly sculptured like the handle of a Chinese parasol. On the door is a *bas-relief* which is very amusing and ingenuous. It represents the meeting of Saint Hubert with the mystic stag, which bears a cross between its antlers. The saint is on his knees; above him hovers an angel who is about to place a crown on his cap; near them stands the saint’s horse, watching the scene with a surprised expression; the dogs are barking and on the mountain, the sides and facets of which are cut to represent crystals, creeps the serpent. You can see its flat head advancing toward some leafless trees that look like cauliflowers. They are the sort of trees one comes upon in old Bibles, spare of foliage, thick and clumsy, bearing blossoms and fruit but no leaves; the symbolical, theological, and devout trees that are almost fantastical on account of their impossible ugliness. A little further, Saint Christopher is carrying Jesus on his shoulders; Saint Antony is in his cell, which is built on a rock; a pig is retiring into its hole and shows only its hind-quarters and its corkscrew tail, while a rabbit is sticking its head out of its house.

Of course, it is all a little clumsy and the moulding is not faultless. But there is so much life and movement about the figure and the animals, so much charm in the details, that one would give a great deal to be able to carry it away and take it home.

Inside of the Château, the insipid Empire style is reproduced in every apartment. Almost every room is adorned with busts of Louis-Philippe and Madame Adélaïde. The present reigning family has a craze for being portrayed on canvas. It is the bad taste of a parvenu, the mania of a grocer who has accumulated money and who enjoys seeing himself in red, white, and yellow, with his watch-charms dangling over his stomach, his bewhiskered chin and his children gathered around him.

On one of the towers, and in spite of the most ordinary common sense, they have built a glass rotunda which is used for a dining-room. True, the view from it is magnificent. But the building presents so shocking an appearance from the outside, that one would, I should think, prefer to see nothing of the environs, or else to eat in the kitchen.

In order to go back to the city, we came down by a tower that was used by carriages to approach the Château. The sloping gravelled walk turns around a stone axle like the steps of a staircase. The arch is dark and lighted only by the rays that creep through the loop-holes. The columns on which the interior end of the vault rests, are decorated with grotesque or vulgar subjects. A dogmatic intention seems to have presided over their composition. It would be well for travellers to begin the inspection at the bottom, with the *Aristoteles equitatus* (a subject which has already been treated on one of the choir statues in the Cathedral of Rouen) and reach by degrees a pair embracing in the manner which both Lucretius and *l'Amour Conjugal* have recommended. The greater part of the intermediary subjects have been removed, to the despair of seekers of comical things, like ourselves; they have been removed in cold blood, with deliberate intent, for the sake of decency, and because, as one of the servants of his Majesty informed us convincingly, "a great many were improper for the lady visitors to see."

CHÂTEAU DE CHENONCEAUX.

A something of infinite suavity and aristocratic serenity pervades the Château de Chenonceaux. It is situated outside of the village, which keeps at a respectful distance. It can be seen through a large avenue of trees, and is enclosed by woods and an extensive park with beautiful lawns. Built on the water, it proudly uprears its turrets and its square chimneys. The Cher flows below, and murmurs at the foot of its arches, the pointed corners of which form eddies in the tide. It is all very peaceful and charming, graceful yet robust. Its calm is not wearying and its melancholy has no tinge of bitterness.

One enters through the end of a long, arched hallway, which used to be a fencing-room. It is decorated with some armours, which, in spite of the obvious necessity of their presence, do not shock one's taste or appear out of place. The whole scheme of interior decoration is tastefully carried out; the furniture and hangings of the period have been preserved and cared for intelligently. The great, venerable mantel-pieces of the sixteenth century do not shelter the hideous and economical German stoves, which might easily be hidden in some of them.

In the kitchen, situated in a wing of the castle, which we visited later, a maid was peeling vegetables and a scullion was washing dishes, while the cook was standing in front of the stove, superintending a reasonable number of shining saucepans. It was all very delightful, and bespoke the idle and intelligent home life of a gentleman. I like the owners of Chenonceaux.

In fact, have you not often seen charming old paintings that make you gaze at them indefinitely, because they portray the period in which their owners lived, the ballets in which the farthingales of all those beautiful pink ladies whirled around, and the sword-thrusts which those noblemen gave each other with their rapiers? Here are some temptations of history. One would like to know whether those people loved as we do, and what difference existed between their passions and our own. One would like them to open their lips and tell their history, tell us everything they used to do, no matter how futile, and what their cares and pleasures used to be. It is an irritating and seductive curiosity, a dreamy desire for knowledge, such as one feels regarding the past life of a mistress.... But they are deaf to the questions our eyes put to them, they remain dumb and motionless in their wooden frames, and we pass on. The moths attack their canvases, but the latter are revarnished; and the pictures will smile on when we are buried and forgotten. And others will come and gaze upon them, till the day they crumble to dust; then people will dream in the same old way before our own likenesses, and ask themselves what used to happen in our day, and whether life was not more alluring then.

I should not have spoken again of those handsome dames, if the large, full-length portrait of Madame Deshoulières, in an elaborate white *dêshabille*, (it was really a fine picture, and, like the much decried and seldom read efforts of the poetess, better at the second look than at the first), had not reminded me, by the expression of the mouth, which is large, full, and sensual, of the peculiar coarseness of Madame de Staël’s portrait by Gérard. When I saw it two years ago, at Coppet, in bright sunshine, I could not help being impressed by those red, vinous lips and the wide, aspiring nostrils. George Sand’s face offers a similar peculiarity. In all those women who were half masculine, spirituality revealed itself only in the eyes. All the rest remained material.

In point of amusing incidents, there is still at Chenonceaux, in Diane de Poitiers’s room, the wide canopy bedstead of the royal favourite, done in white and red. If it belonged to me, it would be very hard for me not to use it once in a while. To sleep in the bed of Diane de Poitiers, even though it be empty, is worth as much as sleeping in that of many more palpable realities. Moreover, has it not been said that all the pleasure in these things was only imagination? Then, can you conceive of the peculiar and historical voluptuousness, for one who possesses some imagination, to lay his head on the pillow that belonged to the mistress of Francis the First, and to stretch his limbs on her mattress? (Oh! how willingly I would give all the women in the world for the mummy of Cleopatra!) But I would not dare to touch, for fear of breaking them, the porcelains belonging to Catherine de Médicis, in the dining-room, nor place my foot in the stirrup of Francis the First, for fear it might remain there, nor put my lips to the mouth-piece of the huge trumpet in the fencing-room, for fear of rupturing my lungs.

CHAPTER II.

CHÂTEAU DE CLISSON.

On a hill at the foot of which two rivers mingle their waters, in a fresh landscape, brightened by the light colours of the inclined roofs, that are grouped like many sketches of Hubert, near a waterfall that turns the wheel of a mill hidden among the leaves, the Château de Clisson raises its battered roof above the tree-tops. Everything around it is calm and peaceful. The little dwellings seem to smile as if they had been built under softer skies; the waters sing their song, and patches of moss cover a stream over which hang graceful clusters of foliage. The horizon extends on one side into a tapering perspective of meadows, while on the other it rises abruptly and is enclosed by a wooded valley, the trees of which crowd together and form a green ocean.

After one crosses the bridge and arrives at the steep path which leads to the Château, one sees, standing upreared and bold on the moat on which it is built, a formidable wall, crowned with battered machicolations and bedecked with trees and ivy, the luxuriant growth of which covers the grey stones and sways in the wind, like an immense green veil which the recumbent giant moves dreamily across his shoulders. The grass is tall and dark, the plants are strong and hardy; the trunks of the ivy are twisted, knotted, and rough, and lift up the walls as with levers or hold them in the network of their branches. In one spot, a tree has grown through the wall horizontally, and, suspended in the air, has let its branches radiate around it. The moats, the steep slope of which is broken by the earth which has detached itself from the embankments and the stones which have fallen from the battlements, have a wide, deep curve, like hatred and pride; and the portal, with its strong, slightly arched ogive, and its two bays that raise the drawbridge, looks like a great helmet with holes in its visor.

When one enters, he is surprised and astonished at the wonderful mixture of ruins and trees, the ruins accentuating the freshness of the trees, while the latter in turn, render more poignant the melancholy of the ruins. Here, indeed, is the beautiful, eternal, and brilliant laughter of nature over the skeleton of things; here is the insolence of her wealth and the deep grace of her encroachments, and the melodious invasions of her silence. A grave and pensive enthusiasm fills one’s soul; one feels that the sap flows in the trees and that the grass grows with the same strength and the same rhythm, as the stones crumble and the walls cave in. A sublime art, in the supreme accord of secondary discordances, has contrasted the unruly ivy with the sinuous sweep of the ruins, the brambles with contrasted the unruly ivy with the sinuous sweep of the ruins, the brambles with the heaps of crumbling stones, the clearness of the atmosphere with the strong projections of the masses, the colour of the sky with the colour of the earth, reflecting each one in the other: that which was, and that which is. Thus history and nature always reveal, though they may accomplish it in a circumscribed spot of the world, the unceasing relation, the eternal hymen of dying humanity and the growing daisy; of the stars that glow, and the men who expire, of the heart that beats and the wave that rises. And this is so clearly indicated here, is so overwhelming, that one shudders inwardly, as if this dual life centred in one’s own body; so brutal and immediate is the perception of these harmonies and developments. For the eye also has its orgies and the mind its delights.

At the foot of two large trees, the trunks of which are intersected, a stream of light floods the grass and seems like a luminous river, brightening the solitude. Overhead, a dome of leaves, through which one can see the sky presenting a vivid contrast of blue, reverberates a bright, greenish light, which illuminates the ruins, accentuating the deep furrows, intensifying the shadows, and disclosing all the hidden beauties. You advance and walk between those walls and under the trees, wander along the barbicans, pass under the falling arcades from which spring large, waving plants. The vaults, which contain corpses, echo under your footfalls; lizards run in the grass, beetles creep along the walls, the sky is blue, and the sleepy ruins pursue their dream.

With its triple enclosure, its dungeons, its interior courtyards, its machicolations, its underground passages, its ramparts piled one upon the other, like a bark on a bark and a shield on a shield, the ancient Château of the Clissons rises before your mind and is reconstructed. The memory of past existences exudes from its walls with the emanations of the nettles and the coolness of the ivy. In that castle, men altogether different from us were swayed by passions stronger than ours; their hands were brawnier and their chests broader.

Long black streaks still mark the walls, as in the time when logs blazed in the eighteen-foot fireplaces. Symmetrical holes in the masonry indicate the floors to which one ascended by winding staircases now crumbling in ruins, while their empty doors open into space. Sometimes a bird, taking flight from its nest hanging in the branches, would pass with spread wings through the arch of a window, and fly far away into the country.

At the top of a high, bleak wall, several square bay-windows, of unequal length and position, let the pure sky shine through their crossed bars; and the bright blue, framed by the stone, attracted my eye with surprising persistency. The sparrows in the trees were chirping, and in the midst of it all a cow, thinking, no doubt, that it was a meadow, grazed peacefully, her horns sweeping over the grass.

There is a window, a large window that looks out into a meadow called *la prairie des chevaliers*. It was there, from a stone bench carved in the wall, that the high-born dames of the period watched the knights urge their iron-barbed steeds against one another, and the lances come down on the helmets and snap, and the men fall to the ground. On a fine summer day, like to-day, perhaps, when the mill that enlivens the whole landscape did not exist, when there were roofs on the walls, and Flemish hangings, and oil-cloths on the window-sills, when there was less grass, and when human voices and rumours filled the air, more than one heart beat with love and anguish under its red velvet bodice. Beautiful white hands twitched with fear on the stone, which is now covered with moss, and the embroidered veils of high caps fluttered in the wind that plays with my cravat and that swayed the plumes of the knights.

We went down into the vaults where Jean V was imprisoned. In the men’s dungeon we saw the large double hook that was used for executions; and we touched curiously with our fingers the door of the women’s prison. It is about four inches thick and is plated with heavy iron bars. In the middle is a little grating that was used to throw in whatever was necessary to prevent the captive from starving. It was this grating which opened instead of the door, which, being the mouth of the most terrible confessions, was one of those that always closed but never opened. In those days there was real hatred. If you hated a person, and he had been kidnapped by surprise or traitorously trapped in an interview, and was in your power, you could torture him at your own sweet will. Every minute, every hour, you could delight in his anguish and drink his tears. You could go down into his cell and speak to him and bargain with him, laugh at his tortures, and discuss his ransom; you could live on and off him, through his slowly ebbing life and his plundered treasures. Your whole castle, from the top of the towers to the bottom of the trenches, weighed on him, crushing, and burying him; and thus family revenges were accomplished by the family itself, a fact which constituted their potency and symbolised the idea.

Sometimes, however, when the wretched prisoner was an aristocrat and a wealthy man, and he near death, and one was tired of him, and his tears had acted upon the hatred of his master like refreshing bleedings, there was talk of releasing him. The captive promised everything; he would return the fortified towns, hand over the keys to his best cities, give his daughter in marriage, endow churches and journey on foot to the Holy Sepulchre. And money! Money! Why, he would have more of it coined by the Jews! Then the treaty would be signed and dated and counter-signed; the relics would be brought forth to be sworn on, and the prisoner would be a free man once more. He would jump on his horse, gallop away, and when he reached home he would order the drawbridge hoisted, call his vassals together, and take down his sword from the wall. His hatred would find an outlet in terrific explosions of wrath. It was the time of frightful passions and victorious rages. The oath? The Pope would free him from it, and the ransom he simply ignored.

When Clisson was imprisoned in the Château de l'Hermine, he promised for his freedom a hundred thousand francs' worth of gold, the restitution of the towns belonging to the duke of Penthièvre, and the cancelling of his daughter Marguerite's betrothal to the Duke of Penthièvre. But as soon as he was set free, he began by attacking Chateladren, Guingamp, Lamballe and St. Malo, which cities either were taken or they capitulated. But the people of Brittany paid for the fun.

When Jean V. was captured by the Count of Penthièvre at the bridge of Loroux, he promised a ransom of one million; he promised his eldest daughter, who was already betrothed to the King of Sicily. He promised Montcontour, Sesson and Jugan, etc., but he gave neither his daughter nor the money, nor the cities. He had promised to go to the Holy Sepulchre. He acquitted himself of this by proxy. He had taken an oath that he would no longer levy taxes and subsidies. The Pope freed him from this pledge. He had promised to give Nôtre-Dame de Nantes his weight in gold; but as he weighed nearly two hundred pounds, he remained greatly indebted. With all that he was able to pick up or snatch away, he quickly formed a league and compelled the house of Penthièvre to buy the peace which they had sold to him.

On the other side of the Sèvre, a forest covers the hill with its fresh, green maze of trees; it is *La Garenne*, a park that is beautiful in itself, in spite of the artificial embellishments that have been introduced. M. Semot, (the father of the present owner), was a painter of the Empire and a laureate, and he tried to reproduce to the best of his ability that cold Italian, republican, Roman style, which was so popular in the time of Canova and of Madame de Staël. In those days people were inclined to be pompous and noble. They used to place chiselled urns on graves and paint everybody in a flowing cloak, and with long hair; then Corinne sang to the accompaniment of her lyre beside Oswald, who wore Russian boots; and it was thought proper to have everybody's head adorned with a profusion of dishevelled locks and to have a multitude of ruins in every landscape.

This style of embellishment abounds throughout La Garenne. There is a temple erected to Vesta, and directly opposite it another erected to Friendship....

Inscriptions, artificial rocks, factitious ruins, are scattered lavishly, with artlessness and conviction.... But the poetical riches centre in the grotto of Héloïse, a sort of natural dolmen on the bank of the Sèvre.

Why have people made Héloïse, who was such a great and noble figure, appear commonplace and silly, the prototype of all crossed loves and the narrow ideal of sentimental schoolgirls? The unfortunate mistress of the great Abélard deserved a better fate, for she loved him with devoted admiration, although he was hard and taciturn at times and spared her neither bitterness nor blows. She dreaded offending him more than she dreaded offending God, and strove harder to please him. She did not wish him to marry her, because she thought that "it was wrong and deplorable that the one whom nature had created for all ... should be appropriated by one woman." She found, she said, "more happiness in the appellation of mistress or concubine, than in that of wife or empress," and by humiliating herself in him, she hoped to gain a stronger hold over his heart.

The park is really delightful. Alleys wind through the woods and clusters of trees bend over the meandering stream. You can hear the bubbling water and feel the coolness of the foliage. If we were irritated by the bad taste displayed here, it was because we had just left Clisson, which has a real, simple, and solid beauty, and after all, this bad taste is not that of our contemporaries. But what is, in fact, bad taste? Invariably it is the taste of the period which has preceded ours. Bad taste at the time of Ronsard was represented by Marot; at the time of Boileau, by Ronsard; at the time of Voltaire, by Corneille, and by Voltaire in the day of Chateaubriand, whom many people nowadays begin to think a trifle weak. O men of taste in future centuries, let me recommend you the men of taste of to-day! You will laugh at their cramps, their superb disdain, their preference for veal and milk, and the faces they make when underdone meat and too ardent poetry is served to them. Everything that is beautiful will then appear ugly; everything that is graceful, stupid; everything that is rich, poor; and oh! how our delightful boudoirs, our charming salons, our exquisite costumes, our palpitating plays, our interesting novels, our serious books will all be consigned to the garret or be used for old paper and manure! O posterity, above all things do not forget our gothic salons, our Renaissance furniture, M. Pasquier's discourses, the shape of our hats, and the aesthetics of *La Revue des Deux Mondes!*

While we were pondering upon these lofty philosophical considerations, our wagon had hauled us over to Tiffanges. Seated side by side in a sort of tin tub, our weight crushed the tiny horse, which swayed to and fro between the shafts. It was like the twitching of an eel in the body of a musk-rat. Going down hill pushed him forward, going up hill pulled him backward, while uneven places in the road threw him from side to side, and the wind and the whip lashed him alternately. The poor brute! I cannot think of him now without a certain feeling of remorse.

The road down hill is curved and its edges are covered with clumps of sea-rushes or large patches of a certain reddish moss. To the right, on an eminence that starts from the bottom of the dale and swells in the middle like the carapace of a tortoise, one perceives high, unequal walls, the crumbling tops of which appear one above another.

One follows a hedge, climbs a path, and enters an open portal which has sunken into the ground to the depth of one third of its ogive. The men who used to pass through it on horseback would be obliged to bend over their saddles in order to enter it to-day. When the earth is tired of supporting a monument, it swells up underneath it, creeps up to it like a wave, and while the sky causes the top to crumble away, the ground obliterates the foundations. The courtyard was deserted and the calm water that filled the moats remained motionless and flat under the pond-lilies.

The sky was white and cloudless, but without sunshine. Its bleak curve extended far away, covering the country with a cold and cheerless monotony. Not a sound could be heard, the birds did not sing, even the horizon was mute, and from the empty furrows came neither the scream of the crows as they soar heavenward, nor the soft creaking of plough-wheels. We climbed down through brambles and underbrush into a deep and dark trench, hidden at the foot of a large tower, which stands in the water surrounded by reeds. A lone window opens on one side: a dark square relieved by the grey line of its stone cross-bar. A capricious cluster of wild honeysuckle covers the sill, and its maze of perfumed blossoms creeps along the walls. When one looks up, the openings of the big machicolations reveal only a part of the sky, or some little, unknown flower which has nestled in the battlement, its seed having been wafted there on a stormy day and left to sprout in the cracks of the stones.

Presently, a long, balmy breeze swept over us like a sigh, and the trees in the moats, the moss on the stones, the reeds in the water, the plants among the ruins, and the ivy, which covered the tower from top to bottom with a layer of shining leaves, all trembled and shook their foliage; the corn in the fields rippled in endless waves that again and again bent the swaying tops of the ears; the pond wrinkled and welled up against the foot of the tower; the leaves of the ivy all quivered at once, and an apple-tree in bloom covered the ground with pink blossoms.

Nothing, nothing! The open sky, the growing grass, the passing wind. No ragged child tending a browsing cow; not even, as elsewhere, some solitary goat sticking its shaggy head through an aperture in the walls to turn at our approach and flee in terror through the bushes; not a song-bird, not a nest, not a sound! This castle is like a ghost: mute and cold, it stands abandoned in this deserted place, and looks accursed and replete with terrifying recollections. Still, this melancholy dwelling, which the owls now seem to avoid, was once inhabited. In the dungeon, between four walls as livid as the bottom of an old drinking-trough, we were able to discover the traces of five floors. A chimney, with its two round pillars and black top, has remained suspended in the air at a height of thirty feet. Earth has accumulated on it, and plants are growing there as if it were a jardinière.

Beyond the second enclosure, in a ploughed field, one can recognise the ruins of a chapel by the broken shafts of an ogive portal. Grass has grown around it, and trees have replaced the columns. Four hundred years ago, this chapel was filled with ornaments of gold cloth and silk, censers, chandeliers, chalices, crosses, precious stones, gold vessels and vases, a choir of thirty singers, chaplains, musicians, and children sang hymns to the accompaniment of an organ which they took along with them when they travelled. They were clad in scarlet garments lined with pearl grey and vair. There was one whom they called archdeacon, and another whom they called bishop, and the Pope was asked to allow them to wear mitres like canons, for this chapel was the chapel, and this castle one of the castles of Gilles de Laval, lord of Rouci, of Montmorency, of Retz and of Craon, lieutenant-general of the Duke of Brittany and field-marshal of France, who was burned at Nantes on the 25th of October, 1440, in the Prée de la Madéleine for being a counterfeiter, a murderer, a magician, an atheist and a Sodomite.

He possessed more than one hundred thousand crowns’ worth of furniture; an income of thirty thousand pounds a year, the profits of his fiefs and his salary as field-marshal; fifty magnificently appointed horsemen escorted him. He kept open house, served the rarest viands and the oldest wines at his board, and gave representations of mysteries, as cities used to do when a king was within their gates. When his money gave out, he sold his estates; when those were gone, he looked around for more gold, and when he had destroyed his furnaces, he called on the devil. He wrote him that he would give him all that he possessed, excepting his life and his soul. He made sacrifices, gave alms and instituted ceremonies in his honour. At night, the bleak walls of the castle lighted up by the glare of the torches that flared amid bumpers of rare wines and gipsy jugglers, and blushed hotly under the unceasing breath of magical bellows. The inhabitants invoked the devil, joked with death, murdered children, enjoyed frightful and atrocious pleasures; blood flowed, instruments played, everything echoed with voluptuousness, horror, and madness.

When he expired, four or five damsels had his body removed from the stake, laid out, and taken to the Carmelites, who, after performing the customary services, buried him in state.

On one of the bridges of the Loire, relates Guépin, opposite the Hôtel de la Boule-d’Or, an expiatory monument was erected to his memory. It was a niche containing the statue of the *Bonne Vierge de crée lait*, who had the power of creating milk in nurses; the good people offered her butter and similar rustic products. The niche still exists, but the statue is gone; the same as at the town-house, where the casket which contained the heart of Queen Anne is also empty. But we did not care to see the casket; we did not even give it a thought. I should have preferred gazing upon the trousers of the marshal of Retz to looking at the heart of Madame Anne de Bretagne.

CHAPTER III.

CARNAC.

The field of Carnac is a large, open space where eleven rows of black stones are aligned at symmetrical intervals. They diminish in size as they recede from the ocean. Cambry asserts that there were four thousand of these rocks and Fréminville has counted twelve hundred of them. They are certainly very numerous.

What was their use? Was it a temple?

One day Saint Cornille, pursued along the shore by soldiers, was about to jump into the ocean, when he thought of changing them all into stone, and forthwith the men were petrified. But this explanation was good only for fools, little children, and poets. Other people looked for better reasons.

In the sixteenth century, Olaüs Magnus, archbishop of Upsal (who, banished to Rome, wrote a book on the antiquities of his country that met with widespread success except in his native land, Sweden, where it was not translated), discovered that, when these stones form one long, straight row, they cover the bodies of warriors who died while fighting duels; that those arranged in squares are consecrated to heroes that perished in battle; that those disposed in a circle are family graves, while those that form corners or angular figures are the tombs of horsemen or foot-soldiers, and more especially of those fighters whose party had triumphed. All this is quite clear, but Olaüs Magnus has forgotten to tell us how two cousins who killed each other in a duel on horseback could have been buried. The fact of the duel required that the stones be straight; the relationship required that they be circular; but as the men were horsemen, it seems as if the stones ought to have been arranged squarely, though this rule, it is true, was not formal, as it was applied only to those whose party had triumphed. O good Olaüs Magnus! You must have liked Monte-Pulciano exceeding well! And how many draughts of it did it take for you to acquire all this wonderful knowledge?

According to a certain English doctor named Borlase, who had observed similar stones in Cornouailles, “they buried soldiers there, in the very place where they died.” As if, usually, they were carted to the cemetery! And he builds his hypothesis on the following comparison: their graves are on a straight line, like the front of an army on plains that were the scene of some great action.

Then they tried to bring in the Greeks, the Egyptians, and the Cochin Chinese! There is a Karnac in Egypt, they said, and one on the coast of Brittany. Now, it is probable that this Karnac descends from the Egyptian one; it is quite

Now, it is probable that this Karnac descends from the Egyptian one, it is quite certain! In Egypt they are sphinxes; here they are rocks; but in both instances they are of stone. So it would seem that the Egyptians (who never travelled), came to this coast (of the existence of which they were ignorant), founded a colony (they never founded any), and left these crude statues (they produced such beautiful ones), as a positive proof of their sojourn in this country (which nobody mentions).

People fond of mythology thought them the columns of Hercules; people fond of natural history thought them a representation of the python, because, according to Pausanias, a similar heap of stones, on the road from Thebes to Elissonte, was called “the serpent’s head,” and especially because the rows of stones at Carnac present the sinuosities of a serpent. People fond of cosmography discovered a zodiac, like M. de Cambry, who recognised in those eleven rows of stones the twelve signs of the zodiac, “for it must be stated,” he adds, “that the ancient Gauls had only eleven signs to the zodiac.”

Subsequently, a member of the Institute conjectured that it might perhaps be the cemetery of the Venetians, who inhabited Vannes, situated six miles from Carnac, and who founded Venice, as everybody knows. Another man wrote that these Venetians, conquered by Cæsar, erected all those rocks solely in a spirit of humility and in order to honour their victor. But people were getting tired of the cemetery theory, the serpent and the zodiac; they set out again and this time found a Druidic temple.

The few documents that we possess, scattered through Pliny and Dionysius Cassius, agree in stating that the Druids chose dark places for their ceremonies, like the depths of the woods with “their vast silence.” And as Carnac is situated on the coast, and surrounded by a barren country, where nothing but these gentlemen’s fancies has ever grown, the first grenadier of France, but not, in my estimation, the cleverest man, followed by Pelloutier and by M. Mahé, (canon of the cathedral of Vannes), concluded that it was “a Druidic temple in which political meetings must also have been held.”

But all had not been said, and it still remained to be discovered of what use the empty spaces in the rows could have been. “Let us look for the reason, a thing nobody has ever thought of before,” cried M. Mahé, and, quoting a sentence from Pomponius Mela: “The Druids teach the nobility many things and instruct them secretly in caves and forests;” and this one from Tucain: “You dwell in tall forests,” he reached the conclusion that the Druids not only officiated at the sanctuaries, but that they also lived and taught in them. “So the monument of Carnac being a sanctuary, like the Gallic forests,” (O power of induction! where are you leading Father Mahé, canon of Vannes and correspondent of the Academy of Agriculture at Poitiers?), there is reason to believe that the intervals, which break up the rows of stones, held rows of houses where the Druids lived with their families and numerous pupils, and where the heads of the nation, who, on state days, betook themselves to the sanctuary, found comfortable lodgings. Good old Druids! Excellent ecclesiastics! How they have been calumnied! They lived there so righteously with their families and numerous pupils, and even were amiable enough to prepare lodgings for the principals of the nation!

But at last came a man imbued with the genius of ancient things and disdainful of trodden paths. He was able to recognize the rests of a Roman camp, and, strangely enough, the rests of one of the camps of Cæsar, who had had these stones upreared only to serve as support for the tents of his soldiers and prevent them from being blown away by the wind. What gales there must have been in those days, on the coasts of Armorica!

The honest writer who, to the glory of the great Julius, discovered this sublime precaution, (thus returning to Cæsar that which never belonged to Cæsar), was a former pupil of l’École Polytechnique, an engineer, a M. de la Sauvagère. The collection of all these data constitutes what is called *Celtic Archæology*, the mysteries of which we shall presently disclose.

A stone placed on another one is called a “dolmen,” whether it be horizontal or perpendicular. A group of upright stones covered by succeeding flat stones, and forming a series of dolmens, is a “fairy grotto,” a “fairy rock,” a “devil’s stable,” or a “giant’s palace”; for, like the people who serve the same wine under different labels, the Celto-maniacs, who had almost nothing to offer, decorated the same things with various names. When these stones form an ellipse, and have no head-covering, one must say: There is a “cromlech”; when one perceives a stone laid horizontally upon two upright stones, one is confronted by a “lichaven” or a “trilithe.” Often two enormous rocks are put one on top of the other, and touch only at one point, and we read that “they are balanced in such a way that the wind alone is sufficient to make the upper rock sway perceptibly,” an assertion which I do not dispute, although I am rather suspicious of the Celtic wind, and although these swaying rocks have always remained unshaken in spite of the fierce kicks I was artless enough to give them; they are called “rolling or rolled stones,” “turned or transported stones,” “stones that dance or dancing stones,” “stones that twist or twisting stones.” You must still learn what a *pierre fichade*, a *pierre fiche*, a *pierre fixée* are, and what is meant by a *haute borne*, a *pierre latte* and a *pierre lait*; in what a *pierre fonte* differs from a *pierre fiette*, and what connection there is between a *chaire à diable* and a *pierre droite*; then you will be as wise as ever were Pelloutier, Déric, Latour d’Auvergne, Penhoet and others, not forgetting Mahé and Fréminville. Now, all this means a *pulvan*, also called a *men-hir*, and designates nothing more than a stone of greater or lesser size, placed by itself in an open field.

I was about to forget the tumuli! Those that are composed of silica and soil are called "barrows" in high-flown language, while the simple heaps of stones are "gals-gals."

People have pretended that when they were not tombs the "dolmens" and "trilithes" were altars, that the "fairy rocks" were assembling places or sepultures, and that the business meetings at the time of the Druids were held in the "cromlechs." M. de Cambry saw in the "swaying rocks" the emblems of the suspended world. The "barrows" and "gals-gals" have undoubtedly been tombs; and as for the "men-hirs," people went so far as to pretend that they had a form which led to the deduction that a certain cult reigned throughout lower Brittany. O chaste immodesty of science, you respect nothing, not even a peulven!

A reverie, no matter how undefined, may lead up to splendid creations, when it starts from a fixed point. Then the imagination, like a soaring hippogriff, stamps the earth with all its might and journeys straightway towards infinite regions. But when it applies itself to a subject devoid of plastic art and history, and tries to extract a science from it, and to reconstruct a world, it remains even poorer and more barren than the rough stone to which the vanity of some praters has lent a shape and dignified with a history.

To return to the stones of Carnac (or rather, to leave them), if anyone should, after all these opinions, ask me mine, I would emit an irresistible, irrefutable, incontestable one, which would make the tents of M. de la Sauvagère stagger, blanch the face of the Egyptian Penhoët, break up the zodiac of Cambry and smash the python into a thousand bits. This is my opinion: the stones of Carnac are simply large stones!

So we returned to the inn and dined heartily, for our five hours' tramp had sharpened our appetites. We were served by the hostess, who had large blue eyes, delicate hands, and the sweet face of a nun. It was not yet bedtime, and it was too dark to work, so we went to the church.

This is small, although it has a nave and side-aisles like a city church. Short, thick stone pillars support its wooden roof, painted in blue, from which hang miniature vessels, votive offerings that were promised during raging storms. Spiders creep along their sails and the riggings are rotting under the dust. No service was being held, and the lamp in the choir burned dimly in its cup filled with yellow oil; overhead, through the open windows of the darkened vault, came broad rays of white light and the sound of the wind rustling in the tree-tops. A man came in to put the chairs in order, and placed two candles in an iron chandelier riveted to the stone pillar; then he pulled into the middle of the aisle a sort of stretcher with a pedestal, its black wood stained with large white spots. Other people entered the church, and a priest clad in his surplice passed us. There was the intermittent tinkling of a bell and then the door of the church opened wide. The jangling sound of the little bell mingled with the tones of another and their sharp, clear tones swelled louder as they came nearer and nearer to us.

A cart drawn by oxen appeared and halted in front of the church. It held a corpse, whose dull white feet protruded from under the winding-sheet like bits of washed alabaster, while the body itself had the uncertain form peculiar to dressed corpses. The crowd around was silent. The men bared their heads; the priest shook his holy-water sprinkler and mumbled orisons, and the pair of oxen swung their heads to and fro under the heavy, creaking yoke. The church, in the background of which gleamed a star, formed one huge shadow in the greenish outdoor atmosphere of a rainy twilight, and the child who held a light on the threshold had to keep his hand in front of it to prevent the wind from blowing it out.

They lifted the body from the cart, and in doing so struck its head against the pole. They carried it into the church and placed it on the stretcher. A crowd of men and women followed. They knelt on the floor, the men near the corpse, and the women a little farther away, near the door; then the service began.

It did not last very long, at least it impressed us that way, for the low psalmodies were recited rapidly and drowned now and then by a stifled sob which came from under the black hoods near the door. A hand touched me and I drew aside to let a bent woman pass. With her clenched fists on her breast, and face averted, she advanced without appearing to move her feet, eager to see, yet trembling to behold, and reached the row of lights which burned beside the bier. Slowly, very slowly, lifting up her arm as if to hide herself under it, she turned her head on her shoulder and sank in a heap on a chair, as limp as her garments.

By the light of the candles, I could see her staring eyes, framed by lids that looked as if they had been scalded, so red were they; her idiotic and contracted mouth, trembling with despair, and her whole pitiful face, which was drenched with tears.

The corpse was that of her husband, who had been lost at sea; he had been washed ashore and was now being laid to rest.

The cemetery adjoined the church. The mourners passed into it through a side-door, while the corpse was being nailed in its coffin, in the vestry. A fine rain moistened the atmosphere; we felt cold; the earth was slippery and the grave-diggers who had not completed their task, found it hard to raise the heavy soil, for it stuck to their shovels. In the background, the women kneeling in the grass, throwing back their hoods and their big white caps, the starched wings of which fluttered in the wind, appeared at a distance like an immense winding-sheet hovering over the earth.

When the corpse reappeared, the prayers began again, and the sobs broke out anew, and could be heard through the dropping rain.

Not far from us, issued, at regular intervals, a sort of subdued gurgle that sounded like laughter. In any other place, a person hearing it would have thought it the repressed explosion of some overwhelming joy or the paroxysm of a delirious happiness. It was the widow, weeping. Then she walked to the edge of the grave, as did the rest of the mourners, and little by little, the soil assumed its ordinary level and everybody went home.

As we walked down the cemetery steps, a young fellow passed us and said in French to a companion: “Heavens! didn’t the fellow stink! He is almost completely mortified! It isn’t surprising, though, after being in the water three weeks!”

One morning we started as on other mornings; we chose the same road, and passed the hedge of young elms and the sloping meadow where the day before we had seen a little girl chasing cattle to the drinking-trough; but it was the last day, and the last time perhaps, that we should pass that way.

A muddy stretch of land, into which we sank up to our ankles, extends from Carnac to the village of Pô. A boat was waiting for us; we entered it, and they hoisted the sail and pushed off. Our sailor, an old man with a cheerful face, sat aft; he fastened a line to the gunwale and let his peaceful boat go its own way. There was hardly any wind; the blue sea was calm and the narrow track the rudder ploughed in the waters could be seen for a long time. The old fellow was talkative; he spoke of the priests, whom he disliked, of meat, which he thought was a good thing to eat even on fast days, of the work he had had when he was in the navy, and of the shots he had received when he was a customs officer.... The boat glided along slowly, the line followed us and the end of the *tape-cul* hung in the water.

The mile we had to walk in order to go from Saint-Pierre to Quiberon was quickly covered, in spite of a hilly and sandy road, and the sun, which made our shoulders smart beneath the straps of our bags, and a number of “men-hirs” that were scattered along the route.

CHAPTER IV.

QUIBERON.

In Quiberon, we breakfasted at old Rohan Belle-Isle’s, who keeps the Hôtel Penthièvre. This gentleman had his bare feet stuck in old slippers, on account of the heat, and was drinking with a mason, a fact which does not prevent him from being the descendant of one of the first families of Europe; an aristocrat of the old stock! a real aristocrat! *Vive Dieu!* He immediately set to work to pound a steak and to cook us some lobsters. Our pride was flattered to its innermost fibre.

The past of Quiberon is concentrated in a massacre. Its greatest curiosity is a cemetery, which is filled to its utmost capacity and overflows into the street. The head-stones are crowded together and invade and submerge one another, as if the corpses were uncomfortable in their graves and had lifted up their shoulders to escape from them. It suggests a petrified ocean, the tombs being the waves, and the crosses the masts of shipwrecked vessels.

In the middle, an open ossuary contains skeletons that have been exhumed in order to make room for other corpses. Who has said: “Life is a hostelry, and the grave is our home?” But these corpses do not remain in their graves, for they are only tenants and are ejected at the expiration of the lease. Around this charnel-house, where the heaps of bones resemble a mass of fagots, is arranged, breast-high, a series of little black boxes, six inches square, surmounted by a cross and cut out in the shape of a heart in front, so that one can see the skulls inside. Above the heart-shaped opening are the following words in painted letters: “This is the head of — — — — , deceased on such and such a day, in such and such a year.” These heads belonged to persons of a certain standing, and one would be considered an ungrateful son if, after seven years, he did not give his parents’ skulls the luxury of one of these little black boxes. The remainder of the bodies is thrown into the bone-house, and twenty-five years afterwards the heads are sent to join them. A few years ago they tried to abolish the custom; but a riot ensued and the practice continued.

Perhaps it is wicked to play with those round skulls which once contained a mind, with those empty circles in which passion throbbed. Those boxes surrounding the ossuary and scattered over the graves, over the wall and in the grass, without any attempt at order, may appear horrible to a few and ridiculous to many; but those black cases rotting even as the bones blanch and crumble to dust; those skulls, with noses eaten away and foreheads streaked by the slimy trails of snails, and hollow, staring eyes; those thigh-bones piled up as in the trails of snails, and hollow, staring eyes, those thigh-bones piled up as in the great charnel-houses mentioned in the Bible; those pieces of skulls lying around filled with earth, in which a flower springs up sometimes and grows through the holes of the eyes; even the vulgarity of those inscriptions, which are as similar as the corpses they identify — all this human rottenness appeared beautiful to us, and procured us a splendid sight.

If the post of Auray had arrived, we should have started at once for Belle-Isle; but they were waiting for it. Transient sailors with bare arms and open shirts sat in the kitchen of the inn, drinking to pass away the time.

“At what time is the post due here in Auray?”

“That depends; usually at ten o’clock,” replied the innkeeper.

“No, at eleven,” put in a man.

“At twelve,” said M. de Rohan.

“At one.”

“At half-past one.”

“Sometimes it doesn’t reach here until two o’clock.”

“It isn’t very regular!”

We were aware of that; it was already three. We could not start before the arrival of this ill-fated messenger, which brings Belle-Isle the despatches from *terra firma*, so we had to resign ourselves. Once in a while some one would get up, go to the door, look out, come back, and start up again. Oh! he will not come to-day. — He must have stopped on the way. — Let’s go home. — No, let’s wait for him. — If, however, you are tired of waiting gentlemen.... After all, there may not be any letters.... No, just wait a little longer. — Oh! here he comes! — But it was some one else, and the dialogue would begin all over again.

At last we heard the beating of tired hoofs on the cobblestones, the tinkling of bells, the cracking of a whip and a man’s voice shouting: “Ho! Ho! Here’s the post! Here’s the post!”

The horse stopped in front of the door, hunched its back, stretched its neck, opened its mouth, disclosed its teeth, spread its hind legs and rose on its hocks.

The animal was lean and tall, and had a moth-eaten mane, rough hoofs and loose shoes; a seton bobbed up and down on its breast. Lost in a saddle that swallowed him up, supported at the back by a valise and in front by the mail-bag, which was passed through the saddle-bow, its rider sat huddled on it like a monkey. His small face, adorned with straggling blond whiskers and as wrinkled and rough as a winter apple, was hidden by a large oil-cloth hat lined with felt; a sort of gray coutil coat was drawn up to his hips and bagged around his stomach, while his trousers stopped at the knees and disclosed his bare legs reddened by the rubbing of the stirrup-straps, and his blue hose, which hung over his shoes. The harness was held together with strings, the rider’s clothes had been mended

The harness was held together with strings, the rider's clothes had been mended with threads of different colours; all sorts of patches and all kinds of spots, torn linen, greasy leather, dried mud, recent dust, hanging straps, bright rags, a dirty man and a mangy horse, the former sickly and perspiring, the latter consumptive and almost spent; the one with his whip and the other with its bells — all this formed but one object which had the same colour and movement and executed almost the same gestures, which served the same purpose, the conducting of the Auray post.

After another hour, when all the packages and commissions had been attended to and we had waited for several passengers who were to come, we finally left the inn and went aboard. At first there was nothing but a confused mass of people and luggage, oars that caused us to stumble, sails that dropped on our heads, men falling over each other and not knowing where to go; then everything quieted down, each one found his nook, the luggage was put in the bottom of the boat, the sailors got on the benches, and the passengers seated themselves as best they could.

There was no breeze and the sails clung limply to the masts. The heavy boat hardly moved over the almost motionless sea, which swelled and subsided with the gentle rhythm of a sleeping breast.

Leaning against one of the gunwales, we gazed at the water, which was as blue and calm as the sky, and listened to the splashing of the oars; sitting in the shadow of the sail, the six rowers lifted their oars regularly to make the forward stroke, and when they dipped them into the water and brought them up again, drops of crystal clung to their paddles. Reclining on the straw, or sitting on the benches, with their legs dangling and their chins in their hands, or leaning against the sides of the boat, between the big jambs of the hull, the tar of which was melting in the heat, the silent passengers hung their heads and closed their eyes to shut out the glare of the sun, that shone on the flat ocean as on a mirror.

A white-haired man was sleeping at my feet, a gendarme was sweltering under his three-cornered hat, and two soldiers had unfastened their knapsacks and used them as pillows. Near the bowsprit stood a cabin-boy looking into the stay-sail and whistling for wind, while the skipper remained aft and managed the tiller. Still no wind arose. Orders were given to haul in the sails; slowly and gently they came down and fell in a heap on the benches; then each sailor took off his waistcoat, stowed it away under the bow of the boat, and the men began to row again with all their might.

Our departure had been so delayed that there was hardly any water left in the harbour and we had great difficulty in landing. Our boat grated on the pebbles, and in order to leave it, we were compelled to walk on an oar as if it were a tight-rope.

Ensconced between the citadel and its ramparts, and cut in two by an almost empty port, the Palay appeared to us a useless little town overcome with military ennui, and put me in mind, I do not know why, of a gaping *sous-officier*.

One fails to see the low-crowned, broad-brimmed black felt hats of Le Morbihan, that give protection to the shoulders as well as the head. The women do not affect the big, white caps that stand out from their faces, and reach down their backs like those worn by the nuns, so that when worn by little girls they cover half of their bodies. Their gowns are made without the wide stripe of velvet applied on each shoulder and rounding away under the arms. Nor do they wear the low shoes with square toes, high heels, and long black ribbon streamers. Here, as elsewhere, we found faces that resemble other faces, costumes that really are no costumes at all, cobblestones, and even a sidewalk.

Was it worth while to expose ourselves to seasickness (which, by the way, we escaped, a fact that inclined us to leniency), only to see a citadel that we do not admire, a lighthouse that did not appeal to us in the least, and a rampart built by Vauban, of whom we were already heartily tired? But people had spoken to us of Belle-Isle’s rocks. So we started at once, and taking a short cut across the fields, walked to the beach.

We saw one grotto, only one (the day was near its close), but it appeared so beautiful to us (it was draped with seaweed and decorated with shells, and water dripped from the top), that we resolved to spend a day in Belle-Isle, in order to discover more of them, if there were any, and feast our eyes leisurely upon their beauties.

The following day, at dawn, having filled our flasks and put some sandwiches in our knapsacks, we decided to go where we pleased; so, without a guide or information of any sort (this is the best way), we set out to walk, having resolved that we would go anywhere, provided it were far, and would return home at any time, provided it were late.

We began by a path which led to the top of a cliff, then followed its asperities and valleys and continued around the whole island. When we reached places where landslips had obliterated it, we struck out into the country and let our eyes roam over the horizon of the sea, the deep blue line of which touched the sky; then we walked back to the edge of the rocks, which had suddenly reappeared at our side. The perpendicular cliff, the top of which we were treading, concealed the flank of the rocks, and we could only hear the roaring of the breakers below us.

Sometimes the rock was split in its entire length, disclosing its two almost straight sides, streaked with layers of silica, with tufts of yellow flowers scattered here and there. If we threw a stone, it appeared suspended in the air for a time, would then strike the sides of the cliff, rebound from the one to the other, break into a thousand bits, scattering earth and pebbles in its course, and finally land at the bottom of the pit, where it frightened the cormorants, which shrieked and took flight.

Frequent storms and thaws have pushed a part of the upper grounds into these gorges, and so their steep slope has grown less abrupt, and one is able to climb down to the bottom. We attempted to do so by sliding down like children, holding ourselves back with our hands and feet, and finally we landed safely on the soft, wet sand.

The tide was going out, but in order to be able to pass, we had to wait until the breakers receded. We watched them approach us. They dashed against the rocks, swirled in the crevices, rose like scarfs on the wind, fell back in drops and sprays, and with one long, sweeping libration, gathered their green waters together and retreated. When one wave left the sand, its currents immediately joined, and sought lower levels. The seaweed moved its slimy branches; the water bubbled between the pebbles, oozed through the cracks of the rocks and formed a thousand rivulets and fountains. The drenched sand absorbed it all, and soon its yellow tint grew white again through the drying action of the sun.

As soon as we could, we jumped over the rocks and continued on our way. Soon, however, they increased in numbers, their weird groups being crowded together, piled up and overturned on one another. We tried to hold on with our hands and feet, but we slid on their slippery asperities. The cliff was so very high that it quite frightened us to look up at it. Although it crushed us by its formidable placidity, still it fascinated us, for we could not help looking at it and it did not tire our eyes.

A swallow passed us and we watched its flight; it came from the sea; it ascended slowly through the air, cutting the luminous, fluid atmosphere with its sharp, outstretched wings that seemed to enjoy being absolutely untrammelled. The bird ascended higher and higher, rose above the cliff and finally disappeared.

Meanwhile we were creeping over the rocks, the perspective of which was renewed by each bend of the coast. Once in a while, when the rocks ended, we walked on square stones that were as flat as marble slabs and seamed by almost symmetrical furrows, which appeared like the tracks of some ancient road of another world.

In some places were great pools of water as calm as their greenish depths and as limpid and motionless as a woodland stream on its bed of cresses. Then the rocks would reappear closer than before and more numerous. On one side was the ocean with its breakers foaming around the lower rocks; on the other, the straight, unrelenting, impassive coast.

Tired and bewildered, we looked about us for some issue; but the cliff stretched out before us, and the rocks, infinitely multiplying their dark green forms, succeeded one another until their unequal crags seemed like so many tall, black phantoms rising out of the earth.

We stumbled around in this way until we suddenly perceived an undulating series of rough steps which enabled us to climb up to flat land again.

It is always a pleasure, even when the country is ugly, to walk with a friend, to feel the grass under one’s feet, to jump over fences and ditches, to break thistles with one’s stick, to pull leaves from the bushes and wheat from the fields, to go where one’s fancy dictates, whistling, singing, talking, dreaming, without strange ears to listen to one’s conversation, and the sound of strange footsteps behind one, as absolutely free as if one were in the desert!

Ah! Let us have air! air! And more space! Since our contracted souls suffocate and die on the window-sill, since our captive spirits, like the bear in its cage, turn around and around, and stagger against the walls of their prison, why not, at least, let our nostrils breathe the different perfumes of all the winds of the earth, why not let our eyes rove over every horizon?

No steeple shone in the distance, no hamlet with thatched roofs and square yards framed by clusters of trees, appeared on the side of a hill; not a soul was to be seen, not even a peasant, a grazing sheep, or a stray dog.

All those cultivated fields look uninhabited; the peasants work in them, but they do not live there. One is led to believe that they benefit by them but do not care about them in the least.

We saw a farm and walked in; a ragged woman served us some ice-cold milk in earthen cups. The silence all around was peculiar. The woman watched us eagerly, and we soon took our departure.

We walked into a valley, the narrow gorge of which appeared to extend to the ocean. Tall grass with yellow flowers reached up to our waists, and we had to take long strides in order to advance. We could hear the murmur of flowing water near by, and we sank ankle-deep into the marshy soil. Presently the two hills parted; their barren sides were covered with short, stubby grass and here and there were big yellow patches of moss. At the foot of one hill a stream wends its way through the drooping boughs of the stunted shrubs that grow on its edges, and loses itself in a quiet pond where long-legged insects disport themselves on the leaves of the water-lilies. The sun beat down on us. The gnats rubbed their wings together and bent the slender ends of the reeds with the weight of their tiny bodies. We were alone in the tranquillity of this desert.

At this point, the valley curved and widened and formed a sharp bend. We climbed a little hill, in order to locate ourselves, but the horizon either ended abruptly, enclosed by another hill, or else stretched out over new plains. We did not lose courage, however, and continued to advance, while we thought of the travellers on desert islands who climb on promontories in the hope of sighting some vessel setting sail towards them.

The soil was growing less moist, and the grass less high; presently the ocean came in view, ensconced in a narrow bay, and soon the shore, strewn with débris of shells and madrepores, crunched beneath our footsteps. We let ourselves drop to the ground and as we were exhausted, we soon fell asleep. An hour later the cold woke us up, and we started homeward without any fear of losing our way this time. We were on the coast facing France, and Palay was on our left. It was here, the day before, that we had discovered the grotto we admired so much. It did not take us long to find others, higher and deeper even than the first one.

They always opened through large, pointed arches which were either upright or inclined, their bold columns supporting enormous pieces of rock. Black, veined with purple, fiery red, or brown streaked with white, these beautiful grottoes displayed for their visitors the infinite variety of their shapes and colouring, their graces and their grand caprices. There was one all of silver veined with deep red; in another, tufts of flowers resembling periwinkles had grown on glazings of reddish granite, and drops of water fell from the ceiling on the fine sand with never-ceasing regularity. In the background of another grotto, beneath a long semi-circle, a bed of polished white gravel, which the tide no doubt turns and makes fresh every day, seemed to be waiting to receive the body of a mermaid; but the bed is empty and has lost her forever! Only the moist seaweed remains on which she used to stretch her delicate nude limbs when she was tired of swimming, and on which she reclined till daybreak, in the pale light of the moon.

The sun was setting, and the tide was coming in over the rocks that melted in the blue evening mist, which was blanched on the level of the ocean by the foam of the tumbling waves. In the other part of the horizon, the sky streaked with orange stripes looked as if it had been swept by a gale. Its light reflected on the waters and spread a gleaming sheen over them, and projected on the sand, giving it a brownish tinge and making it glitter like steel.

Half a mile to the south, the coast is covered by a line of rocks that extends to the sea. In order to reach them, we should have been compelled to tramp as we had already done that morning. We were tired, and it was far; but a temptation seemed to push us forward. The breeze played in the cracks of the rocks and wrinkled the surface of the pools; the seaweed, cleaving to the sides of the cliff, shook in the wind, and from the part of the sky where the moon was to rise, a pale light spread over the waters. It was the hour when the shadows lengthen. The rocks appeared larger, and the breakers a deeper green. The sky seemed to expand, and all nature assumed a different appearance.

So we started, without giving a thought to the incoming tide or whether or not we should find later a way to get back to land. We wished to enjoy our pleasure to the fullest extent. We seemed lighter than in the morning, and ran and jumped without the slightest feeling of fatigue. An abundance of animal spirits impelled us onward and we felt a peculiarly robust twitching in our muscles. We shook our heads in the wind and touched the grasses with our fingers. We breathed the salt air of the ocean, and noted and assimilated every color, every sunbeam, every sound, the design of the seaweed, the softness of the sand, the hardness of the rocks that echoed under our footsteps, the height of the cliffs, the fringe of the waves, the accidents of the coast, and the voice of the horizon; and the breeze that passed over our faces like intangible kisses, the sky with its passing clouds, the rising moon, the peeping stars. Our souls bathed in all this splendour, and our eyes feasted on it; we opened our ears and nostrils wide; something of the very life of the elements, forced from them undoubtedly by the attraction of our eyes, reached us and was assimilated, so that we were able to comprehend them in a closer relation and feel them more keenly, thanks to this complex union.

By thus entering and penetrating into nature, we became a part of it, diffused ourselves in it, and were claimed by it once more; we felt that it was overpowering us, and we rejoiced; we desired to be lost in it, to be borne away, or to carry it away with us. As in the raptures of love, one wishes more hands with which to caress, more lips with which to kiss, more eyes with which to see, more soul with which to worship; spreading ourselves out in nature, with a joyful and delirious abandon, we regretted that our eyes could not penetrate to the innermost parts of the rocks, to the bottom of the sea, to the end of the heavens, in order to see how the stones grow, how the breakers are made, how the stars are lighted; we regretted that our ears could not catch the rumour of the fermentation of the granite in the bowels of the earth, could not hear the sap circulate in the plants and the coral roll in the solitudes of the ocean. And while we were under the spell of that contemplative effusion, we wished that our souls, radiating everywhere, might live all these different lives, assume all these different forms, and, varying unceasingly, accomplish their metamorphoses under an eternal sun!

But man was made to enjoy each day only a small portion of food, colours, sounds, sentiments and ideas. Anything above the allotted quantity tires or intoxicates him; it becomes the idiocy of the drunkard or the ravings of the intoxicates him; it becomes the idiocy of the drunkard or the ravings of the ecstatic. O, God! How small is our glass and how large is our thirst! What weak heads we have!

CHAPTER V.

RETURN.

In order to return to Quiberon, we were compelled, on the following day, to arise before seven o’clock, a feat which required some courage. While we were still stiff from fatigue and shivering with sleep, we got into a boat along with a white horse, two drummers, the same one-eyed gendarme and the same soldier who, this time, however, did not lecture anybody. As drunk as a lord, he kept slipping under the benches and had all he could do to keep his shako on his head and extricate his gun from between his feet. I could not say which was the sillier of the two. The gendarme was sober, but he was very stupid. He deplored the soldier’s lack of manners, enumerated the punishments that would be dealt out to him, was scandalised by his hiccoughs and resented his demeanour. Viewed from the side of the missing eye, with his three-cornered hat, his sabre and his yellow gloves, the gendarme presented one of the sorriest aspects of human life. Besides, there is something so essentially grotesque about gendarmes that I cannot help laughing at them; these upholders of the law always produce the same comic effect on me, and so do attorneys for the king, magistrates, and professors of literature.

Tipped to one side, the boat skimmed lightly through the foaming waves. The three sails were comfortably swelled; the masts creaked and the wind rattled the pulleys. A cabin-boy stood at the helm singing. We could not catch the words, but it was some slow, monotonous lay which neither rose nor fell and was repeated again and again, with long-drawn-out inflections and languid refrain. And it swept softly and sadly out over the ocean, as some confused memory sweeps through one’s mind.

The horse stood as straight as it could on its four legs and pulled at a bundle of hay. The sailors, with folded arms, looked absently at the sails and smiled a far-away smile.

So we journeyed on without speaking a word and as best we could, without reaching the edge of the bay, where it looked as if Plouharnel might be. However, after a while we arrived there. But when we did, we were confronted by the ocean, for we had followed the right side of the coast instead of the left, and were forced to turn back and go over a part of the route.

A muffled sound was heard. A bell tinkled and a hat appeared. It was the Auray post. Again the same man, the same horse, the same mail-bag. He was

Auray post. Again the same man, the same horse, the same mail-bag. He was ambling quietly towards Quiberon; he would be back directly and return again the next day. He is the guest of the coast; he passes in the morning and again at night. His life is spent going from one point to another; he is the only one who gives the coast some animation, something to look forward to, and, I was almost going to say, some charm.

He stopped and talked to us for a few minutes, then lifted his hat and was off again.

What an ensemble! What a horse, and what a rider! What a picture! Callot would probably have reproduced it, but it would take Cervantes to write it.

After passing over large pieces of rock that have been placed in the sea in order to shorten the route by cutting the back of the bay in two, we finally arrived at Plouharnel.

The village was quiet; chickens cackled and scratched in the streets, and in the gardens enclosed by stone walls, weeds and oats grew side by side.

While we were sitting in front of the host’s door, an old beggar passed us. He was as red as a lobster, dirty and unkempt and covered with rags and vermin. The sun shone on his dilapidated garments and on his purple skin; it was almost black and seemed to transude blood. He kept bellowing in a terrible voice, while beating a tattoo on the door of a neighbouring house.

CHAPTER VI.

QUIMPER.

Quimper, although it is the centre of the real Brittany, is distinctly different from it. The elm-tree promenade that follows the winding river, which has quays and boats, renders the town very pretty and the big Hôtel de la Préfecture, which alone covers the little western delta, gives it a thoroughly administrative and French appearance. You are aware that you are in the *chef-lieu* of a department, a fact brought home to you by the latter's division in *arrondissements*, with their large, medium, and small parishes, its committee of primary instruction, its saving banks, its town council and other modern inventions, which rob the cities of local colour, dear to the heart of the innocent tourist.

With all due deference to the people who pronounce the name of Quimper-Corentin as the synonyme of all that is ridiculous and provincial, it is a most delightful place, and well worth other more respected ones. You will not, it is true, find the charms and riotous wealth of colouring possessed by Quimperlé; still, I know of few things that can equal the charming appearance of that alley following the edge of the river and shaded by the escarpment of a neighbouring mountain, which casts the dark shadows of its luxuriant foliage over it.

It does not take long to go through cities of this kind, and to know their most intimate recesses, and sometimes one stumbles across places that stay one's steps and fill one's heart with gladness.

Small cities, like small apartments, seem warmer and cosier to live in. But keep this illusion! There are more draughts in such apartments than in a palace, and a city of this kind is more deadly monotonous than the desert.

Returning to the hotel by one of those paths we dearly love, that rises and falls and winds, sometimes through a field, sometimes through grass and brambles, sometimes along a wall, which are filled in turn with daisies, pebbles and thistles, a path made for light thoughts and bantering conversation, — returning, I said, to the city, we heard cries and plaintive wails issue from under the slated roof of a square building. It was the slaughter-house.

At that moment I thought of some terrible city, of some frightful and immense place like Babylon or Babel, filled with cannibals and slaughter-houses, where they butchered men instead of animals; and I tried to discover a likeness to human agonies in those bleating and sobbing voices. I thought of groups of slaves brought there with ropes around their necks, to be tied to iron rings, and killed in order to feed their masters, who would eat their flesh from rings, and killed in order to feed their masters, who would eat their flesh from tables of carved ivory and wipe their lips on fine linen. Would their attitudes be more dejected, their eyes sadder or their prayers more pitiful?

While we were in Quimper, we went out one day through one side of the town and came back through the other, after tramping about eight hours.

Our guide was waiting for us under the porch of the hotel. He started in front of us and we followed. He was a little white-haired man, with a linen cap and torn shoes, and he wore an old brown coat that was many sizes too large for him. He stuttered when he spoke, and when he walked he knocked his knees together; but in spite of all this, he managed to advance very quickly, with a sort of nervous, almost febrile perseverance. From time to time, he would pull a leaf off a tree and clap it over his mouth to cool his lips. His business consists in going from one place to another, attending to letters and errands. He goes to Douarnenez, Quimperlé, Brest and even to Rennes, which is forty miles away (a journey which he accomplished in four days, including going and coming). His whole ambition, he said, was to return to Rennes once more during his lifetime. And only for the purpose, mind you, of going back, of making the trip, and being able to boast of it afterwards. He knows every road and every *commune* that has a steeple; he takes short cuts across the fields, opens gates, and when he passes in front of a farm, he never fails to greet its owners. Having listened to the birds all his life, he has learned to imitate their chirpings, and when he walks along the roads, under the trees, he whistles as his feathered friends do, in order to charm his solitude.

Our first stop was at Loc-Maria, an ancient monastery, given in olden times by Conan III to the abbey of Fontevrault; it is situated a quarter of a mile from the town. This monastery has not been shamefully utilised like the abbey of poor Robert d’Arbrissel. It is deserted, but has not been sullied. Its Gothic portal does not re-echo the voices of jailers, and though there may not be much of it, one experiences neither disgust nor rebellion. In that little chapel, of a rather severe Romance style, the only curious thing is a large granite holy-water basin which stands on the floor and is almost black. It is wide and deep and represents to perfection the real Catholic holy-water basin, made to receive the entire body of an infant, and not in the least like those narrow shells in our churches in which you can only dip your fingers. With its clear water rendered more limpid by the contrast of a greenish bed, the vegetation which has grown all around it during the religious calm of centuries, its crumbling angles, and its great mass of bronzed stone, it looks like one of those hollowed rocks which contain salt water.

After we had inspected the chapel carefully, we walked to the river, crossed it in a boat, and plunged into the country.

in a boat, and plunged into the country.

It is absolutely deserted and strangely empty. Trees, bushes, sea-rushes, tamarisks, and heather grow on the edge of the ditches. We came to broad stretches of land, but we did not see a soul anywhere. The sky was bleak and a fine rain moistened the atmosphere and spread a grey veil over the country. The paths we chose were hollow and shaded by clusters of foliage, the branches of which, uniting, drooped over our heads and almost prevented us from walking erect. The light that filtered through the dome of leaves was greenish, and as dim as on a winter evening. But farther away, it was brilliant, and played around the edges of the leaves and accentuated their delicate pinking. Later we reached the top of a barren slope, which was flat and smooth, and without a blade of grass to relieve the monotony of its colour. Sometimes, however, we came upon a long avenue of beech-trees with moss growing around the foot of their thick, shining trunks. There were wagon-tracks in these avenues, as if to indicate the presence of a neighbouring castle that we might see at any moment; but they ended abruptly in a stretch of flat land that continued between two valleys, through which it would spread its green maze furrowed by the capricious meanderings of hedges, spotted here and there by a grove, brightened by clumps of sea-rushes, or by some field bordering the meadows which rose slowly to meet the hills and lost themselves in the horizon. Above these hills, far away in the mist, stretched the blue surface of the ocean.

The birds are either absent or they do not sing; the leaves are thick, the grass deadens one’s footfalls, and the country gazes at you like some melancholy countenance. It looks as if it had been created expressly to harbour ruined lives and shattered hopes, and to foster their bitterness beneath its weeping sky, to the low rustling of the trees and the heather. On winter nights, when the fox creeps stealthily over the dry leaves, when the tiles fall from the pigeon-house and the reeds bend in the marshes, when the beech-trees stoop in the wind, and the wolf ambles over the moonlit snow, while one is alone by the dying embers listening to the wind howl in the empty hallways, how charming it must be to let one’s heart dwell on its most cherished despairs and long forgotten loves!

We spied a hovel with a Gothic portal; further on was an old wall with an ogive door; a leafless bush swayed there in the breeze. In the courtyard the ground is covered with heather, violets, and pebbles; you walk in, look around and go out again. This place is called “The temple of the false gods,” and used to be, it is thought, a commandery of Templars.

Our guide started again and we followed him. Presently a steeple rose among the trees; we crossed a stubble-field, climbed to the top of a ditch and caught a glimpse of a few of dwellings: the village of Pomelin. A rough road constitutes the main street and the village consists of several houses separated by yards.

What tranquillity! or rather what forlornness! The thresholds are deserted; the yards are empty.

Where are the inhabitants? One would think that they had all left the village to lie in wait behind the furze-bushes to catch a glimpse of the *Blues* who are about to pass through the ravine.

The church is poor and perfectly bare. No beautiful painted saints, no pictures on the walls or on the roof, no hanging lamp oscillating at the end of a long, straight cord. In a corner of the choir, a wick was burning in a glass filled with oil. Round wooden pillars hold up the roof, the blue paint of which has been freshened recently. The bright light of the fields, filtering through the green foliage which covers the roof of the church, shines through the white window-panes. The door, a little wooden door that closes with a latch, was open; a flight of birds came in, chirping and beating their wings against the walls; they fluttered for awhile beneath the vault and around the altar, two or three alighted upon the holy-water basin, to moisten their beaks, and then all flew away as suddenly as they had come.

It is not an unusual thing to see birds in the Breton churches; many live there and fasten their nests to the stones of the nave; they are never disturbed. When it rains, they all gather in the church, but as soon as the sun pierces the clouds and the rain-spouts dry up, they repair to the trees again. So that during the storm two frail creatures often enter the blessed house of God together; man to pray and allay his fears, and the bird to wait until the rain stops and to warm the naked bodies of its frightened young.

A peculiar charm pervades these churches. It is not their poverty that moves us, because even when they are empty, they appear to be inhabited. Is it not, then, their modesty that appeals to us? For, with their unpretentious steeples, and their low roofs hiding under the trees, they seem to shrink and humiliate themselves in the sight of God. They have not been upreared through a spirit of pride, nor through the pious fancy of some mighty man on his death-bed. On the contrary, we feel that it is the simple impression of a need, the ingenuous cry of an appetite, and, like the shepherd’s bed of dried leaves, it is the retreat the soul has built for itself where it comes to rest when it is tired. These village churches represent better than their city sisters the distinctive features of the places where they are built, and they seem to participate more directly in the life of the people who, from father to son, come to kneel at the same place and on the same stone slab. Every day, every Sunday, when they enter and when they leave, do they not see the graves of their parents, are these not near them while they pray, and does it not seem to them as if the church was only a larger family circle from which the loved ones have not altogether departed? These places of worship thus have a harmonious sense, and the life of these people is influenced by it from the baptismal font to the grave. It is not the same with us, because we have relegated eternity to the outskirts of the city, have banished our dead to the faubourgs and laid them to rest in the carpenter’s quarter, near the soda factories and night-soil magazines.

About three o’clock in the afternoon, we arrived at the chapel of Kerfeunteun, near the entrance to Quimper. At the upper end of the chapel is a fine glass window of the sixteenth century, representing the genealogical tree of the Holy Trinity. Jacob forms the trunk, and the top is figured by the Cross surmounted by the Eternal Father with a tiara on His head. On each side, the square steeple represents a quadrilateral pierced by a long straight window. This steeple does not rest squarely on the roof, but instead, by means of a slender basis, the narrow sides of which almost touch, it forms an obtuse angle near the ridge of the roof. In Brittany, almost every church has a steeple of this kind.

Before returning to the city, we made a détour in order to visit the chapel of *La Mère-Dieu*. As it is usually closed, our guide summoned the custodian, and the latter accompanied us with his little niece, who stopped along the road to pick flowers. The young man walked in front of us. His slender and flexible figure was encased in a jacket of light blue cloth, and the three velvet streamers of his black hat, which was carefully placed on the back of his head, over his knotted hair, hung down his back.

At the bottom of a valley, or rather a ravine, can be seen the church of *La Mère-Dieu*, veiled by thick foliage. In this place, amid the silence of all these trees and because of its little Gothic portal (which appears to be of the thirteenth century, but which, in reality, is of the sixteenth), the church reminds one of the discreet chapels mentioned in old novels and old melodies, where they knighted the page starting for the Holy Land, one morning when the stars were dim and the lark trilled, while the mistress of the castle slipped her white hand through the bars of the iron gate and wept when he kissed her goodbye.

We entered the church. The young custodian took off his hat and knelt on the floor. His thick, blond hair uncoiled and fell around his shoulders. It clung a moment to the coarse cloth of his jacket, and then, little by little, it separated and spread like the hair of a woman. It was parted in the middle and hung on both sides over his shoulders and neck. The golden mass rippled with light every time he moved his head bent in prayer.

The little girl kneeled beside him and let her flowers fall to the ground. For the first time in my life, I understood the beauty of a man’s locks and the fascination they may have for bare and playful arms. A strange progress, indeed, is that which consists in curtailing everywhere the grand superfetations nature has bestowed upon us, so that whenever we discover them in all their virgin splendour, they are a revelation to us.

CHAPTER VII.

PONT-L’ABBÉ.

At five o’clock in the evening, we arrived at Pont-l’Abbé, covered with quite a respectable coating of mud and dust, which fell from our clothing upon the floor of the inn with such disastrous abundance, every time we moved, that we were almost mortified at the mess we made.

Pont-l’Abbé is a peaceful little town, cut in two in its entire length by a broad, paved street. Its modest inhabitants cannot possibly look any more stupid or insignificant than the place itself.

For those who must see something wherever they go, there are the unimportant remains of the castle and the church, an edifice that would be quite passable were it not for the thick coat of paint that covers it. The chapel of the Virgin was a bower of flowers; bunches of jonquils, pansies, roses, jessamine, and honeysuckle were arranged in blue glasses or white china vases and spread their bright colours over the altar and upward between the two tall candlesticks framing the Virgin’s face and her silver crown, from which fell a long veil caught on the gold star of the plaster Infant she held in her arms. One could smell the odour of the holy water and the flowers. It was a perfumed, mysterious little nook all by itself, a hidden retreat decorated by loving hands, and peculiarly adapted for the exhalation of mystical desires and long, heart-broken orisons. All his heart’s sensuousness, compressed by the climate and numbed by misery, is brought here by man and laid at the feet of Mary, the Divine Mother, and he is thus able to satisfy his unquenchable longing for love and enjoyment. No matter if the roof leaks and there are no benches or chairs in the rest of the church, you will always find the chapel of the Virgin bright with flowers and lights, for it seems as if all the religious tenderness of Brittany has concentrated there; it is the softest spot of its heart; it is its weakness, its passion, its treasure. Though there are no flowers in these parts, there are flowers in the church; though the people are poor, the Virgin is always sumptuous and beautiful. She smiles at you, and despairing souls go to warm themselves at her knees as at a hearthstone that is never extinguished. One is astonished at the way these people cling to their belief; but does one know the pleasure and voluptuousness they derive from it? Is not asceticism superior epicureanism, fasting, refined gormandising? Religion can supply one with almost carnal sensations; prayer has its debauchery and mortification its raptures; and the men who come at night and kneel in front of this dressed statue, feel their hearts beat thickly and a sort and kneel in front of this dressed statue, feel their hearts beat thickly and a soft of vague intoxication, while in the streets of the city, the children on their way home from school stop and gaze dreamily at the woman who smiles at them from the stained window of the church.

But you must attend a fête in order to gain an insight into the gloomy character of these people. They don't dance; they merely turn; they don't sing; they only whistle. That very evening we went to a neighbouring village to be present at the inauguration of a threshing-floor. Two *biniou* players were stationed on top of the wall surrounding the yard, and played continuously while two long lines of men and women, following in one anothers' footsteps, trotted around the place and described several figures. The lines would turn, break up and form again at irregular intervals. The heavy feet of the dancers struck the ground without the slightest attempt at rhythm, while the shrill notes of the music succeeded one another rapidly and with desperate monotony. The dancers who tired withdrew without interrupting the dance, and when they had rested, they re-entered it. During the whole time we watched this peculiar performance, the crowd stopped only once, while the musicians drank some cider; then, when they had finished, the lines formed anew and the dance began again. At the entrance of the yard was a table covered with nuts; beside it stood a pitcher of brandy and on the ground was a keg of cider; near by stood a citizen in a green frock coat and a leather cap; a little farther away was a man wearing a jacket and a sword suspended from a white shoulder-belt; they were the *commissaire de police*, of Pont-l'Abbé and his *garde-champêtre*. Suddenly, M. le commissaire pulled out his watch and motioned to the *garde*. The latter drew several peasants aside, spoke to them in a low tone, and presently the assembly broke up.

All four of us returned to the city together, which afforded us the opportunity of again admiring mother of the harmonious combinations of Providence which had created this *commissaire de police* for this *garde-champêtre* and this *garde-champêtre* for his *commissaire de police*. They were made for each other. The same fact would give rise in both of them to the same reflections; from the same idea both would draw parallel conclusions. When the *commissaire* laughed, the *garde* grinned; when he assumed a serious expression, his shadow grew gloomy; if the frock-coat said, "This must be done," the jacket replied, "I think so, too;" if the coat added, "It is necessary;" the waistcoat affirmed: "It is indispensable." Notwithstanding this inward comprehension, their outward relations of rank and authority remained unchanged. For the *garde* spoke in a lower tone than the *commissaire,* and was a trifle shorter and walked behind him. The *commissaire* was polished, important, fluent; he consulted himself, ruminated, talked to himself, and smacked his tongue; the *garde* was deferential, attentive, pensive and observing, and would utter an exclamation from time to time and scratch his nose. On the way, he inquired about the news, asked the *commissaire's* advice, and solicited his orders, while his superior questioned, meditated, and issued commands.

We had just come in sight of the first houses of the city, when we heard shrieks issue from one of them. The street was blocked by an excited crowd, and several persons rushed up to the *commissaire* and exclaimed: “Come, come quickly, Monsieur, they’re having a fight! Two women are being killed!”

“By whom?”

“We don’t know.”

“Why?”

“They are bleeding.”

“But with what?”

“With a rake.”

“Where’s the murderer?”

“One on the head and the other on the arm. Go in, they’re waiting for you; the women are there.”

So the *commissaire* went in and we followed. We heard sobs, screams, and excited conversation and saw a jostling, curious mob. People stepped on one another’s toes, dug one another’s ribs, cursed, and caused general confusion.

The *commissaire* got angry; but as he could not speak Breton, the *garde* got angry for him and chased the crowd out, taking each individual by his shoulders and shoving him through the door into the street.

When the room had been cleared of all except a dozen persons, we managed to discover in a corner, a piece of flesh hanging from an arm and a mass of black hair dripping with blood. An old woman and a young girl had been hurt in the fight. The old woman was tall and angular and had skin as yellow and wrinkled as parchment; she was standing up, groaning and holding her left arm with her right hand; she did not seem to be suffering much, but the girl was crying. She was sitting on a chair with her hands spread out on her knees and her head bent low; she was trembling convulsively and shaking with low sobs. As they replied by complaints to all our questions, and as the testimony of the witnesses was conflicting, we could not ascertain who had started the fight or what it was about. Some said that a husband had surprised his wife; others, that the women had started the row and that the owner of the house had tried to kill them in order to make them stop. But no one knew anything definite. M. *le commissaire* was greatly perplexed and the *garde* perfectly nonplussed.

As the doctor was away, and as it might be that the good people did not wish his services, because it meant expense, we had the audacity to offer the help of our limited knowledge and rushed off for our satchels, a piece of cerecloth, and some linen and lint which we had brought with us in anticipation of possible accidents.

It would really have been an amusing sight for our friends, had they been able to see us spread out our bistoury, our pincers, and three pairs of scissors, one with gold branches, on the table of this hut. The *commissaire* praised our philanthropy, the women watched us in awed silence, and the tallow candle melted and ran down the iron candlestick in spite of the efforts of the *garde*, who kept trimming the wick with his fingers. We attended to the old woman first. The cut had been given conscientiously; the bare arm showed the bone, and a triangle of flesh about four inches long hung over it like a cuff. We tried to put this back in its place by adjusting it carefully over the edge of the gaping wound and bandaging the arm. It is quite possible that the violent compression the member was subjected to caused mortification to set in, and that the patient may have died.

We did not know exactly what ailed the girl. The blood trickled through her hair, but we could not see whence it came; it formed oily blotches all over it and ran down into her neck. The *garde*, our interpreter, bade her remove the cotton band she wore on her head, and her tresses tumbled down in a dull, dark mass and uncoiled like a cascade full of bloody threads. We parted the thick, soft, abundant locks, and found a swelling as large as a nut and pierced by an oval hole on the back of her head. We shaved the surrounding parts; and after we had washed and stanched the wound, we melted some tallow and spread it over some lint, which we adapted to the swelling with strips of diachylum. Over this we placed first a bandage, then the cotton band, and then the cap. While this was taking place, the justice of the peace arrived. The first thing he did was to ask for the rake, and the only thing he seemed to care about was to examine it. He took hold of the handle, counted the teeth, waved it in the air, tested the iron and bent the wood.

“Is this,” he demanded, “the instrument with which the assault was committed? Jérôme, are you sure it is?”

“They say so, Monsieur.”

“You were not present, Monsieur le commissaire?”

“No, Monsieur le juge de paix.”

“I would like to know whether the blows were really dealt with a rake or whether they were given with a blunt instrument. Who is the assailant? And did the rake belong to him or to some one else? Was it really with this that these women were hurt? Or was it, I repeat, with a blunt instrument? Do they wish to lodge a complaint? What do you think about it, Monsieur le commissaire?”

The victims said little, remarking only that they suffered great pain; so they were given over night to decide whether or not they wished to seek redress by law. The young girl could hardly speak, and the old woman’s ideas were muddled, seeing that she was drunk, according to what the neighbours intimated, — a fact which explained her insensibility when we had endeavoured to relieve her suffering.

After they had looked at us as keenly as they could in order to ascertain who we were, the authorities of Pont-l’Abbé bade us good night and thanked us for the services we had rendered the community. We put our things back into our satchel, and the *commissaire* departed with the *garde*, the *garde* with his sword, and the justice of the peace with the rake.

CHAPTER VIII.

ROAMING.

En route! the sky is blue, the sun is shining, and our feet are eager to tread on the grass. From Crozon to Leudevenec the country is quite flat, and there is not a house nor a tree to be seen. As far as the eye can reach, reddish moss spreads over the ground. Sometimes fields of ripe wheat rise above the little stunted sea-rushes. The latter are flowerless now, and look as they did before the springtime. Deep wagon-tracks, edged by rolls of dried mud, make their appearance and continue for a long time; then they suddenly describe a bend and are lost to the eye. Grass grows in large patches between these sunken furrows. The wind whistles over the flats; we walk on; a welcome breeze dries the beads of perspiration on our cheeks, and when we halted we were able to hear, above the sound of our beating arteries, the rustling of the wind in the grass.

From time to time, a mill with rapidly revolving wheels would rise up and point the way. The creaking wooden fans descended, grazed the ground and then rose. Standing erect in the open garret-window, the miller watched us pass.

We walked on; coming to a hedge of elm-trees which probably concealed a village, we caught sight of a man standing in a tree, at the foot of which was a woman with her blue apron spread out to catch the plums he was throwing to her. I recollect a crop of dark hair falling in masses over her shoulders, two uplifted arms, the movement of the supple neck and the sonorous laughter that floated over the hedge to me.

The path we were following grew narrower. Presently the plain disappeared and we found ourselves on the crest of a promontory dominating the ocean. Looking towards Brest, it seemed to extend indefinitely; but on the other side, it projected its sinuosities into the land, between short hills covered with underwood. Each gulf is ensconced between two mountains; each mountain is flanked by two gulfs, and nothing can equal the beauty of those vast green slopes rising almost in a straight line out of the sea. The hills have rounded tops and flattened bases, and describe a wide, curved chain which joins the plateaux with the graceful sweep of a Moorish arch; following so closely upon one another, the colour of their foliage and their formation are almost exactly alike. Propelled by the sea-breeze, the breakers dashed up against the foot of these hills, and the sun, falling on them, made them gleam; the whole surface of the ocean was blue and glittering with silver, and we could not get enough of its beauty. Then we watched the sunbeams glide over the hills. One of the latter had already been watched the sunbeams glide over the hills. One of the latter had already been deserted by them, and appeared more indistinct than the rest, while a broad black shadow was rapidly gathering over another. As we approached the level of the shore the mountains that faced us a moment ago seemed to grow loftier; the gulfs deepened and the ocean expanded. We walked on, oblivious to everything, and let our eyes roam at will, and the pebbles that our feet dislodged rolled down the hill quickly and disappeared in the bushes edging the road.

The roads followed hedges that were as compact and thick as walls; we climbed up and we climbed down; meanwhile, it was growing dark, and the country was settling into the deep silence characteristic of midsummer evenings.

As we failed to meet anybody who could show us the way, the few peasants we had questioned having responded by unintelligible cries, we produced our map and our compass, and, locating ourselves by the setting sun, we resolved to head straight for Daoulas. Instantly our vigour returned, and we started across the fields, vaulting fences and ditches, and uprooting, tearing and breaking everything in our way, without giving a thought to the stiles we left open or the damaged crops.

At the top of a slope, we discovered the village of l’Hôpital lying in a meadow watered by a stream. A bridge spans the latter and on this bridge is a mill; beyond the meadow is a hill, which we started to climb nimbly, when suddenly we saw, by a ray of light, a beautiful yellow and black salamander creeping along the edge of a ditch with its slender tail dragging in the dust and undulating with every motion of its speckled body. It had come from its retreat under a big stone covered with moss, and was hunting insects in the rotten trunks of old oak-trees.

A pavement of uneven cobblestones echoed beneath our feet, and a street stretched out before us. We had arrived in Daoulas. There was light enough to enable us to distinguish a square sign swinging on an iron rod on one of the houses. We should have recognised the inn even without the sign, as houses, like men, have their professions stamped on their faces. So we entered, for we were ravenous, and told the host above all things not to keep us waiting.

While we were sitting in front of the door, waiting for our dinner, a little girl in rags came along with a basket of strawberries on her head. She entered the inn and came out again after a short while, holding a big loaf of bread in both hands. Uttering shrill cries, she scampered off with the alertness of a kitten. Her dusty hair fluttered in the wind and stood out straight from her wizened face, and her bare legs, which she lifted high in the air when running, disappeared under the rags that covered her form.

After our meal, which comprised, besides the unavoidable omelet and the fatal veal, the strawberries the little girl had brought, we went up to our rooms.

The winding staircase with its worm-eaten steps groaned beneath our weight, like a sensitive woman under a new disillusion. At the top was a room with a door that closed on the outside with a hook. We slept there. The plaster on the once yellow walls was crumbling away; the beams of the ceiling bent beneath the weight of the slated roof, and on the window-panes was a layer of dust that softened the light like a piece of unpolished glass. The beds, four walnut boards carelessly put together, had big, round, worm-eaten knobs, and the wood was split by the dryness. On each bed was a mattress and a matting, covered with a ragged green spread. A piece of mirror in a varnished frame, an old game-bag on a nail, and a worn silk cravat which showed the crease of its folds, indicated that the room belonged to some one who probably slept there every night.

Under one of the red cotton pillows I discovered a hideous object, a cap of the same color as the coverlet, but coated with a greasy glazing which prevented its texture from being recognisable; a worn, shapeless, clammy, oily thing. I am sure that its owner prizes it highly and that he finds it warmer than any other cap. A man’s life, the perspiration of an entire existence, is secreted in this layer of mouldy cerate. How many nights it must have taken to make it so thick! How many nightmares have galloped under this cap? How many dreams have been dreamed beneath it? And charming ones, too, perhaps, — why not?

If you are neither an engineer, nor a blacksmith, nor a builder, Brest will not interest you very much. The port is magnificent, I admit; beautiful, if you say so; gigantic, if you wish. It is imposing, you know, and gives the impression of a powerful nation. But those piles of cannons and anchors and cannon-balls, the infinite extension of those quays, which enclose a calm, flat sea that appears to be chained down, and those big workshops filled with grinding machinery, the never-ceasing clanking of galley chains, the convicts who pass by in regular gangs and work in silence, — this entire, pitiless, frightful, forced mechanism, this organized defiance, quickly disgusts the soul and tires the eye. The latter can rest only on cobblestones, shells, piles of iron, madriers, dry docks containing the naked hulls of vessels, and the grey walls of the prison, where a man leans out of the windows and tests the iron bars with a hammer.

Nature is absent and more completely banished from this place, than from any other spot on the face of the earth; everywhere can be seen denial and hatred of it, as much in the crowbar which demolishes the rocks, as in the sabre of the *garde-chiourme* who watches over the convicts.

Outside of the arsenal and the penitentiary, there is nothing but barracks, corps-de-garde, fortifications, ditches, uniforms, bayonets, sabres and drums. From morning until night, military music sounds under your windows, soldiers pass through the streets, come, go, and drill; the bugle sounds incessantly and the troops file past. You understand at once that the arsenal constitutes the real city and that the other is completely swallowed up by it. Everywhere and in every form reappear discipline, administration, ruled paper. Factitious symmetry and idiotic cleanliness are much admired. In the navy hospital for instance, the floors are so highly polished that a convalescent trying to walk on his mended leg would probably fall and break the other. But it looks nice. Between each ward is a yard, but the sun never shines in it, and the grass is carefully kept out. The kitchens are beautiful, but are situated so far from the main building that in winter the food must be cold before it reaches the patients. But who cares about them? Aren’t the saucepans like polished suns? We saw a man who had broken his skull in falling from a vessel, and who for eighteen hours had received no medical assistance whatsoever; but his sheets were immaculate, for the linen department is very well kept.

In the prison ward I was moved like a child by the sight of a litter of kittens playing on a convict’s bed. He made them little paper balls, and they would chase them all over the bed-spread, and cling to its edges with their claws. Then he would turn them over, stroke them, kiss them and cuddle them to his heart. More than once, when he is put back to work and sits tired and depressed on his bench, he will dream of the quiet hours he spent alone with the little animals, and of the softness of their fur on his rough hands and the warmth of their little bodies against his breast. I believe, though, that the rules forbid this kind of recreation and that probably he had them through the kindness of the sister in charge.

But here, as well as elsewhere, rules have their exceptions, for, in the first place, the distinction of caste does not disappear (equality being a lie, even in the penitentiary). Delicately scented locks sometimes show beneath the numbered caps, just as the sleeve of the red blouse often reveals a cuff surrounding a well-kept hand. Moreover, special favours are shown toward certain professions, certain men. How have they been able, in spite of the law and the jealousy of their fellow-prisoners, to attain this eccentric position which makes them almost amateur convicts, and keep it without anybody trying to wrest it from them? At the entrance to the workshop, where boats are built, you will find a dentist’s table filled with instruments. In a pretty frame on the wall, rows of plates are exhibited, and when you pass, the artist utters a little speech to advertise his ability. He stays in his place all day, polishing his instruments and stringing teeth; he can talk to visitors without feeling the restraint of being watched, be informed of what is going on in the medical world, and practise his profession like a licensed dentist. At the present time, I daresay, he must use ether. More than that, he may have pupils and give lectures. But the man who has the most enviable position of all is the curé Delacollonge. He is the mediator between the convicts and the ban; the authorities use his ascendency over the prisoners, and they, in turn, address themselves to him when they want to obtain any favours.

He lives apart from the rest of them in a neat little room, has a man to wait on him, eats big bowls of Plougastel strawberries, takes his coffee and reads the newspapers.

If Delacollonge is the head of the penitentiary, Ambroise is its arm. Ambroise is a superb negro almost six feet tall, who would have made a fine servant for a sixteenth century man of quality. Heliogobalus must have kept some such fellow to furnish amusement for himself and his guests by strangling lions and fighting gladiators single-handed. His polished skin is quite black, with steely reflections; his body is well knit and as vigorous as a tiger's, and his teeth are so white that they almost frighten one.

King of the penitentiary by right of strength, all the convicts fear and admire him; his athletic reputation compels him to test every newcomer, and up to the present time, all these contests have turned out in his favour. He can bend iron rods over his knee, carry three men with one hand, and knock down eight by opening his arms; he eats three times as much as an ordinary man, for he has an enormous appetite and a heroic constitution.

When we saw him, he was watering the plants in the botanical garden. He is always hanging around the hot-house behind the plants and the palm-trees, digging the soil and cleansing the wood-work.

On Thursday, when the public is admitted, Ambroise receives his mistresses behind the boxed orange-trees; he has several of them, in fact, more than he wishes. He knows how to procure them, whether by his charms, his strength or his money, which he always carries in quantities about his person and spends lavishly whenever he wishes to enjoy himself. So he is very popular among a certain class of women, and the people who have put him where he is, have never perhaps been loved as much as Ambroise.

In the middle of the garden, in a little lake shaded by a willow-tree and bordered by plants, is a swan. With one stroke of its leg it can swim from one side of the pond to the other, and although it crosses it a hundred times a day and catches gold fishes to while away the time, it never thinks of wandering away.

Further on, in a line against the wall, are some cages for rare animals from foreign lands destined for the Museum of Paris. Most of the cages, however, were empty. In front of one, in a narrow grated yard, a convict was teaching a young wild-cat to obey commands like a dog. Hasn't this man had enough of slavery himself? Why does he torment this poor little beast? The lashes with which he is threatened he gives the wild-cat, which, some day, will probably take its revenge by jumping over the iron railing and killing the swan.

One moonlit evening, we decided to take a stroll through the streets known to be frequented by *filles de joie*. They are very numerous. The navy, the artillery, the infantry, each has its own particular streets, without mentioning the penitentiary, which covers a whole district of the city. Seven parallel streets ending at its walls, compose what is called Keravel, and are filled by the mistresses of jailers and convicts. They are old frame houses, crowded together, with every door and window closed tight. No sound issues from them, nobody is seen coming out, and there are no lights in the windows; at the end of each street is a lamp-post which the wind sways from side to side, thus making its long yellow rays oscillate on the sidewalk. The rest of the quarter is in absolute darkness. In the moonlight, these silent houses with their uneven roofs projected fantastic glimmerings.

When do they open? At unknown hours, at the most silent time of the darkest nights. Then comes the jailer who has slipped away from his watch, or the convict who has managed to escape from the prison, though sometimes they arrive together, aiding and abetting each other; then, when daylight dawns, the jailer turns his head away and nobody is the wiser.

In the sailor’s district, on the contrary, everything is open and above-board. The disreputable houses are full of noise and light; there is dancing and shouting and fighting. On the ground floors, in the low rooms, women in filmy attire sit on the benches that line the white-washed walls lighted by an oil lamp; others, in the doorway, beckon to you, and their animated faces stand out in relief on the background of the lighted resort, from which issues the sound of clinking glasses and coarse caresses. You can hear the kisses which fall on the opulent shoulders of the women and the laughter of the girl who is sitting on some tanned sailor’s lap, her unruly locks slipping from under her cap and her bare shoulders issuing from her chemise. The street is thronged, the place is packed, the door is wide open, anybody who wishes may go in. Men come and peep through the windows or talk in an undertone to some half-clad creature, who bends eagerly over their faces. Groups stand around and wait their turn. It is all quite informal and unrestrained.

Being conscientious travellers, and desiring to see and study everything at close range, we entered.

In a room papered in red, three or four girls were sitting at a round table, and a man with a cap on his head and a pipe in his mouth was reclining on the sofa; he bowed politely when we entered. The women wore Parisian dresses and were modest in their demeanour. The mahogany furniture was covered with red plush, the floor was polished and engravings of battles decorated the walls. O Virtue!

you are beautiful, for very stupid is vice. The woman who was sitting by my side had hands which were sufficient in themselves to make a man forget her sex, and not knowing how to spend our time we treated the whole company to drinks. Then I lighted a cigar, stretched out on the divan, and, sad and depressed, while the voices of the women rose shrilly and the glasses were being drained, I said to myself:

Where is she? Where can she be? Is she dead to the world, and will men never see her again?

She was beautiful, in olden times, when she walked up the steps leading to the temple, when on her shell-like feet fell the golden fringe of her tunic, or when she lounged among Persian cushions, twirling her collar of cameos and chatting with the wise men and the philosophers.

She was beautiful when she stood naked on the threshold of her *cella* in the street of Suburra, under the rosin torchlight that blazed in the night, slowly chanting her Campanian lay, while from the Tiber came the refrains of the orgies.

She was beautiful, too, in her old house of the *Cité* behind the Gothic windows, among the noisy students and dissipated monks, when, without fear of the sergeants, they struck the oaken tables with their pewter mugs, and the worm-eaten beds creaked beneath the weight of their bodies.

She was beautiful when she leaned over the green cloth and coveted the gold of the provincials; then she wore high heels and had a small waist and a large wig which shed its perfumed powder on her shoulders, a rose over her ear and a patch on her cheek.

She was beautiful also among the goat-skins of the Cossacks and the English uniforms, pushing her way through the throngs of men and letting her bare shoulders dazzle them on the steps of the gambling houses, under the jewellers’ windows, beneath the lights of the cafés, between starvation and wealth.

What are you regretting? I am regretting the *fille de joie*.

On the boulevard, one evening, I caught a glimpse of her as she passed under the gaslight, with watchful and eager eyes, dragging her feet over the sidewalk. I saw her pale face on the street-corner, while the rain wet the flowers in her hair, and heard her soft voice calling to the men, while her flesh shivered in her low-necked bodice.

It was her last day; after that she disappeared.

Fear not that she will ever return, for she is dead, quite dead! Her dress is made high, she has morals, objects to coarse language, and puts the sous she earns in a savings bank.

Cleared of her presence, the street has lost the only poetry it still retained;

they have filtered the gutter and sorted the garbage.

In a little while, the mountebanks will also have disappeared, in order to make room for magnetic *séances* and reform banquets, and the rope-dancer with her spangled skirt and long balancing-pole will be as remote from us as the bayadère of the Ganges.

Of all that beautiful, glittering world as flighty as fancy itself, so melancholy and sonorous, so bitter and yet so gay, full of inward pathos and glaring sarcasms, where misery was warm and grace was sad, the last vestige of a lost age, a distant race, which, we are told, came from the other end of the earth and brought us in the tinkling of its bells the echo and vague memory of idolised joys; some covered wagon moving slowly along the road, with rolled tents on its roof and muddy dogs beneath it, a man in a yellow jacket, selling *muscade* in tin cups, the poor marionnettes in the Champs-Elysées, and the mandolin players who visit the cafés in the outskirts of the city, are all that is left.

Since then, it is true, we have had a number of farces of a higher class of humour. But is the new as good as the old? Do you prefer Tom Thumb or the Museum of Versailles?

On a wooden stand that formed a balcony around a square tent of grey canvas, a man in a blouse was beating a drum; behind him was a big painted sign representing a sheep and a cow, and some ladies, gentlemen, and soldiers. The animals were the two young phenomena from Guérande, with one arm and four shoulders. Their exhibitor, or editor, was shouting himself hoarse and announcing that besides these two beautiful things, battles between wild beasts would take place at once. Under the wooden stand stood a donkey and three bears, and the barking of the dogs, which proceeded from the interior of the tent, mingled with the beating of the drum, the shouts of the owner of the two phenomena and the cries of another fellow who was not as jovial and fat as the former, but tall and lanky, with a funereal expression and ragged clothes. This was the partner; they had met on the road and had combined their shows. The lean one contributed his bears, his dogs and his donkey, while the fat man brought his two phenomena and a grey felt hat which was used in their performance.

The theatre was roofless and its walls were of grey canvas; they fluttered in the wind and would have blown down had it not been for the poles which held them. Along the sides of the ring was a railing, behind which was the audience, and in a reserved corner we perceived the two phenomena nibbling at a bundle of hay half concealed by a gorgeous blanket. In the middle of the ring a high post was sunk in the ground, and here and there, attached to smaller posts, were dogs, barking and tugging at their chains. The men continued to shout and beat the drum, the bears growled, and the crowd began to file in.

First they brought out a poor, half-paralyzed bear, which seemed considerably bored. It wore a muzzle and had a big collar with an iron chain around its neck, a rope in its nose, to make it obey commands promptly, and a sort of leather hood over its ears. They tied bruin to the centre post, and the barks grew louder and fiercer. The dogs stood up, a bristling, scratching crew, their hind-quarters elevated, their snouts near the ground, their legs spread, while their masters stood in opposite corners of the ring and yelled at them in order to increase their ferocity. They let three bull-dogs go and the brutes rushed at the bear, which began to dodge around the post. The dogs followed, crowding and barking; sometimes the bear would upset them and trample them with its huge paws, but they would immediately scramble to their feet and make a dash for its head, clinging to its neck so that it was unable to shake off their wriggling bodies. With watchful eye, the two masters waited the moment when it looked as if the bear would be strangled; then they rushed at the dogs, tore them away, pulled their necks and bit their tails to make them unlock their jaws. The brutes whined with pain, but they would not let go. The bear struggled to free itself from the dogs, the dogs bit the bear, and the men bit the dogs. One young bull-dog especially, was remarkable for its ferocity; it clung to the bear’s back and would not let go, though they chewed and bent its tail, and lacerated its ears. The men were compelled to get a mattock to loosen its jaws. When they had all been disentangled, everyone took a rest; the bear lay down on the ground, the gasping dogs hung their tongues out, and the perspiring men pulled the hairs from between their teeth, while the dust that had arisen during the fight scattered in the atmosphere and settled on the heads of the spectators.

Two more bears were led into the ring, and one acted the gardener of the fable, went on a hunting trip, waltzed, took off its hat, and played dead. After this performance came the donkey. But it defended itself well; its kicks sent the dogs flying through the air like balloons; with its tail between its legs and its ears back, it ran around the ring trying to get its foes under its forelegs while they endeavoured to run around it and fasten their teeth in its throat. When the men finally rescued it, it was completely winded and shaking with fright; it was covered with drops of blood which trickled down its legs (on which repeated wounds had left scars), and, mingling with sweat, moistened its worn hoofs.

But the best of the performance was the general fight between the dogs; all took part in it, the big and the little ones, the bull-dogs, the sheep-dogs, the white ones, the black ones, the spotted ones, and the russet variety. Fully fifteen minutes were spent in bringing them to the proper pitch of excitement. The owners held them between their legs and pointing their heads in the direction of their adversaries, would knock them together violently. The thin men, especially their adversaries, would knock them together violently. The thin man, especially, worked with great gusto. With much effort he succeeded in producing a ferocious, hoarse chest-note that maddened the whole irritated pack. As serious as an orchestra leader, he would absorb the discordant harmony, and direct and strengthen its emission; but when the brutes were let loose and the howling band tore one another to pieces, he would be in a frenzy of enthusiasm and delight. He would applaud and bark and stamp his feet and imitate all the motions of the dogs; he would have enjoyed biting and being bitten, would gladly have been a dog himself with a snout, so that he could wallow in the dust and blood, and sink his teeth in the hairy skins and warm flesh, and enjoy the fray to his heart’s content.

There was a critical moment when all the dogs, one on top of another, formed a wriggling mass of legs, backs, tails and ears, which oscillated to and fro in the ring without separating, and in another instant had torn down the railing and threatened to harm the two young phenomena. The owner’s face paled and he hastily sprang forward, while his partner rushed to his side. Then tails were bitten, and kicks and blows were distributed right and left! They grabbed the dogs everywhere, pulled them away and flung them over their shoulders like bundles of hay. It was all over in a second, but I had seen the moment when the two young phenomena were near being reduced to chopped meat, and I trembled for the safety of the arm which grows on their back.

Flustered, no doubt, by their narrow escape, they did not care to be shown off. The cow backed and the sheep bucked; but finally the green blanket with yellow fringe was removed and their appendage was exhibited to the public, and then the performance ended....

CHAPTER IX.

BREST.

At the light-house of Brest. Here the Old World ends. This is its most advanced point; its farthest limit. Behind you spread Europe and Asia; before you lies the entire ocean. As great as space appears to our eye, does it not always seem limited as soon as we know that it has a boundary? Can you not see from our shores, across the Channel, the streets of Brighton and the fortresses of Provence; do you not always think of the Mediterranean as an immense blue lake ensconced in rocks, with promontories covered with falling monuments, yellow sands, swaying palm-trees and curved bays? But here nothing stops your eye. Thought can fly as rapidly as the winds, spread out, divagate, and lose itself, without finding anything but water, or perhaps vague America, nameless islands, or some country with red fruits, humming-birds and savages; or the silent twilight of the pole, with its spouting whales; or the great cities lighted by coloured glass, Japan with its porcelain roofs, and China with its sculptured staircases and its pagodas decorated with golden bells.

Thus does the mind people and animate this infinity, of which it tires so soon, in order that it may appear less vast. One cannot think of the desert without its caravans, of the ocean without its ships, of the bowels of the earth without evoking the treasures that they are supposed to conceal.

We returned to Conquet by way of the cliff. The breakers were dashing against its foot. Driven by a sea-breeze, they would come rushing in, strike the rocks and cover them with rippling sheets of water. Half an hour later, in a *char-à-banc* drawn by two sturdy little horses, we reached Brest, which we left with pleasure two days afterwards. When you leave the coast and approach the Channel, the country undergoes a marked change; it becomes less wild, less Celtic; the dolmens become scarcer, the flats diminish as the wheat fields grow more numerous, and, little by little, one reaches the fertile land of Léon, which is, as M. Pitre-Chevalier has gracefully put it, “the Attica of Brittany.”

Landerneau is a place where there is an elm-tree promenade, and where we saw a frightened dog running through the streets with a pan attached to its tail.

In order to go to the Château de la Joyeuse-Garde, one must first follow the banks of the Eilorn and then walk through a forest, in a hollow where few persons go. Sometimes, when the underwood thins out and meadows appear between the branches, one catches sight of a boat sailing up the river.

Our guide preceded us at quite a distance. Alone together we trod the good

Our guide preceded us at quite a distance. Alone together we trod the good old earth, flecked with bunches of purple heather and fallen leaves. The air was perfumed with the breath of violets and strawberries; slender ferns spread over the trunks of the trees. It was warm; even the moss was hot. A cuckoo, hidden in the foliage, now and then gave out its long cry, and gnats buzzed in the glades. We walked on with a feeling of inward peace, and let our conversation touch on many subjects; we spoke of sounds and colours, of the masters and their works, and of the joys of the mind; we thought of different writings, of familiar pictures and poses; we recited aloud some wonderful verses, the beauty of which thrilled us so that we repeated the rhythm again and again, accentuating the words and cadencing them so that they were almost sung. Foreign landscapes and splendid figures rose before our mind’s eye, and we dwelt with rapture on soft Asiatic nights with the moon shining on the cupolas; or our admiration was aroused by some sonorous name; or we delighted in the artlessness of some sentence standing out in relief in an ancient book.

Stretched out in the courtyard of Joyeuse-Garde, near the filled-up subterranean vaults, beneath the semi-circle of its unique ivy-covered arcade, we talked of Shakespeare and wondered whether the stars were inhabited.

Then we started off again, having given but a hasty glance at the crumbling home of good old Lancelot, the one a fairy stole from his mother and kept in a shining palace at the bottom of a lake. The dwarfs have disappeared, the drawbridge has flown away, and lizards now crawl where formerly the entrancing Geneviève dreamed of her lover gone to fight the giants in Trébizonde.

We went back through the same paths to the forest; the shadows were lengthening, the flowers and shrubs were hardly visible, and the blue peaks of the low mountains opposite seemed to grow taller against the fading sky. The river, which is bordered by artificial quays for half a mile outside the city, now becomes free to spread its waters at will over the meadow; its wide curve stretched far away into the distance, and the pools of water coloured by the setting sun looked like immense golden platters forgotten on the grass.

Till it reaches Roche-Maurice, the Eilorn follows the road, which winds around the foot of the rocky hills, the uneven eminences of which extend into the valley. We were riding in a gig driven by a boy who sat on one of the shafts. His hat had no strings and consequently blew off occasionally, and during his efforts to catch it, we had plenty of time to admire the landscape.

The Château de la Roche-Maurice is a real burgrave’s castle, a vulture’s nest on the top of a mountain. It is reached by an almost perpendicular slope along which great blocks of stone are strewn in place Of steps. At the top is a wall built of huge stones laid one above another, and in the wall are large windows of huge stones laid one above another, and in the wall are large windows, through which the whole surrounding country can be viewed; the woods, the fields, the river, the long, white road, the mountains with their uneven peaks, and the great meadow, which separates them through the middle.

A crumbling flight of steps leads to a dilapidated tower. Here and there stones crop out among the grass, and the rock shows amid the stones. Sometimes it seems as if this rock assumed artificial shapes, and as if the ruins, on the contrary, by crumbling more and more, had taken on a natural appearance and gone back to original matter.

A whole side of the wall is covered with ivy; it begins at the bottom and spreads out in an inverted pyramid, the color of which grows darker towards the top. Through an aperture, the edges of which are concealed by the foliage, one can see a section of the blue sky.

It was in these parts that the famous dragon lived, which was killed in olden times by knight Derrien, who was returning from the Holy Land with his friend, Neventer. Derrien attacked it as soon as he had rescued the unfortunate Eilorn who, after giving over his slaves, his vassals and his servants (he had no one left but his wife and son), had thrown himself headlong from the top of the tower into the river; but the monster, mortally wounded, and bound by the sash of its conqueror, soon drowned itself in the sea, at Poulbeunzual, like the crocodile of Batz island, which obeyed the behest of Saint Pol de Léon and drowned itself with the stole of the Breton saint wound around it. The gargoyle of Rouen met a similar fate with the stole of Saint Romain.

How beautiful those terrific old dragons were, with their gaping, fire-spitting jaws, their scales, their serpent-tails, their bat-wings, their lion-claws, their equine bodies and fantastic heads! And the knight who overpowered them was a wonderfully fine specimen of manhood! First, his horse grew frightened and reared, and his lance broke on the scales of the monster, whose fiery breath blinded him. Finally he alighted, and after a day’s battle, succeeded in sinking his sword up to the hilt in the beasts belly. Black blood flowed in streams from the wound, the audience escorted the knight home in triumph, and he became king and married a fair maiden.

But where did the dragons come from? Are they a confused recollection of the monsters that existed before the flood? Were they conceived from the contemplation of the carcasses of the ichthyosaurus and pteropod, and did the terror of men hear the sound of their feet in the tall grass and the wind howl when their voices filled the caves? Are we not, moreover, in the land of fairies, in the home of the Knights of the Round Table and of Merlin, in the mythological birthplace of vanished epopees? These, no doubt, revealed something of the old worlds which have become mythical, and told something of the cities that were swallowed up, of Is and Herbadilla, splendid and barbaric places, filled with the loves of their bewitching queens, but now doubly wiped out, first, by the ocean which has obliterated them and then by religion, which has cursed their memory.

There is much to be said on this subject. And, indeed, what is there on which much cannot be said? It might perhaps be Landivisian, for even the most prolix man is obliged to be concise in his remarks, when there is a lack of matter. I have noticed that good places are usually the ugliest ones. They are like virtuous women; one respects them, but one passes on in search of others. Here, surely, is the most productive spot of all Brittany; the peasants are not as poor as elsewhere, the fields are properly cultivated, the colza is superb, the roads are in good condition, and it is frightfully dreary.

Cabbages, turnips, beets and an enormous quantity of potatoes, all enclosed by ditches, cover the entire country from Saint Pol de Léon to Roscoff. They are forwarded to Brest, Rennes, and even to Havre; it is the industry of the place, and a large business is done with them.

Roscoff has a slimy beach and a narrow bay, and the surrounding sea is sprinkled with tiny black islands that rise like the backs of so many turtles.

The environs of Saint Pol are dreary and cheerless. The bleak tint of the flats mingles without transition with the paleness of the sky, and the short perspective has no large lines in its proportions, nor change of colour on the edges. Here and there, while strolling through the fields, you may come across some silent farm behind a grey stone wall, an abandoned manor deserted by its owners. In the yard the pigs are sleeping on the manure heap and the chickens are pecking at the grass that grows among the loose stones; the sculptured shield above the door has worn away under the action of rain and atmosphere. The rooms are empty and are used for storage purposes; the plaster on the ceiling is peeling off, and so are the remaining decorations, which, besides, have been tarnished by the cobwebs of the spiders one sees crawling around the joists. Wild mignonette has grown on the door of Kersa-lion; near the turret is a pointed window flanked by a lion and a Hercules, which stand out in bold relief on the wall like two gargoyles. At Kerland, I stumbled against a wolf-trap while I was ascending the large winding staircase. Ploughshares, rusted shovels, and jars filled with dried grain were scattered around the rooms or on the wide stone window-seats.

Kerouséré has retained its three turrets with machicolations; in the courtyard can still be seen the deep furrows of the trenches that have been filled up little by little, and are now on level with the ground; they are like the track of a bark, which spreads and spreads over the water till it finally disappears. From the platform of one of the towers (the others have pointed roofs), one can see the ocean between two low, wooded hills. The windows on the first floor are half stopped up, so as to keep the rain out; they look out into a garden enclosed by a high wall. The grass is covered with thistles and wheat grows in the flower-beds surrounded by rose-bushes.

A narrow path wends its way between a field where the ripe wheat sways in the breeze and a line of elm-trees growing on the edge of a ditch. Poppies gleamed here and there amongst the wheat; the ditch was edged with flowers, brambles, nettles, sweet-brier, long prickly stems, broad shining leaves, blackberries and purple digitalis, all of which mingled their colours and various foliage and uneven branches, and crossed their shadows on the grey dust like the meshes of a net.

When you have crossed a meadow where an old mill reluctantly turns its clogged wheel, you follow the wall by stepping on large stones placed in the water for a bridge; you soon come to the road that leads to Saint-Pol, at the end of which rises the slashed steeple of Kreisker; tall and slender, it dominates a tower decorated with a balustrade and produces a fine effect at a distance; but the nearer one gets to it, the smaller and uglier it becomes, till finally one finds that it is nothing more than an ordinary church with a portal devoid of statues. The cathedral also is built in a rather clumsy Gothic style, and is overloaded with ornaments and embroideries: but there is one notable thing, at least, in Saint-Pol, and that is the *table d’hôte* of the inn.

The girl who waits on it has gold earrings dangling against her white neck and a cap with turned up wings, like Molière’s soubrettes, and her sparkling blue eyes would incline anyone to ask her for something more than mere plates. But the guests! What guests! All *habitués*! At the upper end sat a creature in a velvet jacket and a cashmere waistcoat. He tied his napkin around the bottles that had been uncorked, in order to be able to distinguish them. He ladled the soup. On his left, sat a man in a light grey frock-coat, with the cuffs and collar trimmed with a sort of curly material representing fur; he ate with his hat on and was the professor of music at the local college. But he has grown tired of his profession and is anxious to find some place that would bring him from eight to twelve hundred francs at the most. He does not care so much about the salary, what he desires is the consideration that attaches to such a place. As he was always late, he requested that the courses be brought up again from the kitchen, and if he did not like them, he would send them back untouched; he sneezed and expectorated and rocked his chair and hummed and leaned his elbows on the table and picked his teeth.

Everybody respects him, the waitress admires everything he says, and is, I am sure, in love with him. The high opinion he has of himself shows in his smile, his speech, his gestures, his silence, and in his way of wearing his hair; it emanates from his entire obnoxious personality.

Opposite to us sat a grey-haired, plump man with red hands and thick, moist lips, who looked at us so persistently and annoyingly, while he masticated his food, that we felt like throwing the carafes at him. The other guests were insignificant and only contributed to the picture.

One evening the conversation fell upon a woman of the environs who had left her husband and gone to America with her lover, and who, the previous week, and passed through Saint-Pol on her way home, and had stopped at the inn. Everybody wondered at her audacity, and her name was accompanied by all sorts of unflattering epithets. Her whole life was passed in review by these people, and they all laughed contemptuously and insulted her and grew quite hot over the argument. They would have liked to have her there to tell her what they thought of her and see what she would say. Tirades against luxury, virtuous horror, moral maxims, hatred of wealth, words with a double meaning, shrugs, everything, in fact, was used to crush this woman, who, judging by the ferocity these ruffians displayed in their attacks, must have been pretty, refined, and charming. Our hearts beat indignantly in our breasts, and if we had taken another meal in Saint-Pol, I am sure that something would have happened.

CHAPTER X.

SAINT-MALO.

Saint-Malo, which is built right on the ocean and is enclosed by ramparts, looks like a crown of stones, the gems of which are the machicolations. The breakers dash against its walls, and when the tide is low they gently unfurl on the sand. Little rocks covered with sea-weed dot the beach and look like black spots on its light surface. The larger ones, which are upright and smooth, support the fortifications, thus making them appear higher than they really are.

Above this straight line of walls, broken here and there by a tower or the pointed ogive of a door, rise the roofs of the houses with their open garret-windows, their gyrating weather-cocks, and their red chimneys from which issue spirals of bluish smoke that vanishes in the air.

Around Saint-Malo are a number of little barren islands that have not a tree nor a blade of grass, but only some old crumbling walls, great pieces of which are hurled into the sea by each succeeding storm.

On the other side of the bay, opposite the city and connected with dry land by a long pier, which separates the port from the ocean, is Saint-Servan, a large, empty, almost deserted locality, which lies peacefully in a marshy meadow. At the entrance to Saint-Servan rise the four towers of the Château de Solidor, which are connected by curtains and are perfectly black from top to bottom. These alone are sufficient compensation for having made that extended circuit on the beach, under the broiling July sun, among the dock-yards and tar-pots and fires.

A walk around the city, over the ramparts, is one of the finest that can be taken. Nobody goes there. You can sit down in the embrasures of the cannons and dangle your feet over the abyss. In front of you lies the mouth of the Rance, which flows between two green hills, the coast, the islands, the rocks, and the ocean. The sentinel marches up and down behind you, and his even footsteps echo on the sonorous stones.

One evening we remained out for a long time. The night was beautiful, a true summer night, without a moon, but brilliant with stars and perfumed by the sea-breeze. The city was sleeping. One by one the lights went out in the windows, and the lighthouses shone red in the darkness, which was quite blue above us and glittering with myriads of twinkling stars. We could not see the ocean, but we could hear and smell it, and the breakers that lashed the walls flung drops of foam over us through the big apertures of the machicolations.

foam over us through the big apertures of the machicolations.

In one place, between the wall and the city houses, a quantity of cannon-balls are piled up in a ditch. From that point you can see these words written on the second floor of one of the dwellings: “Chateaubriand was born here.”

Further on, the wall ends at the foot of a tower called Quiquengrogne; like its sister, La Générale, it is high, broad, and imposing, and is swelled in the middle like a hyperbola.

Though they are as good as new and absolutely intact, these towers would no doubt be improved if they lost some of their battlements in the sea and if ivy spread its kindly leaves over their tops. Indeed, do not monuments grow greater through recollection, like men and like passions? And are they not completed by death?

We entered the castle. The empty courtyard planted with a few sickly lime-trees was as silent as the courtyard of a monastery. The janitress went and obtained the keys from the commander. When she returned, she was accompanied by a pretty little girl who wished to see the strangers. Her arms were bare and she carried a large bunch of flowers. Her black curls escaped from beneath her dainty little cap, and the lace on her pantalettes rubbed against her kid shoes tied around the ankles with black laces. She ran up stairs in front of us beckoning and calling.

The staircase is long, for the tower is high. The bright daylight passes through the loop-holes like an arrow. When you put your head through one of these openings, you can see the ocean, which seems to grow wider and wider, and the crude colour of the sky, which seems to grow larger and larger, till you are afraid you will lose yourself in it. Vessels look like launches and their masts like walking-sticks. Eagles must think we look like ants. I wonder whether they really see us. Do they know that we have cities and steeples and triumphal arches?

When we arrived on the platform, and although the battlement reached to our chest, we could not help experiencing the sensation one always feels at a great height from the earth. It is a sort of voluptuous uneasiness mingled with fear and delight, pride and terror, a battle between one’s mind and one’s nerves. You feel strangely happy; you would like to jump, fly, spread out in the air and be supported by the wind; but your knees tremble and you dare not go too near the edge.

Still, one night, in olden times, men climbed this tower with ropes. But then, it is not astonishing for those times, for that wonderful sixteenth century, the epoch of fierce convictions and frantic loves! How the human instrument vibrated then in all its chords! How liberal-minded, productive, and active men were! Does not this phrase of Fénelon apply wonderfully well to that period: “A sight well calculated to delight the eye?” For, without making any reference to the foreground of the picture, — beliefs crumbling at their foundation like tottering mountains, newly discovered worlds, lost worlds brought to light again, Michael-Angelo beneath his dome, laughing Rabelais, observant Shakespeare, pensive Montaigne, — where can be found a greater development in passions, a greater violence in courage, a greater determination in willpower, in fine, a more complete expansion of liberty struggling against all native fatalities? And with what a bold relief the episode stands out in history, and still, how wonderfully well it fits in, thereby giving a glimpse of the dazzling brightness and broad horizons of the period. Faces, living faces, pass before your eyes. You meet them only once; but you think of them long afterwards, and endeavour to contemplate them in order that they may be impressed more deeply upon your mind. Was not the type of the old soldiers whose race disappeared around 1598, at the taking of Vervins, fine and terrible? It was a type represented by men like Lamouche, Heurtand de Saint-Offange, and La Tremblaye, who came back holding the heads of his enemies in his hand; also La Fontenelle, of whom so much has been said. They were men of iron, whose hearts were no softer than their swords, and who, attracting hundreds of energies which they directed with their own, entered towns at night, galloping madly at the heads of their companies, equipped corsairs, burned villages, and were dealt with like kings! Who has thought of depicting those violent governors of the provinces, who slaughtered the people recklessly, committed rapes and swept in gold, like D’Epernon, an atrocious tyrant in Provence and a perfumed courtier at the Louvre; like Montluc, who strangled Huguenots with his own hands, or Baligui, the king of Cambrai, who read Machiavel in order to copy the Valentinois, and whose wife went to war on horseback, wearing a helmet and a cuirass.

One of the forgotten men of the period, or at least one of those whom most historians mention only slightly, is the Duke of Mercœur, the intrepid enemy of Henri IV, who defied him longer than Mayenne, the Ligue, and Philip II. Finally he was disarmed, that is, won over and appeased (by terms that were such that twenty-three articles of the treaty were not disclosed); then, not knowing what to do, he enlisted in the Hungarian army and fought the Turks. One day, with five thousand men, he attacked a whole army, and, beaten again, returned to France and died of the fever in Nuremberg, at the age of forty-four.

Saint-Malo put me in mind of him. He always tried to get it, but he never could succeed in making it his subject or his ally. They wished to fight on their own account, and to do business through their own resources, and although they were really *ligueurs*, they spurned the duke as well as the Béarnais.

When De Fontaines, the governor of the city, informed them of the death of

Henri III, they refused to recognize the King of Navarre. They armed themselves and erected barricades; De Fontaines intrenched himself in the castle and everybody kept upon the defensive. Little by little, the people encroached upon him; first, they requested him to declare that he was willing to maintain their franchises. De Fontaines complied in the hope of gaining time. The following year (1589), they chose four generals who were independent of the governor. A year later, they obtained permission to stretch chains. De Fontaines acceded to everything. The king was at Laval and he was waiting for him. The time was close at hand when he would be able to take revenge for all the humiliations he had suffered, and all the concessions he had been forced to make. But he precipitated matters and was discovered. When the people of Saint-Malo reminded him of his promises, he replied that if the king presented himself, he (De Fontaines) would let him enter the city. When they learned this, they decided to act.

The castle had four towers. It was the highest one, La Générale, the one on which De Fontaines relied the most, which they climbed. These bold attempts were not infrequent, as proved by the ascension of the cliffs of Fécamp by Bois-Rosé, and the attack of the Château de Blein, by Guebriant.

The rebels connived and assembled during several evenings at the place of a certain man named Frotet, sieur de La Lanbelle; they entered into an understanding with a Scotch gunner, and one dark night they armed themselves, went out to the rampart, let themselves down with ropes and approached the foot of La Générale.

There they waited. Soon a rustling sound was heard on the wall, and a ball of thread was lowered, to which they fastened their rope ladder. The ladder was then hoisted to the top of the tower and attached to the end of a culverin which was levelled in an embrasure of the battlement.

Michel Frotet was the first to ascend, and after him came Charles Anselin, La Blissais and the others. The night was dark and the wind whistled; they had to climb slowly, to hold their daggers between their teeth and feel for the rungs of the ladder with their hands and feet. Suddenly (they were midway between the ground and the top), they felt themselves going down; the rope had slipped. But they did not utter a sound; they remained motionless. Their weight had caused the culverin to tip forward; it stopped on the edge of the embrasure and they slowly resumed their ascension and arrived one after another on the platform of the tower.

The sleepy sentinels did not have time to give the alarm. The garrison was either asleep or playing dice on the drums. A panic seized the soldiers and they fled to the dungeon. The conspirators pursued them and attacked them in the hallways, on the staircase, and in the rooms, crushing them between the doors and slaughtering them mercilessly. Meanwhile the townspeople arrived to lend assistance; some put up ladders, and entered the tower without encountering any resistance and plundered it. La Pérandière, lieutenant of the castle, perceiving La Blissais, said to him: "This, sir, is a most miserable night." But La Blissais impressed upon him that this was not the time for conversation. The Count of Fontaines had not made his appearance. They went in search of him, and found him lying dead across the threshold of his chamber, pierced by a shot from an arquebuse that one of the townspeople had fired at him, as he was about to go out, escorted by a servant bearing a light. "Instead of rushing to face the danger," says the author of this account, "he had dressed as leisurely as if he were going to a wedding, without leaving one shoulder-knot untied."

This outbreak in Saint-Malo, which so greatly harmed the king, did not in the least benefit the Duke de Mercœur. He had hoped that the people would accept a governor from his hands, his son, for example, a mere child, for that would have meant himself, but they obstinately refused to listen to it. He sent troops to protect them, but they refused to let them enter, and the soldiers were compelled to take lodgings outside of the city.

Still, in spite of all this, they had not become more royalist, for some time later, having arrested the Marquis of La Noussaie and the Viscount of Denoual, it cost the former twelve thousand crowns to get out of prison and the latter two thousand.

Then, fearing that Pont-Brient would interrupt commercial relations with Dinan and the other cities in the Ligue, they attacked and subjected it.

Presuming that their bishop, who was the temporal master of the city, might be likely to deprive them of the freedom they had just acquired, they put him in prison and kept him there for a year.

The conditions at which they finally accepted Henri IV are well-known: they were to take care of themselves, not be obliged to receive any garrison, be exempt from taxes for six years, *etc.*

Situated between Brittany and Normandy, this little people seems to have the tenacity and granite-like resistance of the former and the impulses and dash of the latter. Whether they are sailors, writers, or travellers on foreign seas, their predominant trait is audacity; they have violent natures which are almost poetical in their brutality, and often narrow in their obstinacy. There is this resemblance between these two sons of Saint-Malo, Lamennais and Broussais: they were always equally extreme in their systems and employed their latter years in fighting what they had upheld in the earlier part of their life.

In the city itself are little tortuous streets edged with high houses and dirty fishmongers’ shops. There are no carriages or luxuries of any description; everything is as black and reeking as the hold of a ship. A sort of musty smell, reminiscent of Newfoundland, salt meat, and long sea voyages pervades the air.

“The watch and the round are made every night with big English dogs, which are let loose outside of the city by the man who is in charge of them, and it is better not to be in their vicinity at that time. But when morning comes, they are led back to a place in the city where they shed all their ferocity which, at night, is so great.”

Barring the disappearance of this four-legged police which at one time devoured M. du Mollet, the existence of which is confirmed by a contemporaneous text, the exterior of things has changed but little, no doubt, and even the civilized people living in Saint-Malo admit that it is very much behind the times.

The only picture we noticed in the church is a large canvas that represents the battle of Lepante and is dedicated to Nôtre-Dame des Victoires, who can be seen floating above the clouds. In the foreground, all Christianity, together with crowned kings and princesses, is kneeling. The two armies can be seen in the background. The Turks are being hurled into the sea and the Christians stretch their arms towards heaven.

The church is ugly, has no ornamentation, and looks almost like a Protestant house of worship. I noticed very few votive offerings, a fact that struck me as being rather peculiar in this place of sea perils. There are no flowers nor candles in the chapels, no bleeding hearts nor bedecked Virgin, nothing, in fact, of all that which causes M. Michelet to wax indignant.

Opposite the ramparts, at a stone’s throw from the city, rises the little island of Grand-Bay. There, can be found the tomb of Chateaubriand; that white spot cut in the rock is the place he has designated for his body.

We went there one evening when the tide was low and the sun setting in the west. The water was still trickling over the sand. At the foot of the island, the dripping sea-weed spread out like the hair of antique women over a tomb.

The island is deserted; sparse grass grows in spots, mingled here and there with tufts of purple flowers and nettles. On the summit is a dilapidated casemate, with a courtyard enclosed by crumbling walls. Beneath this ruin, and half-way up the hill, is a space about ten feet square, in the middle of which rises a granite slab surmounted by a Latin cross. The tomb comprises three pieces: one for the socle, one for the slab, and another for the cross.

Chateaubriand will rest beneath it, with his head turned towards the sea; in this grave, built on a rock, his immortality will be like his life — deserted and surrounded by tempests. The centuries and the breakers will murmur a long time around his great memory; the breakers will dash against his tomb during storms, or on summer mornings, when the white sails unfold and the swallow arrives from across the seas; they will bring him the melancholy voluptuousness of far-away horizons and the caressing touch of the sea-breeze. And while time passes and the waves of his native strand swing back and forth between his cradle and his grave, the great heart of René, grown cold, will slowly crumble to dust to the eternal rhythm of this never-ceasing music.

We walked around the tomb and touched it, and looked at it as if it contained its future host, and sat down beside it on the ground.

The sky was pink, the sea was calm, and there was a lull in the breeze. Not a ripple broke the motionless surface of ocean on which the setting sun shed its golden light. Blue near the coast and mingled with the evening mist, the sea was scarlet everywhere else and deepened into a dark red line on the horizon. The sun had no rays left; they had fallen from its face and drowned their brilliancy in the water, on which they seemed to float. The red disc set slowly, robbing the sky of the pink tinge it had diffused over it, and while both the sun and the delicate color were wearing away, the pale blue shades of night crept over the heavens. Soon the sun touched the ocean and sank into it to the middle. For a moment it appeared cut in two by the horizon; the upper half remained firm, while the under one vacillated and lengthened; then it finally disappeared; and when the reflection died away from the place where the fiery ball had gone down, it seemed as if a sudden gloom had spread over the sea.

The shore was dark. The light in one of the windows in a city house, which a moment before was bright, presently went out. The silence grew deeper, though sounds could be heard. The breakers dashed against the rocks and fell back with a roar; long-legged gnats sang in our ears and disappeared with a buzzing of their transparent wings, and the indistinct voices of the children bathing at the foot of the ramparts reached us, mingled with their laughter and screams.

Young boys came out of the water, and, stepping gingerly on the pebbles, ran up the beach to dress. When they attempted to put on their shirts, the moist linen clung to their wet shoulders and we could see their white torsos wriggling with impatience, while their heads and arms remained concealed and the sleeves flapped in the wind like flags.

A man with his wet hair falling straight around his neck, passed in front of us. His dripping body shone. Drops trickled from his dark, curly beard, and he shook his head so as to let the water run out of his locks. His broad chest was parted by a stubby growth of hair that extended between his powerful muscles. It heaved with the exertion of swimming and imparted an even motion to his flat abdomen, which was as smooth as ivory where it joined the hips. His muscular thighs were set above slender knees and fine legs ending in arched feet, with short heels and spread toes. He walked slowly over the beach.

How beautiful is the human form when it appears in its original freedom, as it was created in the first day of the world! But where are we to find it, masked as it is and condemned never to reappear. That great word, Nature, which humanity has repeated sometimes with idolatry and sometimes with fear, which philosophers have sounded and poets have sung, how it is being lost and forgotten! If there are still here and there in the world, far from the pushing crowd, some hearts which are tormented by the constant search of beauty, and forever feeling the hopeless need of expressing what cannot be expressed and doing what can only be dreamed, it is to Nature, as to the home of the ideal, that they must turn. But how can they? By what magic will they be able to do so? Man has cut down the forests, has conquered the seas, and the clouds that hover over the cities are produced by the smoke that rises from the chimneys. But, say others, do not his mission and his glory consist in going forward and attacking the work of God, and encroaching upon it? Man denies His work, he ruins it, crushes it, even in his own body, of which he is ashamed and which he conceals like a crime.

Man having thus become the rarest and most difficult thing in the world to know (I am not speaking of his heart, O moralists!), it follows that the artist ignores his shape as well as the qualities that render it beautiful. Where is the poet, nowadays, even amongst the most brilliant, who knows what a woman is like? Where could the poor fellow ever have seen any? What has he ever been able to learn about them in the salons; could he see through the corset and the crinoline?

Better than all the rhetoric in the world, the plastic art teaches those who study it the gradation of proportions, the fusion of planes, in a word, harmony. The ancient races, through the very fact of their existence, left the mark of their noble attitudes and pure blood on the works of the masters. In Juvenal, I can hear confusedly the death-rattles of the gladiators; Tacitus has sentences that resemble the drapery of a laticlave, and some of Horace's verses are like the body of a Greek slave, with supple undulations, and short and long syllables that sound like crotala.

But why bother about these things? Let us not go so far back, and let us be satisfied with what is manufactured. What is wanted nowadays is rather the opposite of nudity, simplicity and truth? Fortune and success will fall to the lot of those who know how to dress and clothe facts! The tailor is the king of the century and the fig-leaf is its symbol; laws, art, politics, all things, appear in tights! Lying freedom, plated furniture, water-colour pictures, why! the public loves this sort of thing! So let us give it all it wants and gorge the fool!

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CHAPTER XI.

MONT SAINT-MICHEL.

The road from Pontorson to the Mont Saint-Michel is wearying on account of the sand. Our post-chaise (for we also travel by post-chaise), was disturbed every now and then by a number of carts filled with the grey soil which is found in these parts and which is transported to some place and utilised as manure. They became more numerous as we approached the sea, and defiled for several miles until we finally saw the deserted strand whence they came. On this white surface, with its conical heaps of earth resembling huts, the fluctuating line of carts reminded us of an emigration of barbarians deserting their native heath.

The empty horizon stretches out, spreads, and finally mingles its greyish flats with the yellow sand of the beach. The ground becomes firmer and a salt breeze fans your cheeks; it looks like a vast desert from which the waters have receded. Long, flat strips of sand, superposed indefinitely in indistinct planes, ripple like shadows, and the wind playfully designs huge arabesques on their surfaces. The sea lies far away, so far, in fact, that its roar cannot be heard, though we could distinguish a sort of vague, aërial, imperceptible murmur, like the voice of the solitude, which perhaps was only the effect produced by the intense silence.

Opposite us rose a large round rock with embattled walls and a church on its top; enormous counterparts resting on a steep slope support the sides of the edifice. Rocks and wild shrubs are strewn over the incline. Half-way up the slope are a few houses, which show above the white line of the wall and are dominated by the brown church; thus some bright colours are interspersed between the two plain tints.

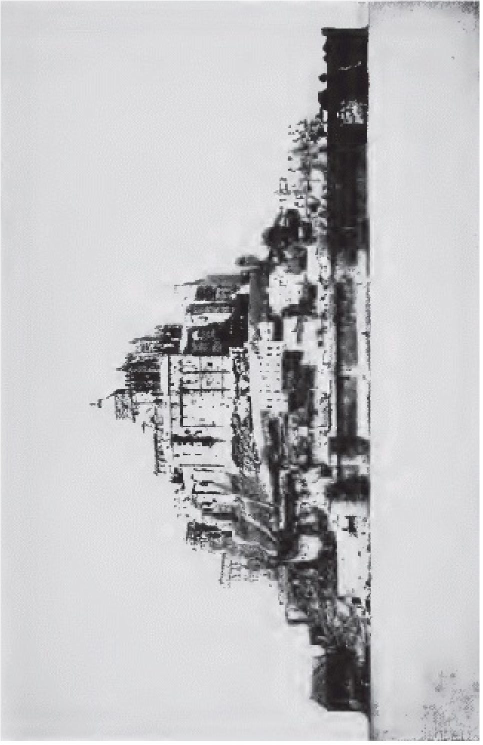
The post-chaise drove ahead of us and we followed it, guiding ourselves by the tracks of the wheels; finally it disappeared in the distance, and we could distinguish only its hood, which looked like some big crab crawling over the sand.

Here and there a swift current of water compelled us to move farther up the beach. Or we would suddenly come upon pools of slime with ragged edges framed in sand.

Beside us walked two priests who were also going to the Mont Saint-Michel. As they were afraid of soiling their new cassocks, they gathered them up around their legs when they jumped over the little streams. Their silver buckles were grey with mud, and their wet shoes gaped and threw water at every step they took.

took.

Meantime the Mount was growing larger. With one sweep of the eye we were able to take in the whole panorama, and could see distinctly the tiles on the roofs, the bunches of nettles on the rocks, and, a little higher, the green shutters of a small window that looks out into the governor's garden.



The first door, which is narrow and pointed, opens on a sort of pebble road leading to the ocean; on the worn shield over the second door, undulating lines carved in the stone seem to represent water; on both sides of the doors are enormous cannons composed of iron bars connected by similar circular bands. One of them has retained a cannon-ball in its mouth; they were taken from the English in 1423, by Louis d'Estouteville, and have remained here four hundred years.

Five or six houses built opposite one another compose the street; then the line breaks, and they continue down the slopes and stairs leading to the castle, in a sort of haphazard fashion.

In order to reach the castle, you first go up to the curtain, the wall of which shuts out the view of the ocean from the houses below. Grass grows between the cracked stones and the battlements. The rampart continues around the whole island and is elevated by successive platforms. When you have passed the watch-house, which is situated between the two towers, you see a little straight flight of steps; when you climb them, the roofs of the houses, with their dilapidated chimneys, gradually grow lower and lower. You can see the washing hung out to dry on poles fastened to the garret-windows, or a tiny garden baking in the sun between the roof of one house and the ground-floor of another, with its parched leeks drooping their leaves over the grey soil; but the other side of the rock, the side that faces the ocean, is barren and deserted, and so steep that the shrubs that grow there have a hard time to remain where they are and look as if they were about to topple over every minute.

When you are standing up there, enjoying as much space as the human eye can possibly encompass and looking at the ocean and the horizon of the coast, which forms an immense bluish curve, or at the wall of La Merveille with its thirty-six huge counterparts upreared on a perpendicular cliff, a laugh of admiration parts your lips, and you suddenly hear the sharp noise of the weaving-looms. The people manufacture linen, and the shrill sound of the shuttles produces a very lively racket.

Between two slender towers, which represent the uplifted barrels of two cannons, is the entrance to the castle, a long, arched hallway, at the end of which is a flight of stone steps. The middle of the hall is always dark, being insufficiently lighted by two skylights one of which is at the bottom of the hall and the other at the top, between the interval of the drawbridge; it is like a subterranean vault.

The guard-room is at the head of the stairs as you enter. The voice of the sergeants and the clicking of the guns re-echoed along the walls. They were beating a drum.

Meanwhile a *garde-chiourme* returned with our passports, which M. le gouverneur had wished to see; then he motioned us to follow him; he opened doors, drew bolts, and led us through a maze of halls, vaults and staircases. Really, one can lose oneself in this labyrinth, for a single visit does not enable you to understand the complicated plan of these combined buildings, where a fortress, a church, an abbey, a prison and a dungeon, are mingled, and where you can find every style of architecture, from the Romance of the eleventh century to the bewildering Gothic of the sixteenth. We could catch only a glimpse of the knights’ hall, which has been converted into a loom-room and is for this reason barred to the public. We saw only four rows of columns supporting a ceiling ornamented with salient mouldings; they were decorated with clover leaves. The monastery is built over this hall, at an altitude of two hundred feet above the sea level. It is composed of a quadrangular gallery formed by a triple line of small granite, tufa, or stucco columns. Acanthus, thistles, ivy, and oak-leaves wind around their caps; between each mitred ogive is a cut-out rose; this gallery is the place where the prisoners take the air.

The cap of the *garde-chiourme* now passes along these walls where, in olden times, passed the shaved heads of industrious friars; and the wooden shoes of the prisoners click on the slabs that used to be swept by the trailing robes of monks and trodden by their heavy leather sandals.

The church has a Gothic choir and a Romance nave, and the two architectures seem to vie with each other in majesty and elegance. In the choir, the arches of the windows are pointed, and are as lofty as the aspirations of love; in the nave, the arcades open their semi-circles roundly, and columns as straight as the trunk of a palm-tree mount along the walls. They rest on square pedestals, are crowned with acanthus leaves, and continue in powerful mouldings that curve beneath the ceiling and help support it.

It was noon. The bright daylight poured in through the open door and rippled over the dark sides of the building.

The nave, which is separated from the choir by a green curtain, is filled with tables and benches, for it is used also as a dining-hall. When mass is celebrated, the curtain is drawn and the condemned men may be present at divine service without removing their elbows from the table. It is a novel idea.

In order to enlarge the platform by twelve yards on the western side of the church, the latter itself has been curtailed; but as it was necessary to reconstruct some sort of entrance, one architect closed the nave by a façade in Greek style; then, perhaps, feeling remorseful, or desiring (a presumption which will be accepted more readily), to embellish his work still further, he afterwards added some columns “which imitate fairly well the architecture of the eleventh century,” says the notice. Let us be silent and bow our heads. Each of the arts has its own particular leprosy, its mortal ignominy that eats its face away. Painting has the family group, music the ballad, literature the criticism, and architecture the architect.

The prisoners were walking around the platform, one after another, silent, with folded arms, and in the beautiful order we had the opportunity to admire at Fontevrault. They were the patients of the hospital ward taking the air.

Tottering along with the file was one who lifted his feet higher than the rest and clung to the coat of the man ahead of him. He was blind. Poor, miserable wretch! God prevents him from seeing and his fellow-men forbid him to speak!

The following day, when the tide had again receded from the beach, we left the Mount under a broiling sun which heated the hood of the carriage and made the horses sweat. They only walked; the harness creaked and the wheels sank deep into the sand. At the end of the beach, when grass appeared again, I put my eye to the little window that is in the back of every carriage, and bade goodbye to Mont Saint-Michel.

CHAPTER XII.

COMBOURG.

A letter from the Viscount Vésin was to gain us entrance to the castle. So as soon as we arrived, we called on the steward, M. Corvesier. They ushered us into a large kitchen where a young lady in black, marked by smallpox and wearing horn spectacles over her prominent eyes, was stemming currants. The kettle was on the fire and they were crushing sugar with bottles. It was evident that we were intruding. After several minutes had elapsed, we were informed that M. Corvesier was confined to his bed with a fever and was very sorry that he could not be of any service to us, but sent us his regards. In the meantime, his clerk, who had just come in from an errand, and who was lunching on a glass of cider and a piece of buttered bread, offered to show us the castle. He put his napkin down, sucked his teeth, lighted his pipe, took a bunch of keys from the wall and started ahead of us through the village.

After following a long wall, we entered through an old door into a silent farm-yard. Silica here and there shows through the beaten ground, on which grows a little grass soiled by manure. There was nobody around and the stable was empty. In the barns some chickens were roosting on the poles of the wagons, with their heads under their wings. Around the buildings, the sound of our footsteps was deadened by the dust accumulated from the straw in the lofts.

Four large towers connected by curtains showed battlements beneath their pointed roofs; the openings in the towers, like those in the main part of the castle, are small, irregular windows, which form uneven black squares on the grey stones. A broad stoop, comprising about thirty steps, reaches to the first floor, which has become the ground-floor of the interior apartments, since the trenches have been filled up.

The yellow wall-flower does not grow here, but instead, one finds nettles and lentisks, greenish moss and lichens. To the left, next to the turret, is a cluster of chestnut-trees reaching up to the roof and shading it.

After the key had been turned in the lock and the door pushed open with kicks, we entered a dark hallway filled with boards and ladders and wheelbarrows.

This passage led into a little yard enclosed by the thick interior walls of the castle. It was lighted from the top like a prison yard. In the corners, drops of humidity dripped from the stones. We opened another door. It led into a large, empty, sonorous hall; the floor was cracked in a hundred places, but there was empty, sonorous hall, the floor was cracked in a hundred places, but there was fresh paint on the wainscoting.

The green forest opposite sheds a vivid reflection on the white walls, through the large windows of the castle. There is a lake and underneath the windows were clusters of lilacs, petunia-blossoms and acacias, which have grown pell-mell in the former parterre, and cover the hill that slopes gradually to the road, following the banks of the lake and then continuing through the woods.

The great, deserted hall, where the child who afterwards wrote *René*, used to sit and gaze out of the windows, was silent. The clerk smoked his pipe and expectorated on the floor. His dog, which had followed him, hunted for mice, and its nails clicked on the pavement.

We walked up the winding stairs. Moss covers the worn stone steps. Sometimes a ray of light, passing through a crack in the walls, strikes a green blade and makes it gleam in the dark like a star.

We wandered through the halls, through the towers, and over the narrow curtain with its gaping machicolations, which attract the eye irresistibly to the abyss below.

On the second floor is a small room which looks out into the inside courtyard and has a massive oak door that closes with a latch. The beams of the ceiling (you can touch them), are rotten from age; the whitewashed walls show their lattice-work and are covered with big spots; the window-panes are obscured by cobwebs and their frames are buried in dust. This used to be Chateaubriand’s room. It faces the West, towards the setting sun.

We continued; when we passed in front of a window or a loop-hole, we warmed ourselves in the warm air coming from without, and this sudden transition rendered the ruins all the more melancholy and cheerless. The floors of the apartments are rotting away, and daylight enters through the fireplaces along the blackened slab where rain has left long green streaks. The golden flowers on the drawing-room ceiling are falling off, and the shield that surmounts the mantelpiece is broken into bits. While we were looking around, a flight of birds entered, flew around for a few minutes and passed out through the chimney.

In the evening, we went to the lake. The meadow has encroached upon it and will soon cover it entirely, and wheat will grow in the place of pond-lilies. Night was falling. The castle, flanked by its four turrets and framed by masses of green foliage, cast a dark shadow over the village. The setting sun made the great mass appear black; the dying rays touched the surface of the lake and then melted in the mist on the purplish top of the silent forest.

We sat down at the foot of an oak and opened *René*. We faced the lake where he had often watched the nimble swallow on the bending reeds; we sat in the shadow of the forest where he had often pursued rainbows over the dripping hills; we harkened to the rustling of the leaves and the whisperings of the water that had added their murmur to the sad melody of his youth. As the darkness gathered on the pages of the book, the bitterness of its words went to our hearts, and we experienced a sensation of mingled melancholy and sweetness.

A wagon passed in the road, and the wheels sank in the deep tracks. A smell of new-mown hay pervaded the air. The frogs were croaking in the marshes. We went back.

The sky was heavy and a storm raged all night. The front of a neighbouring house was illumined and flared like a bonfire at every flash of lightning. Gasping, and tired of tossing on my bed, I arose, lighted a candle, opened the window and leaned out.

The night was dark, and as silent as slumber. The lighted candle threw my huge shadow on the opposite wall. From time to time a flash of lightning blinded me.

I thought of the man whose early life was spent here and who filled half a century with the clamouring of his grief.

I thought of him first in these quiet streets, playing with the village boys and looking for nests in the church-steeple and in the woods. I imagined him in his little room, leaning his elbows on the table, and watching the rain beating on the window-panes and the clouds passing above the curtain, while his dreams flew away. I thought of the bitter loneliness of youth, with its intoxications, its nausea, and its bursts of love that sicken the heart. Is it not here that our own grief was nourished, is this not the very Golgotha where the genius that fed us suffered its anguish?

Nothing can express the gestation of the mind or the thrills which future great works impart to those who carry them; but we love to see the spot where we know they were conceived and lived, as if it had retained something of the unknown ideal which once vibrated there.

His room! his room! his childhood’s poor little room! It was here that he was tormented by vague phantoms which beckoned to him and clamoured for birth: Attala shaking the magnolias out of her hair in the soft breeze of Florida, Velléda running through the woods in the moonlight, Cymodocée protecting her white bosom from the claws of the leopards, and frail Amélie and pale René!

One day, however, he tears himself away from the old feudal homestead, never to return. Now he is lost in the whirl of Paris and mingles with his fellow-men; and then he feels an impulse to travel and he starts off.

I can see him leaning over the side of the ship, I can see him looking for a new world and weeping over the country he has left. He lands; he listens to the waterfalls and the songs of the Natchez; he watches the flowing rivers and the bright scales of the snakes and the eyes of the savages. He allows his soul to be fascinated by the languor of the Savannah. They tell each other of their native melancholy and he exhausts its pleasures as he exhausted those of love. He returns, writes, and everyone is carried away by the charm of his magnificent style with its royal sweep and its supple, coloured, undulating phrase, as stormy as the winds that sweep over virgin forests, as brilliant as the neck of a humming-bird, and as soft as the light of the moon shining through the windows of a chapel.

He travels again; this time he goes to ancient shores; he sits down at Thermopylæ and cries: Leonidas! Leonidas! visits the tomb of Achilles, Lacedæmon, and Carthage, and, like the sleepy shepherd who raises his head to watch the passing caravans, all those great places awake when he passes through them.

Banished, exiled, laden with honours, this man who had starved in the streets will dine at the table of kings; he will be an ambassador and a minister, will try to save the tottering monarchy, and after seeing the ruin of all his beliefs, he will witness his own glorification as if he were already counted among the dead.

Born during the decline of one period and at the dawn of another, he was to be its transition and the guardian of its memories and hopes. He was the embalmer of Catholicism and the proclaimer of liberty. Although he was a man of old traditions and illusions, he was constitutional in politics and revolutionary in literature. Religious by instinct and education, it is he, who, in advance of everyone else, in advance of Byron, gave vent to the most savage pride and frightful despair.

He was an artist, and had this in common with the artists of the eighteenth century: he was always hampered by narrow laws which, however, were always broken by the power of his genius. As a man, he shared the misery of his fellow-men of the nineteenth century. He had the same turbulent preoccupations and futile gravity. Not satisfied with being great, he wished to appear grandiose, and it seems that this conceited mania did not in the least efface his real grandeur. He certainly does not belong to the race of dreamers who have made no incursion into life, masters with calm brows who have had neither period, nor country nor family. But this man cannot be separated from the passions of his time; they made him what he was, and he in turn created a number of them. Perhaps the future will not give him credit for his heroic stubbornness and no doubt it will be the episodes of his books that will immortalise their titles with the names of the causes they upheld.

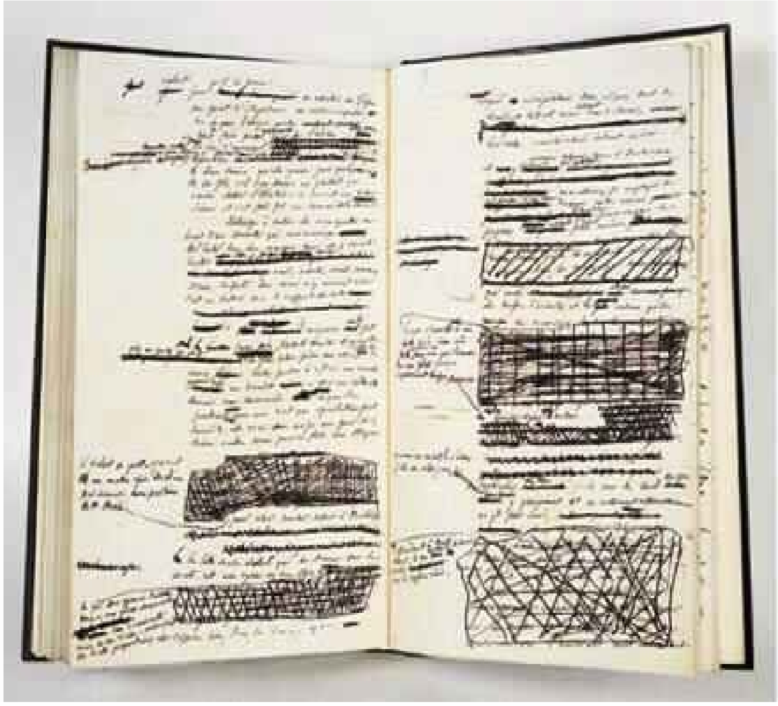
I stayed at the window enjoying the night and feeling with delight the cold morning air on my lids. Little by little the day dawned; the wick of the candle grew longer and longer and its flame slowly faded away. The roof of the market appeared in the distance and a cock crowed; the storm had passed; a few drops of water remained in the dust of the road and made large round spots on it. As I was very tired, I went back to bed and slept.

We felt very sad on leaving Combourg, and besides, the end of our journey was at hand. Soon this delightful trip which we had enjoyed for three months would be over. The return, like the leave-taking, produces an anticipated sadness, which gives one a proof of the insipid life we lead.

PAR LES CHAMPS ET PAR LES GREVES

TABLE DES MATIERES

BRETAGNE.
PYRENEES.
CORSE.



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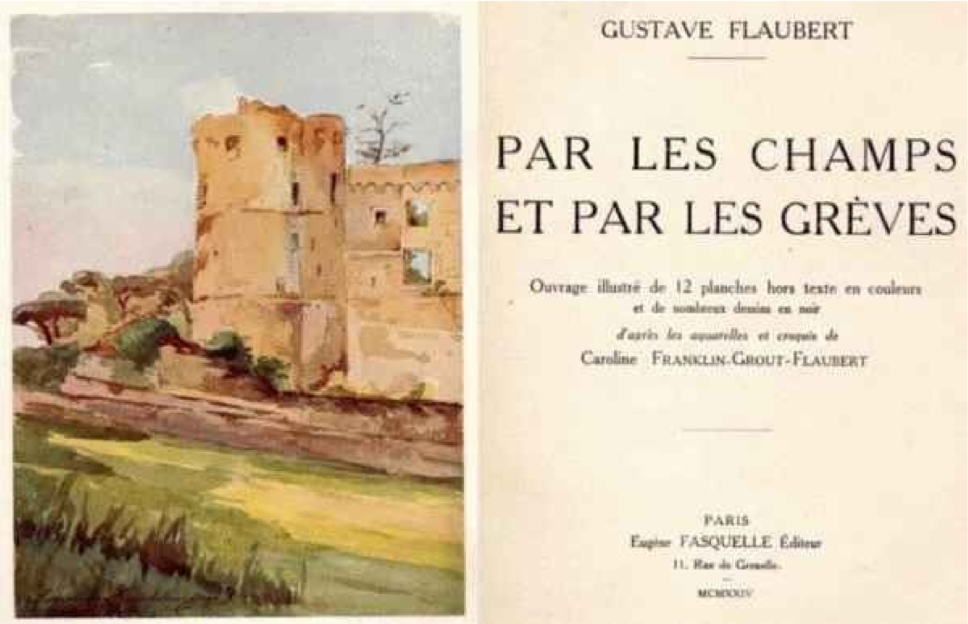


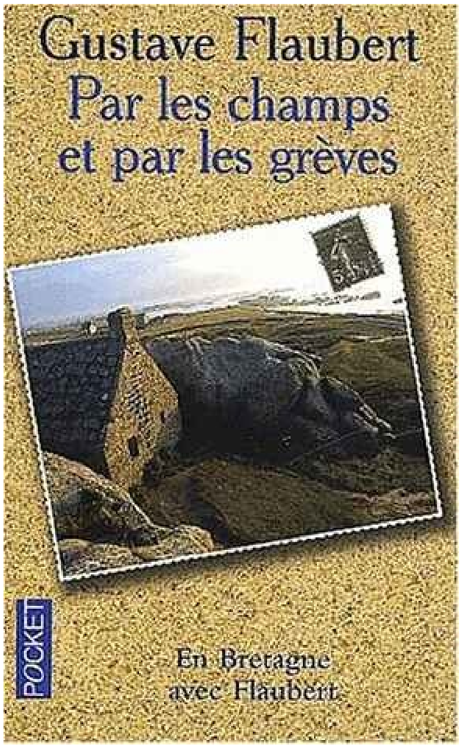
GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

PAR LES CHAMPS
ET PAR LES GRÈVES

Ouvrage illustré de 12 planches hors texte en couleurs
et de nombreux dessins en noir
d'après les aquarelles et croquis de
Caroline FRANKLIN-GROUT-FLAUBERT

PARIS
Eugène FASQUELLE Éditeur
11, Rue de Grenelle.
MCMXXIV

Frontispice et page de titre de l'édition de 1924


Gustave Flaubert
Par les champs et par les grèves
POCKET
En Bretagne avec Flaubert

Couverture de la réédition au format de poche

BRETAGNE.

I

1er mai 1847.

Chemin de fer. — Anglais v....é et son enfant qui lisait des vaudevilles français. — Grainetiers, 2 expressions de marchand, l’accapareur sournois et l’exploiteur jovial et féroce. — Les deux jeunes gens se croyant charmants.

Blois. — Près le débarcadère une allée de vieux ormeaux à tronc large, à branches diffuses, les vrais arbres XVIII^{e} siècle, arbres de théâtre sous lesquels les fillettes dansent au son du violon. — Rues silencieuses *intimes* dans lesquelles on placerait quelque douce et bénigne passion. — En sortant de la cathédrale pour descendre à la rivière il y en a une, à marches, comme celles qui mènent à Fourvières. — Vieille femme dont la tête en coiffe blanche saillissait à sa fenêtre à guillotine. — Près l’église Saint-Nicolas, une rue longue (avec des portes cochères donnant sur des jardins) courbée, herbue ; au fond, une boutique de modes.

Église Saint-Nicolas, entré par derrière, chapiteaux ; grand portail noir avec des ravenelles ; église de l’ogive primitive. — Cathédrale XVI^{e} siècle, transition de la Renaissance. — Château, côté du nord, élevé sur des remparts ; pour y entrer on passe sous une voûte. — Le côté gauche, dans la cour, est de la reine Anne, charmant ; le fond de Louis XIV atroce ; côté de droite réparé, charmant ; tourelle carrée ; délicieuse corniche François I^{er} intérieur. — Oratoire d’Henri III à côté de sa chambre ; à côté son cabinet au nord. — Troupiers avec leurs brocs de vin pour la fête du roi. — Partout la cordelière d’Anne et le cygne percé d’une flèche de Claude de France.

Chambord. — Terrains sablonneux, maigres, dégarnis d’arbres. — Façade, rivière, oiseaux qui volaient bas ; tristesse de la ruine qui n’est pas ruine. — Dans la cour l’âne et son ânon, chien joyeux. — Sur le registre, à côté des jérémiades et souhaits, légitimité, ô mania, Louise et Alfred ; “on peut être boiteux sans cesser d’être droit”. l’abbé Sam. aumônier du presbytère..... exilé sans cesser d’être roi. — Escalier double à jour ; on a fait 2 étages de ce qui n’était que le rez-de-chaussée.

La salle du BG au 2^{e} étage a le plafond comme tout le reste, couvert de salamandres peintes et dorées. — Parc d’artillerie. — Donné au duc de Bordeaux par le colonel Langlois. — Oratoire de François I^{er} : plafond sculpté, une salamandre ou un chou, un ornement quelconque dans chaque carré.

Amboise. — Bâti sur deux bras de la Loire ; une ile au milieu. — Pays singulièrement doux et bon, plus pur comme Touraine qu’à Blois ; femmes jolies, braves. — Revue de la garde nationale ; les bisets sont ficelés et semblaient mettre de la prétention dans leur dédain du costume civique. — Promenade plantée à droite au bas du château. — Château, grandes tours. — Au haut, galerie à arcade ; à gauche, une grande tour avec des ravenelles, superbe en couleur bistrée, elle est garnie de fenêtres hautes, resserrées, a plein cintre. — On monte par derrière, jardin charmant, élevé, en pleine vue sur la campagne ; horizon doux fuyant, avec deux grandes voiles au fond. — A pic sous soi les toits pointus des maisons, vieux hôtels déserts.

Intérieur du château, nul ; les éternels bustes du roi, de la reine et de M^me^ Adélaïde dans plusieurs appartements. — Dans un pan de mur qui faisait partie d’une ancienne terrasse, le porc-épic. — La chapelle : délicieuse, ouvrage de fouillure de ciselé, d’élégance,et dont le style fait penser aux fraises à la Médicis à cause de ses broderies, de ses boutons et de ses découpures. — Sur la porte un saint Hubert descendu de cheval, à genoux ; un ange vient mettre une couronne sur son bonnet, le saint est agenouillé devant le cerf qui porte un crucifix entre ses cornes ; les chiens sont à côté et jappent ; un serpent rampe sur une montagne où l’on aperçoit des cristaux, on voit sa tête plate de vipère au pied des arbres, l’arbre dévot, théologique des bibles, petit et sec de feuillage, mais large de branches. — Saint Christophe porte Jésus ; saint Antoine est dans sa cellule, son cochon rentre, on ne lui voit que le derrière, cela fait parallèle à un autre animal (lièvre ?) dont la tête sort.

Tour par où montent les voitures, garnie de fenêtres de même style que l’autre : médaillons représentant différents sujets grotesques, obscènes ; il y a une intention dans la gradation des scènes en prenant le sujet d’en bas. Ainsi à partir d’en bas, on voit l’*Aristoteles equitatus* (?) et on en arrive à un homme qui visite une dame par derrière. — Plusieurs médaillons intermédiaires ont été enlevés exprès, de sang-froid, “parce qu’il y en avait beaucoup qui étaient inconvenants pour les dames”, a dit le garde d’un air pénétré de cette vérité.

Route de Chenonceaux à travers la forêt monte jusqu’à Bléré à peu près. — Chemin frais, à cause de la fraîcheur de la pluie ; nous fumions dans la voiture après un excellent dîner à Amboise.

Chenonceaux. — Le soir, 2 mai, 9 heures. — Le soir nous avons été fumer sous les arbres verts, à la pluie. — Le château d’un beau style du XVI^e^ siècle. — Le Cher passe dessous. — Salle d’armes dans le vestibule à ogives ; salle à manger avec les tentures de l’époque ; grande cheminée. — Partout les ameublements ont été conservés. — Masse d’armes de François I^er^.

Portraits : l’original de ceux de Rabelais ; Isabeaude Bavière, figure toute blonde, toute blanche, grasse avec des sourcils bruns, des bourrelets aux sourcils ; Mme d’Humières, petite bouche en cœur, singulièrement sensuelle ; Mme Dupin, figure spirituelle, nez retroussé, mine agaçante, yeux bruns (dans la grande galerie qui servait de salle de bal), lèvres minces et roses ; Louise de Vaudemont, femme d’Henri III ; deux grands portraits à cheval de MM. de Beauvilliers, l’un amiral, l’autre colonel de cavalerie ; sur une porte un tableau représente Gabrielle d’Estrées, vue de face jusqu’à la ceinture, avec sa coiffure frisée montée, blonde, un collier de perles sur sa poitrine ; sa sœur nue également, vue de dos, détournant la tête ; au fond, une nourrice en costume de paysanne qui sourit ou plutôt qui rit et donne à téter au duc de Vendôme au maillot.

De Chenonceaux à Bléré ; route à pied, au bord du Cher dans l’herbe ; soleil. — Bléré à Tours ; à partir de Montlouis, grand paysage de la Loire, gras, riche, doux, plein de verdure et d’eau.

Le 1er mai 1847, à huit heures et demie du matin, les deux monades dont l’agglomération va servir à barbouiller de noir le papier subséquent sortirent de Paris dans le but d’aller respirer à l’aise au milieu des bruyères et des genêts, ou au bord des flots sur les grandes plages de sable.

On n’avait d’autre ambition que celle de chercher quelque coin de ciel pur, floconné de nuages enroulés, ou de découvrir au revers d’une roche blanche, caché sous les houx et les chênes, assis entre le fleuve et la colline, un de ces pauvres petits villages comme on en rencontre encore, avec des maisons en bois, de la vigne qui monte aux murs, du linge qui sèche sur la haie et des vaches à l’abreuvoir.

A d’autres temps, pour plus tard, les grands voyages à travers le monde, au dos des chameaux sur des selles turques, ou sous le tendelet des éléphants ; à d’autres temps, si jamais ça arrive, le grelot des mules andalouses, les pérégrinations rêveuses dans la Marenne, et les mélancolies de l’histoire, surgissant, avec les vapeurs du crépuscule, du fond de ces horizons où se sont passées les choses que l’on rêve dans les vieux livres.

Aujourd’hui, sans trop quitter le coin de sa cheminée où on laisse pour les y retrouver, presque tièdes encore, sa pipe et ses songeries, et sans aucun des poignants arrachements du départ, on s’en va, sac au dos, souliers ferrés aux pieds, gourdin en main, fumée aux lèvres et fantaisie en tête, courir les champs pour coucher dans les auberges dans de grands lits à baldaquin, pour écouter les oiseaux sous les arbres quand il a plu et pour voir, le dimanche, les paysannes sous le porche de l’église sortir de la messe avec leurs grands bonnets blancs et leurs gros jupons rouges, et quoi encore ? pour se hâler la peau à coup sûr et pour attraper des poux peut-être ? Voilà donc ce qui a fait que deux êtres doués de raison (définition de l'homme dans les livres) ont, pendant sept mois, médité la forme, le dessin, la couleur, le relief et l'arrangement harmonique entre eux des objets suivants, à savoir :

Un chapeau de feutre gris ;

Un bâton de maquignon, venu exprès de Lisieux ;

Une paire de souliers forts (cuir blanc, clous en dents de crocodiles) ;

Dito vernis (costume de ville pour les visites diplomatiques, s'il s'en trouve à faire, ou les courses à Paphos si par hasard les oies de cette divinité nous enlèvent dans le char de la Déesse) ;

Une paire de guêtres en cuir, appropriée aux souliers forts ;

Dito en drap pour protéger de la poussière nos chaussettes, les jours de souliers vernis ;

Une veste de toile (chic garçon d'écurie) ;

Un pantalon de toile, démesurément large pour être mis dans les guêtres ;

Un gilet de toile, dont la coupe élégante rachète la vulgarité de l'étoffe.

Ajoutez à cela la répétition du même costume en drap.

De plus, un couteau modèle, deux gourdes, une pipe en bois, trois chemises de foulard, ce qu'il faut à un Européen pour ses ablutions quotidiennes, et vous aurez le cadre dans lequel nous nous sommes présentés en Bretagne, dans lequel nous avons vécu durant quelques semaines, à la pluie et au soleil. Jamais habit de bal ne fut médité avec plus de tendresse, et, ce qu'il y a de certain, porté avec aussi peu de gêne.

Le canon tonnait pour fêter le roi, les gardes nationaux s'apprêtaient à se hausser le menton dans leur habit et les allumeurs de la liste civile préparaient leur suif pour la solennité du soir, quand, après avoir dit adieu à nos deux amis Fritz et Louis, nous sommes montés dans notre wagon ; on a fermé la portière, la bête de fer a renâclé comme un cheval qui piaffe, et nous sommes partis.

Autrefois, quand vous vous transportiez d'un lieu à un autre, soit en voiture ou en bateau, vous aviez le temps de voir quelque chose et d'avoir des aventures ; un voyage de Paris à Rouen pouvait fournir un livre. J'ai connu des gens qui avaient mis dans leur jeunesse trois jours à l'accomplir : on s'en allait coucher, le premier, à Pont-de-l'Arche ; le deuxième, à Meulan et on s'estimait heureux si, le troisième, on était arrivé à Paris à temps pour souper. Je lis dans un vieil itinéraire de la France publié vers la fin du règne d'Henri IV : “Pour aller de Rouen à Dieppe, il y a un messager qui part trois fois par semaine ; on est un jour ; la dînée se fait à Tôtes où l'on reste trois heures”. Les hommes, qui maintenant jouent au gendarme, et les femmes, qui font des dines-dines dans le jardin, ne sauront que par tradition ce que c'était seulement que la diligence, avec son conducteur en veste bordée d'astrakan et les postillons en blouse poussant leur cri sonore du haut de leur siège ; ils penseront à la rotonde et à l'impériale, aux relais de la poste où les chevaux crottés et fumants s'attachent, en arrivant, aux anneaux de la muraille, comme nous rêvons, nous autres, aux anciennes nuitées dans les auberges, avec les méprises de lits, les chandelles soufflées dans les corridors, le vacarme des servantes, l'hôte qui jure, l'hôtesse qui crie. Où sont maintenant les histoires de carrosses embourbés et des grandes dames à falbalas qui versaient dans les fondrières, en se rendant dans leurs châteaux ? Est-ce que ce seul mot, le coche d'Auxerre, ne nous fait pas penser à M. de Pourceaugnac débarquant à Paris avec ses hauts-de-chausses trop courts, son habit du règne passé et son accent limousin ? Aurions-nous les charmantes pages de Chapelle et de Bachaumont si, au lieu de s'en aller de province en province, portés dans les lourdes voitures de leurs amis MM. les gouverneurs et les fermiers, ils eussent été entraînés sur un chemin de fer ou dans un bateau à vapeur ?

Tout ce que nous avons donc remarqué de Paris à Blois, c'est que la route, quelque peu qu'elle ait duré, dura trop encore, agacés que nous sommes toujours de ce mode aride de locomotion et fort ennuyés, d'ailleurs, par la société de deux marchands de grains, grands parleurs, grands rieurs, gens enrichis probablement et fort satisfaits d'eux-mêmes. L'un décoré, jovial, gros, gras, lèvres épaisses, fort d'encolure et de voix rude, représentait l'accapareur hardi, le spéculateur en gros, qui est maire de sa commune, qui sera député de sa ville et plus tard ministre tout comme un autre, tandis que son voisin, petit homme maigre à face ridée, à bouche rentrée, à nez saillant, et faisant avec un indicible sourire de satisfaction et de malice sauter dans le creux de sa main des échantillons de blé, avait plutôt l'air du marchand rapace et souterrain, du travailleur entêté, qui suce le sac dont il a vidé les écus, de l'homme féroce aimant l'argent pour l'argent et épris du trafic pour le trafic même ; race de gens fort commune aujourd'hui, qui ambitionne d'avoir des vignes pour n'en pas boire le vin ! Il y avait encore à côté de nous un pauvre Anglais malade et boiteux qui m'avait l'air rongé par un autre métal que par l'argent ; sa petite fille, à figure laide, mais d'expression déjà mûre comme l'est en général celle des enfants qui n'ont pas de mère, lisait des vaudevilles du Palais-Royal et du Gymnase pour s'initier à la langue, aux mœurs et au bon goût français.

A Orléans nous eûmes la vue de M. Berryer qui, assis à la buvette, emplissait sa large poitrine, et nous prîmes deux aimables jeunes gens qui devaient appartenir à une administration quelconque : il y avait de l'un à l'autre la différence du bête au sot, et du nul au vide.

Le souvenir de la jeunesse du poète qui s'est écoulée à Blois nous a pris dès en y entrant ; allant par ses rues tortueuses pleines de silence nous pensions que lui aussi s'y promenait il y a quelque vingt ans, regardant comme nous une de ces maisons-là pour y placer sa Marion de Lorme, et nous demandions à l'air, aux arbres, aux murs, à ce je ne sais quoi de persistant et d'individuel qui réside en un lieu, en constitue la couleur, et en est l'âme, le secret des premières floraisons du grand homme, alors que sa poésie, dans les pièces sans titre de ses premiers recueils, débordait en strophes chevelues pendantes comme des lianes, épanouissait ses métaphores comme des soleils, tressaillait en rythmes multiples et en harmonies incessantes. Que d'idées devenues des œuvres, que de rêves devenus des marbres ont éclos au coin de ce mur, au bord de ce fleuve, sous cet arbre, le matin à la rosée, dans les gouttes de l'herbe, ou par les soirs d'été, par ces beaux soirs ardents et tristes comme le premier amour, quand le ciel est rayé de longues lignes droites et que les essaims de moucherons tournent dans l'air comme des roues d'or !

Est-ce pour cela que Blois nous a charmés ? Près le débarcadère, d'ailleurs, n'y a-t-il pas une large avenue d'ormeaux à feuillage épaté et touffu, avec des branches robustes partant exprès d'en bas comme pour y suspendre la musette ? Vrais ormeaux XVIII^e siècle, poussés larges pour qu'on danse dessous, au son du violon du ménétrier qui, monté sur une barrique, bat la mesure de son pied sonore pendant que les cottes volent au vent, que les boucles poudrées se dénouent, et que les garçons prennent la taille aux fillettes qui en rient d'effroi et s'en pâment de plaisir.

Les rues à Blois sont vides, l'herbe croît entre les pavés ; des deux côtés s'étendent de longs murs gris enfermant de grands jardins, percés de quelques petites portes discrètes qui ne semblent s'ouvrir que la nuit au visiteur mystérieux. On sent que tous les jours doivent s'y passer pareils, qu'ils doivent y être, à cette calme monotonie, douce pourtant comme la sonnerie du cadran des églises, pleins de mélancolie savoureuse et de langueurs émouvantes. On se plaît à rêver, dans ces paisibles demeures, quelque profonde et grande histoire intime, une passion maladive qui dure jusqu'à la mort, amour continu de vieille fille dévote ou de femme vertueuse ; on y met malgré soi comme à sa place voulue quelque beauté pâle aux ongles longs et aux mains fines, dame aristocratique aux froides manières, mariée à un bourru, à un avare, à un jaloux, et qui se meurt de la poitrine.

Ces réflexions, qui nous sont revenues plus tard, à Amboise, à Chinon et dans les autres villes de la Touraine, nous ont fait nous demander si M. de Balzac, qui est de ce pays, y a puisé ses héroïnes, si c'est là, enfin, qu'il a découvert *La femme de trente ans*, cette création immortelle ! inconnue à l'antiquité comme le christianisme dont elle relève et que je prise plus que la plupart de celles de l’industrie moderne (j’en excepte cependant les allumettes chimiques et la fricassée de poulet froid de Tortoni).

Exhumer dans ce qu’on rejetait comme hors d’usage des trésors nouveaux de plastique et de sentiment, découvrir dans l’univers de l’amour un continent nouveau et appeler à son exploitation des milliers d’êtres qui s’en trouvaient rejetés, cela n’est-il pas spirituel et sublime ? Prolonger l’exercice d’un sexe, n’est-ce pas presque en inventer un autre ? Aussi quel enthousiasme nous vîmes ! Ça été comme la découverte de l’Amérique : au lieu de routiers congédiés et de juifs en faillite y courant pour faire fortune, une foule de sentiments aux abois et de décadences encore robustes s’est ruée avec ardeur sur cette grande trouvaille de *La femme de trente ans* ; il y a eu engouement au début, puis réaction en sens inverse, mais on y reviendra plus tard comme à tout ce qui est vrai, comme à tout ce qui est bon, comme au système de Galilée et comme aux gilets longs ; on verra ce qu’on n’a qu’entrevu, on sondera ce qu’on n’a qu’effleuré, la mine est neuve encore, la veine profonde ; préparées par cette question, il en est d’autres, consécutives de celle-là, qui ne demandent plus qu’un grand moraliste, un grand artiste pour être mises au jour, telles que celle du *teton lyrique*, dont toute l’importance et la justesse m’ont été si bien révélées par mon illustre ami Pradier.

Quant à notre problème de tout à l’heure, il en est un peu de l’influence des lieux sur les livres et de celle des livres sur les lieux comme du problème de l’œuf et de la poule : est-ce la poule qui a fait l’œuf, ou l’œuf qui a fait la poule ? Sont-ce les livres de Balzac qui m’ont fait songer dans les rues de Blois à ce qui s’y passe ou bien est-ce ce qui s’y passe qui a causé des livres ? Qui de Dieu ou de l’homme a arrangé les choses comme nous les voyons ?

Allant à l’aventure dans une de ces rues désertes au fond de laquelle, par un hasard ironique se dressait, peint en rouge, l’écriteau d’une marchande de modes, nous tombâmes en une étroite allée, menant à une espèce de cul-de-sac qui contient l’abside de l’église Saint-Nicolas. C’est un coin lugubre et de haut goût, comme empli de bitume ; tout est noir, la pierre du sol, la couleur de l’air elle-même ; ça a un aspect austère et dur de robe de prêtre, c’est beau de nudité, de crudité et de brutalité. Sur la place, devant le portail, en plein soleil, des maçons taillaient des pierres, de grandes ravenelles accrochées aux angles des chapiteaux romans tranchaient par la joyeuseté de leurs tons jaunes avec la couleur sombre du vieil édifice ; mobiles et folâtres dans l’air, elles étaient là rien que pour montrer comme elles étaient jolies.

Château de Blois. — Du côté du nord, le château de Blois, dressé sur des murs formidables, présente une galerie à double arcade d’un charmant effet ; là était la chambre d’Henri III. A côté se trouve son oratoire, coïncidence qui n’a rien de rare en soi-même, mais qui frappe ici, dans cette âme où la volupté s’aiguisait de religion, où la cruauté se ravivait à la peur. Quand nous eûmes passé sous une voûte tournante et traversé la place, nous entrâmes dans la cour intérieure du château. Il y avait grande joie : la garnison avait reçu une bouteille de vin par homme, et les soldats portaient des brocs pleins d’un liquide bleu et s’apprêtaient à le boire à la santé du monarque dont la fête leur occasionnait ce régal. La cour du château est un carré régulier. Le côté de l’entrée, du temps de Louis XII, n’a qu’un seul étage avec une galerie soutenue par des colonnes courtes, couvertes de losanges, et est orné partout de la cordelière de la reine Anne et des hermines de Bretagne ; le côté gauche (sud), un peu antérieur, n’a pas été terminé, il est plus sobre d’ornementation, plus rude, plus reculé dans son moyen âge. En face, un corps de logis des plus bêtes, construction de Louis XIV, jure d’une manière détestable, avec son classique de collège et son goût sobre qui est le goût pauvre ; mais auprès d’elle éclate et reluit en grand costume la belle architecture du xvi^e^ siècle, celle de la bonne époque, avant l’envahissement du pilastre attique, avant que la Renaissance n’allât s’aplatir dans le grec abâtardi de Marie de Médicis. Sur ce corps de logis sont accrochés les deux plus délicieux escaliers du monde, bâtis à jour, ciselés d’un ciseau vivace et tout découpés, comme les hautes collerettes des grandes dames qui, il y a trois cents ans, en montaient les marches. Nous avons vu, au rez-de-chaussée, la salle où se tinrent les États de 1588. Un gentilhomme gascon y assista, envoyé par la noblesse de Bordeaux ; il dut, j’imagine, prendre peu de part aux discussions qui retentissaient sous ces voûtes de bois. Assis à l’écart, dans son élégant costume noir, et jouant avec une badine qu’il portait toujours, sans doute qu’il remâchait en lui-même quelque passage de Salluste ou quelque vers de Lucain que les circonstances présentes lui remettaient en mémoire. Sans passions au milieu de toutes ces passions hurlantes, sans croyances à côté de tant de convictions violentes, il était là comme le symbole de ce qui reste à côté de ce qui passe : il s’appelait Michel de Montaigne.

J’ai vu en dehors du château, sur une plate-forme d’où l’on découvre toute la ville et la Loire bordée de peupliers et la campagne à l’entour, remontant au ciel par de lentes perspectives insensibles, une tourelle qui sert à mettre les poudres de la garnison : c’était là qu’habitait Ruggieri, l’astrologue d’Henri III. On avait tendu du linge sur l’esplanade, les cordes où séchaient les chemises du concierge la zigzaguaient dans tous les sens ; la sentinelle qui veillait à la porte de la poudrière avait posé son fusil dessus, elle l’y balançait en équilibre et jouait à faire claquer le ressort de batterie en attendant qu’on la vînt relever de sa faction.

D’illustres hôtes ont dormi sous ces murs : Valentine de Milan, Isabeau de

Bavière, Anne de Bretagne, Charles VIII, Louis XII, François Ier, Claude de France, Henri III, Catherine et Marie de Médicis, et les Guise qui y ont laissé leur sang ; il a coulé à cette place. Vainement l'œil le cherche encore sur le plancher, avec les prunes de Damus que le Balafré avait jetées à côté dans la salle des gardes en disant « qui en veut » ; on a bouché l'escalier par où il descendit dans la chambre du roi, on ne voit plus rien, et cependant on regarde.

Après avoir servi aux noces du duc d'Alençon avec Marguerite d'Anjou, à celles d'Henri IV avec Marguerite de Valois, et aux sanglantes tragédies des Guise, le château de Blois resta tout ouvert pour recevoir d'autres fortunes : Marie de Médicis y fut enfermée et s'enfuit par cette fenêtre qu'on montre encore ; en 1716, Marie-Casimir, reine de Pologne, l'habita ; en 1814, Marie-Louise s'y réfugia après la prise de Paris, et aujourd'hui les touriourous y fument leur pipe et chantent la gaudriole ; le sang a été lavé, le bruit des sarabandes et des menuets s'est évanoui avec le rire des pages et les frôlements des robes à queue. Que reste-t-il de ce que l'histoire en sait ? et de tout ce qu'elle ne sait pas ? Ce qui est plus tentant à connaître et ce qu'on s'en va demandant aux vieux lambris, aux vieux portraits muets qui vous regardent, aux tombeaux vides qui bâillent, secret qu'ils gardent pour eux seuls et qu'ils se murmurent dans leur solitude. L'histoire est, comme la mer, belle par ce qu'elle efface : le flot qui vient enlève sur le sable la trace du flot qui est venu, on se dit seulement qu'il y en a eu, qu'il y en aura encore ; c'est là toute sa poésie et sa moralité peut-être ?

Le lendemain nous visitâmes une ruine plus ruinée : je parle de Chambord. Après nous être perdus dans la sotte campagne qui l'environne, nous y arrivâmes enfin par un long chemin dans le sable, au milieu d'un bois maigre, propriété de rentier gêné qui fait des coupes anticipées ; le château n'a ni jardin ni parc, pas le moindre arbuste, pas une fleur autour de lui ; il montre sa façade devant une grande place d'herbe grêle, au bas de laquelle coule une petite rivière. Quand nous sommes entrés un jeune chien s'est mis à aboyer ; la pluie tombait, l'eau coulait sur les toits et passait par les fenêtres brisées. On nous a introduits dans le logement du garde, où, en attendant que sa bonne, qui tient lieu de concierge, fût revenue de la messe, nous avons parcouru le livre des visiteurs.

Il est rempli de doléances légitimistes, jérémiades sur le maître et la maison, vœux pour le retour de l'auguste exilé, *etc.* Un certain abbé Sam..., aumônier du presbytère de X..., a écrit ce vers magnifique :

On peut être boiteux sans cesser d'être droit.

Un anonyme plus hardi a fait cette variante :

On peut être exilé sans cesser d'être roi. Quelqu'un, indigné sans doute, a écrit au beau milieu du livre : “ô mania”. Mais ce qui nous a le plus arrêtés, ce sont deux seuls mots : “Louise et Alfred” qui se trouvent perdus sous les marquis, les comtes, les chevaliers de Saint-Louis, les fils des victimes de Quiberon, les pèlerins de Belgrave-Square et toute cette racaille de noblesse postiche qui vit, comme le romantisme de M. de Marchangy, sur la sempiternelle poésie des tourelles, des damoiselles, du palefroi, des fleurs de lis de l'oriflamme de saint Louis, du panache blanc, du droit divin et d'un tas d'autres sottises aussi innocentes. Parmi tant de prétentions pleurardes, grimacières, arrogantes, ces simples noms d'inconnus nous ont paru avoir quelque chose de simple et de bon et de meilleur goût que tout le reste.

Château de Chambord. — Nous nous sommes promenés le long des galeries vides et dans les chambres abandonnées où l'araignée étend sa toile sur les salamandres de François Ier. Ce n'est pas la ruine de partout, avec le luxe de ses débris noirs et verdâtres, la broderie de ses fleurs coquettes et ses draperies de verdure ondulant au vent, comme des lambeaux de damas. C'est au contraire une misère honteuse qui brosse son habit râpé et fait la décente. On répare le parquet dans cette pièce, on le laisse pourrir dans cette autre. Vous sentez partout un effort stérile pour conserver ce qui meurt et pour rappeler ce qui a fui. Chose étrange ! cela est triste et cela n'est pas grand.

Et puis, on dirait que tout a voulu contribuer à lui jeter l'outrage, à ce pauvre Chambord, que le Primatice avait dessiné, que Germain Pilon et Jean Cousin avaient ciselé et sculpté. Bâti par François Ier, à son retour d'Espagne, après l'humiliant traité de Madrid (1526), monument de l'orgueil qui veut s'étourdir lui-même, pour se payer de ses défaites, c'est d'abord Gaston d'Orléans, un prétendant vaincu, qu'on y exile ; puis c'est Louis XIV qui d'un seul étage en fait trois, gâtant ainsi l'admirable escalier double qui allait d'un seul jet, lancé comme une spirale, du sol au faîte. Et enfin, c'est Molière qui y joue pour la première fois le Bourgeois gentilhomme, au deuxième étage, côté qui donne sur la façade, sous ce beau plafond couvert de salamandres et d'ornements peints dont les couleurs s'en vont. Ensuite on l'a donné au maréchal de Saxe ; on l'a donné aux Polignac, on l'a donné à un simple soldat, à Berthier ; on l'a racheté par souscription et on l'a donné au duc de Bordeaux. On l'a donné à tout le monde, comme si personne n'en voulait ou ne pouvait le garder. II semble n'avoir jamais servi et avoir été toujours trop grand. C'est comme une hôtellerie abandonnée où les voyageurs n'ont pas même laissé leurs noms aux murs. Je n'y ai vu qu'un seul meuble, un jouet d'enfant ; un modèle de parc d'artillerie offert par le colonel Langlois au duc de Bordeaux, et précieusement conservé sous des couvertures de toile.

En allant par une galerie extérieure vers l'escalier d'Orléans, pour examiner les cariatides qui sont censées représenter François Ier, Mme de Châteaubriant et Mme d'Étampes, et tournant autour de la fameuse lanterne qui termine le grand escalier, nous avons, à plusieurs reprises, passé la tête par-dessus la balustrade, pour regarder en bas : dans la cour, un petit ânon, qui tétait sa mère, se frottait contre elle, secouait ses oreilles, allongeait son nez, sautait sur ses sabots. Voilà ce qu'il y avait dans la cour d'honneur du château de Chambord ; voilà ses hôtes maintenant : un chien qui joue dans l'herbe et un âne qui tette, ronfle, brait, fiente et gambade sur le seuil des rois !

(*> Le temps s'était radouci ; la pluie s'en était allée et le doux soleil du soir brillait quand nous arrivâmes à Amboise. Ici encore ce sont de ces bonnes rues de province comme à Blois : on y cause sur les portes, on y travaille dehors ; les femmes, presque toutes brunes, de figure douce et remarquablement jolies, ont d'excellents airs féminins, pleins d'une bénignité voluptueuse. Vous êtes en effet dans ce gras et doux pays de Touraine, pays du bon petit vin blanc et des beaux vieux châteaux et qu'arrose la Loire, le plus français des fleuves français. Les poses et les

‘*’ Inédit, pages 20 à 22. allures retiennent quelque chose du calme du Nord ; tandis que la vivacité du Midi anime, dans l'expression, le sourire ; et cependant, malgré le caractère bâtard qui résulte ordinairement de la fusion de nuances opposées, la Touraine me paraît avoir une originalité distincte, pas bien forte il est vrai, mais fine, intime, qui n'est ni prose ni poésie et qui s'exprimerait, je crois, d'un seul mot, si je ne craignais qu'on ne le prît dans une acception trop élevée : ce serait celui de prose chantée.

Comme nous traversions le pont d'Amboise — il y en a deux, la ville étant bâtie sur les deux rives de son fleuve et au milieu ayant une île ; — il y a deux ponts, disons-nous, mais c'est le second qui est beau, un de ces vénérables ponts, un de ces vieux ponts bossus, étroits, gris, racornis au soleil et à l'eau, où il semble, on ne sait pourquoi, qu'une traînée de cavaliers passant dessus avec des bruits d'armures et de pieds de chevaux allant au pas ferait un bon effet et où on regrette de ne pas entendre chanter, assis sur la borne, un mendiant aveugle tournant sa vielle, ou une gitana nu-pieds dans la poussière, secouant son tambourin dont le son court et brusque est emporté par le bruit large de l'eau qui passe sous les arches. Donc, pendant que nous étions sur le pont, nous vîmes apparaître, débusquant de la promenade au pied du château, la garde nationale du lieu qui s'en revenait de la revue. Sur trente hommes environ qu'ils étaient, cinq ou six portaient l'uni-forme, les officiers seulement, le reste n'était que bisets, mais des bisets rares, vraiment en grande tenue avec des habits à queue de morue, des gilets jaunes et des gants noirs. Le dandysme du lieu consiste, je crois, dans cette affectation à mépriser le costume civique. Je dois avouer, à l'honneur d'Amboise, que je n'ai pas vu dans les rangs ou dans le rang (et je m'y attendais) aucun enfant habillé en artilleur tenant son papa par la main. Est-ce que cette monstruosité serait inconnue à cette bienheureuse ville ? ou bien la mode en est-elle passée ? ou bien les fortunes des particuliers ne sont-elles pas assez considérables pour atteindre à cette folle dépense ? N'importe, c'est honorable pour Amboise, car l'enfant habillé en artilleur et récitant des fables est le dernier degré de l'ignominie humaine.

Château d'Amboise. — Le château d'Amboise, dominant la ville qui semble jetée à ses pieds comme un tas de petits cailloux au bas d'un rocher, a une noble et imposante figure de château fort, avec ses grandes et grosses tours percées de longues fenêtres étroites, à plein cintre ; sa galerie arcade qui va de l'une à l'autre, et la couleur fauve de ses murs rendue plus sombre par les fleurs qui pendent d'en haut, comme un panache joyeux sur le front bronzé d'un vieux soudard. Nous avons passé un grand quart d'heure à admirer, à chérir la tour de gauche qui est superbe, qui est bistrée, jaune par places, noire dans d'autres, qui a des ravenelles adorables appendues à ses créneaux et qui est, enfin, un de ces monuments parlants qui semblent vivre et qui vous tiennent tout béants et rêveurs sous eux, ainsi que ces portraits dont on n'a pas connu les originaux et qu'on se met à aimer sans savoir pourquoi. Riez de cela, braves gens, on n'a pas écrit cette phrase pour vous.

On monte au château par une pente douce qui mène dans un jardin élevé en terrasse, d'où la vue s'étend en plein sur toute la campagne d'alentour. Elle était d'un vert tendre ; les lignes de peupliers s'étendaient sur les rives du fleuve ; les prairies s'avançaient au bord, estompant au loin leurs limites grises dans un horizon bleuâtre et vaporeux qu'enfermait vaguement le contour des collines. La Loire coulait au milieu, baignant ses îles, mouillant la bordure des prés, passant sous les ponts, faisant tourner les moulins, laissant glisser sur sa sinuosité argentée les grands bateaux attachés ensemble qui cheminaient, paisibles, côte à côte, à demi endormis au craquement lent du large gouvernail qui les remue, et au fond il y avait deux grandes voiles éclatantes de blancheur au soleil.

Des oiseaux partaient du sommet des tours, des angles des mâchicoulis, allaient se nicher ailleurs, volaient, poussaient leurs petits cris dans l'air, et passaient. A cent pieds sous nous, on voyait les toits pointus de la ville, les cours désertes des vieux hôtels et le trou noir des cheminées fumeuses. Accoudés dans l'anfractuosité d'un créneau, nous regardions, nous écoutions, nous aspirions tout cela, jouissant du soleil qui était beau, de l'air qui était doux et tout imbibé de la bonne odeur des plantes des ruines. Et là, sans méditer sur rien du tout, sans phraser, même intérieurement, sur quoi que ce soit, je songeais aux cottes de mailles souples comme des gants, aux baudriers de buffle trempés de sueur, aux visières fermées sous lesquelles brillaient des regards rouges ; aux assauts de nuit, hurlants, désespérés, avec des torches qui incendiaient les murs, des haches d’armes qui coupaient les corps ; et à Louis XI, à la guerre des amoureux, à d’Aubigné, et aux ravenelles, aux oiseaux, aux beaux lierres lustrés, aux ronces toutes chauves, savourant ainsi dans ma dégustation rêveuse et nonchalante, des hommes, ce qu’ils ont de plus grand : leur souvenir ; de la nature, ce qu’elle a de plus beau : ses envahissements ironiques et son éternel sourire.

Dans le jardin, au milieu des lilas et des touffes d’arbustes, s’élève la chapelle, bijou d’orfèvrerie lapidaire du XVI^e^ siècle, plus travaillé encore au dedans qu’au dehors, taillé à jour comme un manche d’ombrelle chinoise. Sur la porte un bas-relief très réjouissant représente la rencontre de saint Hubert avec le cerf mystique qui porte un crucifix entre les cornes. Le saint est à genoux ; plane au-dessus un ange qui va lui mettre une couronne sur son bonnet ; à côté, son cheval regarde de sa bonne figure d’animal ; ses chiens jappent, et, sur la montagne dont les tranches et les facettes figurent des cristaux, le serpent qui rampe avance sa tête plate au pied d’arbres ressemblant à des choux-fleurs. C’est l’arbre qu’on rencontre dans les vieilles bibles, sec de feuillages, gros de branches et de tronc, qui a du bois et du fruit, mais pas de verdure ; l’arbre symbolique, l’arbre théologique et dévot, presque fantastique dans sa laideur impossible. Non loin de là, saint Christophe porte Jésus sur ses épaules et saint Antoine est dans sa cellule, bâtie sur un rocher ; le cochon rentredans son trou ; on n’en aperçoit que son derrière et sa queue terminée en trompette, tandis que près de lui un lièvre sort les oreilles de son terrier.

Ce bas-relief sans doute est un peu lourd et d’une plastique qui n’est pas rigoureuse. Mais il y a tant de vie et de mouvement dans ce bonhomme et ses animaux, tant de gentillesse et de bonne foi dans les détails, qu’on donnerait beaucoup pour emporter ça et pour l’avoir chez soi. Ça vaudrait bien les statuettes genre moyen âge qu’on trouve chez les coiffeurs, les sujets équestres d’Alfred de Dreux qu’on trouve chez les filles entretenues, et la Putiphar de M. Steuben qu’on ne trouve, Dieu merci, nulle part.

Dans l’intérieur du château, l’insipide ameublement de l’Empire se reproduit dans chaque pièce avec ses pendules mythologiques ou historiques et ses fauteuils de velours à clous dorés. Presque toutes sont ornées des bustes de Louis-Philippe et de Mme Adélaïde. La famille régnante actuelle a la rage de se reproduire en portraits. Elle peuple de sa figure tous les pans de murs, toutes les consoles et les cheminées où elle peut l’y établir ; mauvais goût de parvenu, manie d’épicier enrichi dans les affaires et qui aime à se considérer avec du rouge, du blanc et du jaune, avec ses breloques au ventre, ses favoris au menton et ses enfants à ses côtés.

On a construit sur une des tours, en dépit du bon sens le plus vulgaire, une rotonde vitrée pour faire une salle à manger. De là, la vue qu’on découvre est superbe. Mais le bâtiment est d'un si choquant effet, qu'on aimerait mieux, je crois, ne rien voir ou aller manger à la cuisine.

Pour regagner la ville, nous avons descendu par une tour qui servait aux voitures à monter jusque dans la place. La pente douce, garnie de sable, tourne autour d'un axe de pierres comme les marches d'un escalier et la voûte est, de place en place, éclairée par le jour rare des meurtrières. Les consoles où s'appuie l'extrémité intérieure de l'arc de voûte portent des sujets grotesques ou obscènes. Une intention dogmatique semble avoir présidé à leur composition. II faudrait prendre l'œuvre à partir d'en bas, qui commence par l'*Aristoteles equitatus* (sujet traité déjà sur une des miséricordes du chœur de la cathédrale de Rouen), et l'on arrive, en suivant les transitions, à un monsieur qui s'amuse avec une dame dans la posture perfide recommandée par Lucrèce et par l'*Amour conjugal*. La plupart des sujets intermédiaires ont du reste été enlevés, au grand désespoir des chercheurs de fantaisies drolatiques, enlevés de sang-froid, exprès, par décence, et comme nous le disait, d'un ton convaincu, le domestique de Sa Majesté, “parce qu'il y en avait beaucoup qui étaient inconvenants pour les dames”.

(*) Personne ne peut m'accuser de m'avoir entendu gémir sur n'importe quelle dévastation que ce soit, sur n'importe quelle ruine ni débris ; je n'ai jamais soupiré à propos du ravage des révolutions ni des désastres du temps ; je ne serais même pas fâché que Paris fût retourné sens dessus dessous par un tremblement de terre ou se réveillât un beau matin avec un volcan au beau milieu de ses maisons, comme un gigantesque brûle-gueule qui fumerait dans sa barbe : il en résulterait peut-être des aquarelles assez coquettes et des ratatouilles grandioses dans le goût de Martins. Mais je porte une haine aiguë et perpétuelle à quiconque taille un arbre pour l'embellir, châtre un cheval pour l'affaiblir ; à tous ceux qui coupent les oreilles ou la queue des chiens, à tous ceux qui font des paons avec des ifs, des sphères et des pyramides avec du buis ; à tous ceux qui restaurent, badigeonnent, corrigent, aux éditeurs d'expurgata, aux chastes voileurs de nudités profanes, aux arrangeurs d'abrégés et de raccourcis ;

(*) Inédit, pages 27 à 29. à tous ceux qui rasent quoi que ce soit pour lui mettre une perruque, et qui, féroces dans leur pédantisme, impitoyables dans leur ineptie, s'en vont amputant la nature, ce bel art du bon Dieu, et crachant sur l'art, cette autre nature que l'homme porte en lui comme Jéhovah porte l'autre et qui est la cadette ou peut-être l'aînée. Qui sait ? C'est du moins l'idée d'Hegel que l'école empirique a toujours trouvée fort ridicule — et moi ?

Moi, j'ai des remords d'avoir eu la lâcheté de n'avoir pas étranglé de mes dix doigts l'homme qui a publié une édition de Molière “que les familles honnêtes peuvent mettre sans danger dans les mains de leurs enfants” ; je regrette de n’avoir pas à ma disposition, pour le misérable qui a sali Gil Blas des mêmes immondices de sa vertu, des supplices stercoraires et des agonies outrageantes ; et quant au brave idiot d’ecclésiastique belge qui a purifié Rabelais, que ne puis-je dans mon désir de vengeance réveiller le colosse pour lui voir seulement souffler dessus son haleine et pour lui entendre pousser sa hurlée titanique !

Le beau mal, vraiment, quand on aurait laissé intactes ces pauvres consoles où l’on devait voir de si jolies choses ; ça faisait donc venir bien des rougeurs aux fronts des voyageurs, ça épouvantait donc bien fort les vieilles Anglaises en boa, avec des engelures aux doigts et leurs pieds en battoirs, ou ça scandalisait dans sa morale quelque notaire honoraire, quelque monsieur décoré qui a des lunettes bleues et qui est cocu ! On aurait pu au moins comparer ça aux coutumes anciennes, aux idées de la Renaissance et aux manières modernes, qu’on aurait été retremper aux bonnes traditions, lesquelles ont furieusement baissé, depuis le temps qu’on s’en sert. N’est-ce pas, monsieur ? Qu’en dit madame ?

Mais il y a des heures où l’on est en plus belle humeur que d’autres. L’excellent dîner que nous fîmes à Amboise et dont nous avions besoin (ayant de tout le jour plus nourri la Muse que la Bête) nous remit un peu de calme dans les veines et le soir, trottant lestement sur la route de Chenonceaux, nous fumions nos pipes et humions l’odeur de la forêt dans un état très satisfaisant.

Avant de nous mettre au lit, nous avions été nous livrer au même passe-temps sous les arbres qui entourent le château. La pluie tombait sur les feuilles vertes ; à l’abri sous elles, le dos appuyé sur le tronc des gros charmes, et cirant le cuir de nos chaussures sur la mousse humide, nous nous amusions du bruit des gouttes d’eau qui tombaient sur nos chapeaux.

Château de Chenonceaux. — Je ne sais quoi d’une suavité singulière et d’une aristocratique sérénité transpire au château de Chenonceaux. Placé au fond d’une grande allée d’arbres, à quelque distance du village, qui se tient respectueusement à l’écart, bâti sur l’eau, entouré de bois, au milieu d’un vaste parc à belles pelouses, il lève en l’air ses tourelles, ses cheminées carrées. Le Cher passe en murmurant au bas sous ses arches dont les arêtes pointues brisent le courant. Son élégance est robuste et douce et son calme mélancolique sans ennui ni amertume.

Vous entrez par une salle en ogives qui servait autrefois de salle d’armes, et où, malgré la difficulté de semblables ajustements, quelques armures qu’on y a mises ne choquent point et semblent à leur place. Partout, du reste, les tentures et les ameublements de l’époque sont conservés avec intelligence. Les vénérables cheminées du XVI^e^ siècle ne recèlent pas, sous leur manteau, les ignobles et économiques cheminées à la prussienne qui savent se nicher sous de moins grandes.

Dans les cuisines contenues dans une arche du château, une servante épluchait des légumes, un marmiton lavait des assiettes, et, debout aux fourneaux, le cuisinier faisait bouillir pour le déjeuner un nombre raisonnable de casseroles luisantes. Tout cela est bien, a un bon air, sent son honnête vie de château, sa paresseuse et intelligente existence d'homme bien né. J'aime les propriétaires de Chenonceaux.

N'y a-t-il pas, d'ailleurs, partout de bons vieux portraits à vous faire passer de longues heures en vous figurant le temps où vivaient leurs modèles, et les ballets où tournoyaient les vertugadins de ces belles dames roses, et les bons coups d'épée que ces gentilshommes s'allongeaient avec leurs rapières. Voilà une des tentations de l'histoire. On voudrait savoir si ces gens-là ont aimé comme nous et les différences qu'il y avait entre leurs passions et les nôtres. On voudrait que leurs lèvres s'ouvrissent, pour nous dire les récits de leur cœur, ce qu'ils ont fait autrefois, même de futile, quelles furent leurs angoisses et leurs voluptés. C'est une curiosité irritante et séductrice, une envie rêveuse de savoir, comme on en a pour le passé inconnu d'une maîtresse, afin d'être initié à tous les jours qu'elle a vécus sans vous et d'en avoir sa part. Mais ils restent sourds aux questions de nos yeux ; ils restent là, muets, immobiles dans leurs cadres de bois ; nous passons. Les mites picotent leur toile, on les revernit, ils sourient encore que nous sommes pourris et oubliés. Et puis d'autres viennent aussi les regarder jusqu'au jour où ils tomberont en poussière, où l'on rêvera de même devant nos propres images.

Et l'on se demandera ce qu'on faisait dans ce temps-là, de quelle couleur était la vie, et si elle n'était pas plus chaude.

(*) Il y a, par exemple, deux grands portraits à cheval de MM. de Beauvilliers, l'un amiral, l'autre colonel de cavalerie ; ils sont bottés jusqu'aux cuisses, en grand habit vert, blanchi aux épaules par les tire-bouchons poudrés de leurs perruques, gantés à la crispin, coiffés du petit chapeau, et droits, fichés sur leur grosse mecklembourgeoise

(*) Inédit, pages 31 à 34. qui, rassemblée sur ses jarrets de derrière, se cabre convenablement pour faire le fougueux. Il vous revient là devant comme un souvenir des carrousels de Louis XIV et des grandes chasses à courre, avec des lévriers jaunes à taches blanches, une nuée de piqueurs en livrée entourés des meutes aboyantes, et les grandes trompes passées autour du corps, sonnant dans les clairières des hallalis prolongés.

Sur un dessus de porte une toile de chevalet vous montre de face la belle Gabrielle d'Estrées, nue jusqu'à la ceinture ; un gros collier de perles du même ton blond que sa peau pend sur sa poitrine, sa coiffure blonde, montée et crépelée, donne à son visage un air étonné plein d’une agacerie naïve ; à côté d’elle sa sœur, vue de dos, nue également jusqu’aux reins, détourne sa mine brune et vous regarde curieusement, tandis que, dans le fond, une paysanne en bavolet rouge et en cape blanche présente le sein à M. le duc de Vendôme, charmant maillot, tout ficelé et raide dans ses linges, qui écarquille les yeux, tend les bras et rit de sa petite bouche rose aux agaceries de sa bonne nourrice.

Nous avons encore remarqué, dans l’appartement qui sert de salon et où se trouve sur une table la masse d’armes de François I^er^, un beau portrait de Rabelais, figure bistrée, hilarante, sanguine, robuste, yeux petits et vifs, cheveux rares, barbe et menton de satyre, c’est évidemment le type d’après lequel on a fait tous les portraits du grand homme. Celui d’Isabeau de Bavière, au-dessous un peu à gauche, est singulièrement expressif : elle n’est pas coiffée de son grand bonnet pointu, que je lui avais vu ailleurs, et ce n’est plus la tête pâle et dolente du musée de Versailles ; une espèce de coiffure plate, à l’italienne, couvre les longs bandeaux blonds, à demi défaits, qui entourent sa figure blanche, à la fois sympathique et ardente, pleine d’irrésolutions et d’élans contrariés, elle a les lèvres avancées, le menton court et de grands yeux verts dont l’expression pleurarde est relevée par les bourrelets rouges de ses paupières inférieures.

Il y a encore sur tous les murs beaucoup d’autres toiles qu’on voudrait regarder plus longtemps tout seul et bien à son aise, sans qu’un concierge fût sur vos talons, tenant la clef de la porte à la main et vous invitant du geste à vous dépêcher d’en finir. Je me rappelle encore un portrait en pied de Louis XIII en Apollon, avec son menton pointu, ses petites moustaches droites et sa grande perruque noire qui retombe sur ses épaules et ombrage sa figure triste. Je n’ai jamais pensé à Louis XIII sans une certaine douleur, il me semble que c’est l’homme qui s’est le plus ennuyé sur la terre.

Nous n’avons pas pu entrer dans la salle du spectacle où fut joué le Devin de village, on la réparait ; mais nous avons vu un bon portrait de M^me^ Dupin par Nattier. La figure est brune, éveillée, coquette, le nez retroussé, les lèvres roses, le regard noir et droit, l’air franc, amical, fripon et bon enfant, plus spirituel de beaucoup que celui de M^me^ d’Humières, par exemple, avec sa bouche rose en cœur si sensuelle et tout humide.

Je ne parlerais plus de toutes ces belles dames, si le grand portrait de M^me^ Deshoulières, en grand déshabillé blanc, debout (c’est du reste un noble visage et, comme le talent si décrié et si peu connu de ce poète, meilleur peut-être au second aspect qu’au premier), ne m’avait rappelé par le caractère infaillible de la bouche, qui est grosse, avancée, charnue et charnelle, la brutalité du portrait de M^me^ de Staël, par Gérard. Quand je le vis, il y a deux ans, à Coppet, la fenêtre était ouverte, le soleil l'éclairait en face, je ne pus m'empêcher d'être frappé par ces lèvres rouges et vineuses, par ces narines larges, reniflantes, aspirantes. La tête de George Sand offre quelque chose d'analogue. Chez toutes ces femmes à moitié hommes, la spiritualité ne commence qu'à la hauteur des yeux. Le reste est resté dans les instincts du sexe. Presque toutes aussi sont grasses et ont des tailles viriles : Mme Deshoulières, Mme de Sévigné, Mme de Staël, G. Sand et Mme Colet. Je ne connais que Mme Annaïs Ségalas qui soit maigre.

Nous avons vu dans la chambre de Diane de Poitiers, le grand lit à baldaquin de la royale concubine, tout en damas bleu et cerise. S'il m'appartenait, j'aurais bien du mal à m'empêcher de ne m'y pas mettre quelquefois. Coucher dans le lit de Diane de Poitiers, même quand il est vide, cela vaut bien coucher avec quantité de réalités plus palpables. N'a-t-on pas dit qu'en ces matières le plaisir n'était qu'imagination ? Concevez-vous donc alors, pour ceux qui en ont quelque peu, la volupté singulière, historique et XVIe siècle, de poser sa tête sur l'oreiller de la maîtresse de François Ier et de se retourner sur ses matelas ? (Oh ! que je donnerais volontiers toutes les femmes de la terre pour avoir la momie de Cléopâtre !) Mais je n'oserais pas seulement, de peur de les casser, toucher aux porcelaines de Catherine de Médicis qui sont dans la salle à manger, ni mettre mon pied dans l'étrier de François Ier, de peur qu'il n'y restât, ni poser les lèvres sur l'embouchure de l'énorme trompe qui est dans la salle d'armes, de peur de m'y rompre la poitrine.

(*) Nous lui avons cependant dit adieu à ce pauvre Chenonceaux, nous l'avons laissé avec ses beaux souvenirs, ses beaux portraits, ses belles armes et ses vieux meubles, dormant au bruit de sa rivière roucoulante, à l'ombre de ses grands arbres, sur son herbe verte ; et pleins de bonne humeur et les gourdes remplies, nous avons fait l'inauguration de nos sacs en allant à pied gagner Bléré, pour de là nous rendre à Tours en carriole.

Cette promenade n'a rien de récréatif, c'est une longue prairie assez maigre avec de rares peupliers pâles.

A Bléré, pendant qu'on donnait l'avoine au

(*) Inédit, pages 35 à 36. cheval et qu'on tirait de la remise le cabriolet qui s'y rongeait aux vers, comme un vieux roquefort oublié dans une armoire, nous avons été voir l'église où commence le goût d'ornements rococo, fleurs artificielles, rubans, pompons, guirlandes de papier peint, si remarquable à quelques lieues plus loin, dans les villes de l'Anjou, province qui semble avoir conservé de ses anciens maîtres des prédilections italiennes.

Jusqu'à Tours vraiment la route est belle, la campagne est ample et nourrie, riche à l'œil et bien portante, sans les exubérances presque sombres de la Normandie, ni les finesses de lumière du Midi. On passe sous de beaux arbres qui recouvrent le chemin comme des berceaux, ou au milieu de larges prairies qu'égayent çà et là des villes et des clochers, et, à partir de Montlouis, on va tout le long de la Loire, rencontrant l'un après l'autre, se succédant et revenant sans cesse, des châteaux au haut des collines, des vignes à côté des blés, des îles oblongues avec une couronne de peupliers et une frange de roseaux. Le vent est tiède sans volupté, le soleil doux sans ardeur ; tout le paysage enfin joli, varié dans sa monotonie, léger, gracieux, mais d'une beauté qui caresse sans captiver, qui charme sans séduire et qui, en un mot, a plus de bon sens que de grandeur et plus d'esprit que de poésie : c'est la France. Tours. — Saint-Julien ; portail nu d'un roman superbe ; trois charmants pleins cintres au haut ; intérieur délabré, magasins ; transept de gauche couvert de toiles d'araignée, magnifique de ton ; au fond par la porte on voyait un bazar parisien ambulant.

Plessis-les-Tours ; rue dans une campagne plate ; grand enclos de murs. — Maison de Tristan, petite, à ogive, ouverte. — Cathédrale de la fin du XV^e^ siècle, ornée, lourde, intérieur plus pur, magnifique serrurerie dans le chœur.

Chinon. — A gauche en descendant la côte, les tours du château. — Vue du château, à l'ombre duquel la ville est bâtie. — Chinon à l'air resserré, comprimé entre la Vienne et le château ; elle a été forcée de s'étendre en long. — A partir du pied, de l'endroit où le terrain monte, c'est la ville vieille, rues tortueuses et les voûtes silencieuses, les coques noires comme à Carcassonne et à Provins ; les ânes paissent dans les rues, les m..... de Gargantua s'écrasent sous vos pieds. — Le château sur la hauteur, forme d'un carré long alterné de tours rondes et carrées ; des arbres dans les fossés et de l'herbe qui remonte au mur. — Du côté de la tour d'Agnès Sorel, du côté opposé a la ville, le cimetière est au pied des tours ; deux gros noyers. — La tour de la cage de fer a trois étages. — Dans les deux étages inférieurs (la cage était dans le premier) il y avait une cheminée, anneau au plafond, inscriptions de prisonniers, chapelets, saints ciboires. — Partout au milieu des ruines, des lilas en fleur, de l'herbe. — Dans la chambre où Jeanne d'Arc a été reçue, des narcisses en fleur et des églantiers penchés les uns sur les autres. — A la tour qui sert d'entrée on voit la coulisse de la herse. — Partout à Chinon je cherche le souvenir de Rabelais et je ne trouve rien ; Rabelais au reste est-il un génie local ?

De Chinon à Fontevrault, route charmante avec des sinuosités entre la verdure ; ce sont de grands arbres à large touffe. La nuit nous prit avant.

Fontevrault, enfoncé un peu comme Jumièges, sans que l'on voie grande colline autour de l'abbaye. — Ce qu'il y a de plus curieux, c'est l'église dont l'abside (extérieure) est d'un beau roman avec des rotondes attenantes. — Salle capitulaire d'un gothique primitif ; cloître, gothique comme celui de Saint-Wandrille. — Directeur en robe de chambre bleue dans son cabinet, bègue, pointu, grand ignorantin. — Prisonniers au réfectoire, à la promenade, un à un, en silence forcé, à la queue du loup. — Pauvre Robert d'Arbrissel, âme d'amour, te doutais-tu de ces choses honteuses ? — Gendarmes, troupiers d'Afrique.

De Fontevrault à Saumur. — Par le soleil qui chauffait les roches couvertes de verdure ; singulier pays pour sa douceur. — L'Anjou me semble une espèce de Normandie.

Saumur. — Officiers de cavalerie en costume de cheval. — Église. — Petites rues mal pavées, tortueuses avec des fleurs aux fenêtres. — Église Notre-Dame, rotonde. — Panthéon d'Agrippa. A gauche en entrant, sous une roche artificielle sombre et profonde, une femme en robe blanche, à manches à gigot, avec deux mèches de cheveux noirs, une qui pend à côté, l'autre qui passe sur sa taille, elle couchée au milieu des pierres, sur des rochers ; l'ombre de la voûte contraste avec le blanc du vêtement et la pâleur du visage. Malgré le laid de l'invention et le mauvais goût de tout cela il y a là quelque chose qui frappe et qu'on se rappelle. — Un saint Siméon de Philippe de Champagne ; belle tête du saint, blonde, éclairée, douce, émue ; un enfant à gauche qui marche. — Saint-Pierre, entrée latérale charmante, d'un roman exquis, mais ce qu'il y a de plus beau, c'est la couleur de la pierre qui est verte, bleue, etc. ; les chapelles intérieures sont couvertes de fleurs ; il y en a une qui représente une passion avec des rochers en relief en toile peinte ; partout l'élément moyen âge ogival disparaît sous le badigeon et sous l'ornementation italienne. La foi est évidemment aux chapelles, c'est là qu'on va ; les gravures religieuses sont entrelacées de guirlandes de lierre (comme à Bléré au petit autel latéral). — L'Anjou sent l'Italie. Est-ce souvenir ? reste d'influence ? ou l'effet de la douce Loire, le plus sensuel des fleuves de France ? — Nantilly est d'un roman pur, le plein cintre est large et fort ; on y monte par une pente, ancien escalier de cailloux ; elle est entourée de grands arbres. Comme ce serait beau sans l'affreuse couleur blanche !

L'allée couverte de Bagneux, large d'environ douze pas, longue d'à peu près trente, haute de huit pieds ; pierres monstrueuses ; la pluie tombait par les interstices et faisait des flaques d'eau dans l'intérieur ; deux trous dans le pan du fond laissant passer un jour vif et blanc ; les feuilles des arbres brillaient sous la pluie qui ruisselait ; l'intérieur des pierres était vert par places, plus blanc dans d'autres. — Conducteur inepte de notre américaine. — Troupeau de bœufs vendéens que nous avons croisés. — Art de la taille des arbres publié par l'Administration des ponts et chaussées ; l'idéal de l'ineptie et la haine de la nature s'est réalisé à Saumur sur la route de Poitiers, en sortant de Saumur. — Nos hôtes. — Encore le veau ! — Le salon de province : le velours d'Utrecht rouge paraît être, comme le veau, une des bases des mœurs de la province. — Le veau est parmi la viande de boucherie la viande universitaire et académique.

De Saumur à Ancenis par la Loire. — Fleuve doux, large, étendu, mais les peupliers donnent quelque chose de grêle au paysage. — Tours rondes à Angers. — Saint-Florent à gauche sur une hauteur. — Mais la Seine est plus belle ; je ne mets la Loire qu'après la Seine et le Rhône ; nulle part je ne vois rien de pareil à Dieppedalle, à la Mailleraye, à Caudebec ; la Loire est plus française, plus douce, plus bourgeoise, plus prose. — Bateau à vapeur : la jeune fille et sa mère ; figure blanche froide ; l'officier de cavalerie, sa femme et son moutard ; des MM. Le bateau à vapeur est le bateau à vapeur.

Ancenis est ce qu'on appelle une affreuse petite ville, mal pavée, tortueuse, avec des maisons grises et pauvres, comme les petites villes du Languedoc, mais son dénuement lui donne un chic étrange ; personne dans les rues. — L'Hôtel de la Marine, femme de 40 ans, grasse, gracieuse ; la grand'mère, les deux petites filles ; les MM. de la table d'hôte s'ennuyant fort du pays et convoitant les délices de la capitale. — Jolie vue sur la Loire, une des plus belles du fleuve à coup sûr. — L'église est d'un nu rare et d'une ineptie curieuse : trois pyramides au pied d'une croix de la mission bardées du haut en bas de cœurs percés de flèches ; baldaquins en marbres ; ornements d'un goût déplorable. — Le château n'a plus que ses murs extérieurs garnis de créneaux et les deux grosses tours d'entrée dont l'une porte encore un boulet de pierre. L'intérieur est délabré, occupé par un jardin potager ; la concierge nous y promène avec ses enfants. Des ravenelles, des ronces, les belles plantes vivaces, les belles feuilles vertes se cramponnent partout, pendent dans les coins ; la vue du haut du donjon est singulièrement contrariée par l'aspect du pont suspendu. — Atroce charge de la pierre druidique dans la plaine druidique. — Plaisanterie pleine d'à-propos de mon honorable ami sur la pierre branlante. D'Ancenis à la Meilleraye, le paysage est triste quoique vert et fourni. Partout des enclos, des haies ; il y a quelque chose de sombre et de méfiant dans la campagne. On rencontre peu de monde quoique ce soit le dimanche ; les petites filles ont de grands bonnets comme les femmes qui sont toutes fort laides ; on voit des jeunes filles assises par deux ou trois au bord des fossés, tournant le dos à la grande route. — Les genêts se multiplient à mesure qu'on avance, les arbres deviennent plus forts et plus petits, plus râblés. — A Priaillé, procession avec des drapeaux blancs. — Notre conducteur, normand de Domfront, cheveux presque blancs, yeux noirs qui me rappellent ceux du père Langlois, déteste les chouans ; en 1831 il ne nous aurait pas conduits par là pour 100,000 francs.

La Meilleraye est à découvert au milieu des bois abattus. — A la porte, des bœufs entraient comme nous sortions. — On nous a introduits au premier dans une salle de réception élevée, avec des fauteuils xviii^{e} siècle ; air moitié monacal moitié château de campagne. Un moine est venu nous demander si nous n'avions pas besoin de quelque chose ; puis le frère hôtelier pour nous demander nos noms. On nous a menés à la chapelle, puis au parloir. Deux moines blancs sont venus se prosterner à nos pieds à plat ventre ; ils nous ont reconduits à la chapelle le temps de dire un *ave* et un *credo* et sont revenus dans le parloir nous lire un passage de l'Imitation n° 3, ch. xx. — Dîner dans une grande salle, nappe assez propre, couverts de fer. Un vieil abbé breton, petite figure ouverte, cheveux blancs, a servi des œufs durs à l'oseille, une espèce de bouillie en colle que j'avais prise pour des mattes, des pruneaux cuits. — J'ai pensé à la vertu grotesque et théologique que Henri Estienne leur attribue dans son apologie pour Hérodote. — Figures : à ma gauche, un ancien militaire, calotte de laine, nez retroussé, favoris empire, l'air du carliste panné, grand amateur de beurre salé ; à ma droite, un paysan en faillite ? en face, grand jeune homme, bouche épaisse, mystique, mains fortes, tout à fait mystique ; en face, un curé d'environ 40 ans, homme de puissante encolure et de bonnes manières, en pénitence probablement ; à gauche, de mon côté, un vicaire en cheveux blancs, bas du visage singulièrement charnel et ignoble, front droit et assez intelligent, fort en chimie selon le vieil abbé breton qui a fait la conversation avec nous dans le jardin après le dîner. — Parmi fes pensionnaires un affreux petit bonhomme en habit noir, casquette par-dessus son bonnet de soie noire.

La chapelle. — Après le salve nous sommes descendus de la tribune, les moines se sont mis à genoux, nous sommes au milieu d'eux pour réciter des litanies à la Vierge. La chapelle de la Vierge était tendue d'un rideau blanc ouvert comme un lit, l'autel avait un transparent rose recouvert de dentelles ; des fleurs artificielles ou vraies entouraient la femme de plâtre ; on a allumé les cierges et les voix sont parties. Il y avait dans l'arrangement de tout cela quelque chose de voluptueux, de conjugal ; ces pauvres hommes avaient l'air d'avoir préparé avec amour la couche de leur épouse céleste. Les voix étaient fortes, puissantes ; l'énergie de la vie y rapparaissait, s'y iàisait jour. Quand nous sommes entrés dans l'église, il faisait jour encore ; le soleil, comme l'ironie de la nature, colorait en rose les parois et la muraille blanchies à la craie. — Agent voyer ami de l'établissement. — Dur noviciat des moines. — On ménage la vie de l'abbé à cause des droits de mutation à payer, aussi couche-t-il sur un matelas. — Trait de la mort de la mère d'un des moines annoncée au réfectoire. (Écrit le dimanche 9 mai dans la cellule de Saint-Théodore, 10 heures du soir.)

Dans le parloir, parmi les objets à vendre, une gravure intitulée “les faux plaisirs”. On voit sur le premier plan un adolescent vêtu d'une robe, tenant un chapelet à la main et regardant en haut ; dans le ciel des anges jouent de la viole, avec leurs ailes pointues ; sur la terre, au contraire, on voit deux demoiselles décolletées et en manches à gigot dont l’une joue de la guitare et l’autre danse (celle-là a des manches à sabot et des bracelets), elles charment un jeune troubadour en veste et en culotte courte portant des favoris et leur jetant un regard en coulisse ; au fond un lac avec des peupliers. Il y a écrit au-dessous :

La volupté vous tente,
Fuyez, ne cédez pas,
Une joie innocente
Suivra tous vos combats.

On n’est pas venu me réveiller à 2 heures pour aller aux matines, la nuit s’est passée assez mal dans un lit taché de sang. Le matin, un matin gris et pâle, le déjeuner avec les mêmes inconcevables pensionnaires. Il y a une grande tristesse dans la nécessité de se lever de bonne heure pour manger. — Visite dans l’établissement : dans les ateliers pas de chants, un silence stupide ; salutations dans les corridors quand les moines vous rencontrent ; le petit bœuf dont on tournait les cornes ; ils ne nous ont pas parlé et ils voyaient que nous avions besoin d’explications, mais leurs yeux ! Deux moines en retraite dans le chapitre ; ceux-là vraiment jouaient bien ; au fond le siège de l’abbé avec la crosse. Réfectoire, couvert en bois, odeur humide et fade. — On pue beaucoup dans ce lieu de sainteté ! — Le réfectoire ainsi que le dortoir sont des lieux qu’on respecte spécialement, il n’est pas permis même aux étrangers d’y parler. — Le dortoir est d’une seule couleur et d’un bel aspect austère, gris couleur de bois ; le plafond comme le plancher est de bois, lit à colonnes carrées allant jusqu’au plafond ; entre chaque lit il y a un petit rideau en toile à matelas ; une paillasse ; un pot de chambre sous chaque lit. — Cimetière, toutes tombes pareilles avec des croix noires ; la seule différence est qu’aux moines on met la croix aux pieds, aux abbés à la tête. — Le frère hôtelier n’avait pas au cimetière la tenue confite des ecclésiastiques, il marchait sur les tombes sans façon. — Ce qu’il y a de mieux à la Meilleraye.

Nous étions si pressés d’en partir que nous n’avons pas attendu la messe. — Notre joie dans les champs, portant le sac, retrouvant la liberté et le soleil. — Au bourg, après une omelette qui nous a paru excellente et des rognons délicieux, nous avons été dans le bois fumer sous les arbres.

Nort, indescriptibles fresques.

L’Erdre s’élargit tout à coup, gentille rivière avec de jolis aspects, des arbres dans le goût des vieilles gravures xvii^{e} siècle, où on voit un homme pêcher à la ligne en culottes courtes, en chemise bouffante au nombril, tandis qu’à côté de lui une bergère arrange des fleurs dans son tablier et qu’un chien est couché à plat ventre sur le foin. — Nous retrouvons sur le bateau les MM. de la Meilleraye, le gros beau et le petit cancre en lunettes, que nous avons vus tout à l’heure s’agenouiller dans l’église de Nort. — Canotiers peu habitués aux lorgnons. — Verrières. — Entrée à Nantes ; nous y travaillons depuis avant-hier matin. (13 mai, 10 heures, Nantes.)

Ce sommaire a été développé par Maxime Du Camp. III

Nantes. — Grand lieu ; danses ; bonnet de flanelle blanche.

Musée : Elisabeth par Tibaldi. Prodigieuse fraise à gros tuyaux, brodée de noir ; menton avançant, figure longue, grands yeux bleus sortis, roulant, très animés ; sourcils ébouriffés à la base ; lèvre inférieure grosse, front haut, chevelure blond roux haut montée, avec des œillets rouges sur le côté gauche ; elle est vêtue de noir et passe la main droite dans une chaîne d’or qui lui pend du cou.

Scène de carnaval de Lancret. Dans une grande chambre boisée une dame en corsage jaune et en jupon rose, avec de longs repentirs aux bras, est entre un pierrot et un danseur qui l’invite. On regarde autour. La teinte générale brun de madère est relevée par le costume rose et jaune de la dame et par l’habit gris des deux danseurs qui l’entourent.

Id. Camargo dansant en plein vent, robe de satin blanc avec des rubans bleus, des guirlandes de roses ; à sa droite un joueur de tambour et de fifre ; à gauche un violon, un basson, une femme qui regarde.

Un portrait de femme de Murillo : robe bleue, figure terreuse, ton verdâtre, yeux noirs, retroussés, mystiques et profonds ; elle tient un petit livre ; bandeaux noir de suie mal peignés, air idiot et profond.

Apollon et statues nues avec des feuilles de vigne en fer-blanc découpé.

Adoration des mages, avec des nègres, des gens qui regardent aux fenêtres ; figure stupide et crâne déprimé de celui qui est aux pieds du Seigneur.

Tableau de Daniel dans la fosse, de Zigler.

Musée d’histoire naturelle : deux petits fœtus de cochons ; td. d’hommes ; modèles de têtes de nègre et de chimpanzé, oreilles saillantes de la tête. Tête boucanée d’habitant du fleuve des Amazones, on lui a mis des dents dans les yeux ; à côté sont le collier et le bonnet de plumes bizarres. Tête boucanée de la Zéiande, tatouage, soleils qu’on distingue encore sur son cuir brun, chevelure négligée, longues mèches pleines de férocité et de volupté !

Maison de la duchesse de Berry : impression triste, toute petite chambre, un sale papier bleu gris, nue, une table, plaque.

Château : tours, boulets et canon, pantalon rouge passant par une fenêtre, troupiers dormant sur l’herbe.

Cathédrale, vilaine à l’intérieur, trop courte à l’extérieur ; belle nef d’un beau jet, mais d’une vilaine voûte ; répara-tions de menuiserie en pitoyable chic moyen âge. — Aux chapelles, femme qui priait près d’un confessionnal. —

Tombeau de François II, charmantes figures des petits anges qui portent les coussins. — A côté de l’église une bbutique de « mercerie et objets de piété ».

Clisson, au confluent de la Sèvre et de la Moine. — Cascade qui gâte l’effet de ce paysage simple. — Toits plats en tuile. — Le château, les prodigieux lierres, arbre qui sort du mur. — L’intérieur, arbres, troncs verts. — Donjon des ormeaux, d’où l’on voit la prairie des chevaliers ; pri-son des femmes, crocs, porte ; impression si forte qu’elle n’en est pas triste. — Prodigieuse cheminée, grand pan de mur avec des fenêtres grillées par où le ciel bleu. — Triple enceinte. — La Garenne. — Le temple de Vesta. — Goût italien de l’empire en face de ces choses si veaies et si belles d’elles-mêmes. — Temple à l’amitié.

Tiffauges, ruine tout ouverte dans ia campagne solitaire. — Tour carrée le pied dans l’eau, nénufars, pas un bruit

d’oiseau, vent qui ride les blés et fait trembler le lierre ; fenêtre carrée encadrée. — Restes de chapelle dans une tour où nous avons compté quatre étages ; au haut une cheminée avec des herbes et des fleurs dessus comme sur une jardinière. — Silence général. — Un enfant qui jetait des pierres.

(*> Sortant de chez les frères de la Trappe, il nous a semblé agréable de revoir des figures humaines et des biftecks au beurre d’anchois ; encore tout réjouis des fresques de Nort et tout épouvantés du souvenir de la Meilleraye, nous avons fait, le soir de notre arrivée à Nantes, la meilleure digestion qu’on se puisse sentir. Convenablement installés à l’Hôtel de France, nous avons pendant huit jours mené une vie fort plaisante. Nous avions pour nous servir une de ces canailles alertes et gracieuses qui plaisent aux gens bien nés, drôle intelligent, qui vendait de bons cigares et de bonne parfumerie. Nous écrivions dans notre chambre fraîche, nous nous lavions dans de grandes cuvettes ; nous nous amusions dans la cour avec un petit singe qui déchiquetait de ses dents et de ses ongles nos vieux gants blancs d’une façon à faire croire que c’était pour lui qu’on les avait inventés, ou bien nous allions dans le passage Pommeraye acheter des stores de Chine, des sandales turques ou des paniers du Nil, afin d’examiner à l’aise et de toucher avec nos mains toutes les babioles veInédit, pages 37 à 64. nues d’au delà des mers, dieux, chaussures, parasols et lanternes, futilités splendides en couleur qui font rêver à d’autres mondes, niaiseries sans usage qui pour nous sont des choses graves.

Je crois que Nantes est une ville assez bête, mais j’y ai tant mangé de salicoques que j’en garde un doux souvenir.

Ce qui prouve que Nantes ne nous a pas ennuyés, c’est que nous étions sur le point d’en partir quand nous nous sommes dit qu’il fallait cependant la voir.

Ce n’est pas la saleté sombre de Lyon, ni le mouvement du Havre ou de Marseille, ni l’alignement de Bordeaux, ville si joliment bâtie qui ressemble à un bel homme bien cravaté ; ça ne vaut pas Rouen qui serait beau si on ne l’embellissait et que j’aimerais si je n’y étais né. Du haut de la cathédrale, pourtant, on découvre un horizon qui vous récompense de vous être essoufflé à grimper les escaliers : en bas, à pic, les maisons se pressent et tassent leurs toits comme les chapeaux pointus d’une foule qui se serre aux épaules ; à gauche, une large prairie se mouille au bord du fleuve large et gris qui se divise et fait un coude, tandis que les deux cours de l’Erdre et de la Sèvre, multipliant leurs bras et leurs îles, découpent la campagne en grandes lignes grises. Ce jour-là le ciel était d’une lumière pâle qui, harmonisant sa teinte aux couleurs bourbeuses des eaux, donnait à cet ensemble un aspect tranquille et triste. La campagne est vaste, étendue, plus verte et plus vivante en remontant la Loire du côté de laTouraine, niais monotone et comme engourdie en s’avanÇant vers les sables du côté de la mer. A tout prendre, l’horizon est large et beau, mais quel est l’horizon qui ne soit beau quand il est grand, et tous les horizons ne sont-ils pas grands quand on plane sur eux ?

Montez n’importe où, pourvu que vous mon-tiez haut, et vous découvrirez des perspectives démesurées aux paysages les plus plats. Quelle est aussi l’idée qui ne soit longue quand on y court jusqu’au bout, le cœur qui ne paraisse immense quand on y laisse couler la sonde ?

J’ai passé autrefois de bonnes heures dans les clochers d’églises ; appuyé aussi sur le parapet, je regardais les nuages rouler dans le ciel et les cor-beaux nichés dans les gargouilles s’envoler avec des cris rauques et de grands battements d’ailes. C’était assez fréquemment, pendant ma rhéto-rique, ma manière de suivre la classe ; y perdai-je beaucoup, et cela aussi n’était-ce pas du style ?

Une chose fort ordinaire m’a choqué et m’a fait nre, c’est le télégraphe que tout à coup, en me retournant, j’ai aperçu en face sur une tour. Les bras raides de la mécanique se tenaient immobiles, et sur l’échelle qui mène à sa base un moineau sautillait d’échelon en échelon ; placé au-dessus de tout ce qu’on voyait à l’entour, au-dessus de ‘église et de la croix qui la termine, cet instrument disgracieux me semblait comme la grimace fantastique du monde moderne. Qu’est-ce qui passe dans l’air maintenant, entre les nuages et les oiseaux, dans la région pure où vient mourir la voix des cloches, et où s’évaporent les parfums de la terre ? C’est la nouvelle que la rente baisse, que les suifs remontent ou que la reine d’Angleterre est accouchée.

Quelle drôle de vie que celle de l’homme qui reste là dans cette petite cabane à faire mouvoir ces deux perches et à tirer sur ces ficelles, rouage inintelligent d’une machine muette pour lui ! II peut mourir sans connaître un seul des événements qu’il a appris, un seul mot de tous ceux qu’il aura dits. Le but ? le but ? le sens ? qui le sait ? Est-ce que le matelot s’inquiète de la terre où le pousse la voile qu’il déploie, le facteur des lettres qu’il porte, l’imprimeur du livre qu’il imprime, le soldat de la cause pour laquelle il tue et se fait tuer ? Un peu plus, un peu moins, ne sommes-nous pas tous comme ce brave homme, parlant des mots qu’on nous a appris et que nous apprenons sans les comprendre. Espacés en ligne et se regardant à travers les abîmes qui les séparent, les siècles se transmettent ainsi de l’un à l’autre l’éternelle énigme qui leur vient de loin pour aller loin, ils gesticulent, ils remuent dans le brouillard, et ceux qui, postés sur des sommets, les font se mouvoir n’en savent pas plus long que les pauvres diables d’en bas qui lèvent la tête pour tâcher d’y deviner quelque chose.

Où en étais-je donc ? à Nantes, je crois, à la cathédrale. Elle est dans le goût anglais du xv° siècle tout chargé de ciselures épaisses, tout alourdi des enjolivements stériles du gothique en décadence, et vilaine à l’extérieur, trop courte à l’intérieur ; la nef est d’un bon jet, mais la voûte assez laide et d’une courbe écrasée. Nous avons remarqué sous le portail, occupant l’entre-colonnement des ner-vures ogivales, des espèces de fûts de pierres si-mulant des troncs d’arbres, avec des naissances de branches coupées, comme serait un bâton de houx émondé. Cette particularité se reproduit dans plusieurs églises de la Bretagne. En fait de hideux, et de hideur rare, il faut signaler dans une des chapelles latérales une sorte de lambris plaqué sur les murs, fabriqué dans un chic moyen âge déplorable et atteignant aux dernières limites du rococo imitatif. Mais une chose vraiment belle, c’est le tombeau de François II et de Marguerite de Foix, sa seconde femme. Ils sont tous deux dans leurs beaux costumes du temps, couronne ducale en tête, étendus sur leur marbre, ayant aux pieds, le duc un lion, la duchesse un lévrier ; trois anges soulèvent le coussin où repose leur tête aux yeux fermés ; de grandes figures symboliques se tiennent aux quatre coins du monument. Le visage de la femme est gras, triste, nez relevé et paupières grosses ; celui de François II, assez dur, intelligent et rusé, un peu mêlé de force et de faiblesse comme fut sa vie, révèle bien le vieil en-nemi de Louis XI, l’homme habile comme lui à conclure des traités équivoques et à nouer des alliances clandestines. Ils se trompaient à l’envi.

4-A la réconciliation d’Arras, 1477, *’ ^ut stipulé qu’on jurerait la paix sur telles reliques que l’on voudrait, sauf sur le corps de J.-C. et sur la vraie croix, parce que le parjure en mourrait infaillible-ment dans l’année. Pendant qu’il parlementait avec le roi, il s’alliait avec l’Angleterre et faisait venir des armes d’Italie ; le roi, de son côté, promettait la Bretagne aux Ecossais et soudoyait le sire de Lescun, son conseiller. Une fois pourtant il eut un beau mouvement, qui fut de refuser le collier de Saint-Michel, 1470 ; d’après les statuts de l’ordre, il eût été forcé, en effet, de servir le roi envers et contre tous et de renoncer à toute autre alliance, or il préférait avec raison celle du comte de Cha-rolais et du duc de Berry. II aurait pu jurer et ne pas .tenir, il faut lui savoir gré de la franchise. Louis XI, qui toute sa vie le combattit et qui le haïssait déjà avant d'être roi, mourut sans l'avoir pu vaincre, et quatre ans plus tard cependant, comme pour faire voir combien les gens mé-diocres triomphent parfois des grands hommes pour succomber ensuite sous de plus faibles qu'eux-mêmes, il est forcé de subir l'humiliant traité du Verger, 1488, et il en meurt de tristesse. Quoiqu'il ait établi des manufactures de soie à Vitré et de tapisseries à Rennes (ce qu'on a soin de mettre dans les livres où on le représente comme le défenseur dévoué de l'indépendance bretonne), j'ai toujours eu peu de sympathie pour cet homme terne qui faisait combattre un lion contre des ânes (celui que lui avait donné, quelque temps avant de mourir, l'amiral de Mont-auban) et qui si lâchement abandonna tour à tour son conseiller Chauvin à son favori Landois, et Landois aux ennemis de Chauvin, tiraillé en tous sens par mille liaisons qu'il dénouait, par mille influences qui se succédaient ; il est bien le père, quant au manque de cœur et à la sécheresse de caractère, de la froide et hypocrite Anne qui est pour moi une des figures les plus mal plaisantes du xvi^e^ siècle.

Puisque nous parlons d'histoire, à cent pas de là, en face le vieux château, se trouve la maison où fut surprise la duchesse de Berry en 1832. Le cœur se serre dans cette petite chambre nue tendue d'un sale papier gris et à peine éclairée par des carreaux jaunes. Nous vîmes la plaque derrière laquelle se cachèrent la princesse et ses compagnons ; on a peine à croire qu'ils y aient pu tenir. Toute cette demeure est discrète et froide, on n'y entend aucun bruit, point d'enfant qui joue ni de chien qui aboie. Habitée par deux vieilles filles dévotes, avec son étroite cour sombre, son allée humide, son escalier de bois qui se pourrit à la pluie, elle a quelque chose de découragé, de ruiné, de honteux comme si elle sentait jusque dans ses pierres l'amertume du souvenir.

Il ne reste du vieux château que les deux tours d'entrée, celle dû pied-de-biche à gauche du pont-levis, celle de la boulangerie à droite. Il y a encore d à peu près intact un autre corps de logis percé de fenêtres de la fin du xv^e^ siècle, et dans la cour un vieux et beau puits orné d'un élégant couronnement de fer pour y suspendre des poulies. Des canons, cirés comme des bottes, sont rangés en ligne sur l'herbe à côté de boulets mis distinctement suivant leur calibre, comme les mètres de cailloux sur le bord des routes ; deux ou trois soldats couchés sur le dos dormaient tranquillement au soleil et sans doute rêvaient à quoi ? probablement que ce n'était ni au duc de Mercœur, qui fit bâtir le bastion de la Croix de Lorraine, maintenant délabré, ni au cardinal de Retz qui s'en évada, et pas davantage à la reine Anne qui se maria à Louis XII dans la chapelle du fer à cheval, convertie en poudrière. S'ils rêvaient, n'était-ce pas plutôt aux bonnes parties de boules que l’on faisait le dimanche après vêpres, au jour où ils apercevront le coq du clocher par-dessus les arbres de leur village ou à la payse qu’ils y ont laissée ? Il n’y a que les gens ayant pour métier de penser, qui se fourrent dans le cerveau les passions des époques disparues ; les braves gens ont assez des leurs ; ils font l’histoire — et nous, nous la lisons.

Deux ou trois hommes en chemises chantaient dans la caserne en brossant leurs habits et en polissant les boutons de cuivre avec de la craie. Au second étage, sur le rebord d’une ravissante fenêtre carrée, un pantalon rouge, étalé tout ouvert, laissait tomber ses deux jambes le long du mur, et déployait avec une impudence bête son grand pont à doublure grise. Quand nous fûmes sortis du château, nous allâmes visiter le musée. Le conservateur, occupé dans un coin à peinturlurer quelque chose, se dé-rangea de sa besogne et vint officieusement lier avec nous une conversation artistique, mais bientôt nous ayant vus admirer un Delacroix, le brave homme remit sa casquette sur sa tête et nous tourna les talons, ce qui nous le fit suspecter de se livrer au paysage Bertin ou au genre histoire romaine, à grands renforts de lances en queue de billard et de casques en pots à l’eau. Nous sommes restés longtemps devant un tableau dans la vieille manière allemande, représentant une Adoration des Mages ; le dessin en est d’une naïveté presque ironique : un mage, vêtu d’une sorte de manteau d’évêque, se prosterne aux pieds du Christ avec un air si stupide et un front si déprimé qu’on croirait volontiers que c’est une malice du peintre ; il y a des nègres singuliers, ajustés dans des caleçons rouges et couverts de colliers de corail ; à une fenêtre, des femmes et des hommes passent la tête et montrent une mine ébahie. Tout cela est vivant et drôle, heurté en tons rouges et verts (un peu comme la Tentation de Saint Antoine de Breu-ghel), intense d’expression, amusant de détail, original d’ensemble et d’un effet impossible à faire comprendre quand on ne l’a pas vu.

Nous avons aussi remarqué la Scène de carnaval, Par Lancret. Dans une grande chambre boisée, une belle dame en corsage jaune et en jupon rose, avec de longues manches aux coudes, est entre un danseur et un pierrot qui l’invitent au menuet. Des deux côtés, sur des sièges, des amis sourient et causent. Au premier plan un petit enfant traîne un joujou ; c’est là une bonne maison où il fait chaud, une maison où l’on s’amuse ; on sent que dehors il pleut et que les masques courent dans la crotte, le temps est gris, un vrai temps de carnaval, on jouera tout à l’heure la comédie et l’on mangera ce soir des beignets.

J’aime beaucoup aussi du même auteur un portrait de la Camargo. Elle danse en plein vent, sur l’herbe, en robe de satin blanc avec des rubans bleus et des guirlandes de roses ; à sa droite un tambour remue ses baguettes et un fifre enfle ses joues ; à gauche un violon, un basson et une femme qui regarde. La

Camargo ! quel nom ! est-ce qu’il n’est pas tout résonnant de grelots ver-meils ? est-ce qu’il ne vous envoie pas, comme dans une ritournelle folâtre, avec le vent chaud d’une jupe qui tourne, une odeur de poudre d’iris ou de jasmin d’Espagne et des aperçus de rotules blanches qui se raidissent sur des édredons de soie jaune dans un boudoir plein de porcelaines de Saxe et tout couvert de pastels ?

L’antithèse, comme peinture, comme visage et comme idée, se trouve en face, dans ce portrait de femme qu’on attribue à’MurilIo. Elle est vêtue d’une robe bleue blanchie par l’usage ; ses cheveux noir de suie et mal peignés surplombent d’un ton mort sa figure verdâtre, sous son front bas et mélancolique ses yeux bruns retroussés vous envoient un regard idiotement profond qui déplaît tout en attirant ; à la main elle tient un petit livre, un livre de prières, elle passe sa vie dans les bas côtés de l’église, à l’ombre “humide des piliers, éblouie par les illuminations de l’autel, incessamment éperdue dans les emportements de l’amour mystique, et le soir elle rentre dans son grenier nu où elle a des apparitions de la Vierge et des voix d’anges qui l’appellent par son nom. Voici un rare et bon portrait, celui d’Elisabeth d’Angleterre, par Tibaldi. II faut renoncer, s’il n’est pas ressemblant, à se faire jamais une idée des gens que l’on n’a pas connus, ce qui serait triste vu que tous ceux que l’on connaît d’ordinaire ne sont pas si récréatifs. Une prodigieuse fraise à gros tuyaux empesés, brodée d’un fil noir, enserre sa longue tête osseuse, aux pommettes saillantes et aux lèvres rouges ; son front pâle est droit, élevé et fièrement intelligent. Sous des sourcils blonds, rares à leur jonction, ses grands yeux bleus, sortis, grands ouverts, roulent et regardent avec vivacité et réflexion ; le menton pointu, le bout du nez rond, la bouche avancée où l’on pressent des dents longues décèlent la férocité sensuelle, tandis que la chevelure d’un blond roux, très montée et ondée en demi-cercles successifs, et ornée d’œillets rouges sur le côté gauche, lui donne un air raide et noble, un ragoût bizarre d’une distinction imposante. C’est celle-là qu’on appelait de son temps « l’émeraude des mers, la perle de l’Occident », et pour laquelle, jouant Ri-chard III, Shakespeare s’arrêta tout à coup afin de lui ramasser son mouchoir.

Je donnerais bien le Villemain complet que j’ai acheté dans mon enfance, action insensée qui ne m’a pas fait interdire, ce qui prouve la débonnaireté de ma famille ; je donnerais aussi le cours de M. Saint-Marc Girardin que je conserve, comme dit René pour m’ôter à l’avenir tout mouvement de joie, j’y ajouterais même une vieille paire de babouches marocaines qui l’été m’est très commode, et de plus mes droits de citoyen, l’estime de mes compatriotes et le reste d’une bouteille de beau vernis qui commence à s’épaissir, oui, je donnerais tout cela de grand coeur et sur l’heure pour savoir le nom, l’âge, la demeure, la profession et la figure du monsieur qui a inventé pour les statues du musée de Nantes des feuilles de vignes en fer-blanc, qui ont l'air d'appareils contre l'onanisme. L'Apollon du Belvédère, le Discobole et un joueur de flûte sont enharnachés de ces honteux caleçons métalliques qui reluisent comme des casseroles. On voit, d'ailleurs, que c'est un ouvrage médité de longtemps et exécuté avec amour, c'est escalope sur les bords et enfoncé avec des vis dans les membres des pauvres plâtres, qui s'en sont écaillés de douleur. Par ce temps de bêtises plates qui court, au milieu des stupidités normales qui nous encombrent, il est réjouissant, ne fût-ce que par diversion, de rencontrer au moins une bêtise échevelée, une stupidité gigantesque. Malgré tous mes efforts je ne suis parvenu à me rien figurer sur le créateur de cette pudique immondicité. J'aime à croire que le Conseil municipal en entier y a pris part, que MM. les ecclésiastiques l'avaient sollicitée, et que les dames l'ont trouvée convenable.

Nous avons été ensuite au muséum d'histoire naturelle, maigre collection qui, je pense, n'est pas curieuse pour un savant, mais où il y a néanmoins une momie égyptienne, debout, à côté de son cercueil peint, des coraux tout roses, des coquilles nacrées et des crocodiles suspendus au plafond. Il y a aussi dans un bocal d'esprit-de-vin deux petits cochons unis ensemble par le ventre et qui, cabrés sur leurs pattes de derrière, relevant la queue et clignant des yeux, sont, ma foi, fort plaisants. Placés ainsi à côté de deux fœtus humains, de monstruosité analogue, ils en disent peut-être plus long que beaucoup de nos œuvres. Mais quel est celui qui saura voir, dans ces manifestations irrégulières de la vie, les expressions multiples et graduées de cet art inconnu, qui gît dans son immobilité mystérieuse au fond des océans, dans les profondeurs du globe, dans le foyer de la lumière, y variant les créations successives et perpétuant l'Être.

Depuis six mille ans qu'il l'étudié, l'homme commence peut-être à épeler la première lettre de cet alphabet qui n'a pas d'oméga. Quand pourra-t-il lire une phrase ?

Si ce que l'on appelle les monstruosités de la nature ont entre elles leurs rapports anatomiques, c'est-à-dire plastiques, et leurs lois physiologiques, c'est-à-dire nécessaires pour exister, pourquoi n'auraient-elles pas (partant de ce principe et dès lors nous plaçant dans ce monde qui paraît la négation du nôtre et qui, peut-être, en est bien le corollaire), pourquoi donc tout cela n'aurait-il pas sa beauté aussi, son idéal ? Les anciens ne le croyaient-ils pas ? et leur mythologie est-elle autre chose qu'un univers monstrueux et fantastique, revêtu de formes impossibles à notre nature et belles pourtant, tant elles sont justes en elles-mêmes et harmoniques l'une à l'autre ? N'adorez-vous pas les longs cheveux glauques des Naïades et la voix des Sirènes, gouffre de mélodie qui faisait tourbillonner les navires ? Qu'est-ce qui n'a pas trouvé la Chimère charmante, aimé sa narine de lion, ses ailes d'aigle qui bruissent et sa croupe à reflets verts ?

— Ne croyez-vous pas, comme s’ils avaient existé, aux Satyres ricaneurs qui passaient leurs oreilles pointues derrière les bouquets de myrtes et dont les pieds de boucs tombaient en cadence la nuit sur le gazon des jardins ? — Et ces rêves-là, pas plus que ceux de la nature, n’ont été non plus créés par un homme, ni mis au monde en un jour ; comme les métaux, comme les rochers, comme les fleuves, comme les mines d’or, et comme les perles, ils ont sourdi lentement, goutte à goutte, se formant par couches successives, se produisant d’eux-mêmes et se tirant du néant par leur force interne. Nous les contemplons pareille-ment avec un ébahissement inquiet et rétrospectif, cherchant peut-être au delà du souvenir si, avant notre vie, comme eux aussi nous n’avons pas existé, si nos pensées n’ont pas cohabité dans une patrie commune avec ces pensées devenues formes, si le principe de notre forme à nous n’a pas couvé jadis au sein de la chrysalide univer-selle, avec la graine des chênes et les sources qui ont fait la mer.

La belle chose qu’une tête de sauvage ! Je me souviens de deux qui étaient là, noires et luisantes à force d’être boucanées, superbes en couleurs brunes, avec des teintes d’acier et de vieil argent. La première (celle d’un habitant du fleuve des Amazones) porte des dents qu’on lui a enfoncées dans les yeux ; parée d’ornements d’un goût moui, couronnée de toutes sortes de plumages, et les gencives à nu, elle grimace d’une façon horrible et charmante ; à côté sont suspendus les colliers bigarrés de plumes d’oiseaux qu’autrefois dans la savane, quand elle criait et remuait, elle a pris sur les ennemis vaincus ; les colliers sont nombreux, ce qui prouve que c’était un brave, qui avait expédié beaucoup d’âmes à Areskoni, car ces petites choses-là sont l’inverse de nos médailles de sauvetage. On a mis près d’elfe une tête d homme de la Nouvelle-Zélande, sans autre ornement que les tatouages qui l’ont engravée comme des hiéroglyphes et que les soleils que l’on distingue encore sur le cuir brun de ses joues, sans autre coiffure que ses longs cheveux noirs, débouclés, pendants, et qui semblent humides comme des branches de saule. Avec ses plumes vertes sur les tempes, ses longs cils abaissés, ses paupières demi-closes, elle a un air exquis de férocité, de volupté et de langueur. On comprend en la regardant toute la vie du sauvage, ses sensualités de viande crue, ses tendresses enfantines pour sa femme, ses hurlements à la guerre, son amour pour ses armes, ses soubresauts soudains, sa paresse subite et les mélancolies qui le surprennent sur les grèves en regardant les flots.

Tout cela existe encore, ce n’est pas un conte, il y a encore des hommes qui marchent nus, qui vivent sous les arbres, pays où les nuits de noces ont pour alcôve toute une forêt, pour plafond le ciel entier. Mais il faut partir vite, si vous les vou-lez voir ; on leur expédie déjà des peignes d’écaille et des brosses anglaises pour nettoyer leur chevelure, écumeuse de la sueur des courses, plaquée de rouge par le sang caillé des bétes féroces ; on leur taille des sous-pieds pour les pantalons qu'on leur fait ; on leur prépare des lois pour les villes qu'on leur bâtit ; on leur envoie des martres d'école, des missionnaires et des journaux.

Nous évitons généralement ce qu'on a soin de nous indiquer comme curieux, ainsi nous n'avons vu ni la colonie de Mettray, près Tours, ni l'hôpital des fous, à Nantes, ni les forges d'Indret, ni le fort Penthièvre, ni le phare de Belle-Isle et nous ne sommes pas encore entrés dans aucun des beaux cafés des villes où nous passons, mais nous sommes allés à Clisson. Sur un coteau au pied duquel se joignent deux rivières, dans un frais paysage égayé par les claires couleurs des toits en tuiles abaissés à l'italienne et groupés là ainsi que dans les croquis d'Hubert, près d'une longue cascade basse qui fait tourner un moulin, tout caché dans le feuillage, le château de Clisson montre sa tête ébréchée par-dessus les grands arbres. A I'entour, c'est calme et doux. Les maisonnettes rient comme sous un ciel chaud ; les eaux font leur bruit, la mousse floconne sur le courant où se trempent de molles touffes de verdure. L'horizon s'allonge, d'un côté, dans une perspective de prairies et, de l'autre, remonte tout à coup, enclos par un vallon boisé dont le flot vert s'évase et descend jusqu'en bas.

Quand on a passé le pont et qu'on se trouve au pied du sentier raide qui mène au château, on voit, debout, hardi et dur sur le fossé où il s'appuie dans un aspect vivace et formidable, un grand pan de muraille tout couronné de mâchicoulis éventrés, tout empanaché d'arbres et tout tapissé de lierres dont la masse ample et nourrie, découpée sur la pierre grise en déchi-rures et en fusées, frissonne au vent dans toute sa longueur et semble un immense voile vert que le géant couché remue, en rêvant, sur ses épaules. Les herbes sont hautes et sombres, les plantes sont fortes et dardues ; le tronc des lierres, noueux, rugueux, tordu, soulève les murs comme avec des leviers, ou les retient dans le réseau de ses branchages. Un arbre vert a percé l'épaisseur de la muraille et, sorti horizontalement, suspendu en l'air, a poussé tout à l'aise l'irradiation de ses rameaux. Les fossés dont la pente s'adoucit par la terre qui s'émiette des bords et par les pierres qui tombent des créneaux ont une courbe profonde, et la porte, avec sa vigoureuse ogive un peu cintrée et ses deux baies servant à relever le pont-levis, a l'air d'un grand casque qui regarde par les trous de sa visière.

Entré dans l'intérieur, vous êtes surpris, émerveillé par le mélange des ruines et des arbres, la ruine faisant valoir la jeunesse verdoyante des arbres, et cette verdure rendant plus âpre la tristesse de la ruine. Voilà bien l'éternel et beau rire, le rire éclatant de la nature sur le squelette des choses ; toutes les insolences de sa richesse, la grâce profonde de ses fantaisies, les envahissements de son silence. Un enthousiasme grave vous prend à l’âme ; on sent que la sève coule dans les arbres et que les herbes poussent, en même temps que les pierres s’écaillent et que les murailles s’affaissent. Un art sublime a arrangé, dans l’accord suprême des discordances secondaires, la forme vagabonde des lierres au galbe sinueux des ruines, la chevelure des ronces au fouillis des pierres éboulées, la transparence de l’air aux saillies résistantes des masses, la teinte du ciel à la teinte du sol, et vous en tressaillez intérieurement comme si cette double vie fonctionnait en vous-même, tant survient, brutale et immédiate, la perperception de ses harmonies et la conscience de ses développements.

Au pied de deux grands arbres dont les troncs s’entrecroisent, un jour verdâtre passe sur la mousse, et le dôme des feuilles vous rabat une claire lumière qui, largement, illuminant tous ces débris, en épaissit les ombres et en dévoile toutes les finesses.

On s’avance, on s’en va, errant le long des barbacanes, passant sous les arcades qui s’éventrent et d’où s’épand quelque longue plante frissonnante. Les voûtes comblées qui contiennent des morts résonnent sous vos pas ; les lézards courent sous les broussailles, les insectes grimpent contre les murs, le ciel brille et la ruine assoupie continue son sommeil.

Avec sa triple enceinte, ses donjons, ses cours intérieures, ses mâchicoulis, ses souterrains, ses remparts mis les uns sur les autres, comme écorce sur écorce et cuirasse sur cuirasse, le vieux château des Clisson se peut reconstruire en entier et réapparaître pour nous. Le souvenir des rudes existences d’autrefois en découle comme de lui-même, avec l’émanation des orties et la fraîcheur des lierres.

De longues traînées noires montent encore en diagonales le long des murs, comme au temps où flambaient les bûches dans les cheminées larges de dix-huit pieds. Des trous symétriques alignés dans la maçonnerie indiquent la place des étages où l’on arrivait jadis par ces escaliers tournants qui s’écroulent et qui ouvrent sur l’abîme leurs portes vides. Quelquefois un oiseau, débusquant de son nid accroché dans les ronces, au fond d’un angle sombre, s’abaissait, les ailes étendues, et passait par l’arcade d’une fenêtre pour s’en aller dans la campagne.

Au haut d’un pan de muraille élevé, nu, gris, sec, des baies carrées, inégales de grandeur et d’alignement, laissaient éclater à travers leurs barreaux croisés le bleu vif du ciel qui tirait l’œil à lui par la séduction de sa couleur. Les moineaux dans les arbres poussaient leur cri aigre et répété. Une vache broutait, qui marchait là dedans comme dans un herbage, épatant sur l’herbe sa corne fendue.

Il y a une fenêtre, donnant sur une prairie que l’on appelle la *prairie des Chevaliers*. C’était, de dessus ces bancs de pierres entaillées dans l’épaisseur de la muraille, que les grandes dames d’alors pouvaient voir les chevaliers entrechoquer le poitrail bardé de fer de leurs chevaux et la masse d'armes descendre sur les cimiers, les lances se rompre, les hommes tomber sur le gazon. Par un beau jour d'été comme aujourd'hui, peut-être, quand ce moulin qui claque sa cliquette et met en bruit tout le paysage n'existait pas, quand il y avait des toits au haut de ces murailles, des cuirs de Flandre sur ces parois, des lames de corne à ces fenêtres, moins d'herbe, et des voix et des rumeurs de vivants, oui, là, plus d'un cœur, serré dans sa gaine de velours rouge, a battu d'angoisse et d'amour. D'adorables mains blanches ont frémi de peur sur cette pierre que recouvrent maintenant les orties, et les barbes brodées des grands hennins ont tressailli dans ce vent qui remue les bouts de ma cravate et qui courbait le panache des gentilshommes.

Nous sommes descendus dans le souterrain où fut enfermé Jean V. Dans la prison des hommes nous avons vu encore au plafond le grand crochet double qui servait à pendre ; et nous avons touché avec des doigts curieux la porte de la prison des femmes. Elle est épaisse de quatre pouces environ, serrée avec des vis, cerclée, plaquée et comme capitonnée de fers. Par le petit guichet grillé pratiqué au milieu on jetait dans la fosse ce qu'il fallait pour que la condamnée ne mourût point, car la porte, bouche discrète des plus terribles confidences, était de celles qui se ferment et ne s'ouvrent pas. Quel bon temps pour la haine ! Quand on haïssait quelqu'un, quand on l'avait enlevé dans une surprise, ou pris en trahison dans une entrevue, mais quand on l'avait enfin, qu'on le tenait, on pouvait à son aise le sentir mourir d'heure en heure, de minute en minute,compter ses angoisses, boire ses larmes, On descendait dans son cachot, on lui parlait, on marchandait son supplice pour rire de ses tortures, on débattait sa rançon ; on vivait sur lui, de lui, de sa vie qui s'éteignait, de son or qu'on lui prenait. Toute votre demeure, depuis le sommet des tours jusqu'au pied des douves, pesait

sur lui, l'écrasait, l'ensevelissait ; et les vengeances de famille s'accomplissaient ainsi, dans la famille, et par la maison elle-même qui en constituait la force et en symbolisait l'idée.

Quelquefois, cependant, quand ce misérable était un grand seigneur, un homme riche, quand il allait mourir, quand on en était repu et que les larmes de ses jeux avaient fait à la haine de son maître comme des saignées rafraîchissantes, alors on parlait de le relâcher. Le prisonnier promettait tout : il rendrait ses places fortes, il re-mettrait les clefs de ses meilleures villes, il donnerait sa fille en mariage, il doterait des églises, il irait à pied au Saint-Sépulcre. Et de l'argent ! de l'argent encore ! II en ferait plutôt faire par les juifs ! Donc on signait le traité, on le contre-signait, on l'antidatait ; on apportait les reliques, on jurait dessus, et le prisonnier revoyait le soleil. II enfourchait un cheval, partait au galop, rentrait chez lui, faisait baisser la herse, convoquait ses gens et décrochait son épée. Sa haine éclatait au dehors en explosions féroces. C'était le moment des colères terrifiantes et des rages victorieuses. Le serment ? le pape vous en relevait, et pour la rançon, on ne la payait pas.

Lorsque Clisson fut enfermé dans le château de l'Hermine, il promit pour en sortir cent mille francs d'or, la restitution des places appartenant au duc de Penthièvre, la non-exécution du mariage de sa fille Marguerite avec le duc de Penthièvre. Et, dès qu'il fut sorti, il commença par attaquer Chatelaudren, Guingamp, Lamballe et Saint-Malo, qui furent pris ou capitulèrent. Le duc de Penthièvre se maria avec sa fille, et quant aux cent mille francs d'or qu'il avait soldés, on les lui rendit. Mais ce furent les peuples de Bretagne qui payèrent.[1]

Lorsque Jean V fut enlevé, au pont de Loroux, par le comte de Penthièvre, il promit une rançon d'un million ; il promit sa fille aînée, fiancée déjà au roi de Sicile. II promit Moncontour, Sesson et Jugon, et ne donna ni sa fille, ni l'argent, ni les places fortes. Il avait fait le vœu d'aller au Saint-Sépulcre. II s'en acquitta par procureur. II avait fait voeu de ne plus lever ni tailles ni subsides ; le pape l'en dégagea. II avait fait vœu de donner à Notre-Dame de Nantes son pesant d'or ; mais comme il pesait près de deux cents livres, il resta fort endetté. Avec tout ce qu'il put ramasser et prendre, il forma bien vite une ligue et força les Penthièvre à lui acheter cette paix, qu'ils avaient vendue.

De l'autre côté de la Sèvre, et s'y trempant les P'eds, s'étend sur la colline le bois de « la Garenne », parc très beau de lui-même, malgré ses beautés factices. M. Lemot (le père du propriét^re actuel), qui était un peintre de l'Empire et uu artiste lauréat, a travaillé là du mieux qu'il a Pu à reproduire ce froid goût italien, républicain, romain, si fort à la mode du temps de Canova et de madame de Staël. On était pompeux, grandiose et digne. C'était le temps où on sculptait des urnes sur les tombeaux, où l'on vous peignait en manteau et chevelure au vent, où Corinne chantait sur sa lyre, à côté d'Oswald qui a des bottes à la russe, et où il fallait enfin qu'il y eût sur toutes les têtes beaucoup de cheveux épars et dans tous les paysages beaucoup de ruines.

Ce genre noble ne manque pas à la Garenne. II y a un temple de Vesta et, en face, un temple à l'Amitié, grand tombeau renfermant deux amis (M. Lemot et le sénateur Cacot), ce qui fait pas-ser un peu par-dessus le ridicule du nom qu'ils ont choisi pour leur boîte commune. Ne nions pas, en effet, les sentiments prétentieux et les enthousiasmes déclamatoires, on peut pleurer de bonne foi tout en arrondissant gracieusement Je coude pour tirer son mouchoir, faire une pièce de vers sur un bonheur ou un malheur quelconque et le faire sentir aussi bien que ceux qui n'en font pas, et il n'est pas encore absolument prouvé qu'il soit impossible d'aimer la femme que l'on appelle sa déité ou son bel ange d'amour.

Les inscriptions, les rochers composés, les ruines artificielles sont prodigués ici avec naïveté et conviction. Sur un morceau de granit, on lit cet illustre vers de Delille :

Sa masse indestructible a fatigué le temps.

Plus loin, vingt vers du même Delille ; ailleurs, sur une pierre taillée en forme de tombe : In Ar-cadia ego, non-sens dont je n'ai pu découvrir l'intention. Mais toutes les richesses poétiques sont réunies dans la grotte d'Héloïse, sorte de dolmen naturel sur le bord de la Sèvre.

(#) "Ce que nous éprouvons dans ces lieux, dit M. Richer, auteur d'un voyage dans la Loire-Infé- rieure, Héloïse l'a éprouvé, elle a senti, admiré, et rêvé comme nous. » Eh bien, je l'avoue, je ne suis pas comme M. Richer ni comme Héloïse, j'ai senti peu de chose, je n'ai admiré que les arbres, trouvant que la grotte qu'ils ombragent serait très congruante pour y déjeuner, l'été, en compagnie de quelques amis etd'Héloïses quelconques, d'au-tant que la proximité de l'eau permettrait d'y mettre rafraîchir les bouteilles, et je n'ai rien rêvé du tout. Mais il y a des gens heureux, des gens bien doués, sensibles, imaginatifs, qui sont toujours à la hauteur des circonstances, qui ne manquent pas de pleurer à tous les enterrements, de rire à toutes les noces, et d'avoir des souvenirs devant toutes les tuiles cassées et toutes les bi-coques non construites à la mode du jour. Ceux-là vous disent que la vue de la mer leur inspire de grandes pensées et que la contemplation.d'une forêt élève leur âme vers Dieu. Ils sont tristes en regardant la lune, et gais en regardant la foule. « Ce nom consacré, continue M. Richer, c'était lui seul que cette grotte devait offrir. L'inscription qu'on y lit est peut-être inutile, car le sentiment est toujours plus prompt que la parole. » Quoique

Inédit, pages 71 à 73. je sois volontiers de l'avis de M. Richer et que je pense comme lui que l'inscription n'était pas utile, je ne peux cependant résister au plaisir de la transcrire.

Héloïse peut-être erra sur ce rivage,
Quand aux yeux des jaloux dérobant son séjour
Dans les murs du Pollet elle vint mettre au jour
Un fils, cher et malheureux gage De ses plaisirs furtifs et de son tendre amour.
Peut-être en ce réduit sauvage, Seule plus d'une fois elle vint soupirer Et goûter librement la douceur de pleurer.
Peut-être, sur ce roc assise,
Elle rêvait k son malheur. J'y veux rêver aussi ! j'y veux remplir mon cœur
Du doux souvenir d'Héloïse.

Et ià-dessus le visiteur ingénu s'efforce à se figurer Héloïse errante sur ce rivage avec le petit Astrolabe qu’elle tient par la main, il s’apitoie sur le résultat de ses plaisirs furtifs et de son tendre amour ; il est vrai que si l’idée du tendre amour l’afflige, le tableau des plaisirs furtifs le ragaillardit un peu ; il tâche de trouver sauvage ce réduit, il ne s’en doutait pas tout à l’heure, mais cependant if fe trouve sauvage en effet ; enfin if fa voit pleu-rant sur le roc assise, rêvant à son malheur, et il veut rêver aussi, il veut remplir son cœur du doux souvenir d’Héloïse. II le remplit donc ou du moins il fait tout son possible pour le remplir. Mais non, il ne le remplit pas assez, il ne le remplit pas à son gré, il voudrait l’en remplir tout à fait, l’en combler, l’en bourrer, l’en faire craquer... n’importe ! II s’en retourne, écrit son nom sur l’album du concierge, tire sa pièce de 3o sols et part heureux : il a eu des émotions, il a eu des souvenirs.

Pourquoi donc a-t-on fait de cette figure d’Hé- •oïse, qui était une si noble et si haute figure, quelque chose de banal et de niais, le type fade de tous les amours contrariés et comme l’idéal étroit de la fillette sentimentale ? Elle méritait mieux pourtant, cette pauvre maîtresse du grand Abélard, celle qui l’aima d’une admiration si dévouée, quoiqu’il fût dur, quoiqu’il fût sombre et qu’il ne lui épargnât ni les amertunes ni les coups. Elle craignait “de l’offenser plus que Dieu même, et désirait lui plaire plus qu’à lui ». Elle ne voulait pas qu’il l’épousât, trouvant que « c’était chose messéante et déplorable que celui que la nature avait créé pour tous... une femme se l’ap-propriât et le prit pour elle seule... », sentant, di-sait-elle “plus de douceur à ce nom de maîtresse et de concubine qu’à celui d’épouse, qu’à celui d’impératrice », et, s’humiliant en lui, espérant gagner davantage dans son cœur.

O créatures sensibles, ô pécores romantiques qui, le dimanche, couvrez d’immortelles son mausolée coquet, on ne vous demande pas d’étudier ‘a théologie, le grec ni l’hébreu dont elle tenait école, mais tâchez de gonfler vos petits cœurs et d élargir vos courts esprits pour admirer dans son Nîtelligence et dans son sacrifice tout cet immense amour. Le parc n’en est pas moins un endroit dés-agréable. Les allées serpentent dans le bois taillis, les touffes d’arbres retombent dans la rivière. On entend l’eau couler, on sent la bonne odeur des feuilles. Si nous avons été irrités du mauvais goût qui s’y trouve, c’est que nous sortions de Clisson qui est d’une beauté si solide et si simple, et puis que ce mauvais goût, après tout, n’est plus notre mauvais goût à nous autres. Mais d’ailleurs, qu’est-ce donc que le mauvais goût ? N’est-ce pas invariablement le goût de l’époque qui nous a pré-cédés. Tous les enfants ne trouvent-ils pas leur père ridicule ? Le mauvais goût du temps de Ronsard, c’était Marot ; du temps de Boileau, c’était Ronsard ; du temps de Voltaire, c’était Corneille, et c’était Voltaire du temps de Chateaubriand que beaucoup de gens, à cette heure, commencent à trouver un peu faible. O gens de goût des siècles futurs, je vous recommande les gens de goût de maintenant. Vous rirez un peu de leurs crampes d'estomac, de leurs dédains superbes, de leur prédilection pour le veau et pour le laitage et des grimaces qu'ils font quand on leur sert de la viande saignante et des poésies trop chaudes.

Comme ce qui est beau sera laid, comme ce qui est gracieux paraîtra sot, comme ce qui est riche semblera pauvre, nos délicieux boudoirs, nos charmants salons, nos ravissants costumes, nos intéressants feuilletons, nos drames palpitants, nos livres sérieux, oh ! oh ! comme on nous fourrera au grenier, comme on en fera de la bourre, du papier, du fumier, de l'engrais ! Ô postérité ! n'oublie pas surtout nos parloirs gothiques, nos ameublements Renaissance, les discours de M. Pasquier, la forme de nos chapeaux et l'esthétique de la Revue des Deux-Mondes !

C'est en nous laissant aller à ces considérations philosophiques que notre carriole nous traîna jusqu'à Tiffauges. Placés tous deux dans une espèce de cuve en fer-blanc, nous écrasions de notre poids l'imperceptible cheval qui ondulait dans les brancards : c'était le frétillement d'une anguille dans le corps d'un rat de Barbarie. Les descentes le poussaient en avant, les montées le tiraient en arrière, les débords le jetaient de côté et le vent l'agitait sous la grêle des coups de fouet. Pauvre bête ! Je n'y puis penser sans de certains remords.

La route, taillée dans la côte, descend en tournant, couverte sur ses bords par des massifs d'ajoncs, ou par de larges banques d'une mousse roussâtre. A droite, au pied de la colline, sur un mouvement de terrain qui se soulève du fond du vallon, de grands pans de muraille inégaux allongent les uns par-dessus les autres leurs sommets ébréchés.

On suit une haie, on prend un sentier, on entre sous un porche tout ouvert qui s'est enfoncé dans le sol jusqu'aux deux tiers de son ogive. Les hommes qui y passaient jadis à cheval n'y passeraient plus qu'en se courbant maintenant. Quand la terre s'ennuie de porter un monument trop longtemps sur elle, elle s'enfle de dessous, monte sur lui, le gagne, et pendant que le ciel lui rogne la tête elle lui enfouit les pieds. La cour est déserte, l'enceinte est vide, les herses ne remuent pas, l'eau dormante des fossés reste plate et immobile sous les ronds nénufars.

Le ciel était blanc, sans nuages, mais sans so-leil. Sa courbe pâle s'étendait au large, couvrait la campagne d'une monotonie froide et dolente. On n'entendait aucun bruit, il faisait silence, les oiseaux ne chantaient pas, l'horizon même n'avait point de murmure, et les sillons vides — c'était un dimanche — ne vous envoyaient ni les glapis-sements des corneilles qui s'envolent, ni le bruit doux du fer des charrues. Nous sommes descendus à travers les ronces dans une douve profonde, cachée au pied d'une tour qui se baigne dans l'eau et dans les roseaux.

Une seule fenêtre s’ouvre, un carré d’ombre coupé par la raie grise de son croisillon de pierre. Une touffe folâtre de chèvre-feuille sauvage s’est pendue sur le rebord et passe en dehors sa bouffée verte et parfumée. Les grands mâchicoulis, quand on lève la tête, laissent voir d’en bas, par leurs ouvertures béantes, le ciel seulement ou quelque petite fleur inconnue qui s’est nichée là, apportée par le vent, un jour d’orage, et dont la graine aura poussé à l’abri, dans la fente des pierres.

Tout à coup un souffle de vent est venu, doux et long, comme un soupir qui s’exhale, et les arbres dans les fossés, les herbes sur les pierres, les joncs et les lentilles dans l’eau, les plantes des ruines et les gigantesques lierres qui, de la base au faîte, revêtaient la tour sous leur couche uni-forme de verdure luisante, ont tous frémi et cla-poté leur feuillage ; les blés dans les champs ont roulé leurs vagues blondes, qui s’allongeaient, sur les têtes mobiles des épis. La mare d’eau s’est ridée et a poussé un flot sur le pied de la tour ; les feuilles des lierres ont toutes frissonné ensemble, et un pommier en fleur a laissé tomber ses boutons roses.

Rien, le vent qui passe, l’herbe qui pousse, le ciel à découvert. Pas d’enfant en guenilles gardant une vache qui broute la mousse dans les cailloux ; pas même, comme ailleurs, quelque chèvre solitaire sortant sa tête barbue par une cre-vasse de remparts et qui s’enfuit effrayée en faisant remuer les broussailles ; pas un oiseau chantant, pas un nid, pas un bruit ! Ce château est comme un fantôme, muet, abandonné dans cette campagne déserte ; il a l’air maudit et plein de ressouvenances farouches. II fut habité pourtant, ce séjour triste dont les hiboux maintenant semblent ne pas vouloir. Dans le donjon, entre quatre murs livides comme le fond des vieux abreuvoirs, nous avons compté la trace de cinq étages. A trente pieds en l’air, ayant encore ses deux piliers ronds et sa plaque noircie, une cheminée est res-tée suspendue. II est tombé de la terre dessus et des plantes y sont venues comme dans une jardinière qui serait restée là. Au delà de la seconde enceinte, dans un champ labouré, on reconnaît les restes d’une chapelle, aux fûts brisés d’un portail ogival. L’avoine y a poussé, et les arbres ont remplacé les colonnes. Cette chapelle, jadis, était pleine d’ornements d’or et de soie, d’encensoirs, de chandeliers, de calices, de croix, de pierreries, de plats de ver-meil, de burettes d’or ; un chœur de trente chan-teurs, chapelains, musiciens, enfants, y poussaient des hymnes aux sons d’un orgue qui les suivait quand ils allaient en voyage. Ils étaient couverts d’habits d’écarlate fourrés de petit-gris et de menu-vair. II y en avait un que l’on appelait l’archidiacre, un autre que l’on appelait I’évêque, et on demandait au pape qu’il leur fût permis de porter la mitre comme à des chanoines ; car cette chapelle était la chapelle et ce château était un des châteaux de Gilles de Laval, sire de Rouci, de

Montmorency, de Retz et de Craon, lieute-nant général du duc de Bretagne et maréchal de France, brûlé à Nantes, le 25 octobre 1440, dans la Prie de la Madeleine, comme faux monnayeur, assassin, sorcier, sodomite et athée.

II avait en meubles plus de cent mille écus d’or, trente mille livres de rente, et les profits de ses fiefs, et les gages de son office de maréchal ; cinquante hommes magnifiquement vêtus l’escor-taient à cheval. II tenait table ouverte, on y servait les viandes les plus rares, les vins les plus lointains, et on représentait des mystères chez lui comme dans les villes aux entrées des rois. Quand” n’eut plus d’argent, il vendit ses terres ; quand” eut vendu ses terres, il chercha l’or ; et quand il eut détruit ses fourneaux, il appela le diable. II lui écrivit qu’il lui donnerait tout, sauf son âme et sa vie. II fit des sacrifices, des encensements, des aumônes et des solennités en son honneur. C’était là que vivait cet homme. Ces caveaux se rougis-saient sous le vent incessant des soufflets ma-giques, ces murs s’illuminaient la nuit à l’éclat des torches qui brûlaient au milieu des hanaps pleins de vin des îles, et parmi les jongleurs bohèmes ; on invoquait l’enfer, on se régalait avec la mort, on égorgeait des enfants, on avait d’épouvantables joies et d’atroces plaisirs ; le sang coulait, les instruments jouaient, tout retentissait de voluptés, d’horreurs et de délires.

Quand il fut mort, quatre ou cinq demoiselles firent ôter son corps du bûcher, l’ensevelirent et le firent porter aux Carmes où, après des ob-sèques fort honorables, il fut inhumé solennelle-ment.

On lui éleva sur un des ponts de la Loire, en face de l’Hôtel de la BouIe-d’Or, un monument expiatoire ; c’était une niche dans laquelle se trou-vait la statue de la bonne Vierge de Crée-lait qui avait la vertu d’accorder du lait aux nourrices ; °n y apportait du beurre et d’autres offrandes rustiques. La niche y est encore, mais la statue n’y est plus, de même qu’à l’hôtel de ville la boîte °iui contenait le cœur de la reine Anne est vide aussi. Nous étions peu curieux de voir cette boîte, nous n’y avons pas seulement songé. J’aurais pré-féré contempler la culotte du maréchal de Retz, que le cœur de madame Anne de Bretagne ; il y a eu plus de passions dans l’une que de grandeur dans l’autre. IV

De Nantes À Saint-NazAire. — La Loire, large et plate.

De Saint-Nazajre à Pornichet, aubépines,ajoncs. — Chemins à travers les haies de Pornichet au Pouliguen. — La baie déserte ; au bord des flots, sur le sable dur, des coquilles roses et blanches ; dunes couvertes de joncs. — Le bac. — Le Pouliguen. — Jusqu’au Bourg-de-Batz, marais salins, pas un arbre ; paludiers. — Cabaret de Baz, barriques, deux lits hauts ; sur la cheminée une Vierge en costume ; à une fenêtre le mari, la mariée, trogne rouge d’un homme. — Vieille abbaye d’un bon gothique, toute découverte. — Surprise et curiosité des enfants à nos aspects. — Femme qui met sur les murs de la bouse de vache, ça remet les pierres et sert de mortier. — Jusqu'au Croisic plus rien que des plaines de sable recouvertes d'une herbe maigre ; le ciel bleu pâle à grandes lignes blanches ; les vaches sont petites, les moutons noirs.

Le Croisic. — Le beau temps. — Dune ; varech sous l'eau en allant au bout de la jetée. — Charlotte, bonnet égyptien.

Do Croisic à Guérande. — Au bord de la mer et à travers les marais. — Guérande sur une hauteur qui domine le pays ; les fortifications entourées d'arbres, petits peupliers ; à gauche de l'entrée Nord l'eau baigne le pied des tours ; nous retrouvons ce que nous avons vu à Clisson. — Caractère doux de ces ruines ; ces fortifications me font

6 penser à Avignon. — Moucharabieh éventré, lierres ; mais la beauté naturelle est au pied, dans l'eau sur laquelle les petites plantes vertes ont fait comme une grande couche de peinture.

Église anglaise de caractère ; portail haut, d'une ogive assez pure et pas trop ornementée pour son époque. A la place de la rosace on a accolé l'orgue. Sur un cartouche, il y a, presque illisible, « le peuple français reconnaît un Dieu suprême et l'immortalité de l'âme ». Les deux entrées latérales ont un portique couvert comme l'église de Louviers, à laquelle du reste celle-ci ressemble. A droite du portail d'entrée, en dehors du mur, une chaire en pierre, couverte. — Intérieur : un mauvais tableau qui représente des membres du parlement en costume et un personnage ado-rant Jésus-Christ sur la croix (la coiffure indique le commencement du XVII* siècle) ; au pied du Christ agonisant, un évêque avec la crosse et la mitre ; dans l'air, des anges qui volent.

Vitraux beaux. — Montreur de phénomènes curieux ; enseigne. — C'était une large figure animée, intelligente, dents blanches ; sa manœuvre avec les enfants qu'il faisait mettre à genoux ; vaches et moutons ; nous avons été désillusionnés de ce que le phénomène fût vrai ! Comme d'autres l'auraient été s'ils l'avaient reconnu faux, tant il est vrai qu'on n'aime pas à changer ses idées toutes faites et à voir ce à quoi on ne s'attendait pas. — Nous avons fait une deuxième fois le tour de la ville. — Caractère doux ; nous trouvons que c'est un lieu propre aux promenades amou-reuses par la taille, sans parler, le soir, à cette heure-ci. — Marché encombré de paysans et de bœufs accouplés deux à deux.

Nous partons le jeudi 20 à 6 h. du matin, avec un verre de madère et une croûte dans le ventre et nous filons lestement sur Piriac. La campagne est nue, le chemin monte et descend ; à gauche, une grande vue de mer ; au fond, et jusqu'à la mer, une plaine immense tachée çà et là de flaques d'un brun acier. Ce sont les marais salins. PiRiAc. — Désert ; bon air de la mer ; les rues pleines de sable ; pas même de filets aux portes ; jolie baie avec du sable ; deux ou trois barques sans mâture ni voiles, échouées silr le rivage. — Inconcevable auberge : du veau et des œufs ; le soir à manger du veau et des oeufs ! toujours le veau ! toujours le veau ! — Maire dudit endroit chez lequel nous étions adressés par M. Mérès, bonne robe de chambre, bonne tabatière, bon cabinet du solitaire, collection du Moniteur, les manuels Roret, livres de droit, l'Histoire de Tbiers, un gros livre relié à clous de cuivre sur le-quel était écrit “Arrêtés et délibérations”.

Excursion à l'île. — Canot ; le vieux pilote blanc, barbe longue ; le matelot, le mousse ; un jeune homme fils de l'entrepreneur des travaux, figure singulièrement brutale, tenait la barre, il a déserté ; les travaux n'ont pas l'air de mordre. — Beaux rochers presque tous noirs et marbres. — Je rejouis de la mer, je repense à Trouville et à mes vacances au cottage ; comme autrefois j'ai fumé au soleil dans un trou de rocher. — Rocher en arc, avec des petites marguerites roses et blanches, il y avait sur les roches une verdure pâle comme celle qui vient aux marbres, une verdure de velours vert tirant sur le jaune ; beau fucus que nous avons pris et manié, jabot, festons dentelés et remuants. — Retour vent arrière. — Odeur du suif et chanson de la mère qui endormait son enfant pendant que je bouclais nos sacs. — Le vieux mendiant paralysé à mi-chemin de Piriac ; un vagabond estropié qui espère coucher dans les métairies, qui ramasse des morceaux de pain ; il était hier au marché de Guérande. — Sieste au soleil, sur l'herbe de la falaise. — Dans un che-min ombragé, charrette de deux bœufs avec l'enfant ; ils sont entrés dans une grande ferme où l'on voit des restes de vieilles constructions ; portail ruiné.

^eMesquerà Herbignac, route assez laide, montante et
descendante ; la lande rousse pâle sous un ciel bleu blanc.

Grandes masses de sapins qui enclosent un parc. —

6. La charrette Herbignac. — A i kilomètre d'Herbignac, le château du maréchal de Rieux (qumrouet) ; pas de lierres ni d'arbres sur les murs, de la mousse sèche qui est rouge ; tours démantelées se baignant dans une mare ; nous sommes entrés par une fenêtre. — Dans l'intérieur un plant de choux. Les murs ont l'air démantelés régulièrement ; les pans se tiennent debout. Tout la ruine. Elle a quelque chose de bourgeois comme le maréchal de Rieux lui-même. L'enfant qui nous conduisait grimpait pour dénicher des nids et avec un bâton en faisait tomber la poussière à nos pieds. — Déjeuner à Herbignac dans la boutique de l'épicier.

La Roche-Bernard. — La Vilaine sans arbre au bord, entre les rochers d'un vert pâle recouverts d'ajoncs d'or. — Le pont gâte la simplicité du paysage. — Souterrain bête. — A l'entrée un mendiant aveugle et manchot récitant son chapelet ; une inscription adressée à la bourse des voyageurs indique que c'est un mineur du port que le travail de l'endroit a ainsi favorisé. — Dîner. — M. Poulman (Balzac), l'employé des contributions indirectes un Montmorency !

Vannes. — Sarzeau ; maison de Le Sage.

Sucinio, dans la campagne, en vue de la mer, percé de larges fenêtres, semble avoir été plutôt une habitation qu'une forteresse. — Tours. — On pourrait facilement le reconstruire ; escaliers dont les degrés restent. — L'intérieur de la cour avec ses mâchicoulis, ses pans de mur percés de fenêtres et de jours, et le soleil et le ciel bleu, ça avait un air moresque. — Sur la tour de droite, en regardant la façade (du dehors), fenêtre trilobée dans un cadre carré. — Des animaux sont entrés comme nous étions sur l'herbe, petits bœufs, moutons, deux chèvres.

Retour à Sarzeau. — Promenade dans la campagne. — M......capitaine d'état-major.

De Sarzeau À Logeot. — Dans les champs paysannes se rendant à la messe, avec leur bavolet noir ; presque toutes en noir ; grand tablier quelquefois en soie gorge-pigeon.

Logeot. — Les exécrables brutes ; haine des médailles d'honneur.

L'Île d'Arz. — L'église. — Cimetière, tombes avec un pot de fleurs couvert par une ardoise ; ossuaire à travers des barreaux au milieu des futailles et des bouts de bois. — Bordées que nous avons courues sur la mer.

L'Île de Gavr'inis couverte de longues fleurs bleues à clochette sur tige.

Galgal, avec une allée couverte. Dessous, l'entrée du souterrain est décorée par deux grandes touffes de genêts. L'allée a quelque trente pieds de long. Toutes les pierres sont couvertes de lignes faites au ciseau, régulières et figurant assez d'innombrables côtes ou branches partant d'un thorax ou tronc, et dans le bas les lignes remontent. Du reste il faudrait avoir bonne volonté pour y voir la repro-duction de quoi que ce soit. — L'allée est plus profonde au fond qu'à l'entrée, les pierres aussi y sont plus larges ; sur la gauche, dans une pierre, comme les courroies d'un bouclier creusées à même.

En nous rembarquant nous avons admiré avec amour de grandes plantes qui, partant d'une unique racine, s'irra-diaient en fusées comme des chevelures et s'étalaient sur la surface de l'eau ; au fond, à travers un jour vert bleu, on voyait des mousses, des herbes.

LocmariAquer. — Peulvan abattu, brisé dans sa largeur (7 pieds environ), long de 7a. — Deux allées couvertes : dans l'une, nous retrouvons des dessins pareils, mais plus effacés que ceux de Gavr'inis ; dans l'autre, un tronc pour les pauvres.

De Locmariaquer à Carnac, genêts,genêts, haies d'ajoncs, avec des aubépines par places. — La route monte et descend, se perd. — On ne parle presque plus français. — On voit la mer. — Passage en bac à la pointe d'une pres-qu'île. — Vieillard grave, figure maigre avec son énorme chapeau.

Le clocher de Carnac de loin semblant sur une hauteur quoique Carnac soit au bord de la mer. — Chapelle Saint-Michel bâtie sur un borran ; on monte par un escalier, on descend par une pente. — La mer. — La campagne verte, séparée en” carrés bruns ou gris par des haies et des murs en pierres sèches. — Une croix avec un christ sculpté si mal que ça en a du caractère et rappelle, si ce n’est que c’est plus lourd, le vieux roman. En venant, nous avions vu une autre croix du même genre érigée à l’endroit où fut tué en 1800 un certain M. Lebaron, recteur.

Ce sommaire a été développé par Maxime Du Camp. V

Carnac. — Chez fa veuve Gitdas. — Logés dans une grande chambre à deux lits, nous arrêtons d’y séjourner ; les lits sont à baldaquin et on ne borde pas par le pied la couverture afin qu’on puisse la plier et montrer la large raie rouge qui en fait la bordure. Les murs sont tapissés de l’histoire de Joseph, de gravures religieuses : portraits de saint Stanislas, de saint Louis de Gonzague, etc., certificats de première communion avec vignettes représentant l’intérieur de l’église et des communiants ; une dame qui

revient de la Sainte Table a l’air de d........ dans ses

mains. Sur la cheminée sont rangées des tasses à café dorées sur lesquelles il y a écrit « liberté, ordre public », et aux deux bouts deux carafes dans lesquelles il y a la représentation en bois peint, enrichi de perles et de plumes, du tombeau de l’empereur, entouré de six troupiers de divers grades portant des couronnes vertes oblongues comme des cornichons. Dans l’autre on voit le Saint Sacrifice de la messe, avec deux enfants de chœur ayant des pains de sucre rouges sur la tête en guise de calottes ; l’autel est entouré de quatre colonnes en perles. Sur une grande armoire, quatre cuvettes de Russie. Au plafond sur ma tête deux paniers d’osier.

Après avoir fumé une pipe et bu une bonne bouteille de bière blanche, nous avons été voir les pierres. — Femme en casaquin rouge, nu-pieds, avec son long bonnet qui volait au vent ; c’était vigoureux et hardi. — Les pierres de Carnac nous ont peu émus (nous y avons causé de Very et de Chemery !) ; elles vont grandissant vers le côté de la mer à mesure qu’elles s’en éloignent et elles diminuent et finissent par devenir presque des bornes.

On avait retrouvé un homme perdu à la mer il y avait trois semaines ; on l’a apporté à l’église sur une charrette à boeufs. 11 faisait presque nuit, quatre cierges aux coins du cata-falque, enfant avec sa chandelle tenant la porte ouverte, clochettes des porteurs ; les femmes se sont mises au fond, les hommes au haut, plus près, ordre qui a été conservé au cimetière ; les femmes du reste en bien plus grande quantité. L’office fut court, tout le monde à genoux dans le cimetière sur la terre des tombes. Froid des soirs d’été, crépuscule vert, bonnets se levant au vent. Une femme noire gloussait, c’étaient des pleurs. Le bruit étouffé des sanglots ressemble au rire. On a jeté de la terre sur la fosse, on s'en est allé. Un jeune homme a dit près de moi en français : « Nom de Dicul le bougre pue-t-il ! il est presque tout pourri ; depuis trois semaines c'est pas étonnant." En rentrant nous avons trouvé notre jeune hôtesse donnant à teter à son enfant.

Aujourd'hui 2$, nous avons été fumer une pipe sur le sable en plein soleil ; nous nous sommes joués avec le sable, nous avons fait des trous avec nos bâtons, Max a poussé un bon somme en rentrant, j'ai repassé mes notes.

Depuis Sarzeau environ jusqu'ici les femmes portent par-dessus un petit bonnet plissé une ample cape blanche très avançante comme celle des religieuses et retombant sur le dos. Ce vêtement couvre au moins la moitié du corps aux petites filles. Quant au corsage un ruban de velours noir collé sur l'étoffe (noire) fait le contour de l'omoplate,prenant ainsi l'épaule dans une espèce de bracelet plat qui attire l'œil sur l'aisselle ; souliers à bout rond, orné de longs rubans plats tombant des deux côtés presque jusqu'à terre.

Par un beau temps, mer bleue et brise à peine sensible, nous nous embarquons à Pô pour Saint-Pierre. — Vieux douanier, bonne figure douce et saige, vivant de la pêche, tranquille dans sa barque, aimant peu les prêtres et peu dévot.

De Saint-Pierre à Quiberon. — Terrains nus et sablonneux ; le soleil tapait, la mer brillait en bleu. — L'auberge ; grande femme noire et grosse. — L'hôte : Rohan-Belisle, un vrai noble, en chemise et nu-pieds dans ses souliers vu la chaleur, trinquant avec M. Léon, entrepreneur du lieu, et me battant des biftecks. — Un troupier est entré avec un gendarme, air pourfendant et crâne, le gendarme borgne. — Après le déjeuner bain de soleil. En faisant un long somme sur le sable dans un coin de rocher, ça a réchauffé mes souliers et mes bas que j'avais mouillés en allant de Carnac à Pô.

Cimetière bourré de tombes ; ossuaire au milieu. Sur les quatre faces, petites boîtes en bois noir avec un cœur au milieu par lequel on voit une tête de mort. II n'y a que les gens riches qu'on traite ainsi ; c'est la piété filiale du pays. Le milieu de l'ossuaire rempli d'os pêle-mêle ; on les voit très aisément. Effet effrayant que fait là dedans le clair de lune, au dire de notre hôtesse qui nous explique cet usage. — Les marins pour Belle-Isle attendaient dans l'auberge ; importance de l'heure de la poste. — Le courrier d'Auray (Callot, Bellanger). Aspect singulièrement pittoresque varié de la barque, les rameurs entrecroisés debout sur les bancs, passagers, deux soldats qu'on envoyait en discipline, la petite casquette ; l'autre un paysan ; deux caractères distincts du troupier ; gendarme, soldat qui les moralisait. Peu à peu la blague du flambart tomba. — Avilissement de la discipline. — Un vieux grand chapeau dormant à mes pieds. — Calme plat. — Aviron. — Le soir à Belle-Isle qui a la tristesse du soldat qui s’ennuie. Nous avons été voir des roches. — Deux ou trois cavernes ; refuges de la Naïade ou du monstre marin. — Hôtel : portraits xviii’ : Je chevalier d’Éon.

Le lendemain, grande journée de marche à travers la campagne et les rochers. Nous avons déjeuné sous un bois de petits pins, le soir nous étions gris de la nature. Après nous être reposés deux heures sur le sable, nous étions repartis, emportés par la fièvre des rochers, des goémons, des varechs. — Caverne chocolat. — Une avec des herbes vert feu de bengale et distillant des gouttes d’eau ; un grand pan en glacis, etc., etc. ; forme variée des herbes, couleur d’argent, veines de sang ; grands pans réguliers qui font penser à des ruines de palais antédiluviens.

De Belle-Isle à Quiberon, bon vent. — Jeune mousse blond qui chantait dans la brise et dont on n’entendait pas les paroles. — Un cheval. — Deux voyageurs pour le commerce : le vieux blanchi dans l’exercice ; l’autre, vaudeville Achard, tutoyant les marins, *etc.* — Déjeuner à Quiberon avec eux. — Un monsieur de l’endroit, nullité complète, tout oreilles, le troupier de l’avant-veille gris perdu.

Du fort Penthiévre À Plouharnel, route triste dans les sables au bord de la mer qui reluisait en bleu et pétillait à notre gauche avec ses vagues blanches pressées. — Nous rencontrons la poste de Quiberon. — Chaussée pour re-joindre Plouharnel, grosses pierres.

Plouharnel. — Chez Demame, aubergiste. — Vieux mendiant birsutus, sudans purpureusque. — Le chercheur de sangsues. — Couteau celtique du maire. — Nous dinons avec les deux voyageurs qui se rembouriffent de nous ; le maire veut prendre un verre de champagne et écoute. — A 3/4 de lieue dolmens.

(#)II faisait chaud, le bon soleil de mai nous mor-dait le cou, et nos chemises de soie nous collaient dans le dos. Aussi notre premier soin en arrivant à Carnac, chez la veuve Gildas, notre hôtesse, fut-il

‘*’ Inédit, pages 81 à 96. de nous rafraîchir avec une bouteille de bière blanche qui fut suivie d’une autre, lesquelles nous gonflèrent le ventre, chose importante à dire.

Le gfte était propre et d’honnête apparence. On nous mit dans une grande chambre dont deux lits à baldaquin, recouverts d’indienne, et une table longue pareille à celle d’un réfectoire de collège, formaient l’ameublement principal. Un raffine-ment de coquetterie avait laissé le pied des lits non bordé pour qu’on pût voir sur le bout de la couverture une large raie rouge qui en faisait la bordure, et une précaution de propreté avait cloué sur la table une belle toile cirée verte comme du bronze. Sur les murs, dans des cadres de bois noir, il y a l’histoire de Joseph, y compris la scène avec M™ Putiphar, le portrait de saint Stanislas, celui de saint Louis de Gonzague, qui est bien le saint le plus bête du monde, et des certificats de première communion avec vignettes représentant l’intérieur de l’église et les communiants et assistants dans leurs costumes respectifs. Des tasses à café, décorées de ces mots écrits en lettres d’or “liberté, ordre public”, sont rangées le long de la cheminée dans l’espace que leur laissent deux carafes. Ah ! quelles carafes ! quel dommage si on en cassait une ! où retrouver la paire ? Elles n’étaient pourtant pas de verre de Venise, ni ciselées, ni taillées, mais de verre tout bonnement, comme de simples carafes ; elles n’ont pas même de bouchons, mais dans la première, autour d’un Napoléon, grand d’un demi-pouce et tout raide étendu sur son tombeau piqué de perles et hérissé de plumes, six militaires, de grades différents, se tiennent majestueusement, portant, chacun à la main, des palmes oblongues comme des cornichons, et dans la seconde s’accomplit le Saint Sacrifice de la messe : on voit le prêtre, le calice, l’autel, quatre colonnes de perles, aux quatre coins du sanctuaire, plus deux enfants de chœur surchargés d’énormes pains de sucre rouges qui sont censés être les calottes de ces jeunes drôles.

Ce lieu était si honnête, si bénin, exhalait un tel parfum de candeur, une modestie si bête, mais si douce, la grande armoire à ferrements de cuivre brillait si propre sous les cuvettes de Russie qui en ornaient la corniche, et les paniers d’osier croches au sommier avaient l’air, comme tout le reste, si tranquille et si bonhomme que nous décrétâmes de suite que Carnac nous plaisait et que nous y resterions quelque temps.

Nos fenêtres donnaient sur la place de l’Eglise, où des enfants jouaient aux billes à l’ombre d’un tilleul. C’était là l’unique bruit du village, il n’y passe pas de voiture, il n’y a pas de boutiques et tout le pain qu’on y mange se cuit là en bas, dans la cuisine, dont la moitié est consacrée à une boulangerie.

Quoique ne parlant pas le français et décorant leurs intérieurs de cette façon, on vit donc là tout de même, on y dort, on y boit, on y fait l’amour et on y meurt tout comme chez nous ; ce sont aussi des humains que ces étres-Ià. Mais comme ils s’occupent peu du Salon ! et même de l’Exposition de l’industrie ; comme ils s’embarrassent médio-crement de l’Opéra qui va rouvrir et du Rocher de Cancale qui est fermé ; comme ils ne causent pas de ce dont on cause : le Jockey-Club, ‘es courses de Chantilly, les dettes de Dumas, les cuirs de M. de Rambuteau, le nez d’Hya-cinthe, *etc.*

C’est une chose dont on ne peut se défendre que cet étonnement imbécile qui vous prend à considérer les gens vivant où nous ne vivons point et passant leur temps à d’autres affaires que les nôtres. Vous rappelez-vous souvent, en traversant un village le matin, quand le jour se levait, avoir aperçu quelque bourgeois ouvrant ses auvents ou balayant le devant de sa porte, et qui s’arrêtait bouche béante à vous regarder passer ? A peine s’il a pu distinguer votre visage ni vous le sien, et dans cet éclair pourtant tous les deux, au même instant, vous

vous êtes ébahis dans un immense étonnement ; il se disait en vous regardant fuir : “Où va-t-il donc celui-là et pourquoi voyage-t-il ? », et vous qui couriez : « Qu’est-ce qu’il fait là ? disiez-vous, est-ce qu’il y reste toujours ? »

II faut assez de réflexion et de force d’esprit pour saisir nettement que tout le monde n’habite pas la même ville, ne se chausse pas chez votre bottier, ne s’habille pas chez votre tailleur, dîne à d’autres heures que vous, et n’ait pas vos idées ; niais je ne comprends point encore comment on existe lorsqu’on est notaire, comment il se peut faire que l’on soit employé dans un bureau, comment on se lève avant dix heures et on se couche avant minuit, et je me demande sérieusement s’il est possible qu’il y ait des êtres sur la terre s’occupant à autre chose qu’à aligner des phrases et à chercher des adjectifs.

II serait trop absurde, étant à Carnac, de ne pas aller voir les fameuses pierres de Carnac ; aussi nous reprîmes nos bâtons et nous nous dirigeâmes vers le lieu où elles gisent. Nous allions dans l’herbe, tête baissée et devisant sur je ne sais quoi, quand un frôlement nous a fait lever les jeux et nous avons vu une femme s’avancer par le sentier qui descendait, nu-pieds, nu-jambes, sans fichu, son grand bonnet remuant, sa jupe claquant au vent, une main sur la hanche et de l’autre retenant une énorme gerbe de foin qu’elle portait sur la tête ; elle marchait avec des torsions de taille, hardie et belle, dans son corsage rouge. Elle a passé près de nous. Son souffle était large et fort et la sueur coulait en filets sur la peau brune de ses bras ronds.

Bientôt, enfin, nous aperçûmes dans la campagne des rangées de pierres noires(1), alignées à intervalles égaux, sur onzes files parallèles qui vont diminuant de grandeur à mesure qu’elles s’éloignent de la mer ; les plus hautes ont vingt pieds environ et les plus petites ne sont que de simples

W Flaubert a utilisé ce texte pour en faire un article spécial : « Les Pierres de Carnac et l’archéologie celtique » qui parut dans l’Artiste, en 1858. blocs couchés sur le sol. Beaucoup d’entre elles ont •a pointe en bas, de sorte que leur base est plus mince que leur sommet. Cambry dit qu’il y en avait quatre mille et Fréminville en a compté douze cents ; ce qu’il y a de certain, c’est qu’il y en a beaucoup.

Voilà donc ce fameux champ de Carnac qui a fait écrire plus de sottises qu’il n’a de cailloux ; il est vrai qu’on ne rencontre pas tous les jours, des promenades aussi rocailleuses. Mais, malgré notre penchant naturel à tout admirer, nous ne vîmes qu’une facétie robuste, laissée là par un âge inconnu pour exerciter l’esprit des antiquaires et stupéfier les voyageurs. On ouvre, devant, des yeux naïfs et, tout en trouvant que c’est peu com-mun, on s’avoue cependant que ce n’est pas beau. Nous comprîmes donc parfaitement l’ironie de ces granits qui, depuis les Druides, rient dans leurs barbes de lichens verts à voir tous les imbéciles qui viennent les visiter. H y a des gens qui ont passé leur vie à chercher à quoi elles servaient et n'admirez-vous pas d'ailleurs cette éternelle préoc-cupation du bipède sans plumes de vouloir trouver à chaque chose une utilité quelconque ? Non content de distiller l'océan pour saler son pot-au-feu et de chasser les éléphants pour avoir des ronds de serviette, son égoïsme s'arrête encore lorsque s'exhume devant lui un débris quelconque dont il ne peut deviner l'usage.

A quoi donc cela était-il bon ? sont-ce des tombeaux ? était-ce un temple ? Saint Corneille un jour, poursuivi par des soldats qui le voulaient tuer, était à bout d'haleine et allait tomber dans la mer, quand il lui vint l'idée, pour les empêcher de l'attraper, de les changer tous en autant de pierres. Aussitôt, les soldats furent pétrifiés, ce qui sauva le saint. Mais cette explication n'était bonne tout au plus que pour les niais, les petits enfants et pour les poètes, on en chercha d'autres.

Au xvie siècle, le sieur Olaûs Magnus, arche-vêque d'Upsal (et qui, exilé à Rome, s'amusa à écrire, sur les antiquités de son pays, un livre estimé partout, si ce n'est dans ce même pays, la Suède, où personne ne le traduisit), avait découvert de lui-même que lorsque les pierres sont plantées sur une seule et longue ligne droite, cela veut dire qu'il y a dessous des guerriers morts en se battant en duel ; que celles qui sont disposées en carré sont consacrées à ceux qui périrent dans une mêlée ; que celles qui sont rangées circulairement sont des sépultures de famille, et enfin que celles qui sont disposées en coin ou sur un ordre angulaire sont les tombeaux des cavaliers ou même des gens de pied, surtout ceux dont le parti avait triomphé. Voilà qui est clair, explicite, satisfaisant. Mais Olaûs Magnus aurait bien dû nous dire quelle était la sépulture que l'on donnait à deux cousins germains ayant fait coup double dans un duel à cheval. Le duel, de lui-même, voulait que les pierres fussent droites, la sépulture de famille exigeait qu'elles fussent circulaires, mais comme c'étaient des cavaliers, il fallait bien les disposer en coin. Il est vrai qu'on n'y eut pas été absolument contraint, car on n'enterrait ainsi que ceux surtout dont le parti avait triomphé. Ô brave Olaüs Magnus, vous aimiez donc bien fort le Monte Pulciano et combien vous a-t-il fallu de rasades pour nous apprendre toutes ces belles choses ?

Un certain docteur Borlase, qui avait observé en Cornouailles des pierres pareilles, a dit aussi son petit mot là-dessus. Selon lui, on a enterré là des soldats à l'endroit même où ils avaient combattu. Où diable a-t-il vu qu'on les charriât ordinairement au cimetière ? « Leurs tombeaux, ajoute-t-il, sont rangés en ligne droite comme le front d'une armée dans les plaines qui ont été le théâtre de quelques grandes actions. » Cette comparaison est d'une poésie si grandiose qu'elle m'enlève et je suis un peu de l'avis du docteur Borlase.

On a été ensuite chercher les Grecs, les Egyp-tiens et les Cochinchinois. Il y a un Karnak en Egypte, s’est-on dit, il y en a un en Basse-Bretagne, nous n’entendons ni le cophte, ni le breton ; or, il est probable que le Carnac d’ici descend du Kar-nak de là-bas, cela est sûr, car là-bas, ce sont des sphinx alignés, ici ce sont des blocs, des deux cotés de la pierre. D’où il résulte que les Égyptiens (peuple qui ne voyageait pas) seront venus sur ces côtes (dont ils ignoraient l’existence), y auront fondé une colonie (car ils n’en fondaient nulle part) et qu’ils y auront pas laissé ces statues brutes (eux qui en faisaient de si belles), témoi-gnage positif de leur passage (dont personne ne parle).

Ceux qui aiment la mythologie ont vu là les colonnes d’Hercule ; ceux qui aiment l’histoire naturelle y ont vu une représentation du serpent Python, parce qu’au rapport de Pausanias, une réunion de pierres semblables placées sur la route de Thèbes à Elissonte s’appelait la tête du serpent, “et d’autant plus que les alignements de Carnac offrent des sinuosités comme un serpent ». Ceux qui aiment la cosmographie y ont vu un zodiaque, comme M. de Cambry entre autres, qui a reconnu, dans ces onze rangées de pierres, les douze signes du zodiaque « car il faut dire, ajoute-t-il, que les anciens Gaulois n’avaient que onze signes au zodiaque ».

Un monsieur qui était membre de l’Institut a estimé que c’était le cimetière des Vénètes, qui habitaient Vannes, à six lieues de là, et lesquels fondèrent Venise comme chacun sait. Un autre a pensé que ces bons Vénètes vaincus par César élevèrent ces pierres à la suite de leur défaite, uniquement par esprit d’humilité et pour honorer César. Mais on en avait assez des cimetières, du serpent Python et du zodiaque ; on se mit en quête d’autre chose et on trouva un temple druidique. Le peu de documents authentiques que l’on ait sur cette époque, épars dans Pline et dans Dion Cassius, s’accordent à dire que les Druides choisissaient pour leurs cérémonies religieuses des lieux sombres, le fond des forêts « et leur vaste silence ». Aussi comme Carnac est au bord de la mer, dans une campagne stérile où il n’a jamais poussé autre chose que les conjectures de ces Messieurs, le premier grenadier de France, qui ne me paraît pas avoir été le premier homme d’esprit, suivi de Pelloutier et de M. Mahé, chanoine de la cathédrale de Vannes, a décidé que c était un temple des Druides dans lequel on de-vait aussi convoquer les assemblées politiques.

Tout cependant n’était pas encore dit et ce fait acquis à la science n’eût pas été complet si l’on n’eût démontré à quoi servaient, dans l’alignement, les espaces vides où il ne se trouve pas de pierre. « Cherchons-en la raison, ce que personne ne s’est encore avisé de faire » s’est dit M. Mahé, et s’ap-puyant sur cette phrase de Pomp. Mêla : « Les Druides enseignent beaucoup de choses à la noblesse qu’ils instruisent secrètement en des cavernes et en des forêts écartées », il établit, en consé-quence, que les Druides non seulement desservaient les sanctuaires, mais y faisaient leur demeure et y tenaient des collèges : “Puis donc que le Monument de Carnac est un sanctuaire comme •étaient les forêts gauloises (ô puissance de l’in-duction ! où pousses-tu le père Mahé, chanoine de Vannes et correspondant de l’Académie d’agri-culture de Poitiers ?) i7 y a lieu de croire que les mtervalles vides qui coupent les lignes des pierres renfermaient des files de maisons où les Druides habitaient avec leurs familles et leurs nombreux élèves et où les principaux de la nation qui se rendaient au sanctuaire, aux jours de grande solennité, trouvaient des logements préparés.” Bons Druides ! excellents ecclésiastiques ! comme on les a calomniés, eux qui habitaient là si honnêtement avec leurs familles et leurs nombreux élèves, et qui même poussaient l’amabilité jusqu’à préparer des logements pour les principaux de la nation.

Mais un homme est venu, enfin, qui, pénétré du génie de l’antiquité et dédaignant les routes battues, a osé dire la vérité à la face de son siècle. Il a su reconnaître en ce lieu les restes d’un camp romain, et précisément d’un camp de César qui n’avait fait élever ces pierres “que pour servir d’appui aux tentes de ses soldats et pour les empêcher d’être emportées par le vent”. Quelles bourrasques il devait faire autrefois sur les côtes de l’Armorique !

L’homme qui a restitué à César la gloire de cette précaution sublime s’appelait M. de la Sauvagère et était, de son métier, officier du génie.

L’amas de toutes ces gentillesses constitue ce qui s’appelle l’archéologie celtique, science aux charmes de laquelle nous ne pouvons résister d’initier le lecteur. Une pierre posée sur d’autres s’appelle un *dolmen*, qu’elle soit horizontale ou verticale ; un rassemblement de pierres debout et recouvertes sur leur sommet par des dalles consécutives, formant ainsi une série de *dolmens*, est une *grotte aux fées*, *roche aux fées*, *table des fées*, *table du diable* ou *palais des géants*, car, ainsi que ces maîtres de maison qui vous servent un vin iden-tique sous des étiquettes différentes, les Celtomanes, qui n’avaient presque rien à nous offrir, ont décoré de noms divers des choses pareilles. Quand ces pierres sont rangées en ellipse, sans aucun chapeau sur les oreilles, il faut dire : Voilà un *cromlech* ; lorsqu’on aperçoit une pierre étalée horizontalement sur deux autres verticales on a affaire à un *lichaven* ou *trilithe*, mais je préfère *lichaven* comme plus scientifique, plus local, plus essentiellement celtique. Quelquefois deux énormes blocs sont supportés l’un sur l’autre, ne semblant se toucher que par un seul point de contact, et on lit dans les livres “qu’elles sont équilibrées de telle façon que le vent même suffit quelquefois pour imprimer au bloc supérieur une oscillation marquée”, assertion que je ne nie pas (tout en me méfiant quelque peu du vent celtique), quoique ces pierres prétendues branlantes n’aient jamais remué sous tous les coups de pied que nous avons eu la candeur de leur donner ; elles s’appellent alors pierres *roulantes* ou *roulées*, pierres *retournées* ou *transportées*, pierres *qui dansent* ou pierres *dansantes*, pierres qui *virent* ou pierres *virantes*. II reste à vous faire connaître ce que c’est qu’une *fichade*, une pierre *fiche*, une pierre *fixée* ; ce qu’on entend par *haute borne*, pierre *latte* et pierre *lait* ; en quoi une pierre *fonte* diffère d’une pierre *fiette* et quels rapports existent entre une *chaire au diable* et une *pierre droite* ; après quoi vous en saurez à vous seul aussi long que jamais n’en surent ensemble Pelloutier, Deric, Latour d’Au-vergne, Penhoët et autres, doublés de Mahé et renforcés de Fréminville. Apprenez donc que tout cela signifie un *peulvan*, autrement dit un *menhir*, et n’exprime autre chose qu’une borne, plus ou moins grande, placée toute seule au beau milieu des champs ; les colonnes creuses du boulevard, vues du côté du trottoir, sont donc autant de peulvans placés là par la sollicitude paternelle de la police pour le soulagement des Parisiens, qui ne se doutent guère, les misérables, en lisant l’affiche des capsules Mothes, qu’ils soient momentanément contenus dans un petit menhir. J’allais oublier les tumulus ! Ceux qui sont composés à la fois de cailloux et de terre sont appelés *borrows* en haut style, et les simples monceaux de cailloux, *galgals*.

Les fouilles que l’on a faites sous ces diverses espèces de pierres n’ont amené à aucune conclusion sérieuse. On a prétendu que les dolmens et les trilithes étaient des autels, quand ils n’étaient pas des tombeaux ; que les roches aux fées étaient des lieux de réunion ou bien des sépultures et que les conseils de fabrique d’alors s’assemblaient dans les cromlechs. M. de Cambry a entrevu dans les pierres branlantes les emblèmes du monde suspendu dans l’espace, mais on s’est assuré depuis que ce n’étaient que des pierres probatoires dont on faisait usage pour rechercher la culpabilité des accusés, et qu’ils étaient convaincus du crime imputé quand ils ne pouvaient remuer le rocher mobile.

Les galgals et les borrows ont été sans doute des tombeaux, et quant aux menhirs, on a poussé la bonne volonté jusqu’à trouver qu’ils ressemblaient à des phallus ! D’où l’on a induit le règne d’un culte ithyphallique dans toute la basse Bretagne. Ô chaste indécence de la science, tu ne respectes rien, pas même les peulvans !

Pour en revenir aux pierres de Carnac, ou plutôt pour les quitter, je ne demanderais pas mieux comme un autre que de les avoir contemplées lorsqu’elles étaient moins noires et que les lichens n’y avaient pas encore poussé. La nuit, quand la lune roulait dans les nuages et que la mer mugissait sur le sable, les druidesses errantes parmi ces pierres (si elles y erraient toutefois) devaient être belles, il est vrai avec leur faucille d’or, leur couronne de verveine et leur traînante robe blanche rougie du sang des hommes. Longues comme des ombres, elles marchaient sans toucher terre, les cheveux épars, pâles sous la pâleur de la lune. D’autres que nous déjà se sont dit que ces grands blocs immobiles peut-être les avaient vues jadis, d’autres comme nous viendront aussi là sans comprendre, et les Mahé des siècles à naître s’y briseront le nez et y perdront leur peine.

Une rêverie peut être grande et engendrer au moins des mélancolies fécondes quand, partant d’un point fixe, l’imagination, sans le quitter, voltige dans son cercle lumineux ; mais lorsque, se cramponnant à un objet dénué de plastique et privé d’histoire, elle essaie d’en tirer une science et de rétablir toute une société perdue, elle demeure elle-même plus stérile et plus pauvre que cette matière inerte à laquelle la vanité des bavards prétend trouver une forme et donner des chroniques.

Après avoir exposé les opinions de tous les savants cités plus haut, que si l’on me demande à mon tour, quelle est ma conjecture sur les pierres de Carnac, car tout le monde a la sienne, j’émettrai une opinion irréfutable, irréfragable, irrésistible, une opinion qui ferait reculer les tentes de M. de la Sauvagère et pâlir l’égyptien Penhoet ; une opinion qui casserait le zodiaque de Cambry et mettrait le serpent Python en tron-çons, et cette opinion la voici : les pierres de Car-nac sont de grosses pierres.

Nous nous en retournâmes donc à l’auberge où, servis par notre hôtesse qui avait de grands yeux bleus, de fines mains qui s’achèteraient cher et une douce figure d’une pudeur monacale, nous dînâmes d’un bel appétit qu’avaient creusé nos cinq heures de marche. II ne faisait pas encore nuit pour dormir, on n’y voyait plus pour rien faire, nous allâmes à l’église.

Elle est petite, quoique portant nef et bas côtés, comme une grande dame d’église de ville. De gros piliers de pierre, trapus et courts, soutien-nent sa voûte de bois bleu, d’où pendent de petits navires, ex-voto promis.dans les tempêtes. Les araignées courent sur leurs voiles et la poussière pourrit leurs cordages.

On ne disait aucun office, la lampe du chœur brûlait seule dans son godet d’huile jaune, et en haut, dans l’épaisseur de la voûte, les fenêtres non fermées laissaient passer de larges rayons blancs, avec le bruit du vent qui courbait les arbres. Un homme est venu, a rangé les chaises, a mis deux chandelles dans des girandoles de fer-blanc accrochées au pilier, et a tiré dans le milieu une façon de brancard à pied dont le bois noir avait de grosses taches blanches. D’autres gens sont entrés dans l’église, un prêtre en surplis a passé devant nous ; on a entendu un bruit de clochettes s’arrêtant et reprenant par intervalles, et la porte de l’église s’est ouverte toute grande ; personne ne venait, on attendait quelqu’un. Le son saccadé de la petite cloche s’est mêlé à un autre qui lui répondait, et toutes deux, s’appro-chant en grandissant, redoublaient leurs battements secs et cuivrés.

Une charrette traînée par des bœufs a paru dans la place et s’est arrêtée devant le portail. Un mort était dessus. Ses pieds pâles et mats, comme de l’albâtre lavé, dépassaient le bout du drap blanc qui l’enveloppait de cette forme indé-cise qu’ont tous les cadavres en costume. La foule survenue se taisait. Les hommes restaient découverts ; le prêtre secouait son goupillon en marmottant des oraisons, et les bœufs accouplés, remuant lentement la tête, faisaient crier leur gros joug de cuir. L’église, où brillait une étoile au fond, ouvrait sa grande ombre noire que refou-lait du dehors le jour vert des crépuscules plu-vieux, et l’enfant qui éclairait sur le seuil passait toujours la main devant sa chandelle, pour empêcher le vent de l’éteindre.

On l’a descendu de la charrette ; sa tête s’est cognée contre le timon. On l’a entré dans l’église, on l’a mis sur le brancard. Un flot d’hommes et de femmes a suivi. On s’est agenouillé sur le pavé, les hommes près du mort, les femmes plus loin, vers la porte, et le service a commencé.

Il ne dura pas longtemps, pour nous du moins, car les psalmodies basses bourdonnaient vite, couvertes de temps à autre par un sanglot faible qui partait de dessous les capes noires, en bas de la nef. Une main m’a effleuré et je me suis reculé pour laisser passer une femme courbée. Serrant les poings sur sa poitrine, baissant la tête, allant en avant sans remuer les pieds, essayant de regarder, tremblant de voir, elle s’est avancée vers la ligne de lumières qui brûlaient le long du brancard. Lentement, lentement, en levant son bras comme pour se cacher dessous, elle a tourné la tête sur le coin de son épaule et elle est tombée sur une chaise, affaissée, aussi morte et molle que ses vêtements mêmes. A la lueur des cierges, j’ai vu ses yeux fixes dans leurs paupières rouges, éraillés comme par une brûlure vive, sa bouche idiote et crispée, grelottante de désespoir, et toute sa pauvre figure qui pleurait comme un orage.

C’était son mari, perdu à la mer, que l’on venait de retrouver sur la grève et qu’on allait enterrer tout à l’heure.

Le cimetière touchait à l’église. On y passa par une porte de côté, et chacun y reprit son rang, tandis que dans la sacristie on clouait le mort dans son cercueil. Une pluie fine mouillait l’air, on avait froid ; il faisait gras marcher, et les fossoyeurs, qui n’avaient pas fini, rejetaient avec peine la terre lourde et molle qui collait sur leurs louchets. Au fond, les femmes, à genoux dans l’herbe, avaient découvert leurs capuchons et leurs grands bonnets blancs, dont les pans empesés se soulevaient au vent, faisaient de loin comme un grand linceul qui se lève de terre et qui ondoie.

Le mort a reparu, les prières ont recommencé, les sanglots ont repris. On les entendait à travers le bruit de la pluie qui tombait.

Près de nous sortait par intervalles égaux une sorte de gloussement étouffé qui ressemblait à un rire. Partout ailleurs, en l'écoutant, on l'eût pris pour l'explosion réprimée de quelque joie violente ou pour le paroxysme contenu d'un délire de bonheur. C'était la veuve qui pleurait. Puis, elle s'approcha jusqu'au bord, elle fit comme les autres, et la terre peu à peu reprit son niveau et chacun s'en retourna.

Comme nous enjambions l'escalier du cimetière, un jeune homme qui passait à côté de nous dit en français à un autre : “Le bougre puait-il ! If est presque tout pourri ! Depuis trois semaines qu'il est à l'eau, c'est pas étonnant !”

(*) En rentrant chez nous, nous avons trouvé notre

Inédit, pages 107 à 109. hôtesse qui donnait à teter à son enfant et qui l'endormait en se dandinant sur une chaise. II n'y avait pour nous plus rien de curieux à Carnac. Nous avions vu a loisir sur le portail latéral de son église l'affreux baldaquin qui rentre généralement dans le goût de l'architecture des pâtissiers, j'entends celle qui décore ces odieuses inventions connues sous le nom de pièces montées dont les tranches d'orange confite font les arcades et les bouts de chocolat les colonnes, avec un obélisque en sucre rose terminé par une fleur, et nous avions contemplé dans l'intérieur la statue de saint Corneille, plus entourée de cordes qu'un saucis-son de Lyon ne l'est de ficelles. Les cordes qui ont touché le saint ont la vertu de guérir les animaux malades, aussi y a-t-il au-dessus de la grande porte de l'église une sorte d'enseigne peinte, représentant deux paysans présentant l'un sa vache et l'autre son bœuf à ce bon saint vétérinaire. Quand ces cordes sont restées autour de lui un certain temps, elles ont acquis leur diplôme, on les emporte et on les garde chez soi, on se les emprunte de voisin à voisin et de village à village. Honteux reste des superstitions dont la France éclairée s'est purgée, dirait le National.

Nous n'en restâmes pas moins trois jours en-core à Carnac, à n'y faire autre chose que de nous promener au bord de la mer et à nous coucher sur le sable, où nous dessinions avec nos bâtons des arabesques qu'effaçait le flot montant, et sur lequel, étendus en plein soleil, nous dormions comme des lézards. L'un près de l'autre, assis par terre, nous prenions du sable dans nos mains, nous le regardions couler à travers nos doigts, nous retournions la carcasse séchée de quelque vieux crabe évidé, nous cherchions des galets creux pour nous faire des encriers, nous ramas-sions des coquillages, et la journée passait. Le soleil s'abaissait sur la mer qui variait ses couleurs, continuait son bruit et laissait sur la plage son long feston de varechs et d'écume, nous ouvrions nos poitrines, nous humions le parfum des vagues, douce et acre senteur mêlée d'eau, de brise et d'herbes, qui accourt vers nous du fond de l'océan, et des bouffées d'air chaud venaient d’entre les trous des dunes dont les joncs minces s’accro-chaient aux boucles de nos guêtres. Quand le soir était arrivé, nous retournions au gîte en regardant dans le ciel les grandes traînées de pourpre qui s’étendaient sur son azur.

Un matin pourtant nous partîmes comme les aulres matins ; nous prîmes le même sentier, nous traversâmes la haie d’ormeaux et la prairie incli-née où nous avions vu, la veille, une petite fille chassant ses bestiaux vers l’abreuvoir ; mais ce fut le dernier jour et la dernière fois peut-être que nous passâmes par là.

Un terrain vaseux où nous enfoncions jusqu’aux chevilles s’étend de Carnac jusqu’au village de Pô. Un canot nous y attendait, nous montâmes dedans, on poussa du fond avec la rame et on hissa la voile. Notre marin, vieillard à figure gaie, s’assit à l’arrière, y attacha au plat-bord une ligne pour prendre du poisson, et laissa partir sa barque tranquille. A peine s’il faisait du vent ; la mer toute bleue n’avait pas de rides et gardait longtemps sur elle le sillage étroit du gouvernail. Le bonhomme causait ; il nous parlait des prêtres qu’il n’aime pas, de la viande qui est une bonne chose à manger, même les jours maigres, du mal qu’il avait quand il était au service, des coups de fusil

qu’il a reçus quand il était douanier..... Nous

allions doucement, la ligne tendue suivait toujours et le bout du tape-cul trempait dans l’eau.

La lieue qui nous resta à faire à pied pour aller de Saint-Pierre à Quiberon fut lestement avalée, malgré une route montueuse à travers des sables, malgré le soleil qui faisait crier sur nos épaules la bretelle de nos sacs, et nonobstant quantité de menhirs qui se dressaient dans la campagne.

A Quiberon, nous déjeunâmes chez le sieur Rohan Belle-Isie qui tient l’Hôtel Penthièvre. Ce gentilhomme était nu-pieds dans ses savates, vu la chaleur, et trinquait avec un maçon, ce qui ne l’empêche pas d’être le descendant d’une des premières familles d’Europe. Un noble de vieille race ! un vrai noble, vive Dieu ! qui nous a tout de suite fait cuire des homards et s’est mis à nous battre des biftecks.

Notre orgueil en fut flatté dans sa fibre la plus reculée et encore maintenant je ne puis m’empêcher, en pensant à cet honneur, de remercier d’un seul coup la Providence de tous ceux dont elle m’a comblé dans ma vie. J’ai été embrassé par des princesses de sang royal, j’ai dîné avec un Montmorency (il m’a même offert du cidre), j’ai été servi par un Rohan, j’ai trinqué avec Louis Fessard et j’ai tapé sur la bedaine aux cardinaux !

Tout le passé de Quiberon se résume dans un massacre. Sa plus rare curiosité est un cimetière ; il est plein, il regorge, il fait craquer ses murs, il déborde dans la rue. Les pierres tassées se brisent aux angles, montent les unes sur les autres, s’envahissent, se submergent et se confondent, comme si les morts, gênés dessous, soulevaient leurs épaules pour sortir de leurs tombeaux. On dirait de quelque océan pétrifié dont toutes ces tombes font les vagues et où les croix seraient les mâts des vaisseaux perdus.

Au milieu, un grand ossuaire tout ouvert reçoit les squelettes de ceux que l’on désensevelit pour faire place aux autres. De qui donc cette pensée : la vie est une hôtellerie, c’est le cercueil qui est la maison ? Ceux-ci ne restent pas dans la leur, ils n’en sont que les locataires et on les en chasse à la fin du bail. Tout autour de cet ossuaire, où cet amas d’ossements ressemble à un fouillis de bourrées, est rangée, à hauteur d’homme, une série de petites boites en bois noir, de six pouces carrés chacune, recouvertes d’un toit, surmontées d’une croix, et percées sur la face antérieure d’un cœur à jour qui laisse voir dedans une tète de mort. Au-dessus du cœur, on lit en lettres peintes : “Ceci est le chef de***, décédé tel an, tel jour.” Ces têtes n’ont appartenu qu’à des gens d’un certain rang, et l’on passerait pour un mauvais fils, si au bout de sept ans on ne donnait au crâne de ses parents le luxe de ce petit coffre. Quant au reste du corps, on le rejette dans l’ossuaire ; vingt-cinq ans après, on y jette aussi la tête. Il y a quelques années, je ne sais qui voulut abolir cette coutume. Une émeute se fit, elle resta.

Il peut être mal de jouer ainsi avec toutes ces boules rondes qui ont contenu la pensée, avec ces cercles vides où battait l’amour. Toutes ces boîtes le long de l’ossuaire, sur les tombes, dans l’herbe, sur le mur, pêle-mêle, peuvent sembler horribles à plusieurs, ridicules à d’autres ; mais ces bois noirs se pourrissent à mesure que les os qu’ils renferment blanchissent et s’égrènent ; toutes ces têtes vous regardant avec leur nez rongé, leurs orbites creuses et leur front qui luit par place sous la traînée gluante des limaçons ; ces fémurs entassés là comme tous les grands charniers de la Bible ; ces fragments de crânes qui roulent pleins de terre, et où parfois, comme dans un pot de porcelaine, a poussé quelque fleur qui sort par le trou des yeux ;la vulgarité même de ces inscriptions toutes pareilles les unes aux autres, comme le sont entre eux les morts qu’elles désignent ; toute cette pourriture humaine, disposée de cette façon, nous a paru fort belle et nous a procuré un solide et bon spectacle.

Si la poste d’Auray eût été arrivée, nous fus-sions partis tout de suite pour Belle-Isle ; mais on attendait la poste d’Auray. Assis dans la cuisine de l’auberge, en chemise et les bras nus, les marins de passage patientaient en buvant chopine.

— A quelle heure arrive-t-elle donc la poste d’Auray ?

— C’est selon ; à dix heures d’ordinaire, ré-pondit le patron.

— A midi, fit M. de Rohan.

— A une heure.

— A une heure et demie.

— Souvent elle n’est pas ici avant deux heures.

— C’est pas régulier !

Nous en étions convaincus, il en était trois.

On ne pouvait partir avant l’arrivée de ce mal-encontreux courrier qui apporte pour Belle-Isle les dépêches de la terre ferme. II fallait se rési-gner. On allait sur le devant de la porte, on regardait dans la rue, on rentrait, on ressortait. « Ah ! il ne viendra pas aujourd’hui. — II sera resté en route. — Faut nous en aller. — Non, attendons-le. — Si ces messieurs s’ennuient trop après tout... — Au fait, peut-être n’y a-t-il pas de lettres ? — Non, encore un petit quart d’heure. — Ah ! c’est lui ! » Ce n’était pas lui, et le dialogue recom-mençait.

Enfin, un trot de cheval fatigué qui bat le bri-quet, un bruit de grelots, un coup de fouet, un homme qui crie : “Ho ! ho ! voilà la poste ! voilà la poste !”

Le cheval s’arrêta net à la porte, rentra son

8 échine, tendit le cou, allongea le museau en montrant les dents, écarta les jambes de derrière et se leva sur les jarrets.

La rosse était haute, cagneuse, osseuse, sans poils à la crinière, le sabot rongé, les fers battants ; la croupière lui déchirait la queue ; un séton suin-tait à son poitrail. Perdu dans une selle qui l’en-gouffrait, retenu en arrière par une valise, en avant par le grand portefeuille aux lettres passé dans l’arçon, son cavalier, juché dessus, se tenait ratatiné comme un singe. Sa petite figure à poils rares et blonds, ridée et racornie comme une pomme de rainette, disparaissait sous un chapeau de toile cirée doublé de feutre ; une sorte de pa-letot de coutil gris lui remontait jusqu’aux hanches et lui entourait le ventre d’un cercle de plis ramassés, tandis que son pantalon sans sous-pieds, qui se relevait et s’arrêtait aux genoux, laissait voir à nu ses mollets rougis par le frottement des étrivières, avec ses bas bleus descendus sur le bord de ses souliers. Des ficelles rattachaient les harnais de la bête ; des bouts de fil noir ou rouge avaient recousu le vêtement du cavalier ; des reprises de toutes couleurs, des taches de toutes formes, de la toile en lambeaux, du cuir gras, de la crotte séchée, de la poussière nouvelle, des cordes qui pendaient, des guenilles qui brillaient, de la crasse sur l’homme, de la gale sur la bête, l’un chétif et suant, l’autre étique et soufflant, le premier avec son fouet, le second avec ses grelots ; tout cela ne faisait qu’une même chose ayant même teinte et même mouvement, exécutant presque mêmes gestes, servant au même usage, dont l’ensemble s’appelle la poste d’Auray.

Au bout d’une heure encore, quand on eut pris dans le pays nombre suffisant de paquets et de commissions et qu’on eut encore attendu quelques passagers qui devaient venir, on quitta enfin l’auberge et l’on avisa à s’embarquer. Ce fut d’abord un pêle-mêle de bagages et de gens, d’avirons qui vous barraient les jambes, de voiles qui vous retombaient sur le nez, l’un s’embarrassant dans l’autre et ne trouvant pas où se mettre ; cha-cun prit son coin, trouva sa place, les bagages au fond, les marins debout sur les bancs, les passagers où ils purent.

Nulle brise ne soufflait, et les voiles pendaient droites le long des mâts. La lourde chaloupe se soulevait à peine sur la mer presque immobile qui se gonflait et s’abaissait avec le doux mouvement d’une poitrine endormie.

Appuyés sur l’un des plats-bords, nous regardions l’eau qui était bleue comme le ciel et calme comme lui ; et nous écoutions le bruit des grands avirons qui battaient l’onde et criaient dans les tolets. A l’ombre des. voiles, les six rameurs entrecroisés les levaient lentement en mesure et les poussaient devant eux ; ils tombaient et se relevaient, égrenant des perles au bout de leurs palettes.

Couchés dans la paille, sur le dos, assis sur les bancs, les jambes ballantes et le menton dans les mains ou postés contre les parois du bateau,

8. entre les gros jambages de la membrure dont ïe goudron se fondait à la chaleur, les passagers silencieux baissaient la tête et fermaient les jeux à l’éclat du soleil frappant sur fa mer plate comme un miroir.

Un homme à cheveux blancs dormait par terre à mes pieds ; un gendarme suait sous son tricorne, deux soldats avaient ôté leurs sacs et s’étaient couchés dessus. Près du beaupré, le mousse regardait dans le foc et sifflait pour appeler le vent ; debout, à l’arrière, le patron faisait tourner la barre.

Le vent ne venait pas. On abattit les voiles qui descendirent tout doucement en faisant sonner le fer des rocambots et affaissèrent sur les bancs leur draperie lourde ; puis chaque matelot défit sa veste, la serra sous l’avant, et tous alors recom-mencèrent, en poussant de la poitrine et des bras, à mouvoir les immenses avirons qui se ployaient dans leur longueur.

(*’L’air était d’une transparence bleuâtre, sa lumière crue enveloppant tout, frappant tout, péné-trait jusque dans leurs pores les vieux bois gris de la barque, les fils épais de la voile, la peau des hommes grelottante de sueur ; ils haletaient d’ac-cord, on entendait à la fois leur poitrine respirer et les avirons tomber dans l’eau.

Après chaque mouvement de tous ces bras qui se dépliaient et s’abaissaient, une traction sourde

‘* ! Inédit, pages 116 à 119. vous glissait en avant, on entendait autour du gouvernail l’eau clapoter plus clair et dans le silence la barque s’avançait, puis, secouée, repartait.

Derrière, on voyait Quiberon reculant graduellement sa plage de sable ; à gauche les îles d’Houat et d’Hoedie bombant sur la surface du pâle azur leurs masses d’un vert noir, Belle -Isle grandissant les pans à pic de ses rochers couronnés d’herbe et la citadelle dont la muraille plonge dans la mer, qui se levait lentement de dessous les flots.

On y envoyait dans un régiment de discipline les deux soldats escortés par le gendarme, et que moralisait de son mieux un fusilier qu'il avait pris comme renfort pour les contenir. Le matin déjà, pendant que nous déjeunions, l'un d'eux, en compagnie du brigadier, était entré dans l'auberge d'un air crâne, la moustache retroussée, les mains dans les poches, le képi sur l'oreille, en demandant à manger « tout de suite » et à boire n'importe quoi, fût-ce de l'arsenic, appelant, jurant, criant, faisant sonner ses sous et damner le pauvre gendarme ; maintenant il riait encore, mais des lèvres seulement, et sa joie devenait plus rare à mesure qu'à l'horizon se dressait le grand mur blanc où il allait bêcher la terre et traîner le boulet. Son compagnon était plus calme. C'était une grosse figure lourde et laide, une de ces natures d'une vulgarité si épaisse que l'on compre-nait de suite, l'immense mépris qu'ont pour elle ceux qui poussent sur le canon cette viande ani-mée, et le bon marché qu'ils en font. II n'avait jamais vu la mer, il la regardait en ouvrant ses deux jeux, et il dit se parlant à lui-même : « C'est curieux tout de même, ça donne tout de même un aperçu de ce qui existe", appréciation que j'ai trouvée profonde et aussi émue par le sentiment de la chose même que toutes les expressions lyriques que j'ai entendu faire à bien des dames.

L'autre soldat ne cachait pas pour lui le dédain qu'il avait et quoiqu'ils fussent amis, il haussait les épaules de pitié en le regardant. Quand il se fut suffisamment amusé de Iui'en essayant de faire rire sur son compte la société qui l'entourait, il le laissa dormir dans son coin et se tourna vers nous. Alors il nous parla de lui-même, de la pri-son qu'il va subir, du régiment qui l'ennuie, de la guerre qu'il souhaite, de la vie dont il est las. Peu à peu ainsi sa joie étudiée s'en alla, son rire forcé disparut ; il devint simple et doux, mélancolique et presque tendre. Trouvant enfin une oreille ouverte à tout ce qui depuis longtemps surchargeait son cœur exaspéré d'ennui, il nous exposa longuement toutes les misères du soldat, les dégoûts de la caserne, les exigences taquines de l'étiquette /toutes les cruautés de l'habit, l'arrogance brutale des sergents, l'humiliation des obéis-sances aveugles, l'assassinat permanent de l'instinct et de la volonté sous la massue du devoir.'

II est condamné à un an de discipline pour avoir vendu un'pantalon. « A beaucoup, disait-il, ça ne fait rien, comme à ça par exemple, en dé-signant son compagnon ; des paysans, c'est habitué à remuer la terre, mais moi, ça me salira les mains."

O orgueil ! ton goût d'absinthe remonte donc dans toutes les bouches et tous les cœurs te ru-minent ! Qu'était-il, lui qui se plaignait de tant souffrir au contact des autres ? Un enfant du peu-ple, un ouvrier de Paris, un garçon sellier. J'ai plaint, j’ai plaint cet homme ardent et triste, ma-lade de besoins, rongé d’envies longues, qui s’im-patiente du joug et que le travail fatigue. Il n’y a pas que nous, au coin de nos cheminées, dans l’air étouffé de nos intérieurs, qui ayons des fadeurs d’âme et des colères vagues dont on tâche de sortir avec du bruit en essayant d’aimer, en voulant écrire ; celui-là fait de même dans son cercle inférieur, avec les petits verres et les don-zelles ; lui aussi il souhaite l’argent, la liberté, le grand air, il voudrait changer de lieu, fuir ailleurs, n’importe où, il s’ennuie, il attend sans espoir.

Les sociétés avancées exhalent comme une odeur de foule, des miasmes écœurants, et les duchesses ne sont pas les seules à s’en évanouir. Ne croyez pas les mains sans gants plus robustes que les autres ; on peut être las de tout sans rien connaître, fatigué de tramer sa casaque sans avoir lu Werther ni René, et il n’y a pas besoin d’être reçu bachelier pour se brûler la cervelle.

On avait tant tardé à partir, qu’à peine s’il y avait de l’eau dans le port, et nous eûmes grand mal à y entrer. Notre quille frôlait contre les pe-tits cailloux du fond, et pour descendre à terre il nous fallut marcher sur une rame comme sur la corde raide.

Resserré entre la citadelle et ses remparts et coupé au milieu par un port presque vide, le Palais nous parut une petite ville assez sotte, qui transsude un ennui de garnison et a je ne sais quoi d’un sous-officier qui bâille.

Ici, on ne voit plus les chapeaux de feutre noir du Morbihan, bas de forme, immenses d’enver-gure et abritant les épaules. Les femmes n’ont pas ces grands bonnets blancs qui s’avancent devant leur visage comme ceux des religieuses et, par derrière, retombent jusqu’au milieu du dos, vêtant ainsi chez les petites filles la moitié du corps. Leurs robes sont privées du large galon de velours appliqué sur l’épaule qui, dessinant le contour de l’omoplate, va se perdre sous les aisselles. Leurs pieds non plus ne portent point ces souliers découverts, ronds du bout, hauts de talons et ornés de longs rubans noirs qui frôlent la terre. C’est, comme partout, des figures qui se ressemblent, des costumes qui n’en sont pas, des bornes, des maisons, des pavés et même un trottoir.

Etait-ce la peine de s’être exposé au mal de mer, que nous n’avions pas eu d’ailleurs, ce qui nous rendait indulgents, pour n’avoir à contempler que la citadelle, dont nous nous souciions fort peu, le phare, dont nous nous inquiétions encore moins, ou le rempart de Vauban qui nous ennuyait déjà. Mais on nous avait parlé des roches de Belie-Isle. Incontinent donc, nous dépassâmes les portes, et coupant net à travers champs, ra-battîmes sur le bord de la mer.

Nous ne vîmes qu’une grotte, une seule (le jour tombait), mais qui nous parut si belle (elle était tapissée de varechs et de coquilles et avait des gouttes d’eau qui tombaient d’en haut), que nous résolûmes de rester le lendemain à BelIe-lsle pour en chercher de pareilles, s’il y en avait, et nous repaître à loisir les jeux du régal de toutes ces couleurs.

Le lendemain donc, sitôt qu’il fit jour, ayant rempli une gourde, fourré dans un de nos sacs un morceau de pain avec une tranche de viande, nous prîmes la clef des champs, et, sans guide ni ren-seignement quelconque (c’est là la bonne façon), nous nous mîmes à marcher, décidés à aller n’importe où, pourvu que ce fût loin, et à rentrer n’importe quand, pourvu que ce fût tard.

Nous commençâmes par un sentier dans les herbes, il suivait le haut de la falaise, montait sur ses pointes, descendait dans ses vallons et continuait dessus en faisant le tour de l’île.

Quand un éboulement l’avait coupé, nous remontions plus haut dans la campagne et, nous réglant sur l’horizon de la mer, dont la barre bleue touchait le ciel, nous regagnions ensuite le haut de la côte que nous retrouvions à l’improviste ouvrant son abîme à nos côtés. La pente à pic sur le sommet de laquelle nous marchions ne nous laissait rien voir du flanc des rochers, nous entendions seulement au-dessous de nous le grand bruit battant de la mer.

Quelquefois la roche s’ouvrant dans toute sa grandeur montrait subitement ses deux pans presque droits que rayaient des couches de silex et où avaient poussé de petits bouquets jaunes. Si on jetait une pierre, elle semblait quelque temps suspendue, puis se heurtait aux parois, déboulait en ricochant, se brisait en éclats, faisait rouler de la terre, entraînait des cailloux, finissait sa course en s’enfouissant dans les graviers ; et on entendait crier les cormorans qui s’envolaient.

Souvent les pluies d’orage et les dégels avaient chassé dans ces gorges une partie des terrains supérieurs qui, s’y étant écoulés graduellement, en avaient adouci la pente, de manière à y pouvoir descendre. Nous nous risquâmes dans l’une d’elles, et, nous laissant glisser sur le derrière en nous écorant des pieds et nous retenant des mains, nous arrivâmes enfin en bas sur du beau sable tout mouillé.

La marée baissait ; il fallait, pour passer, attendre le retrait des vagues. Nous les regardions venir. Elles écumaient dans les roches, à fleur d’eau, tourbillonnaient dans les creux, sautaient comme des écharpes qui s’envolent, retombaient en cascades et en perles, et dans un long balancement ramenaient à elles leur grande nappe verte. Quand une vague s’était retirée sur le sable, aussitôt les courants s’entre-croisaient en fuyant vers des niveaux plus bas. Les varechs remuaient leurs lanières gluantes, l’eau débordait des petits cailloux, sortait par les fentes des pierres, faisait mille clapotements, mille jets. Le sable trempé buvait son onde, et, se’séchant au soleil, blanchissait sa teinte jaune.

Dès qu’il y avait de la place pour nos pieds, sautant par-dessus les roches, nous continuions devant nous. Elles augmentèrent bientôt leur amoncellement désordonné ; tournées, bousculées, entassées dans tous - les sens, renversées l’une sur l’autre, nous nous cramponnions de nos mains qui glissaient, de nos pieds qui se crispaient en vain sur leurs aspérités visqueuses.

La falaise était haute, si haute qu’on en avait presque peur quand on levait la tète. Elle vous écrasait de sa placidité formidable et elle vous charmait pourtant ; car on la contemplait malgré soi et les yeux ne s’en lassaient pas.

11 passa une hirondelle, nous la regardâmes vo-ler ; elle venait de la mer, elle montait doucement, coupant au tranchant de ses plumes l’air fluide et lumineux où ses ailes nageaient en plein et semblaient jouir de se déployer toutes libres. Elle monta encore, dépassa la falaise, monta toujours et disparut.

Cependant nous rampions sur les rochers dont chaque détour de la côte nous renouvelait la perspective, lis s’interrompaient « par moments et alors nous marchions sur de grandes, pierres carrées, plates comme des dalles, où des fentes qui se prolongeaient en avant deux à deux et presque symétriques semblaient les ornières de quelque antique voie d’un autre monde. De place en place, immobiles comme leur fond verdâtre, s’étendaient de grandes flaques d’eau qui étaient aussi limpides, aussi tranquilles, et ne remuaient pas plus qu’au fond du bois, sur son lit de cresson, à l’ombre des saules, la source la plus pure.

Puis de nouveau les rochers se présentaient plus serrés, plus accumulés. D’un côté c’était la mer dont les flots sautaient dans les basses roches ; de l’autre, la côte droite, ardue, infranchissable.

Fatigués, étourdis, nous cherchions une issue. Mais toujours la falaise s’avançait devant nous, et les rochers, étendant à l’infini leurs sombres masses de varechs, faisaient succéder l’une à l’autre leurs têtes inégales qui grandissaient en se multipliant comme des fantômes noirs qui sortaient de dessous terre.

Nous roulions ainsi à l’aventure, quand nous vîmes tout à coup, serpentant en zigzag dans la roche, une valleuse qui nous permettait, comme par une échelle, de regagner la rase campagne.

Quand nous l’eûmes gravie, nous nous trou-vâmes sur le plateau qui domine toute la côte de l’île et continuâmes dans la même direction, à travers des champs sans arbres que n’égayait au-cune verdure. Il était néanmoins fort doux de n’avoir plus qu’à remuer les pieds et à les pousser devant soi. Un petit bois de pins grêles s’offrit, nous y entrâmes et ayant débouclé le sac qui de-puis quatre heures me ballottait aux épaules, nous commençâmes à déchiqueter avec nos ongles et nos mains la tranche de veau froid qui s’y boc-quesonnait contre le morceau de pain.

Couchés par terre sur les feuilles tombées, nous dînâmes entre nos jambes, en faisant sécher au bout des branches d’arbres nos chaussettes et 90s souliers tout trempés d’eau de mer. Lorsque la nappe fut ôtée et qu’une bonne pipe nous eut remis de nos fatigues, nous ramassâmes le bâton et nous repartîmes.

Voulant traverser l’île dans sa largeur, nous nous dirigeâmes d’après le soleil et allâmes droit en face de nous ; mais bientôt perdus dans la campagne, nous ne cherchâmes plus dès lors qu’à retrouver la mer dont le rivage, si nous le suivions toujours, devait nous ramener enfin au Palais soit le soir, soit dans la nuit ou le lendemain matin, car nous ne savions plus où il était, ni nous-mêmes où nous étions.

N’importe, c’est toujours un plaisir, même quand la campagne est laide, que de se promener à deux tout au travers, en marchant dans les herbes, en traversant les haies, en sautant les fos-sés, abattant des chardons avec votre bâton, arrachant avec la main les feuilles et les épis, allant au hasard comme l’idée vous pousse, comme les pieds vous portent, chantant, sifflant, causant, rêvant, sans oreille qui vous écoute, sans bruit de pas derrière vos pas, libres comme au désert !

Ah ! de l’air ! de l’air ! de l’espace encore ! Puisque nos âmes serrées étouffent et se meurent sur le bord de la fenêtre, puisque nos esprits cap-tifs, comme l’ours dans sa fosse, tournent toujours sur eux-mêmes et se heurtent contre ses murs, donnez au moins à mes narines le parfum de tous les vents de la terre, laissez s’en aller mes yeux vers tous les horizons !

Aucun clocher ne montrait au loin son toit reluisant d’ardoises, pas un hameau n’apparaissait au revers d’un pli de terrain, ajustant dans un bouquet d’arbres ses toits de chaume et ses cours carrées ; on ne rencontrait personne, ni paysan qui passe, ni mouton qui broute, ni chien qui rôde..

Tous ces champs cultivés n’avaient pas l’air habités ; on y travaille, on n’y vit point. On dirait que tous ceux qui les ont en profitent, mais ne les aiment pas.

Nous avons vu une ferme, nous sommes entrés dedans ; une femme en guenilles nous a servi dans des tasses de grès du lait frais comme la glace. C’était un silence singulier. Elle nous regardait avidement, et nous sommes repartis.

Nous sommes descendus dans un vallon dont la gorge étroite semblait s’étendre vers la mer. De longues herbes à fleurs jaunes nous montaient jusqu’au ventre. Nous avancions en faisant de grandes enjambées. Nous entendions de l’eau couler près de nous et nous enfoncions dans la terre marécageuse. Les deux collines vinrent à s’écarter, portant toujours sur leurs versants arides un gazon ras que des lichens plaquaient par intervalles comme de grandes taches jaunes. Au pied de l’une d’elles un ruisseau passait parmi les rameaux bas des arbrisseaux rabougris qui avaient poussé sur ses bords, et s’allait perdre plus loin dans une mare immobile où des insectes à grandes pattes se promenaient sur la feuille des nénufars.

Le soleil dardait. Les moucherons bruissaient leurs ailes et faisaient courber la pointe des joncs sous le poids de leurs corps légers. Nous étions seuls tous les deux dans la tranquillité de cette solitude.

En cet endroit le vallon s’arrondissait en s’élar-gissant et faisait un coude sur lui-même. Nous montâmes sur une butte pour découvrir au delà ; mais l’horizon vite s’arrêtait, enclos par une autre colline, ou bien étendait de nouvelles plaines. Cependant nous prîmes courage et continuâmes à avancer, tout en pensant à ces voyageurs abandonnés dans les fies, qui grimpent sur les pro-montoires pour apercevoir au loin quelque voile venant à eux.

Le terrain devint plus sec, les herbes moins hautes, et la mer tout à coup se présenta devant nous, resserrée dans une anse étroite, et bientôt sa grève faite de débris de madrépores et de coquilles se mit à crier sous nos pas. Nous nous laissâmes tomber par terre et nous nous endormîmes, épuisés de fatigue. Une heure après, réveillés par le froid, nous nous remîmes en marche, sûrs cette fois de ne pas nous perdre ; nous étions sur la côte qui regarde la France, et nous avions le Pa-lais à notre gauche. C’était sur ce rivage-là que nous avions vu la veille la grotte qui nous avait tant charmés. Nous ne fûmes pas longtemps à en trouver d’autres plus hautes et plus profondes.

Elles s’ouvraient toujours par de grandes ogives, droites ou penchées, poussant leurs jets hardis sur d’énormes pans de rocs aux coupes régulières. Noires et veinées de violet, rouges comme du feu, brunes avec des lignes blanches, elles décou-vraient pour nous, qui les venions voir, toutes les variétés de leurs teintes et de leurs formes, leurs grâces, leurs fantaisies grandioses. II y en avait une, couleur d’argent, que traversaient des veines de sang ; dans une autre des touffes de fleurs ressemblant à des primevères s’étaient écloses sur les glacis de granit rougeâtre, et du plafond tombaient sur le sable fin des gouttes lentes qui re-commençaient toujours. Au fond de l’une d’elles, sur un cintre allongé, un lit de gravier blanc et poli, que la marée sans doute retournait et refaisait chaque jour, semblait être là pour y recevoir au sortir des flots le corps de la Naïade ; mais sa couche est vide et pour toujours l’a perdue ! H ne reste que ces varechs encore humides où elle étendait ses beaux membres nus fatigués de la nage et sur lesquels, jusqu’à l’aurore, elle dormait au clair de lune.

Le soleil se couchait. La marée montait au fond sur les roches, qui s’effaçaient dans le brouillard bleu du soir, que blanchissait sur le niveau de la mer l’écume des vagues rebondissantes, et, de l’autre partie de l’horizon, le ciel rayé de longues lignes orange avait l’air balayé comme par de grands coups de vent. Sa lumière reflétée sur les flots les dorait d’une moire chatoyante ; se projetant sur le sable, elle le rendait brun et faisait briller dessus un semis d’acier.

A une demi-lieue vers le Sud, la côte allongeait vers la mer une file de rochers. II fallait pour les joindre recommencer une marche pareille à celle que nous avions faite le matin. Nous étions fatigués, il y avait loin ; mais une tentation nous pous-sait vers là-bas, derrière cet horizon. La brise arrivait, dans le creux des pierres les flaques d’eau se ridaient, les goémons accrochés aux flancs des falaises tressaillaient, et du côté d’où la lune allait venir, une clarté pâle montait de dessous les eaux.

C’était l’heure où les ombres sont longues. Les rochers semblaient plus grands, les vagues plus vertes. On eût dit que le ciel s’agrandissait et que toute la nature changeait de visage.

Donc nous partîmes en avant, au delà, sans nous soucier de la marée qui montait, ni s’il y au-rait plus tard un passage pour regagner terre. Nous voulions jusqu’au bout abuser de notre plaisir et le savourer sans en rien perdre. Plus légers que le matin, nous sautions, nous courions sans fatigue, sans obstacle, une verve de corps nous emportait malgré nous et nous éprouvions dans les muscles des espèces de tressaillements d’une volupté robuste et singulière. Nous secouions nos têtes au vent, et nous avions du plaisir à toucher les herbes avec nos mains. Aspirant l’odeur des flots, nous humions, nous évoquions à nous tout ce qu’il y avait de couleurs, de rayons, de murmures : le dessin des varechs, la douceur des grains de sable, la dureté du roc qui sonnait sous nos pieds, les altitudes de la falaise, la frange des vagues, les découpures du rivage, la voix de l’horizon ; et puis c’était la brise qui passait, comme d’invisibles baisers qui nous coulaient sur la figure, c’était le ciel où il y avait des nuages allant vite, roulant une poudre d’or, la lune qui se levait, les étoiles qui se montraient. Nous nous roulions l’esprit dans la profusion de ces splendeurs, nous en repaissions nos yeux ; nous en écartions les narines, nous en ouvrions les oreilles ; quelque chose de la vie des éléments émanant d’eux-mêmes, sous l’attraction de nos regards, arrivait jusqu’à nous, s’y assimi-lant, faisait que nous les comprenions dans un rapport moins éloigné, que nous les sentions plus avant, grâce à cette union plus complexe. A force de nous en pénétrer, d’y entrer, nous devenions nature aussi, nous sentions qu’elle gagnait sur nous et nous en avions une joie démesurée ; nous aurions voulu nous y perdre, être pris par elle ou l’emporter en nous. Ainsi que dans les transports de l’amour, on souhaite plus de mains pour pal-per, plus de lèvres pour baiser, plus d’yeux pour voir, plus d’âme pour aimer, nous étalant sur la nature dans un ébattement plein de délire et de joies, nous regrettions que nos yeux ne pussent aller jusqu’au sein des rochers, jusqu’au fond des mers, jusqu’au bout du ciel, pour voir comment poussent les pierres, se font les flots, s’allument les étoiles ; que nos oreilles ne pussent entendre graviter dans la terre la formation du granit, la sève pousser dans les plantes, les coraux rouler dans les solitudes de l’océan et, dans la sympathie de cette effusion contemplative, nous eussions voulu que notre âme, s’irradiant partout, allât vivre dans toute cette vie pour revêtir toutes ses formes, durer comme elles, et se variant toujours, toujours pousser au soleil de l’éternité ses métamorphoses.

Mais l’homme n’est fait pour goûter chaque jour que peu de nourriture, de couleurs, de sons, de sentiments, d’idées ; ce qui dépasse la mesure le fatigue ou le grise ; c’est l’idiotisme de l’ivrogne, c’est la folie de l’extatique. Ah ! que notre verre est petit, mon Dieu ! que notre soif est grande ! que notre tête est faible !

Ce soir-là nous n’avions plus la nôtre parfaitement d’aplomb sur les épaules ; nous nous en revenions animés, émus, presque furieux, le cœur battant, les nerfs vibrant comme les cordes d’une harpe que l’on a trop pincées ; nous nous sentions le corps fatigué, le cerveau étourdi, tan-dis qu’au contraire nos jarrets, saccadant leurs mouvements, d’eux-mêmes nous poussaient en avant et nous faisaient presque bondir. Lorsque nous rentrâmes dans la ville dont on allait fermer les portes, il y avait quatorze heures que nous marchions, nos pieds sortaient par nos souliers et

9-l’on tordit nos chemises qui, deux jours après, n’étaient pas sèches.

Pour nous en retourner à Quiberon, il fallut se lever le lendemain, avant 7 heures, ce qui exigea du courage. Encore raides de fatigue et tout grelottants de sommeil, nous nous empi-lâmes dans la barque, en compagnie d’un cheval blanc, de deux voyageurs pour le commerce, du même gendarme borgne et du même fusilier qui, cette fois, ne moralisait personne. Gris comme un cordelier et roulant sous les bancs, il avait fort à faire pour retenir son shako qui lui vacillait sur la tête et pour se défendre de son fusil qui lui cabriolait dans les jambes. Je ne sais qui de lui ou du gendarme était le plus bête des deux. Le gendarme n’était pas ivre, mais il était stupide. Il dé-plorait le peu de tenue du soldat, il énumérait les punitions qu’il allait recevoir, il se scandalisait de ses hoquets, il se formalisait de ses manières. Vu de trois quarts, du côté de l’œil absent, avec son tricorne, son sabre et ses gants jaunes, c’était certes un des plus tristes aspects de la vie humaine. Un gendarme est, d’ailleurs, quelque chose d’essentiellement bouffon, que je ne puis considérer sans rire ; effet grotesque et inexplicable, que cette base de la sécurité publique a l’avantage de m’occasionner, avec les procureurs du roi, les magistrats quelconques et les professeurs de belles-lettres.

Incliné sur le flanc, le bateau coupait les vagues qui filaient le long du bordage en tordant de l’écume. Les trois voiles bien gonflées arrondissaient leur courbe douce. La mâture criait, l’air sifflait dans les poulies. Penché sur la proue, le nez dans la brise, un mousse chantait ; nous n’entendions pas les paroles, mais c’était un air lent, tranquille et monotone qui se répétait toujours, ni plus haut ni plus bas, et qui prolongeait en mourant des modulations traînantes.

Cela s’en allait doux et triste sur la mer, comme dans une âme un souvenir confus qui passe.

Le cheval se tenait debout, du mieux qu’il pouvait, sur ses quatre pieds et mordillait sa botte de foin. Les matelots, les bras croisés, souriaient en regardant dans les voiles.

(*’A Quiberon, nous revîmes M. Rohan,sa ru-biconde et haute épouse et son jeu du “trou ma-dame » qui remplace dans son établissement le billard obligé et qui paraît être une des curiosités du pays. Nos deux voyageurs y étaient forts, et quand après avoir déjeuné avec eux nous partîmes pour Plouharnel, nous les laissâmes acharnés mieux que jamais en train de jouer le café avec une de leurs connaissances de l’endroit.Tous deux ils voyageaient dans les draps. Le premier était un assez beau mâle de quelque vingt ans, blond, haut en couleur, ayant poitrine bombée, casquette sur l’oreille, talons hauts et gilet jusqu’aux genoux ; il nous représentait l’incarnation du Vau—

Inédit, pages 133 à 136. devilIe-Achard, il en avait l’élégance, c’en était le style. Quant à l’autre, sans doute que dans son temps il avait eu l’aimable laisser-aller de son compagnon ; lui aussi, il avait peut-être jadis pris la taille aux bonnes, injurié amicalement les garçons, été brillant sur le carambolage et distrait les ennuis de la grande route en chantant du Béran-ger dans son cabriolet ; mais l’âge était venu, cette neige du cœur qui avait éteint sa flamme et calmé sa voix. L’expérience d’un sage, la modération du philosophe se lisaient sur son front qu’avaient ridé les soucis de la vente et les inquiétudes du ballot. Combien dans sa vie avait-il dû écrire de lettres d’affaires ? De combien de maisons n’avait-il pas été mis à la porte ? Que de fois il avait dîné à table d’hôte !

Devant se rendre comme nous le soir à PIou-harnel, ces messieurs nous proposèrent de prendre nos sacs dans leur voiture, ce que nous accep-tâmes et dont bien nous prit, car de Quiberon à Plouharnel la route est fort sablonneuse, et vingt-cinq livres de plus sur le dos n’auraient pas accé-léré notre marche.

Jusqu’au fort Penthièvre à peu près, la route étant connue nous ne vîmes rien de nouveau, mais nous revîmes avec ennui quelques-uns de ces bons menhirs allongeant sur l’herbe leur ombre bête.

Nous n’entrâmes pas au fort Penthièvre, ce qui étonna beaucoup le factionnaire qui, nous voyant passer, avait eu la prévenance de nous crier de loin « qu’il nous fallait une permission pour le voir », mais nous nous assîmes au bas de son talus sur le versant d’un grand monticule de gazon dont la pente descend vers les sables. Le soleil brillait, la mer pétillait, un vent sec et âpre soufflait sur les joncs des dunes et, comme une nappe d'eau qui eût passé dessus, les courbait tous à la fois.

En face de cette hauteur où nous étions, PIou-harnel se montrant sur la côte opposée, le clocher de son église, certes, paraissait facile à atteindre, il n'y avait qu'à suivre tout droit ainsi que disent les paysans. Comme si c'était chose fort aisée à faire que de suivre tout droit n'importe quoi, même quand on a devant les yeux un clocher ou une girouette !

La presqu'île, se découpant au milieu de la mer, prolongeait sa perspective d'un jaune pâle, et les vagues dessinaient sur son double rivage deux longues bordures d'écume blanche. La mer était toute bleue, le ciel tout blanc ; frappés d'a-plomb par le soleil, les sables faisaient miroiter devant nous de grands reflets bruns qui semblaient les faire onduler et en allonger l'étendue. Des monticules ronds formés par des coups de vent, et que piquaient çà et là quelques joncs minces comme des aiguilles, se présentaient sans cesse l'un après l'autre, il fallait les monter et les descendre, des traînées de poussière se levant lentement s'envolaient et nos yeux se fermaient à l'éblouissement du soleil qui flambait sur les flots et chatoyait sur le sable. Le vent nous empour-prait le visage, il nous le fouettait à grands coups, nous avancions lentement et avec tristesse sur cette grève abandonnée.

Donc nous allions sans mot dire, du mieux que nous pouvions, sans jamais atteindre au fond de la baie où avait l'air de se trouver Plouharnel. Nous y arrivâmes cependant. Mais là, nous tombions dans la mer. Nous avions pris le côté droit du rivage, tandis qu'on devait suivre le gauche.

II fallut rebrousser chemin et recommencer une partie de la route.

Un bruit étouffé se fit entendre. Un grelot sonna, un chapeau parut. C'était la poste d'Auray. Toujours même homme, même cheval, même sac aux lettres. II s'en allait tranquillement vers Quiberon d'où il reviendra tantôt pour y retourner demain. C'est l'hôte du rivage ; il le passe le matin, il le repasse le soir. Sa vie est de le parcourir ; lui seul l'anime, il en fait l'épisode, j'allais presque dire la grâce.

II s'arrête ; nous lui parlons deux minutes, il nous salue et il repart.

Quel ensemble que celui-là ! Quel homme et quel cheval ! Quel tableau ! Callot, sans doute, l'aurait reproduit ; il n'y avait que Cervantes pour l'écrire.

Après avoir passé sur de grands quartiers de rocs qu'on a essayé d'aligner dans la mer, pour raccourcir la route en coupant le fond de la baie, nous arrivâmes enfin à Plouharnel. Le village était tranquille, les poules gloussaient dans les rues, et dans les jardins enclos de murs, de pierres sèches, les orties sont poussées au milieu de carrés d'avoine.

Comme nous étions devant la maison de notre hôte, assis à prendre l'air, un vieux mendiant a passé. II était courbé, en guenilles, grouillant de vermine, rouge comme du vin, hérissé, suant, la poitrine débraillée, la bouche baveuse.

Le soleil reluisait sur ses haillons, sa peau violette et presque noire semblait transsuder du sang. II beuglait d'une voix terrible en frappant à coups redoublés contre la porte d'une maison voisine.

(*'Nous eûmes l'honneur de dîner avec nos deux voyageurs pour le commerce dont la politesse méritait bien l'offre de l'inévitable bouteille de Champagne, aussi leur cœur s'ouvrit-il complète-ment aux nôtres, et ils versèrent dedans leurs confidences les plus intimes. Nous apprîmes des choses fort intéressantes, que le plus jeune, par exemple, voyageait pour une maison de Lisieux et qu'il avait eu l'an passé une maîtresse qui s'appelait Joséphine et qui avait beaucoup de gorge. C'était, du reste, un gaillard qui avait connu de Cythère le haut et le bas de l'échelle, il lui arrivait souvent de calmer ses sens pour de faibles trésors et il avait couché avec des femmes qui couchaient dans des draps de satin noir.

'*' Inédit, pages 137 à 1^0. — Eh quoi ! lui dit son compagnon, tu ne leur en a pas pris un peu pour te faire des gilets ?

L'hôte, qui est le maire de l'endroit, vint au dessert trinquer avec nous. Les deux coudes de sa chemise appuyés sur la table, son bonnet de soie noire relevé derrière les oreilles pour mieux entendre, il demeura tout le temps muet et béant à savourer les discours de nos amis et les nôtres, qui ne valaient pas mieux. Du reste, ce dîner ne nous ennuya pas, il est parfois très doux de causer avec des imbéciles.

Le lendemain était un dimanche, et la cuisine était déjà toute pleine de paysans qui venaient boire, quand nous descendîmes pour y prendre notre soupe à l'oignon avant de nous mettre en marche pour Auray.

On entendait, par-dessus les voix et les galo-ches ferrées qui résonnaient dans le cabaret, le roucoulement d'une tourterelle enfermée dans une cage suspendue à la muraille. Quel doux bruit que celui-là ! Aimez-vous les vieux colombiers où on les voit marcher sur le toit des tuiles en ren-gorgeant leur cou, en ouvrant leurs ailes, en baignant leurs pieds roses dans l'eau des gouttières tout en poussant tout le long du jour leurs ronflements plaintifs qui reprennent et s'arrêtent ?

Nous étions levés, nous allions partir, nous le vîmes passer, mais nous ne l'aperçûmes que par derrière. Qu'était-ce par devant ? qui donc ? le chapeau. Quel chapeau ! un vaste et immense chapeau qui dépassait les épaules de son porteur et qui était en osier, quel osier ! du bronze plutôt, planisphère dur et compact fait pour résister à la grêle, que la pluie ne traversait point, que le temps ne devait que durcir et fortifier. L'homme qu'il recouvrait disparaissait dessous et avait l’air d’y être entré jusqu’au milieu du corps, et il le portait cependant (je l’ai vu tourner la tête). Quelle constitution ! quel tempérament il avait donc ! quels muscles cervicaux ! quelle force dans les vertèbres ! Mais aussi quelle ampleur ! quel cercle, ce chapeau ! II projette une ombre tout à I’entour de lui, et son maître ne doit jamais jouir du soleil. Ah ! quel chapeau ! C’est un couvercle de chaudière à vapeur surmonté d’une colonne, ça ferait un four en y pratiquant des meurtrières ! II y a des choses inébranlables : le Simplon et l’impudence des critiques, des choses solides : l’arc de l’Étoile et le français de Labruyère, des choses lourdes : le plomb, le bouilli et M. Ni-sard, des choses grandes : le nez de mon frère, l’Hamlet de Shakespeare et la tabatière de Bouilhet, mais je n’ai rien vu d’aussi solide, d’aussi inébranlable, d’aussi grand et d’aussi lourd que ce chapeau de Plouharnel !

Et il avait une couverture en toile cirée ! VI

De Plouharnel à Aura y, campagne déserte ; on rencontre peu de maisons, mais de beaux aspects de paysages comme ajoncs et arbres.

Auray, a un bon chic de bonne petite vieille ville avec ses toits et ses maisons ; les femmes plus jolies qu’aux alentours. — Belle vue du haut d’un belvédère de pierre d’Au-ray, à droite et dedans la terre. — Quelques barques à sec sur la rive à cause de la marée basse ; vieux pont à piles triangulaires avec des avancées dans les piles.

La Chartreuse. — GaUia marens posuit, mausolée, vilain monument dans le goût de la Restauration ; au fond deux bas-reliefs : l’un Mademoiselle d’AngouI posant la première pierre ; pose du préfet qui lui présente la truelle sur un coussin ; l’autre M. d’AngouI priant ; son manteau ; quel galbe de bottes ! Et le Monsieur par derrière retenant un gant sur sa poitrine. — On a descendu avec chandelle par un trou et nous avonsi vu les ossements. — Cloître vitré, fermé, garni de copies de saint Bruno de Lesueur. — Les sœurs grises. — L’abbé se promenant. — Champ des mar-tyrs : une espèce de chapelle totalement insignifiante ; d’un côté un petit bois, une allée d’arbres verts, une longue lande que la mer inonde à chaque marée ; l’endroit était bien choisi.

Pour aller à Sainte-Anne, la route monte. — Lieux charmants avec de l’eau (c’est l’Auray qui coule), des roches, des nénufars sur l’eau, des ajoncs. — Le petit chien qui courait et se baignait partout. — Les haies sont effrayantes tant elles sont multipliées quand on pense à leur usage. — Sous un arbre une vieille femme pâle, agenouillée, priait au coin d’un chemin creux ; c’était l’heure des vêpres. Nous en avons rencontré deux autres qui marchaient tout en priant, sans doute, car Tune a fait le signe de la croix.

Sainte-Anne. — Eglise ornée de tableaux, ex-voto le moulin et les enfants. — Coup de hache. — Boutiques d’objets de piété. — Notre conducteur carliste et dévot, gros bonhomme lourd et nui.

Vannes. — Messieurs et dames endimanchés. — Les jeunes troupiers en bourgeois, moustaches, pantalons tirés ; un pantalon et une paire de bottines 1 — M. Descormiers de Montmorency écarté de tout le monde quoique au milieu.

— L’officier, chapeau en osier noir, redingote de velours noir, cravate blanche, bouche et nez de Marat. On aurait dû le nommer gardien de la promenade avec un logement dans l’hôpital quoiqu’il n’ait pas besoin de ça. — Vannes et sa femme. — La tour du connétable, occupée par un menuisier et des Kiques effroyables. — Eglises sans noms.

— Coin oriental en descendant de l’hôtel vers une petite promenade au bord de l’eau menant à un champ entouré régulièrement de chênes sous lesquels j’écris. — A l’hôtel, dans une pièce qui semble être le salon, deux gravures : le retour et le départ du roi en 1817. M*’ d’Angoulême en Espagne, grand costume, bottes à l’écuyère ; son épée s’ap-puie sur un monstre enchainé qui doit être l’hydre de l’anarchie ; il se tient debout à côté du tronc. Au fond, sur un bouclier pendu à la muraille, il y a écrit : veni, vidi, vici.

De Vannes à Hennebont la route nous semble jolie ; vent frais sur l’impériale. — Bois que la route traverse.

Lorient. — Nullité complète ; rues basses et alignées. — Hôtel de France, gargote, serre dans le jardin. — Musique le soir sous les arbres devant le théâtre. — La calomnie de M. Scribe (M. de Sauvray Raymond), j’en sors malade. — Le port impossible à voir. — Promenade le soir. — Rien dedans. — Hennebont sur le penchant d’un coteau.

De Lorient à Hennebont à pied. — Florentin chantant une chanson génoise et vendant des plâtres. — Plantes violettes dans les ruines ; deux tours conservées avec des toits en ardoise. — En arrivant de Lorient : pan de mur à mâchicoulis garni de terre. — Sur le haut de la ville, promenade, vue sur la rivière ; en face l’Hôtel du Commerce ; grande allée d’ormeaux. — En relayant, idiot farouche, regard dur, grande redingote verte, pantalon de toile trop court, sabots, nu-pieds, chapeau de paille ; femme couverte ....

D’Hennebont à Ploërmel, sous la bâche. — Le conducteur est une espèce de marin. — Mélancolie en regardant la grande route. — A Vannes le démocrate classique, dési-rant notre intimité. — Procession, soldats, jeunes garçons vêtus de blanc couronnés de roses à Hennebont.

Ploërmel. — Eglise gothique du bon temps avec de jolis vitraux ; portail du commencement du xiv* siècle ; la truie à gauche sur un contrefort, près du portail latéral. — Dans un long vallon plat la campagne est foncée en couleur et bleue à l’horizon. — Idiot. — Père de a6 enfants nous récite des vers sur l’empereur.

Josselin, vu de l’angle du pont. — Trois tours, fenêtres carrées (du commencement du XV’ siècle). — Bâti sur roc, sur la rivière, rangée de mâchicoulis ; de face dix fenêtres dans le style de la reine Anne à Blois, mais d’un goût plus raide. — Aucune pareille ; l’entrecroisement des galeries également différent. — Enormes gargouilles : éléphants sans cornes, chien marin, dragon ; de dessous leur ventre part une gouttière en pierre menant jusquen bas, à 3 pieds du sol ; et terminée par une autre tête de gargouille de même caractère. L’une, vers le milieu, la deuxième en partant de l’angle droit, figurent la tête d’un crocodile dont le corps est la gouttière ; le corps est couvert de bosses et, sur les côtés des nageoires, un peu plus haut, la queue réparait autour de la colonne.

Eglise de Josselin. — Notre-Dame du Roncier ; robe rouge étalée en éventail renversé.

Ce sommaire a été développé par Maxime Du Camp.

VII

Baud. — A une petite demi-lieue, après avoir passé par un bois de hêtres, la Vénus de Quinipily qui n’est pas plus égyptienne que les deux cascatelles de Locminé. — Figure plate, écrasée, cheveux aplatis et ondes sur les tempes ; deux bandelettes s’entrecroisent sur son dos après avoir été prises par une espèce d’étole dont le devant, lui retombant sur la poitrine, finit en triangle comme un caleçon de Samoyède. Cuisses grasses, fortes ; genoux fléchis, mains croisées sur la poitrine ; la tête est enfoncée dans les épaules, ce qui, de profil, lui donne quelque chose de frissonnant ; seins marqués, fesses largement indiquées. Ensemble barbare.

QuiMPERLÉ. — Deux rivières. — En revenant, sentiers entre des murs ruisselant de feuilles et de ronces ; vieux pont tout tapissé de feuillage ; l’eau est limpide, arrêtée par les cailloux, elle gargouille et fait de petites cascades qui sont comme des voiles blancs accrochés sur le courant.

Saint-Michel. — N’a pas de façade. Le côté de l’ab-side est appuyé sur deux contreforts où sont accolées des maisons ; on passe dessous. A gauche, une vieille maison avec des bonshommes en bois sculpté, l’un broyant dans un mortier ; le porche latéral fleuri, lourd. — Dans l’intérieur, une statue en bois d’une Pieta : air Grassot de la mère, air Small. de J. — Un tableau de 1715 représentant la mort d’un évêque : à gauche, dans le bas, les âmes au

Église

10 Purgatoire ; le Père Éternel au haut en pape, le Christ avec sa croix ; la Vierge plus bas ; des anges en sandales descendant vers la terre où se meurt dans son lit un évêque ; un prêtre lui présente la croix, sa servante pleure ; un en-fant de chœur à genoux porte un cierge, souliers. Au pied du lit le Diable dégoûtant à l’air d’une vieille maquerelle grasse ; à la tête du lit l’ange qui invite l’évêque à venir au ciel ; sous la table, où sont quelques ornements d’église, le dragon.

L’église Sainte-Croix est le contraire de l’église Saint-Michel, elle donne plus qu’elle ne promet : roman pur, élevé,noble (blanchi 1) ; choeur monté sur une estrade, on y pénètre par deux escaliers ; sous l’autel une voûte où l’on descend par deux perrons de pierre. On pénètre dessous et on circule. — Plein de monde ; bonnet blanc des fem-mes ; les hommes en longs cheveux, en grègues, en sa-bots ; air vigoureux et gracieux, œil pénétrant et intense d’un jeune homme que j’avais vu descendre en sautant une ruelle en pente, à murs couverts de ronces et de lierres et qui est entré en même temps que moi dans l’église. — Autre assis en face sur les marches ; le jour tombait sur ses sabots ; sa tête se perdait dans la masse noire de ses cheveux retombant sur sa veste blanche. On s’est mis à chanter les litanies, j’entendais sa voix dans la masse. A sa gauche, le premier en face sur un banc, homme en veste bleue, air grave. — Aspect normal et tranquille de tous ces hommes qui semblent représenter leurs ancêtres et leurs descendants. — Cryptes ogive basse, ornements de feuilles aux chapiteaux. — Deux beaux tombeaux d'abbés avec la crosse, celui qui est par terre surtout, tout noir, draperies simples et belles, vrai gothique, quelque chose de car-Iovingien même, et puis plus loin le peuple qui chantait. La religion là au moins était vraie et ne choquait pas comme un anachronisme.

Rosporden. — Petit lac. — Église. — Femme pâle, maigre, qui priait sur une tombe dans le cimetière avec un air aussi intense que la femme dans l'église de Nantes près le confessionnal. C'était plus douloureux, plus profond, mais moins élevé, moins mystique ; elle avait la tête droite sur la pierre qu'elle perçait du regard ; l'autre, de côté, au ciel où elle entrevoyait quelque chose. — A côté de l'église petit lac. — Marché silencieux, sans rires, sans cris ; pas de cabarets ni de boutiques ; ils sont silencieux dans leurs cheveux comme le pays dans ses arbres. — Les mendiants tombent sur l'étranger et se ruent sur lui avec l'obstination de la faim.

Quimper. — Longue promenade d'ormeaux sur les bords de l'Odet, dans le genre de Quimperlé, mais moins herbue, moins simple comme impression. — Les abattoirs. S'il y avait des abattoirs d'hommes ! ai-je songé en entendant les cris des animaux ; un veau lié avait, par terre, des mouvements convulsifs de peur. — Cathédrale : Deux grandes tours avec de longues baies étroites, ogives disgracieuses, peu d'élévation comme style, qui a quelque chose du gothique en décadence, est pauvre ; vierge d'Ottin en marbre derrière le choeur, gentil et mollasse ; statue de Grallon à genoux avec une inscription expliquant qu'il a fait des fondations pieuses pour l'église.

Eglise Saint-Mathieu : beaux vitraux du fond du sanctuaire.

Journée du samedi. — Petite pluie fine. — Notre guide, petit vieillard d'une vivacité nerveuse, maigrelet, marchant mal et vite. “Tout ce que je voudrais c'est de retourner encore une fois à Rennes.” — A travers les haies de genêts et d'ajoncs, les routes voûtées de verdures où l'on peut se tenir à peine debout à cause des branches ; quelquefois une avenue de hêtres, deux vallons laissant voir la campagne, dans le brouillard, toute cicatrisée de haies ; et puis des cavées profondes, des pentes nues, jaunâtres d'ajoncs ; pas d'oiseaux, pas de village, pas d'hommes ; la verdure sombre et muette au pays féodal et triste.

Locmaria, à un quart de lieue de Quimper. — Vieux

roman, portail ogival, affreux saint Christophe ; bénitier, la pierre en est verte.

Plomelin. — Enseveli sous la verdure. — Eglise nue, mais qui ne parait pas nulle ; on y sent le sentiment malgré la plastique qui semble anti-plastique, c'est-à-dire que la forme est en rapport avec le lieu où elle se trouve. — Temple de faux dieux, masure ruinée, un portail gothique, plus loin un pan de mur avec une autre entrée ogivale ; les souterrains ont été bouchés.

Église de Kerfeunten. — Clocher carré à jour, en pierre. A gauche sous le porche une inscription en marbre blanc indiquant que le peintre Valentin, né à Guingamp, est enterré là ; belle verrière du fond : arbre généalogique de la Trinité dont le sommet soutient les pieds de la croix où le Christ agonise. — Eglise de la Mère-Dieu. — Jeune homme blond qui nous a apporté la clef ; veste bleue, cheveux contenus sous son chapeau. Quand il s’est agenouillé dans l’église ils ont déroulé comme ceux d’une femme, séparés par une raie sur le milieu de la tête. J’ai compris qu’une femme aussi pouvait aimer à passer sa main dans une chevelure. Quand nous en sommes sortis ils étaient tout répandus et étalés d’eux-mêmes. O les coiffeurs ! Ô l’art appris et montré ! O la bêtise humaine 1 — L’intérieur de l’église est nul, mais elle est si chastement cachée dans un nid de feuillage ! Une date indique qu’elle a été construite en 1590 et l’on aurait juré que l’église était des xiii^e^ ou xiv^e^ siècles.

Il ne reste de Notre-Dame de Guilen que le portail, petit, bas, d’une jolie ogive d’un excellent goût. Ronces, lierres et c’est tout. Sur les deux piliers carrés accolés aux deux côtés du portail, dans chacun un trou carré : lavabo. — La vagabonde.

Costumes. — Les veuves portent un bonnet bleu, le derrière des bonnets fait ceci avec des bouts relevés. Quelques-unes, broderies de couleurs aux parements, sous les aisselles, un galon qui cburt ; par derrière, leur corsage semble un fragment de fraise à grands tuyaux, mais ce n’est que par derrière, le tuyauté n’est pas par devant ; jupe brune plissée en long ; souliers découverts ronds, à boucles d’argent carrées. — Homme : grègues de cuir, sabots ou souliers à semelles de bois, chapeau rond d’une dimen-sion raisonnable, et non plus fantastique comme dans ie Morbihan, placé sur le derrière de la tête ; cela fait un bel effet avec leur chevelure. Veste bleue bordée de jaune, seconde veste par-dessus, sans manche, de même couleur, mais plus foncée ; large plaque de cuivre à la ceinture.

La Procession, les petits anges en bracelets, colliers, ru-bans, fleurs ; ça fait une impression de prostitution. Deux gamins en veste de nankin brodées, jeunes filles en blanc, l’une jolie, maigre, avec des gants jaunes. — Les chantres, la chasuble de velours violet. — Mine démesurément stupide de celui qui portait le Saint-Esprit. — Les troupiers s’agenouillent quand on encense le Saint-Sacrement ; les gendarmes suivent l’épée tirée ; bruit d’un pompier qui pissait pendant que le canon tirait et que le bourdon bourdonnait. — On est révolté quoiqu’on ne veuille pas l’être. — Hôtel de I’Épée. — Expression âpre de la fille qui nous servait, bavoletbleu, bouts de manches, tablier, bonnet blanc ; pas de cheveux.

ConcARNEAU. — Amabilité naïve ou prétentieuse de la jeune fille de l’établissement. — Arbres le long du quai. — Les mâchicoulis sont restaurés et intacts. — Marée basse, vue plate, au loin la mer. — La pierre branlante de Tregunc ne branle plus. — Cimetière celtique, avec les pierres disséminées au milieu des ajoncs et de l’herbe, font un bel effet. — Pluie, pluie. — La route de Concarneau à Fouesnant doit être ravissante, comme arbres, comme montées et descentes.

La Forêt. — On traverse une chaussée bâtie sur un petit bras de mer, les pointes de terre couvertes d’arbres avancent jusque dans la mer. — Caractère breton de l’église avec son clocher carré à jour. - — - Calvaire en pierre ; grcnouilles et tête de chien (ou d’autre animal) comme ornements.

FouesnAnt, lundi soir, 10 heures et demie, 14 juin. — Route jusqu’à Pont-l’Abbé même caractère, couverte d’arbres ; moins de landes que dans le Morbihan.

Bénodet. — On passe en bac.

Pont-l’Abbé. — Église, un seul côté de fait ; le côté droit de la nef s’appuie sur la muraille ; bonnes ogives, mais le tout abîmé sous le badigeon ; toujours le Père éternel en pape portant un petit Christ ; au-dessus le Saint-Esprit.

Danses à un ; entrelacement des rondes, queue allant et revenant. — La deuxième veste des hommes ne leur descend que jusqu’au milieu du dos avec des effilés pareils ; sur le bas de la première des broderies en fil blanc formant des lettres ; chapeau petit, gracieux, couvert de trois rubans de velours. La coiffure des femmes change : des oreillères brodées leur passent sur la tête laissant le derrière des cheveux à découvert ; le chignon relevé est contenu par le bout par un bandeau rouge, sur lequel elles mettent quelquefois un tout petit bonnet ou calotte blanche.

Le commissaire, le garde champêtre, quelle intimité secrète il doit exister entre eux. — Opérations chirurgicales. — Effet du râteau pièce à conviction ; foule ; le juge de paix ; un instrument contondant ; le bon gendarme.

{#) A une demi-lieue de distance du petit village de Baud, cachée au fond d’un bois de hêtres, se trouve la Vénus de Quinipily. C’est une statue en granit, de six pieds de haut, représentant une femme nue posant les mains sur sa poitrine ; une sorte d’étole qui passe autour du cou lui descend

<*’ Inédit, pages 150 à 172. jusque sur le ventre où elle s’arrête en triangle comme un caleçon de Samoyède ; deux bandelettes serrant ses cheveux ondes sont prises sous I’étole et vont s’entrecroiser par derrière à la chute des reins. A voir de profil ses cuisses grasses, sa croupe charnue, ses genoux fléchis et sa grosse tête enfoncée dans les épaules, elle vous semble d’une sensualité à la fois toute barbare et raffinée, la face est plate, le nez camus, les yeux à fleur de tête et la bouche ainsi que les doigts des pieds et des mains indiqués seulement par une

simple raie ; sur la poitrine on a voulu figurer des seins. Au bas de son piédestal est une grande cuve de même granit, ayant la forme d'un carré long terminé à l'une de ses extrémités par un demi-cercle ; il peut contenir, dit-on, seize barriques d'eau.

On l'a prise pour une Isis égyptienne à cause de ses bandelettes, ou pour une Vénus romaine à cause des inscriptions du piédestal. Que décider cependant si ces inscriptions, comme on l'as-sure, n'ont été mises là qu'au xvii" siècle par le comte Pierre de Lannion ? Devons-nous en revenir alors à l'hypothèse d'une Isis ? Mais n'est-ce pas voir, comme M. de Penhoet, la rage perma-nente de l'Egypte, que de reconnaître dans cette œuvre gauche, surabondante et lymphatique, le style élevé, svelte, rythmique des Égyptiens ? et n'y a-t-il pas, d'autre part, une irrévérence trop grossière à supposer les Romains, eux qui aimaient tant les belles femmes, capables jamais d'en avoir fait une si laide ? On sait seulement que jusqu'au xvn" siècle cette statue était placée sur la montagne de Cas-tan nec où les paysans bretons l'y adoraient comme une idole et lui apportaient des offrandes. Elle guérissait des malades ; les femmes relevant de couches se baignaient dans sa cuve et les jeunes gens désireux des noces accouraient s'y plonger pour se livrer ensuite, sous les yeux de la déesse, aux passe-temps solitaires des mélancolies amoureuses. En 1671 des missionnaires se trouvaient à Baud, ayant, à ce qu'il paraît, des prédilections d'une autre nature, en furent scandalisés et enga-gèrent le comte de Lannion, gouverneur du pays, à extirper d'un seul coup l'idolâtrie en détrui-sant l'idole ; le comte se contenta de la renverser et de la rouler du haut de la montagne dans la rivière qui passe au pied. Une inondation survint, les paysans l'attribuèrent à la colère de la déesse, la retirèrent de l'eau, la remirent à sa place et recommencèrent à célébrer son culte avec ces mêmes cérémonies qui révoltaient les honnêtes gens, comme on disait alors, si bien qu'un certain évêque de Vannes, Charles de Rosmadec, supplia à son tour le comte de Lannion (le fils du précédent) de mettre définitivement la pauvre statue en pièces. Le comte n'en fit rien, mais transporta le tout, cuve et femme, dans la cour de son château de Quinipily. Cet enlèvement ne se fit pas sans peine, il fallut que les soldats du gouverneur se défendissent contre les paysans qui la voulaient garder chez eux. Ils devaient y tenir. N'était-ce pas pour eux, au milieu de cette campagne rude et âpre, l'idole féconde et douce, l'idole fortifiante, excitante, guérissante, l'incarnation de la santé et de la chair et comme le symbole même du désir ?

Que ce soit donc la tentative d'un art qui s'éveille ou le fruit pourri d'une civilisation per-due, à quelque culte qu'elle appartienne, de quelque Olympe qu'elle descende, par sa légende et ses formes mêmes est-elle autre chose pour nous qu'une des mille manifestations de cette éternelle religion des entrailles de l’homme ? J’entends celle qui se reconstitue partout sous toutes les autres, s’étalant hier, se cachant aujourd’hui, mais qui pas plus que lui ne peut périr, car ce rêve permanent c’est le rêve individuel de son cœur, ce culte-là c’est le culte de son être : l’adoration de la Vie dans le principe qui la donne.

Le château qui a recueilli la statue est ruiné, rasé, disparu ; la Vénus se dresse au milieu des broussailles sous un dôme de feuilles vertes. Plus d’enceinte sacrée, de cérémonies, d’adorations ; il ne reste d’elle qu’elle seule, c’est-à-dire le Dieu sans la foi, ce qui est peu de chose ou rien du tout. Voilà donc le cadavre de ce qui fut peut-être une religion et ce qui demeure en définitive de la croyance de plusieurs siècles 1 L’idole cependant n’est pas morte sans pousser un râle qui s’entend encore : sur la chapelle chrétienne élevée à la place où jadis était son temple, son nom réapparaît comme l’outrage d’un souvenir dont on ne peut se décharger ; cette chapelle est nommée le prieuré de la Couarde(1).

II y avait autrefois à Quinipily deux autres statues que l’on a transportées à Locminé. Ce sont des hommes trapus, barbus, chevelus et coiffés sur le derrière de la tête d’un bonnet en façon de pyramide tronquée. Une ceinture de feuillage leur entoure le corps, chacun d’eux tient une massue à la main gauche. Je ne puis croire que ces deux espèces de cariatides, taillées par quelque manœuvre de village, aient eu jamais grande valeur ni grand sens, elles ont d’ailleurs par elles-mêmes je ne sais quel air canaille qui me les fit suspecter de n’être pas fort anciennes. Qu’on y voie ce qu’on voudra, des hercules gaulois ou des prêtres égyptiens, “car quant à la barbe et aux cheveux, dit M. de Penhoet, ce sont pour moi autant d’indices qu’il s’agit de prêtres du culte du soleil ou de Sérapis », ils n’en sont pas moins laids, archilaids, et, qui pis est, vilains.

Une heure après avoir quitté ces affreux bonshommes, nous arrivâmes à Quimperlé qui, pour n’offrir rien de celtique, de romain ou de phéni-cien, n’en est pas moins une des plus agréables bonnes fortunes que nous ayons rencontrées dans notre voyage.

Ici, pas d’alignement, pas de trottoir, aucune espèce de palais de justice, que nous sachions du

(‘) La Vénus s’appelle dans le pays la Vitille Couarde (groah geard). moins ; point de bourse en temple grec, aucune caserne, pas même de mairie montrant son inepte façade, rehaussée d’une loque tricolore. Mais ce sont de petites rues qui serpentent comme des sentiers entre de vieux murs d’où retombent des bouquets de feuillages et des grappes de clématite. Les maisons de bois ont des toits pointus et des balcons noirs, et on entend en passant près d’elles les rouets filer dans l’intérieur ou le bruit de quelque oiseau suspendu à la fenêtre dans une cage d’osier blanc. Deux rivières, au pied des montagnes, entourent la ville comme un bracelet d’argent ; elles se réunissent, s’entrecroisent, se divisent, disparaissent en revenant sans qu’on distingue de quel côté elles coulent, s’il y en a plusieurs ou une seule ; elles s’en vont ainsi entre les maisons et les rues en mouillant sur leur bord la dernière marche de l’escalier des jardins, et gargouillent sur les cailloux verts de leur lit où se courbent ensemble de grandes herbes minces. Les espèces de quais qui les enferment disjoi-gnent sous les racines des lierres leurs pierres qui s’éboulent ; elles restent au fond comme des rochers, et le courant se heurtant contre elles déchire dessus sa nappe unie. De place en place, sûr cette surface d’un bleu pâle, ces marques dans l’eau semblent les arrachures blanches d’un grand voile étendu que le vent ferait lever. D’une rive à l’autre un pont d’une seule arche a jeté sa courbe aplatie, dont la silhouette projetée tremblote sur la rivière avec les herbes suspendues à sa voûte ; elles descendent en chevelure, s’allongent jusqu’en bas, et frôlent du bout le courant qui passe à travers l’ogive de cette verdure aérienne. On voit tous les coudes de la rivière réapparaître au loin dans la prairie où elle s’ébat avec des lignes de peupliers sur l’herbe, des bouquets d’arbres derrière les places d’eau, et çà et là, sur les bords, deux ou trois bicoques de travers mirant obli-quement leurs poutres jaunes et leurs plâtres noircis. Puis au fond, tout au fond, dans une perspective se rétrécissant toujours, le vague aperçu des collines et des bois qui se perdent dans la brume.

La ville s’étageant graduellement remonte en face sur une colline avec cette eau, ces arbres, les madriers de ces maisons peints ou vermoulus, ces pignons de plomb, ces toits en tuiles serrés l’un près de l’autre ou régulièrement séparés par la ligne ondoyante de quelque mur tout chevelu ; il semble que Quimperlé n’est venu au monde que pour être un sujet d’aquarelle.

L’église Saint-Michel montre, au-dessus de la ville qui se déroule à ses pieds, les quatre clochetons de sa tour et sa galerie à arcade, mais l’on est fort surpris, quand on arrive auprès, de ne trouver qu’une église assez commune et n’ayant même pour portail qu’un portail latéral divisé par deux portes jumelles dont la forme serait jolie si l’ornementation générale n’en était trop lourde. Sur les contreforts de l’abside deux maisons voisines sont venues appuyer leur premier étage qui, lorsqu’on monte de la ville vers l’église, font l’effet d’un pont jeté sur chacune des rues. La façade de l’une d’elles, noire, obscure, rongée de mites, porte sur les poutres extérieures de sa charpente des personnages sculptés fort amusants ; ils ont des bonnets ronds, des mines sérieuses et des robes longues que leur plisse autour de la taille une ceinture à large boucle. Us sont occupés à différentes besognes qui paraissent très importantes. Un d’eux tenant un pilon broie quelque chose dans un mortier. Probablement que c’était le logis vénéré d’un bon apothicaire-herboriste d’autrefois, lors du vieux temps des élixirs et des juleps, quand on venait chercher chez lui la drogue orien-tale, le médicament miellé, l’or potable qui prolonge la vie, et puis aussi le remède mystérieux qui se composait la nuit dans la seconde arrière-boutique, derrière les gros alambics verts et les paquets de baume : la potion contre l’épilepsie, faite de raclure de crâne humain et de sang de décapité ou le sirop prolifique pour les vieux ma-ris. Celui qui fit bâtir cette maison fut, j’imagine, quelque gros bourgeois du temps ayant sa stalle dans le chœur et sa métairie hors la ville, qui était marguillier de l’église et doit y être enterré quelque part.

II n’y a rien à voir dans l’intérieur de Saint-Michel, et nous allions en sortir quand nous dé-couvrîmes une statue en bois et un tableau â l’huile, la statue est une Pieta dont je défie.qui que ce soit de donner une idée ; la Vierge, bleue et rouge, ressemble à Grassot, l’acteur ; le Christ, jaune et vert, à Small, coiffeur (Palais-Royal, ga-feric Maatpensier, 7).

Mais que dire du tableau dont la poésie miri-fique rappelle (de foin, il est vrai) les extrasu-blimes fresques de Nort ? Un évoque est dans son lit, il va mourir, ce pauvre vieux, mats il a gardé néanmoins sa calotte rouge pour qu’on voie bien qu’il est évêque jusqu’au bout ; son corps se dessi-nant sous les draps avec une gentillesse charmante qui rappelle le galbe d’une andouille vue à travers un torchon mouillé ; à ses côtés un prêtre, en surplis, lui présente la croix à baiser, tandis que sa servante, non loin, pleure en s’essuyant les yeux à l’ourlet de son tablier. A la tête du lit un ange emplumé se penche et souffle de bons conseils à Monseigneur, qui hésite quelque peu, car à ses pieds, en effet, un diable vert, avec un bec de corbeau et des mamelles d’une mollassité dégoûtante, essaie de le fasciner par ses contorsions. La chambre est pleine de chapelets, d’encensoirs, de saints ciboires, de saints sacrements, de reliques et d’agnus Dei. Tout près du moribond, à ge-noux, vu de dos, au premier plan, se tient un enfant de chœur portant un cierge ; la semelle jaune de ses robustes souliers est garnie de clous aussi formidables que les dents des diables, et se présente devant vous avec une naïveté qui fait plaisir, d’autant qu’un raccourci de jambes bien entendu les lui fait remonter jusqu’au milieu des reins. Cependant l’enfer fait rage, l’haleine em-pestée du démon vert se répand en bouffées noires, des oiseaux sinistres voltigent, des serpents s’enroulent aux barreaux des chaises, il y a sous une table un affreux dragon se tordant, bavant, rugissant ; on a peur, on palpite, on tremble pour l’âme de l’évêque. Quel dommage si un homme pareil allait en enfer ! Ira-t-il ? n’ira-t-il pas ? Tout en conservant le calme de l’enfant de chœur, le spectateur ne peut s’empêcher de partager les transes du vicaire et la douleur de la servante. Heureusement que la sainte Trinité veille au salut de l’évêque. En haut est le Père Éternel habillé en pape ; un peu plus bas, à distance respectueuse, le Christ avec sa croix, et plus bas encore, sur un troisième coussin, la Vierge Marie. Ils envoient vers l’évêque de jolis anges qui traversent l’air, ayant à la main des lis lumineux et qui, marchant dignement sur des nuages de mastic, arrondissent leurs mollets rebondis où se rattachent les cordons roses de leurs cothurnes indigo.

Ô sainte religion catholique, si tu as inspiré des chefs-d’œuvre, que de galettes, en revanche, n’as-tu pas causées !

En contemplant cette épouvantable toile, et en songeant que beaucoup l’ont pu regarder sans rire, qu’à d’autres sans doute elle a semblé belle, que d’autres enfin se sont agenouillés devant, y ont puisé peut-être des inspirations suprêmes, nous avons été pris malgré nous d’une mélancolie chagrine. Mais qu’y a-t-il donc dans le cœur de l’homme pour que toujours et sans cesse il le jette sur toutes choses et se cramponne avec une ardeur pareille au laid comme au beau, au mes-quin comme au sublime ? Hélas ! hélas ! rappe-lons-nous, pour excuser celui qui a fait cela et encore plus ceux qui l’admirent, nos prédilections maladives et nos extases imbéciles ! Évoquons dans notre passé tout ce que nous avons eu jadis d’a-mour naïf pour quelque femme laide, de candide enthousiasme pour un niais ou d’amitié dévouée pour un lâche...

Sortis de l’église enfin, nous retrouvâmes le soleil, le ciel, l’air, l’espace, et comme un oiseau joyeux qui s’échappe, quelque chose s’envolant de notre âme disait : « C’est cela ! qu’il me faut, car Dieu est là et pas ailleurs.”

Le soir venait, on sonnait la prière dans les clochers. Nous descendîmes vers la ville par une ruelle à gradins de bois, longue, étroite, remplie d’herbes et qui coulait entre deux grands murs. Leur chaperon disparaissait sous le feuillage, partout les lierres s’y accrochaient, les orties blanches en cachaient le pied et ils n’avaient l’air bâtis que pour porter cette végétation charmante. C’était un torrent de verdure ruisselant à travers les maisons du haut de la côte en bas de la ville.

Nous nous en allions lentement, marche à marche, quand nous nous sommes retournés pour laisser passer un jeune garçon qui descendait en sautant. II était robuste et beau, ses cheveux bruns, que coiffait son chapeau rond de feutre noir, couvraient à demi sa veste bleue et à chacun de ses bonds s’envolaient et retombaient sur ses épaules ; sa taille courte, mais pleine de souplesse, se cambrait d’une façon hardie au mouvement de ses cuisses jouant à l’aise dans son bragow-brass de toile écrue ; son mollet dur, serré dans des grèves blanches, saillissait nerveusement, et son pied chaussé de gros sabots était léger comme celui d’un cha-mois. II s’arrêta à quelques pas de nous pour renouer la boucle de sa jarretière, nous vîmes de profil sa figure pâle sur laquelle, dans cette pose, sa grande chevelure s’avançait comme une draperie et pendait jusqu’au coude. Lorsqu’il eut fini, il se redressa vite et nous le vîmes d’échelon en échelon qui continuait a sauter et de bonds en bonds s’éloignait.

Nous le retrouvâmes dans l’église Sainte-Croix chantant les litanies de la Vierge, à genoux, le front levé sur le ciel ; il nous reconnut, tourna vers nous le regard sérieux de ses jeux noirs, l’y arrê.ta un instant avec une curiosité méfiante, puis il reprit son maintien et continua sa prière. Cette église Sainte-Croix est une belle église romane du xi* siècle, à qui son plan circulaire, sa voûte divisée par arcades, ses colonnes engagées à leur base dans des piliers carrés, ses pleins cintres surhaussés et son chœur placé au milieu auquel on monte par des escaliers de plusieurs marches donnent je ne sais quel air bas-empire et gallo-romain. La lumière arrivant d’en haut par de longues fenêtres étroites descend presque perpen-diculaire, comme le jour des ateliers, et déverse sur vous une sérénité blanche et pacifique. Ce

11 n’est pas le christianisme rêveur de l’ogive, avec le souffle mystique des cathédrales gothiques, c’est plus reculé, plus latin, d’une théologie plus primitive, d’une poésie plus chaude, on se rappelle le cloftre d’Arles et les grands conciles carlo-vingiens.

Elle était pleine. Tout le monde priait, nous seuls regardions. La foule chantait avec une joie grave, et des bas côtés, de dessous le porche, de partout, des voix puissantes reprenaient en chœur, après chaque point d’orgue de la voix grêle du prêtre officiant à l’autel. Cela sortait comme d’une seule poitrine un immense cri d’amour. Les fem-mes agenouillées à une même place inclinaient la tête sous leur bonnet blanc, on n’en pouvait voir le visage, mais on voyait leurs dos courbés ensemble et la file de leurs mains jointes.

Les hommes étaient debout, assis, à genoux, à toutes les places, dans tous les sens, comme ils avaient pu se mettre ou comme la fantaisie les en avait pris ; ils ne semblaient cependant ni contraints ni distraits, on sentait au contraire qu’ils existaient là comme chez eux, chacun s’isolant dans la solitude de son recueillement ou se ré-chauffant à l’âme de ses frères, et les attitudes de leurs corps étaient nonchalantes ou majestueuses, selon sans doute leurs lassitudes ou leurs redressements intérieurs.

C’étaient des figures graves sous de longs cheveux bruns, de rudes regards plus fauves que la lande, de larges poitrines qui respiraient d’une façon puissante, des têtes songeuses, des airs rus-tiques et solennels ; mais ces fronts hâlés, découverts, ces solides épaules qui s’inclinaient, ces mains grises comme le manche des charrues et qui restaient oisives, et même les lourdes chaussures que le respect rendait légères, toute cette rudesse tournée en grâce, cette force devenant douceur à son insu avait un grandiose singulièrement doux, presque attendrissant à force d’être naïf. Ils étaient beaux ces hommes, beaux parce qu’ils étaient vrais et dans la simplicité de leurs costumes faits à leur taille, aptes à leurs corps, plies selon le travail de leur vie, et dans la bonne foi de leur croyance qui s’exhalait à l’aise dans cette église faite pour elle, restes derniers d’une nationalité complète qui s’efface sans métamor-phoses et disparaît sans transition, ainsi que les feuilles de l’if qui tombent sans jaunir. Avec leur costume d’autrefois, leur antique visage et cette religion de leurs ancêtres ils exhibaient ainsi les générations antérieures et semblaient à eux seuls représenter toute leur race. C’est pour cela peut-être qu’ils avaient l’air si pleins, et que chacun d’eux paraissait porter en lui plus de choses qu’il n’y en a ordinairement dans un homme.,

Sous l’église romane se trouve la crypte ro-mane.

Ce souterrain quadrilatéral au lieu de voûte est couvert d’un plafond plat, dallé comme le sol et supporté par quatre rangs de colonnettes soudées ensemble qui se séparent aux deux tiers de leur hauteur ; elles ont toutes de lourds chapiteaux au feuillage allongé, et se relient entre elles par des arcatures surhaussées se succédant sans intervalle.

On tâtonne dans l’ombre, et à la lueur de l’unique fenêtre du fond on aperçoit deux tombeaux noirs, humides, verts, deux vénérables tombeaux. Le premier porte la statue couchée d’un moine. On le reconnaît à la large tonsure qui montre à nu son vieux crâne de pierre ; il tient un livre à la main ; sa figure est rongée, comme à celle des morts le nez disparaît, et son corps maigre est enveloppé de longues draperies qui coulent vers ses pieds à grands plis droits.

Près de lui, sur une lame de pierre, est un abbé avec sa crosse et croisant les bras ; deux chiens soutiennent son écusson burelé sans couleur ; ses pieds, chaussés de chaussures pointues, ne s’appuient sur rien ; un petit dais carré abrite sa tête. On regarde le premier comme étant saint Gurlot, martyrisé à cette place même, aussi son sarcophage est-il percé d’un trou où à certains jours de fête les malades viennent se plonger le bras pour se guérir. Mais le second mort n’a pas laissé son nom. Promenant sur lui notre chandelle nous avons cherché à reconnaître son visage, comme si nous l’eussions connu jadis ! N’est-on pas toujours attiré vers ces choses par un sentiment d’inquiétude curieuse ainsi que vis-à-vis d’un voyageur qui vient de loin ou d’une lettre cachetée. Ainsi se passe une journée en voyage, il n’en faut pas plus pour la remplir : une rivière, des buissons,

une belle tête d’enfant, des tombeaux ; on savoure la couleur des herbes, on écoute le bruit des eaux, on contemple les visages, on se promène parmi les pierres, on s’accoude sur les tombes, et le lendemain on rencontre d’autres hommes, d’autres pays, d’autres débris ; on établit des antithèses, on fait des rapprochements. C’est là le plaisir, il en vaut bien un autre.

A Rosporden, par exemple, nous vîmes dans le cimetière une femme en prières qui nous en rappela une autre que nous avions vue dans la cathédrale de Nantes. Elle était à genoux, raidie, immobile, le corps droit, la tête baissée et regardant la terre avec un œil fouilleur plein de rage et de tristesse. Ce regard perçait la dalle blanche, entrait, descendait, pompait à lui ce qu'il y avait dessous ; celle de Nantes, au contraire, dont le teint était blanc comme la cire des cierges, couchée de côté sur un prie-Dieu, la bouche ouverte dans l'extase, les yeux portés au ciel, au delà du ciel, plus haut encore, avait l'âme partie au dehors. Toutes deux priaient avec une aspiration démesurée, et certes qu'il n'y avait plus pour elles rien dans la création que l'objet de ce désespoir et de cette espérance. La première s'acharnait au néant, la seconde montait à Dieu ; ce qui était regret dans l'une était désir dans l'autre ; et le désespoir de celle-ci si acre qu'elle s'y complaisait comme à une volupté dépravée, et le désir de celle-là si fort qu'elle en souffrait comme d'un supplice. Ainsi toutes deux tourmentées par la vie souhai-taient d'en sortir : celle qui priait sur le tombeau, pour rejoindre ce qu'elle avait perdu ; celle qui priait devant la Vierge, pour s'unir à ce qu'elle adorait. Douleur, aspiration, prière, mêmes rêves et quel abîme ! L'un pivotait sur un souvenir, l'autre gravitait vers l'éternité !

Au village de Rosporden nous avons revu les hommes que nous venions de quitter à Quimperlé : mêmes allures, mêmes habits, grand chapeau, grand gilet, veste bleue ou blanche, large ceinture de cuir, bragow-brass, galoches, mêmes aspects dévisage, mêmes tournures de corps.

C'était jour de marché, la place était pleine de paysans, de charrettes et de bœufs ; on entendait sonner les rauques syllabes celtiques mêlées au grognement des animaux et au claquement des charrettes, mais pas de confusion, d'éclats, ni rires dans les groupes ni bavardages sur le seuil des cabarets, pas un homme ivre, pas de marchand ambulant, point de boutique de toile peinte pour les femmes, ou de verroterie pour les enfants, rien de joyeux, de heurté, d'animé. Ceux qui veulent vendre attendent résignés et sans bouger le chaland qui vient à eux. Dans la place se promènent des couples de bœufs avec quelque en-fant qui les retient par les cornes, ou bien trotte une maigre rosse au milieu de la foule qui s'écarte, sans jurer ni se plaindre. Puis on se regarde un instant, la convention se conclut et l'on s'en retourne chez soi sans s'attarder davantage. En effet le village est éloigné, la lande est grande, le soir arrive, il n'y a personne au logis, la mère est partie dans les tamarins couper des bourrées pour l'hiver, l'enfant est sur la côte à ramasser le varech ou à garder les moutons. Quant au valet de ferme, le plus souvent il n'y en a pas, chaque cultivateur ayant d'ordinaire un petit coin de terrain qu'il égratigne tout seul tant bien que mal et dont il est le maître, l'esclave plutôt ! puisqu'il s'use vai-nement dessus. L'homme ne pouvant engraisser la terre, la terre ne pouvant nourrir l'homme, pourquoi donc ne la quitte-t-il pas ? pourquoi ne se vend-il pas comme le Suisse ? ne s'exile-t-il point comme l'Alsacien ? pourquoi y demeure-t-il avec un amour si opiniâtre ! qui le sait ? le sait-il lui-même ?

Nulle part donc vous ne rencontrez comme chez nous de ces gros fermiers cossus,ventrus, à la face avinée, à la sacoche bourrée d'argent, qui s'en viennent aux foires de campagne, y font grand bruit, y marchandent longuement, se disputent en criant, se tapent dans la main, braillent dans les cafés en jouant aux dominos, s'emplissent de viandes et d'eau-de-vie, boivent jusqu'à trente demi-tasses en un jour, et ne s'en retournent que bien tard dans la nuit, tout en s'endormant sur leur bidette qui trottine lentement le long du chemin jusqu'à ce qu'elle s'arrête d'elle-même à la barrière de la cour, en reconnaissant la bonne écurie où elle a de la litière jusqu'au ventre. Mais le paysan breton repart à jeun, il eût été trop cher de manger dehors ; il va retrouver sa galette de sarrasin et sa jatte de bouillie de maïs cuite depuis huit jours dont il se nourrit toute l'année, à côté des porcs qui rôdent sous la table et de la vache qui rumine là sur son fumier, dans un coin de la même pièce.

D'ailleurs pourquoi serait-il gai ? Qu'a-t-il rap-porté du bourg ? S'il a vendu son cheval, il lui faudra maintenant porter les fardeaux et traîner lui-même la charrue, belle avance ! A quoi lui sert le peu d'argent qu'il en a retiré ? est-ce que tout à l'heure ou demain ou la semaine qui s'approche on ne va pas venir le lui demander dans une langue qu'il n'entend pas, au nom de la loi qu'il jgnore ? Est-ce la peine d'en gagner ? aussi travaille-t-il peu, mal, d'une façon ennuyée et sans s'inquiéter s'il pourrait mieux faire.

Méfiant, jaloux, ahuri par tout ce qu'il voit sans comprendre, il s'empresse donc bien vite de quitter la ville, le bourg, et de regagner sa chau-mière cachée sous des arbres touffus, derrière la haie compacte, et là il se resserre étroitement dans la famille, à son foyer, auprès de son rec-teur, aux pieds du saint de l'église, et il y concentre son cœur qui, condensé sur lui-même, se double d'énergie. De tout ce qui se passe il ne sait rien, si ce n'est qu'à vingt ans son fils s'en ira se battre, puis qu'il y a une ville qui s'appelle Paris et que le roi de France est Louis-Philippe dont il vous demandera des nouvelles, par interprète, en s'informant s'il vit encore, si vous le voyez souvent, et si vous dînez chez lui. Quoi qu'il soit, l'étranger pour eux est toujours quelque chose d'extraordinaire, de vague et de mi-roitant dont ils voudraient bien se rendre compte ; on l'admire, on le contemple, on lui demande l'heure pour voir sa belle montre, on le dévore du regard, d'un regard curieux, envieux, haineux peut-être, car il est riche, lui, bien riche, il habite Paris, la ville lointaine, la ville énorme et reten-tissante.

Dès que vous arrivez quelque part, les mendiants se ruent sur vous et s'y cramponnent avec l'obstination de la faim. Vous leur donnez, ils restent ; vous leur donnez encore, leur nombre s’accroît, bientôt c’est une foule qui vous assiège. Vous aurez beau vider votre poche jusqu’au dernier Iiard, ils n’en demeurent pas moins acharnés à vos flancs, occupés à réciter leurs prières, lesquelles sont malheureusement fort longues et heureusement inintelligibles. Si vous stationnez, ils ne bougent ; si vous vous en allez, ils vous suivent ; rien n’y remédie, ni discours, ni panto-mime. On dirait un parti pris pour vous mettre en rage, leur ténacité est irritante, implacable. Comme on se prend à regretter alors les bonnes bassesses facétieuses du mendiant italien, faisant la roue de-vant votre carriole en vous traitant d’excellence, et l’aimable gueuserie insolente du gamin de Paris qui vous demande votre bout de cigare en vous appelant général et qui le ramasse dans la boue en vous riant au nez !

La pauvreté du Midi n’a rien qui attriste, elle se présente à vous pittoresque, colorée, rieuse, insouciante, chauffant ses poux à l’air chaud et dormant sous la treille ; mais celle du Nord, celle qui a froid, celle qui grelotte dans le brouillard et patauge nu-pieds dans la terre grasse, semble toujours humide de pleurs, engourdie, dolente, et méchante comme une bête malade. Ils sont si pauvres ! la viande pour eux est un luxe rare. Un de nos guides nous disait : “C’est mon plus grand bonheur, comme je tape dessus quand j’en at-trape !” Pour le pain, on n’en mange pas non plus tous les jours. Notre postillon de Locminé n’en avait point goûté depuis huit mois. Une telle existence n’embellit pas les races ; aussi rencontre-t-on quantité d’estropiés, de manchots, d’aveugles-nés, de bossus, de dartreux, de rachi-tiques ; ainsi que les chênes dont les chétifs s’étio-lent au vent de la mer et dont les robustes n’en poussent que mieux, se durcissent aux gelées, ceux qui ont traversé toute cette misère sans y rien laisser n’en paraissent que plus sains, plus droits et plus solides. Ce sont ceux-là que vous voyez passer devant vous, si austères et si forts, taciturnes sous leurs longs cheveux comme leur pays sous sa sombre verdure.

Dans les villes, quoique la langue persiste, le caractère s’efface, le costume national devient plus rare, refoulé qu’il est dans la campagne par l’envahissement progressif du tailleur et de la coutu-rière, dont la petite boutique du rez-de-chaussée étale à son vitrail quelque belle gravure de mode qui fait envie. L’habitant de la ville voit s’arrêter tous les soirs la diligence au bureau des messageries, il en retire bien quelque nouvelle, soit du postillon qui a causé avec le conducteur, ou du commissionnaire qui porte les paquets ; à la tombée du jour, il converse sur sa porte avec l’huissier, le commis de la mairie ou l’employé de la sous-préfecture, lesquels lisent les journaux et savent ce qui se passe dans le monde. Petit à petit ainsi, il se désenbretonne et arrive à s’écarter du paysan qu’il méprise de plus en plus et qui s’éloigne de lui davantage, à mesure qu’ils se comprennent moins.

Ce qu’il y a encore de plus breton dans les villes, ce sont les pauvres filles qu’on fait venir pour servir comme domestiques. Confinées dans leur service, avec qui communiqueraient-elles pour perdre le caractère natal ? Voyez-les s’arrêter dans la rue avec l’homme qui apporte chaque semaine de la campagne les œufs et le beurre. Que leur dit-il ? II leur parle de leur village, de leurs parents ; leur frère leur envoie pour cadeau de noces une belle paire de boucles d’argent, il faudra bien les porter ; il y aura bientôt un pardon, il faudra y venir. Elles iront donc et s’y retremperont à tout ce que la patrie a de plus distinctif, le langage et le costume ; aussi quand elles seront de retour chez leurs maîtres, leur cœur restera là-bas, et elles en causeront ensemble en se promenant comme elles font, par bandes de dix ou vingt, sur les places et à l’entrée de la grande route, le dimanche après les vêpres.

Ainsi se conserve au milieu d’une population déjà bâtarde ce petit peuple entêté, qui tournoie dans l’autre sans y perdre ses angles. A Quimper, à table d’hôte, en regardant la servante, fille large d’épaules, de visage âpre et d’une tenue rigide, avec son bonnet blanc, ses bouts de manche et son bavolet carré, qui servait des œufs à la neige à un gros monsieur à lunettes d’or, inspecteur des contributions indirectes, je me disais : « Voilà donc les deux sociétés face à face et le rapport final d’un siècle à l’autre ! Le vieux portrait s’humilie devant la caricature moderne. D’où j’ai tiré cet axiome : le Présent fait cirer ses bottes par le Passé et ne l’en remercie même pas.”

Quimper, quoique le centre de la vraie Bretagne, est distinct d’elle. Sa belle promenade d’ormeaux, le long de la rivière qui coule entre les quais et porte navires, la rend fort coquette, et le grand hôtel de la préfecture, recouvrant à lui seul le petit delta de l’ouest, lui donne une tournure toute française et administrative. Vous vous apercevez que vous êtes dans un chef-lieu de département, ce qui vous rappelle aussitôt les divisions par arrondissements, avec les grandes, moyennes et petites vicinalités, les comités d’instruction primaire, les caisses d’épargne, les conseils généraux et autres inventions modernes qui enlèvent toujours aux lieux qui en sont doués quelque peu de couleur locale pour le voyageur naïf qui la rêve. N’en déplaise aux gens qui prononcent ce nom de Quimper-Corentin, comme le nom même du ridicule et de l’encroûtement provincial, c’est un charmant petit endroit et qui en vaut beaucoup d’autres plus respectés. Vous n’y retrouvez pas, il est vrai, les fantaisies de Quimperlé, le luxe de ses herbes, le tapage de ses couleurs, mais je sais peu de choses d’un aspect aussi agréable que cette belle allée qui s’en va indéfiniment au bord de l’eau et sur laquelle l’escarpement presque à pic d’une montagne toute proche déverse l’ombre foncée de sa verdure plantureuse.

On n’est pas longtemps à faire le tour de semblables cités ni à les connaître jusque dans leurs replis les plus intimes et on y découvre quelquefois des coins qui arrêtent et vous mettent le cœur en joie. Les petites villes, en effet, sont comme les petits appartements ; elles paraissent d’abord plus chaudes et plus commodes à vivre. Mais restez sur votre illusion. Les premières ont plus de vents coulis qu’un palais, et dans les secondes il y a plus d’ennui qu’au désert.

En revenant vers l’hôtel par un de ces bons sentiers comme nous les aimons, un de ces sentiers qui montent, descendent, tournent et reviennent, tantôt le long d’un mur, tantôt dans un champ, puis entre des broussailles ou dans le gazon, ayant tour à tour des cailloux, des marguerites, des orties, sentiers vagabonds faits pour les pensées flâneuses et les causeries à arabesques ; en revenant donc vers la ville, nous avons entendu sortir de dessous le toit d’ardoises d’un bâtiment carré des gémissements et des bêlements plaintifs. C’était l’abattoir.

Sur le seuil, un grand chien lapait dans une mare de sang et tirait lentement du bout des dents le cordon bleu des instestins d’un bœuf qu’on venait de lui jeter. La porte des cabines était ouverte. Les bouchers besognaient dedans, les bras retroussés. Suspendu, la tête en bas et les pieds passés par les tendons dans un bâton tombant du plafond, un bœuf, soufflé et gonflé comme une outre, avait la peau du ventre fendue en deux lambeaux. On voyait s’écarter doucement avec elle la couche de graisse qui la doublait et successivement apparaître dans l’intérieur, au tranchant du couteau, un tas de choses vertes, rouges et noires, qui avaient des couleurs superbes. Les entrailles fumaient ; la vie s’en échappait dans une bouffée tiède et nauséabonde. Près de là, un veau couché par terre fixait sur la rigole de sang ses gros yeux ronds épouvantés, et tremblait convulsivement malgré les liens qui lui serraient les pattes. Ses flancs battaient, ses narines s’ouvraient. Les autres loges étaient remplies de râles prolongés, de bêlements chevrotants, de beuglements rauques. On distinguait la voix de ceux qu’on tuait, celle de ceux qui se mouraient, celle de ceux qui allaient mourir. II y avait des cris singuliers, des intonations d’une détresse profonde qui semblaient dire des mots qu’on aurait presque pu comprendre. En ce moment, j’ai eu l’idée d’une ville terrible, de quelque ville épouvantable et démesurée, comme serait une Baby-Ione ou une Babel de Cannibales où il y aurait des abattoirs d’hommes ; et j’ai cherché à retrouver quelque chose des agonies humaines, dans ces égorgements qui bramaient et sanglotaient. J’ai songé à des troupeaux d’esclaves amenés là, la corde au cou, et noués â des anneaux, pour nourrir des maîtres qui les mangeaient sur des tables d’ivoire, en s’essuyant les lèvres à des nappes de pourpre. Auraient-ils des poses plus abattues, des regards plus tristes, des prières plus déchirantes ?

^Un garçon a pris un maillet de fer, on a poussé devant lui le pauvre veau qu’on venait de délier, il a levé son instrument dont il l’a frappé d’un coup sec sur le crâne entre les yeux. Ça a fait un bruit sourd, la bête est tombée raide morte avec de l’écume aux lèvres et la langue serrée dans les dents ; on l’a prise, on l’a remuée, elle ne bougeait pas ; on l’a hissée à la poulie pour la dépecer.

Au premier coup de couteau elle a frémi dans toute sa chair, puis est redevenue morte. L’était-elle ? Qui le sait ? Qu’en savez-vous, vous philosophes et physiologistes ? êtes-vous bien sûrs de ce que c’est que la mort ? Qui vous a dit que pour n’avoir pas de manifestations l’âme n’avait plus de conscience ? et qu’elle ne sentait pas goutte à goutte, atome à atome, la décomposition successive de ce corps qu’elle animait ? Qui vous

‘*> Inédit, pages 175 à 178. a dit que le cadavre ne souffre pas à chaque piqûre de tous les vers qui le rongent jusqu’à ce que ses parties intégrantes étant passées ailleurs y revivent une autre vie ou continuent la même, de sorte qu’il y aurait ainsi une moitié de l’être engagée dans une existence nouvelle, tandis que l’autre demeurerait retenue dans l’existence intérieure, un peu comme le lapin que j’ai vu dévorer tout vivant par une chienne de Terre-Neuve et dont la tête était avalée quand les pattes de derrière lui gigotaient encore ?

En sortant, nous avons revu le dogue qui continuait son festin, il avait presque fini son plat de tripes crues, il se léchait les babines et on venait de lui servir pour dessert le péritoine d’un mou-ton ; il est très gras et a l’air farouche.

Nous avons vu aussi à Quimper la cathédrale, grande église du xv° siècle qui ne nous a pas divertis quoique ses tours carrées aient deux immenses baies vraiment très bien construites, quoique son abside soit penchée à droite ainsi que sur son épaule fa tête du Christ mourant, et quoiqu’il y ait en outre une assez gentille Vierge de Ottin, d’une sculpture plus gracieuse qu’élégante et plus mollasse que tendre.

Nous aperçûmes ensuite, dans l’église Saint-Mathieu, des vitraux fort beaux, mais que nous n’eûmes pas le loisir d’examiner à notre aise, car nous fûmes expulsés du chœur par la frénésie du bedeau qui arriva sur nous en nous criant d’une voix exaspérée : “Sortez du sanctuaire ! Voulez-vous bien sortir du sanctuaire ! Mais sortez donc du sanctuaire !”. Pour y rester, il eût fallu se battre ou graisser la patte de cette bête féroce, moyens qui répugnaient également à notre caractère et à notre dignité.

Qu’exigez-vous de plus sur Quimper ? Que voulez-vous savoir encore ? Est-ce d’où lui vient son nom de Quimper ? Quimper veut dire con-fluant, à cause du confluent de I’Odet et de l’Eir (note : aussi Quimperlé, confluent de I’EHée). Pourquoi on y a ajouté Corentin ? C’est à cause de Corentin, son premier évêque “ayant esté homme de grande religion et intégrité de vie, vivant au temps de Gralon, roi de Bretagne ». Faut-il maintenant les dates ? Sachez donc que la première pierre de la cathédrale fut posée le 26 juillet 1424 par l’évêque

Bertrand Rosmadec, et la dernière l’an 1501 (j’ignore le jour, quel dommage !). De plus, la ville fut prise en 1344 par Charles de Blois, puis assiégée une fois en 1345 par le comte de Montfort, puis deux fois en 1594 avant de se rendre au maréchal d’Aumont. Mais vous n’exigez pas, ô lecteurs, la description des sièges (j’oublie toujours que je n’ai pas de lecteurs), donc je m’épargnerai également la relation des facétieuses entrées des évêques de Cor-nouailles, qui devaient laisser au prieuré de Locmaria leurs gants et leur bonnet, et à la porte de la cathédrale leurs bottes et leurs éperonsll) ; ainsi

(‘) C’était la propriété du seigneur de Guengot, qui avait tiié les bottes et qui les emportait ainsi que le cheval.

12 que celle de la vieille coutume du verre de vin que l’on présentait la veille de la Sainte-Cécile à la statue du roi Grallon et qui, bu d’un trait par un des sonneurs de l’église, était rejeté dans la foule où celui qui le rapportait sans fracture au chapitre était récompensé d’un louis d’or. Toutes ces choses en effet étant aussi ennuyeuses à redire qu’elles ont été amusantes à apprendre, les livres vous les donneront si vous en êtes curieux, et non pas nous qui ne prisons pas assez les livres pour les copier, quoiqu’il nous arrive d’en lire et que nous ayons même la prétention d’en faire.

Etant à Quimper, nous sortîmes un jour par un côté de la ville et rentrâmes par l’autre après avoir marché dans la campagne pendant huit heures environ.

Sous le porche de l’hôtel, notre guide nous attendait. II se mit aussitôt à courir devant nous, et nous le suivîmes. C’était un petit bonhomme à cheveux blancs, coiffé d’une casquette de toile, chaussé de souliers percés et vêtu d’une vieille redingote brune trop large qui lui flottait autour de la taille. II bredouillait en parlant, se cognait les genoux en marchant et roulait sur lui-même ; néanmoins il avançait vite avec une opiniâtreté toute nerveuse, presque fébrile. De temps à autre seulement il arrachait une feuille d’arbre et se la collait contre la bouche pour se rafraîchir. Son métier est de courir les environs, pour aller por-ter les lettres ou faire des commissions. II va ainsi à Douarnenez, à Quimperlé, à Brest, jusqu’à Rennes qui est à quarante lieues de là (voyage qu’il a exécuté une fois en quatre journées, y compris l’aller et le retour). « Toute mon ambition, disait-il, est de retourner encore une fois dans ma vie à Rennes. » Et cela, sans autre but que d’y retourner, pour y retourner, afin de faire une longue course et pour pouvoir s’en vanter ensuite. II sait toutes les routes, il connaît les communes avec leurs clochers ; il prend des chemins de traverse à travers champs, ouvre les barrières des cours et, en passant devant les maisons, souhaite le bonjour aux maîtres. A force d’entendre chanter les oiseaux, il s’est appris à imiter leurs cris, et, tout en marchant sous les arbres, il siffle comme eux pour charmer sa solitude.

Nous nous arrêtâmes d'abord à un quart de lieue de la ville, à Locmaria, ancien prieuré, jadis donné à l'abbaye de Fontevrault par Co-nan III. Le prieuré n'a pas, comme l'abbaye du pauvre Robert d'ArbriselIe, été utilisé d'une ignoble manière. Il est abandonné, mais sans souillures. Son portail gothique ne retentit pas1 de la voix des gardes-chiourme, et s'il en reste peu de chose, l'esprit, du moins, n'éprouve ni révolte ni dégoût. Il n'y a de curieux comme détail, dans cette petite chapelle d'un vieux roman sévère, qu'un grand bénitier sans pilier, posé sur le sol et dont le granit taillé à pans est devenu presque noir. Large, profond, il représente bien le vrai bénitier catholique, fait pour y plonger tout entier le corps d'un enfant, et non pas ces cuvettes étroites de nos églises dans lesquelles on trempe le bout du doigt. Avec son eau claire rendue plus limpide encore par la couche verdâtre du fond, cette végétation qui a sourdi dans le calme religieux des siècles, ses angles usés, sa lourde masse à couleur de bronze, il ressemble à un de ces rochers creu-sés d'eux-mêmes dans lesquels on trouve de l'eau de mer.

Quand nous eûmes bien tourné autour, nous redescendîmes vers la rivière que nous traver-sâmes en bateau et nous nous enfonçâmes dans la campagne.

Elle est déserte et singulièrement vide. Des arbres, des genêts, des ajoncs, des tamarins au bord des fossés, des landes qui s'étendent, et d'hommes, nulle part. Le ciel était pâle ; une pluie fine, mouillant l'air, mettait sur le pays comme un voile uni qui l'enveloppait d'une teinte grise. Nous allions dans des chemins creux qui s'engouffraient sous des berceaux de verdure, dont les branches réunies, s'abaissant sur nos têtes, nous permettaient à peine d'y passer debout. La lumière, arrêtée par le feuillage, était verdâtre et faible comme celle d'un soir d'hiver. Tout au fond, cependant, on voyait jaillir un jour vif qui jouait sur le bord des feuilles et en éclairait les découpures. Puis on se trouvait au haut de quelque pente aride descendant toute plate et unie, sans un brin d'herbe qui tranchât sur l'uniformité de sa couleur jaune. Quelquefois, au contraire, s'élevait une longue avenue de hêtres dont les gros troncs luisants avaient de la mousse à leurs pieds. Des traces d'ornières passaient là, comme pour mener à quelque château qu'on s'attendait avoir ; mais l'avenue s'arrêtait tout à coup et la rase campagne s'étalait au bout. Dans l'écartement de deux valions, elle développait sa verte étendue sillon-née en balafres noires par les lignes capricieuses des haies, tachée çà et là par la masse d'un bois, enluminée par des bouquets d'ajoncs, ou blanchie par quelque champ cultivé au bord des prairies qui remontaient lentement vers les collines et se perdaient dans l'horizon. Au-dessus d'elles, bien loin à travers la brume, dans un trou du ciel, apparaissait un méandre bleu, c'était la mer.

Les oiseaux se taisent ou sont absents ; les feuilles sont épaisses, l'herbe étouffe le bruit des pas, et la contrée muette vous regarde comme un triste visage. Elle semble faite exprès pour recevoir les existences en ruines, les douleurs résignées ; elles pourront, solitairement, y nourrir leurs amertumes à ce lent murmure des arbres et des genêts et sous ce ciel qui pleure. Dans les nuits d'hiver, quand le renard se glisse sur les feuilles sèches, quand les tuiles tombent du toit des co-lombiers, que la lande fouette ses joncs, que les hêtres se courbent et qu'au clair de lune le loup galope sur la neige, assis tout seul près du foyer qui s'éteint, en écoutant le vent hurler dans les longs corridors sonores, c'est là qu'il doit être doux de tirer du fond de son cœur ses désespoirs les plus chéris avec ses amours les plus oubliées. Nous avons vu une masure en ruines où l'on entrait par un portail gothique ; plus loin se dressait un vieux pan de mur troué d'une porte en ogive ; une ronce dépouillée s'y balançait à la brise. Dans la cour, le terrain inégal est couvert de bruyères, de violettes et de cailloux. On distingue vaguement des anciens restes de douves ; on entre quelques pas dans un souterrain comblé ; on se promène là dedans, on regarde et on s'en va. Ce lieu s'appelle le temple des faux Dieux, et était, à ce que l'on suppose, une commanderie de Templiers.

Notre guide est reparti devant nous, nous avons continué à le suivre.

Un clocher est sorti d'entre les arbres ; nous avons traversé un champ en friche, escaladé le haut bord d'un fossé ; deux ou trois maisons ont paru : c'était le village de Plomelin. Un sentier fait la rue ; quelques maisons, séparées entre elles par des cours plantées, composent tout le village. Quel calme ! quel abandon plutôt ! les seuils sont vides, les cours sont désertes.

Où sont les maîtres ? On les dirait tous partis à l'affût, se tapir derrière les genêts pour y guetter le Bleu qui doit passer dans la ravine.

L'église est pauvre et d'une nudité sans pareille. Pas de beaux saints peinturlurés, pas de toiles aux murs, ni, au plafond, de lampe suspendue oscillant au bout de sa longue corde droite. Dans un coin du chœur, parterre, brûle une mèche dans un verre rempli d'huile. Des piliers ronds supportent la voûte de bois dont la couleur bleue est déteinte. Par les fenêtres à vitrail blanc arrive le grand jour des champs verdi par le feuillage des arbres d'alentour qui recouvrent le toit de l'église. La porte (une petite porte en bois que l'on ferme avec un loquet) était ouverte ; une volée d'oiseaux est entrée, voletant, caquetant, criant, se cognant aux murs ; ils ont tourbillonné sous la voûte, sont allés se jouer autour de l'autel. Deux ou trois se sont abattus sur le bord du bénitier, y ont trempé leur bec, et puis, tous, comme ils étaient venus, sont repartis ensemble. Il n'est pas rare en Bretagne de les voir ainsi dans les églises ; plusieurs y habitent et accrochent leur nid aux pierres de la nef ; on les laisse en paix. Lorsqu'il pleut, ils accourent, mais dès que le soleil reparaît dans les vitraux et que les gouttières s’égouttent, ils regagnent les champs. De sorte que pendant l’orage deux créatures frêles entrent souvent à la fois dans la demeure bénie : l’homme pour y faire sa prière et y abriter ses terreurs, l’oiseau pour y attendre que la pluie soit passée et réchauffer les plumes naissantes de ses petits engourdis.

Un charme singulier transpire de ces pauvres églises. Ce n’est pas leur misère qui émeut, puisqu’alors même qu’il n’y a personne, on dirait qu’elles sont habitées. N’est-ce pas plutôt leur pudeur qui ravit ? Car avec leur clocher bas, leur toit qui se cache sous les arbres, elles semblent se faire petites et s’humilier sous le grand ciel de Dieu. Ce n’est point, en effet, une pensée d’orgueil qui les a bâties, ni la fantaisie pieuse de quelque grand de la terre en agonie. On sent, au contraire, que c’est l’impression simple d’un be-soin, le cri naïf d’un appétit, et comme le lit de feuilles sèches du pâtre, la hutte que l’âme s’est faite pour s’y étendre à l’aise à ses heures de fatigue. Plus que celles des villes, ces églises de village ont l’air de tenir au caractère du pays qui les porte et de participer davantage à la vie des familles qui, de père en fils, viennent à la même place y poser les genoux sur la même dalle. Cha-que dimanche, chaque jour, en entrant et en sortant, ne revoient-ils pas en outre les tombes de leurs parents, qu’ils ont ainsi près d’eux dans la prière, comme à un foyer plus élargi d’où ils ne sont pas absents tout à fait ? Ces églises ont donc un sens harmonique où, comprise entre le bap-tistère et le cimetière, s’accomplit la vie de ces hommes. 11 n’en est pas ainsi chez nous qui, relé-guant l’éternité hors barrière, exilons nos morts dans les faubourgs, pour les loger dans le quartier des équarrisseurs et des fabriques de soude, à côté des magasins de poudrette.

Vers trois heures de l’après-midi, nous arrivâmes près les portes de Quimper, à la chapelle de Kerfeunteun. II y a, au fond, une belle verrière du xvi° siècle, représentant l’arbre généalogique de la Trinité. Jacob en forme la souche et la croix du Christ le sommet, qui est surmonté lui-même du Père éternel qui a la tiare au front. Le clocher carré figure sur chaque face un quadrila-tère percé à jour, comme une lanterne, par une longue baie droite. II ne pose pas immédiatement sur la toiture, mais, à l’aide d’une base amincie dont les quatre côtés se rétrécissent et se touchent presque, formant un angle obtus vers la crête du toit. En Bretagne, presque toutes les églises de village ont de ces clochers-là.

Avant de rentrer dans la ville, nous fîmes un détour pour aller visiter la chapelle de la Mère-Dieu. Comme d’ordinaire on la ferme, notre guide prit en route le gardien qui en a la clef ; il vint avec nous, emmenant par la main sa petite nièce qui tout le long du chemin s’arrêtait pour ramasser des bouquets. II marchait devant nous dans le sentier. Sa mince taille d’adolescent à cam-brure flexible, un peu molle, était serrée dans une veste de drap bleu ciel, et sur son dos s’agi-taient les trois rubans de velours de son petit chapeau noir qui, posé soigneusement sur le derrière de la tête, retenait ses cheveux tordus en chignon.

Au fond d’un vallon, d’un ravin plutôt, l’église de la Mère-Dieu se voile sous le feuillage des hêtres. A cette place, dans le silence de cette grande verdure, à cause sans doute de son petit portail gothique que l’on croirait du xiue siècle et qui est du xvi% elle a je ne sais quel air qui rappelle ces chapelles discrètes des vieux romans et des vieilles romances, où l’on armait chevalier le page qui partait pour la Terre-Sainte, un matin, au chant de l’alouette, quand les étoiles pâlissaient, et qu’à travers la grille passait la main blanche de la châ-telaine que le baiser de départ trempait aussitôt de mille pleurs d’amour.

Nous sommes entrés. Le jeune homme s’est agenouillé en ôtant son chapeau, et la grosse tor-sade de sa chevelure blonde s’est échappée et s’est dépliée dans une secousse en tombant le long de son dos. Un instant accrochée au drap rude de sa veste, elle a gardé la trace des plis qui la roulaient tout à l’heure, peu à peu est descendue, s’est écartée, étalée, répandue comme une vraie chevelure de femme. Séparée sur le milieu par une raie, elle coulait à flots égaux sur ses deux épaules et couvrait son cou nu. Toute cette nappe d’un ton doré avait des ondoiements de lumière qui changeaient et fuyaient à chaque mouvement de tête qu’il faisait en priant. A ses côtés, la petite fille, à genoux comme lui, avait laissé tomber son bouquet par terre. Là seulement, et pour la première fois, j’ai compris fa beauté de la chevelure de l’homme et le charme qu’elle peut avoir pour des bras nus qui s’y plongent. Etrange progrès que celui qui consiste à s’écourter partout les superfé-tations grandioses de la nature, si bien que lorsque nous la découvrons dans toute sa vierge plénitude, nous nous en étonnons comme d’une merveille révélée.

î*>0 coiffeurs, ô fers à papillottes, ô philocomes à la vanille ou au citron, perruquiers de tous pays, brosses de toutes façons, onguents de toutes

‘*’ Inédit, pages 186 à 194.. puanteurs, ornez les chevelures de vos tire-bouchons et de vos tortillons, rasez-les à la malcon-tent, roulez-les à la Perrinet-Leclerc, montez-les en poire, étalez-les en saule pleureur, versez dessus votre colle de poisson, votre sirop de coing, vos bandolines, fixateurs et vos encaustiques luisants ; taillez, coupez, frisez raide et pommadez gras, ja-mais vous ne m’en montrerez une d’une distinction si relevée, d’une grâce si voluptueuse que celle-là, que l’on ne peignait sans doute qu’avec un gros peigne de corne blanche et que la pluie du ciel et la rosée mouillaient seules de leur eau pure.

Le lendemain, à midi, les rues de Quimper se tendirent de draps de calicot, les cloches son-nèrent, on sema sur le pavé des roses et des juliennes, et dans les carrefours se dressèrent des espèces d’estrades décorées de colonnes de verdure où s’enroulaient des guirlandes de fleurs en papier peint. C’était le dimanche de je ne sais quelle fête, et la procession allait passer. Sur le devant des portes on voyait les servantes dans leur toilette de campagne, avec des broderies de couleur sur les manches de leur casaquin et la tête prise entre leurs grands bonnets à barbes relevées et leur col-lerette raide qui fait l’effet par derrière d’une fraise à gros tuyaux ; leur jupe brune est plissée à petits plis serrés, droits comme ceux des bragow-brass, et leurs souliers découverts portent sur le cou-de-pied de larges boucles d’argent. Aux fenêtres, la haute société, comme aux premières loges, attendait le spectacle du cortège. Les cloches ont redoublé leur volée, on a entendu des chants, on a battu du tambour, on a tiré des coups de fusil et deux files de gamins ont débouché des deux côtés de la rue. Au milieu cir-culait un prêtre en surplis qui commandait la manœuvre à l’aide d’un livre en bois qu’il fermait par un coup sec qui résonnait comme celui d’un battoir. Les enfants avaient des pantalons bouton-nés par-dessus leur veste, un cierge éteint à la main droite et braillaient comme des ânes. Après eux venaient les petites filles toutes en robes blanches, avec des ceintures bleues, et au milieu d’elles un ecclésiastique quelconque pareillement occupé à aller de rang en rang pour les faire s’avancer, s’arrêter, repartir, chanter et se taire. Enfin venaient les chantres et les chanoines ouvrant tous la bouche, baissant les jeux et marchant au pas, en se prélassant dignement dans leurs belles chasubles d’église. Je me souviens d’une surtout qui était de velours violet brodé d’or ; elle brillait là, seule, unique, splendide, effaçant toutes les autres ; l’homme qu’elle recouvrait jouissait à la porter, il s’y délectait, il ne pouvait s’empêcher de sourire tout en chantant, et de se dandiner des épaules pour faire admirer le pan de derrière où était brodé un saint ciboire surmonté d’un soleil. Si le chapitre, en effet, n’en possède pas une seconde, s’il y a soixante gens en droit de la revêtir et qu’on ne fasse que sept ou huit processions par année, voilà peut-être dix ans qu’il l’attend, qu’il l’espère, qu’il languit, qu’il soupire après, car il faut compter les passe-droits, les bassesses triomphantes des rivaux, les préfé-rences injustes. II a donc vieilli, il a maigri dans l’anxiété de l’avoir. Aujourd’hui enfin il l’a ; il la porte sur son dos, dans la rue, on la voit, on le voit dessous, elle dessus. Comme elle lui va bien ! II la flaire, il la hume, il se gonfle dans sa doublure pour l’emplir partout, il y promène ses yeux, il en contemple les broderies, il se repaft des galons ; elle est lourde, il sue, elle l’écrase, tant mieux ! il n’en éprouve que plus de joie, il ne la sent que davantage sur ses épaules ; et il les remue exprès pour se convaincre qu’elle est là, qu’elle tient d’aplomb, qu’il ne l’a pas perdue. Ah ! que ne peut-elle se coller sur lui pour qu’on ne puisse la lui reprendre, car tantôt il va falloir la rendre et quand la remettra-t-il ? jamais peut-être, mon Dieu ; deux jours pareils ne reviennent pas dans la vie. Comme il l’aime ! comme il l’adore, cette chasuble dont la beauté lui remplit l’âme, et avec elle aussi cette bonne religion catholique sans laquelle la chasuble n’existerait pas et en l’honneur de laquelle elle a été faite ! Aussi comme il chante ! avec quel cœur ! avec quelle foi ! avec quel orgueil ! II convient qu’un homme ainsi revêtu ait une voix démesurée, or la sienne domi-nait tout, elle tonnait avec une plénitude sacer-dotale, c’était un beuglement continu couvrant les cris des enfants, le piétinement de la foule et le bourdonnement du serpent dont le souffleur hors d’haleine était pourtant bleu de fatigue. Sous un dais de velours cramoisi s’avança en-core une autre chasuble. Dessous, un homme à front déprimé, blond comme un porte-cigares en cuir de Russie* ayant des cils blancs, des sourcils rouges et les cheveux roulés en champignons, un de ces êtres à profil encore plus bas que niais et qui semblent scrofuleux encore plus en dedans qu’en dessus, portait pieusement d’un air confit et boursouflé le saint Sacrement en or qui tremblait dans ses mains contractées que revêtaient des gants de coton blanc. Autour de lui les enfants de chœur encensaient, les chantres vocifé-raient ; il marchait sur les fleurs que l’on jetait devant ses pas, et lorsqu’aux reposoirs il élevait sa chose reluisante, tout le monde se mettait à genoux, y compris les soldats, les gardes natio-naux et les gendarmes qui escortaient la procession. Quatre rubans de satin tombant du dais étaient tenus par deux bambins habillés en nankin jaune, brodé sur toutes les coutures, et par deux toutes petites filles en robe bleue semée d’étoiles d’argent, les bras nus, garnis de bracelets, avec une couronne sur la tête et deux ailes roses dans le dos.

Suivaient ensuite des bourgeois de la ville qui jouaient du violon, du piston et du basson, puis une douzaine de gendarmes le sabre tiré, puis la garde nationale sur deux files, puis une compagnie de soldats précédée d’un tambour-major qui faisait tournoyer sa canne et remuer son panache.

N’ayant plus rien à voir à Quimper ni dans les environs, nous nous disposâmes pour notre expédition du Finistère dont nous devions parcourir la côte à pied jusqu’à Brest. C’était une course de quatre-vingts lieues. Nous fîmes remettre une pièce à nos souliers et nous partîmes.

Notre première étape fut Concarneau que nous vîmes assez mal, car la pluie tombait à torrents, des ruisseaux jaunes coulaient au pied des maisons et, s’engouffrant au trou des parapets du port, se versaient sur les bancs de vase où étaient couchées sur le flanc des barques vides. L’eau coulait dessus et pénétrait la toile de leurs voiles endormies dans la boue comme un voyageur fatigué. A la prochaine marée cependant elles se relè-veront et s’en iront emmenant avec elles le fucus ou la petite coquille qu’on voit accrochée aux planches de la carène et qui la suit partout dans les flots.

La mer était loin, la vue s’étendait sur les sables et se perdait vite dans la morne teinte du ciel bar-bouillé par les mille rainures de la pluie.

La ville est ceinte de murailles dont à marée haute là vague vient battre la base, les mâchicoulis sont encore intacts comme au temps de la reine Anne, et la ligne des pierres dentelées s’allonge sur les remparts droite et basse, en se découpant dans la brume.

Dans l’intervalle de deux ondées nous passâmes les portes et lé pont-Ievis pour aller à une lieue de là voir là pierre branlante de Trégunc. La route, verdoyante, avait des coudes successifs et des plans inégaux ; c’était large et vert. Comme un poulain en liberté le regard galopait dans la campagne et se roulait sur l’herbe fraîche. A me-sure que nous avancions, des pierres disséminées sur le sol augmentaient de nombre et de gran-deur, et détachaient leurs formes inégales parmi les bouquets d’ajoncs jaunes. Au milieu d’elles se dresse, sur une hauteur de onze pieds, un cône de granit renversé, posé sur une saillie de rocher presque à fleur de terre. Telle est la fameuse pierre branlante de Trégunc que les maris autrefois venaient ébranler pour savoir à quoi s’en tenir sur le compte de la chasteté de leurs épouses. Si la pierre remuait, cela voulait dire : vous l’êtes ! et si elle ne bougeait : revenez demain. Des auteurs assurent l’avoir mise en mouvement, mais pour nous, qui sommes célibataires, elle est restée aussi inébranlable à tous nos coups d’épaule que l’aurait été la grande pyramide d’Egypte.

Deux heures après nous étions de retour à Concarneau. La pluie avait repris de plus belle, notre hôtesse nous faisait pour rester les plus aimables instances. II y avait certes de quoi retenir des chiens ou charmer des tigres, néanmoins nous nous informâmes de suite d’un véhicule quelconque qui pût nous mener le soir même coucher à Fouesnant, la patrie des belles femmes. On trouva d’abord la voiture, puis un homme pour nous conduire, puis le cheval et enfin des harnais. Après que tout se fut ajusté l’un dans l’autre à grande peine, nous nous huchâmes dans le tape-cul qui, trop petit déjà pour nous deux, ne pouvait contenir notre conducteur. II se mit donc à pied et prit par le licou la rosse engourdie qu’il traînait ainsi dans les montées et retenait dans les descentes. Quand il était fatigué, il s’asseyait derrière sur l’essieu et la machine sans s’arrêter continuait son train. Elle allait en zigzags, s’accrochant dans les haies, se cognant aux cailloux, retombant dans les ornières, s’arrêtant aux saignées, et toujours nous *bocquesonnant* devant les yeux sa capote recourbée qui nous dérobait le paysage. De temps à autre, en nous penchant, nous saisissions quelque chose, un massif d’arbres, une clairière dans le bois, un bout de chemin qui tournait, une épine en fleurs dans les pommiers, un bout de mer qu’on voyait à travers les branches ; mais bientôt, à cause de la pente qui montait, les brancards se levaient en l’air et nous n’apercevions plus que le ciel sur nos têtes ; ou bien si elle descendait nous plongions en avant sur les jarrets du cheval et ne recevions plus de jour que par l’intervalle de la capote et du garde-crotte qui tendaient à se refermer sur nous et s’entrechoquaient dans les cahots.

A la Forêt nous passâmes sur une digue qui continuait la route dans l’eau et coupait par le milieu une des plus charmantes baies qu’il y ait. Elle s’avance dans les terres entre deux coteaux boisés dont les arbres descendant jusqu’en bas trempent dans les flots le bout de leur feuillage qui retombe en touffes diffuses, avec des courbes molles comme font les saules sur les bords des rivières.

Une église parut » Nous arrêtâmes la carriole et allâmes en faire le tour. Son clocher, découpé comme celui de Kerfunteun, est flanqué de deux clochetons, et sur son petit portail s’élève un pinacle d’où ressortent des têtes de grenouille et de chien. En face se verdit à la pluie un de ces bons vieux calvaires bretons, ciselés, sculptés, portant fleurons et personnages ; une face représente la Vierge, l’autre Jésus et ses apôtres.

Quant à l’intérieur de l’église, je ne m’en souviens guère, car je crois ne l’avoir pas vu, de même que celle de Fouesnant. Je me rappelle seulement un grand bénitier taillé dans un pilier, et de larges dalles posées transversalement poiir clore l’entrée du cimetière, en manière d’écha-liers.

Fouesnant, du reste, ce lieu si vanté pour toutes les délices qu’il possède, ne nous offrit qu’une détestable omelette que nous mangeâmes tout de même, un épouvantable lit où nous dormîmes néanmoins, et une pluie incessante qui ne nous empêcha pas de repartir le lendemain, ayant ra-battu le bord de nos chapeaux et endossé nos waterproff.

Cette journée-là fut la première de nos vaillantes journées du Finistère. Nous fûmes rafraîchis par le vent, chauffés par le soleil, la pluie nous trempa jusqu’au dernier fil, la sueur jusqu’au dernier poil ; nous dînâmes d’artichauts crus et nous nous trompâmes de route. Longtemps, sans que cela nous parût long, nous cheminâmes par la rase campagne, sous les arbres dans des chemins creux, sur la lande à travers les sillons la-bourés, dans des sentiers, sur la grande route. Quand nous étions las, nous débouclions nos sacs et couchés au pied d’un chêne, sur le revers d’un fossé, tout en fumant et causant, nous regardions les nuages rouler, nous laissions fes heures passer.

A Bénodet nous avons traversé la rivière dans un bac. A Combrit nous nous sommes perdus et nous retournions vers Quimper si un cantonnier ne nous en avait avertis.

A cinq heures du soir, nous arrivâmes à Pont-I’Abbé, enduits d’une respectable couche de poussière et de boue qui se répandit de nos vêtements sur le parquet de la chambre de notre auberge, avec une prodigalité si désastreuse, que nous étions presque humiliés du gâchis que nous faisions, rien qu’en nous posant quelque part.

Pont-I’Abbé est une petite ville fort paisible, coupée dans sa longueur par une large rue pavée. Les maigres rentiers qui l’habitent ne doivent pas avoir l’air plus nul, plus modeste et plus béte.

II y a à voiry pour ceux qui partout veulent voir quelque chose, les restes insignifiants du château et l’église ; une église qui serait passable, d’ailleurs, si elle n’était encroûtée par le plus épais des badigeons qu’aient jamais rêvés les conseils de fabrique. La chapelle de la Vierge était remplie

■3- ‘ de fleurs. Bouquets de jonquilles, juliennes, pensées, roses, chèvrefeuilles et jasmins mis dans des vases de porcelaine blanche ou dans des verres bleus, étalaient leurs couleurs sur l’autel et montaient entre les grands flambeaux vers le visage de la Vierge, jusque par-dessus sa couronne d’ar-gent, d’où retombait un voile de mousseline à longs plis qui s’accrochait à l’étoile d’or du bam-bino de plâtre suspendu dans ses bras. On sentait l’eau bénite et le parfum des fleurs. C’était un petit coin embaumé, mystérieux, doux, à l’écart dans l’église, retraite cachée, ornée avec amour, toute propice aux exhalaisons du désir mystique et aux longs épanchements des oraisons éplorées. Comprimée par le climat, amortie par la mi-sère, l’homme reporte ici toute ia sensualité de son cœur, il la dépose aux pieds de Marie, sous le regard de la femme céleste et il y satisfait, en l’excitant, cette inextinguible soif de jouir et d’aimer. Que la pluie tombe par le toit, qu’il n’y ait ni bancs ni chaises dans la nef, partout vous n’en découvrirez pas moins luisante, frottée et coquette, cette chapelle de la Vierge, avec des fleurs fraîches et des cierges allumés. Là, semble se concentrer toute la tendresse religieuse de la Bretagne ; voilà le repli le plus mol de son cœur, c’est là sa faiblesse, sa passion, son trésor. Il n’y a pas de fleurs dans la campagne, mais il y en a dans l’église ; on est pauvre, mais la Vierge est riche ; toujours belle, elle sourit pour tous et les âmes endolories vont se réchauffer sur ses genoux, comme à un foyer qui ne s’éteint pas. On s’étonrle de l’acharnement de ce peuple à ses croyances, mais sait-on tout ce qu’elles lui donnent de délectation et de voluptés, tout ce qu’il en retire de plaisir ? L’ascétisme n’est-il pas un épicurisme supérieur, le jeûne une gourmandise raffinée ? La religion comporte en soi des sensations presque charnelles ; la prière a ses débauches, la morti-fication son délire, et les hommes qui le soir viennent s’agenouiller devant cette statue habillée y éprouvent aussi des battements de cœur et des enivrements vagues, pendant que, dans les rues, les enfants des villes revenant de la classe s’arrêtent rêveurs et troublés à contempler sur sa fenêtre la femme ardente qui leur fait les doux yeux.

II faut assister à ce qu’on appelle ses fêtes, pour se convaincre du caractère sombre de ce peuple. II ne danse pas, il tourne ; il ne chante pas,,il siffle. Ce soir même, nous allâmes, dans un village des environs, voir l’inauguration d’une aire à battre. Deux joueurs de biniou, montés sur le mur de la cour, poussaient sans discontinuer le souffle criard de leur instrument, au son du-quel couraient au petit trot, en se suivant à la queue du loup, deux longues files qui revenaient sur elles-mêmes, tournaient, se coupaient et se re-nouaient à des intervalles inégaux. Les pas lourds battaient le sol, sans souci de là mesure, tandis que les notes aiguës de la musique se précipitaient l'une sur l'autre dans une monotonie glapissante. Ceux qui ne voulaient plus danser s !en allaient, sans que la danse en fût troublée, et ils rentraient de suite quand ils avaient repris haleine. Pendant près d'une heure que nous considérâmes cet étrange exercice, la foule ne s'arrêta qu'une fois, les musiciens s'étant interrompus pour boire un verre de cidre ; puis, les longues lignes s'ébran-lèrent de nouveau et se mirent il tourner. A l'en-trée de la cour, sur une table, on vendait des noix ; à côté était un broc d'eau-de-vie, par terre une barrique de cidre ; non loin, se tenait un particulier en casquette de cuir et en redingote verte ; près de lui, un homme en veste avec un sabre suspendu par un baudrier blanc : c'était le commissaire de police de Pont-I'Abbé avec son garde champêtre.

Bientôt, M. le commissaire tira sa montre de sa poche, fit un signe au garde qui alla parler à quelques paysans et l'assemblée se dispersa.

Nous nous en revînmes tous quatre de compagnie à la ville et nous eûmes dans ce trajet le loisir d'admirer encore ici une de ces combinaisons harmoniques de la Providence qui avait fait ce commissaire de police pour ce garde champêtre et ce garde champêtre pour ce commissaire de police. Ils étaient emboîtés, engrenés l'un dans l'autre. Le même fait leur occasionnait la même réflexion, de la même idée ils tiraient des déduc-tions parallèles. 'Quand le commissaire riait, le garde souriait ; quand H prenait un air grave, l'autre avait un air sombre ;, si la redingote disait : « •il faut faire cela", la ! veste répondait : « .j'y avais songé » ; si elle continuait : « c'est nécessaire », celle-ci ajoutait : "c'est indispensable". Et les rapports de rang et d'autorité n'en restaient pas moins, malgré cette adhésion intime, respective-ment distincts, nettement établis. Ainsi, le garde élevait la voix moins haut que le commissaire, était un peu plus petit et marchait derrière. Le commissaire, poli, important, beau parleur, se consultait, ruminait à part, causait tout seul et faisait claquer sa langue ; le garde était doux, attentif, pensif, observait de son côté, poussait des interjections et se grattait le bout du nez. Chemin faisant, il s'informait des nouvelles, lui demandait des avis, sollicitait ses ordres, et le commissaire questionnait, méditait, donnait des commandements.

Nous touchions aux premières maisons de la ville, quand nous entendîmes de l'une d'elles sor-tir des cris aigus. La rue était pleine d'une foule agitée et des gens accouraient vers le commissaire en lui disant : « Arrivez, arrivez, monsieur, on se bat ! II y a deux femmes de tuées ! — Par qui ? — On n’en sait rien. — Pourquoi ? — Elles saignent. — Mais comment ? — Avec un râteau. — Où est l’assassin ? — L’une à la tête, l’autre au bras. Entrez, on vous attend, elles sont là.”

Le commissaire entra donc, et nous à sa suite.

C’était un bruit de sanglots, de cris, de paroles, une houle qui se poussait et s’étouffait. On se marchait sur les pieds, on se coudoyait, on jurait, on ne -voyait rien. Le commissaire commença par se mettre en colère. Mais comme il ne parlait pas le breton, ce fut le garde qui se mit en colère pour lui et qui chassa le public de céans, en prenant tout le monde par les épaules et en le poussant à la porte.

Lorsqu’il n’y eut plus dans la pièce qu’une douzaine de personnes environ, nous parvînmes à distinguer dans un coin un lambeau de chair qui pendait à un bras et une masse noire comme une chevelure sur laquelle coulaient des gouttes de sang. C’étaient la vieille femme et la jeune fille blessées dans la bagarre. La vieille, qui était sèche et grande et portait une peau bistrée, plissée comme du parchemin, se tenait debout avec son bras gauche dans sa main droite, geignait à peine et n’avait pas l’air de souffrir ; mais la jeune fille pleurait. Assise, écartant les lèvres, baissant la tête, et les mains à plat sur les genoux, elle tremblait convulsivement et sanglotait tout bas. A toutes les questions qu’on leur faisait, elles ne répondaient que par des plaintes, et les témoi-gnages de ceux qui avaient vu donner les coups ne concordant même pas entre eux, il fut impos-sible de connaître ni qui avait battu ni pourquoi on avait battu. Les uns disaient que c’était un mari qui avait surpris sa femme dans une position horizontale ; d’autres, que c’étaient les femmes qui s’étaient disputées et que le maître de la mai-son avait voulu les assommer pour les faire taire. On ne savait rien de précis, M. le commissaire en était fort perplexe et le garde tout interdit.

Le médecin du pays étant absent, ou ces bonnes gens ne voulant pas s’en servir parce que cela coûtait trop cher, nous eûmes l’aplomb d’of-frir “le secours de nos faibles talents” et nous courûmes chercher notre nécessaire de voyage avec un bout de sparadrap, une bande et de ia charpie que nous avions, en prévision d’accident, fourrés au fond de notre sac.

C’eût été, ma foi, un beau spectacle pour nos amis, que de nous voir étalant doctoralement sur la table de ce gîte notre bistouri, nos pinces et nos trois paires de ciseaux, dont une à branches de vermeil. Le commissaire admirait notre philan-thropie ; les commères nous regardaient en silence, la chandelle jaune coulait dans son chandelier de fer et allongeait sa mèche que le garde mouchait avec ses doigts. La bonne femme fut pansée la première. Le coup avait été consciencieusement donné ; ie bras dénudé montrait l’os et un triangle de chair d’environ quatre pouces de longueur retombait en manchette. Nous tâchâmes de remettre le morceau à sa place en l’ajustant exacte-ment sur les bords de la plaie, puis nous serrâmes le tout avec une bande. II est très possible que cette compression violente ait causé la gangrène et que la patiente en soit morte.

On ne savait au juste ce qu’avait la jeune fille. Le sang coulait dans ses cheveux, sans qu’on pût voir d’où il venait ; il se figeait dessus par plaques huileuses et filait le long de la nuque. Le garde, notre interprète, lui dit d’ôter le bandeau de laine qui la coiffait ; elle le dénoua par un seul mouvement de main, et toute sa chevelure d’un noir mat et sombre se déroula comme une cascade avec t

les fils sanglants qui la rayaient en rouge. Ecar-tant délicatement ses beaux cheveux mouillés qui étaient doux, épais, abondants, nous aperçûmes, en effet, sur l'occiput, une bosse grosse comme une noix, percée d'un trou ovale. Nous rasâmes la peau tout à l'entour ; après avoir lavé et étanché la plaie, nous fîmes fondre du suif sur de la charpie et nous l'adaptâmes sur la blessure à l'aide de bandelettes de diachjlon. Une compresse mise par-dessus fut retenue par le bandeau, recouvert lui-même par le bonnet.

Sur ces entrefaites, le juge de paix survint. La première chose qu'il fit fut de demander le râteau, et la seule dont il s'inquiéta fut de le regarder et de le contempler sous tous les sens. II le prenait par le manche, il en comptait les dents, il le brandissait, l'essayait, en faisant sonner le fer et ployer le bois.

— Est-ce bien là, disait-il, l'instrument de l'attentat ? Jérôme, en êtes-vous convaincu ?

— On le dit, monsieur.

— Vous n'y étiez pas, monsieur le commissaire ?

— Non, monsieur le juge de paix.

— Je voudrais savoir si c'est bien avec un râteau que les coups ont été portés, ou si ce n'est pas plutôt avec un instrument contondant. Quel est le malfaiteur ? Ce râteau, d'abord, lui appar-tenait-il ? ou était-il â un autre ? Est-ce bien avec cela qu'on a blessé ces femmes ? N'est-ce pas plu-tôt, comme je le répète, avec un instrument contondant ? Veulent-elles porter plainte ? Dans quel sens dois-je faire mon rapport ? Qu'en dites-vous, monsieur le commissaire ?

Les malheureuses ne répondaient rien, si ce n'est qu'elles souffraient toujours ; et quant à re-quérir la vengeance des lois, on leur laissa la nuit pour y réfléchir. La jeune fille pouvait à peine parler et la vieille avait également les idées fort confuses, vu qu'elfe était ivre, à ce que disaient les voisins ; ce qui nous expliqua l'insensibilité qu'elle avait montrée pendant que nous la soulagions.

Après nous avoir fouillé des yeux, le mieux qu'ils purent, pour savoir qui nous étions, les autorités de Pont-I'Abbé nous souhaitèrent le bon-soir, en nous remerciant "des services que nous avions rendus au pays". Nous remîmes notre nécessaire dans notre poche et le commissaire s'en alla avec son garde, le garde avec son sabre, le juge de paix avec le râteau.

WA peine montés dans nos chambres, nous y reçûmes la visite de deux gendarmes désireux de lire sur nos passeports nos noms, prénoms, domicile et profession, afin de les rapporter bien vite au commissaire et au juge de paix qui les attent*) Inédit, pages 303 à 205. daient sans doute avec une anxiété fort grande. Mais comme nous jouissons du bonheur insigne de n'exercer aucun métier, de n’être décorés d’au-cun titre ni revêtus d’aucune qualité, il leur fallut se résigner à n’apprendre que deux noms fort inconnus à Pont-î’Abbé, comme ailleurs. Jamais cependant ils ne purent croire que nous fussions des messieurs cheminant à pied pour leur récréation personnelle, cela leur paraissait inouï, absurde ; nous étions des dessinateurs ou des leveurs de plan qui voyageaient par ambition pour faire mieux que les autres et gagner par là la croix d’honneur ; nous étions salariés par le gouverne-ment pour inspecter les routes et surveiller les allumeurs des phares ; nous avions une mission secrète, un travail clandestin que nous ne voulions pas dire afin de surprendre les gens et de faire notre coup ; il y avait en nous quelque chose d’incompréhensible, de contradictoire et de téné-breux, et nous les effrayions presque, tant nous leur semblions étranges.

Non, vive Dieu ! rien de tout cela ne nous pousse. Nous ne sommes que des contemplateurs humoristiques et des rêveurs littéraires ; nous passons notre vie à regarder le soleil et à lire les maîtres. Si cela n’emplit pas la poche comme de faire du suif, des bottes et des lois, si les gendarmes le comprennent peu, et que les bourgeois en rient de pitié, c’est donc pour nous seuls alors, et tant mieux mille fois, que vous étendez vos horizons, grèves et prairies que labourent nos pieds, et c’est pour nous aussi que vous êtes venus, poètes magnifiques où nous délectons nos âmes.

Et nous nous mîmes au lit en riant de cette perversité grande qui fait de la vie humaine l’appendice de la boutique, de l’étude ou du comp-toir, ne la croyant inventée par Dieu que pour emplir des casiers et prendre des numéros.

Puis nous dormîmes d’un bon sommeil malgré nos opérations, et dès l’aurore nous partîmes pour Penmarc’h sans nous informer de l’état de nos malades. VIII

PenmARc’h. — Eglise du commencement du XVI* siècle ; original porche de l’entrée principale ; deux portes jumelles en plein cintre ornées ; niche longue, élégante, à couronnement dentelé ; tête de cheval à gauche ; un homme qui se cramponne. — Entrée latérale charmante comme goût, on y sent un fumet du XVI* siècle allié à l’élément indigène ; deux portes jumelles du même genre, mais plus gracieuses encore ; à gauche, un médaillon représentant un homme qui embrasse une femme, la femme se défend. — Intérieur plein d’oiseaux qui chantent. A notre seconde visite, ce matin, un oiseau a passé au milieu de la nef en volant. Ogives, médaillons à sculptures robustes, représentant des têtes ou des bonshommes. — Dans le chœur un saint en bois coloré, relevant le bras droit ; manteau découpé, fenêtres divisées en fleurs dans la chapelle derrière l’abside. — Restes d’un ossuaire en pierre dans le cimetière, avec deux petites tètes de mort sculptées dans un angle extérieur.

KÉRiTY. — Rochers en vue, marais avec des criques que la marée montante remplissait. — Restes d’une belle église des Templiers, pure, sobre, niches charmantes dans le goût de celles de Penmarc'h. La nef n'a qu'un côté latéral, pas de transept. Autel en pierre. Au fond ogive avec trois divisions dans la fenêtre. — II reste une tour sur le côté droit du portail, nous sommes montés. Campagne plate, la mer, les moulins qui tournaient, vent. — Conversation avec les marins. — Un vieux nous a dit qu'il n'avait vu dire la messe en mer (un autre nous avait dit le contraire) sur les ruines d'Ys, car ils placent Ys ici. Les gens nous ont prétendu qu'on voyait encore des pierres taillées comme s'il y avait eu une ville. — Homard. — Dans le cimetière de Penmarc'h, fût d'une croix avec des bouts de branches coupées, ce qui est un élément indigène constant et très remarquablement caractéristique.

La Torche. — Crevasse. Grand rocher comme un peulvan, vagues retombant en cascade ; autour elles couraient.

White Norse. — Désert pour aller à Plouvan, immense plaine d'un vert pâle, sables, ondulations du terrain. — Hutte aux canards sauvages où nous nous sommes assis ; des oiseaux noirs au ventre blanc volaient en tournant et criaient sur notre tête ; solitude complète ; la mer à gauche.

— Troupeau noir de moutons sautant par-dessus un en-clos. — Nous passons dans des cours où les chiens aboient.

— Bras de mer. — Marais. — M. Bataille a été à Lou-viers, a été dans l'Inde, à Waterloo, a fait la course, a été douanier et est maintenant retraité : histoire pour un

quarteron tu en as une livre. Histoire du..... envoyé

dans un boulet ; il cassera la gueule à quelqu'un. Retraite de Russie ; le grenadier auquel il avait refusé le feu mort au coin de son feu ; il lui prend sa culotte. Les poux appelés Napoléons de Pologne. — L'instituteur primaire nous désillusionne sur la vertu des Bretonnes ; les filles se cotisent pour payer à boire aux garçons afin d'avoir un cavalier pour la danse. — Grogs. — Nous sympathisons avec un cordonnier. — Soupçon de l'hôtesse sur l'immoralité de mon ami.

De Plouvan À Audierne, au bord de la mer en laissant une chapelle à droite. — Route qui serpente suivant les sinuosités de la côte. — Désert, la mer, la mer, le vent. — Le médecin à cheval en houseaux. — Paysans travaillant le varech ; leurs vêtements bruns sur les rochers verts. — A droite, montagnes de sable et de craie ; couleur blanche, la mer bleue verte ; le ciel roulant des nuages, très bleu par places ; le sentier serpentant devant nous au loin suivant l'ondulation des terrains, comme une tramée blanche sur le fond vert pâle de la terre ; sables à traverser ; mou-lin.

Audierne. — Obligés de faire le tour de la baie. — Eglise : sous un porche latéral un monstre marin, une figure grotesque ; un bateau sur la façade, mais moderne et non pas chiqué comme à Penmarc'h. — Le soir nous nous promenons sur le sable si beau que nous avons regret d'y marcher, en parlant de 7 millions de rentes. La mer verte foncée par l'effet d'une côte verte qui se reflétait dessus ; plus près de nous bleue ; nuages de nacre et de poussière d'or pâle. Du côté plus chargé un nuage noir sur une touffe d'arbres verts s'avançait en s'élargissant.

D'Audierne À Plougoff (samedi 19). — D'abord la grande route qui monte ; arbres à droite. — Un monsieur à cheval et orné de longs cheveux, que nous arrêtons pour savoir notre route, nous conseille d'aller au pardon de Saint-Hugin à Premelin. — Baraque en toile. — En attendant vêpres nous allons nous asseoir au bord de la mer. — Eglise : statues décapitées ; porche latéral tout peint. — Dans la baraque, assis sur une planche posée sur deux pierres, nous causons avec des paysans (le grand qui me donne 45 ans, cheveux gris, frisé ; celui à côté de Max tout noir ; effet bouffant du bragow-brass en le voyant assis devant moi ; ils admirent nos pipes, nos couteaux) et un matelot qui tenait l'établissement. ■ — Nous nous perdons. Village désert, chiens aboyant ; personne ne parle français. — So-leil sur le fumier et dans les chemins effondrés, desséchés. A l'entrée de Plougoff, le médecin, l'hôtel ! — Grandes ondulations arides et augmentant d'aridité en s'approchant de la pointe du Raz.Touffes de joncs marins très courts, le sol est pelé par places. Nous traversons deux villages noirs

'4 de crasse. — Une croix en pierre. — Moulin. — Enfant manchot de naissance qui nous demande l'aumône, il nous suit ; un douanier lui explique d'être notre guide. Muet, il nous précède. — Ciel bleu, cormorans. — Nous allons par le côté droit. Trou satanique, bouleversements, replis, indescriptible couleur des roches sous-marines. L'homme n'est pas fait pour vivre là, pour supporter la nature à haute dose. Ce n'est pas un rocher, mais une agglomération de rochers ; la terre a passé entre, herbe courte et glissante. La roche devient de plus en plus sèche, la crête aiguë s'abaisse vers la pointe. — Nous revenons par le versant gauche, la pente est moins à pic, et la vigueur du précipice est un peu atténuée par la dégradation des roches qui le garnissent. L'enfant est obligé de mettre son bras pour que je passe dessus. — Revenus nous fumons assis. — A droite, à l'entrée de la Baie des Trépassés, rocher debout, couvert de mouettes, elles voltigent, crient, montent et s'entrecroisent ; l'enfant jette des pierres ; une barque se balance. — Religiosité de notre hôtesse. — Toujours la soupe au lait et les oeufs. — Nuit bivoua-quée.

De Plougoff À Pontcroix. — Paysans se rendant au par-don de Saint-Hugin qui guérit et préserve de la rage. — Près de Pontcroix nous retrouvons notre gaillard d'hier. — Gendarmes qui nous demandent nos passeports sur notre mauvaise mine. — Violent déjeuner à Pontcroix. — L'aubergiste officier de santé. — Costumes. — Férocité d'un tailleur qui nous mène à Douarnenez ; son char à bancs et le poulet du père Bataille sont les deux choses les plus dures que j'aie encore subies.

Douarnenez. — Temps gris, nuageux, brouillardé, maisons basses, rues désertes, pays pauvre et triste ; à droite, sur le sable, bout de falaise avec de la verdure et des herbes qui pendaient. — L'île Tristan en face ; grand mur blanc. Du cultivateur qui l'habite ; air morose de l'ensemble qui va à ce vieux Fontepelle. De DouArnenez À Crozon. — Interminable route en carriole, mais dont la longueur est atténuée par un sommeil à peu près continuel.

Crozon. — M. de Saint Amour, sa nièce. — M. Grand. — Violence de l'habit du père Renoult allant au dîner de noces rendu par le notaire. — Le gamin tout nu s'habil-Iant dans un couloir. — Le soir, visite au cimetière.

MorgAT. — Le village à droite. — Barques tirées sur le galet comme à Étretat. — Grottes : les petites qu'on voit à pied sec, trois, une avec deux arches, une autre où il y a une espèce d'alcôve basse ; la grande grotte, on y va en bateau. A l'entrée l'eau découle d'en haut, transparence de l'eau, la grotte n'est pas droite, mais fait des courbes ; un petit rocher au milieu. La teinte des rochers est jaune, gris de fer, rouge, etc., et tout cela sans transition suivant les tranches de la pierre. La barque roulait à la godille, on se sentait entraîné vers un royaume nacré, étrange, comme dans un couloir magique ; c'est la magie de la nature. Plafond diversement colorié.

LandonADEC. — Lierres sur pans de murs. — Nos fouilles au dolmen. — Anse de Dinant. — Morts dans le sable, os calcinés par iceluy : on les a retrouvés les bras droits le long du corps, la face au ciel, les pieds vers la mer. — La mer, bleu foncé. — Le sable tout blanc et sec sous le soleil. — Campagne large et nue à couleur rousse pâle.

Ce sommaire a été développé par Maxime Du Camp.

14. IX

De Crozon à Landévennec. — Moulins qui servent à nous reconnaître. — Fond de la rade. — Terre découpée en langues de mer qui avancent entre de petites montagnes toutes vertes et toutes boisées, même jusqu'au bas ; ça m'a fait penser à la Grèce. — Vieille abbaye, deux statues, l'une couchée, l'autre debout ; boudoirs d'un nouveau style ; la mer vue par le trou des fenêtres ; au premier plan un champ de pommiers. — Intensité de priapisme fluent. — Passage. — Course solide.

Daoulas. — Le bonnet de nuit. — Jeune enfant nu-pieds venant vendre des fraises et revenant avec l'argent acheter un gros morceau de pain. — Goût horripilant d'un ossuaire dans le cimetière. — M. Genès, mouchard, marchand d’hommes, agent d’affaires, inspecteur de ces demoiselles, concierge du dispensaire ; il se moque des juifs qui font le même commerce que lui, avec leurs grands manteaux et leur chaîne de chrysocale ; n’aime ni le bal, ni l’église, ni le théâtre, mais une vieille bouteille ; il raccroche des hommes sur la route : « le remplaçant est le meilleur soldat parce qu’il est comme un forçat ». Et l’honneur de l’armée dirait le National ? eh ! eh ! eh !

Calvaire de Plougastel. — Amusant ; animaux lourds,

chevaux et ânes ; mine d’un homme qui....... le Christ

en lui tirant la langue ; air raide de deux hommes qui vont le souffleter. M. Genès prenait la pâque pour une scène de jeu « ils jouent » ; un tambour, un joueur de trompe, un cavalier la figure toute levée en l’air précédant Jésus allant au mont des Oliviers. — Passage, terreur d’une petite femme laide et sale, enceinte ; elle se pressait sur moi. L’homme aime à sentir la femme faible ; la volupté se double de l’orgueil, du sentiment de la force ; et elle avait de la crotte aux yeux ! nous fuyons notre compagnon. — Marche sans fin pour arriver à Brest.

Brest. — Frocart et Oe. — Longue descente pavée. — Passeports. — Hôtel du Grand-Monarque.

Embêtement du port par le soleil. — Combats de chiens, d’ours et d’âne ; nous retrouvons notre ami de Guérande jouant du tambour ; cri d’excitation de son associé ; l’âne en dessous, les ours aux deux coins de l’estrade ; dans l’intérieur, poussière, poteau, groupe d’ours, de chiens et d’homme ; un amateur de la ville. — La vue anti-magné- tique ; « Elle est magnétisée », chansonnette africaine. — Le b.....militaire. — La jeune bayadère.

De Brest Au Conquet. — Monter et descendre. — Saint-Mathieu ; alternative des colonnes. — Mise à l’eau de la frégate la Persévérante ; effet de la masse s avançant doucement et élégamment en soulevant l’eau.

KerAVEL, sept ruelles. — Obscur, silencieux, une lanterne au bout : quartier des maîtresses des gardes-chiourmes et des forçats. Le derrière donne sur les murs du bagne. — La rue de la Trique ; escalier, les femmes assises sur la porte, lits au fond ; les hommes et les femmes causent de-bout dans la rue ; c’est presque une foule. Beau clair de lune. Ces demoiselles, Babet, Clara, le monsieur qui fumait sa pipe.

Visite à l’hôpital. — Fracture du crâne « je ne souffre pas” et il grimaçait quand on lui touchait. — Propreté niaise. — Jardin botanique ; une flaque d’eau et un cygne. — Ambroise nègre, le roi du bagne ; Ambroise doit aimer le cygne. — Un chat-tigre et un forçat qui se jouait avec lui. — Musée : deux têtes boucanées ; plâtres, Voltaire à côté de ces MM. — Un vieux racorni, vol ; un de la Seine-Inférieure, oreilles plates de chimpanzé, attentat à la pudeur. — Salles des forçats, un nègre vérole, comme un crocodile à cause de ses pustules ; un en lunettes, “la malheureuse passion du jeu”, vol et détournement de fonds. — Dans notre promenade du port, le dentiste. — Dans le bagne : logés à part, chien, place des exécutions devant le grand perron, cachots, porte. On s’apprêtait à ouvrir à deux forçats qui s’étaient échappés le matin. Je voulais leur voir donner la bastonnade ; le garde-chiourme m’a engagé à me priver de ce spectacle qui est hideux ; on les mène immédiatement après à l’hôpital où ils en ont pour quinze jours. Ils revenaient du travail, fouillement d’un chacun. — Marchands : ils nous assaillent de leurs marchandises. — Dans le port, les deux bassins ; vue aride des canons, des bouts de bois ; pas de nature, pas d’arbres, à peine un bouquet par-dessus les maisons ; pas de vague, pas d’animal, rien où le cœur se pose. A l’hôpital pourtant j’ai vu une petite nichée de chats sur le lit d’un malade. Recouvrance. — Rue en pente au milieu des échoppes ouvertes. — Vue de la rade ; un matelot regardait la mer, un homme traînait un petit enfant dans un chariot, des enfants jouaient dans les fossés. — Soleil chaud, ciel bleu, les bâtiments sur la rade : le Borda avec ses deux raies blanches ; l’Astrolabe plus loin. — Traversé le port marchand en bateau. — Éternel boucan des trompettes et des tambours.

Landerneau. — Plat. — Un pont. — La rivière de Landerneau, canalisée droite. — Manoir de Kergoat, habitation d’homme ruiné, M. Fabre, bière, jardin, ifs, jets d’eau, soleil. — Intensité d’un moment effréné au milieu de cette nature.

Joyeuse-Garde. — Rien, qu’une porte avec du lierre, et des mouvements de terrain qui indiquent des douves. — Nous causons d’Isabey, Pradier, etc., et de Shakespeare en revc-nant dans la forêt par des chemins encore ombrés. — Vue de la rivière, trop droite près Landerneau, mais plus loin c’est une vraie rivière. — Eau dans les prairies du mont, montagnes assez basses, à sommet aigu, couvertes de verdure. — Chien gueulant auquel on avait attaché une casserole à la queue.

La Roche-Maurice. — Nid d’aigle, démantelé, bâti en pierres plates superposées les unes sur les autres. — Au milieu des rochers qui sortent de l’herbe verte, ce qu’on voit, surtout, quand on y est monté en haut, en se tournant du côté de Landerneau ; d’en bas lierres sur les ruines, la verdure qui s’y cramponne a des gradations de teintes, elle devient plus foncée à mesure qu’elle monte, on la distingue par bouffées vertes différentes ; à travers une ouverture, dont les bords sont engraissés de vert lourd, le ciel bleu. — L’église, clocher en réparation dont les pierres couvrent le sol tout à l’entour ; espèce de cour plantée d’arbres rapprochés, de sorte que ça a l’air d’une église en ruine où l’on dit encore la messe.

Landivisiau. — Plat, nul, mais relais de poste au milieu de la grande route ;

maisons grises, basses. — Une lieue environ avant d’arriver à Saint-Pol, Tissot : point circonscrit dans l’immensité ; un gendarme s’il avait passé pendant ce temps-là, et au beau moment.

RoscOFF. — Terrains dénudés, plats, légumes, légumes. — Les pays riches sont les pauvres ; les millionnaires s’habillent mal. — Rochers blanchâtres, longs, à fleur d’eau dans la mer bleue, nombreux et comme découpant le fond du tapis azuré. — L’église : beaux bas-reliefs en albâtre du xv* ; groupe de gardes au pied de la croix ; le Christ sortant du tombeau, très grand, très maigre, animé ; un garde casque en tête dormant sur son épée. — Malédiction des chaussures.

Manoir de Kersalion : cour restreinte ; trois chevaux s’y jouant ; tourelle dans la muraille ; porte en plein cintre du XV* siècle surmontée d’un bonhomme coiffé d’un chaperon ; fenêtre dans le toit avec un pinacle d’où sortent de côté deux manières de gargouilles qui ne sont pas des gargouilles, un lion et un bonhomme. — Soleil et vent froid, campagne nue, courant d’eau, moulin, pierres ; chemin tout entouré de ronces de diverses espèces maigres, bruyère, etc., dont les formes se dessinaient sur le sentier blanc ; blés à tête blanche, blonds s’agitant sous le vent ; futaie à droite.

Château de Kerouseri. — Trois tourelles, mâchicoulis, appartements boisés, grande pièce avec des fenêtres rape-tissées, donnant vue sur la mer ; pays plat, la mer au fond ; jardin délabré, pièce de blé entourée de roses ; un Avignon-nais pour gardien ; puits à levier.

Kerland. — Entrée, porte couverte de lierre, tour pentago-nafe ; vieil escabeau en pierre ; grande chambre avec des restes de peinture au plafond sur le plâtre qui s’écaille ; ensemble gris, froid, ennuyeux, sombre ; toutes les pièces pleines d’outils, de bancs, d’ustensiles de campagne, un piège à loup dans l’embrasure d’une fenêtre.

A la fin de ce sommaire, Flaubert avait écrit les quelques notes suivantes :

Brest, mardi 29 juin, 3 h. 1/4 du soir.

Mot d’un troupier qui voyait la mer pour la première fois : “C’est curieux tout de même ! ça donne tout de même un aperçu de ce qui existe !” (Belle-Isle.)

« L’amour est comme l’opéra ; on s’y ennuie, mais on y retourne. » Au bazar d’Ozai, 30 avril 1847.

(Blois, i”mai.)

Les pigeons de Paphos ne sont souvent que des oies. II y a beaucoup de gens qui croient avoir les mains belles parce qu’ils les ont propres.

Dans le cimetière d’Arz : Mon Dieu ! n’aviez-vous pas assez d’anges au ciel ?

L ieu chéri du Seigneur où la vertu réside
A imable solitude où l’Esprit Saint préside,
T rois fois heureux celui qui charmé de tes biens
R énonce au siècle et rompt ses funestes liens
A idé par le secours de son Dieu qui le guide
P lus il trouve de croix, plus il est intrépide,
P ersuadé qu’il est que l’instant de la mort
E st l’instant fortuné qui le conduit au port.

En route ! le ciel est bleu, le soleil brille, et nous nous sentons dans les pieds des envies de marcher sur l’herbe.

De Crozon à Landévennec, la campagne est découverte, sans arbres ni maisons ; une mousse rousse comme du velours râpé s’étend à perte de vue sur un sol plat. Parfois des champs de blés mûrs s’élèvent au milieu de petits ajoncs rabougris. Les ajoncs ne sont plus en fleurs, les voilà redevenus comme avant le printemps.

Des ornières de charrettes profondes et bordées sur leurs bords d’un bourrelet de boue sèche, se multipliant irrégulièrement les unes près des autres, apparaissent devant vous, se continuent longtemps, font des coudes et se perdent à l’œil. L’herbe pousse par grandes places entre ces sillons effondrés. Le vent siffle sur la lande ; nous avançons ; la brise joyeuse se roule dans l’air, elle sèche de ses bouffées la sueur qui perle sur nos joues et, quand nous faisons halte un instant, nous entendons, malgré le battement de nos artères, son bruit qui coule sur la mousse.

De place en place, pour nous dire la route, surgit un moulin tournant rapidement dans l’air ses grandes ailes blanches. Le bois de leur membrure craque en gémissant ; elles descendent, rasent le sol, et remontent. Debout sur la lucarne tout ouverte, le meunier nous regarde passer.

Nous continuons, nous allons ; en longeant une haie d’ormeaux qui doit cacher un village, dans une cour plantée, nous avons entrevu un homme monté dans un arbre ; au pied, se tenait une femme qui recevait dans son tablier bleu les prunes qu’il lui jetait d’en haut. Je me souviens d’une masse de cheveux noirs tombant à flots sur ses épaules, de deux bras levés en l’air, d’un mouvement de cou renversé et d’un rire sonore qui m’est arrivé à travers le branchage de la haie.

Le sentier que l’on suit devient plus étroit. Tout à coup, la lande disparaît et l’on est sur la crête d’un promontoire qui domine la mer. Se répandant du côté de Brest, elle semble ne pas finir, tandis que, de l’autre, elle avance ses sinuosités dans la terre qu’elle découpe, entre des coteaux escarpés, couverts de bois taillis. Chaque golfe est resserré entre deux montagnes ; chaque montagne a deux golfes à ses flancs, et rien n’est beau comme ces grandes pentes vertes dressées presque d’aplomb sur l’étendue bleue de la mer. Les collines se bombent à leur farte, épatent leur base, se creusent à l’horizon dans un évasement élargi qui regagne les plateaux, et, avec la courbe gracieuse d’un plein cintre moresque, se relient l’une à l’autre, continuant ainsi, en le répétant sur chacune, la couleur de leur verdure et le mouvement de leurs terrains. A leurs pieds, les flots, poussés par le vent du large, pressaient leurs plis. Le soleil, frappant dessus, en faisait briller l’écume sous ses feux, les vagues miroitaient en étoiles d’argent et tout le reste était une immense surface unie dont on ne se rassasiait pas de contempler l’azur.

Sur les vallons on voyait passer les rayons du soleil. Un d’eux, abandonné déjà par lui, estompait plus vaguement la masse de ses bois et, sur un autre, une barre d’ombre large et noire s’avançait.

A mesure que nous descendions le sentier, et qu’ainsi nous nous rapprochions du niveau du rivage, les montagnes en face desquelles nous étions tout à l’heure semblaient devenir plus hautes, les golfes plus profonds ; la mer s’agrandissait. Laissant nos regards courir à l’aventure, nous marchions, sans prendre garde, et les cailloux chassés devant nous déroulaient vite et allaient se perdre dans les bouquets de broussailles, qui couvraient les bords du chemin. (*)Arrivés enfin à Landévennec, nous entrâmes pour déposer nos sacs quelque part dans un cabaret plus que simple, où l’on s’asseyait sur les futailles en guise de bancs. Après y avoir bu un coup de mauvaise eau-de-vie dans un de ces grands gobelets du pays en faïence rayée de bandes roses et bleues comme une culotte de bal masqué, nous allâmes tout de suite voir l’abbaye.

Il n’en reste qu’un portail composé de trois arcades ; celle du milieu plus basse que les deux autres est seule percée. De chaque côté de l’une d’elles, après un contrefort, une longue petite fenêtre cintrée va s’évasant du dehors comme les meurtrières d’une forteresse ; en dedans de l’arcade du milieu, des colonnes courtes supportant des moulures ont des chapiteaux couverts d’entrelacs compliqués.

Quand on a franchi ce pan de muraille, soit par la brèche qui ouvre sur la cour, soit par le portail dont une échelle mise de travers vous barre l’entrée, apparaissent au fond les ruines du chœur et de l’abside découpant leur dentelure blanchâtre sur la couleur bleue du ciel. Elles forment un rond-point flanqué de chapelles latérales, rondes, garnies de contreforts extérieurs, avec des fenêtres à plein cintre la plupart soutenues par des colonnes qui s’engagent à leur base dans des piliers carrés. Le terrain de la cour ondule, fait des bosses et des creux ; c’est un mouvement heurté de plans inégaux que les ronces et les lierres verdissent de leur verdure inégale.

(*) Inédit, pages 221 à 224.

Dans les chapelles latérales, par le trou des fenêtres, on voit au loin la mer à l’horizon d’une prairie que bossellent en dômes verts les têtes rondes des pommiers et qui s’encadre comme un tableau dans le plein cintre rongé des fenêtres romanes.

Une statue d’abbé est appuyée contre le mur : un gros anneau au médius de la main droite, un menton long, des pommettes saillantes, des yeux sortis, des cheveux légèrement crépelés, et une chape bordée de longues franges, et un écusson qui est d’hermine à trois fasces au chef chargé d’un Iambel à trois pièces timbré de la crosse abbatiale. Est-ce là, pourquoi non ? pourquoi oui ? saint Guenolé, premier abbé du mo-nastère, mort en 448, le même qui conseilla au roi Grallon de quitter la ville d’Ys avant l’en-gloutissement du Seigneur, et qui, lorsque sur la grève le roi fuyait au galop avec la belle Dragut, sa fille, lui cria dans un nuage, comme les flots déjà battaient les jarrets de son cheval, de se débarrasser du démon qu’il emportait en croupe ? Grallon la précipita dans les flots, les flots l’en-gloutirent, s’arrêtèrent, et Grallon continua sa course. Pour contempler cette figure plus à notre aise, nous nous étions assis sur une autre statue couchée par terre.

Celle-là représente un évêque, il a la crosse, la chape bordée de roses et d’olives, la bague au pouce et, sous le bras gauche, le bâton pastoral passé. Une manche étroite, fermée d’un gros bouton et sortant elle-même d’une manche très ample serre son bras ; ses mains sont jointes ; deux anges soutiennent l’oreiller où il repose ; son chien, couché à ses pieds, surmonte un écusson qui est de neuf macles posées par trois au Iam-bel de trois pièces serties au chef et supporté à dextre par un lion Iampassé, à senestre par un lévrier.

Pendant que nous nous occupions à lire ces niaiseries, un veau jaune, marqué d’une tache à la tête, se promenait près de nous. II chancelait sur ses longues jambes faibles, et les mouches bourdonnaient autour de ses naseaux blancs, humides encore du lait de sa mère. Derrière le portail, au bas de la montagne qu’ils recouvrent, les grands hêtres balançaient leurs cimes, le soleil frappait sur les vieux pans de mur, un air chaud passait ; toutes sortes de plants et d’arbrisseaux, des orties, des marguerites, des angéliques, des sureaux, des bruyères et du baume faisaient un mélange de parfums sucrés ; il tombait sur vous quelque chose de tendre, d’énervant, de navrant, d’écœurant ; on se sentait pris de mollesse, tout plein de titillations obtuses et de convoitises fluides. Et comme nous étions là, couchés sur l’herbe, est survenue devant nous une grande jeune fille, blonde et blanche, allant nu-pieds parmi les ronces, et seulement vêtue d’un jupon de drap rouge dont le cordon lui serrait autour de la taille sa chemise de grosse toile jaune ; elle avait à la main un roseau cassé par le haut et se tenait debout à nous regarder sans rien dire.

Elle s’en est allée, puis est revenue ; elle riait quand on lui parlait et vous quittait aussitôt.

Puis nous nous sommes levés, nous avons repris nos bâtons, nous sommes partis. En passant par-dessus le mur, nous en avons fait ébouler des pierres et le ciment s’est égrené sous nos mains. Est-ce que nous détruirions aussi, nous autres ? et ce que n’ont pu abattre ni le temps, ni les hommes, ni le bon goût, ni l’industrie, voilà que l’achève sans le savoir le contemplateur naïf, dans l’exercice même de sa curiosité admirative.

En vingt minutes une barque nous eut passés de l’autre côté de la rade et déposés dans une anfractuosité du rocher, sur de grandes lames de pierre couvertes de goémons où nous glissâmes quelque temps avant de pouvoir gagner la terre. Entrés dans la campagne, notre embarras commença. II fallait coucher à Daoulas, or nous ne savions pas par où prendre. Les chemins tournaient le long des haies fournies, plus compactes que des murs. Nous montions, nous descendions ; cependant les sentiers s’emplissaient d’ombre et la campagne s’assoupissait déjà dans ce beau silence des nuits d’été.

Ne rencontrant personne enfin qui pût nous dire notre route et deux ou trois paysans à qui nous nous étions adressés ne nous ayant répondu que par des cris inintelligibles, nous tirâmes notre carte, atteignîmes notre compas, et, nous orien-tant d’après le coucher du soleil, nous résolûmes de piquer sur Daoulas à vol d’oiseau. Donc la vigueur nous revint aux membres et nous nous lançâmes dans les champs, à travers les haies, par-dessus les fossés, abattant, renversant, bousculant, cassant tout, sans souci aucun des barrières restant ouvertes et des récoltes endommagées.

Au haut d’une pente, nous aperçûmes le village de l’Hôpital couché dans une prairie où passait une rivière. Un pont la traverse ; sur ce pont, il y a un moulin qui tourne ; après la prairie, une colline remonte ; nous la gravissions gaillardement quand, sur le talus d’un haut bord, à la lueur d’un rayon du jour, entre les pieds d’une haie vive, nous avons vu une belle salamandre noire et jaune qui s’avançait de ses pattes dentelées et traînait sur la poussière sa longue queue mince remuant aux ondulations de son corsage tacheté. C’était son heure ; elle sortait de sa caverne qui est au fond de quelque gros caillou enfoui sous la mousse et s’en allait faire la chasse aux insectes dans le tronc pourri des vieux chênes.

Un pavé à pointes aiguës sonna sous nos pas, une rue se dressa devant nous ; nous étions à Daoulas. II faisait encore assez clair pour distinguer à une des maisons une enseigne carrée pen-due à sa barre de fer scellée dans la muraille. Sans enseigne, d’ailleurs, nous aurions bien reconnu l’auberge, les maisons ayant ainsi que les hommes leur métier écrit sur la figure. Donc, nous y entrâmes fort affamés et demandant surtout qu’on ne nous fît pas languir.

Pendant que nous étions assis sur la porte à attendre notre dîner, une petite fille en guenilles est entrée dans l’auberge avec une corbeille de fraises qu’elle portait sur la tête. Elle en est sortie bientôt tenant à la place un gros pain qu’elle main-tenait de ses deux mains. Elle s’enfuyait avec la vivacité d’un chat en poussant des cris aigus. Ses cheveux d’enfant, hérissés, gris de poussière, se levaient dans le vent autour de sa figure maigre et ses petits pieds nus, frappant d’aplomb la terre, disparaissaient, en courant, sous les lambeaux déchiquetés qui lui battaient les genoux.

Après notre repas, qui,outre l’inévitable omelette et le veau fatal, se composa en grande partie des fraises de la petite fille, nous montâmes dans nos appartements.

L’escalier tournant, à marches de bois vermoulues, gémissait et craquait sous nos pas comme l’âme d’une femme sensible sous une désillusion nouvelle. En haut se trouvait une chambre dont la porte, comme celle des granges, se fermait avec un crochet qu’on mettait du dehors. C’est là que nous gîtâmes. Le plâtre des murs, jadis peint en jaune, tombait en écailles ; les poutres du plafond ployaient sous le poids des tuiles de la toiture, et, sur les carreaux de la fenêtre à guillotine, un enduit de crasse grisâtre adoucissait la lumière comme à travers des verres dépolis. Les lits, faits de quatre planches de noyer mal jointes, avaient de gros pieds ronds piqués de mites et tout fendus de sécheresse. Sur chacun d’eux étaient une paillasse et un matelas recouverts d’une couverture verte trouée par des morsures de souris et dont la frange était faite par les fils qui s’effilaient. Un morceau de miroir cassé dans son cadre déteint ; à un clou, un carnier suspendu, et, près de là, une vieille cravate de soie dont on reconnaissait le pli des nœuds, indi-quaient que ce lit était habité par quelqu’un, et, sans doute, qu’on y couchait tous les soirs.

Sous l’un des oreillers de coton rouge, une chose hideuse se découvrit ; à savoir un bonnet de même couleur que la couverture des lits, mais dont un glacis gras empêchait de reconnaître la trame, usé, élargi, avachi, huileux, froid au toucher. J’ai la conviction que son maître y tient beaucoup et qu’il le trouve plus chaud que tout autre. La vie d’un homme, la sueur d’une existence entière est concrétée là en cette couche de cérat ranci. Combien de nuits n’a-t-il pas fallu pour la former si épaisse ? due de cauchemars se sont agités là-dessous, que de rêves y ont passé ! Et de beaux, peut-être. Pourquoi pas ?

‘*> Une délicatesse exagérée nous empêcha de jeter cette ordure par la fenêtre et nous nous con-tentâmes de la repousser du pied sous le lit. Que serait-il advenu si nous y eussions trouvé des sa-vates qui devaient aller au bonnet ? Et ensuite

(*’ Inédit, pages 327 à 239.

‘5-quel beau rapport à écrire pour ceux qui auraient fait notre autopsie.

O confort ! me disais-je en entrant timidement dans mes draps, ô confort idéal du bonheur moderne, que tu es loin d’avoir pénétré jusqu’à Daoulas ! comme on y méconnaît tes douceurs ! Voilà cependant des gens qui ignorent tes stores, tes tapis, tes portières, tes étagères, tes calori-fères ! Quel mépris du chic anglais ! quelle incurie dans le service ! quelle malpropreté de linge ! quels tristes coutiaux ! quelle vilaine argenterie ! On ne trouverait pas dans tout le pays une seule pierre ponce ; ils ne se doutent pas même de la manière de faire le thé, et certainement qu’au-cune de ces maisons-là n’a un water-closet convenable.

Nous dormîmes quatorze heures de suite et nous ronflions encore le lendemain, tout en visi-tant I !église. On raconte sur sa fondation une bfelle* légende dans laquelle figurent un dragon avéû soiijpfetit, deux saints et un seigneur furieux, mais,.je suis..fatigué des légendes et non moins des-églises. Outre que je n’ai pas, d’ailleurs, la bosse archéologique fort développée, n’est-il pas ehrnj<yeuK,,çonvenez->en, d’endurer au moins une fois,par,jour une-nef, un portail, des bas côtés, des chapiteaux, des ; arcades, des arcatures, des colonlnesi, des piliers,> des pleins cintres et des Ogiw& ? :A force, d’être prodiguées, les plus aimables choses deviennent odieuses. De ma vie je n’oublierai la haine que Jes Pyrénées m’avaient procurée pour les cascades ; j’en avais tant admiré que je les détestais à outrance. Lorsqu’il fallait se détourner pour en admirer une nouvelle, je me sentais des défaillances d’estomac ; leur bruit, leur mousse, leur mouvement me révoltaient ; je n’aspirais plus qu’après les plaines les plus sèches, j’aurais voulu vivre dans une marnière.

Sous le porche il y a douze apôtres maigres, avec des mines assez naïves, et l’intérieur, quoique roman (mais plus blanchi, hélas ! que la face de Pierrot), n’a rien, que de gros œufs d’autruche suspendus en ex-voto à la statue de la Vierge et qui rappellent ceux que mettent les musulmans dans les mosquées. Si cela arrête une minute et fait sourire en notre esprit la poésie des rapprochements, vous en êtes puni bientôt par la vue d’un ossuaire du goût le plus horripilant qu’il soit possible de souffrir.

Dans la crainte de nous perdre en chemin, et comme nous voulions arriver de bonne heure à Brest, nous nous enquîmes d’un guide.

— Voilà un monsieur qui vous y mènera bien, il y retourne lui-même, nous dit notre hôtesse en nous désignant du doigt un bourgeois accoudé sur la table de la cuisine et qui trinquait avec un maréchal ferrant.

Quand la bouteille fut vidée, le monsieur se leva, prit une prise dans une tabatière en écaille et se tournant vers nous :

— Vous allez à Brest, messieurs ?

— Oui. — Moi aussi. Nous allons donc faire route ensemble, nous pourrons causer, ça nous distraira.

II était petit et commençait à prendre du ventre ; ses cheveux noirs, coupés ras par derrière, fri-saient sur la tempe gauche en une boucle qui s’avançait jusqu’au coin de la paupière, et son chapeau, s’en allant sur l’oreille droite, découvrait un front rétréci qui paraissait plus fuyant encore à cause de sa mâchoire allongée. Malgré ses joues pendantes, sa figure était maigre. II clignait souvent des jeux et n’arrêtait pas de sourire. Une redingote de Iasting, trop courte de taille, couvrait son dos voûté, et de ses manches trop petites sortaient deux grosses mains rouges, mains pares-seuses, plus grasses que fortes, et dont la peau semblait humide. Sous un gilet de satin noir à schall, brodé de bouquets vert tendre, s’étalait une chemise de coton fort blanche, durement em-pesée, sur laquelle filaient les deux rubans blonds d’une chaîne de sûreté en cheveux qui retenait dans un large gousset sa belle montre d’or. Sur sa cravate affaissée, son cou engoncé tournait à l’aise, et son pantalon à grand pont, éraillé aux boutonnières et bombé aux genoux, s’arrêtait à mi-jambe sur la tige d’une forte botte dont le cuir dur ne ployait pas. II marchait vite, regardant à terre, baissant la tête et relevant l’épaule droite sous laquelle il serrait un formidable gourdin fait d’un bois des îles garni dans toute sa longueur de piquants aigus.

Et il causait ! il causait ! il parlait toujours, nous narrant les anecdotes de gens inconnus, nous rap-portant des dialogues entiers, nous entretenant de ses opinions politiques, de ses goûts en cuisine, de sa santé, de son commerce, de ses relations, du prix des denrées, de sa femme,de son beau-père, de son petit chien, de son poêle qui fume. II s’appelle monsieur Genès, it est fixé à Brest, il fait pour soixante mille francs d’affaires par an ; il a été successivement armurier, soldat, mouchard, inspecteur des filles, concierge du dispensaire et il est maintenant établi, marié, propriétaire et agent d’affaires, c’est-à-dire marchand d’hommes, comme ils appellent ça en Bretagne.

On présumerait qu’une telle existence a dû détremper ses vases sur celui qui l’a traversée et qu’on va s’amuser à les y ramasser à la cuillère, mais non ! rien n’est plus plat, plus nul, plus in-colore et plus insipide que M. Genès. II est bête comme un juge et aussi assommant que la bio-graphie des hommes utiles. Sans se douter le moins du monde de la saleté de son industrie, il se croit fort honnête homme, car il passe tous les marchés qu’il fait par-devant notaire. II est chaste dans ses propos et rangé dans sa conduite. Son seul goût est l’argent, sa seule prédilection le vin, et sans doute qu’il doit à l’habitude d’en boire cet air somnolent et débraillé dont la bonhomie superficielle atténue l’astuce de ses petits yeux gris et la dureté de ses lèvres minces.

II n’a pas de vices, il regarde le jeu comme dangereux, les femmes comme pernicieuses. « On ne sait pas où ça vous mène, tandis qu’avec une vieille bouteille on s’arrête où l’on veut. » C’est un homme d’ordre, actif, malin, prudent et qui a peur des voleurs. II parait flatté de la considération qu’on lui montre ; il respecte beaucoup les lois et vénère les gens de justice, notaires, avoués, huissiers ; il porte un couteau-poignard et jamais n’ôte son chapeau.

Chemin faisant, il raccrochait les jeunes gens qu’il rencontrait et leur proposait de se vendre. Le remplaçant est d’ailleurs pour lui le type accompli du soldat parce qu’il ne craint rien, ne tient à rien, donne sa peau pour quelques centaines de francs, en un mot parce que « le remplaçant est comme un forçat », définition qui satisfe-rait peu les défenseurs de l’honneur militaire.

M.Genès n’aime pas le spectacle, c’est une des causes, entre autres, pour lesquelles il est sorti de la police ; cela l’ennuyait fort d’être obligé tous les soirs d’aller au théâtre. Puis, on lui disait aussi : « M. Genès vous avez tort ! un homme comme vous ne doit pas être attaché à la police.” Du reste il ne fréquente pas davantage les églises, il nous a déclaré n’y avoir pas mis les pieds trois fois en sa vie ; il est voltairien, d’ailleurs, et ami du progrès, mais toutefois plus ami du gouvernement encore. II souhaite la guerre, « ça ferait aller le commerce ».

A Plougastel cependant il s’arrêta comme nous, pour que nous puissions voir le calvaire, petit monument de granit, carré, dont chaque face représente un tableau de la vie de Jésus-Christ, et dont les quatre coins sont occupés par les évan-gélistes dans leurs attributions. Les personnages, un peu lourds, n’en sont pas moins mouvemen-tés, vivants, amusants : les hommes qui tiennent le Christ le lient de toutes leurs forces, à faire éclater leurs muscles ; celui qui lui grimace au nez en tirant la langue grimace si bien qu’il fait rire ; l’âne qui porte Notre-Seigneur entrant à Jérusalem a une vraie mine d’âne, bonasse et pacifique ; les soldats qui le mènent au calvaire, en soufflant de la trompe et battant du tambour, sont précédés d’un officier chevauchant, la figure en l’air, avec une arrogance sublime ; aux pieds de la croix la Madeleine en pleurs répand sa belle chevelure tressée. Mettez à tous ces personnages les costumes des tableaux deTeniers, les petits chapeaux ronds retroussés, les bons pourpoints serrant de grosses bedaines, de grandes manches, des hautes chausses, de larges visages, des yeux ouverts, et vous aurez un ensemble d’une fantaisie solide, quelque chose de très naïf, de très élevé et d’une poésie toute moyen âge, quoique le monument n’ait été construit qu’en 1602 en acquit-tement d’un vœu fait quatre ans auparavant à propos de je ne sais quelle épidémie qui rava-geait la Basse-Bretagne.

Tout cela, du reste, fut complètement perdu pour M. Genès. Il ne se doutait même pas de ce que ça voulait dire ; en regardant la Cène il prit les plats pour des cartes, les coupes pour des dés et il dit, fort ébahi : « ils jouent ». C’est farce.

De Plougastel au bord de la mer on dévale au milieu des bois par une pente rapide d'où l'on découvre une partie de la rade, celle du moins qui s'étend depuis Brest jusqu'à la rivière de Landerneau. A vos côtés se dresse une falaise de rochers blancs, rayée horizontalement par des couches de silex à pic et nue du côté des flots, mais par derrière, sur le plateau, couverte de chênes et de hêtres, surchargée de feuillages, et qui, lorsque vous descendez par le vallon entr'ouvert dans son flanc, est d'une crâne tournure.

Ici l'on s'embarque, on s'évite ainsi, comme à Landévennec, de décrire le circuit de l'anse, les découpures inégales de la rade s'avançant dans les terres en mille golfes capricieux dont il faudrait quelquefois toute une journée pour faire le tour.

Avant de se mettre en mer, M. Genès eut soif et nous invita à entrer avec lui dans un cabaret de sa connaissance où, trouvant qu'on ne le servait pas assez vite, il alla chercher lui-même le vin dans le cellier et tira les verres du buffet. Comme nous redoutions fort qu'il ne payât à boire, car la revanche eût été inévitable, nous nous empressâmes de solder, d'avaler et de décamper au plus vite.

M. Genès, au contraire, voulait s'asseoir, s'at-tabler un peu, se rafraîchir ; il demandait des fraises et s'informait s'il y avait du café ; cependant le batelier nous attendait, la marée était haute, il fallait partir. Les vagues sautaient sur le pavé de la cale où le bateau bondissait en cognant sa quille, leur écume rejaillissait sur les passagers qui s'embar-quaient, une casquette tomba à l'eau, et les bottes de M. Genès furent mouillées.

La mer roulait, la brise était forte. Cahotée par les flots et tourmentée par un vent de nord-ouest qui nous poussait au fond de la baie, la lourde chaloupe n'avançait guère. Pendant le temps qu'on ramenait les avirons, elle se levait de l'avant, et pivotait arrêtée sur la pointe des vagues. Elles étaient blanches à leur crête, vertes dans leur courbure, bruissantes, nombreuses et se poussaient l'une sur l'autre avec un délire folâtre. Un brick devant nous qui prenait des bordées passait les voiles pleines, bouffi de vent, arron-dissant son ventre et s'en allait doucement, coupant l'eau qui clapotait contre sa carène.

A l'horizon Brest apparaissait comme un point gris. Tout à I'entour, dans un cirque de 20 lieues bâti de rochers blancs, la mer s'étalait. A mes pieds, par terre, au fond de la chaloupe, était une cage d'oiseau qui contenait un merle pris le matin et que l'on apportait à la ville ; il criait de peur en entendant le bruit des flots.

A côté de la cage, par terre aussi, se cachant le visage de ses mains, une jeune femme était assise dans une attitude désespérée ; elle sanglotait, elle priait Dieu, elle suppliait tout le monde de la sauver, elle jurait de ne jamais retourner à

Plougastel, elle s’écriait qu’elle allait mourir. C’était une petite femme brune, grasse, sale, mal peignée, mal vêtue, dont les pieds larges, chaussés de bas bleus, s’épataient dans des souliers sans cordons, et qui portait un tablier noir usé sur son ventre rebondi par une grossesse avancée. A mesure que l’on s’écartait du rivage, sa terreur croissait et elle se rapprochait de plus en plus de moi pour s’accrocher à quelqu’un, pour saisir quelque chose. Dans le mouvement d’une vague plus forte elle se jeta à mes pieds et, m’étreignant aux flancs, elle s’enfonça la tête dans mes cuisses sans en vouloir sortir ; ses boucles d’oreilles frot-taient mes mains, je sentais ses seins haleter sur mes genoux et tout son corps frissonnant de terreur qui se serrait sur le mien.

J’y prenais plaisir, pourquoi donc ? est-ce parce que nous nous aimons davantage quand nous nous sentons plus forts que les autres ? ou n’était-ce point plutôt parce que la virilité de l’homme se complétant de la faiblesse de la femme, s’en rehaussait de vanité, et y aiguisait son appétit ? II y avait ainsi, dans ce simple attouchement, tout le rapport d’un sexe à l’autre et comme la communication de leurs caractères mêmes. Quoi qu’il en soit, cela ne manquait pas de douceur et j’aurais voulu que la traversée fût plus longue.

Et elle avait la crotte aux jeux !

Nous épions le moment du débarquement pour sauter avant tout le monde afin de planter là M. Genès, dont la société nous était devenue tout à fait intolérable. Au lieu de rester un quart d’heure encore avec lui, nous eussions renoncé à Brest et couché à la belle étoile ; la mesure était comble, nous en étions ahuris, abrutis. II fut cependant le premier hors du bateau, et comme il y avait sur le rivage un bouchon, il voulut nous y rendre notre politesse et nous offrit tout de suite son éternelle bouteille de vin.

— Merci, il fait trop chaud.

— Alors un peu de bière.

— C’est trop lourd, ça empêche de marcher.

— Un petit verre ?

— Jamais nous n’en prenons.

— D’anisette ?

— Mille grâces, nous sommes pressés.

— Un café ! ah ! un café !

— Non, non, non, bien sûr non, adieu.

II s’arrêta, hésitant un moment, puis avec un geste sublime : « Eh bien j’en prendrai tout de même, allez toujours ! je vais vous rejoindre ».

De quel train nous filâmes ! ce n’était pas cou-rir, mais voler ! plus légers qu’une plume, la peur du Genès et la joie d’en être délivrés nous traînaient en avant avec la vitesse d’un wagon emporté par une double locomotive. A tout instant il nous semblait l’entendre derrière nous et nous n’osions point tourner la tête de peur d’apercevoir son chapeau.

Brest, cependant, n’arrivait pas. Nous avions beau suer, nous hâter, la route s’allongeait toujours, la côte montait sans fin. On rencontrait quantité de promeneurs, des marins, des soldats, des enfants aux bras de leurs bonnes, des bourgeois qui prenaient l’air ou allaient dîner à leur maison de campagne dans une petite voiture de famille ; tout annonçait pourtant les approches d’une ville, mais la ville reculait. Enfin n’en pouvant plus, nous sommes entrés dans un champ de blé où nous nous sommes laissés tomber par terre, fourbus, comme des rosses à bout d’haleine. Un nuage qui creva sur nous nous obligea bientôt à reprendre le sac et un quart d’heure après, Brest, grâce au ciel, montra ses toits. Le premier homme que nous varies en y entrant, ce fut M. Genès. II nous avait dépassés, sans doute pendant que nous faisions halte, et il causait avec un gendarme, mais cette fois nous ne le craignions plus, nous étions arrivés, à peu près du moins, car avant d’être aux portes de Brest il faut encore descendre un faubourg, longue rue continuant la grande route et que bordent de place en place des boutiques de charcutiers ou de marchands de vin, dont les enseignes patriotiques brillent à côté de grands cabarets délabrés qui ont des salons de réunion de ioo couverts, avec des guirlandes peintes à tous leurs étages.

On s’arrêtait pour nous voir, nous en valions la peine. Poitrine nue et la chemise bouffant à l’air, la cravate autour des reins, le sac à l’épaule, blancs de poussière, hâlés par le soleil, avec nos habits déchirés, nos chaussures usées, rapiécées, nous avions une belle allure vagabonde, insolente et pleine d’orgueil ; le fer de nos souliers sonnait sur le pavé, sur nos dos nos sacs battaient la mesure, nos bâtons retombaient d’accord, et la fumée de nos pipes s’échappant sur le bord de nos chapeaux se tordait comme un panache.

Messieurs les officiers, ébahis de cette tenue, nous regardaient d’un air stupéfait, quelques ga-mins nous suivaient de loin et on nous arrêta pour nous demander nos passeports.

II nous fut néanmoins fort agréable, arrivés à l’hôtel, de pouvoir nous rincer à l’eau chaude, de dormir enfin dans un lit propre et de nous asseoir dans un fauteuil. Nous nous plongeâmes dans les délices de la civilisation, nous prîmes un bain et ne mangeâmes point de veau.

Lorsqu’on n’est pas ingénieur, constructeur ou forgeron, Brest ne vous amuse pas considérablement. Le port est beau, j’en conviens ; magnifique, c’est possible ; gigantesque, si vous y tenez. Ça impose, comme on dit, et ça donne l’idée d’une grande nation. Mais toutes ces piles de canons, de boulets, d’ancres, le prolongement indéfini de ces quais qui contiennent une mer sans mouvement et sans accident, une mer assujettie qui semble aux galères, et ces grands ateliers droits où grincent les machines, le bruit continuel des chaines des forçats qui passent en rang et travaillent en silence, tout ce mécanisme sombre, impitoyable, forcé, cet entassement de défiances organisées, bien vite vous encombre l’âme d’ennui et lasée la vue. Elle se promène à satiété sur des pavés, sur des obus, sur les rochers dans lesquels le port est entaillé, sur des monceaux de fer, sur des madriers cerclés, sur des bassins à sec renfermant la carcasse nue des vaisseaux et toujours se heurte aux murailles grises du bagne, où un homme penché aux fenêtres éprouve le scellement de leurs barreaux en les faisant sonner avec un marteau.

Ici la nature est absente, proscrite, comme nulle part ailleurs sur la terre, c’en est la négation, la haine entêtée, et dans le levier de fer qui casse la roche, et dans le sabre du garde-chiourme qui chasse les galériens.

En dehors de l’arsenal et du bagne, ce ne sont encore que casernes, corps de garde, fortifications, fossés, uniformes, baïonnettes, sabres et tambours. Du matin au soir, la musique militaire retentit sous vos fenêtres, les soldats passent dans les rues, repassent, vont, reviennent, manœuvrent ; toujours le clairon sonne et la troupe marche au pas. Vous comprenez de suite que la vraie ville est l’arsenal, que l’autre ne vit que par lui, qu’il déborde sur elle. Sous toutes les formes, en tous lieux, à tous les coins, réapparaît l’administration, la disci-pline, la feuille de papier rayé, le cadre, la règle. On admire beaucoup la symétrie factice et la propreté imbécile. A l’hôpital de la marine, par exemple, les salles sont cirées de telle façon qu’un convalescent, essayant de marcher sur sa jambe remise, doit se casser l’autre en tombant. Mais c’est beau, ça brille, on s’y mire. Entre chaque salle est une cour, mais où le soleil ne vient ja-mais et dont soigneusement on arrache l’herbe. Les cuisines sont superbes, mais à une telle distance, qu’en hiver tout doit parvenir glacé aux malades. II s’agit bien d’eux ! les casseroles ne sont-elles pas luisantes ? Nous vfmes un homme qui s’était cassé le crâne en tombant d’une frégate et qui depuis dix-huit heures n’avait pas encore reçu de secours ; mais ses draps étaient très blancs, car la lingerie est fort bien tenue.

A l’hôpital du bagne j’ai été ému comme un enfant en voyant sur le lit d’un forçat une por-tée de petits chats qui jouaient sur ses genoux. II leur faisait des boulettes de papier et ils couraient après sur la couverture en se retenant aux bords avec leurs griffes pointues. Puis il les re-tournait sur le dos, les caressait, les embrassait, les mettait dans sa chemise. Renvoyé au travail, plus d’une fois, sans doute, sur son banc, quand il sera bien triste et bien las, il rêvera à ces heures tranquilles qu’il passait, seul avec eux, à sentir dans ses mains rudes la douceur de leur duvet et leurs petits corps chauds se tapir sur son cœur.

J’aime à croire cependant que le règlement interdit ces récréations et que c’était, sans doute, une charité de la religieuse.

Au reste, pas plus là qu’ailleurs, la règle n’est sans exception, outre que d’abord la distinction des rangs ne s’efface pas, quoi qu’on dise (l’égalité étant un mensonge, même au bagne). Car du bonnet numéroté sort parfois quelque chevelure finement parfumée, comme sur le bord de la chemise rouge se relève souvent un bout de man—

16 chette entourant une main blanche. Il y a de plus des faveurs spéciales pour certaines professions, pour certains hommes. Comment ont-ils pu, malgré la loi et la jalousie de leurs camarades, conquérir cette position excentrique qui en fait presque des galériens amateurs et qu’ils gardent cependant comme un fait acquis, sans que personne la leur dispute ? A l’entrée du chantier où l’on construit des canots, vous trouvez une table de dentiste munie de tous les ustensiles de la profession. Sur la muraille, dans un joli cadre vitré, s’alignent des râteliers entrebâillés auprès desquels l’artiste, debout, vous fait sa petite réclame, quand vous passez. Il reste là, toute la journée, dans son établissement, occupé à polir ses outils et à enfiler ses chapelets de molaires. Il y peut, loin de tout gardien, causer à l’aise avec les promeneurs, apprendre des nouvelles du monde médical, exercer son industrie comme un homme patenté. A l’heure qu’il est, il doit éthériser. Un peu plus, il aurait des élèves et ferait des cours. Mais l’homme le mieux posé est le curé Lacolonge. Médiateur entre la chiourme et le banc, le pouvoir s’en sert pour agir sur les galériens qui, de leur côté, s’adressent à lui pour obtenir des grâces. Il habite à part, dans une petite chambre fort propre, a un domestique pour le servir, mange de grands saladiers de fraises de Plougastel, prend son café et lit les journaux.

Messieurs les ecclésiastiques d’ailleurs jouissent d’égards tout particuliers ; ils se réunissent, ont entre eux des conférences religieuses, servent la messe, confessent, feraient communier avec plaisir ; c’est un petit séminaire, une aumônerie, il ne manque que le costume pour que l’illusion soit complète.

Si Lacolonge est la tête du bagne, c’est Ambroise qui en est le bras.

Ambroise est un magnifique nègre de près de six pieds de haut et qui eût fait, au xvi* siècle, un admirable bravo pour un homme de qualité. Héliogabale devait nourrir chez lui quelque drôle de cette façon, pour s’amuser, en soupant, à le voir étouffer à bras le corps un lion de Numidie, ou assommer à coups de poing les gladiateurs. II a une peau luisante d’un noir uni, avec un reflet bleu d’acier, une taille mince, vigoureuse comme celle d’un tigre, et des dents si blanches qu’elles en font presque peur.

Roi du bagne de par le droit du muscle, on le redoute, on l’admire ; sa réputation d’hercule lui fait un devoir d’essayer les arrivants, et jusqu’à présent ces épreuves ont toutes tourné à sa gloire. II ploie des barres de fer sur son genou, lève trois hommes au bout du poing, en renverse huit en écartant les bras, et quotidiennement mange triple portion, car il a un appétit démesuré, des appétits de toute nature, une constitution héroïque. Son mignon est un jeune arabe dont il est jaloux à la fureur et qui lui reste fidèle dans la crainte de mourir.

Nous le vîmes au jardin botanique en train d'ar-

\6. roser les plantes. On le trouve par là, dans sa serre chaude, derrière les aloès et les palmiers nains, occupé à remuer le terreau des couches, ou à nettoyer les châssis. Les jeudis, jour d'entrées publiques, Ambroise y reçoit ses maîtresses derrière les caisses d'oranger, et il en a plusieurs, plus qu'il n'en veut. II sait, en effet, s'en procurer, soit par ses séductions, soit par sa force ou par son argent dont il porte habituellement quantité sur lui et qu'il jette royalement dès qu'il s'agit de réjouir sa peau noire. Aussi est-il fort couru d'une certaine classe de dames, et peut-être que les gens qui l'ont mis là n'ont jamais été si fort aimés.

Au milieu du jardin, dans un bassin d'eau claire, couvert de plantes sur les bords qu'om-brage un saule pleureur, il y a un cygne. II s'y promène, d'un coup de patte le traverse en en-tier, en fait cent fois le tour et ne songe plus à en sortir. Pour passer le temps, il s'amuse à gober les poissons rouges.

Plus loin, le long du mur, on a bâti quelques cages pour-recevoir les animaux rares venus d'outre-mer, destinés au Muséum de Paris. Elles étaient vides la plupart. Devant l'une d'elles, dans une étroite cour grillée, un forçat chaussé de bottes fines instruisait un petit chat-tigre et lui ap-prenait comme à un chien à obéir à la parole. II n'a donc pas assez de la servitude, celui-là ? II la déverse sur un autre. Les coups de gourdin dont on le menace, il les donne au chat-tigre qui, un beau jour, sans doute, s'en vengera en sautant par-dessus son grillage et en allant étrangler le cygne.

Un soir que la lune brillait sur les pavés, et que les bons bourgeois de Brest dormaient dans les bras de leurs épouses ou de leurs servantes, nous nous mimes en devoir d'aller nous promener dans les rues dites infâmes. Elles sont nombreuses. La troupe de ligne, la marine, l'artillerie ont chacune la leur, sans compter le bagne qui, à lui seul, a tout un quartier de la ville. Sept ruelles parallèles, aboutissant derrière ses murs, composent ce qu'on appelle Keravel qui n'est rempli que par les maîtresses des gardes-chiourme et des forçats. Ce sont de vieilles maisons de bois tas-sées l'une sur l'autre, ayant toutes leurs portes fermées, leurs fenêtres bien closes, leurs auvents bouchés. On n'y entend rien, on n'y voit personne ; pas une lumière aux lucarnes ; au fond de chaque ruelle, seulement un réverbère que le vent balance, fait osciller sur le pavé ses longs rayons jaunes. Le reste n'en est que plus noir. Au clair de lune, ces maisons muettes, à toits inégaux, projetaient des silhouettes étranges.

Quands'ouvrent-elles ? A des heures inconnues, au moment le plus silencieux des nuits les plus sombres. Alors y entre le garde-chiourme qui s'esquive de son poste, ou le forçat qui s'échappe de son ban, souvent tous deux de compagnie, s'aidant, se protégeant ; puis, quand le jour revient, le forçat escalade le mur, le garde-chiourme détourne la tête et personne n'a rien vu. Dans le quartier des matelots, au contraire, tout se montre et s'étale. II flambe, il grouille. Les joyeuses maisons vous jettent, quand vous passez, leur bourdonnement et leur lumière. On crie, on danse, on se dispute, on s'amuse. Dans de grandes salles basses du rez-de-chaussée, des femmes en camisole de nuit sont assises sur des bancs, le long de la muraille blanchie où un quinquet est accroché ; d'autres, sur le seuil des portes, vous appellent, et leurs têtes animées se détachent sur le fond du bouge éclairé où retentit le choc des verres avec les grosses caresses des hommes du peuple. Vous entendez sonner les baisers sur des épaules charnues, et rire de plaisir, au bras de quelque matelot bruni qui la tient sur ses genoux, la bonne fille rousse dont la gorge débraillée s'en va de sa chemise, comme sa chevelure de son bonnet. Ceux qui sont dehors viennent regarder à travers les carreaux ou causent doucement avec quelque égrillarde à moitié nue qui se penche sur leur visage. Les groupes stationnent ; ils attendent. Cela se fait sans façon et comme l'envie vous y pousse. En voyageurs consciencieux et qui veulent étudier les choses de près, nous entrâmes... Mais ça se fait et ça ne se dit pas ! Mais c'est in-convenant ! Voici un livre dégoûtant ! Comment ? Aller chez les filles et l'écrire encore ! Où en sommes-nous ? Quelle révoltante littérature ! L'impudence ne va pas plus loin. C'est d'un cynisme, d'une immoralité ! Comment ne pas rougir...

Nous entrâmes dans l'un de ces établissements que la Providence a placés dans les villes comme de fétides mais utiles égouts, ainsi que disent les économistes. II n'était ni des derniers, encore moins des premiers.

Dans un salon tendu de papier rouge, trois ou quatre demoiselles étaient assises autour d'une table ronde, et un amateur en casquette, qui fu-mait sa pipe sur le sofa, nous salua poliment quand nous entrâmes. Elles avaient des tenues modestes et des robes parisiennes.

Les meubles d'acajou étaient couverts d'utrecht rouge, le pavé ciré et les murs ornés des batailles de l'Empire. O vertu, tu es belle, car le vice est bien bête !

Ayant près de moi une femme dont les mains auraient suffi pour abattre le satyriasis le plus robuste et ne sachant donc que faire, nous payâmes à boire à la compagnie.

Or j'allumai un cigare, m'étendis dans un coin et là, fort triste et la mort dans l'âme, pendant que la voix éraillée des femelles glapissait et que les petits verres se vidaient, je me disais :

— Où est-elle ? Où est-elle ? Est-ce qu’elle est morte au monde, et les hommes ne la reverront-ils plus ?

Elle était belle, jadis, au bord des promontoires, montant le péristyle des Temples, quand sur ses pieds roses traînait la frange d’or de sa tunique blanche, ou lorsque, assise sur des coussins persiques, elle devisait avec les sages en tournant dans ses doigts son collier de camées. Elle était belle, debout, nue sur le seuil de sa *cella* dans sa rue de Suburre, sous la torche de résine qui pétillait dans la nuit, quand elle chantait lentement sa complainte campanienne et qu’on entendait sur le Tibre de longs refrains d’orgie.

Elle était belle aussi dans sa vieille maison de la Cité, derrière son vitrage de plomb, entre les étudiants tapageurs et les moines débauchés, quand, sans peur des sergents, on frappait fort sur les tables de chêne les grands pots d’étain, et que les lits vermoulus se cassaient sous le poids des corps.

Elle était belle, accoudée sur un tapis vert et guignant l’or des provinciaux, avec ses hauts talons, sa taille de guêpe, sa perruque à frimas dont la poudre odorante lui tombait sur les épaules, avec une rose de côté, avec une mouche sur la joue.

Elle était belle encore parmi les peaux de bique des cosaques et les uniformes anglais, se poussant dans la foule des hommes et faisant luire sa poitrine sur la marche des maisons de jeu, sous l’étal des orfèvres, à la lueur des cafés, entre la faim et l’argent.

Que pleurez-vous ? Est-ce la monarchie ? sont-ce les croyances, est-ce la noblesse ou le prêtre ? Moi, je regrette la fille de joie.

…Sur le boulevard, un soir encore, je l’ai vue passer, aux feux du gaz, alerte, muette, lançant ses yeux, et glissant sur le trottoir sa semelle traînante. J’ai vu sa figure pâle aux coins des rues et la pluie tomber sur les fleurs de sa chevelure, quand sa voix douce appelait les hommes et que sa chair grelottait sur le bord du satin noir.

Ce fut son dernier jour ; le lendemain elle ne reparut plus.

Ne craignez point qu’elle revienne, car elle est morte maintenant, bien morte ! Sa robe est haute, elle a des mœurs, elle s’effarouche des mots grossiers et met à la Caisse d’épargne les sous qu’elle gagne.

La rue balayée de sa présence a perdu la seule poésie qui lui restât encore ; on a filtré le ruisseau, tamisé l’ordure.

Voilà ce que je me disais sur le sofa de ces dames tout en mâchant mon cigare éteint. Je n’y fis pas autre chose, et en nous en retournant nous déplorions dans nos âmes le type perdu dont la plate caricature nous avait glacés d’ennui.

Autrefois, lorsqu’on se promenait, on avait chance aussi de rencontrer des ours, des bateleurs, des tambours de basque, des singes habillés de rouge, dansant sur le dos d’un dromadaire, mais tout cela est également parti, est également chassé, proscrit sans retour ; la guillotine est hors barrière et fonctionne en cachette, les forçats vont en voiture fermée et les processions sont défendues !

Dans quelque temps, les saltimbanques aussi auront disparu, pour faire place aux séances magnétiques et aux banquets réformistes, et la danseuse de corde bondissant dans l’air, avec sa robe pailletée et son grand balancier, sera aussi loin de nous que la bayadère du Gange.

De tout ce beau monde coloré, bruissant comme la fantaisie même, si mélancolique et si sonore, si amer et si folâtre, plein de pathétique intime et d’ironies éclatantes, où la misère était chaude, où la grâce était triste, dernier cri d’un âge perdu, race lointaine qu’on disait venue de l’autre bout de la terre, et qui nous apportait dans le bruit de ses grelots comme la vague souvenance et l’écho mourant des joies idolâtrées, quelque fourgon qui s’en va sur la grande route, ayant des toiles roulées sous son toit et des chiens crottés sous sa caisse, un homme en veste jaune escamo-tant la muscade dans des gobelets de fer-blanc, les pauvres marionnettes des Champs-Elysées et les joueurs de guitare des cabarets hors barrière, voilà tout ce qui en reste.

Il est vrai qu’il nous est survenu en revanche beaucoup de facéties d’un comique plus relevé. Mais le nouveau grotesque vaut-il l’ancien ? Est-ce que vous préférez Tom-Pouce ou le musée de Versailles ?

Sur une estrade de bois qui faisait le balcon d’une tente carrée de toile grise, un homme en blouse jouait du tambour ; derrière lui se dressait une large pancarte peinte représentant un mou-ton, une vache, des dames, des messieurs et des militaires. C’étaient les deux, jeunes phénomènes de Guérande, porteurs d’un bras, quatre épaules. Leur même montreur ou éditeur criait à se lancer les poumons par la bouche et annonçait, outre ces deux belles choses, des combats d’animaux féroces qui allaient commencer à l’heure même. Sous l’estrade on voyait un âne ; trois ours roupil-laient à côté, et des aboiements de chiens, partant de l’intérieur de la baraque, se mêlaient au bruit sourd du tambour, aux cris saccadés du propriétaire des jeunes phénomènes et à ceux d’un autre drôle, non pas trapu, carré, jovial et gaillard comme lui, mais grand et maigre, de figure sinistre et vêtu d’une plaude en lambeaux : c’est son associé ; ils se sont rencontrés en route et ont uni leurs commerces. L’un a apporté les ours, l’âne et les chiens ; l’autre les deux phénomènes et un chapeau de feutre gris qui sert dans les représentations.

Le théâtre, à découvert sous le ciel, a pour muraille la toile grise qui frissonne au vent et s’en irait sans les pieux qui la retiennent. Une balustrade contenant les spectateurs règne le long des côtés de l’arène où, dans un coin à part, grigno-tant une botte de foin déliée, nous reconnaissons en effet les deux jeunes phénomènes recouverts de leur housse magnifique. Au milieu est fiché en terre un long poteau et, de place en place, à d’autres morceaux de bois plus petits, des chiens sont attachés avec des ficelles, s’y démènent et tirent dessus en aboyant. Le tambour bat toujours, on crie sur l’estrade, les ours grognent, la foule arrive.

On commença par amener un pauvre ours aux trois quarts paralytique et qui semblait considérablement ennuyé. Muselé, il avait de plus autour du cou un collier d’où pendait une chaîne de fer, un cordon passé dans les narines pour le faire docilement manœuvrer, et sur la tête une sorte de capuchon de cuir qui lui protégeait les oreilles. On l’attacha au mât du milieu ; alors ce fut un redoublement d’aboiements aigus, enroués, furieux. Les chiens se dressaient, se hérissaient, grattaient la terre, la croupe en haut, la gueule basse, les pattes écartées et, dans un angle, vis-à-vis l’un de l’autre, les deux maîtres hurlaient pour les mieux exciter. On lâcha d’abord trois dogues ; ils se ruèrent sur l’ours qui commença à tourner autour du poteau et les chiens couraient après, se bousculant, gueulant, tantôt renversés, à demi écrasés sous ses pattes, puis se relevant aussitôt et bondissant se suspendre à sa tête qu’il secouait en vain sans pouvoir se débarrasser de cette couronne de corps endiablés qui s’y tordaient et le mordaient. L’œil fixé sur eux, les deux maîtres guettaient le moment précis où l’ours allait être étranglé ; alors ils se précipitaient des-sus, les en arrachaient, les tiraient par le cou, et pour leur faire lâcher prise leur mordaient la queue. Ils geignaient de douleur, mais ne cédaient pas. L’ours se débattait sous les chiens, les chiens mordaient l’ours, les hommes mordaient les chiens. Un jeune bouledogue, entre autres, se distinguait par son acharnement ; cramponné par les crocs à I’échine de l’ours, on avait beau lui mâcher la queue, la lui plier en double, lui presser les testicules, lui déchirer les oreilles, il ne lâchait point, et l’on fut obligé d’aller chercher un Iouchet pour lui desserrer les dents de force. Quand tout était séparé, chacun se repo-sait, l’ours se couchait, les chiens haletaient, la langue pendante ; les hommes, en sueur, se reti-raient d’entre les dents les brins de poil qui y étaient restés, et la poussière soulevée par la mêlée s’éparpillait dans l’air et retombait à I’en-tour sur les têtes du public.

On amena successivement deux autres ours dont l’un imitait le jardinier, allait à la chasse, valsait, mettait un chapeau, saluait la compagnie et faisait le mort. Après lui vint le tour de l’âne. II se défendit bien ; ses ruades lançaient au loin les chiens comme des ballons ; serrant la queue, baissant les oreilles, allongeant le museau, il courait vite et tâchait toujours de les ramener sous ses pieds de devant, pendant qu’ils tournaient autour de lui et lui sautaient sous la mâchoire. On le retira néanmoins fort essoufflé, grelottant de peur et couvert de gouttes de sang qui coulaient le long de ses jambes rendues galeuses par les cicatrices de ses blessures, et mouillaient avec la sueur la corne usée de ses sabots.

Mais le plus beau fut le combat général des chiens entre eux ; tous y étaient, grands, petits, chiens-loups, bouledogues, les noirs, les blancs, les tachetés et les roux. Un bon quart d'heure se passa préalablement à les animer l'un contre l'autre. Les maîtres, les tenant dans leurs jambes, leur tournaient la tête vers leurs adversaires et la leur hocquesonnaient avec violence. L'homme maigre surtout travaillait de tout cœur ; il tirait de sa poitrine, par une secousse brutale, un jet de voix rauque, éraiflée, féroce, qui inspirait la colère à toute la bande irritée. Aussi sérieux qu'un chef d'orchestre à son pupitre, il absorbait en lui cette harmonie discordante, la dirigeait, la renforçait ; mais quand les dogues étaient déchaînés, et qu'ils s'entredéchiraient tous en hurlant, l'enthousiasme le prenait, il se délectait, ne se reconnaissait plus, il aboyait, applaudissait, se tordait, battait du pied, faisait le geste d'un chien qui attaque, se lançait le corps en avant comme eux, secouait la tête comme eux ; il aurait voulu mordre aussi, qu'on le mordît, être chien, avoir une gueule pour se rouler là dedans, au milieu de la poussière, des cris et du sang ; pour sentir les crocs dans les peaux velues, dans de la chair chaude, pour nager en plein dans ce tourbillon, pour s'y débattre de tout son cœur.

Il y eut un moment critique, quand tous les chiens l'un sur l'autre, tas grouillant de pattes, de reins, de queues et d'oreilles, qui oscillait dans l'arène sans se désunir, allèrent donner contre la balustrade, la cassèrent et menacèrent d'endommager dans leur coin les deux jeunes phénomènes. Leur maître pâlit, fit un bond, et l'associé accourut. C'est là qu'on mordit bien vite les queues, qu'on donna des coups de poing, des coups de pied, qu'on se dépêchait, qu'on allait. Les chiens empoignés n'importe par où, tirés du groupe et jetés par-dessus l'épaule, passaient dans l'air comme des bottes de foin qu'on engrange. Ce fut un éclair ; mais j'ai vu l'instant où les deux jeunes phénomènes allaient être ravalés à l'état de biftecks, et j'ai tremblé pour le bras qu'ils portent sur le dos.

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Emus de cette algarade, sans doute, ils firent des façons pour se laisser voir. La vache reculait, le mouton donnait des coups de cornes ; enfin, on releva leurs housses vertes à franges jaunes ; leur appendice fut exhibé, et ainsi se termina la représentation.

(*'Ce genre de littérature (aussi littéraire que beaucoup d'autres, après tout) est fort goûté à Brest. La seconde fois que nous y retournâmes, un bourgeois de la ville avait amené son chien pour combattre, et un artilleur se disposait à lutter contre les trois ours. Malheureusement il passa par là un sergent qui le fit rentrer à la caserne, le public fut indigné et nous aussi.

Que voir ensuite à Brest et qu'y a-t-il ? Des maisons fort bêtes, un théâtre où l'on ne joue pas (et si l'on jouait !), des églises déplorables, une place d'armes carrée, puis une promenade, fort belle il est vrai, ayant vue sur la mer et plantée de grands arbres, où se réunit le soir la bonne société de l'endroit. De l'autre côté du port se trouve l'ancien quartier de Recouvrance. On

<*) Inédit, pages 353 à 257. gravit une grande rue droite dont le milieu est occupé par une file d'échoppes de brocanteurs et de marchands de ferraille et l'on arrive enfin sur l'esplanade des derniers remparts. Ce jour-là le ciel était sans nuages, tout bleu, la mer aussi ; à l'entrée de la rade, la brise du large donnant contre les récifs faisait s'étendre sur tout ce côté de l'horizon une longue ligne blanche ; les bâtiments à l'ancre se tenaient immobiles ; près de nous, appuyé contre une meurtrière, un marin regardait avec une longue-vue, un homme du peuple en chemise traînait un petit enfant dans un chariot, les gamins jouaient dans les fossés, les orties verdoyaient au pied des murs, et le soleil brillait sur les buffleteries de cuivre des sentinelles.

La campagne qui entoure Brest n'a pas la sauva-gerie silencieuse des environs de Crozon et deLan-dévennec, mais les arbres sont plus nombreux, plus verts, presque noirs. Jusqu'au Conquet, la route, comme nageant dans la verdure, monte et descend, tourne au flanc des collines, coupe des prairies ; on file entre de grands genêts.

Ne vous arrêtez pas à Lockrist pour voir le tombeau de Michel Nobletz, car l'église est détestable, le tombeau stupide et Michel Nobletz ressemble à saint Vincent de Paul qui n'était pas un bel homme. Le Conquet lui-même, grand bourg paisible dont les habitants semblent partis, ne vaudrait pas la peine de s'être dérangé pour le voir s'il n'y avait non loin l'abbaye démantelée de Saint-Mathieu. A découvert sous le ciel, la nef déserte reçoit la pluie et à la place des dalles, entre les colonnes où s'enroulent aux chapiteaux des torses historiés, une herbe épaisse a poussé, les murailles nues ont une couleur de suie et de bronze, dont les tons tranchants se fondent l'un dans l'autre et qui capricieusement s’allongent sur la pierre comme les lambeaux inégaux d’une draperie déchirée. A d’autres places, de fines tramées d’herbes descendant de toute la hauteur de l’égîise semblent couler comme de grandes larmes.

Le vent de la mer, dont les vagues battent la base de l’édifice, entre par l’ogive des fenêtres sans vitrail où les courlis perchent sur le bord.

Elle n’a qu’un bas côté, et de l’autre de ses flancs, deux contre-nefs plus basses ; les piliers carrés et les colonnes rondes s’alternent, la maîtresse voûte s’appuyait sur des faisceaux de colonnettes. Près du phare qu’on a bâti là, dans une cour fermée d’une claire-voie, il y a des choux, du chanvre et des poireaux.

Au phare de Brest. — Ici se termine l’ancien monde ; voilà son point le plus avancé, « sa limite extrême ». Derrière vous est toute l’Europe, toute l’Asie ; devant vous c’est la mer et toute la mer. Si grands qu’à nos yeux soient les espaces, ne sont-ils pas bornés toujours, dès que nous leur savons une limite ? Ne voyez-vous pas de nos plages, par delà la Manche, les trottoirs de Brighton, et, des bastides de Provence, n’embras-sez-vous pas la Méditerranée entière, comme un

‘7 immense bassin d’azur dans une conque de rochers que cisèlent sur ses bords les promontoires couverts de marbres qui s’éboulent, les sables jaunes, les palmiers qui pendent, les sables, les golfes qui s’évasent ? Mais ici plus rien n’arrête. Rapide comme le vent, la pensée peut courir, et s’étalant, divaguant, se perdant, elle ne rencontre comme eux que des flots ; puis, au fond, il est vrai, tout au fond, là-bas, dans l’horizon des rêves, la vague Amérique, peut-être des îles sans nom, quelque pays à fruits rouges, à colibris et à sauvages, ou le crépuscule muet des pôles, avec le jet d’eau des baleines qui soufflent, ou les grandes villes éclairées en verres de couleur, le Japon aux toits de porcelaine, la Chine avec les escaliers à jour, dans des pagodes à clochettes d’or.

C’est ainsi que l’esprit, pour rétrécir cet infini dont il se lasse sans cesse, le peuple et l’anime. On ne songe pas au désert sans les caravanes, à l’Océan sans les vaisseaux, au sein de la terre sans les trésors qu’on lui suppose.

Nous nous en revînmes au Conquet par la falaise. Les vagues bondissaient à sa base, accou-rant du large ; elles se heurtaient contre, et couvraient ensuite de leurs nappes oscillantes les grands blocs immobiles. Une demi-heure après, emportés dans notre char à bancs par deux petits chevaux presque sauvages, nous regagnions Brest, d’où le surlendemain nous partîmes avec beaucoup de plaisir.

En s’écartant du littoral et en remontant vers la Manche, la contrée change d’aspect, elle devient moins rude, moins celtique, les dolmens se font plus rares, la lande diminue à mesure que les blés s’étendent, et peu à peu l’on entre ainsi dans ce fertile et plat pays de Léon, qui est, comme l’a si aimablement dit M.

Pitre-Chevalier, “l’Attique de la Bretagne”.

Landerneau est un pays où il y a une promenade d’ormeaux au bord de la rivière et où nous vîmes courir dans les rues un chien effrayé qui tramait à sa queue une casserole attachée.

Pour aller au château de la Joyeuse-Garde, il faut d’abord suivre la rive de I’Elorn, et ensuite marcher longtemps dans un bois par un chemin creux où personne ne passe. Quelquefois le taillis s’éclaircit, alors à travers les branches, la prairie parait ou bien la voile de quelque navire qui remonte la rivière. Notre guide marchait devant nous, loin, écarté. Seuls ensemble, nous foulions ce bon sol des bois où les bouquets violets des bruyères poussent dans le gazon tendre, parmi les feuilles tombées. On sentait les fraises, la fram-boise et la violette ; sur le tronc des arbres, les longues fougères étendaient leurs palmes grêles. II faisait lourd ; la mousse était tiède. Caché sous la feuillée, le coucou poussait son cri prolongé ; dans les clairières, des moucherons bourdonnaient en tournoyant leurs ailes.

Tranquilles d’âme et balancés par la marche, épanchant à l’aise nos fantaisies causeuses qui s’en allaient comme des fleuves par de larges embouchures, nous devisions des sons, des mots, des couleurs ; nous parlions des martres, de leurs œu-vres, des joies de l’idée ; nous songions à des tournures de style, à des coins de tableau, à des airs de tête, à des façons de draperie ; nous nous redi-sions quelques grands vers énormes, beauté inconnue pour les autres qui nous délectait sans fin, et nous en répétions le rythme, nous en creusions les mots, le cadençant si fort qu’il en était chanté. Puis, c’étaient les lointains paysages qui se déroulaient, quelque splendide figure qui venait, des saisissements d’amour pour un clair de lune d’Asie se mirant sur des coupoles, des attendris-sements d’admiration à propos d’un mot, ou la dégustation naïve de quelque phrase en relief trouvée dans un vieux livre.

Et couchés dans la cour de Joyeuse-Garde, près du souterrain comblé, sous le plein cintre de son arcade unique que revêtent les lierres, nous causions de Shakespeare et nous nous demandions s’il y avait des habitants dans les étoiles.

Puis nous partîmes, n’ayant guère donné qu’un coup d’œil à la demeure ruinée du bon Lancelot, celui qu’une fée enleva à sa mère et qu’elle nourrit au fond d’un lac dans un palais de pierreries. Les nains enchanteurs ont disparu, le pont-Ievis s’est envolé et le lézard se traîne où se promenait jadis la belle Geneviève songeant à son amant parti en Trébizonde combattre les géants.

Nous revînmes dans la forêt par les mêmes sentiers ; les ombres s’allongeaient, les broussailles et les fleurs ne se distinguaient plus, et les montagnes basses d’en face grandissaient leurs sommets bleuâtres dans le ciel qui blanchissait. La rivière, contenue jusqu’à une demi-lieue en deçà de la ville dans des rives factices, s’en va ensuite comme elle veut et déborde librement dans la prairie qu’elle traverse ; sa longue courbure s’étalait au loin, et les flaques d’eau que colorait le soleil couchant avaient l’air de grands plats d’or oubliés sur l’herbe.

Jusqu’à la Roche-Maurice, I’EIorn serpente à côté de la route qui contourne la base des collines rocheuses dont les mamelons inégaux s’avancent dans la vallée. Nous la parcourions au petit trot dans un cabriolet paisible qu’un enfant conduisait, assis dans le brancard. Son chapeau, sans cordons, s’envolait au vent, et dans les stations qu’il fallait faire pour descendre le ramasser, nous avions tout le loisir d’admirer le paysage.

Le château de la Roche-Maurice était un vrai château de burgrave, un nid de vautour au som-met d’un mont. On y monte par une pente presque à pic, le long de laquelle, de place en place, des blocs de maçonnerie éboulés servent de marches.Tout en haut, par un pan de mur fait de quartiers plats posés l’un sur l’autre et où tiennent encore de larges arcs de fenêtres, on voit la campagne : des bois, des champs, la rivière qui coule vers la mer, le ruban blanc de la route qui s’allonge, les montagnes dentelant leurs crêtes inégales, et la grande prairie qui les sépare en se répandant au milieu.

Un fragment d’escalier mène encore à une tour démantelée. Çà et là les pierres sortent d’entre les herbes, et la roche se montre entre les pierres. II semble, parfois, qu’elle a d’elle-même des for-mes artificielles, et que la ruine, au contraire, plus elle s’éboule, revêt des apparences naturelles et rentre dans la nature.

D’en bas, sur un grand morceau de muraille, monte un lierre ; mince à sa racine, il va s’élargissant en pyramide renversée et, à mesure qu’il s’élève, assombrit sa couleur verte qui est claire à la base et noire au sommet. A travers une ouverture dont les bords se cachaient sous le feuillage, le bleu du ciel passait.

C’était dans ces parages que vivait le fameux dragon tué jadis par le chevalier Derrien qui s’en revenait de la Terre Sainte. II se mit à l’attaquer dès qu’il eut, il est vrai, retiré de l’eau l’infortuné Elorn qui, après avoir livré successivement ses esclaves, ses vassaux, ses serviteurs (il ne lui restait plus que sa femme et son fils), venait de se jeter lui-même du haut de sa tour, la tête en bas, dans la rivière ; mais le monstre, mortellement blessé et lié par I’écharpe de son vainqueur, alla bientôt, sur son ordre, se noyer dans la mer, à Poulbeun-zualu’, ainsi que l’avait été, sur le commandement de saint Pol de Léon, le crocodile de l’île de

W Par contraction de Poulbeuzanneval : marais où fut noyée la bête. (Note du manuscrit de Gustave Flaubert.) Batz, lié par I’étole du saint breton, comme le fut plus tard la gargouille de Rouen par celle de saint Romain.

Qu’ils étaient beaux vraiment ces vieux dragons horrifiques, endentés jusqu’au fond de la gueule, vomissant des flammes, couverts d’écaillés, avec une queue de serpent, des ailes de chauve-souris, des griffes de lion, un corps de cheval, une tête de coq, et retirant au basilic ! Et le chevalier aussi qui les combattait était un rude sire ! Son cheval, d’abord, se cabrait et avait peur, sa lance se bri-sait en morceaux contre les écailles de la bête, et la fumée de ses naseaux l’aveuglait. II mettait enfin pied à terre, et après tout un grand jour, l’atteignait sous le ventre d’un coup d’épée, laquelle restait enfoncée jusqu’à la garde. Un sang noir sortait à gros bouillons, puis le peuple re-conduisait triomphalement le chevalier qui de-venait ensuite roi du pays, et épousait une belle dame.

Mais eux, d’où venaient-ils ? Qui les a faits ? Était-ce le confus souvenir des monstres d’avant le déluge ? Est-ce sur la carcasse des ichtyosaures et des ptéropodes qu’ils furent rêvés jadis, et que l’épouvante des hommes a entendu dans les grands roseaux marcher le bruit de leurs pieds, et leur voix mugir quand le vent s’engouffrait dans les cavernes ? Ne sommes-nous pas d’ailleurs dans le pays des chevaliers de la Table ronde, la contrée des fées, la patrie de Merlin, le berceau mytho-logique des épopées disparues. Sans doute qu’elles révélaient ces vieux mondes devenus fantastiques, qu’elles nous disaient quelque chose des villes en-glouties, Ys, Herbadilla, lieux splendides et féroces, pleins des amours des reines enchanteresses, et qu’ont doublement effacés à tout jamais la mer qui a passé dessus avec la religion qui en a maudit la mémoire.

II y aurait là beaucoup à dire. Sur quoi, en effet, n’y-a-t-il pas à dire ? Si ce n’est sur Landivisiau toutefois, l’homme le plus prolixe étant forcé d’être concis quand la matière lui manque.

Je remarque que les bons pays sont générale-ment les plus laids, ils ressemblent aux femmes vertueuses ; on les estime, mais on passe outre pour en trouver d’autres. Voici, certes, le coin le plus fertile de la Bretagne ; les paysans semblent moins pauvres, les champs mieux cultivés, les colzas magnifiques, les routes bien entretenues, et c’est ennuyeux à périr.

Des choux, des navets, beaucoup de betteraves et démesurément de pommes de terre, tous, régulièrement enclos dans des fossés, couvrent la campagne, depuis Saint-PoI-de-Léon jusqu’à Roscoff. On en expédie à Brest, à Rennes, jusqu’au Havre ; c’est l’industrie du pays ; il s’en fait un commerce considérable. Mais qu’est-ce que cela me fait à moi ? croyez-vous que ça m’amuse ?

A Roscoff on voit la mer, elle découvre devant les maisons sa grève vaseuse, se courbe ensuite dans un golfe étroit, et au large est toute tachetée d’îlots noirs, bombés comme des dos de tortue. La campagne des environs de Saint-Pol est d'une tristesse froide. La teinte morne des terres lentement onduleuses se fond sans transition dans la pâleur du ciel, et la courte perspective n'a pas de grandes lignes dans ses proportions ni de changement de couleur sur ses bords. Çà et là, en allant dans les champs, vous rencontrez, derrière un mur de pierres grises, quelque ferme silencieuse, manoir abandonné, où les martres ne viennent pas. Dans la cour, sur le fumier, les pourceaux dorment, les poules grignotent l'avoine, entre les dalles disjointes, sous le plein cintre de l'entrée dont l'écusson ciselé est rongé par le grand air. Dans les pièces vides qui servent de grenier, le plâtre des plafonds s'en va avec des restes de peintures ternies par la toile des araignées, que l'on voit courir sur les lambourdes. Le réséda sauvage a poussé sur la porte de Kersalion où se dresse encore, près de la tourelle, une fenêtre à pinacle flanquée d'un lion et d'un hercule sortant d'un mur comme des gargouilles. A Kerjean, dans le grand escalier tournant, j'ai heurté un piège à loup. Des socs de charrue, des fers de bêche rouilles, et des graines sèches dans des calebasses, gisent au hasard sur le parquet des chambres, ou encombrent les grands sièges de pierre dans l'embrasure des fenêtres.

Kerouséré a conservé ses trois tourelles à mâchicoulis, et l'on reconnaît encore dans la cour le large sillon des douves qui, montant petit à petit, en gagne le niveau, ainsi que sur l'onde, le sillage d'une barque qui s'efface en s'étalant. De la plate-forme de l'une des tours (les autres ont des toits pointus) on découvre la mer au bout d'un champ, entre deux collines basses couvertes par des bois. Les fenêtres du premier étage, à moitié bouchées pour que la pluie n'entre pas, plongent sur un jardin clos de grands murs. Le chardon couvre le gazon, et dans les plates-bandes on a semé du blé qu'entourent des bordures de rosiers.

Entre un champ, où les têtes mûres des épis se courbaient ensemble, et un rideau d'ormeaux plantés sur le haut bord d'un fossé, un sentier mince s'allongeait parmi les broussailles. Les co-quelicots éclataient dans les blés ; de la berge du haut bord, des fleurs et des ronces s'échappaient ; des orties, des églantiers, des tiges garnies de dards, des grosses feuilles à peau luisante, des mûres noires, des digitales pourprées, unissant leurs couleurs, enchevêtrant leurs branches, montraient leurs feuillages divers, lançaient Jeurs ra-meaux inégaux, et sur la poudre grise croisaient comme un filet toutes leurs ombres.

Quand on a traversé une prairie, où tourne, embarrassée dans les joncs, la roue d'un vieux moulin dont il faut longer la muraille en marchant sur de grosses pierres mises dans l'eau, pour ser-vir de pont, on se retrouve bientôt sur la grande route de Saint-Pol, au fond de laquelle se dresse, tailladée sur tous ses angles, la flèche du clocher de Kreizker. Fine, élancée et s'appuyant sur une tour surmontée d’une balustrade, de loin elle fait le meilleur effet du monde, mais plus on en approche, plus elle se rapetisse et s’enlaidit, et l’on ne trouve enfin qu’une église comme toutes les églises, ayant même un porche vide d’où les statues sont parties. La cathédrale aussi est d’un gothique lourd, empâté d’ornements, chamarré de broderies ; mais il y a à Saint-Pol quelque chose de pire encore, c’est la table d’hôte de son auberge.

Elle était servie cependant par une avenante donzelle qui, avec ses boucles d’oreille sur un cou blanc, son bonnet à barbes retroussées comme les soubrettes de Molière, et ses vifs yeux bleus surtout, vous aurait bien donné envie de lui demander autre chose que des assiettes. Mais les convives ! Quels convives ! Tous habitués ! Le haut bout était tenu par un être revêtu d’une veste de velours et d’un gilet de cachemire. II aimait à passer sa serviette dans les bouteilles entamées, pour les reconnaître. C’est lui qui sert la soupe. A sa gauche mangeait, le chapeau sur la tête, une espèce de monsieur en redingote gris clair ornée aux parements et au collet d’une laine noire fri-sottée en manière de fourrure, et qui est profes-seur de musique au collège de la ville. Mais la musique le fatigue, il en a assez, il désire trouver une place, n’importe laquelle, de huit cents à douze cents francs, pas davantage. II tient peu à l’argent, plus à la considération ; c’est une position seulement qu’il désire. Comme il arrivait toujours le repas commencé, il se faisait remonter les plats, les renvoyait, puis éternuait fort, crachait loin, se dandinait sur sa chaise, chantonnait tout bas, se couchait sur la table et faisait claquer son cure-dents.

Toute la société le respecte, la servante l’admire parler et en est, je suis sûr, amoureuse. La bonne opinion qu’il a de lui-même sort de son sourire, de ses paroles, de son silence, de ses gestes, de sa coiffure et ruisselle comme une sueur sur toute sa sale personne.

En face de nous, un petit homme grisonnant, frisé, grassouillet et courtaud, à pattes rouges, à lèvres épaisses et salivantes, et dont la voix glapissait, tout en mâchant sa nourriture nous regardait d’une telle façon, que nous nous retenions beaucoup pour ne pas lui jeter les carafes par la tête. Quant au reste, il faisait galerie et contribuait à l’ensemble.

Un soir, l’entretien roula sur une dame des environs qui, ayant jadis décampé du domicile, s’était enfuie en Amérique avec son amant, et qui, la semaine précédente, traversant Saint-Pol pour entrer dans son pays, s’était arrêtée à l’auberge. On s’étonnait de cette audace et l’on accompa-gnait son nom de toutes sortes d’épithètes. On repassait sa vie entière, on riait de mépris, on l’injuriait quoique absente, on s’animait tout rouge, on aurait voulu la tenir là “pour lui dire un peu son fait, pour voir ce qu’elle aurait répondu”. Décla-mations contre le luxe et scandales vertueux, haine de la toilette et maximes morales, mots à double entente et haussements d’épaules, tout fut employé à I’envi pour accabler cette femme qui, à en juger au contraire par l’acharnement de ces rustres, devait être de manière élégante, de nature relevée, avoir des nerfs délicats et, sans doute, quelque jolie figure. Malgré nous le cœur nous battait de colère, et si nous eussions fait à Saint-Pol un dîner de plus, infailliblement il nous serait arrivé quelque aventure. X

MorlAix. — Canal, galerie en bois sous les maisons, perspective de maisons dans des rues étroites, toits, devanture, poutres, couleur noire, vêtements suspendus au rez-de- chaussée. — C’était le jour de marché ; singulière étoffe de vestes d’hommes, fond jaunâtre avec des traînées brunes, inégales, comme des taches de chocolat ; une autre espèce servant de pantalon, fond blanc avec des traînées bleues et café. — Moutard tirant le fusil avec une queue de billard. — Manufacture de tabacs ; les tas ressemblent à des tas de varechs ; chevelure du tabac* à priser ; machines stupides ; casiers du tabac à priser. On y deviendrait fou, tous les hommes qui y travaillent sont pâles.

Tout le pays d’ici paraît plus riche, aussi les costumes deviennent plus laids, les têtes ont moins de vigueur ; plus d’expression vigoureuse et intense comme à Quimperlé ou même à Quimper. (Morlaix, 4 juillet, 10 heures du matin.)

Huelgoat. — Sur une hauteur, dans un fond, entre des coteaux tout boisés, parmi des roches semblables à celles que l’on voit dans la forêt de Fontainebleau ; étang à droite en arrivant. — Une conversation que nous avions eue sur l’amour et sur le sens du mot « curiosité » ayant remué

beaucoup de lie au fond du tonneau.....et puis’ le soleil

qui sèche la vase et fait sortir du fond les insectes qui y étaient cachés ! — Petit canal, promenade au bord. La berge du canal, escarpée, était couverte de ronces ; la digitale pourprée y mirait ses fleurs dans l’eau, bois charmant, arbres menus et longs, pentes, jours sous les troncs ; l’eau qui faisait des coudes. — Trou de Re-ahès, profond d’environ 25 pieds, lieu assez sinistre en effet, longue savouration de cette nature calme et retraitée. Huelgoat est le trou où l’on vient vivre quand on est triste, et le chagrin s’y changerait en mélancolie. — Ce matin, la mine ; pas moyen de la voir ! La boue d’où on retire l’argent. Nous avions, la veille au soir et le matin même, démesurément parlé d’argent ! — A l’auberge de la Tour d’argent, gravures de la Tour de Nesle.

De Huelgoat à Cabhaix, à monter et à descendre sans cesse ; la route passe pendant 300 pas sous de grands arbres. Paysage grand, avec des lignes de terrain les unes sur les autres, noires et bleu foncé ; grande campagne. Avant d’arriver à Huelgoat, au contraire, il y a des aspects tout secs, une montagne dentelée aiguë à la crête ; la lande est sèche, couleur de vieille mousse séchée, ça fait penser à l’Espagne. Au haut de chaque montée, aujourd’hui, on découvrait un paysage nouveau, qui se rétrécissait et perdait ses seconds pians quand nous avions descendu la hauteur.

Carhaix. — Désert, triste, le plâtre s’en va des maisons, les bois s’en vont en poudre. L’hôtel de ville avec une sainte serait un vilain cabaret de la rue Mouffetard. — Dans une rue, une maison d’ardoises et de bois rouge, vigoureuse comme ton à cause de la mousse rousse et verte qui s’est accrochée sur les murs d’ardoises. — Statue de la Tour d’Auvergne de Marochetti : belle tête, jambes lourdes, sotte mine du fusil passé sur un bonnet à poil ; les bas-reliefs sont assez animés, mais lourds. Tout ça c’est de la sculpture lymphatique. — Cimetière : les boites contenant des têtes comme à Quiberon reparaissent « ci-gît le chef de..... » ; à Saint-Pol du reste il y en avait déjà quelques-unes ; une seule convenable, on ne pouvait voir de qui, tout entourée de chèvrefeuille ; tombes de trois notaires et une boîte contenant la tête d’un autre notaire. L’usage est de peindre des paysages funèbres sur le bois des croix, une pyramide, un mausolée, une colonne, un tombeau dans une campagne. II y a une belle croix noire avec des boules d’or à ses trois bouts qui, au point d’in-tersection des bras, montre un tombeau chic : Sainte-Hélène, ombragé par un saule pleureur d’un pleurard échevelé ; la campagne est désolée ; au fond, des montagnes comme des vagues ; au second plan, des herbes alignées et au-dessus des nuages roses. » C’est du reste de règle, partout les nuages sont roses, la différence ne consiste que dans le pluj ou moins vif de la couleur. Le brave homme est là avec son épouse “Priez pour leur repos” ; ils doivent ronfler fort et pourrir gras pour ne pas se réveiller là-des- sous. Pauvre vieux notaire, va ! — Le cimetière est devant l’église : porte en bois sculpté ; le saint, dans l’église, est encore avec sa tête ! Immense bénitier, Saint Michel affreux, une vierge très tetonnière ; une autre grande couronne, jolie vraie figure de gravure de mode ; une statuette en bois, Madeleine esquimaude ; des cheveux énormes, chauds et bouffés, lui couvrent tout le corps jusqu’aux pieds comme un vêtement fait en poil d’animal ; c’est d’une vigousse et d’une bestialité inouïes, la femme a là-dessous la tiédeur animale des étables.

Affreuse bagnole de Carhaix à Guingamp. — Notre conducteur ; la femme veuve amie du conducteur ; noix et pain qu’ils mangeaient ensemble.....

Guingamp. — II y avait eu un pardon : les saints sous le porche de l’église étaient tout couronnés de fleurs ; flambeaux, herbes et gazons, lierres ; leur tête noircie avait une animation bizarre. Au fond, la Vierge au visage hâlé, toute chamarrée d’une robe de satin blanc qui s’étale ; sur la place, des boutiques ; au fond, deux baraques de saltimbanques, l’une où l’on faisait des tours de force et d’équi—

18 tation, où l’on représentait les supplices de la persécution de 150, et l’autre

qui était de danseurs de corde ; sur le devant, à gauche, les musiciens en militaires, figures toutes passives et obligées, et un paillasse en habit bleu à revers rouge qui jouait du tambour ; à droite, rangés, les acteurs : une femme de 40 ans, maigre, la mère ; une de 30, deux ou trois enfants et cambrée, debout, posée, la jambe en avant, en spencer de velours avec une robe blanche à paillette » d'or, une jeune fille de 14. ans, Mariette, cheveux noirs en deux tresses par derrière, front bas, sourcils noirs relevés, œil vigoureux, dardant ; grand avenir de femme moderne ; P... le père, médaille à la poitrine, redingote par-dessus son maillot, calotte sur la tête ; italien de Venise, il parlait, jouait du piston, du violon et faisait des tours de force : danses de corde, sauts sur des chevaux, exercices avec des anneaux. Cachucha, Mariette est revenue habillée en espagnole ; polka nationale, panto-mime, Pierrot Mariette en homme : pantalon blanc, grand chapeau noir, petite veste, moustaches.

Saint-Brieuc. — Rien. — Tour de Cesson, crâne morceau, un monticule, dominant la mer ; on voit encore des fragments d'escaliers et des restes de fenêtres. — Descente presque à pic sur de l'herbe glissante, passage, sables, godfiches, route sur des coquilles au bord de la mer ; il était marée basse. — Nous sommes remontés. — Les blés venaient jusqu'au bord de la falaise.

Pleven. — Cris affreux d'un moutard dans un cabaret où nous avons été prendre de la bière. — Dans le cimetière, vieux tombeau d'un guerrier bardé et cuirassé ; la chevelure frisée a l'air sur le front d'un bouquet de roses et retombe aussi en deux boucles sur les épaules ; à ses pieds, le chien dont la tête est cassée. — Herbes hautes dans ce cimetière, on la fauchait, l'homme repassait sa faux et nous regardait. — Mine de notre guide.

Lamballe. — Eglise sur la hauteur ; éreintée par une ignoble peinture noire qui cache mille bons détails ; deux tombeaux curieux. — Haras ; effet de l'homme à côté des animaux ; rôle tout passif de la jument qui ne dit mot. « Plus une jument est en chaleur et moins elle bouge », nous disait le vieux palefrenier, c'est le contraire chez nous. Mais si l'homme est moins beau que le cheval, en revanche l'ensemble humain est supérieur ; la femme est plus colorée comme mouvement que la cavale. Mais quel outil ! champignon. En le retirant, et lentement, avec un mouvement plein de mélancolie, l'étalon s'en barbouille les jambes. Cris presque féroces dans l'écurie en sentant les juments. Vestes rouges des garçons, l'agent comptable, les paysans, nous autres, c'était un tableau tout fait. Mais où n'y a-t-il pas de tableaux tout faits ? il s'agit de les voir.

DinAN. — Eglise Saint-Sauveur, portaiî, triple plein cintre ; les deux arcades de côté ont sur chaque angle du fond une colonne torse ; dans chacune de ces arcades, deux statues mutilées méconnaissables, debout, avec de grands animaux, lions ou chiens sur lesquels leurs pieds s'appuient ; le couronnement d’une de ces statues (côté droit) représente un agneau portant une croix. — Chapiteaux des colonnes représentant divers sujets : une femme tourmentée par un crapaud et par un diable, le crapaud en bas lui monte le long des cuisses et lui mord le sein ; une cigogne buvant dans un vase ; un homme assis ayant au cou une chaîne d’où pend un boulet qui lui tombe entre les cuisses ; dévoré par deux diables qui ont des têtes de taureaux. — Au bas du pinacle, lion ailé et bœuf ailé. — Pinacle lourd, percé d’une énorme fenêtre ogivale d’un vilain effet. — Sur un chapiteau, un vieux bonhomme à longue barbe portant un bâton au bout duquel est suspendue une boule, un pot ? ; consultant.une chimère. — Bénitier en granit de plus de 3 pieds de diamètre, deux poissons sculptés à l’intérieur ; sur l’extérieur, deux hommes et deux femmes : deux le tiennent sur le ventre et deux autres à la renverse ; toutes les têtes sont parties, on distingue les sexes aux pieds ; les vêtements des femmes descendent jusqu’en

.8. bas, tandis qu’on voit les jambes des hommes ; peu d’eau dans le bénitier. — Un seul bas côté et d’un bon gothique. Le côté droit de la nef (le bas côté de la nef manque) est garni de fenêtres romanes à deux colonnes couronnées de volutes plates. On a percé ce côté-là d’une petite chapelle ogivale. — Nef d’une pureté remarquable, les colonnettes qui terminent la retombée des ogives de la voûte, au lieu à partir de la galerie de se continuer rondes se continuent carrées. — Plaque de marbre de Duguesclin appelée Du-gucaquin. — Dans une des chapelles latérales on a scellé dans le mur un petit tableau en pierre sculptée représentant un homme debout, grand (saint Christophe ?), barbu, chevelu, avec une robe et de longues manches, une ceinture large, judaïque, marchant sur les flots, flanqué de chaque côté de petits arbres (théologiques) sur des rochers ; en bas deux enfants montés l’un sur un lion, l’autre sur un animal à croupe de cheval et à tête de chien, mais de chien qui a des allures de crocodile dans la dentition.

— Sur un chapiteau de colonne romane, deux chameaux s’abouchent ; celui qui lui fait pendant (c’étaient deux colonnes à l’entrée), serpents et dragons enroulés.

Tours de la prison, mâchicoulis avec des trèfles et des carrés longs qui en terminent la base. — Vue toute boisée du haut de la tour. — Restes de remparts. — Rues en pente, maisons en bois à toits aigus, perspective fuyante.

— Hôtel de ville ; collection : cheveux de Napoléon, giberne de La Tour d’Auvergne, clef de Louis XVI, cabi-net de M. le Maire. — Abus de Duguesclin : statue, portrait grand et petit, nom du bateau à vapeur, d’une place, d’un café. — Portrait de Broussais en costume de l’Institut.

Corseul. — Bénitier pareil à celui de l’église Saint-Sauveur, mais plus petit. — La tour du haut. — Le cheval. — Revêtements de pierres alignées à la romaine ; construction à cône, mais l'intérieur de la maçonnerie ne me parait pas romain.

Lehon. — Vieux château, monticule énorme à pente très rapide, toute couverte de hêtres ; à peine si on voit quelques fragments de maçonnerie saillissant de dessous l'herbe et les broussailles. — Chapelle des Beaumanoir ; grande fenêtre du fond par laquelle on voit une côte toute boisée ; caveau funéraire noir ; colonnette si verdie qu'elle ressemble à de beau bronze antique. Par une fenêtre géminée aiguë, à moitié brisée, jour vert, brutal, d'un livide flam-bant à cause des arbres et des feuilles, surtout à gauche, la lumière venait du coin droit. — Le cloître, sans toit, colonnes carrées ; au haut desquelles court de la vigne, une vache jaune ruminait sur l'herbe. — Réfectoire rempli de métiers ; fenêtres avec des châssis en plomb ; construction particulière dans le mur pour la chaire qui servait à faire la lecture pendant les repas. — Petites filles impu-diques et impudentes au bas du château, « si vous ne savez pas que c'est pour avoir du pain ».

Au musée, quelques tombeaux des Beaumanoir ; mais comme les choses hors du lieu pour lequel elles ont été faites manquent d'effet ! Cheveux de Napoléon, giberne de La Tour d'Auvergne, clef de Louis XVI, portraits de Broussais et de Duguesclin en pied ; en haut déjà, dans une des pièces de l'hôtel de ville, il y a un petit portrait de Duguesclin, il y a la place de Duguesclin sur laquelle on voit la statue de Duguesclin, il y a un café Duguesclin, l'hôtel Duguesclin. Les villes où sont nés de grands hom-mes n'y voient pas, elles en font un abus déplorable, ou les laissent complètement dans l'oubli. — Effet du paysage du haut des remparts détruits, comme à la Roche-Bernard, par un pont que l'on construit. — La Rance si vantée n'est belle qu'à l'embouchure, qu'à la mer où s'élargissant tout à coup, on aperçoit et Saint-Servan et tous les rochers qui entourent Saint-Malo. Sur ses bords, petits rochers, mais l'ensemble n'est ni doux ni âpre ; sans caractère original.

Ce sommaire a été développé par Maxime Du Camp. XI

Saint-Malo. — Tout entouré de remparts, rues étroites, resserrées ; maisons hautes noires, on voit chez le voisin ; vie triste, violente et colorée ; caractère singulièrement énergique de tout cela. — La mer est d'une beauté inouïe. — Hôtel de France : au second étage, en dehors, est écrit : Ici est né Chateaubriand. — Ilot du Grand-Bey ; une seule pierre et croix de granit ; le monument est composé de trois morceaux. A droite, Saint-Malo et la maison où il est né ; à gauche, des îles ; en face, la mer. Herbe rare ; plus haut, casemate démantelée qui a l'air d'une masure en ruines ; en bas, des rochers dans l'eau et le bruit des vagues qui s'y entrecroisent et s'y replient. La première fois que nous y (urnes, c'était le soir, le ciel était rose.

Saint-ServAn. — Quatre tours. — Fabrique de pipes, calme tout particulier de cet établissement. — Dans un cabaret, homme indigné contre les entrepreneurs des travaux. — Navigation pour revenir à Saint-Servan avec deux matelots : le père avait doublé le cap Horn, le fils le cap de Bonne-Espérance. — Bordées jusqu’à Dinard. — M. Bou-don, conversation sur Harel et Georges. Les bourgeois comprennent décidément peu la vie honnête ; suivre son instinct semble un crime dans l’état civilisé ; même lorsque l’instinct est généreux on en est puni par les lois souvent ; mais toujours par le mépris de ses concitoyens, et puis par la misère ; alors on rit de vous et on vous blâme et si vous êtes connu cela alimente la conversation des tables d’hôte ! — Lunettes bleues pour voir, plus dans sa couleur, le soleil se coucher. — “Mal du pays !” O Yvetotl la Générale ; la Quiquengrogne : deux fières tours pareilles, intactes, dont le ventre s’évase un peu en fer à cheval ; du haut de la Générale on frémit en songeant à l’ascension de La Blissais et de ses compagnons. — Dans l’église de Saint-Malo, nulle du reste, un tableau, dédié à Notre-Dame des Victoires, représente, au fond dans les nuages, la bataille de Lépante et toute la chrétienté à genoux sur le premier plan.

CancAle. — Baie de Cancale, grande plage vaseuse. — Le village aligne sur le bord de la mer toutes les barques à sec dans des postures différentes ; filets qui sèchent. — Dans l’auberge où nous sommes descendus, chez une pauvre femme qui avait perdu tous ses enfants, un homme ivre est entré en chantant et en demandant à boire. « Vous savez que mon cœur est trop dans le deuil, on ne chante pas ici, allez-vous-en.” — Superbes images : La Demande en mariage, Le Mariage, Le Coucher de la mariée, Le Lever de la mariée. “Qu’il me tarde que tu partages ma demeure et ma couche — je te possède — viens — veux-tu connaître des fêtes plus aimables que celle où nos convives assistent pour nous plaire — l’hymen va te l’apprendre », *etc.* Le lever de la mariée : le mystère de Vénus est accompli ; provisions sur la table de nuit, pâté et bouteille de vin ; le jeune homme, en belle robe de chambre, confie sa joie à son père ; la fillette, en déshabillé, témoigne sa satisfaction à sa mère qui l’engage à la pureté, à la chasteté « qui font le bonheur d’une famille pendant des siècles entiers”. Effet des bottes très pointues du marié, ses pantoufles démesurément pointues.

Rocher de Cancale. — Deux rochers ; on passe dans la crevasse du premier à marée haute ; peuplé de lapins. — On voit le Mont Saint-Michel au milieu de la mer en bleu, dans la brume pénétrée de soleil, et les côtes de la Normandie qui encerclent l’horizon. — M°” Maillart, erreur d’analyse ; c’était son magasin qui lui donnait ça ; nous croyons que c’était vice, c’était spéculation ; ses bagues, ce n’était pas pour se parer et pour plaire, c’était pour faire de sa personne une étagère portative.

Dol. — Belle cathédrale ; haute métropole de Bretagne ; encore sur le chœur la crosse d’évêque ; gynécée trilobé.

Pontorson. — Promenade triste au bord du Couesnon. — Prairies ; pays nourri et vigoureux, tout fourni d’arbres rapprochés.

Mont Saint-Michel. — Chemin tout poussiéreux jusqu’à la grève. — Voitures qui transportent de la terre en quantité telle que ça a l’air d’une émigration barbare ; chariots blancs sur la grève blanche. — Le sol devient bourbeux, rigoles, effet de la voiture. — Deux curés. — Le Mont Saint-Michel debout, haut ; tours et remparts, murs à pic ; les contreforts de l’église alignés donnent une pente où poussent quelques arbustes ; portes, surtout la seconde ; escaliers. — Le couvent : prison, escalier droit ; garde-chiourme ignoble ; dédale d’escaliers et de couloirs ; on entend le bruit des métiers, même d’en bas, ce qui dans un tel lieu choque démesurément. — Église, chœur haut, d’une pureté de gothique remarquable ; elle a été brûlée ; on la divise par des rideaux et la nef sert de réfectoire. — Arcade romane crâne, l’entrée donne sur une plate-forme en vue de la mer : c’est là que se promènent les malades, toujours le système silentiaire. La vue de la mer à un prisonnier est une ironie, l’infini de l’espace à l’homme con-finé dans un point circonscrit. — Cloître en ogives, bon-net d’évêque ; c’est là que les prisonniers exécutent leur promenade que nous avons contemplée à Fontevrault. Homo bomini lupus, c’est ià le cas de le dire. Hobbes avait deviné les gentillesses pénitentiaires modernes ; on est épouvanté quand on pense qu’on peut un jour être con-damné au système cellulaire. — Le soir, sur une des tours, conversation avec un vieux marin qui a navigué dans toutes les mers, en Cochinchine, au Japon, etc. ; la mer était haute, des enfants se baignaient.

A Tombelaine on jouit en plein de la vue du Mont Saint-Michel. — La femme qui nous y conduisait, cuisses d’homme. « Dieu dira : la pauvre bougresse a assez mangé de pain sec il faut lui donner un peu de viande.” — Canons énormes à la porte du pays, herbe dans les meurtrières des courtines. — Petite fille muette.

PoNTORSON. — Dans notre chambre, belles images où des MM. et des dames « en sablant le Champagne jettent des défis à ces Dieux qui font le bonheur de la vie » (c’est Bacchus et l’Amour). — M. Adolphe, gros maître de poste injuriant toutes les voitures qui ne se rangeaient pas et même celles qui se rangeaient.

De Dol À CoMBOURG. — Vieux bonhomme silencieux qui nous conduit en tilbury ; route herbue, nourrie, petites montées.

CoMBOURG. — Ecrasé par le château ; quatre tours réunies par des courtines, le tout couvert d’un toit, de sorte que les baies supérieures ont un peu l’air (aux courtines surtout) des sabords d’un bâtiment ; pas de jardin, pas de parc ; on entre par une grande cour de ferme ; perron d’environ trente marches, tout droit, le perron de René ; grands marronniers à gauche qui montent jusqu’au haut du château. — Imbécile qui nous menait là en bas bleus et fumant sa pipe. — Petite porte, cour étroite enfouie entre les murailles ; a l’air de la cour intérieure d’une prison. — Au second, à gauche, cette petite fenêtre carrée sous le toit est celle de la chambre de Chateaubriand enfant. Le propriétaire actuel “qui déteste Victor Hugo et son oncle, à l’exception du Génie du Christianisme, a fait effacer sur la porte de cette pièce des vers qu’on y avait mis”. C’est une petite porte en bois avec des rainures et des carrés ; la pièce est petite, basse, donnant sur le couchant, mais la vue est bouchée par la courtine d’en face. — Grande salle au rez-de-chaussée, dite salle des Chevaliers, lambrissée, peinte en blanc ; énorme épaisseur des murs ; vue sur le lac et sur le bois dont le terrain remonte doucement en ondulant. — Escaliers sombres en pierre, petits, tournants ; tout verts sur leurs parois, à cause du jour qui arrive par les meurtrières. — Des oiseaux volaient ; chaleur qui rendait tout cela plus triste : le soleil sur des ruines, c’est du vin qu’on met sur les lèvres d’un cadavre ; ils ont volé dans le grand salon au plafond peint et dont la peinture tombe en écailles ; cheminée grande à écusson brisé. — Sur les tours, trous des mâchicoulis. — On s’en va triste. — La route de Rennes a coupé le lac qui baignait jadis les pieds du château ; le lac se rétrécit, s’atterrit ; nénufars, grenouilles. — Nous lisons *René* en face, le soir dans une vieille édition du *Gèn. du Christ.* 1808, à gravures stupides, donnée par M^me^ de Marigny à M. Corvesier. La nuit je me réveille ; éclairs de chaleur ; ma silhouette sur le mur blanc en plâtre d’une maison en face.

Hédé. — Enceinte dont nous faisons lé tour, dessus. — Tour ruinée. — Des Anglais en voiture ne descendent pas pour voir ça, et il y avait pourtant une vue grande, belle, riche, une vue immense de verdure et d’arbres.

Rennes. — Rien, rien que le phoque ; ses narines ont l’air de deux coupures sur son museau ; baquet vert avec des tentures peintes en dedans ; quinquet d’en haut ; orgue de Barbarie. Quand le phoque sera parti de Rennes il n’y aura plus rien à y voir.

Saint-Malo, bâti sur la mer et clos de remparts, semble, lorsqu’on arrive, une couronne de pierres posée sur les flots dont les mâchicoulis sont les fleurons. Les vagues battent contre les murs ou, quand il est marée basse, déferlent à leur pied sur le sable. De petits rochers couverts de varechs surgissent de la grève à ras du sol, comme des taches noires sur cette surface blonde. Les plus grands, dressés en rang à pic et tout unis, supportent de leurs sommets inégaux la base des fortifications, en prolongeant ainsi la couleur grise et en augmentant la hauteur.

Au-dessus de cette ligne uniforme de remparts, que çà et là bombent des tours et que perce ailleurs l'ogive aiguë des portes, on voit les toits des maisons serrés l'un près de l'autre, avec leurs tuiles et leurs ardoises, leurs petites lucarnes ouvertes, leurs girouettes découpées qui tournent, et leurs cheminées de poterie rouge dont les fumi-gnons bleuâtres se perdent dans l'air.

Tout à l'entour sur la mer s'élèvent d'autres îlots sans arbres ni gazon sur lesquels on distingue de loin quelques pans de mur percés de meurtrières tombant en ruines et dont chaque tempête enlève de grands morceaux.

En face de la ville, rattaché à la terre ferme par une longue jetée qui sépare le port de la pleine mer, de l'autre côté du bassin, s'étend le quartier de Saint-Servan, vide, spacieux, presque désert et couché tout à son aise dans une grande prairie vaseuse. A l'entrée se dressent les quatre tours du château de Solidor reliées entre elles par des courtines, et noires du haut en bas. Cela seul nous récompensa d'avoir fait ce long circuit sur la grève, en plein soleil de juillet, au milieu de chantiers, parmi les marmites de goudron qui bouil-Iaient et les feux de copeaux dont on flambait la carcasse des navires.

Le tour de la ville par les remparts est une des plus belles promenades qu'il y ait. Personne n'y vient. On s'asseoit dans l'embrasure des canons, les pieds sur l'abîme. On a devant soi l'embouchure de la Rance, se dégorgeant comme un vallon entre deux vertes collines, et puis les côtes, les rochers, et partout la mer. Derrière vous se promène la sentinelle dont le pas régulier marche sur les dalles sonores.

Un soir nous y restâmes longtemps. La nuit était douce, une belle nuit d'été, sans lune, mais scintillant des feux du ciel, embaumée de brise marine. La ville dormait ; les lumières, l'une après l'autre, disparaissaient des fenêtres, les phares éloignés brillaient en taches rouges dans l'ombre qui sur nos têtes était bleue et piquée en mille endroits par les étoiles vacillantes et rayonnantes. On ne voyait pas la mer, on l'entendait, on la sentait, et les vagues se fouettant contre les remparts nous envoyaient des gouttes de Jeur écume par le large trou des mâchicoulis.

A une place, entre les maisons de la ville et la muraille, dans un fossé sans herbe, des piles de boulets sont alignées.

De là vous pouvez voir écrit sur le second étage d'une maison : "Ici est né Chateaubriand."

Plus loin, la muraille s'arrête contre le ventre d'une grosse tour : c'est la Quiquengrogne ; ainsi que sa sœur, la Générale, elle est large et haute, ventrue, formidable, renflée au milieu comme une hyperbole, et tient bon toujours. Intactes en-core et comme presque neuves, sans doute qu'elles vaudraient mieux, si elles égrenaient dans la mer les pierres de leurs créneaux, et si par leur tête frissonnaient au vent les sombres feuillages amis des ruines. Les monuments, en effet, comme les hommes et comme les passions, ne grandissent-ils pas par le souvenir ? ne se complètent-ils pas par la mort ?

La cour déserte, où les tilleuls chétifs arrondissent leur ombre sur la terre, était silencieuse comme celle d'un couvent. La femme du concierge alla chercher les clefs chez le commandant ; elle revint en compagnie d'une belle petite fille qui venait s'amuser à voir les étrangers. Elle avait les bras nus et tenait un gros bouquet. Ses cheveux noirs frisés d'eux-mêmes dépassaient de sa capote mignonne, et la dentelle de son pantalon flottait sur ses petits souliers de peau de chèvre rattachés autour de ses chevilles par des cordons noirs. Elle allait devant nous dans l'escalier en courant et en appelant.

On monte longtemps, car la tour est haute. Le jour vif des meurtrières passe comme une flèche à travers le mur. Par leur fente, quand vous mettez la tête, vous voyez la mer s'enfoncer de plus en plus et la couleur crue du ciel qui grandit toujours, si bien que vous avez peur de vous y perdre. Les navires paraissent des chaloupes et leurs mâts, des badines. Les aigles doivent nous croire gros comme des fourmis.

Nous voient-ils seulement ? Savent-ils que nous avons des villes, des arcs de triomphe, des clochers ?

Arrivés sur la plate-forme, quoique le créneau vous vienne jusqu'à la poitrine, on ne peut se défendre de cette émotion qui vous prend sur tous les sommets élevés : malaise voluptueux, mêlé de crainte et de plaisir, d'orgueil et d'effroi, lutte de l'esprit qui jouit et des nerfs qui souffrent. On est heureux singulièrement ; on vou-drait partir, se jeter, voler, se répandre dans l'air, être soutenu par les vents, et les genoux tremblent, et l'on n'ose approcher du bord.

Des hommes ont pourtant grimpé là, une nuit, avec une corde, mais jadis, dans ce prodigieux xvi' siècle, époque de convictions féroces et de frénétiques amours. Comme l'instrument humain y a vibré de toutes ses cordes ! comme l'homme y a été large, rempli, fertile ! Ne peut-on pas dire de cet âge le mot de Fénelon : “Spectacle fait à souhait pour le plaisir des yeux ? » car, sans parler des premiers plans, croyances qui craquent sur leur base comme des montagnes qui s'écroulent, mondes nouveaux qu'on découvre, mondes per-dus qu'on exhume, et Michel-Ange sous son dôme, et Rabelais qui rit, et Shakespeare qui regarde, et Montaigne qui rêve, où trouver ailleurs plus de développement dans les passions, plus de violences dans les courages, plus d'apreté dans les volontés, une expansion plus complète enfin de la liberté se débattant et tournant sous toutes les fatalités natives ? Aussi avec quel relief l'épi-sode se détache de l'histoire, et comme il y rentre cependant d'une merveilleuse façon pour en faire briller la couleur et en approfondir les horizons ! Des figures passent devant vous, vivantes en trois lignes ; on ne les rencontre qu’une fois ; mais longtemps on les rêve et on s’efforce à les compléter pour les mieux saisir. N’en étaient-ce pas de belles, entre autres, et de terribles, que celles de ces vieux soudards dont la race disparut à peu près vers 1598, à la prise de Vervins, tels que Lamouche, Heurtaud de Saint-Offrange, La Tremblaye qui s’en revenait portant au poing la tête de ses ennemis, ou ce La Fontenelle dont on a parlé ; hommes de fer dont les cœurs ne ployaient pas plus que les épées et qui, attirant à eux mille énergies divergentes qu’ils dirigeaient de la leur, réveillaient les villes en entrant au galop, la nuit, dans leurs murs, équipaient des corsaires, brû-laient la campagne, et avec qui l’on capitulait comme avec des rois ! Qui a songé à peindre ces violents gouverneurs de province, taillant à même la foule, violant les femmes et raflant l’or, comme d’Épernon, tyran atroce en Provence et mignon parfumé au Louvre, comme Montluc, étranglant les huguenots avec ses mains, ou comme Baligni, ce roi de Cambrai, qui lisait Machiavel pour copier le Valentinois, et dont la femme allait sur la brèche, à cheval, casque en tête et cuirassée. Un des hommes les plus oubliés de ce temps-là, un de ceux du moins que la plupart des his-toriens se contentent de nommer, c’est le duc de Mercœur, l’intrépide ennemi de Henri IV, qui lui résista plus longtemps que Mayenne, plus longtemps que la Ligue et que Philippe II. Désarmé à la fin, c’est-à-dire gagné, apaisé (à de telles conditions qu’on tînt secrets vingt-trois articles du traité) et ne sachant alors plus que faire, il s’en alla servir en Hongrie, combattit les Turcs, en attaqua un jour toute une armée avec cinq mille hommes, puis, vaincu encore par là et s’en revenant en France, mourut de la fièvre à Nuremberg, dans son lit, à l’âge de quarante-quatre ans.

Saint-Malo vient de me le mettre en mémoire. II s’y heurta toujours et ne put jamais l’avoir pour sujet ni pour allié. Ils entendaient en effet faire la guerre pour leur propre compte, le commerce par leurs propres forces, et quoique ligueurs au fond, repoussaient le duc tout en ne voulant pas du Béarnais.

Quand le sieur de Fontaines, gouverneur de la ville, leur eut appris la mort de Henri III, ils refusèrent de reconnahre le roi de Navarre. On prit les armes, on fit des barricades. Fontaines se renferma dans le château, et chacun resta sur la défensive. Peu à peu ils empiétèrent. D’abord ils exi-gèrent de Fontaines qu’il déclarât vouloir les conserver dans leurs franchises. Fontaines céda, espérant gagner du temps. L’année suivante (1589) ils choisirent quatre généraux indépendants du

■9 gouverneur. L’année d’après (1590) ils obtinrent de tendre des chaînes, Fontaines accorda encore. Le roi était à Laval, il l’attendait. Le moment allait venir qu’il se vengerait d’un seul coup de toutes les humiliations qu’il avait reçues, de toutes les concessions qu’il avait faites. Mais il se hâta trop et se découvrit. Quand les Malouins vinrent à lui rappeler ses promesses, il leur répondit que si le roi se présentait il lui ouvrirait les portes. Dès lors on prit un parti.

Le château avait quatre tours. C’est par la plus haute (la Générale), celle en qui Fontaines se fiait le plus, qu’ils tentèrent l’escalade. Ces audaces alors n’étaient pas rares, témoin l’ascension de la falaise de Fécamp par Bois-Rosé et l’attaque du château de Blein par Goebriant.

On se concerta, on se réunit plusieurs soirs de suite chez un certain Frotet, sieur de la Landelle ; on s’aboucha avec un canonnier écossais de la place, et par une nuit de brouillard tous partirent en rfrmes, se rendirent sous les murs de la ville, se laissèrent couler en dehors avec des cordages et s’approchèrent du pied de la Générale.

Là ils attendirent. Un frôlement brusque se fit sur la muraille ; un peloton de fil tomba, ils y atta-chèrent vite leur échelle de corde qui fut hissée le long de la tour et liée par en haut, par le canonnier, à l’extrémité d’une coulevrine braquée dans l’embrasure d’un créneau.

Michel Frotet monta le premier, puis Charles Anselin, La Blissais et les autres. La nuit était sombre ; le vent soufflait ; ils grimpaient lentement, le poignard dans les dents, tâtonnant du pied les échelons et avançant les mains. Tout à coup (ils étaient au milieu déjà), ils se sentent descendre, la corde se dénoue. Pas un cri, ils res-tèrent immobiles. C’était le poids de tous ces corps qui avait fait faire la bascule à la coulevrine ; elle s’arrêta sur l’appui de l’embrasure, puis ils se remirent en marche et arrivèrent tous à la file sur la plate-forme de la tour.

Les sentinelles engourdies n’eurent pas le temps de donner l’alarme. La garnison dormait ou jouait aux dés sur les tambours. La terreur la prit, elle se réfugia dans le donjon. Les conjurés l’y poursuivirent ; on se battit dans les escaliers, dans les couloirs, dans les chambres ; on s’écra-sait sous les portes, on tuait, on égorgeait. Les habitants de la ville arrivèrent en renfort, d’autres dressèrent des échelles contre la Quiquengrogne, entrèrent sans résistance et commencèrent le pil-lage. La Péraudière, lieutenant du château, aper-cevant La Blissais, lui dit : « Voilà, Monsieur, une misérable nuit ». Mais La Blissais lui fit comprendre qu’il n’était pas temps de discourir. On n’avait pas encore vu le comte de Fontaines. On alla à sa chambre, on le trouva mort sur le seuil, percé d’un coup d’arquebuse que lui avait tiré un des habitants, au moment qu’il sortait faisant porter un flambeau devant lui. “Au heu de courir au danger, dit l’auteur de la re—

i9. Iation (l), il s’était habillé lentement et comme pour aller aux noces, sans qu’aucune aiguillette manquât d’être attachée”.

Cette surprise de Saint-Malo qui fit tant de mal au roi n’aida en rien le duc de Mercœur. Il désirait fort que les Malouins acceptassent un gouverneur de sa main, son fils, par exemple, un enfant, c’est-à-dire lui-même, mais ils s’obstinèrent à ne vouloir personne. II leur envoya des troupes pour les protéger, ils les refusèrent, et les troupes furent contraintes de loger hors la ville.

Ils n’en devenaient pas cependant plus royalistes pour cela ; car quelque temps après ayant arrêté le marquis de La Moussaie et le vicomte de Dénouai, il en coûta pour sortir douze mille écus au marquis et deux mille au vicomte.

Puis craignant que Pont-Briant n’interrompit le commerce avec Dinan et les autres villes de la Ligue, ils s’en emparent.

Supposant que leur évêque, seigneur temporel de la ville, pourrait bien les dépouiller de la liberté qu’ils venaient d’acquérir, ils le mettent en prison et ne le relâchent qu’au bout d’un an.

On sait enfin à quelles conditions ils acceptèrent Henri IV : ils devaient se garder eux-mêmes, ne

M Josselin Frotet, sieur de La Landelle, chez qui les conjurés se donnèrent rendez-vous avant de tenter l’escalade. Voyez dans la coll. des Bénédictins, dom Tallandier, t. II, de l’Histoire civ. et ecclés. de Bretagne, p. 386 et sq. (Note du manuscrit de Gustave Flaubert.) pas recevoir de garnison, être exempts d’impôts pendant six ans, *etc.*

Placé entre la Bretagne et la Normandie, ce petit peuple semble avoir à la fois : de la première, la ténacité, la résistance granitique ; de la seconde, la fougue, l’élan. Marins ou écrivains, voyageurs de tous océans, ce qui les distingue surtout c’est l’audace ; violentes natures d’homme, poétiques à force d’être brutales, souvent étroites aussi à force d’être obstinées. II y a cette ressemblance entre ces deux fils de Saint-Malo, Lamen-nais et Broussais, qu’ils furent toujours également extrêmes dans leurs systèmes, et qu’ils ont, avec la même conviction acharnée, employé la seconde partie de leur vie à combattre ce qu’ils avaient soutenu dans la première. Dans l’intérieur de la ville vous passez par de petites rues tortueuses, entre des maisons hautes, le long de sales boutiques de voiliers ou de marchands de morue. Point de voiture, aucun luxe ; c’est noir et puant comme la cale d’un vaisseau. Ça sent Terre-Neuve et la viande salée, l’odeur rance des longs voyages.

“Le guet et ronde s’y fait chaque nuit avec de gros chiens d’Angleterre, dits dogues, lesquels on met au soir hors la ville, avec un martre qui les mène, et ne fait lors bon s’y trouver à I’entour. Mais, venant le matin, on les ramène en certain lieu de la ville où ils déposent toute leur fureur qui, de nuit, est étrangement grande11’ ».

(1) D’Argentré, Hist. de Bretagne, p. 62. (Note du manuscrit de Gustave

Flaubert.) A part la disparition de cette police quadru-pède qui dévora jadis M. du Mollet, et dont voilà l’existence constatée par un texte contemporain, l’extérieur des choses a peu changé, sans doute, et même les gens civilisés qui habitent Saint-Malo prétendent qu’on y est fort arriéré.

Le seul tableau que nous ayons remarqué dans l’église est une grande toile représentant la bataille de Lépante et dédiée à Notre-Dame des Victoires. Elle plane, en haut, dans les nuages. Au premier plan, toute la chrétienté est à genoux, parlements, princesses et rois, couronnes en tête. Au fond, les deux armées s’entrechoquent. Les Turcs sont précipités dans les flots, et les chrétiens lèvent les bras au ciel.

L’église est laide, sèche, sans ornements, presque protestante d’aspect. J’ai remarqué peu d’ex-voto, chose étrange ici en face du péril. II n’y a ni fleurs ni cierges dans les chapelles, pas de sacré-cœur saignant, de vierge chamarrée, rien enfin de ce qui indigne si fort M. Miehelet.

En face des remparts, à cent pas de la ville, I’flot du Grand-Bey se lève au milieu des flots. Là se trouve la tombe de Chateaubriand ; ce point blanc taillé dans le rocher est la place qu’il a destinée à son cadavre.

Nous y allâmes un soir, à marée basse. Le so-leil se couchait. L’eau coulait encore sur le sable. Au pied de l’île, les varechs dégouttelants s’épandaient comme des chevelures de femmes antiques le long d’un grand tombeau. L’île est déserte ; une herbe rare y pousse où se mêlent de petites touffes de fleurs violettes et de grandes orties. II y a sur le sommet une casemate délabrée avec une cour dont les vieux murs s’écroulent. En dessous de ce débris, à mi-côte, on a coupé à même la pente un espace de quelque dix pieds carrés au milieu duquel s’élève une dalle de granit surmontée d’une croix latine. Le tombeau est fait de trois morceaux, un pour le socle, un pour la dalle, un pour la croix.

II dormira là-dessous, la tête tournée vers la mer ; dans ce sépulcre bâti sur un écueil, son immortalité sera comme fut sa vie, déserte des autres et tout entourée d’orages. Les vagues avec les siècles murmureront longtemps autour de ce grand souvenir ; dans les tempêtes elles bondiront jusqu’à ses pieds, ou les matins d’été, quand les voiles blanches se déploient et que l’hirondelle arrive d’au delà des mers, longues et douces, elles lui apporteront la volupté mélancolique des horizons et la caresse des larges brises. Et les jours ainsi s’écoulant, pendant que les flots de la grève natale iront se balançant toujours entre son berceau et son tombeau, le cœur de René devenu froid, lentement, s’éparpillera dans le néant, au rythme sans fin de cette musique éternelle.

Nous avons tourné autour du tombeau, nous l’avons touché de nos mains, nous l’avons regardé comme s’il eût contenu son hôte, nous nous sommes assis par terre à ses côtés.

Le ciel était rose, la mer tranquille et la brise endormie. Pas une ride ne plissait la surface immobile de l’Océan sur lequel le soleil à son coucher versait sa couleur d’or. Bleuâtre vers les côtes seulement, et comme s’y évaporant dans la brume, partout ailleurs la mer était rouge et plus en-flammée encore au fond de l’horizon, où s’étendait dans toute la longueur de la vue une grande ligne de pourpre. Le soleil n’avait plus ses rayons ; ils étaient tombés de sa face et noyant leur lumière dans l’eau semblaient flotter sur elle. II descendait en tirant à lui du ciel la teinte rose qu’il y avait mise, et à mesure qu’ils dégradaient ensemble, le bleu pâle de l’ombre s’avançait et se répandait sur toute la voûte. Bientôt il toucha les flots, rogna dessus son disque rond, s’y enfonça jusqu’au milieu. On le vit un instant coupé en deux moitiés par la ligne de l’horizon, l’une des-sus, sans bouger, l’autre en dessous qui tremblo-tait et s’allongeait, puis il disparut complètement ; et quand, à la place où il avait sombré, son reflet n’ondula plus, il sembla qu’une tristesse tout à coup était survenue sur la mer.

La grève parut noire. Un carreau d’une des maisons de la ville, qui tout à l’heure brillait comme du feu, s’éteignit. Le silence redoubla ; on entendait des bruits pourtant : la lame heurtait les rochers et retombait avec lourdeur ; des moucherons à longues pattes bourdonnaient à nos oreilles, disparaissant dans le tourbillonnement de leur vol diaphane, et la voix confuse des enfants qui se baignaient au pied des remparts arrivait jusqu’à nous avec des rires et des éclats.

Nous les voyions de loin qui s’essayaient à nager, entraient dans les flots, couraient sur le rivage.

Nous descendîmes l’îlot, traversâmes la grève à pied. La marée venait et montait vite ; les rigoles se remplissaient ; dans le creux des rochers la mousse frémissait, ou, soulevée du bord des lames, elle s’envolait par flocons et sautillait en s’enfuyant.

Les jeunes garçons nus sortaient du bain ; ils allaient s’habiller sur le galet où ils avaient laissé leurs vêtements et, de leurs pieds qui n’osaient, s’avançaient sur les cailloux. Lorsque voulant pas-ser leur chemise le linge se collait sur leurs épaules mouillées, on voyait le torse blanc qui serpentait d’impatience, tandis que la tête et les bras restant voilés, les manches voltigeaient au vent et claquaient comme des banderoles.

Près de nous passa un homme dont la chevelure trempée tombait droite autour de son cou. Son corps lavé brillait. Des gouttes perlaient aux boucles frisées de sa barbe noire, et il secouait ses cheveux pour en faire tomber l’eau. Sa poitrine large où un sillon velu lui courait sur son thorax, entre des muscles pleins carrément taillés, haletait encore de la fatigue de la nage et communiquait un mouvement calme à son ventre plat dont le contour vers les flancs était lisse comme l’ivoire. Ses cuisses nerveuses, à plans successifs, jouaient sur un genou mince qui, d’une façon ferme et moelleuse., déployait une fine jambe robuste terminée par un pied cambré à talon court et dont les doigts s’écartaient. II marchait doucement sur le sable.

Oh ! que la forme humaine est belle quand elle apparaît dans sa liberté native, telle qu’elle fut créée au premier jour du monde ! Où la trouver, masquée qu’elle est maintenant et condamnée pour toujours à ne plus apparaître au soleil ? Ce grand mot de nature que l’humanité tour à tour a répété avec idolâtrie ou épouvante, que les phi-losophes sondaient, que les poètes chantaient, comme il se perd ! comme il s’oublie ! Loin des tréteaux où l’on crie et de la foule où l’on se pousse, s’il y a encore çà et là sur la terre des cœurs avides que tourmente sans relâche le malaise de la beauté, qui toujours sentent en eux ce désespérant besoin de dire ce qui ne se peut dire et de faire ce qui se rêve, c’est là, c’est là pourtant, comme à la patrie de l’idéal, qu’il leur faut courir et qu’il faut vivre. Mais comment ? par quel chemin ? L’homme a coupé les forêts, il bat les mers, et sur ses villes le ciel fait les nuages avec la fumée de ses foyers. La gloire, sa mis-sion, disent d’autres, n’est-elle pas d’aller toujours ainsi, attaquant l’œuvre de Dieu, gagnant sur elle ? II la nie, il la brise, il l’écrase, et jusqu’en lui, jusque dans ce corps dont il rougit et qu’il cache comme le crime.

L’homme étant ainsi devenu ce qu’il y a de plus rare et de plus difficile à connaître (je ne parle pas de son cœur, ô moralistes !), il en est résulté que l’artiste ignore la forme qu’il a et les qualités qui la font belle. Quel est le poète d’aujourd’hui, parmi les plus savants, qui sache ce que c’est que la femme ? Où en aurait-il jamais vu, le pauvre diable ? Qu’en a-t-il pu apprendre dans les salons, à travers le corset ou la crinoline empesée, ou dans son lit même, s’il y a songé, pendant les entr’actes du plaisir ?

La plastique cependant, mieux que toutes les rhétoriques du monde, enseigne à celui qui la contemple la gradation des proportions, la fu-sion des plans, l’harmonie enfin ! Les races antiques, par le seul fait de leur existence, ont ainsi détrempé sur les œuvres des maîtres, la pureté de leur sang avec la noblesse de leurs attitudes. J’entends confusément dans Juvénal des râles de gladiateurs ; Tacite a des tournures qui ressemblent à des draperies de Iaticlave, et certains vers d’Ho-race ont des reins d’esclave grecque avec des balancements de hanche, et des brèves et des longues qui sonnent comme des crotales.

Mais pourquoi s’inquiéter de ces niaiseries ? N’allons pas chercher si loin, contentons-nous de ce qui se fabrique. Ce qu’on demande aujourd’hui, n’est-ce pas plutôt tout le contraire du nu, du simple et du vrai ? Fortune et succès à ceux qui savent revêtir et habiller les choses ! Le tailleur est le roi du siècle, la feuille de vigne en est le symbole ; lois, arts, politique, caleçon partout ! Libertés menteuses, meubles plaqués, peinture à la détrempe, le public aime ça. Donnez-lui-en, fourrez-lui-en, gorgez cet imbécile !

m II se ruera sur la gravure et laissera le tableau, chantera la romance et dormira à Beethoven, saura tout Béranger par cœur et pas un vers d’Hugo.

C’est plaisir de le voir à sa table comme il s’em-piffre des plus lourdes marchandises et se grise des plus frelatées. Les mets communs lui vont vite, et demain, encore du Scribe, du Vernet, de l’Eugène Sue, quelque chose de digestion facile et qui ne tienne pas de place au ventre pour qu’on en puisse manger davantage.

L’homme des champs particulièrement se dé-lecte dans le mauvais avec une ténacité édifiante. Son mauvais à lui est plus sincèrement sot, plus sauvagement bête ; il y met moins de finesse que le citadin qui au moins change de modes s’il ne change pas de goût. A combien de miliers d’exem-plaires se vendent annuellement dans les campagnes l’Amour conjugal et Faublas ! sans compter l’Europe et l’Asie, égrillardes demoiselles aux regards gluants qui décorent toutes les chaumières.

Mais il faut avoir vu les belles images de l’auberge de Cancale pour savoir comment le laid, le niais et le vulgaire peuvent prendre forme sur du papier.

Imaginez dans une salle basse cinq cadres de bois noir accrochés aux murs, et dans ces cadres, du rouge, du bleu, du jaune, une mosaïque de

‘*’ Inédit, pages 300 à 310. grosses couleurs qui tranche comme une tache bigarrée sur la blancheur du mur de plâtre.

On s’approche du premier cadre et on lit au-dessous : La Demande en mariage. C’est un salon richement meublé, tapis vert, papier rouge, beaux cordons de sonnette des deux côtés de la cheminée qui est enrichie d’une pendule représentant le Temps avec sa faulx. Un jeune homme, — Quel jeune homme ! l’idéal du jeune homme : habit bleu à boutons luisants, cravate rose tirée droit entre les deux revers à schall d’un gilet de velours, et piquée d’une épingle en diamant, pantalon gris d’un collant très mythologique, jolies cuisses, petite bouche, charmante chevelure, sou-riant et l’air timide, — est présenté par son père à une dame assise dans une bergère et à une jeune personne plantée sur un tabouret. La mère enhar-nachée de dentelles a l’air un peu malade, un peu souffrant et sourit avec ce charmant sourire de la vieillesse indulgente contemplant l’amour ; le père du futur est un homme tout à fait bien, croix d’honneur, cravate blanche, air cossu, beaucoup de paquet. Quant au père de la jeune personne, c’est un vieux, tout ce qu’il y a de plus caduc et de plus vénérable, considérablement de cheveux blancs, bonne redingote jaune d’œuf à collet très haut, bombé comme “ *e gouttière. Tous sourient à la fois, l’émotion, l’amour, les amours pater-nelles, maternelles, filiales, la joie, l’espérance, la satisfaction bien douce et le trouble inconnu se partagent, déchirent, agitent et charment les cœurs. Le second cadre représente Le Mariage. Nous sommes à l’église, le prêtre, l’autel, la fiancée en blanc, l’anneau qu’on se passe au doigt ; la mère pleure, le père du jeune homme dans un coin est attendri, mais sourit ; toutes les femmes ont des chapeaux à plumes ; le marié en noir, frisé dur comme du fer, pantalon encore bien plus collant, bottes très pointues : c’est un chérubin.

Troisième tableau, Le Bal. Réunion du grand monde, luxe somptueux ; deux lustres, brillants quadrilles, perspective de pieds chaussés d’escar-pins très pointus dont la file se prolonge indéfiniment, chaînes de montres partout, pluie d’écharpes et de turbans, éblouissement complet. Cependant le marié tire à part sa compagne et lui dit d’une voix enflammée : « Mon amie, qu’il me tarde que tu partages ma demeure et ma couche, je te pos-sède, viens ! veux-tu connaître des fêtes plus aimables que celle où nos conviés assistent pour nous plaire ? l’hymen va te l’apprendre...”, *etc.*

Quatrième tableau, Le Coucher de la mariée. On la déshabille, le lit est là tout ouvert, avec la table de nuit, le bougeoir et les allumettes chimiques. La mère glisse à l’oreille de sa fille « des mots mystérieux sur les nouveaux devoirs qu’elle a à remplir » ; par la porte entrebâillée on voit le ma-rié « brûlant d’amour » qui veut à toute force en-trer, mais les demoiselles d’honneur le repoussent et « font pour un moment obstacle à ses vœux », tout dévoré qu’il est « de la plus légitime, de la plus pure, de la plus touchante des impatiences ». Cinquième tableau, Le Lever de la mariée. “Le mystère de Vénus est accompli, le sein de l’épouse a reçu le germe créateur qui dans neuf mois doit combler les époux d’un bonheur nouveau » ; le lit est défait ; sur le marbre de la table de nuit on voit les restes d’un pâté et une bouteille de vin entamée ; en dessous, dans l’intérieur, on aperçoit le pot de chambre, et une bonne jette du linge sale dans une armoire ; les parents arrivés dès l’aurore se précipitent dans les bras de leurs enfants ; les traits de la mariée sont abattus, ses bandeaux tout dénoués et sa chemise de nuit entr’ouverte. L’explication la déclare d’ailleurs « un peu lasse peut-être des nouveaux assauts de l’hymen, mais heureuse et le cœur plein d’une félicité su-prême ». Le marié radieux, en robe de chambre azur à revers rouges avec une cordelière d’or, et des pantoufles de velours violet extra-pointues, confie à son père qui sourit encore “les charmes de la nuit passée”, et la mariée confie à sa mère “l’ivresse qu’elle a ressentie” ; celle-ci l’engage “à cette pureté, à cette chasteté qui sont la base des États et qui font le bonheur d’une famille pendant les siècles entiers”.

Nous allâmes prendre l’air sur le quai où luisait un beau soleil ; la grève découverte était toute grise à cause de la vase qui la recouvrait et, sur sa couche lisse, glacée comme une crème, les barques vides, échouées dans toutes les postures du monde, avaient leurs filets suspendus qui séchaient au haut des mâts. Sur le bois des canots le gou-dron suintait en gouttelettes noires. Dans la brume pénétrée de soleil, seul au milieu de la mer, se levait le Mont Saint-Michel, dôme bleuâtre aux sommets découpés ; à droite, les côtes de Normandie continuant, de leur ligne mamelon-neuse, la coupe immense de la baie, allaient graduellement s’abaissant et confondaient à l’horizon le vague de leurs contours dans la blancheur des nuées légères.

Nous glissions sur la vase tiède où nos pieds nus enfonçaient jusqu’à la cheville ; de place en place, dans des flaques d’eau encloses de carrés de galets, quelques huîtres dormaient dans leurs vertes coquilles comme des gens qui font la sieste, les jalousies fermées.

Pour aller au rocher de Cancale nous mon-tâmes en chaloupe, on hissa la voile qui s’étendit dans toute sa hauteur et nous couvrit de son ombre, elle se mirait sur l’eau, nous allions doucement, sans bruit, lentement.

Le rocher a deux pics inégaux, ou plutôt ce sont deux rochers séparés par une crevasse dans laquelle on passe à marée haute ; il est fait de blocs accumulés ; il y pousse des tamarins, du ser-polet et des bruyères. Des lapins qui l’habitent débusquent effrayés quand vous jetez des cailloux dans les broussailles. Quand nous l’eûmes gravi jusqu’en haut, que nous nous fûmes assis à plusieurs places et promenés partout, nous rega-gnâmes la chaloupe qui nous déposa un quart d’heure après sur le galet au pied de la falaise. Elle s’interrompt par un angle et découvre brusquement le village de Cancale aligné sur un quai de pierres sèches. Là, couché par terre à plat dos sur le sable, le chapeau sur les yeux, les bras étendus en croix, je suis resté une grande heure et demie à chauffer ma guenille au soleil et à faire le lézard. On se sent le corps inerte, engourdi, inanimé, inhérent presque à la terre sur laquelle il se vautre, tandis que l’âme, au contraire, partie bien loin, voltige dans les espaces comme une plume égarée.

Lorsque j’ai relevé la tête, la grève avait disparu, la marée presque subitement était venue la recou-vrir, et les barques tout à l’heure immobiles se relevaient maintenant et se remettaient à flot. Sous le roulis des lames longues qui, arrivant l’une par-dessus l’autre comme des inondations successives, accouraient de toute leur vitesse sur cette plage unie où largement elles se développaient sans en finir, les canots pleins de monde se croisaient, se vidaient, revenaient au quai. On allait partir pour la pêche, on crochait les gouvernails, on frappait les tolets, on hissait les voiles ; on voyait les embarcations prendre leur bordée afin de gagner le pied du vent, et s’éloignant les unes des autres chacune choisir sa route et s’enfuir vers le large.

Pendant qu’on attelait nos chevaux pour nous ramener à Saint-Malo, nous jugeâmes convenable de prendre des huîtres et de jeter un dernier coup d’œil aux images. L’hôtesse était une pauvre femme vêtue de noir qui avait perdu son mari la

ao semaine dernière et sa fille il y avait trois jours. Dans un fauteuil dépaillé, au coin de la fenêtre, elle reste sans bouger ni se soucier des pratiques, à regarder par les carreaux la mer où n’apparaît plus la barque de son mari et ce quai vide où jouent maintenant les enfants des autres. Celle-là doit peu rire des fameuses gravures, mais c’est la servante, j’imagine, qui doit s’y plaire et s’en nour-rir. II est probable qu’elle convoite d’abord la bi-jouterie qui s’y trouve et qu’elle rêve là-dessus à des bonheurs de reine, à quelque existence sen-suelle et cossue, toute chatoyante de la couleur des cachemires et sucrée comme du sirop, avec un bel amant bien habillé et des pâmoisons amou-reuses dans de la toile de Hollande. Un matelot ivre est entré dans l’auberge en chantant et en demandant à boire ; comme on ne lui répondait pas, il a donné un grand coup de poing sur la table, ce qui a fait claquer les piles d’assiettes. La bonne femme en noir s’est détournée et lui a demandé :

— Qu’est-ce que vous voulez ?

II a répondu, en continuant sa chanson, qu’il avait besoin de boire ; elle l’a interrompu par un geste de main, et lui a dit :

— Vous savez que mon cœur est trop dans le deuil, on ne chante pas ici, allez-vous-en.

Et elle lui répétait avec une expression sup-pliante de dégoût et de prière :

— Ah ! je vous en prie ! allez-vous-en, allez-vous-en ! II s’est interrompu, a promené sur les murs son regard idiot, puis est sorti en se cognant à la porte où il s’est remis aussitôt à gueuler à pleine poitrine.

Nous avons retrouvé à Saint-Malo, dans la cour de notre hôtel, Mme Maillart, assise comme d’or-dinaire dans son hangar vitré et, de ses doigts gonflés de bagues, ecossant des haricots verts sur un tablier de cuisine mis par-dessus son peignoir jaune.

Quand nous la vîmes la première fois, un matin en arrivant (elle était debout et faisait tourner ses clefs sur son index), avec ses yeux noirs admira-blement doux et beaux et relevés vers les tempes sous un sourcil long, avec sa taille mince forte-ment garnie par derrière de tous les mensonges de l’industrie, avec ses boutons d’émeraude sur sa chemisette de batiste, des boucles d’oreilles battant son cou maigre, un collier sonnant sur ses clavicules et sa montre à breloques, son lorgnon d’or, ses broches et ses camées, avec sa robe jaune, ouverte, si lâche au corps, si parlante, et la pom-made qu’il y avait sur ses bandeaux, et le sourire qui rendait presque jolie sa bouche aux dents gâtées, nous en conçûmes, il faut l’avouer, un pré-jugé défavorable pour ses mœurs, mais bien favorable pour son hôtel. Les arbustes verts dans la cour, des bouquets de fleurs que l’on arrangeait dans des vases de porcelaine, la capucine épa-nouie qui grimpait autour des fenêtres et le galon d’argent des rideaux de nos lits, jusqu’à des pois-sons rouges nageant dans leur bocal, tout cela avait je ne sais quel bon air féminin, espagnol, andalous, odaliscal et rafraîchissant qui faisait plaisir à retrouver après toutes les landes deTAr-morique.

Sotte présomption ! erreur des jugements ! Mme Mailïart est la meilleure mère de famille du monde et la plus tendre épouse du département, y compris les îles de la côte ; elle a quatorze enfants qu’elle élève dans le travail et dans les bons principes ; sa fille aînée fait les desserts et son second fils est parti à Jersey apprendre l’anglais afin de pouvoir un jour servir d’interprète dans la maison.

Elle a adjoint à son établissement une boutique de curiosités où elle se livre vis-à-vis de l’étranger à une réclame des plus tenaces pour qu’il lui prenne ses assiettes du Japon, son point d’Angle-terre, ses colibris empaillés ou ses gros Faënza qu’elle veut faire passer naïvement pour des Pa-lissy. Elle vous montre aussi dans un bas d’armoire une demi-douzaine de bouquins dépareillés parmi lesquels il y a le second tome de Dom Morice, qu’elle garde pour quelqu’un de ses fils s’il s’en trouve un plus tard qui veuille étudier l’histoire, « car c’est une belle science et c’est joli pour un homme de la savoir ».

De temps à autre elle vous quitte au bruit d’une sonnette qui communique de l’hôtel dans son magasin, mais elle y revient bientôt ; elle y passe sa vie, vend, achète, revend, arrange, essuie, tri-pote ; son mari n’y connaît rien, c’est un butor sous le rapport des arts.

Ce magasin seul fut cause de la fausseté de notre diagnostic, elle en porte en effet les plus belles pièces sur elle, afin de les avoir toutes prêtes à offrir aux amateurs : aujourd’hui un bra-celet, ce soir une collerette, demain une aumônière. Ce que l’on prendrait ainsi pour vice n’est que spéculation fort honnête, elle orne son corps non pour le mieux vendre, mais pour en faire une étagère.

Il fallut se quitter pourtant. Or un matin, après des adieux fort aimables, nous partîmes de Saint-Malo pour aller coucher le soir à Pontorson.

La cathédrale de Dol, qui se trouve sur la route, est une église de bon style, à qui son gynécée trilobé donne une grâce charmante sans orne-ments, mais riche d’elle-même par ses hautes proportions. Elle rappelle bien, dans sa sévère ogive, l’orgueil métropolitain de ses évêques dont les descendants laissent encore debout dans le chœur leur crosse recourbée, dorée du haut en bas.

Arrivés de bonne heure à Pontorson et y bâil-lant dès aussitôt, nous allâmes, pour employer le temps à quelque chose, traîner notre ennui le long d’une promenade de peupliers, au bord d’une petite rivière qui coule parmi les touffes d’arbustes et les roseaux grêles des marécages. La vue s’arrête à un coude de la rive, ou flotte, in-certaine et sans rien qui l’amuse, sur une plate prairie régulièrement coupée par de longues lignes d’arbres. Comme on avait la veille péché un saumon, trois ou quatre particuliers du lieu, posés sur les bords des eaux bourbeuses, y plon-geaient et en retiraient un grand filet carré, s’at-tendant à toute minute à en sentir se déchirer les mailles sous la capture rêvée.

Quand nous eûmes assisté suffisamment longtemps à toutes leurs alternatives d’espérance et d’insuccès, nous reprimes le chemin de l’auberge pour nous en aller dîner.

La route de Pontorson au Mont Saint-Michel est tirante à cause des sables. Notre chaise de poste (car nous allons aussi en chaise de poste) était dérangée à tous moments par quantité de charrettes remplies d’une terre grise que l’on prend dans ces parages et que l’on exporte je ne sais où pour servir d’engrais. Elles augmentent à mesure qu’on approche de la mer et défilent ainsi pendant plusieurs lieues, jusqu’à ce que l’on découvre enfin les grèves abandonnées d’où elles viennent. Sur cette étendue blanche où les tas de terre élevés en cônes ressemblaient à des cabanes, tous ces chariots dont la longue file ondulante fuyait dans la perspective nous rappelaient quelque émigration des barbares qui se met en branle et quitte ses plaines.

L’horizon vide se prolonge, s’étale et finit par fondre ses terrains crayeux dans la couleur jaune de la plage. Le sol devient plus ferme, une odeur salée vous arrive, on dirait un désert dont la mer s’est retirée. Des langues de sable, longues, aplaties l’une sur l’autre, se continuant indéfiniment par des plans indistincts, se rident comme une onde sous de grandes lignes courbes, arabesques géantes que le vent s’amuse à dessiner sur leur surface. Les flots sont loin, si reculés qu’on ne les voit plus, qu’on n’entend pas leur bruit, mais je ne sais quel vague murmure, insaisissable, aérien, comme la voix même de la solitude qui n’est peut-être que l’étourdissement de ce silence.

En face, devant nous, un grand rocher de forme ronde, la base garnie de murailles crénelées, le sommet couronné d’une église, se dresse, enfonçant ses tours dans le sable et levant ses clochetons dans l’air. D’énormes contreforts qui retiennent les flancs de l’édifice s’appuient sur une pente abrupte d’où déroulent des quartiers de rocs et des bouquets de verdure sauvage. A mi-côte, étagées comme elles peuvent, quelques maisons, dépassant la ceinture blanche de la muraille et dominées par la masse brune de l’église, clapotent leurs couleurs vives entre ces deux grandes teintes unies.

La chaise de poste allait devant nous, nous la suivions de loin, d’après le sillon de ses roues qui creusaient des ornières ; elle s’enfonçait dans l’éloignement, et sa capote que l’on apercevait seule, s’enfuyant, avait l’air d’un gros crabe qui se traînait sur la grève.

Çà et là, des courants d’eau passaient ; il fallait remonter plus loin. Ou bien c’étaient des places de vase qui se présentaient à I’improviste enca-drant dans le sable leurs méandres inégaux.

A nos côtés cheminaient deux curés qui venaient aussi voir le Mont Saint-Michel. Comme ils avaient peur de salir leurs robes neuves, ils les relevaient autour d’eux pour enjamber les ruis-seaux et sautaient en s’appuyant sur leurs bâtons. Leurs boucles d’argent étaient grises de la boue que le soleil y séchait à mesure, et leurs souliers trempés bâillaient en flaquant à tous leurs pas.

Le mont cependant grandissait. D’un même coup d’œil nous en saisissions l’ensemble et nous voyions, à les pouvoir compter, les tuiles des toits, les tas d’orties dans les rochers et, tout en haut, les lames vertes de la persienne d’une petite fenêtre qui donne sur le jardin du gouverneur.

La première porte, étroite et faite en ogive, s’ouvre sur une sorte de chaussée de galets descendant à la mer ; sur l’écu rongé de la seconde, des lignes onduleuses taillées dans la pierre semblent figurer des flots, par terre, des deux côtés, sont étendus des canons énormes faits de barres de fer reliées avec des cercles pareils. L’un d’eux a gardé dans sa gueule son boulet de granit ; pris sur les Anglais, en 1423, par Louis d’Estouville, depuis quatre siècles ils sont là.

Cinq ou six maisons se regardant en face composent toute la rue ; leur alignement s’arrête et elles continuent par les raidillons et les escaliers qui mènent au château, se succédant au hasard, juchées, jetées l’une par-dessus l’autre. Pour y aller, on monte d’abord sur la courtine dont la muraille cache aux logis d’en bas la vue de la mer. La terre paraît sous les dalles fendues ; l’herbe verdoie entre les créneaux, et dans les effondrements du sol s’étalent des flaques d’urine qui rongent les pierres grises. Le rempart con-tourne l’île et s’élève par des paliers successifs. Quand on a dépassé l’échauguette qui fait angle entre les deux tours, un petit escalier droit se présente ; de marche en marche, en grimpant, s’abaissent graduellement les toits des maisons dont les cheminées délabrées fument à cent pieds sous vous. Vous voyez à la lucarne des greniers le linge suspendu sécher au bout d’une perche avec des haillons rouges recousus, ou se cuire au so-leil, entre le toit d’une maison et le rez-de-chaussée d’une autre, quelque petit jardin grand comme une table où les poireaux languissant de soif couchent leurs feuilles sur la terre grise ; mais l’autre face du rocher, celle qui regarde la pleine mer, est nue, déserte, si escarpée que les arbustes qui y ont poussé ont du mal à s’y tenir et, tout pen-chés sur l’abîme, semblent prêts à y tomber.

Bien haut, planant à l’aise, quand vous êtes ainsi à jouir d’autant d’étendue que s’en peuvent repaître des yeux humains, que vous regardez la mer, l’horizon des côtes développant son immense courbe bleuâtre, ou, dressée sur sa pente perpen-diculaire, la muraille de la Merveille, avec ses trente-six contreforts géants, et qu’un rire d’admiration vous crispe la bouche, tout à coup, vous entendez dans l’air claquer le bruit sec des métiers. On fait de la toile. La navette va, bat, heurte ses coups brusques ; tous s’y mettent, c’est un vacarme.

Entre deux fines tourelles représentant deux pièces de canon sur leur culasse, fa porte d’entrée du château s’ouvre par une voûte longue où un escalier de granit s’engouffre. Le milieu en reste toujours dans l’ombre, éclairé qu’il est à peine par deux demi-jours, l’un qui arrive d’en bas, l’autre qui tombe d’en haut par l’intervalle de la herse ; c’est comme un souterrain qui descendrait vers vous.

Le corps de garde est, en entrant, au haut du grand escalier. Le bruit des crosses de fusil reten-tissait sous les voûtes avec la voix des sergents qui faisaient l’appel. On battait du tambour.

Cependant un garde-chiourme nous a rapporté nos passeports que M. le gouverneur avait désiré voir ; il nous a fait signe de le suivre, il a ouvert des portes, poussé des verrous, nous a conduits à travers un labyrinthe de couloirs, de voûtes, d’escaliers. On s’y perd, une seule visite ne suffisant pas pour comprendre le plan compliqué de toutes ces constructions réunies où, forteresse, église, abbaye, prisons, cachots, tout se trouve, depuis le roman du xie siècle jusqu’au gothique flam-boyant du xvie. Nous ne pûmes voir que par un carreau, et nous haussant sur fa pointe des pieds, fa salle des Chevaliers qui, servant maintenant d’atelier de tissage, est par ce motif interdite aux gens. Nous y distinguâmes seulement quatre rangs de colonnes à chapiteaux ornés de trèfles et sup-portant une voûte sur laquelle filent des nervures saillantes. A deux cents pieds au-dessus du niveau de la mer, le cloître est bâti sur cette salle des

Chevaliers. Il se compose d’une galerie quadran-gulaire formée par une triple rangée de colon-nettes en granit, en tuf, en marbre granitelle ou en stuc fait avec des coquillages broyés. L’acanthe, le chardon, le lierre et le chêne s’enroulent à leurs chapiteaux ; entre chaque ogive bonnet d’évêque une rosace en trèfle se découpe dans la lumière ; on en a fait le préau des prisonniers.

La casquette du garde-chiourme passe le long de ces murs où l’on voyait rêver jadis le crâne tonsuré des vieux bénédictins travailleurs, et le sabot du détenu bruit sur ces dalles que frôlaient les robes des moines soulevées par les grosses san-dales de cuir qui se ployaient sous leurs pieds nus.

L’église a un chœur gothique et une nef romane, les deux architectures étant là comme pour lutter de grandeur et d’élégance. Dans le chœur l’ogive des fenêtres est haute, pointue, élancée comme une aspiration d’amour ; dans la nef, les arcades l’une sur l’autre ouvrent rondement leurs demi-cercles superposés, et sur la muraille montent des colonnes rondes qui grimpent droites comme des troncs de palmier. Elles appuient leurs pieds sur des piliers carrés, couronnent leurs chapiteaux de feuilles d’acanthe, et continuent au delà par de puissantes nervures qui se courbent sous la voûte, s’y croisent et la soutiennent. II était midi. Par la porte ouverte le grand jour entrant faisait ruisseler ses effluves sur les pans sombres de l’édifice.

La nef séparée du chœur par un grand rideau de toile verte est garnie de tables et de bancs, car on l’a utilisée en réfectoire.

Quand on dit la messe, on tire le rideau, et les condamnés assistent à l’office divin sans déranger leurs coudes de la place où ils mangent : cela est ingénieux.

Pour agrandir de douze mètres la plate-forme qui se trouve au couchant de l’église, on a tout bonnement raccourci l’église ; mais comme il fallait une entrée quelconque, un architecte a ima-giné de fermer la nef par une façade de style grec ; puis, éprouvant peut-être des remords ou voulant, ce qui est plus croyable, raffiner son œuvre, ilya rajouté après coup des colonnes à chapiteaux “assez bien imités du xi” siècle”, dit la notice. Taisons-nous, courbons la tête. Chacun des arts a sa lèpre particulière, son ignominie mortelle qui lui ronge le visage. La peinture a le portrait de famille, la musique a la romance, la littérature a la critique et l’architecture a l’architecte.

Les prisonniers marchaient sur la plate-forme, tous en rang, l’un derrière l’autre, les bras croi-sés, ne parlant pas, dans ce bel ordre enfin que nous avions contemplé à Fontevrault. C’étaient les malades de l’infirmerie auxquels on faisait prendre l’air et qu’on distrait ainsi pour les guérir. L’un deux relevant les pieds plus haut que les autres et se tenant les mains à la veste du com-pagnon qui était devant lui, suivait la file en tré-buchant. II était aveugle. Pauvre misérable ! Dieu l’empêche de voir et les hommes lui défendent de parler ! II avait l’air doux cependant, et sa figure aux jeux fermés souriait sous les chauds rayons du soleil.

(*> Après avoir donné la pièce à notre garde-chiourme, qui nous fit en signe de remerciement une grimace de chat-tigre, nous redescendîmes les escaliers, e cinq minutes après nous étions de retour dans l'intérieur du village où des femmes, assises devant les portes, faisaient des filets sur leurs genoux.

Quand on va à Tombelaine, qui est un rocher à une demi-lieue du Mont Saint-Michel et comme lui placé tout au milieu de la mer, on prend un guide pour éviter les courants. Même aux endroits non dangereux si l'on s'arrête on se sent enfoncer dans le sable qui se met à bouillonner et à monter sur vous ; en dix minutes on en aurait jusqu'au ventre, en une demi-heure jusqu'aux épaules.

Lorsqu'on traverse les courants, l'eau rapide coule entre vos jambes avec la force d'un torrent ; le vertige viendrait si on restait à la regarder. De tous côtés, partout, ce n'est que du sable, des étendues monotones qui se succèdent et s'en-

(*' Inédit, pages 317 à 319. fuient ; mais lorsqu'on détourne la tête, le Mont paraît si près qu'il a l'air de vous poursuivre, vous le voyez tout entier avec ses maisons en bas, ses arbustes accrochés sur ses pentes et son église tout en haut.

Tombelaine est un petit îlot de granit aplati sur les flots, à ras du sol. Dans l'herbe, on distingue encore des restes de fondations et sur toute la lon-gueur du rocher deux traces parallèles comme des ornières de voiture. C'est là que Montgommery avait fait transporter le pillage des églises catho-liques, il y battait monnaie, les beaux écus d'or tout neufs ont sauté sur ces pierres où les cormo-rans fatigués viennent poser leurs pieds roses, dans les orages. Jusqu'à la Révolution, dans une petite chapelle dont il ne reste rien, une lampe perpétuelle brûlait.

Tombelaine ! d'où vient ce nom ? est-ce celui de la jeune fille qui, n'ayant pu suivre son amant parti à la conquête avec le roi Guillaume, resta longtemps à l'attendre sur ce rocher, y mourut enfin de douleur et y fut enterrée, ou celui de la mère du roi Hoël qui, ravie à ses parents par un seigneur espagnol, y aurait été transportée, violée et assassinée. Vague histoire de femme et d'amour qui flotte sur cet écueil !

Le soir, pendant que nous dînions, une pro-cession d'enfants conduits par le curé a passé en chantant sous nos fenêtres. Ils tenaient tous des cierges à la main et, marchant deux à deux, ils ont monté l'escalier qui conduit de la rue sur les remparts. On voyait s'élever les robes blanches des petites filles avec les lumières des flambeaux et on entendait les voix s'éloigner.

A la nuit tombante, nous avons été sur les tours voir se coucher le soleil ; nous y avons causé avec un vieux marin qui, appuyé sur le parapet, fumait comme nous la pipe en faisant la digestion. Il avait fait de longs voyages, été en

Cochinchine et dans les Indes, visité le Japon et la mer Blanche ; il nous parlait de ces pays qu'il avait vus, pendant que la marée montante battait le pied des tours, que les étoiles s'allumaient et que de temps à autre la voix éloignée des sentinelles qui criaient : Garde à vous ! allait se répétant dans l'ombre.

Le lendemain, quand la grève se fut découverte encore, nous partîmes du Mont par un ardent soleil qui chauffait les cuirs de la voiture. Nous avancions au pas ; les colliers craquaient, les roues enfonçaient dans le sable. Au bout de la grève, quand le gazon a paru, j'ai appliqué mon œil à la petite lucarne qui est au fond des voitures et j'ai dit adieu au Mont Saint-Michel.

Pour aller à Combourg il fallait revenir à Dol ; ce fut le gros maître de poste de Pontorson qui nous y mena lui-même. Assis sur le tablier de son tape-cul (nous avions quitté notre équipage), les deux pieds posés sur le brancard, en chemise et la pipe aux lèvres, il poussait au grand trot ses deux pommelés et faisait claquer son petpignan ; du plus loin qu'il apercevait des voitures il leur criait de se garer, injuriant celles qui ne se rangeaient pas, injuriant celles qui se rangeaient, les premières pour tout de bon, les secondes pour rire, vociférant, sacrant, furieux et facétieux, des-pote de la grande route comme si elle eût été sa propriété particulière.

De Doï à Combourg nous eûmes au contraire pour conduire notre tilbury un pauvre bonhomme qui tenait à peine ses guides et roupillait accablé par la chaleur. Quant à nous, nous causâmes si peu que nous ne pensâmes à rien regarder.

Une lettre du vicomte de Vesin devait nous ouvrir l'entrée du château. Aussi à peine arrivés nous allâmes chez M. Corvesier qui en est le régisseur.

On nous fit attendre dans une grande cuisine où une demoiselle en noir, fort marquée de petite vérole et portant des lunettes d'écaillé sur de gros yeux myopes, égrenait des groseilles dans une terrine. La marmite aux confitures était sur le feu et on écrasait du sucre avec des bouteilles.

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Evidemment nous dérangions. Au bout de quelques minutes, on descendit nous dire que M. Corvesier, malade et grelottant de la fièvre dans son lit, était bien désolé de ne pouvoir nous rendre service, mais qu'il nous présentait ses respects. Cependant, son commis, qui venait de rentrer de course et faisait la collation dans la cuisine en bu-vant un verre de cidre et en mangeant une tartine de beurre, s'offrit à sa place à nous montrer le château. Il déposa sa serviette, se suça les dents, alluma sa pipe, prit un paquet de clefs accroché à un clou et se mit à marcher devant nous dans le village.

Après avoir longé un grand mur, on entre par une vieille porte ronde dans une cour de ferme silencieuse. Le silex sort ses pointes sur la terre battue où se montre une herbe rare salie par les fumiers qu'on traîne. Il n'y avait personne ; les écuries étaient vides. Dans les hangars, les poules, huchées sur le timon des charrettes, dormaient la tête sous l'aile. Au pied des bâtiments, la poussière de la paille tombée des granges assourdissait le bruit des pas.

Quatre grosses tours, rejointes par des courtines, laissent voir sous leur toit pointu les trous de leurs créneaux qui ressemblent aux sabords d'un navire ; et les meurtrières dans les tours, ainsi que sur le corps du château de petites fenêtres irrégulièrement percées font des baies noires iné-gales sur la couleur grise des pierres. Un large per-rojï d'une trentaine de marches monte tout droit au premier étage, devenu le rez-de-chaussée des appartements de l'intérieur depuis qu'on en a comblé les douves.

Le « violier jaune » n'y croissait pas, mais les lentisques et les orties, avec la mousse verdâtre et les lichens. A gauche, à côté de la tourelle, un bouquet de marronniers a gagné jusqu'à son toit et l'abrite de son feuillage.

Quand la clef eut tourné dans la serrure et que la porte, poussée à coups de pieds, eut longtemps grincé sur le pavé collant, nous entrâmes dans un

21 couloir sombre qu'encombraient des planches et des échelles avec des cercles de futailles et des brouettes. *

Ce passage vous mène à une petite cour com-prise entre les pans intérieurs du château et res-serrée par l'épaisseur des murs. Le jour n'arrive que d'en haut, comme dans un préau de prison. Dans les angles, des gouttes humides coulaient le long des pierres.

Une autre porte fut ouverte. C'était une vaste salle dégarnie, sonore ; le dallage est brisé en mille endroits ; on a repeint le vieux lambris.

Par les grandes fenêtres, la teinte verte des bois d'en face jetait un reflet livide sur la muraille blanchie. Tout à leur pied, le lac est répandu, étalé sur l'herbe parmi les joncs ; sous les fenêtres, les troènes, les acacias et les lilas, poussés pêle-mêle dans l'ancien parterre, couvrent de leur tail-lis sauvage le talus qui descend jusqu’à la grande route ; elle passe sur la berge du lac et continue ensuite par la forêt.

Rien ne résonnait dans la salle déserte où jadis, à cette heure, s’asseyait sur le bord de ces fenêtres l’enfant qui fut René. Le commis fumait sa pipe et crachait par terre. Son chien, qu’il avait amené, se promenait en furetant les souris, et les ongles de ses pattes sonnaient sur le pavé.

Nous avons monté les escaliers tournants. Le pied trébuche, on tâtonne des mains. Sur les marches usées, la mousse est venue. Souvent un rayon lumineux, passant par la fente des murs et frap-frappant dessus d’aplomb, en fait briller quelque petit brin vert qui, de loin, dans l’ombre, scintille comme une étoile. Nous avons erré partout : dans les longs couloirs, sur les tours, sur la courtine étroite dont les trous des mâchicoulis béants tirent l’œil en bas vers l’abîme.

Donnant sur la cour intérieure, au second étage, est une petite pièce basse dont la porte de chêne, ornée de rainures moulées, s’ouvre par un loquet de fer. Les poutrelles du plafond, que l’on touche avec la main, sont vermoulues de vieillesse ; les lattes paraissent sous le plâtre de la muraille qui a de grandes taches sales ; les carreaux de la fenêtre sont obscurcis par la toile des araignées et leurs châssis encroûtés sous la poussière. C’était là sa chambre. Elle a vue vers l’ouest, du côté des soleils couchants .

Nous continuâmes ; nous allions toujours ; quand nous passions près d’une brèche, d’une meurtrière ou d’une fenêtre, nous nous réchauffions à l’air chaud qui venait du dehors, et cette transition subite rendait tous ces délabrements encore plus tristes et plus froids. Dans les chambres, les parquets pourris s’effondrent, le jour descend par les cheminées, le long de la plaque noircie où les pluies ont fait de longues traînées vertes. Le plafond du salon laisse tomber ses fleurons d’or, et l’écusson qui en surmonte le chambranle est cassé en morceaux. Comme nous étions là, une volée d’oiseaux est entrée tout à coup, a tourbillonné avec des cris et s’est enfuie par le trou de la cheminée.

Le soir, nous avons été sur le bord du lac, de l’autre côté dans la prairie. La terre le gagne, il s’y perd de plus en plus, il disparaîtra bientôt, et les blés pousseront où tremblent maintenant les nénufars. La nuit tombait. Le château, flanqué de ses quatre tourelles, encadré dans sa verdure et dominant le village qu’il écrase, étendait sa grande masse sombre. Le soleil couchant, qui passait devant sans l’atteindre, le faisait paraître noir, et ses rayons, effleurant la surface du lac, allaient se perdre dans la brume, sur la cime violette des bois immobiles.

Assis sur l’herbe, au pied d’un chêne, nous lisions René. Nous étions devant ce lac où il contemplait l’hirondelle agile sur le roseau mobile, à l’ombre de ces bois où il poursuivait l’arc-en-ciel sur les collines pluvieuses ; nous écoutions ce frémissement de feuilles, ce bruit de l’eau sous la brise qui avaient mêlé leur murmure à la mélodie éplorée des ennuis de sa jeunesse. A mesure que l’ombre tombait sur les pages du livre, l’amertume des phrases gagnait nos cœurs, et nous nous fondions avec délices dans ce je ne sais quoi de large, de mélancolique et de doux.

Près de nous, une charrette a passé en claquant dans les ornières son essieu sonore. On sentait l’odeur des foins coupés. On entendait le bruit des grenouilles qui coassaient dans le marécage. Nous rentrâmes.

Le ciel était lourd ; toute la nuit il y eut de l’orage. A la lueur des éclairs, la façade de plâtre d’une maison voisine s’illuminait et flambait comme embrasée. Haletant, lassé de me retourner sur mes matelas, je me suis levé, j’ai allumé ma chandelle, j’ai ouvert la fenêtre et j’ai regardé la nuit.

Elle était noire, silencieuse comme le sommeil. Mon flambeau qui brûlait dessinait monstrueuse-ment sur le mur d’en face ma silhouette agrandie. De temps à autre, un éclair muet survenant tout à coup m’éblouissaît les yeux.

J’ai pensé à cet homme qui a commencé là et qui a rempli un demi-siècle du tapage de sa douleur.

Je le voyais d’abord dans ces rues paisibles, vagabondant avec les enfants du village, quand il allait dénicher les hirondelles dans le clocher de l’église ou la fauvette dans les bois. Je me le figu-rais dans sa petite chambre, triste et le coude sur sa table, regardant la pluie courir sur les carreaux et, au delà de la courtine, les nuées qui passaient pendant que ses rêves s’envolaient ; je me figu-rais les longs après-midi rêveurs qu’il y avait eus ; je songeais aux amères solitudes de l’adolescence, avec leurs vertiges, leurs nausées et leurs bouffées d’amour qui rendent les cœurs malades. N’est-ce pas ici que fut couvée notre douleur à nous autres, le golgotha même où le génie qui nous a nourris a sué son angoisse ?

Rien ne dira les gestations de l’idée ni les tres-saillements que font subir à ceux qui les portent les grandes œuvres futures ; mais on s’éprend à voir les lieux où nous savons qu’elles ont été con-çues, vécues, comme s’ils avaient gardé quelque chose de l’idéal inconnu qui vibra jadis.

O sa chambre ! sa chambre ! sa pauvre petite chambre d’enfant ! C’est là que tourbillonnaient, l’appelaient des fantômes confus qui tourmentaient ses heures en lui demandant à naître : Atala secouant au vent des Florides les magnolias de sa chevelure ; Velléda, au clair de lune, courant sur la bruyère ; Cy modocée voilant son sein nu sous la griffe des léopards, et la blanche Amélie, et le pâle René !

Un jour, cependant, il la quitte, il s’en arrache, il dit adieu et pour n’y plus revenir au vieux foyer féodal. Le voilà perdu dans Paris et se mêlant aux hommes ; puis, l’inquiétude le prend, il part.

Penché à la proue de son navire, je le vois cherchant un monde nouveau, en pleurant la pa-trie qu’il abandonne. II arrive ; il écoute le bruit des cataractes et la chanson des Natchez ; il regarde couler l’eau des grands fleuves paresseux et contemple sur leurs bords briller l’écaillé des serpents avec les yeux des femmes sauvages. II abandonne son âme aux langueurs de la savane ; de l’un à l’autre, ils s’épanchent leurs mélancolies natives et il épuise le désert comme il avait tari l’amour. II revient, il parle, et on se tient suspendu à l’enchan-tement de ce style magnifique, avec sa cambrure royale et sa phrase ondulante, empanachée, drapée, orageuse comme le vent des forêts vierges, colorée comme le cou des colibris, tendre comme les rayons de la lune à travers le trèfle des chapelles.

II part encore ; il va, remuant de ses pieds la poussière antique ; il s’asseoit aux Thermopyles et crie : Léonidas ! Léonidas ! court autour du tom-beau d’Achille, cherche Lacédémone, égrène dans ses mains les caroubiers de Carthage, et, comme le pâtre engourdi qui lève la tête au bruit des ca-ravanes, tous ces grands paysages se réveillent quand il passe dans leurs solitudes.

Tour à tour rappelé, proscrit, comblé d’honneurs, il dînera ensuite à la table des rois, lui qui s’était évanoui de faim dans les rues ; il sera ambassadeur, ministre, essayera de retenir dans ses mains la monarchie qui s’écroule et, au milieu des ruines de ses croyances, assistera enfin à sa propre gloire, comme s’il était déjà compté parmi les morts.

Né sur le déclin d’une société et à l’aurore d’une autre, il est venu pour en être la transition et comme pour en résumer en lui les espérances et les souvenirs. II a été l’embaumeur du catholi-cisme et I’acclamateur de la liberté. Homme des vieilles traditions et des vieilles illusions, en politique il fut constitutionnel et en littérature révo-lutionnaire. Religieux d’instinct et d’éducation, c’est lui qui, avant tous les autres, avant Bjron, a poussé le cri le plus sauvage de l’orgueil, exprimé son plus épouvantable désespoir.

Artiste, il eut cela de commun avec ceux du xvme siècle qu’il fut comme eux toujours gêné dans des poétiques étroites, mais qui, débordées à tout instant par l’étendue de son génie, en ont malgré lui craqué dans toute leur circonférence. Comme homme, il a partagé la misère de ceux du xixe siècle ; il a eu leurs préoccupations turbu-lentes, leurs gravités futiles. Non content d’être grand, il a voulu paraître grandiose, et il s’est trouvé pourtant que cette manie vaniteuse n’a pas effacé sa vraie grandeur. Il n’est point certes de la race des contemplateurs qui ne sont pas descendus dans la vie, maîtres au front serein qui n’ont eu ni siècle, ni patrie, ni famille même. Mais lui, on ne le peut séparer des passions de son temps ; elles l’avaient fait et il en a fait plusieurs. L’avenir peut-être ne lui tiendra pas compte de ses entêtements héroïques et ce seront, sans doute, les épisodes de ses livres qui en immortaliseront les titres avec le nom des causes qu’ils défendaient.

Ainsi, tout seul, devisant en moi-même, je restais accoudé, savourant la nuit douce et me trem-pant avec plaisir dans l’air froid du matin qui rafraîchissait mes paupières. Petit à petit, le jour venait ; la chandelle allongeait sa mèche noire dans sa flamme pâlissante. Le pignon des halles a paru au loin, un coq a chanté ; l’orage avait fui ; quelques gouttes d’eau cependant tombées sur la poussière de la rue y faisaient de grosses taches rondes. Comme je m’assoupissais de fatigue, je me suis recouché et j’ai dormi.

Nous nous en allâmes fort tristes de Combourg ; et puis la fin de notre voyage approchait. Bientôt allait finir cette fantaisie vagabonde que nous menions depuis trois mois avec tant de douceur. Le retour aussi, comme le départ, a ses tristesses an-ticipées qui vous envoient par avance la fade exha-laison de la vie qu’on traîne.

(*> La tête sur la poitrine, ne parlant pas et regardant sans trop la voir la route vide qui s’allongeait, nous humions l’odeur des feuilles vertes, dandinés au mouvement du cheval qui trottait dans les brancards. Aux montées quand il soufflait, on entendait de dessous le feuillage quelque petit oiseau qui gazouillait. Nous nous arrêtâmes au village de Hédé pour voir les ruines du château, notre guide pour boire un verre de vin blanc, notre cheval pour prendre un picotin d’avoine : à chacun sa pitance.

II ne reste du château que son enceinte rasée qui sort encore à quelque sept pieds du sol et qui forme comme un grand cirque dont on fait le tour en marchant sur les murs. De là, le paysage se déroulant semble une gigantesque nappe de ver-

(*’ Inédit, pages 329 à 332. dure rayée par les blanches lignes droites des routes, posée tout à plat dans les prairies, ou onduleuse ailleurs sous le mouvement des collines qui la bombent. Le soleil brillait, les arbres ver-doyaient, l’air était bleu ; près de là un ruisseau qui descendait de la colline sautillait de cascades en cascades sur les cailloux.

Un bruit de voiture a passé sur la route ; elle était cachée par les arbres, et nous entendions seulement le glissement rauque de son sabot qui écrasait la poussière. Au bas de la côte elle s’est ar-rêtée ; j’ai pris mon lorgnon : c’était une vraie berline de voyage, ayant siège par derrière, femme de chambre à un bout, chasseur à l’autre, avec quatre chevaux, deux postillons, couverte de vaches, de boîtes, de cartons, et de parapluies accrochés en dehors dans leur étui de cuir ciré. Les stores de soie jaune étaient baissés, je n’ai dis-tingué personne. Qu’y avait-il là dedans ? pourquoi voyageaient-ils, ceux-là, s’ils passaient si vite à côté des ruines sans y mettre un peu les pieds, à côté des beaux ombrages sans lever la tête vers eux, et tout près de cette eau courante sans s’asseoir une minute pour en écouter la chanson ?

Le chasseur, quand il eut remis le sabot, re-monta derrière ; les deux postillons claquèrent leur fouet, la voiture partit, elle s’éloignait et se rapetissait à mesure qu’elle filait sur le long ruban de la route. Quelque temps le bruit des galops retentit encore, puis s’affaiblit, s’éteignit. Et nous, nous repartîmes de notre côté. II était 2 heures environ quand nous arrivâmes à Rennes ; le déjeuner de la table d’hôte était consommé et on nous fit attendre pour les côtelettes.

En nous promenant le soir sur le bord de la Vilaine, du côté des ponts, nous avons vu une sorte de long fourgon où l’on entrait par un escalier à double rampe et qui avait, le long de sa caisse, de petites fenêtres carrées à rideaux de coton rouge. La lumière de l’intérieur passant à travers, empourprait les têtes de la foule qui se tenait alentour ; sur le seuil de la voiture, une femme encore jeune, maigre, salement mise, et le front rétréci par des tresses noires relevées sur les oreilles, tenant une baguette à la main et, glapis-sant dans son accent provençal, racontait l’hor-rible combat qui avait eu lieu sur les côtes de Barbarie entre un marin intrépide et un phoque furieux : on était, cependant parvenu à s’emparer du phoque, on l’avait dompté, éduqué ; il était là, on pouvait le voir.

Nous entrâmes et prîmes rang autour d’un grand baquet obiong dont le dedans peint en gris était relevé par des bandes grenat simulant une tenture. Au-dessus du baquet, un quinquet muni d’un abat-jour en tôle renvoyait sa lumière sur l’eau jaunâtre dans laquelle quelque chose de noir et de long gisait sans bouger. La femme s’en est approchée, l’a frappé d’un petit coup de baguette ; il a sorti sa tête humide, ses narines ressemblant à deux coupures symétriques se dilataient et se con-tractaient avec bruit, et il vous regardait tristement de ses deux gros jeux noirs ; il a voulu faire un mouvement, mais sa queue s’est heurtée contre les planches ; il s’est tourné sur le dos et nous a montré son ventre blanc, gras encore des visco-sités de la mer ; il s’est levé tout droit, a appuyé ses nageoires sur le bord de la cuve, a donné un coup de son museau contre la joue de sa maî-tresse, puis il est retombé au fond, en poussant un grand soufflement.

Il n’a plus ces bons flots où il vivait à son aise, ni les larges grèves où il s’étendait au soleil sur les goémons verts !

Comme il avait bien travaillé, on l’a gratifié de deux ou trois anguilles qu’il avalait lentement en les mangeant par le milieu, et les deux bouts lui sortant de la bouche faisaient de chaque côté de son museau comme deux longues moustaches blanches.

Un orgue de Barbarie qui était dans un coin s’est mis aussitôt à tourner une polka, le quinquet filait, sur l’escalier la femme appelait la foule, la représentation était terminée.

Voilà ce que nous vîmes à Rennes. Quand le phoque n’y sera plus, qu’y aura-t-il à y voir ?

FIN XII

De Rennes à Vitré. — Diligence. — Jeune fille très légère qui filait de Rennes ; encore une faute de diagnostic. — ■ Plaisanteries aimables sur les lanciers, la lance, le piston.

VlTRÉ. — Douves devant l’hôtel Sévigné, grande maison blanche où nous sommes descendus. — Vieux château : deux tours à toit aigu ; à gauche, un bouquet d’arbres et tourelle carrée ; dans l’intérieur, puits très large. — Intérieur des maisons reçoit le jour d’en haut ; escaliers en bois, tournant carrément, comme à Morlaix, comme à Rennes. — Une rare émotion ; tours le long ou plutôt dans la ville. — Jolie route pour aller aux Rochers, à travers les bois : il n’y a pas de rochers aux Rochers. A — Maison en angle : rotonde de la chapelle, cuisine honnête. — Salon au rez-de-chaussée. — Le portrait de M™” de Sévigné n’est pas l’original de Mignard à coup sûr ; plusieurs autres portraits de l’époque sont détériorés. — Chambre de M™* de S. : lit doré en damas rouge ; cabinet, bourdaloue en porcelaine peinte, fauteuil bas en tapisserie blanche et verte ; table de toilette, ustensiles en laque rouge, boîtes rondes, grosse brosse en crin blanc. — Pluie, lac, sous les arbres, sous la cahute des sabotiers, odeur des bois. — Table d’hôte : M. Menars, M. Marin, M. de Couesnon.

De Vitré À Fougères. — Normandie. — Notre conducteur nous parle du marquis de Letumière, père des proprié-taires actuels des Rochers, qui le menaçait de son pistolet pour aller au galop et qui aimait à se faire verser dans sa voiture en tôle ; il se déguisait avec ses amis en charbon-nier.

Vitré. — Chaire extérieure comme à Guérande.

Fougères. — Aspect solide des tours, tes remparts sont couverts de verdure. — La partie seule des fortifications qui descendait dans la vallée subsiste. — Jolie porte avec deux tours ; un grand acacia, chute d’eau ; les tours sont en fer à cheval comme à Saint-Malo. — Grande vue de l’espla-nade sous l’église. — Forêt. — Fabrique de verre.

A Vire, À MortAin même les bonnets de coton commencent. — Nuit en diligence, jour gris se lève, plaques d’argent dans le ciel bleu mat, puis lignes d’or que déchirent les clochers de Caen. — Promenade dans les prairies ; hippodrome pour les courses. — Saint-Etienne : superbe roman ; le cintre des premières galeries est très large, jolis chapiteaux des colonnes de la nef, comme des ventres ; dans le chœur : archivolte, ornementation d’un bâton passé dans des anneaux ; un homme (dans un des bas côtés, à droite vers le milieu) qui se pollue (?). — Saint-Jean : gothique, bas, lourd, lustres de cristal dans le chœur donnent de l’animation à l’église ; elle tombe à gauche, surtout l’entrée, la maison voisine la soutient. — Église Saint-Pierre : vi-laine voûte à cause de l’entrecroisement exagéré des nervures, surtout à l’abside où courent dessus des arabesques ; le mélange des formes carrées Renaissance des culs-de- Iampe avec les formes ogivales choque.

H n’est rien de pire que la statue de Louis XIV sur la place Royale, tout nu, avec un casque et une épée. — Effet superbe de « palais de l’université”, faculté de droit, de médecine, des lettres, *etc.* — Rien au musée d’histoire naturelle. On ne peut pas s’empêcher, en voyant des collec-tions de province, de regretter tout l’argent inutile que ça a coûté. — Buste de Dumont d’Urville ; toujours le grand homme local ! parce qu’il était du pays de Condé-sur-Noi-reau. Musée de Caen. — Le marquis d’Argenson mort en 1721 : grande perruque noire, rabat, yeux et sourcils noirs forts, nez un peu busqué, narines fortes, bouche discrète, menton fourchu, regard ironique, mais plus malin que railleur ; toute la gravité reste dans le bas du visage.

La seconde révélation de sainte Catherine (Albert Durer), mais me parait plus jeune, plus coloré : la Vierge et la Sainte, grands cheveux épars, roux, ondes et tombant menu au bout sur leurs tailles ; deux autres femmes au premier plan, rousses ; id. celle de droite, assise, grande robe rouge étalée à lourds plis ; celle de gauche, robe verdâtre, assise, corsage jaune, manteau rouge à collet d’hermine ; dans le fond, paysage, maison, un vieux serviteur en chaperon qui apporte des fruits.

Portrait de Mme de Parabère entourée d’une guirlande de fleurs : un nègre en bas en manche jaune ; Mme de Parabère, cheveux noirs, frisés naturellement sur le front, dénoués, répandus sur les épaules, le visage dégage, figure ronde, petite bouche, petit nez, air jovial et polisson, yeux bleus, sourcils blonds ; le portrait est par Coypel, la guirlande par Fontenay.

Beau portrait de magistrat de Tournières : en perruque, cheveux d’une fausse couleur blonde, animé, laid, fin, maigre, yeux rouges, chairs molles de vieillard ; cet homme-là devait être en droit ce que Boileau était en littérature ; l’animation de l’étroite pupille à coin blanc (celui où la lumière tombe) éclatante dans son œil bleu.

Parti de Caen après le dîner à 6 heures en tilbury. — Longue promenade au bord de l’eau sous des arbres, très triste à cause du jour vert ; à travers la campagne peuplée ; village. Je sentais que j’approchais de Trouville ; sans connaître les lieux, je les retrouvais et jam redibant multa prae-terita. — Passage du bac ; le petit cheval blanc un peu ombrageux avait peur.

Dives. — Le vétérinaire ivre. — Nous emplissons nos gourdes et nous partons. La lune brillait, au loin, au fond de la mer, le phare du Havre ; nous montons la côte de Houlgate et nous nous perdons ; traversée dans un champ, broussailles, mauvais terrains. La lune nous éclairait et nous perdait, les rigoles qu'on ne voyait pas mouillaient le terrain où nous enfoncions ; enfin, après beaucoup de peines et d'efforts, nous parvenons à la grève. — Marée basse, sable brun rouge. La lune, toute basse sur les montagnes derrière nous, prolongeait notre ombre à nos côtés ; elle brillait. Phosphorescence dans les flaques d'eau ; les étincelles filaient des deux côtés de notre soulier quand nous marchions dedans. Nous étions plus silencieux que la nuit et plus sombres qu'elle, car elle était sereine et douce. J'ai eu un instant un épouvantement de la nature, je sentais trop qu'elle m'envahissait ; à peine de temps à autre échangions-nous un “Eh bien, vieux” qui retombait de suite. Quelquefois des ombres grandissaient et des douaniers s'approchaient de nous avec cet air particulier qu'on a quand on s'aborde la nuit. Nous leur demandions si nous étions loin de Trouville. — Barque dans laquelle il y avait des filets. Max était harassé et a songé à la bonne partie de novembre que cette barque-là m'a remise en mémoire. Il y avait cinq ans à même époque, par une nuit chaude aussi, j'allais à pied pour gagner Trouville tout seul. Le jour venait, et j'y allais maintenant ; mais je ne devais pas cette fois y trouver une famille et en remporter une affection ; je devais n'y trouver que des souvenirs et n'en remporter pour le pays lui-même qu'une sorte de haine mouillée.

Lumières du quai. — Lieutenant de douane qui faisait son inspection avec son petit chien qui rôdait. — Marais. Nous roulons dans les joncs, nous arrivons enfin à la lumière du poteau qui reculait toujours. Max reste pendant que je vais réveiller le passager qui se réveille et consent à grande peine à nous passer ; j'ai du mal à me reconnaître sur le quai. J'entre et le père et la mère David ne me reconnaissent pas, il faut me nommer. Est-ce qu'on se reconnaît ? Se reconnaît-on soi-même ! Nous buvons une bouteille de vin, nous mangeons un morceau de fromage de P L. — Cuisine ! fauteuil. — Entre un monsieur en redingote grise et en bottes à l'écuyère.

Le lendemain, politesses de L., promenade à cheval à Bonneville et à Saint-Arnaud : à Bonneville on détruit la vieille maison et on en fait une neuve, autrefois j'y fis une bonne promenade avec Alfred. — Dames auxquelles Max cueille des bouquets. — A Saint-Arnaud, équipages au coin d'une haie. On y a bâti beaucoup de maisons, fait une route ; dans la chapelle, on a découvert un caveau où il y a beaucoup d'ossements et on a réparé le chœur ! Dans l'église, les mêmes arbres, les mêmes piliers quand j'y venais dessiner avec le père Dumée ; ça, au moins, n'a pas changé. En revenant sur la route je reconnais le curé de Toucques “Vous autres, jeunes de Paris, dans vos soupers fins ». En face le parc aux huîtres, char à banc de maître à siège élevé, conduit par quelque vieux général en chapeau de paille, décoré ; mouvement de côté du fouet. —

Tout est changé, tout, tout ; j’ai du mal à me retrouver et mon souvenir est effarouché par les mutations de cette même nature à laquelle il se cramponnait. La terre même nous fuit de dessous les pieds ; il n’y a pas que les cœurs qui changent, le sol aussi, les maisons aussi, les pavés aussi. O mon pauvre petit cottage et mes deux autres maisons, comme on vous a éreintés, surtout une, la plus chère. Dans la salle à manger, je revois les tables différentes, c’est maintenant un papier qui représente la *Fiancée d’Abydos*. Drôle de chose, il me semble qu’autrefois, dans le coin du fond à gauche, le soleil couchant donnait ses rayons rouges ; mon souvenir est bien fidèle pourtant. Est-ce que le soleil aussi aurait changé ? Non, c’était alors réverbération des sables à marée basse, dont la couleur éclairait les carreaux. — Course au chalet. — Notre ami Ulric. Voilà un homme qui, après avoir fait....., en est revenu au bourgeois le plus convenable ; le bourgeois est donc la fin de tout !

CRIQUEBŒUF, nous n’entrons pas ; Villerville que nous traver-sons seulement. Nous faisons descendre nos chevaux par le chemin des douaniers. — Dîner chez M. Guetier ; promenade le soir (avec eux !) sur la grève ; le lendemain, déjeuner où l’on boit parce qu’il faut boire, et offert parce qu’il avait fallu l’offrir. Mais que c’est triste et bête tout cela ! Comme c’est peu selon le cœur ! Et cette pluie qui tombait et qui a duré toute la journée, comme elle était harmo-nique, elle, avec le fond de nous !

Honfleur. — Pluie sur les bassins. — Dîner ; je me sur-passe dans la composition d’une sauce anglaise. Je retrouve la mine de tous les domestiques que j’avais oubliée, comme le lendemain matin celle de deux canotiers du canot. Reconnaître quelqu’un dont on avait perdu complètement l’idée, c’est retrouver toujours quelque chose de soi-même ; on se dit : tiens, c’est vrai, j’ai eu ça autrefois,... je l’avais perdu, je le regagne. Ah ! Ah !

Dans le canot, curé avec son papier ciré sur son chapeau, froid, malaise ; en vain je tâche de me réchauffer à la chaudière. L’agent comptable de la “Normandie” m’était également sorti de la mémoire ! encore un qui revient ! — La joueuse de harpe et la joueuse de guitare : laideur vio-lente et empoignante de la première ; tout ce que j’ai dis-cerné dans leurs chansons, c’est amour, bonheur, *etc.* Deux religieuses, près de là, s’en sont allées, sans doute de peur d’être troublées, de se sentir venir à l’esprit des images libidineuses. Ah ! les pauvres filles, ça m’en faisait peu venir, à moi. — Déjeuner. — C’est bizarre, mais je ne me suis pas ennuyé sur notre vapeur.

Entre Caudebec et Duclair (?), je reconnais un endroit, une anfractuosité sur la rive gauche, entre deux mamelons boisés, et je me souviens que, une fois que j’y passai, à un voyage de Pâques, en 1841, avec Caroline, ma mère et M”° Jame, nous étions là sur le bastingage de gauche cau-sant avec la femme du restaurant et trois jeunes gens qui ont péri au chemin de fer de Meudon. II faisait froid et était vers 6 heures du soir, au mois d'avril il n'y avait presque personne à bord, c'était un des premiers voyages de la saison.

J'ai repensé à un voyage en bateau à vapeur des Andelys à Rouen avec Alfred : nous étions sales, las et tristes de même, mais alors sans cause ; les voix grêles des deux femmes, le son boiseux de la guitare, le son métallique de la harpe s'en allaient, écrasés par le bruit des roues, par celui de l'eau fendue par la proue ; le mouvement de la vapeur saccadait tout cela.

La Bouille. — Le soir, Max arrange mon trophée, et le lendemain, adieu.

Écrit à Caumont, 28 juillet, mercredi soir, 9 heures et demie à 11 heures. — Il y a un an ; j'étais à Paris : feu d'artifice des fêtes de juillet, vu des hauteurs ; je faisais du sentiment, j'en ressens maintenant, il y a harmonie dans cet anniversaire.

Ce sommaire a été développé par Maxime Du Camp.

PYRENEES.

BORDEAUX.

Il y a des gens qui la veille de leur départ ont tout préparé dans leur poche : encrier rempli, érudition placardée, émotions indiquées d’avance. Heureuses et puériles natures qui se jouent avec elles-mêmes et se chatouillent pour se faire rire, comme dit Rabelais. II en est d’autres, au contraire, qui se refusent à tout ce qui leur vient du dehors, se rembrunissent, tirent la visière de leur casquette et de leur esprit pour ne rien voir. Je crois qu’il est difficile de garder, ici comme ailleurs, le juste milieu exquis préconisé par la sagesse, point géométrique et idéal placé au centre de l’espace, de l’infini de la bêtise humaine. Je vais tâcher néanmoins d’y atteindre et de me donner de l’esprit, du bon sens et du goût ; bien plus, je n’aurai aucune prétention littéraire et je ne tâcherai pas de faire du style ; si cela arrive, que ce soit à mon insu comme une métaphore qu’on emploie faute de savoir s’exprimer par le sens littéral. Je m’abstiendrai donc de toute déclamation et je ne me permettrai que six fois par page le mot *pittoresque* et une douzaine de fois celui d’*admirable*. Les voyageurs disent le premier à tous les tas de cailloux et le second à toutes les bornes, il me sera bien permis de le stéréotyper à toutes mes phrases, qui, pour vous rassurer, sont d’ailleurs fort longues.

Ceci est un préambule que je me suis permis et qu’on aurait pu intituler le marchepied, pour indiquer les émotions que j’avais en montant en voiture, ce qui veut dire que je n’en avais aucune. Je m’assassinerais si je croyais que j’eusse la pensée de faire ici quelque chose d’un peu sérieux : je veux tout bonnement, avec ma plume, jeter sur le papier un peu de la poussière de mes habits ; je veux que mes phrases sentent le cuir de mes souliers de voyage et qu’elles n’aient ni dessus de pieds, ni bretelles, ni pommade qui ruisselle en grasses périodes, ni cosmétique qui les tienne raides en expressions ardues, mais que tout soit simple, franc et bon, libre et dégagé comme la tournure des femmes d’ici, avec les poings sur les hanches et l’œil gaillard, le nez fin s’il est possible et avant tout point de corset, mais que la taille soit bien faite. Cet engagement pris, me voilà lié moi-même et je suis forcé d’avoir le style d’un honnête homme.

La campagne de Paris est triste, l’œil va loin sans rencontrer de verdure ; de grandes roues qui tirent les pierres des carrières, un maigre cheval flanqué d’un petit âne tirant des tombereaux de fumier, du pavé, le cliquetis des glaces et cet indéfinissable vide d’esprit qui vous prend aux moments du départ, voilà tout ce que j’ai vu, voilà tout ce que j’ai senti. Certes, je ne demandais pas mieux que de me fouiller l’esprit pour penser au xvie siècle en passant par Longjumeau, et de là par une association d’idées me laisser couler dans Brantôme et en plein Médicis, mais je n’en avais pas le cœur, de même qu’à Montléry, la tour ne m’a point rappelé de souvenirs. Expression des plus charmantes surtout comme il en arrive dans la bouche de ceux qui ne savent rien et qui l’adoptent par passion historique.

Quand je me suis réveillé le lendemain matin, la campagne avait changé ; il y avait de grands champs de vignes, éclairés du soleil levant, et c’était l’air frais du matin, à 5 heures, dans le mois d’août. Insensiblement le terrain s’abaisse et par une pente douce vous mène aux bords de la Loire que vous longez sur une chaussée de 17 lieues, depuis Blois jusqu’à Tours. Honnête pays, paysages bourgeois, nature comme on l’entend dans la poésie descriptive ; c’est là la Loire, mince filet d’eau au milieu d’un grand lit plein de sable, avec des bateaux qui se traînent à la remorque la voile haute, étroite et à moitié enflée par le vent sans vigueur. D’un autre côté, et sous un certain point de vue de symbolisme littéraire, ce pays m’a semblé représenter une face de la littérature française. A mesure que vous avancez, la vallée se déploie, les arbres de l’autre bord se mirent tranquillement dans l’eau, les coteaux boisés disparaissent les uns après les autres ; on aimerait ici à mettre pied à terre, à s’étendre sur l’herbe, à écouter le bruit de cette pauvre eau paisible, que je n’appelle pas onde ; ce n’est ni grand, ni beau, ni bien vert, mais c’est, si vous voulez, un refrain de Charles d’Orléans, pas plus, où la naïveté seule a une certaine tendresse qui n’est pas même du sentiment, tant c’est faible et calme, mais tranquille est doux.

Il ne faut rien moins que la vue de Blois pour faire penser à quelque chose de plus vigoureux et vous remettre en mémoire la cour d’Henri III. Hélas ! je n’ai point vu le château où Henri se vengea de sa peur, ni ce lit, comme dit Chateaubriand, où tant d’ignominies firent mourir tant de gloire ; la rapidité de ma course m’a à peine laissé la vue des murs extérieurs.

Si j’avais été un beau gentilhomme tourangeau comme ceux à qui je pensais alors, marchant dans son xvie siècle, les mains dans les poches et le large chapeau sur les oreilles, ou s’acheminant sur sa mule aux États de Blois, je n’aurais pas manqué de relire mon Rabelais à l’ombre de ces vignes où il dormit ; car il a vécu là. Ces sentiers sur le sable, dans les roseaux, il y a fait sieste un certain jour peut-être qu’il était soûlas ; son rire a retenti le long des peupliers qui bordent la rivière ; cette voix de Gargantua a rebondi sur ces coteaux, s’en est allée le long de ce courant calme et doux se perdre dans l’Océan plein de clameurs que toutes les autres dérisions ont grossi avec elle ; le géant a marché dans ces larges plaines, sous ce soleil doux ; il lui fallait chaque jour le lait de 3,600 vaches qu’il buvait à large pipée. Toute la contrée est faite à sa taille : plaines larges, arbres frais, eau calme, grand lit qui s’emplit parfois, avenue sans fin qui tourne au fastidieux par sa longueur.

Du reste rien d’original, rien de coloré, une platitude toute française jusqu’à Tours. Je me rappelle seulement trois petites filles qui m’ont demandé l’aumône à Montbazon, le premier relais en sortant de cette ville ; l’aînée surtout, qui avait dix ans à peine, m’a donné la première idée du Midi : pieds nus, elle courait dans la poussière en suivant la portière ; sa voix, qui répétait en crescendo la charité ! la charité ! la charité, avait quelque chose de nasillard et de glapissant ; des cheveux noirs et collés de sueur, un teint de bistre, des dents blanches qui se sont montrées à moi dans un éclat de rire enfantin quand la voiture est partie au galop. Charmante peinture de farce enfantine et de grâce naïve, perdue au milieu de la grande route et que m’a valu l’appât prolongé d’une petite pièce de deux sous.

A Poitiers, le Midi commence : larges bonnets, moins gracieux toutefois que ceux de Montbazon, quelque chose de sévère, autant que j’ai pu en juger par un mauvais dfner et me rappelant que le Poitou est la patrie des… Je garde un souvenir plus gracieux d’Angoulême et de la colline où elle est bâtie. On commence à rencontrer des attelages de bœufs qui m’ont fait penser au tableau de Léopold Robert. Les postillons ont le béret rouge des Basques et le pantalon à galons, les chevaux sont plus petits, plus efflanqués ; les toits deviennent plats ; les tuiles rouges et bosselées qui les couvrent, les murs blancs des maisons dont le faîte n’est pas souvent plus haut que les vignes, tout cela c’est bien du Midi. Partout cheveux noirs et barbes fortes, costumes bigarrés comme dans un bal masqué, des paysans battant le blé devant leur grange. Quand vous passez dans ces petits villages blancs comme la campagne où ils sont assis et comme le soleil qui les éclaire, que vous tournez aux angles de mur uni, percé de petites fenêtres, on se croirait, j’imagine, en Espagne.

Vous n’êtes plus assailli, comme dans le Poitou, de femmes qui exploitent la soif ou la pitié du voyageur, seulement la poussière tourbillonne et le soleil darde ; point de bruit ni de chants dans la campagne. Pour rendre la ressemblance plus parfaite, le rapport plus juste, à Savignac j’ai eu une véritable apparition moresque : pendant que nous relayons, un contrevent vert s’est ouvert, une main est d’abord aperçue (pour qu’on ne m’accuse pas trop d’exploration féminine, je déclare que c’est sur la découverte de mon grave et savant compagnon M. Cloquet), une main, puis un profil, puis deux, deux têtes noires avec un sourcil superbe à peine entrevues ! Dérision ! une plaque jaune me fait conjecturer que c’étaient les deux filles du notaire.

Ce qu’on appelle ordinairement un bel homme est une chose assez bête ; jusqu’à présent, j’ai peur que Bordeaux ne soit une belle ville. Larges rues, places ouvertes, beaucoup de mouchoirs sur des têtes brunes, telle est la phrase synthétique dans laquelle je la résume avant d’en savoir davantage. II me faut pour que je l’aime quelque chose de plus que son pont, que les pantalons blancs de ses commerçants, que ses rues alignées et son port qui est le type du port. II n’y fait, selon moi, ni assez chaud ni assez froid ; il n’y a rien d’incisif et d’accentué : c’est un Rouen méridional, avec une Garonne aux eaux bourbeuses. Je comptais donc me jeter à l’eau et me laisser entraîner par le courant, m’étendre dans le duvet moelleux du fleuve, couche suave dont les draps limpides vous baisent la peau. Imaginez un espace fermé où l’eau reste stagnante comme dans un bocal, comparaison peu flatteuse pour ceux qui y vivent même momentanément, des grilles en bois qui empêchent l’air de circuler et même de vider l’eau, une atmosphère de cigare éteint, de la boue et des oies qui y pataugeaient, telle était l’école de natation. J’hésitai à y souiller mes membres, mon héroïsme m’y fit plonger jusqu’au coude, car un plancher bourgeois remplace le lit du fleuve, de sorte qu’il n’y a pas même la possibilité de se mouiller la tête sans crainte de tomber sur le plancher. Allez-vous donc ici vous reposer dans 1 herbe, effleurer du bout du nez les pointes dardées des roseaux, remuer les cailloux au fond du lit, monter à califourchon sur les câbles étendus et suivre la barque grillée où l’on entend des voix ? Vous voulez de la fraîcheur, du silence, de l’ombrage, de l’eau claire et caressante, et vous avez la puanteur des ruisseaux, le cri des tavernes, la chaleur grasse qui suinte des murs ; car l’onde ici est empoisonnée, le cours arrêté, tant ils sont habiles à souiller ce qui purifie, à salir ce qui lave !

J’ai pourtant vu aujourd’hui, en plein soleil, une nacelle couverte d’une tente carrée, sous laquelle on doit bien dormir et d’où cette pauvre Garonne doit apparaître belle aux clairs de lune quand la ville s’est tue et que les hommes laissent parler les joncs dans le courant. J’y rêverais volontiers de l’Inde et du Gange, avec les cadavres qu’il charrie comme des feuilles et que le soir les vautours viennent becqueter avec de grands cris. J’aurais tout autant aimé passer ainsi ma soirée que d’aller comme j’ai fait tout à l’heure dîner en ville, chez un brave homme dans toute la force du terme, à sa maison de campagne qui est dans un faubourg, pour boire d’excellent vin, j’en conviens, dont la digestion a été gâtée par des romances au piano et deux cigarettes au Maryland, musique d’épiciers, tabac de clerc de notaire, le tout fadasse et doux comme du jus de nojau. Je crois qu’il a été question d’un air italien de Rossini chanté en français. Pauvre Rossini ! plus disséqué que mes cadavres du Gange, et par des becs féminins encore, ce qui est pis. Le salon et la salle à manger étaient ornés d’insectes et d’oiseaux adaptés verticalement à la muraille dans des boites garnies de vitres. J’ai promis de la graine de melon à mon cordial amphytrion. Le dîner après tout a été aimable, et je me suis un peu réconcilié avec ma voisine qui, au premier abord, m’a eu tout l’air d’une bécasse qui a peur de se mouiller les pieds dans de l’eau claire ; et voici pourquoi. J’étais débarqué d’omnibus par une chaleur confortable, ficelé et tiré dans mes dessous de pieds, avec une cravate de satin toute neuve, le lorgnon au bouton du gilet et des gants de la plus scrupuleuse blancheur dont mon bras avait l’air de sortir tant la main y était enchevêtrée. Après les salutations d’introduction on fit un tour de jardin ; le bon ton le plus exquis régnait dans mes manières, je laissais marcher seule dans les allées une jeune dame, la fille de la maison, dans la crainte de faire l’empressé. Me trouvant simplement près d’elle, je lui offris enfin mon bras qu’elle refusa, ce que je trouvai de fort mauvais goût ; car aussitôt je fis un retour sur moi-même où je ne me flattai pas médiocrement, et je repassai dans un éclair tous mes avantages physiques et intellectuels, avec une telle lucidité que j’en rougis presque d’humilité. Au reste, on enfonçait dans les allées du jardin comme dans des landes, et ce que j’y trouvais de plus beau, c’est le chant des cri-cris le soir, après dîner, qui valait mieux que les maigres accords du piano asthmatique.

Puisque j’en suis au jardin, j’ai vu aussi hier le cimetière de Bordeaux, grand jardin planté d’érables, où les tombes sont, je crois, plus bêtes que les vivants trépassés qu’elles renferment ; les pauvres habitent au milieu et ont l’avantage de ne point porter de nom et de regrets peints sur bois ou gravés sur pierre.

La vanité ici a eu recours à la bêtise qui l’a bien secondée. Des pyramides de granit sont entassées sur des épiciers, des sarcophages de marbre sur des armateurs ; au jour du jugement ceux qui ont le plus de pierre sur eux ne seront peut-être pas les plus prompts à monter au ciel, chargés qu’ils seront du poids de leur orgueil. Le concierge avait l’air piteux et rapace, sa mâchoire a souri comme une tombe qui s’ouvre quand il nous a vus entrer. Les cyprès étaient poudreux, déjà des feuilles jaunes étaient dans l’herbe, rien que la platitude du lieu était triste.

Un voyageur est tenu de dire tout ce qu’il a vu, son grand talent est de raconter dans l’ordre chronologique : déjeuner au café et au lait, monté en fiacre, station au cours de la borne, musée, bibliothèque, cabinet d’histoire naturelle, le tout assaisonné d’émotions et de réflexions sur les ruines ; je m’y conformerai donc autant qu’il sera possible.

J’étais curieux de voir le musée d’antiques pour expliquer à mes compagnons deux bas-reliefs dont j’avais lu la description le matin, mais je ne les ai point retrouvés et M. Cloquet, par intuition, m’en a nommé un que je ne reconnais pas.

Mauvais sort de savant. A la bibliothèque j’ai touché le manuscrit de

Montaigne avec autant de vénération qu’une relique, car il y a aussi des reliques profanes. Les additions qui sont en marge sont nombreuses, surchargées, mais nettes et sans rature, écrites comme le reste de veine primesautière ; c’est plus souvent une extension qu’une correction de la pensée ou du mot, ce qui arrive pourtant quelquefois par scrupule d’artiste et pour rendre son idée avec toutes ses nuances.

J’ai feuilleté ce livre avec plus de” religion historique, si cela peut se dire, que je suis entré avec recueillement dans la cathédrale de Bordeaux, église qui veut faire la gothique, mais qui trahit le sol païen où elle est bâtie, alliance de deux architectures, amalgame de deux idées qui ne produit rien de beau. Le jubé est orné de sculptures mignardes et bien ouvragées qui seraient mieux à quelque rendez-vous de chasse de François Ier, à quelque boudoir de pierre au milieu des bois, pour y renfermer à l’heure de midi la maîtresse du roi ; des arceaux romans s’étendent tout le long de l’église, et les ogives supérieures forment la voûte, ogives rondes encore, quoi qu’elles fassent, qui n’ont pas eu la force de s’élever au ciel dans un élan d’amour et qui sont retombées presque en plein cintre, accablées et fatiguées. On a remplacé les anciens vitraux par des neufs, de sorte que le soleil entre malgré les rideaux qu’on a tendus, fait mille jeux de lumière riants sur les dalles, ce qui emporte l’esprit loin du lieu saint dans les champs, sous les vignes. J’ai pensé alors à nos bonnes églises du Nord où il fait toujours sombre et toujours froid, où les peintures des vitraux ne laissent pénétrer que des rayons mystiques qui se reflètent sévèrement, pleins de mélancolie, sur les dalles grises. Si vous montez aux clochers, vous voyez toute la plaine de Bordeaux, blanche et illuminée ; le ciel est bleu et les tours octogones se détachent sur ce fond limpide ; la terre et le ciel se confondent à l’horizon dans leur blancheur, et l’esprit charmé et fatigué retombe de toute la hauteur des tours sur ce sol qui attiédit les âmes.

J’ai voulu grimper aux échelles et aller jusqu’au haut, mais j’ai senti le vertige venir ; des jours partis d’en bas me montaient entre les rayons des échelles et les fentes des charpentes, je suis redescendu avec plaisir tout content d’avoir à temps fui la peur. L’orgue, qu’on raccommodait pendant que nous visitions l’église, bourdonnait comme une grosse mouche.

C’est dans la tour Saint-Michel que se trouve le fameux caveau corroyeur, qui a la propriété de tanner les hommes ; ingénieux caveau qui n’a pas été aux écoles d’arts et métiers et qui fait de peaux de chrétiens des peaux d’ânes, car j’atteste qu’elles sont toutes dures, brunes, coriaces et retentissantes. Je suis désespéré de ne pas avoir eu d’idées fantastiques au milieu de ces vénérables momies ; je ne suis pas assez sensible non plus pour que cela m’ait fait horreur ; j’avoue que je me suis assez diverti à contempler les grimaces de tous ces cadavres de diverses grandeurs, dont les uns ont l’air de pleurer, les autres de sourire, tous d’être éveillés et de vous regarder comme vous les regardez. Qui sait ? ce sont peut-être eux qui vivent et qui s’amusent à nous voir venir les voir. Ils se tenaient en rond autour d’un caveau circulaire, dont le sol est monté à moitié des arceaux, car ces morts-là sont debout sur 17 pieds d’autres morts, et ceux-ci sur d’autres sans doute, et nous, face à face avec les premiers. On vient, on les examine à la lanterne, le gardien leur fait sonner la poitrine pour faire voir qu’elle est dure ; on passe au suivant et, quand la revue est passée, on remonte l’escalier. C’est là leur métier, à ces morts ; on les a retirés de dessous terre, et on les a alignés en cercle ; l’un a 100 ans, l’autre 80, etc., un troisième 76, tous aussi âgés les uns que les autres pourtant ! Quand on vous a raconté leur genre de mort et que vous avez donné vos dix sous, tout est dit et vous faites place à d’autres. J’envie ici le sort de ces braves morts tannés qu’on va voir nus (car la mort n’a pas de pudeur) ; il y a une négresse qui a encore un air d’odalisque, un portefaix, joli garçon de plus de 6 pieds, superbe à voir, et un comte du pays tué en duel. Je ne demande pas à être plus célèbre, car il y a bien des gens vertueux,. des poètes et des membres de l’Institut qui ne sont pas aussi curieux à voir que ces cuirs racornis, et qui n’auront jamais le renom de cette poussière obscure.

Le christianisme n’est point sérieux à Bordeaux. L’église est entourée d’un ancien cimetière où entre autres dorment les Girondins (Vergniaud, et sur l’affirmation d’un ancien camarade de Julien, M. Mabitte, médecin de Bordeaux) converti maintenant en promenade. Ici c’est pire qu’à Saint-Michel, les vivants ne marchent plus seulement sur les morts, ils y font l’amour et on nomme ce lieu l’allée d’Amour, antithèse à la Shakespeare, où se trouvent opposés tout ce que la vie a de beau, tout ce que la mort a de hideux. A côté, sous ces arbres dont l’ombrage est si doux dans le Midi, l’église n’a guère de valeur ; l’amour nargue le ciel et se pose sur les tombeaux.

Sainte-Croix, vieux temple païen, église à demi romane, d’un beau roman du reste ; les phallus sont multipliés dans les murs. La petite église Saint-Pierre est badigeonnée, ouverte au soleil et rit dans ses peintures de théâtre. Non loin, dans la rue de la Bahuterie, je viens de voir une petite façade de maison qui vaut bien à elle tous les monuments de Bordeaux pour les nombreuses conjectures qu’on peut en faire sortir : le panneau principal est occupé par une figure humaine à trois faciès, quatre yeux servent aux trois figures, emblème de la Trinité ; à droite et à gauche, sont des chevaux ailés, plus bas un griffon ; dans une autre cour une tête d’homme couverte d’un turban. Un caractère asiatique persan ressort de cette énigme de pierre, attribuée par mon cicérone à l’invention d’un membre du parlement, alchimiste autrefois célèbre. Symbolisme curieux qui se rattacherait peut-être aux dogmes orientaux du moyen âge. Est-ce qu’Arriman serait venu si loin jusque dans l'anglaise Gascogne ? Un homme du peuple disait près de là que c'était l'hôpital des pauvres. Que conclure de tout ceci ? Rien que du vague.

Comme il faut essentiellement s'instruire en voyage, je me suis laissé mener à la manufacture de porcelaine de M. Johnston, dans laquelle nous avons été pilotés par un petit homme rempli de suffisance, d'ailleurs extrêmement poli pour nous. Pendant deux heures nous avons marché au milieu des cruches, tasses, pots, plats et assiettes de différentes grandeurs et je m'ennuyais si bien que je n'étais point dans la mienne. Je sens au rebours des autres, est-ce ma faute ? Mais je n'aime point à voir travailler et suer la pauvre humanité ; j'aime autant la voir dormir. Voilà un sentiment qu'un philanthrope ne comprendrait guère, j'imagine, mais ce n'est jamais sans être froissé que je vois piteusement entassés des enfants et des jeunes filles sous des vitres et dans une atmosphère lourde, tandis qu'à côté, derrière la muraille, s'étend la campagne, l'herbe verte, la forêt ombreuse, le lac si frais, le champ de vignes tout doré. On nous vante le bonheur matériel du monde moderne et la douceur de l'enchâssement social, et, reportant sur le passé un immense regard de pitié, nous faisons les capables et les forts, nous nous rengorgeons dans notre linge frais et dans nos maisons bien fermées, qui sont plus vides, hélas, que les caravansérails délabrés de l'Orient, abandonnés qu'ils sont à tous les vents qui dessèchent, où nous habitons seuls, sans dieux et sans fées, sans passé et sans avenir, sans orgueil de nos ancêtres, sans espoir religieux dans notre postérité, sans gloires ni armoiries sur nos portes, ni sans christ au chevet.

Quand nous entrions dans les ateliers, on levait la tête pour voir les étrangers, quelques-uns la détournaient avec mépris vers M. Alexandre, les autres continuaient silencieusement ; on n'entendait que le bruit de la meule qui tournait et celui de l'argile clapotée dans l'eau. Est-ce que cela n'est pas triste que de voir ce travail morne et sérieux, cette machine composée d'hommes aller sans bruit, tant d'intelligences travailler sous le même niveau ? Il y a de beaux enfants du Midi, aux jeux noirs, au sourcil arqué, au teint cuivré et qui se courbent et qui pétrissent la terre glaise. Autant valaient des coups de lance et même la famine dans les camps ; mais de l'air au moins, du soleil, de l'action et des coups d'épée en rase campagne, quelque chose qui anoblisse et qui grandisse ! Je sais bien qu'il y a quelque chose d'étroit à tout considérer ainsi sous un petit point de vue sentimental et étriqué, que c'est fausser l'histoire et nier le mouvement que de lapider le présent par le passé, les modernes par les anciens ; j'en demande pardon et je trouve cela assez bête, mais que voulez-vous ? C'est l'image d'un garçon de 14 ans environ, dont les cheveux ras, la tête osseuse et le regard singulièrement triste et élevé, mis en parallèle avec le bambin puant de vanité, faisant le maître et les tutoyant tous ; pauvre enfant qui est peut-être né de la plus pure argile, poète destiné à contenir l'ambroisie des suaves pensées, vase d'élection dont on souille la forme et qu'on fait commun, usuel, utile, propre à faire boire les pourceaux. Rien n'y manque pour l'abrutissement, pas même une école. Vous croyez que le soir, quand le bras est fatigué, l'oreille assourdie, ils peuvent s'étendre sur l'herbe, regarder la lune, courir les champs par bandes joyeuses pour manger le raisin mûr, aimer sous les arbres ? Fi donc ! et la morale ? Les mains lavées, ils montent un étage, du mortier matériel ils passent au gâchis spirituel ; on leur montre à lire, à écrire ; on leur enseigne l'histoire, la géographie, les quatre règles ; aux plus avancés on lit le Journal des Connaissances utiles ; dans les chaudes soirées d'été ils écoutent (Ie maître à la lueur des quinquets qui fument, ils tournent le dos au ciel bleu resplendissant d'étoiles pour regarder le tableau rayé des chiffres, pour écouter la théorie des quatre règles, au lieu de chanter les chansons que leurs pères, dans leur jeunesse, ont chantées à leurs mères, le soir, assis sur le banc devant leur maison.

J'ai hâte d'en finir avec Bordeaux et j'aime mieux le Médoc où je me suis promené dans une bonne vieille voiture à la Louis XIV, comme les présidents devaient en avoir il y a deux cents ans, conduits par le silencieux Cadiche et par deux gros chevaux bretons, au milieu du sable, entre les vignes dont chaque grappe vaut de l'or, religieux pèlerinage où nous avons fait de nombreuses stations. Hélas ! le vin alourdit dans ces chaudes contrées, il n'enivre pas, mais vous enfle et bouffit, vous fait gonfler la veine, et vous endort ; si bien qu'ayant peu bu j'étais horriblement fatigué et que je fis, dès lors, un serment d'ivrogne que je n'ai pas encore violé, car il y a de cela trois jours. J'approuve fort néanmoins la manière dont nous avons dîné à Léoville, qui a consisté à se repaître d'excellent vin, en l'absence des propriétaires ; délicieuse façon de dîner chez les gens et que tous ceux qui vous invitent chez eux devraient avoir. Je me rappellerai donc longtemps M. Bartou, que je n'ai pas vu, et ses excellents procédés.

De Bordeaux à Bayonne vous passez dans un pays qui est dit les Landes, quoiqu'il soit, sans contredit, bien supérieur au Poitou et à la Guyenne. Vous allez au milieu de pins clairsemés ; çà et là une maison, des attelages de bœufs qui traînent un petit chariot dans lequel est assise une femme couverte d'un large chapeau de paille. A Dax, le bois s'épaissit, et jusqu'à Bayonne la route est charmante. On retrouve plus de fraîcheur et d'herbe ; les petites collines boisées qui se succèdent les unes aux autres annoncent enfin qu'on va voir les montagnes et on les voit enfin se déployer dans le ciel à grandes masses blanches, qui tout à coup saillissent à l'horizon. Je ne sais quel espoir vous prend alors, l’ennui des plaines blanches du Midi vous quitte, il vous semble que le vent de la montagne va souffler jusqu’à vous, et quand vous entrez dans Bayonne, l’enchantement commence.

Le soleil se couchait quand nous entrâmes dans le quartier des Juifs, hautes maisons, rues serrées, plus d’alignements au moins ! pour être surpris et plus charmé encore quand vous passez î’Adour. Voilà des eaux azurées, et la chute du crépuscule leur donnait une teinte sombre, et néanmoins les barques, les arbres du rivage s’y miraient en tremblant. La voiture roulait au pas sur le pont de bateaux, et une jeune Espagnole, la cruche de grès passée au bras comme les statues antiques, s’avançait vers nous. C’était là un de ces tendres spectacles qui font sourire d’aise et qu’on hume par tous les pores. Jusqu’à présent j’adore Bayonne et voudrais y vivre ; à l’heure qu’il est je suis assis sur ma malle, à écrire ; la fenêtre est ouverte et j’entends chanter dans la cour de l’hôtel.

L’Adour est un beau fleuve qu’il faut voir comme je l’ai vu, quand le soleil couchant assombrit ses flots azurés, que son courant, calme le soir, glisse le long des rives couvertes d’herbes. Aux allées marines où je me promenais hier après la pluie, l’air était doux, on entendait à deux lieues de là le bruit sourd de la mer sur les roches ; à gauche il y a une prairie verte où paissaient les bœufs.

On vous parle beaucoup de Biarritz à Bayonne. Les voitures qui vous y conduisent sont remplies de gens du pays. Allègre et gaillarde population descendue de la montagne, leur patois est vif et accentué, compris d’eux seuls, et servant de langue commune aux deux frontières espagnole et française. On y va pour s’y baigner, pour y danser. Bravets est un nom qui fait sourire ici chaque habitant, on m’en avait conté mille choses charmantes que je me promettais de voir et que je n’ai pas vues.

Ce joli pays m’a été gâté, non par son aspect physique qui est des plus beaux, mais par son costume, si je puis dire, et gâté par un événement où j’ai trempé ; le mot n’est pas métaphorique.

Nous étions descendus sur la grève à peu près déserte pour lors ; l’heure des bains et des baigneuses surtout était passée, première contrariété pour moi qui comptais voir beaucoup de naïades. Une vieille petite femme, dont les cheveux blancs encadraient un visage ridé, recueilli sous une capote de toile cirée, s’avançait à la mer pour y ramollir sa vieille peau ; une vaste blouse jaune qui l’enveloppait et qui flottait sur ses membres la faisait ressembler à un caniche qui sortirait d’un bol de café au lait. C’est là la seule baigneuse que j’aie vue à Biarritz, quelle chance !

Comme je marchais le long de l’écume des flots, j’ai vu tout à coup sortir de l’eau un baigneur qui appelait du secours pour deux hommes qui se noyaient au large. Je ne sais où étaient les gardecôtes ; il y avait au loin quelques amateurs qui restaient fort impassibles, on ne se dérangeait guère. A l'instant j'entendis des cris aigus, et une grande femme vêtue de noir, qu'à sa douleur expansive je crus être la mère de ceux qui se noyaient, accourait vers moi avec de grandes lamentations. Quand elle vit que j'ôtais vivement mon habit, elle augmenta ses éclats, me déboutonna mes bottines, m'exhortantà sauver ces malheureux, me comblant de bénédictions et d'encouragements. Je me mis à l'eau assez vivement, mais avec autant de sang-froid que j'en ai quand je nage tous les jours, et si bien que, continuant à nager toujours devant moi dans la direction que l'on m'avait indiquée, j'avais fini tout à coup par oublier que je faisais un acte de dévouement ; je n'étais ennuyé seulement que de mon pantalon et de mes bas que j'avais gardés et qui m'embarrassaient dans mes mouvements. A environ cinquante brasses je rencontrai un homme évanoui que deux autres tramaient à terre avec beaucoup de peine. Je me disposais à retourner avec eux et à aider ces braves gens.

— II en reste encore un second, me dit un d'eux.

— Allons le chercher, lui dis-je.

Et nous continuâmes à nager côte à côte assez vigoureusement, d'abord droit devant nous, puis parallèlement au rivage ; mais ne plongeant aucun des deux, que pouvions-nous faire ? Un orage s'annonçait par des éclairs, et les vagues (qu'il ne faut pas dire fortes, car je mentirais) nous empêchaient de voir tout ce qui pouvait saillir sur les flots autour de nous.

— C'est fini, me dit un compagnon, il est noyé !

Nous fîmes alors volte-face, et regagnâmes le rivage. Le trajet me parut plus long que pour aller, et les dernières vagues pleines de mousse nous poussaient vivement sur le sable. Je croyais l'autre homme sauvé, mais tous les soins furent inutiles, il mourut au bout de quelques minutes. Pendant qu'on entourait le noyé, je m'étais réfugié dans une cabane, privé de ma chemise et de mon habit, grelottant et tout trempé d'eau salée. Je finis par les retrouver au bout d'un quart d'heure, ils avaient été déposés dans une baraque où se trouvaient plusieurs pauvres femmes du pays, se lamentant et poussant des cris. Elles me croyaient un de leurs compagnons et leur douleur s'en augmentant, peut-être un peu par politesse, elles répétaient toutes : « ah mon Dieu ! mon Dieu ! la pauvre mère qui les a nourris !” et c'étaient des exclamations et des battements de mains nouveaux. La grande dame anglaise qui m'avait pris mes hardes m'étourdissait de son caquet et voulait que je fisse une plainte contre les gardecôtes qui ne s'étaient pas trouvés à leur poste ; ce qui me dégoûta assez de sa douleur. On me prêta un pantalon de paysan que je gardai toute la journée, où je m'exerçai à aller nu-pieds. Quand je sortis de la cahute on m'entoura pendant cinq minutes ; je fus oublié au bout de dix, comme je le méritais.

Le soir, quand la pluie fut passée, nous allâmes tous au phare, que je ne pus visiter, ayant oublié mon passeport, ce qui me contraria médiocrement, car je n'avais guère envie d'y monter. Le reste de la société s'en retourna à pied directement à Bayonne et moi je revins à Biarritz pour reprendre mon pantalon qui devait être sec et que je repassai aussi mouillé que lorsque je l'avais quitté le matin. Ce fut là ce qu'il y eut pour moi de plus tragique dans l'aventure.

Du phare à Biarritz le terrain descend sensiblement, et après avoir marché sur des rochers escarpés on se trouve sur le rivage. Je marchais le long des flots comme il m'était si souvent arrivé à Trouville, à la même saison et à la même heure ; le soleil aussi se couchait sans doute là-bas sur les flots, mais ici la mer était bleue et douce, le vent était tiède et l'orage s'en allait.

Je me récitais tout haut des vers, comme cela m'arrive quand je suis tout seul dans la campagne ; la cadence me fait marcher et m'accompagne dans la route comme si je chantais. Je pensais à mille choses, à mes amis, à l'art, à moi-même, au passé et à l'avenir, à tout et à rien, regardant les flots et enfonçant dans le sable.

J'ai été hier en Espagne, j'ai vu l'Espagne, j'en suis fier et j'en suis heureux, je voudrais y vivre. J'aimerais bien à être muletier (car j'ai vu un muletier), à me coucher sur mes mules et à entendre leurs clochettes dans les gorges des montagnes ; ma chanson moresque fuirait répétée par les échos. A Behobie je voyais l'Espagne sur l'autre rive et mon cœur en battait de plaisir, c'est une bêtise. La Bidassoa nous a conduits jusqu'à Fontarabie, ayant la France à droite, l'Espagne à gauche. L'île des Faisans ne vaut pas la peine d'être nommée, placée comme une petite touffe d'herbes dans un fleuve, entre de hautes montagnes des deux côtés. Nous avons débarqué sur la terre d'Espagne et, après avoir suivi une chaussée entourée de maïs, nous nous trouvâmes devant la porte principale qui tombe dans les fossés. Il en sortait au même instant une grande fille, pieds nus, vêtue de rouge et les tresses sur les épaules ; elle ne détourna pas la tête et continua sa route. Fontarabie est une ville toute en ruines. L'on n'entend aucun bruit dans les rues, les herbes poussent sur les murs calcinés, point de fenêtres aux maisons. La principale rue est droite et raide, entourée de hautes maisons noires garnies toutes de balcons pourris où sont étendus des haillons rouges qui sèchent au soleil ; nous l'avons gravie lentement, regardant de tous côtés et regardés encore plus. C'est l'Espagne telle qu'on l'a revue souvent : à travers un pan de mur gris, derrière un tas de ruines couvert d'herbes, dans les crevasses du terrain bouleversé, un rayon de soleil sort tout à coup et vous inonde de lumière, comme vous voyez passer devant vous et marchant vivement le long des rues désertes quelque admirable jeune fille, éternelle résurrection des beautés de la nature, qui surgit, quoi que les hommes fassent, au milieu des débris et reparaît plus belle der.rière les tombeaux.

L’église de Fontarabie est sombre et haute, il n’y a plus”ce jour insultant des temples du Midi ; les dorures répandues à profusion ont néanmoins quelque chose de bronzé qui est grave. Point d’ornements à l’extérieur, des grands murs droits comme à Saint-Jean-de-Luz qui ressemble aussi à l’Espagne. Nous y étions entrés le même jour, le matin ; on y disait une messe des morts ; il y avait peu de monde, quelques femmes toutes entourées de voiles et à une grande distance les unes des autres se tenaient au milieu de l’église, agenouillées séparément sur des tapis noirs et la tête baissée.

En me promenant dans Fontarabie, je m’ouvrais tout entier aux impressions qui survenaient, je m’y excitais et je les savourais avec une sensualité gloutonne ; je me plongeais dans mon imagination de toutes mes forces, je me faisais des images et des illusions et je prenais tout mon plaisir à m’y perdre et à m’y enfoncer plus avant. J’entendis, partant d’une maison dont je rasais le mur, une chanson espagnole sur un rythme lent et triste. C’était sans doute une vieille femme, la voix chevrotait et semblait regretter quelque chose d’évanoui. Je ne voyais rien, la rue était déserte, sur nos têtes le ciel était bleu et radieux, nous nous taisions tous. Que voulait-elle dire, cette chanson espagnole chantée par la vieille voix ? Etait-ce deuil des morts, retour sur les ans de jeunesse, souvenirs du bon temps qui n’est plus, des chants de guerre sur ces ruines ou des chants d’amour que fredonnait la vieille femme inconnue ? Elle se tut, et une voix fraîche partit à côté, entonnant un boléro allègre, chaud de notes perlées, chanson de l’alouette qui secoue le matin ses ailes humides sur la haie d’épines ; mais elle ne dura guère, cette voix se tut vite, et le boléro avait été moins long que la complainte. Et nous continuâmes à marcher dans les pierres des rues. On trouve çà et là des puits comblés au milieu des rues, des créneaux dans chaque pan de mur ; on ne sait où on va ; la ville a l’air d’errer aussi et de penser des choses douloureuses.

Un pêcheur vêtu de rouge, de haute stature, le profil osseux et découpé, faisait sécher une voile rapiécée sur un tertre de gazon, entre des hardes sales et cent fois recousues. Quand il nous vit, il nous appela et nous fit descendre dans un trou creux maçonné, plein de meurtrières, et d’où les Carlistes se cachaient pour mitrailler les avantpostes christinos. Car les Carlistes ont tenu bon, ils sont tombés un à un, comme le moyen âge aussi est tombé pierre à pierre ; mais il a fallu les arracher, et bien des ongles ont sauté ; chaque maison, chaque porte, chaque poutre est criblée de balles, l’église a reçu des boulets, les obus ennemis ont été jusqu’à Behobie et y ont tué des hommes. Carlos est venu jusqu’aux bords de la Bidassoa, on montre la porte où il est entré la nuit pour visiter les siens et ranimer les courages.

A côté de la ville est un village moins misérable qu’elle, la Madalena. Il n’y a rien à y voir que des huttes de pêcheurs et sa belle plage qui descend mollement jusqu’à la mer. Devant l’église, il y a une petite fontaine dont les pierres sont disjointes, l’eau tombe goutte à goutte ; une petite fille et une vieille femme rousse attendaient, toutes deux assises sur le bord, que leur cruche fût remplie. L’église est basse, fraîche et sombre ; il y fait presque nuit, nous nous y sommes reposés sur de vieux bancs en chêne, la lampe de l’autel remuait agitée par le vent qui venait de la porte. Je n’oublierai pas le cortège d’enfants qui m’a entouré sur le rivage, alléché par l’espoir des aumônes ; les plus jeunes étaient les plus hardis, les aînés se tenaient au second rang, ordre qu’ils n’ont pas observé quand ma pluie de sous espagnols est tombée sur eux. Ils étaient tous en guenilles, tous timides et beaux, tous attendant l’argent en silence et ils se sont rués dessus quand il est venu. La marée n’était pas encore assez haute pour nous conduire facilement à Irun, ce qui fait que nous avons remonté lentement et péniblement la rivière.

J’ai quitté Fontarabie avec tout le regret d’une chose aimée ; je lui garde une reconnaissance, tout le temps que j’y ai été, il m’a semblé errer dans une ville antique.

J’aime aussi Irun, où nous avons abordé, en remontant la Bidassoa, le soir vers les 5 heures. La première personne que nous y avons vue est une jeune fille qui voulait venir avec nous en France, et la première chose, c’est l’église dont le curé nous a fait les honneurs avec une grâce toute castillane. Elle porte un caractère du xvi” siècle qui sent son Philippe II, dorures sombres à force d’être vieilles, une richesse triste ; les sculptures en bois qui ornent le maître-autel représentant la Passion sont toutes dorées avec une grande profusion, surtout dans les étoffes. Je me rappelle maintenant un morceau de sculpture en bois figurant les limbes et qui se trouve sur le côté gauche : parmi les damnés j’ai remarqué deux têtes tonsurées qui se cachent au spectateur et ne lui montrent que le signe de leur mission oubliée. Evidemment il n’y a eu ici aucune intention personnelle et la leçon est claire, sans être scandaleuse. II m’eût fallu plus de temps pour étudier les deux églises de Fontarabie et d’Irun. Et, d’ailleurs, que résulte-t-il d’une étude si partielle sinon quelques jalons à conjectures ? Je voudrais savoir, par exemple, si Satan est souvent représenté avec des seins de femme, comme je l’ai vu à Fontarabie, ce que je n’ai point remarqué dans les églises du Nord. On fit un baptême, l’orgue joua un air fanfaron et résonnant, on eût plutôt dit une contredanse exécutée par des trompettes.

Nous avons dîné à Irun, nous avons donc fait un repas en Espagne et fy ai bu du cidre, du vrai cidre, comme en Normandie. La salle était tendue de papier frais et ornée d’une gravure de 25 sols représentant l’Europe en chapeau à plumes. La fille qui nous servait à table était maigre, fanée et vieille ; elle a du être jolie à en juger par son beau regard et par l'expression de gracieuse tristesse qui lui donne quelque chose de doux et de fier comme l'Espagne son pays. Le soir enfin nous avons quitté notre hôtesse avec des poignées de main, après lui avoir acheté des cigarettes, nous être souhaité bonne santé et lui avoir promis notre retour. Ah ! c'est un beau pays que l'Espagne ! On l'aime en mettant le pied sur son seuil et on lui tourne le dos avec tristesse, car je la regrettais comme si je l'avais connue, en m'en retournant, le soir, à Behobie, à pied, et le ciel grondait d'orage le long de la rivière ; chemin faisant nous rencontrions des paysans qui rentraient chez eux, et tous nous saluaient en nous souhaitant buonas noches. La pluie venue, nous nous sommes mis à l'abri dans une étable où s'étaient réfugiées comme nous une mère et sa fille, qui se signaient à chaque éclair ; nous avons repris notre route ; l'abbé, qui lisait son bréviaire, n'a pu continuer, l'eau mouillait son livre, et moi je pensais à Fontarabie, à son soleil et à ses ruines.

J'étais triste quand j'ai quitté Bayonne et je l'étais encore en quittant Pau ; je pensais à l'Espagne, à ce seul après-midi où j'y fus, ce qui fait que Pau m'a semblé ennuyeux. On m'a assuré le contraire et on a rejeté sa mine rechignee sur le mauvais temps qu'il faisait ; on m'a dit que les jolies femmes ne se montraient qu'au soleil, et il pleuvait fort, la journée que j'y suis resté. Le haras m'a tout autant intéressé que le château d'Henri IV, car j'ai encore mal au cœur du berceau du bon roi. Son petit-fils Louis XVIII l'a fait surmonter d'un casque doré et de drapeaux blancs, de trophées et de fleurs de lis, et tout cela pour une écaille de tortue et deux fourchettes qui dorment dedans à la place du cher monarque. Cela veut-il dire qu'Henri IV ait été un pique-assiette ? Aujourd'hui on répare le château, on recrépit les ruines, on remet du ciment dans les pierres grises, on se joue avec l'histoire. Qu'est-ce que tout cela signifie ? Par amour pour l'art on finira par s'habiller en ligueur quand on sera dans un château du xvi” siècle, et par vivre dans un bal masqué perpétuel. Bref, je suis assommé des châteaux qui rappellent des souvenirs, et des souvenirs comme ceux d'Henri IV, qui est bien l'homme le plus matériel et le plus antipoétique du monde. Si nous rebattons si bien les vieux habits pour les mettre sur nos dos, c'est faute peut-être d'en avoir de neufs.

L'homme n'est pas content d'avoir le présent et l'avenir, il veut le passé, le passé des autres, et détruit même jusqu'aux ruines. S'il pouvait il vivrait à la fois dans trois siècles et se regarderait dans douze miroirs. Laissez donc un peu couper la faux du temps, ne grattez pas la verdure des vieilles pierres, point de badigeon aux tombeaux et n'ôtez pas les vers de dessus les cadavres pour les embaumer ensuite et vivre avec eux.

Au delà de Pau, le paysage devient triste, sans être encore grandiose. Il n’y a plus rien ici de la vivacité et de l’hilarité bayonnaises ; à Lourdes, à Argeiès, à Pierrefitte, aux eaux voisines et aux eaux chaudes, les vêtements sont bruns ; comme les troupeaux, les hommes sont laids et petits, beaucoup de goftres chez les femmes ; plus de saillies ni d’éclats, on est triste, l’hiver a été rude, il fait froid, le vent souffle de la montagne, le gave gronde et emporte à chacun un morceau de son champ ; on est éloigné des grandes villes et le transport est cher, et pourtant l’herbe est haute, la culture va jusqu’au haut des montagnes et s’attache aux pans escarpés des rochers. La nature est riche et l’homme est pauvre, d’où cela vient-il ? Si on n’avait devant soi les pics des Pyrénées, on trouverait superbes ces montagnes d’avantposte, ces paysages si pleins de fraîcheur, ces vallées qui ont l’air d’une corbeille de marbre tapissée d’herbes. J’ai été à pied de Assat aux Eaux-Chaudes, le long du gave qui roulait au fond sous des touffes d’arbres. La route serpente le long d’un côté, suspendue aux rochers, comme un grand lézard blanc qui en suivrait tous les contours ; je marchais vite, écoutant le bruit de l’eau et regardant les sommets de la montagne.

Tous les établissements thermaux se ressemblent : une buvette, des baignoires et l’éternel salon pour les bals que l’on retrouve à toutes les eaux du monde. La fréquentation des étrangers donne un air plus éveillé aux habitants des eaux qu’à ceux des vallées inférieures, dont le caractère extérieur est plus grave.

A Saint-Savin, qui domine la vallée d’Argelès par exemple, l’église était remplie d’hommes ; les femmes vêtues complètement de noir avaient l’air de statues. L’église est haute, nue ; les fenêtres sont petites et très élevées ; sa simplicité contraste avec les églises du pays (et notamment celles de Lourdes), qui sont toutes chargées d’ornements dans le goût des églises espagnoles, comme celle de Bétarram.

Nous avons été au bout de la terrasse du prieuré pour regarder le panorama de quatre vallées qui s’embranchent. De gros nuages flottaient sur les pics de montagnes et l’air était lourd, et cependant la brise montait jusqu’à nous. Au loin on entendait vaguement le bruit du gave dans la vallée ; l’église résonnait de cantiques et des oiseaux chantaient dans les arbres. A l’entrée du prieuré, il y a des bas-reliefs romans, arrachés au cloître détruit, dont on a formé une sorte de haie ; les feuilles de vignes qui montent le long des fûts de pierre battaient sur les feuilles d’acanthe et sur les oiseaux sculptés dans les chapiteaux écornés ; l’enfant qui nous conduisait et le domestique de la maison, étonnés, nous regardaient. Je garderai bon souvenir de Cauterets et de la cordialité de M. Baron, qui nous a menés au lac de Gaube et au Pont d’Espagne. On y va à cheval, ou plutôt on y grimpe sur des rochers éboulés dans le sentier, on gravit en quelques instants à des hauteurs immenses, s’étonnant de la vigueur de son cheval, dont le pied ne glisse pas sur le granit ni sur le marbre et dont le poil, après une journée de fatigue, est aussi sec et aussi dur que les pierres auxquelles il se cramponne. Ce qu’on appelle le Pont d’Espagne est un pont jeté sur le torrent, que l’on traverse environ une heure après la cascade de Cerisey. Alors on entre dans une forêt de sapins, et bientôt vous marchez sur une grande prairie au bout de laquelle se trouve le lac. Sa teinte vert de gris le fait confondre un instant avec l’herbe que vous foulez ; il est uni et calme ; son eau est si calme qu’on dirait une grande glace verte ; au fond se dresse le Vignemale, dont les sommets sont couverts de neige, de sorte que le lac se trouve encaissé dans les montagnes, si ce n’est du côté où vous êtes. Certes, si on y allait seul et qu’on y restât la nuit pour voir la lune se mirer dans ses eaux vertes avec la silhouette des pics neigeux qui le dominent, écoutant le vent casser les troncs de sapins pourris, certes, cela serait plus beau et plus grand ; mais on y va comme on va partout, en partie de plaisir, ce qui fait qu’on n’a pas le loisir d’y rêver ni l’impudeur de se permettre des élans poétiques désordonnés. On arrive à midi, dévoré d’une faim atroce, et l’on s’y empiffre d’excellentes truites saumonées, ce qui ôte à l’imagination toute sa vaporisité et l’empêche de s’élever vers les hautes régions, sur les neiges, pour y planer avec les aigles. Si vous ouvrez l’album que vous présente le maître de la cabane où vous mangez, vous n’y verrez que deux genres d’exclamations : les unes sur la beauté du lac de Gaube, les autres sur la bonté de ses truites ; les secondes sont infiniment plus remarquables sous le rapport littéraire que les premières, ce qui veut dire qu’il n’y a que des sots ou des ventrus qui aient pris la plume pour y signer leur nom et leurs idées.

Les plus curieuses réflexions :

“Je me suis chargé d’excellentes truites au lac de Gaube.” (Dantan jeune.)

“Malgré tous mes efforts la truite n’a pu entrer.” (Villemain.) En regard, un portrait du fin critique.

“Pour entonner une truite “O truites du lac de Gaube, que n’êtes-vous des cerises ?” (M. de RéMUSAT.)

“Quelle bosse je me suis foutue.” (Cousin.)

Sur le haut d’une page, on lit :

“Mme Thiers. — N’est-ce pas, bijou chéri, qu’il serait bien doux de mourir ensemble, à côté de ces neiges éternelles, au clair de lune et dans les eaux azurées du lac ?

“M. Thiers. — Ma petite chatte, ne parlons pas politique.”

Un jour Chateaubriand se trouvait au lac de Gaube avec quelques amis, tous mangeant assis sur ce même banc où nous avons déjeuné. On s’extasiait sur la beauté du lac : “J’y vivrais bien toujours”, disait Chateaubriand. — “Ah ! vous

vous ennuieriez ici à mourir”, reprit une dame de la société. — “Qu’est-ce que cela, répartit le poète en riant, je m’ennuie toujours !” (Rapporté par M. Caron.)

J’ai la prétention de n’être exclusivement ni l’un ni l’autre (c’est pour cela que je n’ai rien écrit sur l’album ni pour les truites ni pour le lac, gardant mes impressions pour moi seul) et moins ridicule donc que tous les poètes qui sont venus au lac de Gaube. Je n’en dirai rien, ni du Marcado non plus, forêt couverte de sapins noirs et où les branches pourries sont tombées en travers de la route. Je fais comme nos chevaux, je saute par làdessus, ayant bien plus peur qu’eux de m’y casser le cou.

Jusqu’à présent ce que j’ai vu de plus beau, c’est Gavarnie. On part de Luz le matin et on n’y revient que le soir au jour tombant ; la course est longue et dangereuse, on marche peut-être pendant trois lieues au bord d’un précipice de 500 pieds, sans éprouver le moindre sentiment d’inquiétude, confiance qu’il est difficile d’expliquer et que tout le monde éprouve malgré soi. Quand vous avez passé l’échelle et le pic de Bergun, la montagne s’écarte du gave pour un instant, vous étale une prairie qui embaumait de foin coupé ; elle se resserre bientôt et déploie toutes ses splendeurs tragiques au Chaos. Ainsi nomme-t-on un lieu plein de rochers entassés les uns sur les autres, comme un champ de bataille d’un combat de montagnes où ces cadavres immenses seraient restés, écroulés sans doute un jour d’avalanche ; je ne me rappelle plus quand, mais tout l’effroi de leur chute reste encore dans leur nom de Chaos, dans toute la contrée ; le gave passe à travers et se cabre contre eux sans les ébranler. Tout s’oublie vite quand on arrive dans le cirque de Gavarnie. C’est une enceinte de deux lieues de diamètre, enfermée dans un cercle de montagnes dont tous les sommets sont couverts de neige et du fond de laquelle tombe une cascade. A gauche, la brèche de Roland et la carrière de marbre, et le sol sur lequel on s’avance, et qui de loin semblait uni, monte par une pente si raide qu’il faut s’aider des mains et des genoux pour arriver au pied de la cascade ; la terre glisse sous vos pas, les roches roulent et s’en vont dans le gave, la cascade mugit et vous inonde de sa poussière d’eau.

Le temps était pur, et les masses grises des montagnes du Marboré, bordées de neige, se détachaient dans le bleu du ciel et au-dessus d’elles roulaient quelques petits nuages blancs dont le soleil illuminait les contours. On reste ravi, et l’esprit flotte dans l’air, monte le long des rochers, s’en allant vers le ciel avec la vapeur des cascades.

C’est en côtoyant le pied de la montagne que l’on arrive au pont de neige. A l’entrée, nous trouvâmes enseveli un aigle que sans doute l’avalanche aura pris dans son vol et entraîné avec elle, tombeau de neige qui s’est dressé pour lui dans les hautes régions et qui l’a emporté comme un immense lacet blanc.

On s’avance sous une longue voûte qui suit le cours du gave, dont les parois de neige durcie sont en pointe de diamants. On dirait de l’albâtre oriental humide de rosée ; l’eau découle du plafond sur nos habits ; le gave roule des pierres, et au milieu des ténèbres la blancheur des murs de neige nous éclaire, et l’on marche courbé, se traînant sur les pierres de marbre dans cette demeure des fées. Quand vous revenez au jour, vous revoyez le cirque, ses roches, ses petits sapins et dans le bas son herbe roussie du soleil.

Je suis revenu à Luz au pas et en rêvant de Gavarnie ; j’avais encore le bruit de sa cascade dans l’oreille et je marchais sous le pont de neige. J’ai été accosté franchement par un homme qui m’a demandé du tabac et nous avons causé côte à côte jusqu’à Saint-Sauveur, où nous nous sommes quittés. N était grand, veste blanche, bas bleus et espadrilles aux pieds, le chapeau noir espagnol et le foulard roulé en bandeau sur la tête ; il montait un maigre petit cheval blanc et s’appuyait sur son long bâton comme s’il s’en fût aidé pour marcher. Je l’avais d’abord tenu pour espagnol à son accent, mais il m’a dit être français et faire le commerce des mules ; il a servi dans la guerre de Belgique, il a été sergent, on lui a même proposé d’être tambour-major, mais il n’a pas voulu ; car il déteste l’habit de soldat et la discipline, il aime mieux l’Espagne que la France : “C’est là que la vie est bonne, s’écriait-il ! tout le monde y mange de la viande, le pain y coûte un sou, deux liards la livre, le vin y est meilleur, tout le monde est poli et on n’a pas besoin de crier pour se faire servir dans les auberges. — Oui, Monsieur, me disait-il en me regardant avec son œil à moitié fermé, celui qui y fait de la dépense pour un sou est regardé comme celui qui en fait pour six francs.” Comme je lui demandais si les femmes étaient jolies : “Ce n’est pas tant qu’elles sont jolies comme elles sont bonnes ; rien qu’à les entendre parler, continuait-il, il y a une grâce, une certaine chose chez elles enfin, qui vous porte à penser à des affaires de femmes quand on ne le voudrait pas.” Mais il revenait toujours sur le bon marché des vivres et ne tarissait pas sur l’éloge du pain qui est meilleur, du vin, de la viande, de tout en général et sur la magnifique beauté du cher pays qu’il habite.

BAGNÈRES-DE-LUCHON.

15 septembre, temps de pluie.

Aujourd’hui je devais aller au port de Venasque et revenir par le port de la Picade, aller en Espagne encore une fois ! Le projet est avorté et je suis à écrire assis sur un canapé d’auberge, en paletot et le chapeau sur la tête. Je ne sais ni que faire, ni que lire, ni qu’écrire. II faut passer ainsi toute une journée, et qui promet d’être ennuyeuse. A peine s’il est 7 heures du matin, et le jour est si triste qu’on dirait du crépuscule ; il fait froid et humide. Restant confiné dans ma chambre, il ne me reste qu’un parti, c’est d’écrire. Mais quoi écrire ? il n’y a rien de si fatigant que de faire une perpétuelle description de son voyage, et d'annoter les plus minces impressions que l'on ressent ; à force de tout rendre et de tout exprimer, il ne reste plus rien en vous ; chaque sentiment qu'on traduit s'affaiblit dans notre cœur, et dédoublant ainsi chaque image, les couleurs primitives s'en altèrent sur la toile qui les a reçues.

Et puis, à quoi bon tout dire ? n'est-il pas doux au contraire de conserver dans le recoin du cœur des choses inconnues, des souvenirs que nul autre ne peut s'imaginer et que vous évoquez les jours sombres comme aujourd'hui, dont la réapparition vous illumine de joie et vous charmera comme dans un rêve ? Quand je décrirais aujourd'hui la vallée de Campan et Bagnères-de-Bigorre, quand j'aurais parlé de la culture, des exploitations, des chemins et des voitures, des grottes et des cascades, des ânes et des femmes, après ? après ?… est-ce que j'aurai satisfait un désir, exprimé une idée, écrit un mot de vrai ? je me serai ennuyé et ce sera tout. Je suis toujours sur le point de dire avec le poète :

A quoi bon toutes ces peines, Secouez le gland des chênes, Buvez l'eau des fontaines, Aimez et rendormez-vous.

Je suis avant tout homme de loisir et de caprice, il me faut mes heures, j'ai des calmes plats et des tempêtes. Je serais resté volontiers quinze jours à Fontarabie, et je n'aurais vu ni Pau, ni les eaux thermales, ni la fabrique de marbre à Bagnères-de-Bigorre, qui ne vaut pas l'ongle d'une statue cassée, ni bien d'autres belles choses qui sont dans le guide du voyageur. Est-ce ma faute si ce qu'on appelle Yintéressant m'ennuie et si le très curieux m'embête ? Hier, par exemple, en allant au lac d'Oo, quand mes compagnons maugréaient contre le mauvais temps, je me recréais de la pluie qui tombait dans les sapins et du brouillard qui faisait comme une mer de blancheur sur la cime des montagnes. Nous marchions dedans comme dans une onde vaporeuse, les pierres roulaient sous les pieds detios chevaux, et bientôt le lac nous est apparu calme et azuré comme une portion du ciel ; la cascade s'y mirait au fond, les nuages qui s'élevaient du lac, chassés par le vent, nous laissaient voir de temps en temps les sommets d'où elle tombe.

En venant ici de Bagnères-de-Bigorre, nous avons couché à Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges, vieille petite ville aux rues raides et pierreuses, presque déserte, silencieuse et ouverte au soleil. De la vieille ville romaine il ne reste rien, et de l'église romane peu de chose, tant l'attention se porte ailleurs tout entière. La façade est nue ; grande tour carrée avec du ciment neuf entre les vieilles pierres, couverte d'un chapeau de planches construit récemment pour couvrir les cloches qui se rouillent sans doute. Le portail est petit et de vieux goût roman, et les chapiteaux de ses colonnes supportent des grotesques : gnomes montés sur des hippogriffes, usés par le temps, uniformes d'eux-mêmes et qui semblent rire dans leur horreur du mystère qui les entoure. A l’intérieur, murs simples et nus ; point d’abside ; les fenêtres, hautes et étroites, et sur les côtés des arcades jumelles et pointant en pure ogive diminuent de hauteur à mesure qu’elles s’inclinent vers le fond, comme si l’élan diminuait. Mais ce qui est maintenant toute l’église et ce qui la constitue réellement, c’est un immense jubé en buis qui renferme à lui seul le chœur et la nef, le prêtre et les fidèles. Ses pans hauts obscurcissent le jour qui tombe des fenêtres romanes ; son maître-autel, plein de fioritures de bois peint, cache la relique du saint qui est relégué derrière, comme dans la coulisse ; sur les parois latérales, à chaque médaillon une tête de chevalier ou de matrone, souvenir antique que le libre caprice du sculpteur a jeté à profusion, plaçant l’art au milieu de la foi, le remplissant et s’en faisant un prétexte. N’est-ce pas l’antiquité dans le roman, le xvie siècle dans le xie, la Renaissance dans le moyen âge ? Partout le bois est sculpté, fouillé, tressé, tant le talent est flexible, tant l’imagination se joue et rit dans les mignardes inventions ; aux culs-de-lampe ce sont des amours suspendus et versant des corbeilles de fleurs sur des seins de femmes qui palpitent, et des ventres de tritons qui rebondissent et dont, plus bas, la queue de poisson s’enlace et se roule sur la colonne. Çà et là c’est une tête de mort, plus loin une face de cheval, de lion, n’importe quoi pourvu que ce soit quelque chose ; ici un pédagogue qui fesse un écolier pour faire rire quand on passe à côté ; la luxure en femme avec le pied fourchu, et la feuille de chou, un singe qui a mis le capuchon d’un moine, des bateleurs qui s’exercent, et mille choses encore sans gravité et sans pensée ; partout de la complaisance dans les formes, de l’esprit, de l’art et rien autre chose ; pas une tête inspirée qui prie, pas une main tendue vers le ciel, ce n’est pas une église, c’est plutôt un boudoir. Dans un temple, toutes ces miséricordes ouvragées où l’on s’asseoit comme dans un fauteuil, et où les belles dames du xvi” siècle laissaient retomber leurs doigts effilés se prélassant sur les détails païens, ces volutes, ces feuilles d’acanthe, ces têtes de mort même, qu’est-ce que tout cela veut dire ? Les prophètes, Jes docteurs et les sybilles qui se suivent méthodiquement dans chaque cadre de bois, sur les parois intérieures, où vont-ils ? et pourquoi faire ? On leur tourne le dos, et la tête levée vers le ciel rencontre involontairement les petits plafonds fleuris où l’œil caresse des formes amoureuses. La Renaissance est là entière avec son enthousiasme scientifique et sa prodigalité de formes, et sa décence exquise dans les nudités où elle s’étudie, dans la corruption. Qu’il y a loin de là au pieux cynisme du moyen âge ! C’est beau, joli, charmant ; on admire de la tête et non du cœur, enthousiasme frelaté qui s’en va vite ; c’est un musée, un beau morceau d’art qui fait penser à l’histoire, un livre en bois où l’on lit une page du xvie siècle, pas autre chose.

Si vous voulez du grand et du beau, il faut sortir de l’église et gagner la montagne, vous élever des vallées et monter vers la région des neiges. C’est une belle vie que celle de chasser l’isard ou l’ours, de vivre dans le pays des aigles, d’être haut comme eux et de leur faire la guerre.

Quand on va au port de Venasque on traverse d’abord une grande forêt de frênes et de hêtres qui couvrent deux montagnes qui se regardent face à face. Les ravins ont enlevé des arbres, et font sur le côté opposé à celui où vous marchez comme des chemins qui serpentent en tombant à travers les bois. C’était le matin, et les lueurs du soleil levant dessinaient les ombres des branches sur la mousse et sur les feuilles jonchées par terre ; il avait plu, le chemin était boueux ; la lune blanche remontait dans le ciel. Avant de gravir Je plus rude, on s’arrête à l’hospice, grande maison nue au dehors comme au dedans, où nous n’avons vu que les enfants du gardien qui se taisaient en nous regardant. La cuisine est haute et voûtée pour soutenir le poids des avalanches ; des meurtrières dans les murs remplacent les fenêtres, et quand on ferme lès auvents il fait nuit. La fumée sortait en nuages du foyer, et le vent qui venait du dehors passait sur les murs noirs et l’agitait autour de nous sans l’entraîner en se retirant. Des chênes dégrossis, placés devant le feu, servent de bancs, et bien des belles voyageuses qui venaient là s’y asseoir au mois d’août, en compagnie, gantées, heureuses d’être dans les montagnes et de pouvoir le dire, ne pensent guère que quelques mois plus tard, sur ces mêmes bancs, dans les nuits d’hiver, viennent s’asseoir aussi, armés et sombres, les contrebandiers et les chasseurs d’ours. On ferme les ouvertures avec du foin et de la paille, la résine éclaire la voûte, et l’arbre brûle dans cet âtre sombre autour duquel sont réunis quelquefois jusqu’à cinquante hommes, montagnards égarés, chasseurs, contrebandiers, proscrits.Tous se rangent en cercle pour se chauffer ; les uns guettent les bruits de pas sur la neige, les autres laissent venir le jour et fument sous le manteau de la cheminée. Je crois qu’on y cause peu, et que le vent qui rugit dans la montagne et qui siffle dans les jointures de la porte y fait taire les hommes ; on écoute, on se regarde, et quoique les murs soient solides on a je ne sais quel respect qui vous rend silencieux.

A partir de l’hospice la route monte en zigzag et devient de plus en plus scabreuse, ardue et aride. On tourne à chaque instant pour faciliter la montée, et si on regarde derrière soi on s’étonne de la hauteur où l’on est parvenu. L’air est pur, le vent souffle et le vent vous étourdit ; fes chevaux montent vite, donnant de furieux coups d’épaule, baissant la tête comme pour mordre la route et s’y hissent.

A votre gauche vous apercevez successivement quatre lacs enchâssés dans des rochers, calmes comme s’ils étaient gelés ; point de plantes, pas de mousse, rien ; les teintes sont plus vertes et plus livides sur les bords et toute la surface est plutôt noire que bleue. Rien n'est triste comme la couleur de ces eaux qui ont l'air cadavéreuses et violacées et qui sont plus immobiles et plus nues que les rochers qui les entourent. De temps en temps on croit être arrivé au haut de la montagne, mais tout à coup elle fait un détour, semble s'allonger, comme courir devant vous à mesure que vous montez sur elle ; vous vous arrêtez pourtant, croyant que la montagne vous barre le passage et vous empêche d'aller plus avant, que tout est fini, et qu'il n'y a plus qu'à se retourner pour voir la France, mais voilà que subitement, et comme si la montagne se déchirait, la Maladetta surgit devant vous. A gauche toutes les montagnes de l'Auvergne, à droite la Catalogne, l'Espagne là devant vous, et l'esprit peut courir jusqu'à Séville, jusqu'à Tolède, dans I'AIhambra, jusqu'à Cordoue, jusqu'à Cadix, escaladant les montagnes et volant avec les aigles qui planent sur nos têtes, ainsi que d'une plage de l'Océan l'œil plonge dans l'horizon, suit le sillage des navires et voit de là, dans la lointaine Amérique, les bananiers en fleurs, et les hamacs suspendus aux platanes des forêts vierges.

A voir tous les pics hérissés qui s'abaissent et montent inégalement, les uns apparaissant derrière les autres, tous se pressant, serrés et portés au ciel dans des efforts immenses, on dirait les vagues colossales d'un océan de neige qui se serait immobilisé tout à coup.

En longeant la montagne le sentier se rétrécit, et les schistes calcaires sur lesquels on marche ressemblent à des lames de couteaux qui vous offriraient leur tranchant.

Quand on est arrivé à la hauteur de la Pigue, on est retourné vers la France que l'on aperçoit dans les nuages, et dont les plaines se dressent au loin comme des immenses tableaux suspendus, vous offrant des massifs d'arbres, des vallées qui ondulent, des plaines qui s'étendent à l'infini, spectacle d'aigles que vous contemplez du haut d'un amphithéâtre de 1,500 toises.

Dans les gorges des montagnes placées sous nous, des nuages blancs se formaient et montaient dans le ciel ; le vent de la terre les faisait monter vers nous, et quand ils nous ont entourés, le soleil qui les traversait comme à travers un tamis blanc fit à chacun de nous une auréole qui couronnait notre ombre et marchait à nos côtés.

TOULOUSE.

II est commode de n'avoir qu'une demi-science, tout est clair et s'explique ; une érudition plus avancée me gênerait et j'en sais juste assez pour pouvoir dire des sottises de la meilleure foi du monde. Je vois clair comme le jour dans les recoins les plus obscurs, tout s'explique et s'encadre dans mon système ; j'assigne les dates et les caractères avec sang-froid et une assurance miraculeuse. Je retrouve complaisamment ce que j'ai flairé et je fais de la philosophie de l'art, sans en savoir l’alphabet. Ce que je pourrais dire ici de Saint-Sernin serait le pendant de Saint-Bertrand de Comminges, ratatouille de styles qui figurerait bien en face de l’autre, flanqué de cornichons et de réflexions esthétiques. Je vais donc, comme un vrai savant, indiquer ici un aperçu ingénieux qui va se trouver là à propos de rien, comme il m’est pointé hier soir dans l’esprit en me couchant.

Ecrit sur le canal du Midi pour passer le temps :

II ne s’agirait rien moins que de savoir pourquoi, en avançant dans Iexvi” siècle et dans Iexvn’, on trouve en architecture précisément l’inverse de ce qui arrive dans l’histoire de la poésie et de la prose ; pourquoi la pierre se dégrade tandis que la parole devient au contraire éminemment plus nette et plus accentuée. A mesure, par exemple, que Rabelais se filtre et se clarifie dans Montaigne, que Régnier succède à Ronsard et qu’il n’est pas jusqu’à Scarron qui ne se souvienne de Francion, le style de Louis XIII succède hélas à celui d’Henri II, les fenêtres des maisons se rétrécissent et le mur blanc gagne sur les sculptures qu’on y avait dessinées. Non pas que je veuille dire que bien des figures et des niches curieusement taillées n’aient sauté aussi dans le style, abattues à grands coups de marteau, cassées en bloc pour faire de la prose, mais ici il y a renaissance, là il y a mort.

Quand on lit Rabelais et qu’on s’y aventure, on finit par perdre le fil et par avancer dans un dédale dont vous ne savez bientôt ni les issues ni les entrées ; ce sont des arabesques à n’en plus finir, des poussées de rire qui étourdissent, des fusées de folle gaieté qui retombent en gerbes, illuminant et obscurcissant à la fois à la manière des grands feux ; rien de général ne se saisit, on pressent et on prévoit bien quelque chose, mais quant à un sens clair, à une idée nette, c’est ce qu’il n’y faut point chercher. Dans Montaigne tout est libre, facile ; on y nage en pleine intelligence humaine, chaque flot de pensée emplit et colore la longue phrase causeuse qui finit tantôt par un saut tantôt par un arrêt. La pensée de la Renaissance, d’abord vague et confuse, pleine de rire et de joie géante dans Rabelais, est devenue plus humaine, dégagée d’idéal et de fantastique ; elle a quitté le roman et est devenue philosophie. Ce que je voudrais nettement exprimer, c’est la marche ascendante du style, le muscle dans la phrase qui devient chaque jour plus dessiné et plus raide. Ainsi passez de Retz à Pascal, de Corneille à Molière, l’idée se précise et la phrase se resserre, s’éclaire ; elle laisse rayonner en elle l’idée qu’elle contient comme une lampe dans un globe de cristal, mais la lumière est si pure et si éclatante qu’on ne voit pas ce qui la couvre. C’est là, si je ne me trompe, l’essence de Ja prose française du xvn* siècle : le dégagement de la forme pour rendre la pensée, la métaphysique dans l’art, et, pour employer un mot qui sent trop l’école, la substance en tant qu’être.

Je doute que l’architecture ait fait quelque chose de semblable. Elle se dépouille bien, en effet, comme le style, de tous les contours qui entravaient sa marche, et comme dans le style aussi elle a passé un rabot qui fait sauter mille choses gracieuses de la Renaissance ou du moyen âge qui disparaissent pour toujours avec les derniers vestiges de grâce naïve ; la bonne pensée gauloise, échauffée au souvenir latin, ne s’en ira pas moins ; l’arabesque meurt avec Rabelais, la Renaissance, quelque belle qu’elle ait été, n’a vécu qu’un jour. Ce qui a été pour la pierre tout un jour de vie est une aurore, une ère nouvelle pour les lettres. C’est que la pierre n’exprime ni la philosophie ni la critique ; elle ne fait ni le roman, ni le conte, ni le drame ; elle est l’hymne. II ne lui est plus resté après Luther, après la satire Ménippée, qu’à s’aligner dans les quais, à paver les routes, à bâtir des palais, et Louis XIV qui voulait s’en faire des temples pour y vivre n’a pu lui donner la vie ; le sang en était parti avec la foi, c’était chose usée, outil cassé dont l’ouvrier était mort. Tout ce que la pierre n’avait pas dit, la prose se chargea de le dire et elle le dit bien. Maintenant que nous croyons tout expirant, que trois siècles de littérature ont raffiné sur chaque nuance du cœur de l’homme, usant toutes les formes, parlant tous les mots, faisant vingt langues dans un siècle et renfermant dans une immense synthèse Pascal contre Montaigne, Voltaire contre Bossuet, Lafontaine et Marot, Chateaubriand et Rousseau, le doute et -la foi, l’art et la poésie, la monarchie et la démocratie, tous les cris les plus doux et les plus forts, à cette heure, dis-je, où les poètes se rencontrent inquiets et où chacun demande à l’autre s’il a retrouvé la Muse envolée, quelle sera la lyre sur laquelle les hommes chanteront ? reprendront-ils le ciseau pour bâtir la Babel de leurs idées ? dans quelle eau de Jouvence se retrempera leur plume ? C’est ce que je me disais dans Sairit-Sernin à Toulouse, me promenant sous sa belle nef romane ; catacombe de pierre où sont ensevelies de vieilles idées, nous n’avons pour elle qu’une vénération de curiosité et nous faisons craquer nos bottes vernies sur les dalles où dorment les saints. Eh ! pourquoi pas ? Que nous font les saints, à nous autres ? Nous étudions l’histoire du christianisme comme celle de l’islamisme et nous nous ennuyons de l’un et de l’autre. Nous sentons bien qu’il nous faut quelque chose que nous ne savons pas, mais ce n’est rien de ce qu’on nous offre. J’étais fatigué de l’église, quelque beau que soit son roman, j’étais assommé d’église et je le suis encore ; le curé nous dit qu’il y avait des reliques, je l’ai cru en homme bien élevé, et un mouvement de joie inconcevable m’a fait bondir le cœur quand il m’a dit que le vélin des missels avait fait des cartouches. Je rencontrais là au moins quelque chose de notre vie, de ma vie, de la colère brutale ; une passion au moins que nous comprenons, qu’un rien peut rallumer, tandis que pour la foi la niche même en est cassée en pièces dans notre cœur.

Qu’avais-je besoin d’aller à Saint-Sernin pour voir des arceaux romans dans le goût moresque, un vieux christ en bois doré qui m’a fait penser à Don Quichotte et qu’un autre jour j’aurais trouvé superbe ? Mais j’avais mal dormi et j’avais froid, et puis il y a des choses qu’on ne sent bien qu’en certains jours ; il faut être en humeur et en veine de manger. C’est comme le canal du Midi sur lequel j’écris maintenant : traîné par des chevaux, notre bateau glisse entre des rangées d’arbres qui mirent leurs têtes rondes dans l’eau, l’eau fait semblant de murmurer à la proue, nous nous arrêtons de temps en temps à des écluses, la manivelle crie et la corde se tend. Il y a des gens qui trouvent cela superbe et qui se pâment en sensation pittoresque, cela m’ennuie comme la poésie descriptive. Quand on a dépassé certaines classes d’idées et d’émotions, on ne regarde guère ce qui est au-dessous de vous ; il en est de même pour tout, pour les croyances, pour les amours ; nous ne nous reverrons jamais qu’en imagination dans notre temps passé, et nous ne l’aurons que par souvenir. Quelquefois, il est vrai, on détourne la tête pour voir en arrière, mais les jambes vous portent toujours en avant, le cœur humain pas plus que l’histoire ne recule jamais, et comme sous les pieds du cheval d’Attila l’herbe ne repousse pas où il a marché et brouté.

D’ailleurs c’est toujours la même chose, une église du Midi ! Le dehors est roman, le plus souvent le portail est de la Renaissance ; à l’intérieur, du rechampissage et du badigeon.

Ainsi qu’à Saint-Bertrand de Comminges, le chœur de Saint-Sernin à Toulouse est de bois sculpté, bien inférieur à celui-ci tant par l’exécution que par le dessin ; les culs-de-lampe du dais continu qui couronne les miséricordes tombent moins bas, sont plus raides et plus carrés ; les miséricordes elles-mêmes ne signifient rien, elles sont sculptées plus lourdement et leur rangée est terminée aux quatre coins par de gros Amours qui ont le ventre tendu comme des hydropiques. Au fond, en face de la chaire de l’évêque et collée au mur, se dresse une grande Naïade les cheveux en arrière et présentant l’abdomen dans un mouvement de croupe à la Bacchante, incartade drolatique mise en face de Monseigneur pour le délecter un peu pendant l’office. Car j’imagine que l’homme qui s’asseyait dans cette chaire-là, au milieu de ces femmes nues, de ces Amours bouffis et de ces guirlandes sur lesquelles ils dansent, devait lire Marot plus que saint Augustin et faire ses petites heures d’Horace, à la mode des prélats du xvie siècle qui avaient peur de gâter leur latinité en lisant l’évangile. Entre chaque miséricorde il y a alternativement, sur la partie la plus saillante, une jeune femme et une vieille : les premières sont belles, de face pure, et vous regardent avec une sécurité impudente ; les secondes sont maigres et furieuses et tiennent le milieu entre la sorcière et la harpie.

L’église Saint-Etienne se compose de deux parties, deux nefs ajustées ensemble, avec un angle à gauche comme deux bâtons l'un au bout de l'autre et mal attachés ; la première est romane, la seconde est gothique. Le chœur est de la Restauration, de même qu'à Castelnaudary. L'église Saint-Michel a un portail gothique, masqué par une porte moderne, et son autre façade a été bouchée avec du plâtre. Saint-Jean vous offre une enveloppe carlovingienne et un intérieur plein de mauvaises peintures d'auberge. On entre là pensant y rencontrer le moyen âge et on trouve la Restauration.

Ce matin, quand nous sommes allés à SaintFerréol, j'ai regardé du haut du parapet le grand bassin ; l'eau était basse et le vent tiraillait sur les cailloux çà et là, comme une loque, une méchante vague. Vous auriez fermé les jeux et vous auriez reconnu que ce n'était pas le bruit d'un lac, mais une vague artificielle tant sa voix était phtisique et grêle. A cette minute je suis encaissé entre deux écluses ; quand le trop-plein arrive, l'eau coule bêtement et fait le long des pierres comme le bruit d'un homme qui pisse dans un pot de chambre. Voilà le soleil qui se couche, et les joncs du bord se mirent dans l'eau et dessinent en avant et en arrière une longue bande d'ombre. Les joncs ici sont taillés au cordeau et égalisés, on les y plante (planter des joncs !) et on en fait une sorte de palissade d'herbe droite pour empêcher d'endommager les propriétés. Comme je ne suis pas propriétaire, j'aimerais autant voir sous l'eau un champ d'herbes inclinées irrégulièrement, en petits clochers verts qu'agiterait maintenant le vent et qui se ploieraient sous le poids des sauterelles qui s'y mirent avec elles.

MARSEILLE.

C'est à Toulouse qu'on s'aperçoit vraiment que l'on a quitté la montagne et qu'on entre en plein Midi. On se gorge de fruits rouges, de figues à la chair grasse. Le Languedoc est un pays de soûlas, de vie douce et facile ; à Carcassonne, à Narbonne, sur toute la ligne de Toulouse à Marseille, ce sont de grandes prairies couvertes de raisins qui jonchent la terre. Çà et là des masses grises d'oliviers, comme des pompons de soie ; au fond, les montagnes de l'Hérault. L'air est chaud, et le vent du Sud fait sourire de bien-être. Les gens sont doux et polis. Pays ouvert et qui reçoit grassement l'étranger, le Languedoc n'offre point de saillies bien tranchées ni dans les types, ni dans le costume, ni dans l'idiome. Tout le Midi en effet y a passé et y a laissé quelque chose : Romains, Goths, Francs du Nord aussi, dans la guerre des Albigeois, Espagnols à leur tour, tous y sont venus et y ont chassé sans doute tout élément national et primitif ; la nationalité s'est retirée plus haute et plus sombre dans les montagnes, ou plus acariâtre et violente dans la Provence. Quoique je n'aie rien retrouvé du Midi du moyen âge (à l'exception peut-être de quelques sculptures albigeoises à en juger par leur ressemblance avec les monuments persans à cause de la reproduction du cheval ailé et d'autres symboles ultracaucasiques que n'a point employés le Nord), la différence n'en reste pas moins sensible entre les deux provinces. En arrivante Nîmes, par exemple, qui est pourtant encore du Languedoc, tout est changé, et la population y est criarde et avide ; elle ressemble un peu, je crois, à ce que devait être le bas peuple à Rome, les affranchis, les barbiers, les souteneurs, tous les valets de Plaute. Cela tient sans doute à ce que je les ai vus à l'ombre des arènes et dans un pays tout romain.

Le lendemain matin de mon arrivée à Carcassonne, j'ai été sur la grande place. C'est là une vraie place du Midi, où il fait bon dormir à l'ombre pour faire la sieste. Elle est plantée de platanes qui y jettent de l'ombre, et la grande fontaine au milieu, ornée de Naïades tenant entre leurs cuisses des dauphins, répand tout alentour cette suave fraîcheur des eaux que les pores hument si bien. On y tenait le marché : dans des corbeilles de jonc étaient dressées des pyramides de fruits, raisins, figues, poires ; le ciel était bleu, tout souriait, je sortais de table, j'étais heureux.

En face de la ville moderne il y a la vieille, dont les pans de murs s'étendent en grandes lignes grises de l'autre côté du fleuve, comme une rue romaine. On y monte par une rampe qui suit la colline ; on passe les tours d'entrée et l'on se trouve dans les rues. Elles sont droites et petites, pleines de tas de fumier, resserrées entre de vieilles maisons la plupart abandonnées ; de temps en temps un petit jardin avec une vigne et un s olivier s'élève entre des toits plats. Sur une place il y a un grand puits roman dont le dedans est tout tapissé d'herbes ; personne n'y puise plus de l'eau, les plantes poussent au fond dans la source à moitié comblée. La ville est entourée d'un réseau de murs, romains par la base, gothiques par la tête ; on les répare, on les soutient du moins. Les portes aux mâchicoulis sont encore debout, mais je n'y ai trouvé ni soldat romain, ni archer latin, disparus également sous l'herbe des fossés. Si on regarde du côté de la campagne, tout est radieux et illuminé de soleil et flambe de vie. La vieille ville est ïà, assise sur la colline, et regarde les champs étendus à ses pieds depuis longtemps, comme un vieux terme dans un jardin.

L'église est gothique d'extérieur, romane à l'intérieur. Quand nous y sommes entrés, on moulait une vieille sculpture illisible où l'on ne voyait que confusément des cavaliers, une tour, un assaut. Qu'est maintenant devenu le déblaiement de la chapelle latérale ?

Dans la cathédrale de la ville neuve, chapelle très remarquable par deux statues, l'une de saint Benoist et l'autre de saint Jean.

C'était vendanges tout le long de la route jusqu'à Nîmes, aussi avons-nous vu des charrettes couvertes de baquets rougis ; partout on cueillait la vigne dans les champs.

Il était environ midi quand nous entrâmes à Narbonne. Le soleil dorait toute la campagne et la cathédrale se détachait sur l'azur du ciel, je n'avais pas l'idée de ce que c'était qu'un horizon.

Pendant deux jours, c'est bien mieux, j'ai vécu en pleine antiquité, à Nîmes et à Arles.

Rien ne se rattache au Pont du Gard que le vague souvenir qu'évoquent ces grands débris de grandeur romaine ; il ne coule plus rien dans l'aqueduc comblé en partie dans son long tuyau de pierre par les stalactites que les cours des eaux ont formées et qui font comme une double enceinte intérieure. Trois rangs d'arcades superposés les uns sur les autres supportent la rivière aérienne dans le lit de laquelle on se promène maintenant à pied sec. En bas et tout petit, coule le Gard qui ne passait alors que sous deux arches, tant le pont est grand et s'étend sur la campagne ; une partie s'est cachée et enfouie, des deux côtés du fleuve, dans les deux coteaux où l'édifice est appuyé, de sorte que ça fait comme un grand corps de pierre dont la tête et les pieds sont enfoncés dans le sable. En regardant d'en bas la hauteur du jet de ces voûtes, si fortes et si élégantes à la fois, il m'est venu à l'idée qu'on n'avait pas élevé de monument à l'ingénieur qui les avait élevées comme on l'a fait à M. Lebas pour le Luxor, et que les hommes qui ont fait tout cela ne sortaient pas de l'École polytechnique !

Le soleil était presque couché quand nous fûmes de retour à Nîmes ; la grande ombre des arènes se projetait tout alentour ; le vent de la nuit s'élevant faisait battre au haut des arcades les figuiers sauvages poussés sous les assises des mâts du vélarium. C'était à cette heure-là que souvent le spectacle devait finir, quand il s'était bien prolongé et que lions et gladiateurs s'étaient longuement tués. Le gardien vint nous ouvrir la grille de fer et nous entrâmes seuls sous les galeries abandonnées où se. croisèrent et allèrent tant de pas dont les pieds sont ailleurs.

L'arène était vide et on eût dit qu'on venait de la quitter, car les gradins sont là tout autour et dressés en amphithéâtre pour que tout le monde puisse voir. Voici la loge de l'Empereur, voici celle des chevaliers un peu plus bas, les vestales étaient en face ; voici les trois portes par où s'élançaient à la fois les gladiateurs et les bêtes fauves, si bien que si les morts revenaient, ils retrouveraient intactes leurs places laissées vides depuis deux mille ans, et pourraient s'y rasseoir encore, car personne ne la leur a prise, et le cirque a l'air d'attendre les vieux hôtes évanouis. Qui dira tout ce que savent ces pierres nues, tout ce qu'elles ont entendu, les jours qu'elles étaient neuves et quand la terre ne leur était pas montée jusqu'au cou ? cris féroces, trépignements d'impatience, tout ce qui s'est dit, sur ce seul coin de pierre, de triste, de gai, d'atroce et de folâtre, tous ceux qui ont ri, tous ceux qui sont venus, qui s'y sont assis et qui se sont levés ; il fut un temps où tout cela était retentissant de voix sonores, du bas jusqu'en haut, ce n'étaient que Iaticlaves bordés de rouge, manteaux de pourpre, sur l'épaule des sénateurs ; le vélarium flottait et le safran mouillait le sable,avant que la rosée de -sang n'en ait fait une boue. Que disait-on en attendant la venue de César ou du préteur, quand sous ses pieds dans les caveaux qui sont là rugissaient les panthères et que tout le monde se penchait en avant pour voir de quel air elles allaient sortir ? Qu'y disait Dave à Formion, Libertinus à Posthumus ? Quelle histoire racontait Hippia au consul ? de quel air riaient les sénateurs quand la place des chevaliers se trouvait prise ? Et là-haut, suspendus au plus haut, pourquoi les affranchis crient-ils si fort que tout le monde se tourne vers eux ? Et à cette heure-là, au crépuscule, quand tout était fini, que l'empereur se levait de sa loge, quand la vapeur grasse du théâtre montait au ciel toute chaude de sang et d'haleines, le soleil se couchait comme aujourd'hui dans son ciel bleu, le bruit s'écoulait peu à peu ; on venait enlever les morts, la courtisane remontait dans sa litière pour aller aux thermes avant souper, et Gito courait bien vite chez le barbier se faire nettoyer les ongles et épiler les joues, car la nuit va venir et on l'aime tant !

Ce qu'on appelle la Fontaine à Nîmes est un grand jardin plein d'ombrage et de murmures. II n'y avait pas tant d'eau du temps qu'on se baignait sous les colonnes de marbre qui se trouvent suspendre une grande allée de jardin dans laquelle vous marchez. Au milieu il y a une île avec des Amours et des Naïades du temps de Louis XIV qui a fait, construire le canal qui conduit l'eau jusqu'à la ville. Au fond du jardin et à côté de la fontaine, à gauche, est le temple de Diane dont la voûte est écroulée ; on marche sur les frises et les corniches, les acanthes de marbre sont couvertes de mousse, les statues sont brisées et on n'en voit que des tronçons, morceaux de draperies qui semblent déchirés et qui se tiennent debout seuls comme des loques de marbre ; on se demande où est le reste.

Du haut de la tour Magne on voit toute la plaine de Nîmes, ses maisonnettes éparses dans la campagne, à mi-côte, toutes entourées de jardins d'oliviers et de vignes, et chacune assise à son aise dans la verdure grise de ses touffes d'oliviers. De longues rues qui descendent vers la ville, encaissées dans deux couloirs de murs faits avec de la poussière et des cailloux, ressemblent à des lignes de craie serpentant sur un tapis vert.

Je n'ai pas eu le temps de voir complètement la Maison Carrée.

A Arles également j'aurais voulu rester plus longtemps et y savourer longuement toutes les délicatesses sans nombre du cloître Saint-Trophime, qu'il faut avoir vu pour aimer et pour désirer encore Arles. Souvenir romain, un souvenir triste et grave, surtout sur le soir. Son amphithéâtre n'est pas, comme celui de Nîmes, presque intact et retrouvé tout entier comme une statue déterrée, il est enfoui jusqu'au milieu dans la terre et les loges supérieures sont démantelées ; on dirait que les gradins qui s'écroulent veulent descendre dans l’arène. Malgré les tours de Charles Martel on ne pense guère aux Francs, et malgré la chaumière laissée comme spécimen de toutes celles qui emplissaient naguère le cirque, on ne pense guère non plus au moyen âge.

Ces monuments romains sont comme un squelette dont les os çà et là passent à travers la terre ; aux ondulations du gazon on devine la forme du mort. Le théâtre est encore enfoui sous les maisons voisines et il n’y a qu’un coin qui se montre ; sur une plate-forme qui faisait face aux bancs de pierre et que j’ai jugée la scène, deux colonnes de marbre blanc sont encore debout, hautes toutes deux, décorées d’une collerette de feuilles d’acanthe, tandis que toutes les autres sont étendues, mutilées, à leurs pieds. C’est par là qu’on a joué Plaute et Térence et que les Mascarilles du monde latin ont fait rire le peuple ; l’ombre de la comédie latine palpite encore là. Au coin de la rue une fille sur sa porte attendait l’aventure (carnem bomini tenentem), mais les bougies du lupanar qui devaient brûler jour et nuit étaient éteintes, tant toute splendeur se perd ; pauvre ruine d’amour, à côté de la ruine de l’art et qui vivait dans son ombre. Les Arlésiennes sont jolies. On en voit peu, on m’a dit qu’on n’en voyait plus. On ne voit donc plus rien maintenant ! C’est là ce qu’on appelle le type gréco-romain ; leur taille est forte et svelte à la fois comme un fût de marbre, leur profil exquis est entouré d’une large bande de velours rouge qui leur passe sur le haut de la tête, se rattache sous leur cou et rehausse ainsi la couleur noire de leurs cheveux et fait nuance avec l’éclat de leur peau, toute chauffée de reflets de soleil.

C’est le lendemain, en me réveillant, que j’ai aperçu la Méditerranée, toute couverte encore des vapeurs du matin qui montaient pompées par le soleil ; ses eaux azurées étaient étendues entre les parois grises des rochers de la baie avec un calme et une solennité antique. Toute la côte qui descend jusqu’au rivage est couverte de bastides éparses dans la campagne, leurs volets étaient fermés et le jour les surprenait tout endormies entre les oliviers et les figuiers qui les entourent.

J’aime bien la Méditerranée, elle a quelque chose de grave et de tendre qui fait penser à la Grèce, quelque chose d’immense et de voluptueux qui fait penser à l’Orient. A la baie aux Oursins, où j’ai été pour voir pêcher le thon, je me serais cru volontiers sur un rivage d’Asie Mineure. II faisait si beau soleil, toute la nature en fête vous entrait si bien dans la peau et dans le cœur ! C’est la fille du patron Scard qui nous a reçus ; elle nous a fait monter dans sa maison, des filets étaient étendus par terre, et le jour qui entrait par la fenêtre faisait éclater de blancheur la peinture à la colle qui décorait la muraille. Mlle Scard n’est pas jolie, mais elle avait des mouvements de tête et de taille les plus gracieux du monde ; tout en causant, elle se tenait sur sa chaise d’une façon mignarde et naïve. J’ai pensé aux belles demoiselles de ville qui se lissent, qui se sanglent, qui jeûnent et qui, après tout, ne valent pas en esprit et en beauté le sans-façon cordial de la fille du bord de la mer. Elle est venue avec nous dans la barque et elle a causé tout le temps avec nous comme une bonne créature. Ses jeux sont du même azur que la mer. Pas un souffle d'air ne ridait les flots, et nous avancions à la rame doucement et tout en suivant la direction du filet ; l'eau est si transparente que je m'amusais à regarder la madrague qui filait sous notre barque et les petits poissons se jouer dans les mailles avec toutes les couleurs chatoyantes que leur donnait le soleil qui, passant à travers les flots, les colorait de mille nuances d'azur, d'or et d'émeraude ; ils frétillaient, passaient et revenaient avec mille petits mouvements les plus gentils du monde. A mesure qu'on s'avance, le filet se resserre et s'étrangle de plus en plus vers les trois barques placées au large, qui forment comme un cul-de-sac où doit se rendre tout le poisson pris dans le filet antérieur. Les nattes de jonc accrochées aux barques, plongées dans l'eau et sur les bords se relevant en coquille, avaient l'air du berceau d'une Naïade. Un dimanche soir j'ai vu le peuple se réjouir. Ce qui chagrine le plus les gens vertueux c'est de voir le peuple s'amuser. Il y a de quoi les chagriner fort à Marseille, car il s'y amuse tout à son aise, et boit le plaisir par tous les pores, sous toutes les formes, tant qu'il peut. J'en suis rentré le soir tout édifié et plein d'estime pour ces bonnes gens qui dînent sans causer politique et qui s'enivrent sans philosophie. La rue de la Darse était pleine de marins de toutes les nations, juifs, arméniens, grecs, tous en costume national, encombrant les cabarets, riant avec des filles, renversant des pots de vin, chantant, dansant, faisant l'amour à leur aise. Aux portes des guinguettes, c'était une foule mouvante, chaude et gaie, qui se dressait sur la pointe des pieds pour voir ceux qui étaient attablés, qui jouaient et qui fumaient. Nous nous y sommes mêlés et à travers les vitres obscurcies nous avons vu, tout au fond d'une grande pièce, la représentation d'un mystère provençal. Sur une estrade au fond se tenaient quatre à cinq personnages richement vêtus ; il y avait le roi avec sa couronne, la reine, le paysan à qui on avait enlevé sa fille et qui se disputait avec le ravisseur pendant que la mère désolée et s'arrachant les cheveux chantait une espèce de complainte avec des exclamations nombreuses, comme dans les tragédies d'Eschyle. Le dialogue était vif et animé, improvisé sans doute, plein de saillies à coup sûr à en juger par les éclats de rire et les applaudissements qui survenaient de temps à autre dans l'auditoire. Tous ces braves gens écoutaient et goûtaient l'air avec respect et recueillement d'une manière à réjouir un poète s'il fût passé là. J'ai remarqué que les tables étaient presque toutes vides ou à peu près, on se pressait pour entrer, et la foule s'introduisait flot à flot comme elle pouvait, mais sans troubler le spectacle. Des joueurs de mandoline ou des chanteurs étaient aussi dans la rue, il y avait des cercles autour d'eux. On n'entendait aucun chant d'ivrogne ; les tavernes du rez-de-chaussée, toutes ouvertes, fermaient la vue de ce qui se passait au dedans par un grand rideau blanc qui tombait depuis le haut jusqu'en bas ; lorsque quelqu'un allait ou venait, on I'entr'ouvrait, on voyait assis, sur des tabourets séparés, trois ou quatre hommes du peuple, les bras nus, tenant des femmes sur leurs genoux.

A Toulon, j'ai revu, au coin d'une rue, encore un de ces drames, mais cette fois en français ; la scène était plus simple : un nain fort laid causait avec une grande fille assez jolie et exerçait sa verve sur les riches et les gens d'esprit, ce qui faisait rire les pauvres et les sots. Pour un homme intelligent qui saurait le provençal ou qui voudrait l'apprendre, ce serait une chose à étudier que ces derniers restes du théâtre roman, où l'on retrouverait peut-être tout à la fois des romanceros espagnols, des canzone des troubadours, des atellanes latines et de la farce italienne du temps de Scaramouche, quand Molière y prit son Médecin barbouillé.

Marseille est une jolie ville, bâtie de grandes maisons qui ont l'air de palais. Le soleil, le grand air du Midi entrent librement dans ses longues rues ; on y sent je ne sais quoi d'oriental, on y marche à l'aise, on respire content, la peau se dilate et hume le soleil comme un grand bain de lumière. Marseille est maintenant ce que devait être la Perse dans l'antiquité, Alexandrie au moyen âge : un capharnaùm, une babel de toutes les nations, où l'on voit des cheveux blonds, ras, de grandes barbes noires, la peau blanche rayée de veines bleues, le teint olivâtre de l'Asie, des yeux bleus, des regards noirs, tous les costumes, la veste, le manteau, le drap, la toile, la collerette rabattue des Anglais, le turban et les larges pantalons des Turcs. Vous entendez parler cent langues inconnues, le slave, le sanscrit, le persan, le scythe, l'égyptien, tous les idiomes, ceux qu'on parle au pays des neiges, ceux qu'on soupire dans les terres du Sud. Combien sont venus là sur ce quai où il fait maintenant si beau, et qui sont retournés auprès de leur cheminée de charbon de terre, ou dans leurs huttes au bord des grands fleuves, sous les palmiers de cent coudées, ou dans leur maison de jonc au bord du Gange ? Nous avons pris une de ces petites barques couvertes de tentes carrées, avec des franges blanches et rouges, et nous nous sommes fait descendre de l'autre côté du port où il y a des marchands, des voiliers, des vendeurs de toute espèce. Nous sommes entrés dans une de ces boutiques pour y acheter des pipes turques, des sandales, des cannes d'agave, toutes ces babioles étalées sous des vitres, venues de Smyrne, d'Alexandrie, de Constantinople, qui exhalent pour l'homme à l'imagination complaisante tous les parfums d'Orient, les images de la vie du sérail, les caravanes cheminant au désert, les grandes cités ensevelies dans le sable, les clairs de lune sur le Bosphore. J'y suis resté longtemps ; il y avait toutes sortes d'oiseaux venus de pays divers, enfermés dans des cages devant la boutique, qui battaient leurs ailes au soleil. Pauvres bêtes, qui regrettaient leur pays, leur nid resté vide à 2,000 lieues d'ici dans de grands arbres, bien hauts. Si j'ai maudit les bains de Bordeaux, je bénis ceux de Marseille. Quand j'y fus, c'était le soir, au soleil couchant ; il y avait peu de monde, j'avais toute la mer pour moi. Le grand calme qu'il faisait est des plus agréables pour nager, et le flot vous berce tout doucement avec un grand charme. Quelquefois j'écartais les quatre membres et je restais suspendu sur l'eau sans rien faire, regardant le fond de la mer tout tapissé de varechs, d'herbes vertes qui se remuent lentement, suivant le roulis qui les agite lentement comme une brise. Le soleil n'avait plus de rayons, et son grand disque rouge s'enfonçait sous l'horizon des flots, leur donnant des teintes roses et rouge pourpre ; quand il s'est couché, tout est devenu noir, et le vent du soir a fait faire du bruit aux flots en les poussant un peu sur les rochers qui se trouvaient sur le rivage.

J'ai eu le même spectacle le lendemain en allant dîner au Prado. Nous nous sommes promenés en barque dans une petite rivière qui se jette là ; des touffes d'arbres retombent au milieu, mes rames s'engageaient dans les feuilles restées sur le courant… qui ne coule pas, exercice qui m'a préparé à recevoir l'excellent dîner que nous avons fait chez Courty, grâce aux ordres et à la bourse de M. Cauvierre.

A Toulon, il va sans dire que j'ai visité un vaisseau de ligne. C'est certainement beau, grand, inspirant. J'ai vu des marins qui mangeaient dans de la porcelaine, j'ai assisté au salut du pavillon, etc., j'ai pu, comme tous les badauds, être étonné de voir des tapis et des fauteuils élastiques dans la chambre du capitaine ; mais en vue de marine j'aime mieux celle d'un petit port de mer comme Lansac, comme Trouville, où toutes les barques sont noires, usées, retapées, où tout sent le goudron, où la poulie rouillée crie au haut du mât, où les marteaux résonnent sur les vieilles carcasses qu'on calfeutre. De même, les fortifications de Toulon peuvent être une belle chose pour les troupiers, mais je n'aime point l'art militaire dans ce qu'il a de boutonné, de propre ; les remparts ne me plaisent qu'à moitié détruits. II y a plus de poésie dans la casaque trouée d'un vieux troupier que sur l'uniforme le plus doré d'un général ; les drapeaux ne sont beaux que lorsqu'ils sont à moitié déchirés et noirs de poudre. Les canons du Marengo étaient tous en bon état et cirés comme des bottes ; est-ce qu'un canon n'est pas plus beau à voir avec quelques longues taches de sang qui coule et la gueule encore fumante ? A bord, au contraire, tout était propre, ciré, frotté, fait pour plaire aux dames quand elles viennent. Ces messieurs sont d'une politesse exquise et ont fait exécuter je ne sais quelle manœuvre pour nous faire honneur quand nous avions remis le pied sur notre embarcation. Nous revenions de Saint-Mandrier, que nous avons visité, guidés par un de ses médecins, M.

Raynaud fils ; on m’y a fait admirer une église toute neuve bâtie par les forçats, j’ai admiré le coup de génie qui a fait construire un temple à Dieu par la main des assassins et des voleurs. II est vrai que ça n’a rien coûté, mais il est vrai aussi qu’il est impossible, sinon absurde, d’y dire la messe : la forme ronde de cette bâtisse a contraint à placer l’autel sur un des points de la circonférence, de sorte qu’il est impossible que les fidèles puissent voir le prêtre. Je crois, au reste, que les fidèles qui viennent là y sont peu sensibles ; s’ils trempent les mains dans le bénitier placé à l’entrée, ce n’est uniquement que pour se les laver. II faut voir la citerne de l’hôpital dont l’écho répète tous les sons avec un vacarme épouvantable ; on y tire des coups de fusil, on y joue du cornet à piston, on crie, on chante, on miaule, on fait toutes sortes de bruits absurdes pour avoir le plaisir de se les entendre répéter plus nombreux et plus forts.

La rade de Toulon est belle à voir, surtout quand, sorti des gorges d’OHiouIes, on la voit qui s’étend tout au loin dans son rayon de trois lieues de circuit, avec les mâts de tous ses vaisseaux, ses bricks, ses frégates, toutes ces voiles blanches qu’on hisse et qu’on abaisse. A droite, on a le fort Napoléon, au fond le fort Pharon. C’est par ce dernier que les républicains ont d’abord tenté le siège de la ville, qu’ils n’auraient jamais pu prendre sans le conseil de Bonaparte, qui affirma que tant que l’on ne serait pas maître de la rade, tous les efforts seraient inutiles, et qu’une fois la rade prige Toulon n’offrirait plus aucune défense. L’attaque commença donc sur le point appelé le petit Gibraltar, qui domine toute la mer et la ville elle-même qu’elle protège de ce côté. Tous les détails du siège sont d’ailleurs curieusement relatés dans l’Histoire de la Révolution française dans le département du Var, par M. Lauvergne, un de mes amis, que j’ai fait en voyage, un homme à moitié poète et à moitié médecin, offrant un bon mélange de sentiments et d’idées ; il m’a dit de ses vers, un soir que nous sommes revenus au bord de la rade jusqu’à Toulon ; nous avons déjeuné à une bastide voisine, dans un grand jardin plein d’ombre, où il y avait de hautes cannes de Provence, des avenues fraîches ; on a joué à la balançoire, on a fumé des cigarettes de Havane. Passé une journée à ne rien faire ; c’est toujours une de bonne, une journée tranquille, douce, où l’on a vécu avec des amis, sous un beau ciel, l’estomac plein, le cœur heureux ; elle s’est terminée par un beau crépuscule sur les flots, par une promenade pleine de causerie divaguante, de ces causeries où l’on mêle de tout, et qui tiennent à la fois de la rêverie solitaire au fond des bois et de l’intimité babillarde du coin du feu.

Le lendemain matin nous nous sommes embarqués pour la Corse.

CORSE.

Quand nous sommes partis de Toulon, la mer était belle et promettait d’être bienveillante aux estomacs faibles, aussi me suis-je embarqué avec la sécurité d’un homme sûr de digérer son déjeuner. Jusqu’au bout de la rade en effet le perfide élément est resté bon enfant, et le léger tangage imprimé à notre bateau nous remuait avec une certaine langueur mêlée de charme. Je sentais mollement le sommeil venir et je m’abandonnais au bercement de la naïade tout en regardant derrière nous le sillage de la quille qui s’élargissait et se perdait sur la grande surface bleue. A la hauteur des fies d’Hyères, la brise ne nous avait pas encore pris, et cependant de larges vagues déferlaient avec vigueur sur les flancs du bateau, sa carcasse en craquait (et la mienne aussi) ; une grande ligne noire était marquée à l’horizon et les ondes, à mesure que nous avancions, prenaient une teinte plus sombre, analogue tout à fait à celle d’un jeune médecin qui se promenait de long en large et dont les joues ressemblaient à du varech tant il était vert d’angoisse. Jusque-là j’étais resté couché sur le dos, dans la position la plus horizontale possible, et regardant le ciel où j’enviais d’être, car il me semblait ne remuer guère, et je pensais le plus que je pouvais afin que les enfantements de l’esprit fassent taire les cris de la chair. Secoué dans le dos par Jes -coups réguliers du piston, en long par le tangage, de côté par le roulis, je n’entendais que le bruit régulier des roues et celui de l’eau repoussée par elles et qui retombait en pluie des deux côtés du bateau ; je ne voyais que le bout du mât,,et mon œil fixe et stupide placé dessus en suivait tous les mouvements cadencés sans pouvoir s’en détacher, comme je ne pouvais me détacher non plus de mon banc de douleurs. La pluie survint, il fallut rentrer, se lever pour aller s’étendre dans sa. cabine où je devais rester pendant seize heures comme un crachat sur un plancher, fixe et tout gluant.

Le passager se composait de trois ecclésiastiques, d’un ingénieur des ponts et chaussées, d’un jeune médecin corse et d’un receveur des finances et de sa jeune femme qui a eu une agonie de vingt-quatre heures. La nuit vint, on alluma la lampe suspendue aux écoutilles et que le roulis fit remuer et danser toute la nuit ; on dressa la table pour les survivants, après nous avoir fait l’ironique demande de nous y asseoir. Les trois curés et M. Cloquet seuls se mirent à manger. Cela avait quelque chose de triste, et je.commençai à m’apitoyer sur mon sort ; humilié déjà de ma position, je l’étais encore plus de voir trois curés boire et manger comme des laïques. J’aurais pris tant de plaisir à me voir à leur place et eux à la mienne ! Les râles me semblaient intervertis, d’autant plus “rue l’un d’eux voyageait pour sa santé — c’était bietf plutôt à lui d’être malade — ; le second s’occupait de botanique — et qu’est-ce qu’un botaniste a à faire sur les flots ? — le troisième avait l’air d’un gros paysan décrassé, indigne de regarder la mer et de rêver, tandis que moi j’aurais eu si bonne grâce à table ! La nuit venue je l’aurais passée à contempler les étoiles, le vent dans les cheveux, la tempête dans le cœur. Le bonheur est toujours réservé à des imbéciles qui ne savent pas en jouir.

Je m’endormis enfin, et mon sommeil dura à peu près quatre heures. II était minuit quand je me réveillai, j’entendais les trois prêtres ronfler, les autres voyageurs se taisaient ou soupiraient, un grand bruit d’eaux qui venaient et se retiraient se faisait sur les parois du navire, la mer était rude et la mâture craquait ; une faible lueur de lune qui se reflétait sur les flots venait d’en face et disparaissait de temps en temps, et celle de la lampe jetait sur les cabines des ondulations qui passaient et repassaient avec le mouvement du roulis. Alors je me mis à me rappeler Panurge en pareille occurence, lorsque <rla mer remuait du bas abysme” et que tristement assis au pied du grand mât il enviait le sort dès pourceaux ; je m’amusai à continuer le parallèle, tâchant de me faire rire sur le compte de Panurge afin de ne pas trop m’attrister sur moi-même. L’immobilité à laquelle j’étais condamné me fatiguait horriblement et le matelas de crin m’entrait dans les côtes ; au moindre mouvement que je tâchais de faire la nausée me prenait aussitôt, il fallait bien se résigner, la douleur me rendormait.

Nous longions alors les côtes de la Corse, et le temps, de plus en plus rude, me réveilla avec des angoisses épouvantables et une sueur d’agonisant. Je comparais les cabines à autant de bières superposées les unes au-dessus des autres ; c’était en effet une traversée d’enfer, et la barque de Caron n’a jamais contenu de gens qui aient eu le cœur plus malade. D’autres fois j’essayais de m’étourdir, de me tourner en ridicule, de m’amuser à mes dépens ; je me dédoublais et je me figurais être à terre, en plein jour, assis sur l’herbe, fumant à l’ombre et pensant à un autre moi couché sur le dos et vomissant dans une cuvette de fer-blanc ; ou bien je me transportais à Rouen, dans mon lit : l’hiver, je me réveillais à cette heure-là, j’allumais mon feu, et je me mettais à ma table. Alors je me rappelais tout et je pressurais ma mémoire pour qu’elle me rendît tous les détails de ma vie de là-bas, je revoyais ma cheminée, ma pendule, mon lit, mon tapis, le papier taché, le pavé blanchi à certaines places ; je m’approchais de la fenêtre et je regardais les barres du jour qui saillissaient entre les branches de l’acacia ; tout le monde dort tranquille au-dessous de moi, le feu pétille et mon flambeau fait un cercle blanc au plafond. Ou bien c’était à Déville, l’été ; j’entrais dans le bosquet, j’ouvrais la barrière, j’entendais le bruit du loquet en fer qui retentissait sur le bois. Une vague plus forte me réveillait de tout cela et me rendait à ma situation présente, à ma cuvette aux trois quarts remplie.

D’autres fois je prenais des distractions stupides, comme de regarder toujours le même coin de la chambre, ou de faire couler quelques gouttes de citron sur ma lèvre inférieure que je m’amusais ensuite à souffler sur ma moustache, toutes les misères de la philosophie pour adoucir les maux. Le moment le plus récréatif pour moi a été celui où le roulis devenant plus fort a renversé la table et les chaises qui ont roulé avec un fracas épouvantable et ont éveillé tous les malades hurlant : le vieux curé, qui avait les pieds embarrassés dans les rideaux, a manqué d’être écrasé, et le financier, qui sortait du cabinet, est tombé sur le dos de M. Cloquet de la manière la plus immorale du monde. J’ai ri très haut, d’abord parce que j’en avais envie, et, en second lieu, pour faire un peu plus de bruit et me divertir. Le mouvement que je m’étais donné occasionna encore une purgation, qui fut bien la plus cruelle, et de nouvelles douleurs qui ne me quittèrent réellement qu’à Ajaccio sur le terrain des vaches. Quelques heures après être débarqué, le sol remuait encore et je voyais tous les meubles s’incliner et se redresser.

Nous avons eu un avant-goût de l’hospitalité corse dans le cordial et franc accueil du préfet, qui nous a fait quitter notre hôtel et nous a pris chez lui comme des amis déjà connus. M. Jourdan est un homme encore jeune, plein d’énergie et de vivacité. Ancien carbonaro, un des chefs de l’association, sa jeunesse a été agitée par les passions politiques et sa tête a été mise à prix. II administre la Corse depuis dix ans, ne rencontrant plus maintenant d’opposition que dans ! quelques membres du conseil général qu’il mène assez rudement. Sa maison est pleine de ce bon ton qui part du cœur ; ses filles, qui ne sont pas jolies, sont charmantes. M. Jourdan connaît son département mieux qu’aucun Corse et il nous a donné sur ce beau pays d’excellents renseignements. Je me rappelle un certain soir qu’il a déblatéré contre l’archéologie et je l’ai contredit ; un a”tre jour il a parlé avec feu des études historiques et particulièrement de la philosophie de l’histoire ; je l’ai laissé dire, me demandant en moi-même ce que les gens qui ont passé leur vie à l’étudier entendaient aujourd’hui par ce mot-là, et s’ils le comprenaient bien eux-mêmes. Ce que les plus fervents y voient de plus clair, c’est que c’est une science dans l’horizon, et les autres sceptiques pensent que ce sont deux mots bien lourds à entasser l’un sur l’autre, et que la philosophie est assez obscure sans y adjoindre l’histoire, et que l’histoire en elle-même est assez pitoyable sans l’atteler à la philosophie. Nous sommes partis d’Ajaccio pour Vico le 7 octobre, à 6 heures du matin. Le fiïs de M. Jourdan nous a accompagnés jusqu’à une lieue hors la ville. Nous avons quitté la vue d’Ajaccio et nous nous sommes enfoncés dans la montagne. La route en suit toutes les ondulations et fait souvent des coudeff sur les flancs du maquis, de sorte que fa vue change sans cesse et que le même tableau montre graduellement toutes ses parties et se déploie avec toutes ses couleurs, ses nuances de ton et tous les caprices de son terrain accidenté. Après avoir passé deux vallées, nous arrivâmes sur une hauteur d’où nous aperçûmes la vallée de Cinarca, couverte de petits monticules blancs qui se détachaient dans la verdure du maquis. Au bas s’étendent les trois golfes de Chopra, de Liatnone et de Sagone ; dans l’horizon et au bout du promontoire, la petite colonie de Cargèse. Toute la route était déserte, et l’œil ne découvrait pas un seul pan de mur. Tantôt à l’ombre et tantôt au soleil, suivant que la silhouette des montagnes que nous longions s’avançait ou se retirait, nous allions au petit trot, baissant fa tête, éblouis que nous étions par la lumière qui inondait l’air et donnait aux contours des rochers quelque chose de si vaporeux et de si ardent à* la fois qu’il était impossible à l’œil de les saisir nettement. Nous sommes descendus à travers les broussailles et les granits éboulés, tramant nos chevaux par la bride jusqu’à une cabane de planches où nous avons déjeuné sous une treille de fougères sèches, en vue de la mer. Une pauvre femme s’y tenait couchée et poussait des gémissements aigus que lui arrachait la douleur d’un abcès au bras ; les autres habitants n’étaient guère plus riants ; un jeune garçon tout jaune de la fièvre nous regardait manger avec de grands yeux noirs hébétés. Nos chevaux broutaient dans le maquis, toute la nature rayonnait de soleil, la mer au fond scintillait sur le sable et ressemblait avec ses trois golfes à un tapis de velours bleu découpé en trois festons. Nous sommes repartis au bout d’une heure et nous avons marché longtemps dans des sentiers couverts qui serpentent dans le maquis et descendent jusqu’au rivage. Au revers d’un coteau nous avons vu sortir du bois et allant en sens inverse un jeune Corse, à pied, accompagné d’une femme montée sur un petit cheval noir. Elle se tenait à califourchon, accoudée sur une botte de maïs que portait sa monture ; un grand chapeau de paille, plat, lui couvrait la tête, et ses jupes relevées en arrière par la croupe du cheval laissaient voir ses pieds nus. Ils se sont arrêtés pour nous laisser passer, nous ont salués gravement. C’était alors en plein midi, et nous longions le bord de la mer que le chemin suit jusqu’à l’ancienne ville de Sagom. Elle était calme, le soleil, donnant dessus, éclairait son azur qui paraissait plus limpide encore ; ses rayons faisaient tout autour des rochers à fleur comme des couronnes de diamant qui les auraient entourés ; elles brillaient plus vives et plus scintillantes que les étoiles. La mer a un parfum plus suave que les roses, nous le humions avec délices ; nous aspirions en nous le soleil, la brise marine, la vue de l’horizon, l’odeur des myrtes, car il est des jours heureux où l’âme aussi est ouverte au soleil comme la campagne et, comme elle, embaume de fleurs cachées que la suprême beauté y fait éclore. On se pénètre de rayons, d’air pur, de pensées suaves et intraduisibles ; tout en vous palpite de joie et bat des ailes avec les éléments, on s’y attache, on respire avec eux, l’essence de la nature animée semble passée en vous dans un hymen exquis, vous souriez au bruit du vent qui fait remuer la cime des arbres, au murmure du flot sur la grève ; vous courez sur les mers avec la brise, quelque chose d’éthéré, de grand, de tendre plane dans la lumière même du soleil et se perd dans une immensité radieuse comme les vapeurs rosées du matin qui remontent vers le ciel.

Nous avons quitté la mer au port de Sagone, vieille ville dont on ne voit même pas les ruines, pour continuer notre route vers Vico, où nous sommes enfin arrivés le soir après dix heures de cheval. Nous avons logé chez un cousin de M. Multedo, grand homme blond et doux, parlant peu et se contentant de répéter souvent le même geste de main. II s’est vaillamment battu contre les Anglais lorsque ceux-ci ont voulu faire une descente à Sagone ; il se sent tout prêt à recommencer. II y a en effet dans la Corse une haine profonde pour l’Angleterre et un grand désir de le prouver. Sur la route que nous avons faite pour aller à Vico, des paysans nous arrêtaient.

— Va-t-on se battre, demandaient-ils ?

— C’est possible.

— Tant mieux.

— Et contre qui ?

— Contre les Anglais.

A ce mot ils bondissaient de joie et nous montraient en ricanant un poignard ou un pistolet, car un Corse ne voyage jamais sans être armé, soit par prudence ou par habitude. On porte le poignard soit attaché dans le pantalon, mis dans la poche de la veste, ou glissé dans la manche ; jamais on ne s’en sépare, pas même à la ville, pas même à table. Dans un grand dîner à la préfecture et où se trouvait réuni presque tout le conseil général, on m’a assuré que pas un des convives n’était sans son stylet. Le cocher qui nous a conduits à Bogogna tenait un grand pistolet chargé sous le coussin de sa voiture. Tous les bergers de la Corse manquent plutôt de chemise blanche que de lame affilée.

A Vico on commence à connaître ce que c’est qu’un village de la Corse. Situé sur un monticule, dans une grande vallée, il est dominé de tous les côtés par des montagnes qui l’entourent en entonnoir. Le système montagneux de la Corse à proprement parler, n’est point un système ; imaginez une orange coupée par le milieu, c’est là la Corse. Au fond de chaque vallée, de temps en temps un village, et pour aller au hameau voisin il faut une demi-journée de maVche et passer quelquefois trois ou quatre montagnes. La campagne est partout déserte ;

où elle n’est pas couverte de maquis, ce sont des plaines, mais on n’y rencontre pas plus d’habitations, car le paysan cultive encore son champ comme l’Arabe : au printemps il descend pour l’ensemencer, à l’automne il revient pour faire la moisson ; hors de là il se tient chez lui sans sortir deux fors par an de son rocher où il vit sans rien faire, paresseux, sobre et chaste. Vico est la patrie du fameux Théodore dont le nom retentit encore dans toute là Corse avec un éclat héroïque ; il a tenu douze ans le maquis, et n’a été tué qu’en trahison. C’était un simple paysan du pays, que tous aimaient et que tous aiment encore. Ce bandit-là était un noble cœur, un héros. H venait d’être pris par la conscription et il restait chez lui attendant qu’on l’appelât ; le brigadier du lieu, son compère, lui avait promis de l’avertir à temps, quand un matin la force armée tombe chez lui et l’arrache de sa cabane au nom du roi. C’était le compère qui dirigeait sa petite compagnie et quf, pour se faire bien voir sans doute, voulut le mener rondement et prouver son zèle pour l’État en faisant le lâche et le traître. Dans la crainte qu’il ne lui échappât il lui mit les menottes aux mains en lui disant : “Compère, tu ne m’échapperas pas”, et tout le monde vous dira encore que les poignets de Théodore en étaient écorchés. II l’amena ainsi à Ajaccio où il fut jugé et condamné aux galères. Mais après la justice des juges, ce fut le tour de celle du bandit. H s’échappa donc le soir même et alla coucher au maquis ; le dimanche suivant, au sortir de la messe, il se trouva sur la place, tout le monde l’entourait et le brigadier aussi, à qui Théodore cria du plus loin et tout en le mirant : “Compère, tu ne m’échapperas pas”. II ne lui échappa pas non plus, et tomba percé d’une balle au cœur, première vengeance. Le bandit regagna le maquis d’où il ne descendait plus que pour continuer ses meurtres sur la famille de son ennemi et sur les gendarmes, dont il tua bien une quarantaine. Le coup de fusil parti il disparaissait le soir et retournait dans un autre canton. II vécut ainsi douze hivers et douze étés, et toujours généreux, réparant les torts, défendant ceux qui s’adressaient à lui, délicat à l’extrême sur le point d’honneur, menant joyeuse vie, recherché des femmes pour son bon cœur et sa belle mine, aimé de trois maîtresses à la fois. L’une d’elles, qui était enceinte lorsqu’il fut tué, chanta sur le corps de son amant une balIata que mon guide m’a redite. Elle commence par ces mots : “Si je n’étais pas chargée de ton fils et qui doit naître pour te venger, je t’irais rejoindre, ô mon Théodore !”

Son frère était également bandit, mais il n’en avait ni la générosité ni les belles formes. Ayant mis plusieurs jours à contribution un curé des environs, il fut tué à la fin par celui-ci qui, harassé de ses exactions, sut l’attirer chez lui, et sauta dessus avec des hommes mis en embuscade. La sœur du bandit, attirée par le bruit de tous ces hommes qui se roulaient les uns sur les autres, entra aussitôt dans le presbytère. Le cadavre était là, elle se rua dessus, elle s’agenouilla sur le corps de son frère, et agenouillée, chantant une ballata avec d'épouvantables cris, elle suça longtemps le sang qui coulait de ses blessures.

II ne faut point juger les mœurs de la Corse avec nos petites idées européennes. Ici un bandit est ordinairement le plus honnête homme du pays et il rencontre dans l'estime et la sympathie populaire tout ce que son exil lui a fait quitter de sécurité sociale. Un homme tue son voisin en plein jour sur la place publique, il gagne le maquis et disparaît pour toujours. Hors un membre de sa famille, qui correspond avec lui, personne ne sait plus ce qu'il est devenu. Ils vivent ainsi dix ans, quinze ans, quelquefois vingt ans. Quand ils ont fini leur contumace ils rentrent chez eux comme des ressuscites, ils reprennent leur ancienne façon de vivre, sans que rien de honteux ne soit attaché à leur nom. II est impossible de voyager en Corse sans avoir affaire avec d'anciens bandits, qu'on rencontre dans le monde, comme on dirait en France. Ils vous racontent eux-mêmes leur histoire en riant, et ils s'en glorifient tous plutôt qu'ils n'en rougissent ; c'est toujours à cause du point d'honneur, et surtout quand une femme s'y trouve mêlée, que se déclarent ces inimitiés profondes qui s'étendent jusqu'aux arrière-petitsfils et durent quelquefois plusieurs siècles, plus vivaces et tout aussi longues que les haines nationales.

Quelquefois ils font des serments à la manière des barbares, qui les lient jusqu'au jour où la vengeance sera accomplie. On m'a parlé d'un jeune Corse dont le frère avait été tué à coups de poignard ; il alla dans le maquis à l'endroit où on venait de déposer le corps, il se barbouilla de sang le visage et les mains, jurant devant ses amis qu'il ne les laverait que le jour où le dernier de la famille ennemie serait tué. Il tint sa parole et les extermina tous jusqu'aux cousins et aux neveux.

J'ai vu aujourd'hui, à Isolaccio, chez le capitaine Lauseler où je suis logé, un brave médecin des armées de la République dont le fils s'est enfui en Toscane et qui lui-même a été obligé de quitter le village où il habitait. Sa fille s'était laissé séduire ; le père de l'enfant néanmoins reconnaissait son fils, mais il refusait de lui donner son nom en se mariant avec la pauvre fille. Il joignit même l'ironie à l'outrage en assurant qu'il allait bientôt faire un autre mariage et en ridiculisant en place publique la famille de sa maîtresse, si bien qu'un jour le fils de la maison a vengé l'honneur de son nom, comme un Corse se venge, en plein soleil et en face de tous. Pour lui, il s'est enfui sur la terre d'Italie, mais son père et ses parents, redoutant la vendetta, ont émigré dans le Fiuoaorbo. '

A Ajaccîo j'avais vu également un jeurie docteur qui a quitté Sartene, son pays, trois cousins à lui et son frère ayant déjà été les victimes du même homme et lui menacé d'en être ' la cinquième ; aussi marchait-il armé jusqu'aux dents dans les rues de la ville où nous nous promenions avec lui.

On retrouve en Corse beaucoup de choses antiques : caractère, couleur, profils de têtes. On pense aux vieux bergers du Latium en voyant ces hommes vêtus de grosses étoffes rousses ; ils ont la tête pâle, l’œil ardent et couleur de suie, quelque chose d’inactif dans le regard, de solennel dans tous les mouvements ; vous les rencontrez conduisant des troupeaux de moutons qui broutent les jeunes pousses des maquis, l’herbe qui pousse dans les fentes du granit des hautes montagnes ; ils vivent avec eux, seuls dans les campagnes, et le soir quand on voyage, on voit tout à coup leurs bêtes sortir d’entre les broussailles, çà et là sous les arbres, et mangeant les ronces. Eparpillés au hasard, ils font entendre le bruit de leurs clochettes qui remuent à chacun de leurs pas dans les broussailles . A quelque distance se tient leur berger, petit homme noir et trapu, véritable pâtre antique, appuyé tristement sur son long bâton. A ses pieds dort un chien fauve. La nuit venue, ils se réunissent tous ensemble et allument de grands feux que du fond des vallées on voit briller sur la montagne.Toutes les côtes chaque soir sont ainsi couronnées de ces taches lumineuses qui s’étendent dans tout l’horizon. J’ai vu dans toutes les forêts que j’ai traversées de grands pins calcinés encore debout, qu’ils allument sans les abattre pour passer la nuit autour de ces bûches de cent pieds. Ils reçoivent le baudet qui vient tranquillement se réchauffer à leur feu et ils attendent ainsi le jour tout en dormant ou en chantant. J’ai été surtout frappé de la physionomie antique du Corse dans un jeune homme qui nous a accompagnés le lendemain jusqu’à Guagno. II était monté sur un petit cheval qui s’emportait à chaque instant sous lui ; son bonnet rouge’brun retombait en avant comme un bonnet de la liberté. Une seule ligne seulement, interrompue par un sourcil noir faisant angle droit, s’étendait depuis le haut du front jusqu’au bout du nez ; bouche mince et fine, barbe noire et frisée comme dans les camées de César ; menton carré : un profil de médaille romaine.

J’ai eu une transition brusque en fait de physionomie, en voyant à la sucrerie de bois de M. Dupuis la face grasse, réjouie et fleurie d’un beau Normand rebondi, qui est venu exprès de Rouen au fond de la Corse, pour être l’économe de l’établissement. M. François, quand nous l’avons vu, était vêtu d’une veste de tricot gris, un sale bonnet de coton lui couvrait les oreilles, et il s’appuyait en se dandinant sur une canne de jonc, convalescent encore de la fièvre intermittente qui a pincé tous mes compatriotes transplantés. Le vin, qui est ici à très bon marché, tout autant que les miasmes végétaux en ont été la cause, “néanmoins, me disait M. François, nous avons toujours mangé nos 250 livres de viande par semaine”. Ce petit homme, égrillard et gaillard, au ventre arrondi et aux couleurs rosées, regrettant du fond de la Corse les bals masqués de Rouen, et les restaurants de sa ville, la première du monde, m’assurait-il, pour la bonne chère, vu à côté de ces hommes du Midi, pâles, sobres, taciturnes, le cœur plein d'orgueil, d'élans purs, de passions ardentes, me semblait comme un vaudeville à côté d'une tragédie antique. Son grand œil bleu malicieux était réjoui de voir quelqu'un de son pays et en me disant adieu il m'a serré la main avec tendresse. Pauvre homme qui s'expatrie sans doute par dévouement pour lui-même et qui, sa bourse remplie, s'en ira bien vite se bouiotter en carnaval, au théâtre, des Arts, et manger la poule de Pavilly chez Jacquinot !

En revenant à Vico, le jour baissait et toutes les montagnes prenaient des teintes vineuses et vaporeuses. Au crépuscule, le paysage agrandissait toutes ses lignes et ses perspectives, et des rayons de soleil couchant passaient en grandes lignes droites lumineuses entre les gorges des montagnes ; tout le ciel était rouge feu, comme incendié par le soleil.

A notre gauche s'élevaient les sept pics de la Sposa avec la tête qui la couronne. Ces sept pics sont autant de cavaliers, et cette tête est la tête d'une femme. Au delà de ces monts, à droite de Vico, dans la forêt, il y a un village ; c'était le village de cette femme. On venait de la marier, mais son époux après les noces était retourné chez lui, et sa femme qui devait l'y suivre était restée seule chez sa mère dans son lit de fille. Sa mère la gardait toujours, et quand elle demandait à partir, elle lui répondait : demain. En vain chaque matin, quand le rossignol chantait dans le maquis, que les feux des bergers s'éteignaient sur les montagnes, les sept cavaliers, les amis de l'époux, arrivaient avec leurs chevaux tout sellés et bridés ; ce n'était pas encore aujourd'hui. Elle attendit donc un jour, deux jours, trois jours, jusqu'à quatre, et la voilà qui part heureuse, chantant sur son cheval, la couronne de myrte blanc sur la tête. Son mari l'attend sans-doute impatient, regardant la route où rien n'apparaît ; il soupire, tout malade d'amour. Déjà les raisins et les olives sont dans la corbeille, la lampe brûle au plafond, le lit est ouvert et attend les heureux. La fille galope sur son cheval, elle et ses cavaliers sont entrâmes avec une vitesse de démon. Sa mère pourtant est restée toute en pleurs sur le seuil de sa porte et elle lui crie : adieu, adieu, mais pour réponse elle n'entend toujours que le roulement du galop qui s'éloigne de plus en plus. Elle la vit encore une fois quand elle fut arrivée au haut de la montagne et qu'elle allait descendre.

Encore une fois elle fit signe de la main, mais l'autre regardait en avant. Elle regardait le cœur tout palpitant, là-bas au fond de la vallée, un toit qui fumait à l'horizon ; elle enviait le torrent qui courait devant elle, les oiseaux qui volaient à tire d'aile vers la demeure de l'époux chéri. L'infâme, dit-on, ne regarda pas sa mère, ne détourna pas la tête, ne fit pas un signe de main ; avec fureur la voilà qui enfonce l'éperon dans le ventre de son cheval pour descendre la montagne plus vite encore qu'elle ne l'avait montée, mais sa bête ne veut pas avancer ; un cavalier qu’elle appelle pour l’aider ne peut descendre de sa sejle, ni le second non plus, ni aucun des sept cavaliers ne peut faire un mouvement ; ils se sentent tous entrer dans le granit, comme dans la vase ; ils poussent des cris de désespoir auxquels répond la voix de la mère irritée qui leur envoie une malédiction éternelle.

Un paysan, monté sur un petit cheval maigre et chassant devant lui d’autres bêtes chargées d’outres, marchait devant nous depuis quelque temps ; il se détournait pour nous examiner et pour écouter ce que nous disions. Sa maigre et vieille figure était animée tout à la fois de ruse et de bonhomie gracieuse, mélange singulier d’expression que j’avais déjà observé sur quelques visages corses et surtout sur celui du bandit Bastianesi que j’avais vu quelques jours auparavant à l’hôpital d’Ajaccio. Son grand œil noir et sombre nous dévorait et épiait les moindres gestes de nos lèvres. Quand il a pu se rapprocher de M. Multedo, il lui a demandé qui nous étions, où nous allions, et tout ce que nous avions dit depuis qu’il marchait près de nous. Avec nos habitudes de politesse française, une telle curiosité eût été récompensée d’un refus net et formel d’y satisfaire. Rien n’est défiant, soupçonneux comme un Corse. Du plus loin qu’il vous voit, il fixe sur vous un regard de faucon, vous aborde avec précaution, et vous scrute tout entier de la tête aux pieds. Si votre air lui plah, si vous le traitez d’égal à égal, franchement, loyalement, il sera tout à vous dès la première heure, il se battra pour vous défendre, mentira auprès des juges, et le tout sans arrière-pensée d’intérêt, mais à charge de revanche. M. Multedo lui a donc dit qu’il nous l’avait montré comme étant l’oncle de Théodore et qu’il venait de nous raconter l’histoire de ses neveux : “Il n’y a rien de déshonorant, a-t-il dit, vous avez bien fait”. Puis il s’est retourné vers nous et a tâché de lier conversation en italien, nous faisant bonne mine et nous traitant en amis jusqu’au moment où il a pris un chemin de traverse dans le maquis. Nous sommes repartis pour Ajaccio le lendemain matin quand la lune nous éclairait encore ; le neveu de M. Multedo nous a fait la conduite jusqu’à Sagone, ainsi que le médecin du pays qui, tout en chevauchant près de nous, nous conte des histoires corses. Après avoir dit adieu à ces braves gens, nous avons repris le bord de la mer. C’était la même route, dans les mêmes maquis pleins d’arbousiers rouges et de myrtes en fleurs, le même azur sur les flots calmes que le soleil faisait resplendir. Çà et là nous voyions sur les eaux de grands cercles s’étendre et diminuer peu à peu, c’étaient des dauphins qui se jouaient, comme des chevaux dans une prairie et sortaient de leur retraite marine pour voir le soleil du matin.

A Calcatoggio, nous avons déjeuné sous le même lit de fougères sèches, en vue des trois golfes à qui j’ai dit un tendre et dernier adieu.

II y a à Ajaccio une maison que les hommes qui naîtront viendront voir en pèlerinage ; on sera heureux d’en toucher les pierres, on en gravira dans dix siècles les marches en ruines, et on recueillera dans des cassolettes le bois pourri des tilleuls qui fleurissent encore devant la porte, et, émus de sa grande ombre, comme si nous voyions la maison d’Alexandre, on se dira : c’est pourtant là que l’Empereur est né !

Elle se trouve sur la place Laetitia et au coin de la rue Saint-Charles. A l’extérieur elle est peinte en blanc, toutes ses fenêtres ont des volets noirs ; la porte est basse et s’ouvre sur un escalier en marbre noir de même couleur, et dont la rampe en fer date de la même époque. La main de l’Empereur s’est appuyée dessus, à cette place où vous mettez la vôtre. Les chambres sont généralement belles, riches, ornées de rouge la plupart, et décorées dans le goût de la république ; le salôn est grand, un canapé à droite en entrant, des glaces, un lustre en verre. La chambre où il est né donne sur une terrasse ; les volets qui étaient fermés quand nous y entrâmes, nous laissaient à peine voir le plancher, et de grandes barres de jour se dessinaient en blanc sur le parquet ciré, et le portrait de Napoléon, don qu’il a fait de Sainte-Hélène, était suspendu au fond. Le manteau impérial, couvert d’abeilles d’or, saillissait dans l’ombre malgré le crépuscule. On nous a ouvert les fenêtres, et le jour est entré et a inondé toute la pièce, découvrant tout, comme un drap qu’on eût retiré. Alors nous avons vu la cheminée, les murs, les tableaux, le tapis, le sofa, les statues ; les meubles étaient adossés à la muraille tendue de papier grisâtre à petis pois verts ; tout était propre, rangé, habité encore. Mais il n’y a plus le fauteuil où sa mère le mit au monde, ce n’est plus le même lit non plus. Sur la table de nuit se trouvait un livre, et retourné de manière à ne pouvoir en lire le titre. Je le pris et je lus : “Manuel du cultivateur provençal indiquant les divers modes d’engrais, etc.” ; je reposai le livre avec dégoût et m’avançai dans l’autre pièce. C’est là, à l’entrée et près de la porte, le vieux canapé de la famille, fané, à franges arrachées, aux couleurs ternies ; il est encore souple, on enfonce dans son duvet et on s’y met à rêver à bien des choses grandes.

C’est le lendemain matin, à 3 heures, que nous avons commencé notre grande tournée, expédition pour Bastia à travers la Corse. Après avoir embrassé notre excellent hôte, nous sommes partis dans sa voiture qui devait nous mener jusqu’à Bogogna. Le capitaine Laurelli nous accompagne et nous sommes conduits par l’ancien cocher de Pozzo di Borgo, le neveu du ministre russe assassiné il y a quelque temps dans sa voiture, en retournant chez lui. On nous avait montré sur la route de Vico la place où le meurtre s’accomplit, et nous vîmes les trous que les balles ont fait dans le granit de la route. Lestement emportés par nos deux chevaux arabes, nous arrivons vers midi à Bocognano, où nous déjeunons. Chemin faisant, le capitaine nous a raconté des histoires de bandits. M. Laurelli est un ancien bandit lui-même qui a tenu trois ans le maquis. Je ne me rappelle plus bien son histoire, mais c’est toujours l’injustice d’un général qui l’a forcé à fuir dans la campagne ; il était à cette époque maire de la commune cTIsolaccio. C’est lui qui, depuis, a purgé tout le Fiumorbo des bandes qui l’infestaient, et qui le premier a fait payer l’impôt à ce pays que l’on ne traversait pas, il y a vingt ans, sans faire son testament. II nous a indiqué les mouvements stratégiques opérés par les voltigeurs pour s’emparer des bandits et nous a donné sur cette matière tous les documents que nous lui avons demandés. Rarement ou, pour mieux dire, jamais un bandit ne se rend ; attaqué, il se bat tant que sa cartouchière est pleine, et sa dernière balle, il la réserve pour lui. Quelquefois, quand le maquis où il se tient est cerné de toutes parts, le bandit reste couché à plat ventre sous les broussailles et échappe ainsi à toute investigation ; c’est même la manière la plus sûre .

Le capitaine nous raconta l’histoire d’un bandit des environs de Bastia qu’il a tué de sa main. D’une force prodigieuse et d’une férocité analogue, cet homme exerçait sur la Corse entière un absolutisme asiatique : il assignait aux pères et aux maris le jour et le lieu où ils devaient lui envoyer leurs filles et leurs femmes. Quand le capitaine l’eut tué, on fit une fête générale dans le pays, et depuis Bastia jusqu’à Isolaccio, tous les paysans se pressaient à sa rencontre pour le remercier.

A Bocognano, nous trouvons nos chevaux et nous piquons vers la forêt de Vizzavona. Le capitaine s’est fait escorter par deux voltigeurs. Est-ce pour nous faire honneur ? Est-ce par prudence ?

ÉCRIT AU RETOUR.

J’en étais resté à Marseille de mon voyage, je le reprends à quinze jours de distance. Me voilà réinstallé dans mon fauteuil vert, auprès de mon feu qui brûle, voilà que je recommence ma vie des ans passés. Qu’ont donc les voyages de si attrayant pour qu’on les regrette à peine finis ? Oh ! je rêverai encore longtemps des forêts de pins où je me promenais il y a trois semaines, et de la Méditerranée qui était si bleue, si limpide, si éclairée de soleil il y a quinze jours ; je sens bien que cet hiver, quand la neige couvrira les toits et que le vent sifflera dans les serrures, je me surprendrai à errer dans les maquis de myrtes, le long du golfe de Liamone, ou à regarder la lune dans la baie d’Ajaccio.

Maintenant, les arbres ici n’ont plus de feuilles, et la boue est dans les chemins. J’entends encore le chant de nos guides et le bruit du vent dans les châtaigniers ; c’est pour cela que je reprendrai souvent ces notes interrompues et reprises à des places différentes, avec des encres si diverses qu’elles semblent une mosaïque. Je les allongerai, je les détaillerai de plus en plus, ce sera comme un homme qui a un peu de vin dans son verre et qui y met de l’eau pour délayer son plaisir et boire plus longtemps. Quand on marche on veut l’avenir, on désire avancer, on court, on s’élance, regardant toujours en avant et, la route à peine finie, on détourne la tête et l’on regrette les chemins parcourus si vite, de sorte que l’homme, quoi qu’on en dise, aspire sans cesse au passé et à l’avenir, à tout ce qui n’est pas de sa vie actuelle en un mot, puisqu’il se reporte toujours vers le matin qui n’est plus, vers la nuit qui n’est pas encore (réflexion neuve).

Notre guide s’appelle Francesco, et nous faisons connaissance avec lui. Nous n’avons pas voulu reprendre celui qui nous avait conduits à Vico. Charles était un gros garçon joufflu, gai, obséquieux les premiers jours, mais d’une tendresse si exagérée pour ses chevaux qu’il nous défendait presque de les faire trotter. Nous nous sommes débarrassés de sa tutelle, et son successeur parait plus complaisant ; petit, maigre et hâve, il forme en tous points contraste parfait avec l’autre ; le temps nous dira si nous avons gagné au change.

A une lieue environ de Bocognano, au haut de la vallée dont ce village tient la base, on quitte la grande route d’Ajaccio à Bastia et l’on entre dans la forêt de Vizzavona. Le chemin devient de plus en plus ardu et difficile, si bien qu’il faut mettre pied à terre. Chacun marche comme il peut. Vers les 4 heures du soir nous sommes arrivés sur un plateau où nos montures et nous-mêmes avons soufflé à l’aise. Tout à l’heure nous avons failli peut-être avoir une aventure : un coup de fusil est parti devant nous sur la montagne, le capitaine s’arrête, appelle un de ses hommes, lui demande sa carabine, l’arme, et marche devant nous en nous disant de le suivre. Les arbres étaient si hauts, le soleil si resplendissant, toute la nature en un mot était si belle que nous n’avions guère peur, car on ne se figure bien une tragédie que de nuit et par un orage ; mais en plein jour, sous un beau ciel, quand les oiseaux chantent dans le bois, quand, les pieds tout fatigués, on se repose à marcher sur les tapis d’herbes, le cœur se dilate, s’épanouit, aspire en lui la vie luxuriante qui l’entoure, les couleurs qui brillent, tout le bonheur qui se présente. Comment croire alors à quelque chose de triste ? Cela pouvait être pourtant un bandit qui eût quelque querelle avec le capitaine, une vengeance à assouvir sur lui, mille choses probables. Comment se fait-il alors que ces préparatifs de guerre m’aient paru ridicules, et que je me sois diverti de penser qu’ils n’étaient pas peut-être inutiles ? Et à quelques pas de là nous avons rencontré des chasseurs. On voit dans les forêts, de temps en temps, de grands arbres calcinés qui sont encore debout au milieu de leurs frères tout verts et tout chargés de feuilles. Quand les bergers y ont rallumé le feu, et qu’il fait un orage, ils se brisent et tombent par terre ; quelquefois, leurs branches s’embarrassent dans celles des arbres voisins, et ils restent ainsi suspendus dans leurs bras ; les vivants tiennent embrassés les morts qui allaient tomber. Nous avons laissé passer devant nous nos compagnons et nous sommes restés, M. Cloquet et moi, à nous amuser comme des enfants, à faire les hercules du Nord, en soulevant avec une main des arbres de trente pieds et nous les brisant sur le dos en riant aux éclats. C’était chose assez comique que de nous voir enlever de terre des poutres énormes et les lancer à quarante pas aussi facilement que nous eussions fait d’une badine. Après nous être ainsi divertis une bonne demi-heure et avoir ri tout notre soûl, nous avons rejoint nos gens à qui nous avons dit que nous venions de faire des observations botaniques. II était tard quand nous sommes arrivés à Ghisoni, maigre village où il me semblait impossible de loger des honnêtes gens. On nous a conduits devant une grande maison grise et délabrée. Quoiqu’il fût nuit, je ne voyais aucune lumière aux fenêtres, et la porte qui s’ouvrait sur la rue était celle d’une salle basse où grognaient des pourceaux. A un angle de cette pièce enfumée était placée une large échelle en bois et dont les marches peu profondes ne permettaient de monter qu’en se tournant de côté. Nous avons trouvé le mahre et sa femme qui ne nous attendaient que le lendemain. Ils se sont donc beaucoup excusés sur ce qu’ils avaient déjà dîné, et se sont mis tout de suite à préparer notre repas. La maîtresse était une grande femme maigre, vêtue d’une robe bleue faite sans doute d’après une gravure de mode du temps de l’Empire, c’est là, du reste, tout ce que je puis dire d’elle, car elle ne nous a pas adressé un mot et nous a servis silencieusement et respectueusement comme une servante. C’est, du reste, une chose à remarquer en Corse que le rôle insignifiant qu’y joue la femme ; si son mari tient à la garder pure, ce n’est ni par amour ni par respect pour elle, c’est par orgueil pour lui-même, c’est par vénération pour le nom qu’il lui a donné. D’ailleurs, il n’y a entre eux deux aucune communication d’idées et de sentiments ; le fils, même enfant, est plus respecté et plus maître que sa mère(1).

Tandis que vous voyez l’homme bien vêtu, portant une veste de velours, un bon pantalon de gros drap, la pipe à ia bouche et le fusil sur l’épaule, chevauchant à son aise sur une bonne bête, sa femme, à quelques pas de là, le suit pieds nus et portant tous les fardeaux. Vous voyagerez dans toute la Corse, vous y serez partout bien reçu, on vous accueillera d’une manière cordiale qui vous ira jusqu’au cœur, et le lendemain matin votre hôte pleurera presque en vous quittant ; de sa famille, vous ne connaîtrez que lui. En descendant de cheval vous avez bien vu des enfants jouer devant la porte, ce sont les siens, mais ils ne paraissent pas à table ; leur mère ne se montre presque jamais et reste avec eux tant qu’ils sont jeunes. Les liens de famille sont forts, il est vrai, mais à la manière antique, entre frères,

O Dans un curieux mémoire que M. Lauvergne a publié sur la Corse, il dit qu’il a vu un jeune garçon de douze ans environ s’amuser à tenir sa mère couchée en joue au bout de son fusil ; il lui faisait faire ainsi toutes les évolutions qu’il lui commandait et la faisait danser comme un chien avec un fouet. Le père était à deux pas de là et riait beaucoup de cette plaisanterie barbare. entre cousins, entre alliés, même à des degrés éloignés. Quand un membre de la famille est insulté, tout le reste est solidaire de sa vengeance ; s’il succombe c’est à eux de le remplacer, de sorte qu’instantanément il se forme une association de cinquante à soixante hommes, tous servant la même cause, gardant le même secret, animés de la même haine.

La femme compte pour peu de chose et on ne fa consulte jamais pour prendre mari. Quand un fils a 14 ou 15 ans, son père lui dit qu’il est temps d’être homme, qu’il faut se marier ; if lui choisît lui-même une femme, les deux familles négocient longtemps l’affaire et avec toutes les précautions possibles, le pacte d’alliance se conclut, les noces se font avec pompe, on y chante des chansons guerrières ; puis les enfants arrivent dans le ménage, on leur apprend à tirer le fusil, on leur enseigne un peu de français, ils vont à la chasse et c’est là toute fa vie, une vie de paresse, d’orgueil et de grandeur.

Nous avons dîné tard ; le capitaine nous a servis, comme s’il eût été le maitre de la maison. Un avoué de Corte, attiré dans le pays par les affaires de la Compagnie Corse, se chauffait au coin de la cheminée et nous a tenu conversation, car notre hôte restait à distance et avait l’air tout humilié de recevoir des personnages. Après le dîner, on m’a conduit dans une pièce délabrée où je devais coucher. Les murs étaient barbouillés de chaux, une petite gravure noire représentant un moine italien canonisé était à la tête du grand lit qui en occupait l’angle ; la petite fenêtre donnait sans doute sur la campagne ; la lune n’était pas encore levée, je me mis à me déshabiller, éclairé par un flambeau à l’huile placé sur une chaise près de mon chevet et dont la faible lueur néanmoins me faisait très bien voir que les draps n’étaient ni propres ni de fine toile. Je fis alors des réflexions philosophiques et je me dis que sans doute les gens qui dormaient dans ce lit-là devaient y bien dormir n’ajant ni amour contenu, ni ambition rentrée, ni aucune des passions du monde moderne. Tout cela était si loin de la France, si loin du siècle, resté à une époque que nous rêvons maintenant dans les livres, et je me demandais (tout en graissant d’huile mes cuisses rougies) si après tout, quand on voyagera en diligence, quand il y aura au lieu de ces maisons délabrées des restaurants à la carte, et quand tout ce pays pauvre sera devenu misérable grâce à la cupidité qu’on y introduira, si tout cela enfin vaudra bien mieux ; et je comparais le bruit du vent dans les arbres, celui des clochettes de chèvres sur les montagnes, au roulement des voitures dans la rue de Rivoli, au bruit des pompes à feu dans la vallée de Déville. Je me rappelais alors la baie d’Ajaccio et la molle langueur qui vous prend dans la plaine de Liamone, en vue de ces trois lacs que j’aime tant ; je me’ rappellerai le soleil de midi, les jours fuyants sur le tronc des hêtres, la lune le matin dans la vallée de Bocognano, et reportant les jeux sur cette chambre si calme, si paisible, je pensais à d'autres chambres où il y a des tapis, des velours, des rideaux de mousseline, *etc.* Je m'endormis enfin, m'amusant peu de mes réflexions et harassé de la course du jour et de mes exercices acrobatiques. Non, non, on ne dort pas mieux (de corps du moins) à Ghisoni que dans des lits de pourpre (style poétique, car je n'ai jamais couché que dans des draps blancs) ; cela veut dire que les puces m'ont tenu éveillé pendant trois heures, quelque invention que j'aie prise pour les fuir. J'avais éteint mon flambeau, et la lune avec tous ses rayons entrait dans ma chambre et m'éclairait comme en plein jour. Je me levai et je regardai la campagne, je voyais les chèvres marcher dans les sentiers du maquis et sur les collines ; çà et là les feux de bergers, j'entendais leurs chants ; il faisait si beau qu'on eût dit le jour, mais un jour tout étrange, un jour de lune. Etant arrivé de nuit dans le village, je n'avais pu voir le paysage où il se trouve placé, mais il m'était maintenant facile d'en saisir tous les accidents, tout aussi bien qu'en plein soleil. Entre les gorges des montagnes il y avait des vapeurs bleues et diaphanes qui montaient et qui semblaient se bercer à droite et à gauche, comme de grandes gazes d'une couleur indéfinissable qu'une brise aurait agitées sur le flanc de toutes ces collines. Leur grande silhouette se projetait en avant, de l'autre côté de la vallée ; la lumière s'étendait, claire et blanche, autour de la lune, et devenait de plus en plus humide et tendre en s'approchant du haut faite inégal des montagnes. Tous les contours, toutes les lignes saillissaient librement, grâce à leur teinte grise qui surplombait les grandes masses noires du maquis. Le ciel semblait haut, haut, et la lune avait l'air d'être lancée et perdue au milieu ; tout alentour elle éclairait l'azur, le pénétrait de blancheur, laissant tomber sur la vallée en pluie lumineuse ses vapeurs d'argent qui, une fois arrivées à la terre, semblaient remonter vers elle comme de la fumée.

Nous sommes repartis le lendemain de bonne heure, après que M. Cloquet eut vu, je crois, tous les malades du pays qui encombraient la maison de notre hôte avec les curieux venus pour nous voir. Ils sont amenés par un pharmacien italien, grand gaillard blond aux jeux bleus, qui a plutôt l'air d'un Bas-Normand que d'un Parmesan, sauf toutefois la vivacité faciale. C'est un réfugié politique qui paraît fort patriote ; il attend le signal de l'autre rivage pour laisser là la Corse et se mettre le fusil sur l'épaule ; il nous parle beaucoup de M. Libri dont il se dit l'ami intime.

Chemin faisant, je raconte au capitaine mes doléances et mes malédictions de la nuit passée ; ce pauvre Laurelli avait été encore plus mal traité que moi, il ne s'est pas déshabillé et s'est couché sur une malle.

La route est étroite, monte et descend continuellement. Nous sommes au fond d'une vallée dont les deux côtés sont couverts de pins immenses qui font partie de la forêt de Sorba.

Nous nous arrêtons à une rivière qui sépare celle-ci de la forêt de Marmano. Là nous nous sommes assis, et avons dévoré les provisions que le capitaine avait fourréésédans ses sacoches. On a monté dans les arbres pour casser des branches vertes pour nos chevaux qui nous regardent d'un œil d'envie. L'herbe est fraîche, de grands troncs dépouillés et tout blancs s'étendent en travers du torrent, les rochers et les pierres qui sont dans son lit le font murmurer ; les grands arbres nous entourent, et sur leur faîte le soleil commence à darder vigoureusement.

Nous sommes accompagnés par un brave homme de Ghisoni qui doit nous indiquer la route d'isolaccio, qu'ignorent également notre guide et le capitaine. II marche à côté de ce dernier et lui parle sans s'arrêter pendant plus d'une heure, sans que celui-ci lui réponde un seul mot.

Nous avons monté depuis le matin et nous entrons dans la forêt de Marmano. Le chemin est raide et va en zigzag à travers les sapins, dont le tronc a des lueurs du soleil qui pénètre à travers les branches supérieures et éclaire tout le pied de la forêt ; l'air embaume de l'odeur du bois vert. II ne faut pas écrire tout cela.

De temps en temps les arbres avaient l'air de nous quitter, et nous passions alors devant des huttes de bergers, faites de cailloux rapportés et de branchages morts. Enfin nous parvînmes, vers le soir, sur le plateau appelé le Prato. Nous étions placés sur une des plus hautes montagnes de la Corse et nous voyions à nos côtés toutes les vallées et toutes les montagnes qui s'abaissaient en descendant vers la mer ; les ondulations des coteaux avaient des couleurs diversement nuancées suivant qu'ils étaient couverts de maquis, de châtaigniers, de pins, de chênes-liège ou de prairies ; en face de nous et dans un horizon de plus de trente lieues, s'étendait la merTyrrhénienne, comprenant l'île d'Elbe, Sainte-Christine, les îles Caprera, un coin de la Sardaigne ; à nos pieds s'étendait la plaine d'Aleria, immense et blanche comme une vue de l'Orient, où allaient se rendre toutes les vallées qui partaient en divergeant du centre où nous étions ; et là, en face, au fond de cette mer bleue où les rayons de soleil tracent sur les flots de grandes lignes qui scintillent, c'est la Romagne, c'est l'Italie ! Nous étions descendus de nos chevaux et nous les avions laissé aller brouter l'herbe courte qui pousse entre le granit. Nous nous sommes avancés pour contempler plus à notre aise un roc escarpé en espèce de promontoire. On ne saurait dire ce qui se passe en vous à de pareils spectacles ; je suis resté une demi-heure sans remuer, et regardant comme un idiot la grande ligne blanche qui s'étendait à l'horizon. Isolaccio est situé au fond des gorges que nous dominions. Du Prato il faut bien trois heures pour y atteindre. Nous avons descendu par des chemins abrupts, à l’aventure, comme nous avons pu.

Tout le revers de la montagne est couvert d’une forêt de hêtres qui poussent on ne sait comment dans les granits ; de grands glacis s’étendent les uns sur les autres ; nos malheureuses bêtes, que personne ne conduisait, hésitaient à chaque pas à avancer et piétinaient de devant, toutes tremblantes de peur ; nous-mêmes, à l’aide de grands bâtons que nous avions ramassés, ne pouvions faire autrement que de marcher à pas de géants et de sauter tant bien que mal par-dessus les racines qui ressortaient du sol et s’étendaient au loin au milieu des pierres.

Nous avons trouvé au bas de cette côte quelques amis du capitaine (tous armés de fusils et accompagnés de chiens), qui étaient venus à sa rencontre. II faisait presque nuit, le vent du soir venait sécher la sueur qui trempait nos cheveux ; comme je me sentais bon jarret, je fis lestement à pied la distance qui nous séparait du village, le maquis alors n’avait pas plus de deux pieds de hauteur ; cela reposait de courir dans les ronces et les joncs marins, après avoir sauté sur du granit. Enfin au détour d’une petite colline, nous aperçûmes des champs enclos de haies et nous entendîmes des chiens japper, et bientôt nous arrivâmes au village.

La maison du fils du capitaine, où nous devions loger, se trouve la dernière du pays. A la voir extérieurement, avec toutes ses vitres cassées, et ses sombres murs gris, je présumais un triste gîte ; mais deux gros enfants joufflus et bruns, qui vinrent embrasser leur grand-père à la descente de cheval, nous montrèrent à leur bon air et à leurs vêtements propres que mes prévisions étaient injustes, et je me sentis alors soulagé de tout l’espoir d’un bon dîner et d’un bon lit. Les gens qui restent non loin de leur feu, les pieds dans les pantoufles, et à qui l’on vient dire tous les jours, quand il est six heures, que la table est mise, s’étonnent quelquefois dans les récits de voyage de la voracité et des joies bestiales de celui qu’ils lisent ou qu’ils écoutent ; il faut avoir passé plusieurs jours à chevaucher sous un soleil de 23 degrés, pendant douze ou treize heures, s’arrêtant une fois dans la journée pour boire l’eau d’une fontaine et manger du pain sec, avoir marché de longues heures sur des pointes de marbre ou de granit, pour sentir la joie inexprimable (et ne plus la condamner) de dévorer en silence le bouc rôti sur les charbons et de s’étendre ensuite dans une couche molle et propre.

Un jeune homme de 22 ans environ, en veste de velours vert, nu-tête et de manières graves, se tenait sur le perron ; c’était le fils de M. Laurelli. H nous a fait monter en haut où nous avons dîné comme des affamés, en compagnie d’un sergent voltigeur qui a gardé le silence tout le repas et qui, la bouche béante, à chaque mot que nous disions avait l’air d’attendre les suivants comme de bons morceaux.

Le capitaine Laurelli est le propriétaire des eaux minérales de Pietra-Pola, situées à environ deux lieues d’isolaccio dans la direction de la mer. Le médecin du pays nous y a accompagnés (c’est le même dont j’ai parlé plus haut), il s’appuyait sur une petite canne en jonc très courte et terminée par une longue pointe en fer ; il n’estime les médecins qu’autant qu’ils sont bons philosophes, mot qu’il nous répétait souvent. Cela étonne et fait plaisir à la fois de trouver au milieu des forêts, à trente lieues d’une ville, dans un désert pour ainsi dire et chez des gens qui n’ont jamais quitté leur village, tout le bon sens pratique de ceux qui ont vécu longtemps dans le monde, une finesse rare dans les jugements sur les hommes et sur les choses de la vie. L’esprit des Corses n’a rien de ce qu’on appelle l’esprit français ; il y a en eux un mélange de Montaigne et de Corneille, c’est de la finesse et de l’héroïsme, ils vous disent quelquefois sur la politique et sur les relations humaines des choses antiques et frappées à un coin solennel ; jamais un Corse ne vous ennuiera du récit de ses affaires, ni de sa récolte et de ses troupeaux ; son orgueil, qui est immense, l’empêche de vous entretenir de choses vulgaires.

Le capitaine nous avait parlé d’un de ses neveux retiré au maquis pour homicide et nous avait proposé de nous le faire voir. A la nuit close, et sur les dix heures du soir, il fut introduit dans la maison. Comme la salle où nous avions mangé était pleine d’amis qui étaient venus faire visite après dîner, et celle où avait couché M. Cloquet se trouvant au fond, ce fut donc dans la mienne, au haut de l’escalier qui donnait sur la rue, qu’on le fit entrer. Le capitaine nous fit signe et nous sortîmes comme pour aller nous coucher.

Le bandit se tenait au fond de ma chambre, le flambeau placé sur la table de nuit me le fit voir dès en entrant. C’était un grand jeune homme, bien vêtu et de bonne mine, sa main droite s’appuyait sur sa carabine. II nous a salués avec une politesse réservée et nous nous sommes regardés quelque temps sans rien dire, embarrassés un peu de notre contenance. II était beau, toute sa personne avait quelque chose de naïf et d’ardent, ses yeux noirs qui brillaient avec éclat étaient pleins de tendresse à voir des hommes qui lui tendaient la main ; sa peau était rosée et fraîche, sa barbe noire était bien peignée ; il avait quelque chose de nonchalant et de vif tout à la fois, plein de grâce et de coquetterie montagnarde. II n’y a rien de bête comme de représenter les scélérats l’œil hagard, déguenillés, bourrelés de remords. Celui-là, au contraire, avait le sourire sur les lèvres, des dents blanches, les mains propres ; on eut plutôt dit qu’il venait de sortir de son lit que du maquis. II y a pourtant trois ans qu’il y vit, trois ans qu’il n’a été reçu sous un toit, qu’il couche l’hiver dans la neige et que les voltigeurs et les gendarmes lui font la chasse comme à une bête fauve. Brave et grand cœur qui palpite seul et librement dans les bois, sans avoir besoin de vous pour vivre, plus pur et plus haut placé, sans doute, que la plupart des honnêtes gens de France, à commencer par le plus mince épicier de province pour monter jusqu'au roi !

A côté de lui se tenait un autre homme maigre et noir, une figure pleine de feu, grimaçant et pétillant d'expression rustique : c'est le parent qui communique avec lui, lui fait parvenir les vivres et les nouvelles. Tout le temps il est resté assis sur une malle qui se trouvait là et a gardé son bonnet de laine, il parlait à voix basse et très vivement.

Nous avons causé longtemps ensemble, nous nous sommes occupés des moyens de le faire sortir de la Corse. Comme son signalement au besoin eût pu passer pour le mien, je lui ai proposé mon passeport, mais l'autre homme en a tiré un autre de sa poche qu'il s'était procuré sous un faux nom ; de ce côté les mesures sont bien prises. II a été question de le faire aller à la sucrerie de M. Dupuis et de là on l'aurait fait passer en Normandie avec les ouvriers qui retourneraient chez eux, mais il aborderait peut-être plus difficilement sur la terre de France que sur celle d'Italie ; il est donc décidé que la première barque que l'on pourra trouver à Sagone doublera Bonifacio et viendra le prendre la nuit sur le rivage de Fiumorbo. De là il ira à Livourne, tâchera de s'accrocher à quelque commerçant d'Alexandrie ou de Smjrne et de passer avec lui en Égypte où il prendra du service.

Au bout d'une heure il nous a quittés, le capitaine lui a versé une goutte, deux doigts d'eau-de-vie ; enfin il nous a dit adieu à plusieurs reprises, nous lui avons souhaité bonne réussite, il nous a longuement serré la main et nous a quittés le cœur tout navré de tendresse.

Nous devions aller coucher le lendemain soir à Corte, il nous fallait traverser tout le Fiumorbo et fa plaine d'AIeria. C'était une forte journée, aussi commençâmes-nous à 4 heures du matin. Comme if faisait encore froid, nous marchâmes deux heures environ pour nous échauffer ; le fils LaureHi nous a accompagnés jusqu'au bout du pays, et là nous nous sommes séparés. Car c'est là voyager ! On arrive dans un lieu, des amitiés se lient, et à l'heure où elfes vont s'accomplir, tout se défait, et l'on sème ainsi partout quelque chose de son cœur. Les premiers jours cela attriste, on s'arrache difficilement de tout ce que l'on a vu qui vous plaît, mais l'habitude venant, il ne vous prend plus envie de regarder en arrière, on pense toujours au lendemain, quelquefois au jour même, jamais à la veille ; l'esprit, comme les jambes, s'accoutume à vous porter en avant, et comme dans un panorama perpétuel, tout passe près de vous rapidement, vu au galop de votre course. Vallées pleines d'ombre, maquis de myrtes, sentiers sinueux dans les fougères, golfes aux doux murmures dans les mers bleues, larges horizons de soleil, grandes forêts aux pins décharnés, confidences faites dans le chemin, figures qu'on rencontre, aventures imprévues, longues causeries avec des amis d'hier, tout cela glisse emporté et vite s'oublie pour l'instant, mais bientôt se resserre dans je ne sais quelle synthèse harmonieuse qui ne vous présente plus ensuite qu'un grand mélange suave de sentiments et d'images où la mémoire se reporte toujours avec bonheur, vous replace vous-même et vous les donne à remâcher, embaumés cette fois de je ne sais quel parfum nouveau qui vous les fait chérir d'une autre manière.

A Prunelli, le capitaine nous a fait arrêter pour dire le bonjour à deux de ses filles mariées dans ce village. C'était là le quartier général des Corses qui rossèrent si élégamment le marquis de Rivière, ambassadeur à Constantinople. Déjà nous avons vu à la préfecture le général Paoli, à qui la gloire de cette guerre est revenue en entier ; néanmoins, c'est bien notre ami le capitaine Laurelli qui, dans le pays, passe pour y avoir eu la part la plus active. La veille, en allant aux eaux de Pietra-Pola, il nous avait montré tous les lieux où l'action s'est portée, en homme qui parle de ce qu'il a vu ; chez lui, à Corte, il a conservé les étriers du général Sebastiani qui était descendu de cheval pour fuir plus à l'aise dans la campagne. Nous sommes descendus à travers de grands maquis et des chênes-liège jusqu'à l'immense plaine qui forme tout le littoral oriental de la Corse et qui s'étend depuis Bonifacio jusqu'à Bastia. Elle est inculte dans sa plus grande partie, couverte çà et là d'un maquis dont fa touffe de verdure paraît de loin au milieu de cette terre blanche ; on en a brûlé, manière de défricher adoptée dans toute la Corse, mais tous les efforts, la plupart du temps, n'ont pas été au delà et les jeunes pousses reparaissent entre les arbustes calcinés. De temps à autre un grand chêne-liège décharné élève son branchage clairsemé sans donner d'ombrage ; ailleurs, nous allons dans des sentiers à travers de hautes fougères, et chacun voit la tête de celui qui le précède passer rapidement, en mille détours, le long de leur tige. Les voltigeurs nous ont accompagnés jusqu'à la rivière, et nous avons continué seuls notre route. Le pays est désert, vide d'habitants ; ceux qu'on rencontre dans tout le Fiumorbo sont jaunes de fièvre, vêtus de haillons et ont l'air triste. La misère dans le Nord n'a rien de bien choquant, le ciel est gris ; toute la nature est lugubre ; mais ici, quand le soleil répand tant de splendeur et de vie rayonnante, les couleurs sombres sont bien sombres, les têtes pâles sont plus pâles, sous ce beau ciel si bleu et si uni les guenilles sont bien plus déchirées.

Nous avons un peu quitté la plaine et repris à gauche en longeant le pied des mêmes montagnes que nous dominions la veille. J'aime à me redire tous ces détails. II me semble que nous tournons encore dans les chemins du maquis, que j'arrache encore en passant les fruits rouges de l'arbousier et les petites fleurs blanches des myrtes ; nous allons sous des berceaux de verdure, de temps en temps nous nous perdons de vue, tout est vert et frais, et quand on se retrouve dans la plaine, marchant dans les chaumes, tout au contraire est long et lumineux. Quand nos chevaux s’arrêtent, le bruit se tait, et nous ne voyons que l’immense horizon bleu de la Méditerranée qui s’agrandit à mesure que nous montons. La plaine, comme la mer, se déploie aussi de plus en plus, elle agrandit, comme elle, ses perspectives sans nombre. Des masses grises de cailloux vous indiquent dans la plaine quelques petits villages. Dans l’immense baie que la mer découpe devant nous, à quatre lieues en face, était la ville d’AIeria. On nous dit que des flottes pouvaient contenir dans ce port comblé et qu’il ne faudrait qu’enlever les sables pour en faire demain le plus beau du monde. Elle garde un renom de splendeur passée. Quand l’avait-elle ? Personne ne vous le dira ; n’y a sans doute bien des siècles qu’elle regarde ainsi en face l’Italie sans se lever de ses sables et que les lièvres viennent brouter le thym dans les pierres de son aqueduc. Ensevelie dans cette plaine vide et blanche elle me semblait une de ces cités de l’Orient, mortes depuis longtemps et que nous rêvons si tristes et si belles, y replaçant tous les rêves de grandeur que l’humanité a eus.

Cependant nous marchions sur la crête de petites collines, dans des cailloux de cuivre qui ressortaient de sous terre comme des bronzes antiques ; des plantes sauvages poussaient parmi eux, tout était pavé d’airain rouge et noir ; le soleil brillait dessus, et les rayons qui tombaient sur les arêtes saillantes en rebondissaient en paillettes. J’aimais à regarder à gauche la ligne blanche qui bordait la vue et que je savais être l’Italie. Elle s’étendait dans toute la longueur du grand horizon bleu qu’elle contemplait avec une langueur inexprimable. Notre guide nous chantait je ne sais quelle ballata que je n’écoutais pas, laissant buter mon cheval à chaque pierre et tout ébloui, étourdi de tant de soleil, de tant d’images, et de toutes les pensées qui arrivaient les unes sur les autres, sereines et limpides comme des flots sur des flots. Il faisait du vent, un vent tiède qui venait de courir sur les ondes, il arrivait de là-bas, d’au delà de cet horizon, nous apportant vaguement, avec l’odeur de la mer, comme un souvenir de choses que je n’avais pas vues. J’aurais presque pleuré quand je me suis enfoncé de nouveau dans la montagne. Non, ce n’est jamais devant l’océan, devant nos mers du Nord, vertes et furieuses, que les dix mille eussent poussé le cri d’immense espoir dont parle Xénophon ; mais c’est bien devant cette mer-là, quand, avec tout son azur, elle surgit au soleil entre les fentes de rochers gris, que le cœur alors prend une immense volée pour courir sur la cime de ces flots si doux, à ces rivages aimés, où les poètes antiques ont placé toutes les beautés, à ces pays suaves où l’écume, un matin, apporta dans une coquille laVénus endormie.

Le jour était déjà avancé, et nous n’avions point mangé. De temps à autre nous rencontrions bien quelque hutte en chêne-liège de dessous laquelle ressortaient des yeux noirs brillant comme ceux des chats ; des familles entières accroupies se tenaient au milieu de la fumée sous ces maisons de trois à quatre pieds de hauteur ainsi qu'on nous représente les Hottentots ou les naturels de la Nouvelle-Zélande ; mais toutes ces cabanes n'avaient point d'eau, il fallait donc aller plus loin. Nous en trouvâmes enfin vers i heure de l'après-midi à Acquaviva, petit village ombragé d'une touffe de châtaigniers. Nous sommes entrés dans une maison où le bienheureux capitaine nous a fait déjeuner. Quelques charbons se trouvaient au milieu de la cuisine entre trois ou quatre pierres rangées en carré, la fumée s'en allait au ciel à travers les poutres du toit.

Nous avons été reçus par une vieille femme et par une jeune fille très jolie et fort bourrue, dont les naïvetés gaillardes nous ont fait rire encore deux heures après l'avoir quittée ; mon excellent compagnon, eh se séparant d'elle, se roulait sur le perron, et sa bonne humeur l'a mis en train de me faire des confidences facétieuses pendant une partie de la route que nous avons parcourue, cette fois, l'estomac plein tout en devisant et en pantagruélisant.

Après une journée de dix heures de cheval, nous sommes arrivés à Corte. M™8 Laurelli nous a reçus avec une distinction toute parisienne ; ses manières et sa figure ne sont pas de la Corse, où le beau sexe a les unes et les autres assez peu agréables. Hélas ! il a fallu se séparer le lendemain de notre bon capitaine qui nous a embrassés avec effusion et qui nous a bien promis de venir nous voir en France.

La grande route nous a menés jusqu'à trois heures de Corte où nous avons deux voltigeurs qui, par ordre du capitaine, devaient nous accompagner jusqu'à Piedicroce. Nous nous élevons dans la direction de l'Italie et parcourons une route à peu près semblable à celle que nous avons faite de Bocognano à Ghisoni. Les montagnes de la Corse se montrent à nous de nouveau, et le soleil couchant nous les éclaire encore. Arrivés sur la hauteur où nous avons revu la Méditerranée, elles avaient complètement disparu. Le soir venait et le chemin se faisait de plus en plus mauvais ; il a fallu descendre de cheval et aller à pied. Bientôt nous sommes entrés dans une forêt de châtaigniers, et l'obscurité est devenue tout à fait complète. Notre guide ne contribue pas médiocrement à nous rendre la route désagréable, if s'est enivré à Corte, nous étourdit de ses chansons ; il est baveux, bavard et bravache.

Comme la lune n'était pas encore parue e.t que les arbres étaient touffus, nous marchions doucement de peur de rouler dans les pierres, soutenant nos pas avec la baguette qui nous avait servi de cravache. Toute la vallée était couverte de châtaigniers, et les pentes qui s'étendaient sous nous, les hauteurs qui nous dominaient, tout était sombre, silencieux. Le jour qui pénétrait dans les clairières nous faisait voir de gros troncs d'arbres qui apparaissaient les uns derrière les autres ; de temps à autre nous enfoncions les pieds dans des sources d’eau vive. Notre guide, qui conduisait les chevaux, s’inquiétait d’ailleurs fort peu de savoir si nous le suivions, tout entier qu’il était à l’expansion lyrique que la boisson avait provoquée en lui. Souvent nous nous arrêtions pour reprendre haleine et nous demander si bientôt enfin nous arrivions. Les châtaignes tombaient sur les feuilles, sur la mousse ou sur nos chapeaux. Au loin, au fond de la vallée, un chien aboyait après la lune qui commençait à se lever un peu, toute rousse et entourée de nuages ; quelques lumières brillaient çà et là dans les montagnes voisines et disparaissaient les unes après les autres. Francesco de plus belle reprenait sa chanson ou continuait d’exciter ses chevaux avec cet ignoble cri qu’on retrouve par toute la Corse pour faire aller les bêtes, et qui ressemble à celui d’un homme qu’on assommerait à coups de massue. Ce n’était pas sans raison que le brave capitaine nous a fait escorter, nos deux voltigeurs en effet avaient reçu de lui l’ordre de frapper notre guide au moindre signe de rébellion, et l’un d’eux me paraissait très disposé à lui tirer un coup de fusil. J’avoue que j’eus un moment d’inconcevable rage, lorsque tout fatigué, mourant de soif et désespéré de rien avoir sous la dent, je lui demandai la gourde qu’on avait remplie le matin à Corte, et que le misérable me répondit froidement que le bouchon en était tombé et que tout s’était perdu… II me sembla alors qu’on m’enterrait vif, et que toutes les colères du ciel étaient en moi ; je m’étais vivement rapproché de lui, haletant, espérant boire, je me voyais déjà saisissant la bienheureuse gourde, je sentais si bien couler dans mon estomac fatigué… j’arrive, rien. On a beau parler des désillusions morales, celle-là fut atroce. Je déguisai ma douleur sous une ironie magnifique dont je ne me rappelle plus la forme, mais elle l’écrasa, et j’eus pour satisfaction de faire rire les deux voltigeurs qui étaient là et qui, comme moi, n’auraient pas été fâchés de boire.

Nous continuâmes encore à marcher dans des chemins de plus en plus mauvais ; de temps en temps nous tâtions avec les mains pour nous guider, et nous tombions dans les grosses pierres ; le bois était toujours aussi sombre, et la lune rongée se montrait seulement pour l’acquit de sa conscience. Je pensais alors aux contes que l’on débite sur les voyageurs égarés dans les bois, et qui aperçoivent au loin une lumière ; ils s’approchent pour demander du secours, c’est une cabane de faux monnayeurs, où pour la plupart du temps ils sont égorgés. Nous avons frappé aussi à une cabane pour savoir si nous étions loin de Piedicroce. Un vieillard est venu nous ouvrir ; il était seul dans sa maison et nous a dit tout d’abord que nous serions mal logés chez lui parce que toute sa famille était absente et qu’on ne pourrait pas nous servir ; d’ailleurs il ne nous restait plus qu’une heure de chemin. Puis il a refermé sa porte, et toute sa cabane est rentrée dans le silence et l’obscurité. Un de nos gens nous a dit qu’à l’air dont il nous avait répondu, ce vieillard, à coup sûr, était resté le seul de sa famille ; tous les autres ayant été tués par vendetta, il se souciait peu de la visite des étrangers.

Nous avons donc repris courage, et continuant d'un pas plus leste nous sommes enfin arrivés à 9 heures à Piedicroce. M. Paoli nous attendait avec son oncle, vieux curé de la commune, qui se tenait à table tout en prenant patience. C'était un petit gros vieillard, tout blanc, en bonnet de coton et en culotte courte ; il sait peu de français et ne nous a guère parlé que pour dire que le clergé devait se mettre à la tête de la nation et charger le fusil, si le sol venait à être envahi par l'Anglais.

M. Paoli, frère du procureur du roi de Calvi, que nous avions vu à Ajaccio, est un grand gaillard mince ; il était décolleté, en veste de toile, il nous a reçus avec beaucoup de franchise et paraît plus gai et plus causeur que ses compatriotes. Pendant le dîner, il nous a parlé de son pays longuement et même avec une rare sagacité. Cet homme, qui s'exprime si purement en français, qui a tant de finesse et de bon sens, n'est jamais sorti de sa commune dont il est le maire, il est vrai, et à qui il porte un amour d'administrateur.

Nos courses en Corse allaient bientôt finir ; le soir même nous devions aller coucher à Bastia. M. Paoli nous a accompagnés jusqu'à Orezza, monté sur une superbe bête qui bondissait sous lui et sautait comme un chevreuil. Le reste de la route, jusqu'à Saint-Pancrace, se fait dans une grande forêt de châtaigniers, sur des pelouses unies. Nous avons plusieurs fois traversé le Golo dont nous avons suivi le courant. A 4 heures du soir enfin nous atteignons Saint-Pancrace, où M. Podesta avait eu l'obligeance d'envoyer la voiture ; ça a été pour nous une chose toute nouvelle de nous sentir traînés sur une grande route et sur de bons ressorts. Bastia paraît de loin étendue au bas du cap Corse, au fond du golfe ; son phare brillait dans les flots, et la nuit était déjà venue quand nous entrâmes dans les rues de la ville.

II ne nous restait plus qu'une journée, qu'une journée et tout était fini ! Adieu la Corse, ses belles forêts, sa route de Vico au bord de la mer ; adieu ses maquis, ses fougères, ses collines, car Bastia n'est pas de la Corse ; c'en est la honte, disent-ils là-bas. Sa richesse, son commerce, ses mœurs continentales, tout la fait haïr du reste de l'île. II n'y a que là, en effet, que l'on trouve des cafés, des bains, un hôtel, où il y ait des calèches, des gants jaunes et des bottes vernies, toutes les commodités des sociétés civilisées. Bastiacci, disent-ils, méchants habitants de Bastia, hommes vils qui ont quitté les mœurs de leurs ancêtres, pour prendre celles de l'Italie et de la France. II est vrai que les petits commis des douanes et de l'enregistrement, les surnuméraires des domaines, les officiers en garnison, toute la classe élastique désignée sous le nom de jeunes gens, n'a pas besoin, comme à Ajaccio, de faire de temps en temps de petites excursions à

Livourne et à Marseille pour y bannir la mélancolie, comme on dit dans les chansons ; ces messieurs profitent ici de l'avilissement du caractère national. Malgré tous ces avantages incontestables pour le consommateur, qu'il y a loin de Bastia à Ajaccio, cette ville si éclairée, si pure de couleur, si ouverte au grand air, où les palmiers poussent sur la place publique et dont la baie vaut, dit-on, celle de Palerme. A Bastia, les rues au contraire sont petites, noires, encombrées de monde ; son port est étroit, malaisé ; la grande place Saint-Laurent ne vaut pas à coup sûr l'esplanade qui est devant la forteresse ni la terrasse du cardinal Fesch, où je me suis promené le dernier soir à Ajaccio.

Le palais est inachevé, la lune entrait par les vitres et se jouait dans les grandes pièces nues ; les escaliers étaient vides et sonores. Du haut de la terrasse j'ai revu la baie avec toutes les côtes qui l'entourent. La lune en face se reflétait dans les flots ; suivant qu'elle montait dans le ciel, son image prenait sous l'eau des formes changeantes, tantôt celle d'un immense candélabre d'argent, tantôt celle d'un serpent dont les anneaux montaient en droite ligne à la surface et dont le corps remuait en ondulant ; les montagnes étaient éclairées, et de l'autre côté, au large, à travers les ombres, la grande immensité azurée apparaissait toute sereine.

Les églises de Bastia n'ont rien qui me plaise, fraîchement peintes, luisantes, ornées dans le goût italien.

Nous avons été voir les prisons pour y trouver quelque bon type corse et non pour goûter la soupe comme les philanthropes. Le geôlier d'Ajaccio était un vigoureux gaillard, capable de résister seul à une émeute ; celui de Bastia est geignard et doucereux ; il se plaint de l'exiguïté de son logement, quoiqu'il ait envahi une bonne partie des prisons ; un de ses fils est borgne et l'autre est attaqué d'une maladie de poitrine ; ce dernier, nous a-t-il dit, est un fort bon sujet qui s'est rendu malade à force de travailler, nous n'avions qu'à demander au proviseur. .. Nous vîmes en effet étendu dans son lit un maigre jeune homme toussant et crachant, pauvre brute ! que l'ambition dévore et qui se tue pour devenir un savant ! Corse, Corse, gagne plutôt le maquis ! là, tu entendras sous le myrte la chanson des rossignols et tu n'auras pas besoin de dictionnaire pour la comprendre, le vent dans la forêt de Marmano te sifflera un autre rythme que celui de tonVirgile que tu ne comprends guère. Allons, philosophe, jette au feu ton Cousin dont tu voudrais bien être le valet, et va un peu le soir t'étendre sur le sable du golfe de Lucia, à regarder les étoiles. Te voilà devenu professeur de philosophie dans ta ville natale, le maire te fait des compliments dans son discours au jour de la distribution des prix, et tu rougis sans doute devant l'auditoire avec une grâce charmante ; tu as des répétitions au collège et des leçons particulières en ville. Eh bien ! homme vertueux, homme d'esprit, homme que tes frères respectent et que ton père regarde ébahi, tu me parais, à te voir ainsi couché dans ce lit avec ton sot bonnet sur ta tête déjà chauve, et ne voyant de jour qu'à travers les barreaux de cette cage que tu illustres, tu me semblés plus misérable, plus stupide et plus condamnable que tous ceux qui sont là derrière la muraille, aigles de la montagne qui soupirent après l'heure où ils pourront reprendre leur volée.

J'ai vu, dans les cellules des prisonniers, un jeune garçon de Sartene qui a porté faux témoignage ; il était condamné à un an de prison, mais il souriait, passant la main dans ses cheveux, il avait un large front et des dents blanches. J'ai vu aussi plusieurs meurtriers qui m'avaient l'air fort heureux ; j'ai revu mon vieux Bastianesi qui va bientôt sortir ; il y avait de plus une femme adultère qui va bientôt accoucher et qui pense au fils qui va naître, et un Génois accusé de viol, qui a une figure fort bouffonne.Tous m'ont fait plus de plaisir à voir que toi, homme à bonne conduite, parce que ceux-là aiment et haïssent, qu'ils ont des souvenirs, des espoirs, des projets ; ils aiment la lumière, le grand jour, la liberté, la montagne ; mieux que toi, savant, ils comprennent l'élégie que soupire le laurier-rose à la brise du soir, le dithyrambe des pins qui se cassent, le monologue de l'orage qui hurle et de la haine quand elle emplit les cœurs vigoureux. Us n'ont point de poitrine étriquée, de membres amaigris, d'esprit sec, de vanité misérable. Je te hais, fils de geôlier qui veux devenir académicien, et il n'a fallu rien moins pour te faire oublier que l'excellent déjeuner que nous avons fait chez Letellier en compagnie du bon Multedo que j'avais retrouvé le matin dans la rue, et des docteurs Arrighi et Manfredi.

Puisque j'ai rendu compte de ma traversée de Toulon à Ajaccio avec une exactitude psychologique, digne de l'école écossaise, je puis me faire le plaisir de parler de celle du retour.

Quand nous avons quitté Bastia, le temps était superbe, la mer calme. La Corse belle me disait un dernier adieu. Pauvre Corse ! il a fallu en quit ter la vue bien vite pour aller se clouer dans une étroite cabine où, le corps ployé en deux, je recevais le soleil dans la face. Là, fermant les yeux, étourdi du roulis, suant et soufflant, je m'imaginai être un fort poulet à la broche : l'astre du jour me rôtissait et je ne vous dirai pas quel jus tombait dans la lèche-frite.

Vers 5 heures du soir je me suis résigné à monter sur le pont, où je passai la nuit, enveloppé dans ce gros manteau corse que M. Cloquet avait acheté à Ajaccio. La nuit fut belle, je dormis, je rêvai, je regardai la lune, la mer ; je pensais aux peuples d'Orient qui par la même nuit regardaient les mêmes étoiles et qui s'acheminaient lentement dans les sables vers quelque grande cité, je pensais aussi à mon voyage qui allait finir, je regardais le bout du mât se balancer à droite et àgauche, j'écoutais le vent siffler dans les poulies et, à travers lés écoutilles, les bruits des vomissants montaient jusqu'à moi ; j'avais pour eux le dédain du bonheur.

Le matin, quand nous longeâmes les côtes de la Provence, le temps devint rude, les flots fumaient à l'horizon, notre navire s'avançait lentement et rudement secoué, et sa proue pointait dans l'eau. J'ai fait la conversation avec un officier qui a entré en fraude une grande quantité de tabac corse, et avec un épicier qui m'a pris pour un commis voyageur. Allons, finissons-en vite, arrivons au port, puisque nous sommes en rade. C'est en vain que depuis huit jours je suis à m'amuser à ceci, il faut bien plier la feuille, tout cela à deux mains, et quitter le passé, lui qui vous quitte si facilement. J'ai fait le traînard tant que j'ai pu, me promenant cent fois d'Ajaccio à Bastia, de Ghisoni dans la forêt de Marmano, revenant sur mes pas, revoyant les sentiers parcourus, ramassant des feuilles tombées, me jouant avec mes souvenirs comme avec de vieux habits ; il faut se hâter de finir mon voyage qui, du train que je mets à le raconter, pourra bien finir au mois d'août prochain.

Je vous fais grâce du bagne et de l'arsenal, de la description pittoresque et des réflexions humanitaires, j'aime mieux dire qu'un certain soir encore j'ai été à la bastide de Lauvergne. La mer vient battre au pied de sa terrasse ; à gauche il y a une anse dans le rocher, faite exprès par les Tritons pour y nager aux heures de nuit ; de dessus un tombeau turc qui sert de banc, on voit toute la Méditerranée ; son jardin est en désordre, l'herbe pousse dans les murs, la fontaine est tarie, les cannes de Provence sont cassées, mais l'éternelle jeunesse de la mer sourit en face à chaque rayon de soleil, dans chaque vague azurée.

Si je demeurais à Toulon, j'irais aussi tous les jours au jardin botanique ; ce serait peut-être une sottise, car il est choses dont il ne faut garder qu'une vision, comme Arles, par exemple. Que le cloître Saint-Trophime était beau, à la tombée du jour ! Des femmes venaient puiser de l'eau dans le puits de marbre qui se trouve là, à droite en entrant. Les femmes d'Arles ! quel autre souvenir ! Elles sont toutes en noir ; elles marchaient, il m'a semblé, deux à deux dans les rues, et elles parlaient à voix basse se tenant par le bras. J'en ai revu une à Toulon, elle s'en allait aussi la tête penchée un peu sur l'épaule, le regard vers la terre ; avec leur jupe courte, leur démarche si légère et si grave, toute leur stature robuste et svelte, elles ressemblent à la Muse antique.

II faisait du mistrao à Toulon ; nous étions aveuglés de poussière. Une fois entrés dans le jardin, je ne sais si cela tient aux murs qui nous abritaient, l'air est devenu calme. Après la maison du concierge, il y a quelques petites maisonnettes en bois qui servent de serres ; des cages d'oiseaux étaient attachées aux murs extérieurs, elles étaient remplies de gazouillements et de battements d'ailes. Je vis là sous de grands arbres pleins d'ombrages, à côté d'un banc de gazon, deux ou trois forçats qui travaillaient au jardin ; ils n’avaient ni gardechiourme, ni sergents, ni argousins ; on entendait pourtant leur chaîne qui traînait sur le sable.

Tandis que les autres étaient au bagne à soulever des poutres, à clouer îa carcasse des vaisseaux, à manier le fer et le bois, ceux-là entendaient le bruit du vent dans les palmiers et dans les aloès, car il y a là des roseaux de l’Inde à forme étrange, et des bananiers, des agaves, des myrtes encore, des cactus, toutes ces belles plantes des contrées inconnues, sous lesquelles les tigres bondissent, les serpents s’enroulent, où les oiseaux bigarrés perchent et se mettent à chanter. II me semble que cela doit leur amollir le cœur de vivre toujours avec ces plantes, avec ce silence, cet ombrage, toutes ces feuilles petites et grandes, ces petits bassins qui murmurent, ces jets d’eau qui arrosent ; il fait frais sous les arbres et chaud au soleil, le vent agite le branchage sur le treillis, il y a du jasmin qui embaume, des chèvrefeuilles, des fleurs dont je ne sais pas le nom, mais qui font qu’en les respirant on se sent le cœur faible et tout prêt à aimer ; des nénufars sont étendus dans les sources, avec des roseaux qui s’épanchent de tous côtés. Le vent avait renversé les arbustes et il agitait les palmiers dont le faite murmurait, deux palmiers, de ceux qu’on appelle rois ; ils sont au bout du jardin, et si beaux que j’ai compris alors que Xercès en eut été amoureux et, comme à une maîtresse, ait passé à un d’eux autour du cou des anneaux et des colliers. Les rameaux du haut retombaient en gerbes avec des courbes douces et molles, ce mistrao qui soufflait en haut les poussait les uns sur les autres en leur faisant faire un bruit qui n’est point de nos pays, le tronc restait calme et immobile, comme une femme dont les cheveux seuls remuent au vent. Un palmier pour nous c’est toute l’Inde, tout l’Orient ; sous le palmier l’éléphant paré d’or bondit et balance au son des tambourins, la bayadère danse sous son ombrage, l’encens fume et monte dans ses rameaux pendant que le brahme assis chante les louanges de Brahma et des Dieux.

C’était fini du Midi ! A Marseille il faisait froid, tout se rembrunissait et sentait déjà le retour. II y aurait pourtant de l’injustice à ne rien dire du dîner d’adieu chez M. Cauvière. II a une petite salle romaine en pierre de taille, voûtée, pavée de marbre, comme Horace devait en avoir une ; je vous réponds qu’il s’y est bien bu du bon vin, qu’il s’y est dit bien des choses spirituelles. Ce fut un dîner exquis en tout point, comme les rois n’ont pas l’esprit d’en faire, où il y eut, dit Commines, “toutes sortes de bonnes épices qui font boire de l’eau point” ; les mets, les vins, le langage, tout cela eut un caractère à part, bon jusqu’à l’excellent, original et de bon goût ; l’ivresse et la plaisanterie allèrent jusqu’à ce point délicat où l’on ne perd ni l’esprit ni la décence, il y avait des dames. II faudrait une autre mémoire et une autre plume surtout pour vous rapporter’ cette délicieuse soirée, les lumières étaient douces, tout allait harmonieusement, Porto se promenait lentement autour de la table à la manière des grands animaux ; le soir on nous apporta sur la table une colonne de tabac de Lataki, avec des pipes de bambou ; nous bûmes, en fumant, un vin spécial appelé Lep-Fraidi, je n’en écris pas plus.

Avant de m’emboîter pour Paris, j’ai été dire un dernier adieu à la Méditerranée. II faisait encore beau sur le quai, le soleil brillant, le mistrao ne soufflait pas, le ciel était pur comme le jour où j’y fus avant de partir pour la Corse, alors que j’avais devant moi encore, et dans un rose horizon, un mois de beau temps, d’excursions libres, encore tout un mois de Méditerranée et de grand soleil. Les navires étaient attachés sur le quai par des câbles tendus, néanmoins ils remuaient un peu, comme les cœurs par les temps plus calmes, aussi amarrés au rivage, font des bonds qu’eux seuls sentent, pour repartir au large. J’ai encore vu quelques pantalons plissés, des pelisses arabes, des dolmans turcs, et puis il a fallu repartir, tourner le dos à tout cela, sans savoir quand je reverrai ni Arles, ni Marseille, et la baie aux Oursins, et les golfes de Liamone, de Chopra, de Sagone, le Prato, la plaine d’AIeria.

La première page de ceci a été écrite à Bordeaux dans un accès de bonne humeur, le matin, la fenêtre ouverte ; la rue était pleine de cris de femmes, de chansons, de voix joyeuses.

Maintenant il pleut, il fait froid, les arbres dépouillés ont l’air de squelettes verts ou noirs. Au lieu de partir bientôt pour Bayonne, pour Biarritz, pour Fontarabie, me voilà empêtré dans des plans d’études admirables, ayant cinq ou six fois plus de travaux qu’un honnête homme ne peut en accomplir ; dans un mois ce sera la même chose, je serai à la même table, sur la même chaise et toujours ainsi de même. Mais je me console en pensant que cet hiver je pourrai boire quelquefois du Champagne frappé et manger du canard sauvage ; et puis quand reviendra la saison où les blés commencent à mûrir, je m’en irai aussi dans les champs ou dans les îles de la Seine, je nagerai en regardant les arbres qui se mirent au bord, je fumerai une pipe à l’ombre, je laisserai aller ma barque à la dérive vers 5 heures, quand le soleil se couche, mais non !

Car je retournerai à Bordeaux, je passerai SaintJean-de-Luz, Irun ; j’irai en Espagne. II serait trop stupide en effet qu’un homme bien élevé n’ait pas vu l’Andalousie ni les lauriers-roses qui bordent le Guadalquivir, ni l’Alhambra, ni Tolède, ni Séville, ni toutes ces vieilles villes aux balcons noirs, où les Inès chantent la nuit les romances du Cid.

Mais, de grâce, Arles aussi, et Marseille également, et Toulon, parce que je désire avant de mourir dîner encore deux ou trois fois chez M. Cauvière. Plus loin même, je dépasserai la bastide de Raynaud et j’irai à Venise, à Rome, à

Naples, dans la baie de Baia, puisque je relis maintenant Tacite et que je vais apprendre Properce.

Mais la Méditerranée est si belle, si bleue, si calme, si souriante qu'elle vous appelle sur son sein, vous attire à elle avec des séductions charmantes. J'irai bien en Grèce ; me voilà lisant Homère, son vieux poète qui l'aimait tant, et à Constantinople, à qui j'ai pensé plus d'heures dans ma vie qu'il n'en faudrait pour faire d'ici le voyage à pied, ayant toute ma vie aimé à me coucher sur des tapis, à respirer des parfums, regrettant de n'avoir ni esclaves, ni sérails, ni mosquées pavées de marbre et de porphyre, ni cimeterre de Damas pour faire tomber les têtes de ceux qui m'ennuient.

Oh ! moi qui si souvent en regardant la lune, soit les hivers à Rouen, soit l'été sous le ciel du Midi, ai pensé à Babylone, à Ninive, à Persépolis, à Palmyre, aux campements d'Alexandre, aux marches des caravanes, aux clochettes des chamelles, aux grands silences du désert, aux horizons rouges et vides, est-ce que je n'irai pas m'abreuver de poésie, de lumière, de choses immenses et sans nom à cette source où remontent tous mes rêves ?

Povero ! Tu iras dimanche prochain à Déville, s'il fait beau ; cet été, à Pont-l'Évêque.

Encore un mot : Je réserve dix cahiers de bon papier que j'avais destinés à être noircis en route, je vais les cacheter et les serrer précieusement, après avoir écrit sur le couvert : papier blanc pour d'autres voyages.

THE GEORGE SAND-GUSTAVE FLAUBERT LETTERS

Translated by A.L. McKenzie (1921)

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PREFATORY NOTE

This translation of the correspondence between George Sand and Gustave Flaubert was undertaken in consequence of a suggestion by Professor Stuart P. Sherman. The translator desires to acknowledge valuable criticism given by Professor Sherman, Ruth M. Sherman, and Professor Kenneth McKenzie, all of whom have generously assisted in revising the manuscript.

A. L. McKenzie

INTRODUCTION

The correspondence of George Sand and Gustave Flaubert, if approached merely as a chapter in the biographies of these heroes of nineteenth century letters, is sufficiently rewarding. In a relationship extending over twelve years, including the trying period of the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune, these extraordinary personalities disclose the aspects of their diverse natures which are best worth the remembrance of posterity. However her passionate and erratic youth may have captivated our grandfathers, George Sand in the mellow autumn of her life is for us at her most attractive phase. The storms and anguish and hazardous adventures that attended the defiant unfolding of her spirit are over. In her final retreat at Nohant, surrounded by her affectionate children and grandchildren, diligently writing, botanizing, bathing in her little river, visited by her friends and undistracted by the fiery lovers of the old time, she shows an unguessed wealth of maternal virtue, swift, comprehending sympathy, fortitude, sunny resignation, and a goodness of heart that has ripened into wisdom. For Flaubert, too, though he was seventeen years her junior, the flamboyance of youth was long since past; in 1862, when the correspondence begins, he was firmly settled, a shy, proud, grumpy toiling hermit of forty, in his family seat at Croisset, beginning his seven years' labor at L'Education Sentimentale, master of his art, hardening in his convictions, and conscious of increasing estrangement from the spirit of his age. He, with his craving for sympathy, and she, with her inexhaustible supply of it, meet; he pours out his bitterness, she her consolation; and so with equal candor of self-revelation they beautifully draw out and strengthen each the other's characteristics, and help one another grow old.

But there is more in these letters than a satisfaction for the biographical appetite, which, indeed, finds ITS account rather in the earlier chapters of the correspondents' history. What impresses us here is the banquet spread for the reflective and critical faculties in this intercourse of natural antagonists. As M. Faguet observes in a striking paragraph of his study of Flaubert:

"It is a curious thing, which does honor to them both, that Flaubert and George Sand should have become loving friends towards the end of their lives. At the beginning, Flaubert might have been looked upon by George Sand as a furious enemy. Emma [Madame Bovary] is George Sand's heroine with all the poetry turned into ridicule. Flaubert seems to say in every page of his work: 'Do you want to know what is the real Valentine, the real Indiana, the real Lelia? Here she is, it is Emma Roualt.' 'And do you want to know what becomes of a woman whose education has consisted in George Sand's books? Here she is, Emma Roualt.' So that the terrible mocker of the bourgeois has written a book which is directly inspired by the spirit of the 1840 bourgeois. Their recriminations against romanticism 'which rehabilitates and poetises the courtesan,' against George Sand, the Muse of Adultery, are to be found in acts and facts in Madame Bovary."

Now, the largest interest of this correspondence depends precisely upon the continuance, beneath an affectionate personal relationship, of a fundamental antagonism of interests and beliefs, resolutely maintained on both sides. George Sand, with her lifelong passion for propaganda and reformation, labors earnestly to bring Flaubert to her point of view, to remould him nearer to her heart's desire. He, with a playful deference to the sex and years of his friend, addresses her in his letters as "Dear Master." Yet in the essentials of the conflict, though she never gives over her effort, he never budges a jot; he has taken his ground, and in his last unfinished work, Bouvard and Pecuchet, he dies stubbornly fortifying his position. To the last she speaks from a temperament lyrical, sanguine, imaginative, optimistic and sympathetic; he from a temperament dramatic, melancholy, observing, cynical, and satirical. She insists upon natural goodness; he, upon innate depravity. She urges her faith in social regeneration; he vents his splenetic contempt for the mob. Through all the successive shocks of disillusioning experience, she expects the renovation of humanity by some religious, some semi-mystical, amelioration of its heart; he grimly concedes the greater part of humanity to the devil, and can see no escape for the remnant save in science and aristocratic organization. For her, finally, the literary art is an instrument of social salvation — it is her means of touching the world with her ideals, her love, her aspiration; for him the literary art is the avenue of escape from the meaningless chaos of existence — it is his subtly critical condemnation of the world.

The origins of these unreconciled antipathies lie deep beneath the personal relationship of George Sand and Gustave Flaubert; lie deep beneath their successors, who with more or less of amenity in their manners are still debating the same questions today. The main currents of the nineteenth century, with fluent and refluent tides, clash beneath the controversy; and as soon as one hears its "long withdrawing roar," and thinks it is dying away, and is become a part of ancient history, it begins again, and will be heard, no doubt, by the last man as a solemn accompaniment to his final contention with his last adversary.

George Sand was, on the whole, a natural and filial daughter of the French Revolution. The royal blood which she received from her father's line mingled in her veins with that of the Parisian milliner, her mother, and predestined her for a leveller by preparing in her an instinctive ground of revolt against all those inherited prejudices which divided the families of her parents. As a young girl wildly romping with the peasant children at Nohant she discovered a joy in untrammeled rural life which was only to increase with years. At the proper age for beginning to fashion a conventional young lady, the hoyden was put in a convent, where she underwent some exalting religious experiences; and in 1822 she was assigned to her place in the “established social order” by her marriage at seventeen to M. Dudevant. After a few years of rather humdrum domestic life in the country, she became aware that this gentleman, her husband, was behaving as we used to be taught that all French husbands ultimately behave; he was, in fact, turning from her to her maids. The young couple had never been strongly united — the impetuous dreamy girl and her coarse hunting mate; and they had grown wide apart. She should, of course, have adjusted herself quietly to the altered situation and have kept up appearances. But this young wife had gradually become an “intellectual”; she had been reading philosophy and poetry; she was saturated with the writings of Rousseau, of Chateaubriand, of Byron. None of the spiritual masters of her generation counselled acquiescence in servitude or silence in misery. Every eloquent tongue of the time-spirit urged self-expression and revolt. And she, obedient to the deepest impulses of her blood and her time, revolted.

At the period when Madame Dudevant withdrew her neck from the conjugal yoke and plunged into her literary career in Paris, the doctrine that men are created for freedom, equality and fraternity was already somewhat hackneyed. She, with an impetus from her own private fortunes, was to give the doctrine a recrudescence of interest by resolutely applying it to the status of women. We cannot follow her in detail from the point where she abandons the domestic sewing-basket to reappear smoking black cigars in the Latin Quarter. We find her, at about 1831, entering into competition with the brilliant literary generation of Balzac, Hugo, Alfred de Musset, Merimee, Stendhal, and Sainte-Beuve. To signalize her equality with her brothers in talent, she adopts male attire: “I had a sentry-box coat made, of rough grey cloth, with trousers and waist-coat to match. With a grey hat and a huge cravat of woolen material, I looked exactly like a first-year student.” In the freedom of this rather unalluring garb she entered into relations Platonic, fraternal, or tempestuously passionate with perhaps the most distinguished series of friends and lovers that ever fluttered about one flame. There was Aurelien de Seze; Jules Sandeau, her first collaborator, who “reconciled her to life” and gave her a nom de guerre; the inscrutable Merimee, who made no one happy; Musset — an encounter from which both tiger-moths escaped with singed wings; the odd transitional figure of

Pagello; Michel Euraed; Liszt; Chopin, whom she loved and nursed for eight years; her master Lamennais; her master Pierre Leroux; her father-confessor Sainte-Beuve; and Gustave Flaubert, the querulous friend of her last decade.

As we have compressed the long and complex story of her personal relationships, so we must compress the intimately related history of her works and her ideas. When under the inspiration of Rousseau, the emancipated George Sand began to write, her purposes were but vaguely defined. She conceived of life as primarily an opportunity for unlimited self-expansion, and of literature as an opportunity for unrestricted self-expression. “Nevertheless,” she declares, “my instincts have formed, without my privity, the theory I am about to set down, — a theory which I have generally followed unconsciously. … According to this theory, the novel is as much a work of poetry as of analysis. It demands true situations, and characters not only true but real, grouped about a type intended to epitomize the sentiment or the main conceptions of the book. This type generally represents the passion of love, since almost all novels are love-stories. According to this theory (and it is here that it begins) the writer must idealize this love, and consequently this type, — and must not fear to attribute to it all the powers to which he inwardly aspires, or all the sorrows whose pangs he has observed or felt. This type must in no wise, however, become degraded by the vicissitude of events; it must either die or triumph.”

In 1831, when her pen began its fluent course through the lyrical works of her first period — Indiana, Valentine, Lelia, Jacques, and the rest — we conceive George Sand’s culture, temper, and point of view to have been fairly comparable with those of the young Shelley when, fifteen years earlier, he with Mary Godwin joined Byron and Jane Clairmont in Switzerland — young revoltes, all of them, nourished on eighteenth century revolutionary philosophy and Gothic novels. Both these eighteenth century currents meet in the work of the new romantic group in England and in France. The innermost origin of the early long poems of Shelley and the early works of George Sand is in personal passion, in the commotion of a romantic spirit beating its wings against the cage of custom and circumstance and institutions. The external form of the plot, whatever is fantastic and wilful in its setting and its adventures, is due to the school of Ann Radcliffe. But the quality in Shelley and in George Sand which bewitched even the austere Matthew Arnold in his green and salad days is the poetising of that liberative eighteenth century philosophy into “beautiful idealisms” of a love emancipated from human limitations, a love exalted to the height of its gamut by the influences of nature, triumphantly seeking its own or shattered in magnificent despair. In her novels of the first period, George Sand takes her Byronic revenge upon M. Dudevant. In Indiana and its immediate successors, consciously or unconsciously, she declares to the world what a beautiful soul M. Dudevant condemned to sewing on buttons; in Jacques she paints the man who might fitly have matched her spirit; and by the entire series, which now impresses us as fantastic in sentiment no less than in plot, she won her early reputation as the apologist for free love, the adversary of marriage.

In her middle period — say from 1838 to 1848 — of which The Miller of Aginbault, Consuelo, and The Countess of Rudolstadt are representative works, there is a marked subsidence of her personal emotion, and, in compensation, a rising tide of humanitarian enthusiasm. Gradually satiated with erotic passion, gradually convinced that it is rather a mischief-maker than a reconstructive force in a decrepit society, she is groping, indeed, between her successive liaisons for an elusive felicity, for a larger mission than inspiring Musset’s Alexandrines or Chopin’s nocturnes. It is somewhat amusing, and at the same time indicative of her vague but deep-seated moral yearnings, to find her writing rebukingly to Sainte-Beuve, as early as 1834, apropos of his epicurean Volupte: “Let the rest do as they like; but you, dear friend, you must produce a book which will change and better mankind, do you see? You can, and therefore should. Oh, if poor I could do it! I should lift my head again and my heart would no longer be broken; but in vain I seek a religion: Shall it be God, shall it be love, friendship, the public welfare? Alas, it seems to me that my soul is framed to receive all these impressions, without one effacing another … Who shall paint justice as it should, as it may, be in our modern society?”

To Sainte-Beuve, himself an unscathed intellectual Odysseus, she declares herself greatly indebted intellectually; but on the whole his influence seems to have been tranquillizing. The material for the radical program, economic, political, and religious, which, like a spiritual ancestor of H. G. Wells, she eagerly sought to popularize by the novels of her middle years, was supplied mainly by Saint-Simon, Lamennais, and Leroux. Her new “religion of humanity,” a kind of theosophical socialism, is too fantastically garbed to charm the sober spirits of our age. And yet from the ruins of that time and from the emotional extravagance of books grown tedious, which she has left behind her, George Sand emerges for us with one radiant perception which must be included in whatever religion animates a democratic society: “Everyone must be happy, so that the happiness of a few may not be criminal and cursed by God.”

One of George Sand’s French critics, M. Caro, a member of the Academy, who deals somewhat austerely with her religiose enthusiasms and with her Utopian projects for social reformation, remarks gravely and not without tenderness:

“The one thing needful to this soul, so strong, so rich in enthusiasm, is a humble moral quality that she disdains, and when she has occasion to speak of it humble moral quality that she disdains, and when she has occasion to speak of it, even slanders, — namely resignation. This is not, as she seems to think, the sluggish virtue of base souls, who, in their superstitious servitude to force, hasten to crouch beneath every yoke. That is a false and degrading resignation; genuine resignation grows out of the conception of the universal order, weighed against which individual sufferings, without ceasing to be a ground of merit, cease to constitute a right of revolt. … Resignation, in the true, the philosophical, the Christian sense, is a manly acceptance of moral law and also of the laws essential to the social order; it is a free adherence to order, a sacrifice approved by reason of a part of one's private good and of one's personal freedom, not to might nor to the tyranny of a human caprice, but to the exigencies of the common weal, which subsists only by the concord of individual liberty with obedient passions."

Well, resigned in the sense of defeated, George Sand never became; nor did she, perhaps, ever wholly acquiesce in that scheme of things which M. Caro impressively designates as "the universal order." Yet with age, the abandonment of many distractions, the retreat to Nohant, the consolations of nature, and her occupation with tales of pastoral life, beginning with La Mare au Diable, there develops within her, there diffuses itself around her, there appears in her work a charm like that which falls upon green fields from the level rays of the evening sun after a day of storms. It is not the charm, precisely, of resignation; it is the charm of serenity — the serenity of an old revolutionist who no longer expects victory in the morning yet is secure in her confidence of a final triumph, and still more secure in the goodness of her cause. "A hundred times in life," she declares, "the good that one does seems to serve no immediate purpose; yet it maintains in one way and another the tradition of well wishing and well doing, without which all would perish." At the outset of her career we compared her with Shelley. In her last phase, she reminds us rather of the authors of Far from the Madding Crowd and The Mill on the Floss, and of Wordsworth, once, too, a torch of revolution, turning to his Michaels and his leech-gatherers and his Peter Bells. Her exquisite pictures of pastoral life are idealizations of it; her representations of the peasant are not corroborated by Zola's; to the last she approaches the shield of human nature from the golden side. But for herself at least she has found a real secret of happiness in country life, tranquil work, and a right direction given to her own heart and conscience.

It is at about this point in her spiritual development that she turns towards Gustave Flaubert — perhaps a little suspiciously at first, yet resolved from the first, according to her natural instinct and her now fixed principles, to stimulate by believing in his admirable qualities. Writing from Nohant in 1866 to him at Croisset, she epitomises her distinction as a woman and as an author in this

Croisset, she epitomises her distinction as a woman and as an author in this playful sally: “Sainte-Beuve, who loves you nevertheless, pretends that you are dreadfully vicious. But perhaps he sees with eyes a bit dirty, like that learned botanist who pretends that the germander is of a DIRTY yellow. The observation was so false that I could not help writing on the margin of his book: ‘IT IS YOU, WHOSE EYES ARE DIRTY.’“

We have spoken of George Sand as a faithful daughter of the French Revolution; and by way of contrast we may speak of Flaubert as a disgruntled son of the Second Empire. Between his literary advent and hers there is an interval of a generation, during which the proud expansive spirit and the grandiose aspirations imparted to the nation by the first Napoleon dwindled to a spirit of mediocrity and bourgeois smugness under a Napoleon who had inherited nothing great of his predecessor but his name. This change in the time-spirit may help to explain the most significant difference between Flaubert and George Sand. He inherited the tastes and imagination of the great romantic generation; but he inherited none of its social and political enthusiasm. He was disciplined by the romantic writers; yet his reaction to the literary culture of his youth is not ethical but aesthetic; he finds his inspiration less in Rousseau than in Chateaubriand. He is bred to an admiration of eloquence, the poetic phrase, the splendid picture, life in the grand style; with increasing disgust he finds himself entering a society which, he feels, neither understands nor values any of these things, and which threatens their destruction. Consequently, we find him actuated as a writer by two complementary passions — the love of splendor and the hatred of mediocrity — two passions, of which the second sometimes alternates with the first, sometimes inseparably fuses with it, and ultimately almost extinguishes it.

The son of an eminent surgeon of Rouen, Gustave Flaubert may have acquired from his father something of that scientific precision of observation and that cutting accuracy of expression, by which he gained his place at the head of modern French realism and won the discipleship of the Goncourts, Daudet, Zola, and Maupassant and the applause of such connoisseurs of technique as Walter Pater and Henry James. From his mother’s Norman ancestry he inherited the physique of a giant, tainted with epilepsy; a Viking countenance, strong-featured with leonine moustaches; and a barbaric temper, habitually somewhat lethargic but irritable, and, when roused, violent and intolerant of opposition. He had a private education at Rouen, with wide desultory reading; went to Paris, which he hated, to study law, which he also hated; frequented the theatres and studios; travelled in Corsica, the Pyrenees, and the East, which he adored, seeing Egypt, Palestine, Constantinople, and Greece; and he had one, and only one, important love-affair, extending from 1846 to 1854 — that with *Mme.* Louise Colet, a woman of letters, whose difficult relations with Flaubert are sympathetically touched upon in Pater's celebrated essay on "Style." When by the death of his father, in 1845, he succeeded to the family-seat at Croisset, near Rouen, he settled himself in a studious solitude to the pursuit of letters, which he followed for thirty-four years with anguish of spirit and dogged persistence.

Flaubert probably loved glory as much as any man; but he desired to receive it only on his own terms. He profoundly appeals to writers endowed with "the artistic conscience" as "the martyr of literary style." In morals something of a libertine, in matters of art he exhibited the intolerance of weakness in others and the remorseless self-examination and self-torment commonly attributed to the Puritan. His friend Maxime Du Camp, who tried to bring him out and teach him the arts of popularity, he rebuffed with deliberate insult. He developed an aversion to any interruption of his work, and such tension and excitability of nerves that he shunned a day's outing or a chat with an old companion, lest it distract him for a month afterward. His mistress he seems to have estranged by an ill-concealed preference to her of his exacting Muse. To illustrate his "monkish" consecration to his craft we cannot do better than reproduce a passage, quoted by Pater, from his letters to Madame Colet:

"I must scold you for one thing, which shocks, scandalises me, the small concern, namely, you show for art just now. As regards glory be it so — there I approve. But for art! — the one thing in life that is good and real — can you compare with it an earthly love? — prefer the adoration of a relative beauty to the cultus of the true beauty? Well! I tell you the truth. That is the one thing good in me: the one thing I have, to me estimable. For yourself, you blend with the beautiful a heap of alien things, the useful, the agreeable, what not?

"The only way not to be unhappy is to shut yourself up in art, and count everything else as nothing. Pride takes the place of all beside when it is established on a large basis. Work! God wills it. That, it seems to me, is clear.

"I am reading over again the Aeneid, certain verses of which I repeat to myself to satiety. There are phrases there which stay in one's head, by which I find myself beset, as with those musical airs which are forever returning, and cause you pain, you love them so much. I observe that I no longer laugh much, and am no longer depressed. I am ripe, you talk of my serenity, and envy me. It may well surprise you. Sick, irritated, the prey a thousand times a day of cruel pain, I continue my labour like a true working-man, who, with sleeves turned up, in the sweat of his brow, beats away at his anvil, never troubling himself whether it rains or blows, for hail or thunder. I was not like that formerly."

The half-dozen works which Flaubert beat out on his "anvil," with an average expenditure of half-a-dozen years to each, were composed on a theory of which the prime distinguishing feature was the great doctrine of “impersonality.” George Sand’s fluent improvisations ordinarily originated, as we have noted, in an impulse of her lyrical idealism; she began with an aspiration of her heart, to execute which she invented characters and plot so that she is always on the inside of her story. According to Flaubert’s theory, the novel should originate in a desire to present a certain segment of observed life. The author is to take and rigorously maintain a position outside his work. The organ with which he collects his materials is not his heart but his eyes, supplemented by the other senses. Life, so far as the scientific observer can be sure of it, and so far as the artist can control it for representation, is a picture or series of pictures, a dramatic scene or a concatenation of dramatic scenes. Let the novelist first, therefore, with scrupulous fidelity and with minute regard for the possible significance of every observable detail, fill his notebooks, amass his materials, master his subject. After Flaubert, a first-rate sociological investigator is three-fourths of a novelist. The rest of the task is to arrange and set forth these facts so that they shall tell the truth about life impressively, in scene and dramatic spectacle, the meaning of which shall be implicit in the plot and shall reach the reader’s consciousness through his senses.

Critics have spent much time in discussing the conflict of “romantic” and “realistic” tendencies in Flaubert’s works. And it is obviously easy, so far as subject-matter is concerned, to group his books in two divisions: on the one hand, The Temptation of St. Anthony, Salammbo, and two of the Trois Contes; on the other hand, Madame Bovary, L’Education Sentimentale, and the incomplete Bouvard and Pecuchet. We may call the tales in the first group romantic, because the subject-matter is remote in time and place, and because in them Flaubert indulges his passion for splendor — for oriental scenery, for barbaric characters, the pomp of savage war and more savage religion, events strange, terrible, atrocious. We may call the stories in the other group realistic, because the subject-matter is contemporary life in Paris and the provinces, and because in them Flaubert indulges his hatred for mediocrity — for the humdrum existence of the country doctor, the apothecary, the insipid clerk, the vapid sentimental woman, and the charlatans of science. But as a matter of fact, ALL his books are essentially constructed on the same theory: all are just as “realistic” as Flaubert could make them.

Henry James called Madame Bovary a brilliantly successful application of Flaubert’s theory; he pronounced L’Education Sentimentale “elaborately and massively dreary”; and he briefly dismissed Salammbo as an accomplished work of erudition. Salammbo is indeed a work of erudition; years were spent in getting up its archaeological details. But Madame Bovary is also a work of erudition, and Bouvard and Pecuchet is a work of enormous erudition; a thousand volumes were read for the notes of the first volume and Flaubert is said to have killed himself by the labor of his unfinished investigations. There is no important distinction to be made between the method or the thoroughness with which he collected his facts in the one case or the other; and the story of the war of the mercenaries against the Carthaginians is evolved with the same alternation of picture and dramatic spectacle and the same hard merciless externality that distinguish the evolution of Emma Bovary's history.

We may go still farther than that towards wiping out the distinction between Flaubert's "romantic" and his "realistic" works; and by the same stroke what is illusory in the pretensions of the realists, namely, their aspiration to an "impersonal art."

If we were seeking to prove that an author can put NOTHING BUT HIMSELF into his art, we should ask for no more impressive illustions than precisely, Madame Bovary and Salammbo. These two masterpieces disclose to reflection, no less patently than the works of George Sand, their purpose and their meaning. And that purpose and meaning are not a whit less personal to Flaubert than the purpose and meaning of Indiana, let us say, are personal to George Sand. The "meaning" of Madame Bovary and Salammbo is, broadly speaking, Flaubert's sense of the significance — or, rather, of the insignificance — of human life; and the "purpose" of the books is to express it. The most lyrical of idealists can do no more to reveal herself.

The demonstration afforded by a comparison of Salammbo and Madame Bovary is particularly striking because the subject-matters are superficially so unlike. But take any characteristic series of pictures or incidents from Salammbo: take the passing of the children through the fire to Moloch, or the description of the leprous Hanno, or the physical surrender of the priestess to her country's enemy, or the following picture of the crucified lion:

"They were marching through a wide defile, hedged in by two chains of reddish hillocks, when a nauseous odor struck their nostrils, and they believed that they saw something extraordinary at the top of a carob tree; a lion's head stood up above the foliage.

"Running towards it, they found a lion attached to a cross by its four limbs, like a criminal; his enormous muzzle hung to his breast, and his forepaws, half concealed beneath the abundance of his mane, were widely spread apart, like a bird's wings in flight; under the tightly drawn skin, his ribs severally protruded and his hind legs were nailed together, but were slightly drawn up; black blood had trickled through the hairs, and collected in stalactites at the end of his tail, which hung straight down the length of the cross. The soldiers crowded around the beast, diverting themselves by calling him ‘Consul!’ and ‘Citizen of Rome!’ and threw pebbles into his eyes to scatter the swarming gnats.”

And now take any characteristic series of pictures or incidents from Madame Bovary: take Bovary’s bungling and gruesome operations on the club-footed ostler’s leg, with the entire village clustering agape; take the picture of the eyeless, idiotic beggar on the road to Rouen; or the scene in which Emma offers herself for three thousand francs to Rodolphe; or the following bit, only a bit, from the detailed account of the heroine’s last hours, after the arsenical poisoning:

“Emma’s head was turned towards her right shoulder, the corner of her mouth, which was open, seemed like a black hole at the lower part of her face; her two thumbs were bent into the palms of her hands; a kind of white dust besprinkled her lashes, and her eyes were beginning to disappear in that viscous pallor that looks like a thin web, as if spiders had spun it over. The sheet sunk in from her breast to her knees, and then rose at the tips of her toes, and it seemed to Charles that infinite masses, an enormous load, were weighing upon her.

“The church clock struck two. They could hear the loud murmur of the river flowing in the darkness at the foot of the terrace. Monsieur Bournisien from time to time blew his nose noisily and Homais’ pen was scratching over the paper.”

In these two detached pictures — the one from a so-called “romantic,” the other from a so-called “realistic” book — one readily observes the likeness in the subjects, which are of a ghastly repulsiveness; the same minuteness of observation — e.g., the lion’s hind legs “slightly drawn up,” the woman’s thumbs “bent into the palms of her hands”; the same careful notation of effect on the several senses; the same rhetorical heightening — e.g., the “stalactites at the end of his tail,” the web in the woman’s eyes “as if spiders had spun it over”; and finally, that celebrated detachment, that air as of a medical examiner, recording the results of an autopsy. What can we know of such an author? All, or nearly all, that he knew of himself, provided we will searchingly ask ourselves what sort of mind is steadily attracted to the painting of such pictures, to the representation of such incidents, and what sort of mind expresses a lifetime of brooding on the significance of life in two such books as Madame Bovary and Salammbo.

At its first appearance, Madame Bovary was prosecuted, though unsuccessfully, as offensive to public morals. In derision of this famous prosecution, Henry James with studious jauntiness, asserts that in the heat of his first admiration he thought what an excellent moral tract it would make. “It may be very seriously maintained,” he continues, “that M. Flaubert’s masterpiece is the pearl of ‘Sunday reading.’“ As a work of fiction and recreation the book the pearl of “Sunday reading.” As a work of fiction and recreation the book lacks, in his opinion, one quite indispensable quality: it lacks charm. Well, there are momentary flashes of beauty and grace, dazzling bits of color, haunting melancholy cadences in every chapter of Flaubert; but a charming book he never wrote. A total impression of charm he never gave — he never could give; because his total impression of life was not charming but atrocious. It is perhaps an accident, as has been suggested, that one can so readily employ Madame Bovary to illustrate that text on the “wages of sin.” Emma, to be sure, goes down the easy and alluring path to disgrace and ruin. But that is only an incident in the wider meaning of Flaubert’s fiction, a meaning more amply expressed in Salammbo, where not one foolish woman alone but thousands on thousands of men, women, and children, mingled with charging elephants and vipers, flounder and fight in indescribable welters of blood and filth, and go down to rot in a common pit. If I read Flaubert’s meaning right, all human history is there; you may show it by painting on broad canvas a Carthaginian battle-scene or by photographing the details of a modern bedroom: a brief brightness, night and the odor of carrion, a crucified lion, a dying woman, the jeering of ribald mercenaries, the cackle of M. Homais. It is all one. If Flaubert deserved prosecution, it was not for making vice attractive, but for expressing with invasive energy that personal and desperately pessimistic conception of life by which he was almost overwhelmed.

That a bad physical regimen, bad habits of work in excessive quantities, and the solitude of his existence were contributory to Flaubert’s melancholy, his exacerbated egotism, and his pessimism is sufficiently obvious in the letters. This Norman giant with his aching head buried all day long in his arms, groping in anguish for a phrase, has naturally a kindly disposition towards various individuals of his species — is even capable of great generosity; but as he admits with a truth and pathos, deeply appealing to the maternal sympathies of his correspondent, he has no talent for living. He has never been able, like richer and more resourceful souls, to reconcile being a man with being an author. He has made his choice; he has renounced the cheerful sanities of the world:

“I pass entire weeks without exchanging a word with a human being; and at the end of the week it is not possible for me to recall a single day nor any event whatsoever. I see my mother and my niece on Sundays, and that is all. My only company consists of a band of rats in the garret, which make an infernal racket above my head, when the water does not roar or the wind blow. The nights are black as ink, and a silence surrounds me comparable to that of the desert. Sensitiveness is increased immeasurably in such a setting. I have palpitations of the heart for nothing.

“All that results from our charming profession. That is what it means to

"All that results from our charming profession. That is what it means to torment the soul and the body. But perhaps this torment is our proper lot here below."

To George Sand, who wrote as naturally as she breathed and almost as easily, seclusion and torment were by no means the necessary conditions of literary activity. Enormously productive, with a hundred books to his half-a-dozen, she has never dedicated and consecrated herself to her profession but has lived heartily and a bit recklessly from day to day, spending herself in many directions freely, gaily, extravagantly. Now that she has definitely said farewell to her youth, she finds that she is twenty years younger; and now that she is, in a sense, dissipating her personality and living in the lives of others, she finds that she is happier than ever before. "It can't be imperative to work so painfully" — such is the burden of her earlier counsels to Flaubert; "spare yourself a little, take some exercise, relax the tendons of your mind, indulge a little the physical man. Live a little as I do; and you will take your fatigues and illnesses and occasional dolours and dumps as incidents of the day's work and not magnify them into the mountainous overshadowing calamities from which you deduce your philosophy of universal misery." No advice could have been more wholesome or more timely. And with what pictures of her own busy felicity she reenforces her advice! I shall produce three of them here in order to emphasize that precious thing which George Sand loved to impart, and which she had the gift of imparting, namely, joy, the spontaneous joyousness of her own nature. The first passage is from a letter of June 14, 1867:

"I am a little remorseful to take whole days from your work, I who am never bored with loafing, and whom you could leave for whole hours under a tree, or before two lighted logs, with the assurance that I should find there something interesting. I know so well how to live OUTSIDE OF MYSELF. It hasn't always been like that. I also was young and subject to indignations. It is over! Since I have dipped into real nature, I have found there an order, a system, a calmness of cycles which is lacking in mankind, but which man can, up to a certain point, assimilate when he is not too directly at odds with the difficulties of his own life. When these difficulties return, he must endeavor to avoid them; but if he has drunk the cup of the eternally true, he does not get too excited for or against the ephemeral and relative truth."

The second passage is of June 21:

"I love everything that makes up a milieu, the rolling of the carriages and the noise of the workmen in Paris, the cries of a thousand birds in the country, the movement of the ships on the waters. I love also absolute, profound silence, and, in short, I love everything that is around me, no matter where I am."

The last passage gives a glimpse of the seventeenth of January, 1869, a

The last passage gives a glimpse of the seventeenth of January, [illegible], a typical day in Nohant:

“The individual named George Sand is well: he is enjoying the marvellous winter which reigns in Berry, gathering flowers, noting interesting botanical anomalies, making dresses and mantles for his daughter-in-law, costumes for the marionettes, cutting out scenery, dressing dolls, reading music, but above all spending hours with the little Aurore, who is a marvellous child. There is not a more tranquil or a happier individual in his domestic life than this old troubadour retired from business, who sings from time to time his little song to the moon, without caring much whether he sings well or ill, provided he sings the motif that runs in his head, and who, the rest of the time, idles deliciously…. This pale character has the great pleasure of loving you with all his heart, and of not passing a day without thinking of the other old troubadour, confined in his solitude of a frenzied artist, disdainful of all the pleasures of the world.”

Flaubert did “exercise” a little — once or twice — in compliance with the injunctions of his “dear master”; but he rather resented the implication that his pessimism was personal, that it had any particular connection with his peculiar temperament or habits. He wished to think of himself as a stoic, quite indifferent about his “carcase.” His briefer black moods he might acknowledge had transitory causes. But his general and abiding conceptions of humanity were the result of dispassionate reflections. “You think,” he cries in half-sportive pique, “that because I pass my life trying to make harmonious phrases, in avoiding assonances, that I too have not my little judgments on the things of this world? Alas! Yes! and moreover I shall burst, enraged at not expressing them.” And later: “Yes, I am susceptible to disinterested angers, and I love you all the more for loving me for that. Stupidity and injustice make me roar, — and I howl in my corner against a lot of things ‘that do not concern me.’“ “On the day that I am no longer in a rage, I shall fall flat as the marionette from which one withdraws the support of the stick.”

So far as Flaubert’s pessimism has an intellectual basis, it rests upon his researches in human history. For Salammbo and The Temptation of St. Anthony he ransacked ancient literature, devoured religions and mythologies, and saturated himself in the works of the Church Fathers. In order to get up the background of his Education Sentimentale he studied the Revolution of 1848 and its roots in the Revolution of 1789. He found, shall we say? what he was looking for- -inexhaustible proofs of the cruelty and stupidity of men. After “gulping” down the six volumes of Buchez and Roux, he declares: “The clearest thing I got out of them is an immense disgust for the French…. Not a liberal idea which has not been unpopular, not a just thing that has not caused scandal, not a great man who has not been mobbed or knifed. ‘The history of the human mind is the history of human folly,’ as says M. Voltaire. … Neo-Catholicism on the one hand, and Socialism on the other, have stultified France.” In another letter of the same Period and similar provocation: “However much you fatten human cattle, giving them straw as high as their bellies, and even gilding their stable, they will remain brutes, no matter what one says. All the advance that one can hope for, is to make the brute a little less wicked. But as for elevating the ideas of the mass, giving it a larger and therefore a less human conception of God, I have my doubts.”

In addition to the charges of violence and cruelty, which he brought against all antiquity as well as against modern times, much in the fashion of Swift or the older Mark Twain, Flaubert nursed four grave causes of indignation, made four major charges of folly against modern “Christian” civilization. In religion, we have substituted for Justice the doctrine of Grace. In our sociological considerations we act no longer with discrimination but upon a principle of universal sympathy. In the field of art and literature we have abandoned criticism and research for the Beautiful in favor of universal puffery. In politics we have nullified intelligence and renounced leadership to embrace universal suffrage, which is the last disgrace of the human spirit.

It must be acknowledged that Flaubert’s arraignment of modern society possesses the characteristics commended by the late Barett Wendell: it is marked in a high degree by “unity, mass, and coherence.” It must be admitted also that George Sand possessed in a high degree the Pauline virtue of being “not easily provoked,” or she never could have endured so patiently, so sweetly, Flaubert’s reiterated and increasingly ferocious assaults upon her own master passion, her ruling principle. George Sand was one whose entire life signally attested the power of a “saving grace,” resident in the creative and recuperative energies of nature, resident in the magical, the miracle-working, powers of the human heart, the powers of love and sympathy. She was a modern spiritual adventurer who had escaped unscathed from all the anathemas of the old theology; and she abounded, like St. Francis, in her sense of the new dispensation and in her benedictive exuberance towards all the creatures of God, including not merely sun, moon, and stars and her sister the lamb but also her brother the wolf. On this principle she loves Flaubert! — and archly asserts her arch-heresy in his teeth. He complains that her fundamental defect is that she doesn’t know how to “hate.” She replies, with a point that seems never really to have pierced his thick casing of masculine egotism:

“Artists are spoiled children and the best are great egotists. You say that I love them too well; I like them as I like the woods and the fields, everything, everyone that I know a little and that I study continually. I make my life in the midst of all that, and as I like my life, I like all that nourishes it and renews it. They do me a lot of ill turns which I see, but which I no longer feel. I know that there are thorns in the hedges, but that does not prevent me from putting out my hands and finding flowers there. If all are not beautiful, all are interesting. The day you took me to the Abbey of Saint-Georges I found the scrofularia borealis, a very rare plant in France. I was enchanted; there was much — — in the neighborhood where I gathered it. Such is life!

"And if one does not take life like that, one cannot take it in any way, and then how can one endure it? I find it amusing and interesting, and since I accept EVERYTHING, I am so much happier and more enthusiastic when I meet the beautiful and the good. If I did not have a great knowledge of the species, I should not have quickly understood you, or known you or loved you."

Two years later the principles and tempers of both these philosophers were put to their severest trial. In 1870, George Sand had opportunity to apply her doctrine of universal acceptance to the Prussians in Paris. Flaubert had opportunity to welcome scientific organization in the Prussian occupation of his own home at Croisset. The first reaction of both was a quite simple consternation and rage, in which Flaubert cries, "The hopeless barbarism of humanity fills me with a black melancholy," and George Sand, for the moment assenting, rejoins: "Men are ferocious and conceited brutes." As the war thickens around him and the wakened militancy of his compatriots presses him hard, Flaubert becomes more and more depressed; he forebodes a general collapse of civilization — before the century passes, a conflict of races, "in which several millions of men kill one another in one engagement." With the curiously vengeful satisfaction which mortals take in their own misery when it offers occasion to cry "I told you so," he exclaims: "Behold then, the NATURAL MAN. Make theories now! Boast the progress, the enlightenment and the good sense of the masses, and the gentleness of the French people! I assure you that anyone here who ventured to preach peace would get himself murdered."

George Sand in her fields at Nohant — not "above" but a little aside from the conflict — turns instinctively to her peasant doggedly, placidly, sticking at his plow; turns to her peasant with a kind of intuition that he is a symbol of faith, that he holds the keys to a consolation, which the rest of us blindly grope for: "He is imbecile, people say; no, he is a child in prosperity, a man in disaster, more of a man than we who complain; he says nothing, and while people are killing, he is sowing, repairing continually on one side what they are destroying on the other." Flaubert, who thinks that he has no "illusions" about peasants or the "average man," brings forward his own specific of a quite different nature: "Do you think that if France, instead of being governed on the whole by the crowd, were in the power of the mandarins, we should be where we are now? If, instead of having wished to enlighten the lower classes, we had busied ourselves with instructing the higher, we should not have seen M. de Keratry proposing the pillage of the duchy of Baden.”

In the great war of our own time with the same foes, our professional advocates of “preparedness,” our cheerful chemists, our scientific “intellectuals” — all our materialistic thinkers hard-shell and soft-shell, — took the position of Flaubert, just presented; reproached us bitterly for our slack, sentimental pacificism; and urged us with all speed to emulate the scientific spirit of our enemy. There is nothing more instructive in this correspondence than to observe how this last fond illusion falls away from Flaubert under the impact of an experience which demonstrated to his tortured senses the truth of the old Rabelaisian utterance, that “science without conscience is the ruin of the soul.”

“What use, pray,” he cries in the last disillusion, “is science, since this people abounding in scholars commits abominations worthy of the Huns and worse than theirs, because they are systematic, cold-blooded, voluntary, and have for an excuse, neither passion nor hunger?” And a few months later, he is still in mad anguish of desolation:

“I had some illusions! What barbarity! What a slump! I am wrathful at my contemporaries for having given me the feelings of a brute of the twelfth century! I’m stifling in gall! These officers who break mirrors with white gloves on, who know Sanskrit, and who fling themselves on the champagne; who steal your watch and then send you their visiting card, this war for money, these civilized savages give me more horror than cannibals. And all the world is going to imitate them, is going to be a soldier! Russia has now four millions of them. All Europe will wear a uniform. If we take our revenge, it will be ferocious in the last degree; and, mark my word, we are going to think only of that, of avenging ourselves on Germany.”

Under the imminence of the siege of Paris, Flaubert had drilled men, with an out-flashing of the savage fighting spirit of his ancestors, of which he was more than half ashamed. But at heart he is more dismayed, more demoralized, more thoroughly prostrated than George Sand. He has not fortitude actually to face the degree of depravity which he has always imputed to the human race, the baseness with which his imagination has long been easily and cynically familiar. As if his pessimism had been only a literary pigment, a resource of the studio, he shudders to find Paris painted in his own ebony colors, and his own purely “artistic” hatred of the bourgeois, translated into a principle of action, expressing itself in the horrors of the Commune, with half the population trying to strangle the other half. Hatred, after all, contempt and hatred, are not quite the most felicitous watchwords for the use of human society. Like one whose cruel jest has been taken more seriously than he had intended and has been turned upon his own head, Flaubert considers flight: “I cherish the following dream: of going to live in the sun in a tranquil country.” As a substitute for a physical retreat, he buries himself in a study of Buddhism, and so gradually returns to the pride of his intellectual isolation. As the tumult in his senses subsides, he even ventures to offer to George Sand the anodyne of his old philosophical despair: “Why are you so sad? Humanity offers nothing new. Its irremediable misery has filled me with sadness ever since my youth. And in addition I now have no disillusions. I believe that the crowd, the common herd will always be hateful. The only important thing is a little group of minds always the same — which passes the torch from one to another.”

There we must leave Flaubert, the thinker. He never passes beyond that point in his vision of reconstruction: a “legitimate aristocracy” established in contempt of the average man — with the Academy of Sciences displacing the Pope.

George Sand, amid these devastating external events, is beginning to feel the insidious siege of years. She can no longer rally her spiritual forces with the “bright speed” that she had in the old days. The fountain of her faith, which has never yet failed of renewal, fills more slowly. For weeks she broods in silence, fearing to augment her friend’s dismay with more of her own, fearing to resume a debate in which her cause may be better than her arguments and in which depression of her physical energy may diminish her power to put up a spirited defence before the really indomitable “last ditch” of her position. When Flaubert himself makes a momentary gesture towards the white flag, and talks of retreat, she seizes the opportunity for a short scornful sally. “Go to live in the sun in a tranquil country! Where? What country is going to be tranquil in this struggle of barbarity against civilization, a struggle which is going to be universal?” A month later she gives him fair warning that she has no intention of acknowledging final defeat: “For me, the ignoble experiment that Paris is attempting or is undergoing, proves nothing against the laws of the eternal progression of men and things, and, if I have gained any principles in my mind, good or bad, they are neither shattered nor changed by it. For a long time I have accepted patience as one accepts the sort of weather there is, the length of winter, old age, lack of success in all its forms.” But Flaubert, thinking that he has detected in her public utterances a decisive change of front, privately urges her in a finely figurative passage of a letter which denounces modern republicanism, universal suffrage, compulsory education, and the press — Flaubert urges her to come out openly in renunciation of her faith in humanity and her popular progressivistic doctrines. I must quote a few lines of his attempt at seduction:

“Ah, dear good master, if you could only hate! That is what you lack, hate. In spite of your great Sphinx eyes, you have seen the world through a golden colour. That comes from the sun in your heart; but so many shadows have risen that now you are not recognizing things any more. Come now! Cry out! Thunder! Take your great lyre and touch the brazen string: the monsters will flee. Bedew us with drops of the blood of wounded Themis.”

That summons roused the citadel, but not to surrender, not to betrayal. The eloquent daughter of the people caught up her great lyre — in the public Reponse a un ami of October 3, 1871. But her fingers passed lightly over the “brazen string” to pluck again with old power the resonant golden notes. Her reply, with its direct retorts to Flaubert, is not perhaps a very closely reasoned argument. In making the extract I have altered somewhat the order of the sentences:

“And what, you want me to stop loving? You want me to say that I have been mistaken all my life, that humanity is contemptible, hateful, that it always has been and always will be so? … What, then, do you want me to do, so as to isolate myself from my kind, from my compatriots, from the great family in whose bosom my own family is only one ear of corn in the terrestrial field? … But it is impossible, and your steady reason puts up with the most unreasonable of Utopias. In what Eden, in what fantastic Eldorado will you hide your family, your little group of friends, your intimate happiness, so that the lacerations of the social state and the disasters of the country shall not reach them? … In vain you are prudent and withdraw, your refuge will be invaded in its turn, and in perishing with human civilization you will be no greater a philosopher for not having loved, than those who threw themselves into the flood to save some debris of humanity. … The people, you say! The people is yourself and myself. It would be useless to deny it. There are not two races. … No, no, people do not isolate themselves, the ties of blood are not broken, people do not curse or scorn their kind. Humanity is not a vain word. Our life is composed of love, and not to love is to cease to live.”

This is, if you please, an effusion of sentiment, a chant of faith. In a world more and more given to judging trees by their fruits, we should err if we dismissed this sentiment, this faith, too lightly. Flaubert may have been a better disputant; he had a talent for writing. George Sand may have chosen her side with a truer instinct; she had a genius for living. This faith of hers sustained well the shocks of many long years, and this sentiment made life sweet.

STUART P. SHERMAN

EARLY LETTERS

I. TO GEORGE SAND 1863

Dear Madam,

I am not grateful to you for having performed what you call a duty. The goodness of your heart has touched me and your sympathy has made me proud. That is the whole of it.

Your letter which I have just received gives added value to your article [Footnote: Letter about Salammbo, January, 1863, Questions d’art et de litterature.] and goes on still further, and I do not know what to say to you unless it be that *I* QUITE FRANKLY LIKE YOU.

It was certainly not I who sent you in September, a little flower in an envelope. But, strange to say, at the same time, I received in the same manner, a leaf of a tree.

As for your very cordial invitation, I am not answering yes or no, in true Norman fashion. Perhaps some day this summer I shall surprise you. For I have a great desire to see you and to talk with you.

It would be very delightful to have your portrait to hang on the wall in my study in the country where I often spend long months entirely alone. Is the request indiscreet? If not, a thousand thanks in advance. Take them with the others which I reiterate.

II. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Paris, 15 March, 1864

Dear Flaubert,

I don’t know whether you lent me or gave me M. Taine’s beautiful book. In the uncertainty I am returning it to you. Here I have had only the time to read a part of it, and at Nohant, I shall have only the time to scribble for Buloz; but when I return, in two months, I shall ask you again for this admirable work of which the scope is so lofty, so noble.

I am sorry not to have said adieu to you; but as I return soon, I hope that you will not have forgotten me and that you will let me read something of your own also.

You were so good and so sympathetic to me at the first performance of Villemer that I no longer admire only your admirable talent, I love you with all my heart.

George Sand

1867

XLII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croissset

Paris, 9 January, 1867

Dear comrade,

Your old troubadour has been tempted to bite the dust. He is still in Paris. He should have left the 25th of December; his trunk was strapped; your first letter was awaiting him every day at Nohant. At last he is all ready to leave and he goes tomorrow with his son Alexandre [Footnote: Alexandre Dumas fils.] who is anxious to accompany him.

It is stupid to be laid on one's back and to lose consciousness for three days and to get up as enfeebled as if one had done something painful and useful. It was nothing after all, except temporary impossibility of digesting anything whatever. Cold, or weakness, or work, I don't know. I don't think of it any longer. Sainte-Beuve is much more disquieting, somebody have written you about it. He is better also, but there will be serious trouble, and on account of that, accidents to look out for. I am very saddened and anxious about it.

I have not worked for two weeks; so my task has not progressed very much, and as I don't know if I am going to be in shape very soon, I have given the Odeon A VACATION. They will take me when I am ready. I think of going a little to the south when I have seen my children. The plants of the coast are running through my head. I am prodigiously uninterested in anything which is not my little ideal of peaceful work, country life, and of tender and pure friendship. I really think that I am not going to live a long time, although I am quite cured and well. I get this warning from the great calm, CONTINUALLY CALMER, which exists in my formerly agitated soul. My brain only works from synthesis to analysis, and formerly it was the contrary. Now, what presents itself to my eyes when I awaken is the planet; I have considerable trouble in finding again there the MOI which interested me formerly, and which I begin to' call YOU in the plural. It is charming, the planet, very interesting, very curious but rather backward, and as yet somewhat unpractical; I hope to pass into an oasis with better highways and possible to all. One needs so much money and resources in order to travel here! and the time lost in order to procure. these necessaries is lost to study and to contemplation. It seems to me that there is due me something less complicated, less civilized, more naturally luxurious, and more easily good than this feverish halting-place. Will you come into the land, of my dreams, if I succeed in finding the road? Ah! who can know?

And the novel, is it getting on? Your courage has not declined? Solitude does not weigh on you? I really think that it is not absolute, and that somewhere there is a sweetheart who comes and goes, or who lives near there. But there is something of the anchorite in your life just the same, and if envy your situation. As for me, I am too alone at Palaiseau, with a dead soul; not alone enough at Nohant, with the children whom I love too much to belong to myself, — and at Paris, one does not know what one is, one forgets oneself entirely for a thousand things which are not worth any more than oneself. I embrace you with all my heart, dear friend; remember me to your mother, to your dear family, and write me at Nohant, that will do me good.

The cheeses? I don’t know at all, it seems to me that they spoke to me of them, but I don’t remember at all. I will tell you that from down there.

XLIII. TO GEORGE SAND

Croisset, Saturday night

No, dear master, you are not near your end. So much the worse for you perhaps. But you will live to be old, very old, as giants live, since you are of that race: only you MUST rest. One thing astonishes me and that is that you have not died twenty times over, having thought so much, written so much and suffered so much. Do go then, since you have the desire, to the Mediterranean. Its azure sky quiets and invigorates. There are the Countries of Youth, such as the Bay of Naples. Do they make one sadder sometimes? I do not know.

Life is not easy! What a complicated and extravagant affair! I know something about that. One must have money for everything! So that with a modest revenue and an unproductive profession one has to make up one’s mind to have but little. So I do! The habit is formed, but the days that work does not go well are not amusing. Yes indeed! I would love to follow you into another planet. And a propos of money, it is that which will make our planet uninhabitable in the near future, for it will be impossible to live here, even for the rich, without looking after one’s property; one will have to spend several hours a day fussing over one’s INCOME. Charming! I continue to fuss over my novel, and I shall go to Paris when I reach the end of my chapter, towards the middle of next month.

And whatever you suspect, no “lovely lady” comes to see me. Lovely ladies have occupied my mind a good deal, but have taken up very little of my time. Applying the term anchorite to me is perhaps a juster comparison than you think

Applying the term anchorite to me is perhaps a juster comparison than you think.

I pass entire weeks without exchanging a word with a human being, and at the end of the week it is not possible for me to recall a single day nor any event whatsoever. I see my mother and my niece on Sundays, and that is all. My only company consists of a band of rats in the garret, which make an infernal racket above my head, when the water does not roar or the wind blow. The nights are black as ink, and a silence surrounds me comparable to that of the desert. Sensitiveness is increased immeasurably in such a setting. I have palpitations of the heart for nothing.

All that results from our charming profession. That is what it means to torment the soul and the body. But perhaps this torment is our proper lot here below?

I told you, didn't I, that I had reread Consuelo and the Comtesse de Rudolstadt; it took me four days. We must discuss them at length, when you are willing. Why am I in love with Siverain? Perhaps because I am of both sexes.

XLIV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT at Croissset

Nohant, 15 January, 1867

Here I am at home, fairly strong except for several hours during the evening. Yet, THAT WILL PASS. THE EVIL OR HE WHO ENDURES IT, my old cure used to say, CAN NOT LAST. I received your letter this morning, dear friend of my heart. Why do I love you more than most of the others, even more than old and well-tried friends? I am asking, for my condition at this hour, is that of being

THOU WHO GOEST SEEKING, AT SUNSET, FORTUNE! …

Yes, intellectual fortune, LIGHT! Oh well, here it is: one gets, being old, at the sunset of life, — which is the most beautiful hour of tones and reflections, — a new idea of everything and of affection above all.

In the age of power and of personality, one tests one's friends as one tests the earth, from the point of view of reciprocity. One feels oneself solid, one wants to find that which bears one or leads one, solid. But, when one feels the intensity of the moi fleeing, one loves persons and things for what they are in themselves, for what they represent in the eyes of one's soul, and not at all for what they add further to one's destiny. It is like the picture or the statue which one would like to own, when one dreams at the same time of a beautiful house of one's own in which to put it.

But one has passed through green Bohemia without gathering anything there; one has remained poor, sentimental and troubadourish. One knows very well that it will always be the same, and that one will die without a hearth or a home. Then one thinks of the statue, of the picture which one would not know what to do with and which one would not know where to place with due honor, if one do with and which one would not know where to place with due honor, if one owned it. One is content to know that they are in some temple not profaned by cold analysis, a little far from the eye, and one loves them so much the more. One says: I will go again to the country where they are. I shall see again and I shall love always that which has made me love and understand them. The contact of my personality will not have changed them, it will not be myself that I shall love in them.

And it is thus, truly, that the ideal which one does not dream of grasping, fixes itself in one because it remains ITSELF. That is all the secret of the beautiful, of the only truth, of love, friendship, of art, of enthusiasm, and of faith. Consider it, you will see.

That solitude in which you live would be delicious to me in fine weather. In winter I find it stoical, and am forced to recall to myself that you have not the moral need of locomotion AS A HABIT. I used to think that was another expenditure of strength during this season of being shut in; — well, it is very fine, but it must not continue indefinitely; if the novel has to last longer, you must interrupt it, or vary it with distractions. Really, my dear friend, think of the life of the body, which gets upset and nervous when you subdue it too much. When I was ill in Paris, I saw a physician, very mad, but very intelligent, who said very true things on that subject. He said that I SPIRITUALIZED myself in a disquieting manner, and when I told him, exactly, a propos of you, that one could abstract oneself from everything except work, and have more rather than less strength, he answered that the danger was as great in accumulating as in losing, and a propos of this, many excellent things which I wish I could repeat to you.

Besides, you know them, but you never pay any attention to them. Then this work which you abuse so in words, is a passion, and a great one! Now, I shall tell you what you tell me. For our sake and for the sake of your old troubadour, do SPARE yourself a little.

Consuelo, La Comtesse de Rudolstadt, what are they? Are they mine? I don’t recall a single word in them. You are reading that, you? Are you really amused? Then I shall read them one of these days and I shall love myself if you love me.

What is being hysterical? I have perhaps been that also, I am perhaps; but I don’t know anything about it, never having profoundly studied the thing, and having heard of it without having studied it. Isn’t it an uneasiness, an anguish caused by the desire of an impossible SOMETHING OR OTHER? In that case, we are all attacked by it, by this strange illness, when we have imagination; and why should such a malady have a sex?

And still further, there is this for those strong in anatomy: THERE IS ONLY ONE SEX. A man and a woman are so entirely the same thing, that one hardly

ONE SEX. A man and a woman are so entirely the same thing, that one hardly understands the mass of distinctions and of subtle reasons with which society is nourished concerning this subject. I have observed the infancy and the development of my son and my daughter. My son was myself, therefore much more woman, than my daughter, who was an imperfect man.

I embrace you. Maurice and Lina who have tasted your cheese, send you their regards, and Mademoiselle Aurore cries to you, WAIT, WAIT, WAIT! That is all that she knows how to say while laughing like a crazy person; for, at heart she is serious, attentive, clever with her hands as a monkey and amusing herself better with games she invents, than with those one suggests to her. I think that she will have a mind of her own.

If I do not get cured here, I shall go to Cannes, where some friends are urging me to come. But I can not yet mention it to my children. When I am with them it is not easy to move. There is passion and jealousy. And all my life has been like that, never my own! Pity yourself then, you who belong to yourself!

XLV. TO GEORGE SAND

Wednesday evening

I have followed your counsel, dear master, I have EXERCISED!!! Am I not splendid; eh?

Sunday night, at eleven o’clock, there was such lovely moonlight along the river and on the snow that I was taken with an itch for movement, and I walked for two hours and a half imagining all sorts of things, pretending that I was travelling in Russia or in Norway. When the tide came in and cracked the cakes of ice in the Seine and the thin ice which covered the stream, it was, without any exaggeration, superb. Then I thought of you and I missed you.

I don’t like to eat alone. I have to associate the idea with someone with the things that please me. But this someone is rare. I too wonder why I love you. Is it because you are a great man or a charming being? I don’t know. What is certain is that I experience a PARTICULAR sentiment for you and I cannot define it.

And a propos of this, do you think (you who are a master of psychology), that one can love two people in the same way and that one can experience two identical sensations about them? I don’t think so, since our individuality changes at every moment of its existence.

You write me lovely things about “disinterested affection.” That is true, so is the opposite! We make God always in our own image. At the bottom of all our loves and all our admirations we find ourselves again: ourselves or something approaching us. What is the difference if the OURSELVES is good!

My moi bores me for the moment. How this fool weighs on my shoulders at times! He writes too slowly and is not bluffing at all when he complains of his work. What a task! and what a devil of an idea to have sought such a subject! You should give me a recipe for going faster: and you complain of seeking a fortune! You! I have received a little note from Saint-Beuve which reassures about his health, but it is sad. He seemed to me depressed at not being able to haunt the dells of Cyprus. He is within the truth, or at least within his own truth, which amounts to the same thing. I shall be like him perhaps, when I am his age. However, I think not. Not having had the same youth, my old age will be different.

That reminds me that I once dreamed a book on Saint Perrine. Champfleury treated that subject badly. For I don’t see that he is comic: I should have made him atrocious and lamentable. I think that the heart does not grow old; there are even people whose hearts grow bigger with age. I was much drier and more bitter twenty years ago than now. I am feminized and softened by wear, as others get harder, and that makes me INDIGNANT. I feel that I am becoming a COW, it takes nothing to move me; everything troubles and agitates me, everything is to me as the north wind is to the reed.

A word from you, which I remembered, has made me reread now the Fair Maid of Perth. It is a good story, whatever one says about it. That fellow decidedly had an imagination.

Well, adieu. Think of me. I send you my best love.

XLVI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croissset

Nohant, 1867

Bah! zut! troulala! Well! well! I am not sick any more, or at least I am only half sick. The air of the country restores me, or patience, or THE OTHER person, the one who wants to work again and to produce. What is my illness? Nothing. Everything is all right, but I have something that they call anemia, an effect without a tangible cause, a breakdown which has been threatening for several years, and which became noticeable at Palaiseau, after my return from Croisset. An emaciation that is too rapid to be within reason, a pulse too slow, too feeble, an indolent or capricious stomach, with a sensation of stifling and a fondness for inertia. I was not able to keep a glass of water on my poor stomach for several days, and that brought me so low that I thought I was hardly curable; but, all is getting on, and I have even been working since yesterday.

You, dear, you go walking in the night, in the snow. That is something which for an exceptional excursion, is rather foolish and might indeed make you ill also. Good Heavens! It is not the moon, it is the sun that I advise; we are not owls, OBVIOUSLY! We have just had three spring days. I wager that you have not climbed up to my dear orchard which is so pretty and which I love so much. If it was only in remembrance of me, you ought to climb up every fine day at noon. Your work would flow more abundantly afterward and you would regain the time you lost and more too.

Then you are worrying about money? I don’t know what that is, since I have not a sou in the world. I live by my day, work as does the proletarian; when I can no longer do my day’s work, I shall be packed up for the other world, and then I shall have no more need of anything. But you must live. How can you live by your pen if you always let yourself be duped and shorn? It is not I who can teach you how to protect yourself But haven’t you a friend who knows how to act for you? Alas, yes, the world is going to the devil in that respect; and I was talking of you, the other day, to a very dear friend, while I was showing him the artist, a personage become so rare, and cursing the necessity of thinking of the material side of life. I send you the last page of his letter; you will see that you have in him a friend whom you did not suspect, and whose name will surprise you.

No, I shall not go to Cannes, in spite of a strong temptation! Imagine, I received a little box filled with flowers gathered out-doors, five or six days ago; for the package followed me to Paris and to Palaiseau. Those flowers are adorably fresh, they smell sweetly, they are as pretty as anything. — Ah! to go, go at once to the country of the sun. But I have no money, and besides I have no time. My illness has delayed me and put me off. Let us stay here. Am I not well? If I can’t go to Paris next month, won’t you come to see me here? Certainly, it is an eight hours’ journey. You can not see this ancient nook. You owe me a week, or I shall believe that I love a big ingrate who does not pay me back.

Poor Sainte-Beuve! More unhappy than we, he who has never had any great disappointments and who has no longer any material worries. He bewails what is the least regrettable and the least serious in life understood as he understood it! And then very proud, having been a Jansenist, his heart has cooled in that direction. Perhaps the intelligence was developed, but that does not suffice to make us live, and does not teach us how to die. Barbes, who has expected for a long time that a stroke would carry him off, is gentle and smiling. It does not seem to him, and it does not seem to his friends, that death will separate him from us. He who quite goes away, is he who believes he ends and does not extend a hand so that anyone can follow him or rejoin him.

And good-night, dear friend of my heart. They are ringing for the performance. Maurice regales us this evening with marionettes. They are very amusing, and the theatre is so pretty! A real artist’s jewel. Why aren’t you here? It is horrid not to live next door to those one loves

It is horrid not to live next door to those one loves.

XLVII. TO GEORGE SAND

Wednesday

I received yesterday your son’s book. I shall start it when I have gotten rid of less amusing readings, probably. Meanwhile, don’t thank him any the less, dear master.

First, let’s talk of you; “arsenic.” I am sure of it! You must drink iron, walk, and sleep, and go to the south, no matter what it costs, there! Otherwise the WOODEN WOMAN will break down. As for money, we shall find it; and as for the time, take it. You won’t do anything that I advise, of course. Oh! well, you are wrong, and you hurt me.

No, I have not what you call worries about money; my revenues are very small, but they are sure. Only, as it is your friend’s habit to anticipate them he finds himself short at times, and he grumbles “in the silence of his closet,” but not elsewhere. Unless I have extraordinary reverses, I shall have enough to feed me and warm me until the end of my days. My heirs are or will be rich (for it is I who am the poor one of the family). Then, zut!

As for gaining money by my pen, that is an aspiration that I have never had, recognizing that I was radically incapable of it.

I have to live as a small retired countryman, which is not very amusing. But so many others who are worth more than I am not having the land, it would be unfair for me to complain. Accusing Providence is, moreover a mania so common, that one ought to refrain from it through simple good taste.

Another word about money and one that shall be quite between ourselves. I can, without being inconvenienced at all, as soon as I am in Paris, that is to say from the 20th to the 23rd of the present month, lend you a thousand francs, if you need them in order to go to Cannes. I make you this proposition bluntly, as I would to Bouilhet, or any other intimate friend. Come, don’t stand on ceremony!

Between people in society, that would not be correct, I know that, but between troubadours many things are allowable.

You are very kind with your invitation to go to Nohant. I shall go, for I want very much to see your house. I am annoyed not to know it when I think of you. But I shall have to put off that pleasure till next summer. Now I have to stay some time in Paris. Three months are not too long for all I want to do there.

I send you back the page from the letter of your friend Barbes, whose real biography I know very imperfectly. All I know of him is that he is honest and heroic. Give him a handshake for me, to thank him for his sympathy. Is he, BETWEEN OURSELVES, as intelligent as he is good?

I feel the importance now, of getting men of that class to be rather frank with me. For I am going to start studying the Revolution of ‘48. You have promised me to hunt in your library at Nohant for (1) an article of yours on faience; (2) a novel by father X — -, a Jesuit, on the Holy Virgin.

But what sternness for the father Beuve who is neither Jesuit nor virgin! He regrets, you say, “what is the least regrettable, understood as he understood it.” Why so? Everything depends upon the intensity that one puts on the thing.

Men always find that the most serious thing of their existence is enjoyment.

Woman for us all is the highest point of the infinite. That is not noble, but that is the real depth of the male. They exaggerate that unmercifully, God be thanked, for literature and for individual happiness also.

Oh! I have missed you so much. The tides are superb, the wind groans, the river foams and overflows. It blows from the ocean, which benefits one.

XLVIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Paris

Nohant, 8 February, 1867

No, I am not Catholic, but I reject monstrosities. I say that the hideous old man who buys young girls does not make love and that there is in it neither death nor birth, nor infinity, nor male nor female. It is a thing against nature; for it is not desire that drives the young girl into the arms of the ugly old man, and where there is not liberty nor reciprocity there is an attack against holy nature. Therefore that which he regrets is not regrettable, unless he thinks that his little cocottes will regret his person, and I ask you if they will regret anything else than their dirty wages? That was the gangrene in this great and admirable mind, so lucid and so wise on all other subjects. One pardons everything in those one loves, when one is obliged to defend them from their enemies. But what we say between ourselves is buried, and I can tell you that vice has quite spoiled my old friend.

We must believe that we love one another a great deal, dear comrade, for we both had the same thought at the same time. You offer me a thousand francs with which to go to Cannes; you who are as hard up as I am, and, when you wrote to me that you WERE BOTHERED about money matters, I opened my letter again, to offer you half of what I have, which still amounts to about two thousand francs; it is my reserve. And then I did not dare. Why? It is quite stupid; you were better than I, you came straight to the point. Well, I thank you for that kind thought and I do not accept. But I would accept, be sure of it, if I did not have other resources. Only I tell you that if anyone ought to lend to me, it is Buloz who has bought chateaux and lands with my novels. He would not refuse me, I know. He even offers it to me. I shall take from him then, if I have to. But I am not in a condition to leave, I have had a relapse these last few days. I slept thirty-six hours together, exhausted. Now I am on my feet again, but weak. I confess to you that I have not the energy TO WISH TO LIVE. I don't care about it; moving from where I am comfortable, to seek new fatigues, working like a dog to renew a dog's life, it is a little stupid, I think, when it would be so sweet to pass away like that, still loving, still loved, at strife with no one, not discontent with oneself and dreaming of the wonders of other worlds- -this assumes that the imagination is still fresh. But I don't know why I talk to you of things considered sad, I have too much the habit of looking at them pleasantly. I forget that they appear afflicting to those who seem in the fulness of life. Don't let's talk about them any longer and let spring do the work, spring which perhaps will breathe into me the desire to take up my work again. I shall be as docile to the interior voice that tells me to walk as to that telling me to sit down.

It is not I who promised you a novel on the Holy Virgin. At least I don't think so. I can not find my article on faience. Do look and see if it was printed at the end of one of my volumes to complete the last sheet. It was entitled Giovanni Freppa ou les Maioliques.

Oh! what luck! While writing to you it has come back to me that there is a corner where I have not looked. I hasten there, I find it! I find something better than my article, and I send you three works which will make you as learned as I am. That of Passeri is charming.

Barbes has intelligence, certainly! but he is a sugar loaf. Brain on a lofty scale, head of an Indian, with gentle instincts, almost impossible to find; all for metaphysical thought which becomes an instinct and a passion that dominates everything. Add to that a character that one can only compare to Garibaldi. A creature of incredible sanctity and perfection. Immense worth without immediate application in France. The setting of another age or another country is what this hero needs. And now good-night, — O God, what a CALF I am! I leave you the title of COW, which you give yourself in your days of weariness. Never mind, tell me when you are to be in Paris. It is probable that I shall have to go there for a few days for one thing or another. We must embrace each other and then you shall come to Nohant this summer. It is agreed, it must be!

My affectionate regards to your mother and to your lovely niece.

Please acknowledge the receipt of the three pamphlets; they would be a loss.

XLIX. TO GEORGE SAND

Dear master,

You really ought to go to see the sun somewhere; it is foolish to be always suffering; do travel; rest; resignation is the worst of the virtues.

I have need of it in order to endure all the stupidities that I hear! You can not imagine to what a degree they have reached. France which has been sometimes taken with St. Vitus dance (as under Charles VI), seems to me now to have a paralysis of the brain. They are mad with fear. Fear of the Prussians, fear of the strikes, fear of the Exposition which does not go well, fear of everything. We have to go back to 1849 to find such a degree of imbecility.

There was at the last Magny such inane conversation that I swore to myself never to put foot inside the place again. The only subjects under discussion all the time were Bismarck and the Luxembourg. I was stuffed with it! For the rest I don’t find it easy to live. Far from becoming blunted my sensibilities are sharper; a lot of insignificant things make me suffer. Pardon this weakness, you who are so strong and tolerant.

The novel does not go at all well. I am deep in reading the newspapers of ‘48. I have had to make several (and have not yet finished) journeys to Sevres, to Creil, *etc.*

Father Sainte-Beuve is preparing a discourse on free thought which he will read at the Senate a propos of the press law. He has been very shrewd, you know.

You tell your son Maurice that I love him very much, first because he is your son and secundo because he is he. I find him good, clever, cultivated, not a poseur, in short charming, and “with talent.”

L. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 4 March, 1867

Dear good friend, the friend of my heart, the old troubadour is as well as ten thousand men — who are well, and he is gay as a finch, because the sun shines again and copy is progressing.

He will probably go to Paris soon for the play by his son Dumas, let us try to be there together.

Maurice is very proud to be declared COCK by an eagle. At this moment he is having a spree with veal and wine in honor of his firemen.

The AMERICAN [Footnote: Henry Harrisse.] in question is charming. He has, literally speaking, a passion for you, and he writes me that after seeing you he loves you more, that does not surprise me.

Poor Bouilhet! Give him this little note enclosed here. I share his sorrow, I knew her.

Are you amused in Paris? Are you as sedentary there as at Croisset?

In that case I shall hardly see you unless I go to see you.

Tell me the hours when you do not receive the fair sex, and when sexagenarian troubadours do not incommode you.

Cadio is entirely redone and rewritten up to the part I read to you, it is less offensive.

I am not doing Montreveche. I will tell you about that. It is quite a story. I love you and I embrace you with all my heart.

Your old George Sand

Did you receive my pamphlets on the faience? You have not acknowledged them. They were sent to Croisset the day after I got your last letter.

LI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT 14 March, 1867

Your old troubadour is again prostrate. Every moment his guitar threatens to be broken. And then he sleeps forty-eight hours and is cured — but feeble, and he can not be in Paris on the 16th as he had intended. Maurice went alone a little while ago, I shall go to join him in five or six days.

Little Aurore consoles me for this mischance. She twitters like a bird along with the birds who are twittering already as in full spring time.

The anemone Sylvia which I brought from the woods into the garden and which I had a great deal of trouble in acclimating is finally growing thousands of white and pink stars among the blue periwinkle. It is warm and damp. One can not break one’s guitar in weather like this. Good-bye, dear good friend.

G. Sand

LII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Friday, 22 March, 1867

Your old troubadour is here, not so badly off. He will go to dine on Monday at Magny’s, we shall agree on a day for both of us to dine with Maurice. He is at home at five o’clock but not before Monday.

He is running around!

He embraces you

He embraces you.

LIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT 1867 (?)

Then Wednesday, if you wish, my dear old fellow. Whom do you want to have with us? Certainly, the dear Beuve if that is possible, and no one if you like.

We embrace you.

G. S. Maurice Saturday evening.

LIV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 11 April, 1867

Here I am back again in my nest, and almost cured from a bad fever which attacked me in Paris, the day before my departure.

Really your old troubadour has had ridiculous health for six months. March and April have been such stupid months for him. It makes no difference, however, for he is recovering again, and is seeing once more the trees and the grass grow, it is always the same thing and that is why it is beautiful and good. Maurice has been touched by the friendship that you have shown him; you have seduced and ravished him, and he is not demonstrative.

He and his wife, — who is not at all an ordinary woman, — desire absolutely that you come to our house this year, I am charged to tell you so very seriously and persistently if need be And is that hateful grip gone? Maurice wanted to go to get news of you; but on seeing me so prostrated by the fever, he thought of nothing except packing me up and bringing me here like a parcel. I did nothing except sleep from Paris to Nohant and I was revived on receiving the kisses of Aurore who knows now how to give great kisses, laughing wildly all the while; she finds that very funny.

And the novel? Does it go on its way the same in Paris as in Croisset? It seems to me that everywhere you lead the same hermitlike existence. When you have the time to think of friends, remember your old comrade and send him two lines to tell him that you are well and that you don’t forget him.

LV. TO GEORGE SAND

I am worried at not having news from you, dear master. What has become of you? When shall I see you?

you? When shall I see you?

My trip to Nohant has fallen through. The reason is this: my mother had a little stroke a week ago. There is nothing left of it, but it might come on again. She is anxious for me, and I am going to hurry back to Croisset. If she is doing well towards the month of August, and I am not worried, it is not necessary to tell you that I shall rush headlong towards your home.

As regards news, Sainte-Beuve seems to me very ill, and Bouilhet has just been appointed librarian at Rouen.

Since the rumours of war have quieted down, people seem to me a little less foolish. My nausea caused by the public cowardice is decreasing.

I went twice to the Exposition; it is amazing. There are splendid and extraordinary things there. But man is made to swallow the infinite. One would have to know all sciences and all arts in order to be interested in everything that one sees on the Champ de Mars. Never mind; someone who had three entire months to himself, and went every morning to take notes, would save himself in consequence much reading and many journeys.

One feels oneself there very far from Paris, in a new and ugly world, an enormous world which is perhaps the world of the future. The first time that I lunched there, I thought all the time of America, and I wanted to speak like a negro.

LVI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croisset

Nohant, 9 May, 1867

Dear friend of my heart,

I am well, I am at work, I am finishing Cadio. It is warm, I am alive, I am calm and sad, I hardly know why. In this existence so even, so tranquil, and so gentle as I have here, I am in an element that weakens me morally while strengthening me physically; and I fall into melancholies of honey and roses which are none the less melancholy. It seems to me that all those I love forget me, and that it is justice, because I live a selfish life having nothing to do for any one of them.

I have lived with tremendous attachments which overwhelmed me, which exceeded my strength and which I often used to curse. And it happens that having nothing more to carry them on with, I am bored by being well. If the human race went on very well or very ill, one would reattach oneself to a general interest, would live with an idea, wise or foolish. But you see where we are now, you who storm so fiercely against cowards. That disappears, you say? But only to recommence! What kind of a society is it that becomes paralyzed in the midst of its expansions, because tomorrow can bring a storm? The thought of danger has never produced such demoralizations. Have we declined to such an extent that it is necessary to beg us to eat, telling us at the same time that nothing will happen to disturb our digestion? Yes, it is silly, it is shameful. Is it the result of prosperity, and does civilization involve this sickly and cowardly selfishness?

My optimism has had a rude jolt of late. I worked up a joy, a courage at the idea of seeing you here. It was like a cure that I carefully contrived, but you are worried about your dear, old mother, and certainly I can not protest.

Well, if, before your departure from Paris, I can finish Cadio, to which I am bound under pain of having nothing wherewith to pay for my tobacco and my shoes, I shall go with Maurice to embrace you. If not, I shall hope for you about the middle of the summer. My children, quite unhappy by this delay, beg to hope for you also, and we hope it so much the more because it would be a good sign for the dear mother.

Maurice has plunged again into Natural History; he wants to perfect himself in the MICROS; I learn on the rebound. When I shall have fixed in my head the name and the appearance of two or three thousand imperceptible varieties, I shall be well advanced, don’t you think so? Well, these studies are veritable OCTOPUSES, which entwine about you and which open to you I don’t know what infinity. You ask if it is the destiny of man to DRINK THE INFINITE; my heavens, yes, don’t doubt it, it is his destiny, since it is his dream and his passion.

Inventing is absorbing also; but what fatigue afterwards! How empty and worn out intellectually one feels, when one has scribbled for weeks and months about that animal with two legs which has the only right to be represented in novels! I see Maurice quite refreshed and rejuvenated when he returns from his beasts and his pebbles, and if I aspire to come out from my misery, it is to bury myself also in studies, which in the speech of the Philistines, are not of any use. Still it is worth more than to say mass and to ring the bell for the adoration of the Creator.

Is it true what you tell me of G — — ? Is it possible? I can not believe it. Is there in the atmosphere which the earth engenders nowadays, a gas, laughing or otherwise, which suddenly seizes the brain, and carries it on to commit extravagances, as there was under the first revolution a maddening fluid which inspired one to commit cruelties? We have fallen from the Hell of Dante into that of Scarron.

Of what are you thinking, good head and good heart, in the midst of this bacchanal? You are wrathful, oh very well, I like that better than if you were laughing at it; but when you are calmer and when you reflect?

Must one find some fashion of accepting the honor, the duty, and the fatigue of living? As for me, I revert to the idea of an everlasting journey through worlds more amusing, but it would be necessary to go there quickly and change continually. The life that one fears so much to lose is always too long for those who understand quickly what they see. Everything repeats itself and goes over and over again in it.

I assure you that there is only one pleasure: learning what one does not know, and one happiness: loving the exceptions. Therefore I love you and I embrace you tenderly.

Your old troubadour G. Sand

I am anxious about Sainte-Beuve. What a loss that would be! I am content if Bouilhet is content. Is it really a good position?

LVII. TO GEORGE SAND

Paris, Friday morning

I am returning to my mother next Monday, dear master. I have little hope of seeing you before then!

But when you are in Paris, what is to prevent you from pushing on to Croisset where everyone, including myself, adores you? Sainte-Beuve has finally consented to see a specialist and to be seriously treated. And he is better anyway. His morale is improving.

Bouilhet's position gives him four thousand francs a year and lodging. He now need not think of earning his living, which is a real luxury.

No one talks of the war any more, they don't talk of anything.

The Exposition alone is what "everybody is thinking about," and the cabmen exasperate the bourgeois.

They were beautiful (the bourgeois) during the strike of the tailors. One would have said that SOCIETY was going to pieces.

Axiom: Hatred of the bourgeois is the beginning of virtue. But I include in the word bourgeois, the bourgeois in blouses as well the bourgeois in coats.

It is we and we alone, that is to say the literary men, who are the people, or to say it better: the tradition of humanity.

Yes, I am susceptible to disinterested angers and I love you all the more for loving me for that. Stupidity and injustice make me roar, — and I HOWL in my corner against a lot of things "that do not concern me."

How sad it is not to live together, dear master, I admired you before I knew you. From the day I saw your lovely and kind face, I loved you. There you are. — And I embrace you warmly.

Your old

Your old

Gustave Flaubert

I shall have the package of pamphlets about faience sent to the rue des Feuillantines. A good handshake to Maurice. A kiss on the four cheeks of Mademoiselle Aurore.

LVIII. TO GEORGE SAND

I stayed thirty-six hours in Paris at the beginning of this week, in order to be present at the Tuileries ball. Without any exaggeration, it was splendid. Paris on the whole turns to the colossal. It is becoming foolish and unrestrained. Perhaps we are returning to the ancient Orient. It seems to me that idols will come out of the earth. We are menaced with a Babylon.

Why not? The INDIVIDUAL has been so denied by democracy that he will abase himself to a complete effacement, as under the great theocratic despotisms.

The Tsar of Russia displeased me profoundly; I found him a rustic.

On a parallel with Monsieur Floquet who cries without any danger:

“Long live Poland!” We have chic people who have had themselves

registered at the Elysee. Oh! what a fine epoch!

My novel goes piano. The further I get on the more difficulties arise. What a heavy cart of sandstone to drag along! And you pity yourself for a labor that lasts six months!

I have enough more for two years, at least (OF MINE). How the devil do you find the connection between your ideas? It is that that delays me. Moreover this book demands tiresome researches. For instance on Monday; I was at the Jockey Club, at the Cafe Anglais, and at a lawyer’s in turn. Do you like Victor Hugo’s preface to the Paris-Guide? Not very much, do you? Hugo’s philosophy seems to me always vague.

I was carried away with delight, a week ago, at an encampment of Gypsies who had established at Rouen. This is the third time that I have seen them and always with a new pleasure. The great thing is that they excite the hatred of the bourgeois, although they are as inoffensive as sheep.

I appeared very badly before the crowd because I gave them a few sous, and I heard some fine words a la Prudhomme. That hatred springs from something very profound and complex. One finds it among all orderly people.

It is the hatred that one feels for the bedouin, for the heretic, the philosopher, the solitary, the poet; and there is a fear in that hate. I, who am always for the minority, am exasperated by it. It is true that many things exasperate me. On the day that I am no longer outraged, I shall fall flat as the marionette from which one withdraws the support of the stick.

Thus, THE STAKE that has supported me this winter, is the indignation that I had against our great national historian, M. Thiers, who had reached the condition of a demi-god, and the pamphlet Trochu, and the everlasting Changarnier coming back over the water. God be thanked that the Exposition has delivered us momentarily from these GREAT MEN.

LIX. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croisset

Nohant, 30 May, 1867

Here you are at home, old friend of my heart, and I and Maurice must go to embrace you. If you are still buried in work, we shall only come and go. It is so near to Paris, that you must not hesitate to tell us. I have finished Cadio, hurray! I have only to POLISH it a little. It is like an illness, carrying this great affair for so long in one’s HEAD. I have been so interrupted by real illnesses that I have had great trouble in setting to work again at it. But I am wonderfully well since the fine weather and I am going to take a bath of botany.

Maurice will take one of entomology. He walks three leagues with a friend of like energy in order to hunt in a great plain for an animal which has to be looked at with a magnifying glass. That is happiness! That is being really infatuated. My gloom has disappeared in making Cadio; at present I am only fifteen years old, and everything to me appears for the best in the best possible of worlds. That will last as long as it can. These are the intervals of innocence in which forgetfulness of evil compensates for the inexperience of the golden age.

How is your dear mother? She is fortunate to have you again near her! And the novel? Good heavens! it must get on! Are you walking a little? Are you more reasonable?

The other day, some people not at all stupid were here who spoke highly of Madame Bovary, but with less zest of Salammbo. Lina got into a white heat, not being willing that those wretches should make the slightest objection to it; Maurice had to calm her, and moreover he criticised the work very well, as an artist and as a scholar; so well that the recalcitrants laid down their arms. I should like to have written what he said. He speaks little and often badly; but that time he succeeded extraordinarily well.

I shall then not say adieu, but au revoir, as soon as possible. I love you much, much, my dear old fellow, you know it. My ideal would be to live a long life with a good and great heart like yours. But then, one would want never to die, and when one is really OLD, like me, one must hold oneself ready for anything.

I embrace you tenderly, so does Maurice. Aurore is the sweetest and the most ridiculous person. Her father makes her drink while he says: Dominus vobiscum! then she drinks and answers: Amen! How she is getting on! What a marvel is the development of a little child! No one has ever written about that. Followed day by day, it would be precious in every respect. It is one of those things that we all see without noticing.

Adieu again; think of your old troubadour who thinks unceasingly of you.

G. Sand

LX. TO Gustave Flaubert

Nohant, 14 June, 1867

Dear friend of my heart, I leave with my son and his wife the 20th of the month to stay two weeks in Paris, perhaps more if the revival of Villemer delays me longer. Therefore your dear good mother, whom I do not want to miss, has all the time she needs to go to see her daughters. I shall wait in Paris until you tell me if she has returned, or rather, if I make you a real visit, you shall tell me the time that suits you best.

My intention, for the moment, was quite simply to go to pass an hour with you, and Lina was tempted to accompany me; I should have shown her Rouen, and then we should have embraced you in time to return in the evening to Paris; for the dear little one has always her ear and her heart listening when she is away from Aurore, and her holidays are marked by a continual uneasiness which I quite understand. Aurore is a treasure of gentleness which absorbs us all. If it can be arranged, we shall then go on the run to grasp your hands. If it can not, I shall go alone later when your heart says so, and, if you are going south, I shall put it off until everything can be arranged without disturbing whatever may be the plans of your mother or yourself. I am very free. So, don’t disturb yourself, and arrange your summer without bothering about me.

I have thirty-six plans also, but I don’t incline to any one; what amuses me is what seizes me and takes me off suddenly. It is with a journey as with a novel: those who travel are those who command. Only when one is in Paris, Rouen is not a journey, and I shall always be ready when I am there, to respond to your call. I am a little remorseful to take whole days from your work, I who am never bored with loafing, and whom you could leave for whole hours under a tree, or before two lighted logs, with the assurance that I should find there something interesting. I know so well how to live OUTSIDE OF MYSELF! It hasn’t always been like that. I also was young and subject to indignations. It is over!

Since I have dipped into real nature, I have found there an order, a system, a calmness of cycles which is lacking in mankind, but which man can, up to a certain point, assimilate when he is not too directly at odds with the difficulties of his own life. When these difficulties return he must endeavor to avoid them; but if he has drunk the cup of the eternally true, he does not get too excited for or against the ephemeral and relative truth.

But why do I say this to you? Because it comes to my pen-point; for in considering it carefully, your state of overexcitement is probably truer, or at least more fertile and more human than my SENILE tranquillity. I would not like to make you as I am, even if by a magical operation I could. I should not be interested in myself if I had the honor to meet myself. I should say that one troubadour is enough to manage and I should send the other to Chaillot.

A propos of gypsies, do you know that there are gypsies of the sea? I discovered in the outskirts of Tamaris, among the furthest rocks, great boats well sheltered, with women and children, a coast settlement, very restricted, very tanned; fishing for food without trading; speaking a language that the people of the country do not understand; living only in these great boats stranded on the sand, when the storms troubled them in their rocky coves; intermarrying, inoffensive and sombre, timid or savage; not answering when any one speaks to them. I don’t even know what to call them. The name that I have been told has escaped me but I could get some one to tell me again. Naturally the country people hate them and that they have no religion; if that is so they ought to be superior to us. I ventured all alone among them. “Good day, sirs.” Response, a slight bend of the head. I looked at their encampment, no one moved. It seemed as if they did not see me. I asked them if my curiosity annoyed them. A shrug of the shoulders as if to say, “What do we care?” I spoke to a young man who was mending the meshes in a net very cleverly; I showed him a piece of five francs in gold. He looked the other way. I showed him one in silver. He deigned to look at it. “Do you want it?” He bent his head on his work. I put it near him, he did not move. I went away, he followed me with his eyes. When he thought that I could not see him any longer, he took the piece and went to talk with a group. I don’t know what happened. I fancy that they put it in the common exchequer. I began botanizing at some distance within sight to see if they would come to ask me something or to thank me. No one moved. I returned as if by chance towards them; the same silence, the same indifference. An hour later, was at the top of the cliff, and I asked the coast-guard who those people were who spoke neither French, nor Italian, nor patois. He told me their name, which I have not remembered.

He thought that they were Moors, left on the coast since the time of the great invasions from Provence, and perhaps he is not mistaken. He told me that he had seen me among them from his watch tower, and that I was wrong, for they were a people capable of anything; but when I asked him what harm they did he confessed to me that they had done none. They lived by their fishing and above all on the things cast up by the sea which they knew how to gather up before the most alert. They were an object of perfect scorn. Why? Always the same story. He who does not do as all the world does can only do evil.

If you go into the country, you might perhaps meet them at the end of the Brusq. But they are birds of passage, and there are years when they do not appear at all. I have not even seen the Paris Guide. They owe me a copy, however; for I gave something to it without receiving payment. It is because of that no doubt that they have forgotten me.

To conclude, I shall be in Paris from the 20th of June to the 5th of July. Send me a word always to 97 rue des Feuillantines. I shall stay perhaps longer, but I don’t know. I embrace you tenderly, my splendid old fellow. Walk a little, I beg of you. I don’t fear anything for the novel; but I fear for the nervous system taking too much the place of the muscular system. I am very well, except for thunder bolts, when I fall on my bed for forty-eight hours and don’t want any one to speak to me. But it is rare and if I do not relent so that they can nurse me, I get up perfectly cured.

Maurice’s love. Entomology has taken possession of him this year; he discovers marvels. Embrace your mother for me, and take good care of her. I love you with all my heart.

G. Sand

LXI. To GUSTAVE FLATUBERT

Nohant, 24 July, 1867

Dear good friend, I spent three weeks in Paris with my children, hoping to see you arriving or to receive a line from you which would tell me to come and embrace you. But you were HEAD OVER HEELS and I respect these crises of work; I know them! Here am I back again in old Nohant, and Maurice at Nerac terminating by a compromise the law-suit which keeps him from his inheritance. His agreeable father stole about three hundred thousand francs from his children in order to please his cook; happily, although Monsieur used to lead this edifying life, I used to work and did not cut into my capital. I have nothing, but I shall leave the daily bread assured.

They write me that Villemer goes well. Little Aurore is as pretty as anything

They write me that Villemer goes well. Little Aurore is as pretty as anything and does a thousand gracious tricks. My daughter Lina is always my real daughter The OTHER is well and is beautiful, that is all that I ask of her.

I am working again; but I am not strong. I am paying for my energy and activity in Paris. That does not make any difference, I am not angry against life, I love you with all my heart. I see, when I am gloomy, your kind face, and I feel the radiant power of your goodness. You are a charm in the Indian summer of my sweet and pure friendships, without egoisms, and without deceptions in consequence.

Think of me sometimes, work well and call me when you are ready to loaf. If you are not ready, never mind. If your heart told you to come here, there would be feasting and joy in the family. I saw Sainte-Beuve, I am content and proud of him.

Good night, friend of my heart. I embrace you as well as your mother.

G. Sand

LXII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Paris

Nohant, 6 August, 1867

When I see how hard my old friend has to work in order to write a novel, it discourages my facility, and I tell myself that I write BOTCHED literature. I have finished Cadio; it has been in Buloz’ hands a long time. I am writing another thing,[Footnote: Mademoiselle Merquem.] but I don’t see it yet very clearly; what can one do without sun and without heat? I ought to be in Paris now, to see the Exposition again at my leisure, and to take your mother to walk with you; but I really must work, since I have only that to live on. And then the children; that Aurore is a wonder. You really must see her, perhaps I shall not see her long, If I don’t think I am destined to grow very old; I must lose no time in loving!

Yes, you are right, it is that that sustains me. This hypocritical fit has a rough disillusionment in store for it, and one will lose nothing by waiting. On the contrary, one will gain. You will see that, you who are old though still quite young. You are my son’s age. You will laugh together when you see this heap of rubbish collapse.

You must not be a Norman, you must come and see us for several days, you will make us happy; and it will restore the blood in my veins and the joy in my heart.

Love your old troubadour always and talk to him of Paris; a few words when you have the time.

Outline a scene for Nohant with four or five characters, we shall enjoy it. We embrace you and summon you.

embrace you and summon you.

G. Sand

LXIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croisset

Nohant, 18 August, 1867

Where are you, my dear old fellow? If by chance you should be in Paris, during the first few days of September, let us try to see each other. I shall stay there three days and I shall return here. But I do not hope to meet you there. You ought to be in some lovely country, far from Paris and from its dust. I do not know even if my letter will reach you. Never mind, if you can give news of yourself, do so. I am in despair. I have lost suddenly, without even knowing that he was ill, my poor dear, old friend, Rollinat, an angel of goodness, of courage, of devotion. It is a heavy blow for me. If you were here you would give me courage; but my poor children are as overwhelmed as I am. We adored him, all the countryside adored him.

Keep well, and think sometimes of your absent friends. We embrace you affectionately. The little one is very well, she is charming.

LXIV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Paris

Nohant, August, 1867

I bless you, my dear old fellow, for the kind thought that you had of coming; but you were right not to travel while you were ill. Ah! my God, I dream of nothing but illness and unhappiness: take care of yourself, my old comrade. I shall go to see you if I can pull myself together; for, since this new dagger-thrust, I am feeble and crushed and I have a sort of fever. I shall write you a line from Paris. If you are prevented, you must answer me by telegram. You know that with me there is no need of explanation: I know every hindrance in life and I never blame the hearts that I know. — I wish that, right away, if you have a moment to write, you would tell me where I should go for three days to see the coast of Normandy without striking the neighborhood where “THE WORLD” goes. In order to go on with my novel, I must see a countryside near the Channel, that all the world has not talked about, and where there are real natives at home, peasants, fisherfolk, a real village in a corner of the rocks. If you are in the mood we will go there together. If not, don’t bother about me. I go everywhere and I am not disturbed by anything. You told me that the population of the coasts was the best in the country, and that there were real dyed-in-the-wool simple-hearted men there. It would be good to see their faces, their clothes, their houses, and their horizons. That is enough for what I want to do, I need only accessories; I hardly want to describe; SEEING it is enough in order not to make a false stroke. How is your mother? Have you been able to take her to make a false stroke. How is your mother? Have you been able to take her to walk and to distract her a little? Embrace her for me as I embrace you.

G. Sand

Maurice embraces you; I shall go to Paris without him: he is drawn on the jury for the 2 September till…no one knows. It is a tiresome task. Aurore is very cunning with her arms, she offers them to you to kiss; her hands are marvels and they are incredibly clever for her age.

Au revoir, then, if I can only pull myself out of the state I am now in. Insomnia is the devil; in the daytime one makes a lot of effort not to sadden others. At night one falls back on oneself.

LXV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croisset

Nohant, 10 September, 1867

Dear old fellow,

I am worried at not having news of you since that illness of which you spoke. Are you well again? Yes, we shall go to see the rollers and the beaches next month if you like, if your heart prompts you. The novel goes on apace; but I shall besprinkle it with local color afterwards.

While waiting, I am still here, stuck up to my chin in the river every day, and regaining my strength entirely in this cold and shady stream which I adore, and where I have passed so many hours of my life reviving myself after too long sessions in company with my ink-well. I go definitely to Paris, the 16th; the 17th at one o’clock, I leave for Rouen and Jumieges, where my friend Madame Lebarbier de Tinan awaits me at the house of M. Lepel-Cointet, the landowner; I shall stay there the 18th so as to return to Paris the 19th. Will it be inconvenient if I come to see you? I am sick with longing to do so; but I am so absolutely forced to spend the evening of the 19th in Paris that I do not know if I shall have the time. You must tell me. I can get a word from you the 16th in Paris, 97 rue des Feuillantines. I shall not be alone; I have as a travelling companion a charming young literary woman, Juliette Lamber. If you were lovely, lovely, you would walk to Jumieges the 19th. We would return together so that I could be in Paris at six o’clock in the evening at the latest. But if you are even a little bit ill still, or are PLUNGED in ink, pretend that I have said nothing, and prepare to see us next month. As for the WINTER walk on the Norman coast, that gives me a cold in my back, I who plan to go to the Gulf of Juan at that time.

I have been sick over the death of my friend Rollinat. My body is cured, but my soul! I should have to stay a week with you to refresh myself in your affectionate strength; for cold and purely philosophical courage to me, is like cauterizing a wooden leg.

I embrace you and I love you (also your mother). Maurice also, what

I embrace you and I love you (also your mother). Maurice also, what French! One is happy to forget it, it is a tiresome thing.

Your troubadour

G. Sand

LXVI. TO GEORGE SAND

Dear master,

What, no news?

But you will answer me since I ask you a service. I read this in my notes: “National of 1841. Bad treatments inflicted on Barbes, kicks on his breast, dragged by the beard and hair in order to put him in an in-pace. Consultation of lawyers signed: E. Arago, Favre, Berryer, to complain of these abominations.”

Find out from him if all that is true; I shall be obliged.

LXVII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croisset

Paris, Tuesday, 1st October, 1867

Dear friend, you shall have your information. I asked Peyrat last evening, I am writing today to Barbes who will answer directly to you.

Where do you think I have come from? From Normandy. A charming opportunity took me there six days ago. I had been enchanted with Jumieges. This time I saw Etretat, Yport, the prettiest of all the villages, Fecamp, Saint-Valery, which I knew, and Dieppe, which dazzled me; the environs, the chateau d’Arques, Limes, what a country! And I went back and forth twice within two steps of Croisset and I sent you some big kisses; always ready to return with you to the seaside or to talk with you at your house when you are free. If I had been alone, I should have bought an old guitar and should have sung a ballad under your mother’s window. But I could not take a large family to you.

I am returning to Nohant and I embrace you with all my heart.

G. Sand

I think that the Bois-Dore is going well, but I don’t know anything about it. I have a way of my own of being in Paris, namely, being at the seaside, which does not keep me informed of what is going on. But I gathered gentians in the long grass of the immense Roman fort of Limes where I had quite a STUNNING view of the sea. I walked out like an old horse, but I am returning quite frisky.

LXVIII. TO GEORGE SAND

At last, at last, I have news of you, dear master, and good news, which is doubly agreeable.

I am planning to return to my home in the country with Madame Sand, and my mother hopes that will be the case. What do you say? For, with all that goes on, we never see each other, confound it!

As for my moving, it is not that I lack the desire of being free to move about. But I should be lost if I stirred before I finish my novel. Your friend is a man of wax; everything gets imprinted on him, is encrusted on him, penetrates him. If I should visit you, I should think of nothing but you and yours, your house, your country, the appearance of the people I had met, *etc.* I require great efforts to gather myself together; I always tend to scatter myself. That is why, dear adored master, I deprive myself of going to sit down to dream aloud in your house. But, in the summer or autumn of 1869, you shall see what a fine commercial traveller I am, once let loose to the open air. I am abject, I warn you.

As to news, there is a quiet once more since the Kerveguen incident has died its beautiful death. Was it not a farce? and silly?

Sainte-Beuve is preparing a lecture on the press law. He is better, decidedly. I dined Tuesday with Renan. He was marvellously witty and eloquent, and artistic! as I have never seen him. Have you read his new book? His preface causes talk. My poor Theo worries me. I do not think him strong.

LXIX. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Paris

Nohant, 12 October, 1867

I have sent your letter to Barbes; it is fine and splendid, as you are. I know that the worthy man will be glad of it. But as for me, I want to throw myself out of the window; for my children are unwilling to hear of my leaving so soon. Yes, it is horrid to have seen your house four times without going to see you. But I am cautious to the point of fear. To be sure the idea of summoning you to Rouen for twenty minutes did occur to me. But you are not, as I am, on tiptoe, all ready to start off. You live in your dressing gown, the great enemy of liberty and activity. To force you to dress, to go out, perhaps in the middle of an absorbing chapter, and only to see someone who does not know how to say anything quickly, and who, the more he is content, the stupider he is, — I did not dare to. Here I am obliged to finish something which drags along, and before the final touch I shall probably go to Normandy. I should like to go by the Seine to Honfleur. It will be next month, if the cold does not make me ill, and I shall try this time to carry you away in passing. If not, I shall see you at least, and then I shall go to Provence away in passing. If not, I shall see you at least, and then I shall go to Provence.

Ah! if I could only take you there! And if you could, if you would, during the second week in October when you are going to be free, come to see me here! You promised, and my children would be so happy if you would! But you don’t love us enough for that, scoundrel that you are! You think that you have a lot of better friends: you are very much mistaken; it is always one’s best friends whom one neglects or ignores.

Come, a little courage; you can leave Paris at a quarter past nine in the morning, and get to Chateauroux at four, there you would find my carriage and be here at six for dinner. It is not bad, and once here, we all laugh together like good-natured bears; no one dresses; there is no ceremony, and we all love one another very much. Say yes!

I embrace you. And I too have been bored at not seeing you, FOR A YEAR.

Your old troubadour

LXX. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croisset

Nohant, 27 October, 1867

I have just made a resume in a few pages of my impressions as a landscape painter, gathered in Normandy: it has not much importance, but I was able to quote three lines from Salammbo, which seemed to me to depict the country better than all my phrases, and which had always struck me as a stroke from a master brush. In turning over the pages to find these lines, I naturally reread almost all, and I remain convinced that it is one of the most beautiful books that have been made since they began to make books.

I am well, and I am working quickly and much, so as to live on my INCOME this winter in the South. But what will be the delights of Cannes and where will be the heart to engage in them? My spirits are in mourning while thinking that at this hour people arc fighting for the pope. Ah! ISIDORE! [Footnote: Name applied to Napoleon III.]

I have tried in vain this month to go again to see ma Normandie, that is to say, my great, dear heart’s friend. My children have threatened me with death if I leave them so soon. Just at present friends are coming. You are the only one who does not talk of coming on. Yet, that would be so fine! Next month I shall move heaven and earth to find you wherever you are, and meanwhile I love you tremendously. And you. Your work? your mother’s health? I am worried at not having news of you.

G. Sand

LXXI. TO GEORGE SAND 1st November, 1867

Dear master,

I was as much ashamed as touched, last evening, when I received your “very nice” letter. I am a wretch not to have answered the first one. How did that happen? For I am usually prompt.

My work does not go very well. I hope that I shall finish my second part in February. But in order to have it all finished in two years, I must not budge from my arm-chair till then. That is why I am not going to Nohant. A week of recreation means three months of revery for me. I should do nothing but think of you, of yours in Berry, of all that I saw. My unfortunate spirit would navigate in strange waters. I have so little resistance.

I do not hide the pleasure that your little word about SALAMMBO gives me. That old book needs to be relieved from a few inversions, there are too many repetitions of ALORS, MAIS and ET. The labor is too evident.

As for the one I am doing, I am afraid that the idea is defective, an irremediable fault; will such weak characters be interesting? Great effects are reached only through simple means, through positive passions. But I don’t see simplicity anywhere in the modern world.

A sad world! How deplorable and how lamentably grotesque are affairs in Italy! All these orders, counter-orders of counter-orders of the counter-orders! The earth is a very inferior planet, decidedly.

You did not tell me if you were satisfied with the revivals at the

Odeon. When shall you go south? And where shall you go in the south?

A week from today, that is to say, from the 7th to the 10th of November, I shall be in Paris, because I have to go sauntering in Auteuil in order to discover certain little nooks. What would be nice would be for us to come back to Croisset together. You know very well that I am very angry at you for your two last trips in Normandy.

Then, I shall see you soon? No joking? I embrace you as I love you, dear master, that is to say, very tenderly.

Here is a bit that I send to your dear son, a lover of this sort of fluff:

“One evening, expected by Hortense,
Having his eyes fixed on the clock,
And feeling his heart beat with eager throbs,
Young Alfred dried up with impatience.”

(Memoires de l’Academie de Saint-Quentin.)

LXXII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 5 December, 1867

Your old troubadour is no good, I admit it. He has been working like an ox to have the money to go away with this winter to the gulf of Juan, and at the moment of leaving he would like to stay behind. He is worried at leaving his children and the little Aurore, but he suffers with the cold, he fears anemia, and he thinks he is doing his duty in going to find a land which the snow does not render impracticable, and a sky under which one can breathe without having dagger-thrusts in one’s lungs.

So you see.

He has thought of you, probably much more than you think of him; for he has stupid and easy work, and his thoughts run elsewhere very far from him, and from his task, when his hand is weary of writing. As for you, you work for truth, and you become absorbed, and you have not heard my spirit, which more than once has TAPPED at your study door to say to you: “It is I.” Or else you have said: “It is a spirit tapping let him go to the devil!”

Aren’t you coming to Paris? I am going there between the 15th and the 20th. I shall stay there only a few days, and then flee to Cannes. Will you be there? God grant it! On the whole I am pretty well; I am furious with you for not wanting to come to Nohant; I won’t reproach you for I don’t know how. I have scribbled a lot; my children are always good and kind to me in every sense of the word. Aurore is a love.

We have RAVED politically; now we try not to think of it any more and to have patience. We often speak of you and we love you. Your old troubadour especially who embraces you with all his heart, and begs to be remembered to your good mother.

G. Sand

LXXIII. TO GEORGE SAND

Wednesday night

Dear master, dear friend of the good God, “let us talk a little of Dozenval,” let us roar at M. Thiers! Can a more triumphant imbecile, a more abject dabster, a more stercoraceous bourgeois be found! No, nothing can give the idea of the puking with which this old diplomatic idiot inspires me in piling up his stupidity on the dung-hill of bourgeoisie! Is it possible to treat philosophy, religion, peoples, liberty, the past and future, history, and natural history, everything and more yet, with an incoherence more inept and more childish! He seems to me as everlasting as mediocrity! He overwhelms me!

But the fine thing is the brave national guards whom he stuffed in 1848, who are beginning to applaud him again! What infinite madness! That proves that everything consists of temperament. Prostitutes, — like France, — always have a weakness for old buffoons.

Furthermore, I shall try in the third part of my novel (when I reach the reaction that followed the days of June) to insert a panegyric about him a propos of his book: De la propriete, and I hope that he will be pleased with me.

What form should one take to express occasionally one's opinion on the things of this world, without the risk of passing later for an imbecile? It is a tough problem. It seems to me that the best thing is simply to depict the things which exasperate one. To dissect is to take vengeance. Well! it is not he with whom I am angry, nor with the others but with OURS.

If they had paid more attention to the education of the SUPERIOR classes, delaying till later the agricultural meetings; in short, if the head had been put above the stomach, should we have been likely to be where we are now?

I have just read, this week, Buchez' Preface to his Histoire parlementaire. Many inanities which burden us today come from that among other things.

And now, it is not good of you to say that I do not think of "my old Troubadour"; of whom then, do I think? perhaps of my wretched book? but that is more difficult and less agreeable.

How long do you stay at Cannes?

After Cannes shan't you return to Paris? I shall be their towards the end of January.

In order to finish my book in the spring of 1869, I must not give myself a week of holiday; that is why I do not go to Nohant. It is always the story of the Amazons. In order to draw the bow better they crushed their breast. It is a fine method after all.

Adieu, dear master, write to me, won't you?

I embrace you tenderly.

LXXIV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croisset

Nohant, 31 December, 1867

I don't agree with you at all that it is necessary to destroy the breast to draw a bow. I have quite a contrary belief which I follow, and I think that it is good for many others, probably for the majority. I have just developed my idea on that subject in a novel which has been sent to the Revue and will appear after

About’s. I think that the artist ought to live according to his nature as much as possible. To him who loves struggle, warfare; to him who loves women, love; to an old fellow like me who loves nature, travel and flowers, rocks, fine landscapes, children also, the family, all that stirs the emotions, that combats moral anemia.

I think that art always needs a palette overflowing with soft or striking colors according to the subject of the picture; the artist is an instrument on which everything ought to play before he plays on others; but all that is perhaps not applicable to a mind like yours which has acquired much and now has only to digest. I shall insist on one point only, that the physical being is necessary to the moral being and that I fear for you some day a deterioration of health which will force you to suspend your work and let it grow cold.

Well, you are coming to Paris the beginning of January and we shall see each other; for I shall not go until after the New Year. My children have made me promise to spend that day with them, and I could not resist, in spite of the great necessity of moving. They are so sweet! Maurice has an inexhaustible gaiety and invention. He has made for his marionette theatre, marvelous scenery, properties, and machinery and the plays which they give in that ravishing box are incredibly fantastic.

The last one was called 1870. One sees in it, Isidore with Antonelli commanding the brigands of Calabria, trying to regain his throne and to re-establish the papacy. Everything is in the future; at the end the widow Euphemia marries the Grand Turk, the only remaining sovereign. It is true that he is a former DEMOCRAT and is recognized as none other than the great tumbler Coquenbois when unmasked. These plays last till two o’clock in the morning and we are crazy on coming out of them. We sup till five o’clock. There is a performance twice a week, and the rest of the time they make the properties, and the play continues with the same characters, going through the most incredible adventures.

The public is composed of eight or ten young people, my three great nephews, and sons of my old friends. They get excited to the point of yelling. Aurore is not admitted; the plays are not suited to her age. As for me, I am so amused that I become exhausted. I am sure that you would be madly amused by it also; for there is a splendid fire and abandon in these improvisations; and the characters done by Maurice have the appearance of living beings, of a burlesque life that is real and impossible at the same time; it seems like a dream. That is how I have been living for the ten days that I have not been working.

Maurice gives me this recreation in my intervals of repose that coincide with his. He brings to it as much ardor and passion as to his science. He has a truly charming nature and one never gets bored with him. His wife is also charming, quite large just now, always moving, busying herself with everything, lying down on the sofa twenty times a day, getting up to run after her child, her cook, her husband, who demands a lot of things for his theatre, coming back to lie down again; crying out that she feels ill and bursting into shrieks of laughter at a fly that circles about; sewing layettes, reading the papers with fervor, reading novels which make her weep; weeping also at the marionettes when there is a little sentiment, for there is some of that too. In short a personality and a type: she sings ravishingly, she gets angry, she gets tender, she makes succulent dainties TO SURPRISE US WITH, and every day of our vacation there is a little fete which she organizes.

Little Aurore promises to be very sweet and calm, understanding in a marvelous manner what is said to her and YIELDING TO REASON at two years of age. It is very extraordinary and I have never seen it before. It would be disquieting if one did not feel a great serenity in that little brain.

But how I am gossiping with you! Does all this amuse you? I should like this chatty letter to substitute for one of those suppers of ours which I too regret, and which would be so good here with you, if you were not a stick-in-the-mud, who won’t let yourself be dragged away to LIFE FOR LIFE’S SAKE. Ah! when one is on a vacation, how work, logic, reason seem strange CONTRASTS! One asks whether one can ever return to that ball and chain.

I tenderly embrace you, my dear old fellow, and Maurice thinks your letter so fine that he is going to put the phrases and words at once in the mouth of his first philosopher. He bids me embrace you for him.

Madame Juliette Lambert [Footnote: Afterwards, Madame Edmond Adam.] is really charming; you would like her a great deal, and then you have it 18 degrees above zero down there, and here we are in the snow. It is severe; moreover, I rarely go out, and my dog himself doesn’t want to go out. He is not the least amazing member of society. When he is called Badinguet, he lies on the ground ashamed and despairing, and sulks all the evening.

1868

LXXV. TO GEORGE SAND 1st January, 1868

It is unkind to sadden me with the recital of the amusements at Nohant, since I cannot share them. I need so much time to do so little that I have not a minute to lose (or gain), if I want to finish my dull old book by the summer of 1869.

I did not say it was necessary to suppress the heart, but to restrain it, alas! As for the regime that I follow which is contrary to the laws of hygiene, I did not begin yesterday. I am accustomed to it. I have, nevertheless, a fairly seasoned sense of fatigue, and it is time that my second part was finished, after which I shall go to Paris. That will be about the end of the month. You don't tell me when you return from Cannes.

My rage against M. Thiers is not yet calmed, on the contrary! It idealizes itself and increases.

LXXVI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 12 January, 1868

No, it is not silly to embrace each other on New Year's day: on the contrary, it is good and it is nice. I thank you for having thought of it and I kiss you on your beautiful big eyes. Maurice embraces you also. I am housed here by the snow and the cold, and my trip is postponed. We amuse ourselves madly at home so as to forget that we are prisoners, and I am prolonging my holidays in a ridiculous fashion. Not an iota of work from morning till night. What luck if you could say as much! — But what a fine winter, don't you think so? Isn't it lovely, the moonlight on the trees covered with snow? Do you look at that at night while you are working? — If you are going to Paris the end of the month, I shall still have a chance to meet you.

From far, or from near, dear old fellow, I think of you and I love you from the depth of my old heart which does not know the flight of years.

G. Sand

My love to your mother always. I imagine that she is in Rouen during this severe cold.

LXXVII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Paris, 10 May, 1868

Yes, friend of my heart, am I not in the midst of terrible things; that poor little Madame Lambert [Footnote: Madame Eugene Lambert, the wife of the artist] is severely threatened.

I saw M. Depaul today. One must be prepared for anything! — If the crisis is passed or delayed, for there is question of bringing on the event, I shall be happy to spend two days with my old troubadour, whom I love tenderly.

G. Sand.

LXXVIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Paris, 11 May, 1868

If you were to be at home Wednesday evening, I should go to chat an hour alone with you after dinner in your quarters. I despair somewhat of going to Croisset; it is tomorrow that that they decide the fate of my poor friend.

A word of response, and above all do not change any plan. Whether I see you or not, I know that two old troubadours love each other devotedly!

G. Sand Monday evening.

LXXIX. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Paris, 17 May, 1868

I have a little respite, since they are not going to bring on the confinement. I hope to go to spend two days at that dear Croisset. But then don’t go on Thursday, I am giving a dinner for the prince [Footnote: Prince Jerome Napoleon.] at Magny’s and I told him that I would detain you by force. Say yes, at once. I embrace you and I love you.

G. Sand

LXXX. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

I shall not go with you to Croisset, for you must sleep, and we talk too much.

But on Sunday or Monday if you still wish it; only I forbid you to inconvenience yourself. I know Rouen, I know that there are carriages at the railway station and that one goes straight to your house without any trouble.

I shall probably go in the evening.

Embrace your dear mamma for me, I shall be happy to her again.

G. Sand

If those days do not suit you, a word, and I shall communicate with you again. Have the kindness to put the address on the ENCLOSED letter and to put it in the mail.

LXXXI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Paris, 21 Thursday — May, 1868

I see that the day trains are very slow, I shall make a great effort and shall leave at eight o'clock Sunday, so as to lunch with you; if it is too late don't wait for me, I lunch on two eggs made into an omelet or shirred, and a cup of coffee. Or dine on a little chicken or some veal and vegetables.

In giving up trying to eat REAL MEAT, I have found again a strong stomach. I drink cider with enthusiasm, no more champagne! At Nohant, I live on sour wine and galette, and since I am not trying any more to THOROUGHLY NOURISH myself, no more anemia; believe then in the logic of physicians!

In short you must not bother any more about me than about the cat and not even so much. Tell your little mother, just that. Then I shall see you at last, all I want to for two days. Do you know that you are INACCESSIBLE in Paris? Poor old fellow, did you finally sleep like a dormouse in your cabin? I would like to give you a little of my sleep that nothing, not even a cannon, can disturb.

But I have had bad dreams for two weeks about my poor Esther, and now at last, here are Depaul, Tarnier, Gueniaux and Nelaton who told us yesterday that she will deliver easily and very well, and that the child has every reason to be superb. I breathe again, I am born anew, and I am going to embrace you so hard that you will be scandalised. I shall see you on Sunday then, and don't inconvenience yourself.

G. Sand

LXXXII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT Paris, 26 May, 1868

Arrived while dozing. Dined with your delightful and charming friend Du Camp. We talked of you, only of you and your mother, and we said a hundred times that we loved you. I am going to sleep so as to be ready to move tomorrow times that we loved you. I am going to sleep so as to be ready to move tomorrow morning.

I am charmingly located on the Luxembourg garden.

I embrace you, mother and son, with all my heart which is entirely yours.

G. Sand Tuesday evening, rue Gay-Lussac, 5.

LXXXIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT Paris, 28 May, 1868

My little friend gave birth this morning after two hours of labor, to a boy who seemed dead but whom they handled so well that he is very much alive and very lovely this evening. The mother is very well, what luck!

But what a sight! It was something to see. I am very tired, but very content and tell you so because you love me.

G. Sand

Thursday evening. I leave Tuesday for Nohant.

LXXXIV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croisset

Nohant, 21 June, 1868

Here I am again, BOTHERING you for M. Du Camp’s address which you never gave me, although you forwarded a letter for me to him, and from WHOM I never thought of asking for it when I dined with him in Paris. I have just read his Forces Perdues; I promised to tell him my opinion and I am keeping my word. Write the address, then give it to the postman and thank you.

There you are alone at odds with the sun in your charming villa!

Why am I not the…river which cradles you with its sweet MURMURING and which brings you freshness in your den! I would chat discreetly with you between two pages of your novel, and I would make that fantastic grating of the chain [Footnote: The chain of the tug-boat going up or coming down the Seine.] which you detest, but whose oddity does not displease me, keep still. I love everything that makes up a milieu, the rolling of the carriages and the noise of the workmen in Paris, the cries of a thousand birds in the country, the movement of the ships on the waters; I love also absolute, profound silence, and in short, I love everything that is around me, no matter where I am; it is AUDITORY IDIOCY, a new variety. It is true that I choose my milieu and don’t go to the Senate nor to other disagreeable places.

Everything is going on well at our house, my troubadour. The children are beautiful, we adore them; it is warm, I adore that. It is always the same old story that I have to tell you and I love you as the best of friends and comrades. You see that is not new. I have a good and strong impression of what you read to me; it seemed to me so beautiful that it must be good. As for me, I am not sticking to anything. Idling is my dominant passion. That will pass, what does not pass, is anything. Idling is my dominant passion. That will pass, what does not pass, is my friendship for you.

G. Sand

Our affectionate regards.

LXXXV. TO GEORGE SAND

Croisset, Sunday, 5 July, 1868

I have sawed wood hard for six weeks. The patriots won’t forgive me for this book, nor the reactionaries either! What do I care! I write things as I feel them, that is to say, as I think they are. Is it foolish of me? But it seems to me that our unhappiness comes exclusively from people of our class. I find an enormous amount of Christianity in Socialism. There are two notes which are now on my table.

“This system (his) is not a system of disorder, for it has its source in the Gospels, and from this divine source, hatred, warfare, the clashing of every interest, CAN NOT PROCEED! for the doctrine formulated from the Gospel, is a doctrine of peace, union and love.” (L. Blanc).

“I shall even dare to advance the statement that together with the respect for the Sabbath, the last spark of poetic fire has been extinguished in the soul of our rhymesters. It has been said that without religion, there is no poetry!” (Proudhon).

A propos of that, I beg of you, dear master, to read at the end of his book on the observance of the Sabbath, a love-story entitled, I think, Marie et Maxime. One must know that to have an idea of the style of les Penseurs. It should be placed on a level with Le Voyage en Bretagne by the great Veuillot, in Ca et La. That does not prevent us from having friends who are great admirers of these two gentlemen.

When I am old, I shall write criticism; that will console me, for I often choke with suppressed opinions. No one understands better than I do, the indignation of the great Boileau against bad taste: “The senseless things which I hear at the Academy hasten my end.” There was a man!

Every time now that I hear the chain of the steam-boats, I think of you, and the noise irritates me less, when I say to myself that it pleases you. What moonlight there is tonight on the river!

LXXXVI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croisset

Nohant, 31 July, 1868

I am writing to you at Croisset in any case, because I doubt if you are in Paris during this Toledo-like heat; unless the shade of Fontainebleau has kept you. What a lovely forest, isn't it? but it is especially so in winter, without leaves, with its fresh moss, which has chic. Did you see the sand of Arbonne? There is a little Sahara there which ought to be lovely now.

We are very happy here. Every day a bath in a stream that is always cold and shady; in the daytime four hours of work, in the evening, recreation, and the life of Punch and Judy. A TRAVELLING THEATRICAL COMPANY came to us; it was part of a company from the Odeon, among whom were several old friends to whom we gave supper at La Chatre, two successive nights with all their friends, after the play; — songs, laughter, with champagne frappe, till three o'clock in the morning to the great scandal of the bourgeois, who would have committed any crime to have been there. There was a very comic Norman, a real Norman, who sang real peasant songs to us, in the real language. Do you know that they have quite a Gallic wit and mischief? They contain a mine of masterpieces of genre. That made me love Normandy still more. You may know that comedian. His name is Freville. It is he who is charged in the repertory with the parts of the dull valets, and with being kicked from behind. He is detestable, impossible, but out of the theatre, he is as charming as can be. Such is fate!

We have had some delightful guests at our house, and we have had a joyous time without prejudice to the Lettres d'un Voyageur in the Revue, or to botanical excursions in some very surprising wild places. The little girls are the loveliest thing about it all. Gabrielle is a big lamb, sleeping and laughing all day; Aurore, more spiritual, with eyes of velvet and fire, talking at thirty months as others do at five years, and adorable in everything. They are keeping her back so that she shall not get ahead too fast.

You worry me when you tell me that your book will blame the patriots for everything that goes wrong. Is that really so? and then the victims! it is quite enough to be undone by one's own fault without having one's own foolishness thrown in one's teeth. Have pity! There are so many fine spirits among them just the same! Christianity has been a fad and I confess that in every age it is a lure when one sees only the tender side of it; it wins the heart. One has to consider the evil it does in order to get rid of it. But I am not surprised that a generous heart like Louis Blanc dreamed of seeing it purified and restored to his ideal. I also had that illusion; but as soon as one takes a step in this past, one sees that it can not be revived, and I am sure that now Louis Blanc smiles at his dream. One should think of that also.

One must remind oneself that all those who had intelligence have progressed tremendously during the last twenty years and that it would not be generous to reproach them with what they probably reproach themselves.

As for Proudhon, I never thought him sincere. He is a rhetorician of GENIUS, as they say. But I don’t understand him. He is a specimen of perpetual antithesis, without solution. He affects one like one of the old Sophists whom Socrates made fun of.

I am trusting you for GENEROUS sentiments. One can say a word more or less without wounding, one can use the lash without hurting, if the hand is gentle in its strength. You are so kind that you cannot be cruel.

Shall I go to Croisset this autumn? I begin to fear not, and to fear that Cadio is not being rehearsed. But I shall try to escape from Paris even if only for one day.

My children send you their regards. Ah! Heavens! there was a fine quarrel about Salammbo; some one whom you do not know, went so far as not to like it, Maurice called him BOURGEOIS, and to settle the affair, little Lina, who is high tempered, declared that her husband was wrong to use such a word, for he ought to have said IMBECILE. There you are. I am well as a Turk. I love you and I embrace you.

Your old Troubadour,
G. Sand

LXXXVII. TO GEORGE SAND

Dieppe, Monday

But indeed, dear master, I was in Paris during that tropical heat (trop picole, as the governor of the chateau of Versailles says), and I perspired greatly. I went twice to Fontainebleau, and the second time by your advice, saw the sands of Arboronne. It is so beautiful that it made me almost dizzy.

I went also to Saint-Gratien. Now I am at Dieppe, and Wednesday I shall be in Croisset, not to stir from there for a long time, the novel must progress.

Yesterday I saw Dumas: we talked of you, of course, and as I shall see him tomorrow we shall talk again of you.

I expressed myself badly if I said that my book “will blame the patriots for everything that goes wrong.” I do not recognize that I have the right to blame anyone. I do not even think that the novelist ought to express his own opinion on the things of this world. He can communicate it, but I do not like him to say it. (That is a part of my art of poetry.) I limit myself, then, to declaring things as they appear to me, to expressing what seems to me to be true. And the devil take the consequences; rich or poor, victors or vanquished, I admit none of all that. I want neither love, nor hate, nor pity, nor anger. As for sympathy, that is different; one never has enough of that. The reactionaries, besides, must be less spared than the others, for they seem to be more criminal.

Is it not time to make justice a part of art? The impartiality of painting would then reach the majesty of the law, — and the precision of science!

Well, as I have absolute confidence in your great mind, when my third part is finished, I shall read it to you, and if there is in my work, something that seems MEAN to you, I will remove it.

But I am convinced beforehand that you will object to nothing.

As for allusions to individuals, there is not a shadow of them.

Prince Napoleon, whom I saw at his sister’s Thursday, asked for news of you and praised Maurice. Princess Matilde told me that she thought you “charming,” which made me like her better than ever.

How will the rehearsals of Cadio prevent you from coming to see your poor old friend this autumn? It is not impossible. I know Freville. He is an excellent and very cultivated man.

LXXXVIII. TO GEORGE SAND

Croisset, Wednesday evening, 9 September, 1868

Is this the way to behave, dear master? Here it is nearly two months since you have written to your old troubadour! you in Paris, in Nohant, or elsewhere? They say that Cadio is now being rehearsed at the Porte Saint-Martin (so you have fallen out with Chilly?) They say that Thuillier will make her re-appearance in your play. (But I thought she was dying). And when are they to play this Cadio? Are you content? etc., *etc.*

I live absolutely like an oyster. My novel is the rock to which I attach myself, and I don’t know anything that goes on in the world.

I do not even read, or rather I have not read La Lanterne! Rochefort bores me, between ourselves. It takes courage to venture to say even hesitatingly, that possibly he is not the first writer of the century. O Velches! Velches! as M. de Voltaire would sigh (or roar)! But a propos of the said Rochefort, have they been somewhat imbecilic? What poor people!

And Sainte-Beuve? Do you see him? As for me, I am working furiously. I have just written a description of the forest of Fontainebleau that made me want to hang myself from one of its trees. As I was interrupted for three weeks, I am having terrible trouble in getting back to work. I am like the camels, which can’t be stopped when they are in motion, nor started when they are resting. It will be stopped when they are in motion, nor started when they are resting. It will take me a year to finish the book. After that I shall abandon the bourgeois definitely. He is too difficult and on the whole too ugly. It will be high time to do something beautiful and that I like.

What would please me well for the moment, would be to embrace you.

When will that be? Till then, a thousand affectionate thoughts.

LXXXIX. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croisset

Paris, 10 September, 1868

Just at present, dear friend, there is a truce to my correspondence. On all sides I am reproached, WRONGLY, for not answering letters. I wrote you from Nohant about two weeks ago that I was going to Paris, on business about Cadio: — and now, I am returning to Nohant tomorrow at dawn to see my Aurore. I have written during the last week, four acts of the play, and my task is finished until the end of the rehearsals which will be looked after by my friend and collaborator, Paul Meurice. All his care does not prevent the working out of the first part from being a horrible bungle. One needs to see the putting-on of a play in order to understand that, and if one is not armed with humor and inner zest for the study of human nature in the actual individuals whom the fiction is to mask, there is much to rage about. But I don’t rage any more, I laugh; I know too much of all that to get excited about it, and I shall tell you some fine stories about it when we meet.

However, as I am an optimist just the same, I look at the good side of things and people; but the truth is that everything is bad and everything is good in this world.

Poor Thuillier has not sparkling health; but she hopes to carry the burden of the work once more. She needs to earn her living, she is cruelly poor. I told you in my lost letter that Sylvanie [Footnote: Madame Arnould-Plessy.] had been several days at Nohant. She is more beautiful than ever and quite well again after a terrible illness.

Would you believe that I have not seen Sainte-Beuve? That I have had only the time here to sleep a little, and to eat in a hurry? It is just that. I have not heard anyone whatsoever talked about outside of the theatre and of the players. I have had mad desires to abandon everything and to go to surprise you for a couple of hours; but I have not been a day without being kept at FORCED LABOR.

I shall return here the end of the month, and when they play Cadio, I shall beg you to spend twenty-four hours here for me. Will you do it? Yes, you are too good a troubadour to refuse me. I embrace you with all my heart, and your mother too. I am happy that she is well.

G. Sand

G. Sand

XC. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 18 September, 1868

It will be, I think, the 8th or 10th of October. The management announces it for the 26th of September. But that seems impossible to everyone. Nothing is ready; I shall be advised, I shall advise you. I have come to spend the days of respite that my very conscientious and very devoted collaborator allows me. I am taking up again a novel on the THEATRE, the first part of which I had left on my desk, and I plunge every day in a little icy torrent which tumbles me about and makes me sleep like a top. How comfortable one is here with these two little children who laugh and chatter from morning till night like birds, and how foolish it is to go to compose and to put on MADE UP THINGS when the reality is so easy and so fine! But one gets accustomed to regarding all that as a military order, and goes to the front without asking oneself if it means wounds or death. Do you think that that bothers me? No, I assure you; but it does not amuse me either. I go straight ahead, stupid as a cabbage and patient as a Berrichon. Nothing is interesting in my life except OTHER PEOPLE. Seeing you soon in Paris will be more of a pleasure than my business will be an annoyance to me. Your novel interests me more than all mine. Impersonality, a sort of idiocy which is peculiar to me, is making a noticeable progress. If I were not well, I should think that it was a malady. If my old heart did not become each day more loving, I should think it was egotism; in short, I don't know what it is, and there you are. I have had trouble recently. I told you of it in the letter which you did not receive. A person whom you know, whom I love greatly, Celimene, [Footnote: Madame Arnould-Plessy.] has become a religious enthusiast, oh! indeed, an ecstatic, mystic, molinistic religious enthusiast, I don't know what, imbecile! I have exceeded my limits. I have raged, I have said the hardest things to her, I have laughed at her. Nothing made any difference, it was all the same to her. Father Hyacinthe replaces for her every friendship, every good opinion; can you understand that? Her very noble mind, a real intelligence, a worthy character! and there you are! Thuillier is also religious, but without being changed; she does not like priests, she does not believe in the devil, she is a heretic without knowing it. Maurice and Lina are furious against THE OTHER. They don't like her at all. As for me, it gives me much sorrow not to love her any more.

We love you, we embrace you.

I thank you for coming to see Cadio.

G. Sand

XCI. TO GEORGE SAND

Does that astonish you, dear master? Oh well! it doesn’t me! I told you so but you would not believe me.

I am sorry for you. For it is sad to see the friends one loves change. This replacement of one soul by another, in a body that remains the same as it was, is a distressing sight. One feels oneself betrayed! I have experienced it, and more than once.

But then, what idea have you of women, O, you who are of the third sex? Are they not, as Proudhon said, “the desolation of the Just”? Since when could they do without delusions? After love, devotion; it is in the natural order of things. Dorine has no more men, she takes the good God. That is all.

The people who have no need of the supernatural, are rare. Philosophy will always be the lot of the aristocrats. However much you fatten human cattle, giving them straw as high as their bellies, and even gilding their stable, they will remain brutes, no matter what one says. All the advance that one can hope for, is to make the brute a little less wicked. But as for elevating the ideas of the mass, giving it a larger and therefore a less human conception of God, I have my doubts.

I am reading now an honest book (written by one of my friends, a magistrate), on the Revolution in the Department of Eure. It is full of extracts from writings of the bourgeois of the time, simple citizens of the small towns. Indeed I assure you that there is now very little of that strength! They were literary and fine, full of good sense, of ideas, and of generosity.

Neo-catholicism on the one hand, and Socialism on the other, have stultified France. Everything moves between the Immaculate Conception and the dinner pails of the working people.

I told you that I did not flatter the democrats in my book. But I assure you that the conservatives are not spared. I am now writing three pages on the abominations of the national guard in June, 1848, which will cause me to be looked at favorably by the bourgeois. I am rubbing their noses in their own dirt as much as I can. But you don’t give me any details about Cadio. Who are the actors, etc.? I mistrust your novel about the theatre. You like those people too much! Have you known any well who love their art? What a quantity of artists there are who are only bourgeois gone astray!

We shall see each other in three weeks at the latest. I shall be very glad of it and I embrace you.

And the censorship? I really hope for you that it will make some blunders. Besides, I should be distressed if it was wanting in its usual habits.

Have you read this in the paper? “Victor Hugo and Rochefort, the greatest writers of the age.” If Badinguet now is not avenged, it is because he is hard to please in the matter of punishments.

XCII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

The halcyons skim over the water and are common every where. The name is pretty and sufficiently well known.

I embrace you.

Your troubadour.

Paris, Friday evening, 28 August or 4 September, 1868. In October, yes, I will try!

XCIII. TO GEORGE SAND

Saturday evening

I received your two notes, dear master. You send me “halcyon” to replace the word, “dragonfly.” Georges Pouchet suggested gerre of the lakes (genus, Gerris). Well! neither the one nor the other suits me, because they do not immediately make a picture for the ignorant reader.

Must I then describe that little creature? But that would retard the movement! That would fill up all the landscape I shall put “insects with large feet” or “long insects.” That would be clear and short.

Few books have gripped me more than Cadio, and I share entirely

Maxime’s [Footnote: Maxime Du Camp.] admiration.

I should have told you of it sooner if my mother and my niece had not taken my copy. At last, this evening, they gave it back to me; it is here on my table, and I am turning the pages as I write you.

In the first place, it seems to me as if IT OUGHT TO HAVE BEEN THE WAY IT IS! It is plain, it gets you and thrills you. How many people must be like Saint-Gueltas, like Count de Sauvieres, like Rebec! and even like Henri, although the models are rarer. As for the character of Cadio, which is more of an invention than the others, what I like best in him is his ferocious anger. In it is the special truth of the character. Humanity turned to fury, the guillotine become mystic, life only a sort of bloody dream, that is what must take place in such heads. I think you have one Shakespearean scene: that of the delegate to the Convention with his two secretaries, is of an incredible strength. It makes one cry out! There is one also which struck me very much at the first reading: the scene where Saint-Gueltas and Henri each have the pistols in their pockets: and many others. What a fine page (I open by chance) is page 161!

In the play won't you have to give a longer role to the wife of the good Saint-Gueltas? The play ought not to be very hard to cut. It is only a question of condensing and shortening it. If it is played, I'll guarantee a terrific success. But the censorship?

Well, you have written a masterpiece, that's true! and a very amusing one. My mother thinks it recalls to her stories that she heard while a child. A propos of Vendee, did you know that her paternal grandfather was, after M. Lescure, the head of the Vendee army? The aforesaid head was named M. Fleuriot d'Argentan. I am not any the prouder for that; besides the thing is doubtful, for my grandfather, a violent republican, hid his political antecedents.

My mother is going in a few days to Dieppe, to her grandchild's. I shall be alone a good part of the summer, and I plan to grub.

"I labor much and shun the world.
It is not at balls that the future is founded."
(Camilla Doucet.)

But my everlasting novel bores me sometimes in an incredible manner! These tiny details are stupid to bother with! Why annoy oneself about such a miserable subject?

I would write you at length about Cadio; but it is late and my eyes are smarting.

So, thank you, very kindly, my dear master.

XCIV. To M. GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croissset

Paris, end of September, 1868

Dear friend,

It is for Saturday next, 3rd October. I am at the theatre every evening from six o'clock till two in the morning. They talk of putting mattresses behind the scenes for the actors who are not in front. As for me, as used to wakefulness as you are, I experience no fatigue; but I should be very much bored if I had not the resource that one has always, of thinking of other things. I am sufficiently accustomed to it to be writing another play while they are rehearsing, and there is something quite exciting in these great dark rooms where mysterious characters move, talking in low tones, in unexpected costumes; nothing is more like a dream, unless one imagines a conspiracy of patients escaped from Bicetre.

I don’t at all know what the performance will be. If one did not know the prodigies of harmony and of vim which occur at the last moment, one would judge it all impossible, with thirty-five or forty speaking actors of whom only five or six speak well. One spends hours over the exits and entrances of the characters in blue or white blouses who are to be the soldiers or the peasants, but who, meanwhile perform incomprehensible manoeuvres. Still the dream. One has to be a madman to put on these things. And the frenzy of the actors, pale and worn out, who drag themselves to their place yawning, and suddenly start like crazy people to declaim their tirade; continually the assembling of insane people.

The censorship has left us alone as regards the manuscript; tomorrow these gentlemen will inspect the costumes, which perhaps will frighten them.

I left my dear world very quiet at Nohant. If Cadio succeeds, it will be a little DOT for Aurore; that is all my ambition. If it does not succeed, I shall have to begin over again, that is all.

I shall see you. Then, in any case, that will be a happy day. Come to see me the night before, if you arrive the night before, or even the same day. Come to dine with me the night before or the same day; I am at home from one o’clock to five. Thank you; I embrace you and I love you.

G. Sand

XCV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Paris, 5 October, 1868

Dear good friend, I recommend again to your good offices, my friend Despruneaux, so that you will again do what you can to be of use to him in a very just suit which has already been judged in his favor.

Yours,

G. Sand

XCVI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 15 October, 1868

Here I am “ter hum” where, after having hugged my children and my grandchildren, I slept thirty-six hours at one stretch. You must believe that I was tired and did not notice it. I am waking from that animal-hibernation and you are the first person to whom I want to write. I did not thank you enough for coming to Paris for my sake, you who go about so little: and I did not see you enough either; when I knew that you had supped with Plauchut, [Footnote: Edmond Plauchut, a writer and a friend of George Sand.] I was angry at having stayed to take care of my sickly Thuillier, to whom I was of no use, and who was not particularly pleased about it. Artists are spoiled children and the best are great egoists. You say that I like them too well; I like them as I like the woods and the fields, everything, every one that I know a little and that I study continually. I make my life in the midst of all that, and as I like my life I like all that nourishes it and renews it. They do me a lot of ill turns which I see, but which I no longer feel. I know that there are thorns in the hedges, but that does not prevent me from putting out my hands and finding flowers there. If all are not beautiful, all are interesting. The day you took me to the Abbey of Saint-Georges I found the scrofularia borealis, a very rare plant in France. I was enchanted; there was much…in the neighborhood where I gathered it. Such is life!

And if one does not take life like that, one cannot take it in any way, and then how can one endure it? I find it amusing and interesting, and since I accept EVERYTHING, I am so much happier and more enthusiastic when I meet the beautiful and the good. If I did not have a great knowledge of the species, I should not have quickly understood you, or known you or loved you. I can have an enormous indulgence, perhaps banal, for I have had to practice it so much; but appreciation is quite another thing, and I do not think that it is entirely worn out in your old troubadour’s mind.

I found my children still very good and very tender, my two little grandchildren still pretty and sweet. This morning I dreamed, and I woke up saying this strange sentence: “There is always a youthful great first part in the drama of life. First part in mine: Aurore.” The fact is that it is impossible not to idolize that little one. She is so perfect in intelligence and goodness, that she seems to me like a dream.

You also, without knowing it, YOU ARE A DREAM … like that. Plauchut saw you once, and he adored you. That proves that he is not stupid. When he left me in Paris, he told me to remember him to you.

I left Cadio in doubt between good and average receipts. The cabal against the new management relaxed after the second day. The press was half favorable, half hostile. The good weather is against it. The hateful performance of Roger is also against it. So that we don’t know yet if we shall make money or not. As for me, when money comes, I say, “So much the better,” without excitement, and if it does not come, I say, “So much the worse,” without any chagrin. Money not being the aim, ought not to be the preoccupation. It is, moreover, not the real proof of success, since so many vapid or poor things make money.

Here I am with another play already underway, so as to keep my hand in. I have a novel also on the stocks, on the STROLLING PLAYERS. I have studied them a good deal this time without learning anything new. I already had the plot. It is not complicated and is very logical.

I embrace you tenderly as well as your little mother. Give me some sign of life. Does the novel get on?

G. Sand

XCVII. TO GEORGE SAND

Saturday evening

I am remorseful for not having answered at length your last letter, my dear master. You told me of the “ill turns” that people did you. Did you think that I did not know it? I confess to you even (between ourselves), that I was hurt on account of them more because of my good taste, than because of my affection for you. I did not think that several of your friends were warm enough towards you. “My God! my God! how mean literary men are!” A bit out of the correspondence of the first Napoleon. What a nice bit, eh? Doesn’t it seem to you that they belittle him too much?

The infinite stupidity of the masses makes me indulgent to individualities, however odious they may be. I have just gulped down the first six volumes of Buchez and Roux. The clearest thing I got out of them is an immense disgust for the French. My Heavens! Have we always been bunglers in this fair land of ours? Not a liberal idea which has not been unpopular, not a just thing that has not caused scandal, not a great man who has not been mobbed or knifed! “The history of the human mind is the history of human folly!” as says M. de Voltaire.

And I am convinced more and more of this truth: the doctrine of grace has so thoroughly permeated us that the sense of justice has disappeared. What terrified me so in the history of ‘48 has quite naturally its origins in the Revolution, which had not liberated itself from the middle ages, no matter what they say. I have re-discovered in Marat entire fragments of Proudhon (sic) and I wager that they would be found again in the preachers of the League.

What is the measure that the most advanced proposed after Varennes? Dictatorship and military dictatorship. They close the churches, but they raise temples, *etc.*

I assure you that I am becoming stupid with the Revolution. It is a gulf which draws me in.

However, I work at my novel like a lot of oxen. I hope on New Year’s Day not to have over a hundred pages more to write, that is to say, still six good months of work. I shall go to Paris as late as possible. My winter is to pass in complete solitude, good way of making life run along rapidly.

XCVIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, in Paris

Nohant, 20 November, 1868

You say to me, “When shall we see each other?” About the 15th of December, we are baptizing here our two little girls as Protestants. It is Maurice’s idea; he was married before the pastor, and does not want the persecution and influence of the Catholic church about his children. Our friend Napoleon is the godfather of Aurore, and I am the godmother. My nephew is the godfather of the other. All that takes place just among ourselves, in the family. You must come, Maurice wants you to, and if you say no, you will disappoint him greatly. You shall bring your novel, and in a free moment, you shall read it to me; it will do you good to read it to one who listens well. One gets a perspective and judges one’s work better. I know that. Say yes to your old troubadour, he will be EXCEEDINGLY GRATEFUL to you for it.

I embrace you six times if you say yes.

G. Sand

XCIX. TO GEORGE SAND

Tuesday

Dear master,

You cannot imagine the sorrow you give me! In spite of the longing I have, I answer “no.” Yet I am distracted with my desire to say “yes.” It makes me seem like a gentleman who cannot be disturbed, which is very silly. But I know myself: if I go to your house at Nohant, I shall have a month of dreaming about my trip. Real pictures will replace in my brain the fictitious pictures which I compose with great difficulty. All my house of cards will topple over.

Three weeks ago because I was foolish enough to accept an invitation to dinner at a country place nearby, I lost four days (sic). What would it be on leaving Nohant? You do not understand that, you strong Being! I think that you will be a little vexed with your old troubadour for not coming to the baptism of will be a little vexed with your old troubadour for not coming to the baptism of the two darlings of his friend Maurice? The dear master must write to me if I am wrong, and to give me the news!

Here is mine! I work immoderately and am absolutely ENCHANTED by the prospect of the end which begins to be visible.

So that it may arrive more quickly, I have made the resolution to live here all winter, probably until the end of March. Even admitting that everything goes perfectly, I shall not have finished all before the end of May. I don’t know anything that goes on and I read nothing, except a little of the French Revolution, after my meals, to aid digestion. I have lost my former good habit of reading every day in Latin. Therefore I don’t know a word of it any more! I shall polish it up again when I am freed from my odious bourgeois, and I am nowhere near it.

My only excitement consists in going to dine on Sundays at Rouen with my mother. I leave at six o’clock, and I am home at ten. Such is my life.

Did I tell you that I had a visit from Tourgueneff? How you would love him!

Sainte-Beuve gets along. Anyway, I shall see him next week when I am in Paris for two days, to get necessary information What is the information about? The national guard!!!

Listen to this: le Figaro not knowing with what to fill its columns, has had the idea of saying that my novel tells the life of Chancellor Pasquier. Thereupon, fear of the aforesaid family, which wrote to another part of the same family living in Rouen, which latter has been to find a lawyer from whom my brother received a visit, so that … in short, I was very stupid not to “get some benefit from the opportunity.” Isn’t it a fine piece of idiocy, eh?

C. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, AT CEOISSET

Nohant, 21 December, 1868

Certainly, I am cross with you and angry with you, not from unreasonableness nor from selfishness, but on the contrary, because we were joyous and HILARIOUS and you would not distract yourself and amuse yourself with us. If it was to amuse yourself elsewhere, you would be pardoned in advance; but it was to shut yourself up, to get all heated up, and besides for a work which you curse, and which — wishing to do and being obliged to do anyhow, — you ought to be able to do at your ease and without becoming too absorbed in it.

You tell me that you are like that. There is nothing more to say; but one may well be distressed at having an adored friend, a captive in chains far away, whom one may not free. It is perhaps a little coquettish on your part, so as to make yourself pitied and loved the more. I, who have not buried myself alive in yourself pitied and loved the more. I, who have not buried myself alive in literature, have laughed and lived a great deal during these holidays, but always thinking of you and talking of you with our friend of the Palais Royal, [Footnote: Jerome Napoleon.] who would have been happy to see you and who loves you and appreciates you a great deal. Tourgueneff has been more fortunate than we, since he was able to snatch you from your ink-well. I know him personally very little, but I know his work by heart. What talent! and how original and polished! I think that the foreigners do better than we do. They do not pose, while we either put on airs or grovel: the Frenchman has no longer a social milieu, he has no longer an intellectual milieu.

I except you, you who live a life of exception, and I except myself, because of the foundation of careless unconventionally which was bestowed upon me; but I, I do not know how to be “careful” and to polish, and I love life too much, and I am amused too much by the mustard and all that is not the real “dinner,” to ever be a litterateur. I have had flashes of it, but they have not lasted. Existence where one ignores completely one’s “moi” is so good, and life where one does not play a role is such a pretty performance to watch and to listen to! When I have to give of myself, I live with courage and resolution, but I am no longer amused.

You, oh! fanatical troubadour, I suspect you of amusing yourself at your profession more than at anything in the world. In spite of what you say about it, art could well be your sole passion, and your shutting yourself up, at which I mourn like the silly that I am, your state of pleasure. If it is like that then, so much the better, but acknowledge it to console me.

I am going to leave you in order to dress the marionettes, for the plays and the laughter have been resumed with the bad weather, and that will keep us busy for a part of the winter, I fancy. Behold! here I am, the imbecile that you love, and that you call MASTER. A fine master who likes to amuse himself better than to work!

Scorn me profoundly, but love me still. Lina tells me to tell you that you are not much, and Maurice is furious too; but we love you in spite of ourselves and embrace you just the same. Our friend Plauchut wants to be remembered to you; he adores you too.

Yours, you huge ingrate,

G. Sand

I had read the hoax of le Figaro and had laughed at it. It turns out to have assumed grotesque proportions. As for me, they gave me a grandson instead of two granddaughters, and a Catholic baptism instead of a Protestant. That does not make any difference. One really has to lie a little to divert oneself.

1869

CI. TO GEORGE SAND

Saint Sylvester's night, one o'clock, 1869

Why should I not begin the year of 1869 in wishing to you and to yours "Happy New Year and many of them"? It is rococo, but it pleases me. Now, let us talk.

No, I don't get into a heat, for I have never been better. They thought me, in Paris, "fresh as a young girl," and those people who don't know my life attributed that appearance of health to the air of the country. That is what conventional ideas are. Every one has his system. For my part, when I am not hungry, the only thing I can eat is dry bread. And the most indigestible food, such as apples in sour cider, and bacon, are what cure me of the stomach-ache. And so on. A man who has no common sense ought not to try to live according to common-sense rules.

As for my frenzy for work, I will compare it to an attack of herpes. I scratch myself while I cry. It is both a pleasure and a torture at the same time. And I am doing nothing that I want to! For one does not choose one's subjects, they force themselves on one. Shall I ever find mine? Will an idea fall from Heaven suitable to my temperament? Can I write a book to which I shall give myself heart and soul? It seems to me in my moments of vanity, that I am beginning to catch a glimpse of what a novel ought to be. But I still have three or four of them to write before that one (which is, moreover, very vague), and at the rate I am going, if I write these three or four, that will be the most I can do. I am like M. Prudhomme, who thinks that the most beautiful church would be one which had at the same time the spire of Strasbourg, the colonnade of Saint Peter's, the portico of the Parthenon, *etc.* I have contradictory ideals. Thence embarrassment, hesitation, impotence.

As to whether the "claustration" to which I condemn myself may be a "state of joy," no. But what can I do? To get drunk with ink is more worth while than to get drunk with brandy. The muse, cross-grained as she is, gives less trouble than a woman. I cannot harmonize the one with the other. I must choose. My choice was made a long time ago. There remains the matter of the senses. They have always been my servants. Even at the time of my earliest youth, I did have always been my servants. Even at the time of my earliest youth, I did exactly as I wanted with them. I have reached my fiftieth year, and it is not their ardor that troubles me.

This regime is not amusing, I agree to that. There are moments of empty and horrible boredom. But they become more and more rare in proportion as one grows older. In short, LIVING seems to me a business for which I was not made, and yet…!

I stayed in Paris for three days, which I made use of in hunting up information, and in doing errands about my book. I was so worn out last Friday, that I went to bed at seven o’clock in the evening. Such are my mad orgies at the capital.

I found the Goncourts in a frenzied (sic) admiration over a book entitled Histoire de ma vie by George Sand. Which proves more good taste than learning on their part. They even wanted to write to you to express all their admiration. (In return I found ***** stupid. He compares Feydeau to Chateaubriand, admires very much the Lepreux de la cite d’Aoste, finds Don Quichotte tedious, etc.).

Do you notice how rare literary sense is? The knowledge of language, archeology, history, etc., all that should be useful however! Well! well! not at all! The so-called enlightened people are becoming more and more incompetent in the matter of art. Even what art means escapes them. The glosses for them are more important than the text. They pay more attention to the crutches than to the legs themselves.

CII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT 1st January, 1869

It is one o’clock, I have just embraced my children. I am tired from having spent the night in making a complete costume for a large doll for Aurore; but I don’t want to turn in without embracing you also, my great friend, and my dear, big child. May ‘69 be easy for you, and may it see the end of your novel. May you keep well and be always yourself! I don’t know anything better, and I love you.

G. Sand

I have not the address of the Goncourts. Will you put the enclosed answer in the mail?

CIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croissset

Nohant, 17 January, 1869

The individual named George Sand is well: he is enjoying the marvelous winter which reigns in Berry, gathering flowers, noting interesting botanical anomalies, making dresses and mantles for his daughter-in-law, costumes for the anomalies, making dresses and mantles for his daughter-in-law, costumes for the marionettes, cutting out scenery, dressing dolls, reading music, but above all spending hours with the little Aurore who is a marvelous child. There is not a more tranquil or a happier individual in his domestic life than this old troubadour retired from business, who sings from time to time his little song to the moon, without caring much whether he sings well or ill, provided he sings the motif that runs in his head, and who, the rest of the time, idles deliciously. It has not always been as nice as this. He had the folly to be young; but as he did no evil nor knew evil passions, nor lived for vanity, he is happy enough to be peaceful and to amuse himself with everything.

This pale character has the great pleasure of loving you with all his heart, and of not passing a day without thinking of the other old troubadour, confined in his solitude of a frenzied artist, disdainful of all the pleasures of this world, enemy of the magnifying glass and of its attractions. We are, I think, the two most different workers that exist; but since we like each other that way, it is all right. The reason each of us thinks of the other at the same hour, is because each of us has a need of his opposite; we complete ourselves, in identifying ourselves at times with what is not ourselves.

I told you, I think, that I had written a play on returning from Paris. They liked it; but I don’t want them to play it in the spring, and the end of the winter is filled up, unless the play they are rehearsing fails. As I do not know how to WISH my colleagues ill luck, I am in no hurry and my manuscript is on the shelf. I have the time. I am writing my little annual novel, when I have one or two hours a day to get to work on it; I am not sorry to be prevented from thinking of it. That develops it. Always before going to sleep, I have an agreeable quarter of an hour to continue it in my head; there you have it.

I know nothing, nothing at all of the Sainte-Beuve incident. I get a dozen newspapers, whose wrappers I respect to such an extent that without Lina, who tells me the chief news from time to time, I would not know if Isidore were still among us.

Sainte-Beuve is very high tempered, and, as regards opinions, so perfectly skeptical, that I should never be astonished at anything he did, in one sense or the other. He was not always like that, at least not so much so. I have known him to be more credulous and more republican than I was then. He was thin and pale, and gentle; how people change! His talent, his knowledge, his mind have increased enormously, but I used to like his character better. Just the same, there is still much good in him. There is still love and reverence for letters — and he will be the last of the critics. Criticism rightly so-called, will disappear. Perhaps there is no longer any reason for its existence. What do you think about it?

It appears that you are studying the boor (pignouf). As for me, I avoid him. I

It appears that you are studying the boor (pignouf). As for me, I avoid him. I know him too well. I love the Berrichon peasant who is not, who never is, a boor, even when he is of no great account; the word pignouf has its depths; it was created exclusively for the bourgeois, wasn't it? Ninety out of a hundred provincial middle-class women are boorish (pignouf lardes) to a high degree, even with pretty faces that ought to give evidence of delicate instincts. One is surprised to find a basis of gross self-sufficiency in these false ladies. Where is the woman now? She is becoming a freak in society.

Good night, my troubadour: I love you, and I embrace you warmly;

Maurice also.

G. Sand

CIV. TO GEORGE SAND

Croisset, Tuesday, 2 February, 1869

My dear master,

You see in your troubadour a worn-out man. I have spent a week in Paris, looking up wearisome information (from seven to nine hours in fiacres every day, which is a fine way to make money out of literature). Oh, well!

I have just reread my outline. All that I have still to write horrifies me, or rather disgusts me, so that I want to vomit. It is always so, when I get to work. It is then that I am bored, bored, bored! But this time exceeds all others. That is why I dread so much interruptions in the daily grind. I could not do otherwise, however. I dragged about at funerals at Pere-Lachaise, in the valley of Montmorency, through shops of religious objects, *etc.*

In short, I have enough material for four or five months now. What a big "Hooray" I shall utter, when it is finished, and when I am not in the midst of remaking the bourgeois! It is high time that I enjoyed life.

I saw Sainte-Beuve and the Princess Mathilde, and I know thoroughly the story of their break, which seems to me irrevocable. Sainte-Beuve was outraged against Dalloz and has gone to le Temps. The princess begged him not to do anything about it. He did not listen to her. That is all. My opinion on it, if you wish to know it, is this. The first wrong was done by the princess, who was hasty; but the second and the worst was by pere Beuve, who did not behave as a courteous man. If one has a friend, a rather good fellow, and that friend has given one thirty thousand francs a year income, one owes him some consideration. It seems to me that in Sainte-Beuve's place I should have said, "That displeases you, let us talk no more about it." He lacked manners and poise.

What disgusted me a little, between ourselves, was the way he praised the emperor to me! yes, he praised Badinguet, to me! — And we were alone!

The princess had taken the thing too seriously from the beginning. I wrote to her, saying that Sainte-Beuve was right; he, I am sure, found me rather cold. It was then, in order to justify himself to me, that he made these protestations of isidorian love, which humiliated me a little; for it was as if he took me for a complete imbecile.

I think that he is preparing for a funeral like Beranger's, and that Hugo's popularity makes him jealous. Why write for the papers, when one can make books, and when one is not perishing of hunger? He's no sage, Sainte-Beuve. Not like you!

Your strength charms me and amazes me. I mean the strength of your entire being, not only that of your brain.

You speak of criticism in your last letter to me, telling me that it will soon disappear. I think, on the contrary, that it is, at most, only at its dawning. They are on a different tack from before, but nothing more. At the time of La Harpe, they were grammarians; at the time of Sainte-Beuve and of Taine, they are historians. When will they be artists, only artists, but really artists? Where do you know a criticism? Who is there who is anxious about the work in itself, in an intense way? They analyze very keenly the setting in which it was written, and the causes that produced it; but the UNCONSCIOUS poetic expression? Where it comes from? its composition, its style? the point of view of the author? Never.

That criticism would require great imagination and great sympathy.

I mean a faculty of enthusiasm that is always ready, and then

TASTE, a rare quality, even among the best, so much so that one

does not talk about it any longer.

What irritates me every day, is to see a master-piece and a disgrace put on the same level. They exalt the little, and they lower the great, nothing is more imbecile nor more immoral.

At Pere-Lachaise I was seized with a profound and sorrowful disgust for humanity. You can not imagine the fetichism of the tombs. The real Parisian is more of an idolater than a negro is! It made me long to lie down in one of the graves.

And the PROGRESSIVES think that there is nothing better than to rehabilitate Robespierre! Note Hamel's book! If the Republic returned they would bless the liberty poles out of policy and believing that measure strong.

When shall I see you? I plan to be in Paris from Easter to the end of May, This spring I shall go to see you at Nohant, I swear it.

CV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 11 February, 1869

While you are running around to get material for your novel, I am inventing all sorts of pretexts not to write mine. I let myself be distracted by guilty fancies, something I am reading fascinates me and I set myself to scribbling on paper that will be left in my desk and bring me no return. That has amused me, or rather that has compelled me, for it would be in vain for me to struggle against these caprices; they interrupt me and force me…you see that I have not the strength of mind that you think.

As for our masculine friend, he is ungrateful, while our feminine friend is too exacting. You were right; they are both wrong and it is not their fault, it is the social machinery which insists on it. The kind of recognition, that is to say, submission that she exacts, depends on a tradition that the present time still profits by (there lies the evil); but does not accept any longer as a duty. The notions of the obliged are changed, those of the obliger ought to change also. It must be said that one does not buy moral liberty by any kindness, — and as for him, he should have foreseen that he would be considered enchained. The simplest thing would have been not to care about having thirty thousand francs a year. It is so easy to do without it. Let him extricate himself. They won't entangle us in it: we aren't so foolish!

You say very good things about criticism. But in order to do as you say, there must be artists, and the artist is too much occupied with his own work, to forget himself in estimating that of others.

Heavens, what fine weather! Don't you enjoy it, at least from your window? I'll wager that the tulip tree is in bud. Here, the peaches and the apricots are in flower. It is said that they will be ruined; that does not stop them from being pretty and not tormenting themselves about it.

We have had our family carnival: my niece, my grandchildren, *etc.* We all put on fancy dress; it is not difficult here, one only has to go to the wardrobe and one comes down again as Cassandra, Scapin, Mezzetin, Figaro, Basile, etc., all that is very pretty. The pearl was Lolo as a little Louis XIII in crimson satin, trimmed with white satin fringed and laced with silver. I spent three days in making this costume, which was very chic; it was so pretty and so funny on that little girl of three years, that we were all amazed in looking at her.

Then we played charades, had supper, and frolicked till daylight. You see that banished to a desert, we keep up a good deal of vitality. And that I delay all I can, the trip to Paris and the chapter of business. If you were there, I would not need to be urged. But you are going there the end of March if and I can not need to be urged. But you are going there the end of March if and I can not afford to wait till then. To conclude, you swear to come this summer and we count on it absolutely. Sooner than not have you come I shall go to drag you here by the hair. I embrace you most warmly on this good hope.

G. Sand

CVI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croissset

Nohant, 24 February, 1869

I am all alone at Nohant as you are all alone at Croisset. Maurice and Lina have gone to Milan, to see Calamatta who is dangerously ill. Should they have the misfortune to lose him, they will have to go to Rome to settle his estate, an irksome task added to a sorrow, it is always like that. That sudden separation was sad, my poor Lina weeping at leaving her daughters and weeping at not being with her father. They left me the care of the children whom I rarely leave and who only let me work when they sleep; but I am happier at having this care on my shoulders to console me. I have, every day, in two hours news from Milan by telegram. The patient is better; my children are only as far as Turin today and do not know yet what I know. How this telegraph changes one’s idea of life, and when the formalities and formulas are still more simplified, how full existence will be of facts and how free from uncertainties.

Aurore, who lives on adorations in the lap of her father and mother and who weeps every day when I am away, has not asked a single time where they are. She plays and laughs, then she stops; her great eyes stare, she says: MY FATHER? another time she says: MAMMA? I distract her, she thinks no more of it, and then she begins again. They are very mysterious, children! They think without understanding. Only one sad word is needed to bring out their sorrow. She carries it unconsciously. She looks in my eyes to see if I am sad or anxious; I laugh and she laughs, I think that we must keep her sensitiveness asleep as long as possible, and that she never would weep for me if they did not speak of me.

What is your advice, you who have brought up an intelligent and charming niece? Is it wise to make them loving and affectionate early? I thought so formerly: I was afraid when I saw Maurice too impressionable and Solange too much the opposite, and resisting affection. I would like little ones to be shown only the sweet and the good of life, until the time when reason can help them to accept or to fight the bad. What do you say?

I embrace you and ask you to tell me when you are going to Paris, my trip is delayed as my children may be absent a month; I shall be able, perhaps, to meet you in Paris.

Your old solitary,

G. Sand

G. Sand

What an admirable definition I rediscover with surprise in the fatalist Pascal!

“Nature acts progressively, itus et reditus. It goes on and returns, then it goes still further, then half as far, then further than ever.” [Footnote: George Sand had copied this and fastened it over her work table at Nohant.]

What a way of speaking, eh? How the language turns, is twisted, made supple, is condensed under this grandiose “hand.”

CVII. TO GEORGE SAND

Tuesday night

What do I say about it, dear master? Should one excite or repress the sensitiveness of children? It seems to me that one should not have any set rule about it. It is according as they have a tendency to too much or too little. Moreover, the basis isn’t changed. There are tender natures and hard natures, irremediably so. And then the same sight, the same lesson can produce opposite effects. Could anything have hardened me more than having been brought up in a hospital and having played, as a child, in a dissecting amphitheatre? But no one is more sensitive than I am to physical suffering. It is true that I am the son of an extremely humane man, sensitive in the true meaning of the word. The sight of a suffering dog made tears come to his eyes. He did his surgical operations none the less well, and he invented some dreadful ones.

“Show little ones only the sweet and the good of life until the time when reason can help them to accept or to fight the bad.” Such is not my opinion. For then something terrible, an infinite disenchantment is bound to be produced in their hearts. And then, how could reason form itself, if it does not apply itself (or if one does not apply it daily) to distinguish good from evil? Life ought to be a continual education; one must learn everything — from talking to dying.

You tell me very true things about the unconsciousness of children. He who could read clearly in these little brains would grasp in them the roots of the human race, the origin of the gods, the sap which produces actions later on, *etc.* A negro who talks to his idol, and a child who talks to her doll seem to me close together.

The child and the savage (the primitive) do not distinguish the real from the fantastic. I remember very clearly that at five or six years of age I wanted to “send my heart” to a little girl with whom I was in love (I mean my material heart). I could see it in the middle of straw, in a basket, an oyster basket.

But no one has been so far as you in these analyses. There are some infinitely profound pages about it in the Histoire de ma vie. What I say is true, since minds quite opposite to yours have been amazed at them. For instance, the Goncourts.

The good Tourgueneff ought to be in Paris at the end of March. What would be fine, would be for us all three to dine together.

I am thinking again of Sainte-Beuve. Without doubt one can get along without thirty thousand francs a year. But there is something easier yet: that is, when one has them, not to launch into abuse, every week, in the papers. Why doesn't he write books, since he is rich and has talent?

I am just now reading Don Quichotte again. What a tremendous old book! Is there any more beautiful?

CVIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 7 March, 1869

Still alone with my grandchildren; my nephews and friends come to spend two out of every three days with me, but I miss Maurice and Lina. Poor Calamatta is at the last gasp.

Give me the address of the Goncourts, you have never given it to me.

Shall I never know it? My letter is still waiting there for them.

I love you and embrace you. I love you much, much, and I embrace you very warmly.

G. Sand

CIX. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 12 March, 1869

Poor Calamatta died the 9th, my children are coming back. My Lina must be distressed. I have news from them only by telegraph. From Milan here in an hour and a half. But there are no details, and I am anxious. I embrace you tenderly,

G. Sand

Thank you for the address.

CX. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croissset

Nohant, 2 April, 1869

Dear friend of my heart, here we are once more calm again. My children returned to me very exhausted. Aurore has been a little ill. Lina's mother has come to get into touch with her about their affairs. She is a loyal and excellent woman, very artistic, and very amiable. I too have had a bad cold, but everything is getting better now, and our charming little girls console their little mother. If it were less bad weather, and I had a less bad cold, I would go at once to Paris, for I want to see you there. How long do you stay there? Tell me quickly.

I shall be very glad to renew my acquaintance with Tourgueneff, whom I knew a little without having read him, and whom I have since read with a whole-hearted admiration. You seem to me to love him a great deal; then I love him too, and I wish when your novel is finished, that you would bring him to our house. Maurice also knows him and appreciates him greatly, he who likes whatever does not resemble anything else.

I am working at my novel about TRAVELING ACTORS [Footnote: Pierre qui roule.] like a convict. I am trying to have it amusing and to explain art; it is a new form for me and amuses me. Perhaps it will not have any success. The taste of the day is for marquises and courtesans; but what difference does that make? — You must find me a title, which is a resume of that idea: THE MODERN ROMAN COMIQUE.

My children send you affectionate greetings; your old troubadour embraces his old troubadour.

G. Sand

Answer quickly how long you expect to stay in Paris. You say that you are paying bills and that you are vexed. If you have need of quibus, I have at the moment a few sous I can lend you. You know that you offered once to lend me some. If I had been in a hole I would have accepted. Give all my regards to Maxime Du Camp and thank him for not forgetting me.

CXI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 17 April, 1869

I am well, I am finishing (today, I hope) my modern Roman comique which will be called I don’t know what. I am a little tired, for I have done a lot of other things. But I am going to Paris in eight or ten days to rest, to embrace you, to talk of you, of your work, to forget mine, God be thanked! and to love you as always very much and very tenderly.

G. Sand

Regards from Maurice and his wife.

CXII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Monday, 26 April, 1869

I arrived last night, I am running around like a rat, but every day at 6 o’clock one is sure of finding me at Magny’s, and the first day that you are free, come to dine with your old troubadour who loves you and embraces you.

Send word ahead to me, however, so that by an exceptional chance, I do not have the ill luck to miss you.

Monday.

CXIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Thursday evening, 29 April, 1869

I am back from Palaiseau and I find your letter. Saturday I am not sure of being free; I have to read my play with Chilly on account of some objections of detail, and I had told you so. But I see him tomorrow evening, and I shall try to get him to give me another day. I shall write you then, tomorrow evening, Friday, and if he frees me, I shall go to your house about three o’clock on Saturday so that we can read before and after dinner; I dine on a little fish, a chicken wing, an ice and a cup of coffee, never anything else, by which means my stomach keeps well. If I am kept by Chilly, we shall postpone till next week after Friday.

I sold Palaiseau today to a master shoemaker who has a LEATHER plaster on his right eye, and who calls the sumachs of the garden, the schumakre.

Then Saturday morning you shall have word from your old comrade.

G. Sand

CXIV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT 30 April, 1869

No way of going out today. This slavery to one’s profession is horrid, isn’t it? Between now and Friday I shall write to you so that we can again settle on a day. I embrace you, my old beloved troubadour.

G. Sand

CXV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT 3 May, 1869

They are encroaching upon my time more and more. All my days are full until and including next Sunday. — Tell me quickly if you want me Monday, a week from today — or if it is another day. Let us fix it for it is a fact that I don’t really know whom to listen to.

Your troubadour who does not want THIS STATE OF AFFAIRS to continue!

G. Sand

Monday.

CXVI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Paris, 4 May, 1869

On Monday then, and if I have an hour free I shall try to embrace my troubadour before that. But don't disturb yourself, I know very well that one does nothing here that one would like to do. Anyway, on Monday between three and four, clear out your windpipe so as to read me a part before dinner.

G. Sand

Tues. evening.

CXVII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Sunday, 9 May, 1869

Tomorrow, your reverence, I shall go to dine at your house. I shall be at home every day at five o'clock, but you might meet some guys whom you dislike. You would much better come to Magny's where you would find me alone, or with Plauchut, or with friends who are also yours.

I embrace you. I received today the letter which you wrote to me at

Nohant.

G. Sand

CXVIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Paris, 18 May, 1869

I saw Levy today, I tested him at first; I saw that he would not give up his contract at any price. I then said to him many good things about the book and made the remark that he had gotten it very cheap. But he said to me, if the book is in two volumes, it will be 20,000 francs, that is agreed. So I suppose that you will have two volumes, won't you?

However, I persisted and he said to me: If the book is a success, I shall not

However, I persisted and he said to me: If the book is a success, I shall not begrudge two or three thousand francs more. I said that you would not demand anything, that it was not your way of acting, but that for MY PART, I should insist for you without your knowledge, and he left me saying: Be easy, I don’t say no. Should the book succeed I will make the author profit by it.

That is all that I have been able to do now, but I will take it up again at the proper time and place. Leave that to me, I will return your contract. What day next week will you dine with me at Magny’s? I am a little weary.

You would be very kind to come to read at my house, we should be alone and one evening will be enough for the rest. Set the day, and AT SIX THIRTY if that does not bother you. My stomach is beginning to suffer a little from Paris habits. Your troubadour who loves you,

G. Sand

The rest of the week will finish up Palaiseau, but Sunday if you like, I am free. Answer if you want Sunday at Magny’s at half past six.

CXIX. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Then Monday, I count on you, at half past six; but as I am going to Palaiseau, I may be a few minutes late or early. The first one at Magny’s must wait for the other. I am looking forward with pleasure to hearing THE REST. Don’t forget the manuscript.

Your troubadour Thursday evening, 20 May, 1869.

CXX. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT Paris, 29 May, 1869

Yes, Monday, my dear good friend, I count on you and I embrace you.

G. Sand

I am off for Palaiseau AND IT IS TEN O’CLOCK IN THE MORNING!

CXXI. TO GEORGE SAND

My prophecy is fulfilled; My friend X — — has gained only ridicule with his candidacy. That serves him right. When a man of style debases himself to practical life, he loses caste and should be punished. And then, is it a question of politics, now! The citizens who are excited for or against the Empire or the Republic seem to me as useful as those who discuss efficacious or efficient grace. Politics are as dead as theology! They have had three hundred years of existence, that is quite enough.

Just now I am lost in the Church Fathers. As for my novel l'Education sentimentale, I am paying no more attention to it, God be thanked! It is recopied. Other hands have gone over it. So, the thing is no longer mine. It does not exist any longer, good night. I have taken up again my old hobby of Saint Antoine. I have reread my notes, I am making another new plan and I am devouring the ecclesiastical memoirs of the Nain de Tillemont. I hope to succeed in finding a logical connection (and therefore a dramatic interest) between the different hallucinations of the Saint. This extravagant setting pleases me and I am absorbed in it, there you are!

My poor Bouilhet bothers me. He is in such a nervous state that they have advised him to take a little trip to the south of France. He is overwhelmed by an unconquerable melancholy. Isn't it queer! He who was so gay, formerly!

My Heavens! What a beautiful and farcical thing is the life of the desert Fathers! But without doubt they were all Buddhists. That is a stylish problem to work at, and its solution would be more important than the election of an academician. Oh! ye men of little faith! Long live Saint Polycarp!

Fangeat, who has reappeared recently, is the citizen who, on the 25th day of February, 1848, demanded the death of Louis-Philippe "without a trial." That is the way one serves the cause of progress.

CXXII. TO GEORGE SAND

What a good and charming letter was yours, adored master! There is no one but you! upon my word of honor! I am ending by believing it. A wind of stupidity and folly is now blowing over the world. Those who stand up firm and straight against it are rare.

This is what I meant when I wrote that the times of politics were over. In the 18th century the chief business was diplomacy. "The secrecy of the cabinets" really existed. The peoples still were sufficiently amenable to be separated and to be combined. That order of things seems to me to have said its last word in 1815. Since then, one has hardly done anything except dispute about the external form that it is fitting to give the fantastic and odious being called the State.

Experience proves (it seems to me) that no form contains the best in itself; orleanism, republic, empire do not mean anything anymore, since the most contradictory ideas can enter into each one of these pigeon holes. All the flags have been so soiled with blood and with filth that it is time not to have any at all have been so soiled with blood and with filth that it is time not to have any at all. Down with words! No more symbols nor fetiches! The great moral of this reign will be to prove that universal suffrage is as senseless as the divine right although a little less odions!

The question is then out of place. One is concerned no longer with dreaming of the best form of government, since all are equal, but with making science prevail. That is the most important. The rest will follow inevitably. Purely intellectual men have rendered more service to the human race than all the Saint Vincent de Pauls in the world! And politics will be an everlasting folly so long as it is not subordinate to science. The government of a country ought to be a section of the Institute, and the last section of all.

Before concerning yourself with relief funds, and even with agriculture, send to all the villages in France, Robert Houdins to work miracles! The greatest crime of Isidore is the wretched condition in which he leaves our beautiful country. Dixi. I admire Maurice’s occupations and his healthy life. But I am not capable of imitating him. Nature, far from fortifying me, drains my strength. When I lie on the grass I feel as if I am already under the earth and that the roots of green things are beginning to grow in my belly. Your troubadour is naturally an unhealthy man. I do not like the country except when travelling, because then the independence of my individuality causes me to rise above the knowledge of my nothingness.

CXXIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 6 August, 1869

Well, dear good friend, here it is August, and you have promised to come. We don’t forget it, we count on it, we dream of it, and we talk of it every day. You were to take a trip to the seashore first if I am not mistaken. You must need to shake up your gloom. That does not dispel it, but it does force it to live with us and not be too oppressive. I have thought a great deal about you lately, I would have hastened to see you if I had not thought I should find you surrounded by older and better friends than I am. I wrote you at the same time that you wrote me, our letters crossed.

Come to see us, my dear old friend, I shall not go to Paris this month, I do not want to miss you. My children will be happy to spoil you and to try to distract you. We all love you, and I love you PASSIONATELY, as you know.

CXXIV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 14 August, 1869

Your change of plans distresses us, dear friend, but we do not dare to complain in the face of your anxieties and sorrows. We ought to wish you to do what would distract you the most, and take the least out of you. I am in hopes of finding you in Paris, as you are staying there some time and I always have business there. But it is so hard to see friends in Paris and one is so overwhelmed by so many tedious duties! Well, it is a real sorrow to me not to have to expect you any more at our house, where each one of us would have tried to love you better than the others and where you would have been at home; sad when you wanted to be, busy if you liked. I resign myself on condition that you will be better off somewhere else and that you will make it good to us when you can.

Have you at least arranged your affairs with Levy? Is he paying you for two volumes? I would like you to have something on which to live independently and as master of your time. Here there is repose for the mind in the midst of the exuberant activities of Maurice, and of his brave little wife who sets herself to love all he loves and to help him eagerly in all he undertakes. As for me, I have the appearance of incarnate idleness in the midst of this hard work. I botanize and I bathe in a little icy torrent. I teach my servant to read, I correct proof and I am well. That is my life and nothing bores me in this world where I think that AS FAR AS I AM CONCERNED all is for the best. But I am afraid of becoming more of a bore than I used to be. People don’t like such as I am very much. We are too inoffensive. However, love me still a little, for I feel by the disappointment of not seeing you, that it would have gone hard with me if you had meant to break your word.

And I embrace you tenderly, dear old friend.

G. Sand

CXXV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Thursday

I know nothing either of Chilly or la petite Fadette. In a few days I am going to make a tour of Normandy. I shall go through Paris. If you want to come around with me, — oh! but no, you don’t travel about; well, we shall see each other in passing. I have certainly earned a little holiday. I have worked like a beast of burden. I need too to see some blue, but the blue of the sea will do, and you would like the blue of the artistic and literary firmament over our heads. Bah! that doesn't exist. Everything is prose, flat prose in the environment in which mankind has settled itself. It is only in isolating oneself a little that one can find in oneself the normal being again.

I am resuming my letter interrupted for two days by my wounded hand which inconveniences me a good deal. I am not going to Normandy at all, my Lamberts whom I was going to see in Yport came back to Paris and my business calls me there too. I shall then see you next week probably, and I shall embrace you as if you were my dear big child. Why can't I put the rosy, tanned face of Aurore in the place of mine! She is not what you would call pretty, but she is adorable and so quick in comprehending that we all are astonished. She is as amusing in her chatter as a person, — who might be amusing. So I am going to be forced to start thinking about my business! It is the one thing of which I have a horror and which really troubles my serenity. You must console me by joking with me a little when you have the time.

I shall see you soon, have courage in the sickening work of proof-reading. As for me I hurry over it quickly and badly, but you must not do as I do.

My children send you their love and your troubadour loves you.

G. Sand

Saturday evening

I have just received news from the Odeon. They are at work putting on my play and do not speak of anything else.

CXXVI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Paris, 6 September, 1869

They wrote me yesterday to come because they wanted me at the Opera-Comique. Here I am rue Gay-Lussac. When shall we meet? Tell me. All my days, are still free.

I embrace you.

G. Sand

CXXVII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Paris, 8 September, 1869

I send you back your handkerchief which you left in the carriage. It is surely tomorrow THURSDAY that we dine together? I have written to the big Marchal to come to Magny's too.

Your troubadour

G. Sand

Wednesday morning.

CXXVIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Paris, Tuesday, 5 October, 1869

Where are you now, my dear troubadour? I am still writing to you at the boulevard du Temple, but perhaps you have taken possession of your delightful lodgings. I don't know the address although I have seen the house, the situation and the view. — I have been twice in the Ardennes and in a week or ten days, if Lina or Maurice does not come to Paris, as they have a slight desire to do, I shall leave again for Nohant.

We must then meet and see each other. Here am I a little sfogata (eased) from my need for travel, and enchanted with what I have seen. Tell me what day except tomorrow, Wednesday, you can give me for dinner at Magny's or elsewhere with or without Plauchut, with whomever you wish provided I see you and embrace you.

Your old comrade who loves you.

G. Sand

CXXIX. TO GEORGE SAND

Dear good adored master,

I have wanted for several days to write you a long letter in which I should tell you all that I have felt for a month. It is funny. I have passed through different and strange states. But I have neither the time nor the repose of mind to gather myself together enough.

Don't be disturbed about your troubadour. He will always have "his independence and his liberty" because he will always do as he has always done. He has left everything rather than submit to any obligation whatsoever, and then, with age, one's needs lessen. I suffer no longer from not living in the Alhambra.

What would do me good now, would be to throw myself furiously into Saint-Antoine, but I have not even the time to read.

Listen to this: in the very beginning, your play was to come after Aisse; then it was agreed that it should come BEFORE. Now Chilly and Duquesnel want it to come after, simply and solely “to profit by the occasion,” to profit by my poor Bouilhet’s death. They will give you a “sort of compensation.” Well, I am the owner and the master of Aisse just as if I were the author, and I do not want that. You understand, I do not want you to inconvenience yourself in anything.

You think that I am as sweet as a lamb! Undeceive yourself, and act as if Aisse had never existed; and above all no sensitiveness? That would offend me. Between simple friends, one needs manners and politenesses; but between you and me, that would not seem at all suitable; we do not owe each other anything at all except to love each other.

I think that the directors of the Odeon will regret Bouilhet in every way. I shall be less easy than he was at rehearsals. I should very much like to read Aisse to you so as to talk a little about it; some of the actors whom they propose are, to my way of thinking, impossible. It is hard to have to do with uneducated people.

CXXX. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Wednesday evening, 13 October, 1869

Our poor friend is not to be buried till the day after tomorrow, they will let me know where and when we ought to be there, I shall tell you by telegram.

I have seen the directors twice. It was agreed this morning with Duquesnel that they should make an attempt with de la T(our) Saint-Y(bars). I yielded my turn to Aisse. I was not to come till March. I went back there this evening, Chilly IS UNWILLING, and Duquesnel, better informed than this morning, regards the step as useless and harmful. I then quoted my contract, my right. What a fine thing, the theatre! M. Saint-Ybars’ contract antedates mine. They had thought le Batard would last two weeks and it will last forty days longer. Then La Tour Saint-Ybars precedes us [Footnote: This refers to l’Affranchi.] and I can not give up my turn to Aisse without being postponed till next year, which I’ll do if you want me to; but it would do me a good deal of harm, for I have gotten into debt with the Revue and I must refill my purse. — Are directors rascals in all that? No, but incompetents who are always afraid of not having enough plays, and accept too many, foreseeing that they will have failures. — When they are successful, if the authors contracted for are ANGRY they have to go to court. I have no taste for disputes and the scandals of the side-scenes and the newspapers; and neither have you. What would be the result? Inadequate compensation and a deal of uproar for nothing. One needs patience in any event, I have it, and I tell you again if you are really upset at this delay, I am ready to sacrifice myself.

With this I embrace you and I love you.

G. Sand

CXXXI. TO GEORGE SAND 14 October, 1869

Dear master,

No! no sacrifices! so much the worse! If I did not look at Bouilhet's affairs as mine absolutely, I should have at once accepted your proposition. But: (1) it is my affair, (2) the dead must not hurt the living.

But I am angry at these gentlemen, I do not hide it from you, for not having said anything to us about Latour Saint-Ybars. For the aforesaid Latour was engaged a long time ago. Why did we not know anything about him?

In short, let Chilly write me the letter on which we agreed

Wednesday, and let there be no more discussion about it.

It seems to me that your play can be given the 15th of December, if l'Affranchi begins about the 20th of November. Two and a half months are about fifty performances; if you go beyond that, Aisse will not be presented till next year.

Then, it is agreed, since we can not suppress Latour Saint-Ybars; you shall go after him and Aisse next, if I think it suitable.

We shall meet Saturday at poor Sainte-Beuve's funeral. How the little band diminishes! How the few survivors of the Medusa's raft are disappearing!

A thousand affectionate greetings.

CXXXII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Paris, 20 or 21 October, 1869

Impossible, dear old beloved. Brebant is too far, I have so little time. And then I have made an engagement with Marchal and Berton at Magny's to say farewell. If you can come, I shall be very happy and on the other hand if it is going to make you ill, don't come, I know very well that you love me and shall not be angry with you about anything.

G. Sand

CXXXIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croisset

Nohant, 15 Nov., 1869

What has become of you, my dear old beloved troubadour? are you correcting proof like a galley slave, up to the last minute? For the last two days they have been announcing your book FOR TOMORROW. I am looking for it with impatience, for you are not going to forget me, are you? You will be praised and condemned; you expect that. You are too truly superior not to arouse envy and you don't care, do you? Nor I either for you. You have the strength to be stimulated by what discourages others. There will certainly be a rumpus; your subject will be quite opportune in this time of REVOLUTIONISTS. The good progressives, the true democrats will approve of you. The idiots will be furious, and you will say: "Come weal, come woe!" I am also correcting proof of Pierre qui roule and I have half finished a new novel which will not make much of a stir; that is all that I ask for at the moment. I work alternately on MY novel, the one that I like, and on the one that the Revue does not dislike as much, but which I like very little. It is arranged that way; I don't know if I am making a mistake. Perhaps those which I like are the worst. But I have stopped worrying about myself, so far as I have ever done so. Life has always taken me out of myself, and so it will to the end. My heart is always affected to the detriment of my head. At present it is my little children who devour all my intellect; Aurore is a jewel, a nature before which I bow in admiration; will it last like that?

You are going to spend the winter in Paris, and I, I don't know when I shall go. The success of le Batard continues; but I am not impatient, you have promised to come as soon as you are free, at Christmas at the very latest, to keep revel with us. I think only of that, and if you break your word we shall be in despair here. With this I embrace you with a full heart as I love you.

G. Sand

CXXXIV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Paris

Nohant, 30 November, 1869

Dear friend of my heart, I wanted to reread your book [Footnote: l'Education sentimentale.]; my daughter-in-law has read it too, and some of my young people, all readers in earnest and of the first rank and not stupid at all. We are all of the same opinion, that it is a beautiful book, equal in strength to the best ones of Balzac and truer, that is to say more faithful to the truth from one end to the other.

One needs the great art, the exquisite form and the severity of your work to do without flowers of fancy. However, you throw poetry with a full hand on your picture, whether your characters understand it or not. Rosanette at Fontainebleau does not know on what grass she walks and nevertheless she is poetic.

All that issues from a master’s hand, and your place is well won for always. Live then as calmly as possible in order to last a long time and to produce a great deal.

I have seen two short articles which did not seem to me to rebel against your success; but I hardly know what is going on, politics seems to me to absorb everything.

Keep me posted. If they did not do justice to you I should be angry and should say what I think. It is my right.

I don’t know exactly when, but during the month, I shall go without doubt to embrace you and to get you, if I can pry you loose from Paris. My children still count on it, and all of us send you our praises and our affectionate greetings.

Yours, your old troubadour

G. Sand

CXXXV. TO GEORGE SAND

Dear good master,

Your old troubadour is vehemently slandered by the papers. Read the Constitutionnel of last Monday, the Gaulois of this morning, it is blunt and plain. They call me idiotic and common. Barbey d’Aurevilly’s article (Constitutionnel) is a model of this character, and the good Sarcey’s, although less violent, is in no way behind it. These gentlemen object in the name of morality and the Ideal! I have also been annihilated in le Figaro and in Paris, by Cesana and Duranty. I most profoundly don’t care a fig! but that does not make me any the less astonished by so much hatred and bad faith.

La Tribune, le Pays and l’Opinion nationale on the other hand have highly praised me…As for the friends, the persons who received a copy adorned by my hand, they have been afraid of compromising themselves and have talked to me of other things. The brave are few. The book is selling very well nevertheless, in spite of politics, and Levy appears satisfied.

I know that the bourgeois of Rouen are furious with me “because of pere Roque and the cancan at the Tuileries.” They think that one ought to prevent the publication of books like that (textual), that I lend a hand to the Reds, that I am capable of inflaming revolutionary passions, etc., *etc.* In short, I have received very few laurels, up to now, and no rose leaf hurts me.

I told you, didn’t I, that I was working over the fairy play? I am doing now a description of the races and I have cut out all that seemed to me hackneyed description of the races and I have cut out all that seemed to me hackneyed. Raphael Felix didn’t seem to me eager to become acquainted with it. Problem!

All the papers cite as a proof of my depravity, the episode of the Turkish woman, which they misrepresent, naturally; and Sarcey compares me to Marquis de Sade, whom he confesses he has not read!

All that does not upset me at all. But I wonder what use there is in printing my book?

CXXXVI. TO GEORGE SAND

Tuesday, 4 o’clock, 7 December, 1869

Dear master,

Your old troubadour is being jumped on in an unheard of manner. Those people who have read my novel are afraid to talk to me of it lest they compromise themselves or out of pity for me. The more indulgent declare I have made only pictures and that both composition and plan are quite lacking.

Saint-Victor, who puffs the books of Arsene Houssaye, won’t write articles on mine, finding it too bad. There you are. Theo is away, and no one, absolutely no one takes my defense.

Another story: yesterday Raphael and Michel Levy listened to the reading of the fairy play. Applause, enthusiasm. I saw the moment during the reading in which the contract was going to be signed. Raphael so well understood the play that he gave me two or three EXCELLENT criticisms. I found him in other ways a charming boy. He asked me until Saturday to give me a definite answer. Then a little while ago, a letter (very polite) from the aforesaid Raphael in which he declares that the fairy play would entail expenses that would be too much for him.

Ditched again. I must look elsewhere. Nothing new at the Odeon.

Sarcey has published a second article against me.

Barbey d’Aurevilly claims that I dirty a stream by washing myself in it (sic). All that does not bother me at all.

CXXXVII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Thursday, two o’clock in the morning, December 9, 1869

My comrade, it is finished, the article shall go tomorrow. I address it to whom? Answer by telegram. I have a mind to send it to Girardin. But perhaps whom? Answer by telegram. I have a mind to send it to Girardin. But perhaps you have a better idea, I really don’t know the importance and the credit of the various papers. Send me a suitable name and ADDRESS by telegram; I have Girardin’s.

I am not content with my prose, I have had the fever and a sort of sprain for two days. But we must make haste. I embrace you.

G. Sand

CXXXVIII. TO GEORGE SAND 10 December, Friday, 10 o’clock in the evening, 1869

Dear master, good as good bread,

I have just sent you by telegraph this message: “To Girardin.” La Liberte will publish your article, at once. What do you think of my friend Saint-Victor, who has refused to write an article about it because he finds “the book bad”? you have not such a conscience as that, have you?

I continue to be rolled in the mud. La Gironde calls me Prudhomme.

That seems new to me.

How shall I thank you? I feel the need of saying affectionate things to you. I have so many in my heart that not one comes to the tips of my fingers. What a splendid woman you are and what a splendid man! To say nothing of all the other things!

CXXXIX. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, Friday to Saturday during the night, 10 to 11 December, 1869

I have rewritten my article [Footnote: The article, Sur l’Education sentimentale, de Flaubert, was printed in the Questions d’art et de litterature, Calmann-Levy, p. 415.] today and this evening, I am better, it is clearer. I am expecting your telegram tomorrow. If you do not put your veto on it, I shall send the article to Ulbach, who begins his paper the 15th of this month; he wrote to me this morning to beg me urgently for any article I would send him. I think this first number will be widely read, and it would be good publicity. Michel Levy would be a better judge than we as to what is the best to do: consult him.

You seem astonished at the ill will. You are too simple. You do not know how original your book is, and how many personal feelings must be offended by the force it contains. You think you are doing things that will pass as a letter in the mail; ah! well, yes!

I have insisted on the PLAN of your book; that is what they understand the least and it is what is the most important. I tried to show the ordinary people how they should read; for it is the ordinary people who make successes. The clever ones don't like the successes of others. I don't pay attention to the malicious; it would honor them too much.

G. S.

My mother has your telegram and is sending her manuscript to Girardin.
4 o'clock in the afternoon.
Lina

CXL. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, in Paris

Nohant, 14 December, 1869

I do not see my article coming out, but others are appearing which are bad and unjust. One's enemies are always better served than one's friends. And then, when one frog begins to croak, all the others follow suit. After a certain reverence has been violated every one tries to see who can best jump on the shoulders of the statue; it is always like that. You are undergoing the disadvantages of having a style that is not yet familiar through repetition, and all are making idiots of themselves so as not to see it.

ABSOLUTE IMPERSONALITY is debatable, and I do not accept it ABSOLUTELY; but I wonder that Saint-Victor who has preached it so much and has criticised my plays because they were not IMPERSONAL, should abandon you instead of defending you. Criticism is in a sad way; too much theory!

Don't be troubled by all that and keep straight on. Don't attempt a system, obey your inspiration.

What fine weather, at least with us, and we are getting ready for our Christmas festivals with the family at home. I told Plauchut to try to carry you off; we are expecting him. If you can't come with him, come at least for the Christmas Eve revels and to escape from Paris on New Year's day; it is so boring there then!

Lina charges me to say to you that you are authorized to wear your wrapper and slippers continually. There are no ladies, no strangers. In short you will make us very happy and you have promised for a long time.

I embrace you and I am still more angry than you at these attacks, but I am not overcome, and if I had you here we should stimulate each other so well that you would start off again at once on the other leg to write a new novel.

I embrace you.
Your old troubadour,
G. Sand

CXLI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, in Paris

Nohant, 17 December, 1869

Plauchut writes us that YOU PROMISE to come the 24th. Do come the 23d in the evening, so as to be rested for the night of the 24th to the 25th and join in our Christmas Eve revels. Otherwise you will arrive from Paris tired and sleepy and our follies will not amuse you. You are coming to the house of children, I warn you, and as you are kind and affectionate, you love children. Did Plauchut tell you to bring a wrapper and slippers, for we do not want to sentence you to dressing up? I add that I am counting on your bringing some manuscript. The FAIRY PLAY re-done, Saint-Antoine, whatever you have finished. I hope indeed that you are in the mood for work. Critics are a challenge that stimulates.

Poor Saint-Rene Taillandier is as asininely pedantic as the Revue. Aren’t they prudish in that set? I am in a pet with Girardin. I know very well that I am not strong in letters; I am not sufficiently cultivated for these gentlemen; but the good public reads me and listens to me all the same.

If you did not come, we should be unhappy and you would be a big ingrate. Do you want me to send a carriage for you to Chateauroux on the 23d at four o’clock? I am afraid that you may be uncomfortable in that stage-coach which makes the run, and it is so easy to spare you two and a half hours of discomfort!

We embrace you full of hope. I am working like an ox so as to have my novel finished and not to have to think of it a minute when you are here.

G. Sand

CXLII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 19 December, 1869

So women are in it too? Come, forget that persecution here, at a hundred thousand leagues from Parisian and literary life, or rather come be glad of it, for these great slatings are the sure proof of great worth. Tell yourself indeed that those who have not gone through that are GOOD FOR THE ACADEMY.

Our letters crossed. I begged you and I beg you again not to come Christmas Eve, but the night before so as to join in the revels the next night, the Eve, that is to say, the 24th. This is the program: we dine promptly at six o’clock, we have the Christmas tree and the marionettes for the children, so, that they can go to bed at nine o'clock. After that we chatter, and sup at midnight. But the diligence gets here at the earliest at half past six, and we should not dine till seven o'clock, which would make impossible the great joy of our little ones who would be kept up too late. So you must start Thursday 23d at nine o'clock in the morning, so that everyone may be perfectly comfortable, so that everyone may have time to embrace everyone else, and so that no one may be interrupted in the joy of your arrival on account of the imperious and silly darlings.

You must stay with us a very long time, a very long time, we shall have some more follies for New Year's day, and for Twelfth Night. This is a crazy happy house and it is the time of holiday after work. I am finishing tonight my year's task. Seeing you, dear old well-beloved friend, would be my recompense: do not refuse me.

G. Sand

Plauchut is hunting today with the prince, and perhaps will not return till Tuesday. I am writing him to wait for you till Thursday, you will be less bored on the way. I have just written to Girardin to complain.

CXLIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT 31 December, 1869

We hoped to have a word from you this morning. This sudden cold is so severe, I dreaded it for your trip. We know you got to Chateauroux all right. But did you find a compartment, and didn't you suffer on the way? Reassure us.

We were so happy to have you with us that we should be distressed if you had to suffer for this WINTER escapade. All goes well here and all of us adore one another. It is New Year's Eve. We send your share of the kisses that we are giving one another.

G. Sand

1870

CXLIV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croissset

Nohant, 9 January, 1870

I have had so much proof to correct that I am stupefied with it. I needed that to console me for your departure, troubadour of my heart, and for another departure also, that of my drudge of a Plauchmar — and still another departure, that of my grand-nephew Edme, my favorite, the one who played the marionettes with Maurice. He has passed his examinations for collector and goes to Pithiviers- -unless by pull, we could get him as substitute at La Chatre.

Do you know M. Roy, the head of the management of the domains? If by chance the princess knew him and would be willing to say a word to him in favor of young Simonnet? I should be happy to owe her this joy for his family and this economy for his mother who is poor. It appears that it is very easy to obtain and that no rule opposes it. But one must HAVE PULL; a word to the princess, a line from M. Roy and our tears would change to joy.

That child is very dear to me. He is so loving and so good! They had hard work to bring him up, he was always ill, always dandled on the knees and always gentle and sweet. He has a great deal of intelligence and he works well at La Chatre, where his chief the collector adores him and mourns for him also. Well, do what you can, if you can do anything at all.

They continue to damn your book. That doesn’t prevent it from being a fine and good book. Justice will come later, JUSTICE IS ALWAYS DONE. Apparently it did not come at the right moment, or rather it came too soon. It has demonstrated too well the disorder that reigns in people’s minds. It has rubbed the open wound, people recognize themselves too well in it.

Everyone adores you here and our consciences are too pure to be upset at the truth: we talk of you every day. Yesterday, Lina said to me that she admired very much all you do, but that she preferred Salammbo to your modern descriptions. If you had been in a corner, this is what you would have heard from her, from me, and from THE OTHERS:

“He is taller and larger than the average person. His mind is like him, beyond ordinary proportions. In that he is like Victor Hugo, at least as much as like Balzac, but he has the taste and discernment that Hugo lacks, and he is an artist which Balzac was not. — Is he then more than both? Chi lo sa? — He hasn’t let himself out yet. The enormous volume of his brain troubles him. He doesn’t know if he is a poet or a realist; and the fact that he is both, hinders him. — He must get straightened out in his different lines of effort. He sees everything and wants to grasp everything at once. — He is not the cut of the public that wants to eat in little mouthfuls, whom large pieces choke. But the public will go to him, just the same, when it understands. — It will even go rather quickly if the author CONDESCENDS to be willing to be quite understood. — For that, perhaps there will have to be asked some concessions to the indolence of its mind. One ought to reflect before daring to give this advice."

That sums up what we said. It is not useless to know the opinion of good people and of young people. The youngest say that l'Education sentimentale made them sad. They did not come across themselves in it, they who have not yet lived; but they have illusions and they say: "Why does this man, so good, so kind, so gay, so simple, so sympathetic, wish to discourage us from living?" What they say is poorly reasoned out, but as it is instinctive, perhaps it ought to be taken into account.

Aurore talks of you and still cradles her baby in her lap; Gabrielle calls Punch, HER LITTLE ONE, and will not eat her dinner unless he is opposite her. They are our continual idols, these brats.

Yesterday, I received, after your letter of the day before, a letter from Berton, who thinks that they will not play l'Affranchi longer than the 18th or the 20th. Wait for me, since you can delay your departure a little. It is too bad weather to go to Croisset; it is always an effort for me to leave my dear nest to go to attend to my miserable profession; but the effort is less when I hope to find you in Paris.

I embrace you for myself and for all my brood.

G. Sand

CXLV. TO GEORGE SAND

Wednesday afternoon.

Dear master,

Your commission was done yesterday at one o'clock. The princess in my presence took some notes on what you wanted, in order to look after it at once. She seemed to me very glad to do you a service.

People talk of nothing but the death of Noir! The general sentiment is fear, nothing else!

Into what miserable ways we are plunged! There is so much imbecility in the air that one gets ferocious. I am less indignant than disgusted! What do you think all that one gets ferocious. I am less indignant than disgusted! What do you think of these gentlemen who come to confer armed with pistols and sword canes! And of this person, of this prince, who lives in the midst of an arsenal and makes use of it? Pretty! Pretty!

What a sweet letter you wrote me day before yesterday! But your friendship blinds you, dear good master. I do not belong to the tribe you mention. I am acquainted with myself, I know what I lack! And I am enormously lacking.

In losing my poor Bouilhet, I lost my midwife, it was he who saw into my thought more clearly than I did myself. His death has left a void that I notice more each day. What is the use of making concessions? Why force oneself? I am quite resolved, on the contrary, to write in future for my personal satisfaction, and without any constraint. Come what may!

CXLVI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 15 January, 1870

L’Affranchi is for Tuesday. I am working hurriedly to finish my corrections and I leave Tuesday morning. Come to dine with me at Magny’s at six o’clock. Can you? If not, am I to keep a seat for you in my box? A word during the day of Tuesday, to my lodgings. You won’t be forced to swallow down the entire performance if it bores you.

I love you and I embrace you for myself and for my brood. Thank you for Edme.

G. Sand

CXLVII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Paris, 19 January, 1870

Dear friend of my heart, I did not see you in the theatre. The play applauded and hissed, more applauded than hissed. Barton very beautiful, Sarah very pretty, but no interest in the characters and too many second-rate actors, not good. — I do not think that it is a success.

I am better. Yet I am not bold enough to go to your house Saturday and to return from such a distance in this severe cold. I saw Theo this evening, I told him to come to dine with us both on Saturday at Magny’s. Do say yes, it is I who invite you, and we shall have a quiet private room. After that we will smoke at my place.

my place.

Plauchut would not be able to go to you. He was invited to the prince’s.

A word if it is NO. Nothing if it is yes. So I don’t want you to write to me. I saw Tourgueneff and I told him all that I think of him. He was as surprised as a child. We spoke ill of you.

Wednesday evening.

CXLVIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

The 5th or the 6th February, 1870

(On the back of a letter from Edme Simonnet)

I don’t see you, you come to the Odeon and when they tell me that you are there, I hurry and don’t find you. Do set a day then when you will come to eat a chop with me. Your old exhausted troubadour who loves you.

CXLIX. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Paris, 15 February, 1870

My troubadour, we are two old rattle traps. As for me, I have had a bad attack of bronchitis and I am just out of bed. Now I am recovered but not yet out of my room. I hope to resume my work at the Odeon in a couple of days.

Do get well, don’t go out, at least unless the thaw is not very bad. My play is for the 22d. [Footnote: This refers to L’Autre.] I hope very much to see you on that day. And meanwhile, I kiss you and I love you,

G. Sand

Tuesday evening

CL. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Sunday evening, 20th February, 1870

I went out today for the first time, I am better without being well. I am anxious at not having news about that reading of the fairy play. Are you satisfied? Did they understand? L’Autre will take place on Thursday, or Friday at the latest.

Will your nephew and niece go to the gallery or the balcony seats? Impossible to have a box. If yes, a word and I will send these seats out of my allotment — which, as usual, will not be grand.

Your old troubadour.

CLI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Paris, February, 1870

It is for Friday. Then I am disposing of the two seats that I intended for your niece.

If you have a moment free, and come to the Odeon that night, you will find me in the manager's box, proscenium, ground floor. I am heavy-hearted about all you tell me. Here you are again in gloom, sorrow and chagrin. Poor dear friend! Let us continue to hope that you will save your patient, but you are ill too, and I am very anxious about you, I was quite overwhelmed by it this evening, when I got your note, and I have no more heart for anything.

A word when you can, to give me news.

G. Sand

CLII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Paris, 2d March, 1870

Poor dear friend, your troubles distress me, you have too many blows in quick succession, and I am going away Saturday morning leaving you in the midst of all these sorrows! Do you want to come to Nohant with me, for a change of air, even if only for two or three days? I have a compartment, we should be alone and my carriage is waiting for me at Chateauroux. You could be sad without constraint at our house, we also have mourning in the family. A change of lodging, of faces, of habits, sometimes does physical good. One does not forget one's sorrow, but one forces one's body to endure it.

I embrace you with all my soul. A word and I expect you. Wednesday evening.

CLIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 11 March, 1870

How are you, my poor child? I am glad to be here in the midst of my darling family, but I am unhappy all the same at having left you melancholy, ill and upset. Send me news, a word at least, and be assured that we all are unhappy over your troubles and sufferings.

G. Sand

CLIV. TO GEORGE SAND 17 March, 1870

Dear master,

I received a telegram yesterday evening from Madame Cornu containing these words: “Come to me, urgent business.” I therefore hurried to her today, and here is the story.

The Empress maintains that you made some very unkind allusions to her in the last number of the Revue! “What about me, whom all the world is attacking now! I should not have believed that! and I wanted to have her nominated for the Academy! But what have I done to her? etc., etc.” In short, she is distressed, and the Emperor too! He is not indignant but prostrated (sic). [Footnote: Malgre tout, Calmann-Levy, 1870.]

Madame Cornu explained to her that she was mistaken and that you had not intended to make any allusion to her.

Hereupon a theory of the manner in which novels are written.

— Oh well, then, let her write in the papers that she did not intend to wound me.

— But she will not do that, I answered.

— Write to her to tell you so.

— I will not allow myself to take that step.

— But I would like to know the truth, however! Do you know someone who…then Madame Cornu mentioned me.

— Oh, don’t say that I spoke to you of it!

Such is the dialogue that Madame Cornu reported to me.

She wants you to write me a letter in which you tell me that the

Empress was not used by you as a model. I shall send that letter to

Madame Cornu who will have it given to the Empress.

I think that story stupid and those people are very sensitive! Much worse things than that are told to us.

Now dear master of the good God, you must do exactly what you please.

The Empress has always been very kind to me and I should not be sorry to do her a favor. I have read the famous passage. I see nothing in it to hurt her. But women’s brains are so queer!

I am very tired in mine (my brain) or rather it is very low for the moment! However hard I work, it doesn't go! Everything irritates me and hurts me; and since I restrain myself before people, I give way from time to time to floods of tears when it seems to me as if I should burst. At last I am experiencing an entirely new sensation: the approach of old age. The shadow invades me, as Victor Hugo would say.

Madame Cornu has spoken to me enthusiastically of a letter you wrote her on a method of teaching.

CLV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croissset

Nohant, 17 March, 1870

I won't have it, you are not getting old. Not in the crabbed and MISANTHROPIC sense. On the contrary, when one is good, one becomes better, and, as you are already better than most others, you ought to become exquisite.

You are boasting, moreover, when you undertake to be angry against everyone and everything. You could not. You are weak before sorrow, like all affectionate people. The strong are those who do not love. You will never be strong, and that is so much the better. You must not live alone any more; when strength returns you must really live and not shut it up for yourself alone.

For my part, I am hoping that you will be reborn with the springtime. Today we have rain which relaxes, tomorrow we shall have the animating sun. We are all just getting over illnesses, our children had very bad colds, Maurice quite upset by lameness with a cold, I taken again by chills and anemia: I am very patient and I prevent the others as much as I can from being impatient, there is everything in that; impatience with evil always doubles the evil. When shall we be WISE as the ancients understood it? That, in substance, meant being PATIENT, nothing else. Come, dear troubadour, you must be a little patient, to begin with, and then you can get accustomed to it; if we do not work on ourselves, how can we hope to be always in shape to work on others?

Well, in the midst of all that, don't forget that we love you and that the hurt you give yourself hurts us too.

I shall go to see you and to shake you as soon as I have regained my feet and my will, which are both backward; I am waiting, I know that they will return.

Affectionate greetings from all our invalids. Punch has lost only his fiddle and he is still smiling and well gilded. Lolo's baby has had misfortunes, but its clothes dress other dolls. As for me, I can flap only one wing, but I kiss you and I love you.

G. Sand

CLVI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, in Paris

Nohant, 19 March, 1870

I know, my friend, that you are very devoted to her. I know that she [Footnote: Letter written about the rumour current, that George Sand had meant to depict the Empress in one of the chief characters of her novel, Malgre tout; the letter was sent by Flaubert to Madame Cornu, god-child of Queen Hortense, and foster-sister of Napoleon III.] is very kind to unfortunates who have been recommended to her; that is all that I know of her private life. I have never had any revelation nor document about her, NOT A WORD, NOT A DEED, which would authorize me to depict her. So I have drawn only a figure of fancy, I swear it, and those who pretended to recognize her in a satire would be, in any case, bad servants and bad friends.

But I don’t write satires: I am ignorant even of the meaning of the word. I don’t write PORTRAITS either; it is not my style. I invent. The public, who does not know in what invention consists, thinks it sees everywhere models. It is mistaken and it degrades art.

This is my SINCERE answer, I have only enough time to mail it.

G. Sand

CLVII. To MADAME HORTENSE CORNU

Your devotion was alarmed wrongly, dear madame, I was sure of it!

Here is the answer that came to me by return mail.

People in society, I reiterate, see allusions where there are none. When I did Madame Bovary I was asked many times: “Is it Madame X. whom you meant to depict?” and I received letters from perfectly unknown people, among others one from a gentleman in Rheims who congratulated me on HAVING AVENGED HIM! (against a faithless one).

Every pharmacist in Seine-Inferieure recognizing himself in Homais, wanted to come to my house to box my ears. But the best (I discovered it five years later) is that there was then in Africa the wife of an army doctor named Madame Bovaries who was like Madame Bovary, a name I had invented by altering that of Bouvaret.

The first sentence of our friend Maury in talking to me about l’Education sentimentale was this: “Did you know X, an Italian, a professor of mathematics? Your Senecal is his physical and moral portrait! Everything is exact even to the cut of his hair!”

cut of his hair?

Others assert that I meant to depict in Arnoux, Bernard Latte (the former editor), whom I have never seen, etc., *etc*.

All that is to tell you, dear madame, that the public is mistaken in attributing to us intentions which we do not have.

I was very sure that Madame Sand had not intended to make any portrait; (1) because of her loftiness of mind, her taste, her reverence for art, and (2) because of her character, her feeling for the conventions — and also FOR JUSTICE. I even think, between ourselves, that this accusation has hurt her a little. The papers roll us in the dirt every day without our ever answering them, we whose business it is, however, to wield the pen, and they think that in order to MAKE AN EFFECT, to be applauded, we are going to attack such and such a one.

Oh! no! not so humble! our ambition is higher, and our courtesy greater. — When one thinks highly of one’s mind one does not choose the necessary means to please the crowd. You understand me, don’t you?

But enough of this. I shall come to see you one of these days. Looking forward to that with pleasure, dear madame, I kiss your hands and am entirely yours,

Gustave Flaubert

Sunday evening.

CLVIII. TO GEORGE SAND

March, 1870

Dear master,

I have just sent your letter (for which I thank you) to Madame Cornu, enclosing it in a letter from your troubadour, in which I permitted myself to give bluntly my conception of things.

The two letters will be placed under the eyes of the LADY and will teach her a little about aesthetics.

I saw l’Autre last evening, and I wept several times. It did me good, really! How tender and exalting it is! What a charming work and how they love the author! I missed you. I wanted to give you a kiss like a little child. My oppressed heart is easier, thank you. I think that it will get better! There were a lot of people there. Berton and his son were recalled twice.

CLIX. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 3 April, 1870

Your old troubadour has passed through cruel anguish, Maurice has been seriously, dangerously ill.[Footnote: With diptheria.] Favre, MY OWN doctor, the only one in whom I have confidence, hastened to us in time. After that Lolo had violent attacks of fever, other terrors! At last our savior went off this morning leaving us almost tranquil and our invalids went out to walk in the garden for the first time. — But they still want a great deal of care and oversight, and I shall not leave them for two or three weeks. If then you are awaiting me in Paris, and the sun calls you elsewhere, have no regret about it. I shall try to go to see you in Croisset from Paris between the dawn and the dusk sometime.

At least tell me how you are, what you are doing, if you are on your feet in every way.

My invalids and my well ones send you their affectionate regards, and I kiss you as I love you; it is not little.

G. Sand

My friend Favre has quite a FANCY for you and wants to know you. He is not a physician who seeks practice, he only practices for his friends, and he is offended if they want to pay him. YOUR PERSONALITY interests him, that is all, and I have promised to present him to you, if you are willing. He is something more than a physician, I don’t know what exactly, A SEEKER — after what? — EVERYTHING. He is amusing, original and interesting to the utmost degree. You must tell me if you want to see him, otherwise I shall manage for him not to think of it any more. Answer about this matter.

CLX. TO GEORGE SAND

Monday morning, 11 o’clock

I felt that something unpleasant had happened to you, because I had just written to you for news when your letter was brought to me this morning. I fished mine back from the porter; here is a second one.

Poor dear master! How uneasy you must have been and Madame Maurice also. You do not tell me what he had (Maurice). In a few days before the end of the week, write to confirm to me that everything has turned out well. The trouble lies, I think, with the abominable winter from which we are emerging! One hears of nothing but illnesses and funerals! My poor servant is still at the Dubois hospital, and I am distressed when I go to see him. For two months now he has been confined to his bed suffering horribly.

As for me, I am better. I have read prodigiously. I have overworked, but now I am almost on my feet again. The mass of gloom that I have in the depths of my heart is a little larger, that is all. But, in a little while, I hope that it will not be noticed. I spend my days in the library of the Institute. The Arsenal library lends me books that I read in the evening, and I begin again the next day. I shall return home to Croisset the first of May. But I shall see you before then. Everything will get right again with the sun.

The lovely lady in question made to me, for you, the most proper excuses, asserting to me that “she never had any intention of insulting genius.”

Certainly, I shall be glad to meet M. Favre; since he is a friend of yours I shall like him.

CLXI. TO GEORGE SAND

Tuesday morning

Dear master,

It is not staying in Paris that wears me out, but the series of misfortunes that I have had during the last eight months! I am not working too much, for what would become of me without work? However, it is very hard for me to be reasonable. I am overwhelmed by a black melancholy, which returns a propos of everything and nothing, many times a day. Then, it passes and it begins again. Perhaps it is because it is too long since I have written anything. Nervous reservoirs are exhausted. As soon as I am at Croisset, I shall begin the article about my poor Bouilhet, a painful and sad task which I am in a hurry to finish, so as to set to work at Saint-Antoine. As that is an extravagant subject, I hope it will divert me.

I have seen your physician, M. Favre, who seemed to me very strange and a little mad, between ourselves. He ought to like me for I let him talk all the time. There are high lights in his talk, things which sparkle for a moment, then one sees not a ray.

CLXII. TO GEORGE SAND

Paris, Thursday

M. X. — — sent me news of you on Saturday: so now I know that everything is going well with you, and that you have no more uneasiness, dear master. But you, personally, how are you? The two weeks are almost up, and I do not see you coming.

My mood continues not to be sportive. I am still given up to abominable readings, but it is time that I stopped for I am beginning to be disgusted with my subject.

Are you reading Taine's powerful book? I have gobbled it down, the first volume with infinite pleasure. In fifty years perhaps that will be the philosophy that will be taught in the colleges.

And the preface to the Idees de M. Aubray?

How I long to see you and to jabber with you!

CLXIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 16 April, 1870

What ought I to say to Levy so that he will take the first steps? Tell me again how things are, for my memory is poor. You had sold him one volume for ten thousand; — there are two, he himself told me that that would be twenty thousand. What has he paid you up to now? What words did you exchange at the time of this payment?

Answer, and I act.

Things are going better and better here, the little ones well again, Maurice recovering nicely, I tired from having watched so much and from watching yet, for he has to drink and wash out his mouth during the night, and I am the only one in the house who has the faculty of keeping awake. But I am not ill, and I work a little now and then while loafing about. As soon as I can leave, I shall go to Paris. If you are still there, it will be A PIECE OF GOOD LUCK, but I do not dare to wish you to prolong your slavery there, for I can see that you are still ill and that you are working too hard.

Croisset will cure you if you consent to take care of yourself.

I embrace you tenderly for myself and for all the family which adores you.

G. Sand

CLXIV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croisset

Nohant, 20 May, 1870

It is a very long time since I have had news of my old troubadour. You must be in Croisset. If it is as warm there as it is here, you must be suffering; here it is be in Croisset. If it is as warm there as it is here, you must be suffering, here it is 34 degrees in the shade, and in the night, 24. Maurice has had a bad relapse of sore throat, without membranes this time, and without danger. But the inflammation was so bad that for three days he could hardly swallow even a little water and wine. Bouillon did not go down. At last this excessive heat has cured him, it suits us all here, for Lina went to Paris this morning vigorous and strong. Maurice gardens all day. The children are gay and get prettier while you look at them. As for me, I am not accomplishing anything; I have too much to do taking care of and watching my boy, and now that the little mother is away, the little children absorb me. I work, however, planning and dreaming. That will be so much done when I can scribble.

I am still ON MY FEET, as Doctor Favre says. No old age yet, or rather normal old age, the calmness … OF VIRTUE, that thing that people ridicule, and that I mention in mockery, but that corresponds by an emphatic and silly word, to a condition of forced inoffensiveness, without merit in consequence, but agreeable and good to experience. It is a question of rendering it useful to art when one believes in that, to the family and to friendship when one cares for that; I don't dare to say how very simple and primitive I am in this respect. It is the fashion to ridicule it, but let them. I do not want to change.

There is my SPRING examination of my conscience, so as not to think all summer about anything except what is not myself.

Come, you, your health first? And this sadness, this discontent that Paris has left with you, is it forgotten? Are there no longer any painful external circumstances? You have been too much shaken also. Two of your dearest friends gone one after the other. There are periods in life when destiny is ferocious to us. You are too young to concentrate on the idea of REGAINING your affections in a better world, or in this world made better. So you must, at your age (and at mine I still try to), become more attached to what remains. You wrote that to me when I lost Rollinat, my double in this life, the veritable friend whose feeling for the differences between the sexes had never hurt our pure affection, even when we were young. He was my Bouilhet and more than that; for to my heart's intimacy was joined a religious reverence for a real type of moral courage, which had undergone all trials with a sublime SWEETNESS. I have OWED him everything that is good in me, I am trying to keep it for love of him. Is there not a heritage that our beloved dead leave us?

The despair that would make us abandon ourselves would be a treason to them and an ingratitude. Tell me that you are calm and soothed, that you are not working too much and that you are working well. I am not without some anxiety because I have not had a letter from you for a long time. I did not want to ask for one till I could tell you that Maurice was quite well again; he embraces you, and one till I could tell you that Maurice was quite well again, he embraces you, and the children do not forget you. As for me, I love you.

G. Sand

CLXV. TO GEORGE SAND

No, dear master! I am not ill, but I have been busy with moving from Paris and with getting settled in Croisset. Then my mother has been very much indisposed. She is well now; then I have had to set in order the rest of my poor Bouilhet’s papers, on whom I have begun the article. I wrote this week nearly six pages, which was very good for me; this work is very painful in every way. The difficulty is in knowing what not to say. I shall console myself a little in blurting out two or three dogmatic opinions on the art of writing. It will be an opportunity to express what I think; a sweet thing and one I am always deprived of.

You say very lovely and also good things to me to restore my courage. I have hardly any, but I am acting as if I had, which perhaps comes to the same thing.

I feel no longer the need of writing, for I used to write especially for one person alone, who is no more. That is the truth! And yet I shall continue to write. But I have no more liking for it; the fascination is gone. There are so few people who like what I like, who are anxious about what I am interested in! Do you know in this Paris, which is so large, one SINGLE house where they talk about literature? And when it happens to be touched on incidentally, it is always on its subordinate and external sides, such as the question of success, of morality, of utility, of its timeliness, *etc.* It seems to me that I am becoming a fossil, a being unrelated to the surrounding world.

I would not ask anything better than to cast myself on some new affection. But how? Almost all my old friends are married officials, thinking of their little business the entire year, of the hunt during vacation and of whist after dinner. I don’t know one of them who would be capable of passing an afternoon with me reading a poet. They have their business; I, I have none. Observe that I am in the same social position that I was at eighteen. My niece whom I love as my daughter, does not live with me, and my poor good simple mother has become so old that all conversation with her (except about her health) is impossible. All that makes an existence which is not diverting.

As for the ladies, “my little locality” furnishes none of them, and then, —even so! I have nevver been able to put Venus an Apollo in the same coop. It is one or the other, being a man of excess, a gentleman entirely given over to what he does.

I repeat to myself the phrase of Goethe: "Go forward beyond the tombs," and I hope to get used to the emptiness, but nothing more.

The more I know you, yourself, the more I admire you; how strong you are!

Aside from a little Spinoza and Plutarch, I have read nothing since my return, as I am quite occupied by my present work. It is a task that will take me up to the end of July. I am in a hurry to be through with it, so as to abandon myself to the extravagances of the good Saint-Antoine, but I am afraid of not being SUFFICIENTLY IN THE MOOD.

That is a charming story, Mademoiselle Hauterive, isn't it? This suicide of lovers to escape misery ought to inspire fine moral phrases from Prudhomme. As for me, I understand it. What they did is not American, but how Latin and antique it is! They were not strong, but perhaps very sensitive.

CLXVI. TO GEORGE SAND

Sunday, 26 June, 1870

You forget your troubadour who has just buried another friend! From the seven that we used to be at the beginning of the dinners at Magny's, we are only three now! I am gorged with coffins like an old cemetery! I am having enough of them, frankly.

And in the midst of all that I keep on working! I finished yesterday, such as it is, the article on my poor Bouilhet. I am going to see if there is not some way of reviving one of his comedies in prose. After that I shall set to work on Saint-Antoine.

And you, dear master, what is happening to you and all your family? My niece is in the Pyrenees, and I am living alone with my mother, who is becoming deafer and deafer, so that my existence lacks diversion absolutely. I should like to go to sleep on a warm beach. But for that I lack time and money. So I must push on my scratches and grub as hard as possible.

I shall go to Paris at the beginning of August. Then I shall spend all the month of October there for the rehearsals of Aisse. My vacation will be confined to a week spent in Dieppe towards the end of August. There are my plans.

It was distressing, the funeral of Jules Goncourt. Theo wept buckets full.

CLXVII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 27 June, 1870

Another grief for you, my poor old friend. I too have a great one, I mourn for Barbes, one of my religions, one of those beings who make one reconciled with humanity. As for you, you miss poor Jules [Footnote: De Goncourt.] and you pity the unhappy Edmond. You are perhaps in Paris, so as to try to console him. I have just written him, and I feel that you are struck again in your affections. What an age! Every one is dying, everything is dying, and the earth is dying also, eaten up by the sun and the wind. I don't know where I get the courage to keep on living in the midst of these ruins. Let us love each other to the end. You write me very little, I am worried about you.

G. Sand

CLXVIII. TO GEORGE SAND

Saturday evening, 2 July, 1870

Dear good master,

Barbes' death has saddened me because of you. We, both of us, have our mourning. What a succession of deaths during a year! I am as dazed by them as if I had been hit on the head with a stick. What troubles me (for we refer everything to ourselves), is the terrible solitude in which I live. I have no longer anyone, I mean anyone with whom to converse, "who is interested today in eloquence and style."

Aside from you and Tourgueneff, I don't know a living being to whom to pour out my soul about those things which I have most at heart; and you live far away from me, both of you!

However, I continue to write. I have resolved to start at my Saint-Antoine tomorrow or the day after. But to begin a protracted effort I need a certain lightness which I lack just now. I hope, however, that this extravagant work is going to get hold of me. Oh! how I would like not to think any more of my poor Moi, of my miserable carcass! It is getting on very well, my carcass. I sleep tremendously! "The coffer is good," as the bourgeois say.

I have read lately some amazing theological things, which I have intermingled with a little of Plutarch and Spinoza. I have nothing more to say to you.

Poor Edmond de Goncourt is in Champagne at his relatives'. He has promised to come here the end of this month. I don't think that the hope of seeing his brother again in a better world consoles him for having lost him in this one.

One juggles with empty words on this question of immortality, for the

One juggles with empty words on this question of immortality, for the question is to know if the moi persists. The affirmative seems to me a presumption of our pride, a protest of our weakness against the eternal order. Has death perhaps no more secrets to reveal to us than life has?

What a year of evil! I feel as if I were lost in the desert, and I assure you, dear master, that I am brave, however, and that I am making prodigious efforts to be stoical. But my poor brain is enfeebled at moments. I need only one thing (and that is not given me), it is to have some kind of enthusiasm!

Your last letter but one was very sad. You also, heroic being, you feel worn out! What then will become of us!

I have just reread the conversations between Goethe and Eckermann. There was a man, that Goethe! But then he had everything on his side, that man.

CLXIX. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croissset

Nohant, 29 June, 1870

Our letters are always crossing, and I have now the feeling that if I write to you in the evening I shall receive a letter from you the next morning; we could say to each other:

“You appeared to me in my sleep, looking a little sad.”

What preoccupies me most about poor Jules’ (de Goncourt) death, is the survivor. I am sure that the dead are well off, that perhaps they are resting before living again, and that in all cases they fall back into the crucible so as to reappear with what good they previously had and more besides. Barbes only suffered all his life. There he is now, sleeping deeply. Soon he will awaken; but we, poor beasts of survivors, we see them no longer. A little while before he died, Duveyrier, who seemed to have recovered, said to me: “Which one of us will go first?” We were exactly the same age. He complained that those who went first could not let those who were left know that they were happy, and that they remembered their friends. I said, WHO KNOWS? Then we promised each other that the first one to die should appear to the survivor, and should at least try to speak to him.

He did not come, I have waited for him, he has said nothing to me. He had one of the tenderest hearts, and a sincere good will. He was not able to; it was not permitted, or perhaps, it was I; I did not hear or understand.

It is, I say, this poor Edmond who is on my mind. That life lived together, quite ended. I cannot think why the bond was broken, unless he too believes that one does not really die.

I would indeed like to go to see you; apparently you have COOL WEATHER in Croisset since you want to sleep ON A WARM BEACH. Come here, you will not have a beach, but 36 degrees in the shade and a stream cold as ice, is not to not have a beach, but 30 degrees in the shade and a stream cold as ice, is not to be despised. I go there to dabble in it every day after my work; for I must work, Buloz advances me too much money. Here I am DOING MY BUSINESS, as Aurore says, and not being able to budge till autumn. I was too lazy after my fatigues as sick-nurse. Little Buloz recently came to stir me up again. Now here I am hard at it.

Since you are to be in Paris in August, you must come to spend several days with us. You did laugh here anyhow; we will try to distract you and to shake you up a bit. You will see the little girls grown and prettier; the little one is beginning to talk. Aurore chatters and argues. She calls Plauchut, OLD BACHELOR. And a propos, accept the best regards of that fine and splendid boy along with all the affectionate greetings of the family.

As for me, I embrace you tenderly and beg you to keep well.

G. Sand

CLXX. TO GEORGE SAND

Croisset, Wednesday evening…1870

What has become of you, dear master, of you and yours? As for me, I am disheartened, distressed by the folly of my compatriots. The hopeless barbarism of humanity fills me with a black melancholy. That enthusiasm which has no intelligent motive makes me want to die, so as not to see it any longer.

The good Frenchman wants to fight: (1) because he thinks he is provoked to it by Prussia; (2) because the natural condition of man is savagery; (3) because war in itself contains a mystic element which enraptures crowds.

Have we returned to the wars of races? I fear so. The terrible butchery which is being prepared has not even a pretext. It is the desire to fight for the sake of fighting.

I bewail the destroyed bridges, the staved-in tunnels, all this human labor lost, in short a negation so radical.

The Congress of Peace is wrong at present. Civilization seems to me far off. Hobbes was right: Homo homini lupus.

I have begun Saint-Antoine, and it would go perhaps rather well, if

I did not think of the war. And you?

The bourgeois here cannot contain himself. He thinks Prussia was too insolent and wants to “avenge himself.” Did you see that a gentleman has proposed in the Chamber the pillage of the duchy of Baden! Ah! why can’t I live among the Bedouins!

CLXXI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croisset

Nohant, 26 July, 1870

I think this war is infamous; that authorized Marseillaise, a sacrilege. Men are ferocious and conceited brutes; we are in the HALF AS MUCH of Pascal; when will come the MORE THAN EVER!

It is between 40 and 45 degrees IN THE SHADE here. They are burning the forests; another barbarous stupidity! The wolves come and walk into our court, and we chase them away at night, Maurice with a revolver and I with a lantern. The trees are losing their leaves and perhaps their lives. Water for drinking is becoming scarce; the harvests are almost nothing; but we have war, what luck!

Farming is going to nought, famine threatens, poverty is lurking about while waiting to transform itself into Jacquerie; but we shall fight with the Prussians. Malbrough s’en va-t-en guerre!

You said rightly that in order to work, a certain lightness was needed; where is it to be found in these accursed times?

Happily, we have no one ill at our house. When I see Maurice and Lina acting, Aurore and Gabrielle playing, I do not dare to complain for fear of losing all.

I love you, my dear old friend, we all love you.

Your troubadour,

G. Sand

CLXXII. TO GEORGE SAND

Croisset, Wednesday, 3 August, 1870

What! dear master, you too are demoralized, sad? What will become of the weak souls?

As for me, my heart is oppressed in a way that astonishes me, and I wallow in a bottomless melancholy, in spite of work, in spite of the good Saint-Antoine who ought to distract me. Is it the consequence of my repeated afflictions? Perhaps. But the war is a good deal responsible for it. I think that we are getting into the dark.

Behold then, the NATURAL MAN. Make theories now! Boast the progress, the enlightenment and the good sense of the masses, and the gentleness of the French people! I assure you that anyone here who ventured to preach peace would get himself murdered. Whatever happens, we have been set back for a long time to come.

long time to come.

Are the wars between races perhaps going to begin again? One will see, before a century passes, several millions of men kill one another in one engagement. All the East against all Europe, the old world against the new! Why not? Great united works like the Suez Canal are, perhaps, under another form, outlines and preparations for these monstrous conflicts of which we have no idea.

Is Prussia perhaps going to have a great drubbing which entered into the schemes of Providence for reestablishing European equilibrium? That country was tending to be hypertrophied like France under Louis XIV and Napoleon. The other organs are inconvenienced by it. Thence universal trouble. Would formidable bleedings be useful?

Ah! we intellectuals! Humanity is far from our ideal! and our immense error, our fatal error, is to think it like us and to want to treat it accordingly.

The reverence, the fetichism, that they have for universal suffrage revolts me more than the infallibility of the pope (which has just delightfully missed its point, by the way). Do you think that if France, instead of being governed on the whole by the crowd, were in the power of the mandarins, we should be where we are now? If, instead of having wished to enlighten the lower classes, we had busied ourselves with instructing the higher, we should not have seen M. de Keratry proposing the pillage of the duchy of Baden, a measure that the public finds very proper!

Are you studying Prudhomme now? He is gigantic! He admires Musset’s Rhin, and asks if Musset has done anything else. Here you have Musset accepted as the national poet and ousting Beranger! What immense buffoonery is…everything! But a not at all gay buffoonery.

Misery is very evident. Everyone is in want, beginning with myself! But perhaps we were too accustomed to comfort and tranquillity. We buried ourselves in material things. We must return to the great tradition, hold no longer to life, to happiness, to money nor to anything; be what our grandfathers were, light, effervescing people.

Once men passed their life in starving. The same prospect is on the horizon. What you tell me about poor Nohant is terrible. The country has suffered less here than with you.

CLXXIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croisset.

Nohant, 8 August, 1870

Are you in Paris in the midst of all this torment? What a lesson the people are getting who want absolute masters! France and Prussia are cutting each other’s throats for reasons that they don’t understand! Here we are in the midst of great throats for reasons that they don't understand! Here we are in the midst of great disasters, and what tears at the end of it all, even should we be the victors! One sees nothing but poor peasants mourning for their children who are leaving.

The mobilization takes away those who were left with us and how they are being treated to begin with! What disorder, what disarray in that military administration, which absorbed everything and had to swallow up everything! Is this horrible experience going to prove to the world that warfare ought to be suppressed or that civilization has to perish?

We have reached the point this evening of knowing that we are beaten. Perhaps tomorrow we shall know that we have beaten, and what will there be good or useful from one or the other?

It has rained here at last, a horrible storm which destroyed everything.

The peasant is working and ploughing his fields; digging hard always, sad or gay. He is imbecile, people say; no, he is a child in prosperity, a man in disaster, more of a man than we who complain; he says nothing, and while people are killing, he is sowing, repairing continually on one side what they are destroying from the other. We are going to try to do as he, and to hunt a bubbling spring fifty or a hundred yards below ground. The engineer is here, and Maurice is explaining to him the geology of the soil.

We are trying to dig into the bowels of the earth to forget all that is going on above it. But we cannot distract ourselves from this terror!

Write me where you are; I am sending this to you on the day agreed upon to rue Murillo. We love you, and we all embrace you.

G. Sand

Nohant, Sunday evening.

CLXXIV. TO GEORGE SAND.

Croisset, Wednesday, 1870

I got to Paris on Monday, and I left it again on Wednesday. Now I know the Parisian to the very bottom, and I have excused in my heart those most ferocious politics of 1793. Now, I understand them! What imbecility! what ignorance! what presumption! My compatriots make me want to vomit. They are fit to be put in the same sack with Isidore!

This people deserves to be chastised, and I fear that it will be.

It is impossible for me to read anything whatever, still more so to write anything. I spend my time like everyone else in waiting for news. Ah! if I did not have my mother, I would already be gone!

CLXXV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croisset.

Nohant, 15 August, 1870

I wrote to you to Paris according to your instructions the 8th. Weren’t you there then? Probably so: in the midst of all this confusion, to publish Bouilhet, a poet! this is not the moment. As for me, my courage is weak. There is always a woman under the skin of the old troubadour. This human butchery tears my poor heart to pieces. I tremble too for all my children and friends, who perhaps are to be hacked to pieces.

And YET, in the midst of all that, my soul exults and has ecstasies of faith; these terrific lessons which are necessary for us to understand our imbecility, must be of use to us. We are perhaps making our last return to the ways of the old world. There are sharp and clear principles for everyone today that ought to extricate them from this torment. Nothing is useless in the material order of the universe. The moral order cannot escape the law. Bad engenders good. I tell you that we are in the HALF AS MUCH of Pascal, so as to get TO THE MORE THAN EVER! That is all the mathematics that I understand.

I have finished a novel in the midst of this torment, hurrying up so as not to be worn out before the end. I am as tired as if I had fought with our poor soldiers.

I embrace you. Tell me where you are, what you are thinking.

We all love you.

What a fine St. Napoleon we have!

G. Sand

CLXXVI. TO GEORGE SAND.

Saturday, 1870

Dear master,

Here we are in the depths of the abyss! A shameful peace will perhaps not be accepted! The Prussians intend to destroy Paris! That is their dream.

I don’t think the siege of Paris is very imminent. But in order to force Paris to yield, they are going to (1) terrify her by the sight of cannon, and (2) ravage the surrounding country.

We expect the visit of these gentlemen at Rouen, and as I have been (since Sunday) lieutenant of my company, I drill my men and I am going to Rouen to take lessons in military tactics.

The most deplorable thing is that opinions are divided, some for defence to

The most deplorable thing is that opinions are divided, some for defence to the utmost, and others for peace at any price.

I AM DYING OF HUMILIATION. What a house mine is! Fourteen persons who sigh and unnerve me! I curse women! It is because of them that we perish.

I expect that Paris will have the fate of Warsaw, and you distress me, you with your enthusiasm for the Republic. At the moment when we are overcome by the plainest positivism, how can you still believe in phantoms? Whatever happens, the people who are now in power will be sacrificed, and the Republic will follow their fate. Observe that I defend that poor Republic; but I do not believe in it.

That is all that I have to say to you. Now I should have many more things to say, but my head is not clear. It is as if cataracts, floods, oceans of sadness, were breaking over me. It is not possible to suffer more. Sometimes I am afraid of going mad. The face of my mother, when I turn my eyes toward her, takes away all my strength.

This is where our passion for not wanting to see the truth has taken us! Love of pretence and of flap-doodle. We are going to become a Poland, then a Spain. Then it will be the turn of Prussia who will be devoured by Russia.

As for me, I consider myself a man whose career is ended. My brain is not going to recover. One can write no longer when one does not think well of oneself. I demand only one thing, that is to die, so to be at rest.

CLXXVII. TO GEORGE SAND

Sunday evening

I am still alive, dear master, but I am hardly any better, for I am so sad! I didn’t write you any sooner, for I was waiting, for news from you. I didn’t know where you were.

Here it is six weeks that we have been expecting the coming of the Prussians from day to day. We strain our ears, thinking we can hear the sound of the cannon from a distance. They are surrounding Seine-Inferieure in a radius of from fourteen to twenty leagues. They are even nearer, since they are occupying Vexin, which they have completely destroyed. What horrors! It makes one blush for being a man!

If we have had a success on the Loire, their appearance will be delayed. But shall we have it? When the hope comes to me, I try to repel it, and yet, in the very depths of myself, in spite of all, I cannot keep myself from hoping a little, a very little bit.

I don’t think that there is in all France a sadder man than I am! (It all depends on the sensitiveness of people.) I am dying of grief. That is the truth, and consolations irritate me. What distresses me is: (1) the ferocity of men; (2) the conviction that we are going to enter upon a stupid era. People will be utilitarian, military, American and Catholic! Very Catholic! You will see! The Prussian War ends the French Revolution and destroys it.

But supposing we were conquerors? you will say to me. That hypothesis is contrary to all historical precedents. Where did you ever see the south conquer the north, and the Catholics dominate the Protestants? The Latin race is agonizing. France is going to follow Spain and Italy, and boorishness (pignouflism) begins!

What a cataclysm! What a collapse! What misery! What abominations! Can one believe in progress and in civilization in the face of all that is going on? What use, pray, is science, since this people abounding in scholars commits abominations worthy of the Huns and worse than theirs, because they are systematic, cold-blooded, voluntary, and have for an excuse, neither passion nor hunger?

Why do they abhor us so fiercely? Don’t you feel overwhelmed by the hatred of forty millions of men? This immense infernal chasm makes me giddy.

Ready-made phrases are not wanting: France will rise again! One must not despair! It is a salutary punishment! We were really too immoral! *etc.* Oh! eternal poppycock! No! one does not recover from such a blow! As for me, I feel myself struck to my very marrow!

If I were twenty years younger, I should perhaps not think all that, and if I were twenty years older I should be resigned.

Poor Paris! I think it is heroic. But if we do find it again, it will not be our Paris any more! All the friends that I had there are dead or have disappeared. I have no longer any center. Literature seems to me to be a vain and useless thing! Shall I ever be in a condition to write again?

Oh! if I could flee into a country where one does not see uniforms, where one does not hear the drum, where one does not talk of massacres, where one is not obliged to be a citizen! But the earth is no longer habitable for the poor mandarins.

CLXXVIII. TO GEORGE SAND

Wednesday

I am sad no longer. I took up my Saint-Antoine yesterday. So much the

I am sad no longer. I took up my Saint-Antoine yesterday. So much the worse, one has to get accustomed to it! One must accustom oneself to what is the natural condition of man, that is to say, to evil.

The Greeks at the time of Pericles made art without knowing if they should have anything to eat the next day. Let us be Greeks. I shall confess to you, however, dear master, that I feel rather a savage. The blood of my ancesters, the Natchez or the Hurons, boils in my educated veins, and I seriously, like a beast, like an animal, want to fight!

Explain that to me! The idea of making peace now exasperates me, and
I would rather that Paris were burned (like Moscow), than see the
Prussians enter it. But we have not gotten to that; I think the wind
is turning.

I have read some soldiers’ letters, which are models. One can’t swallow up a country where people write like that. France is a resourceful jade, and will be up again.

Whatever happens, another world is going to begin, and I feel that I am very old to adapt myself to new customs.

Oh! how I miss you, how I want to see you!

We have decided here to all march on Paris if the compatriots of Hegel lay siege to it. Try to get your Berrichons to buck up. Call to them: “Come to help me prevent the enemy from drinking and eating in a country which is foreign to them!”

The war (I hope) will make a home thrust at the “authorities.”

The individual, disowned, overwhelmed by the modern world, will he regain his importance? Let us hope so!

CLXXIX. TO GEORGE SAND.

Tuesday, 11 October, 1870

Dear master,

Are you still living? Where are you, Maurice, and the others?

I don’t know how it is that I am not dead, I have suffered so atrociously for six weeks.

My mother has fled to Rouen. My niece is in London. My brother is busy with town affairs, and, as for me, I am alone here, eaten up with impatience and chagrin! I assure you that I have wanted to do right; what misery! I have had at my door today two hundred and seventy-one poor people, and they were all given something. What will this winter be?

The Prussians are now twelve hours from Rouen, and we have no commands, no orders, no discipline, nothing, nothing! They hold out false hopes to us continually with the army of the Loire. Where is it? Do you know anything about it? What are they doing in the middle of France? Paris will end by being starved, and no one is taking her any aid!

The imbecilities of the Republic surpass those of the Empire. Are they playing under all this some abominable comedy? Why such inaction?

Ah! how sad I am. I feel that the world is going by.

CLXXX. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croisset.

Le Chatre, 14 October, 1870

We are living at Le Chatre. Nohant is ravaged by smallpox with complications, horrible. We had to take our little ones into the Creuse, to friends who came to get us, and we spent three weeks there, looking in vain for quarters where a family could stay for three months. We were asked to go south and were offered hospitality; but we did not want to leave the country where, from one day to another, one can be useful, although one hardly knows yet in what way to go at it.

So we have come back to the friends who lived the nearest to our abandoned hearth; and we are awaiting events. To speak of all the peril and trouble there is in establishing the Republic in the interior of our provinces would be quite useless. There can be no illusion: everything is at stake, and the end will perhaps be ORLEANISM. But we are pushed into the unforeseen to such an extent that it seems to me puerile to have anticipations; the thing to do is to escape the next catastrophe.

Don’t let’s say that it is impossible; don’t let’s think it. Don’t let’s despair about France. She is going through expiation for her madness, she will be reborn no matter what happens. We shall perhaps be carried away, the rest of us. To die of pneumonia or of a bullet is dying just the same. Let’s die without cursing our race!

We still love you, and we all embrace you.

G. Sand

1871

CLXXXI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croisset.

Nohant, 4 February, 1871.

Don’t you receive my letters, then? Write to me I beg you, one word only: I AM WELL. We are so worried!

They are all well in Paris.

We embrace you.

G. Sand

CLXXXII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT.

Nohant, 22 February, 1871

I received your letter of the 15th this morning; what a cruel thorn it takes from my heart! One gets frantic with anxiety now when one does not receive answers. Let us hope that we can talk soon and tell all about our ABSENCE from each other. I too have had the good fortune not to lose any of my friends, young or old. That is all the good one can say. I do not regret this Republic, it has been the greatest failure of all! the most unfortunate for Paris, the most unsuitable in the provinces. Besides, if I had loved it, I should not regret anything; if only this odious war might end! We love you and we embrace you affectionately. I shall not hurry to go to Paris. It will be pestilential for some time to come.

Yours.

CLXXXIII. TO GEORGE SAND.

Dieppe, 11 March, 1871

When shall we meet? Paris does not seem amusing to me. Ah! into what sort of a world are we going to enter! Paganism, Christianity, idiotism, there are the three great evolutions of humanity! It is sad to find ourselves at the beginning of the third.

I shall not tell you all I have suffered since September. Why didn’t I die from it? That is what surprises me! No one was more desperate than I was. Why? I have had bad moments in my life, I have gone through great losses. I have wept a great deal. I have undergone much anguish. Well! all these pangs accumulated together, are nothing in comparison to that. And I cannot get over them! I am not consoled! I have no hope!

Yet I did not see myself as a progressivist and a humanitarian. That doesn’t matter. I had some illusions! What barbarity! What a slump! I am wrathful at my contemporaries for having given me the feelings of a brute of the twelfth century! I’M STIFLING IN GALL! These officers who break mirrors with white gloves on, who know Sanskrit and who fling themselves on the champagne, who steal your watch and then send you their visiting card, this war for money, these civilized savages give me more horror than cannibals. And all the world is going to imitate them, is going to be a soldier! Russia has now four millions of them. All Europe will wear a uniform. If we take our revenge, it will be ultra-ferocious, and observe that one is going to think only of that, of avenging oneself on Germany! The government, whatever it is, can support itself only by speculating on that passion. Wholesale murder is going to be the end of all our efforts, the ideal of France!

I cherish the following dream: of going to live in the sun in a tranquil country!

Let us look for new hypocrisies: declamations on virtue, diatribes on corruption, austerity of habits, *etc.* Last degree of pedantry!

I have now at Croisset twelve Prussians. As soon as my poor dwelling (of which I have a horror now) is emptied and cleaned, I shall return there; then I shall go doubtless to Paris, despite its unhealthfulness! But I don’t care a hang for that.

CLXXXIV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croisset.

Nohant, 17 March, 1871

I received your letter of the 11th yesterday.

We have all suffered in spirit more than at any other time of our lives, and we shall always suffer from that wound. It is evident that the savage instinct tends to take the upper hand; but I fear something worse; it is the egoistic and cowardly instinct; it is the ignoble corruption of false patriots, of ultra-republicans who cry out for vengeance, and who hide themselves; a good pretext for the bourgeois who want a STRONG reaction. I fear lest we shall not even be vindictive, — all that bragging, coupled with poltroonery, will so disgust us and so impel us to live from day to day as under the Restoration, submitting to everything and only asking to be let alone.

There will be an awakening later. I shall not be here then, and you, you will be old! Go to live in the sun in a tranquil country! Where? What country is going to be tranquil in this struggle of barbarity against civilization, a struggle which is going to be universal? Is not the sun itself a myth? Either he hides himself or he burns you up, and it is thus with everything on this unhappy planet. Let us love it just the same, and accustom ourselves to suffering on it.

I have written day by day my impressions and my reflections during the crisis. The Revue des Deux Mondes is publishing this diary. If you read it, you will see that everywhere life has been torn from its very foundations, even in the country where the war has not penetrated.

You will see too, that I have not swallowed, although very greedy, party humbugs. But I don’t know if you are of my opinion, that full and entire liberty would save us from these disasters and restore us to the path of possible progress again. The abuses of liberty give me no anxiety of themselves; but those whom they frighten always incline towards the abuse of power. Just now M. Thiers seems to understand it; but can he and will he know how to preserve the principle by which he has become the arbiter of this great problem?

Whatever happens, let us love each other, and do not keep me in ignorance of what concerns you. My heart is full to bursting and the remembrance of you eases it a little from its perpetual disquiet. I am afraid lest these barbarous guests devastate Croisset; for they continue in spite of peace to make themselves odious and disgusting everywhere. Ah! how I should like to have five billions in order to chase them away! I should not ask to get them back again.

Now, do come to us, we are so quiet here; materially, we have been so always. We force ourselves to take up our work again, we resign ourselves; what is there better to do? You are beloved here, we live here in a continual state of loving one another; we are holding on to our Lamberts, whom we shall keep as long as possible. All our children have come out of the war safe and sound. You would live here in peace and be able to work; for that must be, whether one is in the mood or not! The season is going to be lovely. Paris will calm itself during that time. You are looking for a peaceful spot. It is under your nose, with hearts which love you!

I embrace you a thousand times for myself and for all my brood. The little girls are splendid. The Lamberts’ little boy is charming.

CLXXXV. TO GEORGE SAND.

Neuville near Dieppe, Friday, 31 March, 1871

Dear master,

Tomorrow, at last, I resign myself to re-enter Croisset! It is hard! But I must! I am going to try to make up again my poor Saint-Antoine and to forget France.

My mother stays here with her grandchild, till one knows where to go without fear of the Prussians or of a riot.

Some days ago I went from here with Dumas to Brussels from where I thought to go direct to Paris. But "the new Athens" seems to me to surpass Dahomey in ferocity and imbecility. Has the end come to the HUMBUGS? Will they have finished with hollow metaphysics and conventional ideas? All the evil comes from our gigantic ignorance. What ought to be studied is believed without discussion. Instead of investigating, people make assertions.

The French Revolution must cease to be a dogma, and it must become once more a part of science, like the rest of human things. If people had known more, they would not have believed that a mystical formula is capable of making armies, and that the word "Republic" is enough to conquer a million of well disciplined men. They would have left Badinguet on the throne EXPRESSLY to make peace, ready to put him in the galleys afterward. If they had known more, they would have known what the volunteers of '92 were and the retreat of Brunswick gained by bribery through Danton and Westermann. But no! always the same old story! always poppycock! There is now the Commune of Paris which is returning to the real Middle Ages! That's flat! The question of leases especially, is splendid! The government interferes in natural rights now, it intervenes in contracts between individuals. The Commune asserts that we do not owe what we owe, and that one service is not paid for by another. It is an enormity of absurdity and injustice.

Many conservatives who, from love of order, wanted to preserve the Republic, are going to regret Badinguet and in their hearts recall the Prussians. The people of the Hotel de Ville have changed the object of our hatred. That is why I am angry with them. It seems to me that we have never been lower.

We oscillate between the society of Saint-Vincent de Paul and the International. But this latter commits too many imbecilities to have a long life. I admit that it may overcome the troops at Versailles and overturn the government, the Prussians will enter Paris, and "order will reign" at Warsaw. If, on the contrary, it is conquered, the reaction will be furious and all liberty will be strangled.

What can one say of the socialists who imitate the proceedings of Badinguet and of William: requisitions, suppressions of newspapers, executions without trial, etc.? Ah! what an immoral beast is the crowd! and how humiliating it is to be a man!

I embrace you!

CLXXXVI. TO GEORGE SAND.

Croisset, Monday evening, two o’clock.

Dear master,

Why no letters? Haven’t you received mine sent from Dieppe? Are you ill? Are you still alive? What does it mean? I hope very much that neither you (nor any of yours) are in Paris, capital of arts, cornerstone of civilization, center of fine manners and of urbanity?

Do you know the worst of all that? IT IS THAT WE GET ACCUSTOMED TO IT. Yes! one does. One becomes accustomed to getting along without Paris, to worrying about it no longer, and almost to thinking that it exists no longer.

As for me, I am not like the bourgeois; I consider that after the invasion there are no more misfortunes. The war with Prussia gave me the effect of a great upheaval of nature, one of those cataclysms that happen every six thousand years; while the insurrection in Paris is, to my eyes, a very clear and almost simple thing.

What retrogressions! What savages! How they resemble the people of the League and the men in armor! Poor France, who will never free herself from the Middle Ages! who labors along in the Gothic idea of the Commune, which is nothing else than the Roman municipality. Oh! I assure you that my heart is heavy over it!

And the little reaction that we are going to have after that? How the good ecclesiastics are going to flourish again!

I have started at Saint-Antoine once more, and I am working tremendously.

CLXXXVII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croisset.

Nohant, 28 April, 1871

No, certainly I do not forget you! I am sad, sad, that is to say, that I am stunned, that I watch the spring, that I am busy, that I talk as if there were nothing; but I have not been able to be alone an instant since that horrible occurrence without falling into a bitter despair. I make great efforts to prevent it; I do not want to be discouraged; I do not want to deny the past and dread the future; but it is my will, it is my reason that struggles against a profound future, but it is my will, it is my reason that struggles against a profound impression unsurmountable up to the present moment.

That is why I did not want to write to you before feeling better, not that I am ashamed to have crises of depression, but because I did not want to increase your sadness already so profound, by adding the weight of mine to it. For me, the ignoble experiment that Paris is attempting or is undergoing, proves nothing against the laws of the eternal progression of men and things, and, if I have gained any principles in my mind, good or bad, they are neither shattered nor changed by it. For a long time I have accepted patience as one accepts the sort of weather there is, the length of winter, old age, lack of success in all its forms. But I think that partisans (sincere) ought to change their formulas or find out perhaps the emptiness of every a priori formula.

It is not that which makes me sad. When a tree is dead, one should plant two others. My unhappiness comes from pure weakness of heart that I don’t know how to overcome. I cannot sleep over the suffering and even over the ignominy of others. I pity those who do the evil! while I recognize that they are not at all interesting, their moral state distresses me. One pities a little bird that has fallen from its nest; why not pity a heap of consciences fallen in the mud? One suffered less during the Prussian siege. One loved Paris unhappy in spite of itself, one pities it so much the more now that one can no longer love it. Those who never loved get satisfaction by mortally hating it. What shall we answer? Perhaps we should not answer at all. The scorn of France is perhaps the necessary punishment of the remarkable cowardice with which the Parisians have submitted to the riot and its adventurers. It is a consequence of the acceptance of the adventurers of the Empire; other felons but the same cowardice.

But I did not want to talk to you of that, you ROAR about it enough as it is! one ought to be distracted; for if one thinks too much about it, one becomes separated from one’s own limbs and lets oneself undergo amputation with too much stoicism.

You don’t tell me in what state you found your charming nest at Croisset. The Prussians occupied it; did they ruin it, dirty it, rob it? Your books, your bibelots, did you find them all? Did they respect your name, your workshop? If you can work again there, peace will come to your spirit. As for me, I am waiting till mine gets well, and I know that I shall have to help myself to my own cure by a certain faith often shaken, but of which I make a duty.

Tell me whether the tulip tree froze this winter, and if the poppies are pretty.

I often take the journey in spirit; I see again your garden and its surroundings. How far away that is! How many things have happened since! One hardly knows whether one is a hundred years old or not!

My little girls bring me back to the notion of time; they are growing, they are

My little girls bring me back to the notion of time, they are growing, they are amusing and affectionate; it is through them and the two beings who gave them to me that I feel myself still of the world; it is through you too, dear friend, whose kind and loving heart I always feel to be good and alive. How I should like to see you! But I have no longer a way of going and coming.

We embrace you, all of us, and we love you.

G. Sand

CLXXXVIII. TO GEORGE SAND

I am answering at once your questions that concern me personally. No! the Prussians did not loot my house. They HOOKED some little things of no importance, a dressing case, a bandbox, some pipes; but on the whole they did no harm. As for my study, it was respected. I had buried a large box full of letters and hidden my voluminous notes on Saint-Antoine. I found all that intact.

The worst of the invasion for me is that it has aged my poor, dear, old mother by ten years! What a change! She can no longer walk alone, and is distressingly weak! How sad it is to see those whom one loves deteriorate little by little!

In order to think no longer on the public miseries or on my own, I have plunged again with fury into Saint-Antoine, and if nothing disturbs me and I continue at this pace, I shall have finished it next winter. I am very eager to read to you the sixty pages which are done. When we can circulate about again on the railroad, do come to see me for a little while. Your old troubadour has waited for you for such a long time! Your letter of this morning has saddened me. What a proud fellow you are and what immense courage you have!

I am not like a lot of people whom I hear bemoaning the war of Paris. For my part, I find it more tolerable than the invasion, there is no more despair possible, and that is what proves once more our abasement. “Ah! God be thanked, the Prussians are there!” is the universal cry of the bourgeois. I put messieurs the workmen into the same pack, and would have them all thrust together into the river! Moreover they are on the way there, and then calm will return. We are going to become a great, flat industrial country like Belgium. The disappearance of Paris (as center of the government) will render France colorless and dull. She will no longer have a heart, a center, nor, I think, a spirit.

As for the Commune, which is about to die out, it is the last manifestation of the Middle Ages. The very last, let us hope!

I hate democracy (at least the kind that is understood in France), that is to say, the exaltation of mercy to the detriment of justice, the negation of right, in a word, antisociability.

word, antisociability.

The Commune rehabilitates murderers, quite as Jesus pardoned thieves, and they pillage the residences of the rich, because they have been taught to curse Lazarus, who was not a bad rich man, but simply a rich man. “The Republic is above every criticism” is equivalent to that belief: “The pope is infallible!” Always formulas! Always gods!

The god before the last, which was universal suffrage, has just shown his adherents a terrible farce by nominating “the murderers of Versailles.” What shall we believe in, then? In nothing! That is the beginning of wisdom. It was time to have done with “principles” and to take up science, and investigation. The only reasonable thing (I always come back to that) is a government by mandarins, provided the mandarins know something and even that they know many things. The people is an eternal infant, and it will be (in the hierarchy of social elements) always in the last row, since it is number, mass, the unlimited. It is of little matter whether many peasants know how to read and listen no longer to their cure, but it is of great matter that many men like Renan or Littre should be able to live and be listened to! Our safety is now only in a LEGITIMATE ARISTOCRACY, I mean by that, a majority that is composed of more than mere numbers.

If they had been more enlightened, if there had been in Paris more people acquainted with history, we should not have had to endure Gambetta, nor Prussia, nor the Commune. What did the Catholics do to meet a great danger? They crossed themselves while consigning themselves to God and to the saints. We, however, who are advanced, we are going to cry out, “Long live the Republic!” while recalling what happened in ‘92; and there was no doubt of its success, observe that. The Prussian existed no longer, they embraced one another with joy and restrained themselves from running to the defiles of the Argonne where there are defiles no longer; never mind, that is according to tradition. I have a friend in Rouen who proposed to a club the manufacture of lances to fight against the breech-loaders!

Ah! it would have been more practical to keep Badinguet, in order to send him to the galleys once peace was made! Austria did not have a revolution after Sadowa, nor Italy after Novara, nor Russia after Sebastopol! But the good French hasten to demolish their house as soon as the chimney has caught fire.

Well, I must tell you an atrocious idea; I am AFRAID that the destruction of the Vendome column is sowing the seeds of a third Empire! Who knows if in twenty or in forty years, a grandson of Jerome will not be our master?

For the moment Paris is completely epileptic. A result of the congestion caused by the siege. France, on the whole, has lived for several years in an caused by the siege. France, on the whole, has lived for several years in an extraordinary mental state. The success of la Lanterne and Troppman have been very evident symptoms of it. That folly is the result of too great imbecility, and that imbecility comes from too much bluffing, for because of lying they had become idiotic. They had lost all notion of right and wrong, of beautiful and ugly. Recall the criticism of recent years. What difference did it make between the sublime and the ridiculous? What lack of respect; what ignorance! what a mess! “Boiled or roasted, same thing!” and at the same time, what servility for the opinion of the day, the dish of the fashion!

All was false! False realism, false army, false credit, and even false harlots. They were called “marquises,” while the great ladies called themselves familiarly “cochonnettes.” Those girls who were of the tradition of Sophie Arnould, like Lagier, roused horror. You have not seen the reverence of Saint-Victor for la Paiva. And this falseness (which is perhaps a consequence of romanticism, predominance of passion over form, and of inspiration over rule) was applied especially in the manner of judging. They extolled an actress not as an actress, but as a good mother of a family! They asked art to be moral, philosophy to be clear, vice to be decent, and science to be within the range of the people.

But this is a very long letter. When I start abusing my contemporaries, I never get through with it.

CLXXXIX. TO GEORGE SAND

Croisset, Sunday evening, 10 June, 1871

Dear master,

I never had a greater desire or a greater need to see you than now. I have just come from Paris and I don’t know to whom to talk. I am choking. I am overcome, or rather, absolutely disheartened.

The odor of corpses disgusts me less than the miasmas of egotism that exhale from every mouth. The sight of the ruins is as nothing in comparison with the great Parisian inanity. With a very few exceptions it seemed to me that everybody ought to be tied up.

Half the population wants to strangle the other half, and VICE VERSA. This is clearly to be seen in the eyes of the passers-by.

And the Prussians exist no longer! People excuse them and admire them. The “reasonable people” want to be naturalized Germans. I assure you it is enough to make one despair of the human race.

I was in Versailles on Thursday. The excesses of the Right inspire fear. The vote about the Orleans is a concession made to it, so as not to irritate it, and so as to have the time to prepare against it.

I except from the general folly, Renan who, on the contrary, seemed to me very philosophical, and the good Soulie who charged me to give you a thousand affectionate messages.

I have collected a mass of horrible and unpublished details which I spare you.

My little trip to Paris has troubled me extremely, and I am going to have a hard time in getting down to work again. What do you think of my friend Maury, who kept the tricolor over the Archives all during the Commune? I think few men are capable of such pluck.

When history clears up the burning of Paris, it will find several elements among which are, without any doubt: (1) the Prussians, and (2) the people of Badinguet; they have NO LONGER ANY written proof against the Empire, and Haussman is going to present himself boldly to the elections of Paris.

Have you read, among the documents found in the Tuileries last

September, a plot of a novel by Isidore? What a scenario!

CXC. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Paris [FOOTNOTE: Evidently an answer to a lost letter.] Nohant, 23 July, 1871

No, I am not ill, my dear old troubadour, in spite of the sorrow which is the daily bread of France; I have an iron constitution and an exceptional old age, abnormal even, for my strength increases at the age when it ought to diminish. The day that I resolutely buried my youth, I grew twenty years younger. You will tell me that the bark undergoes none the less the ravages of time. I don't care for that, the heart of the tree is very good and the sap still runs as in the old apple trees in my garden, which bear fruit all the better the more gnarly they are. Thank you for having worried over the illness which the papers have bestowed upon me. Maurice thanks you also and embraces you. He is still mingling with his scientific, literary, and agricultural studies, beautiful marionette shows. He thinks of you every time and says that he would like to have you here to note his progress, for he continually improves.

In what condition are we, according to your opinion?

In Rouen, you no longer have any Prussians at your back, that's something, and one would say that the bourgeois Republic wants to impose itself. It will be foolish. You foretold that, and I don't doubt it; but after the inevitable rule of the Philistines, life will extend and spread on all sides. The filth of the Commune shows us dangers which were not sufficiently foreseen and which enforce a new political life on everybody, carrying on one's affairs oneself and forcing the charming proletariat created by the Empire to know what is possible and what is not. Education does not teach honesty and disinterestedness overnight. The vote is immediate education. They have appointed Raoul Rigault and company. They know how much people like that cost now by the yard; let them go on and they will die of hunger. There is no other way to make them understand in a short time.

Are you working? Is Saint-Antoine going well? Tell me what you are doing in Paris, what you are seeing, what you are thinking. I have not the courage to go there. Do come to see me before you return to Croisset. I am blue from not seeing you, it is a sort of death.

G. Sand

CXCI. TO GEORGE SAND 25 July, 1871

I find Paris a little less mad than in June, at least on the surface. They are beginning to hate Prussia in a natural manner, that is to say, they are getting back into French tradition. They no longer make phrases in praise of her civilizations. As for the Commune, they expect to see it rise again later, and the “established order” does absolutely nothing to prevent its return. They are applying old remedies to new woes, remedies that have never cured (nor prevented) the least ill. The reestablishment of credit seems to me colossally absurd. One of my friends made a good speech against it; the godson of your friend Michel de Bourges, Bardoux, mayor of Clermont-Ferrand.

I think, like you, that the bourgeois republic can be established. Its lack of elevation is perhaps a guarantee of stability. It will be the first time that we have lived under a government without principles. The era of positivism in politics is about to begin.

The immense disgust which my contemporaries give me throws me back on the past, and I am working on my good Saint-Antoine with all my might. I came to Paris only for it, for it is impossible for me to get in Rouen the books that I need now; I am lost in the religions of Persia. I am trying to get a clear idea of the God Horn, and it isn’t easy. I spent all the month of June in studying Buddhism, on which I already had many notes. But I wanted to get to the bottom of the subject as soon as possible. And I also did a little Buddha that I consider charming. Don’t I want to read you that book (mine)!

I am not going to Nohant, for I don’t care to go further I away from my mother now. Her society afflicts me and unnerves me, my niece Caroline takes turns with me in carrying on the dear and painful burden.

In a fortnight I shall be back in Croisset. Between the 15th and the 20th of August I am expecting the good Tourgueneff there. It would be very kind of you to come after him, dear master. I say come after, for we have only one decent room since the visit of the Prussians. Come, make a good effort. Come in September.

Have you any news of the Odeon? I can’t get any response whatsoever from de Chilly. I have been to his house several times and I have written three letters to him: not a word! Those gay blades behave towards one like great lords, which is charming. I don’t know if he is still director, or if the management has been given to the Berton, Laurent, Bernard company, do you?

Berton wrote to me to recommend him (and them) to d’Osmoy, deputy and president of the dramatic commission, but since then I have not heard anything mentioned.

CXCII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croissset

Nohant, August, 1871

You want to see me, and you need me, and you don’t come see me! That is not nice; for I too, and all of us here, sigh for you. We parted so gaily eighteen months ago, and so many atrocious things have happened in the meantime! Seeing each other would be the consolation DUE us. For my part, I cannot stir, I have not a penny, and I have to work like a negro. And then I have not seen a single Prussian, and I would like to keep my eyes pure from that stain. Ah! my friend, what years we are going through! We cannot go back again, for hope departs with the rest.

What will be the reaction from the infamous Commune? Isidore or Henry V. or the kingdom of incendiaries restored by anarchy? I who have had so much patience with my species and who have so long looked on the bright side, now see nothing but darkness. I judge others by myself. I had improved my real character, I had extinguished useless and dangerous enthusiasms, I had sowed grass and flowers that grew well on my volcanoes, and I imagined that all the world could become enlightened, could correct itself, or restrain itself; that the years passed over me and over my contemporaries could not be lost to reason and experience: and now I awaken from a dream to find a generation divided between idiocy and delirium tremens! Everything is possible at present.

However, it is bad to despair. I shall make a great effort, and perhaps I shall become just and patient again; but today I cannot. I am as troubled as you, and I don’t dare to talk, nor to think, nor to write, I have such a fear of touching the wounds open in every soul.

I have indeed received your other letter, and I was waiting for courage to answer it; I would like to do only good to those I love, especially to you, who feel so keenly. I am no good at this moment. I am filled with a devouring indignation and a disgust which is killing me.

I love you, that is all I know. My children say the same. Embrace your good little mother for me.

G. Sand

CXCIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 6 September, 1871

Where are you, my dear old troubadour?

I don’t write to you, I am quite troubled in the depths of my soul. But that will pass, I hope; but I am ill with the illness of my nation and my race. I cannot isolate myself in my reason and in my own IRREPROACHABILITY. I feel the great bonds loosened and, as it were, broken. It seems to me that we are all going off, I don’t know where. Have you more courage than I have? Give me some of it?

I am sending you the pretty faces of our little girls. They remember you, and tell me I must send you their pictures. Alas! they are girls, we raise them with love like precious plants. What men will they meet to protect them and continue our work? It seems to me that in twenty years there will be only hypocrites and blackguards!

Give me news of yourself, tell me of your poor mother, your family, of Croisset. Love us still, as we love you.

G. Sand

CXCIV. TO GEORGE SAND

Croisset, Wednesday, 6 September

Well, dear master, it seems to me that you are forgetting your troubadour, aren’t you? Are you then quite overwhelmed with work! How long a time it is since I saw your good firm writing! How long it is since we have talked together! What a pity that we should live so far from each other! I need you very much.

I don’t dare to leave my poor mother! When I am obliged to be away, Caroline comes to take my place. If it were not for that, I should go to Nohant. Shall you stay there indefinitely? Must we wait till the middle of the winter to embrace each other?

I should like very much to read you Saint Antoine, which is half done, then to

I should like very much to read you Saint-Antoine, which is half done, then to stretch myself and to roar at your side.

Some one who knows that I love you and who admires you brought me a copy of le Gaulois in which there were parts of an article by you on the workmen, published in le Temps. How true it is! How just and well said! Sad! Sad! Poor France! And they accuse me of being skeptical.

But what do you think of Mademoiselle Papevoine, the incendiary, who, in the midst of a barricade, submitted to the assaults of eighteen citizens! That surpasses the end of l'Education sentimentale where they limit themselves to offering flowers.

But what goes beyond everything now, is the conservative party, which is not even going to vote, and which is still in a panic! You cannot imagine the alarm of the Parisians. "In six months, sir, the Commune will be established everywhere" is the answer or rather the universal groan.

I do not look forward to an imminent cataclysm because nothing that is foreseen happens. The International will perhaps triumph in the end, but not as it hopes, not as they dread. Ah! how tired I am of the ignoble workmen, the incompetent bourgeois, the stupid peasant and the odious ecclesiastic!

That is why I lose myself as much as I can in antiquity. Just now I am making all the gods talk in a state of agony. The subtitle of my book could be The Height of Insanity. And the printing of it withdraws further and further into my mind. Why publish? Who pray is bothering about art nowadays? I make literature for myself as a bourgeois turns napkin rings in his garret. You will tell me that I had better be useful. But how? How can I make people listen to me?

Tourgueneff has written me that he is going to stay in Paris all winter beginning with October. That will be some one to talk to. For I can't talk of anything whatever with anyone whatever.

I have been looking after the grave of my poor Bouilhet today; so tonight I have a twofold bitterness.

CXCV. TO GEORGE SAND

Croisset, 8 September, 1871

Ah! how sweet they are! What darlings! What fine little heads so serious and sweet! My mother was quite touched by it, and so was I. That is what I call a delicate attention, dear master, and I thank you very much for it. I envy Maurice, his existence is not arid as mine is. Our two letters crossed again. That proves beyond a doubt that we feel the same things at the same time in the same degree.

Why are you so said? Humanity offers nothing new. Its irremediable misery has filled me with sadness ever since my youth. And in addition I now have no disillusions. I believe that the crowd, the common herd will always be hateful. The only important thing is a little group of minds — always the same — which passed the torch from one to another.

As long as we do not bow to mandarins, as long as the Academy of Sciences does not replace the pope, politics as a whole and society, down to its very roots, will be nothing but collection of disheartening humbugs. We are floundering in the after-birth of the Revolution, which was an abortion, a failure, a misfire, "whatever they say." And the reason is that it proceeded from the Middle Ages and Christianity. The idea of equality (which is all the modern democracy) is an essentially Christian idea and opposed to that of justice. Observe how mercy predominates now. Sentiment is everything, justice is nothing. People are now not even indignant against murderers, and the people who set fire to Paris are less punished than the calumniator of M. Favre.

In order for France to rise again, she must pass from inspiration to science, she must abandon all metaphysics, she must enter into criticism, that is to say into the examination of things.

I am persuaded that we shall seem extremely imbecile to posterity. The words republic and monarchy will make them laugh, as we on our part, laughed, at realism and nominalism. For I defy anyone to show me an essential difference between those two terms. A modern republic and a constitutional monarchy are identical. Never mind! They are squabbling about that, they are shouting, they are fighting!

As for the good people, "free and compulsory" education will do it. When every one is able to read le Petit Journal and le Figaro, they won't read anything else, because the bourgeois and the rich man read only these. The press is a school of demoralization, because it dispenses with thinking. Say that, you will be brave, and if you prevail, you will have rendered a fine service.

The first remedy will be to finish up with universal suffrage, the shame of the human mind. As it is constituted, one single element prevails to the detriment of all the others: numbers dominate over mind, education, race and even money, which is worth more than numbers.

But society (which always needs a good God, a Saviour), isn't it perhaps capable of taking care of itself? The conservative party has not even the instinct of the brute (for the brute at least knows how to fight for its lair and its living). It will be divided by the Internationals, the Jesuits of the future. But those of the past, who had neither country nor justice, have not succeeded and the International will founder because it is in the wrong. No ideas, nothing but greed!

Ah! dear, good master, if you only could hate! That is what you lack, hate. In spite of your great Sphinx eyes, you have seen the world through a golden color. That comes from the sun in your heart; but so many shadows have arisen that now you are not recognizing things any more. Come now! Cry out! Thunder! Take your great lyre and touch the brazen string: the monsters will flee. Bedew us with the drops of the blood of wounded Themis.

Why do you feel "the great bonds broken?" What is broken? Your bonds are indestructible, your sympathy can attach itself only to the Eternal.

Our ignorance of history makes us slander our own times. Man has always been like that. Several years of quiet deceived us. That is all. I too, I used to believe in the amelioration of manners. One must wipe out that mistake and think of oneself no more highly than they did in the time of Pericles or of Shakespeare, atrocious epochs in which fine things were done. Tell me that you are lifting your head and that you are thinking of your old troubadour, who cherishes you.

CXCVI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croisset

Nohant, 8 September, 1871

As usual our letters have crossed; you should receive today the portraits of my little grandchildren, not pretty at this period of their growth, but with such beautiful eyes that they can never be ugly.

You see that I am as disheartened as you are and indignant, alas! without being able to hate either the human race or our poor, dear country. But one feels too much one's helplessness to pluck up one's heart and spirit. One works all the same, even if only turning napkin rings, as you say: and, as for me, while serving the public, I think about it as little as possible. Le Temps has done me the service of making me rummage in my waste basket. I find there the prophecies that the conscience of each of us has inspired in him, and these little returns to the past ought to give us courage; but it is not at all so. The lessons of experience are of no use until too late.

I think that without subvention, the Odeon will be in no condition to put on well a literary play such as Aisse, and that you should not let them murder it. You had better wait and see what happens. As for the Berton company, I have no news of it; it is touring the provinces, and those who compose it will not be reengaged by Chilly, who is furious with them.

The Odeon has let Reynard go, an artist of the first rank, whom Montigny had the wit to engage. There really is no one left at the Odeon, as far as I know. Why don't you consider the Theatre

Francais?

Where is the Princess Mathilde? At Enghien, or in Paris, or in England? I am sending you a note which you must enclose in the first letter that you have occasion to write to her.

I cannot go to see you, dear old man, and yet I had earned one of those happy vacations; but I cannot leave the HOME, for all sorts of reasons too long to tell and of no interest, but inflexible. I do not know even if I shall go to Paris this winter. Here am I so old! I imagine that I can only bore others and that people cannot endure me anywhere except at home. You absolutely must come to see me with Tourgueneff, since you are planning to go away this winter; prepare him for this abduction. I embrace you, as I love, and my world does too.

G. Sand

CXCVII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

14 September, 1871, Nohant

[Footnote: Appeared in le Temps, 3 October, 1871, under the title, Reponse a un ami, and published in Impressions et Souvenirs, p. 53.]

And what, you want me to stop loving? You want me to say that I have been mistaken all my life, that humanity is contemptible, hateful, that it has always been and always will be so? And you chide my anguish as a weakness, and puerile regret for a lost illusion? You assert that the people has always been ferocious, the priest always hypocritical, the bourgeois always cowardly, the soldier always brigand, the peasant always stupid? You say that you have known all that ever since your youth and you rejoice that you never have doubted it, because maturity has not brought you any disappointment; have you not been young then? Ah! We are entirely different, for I have never ceased to be young, if being young is always loving.

What, then, do you want me to do, so as to isolate myself from my kind, from my compatriots, from my race, from the great family in whose bosom my own family is only one ear of corn in the terrestrial field? And if only this ear could ripen in a sure place, if only one could, as you say, live for certain privileged persons and withdraw from all the others!

But it is impossible, and your steady reason puts up with the most unrealizable of Utopias. In what Eden, in what fantastic Eldorado will you hide your family, your little group of friends, your intimate happiness, so that the lacerations of the social state and the disasters of the country shall not reach them? If you want to be happy through certain people — those certain people them? If you want to be happy through certain people those certain people, the favorites of your heart, must be happy in themselves. Can they be? Can you assure them the least security?

Will you find me a refuge in my old age which is drawing near to death? And what difference now does death or life make to me for myself? Let us suppose that we die absolutely, or that love does not follow into the other life, are we not up to our last breath tormented by the desire, by the imperious need of assuring those whom we leave behind all the happiness possible? Can we go peacefully to sleep when we feel the shaken earth ready to swallow up all those for whom we have lived? A continuous happy life with one’s family in spite of all, is without doubt relatively a great good, the only consolation that one could and that one would enjoy. But even supposing external evil does not penetrate into our house, which is impossible, you know very well, I could not approve of acquiescing in indifference to what causes public unhappiness.

All that was foreseen. … Yes, certainly, I had foreseen it as well as anyone! I saw the storm rising. I was aware, like all those who do not live without thinking, of the evident approach of the cataclysm. When one sees the patient writhing in agony is there any consolation in understanding his illness thoroughly? When lightning strikes, are we calm because we have heard the thunder rumble a long time before?

No, no, people do not isolate themselves, the ties of blood are not broken, people do not curse or scorn their kind. Humanity is not a vain word. Our life is composed of love, and not to love is to cease to live.

The people, you say! The people is yourself and myself. It would be useless to deny it. There are not two races, the distinction of classes only establishes relative and for the most part illusory inequalities. I do not know if your ancestors were high up in the bourgeoisie; for my part, on my mother’s side my roots spring directly from the people, and I feel them continually alive in the depth of my being. We all have them, even if the origin is more or less effaced; the first men were hunters and shepherds, then farmers and soldiers. Brigandage crowned with success gave birth to the first social distinctions. There is perhaps not a title that was not acquired through the blood of men. We certainly have to endure our ancestors when we have any, but these first trophies of hatred and of violence, are they a glory in which a mind ever so little inclined to be philosophical, finds grounds for pride? THE PEOPLE ALWAYS FEROCIOUS, you say? As for me, I say, the nobility always savage!

And certainly, together with the peasants, the nobility is the class most hostile to progress, the least civilized in consequence. Thinkers should congratulate themselves on not being of it, but if we are bourgeois, if we have come from the serf, and from the class liable to forced labor, can we bend with love and respect before the sons of the oppressors of our fathers? Whoever denies the people cheapens himself, and gives to the world the shameful spectacle of apostasy. Bourgeoisie, if we want to raise ourselves again and become once more a class, we have only one thing to do, and that is to proclaim ourselves the people, and to fight to the death against those who claim to be our superiors by divine right. On account of having failed in the dignity of our revolutionary mandate, of having aped the nobility, of having usurped its insignia, of having taken possession of its playthings, of having been shamefully ridiculous and cowardly, we count for nothing; we are nothing any more: the people, which ought to unite with us, denies us, abandons us and seeks to oppress us.

The people ferocious? No, it is not imbecile either, its real trouble is in being ignorant and foolish. It is not the people of Paris that has massacred the prisoners, destroyed the monuments, and tried to burn the town. The people of Paris is all who stayed in Paris after the siege, since whoever had any means hastened to breathe the air of the provinces and to embrace their absent families after the physical and moral sufferings of the siege. Those who stayed in Paris were the merchant and the workman, those two agents of labor and of exchange, without whom Paris would exist no longer. Those are what constitutes positively the people of Paris; it is one and the same family, whose political blunders cannot restore their relationship and solidarity. It is now recognized that the oppressors of that torment were in the minority. Then the people of Paris was not disposed to fury, since the majority gave evidence only of weakness and fear. The movement was organized by men already enrolled in the ranks of the bourgeoisie, who belong no longer to the habits and needs of the proletariat. These men were moved by hatred, disappointed ambition, mistaken patriotism, fanaticism without an ideal, sentimental folly or natural maliciousness — there was all that in them — and even certain doctrinaire points of honor, unwilling to withdraw in the face of danger. They certainly did not lean on the middle class, which trembled, fled or hid itself. They were forced to put in action the real proletariat which had nothing to lose. Well, the proletariat even escaped them to a great degree, divided as it was by various shades of opinion, some wanting disorder to profit by it, others dreading the consequences of being drawn in, the most of them not reasoning at all, because the evil had become extreme and the lack of work forced them to go to war at thirty sous a day.

Why should you maintain that this proletariat which was shut up in Paris, and was at most eighty thousand soldiers of hunger and despair, represented the people of France? They do not even represent the people of Paris, unless you desire to maintain the distinction between the producer and the trader, which I reject.

But I want to follow you up and ask on what this distinction rests. Is it on more or less education? The limit is incomprehensible if you see at the top of the bourgeoisie, cultivated and learned people, if you see at the bottom of the proletariat, savages and brutes, you have none the less the crowd of intermediaries which will show to you, here intelligent and wise proletarians, there bourgeois who are neither wise nor intelligent. The great number of civilized citizens dates from yesterday and many of those who know how to read and write, have parents still living who can hardly sign their names.

Would it then be only more or less wealth that would classify men into two distinct parties? The question then is where the people begins and where it ends, for each day competencies shift, ruin lowers one, and fortune raises another; roles change, he who was a bourgeois this morning is going to become again a proletarian this evening, and the proletarian of just now, may turn into a bourgeois in a day, if he finds a purse, or inherits from an uncle.

You can well see that these denominations have become idle and that the work of classifying, whatever method one desired to use, would be impracticable.

Men are only over or under one another because of more or less reason or morality. Instruction which develops only egoistic sensuality is not as good as the ignorance of the proletarian, honest by instinct or by custom. This compulsory education which we all desire through respect for human rights, is not, however, a panacea whose miracles need to be exaggerated. Evil natures will find there only more ingenious and more hidden means to do evil. It will be as in all the things that man uses and abuses, both the poison and the antidote. It is an illusion that one can find an infallible remedy for our woes. We have to seek from day to day, all the means immediately possible, we must think of nothing else in practical life except the amelioration of habits and the reconciliation of interests. France is agonizing, that is certain; we are all sick, all corrupt, all ignorant, all discouraged: to say that it was WRITTEN, that it had to be so, that it has always been and will always be, is to begin again the fable of the pedagogue and the child who is drowning. You might as well say at once.

It is all the same to me; but if you add: That does not concern me, you are wrong. The deluge comes and death captures us. In vain you are prudent and withdraw, your refuge will be invaded in its turn, and in perishing with human civilization you will be no greater a philosopher for not having loved, than those who threw themselves into the flood to save some debris of humanity. The debris is not worth the effort, very good! They will perish none the less, that is possible. We shall perish with them, that is certain, but we shall die while in the fulness of life. I prefer that to a hibernation in the ice, to an anticipated death.

And anyway, I could not do otherwise. Love does not reason. If I asked why you have the passion for study, you would not explain it to me any better than those who have a passion for idleness can explain their indolence.

Then you think me upset, since you preach detachment to me? You tell me that you have read in the papers some extracts from my articles which indicate a change of ideas, and these papers which quote me with good will, endeavor to believe that I am illuminated with a new light, while others which do not quote me believe that perhaps I am deserting the cause of the future. Let the politicians think and say what they want to. Let us leave them to their critical appreciations. I do not have to protest, I do not have to answer, the public has other interests to discuss than those of my personality. I wield a pen, I have an honorable position of free discussion in a great paper; if I have been wrongly interpreted, it is for me to explain myself better when the occasion presents itself. I am reluctant to seize this opportunity of talking of myself as an isolated individual; but if you judge me converted to false notions, I must say to you and to others who are interested in me: read me as a whole, and do not judge me by detached fragments; a spirit which is independent of party exactions, sees necessarily the pros and cons, and the sincere writer tells both without busying himself about the blame or the approbation of partizan readers. But every being who is not mad maintains a certain consistency, and I do not think that I have departed from mine. Reason and sentiment are always in accord in me to make me repulse whatever attempts to make me revert to childhood in politics, in religion, in philosophy, in art. My sentiment and my reason combat more than ever the idea of factitious distinctions, the inequality of conditions imposed as a right acquired by some, as a loss deserved by others. More than ever I feel the need of raising what is low, and of lifting again what has fallen. Until my heart is worn out it will be open to pity, it will take the part of the weak, it will rehabilitate the slandered. If today it is the people that is under foot, I shall hold out my hand to the people — if it is the oppressor and executioner, I shall tell it that it is cowardly and odious. What do I care for this or that group of men, these names which have become standards, these personalities which have become catchwords? I know only wise and foolish, innocent and guilty. I do not have to ask myself where are my friends or my enemies. They are where torment has thrown them. Those who have deserved my love, and who do not see through my eyes, are none the less dear to me. The thoughtless blame of those who leave me does not make me consider them as enemies. All friendship unjustly withdrawn remains intact in the heart that has not merited the outrage. That heart is above self-love, it knows how to wait for the awakening of justice and affection.

Such is the correct and easy role of a conscience that is not engaged in the party interests through any personal interest. Those who can not say that of themselves will certainly have success in their environment, if they have the talent to avoid all that can displease them, and the more they have of this talent, the more they will find the means to satisfy their passions. But do not summon them in history to witness the absolute truth. From the moment that they make a business of their opinion, their opinion has no value.

I know sweet, generous and timorous souls, who in this terrible moment of our history, reproach themselves for having loved and served the cause of the weak. They see only one point in space, they believe that the people whom they have loved and served exist no longer, because in their place a horde of bandits followed by a little army of bewildered men has occupied momentarily the theatre of the struggle.

These good souls have to make an effort to say to themselves that what good there was in the poor and what interest there was in the disinherited still exists, only it is no longer in evidence and the political disturbance has sidetracked it from the stage. When such dramas take place, those who rush in light-heartedly are the vain or the greedy members of the family, those who allow themselves to be pulled in are the idiots.

There is no doubt that there are greedy souls, idiots, and vain persons by the thousands in France; but there are as many and perhaps more in the other states. Let an opportunity present itself similar to too frequent opportunities which put our evil passions in play, and you will see whether other nations are any better than we are. Wait till the Germanic race gets to work, the race whose disciplinary aptitudes we admire, the race whose armies have just shown us brutal appetites in all their barbarous simplicity, and you will see what will be its license! The people of Paris will seem sober and virtuous by comparison.

That ought not to be what is called a crumb of comfort, we shall have to pity the German nation for its victories as much as ourselves for our defeats, because this is the first act of its moral dissolution. The drama of its degradation has begun, and as this is being worked out by its own hands it will move very quickly. All these great material organizations in which right, justice, and the respect for humanity are not recognized, are colossi of clay, as we have found to our cost. Well! the moral abasement of Germany is not the future safety of France, and if we are called upon to return to her the evil that has been done us, her collapse will not give us back our life. It is not in blood that races are reinvigorated and rejuvenated. Vital exhalations can issue still from the corpse of France, that of Germany will be the focus of the pestilence of Europe. A nation that has lost its ideals does not survive itself. Its death fertilizes nothing and those who breathe its fetid emanations are struck by the ill that killed it. Poor Germany! the cup of the wrath of the Eternal is poured out on you quite as much as on us, and while you rejoice and become intoxicated, the philosophic spirit is weeping over you and prepares your epitaph. This pale and bleeding, wounded thing that is called France, holds still in its tense hands, a fold of the starry mantle of the future, and you drape yourself in a soiled flag, which will be your winding sheet. Past grandeurs have no longer a place to take in the history of men. It is all over with kings who exploit the peoples; it is all over with exploited peoples who have consented to their own abasement.

That is why we are so sick and why my heart is broken.

But it is not in scorn of our misery that I regard the extent of it. I do not want to believe that this holy country, that this cherished race, all of whose chords I feel vibrate in me, both harmonious and discordant, — whose qualities and whose defects I love in spite of everything, all of whose good or bad responsibilities I consent to accept rather than to detach myself from them through disdain; no, I do not want to believe that my country and my race are struck to death, I feel it in my suffering, in my mourning, in my hours of pure dejection even, I love, therefore I live; let us love and live.

Frenchmen, let us love one another, my God! my God! 1et us love one another or we are lost. Let us destroy, let us deny, let us annihilate politics, since it divides us and arms us against one another; let us ask from no one what he was and what he wanted yesterday. Yesterday all the world was mistaken, let us know what we want today. If it is not liberty for all and fraternity towards all, do not let us attempt to solve the problem of humanity, we are not worthy of defining it, we are not capable of comprehending it. Equality is a thing that does not impose itself, it is a free plant that grows only on fertile lands, in salubrious air. It does not take root on barricades, we know that now! It is immediately trodden under the foot of the conqueror, whoever he may be. Let us desire to establish it in our customs, let us be eager to consecrate it in our ideas. Let us give it for a starting point, patriotic charity, love! It is the part of a madman to think that one issues from a battle with respect for human rights. All civil war has brought forth and will bring forth great crime….

Unfortunate International, is it true that you believe in the lie that strength is superior to right? If you are as numerous, as powerful as one fancies, is it possible that you profess destruction and hatred as a duty? No, your power is a phantom of death. A great number of men of every nationality would not, could not, deliberate and act in favor of an iniquitous principle. If you are the ferocious party of the European people, something like the Anabaptists of Munster, like them you will destroy yourself with your own hands. If, on the contrary, you are a great and legitimate fraternal association, your duty is to enlighten your a great and legitimate fraternal association, your duty is to enlighten your adherents and to deny those who cheapen and compromise your principles. I hope still that you include in your bosom, humane and hard-working men in great numbers, and that they suffer and blush at seeing bandits take shelter under your name. In this case your silence is inept and cowardly. Have you not a single member capable of protesting against ignoble attacks, against idiotic principles, against furious madness? Your chosen chiefs, your governors, your inspirers, are they all brigands and idiots? No, it is impossible; there are no groups, there is no club, there are no crossroads where a voice of truth could not make itself heard. Speak then, justify yourself, proclaim your gospel. Dissolve yourself in order to make yourself over if the discord is in your own midst. Make an appeal to the future if you are not an ancient invasion of Barbarians. Tell those who still love the people what they ought to do for them, and if you have nothing to say, if you cannot speak a word of life, if the iniquities of your mysteries are sealed by fear, renounce noble sympathies, live on the scorn of honest folk, and struggle between the jailer and the police.

All France has heard the word of your destiny which might have been the word of hers. She has waited for it in vain. I too, simple, I waited. While blaming the means I did not want to prejudice the end. There has always been one in revolutions, and the revolutions that fail are not always those with the weakest basis. A patriotic fanaticism seems to have been the first sentiment of this struggle. These lost children of the democratic army were going perhaps to subscribe to an inevitable peace that they judged shameful: Paris had sworn to bury herself under her ruins.

The democratic people were going to force the bourgeois to keep their word. They took possession of the cannon, they were going to turn them on the Prussians, it was mad, but it was grand…. Not at all. The first act of the Commune is to consent to the peace, and in all the course of its management, it does not have an insult, not a threat for the enemy, it conceives and commits the remarkable cowardice of overturning under the eyes of the enemy the column that recalls his defeats and our victories. It is angry against the powers emanating from universal suffrage, and yet it invokes this suffrage in Paris to constitute itself. It is true that this was not favorable to it; it dispenses with the appearance of legality that it intended to give itself and functions by brute force, without invoking any other right than that of hate and scorn for all that is not itself. It proclaims POSITIVE SOCIAL SCIENCE of which it calls itself the sole depository, but about which it does not let a word escape in its deliberations and in its decrees. It declares that it is going to free man from his shackles and his prejudices, and at that very instant, it exercises a power without control and threatens with death whoever is not convinced of its infallibility. At the same threatens with death whoever is not convinced of its infallibility. At the same time it pretends to take up the tradition of the Jacobins, it usurps the papal social authority and assumes the dictatorship. What sort of a republic is that? I see nothing vital in it, nothing rational, nothing constituted, nothing constitutable. It is an orgy of false reformers who have not one idea, not one principle, not the least serious organization, not the least solidarity with the nation, not the least outlook towards the future. Ignorance, cynicism and brutality, that is all that emanates from this false social revolution. Liberation of the lowest instincts, impotence of bold ambitions, scandal of shameless usurpations. That is the spectacle which we have just seen. Moreover, this Commune has inspired the most deadly disgust in the most ardent political men, men most devoted to the democracy. After useless essays, they have understood that there was no reconciliation possible where there were no principles; they withdrew from it with consternation, with sorrow, and, the next day, the Commune declared them traitors, and decreed their arrest. They would have been shot if they had remained in its hands.

And you, friend, you want me to see these things with a stoic indifference? You want me to say: man is made thus, crime is his expression, infamy is his nature?

No, a hundred times no. Humanity is outraged in me and with me. We must not dissimulate nor try to forget this indignation which is one of the most passionate forms of love. We must make great efforts in behalf of brotherhood to repair the ravages of hate. We must put an end to the scourge, wipe out infamy with scorn, and inaugurate by faith the resurrection of the country.

G. Sand

CXCVIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 16 September, 1871

Dear old friend,

I answered you day before yesterday, and my letter took such proportions that I sent it as an article to le Temps for my next fortnightly contribution; for I have promised to give them two articles a month. The letter a un ami does not indicate you by even an initial, for I do not want to argue against you in public. I tell you again in it my reasons for suffering and for hoping still. I shall send it to you and that will be talking with you again. You will see that my chagrin is a part of me, and that believing progress to be a dream does not depend on me. Without this hope no one is good for anything. The mandarins do not need knowledge and even the education of a limited number of people has no longer reason for existing unless there is hope of influence on the masses; philosophers have only to keep silent and those great minds on whom the need of your soul leans, Shakespeare, Moliere, Voltaire, *etc.* have no reason for existing and for expressing themselves.

Come, let me suffer! That is worth more than viewing INJUSTICE WITH A SERENE COUNTENANCE, as Shakespeare says. When I have drained my cup of bitterness, I shall feel better. I am a woman, I have affections, sympathies, and wrath. I shall never be a sage, nor a scholar.

I received a kind little note from the Princess Mathilde. Is she then again settled in Paris? Has she anything to live on from the effects of M. Demidoff, her late and I think unworthy husband? On the whole it is brave and good of her to return near to her friends, at the risk of new upsets.

I am glad that these little faces of children pleased you. I embrace you very much, you are so kind, I was sure of it. Although you are a mandarin, I do not think that you are like a Chinaman at all, and I love you with a full heart.

I am working like a convict.

G. Sand

CXCIX. TO GEORGE SAND

Dear master, I received your article yesterday, and I should answer it at length if I were not in the midst of preparations for my departure for Paris. I am going to try to finish up with Aisse.

The middle of your letter made me SHED A TEAR, without converting me, of course. I was moved, that was all, without being persuaded.

I look vainly in your article for one word: “justice,” and all our ill comes from forgetting absolutely that first notion of morality, which to my way of thinking composes all morality. Humanitarianism, sentiment, the ideal, have played us sufficiently mean tricks for us to try righteousness and science.

If France does not pass in a short time to the crisis, I believe that she will be irrevocably lost. Free compulsory education will do nothing but augment the number of imbeciles. Renan has said that very well in the preface to his Questions contemporaines. What we need most of all, is a natural, that is to say, a legitimate aristocracy. No one can do anything without a head, and universal suffrage as it exists is more stupid than divine right. You will see remarkable things if they let it keep on! The masses, the numbers, are always idiotic. I have few convictions, but I have that one strongly. But the masses must be respected few convictions, but I have that one strongly. But the masses must be respected, however inept they may be, because they contain the germs of an incalculable fecundity. Give it liberty but not power.

I believe no more than you do in class distinction. Castes belong to archeology. But I believe that the poor hate the rich, and that the rich are afraid of the poor. It will be so forever. It is as useless to preach love to the one as to the other. The most important thing is to instruct the rich, who, on the whole, are the strongest. Enlighten the bourgeois first, for he knows nothing, absolutely nothing. The whole dream of democracy is to elevate the proletarian to the level of the imbecility of the bourgeois. The dream is partly accomplished. He reads the same papers and has the same passions.

The three degrees of education have shown within the last year what they can accomplish: (1) higher education made Prussia win; (2) secondary education, bourgeois, produced the men of the 4th of September; (3) primary education gave us the Commune. Its minister of public instruction was the great Valles, who boasted that he scorned Homer!

In three years every Frenchman can know how to read. Do you think that we shall be the better off? Imagine on the other hand that in each commune, there was ONE bourgeois, only one, who had read Bastiat, and that this bourgeois was respected, things would change.

However I am not discouraged as you are, and the present government pleases me, because it has no principle, no metaphysics, no humbug. I express myself very badly. Moreover you deserve a different response, but I am much hurried.

I hear today that the mass of the Parisians regrets Badinguet. A plebiscite would declare for him, I do not doubt it, universal suffrage is such a fine thing.

CC. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 10 October, 1871

I am answering your post scriptum, if I had answered Flaubert I should not have … ANSWERED, knowing well that your heart does not always agree with your mind, a discordance into which we all moreover are continually compelled to fall. I answered a part of a letter of some friend whom no one knows, no one can recognize, since I address myself to a part of your reasoning that is not you entirely.

You are a troubadour all the same, and if I had to write to you PUBLICLY the character would be what it ought to be. But our real discussions ought to remain between ourselves, like caresses between lovers, and even sweeter, since friendship also has its mysteries without the storms of personality.

That letter that you wrote me in haste, is full of well expressed truths against which I do not protest. But the connection and agreement between your truths of reason and my truths of sentiment must be found. France, alas! is neither on your side nor my side; she is on the side of blindness, ignorance and folly. Oh! that I do not deny, it is exactly that over which I despair.

Is this a time to put on Aisse? You told me it was a thing of distinction, delicate like all that HE did, and I hear that the public of the theatres is more THICKHEADED than ever. You would do well to see two or three plays, no matter which, in order to appreciate the literary condition of the Parisian. The provinces will contribute less than in the past. The little fortunes are too much cut down to permit frequent trips to Paris.

If Paris offered, as in my youth, an intelligent and influential nucleus, a good play would perhaps not have a hundred performances, but a bad play would not have three hundred. But this nucleus has become imperceptible and its influence is swamped. Who then will fill the theatres? The shopkeepers of Paris, without a guide, and without good criticism? Well, you are not the master in the matter of Aisse. There is an heir who is impatient, probably. — They write me that Chilly is very; seriously ill, and that Pierre Berton is reengaged.

You must be very busy; I will not write a long letter to you.

I embrace you affectionately, my children love you and ask to be remembered to you.

G. Sand

CCI. TO GEORGE SAND

Never, dear good master, have you given such a proof of your inconceivable candor! Now, seriously, you think that you have offended me! The first page is almost like excuses! It made me laugh heartily! Besides, you can always say everything to me, to me! everything! Your blows will be caresses to me.

Now let us talk again! I continually repeat my insistence on justice! Do you see how they are denying it everywhere? Has not modern criticism abandoned art for history? The intrinsic value of a book is nothing in the school of Sainte-Beuve and Taine. They take everything into consideration there except talent. Thence, in the petty journals, the abuse of personality, the biographies, the diatribes. Conclusion: lack of respect on the part of the public.

In the theatre, the same thing. They don't bother about the play, but the lesson to be preached. Our friend Dumas dreams the glory of Lacordaire, or rather of Ravignan! To prevent the tucking up of petticoats has become with him obsession. We can not have progressed very far since all morality consists for women, in not committing adultery, and for men in abstaining from theft! In short, the first injustice is practised by literature; it has no interest in esthetics, which is only a higher justice. The romantics will have a fine account to render with their immoral sentimentality. Do you recall a bit of Victor Hugo in la Legende des siecles, where a sultan is saved because he had pity on a pig? it is always the story of the penitent thief blessed because he has repented! To repent is good, but not to do evil is better. The school of rehabilitations has led us to see no difference between a rascal and an honest man. I became enraged once before witnesses, against Sainte-Beuve, while begging him to have as much indulgence for Balzac as he had for Jules Lecomte. He answered me, calling me a dolt! That is where BREADTH OF VIEW leads you.

They have so lost all sense of proportion, that the war council at Versailles treats Pipe-en-Bois more harshly than M. Courbet, Maroteau is condemned to death like Rossel! It is madness! These gentlemen, however, interest me very little. I think that they should have condemned to the galleys all the Commune, and have forced these bloody imbeciles to clear up the ruins of Paris, with a chain on their necks, like ordinary convicts. But that would have wounded HUMANITY. They are kind to the mad dogs, and not at all to the people whom the dogs have bitten.

That will not change so long as universal suffrage is what it is. Every man (as I think), no matter how low he is, has a right to ONE voice, his own, but he is not the equal of his neighbor, who may be worth a hundred times more. In an industrial enterprise (Societe anonyme), each holder votes according to the value of his contribution. It ought to be so in the government of a nation. I am worth fully twenty electors of Croisset. Money, mind, and even race ought to be reckoned, in short every resource. But up to the present I only see one! numbers! Ah! dear master, you who have so authority, you ought to take the lead. Your articles in le Temps, which have had a great success, are widely read and who knows? You would perhaps do France a great service?

Aisse keeps me very busy, or rather provokes me. I have not seen Chilly, I have had to do with Duquesnel. They are depriving me definitely of the senior Berton and proposing his son. He is very nice, but he is not at all the type conceived by the author. The Theatre Francais perhaps would ask nothing better than to take Aisse! I am very perplexed, and it is going to be necessary for me to decide. As for waiting till a literary wind arises, as it will never arise in my lifetime, it is better to risk the thing at once.

These theatrical affairs disturb me greatly, for I was in great form. For the last month I was even in an exaltation bordering on madness!

I have met the unavoidable Harrisse, a man who knows everyone, and who is a judge of everything, theatre, novels, finances, politics, *etc*. What a race is that of enlightened men!!! I have seen Plessy, charming and always beautiful. She asked me to send you a thousand friendly messages.

For my part, I send you a hundred thousand affectionate greetings.

Your old friend

CCII. TO GEORGE SAND 14 November, 1871

Ouf! I have just finished MY GODS, that is to say the mythological part of my Saint-Antoine, on which I have been working since the beginning of June. How I want to read it to you, dear master of the good God!

Why did you resist your good impulse? Why didn't you come this autumn? You should not stay so long without seeing Paris. I shall be there day after tomorrow, and I shall have no amusement there at all this winter, what with Aisse, a volume of verse to be printed (I should like to show you the preface), and Heaven knows what else. A lot of things that are not at all diverting.

I did not receive the second article that was announced. Your old troubadour has an aching head. My longest nights these three months have not exceeded five hours. I have been grubbing in a frantic manner. Furthermore, I think I have brought my book to a pretty degree of insanity. The idea of the foolish things that it will make the bourgeois utter sustains me, or rather I don't need to be sustained, as such a situation pleases me naturally.

The good bourgeois is becoming more and more stupid! He does not even go to vote! The brute beasts surpass him in their instinct for self-preservation. Poor France! Poor us!

What do you think I am reading now to distract myself? Bichat and Cabanis, who amuse me enormously. They knew how to write books then.

Ah! how far our doctors of today are from those men!

We suffer from one thing only: Absurdity. But it is formidable and universal. When they talk of the brutishness of the plebe, they are saying an unjust, incomplete thing. Conclusion: the enlightened classes must be enlightened. Begin by the head, which is the sickest, the rest will follow.

You are not like me! You are full of compassion. There are days when I choke with wrath, I would like to drown my contemporaries in latrines, or at least deluge their cockscombs with torrents of abuse, cataracts of invectives. Why? I wonder myself.

What sort of archeology is Maurice busy with? Embrace your little girls warmly for me.

Your old friend

CCIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 23 November, 1871

I hear from Plauchut that you won’t let yourself be abducted for our Christmas Eve REVELS. You say you have too much to do. That is so much the worse for us, who would have had such pleasure in seeing you. — You were at Ch. Edmond’s successful play, you are well, you have a great deal to do, you still detest the silly bourgeois; and with all that, is Saint-Antoine finished and shall we read it soon?

I am giving you an easy commission to do, this is it: I have had to aid a respectable and interesting person [Footnote: Mademoiselle de Flaugergues.] to whom the Prussians have left for a bed and chair, only an old garden bench. I sent her 300 francs, she needed 600. I begged from kind souls. They sent me what was necessary, all except the Princess Mathilde, from whom I asked 200 francs. She answered me the 19th of this month: HOW SHALL I SEND THIS TO YOU?

I replied the same day; simply by mail. But I have received nothing. I do not insist, but I fear that the money may have been stolen or lost, and I am asking you to clear up the affair as quickly as possible.

With this, I embrace you, and Lolo, AURORE EMBRACES YOU TOO and all the family which loves you.

G. Sand

[The words ‘Aurore embraces you too’ were written by the little girl herself.]

CCIV. TO GEORGE SAND 1 December

Your letter which I have just found again, makes me remorseful, for I have not yet done your errand to the princess. I was several days without knowing where the princess was. She was to have come to get settled in Paris, and send me word of her arrival. Today at last I learn that she is at Saint-Gratien where I shall go on Sunday evening probably. Anyway your commission shall be done next week.

You must forgive me, for I have not had for the last two weeks ten minutes of freedom. The revival of Ruy Blas which was going to be put ahead of Aisse had to be PUT OFF (it was a hard job). Well, the rehearsals are to begin on Monday next. I read the play to the actors today, and the roles are to be verified next. I read the play to the actors today, and the roles are to be verified tomorrow. I think it will go well. I have had Bouilhet’s volume of verse printed, the preface of which I re-wrote. In short I am worn out! and sad! sad enough to croak. When I have to get into action I throw myself into it head first. But my heart is breaking in disgust. That is the truth.

I have seen none of our friends except Tourgueneff, whom I have found more charming than ever. Give a good kiss to Aurore for her sweet message, and let her kiss you for me.

Your old friend

CCV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 7 December, 1871

The money was stolen, I did not receive it, and it can not be claimed, for the sender would be liable to a suit. Thank the princess just the same for me, and for poor Mademoiselle de Flaugergues whom by the way, the minister is aiding with 200 francs. Her pension is 800.

You are in the midst of rehearsals, I pity you, and yet I imagine that in working for a friend one puts more heart in it, more confidence and much more patience. Patience, there is everything in that, and that is acquired.

I love you and I embrace you, how I would like to have you at Christmas! You can not, so much the worse for us. We shall drink you a toast and many speaches [sic].

G. Sand

1872

CCVI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 4 January, 1872

I want to embrace you at the first of the year and tell you that I love my old troubadour now and always, but I don't want you to answer me, you are in the thick of theatrical things, and you have not the time and the calmness to write. Here we called you at the stroke of midnight on Christmas, we called your name three times, did you hear it at all?

We are all getting on well, our little girls are growing, we speak of you often; my children embrace you also. May our affection bring you good luck!

G. Sand

CCVII. TO GEORGE SAND

Sunday, January, 1872

At last I have a moment of quiet and I can write to you. But I have so many things to chat with you about, that I hardly know where to begin: (1) Your little letter of the 4th of January, which came the very morning of the premiere of Aisse, moved me to tears, dear well-beloved master. You are the only one who shows such delicacies of feeling.

The premiere was splendid, and then, that is all. The next night the theatre was almost empty. The press, in general, was stupid and base. They accused me of having wanted to advertise by INSERTING an incendiary tirade! I pass for a Red (sic). You see where we are!

The management of the Odeon has done nothing for the play! On the contrary. The day of the premiere it was I who brought with my own hands the properties for the first act! And on the third performance I led the supernumeraries.

Throughout the rehearsals they advertised in the papers the revival of Ruy Blas, etc., *etc.* They made me strangle la Baronne quite as Ruy Blas will strangle

Aisse. In short, Bouilhet’s heir will get very little money. Honor is saved, that is all.

I have had Dernieres Chansons printed. You will receive this volume at the same time as Aisse and a letter of mine to the Conseil municipal de Rouen. This little production seemed too violent to le Nouvelliste de Rouen, which did not dare to print it; but it will appear on Wednesday in le Temps, then at Rouen, as a pamphlet.

What a foolish life I have been leading for two and a half months! How is it that I have not croaked with it? My longest nights have not been over five hours. What running about! What letters! and what anger! — repressed — unfortunately! At last, for three days I have slept all I wanted to, and I am stupefied by it.

I was present with Dumas at the premiere of Roi Carotte. You can not imagine such rot! It is sillier and emptier than the worst of the fairy plays of Clairville. The public agreed with me absolutely.

The good Offenbach has had another failure at the Opera-Comique with Fantasio. Shall one ever get to hating piffle? That would be a fine step on the right path.

Tourgueneff has been in Paris since the first of December. Every week we have an engagement to read Saint-Antoine and to dine together. But something always prevents and we never meet. I am harassed more than ever by life and am disgusted with everything, which does not prevent me from being in better health than ever. Explain that to me.

CCVIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 18 January, 1872

You must not be sick, you must not be a grumbler, my dear old troubadour. You must cough, blow your nose, get well, say that France is mad, humanity silly, and that we are crude animals; and you must love yourself, your kind, and your friends above all. I have some very sad hours. I look at MY FLOWERS, these two little ones who are always smiling, their charming mother and my wise hardworking son whom the end of the world will find hunting, cataloguing, doing his daily task, and gay withal AS PUNCH, in the RARE moments when he is resting.

He said to me this morning: “Tell Flaubert to come, I will take a vacation at once. I will play the marionettes for him, I will make him laugh.”

Life in a crowd forbids reflection. You are too much alone. Come quickly to

Life in a crowd forbids reflection. You are too much alone. Come quickly to our house and let us love you.

G. Sand

CCIX. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Friday, 19 January, 1872

I did not know about all that affair at Rouen and I now understand your anger. But you are too angry, that is to say too good, and too good for them. With a BITTER and vindictive man these louts would be less spiteful and less bold. You have always called them brutes, you and Bouilhet, now they are avenging themselves on the dead and on the living. Ah! well, it is indeed that and nothing else.

Yesterday I was preaching the calmness of disdain to you. I see that this is not the moment, but you are not wicked, strong men are not cruel! With a bad mob at their heels, these fine men of Rouen would not have dared what they have dared!

I have the Chansons, tomorrow I shall read your preface, from beginning to end.

I embrace you.

CCX. TO GEORGE SAND

You will receive very soon: Dernieres Chansons, Aisse and my Lettre au Conseil municipal de Rouen, which is to appear tomorrow in le Temps before appearing as a pamphlet.

I have forgotten to tell you something, dear master. I have used your name. I have COMPROMISED you in citing you among the illustrious people who have subscribed to the monument for Bouilhet. I found that it looked well in the sentence. An effect of style being a sacred thing with me, don’t disavow it.

Today I am starting again my metaphysical readings for Saint-Antoine. Next Saturday, I shall read a hundred and thirty pages of it, all that is finished, to Tourgueneff. Why won’t you be there!

I embrace you.

Your old friend

CCXI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 25 January, 1872

You were quite right to put me down and I want to CONTRIBUTE too. Put me down for the sum you would like and tell me so that I may have it sent to you.

I have read your preface in le Temps: the end of it is very beautiful and touching. But I see that this poor friend was, like you, one who DID NOT GET OVER HIS ANGER, and at your age I should like to see you less irritated, less worried with the folly of others. For me, it is lost time, like complaining about being bored with the rain and the flies. The public which is accused often of being silly, gets angry and only becomes sillier; for angry or irritated, one becomes sublime if one is intelligent, idiotic if one is silly.

After all, perhaps this chronic indignation is a need of your constitution; it would kill me. I have a great need to be calm so as to reflect and to think things over. At this moment I am doing THE USEFUL at the risk of your anathemas. I am trying to simplify a child’s approach to culture, being persuaded that the first study makes its impression on all the others and that pedagogy teaches us to look for knots in bulrushes. In short, I am working over A PRIMER, do not EAT ME ALIVE.

I have ONLY ONE regret about Paris: it is not to be a third with Tourgueneff when you read your Saint-Antoine. For all the rest, Paris does not call me at all; my heart has affections there that I do not wish to hurt, by disagreement with their ideas. It is impossible not to be tired of this spirit of party or of sect which makes people no longer French, nor men, nor themselves. They have no country, they belong to a church. They do what they disapprove of, so as not to disobey the discipline of the school. I prefer to keep silent. They would find me cold or stupid; one might as well stay at home.

You don’t tell me of your mother; is she in Paris with her grandchild? I hope that your silence means that they are well. Everything has gone wonderfully here this winter; the children are excellent and give us nothing but joy. After the dismal winter of ‘70 to ‘71, one ought to complain of nothing.

Can one live peaceably, you say, when the human race is so absurd? I submit, while saying to myself that perhaps I am as absurd as every one else and that it is time to turn my mind to correcting myself.

I embrace you for myself and for all mine.

G. Sand

CCXII. TO GEORGE SAND

No! dear master! it is not true. Bouilhet never injured the bourgeois of Rouen; no one was gentler to them, I add even more cowardly, to tell the truth. As for me, I kept apart from them, that is all my crime.

I find by chance just today in Nadar's Memoirs du Geant, a paragraph on me and the people of Rouen which is absolutely exact. Since you own this book, look at page 100.

If I had kept silent they would have accused me of being a coward. I protested naively, that is to say brutally. And I did well.

I think that one ought never begin the attack; but when one answers, one must try to kill cleanly one's enemy. Such is my system. Frankness is part of loyalty; why should it be less perfect in blame than in praise?

We are perishing from indulgence, from clemency, from COWISHNESS and (I return to my eternal refrain) from lack of JUSTICE!

Besides, I have never insulted any one, I have kept to generalities, — as for M. Decorde, my intentions are for open warfare; — but enough of that! I spent yesterday, a fine day, with Tourgueneff to whom I read the hundred and fifteen pages of Saint-Antoine that are finished. After which, I read to him almost half of the Dernieres Chansons. What a listener! What a critic! He dazzled me by the depth and the clearness of his judgment. Ah! if all those who attempt to judge books had been able to hear, what a lesson! Nothing escapes him. At the end of a passage of a hundred lines, he remembers a weak epithet! he gave me two or three suggestions of exquisite detail for Saint-Antoine.

Do you think me very silly since you believe I am going to blame you for your primer? I have enough philosophic spirit to know that such a thing is very serious work.

Method is the highest thing in criticism, since it gives the means of creating.

CCXIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 28 January, 1872

Your preface is splendid and the book [Footnote: Dernieres Chansons, by Louis Bouilhet.] is divine! Mercy! I have made a line of poetry without realizing it, God forgive me. Yes, you are right, he was not second rank, and ranks are not given by decree, above all in an age when criticism undoes everything and does nothing. All your heart is in this simple and discreet tale of his life. I see very well now, why he died so young; he died from having lived too extensively in the mind. I beg of you not to absorb yourself so much in literature and learning. Change your home, move about, have mistresses or wives, whichever you like, and during these phases, must change the end that one lights. At my advanced age I throw myself into torrents of far niente; the most infantile amusements, the silliest, are enough for me and I return more lucid from my attacks of imbecility.

It was a great loss to art, that premature death. In ten years there will not be one single poet. Your preface is beautiful and well done. Some pages are models, and it is very true that the bourgeois will read that and find nothing remarkable in it. Ah! if one did not have the little sanctuary, the interior little shrine, where, without saying anything to anyone, one takes refuge to contemplate and to dream the beautiful and the true, one would have to say: "What is the use?"

I embrace you warmly.

Your old troubadour.

CCXIV. TO GEORGE SAND

Dear good master,

Can you, for le Temps, write on Dernieres Chansons? It would oblige me greatly. Now you have it.

I was ill all last week. My throat was in a frightful state. But I have slept a great deal and I am again afloat. I have begun anew my reading for Saint-Antoine.

It seems to me that Dernieres Chansons could lend itself to a beautiful article, to a funeral oration on poetry. Poetry will not perish, but its eclipse will be long and we are entering into the shades.

Consider if you have a mind for it and answer by a line.

CCXV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, in Paris

Nohant, 17 February

My troubadour, I am thinking of what you asked me to do and I will do it; but this week I must rest. I played the fool too much at the carnival with my grandchildren and my great-nephews.

I embrace you for myself and for all my brood.

G. Sand

CCXVI. TO GEORGE SAND

What a long time it is since I have written to you, dear master. I have so many things to say to you that I don’t know where to begin. Oh! how horrid it is to live so separated when we love each other.

Have you given Paris an eternal adieu? Am I never to see you again there? Are you coming to Croisset this summer to hear Saint-Antoine?

As for me, I can not go to Nohant, because my time, considering my straitened purse, is all counted; but I have still I a full month of readings and researches in Paris. After that I am going away with my mother: we are in search of a companion for her. It is not easy to find one. Then, towards Easter I shall be back at Croisset, and shall start to work again at the manuscript. I am beginning to want to write.

Just now, I am reading in the evening, Kant’s Critique de la raison pure, translated by Barni, and I am freshening up my Spinoza. During the day I amuse myself by looking over bestiaries of the middle ages; looking up in the “authorities” all the most baroque animals. I am in the midst of fantastic monsters.

When I have almost exhausted the material I shall go to the Museum to muse before real monsters, and then the researches for the good Saint-Antoine will be finished.

In your letter before the last one you showed anxiety about my health; reassure yourself! I have never been more convinced that it was robust. The life that I have led this winter was enough to kill three rhinoceroses, but nevertheless I am well. The scabbard must be solid, for the blade is well sharpened; but everything is converted into sadness! Any action whatever disgusts me with life! I have followed your counsels, I have sought distractions! But that amuses me very little. Decidedly nothing but sacrosanct literature interests me.

My preface to the Dernieres Chansons has aroused in Madame Colet a pindaric fury. I have received an anonymous letter from her, in verse, in which she represents me as a charlatan who beats the drum on the tomb of his friend, a vulgar wretch who debases himself before criticism, after having “flattered Caesar”! “Sad example of the passions,” as Prudhomme would say.

A propos of Caesar, I can not believe, no matter what they say, in his near return. In spite of my pessimism, we have not come to that! However, if one consulted the God called Universal Suffrage, who knows?…Ah! we are very low, very low!

I saw Ruy Blas badly played except for Sarah. Melingue is a sleep-walking drain-man, and the others are as tiresome. As Victor Hugo had complained in a drum man, and the others are as tiresome. As Victor Hugo had complained in a friendly way that I had not paid him a call, I thought I ought to do so and I found him …charming! I repeat the word, not at all “the great man,” not at all a pontiff! This discovery greatly surprised me and did me worlds of good. For I have the bump of veneration and I like to love what I admire. That is a personal allusion to you, dear, kind master.

I have met Madame Viardot whom I found a very curious temperament.

It was Tourgueneff who took me to her house.

CCXVII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croissset

Nohant, from the 28 to the 29 February 1872. Night of Wednesday to Thursday, three o’clock in the morning.

Ah! my dear old friend, what a dreadful twelve days I have spent! Maurice has been very ill. Continually these terrible sore throats, which in the beginning seem nothing, but which are complicated with abscesses and tend to become membranous. He has not been in danger, but always IN DANGER OF DANGER, and he has had cruel suffering, loss of voice, he could not swallow; every anguish attached to the violent sore throat that you know well, since you have just had one. With him, this trouble continually tends to get worse, and his mucous membrane has been so often the seat of the same illness that it lacks energy to react. With that, little or no fever, almost always on his feet, and the moral depression of a man used to continual exercise of body and mind, whom the mind and body forbids to exercise. We have looked after him so well that he is now, I think, out of the woods, although, this morning, I was afraid again and sent for Doctor Favre, our USUAL savior.

Throughout the day I have been talking to him, to distract him, about your researches on monsters; he had his papers brought so as to hunt among them for what might be useful you; but he has found only the pure fantasies of his own invention. I found them so original and so funny that I have encouraged him to send them to you. They will be of no use to you except to make you burst out laughing in your hours recreation.

I hope that we are going to come to life again without new relapses. He is the soul and the life of the house. When he is depressed we are dead; mother, wife, and children. Aurore says that she would like to be very ill in her father’s place We love each other passionately, we five, and the SACROSANCT LITERATURE as you call it, is only secondary in my life. I have always loved some one more than it and my family more than that some one.

Pray why is your poor little mother so irritable and desperate, in the very midst of an old age that when I last saw her was still so green and so gracious? Is her deafness sudden? Did she entirely lack philosophy and patience before these her deafness sudden? Did she entirely lack philosophy and patience before these infirmities? I suffer with you because I understand what you are suffering.

Another old age which is worse, since it is becoming malicious, is that of Madame Colet. I used to think that all her hatred was directed against me, and that seemed to me a bit of madness; for I had never done or said anything against her, even after that vile book in which she poured out all her fury WITHOUT cause. What has she against you now that passion has become ancient history? Strange! strange! And, a propos of Bouilhet, she hated him then, him too this poor poet? She is mad.

You may well think that I was not able to write an iota for these twelve days. I am going, I hope, to start at work as soon as I have finished my novel which has remained with one foot in the air at the last pages. It is on the point of being published but has not yet been finished. I am up every night till dawn; but I have not had a sufficiently tranquil mind to be distracted from my patient.

Good night, dear good friend of my heart.

Heavens! don’t work nor sit up too much, as you also have sore throats. They are terrible and treacherous illnesses. We all love you, and we embrace you. Aurore is charming; she learns all that we want her to, we don’t know how, without seeming to notice it.

What kind of a woman do you want as a companion for your mother? Perhaps I know of such a one. Must she converse and read aloud? It seems to me that the deafness is a barrier to that. Isn’t it a question of material care and continual diligence? What are the stipulations and what is the compensation?

Tell me how and why father Hugo did not have one single visit after

Ruy Blas? Did Gautier, Saint-Victor, his faithful ones, neglect him?

Have they quarreled about politics?

CCXVIII. TO GEORGE SAND

March, 1872

Dear master,

I have received the fantastic drawings, which have diverted me. Is there perhaps profound symbolism hidden in Maurice’s work? But I did not find it. … Revery!

There are two very pretty monsters: (1) an embryo in the form of a balloon on four feet; (2) a death’s head emanating from an intestinal worm.

We have not found a companion yet. It seems difficult to me, we must have someone who can read aloud and who is very gentle; we should also give her some charge of the household. She would not have much bodily care to give, as my mother would keep her maid.

We must have someone who is kind above all, and perfectly honest. Religious principles are not objected to! The rest is left to your perspicacity, dear master! That is all.

I am uneasy about Theo. I think that he is getting strangely old. He must be very ill, doubtless with heart trouble, don’t you think so? Still another who is preparing to leave me.

No! literature is not what I love most in the world, I explained myself badly (in my last letter). I spoke to you of distractions and of nothing more. I am not such a pedant as to prefer phrases to living beings. The further I go the more my sensibility is exasperated. But the basis is solid and the thing goes on. And then, after the Prussian war there is no further great annoyance possible.

And the Critique de la raison pure of the previously mentioned Kant, translated by Barni, is heavier reading than the Vie Parisienne of Marcelin; never mind! I shall end by understanding it.

I have almost finished the scenario of the last part of Saint Antoine. I am in a hurry to start writing. It is too long since I have written. I am bored with style!

And tell me more about you, dear master! Give me at once news of Maurice, and tell me if you think that the lady you know would suit us.

And thereupon I embrace you with both arms.

Your old troubadour always agitated, always as wrathful as Saint
Polycarp.

CCXIX. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT 17 March, 1872

No, dear friend, Maurice is almost well again but I have been tired, worn out with URGENT work: finishing my novel, and correcting a mass of proof from the beginning. And then unanswered letters, business, no time to breathe! That is why I have not been able to write the article on Bouilhet, and as Nanon has begun, as they are publishing five numbers a week in le Temps, I don’t see where I shall publish that article very soon.

In the Revue des Deux Mondes, they don’t want me to write criticism; whoever is not, or was not of their circle, has no talent, and they do not give me the right to say the contrary.

There is, to be sure, a new review wide open to me, which is published by very fine people, but it is more widely read in other countries than in France, and you will find perhaps that an article in that would not excite comment. It is the Revue universelle directed by Amedee Marteau. Discuss that with Charles Edmond. Ask him if, in spite of the fact that Nanon is being published, he could find me a little corner in the body of the paper.

As for the companion, you may rest assured that I am looking for her. The one whom I had in view is not suitable, for she could not read aloud, and I am not sure enough of the others to propose them. I thought that your poor mother was too deaf to listen to reading, and to converse, and that it would be enough for her to have some one very gentle, and charming, to care for her, and to stay with her.

That is all, my dear old friend, it is not my fault, I embrace you with all my heart. For the moment that is the only thing that is functioning. My brain is too stupefied.

G. Sand

CCXX. TO GEORGE SAND

Croisset

Here I am, back again here, dear master, and not very happy; my mother worries me. Her decline increases from day to day, and almost from hour to hour. She wanted me to come home although the painters have not finished their work, and we are very inconveniently housed. At the end of next week, she will have a companion who will relieve me in this foolish business of housekeeping.

As for me, I have quite decided not to make the presses groan for many years, solely not to have “business” to look after, to avoid all connection with publishers, editors and papers, and above all not to hear of money.

My incapacity, in that direction, has developed to frightful proportions. Why should the sight of a bill put me in a rage? It verges on madness. Aisse has not made money. Dernieres Chansons has almost gotten me into a lawsuit. The story of la Fontaine is not ended. I am tired, profoundly tired, of everything.

If only I do not make a failure also of Saint-Antoine. I am going to start working on it again in a week, when I have finished with Kant and Hegel. These two great men are helping to stupefy me, and when I leave them I fall with eagerness upon my old and thrice great Spinoza. What genius, how fine a work the Ethics is!

CCXXI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croissset 9 April, 1872

I am with you all day and all night, and at every instant, my poor dear friend. I am thinking of all the sorrow that you are in the midst of. I would like to be near you. The misfortune of being tied here distresses me. I would like a word so as to know if you have the courage that you need. The end of that noble and dear life has been sad and long; for from the day that she became feeble, she declined and you could not distract her and console her. Now, alas! the incessant and cruel task is ended, as the things of this world end, anguish after struggle! What a bitter achievement of rest! and you are going to miss this anxiety, I am sure of that. I know the sort of dismay that follows the combat with death.

In short, my poor child, I can only open a maternal heart to you which will replace nothing, but which is suffering with yours, and very keenly in each one of your troubles.

G. Sand

CCXXII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 14 April, 1872

My daughter-in-law has been staying several days with our friends, at Nimes, to stop a bad case of WHOOPING-COUGH that Gabrielle was suffering with, to separate her from Aurore, from fear of contagion, and to recuperate, for she has not been well for some time. As for me, I am well again. That little illness and this departure suddenly resolved upon and accomplished, have upset my plans somewhat. I had to look after Aurore so that she might be reconciled to it, and I have not had a moment to answer you. I am wondering too if you don’t like it better to be left to yourself these first few days. But I beguile the need I feel of being near you at this sad time, by telling you over and over again, my poor, dear friend, how much I love you. Perhaps, too, your family has taken you to Rouen or to Dieppe, so as not to let you go back at once into that sad house. I don’t know anything about your plans, in case those which you made to absorb yourself in work are changed. If you have any inclination to travel, and the sinews of war are lacking, I have ready for you a few sous that I have just earned, and I put them at your disposal. Don’t feel constrained with me any more than I would with you, dear child. They are going to pay me for my novel in five or six days at the office of le Temps; you need only to write me a line and I shall see that you get it in Paris. A word when you can, I embrace you, and so does Maurice, very tenderly.

CCXXIII. TO GEORGE SAND

Tuesday, 16 April, 1872

Dear good master,

I should have answered at once your first, very kind letter. But I was too sad. I lacked physical strength.

At last, today, I am beginning to hear the birds singing and to see the leaves growing green. The sun irritates me no longer, which is a good sign. If I could feel like working again I should be all right.

Your second letter (that of yesterday) moved me to tears! You are so good! What a splendid creature you are! I do not need money now, thank you. But if I did need any, I should certainly ask you for it.

My mother has left Croisset to Caroline with the condition that I should keep my apartments there. So, until the estate is completely settled, I stay here. Before deciding on the future, I must know what I have to live on, after that we shall see.

Shall I have the strength to live absolutely alone in solitude? I doubt it, I am growing old. Caroline cannot live here now. She has two dwellings already, and the house at Croisset is expensive. I think I shall give up my Paris lodging. Nothing calls me to Paris any longer. All my friends are dead, and the last one, poor Theo, is not for long, I fear. Ah! it is hard to grow a new skin at fifty years of age!

I realized, during the last two weeks, that my poor dear, good mother was the being that I have loved the most! It is as if someone had torn out a part of my vitals.

CCXXIV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 28 April, 1872

I hold my poor Aurore, who has a terrible case of whooping-cough, day and night in my arms. I have an important piece of work that I must finish, and which I shall finish in spite of everything. If I have not already done the article on Bouilhet, rest assured it is because it is IMPOSSIBLE. I shall do it at the same time as that on l’Annee terrible. I shall go to Paris between the 20th and 25th of May, at the latest. Perhaps sooner, if Maurice takes Aurore to Nimes where Lina and the littlest one are. I shall write to you, you must come to see me in Paris, or I will go to see you.

I thirst too to embrace you, to console you — no, but to tell you that your sorrows are mine. Good-bye till then, a line to tell me if your affairs are getting settled, and if you are coming out on top.

Your old G. Sand

Your old G. Sand

CCXXV. TO GEORGE SAND

What good news, dear master! In a month and even before a month, I shall see you at last!

Try not to be too hurried in Paris, so that we may have the time to talk. What would be very nice, would be, if you came back here with me to spend several days. We should be quieter than there; “my poor old mother” loved you very much, would be sweet to see you in her house, when she has been gone only such a short time.

I have started work again, for existence is only tolerable when one forgets one’s miserable self.

It will be a long time before I know what I have to live on. For all the fortune that is left to us is in meadowland, and in order to divide it, we have to sell it all.

Whatever happens, I shall keep my apartments at Croisset. That will be my refuge, and perhaps even my only habitation. Paris hardly attracts me any longer. In a little while I shall have no more friends there. The human being (the eternal feminine included) amuses me less and less.

Do you know that my poor Theo is very ill? He is dying from boredom and misery. No one speaks his language anymore! We are like fossils who subsist astray in a new world.

CCXXVI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 18 May, 1872

Dear friend of my heart, your inability does not disturb me at all, on the contrary. I have the grippe and the prostration that follows it. I cannot go to Paris for a week yet, and shall be there during the first part of June. My little ones are both in the sheepfold. I have taken good care of and cured the eldest, who is strong. The other is very tired, and the trip did not prevent the whooping-cough. For my part, I have worked very hard in caring for my dear one, and as soon as my task was over, as soon as I saw my dear world reunited and well again, I collapsed. It will be nothing, but I have not the strength to write. I embrace you, and I count on seeing you soon.

G. Sand

CCXXVII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Paris, Monday, 3 June, 1872, Rue Gay Lussac, 5

I am in Paris, and for all this week, in the horror of personal business. But next week will you come? I should like to go to see you in Croisset, but I do not know if I can. I have taken Aurore's whooping-cough, and, at my age, it is severe. I am, however, better, but hardly able to go about. Write me a line, so I can reserve the hours that you can give me. I embrace you, as I love you, with a full heart.

G. Sand

CCXXVIII. TO GEORGE SAND 1872

The hours that I could give you, dear Master! Why, all the hours, now, by and by, and forever.

I am planning to go to Paris at the end of next week, the 14th or the 16th. Shall you be there still? If not, I shall go earlier.

But I should like it much better if you came here. We should be quieter, without callers or intruders! More than ever, I should like to have you now in my poor Croisset.

It seems to me that we have enough to talk about without stopping for twenty-four hours. Then I would read you Saint-Antoine, which lacks only about fifteen pages of being finished. However, don't come if your cough continues. I should be afraid that the dampness would hurt you.

The mayor of Vendome has asked me "to honor with my presence" the dedication of the statue of Ronsard, which occurs the 23rd of this month: I shall go. And I should even like to deliver an address there which would be a protest against the universal modern flap-doodle. The occasion is good. But for the production of a really appropriate little gem, I lack the snap and vivacity.

Hoping to see you soon, dear master, your old troubadour who embraces you.

CCXXIX. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT 7 June, 1872

Dear friend,

Your old troubadour has such a bad cough that a little bit more would be the last straw. On the other hand, they cannot get on without me at our house, and I cannot stay longer than next week, that is to say, the 15th or the 16th. If you could come next Thursday, the 13th, I should reserve the 13th, the 14th, even the 15th, to be with you at my house for the day for dinner, for the evening, in short, just as if we were in the country, where we could read and converse. I would be supposed to have gone away.

A word at once, I embrace you as I love you.

G. Sand

CCXXX. TO GEORGE SAND

Dear master,

Have you promised your support to the candidacy of Duquesnel? if not, I should like to beg you to use to the utmost your influence to support my friend, Raymond Deslandes, as if he were

Your old troubadour,

G. Flaubert

Thursday, three o’clock, 13 June, 1872.

Answer me categorically, so that we may know what you will do.

CCXXXI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croissset

..Nohant, 5 July, 1872

I must write to you today. Sixty-eight years old. Perfect health in spite of the cough, which lets me sleep now that I am plunging daily in a furious little torrent, cold as ice. It boils around the stones, the flowers, the great grasses in a delicious shade. It is an ideal place to bathe.

We have had some terrible storms: lightning struck in our garden; and our stream, the Indre, has become like a torrent in the Pyrenees. It is not unpleasant. What a fine summer! The grain is seven feet high, the wheat fields are sheets of flowers. The peasant thinks that there are too many; but I let him talk, it is so lovely! I go on foot to the stream, I jump, all boiling hot, into the icy water. The doctor says that is madness. I let him talk, too; I am curing myself while his patients look after themselves and croak. I am like the grass of the fields: water and sun, that is all I need.

Are you off for the Pyrenees? Ah! I envy you, I love them so! I have taken frantic trips there; but I don’t know Luchon. Is it lovely, too? You won’t go there without seeing the Cirque of Gavarnie, and the road that leads there, will you? And Cauterets and the lake of Gaube? And the route of Saint-Sauveur? Heavens! How lucky one is to travel and to see the mountains, the flowers, the cliffs! Does

How lucky one is to travel and to see the mountains, the flowers, the cliffs! Does all that bore you?

Do you remember the editors, the theatrical managers, the readers and the public when you are running about the country! As for me, I forget everything as I do when Pauline Viardot is singing.

The other day we discovered, about three leagues from here, a wilderness, an absolute wilderness of woods in a great expanse of country, where not one hut could be seen, not a human being, not a sheep, not a fowl, nothing but flowers, butterflies and birds all day. But where will my letter find you? I shall wait to send it to you till you give me an address!

CCXXXII. TO GEORGE SAND

Bagneres de Luchon, 12th July, 1872

I have been here since Sunday evening, dear master, and no happier than at Croisset, even a little less so, for I am very idle. They make so much noise in the house where we are that it is impossible to work. Moreover, the sight of the bourgeois who surround us is unendurable. I am not made for travelling. The least inconvenience disturbs me. Your old troubadour is very old, decidedly! Doctor Lambron, the physician of this place, attributes my nervous tendencies to the excessive use of tobacco. To be agreeable I am going to smoke less; but I doubt very much if my virtue will cure me!

I have just read Dickens’s Pickwick. Do you know that? There are superb passages in it; but what defective composition! All English writers are the same; Walter Scott excepted, all lack a plot. That is unendurable for us Latins.

Mister ***** is certainly nominated, as it seems. All the people who have had to do with the Odeon, beginning with you, dear master, will repent of the support that they have given him. As for me, who, thank Heaven, have no more connection with that establishment, I don’t give a whoop.

As I am going to begin a book which will exact much reading, and since I don’t want to ruin myself in books, do you know of any dealer in Paris who would rent me all the books that I designated?

What are you doing now? We saw each other so little and so inconveniently the last time.

This letter is stupid. But they are making such a noise over my head that it is not clear (my head).

In the midst of my bewilderment, I embrace you and yours also. Your old blockhead who loves you.

CCXXXIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 19 July, 1872

Dear old troubadour,

We too are going away, but without knowing yet where we are going; it doesn't make any difference to me. I wanted to take my brood to Switzerland; they would rather go in the opposite direction, to the Ocean; the Ocean will do! If only we travel and bathe, I shall be out of my mind with joy. Decidedly our two old troubadourships are two opposites. What bores you, amuses me; I love movement and noise, and even the tiresome things about travelling find favor in my eyes, provided they are a part of travelling. I am much more sensible to what disturbs the calm of sedentary life, than to that which is a normal and necessary disturbance in the life of motion.

I am absolutely like my grandchildren, who are intoxicated beforehand without knowing why. But it is curious to see how children, while loving the change, want to take with them their surroundings, their accustomed playthings, when they go out into the world. Aurore is packing her dolls' trunk, and Gabrielle, who likes animals better, intends to take her rabbits, her little dog, and a little pig that she is taking care of until she eats it. SUCH IS LIFE [sic].

I believe that, in spite of your bad temper, this trip will do you good. It will make you rest your brain, and if you have to smoke less, so much the better! Health above all. I hope that your niece will make you move around a bit; she is your child; she ought to have some authority over you, or the world would be turned upside down.

I cannot refer you to the bookshop that you need for borrowing books. I send for such things to Mario Proth, and I don't know where he finds them. When you get back to Paris, tell him from me to inform you. He is a devoted fellow, as obliging as possible. He lives at 2 rue Visconti. It occurs to me that Charles Edmond, too, might give you very good information; Troubat, [Footnote: Sainte-Beuve's secretary.] also.

You are surprised that spoken words are not contracts; you are very simple; in business nothing holds except written documents. We are Don Quixotes, my old troubadour; we must resign ourselves to being trimmed by the innkeepers. Life is like that, and he who does not want to be deceived must go to live in a desert. It is not living to keep away from all the evil of this nether-world. One must swallow the bitter with the sweet.

As to your Saint-Antoine, if you let me, I shall see about finding you a

As to your Saint-Antoine, if you let me, I shall see about finding you a publisher or a review on my next trip to Paris, but we ought to talk about it together and you ought to read it to me. Why shouldn’t you come to us in September? I shall be at home until winter.

You ask me what I am doing now: I have done, since I left Paris, an article on Mademoiselle de Flaugergues, which will appear in l’Opinion nationale with a work by her; an article for le Temps on Victor Hugo, Bouilhet, Leconte de Lisle and Pauline Viardot. I hope that you will be pleased with what I said about your friend; I have done a second fantastic tale for the Revue des Deux Mondes, a tale for children. I have written about a hundred letters, for the most part to make up for the folly or to soften the misery of imbeciles of my acquaintance. Idleness is the plague of this age, and life is passed in working for those who do not work. I do not complain. I am well! every day I plunge into the Indre and into its icy cascades, my sixty-eight years and my whooping-cough. When I am no longer useful nor agreeable to others, I want to go away quietly without saying OUF! or at least, not saying anything except that against poor mankind, which is not worth much, but of which I am part, not being worth perhaps very much myself.

I love you and I embrace you. My family does too, Plauchut included.

He is going to travel with us.

When we are SOMEWHERE FOR SEVERAL DAYS I shall write to you for news.

G. Sand

CCXXXIV. TO GEORGE SAND

Croisset, Thursday

Dear master,

In the letter I received from you at Luchon a month ago, you told me that you were packing up, and then that was all. No more news! I have permitted myself to assume, as the good Brantome would say, that you were at Cabourg! When do you return? Where do you go then? To Paris or to Nohant? A question.

As for me, I am not leaving Croisset. From the 1st to the 20th or 25th of September I shall have to go about a bit on business. I shall go to Paris. Write then to rue Murillo.

I should like very much to see you: (1) to see you; (2) to read you Saint-Antoine, then to talk to you about another more important book, etc., and to talk about a hundred other things privately.

CCXXXV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 31 August, 1872

My old troubadour,

Here we are back again at home, after a month passed, just as you said, at Cabourg, where chance more than intention placed us. We all took wonderful sea baths, Plauchut, too. We often talked of you with Madame Pasca who was our neighbor at table, and had the room next us. We have returned in splendid health, and we are glad to see our old Nohant again, after having been glad to leave it for a little change of air.

I have resumed my usual work, and I continue my river baths, but no one will accompany me, it is too cold. As for me, I found fault with the sea for being too warm. Who would think that, with my appearance and my tranquil old age, I would still love EXCESS? My dominant passion on the whole is my Aurore. My life depends on hers. She was so lovely on the trip, so gay, so appreciative of the amusements that we gave her, so attentive to what she saw, and curious about everything with so much intelligence, that she is real and sympathetic company at every hour. Ah! how UNLITERARY I am! Scorn me but still love me.

I don't know if I shall find you in Paris when I go there for my play. I have not arranged with the Odeon for the date of its performance. I am waiting for Duquesnel for the final reading. — And then I expect Pauline Viardot about the 20th of September, and I hope Tourgueneff too, won't you come also? it would be so nice and so complete!

In this hope which I will not give up, I love you and I embrace you with all my soul, and my children join me in loving you and summoning you.

G. Sand

CCXXXVI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Paris

Nohant, 25 October, 1872

Your letters fall on me like a rain that refreshes, and develops at once all that is germinating in the soil; they make me want to answer your reasons, because your reasons are powerful and inspire a reply.

I do not assume that my replies will be strong too; they are sincere, they issue from the roots of my being, like the plants aforesaid. That is why I have just written a paper on the subject that you raise, addressing myself this time TO A WOMAN FRIEND, who has written me also in your vein, but less well than you, of course, and a little from an aristocratically intellectual point of view, to which she has not ALL THE RIGHTS SHE DESIRES.

My roots, one can't extirpate them, and I am astonished that you ask me to

My roots, one can't extirpate them, and I am astonished that you ask me to make tulips come from them when they can answer you by producing only potatoes. Since the beginning of my intellectual blooming, when, studying quite alone at the bedside of my paralyzed grandmother, or in the fields at the times when I entrusted her to Deschartres, I asked myself the most elementary questions about society; I was no more advanced at seventeen than a child of six, not as much! thanks to Deschartres, my father's teacher, who was a contradiction from his head to his feet, much learning and little sense; thanks to the convent, into which they stuck me, God knows why, as they believed in nothing; thanks also to a purely Restoration surrounding in which my grandmother, a philosopher, but dying, breathed her last without resisting further the monarchical current.

Then I read Chateaubriand, and Rousseau; I passed from the Gospels to the Contrat social. I read the history of the Revolution written by the pious, the history of France, written by philosophers; and, one fine day, I made all that agree like light proceeding from two lamps, and I had PRINCIPLES. Don't laugh, very candid, childish principles which have remained with me through all, through Lelia and the romantic epoch, through love and doubt, enthusiasm and disenchantments. To love, to make sacrifices, only to reconsider when the sacrifice is harmful to those who are the object of it, and to sacrifice oneself again in the hope of serving a real cause, love.

I am not speaking here of personal passion, but of love of race, of the widening sentiment of self-love, of the horror of THE ISOLATED MOI. And that ideal of JUSTICE of which you speak, I have never seen it apart from love, since the first law on which the existence of a natural society depends, is that we shall serve each other mutually, like the bees and the ants. This concurrence of all to the same end, we have agreed to call instinct among beasts, and it does not matter, but among men, the instinct is love; he who withdraws himself from love, withdraws himself from truth, from justice.

I have experienced revolutions, and I have seen the principal actors near to; I have seen the depth of their souls, I should say the bottom of their bag: NO PRINCIPLES! and no real intelligence, no force, nor endurance. Nothing but means and a personal end. Only one had principles, not all of them good, but in comparison with their integrity, he counted his personality for nothing: Barbes.

Among artists and literary men, I have found no depth. You are the only one with whom I have been able to exchange other ideas than those of the profession. I don't know if you were at Magny's one day when I said to them that they were all GENTLEMEN. They said that one should not write for ignoramuses. They spurned me because I wanted to write only for them, as they are the only ones who need anything. The masters are provided for, are rich are the only ones who need anything. The masters are provided for, are rich, satisfied. Imbeciles lack everything, I am sorry for them. Loving and pitying are not to be separated. And there you have the uncomplicated mechanism of my thought.

I have the passion for goodness and not at all for prejudiced sentimentality. I spit with all my might upon him who pretends to hold my principles and acts contrary to them. I do not pity the incendiary and the assassin who fall under the hand of the law; I do pity profoundly the class which a brutal, degenerate life without upward trend and without aid, brings to the point of producing such monsters. I pity humanity, I wish it were good, because I cannot separate myself from it; because it is myself; because the evil it does strikes me to the heart; because its shame makes me blush; because its crimes gnaw at my vitals, because I cannot understand paradise in heaven nor on earth for myself alone.

You ought to understand me, you who are goodness from head to foot.

Are you still in Paris? It has been such fine weather that I have been tempted to go there to embrace you, but I don’t dare to spend the money, however little it may be, when there is so much poverty. I am miserly because I know that I am extravagant when I forget, and I continually forget. And then I have so much to do!…I don’t know anything and I don’t learn anything, for I am always forced to learn it over again. I do very much need, however, to see you again, for a little bit; it is a part of myself which I miss.

My Aurore keeps me very busy. She understands too quickly and we have to take her at a hard gallop. To understand fascinates her, to know repels her. She is as lazy as monsieur, her father, was. He has gotten over it so well that I am not impatient. She promises me to write you a letter soon. You see that she does not forget you. Titite’s Punch has lost his head, literally, because he has been so embraced and caressed. He is loved as much without his head; what an example of fidelity in misfortune! His stomach has become a receptacle where playthings are put.

Maurice is deep in his archeological studies, Lina is always adorable, and all goes well except that the maids are not clean. What a road the creatures have still to travel who do not keep themselves clean!

I embrace you. Tell me how you are getting on with Aisse, the Odeon and all that stuff you are busy about. I love you; that is the end of all my discourses.

G. Sand

CCXXXVII. TO GEORGE SAND

Dear master,

In your last letter, among the nice things that you say to me, you praise me for not being “haughty”; one is not haughty with what is high. Therefore, in this aspect, you cannot know me. I object.

Although I consider myself a good man, I am not always an agreeable gentleman, witness what happened to me Thursday last. After having lunched with a lady whom I had called “imbecile,” I went to call on another whom I had said was “ninny”; such is my ancient French gallantry. The first one had bored me to death with her spiritualistic discourses and her pretensions to ideality; the second outraged me by telling me that Renan was a rascal. Observe that she confessed to me that she had not read his books. There are some subjects about which I lose patience, and, when a friend is slandered before my very face, the savage in my blood returns, I see red. Nothing more foolish! for it serves no purpose and hurts me frightfully.

This vice, by the way, BETRAYING ONE’S FRIENDS IN PUBLIC, seems to me to be taking gigantic proportions!

CCXXXVIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 26 October, 1872

Dear friend,

Here is another chagrin for you; a sorrow foreseen, but none the less distressing. Poor Theo! I pity him deeply, not because he is dead, but because he has not been really living for twenty years; and if he had consented to live, to exist, to act, to forget a bit his intellectual personality so as to conserve his material personality, he could have lived a long time yet, and have renewed his resources which he was too much inclined to make a sterile treasure. They say that he suffered greatly from hardship during the siege. I understand it, but afterward? why and how?

I am worried at not having had news from you for a long time. Are you at Croisset? You must have been in Paris for the funeral of this poor friend. What cruel and repeated separations! I am angry with you for becoming savage and discontented with life. It seems to me that you regard happiness too much as a possible thing, and that the absence of happiness which is our chronic state, angers you and astonishes you too much. You shun friends, you plunge into work, and reckon ass lost the time you might employ in loving or in being loved. Why didn’t you come to us with Madame Viardot and Tourgueneff? You like them, you admire them, you know that you are adored here, and you run away to be alone. Well, how about getting married? Being alone is odious, it is deadly, and it is cruel also for those who love you. All your letters are unhappy and grip my heart. Haven’t you any woman whom you love or by whom you would be loved with pleasure? Take her to live with you. Isn’t there anywhere a little urchin whose father you can believe you are? Bring him up. Make yourself his slave, forget yourself in him.

What do I know? To live in oneself is bad. There is intellectual pleasure only in the possibility of returning to it when one has been out for a long time; but to live always in this Moi which is the most tyrannical, the most exacting, the most fantastic of companions, no, one must not. — I beg you, listen to me! You are shutting up an exuberant nature in a jail, you are making out of a tender and indulgent heart, a deliberate misanthrope, — and you will not make a success of it. In short, I am worried about you, and I am saying perhaps some foolishness to you; but we live in cruel times and we must not undergo them with curses. We must rise above them with pity. That’s it! I love you, write to me.

I shall not go to Paris until after a month’s time to put on Mademoiselle La Quintinie. Where shall you be?

CCXXXIX. TO GEORGE SAND

Monday night, 28 October, 1872

You have guessed rightly, dear master, that I had an increase of sorrow, and you have written me a very tender, good letter, thanks; I embrace you even more warmly than usual.

Although expected, the death of poor Theo has distressed me. He is the last of my intimates to go. He closes the list. Whom shall I see now when I go to Paris? With whom shall I talk of what interests me? I know some thinkers (at least people who are called so), but an artist, where is there any? For my part, I tell you he died from the “putrescence of modern times.” That is his word, and he repeated it to me this winter several times: “I am dying of the Commune,” *etc.*

The 4th of September has inaugurated an order of things in which people like him have nothing more in the world to do. One must not demand apples of orange trees. Artisans in luxury are useless in a society dominated by plebeians. How I regret him! He and Bouilhet have left an absolute void in me, and nothing can take their place. Besides he was always so good, and no matter what they say, so simple. People will recognize later (if they ever return seriously to literature), that he was a great poet. Meanwhile he is an absolutely unknown author. So indeed is Pierre Corneille author. So indeed is Pierre Corneille.

He hated two things: the hate of the Philistines in his youth, that gave him his talent; the hate of the blackguards in his riper years, this last killed him. He died of suppressed fury, of wrath at not being able to say what he thought. He was OPPRESSED by Girardin, by Fould, by Dalloz, and by the first Republic. I tell you that, because *I* HAVE SEEN abominable things and I am the only man perhaps to whom he made absolute confidences. He lacked what was the most important thing in life for him and for others: CHARACTER. That he failed of the Academy was to him a dreadful chagrin. What weakness! and how little he must have esteemed himself! To seek an honor no matter what, seems to me, besides, an act of incomprehensible modesty.

I was not at his funeral owing to the mistake of Catulle Mendes, who sent me a telegram too late. There was a crowd. A lot of scoundrels and buffoons came to advertise themselves as usual, and today, Monday, the day of the theatrical paper, there must be bits in the bulletins, THAT WILL MAKE COPY. To resume, I do not pity him, I ENVY HIM. For, frankly, life is not amusing.

No, I don’t think that HAPPINESS IS POSSIBLE, but certainly tranquillity. That is why I get away from what irritates me. A trip to Paris is for me now, a great business. As soon as I shake the vessel, the dregs mount and permeate all. The least conversation with anyone at all exasperates me because I find everyone idiotic. My feeling of justice is continually revolted. They talk ONLY of politics and in what a fashion! Where is there a sign of an idea? What can one get hold of? What shall one get excited about?

I don’t think, however, that I am a monster of egoism. My Moi scatters itself in books so that I pass whole days without noticing it. I have bad moments, it is true, but I pull myself together by this reflection: “No one at least bothers me.” After that, I regain my balance. So I think that I am going on in my natural path; am I right?

As for living with a woman, marrying as you advise me to do that is a prospect that I find fantastic. Why? I don’t know. But it is so. Explain the riddle. The feminine being has never been included in my life; and then, I am not rich enough, and then, and then — …I am too old, and too decent to inflict forever my person on another. There is in me an element of the ecclesiastical that people don’t know. We shall talk about that better than we can write of it.

I shall see you in Paris in December, but in Paris one is disturbed by others. I wish you three hundred performances for Mademoiselle La Quintinie. But you will have a lot of bother with the Odeon. It is an institution where I suffered horribly last winter. Every time that I attempted to do anything they dished me. So, enough! enough! “Hide thy life,” maxim of Epictetus. My whole ambition now is to flee from bother, and I am sure by that means never to cause any to now is to flee from bother, and I am sure by that means never to cause any to others, that is much.

I am working like a madman, I am reading medicine, metaphysics, politics, everything. For I have undertaken a work of great scope, which will require a lot of time, a prospect that pleases me.

Ever since a month ago, I have been expecting Tourgueneff from week to week. The gout is delaying him still.

CCXL. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croissset

Nohant, 22 November, 1872

I don’t think that I shall go to Paris before February. My play is postponed on account of the difficulty of finding the chief actor. I am content about it, for the idea of leaving Nohant, my occupations, and the walks that are so lovely in this weather, didn’t look good to me at all; what a warm autumn and how good for old people! Two hours distant from here, we have a real wilderness, where, the next day after a rain, it is as dry as in a room, and where there are still flowers for me, and insects for Maurice. The little children run like rabbits in the heather which is higher than they are. Heavens! how good it is to be alive when all one loves is living and scurrying around one. You are the only BLACK SPOT in my heart-life, because you are sad and don’t want to look at the sun. As for those about whom I don’t care, I don’t care either about the evils or the follies they can commit against me or against themselves. They will pass as the rain passes. The eternal thing is the feeling of beauty in a good heart. You have both, confound it! you have no right not to be happy. — Perhaps you ought to have had in your life the INCLUSION OF THE FEMININE SENTIMENT which you say you have defied. — I know that the feminine is worth nothing; but, perhaps, in order to be happy, one must have been unhappy.

I have been, and I know enough about it; but I forget so well. Well, sad or gay, I love you and I am still waiting for you, although you never speak of coming to see us, and you cast aside the opportunity emphatically; we love you here just the same, we are not literary enough for you here, I know that, but we love, and that gives life occupation.

Is Saint-Antoine finished, that you are talking of a work of great scope? or is it Saint-Antoine that is going to spread its wings over the entire universe? It could, the subject is immense. I embrace you, shall I say again, my old troubadour, since you have resolved to turn into an old Benedictine? I shall remain a troubadour, naturally.

G. Sand

I am sending you two novels for your collection of my writings: you are not OBLIGED to read them immediately, if you are deep in serious things.

OBLIGED to read them immediately, if you are deep in serious things.

CCXLI. TO GEORGE SAND

Monday evening, eleven o’clock, 25 November, 1872

The postman just now, at five o’clock, has brought your two volumes to me. I am going to begin Nanon at once, for I am very curious about it.

Don’t worry any more about your old troubadour (who is becoming a silly animal, frankly), but I hope to recover. I have gone through, several times, melancholy periods, and I have come out all right. Everything wears out, boredom with the rest.

I expressed myself badly: I did not mean that I scorned “the feminine sentiment.” But that woman, materially speaking, had never been one of my habits, which is quite different. I have LOVED more than anyone, a presumptuous phrase which means “quite like others,” and perhaps even more than average person. Every affection is known to me, “the storms of the heart” have “poured out their rain” on me. And then chance, force of circumstances, causes solitude to increase little by little around me, and now I am alone, absolutely alone.

I have not sufficient income to take unto myself a wife, nor even to live in Paris for six months of the year: so it is impossible for me to change my way of living.

Do you mean to say that I did not tell you that Saint-Antoine had been finished since last June? What I am dreaming of just now, is something of greater scope, which will aim to be comic. It would take too long to explain to you with a pen. We shall talk of it when we meet.

Adieu, dear good, adorable master, yours with his best affection,

Your old friend.

Always as indignant as Saint Polycarp.

Do you know, in all history, including that of the Botocudos, anything more imbecile than the Right of the National Assembly? These gentlemen who do not want the simple and frivolous word Republic, who find Thiers too advanced!!! O profoundness! problem, revery!

CCXLII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 27 November, 1872

Maurice is quite happy and very proud of the letter you wrote him; there is no one who could give him as much pleasure and whose encouragement counts more with him. I thank you too, for my part; for I agree with him.

What! you have finished Saint-Antoine? Well, should I find a publisher, since you are not doing so? You cannot keep it in your portfolio. You don’t like Levy, but there are others; say the word, and I will act as if it were for myself.

You promise me to get well later, but in the mean time you don’t want to do anything to jolt yourself. Come, then, to read Saint-Antoine to me, and we will talk of publishing it. What is coming here from Croisset, for a man? If you won’t come when we are gay and having a holiday, come while it is quiet an I am alone. All the family embraces you.

Your old troubadour

G. Sand

CCXLIII. TO GEORGE SAND

Dear master,

Here it is a night and a day that I have spent with you. I had finished Nanon at four o’clock in the morning, and Francia at three o’clock in the afternoon. All of it is still dancing around in my head. I am going to try to gather my ideas together to talk about these excellent books to you. They have done me good. So thank you, dear, good master. Yes, they were like a great whiff of air, and, after having been moved, I feel refreshed.

In Nanon, in the first place I was charmed with the style, with a thousand simple and strong things which are included in the web of the work, and which make it what it is; for instance: “as the burden seemed to me enormous, the beast seemed to me beautiful.” But I did not pay any attention to any thing, I was carried away, like the commonest reader. (I don’t think that the common reader could admire it as much as I do.) The life of the monks, the first relations between Emilien and Nanon, the fear caused by the brigands and the imprisonment of Pere Fructueux which could be commonplace and which it is not at all. What a fine page is 113! and how difficult it was to stay within bounds! “Beginning with this day, I felt happiness in everything, and, as it were, a joy to be in the world.”

La Roche aux Fades is an exquisite idyll. One would like to share the life of those three fine people.

I think that the interest slackens a little when Nanon gets the idea of

I think that the interest slackens a little when Nanon gets the idea of becoming rich. She becomes too strongminded, too intelligent! I don’t like the episode of the robbers either. The reappearance of Emilien with his arm cut off, stirred me again, and I shed a tear at the last page over the portrait of the Marquise de Francqueville in her old age.

I submit to you the following queries: Emilien seems to me very much up in political philosophy; at that period did people see as far ahead as he? The same objection applies to the prior, whom I think otherwise charming, in the middle of the book especially. But how well all that is brought in, how well sustained, how fascinating, how charming! What a creature you are! What power you have!

I give you on your two cheeks, two little nurse’s kisses, and I pass to Francia! Quite another style, but none the less good. And in the first place I admire enormously your Dodore. This is the first time that anyone has made a Paris gamin real; he is not too generous, nor too intemperate, nor too much of a vaudevillist. The dialogue with his sister, when he consents to her becoming a kept woman, is a feat. Your Madame de Thievre, with her shawl which she slips up and down over her fat shoulders, isn’t she decidedly of the Restoration! And the uncle who wants to confiscate his nephew’s grisette! And Antoine, the good fat tinsmith so polite at the theatre! The Russian is a simple-minded, natural man, a character that is not easy to do.

When I saw Francia plunge the poignard into his heart, I frowned first, fearing that it might be a classic vengeance that would spoil the charming character of that good girl. But not at all! I was mistaken, that unconscious murder completed your heroine.

What strikes me the most in the book is that it is very intelligent and exact. One is completely in the period.

I thank you from the bottom of my heart for this twofold reading. It has relaxed me. Everything then is not dead. There is still something beautiful and good in the world.

CCXLIV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 29 November, 1872

You spoil me! I did not dare to send you the novels, which were wrapped up addressed to you for a week. I was afraid of interrupting your train of thought and of boring you. You stopped everything to read Maurice first, and then me. We should be remorseful if we were not egoists, very happy to have a reader who is worth ten thousand others! That helps a great deal; for Maurice and I work in a desert, never knowing, except from each other, if a thing is a success or a mess, exchanging our criticisms, and never having relations with accredited JUDGES.

Michel never tells us until after a year or two if a book has SOLD. As for Buloz, if it is with him we have to do, he tells us invariably that the thing is bad or poor. It is only Charles Edmond who encourages us by asking us for copy. We write without consideration for the public; that is perhaps not a bad idea, but we carry it too far. And praise from you gives us the courage which does not depart from us, but which is often a sad courage, while you make it sparkling and gay, and healthful for us to breathe.

I was right then in not throwing Nanon into the fire, as I was ready to do, when Charles Edmond came to tell me that it was very well done, and that he wanted it for his paper. I thank you then, and I send you back your good kisses, for Francia especially, which Buloz only put in with a sour face and for lack of something better: you see that I am not spoiled, but I never get angry at all that and I don’t talk about it. That is how it is, and it is very simple. As soon as literature is a merchandise, the salesman who exploits it, appreciates only the client who buys it, and if the client depreciates the object, the salesman declares to the author that his merchandise is not pleasing. The republic of letters is only a market in which one sells books. Not making concession to the publisher is our only virtue; let us keep that and let us live in peace, even with him when he is peevish, and let us recognize, too, that he is not the guilty one. He would have taste if the public had it.

Now I’ve emptied my bag, and don’t let us talk of it again except to advise about Saint-Antoine, meanwhile telling ourselves that the editors will be brutes. Levy, however, is not, but you are angry with him. I should like to talk of all that with you; will you come? or wait until my trip to Paris? But when shall I go? I don’t know.

I am a little afraid of bronchitis in the winter, and I do not leave home unless I absolutely have to for business reasons.

I don’t think that they will play Mademoiselle La Quintinie. The censors have declared that it is a MASTERPIECE OF THE MOST ELEVATED AND HEALTHIEST MORALITY, but that they could not TAKE UPON THEMSELVES to authorize the performance. IT WILL HAVE TO BE TAKEN TO HIGHER AUTHORITIES, that is to say, to the minister who will send it to General Ladmirault; it is enough to make you die laughing. But I don’t agree to all that, and I prefer to keep quiet till the new administration. If the NEW administration is the clerical monarchy, we shall see strange things. As for me, I don’t care if they stand in my way, but how about the future of our generation?…

CCXLV. TO GEORGE SAND

Wednesday, 4th December, 1872

Dear master,

I notice a phrase in your last letter: “The publisher would have taste if the public had it…or if the public forced him to have it.” But that is asking the impossible. They have LITERARY IDEAS, rest assured, and so have messieurs the managers of the theatre. Both insist that they are JUDGES IN THAT RESPECT, and their estheticism mingling with their commercialism makes a pretty result.

According to the publishers, one’s last book is always inferior to the preceding one. May I be hung if that is not true. Why does Levy admire Ponsard and Octave Feuillet more than father Dumas and you? Levy is academic. I have made more money for him than Cuvillier-Fleury has, haven’t I? Well, draw a parallel between us two, and you will see how you will be received. You know that he did not want to sell more than 1200 copies of the Dernieres Chansons, and the 800 which were left over, are in my niece’s garret, rue de Clichy! That is very narrow of me, I agree to that; but I confess that the proceeding has simply enraged me. It seems to me that my prose might have been more respected by a man for whom I have turned a penny or two.

Why publish, in these abominable times? Is it to get money? What mockery! As if money were the recompense for work, or could be! That will be when one has destroyed speculation, till then, no! And then how measure work, how estimate the effort? The commercial value of the work remains. For that one would be obliged to suppress all intermediaries between the producer and the purchaser, and even then, that question in itself permits of no solution. For I write (I speak of an author who respects himself) not for the reader of today, but for all the readers who can present themselves as long as the language lives. My merchandise, therefore, cannot be consumed, for it is not made exclusively for my contemporaries. My service remains therefore indefinite, and in consequence, unpayable.

Why publish then? Is it to be understood, applauded? But yourself, YOU, great George Sand, you confess your solitude. Is there at this time, I don’t say, admiration or sympathy, but the appearance of a little attention to works of art? Who is the critic who reads the book that he has to criticise? In ten years they won’t know, perhaps, how to make a pair of shoes, they are becoming so frightfully stupid! All that is to tell you that, until better times (in which I do not believe), I shall keep Saint-Antoine in the bottom of a closet.

If I publish it, I would rather that it should be at the same time as another entirely different book. I am working now on one which will go with it. Conclusion: the wisest thing is to keep calm.

Why does not Duquesnel go to find General Ladmirault, Jules Simon, Thiers? I think that the proceeding concerns him. What a fine thing the censorship is! Let us be reassured, it will always exist, for it always has! Our friend Alexandre Dumas fils, to make an agreeable paradox, has boasted of its advantages in the preface to the Dame aux Camelias, hasn't he?

And you want me not to be sad! I think that we shall soon see abominable things, thanks to the inept stubbornness of the Right. The good Normans, who are the most conservative people in the world, incline towards the Left very strongly.

If they consulted the bourgeoisie now, it would make father Thiers king of France. If Thiers were taken away, it would throw itself in the arms of Gambetta, and I am afraid it will do that soon! I console myself by thinking that Thursday next I shall be fifty-one years old.

If you are not to come to Paris in February, I shall go to see you at the end of January, before going back to the Pan Monceau; I promise.

The princess has written me to ask if you were at Nohant. She wants to write to you.

My niece Caroline, to whom I have just given Nanon to read, is enchanted with it. What struck her was the "youth" of the book. The criticism seems true to me. It is a real BOOK while Francia, although more simple, is perhaps more finished; more irreproachable as a work.

I read last week the Illustre Docteur Matheus, by Erckmann-Chatrian.

How very boorish! There are two nuts, who have very plebeian souls.

Adieu, dear good master. Your old troubadour embraces you,

I am always thinking of Theo. I am not consoled for his loss.

CCXLVI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croissset

Nohant, 8 December, 1872

Oh! well, then, if you are in the realm of the ideal about this, if you have a future book in your mind, if you are accomplishing a task of confidence and conviction, no more anger and no more sadness, let us be logical.

I myself arrived at a philosophical state of very satisfactory serenity, and I did not OVERSTATE the matter when I said to you that all the ill any one can do me, or all the indifference that any one can show me, does not affect me really any more and does not prevent me, not only from being happy outside of literature, but also from being literary with pleasure, and from working with joy.

You were pleased with my two novels? I am repaid, I think that they are SATISFACTORY, and the silence which has invaded my life (it must be said that I have sought it) is full of a good voice that talks to me and is sufficient to me. I have not mounted as high as you in my ambition. You want to write for the ages. As for me, I think that in fifty years, I shall be absolutely forgotten and perhaps unkindly ignored. Such is the law of things that are not of first rank, and I have never thought myself in the first rank. My idea has been rather to act upon my contemporaries, even if only on a few, and to share with them my ideal of sweetness and poetry. I have attained this end up to a certain point; I have at least done my best towards it, I do still, and my reward is to approach it continually a little nearer.

That is enough for myself, but, as for you, your aim is greater, I see that clearly, and success is further off. Then you ought to put yourself more in accord with yourself, by being still calmer and more content than I am. Your momentary angers are good. They are the result of a generous temperament, and, as they are neither malicious nor hateful, I like them, but your sadness, your weeks of spleen, I do not understand them, and I reproach you for them. I have believed, I do still, that there is such a thing as too great isolation, too great detachment from the bonds of life. You have powerful reasons to answer me with, so powerful that they ought to give you the victory.

Search your heart, think it over, and answer me, even if only to dispel the fears that I have often on your account; I don’t want you to exhaust yourself. You are fifty years old, my son is the same or nearly. He is in the prime of his strength, in his best development, you are too, if you don’t heat the oven of your ideas too hot. Why do you say often that you wish you were dead? Don’t you believe then in your own work? Do let yourself be influenced then by this or that temporary thing? It is possible, we are not gods, and something in us, something weak and unimportant sometimes, disturbs our theodicy. But the victory every day becomes easier, when one is sure of loving logic and truth. It gets to the point even of forestalling, of overcoming in advance, the subject of ill humor, of contempt or of discouragement.

All that seems easy to me, when it is a question of self control: the subjects of great sadness are elsewhere, in the spectacle of the history that is unrolling around us; that eternal struggle of barbarity against civilization is a great bitterness for those who have cast off the element of barbarity and find themselves in advance of their epoch. But, in that great sorrow, in these secret angers, there is a great stimulant which rightly raises us up, by inspiring in us the need of reaction. Without that, I confess, for my part, that I would abandon everything.

I have had a good many compliments in my life, in the time when people were interested in literature. I have always dreaded them when they came to me from unknown people; they made me doubt myself too much. I have made enough money to be rich. If I am not, it is because I did not care to be; I have enough with what Levy makes for me. What I should prefer, would be to abandon myself entirely to botany, it would be for me a Paradise on earth. But it must not be, that would be useful only to myself, and, if chagrin is good for anything it is for keeping us from egoism, one must not curse nor scorn life. One must not use it up voluntarily; you are enamoured of JUSTICE, begin by being just to yourself, you owe it to yourself to conserve and to develop yourself.

Listen to me; I love you tenderly, I think of you every day and on every occasion: when working I think of you. I have gained certain intellectual benefits which you deserve more than I do, and of which you ought to make a longer use. Consider too, that my spirit is often near to yours, and that it wishes you a long life and a fertile inspiration in true joys.

You promise to come; that is a joy and a feast day for my heart, and in my family.

Your old troubadour

CCXLVII. TO GEORGE SAND 12 December 1872

Dear good master,

Don’t take seriously the exaggerations about my IRE. Don’t believe that I am counting “on posterity, to avenge me for the indifference of my contemporaries.” I meant to say only this: if one does not address the crowd, it is right that the crowd should not pay one. It is political economy. But, I maintain that a work of art (worthy of that name and conscientiously done) is beyond appraisal, has no commercial value, cannot be paid for. Conclusion: if the artist has no income, he must starve! They think that the writer, because he no longer receives a pension from the great, is very much freer, and nobler. All his social nobility now consists in being the equal of a grocer. What progress! As for me, you say to me “Let us be logical”; but that’s just the difficulty.

I am not sure at all of writing good things, nor that the book of which I am dreaming now can be well done, which does not prevent me from undertaking it. I think that the idea of it is original, nothing more. And then, as I hope to spit into it the gall that is choking me, that is to say, to emit some truths, I hope by this means to PURGE MYSELF, and to be henceforward more Olympian, a quality that I lack entirely. Ah! how I should like to admire myself!

Mourning once more: I headed the procession at the burial of father Pouchet last Monday. That gentle fellow’s life was very beautiful, and I mourned him.

I enter today upon my fifty-second year, and I insist on embracing you today: I do it affectionately, since you love me so well.

1873

CCXLVIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 8 January, 1873

Yes, yes, my old friend, you must come to see me. I am not thinking of going to Paris before the end of the winter, and it is so hard to see people in Paris. Bring me Saint-Antoine. I want to hear it, I want to live in it with you. I want to embrace you with all my soul, and Maurice does too.

Lina loves you too, and our little ones have not forgotten you. I want you to see how interesting and lovely my Aurore has become. I shall not tell you anything new about myself. I live so little in myself. This will be a good reason for you to talk about what interests me more, that is to say, about yourself. Tell me ahead so that I can spare you that horrid coach from Chateauroux to Nohant. If you could bring Tourgueneff, we should be happy, and you would have the most perfect travelling companion. Have you read Peres et Enfants? How good it is!

Now, I hope for you really this time, and I think that our air will do you good. It is so lovely here!

Your old comrade who loves you,

G. SAND

I embrace you six times for the New Year.

CCXLIX. TO GEORGE SAND

Monday evening, 3 February, 1873

Dear master,

Do I seem to have forgotten you and not to want to make the journey to Nohant? Not at all! But, for the last month, every time I go out, I am seized anew with the grippe which gets worse each time. I cough abominably, and I ruin innumerable pocket-handkerchiefs! When will it be over?

innumerable pocket-handkerchiefs! When will it be over?

I have sworn not to step beyond my doorsill till I am completely well again, and I am still awaiting the good will of the members of the commission for the Bouilhet fountain! For nearly two months, I have not been able to get together in Rouen six citizens of Rouen! That is the way friends are! Everything is difficult, the least undertaking demands great efforts.

I am reading chemistry now (which I don't understand a bit), and the Raspail theory of medicine, not to mention the Potager moderne of Gressent and the Agriculture of Gasparin. In this connection, Maurice would be very kind, to compile his agronomical recollections, so that I may know what mistakes he made and why he made them.

What sorts of information don't I need, for the book that I am undertaking? I have come to Paris this winter with the idea of collecting some; but if my horrible cold continues, my stay here will be useless! Am I going to become like the canon of Poitiers, of whom Montaigne speaks, who for thirty years did not leave his room "because of his melancholic infirmity," but who, however, was very well "except for a cold which had settled on his stomach." This is to tell you that I am seeing very few people. Moreover whom could I see? The war has opened many abysses. I have not been able to get your article on Badinguet. I am planning to read it at your house.

As regards reading, I have just swallowed ALL the odious Joseph de Maistre. They have saddled us enough with this gentleman! And the modern socialists who have praised him beginning with the saint-simonians and ending with A. Comte. France is drunk with authority, no matter what they say. Here is a beautiful idea that I find in Raspail, THE PHYSICIANS OUGHT to be MAGISTRATES, so they could force, *etc.*

Your romantic and liberal old dunce embraces you tenderly.

CCL. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 5 February, 1873

I wrote to you yesterday to Croisset, Lina thinking that you had returned there. I asked you the little favor which you have already rendered me, namely, to ask your brother to give his patronage to my friend Despruneaux in his suit which is going to be appealed. My letter will probably be forwarded to you in Paris, and reach you as quickly as this one. It is only a question of writing a line to your brother, if that does not bother you.

Pray, what is this obstinate cough? There is only one remedy, a minimum dose, a half-centigram of acetate of morphine taken every evening after digesting your dinner, for a week at least. I do nothing else and I always get over it, I cure all my family the same way, it is so easy to do and so quickly done! At the end of two or three days one feels the good effect. I am awaiting your cure with impatience, for your sake first, and second for myself, because you will come and because I am hungry and thirsty to see you.

Maurice is at a loss to know how to answer your question. He has not made any mistake in his experiments, and knows indeed those that others make or could make; but he says that they vary infinitely and that each mistake is a special one for the conditions in which one works. When you are here and he understands really what you want, he can answer you for everything that concerns the center of France, and the general geology of the planet, if there is any opportunity to generalize. His reasoning has been this: not to make innovations, but to push to its greatest development what exists, in making use always of the method established by experience. Experience can never deceive, it may be incomplete, but never mendacious. With this I embrace you, I summon you, I await you, I hope for you, but will not however torment you.

But we love you, that is certain; and we would like to infuse in you a little of our Berrichon patience about the things in this world which are not amusing, we know that very well! But why are we in this world if it is not to learn patience.

Your obstinate troubadour who loves you.

G. Sand

CCLI. TO GEORGE SAND

Tuesday, March 12, 1873

Dear master,

If I am not at your house, it is the fault of the big Tourgueneff. I was getting ready to go to Nohant, when he said to me: “Wait, I’ll go with you the first of April.” That is two weeks off. I shall see him tomorrow at Madame Viardot’s and I shall beg him to go earlier, as I am beginning to be impatient. I am feeling the NEED of seeing you, of embracing you, and of talking with you. That is the truth.

I am beginning to regain my equilibrium again. What is it that I have had for the past four months? What trouble was going on in the depths of my being? I don’t know. What is certain, is, that I was very ill in an indefinable way. But now I am better. Since the end of January, Madame Bovary and Salammbo have belonged to me and I can sell them. I am doing nothing about it, preferring to do belonged to me and I can sell them. I am doing nothing about it, preferring to do without the money other than to exasperate my nerves. Such is your old troubadour.

I am reading all sorts of books and I am taking notes for my big book which will take five or six years to write, and I am thinking of two or three others. There will be dreams for a long time, which is the principal thing.

Art continues to be “in the marasmus,” as M. Prudhomme says, and there is no longer any place in this world for people with taste. One must, like the rhinoceros, retire into solitude and await one’s death.

CCLII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, in Paris

Nohant, 15 March, 1873

Well, my old troubadour, we can hope for you very soon. I was worried about you. I am always worried about you. To tell the truth, I am not happy over your ill tempers, and your PREJUDICES. They last too long, and in effect they are like an illness, you recognize it yourself. Now, forget; don’t you know how to forget? You live too much in yourself and get to consider everything in relation to yourself. If you were an egoist, and a conceited person, I would say that it was your normal condition; but with you who are so good and so generous, it is an anomaly, an evil that must be combated. Rest assured that life is badly arranged, painful, irritating for everyone, but do not neglect the immense compensations which it is ungrateful to forget.

That you get angry with this or that person, is of little importance if it is a comfort to you; but that you remain furious, indignant for weeks, months, almost years, is unjust and cruel to those who love you, and who would like to spare you all anxiety and all deception.

You see that I am scolding you; but while embracing you, I shall think only of the joy and the hope of seeing you flourishing again.

We are waiting for you with impatience, and we are counting on Tourgueneff whom we adore also.

I have been suffering a good deal lately with a series of very painful hemorrhages; but they have not prevented me from amusing myself writing tales and from playing with my LITTLE CHILDREN. They are so dear, and my big children are so good to me, that I shall die, I believe, smiling at them. What difference does it make whether one has a hundred thousand enemies if one is loved by two or three good souls? Don’t you love me too, and wouldn’t you reproach me for thinking that of no account? When I lost Rollinat, didn’t you write to me to love the more those who were left? Come, so that I may OVERWHELM you with reproaches; for you are not doing what you told me to do.

do.

We are expecting you, we are preparing a mid-Lent fantasy; try to take part. Laughter is a splendid medicine. We shall give you a costume; they tell me that you were very good as a pastry cook at Pauline’s! If you are better, be certain it is because you have gotten out of your rut and have distracted yourself a little. Paris is good for you, you are too much alone yonder in your lovely house. Come and work, at our house; how perfectly easy to send on a box of books!

Send word when you are coming so that I can have a carriage at the station at Chateauroux.

CCLIII. TO GEORGE SAND

Thursday, 20 March, 1873

Dear master,

The gigantic Tourgueneff is at this moment leaving here and we have just sworn a solemn oath. You will have us at dinner the 12th of April, Easter Eve.

It has not been a small job to get to that point, it is so difficult to succeed in anything, no matter what.

For my part nothing would prevent me from going tomorrow But our friend seems to me to enjoy very little liberty and I myself have engagements the first week in April.

I am going this evening to two costume balls! Tell me after that that I am not young.

A thousand affectionate greetings from your old troubadour who embraces you.

Read as an example of modern fetidness, in the last number of the Vie Parisienne, the article on Marion Delorme. It ought to be framed, if, however, anything fetid can be framed. But nowadays people don’t look so closely.

CCLIV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 23 March, 1873

No, that giant does not do as he likes, I have noticed that. But he is one of the class that finds its happiness in being ruled and I can understand it, on the whole. Provided one is in good hands, — and he is.

Well, we are hoping still, but we are not absolutely counting on anyone but you. You can not give me a greater pleasure than by telling me that you are going out among people, that you are getting out of a rut and distracting yourself, absolutely necessary, in these muddled days.

On the day when a little intoxication is no longer necessary for self-preservation, the world will be getting on very well. We haven’t come to that yet.

That FETID thing is not worth the trouble of reading, I didn’t finish it, one turns away from such things, one does not spoil one’s sense of smell by breathing them. But I do not think that the man to whom one offers that in a censer would be satisfied with it.

Do come with the swallows and bring Saint-Antoine. It is Maurice who is going to be interested in that! He is more of a scholar than I am, I who will appreciate, thanks to my ignorance about many things, only the poetic and great side of it. I am sure of it, I know already that it is there.

Keep on going about, you must, and above all continue to love us as we love you.

Your old troubadour,
G. Sand

CCLV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 7th April, 1873

I am writing to my friend General Ferri Pisani, whom you know, who HAS CHARGE at Chateauroux, to reserve you a carriage which will be waiting for you on the 12th, at the station, at twenty minutes past three. You must leave Paris at ten minutes past nine o’clock by the EXPRESS. Otherwise the trip is too long and stupid. I hope that the general will come with you, if there is any decision contrary to your promise send him a telegram to Chateauroux so that he shall not wait for you. He usually comes on horseback.

We are looking forward IMPATIENTLY to seeing you.

Your old troubadour
G. Sand

CCLVI. TO GEORGE SAND 23 April, 1873

It is only five days since we parted, and I am missing you like the devil. I miss Aurore and all the household down to Fadette. Yes, that is the way it is, one is so happy at your house! you are so good and so interesting.

Why can’t we live together, why is life always so badly arranged? Maurice seems to me to be the type of human happiness. What does he lack? Certainly, he is no more envied by anyone than by me.

Your two friends, Tourgueneff and Cruchard philosophized about that from Nohant to Chateauroux, very comfortably borne along in your carriage at a smart pace by two horses. Hurrah for the postillions of La Chatre! But the rest of the trip was horrid because of the company we had in our car. I was consoled for it by strong drink, as the Muscovite had a flask full of excellent brandy with him. We both felt a little heavy hearted. We did not talk, we did not sleep.

We found here the barodetien folly in full flower again. On the heels of this affair has developed during the last three days, Stoppfel! another bitter narcotic! Oh! Heavens! Heavens! what a bore to live in such times! How wise you are live so far from Paris!

I have begun my readings again, and, in a week I shall begin my excursions hereabouts to discover a countryside that may serve for my two good men. After which, about the 12th or the 15th, I shall return to my house at the water-side. I want very much, this summer, to go to Saint Gervais, to bleach my nose and to strengthen my nerves. For ten years I have been finding a pretext for doing without it. But it is high time to beautify myself, not that I have any pretensions at pleasing and seducing by my physical graces, but I hate myself too much when I look in my mirror. The older one grows, the more care one should take of oneself.

I shall see Madame Viardot this evening, I shall go early and we will talk of you.

When shall we meet again, now? How far Nohant is from Croisset!

Yours, dear good master, all my affection.

Gustave Flaubert

otherwise called the R. P. Cruchard of the Barnabites, director of the Ladies of Disillusion.

CCLVII. TO GEORGE SAND

Dear master,

Cruchard should have thanked you sooner for sending him your last book; but his reverence is working like ten thousand negroes, that is his excuse. But it did not hinder him from reading “Impressions et Souvenirs.” I already knew some of it, from having read it in le Temps (a pun). [Footnote: “Dans de temps” means also, “some time ago.”]

This is what was new to me and what struck me: (1) the first fragment; (2) the second in which there is a charming and just page on the Empress. How true is what you say of the proletariat! Let us hope that its reign will pass like that of the bourgeois, and for the same causes, as a punishment for the same folly and a similar egoism.

The “Reponse a un ami” I knew, as it was addressed to me.

The “Dialogue avec Delacroix” is instructive; two curious pages on what he thought of father Ingres.

I am not entirely of your opinion as regards the punctuation. That is to say that I would shock you by my exaggeration in that respect; but I do not lack, naturally, good reasons to defend my point of view.

“J’allume le fagot,” etc., all of this long article charmed me.

In the “Idees d’un maitre d’ecole,” I admire your pedagogic spirit, dear master, there are many pretty a b c phrases.

Thank you for what you say of my poor Bouilhet!

I adore your “Pierre Bonin.” I have known people like him, and as these pages are dedicated to Tourgueneff it is the moment to ask you if you have read “I’Abandonnee”? For my part, I find it simply sublime. This Scythian is an immense old fellow.

I am not at such high-toned literature now. Far from it! I am hacking and re-hacking “le Sexe faible.” I wrote the first act in a week. It is true that my days are long. I spent, last week, one of eighteen hours, and Cruchard is as fresh as a young girl, not tired, no headache. In short, I think that I shall be through that work in three weeks. After that, God knows what!

It would be funny if Carvalho’s fantasticality was crowned with success!

I am afraid that Maurice has lost his wager, for I want to replace the three theological virtues by the face of Christ appearing in the sun. What do you think about it? When the correction is made and I have strengthened the massacre at Alexandria and clarified the symbolism of the fantastic beasts, “Saint-Antoine” will be finished forever, and I shall start at my two good fellows who were set aside for the comedy.

What a horrid way of writing is required for the stage! The ellipses, the delays, the questions and the repetitions have to be lavish, if movement is desired, and all that in itself is very ugly.

I am perhaps blinding myself, but I think that I am now writing something very quick and easy to play. We shall see.

Adieu, dear master, embrace all yours for me.

Your old good-for-nothing Cruchard, friend of Chalumeau. Note that name. It is a gigantic story, but it requires one to toe the mark to tell it suitably.

CCLVIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 4 July, 1873

I don’t know where you are at present, Cruchard of my heart. I am addressing this to Paris whence I suppose it will be forwarded to you. I have been ill, your reverence, nothing except a stupid anemia, no legs, no appetite, continual sweat on the forehead and my heart as jumpy as a pregnant woman; it is unfair, that condition, when one gets to the seventies, I begin my seventieth spring tomorrow, cured after a half score of river baths. But I find it so comfortable to rest that I have not yet done an iota of work since I returned from Paris, and until I opened my ink-well again to write to you today. We reread your letter this morning in which you said that Maurice had lost his wager. He insists that he has won it as you are taking out the vertus theologales.

As for me, bet or no bet, I want you to keep the new version which is quite in the atmosphere, while the theological virtues are not. — Have you any news of Tourgueneff? I am worried about him. Madame Viardot wrote me, several days ago, that he had fallen and hurt his leg. — Yes, I have read l’Abandonnee, it is very beautiful as is all that he does. I hope that his injury is not serious! such a thing is always serious with gout.

So you are still working frantically? Unhappy one! you don’t know the ineffable pleasure of doing nothing! And how good work will seem to me after it! I shall delay it however as long as possible. I am getting more and more of the opinion that nothing is worth the trouble of being said!

Don’t believe a word of that, do write lovely things, and love your old troubadour who always cherishes you.

G. Sand

Love from all Nohant.

CCLIX. TO GEORGE SAND

Thursday

Why do you leave me so long without any news of yourself, dear good master? I am cross with you, there!

I am all through with the dramatic art. Carvalho came here last Saturday to hear the reading of le Sexe faible, and seemed to me to be satisfied with it. He thinks it will be a success. But I put so little confidence in the intelligence of all those rascals, that for my part, I doubt it.

I am exhausted, and I am now sleeping ten hours a night, not to mention two hours a day. That is resting my poor brain.

I am going to resume my readings for my wretched book, which I shall not begin for a full year.

Do you know where the great Tourgueneff is now?

A thousand affectionate greetings to all and to you the best of everything from your old friend.

CCLX. TO GEORGE SAND

Sunday …

I am not like M. de Vigny, I do not like the “sound of the horn in the depth of the woods.” For the last two hours now an imbecile stationed on the island in front of me has been murdering me with his instrument. That wretched creature spoils my sunlight and deprives me of the pleasure of enjoying the summer. For it is lovely weather, but I am bursting with anger. I should like, however, to talk a bit with you, dear master.

In the first place, congratulations on your seventieth year, which seems more robust to me than the twentieth of a good many others! What a Herculean constitution you have! Bathing in an icy stream is a proof of strength that bewilders me, and is a mark of a “reserve force” that is reassuring to your friends. May you live long. Take care of yourself for your dear grandchildren, for the good Maurice, for me too, for all the world, and I should add: for literature, if I were not afraid of your superb disdain.

Ha! good! again the hunting horn! The man is mad. I want to go and find the rural guard.

As for me, I do not share your disdain, and I am absolutely ignorant of, as you say, “the pleasure of doing nothing.” As soon as I no longer hold a book, or am not dreaming of writing one, A LAMENTABLE boredom seizes upon me. Life, in short seems tolerable to me only by legerdemain. Or else one must give oneself up to disordered pleasure … and even then!

Well, I have finished with le Sexe faible, which will be played, at least so Carvalho promises, in January, if Sardou’s l’Oncle Sam is permitted by the censorship; if otherwise, it will be in November.

As I have been accustomed during the last six weeks to seeing things from a theatrical point of view, to thinking in dialogue, here I am starting to build the plot of another play! It will be called le Candidat. My written plot is twenty pages long. But I haven’t anyone to show it to. Alas! I shall therefore leave it in pages long. But I haven't anyone to show it to. Alas! I shall therefore leave it in a drawer and start at my old book. I am reading l'Histoire de la Medecine by Daremberg, which amuses me a great deal, and I have finished l'Essai sur les facultes de l'entendement by Gamier, which I think very silly. There you have my occupations. THINGS seem to be getting quieter. I breathe again.

I don't know whether they talk as much of the Shah in Nohant as they do around here. The enthusiasm has been immense. A little more and they would have proclaimed him Emperor. His sojourn in Paris has had, on the commercial shop-keeping and artisan class, a monarchical effect which you would not have suspected, and the clerical gentlemen are doing very well, very well indeed!

On the other side of the horizon, what horrors they are committing in Spain! So that the generality of humanity continues to be charming.

CCLXI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croissset

Nohant, 30 August, 1873

Where are you to be found now? where are you nestled? As for me, I have just come from Auvergne with my whole household, Plauchut included. Auvergne is beautiful, above all it is pretty. The flora is always rich and interesting, the walking rough, the living accommodations poor. I got through it all very well, except for the elevation of two thousand meters at Sancy, which combining an icy wind with a burning sun, laid me flat for four days with a fever. After that I got into the running again, and I am returning here to resume my river baths till the frost.

There was no more question of any work, of any literature at all, than if none of us had ever learned to read. The LOCAL POETS pursued me with books and bouquets. I pretended to be dead and was left in peace. I am square with them now that I am home, by sending a copy of something of mine, it doesn't matter what, in exchange. Ah! what lovely places I have seen and what strange volcanic combinations, where we ought to have heard your Saint-Antoine in a SETTING worthy of the subject! Of what use are these pleasures of vision, and how are these impressions transformed later? One does not know ahead, and, with time and the easy ways of life, everything is met with again and preserved.

What news of your play? Have you begun your book? Have you chosen a place to study? Do tell me what is becoming of my Cruchard, the Cruchard of my heart. Write to me even if only a word! Tell me that you still love us as I love you and as all of us here love you.

G. Sand

CCLXII. TO GEORGE SAND

Croisset, Friday, 5th September, 1873

On arriving here yesterday, I found your letter, dear good master.

All is well with you then, God be praised!

I spent the month of August in wandering about, for I was in Dieppe, in Paris, in Saint-Gratien, in Brie, and in Beauce, hunting for a certain country that I had in mind, and I think that I have found it at last in the neighborhood of Houdan. But, before starting at my terrifying book, I shall make a last search on the road that goes from Loupe to Laigle. After that, good night.

The Vaudeville begins well. Carvalho up to now has been charming.

His enthusiasm is so strong even that I am not without anxieties.

One must remember the good Frenchmen who cried “On to Berlin,” and then received such a fine drubbing.

Not only is the aforesaid Carvalho content with the le Sexe faible, but he wants me to write at once another comedy, the scenario of which I have shown him, and which he would like to produce a year from now. I don’t think the thing is quite ready to be put into words. But on the other hand, I should like to be through with it before undertaking the story of my good men. Meanwhile, I am keeping on with my reading and note-taking.

You are not aware, doubtless, that they have forbidden Coetlogon’s play formally, BECAUSE IT CRITICISED THE EMPIRE. That is the censorship’s answer. As I have in the le Sexe faible a rather ridiculous general, I am not without forebodings. What a fine thing is Censorship! Axiom: All governments curse literature, power does not like another power.

When they forbade the playing of Mademoiselle La Quintinie, you were too stoical, dear master, or too indifferent. You should always protest against injustice and folly, you should bawl, froth at the mouth, and smash when you can. If I had been in your place with your authority, I should have made a grand row. I think too that Father Hugo was wrong in keeping quiet about le Roi s’amuse. He often asserts his personality on less legitimate occasions.

At Rouen they are having processions, but the effect is completely spoiled, and the result of it is deplorable for fusion! What a misfortune! Among the imbecilities of our times, that (fusion) is perhaps the greatest. I should not be surprised if we should see little Father Thiers again! On the other hand many Reds, from fear of the clerical reaction, have gone over to Bonapartism. One needs a fine dose of simplicity to keep any political faith.

Have you read the Antichrist? I find that indeed a beautiful book, aside from some faults of taste, some modern expressions applied to ancient things. Renan some faults of taste, some modern expressions applied to ancient things. Renan seems to me on the whole to have progressed. I passed all one evening recently with him and I thought him adorable.

CCLXIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croissset
Nohant, 3d October, 1873

The existence of Cruchard is a beautiful poem, so much in keeping, that I don’t know if it is a fictitious biography or the copy for a real article done in good faith. I had to laugh a bit after the departure of all the Viardots (except Viardot) and the big Muscovite, who was charming although very much indisposed from time to time. He left very well and very gay, but regretting not to have been to see you. The truth is that he was ill just then. He has had a disordered stomach, like me, for some time. I get well by being moderate, and he does not! I excuse him; after these crises one is famished, and if it is because of an empty stomach that one has to fill up, he must be terribly famished. What a kind, excellent and worthy man! And what modest talent! Everyone adores him here and I give them the example. We adore you too, Cruchard of my heart. But you love your work better than your friends, and in that you are inferior to the real Cruchard, who at least adored our holy religion.

By the way, I think that we shall have Henry V. They tell me that I am seeing the dark side of things; I don’t see anything, but I perceive the odor of sacristies that increases. If that should not last a long time, I should like our clerical bourgeois to undergo the scorn of those whose lands they have bought and whose titles they have taken. It would be a good thing.

What lovely weather in our country! I still go every day to dip into the cold rush of my little river and I feel better. I hope to resume tomorrow my work that has been absolutely abandoned for six months. Ordinarily, I take shorter holidays; but the flowering of the meadow saffron always warns me that it is time to begin grubbing again. Here it is, let us grub. Love me as I love you.

My Aurore, whom I have not neglected, and who is world: well, sends you a big kiss. Lina, Maurice send affection.

G. Sand

CCLXIV. TO GEORGE SAND

Croisset, Thursday

Whatever happens, Catholicism will receive a terrible blow, and if I were a devotee, I should spend my time before a crucifix saying: “Maintain the

Republic for us, O my God!”

But THEY ARE AFRAID of the monarchy. Because of itself and because of the reaction which would follow. Public opinion is absolutely against it. The reports of messieurs the prefects are disquieting; the army is divided into Bonapartists and Republicans; the body of big business in Paris has pronounced against Henry V. Those are the bits of information that I bring back from Paris, where I have spent ten days. In a word, dear master, I think now that THEY will be swamped! Amen!

I advise you to read the pamphlet by Cathelineau and the one by Segur also. It is curious! The basis is clearly to be seen. Those people think they are in the XIIth century.

As for Cruchard, Carvalho asked him for some changes which he refused. (You know that sometimes Cruchard is not easy.) The aforesaid Carvalho finally realized that it was impossible to change anything in le Sexe faible without distorting the real idea of the play. But he is asking to play le Candidat first, it is not finished but it delights him — naturally. Then when the thing is finished, reviewed and corrected, perhaps he won’t want it. In short, if after l’Oncle Sam, le Candidat is finished, it will be played. If not, it will be le Sexe faible.

However, I don’t care, I am so eager to start my novel which will take me several years. And moreover, the theatrical style is beginning to exasperate me. Those little curt phrases, this continual scintillation irritates like seltzer water, which is pleasing at first but shortly seems like nasty water. Between now and January I am going to compose dialogues in the best manner possible, after that I am coming back to serious things.

I am glad to have diverted you a little with the biography of Cruchard. But I find it is hybrid and the character of Cruchard is not consistent! A man with such an executive ability does not have so many literary preoccupations. The archeology is superfluous. It belongs to another kind of ecclesiastics. Perhaps there is a transition that is lacking. Such is my humble criticism.

They had said in a theatrical bulletin that you were in Paris; I had a mistaken joy about it, dear good master whom I adore and whom I embrace.

CCLXV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Your poor old troubadour, just getting well from a cruel attack of rheumatism, during which he could not lie down, nor eat, nor dress without aid, is at last up again. He suffered liver trouble, jaundice, rash, fever, in short he was fit to be thrown out on a pile of rubbish.

Here he is up again, very feeble, but able to write a few lines and to say with you AMEN to the buried catholic dictatorships; it is not even Catholics that they should be called, those people are not. They are only clericals.

I note today in the papers that they have played l’Oncle Sam. I hear that it is bad, but it may very well be a success all the same. I think that your play is surely postponed and Carvalho seems as capricious too, to me, as hard to put your finger on as other theatrical managers.

All Nohant embraces you and I embrace you even more, but I cannot write any more.

G. Sand Monday

Hard work? When indeed can I start at it? I am NO GOOD.

1874

CCLXVI. TO GEORGE SAND

January, 1874

As I have a quiet moment, I am going to profit by it by talking a little with you, dear good master! And first of all, embrace for me all your family and accept all my wishes for a Happy New Year!

This is what is happening now to your Father Cruchard.

Cruchard is very busy, but serene and very calm, which surprises everybody. Yes, that’s the way it is. No indignations, no boiling over. The rehearsals of le Candidat have begun, and the thing will be on the boards the first of February. Carvalho seems to me very satisfied with it! Nevertheless he has insisted on my combining two acts in one, which makes the first act inordinately long.

I did this work in two days, and Cruchard has been splendid! He slept seven hours in all, from Thursday morning (Christmas Day) to Saturday, and he is only the better for it.

Do you know what I am going to do to complete my ecclesiastical character? I am going to be a godfather. Madame Charpentier in her enthusiasm for Saint-Antoine came to beg me to give the name Antoine to the child that she is expecting! I refused to inflict on this young Christian the name of such an agitated man, but I had to accept the honor that was done me. Can you see my old top-knot by the baptismal font, beside the chubby-cheeked baby, the nurse and the relatives? O civilization, such are your blows! Good manners, such are your exactions!

I went on Sunday to the civic funeral of Francois-Victor Hugo. What a crowd! and not a cry, not the least bit of disorder! Days like that are bad for Catholicism. Poor father Hugo (whom I could not help embracing) was very broken, but stoical.

What do you think of le Figaro, which reproached him for wearing at his son’s funeral, “a soft hat”?

As for politics, a dead calm. The Bazaine trial is ancient history. Nothing shows better the contemporary demoralization than the pardon granted to this wretched creature! Besides, the right of pardon if one departs from theology is a denial of justice. By what right can a man prevent the accomplishment of the denial of justice. By what right can a man prevent the accomplishment of the law?

The Bonapartists should have let this alone; but not at all: they defended him bitterly, out of hatred for the 4th of September. Why do all the parties regard themselves as having joint interests with the rascals who exploit them? It is because all parties are execrable, imbecile, unjust, blind! An example: the history of Azor (what a name!). He robbed the ecclesiastics. Never mind! the clericals consider themselves attacked.

As regards the church. I have read in full (which I never did before) Lamennais' Essai sur l'indifference. I know now, and thoroughly, all the great buffoons who had a disastrous influence on the XIXth century. To establish common sense or the prevailing mode and custom as the criterion of certitude, that is preparing the way for universal suffrage, which is, to my way of thinking, the shame of human kind.

I have just read also, la Chretienne by the Abbe Bautain. A curious book for a novelist. It smacks of its period of modern Paris. I gulped a volume by Garcin de Tassy on Hindustani literature, to get clean. One can breathe, at least, in that.

You see that your Father Cruchard is not entirely stupefied by the theatre. However, I haven't anything to complain of in the Vaudeville. Everyone there is polite and exact! How different from the Odeon!

Our friend Chennevieres is now our superior, since the theatres are in his division. The theatrical people are enchanted.

I see the Muscovite every Sunday. He is very well and like him better and better.

Saint-Antoine will be in galley proof at the end of January.

Adieu, dear master! When shall we meet? Nohant is very far away! and

I am going to be, all this winter, very busy.

CCLXVII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

January, 1874

I am seized with a headache, but, although perfectly imbecile, I want to embrace you and thank you for having written to me on New Year's day. All Nohant loves you and smacks you, as they say in the country.

We wish you a magnificent success and we are glad that it is not to be at the cost of annoyances. However, that is hardly the way of the actors whom I have known, and at the Vaudeville I have found only those who were good natured. Have you a part for my friend Parade? And for Saint-Germain, who seemed to you idiotic one day when perhaps he had lunched too well, but who nevertheless is a fine addlepate, full of sympathy and spirit. And with real talent!

I am not reading all these horrid things that you feed on so as to sense better apparently the good things with which you sandwich them. I have stopped laughing at human folly, I flee it and try to forget it. As for admiration, I am always ready, it is the healthiest regime by far, and too, I am glad to know that I shall soon read Saint-Antoine again.

Keep in touch with your play and don’t get ill this hateful winter.

Your old troubadour who loves you.

G. Sand

CCLXVIII. TO GEORGE SAND

Saturday evening, 7th February, 1874

I have at last a moment to myself, dear master; now let us talk a little.

I knew through Tourgueneff that you were doing very well. That is the main thing. Now I am going lo give you some news about that excellent Father Cruchard.

Yesterday I signed the final proof for Saint-Antoine. …But the aforesaid old book will not be published until the first of April (like an April fool trick?) because of the translations. It is finished, I am not thinking any more about it! Saint-Antoine is relegated, as far as I am concerned, to the condition of a memory! However I do not conceal from you that I had a moment of great sadness when I looked at the first proof. It is hard to separate oneself from an old companion!

As for le Candidat, it will be played, I think, between the 2oth and the 25th of this month. As that play gave me very little trouble and as I do not attach great importance to it, I am rather calm about the results of it.

Carvalho’s leaving irritated and disturbed me for several days. But his successor Cormon is full of zeal. Up to now I have nothing but praise for him, as for all the others in fact. The people at the Vaudeville are charming. Your old troubadour, whom you picture agitated and always angry, is gentle as a lamb and even good natured! First I made all the changes that THEY wanted, and then THEY put back the original text. But of my own accord I have cut out what seemed to me too long, and it goes well, very well. Delannoy and Saint-Germain have excellent wigs and play like angels. I think it will be all right.

One thing vexes me. The censorship has ruined the role of a little legitimist ragamuffin, so that the play, conceived in the spirit of strict unpartisanship, has ragamuffin, so that the play, conceived in the spirit of strict unpartisanship, has now to flatter the reactionaries: a result that distresses me. For I don’t want to please the political passions of anyone, no matter who it may be, having, as you know, an essential hatred of all dogmatism, of all parties.

Well, the good Alexander Dumas has made the plunge! Here he is an Academician! I think him very modest. He must be to think himself honored by honors.

CCLXIX. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 15 February, 1874

Everything is going well, and you are satisfied, my troubadour. Then we are happy here over your satisfaction and we are praying for success, and we are waiting impatiently Saint-Antoine so as to read it again. Maurice has had a cold which attacks him every other day. Lina and I are well, little girls superlatively so. Aurore learns everything with admirable facility and docility; that child is my life and ideal. I no longer enjoy anything except her progress. All my past, all that I have been able to acquire or to produce, has no value in my eyes unless it can profit her. If a certain portion of intelligence and goodness was granted to me, it is so that she may have a greater share. You have no children, be therefore a litterateur, an artist, a master; that is logical, that is your compensation, your happiness, and your strength. And do tell us that you are getting on, that seems to us the main thing in life. — And keep well, I think that these rehearsals which make you go to and fro are good for you.

We all embrace you fondly.

G. Sand

CCLXX. TO GEORGE SAND

Saturday evening, 28 February, 1874

Dear master,

The first performance of le Candidat is set for next Friday, unless it is Saturday, or perhaps Monday the 9th? It has been postponed by Delannoy’s illness and by l’Oncle Sam, for we had to wait until the said Sam had come down to under fifteen hundred francs.

I think that my play will be very well given, that is all. For I have no idea about the rest of it, and I am very calm about the result, a state of indifference that surprises me greatly. If I were not harassed by people who ask me for seats, I should forget absolutely that I am soon to appear on the boards, and to expose myself, in spite of my great age, to the derision of the populace. Is it stoicism or fatigue?

I have been having and still have the grippe, the result of it for your Cruchard, is a general lassitude accompanied by a violent (or rather a profound) melancholy. While spitting and coughing beside my fire, I muse over my youth. I dream of all my dead friends, I wallow in blackness! Is it the result of a too great activity for the past eight months, or the radical absence of the feminine element in my life? But I have never felt more abandoned, more empty, more bruised. What you said to me (in your last letter) about your dear little girls moved me to the depths of my soul! Why haven’t I that? I was born with all the affections, however! But one does not make one’s destiny, one submits to it. I was cowardly in my youth, I had a fear of life! One pays for everything.

Let us speak of other things, it will be gayer.

H. M. the Emperor of all the Russias does not like the Muses. The censorship of the “autocrat of the north” had formally forbidden the transportation of Saint-Antoine, and the proofs were returned me from Saint Petersburg, last Sunday; the French edition even will be prohibited. That is quite a serious money loss to me. It would have taken very little for the French censorship to forbid my play. Our friend Chennevieres gave me a good boost. Except for him I should not be played. Cruchard does not please the temporal powers. Isn’t it funny, this simple hatred of authority, of all government whatever, for art!

I am reading now books on hygiene. Oh! but they are comic! What assurance physicians have! what effrontery! what asses for the most part! I have just finished the Gaule poetique of Marchangy (the enemy of Beranger). This book gave me hysterics.

So as to retemper myself in something stronger, I reread the great, the most holy, the incomparable Aristophanes. There is a man, that fellow! What a world in which such work were produced!

CCLXXI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, March, 1874

Our two little girls cruelly ill with the grippe have taken up all my time, but I am following, in the papers, the course of your play. I would go to applaud it, my cherished Cruchard, if I could leave these dear little invalids. So it is on

Wednesday that they are going to judge it. The jury may be good or stupid, one never knows!

I have started grubbing again after having rested from the long and successful novel published by the Revue. I shall send it to you when it is published in book form.

Don’t you delay to give me the news on Thursday, I don’t need to tell you that success and the lack of it prove nothing, and that it is a ticket in a lottery. It is agreeable to succeed; to a philosophical spirit it ought not to be very distressing to fail. As for me, without knowing the play, I predict a success on the first day. As for its continuance, that is always unknown and unforeseen from day to day.

We all embrace you very affectionately.

G. Sand

CCLXXII. TO GEORGE SAND

Thursday, one o’clock, 12 March, 1874

Speaking of FROSTS, this is one! People who want to flatter me insist that the play will do better before the real public, but I don’t think so! I know the defects of my play better than anyone. If Carvalho had not, for a month, bored me to death with corrections that I have cut out, I would have made re-touches or perhaps changes which would perhaps have modified the final issue. But I was so disgusted with it that I would not have changed a line for a million francs. In a word, I am dished.

It must be said too that the hall was detestable, all fops and students who did not understand the material sense of the words. They made jokes of the poetical things. A poet says: “I am of 1830, I learned to read in Hernani, and I wanted to be Lara.” Thereupon a burst of ironical laughter, *etc.*

And moreover I have fooled the public in regard to the title. They expected another Rabagas! The conservatives have been vexed because I did not attack the republicans. Similarly the communists would have liked some insults against the legitimists.

My actors played superbly, Saint-Germain among others; Delannoy who carries all the play, is distressed, and I don’t know what to do to soften his grief. As for Cruchard, he is calm, very calm! He had dined very well before the performance, and after it he supped even better. Menu: two dozen oysters from Ostend, a bottle of champagne frappe, three slices of roast beef, a truffle salad, coffee and a chaser. Religion and the stomach sustain Cruchard.

I confess that I should have liked to make some money, but as my fall involves neither art nor sentiment I am profoundly unconcerned.

I tell myself: “well, it’s over!” and I experience a feeling of freedom. The worst of it all is the scandal about the tickets. Observe that I had twelve orchestra seats and a box! (Le Figaro had eighteen orchestra seats and three boxes.) I did not even see the chief of the claque. One would say that the management of the Vaudeville had arranged for me to fail. Its dream is fulfilled.

I did not give away a quarter of the seats that I needed and I bought a great many for people who slandered me eloquently in the lobbies. The “bravos” of a devoted few were drowned at once by the “hushes.” When they mentioned my name at the end, there was applause (for the man but not for the work) accompanied by two beautiful cat-calls from the gallery gods. That is the truth.

La Petite Presse of this morning is polite. I can ask no more of it. Farewell, dear good master, do not pity me, for I don’t feel pitiable.

P. S. — A nice bit from my servant when he handed me your letter this morning. Knowing your handwriting, he said sighing: “Ah! the best one was not there last evening!” That is just what I think.

CCLXXIII TO GEORGE SAND

Wednesday, April, 1874

Thank you for your long letter about le Candidat. Now here are the criticisms that I add to yours: we ought to have: (1) lowered the curtain after the electoral meeting and put the entire half of the third act into the beginning of the fourth; (2) cut out the anonymous letter, which is unnecessary, since Arabelle informs Rousselin that his wife has a lover; (3) inverted the order of the scenes in the fourth act, that is to say, beginning with the announcement of the tryst between Madame Rousselin and Julien and, making Rousselin a little more jealous. The anxieties of his election turn him aside from his desire to go to entrap his wife. Not enough is made of the exploiters. There should be ten instead of three. Then, he gives his daughter. The end was there, and at the instant that he notices the blackguardism, he is elected. Then his dream is accomplished, but he feels no joy over it. In that manner there would have been moral progress.

I think, whatever you say about it, that the subject was good, but that I have spoiled it. Not one of the critics has shown me in what. But I know, and that consoles me. What do you think of La Rounat, who in his page implores me, “in the name of our old friendship,” not to have my play printed, he thinks it so “silly and badly written”! A parallel between me and Gondinet follows.

The theatrical mystery is one of the funniest things of this age. One would say that the art of the theatre goes beyond the limits of human intelligence, and that it is a secret reserved for those who write like cab drivers. The QUESTION OF

IMMEDIATE SUCCESS leads all others. It is the school of demoralization. If my play had been sustained by the management, it could have made money like another. Would it have been the better for that?

The Tentation is not doing badly. The first edition of two thousand copies is exhausted. Tomorrow the second will be published. I have been torn in pieces by the petty journals and praised highly by two or three persons. On the whole nothing serious has appeared yet, nor will appear, I think. Renan does not write any more (he says) in the Debats, and Taine is busy getting settled at Annecy.

I have been EXECRATED by the Messrs. Villemessant and Buloz, who will do all they can to be disagreeable to me. Villemessant reproaches me for not “having been killed by the Prussians.” All that is nauseous!

And you beg me not to notice human folly, and to deprive myself of the pleasure of depicting it! But the comic is the only consolation of virtue. There is, moreover, a manner of taking it which is elevated; that is what I am aiming at with two good people. Don’t fear that they are too realistic! I am afraid, on the contrary, that it may seem beyond the bounds of possibility, for I shall push the idea to the limit. This little work that I shall start in six weeks will keep me busy for four or five years!

CCLXXIV. TO GEORGE SAND

April, 1874

As it would have necessitated a STRUGGLE, and as Cruchard has lawsuits in horror, I have withdrawn my play on the payment of five thousand francs, so much the worse! I will not have my actors hissed! The night of the second performance when I saw Delannoy come back into the wings with his eyes wet, I felt myself a criminal and said to myself: “Enough.” (Three persons affect me: Delannoy, Tourgueneff and my servant!) In short, it is over. I am printing my play, you will get it towards the end of the week.

I am jumped on on all sides! le Figaro and le Rappel; it is complete! Those people to whom I lent money or for whom I did favors call me an idiot. I have never had less nerves. My stoicism (or pride) surprises myself even, and when I look for the causes, I ask myself, dear master, if you are not one of them.

I recall the first night of Villemer, which was a triumph, and the first night of Don Juan de Village, which was a failure. You do not know how much I admired you on those two occasions! The dignity of your character (a thing rarer still than genius) edified me! and I formulated within myself this prayer: “Oh! how I wish I could be like her, on a similar occasion.” Who knows, perhaps your how I wish I could be like her, on a similar occasion." Who knows, perhaps your example has sustained me? Forgive the comparison! Well, I don't bat an eye-lid. That is the truth.

But I confess to regretting the THOUSANDS OF FRANCS which I should have made. My little milk-jug is broken. I should have liked to renew the furniture at Croisset, fooled again!

My dress rehearsal was deadly! Every reporter in Paris! They made fun of it all. I shall underline in your copy, all the passages that they seized on. Yesterday and the day before they did not seize on them any more. Oh! well, so much the worse! It is too late. Perhaps the PRIDE of Cruchard has killed it.

And they have written articles on MY dwellings, my SLIPPERS, my DOG. The chroniclers have described my apartment where they saw "on the walls, pictures and bronzes." But there is nothing at all on the walls! I know that one critic was enraged because I did not go to see him; and a third person came to tell me so this morning, adding: "What do you want me to tell him?…But Messieurs Dumas, Sardou and even Victor Hugo are not like you. — Oh! I know it! — Then you are not surprised, etc."

Farewell, dear good adored master, friendly regards to yours. Kisses to the dear little girls, and all my love to you.

P.S. Could you give me a copy or the original of Cruchard's biography; I have no draft of it and I want to reread it to freshen up MY IDEAL.

CCLXXV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croissset

Nohant, 10 April, 1874

Those who say that I do not think Saint-Antoine beautiful! and excellent, lie about it, I do not need to tell you. Let me ask you how I could have confided in the Levy clerks whom I do not know! I remember, as for Levy himself, saying to him last summer, that I found the thing superb and first class.

I would have done an article for you if I had not already refused Maurice recently, to do one about Hugo's Quatre-vingt-treize. I said that I was ill. The fact is, that I do not know how to DO ARTICLES, and I have done so many of them for Hugo that I have exhausted my subject. I wonder why he has never done any for me; for, really, I am no more of a journalist than he is, and I need his support much more than he needs mine.

On the whole, articles are not of any use, now, no more than are friends at the theatre. I have told you that it is the struggle of one against all, and the mystery, if there is one, is to turn on an electric current. The subject then is very important in the theatre. In a novel, one has time to win the reader over. What a difference! I do not say as you do that there is nothing mysterious in that. Yes, indeed, there is something very mysterious in one respect; namely that one can not judge of is something very mysterious in one respect: namely that one can not judge of one’s effect beforehand, and that the shrewdest are mistaken ten times out of fifteen. You say yourself that you have been mistaken. I am at work now on a play; it is not possible to know if I am mistaken or not. And when shall I know? The day after the first performance, if I have it performed, which is not certain. There is no fun in anything except work that has not been read to any one. All the rest is drudgery and PROFESSIONAL BUSINESS, a horrible thing. So make fun of all this GOSSIP; the guiltiest ones are those who report it to you. I think it is very odd that they say so much against you to your friends. No one indeed ever says anything to me: they know that I would not allow it. Be valiant and CONTENT since Saint-Antoine is doing well and selling better. What difference does it make if they cut you up in this or that paper? In former times it meant something; in these days, nothing. The public is not the public of other days, and journalism has not the least literary influence. Every one is a critic and forms his own opinions. They never write articles about my novels. That doesn’t make any difference to me.

I embrace you and we love you.

Your old troubadour.

CCLXXVI. TO GEORGE SAND

Friday evening, 1st May, 1874

Things are progressing, dear master, insults are accumulating! It is a concerto, a symphony in which each one is intent on his own instrument. I have been cut up beginning le Figaro up to la Revue des Deux Mondes, including la Gazette de France and le Constitutionnel. And THEY have not finished yet! Barbey d’Aurevilly has insulted me personally, and the good Saint-Rene Taillandier, who declares me “unreadable,” attributes ridiculous words to me. So much for printing. As for speech, it is in accord. Saint-Victor (is it servility towards Michel Levy) rends me at the Brabant dinner, as does that excellent Charles Edmond, *etc.* On the other hand I am admired by the professors of the Faculty of Theology at Strasbourg, by Renan, and by the cashier at my butcher’s! not to mention some others. There is the truth.

What surprises me, is that under several of these criticisms there is a HATRED against me, against me personally, a deliberate slandering, the cause of which I am seeking. I do not feel hurt, but this avalanche of foolishness saddens me. One prefers inspiring good feelings to bad ones. As for the rest, I am not thinking any more about Saint-Antoine. That is over with!

I shall start, this summer, another book of about the same calibre; after that I shall return to the novel pure and simple. I have in my head two or three to write before I die. Just now I am spending my days at the Library, where I am accumulating notes. In a fortnight, I shall return to my house in the fields. In July I shall go to get rid of my congestion on the top of a Swiss mountain, obeying the advice of Doctor Hardy, the man who called me “a hysterical woman,” a saying that I consider profound.

The good Tourgueneff is leaving next week for Russia, his trip will forcibly interrupt his frenzy for pictures, for our friend never leaves the auction rooms now! He is a man with a passion, so much the better for him!

I missed you very much at Madame Viardot’s a fortnight ago. She sang Iphigenie en Aulide. I can not tell you how beautiful it was, how transporting, in short how sublime. What an artist that woman is! What an artist! Such emotions console one for life.

Well! and you, dear good master, that play that they talk about, is it finished? You are going to fall back into the theatre! I pity you! After having put dogs on the boards at the Odeon, perhaps they are going to ask you to put on horses! That is where we are now!

And all the household, from Maurice to Fadet, how is it?

Kiss the dear little girls for me and let them return it to you from me.

Your old friend.

CCLXXVII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 4th May, 1874

Let them say what they like, Saint-Antoine is a masterpiece, a magnificent book. Ridicule the critics, they are blockheads. The present century does not like lyricism. Let us wait for the reaction, it will come for you, and a splendid one. Rejoice in your insults, they are great promises for the future.

I am working still on my play, I don’t at all know if it is worth anything and don’t worry about it. I shall be told that when it is finished, and if it does not seem interesting I shall lock it up. It will have amused me for six weeks, that is the most certain thing for us about our profession.

Plauchut is the joy of the salons! happy old man! always content with himself and with others; that makes him as good as an angel, I forgive him all his graces.

You were happy at hearing the Diva Paulita, we had her, with Iphigenie, for two weeks in Nohant last autumn. Ah! yes, there is beauty and grandeur! Try to come to see us before going to Croisset, you would make us happy.

We all love you and all my dear world embraces you with a GREAT GOOD HEART.

Your old troubadour always,

G. Sand

CCLXXVIII. TO GEORGE SAND

Croisset, Tuesday, 26th March, 1874

Dear good master,

Here I am back again in my solitude! But I shall not remain in it long, for, in a short month, I shall go to spend three weeks on the Righi, so as to breathe a bit, to relax myself, to deneurasthenize myself! It is a long time since I took the air, I am tired. I need a little rest. After that I shall start at my big book which will take at least four years. It will have that good quality!

Le Sexe faible which was accepted at the Vaudeville Carvalho, was returned to me by the said Vaudeville and returned also by Perrin, who thinks the play off-color and unconventional. “Putting a cradle and a nurse on the French stage!” Think of it! Then, I took the thing to Duquesnel who has not yet (naturally) given me any answer. How far the demoralization which the theatres bring about extends! The bourgeois of Rouen, my brother included, have been talking to me of the failure of le Candidat in hushed voices (sic) and with a contrite air, as if I had been taken to the assizes under an accusation of forgery. NOT TO SUCCEED IS A CRIME and success is the criterion of well doing. I think that is grotesque in a supreme degree.

Now explain to me why they put mattresses under certain falls and thorns under others? Ah! the world is funny, and it seems chimerical to me to want to regulate oneself according to its opinion.

The good Tourgueneff must be now in Saint Petersburg; he sent me a favorable article on Saint-Antoine from Berlin. It is not the article, but he, that has given me pleasure. I saw him a great deal this winter, and I love him more and more. I saw a good deal of father Hugo who is (when the political gallery is absent) a charming, good fellow.

Was not the fall of the Broglie ministry pleasing to you? Very much so to me! but the next! I am still young enough to hope that the next Chamber will bring us a change for the better. However?

Ah, confound it! how I want to see you and talk a long time with you! Everything is poorly arranged in this world. Why not live with those one loves? The Abbey of Theleme [Footnote: Cf. Rabelais’ Gargantua.] is a fine dream, but

The Abbey of Theleme [Footnote: Cf. Rabelais' Gargantua.] is a fine dream, but nothing but a dream. Embrace warmly the dear little girls for me, and entirely yours.

R. P. Cruchard

More Cruchard than ever. I feel like a good-for-nothing, a cow, damned, antique, deliquescent, in short calm and moderate, which is the last term in decadence.

CCLXXIX. TO GEORGE SAND

Kalt-Bad. Righi. Friday, 3d July, 1874

Is it true, dear master, that last week you came to Paris? I went through it to go to Switzerland, and I read “in a sheet” that you had been to see les Deux Orphelines, had taken a walk in the Bois de Boulogne, had dined at Magny’s, etc.; all of which goes to prove that, thanks to the freedom of the Press, one is not master of one’s own actions. Whence it results that Father Cruchard is wrathful with you for not having advised him of your presence in the “new Athens.” It seems to me that people are sillier and flatter there than usual. The state of politics has become drivel! They have tickled my ears with the return of the Empire. I don’t believe in it! However…We should have to expatriate ourselves then. But how and where?

Is it for a play that you came? I pity you for having anything to do with Duquesnel! He had the manuscript of le Sexe faible returned to me by an agent of the theatrical management, without a word of explanation, and in the ministerial envelope was a letter from an underclerk, which is a gem! I will show it to you. It is a masterpiece of impertinence! People do not write in that way to a Carpentras urchin, offering a skit to the Beaumarchais theatre.

It is that very play le Sexe faible that, last year, Carvalho was so enthusiastic about! Now no one wants it any more for Perrin thinks it unconventional to put on the boards of the Theatre Francais, a nurse and a cradle. Not knowing what to do with it, I have taken it to the Cluny Theatre.

Ah! my poor Bouilhet did well to die! But I think that the Odeon could show more respect for his posthumous work.

Without believing in an Holbachic conspiracy, I think that they have been knocking me a bit too much of late; and they are so indulgent towards certain others.

The American Harrisse maintained to me the other day that Saint-Simon wrote badly. At that I burst out and talked to him in such a way that he will never more before me belch his idiocy. It was at dinner at the Princess’s; my violence cast a chill.

You see that your Cruchard continues not to listen to jokes on religion! He does not become calm! quite the contrary!

I have just read la Creation naturelle by Haeckel, a pretty book, pretty book! Darwinism seems to me to be better expounded there than in the books of Darwin himself.

The good Tourgueneff has sent me news from the depths of Scythia. He has found the information he wanted for a book that he is going to do. The tone of his letter is frivolous, from which I conclude that he is well. He will return to Paris in a month.

A fortnight ago I made a little trip to Lower Normandy, where I have found at last a neighborhood suitable to place my two good men. It will be between the valley of the Orne and the valley of the Auge. I shall have to return there several times.

Beginning with September, then, I shall start that hard task! it makes me afraid, and I am overwhelmed by it in advance.

As you know Switzerland, it is useless for me to talk to you of it, and you would scorn me if I were to tell you that I am bored to extinction here. I came here obediently because they ordered me to, for the purpose of bleaching my face and calming my nerves! I don’t think that the remedy will be efficacious; anyhow it has been deadly boring to me. I am not a man of nature, and I do not understand anything in a country where there is no history. I would give all these glaciers for the Vatican Museum. One can dream there. Well, in three weeks I shall be glued to my green table! in a humble refuge, where it seems to me you never want to come!

CCLXXX. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 6th July, 1874 (Yesterday, seventy years.)

I was in Paris from the 30th of May to the 10th of June, you were not there. Since my return here, I have been ill with the grippe, rheumatic, and often absolutely deprived of the use of my right arm. I have not the courage to stay in bed: I spend the evening with my children and I forget my little miseries which will pass; everything passes. That is why I was not able to write to you, even to thank you for the good letter which you wrote to me about my novel. In Paris I was overwhelmed by fatigue. That is the way I am growing old, and now I am beginning to feel it; I am not more often ill, now, illness PROSTRATES me beginning to feel it, I am not more often ill, now, illness FRUSTRATES me more. That is nothing, I have not the right to complain, being well loved and well cared for in my nest. I urge Maurice to go about without me, since my strength is not equal to going with him. He leaves tomorrow for Cantal with a servant, a tent, a lamp, and a quantity of utensils to examine the MICROS of his entomological DIVISION I am telling him that you are bored on the Righi. He cannot understand it.

The 7th

I am taking up my letter again, begun yesterday; I still find it very hard to move my pen, and even at this moment, I have a pain in my side, and I cannot…

Till tomorrow.

The 8th

At last, I shall be able perhaps today: for I am furious to think that perhaps you are accusing me of forgetting you, when I am prevented by weakness that is entirely physical, in which my affections count for nothing. You tell me that they KNOCK you too much. I read only le Temps and it is a good deal for me even to open a paper to see about what it is talking. You ought to do as I do and IGNORE criticism when it is not serious, and even when it is. I have never been able to see what good it is to the author criticised. Criticism always starts from a personal point of view, the authority of which the artist does not recognize. It is because of that usurpation of powers in the intellectual order of things, that people get to discussing the Sun and the Moon; but that does not prevent them in the least from showing us their good tranquil faces.

You do not want to be a man of nature, so much the worse for you! therefore you attach too much importance to the details of human things, and you do not tell yourself that there is in you a NATURAL force that defies the IFS and the BUTS of human prattle. We are of nature, in nature, by nature, and for nature. Talent, will, genius, are natural phenomena like the lake, the volcano, the mountain, the wind, the star, the cloud. What man dabbles in is pretty or ugly, ingenious or stupid; what he gets from nature is good or bad; but it is, it exists and subsists. One should not ask from the jumble of appreciation called CRITICISM, what one has done and what one wants to do. Criticism does not know anything about it; its business is to gossip.

Nature alone knows how to speak to the intelligence in a language that is imperishable, always the same, because it does not depart from the eternally true, the absolutely beautiful. The hard thing, when one travels, is to find nature, because man has arranged it everywhere and has almost spoiled it everywhere; probably it is because of that that you are bored, it is because it is disguised and travestied everywhere. However, the glaciers are still intact, I presume.

But I cannot write further, I must tell you quickly that I love you, that I embrace you affectionately. Give me news of yourself. I hope to be on my feet in a few days. Maurice is waiting until I am robust before he goes: I am hurrying as much as I can! My little girls embrace you, they are superb. Aurore is devoted to mythology (George Cox, Baudry translation). You know that? An adorable work for children and parents. Enough, I can no more. I love you; don't have black ideas, and resign yourself to being bored if the air is good there.

CCLXXXI. TO GEORGE SAND

Righi, 14 July, 1874;

What? ill? poor, dear master! If it is rheumatism, do as my brother does, who in his character of physician, scarcely believes in medicine. Last year he went to the baths at Aix in Savoy, and in two weeks he was cured of the pains that had tormented him for six years. But to do that you would have to move, to resign your habits, Nohant and the dear little girls. You will remain at home and YOU WILL BE WRONG. You ought to take care of yourself … for those who love you.

And as regard this, you send me, in your last letter, a horrid thing. Could I, for my part, suspect you of forgetting Cruchard! Come now, I have, first of all, too much vanity and next, too much faith in you.

You don't tell me how your play is getting on at the Odeon.

Speaking of plays, I am going again to expose myself to insults of the populace and the penny-a-liners. The manager of the Cluny Theatre, to whom I took le Sexe faible, has written me an admiring letter and is disposed to put on that play in October. He is reckoning on a great money success. Well, so be it! But I am recalling the enthusiasm of Carvalho, followed by an absolute chill! and all that increases my scorn for the so-called shrewd people who pretend to know all about things. For, in short, there is a dramatic work, declared by the managers of the Vaudeville and the Cluny "perfect," by the Theatre Francais "unplayable," and by the manager of the Odeon "in need of rewriting from one end to the other." Draw a conclusion now! and listen to their advice! Never mind, as these four gentlemen are the masters of your destinies because they have the money, and as they have more mind than you, never having written a line, you must believe them and submit to them.

It is a strange thing how much pleasure imbeciles find in floundering about in the work of another! in cutting it, correcting it, playing the pedagogue! Did I tell you that I was, because of that, very much at odds with a certain *****. He wanted to make over, sometime ago, a novel that I had recommended to him, which was not very good, but of which he is incapable of turning the least phrase. And I did not hide from him my opinion about him; inde irae. However, it is impossible for me to be so modest as to think that that good Pole is better than I am in French prose. And you want me to remain calm! dear master! I have not your temperament! I am not like you, always soaring above the miseries of this world. Your Cruchard is as sensitive as if he were divested of skin. And imbecility, self-sufficiency, injustice exasperate him more and more. Thus the ugliness of the Germans who surround me shuts off the view of the Righi!!! Zounds! What mugs!

God be thanked, “of my horrible sight I purge their States.”

CCLXXII. TO GEORGE SAND

Saturday, 26 September, 1874

Then, after having been bored like an ass on the top of the Righi, I returned home the first of August and started my book. The beginning was not easy, it was even “direful,” and “methought” I should die of despair; but now things are going, I am all right, come what may! But one needs to be absolutely mad to undertake such a book. I fear that, by its very conception, it is radically impossible. We shall see, Ah! supposing I should carry it out well … what a dream.

You doubtless know that once more I am exposing myself to the storms of the footlights (pretty metaphor) and that “braving the publicity of the theatre” I shall appear upon the boards of Cluny, probably, towards the end of December. The manager of that “little theatre” is enchanted with le Sexe faible. But so was Carvalho, which did not prevent him … You know the rest.

Of course every one blames me for letting my play be given in such a joint. But since the others do not want that play and since I insist that it shall be presented to make a few sous for the Bouilhet heirs, I am forced to pass that over. I am keeping two or three pretty anecdotes about this to tell you when we meet. Why is the theatre such a general cause of delirium? Once one is on that ground, ordinary conditions are changed. If one has had the misfortune (slight) not to succeed, friends turn from one. They are very inconsiderate of one. They never salute one! I swear to you on my word of honor that that happened to me on account of le Candida. I do not believe in Holbachic conspiracies, but all that they have done to me since March amazes me. But, I decidedly don’t bat an optic, and the fate of le Sexe faible disturbs me less than the least of the phrases of my novel.

Public intelligence seems to me to get lower and lower! To what depth of imbecility shall we descend? Belot’s last book sold eight thousand copies in two weeks. Zola’s Conquete de Plassans, seventeen hundred in six months, and there was an article about it. All the Monday-morning idiots have just been swooning away about M. Scribe’s Une Chaine. France is ill, very ill, whatever they say; and my thoughts are more and more the color of ebony.

However, there are some pretty comic elements: (1) the Bazaine escape with the episode of the sentinel; (2) l’Histoire d’un Diamant by Paul de Musset (see the Revue des Deux Mondes for September); (3) the vestibule of the former establishment of Nadar near Old England [sic], where one can contemplate a life-size photograph of Alexander Dumas.

I am sure that you are finding me grouchy and that you are going to answer me: “What difference does all that make?” But everything makes a difference, and we are dying of humbug, of ignorance, of self-confidence, of scorn of grandeur, of love of banality, and imbecile babble.

“Europe which hates us, looks at us and laughs,” said Ruy Blas. My Heavens, she has a right to laugh.

CCLXXXIII TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 5th November, 1874

What, my Cruchard, you have been ill? That is what I feared, I who live in the woes of indigestion and yet hardly work at all, I am disquieted at your kind of life, the excess of intellectual expenditure and the seclusion. In spite of the charm that I have proved and appreciated at Croisset, I fear for you that solitude where you have no longer anyone to remind you that you must eat, drink and sleep, and above all walk. Your rainy climate makes you keep to the house. Here, where it does not rain enough, we are at least hustled out of doors by the beautiful warm sun and that Phoebus invigorates us, while our Phoebus-Apollo murders us.

But I am always talking to you as to a Cruchard philosophic and detached from his personality, to a Cruchard fanatical about literature and drunk with production. When, then, shall you be able to say to yourself: Lo! this is the time for rest, let us taste the innocent pleasure of living for life’s sake, of watching with amazement the agitations of others and of not giving to them anything except the excess of our overflow. It does one good to ruminate over what one has assimilated in life, sometimes without attention and without discrimination.

Old friendships sustain us and all at once they distress us. I have just lost my poor blind Duvernet, whom you have seen at our house. He expired very quietly without suspecting it and without suffering. There is another great void about us and my nephew, the substitute, has been nominated for Chateauroux. His mother has followed him.

So we are all alone. Happily we love one another so much that we can live like that, but not without regret for the absent ones. Plauchut left us yesterday to return at Christmas. Maurice is already at work preparing a splendid performance of marionettes for us. And you, if you are in Paris, won't you come to keep the Christmas Eve revels with us? You will have finished your rehearsals, you will have had a success, perhaps you will be in the mood to return to material life, eating truffles?

Tell us about yourself, do not be ill, always love your old troubadour and his people who love you too.

G. Sand

CCLXXXIV. TO GEORGE SAND

Wednesday, 2nd December, 1874

I am having remorse about you. It is a crime to let so long a time elapse without answering such a letter as your last. I was waiting to write to you until I had something definite to tell you about le Sexe faible. What is definite is that I took it away from the Cluny a week ago. The cast that Weinschenk proposed to me was odiously stupid and he did not keep the promises that he made. But, God be thanked, I withdrew in time. At present my play has been offered to the Gymnase. No news up to now from Montigny.

I am worrying like five hundred devils about my book, asking myself sometimes if I am not mad to have undertaken it. But, like Thomas Diafoirus, I am stiffening myself against the difficulties of execution which are frightful. I need to learn a heap of things about which I am ignorant. In a month I hope to finish with the agriculture and the gardening, and I shall only then be at the second third of my first chapter.

Speaking of books, do read Fromont et Risler, by my friend Daudet, and les Diaboliques, by my enemy Barbey d'Aurevilly. You will writhe with laughter. It is perhaps owing to the perversity of my mind, which likes unhealthy things, but the latter work seemed to me extremely amusing; it is the last word in the involuntary grotesque. In other respects, dead calm, France is sinking gently like a rotten hulk, and the hope of salvage, even for the staunchest, seems chimerical. You need to be here, in Paris, to have an idea of the universal depression, of the stupidity, of the decrepitude in which we are floundering.

The sentiment of that agony penetrates me and I am sad enough to die. When

I am not torturing myself about my work, I am groaning about myself. That is the truth. In my leisure moments, all I do is to think of the dead, and I am going to say a very pretentious thing to you. No one understands me; I belong to another world. The men of my profession are so little of my profession! There is hardly anyone except Victor Hugo with whom I can talk of what interests me. Day before yesterday he recited by heart to me from Boileau and from Tacitus. That was like a gift to me, the thing is so rare. Moreover, the days when there are not politicians at his house, he is an adorable man.

CCLXXXV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croissset

Nohant, 8th December, 1874

Poor dear friend,

I love you all the more because you are growing more unhappy. How you torment yourself, and how you disturb yourself about life! for all of which you complain, is life; it has never been better for anyone or in any time. One feels it more or less, one understands it more or less, one suffers with it more or less, and the more one is in advance of the age one lives in, the more one suffers. We pass like shadows on a background of clouds which the sun seldom pierces, and we cry ceaselessly for the sun which can do no more for us. It is for us to clear away our clouds.

You love literature too much; it will destroy you and you will not destroy the imbecility of the human race. Poor dear! imbecility, that, for my part, I do not hate, that I regard with maternal eyes: for it is a childhood and all childhood is sacred. What hatred you have devoted to it! what warfare you wage on it!

You have too much knowledge and intelligence, you forget that there is something above art: namely, wisdom, of which art at its apogee is only the expression. Wisdom comprehends all: beauty, truth, goodness, enthusiasm, in consequence. It teaches us to see outside of ourselves, something more elevated than is in ourselves, and to assimilate it little by little, through contemplation and admiration.

But I shall not succeed in changing you. I shall not even succeed in making you understand how I envisage and how I lay hold upon HAPPINESS, that is to say, the acceptation of life whatever it may be! There is one person who could change you and save you, that is father Hugo; for he has one side on which he is a great philosopher, while at the same time he is the great artist that you require and that I am not. You must see him often. I believe that he will quiet you: I have not enough tempest in me now for you to understand me. As for him, I think that he has kept his thunderbolts and that he has all the same acquired the gentleness and the compassion of age.

See him, see him often and tell him your troubles, which are great, I see that, and which turn too much to spleen. You think too much of the dead, you think that they have too soon reached their rest. They have not. They are like us, they are searching. They labor in the search.

Every one is well, and embraces you. As for me, I do not get well, but I have hopes, well or not, to keep on still so as to bring up my grandchildren, and to love you as long as I have a breath left.

G. Sand

1875

CCLXXXVI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croissset

Nohant, 16th January, 1875

I too, dear Cruchard, embrace you at the New Year, and wish that you may have a tolerable one, since you do not care to hear the myth happiness spoken of. You admire my serenity; it does not come from my depths, it comes from my necessity of thinking only of others. There is but a little time left, old age creeps on and death is pushing me by the shoulders.

I am as yet, if not necessary, at least extremely useful, and I shall go on as long as I have a breath, thinking, talking, working for them.

Duty is the master of masters, it is the real Zeus of modern times, the son of Time, and has become his master. It is that which lives and acts outside of all the agitations of the world. It does not reason, does not discuss. It examines without fear, it walks without looking behind it; Cronos, the stupid, swallowed stones, Zeus breaks them with the lightning, and the lightning is the will. I am not a philosopher, I am a servant of Zeus, who takes away half of their souls from slaves, but who leaves them entire to the brave.

I have no more leisure to think of myself, to dream of discouraging things, to despair of human-kind, to look at my past sorrows and joys and to summon death.

Mercy! If one were an egoist, one would see it approach with joy; it is so easy to sleep in nothingness, or to awaken in a better life! for it opens these two hypotheses, or to express it better, this antithesis.

But, for the one who must continue working, death must not be summoned before the hour when exhaustion opens the doors of liberty. You have had no children. It is the punishment of those who wish to be too independent; but that suffering is nevertheless a glory for those who vow themselves to Apollo. Then do not complain for having to grub, and describe your martyrdom to us; there is a fine book to be written about that.

You say that Renan is despairing; for my part, I don’t believe that: I believe that he is suffering as are all those who look high and far ahead; but he ought to have strength in proportion to his vision. Napoleon shares his ideas, he does well if he shares them all. He has written me a very wise and good letter. He now sees relative safety in a wise republic, and I, too, think it still possible. It will be very bourgeois and not very ideal, but one has to begin at the beginning. We artists have no patience at all. We want the Abbey of Theleme at once; but before saying, “Do what you want!” one must go through with “Do what you can!” I love you and I embrace you with all my heart, my dear Polycarp. My children large and small join with me.

Come now, no weakness! We all ought to be examples to our friends, our neighbors, our fellow citizens. And how about me, don’t you think that I need help and support in my long task that is not yet finished? Don’t you love anyone, not even your old troubadour, who still sings, and often weeps, but who conceals himself when he weeps, as cats do when they die?

CCLXXXVII. TO GEORGE SAND

Paris, Saturday evening

Dear master,

I curse once more THE DRAMATIC MANIA and the pleasure that certain people have in announcing remarkable news! Someone had told me that you were VERY ill. Your good handwriting came to reassure me yesterday morning, and this morning I have received the letter from Maurice, so the Lord be praised!

What to tell you about myself? I am not stiff, I have … I don’t know what. Bromide of potassium has calmed me and given me eczema on the middle of my forehead.

Abnormal things are going on inside me. My psychic depression must relate to some hidden cause. I feel old, used up, disgusted with everything, and others bore me as I do myself.

However, I am working, but without enthusiasm: as one does a stint, and perhaps it is the work that makes me ill, for I have undertaken a senseless book.

I lose myself in the recollections of my childhood like an old man … I do not expect anything further in life than a succession of sheets of paper to besmear with black. It seems to me that I am crossing an endless solitude to go I don’t know where. And it is I who am at the same time the desert, the traveller, and the camel.

I spent the afternoon today at the funeral of Amedee Achard. The Protestant ceremonies were as inane as if they had been Catholic.

ALL PARIS and the reporters were there in force!

Your friend, Paul Meurice, came a week ago to ask me to “do the Salon” in le Rappel. I declined the honor, for I do not admit that anyone can criticise an art of which he does not know the technique!

And then, what use is so much criticism!

And then, what use is so much criticism!

I am reasonable. I go out every day, I exercise, and I come home tired, and still more irritated, that is the good I get out of it. In short, your troubadour (not very troubadourish) has become a sad bonehead.

It is in order not to bore you with my complaints that I write so rarely to you now, for no one has a livelier sense than I of my unbearableness.

Send me Flamarande; that will give me a little air.

I embrace you all, and especially you, dear master, so great, so strong, and so gentle. Your Cruchard, who is more and more cracked, if cracked is the right word, for I perceive that the contents are escaping.

CCLXXXVIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT 20th February

Then you are quite ill, dear old fellow? I am not worried about it, since it concerns only nerves and rheumatisms, and I have lived seventy years with all that nuisance in my body, and I am still healthy. But I am sad to know that you are bored, suffering, and your spirit turned to darkness as it necessarily is when one is ill.

I was sure that a moment would come when someone would prescribe walking to you. All your illness comes from the lack of exercise, a man of your strength and your complexion ought to have lived an athletic life.

Don’t sulk then about the very wise order that condemns you to an hour’s walk each day.

You fancy that the work of the spirit is only in the brain, you are very much mistaken, it is also in the legs.

Tell me that two weeks of this regime has cured you. It will happen,

I am sure of it.

I love you, and I embrace you, as does every one of my brood.

Your old troubadour

CCLXXXIX. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 25th March, 1875

Don’t be worried about me, my Polycarp. I have nothing serious, a little grippe, and this right arm which hardly moves but which electricity will cure. One thinks that it is an effort.

I am much more worried about you, although you are ten times as strong as I am, but your morale is affected whereas mine takes what comes, in a cowardly way, if you like, but there is perhaps a philosophy in knowing how to be cowardly rather than angry.

Do write to me, tell me that you are going out of doors, that you are walking, that you are better. — I have finished going over the proofs of Flamarande. That is the most boring part of the task.

I shall send you the book when it is published. I know that you do not like to read bit by bit.

I am a little tired; however, I want to begin something else. Since it is not warm enough to go out, I get bored with not having anything on the stocks. Everything is going well in the nest, except for a few colds. Spring is so peevish this year! At last the pale sun will become the dear Phoebus-Appolo with the shining hair, and all will go well.

Aurore is getting so big that one is surprised to hear her laugh and play like a child, always good, and tender, the other is always very funny and facetious.

Tell us of yourself and always love us as we love you.

Your old troubadour

CCXC. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 7th May, 1875

You leave me without news of you? You say that you prefer to be forgotten, rather than to complain ceaselessly, as it is very useless and since you will not be forgotten; complain then, but tell us that you are alive and that you still love us.

As you are much nicer, the more surly you are, I know that you are not rejoicing over the death of poor Michel. For me, it is a great loss in every way, for he was absolutely devoted to me and proved it all the time by his care and services without number.

We are all well here. I am better since it is not cold any more, and I am working a great deal. I am also doing many water colors, I am reading the Iliad with Aurore, who does not like any translation except Leconte de Lisle’s, insisting that Homer is spoiled by approximate renderings.

The child is a singular mixture of precocity and childishness. She is nine years old and so large that one would think her twelve. She plays dolls with passion, and she is as LITERARY as you or I, meanwhile learning her own language which she does not yet know.

Are you still in Paris in this lovely weather? Nohant is now STREAMING with flowers, from the tips of the trees to the turf; Croisset must be even prettier, for it is cool, and we are struggling with a drought that has now become chronic in Berry. But if you are still in Paris, you have that beautiful Pare Monceau under your eyes where you are walking, I hope, since you have to. Life is at the under your eyes where you are walking, I hope, since you have to. Life is at the price of walking!

Won’t you come to see us? Whether you are sad or gay, we love you the same here, and we wish that affection meant something to you, but we shall give it to you, and we give it to you without conditions.

I am thinking of going to Paris next month, shall you be there?

G. Sand

CCXCI. TO GEORGE SAND

Croisset, 10th May, 1875

A wandering gout, pains that go all over me, an invincible melancholy, the feeling of “universal uselessness” and grave doubts about the book that I am writing, that is what is the matter with me, dear and valiant master. Add to that worries about money with melancholic recollections of the past, that is my condition, and I assure you that I make great efforts to get out of it. But my will is tired. I cannot decide about anything effective! Ah! I have eaten my white bread first, and old age is not announcing itself under gay colors. Since I have begun hydrotherapy, however, I feel a little less like a COW, and this evening I am going to begin work without looking behind me.

I have left my apartment in the rue Murillo, and I have taken a larger one which is next to the one that my niece has just reserved on the Boulevard Reine Hortense. I shall be less alone next winter, for I cannot endure solitude.

Tourgueneff seemed to me, however, to be very well pleased with the two first chapters of my frightful book. But Tourgueneff loves me too much, perhaps to judge impartially. I am not going to leave my house for a long time now, for I WILL get ahead in my task, which weighs on my chest like a burden of a million pounds. My niece will come to spend all the month of June here. When she has gone away, I shall make a little archeological and geological excursion in Calvados, and that will be all.

No, I do not rejoice at Michel Levy’s death, and I even envy him that death so quiet. Just the same, that man did me a great deal of harm. He wounded me deeply. It is true that I am endowed with an absurd sensitiveness; what scratches others tears me to pieces. Why am I not organized for enjoyment as I am for suffering!

The bit you sent me about Aurore who is reading Homer, did me good. That is what I miss: a little girl like that! But one does not arrange one’s own destiny, one submits to it. I have always lived from day to day, without plans for the future and pursuing my end (one alone, literature) without looking to the right or to the left. Everything that was around me has disappeared, and now I find I am in a desert. In short, the element of distraction is absolutely lacking to me. One needs a certain vivacity to write good things! What can one do to get it again? How can one proceed, to avoid thinking continually about one's miserable person? The sickest thing in me is my humor: the rest doubtless would go well. You see, dear, good master, that I am right to spare you my letters. Nothing is as imbecile as the whiners.

CCXCII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Thursday morning, 10th June, 1875

We are leaving, Lina and I, on Saturday morning, and up to then we shall be on the move. If you wanted to come to dine with us Friday at Magny's at six o'clock, at least we could say farewell. You should be free at nine o'clock, for we go to bed with the chickens in order to leave early the next day. What do you say?

I love you with all my heart.

CCXCIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Friend, I shall come at your call as soon as you say to me, "I have finished."

I love you, and I embrace you.

G. Sand

CCXCIV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 15 August

My poor, dear, old fellow,

I learn only today in a letter from that dear, lazy soul of a Tourgueneff, about the misfortune which has come to your niece. Is it then irreparable? Her husband is very young and intelligent, can't he begin over again, or take a position that will give him a living? They have no children, they do not need millions to live on, young and well as they both are. Tourgueneff tells me that your property has been affected by this failure. If it is AFFECTED MERELY you will bear this serious annoyance philosophically. You have no vices to satisfy, nor ambitions to appease. I am sure that you will accommodate your life to your resources. The hardest thing for you to bear, is the chagrin of that young woman who is as a daughter to you. But you will give her courage and consolation, it is the moment to be above your own worries, in order to assuage those of others. I am sure that as I write, you have calmed her mind and soothed her heart. Perhaps, too, the disaster is not what it seems at the first moment. There will be a change for the better, a new way will be found, for it is always so, and the worth of men is measured according to their energy, to the hopes which are always a sign of their force and intelligence. More than one has risen again bravely. Be sure that better days will come and tell them so continually, for it is true. Your moral and physical welfare must not be shaken by this rebuff. Think of healing those whom you love, and forget yourself. We shall be thinking of you, and we shall be suffering for you; for I am keenly affected at seeing that you have a new subject of sadness amidst your spleen.

Come, dear splendid old fellow, cheer up, do us a new successful novel, and think of those who love you, and whose hearts are saddened and torn by your discouragements. Love them, love us, and you will find once more your strength and your enthusiasm.

We all embrace you very tenderly. Do not write if it bores you, say to us only, “I am well, and I love you.”

G. Sand

CCXCV. TO GEORGE SAND

Wednesday

Will you forgive my long delay, dear master? But I think that I must bore you with my eternal jeremiads. I repeat myself like a dotard! I am becoming too stupid! I am boring everybody. In short, your Cruchard has become an intolerable old codger, because he has been intolerant. And as I cannot do anything that I ought to do, I must, out of consideration for others, spare them the overflow of my bile.

For the last six months, especially, I don’t know what has been the trouble with me, but I feel dreadfully ill, without being able to get to the root of the matter, and I know many people are in the same condition. Why? Perhaps we are suffering from the illness of France; here in Paris, where her heart beats, people feel better than at her extremities, in the provinces.

I assure you that every one now is suffering with some incomprehensible

I assure you that every one now is suffering with some incomprehensible trouble. Our friend Renan is one of the most desperate, and Prince Napoleon feels exactly the way he does. But they have strong nerves. But, as for me, I am attacked by a well defined melancholia. I should be resigned to it, and I am not.

I work all the more, so as not to think about myself. But since I have undertaken a book that has absurd difficulties in its execution, the feeling of my powerlessness adds to my chagrin.

Don’t tell me again that imbecility is sacred like childhood, for imbecility contains no germ. Let me believe that the dead do not “search any more,” and that they are at rest. We are sufficiently tormented on earth to be at rest when we are beneath it! Ah! How I envy you, how I long to have your serenity! To say nothing of the rest! and your two dear little girls, whom I embrace as tenderly as I do — you.

CCXCVI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croissset

Nohant, 7th September, 1875

You are distressed, you are discouraged, you distress me too. That is all right, I would rather have you complain than keep silent, dear friend. And I don’t want you to stop writing to me.

I also have great and frequent sorrows. My old friends are dying before I do. One of the dearest, the one who brought up Maurice and whom I was expecting to help me to bring up my grandchildren, has just died, almost in an instant. That is a deep sorrow. Life is a succession of blows at one’s heart. But duty is there: we must go on and do our tasks without saddening those who suffer with us.

I ask you absolutely to WILL, and not to be indifferent to the griefs which we are sharing with you. Tell us that calm has come and that the horizon has cleared.

We love you, sad or gay.

Give us news of yourself.

G. Sand

CCXCVII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 8th October, 1875

Well, well, your health has come back in spite of you, since you are sleeping all night. The sea air forces you to live and you have made progress, you have given up a work that would not have made a success. Do something more of earth earthy, which would reach everybody. Tell me what price they would sell

Croisset for if they are obliged to sell it. Is it a house and garden, or is there a farm and grounds! If it is not beyond my means I might buy it and you should spend the rest of your life there. I have no money, but I should try to shift a little capital. Answer me seriously, I beg of you; if I can do it, it shall be done.

I have been ill all the summer, that is to say, that I have suffered continually, but I have worked all the more not to think of it. In fact they are to put on Villemer and Victorine at the Theatre Francais again. But there is nothing now in preparation. I do not know at what time in the autumn or winter I shall have to go to Paris. I shall find you there ready and courageous, shan’t I? If you have made, through goodness and devotion, as I think, a great sacrifice for your niece, who, in truth, is your real daughter, you will forget all about it and will begin your life again as a young man. Is one old when one does not choose to be? Stay at the seaside as long as you can. The important thing is to patch up the physical machine. Here with us it is as warm as in midsummer. I hope that you still have the sun down there. Study the life of the mollusc! They are creatures better endowed than one thinks, and, for my part, I should love to take a walk with Georges Pouchet! Natural history is the inexhaustible source of agreeable occupations for even those who seek only amusement in it, and if you actually attacked it you would be saved. But you must by all means save yourself, for you are somebody, and you cannot drop out of the running, as can a mere ruined grocer. We all embrace you with our best love.

G. Sand

CCXCVIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, in Paris

Nohant, 15 November, 1875

So you are there in Paris, and have you left your apartment at the rue Murillo? You are working? Good luck and good courage! The old man is coming to the top again! I know that they are rehearsing Victorine at the Theatre Francais; but I don’t know whether I shall go to see that revival. I have been so ill all the summer and I am still suffering so much with intestinal trouble, that I do not know if I shall ever be strong enough to move in winter. Well, we shall see. The hope of finding you there will give me courage; that is not what will be lacking, but, since I passed my seventieth birthday, I have been very much upset, and I do not yet know if I shall get over it. I cannot walk any more, I who used to love to be on my feet so much, without risking atrocious pains. I am patient with these miseries, I work all the more, and I do water-colors in my hours of recreation.

Aurore consoles and charms me; I should like to live long enough to get her married. But God disposes, and one must take death and life as He wills.

Well, this is just to say to you that I shall go to embrace you unless the thing is ABSOLUTELY impossible. You shall read me what you have begun. Meanwhile, give me news of yourself; for I shall not stir until the last rehearsals. I know my cast, I know that they will all do well, according to their capabilities, and, besides, that Perrin will look after them.

We all KISS you very tenderly, and we love you, Cruchard or not.

G. Sand

CCXCIX. TO GEORGE SAND

Paris, 11 December, 1875

Things are going a little better, and I am profiting by the occasion to write to you, dear, good, adorable master.

You know that I have abandoned my big novel in order to write a little MEDIEVAL bit of nonsense, which won’t run to more than thirty pages. It puts me in a more decent setting than that of modern times, and does me good. Then I am hunting for a contemporary novel, but I am hesitating among several embryonic ideas; I should like to do something concise and violent. The string of the necklace (that is to say, the main idea) is still to seek.

Externally my life is scarcely changed: I see the same people, I receive the same visits. My faithful ones on Sunday are first of all, the big Tourgueneff, who is nicer than ever, Zola, Alphonse Daudet, and Goncourt. You have never spoken to me of the first two. What do you think of their books?

I am not reading anything at all, except Shakespeare, whom am going through from beginning to end. That tones you up and puts new air into your lungs, just as if you were on a high mountain. Everything appears mediocre beside that prodigious felow.

As I go out very little, I have not yet seen Victor Hugo. However, this evening I am going to resign myself to putting on my boots, so that I can go to present my compliments to him. His personality pleases me infinitely, but his court! … mercy!

The senatorial elections are a subject of diversion to the public of which I am a part. There must have occurred, in the corridors of the Assembly, dialogues incredibly grotesque and base. The XIXth century is destined to see all religions perish. Amen! I do not mourn any of them.

At the Odeon, a live bear is going to appear on the boards. That is all that I know about literature.

CCC. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, in Paris

Nohant, 18th and 19th December, 1875

At last I discover my old troubadour who was a subject of chagrin and serious worry to me. Here you are yourself again, trusting in the very natural luck of external events, and discovering in yourself the strength to control them, whatever they may be, by effort. What is it that you call some one in HIGH FINANCE? For my part, I don't know; I am in relations with Victor Borie. He will do me a favor if he sees it to his interest. Must I write him?

Then you are going to start grubbing again? So am I; for since Flamarande I have done nothing but mark time, while waiting for something better. I was so ill all summer! but my strange and excellent friend Favre has cured me wonderfully, and I am taking a new lease on life.

What's our next move? For you, of course, DESOLATION, and, for me, consolation. I do not know on what our destinies depend; you see them pass, you criticise them, you abstain from a literary appreciation of them, you limit yourself to depicting them, with deliberate meticulous concealment of your personal feelings. However, one sees them very clearly through your narrative, and you make the people sadder who read you. As for me, I should like to make them less sad. I cannot forget that my personal victory over despair was the work of my will and of a new way of understanding which is entirely opposed to what I had before.

I know that you criticise the intervention of the personal doctrine in literature. Are you right? Isn't it rather a lack of conviction than a principle of esthetics? One cannot have a philosophy in one's soul without its appearing. I have no literary advice to give you, I have no judgment to formulate on the author friends of whom you speak. I, myself have told the Goncourts all my thought; as for the others, I firmly believe that they have more education and more talent than I have. Only I think that they, and you especially, lack a definite and extended vision of life. Art is not merely painting. True painting, moreover, is full of the soul that wields the brush. Art is not merely criticism and satire: criticism and satire depict only one side of the truth.

I want to see a man as he is, he is not good or bad, he is good and bad. But he is something more … nuance. Nuance which is for me the purpose of art, being good and bad, he has an internal force which leads him to be very bad and slightly good, — or very good and slightly bad.

I think that your school is not concerned with the substance, and that it dwells too much on the surface. By virtue of seeking the form, it makes the substance too cheap! it addresses itself to the men of letters. But there are no men of letters, properly speaking. Before everything, one is a man. One wants to find man at the basis of every story and every deed. That was the defect of l’Education sentimentale, about which I have so often reflected since, asking myself why there was so general a dislike of a work that was so well done and so solid. This defect was the absence of ACTION of the characters on themselves. They submitted to the event and never mastered it. Well, I think that the chief interest in a story is what you did not want to do. If I were you, I would try the opposite; you are feeding on Shakespeare just now, and you are doing well! He is the author who puts men at grips with events; observe that by them, whether for good or for ill, the event is always conquered. In his works, it is crushed underfoot.

Politics is a comedy just now. We have had tragedy, shall we end with the opera or with the operetta? I read my paper conscientiously every morning; but aside from that moment, it is impossible for me to think of it or to be interested in it. All of it is absolutely void of any ideal whatsoever, and therefore I cannot get up any interest in any of the persons concerned in that scullery. All of them are slaves of fact because they have been born slaves of themselves.

My dear little girls are well. Aurore is a well-set-up girl, a beautiful upright soul in a strong body. The other one is grace and sweetness. I am always an assiduous and a patient teacher, and very little time is left to me to write PROFESSIONALLY, seeing that I cannot keep awake after midnight and that I want to spend all my evening with my family; but this lack of time stimulates me and makes me find a true pleasure in digging away; it is like a forbidden fruit that I taste in secret.

All my dear world embraces you and rejoices to hear that you are better. Did I send you Flamarande and the pictures of my little girls? If not, send me a line, and I send you both.

Your old troubadour who loves you,

G. Sand

Embrace your charming niece for me. What a good and lovely letter she wrote me! Tell her that I beg her to take care of herself and to please get well quickly.

What do you mean! Littre a senator? It is impossible to believe it when one knows what the Chamber is. All the same it must be congratulated for this attempt at self-respect.

CCCI. TO GEORGE SAND

December, 1875

Your good letter of the 18th, so maternally tender, has made me reflect a great deal. I have reread it ten times, and I shall confess to you that I am not sure that I understand it. Briefly, what do you want me to do? Make your instructions exact.

I am constantly doing all that I can to enlarge my brain, and I work in the sincerity of my heart. The rest does not depend on me.

I do not enjoy making “desolation,” believe me, but I cannot change my eyes! As for my “lack of convictions,” alas! I choke with convictions. I am bursting with anger and restrained indignation. But according to the ideal of art that I have, I think that the artist should not manifest anything of his own feelings, and that the artist should not appear any more in his work than God in nature. The man is nothing, the work is everything! This method, perhaps mistakenly conceived, is not easy to follow. And for me, at least, it is a sort of permanent sacrifice that I am making to good taste. It would be agreeable to me to say what I think and to relieve Mister Gustave Flaubert by words, but of what importance is the said gentleman?

I think as you do, dear master, that art is not merely criticism and satire; moreover, I have never tried to do intentionally the one nor the other. I have always tried to go into the soul of things and to stick to the greatest generalities, and I have purposely turned aside from the accidental and the dramatic. No monsters and no heroes!

You say to me: “I have no literary advice to give you; I have no judgments to formulate on the authors, your friends, etc.” Well? indeed! but I implore advice, and I am waiting for your judgments. Who, pray, should give them, and who, pray, should formulate them, if not you?

Speaking of my friends, you add “my school.” But I am ruining my temperament in trying not to have a school! A priori, I spurn them, every one. The people whom I see often and whom you designate cultivate all that I scorn and are indifferently disturbed about what torments me. I regard as very secondary, technical detail, local exactness, in short the historical and precise side of things. I am seeking above all for beauty, which my companions pursue but languidly. I see them insensible when I am ravaged with admiration or horror. Phrases make me swoon with pleasure which seem very ordinary to them. Goncourt is very happy when he has seized upon a word in the street that he can stick in a book, and I am well satisfied when I have written a page without assonances or repetitions. I would give all the legends of Gavarni for certain expressions and master strokes, such as “the shade was NUPTIAL, august and solemn!” from Victor Hugo, or this from Montesquieu: “the vices of

Alexander were extreme like his virtues. He was terrible in his wrath. It made him cruel."

In short, I try to think well, IN ORDER TO write well. But writing well is my aim, I do not deny it.

"I lack a well-defined and extended vision of life." You are right a thousand times over, but by what means could it be otherwise? I ask you that. You do not enlighten my darkness with metaphysics, neither mine nor that of others. The words religion or Catholicism on the one hand; progress, fraternity, democracy on the other, do not correspond to the spiritual needs of the moment. The entirely new dogma of equality which radicalism praises is experimentally denied by physiology and history. I do not see the means of establishing today a new principle, any more than of respecting the old ones. Therefore I am hunting, without finding it, that idea on which all the rest should depend.

Meanwhile I repeat to myself what Littre said to me one day: "Ah! my friend, man is an unstable compound, and the earth an inferior planet."

Nothing sustains me better than the hope of leaving it soon, and of not going to another which might be worse. "I would rather not die," as Marat said. Ah! no! enough, enough weariness!

I am writing now a little silly story, which a mother can permit her child to read. The whole will be about thirty pages, I shall have two months more at it. Such is my energy, I shall send it to you as soon as it appears (not my energy, but the little story).

1876

CCCII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, in Paris

Nohant, 12th January, 1876

My cherished Cruchard,

I want to write to you every day; time is lacking absolutely. At last here is a free moment; we are buried under the snow; it is the sort of weather that I adore: this whiteness is like general purification, and the amusements of the house seem more intimate and sweeter. Can anyone hate the winter in the country? The snow is one of the most beautiful sights of the year!

It appears that I am not clear in my sermons; I have that much in common with the orthodox, but I am not of them; neither in my idea of equality, nor of authority, have I any fixed plan. You seem to think that I want to convert you to a doctrine. Not at all, I don't think of such a thing. Everyone sets off from a point of view, the free choice of which I respect. In a few words, I can give a resume of mine: not to place oneself behind an opaque glass through which one can see only the reflection of one's own nose. To see as far as possible the good, the bad, about, around, yonder, everywhere; to perceive the continual gravitation of all tangible and intangible things towards the necessity of the decent, the good, the true, the beautiful.

I don't say that humanity is on the way to the heights. I believe it in spite of everything; but I do not argue about it, it is useless because each one judges according to his own personal vision, and the general aspect is for the moment poor and ugly. Besides, I do not need to be sure of the safety of the planet and its inhabitants in order to believe in the necessity of the good and the beautiful; if the planet departs from that law it will perish; if the inhabitants discard it they will be destroyed. Other stars, other souls will pass over their bodies, so much the worse! But, as for me, I want to gravitate up to my last breath, not with the certitude nor the need of finding elsewhere a GOOD PLACE, but because my sole joy is in keeping myself with my family on an upward road.

In other words, I am fleeing the sewer, and I am seeking the dry and the clean, certain that it is the law of my existence. Being a man amounts to little; we are still near the monkey from which they say we proceed. Very well! a further reason for separating ourselves still more from it and for being at least at the height of the relative truth that our race has been admitted to comprehend; a very poor truth, very limited, very humble! well, let us possess it as much as we can and not permit anyone to take it from us. We are, I think, quite agreed; but I practice this simple religion and you do not practice it, since you let yourself become discouraged; your heart has not been penetrated with it, since you curse life and desire death like a Catholic who yearns for compensation, were it only the rest eternal. You are no surer than another of this compensation. Life is perhaps eternal, and therefore work is eternal. If this is so, let us do our day’s work bravely. If it is otherwise, if the MOI perishes entirely, let us have the honor of having done our stated task, it is our duty; for we have evident duties only toward ourselves and our equals. What we destroy in ourselves, we destroy in them. Our abasement lowers them, our falls drag them down; we owe it to them to remain erect so that they shall not fall. The desire for an early death, as that for a long life, is therefore a weakness, and I do not want you to admit any longer that it is a right. I thought that had it once; I believed, however, what I believe today; but I lacked strength, and like you I said: “I cannot help it.” I lied to myself. One can help everything. One has the strength that one thinks one has not, when one desires ardently to GRAVITATE, to mount a step each day, to say to oneself: “The Flaubert of tomorrow must be superior to the one of yesterday, and the one of day after tomorrow more steady and more lucid still.”

When you feel you are on the ladder, you will mount very quickly. You are about to enter gradually upon the happiest and most favorable time of life: old age. It is then that art reveals itself in its sweetness; as long as one is young, it manifests itself with anguish. You prefer a well-turned phrase to all metaphysics. I also, I love to see condensed into a few words what elsewhere fills volumes; but these volumes, one must have understood them completely (either to admit them or to reject them) in order to find the sublime resume which becomes literary art in its fullest expression; that is why one should not scorn the efforts of the human mind to arrive at the truth.

I tell you that, because you have excessive prejudices AS TO WORDS. In truth, you read, you dig, you work much more than I and a crowd of others do. You have acquired learning that I shall never attain. Therefore you are a hundred times richer than all of us; you are a rich man, and you complain like a poor man. Be charitable to a beggar who has his mattress full of gold, but who wants to be nourished only on well-turned phrases and choice words. But brute, ransack your own mattress and eat your gold. Nourish yourself with the ideas and feelings accumulated in your head and your heart; the words and the phrases, THE FORM to which you attach so much importance, will issue by itself from your digestion. You consider it as an end, it is only an effect. Happy manifestations proceed only from an emotion, and an emotion proceeds only from a conviction. One is not moved at all by the things that one does not believe with all one’s heart.

I do not say that you do not believe: on the contrary, all your life of affection, of protection, and of charming and simple goodness, proves that you are the most convinced individual in the world. But, as soon as you handle literature, you want, I don’t know why, to be another man, one who should disappear, one who destroys himself, who does not exist! What an absurd mania! what a false rule of GOOD TASTE! Our work is worth only what we are worth.

Who is talking about putting yourself on the stage? That, in truth, is of no use, unless it is done frankly by way of a chronicle. But to withdraw one’s soul from what one does, what is that unhealthy fancy? To hide one’s own opinion about the characters that one puts on the stage, to leave the reader therefore uncertain about the opinion that he should have of them, that is to desire not to be understood, and from that moment, the reader leaves you; for if he wants to understand the story that you are telling him, it is on the condition that you should show him plainly that this one is a strong character and that one weak.

L’Education sentimentale has been a misunderstood book, as I have told you repeatedly, but you have not listened to me. There should have been a short preface, or, at a good opportunity, an expression of blame, even if only a happy epithet to condemn the evil, to characterize the defect, to signalize the effort. All the characters in that book are feeble and come to nothing, except those with bad instincts; that is what you are reproached with, because people did not understand that you wanted precisely to depict a deplorable state of society that encourages these bad instincts and ruins noble efforts; when people do not understand us it is always our fault. What the reader wants, first of all, is to penetrate into our thought, and that is what you deny him, arrogantly. He thinks that you scorn him and that you want to ridicule him. For my part, I understood you, for I knew you. If anyone had brought me your book without its being signed, I should have thought it beautiful, but strange, and I should have asked myself if you were immoral, skeptical, indifferent or heart-broken. You say that it ought to be like that, and that M. Flaubert will violate the rules of good taste if he shows his thought and the aim of his literary enterprise. It is false in the highest degree. When M. Flaubert writes well and seriously, one attaches oneself to his personality. One wants to sink or swim with him. If he leaves you in doubt, you lose interest in his work, you neglect it, or you give it up.

I have already combated your favorite heresy, which is that one writes for twenty intelligent people and does not care a fig for the rest. It is not true, since the lack of success irritates you and troubles you. Besides, there have not been twenty critics favorable to this book which was so well written and so important. So one must not write for twenty persons any more than for three, or for a hundred thousand.

One must write for all those who have a thirst to read and who can profit by good reading. Then one must go straight to the most elevated morality within oneself, and not make a mystery of the moral and profitable meaning of one’s book. People found that with Madame Bovary. If one part of the public cried scandal, the healthiest and the broadest part saw in it a severe and striking lesson given to a woman without conscience and without faith, to vanity, to ambition, to irrationality. They pitied her; art required that, but the lesson was clear, and it would have been more so, it would have been so for everybody, if you had wished it, if you had shown more clearly the opinion that you had, and that the public ought to have had, about the heroine, her husband, and her lovers.

That desire to depict things as they are, the adventures of life as they present themselves to the eye, is not well thought out, in my opinion. Depict inert things as a realist, as a poet, it’s all the same to me, but, when one touches on the emotions of the human heart, it is another thing. You cannot abstract yourself from this contemplation; for man, that is yourself, and men, that is the reader. Whatever you do, your tale is a conversation between you and the reader. If you show him the evil coldly, without ever showing him the good he is angry. He wonders if it is he that is bad, or if it is you. You work, however, to rouse him and to interest him; you will never succeed if you are not roused yourself, or if you hide it so well that he thinks you indifferent. He is right: supreme impartiality is an anti-human thing, and a novel ought to be human above everything. If it is not, the public is not pleased in its being well written, well composed and conscientious in every detail. The essential quality is not there: interest. The reader breaks away likewise from a book where all the characters are good without distinctions and without weaknesses; he sees clearly that that is not human either. I believe that art, this special art of narration, is only worth while through the opposition of characters; but, in their struggle, I prefer to see the right prevail. Let events overwhelm the honest men, I agree to that, but let him not be soiled or belittled by them, and let him go to the stake feeling that he is happier than his executioners.

15th January, 1876

It is three days since I wrote this letter, and every day I have been on the point of throwing it into the fire; for it is long and diffuse and probably useless. Natures opposed on certain points understand each other with difficulty, and I am afraid that you will not understand me any better today than formerly. However, I am sending you this scrawl so that you can see that I am occupied with you almost as much as with myself.

You must have success after that bad luck which has troubled you deeply. I tell you wherein lie the certain conditions for your success. Keep your cult for form; but pay more attention to the substance. Do not take true virtue for a commonplace in literature. Give it its representative, make honest and strong men pass among the fools and the imbeciles that you love to ridicule. Show what is solid at the bottom of these intellectual abortions; in short, abandon the convention of the realist and return to the time reality, which is a mingling of the beautiful and the ugly, the dull and the brilliant, but in which the desire of good finds its place and its occupation all the same.

I embrace you for all of us.

G. Sand

CCCIII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Nohant, 6th March, 1876

I am writing to you in a hurry this morning because I have just received news from M. Perrin of the first performance of the revival of the Mariage de Victorine, a play of mine, at the Theatre Francais.

I have neither the time to go there, nor the wish to leave like that at a moment’s notice, but I should have liked to send some of my friends there, and he does not offer me a single seat for them. I am writing him a letter that he will receive tomorrow, and I am asking him to send you at least one orchestra seat. If you do not get it, please understand that it was not my fault. I shall have to say the same thing to five or six other people.

I embrace you therefore in a hurry, so as not to lose the post.

Give me news of your niece and embrace her for me.

G. Sand

CCCIV. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Paris

Nohant, 8th March, 1876

You scorn Sedaine, you great profane soul! That is where the doctrine of form destroys your eye! Sedaine is not a writer, that is true, although he falls but little short of it, but he is a man, with a heart and soul, with the sense of moral truth, the direct insight into human feelings. I don’t mind his out-of-date reasonings and dry phraseology! The right thought is always there, and it penetrates you deeply!

My dear old Sedaine! He is one of my well-beloved papas, and I consider le Philosophe sans le savior far superior to Victorine; it is such a distressing drama and so well carried out! But you only look for the well-turned phrase, that is one thing — only one thing, it is not all of art, it is not even half of it, it is a quarter at most, and if three-quarters are beautiful, one overlooks the part that is not.

I hope that you will not go to seek for your country-side before the good weather; here, we have been pretty well spared; but for the past three days there has been a deluge, and it makes me ill. I should not have been able to go to Paris. Your niece is better, God be praised! I love you and I embrace you with all my soul.

G. Sand

Do tell M. Zola to send me his book. I shall certainly read it with great interest.

CCCV. TO GEORGE SAND

Wednesday, 9th March, 1876

COMPLETE SUCCESS, dear master. The actors were recalled after each act, and warmly applauded. The public was pleased and from time to time cries of approval were heard. All your friends who had come at your summons were sorry that you were not there.

The roles of Antoine and Victorine were especially well played.

Little Baretta is a real treasure.

How were you able to make Victorine from le Philosophe sans le savoir? That is beyond me. Your play charmed me and made me weep like an idiot, while the other bored me to death, absolutely bored me to death; I longed to get to the end. What language! the good Tourgueneff and Madame Viardot made saucer-eyes, comical to behold. In your work, what produced the greatest effect is the scene in the last act between Antoine and his daughter. Maubant is too majestic, and the actor who plays Fulgence is inadequate. But everything went very well, and this revival will have a long life.

The gigantic Harrisse told me that he was going to write to you immediately. Therefore his letter will arrive before mine. I should have started this morning for Pont-l’Eveque and Honfleur to see a bit of the country that I have forgotten, but the floods stopped me.

Read, I beg of you, the new novel by Zola, Son Excellence Rougon: I am very anxious to know what you think of it.

No, I do not SCORN Sedaine, because I do not scorn what I do not understand. He is to me, like Pindar, and Milton, who are absolutely closed to me; however, I quite understand that the citizen Sedaine is not exactly of their calibre.

The public of last Tuesday shared my error, and Victorine, independently of its real worth, gained by contrast. Madame Viardot, who has naturally good taste, said to me yesterday, in speaking of you: “How was she able to make one from the other?” That is exactly what I think.

You distress me a bit, dear master, by attributing esthetic opinions to me which are not mine. I believe that the rounding of the phrase is nothing. But that WRITING WELL is everything, because “writing well is at the same time perceiving well, thinking well and saying well” (Buffon). The last term is then dependent on the other two, since one has to feel strongly, so as to think, and to think, so as to express.

All the bourgeois can have a great deal of heart and delicacy, be full of the best sentiments and the greatest virtues, without becoming for all that, artists. In short, I believe that the form and the matter are two subtleties, two entities, neither of which can exist without the other.

This anxiety for external beauty which you reproach me with is for me a METHOD. When I discover a bad assonance or a repetition in one of my phrases, I am sure that I am floundering in error; by dint of searching, I find the exact expression which was the only one and is, at the same time, the harmonious one. The word is never lacking when one possesses the idea.

Note (to return to the good Sedaine) that I share all his opinions and I approve his tendencies. From the archeological point of view, he is curious and from the humanitarian point of view very praiseworthy, I agree. But what difference does it make to us today? Is it eternal art? I ask you that.

Other writers of his period have formulated useful principles also, but in an imperishable style, in a more concrete and at the same time more general manner.

In short, the persistence of the Comedie Francais in exhibiting that to us as “a masterpiece” had so exasperated me that, having gone home in order to get rid of the taste of this milk-food, I read before going to bed the Medea of Euripides, as I had no other classic handy, and Aurora surprised Cruchard in this occupation.

I have written to Zola to send you his book. I shall tell Daudet also to send you his Jack, as I am very curious to have your opinion on these two books, which are very different in composition and temperament, but quite remarkable, both of them.

The fright which the elections caused to the bourgeois has been diverting.

CCCVI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, at Croissset

Nohant, 15th March, 1876

I should have a good deal to say about the novels of M. Zola, and it would be

I should have a good deal to say about the novels of M. Zola, and it would be better to say it in an article than in a letter, because there is a general question there which must be formulated with a refreshed brain. I should like to read M. Daudet’s book first, the book you spoke of to me, the title of which I cannot recall. Have the publisher send it to me collect, if he does not want to give it to me; that is very simple. On the whole, the thing that I shall not gainsay, meanwhile making a PHILOSOPHICAL criticism of the method, is that Rougon is a STRONG book, as you say, and worthy of being placed in the first rank.

That does not change anything in my way of thinking, that art ought to be the search for the truth, and that truth is not the picture of evil. It ought to be the picture of good and evil. A painter who sees only one is as false as he who sees only the other. Life is not crammed with monsters only. Society is not formed of rascals and wretches only. The honest people are not the minority, since society exists in a certain order and without too many unpunished crimes. Imbeciles dominate, it is true, but there is a public conscience which weighs on them and obliges them to respect the right. Let people show up and chastise the rascals, that is good, it is even moral, but let them tell us and show us the opposite; otherwise the simple reader, who is the average reader, is discouraged, saddened, horrified, and contradicts you so as not to despair.

How are you? Tourgueneff wrote me that your last work was very remarkable: then you are not DONE FOR, as you pretend?

Your niece continues to improve, does she not? I too am better, after cramps in my stomach that made me blue, and continued with a horrible persistence. Physical suffering is a good lesson when it leaves one freedom of spirit. One learns to endure it and to conquer it. Of course one has some moments of discouragement when one throws oneself on the bed; but, for my part, I always think of what my old cure used to say to me, when he had the gout: THAT WILL PASS, OR I SHALL PASS. And thereupon he would laugh, content with his joke.

My Aurore is beginning history, and she is not very well pleased with these killers of men whom they call heroes and demigods. She calls them horrid fellows.

We have a confounded spring; the earth is covered with flowers and snow, one gets numb gathering violets and anemones.

I have read the manuscript of l’Etrangere. It is not as DECADENT as you say. There are diamonds that sparkle brightly in this polychrome. Moreover, the decadences are transformations. The mountains in travail roar and scream, but they sing beautiful airs, also.

I embrace you and I love you. Do have your legend published quickly, so that we may read it we may read it.

Your old troubadour,

G. Sand

CCCVII. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT 30th March, 1876

Dear Cruchard,

I am enthusiastic about Jack, and I beg you to send my thanks to M. Daudet. Ah, yes! He has talent and heart! and how well all that is done and SEEN!

I am sending you a volume of old things that have just been collected. I embrace you, and I love you.

Your old troubadour,

G. Sand

CCCVIII. TO GEORGE SAND

Monday evening, 3rd April, 1876

I have received your volume this morning, dear master. I have two or three others that have been loaned to me for a long time; I shall send them off, and I shall read yours at the end of the week, during a little two-days' trip that I am forced to take to Pont-l'Eveque and to Honfleur for my Histoire d'un coeur simple, a trifle now "on the stocks," as M. Prudhomme would say.

I am very glad that Jack has pleased you. It is a charming book, isn't it? If you knew the author you would like him even better than his book. I have told him to send you Risler and Tartarin. I am sure in advance that you would thank me for the opportunity of reading these two books.

I do not share in Tourgueneff's severity as regards Jack, nor in the immensity of his admiration for Rougon. The one has charm, the other force. But neither one is concerned ABOVE ALL else with what is for me the end of art, namely, beauty. I remember having felt my heart beat violently, having felt a fierce pleasure in contemplating a wall of the Acropolis, a perfectly bare wall (the one on the left as you go up to the Propylaea). Well! I wonder if a book independently of what it says, cannot produce the same effect! In the exactness of its assembling, the rarity of its elements, the polish of its surface, the harmony of its ensemble, is there not an intrinsic virtue, a sort of divine force, something eternal as a principle? (I speak as a Platonist.) Thus, why is a relation necessary between the exact word and the musical word? Why does it happen that one always makes a verse when one restrains his thought too much? Does the law of numbers govern then the feelings and the images, and is what seems to be the exterior quite simply inside it? If I should continue a long time in this vein, I should blind myself entirely, for on the other side art has to be a good fellow; or rather art is what one can make it, we are not free. Each one follows his path, in spite of his own desire. In short, your Cruchard no longer knows where he stands.

But how difficult it is to understand one another! There are two men whom I admire a great deal and whom I consider real artists, Tourgueneff and Zola. Yet they do not admire the prose of Chateaubriand at all, and even less that of Gautier. Phrases which ravish me seem hollow to them. Who is wrong? And how please the public when one’s nearest friends are so remote? All that saddens me very much. Do not laugh.

CCCIX. TO GEORGE SAND

Sunday evening… 1876

You OUGHT to call me inwardly, dear master, “a confounded pig,” — for I have not answered your last letter, and I have said nothing to you about your two volumes, not to mention a third that I received this morning from you. But I have been, for the last two weeks, entirely taken up by my little tale which will be finished soon. I have had several errands to do, various readings to finish up with, and a thing more serious than all that, the health of my poor niece worries me extremely and, at times, disturbs my brain, so that I do not know at all what I am doing! You see that my cup is bitter! That young woman is anemic to the last degree. She is wasting away. She has been obliged to leave off painting, which is her sole distraction. All the usual tonics do no good. Three days ago, by the orders of another physician, who seems to me more learned than the others, she began hydrotherapy. Will he succeed in making her digest and sleep? in building up her strength? Your poor Cruchard takes less and less pleasure in life, and he even has too much of it, infinitely too much. Let us speak of your books, that will be better.

They have amused me, and the proof is that I have devoured with one gulp and one after another, Flamarande and the Deux Freres. What a charming woman is Madame Flamarande, and what a man is M. Salcede. The narrative of the kidnapping of the child, the trip in the carriage, and the story of Zamora are perfect passages. Everywhere the interest is sustained and at the same time progressive. In short, what strikes me the most in these two novels (as in all yours, moreover), is the natural order of the ideas, the talent, or rather the genius for narrative. But what an abominable wretch is your M. Flamarande! As for the for narrative. But what an abominable wretch is your M. Flamarande. As for the servant who tells the story and who is evidently in love with Madame, I wonder why you did not show more plainly his personal jealousy.

Except for the count, all are virtuous persons in that story, even extraordinarily virtuous. But do you think them really true to life? Are there many like them? It is true that while reading, one accepts them because of the cleverness of the execution; but afterwards?

Well, dear master, and this is to answer your last letter, this is, I think what separates us essentially. You, on the first bound, in everything, mount to heaven, and from there you descend to the earth. You start from a priori, from the theory, from the ideal. Thence your pity for life, your serenity, and to speak truly, your greatness. — I, poor wretch, I am stuck on the earth as with soles of lead; everything disturbs me, tears me to pieces, ravages me, and I make efforts to rise. If I should take your manner of looking at the whole of life I should become laughable, that is all. For you preach to me in vain. I cannot have another temperament than my own; nor another esthetics than what is the consequence of it. You accuse me of not letting myself go, according to nature. Well, and that discipline? that virtue? what shall we do with it? I admire M. Buffon putting on cuffs when he wrote. This luxury is a symbol. In short I am trying simply to be as comprehensive as possible. What more can one exact?

As for letting my personal opinion be known about the people I put on the stage: no, no, a thousand times no! I do not recognize the right to that. If the reader does not draw from a book the moral that should be found there, the reader is an imbecile or the book is false from the point of view of accuracy. For, the moment that a thing is true, it is good. Obscene books likewise are immoral only because they lack truth. Things are not “like that” in life.

And observe that I curse what they agree to call realism, although they make me one of its high priests; reconcile all that.

As for the public, its taste disgusts me more and more. Yesterday, for instance, I was present at the first night of the Prix Martin, a piece of buffoonery that, for my part, I think full of wit. Not one of the witty things in the play produced a laugh, and the denouement, which seems out of the ordinary, passed unperceived. Then to look for what can please seems to me the most chimerical of undertakings. For I defy anyone to tell me by what means one pleases. Success is a consequence and must not be an end. I have never sought it (although I desire it) and I seek it less and less.

After my little story, I shall do another, — for I am too deeply shaken to start on a great work. I had thought first of publishing Saint-Julien in a periodical, but I have given the plan up.

CCCX. TO GEORGE SAND

Friday evening…1876

Ah! thank you from the bottom of my heart, dear master! You have made me pass an exquisite day, for I have read your last volume, la Tour de Percemont. — Marianne only to-day; as I had many things to finish, among others my tale of Saint-Julien, I had shut up the aforesaid volume in a drawer so as not to succumb to the temptation. As my little story was finished last night, I rushed upon your book when morning came and devoured it.

I find it perfect, two jewels! Marianne moved me deeply and two or three times I wept. I recognized myself in the character of Pierre. Certain pages seemed to me fragments of my own memoirs, supposing I had the talent to write them in such a way! How charming, poetic and true to life all that is! La Tour de Percemont pleased me extremely. But Marianne literally enchanted me. The English think as I do, for in the last number of the Athenaeum there is a very fine article about you. Did you know that? So then, for this time, I admire you completely and without the least reserve.

There you are, and I am very glad of it. You have never done anything to me that was not good; I love you tenderly!

CCCXI. TO GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Sunday, Nohant, 5th April, 1876.

Victor Borie is in Italy, what must I write him? Are you the man to go to find him and explain the affair to him? He is somewhere near Civita-Vecchia, very much on the go and perhaps not easy to catch up with.

I am sure that he would receive you with open arms, for, although a financier to his finger-tips he has remained very friendly and nice to us. He does not tell us if he is on his mountain of alum for long. Lina is writing to him and will know soon, shall she tell him that you are disposed to go to meet him, or that you will wait until his return to Paris? anyway until the 20th of May he will get letters addressed to him at the Hotel Italy in Florence. We shall have to be on the watch, for he writes AT LONG INTERVALS.

I have not the time to say any more to you today. People are coming in. I have read Fromont et Risler; I charge you to thank M. Daudet, to tell him that I spent the night in reading it and that I do not know whether I prefer Jack or Risler; it is interesting, I might almost say GRIPPING.

I embrace you and I love you, when will you give me some Flaubert to read?

G. Sand

CCCXII. To GEOBGE SAND

Monday evening

Dear master, Thanks to Madame Lina’s kind note, I betook myself to V. Borie’s yesterday and was most pleasantly received. My nephew went to carry him the documents today. Borie has promised to look after the affair; will he do it?

I think that he is in just the position to do me indirectly the greatest service that any one could do me. If my poor nephew should get the capital which he needs in order to work, I could get back a part of what I have lost and live in peace the rest of my days.

I presented myself to Borie under your recommendation, and it is to you that I owe the cordiality of his reception. I do not thank you (of course) but you can tell him that I was touched by his kind reception (and stimulate his zeal if you think that may be useful).

I have been working a great deal lately. How I should like to see you so as to read my little medieval folly to you! I have begun another story entitled Histoire d’un coeur simple. But I have interrupted this work to make some researches on the period of Saint John the Baptist, for I want to describe the feast of Herodias.

I hope to have my readings finished in a fortnight, after which I shall return to Croisset from which spot I shall not budge till winter, — my long sessions at the library exhaust me. Cruchard is weary.

The good Tourgueneff leaves this evening for Saint Petersburg. He asks me if I have thanked you for your last book? Could I be guilty of such an oversight? You will see by my Histoire d’un coeur simple where you will recognize your immediate influence, that I am not so obstinate as you think. I believe that the moral tendency, or rather the human basis of this little work will please you!

Adieu, dear good master. Remembrances to all yours.

I embrace you very tenderly.

Your old Gustave Flaubert

CCCXIII. To MAURICE SAND

Tuesday evening, 27th

All I can say to you, in the first place, my dear friend, is, that your book has made me pass a sleepless night. I read it instantly, at one fell swoop, only stopping to fill my good pipe from time to time and then to resume my reading.

When the impression is a little less fresh I shall take up your book again to find the flaws in it. But I think that there are very few. You must be content? It ought to please? It is dramatic and as amusing as possible!

Beginning with the first page I was charmed with the sincerity of the description. And at the end I admired the composition of the whole, the logical way the events were worked out and the characters related.

Your chief character, Miss Mary, is too hateful (to my taste) to be anything but an exact picture. That is one of the choicest parts of your book, together with the homelife, the life in New York?

Your good savage makes me laugh out loud when he is at the Opera.

I was struck by the house of the missionaries (Montaret's first night). You make it seem real. Naissa scalping, and then wiping her hands on the grass, seemed to me especially well done. As well as the disgust that she inspires in Montaret,

I venture a timid observation: it seems to me that the flight of father Athanasius and of Montaret, when they escape from their prison, is not perfectly clear? Is not the material explanation of the event too short?

I do not care for, as language, two or three ready-made locutions, such as "break the ice." You can see that I have read you attentively! What a pedagogue I make, eh! I am telling you all that from memory, for I have lent your book, and it has not been returned to me yet. But my recollection of it is of a thing very well done.

Don't you agree with me that a play of very great effect could be made from it for a boulevard theatre?

By the way, how is Cadio going?

Tell your dear mamma that I adore her.

Harrisse, from whom I have received a letter today, charges me to remember him to her, and, for my part, I charge you to embrace her for me.

And I grasp your two hands heartily and say "bravo" to you again, and faithfully yours.

Gustave Flaubert

CCCXIV. To MADAM MAURICE SAND

Thursday evening, 25th May, 1876

Dear Madam,

I sent a telegram to Maurice this morning, asking for news of Madam Sand.

I was told yesterday that she was very ill, why has not Maurice answered me?

I went to Plauchut’s this morning to get details. He is in the country, at Le Mans, so that I am in a state of cruel uncertainty.

Be good enough to answer me immediately and believe me, dear madam,

Your very affectionate,

Gustave Flaubert

4 rue Murillo, Parc Monceau

CCCXV. To MADAM LINA SAND

Dear Madam,

Your note of this morning reassures me a little. But that of last night had absolutely upset me.

I beg you to give me very frequent news of your dear mother-in-law.

Embrace her for me and believe that I am

Your very devoted

Gustave Flaubert

Beginning with the middle of next week, about Wednesday or Thursday, I shall be at Croisset.

Saturday morning, 3d June, 1876.

CCCXVI. To MAURICE SAND

Croisset, Sunday, 24 June, 1876

You had prepared me, my dear Maurice, I wanted to write to you, but I was waiting till you were a little freer, more alone. Thank you for your kind thought.

Yes, we understood each other, yonder! (And if I did not remain longer, it is because my comrades dragged me away.) It seemed to me that I was burying my mother the second time. Poor, dear, great woman! What genius and what heart! But she lacked nothing, it is not she whom we must pity

But she lacked nothing, it is not she whom we must pity.

What is to become of you? Shall you stay in Nohant? That good old house must seem horribly empty to you! But you, at least, are not alone! You have a wife…a rare one! and two exquisite children. While I was with you, I had, over and above my grief, two desires: to run off with Aurore and to kill M. Marx. [Footnote: A reporter for le Figaro.] There you have the truth, it is unnecessary to make you see the psychology of the thing. I received yesterday a very sympathetic letter from good Tourgueneff. He too loved her. But then, who did not love her? If you had seen in Paris the anguish of Martine![Footnote: George Sand’s maid.] That was distressing.

Plauchut is still in Nohant, I suppose. Tell him that I love him because I saw him shed so many tears.

And let yours flow, my dear friend, do all that is necessary not to console yourself, — which would, moreover, be impossible. Never mind! In a short time you will feel a great joy in the idea alone that you were a good son and that she knew it absolutely. She used to talk of you as of a blessing.

And when you shall have rejoined her, when the great-grand-children of the grandchildren of your two little girls shall have joined her, and when for a long time there shall have been no question of the things and the people that surround us, — in several centuries, — hearts like ours will palpitate through hers! People will read her books, that is to say that they will think according to her ideas and they will love with her love. But all that does not give her back to you, does it? With what then can we sustain ourselves if pride desert us, and what man more than you should have pride in his mother!

Now dear friend, adieu! When shall we meet now? How I should feel the need of talking of her, insatiably!

Embrace Madam Maurice for me, as I did on the stairway at Nohant, and your little girls.

Yours, from the depths of my heart,

Your Gustave Flaubert

CCCXVII. To MAURICE SAND

Croisset, Tuesday, 3rd October, 1876

Thank you for your kind remembrance, my dear friend. Neither do I forget, and I dream of your poor, dear mamma in a sadness that does not disappear. Her death has left a great emptiness for me. After you, your wife and the good Plauchut, I am perhaps the one who misses her most! I need her.

I pity you the annoyances that your sister causes you. I too have gone through that! It is so easy moreover to be good! Besides that causes less evil. When shall we meet? I want so much to see you, first just to see you — and second to talk of her.

When your business is finished, why not come to Paris for some time? Solitude is bad under certain conditions. One should not become intoxicated with one’s grief, however much attraction one finds in doing so.

You ask me what I am doing. This is it: this year I have written two stories, and I am going to begin another so as to make the three into one volume that I want to publish in the spring. After that I hope to resume the big novel that I laid aside a year ago after my financial disaster. Matters are improving in that direction, and I shall not be forced to change anything in my way of living. If I have been able to start at work again, I owe it partly to the good counsel of your mother. She had found the best way to bring me back to respect myself.

In order to get the quicker at work, I shall stay here till New Year’s Day, — perhaps later than that. Do try to put off your visit to Paris.

Embrace your dear little girls warmly for me, my respects to Madam Maurice, and-sincerely yours, ex imo.

Gustave Flaubert

1877

CCCXVIII. To MAURICE SAND

Saint-Gratien par Sannois, 20th August, 1877

Thank you for your kind remembrance, my dear Maurice. Next winter you will be in Passy, I hope, — and from time to time we can have a good chat. I even count on seeing myself at your table by the side of your friends whose “idol” I am.

You speak to me of your dear and illustrious mamma! Next to you I do not think that any one could think of her more often than I do! How I miss her! How I need her!

I had begun un coeur simple solely on account of her, only to please her. She died while I was in the midst of this work. Thus it is with our dreams.

I still continue not to find diversion in existence. In order to forget the weight of it, I work as frantically as possible.

What sustains me is the indignation that the Imbecility of the Bourgeois affords me! Summed up at present by the large party of law and order, it reaches a dizzy height!

Has there been anything in history more inept than the 16th of May?

Where is there an idiot comparable to the Bayard of modern times?

I have been in Paris, or rather at Saint-Gratien, for three days. Day after tomorrow I leave the princess, and in a fortnight I shall make a little trip to Lower Normandy for the sake of literature. When we meet I shall talk a long time with you, if you are interested, about the terrible book that I am in the process of concocting. I shall have enough work in it to take me three or four years. Not less!

Don’t leave me so long without news. Give a long look for me at the little corner of the holy ground!…My regards to your dear wife, embrace the dear little girls and sincerely yours, my good Maurice,

Your old friend

Gustave Flaubert

LAST LETTER

CCCXIX. To MAURICE SAND

Tuesday morning, April, 1880

My dear Maurice,

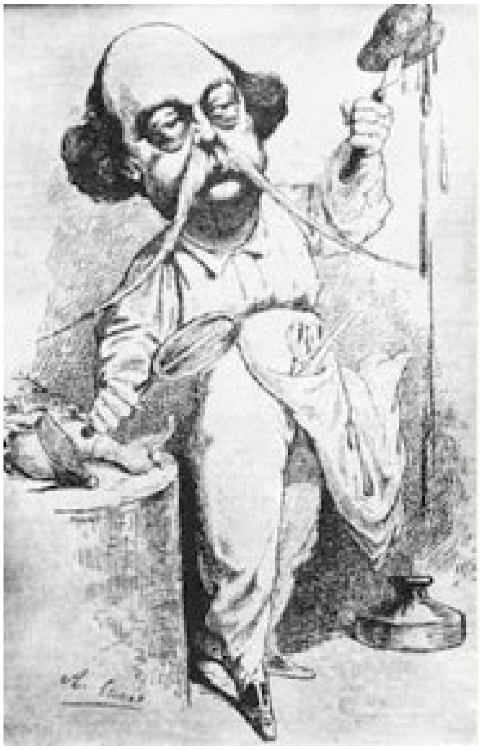
No! Erase Cruchard and Polycarp and replace those words by what you like.

The Public ought not to have all of us, — let us reserve something for ourselves. That seems to me more decent (quod decet). You do not speak of a COMPLETE EDITION? Ah! your poor dear mamma! How often I think of her! And what need I have of her! There is not a day when I do not say: “If she were there, I should ask her advice.”

I shall be at Croisset till the 8th or the 10th of May. So, my old fellow, when you wish to come there, you will be welcome. I embrace you all from the oldest to the youngest.

Cruchard for you,
Polycarp for the human race,
Gustave Flaubert for Literature

The Trial


“Flaubert dissects Madame Bovary” — a caricature by A. Lernot, printed in La Parolie, 1869

THE PUBLIC *vs*. M. GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

In 1850 Flaubert began work on *Madame Bovary*, his most celebrated novel, which took five years to complete. After being serialised in the *Revue de Paris* in 1856, the government brought an action against the novel's publisher and author on the charge of immorality. The trial was held the following year, but both Flaubert and his publisher were fully acquitted. *Madame Bovary* then appeared in book format for the first time, receiving a very positive reception. A full account of the trial and acquittal is provided in this section of the eBook.

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SPEECH OF THE PROSECUTING ATTORNEY M. ERNEST PINARD

Gentlemen, in entering upon this debate, the Public Attorney is in the presence of a difficulty which he cannot ignore. It cannot be put even in the nature of a condemnation, since offenses to public morals and to religion are somewhat vague and elastic expressions which it would be necessary to define precisely. Nevertheless, when we speak to right-minded, practical men we are sure of being sufficiently understood to distinguish whether a certain page of a book carries an attack against religion and morals or not. The difficulty is not in arousing a prejudice, it is far more in explaining the work of which you are to judge. It deals entirely with romance. If it were a newspaper article which we were bringing before you, it could be seen at once where the fault began and where it ended; it would simply be read by the ministry and submitted to you for judgment. Here we are not concerned with a newspaper article, but entirely with a romance, which begins the first of October, finishes the fifteenth of December, and is composed of six numbers, in the *Revue de Paris*, 1856. What is to be done in such a case? What is the duty of the Public Ministry? To read the whole romance? That is impossible. On the other hand, to read only the incriminating texts would expose us to deep reproach. They could say to us: If you do not show the case in all its parts, if you pass over that which precedes and that which follows the incriminating passages, it is evident that you wish to suppress the debate by restricting the ground of discussion. In order to avoid this twofold difficulty, there is but one course to follow, and that is, to relate to you the whole story of the romance without reading any of it, or pointing out any incriminating passage; then to cite incriminating texts, and finally to answer the objections that may arise against the general method of indictment.

What is the title of the romance? *Madame Bovary*. This title in itself explains nothing. There is a second in parentheses: *Provincial Morals and Customs*. This is also a title which does not explain the thought of the author but which gives some intimation of it. The author does not endeavour to follow such or such a system of philosophy, true or false; he endeavours to produce certain pictures, and you shall see what kind of pictures! Without doubt, it is the husband who begins and who terminates the book; but the most serious portrait of the work, the one that illumines the other paintings, is that of Madame Bovary.

Here I relate, I do not cite. It takes the husband first at college, and it must be stated that the boy already gave evidence of the kind of husband he would make.

He is excessively heavy and timid, so timid that when he arrives at the college and is asked his name, he responds: “*Charbovari*” He is so dull that he works continually without advancing. He is never the first, nor is he the last in his class; he is the type, if not of the cipher at least of the laughing-stock of the college. After finishing his studies here, he goes to study medicine at Rouen, in a fourth-story room overlooking the Seine, which his mother rented for him, in the house of a dyer of her acquaintance. Here he studies his medical books, and arrives little by little, not at the degree of doctor of medicine, but that of health officer. He frequented the inns, failed in his studies, but as for the rest, he had no other passion than that of playing dominoes. This is M. Bovary.

The time comes for him to marry. His mother finds him a wife in the widow of a sheriff’s officer of Dieppe; she is virtuous and plain, is forty-five years old, and has six thousand a year income. Only, the lawyer who had her capital to invest set out one fine morning for America, and the younger Madame Bovary was so much affected, so struck down by this unexpected blow that she died of it. Here we have the first marriage and the first scene.

M. Bovary, now being a widower, begins to think of marrying again. He questions his memory; there is no need of going far; there immediately comes to his mind the daughter of a neighboring farmer, Mile. Emma Rouault, who had strangely aroused Madame Bovary’s suspicions. Farmer Rouault had but one daughter, and she had been brought up by the Ursuline sisters at Rouen. She was little interested in matters of the farm; her father was anxious for her to marry. The health officer presented himself, there was no difficulty about the *dot*, and you understand that with such a disposition on both sides, these things are quickly settled. The marriage takes place. M. Bovary is at his wife’s knees, is the happiest of men and the blindest of husbands. His sole occupation is anticipating his wife’s wishes.

Here the rôle of M. Bovary ends; that of Madame Bovary becomes the serious work of the book.

Gentlemen, does Madame Bovary love her husband, or try to love him? No; and from the beginning there has been what we might call the scene of initiation. From the moment of her marriage, another horizon stretched itself out before her, a new life appeared to her. The proprietor of Vaubyessard Castle gave a grand entertainment. He invited the health officer and his wife, and this was for her an initiation into all the ardour of voluptuousness! There she discovered the Duke of Laverdière who had had some success at Court; she waltzed with a viscount and experienced an unusual disturbance of mind. From this moment she lived a new life; her husband and all her surroundings became insupportable to her. One day, in looking over some furniture, she hit a piece of wire which tore her finger; it was the wire from her wedding bouquet.

To try to dispel the *ennui* that was consuming her, M. Bovary sacrificed his office and established himself at Yonville. Here was the scene of the first fall. We are now in the second number. Madame arrived at Yonville, and there, the first person she met upon whom she could fix her attention was — not the notary of the place, but the only clerk of that notary, Léon Dupuis. This is a young man who is making his own way and is about to set out for the capital. Any other than M. Bovary would have been disquieted by the visits of the young clerk, but M. Bovary is so ingenuous that he believes in his wife's virtue. Léon, wholly inexperienced, has the same idea. He goes away, and the occasion is lost; but occasions are easily found again.

There was in the neighborhood of Yonville one Rodolphe Boulanger (you understand that I am narrating). He was a man of thirty-four years old and of a brutal temperament; he had had much success and many easy conquests; he then had an actress for a mistress. He saw Madame Bovary; she was young and charming; he resolved to make her his mistress. The thing was easy; three meetings were sufficient to bring it about. The first time he came to an agricultural meeting, the second time he paid her a visit, the third time he accompanied her on a horseback ride which her husband judged necessary to her health; it was then, in a first visit to the forest, that the fall took place. Their meetings multiplied after this, at Rodolphe's chateau and in the health officer's garden. The lovers reached the extreme limits of voluptuousness! Madame Bovary wished to elope with Rodolphe, but while Rodolphe dared not say no, he wrote a letter in which he tried to show her that for many reasons, he could not elope. Stricken down by the reception of this letter, Madame Bovary had a brain fever, following which typhoid fever declared itself. The fever killed the love, but the malady remained. This is the second scene.

We come now to the third scene. The fall with Rodolphe was followed by a religious reaction, but it was short; Madame Bovary was about to fall anew. The husband thought the theatre useful in the convalescence of his wife and took her to Rouen. In a box opposite that occupied by M. and Madame Bovary, was Léon Dupuis, the notary's young clerk, who had made his way to Paris, and who had now become strangely experienced and knowing. He went to see Madame Bovary and proposed a *rendezvous*. Madame Bovary suggested the cathedral. On coming out of the cathedral, Léon proposed that they take a cab. She resisted at first, but Léon told her that this was done in Paris, and there was no further obstacle. The fall takes place in the cab! Meetings follow for Léon, as for Rodolphe, at the health officer's house, and then at a room which they rented in Rouen. Finally, she became weary of the second love, and here begins the scene of distress; it is the last of the romance.

Madame Bovary was prodigal, having lavished gifts upon Rodolphe and Léon; she had led a life of luxury and, in order to meet such expense had put her name to a number of promissory notes. She had obtained a power of attorney from her husband in the management of their common patrimony, fell in with a usurer who discounted the notes which, not being paid at the expiration of the time, were renewed under the name of a boon companion. Then came the stamped paper, the protests, judgments and executions, and, finally, the posting for sale of the furniture of Monsieur Bovary, who knew nothing of all this. Reduced to the most cruel extremities, Madame Bovary asked money from everybody, but got none. Léon had nothing, and recoiled frightened at the idea of a crime that was suggested to him for procuring funds. Having gone through every degree of humiliation, Madame Bovary turned to Rodolphe; she was not successful; Rodolphe did not have 3000 francs. There remained to her but one course: to beg her husband's pardon? No. To explain the matter to him? No, for this husband would be generous enough to pardon her, and that was a humiliation which she could not accept: she must poison herself.

We come now to grievous scenes. The husband is there beside his wife's icy body. He has her night robe brought, orders her wrapped in it and her remains placed in a triple coffin.

One day he opens a secretary and there finds Rodolphe's picture, his letters and Léon's. Do you think his love is then shattered? No, no! on the contrary, he is excited and extols this woman whom others have possessed, as proved by these souvenirs of voluptuousness which she had left to him; and from that moment he neglects his office, his family, lets go to the winds the last vestige of his patrimony, and is found dead one day in the arbor in his garden, holding in his hand a long lock of black hair. This is the romance. I have related it to you, suppressing no scene in it. It is called *Madame Bovary*. You could with justice give it another title and call it. *Story of the Adulteries of a Provincial Woman*.

Gentlemen, the first part of my task is fulfilled. I have related, I shall now cite, and after the citations come the indictments which are brought upon two counts: offense against public morals and offense against religious morals. The offense against public morals lies in the lascivious pictures which I have brought before your eyes; the offense against religious morals consists in mingling voluptuous images with sacred things. I now come to the citations. I will be brief, for you will read the entire romance. I shall limit myself to citing four scenes, or rather four tableaux. The first will be that of the fall with Rodolphe; the second, the religious reaction between the two adulteries; the third, the fall with Léon, which is the second adultery, and finally the fourth, the death of

Madame Bovary.

Before raising the curtain on these four pictures, permit me to inquire what colour, what stroke of the brush M. Flaubert employs — for this romance is a picture, and it is necessary to know to what school he belongs — what colour he uses and what sort of portrait he makes of his heroine.

The general colour of the author, allow me to tell you, is a lascivious colour, before, during, and after the falls! When she is a child ten or twelve years of age, she is at the Ursuline convent. At this age, when the young girl is not formed, when the woman cannot feel those emotions which reveal to her a new world, she goes to confession:

“When she went to confession, she invented little sins in order that she might stay there longer, kneeling in the shadow, her hands joined, her face against the grating beneath the whispering of the priest. The comparisons of betrothed, husband, celestial lover, and eternal marriage, that recur in sermons, stirred within her soul depths of unexpected sweetness.”

Is it natural for a little girl to invent small sins, since we know that for a child the smallest sins are confessed with the greatest difficulty? And again, at this age, when a little girl is not formed, does it not make what I have called a lascivious picture to show her inventing little sins in the shadow, under the whisperings of the priest, recalling comparisons she has heard about the affianced, the celestial lover and eternal marriage which gave her a shiver of voluptuousness?

Would you see Madame Bovary in her lesser acts, in a free state, without a lover and without sin? I pass over those words, “the next day,” and that bride who left nothing to be discovered which could be divined or found out, as the phrase in itself is more than equivocal; but we shall see how it was with the husband:

The husband of the next day, “whom one would have taken for an old maid,” the bridegroom of this bride who “left nothing to be discovered that could be divined,” arose and went out, “his heart full of the felicities of the night, with mind tranquil and flesh content,” going about “ruminating upon his happiness like one who is still enjoying after dinner the taste of the truffles he is digesting.”

It now remains, gentlemen, to determine upon the literary stamp of M. Flaubert and upon the strokes of his brush. Now, at the Castle Vaubyessard do you know what most attracted this young woman, what struck her most forcibly? It is always the same thing — the Duke of Laverdiere, as a lover — ”as they say, of Marie-Antoinette, between the Messrs. de Coigny and de Lauzun.” “Emma’s eyes turned upon him of their own accord, as upon something extraordinary and august; he had lived at Court and slept in the bed of queens!” Can it be said that this is only an historic parenthesis? Sad and useless parenthesis! History can authorise suspicions, but has not the right to establish them as fact. History has spoken of the necklace in all romances; history has spoken of a thousand things; but these are only suspicions and, I repeat, I know not by what authority these suspicions should be established as facts. And, since Marie-Antoinette died with the dignity of a sovereign and the calmness of a Christian, her life-blood should efface faults of which there are the strongest suspicions. M. Flaubert was in need of a striking example in the painting of his heroine, but Heaven knows why he has taken this one to express, all at once, the perverse instincts and the ambition of Madame Bovary!

Madame Bovary dances very well, and here she is waltzing:

“They began slowly, then went more rapidly. They turned; all around them was turning — the lamps, the furniture, the wainscoting, the floor, like a disc on a pivot. On passing near the doors the bottom of Emma’s dress caught against his trousers. Their legs commingled; he looked down at her; she raised her eyes to his. A torpor seized her; she stopped. They started again, and with a more rapid movement; the Viscount, dragging her along, disappeared with her to the end of the gallery, where, panting, she almost fell, and for a moment rested her head upon his breast. And then, still turning, but more slowly, he guided her back to her seat. She leant back against the wall and covered her eyes with her hands.”

I know well that the waltz is more or less like this, but that makes it no more moral!

Take Madame Bovary in her most simple acts, and we have always the same stroke of the brush, on every page. Even Justin, the neighbouring chemist’s boy, undergoes some astonishment when he is initiated into the secrets of this woman’s toilette. He carries his voluptuous admiration as far as the kitchen.

“With his elbows on the long board on which she was ironing, he greedily watched all these women’s clothes spread out about him, the dimity petticoats, the fichus, the collars, and the drawers with running-strings, wide at the hips and growing narrower below.

“What is that for?” asked the young fellow, passing his hand over the crinoline or the hooks and eyes.

“‘Why, haven’t you ever seen anything?’ Félicité answered laughing. ‘As if your mistress, Madame Homais, didn’t wear the same.’“

The husband also asks, in the presence of this fresh-smelling woman, whether the odour comes from the skin or from the chemise.

“Every evening he found a blazing fire, his dinner ready, easy-chairs, and a well-dressed woman, charming with an odour of freshness, though no one could say whence the perfume came, or if it were not her skin that made odourous her chemise."

Enough of quotations in detail! You know now the physiognomy of Madame Bovary in repose, when she is inciting no one, when she does not sin, when she is still completely innocent, and when, on her return from a rendezvous, she is by the side of her husband, whom she detests; you know now the general colour of the picture, the general physiognomy of Madame Bovary. The author has taken the greatest care, employed all the prestige of his style in painting the portrait of this woman. Has he tried to show her on the side of intelligence? Never. From the side of the heart? Not at all. On the part of mind? No. From the side of physical beauty? Not even that. Oh! I know very well that the portrait of Madame Bovary after the adultery is most brilliant; but the picture is above all lascivious, the post is voluptuous, the beauty a beauty of provocation.

I come now to the four important quotations; I shall make but four; I hold to my outline: I have said that the first would be the love for Rodolphe, the second the religious reaction, the third the love for Léon, the fourth her death.

Here is the first. Madame Bovary is near her fall, nearly ready to succumb.

"Domestic mediocrity drove her to lewd fancies, marriage tendernesses to adulterous desires. She would have liked Charles to beat her, that she might have a better right to hate him, to revenge herself upon him."

What was it that seduced Rodolphe and prepared him? The opening of Madame Bovary's dress which had burst in places along the seams of the corsage. Rodolphe took his servant to Bovary's house, to bleed him. The servant was very ill, and Madame Bovary held the basin.

"Madame Bovary took the basin to put it under the table. With the movement she made in bending down, her skirt (it was a summer frock with four flounces, yellow, long in the waist and wide in the skirt) spread out around her on the flags of the room; and as Emma, stooping, staggered a little as she stretched out her arms, the stuff here and there gave with the inflections of her bust."

Here is Rodolphe's reflection: "He again saw Emma in her room, dressed as he had seen her, and he undressed her."

It is the first day they had spoken to each other. "They looked at one another. A supreme desire made their dry lips tremble, and softly, without an effort, their fingers intertwined."

These are the preliminaries of the fall. It is necessary to read the fall itself.

"When the habit was ready, Charles wrote to Monsieur Boulanger that his wife was at his command, and that they counted on his good-nature.

"The next day at noon, Rodolphe appeared at Charles's door with two saddle-horses. One had pink rosettes at his ears and a deerskin side-saddle.

“Rodolphe had put on high soft boots, saying to himself that no doubt she had never seen anything like them. In fact, Emma was charmed with his appearance as he stood on the landing in his great velvet coat and white corduroy breeches.”

“As soon as he felt the ground, Emma’s horse set off at a gallop. Rodolphe galloped by her side.”

Here they are in the forest.

“He drew her farther on to a small pool where duckweeds made a greenness on the water. Faded waterlilies lay motionless between the reeds. At the noise of their steps in the grass, frogs jumped away to hide themselves.

“‘I am wrong! I am wrong!’ she said. ‘I am mad to listen to you!’“

“‘Why? Emma! Emma!’“

“‘Oh, Rodolphe!’ said the young woman slowly, leaning on his shoulder.”

“The cloth of her habit caught against the velvet of his coat. She threw back her white neck, swelling with a sigh, and faltering, in tears, with a long shudder and hiding her face, she gave herself up to him.”

Then she arose and, after shaking off the fatigue of voluptuousness, returned to the domestic hearth, to that hearth where she would find a husband who adored her. After this first fall, after this first adultery, this first fault, is it a sentiment of remorse that she feels, in the presence of this deceived husband who adores her? No! with a bold front, she enters, glorifying adultery.

“But when she saw herself in the glass she wondered at her face. Never had her eyes been so large, so black, of so profound a depth. Something subtle about her being transfigured her. She repeated, ‘I have a lover! a lover!’ delighting at the idea as if a second puberty had come to her. So at last she was to know those joys of love, that fever of happiness of which she had despaired! She was entering upon marvels where all would be passion, ecstasy, delirium.”

Thus, from this first fault, this first fall, she glorified adultery, she sang the song of adultery, its poesy and its delights. This, gentlemen, to me is much more dangerous and immoral than the fall itself! Gentlemen, all pales before this glorification of adultery, even the rendezvous at night some time after:

“To call her, Rodolphe threw a sprinkle of sand at the shutters. She jumped up with a start; but sometimes he had to wait, for Charles had a mania for chatting by the fireside, and he would not stop. She was wild with impatience; if her eyes could have done it, she would have hurled him out at the window. At last she would begin to undress, then take up a book, and go on reading very quietly as if the book amused her. But Charles, who was in bed, called to her to come too.

“‘Come, now, Emma,’ he said, ‘it is time.’

“‘Yes, I am coming,’ she answered.

“Yes, I am coming,” she answered.

“Then, as the candles dazzled him, he turned to the wall and fell asleep. She escaped, smiling, palpitating, undressed.

“Rodolphe had a large cloak; he wrapped her in it, and putting his arm around her waist, he drew her without a word to the end of the garden.”

“It was in the arbour, on the same seat of old sticks where formerly Léon had looked at her so amorously on the summer evenings. She never thought of him now.

“The cold of the nights made them clasp closer; the sighs of their lips seemed to them deeper; their eyes, that they could hardly see, larger; and in the midst of the silence low words were spoken that fell on their souls sonorous crystalline, and reverberating in multiplied vibrations.”

Gentlemen, do you know of language anywhere in the world more expressive? Have you ever seen a more lascivious picture? Listen further:

“Never had Madame Bovary been so beautiful as at this period; she had that indefinable beauty that results from joy, from enthusiasm, from success, and that is only the harmony of temperament with circumstances. Her desires, her sorrows, the experience of pleasure and her ever-young illusions had, as soil and rain and winds and the sun make flowers grow, gradually developed her, and she at length blossomed forth in all the plentitude of her nature. Her eyelids seemed chiselled expressly for her long amorous looks in which the pupil disappeared, while a strong inspiration expanded her delicate nostrils and raised the fleshy corner of her lips, shaded in the light by a little black down. One would have thought that an artist apt in conception had arranged the curls of hair upon her neck; they fell in a thick mass, negligently and with the changing chances of their adultery that unbound them every day. Her voice now took more mellow inflections, her figure also; something subtle and penetrating escaped even from the folds of her gown and from the line of her foot. Charles, as when they were first married, thought her delicious and quite irresistible.”

Up to this time this woman’s beauty had consisted of her grace, her elegance, and her clothes; finally she is shown to you without a veil and you can say whether adultery has embellished her or not.

“‘Take me away,’ she cried, ‘carry me off! Oh, I entreat you!’

“And she threw herself upon his mouth, as if to seize there the unexpected consent it breathed forth in a kiss.”

Here is a portrait, gentlemen, which M. Flaubert knows well how to draw. How the eyes of this woman enlarge! Something ravishing expands around her, and then her fall! Her beauty has never been so brilliant as the next day after her fall and the days following. What the author shows you is the poetry of adultery, and I ask you again whether these lascivious pages do not express a profound and I ask you again whether these lascivious pages do not express a profound immorality!

I come now to the second situation, which is the religious reaction. Madame Bovary is very ill, is at death’s door. She is brought back to life, and her convalescence is made remarkable by a little religious awakening.

“It was at this hour that Monsieur Bournisien came to see her. He inquired after her health, gave her news, exhorted her to religion in a coaxing little gossip that was not without its charm. The mere thought of his cassock comforted her.”

Finally, she goes to communion. I do not like much to meet these holy things in a romance; but at least, when one speaks of them, he need not travesty them by his language. Is there in this adulterous woman going to communion anything of the repentant faith of a Magdalene? No, no; she is always the same passionate woman, seeking illusions and seeking them even among the most august and holy things.

“One day, when at the height of her illness, she had thought herself dying, and had asked for the communion; and, while they were making the preparations in her room for the sacrament, while they were turning the night-table covered with sirups into an altar, and while Félicité was strewing dahlia flowers on the floor, Emma felt some power passing over her that freed her from her pains, from all perception, from all feeling. Her body, relieved, no longer thought; another life was beginning; it seemed to her that her being, mounting toward God, would be annihilated in that love like a burning incense that melts into vapour.”

In what tongue does one pray to God in language addressed to a lover in the outpourings of adultery? Without doubt they will tell us it is local colour, and excuse it on the ground that a vapourous, romantic woman does nothing, even in religion, like anybody else. There is no local colour which can excuse this mixture! Voluptuous one day, religious the next, there is no woman, even in other countries, under the sky of Spain or Italy, who murmurs to God the adulterous caresses which she gives her lover. You can appreciate this language, gentlemen, and you will not excuse adulterous words being introduced in any way into the sanctuary of the Divinity!

This is the second situation. I now come to the third, which is a series of adulteries.

After the religious transition, Madame Bovary is again ready to fall. She goes to the theatre at Rouen. The play is *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Emma returns to her old self.

“Ah! if in the freshness of her beauty, before the pollution of marriage and the disillusions of adultery, she could have anchored her life upon some great, strong heart, then virtue, tenderness, voluptuousness, and duty blending, she would never have fallen from so high a happiness.”

Seeing Lagardy upon the stage, she had a desire to run into his arms, to take refuge in his strength, even as in the incarnation of love, and of saying to him: “Take me, take me away, let us go! thine, thine, with thee are all my ardour and all my dreams!”

Léon was with the Bovarys.

“He was standing behind her, leaning with his shoulder against the wall of the box; now and again she felt herself shuddering beneath the hot breath from his nostrils falling upon her hair.”

You were spoken to just now of the pollution of marriage; then you are shown adultery in all its poesy, in its ineffable seductions. I have said that the expression should be modified to read: the disillusions of marriage and the pollution of adultery. Very often when one is married, in the place of happiness without clouds which one promises himself, he finds but sacrifice and bitterness. The word disillusion can then be used justifiably, that of pollution, never.

Léon and Emma have a rendezvous at the cathedral. They look around or they do not, it makes no difference. They go out.

“A lad was playing about the close.

“‘Go and get me a cab!’

“The child bounded off like a ball by the Rue Quartre-Vents; then they were alone a few minutes, face to face, and a little embarrassed.

“‘Ah! Léon! Really — I don’t know — if I ought,’ she whispered. Then with a more serious air, ‘Do you know, it is very improper?’

“‘How so?’ replied the clerk. ‘It is done at Paris.’

“And that, as an irresistible argument, decided her.”

We know now, gentlemen, that the fall did not take place in the cab. Through a scruple which honors him, the editor of the *Revue de Paris* has suppressed the passage of the fall in the cab. But if the *Revue* lowered the blinds of the cab, it does allow us to penetrate into the room where they found a rendezvous.

Emma wished to leave it, because she had given her word that she would return that evening.

“Moreover, Charles expected her, and in her heart she felt already that cowardly docility that is for some women at once the chastisement and atonement of adultery.”

Once upon the sidewalk, Léon continued to walk; she followed him as far as the hotel; he mounted the stairs, opened the door and entered. What an embrace! Words followed each other quickly after the kisses. They told the disappointments of the week, their presentiments, their fears about the letters; but now all was forgotten, and they were face to face, with their laugh of voluptuousness and terms of endearment.

“The bed was large, of mahogany, in the shape of a boat. The curtains were in red levantine, that hung from the ceiling and bulged out too much towards the bell-shaped bed-side; and nothing in the world was so lovely as her brown head and white skin standing out against this purple colour, when, with a movement of shame, she crossed her bare arms, hiding her face in her hands.

“The warm room, with its discreet carpet, its gay ornaments, and its calm light, seemed made for the intimacies of passion.”

We are told what happened in that room. Here is still a passage, very important as a piece of lascivious painting:

“How they loved that dear room, so full of gaiety, despite of its rather faded splendour! They always found the furniture in the same place, and sometimes hairpins that she had forgotten the Thursday before under the pedestal of the clock. They lunched by the fireside on a little round table, inlaid with rosewood. Emma carved, put bits on his plate with all sorts of coquettish ways, and she laughed with a sonorous and libertine laugh when the froth of the champagne ran over from the glass to the rings on her fingers. They were so completely lost in the possession of each other that they thought themselves in their own house, and that they would live there till death, like two spouses eternally young. They said ‘our room,’ ‘our carpet,’ she even said ‘my slippers,’ a gift of Léon’s, a whim she had had. They were pink satin, bordered with swansdown. When she sat on his knees, her leg, then too short, hung in the air, and the dainty shoe, that had no back to it, was held on only by the toes to her bare foot.

“He for the first time enjoyed the inexpressible delicacy of feminine refinements. He had never met this grace of language, this reserve of clothing, these poses of the weary dove. He admired the exaltation of her soul and the lace on her petticoat. Besides, was she not ‘a lady’ and a married woman — a real mistress, in fine?”

This, gentlemen, is a description which leaves nothing to be desired, I hope, from the point of view of conviction. Here is another, or rather here is the continuation of the same scene:

“She used some words which inflamed him, with some kisses which drew forth his soul. Where had she learned these caresses almost immaterial, so profound and evasive were they?”

Oh! I well understand, gentlemen, the disgust inspired in her by that husband who wished to embrace her upon her return; I comprehend admirably that after a rendezvous of this kind, she felt with horror at night, “that man against her flesh stretched out asleep.”

That is not all, for according to the last tableau that I cannot omit, she came to be weary of her voluptuousness.

"She was constantly promising herself a profound felicity on her next journey. Then she confessed to herself that she felt nothing extraordinary. This disappointment quickly gave way to a new hope, and Emma returned to him more inflamed, more eager than ever. She undressed hastily, tearing off the thin laces of her corset that nestled around her hips like a gliding snake. She went on tip-toe, barefooted, to see once more that the door was closed; then, pale, serious, and without speaking, with one movement she threw herself upon his breast with a long shudder."

I notice here two things, gentlemen, an admirable picture, the product of a talented hand, but an execrable picture from a moral point of view. Yes, M. Flaubert knows how to embellish his paintings with all the resources of art, but without the discretion of art. With him there is no gauze, no veils, it is nature in all her nudity, in all her crudity!

Still another quotation:

"They knew one another too well for any of those surprises of possession that increase its joys a hundred-fold. She was as sick of him as he was weary of her. Emma found again in adultery all the platitudes of marriage."

The platitudes of marriage and the poetry of adultery! Sometimes it is the pollution of marriage, sometimes the platitudes, but always the poetry of adultery. These, gentlemen, are the situations which M. Flaubert loves to paint, and which, unfortunately, he paints only too well.

I have related three scenes: the scene with Rodolphe, and you have seen the fall in the forest, the glorification of adultery, and this woman whose beauty became greater with this poesy. I have spoken of the religious transition, and you saw there a prayer imprinted with adulterous language. I have spoken of the second fall, I have unrolled before you the scenes which took place with Léon. I have shown you the scene of the cab — suppressed — and I have shown you the picture of the room and the bed. Now that we believe your convictions are formed, we come to the last scene, — that of the punishment.

Numerous excisions have been made, it would appear, by the *Revue de Paris*. Here are the terms in which M. Flaubert complains of it:

"Some consideration which I do not appreciate has led the *Revue de Paris* to suppress the number of December 1st. Its scruples being revived on the occasion of the present number, it has seen fit to cut out still more passages. In consequence, I wish to deny all responsibility in the lines which follow; the reader is informed that he sees only fragments and not the complete work."

Let us pass, then, over these fragments and come to the death. She poisons herself. She poisons herself, why? Ah! it is a very little thing, is death, she thinks; I am going to fall asleep and all will be finished. Then, without remorse, without an avowal, without a tear of repentance over this suicide which is brought about by adulteries in the night watches, she goes to receive the sacrament for the dying. Why the sacrament, since in her last thought she is going to annihilation? Why, when there is not a tear, not a sigh of the Magdalene over her crime of infidelity, her suicide, or her adulteries?

After this scene comes that of extreme unction. These are holy and sacred words for all. It is with these words that our ancestors have fallen asleep, our fathers and our relatives, and it is with them that one day our children will see us sleep. When one wishes to make use of them, it should be done with exactness; it is not necessary, at least to accompany them with the voluptuous image of a past life.

You know how the priest makes the holy unctions upon the forehead, the ears, upon the mouth, the feet, pronouncing at the same time the liturgical phrases: *quidquam per pedes, per auras, per pectus*, etc., always following with the words *misericordia* … sin on one side and pity on the other. These holy, sacred words should be reproduced exactly; and if they cannot be reproduced exactly, at least nothing voluptuous should be put with them.

“She turned her face slowly and seemed filled with joy on seeing suddenly the violet stole, no doubt finding again, in the midst of a temporary lull in her pain, the lost voluptuousness of her first mystical transports, with the visions of eternal beatitude that were beginning.

“The priest rose to take the crucifix; then she stretched forward her neck as one who is athirst, and gluing her lips to the body of the Man-God, she pressed upon it with all her expiring strength the fullest kiss of love that she had ever given. Then he recited the *Misereatur* and the *Indulgentiam*, dipped his right thumb in the oil and began to give extreme unction. First, upon the eyes, that had so coveted all worldly pomp; then upon the nostrils, that had been greedy of the warm breeze and amorous odours; then upon the mouth that had uttered lies, that had been curled with pride and cried out in lewdness; then upon the hands, that had delighted in sensual touches; and finally upon the soles of the feet, so swift of yore, when she was running to satisfy her desires, and that would now walk no more.”

Now, in the prayers for the dying which the priest recites, at the end or at the close of each verse occur these words: “Christian soul, go out to a higher region.” They are murmured at the moment when the last breath of the dying escapes from his lips. The priest recites, *etc.*

“As the death-rattle became stronger the priest prayed faster; his prayers mingled with the stifled sobs of Bovary, and sometimes all seemed lost in the muffled murmur of the Latin syllables that tolled like a passing-bell.”

After the fashion of alternating these words, the author has tried to make for them a sort of reply. He puts upon the sidewalk a blind man who intones a song of which the profane words are a kind of response to the prayers for the dying.

“Suddenly on the pavement was heard a loud noise of clogs and the clattering of a stick; and a voice rose — a raucous voice — that sang —

“‘Maids in the warmth of a summer day
Dream of love and of love alway.
The wind is strong this summer day,
Her petticoat has flown away.’“

This is the moment when Madame Bovary dies.

Thus we have here the picture: on one side the priest reciting the prayers for the dying; on the other the hand-organ player who excites from the dying woman

“an atrocious, frantic, despairing laugh, thinking she saw the hideous face of the poor wretch that stood out against the eternal night like a menace…. She fell back upon the mattress in a convulsion. They all drew near. She was dead.”

And then later, when the body is cold, above all should the cadaver, which the soul has just left, be respected. When the husband is there on his knees, weeping for his wife, when he extends the shroud over her, any other would have stopped, but M. Flaubert makes a final stroke with his brush:

“The sheet sank in from her breast to her knees, and then rose at the tips of her toes.”

This the scene of death. I have abridged it and have grouped it after a fashion. It is now for you to judge and determine whether there is a mixture of the sacred and the profane in it, or rather, a mixture of the sacred and the voluptuous.

I have related the romance, I have brought a charge against it and, permit me to say, against the kind of art that M. Flaubert cultivates, the kind that is realistic but not discreet. You shall see to what limits he has gone. A copy of the *Artiste* lately came to my hand; it is not for us to make accusations against the *Artiste*, but to learn to what school M. Flaubert belongs, and I ask your permission to read you some lines, which have nothing to do with M. Flaubert’s prosecuted book, only to show to what a degree he excels in this kind of painting. He loves to paint temptations, especially the temptations to which Madame Bovary succumbed. Well, I find a model of its kind in the lines to follow, from the *Artiste*, for the month of January, signed *Gustave Flaubert*, upon the temptation of Saint Anthony. Heaven knows it is a subject upon which many things might be said, but I do not believe it possible to give more vivacity to the image, stronger lines to the picture. Apollonius says to Saint Anthony: —

“What is knowledge? What is glory? Wouldst thou refresh thine eyes under the humid jasmines? Wouldst thou feel thy body sink itself, as in a wave, in the sweet flesh of swooning women?”

Ah! well! here is the same colour, the same strength of the brush, the same vivacity of expression!

To resume. I have analyzed the book, I have related the story without forgetting a page, I have then made the charge, which was the second part of my task. I have exhibited some of the portraits, I have shown Madame Bovary in repose, by the side of her husband, in contact with those whom she could not tempt, and I have pointed out to you the lascivious colour of that portrait! Then I have analyzed some of the great scenes: the fall with Rodolphe, the religious transition, the meetings with Léon, the death scene, and in all this I find the double count of offense against public morals and against religion.

I had need of but two scenes: Do you not see the moral outrage in the fall with Rodolphe? Do you not see the glorification of adultery in it? And then, the religious outrage, which I find in the drawing of the confession, in the religious transition, and finally, the scene of death.

You have before you, gentlemen, three guilty ones: M. Flaubert, the author of the book, M. Pichat who accepted it, and M. Pillet, who printed it. In this matter, there is no misdemeanor without publicity, and all those concerned in the publicity should be equally blamed. But we hasten to say that the manager of the *Revue* and the printer are only in the second rank. The principal offender is the author, M. Flaubert; M. Flaubert who admonished by a note from the editor, protested against the suppression which had been made in his work. After him comes M. Laurent Pichat, from whom you will demand a reason, not for the suppression which he has made, but of that which he should have made; and finally comes the printer, who is a sentinel at the door of scandal. M. Pillet, besides, is an honourable man against whom I have nothing to say. We ask but one thing of you, which is to apply the law to him. Printers should read; when they do not read or have read what they print, it is at their own risk and peril. Printers are not machines; they have a privilege, they take an oath, they are in a special situation and they are responsible. Again, they are, if you will permit the expression, like an advanced guard; if they allow a misdemeanor to pass, it is like allowing the enemy to pass. Make the penalty as mild as you will for Pillet, be as indulgent as you like with the manager of the *Revue*; but as for Flaubert, the principal culprit, it is for him you should reserve your severities!

My task is accomplished; we await the objections on the part of the defense. The general objection will be: But after all the romance is moral on the whole, for is not adultery punished?

To this objection there are two replies: I believe that in a hypothetically moral work, a moral conclusion cannot be reached by the presentation of the lascivious details we find here. And again I say: that the work is not moral at the foundation.

I say, gentlemen, that lascivious details cannot be covered by a moral conclusion, otherwise one could relate all the orgies imaginable, describe all the turpitude of a public woman, making her die in a charity bed of a hospital. It would be allowable to study and depict all the poses of lasciviousness. It would be going against all the rules of good sense. It would place the poison at the door of all, the remedy at the doors of few, if there were any remedy. Who are the ones to read M. Flaubert’s romance? Are they men who are interested in political or social economy? No! The light pages of Madame Bovary fall into hands still lighter, into the hands of young girls, sometimes of married women. Well, when the imagination has been seduced, when this seduction has fallen upon the heart, when the heart shall have told it to the senses, do you believe that cold reason would have much power against this seduction of sense and sentiment? And then, man should not clothe himself too much in his power and his virtue; man has low instincts and high ideas, and, with all, virtue is only the consequence of an effort ofttimes laborious. Lascivious pictures have generally more influence than cold reason. This is what I respond to that theory, that is, as a first response; but I have a second.

I hold that the romance of *Madame Bovary*, from a philosophic point of view, is not moral. Without doubt Madame Bovary died of poison; she suffered much, it is true; but she died at her own time and in her own way, not because she had committed adultery but because she wished to; she died in all the prestige of her youth and beauty; she died after having two lovers, leaving a husband who loved her, who adored her, who found Rodolphe’s portrait, his letters and Léon’s, who read the letters of a woman twice an adulteress, and who, after that, loved her still more, even on the other side of the tomb. Who would condemn this woman in the book? No one. Such is the conclusion. There is not in the book a person who condemns her. If you can find one wise person, if you can find one single principal virtue by which the adulteress is condemned, I am wrong. But if in all the book there is not a person who makes her bow her head, there is not an idea, a line, by virtue of which the adulteress is scourged, it is I who am right, and the book is immoral!

Should it be in the name of conjugal honor that the book be condemned? No, for conjugal honor is represented here by a devoted husband who, after the death of his wife, meets Rodolphe and seeks to find upon the face of the lover the features of the woman he loved. I ask you whether you could stigmatize this woman in the name of conjugal honor when there is not in the book a single word where the husband does not bow before the adulteress?

Should it be in the name of public opinion? No, for public opinion is personified in a grotesque being, in the Homais apothecary surrounded by ridiculous persons whom this woman dominated.

Will you condemn it in the name of religious sentiment? No, for this sentiment you see personified in the curate Bournisien, a priest as grotesque as the apothecary, believing only in physical suffering, never in moral, and little more than a materialist.

Will you condemn it in the name of the author's conscience? I know not what the author thinks, but in chapter 10, the only philosophical one of his book, I read the following:

"There is always after the death of any one a kind of stupefaction; so difficult is it to grasp this advent of nothingness and to resign ourselves to believe in it."

This is not a cry of unbelief, but it is at least a cry of scepticism. Without doubt it is difficult to comprehend and believe it, but why this stupefaction which manifest's itself at death? Why? Because this surprise is something that is a mystery, because it is difficult to comprehend and judge, although one must resign himself to it. And as for me, I say that if death is the beginning of annihilation, that if the devoted husband feels his love increase on learning of the adulteries of his wife, that if opinion is represented by a grotesque being, that if religious sentiment is represented by a ridiculous priest, one person alone is right, and that is Emma Bovary, — Messalina was right against Juvenal.

This is the conclusion of the book, drawn not by the author, but by a man who reflects and goes to the depths of things, by a man who has sought in this book for a person who could rule this woman. There is none there. The only person who ruled was Madame Bovary. It is necessary to seek elsewhere than in the book; we must look to Christian morals, which are the foundation of modern civilization. By this standard all explains itself, all becomes clear.

In its name the adulteress is stigmatized, condemned, not because her act is an imprudence, exposing her to disillusions and regrets, but because it is a crime against the family. You stigmatize and condemn suicide, not because it is a foolish thing (the fool is not responsible), not because it is a cowardly act (for it sometimes requires a certain physical courage), but because it is a scorn of duty in the life we are living, and the cry of unbelief in the life to come.

This code of morals stigmatizes realistic literature, not because it paints the passions: hatred, vengeance, love — the world sees but the surface and art should paint them — but not paint them without bridle, without limits. Art without rules is not art. It is like a woman who discards all clothing. To impose upon art the one rule of public decency is not to subject it, not to dishonor it.

One grows great only by rule. These, gentlemen, are the principles which we profess, this the doctrine which we defend with conscience.

PLEA FOR THE DEFENSE, BY M. SENARD

Gentlemen, M. Gustave Flaubert has been accused before you of making a bad book; of having, in this book, outraged public morals and religion. M. Gustave Flaubert is beside me and affirms before you that he has made an honest book; he affirms before you that the thought in his book, from the first line to the last, is a moral thought; and that, if it were not perverted (and you have seen during the last hour how great a talent one may have for perverting a thought) it would be (and will become again presently) for you, as it has been already for the readers of the book, an eminently moral and religious thought capable of being translated into these words: the excitation of virtue through the horror of vice.

I bring M. Gustave Flaubert's affirmation here to you, and I put it fearlessly in the light of the prosecuting attorney's speech, for this affirmation is grave; and it is through the personality of its maker, through the circumstances which have led to the writing of the book, that I am going to make it understood to you.

The affirmation is grave on account of the personality that makes it: and, permit me to say to you that M. Gustave Flaubert is not to me an unknown man who has instructions to give me, and who has need of recommendations from me — I speak not only of his morality but of his position. I come here, into this precinct, fulfilling a duty of conscience after reading the book, after feeling myself exalted, by this reading, in all that is honest and profoundly religious. But, at the same time that I come fulfilling a duty of conscience, I come to fulfill a duty of friendship. I remember, and I can never forget, that his father was an old friend of mine. His father, by whose friendship I was long honoured, to the last day of his life, his father, — permit me to say his illustrious father, — was for thirty years surgeon-in-chief at the hospital at Rouen. He was in charge of the Dupuytren dissecting room, and in giving to science great instruction, he has endowed it with some great names; I will mention but one, that of Cloquet. He has not only left for himself a good name in science, he has left a grand memento in his immense service to humanity. And at the same time I am recalling my bond of friendship with him, I wish to tell you that his son, who has been dragged into Court for an outrage against morals and religion, this son is the friend of my children, as I was the friend of his father. I know his thought, I know his intentions, and the counsellor has the right here of placing himself as a personal guaranty of his client.

Gentlemen, a great name and great memories have obligations. Children were not wanting to M. Flaubert. There were three of them, two sons, and a daughter who died at twenty-one. The eldest has been judged worthy to succeed his father; and he is to-day, as he has been for many years, carrying on the mission which his father conducted for thirty years. The younger son is here; he is at your bar. In leaving them a considerable fortune and a great name, their father has left upon them the obligation of being men of intelligence and of heart; that is to say, useful men. The brother of my client has been thrown into a career where each day brings its own service. This one has devoted his life to study and to letters, the work before you being his first work. This first work, gentlemen, which provokes the passions, as the Government Attorney has said, is the result of long study and much thought. M. Gustave Flaubert is a man of serious character, turning his attention, through his very nature, to serious subjects, to sad subjects. He is not the man whom the prosecuting attorney, in fifteen or twenty lines bitten out here and there, has presented to you as a maker of lascivious pictures. No; there is in his nature, I repeat, all that is gravest, most serious, and even the saddest that one could imagine. His book, by restoring a single phrase, by putting beside the quoted lines the lines which precede and follow, will take on its veritable colour, as soon as you understand the intentions of the author. And, of the too clever words to which you have listened, there will remain to you only the memory of a sentiment of profound admiration for a talent which can thus transform things.

I have told you that M. Gustave Flaubert was a serious and grave man. His studies, conforming to his nature, have been serious and broad. They have embraced not only all branches of literature, but the right branches. M. Flaubert is not the man to be content with observations of even the best where he lived; he has sought out the best in other places; *Qui mores multorum vidit et urbes*.

After his father’s death and the completion of his studies at college, he visited Italy, and from 1848 to 1852 traveled through the countries of the Orient, — Egypt, Palestine, Asia Minor — in which countries, doubtless, a man traveling through and bringing to his travels a fine intelligence, could acquire something exalted, something poetic, as well as the colour and prestige of style which the public minister has just pointed out, to make good the misdemeanor that he imputes. That prestige of style, those literary qualities pointed to with *éclat* in this debate, are there, but after no fashion can they be brought up for indictment.

Since his return, in 1852, M. Gustave Flaubert has written and sought to produce in a grand outline the result of his close and serious studies, the result of what he had gathered in his journeys.

What is the outline he has chosen, the subject he has taken, and how has he treated it? My client belongs to any of the schools, whose names I have just learned in the Attorney’s speech. Heaven knows he belongs to the realistic school, in that he occupies himself with the reality of things. He belongs to the psychological school, in the sense that it is not material things which engage him, but human sentiment and the development of the passions wherever the human being is placed. He belongs to the romantic school less perhaps than to any other, because, if romanticism appears in his book, as does realism, it appears only in some ironical expressions here and there, which the public attorney has taken seriously. What M. Flaubert especially wished was to take a subject of study from real life, creating from it some true types of the middle class, arriving finally at some useful result. Yes, what has most occupied my client in the studies to which he has devoted himself, is precisely this useful aim, followed out in putting upon the scene three or four personages from actual society, living in the conditions of real life, and presenting them to the eyes of the reader in a true picture of what is met with very often in the world.

The Prosecuting Attorney, summing up his opinion of *Madame Bovary*, has said:

“The second title of this work might be: *The Story of the Adulteries of a Provincial Woman*.”

I protest vigorously against this title. This alone, had I not listened to your speech from beginning to end, would prove to me the prejudice in which you are firmly bound. No! the second title of this work is not: *The Story of the Adulteries of a Provincial Woman*; it is, if it is absolutely necessary to have a second title: the story of the education too often met with in the provinces; the story of the perils to which such an education leads; the story of degradation, of dishonesty, of suicide, considered as a consequence of a first fault, and a fault led up to through wrong-doing, by which a young woman is often carried away. It is the story of an education, and the deplorable life of which such an education is often the preface. This is what M. Flaubert desired to paint, and not the adulteries of a woman of the provinces. You will see this at once on reading the incriminated book.

Now, the prosecuting attorney perceives in all this, and through it all, a lascivious colour. If it were possible to take the number of lines of the book which he has cut out, and put parallel to them other lines that he has left, we should have a total proportion of about one to five hundred; and you would see that this proportion of one to five hundred was in no way of a lascivious colour; it exists only under the conditions of being cut out and commented upon.

Now, what has M. Flaubert desired to paint? First, education given to a woman which is above the conditions to which she was born — something that too often happens among us, it must be confessed. Then, the mixture of discordant elements that are thus produced in the intelligence of the woman; and then when marriage comes, especially if the marriage is not in accordance with the education, but rather with the conditions under which the woman was born, the author explains all these facts which occur in the situation that he depicts.

What has he shown? He shows a woman entering upon vice because of a disappointing match; then vice in its last degree, degradation and wretchedness. Presently, when through the reading of several passages, I shall have made you acquainted with the book as a whole, I shall demand of this tribunal the privilege of their accepting the question on these terms: Would this book, put into the hands of a young woman, have the effect of leading her towards easy pleasures, towards adultery, or, on the contrary, would it show her the danger of the first step, and bring upon her a shiver of horror? The question thus put, your conscience would soon decide.

I have here stated that M. Flaubert wished to paint a woman who, instead of trying to adapt herself to the conditions in which she was placed, to her position and her birth, instead of seeking to make herself a part of the life to which she belonged, was occupied with a thousand foreign aspirations drawn from an education too far above her; instead of accommodating herself to the duties of her position, of being the tranquil wife of a country doctor with whom she should pass her days, in place of seeking her happiness in her house and in her marriage, sought it in interminable fancies; and then, meeting a young man upon the way who coquetted with her, she played the same game with him (Heaven knows they were both inexperienced enough!) urging herself on by degrees, and frightened when she turned to the religion of her early years and found it insufficient. We shall see presently why this was so. At first, the young man’s ignorance and her own preserves her from danger. But she soon meets a man, of the kind of which there are too many in the world, who takes possession of her — this poor woman, already perverted and ready to stray. Here is the main point; now it is necessary to see what the book makes of it.

The Public Minister becomes incensed, and I believe wrongly so from the standard of conscience and the human heart, over that first scene, where Madame Bovary finds a sort of pleasure, of joy, in having broken her prison, and returns to her home saying: “I have a lover.” Do you believe that this is not the first cry of the human heart! The proof is between you and me. But we must look a little further, and then we shall see that, if the first moment, the first instant of the fall, excites in this woman a sort of transport of joy, of delirium, in some lines farther on the deception makes itself manifest and, following the expression of the author, she seems humiliated in her own eyes.

Yes, deception, grief, and remorse come to her at the same time. The man in whom she has confided, to whom she has given herself up, has only made use of her for the moment, as he would a plaything; remorse and regret now rend her heart. It has shocked you to hear this called the disillusion of adultery; you would have preferred *pollution* at the hand of a writer who placed before you a woman who, not having comprehended marriage, felt herself *polluted* by contact with her husband, and who, having sought her ideal elsewhere, found the *disillusions* of adultery. This word has shocked you; in the place of *disillusions*, you would have wished *pollution* of adultery. This tribunal shall be the judge. As for me, if I had depicted the same personage I would have said to her: Poor woman! if you believe that your husband's kisses are monotonous and wearisome, if you have found only platitudes — this word has been especially brought to our notice — the platitudes of marriage — if you seem to see pollution in a union where love does not preside, take care, for your dreams are an illusion, and you will one day be cruelly deceived. But this man, gentlemen, who knows how to speak strongly, makes use of the word pollution to express what we would have called disillusion, and he has used the true word, although vague to him who can bring to it no intelligence. I would have liked better his not speaking so strongly, his not pronouncing the word *pollution*, but rather averting the woman from deception, from disillusion, and saying to her: Where you believe you will find love, you will find only libertinism; where you think you will find happiness, there is only bitterness. A husband who goes tranquilly about his affairs, who kisses you, puts on his house cap and eats his soup with you, is a prosaic husband revolting to you; you aspire to a man who will love you, idolize you; poor child! that man will be a libertine who will have taken you for a minute for the sake of playing with you. There will be some illusion about it the first time, perhaps the second; you may come back home joyous, singing the song of adultery. "I have a lover!" but the third time you will not wish to go to him, for the disillusion will have come. The man you have dreamed of will have lost all his prestige; you will have found again in love the platitudes of marriage, and this time with scorn, disdain, disgust and poignant remorse.

This, gentlemen, is what M. Flaubert has said, what he has painted, what is in each line of his book; and this is what distinguishes his work from all other works of the kind. Under his hand, the great irregularities of society figure on each page, and adultery walks abroad full of disgust and shame. He has brought into the common relations of life the most powerful teaching that can be given to a young woman. And Heaven knows that to those of our young women who do not find in lofty, honest principle and stern religion enough to keep them steady in the accomplishment of their duties as mothers, or who do not find it in that resignation and practical science of life which bids us accommodate ourselves to what we have, but who carry their dreams to the outside (and the most honest, the most pure of our young women, in the prosaic life of their households, are sometimes tormented by that which is going on outside), a book like this would bring but one reflection. Of that you may be sure. And this is what M. Flaubert has intended.

And notice carefully one thing: M. Flaubert is not the man who has painted a charming adultery for you, in order to arrive later with the *Deus ex machina*; no, you are carried too quickly on to the last page. Adultery with him is only a series of torments, remorse and regret; and then he arrives at the final, frightful expiation. It is excessive. If M. Flaubert sins, it is through excess; and I will show you presently what is meant by this. The expiation is not allowed to wait, and it is that which makes the book eminently moral and useful. It does not promise the young woman some beautiful years at the end of which she can say: after this, one is willing to die. No! from the second day there is bitterness and disillusion. The conclusion for morality is found in each line of the book.

This book is written with a power of observation to which the Government Attorney has rendered justice. And it is here that I would call your attention to it, because if the accusation is without foundation, it must fall. This book is written with a power truly remarkable for observing the smallest details. An article in the *Artiste*, signed Flaubert, has served as yet another text for the accusation. Let the Government Attorney note, first that this article is foreign to the indictment; then, that we will hold him innocent and moral in the eyes of this tribunal on one condition, which is, that he will have the goodness to read the entire article from the place of the cutting.

The most noticeable thing in M. Flaubert's book is what some accounts have called a fidelity wholly Daguerreian in the reproduction of the type of things, and in the intimate nature of the thought of the human heart; — and this reproduction becomes more powerful still by the magic of his style. Now notice, that if he had applied this fidelity only to the scenes of degradation, you could say with reason: the author has been pleased to paint the scenes of degradation with that power of description which is peculiarly his own. From the first to the last page of his book, he keeps close to all the facts in Emma's life, without any kind of reserve, from her infancy in her father's house, to her education in the convent, sparing nothing. And those of us who have read the book from beginning to end can say — and this is a notable point which should put him in a favorable light with you, not only bringing him acquittal, but removing from him every kind of misunderstanding — that when he comes to the difficult parts, precisely at the time of degradation, in place of doing as some classic authors have done, (as the Public Attorney knows full well, but whom he forgot when he wrote his address) a few pages of whose writings I have with me here, (not to read to you but for you to run through in Court — and I might quote a few lines here presently), in place of doing as our great classic authors, our great masters have done, who never hesitate at description when they have come to the scene of a union of the senses between man and woman, M. Flaubert contents himself with a word. All his descriptive power disappears, because his thought is chaste; because where he might write in his own manner and with the magic of his style, he feels that there are some things that should not be described or even touched upon. The Public Attorney finds that he has still said too much. When I have shown him some men who, in great philosophical works, have delighted in descriptions of these things, and when in the light of this fact I have shown that this man, who possesses the descriptive faculty to so high a degree and who, far from using it, desists and abstains from it, I shall indeed have the right to ask why this accusation has been brought?

Nevertheless, gentlemen, just as he has described to us the pleasant cradle of Emma’s infancy, with its foliage, its rose-colored and white flowers which gladdened her with their blossoms and their perfume, so he has described her when she went out from there into other paths, into paths where she found mire, where her feet became soiled from its contact, when the mire rose higher than herself and — he need not have told it! But that would be to suppress the book completely, and I am going far enough to say would suppress its moral element under a pretext of defending it; for if a fault cannot be shown, if it cannot be pointed out, if in a picture of real life which aims to show, through thought, peril, fall and punishment, you would debar painting such as this, it is evident you would cut out of the book its whole purpose.

This book was not a matter of a few hours’ amusement for my client. It represents two or three years of incessant study. And now I am going to tell you something more: M. Flaubert who, after so many years of labor, so many of study, so many journeys, so many notes culled from authors he had read, — and Heaven grant you may see the fountain-head from which he has drawn, for this strange fact will take upon itself his justification — M. Flaubert (and his lascivious colour) — you will find impregnated wholly with Bossuet and Massillon. It is in the study of these authors that we shall presently find him seeking, not to plagiarize, but to reproduce in his descriptions the thoughts and colours employed by them. And can you believe, after all that, having done this work with so much love for it, and with a decided purpose, that, full of confidence in himself, and after so much study and meditation, he would wish to throw himself immediately into the arena? He would have done it, no doubt, had he been an unknown man, if his name had belonged to himself in sole ownership, had he believed himself able to dispose of it and use it as it seemed good to him; but, I repeat, he is one of those upon whom rests the obligation of rank. His name is Flaubert, he is the second son of M. Flaubert, and he has desired to make a place for himself in literature, profoundly respecting the moral and religious phases of it, — not through the notoriety of a lawsuit, for such a purpose could not enter his thoughts — but through personal dignity, not wishing his name to be at the head of a publication that did not seem to some persons and to those in whom he had faith, worthy of being published. M. Flaubert read in fragments, and even in totality, to friends holding high places in the world of letters, the pages which he hoped some day to print, and I assure you that not one of them has been offended by what has just now excited such lively severity on the part of the Government Attorney. No one even thought of it. They simply examined and studied the literary value of the book. As to the moral purpose, it is so evident, so written in every line in terms so unequivocal that there was no need of raising the question.

Reassured upon the value of the book, encouraged, furthermore, by the most eminent men of the press, M. Flaubert thought only of printing it and giving it to the public. I repeat: everyone was unanimous in rendering homage to its literary merit, to its style, and at the same time to the excellent thought that pervaded it, from the first line to the last. And when this action was brought it was not he alone who was surprised and profoundly troubled, but, permit me to say, we, who cannot understand the action, and I myself most of all, who had read the book with a very lively interest as soon as it was published. But we are his intimate friends. Heaven knows that there are some shades of meaning that might escape us in our easy-going habits which never could escape women of great intelligence, of great purity and unquestioned chastity. These are not names which can be pronounced in this audience, but if I could tell you what has been said to Flaubert, what has been said to me, even, by mothers of families who have read this book, if I could tell you their astonishment, after receiving from that reading an impression so good that they believed they should thank the author for it, if I could tell you their astonishment, their grief, when they learned that this book was thought to oppose public morals and religious faith, the faith of their whole life, God knows there would be in the sum of this appreciation sufficient to fortify me, had I need of being fortified for this combat with the Public Attorney.

However, in the midst of all the appreciative voices of contemporaneous literature there is one which I wish to mention to you. There is one who is not only respected by reason of a grand and beautiful character, who, in the midst of adversity, of suffering even, has struggled courageously each day; who is not only great by virtue of many deeds useless to recall here, but great through his literary works which must be recalled because here he is an authority; great especially through the purity which exists in all his works, through the chastity of all his writings: Lamartine.

Lamartine did not know my client; he did not know that he existed. Lamartine, at his home in the country, read *Madame Bovary* in each number of the *Revue de Paris,* and Lamartine found there such power that it recurred to him again and again, as I am going to tell you.

After some days, Lamartine returned to Paris, and the next day informed himself where M. Gustave Flaubert lived. He sent to the *Revue* to learn where M. Gustave Flaubert lived, who had published in the magazine some articles under the title of *Madame Bovary*. He then directed his secretary to go and present his compliments to M. Flaubert, to express for him the satisfaction he had found in reading his book, and also his desire to see the new author who revealed himself in an essay of that order.

My client went to Lamartine's house; and he found in him not only a man who encouraged him, but who said to him:

"You have made the best book I have read in twenty years."

In a word, his praise was such that, in his modesty, my client scarcely liked to repeat it to me. Lamartine proved to him that he had read each number, proving it most graciously by repeating entire pages from them. Lamartine only added:

"While I have read even to the last page without reserve, I did blame the last pages. You have hurt me, you have literally made me suffer! The punishment is beyond all proportion to the crime; you have created a pitiably frightful death! Assuredly the woman who defiles the marriage bed should expect punishment, but this is horrible; it is a punishment such as I have never seen. You have gone too far; you have done mischief to my nerves. That power of description which you have applied to the last moment of death has left upon me an indelible suffering!"

And when Gustave Flaubert said to him:

"But, Monsieur de Lamartine, do you know that I have been indicted and summoned to a court of correction for an offense against public morals and religion for having made a book like that?"

Lamartine answered:

"I believe that I have been all my life a man who, in literary works as well as others, comprehends fully what makes for public and religious morals; my dear child, it is not possible to find in France a tribunal that will convict you."

This is what passed between Lamartine and Flaubert yesterday, and I have the right to say to you that this approval is among those which are worthy to be well weighed.

This well understood, let us see how my conscience could tell me that *Madame Bovary* was a good book, a good deed. And I ask your permission to add that I do not take to these things easily, this facility is not my habit. Some literary works I take up which, although emanating from our great writers, do not remain two minutes before my eyes. I will pass to you in the council chamber some lines that I took no delight in reading, and I will ask your permission to say to you that when I came to the end of M. Flaubert's work, I was convinced that a cutting made by the *Revue de Paris* was the cause of all this. I shall ask you further to add my appreciation to this highest and most distinguished appreciation which I am about to mention.

Here, gentlemen, is a portfolio filled with the opinions of all the literary men of our time upon the work with which we are engaged, among whom are some of the most distinguished, expressing their astonishment upon reading this new work, at once so moral and so useful!

Now, how has it come about that a work like this can incur a process of law? If you will permit me, I will tell you. The *Revue de Paris*, whose reading committee had read the work in its entirety, for the manuscript was sent long before it was published, evidently found nothing to criticise. When it came time to print the copy of December 1st, 1856, one of the directors of the *Revue* became affrighted at the scene in the cab. He said: "This is not conventional, we must suppress it." Flaubert was offended by the suppression. He was not willing that it should be made unless a note to that effect were placed at the bottom of the page. It was he who exacted the note. It is he who, on account of his self-respect as an author, neither wishing to have his work mutilated nor, on the other hand wishing to make trouble for the *Revue*, said: "You may suppress it if it seems best to you, but you will state that you have suppressed something." And they agreed upon the following note:

"The directors have seen the necessity of suppressing a passage here which did not seem fitting to the *Revue de Paris*; we give notice of it to the author."

Here is the suppressed passage which I am going to read to you. We have only a proof, which we had great difficulty in procuring. The first part has not a single correction; one word is corrected in the second part.

"'Where to, sir?' asked the coachman.

"'Where you like,' said Léon, forcing Emma into the cab.

"And the lumbering machine set out. It went down the Rue Grand-Pont, crossed the Place des Arts, the Quai Napoléon, the Pont Neuf, and stopped short before the statue of Pierre Corneille.

"'Go on,' cried a voice that came from within.

"The cab went on again, and as soon as it reached the Carrefour

Lafayette, set off down-hill, and entered the station at a gallop.

"'No, straight on!' cried the same voice.

"The cab came out by the gate, and soon having reached the Cours, trotted quietly beneath the elm-trees. The coachman wiped his brow, put his leather hat between his knees, and drove his carriage beyond the side alley by the meadow to the margin of the waters.

"It went along by the river, along the towing-path paved with sharp pebbles, and for a long while in the direction of Oyssel, beyond the isles.

"But suddenly it turned with a dash across Quatre-mares, Sotteville, La Grande-Chaussée, the Rue d'Elbeuf, and made its third halt in front of the Jardin des Plantes.

"'Get on, will you?' cried the voice more furiously.

"And at once resuming its course, it passed by Saint-Sever, by the Quai des Curandiers, the Quai aux Meules, once more over the bridge, by the Place du Champ de Mars, and behind the hospital gardens, where old men in black coats were walking in the sun along the terrace all green with ivy. It went up the Boulevard Bouvreuil, along the Boulevard Cauchoise, then the whole of Mont-Riboudet to the Deville hills.

"It came back; and then, without any fixed plan or direction, wandered about at hazard. The cab was seen at Saint-Pol, at Lescure, at Mont Gargan, at La Rouge-Marc and Place du Gaillardbois; in the Rue Maladrerie, Rue Dinanderie, before Saint-Romain, Saint-Vivien, Saint-Maclou, Saint-Nicaise — in front of the Customs, at the 'Vieille Tour,' the 'Trois Pipes,' and the Monumental Cemetery. From time to time, the coachman on his box cast despairing eyes at the public-houses. He could not understand what furious desire for locomotion urged these individuals never to wish to stop. He tried to now and then, and at once exclamations of anger burst forth behind him. Then he lashed his perspiring jades afresh, but indifferent to their jolting, running up against things here and there, not caring if he did, demoralised, and almost weeping with thirst, fatigue, and depression.

"And on the harbour in the midst of the drays and casks and in the streets at the corners, the good folk opened large wonder-stricken eyes at this sight, so extraordinary in the provinces, a cab with blinds drawn, and which appeared thus constantly shut more closely than a tomb, and tossing about like a vessel.

"Once, in the middle of the day, in the open country, just as the sun beat most fiercely against the old plated lanterns, a bared hand passed beneath the small blinds of yellow canvas, and threw out some scraps of paper that scattered in the wind, and farther off alighted like white butterflies on a field of red clover all in bloom.

“At about six o’clock, the carriage stopped in a back street of the Beauvoisine Quarter, and a woman got out, who walked with her veil down, and without turning her head.

“On reaching the inn, Madame Bovary was surprised not to see the diligence. Hivert, who had waited for her fifty-three minutes, had at last started.

“Nothing, however, could prevent her setting out; she had promised to return that evening. Moreover, Charles expected her, and in her heart she felt already that cowardly docility that is for some women at once the chastisement and atonement of adultery.”

M. Flaubert calls my attention to the fact that the Public Attorney condemned this last clause.

THE GOVERNMENT ATTORNEY:

No, I have pointed it out.

M. SENARD:

It is certain that if he had made a reproach it would have fallen before these words: “at once the chastisement and atonement of adultery.” Furthermore, that could be made a matter of reproach with as much foundation as the other quotations, for in all that you have condemned there is no point that can be seriously held.

Now, gentlemen, this kind of fantastic journey having displeased the editors of the *Revue*, it was suppressed. This was certainly excess of reserve on the part of the *Revue*; and it is very certain that it is not an excess of reserve which could furnish material for a lawsuit. You shall see now what has furnished the material. What is not seen, what has been suppressed, comes thus to appear a very strange thing. People imagine many things, and often those which do not exist, as you have seen from the reading of the original passage. Heavens! Do you know what they imagined? Probably that there was in the suppressed passage something analogous to that which you will have the goodness to read in one of the most marvellous romances from the pen of an honorable member of the French Academy, M. Mérimée.

M. Mérimée, in a romance entitled *The Double Mistake*, describes a scene which took place in a postchaise. It is not the locality where the carriage is that is of importance, it is, as here, in the detail of what is done in the interior. I do not wish to abuse the audience, and will pass the book to the Public Attorney and to the court. If we had written a half, or a quarter part of what M. Mérimée wrote, I should find some embarrassment in the task that has been given me, or rather I should have to modify it; in place of saying what I have said, and what I affirm, that M. Flaubert has written a good book, an honest book, useful and moral, I should say: literature has its rights; M. Mérimée has made a very remarkable literary work, and it is not necessary to show ourselves too particular about details when the whole is irreproachable. I take my stand there; I should acquit, and you will acquit. Great Heavens! It is not by omission that an author can sin in a matter of this kind. And besides, you will have the detail of that which took place in the cab. But as my client himself was content to make a journey, revealing what passed in the interior of the carriage only by a bare hand which appeared under the yellow silk curtains and threw out bits of torn paper which were scattered by the wind and settled down afar off like white butterflies upon a field of red clover all in flower, as my client was content with that, no one knew anything about it and everyone supposed — from the suppression itself — that he had at least said as much as the member of the French Academy. You have seen that there was nothing in it.

Ah, well! this unfortunate suppression has caused the lawsuit! That is to say, when, in the offices where they have charge, and with infinite reason, of inspecting all writings which could offend public morals, they saw this cut, they took warning. I am obliged to declare, and, gentlemen of the *Revue*, allow me to state that they started the work of their scissors two words too far off; they should have begun before they got into the cab. To cut after that was more difficult. This cutting was indeed most unfortunate; but if you have committed the error, gentlemen of the *Revue*, assuredly you will atone for it to-day.

They said in the inspecting office: Take heed of what is to follow, and when the following number appeared, they made war on it to the syllable. The people in the office are not obliged to read all; and when they saw that some one had written about a woman removing all her clothing, they were startled enough without going further. It is true that, differing from our great masters, Flaubert has not taken the trouble to describe the alabaster of her bare arms, throat, *etc.* He has not said, as did a poet whom we love:

I see her alabaster limbs ardent and pure,
Smooth as ebony, like the lily, coral, roses, veins of azure,
Such indeed, as in former times thou showedst to me
Of nudity embellished and adorned;
When nights slipped by, and pillows soft
Saw thee from my kisses waking and sleeping oft.

He has said nothing like this of André Chénier’s. But he finally said:

“She abandoned herself…. Her clothing fell from her.”

She abandoned herself! Why not? Is all description to be prohibited? But when one makes an incriminating charge, he should read the whole, and the Government Attorney has not read the whole. The passage he makes the charge against does not stop where he stopped; it has a corrective, and here it is:

"Nevertheless, there was upon this brow covered with cold drops, upon these stammering lips, in these bewildered eyes, in the clasp of these arms something extreme, something vague and lugubrious which seemed to Léon to glide between them in some subtle fashion, as if to separate them."

In the office they did not read that. The Government Attorney just now did not notice it. He only saw this:

"Then, with a single gesture, she allowed all her clothes to fall from her."

And then he cries out: An outrage to public morals! Surely, it is too easy to accuse with a system like this. God forbid that the authors of dictionaries fall under the Government Attorney's hand! Who could escape condemnation if, by means of cutting, not of phrases, but of words, one is to be informed of a list he has made that might offend morals or religion?

My client's first thought, which unfortunately met with resistance, was this: "There is only one thing to do: print the book immediately, not with parts cut out, but the work entire as it left my hands, restoring to it the scene in the cab." I was of his opinion, believing that the best defense of my client would be a complete imprint of the work with special indication of some points to which we would beg to draw the Court's attention. I myself gave the title to this publication: *Memoir of Gustave Flaubert for the prevention of outrage to religious morals brought against him*. I had written on it with my hand: Civil Court, Sixth Chamber, with the signature of the President and the Public Minister. There was a preface in which was written:

"They have indicted me with phrases taken here and there from my book; I can only defend myself with the whole book."

To ask the judges to read an entire romance would be asking much; but we are before judges who love truth, who desire the truth, and who to learn it would not shrink from any fatigue. We are before judges who desire justice and desire it energetically, and who will read, without any kind of hesitation, what we beg them to read. I said to M. Flaubert: "Send this immediately to the printers, and put my name at the bottom beside yours: SENARD, *Counsel*." They had begun the printing; arrangements were made for a hundred copies for our own use; the work went on with extreme rapidity, they were working day and night on it, when the order came to us to discontinue the printing, not of a book, but of a pamphlet in which was the incriminated work together with explanatory notes. We appealed to the office of the Attorney-General — who informed us that the prohibition was absolute and could not be removed.

Well, so be it! We should have published the book with our notes and observation's; but now I ask you, gentlemen, if your first reading has left you in doubt, to give it a second reading. You will willingly do this, as you desire the truth; and you could not be among those who, when two lines of a man's writing is brought to them, are sure to make it fit any condition that may be. You do not wish a man to be judged upon a few cuttings more or less skilfully made. You would not allow that; you would not deprive him of the ordinary means of defense. Well, you have the book, and although it may be less easy than you might wish, you will make your own divisions, observations, and meanings, because you desire the truth, because truth is necessary for the basis of your judgment, and truth will come from a serious examination of the book.

However, I cannot stop here. The Public Minister has attacked the book, and it is necessary for me to defend it, to complete the quotations he has made, and show the nothingness of the accusation against each incriminated passage; that will be all my defense.

I shall not attempt, assuredly, to place myself in opposition to the exalted, animated, pathetic appreciation with which the Public Attorney has surrounded all that he said, by striving for appreciation of the same kind; the defense would have no right to make use of such a manner of procedure; it must content itself with citing the text, such as it is.

And in the first place, I declare that nothing is more false than what has just been said about lascivious colour. Lascivious colour! Where can you find it? My client has depicted in *Madame Bovary* what sort of woman? My God! it is sad to say, and yet it is true, a young girl, born, as they nearly all are, honest; at least the greater number are honest, but very fragile, when education, instead of fortifying them, softens them and turns them into bad paths. He has depicted a young girl. Is she of perverse nature? No, but of an impressionable nature, susceptible of exaltation.

The Government Attorney has said: “This young girl has constantly been presented in a lascivious light.” No! she is represented as born in the country, born on a farm, where she is occupied with all her father's labor, and where no kind of lasciviousness can find a way to her mind or heart. Then she is represented, in the place of following the destiny which would be hers naturally, instead of being brought up for the farm or in some analogous place in which she ought to live, she is represented as under the short-sighted authority of a father who thinks he must have his daughter educated in a convent, this girl born on a farm, who should marry a farmer, or a man of the country. She is then taken to a convent, outside her sphere. As there is nothing that does not have weight in the Public Attorney's speech, we must leave nothing without a response. Ah! you spoke of her little sins, and in quoting from the first number, you said:

“When she went to confession, she invented little sins, in order that she might stay there longer, kneeling in the shadow … beneath the whisperings of the priest.” You have gravely deceived yourself in regard to my client’s meaning. He has not committed the fault with which you reproach him; the error is wholly on your side, in the first place upon the age of the girl. As she entered the convent at thirteen, it is evident that she must have been fourteen when she went to confession. She was not then a child of ten years, as it has pleased you to say, and you were materially deceived on that point. But I am not so sure of the unlikelihood of a child of ten years liking to remain at the confessional “under the whisperings of the priest.”

All that I desire is that you read the lines which precede, and that is not easy, I agree. And here appears the inconvenience of not having a pamphlet memoir at hand; with such an aid, we should not have to search through six volumes!

I have called your attention to this passage in order to recall it to *Madame Bovary* and her true character. Will you permit me to say, what seems to me very important, that M. Flaubert has fully comprehended this point and put it in bold relief. There is a kind of religion which is generally spoken of to young girls, which is the worst of all religion. There may be in this regard a difference of opinion. As for me, I declare clearly that I know nothing more beautiful, or useful, or necessary to sustain, not only women in the ways of life but men themselves, who sometimes have the most difficult trials to overcome, I know nothing so useful, so necessary, as the religious sentiment, but a serious religious sentiment, and permit me to add, severe.

I wish my children to believe in one God, not a God in the abstractness of pantheism, but in a Supreme Being with whom they have relationship, to whom they are accustomed to pray, and who at once awes and fortifies them. This thought, you see, it is your belief as well as mine, is our strength in evil days, is our strength against what we call the world; the refuge; or better still, the strength of the weak. It is this thought which gives women that stability which makes them resigned to a thousand little things in life, which makes them carry all their suffering to God, and ask of Him grace to fulfill their duty. That religion, gentlemen, is the Christian religion, and it is that which establishes a relationship between God and man. Christianity, in placing a sort of intermediary power between God and ourselves, renders God more accessible, and communication with Him easier. That the Mother of Him who has made Himself the Saviour should receive the prayers of women, cannot affect, so far as I can see, purity, religious sanctity, or religious sentiment itself. But here is where the change begins. In order to accommodate a religion to all natures, all sorts of petty, miserable, paltry things are introduced. The pomp of the ceremonies, instead of being a true pomp which lays hold on the soul, often degenerates into a commerce in relics, medals, of little saints and Virgins. To what, gentlemen, do the minds of children, curious, ardent, and tender, lend themselves, especially the minds of young girls? To all these enfeebled, attenuated, miserable images of the religious spirit. They then take upon themselves little religious duties to put in practice, little devotions of tenderness, of love, and in the place of having in their soul the sentiment of God, the sentiment of duty, they abandon themselves to reveries, to little devices, to little devotions. And then comes the poesy, and then comes, it is very necessary to say it, a thousand thoughts of charity, of tenderness, of mystic love, a thousand forms which deceive young girls and sensualize religion. These poor children, naturally credulous and weak, take to all this poesy and reverie instead of attaching themselves to something more reasonable and severe. Whence it happens that you have very many strong devotees among women who are not religious at all. And when the wind blows them from the path where they ought to walk, in place of finding strength to combat it, they find only a kind of sensuality which bewilders them.

Ah! you have accused me of having confounded the religious element with sensualism, in the picture of modern society! Accuse rather the society in the midst of which we live, but do not accuse the man who cries with Bossuet: “Awake and be on thy guard against peril!” And say to the fathers of families: Take care! These are not good customs for your daughters; there is in all these mixtures of mysticism something which sensualises religion; say that, and you will speak the truth. It is for this that you accuse Flaubert; it is for this that I exalt his conduct. Yes, he has given very good warning of the whole family of dangers arising from exaltation among young persons, who take upon themselves petty devotions instead of attaching themselves to a strong and severe religion which would sustain them in a day of weakness. And now you shall see whence comes the invention of the little sins “under the whisperings of the priest.” Read page 30:

“She had read ‘Paul and Virginia,’ and she had dreamed of the little bamboo-house, the nigger Domingo, the dog Fidèle, but above all the sweet friendship of some dear little brother, who seeks red fruit for you on trees taller than steeples, or who runs barefoot over the sand, bringing you a bird’s nest.”

Is this lascivious, gentlemen? Let us continue.

THE GOVERNMENT ATTORNEY:

I did not say that passage was lascivious.

M. SENARD:

I ask your pardon, but it is precisely in this passage that you found a lascivious phrase, and it was only by isolating it from what preceded and what followed that you could make it seem lascivious.

“Instead of attending to mass, she looked at the pious vignettes with their azure borders in her book, and she loved the sick lamb, the sacred heart pierced with sharp arrows, or the poor Jesus sinking beneath the cross he carries. She tried, by way of mortification, to eat nothing a whole day. She puzzled her head to find some vow to fulfill.”

Do not forget this; when one invents little sins to confess and seeks some vow to fulfill, as you will find in the preceding line, evidently one has got ideas that are a little false from somewhere. And now I ask you if I have to discuss your passage! I continue:

“In the evening, before prayers, there was some religious reading in the study. On week-nights it was some abstract of sacred history or the Lectures of the Abbé Frayssinous, and on Sundays passages from the ‘Génie du Christianism,’ as a recreation. How she listened at first to the sonorous lamentations of its romantic melancholies re-echoing through the world and eternity! If her childhood had been spent in the shop-parlor of some business quarter, she might perhaps have opened her heart to those lyrical invasions of Nature, which usually come to us only through translation in books. But she knew the country too well; she knew the lowing of cattle, the milking, the plow. Accustomed to calm aspects of life, she turned, on the contrary, to those of excitement. She loved the sea only for the sake of its storms, and the green fields only when broken up by ruins. She wished to get some personal profit out of things, and she rejected as useless all that did not contribute to the immediate desire of her heart, being of a temperament, more sentimental than artistic, looking for emotions not landscapes.”

You shall see with what delicate precaution the author has introduced a saintly old maid, and how, with a purport of teaching religion, there is allowed to slip into the convent a new element, through the introduction of romance brought in by a stranger. Do not forget this when the subject of religious morals is under consideration.

“At the convent there was an old maid who came for a week each month to mend the linen. Patronized by the clergy, because she belonged to an ancient family of noblemen ruined by the Revolution, she dined in the refectory at the table of the good sisters, and after the meal had a bit of chat with them before going back to her work. The girls often slipped out from the study to go and see her. She knew by heart the love-songs of the last century, and sang them in a low voice as she stitched away. She told stories, gave them news, went errands in the town, and on the sly lent the big girls some novel, that she always carried in the pockets of her apron, and of which the good lady herself swallowed long chapters in the intervals of her work."

This is nothing but marvellous, speaking from a literary point of view, and absolution can but be granted a man who has written these admirable passages as a warning against all perils of education of this kind, as an indication to young women of the stumbling-blocks in the life in which they will be placed. Let us continue:

"They were all love, lovers, sweet-hearts, persecuted ladies fainting in lonely pavilions, postilions killed at every stage, horses ridden to death on every page, sombre forests, heartaches, vows, sobs, tears and kisses, little skiffs by moonlight, nightingales in shady groves, 'gentlemen' brave as lions, gentle as lambs, virtuous as no one ever was, always well dressed, and weeping like fountains. For six months, then, Emma, at fifteen years of age, made her hands dirty with books from old lending libraries. With Walter Scott, later, she fell in love with historical events, dreamed of old chests, guardrooms and minstrels. She would have liked to live in some old manor-house, like those long-waisted châtelaines who, in the shade of pointed arches, spent their days leaning on the stone, chin in hand, watching a cavalier with white plume galloping on his black horse from the distant fields. At this time, she had a cult for Mary Stuart and enthusiastic veneration for illustrious or unhappy women. Joan of Arc, Héloïse, Agnès Sorel, the beautiful Ferronnière, and Clémence Isaure stood out to her like comets in the dark immensity of heaven, where also were seen, lost in shadow, and all unconnected, St. Louis with his oak, the dying Bayard, some cruelties of Louis XI., a little of St. Bartholomew's, the plume of the Béarnais, and always the remembrance of the plates painted in honor of Louis XIV.

"In the music-class, in the ballads she sang, there was nothing but little angels with golden wings, madonnas, lagunes, gondoliers; — mild compositions that allowed her to catch a glimpse athwart the obscurity of style and the weakness of the music of the attractive phantasmagoria of sentimental realities."

Now, you have not remembered this, when that poor country girl, having returned to the farm and married a village physician, is invited to an evening party at the Castle, to which you have sought to call the attention of the judges to show that there was something lascivious in a waltz she took part in. You have not called to mind this education when this poor woman is charmed that an invitation comes to take her from her husband's common fireside and lead her to the Castle, where she sees fine gentlemen, beautiful ladies, and the old duke, who, they said, had had great fortune at Court! The Government Attorney has shown some fine emotions *à propos* of Queen Marie-Antoinette! Assuredly there is not one of us who would not share his thought; like him, we have trembled at the name of this victim of the Revolution, but it is not with Marie-Antoinette that we are concerned here, it is with the Castle Vaubyessard.

There was an old duke there who had had, they said, relations with the queen, and towards whom all eyes were turned. And when this young woman found herself thus transported into the midst of the world, thus realizing all the fantastic dreams of her youth, can you wonder at the intoxication of it? And you accuse her of being lascivious! Better accuse the waltz itself; that dance of our great modern balls where, said a late author writing about it, the woman "leans her head upon the shoulder of her partner whose limbs embrace her." You find Madame Bovary lascivious in Flaubert's description, but there is not a man, and I will not except you, who, having taken part in a ball like that and seen that sort of waltz, has not had in mind the wish that his wife or his daughter refrain from this pleasure which has in it so much of the untamed. If, counting upon the chastity which enveloped this young woman, we allow her sometimes to give herself up to this pleasure which the world sanctions, it is necessary to count very much upon that envelope of chastity and, however much one may count upon it, it is not unheard of to express the impressions which M. Flaubert has expressed in the name of morals and chastity.

Here she is at the Castle Vaubyessard, observed by the old duke, noticed favorably by all, and you cry out: What details! What does it mean? Details are everywhere, although we cite but a single passage.

"Madame Bovary noticed that many ladies had not put their gloves in their glasses.

"But at the upper end of the table, alone among all those women, bent over his full plate, with his napkin tied round his neck like a child, an old man sat eating, letting drops of gravy drip from his mouth. His eyes were bloodshot, and he wore a little queue tied with a black ribbon. He was the Marquis's father-in-law, the old Duke de Laverdiére, once on a time favorite of the Count d'Artois, in the days of the Vaudreuil hunting-parties at the Marquis de Conflans', and had been, it was said, the lover of Queen Mari-Antoinette between Monsieur de Coigny and Monsieur de Lauzun."

Defend the queen, defend her especially before the scaffold, say that because of her title she had the right of respect, but suppress your accusations when one contents himself with saying that he had been, it was said, the lover of the queen. Can that be so serious that you reproach us with having insulted the memory of that unfortunate woman?

"He had lived a life of noisy debauch, full of duels, bets, elopements; he had squandered his fortune and frightened all his family. A servant behind his chair named aloud to him in his ear the dishes that he pointed to, stammering, and constantly Emma's eyes turned involuntarily to this old man with hanging lips, as to something extraordinary. He had lived at court and slept in the bed of queens!

"Iced champagne was poured out. Emma shivered all over as she felt it cold in her mouth. She had never seen pomegranates nor tasted pine-apples."

You see that these descriptions are charming, incontestably, and that it is not difficult to take a line here and there for the purpose of creating a kind of colour, against which my conscience protests. It is not a lascivious colour, it is only lifelike; it is the literary element and at the same time the moral element.

Here we have a young girl, whose education you are acquainted with, become a woman. The Government Attorney has asked: Did she even try to love her husband? He has not read the book; if he had read it, he would not have made the objection.

We have, gentlemen, this poor woman dreaming at first. On page 34 you will find her dreams. And there is something more here, something of which the Government Attorney did not speak, and which I must tell you, and these are her impressions when her mother died; you will see if they are lascivious soon enough! Have the goodness to turn to page 33 and follow me:

"When her mother died she cried much the first few days. She had a funeral picture made with the hair of the deceased, and, in a letter sent to the Bertaux full of sad reflections on life, she asked to be buried some day in the same grave. The good man thought she must be ill, and came to see her. Emma was secretly pleased that she had reached at a first attempt the rare ideal of pale lives, never attained by mediocre hearts. She let herself glide along with Lamartine meanderings, listened to harps on lakes, to all the songs of dying swans, to the falling of the leaves, the pure virgins ascending to heaven, and the voice of the Eternal discoursing down the valleys. She wearied of it, would not confess it, continued from habit, and at last was surprised to feel herself soothed, and with no more sadness at heart than wrinkles on her brow."

I wish to make answer to the Government Attorney's reproach that she made no effort to love her husband.

THE GOVERNMENT ATTORNEY:

I did not reproach her for that, I said that she did not succeed in loving him.

M. SENARD:

If I have been mistaken, if you made no reproach, that is the best response that could be given. I believed that I understood you to make one; let us see how I may be deceived. Moreover, here is what I read at the end of page 36:

"And yet, in accord with theories she believed right, she desired to make herself in love with him. By moonlight in the garden she recited all the passionate rhymes she knew by heart, and, sighing, sang to him many melancholy adagios; but she found herself as calm after this as before, and Charles seemed no more amorous and no more moved.

"When she had thus for a while struck the flint on her heart without getting a spark, incapable, moreover, of understanding what she did not experience as of believing anything that did not present itself in conventional forms, she persuaded herself without difficulty that Charles's passion was nothing very exorbitant. His outbursts became regular; he embraced her at certain fixed times. It was one habit among other habits, and, like a dessert, looked forward to after the monotony of dinner."

On page 37 we find a group of similar things. Now, here is where the peril begins. You know how she has been brought up; and I beg you not to forget this for an instant.

There is not a man who, having read this, would not say that M. Flaubert is not only a great artist but a man of heart, for having in the last six pages turned all the horror and scorn upon the woman and all the interest towards the husband. He is a great artist, as has been said, because he has left the husband as he was, he has not transformed him, and to the end he is the same good man, commonplace, mediocre, full of the duties of his profession, loving his wife well, but destitute of education or elevation of thought. He is the same at the death-bed of his wife. And nevertheless, there is not an individual to whom the memory returns with more interest.

Why? Because he has kept to the end his simplicity and uprightness of heart; because to the end he has fulfilled his duty while his wife was led astray. His death is as beautiful and as touching as the death of his wife is hideous. On the dead body of the woman the author has shown the spots made by the vomiting of poison; they soil the white shroud in which she goes to her burial, and he has made her, as he desired, an object of disgust; but there is a man there who is sublime — the husband standing beside the grave. There is a man who is grand, sublime, whose death is admirable — the husband, who, finding himself broken-hearted by the death of his wife, sees afterwards all the illusions of the heart that remained to him embraced in the thought of his wife in the tomb. Keep that, I beg you, in your remembrance. The author has gone beyond what was necessary — as Lamartine has said — in rendering the death of the woman hideous and her punishment most terrible. The author has concentrated all the interest upon the man who did not deviate from the line of duty, who preserved his mediocre character, to be sure (for the author could not change his character) but who preserved also all his generosity of heart, while upon the wife who deceived him, ruined him, gave him into the hands of usurers, put into circulation forged notes and finally arrived at suicide, was heaped all the accumulated horrors. We shall see that it is natural — the death of this woman who, if she had not come to her end by poison, would have been broken by the excess of misfortune with which she was surrounded. The author has seen this. His book would not be read if he had done otherwise, if, in order to show where an education as perilous as that of Madame Bovary can lead, he had not been prodigal with the fascinating images and the powerful tableaux for which he is reproached.

M. Flaubert constantly sets forth the superiority of the husband over the wife, and what superiority, if you please? that of simple duty fulfilled, while the wife was straying from hers. Here she is, fixed by the bent of this bad education; here she is, gone out after the scene of the ball, with the young boy, Léon, as inexperienced as herself. She coquets with him but does not dare to go further; nothing happens. Then comes Rodolphe who takes the woman to himself. After looking at her for a moment, he said: This woman is all right. She will be easy prey, because she is light-minded and inexperienced. As to the fall, will you re-read pages 42, 43 and 44. I have only a word to say about this scene and that is: there are no details, no descriptions, no image that can trouble the senses; a single word indicates the fall: “She abandoned herself.” I pray you to have the goodness to read again the details of the fall of Clarissa Harlowe, which I have not heard decried as a bad book. M. Flaubert has substituted Rodolphe for Lovelace, and Emma for Clarissa. If you will compare the two authors and the two books you will appreciate the situation.

But I will return here to the indignation of the Government Attorney. He is shocked that remorse does not immediately follow the fall, and that in the place of expressing bitterness, she said with satisfaction: “I have a lover!” But the author would not be true, if he made the enchanting draught seem bitter while it still touched the lips. He who wrote as the Attorney understands might be moral, but he would be saying what is not in nature. No, it is not at the first moment of a fault that the sentiment of fault is awakened; otherwise, it would not be committed. No, it is not at the moment when she is under a delusion that intoxicates her that a woman can be averted from this intoxication even by the immensity of the fault she has committed. She feels only the intoxication; she goes back to her home happy, sparkling, and singing in her heart: “I have a lover!” But can this last long? You have read pages 424 and 425. On both pages, and if you please, to page 428, the sentiment of disgust with her lover is not yet manifest; but she is already under the impression of fear and uneasiness. She thinks, weighs the question, and believes that she does not wish to abandon Rodolphe:

“Something stronger than herself forced her to him; so much so, that one day, seeing her come unexpectedly he frowned as one put out.

“‘What is the matter with you?’ she said. ‘Are you ill? Tell me!’

What is the matter with you? she said, Are you ill? Tell me!

“At last he declared with a serious air that her visits were becoming imprudent — that she was compromising herself.

“Gradually Rodolphe’s fears took possession of her. At first, love had intoxicated her, and she had thought of nothing beyond. But now that he was indispensable to her life, she feared to lose anything of this, or even that it should be disturbed. When she came back from his house, she looked all about her, anxiously watching every form that passed in the horizon, and every village window from which she could be seen. She listened for steps, cries, the noise of the ploughs, and she stopped short, white, and trembling more than the aspen leaves swaying overhead.”

You see unmistakably that she was not deceived; she felt clearly that there was something about it of which she had not dreamed. Let us take pages 433 and 434 and you will be still further convinced:

“When the night was rainy, they took refuge in the consulting-room, between the cart-shed and the stable. She lighted one of the kitchen candles that she had hidden behind the books. Rodolphe settled down there as if at home. The sight of the library, of the bureau, of the whole apartment, in fine, excited his merriment, and he could not refrain from making jokes about Charles which rather embarrassed Emma. She would have liked to see him more serious and even on occasions more dramatic; as, for example, when she thought she heard a noise of approaching steps in the alley.

“‘Some one is coming!’ she said

“He blew out the light.

“‘Have you your pistols?’

“‘Why?’

“‘Why, to defend yourself,’ replied Emma.

“‘From your husband? Oh, poor devil!’“

And Rodolphe finished his phrase with a gesture which signified: I could crush him with a fillip.

She was amazed at his bravery, although she felt that there was a sort of indelicacy and naïve grossness about it that was scandalizing.

“Rodolphe reflected a good deal on the affair of the pistols. If she had spoken seriously, it was very ridiculous, he thought, even odious; for he had no reason to hate the good Charles, not being what is called devoured by jealousy; and on this subject Emma had treated him to a lecture, which he did not think in the best taste.

“Besides, she was growing very sentimental. She had insisted on exchanging miniatures; they had cut handfuls of hair, and now she was asking for a ring — a real wedding-ring, in sign of an eternal union. She often spoke to him of the real wedding-ring, in sign of an eternal union. She often spoke to him of the evening chimes, of the voices of nature. Then she talked to him of her mother — hers! and of his mother — his!

“Finally she wearied him.”

Then, on page 453:

“He had no longer, as formerly, words so gentle that they made her cry, nor passionate caresses that made her mad; so that their great love, which engrossed her life, seemed to lessen beneath her like the water of a stream absorbed into its channel, and she could see the bed of it. She would not believe it; she redoubled in tenderness, and Rodolphe concealed his indifference less and less.

“She did not know whether she regretted yielding to him, or whether, she did not wish, on the contrary, to enjoy him the more. The humiliation of feeling herself weak was turning to rancour, tempered by their voluptuous pleasures. It was not affection; it was like a continual seduction. He subjugated her; she almost feared him.”

And you are afraid, Mr. Government Attorney, that young women might read this! I am less frightened, less timid than you. On my own personal account, I can admirably understand a father of a family saying to his daughter: Young lady, if your heart, your conscience, if religious sentiment and the voice of duty are not sufficient to make you walk in the right path, look, my child, look well at the weariness, the suffering, the grief and desolation attending the woman who seeks happiness outside her home! This language would not wound you in the mouth of a father, would it? M. Flaubert has said nothing but this; he has made a painting most true, and most powerful, of what the woman who dreams of finding happiness outside her house immediately discovers.

But let us go on and we shall come to all the adventures of the disillusion. You show me the caresses of Léon on page 60. Alas! she will soon pay the ransom of adultery, and that ransom you will find terrible, in some pages farther on in the book you condemn. She sought happiness in adultery, poor unfortunate one! And she found, besides the disgust and fatigue that the monotony of marriage can bring to the woman who does not walk in the path of duty, the disillusion and the scorn of the man to whom she has given herself. Was any of this scorn lacking in the book? Oh, no! and you cannot deny it, for the book is under your eyes. Rodolphe, who has shown himself so vile, gives to her a last proof of egoism and cowardice. She has said to him: “Take me! Carry me away! I am stifling; I can no longer breathe in my husband’s house, to which I have brought shame and misfortune.” He hesitates; she insists. Finally, he promises, and the next day she receives a terrible letter under which she falls crushed and annihilated. She is taken ill and is dying. The number you are consulting shows you all the convulsions of a soul at war with itself, which perhaps could be led you all the convulsions of a soul at war with itself, which perhaps could be led back to duty by an excess of suffering, but unfortunately she meets a boy with whom she had played when she was inexperienced. This is the movement of the romance, and then comes the expiation.

But the Government Attorney stops me and asks: Although it may be true that the purpose of the book is good from one end to the other, could you allow such obscene details as those that have been brought forward?

Very certainly I could not allow such details, but where have I allowed them? Where are they? I now arrive at the passages most condemned. I will say no more of the adventure in the cab. This Court has heard enough with regard to that; I come to the passages that you have pointed out as contrary to public morals and which form a certain number of pages in the December number. And, in order to pull away all the scaffolding of your accusation, there is only one thing to be done: to restore what precedes and what follows your quotations, in a word, to substitute the text complete as opposed to your cutting.

At the bottom of page 72, Léon, after making an agreement with Homais, the chemist, goes to the Hôtel de Boulogne; the chemist goes there to find him.

“Emma was no longer there. She had just gone in a fit of anger. She detested him now. This failing to keep their rendezvous seemed to her an insult.

“Then, growing calmer, she at length discovered that she had no doubt calumniated him. But the disparaging of those we love always alienates us from them to some extent. We must not touch our idols; the gilt sticks to our fingers.”

Great heavens! And it is for such lines as I have been reading to you that we are dragged before you. Listen now:

“They gradually came to talking more frequently of matters outside their love, and in the letters that Emma wrote him she spoke of flowers, verses, the moon and the stars, naïve resources of a waning passion striving to keep itself alive by all external aids. She was constantly promising herself a profound felicity on her next journey. Then she confessed to herself that she felt nothing extraordinary. This disappointment quickly gave way to a new hope, and Emma returned to him more inflamed, more eager than ever. She undressed brutally, tearing off the thin laces of her corset that nestled around her hips like a gliding snake. She went on tip-toe, barefooted, to see once more that the door was closed; then, pale, serious, and without speaking, with one movement she threw herself upon his breast with a long shudder.” You have stopped here, Mr. Attorney; permit me to continue:

“Yet there was upon that brow covered with cold drops, on those quivering lips, in those wild eyes, in the strain of those arms, something vague and dreary that seemed to Léon to glide between them subtly as if to separate them.”

You call this lascivious colour, you say that this gives a taste for adultery, you say that these pages excite and arouse the senses, — that they are lascivious pages! But death is in these pages! You did not think of that, Mr. Attorney, and were simply frightened to find such words as *corset, clothing which falls off*, etc.; and you attach yourself to these three or four words, such as corset and falling clothing. Do you wish me to show you that corsets can appear in a classic book, a very classic book? I shall give myself the pleasure of so doing, presently.

"She undressed herself …" [ah! Mr. Government Attorney, how badly you have understood this passage!] "she undressed hastily [poor thing], tearing off the thin laces of her corset that nestled around her hips like a gliding snake; then pale, serious, and without speaking, with one movement she threw herself upon his breast with a long shudder…. There was upon that brow covered with cold drops … in the strain of those arms something vague and dreary…."

We must ask here where the lascivious colour is? and where is the severe colour? and ask if the senses of the young girl into whose hands this book might fall, could be aroused, excited — as she might by reading a classic of classics, which I shall cite presently, and which has been reprinted a thousand times without any prosecution, public or royal, following it. Is there anything analogous in what I am going to read you? Is there not, on the contrary, a horror of vice that this "something dreary glides in between them to separate them?" Let us continue, I pray:

"He did not dare to question her; but, seeing her so skilled, she must have passed, he thought, through every experience of suffering and of pleasure. What had once charmed now frightened him a little. Besides, he rebelled against his absorption, daily more marked by her personality. He begrudged Emma this constant victory. He even strove not to love her; then, when he heard the creaking of her boots, he turned coward, like drunkards at the sight of strong drinks."

What is lascivious there?

And then, take the last paragraph:

"One day, when they had parted early and she was returning alone along the boulevard, she saw the walls of her convent; then she sat down on a form in the shade of the elm-trees. How calm that time had been! How she longed for the ineffable sentiments of love that she had tried to figure to herself out of books! The first month of her marriage, her rides in the wood, the viscount that waltzed, and Lagardy singing, all repassed before her eyes. And Léon suddenly appeared to her as far off as the others.

"'Yet I love him,' she said to herself."

Do not forget this, Mr. Attorney, when you judge the thought of the author, when you wish to find absolutely lascivious colour where I can only find an excellent book.

“She was not happy — she never had been. Whence came this insufficiency of life — this instantaneous turning to decay of everything on which she leant?”

Is that lascivious?

“But if there were somewhere a being strong and beautiful, a valiant nature, full at once of exaltation and refinement, a poet’s heart in angel’s form, a lyre with sounding chords ringing out elegiac epithalamia to heaven, why, perchance, should she not find him? Ah! how impossible! Besides, nothing was worth the trouble of seeking it; everything was a lie. Every smile hid a yawn of boredom, every joy a curse, all pleasure satiety, and the sweetest kisses left upon your lips only the unattainable desire for a greater delight.

“A metallic clang droned through the air, and four strokes were heard from the convent-clock. Four o’clock! And it seemed to her that she had been there on that form an eternity. But an infinity of passions may be contained in a minute, like a crowd in a small space.”

It is not necessary to look at the end of the book to find what is in it from one end to the other. I have read the incriminated passage without adding a word, to defend a work which defends itself through itself. Let us continue leading from this same incriminated passage, looking at it from a moral point of view:

“Madame was in her room, which no one entered. She stayed there all day long, torpid, half dressed, and from time to time burning Turkish pastilles which she had bought at Rouen in an Algerian’s shop. In order not to have at night this sleeping man stretched at her side, by dint of manoeuvering, she at least succeeded in banishing him to the second floor, while she read till morning extravagant books, full of pictures of orgies and thrilling situations. Often, seized with fear, she cried out, and Charles hurried to her.

“‘Oh, go away!’ she would say.

“Or at other times, consumed more ardently than ever by that inner flame to which adultery added fuel, panting, tremulous, all desire, she threw open her window, breathed in the cold air, shook loose in the wind her masses of hair, too heavy, and gazing upon the stars, longed for some princely love. She thought of him, of Léon. She would then have given anything for a single one of those meetings that surfeited her.

“Those were her gala days. She wished them to be sumptuous, and when he alone could not pay the expenses, she made up the deficit liberally, which happened almost every time. He tried to make her understand that they would be quite as comfortable somewhere else, in a smaller hotel, but she always found some objection.”

You see all this is very simple when one reads the whole; but in cuttings like those of the Government Attorney, the smallest word becomes a mountain.

THE GOVERNMENT ATTORNEY:

I did not quote any of those phrases last mentioned; but since you wish to quote what I have not incriminated, it would be well not to pass over the foot of the page adjoining page 50.

M. SENARD:

I pass over nothing, but I insist upon citing the incriminated passages in the quotations. We are quoting from pages 77 and 78.

THE GOVERNMENT ATTORNEY:

I refer to the quotations made to the audience, and thought you imputed me with having cited the lines you are about to read.

M. SENARD:

Mr. Attorney, I have quoted all the passages by whose aid you have attempted to constitute a misdemeanor — which accusation is now shattered. You developed before the audience what seemed to you convincing, and have had a fair opportunity. Happily we had the book and the defense knew the book; if he had not known it, his position, allow me to tell you, would have been very awkward. I am called upon to explain such and such passages to myself and to add others for the benefit of the audience. If I had not possessed the book, as I do, the defense had been difficult. Now, I can show you, through a faithful analysis of the romance, that far from being considered a lascivious work, it should be considered, on the contrary, eminently moral. After doing this, I took the passages that have been the motive for police correction, and after I followed the cuttings with what preceded and what succeeded, the accusation became so weak that you are in revolt the moment I have finished reading them! These same passages that you stamped as recriminating, I have used an equal right to quote myself, for the purpose of showing you the folly of the accusation.

I continue my quotation where I stopped at the bottom of page 78.

“He was bored now when Emma suddenly began to sob on his breast, and his heart, like the people who can only stand a certain amount of music, dozed to the sound of a love whose delicacies he no longer noted.

“They knew one another too well for any of those surprises of possession, that increase its joys a hundredfold. She was as sick of him as he was weary of her. Emma found again in adultery all the platitudes of marriage.”

Platitudes of marriage! He who did the cutting here has said: Now, here is a man who says that in marriage there are only platitudes! It is an attack on marriage, it is an outrage to morals! You will agree, Mr. Attorney, that with cuttings artistically made, one can go far in the way of incriminating. What is it that the author called the platitudes of marriage? That monotony which Emma had dreaded, which she had wished to escape from but had found continually in adultery, which was precisely the disillusion. You now see clearly that when, in the place of cutting off the members of certain phrases and cutting out some words, we read what precedes and what follows, nothing remains for incrimination; and you can well comprehend that my client, who knew what he wished to say, must be a little in revolt at seeing it thus travestied. Let us continue:

"She was as sick of him as he was weary of her. Emma found again in adultery all the platitudes of marriage.

"But how to get rid of him? Then, though she might feel humiliated at the baseness of such enjoyment, she clung to it from habit or from corruption, and each day she hungered after them the more, exhausting all felicity in wishing for too much of it. She accused Léon of her baffled hopes, as if he had betrayed her; and she even longed for some catastrophe that would bring about their separation, since she had not the courage to make up her mind to it herself.

"She none the less went on writing him love letters, in virtue of the notion that a woman must write to her lover.

"But whilst she wrote it was another man she saw, a phantom fashioned out of her most ardent memories. [This is certainly not incriminating.]

"Then she fell back exhausted, for these transports of vague love wearied her more than great debauchery.

"She now felt constant ache all over her. Often she even received a summons, stamped paper that she barely looked at. She would have liked not to be alive, or to be always asleep."

I call that an excitation of virtue through a horror of vice, as the author himself calls it, and which the reader, no longer perplexed, cannot fail to see, unless influenced by ill-will.

And now, something more to make you perceive what kind of man you are about to judge. And in order to show you, not what kind of justification I may expect, but whether M. Flaubert has made use of lascivious colour, and whence he got his inspiration, let me put upon your desk this book used by him, in whose passages he found himself inspired to paint this concupiscence, the entanglements of this woman who sought happiness in illicit pleasures, but could not find it there, who sought again and again and never found it. Whence has Flaubert derived his inspiration, gentlemen? It was from this book; listen:

ILLUSION OF THE SENSES.

"Whoever, then, attaches himself to the senses, must necessarily wander from object to object and deceive himself, so to speak, by a change of place, as concupiscence, — that is to say, love of pleasure, — is always changing, because its ardour languishes and dies in continuity, and it is only change that makes it revive. Again, what is that other characteristic of a life of the senses, that alternate movement of appetite and disgust, of disgust and appetite, the soul floating ever uncertain between ardour which abates and ardour which is renewed? *Inconstantia concupiscentia*. That is what a life of the senses is. However, in this perpetual movement, one must not allow himself to be deceived by the image of wandering liberty."

This is what a life of the senses is. Who has said that? Who has written these words which you are about to hear upon these excitements and excessive ardor? What is the book which M. Flaubert perused day and night, and which has inspired the passages that the Government Attorney condemns? It is by Bossuet! What I shall read to you is a fragment of Bossuet's discourse upon *Illicit Pleasures*. I shall bring you to see that all these incriminated passages are — not plagiarized; the man who appropriates an idea is not a plagiarist — but imitations of Bossuet. Do you wish for another example? Here it is:

UPON SIN.

"And do not ask me, Christians, in what way this great change of pleasure into punishment will come about. The thing is proved by the Scriptures. It is Truth who has said it, it is the All-Powerful who has made it so. And sometimes, if you will look at the nature of the passions to which you abandon your heart, you will easily comprehend that they may become an intolerable punishment. They all have in themselves cruel pain, disgust and bitterness. They all have an infinity which is angered by not being able to be satisfied. There are transports of rage mingled in all of them which degenerates into a kind of fury not less painful than unreasonable. Love, if I may be permitted so to name it in this guise, has its uncertainties, its violent agitations, its irresolute resolutions and an abyss of jealousies."

And further:

"Ah! What, then, is easier than making of our passions an insupportable pain or sin, when, if we cut out, as is very just, the little sweetness through which they lead us, there is left of them only the cruel disquiet and bitterness with which they abound? Our sins are against us, our sins are upon us, our sins are in the midst of us; like an arrow piercing our body, an insupportable weight upon our head, a poison devouring our entrails."

Is not all that you have just listened to designed to show you the bitterness of passion? I leave you this book, lined and thumb-marked by the studious man who has found his thought there. And that man, who has been inspired from a source of this kind, who has written of adultery in the terms you have listened to, is prosecuted for outrage of public and religious morals!

A few lines still upon the *woman sinner*, and you will see how M. Flaubert, having decided to paint this ardour, understood taking inspiration from this model:

"But, punished for our error, without being deceived by it, we seek in change the remedy for our scorn; we wander from object to object, and if, finally there is some one who holds us, it is not because we are content with our choice, but because we are bound by our inconstancy."

*

"All appeared to her empty, false, disgusting in these creatures: far from finding there those first charms which her heart had had so much difficulty in defending, she saw in them now only frivolity, danger and vanity."

*

"I will not speak of an entanglement of passion; what fears there are that the mystery of it cannot dispel! what measures to keep on the side of well-being and pride! what eyes to shun! what watchers to deceive! what returns to fear from those whom one chooses for their aids and confidants in their passion! what indignities to suffer from him, perhaps, for whom one has sacrificed honour and liberty, and of whom one dare not complain! To all this, add those cruel moments when passion, less lively, leaves us to choose between falling back upon ourselves and feeling all the humility of our position, and those moments where the heart, born for more solid pleasures, leaves us with our own idols and finds its punishment in its own disgust and inconstancy. Profane world! if there is in you that felicity that is so much vaunted, favor your adorers with it nor punish them for the faith they have added so lightly to your promises."

Let me say to you here: when a man in the silence of the night, meditates upon the causes of enticement for woman, when he finds them in her education and, putting aside personal observation, for the sake of expressing his thoughts, matures them at the sources I have indicated, not allowing himself to use his pen except from inspiration of Bossuet and Massillon, permit me to ask you if there is a word to express my surprise, my grief, on seeing this man dragged into Court — on account of some passages in his book, and precisely for the truest and most elevated ideas that he was able to bring together! And I pray you not to forget this in relation to the charge of outrage against religious morals! And then, if you will permit me, I will put in opposition to all this, under your very eyes, what I myself call attacking the moral, that is to say, satisfaction of the senses without bitterness, without those large drops of cold sweat which fall from the brow of those who give themselves over to it; and I will not quote to you from licentious books in which the authors have sought to arouse the senses; I will quote from only one book — which is given as a prize in colleges, but whose author's name I ask leave to withhold until after I have read you a passage from it. Here is the passage: I will ask you to pass the volume. It is a copy that was given to a college student as a prize. I prefer you to take this copy rather than M. Flaubert's:

"The next day I was received into her apartment. There I felt all that voluptuousness carries with it. The room was filled with the most agreeable perfumes. She lay upon a bed which was enclosed in garlands of flowers. She appeared to be lying there languishingly. She extended her hand to me and made me sit beside her. In all, even in the veil which covered her face, there was a charm. I could see the form of her beautiful body. A simple cloth which moved as she moved allowed me at one time to see, and at another to lose sight of, her ravishing beauty."

A simple cloth when it was extended over a dead body appeared to you a lascivious image; here it is extended over a living woman:

"She noticed that my eyes were occupied, and when she saw them inflamed, the cloth seemed to open itself away from her; I saw all the treasures of a divine beauty. At this moment she took my hand; my eyes were wandering. There is only my dear Ardasire, I cry out, who can be as beautiful; but I swear to the gods that my fidelity…. She threw herself on my neck and drew me into her arms. Suddenly the room became darkened; her veil opened and she gave me a kiss. I was beside myself; a flame started suddenly through my veins and aroused all my senses. The idea of Ardasire was far from me. She remained to me only as a memory … there appeared to me but one thought…. I was going…. I was going to prefer this one even to her. Already my hands had wandered to her breasts; they ran rapidly everywhere; love showed itself only in its fury; it hurried on to victory; a moment more and Ardasire could not defend herself."

Who, now, has written that? It is not the author of *The New Héloise*, it is the President, Montesquieu! Here is no bitterness, no disgust, but all is sacrificed to literary beauty, and they give it as a prize to pupils in rhetoric, without doubt to serve as a model in the amplifications and descriptions that they are required to write. Montesquieu described in his Persian Letters a scene which could not even be read. It concerns a woman placed between two men who dispute over her. This woman, placed between two men, has dreams — which appear to the author very agreeable.

Shall we sum up, Mr. Attorney? Or is it necessary for me to quote you Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Confessions*, and some others? No, I will only say to the judges that if, on account of his description of the carriage in *The Double Misunderstanding*, M. Mérimée had been prosecuted, he would have been acquitted immediately. One sees in his book only a work of art of great literary beauty. One would no more condemn it than he would condemn paintings or statuary, which is not content with representing all the beauties of the body, but wishes to add ardour and passion. I will follow it no farther; I ask you to recognise the fact that M. Flaubert has not weighted his images and has done only one thing: he has touched with a firm hand the scene of degradation. At each line of his book he has brought out the disillusion, and instead of ending it with something charming, he has undertaken to show us that this woman, after meeting scorn, abandonment, and ruin of her house, comes to a frightful death. In a word, I can only repeat what I said at the beginning of this plea, that M. Flaubert is the author of a good book, a book which aims at the excitation of virtue by arousing a horror of vice.

I will now look into his outrage against religion. An outrage against religion committed by M. Flaubert! And in what respect, if you please? The Government Attorney has thought he found in him a sceptic. I can assure the Government Attorney that he is deceived. I am not here to make a profession of faith, I am here only to defend a book, and for that reason I shall limit myself to a simple word. Now as to the book, I defy the Government Attorney to find in it anything that resembles an outrage against religion. You have seen how religion was introduced in Emma’s education, and how this religion, false in a thousand ways, could not hold Emma from the bent that carried her astray. Would you know in what kind of language M. Flaubert speaks of religion? Listen to some lines that I take from the first number, pages 231, 232 and 233:

“One evening when the window was open, and she, sitting by it, had been watching Lestiboudois, the beadle, trimming the box, she suddenly heard the Angelus ringing.

“It was the beginning of April, when the primroses are in bloom, and a warm wind blows over the flower-beds newly turned, and the gardens, like women, seem to be getting ready for the summer fêtes. Through the bars of the arbour and away beyond, the river could be seen in the fields, meandering through the grass in wandering curves. The evening vapors rose between the leafless poplars, touching their outlines with a violet tint, paler and more transparent than a subtle gauze caught athwart their branches. In the distance cattle moved about; neither their steps nor their lowing could be heard; and the bell, still ringing through the air, kept up its peaceful lamentation.

“With this repeated tinkling the thoughts of the young woman lost themselves in old memories of her youth and school-days. She remembered the great candlesticks that rose above the vases full of flowers on the altar, and the tabernacle with its small columns. She would have liked to be once more lost in the long line of white veils, marked off here and there by the stiff black hoods of the good sisters bending over their prie-Dieu.”

This is the language in which his religious sentiment is expressed. And yet we have understood from the Government Attorney that scepticism reigned in M. Flaubert’s book from one end to the other. Where, I pray you, have you found this scepticism?

THE GOVERNMENT ATTORNEY:

I have not said that there was any of it in its inner meaning.

M. SENARD:

If not in its inner meaning, where then, is it? In your cuttings, evidently. But here is the work entire, as the Court will judge it, and it can see that the religious sentiment is so forcefully imprinted there that the accusation of scepticism is pure slander. And now, the Government Attorney will permit me to say to him that it was not for the purpose of accusing the author of scepticism that all this trouble has been made. Let us proceed:

“At mass on Sundays, when she looked up, she saw the gentle face of the Virgin amid the blue smoke of the rising incense. Then she was moved; she felt herself weak and quite deserted, like the down of a bird whirled by the tempest, and it was unconsciously that she went towards the church, inclined to no matter what devotions, so that her soul was absorbed and all existence lost in it.”

This, gentlemen, is the first appeal of religion to hold Emma from the trend of her passions. She has fallen, poor woman, and then been repelled by the foot of the man to whom she abandoned herself. She is nearly dead, but raises herself and becomes reanimated; and you shall see now what is written in the 15th of November number, 1856, page 548:

“One day, when at the height of her illness, she had thought herself dying, and had asked for the communion; and while they were making the preparations in her room for the sacrament, while they were turning the night-table, covered with sirups, into an altar, and while Félicité was strewing dahlia flowers on the floor, Emma felt some power passing over her that freed her from her pains, from all perception, from all feeling. Her body, relieved, no longer thought; another life was beginning; it seemed to her that her being, mounting toward God, would be annihilated in that love like a burning insense that melts into vapour. [You see that this is the language in which M. Flaubert speaks of religious things]. The bed-clothes were sprinkled with holy water, the priest drew from the holy pyx the white wafer; and it was fainting with a celestial joy that she put out her lips to accept the body of the Saviour presented to her.”

I ask the pardon of the Government Attorney, I ask the Court’s pardon for interrupting this passage; but I must needs say that it is the author who is speaking, and bring to your notice in what terms he expresses the mystery of the communion. Before going on with the reading, I must needs impress the literary value of this picture upon the Court and insist that they seize upon these expressions which are the author’s own:

“The curtains of the alcove floated gently round her like clouds, and the rays of the two tapers burning on the night-table seemed to shine like dazzling halos. Then she let her head fall back, fancying she heard in space the music of seraphic harps, and perceived in an azure sky, on a golden throne in the midst of saints holding green palms, God the Father, resplendent with majesty, who with a sign sent to earth angels with wings of fire to carry her away in their arms.”

*

“This splendid vision dwelt in her memory as the most beautiful thing that it was possible to dream, so that now she strove to recall her sensation, that still lasted, however, but in a less exclusive fashion and with a deeper sweetness. Her soul, tortured by pride, at length found rest in Christian humility, and, tasting the joy of weakness, she saw within herself the destruction of her will, that must have left a wide entrance for the inroads of heavenly grace. There existed, then, in the place of happiness, still greater joys, — another love beyond all loves, without pause and without end, one that would grow eternally! She saw amid the illusions of her hope a state of purity floating above the earth mingling with heaven, to which she aspired. She wanted to become a saint. She bought chaplets and wore amulets; she wished to have in her room, by the side of her bed, a reliquary set in emeralds that she might kiss it every evening.”

Here are some of his religious sentiments! And if you wish to pause a moment to consider the author’s thought, I will ask you to turn the page and read the first three lines of the second paragraph:

“She grew provoked at the doctrines of religion; the arrogance of the polemic writings displeased her by their inveteracy in attacking people she did not know; and the secular stories, relieved with religion, seemed to her written in such ignorance of the world, that they insensibly estranged her from the truths for whose proof she was looking.”

This is the language of M. Flaubert. Now, if you please, we come to another scene, that of the extreme unction. Oh! Mr. Government Attorney, how you have deceived yourself when, stopping at the first words, you accuse my client of mingling the sacred with the profane; when he has been content to translate the beautiful formulas of extreme unction, at the moment when the priest touches the organs of sense, at the moment where, according to the ritual, he says: *Per istam unctionem, et suam piissimam misericordiam, indulgeat tibi Dominus quid-quid deliquisti*!

You said it was not necessary to touch upon holy things. With what right do you misinterpret these holy words:

“May God, in His holy pity, pardon you for all the sins that you have committed through sight, taste, hearing, etc.?”

Wait, I am going to read the condemned passage, and that will be all my vengeance. I dare say vengeance, because the author has need of being avenged! Yes, it is necessary for M. Flaubert to go out of here not only acquitted, but avenged! You will see from what kind of reading he has been nourished. The condemned passage is on page 271 of the December 15th number, and runs thus:

“Pale as a statue, and with eyes red as fire, Charles, not weeping, stood opposite her at the foot of the bed, while the priest bending one knee, was muttering words in a low voice.”

This whole picture is magnificent, and the wording of it irresistible. But be quiet, and I will not prolong it beyond measure. Now here is the condemnation!

“She turned her face slowly, and seemed filled with joy on seeing suddenly the violet stole, no doubt finding again, in the midst of a temporary lull in her pain, the lost voluptuousness of her first mystical transports, with the visions of eternal beatitude that were beginning.

“The priest rose to take the crucifix: then she stretched forward her neck as one who is athirst, and gluing her lips to the body of the Man-God, she pressed upon it with all her expiring strength the fullest kiss of love that she had ever given.”

The extreme unction has not yet begun; but we are reproached for this kiss. I am not going to search in the history of Saint Theresa whom you perhaps know, but the memory of whom is too far away, I am not going to seek in Fénelon for the mysticism of Madame Guyon, nor in more modern mysticisms, in which I find much reason. I only wish to ask of those schools which you designate as belonging to sensual Christianity, the explanation of this kiss; it is Bossuet, Bossuet himself, of whom I would ask it:

“Obey, and strive finally to enter into the disposition of Jesus in communing, which is the disposition of harmony, joy and love; the whole gospel proclaims it. Jesus wishes that we may be with Him; He wishes to rejoice and He wishes us to rejoice with Him: He has given Himself….” *etc.*

I continue the reading of the condemned passage:

“Then he recited the *Misereatur* and the *Indulgentiam*, dipped his right thumb in the oil and began to give extreme unction. First upon the eyes, that had so coveted all worldly pomp; then upon the nostrils, greedy for warm breezes and amorous perfumes; then upon the mouth, that had uttered lies, that curled with pride and cried out in lewdness; then upon the hands, that had delighted in sensual touches, and finally upon the soles of feet, so swift of yore when she was running to satisfy her desires, and that now would walk no more.

“The curé wiped his fingers, threw the bit of cotton dipped in oil into the fire, and came and sat down by the dying woman, to tell her that she must now blend her sufferings with those of Jesus Christ, and abandon herself to the Divine mercy.

“Finishing his exhortations, he tried to place in her hand a blessed candle, symbol of the celestial glory with which she was soon to be surrounded. Emma, too weak, could not close her fingers, and the taper, but for Monsieur Bournisien, would have fallen to the ground.

“However, she was not quite so pale, and her face had an expression of serenity as if the sacrament had cured her.

“The priest did not fail to point this out; he even explained to Bovary that the Lord sometimes prolonged the life of persons when he thought it meet for their salvation; and Charles remembered the day when, so near death, she had received the communion. Perhaps there was no need to despair, he thought.”

Now, when a woman dies and the priest goes to give her extreme unction, if one portrays that mystic scene and translates for us the sacramental words with scrupulous fidelity, they say that he has touched upon holy things; that he has put a rash hand on sacred matters; because to the *deliquisti per oculos, per os, per aurem, per manus et per pedes* he has added the sin which each of the organs has committed. But we are not the first to walk in this path. M. Sainte-Beuve, in a book which you know, has also a scene of extreme unction, and here is how he expresses it:

“Oh! yes, upon the eyes first, as the most noble and most alive of the senses; upon those eyes for what they have seen and regarded too tenderly, or that which was too perfidious in others’ eyes, or too mortal; for what they have read and re-read of endearment that was too dear; for what they have poured out in vain tears over fragile goods and faithless creatures; for the sleep which they have too often forgotten, thinking only of the evening!

“Upon the ears also for what they have heard and allowed themselves to hear that was too sweet, too flattering and intoxicating; for that sound which the ear steals from deceptive words; for what it drinks in from stolen honey!

"Then the smell, for the too subtle and voluptuous perfumes of evening and the springtime in the depth of the woods, for flowers received in the morning and all through the day, and breathed in with so much pleasure!

"Upon the lips, for what they have pronounced that was too confused or too open; for what they did not reply at certain moments or what they have not revealed to certain persons; for what they have sung in solitude that was too melodious and too full of tears; for their inarticulate murmur and for their silence!

"Upon the neck, in the place of on the breast, for the ardor of desire according to the consecrated expression (*propter ardorem libidinis*); yes, for the grief in affection and the rivalry, for too much anguish in human tenderness, for the tears which are suffocated in a voiceless throat, for all that goes to wound the heart and break it!

"Upon the hands also, for having seized a hand which was not bound to holiness; for having received too burning tears; perhaps for having begun to write and for finishing a response not lawful!

"Upon the feet, for not having fled, for not having been satisfied with long, solitary walks, for not having been weary soon enough in the midst of temptations which were ever beginning anew!"

You did not prosecute that. Here are two men who, each in his own sphere, has taken the same thing and who have, according to his own idea, added the sin, the fault. Can it be that you make an indictment for simply translating the formula of the ritual: *Quidquid deliquisti per oculos, per aurem*, etc.?

M. Flaubert has done just what M. Sainte-Beuve did, without plagiarizing. He has made use of a right which belongs to any writer, to add to what another has said and complete the subject. The last scene of the romance of *Madame Bovary* has been made a complete study of this kind from religious documents. M. Flaubert has taken the scene of the extreme unction from a book which a venerable ecclesiastic, one of his friends, lent to him; this same friend has read the scene and been moved to tears, not imagining that the majesty of religion was in any way offended. The book is entitled: *An historic, dogmatic, moral, liturgical and canonical explanation of the catechism, with an answer to the objections drawn from science against religion, by the Abbé Ambroise Guillois, curate of Nôtre-Dame-du-Pré, 6th edition, etc.*, a work approved by His Eminence the Cardinal Gousset, N.N.S.S. the Bishops and Archbishops of Mans, of Tours, of Bordeaux, of Cologne, etc., vol. III., printed at Mans, by Charles Monnoyer, 1851. Now, you shall see in this book, as you saw just now in

Bossuet's, the principles, and, in a certain way, the text of the passages which the Government has condemned. It is no longer M. Sainte-Beuve, an artist, a literary rhapsodist, whom I am quoting; we now listen to the Church itself:

"Extreme unction can give back health to the body if it be useful to the glory of God" … and the priest says that this often happens. Now, here is the extreme unction:

"The priest addresses the sick with a short exhortation, if he is in a state to hear it, in order to dispose him worthily to receive the sacrament which is to be administered to him.

"The priest then passes the unction upon the sick person with the stiletto or the extremity of his right thumb, which he dips each time in the oil. This unction should be made especially upon the five parts of the body which nature has given to man as the organs of sensation, namely: the eyes, the ears, the nostrils, the mouth and the hands."

"As the priest makes the unctions [we have followed from point to point the ritual which we have copied], he pronounces the words which correspond to them.

"*To the eyes, upon the closed eyeball*: Through this holy unction and His divine pity, may God pardon all the sins that you have committed through sight. The sick person should at this moment have a new hatred of all the sins committed through sight: such as indiscreet looks, criminal curiosity, and reading what has caused to be born in him a host of thoughts contrary to faith or morals."

What has M. Flaubert done? He has put in the mouth of the priest, by uniting the two parts, what should be in his thoughts and also those of the sick person. He has copied purely and simply.

"*To the ears*: Through this holy unction and through His divine pity, may God pardon all the sins that you have committed through the sense of hearing. The sick person should, at this moment, detest anew all the errors of which he is guilty from listening with pleasure to slander, calumny, proposed dishonesty and obscene songs.

"*To the nostrils*: Through this holy unction and His divine pity, may the Lord pardon all the sins that you have committed through the sense of smell. At this moment the sick person should detest anew all the sins that he has committed through the sense of smell, his refined and voluptuous search for perfumes, all his sensibilities, all that he has breathed in of iniquitous odors.

"*To the mouth, upon the lips*: Through this holy unction and through His great pity, may the Lord pardon you all the sins that you have committed by the sense of taste and words. The sick man at this moment should detest anew all the sins that he has committed in oaths and blaspheming … in eating and drinking to excess….

"*Upon the hands*: Through this holy unction and through His great pity, may the Lord pardon all the sins that you have committed through the sense of touch. The sick man ought to detest at this moment all the larcenies, the injustice of which he has been guilty, all the liberties, more or less criminal, which he has allowed himself. The priest receives the unction on his hands from without because he has already received it from within at the time of his ordination, and the sick person receives it within.

"*Upon the feet*: Through this holy unction and His great pity, may God pardon all the sins that you have committed in your walks. The sick man ought, at this moment, to detest anew all the steps that he has taken in the path of iniquity, such as scandalous walks, and criminal interviews…. The unction of the feet is made upon the top or on the sole, according to the convenience of the sick person, and according to the custom of the diocese where it takes place. The most common practice seems to be to make it on the soles of the feet.

"And finally upon the breast. [M. Sainte-Beuve has copied this; we have not, because it was concerned with the breast of a woman.] *Propter ardorem libidinis, etc.*

"*On the breast*: Through this holy unction and His great pity, may the Lord pardon all the sins which have been committed from the ardour of the passions. The sick man ought, at this moment, to detest anew all the bad thoughts to which he has abandoned himself, all sentiments of hatred, or vengeance that he has nourished in his heart."

And following the ritual, we could have spoken of something more than the breast, but God knows what holy anger would have been aroused in the Public Attorney's office, if we had spoken of the loins!

"*To the loins*: Through this holy unction and His great pity, may the Lord pardon all the sins that you have committed by irregular impulses of the flesh."

If we had said that, what a thunderbolt you would have had with which to attempt to crush us, Mr. Attorney! and nevertheless, the ritual adds: "The sick man ought, at this moment, to detest anew all illicit pleasures, carnal delights, etc…."

This is the ritual; and you have seen the condemned article. It has nothing of raillery in it, but is serious and earnest. And I repeat to you that he who lent my client this book, and saw my client make the use of it that he has, has taken him by the hand with tears in his eyes. You see, then, Mr. Government Attorney, how rash — not to use an expression which in order to be exact is not too severe

— is your accusation of our touching upon holy things. You see now that we have not mingled the profane with the sacred when, at each sense we indicated the sin committed by that sense, since it is the language of the Church itself.

I insist now upon mentioning the other details of the charge of outrage against religion. The Public Minister said to me: “It is no longer religion but the morals of all time that you have outraged; you have insulted death!” How have we insulted death? Because at the moment when this woman dies, there passes in the street a man whom she had met more than once, to whom she had given alms from her carriage as she was going to her adulterous meetings; a blind man whom she was accustomed to see, who sang his song walking along slowly by the side of her carriage, to whom she threw a piece of money, but whose countenance made her shiver? This man was passing in the street; and at the moment when Divine pity pardoned, or promised pardon, to the unfortunate woman who was expiating the faults of her life by a frightful death, human raillery appeared to her in the form of the song under her window. Great Heavens! you find an outrage in this! But M. Flaubert has only done what Shakespeare and Goethe have done, who, at the supreme moment of death, have not failed to make heard some chant, or perhaps plaint, or it might be raillery, which recalls to him who is passing to eternity some pleasure which he will never more enjoy, or some fault to be atoned. Let us read:

“In fact, she looked around her slowly, as one awakening from a dream; then in a distinct voice she asked for her looking-glass, and remained some time bending over it, until the big tears fell from her eyes. Then she turned away her head with a sigh and fell back upon the pillows.”

I could not read it, I am like Lamartine: “The punishment seems to me to go beyond truth….” I should not consider that I was doing a bad deed, Mr. Attorney, in reading these pages to my married daughters, honest girls who have had a good example and good teaching, and who would never, never go away from the straight path for indiscretion, or away from things that could and ought to be understood…. It is impossible for me to continue this reading and I shall hold myself rigorously to the condemned passages:

“As the death-rattle became stronger [Charles was by her side, the man whom you did not see but who is admirable] the priest prayed faster; his prayers mingled with Bovary’s stifled sobs, and sometimes all seemed lost in the muffled murmur of the Latin syllables that tolled like a passing bell.

“Suddenly on the pavement was heard a loud noise of clogs, and the clattering of a stick; and a voice, a raucous voice, sang:

“‘Maids in the warmth of a summer day,
Dream of love and of love alway;

The wind is strong this summer day,
Her petticoat is blown away.'"

Emma raised herself like a galvanized corpse, her hair undone, her eyes fixed, staring.

"Where the sickle blades have been,
Nannette, gathering ears of corn,
Passes bending down, my queen,
To the earth where they were born."

"'The blind man!" she cries.

"And Emma began to laugh, an atrocious, frantic, despairing laugh, thinking she saw the hideous face of the poor wretch that stood out against the eternal night like a menace.

"She fell back upon the mattress in a convulsion. They all drew near. She was dead."

You see, gentlemen, in this supreme moment, a recalling of her sin, and with it remorse and all that goes with it of poignancy and fear. It is not alone the whim of an artist wishing only to make a contrast without a purpose or a moral; she hears the blind man in the street singing the frightful song he had sung when she was returning all in a perspiration and hideous from an adulterous meeting; it is the same blind man whom she saw at each of those meetings; the blind man who pursued her with his song and his importunity; it is he who comes now to personify human rage at the instant when Divine pity comes to her and follows her to the supreme moment of death! And this is called an outrage against public morals! But I say, on the contrary, that it is an homage to public morals, that there is nothing more moral than this; I say that in this book the vice of education is awake, that it is taken from the true, from the living flesh of our society, and that at each stroke the author places before us this question: "Have you done what you ought for the education of your daughters? Is the religion you have given them such as will sustain them in the tempests of life, or is it only a mass of carnal superstitions which leaves them without support when the storm rages? Have you taught them that life is not the realization of chimerical dreams, that it is something prosaic to which it is necessary to accommodate oneself? Have you taught them that? Have you done what you ought for their happiness? Have you said to them: Poor children, outside the route I have pointed out to you, in the pleasures you may pursue, only disgust awaits you, trouble, disorder, dilapidation, convulsions, and execution…." And you will see that if anything were lacking in the picture, the sheriff's officer is there; there, too, is the Jew who has seized and sold her furniture to satisfy the caprices of this woman; and the husband is still ignorant of this. Nothing remains for the unfortunate woman, except death!

But, said the Public Minister, her death is voluntary; this woman died in her own time.

But how could she live? Was she not condemned? Had she not drunk to the last dregs her shame and baseness?

Yes, upon our stage we show women who have strayed (and I cannot say what they have done) as happy, charming and smiling. *Questam corpore facerant*. I limit myself to this remark: When they show them to us happy, charming, enveloped in muslin, presenting a gracious hand to counts, marquises and dukes, often responding themselves to the name of countess or duchess, you call that respecting public morals. But the man who depicts the adulterous woman dying a shameful death, commits an outrage against public morals!

Now, I do not wish to say it is not your opinion that you have expressed, since you have expressed it, but you have yielded to a prejudice. No, it cannot be you, the husband, the father of a family, the man who is there, it is not you, that is not possible; without the prejudice of the speech of the prosecution and a preconceived idea, you would never say that M. Flaubert was the author of a bad book! Surely, left to your inspirations, your appreciation would be the same as mine. I do not speak from a literary point of view; but from a moral and religious standard, as you understand it and I understand it, you and I could not differ.

They have said, furthermore, that we have brought upon the scene a materialistic curate. We took the curate as we took the husband. He is not an eminent ecclesiastic, but an ordinary priest, a country curate. And as we have insulted no one, expressed no thought or sentiment that could be injurious to a husband, so we have insulted no ecclesiastic. I have only a word to say beyond this. Do you wish to read books in which ecclesiastics play a deplorable rôle? Take *Gil Blas*, *The Canon* (of Balzac), *Nôtre-Dame de Paris* of Victor Hugo. If you wish to read of priests who are the shame of the clergy, seek them elsewhere, for you will not find them in *Madame Bovary*. What have we shown? A country curate, who in his function of country curate is, like M. Bovary, an ordinary man. Have I represented him as a gourmand, a libertine, or a drunkard? I have not said a word of that kind. I have represented him fulfilling his ministry, not with elevated intelligence, but as his nature allowed him to fulfill it. I have put in contact with him, and in an almost continual state of discussion, a type which lives — as the creatures of M. Prudhomme live — as all other creations of our time will live who are taken from truth and which it is not possible for one to forget, and that is the country pharmacist, the Voltairean, the sceptic, the incredulous man, who is in a perpetual quarrel with the curate. But in these quarrels, who is it that is beaten, buffeted, and ridiculed? It is Homais; to him is the most comic rôle given, because he is the most true, because he best paints our sceptical epoch, a fury whom we call a priest-hater. Permit me still to read to you page 206. It is the good woman of the inn who offers something to her curate:

"'What can I do for you, Monsieur le Curé?' asked the landlady, as she reached down from the chimney one of the copper candlesticks placed with their candles in a row. 'Will you take something? A thimbleful of *cassis*? A glass of wine?'

"The priest declined very politely. He had come for his umbrella, that he had forgotten the other day at the Ernemont convent, and after asking Madame Lefrançois to have it sent to him at the presbytery in the evening, he left for the church, from which the Angelus was ringing.

"When the chemist no longer heard the noise of his boots along the square, he thought the priest's behavior just now very unbecoming. This refusal to take any refreshment seemed to him the most odious hypocrisy; all priests tippled on the sly, and were trying to bring back the days of the tithe.

"The landlady took up the defense of her curé.

"'Besides, he could double up four men like you over his knee. Last year he helped our people to bring in the straw; he carried as many as six trusses at once, he is so strong.'

"'Bravo!' said the chemist. 'Now just send your daughters to confess to fellows with such a temperament! I, if I were the Government, I'd have the priests bled once a month. Yes, Madame Lefrançois, every month — a good phlebotomy, in the interests of the police and morals.'

"'Be quiet, Monsieur Homais. You are an infidel; you've no religion.'

"The chemist answered: 'I have a religion, my religion, and I even have more than all these others with their mummeries and their juggling. I adore God, on the contrary. I believe in the Supreme Being, in a Creator, whatever he may be. I care little who has placed us here below to fulfill our duties as citizens and fathers of families; but I don't need to go to church to kiss silver plates, and fatten, out of my pocket, a lot of good-for-nothings who live better than we do. For one can know him as well in a wood, in a field, or even contemplating the eternal vault like the ancients. My God! mine is the God of Socrates, of Franklin, of Voltaire, and Béranger! I am for the profession of faith of the 'Savoyard Vicar,' and the immortal principles of '89! And I can't admit of an old boy of a God who takes walks in his garden with a cane in his hand, who lodges his friends in the belly of whales, dies uttering a cry, and rises again at the end of three days; things absurd in themselves, and completely opposed, moreover, to all physical laws, Which proves to us, by the way, that priests have always wallowed in torpid ignorance, in which they would fain engulf the people with them.’

“He ceased looking round for an audience, for in his bubbling over the chemist had for a moment fancied himself in the midst of the town council. But the landlady no longer heeded him; she was listening to a distant rolling.”

What is this? A dialogue, a scene such as occurred each time that Homais had occasion to speak of priests.

There is something better in the last passage of page 271:

“Public attention was distracted by the appearance of Monsieur Bournisien, who was going across the market with the holy oil.

“Homais, as we due to his principles, compared priests to ravens attracted by the odour of death. The sight of an ecclesiastic was personally disagreeable to him, for the cassock made him think of the shroud, and he detested the one from some fear of the other.”

Our old friend, he who lent us the catechism, was very happy over this phrase; he said to us: “It is a true hit; it is indeed the portrait of a *priestophobe* whom the cassock makes think of a shroud, and who holds one in execration from a little fear of the other.” He was impious, and he profaned the cassock a little through impiety, perhaps, but much more because he was made to think of a shroud.

Permit me to make a *résumé* of all this. I am defending a man who, if he had met a literary criticism upon the form of his book, or upon certain expressions, or on too much detail, upon one point or another, would have accepted that literary criticism with the best heart in the world. But to find himself accused of an outrage against morals and religion! M. Flaubert has not recovered from it; and he protests here before you with all the astonishment and all the energy of which he is capable against such an accusation.

You are not of the sort to condemn books upon certain lines, you are of the sort to judge after reflection, to judge of the way of putting a work, and you will put this question with which I began my plea and with which I shall end it: Does the reading of such a book give a love of vice, or inspire a horror of it? Does not a punishment so terrible drive one to virtue and encourage it? The reading of this book cannot produce upon you an impression other than it has produced upon us, namely: that the work is excellent as a whole, and that the details in it are irreproachable. All classic literature authorizes the painting of scenes like these we are passing upon.

With this understanding, we might have taken one for a model, which we have not done; we have imposed upon ourselves a sobriety which we ask you to take into account. If, as is possible, M. Flaubert has overstepped the bound he placed for himself, in one word or another, I have only to remind you that this is a first work, but I should then have to tell you that his error was simply one of self-deception, and was without damage to public morals. And in making him come into Court — him, whom you know a little now by his book, him whom you already love a little and will love more, I am sure, when you know him better — is enough of a punishment, a punishment already too cruel. And now it is for you to decide. You have already judged the book as a whole and in its details; it is not possible for you to hesitate!

THE DECISION

The Court has given audience for a part of the last week to the debate of the suit brought against MM. Léon Laurent-Pichat and Auguste-Alexis Pillet, the first the director, the second the printer of a periodical publication called the *Revue de Paris*, and M. Gustave Flaubert, a man of letters, all three implicated: 1st, Laurent-Pichat, for having, in 1856, published in the numbers of the 1st and the 15th of December of the *Revue de Paris*, some fragments of a romance entitled, *Madame Bovary* and, notably, divers fragments contained in pages 73, 77, 78, 272, 273, has committed the misdemeanor of outraging public and religious morals and established customs; 2nd, Pillet and Flaubert are similarly guilty; Pillet in printing them, for they were published, and Flaubert for writing and sending to Laurent-Pichat for publication, the fragments of the romance entitled, *Madame Bovary* as above designated, for aiding and abetting, with knowledge, Laurent-Pichat in the facts which have been prepared, in facilitating and consummating the above-mentioned misdemeanor, and of thus rendering themselves accomplices in the misdeameanor provided for by articles 1 and 8 of the law of May 17, 1819, and 59 and 60 of the Penal Code.

M. PINARD, substitute, has sustained the prosecution.

The COURT, after hearing the defense, presented by M. SENARD for M. FLAUBERT, M. DEMAREST for PICHAT, and M. FAVÉRIE for the PRINTER, has set for audience this day (Feb. 7) for pronouncing judgment, which is rendered in the following terms:

"*Be it known*, that Laurent-Pichat, Gustave Flaubert and Pillet are charged with having committed the misdemeanor of an outrage against public and religious morals and established customs; the first as author, in publishing in the periodical publication entitled the *Revue de Paris* of which he is the manager-proprietor, and in the numbers of the 1st and 15th of October, the 1st and 15th of November and the 1st and 15th of December, 1856, a romance entitled *Madame Bovary*, Gustave Flaubert and Pillet as accomplices, the one for furnishing the manuscript, and the other for printing the said romance;

"*Be it known*, that the particularly marked passages of the romance with which we have to do, which include nearly 300 pages, are contained, according to the terms of the ordinance of dismissal before the Court of Correction, in pages 73, 77 and 78 (of the number of the 1st of December), and 271, 272, 273 (of the 15th of December number, 1856);

“*Be it known*, that the incriminated passages, viewed abstractively and isolatedly, present effectively either expressions, or images, or pictures which good taste reproves and which are of a nature to make an attack upon legitimate and honorable susceptibilities;

“*Be it known*, that the same observations can justly be applied to other passages not defined by the ordinance of dismissal, and which, in the first place seem to present an exposition of theories which would at least be contrary to the good customs and institutions which are the basis of our society, as well as to a respect for the most august ceremonies of divine worship;

“*Be it known*, that, from these diverse titles, the work brought before the Court merits severe blame, since the mission of literature should be to ornament and recreate the mind by raising the intelligence and purifying manners, rather than by showing the disgust of vice in offering a picture of disorder which may exist in our society;

“*Be it known*, that the defendants, and particularly Gustave Flaubert, energetically denied the charge brought against them, setting forth that the romance submitted to the judgment of the Court had an eminently moral aim; that the author had principally in view the exposing of dangers which result from an education not appropriate to the sphere in which one lives, and that, pursuant to this idea, he has shown the woman, the principal personage in the romance, aspiring towards the world and a society for which she was not made, unhappy in her modest condition where she was placed by fate, forgetting first her duties as a mother, afterward lacking in her duties as a wife, introducing successively into her house adultery and ruin, and ending miserably by suicide, after passing through all degrees of the most complete degradation, having even descended to theft;

“*Be it known*, that this data, moral without doubt in principle, must be completed in its development by a certain severity of language and by a reserve directed especially towards that which touches the exposition of the pictures and situations which the author has employed in placing it before the eyes of the public;

“*Be it known*, that it is not allowed, under pretext of painting character or local colour, to reproduce the facts, words, and gestures of the digressions of the personages which a writer gives himself the mission to paint; that a like system, applied to works of the mind as well as to productions of the fine arts, would lead to a realism which would be the reverse of the beautiful and the good, and which, bringing forth works equally offensive to the eye and to the mind, would commit a continual outrage against public morals and good manners;

“*Be it known*, that there are limits which literature, even the lightest, should not pass, and of which Gustave Flaubert and the co-indicted have not taken sufficient account;

“*Be it known*, that the work of which Flaubert is the author, is a work which appears to be long and seriously elaborated, from a literary point of view and as a study of character; that the passages coming under the ordinance for dismissal, as reprehensible as they may be, are few in number as compared with the extent of the work; that these passages, either in the ideas they expose, or in the situations they represent, bring out as a whole the characters which the author wished to paint, although exaggerated and impregnated with a vulgar realism often shocking;

“*Be it known*, that Gustave Flaubert affirms his respect for good manners, and all that attaches itself to religious morals; that it does not appear that his book has been written like certain other books, with the sole aim of giving satisfaction to the sensual passions, to a spirit of license and debauch, or of ridiculing things which should be held in the respect of all;

“That he has done wrong only in losing sight of the rules which every writer who respects himself ought never to lose sight of, or forget: that literature, like art, in order to accomplish the good which it is expected to produce ought only to be chaste and pure in its form and expression;

“In the circumstances, *be it known*, that it is not sufficiently proven that Pichat, Gustave Flaubert and Pillet are guilty of the misdemeanor with which they are charged;

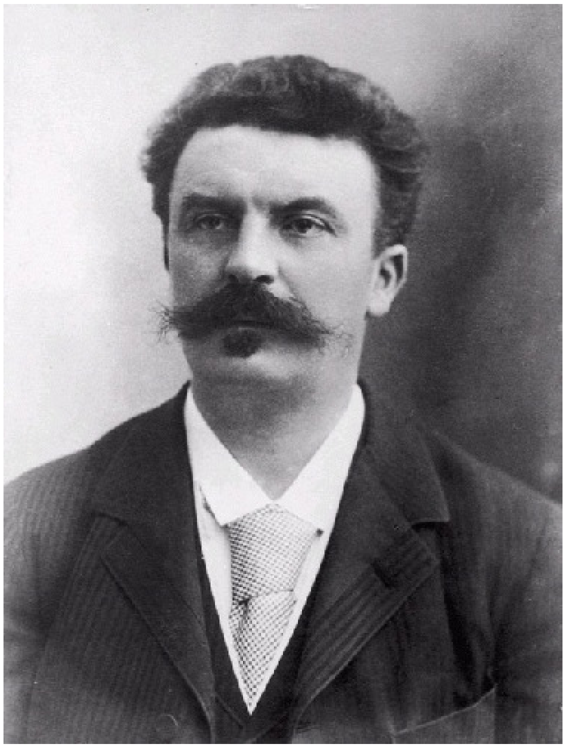
“The Court acquits them of the indictment brought against them, and decrees a dismissal without costs.”

The Criticism

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT: A STUDY by Guy de Maupassant

Translated by M Walter Dinne

The great short story writer Guy de Maupassant (1850 – 1893) was a protégé of Flaubert, and Maupassant's stories contain an economy of style that are said to have been inspired by his mentor. Following Flaubert's death, Maupassant wrote this critical analysis of his work, using notes and diary accounts.



Guy de Maupassant — Flaubert’s famous protégé

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT: A STUDY

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT was born in Rouen on the 12th of December, 1821. His mother was the daughter of a physician of Pont-l'Evéque, M. Fleuriot. She belonged to a Low-Normandy family, the Cambremers of Croix-Mare, and was allied to Thouret, of the Constituent Assembly.

Flaubert's grandmother, Charlotte Cambremer, was, in childhood, a companion of Charlotte Corday. His father, born at Nogent on the Seine, was of a family originally from Champagne. He was a surgeon of great skill and renown, a director of the hospital at Rouen. A straightforward, simple, brusque man, he was astonished, though not indignant, at his son's choice of a vocation. He considered the profession of writing an occupation of idleness and uselessness.

Gustave Flaubert was the opposite of a phenomenal child. He succeeded in learning to read only with extreme difficulty. It is doubtful whether he knew how when he entered the Lyceum, at nine years of age.

His great passion in childhood was to have stories told to him. He would listen motionless, fixing his great blue eyes upon the narrator. Then, he would remain quiet for some hours thinking, one finger in his mouth, entirely absorbed, as if asleep.

His mind was at work, however, for he composed dramatic pieces before he was able to write, which he acted all alone, representing the different personages, and improvising the long dialogues.

From his early infancy, the two distinctive traits of his nature were great ingenuousness and a dislike of physical action. All his life he remained ingenuous and sedentary. He could not see any one walking or moving about near him without becoming exasperated; and he would declare in his sharp voice, sonorous and always a little theatrical, that motion was not philosophical. "One can think and write only when seated," he would say.

His ingenuousness continued until his last days. This observer, so penetrating and so subtle, seemed to see life clearly only from afar. When it touched him, when it was busy in his immediate neighborhood, one would have said that a veil covered his eyes. His extreme native frankness, his immovable honesty, the generosity of all his emotions, of all the impulses of his soul are indubitably the causes of this unchanging ingenuousness.

He lived beside the world, but not in it. Better placed for observation, he did not have the impression of downright contact.

To him especially could one apply what he wrote in his preface to the *Last Songs,* of his friend Louis Bouilhet:

> *“Finally, if the accidents of the world, when they are observed, appear to you transposed for the sake of an illusion in description, so that all things comprise a part of your existence, nor seem to have any other use; if you can be unmoved by any injury, ready for any sacrifice, breastplated against any trial, rush in and publish!”*

As a young man, he was of surprising beauty. An old friend of the family, an illustrious physician, said to his mother: “Your son is the God of Love grown up.”

Disdaining women, he lived in the exaltation of the artist, in a kind of poetic ecstasy which he preserved by daily association with him who was his dearest friend, the brother heart which one never finds twice. This was Alfred Le Poittevin, who died young of a disease of the heart, brought on by overwork.

Then Flaubert was struck with a terrible malady which his other friend, M. Maxime Ducamp, had the evil inspiration to reveal to the public, in trying to establish a relation between the artistic nature of Flaubert and epilepsy, explaining one by the other.

Assuredly, this frightful disease could not strike down the body without overshadowing the mind. But is that to be regretted? Are happy, strong and self-reliant people fitted, as it is generally understood, to penetrate and express our life, so tormented and so short? Are these exuberant persons made for discovering all the misery, all the suffering which surrounds us, to perceive that death strikes without ceasing, everywhere, each day, ferocious, blind, and fatal?

So it is possible, it is probable, that the first attack of epilepsy left an imprint of melancholy and of fear upon the ardent mind of this robust man. It is probable that, as a consequence of it, a sort of apprehension of life rested upon him, a little more sombre manner of looking at things, a suspicion before the event, a doubt before apparent happiness. But to those who knew that enthusiastic, vigorous man who was called Flaubert, to those who saw him live, laugh, rejoice, feel and vibrate each day, there is no doubt that the fear of a crisis, which disappeared in ripe age and re-appeared only in the last years, could not have modified, except in an imperceptible degree, his manner of being and feeling and the habits of his life.

After some literary essays which were not published, Gustave Flaubert made his *début* in 1857 by a masterpiece called *Madame Bovary.*

Everyone knows the history of this book, the lawsuit brought by the Public Attorney, the violent speech of M. Pinard, whose name will be remembered by this case, the eloquent defense of M. Senard, the difficult, haggling acquittal, the reproach of the President in severe words, and then, success, the avenger, resounding, immense!

But *Madame Bovary* has also a secret history which may be a lesson to beginners in this difficult trade of letters.

When Flaubert, after five years of wearisome labor, had finished this unusual work, he intrusted it to his friend M. Maxime Ducamp, who put it into the hands of M. Laurent Pichat, editor-proprietor of the *Revue de Paris.* Then it was that he found how difficult it is to make oneself understood at the first blow, how one is misunderstood by those in whom he has confidence, and by those who pass for the most intelligent. From this epoch dates that scorn which he had for men's judgment, and his irony for absolute assertions or denials.

Some time after taking the manuscript of *Madame Bovary* to M. Laurent Pichat, M. Maxime Ducamp wrote the following singular letter to Gustave Flaubert, which may perhaps modify the opinion one has formed from the revelations of this writer of his friend, and in particular of *Madame Bovary* in his *Literary Souvenirs:*

JULY 14, 1856.

"DEAR OLD FRIEND: Laurent Pichat has read your romance and has sent me his approval of it, which I am to address to you. You will see on reading it how much I should share it, since it reproduces nearly all the observations that I made before your depa.ture. I sent your book to Laurent without doing more than to recommend it to him warmly; we had no understanding that we were to see you with the same eye. The counsel he gives you is good, and I would even say that it is the only counsel you can follow. Leave us *masters* of your romance that we may publish it in the *Revue;* we will make such cuttings as we judge indispensable; you can then publish it later in book form as you think best; that concerns you alone. My most friendly opinion is that, if you do not do this, you will compromise yourself absolutely and will make your appearance with a perplexing work whose style is not sufficient to give it interest. Be courageous, close your eyes during the operation and pride yourself, if not upon your talent, at least on the experience acquired in these things, and upon our affection for you. You have buried your romance under a heap of things, well done but useless; one cannot see it plainly enough; but try to uncover it and it is an easy task. We shall have this done under our eyes by an experienced and skilful person; we shall not add a word to your copy; we shall only prune it; this will cost you a hundred francs, which will be reserved for you on your rights, and you will have published a thing truly good in the place of an incomplete work too much bolstered. You may curse me with all your might, but remember meanwhile, that in all this I have looked only to your interest.

Adieu, dear old chap; answer, and believe me Yours always, MAXIME DUCAMP."

The mutilation of this typical and henceforth immortal book, performed by an "experienced and skilful person," would have cost the author only one hundred francs! Truly, that is nothing!

Gustave Flaubert was stirred with a profound and natural emotion on reading this strange counsel. And he wrote in his boldest hand, upon the back of that carefully preserved letter, only this word: "Gigantic!"

The two collaborators, Messrs. Pichat and Maxime Ducamp, now put themselves to work to extricate their friend's book from that heap of things "well done, but useless," which damaged it; for one reads in a sample copy of the first edition of the book, preserved by the author, the following lines:

"This copy represents my manuscript as it comes from the hand of Sir Laurent Pichat, poet and editor-proprietor of the *Revue de Paris.*" GUSTAVE FLAUBERT.

20th April, 1857.

On opening the volume, one finds from page to page, lines, paragraphs, and entire scenes cut out. The greater part of the new or original things are cancelled with care.

And one reads further, on the last page, from the hand of Gustave Flaubert, this:

"It was necessary, according to Maxime Ducamp, to retrench *all* the nuptials, and, according to Pichat, to suppress, or at least abridge considerably, and to make over the meetings from one end to the other! According to the general opinion of the *Revue*, the clubfoot is considerably too long, 'useless.'"

This was also the origin of the coolness which arose in the ardent friendship between Flaubert and M. Ducamp. If it were necessary to produce a more definite proof of this, it could be found in this fragment of a letter from Louis Bouilhet to Flaubert:

"As for Maxime Ducamp, I have gone fifteen days without seeing him and should have passed another week in the same fashion if he had not appeared at my house on Thursday of last week. I must say that he was very amiable both as regards my welfare and your own. This may have been policy, but I state the fact simply as a historian. He offered me his services in finding an editor, and later in finding a library. He is well informed about you and your work. What I told him about *Bovary* interested him very much. He said to me, in incidental phrases, that he was very glad the wrong was on your side for never having pardoned him the matter of the *Revue,* that he saw with happiness your works in his magazine, etc., *etc.* He seemed to speak with conviction and frankness. . . .”

These small details are important only from the point of view of M. Ducamp’s judgment of his friend. A reconciliation took place between them later.

The appearance of *Madame Bovary* was a revolution in letters. The great Balzac, forgotten, had shown his genius in some powerful books, stuffed, taken from life, observations, or rather revelations of humanity. He divined, invented, created an entire world, born of his mind. Little of the artist, in the delicate sense of the word, he wrote strong language, full of imagery, a little confused and laborious.

Carried away by his inspiration, he seemed to be ignorant of that difficult art, the giving to ideas their true value through words, sonorousness and context of phrase.

He put into his work the weight of a colossus; and there are few pages from this great man which can be cited as masterpieces of language, as one cites Rabelais, La Bruyère, Bossuet, Montesquieu, Chateaubriand, Michelet, Gautier, *etc.*

Gustave Flaubert, on the contrary, proceeding more by penetration than intuition, makes use of an admirable new language, precise, sober, sonorous, for a study of human life, profound, surprising, complete.

This is no longer the romance such as the greatest have made, the romance where one always feels a little imagination, a little of the author; a romance that can be classed among the tragic kind, the sentimental kind, the passionate kind; the romance where the purpose, the opinions of the author and his manner of thought show themselves. It is life itself made evident. One would say that the personages arose under his eyes as he turned the pages; that the landscapes unrolled themselves, with their sorrows, their gaieties, their odours, their charm; that objects surged before the reader, as he called them forth with an invisible power, concealed one knows not where.

Gustave Flaubert, in fact, was the most ardent apostle of impersonality in art. He would not admit, that the author ever should be surmised, that he should let fall in a page, in a line, in a word, a single particle of his opinion, nor any appearance of purpose. He should be the mirror of facts, but a mirror which should reproduce them by giving to them that inexpressible reflection, that, I know not what of something almost divine which is called art.

It is not “impersonal” that one should call it, in speaking of this impeccable artist, but impassible. If he attached considerable importance to observation and analysis, he laid still greater stress on composition and style. For with him these two qualities were the essentials of an imperishable book. By composi — tion, he meant that vexatious labour which consists in expressing only the essence of actions that follow each other in an existence, in choosing uniquely the characteristic traits and grouping them, combining them in such a way that they concur in a manner most perfect for producing the effect one wishes to obtain, but not with any purpose of instruction whatever.

Nothing so irritated him as the doctrines of the pawns of criticism upon moral art or honest art. “Since humanity has existed,” he would say, “all the great writers have protested through their works against such impotent counsel.”

Morality, honesty, and such principles are indispensable things in the maintenance of established social order; but there is nothing in common between social order and letters. Romance writers have as their chief object the observation and description of human passions, good and bad. Their mission is not to moralise, nor to scourge, nor to teach. A book with these tendencies ceases to be an artistic book.

The writer looks at and tries to penetrate the soul and the heart, to sound their depths, the propensities, shameful or magnanimous, together with all the complicated mechanism of movable mortals. He observes according to his temperament as a man, and his artistic conscience. He ceases to be conscientious and artistic if he systematically forces himself to glorify humanity, to gloss things over, to attenuate the passions that he judges dishonestly to the profit of the passions he judges honestly.

Any act, good or bad, has importance for the writer only as a subject for writing, without any idea of good or bad to be attached to it. It is worth more or less as a literary document, that is all.

Beyond the truth, observed in good faith and expressed with talent, there is nothing except the powerless efforts of the pawns.

The great writers are not preoccupied with either morals or chastity. For example: Aristophanes, Apuleius, Ovid, Virgil, Rabelais, Shakespeare and many others.

If a book carries a lesson, it should be in spite of the author, through the very force of the facts it relates. Flaubert considered these principles as articles of faith.

When *Madame Bovary* appeared, the public, accustomed to the unctuous syrup of the elegant romances, likewise to the unlikely adventures of the chance romances, classed the new writer among the realists. This is a gross error and stupid folly. Gustave Flaubert was no more a realist because he observed life with care than M. Cherbuliez is not an idealist because he observed badly. The realist is he who occupies himself only with the brutal fact without comprehending its relative importance or noting its reverberations. To Gustave Flaubert, a fact in itself signified nothing. He explains himself thus in one of his letters:

"You complain that the events are not varied, — that is the plaint of a realist, and besides, how do you know this? It may be necessary to look at them more closely. Have you ever believed in the existence of things? Is not everything an illusion? There is no truth except in its relation, that is to say, the fashion in which we perceive the objects."

No observer, however, was ever more conscientious; and no one strove more to comprehend the causes which led to the effects. His process of work, his artistic process held much more to penetration than to observation. Instead of displaying the psychology of his personages in explanatory dissertations, he simply made it appear by their acts. The inward was thus unveiled by the outward, and without any psychological argument.

In the first place, he imagined his types; then, proceeding by deduction, he gave to these beings the characteristic actions which they would naturally accomplish, following their temperaments with an absolute logic. Life, then, that he studied so minutely, could serve him only as a title of instructions.

Never does he announce the events; one would say on reading them that the facts spoke for themselves, so much importance did he attach to a visible appearance of men and things.

It is this rare quality of *scene-setter* and impassible portrayer which baptized him a realist by the superficial minds who know how to comprehend the deep meaning of a work only when it is spread out in philosophic phrases.

He was much irritated over this epithet of realist, which they pasted on his back, and pretended to have written his *Bovary* only out of hatred to the school of M. Champflèury.

In spite of a great friendship for Émile Zola, and a great admiration for his powerful talent, which he qualified as genial, he could never pardon him his naturalism. It is sufficient to read *Madame Bovary* with intelligence to understand how far removed he was from realism. The plan of the realistic writer consists in simply relating the facts that have happened among personages whom they have known or ob—

served. In *Madame Bovary,* each personage is a type, that is to say, a *résumé* of a series of beings belonging to the. same intellectual order.

The country doctor, the provincial dreamer, the chemist, — a sort of Prudhomme, — the curate, the lovers, and even all the accessory figures, are types, endowed with a *relievo* much more energetic than are they in whom are concentrated great powers of observation, and much more lifelike than those represented by a pattern, or model, of their class.

But Gustave Flaubert continued to grow great up to the hour of the blossoming of romanticism; he was nourished by echoing phrases of Chateaubriand and Victor Hugo, and felt in his soul a lyric need which could not completely expand in such clearly-defined books as *Madame Bovary.*

And this is one of the most singular sides of this great man: this innovator, this revealer, this man-who-dared was, up to the time of his death, under the dominating influence of romanticism. Almost in spite of himself, almost unconsciously, driven by the irresistible force of his genius, by the creative force shut up within him, has he written these romances in a style so novel, and a note so personal. From his own taste, he would have preferred epic subjects, which unrolled themselves in a kind of song, like tableaux in an opera.

In *Madame Bovary,* besides, as in the *Sentimental Education,* his style, constrained to the rendition of common things, has often some flights, some sonorousness of tone, above the subjects it expresses. It makes departures, as if tired of being held back, of being forced to such platitude and, in speaking of Homais' stupidity or Emma's silliness, it becomes pompous or confusing, as if he were translating the movement of a poem.

Not being able to resist this need of grandeur, he composed, after the fashion of a Homeric recital, his second romance, *Salammbô.*

And is that a romance? Or is it rather an opera in prose? The tableaux are developed with prodigious magnificence, with a surprising pomp, colour and rhythm. The phrase sings, cries, has the fury and sonorousness of the trumpet, the murmur of the hautboy, the undulations of the violoncello, the artifice of the violin and the finesse of the flute. And the personages, built for heroes, seem always on the stage, speaking after a superb mode, with an elegance strong and charming, with the air of moving about in antique and imposing garb and decorations.

This giant's book, the most plastically beautiful that he has written, gives also the impression of a magnificent dream. Is it thus that events passed such as Gustave Flaubert relates? No, undoubtedly no. If the facts are exact, the pomp of poesy which he throws over them show them to us in a kind of apotheosis, the lyric art of which envelops whatever it touches.

But scarcely had he ended that sonorous recitation of a mercenary revolt, when he felt himself called on anew by subjects less superb, and he composed with slowness that great romance of patience, that long, sober, and perfect study which is called the *Sentimental Education.*

This time he took for his personages, no longer types, as in the *Bovary,* but any sort of men, mediocre men, the kind we meet every day. Although this work demanded a superhuman amount of labour in its composition, so much does it resemble life itself that it has the air of being executed without plan or purpose. It is the perfect image of what takes place each day; it is an exact journal of existence. And yet, the philosophy in it remains so completely latent, so completely concealed behind the facts; the psychology is so perfectly enclosed in the action, attitudes and words of the personages, that the great public, accustomed to underscored effects, to manifest teaching, did not comprehend the value of this incomparable romance.

Only very keen minds and observers have seized the purport of this unique book, so artless, so sad, so simple in appearance, but so profound, so veiled, and so bitter. The *Sentimental Education,* scorned for the most part by the critics, accustomed as they are to the known forms and the immutable in art, has, nevertheless, numerous and enthusiastic admirers who give it the highest place among Flaubert’s works.

But it became necessary for him, in consequence of one of those inevitable reactions of the mind, to undertake a new subject, something large and poetic; and he finished a work, sketched some time before, entitled *The Temptation of Saint Antony.*

This is certainly the most powerful effort of the mind he ever made. But the very nature of the subject, its extent, its inaccessible height, rendered such a work almost beyond human strength. Taking up the old legend, he no longer has him assailed by visions of nude women and succulent nourishment alone, but by all the doctrines, all the beliefs and superstitions by which the disturbed mind of man is bewildered. It is a colossal defile of religious escort, of -all the strange conceptions, simple and complicated, enclosed in the brain of dreamer, priest, or philosopher who is tortured by a desire to penetrate the unknown.

As soon as this enormous task was finished (a work somewhat painful and confused, a chaos of tottering beliefs), he began again upon nearly the same subject, taking the sciences in place of religion and two narrow-minded citizens instead of the ecstatic saint.

Here are some of the ideas and the development of this encyclopaedic book, *Bouvard and Pécuchet,* which might have as a sub-title: “Concerning false methods in the study of human knowledge."

Two copyists employed in Paris met by chance and became bound together in the closest friendship. One of them had a small inheritance, the other his savings. With the combined sum they bought a farm in Normandy, the dream of their existence, and left the capital. Then they began a series of studies and experiences embracing all human knowledge, and thus are developed the philosophic data of the work.

At first, they took to gardening, then to agriculture, to chemistry, astronomy, medicine, archaeology, history, literature, politics, hygiene, to magnetism and sorcery; they finally came to philosophy, losing themselves in its abstractions; they fell into religion, which soon disgusted them; they took up the education of two orphans, but finding themselves frustrated again and in despair, they go back to copying as in days gone by.

The book is thus a review of all the sciences, as they appear to two lucid enough minds of the mediocre, simple order. It is at the same time a formidable collection of knowledge, and above all a prodigious criticism on all scientific systems, opposing the one to the other, tearing down both sides by bringing fact to bear upon them, contradicting them by the aid of accepted and undisputed laws. It is a history of the feebleness of human intelligence, a promenade through the labyrinth of erudition with a thread in one's hand. This thread is the grand irony of a thinker who proves, in all things and without ceasing, eternal and universal stupidity.

Beliefs, established for some centuries, are exposed, developed, and dismembered in ten lines by placing in opposition other beliefs so deftly and briskly as to undo and demolish them. From page to page, from line to line, a notion comes up, and immediately another rises in its turn, when the first withdraws or falls, struck down by its neighbor.

What Flaubert did for religions and antique philosophy in *The Temptation of Saint Antony*, he has here accomplished anew for all modern knowledge. It is the Tower-of-Babel of science, where all doctrines, diverse, contrary, and absolute (above all), speaking each its own language, demonstrate the impotence of effort, the vanity of affirmation and always "the eternal misery of all."

The truth of to-day becomes the error of to-morrow; all is uncertain, variable, containing in unknown proportions, some quantity of the true and of the false. At least, what is there is neither true nor false. The moral of the book seems contained in this phrase of Bouvard's: "Knowledge is gained by following the data furnished by an angle in space. Perhaps it will not bring all that we are ignorant of, which would require so much greater space that one can never hope to discover it."

This book touches upon that which is greatest, most curious, most subtle and most interesting in man: it is the history of an idea under all its forms, in all its manifestations, with all its transformations, in its weakness and in its power.

It is curious to notice here in Gustave Flaubert a tendency towards an ideal more and more abstract and elevated. By ideal must not be understood that sentimental kind which seduces the common citizen’s imagination. For the ideal, with most men, is nothing other than the unlikely. For the rest, it is simply the domain of the idea.

Flaubert’s early romances have been first of all a study of customs, very true and very human; then, a dazzling poem, a procession of images and visions. In *Bouvard and Pécuchet,* the personages themselves belong to systems and not to mankind. The actors serve uniquely for expressing ideas which, as if they were beings, move, unite, combat and destroy each other. And some particularly comic part, or wicked idea, takes its place in the procession of beliefs in the brains of these two poor gentlemen who personify humanity. They are always of good faith, always zealous; and invariably experience contradicts the best established theory, and the most subtle reasoning is demolished by the most simple fact.

This surprising edifice of knowledge, built for demonstrating human impotence, should have a crowning conclusion, a shining justification. After this formidable array, the author has heaped up an irresistible amount of proof, the wrong side of foolishness culled from among great men.

When Bouvard and Pécuchet, disgusted with everything, returned to their copying, they naturally opened the books that they had read, taking them in the natural order of their studies, and transcribed minutely some choice passages from them into the works from which they were drawing. Then begins a series of frightful absurdities, ignorance, flagrant contradictions, monstrous errors, shameful statements, and mistakes inconceivable to high minds and those of more intelligence. Whoever has written upon a subject has sometime said a foolish thing. This foolish statement Flaubert has unfailingly found and set down; and, putting with it another, then another, then another, he has made a formidable array which disconcerts all belief and all statement.

This inner view of human stupidity resulted in a mountain of notes too mixed ever to be published unabridged. He has classed them, however; but this classification should be revised, and half, at least, of this mass of documents suppressed. Nevertheless, here is the order in which he left these notes:

Morality.
Love.

Philosophy.
Mysticism.
Religion.
Prophecy.
Socialism. (Religious and political.)
Criticism.
Estheticism.

Specimens of style:
Periphrases.
Recantation.
Rococo.

Styles of great writers, journalists and poets.
Styles:
Classic.
Scientific: (Medical, Agricultural).
Clerical.
Revolutionary.
Romantic.
Realistic.
Dramatic.
Official, of Sovereigns.
Poetic-official.

HISTORY OF SCIENTIFIC IDEAS.

FINE ARTS

BEAUTY:
On the part of order.
Of people of letters.

Of religion. Of sovereigns.

Opinions of great men.
The classics corrected.
Whimsicality. — Ferocity. — Eccentricities. — Injuries. — foolishness. —

Cowardice. Exaltation of the low.

Official popularity:

Discourse.

Circulars.

IMBECILES.

The dictionary of accepted ideas.

The catalogue of *chic* opinions.

This then, is the history of human stupidity in all its forms.

Some quotations to make the purport and nature of these notes comprehended:

PHILOSOPHY, MORALITY, RELIGION.

The Greeks corrupted by their philosophic reasoners.

“This so brilliant people has founded nothing, established nothing lasting, and there remains of them only memories of crimes and disasters, books and statues. They always lacked reason.” — LAMENAIS: *Essay upon Indifference,* vol. 4, p. 171.

MORALITY.

“Sovereigns have the right to make changes in morals.”

— DESCARTES: *Discourse on Method,* part 6.

“The study of mathematics, comprising as it does, sensibility and imagination, sometimes causes a terrible explosion of the passions.”

— DUPANLOUP: *Intellectual Education,* p. 147.

“Superstition is a production put forth by religion, which there is no need of destroying.”

— DE MAISTRE: *Evenings at St. Petersburg,* No. 7, p. 234.

“Water is made for sustaining these prodigious floating edifices which we call vessels.”

— FENELON.

RELIGIOUS AND PHILOSOPHICAL AND MORAL BEAUTIES.

POLITICAL ECONOMY.

“In 1823, the inhabitants of the town of Lille, speaking in the name of rape-seed oil, exposed to the government the fact that a new product, gas, had begun to make itself known; that this mode of lighting, if put into general use, would leave all others behind, inasmuch as it appeared at once the best and the lowest in price, *etc.* By reason of which, they prayed humbly, but firmly, that his Majesty, the natural protector of their work, would be willing to protect them from all attack upon their rights by absolutely interdicting this perturbing product."

— FREDERIC PASSY: *Discourse upon Free Trade. Dec. 5, 1878.*

"Shakespeare himself, crude as he was, was not without reading or without knowledge."

— LA HARPE: *Introduction to a Literary Course.*

THE ECCLESIASTICAL STYLE.

"Ladies, in the march of Christian society, upon the railway of the world, woman is a drop of water whose magnetic influence, vivified and purified by the fire of the Holy Spirit, communicates movement to the social convoy under her beneficent impulse; it runs along the way of progress and advances towards the eternal doctrines.

"But if, instead of furnishing the drop of water of the divine benediction, woman supplies the pebble of derailment, some frightful catastrophes are the result."

— MGR. MERMILLOD:

On Supernatural Life in the Soul.

PERIPHRASES.

IMBECILE.

"I should consider it bad for a not over-wise girl to live with a man before marriage."

(Translation of Homer.) PONSARD.

ROMANTIC STYLE.

"Sibyl, playing on the harp, was generally adorable. The word angel came to the lips in looking at her."

— *Sibylle* (p. 146) O. FEUILLET.

STYLE OF SOVEREIGNS.

"The riches of a country depend upon its general prosperity."

— Louis NAPOLEON:

Quoted in the *Rive Gauche,* March 12, 1865.

THE CATHOLIC STYLE.

“Philosophic teaching makes youth drink of the rancour of the dragon in the chalice of Babylon.”

— Pius IX: *Manifesto,* 1847.

“The inundations of the Loire are due to the excess of pressure and the non-observance of Sunday.” — THE BISHOP OF METZ: *Mandate,* December, 1846.

SCIENTIFIC IDEAS.

NATURAL HISTORY.

“The women in Egypt prostituted themselves publicly to the crocodiles!” — PROUDHON: *{On the celebration of Sunday,* 1850.)

“Dogs are ordinarily of two opposite tints, the one light and the other dark, so that in whatever part of the house they may be, they can be seen upon the furniture, with the colour of which they might be confounded.”

— BERNARDIN DE SAINT-PIERRE: *Harmonies of Nature.*

“Fleas throw themselves, wherever they are, upon a white colour. This instinct was given to them that we might catch them more easily.”

— BERNARDIN DE SAINT-PIERRE: *Harmonies of Nature.*

“The melon is divided by nature into sections so as to be eaten in the family; the pumpkin, being much larger, can be eaten with the neighbours.”

— BERNARDIN DE SAINT-PIERRE: *Études de la Nature.*

CARE FOR THE TRUTH.

“AU authority, especially that of the church, ought to oppose new things, without letting themselves be frightened at the danger of retarding the discovery of some new truths, which may be inconvenient, fleeting, and wholly useless as compared with the shocking of institutions and accepted opinions.”

— P. 283, vol. 2, DE MAISTRE, *Exam. Phil. Bacon.*

“A disease of potatoes was caused by the disaster at Monville. The meteor was most active in the valleys, where it drew off the heat. It had the effect of a sudden coldness.”

— RASPAIL: *Hist. Health and Sickness,* p. 246, 247.

FISHES.

“I notice in fishes that it is a marvel they are born and live in the waters of the ocean, which are salt, and that their race was not annihilated long ago.”

— GAUME: *Catechism of Perseverance,* 57.

CONCERNING CHEMISTRY.

“Is it necessary to observe that this vast science (Chemistry) is absolutely out of place in general teaching? Of what use is it to the minister, the magistrate, the sailor, or the merchant?”

— DE MAISTRE: *Letters and unedited pamphlets.*

SCORN OF SCIENCE.

“Many persons have thought that science in the hands of man dries up the heart, disenchants nature, leads the minds of the weak to atheism, and from atheism to crime.”

— CHATEAUBRIAND: *Genius of Christianity,* p. 335.

ZOOLOGY.

“It is, as it seems to us, a great pity to find man to-day ranked among the mammiferous (after Linnœus’s system) with the monkeys, the bats and the sloths. Is he not worthy to be left at the head of creation where Moses, Aristotle, Buffon, and Nature placed him?”

— CHATEAUBRIAND: *Genius of Christianity,* p. 551.

“His movements [of the serpent] differ from those of all animals. One does not know where to say the principle of his locomotion lies, for he has neither fins, nor feet, nor wings; nevertheless he flees like a shadow and vanishes magically.”

— CHATEAUBRIAND: *Genius of Christianity,* p. 138.

LINGUISTIC.

“If one had a dictionary of savage tongues, he might find there the remaining evidence of a language spoken before their day by an enlightened people, and, if we did not find it, the only conclusion would be that degradation had arrived at such a point that the last remnants had been effaced.”

— DE MAISTRE: *Evenings at St. Petersburg.*

THE NATURAL SCIENCES ARE SECONDARY.

“They belong to prelates, to the nobles, to the great officers of State, to be the depositories and the guardians of conserved truth, to téach nations what is good and what is bad, what is true and what is false, in moral and spiritual order. Others have no right to reason upon this kind of matter. They have the natural sciences to amuse them; of what can they complain?”

— 8th *Conversation*, p. 131. DE MAISTRE.

Evenings at St. Petersburg.

SCIENCE SHOULD BE PUT IN SECOND PLACE.

“If we do not look well to ancient maxims, if education be not given up to the priests, and if science is not put in the second place, the evils which await us are incalculable; we shall be brutalized by science, and that is the last degree of brutality.”

— DE MAISTRE: *Essay on generating principles.*

HISTORIC REVIEW.

Opinion on the study of history.

“The teaching of history may have, in my opinion, some inconvenient peril for the professor. It has some also for pupils.” — DUPANLOUP.

CRITICAL HISTORY.

“If we consider Napoleon in respect to his moral qualities, it is difficult to estimate him, because it is difficult to discover goodness in a soldier who is ever occupied with strewing the earth with the dead; friendship in a man who never has his equals about him; probity in a potentate who is master of the riches of the universe. At the same time, however outside the ordinary rules this mortal may be, it is not impossible to seize here and there certain traits of his moral physiognomy.”

— A. THIERS:

History of the Consulate and the Empire, vol. *22*, p. 713.

“Many times have I heard deplored the blindness of the judgment of Francis I., who thrust away Christopher Columbus when he proposed the Indes.”

— MONTESQUIEU: *The Mind of Louis XIV.*, Book 21, Chap. *22.*

(Francis I. mounted the throne in 1515. Columbus died in 1506.)

A PIPE IN THE xv. CENTURY.

“Some steps from this very lively scene, the Spanish chief sat motionless smoking a long pipe.”

smoking a long pipe.

— VILLEMAIN: *Lascaris.*

ON THE EVE OF THE NAPOLEONIC EMPIRE.

“There has never existed a sovereign family whom one could connect with a plebeian origin. If this phenomenon should make its appearance, it would make an epoch in the world.”

— DE MAISTRE: *Evenings at St. Petersburg.*

PRUSSIA WILL NOT BE RE-ESTABLISHED.

“Nothing can establish the power of Prussia (1807). This famous edifice, constructed of blood, of filth, of false money and the leaves of pamphlets, has crumbled in the twinkling of an eye and gone forever.”

— DE MAISTRE: *Letters and Pamphlets,* p. 98.

SAINT JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, THE AFRICAN BOSSUET.

(St. John Chrysostom was born in Antioch, Asia.)

“The town of Cannes, doubly celebrated for the victory gained by Hannibal over the Romans and the landing of Bonaparte.”

“He accuses Louis XI. of having persecuted Abélard.” (Louis XI. was born in 1423. Abélard was born in 1079.)

“Smyrna is an island.”

— J. JANIN, in *G. de Flotte,* 1860.

EXALTATION OF THE LOWLY.

“It requires more genius to be a boatman on the Rhône than to reach the Orient.”

— PROUDHON.

STUPIDITIES OF GREAT MEN. CORNEILLE.

“His morals [Chlmène] are at least scandalous, if, in fact, not depraved. This pernicious example renders the work notably defective and destroys the aim of the poetry which would otherwise be useful.”

— *Academy (On The Cid).*

“Let one quote me an excerpt from the great Corneille that I would not have undertaken to do better myself than he has done it! Who is to be the judge? I should only do what any man is capable of doing, provided he believed as firmly in Aristotle as in me.”

— LESSING: *Dramatists of Hamburg,* p. 462, 463.

“In spite of the reputation which this writter [La Bruyère] enjoyed, there is much negligence in his style.”
— CONDILLAC: *Treatise on the Art of Writing.*

“A famous dreamer [Descartes], subject to flights of the imagination, whose name is made for a chimerical country.”
— MARAT: *Concerning the Panthéon.*

“Rabelais, filth of humanity.” — LAMARTINE, LULLI.
“His songs, so often repeated in the world, serve only to suggest passions the most irregular.”
— BOSSUET: *Maxims on Comedy.*

MOLIERE

“It is a pity that Molière did not know how to write.” — FENELON.

“Molière is an infamous actor.” — BOSSUET.
BYRON.
“Byron’s genius seems to me to be at bottom a little stupid.” — L. VEUILLOT: *Free Thoughts*, p. 11.

“In my opinion, Byron, after he had been very justly rejected by his family and his country, — that is to say, — put in a convict-prison for being a faithless husband and a scandalous citizen, — if he had been a man of sense, and truly great in mind and heart, he would have made the simplest reparation for the sake of recovering the right to bring up his daughter and serve his country.” — L. VEUILLOT: *Free Thoughts*, p. 11.

ABUSE OF GREAT MEN.
“He [Bonaparte] is in fact a great winner of battles; but aside from that the least General is more skilful than he.”
— CHATEAUBRIAND: *Napoleon and the Bourbons.*

BONAPARTE.
“It has been believed that he had perfected the art of war, while it is certain that he has retrograded toward the infancy of the art.”

that he has retrograded toward the infancy of the art.”

— CHATEAUBRIAND: *Bonaparte and the Bourbons.*

BACON.

“Bacon is absolutely devoid of the spirit of analysis; not only does he not know how to resolve questions, but he does not know how to place them.”

— DE MAISTRE: *Examination of Bacon s Philosophy,* vol. i, p. 37.

“Bacon was a man ignorant of all the sciences, and all his ideas were fundamentally false.”

DE MAISTRE:

Examination of Bacon’s Philosophy, vol. 1, p. 82.

“Bacon had an eminently false mind, of a kind of falseness which never has belonged to any one but him. His absolute incapacity, essential, radical, was seen in all branches of natural science.”

— DE MAISTRE: *Examination of Bacon’s Philosophy,* vol. 1, p. 285.

VOLTAIRE.

“Voltaire is nothing as a philosopher, without authority as a critic and an historian, and antiquated as a scholar; daylight has been let in upon his private life, but through pride, the wickedness and little meannesses of his soul and character are discredited.”

— DUPANLOUP: *High Intellectual Education.*

GOETHE.

“Posterity, to whom Goethe has left his work to be judged, will do what it has to do. It will write on tablets of bronze:

‘Goethe, born at Frankfort in 1749, died at Weimar in 1852; a great writer, a great poet and a great artist.’ And then the fanatics, who are for form for the sake of form, and art for the sake of art, for love and materialism, will come and ask to have added: ‘Great man!’ and Posterity will answer: ‘No!’“

— A. DUMAS, *fils.*

July 23, 1873.

IDEAS OF ART.

IMBECILE.

“There is no doubt that extraordinary men, in whatever way it may be, owe a part of their success to the superior qualities with which they are endowed by organization.” — DAMIRON: *Course of Philosophy,* vol. 11, p. 35.

“The grocery shop is respectable. It is a branch of commerce. The army is more respectable still, because it is an institution whose aim is order. The grocery is useful, the army is necessary.”

— *The News:* JULES NORIAC.

Oct. 26, 1865.

JOCRISSES.

“As soon as a Frenchman has passed the frontier, he enters upon foreign territory.”

— L. HAVIN: *Sunday Courier,* Dec. 15.

“When the limit is overleaped, there are limits no longer.” — PONSARD.

There are in existence almost enough of these notes to fill three volumes. The aptitude of Gustave Flaubert for discovering this kind of stupidity was surprising. The following example is characteristic.

On reading the discourse of Scribe’s reception at the French Academy, he stopped short before this phrase, which he noticed immediately:

“Does Molière’s comedy instruct us in the great events of the Louis XIV. century? Does it tell us a word of the weaknesses or faults of the great king? Does it speak of the revoking of the Edict of Nantes?”

He wrote under this quotation:

“Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, 1685.”
“Death of Molière, 1673.”

How was it that no one of the Academicians, meeting to listen to this discourse before it was delivered, happened upon this very simple comparison of dates?

Gustave Flaubert counted upon forming a volume of these justifying documents. In order to render the collection of stupidity less heavy and fastidious, there were to be at intervals two or three stories, of poetic idealism, also copied in *Bouvard and Pechuchet.*

Among his papers was found the plan of one of these stories, which would have been entitled: *A Night with Don Juan.* This plan, indicated by short phrases, often by single words alone, reveals better than any dissertation his manner of conceiving and preparing his work. From this point of view it is interesting. Here it is:

A NIGHT WITH DON JUAN.

I.

“Make him without accomplishments, of a single trait.

“Begin with tumult of action, — tableau of two cavaliers arriving upon horses out of breath. Glimpse of the landscape, but not too marked, only as seen through the trees, — let the horses graze in the brushwood, — they become entangled in the lines, *etc.* — In the midst of the dialogue, from time to time, break in with little details of action.

“Don Juan unbuttons and throws down his sword which comes out of the scabbard a little upon the turf. — He comes to kill the brother of Donna Elvira. — He has fled. — The conversation begins in sharp, brusque speeches.

“Landscape. — The convent behind them. — They are seated on a grassplot, on a declivity under some orange trees. — Circle of woods about them. — Slightly rising land before them. — Horizon of mountains, bare at the summit. — Setting sun.

“Don Juan is weary and betakes himself to Le porello. — But is it my fault, the life you lead and make me lead? Ah, well, the life that I lead — is that my fault also? What! It is not your fault. — Leporello believed him, for he had often seen in him the good intention of leading a more regular life, — yes, and the chance of making it otherwise. Examples. — Leporello mentions the examples: desire that he has for knowing all the women he sees, universal jealousy of the human race. — You would wish all to belong to you. — You would seek occasions. — Yes, a disquiet urges me. I should wish . . . aspiration. . . . — Less than ever he knows what he would wish, what he wishes. — Leporello for a long time has comprehended little that his master said. — Don Juan wishes to be pure, to be a virgin youth. — He has never been so because he is so bold, impudent and positive. — He has often wished for the emotions of innocence. — In all and above all, it is the woman he seeks. — But why do you leave them? — Ah! why? — Don Juan says it is from weariness of a woman possessed. — Annoyance which takes his eye, temptation to strike those who weep. — How you repel them, the poor little hinds! How you forget! — Don Juan astonishes himself even in forgetting and sounds this idea, finding it a sad thing. — I have found some tokens of love, but know not whence they have come to me. — You complain of life, master; it is unjust. — Leporello wickedly enjoys the idea of goodness in Don Juan. — The young people look at him, Leporello, with envy, thinking that he participates somewhat in the poesy of his master.

“Reverie of Don Juan on the idea submitted to him by Leporello, that he may have a son somewhere. . . .

“And I have seen you in having seen your ancestors. — Desire that Don Juan has to define in his thoughts the countenances now nearly effaced. — What would he not give to have once more a clear idea of these images!

“It is not all the change itself. It is that you change often for the worse. — Love of plain women. Have you not been mad during the past year over that old Neapolitan marchioness?

“Don Juan relates how he lost his virginity (an old duenna, in a shadow, in a castle). — But you did not know then that this was only a desire; poor man (Seized him in her arms), and what it is born of? — Excitation of physical desire — Corruption. — Abyss which separates subject and object, and the appetite of the one for entering the other. — This is what I am always in quest of. — Silence.

“There was in my father’s garden the figure of a woman which had been on the prow of a ship. — Desire showed in it. — He clambers up one day and takes hold of her breasts. — Dead spiders in the wood. — First sentiment of woman, a feeling of peril. — And I have always found the heart of wood. And especially so when they are at play! I see you are happy. Atonement for joy (calm before, calm after), this has alway given me the suspicion that there was something concealed. — But no. — Impossibility of a perfect communion, however adherent the kiss may be. — Something constrains and in itself makes a wall. Silence of the pupils of the eye while they devour themselves, The look goes for more than words. From there comes the desire, for a most intimate attachment, always being renewed and deceived. (Note it from different standpoints):

Jealousy in desire: to know, to have.
Jealousy in possession: to look at in sleep, to understand at heart
Jealousy in remembrance: to see again and remember well.

“It is always the same thing, said Leporello. — Ah, no! it is never the same thing! So many women, so many desires, and the different joys and bitternesses.

“Let the vulgarism of Leporello bring out the superiority of Don Juan and place it objectively in showing the difference, especially that the difference is only in intensity I “Desire of other men. Willing to be all that the women expect. — How does it affect me? What is this great number of mistresses compared to the rest? How many there are who do not know me and to whom I have never been anything!

“Two kinds of love. That which attracts to itself, which imbibes, where individualism and the senses predominate (not all of the voluptuous kind, however). To this belongs jealousy. The second is the love which draws you outside of itself. It is larger, more rending, more sweet. It has some magnetic influence where the other has recurring sharpnesses. Don Juan has proved the two, sometimes in the case of the same woman. There are some women who bring the first, there are others who provoke the second, some both at the same time. This also depends upon the moment, chance and the disposition.

“Don Juan is weary and finishes with a feeling that his head would split, as one does when he has thought too long, without a solution. — They hear the bell toll for the dead. And this is one for whom all is done! What is it for?

“They raise their heads.

II.

“Don Juan scales the wall and sees Anna Maria asleep. — Tableau. — Long contemplation, — desire, — remembrance. — She awakes. At first, some words cut short, as if following her thought. She has no fear of him (the least clash possible without their being able to distinguish the fantastic from the real).

“It is long that I have awaited you. You did not come. — Relate her illness and death. — As the dialogue proceeds, she awakes more and more. — Sweat upon her head-bands; raises herself slowly, slowly, at first on her elbows, then sits. — Great astonished eyes. Return to the exact. How?

“Then it is you whose steps I was listening for in the wood. — Stifling heat of the nights. — The promenade in the cloister, shade of the columns, which did not move as the trees had. I plunged my hands into the fountain. — Symbolic comparison of the changed stag. — A summer afternoon.

“They prohibit our telling our thoughts — *à propos* of the crucifix which stands over Anna Maria’s bed, the Christ who watches over our dreams. — The crucifix is alway immovable while the heart of the young girl is agitated and often grieved.

“This crucifix is a comfort to Anna Maria, but it does not respond to her in her love. — Oh! I have prayed to Him so often! Why will He not, why has He not listened to me? Aspirations of the flesh and love that is true (perfecting the mystic love), in parallel with the shameless aspirations of Don Juan who has had, in his other loves, especially in moments of lassitude, some mystic needs. (Indicate this, as to Don Juan, in his conversation with Leporello.)

“Movement of Anna Maria encircling Don Juan with her arms. — The flesh of the fore-arm borne upon the arteries and the wrists at the end of the stiff hands, too small to reach to him; a lock of Don Juan’s hair catches in a button of her chemise, as he lowers his head towards her.

“The night becomes animated, — a few shepherds are heard upon the mountains. There also they speak of love. — It is love which occupies them. — You do not know the simple joy. — The day dawns.

“Aspirations of Anna Maria’s life at harvest times. Sunday afternoons the feast days of the church. — The overseers torment her. — I loved the confessional much. She approached it with a sentiment of voluptuous fear, because her heart was open. — Mystery, shade. — But she had no sins to tell, although she could have wished she had. There are, they say, some women of the ardent life, — happy.

“One day she swooned all alone in the church, where she went to place some flowers (the organist was playing all alone), while contemplating a large window penejrated by the sunlight.

“Frequent desires which she has at communion. To have Jesus in the body. God in self! — At each new sacrament it seems to her that the thirst may be appeased. — She multiplies her works, fasts, prayers, *etc.* — Sensuality of the young. — Feels the stomach pulling, weakness of the head. — She is afraid, and studies how to overcome these fears, *etc.* — Mortifications. — Is fond of pleasant odours. She smells some disgusting things. — Voluptuousness of bad odours. — She is ashamed before Don Juan, because of her enthusiasm. — Anna Maria is astonished at his desire. — What is it? How is it that I desire and she desires that which she does not know? Voluptuousness creeps into her, as disgust into Don Juan. I heard you speaking of the world. Speak to me! Speak to me!

“The lamp goes out for want of oil. — The stars shine into the room (not the moon). Then the day dawns. — Anna Maria falls dead.

“The horses are heard browsing and shaking the saddles on their backs. Don Juan escapes.

“Tone of character of Anna Maria: *sweet.*

“Never lose sight of Don Juan! The principal object (at least of the second part) is the union, the equality, the duality, each of which terms has been incomplete up to the present time, melting them together, and each showing gradually that it is coming to complete itself by uniting with the neighboring term.”

Gustave Flaubert did not write *Bouvard and Pécuchet* at a single stroke. It might be said that half of his life was passed in meditation upon this book, and that he consecrated his last six years to the execution of this *tour de force.* An insatiable reader, indefatigable in research, he heaped up documents without ceasing. Finally, one day, he put himself to work, somewhat terrified before the enormity of the task. “One must be mad,” he often said, “to undertake a work like that.” And it was indeed necessary to have superhuman patience and an ineradicable will.

Down there at Croisset, in his great study with five windows, he moaned day and night over his work. Without relaxation, without recreation, pleasures or distractions, with mind fearfully intent, he advanced with a desperate slowness, discovering each day some new study to be made, some new research to undertake. And his phrases also tormented him, his phrase, so concise, so precise, so coloured as to enclose in two lines a whole volume, and in a paragraph all the thoughts of a savant. He would take a number of ideas of the same nature, and, as a chemist prepares an elixir, dissolve them and mix them, rejecting the accessories and simplifying the principles, until out of his crucible would come absolute formulas containing in fifty words an entire system of philosophy.

Once it became necessary for him to stop, exhausted and almost discouraged; then, as a recreation, he wrote his delicious volume entitled: *Three Stories.*

It might be said here that he wished to make this a complete and perfect *résumé* of his work. The three novels: *A Simple Soul, The Legend of Saint Julien the Hospitaller* and *Herodias*, show in a short and admirable fashion the three aspects of his talent.

If it were necessary to class these three jewels, perhaps we should put *Saint Julien the Hospitaller* in the, first rank. It is an absolute masterpiece in colour and style, a masterpiece in art.

A Simple Soul relates the story of a poor country servant, honest and shallow, whose life goes on until death without a glimmer of true happiness ever shining upon it.

The Legend of Saint Julien the Hospitaller shows us the miraculous adventures of a saint as made by an old, stained-glass church window, with a wise and highly-coloured simplicity.

Herodias tells us of the tragedy of the decapitation of Saint John the Baptist.

Gustave Flaubert still had many subjects for novels and romances. He counted on writing, from the first, the Battle of Thermopylae, and for this purpose made a voyage to Greece in the beginning of the year 1872 to see the actual country of this superhuman struggle. He wished to make of it a kind of patriotic recitation, simple and terrible, which might be read to the children of the people, to teach them to make them love their country.

He wished to show the valiant souls, the magnanimous hearts and the vigorous bodies of these symbolic heroes and, without employing a technical word, or an ancient term, to tell the story of this immortal battle, which belonged not to the history of a single nation but of the world. He rejoiced at the idea of writing the adieux of these warriors to their wives in sonorous terms, where they recommend them, in case they fall in the encounter, to marry again some robust men soon, in order to give new sons to their country. The very thought of this heroic story gave Flaubert a powerful enthusiasm.

He had planned, too, a kind of modern *Matron of Ephesus,* having been carried away by a subject which Turgenief related to him.

Finally, he meditated a great romance upon the second Empire, where could be seen the mixture and contact of Oriental and Occidental civilisations, — the amalgamation of the Greeks from Constantinople, so many of whom came to Paris during Napoleon’s reign, playing an important rôle in Parisian society and the factitious, refined world of Imperial France.

Two personages chiefly attracted him, a man and a woman, a Parisian household, showing craftiness with ingenuousness, ambition and corruption. The man, a superior officer, dreams of a great fortune which he is slowly amassing, and with a natural, egotistic profligacy he makes his wife, who is very pretty and full of intrigue, serve his projects.

In spite of all the efforts, of every nature, of his companion, his desires are not satisfied to his liking. Then, after long years of attempts, both realise the vanity of their hopes and finish their life as honest, deceived people, resigned and tranquil.

He saw still, in project, another great romance upon the administration, with this title: *The Head of the Department*, and he affirmed that no one has ever yet comprehended what a comic personage, and how important and useless, a Head of the Department is.

Gustave Flaubert was before all, and above all, an artist. The public to-day scarcely distinguishes the signification of this word as applied to a man of letters. The sense of art, that scent so delicate, so subtle, so difficult, so unseizable, so inexpressible, is essentially a gift of the aristocracy of intelligence; it can scarcely belong to the democracy.

Some very great writers have not been artists. The public and even the greater part of the critics make no difference between the one and the other.

In the last century, on the contrary, the public, adjudged difficult and refined, carried to an extreme this artistic sense which has now disappeared. It worked itself into a passion for a phrase, for a verse, for an ingenious or a bold epithet. Twenty lines, a page, a portrait, an episode, sufficed it for judging and classing an author. It sought the underneath, the inner meaning of the words, penetrated the secret reasoning of the author, read slowly without passing over anything, seeking, after digesting the phrase, to find out whether there still remained anything more to penetrate. And minds, slowly prepared for literary sensations, receive readily the secret influence of this mysterious power which puts some soul into a work.

When a man, however richly endowed he may be, concerns himself only with relating something, when he takes no account of the fact that veritable literary power is not in the anecdote but in the manner of preparing, presenting, and expressing it, he has no sense of art.

The profound and delicious joy which leaps to youk heart before certain pages, before certain phrases, comes only through those who have said them; they come from an accordance of expression and idea which is absolute, from a sensation of secret beauty and harmony which escapes for the most part the observation of the multitude.

Musset, that great poet, was not an artist. The charming things he said, in an easy, seductive language, left quite indifferent those who are occupied in the pursuit, the research, and the emotions of a higher beauty, more unreachable, more intellectual.

The multitude, on the contrary, found in Musset satisfaction for all their poetic appetites, which are a little gross, and unable to comprehend the trembling, almost the ecstasy, which certain pieces of Baudelaire, Victor Hugo, and Leconte de Lisle can give. Those words have a soul. Most readers, and even writers, ask only a meaning. They find that this soul, which appears in contact with other words, which shines upon and illumines certain books with an unknown light, is very difficult to call forth.

There are, in the joining and combinations of the language written by certain men, the evocation of a whole poetic world, that the people of the mundane world know neither how to perceive nor to surmise. When one speaks to them of it, they are offended, begin to reason, argue, deny, and cry out that they wish you would show it to them. It would be useless to try. Feeling it not, they could never comprehend.

Some educated, intelligent men, writers even, are astonished when one speaks to them of this mystery of which they are ignorant; and they laugh and shrug their shoulders. What matters it? They do not know. As well talk music to a people who have no ear.

Ten words exchanged are sufficient for two minds endowed with this mysterious sense of art to comprehend each other’s meaning, as if they were speaking a language of which others were ignorant.

Flaubert was tortured all his life in the pursuit of this unseizable perfection. He had a conception of style which bestows upon him, in this one word, all the qualities of the thinker and the writer. So, when he declared: “There is nothing but style,” one must understand him to mean: There is nothing but sonorousness or harmony of words.

One usually means by “style,” the fashion in which each individual writer presents his thought. Style would then be different according as the man, brilliant or sombre, abundant or concise, followed his own temperament. Gustave Flaubert thought that the personality of the author should disappear in the originality of the book, and that the originality of the book should not come from the singularity of style.

For he did not consider “styles” as a series of moulds each of which carries the particular mark of a writer and in which he runs all of his ideas; but he believed in *style,* that is to say, in a unique, absolute manner for expressing a thing in all its colour and all its intensity.

For him it was the work itself. Just as among beings, the blood nourishes the flesh and even determines the contour and external appearance, following its race and family, so, for him, the foundation in a work imposed the expression with a fatality, unique and true; also the measure, rhythm, and all the lines of the form.

He did not understand that foundation could exist without form, nor form without foundation. The style, then, became the being, the impersonal being, so to speak; and imprinted only its qualities upon the quality of the thought and the power of vision.

Possessed by the absolute belief that there existed only one way of expressing a thing, one word to use, one adjective to qualify it and one verb to give it life, he gave himself superhuman labor to discoyer, in each phrase, that word, that epithet and that verb. Thus, he believed in a mysterious harmony of expression, and, when a correct term did not seem to him euphonious, he would seek another with an invincible patience, certain that he had not found the true, the unique.

Writing, then, was for him a formidable thing, full of torment, peril and fatigue. He would seat himself at his table with a fear of and a desire for this loved but torturing work. He would remain there for hours, immovable, vexed by his frightful labour, fearful of this colossus, patient and careful as one who would build a pyramid of a child’s marbles.

Sunk in his oak armchair with its high back, his head drawn down between his shoulders, he would look steadily at his paper with his blue eye, whose small pupil seemed like a black dot always in motion. A light cap of silk, such as ecclesiastics wear, covering the top of his head, allowed long locks of hair to escape, which fell down and spread out upon his back. A large dressing-gown, of brown cloth, enveloped him entirely; and his red face, cut by a heavy moustache, white at the drooping ends, appeared swollen under a furious rush of blood. His eyes, shaded by great, sombre brows, ran along the lines, digging out words, overturning phrases, consulting the physiognomy of the assembled letters, spying the effect as a hunter eyes his game.

Then he would begin to write, slowly, stopping often, beginning again, erasing, writing across words, filling the margins, and intervening spaces, blackening twenty pages to finish one, and, under the heavy effort of his thought, whining meantime like a sawyer.

Sometimes, throwing the quill which he held in his hand into a large Oriental tin plate filled with goose-quills carefully sharpened, he would take up the sheet of paper, raise it to a level with his eyes and, leaning upon his elbow, would declaim in a sharp, high voice. He would listen to the rhythm of his prose, stop as if seizing a passing cadence, place the commas with exact knowledge, like the halting-places in a long journey.

“A phrase is likely to live,” he would say, “when it corresponds to all the necessities of respiration. I know that a phrase is good when it can be read very loud.”

“Phrases badly written,” he writes in a preface to the *Last Songs* of Louis Bouilhet, “will not submit to this test; they oppress the chest, strain the cords of the heart, and are thus found outside the conditions of life.”

A thousand occupations besieged him at the same time, taking possession of him; but that certain attitude of desperation always remained fixed in his mind: “Among all expressions, all turns, all forms, there is but one expression, one turn, one form for expressing what I have to say.”

And with cheek inflated, neck congested, brow reddened, and muscles stretched like those of an athlete in a struggle, he would fight desperately for an idea, for a word, seizing them and coupling them in spite of themselves, holding them together in an indissoluble fashion by the power of his will, grasping the thought and subjugating it little by little, with fatigue and almost superhuman effort, encaging it like a captive beast, in solid and precise form.

From this formidable labour was born for him an extreme respect for literature and for the phrase. The moment that he had constructed a phrase, with so much difficulty and torture, he would not admit that a word of it could be changed. When he read to his friends the story entitled *A Simple Soul*, they made some remarks and criticisms upon a passage of ten lines, in which the old maid ends by confounding her parrot with the Holy Spirit. The idea would appear too subtle for a peasant’s mind. Flaubert listened, reflected, and recognised that the observation was just. But a sudden anguish seized him: “You are right,” said he, “only — in that case I must change my phrase.”

That same evening, however, he put himself to the task; he passed the night in changing ten words, scratching and erasing twenty sheets of paper and in the end changed nothing, not having been able to construct another phrase whose harmony appeared to satisfy him.

At the beginning of the same story, the last word of a new paragraph, serving for the subject of the next following, could but make place for an ambiguity. This defect was pointed out to him; he recognized it, forced himself to modify the sense, and, not succeeding in producing the cadence that he wished, he cried out discouraged: “So much the worse for the sense; rhythm before everything!”

That question of rhythm in prose sent him forth into passionate dissertations, at times: “In verse,” he would say, “the poet has fixed rules. He has measure, caesura, rhyme, and a quantity of practical indications making a science of the trade. In prose, a profound sentiment of rhythm is necessary, of fugitive rhythm, without rules, without certainty, an inborn quality, and with that a power of reasoning, the artistic sense infinitely more subtle and more keen, in order to change at any instant the movement, the color, the style, to follow the things one wishes to say. When one knows how to handle this fluid thing which is called French prose, when one knows the exact value of words, and when one knows how to modify that value according to the place he gives it, when one knows how to put all the interest of a page to one line, put one idea in relief among a hundred others, and this uniquely by the choice and position of the terms which express it; when one knows how to strike with a word, with a single word placed in a certain fashion, as one strikes with an arm; when one knows how to overturn a soul, to fill it suddenly with joy or fear, enthusiasm, chagrin, or anger, by simply putting an adjective under the eye of the reader, one is truly an artist, the most superior of artists, a true prose-writer.”

He had for the great French writers a frantic admiration. Entire chapters of the masters he knew by heart, and would declaim them in a resounding voice, intoxicated by the prose, giving special sounds to the words, scanning, modulating, singing the phrases. Some clauses fascinated him; he would repeat them a hundred times, always astonished at their exactness, and declaring: “One must be a man of genius to find adjectives like that.”

No one had a greater respect and love for his art, or sentiment for the literary dignity, than Gustave Flaubert. A single passion, love for literature, filled his life, even to his last day. He loved it furiously, in a unique, absolute fashion.

Nearly always, an artist conceals some secret ambition foreign to his art. It is often glory that he pursues, that radiant glory which places us, while we are yet living, in an apotheosis, which turns heads, brings down applause and captivates the hearts of women.

To please the ladies! This is also the desire of nearly all. To be all-powerful through talent, in Paris, in the world, an exceptional being, admired, praised, loved, who can cull at will, almost, these fruits of the living flesh of which we are ahungered! To enter, especially where one is preceded by renown, respect and adoration, and see all eyes fixed upon him, and all smiles turned towards himself. It is this that they seek who give themselves up to this strange and difficult trade, this trade of reproducing and interpreting nature by artificial means.

Others have sought money, perhaps for itself, perhaps for the satisfaction it gives: the luxury of existence and the delicacies of the table.

Gustave Flaubert loved letters in an absolute fashion, so absolute that in his soul filled with this love, there was no place for any other ambition.

Never had he any other interest, any other desire; it was almost impossible for him to talk of anything else. His mind, possessed by literary occupations, always returned to them, and he declared useless all those things which interest the people of the world.

He lived alone nearly all the year, worked without respite, without interruption. An indefatigable reader, his repose was in his books, and he possessed an entire library of notes taken from the volumes in which he had dug. Besides, his memory was marvellous; he could recall a chapter, page, or paragraph where he had found a little detail in an unknown work, five or ten years before. He also knew an incalculable number of facts.

The greater part of his life he passed on his estate it Croisset, near Rouen. It was a pretty white house, of ancient style, on the bank of the Seine, in the midst of a magnificent garden which extended back and scaled, by steep roads, the great side of Canteleu. From some of the windows of his large study, could be seen the great ships coming up to Rouen, or going down to the sea, passing so near that they almost seemed to touch the walls with their yards. He loved to watch this mute movement of the vessels gliding along on the great river, going out to all the countries of which one dreams.

Often, leaving his table, he would go and frame his giant chest and his head, which was like one of an ancient Gaul, in one of the windows. On the left, the thousand steeples of Rouen outlined upon space their silhouettes and their carved profiles of stone; a little more to the right, the thousand chimneys of the Saint-Sever manufactories, vomited into the sky their festoons of smoke. The water-tower, as high as the highest of the pyramids of Egypt, looks from the other side of the water at the spire of the cathedral, the highest clock-tower in the world.

Opposite extended green fields where red and white cows were lying down or feeding and, still more to the right, a great forest upon the coast shuts off the horizon where flows the large, calm river, full of tree-covered islands, on its way to the sea, disappearing in the distance in the curve of an immense valley.

He loved this superb, tranquil landscape, which his eyes had looked upon since his infancy. He almost never descended to the garden, having a distaste for moving about. Sometimes, however, when a friend came to see him, he would walk with him along the great avenue of willows planted on the terrace, which seemed made for serious or tender conferences.

He pretended that Pascal had already been in that house, and that he had walked and talked and dreamed with him under those trees.

Three windows of his study opened on the garden and two on the river. The room was large, having no ornaments except books, a few portraits of friends and some souvenirs of his travels. There were the bodies of some little alligators, dried, the foot of a mummy (which a simple-minded domestic had blackened and polished like a boot), some amber beads from the Orient, a gilt Buddha dominating his great work-table and looking both divine and secular out of his motionless, long, yellow eyes; an admirable bust of Caroline Flaubert, Gustave’s sister, who died as a young woman, and on the floor beside a Turkish divan covered with cushions, a magnificent white bear skin.

He would set himself to work at nine or ten o’clock in the morning, stop long enough for breakfast, and immediately take up his labour again. He often slept an hour or two in the afternoon; but he was awake until three or four o’clock in the morning, accomplishing the best part of his task in the calm silence of the night, in the tranquillity of that great apartment, scarcely lighted by the two lamps with green shades. Mariners upon the river made use of “Monsieur Gustave’s” windows for a lighthouse.

There was in the country-side a sort of legend about him. They looked upon him as a brave man, a little queer, whose singular costumes astonished their eyes and their minds.

He was always clothed for work in large trousers, held by a silk cord, *à la* girdle, and an immense dressing-gown which reached the floor. This garment, which he adopted not for pose, but because of its ample comfort, was made of brown cloth in winter, and in summer of some light stuff having a white ground with bright-colored design. The citizens of Rouen, going to breakfast at the *Bouille*, on Sunday, returned cheated in their hopes when they could not see from the bridge of the steamboat the original of M. Flaubert’s portrait standing in his high window.

He took pleasure also in looking at the boats full of people. He would put up to his eyes an opera-glass that always lay on the edge of his table or the corner of the chimney-piece, and watch curiously all the faces turned towards him. Their ugliness amused him, their astonishment made him expand; he read the character, temperament, and stupidity of each one from his face.

character, temperament, and stupidity of each one from his race.

Much has been said of his hatred of the common citizen, the *bourgeois.* He made this word *bourgeois* a synonym for stupidity and defined it thus: “I call anybody who thinks sordidly a *bourgeois.”* He had, then, nothing against the *bourgeois* class, but against a particular kind of stupidity that he met most often in that class. He had also perfect scorn for “good people.” But, finding himself less often in contact with the workman than with the people of the world, he suffered less from popular foolishness than from the worldly sort. That ignorance whence comes absolute beliefs, so-called immortal principles, all the conventions, all prejudice, the whole arsenal of commonplace, elegant opinions exasperated him. Instead of smiling, as very many do, at the universal silliness, at the intellectual inferiority of the greater number, he suffered horribly from it. When he went away from a drawing-room where mediocrity of talk had continued for an evening, he was cast down, weakened, as if he had been beaten unmercifully — was half-idiot himself, he affirmed — so much did he possess the faculty of penetrating another’s thoughts. Always vibrating and very impressionable, he likened himself to one flayed, who leaped from pain at the least contact; and human stupidity assuredly wounded him during his whole life, as great misfortunes of the intimate, secret kind, wound.

He considered stupidity a little in the light of a personal enemy, tormenting him to the point of martyrdom; and he pursued it with fury, as a hunter follows his prey, attacking it from the lowest to the greatest brains. He had the subtle sense of a bloodhound for discovering it, and his rapid eye would fall upon it as it was concealing itself in the columns of a journal or even in the lines of a beautiful book. He would sometimes arrive at such a degree of exasperation from it that he wished to destroy the whole human race.

The misanthropy of his works comes from no other thing. The bitter savour found in them is only that continual discovery of mediocrity, of commonplaceness, of foolishness in all its forms. He makes a note of it on every page, in every paragraph, by a word, a simple design, by accenting a scene or a dialogue. He fills the intelligent reader with melancholy and r lakes him desolate by proving the folly of human life. The unexplained uneasiness that many people have had on opening the *Sentimental Education,* was onlythe unreasoned sensation of that eternal stupidity of bought shown openly in skulls.

He said sometimes that he ought to have called that book *Dried Fruits,* in order to make its meaning better comprehended. Each man reading it asked himself with uneasiness whether he were not one of those sad personages of that gloomy romance, so much that was intimate and rending did one find in each of the personal statements.

After an enumeration of his grim studies, he wrote one day: “And all this in the unique aim of sputtering upon my contemporaries the disgust they inspire in me! I shall finally tell my manner of thought, exhale my resentment, vomit my hatred, expectorate my gall, purge my indignation.”

This scorn of the exalted idealist for the current stupidity and the customary commonplaceness was accompanied by a vehement admiration for superior people, whatever was their talent or their erudition. Never having loved anything but Thought, he respected it in all its manifestations; and his reading extended into books that would ordinarily seem most foreign to literary art. He became angry with a friendly journal when some one criticised M. Renan adversely in it: the name of Victor Hugo filled him with enthusiasm; his friends were such men as MM. Georges Pouchet and Berthelot; his *salon* in Paris was very curious.

He received there Sundays, from one o’clock until seven, in a very simple bachelor’s apartment on the fifth story. The walls were bare and the furniture modest, for he had a horror of the playthings of art.

As soon as a touch of the bell announced the first visitor, he would throw over his work-table (which was covered with scattered leaves of paper black with writing) a light cover of red silk that enveloped and concealed all the implements of his work, which were as sacred to him as the objects of divine service are to a priest. Then, as his domestic nearly always went out on Sunday, he would open the door himself.

The first comer was often Ivan Turgenief, whom he embraced as he would a brother. Larger still than Flaubert, the Russian romance writer loved the French romancer with an affection profound and rare. Affinity in talent, philosophy, and mind, similarity in tastes, in life and in dreams, a conformity in literary tendencies, in exalted idealism, in admiration and erudition, put so many points of contact between these two that on seeing each other they experienced perhaps a still greater joy of heart than joy of intelligence.

Turgenief would sink into an armchair and speak slowly, in a sweet voice, a little feeble and hesitating, which gave to anything he said a charm and an extreme interest. Flaubert would listen religiously, fixing upon the great white face of his friend his large blue eyes with their moving pupils, and respond in his sonorous voice, which came out like the sound of a clarion from under the moustache of an old Gallic warrior. Their conversation rarely touched upon current affairs and scarcely ever got far from literary history. Often Turgenief was laden with foreign books, and would make running translations of Goethe’s, Poushkin’s, or Swinburne’s poems.

Others would arrive, from time to time; M. Taine, his eyes concealed behind his spectacles, of timid gait, carrying historical documents containing unknown facts, all with the odor and savor of stirred-up archives, a vision of ancient life perceived by the piercing eye of philosophy.

Here were MM. Frederic Baudry, a member of the institute and director of the Mazarine Library; Georges Pouchet, professor of comparative anatomy in the Museum of Natural History; Claudius Popelin, the master enameler; Philippe Burty, writer, collector, art critic, of subtle and charming mind.

Then there was Alphonse Daudet, who brought the air of Paris, the living Paris, a lover of pleasure, brisk and gay. He would trace in a few words some infinitely droll silhouettes, walk over each and all with his charming irony, Southern and personal, accentuating the fine points of his lively mind with his attractiveness of face and gesture, as well as with the skill of his recitals, always composed like his written stories. His head, shapely and very fine, was covered with a mass of black hair falling to his shoulders, mingling with his curly beard, the pointed ends of which he often rolled between his fingers. His eye, long in cut but little open, sent forth a look as black as ink, vague sometimes, by reason of excessive short-sightedness. His voice sang a little; his gesture was lively, manner active; in short, he had all the signs of a son of the South.

Émile Zola enters in his turn, breathless from climbing the five stories, and always followed by his faithful son, Paul Alexis. He throws himself into an armchair and seeks, with a glance of his eye over the faces, the state of mind, the tone and nature of the talk. Seated a little at one side, one leg under him, holding his ankle in his hand, and speaking little, he listens attentively. Sometimes when literary enthusiasm, an artists’ muddle, carries them away, throwing them into excessive theories and paradoxes so dear to men of lively Imagination, he becomes restless, removes the leg, utters, from time to time, a “But — ” suppressed in the great uproar; then, when Flaubert’s lyric is over, he takes up the discussion tranquilly, in a calm voice and peaceable words. He is of medium height, a little stout, of gentlemanly and obstinate aspect. His head, much like those seen in old Italian paintings, without being beautiful shows a great character of power and intelligence. His short hair springs from a very well developed brow, and the straight nose stops as if cut short by a blow of the shears, too abruptly, above the lip shaded by a rather heavy black moustache. The lower part of the face is full but energetic, and is covered with a trimmer beard almost beautiful. His black, short-sighted, penetrating eye smiles often ironically, while a peculiar fold draws back the upper lip in a droll and mocking fashion.

Some others still arrive; here is the editor, Charpentier. Except for some white hairs among the long black locks, one might take him for a youth. He is a slender and handsome bachelor, with a thin pointed chin shaded blue from the closely shaved beard. He wears only a moustache. He laughs easily with a young and shaved beard. He wears only a moustache. He laughs easily with a young and sceptical laugh, listens, and promises all that each writer asks of him, as they seize him and push him into a corner, recommending to him a thousand things. Here is the charming poet, Catulle Mendès, with the face of a sensual, seductive saint, whose silken beard and light hair surround, in a blonde cloud, a fine, pale face. An incomparable talker, a refined artist, subtle, seizing upon all the most fugitive literary sensations, he especially pleases Flaubert by the charm of his words and the delicacy of his mind. Here is Émile Bergerat, his brother-in-law, who married the second daughter of Théophile Gautier. Here is José-Maria Hérédia, that marvellous maker of sonnets, who will live as one of the most perfect poets of his time. Here are Huysmans, Hennique, Céard, and others still, Léon Cladel, the difficult and refined stylist, and Gustave Toudouze.

Then enters, almost always the last, a man of tall, thin figure, whose serious face, although often laughing, shows a great character of a high and noble order. He has long, grayish hair that has a faded appearance, a moustache a little lighter, still, and singular eyes whose pupils are strangely dilated. He has the aspect of a gentleman, that fine, nervous air of people of blood. He is (one can feel it) of the world, and of the best of it. It is Edmond de Goncourt. He advances holding in his hand a package of tobacco which he carefully guards while he extends to his friends his free hand.

The little drawing-room is overflowing. Some groups pass into the dining-room. It is then that one sees Gustave Flaubert.

With large gestures, by which he appears to fly, going about from one to another, crossing the apartment with a single step, his long robe swelling out behind him in his brusque movements like the brown sail of a fishing barque, full of exaltations, indignations, of vehement flames, of resounding eloquence, he amuses with his rage, his good nature, stupefies with his prodigious erudition, to which his surprising memory is an aid, terminates a discussion by a clear, profound word, runs through the centuries at a bound of thought to bring together two facts of the same order, two men of the same race, two lessons of the same nature, whence light would leap out as if flint struck flint.

Then the friends depart, one after another. He accompanies them into the anteroom where they chat a moment, each alone with him, shaking hands vigorously, tapping each other on the shoulder with a good, affectionate laugh. And when Zola, who was the last to leave, was gone, always followed by Paul Alexis, Flaubert slept an hour under a large canopy before changing his coat to call upon his friend, the Princess Mathilde, who received every Sunday.

He loved the world, although he grew indignant over some of the conversation in it; and he had for women a tender and paternal friendship, although he judged them severely at a distance and often repeated that phrase of although he judged them severely at a distance and often repeated that phrase of Proudhon's: "Woman is the desolation of the just"; he loved great luxury and sumptuous elegance; it was apparent, although he lived in the most simple manner possible.

Among his intimates he was gay and good. His powerful gayety seemed to have descended directly from the joviality of Rabelais. He loved farces and amusements throughout the whole year. He laughed often, with a contented, frank, deep laugh; and this laugh seemed even more natural to him, and more normal than his exasperation against humanity. He loved to receive his friends and to dine with them. When one went to see him at Croisset it was a great happiness for him, and he prepared the reception beforehand with a cordial and visible pleasure. He was a great eater and loved fine, delicate things for the table.

This sad misanthropy which has been so much spoken of was not innate with him, but came little by little from a permanent realization of human stupidity. His soul was naturally joyous and his heart full of generous impulses. In short, he loved to live and he lived fully, sincerely, as one can live with the French temperament, with which melancholy never takes the same desolating way that it does among certain Germans and certain Englishmen.

And now, is it not sufficient to have loved life with a long and powerful passion? He had it, this passion, until his death. He had given, from his youth up, all his life to letters, and he never took it away. He used his existence in this immoderate, exalted tenderness, passing feverish nights, like a lover, trembling with ardour, falling from fatigue after hours of taxing and violent love, and beginning again each morning from the time of his waking to give his thought to the well-beloved.

Finally, one day he fell, stricken, against the foot of his work-table, killed by HER, by LITERATURE; killed as are all great passionate souls by the passion that fires them.

GUY DE MAUPASSANT.

PREFACE

IN 1849 Flaubert, accompanied by his close friend and ardent admirer, Maxime Ducamp, set out for a lengthened tour in the East. That they might enjoy every facility for their expedition, Ducamp succeeded in obtaining governmental missions of a nominal nature for himself and his companion, Flaubert's charge being the collection of any information that might be thought suitable for communication to the Chambers of Commerce. The two friends journeyed through Egypt, Nubia, Palestine, Syria, and Rhodes, and so home through Asia Minor, Turkey in Europe, and Greece. During all the earlier portions of their travels, and in spite of the eagerness with which he had anticipated them, Flaubert displayed only listlessness and lack of curiosity, though, strange to say, the scenes which at that time impressed him so slightly came back to him afterwards with great vividness, and were of infinite service to him when writing *Salammbô.* On arriving in Greece, however, and finding himself surrounded by those historic scenes with which books had made him so familiar, a change came. His enthusiasm was kindled; he began to make notes; he resolved to write the tale of Thermopylae; (lxiii)

he laughed at difficulty and hardship, and flung himself, with all the ardour of which his nature was capable, into the enjoyment of the hour. It was a time which dwelt long in his memory; a gleam of light falling across his darkened life, to which in after days he was wont to look back with lingering regret.

On his return to France in 1851 Flaubert resumed his former life at Croisset, a house which had belonged to his father, near Rouen. Here for the most part he lived, working, feeling, remembering, distrusting, until 1857, when his first published work, *Otiadame Bovary*, made its appearance in the columns of the *Revue de Paris,* a journal established a few years before by some of his own friends. The story of the publication of this pitiless book, the hubbub it created, and the prosecution to which it gave rise, can’only be alluded to in passing. A fact, however, to be noted, is that it struck loudly the keynote of a new literary school. Flaubert may be called the creator of realism in modern French literature. For its subsequent development away from and down from himself he is, of course, in no way responsible. Indeed, seeing, as he did, much writing that he despised characterized as “realistic,” he shrank from the application of the epithet to his own books. Yet he was wrong. Realism in art is simply minute and impersonal presentation. Part of Flaubert’s work was anticipated by his predecessors. Scrupulosity of description is to be found in Balzac. Flaubert, taking up the work where Balzac laid it down, added impersonality and perfected the new literary creed.

It was a cardinal principle with him that to the reader the author should be altogether non-existent, that of his private views and feeling there should be absolutely no trace. Not a phrase, not an epithet must betray him. What he preached was the pure objectivity of literature. He conceived it to be the duty of an author to hold the mirror up to nature, but to be no less his duty sedulously to refrain from adding any comment on the reflections that he obtained. It was no part of art, as art, to teach. Any didactic face that it possessed, whether for good or evil, could inhere only in the facts themselves. And these facts must be scrupulously and faithfully portrayed. Flaubert, then, was undoubtedly a realist, and if we find him at times impatiently repudiating the title, it is because it had come to be frequently applied to men who were clever copyists — unimaginative though faithful presenters of fact — and little if anything more. But Flaubert himself was much more. He was a realist, it is true, but he was a great artist as well, — how great only those possessed of the literary sense and of some poetical feeling can fully know.

There is the same distinction between Flaubert’s work and that of many imitators of his method as there is between a waxen figure at Madame Tussaud’s and a masterpiece of portraiture by Millais. Both are truthful, both are real, but the one possesses what the other lacks — that power, namely, of stimulating the imagination which differences a picture from a design, or a description from a catalogue. Flaubert was no mere depicter of crude facts. A fact in itself was nothing to him. He held it valuable only in so far as it was capable, in combination with other facts, of assisting to set forth a picture that should be artistic as well as true. His works are constructions, not compilations.

Flaubert’s literary ideals were therefore two — Truth and Art — and his devotion to them guided and leavened his whole career. To attain to the first he shrank from no toil, and the subjects of most of his works were such as to render the most arduous toil necessary. His appetite for knowledge was Gargantuan. His researches were extraordinary and were sometimes so recondite as to be superfluous. He would ransack volumes to furnish forth the detail of a phrase, and his books bear testimony to his extraordinary capacity for assimilating and utilising the information that he acquired. Yet his writings are not the products of a pedant. Truth stood high in his estimation, but Art held a higher place still. Indeed he frequently dwelt upon its claims with an almost extravagantly enthusiastic insistence. “What is said is nothing; the manner in which it is said is everything. A work of art which seeks to prove anything fails from that very reason. A fine verse with no meaning is superior to one which is less fine and which has a meaning.” And in phrases such as these he frequently and passionately emphasised the necessity of perfection in form.

It is not surprising to find that to Flaubert, with his lofty ideas concerning art, writing was literally an anguish. His distress was no doubt partly the sad effect of nervous disease, and partly the outcome of that natural anxiety felt by many great writers respecting their work, and of the existence of which George Eliot’s experience affords a recent proof. To a very large extent, however, it proceeded from a peculiarly eager restlessness after an ideal perfection of form and phrase. “Style” was to him something lofty and. almost sacred. As commonly employed the term denotes a manner of writing characteristic of an individual. Flaubert understood it differently. Art, he believed, was impersonal. “Style,” accordingly, denoted not one method, but the only method, of expressing a given idea, and it was to the discovery of this intimate relationship between thought and speech that his mighty energies were directed. “Amid all these expressions,” he says, “all these forms and all these terms, there is but one expression, one turn, and one form to describe what I wish to say.”

The labour bestowed by Flaubert upon the execution of his work, was, therefore, as prodigious as that devoted to the accumulation of material for them. His letters to George Sand are studded with allusions to the “terrors of style,” and to his “literary agonies.” He considers the writing of twenty pages within a month as an extraordinary feat. He describes his work as being both a pleasure and a torture. He was harassed by an intense longing after an ideal perfection of style. His language must be at once the jxact and the harmonious expression of his thought.

Immediately after the publication of *(Madame ‘Bovary,* Flaubert set about the writing of *Salammbô,* which appeared in 1862. It is interesting to learn that he had intended his second book to be a reply to those critics who accused him of merely copying what he had seen and of being altogether incapable of invention. “No one,” he said, speaking of what he would put into his projected work, “shall accuse me of realism.” His purpose, however, was not fulfilled. *Salammbô* is to the full as realistic as *(Madame ‘Bovary,* the difference between the two consisting simply in the fact that whereas the author had actually seen the life depicted in the latter, that in the former had to be framed by his imagination out of the materials afforded him by long and painful study.

Salammbô must be regarded as Flaubert’s masterpiece. It is the book in which his powers found the freest scope, and in which he is at his best. It was, further, the book for which he himself entertained most affection, and so much was this the case that he would grow angry when people spoke of him as “the author of *IMadame Hovary.”*

In 1838 he had visited Tunis and the ruins of Carthage in order to prosecute his researches amid the very scenes in which the action of his story was to proceed, while the studies which he undertook to enable him to conjure up so vividly before us the events of a most obscure historical period were, to use a favourite expression of his own, “enormous.” His replies to Sainte-Beuve and Frcehner, contained in the appendix in Volurrçe II. of this edition of *Salammbô,* will give some idea of the conscientious care with which he executed his work, and which on this occasion was all the more honourable to him, seeing that the obscurity of his subject and the absence of general information about it, almost invited to a lax exercise of the imagination. He was true to his principles, nevertheless, and was in a position to adduce authorities for every detail in his book, from the name of a god to the epithet given to a precious stone, and from the costume of Salammbô to the ingredients of a medicament. His critics certainly experienced *le quart d'heure de Rabelais* when he took up his pen to reply to them. Had some of them known th® man with whom they had to deal, their strictures would have been less sweeping, and they would have regarded him with a feeling of awe similar to that with which the accomplishments of our own Ben Jonson inspired the critics of his day.

It is no small merit in *Salammbô* that all its wealth of detail is rarely oppressive, and that the human interest distinctly dominates throughout.

Of the characters in the book the highest praise has generally been given to Hamilcar. He is certainly a grand creation. There is infinite art displayed in the manner in which his various qualities are contrasted with one another, and at the same time harmonised into a single living whole. His tender affection for his little son, his brutal treatment of his slaves, his generosity to the poor, his commercial dishonesty, his lofty scorn of the Ancients, and his faithless cruelty towards his vanquished foes, are all combined to form a portrait that is both congruous and real. Nevertheless I should, for my own part, be inclined to award the palm to Matho. Nothing could be more excellent than the delineation of this African Hercules. The savage simplicity of his nature is wrought out with marvellous skill. His utter lack of self-consciousness or self-restraint, his passionate tears and groans, his stupefaction at the sight of Salammbô, the fitful play of his moods in the tent scene, his dogged submission to his fate when he realizes that he can never again see the woman that he loves, — all his actions and feelings, from his first appearance in Hamilcar's gardens down to the climax of his great agony in the presence of assembled Carthage, are depicted with a vividness so startling that the man seems to be living before our eyes. Such a character as this finds an excellent foil in the wily Greek, Spendius. Subtle, keen-witted, audacious, cowardly, he contrasts in every way with the simple, one-idead, brutally-brave Libyan, who, save on the one occasion when the ardour of his passion bears down all attempts at opposition, is as wax in his hands. Some of Flaubert's most artistic touches are to be found in the contrasts suggested between these two widely different natures.

Salammbô herself is the only unsatisfactory character in the book. She is an enigma. Flaubert himself recognised this, but the plea which he urged in excuse can scarcely be admitted. It may be true that we can have no intimate knowledge of the Eastern woman, but nevertheless if the actions of one are to be described at all, there should surely be some attempt to indicate their motives. Respecting Salammbô's motives, however, we are left altogether in the dark. Her earlier conduct, indeed, is not wholly unintelligible. Her secluded life and burning religious enthusiasm might perhaps have induced that semi-ecstatic state which apparently is hers, a condition which almost defies analysis, and in which actions seem to be the creatures of wholly unaccountable impulses. But the description of her behaviour subsequent to her disillusion is disappointing.- There are incidents that seem to denote the dull, purposeless atony of despair, and others that point to a loss of religious faith. The gradual growth of a tender feeling towards Matho is also hinted at, but all is left in provoking uncertainty, and if her conduct is not inexplicable it is certainly not explained. Yet, in spite of all its defects, the portrait of Salammbô is a striking one. In the gardens among the soldiers, on the terrace invoking Tanith, with Matho in the tent, or bending down in the last scene towards the tortured man whose life she would now gladly save, she is very real to us. She may perplex us but she certainly lives. She is at once as vivid and as incomprehensible as a dream.

The world in which these characters move is brought before us with a realism that is a triumph of art. We feel indeed as if we had been transported bodily into a new region. We are given no vague description of what once has been. We are placed in the centre of what, for the time being, actually is. The surroundings are by no means pleasant ones, it is true, and it is very possible to sympathise with the feeling which prompted Sainte-Beuve to declare that the atmosphere irritated him, and to deplore the absence of some character who might have bridged over the gulf lying between the ideas of Modern Europe and those of Ancient Carthage. Yet the existence of this very feeling is a testimony to Flaubert's artistic skill. The people whom we are called upon to contemplate revolt us at every turn, but there is that in them, nevertheless, which compels us to recognise that they are our own flesh and blood. The inhuman humanity of the book tries us often as we read, but the pain that it causes us is in itself a proof of the author's realistic power.

Nothing can in fact exceed the vividness of the scenes described. Flaubert excels himself in this work as a *metteur en scène.* The bustling, selfish, immoral, superstitious town seems to live before us. The brutal, unsophisticated, credulous Mercenaries stare us in the face. We reel with the Barbarians at their feast; we hold our breath in agony as Matho makes his wondrous escape; we can see every incident in the siege; we shudder at the horrors of the Pass, and we are harrowed almost beyond endurance by the spectacle of Matho's terrible end.

It would be a graceless task to dwell upon the faults in such a book as this. Faults, of course, there are, for the greatest artist cannot command complete success. There are some improbabilities in the story, the most notable of which is, perhaps, Hanno's escape from the camp at Sicca. Occasionally, too, insufficient regard is paid to the necessity of perspective, and the elaboration of detail for the purpose of producing a realistic effect is carried to an extreme which defeats its own object. Instances are the disaster to the woman and child in Chapter XIII., and the contest for the rat in Chapter IX. But, after all, the scratches at the base of a cathedral do not detract from the grandeur of the pile, and in spite of such relatively microscopic blemishes, *Salammbô* is a work which will always be noted for its grand simplicity and purity of diction, its artistic construction, its dramatic force, and its truth to humanity.

Extract from ‘FIGURES OF SEVERAL CENTURIES’ by Arthur Symons

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Salammbô is an attempt, as Flaubert, himself his best critic, has told us, to ‘perpetuate a mirage by applying to antiquity the methods of the modern novel.’ By the modern novel he means the novel as he had reconstructed it; he means *Madame Bovary*. That perfect book is perfect because Flaubert had, for once, found exactly the subject suited to his method, had made his method and his subject one. On his scientific side Flaubert is a realist, but there is another, perhaps a more intimately personal side, on which he is lyrical, lyrical in a large, sweeping way. The lyric poet in him made *La Tentation de Saint-Antoine*, the analyst made *L’Education Sentimentale*; but in *Madame Bovary* we find the analyst and the lyric poet in equilibrium. It is the history of a woman, as carefully observed as any story that has ever been written, and observed in surroundings of the most ordinary kind. But Flaubert finds the romantic material which he loved, the materials of beauty, in precisely that temperament which he studies so patiently and so cruelly. Madame Bovary is a little woman, half vulgar and half hysterical, incapable of a fine passion; but her trivial desires, her futile aspirations after second-rate pleasures and second-hand ideals, give to Flaubert all that he wants: the opportunity to create beauty out of reality. What is common in the imagination of Madame Bovary becomes exquisite in Flaubert’s rendering of it, and by that counterpoise of a commonness in the subject he is saved from any vague ascents of rhetoric in his rendering of it.

In writing *Salammbô* Flaubert set himself to renew the historical novel, as he had renewed the novel of manners. He would have admitted, doubtless, that perfect success in the historical novel is impossible, by the nature of the case. We are at best only half conscious of the reality of the things about us, only able to translate them approximately into any form of art. How much is left over, in the closest transcription of a mere line of houses in a street, of a passing steamer, of one’s next-door neighbour, of the point of view of a foreigner looking along Piccadilly, of one’s own state of mind, moment by moment, as one walks from Oxford Circus to the Marble Arch? Think, then, of the attempt to reconstruct no matter what period of the past, to distinguish the difference in the aspect of a world perhaps bossed with castles and ridged with ramparts, to two individualities encased within chain-armour! Flaubert chose his antiquity wisely: a period of which we know too little to confuse us, a city of which no stone is left on another, the minds of Barbarians who have left us no psychological documents. ‘Be sure I have made no fantastic Carthage,’ he says proudly, pointing to his documents; Ammianus Marcellinus, who has furnished him with ‘the *exact* form of a door’; the Bible and Theophrastus, from which he obtains his perfumes and his precious stones; Gresenius, from whom he gets his Punic names; the *Mémoires de l’Académie des Inscriptions*. ‘As for the temple of Tanit, I am sure of having reconstructed it as it was, with the treatise of the Syrian Goddess, with the medals of the Duc de Luynes, with what is known of the temple at Jerusalem, with a passage of St. Jerome, quoted by Seldon (*De Diis Syriis*), with the plan of the temple of Gozzo, which is quite Carthaginian, and best of all, with the ruins of the temple of Thugga, which I have seen myself, with my own eyes, and of which no traveller or antiquarian, so far as I know, has ever spoken.’ But that, after all, as he admits (when, that is, he has proved point by point his minute accuracy to all that is known of ancient Carthage, his faithfulness to every indication which can serve for his guidance, his patience in grouping rather than his daring in the invention of action and details), that is not the question. ‘I care little enough for archæology! If the colour is not uniform, if the details are out of keeping, if the manners do not spring from the religion and the actions from the passions, if the characters are not consistent, if the costumes are not appropriate to the habits and the architecture to the climate, if, in a word, there is not harmony, I am in error. If not, no.’

And there, precisely, is the definition of the one merit which can give a historical novel the right to exist, and at the same time a definition of the merit which sets *Salammbô* above all other historical novels. Everything in the book is strange, some of it might easily be bewildering, some revolting; but all is in harmony. The harmony is like that of Eastern music, not immediately conveying its charm, or even the secret of its measure, to Western ears; but a monotony coiling perpetually upon itself, after a severe law of its own. Or rather, it is like a fresco, painted gravely in hard, definite colours, firmly detached from a background of burning sky; a procession of Barbarians, each in the costume of his country, passes across the wall; there are battles, in which elephants fight with men; an army besieges a great city, or rots to death in a defile between mountains; the ground is paved with dead men; crosses, each bearing its living burden, stand against the sky; a few figures of men and women appear again and again, expressing by their gestures the soul of the story.

Flaubert himself has pointed, with his unerring self-criticism, to the main defect of his book: ‘The pedestal is too large for the statue.’ There should have been, as he says, a hundred pages more about Salammbô. He declares: ‘There is not in my book an isolated or gratuitous description; all are useful to my characters, and have an influence, near or remote, on the action.’ This is true, and yet, all the same, the pedestal is too large for the statue. Salammbô, ‘always surrounded with grave and exquisite things,’ has something of the somnambulism which enters into the heroism of Judith; she has a hieratic beauty, and a consciousness as pale and vague as the moon whom she worships. She passes before us, ‘her body saturated with perfumes,’ encrusted with jewels like an idol, her head turreted with violet hair, the gold chain tinkling between her ankles; and is hardly more than an attitude, a fixed gesture, like the Eastern women whom one sees passing, with oblique eyes and mouths painted into smiles, their faces curiously traced into a work of art, in the languid movements of a pantomimic dance. The soul behind those eyes? the temperament under that at times almost terrifying mask? Salammbô is as inarticulate for us as the serpent, to whose drowsy beauty, capable of such sudden awakenings, hers seems half akin; they move before us in a kind of hieratic pantomime, a coloured, expressive thing, signifying nothing. Mâtho, maddened with love, ‘in an invincible stupor, like those who have drunk some draught of which they are to die,’ has the same somnambulistic life; the prey of Venus, he has an almost literal insanity, which, as Flaubert reminds us, is true to the ancient view of that passion. He is the only quite vivid person in the book, and he lives with the intensity of a wild beast, a life ‘blinded alike’ from every inner and outer interruption to one or two fixed ideas. The others have their places in the picture, fall into their attitudes naturally, remain so many coloured outlines for us. The illusion is perfect; these people may not be the real people of history, but at least they have no self-consciousness, no Christian tinge in their minds.

‘The metaphors are few, the epithets definite,’ Flaubert tells us, of his style in this book, where, as he says, he has sacrificed less ‘to the amplitude of the phrase and to the period,’ than in *Madame Bovary*. The movement here is in briefer steps, with a more earnest gravity, without any of the engaging weakness of adjectives. The style is never archaic, it is absolutely simple, the precise word being put always for the precise thing; but it obtains a dignity, a historical remoteness, by the large seriousness of its manner, the absence of modern ways of thought, which, in *Madame Bovary*, bring with them an instinctively modern cadence.

Salammbô is written with the severity of history, but Flaubert notes every detail visually, as a painter notes the details of natural things. A slave is being flogged under a tree: Flaubert notes the movement of the thong as it flies, and tells us: ‘The thongs, as they whistled through the air, sent the bark of the plane trees flying.’ Before the battle of the Macar, the Barbarians are awaiting the approach of the Carthaginian army. First ‘the Barbarians were surprised to see the ground undulate in the distance.’ Clouds of dust rise and whirl over the desert, through which are seen glimpses of horns, and, as it seems, wings. Are they bulls or birds, or a mirage of the desert? The Barbarians watch intently. ‘At last they made out several transverse bars, bristling with uniform points. The bars became denser, larger; dark mounds swayed from side to side; suddenly square bushes came into view; they were elephants and lances. A single shout, “The Carthaginians!” arose.’ Observe how all that is seen, as if the eyes, unaided by the intelligence, had found out everything for themselves, taking in one indication after another, instinctively. Flaubert puts himself in the place of his characters, not so much to think for them as to see for them.

Compare the style of Flaubert in each of his books, and you will find that each book has its own rhythm, perfectly appropriate to its subject-matter. That style, which has almost every merit and hardly a fault, becomes what it is by a process very different from that of most writers careful of form. Read Chateaubriand, Gautier, even Baudelaire, and you will find that the aim of these writers has been to construct a style which shall be adaptable to every occasion, but without structural change; the cadence is always the same. The most exquisite word-painting of Gautier can be translated rhythm for rhythm into English, without difficulty; once you have mastered the tune, you have merely to go on; every verse will be the same. But Flaubert is so difficult to translate because he has no fixed rhythm; his prose keeps step with no regular march-music. He invents the rhythm of every sentence, he changes his cadence with every mood or for the convenience of every fact. He has no theory of beauty in form apart from what it expresses. For him form is a living thing, the physical body of thought, which it clothes and interprets. ‘If I call stones blue, it is because blue is the precise word, believe me,’ he replies to Sainte-Beuve’s criticism. Beauty comes into his words from the precision with which they express definite things, definite ideas, definite sensations. And in his book, where the material is so hard, apparently so unmalleable, it is a beauty of sheer exactitude which fills it from end to end, a beauty of measure and order, seen equally in the departure of the doves of Carthage, at the time of their flight into Sicily, and in the lions feasting on the corpses of the Barbarians, in the defile between the mountains.

1901.

Extract from ‘ESSAYS IN LONDON AND ELSEWHERE’ by Henry James

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

In the year 1877 Gustave Flaubert wrote to a friend : “ You speak of Balzac’s letters. I read them when they appeared, but with very little enthusiasm. The man gains from them, but not the artist. He was too much taken up with business. You never meet a general idea, a sign of his caring for anything beyond his material interests. . . . What a lamentable life!” At the time the volumes appeared (the year before), he had written to Edmond de Goncourt: “ What a preoccupation with money and how little love of art! Have you noticed that he never once speaks of it? He strove for glory, but not for beauty.”

The reader of Flaubert’s own correspondence,1 lately given to the world by his niece Madame Commanville and which in the fourth volume is brought to the eve of his death — the student of so much vivid and violent testimony to an intensely exclusive passion is moved to quote these words for the sake of contrast. It will not be said of the 1 Correspondance de Gustave Flaubert. Quatrieme Serie. Paris, 1893.

writer that he himself never once speaks of art; it will be said of him with a near approach to truth that he almost never once speaks of anything else. The effect of contrast is indeed strong everywhere in this singular publication, from which Flaubert’s memory receives an assault likely to deepen the air of felicity missed that seemed destined henceforth to hang over his personal life. “ May I be skinned alive,” he writes in 1854, “before I ever turn my private feelings to. literary account.” His constant refrain in his letters is the impersonality, as he calls it, of the artist, whose work should consist exclusively of his subject and his style, without an emotion, an idiosyncrasy that is not utterly transmuted. Quotation does but scanty justice to his rage for this idea; almost all his feelings were such a rage that we wonder what form they would have borrowed from a prevision of such posthumous betrayal. “ It’s one of my principles that one must never write down one’s self. The artist must be present in his work like God in Creation, invisible and almighty, everywhere felt but nowhere seen.” Such was the part he allotted to form, to that rounded detachment which enables the perfect work to live by its own life, that he regarded as indecent and dishonourable the production of any impression that was not intensely calculated. “ Feelings “ were necessarily crude, because they were inevitably calculated. “Feelings” were necessarily crude, because they were inevitably unselected, and selection (for the picture’s sake) was Flaubert’s highest morality.

This principle has been absent from the counsels of the editor of his letters, which have been given to the world, so far as they were procurable, without attenuation and without scruple. There are many of course that circumstances have rendered inaccessible, but in spite of visible gaps the revelation is full enough and remarkable enough. These communications would of course not have been matter for Flaubert’s highest literary conscience; but the fact remains that in our merciless age ineluctable fate has overtaken the man in the world whom we most imagine gnashing his teeth under it. His ideal of dignity, of honour and renown, was that nothing should be known of him but that he had been an impeccable writer. “ I feel all the same,” he wrote in 1852, “that I shall not die before I’ve set a - roaring somewhere (sans avoir fait rugir quelque part) such a style as hums in my head and which may very well overpower the sound of the parrots and grasshoppers.” This is a grievous accident for one who could write that “ The worship of art contributes to pride, and of pride one has never too much.” Sedentary, cloistered, passionate, cynical, tormented, in his love of magnificent expression, of subjects remote and arduous, with an unattainable ideal, he kept clear all his life of vulgarity and publicity and newspaperism only to be dragged after death into the middle of the market-place, where the electric light beats fiercest. Madame Commanville’s publication hands him over to the Philistines with every weakness exposed, every mystery dispelled, every secret betrayed. Almost the whole of her second volume, to say nothing of a large part of her first, consists of his love-letters to the only woman he appears to have addressed in the accents of passion. His private style moreover was as unchastened as his final form was faultless. The result happens to be deeply interesting to the student of the famous “ artistic temperament “; it can scarcely be so for a reader less predisposed, I think, for Flaubert was a writers’ writer as much as Shelley was a “ poets’ poet”; but we may ask ourselves if the time has not come when it may well cease to be a leading feature of our homage to a distinguished man that we shall sacrifice him with sanguinary rites on the altar of our curiosity. Flaubert’s letters indeed bring up with singular intensity the whole question of the rights and duties, the decencies and discretions of the insurmountable desire to know. To lay down a general code is perhaps as yet impossible, for there is no doubt that to know is good, or to want to know, at any rate, supremely natural. Some day or other surely we shall all agree that everything is relative, that facts themselves are often falsifying and that we pay more for some kinds of knowledge than those particular kinds are worth. Then we shall perhaps be sorry to have had it drummed into us that the author of calm, firm masterpieces, of Madame Bovary, of Salammbo, of Saint - JuHcn

VHospitalier, was narrow and noisy and had not personally and morally, as it were, the great dignity of his literary ideal.

When such revelations are made, however, they are made, and the generous attitude is doubtless at that stage to catch them in sensitive hands. Poor Flaubert has been turned inside out for the lesson, but it has been given to him to constitute practically — on the demonstrator’s table with an attentive circle round — an extraordinary, a magnificent “ case.” Never certainly in literature was the distinctively literary idea, the fury of execution, more passionately and visibly manifested. This rare visibility is probably the excuse that the responsible hand will point to. The letters enable us to note it, to follow it from phase to phase, from one wild attitude to another, through all the contortions and objurgations, all the exaltations and despairs, tensions and collapses, the mingled pieties and profanities of Flaubert’s simplified yet intemperate life. Their great interest is that they exhibit an extraordinary singleness of aim, show us the artist not only disinterested but absolutely dishumanised. They help us to perceive what Flaubert missed almost more than what he gained, and if there are many questions in regard to such a point of view that they certainly fail to settle, they at least cause us to turn them over as we have seldom turned them before. It was the lifelong discomfort of this particular fanatic, but it is our own extreme advantage, that he was almost insanely excessive. “In literature,” he wrote in 1861, “the best chance one has is by following out one’s temperament and exaggerating it.” His own he could scarcely exaggerate; but it carried him so far that we seem to see on distant heights his agitations outlined against the sky. “ Impersonal” as he wished his work to be, it was his strange fortune to be the most expressive, the most vociferous, the most spontaneous of men. The record of his temperament is therefore complete, and if his ambiguities make the illuminating word difficult to utter, it is not because the picture is colourless.

Why was such a passion, in proportion to its strength, after all so sterile? There is life, there is blood in a considerable measure in Madame Bovary, but the last word about its successors can only be, it seems to me, that they are splendidly and infinitely curious. Why may, why must indeed in certain cases, the effort of expression spend itself, and spend itself in success, without completing the circle, without coming round again to the joy of evocation? How can art be so genuine and yet so unconsoled, so unhumorous, so unsociable? When it is a religion, and therefore an authority, why should it not be, like other authorities, a guarantee? How can it be such a curse without being also a blessing? What germ of treachery lurks in it to make it, not necessarily but so easily that there is but a hair-line to cross, delusive for personal happiness? Why in short when the struggle is success should the success not be at last serenity? These mysteries and many others pass before us as we listen to Flaubert’s loud plaint, which is precisely the profit we derive from his not having, with his correspondents, struck, like Balzac, only the commercial note. Nothing in his agitated and limited life, which began at Rouen in 1821, is more striking than the prompt, straightforward way his destiny picked him out and his conscience handed him over. As most young men have to contend with some domestic disapproval of the muse, so this one had rather to hang back on the easy incline and to turn away his face from the formidable omens. It was only too evident that he would be free to break his heart, to gueuler, as he fondly calls it, to spout, to mouth and thresh about, to that heart’s content. No career was ever more taken for granted in its intensity, nor any series of tribulations more confidently invited. It was recognised from the first that the tall and splendid youth, green-eyed and sonorous (his stature and aspect were distinguished), was born to gueuler, and especially his own large cadences.

His father, a distinguished surgeon, who died early, had purchased near Rouen, on the Seine, the small but picturesque property of Croisset; and it was in a large five-windowed corner room of this quiet old house, his study for forty years, that his life was virtually spent. It was marked by two great events; his journey to the East and return through the south of Europe with Maxime Du Camp in 1849, and the publication of Madame Bovary (followed by a train of consequences) in 1857. He made a second long journey (to Algeria, Tunis and the site of Carthage) while engaged in writing Salammbo; he had before his father’s death taken part in a scanted family pilgrimage to the north of Italy, and he appears once to have spent a few weeks on the Righi and at another time a few days in London, an episode, oddly enough, of which there is but the faintest, scarcely a recognisable, echo in his correspondence. For the rest, and save for an occasional interlarding of Paris, his years were spent at his patient table in the room by the rural Seine. If success in life (and it is the definition open perhaps to fewest objections), consists of achieving in maturity the dreams of one’s prime, Flaubert’s measure may be said to have been full. M. Maxime Du Camp, in those two curious volumes of Impressions Litteraires which in 1882 treated a surprised world and a scandalised circle to the physiological explanation of his old friend’s idiosyncrasies, declares that exactly as that friend was with intensity at the beginning, so was he with intensity in the middle and at the end, and that no life was ever simpler or straighter in the sense of being a case of growth without change. Doubtful indeed were the urgency of M. Du Camp’s revelation and the apparent validity of his evidence; but whether or no Flaubert was an epileptic subject, and whether or no there .was danger in our unconsciousness of the question (danger to any one but M. Maxime Uu Camp), the impression of the reader of the letters is in complete conformity with the pronouncement to which I allude. The Flaubert of fifty differs from the Flaubert of twenty only in size. The difference between Bouvard et Pecuchet and Madame Bovary is not a difference of spirit; and it is a proof of the author's essential continuity that his first published work, appearing when he had touched middle life and on which his reputation mainly rests, had been planned as long in advance as if it had been a new religion.

Madame Bovary was five years in the writing, and the Tentation de Saint-Antoinc, which saw the light in 1874, but the consummation of an idea entertained in his boyhood. Bouvard et Peeuchet, the intended epos of the blatancy, the comprehensive betise of mankind, was in like manner the working out at the end of his days of his earliest generalisation. It had literally been his lifelong dream to crown his career with a panorama of human ineptitude. Everything in his literary life had been planned and plotted and prepared. One moves in it through an atmosphere of the darkest, though the most innocent, conspiracy. He was perpetually laying a train, a train of which the inflammable substance was " style." His great originality was that the long siege of his youth was successful. I can recall no second case in which poetic justice has interfered so gracefully. He began Madame Bovary from afar off, not as an amusement or a profit or a clever novel or even a work of art or a morceau de vie, as his successors say to-day, not even, either, as the best thing he could make it; but as a premeditated classic, a masterpiece pure and simple, a thing of conscious perfection and a contribution of the first magnitude to the literature of his country. There would have been every congruity in his encountering proportionate failure and the full face of that irony in things of which he was so inveterate a student. A writer of tales who should have taken the extravagance of his design for the subject of a sad " novelette " could never have permitted himself any termination of such a story but an effective anticlimax. The masterpiece at the end of years would inevitably fall very flat and the overweening spirit be left somehow to its illusions. The solution in fact was very different, and as Flaubert had deliberately sown so exactly and magnificently did he reap. The perfection of Madame Bovary is one of the commonplaces of criticism, the position of it one of the highest a man of letters dare dream of, the possession of it one of the glories of France. No calculation was ever better fulfilled, nor any train more successfully laid. It is a sign of the indefeasible bitterness to which Flaubert's temperament condemned him and the expression of which, so oddly, is yet as obstreperous and boyish as that of the happiness arising from animal spirits — it is a mark of his amusing pessimism that so honourable a first step should not have done more to reconcile him to life. But he was a creature of transcendent dreams and unfathomable perversities of taste, and it was in his nature to be more conscious of one broken spring in the couch of fame, more wounded by a pin-prick, more worried by an assonance, than he could ever be warmed or pacified from within. Literature and life were a single business to him, and the “ torment of style” that might occasionally intermit in one place was sufficiently sure to break out in another. We may polish our periods till they shine again, but over the style of life our control is necessarily more limited.

To such limitations Flaubert resigned himself with the worst possible grace, He polished ferociously, but there was a side of the matter that his process could never touch. Some other process might have been of use; some patience more organised, some formula more elastic, or simply perhaps some happier trick of good-humour; at the same time it must be admitted that in his deepening vision of the imbecility of the world any remedy would have deprived him of his prime, or rather of his sole, amusement. The b£tise of mankind was a colossal comedy, calling aloud to heaven for an Aristophanes to match, and Flaubert’s nearest approach to joy was in noting the opportunities of such an observer and feeling within himself the stirrings of such a genius. Toward the end he found himself vibrating at every turn to this ideal, and if he knew to the full the tribulation of proper speech no one ever suffered less from that of proper silence. He broke it in his letters, on a thousand queer occasions, with all the luxury of relief. He was blessed with a series of correspondents with whom he was free to leave nothing unsaid; many of them ladies too, so that he had in their company all the inspiration of gallantry without its incidental sacrifices. The most interesting of his letters are those addressed between 1866 and 1876 to Madame George Sand, which, originally collected in 1884, have been re-embodied in Madame Commanville’s publication. They are more interesting than ever when read, as we are now able to tread them, in connection with Madame Sand’s equally personal and much more luminous answers, accessible in the fifth and sixth volumes of her own copious and strikingly honourable Correspondance. No opposition could have been more of a nature to keep the ba’l rolling than that of the parties to this candid commerce, who were as united by affection and by common interests as they were divided by temper and their way of feeling about those interests. Living, each of them, for literature (though Madame Sand, in spite of her immense production, very much less exclusively for it than her independent and fastidious friend), their comparison of most of the impressions connected with it could yet only be a lively contrast of temperaments. Flaubert, whose hark indeed (it is the rule) was much worse than his bite, spent his life, especially the later part of it, in a state of acute exasperation; but her inalterable serenity was one of the few irritants that were tolerable to him.

Their letters are a striking lesson in the difference between good-humour and bad, and seem to point the moral that either form has only to be cultivated to become our particular kind of intelligence. They compared conditions at any rate, her expansion with his hard contraction, and he had the advantage of finding in a person who had sought wisdom in ways so many and so devious one of the few objects within his ken that really represented virtue and that he could respect. It gives us the pattern of his experience that Madame Sand should have stood to him for so much of the ideal, and we may say this even under the impression produced by a reperusal of her total correspondence, a monument to her generosity and variety. Poor Flaubert appears to us to-day almost exactly by so much less frustrated as he was beguiled by this happy relation, the largest he ever knew. His interlocutress, who in the evening of an arduous life accepted refreshment wherever she found it and who could still give as freely as she took, for immemorial habit had only added to each faculty, his correspondent, for all her love of well-earned peace, offered her breast to his aggressive pessimism, had motherly, reasoning, coaxing hands for it, made in short such sacrifices that she often came to Paris to go to brawling Magny dinners to meet him and wear, to please him, as I have heard one of the diners say, unaccustomed peach-blossom dresses. It contributes to our sense of what there was loveable at the core of his effort to select and his need to execrate that he should have been able to read and enjoy so freely a writer so fluid; and it also reminds us that imagination is after all, for the heart, the safest quality. Flaubert had excellent honest inconsistencies, crude lapses from purity in which he could like the books of his friends. He was susceptible of painless amusement (a rare emotion with him) when his imagination was touched, as it was infallibly and powerfully, by affection. To make a hard rule never to be corrupted, and then to make a special exception for fondness, is of course the right attitude.

He had several admirations, and it might always be said of him that he would have admired it he could, for he could like a thing if he could be proud of it, and the act adapted itself to his love of magnificence. He could like indeed almost any one he could say great coloured things about: the ancients, almost promiscuously, for they never wrote in newspapers, and Shakespeare (of whom he could not say fine things enough), and Rabelais, and Montaigne, and Goethe, and Victor Hugo (his biggest modern enthusiasm), and Leconte de Lisle, and Renan, and Thdophile Gautier. He did scant justice to Balzac and even less to Alfred de Musset. On the other hand he had an odd and interesting indulgence for Boileau. Balzac and Musset were not, by his measure, “ writers,” and he maintains that be it in verse, be it in prose, it is only so far as they “ write “ that authors live; between the two categories he makes a fundamental distinction authors live; between the two categories he makes a fundamental distinction. The latter indeed, the mere authors, simply did not exist for him, and with Mr, Bcsant’s Incorporated Society he would have had nothing whatever to do. He declares somewhere that it is only the writer who survives in the poet. In spite of his patience with the “muse” to whom the majority of the letters in the earlier of the volumes before us were addressed, and of the great invidious coup de chapeau with which he could here and there render homage to versification, his relish for poetry as poetry was moderate. Far higher was his estimate of prose as prose, which he held to be much the more difficult art of the two, with more maddening problems and subtler rhythms, and on whose behalf he found it difficult to forgive the “ proud sister” attitude of verse. No man at any rate, to make up for scanty preferences, can have had a larger list of literary aversions. His eye swept the field in vain for specimens untainted with the “ modern infection,” the plague which had killed Thdophile Gautier and to which he considered that he himself had already succumbed. If he glanced at a feuillcton he saw that Madame Sarah Bernhardt was “ a social expression,” and his resentment of this easy wisdom resounded disproportionately through all the air he lived in. One has always a kindness for people who detest the contemporary tone if they have done something fine; but the baffling thing in Flaubert was the extent of his suffering and the inelasticity of his humour. The jargon of the newspapers, the slovenliness of the novelists, the fatuity of Octave Feuillet, to whom he was exceedingly unjust, for that writer’s love of magnificence was not inferior to his critic’s, all work upon him with an intensity only to be explained by the primary defect of his mind, his want of a general sense of proportion. That sense stopped apparently when he had settled the relation of the parts of a phrase, as to which it was exquisite.

Fortunately he had confidants to whom he could cry out when he was hurt and whose position, as he took life for the most part as men take a violent toothache, was assuredly no sinecure. To more than one intense friendship were his younger and middle years devoted; so close was his union with Louis Bouilhet, the poet and dramatist, that he could say in 1870 : “ I feel no longer the need to write, because I wrote especially for a being who is no more. There’s no taste in it now — the impulse has gone.” As he wrote for Bouilhet, so Bouilhet wrote for him. “ There are so few people who like what I like or^ have an idea of what I care for.” That was the indispensable thing for him in a social, a personal relation, the existence in another mind of a love of literature sufficiently demonstrated to relieve the individual from the great and damning charge, the charge perpetually on Flaubert’s lips in regard to his contemporaries, the accusation of malignantly hating it. This universal conspiracy he perceived, in his own country, in every feature of manners, and to a degree which may well his own country, in every feature of manners, and to a degree which may well make us wonder how high he would hove piled the indictment if he had extended the inquiry to the manners of ours. We draw a breath of relief when we think to what speedier suffocation he would have yielded had he been materially acquainted with the great English-speaking peoples. When he declared, naturally enough, that liking what he liked was a condition of intercourse, his vision of this community was almost destined, in the nature of things, to remain unachievable; for it may really be said that no one in the world ever liked anything so much as Flaubert liked beauty of style. The mortal indifference to it of empires and republics was the essence of that “ modern infection” from which the only escape would have been to ne faire que de Vart. Mankind, for him, was made up of the three or four persons, Ivan Turgenieff in the number, who perceived what he was trying for, and of the innumerable millions who didn’t. Poor M. Maxime Du Camp, in spite of many of the leading characteristics of a friend, was one of this multitude, and he pays terribly in the pages before us for his position. He pays, to my sense, excessively, for surely he had paid enough and exactly in the just and appropriate measure, when, in the introduction contributed to the “ definitive “ edition of Madame Bovary, M. Guy de Maupassant, avenging his master by an exquisite stroke, made public the letter of advice and remonstrance addressed to Flaubert by M. Du Camp, then editor of the Revue de Paris, on the eve of the serial appearance of the former’s first novel in that periodical. This incomparable effusion, with its amazing reference to excisions and its suggestion that the work be placed in the hands of an expert and inexpensive corrector who will prepare it for publication, this priceless gem will twinkle for ever in the setting M. de Maupassant has given it, or we may perhaps still more figuratively say in the forehead of the masterpiece it discusses. But there was surely a needless, there was surely a nervous and individual ferocity in such a vindictive giving to the world of every passage of every letter in which the author of that masterpiece has occasion to allude to his friend’s want of tact. It naturally made their friendship unsuccessful that Flaubert disliked M. Du Camp, but it is a monstrous imputation on his character to assume that he was small enough never to have forgiven and forgotten the other’s mistake. Great people never should be avenged; it diminishes their privilege. What M. Du Camp, so far as an outsider may judge, had to be punished for was the tone of his reminiscences. But the tone is unmistakably the tone of affection. He may have felt but dimly what his old comrade was trying for, and even the latent L

richness of L Education Sentimentale, but he renders full justice to Flaubert’s noble independence. The tone of Flaubert’s own allusions is a different thing altogether. It is not unfair to say that all this disproportionate tit-for-tat renders altogether. It is not unfair to say that all this disproportionate tit for tat renders the episode one of the ugliest little dramas of recent literary history. The irony of a friend's learning after long years and through the agency of the press how unsuspectedly another friend was in the habit of talking of him, is an irony too cruel for impartial minds. The disaster is absolute, and our compassion goes straight to the survivor. There are other survivors who will have but little more reason to think that the decencies have presided over such a publication.

It is only a reader here and there in all the wide world who understands to-day, or who ever understood, what Gustave Flaubert tried for; and it is only when such a reader is also a writer, and a tolerably tormented one, that he particularly cares. Poor Flaubert's great revenge, however, far beyond that of any editorial treachery, is that when this occasional witness does care he cares very peculiarly and very tenderly and much more than he may be able successfully to say. Then the great irritated style-seeker becomes, in the embracing mind, an object of interest and honour; not so much for what he altogether achieved as for the way he strove and for the inspiring image that he presents. There is no reasoning about him; the more we take him as he is the more he has a special authority. Salammbo, in which we breathe the air of pure aesthetics, is as hard as stone; L'Education, for the same reason, is as cold as death; Saint-Antoine is a medley of wonderful bristling metals and polished agates, and the drollery of Bouvard et Pfcuchet (a work as sad as something perverse and puerile done for a wager), about as contagious as the smile of a keeper showing you through the ward of a madhouse. In Madame Bovary alone emotion is just sufficiently present to take off the chill. This truly is a qualified report, yet it leaves Flaubert untouched at the points where he is most himself, leaves him master of a province in which, for many of us, it will never be an idle errand to visit him. The way to care for him is to test the virtue of his particular exaggeration, to accept for the sake of his aesthetic influence the idiosyncrasies now revealed to us, his wild gesticulation, his plaintive, childish side, the side as to which one asks one's self what has become of ultimate good-humour, of human patience, of the enduring man. He pays and pays heavily for his development in a single direction, for it is probable that no literary effort so great, accompanied with an equal literary talent, ever failed on so large a scale to be convincing. It convinces only those who are converted, and the number of such is very small. It is an appeal so technical that we may say of him still, but with more resignation, what he personally wailed over, that nobody takes his great question seriously. This is indeed why there may be for each of the loyal minority a certain fine scruple against insistence. If he had had in his nature a contradiction the less, if his indifference had been more forgiving, this is surely the way in which he would have desired most to be preserved.

To no one at any rate need it be denied to say that the best way to appreciate him is, abstaining from the clumsy process of an appeal and the vulgar process of an advertisement, exclusively to use him, to feel him, to be privately glad of his message. In proportion as we swallow him whole and cherish him as a perfect example, his weaknesses fall into their place as the conditions about which, in estimating a man who has been original, there is a want of tact in crying out. There is of course always the answer that the critic is to be suborned only by originalities that fertilise; the rejoinder to which, of equal necessity, must ever be that even to the critics of unborn generations poor Flaubert will doubtless yield a fund of amusement, To the end of time there will be something flippant, something perhaps even “ clever “ to be said of his immense ado about nothing. Those for some of whose moments, on the contrary, this ado will be as stirring as music, will belong to the group that has dabbled in the same material and striven with the same striving. The interest he presents, in truth, can only be a real interest for fellowship, for initiation of the practical kind; and in that case it becomes a sentiment, a sort of mystical absorption or fruitful secret. The sweetest things in the world of art or the life of letters are the irresponsible sympathies that seem to rest on divination. Flaubert’s hardness was only the act of holding his breath in the reverence of his search for beauty; his universal renunciation, the long spasm of his too-fixed attention, was only one of the absurdest sincerities of art. To the participating eye these things are but details in the little square picture made at this distance of time by his forty years at the battered table at Croisset. Everything lives in this inward vision of the wide room on the liver, almost the cell of a monomaniac, but consecrated ground to the faithful, which, as he tried and tried again, must so often have resounded with the pomp of a syntax addressed, in his code, peremptorily to the ear. If there is something tragi-comic in the scene, as of a tenacity in the void or a life laid down for grammar, the impression passes when we turn from the painful process to the sharp and splendid result. Then, since if we like people very much we end by liking their circumstances, the eternal chamber and the dry Benedictine years have a sufficiently palpable offset in the repousst bronze of the books.

An incorruptible celibate and dedaigneux des femmes (as, in spite of the hundred and forty letters addressed to Madame Louise Colet, M. de Maupassant styles him and, in writing to Madame Sand, he confesses himself), it was his own view of his career that, as art was the only thing worth living for, he had made immense sacrifices to application — sacrificed passions, joys, affections, curiosities and opportunities. He says that he shut his passions up in cages and only at long intervals, for amusement, had a look at them. The orgie Je littdraturc, n short, had been his sole form of excess. He knew best of course, but his imaginations about himself (as about other matters) were, however justly, ri;h, and to the observer at this distance he appears truly to have been made of the very stuff of a Benedictine. He compared himself to the camel, who can neither be stopped when he is going nor moved when he is resting. He was so sedentary, so averse to physical exercise, which he speaks of somewhere as an occupation funeste, that his main alternative to the chair was, even by day, the bed, and so omnivorous in research that the act of composition, with him, was still more impeded by knowledge than by taste. “ I have in me,” he writes to the imperturbable Madame Sand, “ a fond d eccUsiastique that(people don’t know “ — the clerical basis of the Catholic clergy. “ We shall talk of it,” he adds, “.much better viva voce than by letter”; and we can easily imagine the thoroughness with which between the unfettered pair, when opportunity favoured, the interesting subject was treated. At another time indeed, to the same correspondent, who had given him a glimpse of the happiness of being a grandmother, he refers with touching sincerity to the poignancy of solitude to which the “ radical absence of the feminine element” in his life had condemned him. “ Yet I was born with every capacity for tenderness. One doesn’t shape one’s destiny, one undergoes it. I was pusillanimous in my youth — I was afraid of life. We pay for everything.” Besides, it was his theory that a “ man of style “ should never stoop to action. If he had been afraid of life in fact, I must add, he was preserved from the fear of it in imagination by that great “ historic start,” the sensibility to the frisson historique, which dictates the curious and beautiful outburst, addressed to Madame Colct, when he asks why it had not been his lot to live in the age of Nero. “ How I would have talked with the Greek rhetors, travelled in the great chariots on the Roman roads, and, in the evening, in the hostelries, turned in with the vagabond priests of Cybele! . . . I have lived, all over, in those directions; doubtless in some prior state of being. I’m sure I’ve been, under the Roman empire, manager of some troop of strolling players, one of the rascals who used to go to Sicily to buy women to make actresses, and who were at once professors, panders and artists. These scoundrels have wonderful ‘ mugs’ in the comedies of Plautus, in reading which I seem to myself to remember things.”

He was an extreme admirer of Apuleius, and his florid inexperience helps doubtless somewhat to explain those extreme sophistications of taste of which La Tentation de Saint-Antoine is so elaborate an example. Far and strange are the refuges in which such an imagination seeks oblivion of the immediate and the ugly. His life was that of a pearl-diver, breathless in the thick element while he groped for the priceless word, and condemned to plunge again and again. He passed it in reconstructing sentences, exterminating repetitions, calculating and comparing cadences, harmonious chutes de phrase, and beating about the bush to deal death to the abominable assonance. Putting aside the particular ideal of style which made a pitfall of the familiar, few men surely have ever found it so difficult to deal with the members of a phrase. He loathed the smug face of facility as much as he suffered from the nightmare of toil; but if he had been marked in the cradle for literature it may be said without paradox that this was not on account of any native disposition to write, to write at least as he aspired and as he understood the term. He took long years to finish his books, and terrible months and weeks to deliver himself of his chapters and his pages. Nothing could exceed his endeavour to make them all rich and round, just as nothing could exceed the unetherised anguish in which his successive children were born. His letters, in which, inconsequently for one who had so little faith in any rigour of taste or purity of perception save his own, he takes everybody into his most intimate literary confidence, the pages of the publication before us are the record of everything that retarded him. The abyss of reading answered to the abyss of writing; with the partial exception of Madame Bovary every subject that he treated required a rising flood of information. There are libraries of books behind his most innocent sentences. The question of “ art” for him was so furiously the question of form, and the question of form was so intensely the question of rhythm, that from the beginning to the end of his correspondence we scarcely ever encounter a mention of any beauty but verbal beauty. He quotes Goethe fondly as to the supreme importance of the “ conception,” but the conception remains for him essentially the plastic one.

There are moments when his restless passion for form strikes us as leaving the subject out of account altogether, as if he has taken it up arbitrarily, blindly, preparing himself the years of misery in which he is to denounce the grotesqueness, the insanity of hi.? choice. Four times, with his orgueil, his love of magnificence, he condemned himself incongruously to the modern and familiar, groaning at every step over the horrible difficulty of reconciling “ style “ in such cases with truth and dialogue with surface. He wanted to do the battle of Thermopylae, and he found himself doing Bouvard et Ptcuchet. One of the sides by which he interests us, one of the sides that will always endear him to the student, is his extraordinary ingenuity in lifting without falsifying, finding a middle way into grandeur and edging off from the literal without forsaking truth. This way was open to him from the moment he could look down upon his theme from the position of une blague suptrieurc, as he calls it, the amused freedom of an observer as irreverent as a creator. But if subjects were made for style (as to which Flaubert had a rigid theory : the idea was good enough if the expression was), so style was made for the ear, the last court of appeal, the supreme touchstone of perfection. He was perpetually demolishing his periods in the light of his merciless gueulades. He tried them on every one; his gtteulades could make him sociable. The horror, in particular, that haunted all his years was the horror of the cliche, the stereotyped, the thing usually said and the way it was usually said, the current phrase that passed muster. Nothing, in his view, passed muster but freshness, that which came into the world, with all the honours, for the occasion. To use the ready-made was as disgraceful as for a self-respecting cook to buy a tinned soup or a sauce in a bottle. Flaubert considered that the dispenser of such wares was indeed the grocer, and, producing his ingredients exclusively at home, he would have stabbed himself for shame like Vatel. This touches on the strange weakness of his mind, his puerile dread of the grocer, the bourgeois, the sentiment that in his generation and the preceding misplaced, as it were, the spirit of adventure and the sense of honour, and sterilised a whole province of French literature. That worthy citizen ought never to have kept a poet from dreaming.

He had for his delectation and for satiric purposes a large collection of those second-hand and approximate expressions which begged the whole literary question. To light upon a perfect example was his nearest approach to natural bliss. Bnuvard et Ptcuchct is a museum of such examples, the cream of that Dictionnaire des Idtfes Regies for which all his life he had taken notes and which eventually resolved itself into the encyclopaedic exactitude and the lugubrious humour of the novel. Just as subjects were meant for style, so style was meant for images; therefore as his own were numerous and admirable he would have contended, coming back to the source that he was one of the writers to whom the significance of a work had ever been most present. This significance was measured by the amount of style and the quanity of metaphor thrown up. Poor subjects threw up a little, fine subjects threw up much, and the finish of his prose was the proof of his profundity. If you pushed far enough into language you found yourself in the embrace of thought. There are doubtless many persons whom this account of the matter will fail to satisfy, and there will indeed be no particular zeal to put it forward even on the part of those for whom, as a writer, Flaubert most vividly exists. He is a strong taste, like any other that is strong, and he exists only for those who have a constitutional need to feel in some direction the particular aesthetic confidence that he inspires. That confidence rests on the simple fact that he carried execution so far and nailed it so fast. No one will care for him at all who does not care for his metaphors, and those moreover who care most for those will be discreet enough to admit that even a style rich in similes is limited when it renders only the visible. The invisible Flaubert scarcely touches; his vocabulary and all his methods were unadjusted and alien to it. He could not read his French Wordsworth, M. Sully Prudhomme; he had no faith in the power of the moral to offer a surface. He himself offers such a flawless one that this hard concretion is success. If he is impossible as a companion he is deeply refreshing as a reference; and all that his reputation asks of you is an occasional tap of the knuckle at those firm thin plates of gold which constitute the leaves of his books. This passing tribute will yield the best results when you have been prompted to it by some other prose.

In other words, with all his want of porti,e, as the psychological critics of his own country would say of him, poor Flaubert is one of the artists to whom an artist will always go back. And if such a pilgrim, in the very act of acknowledgment, drops for an instant into the tenderness of compassion, it is a compassion singularly untainted with patronage or with contempt; full moreover of mystifications and wonderments, questions unanswered and speculations vain. Why was he so unhappy if he was so active; why was he so intolerant if he was so strong? Why should he not have accepted the circumstance that M. de Lamartine also wrote as his nature impelled, and that M. Louis Enault embraced a convenient opportunity to go to the East? The East, if we listen to him, should have been closed to one of these gentlemen and literature forbidden to the other. Why does the inevitable perpetually infuriate him, and why does he inveterately resent the ephemeral? Why does he, above all, in his private, in other words his continuous epistolary, despair, assault his correspondents with malodorous comparisons? The bad smell of the age was the main thing he knew it by. Naturally therefore he found life a chose hideuse. If it was his great merit and the thing we hold on to him for that the artist and the man were welded together, what becomes, in the proof, of a merit that is so little illuminating for life? What becomes of the virtue of the beauty that pretends to be worth living for? Why feel, and feel genuinely, so much about " art," in order to feel so little about its privilege? Why proclaim it on the one hand the holy of holies, only to let your behaviour confess it on the other a temple open to the winds? Why be angry that so few people care for the real thing, since this aversion of the many leaves a luxury of space? The answer to these too numerous questions is the final perception that the subject of our observations failed of happiness, failed of temperance, not through his excesses, but absolutely through his barriers. He passed his life in strange oblivion of the circumstance that, however incumbent it may be on most of us to do our duty, there is, in spite of a thousand narrow dogmatisms, nothing in the world that any one is under the least obligation to like — not even (one braces one's self to risk the declaration), a particular kind of writing. Particular kinds of writing may sometimes, for their producers, have the good fortune to please; but these things are windfalls, pure luxuries, not resident even in the cleverest of us as natural rights. Let Flaubert always be cited resident even in the cleverest of us as natural rights. Let Flaubert always be cited as one of the devotees and even, when people arc fond of the word, as one of the martyrs of the plastic idea; but let him be still more considerately preserved and more fully presented as one of the most conspicuous of the faithless. For it was not that he went too far, it was on the contrary that he stopped too short. He hovered for ever at the public door, in the outer court, the splendour of which very properly beguiled him, and in which he seems still to stand as upright as a sentinel and as shapely as a statue. But that immobility and even that erectness were paid too dear. The shining arms were meant to carry further, the other doors were meant to open. He should at least have listened at the chamber of the soul. This would have floated him on a deeper tide; above all it would have calmed his nerves.

1893.

Extracts from ‘PHOENIX: THE POSTHUMOUS PAPERS’ by D.H. Lawrence

This short extract was taken from D.H. Lawrence’s review of *Mastro-don Gesualdo*, by Giovanni Verga.

The trouble with realism — and Verga was a realist — is that the writer, when he is a truly exceptional man like Flaubert or like Verga, tries to read his own sense of tragedy into people much smaller than himself. I think it is a final criticism against *Madame Bovary* that people such as Emma Bovary and her husband Charles simply are too insignificant to carry the full weight of Gustave Flaubert’s sense of tragedy. Emma and Charles Bovary are a couple of little people. Gustave Flaubert is not a little person. But, because he is a realist and does not believe in “heroes,” Flaubert insists on pouring his own deep and bitter tragic consciousness into the little skins of the country doctor and his uneasy wife. The result is a discrepancy. *Madame Bovary* is a great book and a very wonderful picture of life. But we cannot help resenting the fact that the great tragic soul of Gustave Flaubert is, so to speak, given only the rather commonplace bodies of Emma and Charles Bovary. There’s a misfit. And to get over the misfit, you have to let in all sorts of seams of pity. Seams of pity, which won’t be hidden.

The great tragic soul of Shakespeare borrows the bodies of kings and princes — not out of snobbism, but out of natural affinity. You can’t put a great soul into a commonplace person. Commonplace persons have commonplace souls. Not all the noble sympathy of Flaubert or Verga for Bovarys and Malavoglias can prevent the said Bovarys and Malavoglias from being commonplace persons. They were deliberately chosen because they *were* commonplace, and not heroic. The authors insisted on the treasure of the humble. But they had to lend the humble by far the best part of their own treasure, before the said humble could show any treasure at all.

So, if *I Malavoglia* dates, so does *Madame Bovary*. They belong to the emotional-democratic, treasure-of-the-humble period of the nineteenth century. The period is just rather out of fashion. We still feet the impact of the treasure-of-the-humble too much. When the emotion will have quite gone out of us, we can accept *Madame Bovary* and *I Malavoglia* in the same free spirit with the same detachment as that in which we accept Dickens or Richardson.

Mastro-don Gesualdo, however, is not nearly so much treasure-of-the-humble as *I Malavoglia*. Here, Verga is not dealing with the disaster of poverty, and calling it tragedy. On the contrary, he is a little bored by poverty. He must have a hero who wins out, and makes his pile, and then succumbs under the pile.

This extract was taken fron Lawrence’s review of Thomas Mann.

German Books: Thomas Mann

Thomas Mann is perhaps the most famous of German novelists now writing. He, and his elder brother, Heinrich Mann, with Jakob Wassermann, are acclaimed the three artists in fiction of present-day Germany.

But Germany is now undergoing that craving for form in fiction, that passionate desire for the mastery of the medium of narrative, that will of the writer to be greater than and undisputed lord over the stuff he writes, which is figured to the world in Gustave Flaubert.

Thomas Mann is over middle age, and has written three or four books: *Buddenbrooks*, a novel of the patrician life of Lubeck; *Tristan,* a collection of six *Novellen; Konigliche Hoheit,* an unreal Court romance; various stories, and lastly, *Der Tod in Venedig.* The author himself is the son of a Lubeck *Patrizier.*

It is as an artist rather than as a story-teller that Germany worships Thomas Mann. And yet it seems to me, this craving for form is the outcome, not of artistic conscience, but of a certain attitude to life. For form is not a personal thing like style. It is impersonal like logic. And just as the school of Alexander Pope was logical in its expressions, so it seems the school of Flaubert is, as it were, logical in its aesthetic form. “Nothing outside the definite line of the book,” is a maxim. But can the human mind fix absolutely the definite line of a book, any more than it can fix absolutely any definite line of action for a living being?

Thomas Mann, however, is personal, almost painfully so, in his subject-matter. In “Tonio Kroger,” the long *Novelle* at the end of the *Tristan* volume, he paints a detailed portrait of himself as a youth and younger man, a careful analysis. And he expresses at some length the misery of being an artist. “Literature is not a calling, it is a curse.” Then he says to the Russian painter girl: “There is no artist anywhere but longs again, my love, for the common life.” But any young artist might say that. It is because the stress of life in a young man, but particularly in an artist, is very strong, and has as yet found no outltt, so that it rages inside him in *Sturm und Drang.* But the condition is the same, only more tragic, in the Thomas Mann of fifty-three. He has never found any outlet for himself, save his art. He has never given himself to anything but his art. This is all well and good, if his art absorbs and satisfies him, as it has done some great men, like Corot. But then there are the other artists, the more human, like Shakespeare and Goethe, who must give themselves to life as well as to art. And if these were afraid, or despised life, then with their surplus they would ferment and become rotten. Which is what ails Thomas Mann. He is physically ailing, no doubt. But his complaint is deeper: it is of the soul.

And out of this soul-ailment, this unbelief, he makes his particular art, which he describes, in "Tonio Kroger," as *"Wahlerisch, er-lesen, kostbar, fein, reizbar gegen das Banale, und aufs hochste empfindlich in Fragen des Taktes und Geschmacks."* He is a disciple, in method, of the Flaubert who wrote: "I worked sixteen hours yesterday, today the whole day, and have at last finished one page." In writing of the *Leitmotiv* and its influence, he says: "Now this method alone is sufficient to explain my slowness. It is the result neither of anxiety nor indigence, but of an overpowering sense of responsibility for the choice of every word, the coining of every phrase ... a responsibility that longs for perfect freshness, and which, after two hours' work, prefers not to undertake an important sentence. For which sentence is important, and which not? Can one know before hand whether a sentence, or part of a sentence may not be called upon to appear again as *Motiv,* peg, symbol, citation or connexion? And a sentence which must be heard twice must be fashioned accordingly. It must — I do not speak of beauty — possess a certain high level, and symbolic suggestion, which will make it worthy to sound again in any epic future. So every point becomes a standing ground, every adjective a decision, and it is clear that such work is not to be produced off-hand."

This, then, is the method. The man himself was always delicate in constitution. "The doctors said he was too weak to go to school, and must work at home." I quote from Aschenbach, in *Der Tod in Venedig.* "When he fell, at the age of fifty-three, one of his closest observers said of him: 'Aschenbach has always lived like this' — and he gripped his fist hard clenched; 'never like this' — and he let his open hand lie easily on the arm of the chair."

He forced himself to write, and kept himself to the work. Speaking of one of his works, he says: "It was pardonable, yea, it showed plainly the victory of his morality, that the uninitiated reader supposed the book to have come of a solid strength and one long breath; whereas it was the result of small daily efforts and hundreds of single inspirations."

And he gives the sum of his experience in the belief: *"dass beinahe alles Grosse, was dastehe, als ein Trotzdem dastehe, trotz Kummer und Qual, Armut, Verlassenheit, Korperschwache, Luster, Leidenschaft und tausend hemmnischen Zustande gekommen sei."* And then comes the final revelation, difficult to translate. He is speaking of life as it is written into his books:

"For endurance of one's fate, grace in suffering, does not only mean passivity, but is an active work, a positive triumph, and the Sebastian figure is the most beautiful symbol, if not of all art, yet of the art in question. If one looked into this portrayed world and saw the elegant self-control that hides from the eyes of the world to the last moment the inner undermining, the biological decay; saw the yellow ugliness which, sensuously at a disadvantage, could blow its choking heat of desire to a pure flame, and even rise to sovereignty in the kingdom of beauty; saw the pale impotence which draws out of the glowing depths of its intellect sufficient strength to subdue a whole vigorous people, bring them to the foot of the Cross, to the feet of impotence; saw the amiable bearing in the empty and severe service of Form; saw the quickly enervating longing and art of the born swindler: if one saw such a fate as this, and all the rest it implied, then one would be forced to doubt whether there were in reality any other heroism than that of weakness. Which heroism, in any case, is more of our time than this?"

Perhaps it is better to give the story of *Der Tod in Venedig*, from which the above is taken, and to whose hero it applies.

Gustav von Aschenbach, a fine, famous author, over fifty years of age, coming to the end of a long walk one afternoon, sees as he is approaching a burying place, near Munich, a man standing between the chimeric figures of the gateway. This man in the gate of the cemetery is almost the *Motiv* of the story. By him, Aschenbach is infected with a desire to travel. He examines himself minutely, in a way almost painful in its frankness, and one sees the whole soul of this author of fifty-three. And it seems, the artist has absorbed the man, and yet the man is there, like an exhausted organism on which a parasite has fed itself strong. Then begins a kind of Holbein *Totentanz*. The story is quite natural in appearance, and yet there is the gruesome sense of symbolism throughout. The man near the burying ground has suggested travel — but whither? Aschenbach sets off to a watering place on the Austrian coast of the Adriatic, seeking some auventure, some passionate adventure, to which his sick soul and unhealthy body have been kindled. But finding himself on the Adriatic, he knows it is not thither that his desire draws him, and he takes ship for Venice. It is all real, and yet with a curious sinister unreality, like decay, the "biological decay." On board there is a man who reminds one of the man in the gateway, though there is no connexion. And then, among a crowd of young Poles who are crossing, is a ghastly fellow, whom Aschenbach sees is an old man dressed up as young, who capers unsuspected among the youths, drinks hilariously with them, and falls hideously drunk at last on the deck, reaching to the author, and slobbering about *“dern allerliebsten, dem schdnsten Liebchen.”* Suddenly the upper plate of his false teeth falls on his underlip.

Aschenbach takes a gondola to the Lido, and again the gondolier reminds one of the man in the cemetery gateway. He is, moreover, one who will make no concession, and, in spite of Aschenbach’s demand to be taken back to St. Mark’s, rows him in his black craft to the Lido, talking to himself softly all the while. Then he goes without payment.

The author stays in a fashionable hotel on the Lido. The adventure is coming, there by the pallid sea. As Aschenbach comes down into the hall of the hotel, he sees a beautiful Polish boy of about fourteen, with honey-coloured curls clustering round his pale face, standing with his sisters and their governess.

Aschenbach loves the boy — but almost as a symbol. In him he loves life and youth and beauty, as Hyacinth in the Greek myth. This, I suppose, is blowing the choking heat to pure flame, and raising it to the kingdom of beauty. He follows the boy, watches him all day long on the beach, fascinated by beauty concrete before him. It is still the *Kiinstler* and his abstraction: but there is also the “yellow ugliness, sensually at a disadvantage,” of the elderly man below it all. But the picture of the writer watching the folk on the beach gleams and lives with a curious, gold-phosphorescent light, touched with the brightness of Greek myth, and yet a modern seashore with folks on the sands, and a half-threatening, diseased sky.

Aschenbach, watching the boy in the hotel lift, finds him delicate, almost ill, and the thought that he may not live long fills the elderly writer with a sense of peace. It eases him to think the boy should die.

Then the writer suffers from the effect of the *sirocco,* and intends to depart immediately from Venice. But at the station he finds with joy that his luggage has gone wrong, and he goes straight back to the hotel. There, when he sees Tadzin again, he knows why he could not leave Venice.

There is a month of hot weather, when Aschenbach follows Tadzin about, and begins to receive a look, loving, from over the lad’s shoulder. It is wonderful, the heat, the unwholesomeness, the passion in Venice. One evening comes a street singer, smelling of carbolic acid, and sings beneath the veranda of the hotel. And this time, in gruesome symbolism, it is the man from the burying ground distinctly.

The rumour is, that the black cholera is in Venice. An atmosphere of secret plague hangs over the city of canals and palaces. Aschenbach verifies the report at the English bureau, but cannot bring himself to go away from Tadzin, nor yet to warn the Polish family. The secretly pest-smitten days go by. Aschenbach follows the boy through the stinking streets of the town and loses him. And on the day of the departure of the Polish family, the famous author dies of the plague.

It is absolutely, almost intentionally, unwholesome. The man is sick, body and soul. He portrays himself as he is, with wonderful skill and art, portrays his sickness. And since any genuine portrait is valuable, this book has its place. It portrays one man, one atmosphere, one sick vision. It claims to do no more. And we have to allow it. But we know it is unwholesome — it does not strike me as being morbid for all that, it is too well done — and we give it its place as such.

Thomas Mann seems to me the last sick sufferer from the complaint of Flaubert. The latter stood away from life as from a leprosy. And Thomas Mann, like Flaubert, feels vaguely that he has in him something finer than ever physical life revealed. Physical life is a disordered corruption, against which he can fight with only one weapon, his fine aesthetic sense, his feeling for beauty, for perfection, for a certain fitness which soothes him, and gives him an inner pleasure, however corrupt the stuff of life may be. There he is, after all these years, full of disgusts and loathing of himself as Flaubert was, and Germany is being voiced, or partly so, by him. And so, with real suicidal intention, like Flaubert's, he sits, a last too-sick disciple, reducing himself grain by grain to the statement of his own disgust, patiently, self-destructively, so that his statement at least may be perfect in a world of corruption. But he is so late.

Already I find Thomas Mann, who, as he says, fights so hard against the banal in his work, somewhat banal. His expression may be very fine. But by now what he expresses is stale. I think we have learned our lesson, to be sufficiently aware of the fulsomeness of life. And even while he has a rhythm in style, yet his work has none of the rhythm of a living thing, the rise of a poppy, then the after uplift of the bud, the shedding of the calyx and the spreading wide of the petals, the falling of the flower and the pride of the seed-head. There is an unexpectedness in this such as does not come from their carefully plotted and arranged developments. Even *Madame Bovary* seems to me dead in respect to the living rhythm of the whole work. While it is there in *Macbeth* like life itself.

But Thomas Mann is old — and we are young. Germany does not feel very young to me.

Extracts from Virginia Woolf’s diary

1936

Sunday, June 21st.

After a week of intense suffering - indeed mornings of torture - and I’m not exaggerating - pain in my head - a feeling of complete despair and failure - a head inside like the nostrils after hay fever - here is a cool quiet morning again, a feeling of relief, respite, hope. Just done the Robson: think it good. I am living so constrainedly: so repressedly: I can’t make notes of life. Everything is planned, battened down. I do half an hour down here: go up, often in despair: lie down: walk round the Square: come back and do another ten lines. Then to Lords yesterday. Always with a feeling of having to repress control. I see people lying on sofa between tea and dinner. Rose M„ Elizabeth Bowen, Nessa. Sat in the Square last night. Saw the dripping green leaves. Thunder and lightning. Purple sky. N. and A. discussing 4/8 time. Cats stealing round. L. dining with Tom and Bella. A very strange, most remarkable summer. New emotions: humility: impersonal joy: literary despair. I am learning my craft in the most fierce conditions. Really reading Flaubert’s letters I hear my own voice cry out Oh art! Patience: find him consoling, admonishing. I must get this book quietly, strongly, daringly into shape. But it won’t be out till next year. Yet I think it has possibilities, could I seize them. I am trying to cut the characters deep in a phrase: to pare off and compact scenes: to envelop the whole in a medium.

Tuesday, June 23rd.

A good day - a bad day - so it goes on. Few people can be so tortured by writing as I am. Only Flaubert I think. Yet I see it now, as a whole. I think I can bring it off, if I only have courage and patience: take each scene quietly: compose: I think it may be a good book. And then - oh when it’s finished!

Not so clear today, because I went to dentist and then shopped. My brain is like a scale: one grain pulls it down. Yesterday it balanced: today dips.

Friday, October 6th.

Well I have succeeded in despite of distractions to belong to other nations in copying out again the whole of *Roger*. Needless to say, it’s still to be revised, compacted, vitalized. And can I ever do it? The distractions are so incessant. I compose articles on Lewis Carroll and read a great variety of books - Flaubert's life, R.'s lectures, out at last, a life of Erasmus and Jacques Blanche. We are asked to lunch with Mrs Webb, who so often talks of us. And my hand seems as tremulous as an aspen. I have composed myself by tidying my room. Can't quite see my way now as to the next step in composition. Tom this weekend. I meant to record a Third Class Railway Carriage conversation. The talk of business men. Their male detached lives. All politics. Deliberate, well set up, contemptuous and indifferent of the feminine. For example: one man hands the *Evening Standard*, points to a woman's photograph. 'Women? Let her go home and bowl her hoop,' said the man in blue serge with one smashed eye. 'She's a drag on him,' another fragment. The son is going to lectures every night. Odd to look into this cool man's world: so weather tight: insurance clerks all on top of their work; sealed up; self-sufficient; admirable; caustic; laconic; objective; and completely provided for. Yet thin, sensitive: yet schoolboys; yet men who earn their livings. In the early train they said, 'Can't think how people have time to go to war. It must be that the blokes haven't got jobs.' 'I prefer a fool's paradise to a real hell.' 'War's lunacy. Mr Hitler and his set are gangsters. Like A1 Capone.' Not a chink through which one can see art, or books. They play crosswords when insurance shop fails.

The Biography

GVSTAVE FLAVBERT
1821-1880
E. BIGARD
QVOD SVPEREST · MCMXXI
PAVILLON · MVSÉE
A CROISSET

Commemorative Medal of the Flaubert Museum

THE LIFE-WORK OF FLAUBERT by G. A. Mounsey

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I

Balzac in one of his novels gives utterance to the following thought: “Genius is a terrible disease. Every writer of genius cherishes in his heart a monster which devours all his emotions as soon as he gives birth to them. Which is to be the conqueror? Will the disease vanquish the man, or the man the disease? He must be a great man who can establish a perfect equilibrium between his genius and his character. Unless the poet be a giant, unless he be possessed of the shoulders of a Hercules, he must inevitably remain bereft of heart, or else bereft of talent.”

Here, unfortunately, Balzac breaks off his dissertation, and does not state what in his opinion is the cause of this disease of genius, why the development and power of the artistic personality stand in many respects in inverse ratio to the development and power of the moral type, or on what fundamental ground depends that primary antagonism between these two elements which is so often to be observed in the daily experience of life. Every one knows, for instance, that writers of talent, artists or musicians, are in the majority of cases men of the most unpractical nature, that their eccentricities and irresponsibility verge not uncommonly on complete moral disintegration, that they are bad fathers of families and bad husbands, and that while expressing great sensitiveness in the forcible language of their works, they very often show themselves in real life to be at heart hard and unfeeling egotists. An enquiry into the origin of the causes responsible for the deep contrast which exists between the æsthetic and ethical points of view, between the artist and the man, between genius and character, would undoubtedly open up one of the most interesting chapters in the history of creative psychology.

Let us take, as an illustration of our thesis, the tragic scene of the destruction of Laocoon, as described in the Æneid. Picture the horror and anguish with which the citizens of Troy witness the seizure and suffocation of Laocoon and his children by the gigantic serpents. The onlookers are filled with terror, grief, and a desire to save the unfortunate victims. In bringing out the psychic differences of constitution among the crowd, the crucial moment of action plays a most important *rôle*, developing the instinct of self-preservation among the more timid ones, or the efforts of the more manly to lend their aid. Then imagine a sculptor moving about in this wavering and undecided crowd, and studying the terrible tragedy which is being enacted before his eyes as a fit theme for a future work of art. He alone remains an unmoved spectator amid the general confusion, lamentation, cries, and prayers. His moral instincts are all absorbed in an intense æsthetic curiosity. Tears would hinder his vision, and he keeps them sternly back, because it is imperatively necessary for him to see every form, every outline of the muscles distorted under the crushing force of the snakes' huge coils. Every detail of the picture which in the others awakens loathing and terror, evokes in him a joy that is outside the ken of other men. While they weep and waver, the artist rejoices in the expression of agony on the countenance of Laocoon, rejoices that the father is unable to bring aid to his children, that the serpents are compressing their bodies with irresistible force. The next moment, perchance, the man will have conquered the artist. But the deed is done, the fact remains, the moment of cruel contemplation has had the power to brand upon his heart its ineradicable impression.

A series of similar episodes must sooner or later create in the mind of the artist the habit of withdrawing himself from life, of regarding it from one side, from without, from the point of view no longer of a living human being, but from that of an unmoved observer, who seeks in all that comes to pass before his eyes only some material for his own artistic reproduction. And in proportion as his powers of imagination and observation increase, so in equal measure must his sensitiveness and the exercise of that power of will which is indispensable for all moral activity diminish. If nature has neither endowed the mind of the artist with an adamantine stoicism, nor filled his heart with an inexhaustible spring of love, his æsthetic qualities will little by little devour his ethical instincts; genius may, in the words of Balzac, "consume" the heart. In such a case as this, the categories of good and evil which people have most to do with in real life, *i.e.*, the will and the passions, are confused in the artist's mind with the categories of the beautiful and the ugly, the characterless and the characteristic, the artistically interesting and the inane. Wickedness and vice attract the imagination of the poet, if only they be concealed under forms that are externally beautiful and attractive; while virtue looks dull and insignificant unless she can afford some material for a poetical apotheosis.

But the artist excels not only in the quality of being able to contemplate objectively and dispassionately the emotions of others, he is unique also in this, that he can, as an impartial observer, subject his own heart to the same hard, æsthetic scrutiny that he applies to the actions of others. Ordinary people can, or at least believe that they can, entirely recover from the emotions which may have seized upon them, be they transports of love or hatred, of joy or sorrow. An honourable man, when he makes his vow of love to a woman, honestly believes in the truth of that vow — it never enters his head to inquire whether he really is as much in love as he says he is. One would on the face of things expect a poet more than other men to be inclined to give way to emotion, to be credulous, and to let himself be carried away; but in reality there always remains in his soul, however deeply it may be swayed by passion, the power to look into its own depths as into those of a character in a dream or novel; to follow with attention, even in moments of complete intoxication, the infinite intangible changes of his emotions, and to focus upon them the force of his merciless analysis.

Human emotions are hardly ever simple or unalloyed: in the majority of cases they are composed of a mixture of parts differing immensely in the values of their components. And a psychological artist involuntarily discovers so many contradictions in himself and in others, even in moments of genuine exaltation, that by degrees he comes to lose all faith in his own rectitude, as well as in the rectitude of others.

II

The letters of Flaubert, published in two volumes, offer rich material for the study, from a living example, of the question of the antagonism which exists between the artistic and moral personality.

“Art is higher than life”; such is the formula which stands as the corner-stone of the whole, not only of Flaubert’s æsthetic view, but also of his philosophical view of life. As a young man of thirty he writes to one of his school friends: “If I did not introduce into the plot of my poems a French queen of the fifteenth century, I should feel an utter disgust of life, and long ere this a bullet would have freed me from this humiliating folly.” Within a year’s time he is, with half serious rhetoric and youthful enthusiasm, encouraging the same young friend to proceed with his own work. “Let us ever devote ourselves to our art, which, being more powerful than all nations, crowns, or rulers, holds, in virtue of its glorious diadem, eternal sway over the whole universe.” When over forty years of age, and on the verge of the tomb, Flaubert repeats with even greater emphasis and audacity the same device: “*L’homme n’est rien; l’œuvre est tout.*” — ”Man is nothing; work is everything.”

In the flower of his early manhood, though possessed of beauty, wit, and talent, he forsook the world for the sake of his art, like an ascetic in the desert: he immersed himself in his solitude, as the Christian hermits immured themselves in their caverns. “To bury oneself in one’s art, and spurn all else, is the only way to evade unhappiness,” he writes to his friend. “Pride makes up for all things, if there be only a broad enough foundation for it.... I certainly lack little; I should no doubt like to be as generous as the richest, as happy as a lover, as sensuous as those who give up their lives to pleasure; ... But in the meanwhile I covet neither riches, nor love, nor pleasures; ... Now, as for a long time past, I ask only for five or six hours of repose in my own chamber; in winter a big fire in my fireplace, and at night two candles on my table.” A year later he is advising the same friend: “Do as I do, break from the outside world, and live like a bear, like a white bear; send all else to the devil, and yourself as well, everything except only your thoughts. There is at the present moment such a great gulf fixed between myself and the rest of the world, that I oft-times experience a feeling of astonishment when I hear even the most ordinary and natural things; ... there are certain gestures, certain intonations of the voice, which fill me with surprise, and there are certain silly things which nearly make me giddy.”

Even in moments of overwhelming passion, Flaubert places his literary vocation immeasurably above his personal happiness; and love of woman strikes him as insignificant by the side of his love of poetry. “No,” he writes to his *fiancée,* “you had far better love my art and not myself; for this attachment will never leave you, nor can illness or death deprive you of it. Worship thought, for in thought alone is truth, because it is one and imperishable. Can art, the only thing in life that is true and valuable, be compared with earthly love? Can the adoration of relative beauty be preferred to an eternal worship? Veneration for art — that is the best thing that I possess; it is the one thing for which I respect myself.”

He refuses to see anything relative in poetry, but regards it as absolutely independent of and entirely cut off from life, and as being more real than action; he perceives in art “the most self-satisfying principle imaginable which requires as little external support as a star.” “Like a star,” he says, “fixed and glittering in its own heaven, does art observe the globe of the world revolve; that which is beautiful will never be utterly destroyed.” In the unity of the various portions of a work, in the every detail, in the harmony of the whole, Flaubert feels that “there is some inner essence, something in the nature of a divine force, something like an eternal principle.” “For how otherwise would there exist any relation between the most exact and the most musical expression of thought?”

The sceptic who is not bound by any creed, but has spent his whole life in doubt and hesitation in face of the ideas of God, religion, progress, and scientific humanity, becomes pious and reverential when face to face with the question of art. The true poet is, in his opinion, distinguished from all other people by the divine inspiration of his ideas, “by the contemplation of the immutable (*la contemplation de l’immuable*), that is to say, religion in the highest sense of the word.” He regrets that he was not born in that age when people worshipped art, when there still existed genuine artists in the world, “whose life and thoughts were the blind instruments of the instinct of beauty. They were the organs of God, by means of which He Himself revealed His true essence to them; for these artists there was no happiness; no one knew how much they suffered; each night as they lay down sadly to rest they gazed wearily at the life of men with an astonished eye, just as we might gaze at an ant-hill.”

To most artists beauty is a more or less abstract quality; to Flaubert it was as concrete an object of passion as is gold to the miser, power to the ambitious, or his lady to the lover. His work was like a deliberate suicide; he gave himself entirely up to it, with the fanaticism of a man possessed by a mania, with the mystic submission and enthusiasm of a martyr, with the awe of a priest as he enters the sacred sanctuary. Thus does he describe his own work: “Sick and irritable at heart, enduring a thousand times in the day moments of anguish and despondency, and having neither wife nor any of the joys of life to distract me, I continue to toil at my weary task, like a good workman who, with sleeves rolled up and brow streaming with sweat, strikes on his anvil without fear of rain or hail, of storm or thunder.” Here is an extract from a biography of Flaubert written by Maupassant, one of his favourite pupils and disciples, which gives an accurate picture of the gifted writer’s energy for work: “His head bowed, his face and brow and neck bathed in moisture, all his muscles tense, like an athlete at the height of the contest, he set himself to face the desperate strife with his ideas and words, rejecting, uniting, or forging them as in an iron grip by the power of his will, condensing them and gradually with superhuman strength working out his thought, and confining it, like a wild beast in a cage, in a definite, indestructible form.”

III

Flaubert, more than any other man, has experienced in his own life, the destructive power of his over-sharpened, analytical disposition. With the malevolence, which was so strangely mingled in him with the then fashionable Byronism, and with a confused presentiment of an impending and inevitable catastrophe, he embarks at the early age of seventeen upon his work of destruction and internal iconoclasm: “I analyse myself and others,” he writes to a friend; “I am always anatomizing, and whenever I at last succeed in finding something, which all men consider pure and beautiful, but which is in reality a putrid spot, a gangrene, I shake my head and smile. I have come to the firm conclusion that vanity is the fundamental basis of all things, and that even that which we call conscience is in fact only a concealed and incipient vanity. You give in charity, partly, may be, out of compassion, out of pity, or from horror of suffering and sordidness, but also out of egotism; for the chief motive of your action is the desire to acquire the right to say to yourself: I have done good; there are very few people like me; I respect myself more than other men.” Eight years later he writes to his devoted wife: “I love to analyze; it is an occupation that distracts me. Although I am not very much inclined to see the humorous side of things, yet I cannot regard my own personality altogether seriously, because I see myself how ridiculous I am, ridiculous not in the sense of being externally comic, but in the inner sense of that inherent irony which, being present in the life of men, shows itself sometimes even in the most obviously natural actions, in the most ordinary gestures.... All this one feels in oneself, but it is hard to explain. You do not understand it, because in you it is as simple and genuine as in a beautiful hymn of love and poetry. For I regard myself as a sort of arabesque or marqueterie work; there are within me pieces of ivory and of gold and of iron, some of painted paper, others of brilliants, and others again of lead.”

This life is so rich in visions and imaginings, that they finally obscure the real world altogether, and receive in passing through this medium a reflected colouring in addition to their own. “I always see the antithesis of things; the sight of a child inevitably suggests to my mind the thought of old age; the sight of a cradle, the idea of the grave. When I look at my wife, I think of myself as her skeleton. That is why scenes of happiness sadden me, while sad things leave me indifferent. I weep so much internally in my own soul, that my tears cannot flow outwardly as well; things that I read of in a book agitate me much more than any actually existing sorrows.” Here we encounter a distinguishing trait of the majority of natures that are gifted with strong artistic temperaments. “The more oppressed I feel, the more melancholy and highly strung and prone to tears and to give myself over to a sense of imaginary suffering, so much the more do my real feelings remain dry and hard and dead within my heart; they are crystallized within it.” This is the mental attitude described by Pushkin:

“In vain did I appeal to the emotions within me, With unmoved ears I heard the breath of Death, And all unmoved I gazed on her. So that is what I loved with flaming soul, With such intensity of passion, With so great anguish and agony of love, With such torment and unreason! Where is now pain and where is love? Alas, for the poor credulous shade in my soul! For the sweet memory of days for ever passed I can now find neither tears nor reproaches.”

This condition of incomprehensible indifference towards the beloved one, this despair arising not out of grief, but as a result of his own coldness, of his lack of commiseration and pity was all too familiar to Flaubert; and according to his custom, he boldly proceeds to analyse this trait, which it is the one endeavour of most other artists to conceal, not only from others, but even from themselves, regarding it mistakenly as a form of egoism that is entirely in conflict with Nature. He describes his feelings at the grave of his dearly loved sister: “I was as cold as the grave-stone, and only terribly bored.” What does he do at the moment when an ordinary man, forgetful of all else, would give himself up entirely to his grief? With pitiless curiosity, “himself catching nothing of their emotions,” he analyzes them “like an artist.” “This melancholy occupation alleviated my grief remarkably,” he writes to a friend, “perhaps you will regard me as utterly heartless if I confess to you that my present sorrow” (that is to say the grief experienced at the death of his sister) “does not strike me as the heaviest lot that I have ever had to endure. At times when there was apparently nothing to be sad about, it has been my fate to be much sadder.” A little further on comes a long discourse upon the Infinite, upon Nirvana, — a discourse in which the author gives utterance to much inspired poetry, but to very little simple human sorrow.

In the letter in which Flaubert describes the funeral of a friend of his childhood, his æsthetic cult of sadness reaches a still higher plane of meditativeness. “On the body of the departed there appeared the signs of a terrible transformation; we hid the corpse in a double shroud. So covered, he looked like an Egyptian mummy enveloped in the bandages of the tomb, and I cannot describe the feelings of joy and freedom which I experienced at sight of him at that moment. There was a white mist over everything, the forest trees stood out against the sky, and the funeral lights were still shining in the pallor of the dawning day; the birds were twittering, and I recalled a verse of his poem: ‘He flies away like a winged bird to meet the rising sun in the pine wood,’ or, to put it better, I heard his voice uttering these words and the whole day long they haunted me with their enchantment. They placed him in the ante-chamber, the doors were left ajar, and the cool morning air penetrated into the room, mingled with a refreshing rain, which had just then begun to fall.... My soul was filled with emotions, till then unknown, and upon it there flamed forth like summer lightning such thoughts as I can never repeat again: a thousand recollections of the dead were wafted to me on the fumes of the incense, in the chords of the music.” ... And here the artist, in the midst of his æsthetic abstraction, converts his genuine grief into a thing of beauty, so that in his enlightened view the death of his beloved friend not only causes him no pang, or suffering, but, on the contrary, gives him a mystic resignation, incomprehensible to ordinary men, an ecstasy that is foreign to and removed from life, a joy that is entirely impersonal.

During his sojourn in Jerusalem, Flaubert paid a visit to the lepers. Here is the account of his impressions: “This place (that is the plot of land set aside for those who are afflicted with leprosy) is situated outside the town, near a marsh, whence a host of crows and vultures arose and took their flight at our approach. The poor sufferers, both women and men (in all about a dozen persons) lie all huddled together in a heap. They have no covering on their heads, and there is no distinction of sex. Their bodies are covered with putrefying scars, and they have sombre cavities in place of noses. I was forced to put on my eye-glasses in order to discover what was hanging to the ends of their arms. Were they hands, or were they some greenish-looking rags? They were hands! (*There* is a prize for colourists!) A sick man was dragging himself to the water’s edge to drink some water. Through his mouth, which yawned black and empty of the gums, that seemingly had been burned away, the palate was clearly visible. A rattle sounded in his throat as he dragged the limbs of his dead-white body towards us. And all around us reigned tranquil Nature, the ripples of the stream, the green of the trees, all bubbling over with the abundance of sap and youth, and the coolness of the shadows beneath the scorching sun.” This extract is taken from no novel, in which a poet might force himself to be objective, but from a traveller’s notes, from a letter to a friend, wherein the author has no kind of motive for concealing the subjective character of his emotions. And yet in spite of this, except for the two rather common-place epithets of “poor wretches” (*pauvres misérables*), there is not a single touch of pity, not even a suggestion of compassion.

IV

“I am not a Christian” (*je ne suis pas Chrétien*), says Flaubert in a letter to Georges Sand. The French Revolution was, in his opinion, unsuccessful, because it was too intimately bound up with the idea of religious pity. The idea of equality, on which is based the essence of the democracy of to-day, is a contradiction of all the principles of equity. See what a preponderating influence is given at this day to grace. Emotion is everything, justice nothing. “We are degenerating owing to our superfluity of indulgence and of compassion, and to our moral drought.” “I am convinced,” he remarks, “that the poor envy the rich, and that the rich fear the poor; it will be so for ever — and vain it is to preach the Gospel of Love.”

Flaubert tries to justify his instinctive antipathy to the idea of brotherhood by the assertion that this idea is always found to be in irreconcilable contradiction to the principle of equity. “I hate democracy (in the sense at least in which the word is accepted in France), that is to say the magnifying of grace to the detriment of justice, the negation of right — in a word, the anti-social principle (*l’anti-sociabilité*).” “The gift of grace (within the province of theology) is the negation of justice; what right has a man to demand any change in the execution of the law?” Yet he hardly believes in this principle himself, and only enunciates it in order to have an argument with which to refute the idea of brotherhood. At least this is what he says, in a moment of complete frankness, in a letter to an old friend: “Human justice seems to me the most unstable thing in the whole world. The sight of a man daring to judge his neighbour would send me into convulsions of laughter if it did not arouse my disgust and pity, and if I were not at the present moment” (he was at that time engaged in studying for the law) “obliged to study a system of absurdities, by virtue of which men consider that they acquire the right to judge. I know of nothing so absurd as law, except, perhaps, the study of it.” In another letter he confesses that he never could understand the abstract and dry conception of duty, and that “it did not seem to him to be inherent in the nature of mankind (*il ne me paraît pas inhérent aux entrailles humaines*).” Evidently, then he believes as little in the idea of justice as he does in that of fraternity. As a matter of fact, he has no moral ideal.

“There is only one thing in the world that I really value, and that is beautiful verse; an elegant, harmonious, melodious style; the warmth of the sun; a picturesque landscape; moonlight nights; antique statues, and the character in a profile.... I am a fatalist, in fact, like a Mahometan, and I believe that all that we do for the progress of humanity is of no use. As to this idea of progress, I am mentally incapable of grasping such nebulous and dreary conceptions. All the nonsense talked on this subject simply bores me beyond endurance.... I cherish a deep respect for the ancient form of tyranny, for to me it is the finest expression of humanity that has ever been made manifest." "I have few convictions," he writes to Georges Sand, "but one of those I have I cherish firmly — it is the conviction that the masses are always composed of idiots. And yet one may not consider the masses as stupid, because within them is concealed the seed of an incalculable fecundity (*d'une fécondité incalculable*)."

Flaubert makes a half-jesting attempt to contrast the doctrines of the socialists with his own ideas of the political order of the future. "The only logical conclusion is an administration consisting of mandarins, if only these mandarins be possessed of some knowledge, and if possible, even considerable knowledge. The mass of the people will thus always remain as minors, and will always hold the lowest place in the hierarchy of the social orders, seeing that it is composed of unlimited numbers.... In this lawful aristocracy of the present time is our whole salvation." ... "Humanity represents nothing new. Its irremediable worthlessness filled my soul even in my early youth with bitterness. And that is why I now experience no disappointment. I am convinced that the crowd, the common herd will always be odious.... Until the time comes when men shall submit to set up mandarins, and shall have substituted for the Roman Pope an Academy of Sciences, until that time comes, all politics, and all society even to its deepest roots, must be merely a collection of revolting lies (*de blagues écœurantes*.)" Nevertheless in his novel "Bouvard et Pécuchet" Flaubert makes every effort to destroy faith even in the strength of the principles of science, and to prove that modern science is as impermanent a structure, as contradictory and superstitious a system as was the theology of the Middle Ages. To his disbelief in science Flaubert, moreover, is constantly giving utterance: thus, for instance, when he comes upon the Positivism of Comte, he finds this system "unbearably stupid" (*c'est assommant de bêtise*).

V

We have thus seen that Flaubert’s attempt to reach a compromise with regard to the preponderating tendency of the age did not succeed; of his views respecting the structure of society, the only true one is his insight into the lower classes of the people. “However well you may feed the animal man, however thickly you gild his stable, even though you give him the softest and most luxurious litter, still he will ever remain a beast. The only progress upon which one can count is the effort to make the beast less of a cannibal. But as to raising the level of his ideas, or inspiring the masses with a broader conception of God, I seriously doubt whether this can ever be achieved.”

In another letter he frankly admits that he has no faith, no principles of morality, no political ideals, and in this admission, wrung from the depths of his heart, the note of despair is already struck: “In the present day there seems to be as little possibility of establishing any new belief as of obtaining respect for the old faith. And so I seek and fail to find that one idea upon which all the rest should depend.” These few words throw a clearer light on the attitude of Flaubert during the latter years of his life than anything else. Formerly he had found this idea in his art, while now he assumes that there is another and higher basis, upon which art itself must rest; but to find this principle is beyond his power. He seeks forgetfulness in work, but work only brings exhaustion, and he is still more dissatisfied. He realises his singularity, and it draws him out of his objective attitude into that incomprehensible existence, the very conception of which he himself denies.

The real tragedy of his position lies in the fact that he is alone in the midst of a strange and unknown world. And little by little his despair reaches its utmost limits: “Whenever I am without a book in my hand, or whenever I am not writing, such anguish seizes on me that I simply find myself on the verge of tears.” So he writes in a letter to Georges Sand. “It seems to me that I have literally turned into a fossil, and that I am deprived of all connection with the universe around me.” “A feeling of universal destruction and agony possesses me, and I am deathly sad.” “When I am tired out from my work, I grow anxious about myself. No one remembers me, I belong to another sphere. My professional friends are so little friendly to me.” “I pass whole weeks without exchanging a word with a single human creature, and at the end of the week I find it hard to recall any special day or any particular event during the course of that time. On Sundays I see my mother and niece, and that is all. A gathering of rats in the attic, that is my whole society. They make an infernal noise over my head, when the rain is not roaring, and the wind is not howling. The nights are blacker than coal, and a silence is all around me, infinite as in the desert. One’s senses are terribly sharpened in such surroundings, and my heart starts beating at the slightest sound.” “I am losing myself in the reminiscences of my youth, like an old man. Of life I ask nothing more, save a few sheets of paper that I may scratch ink upon. I feel as though I were wandering through an endless desert, wandering, not knowing whither; and that at one and the same time, I am the wanderer, and the camel, and the desert.” “One hope alone sustains me, that soon I shall be parted from life, and that I shall surely find no other existence that might be still more painful.... No, no! Enough of misery!”

All his letters to Georges Sand are one weary restless martyr’s confession of the “disease of genius.” Sometimes a simple plaint bursts from him, and in it, through the impenetrable pride of the fighter, can be detected something soft and broken, as in the voice of a man who is over-tired. The fury of his enemies, the calumnies of his friends, the lack of understanding of his critics, no longer wounded his self-pride; he merely hated them. “All this avalanche of folly neither disturbs nor grieves me. Only one would prefer to inspire one’s fellow men with pleasant feelings.”

Then finally, even his last consolation — his art — deserts him. “In vain I gather my strength; the work will not come, will not come. Everything disturbs and upsets me. In the presence of others I can still control myself, but when I am alone I often burst into such senseless, spasmodic tears that I think I am going to die from them.” In his declining years, when he can no longer turn to the past, and no longer correct his life, he asks himself the question: what if even that beauty, in the name of which he has destroyed his faith in God, in life, and in humanity, is as visionary and delusive as all else? What if his art, for the sake of which he had given up his life, his youth, and happiness, and love, should have abandoned him on the very edge of the grave?

“The Shadow is enveloping me,” he says, as he realises that the end is at hand. This exclamation is as the cry of eternal anguish uttered before his death by another artist, Michael Angelo, the brother of Flaubert in his ideals and aims and genius:

“Io parto a mano a mano, Crescemi ognor piu l’ombra, e il sol vien manco, E son presso a cadere, infermo e stanco.” “Inch by inch I sink, The shadows lengthen, the sun sinks down, And I am ready to depart, Broken and weary.”

Death struck him down at his work-table, quite suddenly, like a thunder-bolt. Dropping his pen from his hand, he sank down lifeless, killed by his one great, single passion, the love of his art.

Plato in one of his myths relates how the souls of men travel in chariots on winged steeds along the heavenly way; to some of whom it is given after a short time to approach that spot whence is visible the domain of Ideas; with yearning do they gaze aloft, and a few stray rays of light fall deep down among them. Then, when these souls are re-incarnated, to return and suffer on earth, all that is best in the human heart appeals to them and touches them, as a reflection of some eternal light, as a confused remembrance of another world, into which it was granted them to peep for the space of a single moment.

Surely there must have fallen upon the soul of Flaubert in the glorious sphere of the imagination a ray of beauty that was perhaps too bright.

The French Texts

MÉMOIRES D’UN FOU
MADAME BOVARY
SALAMMBÔ
L'ÉDUCATION SENTIMENTALE
BOUVARD ET PÉCUCHET
TROIS CONTES
LA TENTATION DE SAINT ANTOINE
LE CANDIDAT
LE CHATEAU DES CŒURS
LE SEXE FAIBLE
PAR LES CHAMPS ET PAR LES GREVES

Le Cimetière Monumental de Rouen — Flaubert’s final resting place

Flaubert's grave